

Zacharias Mbizo: The Shadow of the Dragon *Literary Corona Diary*



Despite all the discussions about the medical, social, political and economic impact of the Corona pandemic, there is often a feeling that something remains unsaid. The reason for this is that the emotional upheaval triggered by the crisis is neglected. The present literary diary takes this into account by illuminating our Corona nightmare from within, as a series of subjective dream images.

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I. Disturbance



The first part of the literary Corona diary revolves around the abrupt changes the virus has brought about and with our futile attempts to lock it out or flee from it.



Disease Symptoms

When you woke up that morning, everything was as usual. The calendar on the wall opposite your bed showed the same snow-covered mountains as the evening before. On the pinboard, the same chaos of notes still prevailed, and your Tiffany bedside lamp glistened in the ray of sunshine that stealed through the gap in the curtain as it did every morning. And yet you had the feeling that something had changed.

Drowsily you stretched and tried to wipe the dream world of the night from your eyes. In the bathroom you let mountain stream cold water penetrate your pores, in the vague desire to wash yourself clean from something. Then you charged the coffee machine with an extra strong awakening potion. It followed your instructions with a whirring sound.

You sat down at the kitchen table. You turned on the radio. You flipped through the newspaper. You sipped your coffee.

But the music sounded shriller than usual, it couldn't be tamed to the sound carpet it usually added to your breakfast. The newspaper did not speak to you – as if it was reporting about another universe. And the coffee tasted bitter, as if someone had poisoned it.

You felt like an actor who was supposed to portray the life of another person. What used to be taken for granted, you now had to tediously pretend to yourself: normality.

Did someone break into your house? Yes, you said to yourself, that had to be it! How else could it be explained that everything seemed different to you, although nothing had changed?

You jumped up from your chair and hurried from one corner of the apartment to the other. Hastily you created an imaginary inventory of your belongings: Smartphone? In your hand! Tablet? On the coffee table! Television set? Hanging on the wall! Purse? Untouched in your coat pocket – which was no surprise, because only a few useless coins were jingling in it!

No, you had to admit to yourself, nothing was missing. A burglar could not have been in the apartment. All of a sudden an unpleasant feeling arose in you: What if the burglar was still in the apartment? If you woke up before he could finish his work?

Reflexively you turned around: Wasn't there something moving in your back? Something that imperceptibly crept up on you?

Worried, you stepped to the window. Even the people down in the street seemed to move more hectically than usual. They, too, were constantly turning around in all directions, as if they were being pursued by an invisible enemy.

Thus the wave of your inner restlessness broke only at the outer one and crashed back into you with double force. When you sat down at the table again, it suddenly became clear to you: no one had broken in on you. No, someone had moved in with you. Someone you did not see. Someone you did not know. Someone you could not talk to because he did not speak your language.

Maybe this someone had just left your apartment for a few moments. But you knew: He would return. From now on, he would live with you as a subtenant, he would be close to you without you being able to get close to him.

You wanted to flee, flee from this house where you suddenly no longer felt at home. But you did not even rise from your chair. Too clearly you felt that the

one who had moved in with you would follow you everywhere, no matter in what remote places you should seek refuge.

You felt like someone innocently convicted. Mechanically you snuck into the bathroom to get ready for a day that no longer belonged to you. When you looked in the mirror, you stared into the face of a stranger.





Captured Bodies

On your return from holiday a noise from the neighbouring property attracted your attention. It sounded like construction work. Should your neighbour indulge his passion for shed building again?

Curious, you stepped to the hedge that separated the plots. "Hey there! What is this going to be?" you asked into the whirled up dust.

Your neighbour flinched as if a bomb had hit next to him. Strange, you thought. You didn't remember him being so jumpy!

"A bunker, of course", your neighbour explained to you in hasty, choppy words. "I'm building a bunker against the aliens."

Now it was your turn to flinch. Not only because of the peculiar explanation, which didn't fit at all to your sober, anything but imaginative neighbour. What startled you the most was his outward appearance. Only now, after he had turned his face towards you, did you see the knight's armour of Plexiglas in which he was wrapped.

Was this some sort of carnival? But why dig a building pit in disguise? So was the knight's armour rather a new kind of construction worker's outfit?

"Have you thought about the anti-radiation shield?" you joked, supposing that your neighbour was kidding you. "Everyone knows that aliens have X-ray eyes with which they can see through bunker walls!"

