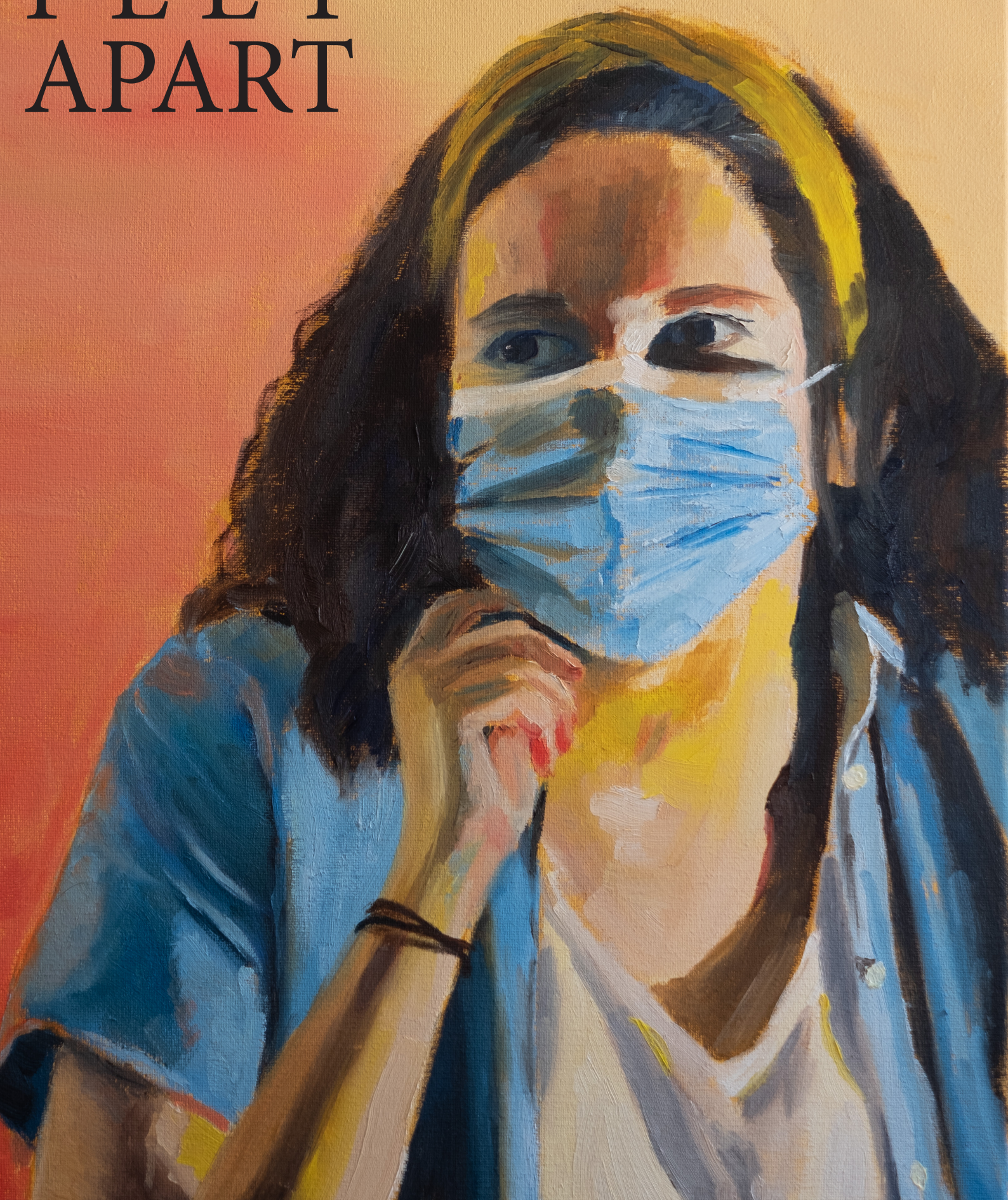
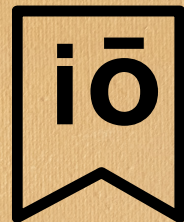


TALES FROM
S I X
F E E T
A P A R T





Literary
Journal

presents

Tales From Six Feet Apart

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VISION

iō believes that art is derived from one's experiences and exploration of life. Therefore, anyone is capable of creation. However, not everyone has access to traditional means of publication. This book aims to provide a platform for these underrepresented voices of our time. Now is your chance to listen and respond.

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EDITORS' NOTE

When COVID-19 jolted the U.S. last spring, we knew we wanted to point a telescope toward your most personal experiences with this unimaginable time. Though our individual affiliations with colleges and universities — Crystal as an instructor at a community college, Laura as a law student, and Isabelle as a master's student — allowed us the privilege to quarantine, we understood our government at large did not prioritize this privilege for everyone. While some were able to stay safer at home, our most vulnerable and exposed were forced to maintain life as usual. There is no universal COVID-19 experience.

In our second print volume, we aimed to continue to shape *iō* as a journal for you and to be shaped by our contributors' writing and artwork. We hold this vision close to us as our central purpose. Thus began our new priority in a new normal: showcase the range of experience during this pandemic. The peaks. The flatness. The bursts of joy. The despair. Whatever it was, it was yours.

Our submissions for *Tales from Six Feet Apart* opened near the beginning of the pandemic in the U.S. We wanted to capture your experiences as we collectively maneuvered this novel time.

Since then, though, we have endured what has been deemed a multi-pandemic. As of this writing, the country has reached over 28 million COVID-19 cases and over 500,000 deaths since the virus struck last year.¹ Last summer, after the brutal death of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others, *The New York Times* deemed Black Lives Matter as potentially the largest movement in U.S. history.² In November, the nation's ideological fault lines expanded in the midst of a contentious election season. At the start of 2021, we watched a far-right mob threaten democracy in a violent insurrection of the Capitol. What you will find in this book is a collection of your

1 "United States COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by State," COVID Data Tracker, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, updated Feb. 26, 2021, https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_totalcases

2 Larry Buchanon. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *New York Times*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>

experiences at the start of a year unlike what any of us have experienced before.

But amidst such turbulent and relentless times are some beacons of light and hope. You found solace in the small and simple things around you with a newfound appreciation for them. You made connections, albeit from a distance. At the same time, this time has spawned tremendous reflection and desolation. You lost, and you mourned. You may be still mourning now. But throughout this pandemic, and throughout the different pieces we've collected, you persevered through unprecedented adversity and trauma.

Our final wish then, in presenting this body of work, is that you find a sense of unity in our collective experience. We hope you can laugh at the more ridiculous and relatable moments of this pandemic, such as the toilet paper shortage of 2020 or the memes inspired by the boatload of television many of us consumed. Remembering your own experiences as you read *Tales from Six Feet Apart* may lead to tears and anguish. Maybe you will smile at the restored faith in humanity brought upon by the actions of kind neighbors and strangers. The world still has a ways to go before the pandemic is over and a semblance of normalcy is re-established, but the last year has proven that, if we remain mindful of others' realities, we are more than capable of getting through this together.

Sincerely,

Crystal, Isabelle, and Laura

COPY EDITOR NOTES

Natalia Pagán Serrano

Working on *Tales* has shown me not one COVID-19 experience is the same. It has proved to me, as writing and art often do, that sharing our experiences is an exercise in empathy and love. As we continue to be apart from the ones we care for the most, what greater act of closeness is there than this?

2020, which I often jokingly, and not-so, refer to as the “lost year,” tested us in a myriad of ways. I know it tested me. And though some days I would wake up feeling numb, desperate to get out, to see my mother, to show a stranger my smile, I persisted. And so did many others, in the face of immeasurable loss, turmoil, and desperation. And many did not. We persist for those who cannot. We persist, we *persist*.

Raquel Mueller

The pandemic has been a stagnant time for me, especially in creative endeavors, but being able to have a consistent project to work on with others from *Tales* and beyond has been a gift. Being able to connect with people creatively — especially through and about a pandemic that’s isolated us — continues to be enormously cathartic. To see through the work in *Tales* that I am not alone, but also that my experience is only one of many has helped contextualize and ground the events for me. It’s been a privilege to work with everyone on *Tales* and I hope that everyone who gets a chance to read it finds comfort in seeing some of their own experience reflected, like I did.

Ellianie Vega

As I look at pieces from the beginning of the pandemic as we near its one year anniversary, it’s both inspiring and terrifying to see what has transpired. While so much has been lost, there’s so much we have learned from this global pandemic. We have seen mutual aid unlike ever before, global movements towards racial justice, and made deep personal connections despite the distance. This project came into my life after I had just lost so much that now seems so small — my graduation ceremony, my job offer, a newfound prom-

ise of independence — and it reminded me for the first time in a long time how art not only soothes suffering, but imagines the framework to build a better world.

The summer of 2020, I spent so much time reading a work that posited the gap between adolescence and adulthood is the shattering of illusions. 2020 taught the world that so many institutions we once thought our saviors cannot hold us up, and as terrifying as it is, this shattering of illusions has made us powerful. As we stand up to support each other as all else fails, ordinary citizens have learned their power. In these stories of desperation, grief, ennui, and joy, we find power through our voices

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6 feet apart

Jay Aja

or 6 feet under. i can't separate the polarities.

i am selfish.

watching you die last year

is better than seeing what the world would have done to you today.

your lungs two lost

punctured jellyfish

adrift in a body forsaken.

imagine this virus.

i watched the air in your lungs

become an aqueous environment

where you constantly drowned.

i don't want to know how this toxin

would have poisoned you too.

we open the blinds.

your room has lain in silence

and now there is light.

the sight of garbage bags filled

with your panties and bras

is too final

like watching the sands of someone's life run

out of an hourglass.

the pandit is here
as he was a year ago
in that hospital. the day
he chanted rites over your dying body
when childhood friends summoned
you to become spirit
in 108 repetitions. we praised lord shiva
offered tulsi and mango leaves with kush grass
dropped ghee into a fire
smeared sindoor on a bust of lord krishna
enough prayers
to send you to the gods.
and now 6 feet becomes thousands
and the faces of your sisters
are just pixels on a screen
the static too distant a space to reach across.

I Hope This Finds You Well

Ellen ZB

i hope this finds you well.

i hope this finds you
doors locked, windows cracked.
i hope this finds you cutting mask shapes
from your spouse's t-shirts,
looping elastic over your ears
to get the sizing right.
i hope this finds you
baking bread in the loaf pans you got
for your wedding and never used.
oil the pans, pat down the dough,
wash your hands again, knuckles rough,
nail-beds like cracked earth.
i hope this finds you in your bedroom
sobbing.
i hope this finds you watching
another commercial with a gaggle of
singing kids,
parents smiling, preternaturally calm
like their hearts aren't jetpacks, like they aren't
counting the minutes their kids are outside
dreading cooking dinner again
weighing the risks of food delivery
adjusting their masks, washing their hands.
i hope this finds you too tired for anger
too nervous for sleep.
i hope this finds you in a closet in lieu of an office
typing reports on a laptop you bought
to write stories.

On Growing Garlic

Melissa Smith

I.

We have garlic on our windowsill
That's growing leaves,
And I asked if we should keep it.
Wouldn't it be cruel to let it stay
Uprooted? Should we have
Mercy for something sprouting
With no ground to stand on?
Aren't we just delaying
The inevitable?

II.

You are the only thing
Keeping me going, and you
Find new ways to make me
Laugh every day. We are falling
In love, and I can't help but think
We are blind to the
Ground.

III.

My therapist tells me that most everyone she talks to is
Up and down, like bobbing
Moles, and I pray someone
Whacks me. It is safety to wake up and
Know that I'll be hurting. It is
Hope that is helpless.

IV.

"How are you feeling?" you ask,
And I say that I am better, with precision,
But in reality, it is
As familiar as breathing, as if I were
Sickness to begin with.

V.

It is

2 p.m.

And I haven't

Gotten out of bed.

VI.

We trip over each other in the kitchen while we

Cook, slow dancing over an

Open flame, and sometimes you forget

To flip the pancake, but I always take

The ones we burn. I eat them

Barehanded, cross-legged on the

Floor, and this is the way we spend

The days that line up a little less. This

Is the way I would spend every day

If I could.

VII.

There's a store on a corner that sells

Kimchi and gyoza and

Nori. There's a couple fighting and

A woman is crying, and we hold our

Breath as we pass for fear of catching

Whatever they have.

VIII.

"I can't keep going like this."

And you are tired, and I am

Crying on the floor,

and it's a wonder

We've lasted this long at all.

IX.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

X.

I want to spend the rest of my life with you.

XI.

I do not know how
Garlic grows.

Unlucky 13: Ordinary Lasts in the Time of COVID

Jessica Burdg

They say the hardest part of writing is knowing when you're done. When to stop. How it ends. In living, that's not as difficult—usually. We take it for granted, walking through the world with the assumption that we get more of it tomorrow. But for the almost 54,000 human beings in the U.S. alone who have died at the hands of the COVID-19 virus (as of this writing), that was not to be.

There's so much here to grieve for, to rage against, to fear. I have done that and am still doing it, like so many of us. But there's something specific I just can't shake, a thought-chrysalis which I can't shimmy out of.

The tear-off calendars and motivational speakers tell us to live every day like it's our last. But we don't. We don't because living every day like it's our present is often hard enough. Those 54,000 people? I know some of their bodies were stacked in refrigerated trucks. I know they did not feel the comfort of holding a loved one's hand as they passed. I know all the headlines, my brain saturated with good journalism and thoughtfully-reported truth. We need our media always, but especially now. Especially when it's uncomfortable.

The thought I cannot shake has nothing to do with any news reports or anecdotes or obituaries or charts or projections, though—all of which, again, matter profusely. Instead, this thought is prickly and indefinite; you couldn't report on it if you tried.

Those 54,000 people didn't know their last good, ordinary days—the ones before they fell sick, before they walked into or were wheeled into hospital rooms from which they'd never emerge—were *it*. The last time they felt that familiar floor under their feet as they stepped out of bed, the last time they sipped that nothing-special-about-it cup of coffee, the last time they felt that regular-old breeze on their skin, the last time their nothing-to-see-here car sputtered to life at their command, the last time they instinctively grinned at the everyday giggle of a child, the last time they called their parents to

have that same-old conversation about the weather.

Those days of ordinary lasts, all 54,000 of them (and counting). That's what I think about.

I can only assume that few, if any, of those people recognized those ordinary lasts for what they were. How could they? But we do, now.

In tribute to those we've lost and have yet to lose, what if we, the living, took one day and treated *our* ordinaries as if they were our last-ers? If we savored each sip, bent toward each breeze, turned toward the laughing child instead of rushing ahead, talked to our parents about more than the weather.

In living our faux ordinary day of lasts, odds are – in this time, especially – someone we care deeply for or barely know at all or have merely passed by in the store or on the street is walking through their *actual* day of ordinary lasts. They just don't know it. If enough people hold days of ordinary lasts – remembering that noticing and slowing and appreciating are just as much verbs as are arriving and accomplishing and managing – we can collectively improve the invisible real ordinary lasts of those in our periphery. Or maybe even our own.

I tried it.

1. What should I do with my 401(k)?¹

My alarm buzzes: 6:30, same as always. I snooze, same as always

I awake slowly, groggily examining the grooves of my headboard, smoother than I remembered. As my brain starts to fire, I realize that somewhere, somebody's job is to see to it that grooves in headboards are smooth. A groove maker, a groove checker.

I know what I'd like to feel now, on my day of ordinary lasts: fingers in my hair, fingers on my skin, the heat of a body I desire and ask for pressed into mine, also desired and asked for. But these are the days of quarantine, and I am alone.

One of my legs has escaped cover in the night, chilled from the fan above. I pull the blanket over me again briefly, committing its

1 "The New York Times's 13 Frequently Asked Questions in the time of Coronavirus", Coronavirus Updates, New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/news-event/coronavirus>. Accessed April 2020.

softness to memory. I yawn, stretching slowly as I rise — the kind of stretch that you can't do without releasing a satisfied groan. The kind of stretch you might skip to save time if it wasn't your day of ordinary lasts.

I head for the kitchen, where my kettle lies in wait. I have enough coffee left for the morning, I'm pretty sure.

*And the New York Times says: "Food, Rent, Health Insurance? Tough Choices in Pandemic Economy"*²

2. Should I pull my money from the markets?

I sip it hot and black, same as always. I respond to important emails and text messages, same as always.

On my day of ordinary lasts, though, I am highly selective, responding to my family, my friends. I write to them, asking if they're okay, asking how their families are holding up, asking if they need anything.

I tell everyone I love that I love them.

*And the New York Times says: "More Than 4 Million Filed Unemployment Claims Last Week"*³

3. Can I go to the park?

I pull on my well-worn running shoes, same as always. I drive the few miles to the trail circling the reservoir, same as always.

About halfway through my jog, a little boy, three or so, stands on the opposite side of the trail. He looks at me as if he wants to race. His mom, pushing a stroller, gives him a go-ahead nod. A go-ahead nod on a day of ordinary lasts is a big deal. She must assume I'm safe, and I thank whatever about me shows her that.

The boy giggles, as pure a sound as exists in this world, excited at his freedom. I like that about the boy. He picks up two sticks and eyeballs me, a dare. For a second, I want to tell him that it's not

2 Tiffany Hsu, "Food, Rent, Health Insurance? Tough Choices in Pandemic Economy", New York Times, April 22, 2020, Last Modified April 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/business/economy/coronavirus-budget-savings.html>.

3 "More Than 4 Million Filed Unemployment Claims Last Week", Coronavirus Updates, New York Times, April 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/business/stock-market-coronavirus-live.html>.

safe to run with pointy sticks. But his mother is there. And I am far enough away to maintain the requisite distance, yet close enough to ignore it if he's about to fall. On a day of ordinary lasts, I'm not about to take anything from anyone.

We start off, his tiny feet shuffling, holding the sticks out like they are wings. Maybe they are. I let him get ahead, where he stands in front of me in the center of the trail, his stick-wings turned to road blocks. I stop, six feet away from him, and juke left, animatedly. He does the same, eyes gleaming. I juke right. I travel into the woods, dodging a tree which I notice is decorating the muddy ground with tiny purple petals, almost translucent and defiantly beautiful, even in their discard. I circle past the boy, flanked by flora.

Before I continue, I pause ahead of him, turning to say that I think he is very fast. He raises his sticks triumphantly in the air, smiling.

And The New York Times says: "To discourage crowds, a park in Japan clips 10,000 lilies."⁴

4. Should I stock up on groceries?

I shower, the eucalyptus-scented steam filling my small bathroom, same as always. I dress in neutral colors as I make my way into the day, same as always.

As I look into my familiar bathroom mirror, a little smudged, I pause to admire the wisdom in my doe eyes, the arch in my cheekbones, angled and smooth as the best skipping rock. I choose, for once, to ignore the deep lines creasing my forehead the way rivers cut canyons, the cracks at the corners of my eyes jagged like the cliffs that same river cut, the tiny gray hairs that continue to multiply around my crown, surely fed by all that water.

None of it matters. Did it ever?

I stop by the market on my way to pick up my daughters from their dad's house. It is switching day, and I need a handful of items – bread, peanut butter, bananas, macaroni and cheese.

I am in the store briefly, the paisley cloth mask my mother

⁴ "To discourage crowds, a park in Japan clips 10,000 lilies." Coronavirus Updates, New York Times, April 25, 2020, Last Modified May 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/25/world/coronavirus-news.html>.

sewed covering half of my face. This ordinary last, a shopping trip.

I am hyper-aware of my level of privilege, to have access to what I need and the means to bring it home. The bunch of bananas in my basket, blotched only slightly by brown, suddenly feel like bars of gold – the essential worker cashier selling them to me, young and tired and unmasked, their bearer.

And The New York Times says: “Many unemployed people are not receiving benefits, Pew finds”⁵

5. What if somebody in my family gets sick?

I read to my daughters, who argue over who gets to sit closest to me, same as always. I carefully show them the pictures as they lean in, their little brows furrowed in concentration, same as always.

On my day of ordinary lasts, I do not rush through the book because I need to send work emails. I do not wonder about my bank account in the back of my mind while reading a fairytale. Instead, I marvel at how, mercifully, we are all still healthy today.

I do not only read the words and show the pictures *to* my children, but I hear the words and see the pictures *with* my children. It turns out that the story, one I’ve read a hundred times before, is actually pretty good.

And The New York Times says: “What’s a Pulse Oximeter, and Do I Really Need One at Home?”⁶

6. What makes this outbreak so different?

I take a moment alone to catch up on the news, same as always. It is what I must know and what hurts to know, same as always.

I pause, closing my eyes for a moment to digest it all. I linger longer in this moment, noticing how the whole of a breath fills me, how my chest visibly rises. Then, like the tides, it falls. Cyclical. That’s a word I’ve read to describe a particular kind of stock, but I

5 “Many unemployed people are not receiving benefits, Pew finds.” Coronavirus Updates, New York Times, April 25, 2020, Last Modified April 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/25/us/coronavirus-news.html>.

6 Parker-Pope, Tara, “What’s a Pulse Oximeter, and Do I Really Need One at Home?”, New York Times, April 24, 2020, Last Modified June 18, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/24/well/live/coronavirus-pulse-oximeter-oxygen.html>

don't know what it means in terms of the market. And those aren't the kinds of numbers I'm thinking about today, anyway, on this day of ordinary lasts.

*And The New York Times says: "36,000 Missing Deaths: Tracking the True Toll of the Coronavirus Crisis"*⁷

7. Is there a vaccine yet?

I make lunch for my daughters, simple sandwiches, same as always. I ask my oldest if she'd remembered to take her steroid inhaler this morning; she hadn't, same as always.

As I cut the crust away with a butter knife, I look at them. Innocence. They know only that there are germs outside, and that's why we can't touch anything or go to school or see friends.

They accept that explanation finitely, as that's how young children often take truths from those they trust. We follow the rules. I remember what I read just a few moments ago, about mass protests by the unworried and unmasked, about states opening hair salons while their neighbors die.

Though I try to squash it, there is fear. I pick up the gray inhaler with the white cap — one I just had refilled for three months, a refill that cost almost \$200 with insurance — and place it in front of my eight-year-old.

Please take it, I tell her softly. Please try to remember.

*And The New York Times says: "W.H.O. says coronavirus antibody tests 'need further validation.'"*⁸

7 Katz, McCann, Peltier, & Wu, "161,000 Missing Deaths: Tracking the True Toll of the Coronavirus Outbreak", New York Times, April 21, 2020, Last Modified July 31, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/21/world/coronavirus-missing-deaths.html>. Accessed April 2020 - Article has since been updated to reflect rising number of deaths.

8 "U.S. scientists join W.H.O. in calling for better coronavirus antibody tests." Coronavirus Updates, New York Times, April 25, 2020, Last Modified April 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/25/us/coronavirus-news.html#link-48fb8644>.

8. How does coronavirus spread?

After lunch, I bring my laptop to my patio and sit in the sun, sunglasses perched over reading glasses inelegantly, aiming to write, same as always. My daughters run around the slightly-overgrown backyard, intermittently shrieking in delight or arguing, same as always.

This day of ordinary lasts, I do not stare at a blinking cursor and second-guess myself for hours. I just write, the warmth of the midwestern afternoon sun warming the back of my neck. I don't care if nobody will want to read my essay. I don't worry about the rejection of an editor. Instead, I look down at my hands as I type, knuckles wrinkled and veins popping and polish chipped. I've never seen them so capable. Maybe they always have been.

I hear my children bickering over the mini trampoline in the yard. Instead of intervening, I watch quietly to see if they can find compromise in chaos.

I return to my computer, writing emails this time.

I tell everyone I am grateful for, that I am grateful for them.

And The New York Times says: "In a Crowded City, Leaders Struggle to Separate the Sick From the Well"⁹

9. How do I get tested?

I close my computer when I run out of things to say, same as always. I play a couple rounds of hide and seek before calling the kids inside, same as always.

Once inside, we wash our hands for a full twenty seconds, singing the ABCs. It's time for homeschooling; I bring them the assignments their teachers sent: letter tracing and sight words for my kindergartener, math equations and story character trait identification for my second-grader.

They ask if we can play school instead, just today. Their eyes are twinkly, hopeful. They don't know it's my day of ordinary lasts.

⁹ Barry, Ellen, "In a Crowded City, Leaders Struggle to Separate the Sick from the Well", New York Times, April 25, 2020, Last Modified April 28, 2020. <https://www.ny-times.com/2020/04/25/us/coronavirus-chelsea-massachusetts.html>

I choose my pretend teacher name, and we dive into a lesson we create as we go. They learn, but their papers stay blank. When they eventually go back to school will depend on when testing is developed. Until then, and especially today, I will let them call me Ms. Sunshine.

And The New York Times says: "The U.S. conducted 1.2 million tests in a week, but experts say that is not enough."¹⁰

10. Should I wear a mask?

I decide to take a drive with the windows down and music up, what we call a "wind party," same as always. It lifts our spirits, the combination of breeze and joy contagious, same as always.

The best wind parties are held on the interstate. You have to turn the music up louder to overpower the sound of the whipping wind. We have our playlist ready. As we approach our turn, the girls roll down their windows in anticipation.

An old woman driving an SUV rolls up beside us at the red light. She is wearing an N95 mask. We are not wearing our masks because we are not getting out of our car.

The girls wave to the woman, and I lift my index finger off the wheel, the standard driver-to-driver acknowledgment. I cannot see the other driver's expression, but I think I see her eyes smile-crinkle, a tell. She waves back.

As we take the on-ramp, I hear a question from the backseat.

"Mommy, why did that lady have that mask on her face?"

It's because of the germs, I say.

"Oh, ok."

That's the last thing I hear before we reach the speed limit, starting the cacophony of blues guitar and child glee and singing wind, the soundtrack to my day of ordinary lasts so perfect that I blink back the sting of tears.

At least, I think that's why.

¹⁰ "The U.S. conducted 1.2 million tests in a week, but experts say that is not enough.", Coronavirus Updates, New York Times, April 25, 2020, Last Modified April 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/25/us/coronavirus-news.html>.

And The New York Times says: "As Leaders Urge Face Masks, Their Behavior Muffles the Message"¹¹

11. What should I do if I feel sick?

I make dinner — simple pasta, with the sauce that doesn't have tomato chunks so my kids will eat it, same as always. I make a smoothie for dessert, and I sneak in extra greens alongside the frozen fruit, giving them all the nutrition I know how to do, same as always.

Around the dinner table, I ask my daughters to share their peach and pit — something good from the day, something not so good. I am sitting with them, but not eating. There is something about the day of ordinary lasts coming to an end that feels heavy in my stomach, and there isn't room for anything else. I focus on their little faces, trying to memorize every single strand of hair, every eyelash. I love them so much I could burst.

We all have the same peach: the wind party. We all have the same pit: the germs.

And The New York Times says: "Please Do Not Eat Disinfectant"¹²

12. How Can I Help?

I call my mother and father, same as always. My mother does most of the talking, asking about her granddaughters and telling me about what she accomplished in the yard today, same as always.

I do not rush off the phone. I ask my mother questions about the trees she's going to plant this spring. My father tells me that next time he's in town, he'll take a look at my lawn mower to see if he can replace a missing bolt.

Here, nearing the end of my day of ordinary lasts, I'm astounded at the many ways we show and receive care in this lifetime. All those micro-actions of attention, of tenderness, of trust. How there is so much potential for joy in staying a bit longer.

11 Astor, Maggie & Karni, Annie, "As Leaders Urge Face Face Masks, Their Behavior Muffles the Message", New York Times, April 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/politics/coronavirus-masks.html>.

12 Nierenberg, Amelia, "Please Do Not East Disinfectant", New York Times, April 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-disinfectant-inject-ingest.html>.

How there is so much luck in getting to stay a bit longer.
Just a bit longer.

And The New York Times says: "How to Manage Your Loneliness"¹³

13. When will this end?

I tuck my daughters in, making sure they have their special blankets, as always. I make up a bedtime story about a far away place, same as always.

I see that my youngest is again sleeping in my frayed, oversized sweater. It's so big that it hits her right at the shins. She sleeps in it because she says it smells like me — this I have long known. But on my day of ordinary lasts, I allow myself to feel what that means, to sit with the realization that love can provide physical warmth, too, when it's strong enough.

I crawl into my own bed, the day done. The whirring overhead fan spins a kaleidoscope behind my eyelids. I'm somewhere in that in-between, itself a universe as luminous and unexplored and mysterious as the deepest seas. There are creatures that live there that glow simply as part of their existence. Can you imagine? I see them, flickering and floating in air not water, just this once, just for me, a lava lamp to rock me to sleep on my day of ordinary lasts.

Our time in this space of abstract shape and color, our own light show, is always brief. We will rise eventually. Or rest will come, and with it the full of darkness.

And The New York Times says: "On the Front Lines of a Pandemic, 'I Love You' Can Mean 'Goodbye'"¹⁴

13 Halpert, Julie, "How to Manage Your Loneliness", New York Times, April 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/20/smarter-living/how-to-manage-your-loneliness.html>.

14 Kuo, James, "On the Frontline of the Pandemic, 'I Love You' Can Mean 'Goodbye'", New York Times, March 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/style/modern-love-coronavirus-seattle-kirkland.html>.

