

At Home in the Corona
Memoirs and Essays

Edited by
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Introduction

March 2020 seemed a grim time to start Memoir and Personal Writing with fifteen undergraduates at the University of Denver. DU had announced that the spring quarter would start online, and it turned out we'd end there, too. Students had to scurry from residence halls or decide to ride things out from Denver locales. Here, home, or elsewhere? Among these writers, one stayed in a residence hall as an RA for stranded international students, four others in apartments near campus, and the rest went elsewhere. Elsewhere meant California, Texas, Illinois, Minnesota, Massachusetts, Georgia, or splayed across Colorado, Front Range to Western Slope. We became writers in diaspora.

Given that foreboding start, I was stunned by the quality of writing produced during the quarter, works I'd find impressive in any circumstance. You'll see.

In many respects, writing is a social act, ultimately involving a compact with readers and, even before publication, writers benefit from readers commenting on work in progress. But writing is ultimately a solitary act, too. Even if we keep company in our heads with people and places, writers alone have to put words on the screen or on the page, a sentence at a time. I don't want to paint a silver lining on a black cloud, but in a perverse way, the spring's quarantine and isolation and dislocation may have opened some possibilities for writing that "normal" times wouldn't have done as easily. It threw writers deeply into their own selves, like it or not.

Several students suddenly returned home to places they expected they'd left for good, sometimes with disappointment (as with Sophie Gordon), sometimes with unexpected appreciation (Sophie Vernon), sometimes with great lessons about families and selves (Elizabeth Ward), sometimes with deep, ambivalent, poetic reflection (Paige Grover). At the very least, we all faced disruptions, which can be productive for writers, especially when the

subject matter is one's own thoughts and memories. Disruption defamiliarizes. As I said, I don't want to romanticize this too much. I watched a couple students struggle mightily, especially near the end of the course, when the murder of George Floyd stirred a nation to deal with sadly lingering and profound issues of racism and social injustice. Teachers feel helpless in those situations; the obligations of mere courses pale against the more profound demands of history.

The class itself? We'd been destined to meet every Monday, from 4:00 to 8:00 pm in Anderson Academic Commons, for a workshop intensive experience, discussing some common readings, learning and experimenting with techniques, writing and discussing each others' writing in progress. I'd chosen three books to spur things along: Kristen Iversen's *Full Body Burden*, Annie Dillard's *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, and *The Best American Essays 2019*, edited by Rebecca Solnit. Students wrote weekly response/analyses, one to two-page responses about things they chose from these readings. But as any writing course must be necessarily be, the heart of things were students' own writings, in two to four-page exercises each of the first seven weeks, with some occasional incidental writings thrown in. For the last part of the course, students turned in three extended polished writings, whether revised from earlier work or brand new stuff, at least ten pages. Several students produced polished work totaling more than double that, ever sentence mattering.

Instead of meeting four hours on campus, we met 50-90 minutes once a week on Zoom, mostly as a way to check in, share reactions to the week's readings, and get a brief lesson on a technique. A second meeting each week, optional but almost universally pursued, was with a small group of other writers. Each week I put up a Google doc with five or six possible meeting times. Up to four students could sign up for any slot, and I joined each one. The directions were simple. Read other group members' writings before the meeting, which took place on Zoom, and come ready to answer two questions: What did you enjoy or find most promising about this piece? and If the writer chose to work further on the piece, what ideas or suggestions might be useful to them?

Inevitably, these were generous, thoughtful conversations, often exuberant. I frequently needed to close discussion as we exceeded the fifteen minutes given each writer. These four or five hours were the highlight of each week for me, and I gathered that was true for many students. A group of writers that coalesced on Friday mornings planned to keep sharing writing over the summer.

Enough of that. On now to the heart of things.

At the end of the course, I offered to produce a volume of writings. Participating in the volume was completely voluntary; production would happen after the course had ended, after all. Students could submit any piece they wanted, of whatever length, or they could hand the decision over to me.

In the end, nine writers agreed to come along. I'd hoped for all fifteen and can assure you that there are some fine memoirs and essays sitting in hard drives across America right now. But what's here is plenty satisfying.