Your neighbour looked at you in dismay. As you made an effort to climb over the hedge at a low point, he retreated like a half sucked victim from a vampire. "Stay away from me!" he shouted. "And leave me alone with your stupid quips – they won't help us anyway!"

Now you've had enough of the prank. "What are you so upset about?" you asked angrily. "I'm not an alien myself!"

"Maybe not you," replied your neighbour in all seriousness. "But how can I make sure that an alien hasn't already penetrated you and now tries to attack me from inside your body?"

Now the matter was clear for you: Your neighbour had obviously lost his mind. Wordlessly you turned away from him.

How was that possible, you asked yourself as you went back to your house. How could the mind get confused so quickly? Your neighbour had always been a pragmatic contemporary whose thinking never left the ground of accepted reality! Or was this perhaps the very reason for his sudden derangement?

The doorbell rang. When you opened it, no one was there. Probably some rascals again, who wanted to play a trick on you, you thought. But then you saw the postman hurrying away from your house, as if he feared to come close to you.

Immediately afterwards, you discovered the parcel that the man had obviously left on your doorstep. Astonished, you picked it up and carried it into the house. Carefully you pelt the contents from all the envelopes that surrounded it like a precious jewel. When you finally held the treasure in your hands, you twitched involuntarily: It was exactly the same glass knight's armour as you had seen on your neighbour.

A strange restlessness arose within you. Spontaneously you decided to go for a little walk.

Your neighbour was still so busy building his bunker that he didn't even look up when you passed him. It was a hot summer day, his face was glowing under his visor. Relief spread inside you as you moved away from him.

At the next corner you turned into the main street leading to the park. For a while you were so engrossed in your thoughts that you didn't notice anything around you. But then you suddenly wondered: The woman who had just passed you – wasn't she also wrapped in a glass knight's armour? And the man over there – didn't he also march across the street as a carnival knight?

When you looked around more closely, you realised: almost everyone was in disguise. It was as if someone had proclaimed the day of the glass knights' games.

Did you perhaps miss something? Was it all because of your news fast – your habit of fading out everything happening on the big world stage or in your home country during your holiday in order to relax better?

A few steps further on, a kiosk shouted the reality to your face: "Aliens keep advancing!" the headlines screamed, and: "Sad record: aliens captured a thousand bodies in one day!"

When you looked up, you saw that the kiosk saleswoman was also hidden behind a knight's armour. In addition, the sales area was secured by a plexiglass panel. Behind it, the figure of the woman blurred with the darkness of her kiosk cave.

Confused, you set off on your way home. Looking at all the people passing by in full knight's outfit, you suddenly felt almost naked, like in swimwear at a police ball. More and more waves of uniforms were crashing towards you, splitting in front of you, breaking on you like on a disturbing cliff. Reluctantly you realised that you yourself already felt like in a world flooded with aliens.

At home you took the knight's armour that the postman had brought you out of the box and laid it on the table in front of you. For a long time you gazed at it indecisively, touched it lost in thought, looked at your reflection in the glass visor. Then you put it on.



The Shadow of the Dragon

Some time ago you learned from the news that a dragon had settled outside the town. Anyone who came too close to him was scorched, so the experts said, by his poisonous breath.

According to the media, even the slightest traces of the dragon's breath could lead to death. As the dragonologists explained, the monster's breath droplets had the ability to mutate into small worms on the skin of those affected. These worms were reported to have tiny spikes with which they could penetrate the skin of their victims. This would allow them to enter their bloodstream and suck them out from inside.

The death brought about by the breath worms was said to be torturous, torturous and lonely. According to the experts, it felt as if someone was strangling the victim for days on end. Help was impossible, they said, there was no remedy to the dragon's devastating breath. Mental support could not be provided either, as the spiky worms would jump over to anyone trying to comfort the victim.

An urgent warning was therefore issued against leaving the town. Nevertheless, traces of the poisonous dragon breath were discovered even within the town shortly afterwards. Dragon researchers had made them visible with special sensors. Perhaps the vapours of the dragon had simply been blown into the town by the wind. Or maybe the clothing of some careless people who

had ignored the warnings and moved outside the town had been a kind of Trojan horse for them.

So the town gates were closed. No one was allowed to go out, no one was allowed to go in.

However, despite all the precautions taken, reports of victims of the dragon and its insidious miniature clones increased dramatically. Every day new rumours about their gateways to the victims occurred, and the list of discomforts they caused was growing steadily.

At the same time, however, there were more and more reports of those lucky ones who had resisted the attacks of the miniature dragons and succeeded in destroying them with the sword of their will to survive.

