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The Quarantine Quatrains *A new Rubaiyat*

by

Malcolm Guite



With illustrations by Roger Wagner

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Introduction

Like many people during lockdown I turned to my bookshelves and began rediscovering old classics that seemed to speak with new poignancy, and sometimes urgency, into the current crisis. One of these was Fitzgerald's beautiful translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Somehow this Mediaeval Persian reflection on life's joys and sorrows, on how our mortal frailty intensifies our brief pleasures and deepens our love and intimacy, all seemed to speak immediately into our time. So I responded by 'channeling my inner Omar' and composing a series of Quarantine Quatrains: a new poem in conversation with an old one. The conversation began in that first flush of what seemed like a new freedom in Lockdown and linked into Khayyam's praise of leisure and letting things be. I joined with 'old Khayyam' in observing the return of nature as it mocked mankind's brief achievements, and I joined with him of course in praise of wine. But, like everyone, I soon found that zoom had come to consume my new freedoms and to tease me with connections just out of reach, and then as the death toll rose I found myself understanding far more deeply the elegiac tone of his poem. When I came to the last section of my quatrains, the elegiac note prevailed and I found myself remembering and praying for all those whom we have lost. When I wrote the verse:

*All loved and loving, carried to the grave
The ones whom every effort could not save
Amongst them all those carers whose strong love
Bought life for others with the lives they gave.*

I knew that this special edition should be dedicated to those carers and be sold to raise funds for CWC the charity that is doing so much to look after them.

The Rubaiyat is especially celebrated for having given rise to a series of exquisite illustrated editions featuring some of the finest artists of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries so I was thrilled when Roger Wagner, one of the leading artists of our own time, agreed to make the beautiful paintings that accompany this edition.

Malcolm Guite

The Persian tradition of placing miniature paintings surrounded by gold flecked or fantastically elaborate carpet-like borders in an album called a *murakka*, first developed in the 13th century. These generally illustrated famous classical Persian poems, and although the first illustrations of *The Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam didn't appear until 1500, after Edward Fitzgerald's 19th century English translation, *The Rubaiyat* became one of the most illustrated poems in the world.

The invitation to illustrate Malcolm Guite's Quarantine Quatrains, which take the rubaiyat form into the landscape of the Covid 19 lockdown, thus presented an irresistible challenge. Our strange new world - in which zoomed heads appear on our screens like a medieval saints' calendar; in which tourist landmarks seem suddenly as isolated as remote islands; and in which beasts of the field stray into deserted streets - provided its own surreal images. What though could provide an appropriate surrounding border?

After travelling in Syria many years ago, I produced a series of paintings of the mountain where one of the desert fathers, Simeon Stylites, sat on his pillar. The pictures were painted on pieces of handmade Nepalese paper whose rough colour and texture seemed to mirror the desert experience. The paper is no longer obtainable but I had just enough scraps left for the seven groups of quatrains. Its torn and jagged edges somehow provided a reminder of the real life-and-death background of these poems which, while they grow darker as they move from 'dawn's left hand' back to the 'bowl of night', end by 'feeling for words of hope' beyond the rim of 'old Khayyam's' skeptical philosophy.

Roger Wagner



The Quarantine Quatrains: a new Rubaiyat

I

1

Awake to what was once a busy day
When you would rush and hurry on your way
Snatch at your breakfast, start the grim commute
But time and tide have turned another way.

2

For now, like you, the day is yawning wide
And all its old events are set aside
It opens gently for you, takes its time
And holds for you -whatever you decide.

3

This morning's light is brighter than it seems
Your room is rafted with its golden beams
The bowl of night was richly filled with sleep
And dawn's left hand is holding all your dreams

4

Your mantle clock still sounds its silver chime
The empty page invites an idle rhyme
This quarantine has taken many things
But left you with the precious gift of time

5

Your time is all your own - yet not your own
The rose may open, or be overblown
So breathe in this day's fragrance whilst you may
To each of us the date of death's unknown.

6

Then settle at your desk, uncap your pen
And open the old manuscript again
The empty hours may tease you out of thought
Yet leave you with a poem now and then.



