

JONATHAN GIBBS

**Spring Journal**

after Louis MacNeice

**B** *editions*

To David, and to Michael, and to the Leapers

First published in 2020  
by CB editions  
146 Percy Road London W12 9QL  
[www.cbEditions.com](http://www.cbEditions.com)

All rights reserved

© Jonathan Gibbs, 2020

The right of Jonathan Gibbs to be identified as author  
of this work has been asserted in accordance  
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

The author and publisher acknowledge the support  
of the Estate of Louis MacNeice, author of *Autumn Journal*,  
© 1939 The Estate of Louis MacNeice, published by Faber & Faber

Printed in England by Blissetts, London W3 8DH

ISBN 978-1-909585-37-9

## Note

On the evening of Thursday, 19th March 2020, I had the idea of tweeting about the coronavirus epidemic in short poetic bursts, inspired by Louis MacNeice's long poem *Autumn Journal*, which he wrote in late 1938 in response to the impending world war and described as 'not strictly a journal but giving the tenor of my emotional experiences during that period. It is about everything which from first-hand experience I consider important.'

I created a new Twitter account, @SpringJournal, and wrote two tweets that evening, and six more the following day, each tweet containing four lines of poetry in MacNeice's 'elastic kind of quatrain'. By the end of March I had written a little over 40 tweets, the equivalent of two of MacNeice's 'cantos'. Around this time David Collard asked if I would be interested in having *Spring Journal* feature in a series of online salons he was organising during lockdown called 'A Leap in the Dark', where they would be read by novelist and actor Michael Hughes (like MacNeice, Michael is from Northern Ireland).

Michael read the first two Cantos on Friday, 4th April, and from that point onwards I wrote a canto a week, sending it to Michael and David to be read out on the Friday evening. I took the poem as a loose model: sometimes working out from specific lines, sometimes engaging more broadly with the themes of individual cantos, sometimes ignoring the original as I responded to world events. The final canto was performed as part of a complete readthrough of all 24 cantos on a special 'Leap in the Dark' on Friday, 28th August, with Michael joined by guest readers, and original music composed and performed by Helen Ottaway and Melanie Pappenheim.

J.G.

October 2020

# I

Close and slow, spring is starting in London,  
    Creeping up through thickset lawns that though too wet to cut  
Still taunt the retired asset managers and accountants  
    Who would be out there by now for certain but  
Strange thoughts stay their hands from the Barbour  
    On the hook in the hallway, and the lead and poop-bags by the door,  
For this spring brings headlines from Italy and China,  
    And nobody knows what anyone's allowed to do any more.  
And it's March coming in as the last daffs are fading,  
    And the first nasturtiums coming, blithely ignorant of the farce,  
And the mother popping out to Tesco despite her daughter's anguished warnings,  
    Raising her eyes to the few remaining planes that pass  
Westwards from Heathrow, which is no longer owed an extra runway.  
    For so it is we learn to live in air that's good to breathe,  
And the canals in Venice running clear, with little fishes swimming  
    And the tourists at the airport asking when they'll get to leave.  
And it's Friday night in London where the pubs are all still open  
    For the blessed who think it's fine to drink then loll home in an Uber.  
Do they raise a glass to those still stuck onboard the MS *Braemar*  
    Turned away from every port till they were taken in by Cuba?  
And all the worries, social anxiety and taxes,  
    And whether Stella will marry and what to do with Dick  
And the great-uncle who lost his savings to a doorstep fraudster,  
    And is this tightness in the chest merely asthmatic?  
And the growth of vulgarity, electric scooters on the pavement  
    And the rising tide of plastic on the beach  
And the hiking LGBTQ+ lovers with thoughts directed  
    Not to God nor Sovereign Nation but each to each.

And the queue for Sainsbury's this morning was a sight to behold;  
The shoppers with their trolleys  
Running right around the car park – 'At ten to seven! On a Saturday!' –  
Are just the highest tide mark of our ongoing infinite follies.  
So I'm Tweeting this from the till queue trailing up aisle 27  
(Where there's plenty of shampoo and hair spray)  
And there's eggs and bread and bleach and chips and lasagne,  
But even those might be gone by now I dare say.  
And the question of privilege raises its head,  
As of course it does,  
In every aspect of the current situation,  
And what each one of us does  
And can possibly do is permanently affected:  
The tins I'll decant  
Into the food-bank dump bin by the exit  
Are, let's face it, scant  
Atonement for my middle-class security,  
And the gofundme  
Donations for artists and writers  
Faced with shock redundancy.  
So let's hear it for Picturehouse cinemas, sacking  
Staff as a matter of course,  
And for the Coylumbridge Hotel in Aviemore,  
Which 'apologised for any upset caused'  
After laying off a dozen workers in what it called  
An 'administrative error',  
God knows what goes through these people's heads as they write these letters,  
If they understand the terror.  
The terror? Is it terror? This fluctuating fear, anxiety and worry  
All laid one over the other like card laid over card,  
And everyone I speak to seems broadly fine, but there are others  
Online that this crisis is hitting more squarely and hard.  
And I am in the car now and the sun is out as we are heading east

Bound for the Essex coast, and the shuck of wave on shingle,  
The visit to my wife's parents, to deliver essential items and offer solace  
But not to hug or kiss or even mingle.  
And we sit in our parked cars and eat fish and chips from cardboard boxes  
Watching the too many people on the esplanade, and the not-enough sky,  
For we cannot eat in the flat, and the communal room is closed,  
And this is the English way.  
And the drive back, yawning, with the sun low in the windscreen,  
Though it's now that it gives its most singular light,  
Painting the winter wheat a rich green-gold and dotting  
The turned brown clay with Canaletto white.  
And as I stand pissing against the hedge, I notice the first hawthorn blossoms,  
Simple specks in a complex pattern,  
Like you'd find printed lattice-wise on wallpaper,  
Or on a cushion or curtain.  
And so back to London, with its own uncertainties evolving:  
The density of population, the space and air we share,  
Where the warm spring wind blows us dangerously together  
And infects our complexes and cares.

*Written 19 March to early April*