

Wrong Way Round

WARWICK TIE

I've not put a mask on as yet. Before the lockdown, more and more people around here began to wear them. And on the campus where I work many of the students had long been doing so. They were mostly the international students. I can understand that. If I were living in another country, with a virus circulating, I would be especially anxious about protecting myself.

I've just got the one mask. And I'm lucky to have it, late as I was in trying to get some. Here's a thing—I anticipate everything will be laid on for me when and where-ever I turn up. So when I arrived at the pharmacy I was shocked to find that all their stock had been sold. 'Some time back', they said. Thinking that a dust-mask might be almost as good as the surgical kind, I headed off to a Mitre 10 in the newer, brighter side of town. 'How many do you want', the young shop assistant asked me as we looked together at the empty shelf. 'Just one'. 'Oh', they continued, 'I have a spare one in my handbag; just wait here'. The self-sacrifice moved me. Might it be possible, I wondered hopefully, that the pandemic is bringing about a shared sense of fate, that humanity might have a shot at overcoming its differences? Admiring the mask in my car, it struck me how easily it had happened. Perhaps too easily. Pale skins picking each other out in a crowd; male and female; older and younger. I didn't want to diminish

the act of kindness, and still don't, but its contours nevertheless felt familiar.

At home, alone with the mask, I couldn't put it on. Just the thought of doing so set my skin crawling. Instead, I busied myself with its transformation to distance myself from the rawness for which it stood: anxiety, sickness, death. Using faux black leather, a range of brass bits and pieces I'd taken from various places, a concertinaed pipe stolen from an airbed pump, along with a brass Kraken grabbed from goodness knows where to decorate the nose, I Steampunked that puppy. It's not pretty in the way WWI gasmasks are not pretty. Neither of them are meant to beautify. They shock. I can handle that shock, though, in a way I can't handle whatever it is that's going on.

Even now that it's finished, I can't put the mask on. The new issue I face is that I couldn't cope with the attention which it will draw if I wear it out. This whole thing throws me. Fragile, I am. Thankfully, though, I now have options: I have a stock of surgical masks on their way. Coming from China with kind regards—thanks Anran.

When it was suggested that we write blog posts on the pandemic for Counterfutures, I thought 'fine'. I now know a reasonable amount about the biology of the virus, about the political economy of its global movement, about its likely devastation if it spreads through African and Asian countries, about the need to organise in anticipation of the aggression to come from those wanting their profits back. I have stuff I can say.

As I look back through what I've written, though, I see that it's all about me. Perhaps that's the problem. It's All About Me. Perhaps it's me from whom others will need protection. Perhaps that's what the masks are for.

Looking back, I'm pleased that I haven't been able to put a mask on yet. If I had, I'd have been wearing it the wrong way round.

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