What I Want for the Next Pandemic

Kelly Nickie

At least a month's notice
on the shutdown
of storefronts and friendships
so I can stock up on
sanitizer
and hugs

A live-in caretaker
to disinfect
700 square feet
of surfaces
all the time

One of those portable bidets
installed on the rim of the toilet
to eliminate the now
conspicuous consumption
of toilet paper

A fiancé
who knows when
to emerge for attention
and when to retreat
for space

Some heirloom jewelry
ready to barter
for gas
to leave
if my apartment
becomes a secondary morgue

The ability
to tell people to fuck off
when they copy and paste
into my DM's
"Just taking the time
to check in on people
and sending positive vibes.
Hope everything
is going as well
as can be."

Lambs and Martyrs

Tunisia Nelson

If you have not been living under a rock, you know there is a virus.

There have been so many memes and talks about the frontline workers,
The essential workers,
The sacrificial lambs.
They are praised for walking into slaughter.
This is not to say they should not be, but take a look at their journey.

Did they wake up that morning and say they wanted to be a lamb?
Are they contracted to that position?
What if they had woke up and felt more like a lion,
King of the jungle?
Isn't life nothing but the sort?
You have a 1% dictating the watering hole:
A system, you could say.
What if instead of being a lion, they indeed wanted to be a lamb,
A martyr,
Taking an oath to risk their lives, their families lives, their sanity?
Should a martyr require more praise than a lamb?
They both serve a purpose.
They both make up a system.
When you think of a martyr and a lamb, does one's suffering outweigh the other?
Lambs are food.
They will be eaten,
They provide,
But do they know their fate?
Now martyrs, they are
The revered
The holy
The great
The sacrificial
The lambs.

I Died Before I Could Furnish My Living Room

Oak Morse

For Covid-19

I imagine
I'd get contaminated,
soon
kind of how cancer
got a hold of me.

When you think
you have the optimum armor
there's always a crack
somewhere.

Diseases look for cracks
and diseases are honest too —
they tell
about how you've been living
though sometimes
they get it wrong.

No lifestyle
will ever be healthy enough.
Soon as we hit the womb
we become inmates,
vulnerable to suffering.

I imagine myself
curled up under my comforter
counting memories:
when I pushed those rotten
berries up my four-year-old brother's nostrils,

when I scraped my knees,
claiming I knew how to rollerblade.

I imagine I would lie
in bed sinking
until it becomes my coffin.
Never once did I think
I would die in my very first apartment.
(Oh, how poems make you wonder
about so much, but also so little)

I had plans:
L.A. was going to get a load
of me at the end of the spring,
my body was going to be
like last year's tax refund,
the best it has ever been,
I was going to have
the eighth-grade algebra teacher
help prep me for the GRE.

I was supposed to leave a dent in 2020
but Covid-19 has us suspended
with our hands tied
and it's far from funny,
just like cancer.

Because when you are face to face
with reality,
there's no ladder that will lift you
out of it
no speed dial for God,
just a bed for you to lie in
even though you may not have made it.

Survivor's Guilt

SaMantha Shields

Black people are dying, and I have never felt safer.

March was the first month in years without a school shooting. I can't remember the last time I hadn't experienced a shooter drill.

Black people are 8 times more likely to be stopped by police. I have only driven a handful of times, mostly to ensure my engine doesn't die, and I haven't had to worry about the cops.

Houston has thousands of untested rape kits. The parks have been closed, so I don't have to think about being raped while exercising during Houston's cooler evenings.

Texas has over 300,000 trafficking victims at any given time. I don't have to be extra vigilant around the Uber/Lyft drivers or vans in the parking lots.

59% of black consumers have been surveilled. I don't have to concern myself with clerks following me to confirm I'm not shoplifting.

Houston has the highest number of drunk driving fatalities in Texas. I spend very little time on the roads now.

10% of public-school teachers say they have been threatened by students, and 6% have been physically attacked. Classes have been on-line since March, so I haven't had to second-guess myself, fearing the consequences of defending myself against a child who would likely be much larger than me.

18% of all hate crimes in the United States are motivated by anti-LGBTQIA hatred. I haven't had to give homophobes a second thought because date nights are now at home.

I haven't felt this safe since I was a child sleeping in my parents' bed. Even as black people are dying from COVID-19 2.6 times more than

their white counterparts.

60% of delivery workers are people of color, and 74% of janitors are people of color. They are considered expendable. I thank God every day that I am not essential.

Black women earn 61 cents to every dollar a man makes, and 16% of black people living in Texas are uninsured. My wife just went back to work this week, and even with the possibility that she could come home positive, I am still comforted despite our high-risk factors. We have coverage.

Anti-insomnia prescriptions have increased by 21% during the quarantine. My sleep pattern has been decimated, but I'm not tossing and turning, ruminating on the threats I used to face daily by merely walking out of my door and going to work.

For every 100 white men who are given management roles only 60 black women will be promoted despite being the most educated demographic in the United States. Being passed over for promotions has ensured that I get to work from home a little longer. I get to hold on to this peace for a few more days. I get to experience some comfort in this storm.

Maybe I should feel guilty. But is it my guilt to feel? Perhaps I should do something. But am I the one who needs to act? Maybe I should speak out. But is it my words that will make a change?

I sometimes weep at the numbers, at the pictures, at the hashtags, the names. Is it wrong to feel gratitude that I'm not among them?

I am a black lesbian, and I am grateful for what little privilege I have to speak of at this moment.

This feeling of security is such a rare and precious gift, and black people are dying.

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Two Windows Apart

Ashton V Ray

I noticed her for the first time on my second day working from home.

The adjacent windows of our New York City apartments allowed us a clear view of each other's kitchen. I've seen her dishwasher a thousand times, and even her roommate once or twice, but I'd never seen her before.

She has thick, dark hair that hangs straight, just above her shoulders. She wears glasses, though I can't be sure if that's an every-normal-day thing or an every-quarantine-day thing. Most of the time, she was sporting the same black sweatshirt with a pair of oversized men's boxers.

She noticed me for the first time on the day that New York City went into lockdown. My roommates, two brothers from Boston, had just fled the city to go work from home at their parents' house. I celebrated my isolation by listening to Childish Gambino's new album as loudly as I could. I wasn't anticipating an isolated quarantine to be easy, but it must be easier than enduring it with two other grown men in our tiny apartment.

She must have been able to hear the music because as I danced into my kitchen, I found her staring through our windows, almost like she was waiting for me.

I froze, suddenly aware that I'd made the decision not to get dressed for the day, still wearing my boxers and an undershirt. That I'd put on *yesterday* morning.

I stood there, staring back at her, when I saw her bust out laughing. I couldn't hear her, especially over my music, but her smile was easily the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. She laughed hard enough that she eventually began gripping her side. I stood there, grinning like an idiot, willing her to be unable to see the pen-guins on my boxers.

The next time I looked up, she'd stopped laughing but instead was staring back at me. She raised a hand to waive and mouthed "Hi." I did the same.

She then walked away and I didn't see her for days.

On a Wednesday, I think, because I'd lost track of what day it was, while grabbing a snack in between working from home and playing video games, I saw her again. She was sitting in her window with a pad of paper, seemingly waiting for me.

When she saw me, she smiled her brilliant smile and got to work writing. I noticed then that she'd traded the revolving pairs of boxer shorts for black leggings. I praised the universe for my decision to actually put pants on today.

"Hi, I'm Amelia," the paper read.

My heart beat quickly in my chest as I looked around the room for something — anything — to be able to write on. Coming up empty, I put up a finger asking her to hold on while I ran to my room, now doubling as my office, to grab a legal pad and a pen. When I came back, I sat in the window, putting the pad in my lap as I wrote my response.

"Hi Amelia," I wrote. "I'm Peter." I held up the sign for her to see, and it was greeted with an eager, beautiful smile.

She bit her lip as she flipped the page, concentrating on what she wrote next.

She held up her paper that read, "How's quarantine treating you, Peter?"

Relief settled in my chest. She wanted to get to know me. Not only did I find her beautiful and interesting, but at this point I hadn't spoken to another real, live human in almost a week. This was too good to be true.

I debated over what to write. Do I tell her about the ever impending loneliness that had made its home in my chest? Do I tell her about my Uncle Dennis who is on a ventilator in New Jersey? How much is too much to share? What does she actually want to know?

"Quarantine is okay." I wrote, adding, "I have a job, I'm healthy, and I'm thankful. What about you?"

A few seconds later, her thick, black writing reappeared in the window. "I've been better, but like you, I'm thankful."

I decided to be bold, to take a chance on the common ground found in our humanity. "How hard has this hit your life?" I ask, nervous for her response. If she's been majorly affected, I'm going to feel like an ass. All it's meant for me is that I work from my couch

and not my desk. I'm still getting a paycheck, still spending my days responding to customer service emails. I wear a mask in public, but I'm healthy enough to be able to go into public to buy my own groceries. My parents are high risk, but they're home and safe.

She was holding the paper up in her window, the sun glaring on the glass so I had to squint to read it. "Pretty hard. I lost my job. Plus, I'm immunocompromised, so I can't go get an 'essential' position. It's knocked me down, but I'll be okay." She flipped to the next page. "What about you?" it read.

I knit my brows together, both angry for her and unsure of how to word my own response. Something about the smile she offered kept me from feeling like an ass.

"I'm okay. Making it. I'm sorry it's so much for you." Next to that I drew a frowny face, which made her laugh. I wish I could have heard it.

"It was nice to meet you Peter," her next sign read. "We should do this again sometime."

"YES PLEASE," I wrote in big letters across the page. She smiled once again, waved goodbye, and that was that.

The next time I left my apartment, I made sure to buy a stack of legal pads and a box of black markers. I thought about buying her some too, but then realized I didn't actually know which apartment she lived in. With the way our building was shaped, there was no way to know.

A week later, I looked out from my kitchen window to see a note taped to hers. "Tonight? 8PM?" it said. My heart jumped into my throat when I saw it. It felt like I was being asked on a date. Is that what this was? I wasn't sure, but I knew that I was interested enough to find out.

I left a note in my own window that read "YES." The hours until eight passed slowly. I showered and put on my nicest sweatpants and a clean t-shirt. I'd even considered jeans, but didn't want to seem like I was trying too hard.

Right at eight, I met her at our windows. She, apparently, didn't care if she seemed like she was trying too hard and I was instantly thankful. She looked beautiful. She'd always looked beautiful, but this was something else. The glasses were gone. This was the first time I'd seen her wearing makeup, and the old sweatshirt was no-

where to be found. In its place was a fitted white t-shirt and she, if I could see correctly, was wearing jeans. I'd have to remember to clean my window later.

That night, I learned that Amelia is from Mississippi but had moved to New York City right after college. She's the youngest of five siblings and, before COVID-19 hit, she worked as a writer. She'd just been hired, so she was the first to be let go. She loves NYC, but fears she'll have to leave.

Though I'd just met her, I hated the thought of her leaving.

I told her that I grew up here, that my parents live on the Upper East Side and that they're safe. I offered to get groceries for her, but she told me that her roommate made the trips. That night, I used an entire legal pad, pressing the pages up to the windows again and again in hopes that she could read them. Our windows were only a foot or two apart, but that suddenly seemed like light-years.

"What if we texted?" I'd asked towards the end of our conversation, anxious for her reply.

"Is that you asking for my number?" she'd written, a smirk across her face.

"Yes, absolutely, it is." I wrote back.

"Maybe next week. This is too fun to give up." She wrote, and though it was a tiny rejection, it felt more like I'd just won the lottery.

Next week.

There would be more.

We went on like this for weeks. Meeting in our windows at night, just once a week at first, but then more often. I asked for her number again, but she was too caught up in the romance of our window meetings to give them up, which I liked about her. I couldn't help but agree, though I longed to learn what her voice sounded like.

Five weeks into quarantine and three weeks into our meetings, at the beginning of April, we sat in our windows with drinks in our hands and smiles on our faces.

Before I was able to write anything to her, I looked up and saw her first message. "I like you, Peter," it read. My eyes went wide and my smile went wider as my heart beat in my chest.

I wrote quickly, confessing, "I like you too, Amelia."

It felt strange, admitting this to her. It was strange, but it was

right. People met online all the time; wasn't this just some other, weird, quarantine induced version of messaging back and forth with someone? I decided yes.

As I held my sign up, I thought I could see her cheeks flash red. The idea of it nearly set me on fire.

"I want to meet you," I wrote quickly and held up for her to see. She frowned, so I quickly added. "I know we can't right now. I want to keep you safe."

Her frown evaporated and she wrote, "Thank you. I want to meet you too." We smiled at each other, our most exchanged form of communication. Before I could write anything else, I looked up to find that she'd written her phone number across the page. Below it read, "No texting, but you can call me."

I nearly jumped out of the window to retrieve my phone from the counter. I dialed her number like my life depended on it. I watched as she reached for her own phone, my heart beating a million miles a minute.

She raised her phone to her ear and seconds later I heard her say, "Hi Peter" for the first time. It was the sweetest thing I'd ever heard.

"Hi Amelia," I said back, breathless.

The distance between our windows suddenly seemed so much smaller.



Essential Worker (series)

Carter Ayles





The updates get confusing

Alicia Byrne Keane

so everything becomes a turned breath eventually, unless this network of lighthouses steeping goes on forever, forming a constellation when viewed from the air. By no one from the air, since the air is a sigh of pressure depopulated, and I think in annoyances since the dread is too big otherwise. Some small things that may occur: the lilac polish will break into smaller islands across my toenails, I will not have any jewellery, I will listen to the playlist written on turquoise ink and folded wrongly in last year's purse. I will drink all the coffee in the house over and over, so the tide of coffee empties and fills itself billowing, until there is eventually none. I will try to read *Life: A User's Manual*, and I am not sure I will be able to concentrate on it. I will finish all of *Bojack Horseman*, and watch it again to make up for the times I fell asleep to its improbable voices blaring. I will foam roll the muscle that is sore in my hip every day, and drink wine twice a week. These increments acquire the pale colour of bargaining. I will organise my childhood books, stop them from circulating around the house in snowdrifts. In failing to be measured I will measure other things, twist between a pale planet and a countdown. The greenhouse is a slanted space I will get to know better, sit surrounded by unfurled things that seem both curious and curiously frozen.

Blue Angel

Ayesha Asad

In the sun, a window opens. Your son presses
against a glass cockpit, his nostrils
fogging over the cosmos. A breath
of starlight, imagined. An unmasking
at the cusp of rising air where the heat
ripples your vision, a swarm to be melted
in its own stratum, wing tipped
towards the horizon. Oh, blue angel. Lion
tongue. Fly over the neighbors, blessing the skies,
jaws seeping into gold, fluid,
yet still, like a crowd paused
before the beginnings of a revolt. Their daughters, pilots
of the smoke dovetailed in air, throaty
and newborn, like a bee humming its way
to its first flower. Their sons, stiff
before a crushing sea, a tsunami of car horns
to part like Moses. And they hold
the wind up, torpedoes that float,
jets that sink into palm lines and paper-thin
gloves, scrubbed like the clean blue
above them.¹

1 Note: This poem is a response to the Blue Angels flyover in Dallas: <https://www.fox4news.com/news/blue-angels-flyover-pays-tribute-to-frontline-workers-in-dfw>

The New Kindness

Stephen Jackson

In her seventies, at least,
back arched, bent over

her walker, wheels scrape
the concrete up ahead,

as I prepare to greet her,
say *hello*, at least, under

normal circumstances,
but today I'm quick

to move away. I veer into
the street, to avoid her —

this, the new kindness
she must recognize, as

it registers on her face
with the ache of a smile.

Georgie

Constance Sommer

Because the Coronavirus and all that surrounds it is hard and distressing, here is a story about my dog.

We're the kind of edgy around here that little changes make us jump. So on Sunday, when I heard our labradoodle trying to get up in the hallway, her paws unable to find purchase on the hardwood floor, I ran out of my room.

"Georgie?" I called. "Georgie!"

Her tail whisked around the corner. I raced into the family room to find she'd planted herself in her brown doggy bed and was sitting there, wide-eyed, shaking slightly.

I looked up and down the hallway. Was there some small creature that spooked her? But I saw nothing.

I asked my daughter, whose room was right there, if she'd dropped something that might have startled the dog. Nope.

I went back and stared at Georgie. She was lying down now, her expression an indecipherable mix of alert and zen. Her head bobbed back and forth, an odd kind of palsy, but otherwise, she seemed fine. I returned to folding my laundry.

An hour and a half later, I walked past the dog on my way to the bathroom. She was in the same place she'd been 90 minutes before. Not just in the same bed, but in the same, exact position.

Huh.

Georgie's just sedentary, I thought.

But she's not *that* sedentary.

I asked my 16-year-old daughter to take the dog on a walk. Usually, those words alone are enough to pop our pooch to her feet. But I didn't hear any movement.

Sarah got the leash, called the dog's name. Georgie wouldn't move. I got up, stumbled into the family room, called to the dog. She just stared at me, her head doing that same Jello-wobble. My daughter and I looked at each other. Since it was Sunday and the regular vet was closed, I called the animal ER. *Bring her in*, they said.

My sons, ages 19 and 21, lifted her into the car, and Sarah

and I took off, Georgie slip-sliding back and forth across the floor of the minivan. Her legs seemed like they couldn't quite bear up underneath her. But she didn't moan or cry out in pain. She didn't actually make any sound at all.

When we got to the veterinary ER, we called the front desk and a broad man in a black face mask came out and carried her in the building. The last glimpse we had was of her tail, wagging lazily, as the sliding doors closed behind her.

Five minutes passed, then ten. "Do you think it's kinda bad?" I asked my daughter at last. "Or just bad? Or really bad? I think it's only kinda bad."

"Mom!" she said, turning to face the car door. "Stop it! You're stressing me out."

Finally, my phone rang. It was the vet. She asked me to repeat the story of how we got here. After I did, she asked a question. "Is there any chance," she said, "that there's marijuana in your house?"

"Um..." I started to grin. One of Sarah's brothers had been attending college in Michigan; the other had been doing a semester abroad in Ghana. Thanks to the virus, they were newly home with us in Los Angeles – and apparently making the best of it.

"Maybe?" I said.

The dog, she said, was showing "classic signs of marijuana toxicity," but not to worry; Georgie would be fine. Leave her in a dark room. Let her sleep it off.

"She's just high," the vet said.

I started to giggle. My daughter asked what was going on. I put the vet on speaker, asked her to repeat the diagnosis. Sarah and I laughed until we just about cried.

When they brought the dog back to the car, my daughter, still giggling, covered her in kisses.

"Stoner dog," I crooned to Georgie. "You're just a stoner doggie, aren't you?"

As for what she ate, apparently it was a cookie with more than just flour and sugar. One young man left the cookie out on the counter in the other one's room. The person whose room it was failed to throw it out when the night was over.

And in the morning, when no one was looking, the dog's excellent sense of smell led her to discover what others had missed.

The remaining edibles, I've been told, have been put away. Hopefully, far, far away.

But look, these are stressful times. The dog feels it, too. She's got that little limp coming and going, the one that always shows up when she's tense. Though, for 48 hours, that limp disappeared. It wasn't intentional, and we don't plan to repeat it, but for a couple of days, Georgie got to chill, as if none of this Coronavirus stuff was even happening.

Don't we all want a little of that?

Quarantine Shopping List

Jesse Fowler

Apples
Bananas
Broccoli
Tomatoes
Sweet potatoes
Chicken
Beef
Pasta
Dog food for Cuba
Butter
Garlic
Onion
Shampoo
Toilet paper
Face masks
Gloves
Hand sanitizer
Lysol (all of it)
Ibuprofen
Water
A Bible
Subscription to *Why Me, God?*
~~Divorce papers~~
More toilet paper
COVID-19 for Dummies
How to Live with Your Mother-in-law for Dummies
Collector's edition of *Married... with Children*
VH1 Storytellers: Johnny Cash & Willie Nelson album
Lunch Poems by Frank O'Hara
Coursera enrollment
The rest of the toilet paper
A life

Before We Isolate

Lynne Schmidt

For Courtney MacMunn Schlachter

Before we understand the ramifications,
before we understand the threat,
we walk down white tiled floors
 for supplies
 for food
 for what may be the last
until the next.

Everyone's eyes flicker the same way,
 wondering if it's true
 wondering how bad it will be
worried.

I imagine this is how a cow looks
before being led to slaughter—
Bodies milling around, scrambling to understand
where they're being led
knowing something awful is happening
but not knowing what that awful is
until it's too late to run away.

When we see each other,
our motion comes to a complete standstill.

She is light at the end of the tunnel,
she is the last thing in Pandora's Box.
She is sunlight after the darkest night.

We stop well beyond six feet apart
before we understand the safety of six feet.

Our hearts speak in rhythm to each other–
Unmasked, hands unclean,
we ask if it's okay
we ask if it's safe
we ask if we are worth the risk to each other and our families.

And when we say yes
we don't realize this is the last moment of normal
the last hug
before the masks
before the distance
until the world heals again.

Relationship OCD in the Time of COVID

Rota

Finally, my breath is truly toxic.
Finally, the danger isn't in my head,
the safety is in yours.
The germs are real.
The harm is imminent.
You're crazy
not to scrub your hands
of me.
When I push others away,
I am simply following doctor's orders.

I'm sorry. I can't go to dinner. I care about you too much. I can't risk hurting you.

It feels good to finally say out loud.

In Sickness & In Health

Jasmine Huang

My brother and I have an argument that has been going on since we were children. Despite our tender age, it has always been a rather vicious, stubborn battle, predicated on hubris and the unyielding belief that one is right and the other wrong. Jonathan will say, *You have a weak immune system, not me!* And in complete disregard of the trap I have already drawn myself into, I will retort without fail, *You get sick more than I do!* In this situation, we're both the fool, blindly ignoring the vast number of individuals who struggle with legitimate health problems and compromised immune systems, knowingly sticking our heads in the sand as we burrow further and further into the realm of misguided youth and immaturity. Perhaps this can be said of me more so than him, given that I am older and also usually the one who instigates these squabbles. This question of physical health and strength has always been a sensitive one for me, a result of years spent simmering under a household ruled by gender roles and norms. But I like fighting, even if I can never win any of these fights, even if the blatant lies I tell my younger brother are merely pitiful attempts to distort the truth.

In all honesty, Jonathan never gets sick; I do. Like most people in the day and age of COVID-19, I used to take my health for granted (and no, I won't be writing about having an existential crisis regarding my mortality). But after being hauled in an ambulance twice, I have begun to realize more and more how futile my argument is whenever I try to prove to him that *I* am the child with the stronger body, the stronger immune system, the stronger sense of self. The first time I got strapped to a gurney, I'd drunk myself a little too far into oblivion. The nurses gave me pale blue socks in lieu of shoes, which I still keep in my bedroom drawer as a reminder of the perils and fallacies of the American healthcare system.

The most infamous event occurred when I flew off my longboard while zooming down a steep road in a neighborhood near my college. Gravity, speed wobbles, and naiveté caused me to faceplant into the ground. I spat out a mouthful of blood when I finally regained consciousness, full-body abrasions wrapped around my arms, legs, and knees, skin seemingly marred beyond repair, and my

face looking like a swollen, beat-up punching bag. At first, the doctor thought I might've broken my face. Maybe I wasn't destined to be a cool skater and carve roads after all. I had two black eyes and pus for days. Taking a shower and unwrapping and wrapping my bandages was a two-hour hassle that I dealt with myself, determined to complete alone without the help of my parents. Afterward, I would wipe the glass mirror, stand atop the cool tiled floor of my childhood bathroom, and ogle at myself and the mass of wet, rugged flesh sagging along my wounds. Even when I was in a drug-induced haze of Percocets and could hardly walk, I was afraid of revealing to my mother and father what my body had become after accumulating ink at various tattoo parlors. Aside from the black pigment that permanently stained my skin, I was also scared of them seeing what I'd become after skidding across the pavement.

I finally learned what it meant to be selfish when my grandmother saw me after the accident. The sky had sunk into a deep, indigo hue by the time I arrived home. When I entered the kitchen, she turned on the light to look at me, taking a few hesitant steps. Then she came closer, cradled my face in her hands, and stroked the unscarred side of my cheek with her coarse, callous-ridden fingers as tears began to streak down the corners of her eyes. She murmured to me in rough, unbridled Chinese, her voice cracking at the edges and stumbling over words. My father stood in the corner. When she began to quietly cry, he looked away. My reply got mangled in the lower parts of my throat, my voice splitting at various intervals when both of us would falter. With our heads bowed in unison under the dim light of the kitchen, I imagined our two dark silhouettes of hair merging into one. It was then that I finally learned what it meant to be loved.

I never tell this side of the story because it reveals the ugly, careless parts of myself that constantly depend on others to pick me up when I have been the cause of my undoing. This is the part of me that I love and hate the most, this selfish, childish impetuosity that has allowed me to experience the world unencumbered, but at the cost of others. Usually, when I explain to people what happened during the accident, I am laughing, joking, making myself seem hardcore and dumb all at once. It is pretty funny if you think about it. Over time, though, while I've learned that my physical body is fragile and my soul and spirit deceivingly invincible, I myself am

still an uncompromising idiot. Despite everything, I am reckless to this day, still very aware of how I have hurt my loved ones by choosing to be the person that I am and the many ways I will continue to do so. Just as I sit in a black leather chair and feel the needle prick into my skin, knowing the anger that will make its way towards me if my family finds out how my skin has been violated, I throw myself into hopeless arguments with my brother that I will never win. Just as I have grown accustomed to hiding my tattoos in extra-large clothing whenever I go home, I cling to the lies I tell Jonathan, to the fresh, pink flesh that has slowly grown along my face and allowed me to forget about my grandmother's tears.

The other day, my brother called me sickly, once again reigniting the old debate. I'd been coughing and developing symptoms of COVID-19, except for a fever. I was sequestered into my room for around a week and a half, and when I came out, I felt victorious. Allergies, I told myself. Just annoying allergies. I went on bike rides and wore makeup. I listened to music and made art. I still coughed, though, which he'd pointed out. And when I woke up at 2 a.m. with a raging 103-degree fever for the first time in years, I found myself curling up in a ball once more, grieving for something I didn't quite understand or know.

Quarantine is a State of Mind

Ronit Bezalel

In March 2020, I jumped on one of the last flights from Chicago to Israel. A fraught journey bathed in isopropyl alcohol. The smell wafted through my pores as flight attendants took our temperatures and scribbled down quarantine information. I was sure my sweaty palms and forehead would jack up my temperature, but I passed and was allowed to land at Ben Gurion Airport.

I'm now in Jerusalem, 6000 miles from the Midwest, attempting to shield my elderly parents from invisible invaders. I feel useless next to a father who only wants to be left alone and a mother who drowns her anxiety with cleaning.

"Please buy me jam, preferably mishmish," my mother says, handing me a crisp fifty shekel bill.

As I don a mask and gloves to venture outside, I wonder, is apricot jam an essential item in a pandemic?

I dodge fellow walkers and arrive at the grocery store, called a *ma-kolet* in Hebrew. I'm not happy about the crowds. I find a clerk and pantomime for jam. "Not butter," I say, "mishmish". As usual, I receive confused looks because of my thick accent and rudimentary Hebrew.

"But you look Israeli," people say. "And your name is 100 percent Israeli," they tell me. "I know." I nod. "I cannot speak the language of my father, of my extended family. I was raised in English-speaking countries."

I can say "I want" in Hebrew, but the sentence stops short because I've arrived at a gaping hole in the road, a crevasse in my vocabulary. My desires are trapped inside my own head, quarantined by lack of language.

The clerk points me in the direction of mishmish and I grab the glass jar. However, I cannot fathom waiting in the tangled line, where social distancing is an abstract theory, and the majority do not wear

their masks correctly, if at all.

I walk home empty handed. I feel like I have failed my mother.

In my parents' garden, I climb high and wrestle a grapefruit free from its blossoming tree. As I clutch the bittersweet fruit, I remember the French word for grapefruit, pamplemousse. Such an elegant word for such inelegant times.

I offer the fruit to my mother. She thanks me. I know she would have preferred the jam, the sugar over the bittersweet.

I may not be fluent in this brave, new world of masks and gloves. Of languages that are not my own. Of knowing exactly how to care for my parents. But I tell my parents we will make do.

Our quarantine, like language, is just a state of mind.

A Supermarket in California

Kent Leatham

"Are you my Angel... dreaming of the lost America"
(Allen Ginsberg)

Queer, to be here as never before
at 6 AM just so no one else will have touched
the cart's grubby handle, the squid-sucker doors
on the frozen aisle's poor plucked gums.
Fluorescent glare. Muzak. Like nothing has changed.
Still *Two-for-One* pears. Still *Baked-Fresh-Today*.

But all the old poets I pass wear masks,
though Walt's beard spills out, and his eyes are glass,
and they've put up plastic between my nose
and Lawrence, elderly checker, Lane Two.
Filthy lucre. No cash back.

Allen Ginsberg, I'm thinking of you
through the ravaged wasteland of Pasta and Soup.
When I was six, we were told not to touch,
for fear of the Gay Plague (according to the big kids),
our innocent lips to the school drinking fountain's
succulent chrome cockhead. No
telling who may have previously sucked.

America sucks.
This week they say 200,000 may die,
though — compared to a million — I still think Federico
del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús García Lorca
should have stayed in New York.