So gradually your doubts began to grow: Weren't the victims of the dragon and his offspring mainly old and infirm? Weren't they rather decaying leaves on the tree of life, which would have been blown to the ground by the next gust of wind anyway? Was the alleged dragon in the end just an ordinary reptile that had been inflated to something extraordinary in the monotonous desert of everyday life? A hallucination, so to speak, which was due to the lack of stimuli in normality?

That's when you remembered the old tunnel that had once served as a supply shaft during sieges of the town. What nobody knew: there was an access to it right underneath your house. All you had to do was descend into the cellar and open the rotten door, well hidden behind a wine rack, to enter it.

So now you are standing on the other side of the tunnel, looking out into the wide plain into which the tunnel leads. You didn't remember it that vast; that free; that boundless. Pleasant showers overflow you as the wings of the wind touch you. You sink into them like into the arms of a long missed brother.

You breathe deeply. This dancing light under the passing clouds! The enigmatic chant of the crickets! The spicy scent of the herbs!

Or are you just imagining all this? Does the world seem so free to you only because you have been locked up for so long behind the narrow town walls? Crickets can't sing at all! And weren't many herbs even poisonous?

A sudden insecurity paralyses your step. For a moment even the thought of returning touches the threshold of your consciousness. But your pride pushes it back so quickly that you forget it right away.

Defiantly you accelerate your pace. Deeper and deeper you penetrate into the plain, resolutely striving away from the prison that the town had become for you in the end.

One last time you turn around, as if to say a malicious farewell to the town dungeon. To your disappointment, you have to realise that you are not as far away from the town as you thought. Moreover, it suddenly becomes completely dark around you.

Could a thunderstorm be approaching? Or is night about to fall? But how could that be possible? You remember very well that you left early in the morning to walk in daylight! And what's that pungent, acrid smell that suddenly gets into your nose? Why is your skin tingling as if invisible insects were crawling all over it?

It gets black before your eyes, you have to sit down. Stars are dancing around you, you want to reach out and grab them, but they turn into butterflies that elude you with a glittering glow. You are a little child again, you run after them, waving your arms to catch the gems of the air, you imitate their dances on the ground, these swinging swaths they carve into the air ...

Yes, you think, the butterflies, one day I will travel with them to the south. But for now you must give in to the great shadow that has fallen over you, this shadow from which an unpleasant breath flows down on you, paralysing all your limbs.

II. Disruption



In the first part of the literary Corona diary, the focus was on the general change in our living conditions caused by the virus. In the second part, emphasis is placed on specific social areas and groups of people. At the beginning we take a look at the political stage.



The Puppet Master

With his legs apart, a living statue, he stood in the middle of the market place. Like a crown of bodies, the henchmen of his Air Police had gathered around him. Intently, their eyes were fixed on the corners of the square assigned to each of them. Nothing and nobody escaped their gaze. No breath of air should penetrate into the sphere of another! No one should be allowed to absorb the scent of another with his breath!

The man with his legs apart twitched his eyes. A hundred meters away, at the very edge of the square: Hadn't someone lifted his veil there? And right below him, in these knots of people who sinned against the holy seriousness of life: Hadn't someone laugh out loud there?

He gave his henchmen a sign. Two of them detached themselves from the laurel wreath formed by the guardian bodies and, guided by the circumspect gaze of their master, walked towards the deviants. A practised grip, a casual turn of the wrist, then the heretics were no longer in the mood for laughter.

Mechanically the henchmen turned around and went back to their place in the guardian crown.

Satisfied, their commander nodded to them. He knew: not for long and he would be able to do without his henchmen. Then they would only be a kind of ornament for him, insignia of his reign, like the veil in front of his face that blurred the imprint of his powerful features with the coat of arms of the country he ruled over.

Hadn't the relentless glances of his guardians long since taken on a life of their own? Didn't it already feel as if disembodied eyes were staring at everyone from everywhere? As if, in the midst of the immaculate blue of the sky, the abyss of an eyeball was shimmering, an eyeball that recorded all activity on earth? As if the air was filled with the latticework of invisible eyelids that answered every movement, every impulse, every stirring, no matter how inconspicuous, with a blaming twitch?

A comforting shiver flowed through the immobile man, as with a statue awakening to life. At last he could be the great puppet master he always wanted to be! The veiled creatures had become blank sheets in which he himself could inscribe the signature of his reign. He was the one who assigned them their roles. And whoever falled out of the role was simply denied the right to have a role of his own.

