

**T H R O U G H .**     *A Wandering Mind in a Not Normal Time*

MY PANDEMIC JOURNALS

*dave buckhout* ©

## *Prelude* .

Under a cool clear evening in early March 2020, I pulled into a local bar to meet up with a friend as one did without a thought at the time. Deep-diving a shared interest in history while downing fine ales were twin pillars of the venture, goals never not realized. It was a near-to-monthly ritual going on a decade, a robust streak that was about to end. For it was already here in the form of dire headlines, a tense trepidation not yet panicked, a public not yet wise to transmission vectors still a worry for others. And it just so happened that the friend was an epidemiologist with 30+ years in the field, an official at a certain local agency specializing in infectious diseases and their control. "This is the big one," he had said, and more than once. But it was in parting that he had put it plain: "This is going to get bad. Just keep your head and move through. Good luck."

"Good luck" . . . not the normal farewell one expects following a night of ale-fueled, if trace-anxious, camaraderie. But then, normal was no longer a thing.

*From March 18 - July 4, 2020, I kept two running journals documenting the initial wave of the COVID-19 (C19, as I was calling it) pandemic. What started as tense, if topical, rants and past-present weave-togethers spun out through the vacuum of those early days, evolved into deep-dive cross-examinations of myself, my home country, and humanity. Throwing my lived experience and those I was in contact with into a thought-blender overflowing with daily headlines, scientific articles, and as much historical background as I could lay my hands on, I began to hone in on definitive themes to go with each day. There was much redundancy, the days and themes often recursive and repetitive. But, those were often redundant, often recursive, repetitive days. That said, there was plenty of unique mulling too. For this was all new and it was blowing the doors off all that I did know. As if for the first time, I could see just how interconnected all things were. I saw with clear eyes what the pandemic was laying bare in our national lives, how an epic crisis and the tidal weather of America's lurching response to it was dialing into sharp relief just how f-d up our "normal" had really been. It was clear there was much work to do. It was also crystal clear that what I was documenting was a pivot-point instant, a moment that was historical just as soon as it hit the page. Entries that start off wandering about the whirling immediacy of the moment widen in aperture and coalesce into a set of daily rallying cries for how we push through. Only two questions remained: Would we? Could we?*

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**JOURNAL 1** . *And so, it began . . .*

*The Unknowable Next* . March 18

Here's the thing, reality has the innate ability to be more than you think it will be. It is thespian in its ways, asserting itself if not afforded the attention that it feels it is due. It is a sucker for the drama and is playing a long game, perhaps the longest of them all. It is why when troubles bloom before your eyes they tend to eventually be worse and last longer and be more challenging than you can imagine they could be. The biology of human history, its very bloodstream, is teeming with the opening acts to conflicts and cataclysmic natural disasters and upending end-over-end sociopolitical movements—*of shit getting real*—having been defined in their opening frame by the insistence of many that it was an isolated event, nothing concurrent or of a larger percolating moment, a one-and-done instant from which we should simply move on. And though a flat lack of imagination run out alongside absurd overconfident stands more often than not is core to these instants, that alone cannot explain it away. For even the overachieving imagination is no match

for the masterworks of reality as it unfolds, the most expansive minds capable of sketching but a few strokes of teetering obscure real-time fits and starts as they slip the bounds of predictable explanation and barrel into being. Clanging and banging all the while, here comes the unknowable next.

Reality in crisis has the chops to outlast the imagination's ability to go that deep and that dark. It is running a marathon. It is well-trained and at high altitudes. This, while the individual—and as a result the collective imagination of societies of individuals—sprint from thought to thought, reaction to reaction, day to day. I mean, we must do this. We are a busy people. There is much to do. But there is also much wasted in all that exertion. For in the process of attending to our busyness, we fail to realize that we leave ourselves winded, all that chasing having deprived us of useful oxygen further stunted by the unyielding human capacity to downplay a thing; and this, if only because of its evolutionary benefit. How does one walk through fog-dense darkness for long without losing one's shit? "It's going to be alright" has long seemed to me less homespun reassurance hung out in lieu of a strict interpretation of available facts and more a simple defense mechanism: a hope pleading for the shroud to lift, for better days to sail into port and that right soon. It is a social evolutionary trait if ever there was one, something selected for its unique coping benefits over the centuries and millennia run over by plagues and pandemics, droughts and tsunamis, crises of collapse and bloodlusting wars beyond the scope of simple—*sane*—imagination to fathom.

To filter such depths in the moment, sans the ability to reach for some—*any*—kind of light does seem a slow stroll into madness. What sane mortal could coolly map the slag-heap depths of pain and suffering brought on by the desperation of the Great Depression and World

Wars ahead of those things having occurred in all their real-time horrors? Of the Soviet Union's grey suffocation of Eastern Europe? Of China's efficient extermination in the name of "cultural revolution"? Of Franco and The Vietnam War and Pol Pot, of Pinochet and Saddam Hussein, of Rwanda, Darfur, the Taliban, Boko Haram, ISIS, the "cleansing" of the Rohingya? What creature of compassion and eventual goodness could do this for any length of time without sliding into a shell-shocked coma? We downplay troubles beyond our scope in order to reduce their expansive smothering reality enough to keep our heads and make our way through. And we do so one bloody day at a time.

Methods run the spectrum: from the overconfident (some would say naive) sweep-away of the depths into which a plunging present is, clearly, plunging, to those guided by caution and compassion but nonetheless shocked into stasis when the shit does hit the fan. . . .

And then there was this here. It would almost certainly be worse than we, in our present, were imagining it would, or could be . . . *An angle, a tack of reality that was probably always there but for want of imagination to see it, to sense it, back when the clang of the unimaginable was a bit more abstract.* . . . It was almost certainly to be worse, for the real is that way. It is a spotlight-hungry narcissist, a cunning manipulative strategist. It is confounding and masterful, is playing chess to the human imagination's checkers. As has been said by many down the line when the real jumps the bounds of belief: "You just can't make this up."

*It will all simply roll away into an ether primed of stardust anthems, blending off into silence as if it had never been at all . . . or it wouldn't.*

— Note to Self

And it began, what had been real and normal and routine in January and February of a still young 2020 sliding down a chute into an uncharted shapeless real. It was just now beginning to sink in and some were beginning to freak out. Within the riptide swirl of surreality, I too felt a slow-burn panic beginning to dog recently self-quarantined steps, a shallow mental rattle with every beat. The ability to hang with confidence on a positive outcome, what with a once distant-seeming novel virus having washed up on national shores, was all sinking as a stone in what was each day, each hour, minute-by-minute looking to be way worse and last way longer and be more challenging than most could fathom. Imaginations were already failing in the face of the unknown. Many were insisting that this was not of a larger percolating moment, that worry was for the weak and people were over-reacting; all this, as history stood just offstage ready to drown out insufficient imaginations in a reality most were incapable of conceiving. *The real* has been confounding us since the dawn of human consciousness. It was doing so again. How naive or vain to have ever thought otherwise, this confounding masterwork in the making.

There were 2,444 confirmed cases reported in the United States that Wednesday. It had begun.



*Assist Or Die* . . . March 19

*History will find you . . .*

The morning headlines threw a tonal matrix of sputtering, infuriating, a stirring of resolve, and shrill despair . . . *Promising Early Treatments for Coronavirus Fail . . . Need a Coronavirus Test? Money and Fame Will Help . . . The Birth of the Coronavirus Economy is Upon Us . . . My Life Appears to be More Disposable.* . . . It did not help that this hung beneath a smother-sick Donora Fog of how—*how*—so fantastically equipped, so filthy wealthy, so infinitely capable a culture as ours could have found itself so unprepared. It was a lethargic, still developing (if still reversible, *still time*) failure smothering the fly-high guidons of exceptionalism, a toxic cloud drifting out and over this land of fighter jet flyovers and giants carved in stone, our carrier groups astride the globe and patrolling all oceans—the fucking Star-Spangled Banner! That country was this

country? Even accepting that there was no semblance of a system ready to roll . . . *In Case of Emergency Break Glass* . . . there did not even seem a scalable prototype, no coordinated national program ready to lean on that wealth, that infinite capability.

There did seem to be a push to do, well, not much. A "do nothing" response? Would we simply allow this thing to "wash over us?" Early indications pointed at . . . yes? Stunning, and yet . . . true? There was a void where I would have guessed, would have expected, some finely-tuned apparatus to reside, already in gear, already humming along. Was I expecting too much? (*The fucking Star-Spangled Banner!*) Certainly we had some concerted method by which to broadcast developing news of the threat, relay the developing measures required of a patriotic people to help contain this thing, to coordinate / ramp up testing, quarantine and aid the sick, trace those they had been in contact with. We had watched South Korea do this with success. We were then watching Germany do this successfully. South Korea, a modern unified Germany, two nations that existed in contemporary form because of American feats of arms that, having not gone off perfectly, had nonetheless come down on the right side of history. Here were countries with—supposedly—less wealth, less capability, that were holding down the worst of a public health crisis. It was our turn. Would we meet a hot crisis with resolve? Maybe? No?

It was becoming obvious in that fraught present that our pandemic story was going to tell a different tale, that it would be defined by a pre-existing condition: our state of infinite superiority having found us detached from the mortal world in which other cultures and nations and viruses operated. For all of our exceptional standing in the annals of historical greatness, we were being treated to a lack of national concision on public health measures required to slow the spread already sailing along strings of invisible vapor, already here, already killing. We seemed

so very unprepared, lacking even an emergency stockpile of collective spirit to roll out—that too having been gerrymandered and sent to its respective red / blue corners along with everything else in our piss poor national life. There was confusion, doubt, and fear, all three of which I moved through inside my first hour awake that morning.

*The federal government was giving no guidance that a reasoning person could credit. Few local governments did better. They left a vacuum. Fear filled it.*

— John Barry (referencing 1918), *The Great Influenza*

And yet, as I scrolled through stories and headlines, I ambled across one just beyond the maelstrom. A beam of calm, it simply said: *We Must Assist One Another or Die*.\* It was the most sensible thing I had read or heard in days. It was not comforting, but was tangible; an attainable bit of advice within a dumbstruck deluge of data. Written by Jan-Werner Müller, he was paraphrasing W. H. Auden, a line from a poem of Auden's written on the eve of World War II, an even more fraught breathless instant: *We must love one another or die*.† But however this turn came to pierce my cerebral doldrums, it did so brightly, opening up a path through the dense fog ahead. It would be thick set, moody; the road itself rocky. There would be grief. There would be more drill-down suffering than we could know. But here was a path through. Just knowing that history was wall-to-wall filled of humans having gone through shit storms before, that we had been here before and instinctively knew what to do. If only we would, if only we could.

I read and read on, and was filled with a disarming calm. Not of peace, not of confidence, but elusive resolve. Here was *a way to be* in the midst of the maelstrom, the Tao of this moment:

to see beyond the self-fumigating fog, that uneven unsparing smokescreen induced by an insular egocentric individualism. All the warlike metaphors, all the tough guy proclamations, the virus could not care less about all of that. "This was not about you," a phrase I wanted to drop into a megaphone and blast from atop the tallest mountain. This was going to outflank your selfish ego and its weak tea grasping at control. This was about admitting to the freak-out of uncertainty, the potential and increasingly probable freefall of the economy, of possibly being an asymptomatic super-spreader infecting dozens, who then infect hundreds and thousands—of dying alone in a hallway on a gurney. . . . But in the same beat, it was about copping to all of this, to the sudden frailty, the omnipresent mortality, and using its heightened sense of presence to move beyond an instinct to self-center and towards some higher state of selflessness. That is how this thing could be dealt with, contained, neutralized. "That is how we beat this thing." To accept that we are all vulnerable to a novel virus, to the normal course of everyday shit happening, and that everyone else we encounter and all those who have ever lived are too. No one is immune. No one. And because of that inescapable fact, we had all damned well better look out for one another . . .

*Assist or Die*

Here was compassion at mass scale. More over, here was the patriotic call: individuals choosing to care about other individuals, including those they would never know or even meet. Doing something not because that is what you want to do, doing it because that is what we must do. Compassion the core ingredient: what a novel concept and more important now than ever . . .

*Respect. Respect one another, and the other. . . .* To chose to be kind and respectful, giving and gracious. We all would have to work at it. And it would not be easy. It would be tricky. It would have to be extracted from the self-filtered bubble so very much defining "*before times*" and then

grafted, with care, onto the whole, the commonweal, the herd. Here was a very different type of herd immunity: an infectious swell of compassion vital to seeing this thing through.

The surface thin individualism of unrestrained unconsidered egos, of the selfish looking to launder their own shitty-ness, that was D.O.A. as of March 11, 2020, what was setting up as the worldwide tipping point, the day the "pandemic" label was slapped on this contagion by the World Health Organization—the day it was truly, unavoidably, on. The road ahead would require an interconnectedness then in short supply (always?): a local, regional, national, continental, global infrastructure of interdependence never before seen. But would—*could*—such a thing develop in the darkroom bath, or would the easier lean on tribalism and ego win out? I considered that, worried over it, and then dug into history.

Charity is the best of humanity in action: those who can give of themselves, giving. But private charity alone will never fill the void left by the Earth sliding out from under everyone. America had learned this before. An inability to think beyond austere dogma stuck with private charity and volunteerism as the sole forms of relief to start off the Great Depression. Beyond that, individual fates were left to the "moral state" of each individual; in other words, you got what you deserved. But in 1930 (as in 2020) this looked and felt a lot more like cunning wrapped in the cloak of policy and an ideology. It was then, as it was now, a mean-spirited classifying of foundational societal flaws—not to mention simple bad luck—as not one's problem, distracting (as it seems designed to do) from a national lack of institutional security against things beyond the control of any individual regardless of how responsible or irresponsible they had been. Bad luck is bad luck, full stop. In 2020, unlucky meant that you could fall severely ill and possibly die of a viral contagion. In 1930, it meant you could starve in the streets.

National leaders stuck with austere dogma at the outset of the Great Depression as if a good chastising, a righteous shaming of the victim was all the unlucky bastards needed. It resulted in a society that circled the drain. It was not a lack of rugged individualism that had brought it on. It was an economic fault-line opening up under everyone and everything. It shone a hot spotlight on what had always been there: We are all vulnerable, some more than others. Ego and sheer grit in individual effort was not enough to guarantee escape from an economic collapse collapsing around everyone, everything. And likewise, in this moment, ego would not protect me or anyone I knew from a viral storm. All were vulnerable in 1930. All were vulnerable in 2020. And this meant all were interconnected in 1930 and 2020.

As during the first days of this pandemic, the wealthy and the scared alike hoarded goods to start off the Great Depression. Then, as now, people felt the leery looming sense of being on their own, no order to trust, no central core that could guide a national reaction. The early years of the Great Depression were set into the concrete of waiting it out by leaders stuck inside frail egos unwilling to consider another way, any other way. They relied on the saint-like efforts of mutual aid groups and private charities to feed those starving. But it was too big for homespun and grassroots aid groups alone. Citizens starved anyway, mass suffering grew more vast, banks foreclosed on farmers and homeowners with cold calculation, and then the banks failed too. It took a nation of individuals to embrace a bold interconnectivity before the country could turn the thing around. Even then it was rocky. Political, ideological, and economic squabbles continued. Grief continued. Suffering continued. But the scaffolding of recovery went up and it marked out an institutional foundational assistance built on compassion and aid, not shame. In the midst of

terra firma shifting beneath everyone and everything, any amount of security—even the purely symbolic—was precious fuel . . . *Assist or Die . . . Love or Die.*

The country had been here before, but had forgotten all about it. Instead, recent years had gone with the quick dopamine fix of crowning insularity, letting it fill the void of disconnection and the selfish want that drove ambition into a deeply atomized state; everyone an earbud-isolated island. We had learned—*hard*—the lesson of interconnectedness once before. Then, in the great human tradition, forgot it all in favor of the fake all-promising fog of selfish want.

To beat this, we would all have to rely on one another. We would have to retrain brains, put faith in an interdependent state of being, relearn that we are all of one big biological experiment—and this would all need to be done on the fly.

It was fitting that this thought seed had arrived on the final day of Winter, Spring having arrived with a late-day equinox. That evening, The Big Dipper hung dutifully to the north x east. And as dusk slid into night, it slowly wound gears up and over the budding canopy across the street, higher into the sky, as it does—as it always has. And the Phoebes, too, had already built a nest in the outbuilding rafters as they do this time each Spring. Interconnected, interdependent, all of it, all of us. . . . But then, did it matter what I said or thought?

\* The New York Times, "We Must Assist One Another Or Die," Jan-Werner Müller / 0319

† poets.org — W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939"



*Barbarians Inside The Gates* . . . March 20

*When the depths of an abyss unseen, unknowable, becomes seen, known . . .*

— Note to Self

In February, national executives claimed it would all burn itself out, would just blow over once the warm Spring breeze kicked in. And there was no way that they could actually believe such bullshit, but had said it anyway, over and over. There was what had gone down in Wuhan and the odd, too proud, or too dense sense that there was "no way that could happen here." But then South Korea and Thailand, etc., Italy and Spain, etc. "Here it comes. How do we prepare? Are we ready for this?" Those were phrases I wanted to hear, but did not hear. Instead, I heard word dumps pumping the polar opposite . . . *This is not a big deal. It's no worse than the seasonal flu.*

*We're in great shape.* . . . As if a key strategy was to will it away. As if expelling hot air into microphones would stand in for that warm Spring breeze and magically dissolve a killer.

And it had arrived and no one really knew when or how widespread it was because the country was so very logistically and psychologically unprepared. There was only so much that could be done to prepare for a pandemic. *A fucking pandemic.* But even that, it seemed, had not been done, or had been botched, or had been shelved, or . . . It was hard to tell what had, or had not been done. So confusing, so confounding, the chaotic funnel cloud of information, which also seemed like misinformation, or at a distance from usable information, or . . . The steady breeze of weightless words, meaningless assurances. All of this apparently (?) trying to cover up a logistics, planning, and coordinating system proving piss poor, no match for the moment, the national stockpile of backstop medical supplies moldering in warehouses, the nation so exceptionally vulnerable. This would be our story?

And it had arrived, and it was mocked as a weakling virus no worse than a seasonal flu (said weakling flu actually killing tens of thousands every year). That was pretty much the extent of national level preparation, it seemed. The hurricane flags had gone up and had been up for weeks now, and were standing starch straight on their staffs as the wind-rip warnings rolled in from Asia and Europe. They could not actually believe the bullshit they were spewing, right? *right?* Said crap pouring out of mouths and into microphones, hot words leaking from mouths attached to brains that seemed themselves detached, sold (?) on the benefits of a misinformed public over one armed with the true state of the state. So confounding, so confusing.

And we did not do much of anything, and the opportunity to prepare, get ready, hunker (January, February, etc.) was missed. At least that much was now clear. The people would have

gone along. If dealt with straight, the people would have gone along; or at least enough of the people would have gone along to have made countermeasures actually count. Yes, we were a stubborn people, at points ridiculously and injuriously so. But given an existential threat defined and screen-device displayed in all its raw killing power, enough people would have mobilized, enough people would have dug deep for a courage they might not have realized they had had all along. We could have done this. I had to know that this was so, if only to stock my own unprepared psychological safe house.

The nation had mobilized before. We had defeated totalitarians. We had outlasted Soviet Russia. Yes, instinctual bigotry, racial injustice, and rigid economic class-caste hierarchies had trudged alongside all of our continued efforts to perfect this Union, and persist still. But, we had had our moments. We had mobilized and done good too. We had been great too. We had taken the lead and smothered the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014, we had done this for others. Yes, some leaders, civic, political, had shown a sick disregard for life in the first decade of HIV. But, well, we could not ever make up for such failings aside from rising up now to this moment: our moment . . . *Rise up!* . . . Disjointed, ramshackle, often dysfunctional, we had risen to past moments. We could do so right then. Ever skeptical, fierce in defense of personal independence, quick to anger in the face of the slightest perceived tyranny . . . *Little Tyrannies Everywhere!* . . . It would have required honest persuasion. Leaders—national, state, local—would have had to bring us along, make the case. The number of cases had still been low, in double digits in those last chance days of late February; though something was clearly brewing. ("This is the big one.") No one really knew the extent. Widespread testing was not in place and would not be. Numbers were still a mystery. But then, low numbers were the only ones some wanted to hear, and the

only thing they wanted anyone else to hear. And as February came to a close "the numbers were still good," and it was claimed they might go to zero. This would be our story.

We continued to not prepare, consumed in our normal bothered busy-ness. But then the markets (that most sensitive of barometers) got wind of it all and began to fall, falling through the basement, it seemed. For it turned out that waiting for zero was not a winning strategy. Waiting for the warmth of Spring would not be of any assistance. Waving it off as some pussy virus not man enough to mutate beyond your "average" every year flu, and this, though all the evidence pointed at this thing being a trim opportunistic killer of humans. Downplaying would do no good, would in fact give a novel virus—indifferent to taunts and overconfident wave away carelessness —what it needed: time amongst crowds of unsuspecting unprotected unprepared hosts doing nothing to protect or prepare themselves. The barbarians were not at the gates, they had breached the walls. They were not preparing scaling ladders, bloodlust, or fire-missile trebuchet. They were inside, ambling among us all.

It would have been good to have been on a war footing from day one. That is what I wrote in my entry for this day. What an odd uncomfortable wish: To desire for, to wish for war. Everything was changing. And the headlines fell on swords of foreboding, sacrificing themselves for dramatic heft. The temperature was rising, a fever setting in nationwide—the news the mirror of a populace. And the headlines would all have to make up lost ground, quickly digest and accept the bad signs ahead . . . *The Bailout Will Be a Moral Failure* . . . *We Were Warned*.

A fumble-forward present, so confusing, so confounding. But I had stumbled across that slight sliver of light in which to operate, as if a whirling turbine of collective anxiety forming from the storm-wall a hurricane eye. It had arrived. It was looking bad. It was almost certainly to

be worse than I could imagine. But here was a place of respite; manufactured, admittedly, but a place to call on, to go to. It was something, everything changing, and by the minute . . .

*It is the epidemic that is now calling the shots . . . The government will have to shut down my restaurant before I close it . . .*

Foreboding, defiant, grasping, acting out. We were all grasping at some wisp of control over anything. It was all so very American in the various mobilizations then taking shape: scattered, defiant, erratic, dramatic, know-it-all, calm, selfish, selfless, the compassionate. Meanwhile, I surveyed the contours of the mentioned safe space I was right then cultivating with greater urgency, reminding myself: *Don't forget to be nice*, the novelty doormat to its entrance.

The virus was already inside the gates. It was vengeful and did not give a fuck about the responsible voluntarily sheltering-in-place or those who "felt just fine" and were still partying away Spring break on half-naked Florida beaches and in the delirium streets of post Mardi Gras New Orleans. The virus was thrilled by the sight of the ignorant persisting to wave it all away, those insisting that weak-spines were the real epidemic. It was indifferent and thriving and getting set to do what it does: infect, injure, and kill the prepared and unprepared alike.

And the case numbers were growing and overwhelming the play-it-down fools, and it was now undeniable that we had all been so lax . . .

*Perhaps it was overuse of virus as a metaphor that kept us from grasping a real virus and accepting public health safeguards needed to stop the spread . . . Don't forget to be nice . . .*

The taxi drivers in Shanghai. The drive-thru testing operations all over South Korea. The all but empty streets of Tokyo, the most crowded city on the planet. China, of course. The heart-rending tragic beauty of balcony performances all across Lombardy in northern Italy, the country stacking coffins, slogging through the valley of the shadow. The scared-stiff streets of France. The Germans high rate of infection yet low rate of deaths; doing something right, something. Spain inundated. Sweden standing pat, gambling. Fear running strong in Australia and Nairobi. Africa largely untouched, so far, but in the early thrall of a fear running the world over. England, Canada, Iceland, there. Mexico and Central and South America next. "Wake the fuck up!" We will live together or we will die alone . . . *Assist or Die*.

And California went into lockdown. And New York City went into lockdown. And the state of Washington was already in lockdown. Fate, itself, seemed balanced on a hair trigger, the violence of this unknowable present out of some coke-addled paranoia. This was an historic instant, and for all the wrong reasons.

"Don't forget to be nice." I repeated it over and over and over all along the arch of that day. A mantra for the moment.



*A Slow Moving Avalanche* . March 21

I had been reading up on the moment as no present moment before, articles, histories, the deluge of headlines . . . *Time is of paramount importance . . . We must save businesses to preserve our productive capacity.* . . . It demanded it, this moment. It was obsessive, kind of. "Doomscrolling" a word smithed early from this moment, fermenting rapidly into dead-on popular use. It was all particularly demanding—the scrolling, the headline ingesting—on that late morning in March. It was like coming up on quicksand, the bottom imperceptibly falling away. Rolling in, rising up, buried. So, so much data. I was buried, slowly, imperceptibly, in real time.