We've started hoarding hair-dye,
to hide our shameful roots, I guess —
after all, we've hidden everything else,
judging by the state of these hurricane shelves.

Eggs. Milk. The 4oz cans of pickled hope.
The cupboard is bare. The old dog gets none.
The jig is up, and the shoulder, and the wheel.

Fuck.

Uncle Allen, I just need some fruit,
tropical or domestic, neon or plain,
to keep the express lane to my asshole clear,
to keep up my spunk and moxie. Also, greens
and spuds and bran, and ninety-nine walleyed bottles of beer.
(I get a case of Corona. Even Dugan refuses to laugh.)

The store is called Lucky. I pray god it's true.
I disinfect my hands twice before driving home
at dawn's civil twilight – curdled milk in a weak-tea sky –
in my unkillable ten-year-old Asian car,
having spent all but my last two coins.

March 30, 2020

Shuttered Routine

Kim Malinowski

My coffee shop closed.
Means no espresso —
well yes, but really it means there is no chatter —
no everyone knows your name-ness.
No therapy barista that is all up in my business.
Empty building. Closed drive-thru.
You see, you need at least five baristas — and now I have none.
The first is to take your order, greet you a bit. Make you feel welcome.
Three to tell you how good you look, nice clothes, lie a bit.
And that one, the one I miss, the one that tells you all the shit
and gossip going on — the Tell It Like It Is — barista. I crave her/him.
All that sass gone to plague. Now, I'm the Tell It Like It Is Barista — damn.
That's responsibility. It's not all gone. Just paused. Don't know how long.
Don't know if my friends or parents or I will die. We have masks. Hand sanitizer.
Just shuttered coffee shops and barista ghosts. No espresso. But we have hope,
and more importantly, disinfectant wipes.

Flying Through this Shit Storm Upside Down

Autumn Bernhardt

Well, we're flying through
this shit storm of time and space in chaotic formation exactly 6 feet apart
except in a grocery store, a drug store, or someplace else we need to go

We're out of toilet paper, out of a job, out of money, out of breath
but we are not out of the woods
not for the duration... not for a good long while
Late Spring will turn into late Fall, late Fall will turn into Christmas,
and Christmas might never be the same again

We're weeks behind and still years to go on testing
Scrolling through articles to find big contradictions, overwhelming
uncertainty, and small hope in tomorrow's science, next year's science, or who
really knows if science can save us now

There's faith in the Good Lord and our exceptional history
Firecrackers are lit up at 7 PM even though Independence Day is far, far away
Red, white, and blue flags are flying on lawns and balconies,
but there's just way too many red hats on white people
in this blue-collar neighborhood

We're all in this together, except when we're not
Radio's been stirring them up, Kung Flu fighting words
and I know how this story goes
so I've been putting my faith in dog tags, drop fades, and Damascus blades

There's just way too many red hats on white people
in this blue-collar neighborhood
And these colors don't run, but they do clash
So I've been folding bandanas, watching disaster capitalism unfold,
and hiding epicanthic eye folds
behind shades on quarantine walks

You know you can always count on racial profiling, but not racial profiling
right

Poverty is a preexisting condition and reservations get hit hard
Folks can't breathe with virus-filled lungs, and knees on the back of necks,
shot to death in bed

We're all in this together, except when we're not
There's way too many red hats on white people
in this blue-collar neighborhood
and those red hats are starting to look more and more
like white robes on white people
under these blue, blue skies

Experts recommend that you wash your hands for 20,
then hold your shit together for the next 5,
then the next 5 and the next 5
It's all lather, rinse, repeat
lather, rinse, repeat
... endless repeat

My friends and I have been taking good notes on pop culture
Watching *World War Z*, *Zombieland*, *Contagion*
to both distract and prepare for what's coming
Hell, we are pop culture now
and suddenly no one wants to wear a crown
in this celebrity *Tiger King* kingdom

We send health check texts on Thursday afternoons, see each other though
choppy video feed
somehow feel we are not alone
But there's a lot of crazy shit out there
a lot of crazy shit
Still we're slant flying
Flying red, white, and blue
Flying through this shit storm upside down, right next to each other with a big
thumbs up

Lentils for Dinner

Véronique Béquin

Look! You think that Puy lentils are so special now, but believe me, you'll discover an appetite for good old plain brown lentils when shopping for staples feels like some kind of army obstacle course you know you never signed up for. Well, you wouldn't, would you, being from a long line of peaceniks. Let me tell you, now, you'll end up buying the damn lentils in twenty-kilo bags from a wholesale distributor your cousin Jennie, who knows everyone, tells you about, and you'll drag the bulky sacks up the stairs to your sixth-floor apartment, like the gold trophy you never won in high school. The elevators won't be fixed long enough for you to forget your acrophobia. You might think that would help with your good intentions about getting fit and lean, and running in the Toronto marathon one day. But no. They will just be that: good intentions. Running outside will be forbidden until it will seem that marathons never existed. Pheidippides be damned! So, don't sweat the resolutions. Mind you, you won't want to be seen in running shorts, that's for sure...It's not like personal grooming will be a priority. Let me break it to you, after twelve weeks without social interactions except on the lentil runs, where strangers will glare at you and you'll almost growl in return, you won't care as much as you'd think you would. Or should. Same thing with the trim haircuts you book like clockwork in case you look untidy. Untidy!? Pfft! You won't even notice the misaligned buttons on your best J. Crew cashmere cardigan nor the slight but nonetheless obvious stains on your favourite linen shift dress. They may well be wine stains, or perhaps ice cream. You won't be stopping by the dry cleaners because they won't be deemed essential. No more "Hi Mister Parker, and how are your summer vacation plans going?" Neat and polite Mister Parker, along with his entire feral-looking family, will be in the same wholesaler queue avoiding eye contact as you both reach for the last bag of lentils. But really, you're more resilient than even your boss ever thought you could be on that mandatory team building weekend in the boonies, where you had to build a shelter with Mark from IT Support. You thought you'd never meet a more irritating guy. And now that you've lost

your job and have been housebound for long enough to watch the entire back catalogue of Ally McBeal, wouldn't you like to have his cell phone number or his personal email address? Who else could help you restore your crashed laptop? But really, girl, don't sweat it. Lentils can be prepared in a multitude of ways, and social media will turn out to be totally overrated...People will dream of face-to-face connections, hands on hand, eye to eye, arm in arm, breath on breath. Yep! That's what the COVID-19 outbreak will teach us. Death. Lentils. The need for touch.

Public Health Mandates

Lina Rincón

I complied.

I wore the expensive mask
over my nose
and
mouth,

the warm air that fogged up my glasses
reminiscent of claustrophobic confinement.

I feel myself breathing
I am confronted with myself
I feel myself feeling

I fear myself breathing
I see the danger of myself
I fear myself feeling

I complied.

I washed my hands
rubbed up and down
for 20 seconds,

My skin a cracked-dry
metaphor of my short-term heart.

20-seconds on the clock
the exact beats of *happy birthday to you*
the delayed feeling of a grass induced journey.

20-second intervals
from posting my status update

to refreshing my feed.

I complied.

I quarantined myself
locked in place
for 14 days,

My heart beats fast like
an asphyxiating lung fighting for its life.

Loss of habit
fosters our remote interdependence.
The illusion of community building.

A festered liquidity,
the race for supplies
a dystopian nightmare.

I complied.

I walked away from you
kept my distance
6 feet apart

Nose, mouth, and hands
deprived of the usual, unknown, intimate connection.

I drowned in a deep well of
public health facts, statistics,
Laborious breathing, panic attacks.

The world feels unsettled in the stillness
I live every day as if it is the last one
I just don't tell anyone.

I complied, got sick.

I (had to) breathe deep,
find myself, *remain within.*

I fight the collective contagion.

3,000 Estimated Deaths Per Day

Kent Leatham

*"Who has the right to be angry?"
(Rebecca Solnit, "Facing the Furies")*

*"I don't want to leave a messy corpse."
(Jericho Brown, "Duplex [I Begin With Love]")*

Some people trust themselves.
A neighbor gets a puppy,
promises the shelter to be good.
Takes him back a week later
to be surgically dociled.
Now he wears a collar-cone
so as not to chew his scrotum open
and infect the emptiness inside.
This is called civic responsibility.
I watch them through my window.
They seem happy. Her face-mask
is a handkerchief of stripes and stars.
She is a good person, an essential worker.
Ahmaud Arbery would have been twenty-six on Friday.

May 7, 2020

“Why not try life one more time?”: Living in Quarantine with James Baldwin

Stephen Adubato

“I used to distract myself,” writes James Baldwin in his 1964 essay *Nothing Personal*, “some mornings before I got out of bed, by pressing the television remote control gadget from one channel to another. This may be the only way to watch TV: I certainly saw some remarkable sights.”

Baldwin, renowned for his commentary on race and American culture, was not one to parse words. His sharp critiques of American culture scraped away at the hypocrisy and superficiality that covered up the deep-seated wounds and injustices that plagued our historical landscape.

One of his most poignant criticisms was of our impulsive recourse to distraction. Baldwin observed that so many Americans lacked the tools to face their woundedness — both the wounds they have inflicted on others and the ones inflicted on themselves. The existential shallowness of the American dream doesn’t exactly hold values like vulnerability, transparency, and intimacy in high regard. Baldwin saw through the alluring fantasies of American life offered to us on television screens.

He continues, “Blondes and brunettes and, possibly, redheads—my screen was colorless—washing their hair, relentlessly smiling, teeth gleaming like the grillwork of automobiles...hands prevented from aging by incredibly soft detergents, fingernails forbidden to break by superbly smooth enamels, teeth forbidden to decay by mysterious chemical formulas, all conceivable body odor, under no matter what contingency, prevented for twenty-four hours of every day, forever and forever and forever.”

Baldwin made his name as a modern-day prophet by his audacious censures of his own people’s lack of authenticity. His ability to penetrate to the core of American culture and entertainment, call out our attempts to mask our own poverty and iniquity through illustrious facades and vapid distractions, harkens back to the prophets of the Old Testament. One can dare to imagine the biting words with which he would critique more contemporary

forms of entertainment found on social media. I shiver thinking of what he would see in the variety of filters and facial modifications made available through Instagram and Snapchat.

Baldwin traces this mentality back to the days of colonization. Allured by the fantasy of a comfortable, picture perfect life, with enough wealth and materials goods, devoid of conflict, pain and insecurity, the pilgrims set to work pursuing their “false myth” — as Baldwin called it — of happiness.

Baldwin continues, “I know the myth tells us that heroes came, looking for freedom; just as the myth tells us that America is full of smiling people...and though I rarely see anyone smiling here, I am prepared to believe that many people are, though God knows what it is they’re smiling about; but the relevant truth is that the country was settled by a desperate, divided, and rapacious horde of people who were determined to forget their pasts and determined to make money.”

Even the disease of racism, Baldwin appears to claim, is rooted in the graver illness brought on by the infectious “American myth.” It comes from the intentional blindness of the slave traders, and of those early colonists who denied the humanity of the people they made a claim over. But they were only able to do this, Baldwin claims, because they never stopped to look at themselves in the mirror. Their blindness to their own humanity made it easier for them to be convinced that the Africans they were enslaving, and the original peoples’ land they were pillaging, were not actually human beings.

The long-term effect of this mythological vision of bourgeois complacency — devoid of inconvenience, ugliness, and woundedness — was that we Americans became blind to, what it really means to be human. Not only this, but the myth blinds its adherents to the injustices and sufferings they are inflicting on others.

Baldwin’s incisive prophecy is all the more relevant, and vexing, fifty-six years later. As the days in quarantine continue to drag on, I find myself wrestling with Baldwin’s words. Working, relaxing, eating, communicating, praying, and sleeping in the same space for a prolonged period of time has a way of wearing you down. Modifying my daily routine to fit my new lifestyle of spatial

fixedness and social isolation has left me confused and exhausted. The impulse to distract oneself becomes all the more alluring. Why keep focused at a Zoom meeting, when you can hold your phone out of sight from the camera shot and scroll through Instagram? Why buckle down and knock out your day's tasks in one sitting, when you can take a "quick break" and watch an episode or two (or three) of a Netflix series?

Shockingly enough, I'm already bored with the very distractions I'm using to distract myself from boredom. Something about watching five episodes in a row of *Unorthodox*, or watching thirty Instagram stories consecutively, leaves me feeling groggy and, well, useless. And as the effectiveness of my go-to distractions begins to wither, I find myself reflecting not only on how unideal our current circumstances are, but on how unideal my life is as a whole. Past memories that I always hoped would fade into the background start surging to the surface of my mind, along with my dissatisfaction with my current place in life. Faces of people who have wronged me, and worse, those I have wronged, make their way back into my conscience.

There is something exhaustingly inconvenient about the human condition. Our inability to completely stave off the sensation of loneliness and satisfy the need to feel that we are "good enough" comes off as a condemnation. We are unavoidably and inescapably characterized by an onerous "lack."

The Coronavirus isn't only shaking up our health and safety, it is shaking up the very fibers of American culture. The recourse to distractions, facades, and superficial solutions are unable to offer a sufficient answer to what is emerging from our experience. The fears, needs, and questions that this quarantine is bringing out of us demands that we face ourselves in the mirror, and start asking, "Who am I really? And what is the point of my existence?"

The American myth of happiness is like a band-aid that covers up these questions that are deeply rooted in our spiritual poverty. The dangerous result of this cover-up logic is that we inoculate ourselves to the possibility of being vulnerable with others, of embracing our own woundedness, and letting others gaze upon those wounds with affirmation, empathy, and mercy. The more this becomes impossible, the further we alienate ourselves from

each other, living in relationships marked by superficiality and inauthenticity, and distancing ourselves from those for whom this illusion of intimacy is not feasible.

At what point do we realize that we all share in this condition of poverty...that we all are plagued with this terrifying lack? At what point do we break through this facade, tear off the band-aid, and start facing the terrifying questions with each other?

Opening up about our existential insecurities and longings is a risk, to say the least. But my experience over this time in quarantine has shown me it's a risk I can't afford not to take anymore. My phone calls with friends and coworkers, especially with those with whom I am close in age, has revealed to me that I'm not the only one who deals with the sense of feeling inadequate. A shocking amount of my friends also struggle with insecurities about their competency in our careers, their fear of being overly needy in relationships, and their moral quandaries about how they are living their lives.

There's something about answering the question, "So, how have you been doing?" honestly – without the recourse to more conventional responses like recounting the events of the day, or, "You know, just hammering through these Zoom meetings" – that allows you to experience real intimacy with the person at the other end of the line. Not being afraid to speak up about your internal struggles and questions, and to just "bare it all", creates a space where we can be freely and authentically human.

Baldwin laments that we "appear to have become too timid to question what we are told. Our failure to trust one another deeply enough to be able to talk to one another has become so great that people with these questions in their hearts do not speak them; our opulence is so pervasive that people who are afraid to lose whatever they think they have persuade themselves of the truth of lie, and help disseminate it; and God help the innocent here, that man or woman who simply wants to love, and be loved."

He attempts to help us face those rare and precious moments, when those existential questions inevitably rise up to the surface of our consciousness in an attempt to break through the facade. He points to that "devastating" moment when we wake up in the middle of the night, perhaps at 4 a.m., in which we start thinking about all the things we have to do the next day. Get up. Get dressed.

Go to work. Make dinner. Watch TV. Then fall asleep and do it all over again. Just going through the same cycle again and again. Is there any point to this seemingly endless ratrace?

This 4 a.m. hour also is the moment in which we are forced to confront the conundrum that arises when our daily routine is brought to face our unavoidable mortality. “It is a fearful speculation—or, rather, a fearful knowledge—that, one day one’s eyes will no longer look out on the world. One will no longer be present at the universal morning roll call. The light will rise for others, but not for you. Sometimes, at four AM, this knowledge is almost enough to force a reconciliation between oneself and all one’s pain and error.”

At 4 a.m., we have a choice. Either fall asleep, and keep blindly going through the routine. Continue following the example of Camus’ Sisyphus in his absurd task of pushing a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down, day after day, and never really face our need for answers to those existential questions.

Or, we can wake up and look at ourselves in the mirror, facing our wounds, our needs, and our desire to be infinitely, unconditionally loved. “Since, anyway, it will end one day, why not try it—life—one more time?”

This time in quarantine seems to be a prolonged “4 a.m. hour.” The real question is, will we go back to sleep? The future of our country post-Coronavirus will be largely determined by our answer to that question. Will we continue wallowing in our distractions and facades, running further away from those questions whose ubiquitous presence shakes up our aspirations to bourgeois complacency? Or will we look in the mirror? Will we take the risk of showing ourselves to others as we are, and start embracing that fact that we aren’t as happy as our Instagram profiles may make it seem? Though the journey toward the truth may seem long and daunting, its nature might be different if we allow ourselves to be accompanied by others.¹

1 Baldwin, James (2008) “Nothing Personal,” Contributions in Black Studies: Vol. 6 , Article 5. <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol6/iss1/5>



Begone Virus

Hayley Patterson



Coffin

Hayley Patterson

Shelter Out of Place

John Streamas

At the Zoom meeting I realize
how I hate to see my face
on a screen and hear my voice
on a speaker, how carefully
I need to listen to my student

who just lost to the virus
the aunt and uncle who raised him,
whom he struggled to care for
in their last days, and for whose loss
he blames himself, as he says how

he may not return to school in the fall,
and before I fumble an offer to help
with his grade and an encouragement
to stay enrolled, his face vanishes
from my screen, and I lose him.

The Rona

Liana Segan

A piece of code has corrupted their system
Wearing a protein coat, this molecule is the King of Winter — late.
He decrees: isolation!

Yet, these human hearts seem to wither without each other
The rock they live upon rotates around a star: providing.
The birds chit-chat, shoot the shit in trees
That bloom, much to the envy of humans.

For survival, humorous images are passed from host to host
In hopes that levity will lift heartache far away,

Yet the humans thrive with broken hearts
And as long as they are alive, the virus thrives too,
Stalking safety, haunting public life.

Blueprint to a Sonic Prison

Anna Svoboda

I'm grasping for music like it's a floatation device that'll pull me up, up and above the ceiling and walls of my home that now quadruples as an office and classroom and confines in which I can leave once a day for outdoor exercise. Most of the time, it's not that bad. In fact, when meetings bleed into dinner into sleep, time loses all meaning and it seems like these months have passed in a blink. But then when I hear about my best friend's grandma dying at the hands of this thing, the clock stops and an unseen hand holds me under. I choke and sputter until a song intervenes.

I've been saved by old albums like Joni Mitchell's debut, *Song to a Seagull*, and new ones from artists I've loved and continue to fall for because they're creating even when the industry is sinking like a corpse with rocks in its pockets. On repeat: Fiona Apple's "Fetch the Bolt Cutters," because it's the music-equivalent of screaming into a pillow. It's a mental, physical release with a name that's too apropos. Fetch the bolt cutters, break the windows, come closer. Six feet apart, six feet under. It's a safe distance for both the living and the dead.

I'm 25 weeks pregnant, and according to all the literature I've had the time to read, the baby can hear everything. I've become obsessed with taking advantage of this fact. I got new headphones for Christmas that have gone untouched for months because I've created a sonic prison for this unborn being between our manufactured wood floors and crown molding. At first, I tried to play Chet Baker and Deepak-approved meditation music. But now, anything goes. I'm in survival mode. I scream the lyrics to "Cactus Tree" alongside Joni ("she was busy being free") while doing a downward dog pose. It's like the lights went off in a stranger's backyard on a blistering night, and you can see the winking surface of an inground pool lit by the moon. Fetch the bolt cutters, please.

Ten-Sided Parenting in the Time of Coronavirus

Seth Michael White

In the small hours before dawn, the adventurers surround two hill giants caught raiding a farm. After a harrowing battle involving the clanging of swords, propelling of fireballs, and hurling of insults, the hill giants finally surrender and beg for food.

“Do *not* feed the hill giants!” cries my youngest daughter. “They’re just like cats. They’ll keep coming back for more.” The fourth-level gnome wizard rolls a ten-sided die.

This is parenting in the time of coronavirus.

I’m talking about Dungeons & Dragons: the tabletop fantasy role-playing game known by fans as D&D. One might reasonably ask how I – scientist by trade, enamoured with reality and empirical data – became mired in this nerdiest of nerd culture? The answer begins four decades ago and includes the suicide of a college student, a river ecology project, and a global pandemic.

Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson conjured up D&D in the mid-70s as a game where player characters are guided through adventures by a Dungeon Master – a sort of omniscient referee – to encounter monsters, solve mysteries, find treasure, and gain experience. Rules that seem overwhelmingly complicated at first (why the heck do we need *seven* multi-sided dice?) become surprisingly simple after playing the first session.

In 1979, James Dallas Egbert III – a kid ten years older than I was – disappeared and eventually committed suicide; the press blamed his obsession with D&D. The book *Mazes and Monsters* and a subsequent movie based on Egbert’s story (starring a very awkward 26-year old Tom Hanks in his first major film role) caused widespread alarm,

especially among Christian conservatives. Nearly since its inception, D&D has been on trial, figuratively but also literally in courtrooms, for instigating suicide, promoting Satanism, and even encouraging gang affiliations. All the charges have come up null, with one notable exception: two prominent evangelical pastors have adamantly maintained D&D is a gateway to critical thinking. Oh, the heresy.

For decades, the game exuded an aura of geekiness (before geekiness was cool) and was relegated to daylight basements and the Formica lunch tables of school cafeterias. I recall the dissatisfaction of rolling dice onto the brown shag carpet of my childhood ranch-style home. But more recently, attention in popular shows like *The Big Bang Theory* and *Stranger Things* – coupled with an effort by the game’s publisher to emphasize storytelling while retaining an element of chance – has caused a new swell in popularity.

As for me: I “grew up,” went to high school and then college, and forgot about the game. But, in 2018, I joined a historical ecology project to collect new data on aquatic insects, replicating methods of a 1990s PhD dissertation from Oregon State University. The grad student used a ten-sided die to randomize the location of transects.

On a lark I reached out on Twitter: “Seeking dungeon master willing to loan a ten-sided die for a historical ecology project.” A week later, a set of seven multi-sided dice arrived in my mailbox from a colleague at the American Museum of Natural History. I dusted off my Elvish armor and polished my longsword. I was back in business.

Since that early encounter with the hill giants, my daughters have fought, won, and lost many battles. Deep in our lockdown, our rag-tag gang of adventurers has expanded to include several of their friends over Zoom. They’ve restored a magical forge deep in the mines of Phandelver, prevented a cult of dragon worshippers from taking over the kingdom, and are currently venturing to the far North in search of a tribe of disgruntled storm giants.

I’m their Dad/Dungeon Master so I *could* be biased, but I notice a

sea change in my daughters. Their fearlessness towards music performance. The way they approach or are approached by strangers at six feet away. I like to think they've opened more widely and bravely to both the imagined and real worlds. Parenting is a high-stakes game, a messy fusion of storytelling and chance. I create and nurture a working narrative, bending the overly complicated rules a little as I go. I roll the ten-sided die.

Notes

D&D publisher's website: <https://dnd.wizards.com/>

1990s River Ecology PhD dissertation: <https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/concern/graduate-thesis-or-dissertations/6969z3268>

Resurgence in D&D popularity: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/13/books/dungeons-dragons.html>

Stranger Things based on D&D: <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/jul/13/no-more-nerds-how-dungeons-dragons-became-cool-stranger-things-game-of-thrones>

D&D controversies: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dungeons_%26_Dragons_controversies

How to get started playing: Navigate to www.powells.com and search "Dungeons & Dragons Starter Set"

Amtrak Service Suspended

Sarah Henry

The Pittsburgh to Harrisburg
train didn't roll last April.
Rides for the trip weren't
sold due to fear of contagion.

The virus was like a tree
on the track. People sheltered
at home with laptops. They
didn't travel to be with friends
or relatives. Amtrak service
was suspended; no one took
the train and saw the rounded
shape of Horseshoe Curve.

No one viewed mountains
called Allegheny and planted
Amish farmland. No one
guzzled cans of Coke at the
crowded snack bar. The train
didn't arrive. No one stepped
to the platform like in the months
when it was safe to be alive.

Research

John Weston

I am curious as to how, exactly, and by what random route of mediated experience, the word “cantilever” came to mind while I was in the shower just now, but my memory’s blank of associations and I lack the drive to Google.

I think there’s a literary journal called *Cantilever*; it also seems like “cantilever” is definitely part of a R.E.M. lyric, but I’m not interested in confirming or denying these intuitions.

It’d be cool if my distaste for the work of confirming and denying intuitions said something good about me. But if I’m taking a thirty-minute shower at 8 p.m. after a day without kids (they’re with their mom this week) where all I did was lay around spiraling about why I wasn’t working harder on my novel, yet I am intrigued to note the word banging around my head to the point where I’ll compulsively comment on it as soon as I can pat my hands dry enough to handle my phone – but not intrigued enough to look it up – I bet there’s a chance that maybe all of my ideally unpretentious preferring not to have more to do with laziness than anything else.

Of course it is COVID Times. Thursday, May 14th. Somewhere in the thick of it.

I’m not even quite six months divorced, and I’m a month away from moving myself and the kids in with my girlfriend and her kids. I’m collecting pandemic unemployment and child support and trying to think of the stay-at-home order as the writer’s retreat I’ve always felt I deserved but have never won through merit or been able to afford.

I’ve read headlines to the effect that artists should try not to think of this period as an artist’s retreat, for reasons having to do with the stress of so much collective uncertainty adding unhelpful pressure to the economically pinched individual whose stabilizing routines have

all just stopped.

Or so I imagine.

Can't say I've actually read any of those articles.

Although that fact aside, I guess "laziness" might be harsh? That the self-chastisement I engage in when I'm down on myself for masturbating again or eating another Nutrigrain bar instead of writing probably, from a clinical standpoint anyway, isn't helping me write?

But cantilever.

I know there are cantilever bridges.

Are those the bridges to nowhere, like in Avignon? Or draw-bridges, maybe, which lower to receive only what's welcome?

That's right (I finally Googled): "Cantilever" means "supported at only one end." But from a glance at the examples I still don't really understand what that means.

Looks like cantilevers are the things that come from below and support a bridge in either direction. Like a V, or a series of Vs supporting a line running across the top, which line in this analogy is the bridge.

I don't know shit about architecture.

I think the main idea is that the span between the left-most of two Vs' right-most tip and the right-most of those same two Vs' left-most tip can sit there unsupported because the load it bears is distributed throughout the bridge by the cantilevers.

It was a revolutionary invention at some point, I guess. Allowed bridges to be built across difficult crossings without falsework.

"Falsework" is a temporary structure built to support the actual

structure under construction until it's sufficiently far enough along to support itself, and also a word I'll dive for like a forgotten bag of Doritos found during the day's tenth cupboard-check every time. Cantilevers did away with the need for falsework, somehow.

What happened to the falsework builders, whose lives were built upon the steady demand for falseworkmanship?

What if your autobiographical novel is the falsework your cantilevered life doesn't need?

What if your life is the falsework you spend too much time dreaming a cantilever might magically come do away with so you can more efficiently get to the true work of your autobiographical novel, especially on weeks you have your kids, but even more on weeks you don't?

How would you be able to tell which was the falsework, life or novel, especially from your ground floor apartment's unventilated bathroom at 9 p.m. as you pour over your phone like a librarian of bygone days might have combed a card catalog, saying, "cantilever, cantilever" involuntarily in your head, the ghost of a song you once knew just beyond the range of memory's ear-drum, or imagination's ear-drum — due to laziness or stress — like the middle-most span of a precarious crossing not yet laid down, placed by towering crane?

In Search of Quiet in the Time of Corona

Shelby Hinte

A quiet space. This has somehow become unobtainable in recent weeks. This is not unique to me. This is a global experience. Life exists in extremes. Too much quiet or not enough. If you are a parent or know people who are parents, a brief exchange is enough to tell you that the absence of quiet is prevalent amongst households worldwide. Living rooms and kitchens are no longer just a place to share a meal. They are classrooms and offices. Sometimes they are classrooms and offices at the same time for two or more people. A man shushes his daughter as she counts out loud on her fingers while he listens intently to his supervisor list the names of recent layoffs and furloughs. Each week the list inches closer and closer to his name.

I should consider myself lucky. I still have a job. In fact, I now have the job of three people. Teacher. Curriculum Writer. Website Designer. And what do you call a person who chases down teenagers begging them to do their homework? In addition, my husband has escaped furlough three times now. Our daughter, nearly twelve, has emerged a well-organized, patient, and responsible young adult. How did this happen I wonder? Other than a two-hour Socratic dialogue, one-hour long geometry lesson, one-hour tear session over a drawing she “would never be able to do,” and my daily sifting through of her endless stream of assignments to help her plan her school day, my stepdaughter’s homeschooling has fit nicely into the schedule I color-coded and hung in our shared workspace. I should also mention that 2 of her school days each week are spent with her mother. This means that 2-4 days a week the only person I share my home with is my husband who is not only my best friend but is rather quiet and keeps himself busy with painting and hand building ceramic pots when he is not working his day job. Despite all of this, these truths that should equate to long stretches of quiet, I find myself void of quietude.