Sophie Gordon's "Witness to the End of a Home" throws readers into the middle of leaving campus at the start of Covid, with all of its disappointing chaos, leaving the new home she'd made for herself.

In "Magic Tricks, Invisibility Cloaks, and Funhouse Mirrors," Daniel Nava Cabral crafts a piercing portrait of being a Mexican American who can pass for white, allowing him to perform an increasingly troubling "magic trick" of revealing or concealing his identity. Daniel narrates a cruel fourth grade teacher and clueless DU classmates and baffled Uber drivers who wonder, "Who *are* you?"

Sophie Vernon, a graduating senior, writes about surprisingly finding herself back in her childhood home in Wellesley, MA, in an historical house ("The Scarab") once owned by a famous (and closeted) lesbian couple, Katherine Coman and Katherine Lee Bates, the latter the composer of "America the Beautiful." Against scenes with her architect mother, two sisters, and a beloved dead stepfather, Sophie weaves memories from extended time in Senegal and what it means to be gathered again in a family of women.

In "Papa Joe," Alex Koon reflects on what it was like to grow up as a granddaughter around traditional Italian grandparents who are bemused and confused by her sexual orientation but ultimately—and surprisingly—accepting, as Alex so warmly is of herself.

Julia Cordova ("Down in the Valley") tells the poignant story of a photograph that sits on the mantel of her parent's house in Pueblo, taken on a trip she recalls to a grandmother's house in New Mexico, along a dirt road in the valley of Questro, against the Sangre de Christo mountains. Her father—and her relationship to him and his past—are central to this story. There's a profoundly heartbreaking moment in this trip; I'll leave readers to discover it.

Elizabeth Ward ("In Sickness and in Health") has an unexpected—and ultimately timely and welcome—return home due the pandemic. She's back in the Western Slope town of Delta, tucked in a bowl of mountains including the West Elks and San Juans. She learns things from brothers and teaches them, too—as well as herself. In the backdrop are a lingering illness, the downsides of high ambitions, and a rich family life.

Connor Lukes ("Life Is a Musical") composes a five-movement suite of scenes where music plays vital, if surprising roles in his life. There's an event in a climbing gym, an awkward moment at a party rescued by a song, a borderline suicidal moment in a car driven too fast by a song, a deep memory of a jazz band that culminates with a Billy Strayhorn song.

In “God Is a Soprano,” Kathleen Burns takes us back to Christmas Eve services at the Catholic Church of her childhood, the cold air, the candles, the communion, and above all the music, including from a choir directed by her father. The memoir has deep layers of history and family, culminating in an ecstatic moment in which a pure soprano shivers the church’s marble and Kathleen’s nine-year-old memory.

Finally, Paige Grover, in “What Is it Then, to Return?” writes an extraordinarily powerful essay, poetic and brave, about returning to the Boerne, Texas, in the Hill Country. The piece is lush in detail, alternatively critical and appreciative of a town where “gettingthefuckout” was her main imperative—and for disturbing good reasons, we learn. Her return is caused by a terrible incident, rendered frankly. In the end are the consolations of family and of language, Paige’s brilliant own, in rendering the ambiguities of a place too-often ugly but whose beauty surprisingly revels itself with time and distance.

I began the class with two short writing invitations. “Where are you? How are You?” asked students simply to describe their physical locations with an invitation, if they wanted, to answer the questions more metaphorically. “In the Corona” invited a piece of creative nonfiction that narrated a slice of experience: life in March 2020. I concluded this second assignment:

A corona, as we’ve all learned recently, owing to the shape of a pernicious virus, is a crown. It’s also the name of the atmosphere that flares above the sun’s surface, invisible except during an eclipse, when enough of the sun’s brilliance is occluded that we can see what’s always been there. Perhaps in these times, with so much of normal life eclipsed, we see aspects of ourselves and our worlds we usually never notice.

I’ve titled this collection writings *At Home in the Corona* to play on a double meaning. For each writer here, a pandemic refracted their sense of home, sometimes through premature dislocations back to places they’d left, other times by recasting dramatically the places they remained. Writers made themselves at home in a sobering, restricted new world of a heartless virus—not necessarily or often a comfortable, relaxing home, but a place from which they could push words with remarkable success against the world’s memories, inscribing themselves.