At last he had succeeded in taking away from life those unpredictable things, those imponderables, which had once so painfully shown him the limits of his power. Nothing could surprise him anymore. Life was in his hands. He was the one who gave it shape and direction.

The following entry in the literary Corona diary takes a look behind the applause rituals used at the beginning of the pandemic to pay tribute to the achievements of certain professional groups, especially healthcare personnel.



The Unholy Saint

Of course you were flattered when they raised you to the state of a saint. Who would not like to be lifted out of the crowd? Who is completely immune to applause and admiration?

But soon you also got to know the dark sides of being a saint. A saint, you had to learn, should be like a little bird that pecks the grains of life right out of God's hand. A saint does not need money. A saint does not need earthly food. Unfortunately, your landlord didn't care about this wisdom. Admittedly, he always greeted you respectfully when he met you on the street. But when you didn't pay your rent on time, he would send you a reminder that sounded far less respectful.

So you felt a growing desire to be a mere mortal again. Especially when you had to go to bed with a rumbling stomach after a long, far too long day at work.

When all the shopkeepers and even the snack bar staff were allowed to sleep the satisfied sleep of the righteous, while you had to sleep the restless sleep of the hungry.

But most painful for you was when you realised that a saint doesn't have the right to fail. If a saint fails, so you had to learn, it is not because his strength is not up to the task; because there are tasks that go beyond human strength; because others do not create the necessary conditions for successful work. No, the failure of a saint means that he has let himself slip out of God's hand; that he has slackened in his ascetic rigour and therefore can no longer reach God's ear. The failure of a saint always shows that he has done wrong. The failure of a saint is always his own fault.

No one could count your prayers for being released from your saintly status! But a saint's stigma cannot simply be washed away. Once a saint, always a saint! No one can be made unholy. And yet you could not resign to the fact that the halo would stick to you until after your death.

Even at this moment, when the crowd is leading you to a place outside the town, you are by no means willing to submit to your fate. The sun-flooded cross they have erected for you up there on the hill stabs you in the eyes. Like buzzing arrows, the cheers of the crowd are ringing in your ears: "Hail to the saint! Hail to the one who redeems us from our sins! Hail to the one who carries our prayers into the other world! Hail to our intercessor before God!"

But you don't want to go to the other world. You want to stay in this world. You want to live, simply live your life like everyone else.

Corona destinies I: During the Corona crisis, an uninvited guest has moved in with many people, especially the elderly: the loneliness.



Robinson

Actually, you can't complain. On your island you lack for nothing. You are regularly supplied with nutrients, your rest periods are respected, you have enough space to spread out according to your needs, even the alternation between sunshine and shady hours has been adapted to your individual life rhythm. If you were a plant, you would be in full bloom.

Even a mirror has been placed on your island. So you can at least preserve the bridge to your outer self, now that all other bridges to you are severed.

Sometimes you stay in front of the mirror for minutes and read in your face as if it were the face of a stranger. In these crests of folds and wrinkled valleys that speak to you like yellowed holiday photos. That little scar there: isn't it a souvenir from that summer when you first dared to climb up the steep hill at your southern holiday resort and were injured by a thorn in the macchia? And down there, the furrow next to your left lower lip: wasn't it carved into your skin in that Hades autumn when you lost your best friend? Isn't it almost like an autograph from him, as if he had written himself into you indelibly on his farewell?

Like tree rings the lianas of your grey curls flow around your face. Each ring tells the story of an entire year of your life.

You could indeed immerse yourself completely in your past. For days, weeks, months you could walk in the forest of your memories without getting bored. Just like at the beginning of your life, when you were digging in your grandparents' memories in the attic, there would always be things to discover. With their roots in old, long-forgotten habits and preferences, they seem quite alien to you. The past too is an unknown continent.

But as appealing as such expeditions into past life may be: they are journeys in a closed space, in a reservation whose fences cannot be broken by any force in the world. That is why you often go to the edge of your little island and dip your feet in the sea to feel the free, unforeseeable pulse of life.

Shielding your eyes from the sunlight, you scan the horizon for passing ships. Whenever you catch sight of one, you imagine yourself standing on it: you feel the dance of the waves under your feet, you try to swing along with their rhythm, to attune to their beat, which carries you away into new, unknown worlds. Every moment is like the beginning of your first dance lesson, in every moment a new element from the inexhaustible cornucopia of rhythms wraps itself around your limbs.