This absence of quiet is not a product of shelter-in-place or-

ders brought on by a global pandemic. But it is in this time that my noiselessness has become unbearable. I first noticed this the other day while walking my dog. I live in a quiet sleeper town beside the Carquinez Straits. It is situated between two regional parks that have the famous golden rolling hills of California and from every inch of my small town you can see the water and waves as enormous ships make their passage to the ocean. It is a calm place. The kind of town a person might go to find quiet.

It was on my pre-dawn walk I take each morning to clear my head before sitting down to write in the sleepy town where I live, that I was overcome with the realization that my mind is a loud place where quiet does not exist. As I walked my dog, I found that I kept looking down at my watch every block to see how many steps we'd gone. I was analyzing the steps in light of my day ahead and whether I would run or not and how many steps the answer to that question would elicit for this morning walk thus forcing me consider the possibility that a wave of laziness might overcome me at lunch or a last minute work task might get dropped on my load and I'd end up skipping my lunch walk or my after-dinner-walk, and then I wouldn't meet my goal of a minimum of 10,000 steps for the day which of course would lead to a guilt-induced walk around the neighborhood while my husband read in bed until finally I heard the bell of my watch alert me that I'd met my goal and could finally live with myself until tomorrow. My dog tugged on the leash to go on and we did. As we walked, my mind sifted through the data of steps and I forgot to look at the waves slapping against the edge of the railroad below us. Forgot to see the sun peeking out above the sugar factory that filled the air with the scent of burnt molasses.

My brain is a screaming machine. It goes on and on inside my head building up pressure against my skull that is surely going to fracture bone soon enough. Its noise is one of daily goals that weaves through each possible permutation of obstacles that might inhibit the meeting of said goals. It does not end at my daily step count. I am beginning to wonder if there is anything in my life that I don't track and plan and pencil in on the legal pad we keep in the kitchen or the whiteboard with the weekly lunch and dinner menu posted on the fridge.

The list of things I track:

- Words I write
- Books I've read
- Rejections I've received
- Hours fasted
- Minutes on social media
- Hours of overtime at work
- Calories consumed
- Cigarettes I've smoked (because god damnit I started again, but the limit is 1 a day tops which most days I don't need, but on days I do need the self-loathing is an endless spiral)
- Glasses of wine
- Cups of coffee
- Glasses of water
- Quality family time activities
- Grams of protein
- Miles run
- Hours slept

The list goes on. The other night at dinner, as I took the last bit of food (which was a bite of all the best parts I'd been setting aside on my plate in anticipation of the perfect combination of foods), my husband laughed and said, "Not only do you plan the meals a week out, you plan each bite you take." He kissed my forehead and I made a face and he swore it was an endearing quality, but I felt seen in a way that was too revealing. Even in front of him. Months ago he joked with my stepdaughter that if she asked me I could tell her what we were eating for breakfast, lunch, and dinner on a particular day in 2021. They laugh. I cringe. I hate myself for the tracking, and still I go on. My brain is exhausted from the reeling of data I cannot help but run through and organize and reorganize until it fits into chunks of space and time that inevitably will get undone by life and need to be reorganized yet again.

A quick skim through the news or scroll through social media is enough to explain why I am this way. I don't know if one can escape the endless stream of advertisements, articles, and influencers sharing ways you can be more productive. Productivity is now a product

you can purchase. There is no shortage of apps or workshops for sale to teach you how to better fill your time. To ensure that you can work more. Do more. Earn more. Mechanize your existence. This is what it means to live in a capitalist society, is it not? I may hate myself for my incessant manipulation of time into color-coded boxes that yield the greatest number of activities completed in a single day, but isn't that what I've been conditioned to do?

As the world shifts to this new place of slowing down and most of us remain sheltered-in-place, there are contradicting messages in my feed. Those that reinforce productivity and use hashtags like #quarantineproductivity (urging you to finally do ALL the things you've ever considered doing, despite the reality that we are living through a global pandemic and are inundated with grim news of the future). There is also a rise in the #selfcare messaging. They read:

"It's ok to slow down."

"It's ok not to be busy."

"It's ok to rest."

"Be gentle with yourself."

"Your mental health is more important than your productivity."

I want to believe these messages. They feel good to read, but I can't trust how reliable the source is when most of my life I've been conditioned to find worth in productivity. I feel the to-do list each day is infinite and before quarantine this felt like a successful life. My worth measured by things I'd accomplished. Days full to the point of excess.

As I write this, I count the minutes I am over time, aware that this task has bled into the next one and soon I will have to recalculate the time of each thing I'd planned for today, which inevitably affects the time for each thing planned tomorrow and the next day. I think there is never enough time in the day. I keep planning for time where tasks do not exist and still tasks are added and take up this small space where I imagine quiet lives. I want just one day, one hour, where time spreads out vast as the ocean before me. I want simply to think of nothing but sitting at the water's edge and feeling the waves roll atop my skin. I am not this kind of person. I am the person who sees the ocean and maps out how far they can swim and how long it will take.

Reclamation — Earth Day 2020

Marianne Gambaro

DATELINE

SOUTH AFRICA — Lions cherish their pride as they bask in an empty road, without fear of being shot with rifles or cameras.

VENICE — Dolphins frolic and swans glide in canals no longer plied by gondoliers and water taxis.

THAILAND — Biologists report discovering the largest number of rare leatherback sea turtle nests on beaches in two decades, in the absence of tourists and their trash.

LLANDUDNO, WALES — A herd of wild Great Orme Kashmiri goats has come down from the hills to graze on residents' hedges and gardens.

CHICAGO — Free ranging penguins have been given the run of Shedd Aquarium, finally allowed to explore their surroundings rather than performing for tourists.

EVERYWHERE — Humans await the end of our sentence, contemplating the value of freedom and (hopefully) pondering the weight of the footprint we are leaving on our Earth.

Azalea's Time

Bryan Betancur

Time and memory are inextricable facets of consciousness. An alarm can alert me when an hour has elapsed, but my subjective understanding of one hour is reliant upon my ability to recall where I was and what I was doing at minute one, and at any number of points, through minute sixty. Without recollections to serve as temporal markers, my comprehension of constructs, such as day, week, year, would be reduced to digits and boxes in a calendar. I would experience time like my seven-month-old daughter, Azalea, who does not yet form memories that can be articulated into discrete temporal markers. Today and yesterday don't exist for her as they do for me, only *I'm seeing (tasting, smelling, touching) this now*. Her time, in a sense, has not yet come.

Like most Americans, my experiences of an hour, day, etc. prior to the COVID-19 outbreak were reflective of a capitalist society in which work, expediency, and deliverables function as basic organizing principles of time. My understanding of Tuesday or last month depended upon memories related to my life as a college professor: classes I taught, meetings I attended, deadlines I made or missed. And, like most Americans, my experience of time has profoundly changed over the past three months.

I am fortunate to still have a job, but the memory markers that now shape my sense of time are unrelated to work. I live in an undefined *now* devoid of the divisions of labor — commute, teach, write, grade — that normally structure my temporal consciousness. These divisions have been overshadowed by *Groundhog Day*-like iterations of images — infection rates, grieving families, angry protesters — that never seem to progress toward a resolution, making it difficult to feel a tangible difference between, say, Monday and Tuesday, or last week and this week. Throughout the latter half of the spring term, my experience of Monday and Tuesday no longer included memories of classes; on the contrary, I frequently lost track of when and what I taught.

My temporal markers now reflect the vicissitudes of a global health crisis and prolonged period of social isolation, though not in the way one might expect. The more I'm surrounded by news of

sickness, death, and economic insecurity, the easier it becomes to get mired in anxious thoughts regarding all the things I can't control — when will it be safe to let Azalea visit family; will the college where I work remain financially viable; will my commute from north New Jersey to the Bronx put my family at risk of infection; etc. The memories that form my temporal experience of this historical moment could all be tinged with hues of uncertainty and helplessness, with images of shuttered businesses, stacked coffins, miles-long food lines. But they're not, thanks to Azalea.

My wife and I tried unsuccessfully to have a baby for three years, a period marked by failed IVF cycles, long tearful nights, and a yearning sadness that penetrated every corner of our lives. Our experience of time was altered when we went through fertility treatment. Over those three years, my wife and I found new jobs, relocated, and traveled, but my temporal markers, the memories that structured my understanding of the passage of time, forged an unshakeable feeling of being lost in a desert, ceaselessly reaching for a mirage. Three years of fertility treatment meant life was on loop: driving to the same clinics, hearing the same words of cautious optimism, feeling the same awe at scientific progress and the same frustration at its limits. Our hopes, emotions, and experience of the world were frozen in a *today* that extended perpetually toward a *tomorrow* that grew increasingly unattainable.

But that tomorrow came, and our Azalea entered the world last October. As we held our newborn in our arms and settled into the fusion of euphoria, fear, and exhaustion that comes with parenthood, we could have never predicted that in a matter of months we would live through another estrangement from our customary experience of time.

Life is once again stuck on loop. We see similarly masked faces during every morning walk, hear the same words of guarded encouragement on the news, marvel at the pace of scientific progress while lamenting its limitations. But unlike the three years my wife and I confronted sadness with a mutual joy that existed only in potential, over the past three months we have staved off despair because we are constantly in the presence of an infant who is happiness in essence, and who knows the world only as a continuous instant of boundless awe.

For every masked face that makes me ruminate about life re-

turning to normal, there's a broad, tiny-toothed smile from Azalea to remind me that worrying about the future is an unhealthy expenditure of emotional energy, no matter the circumstances. I watch Azalea caterpillar across the floor with no apparent destination in sight, stopping to carefully examine every stray fiber in the area rug, every divot in the hardwood floor, every shadow on the wall. I watch, and I learn—I genuinely learn—what I've only pretended to grasp in years of psychotherapy and aborted attempts at sustained meditation practice. I learn to recognize the immense in the mundane and to be grateful for the gift of *now*.

Without Azalea, quarantine would be a desolate time vacuum; without the quarantine, I wouldn't spend enough time with Azalea or be sufficiently detached from my regular experiences of time to fully appreciate how she lives each moment for itself, freed from the blinding preconceptions of moments past and the stifling preoccupations of moments to come. Social isolation isn't claustrophobic confinement in a small apartment with nowhere to go and nothing to see, it's an opportunity to share a space of immeasurable wonder with the two people I love most, a chance to learn how to live beyond the limiting constructions of time society imposes upon me.

It is odd to think that Azalea will grow up in a world significantly altered by COVID-19, yet have no recollection of the past three months. Years from now, when she asks about life during the pandemic, a quick internet search will yield a plethora of graphs, photos, videos, and narratives. All that information, however, will only construct an impersonal image, a museum diorama viewed behind an impenetrable glass. If Azalea wants to know about *her* experience, she'll have to turn to my wife and me. When that day comes, I'll tell Azalea that my memories of this period are not arranged in days, weeks, months, but in firsts: the first time she tried solid food; her first infectious belly laugh; the first time she squirmed across the living room and tugged on my pants so I'd play with her on the floor. My memories won't be of a dark, interminable today that elicited despair, but of a bright, timeless *now* that inspired hope.

Time and memory are inextricable. Azalea's memory of the COVID-19 outbreak depends on my wife and me, and our ability to articulate our experience of time during the pandemic depends on Azalea. We are living Azalea's time, our moment.

A Frozen Veggie Burrito

Connor Buckmaster

Earlier this year, perhaps only two months before the coronavirus spread to my home state of New Jersey, I woke up before my eyelids opened. Bright fluorescent hospital lights bursted through my shut eyelids, and all I saw was red. With my eyes open, adjusting to the light, I found myself in a hospital bed covered in a thin white sheet, the same place I fell asleep perhaps only an hour before. Just beyond the foot of the bed were my brother and my mother. They stirred from their inward silence at the sight of me awake. Regaining my bearings, I looked down the hallway. Beds lined the walls. Some patients were sitting up, others were laying down asleep. Nurses and doctors buzzed from bed to bed checking vitals. My mother flagged down a nurse passing by and asked her to unhook my IV. She was gentle, cheery as her dirty blonde hair, and offered to get another IV bag while I was gone. I thanked her as she left. Laying there, I thought of my walk to the bathroom: I will need to sit up, take a breath, stand, and, supported by my brother's shoulder, limp forward, forward, forward, make a right, collect myself as the piercing pain grows, glance at the patients ill and estranged from privacy, struggle to keep my head up with every twinge radiating from my abdomen, until I stumble into the bathroom, into that small dingy square with handrails on every wall, knowing that in twenty minutes, all this will happen again.

On December 30th, Dr. Li Wenliang posted a warning to his medical school classmates about the possibility of a SARS-like outbreak in Wuhan. Dr. Li, an ophthalmologist working in Wuhan, the capital of the Hubei Province, was 34, married, expecting a second child. On December 31st, the Chinese government confirmed it was dealing with multiple cases of pneumonia in Wuhan; the cause was unknown. Yet Dr. Li was summoned by health officials and police and was forced to sign a statement denouncing his comments as an unfounded illegal rumor. Meanwhile, the WHO organized a support team around this outbreak to figure out its cause. Within days,

health officials identified a new virus, but they were unsure of how it spread.

Of this story, my recollection of events is scattered – reasons why I’ll get to shortly. From my mother, father, and brother, I’ve gathered moments I can’t remember, or wasn’t present for, but did in fact happen – like on New Year’s Eve earlier this year. I was celebrating at my friend’s house while my family was at home. That night, my brother and I both experienced abdominal pain and frequent trips to the bathroom. My mother told me this when I came home a day later and said that he was up most of the night in severe pain. Over the next three days, his symptoms improved, mine continued to get worse. By January 3rd, my insides felt like they were ripping apart (and I would later learn that they were). After a morning spent in the bathroom, blood in my stool (gross, I know – I’m just laying out the facts here), and the inability to stand, I realized this was bad. I needed help.

“I think I need to go to the hospital,” I said to my mother, sitting outside the bathroom on the floor. She sat on the couch hunched over, like her maternal instincts allowed her to feel my pain. Visibly worried, she took a short breath before she spoke, and spoke shortly.

“Okay. Then let’s get you changed.” I was still in my pajamas, unable to move, so she got me a change of clothes. My brother drove my mother and me to Jefferson Hospital in Washington Township, New Jersey. The drive was absolute agony. I nearly puked into my makeshift bucket (a trash can stolen from the bathroom). But this story isn’t about me or my pain, it’s about the people who helped me.

A woman, I never got her name, checked us into the ER and gave me one of those plastic bracelets with my name, age, and a string of numbers.

“Do you need a wheelchair?” she asked as I hunched over, clutching my stomach. Something in me said *no! I don’t need that!* I wanted to believe I was okay. After twenty minutes, and an exhausting trip trying to find the bathroom, I opted for the wheelchair.

Not long after, I was wheeled into a small consulting room. A nurse took my vitals, inserted an IV, and sat me in a hospital bed (the same bed I would spend the next few days in). I was told that, until they figured out what was wrong, I couldn’t eat any food. By

then, I was sifting through the last few days in my mind, trying to figure out what got me sick. My brother and I both were sick, *maybe he got me sick? Or, maybe we ate something bad?* (And that's likely what happened – though, to this day, I don't know what I ate.)

I was rolled out into the hallway, and here I realized that the ER was overflowing with patients. Beds lined the walls, makeshift rooms of thin yellow curtains popped up near the edges of the hallway. I watched as nurses and doctors in muted blue colors bustled all around me. I spent hours in this hallway, shuffling back and forth to the bathroom. Occasionally, my nurse would check on me, see if my fluids needed to be refilled. She was kind, her dirty blonde hair tightly pulled back in a ponytail, focused on her speech, clearly doing her best to keep up with the surplus of patients under her care. I don't remember her name, and doubt I could have. It was around this time when the nurse began a regimen of morphine to help with the pain. The first shot (a dose of 4 mL) sent me into a sedated high; the hour after I have little memory. My brother and mother told me after that I kept complaining about my shoes.

"You just kept asking me to take them off," my mom told me, recalling that first day. "But we couldn't take them off. We didn't know when you'd need to get up again to go to the bathroom."

"Yeah, and you tried to play this game mom and I were playing," my brother said. "This word game on mom's phone. But you were out of it." They both laughed.

I have a faint recollection of my shoes being too tight and asking to play a game with them, but the morphine has clouded my memories. This is why my recollection is scattered: both due to the pain I was in and the morphine shots which dulled the pain and allowed me to sleep. Eventually, sometime during the night of that first day, I was moved out of the hallway and into a private room in the ER.

Dr. Li was soon vindicated for speaking out as hundreds of cases of the novel coronavirus appeared in the Wuhan area. By January 11th, the first known death of coronavirus occurred; a 61-year-old man from Wuhan with multiple underlying conditions passed away. By mid- January, health officials all over the globe were scrambling to prepare for incoming outbreaks; the United States announced its

first case of coronavirus around this time.

In my home state of New Jersey, there were multiple scares leading up to our first confirmed case on March 4th. In the following days, Governor Phil Murphy declared a state of emergency; there were over 600 confirmed cases in the United States at the time. From one, there were two, then eight, then twenty; numbers grew as our hospitals began to fill with coronavirus patients. The people on the front lines, the nurses, doctors, EMT workers, began to see the true devastation this virus was causing. The emotional, human toll on these workers is immeasurable, yet they kept showing up to work despite the dangers. Many would become sick themselves, like Dr. Li, who sadly passed away in early February after he was infected with the coronavirus while treating a patient with glaucoma.

A team of gastroenterologists, surgeons, and infectious disease specialists were assigned to me. I met so many, I can't recall all their names, but I remember Christie. Christie was my nurse the first night at Jefferson. She was petite and had short brown hair, peppy with a cheerful tone in her voice. I was one of her many patients, but she checked on me regularly.

"How's the guy doing?" she would say softly, popping her head through the open door. I was laying in bed, wires and buttons and machines all around me, curled up in a ball. I probably said something back like "Eh, I've been better." She checked my vitals while making small talk with my mom.

"The ER seems slammed tonight," my mom said.

"Yeah, it's been like this for the last few days. I don't even work in the ER. I work in surgery, but they needed some extra hands down here," Christie said.

If I wasn't in the bed, I was sauntering to the bathroom, IV pole in hand. I remember occasionally glancing at Christie on these walks, herself busy on the phone or filling out forms. The times she noticed me, she smiled. In this ailing place, I found some comfort in her small gestures of kindness. Days later, my mother told me that, because no one knew what was causing my illness, Christie cleaned the bathroom *every time* I used it. She must have done that at least twenty times. Damn did I feel bad! But I also felt so grateful for this woman who met my pain with kindness, who volunteered to help

where she was needed, who cleaned up after me to protect other patients. She was one of many physicians who went beyond what I could have asked for.

At the time of writing, there are over 145,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus in New Jersey; over 10,000 deaths. There's a [map](#) that shows the spread of the virus; the entire state is covered, but North Jersey has it far worse than us in South Jersey. The epicenters of this virus are in two major North Jersey hospitals: Holy Name Medical Center in Teaneck and University Hospital in Newark. I look at pictures of makeshift tents outside University Hospital set up in the parking lot. The surplus of patients with COVID-19 has forced the hospital to expand its facilities. I can only imagine the kinds of loss happening under those white tarps. How many patients are there? Dr. Erin Muckey at University Hospital relayed how quickly COVID-19 takes hold, "[The patient] was speaking to us. She was answering questions," but moments later she slumped over, unconscious. The rate of decline is staggering. Patients can transition from communicating to deteriorating in seconds.

Earlier last month, nurse practitioner Cedar Wang at Holy Name recounted watching her coworker succumb to COVID-19, desperately gasping for air, "You see it. You kind of feel it. The stare – the fear. It's one of those images that you can't get out of your head." Her experience mirrors so many others: doctors and nurses rushing from one breathless patient to another. Hospital is overflowing with patients. Eyes staring, fear, lingering breaths, suffocated lungs. What they see cannot be unseen.

I imagine those tents again, the patients, nurses, and doctors inside. When their job is to save lives, when the reason they get up in the morning is to help others, how must it feel to be awash with all this death? To save a life, only to rush to another's decline? The flurry of patients ever-growing, when do *they* find moments to breathe? Will they ever breathe the same again?

I wonder these things now, months after my gastrointestinal recovery. This state has felt some of the worst pains in this pandemic. Our eyes stare into an immediate future which is bleak, I fear, and all we can do is think of those men and women on the front lines. Those men and women whose eyes stare into hollow chests, gasping for

air.

On January 4th, I was scheduled to get a CT scan of my abdomen. A nurse from the radiology department came to wheel me there; her name was Jen. She was tall and thin, her long brown hair wrapped up in a bun. She came with a wheelchair and spoke cheerfully as we rolled to the other side of the hospital.

"How long has this been going on?" she might have asked.

"A couple days now. It got really bad on Friday, that's when I checked into the hospital." I said.

"Hopefully this will turn around soon. Have you had this test before?"

"I haven't. I've had contrast tests before, but not this one."

"Well, we're gonna take you into a room with this big machine. You'll lay down on the table and then the doctor will come to administer the test. He'll press on your stomach and watch how the contrast moves through your intestines. It might hurt, but you'll have to try to stay as still as you can. If anything doesn't look right, he'll be able to see it on the monitor. There's also a TV in the room, so you'll be able to watch it too!"

Upon booting up the machine, the monitor failed to turn on. While nurse Jen was trying to fix it, a different nurse (who I had seen possibly twice before) came and gave me a shot of morphine. Clearly rushed, she administered the shot too quickly and left. I watched as a red blotch appeared under the surface of my skin. Immediately, my arm started to itch and burn – the morphine failed to go into my vein. Instead, it pooled in the crevasse of my arm. The monitor now fixed, I was rolled into the CT room to take the test, which revealed no abnormalities.

I got back in the wheelchair and Jen rolled me out of the room. I mentioned the burning in my arm.

"I think that nurse gave me the shot too quickly. This is really burning."

"Oh yeah, that doesn't look good. Wait here," as if I could go anywhere on my own. "I'll look in our kitchen for an ice pack."

A few minutes later, she returned and handed me a frozen burrito in a plastic wrapper, the word "Veggie" on the front in green and red.

"I thought we had some ice packs in the fridge, but I couldn't find any," she said, now starting to laugh. "That's all I could find. It's my lunch, but you can have it."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll be fine! I'll grab lunch from the cafeteria or something." I placed that frozen burrito on my arm and the burning quickly mellowed. We kept up the small talk as she wheeled me back to my room. I thought about giving her lunch back once I felt better but decided against it – probably not the most sanitary thing to do. She dropped me off and said goodbye. I never saw her again, but I continued to use her makeshift ice pack until it thawed.

Later that same day, I got some good news – I could start eating again! I'd shown steady progress, and after two days of no food, the doctors wanted to get some nutrients in me. My mother and I were moved out of the ER and into a private room on the other side of the hospital. In the new room, I called the cafeteria to order chicken broth and apple juice, but no one answered – it was closed for the night. I would have to wait until the morning, when the cafeteria opened again, to eat.

Shortly after this, I met my two new nurses: Chanel and Susan. Chanel greeted us as Susan rolled in a medical cart. I noticed Susan's bright flashy shoes, which seemed to contrast against her calm presence. She took my vitals and asked what my eating restrictions were.

"They just put me on a liquid-only diet. I called the cafeteria a few minutes ago, but they were closed," I said.

"We can get you some food!" Chanel said.

"We have a pantry of food for the families," Susan said. "We'll be right back to grab you something."

They came back with a feast: cups upon cups of Jell-O, apple juice, and water ice. They piled the food and drinks on my little brown table that hovered above the bed. My mother and I were all smiles.

"That's about all we could find," Chanel said.

"This is great, more than enough," I said. "Thank you so much." They left the room as I handed my mother a cherry water ice – I ate up the Jell-O.

The next day, on January 5th, my doctor diagnosed me with colitis due to the Shiga toxin-producing E. coli 0157:H7. From The

New Jersey Department of Health, “*Escherichia coli* are bacteria that normally live in the intestines of healthy people and animals, primarily cattle. Most strains of this bacteria are harmless. *E. coli* 0157:H7 is a specific strain of *E. coli* that causes illness [...] The symptoms of *E. coli* 0157:H7 infection are variable. Some people have no symptoms (asymptomatic). Others may have mild to severe diarrhea, which may contain blood. Abdominal cramps, nausea, and vomiting may occur.” My pain was caused by my body trying to fight the bacteria; my intestine was inflamed, shedding and ripping itself apart trying to get rid of *E. coli* 0157:H7. But over the following day, my symptoms improved, my body flushed out the bacteria, and by late afternoon on January 6th I was released from the hospital.

Right now, we are dealing with a sickness on a global scale, one which is ripping and tearing apart our entire society. In self-isolation, our minds and bodies are trying to preserve through while the heroes on the front lines put themselves and their families at risk. I can't help but think of the nurses and doctors who helped me earlier this year. I can't help but compare the overcrowded ER room I saw to what is occurring now: hospital beds and ventilators scarce, workers rushing between patients, widespread panic, all-hands-on-deck.

I reached out to Jefferson Hospital recently. I wanted to know how many coronavirus patients they had. But in the back of my mind, I also wanted to know how those nurses and doctors were doing. It's something I could never know. Our paths crossed for a moment and diverged. Yet their care and gestures of kindness have remained with me. I think of them when I see photos and videos of medical workers, their faces bruised from the PPE, their hearts and minds scarred with all the patients they have lost. I have no way of knowing, but I hope they are okay.

The health workers, our heroes, may never breathe the same again. The pain they have witnessed and experienced cannot be removed. They will need to receive mental and physical care for the trauma this horrible disease inflicted. They will need our gratitude and support, now and in the future. When all this is over, our health workers will need a moment to breathe. Until then, I will think of them. I will be grateful for them. I will hope for the best. I will hope for a better future. I will hold my breath.

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If I Were

Mori Thomson

– 04.05.19

If I were to suspend my sympathies and forget humanity, what would I feel?

If I were to submerge myself in selfish thought and leave all this cruelty to the concern of others, what would I feel?

If I were to live this life as life is now, what would I feel?

I would feel the clouds of stress regress.

And I'd feel the weight of each dawn's struggles lift as the lashing challenges of their days evaporate.

I would feel the fear of the unknown dissipate,

And the superficial worries becoming as superfluous as a mask on a mannequin.

I would feel angry journeys people melting away unthreateningly, clapping respectfully at their doors.

I would rediscover idleness and sink into the softness, slipping away silently into her arms. And I would feel content in that comfort, not fighting for money for power for praise.

I would feel a peace condensed,

And a tapestry of helping hands blossoming, reaching over and round and through, supporting, but with space.

And I would feel closer to these closest people, like great pine trees standing together in the darkness of the forest.

I would feel and see and know the tangible edges of this forest and I would feel bigger in it. And with each certain step I'd feel I was I.

That is how I *would* feel.

But that could not be and should not be me.

For I need you and we and they and us.

I need he that I do not know.

And I need not the safety that comes with knowing tomorrow.

I need the fight, the undiscovered light and all life's frightening lies.

These two lives are not one but they should not stand in conflict. We can bring them to one another and live with thought and feeling.

The Kingfisher

Erin Fix

There's a certain way the streets go still
when the world is under siege,
and when I wander where I will
I'm alone, but for the trees.
I'm stepping past the battle lines,
the chalk scrawled on the road,
the blinking of the crossing signs
seems a final, voiceless ode.

The playgrounds are a graveyard,
the swingsets undisturbed,
and the red tape border stands guard
while I walk by, perturbed.
The laughter of the passers-by
was the first casualty.
In a war with no answers, I
don't know where they must be.

A trace of blue, a flash of wing —
There! And gone again.
Like a whisper, a spoken thing,
a game of *remember when*;
when the streets were loud and bustling
and the crosswalks always full,
there's a murmuring, a rustling —
when it's gone, I feel its pull.

And in a tree, a kingfisher
tells me of my youth —
then and now, the gaping fissure,
and a quiet, simple truth:
though the road will be full once more
and red tape removed,
there is never an end to war
or the things that must be proved.

Starting to Slide

Laura Federico

May 8, 2020

So it's getting really hard. I don't know about you but I, for one, am showing signs of fraying.

Take cleaning. In the first week of quarantine, way back in March, my partner Steph and I decided the first thing to do was clean house. After all, we'd be spending way more time here than usual — we should make it as accommodating as possible.

So we gave every room what my grandmother used to call a spring cleaning. Except she did it in both spring and fall, because she was a member of the rightly-called Greatest Generation: curtains washed, rugs shampooed, furniture pulled away from walls, baseboards scrubbed, etc.

(Our generation isn't really given to cleaning like that, unless we're religious and prepping for a High Holy Day, or while hunting for the diamond that fell out of a wedding ring.)

It was almost fun, like getting ready for company. But of course no company came.

As I've written about in here, I'm an enthusiastic cook. That's all the time, not just in quarantine. But the whole first six weeks, I put an extra dollop of effort into my creations.

Not anymore. It's too dreary: the inside of my cabinets, the scratched enamel in the stove wells, the two glasses flanking an empty antique perfume atomizer that's my kitchen window decor. It's all the same every day.

I have tons of recipes, some of which I've never tried, and the NYT

Cooking app resides on my phone. Where we live, I can still get almost any ingredient I want. Just by dumb luck, I snagged some new cooking gear right before shutdown began: a crepe pan, a new skillet, and a utensil I don't know the name of, but it's great for fetching and straining foods out of liquid.

