

Selected poetry and prose

By Edward Tick

MMK3025

At Chuong Ek, the Killing Fields of Cambodia

Dear unknown friend,
I met you at the tall stupa –
red cone roof climbing toward your burning sky.
First a woman, toothless, barely as tall
as my chest, offered me one choice –
incense or lotus flower.
I refused neither prayer nor payment.
She nodded but did not smile.
She looked old but here we cannot tell.
Could she have been your mother, aunt or wife?

I climbed the stupa's concrete steps
slowly, sadly, frightened.
I saw you in the crowd as in an airport,
blending into all the other faces,
not noticing me. I did not charge
through the gathering to grip you in my arms.
I did not want to hurry our meeting.

I tried to meet your friends and neighbors first.
There were many. Some grinned at me
with teeth showing, jaws hanging open.
Others were clenched and solemn.
The entire group stared as if at once
looking through me and not seeing me.
You had so many neighbors
I feared I would never find you.
I shuddered before their stares
that rooted my feet to the concrete portico.

Bird song and wafting incense broke me free.

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I moved on to the second crowd
and the third. They were younger –
children, teens, boys and girls, showing me
how fertile your land and people are.
Many wore piercings, but not the kind
teens wear at home. I could not see
their pins or rings. I could not see them play.

The thick crowd continued to stare.
No one said hello or asked my name.
I knew I was in a foreign land
different from any I had ever visited
but the only place where I could find you.
I kept searching the faces, the stares,
the grins and piercings for one face,
just one I could name.

I finally found you. You were gazing sideways,
staring at the back of the head before you.
You did not turn to look at me
or greet or welcome me. You did not call my name.
But of all this massive crowd,
of all these empty eyes and stretched grins,
of all these piercing holes and crooked teeth,
of all these broken noses and offset jaws,
in all this multitude of strangers
you were the only one I could name.
There, inked across your left temple –
“MMK 3025.”
That is all that is left of you
so that must be your name.
You are not my father, brother, uncle or cousin
but I have found you and call you friend
for on this field in this kingdom of skulls
you are the only one I can name.

Noah and the pandemic: a survivor's transformation

A cataclysm that destroys all life on earth and cleanses the planet for a new cycle of rebirth – whether by flood, fire or ice, this motif of world destruction is

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nearly universal in world spiritual and mythological literature. It occurs in ancient Greek, Native American, Sumerian, Hindu and other traditions. It is one “symptom” of Apocalypse that, numerous traditions tell, has revisited humanity regularly throughout the ages and is not an accident of nature. Rather, it is profoundly connected to how we humans behave toward our planet and each other.

The Flood, of course, is an early event in the Judeo-Christian sacred history of the world. In *Genesis*, long before Abraham perceived the One, lived Noah, who was “righteous” and “blameless” and “walked with God.” But even in that early time the people had forgotten the Creation and its care. “All flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth” and “the earth is filled with violence.” The Divine determined that all living things would be blotted out – except Noah. Because he was righteous, he and his family would be saved along with pairs of animals to repopulate the planet after its devastation. Noah the Good, saved from the horrors that devastate the rest of humanity. The story traditionally gives us hope and faith that if we are good we might be spared “all the ills that flesh is heir too,” that goodness may serve as a protection against harm and evil. This belief is part of the innocence we carry in the face of a universe that can seem random and cruel.

The theme of divine or natural retribution in response to human wrongdoing is at the core of the universal message sent by Apocalypse. When “the earth is filled with violence” – human beings against each other, against the poor and weak, against nature itself – then Nature or the Divine pushes back in ways we experience as catastrophic. We have rendered the cosmos out of balance. While nature itself can be violent towards its creatures, the floods, fires and other environmental disasters we experience globally today are largely inevitable results of the imbalances we human beings have caused. The Divine has been seen in nature throughout time. The natural order is an expression of the Divine. When nature strikes, though modern scientific thought teaches us that it is inanimate and neutral, we experience nature’s manifestations as an expression of the Divine and our relationship to the cosmos.

The Flood in Noah’s time was God using Nature to strike back at the human violence that had upset the order and harmed the balance and harmony of life. Noah, the only righteous man, was chosen to survive the pandemic in order to repopulate the planet supposedly emptied of human violence.

