

# Lift up your hearts



**Roger Wagner** continues our lockdown series

**A**T a pub lunch with three Oxford poets, just before the lockdown, we all agreed that self-isolation would hardly alter our lives, and so (poetic lunches excepted) it has proved.

Almost the only change to my working rhythm in recent weeks has been ringing the handbell from my grandfather's school out of my studio window on Thursday evenings (though, the first time I did this, I mistook the day, and my wife was afraid that the fire brigade might turn up — it's a very loud bell).

Having said that, the shadow of the present situation falls on us all, and the effect on some painters has been a heightening of creativity. Richard Kenton Webb had started a while ago on a series of huge **drawings** illustrating Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but has now produced 130 and is still going.

I saw *The Loneliness of Adam* (below) in

his studio last summer. No reproduction can really convey the effect of size — each drawing is more than seven foot wide — and, in this image, that scale magnifies the effect of the figure of Adam against the vast waste of sea and the blank immensity of sky.

Is it a consoling image? I find that it is. In placing the loneliness of the human condition against the immensity of creation, it reminds us that, however isolated we may feel, we stand in the presence of a creator who recognises that it is not good for us to be alone.

ALTHOUGH (despite the easing of restrictions) we cannot travel much in the landscape, we can travel in our minds, and I have been **reading** *Travels with a Writing Brush*, an anthology of Japanese travel writing from the seventh to the 17th centuries.

The wonderful combination of fiercely concentrated poetry and gently rambling prose in the great 17th-century poet Matsuo Basho's *Narrow Road to the Deep North* is the culmination, I now discover, of a thousand years of wandering Buddhist monks and others' going on pilgrimage and recording their journeys in prose and poetry. The last Haiku that Basho ever wrote is a crystallisation of this millennium of spiritual yearning:

Sick on a journey  
Over parched fields  
Dreams wander on.

As a schoolboy, I dreamed about being a Zen monk wandering through the Japanese

landscape, but never got beyond dreaming. A more intrepid schoolfriend, Pico Iyer, did travel to Japan, and even lived for a time in a Zen monastery.

It was not quite what he expected, but, having married a Japanese, he has made his home in Japan while continuing his travels around the world. His latest book, *Autumn Light*, is a beautiful meditation on love and loss in the autumn of life, focused on his life in Japan and his membership of the Deer's Slope Ping-Pong club.

Another book that I have been reading is by an Iffley neighbour: Michael Bourdeaux. His Cold War memoir, *One Word of Truth*, is an inspiring read.

If you imagine a book that begins in the area of *Cider with Rosie*, moves into the landscape of John le Carré, with cameo roles for Shostakovich, Solzhenitsyn, and a succession of British prime ministers from Harold Wilson to Margaret Thatcher, you will get some sense of its richness and scope.

In contrast to the ethical ambiguities of le Carré's world, however, this is an account of a clear moral vocation staunchly pursued against intense opposition.

A **FILM** that allows a somewhat different kind of mental travelling is *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, which documents life in a family of Gobi desert nomads. The travelling here, though, is almost metaphysical: it would need a heart of stone not to weep with the weeping camel.

I have not in fact been watching many

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films, but have been following some **YouTube videos** that people have been filming in their homes. Malcolm Guite's *A Spell in the Library*, in which he reads from books in his collection, is a delight, as in a similar way is Philip Mould's *Art in Isolation*, where he talks about pictures in his house. (I was astonished to see a picture of mine, which I thought had disappeared without trace 30 years ago.)

**Morning Prayer** led by the Dean of Canterbury from various points in the deanery garden (accompanied by one or other of the deanery cats) has become a fixed point in my day.

I DECIDED that I wouldn't sing "Happy

birthday" while washing my hands, and opted instead for a chorus from my youth: "From the rising of the sun to the going down of the same the Lord's name is to be praised", thus combining ritual cleansing with what Paul calls "making **music** in your heart to God".

The internet attributes tune and lyrics to Paul Deming. He is the writer of the wonderfully harmonisable tune; the lyrics are, of course, from Psalm 113.

As a selection of my illustrated psalm translations is being published, I am more than usually absorbed in the **psalter**. My Hebrew editor insists on excising Tiberian *sigla* with the removal of all cantillation marks (not my strong point), and, because our software is not compatible, this is proving fiddly.

Nevertheless, through it all the voice of these ancient poems sounds in our present moment as a constant encouragement:

He that goes out and goes out  
And weeps  
Carrying a handful of seed  
Shall return and return  
With shouts of joy  
Carrying his sheaves.

