

Intimate Selves: A Poetic Inquiry into Self-Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This article uses poetic inquiry to explore the author's experiences of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which brought about a State of Disaster in South Africa from 26 March 2020 to 5 April 2022. The author had, before the pandemic, been used to going to an office and interacting with colleagues every day, and was not used to spending long periods of time alone. The poetry presented in this article was written during, and about, time the author spent alone during the pandemic and afterwards. The methodology of poetic inquiry, which was introduced as a scholarly approach in the 1970s (Davis, 2023), is used to reflect on the poems. Poetic inquiry typically fashions a poem from research data, instead of presenting the data according to the conventional schema for reporting (for example, with separate sections for 'Findings', 'Data Analysis', and 'Conclusions'). Advocates of poetic inquiry find it an apt method for reducing data to a much more manageable corpus. In addition, it enables researchers to include affect, and to use evocative figurative language. The article uses the author's subjective experiences as research data, presents the poems crafted from them, and comments on the poetry.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa, self-knowledge, poetry, poetic inquiry

INTRODUCTION

This article uses poetic inquiry to explore my experiences of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which brought about a State of Disaster in South Africa from 26 March 2020 to 5 April 2022. The need to limit infections of the disease and to curb the increase in COVID-related deaths, brought about intense and far-reaching changes to lifestyles across the globe. Most countries implemented lockdowns of varying levels of severity (with the exception of Sweden, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, two states in Brazil, and several in the United States), ordering people to stay at home and refrain from social or economic interaction with the world outside their domestic environments. People were thrown back onto their own devices as they obeyed the orders to stay at home except for essential outings. These sudden changes to lifestyles that people had followed for decades brought psychological suffering in their wake. The World Health Organisation succinctly states:

A great number of people have reported psychological distress and symptoms of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress. And there have been worrying signs of more widespread suicidal thoughts and behaviours, including among health care workers. (WHO, 2022: n. p.)

In a similar vein, Konstantinos Kontoangelos, Marina Economou, and Charalambos Papageorgiou (2020) mention that several psychological symptoms are directly traceable to the pandemic: anxiety, stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), boredom, loneliness, and depression. The cost of the pandemic's long duration and its attendant lockdowns in various countries has yet to be accurately measured or documented.

With all this in mind, I expected to suffer from loneliness and isolation during the State of Disaster in South Africa. To my surprise, I did not experience these emotions. What followed was a period of deepening intimacy with my self. This would be more accurately written as 'my selves' since I became aware, through the hours and days spent alone, that I have a number of 'selves' — each linked to and dependent on the others — that emerge, depending on the context.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Poetry is my chosen medium to explore the deepening intimacy with my selves that has arisen over the past two and a half years. In this, I follow the methodology of poetic inquiry, which was first introduced in the 1970s (Davis, 2023) as a way of creating space for marginalised and subaltern voices in traditional qualitative research. In the past two decades, poetic inquiry has acquired prominence as an alternative to ‘objectivist’ forms of scholarship (Elliott, 2012: 7). Objectivism assumes that research is a process of discovering something in the world ‘out there’ — that is, separate/d from the researcher — and communicating it to others in terms that are devoid of subjectivity. Carolyn Elliott defines poetic inquiry as ‘a mode of thought and discovery that seeks to reveal and communicate truths via intuitive contemplation and creative expression’ (2012: iv). This makes it clear that poetic inquiry is a mode of being, an existential orientation towards the world and experience, which is based on contemplation and creates intuitive, creative texts as opposed to the rational, analytical ones that are often published in academic journals.