And there were those at the national executive level now wanting to call it the "China virus" or the "Kung flu," dumb uncreative stabs at roiling up partisans, at the very least; pure down-through-the-ages xenophobia, for sure. Here was the best they had to offer, the masquerade of leadership in the middle of a once-a-century public health crisis affecting all of humanity.

China was China: opaque, oppressive, an Orwellian surveillance state, almost certainly cooking the books on its own infection and death stats, known to have held back vital warnings about the initial outbreak at critical points—those fucking barbaric live-animal buffets. But China would have to answer to history, the omnipresence of time and where you land on the spectrum of right v. wrong being indifferent to petty political insinuation, the infection rate of generational racism. And was our own meat industrial complex any better, really, than the barbarism of eating a live frog in a mall? Given the poverty wage on which "essentials" in domestic meat-packing plants were right then being forced to work—that alongside the glaring institutional bias of their safety being an afterthought—were we any better? Rolling, indomitable, burying my wandering mind beneath a mountain of mental debris.

C19 was here, was everywhere. That seemed to be all of the news distilled to its purest point. It was here and it was bad, and at the moment it mattered not where it came from, only what in the hell we were going to do now . . . *Assist or Die . . . Don't forget to be nice.*

New York City was declared a disaster area. And Italy was tragic and epic in its tragedy. And yet, the Italians continued to sing and perform on balconies to their neighbors, the neighbors singing along. And the world, or the better parts of the world, were trying to sing along: beauty and resolve amidst the avalanche. "Perhaps I land there," I thought in that moment. Perhaps it is just best to lay off the scroll and soak in a float-away daydream instant. Neighbors. Balconies. Song. *Peace*, if only for a moment.



*Taking In Beautiful, 16 Words At A Time* . March 22

As mentioned, it had become an addiction, sort of: seeking out the very latest news—refresh, refresh—all the while knowing the general tenor would induce wincing, a forehead clenching sigh. That morning it was no different. But with the usual head churn run of headlines digested, it was an unrelated story that caught my eye, a piece collectively written prior to C19 sowing its anxiety, the siren-laced unknown now clouding eerie traffic-less streets. The inspiration for it had coalesced within the echoing salve of Langston Hughes's "Daybreak In Alabama," dozens of writers having used the piece as a guide star by which to stitch together a dozen bright takes, all looking forward. These futures, filled of light, searching beyond a past drowning in darkness, hatred, and bigotry. (And this, having been penned before all of THIS.) It read like that warm Spring breeze, but for real, lacking the wave away fiction, the lazy bloviating red herrings of a leadership cabal failing publicly. It was a time capsule that seemed created and designed as if

solely for this moment, as if from an unsuspecting recent past knowing that eventually—*soon*—it would be needed. All of its clear sky brilliance, a thing as vital as oxygen, set it up as a curative, surrounding us as would mother's arms—the glow of that remembered comfort and security. I read and I read on, halting over one line in particular, one perfect line . . .

*We need to hold more hands, sing more harmonies, hear more stories, and share more truths. — "Standing At Daybreak," Bitter Southerner*

I knew right then that I needed to read no more, listen no more, and view no more of the media mire that day. I would go mute on the boil-over of dreadful depressing dismay then rolling over the country and the world, and I would be the better for it. Allow those low chime words to ring, to cure the sickness of worry echoing from one end of that day to the other. If for a day.



*Trading Death For Dollars* . . . March 24

The constant check-in of the news (*stop already*) was proving a self-induced epidemic . . . *Sleep deprivation has become an epidemic of its own* . . . one that I was needing to self-medicate, talk down from its balance-challenged ledge dance. For the indefinite future showed no cure for the slow swamping waves, the dim stew of panic-adjacent alarm, as the cold list of statistics clicked off on digital wires in the background . . . *The ring-run worry of a world turned upside down, of up is down, is running me down, man.* . . . In *before times* a lot of what had become standard fare would have induced a head snap, a reeling disbelief. But all of that seemed the very DNA of the moment now, the whole thing a wobbly wheel at high speed. The unbelievable was now standard.

And that is where I stood, having written those few lines as I ambled on this . . . *The cure can't be worse than the problem.* . . . I had to have misread it, but in the same beat remembered

that this was not *before times*. This was the disorienting now. Of course that's what had been said. "Wait, was that a cold-hearted wink at profits over lives?" Surely I had missed vital context. But then, no, no. A worldwide public health disaster unseen in scope over the past century (almost to the year) was on. This here was not just a problem, this was the big one. The sheltering-in-place, the lockdown of urban spaces, the social distancing so antithetical to we social animals, the freezing-in-place of close contact commercial activity, shuttering anything that gathers groups in tight indoor commercial, social, cultural spaces—and all of those who can working from home and thanking their lucky stars in knowing all those who cannot and who are out there running the gauntlet every day, a rapid-spread contagion on their heels as they deliver e-commerce orders, pick, make, deliver, and stock the food, fix the plumbing and the HVAC and fiber / cable lines, haul off all of our garbage and police (at that moment empty) streets—those in the very front ranks caring for those already stricken—all of this in order to slow the incomprehensible speed of the spread, to spare the national healthcare system (already creaking under the long haul strain of neglect and pestilent profiteering) from drowning in waves of the infected and dying. The shut it all down sucked balls, could, and would be devastating. But to shut it all down was a national sacrifice—a civic responsibility—in order to save the veracity of vital systems and the lives of fellow citizens. It is what successful cultures do: individuals deciding to aid the collective society. If painful and devastating to do so, it is nonetheless done. . . .

"No way that is how it was meant." But that is what was said and that is what was meant; just another routine abdication of compassion in the face of a worldwide killer. Trading human lives for profit. This thing had been on us in force for not even a month. And here, these pricks

couldn't go a month without trying to engineer national opinion around the restoration of their stock portfolios? Cases were aiming towards worse, much worse. Hundreds were dying each day. New York City was slipping into an abyss, a concrete vertical mortuary. And these people were thumbing at the importance of profits over mass death? Was this about the election? The thought plumbed the dark mercurial depths of the sociopathic, something too damned close to sadism not bring a wave of nausea. A booming economy, their only hope. And yet, the patriotic thing to do was shutter it, shut down the spread, save American lives.

*We're going to have to make some difficult trade-offs . . .* So, getting this straight: people must die so that shareholder values can improve? And this, on a day when I realized the usual blood-rush thrum of terrible news was becoming normalized . . . *Fight it, fight it. . . .* Here it was sinking to the point where a reeling head snap was again possible. Just when the ebb seemed at its lowest, humankind reminding of its infinite capability to shock with its vile disregard for humankind.

In the mist-strewn dawn that morning the birds rang out clear calls, a sliver of peace and calm in the face of revulsion, blood boiling. "When the bottom lines of a few is tagged as more important than human lives, isn't that it? Are we now totally fucked? Is it game over?" I wrote. I had hoped that I had heard it wrong, but knew I had not.



*Concussed* . March 25

It struck me that this was the first time in my entire life when I could look out into the world around me, my immediate plain and far off vistas, and not with complete confidence count out the darker scenarios from materializing. I did not grow up in a war-torn country or a remote poor country. I knew nothing of places where *anything* can happen. I could hardly conjure up what a coup attempt must be like, of what guerrilla style battles in the streets or ethnic cleansing directed by those in charge, of what that must be like. What was it like to live through a complete salt-in-water dissolve of political institutions, a wipe-out outbreak of disease catalyzing a spiral breakdown of society? I never had any reason to war game out such doom-and-gloom scenarios in my corner of the world, in these United States. Nuclear armageddon? Sure. I was of a vintage to have known that as a foreground possibility. But even that had rendered itself remote to my still-gelling brain, something Americans had (it seemed) just learned to live with—like

commuter smog, gender roles, old racist uncles. But I knew nothing of societal dislocation that could pull apart the fabric of nations, cultures. And to be sure, all of that was highly improbable now. We would more than likely muddle through. *But that it was possible. That it could not be ruled out, completely.*

This was all unspooling across my brain waves in the wake of days having rained down like a flurry of blows. Ah, that purple flash disorientation before coming-to, the hazy ring-light drift back into consciousness. Ya, I know that product line of disorientation well, had suffered more concussions than I (or my poor brain) care to remember: collisions in sports with opposing players and at least two thrown baseballs, bike accidents (as in many), having once been kicked in the head (for real). Any long-term worry about CTE seemed remote. But I was no stranger to having your "bell rung," that warrior wave away descriptor football announcers very quietly dropped from their on-air lexicon a few years back . . . *How many fingers am I holding up? You're fine, Buckhout. Now get back out there!*

And yet a familiarity with head trauma, if minor, provided me nothing to go on this go-round. This was all new: a purple flash of circumstances. The roar of events had been the dealer of blows. I went a good deal of March 25, 2020, not even sure what day of the week it was. The head-smacking wash over of so many pang-pained days, one on another on another on . . . serving up a disorientation foreign as to origin, but all too recognizable in its "bell ringing."

Wednesday. It was a Wednesday. I had to look it up. So fluid the moment, rushing in with dam-break speed, the circumstances and events fantastical but for their exceptional reality, their blowing away of the boundaries of predictable existence. Wednesday, usually a day that would find me swimming at the YMCA. Closed for two weeks now, that had been the first realization in

my own routine that Wuhan and Italy were coming, that they were here, a fellow Y member having tested positive for C19 on March 11. I had been at the Y on March 11: a Wednesday. It was shut down the next day when the positive test became known. It was real, the day it had been declared: *a fucking pandemic*.

My bleary-eyed stumble about days (staying up too late, poor sleep, too many bourbons). It had me wandering about that Wednesday, which might as well have been Monday, or Friday, or a day without a label but only the grey dawn to gloam-of-dusk progression of forces larger than we vulnerable little life forms, backstopped as it all was by the choral improvisation of songbirds moving on with their Spring. They went about their way as if just another Spring day demanding that full-throated songs be sung. This, as all of humanity settled in for a siege.

I was not able to shake the blur that day, the mental and physical haze like a floater but in both eyes. Stepping through the progression of a concussion: the purple flash instant (let's call it March 11), stunned in the immediate aftershock, the actual physical shock, the concussed soup of thoughts, groggy, that damned unshakeable blur and low brain ache originating from somewhere deep-lobed. Grey matter settles slowly after being smashed about: that most sensitive of organs, the cloak-over shroud slowly dissipating and angling down before coming to rest within a low background hum. Ya, I knew what a concussion felt like. This felt like that.

And that, at least in part because of this: *that anything could happen*, that for the very first time in my entire life nothing was off the table.

*The resulting measures will attempt to sustain workers and businesses in place as a vast swath of the American economy shuts down under shelter-in-place and quarantine orders, the hope that the economy can rebound quickly once the pandemic ends . . .*

This national concussion, puzzling over its long-term effects. Some piece of damage must be sustained, a lump of dead damaged brain tissue forever dormant. This, the out-of-the-blue eye-searing hum, the momentary vertigo and confusion, that telltale dazed look: "where . . . am I?" This would be all the scar we would need by which to remember all the fun we'd had during our pandemic year. That deep-lobed ache suddenly beginning to swell. Another nameless day picking up where the last had imperceptibly left off. . . .

Likely, no. *But that it was possible.*



*To Live And Let . . . Live* . . . March 26

*Misinformation and cant, along with a kindred scorn for science and professional expertise: these things are pathogens, too.* — David Remnick

*Surging traffic is slowing down our internet.* . . . The mass national move to work from home for those that could, socializing and happy hours via video-conferencing, family and friends as distant pixels. A marvel, really: to be connected while we had to keep our distance, something they did not have in 1918. But the *amazing* of it seemed to wane before the misplaced bitching and moaning. Slow speeds got the buzz, "my needs" the spotlight. This was a pandemic, people. Our fellow citizens—individuals the world over—falling ill and dying. Perspective, people?

*The clear and present danger would be doing too little, not too much.* . . . The emergency stimulus bill, a massive package made up of forgivable business loans, huge corporate subsidies,

unemployment extensions, and direct cash payments—all of which would do much much good—had arrived too. But not before the puritans and the hard-hearted could get in their moralizing about "government handouts" and, in the great American tradition, shaming the less fortunate. To do so right then, to take that moment as one ripe a good moral shaming; mustering vacuity enough to tight-fist a superiority over those not so lucky as to own financial security, despite it being clear: we needed to do all we can for all—*now*. As if the tax levied for government largesse in the face of a thunderstruck crisis was having to endure a good finger-wagging, the venting of principled spleens. The future would be dark indeed if we could not stop this thing in its tracks—*now*. Slow the spread. Reduce the rate of ICU hospitalizations. Stop the dying. But then this, the tut-tut clamoring and cruelty of well-off white senators carping over unemployment benefits outstepping the actual wages of underpaid under-served paycheck-to-paycheck Americans by a few hundred dollars a month. The horror.

The black hole dearth of compassion, the "not my problem" cruelty. And it was claimed by an actual person speaking actual words on a television interview that the patriotic thing to do was to allow older people to die in order to reduce the hit to the economy. "A sacrifice," was something else this sad life form had said, calling elders to "step up." How often that I had been shocked still by the stupid shit leaking out of mouths unconnected to brains, numb-dumb bags of meat and bones lacking even a sliver of empathy; and that we were only a month in? I did not want my 83 year old mother to die just to save the economy. If we had an economy that required people to die when it enters stressed moments, then perhaps we needed to rethink our economic systems and how they respond during moments of stress. I want my Mom to see 90, or 100 even, you fuck. Fuck you. People were dying. No one need fall on a grenade whose blast radius was

being exponentially increased by the inept wave away fools talking down what scientists and doctors and public health officials—*professionals with expertise in the field, unlike all the rest of us who were not and did not*—what they were prescribing. You want to save the economy? Stop the virus. Why must this (like everything else) be an either / or? Why did we have to reduce all in present day America to regressive zero sum play-acting? Here was a question: How in so creative and fantastically wealthy a nation-state can we not enact strict public health measures designed to slow a rampaging virus and save lives—*and*—enact, if on the fly, a method by which to float businesses in danger of folding? Why were national leaders not giving their all to both of those things? And while at it, what of all those who were previously being crushed under the weight of an economy designed by and for high wealth? *There was work to do.*

And yet, old white men stood up in rostrums and denounced the lack of work ethic and low-wage working individuals, generally, for sitting on this few hundred extra bucks: a princely sum that might actually allow such households to pay the cable bill and power bill—*and*—buy vital medications for a critically-ill family member. That they could reduce such realities to the abstraction of "dis-incentivizing" the work force? Fuck you. Actual people were doing the dying, people with lives or at least years to live. People, not dollars, the most important commodity—*always, full stop.* Save people, save the economy. Save our elders, those in our care. We were supposed to let them die, so as to save the economy? How about we do not let them die—*and*—save the economy, and make the economy work just a bit better for all who do work? Stimulus was a great start. It would aid enormously. But in the "aiding enormously" it was coming clear just how thin people lived. A few hundred extra bucks. That was the clear and present danger to a bunch of old well-off white dudes? That this would make so drastic a difference in the lives of

Americans? There was no issue with that piss poor reality?! How about we lay into that with our righteous indignation? How about we actually support small business owners with the kind of access to wealth and capital that they deserve, this in order to pay the average working American a wage worthy of a "rich" nation while also being able to turn a profit? How about we start all of this by course-correcting a hemorrhaging do-nothing pandemic response? . . . *Could we? Would we?* . . . Public shaming. What land of black heart processions and nonchalant sacrificial corteges had become of my homeland? A place where trading lives for bottom lines was a project worth considering, something you should even say out loud? Fuck you.

And many of our elders were beginning to die. And New York City was now the global epicenter of the outbreak, a "hot spot" — 21,000 cases — 26,000 cases — 31,000+ — cases cascading down, if on the up, and daily. And yet there were those who were still skeptical: "So I get coronavirus, so what?" / "I think this is all being overblown. The media is blowing this all out of proportion." And though many modern media outlets often did blow all of everything way out of proportion in the numb quest to grab bored eyeballs and hook them on hoopla, was there anyway one could downplay a pandemic? *A fucking pandemic.*

That this was bringing out "the best and the worst in us" was an observation dropped into conversation and journalism, and in increasingly raw tones. There was a pandemic in our midst, yet some were bitching about the slowdown of internet speeds. The dying had begun in earnest, and was continuing in earnest. But YouTube videos were streaming at a lower quality to ease the burdens on cable / fiber lines; that was catching the heat. We understood what a pandemic was, right? Were we adults . . . right?

Adults can handle bad news, bad prognostications, grim prospects, a dark forecast. It is part of being adult, part of growing the fuck up. They needed to tell it to us straight, let us stand up as straight and strong as we are able, and get to it. We had to save businesses, jobs, and lives. Not just one—all. Stop for once all the petty complaining, the self-wrapped tunnel vision that had people bitching about their reduced MBPS throughput on downloads / uploads . . . or were we just to hoard toilet paper and flour, vent frustration via the sewer of fear and xenophobia? Was this country adult enough to handle such a thing? How could that even be a question I needed to ask? I had heard senators claim that a few hundred dollars to those in need would kill the incentive to work, though they failed to even mention the depressed-wage reality that had so many people struggling in the first place, that had said few hundred extra dollars die-casting so positive an impact in American lives. I had heard some guy (who will remain nameless) go on a nationally-syndicated television show and ask our elders to sacrifice themselves to C19 so that we can stoke a sinking GDP, though he said nothing about controlling the virus. How about this radical idea: they should take this thing seriously, take the fight to it, fight for every single bloody life.

Through a forehead clenching daze, I could not help but ask out loud: "What had become of this country?" I had to fend off a strong urge to start drinking. The clock read 11:30 a.m.

*A series of missteps and lost opportunities had crippled the national response, the failure to take the pandemic seriously being the worst . . .*



*Quarantine* . March 27

There are things that I do not like to do: dusting, insulating, repairing fences, bathing dogs. I cannot stand being forced to watch a movie I dislike or listen to a song I do not like. I absolutely loath waiting in lines, waiting at red lights, waiting anywhere for anything, ever . . . *The tick-tock seconds thud-thud-thudding, irreplaceable seconds ticking past.* . . . But then, I dust and I repair and I bathe dogs. I watch, listen, and wait. I do none of these things because I want to. I do them because it is often, for whatever reason, the thing that must be done. I do these and many other things because in that moment it is not about me. It is simply what must be done.

Self-quarantine. "Sheltering in place." For most of us, this was adaptation on the fly. It was to be a national learning curve, its successful application running the spectrum; the thing we must do . . . *We must.* . . . But as with all things new and unfamiliar, the right and wrong / success or lack of, were moving targets, not fully apparent. Many were attempting to do the right thing.

Many were, under no f-ing circumstances, going to let anyone tell them what is the right thing to do. America, the land of "go your own way," its blessing, its curse. But a majority seemed to imbibe the seriousness of that moment. Or so it seemed (or so I had hoped.) As hard as it was for a militantly free people rightfully leery of centralized control to voluntarily lock-down physical space and their physical selves, to follow the lead of anyone—*anyone*—telling them what they must do, it was just what had to be done. And with the month of March running out the clock, and this thing gaining steam, it may have been the only thing that could be done.

Quarantine, a word sick with the implication of infection, of being "stricken." But this quarantine was of another brand altogether, new and unfamiliar. Self-quarantine . . . *What must be done, what we must do.* . . . To slow the spread. To save lives. Quarantine yourself and your family, shut yourself off from the physical presence of others, as is possible. I did not want to do this, but felt I must. Its general application ran along a spectrum: from anxiety-laced doldrums to improv comedy (gallows humor, of course, welcome); from remote-schooled kids hamming-up interruptions of work-from-home video-conferences (one of my clients having had to abruptly attend to a thing having smashed in another room), to friends you rarely heard from dropping posts that telegraphed deep-heart origins, life-flashing passages run out on how much everyone in their lives were a treasure, how it was now so very obvious, recalling the pure gold of being together now that we were all apart. These posts, digging deep into rich veins and brightening days otherwise spun from a grime I would just as well rather watch go down the drain. For there were the contrarians, the nihilists, a whole militant tribe of, apparently, "freedom loving Americans" claiming that this was all an overreaction.

*March 27: 64,305 new cases were reported worldwide. That is a 10x increase in two weeks.*

And this defiance, if only because others had told them what to do, had suggested what they must do, and that these things that experts and officials had dared mandate or even suggest ran counter to what they wanted to do . . . *the tyranny* . . . insular acts of defiance lit from behind by a slow-scroll backdrop of daily tallies—of those suffering, those dying, of the dead ticking past.

Self-quarantine. Stretch out the volume of infection rates. Stay away from each other. Do what a highly sociable animal was not designed to do. Do this even though you don't want to do this. Do this even though you dislike or loathe doing things you do not like to do. We needed to regain lost time (*January, February, March . . .*), to aid the stand-up of nascent recovery efforts, course-correct to absorb the suffering, think over strategies by which to come through. No new normal could materialize until the work had been done. And how odd the irony (if par for the moment), that the work to be done was to do nothing.

I settled down to do what I did not want to do. I settled in to wait it all out.



*1918 Is Now* . March 28

*Newspapers reported on the disease with the same mixture of truth and half-truth, truth and distortion, truth and lies with which they reported everything else. And no national official ever publicly acknowledged the danger of influenza. — John Barry, *The Great Influenza**

In an unprecedented present trying, literally, to kill us, digging into history, attempting to listen for echoes reverberating from those who dealt with and pushed through, should be second nature. To seek out guiding canons, the stacked cairns left by previous generations marking the way To study the sere vitrine-encased displays showcasing the success and the failure, the short- and long-cuts alike, listening hard for that trace stir of wisdom still rattling about. In all of that lay what to do and what not to do. In that lay all the clues needed to drill through to the core of a present beyond the capacity of anyone alive to fully take in . . . that, all of that.

"Hey history, what the hell do we do with this? Really, a little help here?"

It was a transcript that drove my theme for that day, a radio story on my hometown during that gold standard of pandemics: the Great Influenza. Though no specific numbers could ever be firmly established, the accepted consensus has it that up to 33% of the world's population—*one-in-three*—caught it and that it killed at least fifty million souls (with many tallies doubling that death total). And it swept through Atlanta like a scythe, a harvest moon grim for the reaping that made for a dark fall / winter in the southeast's then (and now) most populous city.

The narrator was someone who, like me, had clearly spent many recent days wandering about the harrowing pall of late 1918, attempting (like me) to divine what it could tell us about now . . . *that, all of that*. . . . And among many loud notes in her piece, one in particular struck with a dull clattering clang: "The tone of 1918 reminds me of the present day reaction of some to the coronavirus: If you can't see it, it can't hurt me. I feel fine. Therefore it's not going to be an issue." \*

The Great Influenza descended on Atlanta as would a sudden hurricane. And it was all made worse by the wave away what-me-worry crowd in pursuit of a "return to normal," quack medical advice, and business owners understandably anxious over a two-month closure mandate blanketing all indoor gatherings, schools, and places of commerce—that era's attempt to slow the spread. In the end, this mandate would not last two weeks before being widely ignored, heavy pressure to lift the closures stoked by then mayor (and former Coca-Cola kingpin), Asa Candler. It was also decided that the city would go ahead with a huge outdoor event at the Lakewood

fairgrounds south of downtown in mid-October . . . *It is coming. It is here.* . . . And this, despite the alarm bells dull clanging. The "second-wave" of the 1918-19 influenza pandemic, the terrible stroke for which that pandemic would be remembered, was already in their midst. It would burn the world over that fall and winter, killing hundreds of thousands of Americans in just a few dark months. All in attendance at the Southeastern Fair were required to wear masks. But "keep your distance" recommendations were cast aside for a one-day return to normal. 25,000 Atlantans packed onto the grounds over a single weekend day.

What that *not normal time* long ago returned was a different type of harvest. Predictably, infection rates soared across Atlanta in the months following the event, extending into February of the following year. The second-wave would have been bad enough without a super-spreader event. It was going to be bad even if all the recommendations and mandates had been faithfully adhered to. That these guidelines were not strictly followed made a bad thing that much worse, having ignored the killer in their midst . . . *It is already with us.* . . . All would be fine if only they had fresh air to breath, a day of normalcy. It was all an overreaction. "We just need to screw up our courage and kick this thing in the teeth." But then, normal was already not a thing on that long ago fall weekend, and all the downplaying achieved was mass death. There had been a pent-up urge to go about things, normally. *But it was not a normal time.*

And here we were. Only a month into the deep end of the first-wave of "our" pandemic and some already itching, militantly, to ditch public health measures, physical distancing, mask-wearing. 1918 suddenly seemed very close . . . *History will find you. It will overwhelm those that feel they are beyond its grasp.* . . . And yet, the Great Influenza of 1918-19-20 was not a known quantity. But for a cadre of epidemiologists, public health officials, and some historians, it was

popularly forgotten. Of course, this was to the peril of present and future—even if a part of my brain understood. The helpless anonymous victims of a howling flu being shoveled into mass graves, how history's unforgiving indifferent march will just as soon devolve into a desire to forget such things, such mass despair? I get it. But I also get that in the forgetting we make the march of history that much more inexorable. We render a return of unlearned undigested lessons as inevitable, guaranteeing that they catapult into the present and incinerate uninformed default assumptions about our own times. "No one could ever have seen this coming," is a thing you will hear few historians ever say. Yet this was something I was already beginning to hear uninformed careless people say. Which is not to say that history repeats itself. That is not a thing. Every era is unto itself. But every era is also the cumulative result of all the actions and all the circumstances and all of the crazy random shit that preceded it. History does not repeat, but it rings of enough rap and rhyme, just enough of the dull clattering clang, to warn any present time—wherever that finds you on the timeline—to pull yourself together, and if only to prepare for the big one.

