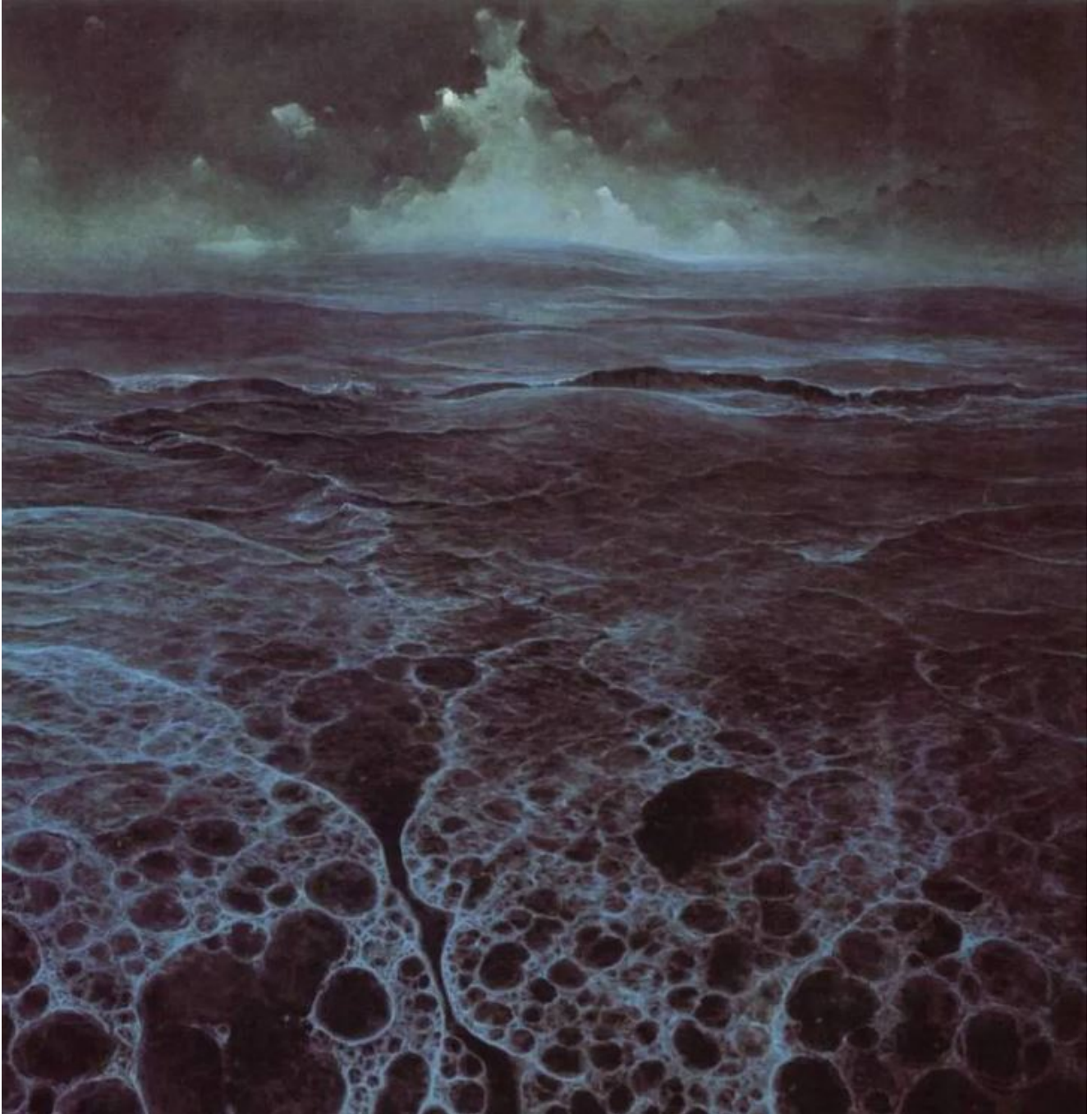


# Poems of the Black Death

by [Tom Holmes](#) (February 2024)



Untitled, Zdzisław Beksiński, 1985

# When Death Is the Object and Subject of Trauma

*The Black Death began around 1346 and ended in 1350/1351. Then there were eight plague aftershocks between 1361 and 1393.*

## I. Violence

She could not scrub the black  
from her daughter's finger tips  
and her bubo swelled. She paced  
from bed to door to bed chanting  
*My girl will die, will die, will die.*

The doctor popped the bubo,  
released fluids and stench  
of sharp flatulence like all the town.  
She couldn't smell her daughter's death.  
The father carved a wooden doll.