The term ‘poetic inquiry’ is used in connection with social science research. In this relation, poetic inquiry involves crafting ‘research poems’, which are distinguished from ‘literary poems’ by their intention to ‘remain faithful to the essence of the text, experience, or phenomena being represented’ (Furman, Lietz and Langer, 2006: 27). Literary poems may incorporate the fictional, the fantastical, or the fantasies of the poet, while research poems strive to convey, in poetic form, the kernel of data gathered through traditional social science research. Van Rooyen and D’Abdon emphasise the corporeal aspect of poetic inquiry as a method of ‘blend[ing] the arts and humanities with scientific inquiry to craft more embodied ways of understanding the social and physical world’ (2020: 2), reinforcing poetry’s roots in bodily and intuitive experience, rather than in rationality. In this sense, poetic inquiry uses poetry to present, report and analyse data. My use of ‘poetic inquiry’ in this article partakes of both Elliott’s understanding, and that articulated by Furman *et al.*, as well as Van Rooyen and d’Abdon. During the COVID-19 State of Disaster in South Africa, I engaged in intense contemplation of what was most directly to hand: my own experiences. I was my most constant and often only human companion: I had an opportunity to encounter and learn about my selves in more detail than ever before, except perhaps during my intensely introspective adolescence. The poems record my own deepening intimacy with myself, during which I learned about my palpably ageing body, my less conspicuously ageing mind, and the daily shifts in my consciousness as I navigated the predictable threats and unforeseen benefits of the pandemic.

Giving form to my inner explorations called for lyric poetry, the ‘the genre of personal expression’ (Jackson and Prins, 2014: 2, in Burt, 2016: 423). Lyric is characterised by its musicality (an echo of the other meaning of the words ‘lyric’ and ‘lyrical’) and by the fact that the speaking voice in the poetry is close, or identical, to the poet’s. (Even if the poet writes in her own voice, she will, simply because of the nature of poetry, craft a voice that is not identical to her conversational voice to write the poem.) The lyric is to poetry what autobiography is to prose. Some critics feel that lyric poetry’s focus on the speaking self comes at the expense of its own historicity: Kevin McGuirk (in Jeffreys, 1998: x) goes as far as to state that ‘the binary poetry versus history ... means, in effect, the lyric self versus history’. I disagree with such critics (Jeffreys’s edited volume is full of them) because I maintain that my poetic inquiry into intimacy with myself in my poetry is firmly rooted in the historical realities of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, and in my own situation, as a white female academic in late middle age, living in Johannesburg.

Because ‘The researcher is the instrument’ (Davis, 2023), and because my poetry is about myself, it is important to spell out the intimate, familial aspects of my life. I am single; my only child has left home, although she and I see each other regularly, and I share my home with three cats. In beginning to explore why I landed up romantically single (a condition that may be seen as that of a spinster or maiden aunt, but has also been seen as empowering¹) I turned to my personal history and wrote the following poem:

Bluebeard’s Chamber

I
The midnight-coloured door
at the foot of the stone stairs
bristles with locks.
It looms: ‘NO ENTRY’.

I do not have the keys.

¹ See, for example, Simpson (2005).

I have ransacked
drawers, cupboards, shelves and vases;
I have knocked, pummelled, called and pleaded;
but the door remains
blank and shut.

II
When I lean against the door,
it melts.
The stone hall is awash with blood.

My ex-lovers' dead bodies,
rolled downstairs and hauled in here —
door slammed, bolted and padlocked —
have continued bleeding.

III
I slide all over
on salty-sweet blood
as I slippingly cross the hall
and come to the head
of the narrow wooden steps
leading down into the dark.

The cave is cool,
lit by lantern fungi.
Water tinkles
into glittering pools.
The innermost recess
holds no mutilated lovers:
only the faintest notes
of shining water dripping
into silence deeper than moss.

The poem (inspired by Andreas Vollenweider's 1982 album, *Caverna Magica*) pivots on a metaphor representing my romantic history as a forbidden hall, akin to Bluebeard's chamber. The hall is forbidden because — in keeping with the late twentieth and early twenty-first century obsession with well-being and 'being well' — I tend not to dwell on the failures of my relationships, or to discuss them with others. But, as the poem reveals, the door, which appears impenetrably shut, is not even there: as soon as I attempt to enter, it melts and the gruesome history, which never could be fully hidden behind the door, is revealed. The blood of my former lovers symbolises their continued presence in my emotions; my experiences of interpersonal violence; and the pain of ending the relationships. As I cross the blood, slipping and sliding, I must come to terms with what my past holds. The final section of the poem sees me arriving in a cave, where, contrary to conventions of claustrophobia and hidden dangers, I feel at home and I am soothed by the soft lights and sounds. The silence that ends the poem is not the menacing stillness of waiting to be attacked or to fall into a bottomless pit, but the silence of completely accepting my situation as a single person.