II

7

I think of old Khayyam who 'stood before
The tavern shouting open up the door'
And wish I might carouse the night with him
Alas that such carousals are no more

8

I'll keep the rules my country has imposed
My life, like my small garden, is enclosed,
But still I'll raise a glass and pledge my friends
Although, for us, the tavern door is closed

9

For in my cellar, ranged in dusty rows,
Are sleeping poets waiting to disclose
Deep memories of St. Emillion
Whose vineyards reach to where the Dordogne flows

10

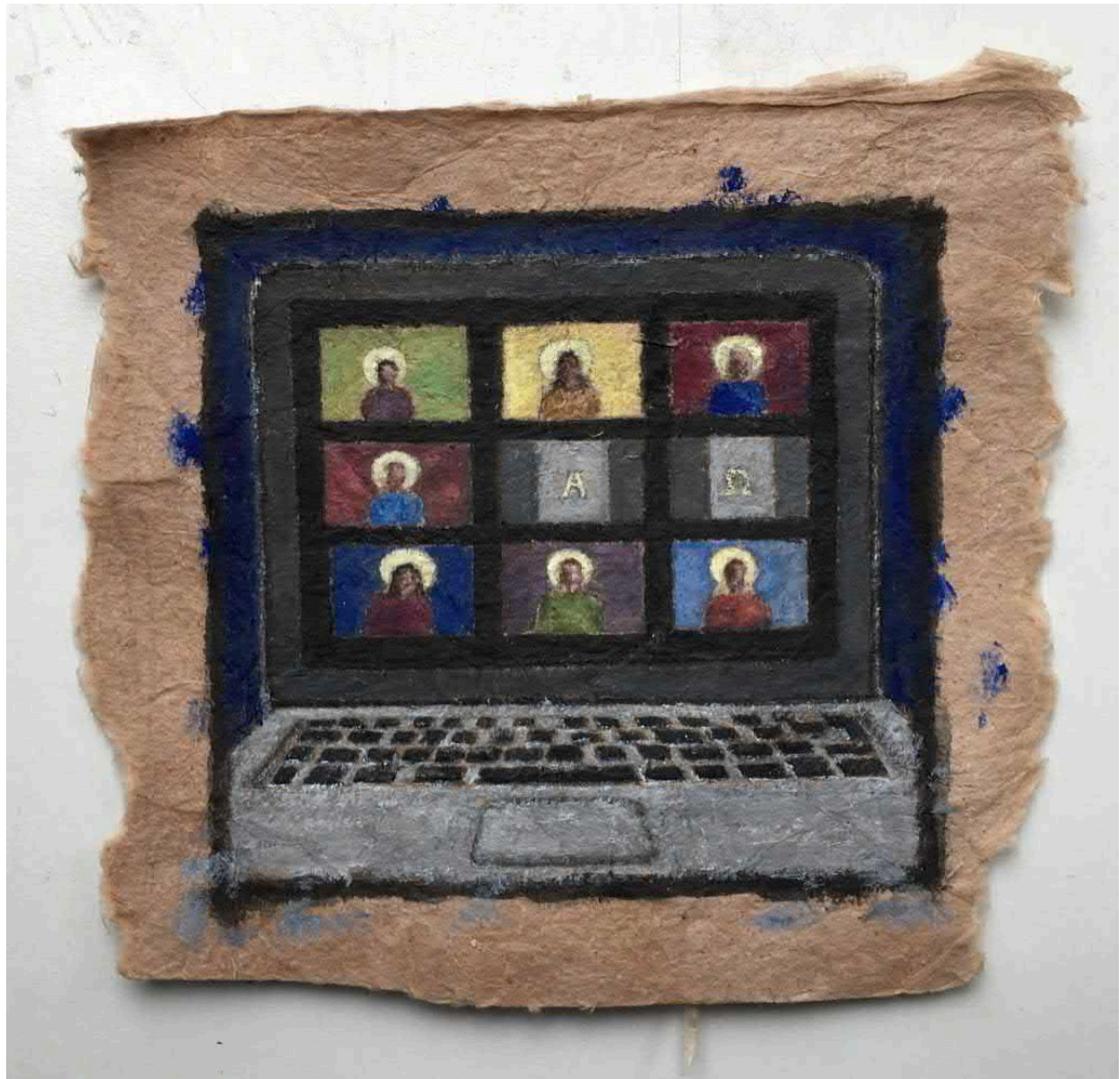
And with these wines I travel where I please
From Rhineland to the lofty Pyrenees,
I saunter though the chateaus of the loire,
Drawing the cork on any one of these.

11

So with the poets let me praise the vine
And pledge my absent friends in vintage wine
Sensing, sometimes, the savour at my lips
Speaks of a love both human and divine.

12

And when I come to taste my life's last drop,
When all that flowed in me comes to a stop,
Then let me see my saviour pledge his love,
Come close to me, and help me drink the cup.