That the Great Influenza was publicly excised seems much more than simple ignorance. There is plenty of that. But in so far as long-term tale-telling goes it seems to have been buried deep in the archives on purpose. It just does not show up, in histories, in memorials, across the vast turbulent expanse of the twentieth-century. It is a back-bench player in the American (and world's) historical tale, despite it being the most horrific public health disaster ever, one of the most significant and devastating things to fall on humankind *ever*. And thinking this through spotlit the constant foolish attempts of individuals to sidestep history's march: the never-ending head-shaking efforts to "play it up," as if trying to cook the books on a past way better than actual history would indicate. The desire—*need?*—to purposefully forget, preferring to

downplay past hardness and inequity and all the despair it dusted up if only to avoid having to confront and reconcile the often black-hearted hardness of past events; and in so doing, avoid having to change, having to learn, having to adjust—*having to be better*.

In part, that line is not totally fair. Though the Great Influenza did not find a lot of ink in the newspapers of the day and in written accounts in the decades that followed, the world on the whole did come away from that pandemic stunned by how woefully unprepared it was for the big one. The general drift of the twentieth-century flows out as an answer to the primitive state of medical practice and knowledge and public health that preceded the influenza pandemic. In fact, it is no stretch to say that the quantum leap in the ubiquity of effective healthcare and mass vaccination against preventable diseases were the most important achievements of the twentieth-century—and—that the influenza pandemic was almost certainly responsible for kicking that, all of that, into gear. The terror of human exposure before a rabid flu bug was the kick-in-the-ass the world required (solving the epidemic of violent conflict a solution for some other future). It was one of the most devastating things to occur, *ever*. And yet, that so little of its occurring was kept kicking around for the future to utilize: of what it was like to live through, of what they did, of what they should have done . . . *What we should do, what we need to do*.

The Great Influenza imprinted such trauma, such a state of lingering PTSD on the world, that it was all but erased from the public consciousness. It is the only explanation. And here we were: learning again because we humans had decided to forget all about it. Because we were past such things, right? Because 1918 was a long time ago and could not ever happen again, right? Because we are beyond such a primitive state in our highly enlightened present, right? No, it turns out. No, we are not. We never are. Again, here, now. You can attempt to purposefully or

absent-mindedly forget all about history only to have it walk right over you and into whatever present and future it was being denied, the magnitude of dull clanging with which it does so in direct relation to just how deeply it was forgotten or ignored. It will find you: a heat-seeking missile without a trace stir to warn the unprepared that it is coming, that it is here.

I got it. I could see why. I was already wanting to forget all of what was happening. That the Great Influenza pandemic became something of a historical blank, pushed from the collective memory, was understandable. But here it was, again: history in the present. Having methodically side-stepped all of the present's attempts to claim that the modern era was beyond such things, here was the past in the present again. Would we forget all of its lessons, again?

*(The 1918-1920 Great Influenza) calamity left few visible traces in American culture. . . . Being modern people, historians have had trouble . . . accepting that brainless packets of RNA and DNA can capsized the human enterprise in a few weeks or months. — Charles Mann*

It was proving impossible to maintain any traction in this new total present. I was trying, trying hard. But it all felt like endless skidding, that moment when a tenuous grip could go either way . . . *White knuckles. Slipping, but holding. Hold on. Hold on. . . .* To push the present from my mind for even a few minutes seemed a serenity beyond my brain's capacity, any space that opened quickly filling up with the dam break of history, of knowing what could be, of knowing 1918 . . .

*A Tragic Failure of Leadership. The disconnect between an imagined real and the real has been on stark display . . . As the daily Vietnam briefings of a generation ago turned into a tragic farce, a yardstick by which to measure the numb collapse of government credibility, so now . . . The words of Italians bearing witness but a month ago now seems like an open letter to New York City: This is what is coming. Don't make our mistakes. Prepare. You do not have much time. Get ready . . .*

All the missteps—*as in 1918*—and all the lazy downplaying—*as in 1918*—and all of the purposeful misinformation—*as in 1918*. All of the road-swerve contradictions and confusing misdirection by national executives; as if there was a point to the subterfuge, a point to denying adults from being able to make informed decisions based on actionable knowledge. We could have been using that knowledge, hard as it was, to do something. In the vacuum, states were doing things; some bold, brave, radical things. But fifty individual plans all rolling at once with different goals and different ideological hot takes on this "historical now"? It was bound to be a hot mess. We should have been doing something, a national coordinated anything. But instead, we had head-struck ambling about some alternate real, putting faith not in experts with scientific answers, but Hail Mary wave aways. Having abstracted any semblance of a plan, getting down to business in the face of a kill-you-for-real real, this, all of this, play-acting at leadership . . . *no national official ever publicly acknowledged the danger of influenza . . .* not having studied for the part. On our own—*as in 1918*. And as in 1918, Americans were dying by the score.

But through this haze of disbelief I scrolled up on a sidebar that reeled me back in. Two women, elders if ever the title stuck, aged 95 and 101, they had lived through all the harrowing

everything that the twentieth-century had thrown at this world. They had known each other since they were long ago young. They had maintained a strong friendship across nearly a century, that brand of companionship whose core bond arose from slogging through the mudslides and earth-shattering bad, time and again—*together*—having survived the battering of life, having shared it. This, this was the coda I had been parch-throat thirsting for . . . *When catastrophe is sequential, it eventually trains its survivors to greet terror with the serenity of the enlightened.* . . . These two elders, they had been here before. Their history, their words spun out as wisdom in the present. They had lived through the terrible: a pandemic, global economic depression and mass upheaval, a world war, a Holocaust. They had seen mortal crisis before. And that experience had imprinted on them the absolute unwavering need to live on despite the terrible mistakes made, despite the terrible real. Here was living proof of a path through: That it was not for the mistakes of the present or the repeating of mistakes past that has to color our world, but our ability to bury those things and pray over the graves—pray that we learn to live regardless and in direct answer to it all, that we conjure up enough sense to play the cards we are dealt and live full-frame.

*When the cold does not destroy, I leap from ambush on the joy,* one of them wrote. †

\* WABE, "Familiar Echoes: 1918 Atlanta And The Spanish Flu," Emma Hurt / 0326

† The New York Times, "They Survived the Spanish Flu, Depression, Holocaust," Ginia Bellafante / 0328



*Sunday Nights* . March 29

The cumulative weight of days and nights and the pile-on of events pushed the needle into the red. Still, the kicked about storm-rocked skiff in which I had battened down mentally had kept to course throughout the furious March storm. I was keeping it together, it seemed. But Sundays, there was something about Sunday nights.

Sundays held a special place on my calendar, a bulwark against the coming week of work closing by the hour, a nostalgia for the privileged childhood I had enjoyed in which Sundays had stood out—when we had seemed to very much revel in the privilege of comfort and security and predictability. But this new terrible now, it was casting Sundays in a different light, turning all of that warm glow into searing worry. Here was a national / global catastrophe and there was no guarantee things wouldn't circle the drain before all was said and done. And all of that meant more on that Sunday: March 29, 2020. I had spent the past two in turmoil. I was fearing Monday

more than ever before. Now, I had always been leery of Monday (a long held insecurity for another sketch). But this, this was different. This was fear. What would Monday bring? Helplessness? More unceasing statistical fury?

*The progress out of Washington state is precarious . . . Social distancing policies that have disrupted life across the nation seem to be effective in slowing the spread . . .*

Something, something to hang onto in the midst of a global contagion. Of all the things to upend humanity at this moment. But then, what else would it have been? War and pestilence. History is nothing without the two. They are two of the most common things that we find in and throughout all of humans documenting the world around them: the Plague of Athens, 420s BCE / the Plague of Galen, 165 CE / the Bubonic Plague of Justinian, 540s CE / more bubonic plague in the form of The Black Death, mid-1300s / the pox wipeout of Native Americans across two continents from the arrival of Columbus-on, more bubonic and smallpox and yellow fever epidemics than can be counted all the way through the 1800s / the Great Influenza pandemic and its three separate waves across 1918, 1919, 1920. Having dug through the sources, plowing them into rapidly filling journals, I saved myself the joy of a dull headache by overlooking all the wars. (I would be documenting that elsewhere.) It would arrive as it had for weeks now by about mid-afternoon, anyway; the dull headache, that is. "I need not list all the damned wars." And yet, knowing the familiar patterns of mass human death did little for my morale in the middle of a pandemic. Am I surprised? No. Am I masochistic? Maybe.

The country had to stop the damned spread. The cold heart calculation then circulating that dollars now and in the future were a more important commodity than human life? "Are we such a self-loathing people?" . . . *The only way that we save the economy is to stop the virus. . . .* All the foot-dragging on preparation, to think this was to be someone else's pandemic? . . . *It will be difficult to explain these past few weeks to future generations, how terror and complacency sat so close together.* \*

"Are we really so irresponsible to ourselves and to others?" Several states were reeling. Governors were being forced into bidding wars against each other, all other countries across the globe, and even their own federal government, trying desperately to obtain the limited dwindling supplies of vital emergency medical gear. All this as the contagion began to spread: tinder dry, fuel-rich. There was no telling how this thing would go . . . *But that it was possible. That it could not be ruled out, completely. . . .* I felt nodes in the recesses of the soul of the country flickering, if not flaming out, as I struggled to keep my own pilot light lit. My Sunday nights, reserved for losing my shit.

\* The New York Times, Editorial / 0330



*Do It For All* . March 30

"What the fuck?" was all I could say, head shaking and out loud cursing as I read on. Apparently, there had been a government program following the near-misses of H1N1 and the Swine Flu outbreaks in the 'aughts whose sole purpose was to build up a robust strategic reserve of personal protective equipment and the critical ICU gear needed to blunt a run on healthcare systems in the face of an epidemic, or worse. To that end, a small nimble company in California had worked out how to cost-efficiently build small portable ventilators, the kind of thing that could be shuttled around to hot spots nationwide. (You know, as part of a coordinated national effort?) Ease the burden on hot-spots when they occurred, and then mobilize and move it all to the next one, etc. etc. A solid plan. *A plan*. And prototypes for this smaller efficient machine were delivered on time and at projected cost. They were a model of innovation. It had worked.

Then, in 2012, a larger established competitor bought them out and suffocated them, the smaller, more innovative machines a threat to that larger company's established revenue stream reliant on selling older, bulkier, legacy ventilators. This was what our vaunted capitalist process had delivered: an established company killing off a young innovator in favor of old systems. And here we were. A "sound economic strategy" in the private marketplace had helped mainline the country into the dispiriting unprepared overwhelmed scramble that was then banging down the doors of cities along the coasts: Seattle, San Fran, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Miami, NYC. Capitalism, not the stale bureaucracy of feckless government lay-abouts, but capitalism—that engine of innovation and "inevitable" societal wealth—was responsible. "What the fuck?"

And this, in light of the volume of articles documenting America's "lost month." February 2020, our vital cushion of time, wasted. This would be one of my enraged days, stalking about that Monday, muttering angrily, pissed off generally. I stumbled about that anger, sidling up alongside being inconsolable, ready for a fight but more vulnerable than ever. I was not alone . . . *China had warned Italy. Italy had warned us.* . . . Enraged, vulnerable, pugilistic, inconsolable. Fear, sadness, anger, none of it healthy, none of it doing anyone any damned good.

"Do not give in," I had to remind himself . . . *Don't forget to be nice, over and over as a mantra.* . . . And I was able to wander through it: the rage, the deep sorrow for people I did not know. I turned it over in my head, slowly turning, grilling those emotions down into a mellow roast. Deep breaths, moments of calm. "There is only fear to fear." The last thing anyone needed was foolish optimism. This was bad, as bad as it seemed, almost certainty worse, and to get way worse. Downplaying this moment was to mock the deaths of those souls stacking up so rapidly in the boroughs of NYC that they had brought in and parked freezer truck semis behind

hospitals to serve as temporary mortuaries. It was going to be like war-time death: hundreds, thousands a day.

Grieve. Be angry. Be mad at capitalist greed. Be mad as hell at this iteration of national government. But do not give in. Vent and then help. Be responsible. Share in the responsibility. Be pissed off and then push good out into this blow-staggered world. Do it for yourself. But more over: "Do it for everyone else," I told myself.

*Every day now feels an hour longer than the day before, the sun rises in mourning each morning . . . We will survive. We will prevail. First, we will weep.*

— John Gorman, "*May We Yearn for New Horizons*"



***With Us*** . March 31

*We're stuck in a new kind of everlasting present.* — Matt Simon, *Wired*

I would later hear it put that "corona time" had no hours or minutes, more a blank tick-tocking minus all measurement. I would liken it to the suspension of reality in a slow-motion sequence, all things thrown up into the air, momentarily heedless of gravity. Yes, that: a boundary-less drift pulling away from the present tense, sandblasted of its usual frames, skip-skipping around erratically; but for our reflexive think-back expectation to earlier days when it all clicked along frame-by-frame, effortless, reliable; this sweet extract from *before times* when, despite there having been plenty of fucked-up bullshit to go around, the steel-rib skeleton of normal regular schedules and common knowledge of hour and day still framed the usual rush-about.

At least part of this was the hazy shroud of mis- or dis- or just dumbed-over information flooding boundary-less days like a swamp. It all stank of a fetid nonchalance, the ability to piece together a real so clearly out of step with this projected "look at me" real desensitizing time itself. For the chief executive of the country had stood behind a lectern back in late February and said that we only had 15 cases in the entire United States, and that even those would soon, "very soon," go down to zero. Everyone behind him seemed to indicate, if by posture alone, that he was full of shit, or at least had no idea what he was talking about. Just listening to him was to know that he was full of shit and had no idea what he was talking about, nor did he really seem to care. It was now the end of March. Cases had crested 160,000, the virus had already claimed 3,000, and we were—*clearly*—still at the very start of this thing. No reasonable person expects anyone in a leadership role to get it right all the time. But how could any thinking person square the shilling of collective ignorance as a strategy? If we ignore it, it will disappear? That's what we were given to work? Was boundary-less drifting a simple defense mechanism? A mindful hibernation of consciousness the only way to maintain a fealty to sanity?

We, puny little humans all. We know so little about all things, even the smartest that walk among us mere mortals full of eventual mistakes. But, all of we people of Earth knew that we knew next to nothing about this here; and the smartest knew it in the most blinding terms. This was novel, it was coming on like nothing in a century, and I was coming to think that anyone who claimed with any confidence at all to know things was likely full of shit.

February was just a month in the rearview. But it already seemed of another dimension, a schism of the type that thinking back or watching clips from previous decades will serve up: all the often comic dislocation of hair styles, clothing and music trends, the general cultural vibes

normally attendant to a time decidedly in the past—even the visual signatures of recorded film itself (the dull saturation of the '70s, the over-saturation of the '80s, the finer detail if still grainy '90s)—all of that dropped into the breach too, raft differences at a glance between a few months ago and now. It was a cleave in the expectation of linear time and routine that I (no one?) could compare to anything else in this life. It had only been a month, 31-days elongated and pulled into an unnatural surrealistic smelting of memory. And yet it seemed longer, way longer. February and January from another decade. Not measurable. Not unquantifiable; not yet, at least.

And it was only one month ago, back in February that the chief executive had said how little he was worried about the whole thing. It was February no more. It was of another era and worry had been promoted to the conscious state, a conscious edge-less funnel of days, nights, weeks, and now months. A disbelieving laugh or rain of tears, either seemed an accurate reaction across that float-through day; though, neither seemed quite adequate either . . . *This virus is going to be with us.* \*

\* WABE, On-Air Interview with CDC Chief, Robert Redfield / 0331



*Weaponize* . April 1

*Live Like You're Contagious* . . .

April Fool's Day, the least "joke day" I could remember. Pretty sure the whole annual festival of joke stories and headlines, pranks and practical jokes was put on hold, if only for just not being in the mood. Even "the joke's on you" a mocking rejoinder to evidence sluicing out in ever-clear proof: the blustering adjective clouds of national exceptionalism, the demented blundering downplay of a generational challenge and empirical science itself—as if repeating dumb-down talking points while clicking heels was all the national strategy required to take on a methodical viral killer. "Are we actually failing this?" . . . *The early response is shaking foundational assumptions about American exceptionalism.* . . . There was all the furious proof one needed in any direction

you looked. No, it was no joke. Yes, it was still "too soon," still hitting too close to home . . . *In our midst. With us.* . . . All of that, droning on and on and . . .

But then, this amazing thing: *The seismologically and thoroughly documented quiet.*

What would come to be called the "anthropause," we noisy clanging and banging creatures, with all of our decibel-soaring activities and ways, of how we had gone into worldwide lockdown and taken our droning whirring sound-pound with us. Humans, for the first time since the industrial revolution began had collectively shut the fuck up. This, then, opening up an unprecedented opportunity to study how we, in all of our clanging ringing roar, drive animals to break from their usual natural tendencies in the name of avoiding our clamor, often driving them out of their normal range and migratory paths and to the very brink in the process. If we could only take this snapshot with us into whatever the future will be, replicate the balm peace of quietude in everything we do—*and then do that for all time.*

It was noticeably more quiet. Gone was the steady oceanic drone of the eight-lanes of interstate perimeter just beyond our immediate neighborhood and a few hundred yards to the east, the distinct almost "unnatural" lack of planes in the Atlanta sky. (All but for the sirens, the depressing continual ring of the sirens.) At once ominous, in that we all knew why it was quiet, and yet so present a presence. My *before times* skepticism had me thinking that this would not be possible. "This, as a baseline for all time?" Not ever. And yet, the upending disorientation of this moment meant that all things were bound to settle in unfamiliar "not like before" ways. Throw a deck of cards up into the air and they will fall where they may, not as you wish. Gravity, nature, systemic if disruptive, cares little for our grasping at order. To create a new (*and better*) order from old chaos? That was the challenge.

And having us start with a new unwieldy low-decibel normal? Why the fuck not?! As I read on about this amazing, tactile, decibel-pause, I began to hear the possibilities ping a still obscure future. Could it, maybe, return the outlines of unprecedented opportunities to remake things? To review, retool, refurbish? To re-do systems, attitudes, society, if from the ground up? It is all a knit-tight twine, so interconnected. The interconnected real, the possibility of all that *could be* done in its name, it was a sweet taste severing the sting from what otherwise seemed little more than a trolling joke: these wretched *now times* . . . *It will be difficult to explain these past few weeks to future generations* . . . *It is already difficult to explain the lack of a robust public health system in this America.* . . . "If only the future could quiet down. If only it would talk less, listen more." It was not the first time I had thought this. I would come back to this.

Hope, positivity, optimism, these and like terms were finding it tough going . . . *Talk less and listen* . . . *Keep your head, move through.* . . . A pinprick reminder of this altered state-of-being having arrived with the abnormal-ness of my once-a-week "provisioning run" . . . *Limit exposure. Limit contact with other humans breathing in enclosed spaces. Shelter-in-place.* . . . The surreal grip of it all, the suspended low-grade suspicion of fellow shoppers inside that most ritual of things: a trip to the grocery store; and how, stepping into such a place in those elevated times stoked fevers of fear: an invisible virus jumping as a bloodthirsty translucent flea onto product shelves, shopping carts handles, and the too close pass-by of fellow shoppers breathing, infecting. The sad irony: it could be me sowing the spread, not them.

And fresh food was still available in abundance, as I had always known it to be, a life gifted with an abundance and availability known to almost no other human—*ever*. It was here in

abundance, still; but for how much longer? The mass cleaving of domestic supply-chains would surely hit fresh foods too. When? How? Would it knock the load-bearing posts out from under this facade of invariable abundance? Would this be the moment we were forced to revisit how we consume? Re-do the self-involved concept of convenience, the invariably abundant *everything*? Almost certainly not. That, I could not see in modern America. That level of personal sacrifice would push marchers into the street, mass demonstrations ringed of placards and bullhorns, riots but a slip-step behind. Our numb tolerance for institutional and generational inequalities seemed always capable of finding powerful distractions: the explain-away theories and harangues, the victim-shaming industrial complex, those with power using it to deny dignity / equity via the craven ignorance of ideology. That is as much a piece of our American history as winning wars to our advantage, world-moving technological innovation, the wonder of fully-stocked grocery stores. But anyone that interferes with our ability to get what we want whenever we want it? That person would find themselves front-lit by angry torches, staring down the barrel of pitchforks . . .

*Can we overcome this epidemic of selfishness? Can some do without illogical excess in order for all to have some? Can we do this? . . .* I would come back to this: convenience culture, such excess while inequity remains un-dealt with. I would have to come back to this.

But then and there, the strange noir-like suspense of grocery shopping. The signs were telling: some shelves no longer fully-stocked, no longer filled of products ten deep, the wall of options / choices now looking picked over and handled frantically; the noticeable early March ravaging of empty—as in dust-mite bare—paper and cleaning-supply rows. Were we living through the start of a mass breakdown of capacity and ability? It is a thought I never would have thought possible, as in *never . . . This overtly abundant life. My most convenient life. . . .* And yet,

so odd: the continued abundance and wondrous variety of fresh food. No disruption there, a sign of wealth if ever there was one. No disruption, yet. Who was risking their life to keep it coming? Who was doing this for us all? For me? That newly coined, long laboring "essential" class. It only took a pandemic to make the invisible indispensable. I would have to come back to this.

And the wrack of arriving home, what in other times (not long past) was a majestic load of caloric wealth. Like most, we set up a system: the load-in of purchased items at a designated in-house staging site, ours atop the slick-top washer machine and dryer—all the easier to spray down with a stiff bleach cleanser, kill any little COVID fucks that may have hitched a ride. This, followed by washing hands, washing them again. (Had my hands ever been so clean? No. Not ever.) But it was in the sorting and storing when it struck me on that April Fool's Day. Could it be that bunch of bananas I just hung on the hook? Instinctive, preternatural, suspicious: "Could that be the thing that brought it home?" This leading my witness towards an even more cheerful thought: The whole damned world having been weaponized, any touched surface, breathed or coughed-on object, any six-foot radius into which another person had wandered. Indifferent, if indirectly-aimed, walking, sitting, standing weapons all. The entire human world weaponized against itself. It was the cunning stroke of the virus. It was of some mad experiment gone very very wrong. "We are all weapons now. I am a weapon now."

And this, despite the sparkling clear Spring day: day-after-storm clear air, long rippling rows of cirrostratus high-up against a deep blue ceiling, the flowering trees. If it had been any other Spring the topic of conversation would have been the unquestionable beauty of this particularly exceptional Spring. But it was not just any other Spring, not by a long shot.

There was not enough ink, not enough paper, not anywhere near enough time that day for my frantic cramping hands to put down all that required documenting, all the themes that were emerging: the unfolding failure to meet this moment and what this meant for "exceptionalism," the astounding unforeseen by-product of "anthropause" and what this could mean for our future world, the rabid state of our lost-in-self self-engorged consumerism, the sorry depressing state of provisioning in a time of hoarding. and all those in the shadows who make such overt abundance possible (even in the middle of a pandemic, even though their lives are on the line). And then, adding to this already formidable list by having to consider—*hard*—my own privilege, my own exceptional fortune in having never known want, of how suddenly even that was in question: all the invariable abundance, all the unquestionable convenient everything—of how we were all now walking breathing weapons of viral war.

To redo systems, attitudes, society. It was all I could do to hope that we would have the sense enough, the mettle enough to marshal all of the negative and turn it on itself, weaponize the response to all these things and then start blasting away. Would we? Could we? There was work to be done. There was a "better" to be had.

There was not enough time that day for me to outline all of the work that had to be done. I would come back to this. I would have to come back to all of this.



*Clinging To Routine* . April 3

A creature of habit, my morning routine became the cylindrical corridor through which to run my mind. If the guardrails of expectation were dissolving in the acid-wash scrum of time making less and less sense, exhibiting little beyond faint outlines recognizable . . . *anything can happen, nothing is predictable* . . . at least I still had the routine. If plagued by every damned everything pinging "not so normal" responses, an invisible flammable gas seeking any old spark, as asterisked as that was, it was something aside from drooling off into the void.