Five weeks' hard lockdown was followed by a slight easing of restrictions in May 2020, when the National Coronavirus Command Council of South Africa allowed citizens to go outside our houses between 6:00 and 9:00 am. I was suddenly able to leave my house and look at the world outside my four walls. On that first day, I was up and dressed 15 minutes before we were allowed to leave our houses, despite the fact that, for the previous 12 years, I had left my house on most days at 5:30 for a walk with a friend and had been late many times. I was overwhelmed at the bright colours and vivid atmosphere of my neighbourhood. When I returned home, the impressions of my walk seemed to me like a set of pictures, and I wanted to write about how vivid they were. I wrote 'Snapshots of a Walk', which was published in *All Shook Up: A Global Anthology* (Friedman, 2021: 29). I originally wrote the poem with the most minimal punctuation, but later decided that the drama of the experience called for the pauses that punctuation affords. I present both versions of the poem below:

Snapshots of a Walk (original version)

*wake up it's time
the window will close soon
fish the reluctant mind from dreams of 'normal life'
clothes takkies keys
remember the compulsory accessory*

up a hill, round a corner,
the sun crests the ridge all *Lion King*
and gold floods towards us,
cupped in geologic hands.

*It's the end of the world as we know it
but the aloes haven't heard
Their candle-buds aim heavenwards
spark, catch, ignite
flaming we are here*

STOP says the sign
GROW says the convolvulus
soft, thin green stalk winding
up the pole to shoulder height
periwinkle blue
blaring *we will outlive you*

Snapshots of a Walk (revised version)

*Wake up! It's time!
Don't miss the walk window!
fish the sleep-fuddled mind
from dreams of 'normal life'.
Clothes, takkies, keys;
remember the compulsory accessory.*

Up a hill, round a corner,
the sun crests the ridge all *Lion King*
and gold floods towards us,
cupped in geologic hands.

It's the end of the world as we know it,
but the aloes haven't heard.
Their candle-buds aim heavenwards
spark, catch, ignite;
flaming, *We are here!*

STOP! says the sign.
GROW! says the convolvulus.
Soft, thin green stalk winding
up the pole to shoulder height;
periwinkle trumpets
blaring, *We will outlive you!*

My revised version of 'Snapshots' more closely approximated the rhythms of human speech, with exclamation marks for emphasis and some approximations of natural syntax. The aloe and convolvulus flowers, burgeoning in the sudden drop in pollution caused by motorised transport, flourished, despite their urban setting. The

punctuation allowed me to make the flowers' messages of defiance against human dominance more strident, and their reminders to human beings that they, not we, will endure, louder and more noticeable.

At the same time, the National Coronavirus Command had enforced new fashions:

Fashion

The new wave has taught us
that humans are dangerous to each other.
We must seal our faces,
keep our spit, snot, smiles and souls
safely under wraps.
Even so,
it's still a fashion parade.

'Fashion' is an example of a dramatic monologue, spoken in a voice, and from an existential position, that I find comfortable. The speaker is at some distance from my subject (the compulsory anti-virus face masks that South Africans had to wear for nearly three years). The first four lines adopt the position of a parent or sage, telling the reader that the regulation is for her own good. The final two lines switch to satire, remarking wryly on the human habit of turning even health rules into a fashion competition. The irony of pandemic-stricken humanity unable to give up their aspirations for glamour has a mordant bite.

As the masks and solitude grew commonplace, I settled into a routine alone and started to take stock of where I was, existentially, geographically, and chronologically. My body, I was surprised to find, was neither as young nor as resilient as it had been when I was an undergraduate. I was not the first person to be surprised by their body's ageing while their emotions and thoughts are still filled with curiosity, enthusiasm and wonder: but common experiences are always new in individual lives. Either through forced solitude or physical ageing, I reflected on great existential questions: Where am I? How did I get here? Where am I going? And, do I even want to go there? I remembered a section from TS Eliot's *Four Quartets* from my undergraduate years:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years —
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres* —
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a wholly new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. (1943: 30–31)

Eliot's great poem, *Four Quartets*, had enchanted me as an undergraduate. His metaphysical reflections appealed to my transcendental and metaphysical bent, and I was awed by his ability to switch between forms and voices mid-poem, adopting whatever voice suited his subject. His 'middle way' passage extends the experience of living between two world wars to the chronological middle of life and, metadiscursively, to the experience of a poet who has finished writing something and now has no idea how to begin what he next wants to write.