Imagine the mass destruction caused by the flood. Every human and animal being drowned. Cities underwater. All flora under water. The entire earth covered. No refuge in sight for days and weeks. No knowledge of an end to the

calamity. And then the olive branch, the waters receding, the rainbow of hope and promise.

Hearing this story, we concentrate on the message of hope. Life is restored. We are Noah's distant inheritors. We are great grandchildren of the righteous. We have the earth and its bounty for our home. The rainbow promised "Never again."

But we must pause to ask, what happened to Noah and his family? Was he so good? Did he remain so? Did he restart humanity based in righteousness? What was the impact of being saved while watching the entire planet and all its creatures destroyed? The Bible gives us that aftermath as well.

As is common with ancient tales, we are not told Noah's emotions but only his actions. His actions following the flood are recognizable symptoms of what today we label as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

We are told that when the waters receded Noah planted the first vineyard, made the first wine, got drunk, passed out, and cursed the son who found and helped him for looking on his shame and nudity. Noah declared this son, Ham, would be a slave to his brothers for all time., thus providing the Biblical rationale for practicing millennia of brutal slavery. Noah became alcoholic and acted out blindly and aggressively against loved ones – a familiar traumatic response.

We are further told that after the flood the Divine gave Noah and humanity permission to eat flesh for the first time. Supposedly humanity was vegetarian, did not take animal life, until the Divine became convinced that "the imagination of man's heart is evil from the time of his youth." Only if we tend toward evil are we given the right to take other life to support our own. Tending toward violence, taking life, losing compassion – familiar traumatic responses.

We are told that Noah sacrificed live animals to the Divine for his salvation. What should we think of Noah killing a few of the few remaining creatures, believing that more bloodletting, more death, would please the Creator and that it was okay to kill rather than preserve those few remaining animals. Again – the tendency toward more violence – a familiar traumatic response.

Since Noah was righteous and singled out for survival and restoration of the species, we may wonder why he was not, like Abraham, the friend of God and father of his people? Rabbinical scholars have observed that though righteous, Noah seemed only concerned about himself and lacked compassion for suffering humanity. Biblical text commonly does not tell the emotions of its

figures and we project our interpretations on them. But if Noah indeed lacked feeling for all those lost in the flood, we may be viewing Noah's inability to feel except for oneself and one's survival. This is known as psychic numbness - another symptom of PTSD.

Noah after the Flood – the righteous man saved to repopulate the earth had become alcoholic, abusive, violent, acting out, angry, numb in his feelings for others. distorted in his thinking by the massive destruction and death he witnessed and survived. No one comes out of such horrors unchanged, unscathed, still innocent and gentle. Would Noah be diagnosed with PTSD today?

And the rainbow promise? We suffer rising seas, melting glaciers, cities, islands, countries going underwater, people migrating in terror, natural habitat being destroyed. The Divine "Never Again" meant that humanity had to learn from the Flood, changes its ways, stop perpetrating violence and abusing the Creation. Never Again does not mean that the Divine or Nature will not be skewed by our actions and strike back against us. It means that unless we align ourselves with the balance, it will.

So, what did Noah learn? What does humanity learn from this early apocalyptic ordeal and the one we suffer today? Can global trauma be a balancing and teaching force that brings us and nature back into a oneness that sustains life instead of the abuse that causes the imbalance and destroys? We too are left, as we creep out of our private arks back into public spaces, with Noah's challenge.

Noah¹

"I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living thing as I have done."

Genesis 8:21

What did he learn then,
Floating on that silent expanse
While the bloated bellies of neighbors
Bumped his hull and drifted away?

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What did he sense
 Astride a tone of manure
 That rose faster than he could shovel?
 What did he feel,
 This caretaker of all remaining life,
 As the last fawns and kids
 Bleated helplessly from drowning rocks?

And what finally left him
 When the deluge withdrew
 And land that could still sprout olive branches
 Revealed its litter of white and staring eye sockets?

He knew his duty:
 We must thank the great One.
 His first act:
 To roast a large bit
 Of the little remaining clean flesh –
 Sweet sacrifice for being saved.
 His second act –
 To banish one son of three
 For looking on his nudity.
 After the flood Eden was not even memory.