But it's no use. I still cook (we can't afford takeout every night), but as B.B. King sings, the thrill is gone.

Our exercise plan? Minimally adhered to, ever since our latest trainer told us we shouldn't walk one of the dogs, Giorgio, for a couple of weeks. First we stopped his walks, then all walks. Occasionally we still heave ourselves off the couch and take Rafael or Agent 99 for a spin.

Steph rides her motorcycle (does that really count?). A special needs PE teacher, she also exercises with her students (virtually, but hey, it counts). Me...well, no. I wake up most days vowing today's the day, today I launch my new exercise/motivation/cooking/learning Portuguese/gardening routine! You know those vows. Mostly I don't stick to them.

I still see neighbors walking, jogging or biking, but there are way less of them than there were in March, or even April.

It's time to admit that I, perhaps like others, am sliding. It's no fun cleaning for just us. Or cooking. Plus, we're tired of the floors, the quaint wood-trimmed windows, the bathtub, the kitchen appliances. Every object we're surrounded by seems to need something from us and we don't want to give it.

All we want is to be outside, by which I mostly mean our favorite Italian restaurant, the inside of a mall, at a concert or show, or maybe the inside of an Uber zipping to the airport (that would definitely count as outside). Not outside on our street, holding a dog leash and choosing whether to turn left or right, which sadly doesn't matter.

This morning I managed to sweep the staircase, after which I found

myself announcing, “I swept the stairs” in a triumphant tone more appropriate to “I landed the space shuttle.” That’s how bad it’s gotten.

Maybe tomorrow one of us will tackle the bathroom sink.

The Blue Marble Effect

Elizabeth Nowak

I bet in space the whole world eats up your eyes
and that's why astronauts come back all blue and jabbering
we're all in this together.

What I'm trying to say is
they come back with marbles in their head and it's tough
living here and taking advice from that kind of blind man.
It's enough to want to fuck off this planet and die in outer space.

They say it's instantaneous.
Like sucking an insect up a vacuum.

But you know,
I once watched a mud dauber
near the pneumatic tubes outside The Bank of America.
It floated along until
ZUP
it got sucked right up Tube #4.
It reappeared inside the bullet-proof glass terrifying the teller.
If a mud dauber, then a wasp.
That blonde ponytail shook and danced like a mop handle
until I heard a double THWACK and a crack of exoskeleton and then
PUZZZZZZ.
Capsule delivery for Tube #3.
She had to hit it before it'd stopped moving.

In space, it's just T-minus 10 seconds —
all the water in your body vaporizes in a boil.

They say that only four dogs died getting Russia to the cosmos.
They say that it only took us a handful of monkeys, a couple of
chimps, a few dozen mice.
You see?

We're all in this together.

How many monkeys do you think it would take to get us back to where we were?

So look.

If I have to have a respirator,
and I'll have to have a respirator,
I'd rather bare my lungs to the universe
and let that starry bitch crush me.

Do Open Windows Keep The Rain Away?

Noah Belanger

I've been thinking a lot about windows lately. It's the time of year where the weather begins to feel like spring; the air caresses the space between your toes when you go fetch the mail and the cool earth allows you to sink into it just a little. In the weeks leading to this time of year, I'm anxious to open the windows. The air inside starts to smell no matter how often I vacuum the carpet and burn candles. The few houseplants that sit on our windowsills can't possibly keep up with the carbon dioxide that my partner Erin and I pile into our home's little atmosphere. By spring, the house needs to breathe.

Our apartment is on the bottom floor of a house that looks like it was built in the 1920s or 30s. The windows operate by the same weight and pulley system as the windows in my childhood home, except the ones here don't open — at least most of them don't. They are beautiful pieces of machinery. A rope connected to the bottom sash runs up the track, loops through a wheel, and disappears into the frame. Inside the frame, the rope is attached to a narrow weight that counterbalances the weight of the sash when it's open. As with all old windows, the frame, the sash, and the grilles between the windowpanes are wooden and must be painted, and somewhere along the way someone got lazy. Instead of cutting into the track, they slopped paint onto everything, rope and all, so that the windows are bound in place. Of all the beautiful, large windows in the open kitchen and living room, only two open, and the ropes are cut on one of those so that we have to jam a piece of wood or a beer growler under the sash to keep it from closing. All spring and summer, I keep these two windows and the front door wide open so that fresh air spills in and out of the house.

During this spring, it's vital to have that air. I think about everyone out of a job because of this virus who lives in a basement apartment, trapped halfway underground with small chutes of light to look out of. How claustrophobic that must be. It helps me under-

stand those who simply won't abide by stay-at-home orders. The large windows on every wall of our living space fill the room with a diffuse glow in the morning and bright shafts in the evening. It's not a mansion, but we have our two open windows, and if that's not enough, we have a front porch to escape to. It's relatively easy for us to stay at home for days on end. If I didn't have any of this, I don't know that I'd be so quick to follow orders either.

There is such a gentle balance between separation and closeness that we all strive for. Very few people would choose to live without a home, and those who do live without a home, by choice or not, find ways to demarcate a space for themselves. As humans, we seem to crave a boundary, a way to close ourselves off from everything when it becomes too much or simply doesn't suit us. At the same time, boundaries become insufferable when they are compulsory. Air sticks in the lungs – the stomach contracts as if trying to squeeze a bit of rebellion out along with the bile. It's not that we need to go outside at that very moment. In fact, if given the option, we might just as well prefer to stay indoors, but it's the option we want. Something as simple as a window can often be enough to mediate the two conflicting desires.

There's a song lyric that asks, *Do open windows keep the rain away?* I like that thought – that an open window is like a talisman used to control your fortunes. A farmer might close the window to water his crops, and a child might open it to clear the skies again. But what happens when the air that comes through the window can't be trusted?

There's that other lyric about the harm an open window can cause: *I had a little bird. Its name was Enza. I opened up the window, and in flew Enza.* Even though the rhyme may not be scientifically sound – neither the flu nor this virus now is, strictly speaking, airborne – it captures the uncertainty and fear both in 1918 and today. When every sick person walks around with a six-foot halo of infection, when the water droplets they exhale hang in the air long after they've moved past, it becomes difficult to trust the air at all, and just as difficult to trust those tasked with protecting it.

No one seems to know anything for sure. We're told we'll be fine as long as we stay a certain number of feet away from others. Then we're told it's better to stay indoors because the virus can live

on surfaces and stay in the air for longer than we thought. We are told not to wear masks because they won't do anything for us, but later we're told that if we have to go out, even a strip of cloth over our mouth and nose is better than nothing. At this rate, how do I know that if I open the windows today, my lungs, or someone else's, won't be filled with fluid two weeks later?

I've been thinking a lot about windows lately. With all the uncertainty, it's beginning to feel like the boundary of this house is less than voluntary. My gut is beginning to clinch. I want to throw the windows open in some small act of rebellion, as if to say that my well-being won't be dictated to me by a fictitious bird with a clever name. Better, maybe, to keep the windows closed.



Power in Distance (series)
Anthony Afaïro Nze



Lessons I Wish We Learned in Quarantine

Amanda Burns

Value our lives, the broken. Take care of each other.

Fix the systems that are causing our demise.

Inspire joy and justice, recognize the privilege of health.

Treat mental health like physical health— Grieve.

Take a breath when you need to. Fight when you have to.

Love strangers more than your convenience.

Wear the damn mask.

Sabbath in Time of Corona

Leslie Manning

In the streets of South Africa
the lions rest.
Satiated and peaceful under the noonday sun.

Highways hold their breath
And in place of cacophonous pollution
Easy slumber awaits.

I imagine watching these magnificent beasts
Their chests rise and fall with every breath.
No longer at war with the world.

Do they find themselves curious?
Did the Earth give back their holy unfettered ground?
Perhaps it was returned to the beings that once roamed free.

Rivers run clean, thick air thins, people wait.
It is now the sixth day of creation.
It is early in the day when life is freshly ordered.

People are sick – and recovering
People are dying – and mourning
The earth is healing – and humankind is aching.

What if those behind masks and ventilators
Breathe in time with the lions?
Wondering why

Wondering how
Grateful for the peace.
Sabbath comes at last.

Food for Thought

Abbie Maemoto

I have always been known for my big, red cheeks. Since I was three years old, my grandfather has called me “Momotaro”: a giant peach in Japanese, because of the enormous peaches that have taken residence in the things I know as “cheeks.” It may not seem like such a big deal, but imagine being constantly asked why your cheeks are so sunburnt, when in reality, you could probably use some more Vitamin D. And that’s why I love swimming – my cheeks stay cool and no one can see them, except the bottom of the pool.

However, during this quarantine time, my sanctuary has been taken away from me, and my red cheeks are back with a vengeance. Therefore, every so often, I open the fridge and just sit there as the crisp cold wraps its frosty fingers around my face. From my daily cheek therapy treatments in the refrigerator, I learned something astounding: hope during a pandemic lies in leftover microwavable corn dogs, tater tot casserole, and upside-down cupcakes.

For most families, corn dogs for dinner are a result of a last-minute, I’m-too-lazy-to-cook stop at the local Wienerschnitzel. But the limp, leftover corn dogs in my fridge, with burnt sticks and chunks of breading missing where it was too charred to be edible, represent a revival of familial connection.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of “family dinners” was a myth. With Dad constantly on business trips abroad, Mom driving 80 mph to get my brother from basketball practice to debate tournaments on time, and me being a full-time mermaid spending several hours in the pool daily, the concept of family time was simply not in the realm of possibility.

This COVID-19 time marked the first time where the entire family would be together – all. day. long. Yes, we get annoyed by each other’s strange antics of my brother singing a shoddy rendition of “Sweet Caroline” as he makes his bed in the mornings, and my mom attempting to use Siri by screaming “Hey Siri, call Marie” into the microphone, even though she could make the call with just one touch of a finger. But from this time together, anomalies have mani-

fested themselves. My brother and I are washing the dishes. My dad is learning how to play the guitar. We have time to play a full game of Monopoly every Friday. The kids are even learning to make dinner by themselves, even if the dinner is a plate of burnt corn dogs splattered with ketchup. Renowned psychologists and researchers have spent the last five years trying to discover how to repair familial connectedness in the digital age by investing millions of dollars in clinical trials and observational studies. Who knew that my family would finally find this connectedness by investing in a \$5 box of frozen corn dogs?

Sitting in a container in the back of the fridge is a mound of brown mush drenched in an onslaught of cheese. Whereas Edison's prized invention is the lightbulb, my dad's pride lies in his tater tot casserole. Don't get me wrong — there's nothing special about the casserole. It's overly cheesy, the tater tots are soggy, and the tortillas have been dissolved in an ocean of cream of mushroom. But to my dad, it might as well be equivalent to the development of the smartphone: "The rough texture of the tater tots perfectly compliment the creaminess of the sauce. Yin and yang, tater tots and cream of mushroom." Despite my personal feelings towards the abomination, I have never seen my dad so fascinated with a dish. Normally, he is a stick-to-the-recipe kind of cook, but this tater tot casserole was his first invention.

This pandemic has inspired people to innovate and create within the boundaries of the home; seemingly normal household objects are now the building blocks for new projects. The old vanity has been upcycled into a brand-new kitchen table. An old basketball has been turned into a nest for an injured bird. And in my dad's case, freezer-burn tater tots have been repurposed into an entire casserole. In the midst of COVID-19 ravaging the world, the indomitable human spirit has been resurrected in the form of a global enterprise of innovation. From the new antibodies being manufactured in laboratories for a vaccine, to the measly tater tot casserole in my fridge, this revolution of creation is where we will find hope for the end of this pandemic.

For the millions of dessert-loving people who were simply not destined to be bakers, Betty Crocker has provided delectable sweets in the form of box mix. Eggs, oil, and water — how hard could it be?

But in my fridge, sitting on a large platter, is a batch of upside-down cupcakes. Where the fluffy cake was supposed to poof up, the cupcakes look as if my brother had sat on the center of each one. I used to think that getting a B on a test constituted being a failure, but this cupcake endeavor proved me wrong. The sunken-in, drooping cupcakes staring at me were a complete, utter failure. However, the cupcake fiasco did help me get one step closer to choosing the best brand of box mix.

During this pandemic, while failure may excite fear, failure expands our knowledge of what *not* to do for future pandemics. While failed clinical trials and ineffective stay-at-home orders may have hindered the potential for slowing the spread of the disease, we learned. We ruled out failed methods, and we developed new plans. As failure inspires new ideas, our hope for the reconstruction of our world post-COVID-19 lies within the debacles of things like upside-down cupcakes.

It took eating leftover corn dogs, tater tot casserole, and upside-down cupcakes for me to reconnect with my family, reignite the engines of ingenuity, and realize the beauty in my defeats. Therefore, even if you don't have giant red cheeks like mine, take a moment to sit in front of the fridge. I'm not qualified to give advice — but it's food for thought.

The Land of Canaan: Part 1

Autumn Bernhardt

Part 1:

The Story of Exodus

Pharaoh's heart is hard.

He did not heed the warnings of Moses or the scientists.

So we paint our apartment door frames with lamb's blood.

Mark our countertops and keys with the scent of bleach.

Pharaoh worships false gods.

But he has faith in the economy he did not build.

So he wants to reopen Egypt.

And have us gather for Passover like sheep to the slaughter.

The Angel of Death has not yet passed us over.

But a few can't pass up an opportunity to shout in someone's face
and carry guns to the capitol.

The chosen people suffer heavy burdens, are slaves of men and rent.

So we take on more hours, keep teaching online.

Civil rights lawyers say "let my people go... let my people go."

While Pharaoh gives edicts about mail-in ballots on Twitter.

Our prophets tell us to get our provisions ready.

There will be no Exodus but there will be a Quarantine and you need
canned goods.

Now, there is a loud wailing throughout Egypt.

For there is not a house without someone dead or unemployed.

Pharaoh's heart is hard.
He did not heed warnings of the plague.
He didn't even mention the 100,000 dead because of it.

Productivity Trap

Christine Wishnoff

Learned satisfaction
Accompanies inundation.
Productivity as a measure
Of our individual treasure.
Pushed to the point of exhaustion:
In a workplace that is always on.
Dings, buzzes, and beeps
To circumvent quality sleep.
One eye open to browse
Laptops that never shut down.
Extended hours in the trench
Were an inescapable circumstance.
Until an unexpected event
United behavior with common sense.
What kind of lifestyle could we make
When we are always running late?
Torn between tasks of home and work,
Organized by the greater guilt.
Slogging through the daily grind
With nothing but goals on the mind.
Telework wasn't much better:
Expectations as a homewrecker.
Work life balance had fully tipped
Into the territory of ridiculous.
Striving to do more each day,
Without downtime or a raise.
Stress threatening earned wealth,
Peace of mind, and robust health.
Unable to find our happy place
Within the frenzy we tolerate.
The productivity trap
Is a modern clapback.
Wake up to the disarray

Of doing more for the same pay.
End the cycle that misrepresents
Activity as accomplishment.
Our value is not empowered
By accumulation of billable hours.
If staying busy does not make us happy,
Let's create a new reality.
Policies and practices that support:
The ball is finally in our court.
We are the most precious asset
After the worldwide viral reset.
In a post-productive society,
A humane existence is the priority.

David and Covid

Mark Zimmer

5/28/20

David and Covid

"Daddy, are we going to school today?" My three-year-old asked hopefully. He really missed his classmates and teachers.

"David, your school is closed," I said for the fourth morning in a row. I didn't go into detail on the virus; it was complicated explaining why his life was unsettled.

I also missed the two-block trip to his Episcopal preschool; it could go on for a half-hour depending on diversions, detours, and my explanations. The familiar walk was always an adventure when viewed through David's eyes, 32 inches above the ground.

"Daddy, I want to play with my friends," he said, halfway out the door and fire truck at the ready.

"Sorry David." Since he was an only child, I knew the quarantine was the most difficult penance for him.

"I want to stay in the house," he said, discouraged. His grandparents played games with him and of course he watched a lot of cell phone videos, but he grew restless with the confinement.

"David, I think it's alright for you to go out, the weather's great." His mother gently nudged him.

"Can I go on my scooter?" David said, remembering a toy he had just learned how to ride.

"Yes!" I responded. I was as excited as he was to get out of the house.

"You have to wear your helmet," my wife added. Normally, it would be a battle to get him to wear the purple headgear, but today, he let me put it on him without protest.

"You need to keep it on your head too," I reminded him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he huffed, mimicking what he heard me tell his mother.

When David got a scooter for his third birthday, his protective doctor-mother wasn't pleased. Maybe she felt it was a stepping

stone to motorcycles and body piercing. I jokingly promised her I wouldn't let David move up to a motorcycle until he was at least seven. She wasn't amused.

As he hopped on the lime green 'Razor' three-wheeler, he was transformed like one of his superheroes. A quick push and he jumped off the curb and onto the street. As he flew by me, I pursued, but he already had a good lead.

I was jealous of both his escape and freedom!

"Stop at the sign!" I yelled, out of breath.

"Of course." Another expression he recently learned.

He stopped at the last second, looked back at me with a grin, and seemed to relish in his old father's struggle to keep up.

"Can we go to the park?" David asked.

"Yes, but only around the outside, the rest is closed."

"You can't catch me," he said, with a beaming smile and giggle.

He took off again, sped by the magnificent magnolia heavy with flowers and fragrance, and then rounded the corner for the park.

His transformation was a mystery to me. David was sometimes clumsy, kind of top-heavy and uncoordinated in his movements, but man was he agile on that machine. He was a natural on the platform, shifting effortlessly, catching the asphalt grooves and fluidly bending around the parked cars and obstacles.

"Good job, Dad," David said, reassuring me as I caught up with him at the playground.

David did laps around the perimeter, oblivious to a warm, lilac-flavored breeze. The Coronavirus had emptied the green space and provided me wonderful respite and a short, precious solitude. I forgot my cell phone, so I just found a seat to observe and daydream while David went around.

A young, yellow Labrador trailing a leash interrupted my meditation, clicking his nails on the concrete and exiting the park rapidly. There was no owner in sight. I imagined he was another getaway from the lockdown.

Aroused, I looked across to check on my mobile lad.

"Where is your helmet?" I shouted nervously. Somewhere along the route, he had ditched his headgear, and I ran after him again as he rounded the far turn.

"Slow down, please," I pleaded, as he defiantly zipped around the curve.

It was not the turns that proved his undoing, but a straight-away. The roots of a large elm had pushed up the sidewalk and this break was a hazard for those on wheels. He lost control of his scooter on the backside of the ridge and tumbled into the edge of a metal park bench.

"David, are you ok?" I asked, trying to remain composed amid a bleeding gash on his forehead.

"Yes," he said as blood spilled onto his sweatshirt. He looked up at me with mischief in his wide blue eyes. I started breathing again.

I tore my sleeve and made a makeshift bandage, which he bravely held over his injury. The bleeding slowed. I managed to carry the weeping boy, the toy, and helmet back to the house where his mother, the physician, ran out to meet us.

"How come he wasn't wearing his helmet?!" his mom said as she shot me a murderous glance.

"Well, I..."

She didn't wait for my answer.

"It looks like the artery above his eye got nicked," my wife revealed. I marveled how his mother coolly took charge and calmed everyone down. She tenderly cleaned up her son and quickly put a sterile compress on him. David ended up being more puzzled by the accident than scared.

We headed for Arlington Hospital, which wasn't far from our house.

"How are you doing, little man?" The nurse on duty asked when we arrived at the Emergency Room. She was decked out in a mask, pale gown, transparent gloves and ghostly goggles.

"I'm good," he replied, a little drowsy from the day's events. "Are you feeling alright?" David asked her empathetically, clearly concerned with the required, protective outfit.

We held our blanket-bundled son down on the stainless steel OR table while the plastic surgeon masterfully stitched him up. I was going to congratulate David for getting his first scar even before I did as a child. Then, I realized that my wife was in easy reach of the scalpels, and she knew how to use them.

"Here's a lollypop for you, partner," the clearly charmed nurse said as we were leaving the hospital .

"I want to go to 'Old McDonalds' and get chicken McNuggets and a Happy Meal," David said, mixing up the restaurant with the nursery rhyme.

"You're a Happy Meal," I teased.

"I am not a Happy Meal, I'm David," he protested.

We got into the car and David pushed his head deeper into his mother's chest; his breathing slowed down and he began snoring softly. My wife kissed me on the cheek, I thought more out of relief than to signal I was off the hook. When we got home, I carried sleeping David and his faithful blanket to his room and tucked him into bed.

The surgeon had said the scar would be barely noticeable. His mother seemed to accept my explanation of David's free spirit in the abandoning of his helmet in the park. We were both anxious, but intuitively, she knew how to quiet my fears. I knew where David got his sensitivity from.

"What do you want for your birthday?" my wife inquired, changing the subject as we sat on the couch.

My birthday was in a couple of weeks, so maybe in her own way, she forgave me for not watching our son more closely in the park.

Then, I remembered David's fearless ride and the pure joy I saw on his face when he broke away from me down our street.

"How about a scooter?" I answered.

"Only if you wear a helmet." She smiled and rested her head on my shoulder.

Touch Starvation

Katherine Bustin

A glimpse of
copper in this
golden light
of the deserted
market square

A memory
A shadow
A cat's wishful thinking
starts with love
and
keeps the ghost town
alive
feeding it
with the laughter
the souls
of untouchable days

He watches nonchalantly
how
all our cathedrals
wildly swim at
the bottom of the River
April
fools
us again
and
we sleep with both eyes
open

Dear Mothers (on the 67th Day of Quarantine)

Jazmine Aluma

You see, we have done this before.
We have walked into the
unknown and watched
everything we thought we understood
about the world crumble into
flakes of our former life, so
transparent we can almost see
an outline of who we once were
when we hold them to the light.

Yes. We've done this before.

Do you remember the way you listened
when they told you
what it would be like?
Like you already knew.
But you didn't know. How could you?
How could you even
wrap your mind around it?

Do you remember what it was like
when you realized you had no idea?
You had no fucking idea.
Remember?

You held this bundle,
this baby,
this bomb—eyes wide
with shock. And you did it.
You got through one day,
and then another.
And then another
until you were doing the thing.
You were raising a child.
Remember?

Remember how it hurt?
How it hurt to do the small things
like shit?
Be alone?
Have a conversation?
Feed yourself?
Remember how it felt to
reorganize your cells
and your schedule
and make a new life – the one
you never thought you'd be living?

And months later, do you
remember what it was like to cry
when all the tears were gone, because
you had cried them all – rivers
of the things you missed
like brunches with your friends,
and sleeping in,
and dancing in a dark room
full of sweaty bodies.

Remember what it was like before,
not to worry,
not to worry
about a fucking thing?

You see, mamas,
we've done this before.
We've walked into the nebulous
optimisms, the long nights,
the unknown. And we walked out with
hard-earned joy, the kind
no brunch can replace.
We can do this. Because, you see,
we've done this before.

The Ridotto

Marilyn Woods

Ten long weeks ago, when shelter-in-place, quarantine and six-footers barely invaded our consciousness, my silly friend Jan, brought joke masks for us to wear at our Monday night game of Duplicate Bridge, where a dozen regulars gather each week at the Lazy H Restaurant in Pauma Valley. That night everybody laughed.

We aren't laughing now.

It's May and in California we're required to wear masks; in most parts of the country, they are strongly recommended.

Walking — my Covid-19 mask in place — on Sixth Avenue in Bankers Hill bordering Balboa Park recently, I yearned for The San Diego Museum of Art nearby and the collections I love there.

As I adjusted my face covering, trying to breathe more freely, one of my favorite paintings came to mind. Not surprising. Masks are central to this masterful work of art by the extraordinary, eighteenth-century Venetian painter, Giuseppe de Gobbis.

The Ridotto, brings to life the most prominent and famous casino in Venice, popular with nobles and wealthy tourists. The Ridotto (from the Italian "to reduce one's wealth by gambling") was notorious, before it closed in 1774, as a place of decadence where one could gamble, purchase illicit verse and paintings, flirt and converse with noble men and women, or even find a prostitute. The lively and humorous stories behind the oil painting's cast of colorful characters captivate, especially when you're standing in front of the actual work of art. You can almost feel the frivolity, smell exotic fragrances, hear muffled laughter.

One of these days those museum doors will open again. But for now, the painting's masked revelers in this Grand Tour destination in Venice cavort solely in my mind. I can see the high ceiling,

chandeliers with tapered candles glowing, ornate deep red brocade patterned wallpaper. My view is of the arresting gentlewoman in the center who anchors the work. She is surrounded by partygoers loosely organized on a shallow stage in the casino. She wears a luxurious, billowing white ball gown and seems to float in a pool of light. At this time in history, only the very wealthy, supported by battalions of staff, could afford to keep a dress like this pristine.

At home after my walk, an eagerness to research led me to my docent files where I found this written about *The Ridotto* by a beloved curator, John Marciari, some years back.

Masks were de rigueur for the Ridotto, enabling a sense of anonymity to the wearers. Sometimes, the aristocrats who served as bankers and moderators did not conceal their identities. The public masquerade was hugely popular; wealthy tourists and even eminent princes visiting Venice donned the costume to partake in the festivities.¹ Apparently, if you had a mask and wanted to misbehave, the Ridotto was the place to be.

The snow-white brilliance of the striking female figure's sumptuous frock is echoed by the repeated use of chalk white masks and costume details which lead the eye throughout the painting and serve to highlight individual vignettes. Poise, grace, and manners abound. But so is a sense of mystery and intrigue. Who's hiding from whom? Or what? Why?

I, too, have a fancy white dress, brand new, poufy, and unworn, hanging in my closet along with my other dresses. I purchased it just before shelter-in-place to wear to my granddaughter's Pi Beta Phi initiation ceremony at USD. Postponed.

I miss dressing up. Not that I often find occasion for ball gowns. I am bored with stretchy comfort clothes and no make-up. What's the point of putting effort into make-up if I'm going to cover it up

¹ Marciari, John. *Italian, Spanish, and French Paintings Before 1850 in The San Diego Museum of Art*. p.283

when I get close enough for an onlooker to notice? I love the experience of planning a special occasion ensemble with bangles and blushing bronzer. I ache to party.

I have three closets in my bedroom, each about the size of a porta potty. Standard, not the deluxe version with the little sink for handwashing and mirror with twinkle lights over it. My house, built in 1925, is made up of small doorways, rooms and closets. I know guys with shoulders wider than my closet. I have arranged my clothes in these three closets into three categories — one casual/athletic; one special occasion; one professional, for things like giving a tour at the art museum. Closet number three hasn't been opened in months, but I do open the dressy/party closet once in a while just to swoon over the lush fabrics, swanky styles and fancy embellishments.

Oh, how I long to dress up and go to a happening — a party, a gala, a celebration of any kind. I would love to emulate the woman in the titanium white poufiness in *The Ridotto*. What fun to hold court among musicians, revelers and fascinating conversationalists.

Instead, weddings, graduation ceremonies, garden parties, reunions, big-number birthday hooplas and fund-raising galas are a thing of my past. Cancelled, postponed or in limbo. That's how I feel. My social life is on hold; I am condemned to leisure wear. No silver slippers, lacy ruffles or plunging necklines on my horizon.

In *The Ridotto*, a pretty young lady — how to be sure she's pretty when her whole face is masked in black? — on the left wears a lush dress with teal satin bodice accented with a delicate nosegay of romantic pink roses and holds the hand of a small boy, also masked in black, dressed as a harlequin. Around the two are scattered playing cards on the grand, elegant parlor floor that make me yearn for my regular games of Duplicate Bridge. How long will it be before we can ever gather at a card table again?

Those playing cards strewn around, a hard-to-see room key,

and come-hither glances everywhere are evidence of flirtatious and perhaps questionable behavior in the de Gobbis masterpiece. Mystery, merrymaking and masks.

I want to be there – jump into the painting and gather with like-minded bon vivants. I crave kicking up my heels with friends and even not-so-much-friends. I'll never refuse an invitation again. I'm tired of my own company. I want to be the dame in the middle of the room, a room with the theatrical elegance of *The Ridotto*. And if I can't do that, I just want to go back to the bridge table and to the art museum. And Nordstrom.

I can't focus. I'm stir-crazy. I'm bored. I'm impatient. I grind my teeth in my sleep. I'm lonely. I'm discontented. I'm exasperated.

Try as I might, I can't mask my feelings.

Daily Coving

Sabina Khan-Ibarra

Day 56: I told my dad to stay at home. I need to go out, he says. How am I supposed to live like this? There's a new C word in town, Baba, and if you aren't careful, it will kill you. He pushes away the hand sanitizer. I'm ready to go if it's my time. We stare at each other, me holding the bottle. After a few seconds he takes the sanitizer and rubs it on his hands. Two pumps for good measure. Maybe I am not ready to die, he grumbles.

Day 60: How are your kids okay, my friends with kids ask. They're okay because I let them run free. Do their work until they can't do anymore and run in the yard. Play with shadowed rabbits and Ethel the hen. But they don't go out into the front yard. Nowadays I am less worried about bad guys in masks and more worried about people without masks.

Day 68: Tell the kids to get ready for bed. Brush their teeth and, yes, use the electric toothbrush that cost me a fortune but stopped working for no goddamn reason. Go to bed, I say, because my six year old has a Zoom meeting at 8:30. They convene in the bathroom and giggle, and I think at least they aren't too traumatized.