I drew on Eliot's 'the middle way' in a slightly sardonic poem about being well past middle age (some might say heading for old age):

The Middle Way

I pause on a highwire
vertiginously suspended
over an abyss.

Behind me yawn the reaches
of years filled with fairies,
ice-cream, trauma,

whole days of swimming pools and sunsets,
summer-seared skin regrowing.

The road ahead smells sweaty.
It may already have been lived by someone else.
Its swirling, murky brown depths
are tepid and uninviting.

Looking back // looking ahead,
I follow pinpricks of light.
Behind me a bell tinkles
as a door shuts.

The poem pivots on the contrast between the road behind me and that which is still to be travelled. As is common among ageing people, I indulge in nostalgia for a childhood that — with the benefit of hindsight — appears enchanted and blissful. If I had been completely honest, I would have said that my childhood included magical and happy moments, but was certainly not so all the time. While writing poetry allows us to express emotion, such as nostalgia and trepidation, it also allows us to flee, in writing, from some emotions we do not wish to probe or express. ‘The Middle Way’ is not centrally about my memories of a (non-)blissful childhood, though: it is centrally about my apprehension towards what Philip Larkin, with characteristic toughness, calls ‘age, and then the only end of age’ (n. d.). I used the well-worn metaphor of life as a journey, but, without being conscious of it, I added an allusion to Ferlinghetti’s ‘Constantly Risking Absurdity (#15)’ (n. d.) in the first stanza. Ferlinghetti’s poem about the craft of poetry, where the poet balances between ridiculousness and the audacious act of capturing beauty in words, is not only close to my own experience of writing, but also captured my feelings of being poised on the edge of age.

‘The Middle Way’ ends with the nihilistic image of possibilities closing off as I pursue my journey along the road. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not always nihilistic and am not, by nature, a nihilistic person. The most intimate knowledge that I gained during the lockdown was a profound awareness of my body: its intricacies, its frailties, its mortality, and the extent to which I depend on it. The pandemic threw most of human society into reflections on the body’s frailty, along with anxious hypochondria about the meaning of small ailments and symptoms. During the first stage of lockdown, many people addressed their anxieties by becoming obsessed with physical fitness. They turned their homes into domestic gymnasias, using doorways and chairs as equipment, while others used their gardens as jogging or walking circuits or completed workouts on YouTube.

As I watched acquaintances and friends become ill, and some pass away from COVID-19, I marvelled at my own health and wondered how long it would last. I mused that, having reached my late fifties, it would be, as popular parlance has it, ‘downhill all the way’ to decrepitude and death. Nevertheless, I also nurtured care and gratitude for my body, as ‘To my Body’ confirms:

To my Body (Move over, René Descartes)

I love cardigans, pullovers, polo necks, and sweaters
(although ‘sweater’ is not **real** South African).
Among cupboards and drawers filled with knitwear,
you, body, are my favourite.
You are stretched comfy with long use,
stained and fraying,
but still warm and serviceable.

Your sack of patched and thinning skin
is tattooed with innumerable stories
(seventeen deep in places)
for me to read to pass the time.

You are disreputably wrinkled and crumpled.
You seem to have escaped
being hung on the laundry line
for your lines to dry into insignificance.

From the mirror, no terrible fish
but a whole landscape,
contoured, folded, speckled,
looks back at me
through eyes I barely know
though their sadness is my own.

Yes. You and I are still one,
marvelling at all that passes,
loving water, oxygen, sun.

The poem joins countless other texts that have repudiated the famous Cartesian split between mind and matter. Descartes proposes fallaciously that ‘the essence of matter is extension, and the essence of mind is thought’ (‘René Descartes’, 2014). He does not give any thought to the fact that his mind would not function without matter (that is, without his body). My poem asserts that the mind and body are ‘still one’ despite the body’s having changed with age. It also expresses the ambivalence I felt towards it. On the one hand, it is a comfortable sweater, keeping me warm and safe; on the other, it looks and feels unfamiliar. (The reference to ‘not a terrible fish’ in the penultimate stanza alludes to the terrifying last two lines of Sylvia Plath’s ‘Mirror’:

In me she has drowned a young woman, and in me an old woman
Rises towards her day after day, like a terrible fish. (n. d.)