Then stabbed its heart and head.

## II. Survival

*This fault is with the filthy,  
immigrant poor. Let's build a wall.  
And pray and pray. It's logical.*

The poor, both clean and scummed, died  
and the wealthy, and the priests,  
and the doctors. And the supplicants.

Family phantoms gurgled  
bad breath from under the bed  
where the father caressed the doll.

He forsook prayer and wished  
the phantoms to particulate,

to fog, to blow away.

Outside his home, a breeze  
and rats infested with fleas.

### **III. Silence**

The arrival of a subtle crack  
crept from pole to pole across the moon.  
Astrologers and scientists calculated

the end. Commoners counted days  
until their infection and divided  
the result by the number of months

until the earth boiled or froze.  
A few prayed inside their hands.  
I counted rats. Then the infected.

Then the number of graves to dig.  
The dead and dying outnumbered  
the living, and math like dying

is reticent and limitless. I caressed  
my cold daughter's doll. I wondered  
about the other side of the equation

and the phantom X. It proved  
unsolvable. I caressed my daughter  
and coughed and ended the quiet.

### **IV. Witness**

I rolled so many stones  
with purpose from here  
to the cemetery. I shoveled  
  
one grave for the mass

of them and layered them  
eye to eye, then with stones.

No one saw me  
not even the dead.  
They were all dead.

## **V. Memory**

I roll so many stones  
from cemetery to town I undig  
the grave I attempt to rebuild

the human race from rocks and bones  
that persist beyond God's black vengeance  
and thereafter I caress the doll and rest

her on the remnants' northern pole  
because the moon is still here  
because the deeds of death endure

## **The Gray Death: Eleven Years after the Passing of the Black Death**

The Black Death washes  
away on a small British isle.  
Half of Europe, Asia, Africa sing  
their heroic tales of survival.

Half withdraw from family  
to a personal space and negotiate  
between speaking the unutterable  
and the unutterable silenced.

Then arises the powerfulest  
desire across Europe, Asia, Africa—  
the urge to laze, to unburden  
the long, heavy obscurity

they drag behind them all hours,  
so close to dying. In traumatic  
aftershock, just on the edge  
of forgetting, the first resurgence

of the plague, as God ordains.  
Children born at the tail end  
of his Black Death know nothing  
to suppress or say. In invincible

courage, they sharpen sticks  
and play, *The Poking of the Rats*.  
Fathers do not want to know.  
Mothers command, *Wash your hands*.

Like all children, they will not  
listen. They slash and tie rat  
tails into nooses or necklaces.  
They walk home swiping hands

on their scarves and sleeves. *See*.  
*They're clean*. They say  
grace and eat their hot,  
gray, post-pandemic meal

in wake of the first resurgence—  
God's unmentionable edict  
to slaughter, once again,  
unmemorable people so fair.

## **A Merchant Ship from Genoa, Italy, on March 24th, 1345**

The fourth day at sea a bump  
surfaces on the captain's neck.

A whitecap bounces the ship.

Then another and another.

The chef feels a bubo  
in his armpit. It itches, hot.  
Both men smell like fetid blood.  
On the eighth day, three more men.

Panicked sailors hide  
beneath deck in horse stalls  
near the barrel of lemons  
with rats and fleas.

The ship loses course.  
"It's destiny for our sins,"  
a sailor preaches as he ropes  
the captain to the helm. "Steer."

His face is ruddy and can't see.  
They strap a gold compass  
to his head and layer it  
with grounds of old tea.

The world spins the boat.  
Someone coughs blood.  
Another sneezes bile.  
"We're infected. Save our souls."

There's a splash of water  
The captain's compass floats away,  
and a seagull nips his left eye.  
There's another splash and another.

A survivor whispers to the wind,

another heckles the sun.  
Soon they eat the horses,  
then the rats eat the men.

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For over twenty years, **Tom Holmes** is the founding editor and curator of *Redactions: Poetry & Poetics*. Holmes is also the author of five full-length collections of poetry, including *The Book of Incurable Dreams* (Xavier Review Press) and *The Cave*, which won The Bitter Oleander Press Library of Poetry Book Award for 2013, as well as four chapbooks. He teaches at Nashville State Community College (Clarksville). His writings about wine, poetry book reviews, and poetry can be found at his blog, The Line Break: [thelinebreak.wordpress.com/](http://thelinebreak.wordpress.com/). Follow him on Twitter: [@TheLineBreak](https://twitter.com/TheLineBreak)

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