The routine, stick to it. Cling to it as if your life depended on it. (Might it?) Do this if only to keep pace, to keep stride through the slog pouring out muddle-through density . . . *Ankle-deep, knee-deep, wading, wading*. . . Every damned *everything* was being cranked up to media-wall volume, the wandering mind overrun by thoughts part spinning out into the void, part sleep-deprived. The routine could keep a line on pace, avoid the falling away of structure that would

bring the whirlpooling sink of all-day depression, heavy drinking, morose nihilism, or some combination of all three. There was the routine to attend to, now more than ever.

*And the captain of the carrier U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt sent off a rare public rebuke of superiors that were failing to catch the firestorm potential of an outbreak on his "floating city" then stationed in the Pacific. And the Navy canned him for breach of protocol, canned him for caring about the lives of sailors. . . . And they put in at Guam, and he was formally relieved of command. And the sailors formed a wall some ten, twenty deep tracing his route through the cavernous below-decks to an exit ramp. And as he snaked his way through the crowd, they were silent, attentive. But then, as he made his final steps down the ramp towards official censure, they started the chant: "Cap-tain Cro-zier!" Like a stadium of fans sensing their energy was required for there to be victory, they chanted themselves hoarse: "Cap-tain Cro-zier!" — "Cap-tain Cro-zier!" — "Cap-tain Cro-zier!" A national figure who cared. How was this the rare story?*

The morning routine: open up the house and the outside entrance to the basement, fly the flag, morning fruit preparation, check news, read some news, open up the home office, emails, emails, dog walks, breakfast, writing. The vital elements and the vitality of the routine. And as I began the routine, that morning rolled up cool and dark. Hints of grey-blue cast down through the tree line to the east, a gun-metal sky uncomfortably devoid of planes. (80% drop-off in domestic flights, no international travel; none.) But that sky, still spot-clustered of the brightest stars, an arc of planets synching in line—Jupiter and Saturn and Mars—east x southeast. The daylight slow and groggy. It seemed of a dim metallic slate overhead, like an old-time hand-held

chalkboard on which I wished to write out a day different from the last twenty or twenty-one or -two or . . . Something devoid of C19, of the notion that it had ever existed. A clean slate.

The previous day had been the first full day of a state-mandated shelter-in-place, one of the last states to do so. We had been doing so for weeks, listening to state leadership no better than listening to national executive leadership at this point. A do nothing plan of attack . . . *On our own. On our own.* . . . But as the morning slipped into whatever the hell was next, I began thinking on the future instead—horizon points on which to fix a long (longing?) gaze during the trip. Nothing concrete, no goal-specific site, just there—waiting for me to arrive. Getting there would amount to a small victory; and stacking up a handful of minute victories along the way seemed as wise as anything in this stripped-bare shuddering moment. I would later hear this tactic described as "temporal distancing," envisioning yourself in an unknown future in order to look back from that future perch and imagine how you want the start-point present moment to be remembered. Attainment of that ideal future, its goals, was now a vital part of this new strange routine, right alongside dog walks and emails, emails. Do it like you want to remember having done it . . . *Do it for all.* . . . Get through this day and then the next. Little victories, each.

I made sure to self-quarantine body and mind that day, shielding both from the bullhorn of the near-to-panic news storm at any point a click away. I patrolled click-bait crossings with vigilance, allowed no quick fix of the sort. I was not about to let it tread on an afternoon and evening filled of Spring songs.



*Hey, We're Dying Over Here* . April 4

*Coronavirus. Wash Hands. Cover Cough* — An electric road sign in DeKalb County, GA

*On our own* . . . rattling around my head, a hollow ka-thunking sound akin to small unsecured packages knocking about the back of a delivery van. A national emergency had been declared. Apparently this had been the case for some time. It was easy to forget for the hollow din lack of a national response, or at least anything that could be taken seriously. Plowing into coordinated efforts across state borders, synching regions with the logistics and wealth-share required to guide local solutions, local relief. You know, a plan. If only . . . *It is coming. It is here.* . . . Act collectively and with speed. Do it now. This is the big one. *A fucking pandemic.* Bring power and might to bear. Bring production up to full capacity. Retool those companies that do something else but are eager to do whatever it takes. Mobilize. Do it with precaution. Expect that no

American should have to die for doing their job. Do it yesterday. Do it back in February. Forget what is past. The past is why we are here, but, just forget that for now. A present more present than any I had ever known. There was only now. We can do this. Power up to slow this thing down, douse it to the point of manageable. If we can't do this, *what can we do?*

*Act!* . . . The word put to a shrill tone, jumping inside my head. No prompt, just there at random: a COVID-spasm. It was doing so that morning . . . *Act! Act!* . . . Even my subconscious had sense enough to see through this "leadership" shit show, that it meant to do nothing of the sort, to do nothing in regards to public health as a matter of course; a plan without a plan. To unleash a massive nationally-coordinated governmental response at any point would be to cross an ideological red line. Best to be pure. Governance is not what they signed up for. An effective response rolled out by government would tank the entire messaging machine. Even rampant death and profound damage to the socioeconomic fabric could not budge it from the most base planks of obstruction and redirection as means to advance private gain, a mass redistribution up for those on the in. To govern is not why they were where they were. Action on behalf of all is not the program. They say this is war, a proclamation that came off as a vacuous hanging of red, white, and blue bunting undone in the next sentence claiming: "This is something the states need to handle." The "United" piece of United States was designed for such a moment, for the need to dial up collective action in the face of a common threat that no one state—*no one American*—can absorb individually. (Read the Constitution. This is why we have the Second Amendment.) There is a specific debated design behind so very important an adjective proceeding "States" in our national title. And yet in that moment when, in modern memory, bringing the full capacity of a powerful union to bear had no dire equal, we got: "This is really something the states need to

handle." As if national executives had become bored with it all, would rather the pandemic (*a fucking pandemic!*) be left to work itself out. "Can't we just let this thing wash over us?" And so did they bide their time until the weather improved enough for more predictable tee times.

*America was once the arsenal of democracy; we can be the arsenal of public health . . . \**

This, by way of former Reagan-era executive, James Baker; as deflating as it was stirring, in that it seemed almost certain not to see its day. And this, as we watched New York City being pulled under by death and fear, over 100,000 cases in Gotham alone, 630 having died the previous day. How do you grieve for the pain and the passing of those you have never met? A piece of America was dying before our eyes. For any American still clinging to that (naive?) hope for some / any sort of national collective resolve to coalesce and light a way through, a piece of us was withering too. Death and dying, this unavoidable *now*.

I could not keep the thought down, of how lucky I had been. Only a few friends and the friends of friends had so far contracted C19. All were okay. That would surely change, at the very start of this thing; but for now, in the clear. And yet, the morose bottomless pit, an abyss of despair looking to swallow up anyone not careful to avert their gaze from a too-long look at what was happening. We had been lucky. I had to that point been so very lucky. So very many that I did not know and would never know had not. We needed to think about them, all of them. We needed, as a nation, to do whatever it was that needed to be done to protect them all, all of those people we did not know. We needed to save their lives. I needed to save their lives. Would we?

And I wandered through that shadowed valley all of that Saturday, if only out of respect to those I did not know who were dying, who were going to suffer and, or die from this thing. A

camaraderie of anguish? To feel loss in your soul though it is not affecting you in your actual sphere? How do you grieve for those you do not know, for those dying alone, in a hallway, on a gurney? How do you do this? You find a way. You just figure it out and you do so. You advance whatever savings of resolve remains in your personal vault and spread it around liberally: to those you know, to those you do not know. For the "rainy days" had arrived.

There was a passage I had heard often enough through the years and in multiple iterations to have hung it on the interior walls of my mind: a phrase to know, study, cling to tenaciously, as needed. It is of resolve, not necessarily positive, but of a tenacious bitter resolve. Some claim it cliché to say anymore. Perhaps. But for me, it still wanders out as something more, something akin to gut-check resolve when there is little else to pull on.

The original passage goes to Robert Frost's 1915 — *A Servant to Servants* — and is still the one I go to, lines 56 - 58:

*He says the best way out is always through.*

*And I agree to that, or in so far*

*As that I can see no way out but through—*

Keep your head. Move through. Good luck. All of that. All of it.

\* The New York Times, James Baker / 0404



*An All Too Present Now* . April 5

*I am a wave. I am a well . . .*

Day twenty, sheltering-in-place, it having—*finally*—been declared mandatory statewide only a few days back. It felt about three weeks too late. We were not even at three weeks, but already that pull, that gnawing tug: How much longer will we have to go on like this? I wondered while thinking it: when (not if) would that thought sound all of the impatient foolish question that it was . . . *Reality has the innate ability to be more than you think it will be.* . . . To quarantine and keep our distance, the world's improvisational tactic for starving the contagion of hosts, answers to my impatient query but a headline click away . . . *The first would be developing and rolling out vaccines on a massive scale. A second would be herd immunity; this, though many would have to die first.* . . . The answer then: longer than my imagination could, at present, muster.

*We may need "helicopter money" before all is said and done, shoveling it out the door . . .*  
*In the past few weeks, doctors have experimented with convalescent plasma therapy and are*  
*reporting varying degrees of success . . . Our daily patterns have been obliterated . . .*

In that later point seemed to lodge the drift of that day, of those early days: the future an indeterminate grey. No shape, no certainty, hope grasping, pleading for it all to ease, a slow-trot shock settling in. It did seem as if the Earth's rotation had downshifted, had slowed, perceptibly. The effect was to italicize *the right now*, elevate its already heightened sirens into something all too present to ignore for long (though I would try, mightily). There was a future out there. But it was next to impossible to make out through the fog bottom present. Faint outlines of a normal and "expected" passing within it, out there just beyond grasp. You could make them out, barely; but at that moment, a future unattainable for the all too close present, the all too present *now*.

Aimlessly wandering through days and hours and weeks and minutes, a vague dreamlike march through that boundary-less soup of time and circumstance mentioned . . . *Surrealistic* (*adj*): *Having an oddly dreamlike or unreal quality.* . . . And to think, a little over a month earlier, the final weekend of February, a surprise visit from my sister and nephew, the virus already in the States and spreading, but the general public concern no more than what you'd get during a bad flu season, nothing beyond the lo-fi normal, the expected, the routine. "Will there be enough parking at the market? Did we buy enough vegetable medley for four?" That what I worried about that weekend. A little over a month ago. It felt of a whole different era *now*. Surreal.

This vague concussed stroll through an instant having lost all construct. It demanded a higher state of awareness . . . *I am a wave. I am a well.* . . . It pleaded for the maintenance of physical and mental health as a means to get through. The achievement of either was right then debatable. (Drinking too much. Sleeping too little. The white noise worry.) What had only been my occasional adherence to meditation was seen to with a more exacting rigor. Every morning now: breath in deep, breath out deep, repeat; repeating this just as many times as that day's mood seemed to require. The drift-off into an unconscious consciousness: half-there, if radically present. A so very present *now*.

My mantra, set to the cycle of breathing in / breathing out . . . *I am a wave. I am a well* . . . tailor-fit to acknowledge my own temporary-ness here on this slow-spin rock—*and*—the fortune of owning a deep creative well on which to draw, a reminder to stoke the creative fire within. And it was firing on all cylinders. It was gushing out, in fact, both the too close fact of the temporary role I play in this epic tale—*and*—a megaton creative yield. These entries, these journals. I was setting a torrid pace, cramped-hand seize-ups the only moment of pause. It just meant more in that stirred and stoked instant: acknowledging your place in a humbled world made small, seeing to the temporal fires. All of this, vital fuel in a world hammering away.

But if the provenance of the practice . . . *wave . . . well . . . repeat . . .* was the seeing-to of mental health, it was—*now*—also serving the physical. For if I could not breath in, breath out, deeply, clearly, sans rattle or chest-caving pressure, then I had it and it had me. A clear diagnosis this morning, still virus free . . . *I am a wave. I am a well.* . . . In. Out. Over and over and . . .



*How To Prepare for Mass Death* . April 6

As of the previous day, there were 1.2 million known infections worldwide, almost 69,000 deaths confirmed . . . *The scope, the scale. Swimming, treading through numbers, lives as statistical tick marks.* . . . But that was only the known cases, the known deaths confirmed. It will be like war-time numbers. I had thought it before. (I would think it many many times again.) Casualties, the actual dead. A viral war. And there was now concrete evidence of sustained transmission on six continents, over 336,700 confirmed cases in the U.S. A sudden (if start-point) deluge that caused a pause in my routine that morning; or, more accurately, induced the halting effect of being struck—if by stats and the long foreshadow knowledge of what was coming.

How to handle it? I was not trained to handle mass death. That is not something that the average citizen is expected to confront, not these days. In the past, for sure. One does not even have to go that far back to find it in the normal course. If it wasn't an epidemic, it was some big

destructive war of kings or a despotic purge or your general "run-of-the-mill" famine. Accidents on the farm, on construction sites, in factories and at saw mills, the imminent multitude dangers of the lumberjack and seafarer. Death, even mass death, was just closer, expected even. But in this so very advanced age of ours how could anyone who had spent time with mass death proceed through the average every day? Humankind had spent an immeasurable amount of will and sweat and capital on reversing the regularity of accidental death, easing the forest fire effect of epidemics, slowing the pace and the destructive scope of war and disease. It had been so effective, that I in this so very advanced age (humans the world over mass-inoculated against once common rampaging pathogens and still in thrall to the game-changing victory of penicillin) knew nothing of such a thing. How did humans deal? How could they have simply proceeded on their way back when the prevalence of death was a "normal" shadow that fell across a day in the life? Only a sociopath can get beyond mass suffering, mass death, with ease. Only a deranged human mind allows such numbers to wash over a person. I could take some measure of comfort in that I must not be deranged. Knowing of the mass death, *what had begun, what was still to come*, was physically viscerally painful. And that it was only going to get worse.

Knowing, clearly, of the going to get worse part. Knowing that I had no control over that occurring. Many had said that particular week (of April 6, 2020), that it could be that instant's "Pearl Harbor moment" here in the U.S. Of course, I took that for the net positive, that it implied we were about to see a mass national mobilization unlike ever before: the long legacy of Pearl Harbor across that dark December in 1941. . . . But . . . would we? Or would we just be treated to more slow drifting towards oblivion, a slow carpet-bombing of pride as microscopic incendiary killers spread out across the land?

I knew it would only get worse. I knew that death was to be widespread, dramatic deadly spikes and the longer slow-drip of the tallied dead. There would be plenty of death to come. It was on me to prepare, mentally. But I had had no practice in this field. I had no idea where to start.

*From the dullest smote black dark to the inchoate and the incorporeal, this bone-deep discomfiting grey . . . the prayerful eyes and words thrown at heaven as minute lead weights.*



*New York City* . April 8

My entire family tree comes out of, or somehow loops through the greater New York City area. The original Buckhout—*Jan Boeckhout*—arrived from Holland in the 1660s. After five years an indentured servant, his debt for the travel to this new world settled, he was free; a state of living enjoyed by all of his descendants since, free to roam and live as they would, though most stayed close. Buckhout is a common name on the New York militia muster rolls during the French and Indian War, North America's theatre of the larger Seven Year's War between France and England. We took up in Westchester and further north in Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow when those were rural landscapes. Great-great uncles were lauded far and wide for championship ice boat designs (think long sleek sailboats on truck-length skates) back when that was a thing in the late 1800s. My grandfather and my many great aunts and uncles grew up in the Hackensack area, just over the Hudson. The Dutch, English, French, Welsh, all white ethnic tribes that took up in the greater

New York area, their strands are stitched tight into my DNA. Two generations ago, my maternal grandfather, a Reed, came down to Brooklyn from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, to try his hand at music (trombone, specifically) and for the more steady sturdier outcome of a good school. He stayed, "met a gal," as he liked to say, and raised a family of Reeds. My Mom, my Dad, both natives; my ancestral roots recursive and deep, a root structure that wraps ever tighter around many an ancestor in the ground. I have attended more than one family funeral out on the Island, there being no more visceral human connection to land than death. Knowing of those who lived in a place, died in a place, and were buried in that place, creates a steel-cable bond to that place. To those free and lucky enough to have and value family, free and lucky enough in their ancestral history to know at least something of that history, it is all part of a larger gift: a lineage. There are more Buckhouts buried in and around the greater New York City area than anywhere else, by orders of magnitude. I am of the first full generation of Buckhouts to consider an entire life lived beyond America's original national capital as not a rare thing. It was a big deal that my father and uncle moved off, though a part of them was, and will always be, there still. Over three centuries of Buckhouts lie in the ground in and around New York City. I have never lived in New York City. But I am from New York City if I am from anywhere at all.

The death toll for that day in New York was 779. All of them dead at the hands of a single thing, a microscopic creation bent on mortal violence. An eyewitness said the streets were empty and completely silent but for the non-ending wail of ambulance sirens. I rarely pray. I prayed for New York that day as if it were my own. And then I prayed for all, knowing that was all I had.



*The Pink Moon* . April 9

To unplug from the waves of negativity, the decibel-shrill uncertainty, all the anxious waiting. It had become required. For those that felt soul / spirit deep for the afflicted, the infected, the dying, and the many many others who would join the ranks of all three, compartmentalization had come to be a required act. I would not, I could not, unplug completely, the slow plodding orbital spin of this moment always at the periphery, even in those moments of "compartmentalization achieved."

*Another 6.6 million people have filed for unemployment benefits . . . As the pain of the economic shutdown continues, calls for opening up are growing louder . . . Scientists are warning that the virus may not disappear in the summer as originally expected . . .*

I would not. I could not. It seemed more and more of a civic duty to stay informed, to cut through the sludge of lazy misinforming and purposeful distortion—the plain rank made up shit. And this, with the truth in plain view: the moldering reality of our national stockpile of pandemic ready supplies (yes, we had one of these) being dispensed haphazardly, at best, and being doled out via political preference, at worst, no fifty-state-wide strategic response to bootstrap-up mass testing + contact-tracing in order to control the course of the virus, dampen its roaring spread to manageable, and save lives while saving us from rolling blackout hits to the economy. There was a fetid swamp of dangerous down-playing, waving away, antagonizing not cooperating, the dumb-skull chain-clanging call and response for reopening economic sectors with no thought at all for keeping people—*Americans*—safe and alive. There was the black hole suffocation of all that seemed reasonable, measured, considered, all of it drowning in a deafening void. There were the still-born promises of a V-like "return to normalcy" released on flimsy toy boat lies into the raging COVID sea. And I was having to bore a tunnel through all of it just to stay informed on an actual factual rendering of *now*; though it seemed a small reward to stay informed . . . *The head of the W.H.O. has been subjected to a steady wave of racial slurs and death threats. . . .*

Compartmentalize. Wandering my mind.

And my crisis-strong partner of then 23 years (a veteran of life crises rolling back twice as long) sought distraction, a break in the grey, something else . . . *You are strong. . . .* She found it where she always does, the mysterious wandering rhythms of nature and the weird beauty of our tripping through it. There was a full moon that day: *the pink moon*. A distraction rising above and beyond the usual sludge, its welcome off-course drift, something else on which to focus

thoughts laden by the pound-down days and nights. This day, this night, we agreed, would belong to *the pink moon*.

Handed down to us by way of the lunar calendar native tribes synch to the step-through of seasonal change here on Earth, this phase spoke to the bloom of spring flowers, pink phlox specifically—what at one time flowed over by the field and for as far as the eye could see, no doubt. It was not only *the pink moon*, but it would be a supermoon to boot: 20% brighter, 15% larger due to the off-elliptical orbit of our satellite's swing around the mother ship. Add in this: Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars continuing their easy skyline arc to south x east. Here was compartmentalization by way of awe.

That it was cloudy and we would go on to miss the whole damned thing rendered it no less perfect, the images of it from elsewhere proof of its spectacular-ness. Whether in our heads by way of idea, or images shared by a love and contact hungry world, here was a day of wonder shoving its way through the daze. Not just a simple distraction, I felt it ambling in as a need, a required reminder that the natural world need not be so feared. Though it had pinned a bullseye on humanity (and some would argue justly so), nature can still be a place where the mind can go to gain solace and a respite, however brief. Something to generate wonder sans anxiety, awe instead of fear. A needed break for a nation and a culture at that moment teetering.



*How Are You Doing?* . April 11

That had become the standard greeting among the group of regular morning dog walkers, and all other regular walkers, in ours and the contiguous connected neighborhoods around us. Sure, neighbors were now hugging opposite road sides in passing, many masked up; and this, despite all of our dogs' utter contempt for this un-pack-like social distancing. But the distance aside, all were showing deliberate concern: "How are you doing? You all doing okay?" It was heartening, if ultimately a reminder that some in this country were absolutely not doing okay, that some individuals and families were in a deep dark way as counts continued to climb.

On work calls (lucky, privileged to be at work in a home office), the now standard video-conference: "How are you? How are things?" This was the week that every greeting from anyone I knew clasped tight to this pensive, if caring inquiry: "You all doing okay?" You could sense that a lot of people did not really want to ask, as if a part of them did not want to know for knowing

that the reply might be: "not so good." But you got the sense that everyone felt they should, if only for the civic good. And most did.

Perhaps I was just that lucky, so very fortunate to find myself surrounded where I live and work and spend most all of my time, encircled by empathy—the pathology of its absence in modern life (if a history-long affliction) a reckoning already in the works *before times*. This quick Q&A in passing, a small but not insignificant dose dispensed from the apothecary of empathy, another in the lengthening line-item list for how we get through.

"How are you doing? You doing okay?" It was a greeting that queried the internal storms too, double-checking that folks were holding up under the unique strain and (more so?) the shock that this unique viral strain had draped over all. A road grid sans atlas, the unknowable day-to-day and hour-to-hour . . . *Too much, too much*. . . . Our brains were not designed to take this for long without release, was a thought I thought often. And yet, in the same beat thought how amazing it is that we can take much more than we ever thought we could . . . *Adjust, keep calm, carry on*. . . . We are designed for the long draining haul physically, but mentally too. Still, some tire faster; and in that instant who could blame a bit of freak out? . . . *Inquiring, just checking in*. . . . "You sure you're alright?"

It was a beautiful thing, the kind of reaction I had hoped to see all along, that something, that anything to reverse the epidemic of smallness and naked self-interest that had for too many recent years blackened the national lungs, gobbled up the national arterial highway with the fast food garbage of hate-filled ranting, blinder-donned partisanship, a xenophobic fear of the other—all that, having long preceded C19—all that, having been exposed as raw anemic symptoms of a chronic illness long proceeding but made painfully clear by C19. The current state of America

was already bound for the crash-cart, pre-existing conditions aimed squarely at pulmonary collapse. Sad, depressing, all of that . . . *It only took a pandemic.* . . . Odd that this rang a small bell of hope: the onset of a pandemic ushering in a reexamination of the national soul.

It was not a Chinese chemical weapons experiment gone wrong. It was not due to the rapid worldwide installation of 5G cell towers. Stop fucking hoarding, people. Could we just lock in, buckle up, and get to work? How about sharing the nerve-wrack anxiety, easing the pile-on strain through cohabitation of a tempered fear. And then, resolving to make sure it was not all in vain—the anxiety, the fear, the mortality. Use the strengths of negativity against itself, invert anxiety and fear into consolation, empathy, joking (gallows humor welcome, don't forget). And then, let us resolve, let us demand "better." Lie prostrate as you must. Grieve, be exasperated and cry the good long cry. And then, ask the passer-by, that person on the other end of a video call: "How are you doing? You all doing okay?" I could not think of a better place to start.



***Bottom On Top*** . April 12

*The poor and especially poor Americans of color are being hit hard by this virus . . . The deadly spread of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 has thrown a spotlight on the unconscionable failures of our public health system . . .*

The national executive was saying: "no one could have ever seen this coming." That, aside from any historian worth their degrees. That, aside from the entire scientific community and the industries of those having devoted their lives to the study of disease and mitigating its impact on local, national, global health systems and populations for the past century. That, aside from all those that had given their life's work to the study, development, and rollout of pathogen-curbing vaccinations. That, aside from all those leaders having increasingly understood the sharp severity of consequences that flood in waves from disruptive epidemics, having listened intently for at

least the past half-century to those who had devoted their careers and lives to the study of disease and its mitigation for the past century. That, plus: China, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, The Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, India, Iran, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Syria, Oman, Israel, South Africa, Italy, Kenya, Turkey, Senegal, Russia, Slovakia, Egypt, The Czechs, Namibia, Romania, Sierra Leone, Hungary, Norway, The Netherlands, Ethiopia, Denmark, Morocco, Sweden, Portugal, Ghana, Germany, France, Spain, The U.K., Iceland, Canada . . . Kirkland, Washington . . . *No one* . . . Indifference that leads to a catastrophe carries intent nonetheless. If you fire a gun into the air to have the bullet fall and hit someone in the head a mile away that still means you shot someone in the head. An intentional indifference, a rhetorical mendacity, an alternate reality that was right then circling the drain.