Roger Wagner is an artist, painter, and poet, [www.rogerwagner.co.uk](http://www.rogerwagner.co.uk). *The Nearer You Stand: Poems and images by Roger Wagner is published by Canterbury Press at £12.99* (CT Bookshop £11.70).

For more on Richard Kenton Webb, visit [www.richardkentonwebb.art](http://www.richardkentonwebb.art)  
Next week: Martyn Percy

## Lighter side of lockdown

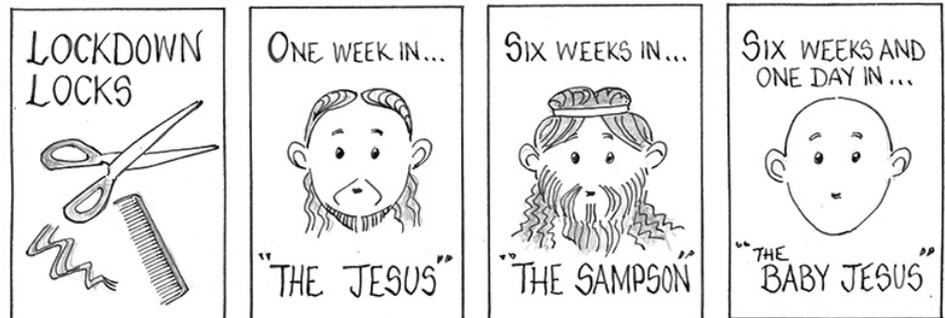
ALTHOUGH some of our lockdown contributors have lightened the mood, it is possible that these pages have not represented the great efforts being made to cheer people up during the pandemic.

This week we feature just two of them: two "Lockdown Psalms" written by Professor Catherine Clarke, from the Institute of Historical Research, University of London; and one from a series of strip cartoons drawn by Jim Godfrey, a verger at Christ Church, Oxford, and a worshipper at the Wesley Methodist Memorial Church near by.

I

1. I have dwelt long in the house of lockdown: I have enclosed myself in the habitation of Netflix and groaning.
2. They have set me my bounds which I shall not pass: I keep the statutes and observe the laws.
3. I entered into the supermarket, but it was barren: its plenty was turned into empty shelves, and there was no toilet paper in it.
4. Neither were there delivery slots by day nor by night: verily, not even from Ocado.
5. [2nd part] Deliver us from the wilderness of delivery: and deliver our deliveries unto us.
6. I am become a stranger unto the pub, and unto the office: even an alien unto Pizza Express.
7. The sun ariseth, and I go forth to work

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and to my labour: even in my pyjamas until the evening.

8. I am weary of Zoom, my throat is dry: it melteth away like wax as my broadband vanisheth.
9. Yet they gape upon me with their mouths and say: thy toddler sitteth lurking in the corner of the screen, and lo he imagineth mischief.
10. And thou, oh daughter of lockdown: thou shalt do thy phonics in exile.
11. Also thy literacy and numeracy work, and thy comprehension: yea verily, even thy fronted adverbials.
12. They have sprayed markers for my feet: they have set a place for me on the pavement outside Tesco Metro.
13. The unrighteous forget their social distancing: I swerve from their transgressions.
14. [2nd part] The people rebuke each other: and bear in their bosoms the rebukes of many people.
15. A mask hath covered my face and I wash my hands: neither have I found any hand sanitiser to comfort me.
16. The pestilence layeth siege against me: according to the cleanness of my hands shall I be recompensed.

II

1. Clap your hands, all ye neighbours: clap in the front gardens and on the doorsteps.
2. Make a thankful noise, for it is Thursday: clap your hands and bang the pots; bang the mighty pan from the stove, the frying pan from the draining board, and the little pan from under the sink.
3. Rejoice, for thou hast booked a delivery: a weekly slot even unto the end of June.
4. Surely plenteousness shall be in thy house: goodness shall follow thee, at a two-metre distance, all the days of thy life.
5. [2nd part] Our garners shall be full: and Netflix shall bring forth thousands and ten thousands of new episodes for evermore.
6. Arise! Yea, verily, for the lockdown easeth: gird thy face with apparel and go into the city.
7. Rejoice in the fruitful offices, all ye who were furloughed: but thy going out and thy coming in shall not be on public transport.
8. Rest ye alert by day, and alert by night: and the pillars shall deliver ye out of the wilderness.
9. Judgement and remembrance shall be thine heritage: and ye shall dwell in the house of austerity for ever.