‘Mirror’ records a middle-aged woman’s terror at the prospect of ageing and becoming ‘an old woman’ through the voice of a mirror. The poet’s anguish at losing her youth and becoming an old woman is captured in the image of the fish rising unstoppably toward her through the murky water. My poem expresses more moderate emotions than Plath’s, possibly because I am psychologically more sanguine than she was; and it ends on a reaffirmation of my enjoyment of physical pleasure, despite the knowledge that all delightful phenomena will pass.

After spending weeks in my own company, I realised that, despite my having dedicated my whole professional career to cognitive pursuits, my mind was a problematic part of my experience. Instead of being disciplined and focused on the task/s at hand, which did not stop during the pandemic, it would run off in any direction, captivated by frivolous images on social media, fruitless regrets about the past, or anything else. In response, my poem, ‘Central Processing Unit’, tries to unseat the mind from the pride of place it has enjoyed in many accounts of human existence:

Central Processing Unit

Duplicity and manipulation
are your stock-in-trade,
fuelled by your incessant sales pitch
and multiple failures to focus.
Guilt and fear are the big guns
in your arsenal.
Like a toddler,
you scream
for all the sugar and fat you see.
You are known as diamond,
X-ray, sword,
but you skitter
like dropped mercury.

Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki Roshi explains the difference between ‘big mind’ and ‘small mind’ — a distinction that appears frequently in Buddhist thinking — as follows: ‘If your mind is related to something outside itself, that mind is a small mind, a limited mind [...] Big mind experiences everything within itself’ (2018). ‘Central Processing Unit’ concerns what Buddhism calls ‘small mind’: the mind where thoughts arise incessantly, usually with no relevance to present experience. The poem accuses the mind of multiple misdemeanours: it lies and schemes; it tries to persuade a person into self-destructive actions; it only knows instant gratification. The final two lines of the poem seal the mind’s coffin by alluding to its reputation as being pure and valuable, penetrating and incisive. The ‘mercury’ in the final line is the climax of the poem’s undoing of the mind’s popular reputation as crystalline, focused and sharp.

I initially became aware of age-related bodily weakness through orthopaedic conditions, rather than through a COVID-19 infection, when I developed an arthritic lower spine that caused intense hip pain and made it difficult to perform simple household chores such as vacuuming the carpets or sweeping the floors. I experienced all of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's celebrated stages of grieving (2005) as I slowly came to terms with the fact that my spine was not going to recover, but would have to be accommodated. As I reluctantly and disjunctively approached acceptance, I wrote a love poem to the ailing column:

To my Spine

You are an architectural crane
with multiple complex controls.
You swivel like an owl's eye:
up, down, sideways,
even (occasionally) diagonally.
But you are a superannuated model
longing for the stillness
of permanent retirement.

You dare not say this
lest it become your last choice,
your life death sentence.

You are a string of jewels,
but your edges are blunt:
planes touching, rubbing, grinding,
radiating blinding lightning
through nerve and muscle.

I have become an engineer —
chemical, athletic, metaphysical —
with your daily care in my hands.

'To my Spine', like 'The Middle Way', expresses my ambivalence towards an ageing body. The spine is represented as an 'architectural crane' (recording my wonder at its range of movement), as well as a 'string of jewels', suggesting how valuable each vertebra is. The value of each bone in the spine became more evident to me as I realised that the pain I was experiencing daily was caused by degeneration of the spinal discs and could not be cured, although it could be managed. I slowly and reluctantly learned to work with the pain and to practise daily exercises to alleviate it.

As South African society progressed from Lockdown Stage 5 (where we were required to stay at home except for essential or emergency outings; no social gatherings; no alcohol or cigarettes) to Stage 1 (where almost everyone was working from their offices again), I developed an intimate relationship with my home and began to understand that it is a symbol, in material terms, of myself as it holds and contains my aspirations, my history, and the possessions I have accumulated. My first stab at writing about the space I have lived in for 28 years focused on past inhabitants and past selves:

Ghost House

The humans who once lived here
are gone. I alone remain.
You might expect thick dust;
spiders' nests; shadows falling deep.
But the rooms are inhabited
by plants and furred people,
who live and love and talk
in different tongues from me.
My home is also host
to the women I have been
and the women I am:

daughter, wife, lover, friend.
They watch me from their walls
with kind eyes and mute, curious love.