*The swirl-gust mean of days unlike any other days running me down, running me down, man. I struggle to pull myself up out of the chaotic ear-deep roar of waves crashing, one after another; the scudding undertow suck out to sea. Upright, free of the tidal roar, a visceral calm not unlike coming to, post-concussion. Aim for the heart of it, aim for the heart of it, man.*

And the incontrovertible truths, the hard-headed heartlessness of this fantastical failure at leadership, just another indictment of a punitive caste system still here, still institutional, put in place with purpose, maintained via carelessness, and being laid bare before our eyes. All those once invisible—if having always been indispensable—were now being titled: "essential" . . . *It only took a pandemic*. . . . And I had begun to wonder who exactly was benefiting the most: the labeled or the many others doing the labeling? I wanted to think the former; but there was work

to be done beyond statements and yard signs. There was work to be done on behalf of the fruit and vegetable pickers, all those in public transit, the grocery store clerks and shelf-stockers and sandwich-makers, the meat packers being cold-shouldered back into hard slog jobs for meager pay in viral hot-spots (minus physical distancing), all the staffs at restaurants now hanging on by fingernails, the mechanics and fixers of vital parts, the fiber / cable techs, those maintaining the power and gas and water and sewage, and the plumbers and the electricians and the roofers and the like, the anonymous army cleaning up after our slob-like species, cleaning up our intolerable toss-away convenient-culture mess, educators—all of them—and of course the underpaid nurses and healthcare workers and the elderly and hospice care-givers. . . . The bottom had to rise to the top of the national discussion, those usually invisible now indispensable. To say they were heroes was a start, but could also be a thing too easily employed as a salve for the troubled conscience; and this before going right back to the making of an intolerable mess. To say things is one thing. To extend dignity to this indispensable army via legislation, fair wages, a recast American dream worthy of the title-drop "essential," was the only thing. . . . *Make it happen, man.*

I wandered about this thought-seed all of that day, having to settle for: "I guess we are going to see what we are made of, for real." Who is America really working for? Executives with capital? Those now unquestionably "essential"? All of the above and in between? These were questions a compassionate country had to answer, supposing that we were still such a thing; which seemed the question at hand. Were we still a good people? Where we ever truly good? From within the scudding roil of having to ask, I could only think: "Shit has got to change."

*We were not as healthy as we thought we were. The biological virus afflicting individuals is also a social virus. — Viet Thanh Nguyen*

*Postscript:* Few that had their fingers on the pulse throughout the stretch-out duration of the C19 pandemic were able to interpret and lay it all out in an obvious incisive way like *The Atlantic's* science writer, Ed Yong. He wrote this about all those finding themselves at the bottom of the economic ladder in the middle of a pandemic in September 2020 . . .

*The decades-long process of shredding the nation's social safety net forced millions of essential workers in low-paying jobs to risk their life for their livelihood.*

Not long after, I wrote this to myself: part mission statement, part exhortation . . .

*Acknowledging people's humanity is not enough. Change must follow. Better lives must follow. Let's be better.*



*Exceptional* . April 13

*The problem isn't that people are not the way they used to be. It's that the economy and the structure of work are not the way they used to be \* . . . . We are exceptional in our ability to look down on those down in this country. We have a high talent for kicking a person while down. We seem quite skilled at heaping on indignities to those incurring suffering, blaming the victim if only to distract from all the self-incriminating evidence for why there is so much bad and there are so many down amidst so much good, so very many on the make. We ratchet-up good fortune, whether co-pilot to hard work / determination, or not, and turn it into righteous virtue, an entitled state, grace bestowed. Inversely, we view hard circumstances, tough runs of luck brought on by poorly considered paths, or birth—or neither—as all the cue we need to wag fingers.*

In a world full of imperfect individuals, we sure seem to enjoy jabbing at the imperfect and the fallen, dishing out a good stare-down scolding of all those that find themselves opposite

a rickety bridge from fortunate. Perhaps a night in the stocks on the commons would cure the lesser amongst us of down-on-their-luck ways, their paycheck-to-paycheck ways, the failings of a cycling addiction, the petty War On Drug offenses, their food-desert-driven diabetic drag on crowded ERs—their own poverty. Perhaps we should shock the value of hard work into those we feel are not working hard enough: 60-70-80 hours a week spread over three minimum wage jobs scattered across town and accessible only via circuitous bus routes would seem a strong enough dose to cure the imperfect fallen of their impurities, those reliant on welfare because of poorly considered paths, or where they were born—*or neither*—incarceration seeming a fine enough solution for removing all of our hallucinating homeless and PTSD-throttled veterans from view, prison the right fit for the chronically hooked, and all of our less virtuous selves. Or better yet, let us continue to allow the police to sort out our endemic age-old economic and social disparities. I mean, outsourcing the tricky work of policy and legislation and opportunity incubation to the baton and the gun is bound to be cheaper than a social science department, right?

We are exceptional for the tossing of sneer-lit grins at those in a bad way, exceptionally creative at crafting theories and funding think tanks and spinning up whole ideologies to explain away why bad outcomes repeat endlessly in places where bad outcomes repeat endlessly. We stand tall, above the crowd, when it comes to blaming those born where they were: down-slope runways greased and listing of generational drift. We blame them as if they had a choice, for not asserting radical individualism in places where radical individualism tends to fall to the baton and the gun. We blame them for not sewing their own bootstraps and pulling themselves up from deprived environments where the delivery manifests never thought to include support structures and opportunity zones and good fortune (or even bootstraps) as basic nutrients for healthy

outcomes. There is something absolving in the tactic. It allows the blessings of good fortune to seem at all points meritocratic, something due. We are exceptionally gifted in this land of the free in failing to comprehend that others have little to start with and at present, while others have so very much to start with and at present. And that hard work and applying yourself and self achievement is, of course, the desired state; and that is all well and good—*unless*—bad fortune, a simple luck of the draw, intercedes to render a different outcome. And this, because that is where we have drawn the line, that being the tipping point beyond which those fortunate are allowed to think that they are better than of all those imperfect and fallen; and that those finding themselves down, well, they probably deserved it anyway. And none of this is to say that scheming lazy douchebags don't have it coming. They do and they should have it coming. But it is saying that lazy douchebags are the exception, and that we can and should be better . . . *Assist or Die*.

I would read that 44% of Americans earned a annual median of \$18,000 in wages in the immediate *before times*. As much as some cold-hearts would be willing to try, this was not a stat that could be explained away by poor work ethic or an epidemic of laziness. It was indicative of a pitiless nature, a cruelty where empathy should reside. To be down is not always to be bad, but often just down and in need of an outstretched hand—for someone, somewhere, for once, to just give a shit. We are an exceptional people, we really are . . . *The poor are being hit especially hard by this virus . . . Because economic policy is inseparable from healthcare policy, the unfairness of the health system is inseparable from the unfairness of the economy.* \*

\* The New Yorker, Why Americans Are Dying from Despair? Atul Gawande



*A Beat Down Optimism* . April 15

Global cases continued to rise: now over 1,900,000. The global death count continued to rise: 126,213. Yet, in this strange new world could there be reason for optimism? . . . *The lockdown shelter-in-place orders in Washington, California, even New York, seem to tease out initial signs of flattening the curve.* . . . A ray, if faint. What even counted for optimism? A faint ray in its white-knuckle attempt to pry apart a drear draped over all? Hanging on incremental hopes won inch by cold-sweating inch? Did we just need to lower our expectations, dose our *before times* acclimated "we want it all, now" brains with a stiff vaccinating rush of the real?

*Vice Admiral James Stockdale was held as a prisoner of war during Vietnam. To survive the experience, Stockdale said he relied on a mix of hope—the need for absolute, unwavering*

*faith that you can prevail—and realism—the discipline to begin by confronting the brutal facts, whatever they are. . . . The same strategy can be applied to this pandemic. \**

So, we could have all agreed that we were not prisoners of war. Prisoners of a sort, but 180° off from the sadist soul crush of a Vietnam War prison camp. Our bones are not rattling. We are not wire-cuffed to a creeping iron-fisted torture (as an unthinking few dumbly claimed). But, there was suffering. There was a tortuous wave of death rolling, the "like an elephant sitting on my chest " heaving and gasping for breath, lung-struck fade-outs on gurneys in overcrowded hallways. Doctors having pledged to "first do no harm"—*primum non nocere*—in all that they did were right then having to triage who lives and who will likely die for want of equipment and devices to save all . . . but . . . *but* . . . hospitalizations were going down; for several days now, new hospitalizations tailing off. The ICUs still full, the hundreds on top of hundreds still dying and stacked in freezer trucks. But there was the mentioned adjustment: realigning optimism down a notch in order to raise morale up . . . *Faith that you can prevail. Confronting brutal facts. We are adults. Give it to us straight.* . . . It is of a severed time when morale must be won out of the mess of digesting, confronting, and accepting brutality. A recalculation of metrics in a time of disease-strewn vectors, the miasma of aerosol rage, a grotesque—*brutal*—calculus. Weird, unknowable. But known. It was a known thing. It was a human thing. We had been doing this since the cave: pushing on, daring to visualize "better," summoning the audacity to give it a shot. Fearing, hoping, this is what humans do. This is what humans have always done. Keep calm, carry on, and this though you know the bombs will fall again that night, and the night after that, and . . . We were not prisoners of war. We were prisoners of a virus. Could we do this?

The curve was flattening in those spots hit hard and early. The contagion was spreading elsewhere and rapidly down through New Jersey, taking aim at Philadelphia, a place done nearly to death in October 1918 . . . *During the week of October 16 alone, 4,597 Philadelphians died from influenza or pneumonia, and influenza killed still more indirectly †* . . . Detroit's inner-city communities were right then being hammered. The toll on the urban poor grotesque and brutal and made all the worse by general neglect, decades of it, generations of it, a history filled of it. Hope, and the act of scrolling in search of hope struck me as untethered, not something I would have done in *before times*, but something I was most definitely doing in that most fucked up new normal. And yet, in the same beat it struck me that mid-April day that this brand of normal was, historically, more normal than not. It is what we do. It is what we have always done . . .

*It was becoming obvious that the country was living through two pandemics: one of near misses, in which pre-existing advantages helps lift many from harm's way, and one shaped by generational neglect dropping the unlucky squarely in the line of fire.*

\* The Atlantic Daily e-newsletter / 0415 | † John Barry, *The Great Influenza*

*Postscript:* Despite hospitalization rates having begun to trend down, 2,752 died of C19 that Wednesday: April 15. It would be America's deadliest day until December 2, 2020.



*A Great Silence* . April 16

On April 1, I wrote of the amazed reports then filtering in around the "anthropause." It had only gained steam, in that it become even quieter. The phenomenon, picked up by seismologists (those with the noble task of listening to the Earth for a living), presented clear-as-day evidence that THE animal responsible for the swollen terrestrial roar had attenuated, sheltering quietly in place. Where we had each-and-every-day been the source of Himalayan peaks of decibel-busting seismological spikes, a low-volleyed ebb. Whereas a sky full of contrails had been the *before times* normal in our neck of the woods, now one, maybe two an hour: Atlanta, one of the busiest airports in the world, silenced by a microbe. And the usual bustling streets and all the spillover congestion of area highways here in the ATL, eerily spacious, silenced, something of a stock dystopian scene to some—or—a model for the future (being my take).

For there was yet that "other calamity" to consider, the one that actually did threaten all of human existence. A plague is one thing: immediate, seemingly existential, threatening all of humanity. And it did, but in the end it would spare many. Global warming, that was another thing altogether, a whole other level of existential, and in the most personal of terms. No advantages of birth would help, though the toxic bloom of disadvantages at birth would, like all other things, make the climate crisis that much worse for the less fortunate. But that was still coming. (*And it was.*) "The pause," here and now, its ease on the air, the greatness of the quiet, that was *now*.

"We could learn from this, learn what it could be like, what it should be like. Could we learn? Could we ever come together and do this? Achieve a quiet silent calm as our baseline day in the life? A profound quiet?" The reality of insularity, selfish nationalist impulses, leery otherism, greed, they all smothered the oxygen of my thoughts . . . but . . . "maybe?"

The air had been the first thing that satellites had picked up: how clean the air. One could actually see landmarks from space, the rapid dissolve of the "normal" sight-smothering clouds of CO<sub>2</sub> and particulate matter and all other heat-trapping gases. Here was a template, a quiet reminder of how, what, and (most importantly) why.

"Would we allow ourselves, our species, to live?" A good question, one like all others at the moment with no immediate satisfactory answer. I could not see the future for the obscurity of the moment in all its ecological and biological and political chaos / violence; and this despite the crystal ring of nature itself in that moment: relieved, unburdened, the template for a future if we are to have one worth living at all. "Maybe," the only answer I could muster. I took hold of it, clung tight as the lifejacket it was.

*A backlash against the economic shutdown is brewing, and with a vengeance . . . Will teenagers ever be the same post-pandemic? . . . Is it safe to be ordering take-out food? . . .*

It had been a month. It felt like it had been a year. And yet at the slightest of angles, it almost seemed like no time had elapsed at all. Not in the way of the weightless liberating drift of a weeks-long vacation or that sink-deep mode you find yourself in when too busy to notice, both oddly similar. No, this was time itself being stripped of its ability to coordinate and order our world. All of the smothering rigidity that can come with just trying to make a living, making your way through day to day to . . . *silence*. Here, in the midst of a rippling crisis touching all of the world—*everyone, all humans*—and wrapped in the deeper distressing slow-moving crisis that would, and already is landing harder blows on all of this world, I could sense time itself refusing to go along. As if it had had enough of our hijinks, content to wait for we humans to pull our shit together. Even time was so very over our ineffectual treatment of this most giving host, this most amazing of homes (the occasional plague / contagion aside). And who could blame time? I certainly could not, looking around at our self-induced mess rising high behind a levee we knew would not hold. What was coming was to be the Katrina of Katrinas. We knew it. And just like the inequitable bumbling-through that still frames the aftermath of that deflating debacle 15 years earlier, our own bumble-through fecklessness had made this calamity all the worse. Could we rise to the challenge? To that other challenge? Would that great silencing provide us the template by which we make our way through? "Maybe," all I could muster.

Inside that unmeasured void, time and worth and ideas and policies and the experience of it all . . . *funneling through ear drums clattering, piercing retinas unmasked* . . . there it hung; but

for the slightest drugged movements, suspended as in a conscious trance. There was no way to predict what would be. Even time itself seemed in on "the pause," as if sensing that we needed it; a reflective break from the usual rote run-around, a busy-ness so siloed that the outside world—*our home of homes*—registered as little more than that rock under our feet, our culture / our nation / our fellow citizens potential impediments to be evaded in getting to whatever more important thing was at that moment so very important. To slow down and go silent, a breeze of time ambling through unmeasured and unconcerned with clocking your hours, minutes, seconds; if for a beat, just enough time for the enormity of this moment to be properly registered, properly diagnosed, and archived for proper use once we are able to unlock, crawl out, stand up, breath deep and true, and pivot towards that unknowable next.

In all of my life the future had never seemed so distant, the present having never been so present. All was of silence, silent on what was coming, silent in that moment. And as with the active seasons having been underway when this all started for baseball and basketball and hockey and soccer, etc., time itself had been suspended until further notice.

*Postscript: The Atlantic Planet Weekly* (January 2021) — In 2020, American greenhouse-gas pollution fell 10.3 percent, a staggering decline and the largest year-over-year drop since World War II. . . . *Science Magazine* (July 25, 2020) — More than 600 seismometers around the world recorded half as many human-generated vibrations from March to May, the longest and most coherent global seismic noise reduction in recorded history.



*Document The Now* . April 17

*Universities, archives and historical societies . . . are rushing to collect and curate the personal accounts of how people are experiencing this sprawling public health crisis. . . . What we as contributors record is what future generations will remember. \**

It is my instinct is to jot down observations, mental nuggets, any of a dozen pinwheeling sights, sounds, thoughts short-tracking around my skull wherever, whenever, and about whatever. I am not ever without a writing or recording device wherever I am and in whatever I am doing. It is on the whole obsessive and has been "thus" since my teens. With the arrival of C19 that instinct joined forces with a ringing necessity: to document in real time all of the head-slapping, brain twist what-the-fucks of an instant very few on this planet had ever been through before.

To know that you were moving through something historic and for that to be obvious in the moment. To know, though the contours and outlines might differ, that the reality of what you were experiencing was what every other human on the face of the Earth was also experiencing? Mind-bending, obvious in its historic-ness. Even though each of us experiences life across this rambling place in space through a unique filter that not even your closest friends, your immediate family, your spouse, can ever entirely know—*it's all you, baby!*—even so, here was something uniformly beyond the scope, if not beyond the pale, for all. It was a unique—*and*—collective experience like nothing we had ever seen.

All of that was obvious, and it made all of this journal scribbling the more pressing. I was at once observer—*and*—participant. (In fact, the entries I dropped onto journal pages each day were originally written in the third-person, a mental separation that a friend suggested I needed between myself and that moment more than I may have realized.) These entries were not ever about complete sensory-soaked renderings. A faithful 100% accurate picture of each second's twenty-four frames is not possible, nor is it the point. The core theme and its larger surround is, and was, the point, the essence of the effort that become obvious as I kept at it. Digging in and developing themes would create the tether between my observations and those of all my fellow humans under siege. That, I realized years ago, is the relatable something that makes reading the observations and rumination of others not just interesting, but often profound: to be unique, do you. For what you perceive and sense is never exactly the same as what anyone else perceives or is sensing. It does not have to be. Your thing does not have to capture every frame. It needs only a quick sketch. Your unique take will ring enough familiar bells for others to get it, often getting it in a slightly different way than they had before considered. To see this madcap world through

the eyes of others comes with a loud disclaimer: *What follows is an incomplete rendering of the scene, but you'll get the gist . . .* Done with skill, it lands. It can move your fellow human.

Connecting with others is what we do. We can only know "I." But we all know "I." And there are times (I now know) when connecting all those "I's" is more important than other times. That was one of those times. An historic present, an unknowable future. Sheltering-in-place. One seriously f-d up time. To be at once groping through fog, grasping for a concrete *anything*; all the while knowing that, however amorphous, that *now* was an instant to be etched in memories, if not in stone. To be in your bones certain that future generations will point to this moment and say: "2020? Ya, that something."

It was enough to set my pen to scrawling: from the shallow shoals of drive-by thoughts to the deep deep plunge; deep on meditations, from the harrowing to those somehow blessed with a calm not conceivably my own. And the headlines, the harrowing mess of headlines . . . *Dump the doomscroll, friend. . .* Or, better yet pour it all onto the page. Sift and sort later. Just get it down. Document, document. I did not need to be asked twice. I was already there in *before times*. These times had simply cranked up the volume. For we are always moving through history, most of it dull, rote, not worth recording for its dull rote-ness. But to know, in real time, that the moment you are in was a profound experience? Well, that is when the magnitude of living—even if dull and routine—should be obvious, the sprawl of our miraculous lives clinging so perilously, if tenaciously, to a thin rind of planetary crust scrolling out on our feeds clear as the day.

Whether propelled by long game documentation for the sake of future generations, or just wagon-circling my own sanity . . . *I can see no way out but through . . .* either seemed worthy of the dead soldiers I was creating of Pilot Rolling Balls and 2-Gs, the thin-tip Sharpies (ink pens

the one thing I did hoard with selfish abandon); these, and the two thick journals catching it all. A constant "journal-ist," I knew on down the years that what I was doing was sketching my own unique take, what my unique filtering devices were processing and imprinting onto my neurons, documenting my time as the curious, odd, if creative tick-tocking that was the first draft of my own history. Whether it was to be of use to anyone aside from my senior self flipping through piles of black-ink ramblings dutifully documenting my years, wondering aloud in my geriatric state on how well or unwell I had grasped it all, that had always been besides the point. It was something I did without a reason for doing it. An instinct, an automatic response to a world providing more material than I could possibly record, more grist for thought and creative repurposing than a hundred lifetimes could properly utilize.

But that moment, that was different. A moment humans would look at for generations and want to know about: about what people thought and felt, how they dealt, how they reacted to a dire public health crisis and, maybe more so, how they did not react to it and why. Of course, it seemed entirely possible that no one would want to remember a scintilla of the entire mess (re: The Great Influenza). That was totally possible. And given America's preferred state of historical tunnel-vision, preferring more palatable / less irritable tales told via the white-washing of an ugly past, some form of forgetting or revision seemed inevitable. But there was something about that moment. The sheer scale of us all recording, all the technological ability to document and share not just observations but the actual experiences (as singular and unique as they were); all of it pointed at a more honest reckoning with a not normal time, renderings stark in their brutality—*and*—exceptional in its heroic tenor, the transcendent triumph of will in the face of daily defeats.

It was totally possible that the nation and world simply moved on with no postmortem, but I did not think so. There was too much deeply held documenting going on. To forget would seem to dishonor all those who had and would die, all those that did care and tried the best they could to ease the catastrophic physical and mental distress of others. No, this was not only worth remembering, it was worth honoring. To be documenting this time—*epic, horrific, stricken, yet scattering beauty, grace, and the very best of what we can be*—it all set up as a unique privilege. To be living through a most fucked up time, it came to seem an odd extraordinary privilege.

*'Tis true St. Giles's buried two-and-thirty, but still, as there was but one of the plague, people began to be easy . . . We continued in these hopes for a few days, but it was but for a few, for the people were no more to be deceived thus; they searched the houses, and found that the plague was really spread every way, and that many died of it every day. So that now all our extenuations abated, and it was no more to be concealed; nay, it quickly appeared that the infection had spread itself beyond all hopes of abatement . . . the next week the thing began to show itself. — Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year (During the last Great Visitation in 1665)* †*

\* The New York Times, What Historians Will See When They Look Back (on C19), Audra D.S. Burch / 0417

† Note: Defoe's "Journal" a work of fiction written in 1722, a half-century after the 1665 "Visitation"



*Captain Tom* . April 18

Skimming through the doomscroll's waves of terrifying and security obliteration blending imperceptibly with the over-reactions, general mania, and just straight up bullshit, I continued to see flickers of one truly great story. It was one of those human acts that you find indicative of such times—inevitable, even—at once restorative in our reason for being, reassuring, in that we might actually continue to be. It was plain, perfect, and had been appearing even-by-scene in my feeds for about a week: a 99 year old British World War II veteran, Tom Moore (having risen to the rank of captain while serving the old empire in Burma, modern Myanmar), was attempting to complete 100 laps of his sizable backyard garden by his 100th birthday. With aid of a walker and his crisp English gung-ho, Mr. Moore was closing in on his goal every day. His original intent was to raise £1000 for charities tied to Britain's National Health Service, the NHS. By the time

he completed that 100th lap, well in advance of his late April birthday, he had been daily joined by an honor guard from the active duty First Yorkshire Regiment and had raised £23 million.

During lockdown, here is what one man had done: he had served. The BBC reported that over half a million British citizens had signed a petition to the United Kingdom's Honours Committee calling for "Captain Tom" to be knighted. And this, in post-Brexit U.K., a place as severely rent by partisanship as my own United States—a fading old "chap" in a fading world power whose citizens were at each other's throats. And yet, this: service in the face of England's staggering death toll, C19 having hit the island nation hard. Under siege, Captain Tom had decided to serve.

*Postscript:* Tom Moore wound up raising over £32 million. He was made an honorary colonel on his 100th birthday: April 30, 2020. On July 17, he was knighted by the Queen. . . . On February 2, 2021, Sir Tom Moore finally surrendered. The Captain died of pneumonia complicated by COVID-19.