O Universe, you have been skewed
 By the powers of our hands.
 And we who taste your rain
 And tornado, your typhoon and blizzard,
 We who sweep the refuse of seed
 After the cleansing wind has passed
 We who float
 Give you our own flesh
 In apology and retribution.

Potatoes

After a story reported during the trial of Klaus Barbie for crimes against
 humanity, August, 1987

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1.

She wore her long auburn hair
rolled in a bun and pinned in the back
like the other women of her time.
But at night, for me,
her slender fingers pulled long pins
one by one, until her hair
tumbled over her shoulders
onto my chest in the moonlight
a meadow of ripening wheat.

2.

I survived by lapping water like a dog
and remembering the tingle of her hair
on my rancid chest. At the end,
with Russian cannons exploding in our ears,
they ordered us – walking piles of bone,
worm-eaten stomachs, eyes like dice –
to march or die. Soot coated my shoulders

and stuffed my nostrils as I forced my limbs
through ripening, crater-torn fields.

Just then a heavy frau, gray hair
rolled in a bun and pinned in the back
placed a bucket of boiled potatoes
beside our long line of bones.

3.

I emerged a skeleton
and went in search of her.
I found
the only part left –
a pillow
stuffed with her hair
for the S.S. officer's head.

4.

I never use a pillow
but in winter always eat
boiled potatoes.

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Praying

Never in my life did I pray so hard
 as that day, at the smoking bottom of this mountain,
 among giant boulders and fallen trees,
 when the enemy overran our wire
 and sprouted like berserk rice stalks
 no farther away than the length of my rifle
 and our muzzle holes became God's wrathful eyes;

Never in my life did I pray so hard
 until today, on the cloud-crowned top of this mountain,
 among smiling statues and wafting incense
 when their children took my hands and called me Uncle
 and monks bowed to me as if I were a saint
 and I embraced their dead as my true brothers
 and God's loving eyes gazed through my torn and mending heart.

To friends at war

For United Ministry Team Chaplain Chris and Sgt. Tony
 In Afghanistan, 2012

I sit on this eastern shore.
 The wind whipping my bare legs
 is warm and soothing and does not rend.
 The waves rolling in from the gray horizon
 sing in incessant monotony.
 The lone gull shrieking by my side
 may be begging, crying, laughing.
 If I knew his language I would send it you.

You are deep in distant sands.
 The wind that lashes your faces and hands
 is filled with fragments of shrapnel
 that tear both flesh and soul.
 You have neither rolling waves nor ready water
 and the shrieks arising from your torn earth
 are the begging and lamenting

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of the hungry, the angry, the wounded and the dead.

Thinking of you I have no rest or sleep
but even my weariness in love for you
is as a gnat before a dragon.
You are in a world that denies all succor.

I rise, walk to the line of wet sand
where sea and shore caress and devour.
I collect shells – long, smooth and black
or white and fissured like turtle claws
or cracked and half-eaten by gulls, tides or time.
I gather gull feathers wet and straight from foam
and sticks polished smooth by the great sea carpenter.
As I hug this wild armful against my chest
I think of how your rucksacks bite into your shoulders.

In that strange pause between sea and shore,
wind and tide, sand and sky,
in that terrible place in which we all must stand
between chance and fate, the divine and damned,
I lay down my load. As my bundle hits the sand
I beg that in this moment you too can drop your burdens.

I fall to my knees. I fall on my hands.
I grasp each fragment of shell, stone, stick and feather
one by one. I lay each next to another
and place and place until these elements of ocean
strongly, simply, clearly spell your names.
Above them with black shells I shape a chalice.
In its bowl white shells leap as eternal flame.
Around this ideogram made of nature's detritus
I inscribe a giant heart. Beneath it
I write the words that wind and tide will steal –
"To Friends at War."

I sit back. A dog walks through unheeding.
Two children stop and stoop and ask
then drag their parents who stand and read
then offer a prayer for you whom they do not know.

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I sit and sit and guard your altar
 until the green-gray tide washes in,
 washes over, and sucks your names,
 your totems, and all our prayers
 back into its one great womb.

If tides have any mercy,
 if the shafts of light cracking these gray clouds
 like albumen leaking through egg shells
 have any meaning beyond what we can see,
 if there is a throbbing heart in the core of this immensity,
 then the wind will etch these shells and prayers
 into the bloodied sands beneath your boots
 and you will hear the gull cries I send to you.