Sometimes it might even happen that one of the big ships launches a dinghy to your island. Most of the time, however, the boat will drop anchor a few meters from the beach. So you can only discern the outlines of a figure waving at you through the veil of sunlight. Is it a familiar person? Maybe even someone particularly close to you? Does the shadow smile at you? And why doesn't he speak to you? Or are the words just swallowed up by the surf?

Before you can find the answers to your questions, the boat sets out to sea again. As it plunges into the mists of the distance, the boundaries of your perception become blurred: Have you only dreamed of the encounter? Was it just a hallucination, a play of light on the tree of your memories? Or did it really happen?

Shortly afterwards the blue emptiness surrounds you again. Impenetrably it stretches from one side of the horizon to the other, like a canvas on which your world-weaned eyes can draw the pictures of your longing, only now and then dabbed by the ghostly roundelay of ships.

Corona destinies II: For some people a ban on going out during a lockdown is the same as a ban on existence.



Abandoned

When you arrived at the crossroads where you used to set up your little stall every morning, you couldn't hardly believe your luck: No one was there yet! You were free to choose where you wanted to present your goods.

You couldn't even remember when this last happened. Or whether it had ever happened at all. Normally, there were always nerve-racking quarrels with the other street hawkers about the best places. With your decades of sales experience you were able to classify the different corners with a sure eye according to their success probability. And you could indicate the value of each corner exactly in the size of the rice bowls you could serve your children in the evening.

You joyfully chose the best place and arranged your products on the fold-out table that served you as a sales area. Then you looked out for customers.

You waited five minutes. You waited ten minutes. You waited half an hour. Gradually your joy turned into amazement and your amazement into disbelief, which gradually grew into a swelling horror. For not only were the other

hawkers absent that morning. The streets were completely abandoned, nobody was outside.

No one came up to you. No car was to be seen. From nowhere the usual morning conversations could be heard and the children's chirping, which usually competed for supremacy with the honking of the ever impatient drivers. Only after half an eternity did a single pedestrian approach you. As he passed you by, you looked at each other as if a ghost had appeared to you.

Had you missed a holiday? But even if so: Shouldn't then, free from the constraints of everyday life, all the more the usual hustle and bustle on the streets have been heard?

What a pity that you hadn't gone to your neighbours the previous evening as you had intended to! Your television had been broken for quite a while. If you wanted to watch something on TV, you had to visit some friends. But in the evening you were usually too tired for that. As a result, you only got to know half of what was going on in the world.

So you were helplessly at the mercy of the stream of adventurous assumptions rising within you. A bomb you had once heard of came to your mind. Supposedly it could kill a large number of people without damaging the buildings. And didn't there also exist certain insidious gases that penetrated through all gaps and cracks and surprised people in their sleep?

But even these explanations did not satisfy you. Even if there should have been such a sneaky nocturnal attack – some traces of it would have been visible. After all, the city was not deserted at night either. Normally, there was always and everywhere life in it. So someone would have been hit by the attack outside too. And weapons that not only killed their victims silently, but also eliminated them without a trace, were, to your knowledge, only to be found in science fiction films.

Once again you pierced the lifeless street canyons with your gaze. And indeed, at the next street corner you saw a policeman. He was completely wrapped in a dark combat outfit – apparently he was assigned to watch the street. Then he would certainly know what had happened, you thought relieved. Shortly decided, you walked up to him.

Halfway to the officer of the law, you habitually looked back once more. There was nobody on the street, so nobody could actually rob you – but you never know. Maybe someone was hiding nearby, just waiting for the opportunity to outsmart you.

Suddenly a scream broke the silence. Startled, you turned back to the man in uniform. The scream came from his direction: Was he trying to warn you about something?

A moment later you saw him pull the pistol out of his holster and point it at you.



Corona destinies III: Even the school benches were harder than usual during the Corona crisis.



Veiled Spirit

In long rows they stand in front of the interrogation rooms that once were classrooms. No one is who they used to be anymore. Everyone exists only as an inanimate copy of themselves, in which an evil, all-destroying enemy has set up camp.

"Don't let appearances deceive you," they were told. "Even in your best friend now lives your enemy!"

So they stand far apart from each other. The thing they would need most in this situation is strictly forbidden to them: human proximity.

Then a penetrating signal resounds, which runs through their bodies like a power surge. Pupil 1 enters the interrogation room.

A new signal. Pupil 2 enters the interrogation room.

Little by little they all sneak to their places, on prescribed paths, at a proper distance from the enemy who now lives in their former friends.