*Freedom* . April 20

*To say everything has changed is cliché, but everything has changed.*

— The Atlantic Daily e-newsletter

The first thing I read that Monday morning was that the Boston Marathon would be postponed (and eventually cancelled) for the first time since its inaugural running in 1897. Cornerstone of Massachusetts' "Patriots Day" celebrations, honoring that most selfless stand of minutemen at Lexington and Concord, and falling on the closest Monday after April 19 each year, it was still a relevant holiday on my personal calendar, having grown up a state over. But, one more calendar twinge tossed onto the expanding list of everything having changed was hardly the main drift of that morning's scroll-slog through the headlines . . . *If we commit to protecting ourselves and our loved ones, then we will be committing to more Americans living . . . If we give up on the*

*vigilance of public health measures now and go right back to the normal we knew, we will have the mirage of normalcy, a few weeks of calm followed by a surge like we have not yet seen . . .*

*It took the United States 38 days after recording its first fatality on February 29 to reach 10,000 deaths on April 6, but only five days to reach 20,000. — Reuters*

*Our collective behavior will be the primary determinant of whether we can keep this virus in check. — David Kessler*

Self-quarantine, social distancing, the obvious utility of simply wearing a mask, all of it had been working in concert to help "flatten the curve." But unified application was tenuous, at best, if not outright porous. The headlines were lighting up with reports of protests erupting, very white crowds of protestors claiming this was not a series of personal sacrifices in order to protect the health of others and save lives, but that it was nothing short of a galling infringement on personal liberties, the work of some (not well explained) government power grab, if not an outright hoax perpetrated for nefarious political aim (again, poorly explained). It was no on-the-fly, if drastic, attempt to safeguard the health and lives of fellow Americans, it was tyranny and it would not stand. The protesters were not to my knowledge being forced to quarter *large Bodies of Troops among them*. They had not taken a stand against *transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended Offences*, nor against an evil foreign power having *plundered our Seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the Lives of our People*. They would argue that their lives were being destroyed and in that they were not entirely off the mark. We were a

beset, hunted, and increasingly ravaged people. But these people were not protesting against the source of the besetting, the hunter, the ravager. They were indeed protesting against perceived *Oppressions*, victims of an elaborate scheme or plot or some secret junta's highly conceived and dastardly bid to curb their ability to do what they wanted when they damned well pleased, full stop. They were most certainly not protesting in the form of petitions *for Redress in the most humble Terms*. It could be claimed that they were in the right to shout out loud about *cutting off our Trade with all Parts of the World*, even though it was most of the world that had cut itself off from us, and we from them, and that being the right call for now . . . *Slow the spread. Starve the virus*. . . . They were right to be pissed off about what we were all having to endure. They were right to be angry. I was pissed off. I was angry. And they were right to contend that aspects of the economic lockdown should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, as opposed to the blanket shut down orders (eventual mandates) then prevalent; and that we really should evolve in real time on what exactly was the safest approach to reopening certain industries and trades and pursuits—to help in any way we could to put a floor under the economic distress we were all watching creep ever closer. But that we must do this while mitigating the danger of crowds of humans in social settings and workplace settings aerosoling mushroom clouds of potentially infected vapor, that we must balance making a living with making sure Americans live.

There was what we must do, but that was not what they were doing. Some did seem sincere. Some did want that hard-boiled evaluation of how best to avoid large-scale economic ruin while suppressing large scale disease-plagued ruin. Some were sincere in this. Many were not. Many, especially among the most vocal of those protesting, just wanted their hair cut and their nails done, and to eat hamburgers and fries indoors at restaurants and drink beer at bars with

crowds of other people. Some even brought along their long guns to show just how serious they were, that they meant to defend this cause wrapped as it was in the patriotic bunting of camo-fatigues and Hawai'ian shirts. Here they were, later day self-titled minutemen having force-fed small brains to think that having to do anything, any damned *anything* that you don't want to do is a holocaust perpetrated against freedom itself. And that, as true patriots, they were fending off the *direct Object* of admittedly harsh punitive-seeming public health measures, measures they claimed were *the Establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States*.

The economy on the whole was on pause, in a deep freeze but for the essential few (the distressing inequity of our society's economic demands and how that intersect's with one's health having become coldly clear). This was a sacrifice we were having to make, collectively, knowing of the financial hurt, knowing that we are going to hurt ourselves doing so, a public health course of radiation done to save lives, to save American lives. It was hard. It was going to get harder. It was never going to be easy. Could we do this? Or had we been so thoroughly conditioned to consider ourselves, our lives, as little more than economic commodities wrapped of flesh and bone, reacting to market—or, more accurately, marketing—forces in crowning our wants as the whole point of living? Had we been so conditioned by market forces and marketing campaigns and political campaigns and ideological planks to consider that anything—*anything*—put in the way of achieving our wants could only be viewed through the zero sum lens of *Tyranny*? No one in their right mind wanted lockdown. No one in their right mind was for a cratering economy. But those in their right minds could see that all of this short-term pain—acute, real, *now*—would allow more Americans to live. All of that was a rationing of self need and desire in order to fill the larger bill: a collective sacrifice with the aim of buying time to figure this shit out.

Could we do this? Or had modern America been so effectively programmed into silos of self-interest, conditioned by culture, media, and other Americans to think "self" stands above all—*always*—and that a "collective anything" is for suckers lacking spine and the balls to capitalize off their fellow citizen? Self-interest is what I and everyone I know had been told our entire lives by Nobel-laureate economists and actors in movies and presidents who once acted in movies—that it IS about us and SHOULD BE about us—that greed is good.

And there were those, by no means all, but by any measure enough, that were shouting to hoarse of how this was no sacrifice but the tyranny of a nanny state, or of socialists, or fascists, or liberal pussies, or deep state cabals, or some other ping-pong thought soup then pouring out of angry bullhorns. There was no "we" to be seen, only a whole lot of "me." And as much as my "wait, what?" reaction to it all seemed both inadequate and all that these tantrums deserved, it all pushed me into a deeper dive worry about foundational national being. Over the course of the past several decades, had we reengineered this experiment in self-governance called the U.S. of A. around a radical unapologetic selfishness? Was that what it meant to be an American? All of this protesting was being pushed out as a set of rugged individuals who weren't going to take it anymore, had been driven to their muskets and were done with said tyranny. That, without any tip to extraordinary times requiring extraordinary measures, sacrifices from all to save some, and if only because crowding together in a restaurant or bar to eat chicken wings and drink tap beer had shoved its way to the front of freedom's line, right up there with *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*. And this, though it did seem that abridging the freedom of some speech and most certainly the press was now all fine and good. And how all the roaring *redress of grievances* blowing up from these crowds had

begun to sound less like rugged individuals raising legitimate concerns about acute economic pain, less about taking a stand for the fundamental rights of a free people, and more like selfish numb-skulling since, apparently, the wearing of a mask was akin to living in Stalinist Russia. . . . All of that, all of it, while the novel virus in our midst seemed to be not at all interested in rugged individualism, but much more in favor of such large group gatherings, venting and ranting and breathing on one another, unmasked, unwary, uncaring.

In the end, all of this protest and yelling and aerosol-streaming vitriol had little to do with the virus, the thing "calling the shots." It had to do with self-titled "patriots" coming together in large close groups to fume over what they wanted—what *they* wanted. This was not for country, but for their own individual "me." And this, because an insular narrow society had taught them to be little else, to think about little aside from their own minor little kingdoms; to get theirs, to capitalize, even at the expense of others. Because "theirs" was the only metric that had come to matter. And besides, it was their due anyway. They were born free (and white) in America, and in lieu of that birthright they had the freedom to be just as selfish as they damned well pleased. It apparently said so right there in the Constitution, or Declaration, or somewhere . . . *A Truth self-evident*. . . . LIBERATE VIRGINIA. LIBERATE MICHIGAN. LIBERATE MINNESOTA.

The freedom to self-realize is an absolute concrete right guaranteed to we Americans. The freedom to potentially infect others because after a single month you are sick of sitting at home and not being able to go out whenever you damned well please to eat burgers at a restaurant or not wear a mask at a store full of others having to endure you as a potential disease vector because a mask is uncomfortable and they fog your glasses, besides, seemed less tenable tangents of that principle—and by a country fucking mile. . . . But then none of this really

seemed of, or about principle. It did seem all about selfish dicks lacking a conscience and the ability to comprehend anything aside from the "pain" of a minor inconvenience (re: *Tyranny*). It did seem all about a hyper-sensitive radar set to cannonade any faint trace or hair-thin tweaking of their right to do whatever the fuck they want regardless of how it effects anyone else (a thing guaranteed nowhere in The Constitution, by the way, that under-glass parchment seeming to infer the very opposite: channeling as much as it mandates freedoms). And that, all of it, if only because nowhere into such a dim-lit view dares wander the concept of anyone aside from themselves, or in so far as I could see. These were people failing entirely to digest the whole of an oft-quoted source of our modern sense of *liberty / freedom*, John Stuart Mill having defined such liberty / freedom as equal to "doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow, without impediment from our fellow creatures, as long as what we do does not harm them even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse or wrong." . . . It would seem that these freedom-loving Americans had stopped abruptly seventeen words in, the natural stopping point where it would best serve their individual person the most—failing, miserably, to grasp the concept: from many, one.

That sound policies, if searing and painful, sacrificial, imperfect, and in need of audit and ongoing real-time revision lest we make all of the anxiety and devastation worse, were required right then was not in question. Unless, you were a selfish dick looking out for #1. Everything had, indeed, changed. But some things never do seem to change.



*Provisioning In A Time of Hoarding* . April 21

As mentioned, Tuesday morning had become my default day: the once-a-week provisions run. In *before times* we were a multiple-stop grocery shop household, buying a handful of things 2-3-4 times a week on ways home from something else. Our backstock, if it could even be called that, only ever had us a few weeks of staples. It was the first thing we noticed: *how very unprepared we were*. That had changed, and for good. (*All it took was a pandemic.*) Now, once a week, I was running a ring along an arc of grocery and convenience / pharmacy stores: two, three, four stores as needed, all in one shot. Our pantry, soon stocked of cereals, lentils, soups, rice, curry paste, noodles, pasta, dried chickpeas, canned tomatoes, items that would keep for the long-haul.

But it all begged a deeper dive, in that the prospect of being holed up in our house for any stretch of time during an instant of strained and crawl-along supply chains had never crept into my head as a worry—as in *never*. So much abundance, so much convenient access to anything at

almost any time of the year, week, or day . . . *And this, while there is so much want?* . . . Having been so very conditioned that so very much is always at hand, on demand, often having to raise little more than a finger . . . *click* . . . for its acquisition; my having been conditioned, as if on purpose, not to think about what goes into it all, who does it all . . . *American corporations have spent decades squeezing every last dollar out of markets, largely at the expense of flexibility and resilience* \* . . . . But then, having been forced to confront what does go into it, the once invisible human beings and the finite personal capital they were forced to sink into making it all go.

It is amazing, it really is: the scope of abundance an accomplishment next to miraculous. But (the pandemic turning up lots of "buts"), there was that essential lesson being taught. And whether we all, or even a good portion of us chose to listen? Hard to predict, especially given the rapt self-involved bubble confining so many in all that they did across the increasingly fawned-over *before times* (its instant nostalgia markedly reserved for those having been doing swell during said *times*). In fact given that so very recent past, it seemed likely that Americans would reward themselves once this shit storm was over by amping up reckless over-abundant ways—very likely, in fact. And perhaps some of that will be just reward. But (lots and lots of "buts"), there was that lesson out there to be learned, respected, rewarded with a proper reevaluation and definitive action on its behalf: the hard strain of maintaining that edifice of fully-stocked shelves, of convenient access to everything at all times—*everywhere*—and the tax applied inequitably to that army of "essentials" out there making it seem so easy. And that we were now asking them to risk their lives to do so? Only the reward of revising vital codes in the social contract seemed worthy of that stricken moment.

And we had read early on to choose one household member as the "chosen" shopper . . . *Limit exposure. Limit contact. Do not gather in enclosed spaces. Shelter-in-place.* . . . It went without saying that was going to be me, food shopping the only kind of shopping I actually enjoyed. And that particular morning had been fruitful: coffee on sale and still plentiful, a few packs of frozen fish having reappeared after evaporating from shelves back in March. A favorite cereal was still absent a month running, but that was offset by the gold standard of scores in this time of hoarding: toilet paper. I had looped in a fourth store that morning, a second convenience store that was a bit out of the way, persistence paying off. It was only a four-pack, having taken the second to last pack (limit one per customer). But it was some, and that was cause for an in-aisle touchdown celebration dance, sad but true.

Since the start of the mess, made worse by the mess of a national executive response, I had hoped beyond hope that coming together as a unified people to conquer something larger than any individual or any one nation could, that that would be the narrative we Americans would be able to look back on from the safety of some soon-to-be *after times*, bathing in the warm radiance of that as the triumphant theme of *those times*. But the rush of panic-struck hordes raiding every damned paper aisle in every damned store coast-to-coast; and me, having wandered listlessly, automatically, for weeks now down the raid-scatter debris of paper aisles in store-after-store, the hallow ghost town experience that it was—as if sound itself was swallowed up in the void as you passed through—that would be a hard memory to shake. There had not been a square to be seen for six weeks now, my minor haul cause for celebration, if muted by, well, everything else at that moment.

I was now wise to why those having endured The Great Depression kept well-stocked pantries deep into the abundant twentieth century, the elderly who picked out exact change at the grocery store checkout. You just never know. You can never be certain. The grocery store itself, fully-stocked, bursting with displays and abundance, that most intentional Cold War piece of propaganda telling an undeniable story of superior cultural ability, of how mighty and capable the capitalist system was. And it was hard to argue, communism looking bleak and shitty all through my first twenty years, having been eyewitness to the grey concrete-bloc toiling of the Soviet Union as it slowly disintegrated. And this, while I had everything a kid could need.

Lucky. Fortunate. Abundant. Convenient. These and similar word-salads tossed about my mental wanderings. So very lucky, while so many were less than lucky . . . *Virus free, I think. So very lucky, others less so.* . . . And so maybe, here, now, was a touch of comeuppance. And not because I had abused our abundance-industrial-complex. Hardly. We had long been a second-hand store reliant household, my wife having grown up on the opposite end of the luck spectrum, knowing what want was like, applying that knowledge in all she did and schooling me along the way. Plus, we had seen our share of belt-tightening; and this alongside the bigger badder recessions and economic collapses. But still, never for want. Not even now.

How best to respect that? How best to show good fortune that you respect and value it having continually hove into view just as the storms bear down? For that moment, it took the shape of provisioning trim and smart without hoarding, taking in just what we needed for the ongoing siege in knowing all that could were doing the same . . .

*We must love one another or die . . . The striking visual of long lines of cars at food banks are coming to define the current crisis . . . A pantry set up to serve 100 had 900 appear on a single day last week. . . .*

America had been desperate and food poor before, and in a way worse way. But there was still an abundance of fresh food then and there. There seemed no disruption in its delivery at all. The ability to purchase it was a different story. The ability to realize that, for some, food poor has been a way of life all down the line, that many many Americans had known nothing but? A realization, a personal reckoning. Too late in life, I am the first to admit, but understood now. My wife knew of it, a youth of something adjacent to poverty: paycheck-to-paycheck, single mother. I knew nothing of this, not as a kid—*never*. And I came to realize that belt-tightening is not the same. Belt-tightening means you have a belt and clothes and the expectation, through sacrifice and just showing up every day, of better days. To understand that food poor had been a constant down through our magnificently stocked modern history, that the reason shelves were stocked still was due to those risking all to maintain the edifice, and that the cruel irony was this: many "essentials" live a life adjacent to poor, if not of full-blown poverty.

How could we tolerate such want in a land with so very much? Here was a chance to correct that, to redefine what is expected, update those vital codes. Over abundance? A society pre-disposed to a convenient disposable everything? Tenuous, not sustainable. Thrift? Taking just what you need? Laudable, the goal. And yet, not realistic, not if *before times* America was to have anything to say about it. Was this the conundrum of abundance? When it is there, it just is. When it is not, it stokes the wail of tragic suffering? And this, while so very many are forced to

line up in mile-long queues to receive charitably sourced bags of food? So very much. So very little. How could a nation proclaiming greatness and exceptionalism exhibit both of those poles in such close proximity, in its collective conscience, and survive? How would this so modern America have ever survived The Great Depression?

Some would never learn. Some would go right back to bad habits. Some were not even ridding themselves of bad habits during that bad moment. Hoarding is a sign that people are not convinced of the efficacy of leadership to aid in a crisis. But some of the hoarding was just shitty people being shitty selfish assholes. Though I tended to see a calmer set at the grocery stores a month and a few weeks in, distancing, mostly masked, I could see the hoarding impulse in spots: canned things, bottled anything being cleaned out, meat and seafood aisles spacious, the paper aisle vacant of any sign paper had ever been a product for sale. And that morning it had seemed starker, more visibly simmering. We were not even through the first phase of this thing and already civility strained and thin, if not in public displays of suspicion or out loud venting, then in the rattled-through aisles, angrily picked over shelves, the damned hoarding.

But where I had really begun to notice the down run state of things was in the "essentials" out there working the counters and checkout lines. They seemed more sullen. Some were even noticeably careless about the rudimentary performance of their job. I could not fault a set of folks finding themselves stuck in the line of fire if only so that a lavish abundant normal could go on unimpeded for all those not them. All the lauding of essentials was coming to feel like an empty gesture, a pat on the back before we sent them back to resume their position on the front lines, dealing with the public suspicion, the out loud selfish venting, a deadly viral contagion. Here was the cannon fodder of a convenience-addicted abundance-expecting nation. Already earning poor

mostly non-livable wages in an expensive time, and then having to do so in the face of pathogen-exhaling crowds still high-lit by those purposeful uncaring "freedom lovers" refusing to wear a fucking mask, the *very least* those people could do being too much for them to do.

That is where things stood: a nation in the midst of a trying once-in-a-lifetime (we hoped) crisis. The essential workers I encountered that morning in mid-April had seemed somewhere between pissed and fated. How could it be any wonder, at all?

\* The Atlantic, "Why Everything is Sold Out," Amanda Mull



***The Cytokine Storm*** . April 23

*In 1918 (the immune response) of young adults . . . followed the virus into the lungs and there waged war. In this war the immune system held nothing back. It used all its weapons . . . a "cytokine storm," a massive attack using every lethal weapon the body possesses. . . . The immune response killed. — John Barry, *The Great Influenza**

*Once the body recognizes that it's been overwhelmed by the virus, which can take a week or two, the immune response sometimes goes into overdrive. This process, known as a cytokine storm, seems to be what causes many coronavirus patients to crash. — Jim Hamblin*

We were being held witness to a rolling abdication of responsibility, national executive leaders and their loyal congressional soldiers and pundits down-playing this thing with a head-smack

indifference. A blunt honesty and the determined resolve / preparation that it could have spawned was not to be, hard truths dosed with a healthy spoonful of *how we get through* having been sub'd out in favor of lies, wave after wave of lies . . . *A weakling virus no worse than the common flu.* . . . They knew better. They all did. They had the grim knowledge of what other nations had confronted in January and February. And yet, for months uncapped verbal hydrants that spewed reservoirs of bullshit. All of the daily wading through dis- and misinformation: a strategic plan of dishonesty and incessant over-promising. The gloss-overs, the diversionary messaging, all of it calculated, a plotted and coordinated indifference. It was serrated cruelty immune to the empathy that would push us through. And the stormed response was killing something of this nation.

*I was immune. I was infected. I was the inculcation of this denomination of lather, rinse, repeat; as were all of my peers; as were all of we. To listen without thought, to be moved only by the instinct of self aggrandizing contentment. It was imprinted, tattooed on the stem of my brain, the drain-out hammer-thud points driven like so many railroad spikes into the national soul: do what we say, do what we want, buy what we say, buy what we want. But still, all on down and through the dis- and misinforming repeating, repeating, repeat, still—somehow—free.*

And it was not the first time this country had seen such a public campaign of lies during a pandemic. Though it made me feel no better about the current hip-high shit-slog, it was revealing—*infuriating?*—to know that in 1918 local newspapers from Phoenix to Seattle, North Carolina to The Bronx, claimed "on the testimony of physicians" that those afraid, the "weak and timid," were the first to succumb to the influenza.\* Yes, that sounded as stupid and irresponsible now as

it most surely did to all those Philadelphians dying quick terrifying deaths in October of 1918, all of those Atlantans dying across the late fall of 1918, those strong and not afraid just-drafted kids at Camp Funston in Kansas, Camp Devens in Massachusetts, Camp Grant in Illinois, and Camp Sherman in Ohio who across the end of 1918 were quite suddenly stricken, found themselves unable to breathe, turned blue, and died quick terrifying deaths. The death rate in what must be understood as one of the worst seasons in American history overwhelmed large population centers and the sardine-stuffed army cantonments to such a degree that bodies stacked up like "cordwood," the need for mass graves so immediate that steam shovels were requisitioned to do the digging, to clear the backlog. And yet, Vicks VapoRub ran an ad informing readers that the influenza was "Simply the Old-Fashioned Grip (Grippe or Flu) Masquerading Under a new Name" . . . *A weakling. Just your common flu.*

Then, as now, the cytokine storm of fear and disorientation that had spread was not for lack of courage, or a nation of potentially brave individuals who—armed with the stark mortal truth, having absorbed and processed scientific realities—were ready to do what one must; but a hollow lack of credible information into which the desperation of over-stimulated imaginations poured out antibodies of anxiety. Now, as then, it was overwhelming the ability to cope. The near hysterical run of headlines, even those ticking off what seemed like credible information, did not help, an overdriven immune response of the sort that was rolling tribal passions to a boil. Only a month-and-a-half in and already the fissures were showing. The lack of clarity, the confusing mixed-message jumble of made up bullshit tossed out as some shiny object designed to distract and deceive and contradict actual professionals—actual experts trying to save lives—none of this was lost. And yet, the chosen immunity seemed a further retreat into information silos, snake oil

hydroxychloroquines, alternate reals, wild forehead-gripping conspiracy groups, the steaming troll-pile of social media comments, and massive doses of diametrically-opposed evidence attempting to cure the stricken suddenly unable to breathe. It could be seen, sensed when not visible. The cracks, already there, were cracking wider and quaking. I could see it, the overdriven immune response to the incessant stream of indifference and irresponsibility and complete fucking bullshit was killing us all.

Back in March, I had said that "it had begun." And the evidence was now pointing at "it" having begun much earlier than experts had previously thought; early February, earlier, crowds of the infected walking around oblivious and infecting. And yet, we had been told none of this on the up in real time. It all seemed to require a scoop or a leak. We had been lied to our face. And they knew that so many of us knew they were lying. But they went right on lying anyway, down-playing the severity of a pandemic an actual thought through strategy. And to watch the many others that were going right along, doing what was said, buying-in, a weakling virus more hoax than real, for the weak and timid to worry over, not really real . . . *Oblivious. Infecting . . . The U.S. is not doing a bad job in its response, it is doing an exceptionally bad job. . . .* To sit down at the end of those days in April was to collapse, to crash, the adrenaline of fending off anxiety just to get through a full exhausting trip each and every fucking day. The response to this mess was killing something of us all, root and branch.

\* Add'l references: John Barry, *The Great Influenza*



***I, Killer*** . April 24

*Who do we as a society feel is deserving of an economic bailout? Small businesses are left to wonder as they struggle to hold on . . . Wearing a mask is mainly a tactic for protecting your community, not just yourself . . . Now that experts posit the virus having arrived earlier than anyone originally thought, many Americans are asking: "Did I have it?"*

The head-smack realization that you could be an asymptomatic carrier, unknowing spreader of a voracious lung-smothering virus. That you could have been a walking weapon, C19 on you—*in you*—for a month or more, and had no idea, no symptoms, feeling just fine. That is a sick twisted killer, if I can personify an indifferent novel germ. So cunning, using our sociable nature against us, script-flipping strength into weakness in using our desire for close proximity and instinctual gathering and our fluent AI talent for inaccurately gauging risk—using all of this against us. We,

against ourselves . . . which did not sound far-fetched. Humans work against other humans in the competition for resources, wealth, stature, power, authority, each and every bloody day. But this was different. The simple acts of talking, touching, hugging, breathing, turned on us, turning us on each other, biologically. Maybe it's just as well. We had been turning on each other tribally for millennia now. How could we be surprised that a cold efficient killer had simply jumped on the bandwagon? It is just an increment or two more cold, a touch more efficient way to thin the human herd; but for individuals stepping up, to mitigate for the sake of others not yourself.

Asymptomatic. That morning, I had wandered through other ways in which I could have been an anonymous killer. I mean, a virus turning us into unsuspecting unknowing reapers is some cold shit, a gold standard (if a rusted out shot-through gilding). But just knowing that I could have been spreading the disease, could have been killing others I do not know and will never properly meet; going about my way, feeling fine. Likely, no. Possible, yes. . . . But, how else had I flat-lined instants of human interaction across this life? How had I murdered moments, floated in-and-out of scenes as a simmering indifferent killer of moods, "good days," or positive vibes? How often had my impatience, my short-fuse remarks thrown out as off-handed alkaline barbs—shitty little word grenades—gone on to ruin a person's mood, their day, a general outlook for one or many? I could not classify myself as a super-spreader of such things, but on occasion I had torn off the mask of decency, let lapse the extension of general dignity to my fellow human, and indulged in the sugar-fat high of selfish venting. I had spread *that* disease, viral vectors of negativity. How often had a middle-finger fury tossed out in a traffic altercation dragged down an already crappy moment to an even more retrograde one, an even shittier "worse"?

