How do I describe my recent experiences of this situation, of being - in this body, these relationships, this house, garden, street, city, and the wider world - in lockdown. I don’t know. It’s still happening, I am in it still, hence the *essaying*. This is a rather old fashioned term, the verb essay means to try and do something, to attempt, and for me it carries an air of jauntiness, experimentation, openness to the unexpected and a sense of meandering, that the word ‘try’ simply lacks. This visual and verbal meandering seems appropriate not only to conveying a sense of the present moment and how it has affected my relationship to this place, but also to what was supposed to have been, in a different reality, a walking tour. So, here, in my home in south Bristol, I begin my essay to convey something of what my life has been like and where my thoughts have wandered in the last five and a half weeks of lockdown, using only what materials and tools I have to hand – a small amount of collage material, a smart phone and a laptop.
It’s changed almost everything, and brought a whirlwind of adaptations and improvisations, and a contradictory pull between feelings of entrapment and of release. My relationships with everyone and everything have altered in ways I could never have predicted. I must negotiate and approach the world outside with a plan - a set of rules and strategies. Communicating with others now takes place in an, by turn, exciting and exhausting variety of formats – post, phone, text, messaging, video calls, emails and shouting across the road and over the wall. If the postman, a neighbour or a fellow shopper or walker gets too close, I reverse at speed. If I see someone I know or want to talk to, I start to approach, hesitate and then have to think about what to do, what I can do, how close should I get, and so interactions with others become a kind of spontaneous, clumsy choreography. I see others going through the same process, looking confused and hesitant, children looking to their parents to tell them what to do, and I wonder - how long it will be before we no longer have to think about how to approach someone... I even find myself reacting with an instinctive tightening of the stomach if the characters in a film or TV programme stand too close to each other. It is becoming ingrained. The mere physical presence of others is a hazard, a trip to a shop is stressful, and takes far longer than it used to. All the while I am remembering, forgetting, and flip flopping between thinking I’m being lax and irresponsible (maybe even a potential super-spreader), and then, that I am being rude, over-reacting, a drama queen. It’s easier to be at home - Stay at home. Stay sane.
But even at home there is navigating and negotiating to be done around the use of space – who is where, when, who is working, who will answer the phone, who’s turn it is to make the call, who decides on today’s menu or what needs to be done in the garden or what film to watch, who shops, who is drinking too much, what is too much, why doesn’t one of us ever hover (my eyesight has deteriorated?)? And then there’s - which room is warmer, sunnier, more comfortable, better for this activity or that, who has taken over which space with their stuff, should I wash, when did I last wash, who cares, who always has access to the TV, is it warm enough to sit outside, will I be able to see the screen on the laptop in the sun, how do I avoid getting caught up in yet another long conversation with a lonely, frustrated or upset neighbour, do even try, what is more important right now? And then, decisions made, space divided, tasks allocated, truces agreed, time for walk or cycled agreed, the messages start coming in, adding new binging sounds to my existence (I have resisted most messaging apps up till now), the phone rings, the calls must be made, hours pass, I’m exhausted.

On the other hand, the irony is that, for me (and believe me, I know how lucky I am), lockdown has enabled a certain amount of opening up, a release from various pressures and constraints, even though it has brought new responsibilities, anxieties and uncertainties. I am fortunate to have enough to eat, technology to connect me with friends and family, most of whom are safe, well and not on the front line, a job to return to, a safe, secure for the time being, comfortable home with a garden on a nice street with good neighbours, no small children to entertain or home school, and easy access to shops, green, open spaces, the Cut and the Docks. In this context, it sounds like paradise. This is something I am constantly aware of, as I wonder about the daily lives of people who do not have these things; the differences of our experiences have never been so sharp; disparities in working conditions, wages, quality of housing, etc., never so stark. I try and imagine how different this situation would be living in a cramped, city centre flat, or in a tower block, where simply walking out your front door puts you in a public space, and so, at risk.
So, despite the anxieties this has brought, and for the moment anyway, I have relaxed from what I realise has become a habitual state of BRACE. BRACE, as I negotiate my way through an increasingly busy city. I have been protecting myself, always bracing for the impact of sensory and cognitive overload. This is not the experience of everyone, I know, and we are still a relatively small, quiet city compared to lots of others, and there are still many positive aspects to life here. And I also know that I am not the only one who has, in recent years, felt assaulted by the unassailable and unquestionable agenda of constant, unlimited growth and development. I am not the only one who has longed for a less profit driven approach to policies that shape the places we live, and for an approach that takes into account our lived experience and quality of life, our physical and mental well-being, connections, communities, social justice, and a real commitment to environmental sustainability. Not the only one who wonders, “Who really decides who decides”?