The last person to enter the room is the one who once was their teacher. The enemy now dwells in him as well, he too is only a blackboard robot, following a plan incomprehensible to himself.

From fear-filled eyes they gaze at the blackboard robot. Locked up in the protective custody of their protective masks, their thoughts are only the echo of the words that pour down on them.

"Pupil 5: Get up!" it rumbles through the interrogation room.

Shivering, pupil 5 stands up.

"Enumerate all the first names of your sovereigns!" it roars from the blackboard.

"Abraham", student 5 stammers.

The blackboard robot nods.

"Theodore", student 5 continues.

The blackboard robot nods.

Then student 5 is at his wits' end. "Buffoon?" he finally asks.

The blackboard robot trembles. "Sit down! Failed!" he barks.

After a while a new signal is emitted, a new electric shock, directing the bodies to the door as if on puppet strings.

One by one they step out into the prison yard, which was once a school yard. Silently they walk their rounds, each one trapped inside himself, the soul gate triple-locked to prevent the enemy from entering.

After they have returned to their places in the interrogation room, something incredible happens. Something that has not happened in this place for ages. A bright, twitching light fills the room: a flash of inspiration! The one who is struck by it suddenly rises.

The blackboard robot looks at him with irritation: A movement that was not ordered by him? Outrageous! How could that be possible?

But the glow in the eyes of the enlightened one is stronger than the gloomy gaze of the blackboard robot. One thing has become quite clear to him: No barracks can exist without barracked people.

So he tears the mask off his face and declares in a firm voice: "I acknowledge the reality of the invisible enemy – but not the barracks you have built on his foundations!"

With this he leaves his seat and marches through the door out into the open.

And behold, even the spirit can procreate itself invisibly, not unlike the enemy who was supposed to destroy all spiritual life. The spirit too can pass from one to the other, no rule of distance whatsoever can prevent it from doing so.

So one after the other stands up, tears the mask off his face and steps out into the open. Everyone becomes who they were again. Finally, the mask also falls

off the face of the blackboard robot. He winks his eyes, shakes his head – and suddenly he too can no longer be controlled by those who wanted to suffocate the realm of the spirit in the slipstream of an invisible threat.

They all know: the stealth enemy is still creeping around on the streets outside. He is still trying to penetrate them and turn them into a deadly weapon against their best friends.

But now they no longer allow the one who threatens to destroy their bodies to decompose their souls in advance. They meet in virtual worlds. They get to know themselves and others anew. They find comfort in the free world of the spirit. They invent dreams for a new togetherness, which will come into being on the day of victory over the invisible enemy.

And they swear to themselves: Never again shall their school be transformed into barracks!



III. Distress



The last three entries in the literary Corona Diary revolve around the question of possible long-term consequences of the Corona crisis: What impact will it have on the way we interact with each other? On our attitude towards illness and ill people? And, more generally: on our sense of existence? Starting point of today's entry: quarantine measures as a means of "pest control".



Pest Control

It was all because of the pepper. For a long time you hadn't used any, because you knew very well how dangerous this was under these circumstances. But that's exactly why the desire for something hot, sparkling, extraordinary in your dull everyday life suddenly became so overwhelming that you just couldn't resist it.

Of course, you tried to sneeze as inconspicuously as possible when the pepper dust crept up your nose. Moreover, you followed all the new rules of etiquette,

even though you were all alone in your flat. You withdrew into a corner, sneezed bashfully into the crook of your arm and then washed your hands.

But none of that helped. Nothing escaped the new body sensor that had been installed in your flat a few weeks ago. No matter how pleadingly you stared at the little traffic light next to it, it immediately switched to yellow as soon as the sensor detected your sneeze.

The worst thing was: the tingling in your nose just didn't stop. In all haste, you rushed to the window. Fresh air was the only thing that could help you now! But even before you reached the window, you had to sneeze once more, and shortly afterwards for a third time.

A clicking sound indicated that it was too late. You just ignored it as if you could undo it that way. Two more steps, then your hand embraced the cold window handle. But it could no longer be moved: Relentlessly, the sensor had activated the automatic lock after your third sneeze.

You turned around and looked at the traffic light: it had switched to red. Light red, you said to yourself, not too bad, then perhaps the door could ... With four or five hasty steps, you reached the apartment door. Of course it was locked. What else did you expect? Why should you be prevented from snorting your secretions out of the window, when there was still an escape route left open for you?