It is a trait I had worked hard to wrangle across my years: a public temper so ultimately useless. Unrestrained, it is the sure sign of a petty ego; and if only because it is so easy. It requires no work to be an asshole, only that momentary lapse into the unrestrained shitty-ness of id. . . . I am almost never pushed to that point in a public space anymore, age having snapped such stark and irrelevant spleen-vents into the sharp relief that I am not adding, but detracting—injecting a harmful negativity into the world that only maims. (Those traffic "furies"? Perhaps some work to do there, still.) And yet, there is no doubt in my head: having committed such killer acts across my years, having perpetuated occasional situational murder on those I do not know and would never properly meet. Yes, I have pushed negativity out into the world because I was momentarily inconvenienced, inadvertently (and most often unintentionally) interrupted, denied but a few seconds of unswerving self-absorbed id-fulfillment.

How often had I infected someone's good mood with bad, killed a breathe-easy day? How often had I spread a minor malice, rained all over someone's parade? How often had I been a killer?



*Sow Bravery* . April 25

*Get on with it, if only to attenuate time's weight.*

— Note to Self

A fantastic article read that morning high-lit an online group of bored Russians under lockdown recreating famous classic works of art with whatever costumes and props they had on hand . . . *frozen dumplings were used as skulls, loose ducts as accessories, bubble wrap for Elizabethan ruffles* . . . this + smartphone cameras and a gravely needed parody had been pumped out into our light-starved troubled world: *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, *The Discobulus of Myron of Eluetherae*, *The Demon Seated*, and Frida Kahlo's *The Broken Column*, all attempted expertly; amateurs expertly venting off self-isolation. Parody, self-deprecation, humor (gallows, of course), all of these were to be vital tactics in seeing this thing through.

But that day I would mostly remember for a saying, one offered with hope, resolutely, and in an outsized way considering the delivery device. My wife's best friend had given her a fun gift in the form of a cheap handheld marquee sign, a slide-in alphabet of letters, numbers, some emoji characters thrown in. It must have cost all of \$7, but had held an outsized megaphone in our house. The daily morning ritual of a new saying or announcement in step with anniversaries, the seasonal drift of the year, event reminders, a funny thing said, or just general snap-into-the-moment sayings. That morning: Saturday April 25, the marquee read: "Sow Bravery." I found it hard to believe that the off-handed brilliance of acted out parodied art could be outdone in the course of that day's "mental balancing," things by which to soften the doomscroll working the body with its repeated blows, something—*anything*—that was not at all that. But there I was, taking it in one letter at a time; taking it in deep.

Here was a sign of our times, or more accurately: a sign for our times. Stand up. Get to it, and do so every damned day. No exceptions, not now. The simple act of living was resistance enough, a superhero shield against the urge to go dark in the face of the smothering loom-scroll of days. So small a thing, a simple saying on a cheap handheld marquee; this saying, alongside the vegetable pickers and delivery van deliverers, and the mail folks and grocery store clerks, and all those restaurant workers trying to hold on, hold on, holding on by their fingernails via the (glad to see) lengthening of take-out queues, selling back-stock as if twenty-first century dry good stores; and the transit workers and tree crews and fiber stringers and automotive and bike repair shops, and all of those selflessly giving their days and all of their courageous bravery—*all of it all*—to the stricken, the fallen, the diseased then suffocating and dying in ICUs across the

country, the world. In light of that list, it seemed a very small thing. But it also, somehow, seemed giant . . .

*Sow Bravery*

If small, essential. And if only to support those "essentials" in all that they were doing, to do so in whatever meager way I could. Honor their sacrifice by getting up each day, taking a deep breath, and going to it undeterred, resolute, ready.

*Sow bravery. Save the world.*

*I walk into work feeling like I still don't know enough about this disease, and . . . I leave work feeling like I failed, like I could have done so much more. It never feels like enough . . . That is why I tell people to not call me a hero. — KP Mendoza, ICU nurse @ Mount Sinai (from a letter written to himself) \**

\* The PBS Newshour / 0425



*Of Plagues* . April 26

*During the plague, what changed was the seemingly unchangeable, especially for people who until then had been largely invisible. What had been fixed in place was, all at once, not.*

— Steve Levine, *Medium*

To know that your present moment was to be cast, was being cast, in such historical context. I had been harping on this; but could one slice and dice and examine something so profound too much? Going into each day knowing that what we were experiencing would change things, that it must change things if we were paying any attention to it at all?

To know that what we were within fell inside the same brackets as The Black Death, as in "The" Plague; that plus all of the rolling centuries-long waves of "The Grippe" and cholera and tuberculosis bacillus, all of the smallpox and yellow fever epidemics—all of this killing of

humans in population heaves clack-clacketing off worldwide percentages: 2%, 3% . . . It is said that the population of Europe was halved by The Plague over its cold winding course. And that I was inconsolable after the number of Americans having died of C19 just topped 50,000. That is a decimal-point total in comparison to the epidemics / pandemics of a distant past; but these were all lives, humans all.

The numbers that morning were bad enough. But to lose half a continent? Those were human lives too. Of course, a human life was generally held in less regard back in such dark and middle ages. Of course, human lives have not been held in proper regard even in our modern enlightened age either. Slavery was still in existence just over 150 years ago, *here*. White Euro-centric America was still attempting the extermination of Native Americans just over 125 years ago, *here*. Women and children, white, black, whatever, were all but legal chattel in the economy just over 100 years ago, *here*. Jim Crow did not end until 1964. Many states, not just southern, still outlawed interracial marriage just over 50 years ago. The nation denied gays the right to be people and gay couples the right to marry until only a handful of years ago. Mass incarceration due to the outsourcing of societal inequities to law enforcement instead of social reconstruction and legislative cures was still with us. And at that moment, in the dark swoon of our sad historic moment, it was hard to tell if we were absorbing the kind of incalculable personal loss infecting the nation at a clip. Some just did not seem capable, as if it were too much of a bother, as if internal wiring could not produce enzymes enough to seed empathy. I wondered to what degree would the percentage of sick and dying in relation to the general population need to soar for that to matter. What if half of the North American continent—white, black, hispanic, asian, other /

man, woman, straight, gay, other—were wiped out by this thing? Would it matter then? . . . Half of the European continent. It was not a stat the average mind could wander through for long.

And yet, I lived the first twenty years of my life under threat of such an annihilation. That nature was so determined to infect and kill off half a continent of humans during The Dark Ages is bad enough. That we humans held (and still do hold) the power to kill off half of humanity in a nuclear war is a sickness of another sort. And we were still ailing, as if the plague days past were just foreshadowing more terribleness to come—and by our own hand. The Great Influenza, then, seemed the point when these two plagues merged. It came to be known as the "Spanish Flu" because that neutral nation contained the only newspapers reporting on it. The wartime censors for all the belligerents of that other plague then rolling kept score of battlefield death only, as if death by any other means did not count. And there was plenty of death to cover. The plague of humans warring against humans was at that point on the timeline grinding out human devastation unfathomable. There was plenty of death on the battlefield, more than could be conceived. And yet, Americans died of the influenza in the neighborhood of three-quarters of a million—more American deaths than the grim tally of any of our wars. It seems it would be newsworthy, if only to honor the dead: lives, humans all. 2% is the generally accepted statistic. The Great Influenza killed 2% of the world's population. That is not a number to fathom. It is a number to forget.

We were living in that same rare tragic space as the world had during "The" Plague and 1918-20. We still did live in a world but a few key diplomatic or military mistakes away from nuclear armageddon. I did not want to remember any of that either. But knew that I must.



*Net Worth* . April 27

Anti-government rhetoric and actual policy designed to disrupt, hamper, and shrink the ability of governments to govern has been a hot gust rolling across the backdrop of my entire recalled life. And though I, like most Americans, prefer the operational click-clack of government to occur in the background, the multi-generational movement to defund and restrict the ability of national, state, and local governments to (paraphrasing Lincoln) "do what people cannot on their own do," a notion itself having grown exponentially along with the complexity and interconnectedness of society, economies, and life in general, has had its hammer-away effect. Gripe and fume and opened to enough people for long enough with an empty shell sound-bite like "government is the problem," and you will train enough people to believe such pure ideology is true—and this whether it goes against a person's self-interest to believe this, or not.

And so, now: No one who was being honest could claim that this long PR campaign to paint government as THE problem had not succeeded wildly since it began indoctrinating all the so-wronged masses in the 1980s. And as a result, we found ourselves where we did: Governing capacity at the national level having been so crippled and diminished by decades of shit-slather and reallocation (the current national executive program more regime than governing entity), that when we as a nation needed a strong central core to support the absorption and mitigation of this —*the big one*—we were instead left with the limp husks of once stout institutions now haggard, politicized, and demoralized, many of its spokes so denigrated that they seemed little more than private interest power hubs, slush funds by which favors are doled (at taxpayer expense) to pliant followers, those true believers. . . . And in the midst of an unfolding disaster, it was only that purest strain, those most benefitting from the graft, that could hold fast to this husk of a concept, the dry-well fiction that hollowing out the role of effective governance at all levels in American life was the best application of political energies over the past half century. And so, now . . .

*Action on behalf of all is not the program. That is not the reason they are where they are.*

But then, some good actually did seem ready to roll out of this empty shell, if predictably unprepared, stumbling, and ultimately inadequate: a program designed for the everyday average working stiff. Self-employed since 1999, I like most all of small business America attempted to go in on the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) in early April 2020, applying for a modest chunk of temporary relief funding in lieu of the unpredictable chasm dead ahead. To keep businesses open, even by straight-up subsidy, was better than watching ten thousand fold; a "mechanism to buy time," I heard it put. Even in *before times* the modern economic taxonomy put the collapse of small / micro-biz entities but a few bad months away. Having to withstand

nose-down recessions and near depressions in the face of ever slim margins brought on by the steady lift-off in the cost of every damned *everything*, the private market, lobbyist-designed, politically-sustained usury rates of interest on loans and credit, the unexplained pile-on of service fees, the bleak wind exposure of solo practitioners of the American dream before the wolves of health insurance, etc. etc. Even in the *best of before times*, the margin for error was pixel thin.

And so, I applied and was pre-approved for 25 K, a hefty sum that was more than I felt necessary. But I did not have to tread on that "dilemma," initial PPP funds having run out before my turn. And it was found out that franchises and mid-sized companies masquerading as small businesses had vacuumed up million and billions. And national officials let private banks dole it out instead of direct account deposits pumped straight out of the Treasury, agnostically (as was done with success in Germany). And the banks got a hold of their chunks and the big banks set about prioritizing the loans according to what customers meant to their bottom line. And the PPP program was injected with supplemental funds and the queue began again and this time I was pre-approved for 19 K. I asked for 15 K, what I judged would see me through three months of a lean summer as the virus "washed" over us. And I felt good about it. Certainly my near 21 years of self-seen-to participation in our economic program, if an up-down all-around roller coaster ride, was worth 15 K, eh? At the very least (taxes paid during those 20+ years a significant 20-30% of gross on average). I would have taken more. I would take 15 K. But the big bank that I used and had to run my PPP application through decided that 8.5 K would be my take. This, the same big trolling bank that had been pegged infamous for its pitiless racist scheming during the subprime mortgage era, as well as subsequent hand over fist fee-generating schemes (albeit no worse than any of the dozens of other big bank schemes imploding economies and lifetime

investments and lives, generally, with what seemed like wrecking-ball glee through the years). That behemoth bank who had bought up the regional bank I had originally opened accounts with back in 1999, having stayed with the behemoth because no other looked any better, they were to decide that my 20.75 years of participation in the U.S. economy was worth 8.5 K, even though the original Small Business Administration calculation had me pre-approved for almost triple that amount. I took it. A loan likely forgiven per original intent, it would help for many months if dire days did appear. But then I heard of those getting tens and hundreds of thousands, and many decidedly not small businesses getting millions and millions. I had been at it through thick and rail-thin since August 1999. In the eyes of a big bank that equaled 8.5 K, take it or leave it.

My micro-biz had weathered decades of economic conditions designed for and by titans, having weathered the tumbleweed years of 2004-2005 and 2016-2017, dust-dry downturns in income the both of which pushed me to the brink, two actual economy-wide collapses in 2001 and 2008, which pushed all to the brink, plus the non-ending minor / major personal, financial, and industry-wide fault-line shifts and crises that swirl about the container of the self-employed world—all that to be told my life's work was worth 8.5 K (just over 5K post payroll taxes @ 20-30%). And yet my tiny entity in a vast ocean of an economy was worth so very much, and if only because of its staying power: having sailed through the howling hurricanes and rock-dashed straits *not at all* of my making. But then ours seemed not an economic system designed to reward the survivors. It was designed to extract every last penny it could pry loose, every last drop the true believers could squeeze from the stone. At least that much was now crystal clear.



***Grasping*** . April 28

*Thanks to the president and this team's aggressive containment efforts, coronavirus is contained.*

— Alex Azar, *Secretary of Health & Human Services* — late February, 2020

*We have contained this . . . pretty close to airtight.*

— Larry Kudlow, *Director of National Economic Council* — late February, 2020

Of the federal stimulus / relief particulars, there had been that one leaping out of the massive bill passed at the end of March. I had mentioned it (re: March 26) mainly for the dead soul carping and hand-wringing around its enactment. But the wobbly pitiless real that it spoke to, I just could not shake. That provision, the one adding an additional \$600 to weekly unemployment checks; this on top of the state-figured amounts in the range of 40-50% of what full-time workers who

qualified were pulling pre-pandemic-induced layoff / furlough. Cumulatively, this had already had a dramatic backstop effect, providing many working Americans a slightly better overall wage than they pulled in *before times*, enough for many to fully cover the basic costs-of-living regularly. It was also a national embarrassment, providing many working Americans a slightly better overall wage than they pulled in *before times*, enough for many to fully cover the basic costs-of-living regularly.

That it would require an emergency relief act during a national / global crisis for America to conceive of a way for working Americans to take in enough to fully cover the basic costs-of-living on a regular basis? And yet, in the din of that shrill real, the smoke curling up across the backdrop in the form of howling and privileged patronizing, all the punitive lectern-blabbing on and on about the "dignity of work" and how this was government meddling in private markets and a giveaway that would create more problems than it would solve. That this, a "damaging incentive," would keep many from returning to work as soon as possible—this, though the immediate potentially deadly risk of viral infection was now clear . . .

*Community spread now seems to be rampant . . . A lack of emergency funding means that many workplaces remain unsafe . . . Federal relief efforts often exceed what people were earning before coronavirus, but does so without the risk of catching coronavirus . . .*

On its face, the detractors of this particular piece of relief had a point. After factoring in state benefits to the federal funds, some of the laid-off / furloughed workers no longer working were bringing in a modest extra sum per week by extending their unemployment. That, plus,

there would prove a Grand Canyon wide flaw in the law, a loophole in that "reduced hours" also qualified those still working for the additional federal relief, something exploited by the cunning, no doubt, and yet something that legislators did nothing to correct. But what of the central stone-heart point from which all others hung? That so many Americans working full-time, or more, had done so for wages that did not add up to the basic costs-of-living. How did that dignify work? How did the cold call for forcing people back into a system unfair, and now unsafe, dignify or even justify participation in such a system? How did well-heeled dim bulbs preening on and on behind lecterns dignify their remarks on the "dignity of work" by having—for decades—denied any and all attempts to bring low-rung wages up to something that dignifies the workforce of what so many of them have long claimed, time and again, is the most dynamic economic system the world has ever known? If the call was to return to this normal unregulated greatness, then it must also be true that said greatness was always so because it stifled the core source of muscle that allowed said dynamism to ascend, that it had been built on exploiting the "essentials" that make it go all along. If no, then please explain why it required an emergency relief bill during a global health crisis to found conditions by which working (or in the case at that present: previously working) Americans could actually cover basic living costs regularly? Where was the dignity in, time and again, denying the dignity of a living wage?

That one hundred extra dollars a week was impacting the lives of people so dramatically, Americans who live within the shadow of that widening and receding and receding and widening penumbra of financial ruin. That so many had to live within this zip code, having absorbed it as their reality. Here was the smoke plume of a more dire note curling up from the dark unrealized valleys of America, a far off yet undeniable signal to do something—*now*. Would we turn our

backs on it? Would we allow this brush fire indignity to jump-contain into a runaway forest fire of pointless burden? Would we just go on accepting the toxic want that had been infecting this country long before a damned novel coronavirus did likewise? Could we? Or would we fold up tents and go right back to "how it was" just as soon as we were able to do so? Many were already calling for just this, a return to *as it was*. And yet *as it was*—now seeing *how it was*—would be ceding the field to a heartless *before times*. It would be giving up on aiming at "better" and in the process forfeiting any claim we might have had on greatness, or the equity of fair return for the necessary sacrifice of work, or the notion that we as a nation give a shit about people at all.

The daily exposure to financial hardness that IS the average modern working experience in America was here and running headlong into the hard-hearted asshole-d-ness of ideological warriors droning on about addled economic theories . . .

*The average middle-class house costs 2.5 times what it did in the 1990s . . . Average health-care expenses per individual are three times higher than they were 25 years ago . . . Tuition at a four-year college has nearly doubled since the turn of the millennium \* . . .*

The bullshit sleight-of-hand that was trickle-down anything and the real-world problems it passed off to those not on top, of course, was then piled atop the unlucky honest employer having found themselves caught up in this shit-pile system, unable to pay workers more for want of resources because of the rocket-strapped cost of every damned *everything* outpacing, by full strides, a fair comparative rise in inflation. Caught up in it, unable to see their own path forward (when all they wanted to do was work a sliver of "the dream"); and this for want of any real

meaningful framework put in place by leaders and legislators and group-think to consign "want" to the ash-heap of a worse America—that was, sadly, the state of our America. That, all of that, and then this:

*Many were now wondering: do I need to choose between my job and my health?*

That morning I laid in bed wondering where my financial breaking point might be. It was a common worry. Even someone with resources, well off enough, I worried, serially, because it never did seem "enough," and often was not. But in the same beat that morning, I snapped to in realizing that I did not have to choose between work and health. That particular breaking point I would be able to swerve around, that while so many others braced for a head-on collision. I had come up on my financial breaking point more than once, and in the recent past. It was a feeling not unlike being hard-grasped by shoulders and biceps, spun around like a top, and, delirious with vertigo, left to stare into the chasm of yourself, of things falling apart—*of you breaking apart*. I had been presented with that cavernous void more than once, and recently. This did not feel like that, not yet. We were okay, for now. "We had resources, could weather this storm . . . I think." We would not have to choose between work and health. Or at least, not yet.

But, all that still hung, suspended and just there in the air alongside the constant weight of days, the flaming garbage scow of dis- and misinformation. It was a multi-sided / multi-hued schism of worry—*financial, physical, mental*—rounded out by the waiting, all the interminable waiting to see. (*How long? How . . . long?*) Distressing and disquieting, riddled as it danced a razor's edge. For once, all of my damned worrying over *everything* seemed justified. So did the

outrage, our pitiless, punitive, national instinct; the "dignity of work" a drooling slur spun out like an inside joke among assholes.

"Not yet," my answer to myself while lying there that morning. "I'm not broke. I'm not broken." It felt like grasping. In a world and a country that can so rarely be bothered to care for its own, this little minor self-help session felt terribly minor, like grasping. But, grasping would do. In fact, I got the feeling that grasping would go far. It was something, an action. In light of how far we had to go? How a country with so very much could give back so very little to such a large cut of its people, and in the same beat fly the black-hearted standard proud enough to turn that dearth back on those poorly compensated, poorly cared for—a victim-blaming so innate that ill-will minds seemed to take it in-and-out like involuntary breathing? Was I grasping at straw hopes? Or maybe . . . *Could we?* . . . In the face of the run-rampant community spread of asshole-d-ness, it felt like something.

And that morning it was something, urged on by the blush of a clear Spring sky: a rose-crimson and tangerine bloom ringed in a larger gulf of violet-cyan to the east. So much clouding the mind. So much clouding over this long infected nation. So much color spray through trim clouds: its light hovering over so much distress. "Not yet, not yet."

Grasping. And yet, it felt like something.

\* Sources: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Centers for Medicaid & Medicare Services, U.S. Department of Education + National Center for Education Statistics / Dani Alexis Ryskamp

*Postscript:* From Jason DeParle's statistical-rich examination, "*A Year of Hardship, Helped and Hindered by Washington,*" *The New York Times* (February 14, 2021) — Despite mass unemployment, poverty estimates fell. Researchers at the University of Chicago and Notre Dame found there were five million fewer poor people in June (2020) than before the crisis . . . As aid dwindled, hardships rose nationwide. The number of poor people . . . grew by eight million through the rest of the year.



*How To Cope, An Evolution* . April 29

It struck me that I was the same. All these years later, I was still that kid a quadrant of my brain will never relinquish as the default stock-image "me," this despite the age, despite the marching year-scroll. Why did this suddenly matter? Because part of me was scared shitless by all of this, just like a kid in the face of some great unfathomable sadness, something without contour—beyond a young mind's ability to cope.

The base alloys and elements never really change. They are reprogrammed, resequenced, refitted, retooled—and constantly. But it is always the same basic blocks of matter, the same pool of physical mental matter. Here I was, 40+ years beyond "kid," frightened for the first time in a very long time like I was back when I was a kid, back when fear had no recourse, was of a pure inexplicable strain. There was little in this viral instant carrying contour, shape, predictability; an unknowable progression ticking off voids, day after day. A slight shift in opacities seemed the

only semblance of difference. Even my imagination was failing the moment, the thing I'd been able to call on since I gained consciousness, a mysterious right-brain churn there to transport me up-off-and-away (*a serial card-carrying daydreamer*) towards something resembling different whenever and wherever I was, whenever and wherever I needed it. It was so innate that it did, and does, seem like any other internal organ, another pair of arms. My imagination: a vital piece of the operating system, even if in that particular instant it was proving unable to parse and process something having upset *everything*.

But if imagination was proving no match for this "wandering teetering obscure slipping the bounds of predictable explanation as it barreled into being," there was one key element of the mentioned resequencing and retooling having evolved down through the year-scroll that was proving its mettle: an ability to reallocate the down-swing emotions subsidizing fear into a form regenerative instead. As a rotting stump will yield rich biomass, this trait . . . skill? . . . was bent on absorbing and turning around fear into something like . . . purpose? . . . determination? . . . It is hard to describe. It does not remove fear; but it does siphon off enough of it to allow resolve to enter in. "*Buck up!*" The ability to breath deep, digest the seared defeat of a moment, and plug through. Was it morale hygiene? The maintenance of spirit? *Spirit maintenance*, that was it.

It had proven itself to be no surface-thin personal platitude either, no consumer novelty stamped onto an office-desk paper weight reminding me to "just hang in there" or "working for the weekend." No, this one went spirit deep, RNA that had already (in my short 50+ years) delivered its double-helix message across many a no man's land. Born of bearing tough times, it was something of mettle. It had developed, largely without my noticing, over crises (as in plural), absorbed, dealt with, pushed through. *Spirit maintenance*. "Buck up, Buckhout!" No, even I can't

resist the batting-practice pitch that is the easy play on my last name, and if only because, on its own, it will curl a grin up into the cynic's craw despite the doomscroll screed of events (and yes, I have heard all the other obvious ones too: hilarious, owned). When fear rears up, it is all I can do to reduce the boil to a simmer and pour that steam into bucking up spirit instead. But I can. I was not always able to do so. But I can now. It is there and available at a drop, a mysterious left-brain churn that settles me in for the long haul trials at hand. "Buck up!" I cannot accurately pin when this most practical and advantageously-selected evolutionary trait settled in, but just know that it is on hand: the fortunate ability to transfer stark emotional weather into resolution—*the maintenance of spirit*—when I need it most.

But this? This here was bigger and more vast than anything that a resolution of spirit had yet to confront. And there had been big ones, crises (plural): big personal losses at inopportune times, overlapping crises, the sheer confusion, the individual tempests we all sail through. But . . . *a fucking pandemic* . . . there was nothing in the storehouse for that. If actually paying attention to the all of that April, it would have seemed impossible to go ahead without fear. In fact, it would have been irresponsible to do so. Anyone who says, generally, that they are not in some way / shape / form afraid is ignorant or a fool. History deals uncharitably and indifferently with both, and rightly so. Because those without fear do dumb fucking shit in their moment, to themselves, and worse: to others. And yet, that thing I had evolved over time: the mentioned resequencing and refitting of alloys? Fear was but another of the vital elements on my personal periodic table, a basic building block of resolve. Maintain the spirit under duress and it was there to have. Absorb the blow, turn it into something of mettle, resolution, all the better to receive and survive future blows. To hold fear and not be undone by it. To trudge through to a lighter future

day out there somewhere (if requiring a little help from that failing imagination). Humanity would survive this. It would. Slog through. Laugh, if darkly (gallows humor, of course). Buck up, but be honest. Feel all of the bone-pang weary. Be afraid. But above all, keep moving . . .