To survive, I started to move around in a protective bubble, a state of shutdown, to prevent being overwhelmed. I retreated, trying not to notice absolutely everything going on around me; my senses can’t cope. But this is at the expense of noticing the little things that I would have in the past; things I enjoy or that spark my curiosity, or provide solace; I can’t afford to engage. At times, it has felt like a loss; I have grieved. I have felt disconnected from what I considered my place, my community. I no longer felt grounded, located, situated, positioned. Belonging.
And so, whilst this time has brought inconvenience, separation, illness, stress, anxiety, worry, anger, grief, helplessness and frustration, it has also brought joy, fun, connection, and an ease and many new experiences, such as, my first letter from Downing Street, signed by the prime minister, no less, and ordering me to stay at home. Who could have predicted that? An older, more familiar Bristol seems to be resurfacing for me (and again, I acknowledge how lucky I am, but this is my experience at the moment, it may change), one that moves a bit slower, where the air is cleaner, the sky clearer, there are other people I know are out walking and we can stop and chat (from a safe distance, of course), there is less noise from road and air traffic, and other sources, and there aren’t any cars racing around my neighbourhood desperately looking for a parking space before a match begins. I can risk opening up my senses, allowing awareness, even sleep with the window open for the first time in years, relax a bit, notice things, walk in the centre of the street and along what are usually busy, noisy, polluted roads and enjoy it. One evening I cycled down Coronation Road and around Bedminster Roundabout, slowly, singing to myself. In the absence of traffic, I was able to take in my surroundings and pay attention to what is normally the wallpaper I pass as I struggle to get somewhere on time and without getting too is allowing for more connection, even and distancing, I am finding that many of us walks and when we are in the front garden, sometimes stop to talk. I have reengaged belonging and ownership has returned, as of my concerns and interests. Once again, I common, what unites us, in a time when different from each other, and divides us.
The joy of small things has returned, not that it has ever really left, but it had been curtailed. In the last few weeks, in between the less positive aspects of all this, I have derived so much pleasure, amusement and/or satisfaction from many things, including:

- Walking and cycling for *enjoyment*, not to get somewhere.
- Reacquainting ourselves with our parks and the Docks, at the beginning of lockdown, and then avoiding them in favour of and roaming once busy streets, industrial estates, and forgotten corners, as they tend to be busy and dodging people is not relaxing, or natural.
- Ambling and noticing things again, and for the first time.
- Discovering new routes, and landmarks, just around the corner.
- Taking our neighbour’s dog for a walk, they make you aware of a different way of seeing and navigating, like toddlers. I now know where all the important lampposts are in our area, and where the local cats and foxes tend to hang out.

- Sitting in the sun, for warmth and relaxation, not for it’s supposed, potential anti-viral affects.

- Getting to know our neighbours; chatting, occasionally having morning coffee or evening drinks together (all sitting at the end of our front drives, and at least two metres apart), exchanging a listening ear, a change of face from the one(s) we’re locked down with, food, skills, knowledge, recipes, twigs for bug and bee hotels, plants – we’ve even received two bird boxes and a bat box.