Quarantine: SAD!

Rebecca Portela

The first few days didn't count. Nobody baked homemade bread or opened Duolingo to aprender español. The first days were reserved for shock and disbelief and just needing a couple of days to do absolutely nothing because you were told you will have all the time in the world for all the things you've been putting off. Like getting abs and organizing the closet. Those first two days are that part of a dream where your legs are too heavy to propel you forward and you go to speak and your voice is garbled and then the amorphous blob monster gets you and gobbles you up. Because we were eleven days behind Italy where doctors were deciding who lived and who died and everyone promised a slow burn until things would get really bad. Until people would get too sick and until hospitals wouldn't be able to save them. They said the best thing we can do is to stay inside with our Internet and endless programming and Twitter-verse and learn of the devastation happening outside from our tiny addictive screens.

I used to wake up and wonder what time it was and now time doesn't matter because I have nowhere to be. This virus knows no boundaries; even my dreams have been seamlessly infiltrated by people wearing masks and mentally gauging increments of six feet. I wake up now and wonder where we are in the timeline of this "curve." Our government has failed us, and half of society is following the rules of common sense and the other half is perpetuating this quarantine because they are profoundly selfish. I often go out for a run when it isn't snowing in the middle of May. I smile at people I pass along the way in a "we are all in the same boat" kind of way, but also stay the hell away from me because I read that 4% of the population will die and I can't trust you. What a bizarre place to be in where we are afraid of one another to protect each other.

I had so much work to get done at the beginning of March. I remember having a migraine in the middle of a day that was going by too fast. I remember saying to someone who asked how they could help, "Can you make a 36-hour day please so I can get some sleep?" I couldn't focus and kept looking at my calendar wondering when I would ever get a day off, a much-needed day off to essential-

ly flatline in front of the TV with potato chip grease smeared across my shirt and my hair mostly fly-aways. I needed to have slept a solid eight hours and then take a nap around 3 pm.

Now jobless, I end each day fearing I won't accomplish anything besides consuming all social media and smirking at memes, trying to somehow lighten the mood of the constant and relentless news spouting buzzwords like *unprecedented times* and *epicenter of the pandemic*. It seems every update paralyzes me just a little bit more. Each task force is fired for contradicting our "dear leader." Each body in a refrigerated makeshift truck morgue. Each healthy young person going from alive to dead in a matter of days. Every siren heard every few minutes. Every pot and pan banging together from windows.

What can I do so that tomorrow will be different? Get dressed? FaceTime my family? Hope my mother is using the gloves I sent her? Put on music and dance around? But it's like I can't even relate to it anymore as it's filtered through this crisis, making everything irrelevant. Because what does a Total Eclipse of the Heart or a Rocket Man or a Party in the USA even mean right now?

Golden Years

John Streamas

During the pandemic, according to the commercial I just saw,
Walgreens is making special provisions for people
In their golden years, so I ask Ruth, "Are we in our golden years?"
And she says, "Not until we're retired,"
And I say, "So if we're still working when we're ninety,
We won't be in our golden years?" and she says,
"Don't be ridiculous. We won't be working when we're ninety,"
But I say, "We might have to, if the economy keeps tanking,"
And she says back, "We can't afford to think like that.
We have to think things will get better," to which I say,
"But we're getting too old to benefit from things getting better.
That happens to younger people who can adapt, learn new skills,
Relocate," to which she pauses, cups her chin in a hand, then says,
"Well, then, we must be in our golden years, after all.
But I still wouldn't go rushing to Walgreens for that discount
On your prescriptions," and I say, "All I need
Is that Chinese hot balm to rub into my neck,
Which is still creaking like Methuselah's walking stick."

Kharon

David Sam

I dress myself in plastic,
shield my face with clear plastic,
cover my mouth with the plastic foam
of an N95 mask, as I gurney
the blue plastic cocoons that carry
the dead to their soil metamorphosis.

There are so many dead.
I had not thought so many to be undone
so quickly, drowning in the ocean
their lungs made.
The morgue has no place for them,
so we manger them in refrigerated trailers,
parked side-by-side in the parking lot.

Many are claimed by families,
buried in secret ceremonies
attended by a few who stand spaced out,
too far to clutch at comfort.
The rest the city workers will take,
unclaimed, to a pauper's field.

I fall asleep on a plastic bench
that stands against a sterile wall
until startled awake by bleating alarms
or the tired voice of a nurse or orderly
asking me to take out the dead.

We all fear the air, the wind,
the touch of flesh to our flesh,
the clearing of someone's throat
that might presage the disease.
We all walk weary, stumbling steps.

I am the servant of the gurney
more than its master.
Its wheels rattle a martial echo
through the halls, parting any
who may walk their white way.
Only the dead have seen the end
of this war. And there are so many more.

Women's Names

Anna-Claire McGrath

This is a story that sounds fake. When I was in seventh grade, a substitute teacher marked “Anna” as present and “Claire” as absent for an entire week. Logistically, it doesn’t make sense: My name would have been written “Anna Claire McGrath” on the roster. But it’s somehow true: she called me “Anna” all week long and I didn’t correct her. Plenty of people called me “Anna” by mistake, and I didn’t care enough to clarify.

Friday someone called me “Anna Claire,” and she overheard. She got visibly angry.

Do names matter? I watched a TED Talk last week, or the week before (because time has stopped mid-coronavirus). In it, the speaker explains that coronavirus is a *kind* of virus. SARS, she explains, is a coronavirus. MERS is a coronavirus. COVID-19 is simply one type of coronavirus. And yet, none of us can stop calling it “*the* coronavirus,” like it’s *the* president (who is lying every day), *the* Met (which is set to lose \$100 million due to the virus), *the* Centers for Disease Control (whose website I now check daily). COVID-19 sounds like a science-fiction, alien threat. It sounds like a code name for something. *The* coronavirus is somehow more animate, more like the monster it is, and more comprehensible than a series of letters and numbers like COVID-19.

I realized early on that “get corona” sounded like “My Sharona” and started making up a parody song that was probably in poor taste: “Ooh, you better wash your hands, wash your hands, ooh, you better wash your hands or *get corona*.” YouTube, which knows me better than I know myself, figured out I enjoyed parody songs about corona, and started recommending me videos. There were of course the “My Sharona” parodies, but the second most popular was “COVID-19” set to the tune of “Come On Eileen.” There was also “We Didn’t Spread the Virus,” to the tune of “We Didn’t Start the Fire,” “My Corona Home,” to the tune of “Kokomo,” and “Hey There Corona” to the tune of “Hey There Delilah,” and more. Often they use “Corona” rather than “Coronavirus,” probably because it’s

easier to rhyme and sing, but it also sounds familiar. You take a song like, “Hey There Corona,” and suddenly the virus has replaced a woman’s name, the virus is someone you’re speaking to, like a lover.

My favorite is the “COVID-19” video to “Come On Eileen,” where a man who I assume is British changes the “too la roo la, too la roo la, aye” section to “Where’s the loo roll? I need loo roll now.” It has been stuck in my head for days. At camp once as a teenager, a volunteer explained to us that she was named after “Come On Eileen.” The only thing was her name was Ally. Her parents had misheard the song and she hadn’t found out the real lyrics until she bought the CD when she was fifteen. Again, that story sounds fake. How could that possibly happen? Why would you name your daughter after a song you didn’t even know well enough to know its real name?

I wonder how that girl would feel watching these videos, which change the song she was named after to be about this deadly virus. The song couldn’t have meant too much to her, or she would’ve listened to it before she was fifteen. And yet, what would it mean if your namesake could be easily transposed into a joking video about a pandemic that’s destroying lives worldwide? Somehow to me, it is worse to be named “Delilah” and watch “Hey There Corona,” your own name replaced by the pandemic, as if the pandemic were a pretty girl, though I suppose the same thing happens in both songs.

I found one song called “Quarantine” to the tune of “Jolene.” A man who is definitely a Trump supporter makes racist jokes about the virus starting in China. This is a man who is probably angry that he cannot go outside and is making this video as an eff you to society. Is he living alone? Does it feel creepy to me just because he keeps emphasizing things that aren’t true about China, or because making jokes right now feels gauche? Apparently Carl Reiner tweeted on his birthday that for the first time in his life he had nothing to joke about. And yet it seems to me that we have got to be joking right now or we will go insane.

I read online early on that you can also use the chorus of “Jolene” instead of “Happy Birthday” when you wash your hands, so I have been using that instead. But it’s hard to know how long to hold the notes for: “Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, *Joleeeeeeeeeene*.” When people sing “Happy Birthday,” whose name do they celebrate? I want to

create a poll just to find out. Certainly the name you choose reveals something about you, and whether you choose the same name every time. Dolly has said that she wrote “Jolene” for two reasons: One was a red-haired bank teller that her husband had a crush on. Another was a girl named Jolene who came up to her after a show. “I’m going to write a song about you,” Dolly said. And she did. But the song has nothing to do with that girl, who probably didn’t even have red hair. She took the woman’s name and gave it to a completely separate person, because the name, like corona, was easy to sing.

Why do we love to sing women’s names? Is it simply the patriarchy that keeps us singing women’s names over and over again and rarely men’s? I could sing, “Jolene” over and over again, but the first songs with men’s names that I can think of are “Fernando” by ABBA or “Alejandro” by Lady Gaga. It’s probably relevant that both those artists have a significant queer following. There’s already something subversive about singing a song with a man’s name and not a woman’s.

My sister has a seven-month-old baby in Los Angeles and his daycare insisted on staying open long into the pandemic under the guise of being there for parents who were medical workers. “But you know I can’t send him there,” she texted me, “not with the ‘Rona.” I like “‘Rona” most of all. ‘Rona is a person’s name, like Rona Jaffe. It’s cute, friendly. It does not sound like the more than 3,000 people in the U.S. who have died of the virus. When I first wrote this draft, it was 1,000. By the time I finish it, it will be more. The nickname makes it less frightening – it changes the virus into someone we can know.

My nickname is “A.C.” I like that the gender is not immediately obvious, though I feel I am not a very androgynous person in either my persona or my writing. I am an alarmingly cis-gendered girl who enjoys wearing dresses and listening to Taylor Swift and has more than one Disney Princess figurine in her apartment. But I like the name “A.C.” It feels tomboyish, cute. “A.C.” is a cooler girl than “Anna-Claire,” who is the same messy-haired, overly emotional dork I’ve been in my life. “A.C.” doesn’t care what other people think of her. I worked at the same theater company for years and about a year and a half in, I told everyone that I was going by “A.C.” now. I grew more confident in my job around the same time.

Certainly to put that all on the nickname is too much. But still I wonder, did choosing a name that was not so immediately feminine, make me feel stronger, more intimidating? In that same way, giving the coronavirus a nickname like “Rona” makes the illness feel weaker, safer. Maybe the reason we love to sing women’s names is that they are comforting to us. Singing a man’s name feels like we’ve feminized it somehow, and just in that word “feminize” is the implication that it is now less imposing. It’s probably irresponsible to do this. To make the virus into something silly. And yet if we don’t: What can we do instead?

A song with a woman’s name in it that I listened to today is “Maureen” by Fountains of Wayne. Adam Schlesinger, the bassist and lead songwriter of Fountains of Wayne and composer of a lot of my favorite movies and TV shows, was the first death I gasped audibly to read. I’ve been listening to *That Thing You Do!*, *Music and Lyrics*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, and also deep-diving into the Fountains of Wayne catalog. I discovered “Maureen,” which is about having feelings for a friend who keeps oversharing the details of her sex life with the singer. And then I relistened to one of their songs I knew before, “All Kinds of Time.” And it both felt true — we’ve all got all kinds of time right now — and untrue — Adam Schlesinger didn’t.

Schlesinger was a master of parody songs. In *That Thing You Do!* he spoofed Beatlesesque rock so well, you could’ve sworn this was a real song you’d forgotten. “Pop! Goes My Heart” from *Music and Lyrics* is a credible 80s New Wave trash hit, that’s no more ridiculous than naming your band The The. On *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, he churned out a boy band parody, a *La La Land* parody, an 80’s hip-hop song, a Fred-and-Ginger number. I love these parody songs because they often take something I needed to make light of and turn it into something funny. The boy band parody, “A Boy Band Made Up of Joshes,” turns thinking a man will solve all of your problems into a hilarious joke: “Because we’re not just a boy band made up of Joshes, we’re also a team of licensed mental health professionals,” they sing. Mental health was a theme on the show, and it comes up again in the *La La Land* parody: “Anti-Depressants Are So Not a Big Deal.” It’s dark, just like the coronavirus songs are dark, and it’s much better writing than any of those songs, more intelligent, nuanced. But it does the same thing: Takes something scary and makes it under-

standable.

I don't watch the coronavirus parodies as much as when this started. They simply aren't funny, and there's something incredibly depressing about watching a grown man alone in his home sing about how lonely he is, even to the tune of the Beach Boys. One video I did watch was Neil Diamond singing in front of his fireplace. The camera is badly out of focus. It opens on his dog's nose, blurry, and out of focus. It must be his wife filming. Then she pans over to Diamond.

Hands, washing hands, reaching out, don't touch me, I won't touch you, he sings.

But mostly he doesn't change the lyrics.

Good times never seemed so good.

It feels colossally irresponsible. And yet it is so comforting.

He doesn't change the woman's name to Corona. He sings,

Sweeeeeeet Caroline! Then when the song is over, he says, "Good night, everybody! Good night, we love you!" He blows a kiss at his computer. It pans over to the floor. The dog is asleep.

I take a breath. I rewind the video.

Where it began

I can't begin to knowing

But then I know it's growing strong.

And he's right. I can't begin to knowing either.

One Month Ago Today, NYC

Sally DeJesus

One month ago today I woke up on the kitchen floor
dizzy and confused got a bigger headache now
bumps and bruises show up later maybe I'm in shock
slowly coming to remembering the night sweats got
much worse I'm shivering in a drenched tee-shirt just
trying to get to the bathroom why does it suddenly feel so far away?
Living alone is so much harder now but I've
got to get up
got to get dressed
got to get help
got to get carefully down 3 flights of stairs in my building
damn I forgot to put gloves on I'm so sorry please forgive me
for grabbing the rail with bare hands but
I'm scared and it's too late to go back now.

At urgent care my mask is on so they will see me
my mind is spinning when they rush in with an IV drip
please can I call my son before the ambulance takes me
to a hospital where hallways are lined with hundreds of hurting people
crying, coughing, begging for help, begging for air, for water
I don't want to ask for nothing from the racing staff but it's been 3 hours
and the IV hydrates my body but not my mouth which is parched
from the speechlessness of Covid-19

6 hours after EKG, chest x-ray, blood work, and more tests a doctor leans
in and quietly says, "We all have it and so do you,
but because you're not high respiratory need we're saving beds in here"
and this I understand more than ever now.

I follow orders leaving the hospital:
keep your mask on, walk home, do not take a bus, do not stop anywhere,
self-isolate and return immediately if you struggle to breathe.

One month ago today I was blessed to go home, but not eternally yet.

I don't struggle to breathe, by the grace of God.
I only struggle not to cry every day and night for all the people
who I waited with surrounded by suffering,
coughing, begging for help, for air and water,
in a sea of sirens.

Safety Feet

Heather Rogers

Him, in line
and me, in line
for the grocery store
with two old ladies
18 safety feet
between us
he plays Latin music
from his phone.
Our eyes meet, smile
above our masks
I slightly shake
my shoulders, rock
my hips a bit
he nods, our secret...
I really should have
moved my feet
just gone for it
busted out
my hottest moves
perhaps
he would have danced with me
a partner (wepa!)
there, at 18 safety feet
and two old ladies' distance
on the sidewalk
with our masks and gloves
his cart, my bags
gyrating to the conga beats,
the whole grim line
would have laughed, exhaled
had one new thing to say:
this cracked white lady
dancing salsa

in the grocery line!
But I left it at
a slight shimmy and
shy smile, I never
made that friend
kept my safe feet planted
where they'd always been.



At Noon Flowers Show Their Shadow Sides

Christina Gessler

Holding Space with the Dying

Kim Malinowski

I burn frankincense for love — for maidens and crones — for men old and young.

For their lives and mine — taken by a hidden thief.

I burn myrrh for burial — for death and rebirth.

I hum ancient hymns — no words — only melody on lips.

Be well, my friends. Breathe deeply, let rich smells overpower.

Sink down. Balm of hush. No monitors, no tubes, only sunshine.

I will hold space with you. Hold my hand, then go.

There are other hands waiting to clutch you — peace.

Countdown to a Livestream Funeral During Covid-19

Yvonne Stephens

Camera Starts in 15m 5s

on the Kaatz Funeral Home web page with my grandmother's obituary and photo.

13m 12s and, to be honest, a few minutes ago I was scrolling my newsfeed, thinking about how my mom got dressed for the funeral this morning and has probably almost arrived across town.

12m 8s.

I'm worried about seeing my uncle, getting a trauma response via livestream, and even that's enough to get the loop going on repeat: Me, mid-air above the lake, 12 years old with braces. I'm wearing a one-piece with polka dots and green racer stripes when I feel him. Two hands from behind. A lift. Hands that slipped? A lift. Just a toss in the lake? Oscillating, falling, fighting. For decades, I have hit that water.

I just helped my son with math.

10m 20s.

It snowed last night. We tried a Zoom call with family, but it didn't work. "Why does this always happen to me?" Mom had asked, and I think about her "always." My "always." That water. Two hands. Always.

9m 14s

9m 7s

My kids are arguing over devices.

8m 20s

Who will use what for school today.

8m 5s

My daughter says to let her know when great grandma's funeral is on. She wants to watch it.

7m 21s

My seven-year-old son is scooting around on a piece of cardboard like a skateboard.

My dog is resting in a chair that was my grandmother's.

She sits in her chair, in her living room, in her home, the sheer curtain behind her, legs crossed at the ankles, and gives update by update about my cousins, aunts and uncles, including her son-in-law (yes, that uncle).

6m 34s

Our kitchen table and chairs once belonged to her, too. We hauled them north in a trailer.

5m 22s

I think my husband, working from home in the basement, is planning to join me here one minute to start. I'm in my pajamas. I thought about getting dressed. I thought about a lot of things.

4m 24s

More arguing over devices

2m 53s

“Do you know what a funeral is?”

“No.”

“Yes. When someone passes away, you go somewhere and say nice things about the person.”

1m 56s

Here comes my husband.

1m

I wonder how my dad is doing as he parks the car at the funeral home, walks around, and offers his hand to my mom to help her stand and walk in.

8s

1s

The grey countdown box opens to a view of a room from up in the corner. I’m floating again, suspended above a surface that feels new and familiar, and I know it will break. Beyond rows of empty chairs, I see her casket. Then I look carefully and can just see my grandmother, her head, her hands, so fuzzy, it’s like she’s underwater. For a moment it’s only me looking at only her, in the only way I know how right now. And then the nine out of ten people who are allowed to walk in, walk in.

Delta

Oak Morse

For Covid-19

It's the summer of 2009
and I'm not going back to Middle Georgia to live on campus.
I'm a city boy,
a sophomore in his own lane,
a considerer of opportunity,
lying upon my aunt's futon, ignoring the recession's reflection.
There's always transportation jobs and Delta is one of them.
Brother says I'll be able to explore places most Americans are blind to.
Aunt says take the transit to the interview
because Atlanta traffic will have me looking like a caboose,
rolling into the unknown.
I make it to the train station way before dawn.
Figure I will find the site once I get into that universe.
On the trip, my mind grows as big as the globe.
I can already see Tokyo villages in Cape Town,
Southwest London where story-teller Slick Rick was raised.
Dropped off at Delta Airlines, an hour and a half left to find the interview site.
Traveling through people, collecting information like my clock collects time.
One worker says you have to take the Holiday Inn Shuttle up to Cleveland
Avenue.
Another says I might make it there ten minutes late.
My heart jumps out of my chest and begins to fall 38,000 feet.
I land on the site twenty-seven minutes late.
The interviewer is an engine that won't give out.
She tells me I need to go home.
That train ride home is the longest, darkest tunnel I've known.
When I arrive home, my old company calls me back.

2009: Rehired at K&G Fashions, became the modern John Henry, worked until
there was no electricity left in me.

2010: Enrolled in a city school. K&G gave me the green light to intern at the
number one urban radio group, Radio One, and I was selected to become a
promotions tech, passing out flyers for events and driving the brand. One
night, an entertainer's words dug into me like a scrape in a new car. That night
was open mic poetry.

2010: My mouth began to spit out screws, down the aisles, between each customer and every sale. Those screws were building mantras and poems.

2011: Received “Employee of The Year” for being the top sales consultant. Praised, then upgraded to manager, becoming the youngest manager in the region.

2011: Grandfather caught the train to heaven, and I was studded with regrets.

2012: Met girlfriend at the workplace; she saw I was made of metal. We derailed. She left me with a map of how much further I had to go in life.

2012: Produced my first heartfelt poem. Her memory fueled it.

2013: Revisited Delta to fly to a writer’s festival.

2013: Met Jesus through a poet friend in a small church in Macon, Georgia before a poetry reading.

2014: Recognized for forgiveness, one of the biggest awards in a household, beating out my brothers who also had fathers who looked like air and came around every mahogany moon.

2015: Respected as a poet and manager by staff.

2015: Graduated with a B.A. from Georgia State University and learned to toot my horn for my publication record.

2016: Recovered from a love who wrecked me, whose heart was a lemon.

2017: Looked at Delta in my rearview mirror.

2017: Received a poetry award and a residency and gave praise to the inspiration that lives within the Workplace.

2018: Car was broken into, vandals swiped everything including my poetry notebook that contained my very self.

2018: Returned to the steering wheel of my destiny.

2019: Commended for a speech at Toastmasters International, titled *Don’t Know Where I Would Be Had I Caught an Earlier Train*.

2020: Overcame Covid-19 that crept into my lungs and tried to invade the temples where my poems come from.

2020: Was given a second chance to live and not only to look forward but to also take off higher than Delta could have ever taken me.

Toilet Paper and Tributaries

Shelby Wardlaw

When my grandfather decided to move to a retirement community, I inherited his Oldsmobile. The car retained many reminders of its original owner — the interior smelled of mint and Brylcreem, the stereo played an Elvis Hits CD — but perhaps the greatest reminder came when I opened the trunk: it was stuffed to the gills with toilet paper. In fact, for years afterwards, I kept finding rolls of toilet paper squirreled away in various vehicular nooks. There was a roll in the glove compartment, another in the seatback pocket, still another in the pull out mid-section where cup holders were supposed to live. When I needed a spare tire I found the hollow full of toilet paper instead. Last week, walking through the deserted paper goods aisle in my local grocery store, I thought of my grandfather. He would have been the most prepared person for this COVID-19 disaster. He was planning for disaster his whole life.

My grandfather, Ray Bryant, never acted spontaneously. When he and my grandmother, Hattie, drove from Natchez to Austin to visit us, Ray meticulously charted their course on his paper map. Using a complex series of pencils and highlighters, Ray marked his way across the mighty Mississippi river, noting every turn through the backroads of Louisiana, every change of highway once they crossed the Texas border; he even went so far as to circle the specific bathrooms at which they would stop. When my family made the reverse drive, Ray insisted we recreate his course, right down to the bladder-emptying sub-plan, of which he was extremely proud. Of course — should all urinary-mitigation plans fail — there was always the trunk full of toilet paper.

Like many in the Greatest Generation, my grandpa adhered to a personal ethos of almost-ritualistic sacrifice and materialistic asceticism; he was practical, as steady on his course as the great American river that ran beside his hometown.

Then, two months ago, I got a call.

After my university asked all students to leave campus, after I scrapped my lesson plans, after I attempted to answer my students' unanswerable questions, after I repeated those unanswerable questions during a frantic faculty meeting, after I commuted home

through droves of desultory workers, after kicking off my exhausted shoes in my shoebox-sized apartment, my mother called and informed me that Ray had attempted suicide. He'd taken a sharpened pencil and stabbed himself repeatedly across his arms and legs, puncturing his now 91-year-old skin.

He was at the hospital. Doctors said he would recover, but the pictures Mom sent were gruesome. Holes dotted his forearms; his calves were pocked with dried blood. Bruises radiated out from the epicenters of his wounds, blurring together to form a topographical map of hurt. Looking at those photos, I had the wild thought that somehow my grandfather had tried to map the encroaching pandemic, marking the sprawl of infection and panic and fear across the country. My mother was still able to visit him, though only after several weeks due to fears of the virus. Never one to mince words, as soon as my mother entered the hospital room Ray said, "I'm here because I tried to kill myself." It was the most lucid communication he'd had in months.

Ray is back in the Memory Care ward now. His advanced dementia prevents him from understanding much of our current political circumstances. Yet his suicidal distress — so uncharacteristic — suggests that perhaps the deterioration of his frontal lobe has not diminished his deeper, meta-cognitive faculties. Ray *knows* what he does not know.

In fact, my grandfather has the distinction of being the only person in Longhorn Village history of checking *himself* into the Memory Care unit. One day, when he was still in Assisted Living, Ray decided that he was too impaired to continue in his current living situation. He filled his walker with a few essentials — a sweater, a toothbrush, a roll of toilet paper — and charted his course to the Memory Care wing. When he arrived, he knocked politely and, in his thick Mississippi drawl, said, "It's time for me to move in here."

I never got over the strange, imposter feeling of driving my grandfather's Oldsmobile. I was so used to Ray manning the steering wheel. For years he drove us steadily through the streets of Natchez, Elvis crooning on the stereo, live oaks dripping mossy shadows across the road, the Southern air moist and heavy and dense. From the backseat, I saw the Mississippi River flow beneath the bluffs, its thick waters pumping towards the Gulf, heedless to history, cutting its timeless, arterial course through North America. Birthed in north-

ern Minnesota, the mighty river picks up speed and youthful ferocity in Iowa, accumulates silt as it matures in Missouri and Arkansas, pours through Tennessee and Kentucky and Louisiana until it reaches Mississippi, its namesake, where it courses — deep and wide with experience and fluvial memory — into its final resting place in the Gulf of Mexico.

In the wake of my grandfather's suicide attempt, I've wondered: how do we deal with the small tributaries of our own personal tragedies when the world is swept away in a river of deeper ones? How do I reconcile my grandfather's sudden violent act with the steady coursing of the man I knew as a child?

Perhaps the answer is in Ray's road maps, those carefully marked plans across the South. The pencil, once his compass, at last became his sword. But either way, my grandfather plots his own course, marking his way home, as if knocking on the door and saying, in his thick Mississippi drawl, "It's time for me to move in here."

Grapefruit Isolation

Kat Heger

As a result of isolation, I begin to wonder at the beeping of a semi-truck with its hazards on.

Hazard on, and I feel my body transported to the cockpit.

How desperately I wish to unfold my origami structure, spread and float,

But I could not reach a Hallowed pumpkin, or a Christmas tinsel this way.

Time would dry my grapefruit slices. I would candy and place them on a cake I learned to make.

I imagine my English grandmother, captive on a roiling sea. A shared cabin, the singular commodity.

I am a hair follicle tracing her cheek on the endless prairie ocean.

I am bread kneaded in drawers to keep out the dust, and an oxen cough from the topsoil in her lungs.

A wind-whipped wooden fixture, faucet of hopeful materials, a cure to absences,

Still only a blip on an endless horizon.

I know the weight of an ancestor's hand on my shaking back.

A tent could fly away with the wind, but an Alberta girl knows how to peg in.

Imagine How I Feel

O.H. Greenwood

There are some things that are too poetic to write poems about. Like staring at the neighbor's caged bird while in quarantine. It's too much, I know. Just imagine how I feel, sitting, watching the little parrot, waiting for the unemployment office to call. The bird was there before all this started, of course. It used to inspire in me a vague feeling of disapproval towards my neighbor, but now the cage in its blue cardboard tray makes me shudder. It has a perch on which the bird swings back and forth with a certain gusto. Pedro Sánchez flickers on the television behind it, announcing an extension to the lockdown. The bird hops down for a drink of water. It thinks it's getting out one day.

There are some things that are too poetic to write poems about, like how we stand at our windows and applaud at 8 PM every night. The owner of the bird shuts his curtains at this hour, but a woman next door to him opens the sliding door to her balcony, holding her tiny daughter by the hand.

"It's ridiculous," says A. as applause erupts in her section of the city a minute after it does in mine. I can hear it through my bluetooth headphones as I open my window. "I find the clapping ridiculous." Then she says, "Dude. The guy next door just came out. He's pretty hot, actually."

I'm playing peekaboo with the toddler across the narrow street. She crouches behind a potted geranium, thinking I can't see her. When she pops up, I duck behind my green shutters. For a second, she thinks I've disappeared forever. But I'm still here, being ridiculous.

Love in the Time of Coronavirus

Sandra Eliason

My mother-in-law looks up from her jigsaw puzzle and repeats, for the tenth time, "This is too hard. There are too many pieces. I think I'll leave it with you when I'm done."

She sits in front of the window, at the table we brought up from the basement to make a space just for her, a place that she could recognize and attach herself to. Her memory is slowly worsening, and one never knows when something will stick or be lost. Sun streams through the glass, lighting the green and blue puzzle pieces that she slowly lifts and rotates, her gnarled hands showing her 90 years.