Instinctively you turned to the kitchen. The fridge was still well stocked, and the pantry next to it also had plenty to offer. No big deal, you reassured yourself, the two weeks of quarantine you would overcome without any problems. Now you could benefit from the fact that since the outbreak of the epidemic you had always bought a little more than usual. Thank goodness you hadn't let yourself be lulled by the general chatter of appeasement!

To calm down, you first cooked yourself a cup of tea. A pleasant warmth flowed through you as your lips touched the hot water. Now you could almost appreciate the situation. When had you ever been given two weeks extra holiday just like that? Finally you had time to read a good book again! To watch some old films you hadn't seen for a long time. To download the photos from your smartphone to your PC and rearrange your picture collection.

But no matter how lullaby-like you talked to yourself, you always kept one eye on the little traffic light. So the fact that the light red gradually changed to a darker shade just couldn't escape your attention.

Alarmed, you jumped up from your chair. How could that be? After all, you were behaving completely according to the rules! Even the tea you had made for yourself was labelled "medicinal" and contained all kinds of healing herbs. Or could it be that the tea was the problem in the end? Did it cause a heat development which the sensor interpreted as fever?

Without a second thought, you rushed into the kitchen and poured the rest of the tea into the spout. Back in the living room, you stared at the traffic lights again. You waited one minute, two minutes, ten minutes ... But the dark red colour just wouldn't lighten up.

Could it be that ...? But how was that possible – how could pepper cause fever? With a beating heart you took your old thermometer out of the drawer. Reluctantly, you put it between your lips, as if your hand was being guided by an invisible doctor.

Another few seconds of agonising waiting, then the relieving beeping of the thermometer was heard. Your fingers trembled as you held it in front of your eyes. Impassively it announced the verdict: 38.5 degrees!

A feeling of leaden exhaustion wrapped around your limbs. You let yourself fall into an armchair and stared dully at the sensor in the corner of the room. For a moment you wondered whether you could possibly manipulate it. But of course you knew that the sensor was incorruptible. Imperturbably, it registered every approach, an unauthorised touch would have been answered with an electric shock.

While you were pondering whether you had fever-reducing remedies in the apartment, a hissing sound suddenly came to your ear. Perhaps you hadn't switched off the kettle properly? Or could the heating be defective?

An unpleasant memory rose in you. You tried to repress it, but it flooded your brain with such power that you couldn't escape it. Some time ago a friend had told you about a euthanasia programme. It was supposed to save seriously ill people from suffering an agonising death by suffocation. A combination of anaesthetics and medicines paralysing the heart should guarantee the humane effect of the product.

Certainly one of these unsubstantiated rumours, as they had been circulating recently, you said to yourself. Times of crisis have always been a fertile ground for all kinds of old wives' tales!

Or were you only imagining the conversation with your friend? Was all this just a bad dream? A feverish delusion of dancing grimaces dragging you away into their distorted world?

Your senses got confused and became lost in an increasingly impenetrable fog. In the fog of oblivion. In the fog of a deep sleep, on whose wings you unconsciously slipped away into another land.

The last thing you noticed was a fine white haze streaming into your apartment from a hole next to the sensor.



A view across the street: The colourful hustle and bustle has been replaced by a procession of hooded figures whose masks gradually merge with their faces.



Masking Command

Bathed in sweat, you woke up from your sleep. Instinctively, you shook yourself to brush off the aftermath of the nightmare that had haunted you.

In your dream, every face you encountered had melted into a shapeless mass. All outlines had disappeared, one face was like the other. They were rising up in front of you like waves in the surf, disintegrating as soon as you approached them.

Only the eyes did not dissolve. Nothing remained but the eyes. Hunted, frightened eyes that detached themselves from the faces and stared at you from everywhere: from the clouds, from the trees, from the pavements, from the shrubbery. In their fear they looked extremely threatening, like a cornered animal that would bite if you came too close.

Drowsily you got up and snuck to the window. Looking out into the street, you realised: The nightmare had become reality. Every face had frozen into a blue stone, a block of ice, which, like in the eternal ice, passed by the other ice floes.

No smile resisted the relentlessly straight tracks of everyday life any more. Stunned, the eyes followed the paths that others had cleft for them.

Half a year later you were again haunted by a nightmare. This time the faces did not melt before your eyes. Instead, every detail was all too clearly visible. Everything looked as if you were staring at it through a magnifying glass. Had the lips really always been so bulging? The cheeks so hollow? The noses so pointed?