- Finally having the time and energy to do some work in the garden, especially the front garden, as so many people, especially ones with children, passing want to tell us how much they enjoy walking on our street because of the gardens and the trees, most of them living in areas with small gardens, if any, and no street trees. Some of the children ask to come our way to look at birds, trees, bugs; it fills me with hope.

- My newly established ‘Front Garden/Street Project’, that involves putting up things to amuse, interest and/or inform passers-by. It feels like a responsibility now, the front garden, and an opportunity to share, have fun and encourage others to connect with the nonhuman world around us.
- Time to look closely at trees and plants, watching insects, birds, foxes and hedgehogs, seeing tadpoles and a slow worm. Sitting by the backdoor at night, I watch the hedgehogs eating the cat food I’ve left out for them. (They are still getting in, despite the neighbours on one side blocking their route under the fence, as they don’t want them in the garden.) It’s so comforting, observing these other creatures we share our planet with. They eat, bathe, collect nesting material, fight, “court”, mate, live, die, and all the while know and care nothing of what happens in our world, unless it impacts on them, and many are taking advantage of our lockdown to expand into what is normally our territory.

- Not washing as often, and trying an experiment in what I now know is called ‘no-poo’, i.e. trying to go without using shampoo (it is a case of now or never), but I don’t think I have the stamina for it, not sure anyone else does either. I have had a go at cutting my hair, somewhat successfully, I think anyway, and put what I cut off out for the birds to use as nesting material. Again, a success, there are blue tits and goldfinches sitting cozy in nests containing my hair as I write. I wear whatever I want and what feels comfortable. This has worked well for me, until the evening I almost changed out of the bright, oversized hoodie and baggy, patterned trousers I had been wearing around the house all day before we took the dog for a stroll, then thought why bother – who’d see me anyway? – and, as we were walking up the middle of a narrow road, the Thursday Clap for Carers brought all the residents out of their houses to applaud.

- Learning new technology, to connect with family around the world, to actually see them. Talking my 86 year old father through the same, successfully in the end, but three times now, over the phone…

- Attending work meetings of 80+ people online, with most having technical problems, other people interrupting, dogs and small children wanting to join in and someone who seems to have to open their fridge each time.
- Becoming more aware of the services that keep our loved ones alive and healthy. I never thought I would be so humbled by, and in debt to, the people who are still going to work everyday, keeping things going for the rest of us, making sure we, our friends, family and other key workers can buy food, are cared for, our rubbish is collected, etc., etc. My gratitude is not much use, I know, and neither is this, but from the bottom of my heart, I wish you continued recognition of your value, better wages and improved working conditions.

Now, I’ve not watched all the programs, films, and videos I have highlighted, or listened to all the radio programs, podcasts and talks I have saved, or done any of the very interesting online courses, or been inspired by hints, tips and self improvement activities that I’ve seen online, never mind the ones that others keep sending and recommending to me. But neither have I been bored, as many people have confessed to be, or found myself snacking a lot more and putting on weight (I know, I know, shut up - I have been told, a few times). I’ve felt free to be creative in a much wider way than usual, only possible because of the lack of external expectation and pressure. This has enabled me to have very long phone calls, and video meetings with family and friends, experiment in the kitchen, sit in the garden, enjoy the weather, rain and sun, listen to bird song and the buzz of bees, wasps and flies. These are things that make me feel alive and grounded, at home, but they are things that I now often don’t have the time or energy for, or simply can’t justify to a wider audience, in a world of productivity and observable outcomes.
In some ways, I am capable of so much more focus right at the moment, but I also get distracted, god do I get distracted, there is so much to see and experience now. On video calls, I have to explain my constant looking off to the side, or up over the top of the screen, “sorry, the sparrows, or blue tits, or even better gold finches, are going mad, taking some of my hair, bathing, etc.” And when I’m on the phone at night, I have to interrupt and tell the other person about the hedgehog that has just arrived, and then another, and the scuffle that breaks out, and how one runs off defeated – and then the fox passes the window. What will come next, I ask myself?

Greetings from my home studio:

Stay safe and stay well, and stay at home.
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