

Fourteeners



KAREN DOUGLASS

POEMS

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This book is dedicated to Laura and Scott
Mc Collom, who have sheltered me throughout
this tough time.

PREFACE

In Colorado a fourteener is a tall mountain. In poetry a fourteener is a sonnet. This small book is neither. But in this difficult year, 2020, life for many feels like a long hike up a steep grade.

Most of these poems were written during our sequestered lives. My hope is that these poems will comfort and/or entertain you.

PHYSICS AND THE HUMAN BODY

What grows up eventually
falls down. The body, being
manmade, carries no warranty,
requires soft, flexible packaging
and frequent refueling.

The slow assembly line works
in secret, and the product, fragile
and more costly than rare gems,
comes without instructions.

The body's moving parts work well
only on safe surfaces, and
all its parts move, but a body
in motion will not stay in motion.
Sleep demands the user be
out of body in the dark,
prey to falling dreams and
dragons of wonderful deceit.

Two bodies cannot occupy

the same space at the same time
and when bodies collide, blood
appears. Yet, left too long alone
weeping begins.

THE TYRANNY OF WALLS

The ancient walls of Jericho
fell at the blowing of a ram's horn.
China's Great Wall long ago
let in those bloody Mongols.
Hadrian's Wall failed Roman troops
against Britain's northern barbarians.
Wicked King Herod's Western Wall
still gives people in Jerusalem
cause to wail. It no longer protects them.
The Berlin Wall fell to its knees,
sold off in sections, tokens
to cities that never had a wall.
My hometown displays one
near the Visitor's Bureau
but summer people prefer whale watching,
fried clams and shopping at LL Bean's.
Now let's pretend we can see
our new fourteen-foot US Border Wall
turned to scrap metal and rust
tortoises, ocelots, bighorn sheep
and other large mammals

migrating freely. I'm sick of walls—
no, really—rash, pain, nausea,
sort of a big-wall fever,
a common human disease
without prevention or cure.

MANDATORY OVERTIME

The shift ends, the charge nurse
still running on cold coffee
and adrenaline. Hungry,
missed dinner again. No more
reporting off, no fresh staff,
no leaning back in the driver's seat
before the midnight drive home,
no calling the kids at bedtime,
"I'll be there when you wake up."
If one of them vomits at 2:00 AM,
the sitter will be asleep on the sofa.

No overtime or day off will
lower her blood pressure,
ease aching joints, or
relieve a bladder
stretched beyond endurance.

When at last the extra shift ends,
there's just time to shower and sleep
before doing it all again.

THEORIES OF CONTROL

Despot dog, a tyrant until there's thunder
when she dives behind the biggest chair.
She's superstitious about the gate
that restricts her right to roam, more
like a politician than a pack leader.

Dog goes out and comes back
carrying a chew toy she left
in the yard, now snow covered.
A mouthy dog, she often carries
a bully stick. Her theory of control
is to throw her weight into the center
of any gathering, invited or not,
to sit on a person to pin her in place,
occupy space so the other pups
get no lap time. This dog would
rule the world, forbid strangers
to walk past our house, shout out
other dogs, demand food at early hours
sniff any crotch within her reach.

I AM ONE

who pulls herself
through the day
tasks as toe holds

can I yield
to random wind
bending tender leaves

plan nothing
for this day
romp with the dogs

eat lunch
at ten or two
nap at noon
neglect books

will I become
someone else
lose time
I'll never find again

HOW TO BE ALONE

If I curl up in the backyard hammock
visiting finches chatter at the feeder.

If I lock myself inside, the cat
flings through the pet door.

In a barren desert things would slither
from their burrows to warm on the rocks.

Snowy tundra spawns caribou and
at the polar extreme, penguins,

a cacophony of black & white busyness.
I cannot escape the biosphere,

nor the old critic in my head
who sniggers and rolls his eyes.

He knows I will never be alone.
The dead are always with me.