‘Ghost House’ is about the traces left by people who have vacated a home in the memories of those who remain. My three-bedroomed house was once inhabited by three people, and the remains of their lives are still to be seen, particularly in things that mark my daughter’s growth through childhood to adulthood, which are still on shelves, in cupboards and other storage spaces. The second half of the poem returns self-reflexively to the idea of the house as a larger form of myself, with traces of my former selves. These are listed in terms of relationships: I am the daughter of my parents; I was once a wife; I have been a lover; and I remain a friend to many. In listing these human connections, I was reminded that, however alone I might feel under lockdown, I remained inextricably entangled with others. In addition, I realised anew that what I experience as ‘my self’ is often a construct generated through relationship and in no way possesses substance independent of its interweaving with other people, life-forms, and the material world.

As a feminist theorist of more than thirty years’ standing, I was struck by the ways in which my space was gendered. I was raised by two generations of women who took intense pride in their houses. My grandmother and mother, together with all their sisters, were concerned to train the next generation to keep their homes as pristine and well-run as theirs had been. It did not escape my notice that — in my family, as in many others — this was an exclusively female activity, and I explored the patriarchal roots of these practices in ‘A Woman’s House is her Castle’:

A Woman’s House is her Castle

Every woman knows
that a woman needs a house
more than she needs a man.
A man may be useful
as a means to the end
of obtaining a house
but is not indispensable.

Home is always a woman,
and a house cannot be a home
if there is no woman
to polish, tend, and arrange it.
She knows, as though by magic,
what she has learned
from her foremothers and Google:
how to clean, fix, furbish,
compose and grace her space.

Here I am: a woman in my house,
barred, locked, and sealed inside,
like a gift; like a prize.
But there is no competition,
no act of giving.
I am my own reward.

‘A Woman’s House is her Castle’ is an obvious reference to the often-quoted proverb: ‘A man’s house is his castle’, used to reinforce the patriarchal idea of a man as the unquestioned head of the household. The poem ironically subverts the popular idea that women are better at home-making than men, especially when the woman demonstrates skills that she has learned ‘from her foremothers and Google’. Google is the *de facto* assistant of any hapless homeowner confronted by a leaking basin, a non-functioning electrical plug, or any other perplexity. The woman in the poem, much like the American wife of the post-World War II era,² disguises the sources of her knowledge to make her household skills seem innate.

² Betty Friedan famously described this kind of behaviour in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963: 57–122).

The poem's final stanza, however, exposes the patriarchal division of labour, where men are supposed to work outside the home while women work inside it, as a way of confining and restricting women 'like a prize or a gift' rather than the agent of her own life. The bars and locks of this stanza allude to the alarming rate of domestic crime in South Africa and to what Pumla Gqola has called 'the female fear factory' (2022). Gqola incisively observes that the female fear factory makes women believe that they own nothing, not even their own bodies. In my case, as an older woman living alone, the fear that I, or my home, which is also my larger self, will be violated is a constant, even when I am not directly conscious of it. Hence I have bars and locks, and I am vigilant about security, even as I realise that it makes me a prisoner in my own home. Despite this, have come to understand that, in the absence of a man whom I have to please, I can, fortunately, become my own prize: a realisation that dawned slowly, through the deepening intimacy with myself that I enjoyed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Intimacy is frightening because it calls for honesty and vulnerability and is not satisfied with anything less. My experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic were not as dramatic as those of others who lost their jobs, or lost loved ones, or even lost their homes. I could not write about those experiences and call it poetic inquiry, since I did not live through such losses. My subject had to be myself, and my poetry had to be about my own life. My final poem describes how I came to write poetry about my own minoritarian, bourgeois or maybe just uninteresting experiences:

Poking It

Walking around my neighbourhood one morning,
I found it on the road: a heap of grey, crumpled rags,
barely larger than my foot.
It was a no-account, throwaway thing,
something you would toss into a rubbish heap.
It was whimpering softly,
so I moved closer and touched it with my shoe.
It moaned and shrank back into itself.
I leaned down and poked it, calling,
'Are you hurt? Do you need anything?'
My life leapt into my arms
and lay there, warm and soft.
'I need to speak. Please help.'

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