

DIANA CAO

*Sick Days: Sonnet Corona*

*February 2025, Cambridge, MA*

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.