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Sick Days: Sonnet Corona

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How many famous people have been sick
in this house? Famous meaning old. Horace
Mann had tuberculosis here when cobalt
was thought to be the cure for consumption.

The day I got sick, I was at the doctor's,
but not in that order. Just the standard questions:
Family history of cancer? *I don't know*, I say, *we think so?*
Do I mention the lack of physicians in Cultural

Revolution-era China? She doesn't need a history lesson.
None, writes my doctor, and I think I should have given
the history lesson. Sex with men, women? *Anyone*, I say,
and at least that gets me a laugh, though I wasn't trying

to be funny. It's funny. I like to joke about the ghosts,
but they haven't shown up, yet.

I like to joke about the ghosts but
they haven't shown up yet and now
would be a good time. On a trip to Shanghai
to bury my grandmother, I went sightseeing

in the renovated 豫 garden, manufactured rockeries
and a zigzag bridge my uncle explained
gives you an advantage in outrunning
a goose. Only months later, writing

and rewriting the scene, I think that he probably
meant ghost. But outside, a goose startles and lurches
on the banks of the Charles, and the students shriek
from its hiss. Sometimes they must not be fast enough.

Maybe that is what my uncle meant.
What kind of creature can't navigate a turn?

What kind of creature can't navigate a turn?
I'm done sweating through the sheets. I've moved on
to pacing the room. Horrible things
probably happened here. When my sister calls,

I act worse than I am so I can get back
to reading aloud the dead poets. Someone wrote
a famous song about a meatball in this house. I play it.
I spill tea on *Roget's Third*, the first time

I'm cracking open the pages, and it's to put Kleenex
between them. It's a used copy so at least someone
has cracked the pages before. In my attic room,
there used to be an observatory, the only one in town.

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knowing they're already dead.

The thing about stars is you can admire them in peace,
knowing they're already dead. A physician in the 1800s,
Roget would have been familiar with the kingdom *mortis*.
He's famous now for classifying language, imposing rigor

on an undiagnosed mass of related words, his thesaurus.
I don't know if that has any bearing on his skill
as a physician, but I suppose I can relate, not hoping
to be remembered as a lawyer. I suppose I don't hope

to be remembered, period, but if it has to be for something,
I hope it's for a meatball song. I hope it's among friends.
I hope I was a good friend. There's a word that means
linger with me after the meal is done. I linger

and malingering. From the couch, I hear
my email ping. Everything on earth is busy.

Everything on earth is busy!
In 16th-century Shanghai, a son failed
his imperial exams and built a garden
in a show of filial piety. He called it 豫,

pleasing and satisfying to one's parents.

Diaries from the time mention it frequently
as the center of high society; in the shrubbery
red squirrels scampered and chirped. Next

the garden's upkeep ruined his family.
The moral of this story is that some people
have journaled for centuries, and I balk
at the idea of morning pages. Shanghainese

squirrels scurry. I wish I could drag each day
behind me like a weighted blanket.

I wish I could drag each day
behind me like a weighted blanket. But
in the yard, one tiny rabbit leaps over
another and newly leafed branches slash

at my windows. I'm afraid of what it means
to be left behind. To prepare for future
orientations, the law firm wants to know:
If you could have dinner

with any four people, dead or alive,
who with—and why? I live with four
of my very good friends, but godspeed
to anyone trying to schedule a full house.

I'll take what I can get. Anyone
who survives this is lucky.

Anyone who survives this is lucky.
What's a word the opposite of
unscathed? At a party before the pandemic,
a doctor-to-be tells me that we (society)

overinvest in the final years of life.
How do you know they're final? I want to say
but don't—I don't want him
to know I'm still listening. It's 2023.

The doctor-to-be is a doctor. Everything
that isn't terminal is chronic, and no one
is saying it's an emergency. It's not
too late. Emergency. *Emergency*. Am I lying

when I say I don't want to last forever,
not even in a poem?

I don't want to last forever, not even in a poem.
Would it be worse never to remember, or never
to forget? My mom says she can tell we're all waiting
for her to die, so to spite us, she's staying alive—

if she can remember to, ha ha. But spite is a feeling
that outlasts, so I'm sure she'll follow through.
I'm the keeper of her life's more sordid details
until I'm gone too: meat cleaver crashing through

my bedroom door, broken leg at the foot of the stairs
all night, friends my friends—thirteen, all of us—sweeping
up the shattered plates. How did she get away with it?
How did they, the men who came to haunt us in her sleep,

get away each day without remembering
it? Who are you responsible for keeping alive?

Who are you responsible for keeping alive?
My mom asks me for the 500th time
if the St. Ives apricot scrub I bought her
is the same as her discontinued dollar-store brand.

She likes to stare into the passenger-seat mirror
while I drive. It's amazing that one of the final things
to leave her is her vanity. How do I know it's final?
On my last day in quarantine, I sat on the counter

and photographed myself for no one. For the internet,
I posted a black-and-white family photo, stiff postures
and plain Communist garb. Friends commented that they could see
an echo of her in me. My mother was beautiful and likes to pretend

that's all she was. She was. I wish I knew her
in the past tense. How many stars have been sick in this house?

How many people have walked
through these walls? I joke
about the ghosts when
they haven't said a word to me.

I don't know what I should be
running from. The stars, I understand,
are already dead. But everything
on earth is busy busy, and each day

passes me with me. I'm such a drag.
Wait. I mean I'm lucky. I know
I'm dying when I say I don't want to last
forever, buried in some poem.

Who made me
responsible for anything.