DRESS FOR DISASTER

In our burning world
I check the local forecast—
no coronavirus nearby
so no face mask today,
and no shooter so
no mylar vest, I guess.

I coordinate for comfort
and trash-day routine,
sort plastic from paper
to safeguard my future.

In the usual coffee shop
Friday's usual crowd
and false fireplace
look harmless.

Words float from
an adjacent table—
chemo and radiation.
Ahh, yes, there is that.

MAKING MASKS

Hours of pleating fabric,
cutting string to hide
one half of every face
doesn't fool the virus and
we just look like bank robbers.

My mask is rust colored
with green ribbon ties.
It fogs my glasses,
mutes my voice. Will I
emerge from April
with my skin intact
or rubbed raw?

And will we then breathe easy,
burn the stinking masks,
and dance around the fire
whooping like banshees? Or
will we wash them, dry them
in healing sunshine
and fold them safe away
for the next dark day?

CROSS WORDS

April 2020

No longer a word game,
but plague talk,
corona no longer
a crown of light
around the sun. We are
eclipsed, shadowed, masked,
sheltered, unemployed, and
howling lonely, our survival
visible on state-by-state graphs,
the daily math of contagion.
Words fail me.

CONTAGION

What's the good of knowing
my life is easy? Gut
punched, in a cold sweat,
humbled, floored. So what?
This time I'm spared
the indignity of my own
filth. I have my life.
I have, have, have—
and others have not. Germs
are not a concept. They
colonize and breed and kill.
We give them lilting
names— Ebola, Corona —
yet they cut, a scythe
of otherness. Warned,
we still die. If not now,
then when?

AN AGE OF MIRACLES

In the middle
of another morning I sit
with a small rectangle of music,
its source far away,
yet it sings to me—
wires and tubes
retired magic. Edison
would be proud. The clock
has no hands. A candle winks
in a glass sconce—
glass, a wonder
I barely understand. Books
line up by the dozens
in this room
full of ease and marvels.

If it all melts in fire,
drowns in flood or mudslide,
nature will remind me
I have lived in blind comfort.

HARD LOVING

April 2020

these raw, red hands and
a world shrunk down

to soap, running water
and a praise-worthy pantry.

Coffee alone is mere beverage,
when I'd rather go to a café,

order my usual dark roast
served with a grin and

a question I can answer,
"I'm fine, and you?"

Instead I hear the gurgle
of the dishwasher cleaning my cup,

and my every fear has a proper name—

Scott, Amy, Emily—

my front-line heroes in this war

against a faceless assassin.

A MALL IN AMERICA

Owls and foxes
pursue pigeons
where lingerie
once lived,
Victoria's secrets
unclothed, and
wind licks
the false façade
and weeds crack
open the skin
of the parking lot,
doors gape
like mouths,
music still plays
its continuous loop,
a noose of noise
because time has
picked our pockets.

WALKING COMPANION

I choose one stone as a partner—
oval, black, smooth, palm sized,
a talisman against the invisible.

Escaping a sick world,
I carry silence with me,
hear only birds, sighs
of a bike on pavement,
the scuff of my shoes
if I forget to pick up my feet.

I clutch the stone like a gift.
Shaped by long friction
against the elements, it asks
nothing but a resting place, yet
I have wrested it from its home.
We meet no one. The day lengthens.

IN A YEAR OF PANDEMIC, MIRACLES

My heart hurdles over despair—
Four Seasons saves me. I imagine
the bow arm of the violinist,
honor and adore this wonder,
grateful too for the scientists
who let me hear it with only
the press of an index finger.

I do not take my joy lightly,
but praise diggers and delvers
who free long-lost wonders
from ancient soil to fill
our free virtual museums.

Having the past at my command,
lightened by these delights, I shout
hosanna to composers, conservators,
even Ben Franklin, that soiled saint
of electricity. To these great minds
I give thanks this deadly year.