III

13

Some days I am diverted by a call:
The soft computer chime that summons all
To show a face to faces that we meet
Mirages, empty mirrors on the wall.

14

Alas that all the friends we ever knew
Whose lives were fragrant and whose touch was true
Can only meet us on some little screen
Then zoom away with scarcely an adieu.

15

We share with them the little that we know
These galleries of ghosts set in a row
They flicker on the screen of life awhile
But some have left the meeting long ago.

16

We used to stroll together on the green
Who now divide the squares upon the screen,
The faces of our friends, so far apart
Tease us with tenderness that might have been

17

Some day we'll break the bread, we'll pour the wine
And meet and kiss and feast beneath the vine,
Till then we'll sweeten solitude with verse
And yearn through pain, and watch each day decline.



IV

18

Here in my garden hut, just on the brink
Of making some new song of all I think,
A sudden thrill and ripple of true song
Makes mockery of my poor pen and ink.

19

Beyond my hut a vivid glimpse of red:
A bright-eyed robin by the garden bed
Sings his mellifluous and liquid notes,
That utter more than all I've ever said.

20

Three busy sparrows soon take up the song,
Chaffinches and blue tits join the throng,
A pattern of bright music nets the air
And catches me off guard and makes me long,

21

Long for the joys that I have yet to sing
Long for the sudden flight, the lifting wing,
Long for the songs of summers yet to come
Long for the freedom future days may bring.

22

Though sorrow runs so deep, and our brief songs
Are burdened still with all the ills and wrongs
Of this sad exile, something in us sings,
Sings from that garden where the soul belongs.



V

23

On Sunday morning, standing on my lawn
I bless the kindling of this Sabbath dawn
And do not seek withdrawal from the world
Since all the world itself is now withdrawn.

24

In Piccadilly Circus, still as stone,
Its central hub become a quiet zone,
Eros may loose his arrow as he will
The little love-god languishes alone.

25

From Marble Arch and all along The Mall
Only the pigeons still stand sentinel
And all the streets that thronged with rush and fret
Are soaked in silence almost magical.

26

No need to find the Isle of Innisfree,
Or seek with Brendan islands in the sea
For now the town and countryside alike
Partake the Sabbath rest of Galilee

27

And all that smudge of noise, the muffled roar
Of distant rush hour traffic is no more
The 'roadway and the pavement grey' both keep
A greater silence in the deep hearts core.



VI

28

*They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshýd gloried and drank deep:*
But now in every corner of the world
The wild things flourish whilst the cities sleep

29

For when they see our influence abate
The banished creatures soon resume their state:
Blithe dolphins sport along the grand canal,
Coyotes call across the golden gate.

30

The grass grows green in every city square,
The little foxes, once so shy and rare,
Saunter our streets and boulevards by day
Whilst birds and insects throng the cleaner air

31

How soon the tide of nature has returned
How soon renew the forests that we burned
How soon they seed and repossess our streets
Those precious plants and animals we spurned.

32

Perhaps in all this crisis, all this pain,
This reassessment of our loss and gain
Nature rebukes our brief authority
Yet offers us the chance to start again

33

And this time with a new humility,
With chastened awe, and mutual courtesy;
To re-accept the unearned gift of life
With gratitude, with joy and charity.

34

Perhaps we'll learn to live without so much
To nurture and to cherish, not to clutch,
And, if I'm spared, I'll hold the years I'm given
With gentler tenure and a lighter touch.



VII

35

At close of day I hear the gentle rain
Whilst experts on the radio explain
Mind-numbing numbers, rising by the day,
Cyphers of unimaginable pain

36

Each evening they announce the deadly toll
And patient voices calmly call the roll
I hear the numbers, cannot know the names
Behind each number, mind and heart and soul

37

Behind each number one beloved face
A light in life whom no-one can replace,
Leaves on this world a signature, a trace,
A gleaning and a memory of grace

38

All loved and loving, carried to the grave
The ones whom every effort could not save
Amongst them all those carers whose strong love
Bought life for others with the lives they gave.

39

The sun sets and I find myself in prayer
Lifting aloft the sorrow that we share
Feeling for words of hope amidst despair
I voice my vespers through the quiet air:

40

O Christ who suffers with us, hold us close,
Deep in the secret garden of the rose,
Raise over us the banner of your love
And raise us up beyond our last repose.



Always there for social care workers

All profits from the sale of this edition go to the CWC

<https://www.thecareworkerscharity.org.uk/donations/>