Welcome to the Apocalypse

Pandemics. Droughts. Fires. Locusts. Floods. Tornados. Tidal Waves. Hurricanes. Volcanos. Species extinction. Cities submerging. Cancers. Terrorism. Endless wars. Mass migrations. Mass shootings. We are indeed in a time of environmental and systemic collapse. It has been variously known as The Great Flood, The Ten Plagues, World Wars, karmic retribution, divine punishment, dying worlds in Hindu, Greek and Native American cosmological cycles. We can understand it through environmental, scientific, historical, moral, spiritual, transgenerational, karmic, religious and other lenses. Each offers a pinhole image of the complete portrait of our current moment. One lens, revelatory yet neglected, is the archetypal.

Archetypes are enduring images, symbols, stories and patterns that recur throughout human existence and experience. They are universal. Every age and culture gives their particular embodiments to these universals.

What does this have to do with our collective moment? The terrible truth is that this is archetypal. It has happened before; it seems to be a recurring theme and event in human and natural history and cosmology; it is forewarned and foretold in our major religions and mythologies as well as by science. We are in the archetype of the apocalypse.

Apocalypse is associated with St. John's Book of Revelations. He envisioned the Four Horsemen – pestilence, war, famine, death – galloping down upon humanity. We meet them today in the guise of Covid19, eternal warfare, climate crises. They destroy the old order with much suffering in their wake.

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Old ways must die and their toxic underpinnings revealed. Chaos ensues and ultimately a new order seeded. We may or may not like the new order. It may or may not be matched to our desires or efforts. We may or may not survive the recreation. We cannot subvert or avoid this process. We are in it. Its possible consequences – death or rebirth.

The word Apocalypse comes from the ancient Greek. *Apokalypsis* literally means to take the covering away, to reveal what has been hidden. During Apocalypse hidden and denied forces of global proportion surface to possess and direct humanity. These forces are karmic; they are the powers and traits that possess and control us, yet we remain unaware of them. Depth psychology calls what is revealed the Shadow – our lusts, greed, selfishness, disregard, all that we are and do not wish to admit to ourselves. Apocalypse releases the long-denied human shadow. Its symptoms are what we have wrought.

We may not see the great darkness, known as Satan in the Biblical tradition, the Dark Lord or Force in *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*. But we feel it pulling its shadow over us like a shroud upon the living. Apocalypse is not a great and horrible being outside of us. It lives through the countless small egos it possesses. It shatters the world as it has been and destroys the old order. It demands that we become conscious. It projects us into the liminal and onto the threshold of the new. There we are responsible for what happens next and either repeat, transform or are obliterated.

To live in apocalyptic times means that we must see – not only the floods and wars but the universals behind them. George Orwell who tried to warn us said, “It takes constant struggle to see what is right in front of your eyes.” See that we are in End Times. See that the old order no longer serves and will not return. See that we are all endangered, wounded, being transformed, from frogs to humans, insects to elephants. See that a great darkness is rolling over us, many will not survive, and we cannot be the same. And see that we are all in this together.

It means that we must transform. Our old ways of being and doing, measuring and acquiring, defining, behaving, competing and keeping apart, working for ourselves, believing ourselves better or more secure or more protected or wealthier or safer are no longer true. We are all in Poe’s citadel and the Red Death can touch any one of us anywhere. We cannot survive by behaving in the old ways – from washing hands and kissing to social gatherings and sports. We must find and create new ways for billions of people and untold species to live together – or not. We cannot know in advance what these new

ways will look like. We must be together in a collective limbo and create a collective trust and purpose.

Every one of us becomes highly responsible for the tiny bit of the universal web we each inhabit. It matters whether I sneeze near you, whether we hug when we meet, whether we each get sunlight and fresh air and space. And it matters that we are all safe in the exchange.

The majority of us do not live most of our lives fiercely awake and responsible. But Apocalypse demands it. World wars, continental plagues and famines, decades-long droughts and fires – we cannot avoid Apocalypse. We must see it. We must embrace it. We must each do our small parts to protect the whole and transform together. Here we are. Welcome to the Apocalypse.

¹ Edward Tick. *Noah*. «Carousel Quarterly of Poetry», 4, 2 (1979): 16.