We brought her here when it looked like the coronavirus was going to take off in Minnesota. The four siblings began to wonder what to do with Mom. Living in a seniors' building, with assisted living and nursing home attached, meant she was more likely to contract the virus. Staff and residents were still allowed to come and go freely. It was only a matter of time before the virus attacked her building, and, given her cancer treatments, she was at increased risk.

"Take her to the lake house," they said. We considered. We knew it would be a chore, with her lapsing memory and her tendency to get fixated on a single idea and not let go. "Getting stuck in a loop," our kids call it.

"I don't think I should get the special from the cafeteria," she would begin, "I got food poisoning there once. They make it all in a central kitchen, you know. Who knows who touches it there?"

My husband, her son, asked the staff where food was prepared. On site, they told him, and her.

But, "I don't think you should order the special here," she said two minutes later. "They're not cooked here in the building. They're prepared in a central kitchen, you know; who knows who touches them."

She repeats this every time we join her for dinner, in spite of my husband reassuring her otherwise.

Now, she stands and reaches for her walker, wheeling herself to

the kitchen for water. "That puzzle is too hard," she says as she goes by me. "I think I'll leave it here for you."

I watch her from my chair in this big open space, convenient for conversation while doing dinner prep, but challenging to find a place of my own. I can go to my bedroom or the basement, but risk being rude. Or, I can give all my brain space to someone who needs to talk, and fills my silence.

Even our opinions seem no longer our own.

My husband wondered, with the lockdown, how he would get the materials for our bathroom remodel.

"I hope you're going to put in a tub," his mother said.

"We have a tub now," he answered. "We're going to put in a walk-in shower."

"But a lot of people want tubs," she said firmly.

"There's still a tub downstairs," he responded.

"But people want tubs on the main floor."

"A lot of people our age don't even take baths anymore."

"I do," she said emphatically.

My husband looked at her quizzically. "You don't have a bathtub."

"Well, I would if I had one."

A long pause followed.

Then, "You're not going to have a bathtub?"

"There'll still be one downstairs," my husband replied.

"A lot of people want bathtubs on the main floor," she repeated. "What if they have children?"

"They can use the tub downstairs."

"But what if you want to sell? People want a bathtub. I used to be married to a realtor you know, I know what people want."

And on it went for another five minutes.

He could refuse to engage with her, refuse to take her on. But somehow, he can't let it go either.

Is it her memory that keeps her insisting, or is it obstinacy? Today, it's hard to know.

When my daughter was an infant, we visited their house for a few days. She wanted to give baby April a bath.

"Please don't," I said, "She hates them. I do sponge baths."

She nodded, and told me she'd watch April while I took a shower.

Toweling off, I heard my baby shrieking. I quickly dressed and rushed to the kitchen. My naked child was submerged in the sink, protesting loudly. My mother-in-law wanted to give April a bath, so she did.

When my father-in-law planted an oak sapling in their backyard, she didn't like where it was situated. Right in front of the kitchen window, the one she looked through while doing dishes. He didn't move it. So she went out and chopped it down.

I've watched these interactions for almost 50 years now, our first rocky encounters demonstrating difficulties ahead. I am three years older than my husband, and his parents didn't like the idea of my "cradle robbing." It was the turbulent 70's, and society was changing. They were already upset by his lengthening hair, ripped and patched jeans, and newfound belief that the Vietnam War was wrong. It had to be my bad influence. She prohibited her son from visiting his sister's school due to his shoulder-length hair; and when we moved in together, it was beyond acceptable. Surely her son would never decide this on his own.

Our decision to have a child while I was taking pre-med classes, and my commitment to going to medical school with said child, were antithetical to her every belief. She handed me "helpful" articles on child rearing, and the damaging effects of a mother who worked. She told us she was done with kids and never wanted to babysit ours. She commented on how difficult it must be to get wrinkles out of my (unironed) linen pants, and offered to get the spots off of my windows. She called to tell me the proper way to treat a child's fever and what baby food was appropriate. And most of all, she watched me from under those lidded eyes, with a look that said: judgement.

My husband is her oldest child; I am just the daughter-in-law. The two sisters own the daughter space, make the choices, decide when my thoughts are appropriate.

She's not my mother, I've been told, which has two meanings: she's not my biological mother, so not to assume what is right for her; and she's not the same as my mother, who had such a zest for living and tried so hard not to die. My mother-in-law, on the other

hand, asks why she has to continue these cancer treatments, because isn't it time she dies anyway? She is 90, you know. Another loop.

She's had weekly injections for her multiple myeloma for nine months. The original plan was to treat for a year, then reevaluate. She has done remarkably well, really, blood counts stabilizing, mood, memory and pain level improving. In fact, she is pain free.

"I don't see the point of going in for these treatments every week," she said every time. "It's not curable anyway."

We try to explain the chronic disease model to her. "It's like high blood pressure or diabetes," we say. "It can't be cured, but the medications make it livable."

"Yes, but I don't see why I have to keep going," she says. "I'm 90. You have to die of something."

I ask my husband why we are doing this if she doesn't want to continue.

"It's like preventing a suicidal person from jumping off a bridge," he answers.

She has been treated for depression for years, but didn't stay with any one medication long. They made her feel funny, she said, giving her a headache, or nausea, and she stopped them before they had time to work. I sometimes wondered if she stopped when she started feeling better, and it was such a strange feeling to see the world looking lighter, more hopeful, that it scared her. She's been with this current one a while. Maybe it will do something.

The siblings talked her into continuing the cancer treatments. Which was probably justified, since she kept going each week, calling to ask who was taking her this time in the sibling rotation. If she really didn't want to go, wouldn't she sit in her chair and refuse to get up, the same way she resolutely chopped down the oak sapling?

When we saw how the coronavirus was worsening, one of the sisters called her doctor. He said she would be fine skipping a few treatments, less risky than going to the office. She refused to come to the lake house several times, for which we were secretly grateful and relieved. But we also worried about how she would manage if no one could visit her. I don't think any of us realized the long slog this would turn into. We were still in "life as usual" mode, thinking we would just get her away for a bit.

Now, she places the water glass on the seat of her walker and

moves back to the table. "This puzzle is too hard," she says again, surveying it.

I make a comment about it being 550 pieces, and maybe the next one will be easier. I look downstairs. I have three others that are 500 pieces.

"I'm not doing those," she says. "They're too hard."

I've been helping her with the one she's working on, and we've made good progress together. "Why don't we try it together?" I ask.

"No, they're too hard."

"Will you help me if I start it?"

"No."

"You won't even help me?"

"No, I won't do it. It's too many pieces."

So we'll have to find something else to do with her time.

I watch her stand over the table. Her back is so crooked that she is bent in half to the right. I wonder why she's not hurting.

She sits and picks up another piece.

When I was accepted to medical school, my husband asked if April and I could stay with them while he moved our mobile home and got it set up.

"No," she said, "It's better for our relationship if we keep separate homes."

He's never forgotten that. "She wants to go home," he says, "We should just let her. It's karma."

The siblings say no, and I know that being locked down in her apartment, unable to go out or visit, would likely make her more unhappy than being in a space not her own.

I kept contact through the years, at first so my children would have grandparents. But over the seasons, an understanding and kind of bond developed, forged by common experience and the love of her son. So many family meals and celebrations and joint activities; the death of her husband, and the sharing of my children/her grandchildren. The relationship has grown with time and was sealed with a secret Hallmark card she sent several years ago, in which she told me she regretted her mistakes and her sorrow at not being a good mother-in-law in the past.

And here we are, locked in together, all these years later. She's in failing health, my own mother is dead, and I am aware that when

she is gone, I will be the oldest, the matriarch of our family.

So I will listen to her repeat how hard the puzzle is, to her complaints about the flimsy paper her newspaper uses, and her descriptions of the movies *Titanic* and *Singing in the Rain* (chosen just for her) as “weird” and “strange.” I will leave my writing to get up and make dinner at her preferred hour, while she still turns over puzzle pieces, muttering about how hard they are, and try again tomorrow. I will put on my best face and smile, share my mental space, and understand this is how to love in this strange time.

collective loss

Alyssa Sandoval

the sun
rises, day after day,
operating as if nothing
has changed

they say
if you press your ear
to the floorboards late at night,
you can hear the gentle hum
of collective loss.

it's been so long that
i can't remember
how we got to a place

where toddlers get honks
on their birthdays
instead of hugs

where seniors watch
their prom dresses
instead of dancing in them

where pillars of the family fall
in empty hospital rooms,
their loved ones break
in the parking lot below.

our health-care workers
are sacrificing sleep and mental wellness
so that we can breathe another day;

the internet sings of hope,
boasts that we are more connected,
despite being forced apart,

but we are living in a world
where, just yesterday,
i crossed the street
when i saw a runner
coming toward me;

i think,
subconsciously,
i viewed him
as a threat.

i laugh because i feel afraid

what if my mother doesn't live to see sixty

what if the last time i see my sister is through a screen

what if the last touch
i'll ever experience
was the accidental graze
of a gloved hand,
passing my groceries
through a rolled-down window

i remember
i made a
mental note
to sanitize
the second
he turned away.

the sun
(the death count,
our grief)
rises, day after day,

everything has changed

Walk

Jason Montgomery

I've walked around my neighborhood
One hundred one million one billion
Times since about this same time
Yesterday. I've walked
Around the coming
Springtime sunshine
One hundred
One million
One.

Call Your Parents

Amanda Nyren

My parents live 45 minutes away, but I haven't been to visit them. They're in their upper 60s, and I'm honestly not sure what's advisable. I've called them more than I normally do. As I have with other family and friends. To check up on them, and also to connect with someone while I self-isolate in my apartment.

My mom sounds surprisingly upbeat when I call her the day the governor closes all restaurants. She's been working from home, doing lots of Zoom meetings. She tells me it's funny to see her coworkers in their pajamas with their dogs and boyfriends. She works in event planning and all her events have been cancelled, so when she's not in Zoom meetings, she's averaging 30,000 steps a day, circling and circling the golf course behind the house.

My dad gets on the phone and starts talking about Bitcoin. He thinks it's worth investing in, a fact he's made clear with a few blog posts he's forwarded to me via email. I have not fully read or responded to any of these emails. I remind him that I've been laid off and the job market isn't great, so speculative investing isn't high on my list of priorities. He says he understands, but that if Bitcoin pays off, I may not have to worry about working for a while. I tell him I like working.

Finance has never been my favorite topic. I took economics in college at my dad's urging, but my performance was middling. Then again, that might have been a subconscious act of rebellion. The last time I was unemployed was also during a recession, in 2008. I had an opportunity to go to work at an investment research firm then, but turned it down, knowing I wouldn't be happy. Instead, I got an internship at a newspaper, a decision that I'm sure looked like a mistake to my parents (and probably some other people, too). It's a credit to them that they allowed me the dignity of my own experience.

The day the governor signs a shelter-in-place order, I call my parents again. My mom tells me that she's found a data entry project to do "for job security," which concerns me, but I don't say anything. She's also baked banana bread and broccoli cheddar bread and deep-cleaned the house.

My dad gets on. He starts talking about cryptocurrency, and half of my brain shuts off like I'm a sleeping dolphin. Why can't I just say, "I'm not interested. Let's talk about something else?" Because I know financial advice is one of his love languages. (Washing your car is another.) So I don't ask him to change topics, although I wonder if that's dishonest of me.

Just in case he asks me a question about all of this later, I press the phone between my ear and my shoulder and search for pen and paper. All while my dad continues to talk, I write, "crypterium, chain-link, terium, ox." Satisfied I've gotten enough down to have some semblance of conversation later, I relax into a chair. I look at my list of words and draw a big equals sign underneath. In quotation marks, I write, "I love you."

It takes a while for me to call my parents again, mostly because I don't have the stomach for another cryptocurrency talk. When I finally do, the governor has extended the shelter-in-place order through the end of the month, and it's unclear when we will next see each other in person. My mom tells me about her walks and her job, which she says she may lose. Even as someone who has recently lost a job, I'm not sure what to say to that, so I tell her that her family loves her very much.

Then my dad gets on. He asks if I've bought any Bitcoin yet. I tell him the truth, which is no. It's a nice day, so I put on my earbuds and head outside. I brace myself for a lecture, but instead my dad changes the subject almost exactly as I step outside into the sun. He asks if I remember the ladder we built so I could climb up into the apple tree in the backyard. I tell him of course, as I walk toward the park at the end of my block. He tells me that it's gotten pretty dilapidated. My phone buzzes, and I see my dad has texted me a picture of

the ladder leaned against the tree. It's weathered and rotted in half from the years of rain and snow. I ask him why he's kept it. "So you could remember," he says, "and so I could." In the park, there are couples with new puppies and kids learning to ride on two wheels. "I love you, too," I say.



Intransitive

George Stein

This Chapter

Alicia Drier

When life outside my home
has been reduced to shadowed pixels
When I left to seek empathy
in the decimals between my keyboard

I worry less about the titles
of each moment in my life
And more about what is being written
in the margins right now

Flour packed beneath my fingernails
New grass stain along my favorite pair of jeans
Weight of a trowel puncturing dirt
Clang and twinkle of my dog's leash against my thigh

I know there is a poem in this new place
But I've lost the ability to write it

My Corona Journal

Zeina Azzam

1.

Leaves of the fig tree
like five-fingered hands
on a thick stem, a welcoming
statue in my garden.
A small world of green
reaching for a sun ray.
I check in each morning,
gingerly elbow boundaries
of the canopy,
avoid spider webs
between branches.
You are beautiful,
I tell the leaves and
the flowers in nearby pots.
There are geraniums
with an earthy scent,
the colors of bright red
and pink lipstick.
Lilies grow slowly
but promise a showy splash.
Daffodils and tulips already
bloomed, now reenergize in bulbs.
I want to live in this garden,
to drink coffee at sunrise
next to the embracing hands
of a fig tree.
I yearn to be ensconced in this
delightful, safe, green space
away from the Covid-19 world.

2.

Sewing face masks was not
in my repertoire.

When did I start saying to door knobs,
who touched you last?

My hands, scrubbed so often,
feel like sandpaper.

My heart beats fast before
heading to the grocery store.

I imagine viral droplets lurking
on apples and tomatoes and paper bags.

I often walk in the street
to avoid brushing by others.

This virus makes me speak
in halting sentences.

It is not like a wildfire, a tornado,
a tsunami, a volcano....

This is an invisible stealer of breath,
engraver of worry lines.

I am so exhausted at the end of each day.

3.
17 percent.
Global emissions went down
by 17 percent since
the pandemic started:
one billion tons
of carbon dioxide less
in our atmosphere.
Earth is becoming uncaged
from the green house,
now a clear

cavernous
curving
blue
body.
It is more visible
from the glistening handle
of the Big Dipper,
the dense, opalescent ribbon
of the Milky Way.

4.
A prayer for the peonies today,
so big in their gorgeousness
that the whole flower
bends down, too heavy
for itself.

A prayer, too, for the nurse
who succumbed to Covid-19
after helping save many patients.
She keeled over like a peony,
such overwhelming beauty and kindness
in her soul.

5.
The masks we wear
are a curious sight.
Some look like blunted beaks,
others invoke images of
colorfully bearded men and women.
We will have funny tan lines this summer!
Then we'll know who did not wear the masks
and who did,
evidence, some would say,
of a political stance,
others, of social thoughtfulness.

6.

I watch the news while making dinner, chopping ripe tomatoes, delicious now that they have aged on the counter for a few days.

The senator on TV says 69 percent of those who have died were in nursing homes and assisted living facilities. He reasons we should open up the country because the vast majority of people who die of Covid-19 are old.

On hearing these words, I accidentally slice my finger with the knife. A drop of blood mixes with the orange-red tomato juice. Am I now one of the expendable old people, sacrificial?

I'd like to think of myself as a delectable, plump tomato instead.

7.

I tell my friend today that

I am living an interior life.

What I don't say is,

*I think I am getting too comfortable
in this solitude.*

There is 9-5 work with no commute
then long hours doing
whatever feels right
at the moment. What a break
from the many years
of rush hour traffic,
appointments,
grassroots activism,
letters to the editor,
political demonstrations,
endless shopping,
too little time
at home.

Now there is more of a balance,
as if someone placed a weight
marked TIME on the one side.

James Taylor's lyrics surface:
*The secret of life is enjoying
the passage of time.*
I keep this secret to myself.

8.

My mother's cousin used to tell me
stories from Greek myths at bedtime.
Daoud introduced me to Zeus and Hera
and Athena, watered my thirsty imagination
with dramas about gods of oceans and wars.
Recently I thought of Daoud as I read
about the priestess Cassandra, the one
who made true prophecies. Her curse was
that nobody would believe her. Tonight as
Dr. Fauci spoke at a press conference, I
imagined him as the male Cassandra
with a face mask, more like a muzzle.
If he were alive, Daoud would be pleased
that I made this connection.

9.

I begin each day on my patio with coffee.
Often a crow (maybe the same one?)
lands on the side wall.
This always reminds me of Mahmoud Darwish's
words that a black bird is a bad omen....
so when the crow comes I feel scared
it will bring some calamity to my life.
This morning the crow stood on the
nearby brick wall and looked me straight
in the eye then let out a loud CAW, CAW.
I immediately grabbed my cup
and got up to go inside, trembling.
Through the window I watched
it fly to the table area
where I had placed my coffee.

He stood there and looked around, triumphant.
The crow had conquered my space.

I need to stop being so fearful of Covid-19.

Or maybe I just need a scarecrow.

10.

Every time I hear statistics about rising domestic abuse during this time, I think of Souhaila. She was our neighbor in Beirut in the apartment building when I was a child, on the floor below us. My parents always whispered when they talked about Souhaila. Every few days she would arrive at our door, day or night, red-eyed and bruised. My mother would let her in and take care of her. Sometimes she would sleep on our couch in the living room. The story would usually end with her husband coming to collect her. I think I remember that my father tried to talk to him and to his relatives. I didn't understand until I was a little older — about 8 or 9 years old — what was happening. I was frightened of Souhaila's husband throughout my childhood years, until we moved away when I was 10 years old. I don't know what happened to her but I know she always went back to him.

11.

Sometimes I think it's a marvel
that I ended up in this privileged
position in life. I am a child of refugees,
after all. Our early days as immigrants
to three different countries
were filled with insecurity and fear.

But at this time in my life I have a job,
and one that can be done remotely.
Even with its pandemic pay cut
I am thankful to have this job.
I am grateful to have health insurance,
a comfortable home, enough money.

I've already raised my children
and can enjoy the luxury of these basics.

I am fortunate to have time to reflect,
the freedom to be able to pull away
and retreat to my cozy abode.

And I know that a small or unwise decision
or world event or yet a different skin color
or health problem — or simply being born
in a refugee camp, in a poor family,
in a war zone, as one of a marginalized group —

could have put my life path
on a vastly divergent trajectory.

12.

I miss seeing my children so much.

How much time will it be
before I can touch them again?
I long to see my friends, too —
now voices over the telephone,
framed images on the internet,
muted and unmuted.

An Arabic word keeps
coming to mind: *shawq*,
longing and yearning.

Except *shawq* conjures more:
wanting to see and touch,
craving a presence, desiring
from deep within.

So much *shawq*.

The Bench

Charles Spring

I lay in bed, trying to fall asleep at an appropriate time so I don't let this quarantine ruin my sleep schedule. Days became routine: wake up, walk around the city late morning/noon, then loaf around in bed the rest of the day sexting men until I fell asleep. A repetitive life, but a safe one during the pandemic. The lack of excitement makes falling asleep difficult though. My solution is to force myself to dream until the dream takes over.

In tonight's dream, I find myself in a familiar spot. I'm walking through a black void until I see the bench. Once it peaks over the horizon, the void shifts to white. It feels like a bright day at high noon, slight breeze. The kind of time I would go for walks where the light doesn't feel like it's just starting or fading, but like it's shining as if it can breathe life on the planet.

I sit at the bench, legs crossed and hands brought together, as I watch newly-conjured shadows mingle around me — the men I've been talking to. I sigh. "I was supposed to leave hook-up culture behind." I stare at the dozens of men, now taking form from their apparitions. Some of them naked, because that's all I've seen of them. While others are clothed, they remain further away from me than the nude ones. I take in a breath as a familiar presence now sits beside me.

"Hmm, I mean that one is pretty decent, but I didn't think these would be your rebounds after me." he speaks. He's angled to face me, but I keep looking out into the void where the men stand. I almost forget what he looks like, yet I always choose to remember him with his long, disheveled hair no matter what he wears — or doesn't wear.

"It'll be one year since I started speaking to you in June," I reply, brushing off the comment.

"Yeah? Maybe we should celebrate it." His suggestion is painted with a smirk on his face. I continue to stare out, expressionless. He gets serious, reaching for my hand. "You've come a long way, Charles. You should be happy with all of this. When we met, you

couldn't handle talking to multiple men without some sort of attachment. Now look at you. Half of them don't even have faces and the other half, well, it's not their faces you're really looking at." He laughs and my persona breaks so I laugh a little bit too. "There you go. You're always so cold to me when I show up now."

"It's been fun. I can't tell what helped more: the therapy, the medication, or you," I say and he scoffs.

"If I could help anyone, maybe things would have been different. It's definitely the other two." Just like that, the smile I had fades. I look down, breathing in deep again.

"The only reason I came back to this sexting, Grindr, hook-up bullshit was because of corona. I waste my days in bed anyway, might as well let myself do it with some men throwing me attention, but..." I trail off. He's right, I'm stronger now. I've been surprised how levelheaded I can be talking to men that only have a desire to choke me, fuck me, and leave me. I'm not crying at night for hours anymore, feeling incomplete when someone blocks me without reason. There was a time I would drive home from work, park my car right outside my apartment, and just sink back into my seat with the music on and AC blaring. I'd break down in tears for maybe fifteen minutes, maybe an hour, just thinking about my worth and what I can do to be better. I'm not like that anymore. I can have fun now and be free without worrying about the emotions overriding my judgement or self-esteem. I can have all these men flaunting their cocks at me as if they're the best things on this planet, as if having even an inch of them in me could cure cancer and world hunger, worshiping them. And yet, "...it should have been you," I speak. "It should have been you, Nico." He turns away from me and hunches over on the bench, clasping his hands as he looks down.

"I know," he agrees. Here we are, again, miserable on the bench in my dreams – the only place I can still talk to him. Exactly one month away from the day we met online. But tonight I feel like I need to be honest with him.

"I was in love with you," I confess. "I didn't want to be, I didn't think I could be. We never met. I was confused, depressed, destroyed; all these excuses I kept saying to rationalize it. When my therapist started saying '*in love*' at me, I found it harder and harder to deny it. But I couldn't. I was naïve, foolish, and too emotionally

erratic, and I was in love with a man I never even met." His posture stays the same. I don't know how we would react to the confession so I don't know how to dream about his reaction either. He reciprocated all of the things I felt before this. I'd like to think maybe, deep in the recesses, he could reciprocate this one, too. But he always said he'd need to meet me to know. "Maybe I'm still confused, but I still wish you were here every day. I always hope the next day you'll finally reach out again and tell me you're ready to change."

"I wanted to stay, Charles. I loved you, I told you I loved you so many times. But you still walked away from me. Twice."

"I had to." My voice becomes sullen. "You couldn't give me the attention I needed. Not with her around." He jolts in his seat slightly. "I admired you for telling me about her the first time we spoke, but I just couldn't forget about her, and how much you ignored me to spend time with her so you wouldn't get caught."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be what you deserved." The last thing he ever said to me. "You meant a lot to me. I finally accepted I was bisexual because of talking with you. You meant more to me than what I was capable of giving back to you, but I wanted to be that man. I wanted to give you everything you wanted out of me. But I can't leave her, either. Not for a man I never met on the east coast."

"The day I blocked you on Snapchat, the moment I pressed the button, I was on a train going into work and, as if it was a scene from a movie, the train doors opened up and I just broke down in tears. I got up from my seat and rushed off the train, wanting to throw my phone at the ground because all I wanted was to stay. But you had your girlfriend, your Grindr whores, your perfect life that you wanted to fuck up. You wanted to get caught. I couldn't stay with someone I cared about who was so self-destructive. I didn't want to watch it all fall apart, for my benefit or otherwise," I say, and Nico smacks his knees and stands up, walking around the bench keeping a hand on the back of it. He looks away then back at me.

"There wasn't a way to merge these two lives! I wanted to be happy with her, but I was curious. I wanted to explore my sexuality after 7 years. And in case you forgot, *she* cheated on *me* first."

"And you think that absolves you?" I look at him, locking eyes while I sit. We pause for a moment, his breathing quickens.

"You always thought I was a good person, but I'm not. I love

my girlfriend and I still cheat on her every day for all you know. What am I doing right now? You don't know. Maybe things worked out and that part of me is all behind. Or maybe I'm still fucking men anytime I can get out of the house during quarantine because that's the kind of guy I am. And maybe, just maybe, you hope I'm thinking about you and wanting to be a better person because you will it hard enough. Well, I think we both know what I am: a fuck up." He slams the other hand on the bench and looks down. "Always a fuck up, always. I'm happy with where I'm at. I can have all the men I want and I can keep my girlfriend. My two worlds, I can have them both." He lifts his head up and we lock eyes again.

"And you still wish you could choose one over the other," I say. He takes in a breath.

"Yes." Silence. Whatever men were around us before had been gone for a while now, because that's how this scene always plays out. Even when I have others to choose from, I think about him and only him.

"This is why I can't go back. I can't watch you fall apart. I care too much about you to watch you ruin the life you don't think you deserve."

"I was there for you when you fell apart," he reminds me, water forming in his eyes as his hands turn to fists on the bench. "You owe me, Charles! I need a friend. I need someone to talk to. Please." I sit there staring at him as a tear slides down his cheek. He wipes it away, keeping an intense stare. "Please!" he begs again. After a pause, I slowly shift my body away from facing him and stare back out into the white void surrounding us.

"This is why I fell in love. You cared more about me than yourself. You'd say things like 'I'd be mad if I couldn't be the one, but I want you to be happy. You deserve it.' All I have are the memories, now. Memories of a man who cared so little about himself, his happiness, that he risked everything for mine. You never wanted to talk about your feelings, just mine; my pains, my traumas, my joys, my successes. You always put me and my wellbeing first. I wish you could be here with me, share in these new successes. I'm so much happier, now. When I wrote you that letter the first time I walked away and it made you cry, you asked why things couldn't be different. Because, at least for now, this is how it is supposed to be." I

close my eyes. The void turns back to blackness, but the bench remains.

I feel a hand on my shoulder. When I reach for it, it disappears. "You're just a ghost, Nico. You're not dead, but you linger behind me every day. I feel you push me forward and I wish I could grab you and fling you forward, too." I stand up and the bench disappears. I take another look behind me and in the distance, I see the outline of him and I smile. "Thank you for saving my life." I walk forward out of the abyss as a bright flash of light engulfs me.

I slowly blink my eyes open in bed, the sound of my fan blowing as the morning light lifts me awake in my bed. I close my eyes and try to keep sleeping for a little longer as the notifications build up on my phone.

"If you need me, I'm here. Please take good care of yourself. If you have hard days, just try to remember that there's a guy in the midwest (who may be a complete mess) that thinks that you are amazing."

Movie Watching and the Pandemic

Adam Oyster-Sands

As the final
glimmer of sunlight
held tight
to the horizon,
sucking out
every last moment
from the day,
we settled down
on the couch with
our wine
and weed
and bag of popcorn
to watch a movie.

And for those few hours,
nestled under
the blanket
with our dogs,
I forgot
what day it was
and how long
we'd been
in this house.

And for those few hours
I forgot how many
more days it would
be before
we could go
out to eat
or wander aim-
lessly through

the shops downtown.
And for those few hours
I forgot
the panic
and fear
and responsibility
that lay
on my doorstep.

And for those few hours
it could have been
any old night
in the past
ten years where
we settled in-
to each other and
a life we built
without noticing.

And for those few hours, everything was nice.

The lives we do not count

Melissa Smith

To the homeless men who drink by the steps to my boyfriend's apartment building:

It's quiet without you now. Not saying you're
Gone, just that you're not *here*, and
There are still greased-paper sacks that held
Burgers or liquor or a
Laugh, and you used to stay up late into the
Night, singing a song without a melody
Until one of you made a bed
Out of concrete, out of ripped
Sweaters and plastic bags.

I don't know if you spent
The night. Or if you wandered
Away into the richest parts of
Town, where white people peddle
Pittances through cobblestone streets
With too-small sidewalks to
Social distance and
Cupcakes that cost an hour's
Pay. I don't know if you prefer
To sleep there instead, and in my
Head, I hope it's true because,

There's an incalculable loss, said
The New York Times.
But what about the lives
We do not
Count?

Lines From My Couch: A Quarantine Lament

Pamela Potter

My brain is full of fog
I want to create
I want to write
I want to make
but worry has made my thoughts thick and cloudy
so I sit and I stare at the screen...

My heart is full of fear
I want to clean
I want to sort
I want to organize
but distress steals my energy and paralyzes my limbs
so I sit and I stare at the screen...

My days are full of time
I want to learn
I want to plan
I want to research
but anxiety pulls my attention in every direction
so I sit and I stare at the screen...

My house is full of silence
I want to talk
I want to laugh
I want to discuss
but my friends and family are far away
so we all sit and stare at the screen...