While you were pondering these thoughts, suddenly the gate of a mouth opened. You were startled by the darkness that gathered behind it. Reflexively you tried to flee – but it was too late. The mouth widened to a predator's gullet, a poisonous breath poured out of it, banishing you to your place. Helplessly, you had to watch how the gullet turned into an abyss that sucked you down into its dark depths.

Once again you got up drowsily and snuck to the window. And again you had to realise: The nightmare had only found another expression for what had become reality.

Everyone had taken off the blue veils that until recently covered their faces. But the faces were no longer the same. The veils had been burned into their features, and even uncovered, the faces appeared to be masked. No movement was visible on them, their lips were firmly closed, a lowered barrier that repelled any stranger.

Even the eyes still looked past each other, anxiously trying to make their way through the human jungle. No one dared to get too close to the other. And if, nevertheless, a finger brushed against another hand, it flinched back as though it had touched a hot cooker.

Each one trembled in the face of the other's existence. Each one was a life-threatening danger to the other. No one knew a worse enemy than the one who tried to get close to him.

The final entry in the literary Corona diary poses the crucial question: Where has God actually disappeared to?



The Void of Faith

When you entered the church that morning, nothing but a great, dark emptiness welcomed you.

All the pews were deserted. No one whispered secretly with their neighbours. No one was thoughtlessly leafing through his prayer book. No one was waiting in devotional prayer for the organ's redemptive storm of harmony.

Astonished, you stepped into the sacristy to dress for your sermon. There too: emptiness. Silence of the grave. Abandonment. No altar boy was waiting for you. No member of the church council was looking for the proximity of the Holiest of Holies under any pretext. No deaconess was there to help you prepare for mass.

Had you been mistaken about the day? Although you knew very well that this couldn't be the case, you looked at your wristwatch. As expected, it also announced that this was the day for the celebration of faith, the day for the renewal of the Covenant with the Almighty.

You breathed deeply. Maybe, you said to yourself, it was even better this way. For this exceptional day, when after a long, crisis-related closure of the church,

a mass was to be celebrated for the first time again, you had also prepared an exceptional sermon. You had been working on it all week long. It might even be an advantage to go through it again in peace and quiet and to ask the true Lord of this house for his blessing in a contemplative dialogue.

So you knelt down devoutly in front of the altar and recalled the text of the sermon. But you were not able to concentrate on the words. As soon as you were immersed in the flood of sentences, they became confused like waves crashing into each other and breaking on the shore in random succession.

Sighing, you stood up and turned around. For a long time you let your gaze wander through the vault, looking for something to hold on to, a figure or at least the shadow of a figure. But in vain: the church room was as deserted as before, you stared into an oversized crypt.

How was that possible? Especially in these times of crisis, people should flock to this ark in droves, to the only place with an anchor to give them stability in unstable times!

Suddenly you felt a stab in the heart. Against your will, a door had opened inside you, a door which you had always kept firmly closed since your youth. A door behind which all the walls that had once separated you from the one you served today were piled up. And all of a sudden you were painfully aware again that an anchor must have pointed ends to take root in the ground; and that these ends, if they are stuck in a heart, can also cause wounds that leave deep scars.

All the dark questions were at once stretching out their grimaces to you again and piercing their poisonous arrows into your heart: What kind of power was this that arbitrarily tormented its creatures to death with diseases and epidemics? That made everything created fall apart as soon as it had seen the light of day, like children who out of pure exuberance tore down their toy towers again and again? That allowed one form of existence to survive only at the price of the extinction of another existence? That had designed its creation like a giant slaughterhouse?

Was it even remotely imaginable to associate such a creation with the ideals of peace and love, reconciliation and mercy? Wasn't it much more likely that the universe – or at least this world, as the only one familiar to you – was the arena of two powers struggling ferociously for supremacy in the cosmos?

But how could you believe in the saving grace of a power that allowed or had to allow another power to exist beside and with it, a power that in everything

was the opposite of it? That sowed the seed of destruction and, even worse, the lust for destruction in all beings?

A shiver ran down your spine. With all your might you re-shut the dark door that had opened up in your heart. For a moment you closed your eyes and allowed the waves of darkness to leap up on your ark. It swayed heavily, but it did not sink.

With a jerk you opened up your eyes again. Like a shipwrecked sailor who, washed over by a huge wave, is gasping for air, your gaze sucked in the void of the enormous vault. This impenetrable, all-pervading void that was the reflection of your hopelessness – but at the same time your only hope.



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