

WEATHERING COVID

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The following four poems are a reflection on a pandemic year on the Isle of Coll, Scotland. They are based on my fieldwork on Coll between August 2020 and August 2021 and speak to both ordinary aspects of island living and the impacts of the pandemic.



View from Coll to the mainland and the Isle of Mull. Photograph by the author, March 2021.

Preparing for winter / lockdown

stock up the freezer
order coal and heating oil
stomach the price of freight now
there will be days without a ferry

fix the tiles on the roof
buy candles, torches, generators
until the next storm
stuff newspaper into the gaps
in the windows

keep the boat in mind
even if you can't go
anywhere, position yourself
vis-à-vis the 4G mast
keep an eye on the light
in your neighbour's window
insulate from contagious isolation
and keep this above all in mind
everyone here finds winter hard

winter

laughing, she digs
her heels into the ground
pulling at the brambles
while the kids start a fire

on the eve of the shortest day
we lay cardboard and seaweed
around frail trees, and we share
cake in the downpour

*

stay in your car, a sign
has gone up in the village
no more than one person
at
the
time
for the first time
a positive test confirms
31st of December 2020
we stopped being an island

*

the ten first days of the year, I hear nothing but deafening silence

the house moves
creaking and shifting, expanding
with hesitant warmth

radiators crackle
fabric rustles
with my shivering breath

wind rattling the roof tiles rumbling the barn door rushing through leaves like engine noise throwing
the gate wide open

*

amid scattered chocolate boxes
we laugh tears on the sofa
wet from the walk
the neighbours' teens tell jokes
feet still muddy
it will be quiet
when they leave

summer

surrounded by heather, we live
in a wide stretch of flammables
it hasn't rained in weeks

by the ferry pier, we watch
unfamiliar faces in unfamiliar cars, looking
through the lenses of their phones

shadowed by blackened hills, we cough
in smoke flooding the village street
we beat out the fire with all that we have

*

billowing coat, walking stick, stray white hair
she stumbles back
arms raised, hands covering
her mouth, shielding
from my breath

like when he checks wind directions
before letting me sit in his garden

they wish we were still an island

*

breathless
we swim in the cold blue
catching fish off the cliff edge

painting memories on pebbles

elated

we hug again

our loved ones arriving

at an unmediated distance

delirious

we sing at night

with drunken smiles

of forgetting

*

visitors in bright outdoor jackets crowd

on the viewing deck of the boat

while we watch, stranded

at the pier

unable to find room, left

behind as the world starts moving

again

How to live on an island

learn

how much flooding

your car can take, know

there are good weather jobs

and bad weather jobs

walk

on the beach

walk

on the hills

walk

through the fields

walk

up the road

walk

with a dog

walk

with a friend

walk

on your own

walk, and

take a trip to the village, because

people will talk

but go to the village, because

people will talk

and care for what you say, because

people will talk

learn
how to weather
storms and calm seas
windproof your skin, know
that even an island
is not always an island