My future is full of dread
I want health
I want freedom
I want normalcy
but the world has shifted and no amount of wishing will put it back
so I sit and I stare at the screen.



Most Days (series)

Jane Dabate



The Game of Global Domination

Amy Zaranek

Uncertainty and risk are often mistaken for one another. The difference is a person's ability to react.

Jason proposed to me on February 25, 2020—just over a month after the first case of the novel coronavirus was reported in the United States. I said, “Of course.” I knew it was coming; still, he surprised me. He was set to deploy to the Middle East for a year starting at the end of March. We had talked about what being engaged would mean when he left: more commitment, a risk we were willing to take.

Risk requires calculation, a careful weighing of all options before making the best possible decision for a given time.

Three days later, we moved out of our shared apartment to prepare for deployment. We canceled our flight to AWP hours before we were supposed to board. Instead of celebrating our engagement with friends in a San Antonio Airbnb, we laid down at night in Jason's brother's guest bedroom. I calculated case-to-death ratios for COVID-19 versus the flu, which Jason had nursed me through in December. Now, he tried to ease my mind. Our conversations in the dark sounded apocalyptic. “What if we can't see each other before you leave?” What-ifs don't usually happen, but neither do pandemics.

Uncertainty causes helplessness.

Rumors of lockdowns swirled and our home states both shut down on March 23. I drove to Detroit to be with my family, unsure if I'd be stranded out-of-state after Jason left. His orders changed. The military instituted a travel ban. Those on base had to stay on

base; everyone else had to stay within two hundred fifty miles of home — then within fifty miles of home. His command checkout was canceled, our engagement photos were postponed. “The month before deployment is the most important for a couple,” he said. But we were spending that precious time apart. We were stuck, separated indefinitely.

Disappointment and regret are related. Humans can thrive in healthy regret: replaying events and considering alternatives can help us react better to similar situations in the future.

We sheltered in place, alone together, me with my parents and him with his brother and sister-in-law. We postponed our time together until he received concrete orders. The arbitrary reunion dates we set — this weekend, Easter, next weekend — passed like each hour of quarantine. We stayed put. We missed each other’s birthdays. I cried on mine, wishing we could have spent it together, knowing that we’d likely miss next year’s too, kept apart by oceans instead of a virus. We FaceTimed every night. Through the phone screen I asked him, “What if I can’t see you at all when you’re gone?”

When disappointed, we also replay our decisions. We want to act on the change of circumstance, but disappointment is not regret. With disappointment, we lack agency and are left only with the emotion.

I packed my truck and turned the key. Meat Loaf’s “I’d Do Anything for Love” crackled through the radio static as I pulled out of my driveway. I stopped once, for gasoline, wiping down the pump before and after use, dousing my hands in sanitizer that stung when I absentmindedly touched my eyes. Five hundred miles later, Jason kissed me in his brother’s driveway. The diamond he put on my finger sparkled in the sundown light.

Commercialized COVID

Jaden Goldfain

Where were the commercials
in black and white,
layered with generic piano chords
and a shallow narration, to lament
the world's hidden courage
and infiltrating loneliness
when only half of us
were invisible?

American capitalism becomes invisible too,
so now they're qualified to offer
commercialized words of support?
They didn't know instability
until they scrambled to find sturdy ground
among cliffs that have been jagged for years.

"You're not alone."

We have been and will continue to be
after your precious businesses are revived.
Don't forget the invisible ones
when everyone can see you again.

We'll still be here.

The Other Virus

Omar Saeed

Here I am
In total isolation
Separated by the invisible,
Weakened by the distance,
Struck by an elegant viral envelope
With a dense protein capsule
Nearing hospital admission.

The fever forces a tumultuous turning inside my veins,
Threatening to boil over and consume,
Unrelenting crystalline droplets moisten my bronzed skin
Yet still, I writhe with chills.
Fraught with profuse muscle pains and exhaustion
That no amount of sleep can overcome,
The main tragedy
Lies not within the physical,
But in the social deprivation.
How can extroverts survive such isolation?

These four walls remain sealed
As my glare
Attempts to penetrate these confines.
The other virus does not lie within my lungs,
But within my grieving heart.
My wife has moved out to the guest room
I have not seen her smile in days.
Facial masks evoke muffled speeches,
But her visits are over just as soon as they began.
The seclusion is consuming.
My strength is waning.
How much longer will the virus overwhelm me?

Ten days later
My symptoms subside.
I am starting to feel reawakened inside.
A mask still covers my smile,
But at least I can laugh,
At least I can cry tears of joy
As I finally look my wife in her eyes.
Familial love, like a waterfall,
Provides the social attention I crave.
The other virus is like a drought,
Leaving us to wither away.

Whether infected or in quarantine
We are all affected to some degree.
We will get through this together.
We will all get through this,
Just with a little distance.

Living in Manhattan Through the Pandemic

Barbara Zapsen

Growing up in New York City, in a middle-class housing development with approximately 35,000 people, I never expected to know my neighbors. My parents never sought them out, so neither did I. After marriage I moved to a small town on Long Island and lived there for twenty-four years. There was a strong sense of community, and I became very active civically and politically and made many friends and a few enemies.

Several years ago, I moved back to the City and development I grew up in and resumed my “see nothing, say nothing” attitude towards my neighbors. Not because I’m unfriendly, as I’m basically a very friendly person. I’m the New Yorker who stops to give visitors directions when I see them looking at a map or phone, obviously lost. Sometimes I suggest a reasonably priced restaurant, or that they visit a site nearby that they didn’t know existed. It’s just that, in big apartment complexes in the City, people move in and out so fast, you really don’t get a chance to know them. But, if you do, either you or they are in a hurry to get to work, or a doctor’s appointment or the theater, and neither party has time for more than a quick “hello.”

I’ve always had three kinds of neighbors in the City. There’s the “Hi, how are you?” group, who might answer, “Fine, how are you?” with neither you nor they really interested; the “nod and a smile” as you or they rush by neighbors; and the third category consists of the people that you know just a little better or care about just a little bit more. Those are “the stop and chat” group, with whom you will spend a few minutes, regardless of where you, or they, have to be.

There are eight apartments on each floor in my building. We’re the third longest residing people on our floor. I don’t know the tenants at all on one side of my apartment, nor the person across the hall

from them. I have a “nod and a smile” relationship with the residents of two other apartments, one of whom gifted us with a welcome basket when we moved in. I appreciated the gesture greatly, and we’ve been invited to their gatherings and we, in turn, invite them to ours. Other than that, they are in the third category, as is my neighbor two doors away. One of the apartments on my floor has three adorable children—3, 8 and 10 years old. Since our grandchildren are all grown, the kids down the hall have kind of taken their place. We give them small gifts at Christmas and they stop by occasionally, just to say hello.

Immediately next door to our apartment is a wonderful neighbor, Amy, and her two (now teenaged) children. She moved in about eight years ago and we immediately became good friends. We are old enough to be Amy’s parents, but it doesn’t matter to us or to her. Amy has a great personality and an infectious laugh. When Hurricane Sandy knocked out our power and we couldn’t go out because we’re on the 11th floor, and we had no elevator service, Amy had a dinner party and invited all her friends from the building, including us. We all emptied our refrigerators, brought flashlights, candles, wine and either food we cooked at home or items to cook in her house. Luckily we all have gas stoves, which worked! It was a great party and helped us to forget our problems.

Fast forward to March 10, 2020. I fell onto my face on the cement sidewalk just six days before we were asked to shelter in place. I went to the hospital where they cleaned and bandaged my wounds, did a CAT scan, gave me a tetanus shot and sent me home. My entire face from my forehead down was injured. In a few days, my nose, chin and forehead swelled up, I had two black eyes, and my cheeks were green and purple. Strange though, nothing hurt, but I wouldn’t leave the house looking the way I did! Amy rang the bell to borrow something and went into shock when she saw me. She was practically crying. From that day until now, two months later, she has gone shopping for us at food stores, the bakery, the pharmacy, and even to the bank and post office. There isn’t a day that I don’t hear from her, asking what I need or want.

Before we were given the six-feet-apart edict, we invited Amy and

her children over for dinner. She said she'd come, but not her kids. She was afraid they might be carriers of COVID-19. We appreciated her honesty and thoughtfulness, and she came for dinner on a night when her kids were with their father. Since then, I've cooked several meals — enough for five of us — and shared them with Amy and her kids. That's the least I can do for all the time and attention she's given us. I haven't cooked so much in 40 years, but all the restaurants are closed! Amy also comes over for a glass of wine (and even brings her own) every Saturday evening and we sit six feet apart. She calls us her Saturday night date!

Down the hall are Merle ("gift basket lady") and her husband, Mort. Merle called to ask if I knew of an open laundry since all the small ones had closed because of the pandemic, and also to ask if I'd like to share a humongous Katz Deli gift from their son. He had sent pounds of turkey, potato pancakes, chicken soup with enormous matzo balls, knishes and three commercial-sized loaves of rye bread, each as long as my dining room table, which easily seats six! I told her she could freeze all, but she said she'd rather share it, so we were, happily, her chosen recipients.

My neighbor's husband, who lives on the other side of Amy's apartment, is older than we are and has been ill for some time. Yet she rang our bell to see if we were okay and to tell us that she was, in fact, going out shopping, so if we needed anything, be sure to tell her.

The folks with the three kids down the hall moved to New Hampshire with relatives. I don't know if this is a permanent move or just for the pandemic's duration. I'd love to hear from them, but they don't have our phone numbers or email addresses. I'm not even sure if they know our last name. They've lived here about two years. The three young men who live opposite us told us that if we should need anything, just ask. Something we never had to do, because of Amy.

Silvia, from another floor, is someone we met at one of Amy's parties. She obtained our phone number from Amy, and called to say: "I know Amy is taking good care of you, but if there is anything I

can do for you, please let me know,” and gave me her contact information. We don’t even know her well enough to know what floor she lives on!

I really never knew any of these people, except for Amy and Merle, before the pandemic. I certainly never expected such an outpouring of sincere caring in my building, which houses one hundred-twenty apartments. One thing is for sure: When there is a serious problem, New Yorkers support each other and survive!

I know ...when the “all clear” is sounded and the sun is shining, we will go out and greet ALL of our neighbors with “hello, how have you been?”, mean it, and wait for the reply! Then we’ll take Amy to dinner at the best restaurant that is open in New York City.

As Untouchable

Michael Volpi

As forbidden, finger-tips return to their newborn position, the pillows of the palm. For now, when we meet, move your fist towards mine, but leave an interstice between each other's knuckles, as though we are taking baby steps toward a new language of space. We must keep our distance these days, as time has latched itself onto our sides like a lamprey, lonely and desperate, over-swum through moonscapes taken for left-behind cities.

Due to Covid, I'm No Longer Alone

Gayle Kirschenbaum

I have a new relationship. I'm no longer alone.

I couldn't bear to be by myself in my apartment. I'd return at night and draw the blinds before I turned on the lights. It didn't matter that my ceilings are eleven feet high and my studio is 750 square feet, there was nobody else there, no view to look at, no people to ponder walking on the streets, only a view of an air shaft, which faces a parallel hall with barely a human in sight.

I was distracted by loneliness and fatigued by the darkness, which blanketed my studio by late afternoon. I craved the sun, like a dog, sprawled out sleeping on the sunny patch on the floor. I ached to be surrounded by the energy of others.

The library had been my haven. Comforted by people sitting around me working quietly on their computers. My work — giving talks, workshops and screenings — was all cancelled.

Everything came to a halt. Now, locked in the flat I avoided for years, I was alone. Allowed out only for necessities and exercise, I wondered if my claustrophobia would be triggered. The last time it happened I was in tears curled up in a fetal position on the floor of an elevator.

With one short glance I take in my one room apartment. How could I manage here and not feel imprisoned?

I hadn't used my L-shaped desk for over a decade. While working on my films, I had others sitting there. When the last project ended, it became a storage area stacked with cartons filled with movie merchandise including postcards, pins, posters and DVDs.

Something had to change. I had to come to terms with not just my flat but with myself. I couldn't run anymore. By the second week of confinement, things began to look different.

My building is from 1892. As I work, I stare at my windows. The chicken wire in the glass once seemed like barbed wire. I've decorated the shelf in front of them. Sunflowers fan out of a blue vase and chrysanthemums out of a clear vase. In between them is a hand-

made green ceramic dish propped up on a stand with baby's breaths behind it. Looking out the window now means seeing this life — the different colors and the textures.

The boxes behind my desk have been condensed and some thrown away. File cabinets have been cleaned out. Chopin plays softly in the background. At night, I keep on only my Himalayan salt lamp. It's soothing.

Now, I have a home I love. I'm no longer lonely here. As I shelter in place, I don't feel trapped. I cherish my workspace. My desire to run is gone.

I don't feel disconnected from my loved ones. I feel more connected. Family members I didn't speak to, didn't visit before the pandemic — even though they live less than 40 minutes away — I see at least once a week on a family Zoom and sometimes during the week for the family exercise class I started for my 96 year-old mother.

My friends live all over the world, and now I've had the perfect excuse to introduce them using Zoom. We meet every Saturday night.

My photo exhibit still hangs in the gallery off the lobby downstairs. Since it's a new and makeshift gallery, my photos are literally hanging by a thread — a nylon thread used for fishing. To hold them flat against the wall, we used Velcro and double-face tape. Several have worn, and those photos are leaning forward and dangling. On the rare occasion I'm down there, I push the photo back on the aged tape, hoping it will stay. It does, for a short time. Since no outsiders are allowed into the building, it doesn't matter as much now.

You no longer have to come inside to see my exhibit. It's now online, and I'm giving virtual walkthroughs while sitting at my comfortable desk.

When I'm hungry I don't have to go far to take a new exotic dish I cooked — something I rarely did before — out of my refrigerator. My cast iron pan, which was collecting dust, is used almost daily. After scrubbing it clean, I grease it and place it into my oven where it sleeps until the next day.

I embrace my new self. I'm no longer lonely and I treasure my time at home.

Invisible Pull

Liza Nepa

It's been a while since I reconciled my notes & matchbook quotes,
and took time to devote to a poem.

A poem, an antidote, to counteract fear of the fact that so much is unknown
and so many people have died, and we tune in at five to watch #45 train his
gun on CNN.

Right now, the planet is sick and quiet.

We have all been ordered inside.

We cannot hide.

We've been made to look inward to our own pointless pride.

Downtown is shut down, seismic noise is quiet, slowing down the planet.
Everything is postponed, except the present moment.

We are living a nightmare that reveals our deepest fears.

Our elderly are alone. You can't see your child be born.

Will I be alone when I'm knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door?

However, we are to embrace the faces, the kisses, the talks,
the walks, the laughs, the dinners, the drinks, the applause.

Central Park is a hospital.

Death tolls rise.

March 12 Broadway goes dark.

Closed churches, closed mosques, sanctuaries, shrines, synagogues.

You may NOT gather in the house of God.

April Fool's I wore my first mask to do groceries.

Should I have paid more attention to *12 Monkeys* & *World War Z*?

No one can see my smile, and it appears the national stockpile of toilet paper
has been depleted.

Meanwhile, turning the aisle my thoughts switch like a turnstile driven by an
invisible pull. A pull to remain poised. A pull to make sense.

"Gather essentials, grab some bread, take all measures to prevent the spread."

"Gather essentials, grab some bread, take all measures to prevent the spread."

Times like these, with so much to lose. When will they end?

I know, I won't get an answer by watching the five o'clock news.

Watching TV in a daydream, it's strange to see people touching.

Outside feels upside down. It's weird.

Faces behind masks hide smiles and somehow, the gleam in people's eyes

seems dim when it's reflecting the rim of this cloth, covering skin.

Sometimes fear, like a creep, be creepin' in places where light shines in.
Reality is messy, somewhat deranged. And this ain't no Marie Kondo re-arrange.

Each day we turn the page there is something new and everything feels uncertain.

I am afraid that this country will not heed the need to heal.

Because of greed, they will sign on the dotted line and continue to jeopardize our workers on the frontline. We have half of the world's cases and a clown named "leader" who doesn't give a fuck.

I know we need money, and not feeding your family can provoke despair, but you can't provide for them if you aren't there.

This virus steals your air and doesn't care if you are working class or a millionaire.

The fellows of the Senate make it obvious that the number of COVID-19 infections affect pending elections.

Blacks and Latinos are disproportionately being affected. Navajo nation & jails make it clear how the system fails.

I suspect Trump is on the books of pharmaceutical crooks. Promoting a magic elixir, alerting the masses, increasing sales, depleting stock, making it unavailable for those with a true need.

Then, *"The devil went down to Georgia and he was looking for a soul to steal.*

He was in a bind 'cause he was way behind

And he was willing to make a deal."

It's real. Some dude named Kemp is making an attempt to open Georgia against all medical advice. Perhaps he should first self-sacrifice? And Dan Patrick from Texas announces publicly that "there are more important things than living?" Whilst Mayor Goodman from Vegas figures life is a gamble. If I am correct in how I understand this, she mentioned a "control group" of laborers should begin working — like lab rats. Here's a thought: Perhaps, she can contract her own family members and peers? To boost city confidence, you know, pacify fears.

I offer a hypothetical position, a new thought. I am no data expert, my mere common sense will suffice. We must see a decline in cases, take tests, trace, and re-assess, slowly.

With humankind as the priority, NOT white greed.

Let science make sense. Fill spaces with data that is sound. Before we fill unnecessary spaces underground.

That's it. This poem made me tired.

I'd rather compose more about how Phoenix rose, and how the lotus flower

grows into something beautiful, and about how I believe deeply in real connection. Intention that can be felt when I say I am sending you love via the internet. Asking you not to forget the way my smile looked. And how my hug would transmit real love to you...

"Los Tiempos Sin Sonrisas Ni Abrazos."

The Times when smiles are hidden and hugs are forbidden.

The Times when smiles are hidden and hugs are forbidden.

Take a moment to let that sink in.

Journey in Missouri

Sally DeJesus

I inventory big brother's guns
never knew he held so many weapons
he demands I take Navajo rugs from under the trailer bed
where he slept by a highway in Missouri
wants me to spread them in my home now.

His pastor's wife gives me her mink coat
says she wants me to wear it when I get back home to Harlem
and no offense but I don't like to wear dead animals
even though I had no part in the killing.

We sit and pray often on ancient wisdom
even when the rugs get pulled out from under us.

Big brother looks right at me, my big brother
asks if I've met his sister, who is me, his little sister
sitting across from him at Wendy's
where he always likes to go after his brain cancer treatments
where he loves to give big tips to the guy who finally gets his order right.
See, when you are losing your brain people don't understand what you
are trying to say.

We cry often between treatments called radiation, chemotherapy,
steroids, Xanax, mood stabilizers, blood tests, damn,
why can't she get the needle in right the first time!?
Hasn't he suffered enough?
We wait in waiting rooms on earth.

I never tried moonshine til I got to Missouri but damn that shit is good.

I use La Quinta hotel printer to try and keep track of big brother's bills
he can't remember things like days or names or reasons anymore
I use La Quinta hotel gym to try and stay on track and not to lose my
heart
inside big brother's terminal nightmare further complicated by

a worldwide epidemic called COVID-19.

A special bank key opens a vaulted box of gold coins
per big brother's wishes, we sell gold to pay off debts
there are many more wishes, guns, rugs that will be pulled
I am honored to carry out and witness wishes but more than this
I just wish his suffering soon ends
with a walk outside the hospice
from COVID-19 lockdown with brain cancer in Missouri.

Reading Poetry to a Lion

Chloe Skye Landisman

BB, my cat, urinated on my bedroom curtain at six o'clock this morning. So I spent the rest of the morning reading him poetry in hopes it would lighten his spirit. I had no reason to scold BB—he'd been sick since yesterday afternoon. My father emerged from his office to notify my mother and I of his concern for BB's health.

"BB pissed on my desk but it was just a little bit pink..." Worry stretched his crow's feet as his eyes widened like a lost child. My mom has told me more than once that my dad's gentlest energy exists when he cares for animals. This applies to our own pets and the stray cats he found by means of skateboard excursion whilst skipping class in high school. We decided to take BB to visit the vet in the morning.

BB's stared up at me from the awkward squatting position he was in as a feeble attempt to relieve himself. He was in front of the curtain, backlit by the morning sun that illuminated the sheer curtain, making him look like a two-dimensional shadow. The exception was his big green eyes, which stood out starkly from his all-black fur coat, pupils dilated wide like a Pokémon character. I mumbled a half-asleep assurance to him, tasting my own morning breath, that we'll get him to the vet soon. I then drifted back to sleep and awoke about an hour later to find him curled up at the foot of my bed. I watched the side of his body rise and fall heavily as he took in breath. He's usually up and stealing the milk cap from my mother when she takes out the milk carton to null her caffeine.

Leaving this moment with my cat for morning coffee with my mother didn't feel right just yet. I slipped my legs from beneath my comforter in one lithe movement, not wanting to disturb him, and slinked across my bedroom to make some literary selections for him. He lifted his head with mild effort to look when I sat next to him, hanging my legs off the edge of the bed. His lime green eyes were

half-lidded and a little suspicious of me, as if he knew what I was about to do. Though it sounds particularly silly, his acknowledgment and accompanying pithy expression made me feel self-conscious. I expected him to pay me no mind, but I felt listened to already and a little bit exposed. Could he be prematurely telling me that it is absurd to share poetry with a cat? Nevertheless, I cracked open Emily Jungmin Yoon's *A Cruelty Special to Our Species* and began to read to him.

“‘An Ordinary Misfortune. The trouble with trees is that their bodies and limbs are too capable, capable of burning, of living...’” I glanced over at him periodically as I read the poem. The way you do when you play a friend's favorite song, waiting for them to comment *I love the bass beats* or *that line about blood rare like cherry wine is clever*. Your hands get sweaty, you feel examined if the listener remains silent. I couldn't expect spoken thoughts on the piece from BB, that wouldn't be fair, but a piece of me hoped that perhaps he'd tilt his head or widen his brow in response. “...capable of leaves, of leaving, charcoal, ash, and we think we have power.” BB didn't express anything quite that distinct. However, he kept his gaze trained on me as I read, only ever punctuating his attention with a languid-lidded blink.

It wasn't exactly validation but it was, at its very least, uninhibited interest. Gently flattered, I took this as a cue to continue to read poetry to him. I read a little fast. My parents hail from New York City; we speak with the speed of New Yorkers and with the flattened accents of people who have lived in Connecticut for over a decade. He remained invested, even when I paused reading upon having found lines I felt the need to underline and annotate accordingly.

“What you contain is mine — your sick cats I resurrect as black lions.” I paused on this line, thinking about my own sick cat beside me, how in the quick wake of his health's decline he faded from the puckish little thing I knew him to be. I fumble over this line for a minute longer, wondering: *what exactly makes a cat a black lion*.

I looked over at BB, wondering if it was a question he could answer, but he had tucked his face under his back legs — in the shape of a croissant. Air whistled lightly from his nose as he snoozed but his ears still faced me. I was momentarily disappointed that he dozed off but felt guilty immediately when taking his illness into consideration. I closed the book and dressed myself carelessly, mismatching a soft rainbow jumper with blue joggers. I decided that he had to be at the vet sooner rather than later.

I want him to live to read another poem.

— — — — —

“His ultrasound revealed that his bladder was completely empty,” Dr. Mixon told me over the phone as I sat in my mother’s car, borrowed for the appointment. The human pathogen currently wracking the globe had rendered BB’s visit sort of solitary, as I was instructed to await the vet’s call from the confinement of the car. It was odd, a buff vet with cool tattoos took BB’s carrier from the passenger side of the car, and I had to watch him carry my little cat through a door to the animal hospital that I was not allowed to pass through.

I waited for a little over an hour. BB had slashed the bars of the carrier so fiercely on the way over, that his claws had shredded and torn off. A few nails had popped off completely intact and stood out brightly against the black leather seats. I gathered up his nail clippings and lined them up on my dashboard, where I was trying to construct a little caricature of his paw.

The doctor called somewhat unceremoniously about an hour later. He told me that had I waited to take BB in until the afternoon, he likely could have developed a urethral block. It’s possible BB would’ve heard his last poem that morning, but Dr. Mixon didn’t put it in those words. He gave me instructions on how to medicate BB. I learned that if you massage a cat’s throat, they’ll swallow a pill with much less protest. I paid over the phone and the same buff vet tech dropped BB off in the passenger seat, and I thanked him curtly.

He might've said something in return but it was muffled under his little blue face mask.

As I pulled out of the animal hospital parking lot, an older man smiled at me like a neighbor while cradling his miniature pinscher. He was awaiting veterinary assistance, standing outside of his Subaru. I made a conscious effort to make sure he saw the smile returned. Perhaps it was a tacit acknowledgment of each other's mutual risk of contracting the virus that we took to care for our animals, like parents on an airplane who plan to put the oxygen mask over children's faces before their own. He could, of course, just be nice. That would be okay, too.

I watched BB lap up his twelve-dollar prescription cat food in the evening. He was slow and spacey from the painkillers.

Did I help a sick cat become a black lion today?

Regardless, tomorrow morning I think I will try reading Dorothy Parker's "Resumé" to him, should he join me at the foot of my bed again.

"Nooses give;

Gas smells awful;

You might as well live."

—Dorothy Parker, "Resumé"

Is It Dangerous to Scroll?

Liana Segan

When I was away at school a friend
showed off their apple – how pristine the future looked!

When I held my own iPhone,
my reach extended beyond places
I'd never been to people I'd never meet.
I could hold their pain in my hand.

With each reach, my hand weaponized.

I stay inside unmoved by death,
continuing to slide my thumb down the broken glass
I will continue to scroll compulsively
until my thumb rubs away and only bone remains,
stripping whole communities of their humanity.

I unroll pixel paper files and spit in the face of those
without access, those who will never see these sacred
parchments, these articles, this information.

As I move graphic assaults out of view
for memes

I murder
again and again in my house
alone on my phone.

Apples and Oranges

Laurie Kuntz

In February of 2020, my friend decided to join the world and get an iPhone. It was a walkable, wintery day in Arlington, and all scarved up, we walked to the neighborhood Apple store. Once in the store, all the Geniuses were 19 years old and from the future. They all sounded as if they had just completed studies at Oxford. They had sculptured profiles in various colors and were adorned with politically correct tattoos on their sleek 24/7 yoga bodies. One of these perfect beings approached us. She was going to be our savior and explain everything phone-like, including the meaning of life. She spoke in the infinitive case, none of her verbs ended in “ing.” She was kind and gentle, and diligently tried not to be condescending. She treated us like we were someone’s Bubby, but not hers. And in reality, she really thought we were from another time, place, and planet. At one point, I pulled out my oversized Android phone, and I got horrified stares from all the other Apple-clothed clones—it was as if I were wearing a MAGA cap at a Bernie rally. After what seemed an endless morning of us asking a plethora of “silly” questions about everything “iPhone-ish,” my friend had her new pink iPhone. We walked out of the store, to the relief of our lovely Apple rep, with years of store-bought guarantees, a new language to master, and links to virtual this and thats. I wanted to yell back to every person in that store that I went to Woodstock, that I was cool before they were a gleam in anyone’s plans. But, I didn’t. I was only to be remembered as that Android lady from another planet. This all took place on February 22, 2020. Today, as we are in the “cruellest month” of April, we all find ourselves on the same planet, all speaking the same language.

too early

Alyssa Sandoval

it is too early
to say if this is
a blessing or a curse.

are we being rewarded
for pushing ourselves to
a breaking point despite the
temptation of the daily sunrise,
rising, shedding light on the ignored fact
that every day could be our day to grasp
and run with, aimlessly, but with fervor:
a child sprinting across an open field
while kite tails tickle their shoulders,
free from restraint and fear.

are we being punished
for constantly begging for what
we have chosen not to prioritize?
blaming time, social pressures, financial needs
for our choice to put passion on the back burner?
we nervously smile at ambition
over our shoulder as it collects
cobwebs and dust showers,
mutter something like an apology,
a broken promise that speaks of tomorrows,
but *tomorrow* sounds a lot like *never*
if you say it too many times in a row.

it is too early.

Resources

Tracking Covid Data

- [Center for Disease Control COVID-19 Data Tracker](#)
- [The Guardian COVID-19 Data Tracker with Percentages](#)

Vaccine Information

- [CDC Vaccine Updates](#)
- [How to get the vaccine by state](#)

Mental Health, Coping, and Other Resources

- [CDC Coping with Grief & Loss](#)
- [CDC Coping with Stress](#)
- [Helplines and Free Counseling Services](#)
- [National Institute of Mental Health Resources for Coping with COVID-19](#)
- [Virtual Calming Room](#)
- [Mental Health Resources for Frontline Workers](#)
- [COVID-19 Resources for Immigrants](#)
- [COVID-19 Resources for Farmworkers](#)
- [Find Food Pantries](#)

Passing Time at Home

- [21 Hobbies You Can Start At Home](#)
- [How to Find a New Hobby](#)
- [New York Times At Home](#)
- [Food and Wine: How to Cook at Home Under COVID](#)
- [Recipes and Meal Plans for Cooking During COVID](#)

Donating

- [Food & Drug Administration - Donate COVID-19 Plasma](#)
- [Feeding America](#)
- [Direct Relief Donations](#)
- [Community Foundation of Tampa Bay Nonprofit Needs List](#)