*Do you want to die in an ICU? The pandemic forces the question . . . Mardi Gras is an annual uplift for New Orleans's Zulu Club. This year made it a tragedy. . . .*

Just seeing this thing collapse through my small biz was enough to generate waves of fear. The fall inward of the general economy, the way it was rippling through, gaining steam. It did not have to go down in this way. As mentioned, "the biz" had survived economic tankings (plural) not of my making, the multiple recessions that had resulted, the roar of bankrupt hopes and phone-silent doldrums. Still the worst: the 2014 loss of the single biggest client I had (and would likely ever have), that client having lost its way, and I, somehow, having not lost mine in the process. Still, a 70K annual contract having disappeared . . . *the blank void disbelief, the gale of what the fuck now?* . . . But slowly, painfully, fearfully, having reprogrammed / retooled, the biz having survived all of that; like a faithful pickup that simply will not give up—one more mile yet. . . . But now, what of now? The shutdown of businesses felt like an amputation: lose the arm, save the body. But . . . *America's death toll is higher than is being reported, experts fear . . . China's industrial engine has been restarted, consumer spending not so much.*

And it struck me, the thought-seed germinating across that Wednesday, that the flashback of fear I was then feeling held a trace of familiarity. Right at the point when I was trading in my kid for teen, a friend, not a close friend, son of my parents' friends, was killed in a tragic bike

accident. There was the immensity of the sadness to it all, a concussed hazy state, the extremely sad event that was his funeral. The *now* was like that. An immense and generalized, if at once focused, sadness. . . . It was all I could do to reduce the fear-hover to a mere 30-40% of all conscious thought per day across that most extraordinary April; and that I labeled a "good day." But it was there, nonetheless: fear. The lives I knew nothing of upended, thousands infected, hundreds dying in sterile lonely ICUs. That brand of breathless immensity had hung over my young friend's funeral way back when too, a confusing fathoms-deep sadness easily turning on a general looping fear: that life could be removed from the living so quickly, that death could manifest from unknown corners and smother as a fog. Back then, without the ability to cope with such hardness, such random seeming sadness spun out as a low simmering fear—the kind of fear that I had as a kid, as a teen. Ya, that was it. That was the immensity of this moment . . . *the big one . . . good luck . . .* rendering itself as a grey void of unknowing, an immense sadness.

That, but for one key difference: a coping mechanism picked up along the way, that rare-earth ability to mine personal matter and, in a mysterious feat of alchemy, retool it to absorb fear and sadness, and swallow it up. . . . Put under an extreme pressure, it is turned from an irritating fearful immensity into something other than a net-negative, a gloom-doom all-encompassing pall into something—*anything*—other than that. This here, a coping mechanism evolved over time, honed and still being perfected over the span of crises large and small, personal and national; reversing the negative polarity, refining it into fuel by which to maintain motion. To keep moving, if only because in the end that is the one thing we have.



*An Acceptable Risk* . April 30

*(They) terrified by making little of it, for what officials and the press said bore no relationship to what people saw and touched and smelled and endured.*

— John Barry, *The Great Influenza*

*How could something so dominating, so complete, so all and everything simply wander off without so much as a salutation?*

— Note to Self

It turned out that my state would be the one, the first of all fifty states to "reopen." This, as if it were some race to be won. The normal course of our normal humdrum economic activity, the shopping and buying and selling—the working—it all having been largely suspended, those that

could moving to remote work, those that could not continuing to risk it all . . . *Could we thank them enough? . . . No. . . .* The need to physically distance, freeze those places where groups gather indoors for economic and not-economic reasons. To slow the spread of C19 was apparent, obvious, vital, if not universally accepted . . . *You think it is not a big deal, that it's being blown out of proportion? Are you an epidemiologist? . . . No? . . . Well then, maybe, just maybe, you should shut the fuck up? . . .* An extraordinary and no doubt punitive seeming public health measure that had not been implemented, or even considered outside professional doomsayers, for just over a hundred years (re: The Great Influenza): shut things down in order to save lives.

And there it was, it had become our "now." Painful, teeth-grindingly so, if necessary . . . *As that I can see no way out but through. . . .* A personal sacrifice for others. And it was so very strange, having hidden in plain sight all along, that "proximity" was so central to doing business; that proximity was now dangerous, that it was (for now) no longer a thing. Whether that distance for the sake of others could be maintained by a public no longer required to maintain their distance, that was the experiment. And my state had decided to be the lab . . .

*(Georgia) is about to find out how many people need to lose their lives to shore up the economy . . . canaries in an invisible coalmine, sent to work through a plague.*  
— *The Atlantic Daily e-newsletter*

Reopening prior to the virus having been quarantined. Reopening prior to a mass national test / trace program having been put in place (as in a complete lack of), the thing that every public health official had pleaded to have the funding and the support for implementing since the

middle of March; that, let alone a vaccine, which was probably a year off (even that to be an electric miraculous accomplishment). All that, plus the disorienting ping-pong of "wear a mask, but I'm not going to wear a mask," shut down and subsidize the closure of businesses but reopen it all right now so we don't have to shut down and subsidize the closure of businesses, practice social distancing but government cannot tell free Americans what to do—all this, part-and-parcel of the "we are on our own" brand of leadership (leadership?) that some seemed to feel was in line with the core values of "America." They bullhorned all of the freedom part; but what of the "common sense in a pandemic" part? What of the saving the life of every American first part? What of common purpose when we are being attacked in whole?

Some definitive direction in the face of a public health disaster, just some unwavering points of light that we could grab onto as the handles in a car, on a mass transit car. How about some handlebars and two wheels instead of a unicycle with no instructions? Any standard adult human unit could make their own decisions about their money and their faith and what is best in their own lives and the lives of their family members. No adult unit could do the same when it comes to "how best to act in the name of public health in the midst of a pandemic." Unless you happen to be an epidemiologist . . . *Are you? No? Well then, shut the . . . This is going to get bad. Just keep your head and move through.* . . . I was not an epidemiologist with 30+ years in the field. The governor of my state was not this either. You would think that he would have been listening to those people, their pleas for restraint. But, well, there we were, the blood red spatter of ideological division infecting the real worry of how Americans on their own should support themselves during the worst public health crisis since 1918.

There were online groups listing businesses that went ahead with a full reopening right away, pandemic be damned, as a partisan act of public shaming. There were online groups listing businesses that went ahead with a full reopening right away, pandemic be damned, as a partisan act of patriotism. (That was the best we could be to each other? That was how we would respond?) None of these people knew what was best. And yet all of these people claimed to know what was best. And there we were, truth—a slippery catch in the best of *before times*—slip-sliding down its familiar ideological chute, instead of summoning consensus on best practice in so far as we can tell (one month in, one month and two days in, one month and twelve days in, repeat, etcetera). This, a political solution to a public health crisis. And there I was, not having asked for such an honor, to be dropped onto the front lines. My state, first . . . *as if a race to be won*. . . . Those claiming to be leading were about to roll the dice and see how many would live or die, perish economically or not—as if fate and luck alone should be the arbiters of whether some perish economically or not, some die or do not, some whatever, whatever, repeat, etc.

"On our own" I thought repeatedly that day, a skip-skipping loop in my brain. And to make matters worse, fear of contracting the virus was not to be accepted by state unemployment officials as a reason to opt out from work and stay on unemployment . . . *You may risk your life or bankruptcy. You decide*. . . . That it had come to this was the deflating thought, a rotting mass of fetid decision-making blinded by one thing: money. This while every economist worth listening to was telling political leaders: to save the economy, we must control infections. Don't half control it. Don't point to a two-day dip in the infection rate and declare the thing over. Stop the spread. Subsidize those out of work. Put people first. . . . Instead, my state rolled the dice.

*This plan provides no required regulations on safety measures, let alone supplemental funds to help businesses procure protective gear; or even if business owners should be held liable should their customers get sick . . . or . . .*

That the governor would make his proclamation from the Georgia World Congress Center (a huge convention space in downtown Atlanta) in front of rows on rows of cubicle-style beds for future patients, the place having been reconfigured into a massive indoor field hospital, came off like a grand ghoulish troll by a pandemic skeptic with tax revenues to collect. Bars, restaurants, gyms, salons, bowling alleys opening up. Instead of saving small businesses and lives by subsidizing these places to stay closed, to slow the spread, we would reopen in order to . . . win the race to reopen? If a PR stunt held before a halting number of patient cubes was the governor's attempt at reassurance, it came out as a thundering indictment instead: that he and all those in on the decision to "go first" knew this would cause a run of infections, many on many to fall ill. We could reopen smart, save livelihoods and lives industry-by-industry . . . or . . .

My state was set to be "exceptional," and not in the way that the triumphalists always claim—but as an exception to a place that leads with the dignity of life as the number one motivating factor for doing, well, anything.

*What we are essentially saying in Georgia is, "Go bowling and we'll have a bed waiting for you." — Keisha Lance Bottoms, Mayor of Atlanta*



*Vectors* . May 1

*In 1918, during the flu pandemic, the mayor of Pittsburgh brought a ban on public gatherings to a swift—and premature—conclusion over concerns about a coming election. . . . In 2020, the same tension is back . . . The nation is under siege from the worst pandemic in a century, and the United States is on track to suffer more deaths than any other industrialized country. \**

*"In 1918, people were very familiar with infectious diseases and dying from them," said Nancy Tomes (of Stony Brook University). "There was not this whole kind of expectation that we have today that this shouldn't be happening." \**

Vector [ n ] 1: An organism that carries pathogens from one host to another. 2: A force or influence. . . . That a century (*The American Century*) had passed, a century in which so much

progress had been made, so very many steps forward. But, it was a century that also witnessed unparalleled worldwide devastation, the madness of Mugabe, Milosevic, Pinochet, Pol Pot, Franco (this but the JV squad of twentieth-century psychopaths). Steps forward on human rights were swiftly followed by the rigor-mortis of its retrograde, the searing pollution and parasitic devouring of the planet's ability to sustain an ever-growing ever-more-consuming species, old insular power entrenching itself ever deeper and demanding their blood ransoms ever more—the spiral, specter, and continued assault of racial and gender and non-binary bigotry. And yet, so very much progress HAD been made over that hundred-year span. And yet, a century + two decades in found us fighting over mask-wearing during a pandemic . . .

*When the World Health Organization convened on January 22 to discuss whether to declare a public health emergency (COVID-19 then referred to as the "Wuhan Unexplained Pneumonia") and ostensibly shut down travel to China, there were only 82 cases and no deaths reported outside the Asian nation. Yet it was already too late. — Nsikan Akpan, National Geographic*

I had read that morning of a career public health official, a long-time deputy at *Health & Human Services*, having produced an exhaustive report identifying critical shortages of supplies across the U.S., having high-lit the hundreds of medical centers and hospitals that were in a bad way as they tried desperately to stock up on test kits and ventilators and personal protective gear (the suits, gloves, face-shields, N95 masks, etc.). This report, part reality check / part rallying cry to ramp up the domestic effort, to pour it on, to unleash capacity and give those on the front-lines

everything they needed to slow the spread and save lives . . . but, no. . . . It was buried instead. It was seen to reflect poorly on a national executive response that was doing all in its power to look as if it were responding poorly. Best redact reality. For there would be no way to explain away such incompetence detonating a crisis into an all-out catastrophe.

It was yet another concussive blow. This report, an opportunity to admit to the false start, right the ship by righting the wrong of a wasted February. Here was a do-over, that rare slate-cleaning fortune that the wise understand for what it is. To waste a mulligan is to incur double jeopardy: Two strikes and you're out. But then, what else had we been conditioned to expect? An honest report having held out a lantern in the darkness, showing a difficult knee-buckling trail through—*but a way through, nonetheless*—scuttled in favor of more flattering PR, alternative facts, bull-fucking-shit. And they let rip their flatulent narrative in front of everyone.

To be clear, no amount of preparation would have been enough to fully offset what was then swamping the east coast states and Gulf coast states and upper Midwest states and Pacific-facing states (this most certainly a preface for an inexorable viral march across the Appalachians and into the Midwest and Sun Belt, over the Rockies and into the Southwest and up and down the Plains and the Mississippi into the very heartland itself). But at a point when the federal government could have been a power station helping to mitigate a virus on the move, when it could have been an influential turbine (2: A force or influence) "turning the tide" as the country steered into the very heart of the storm—*our storm*—it was not that at all. Instead the focus came to rest on optics, about "what" such a report "would say" (which, of course, was the truth). Here was THE chance to invert disease vectors then coursing through the public body, to be the vector that reversed the tide on a viral pathogen infecting, killing, Americans. *Americans*. Fight vector

with vector. *Produce!* Stock up and shuttle resources to hot-spots then drowning, push aid where it was needed most; and then on to the next; and the next; and . . . This could have been our moment. But a report calling on America to ramp up and get in the game fell into the black hole of "optics," was buried, the author not lauded but subjected to the trolling smear of comment-field warriors and other useless assholes. A woman doing her job having run up against frail egos with a bully pulpit. Her's was a playbook for slowing the spread, saving lives. But she was fired and we were all left unvaccinated before the twin pathogens of hate and fear.

It could seem that the lash-out aerosol strings of hate driven by smallness and fear might be a worse enemy than the virus itself. But could we be surprised? Human behavior has been the most consistent virulent disease vector the world has ever known . . . *So very much having been accomplished . . . So very far to go.*

America's pandemic death count now topped the grim tally of dead incurred during the entire Vietnam War, having reached that toll in about two months. It all fell like the cold chill of deep Winter over what was (again) a beautiful pollution-light Spring, the most exceptional Spring that I could remember. How to pay back such beauty? In light of the devastation, the chill lack of empathy: pay it forward. Be a vector for "better." Be a force for compassion. Don't be a dick . . . *Don't forget to be nice.* . . . All of this ricocheted through my grey matter on that May Day. I would have plenty of time to think this all over, sheltering-in-place.

\* The New York Times, various articles



*The Eye* . May 3

*The People:* How long should we stay inside?

*Answer:* I'm thinking two months. No, three. Six? No, 12. Yes, 12!

*The People:* Then it will be gone?

*Answer:* The virus? Lord no. It could be 18 months till we get a vaccine. But by then you'll have already gotten it, so the date doesn't really matter . . .

*The People:* No one's giving us this information.

*Answer:* Well, you know how we're stretching out the cases over a longer period of time?

Flattening the curve? We're also flattening the truth. So just stay inside, and you'll be fine. Order stuff online. Support your local restaurant.

*The People:* Whew. OK. We can do that.

*Answer:* But do so knowing that you are putting the lives of everyone at risk . . .

— Dave Eggers, *"Flattening The Truth"*

It was an odd sense to wake up that Sunday morning, early May, and feel that something had turned. The whiplash snap-back hurricane of information deluging and counter-factualizing and fogging over every waking second (mask + exhale + glasses) that had run over the previous months, suddenly, strangely, felt different. It was the low hum of a lull, a brief pause. It fell into the primal bracket that informs you it is no longer Winter, no longer Summer or Fall. A sense that stirs. The cues filter through you, imperceptible to the eye, but pricking synapses all the same. Mysterious, but there: We had come through a phase. Had we come through a phase?

"At the start of this, wise people had been preparing us," I thought. I had been preparing all of this time: preparing to meet gale winds head on, and daily; absorbing, settling in, keeping my head. Of course, the wise voices were being drowned out in the unreliable bullshit info-storm part panicked run-on, part wave away partisans and pundits who really had no idea what the fuck they were talking about, but talked louder, louder, and louder, nonetheless. I was absorbing that too . . . *the only way is through.*

We had only been in deep for a few months now . . . *though it seemed longer, longer, and longer* . . . having watched it bowl through other places from New Year's Day on through January and February, knowing it was coming but unable to conceptualize "that" here. Wuhan, Northern Italy, Iran. "Those were places not here," as if that somehow draped an immunity over "here," a place somehow elevated beyond such things. But then it arrived and that sense of superiority or programmed hometown prejudice / bias against "not here" disappeared with the warmer air. (At least something disappeared with the warmer air.) Subject to the infrared of a reality unknown

(unknown to "here," that is), whole other bandwidths of real were making themselves available to my previously untrained senses. I had been in training since March: Spring training for this time of disease.

It might just have been familiarity settling in, that blending moment when a previous unknown loses its new car smell, its ability to shock and surprise or even hold close attention, and from that point simply existing—another "usual" among normalcies. But then, how normal could a pandemic ever be? History would say quite so. I would hope not so much. Once would do . . . *3 months? 6? 12?* . . . I held no experience-stark reserve by which to consider how fucked up this was going to be. Forgetting for a moment the spewing mis- dis- non-information, this thing was confounding even those who did have the credentials to translate such things with authority. It was all new. Novel. Unknown. It would take time to know, as it always does when a thing is new, unknown. It had arrived, and we finally did know. Others "not here" had been through it. And they were now doing this better, in those places not here. And we—*here*—were beginning to understand who we could trust and who we should not trust. At least that part was clear through the face-shield fog . . . *Are you a doctor? No? Good. Then pay attention.* . . . For all the confused wind shear of bullshit we were subjected to day on day on day, I was coming to understand and was adjusting. Above all I understood that despite this new normal, this new knowledge, the days on days on days of training, just how dumb-luck lucky I had so far been: still virus-free.

I had watched New York City in deep pain, buckling under the strain. I had watched on in desperation, very much like I did all of that horrific jawdrop September Tuesday in 2001. Except that this was a whole month of September Tuesdays minus the epic shock of a single event; just a slow wrenching churn. Watching that symbolic American metropolis shuttered, put to siege, and

suffering—a place I know well, a place with which I carry so deep a familial tie (re: April 8). I—*we all*—were forced to watch from a distance (via tablet video-link, no visitation for fear of viral transmission) as a relative slowly passed. . . . New Orleans and Miami-Dade, Seattle and San Francisco. The states of Texas and Georgia now reopening and at a clip, as if winning a race for lack of conscientious contestants, dumb-stumbling towards victory . . . *we'll have a bed waiting for you*. . . . And all the while, a novel coronavirus doing its highly-evolved thing and we all unable to do a damned thing about it, nothing but ride the high-low emotional swing, train, mourn, push through.

*But in the whole, the face of things, I say, was much altered; sorrow and sadness sat upon every face; and though some parts were not yet overwhelmed, yet all looked deeply concerned; and as we saw it apparently coming on, so every one looked on himself and his family as in the utmost danger. Were it possible to represent those times exactly to those that did not see them, and give the reader due ideas of the horror that everywhere presented itself, it must make just impressions upon their minds and fill them with surprise. — Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year (During the last Great Visitation in 1665)**

It had arrived. It was bad. It was worse than I could have imagined. I had no practical knowledge of a viral pathogen. I had no previous training for such things. Certain Pacific Rim countries did. Certain Middle Eastern countries did. The city of Toronto did. SARS: 2004, H1N1: 2009, MERS: 2012, Ebola in West Africa: 2014, outbreaks not of my world, so isolated, of other

places / worlds not here. Sure, I now knew a great deal about the Great Influenza of 1918-20, that long ago pandemic. But that was way back then. That was a more primitive time. That was not something of now—*not of my world*—nothing that we would see again . . . right? (SARS, H1N1, MERS . . . ) To think that I ever carried such a false sense of security, had in my bubble-wrap world held a belief so naive: that modern medical advances and all the public health departments placed us beyond the reach of nature and history?

Since the face-slap realization on March 11 . . . *a fucking pandemic* . . . I passed through to something else and someone else, another plane of understanding, despite the non- mis- dis-information. I did not feel the better for knowing it. But I was better prepared for knowing it. I had considered the angles as they made themselves available . . . *How does one walk through fog-dense darkness?* . . . I had trained hard throughout March and April. I was now prepared for what was next, knowing that I could not know what the hell was next. If anything, I now knew what that parting phrase (re: a cool clear evening in early March) meant, full-frame: "It will be bad, but just keep your head and move through." A wise voice inside the furious dis-info-storm, a mental buttress. *Buck Up!* Wise people had told me to get ready, to hunker down, and to do so quickly. I had, hoping that concussed moment would be over quickly so that I could get back to things as they were—a thing that I had come to realize was no longer a thing.

For there would not be an "as it was." I learned this too. And I was only just beginning to train up, adjust. There was only what was to be. Here was a history-erasing moment, a reset by which only training and improvisation, and a keen use of that training and improvisation, would keep you in the race, head above water. That only two months ago I was out and about, stepping through a normal routine and not thinking twice about it or any of the naive "beyond history"

assumptions that coursed through my brain's veins. All of what had come down since, having been schooled by a real magnitudes more real than I had the ability to previously consider.

Once you fold into the taut tough spikes of life, take that experience in deep, you gain a kind of power. You are not emboldened. It is more like a notch on the walking staff, having lived through. That was my mood that Sunday: having passing through to a new chapter of me. Still a ways to go, still settling in to that point on the timeline where I right then found myself, amazed. Having passed through a phase. How many more? Anyone's guess. Still, for all the uncertainty, the sleepless nights, the muscular remake of my bullshit filters to detect and deflect said shit pouring down from podiums and those with opinions and microphones—all the high-low emotional swings, the roaring storm all about us—we had come through . . . Part 1?

That Sunday felt like the sun-pour moment when the eye of a hurricane passes over. For anyone who has experienced this, it is a surreality that is hard to explain to those who have not. It is of a miracle, a brief moment of calm, of being able to fully—*finally*—conceptualize newfound knowledge. The spin-blown fury halts, if briefly. You are left to make what you will of newfound knowledge, if briefly. For it is also a charged eggshell instant. All the while you know what is coming . . . Part 2.

It had begun. It had done its thing and would continue to do its thing: terrible, indifferent, random. "What now?" How many more parts to go? 3, 6, 12? No wise person could yet say. And so, I settled in waiting for the eye to pass over.



*A Sporting Chance* . . . May 5

There was the jarring scene of sports stadiums around the world standing empty—Barcelona, Juventus, Nice, Leipzig, Liverpool, Karachi, New Delhi, Tokyo, Inchon, Melbourne, Auckland, Guadalajara and Mexico City, Rio and Sao Paulo and all of South America (in anticipation of Copas Libertadores), Dallas and Oklahoma City and Milwaukee, Montreal and Winnipeg, New York City, San Diego . . . Atlanta—standing still, caverns of spare silence lacking the requisite chanting and roaring crowds distracted from the worries and gripes and pressures, that brief fanatic investment in something other than "normal / usual" things. The spectacle of sport, of athletes doing things that you are not supposed to be able to do, but doing it as a matter of course, making it look effortless. The time poured into their craft, the dedication and zero-in-focus of committing fully, sacrificing as any of us do for our work-a-day lives. But that their work is to play, its demands on another level of dedication.

Of course sports matter. In sport we can see the whole of the human frame play out in brief electric clips: the wild mood swings, the droning dull, the ups-and-downs and all around compressed into three or four or five hour events, series, tournaments. Fortunes twisting and turning, rearing and rending, reminding us what we already know: that for all of our talents we can achieve great things / that for all of our talents they can fail us in pivotal moments / that for all of our talents we can win, lose, draw, and yet still have to get back in the game, regardless of outcome. The lived life is the ultimate arena, filled of expected success, unexpected heartbreak, the average mundane, where some breaks go your way, and some don't—just like in sport.

And here, these great crowd-centric centers of modern civilization, no longer the barbaric coliseums of antiquity (if we may for a moment forget the reality of broken bones, torn cartilage, hooligan riots, and CTE), these cross-ethnic, cross-racial, cross-nationality stadia of competitive spirit that we look to, the world over, to distract us from the normal, the mundane, the heartbreak—all of it unavailable. These places designed for the average non-athlete to blow off steam and be entertained, taken away like all other close-distance rituals; proximity, sociability, gathering in our tribes, those things that define the human experience: *suspended until further notice*.

And not only were we without the distraction of sport . . . *Liga MX Season has been suspended. Indian Premier League Cricket is in jeopardy. NBA and NHL seasons will remain on hold until summer . . .* we were reminded of the thing we could all use distracting from each and every day in the jarring jolting scenes of these empty stadiums being transformed into drive-thru testing centers, field hospitals, temporary morgues. Basketball and hockey arenas, baseball and cricket fields, football and "futbol" stadiums—big ones—silenced by a pathogen, emptied of the

screaming chanting roaring by tens of thousands, repurposed in real-time as was all of life on Earth in this time of plague.

All of that early May day I could not shake loose one recollection in particular: Major League Baseball, having been set to open the 2020 season on March 26, at that time suspending the season's opening day for two weeks—you know, as a precaution . . . *Reality has the innate ability to be more than you think it will be.*

It was a time to prepare for the long haul, sport like life being suspended until further notice. And in the way that sport brings us together to cheer and jeer and mock (but ideally without the wars and the bloodshed and the military coups d'état that otherwise go with tribal interaction), the way it brings us to these live stages to live out the microcosms of victory, defeat, and draw that life tosses out each and every day by way of a drama put on by actors at the top of their game, if we were to have even a remote chance of coming through—knocked around a bit, but hanging together—our only chance was to come together. But . . . Would we? Could we?

*(Talk) around reopening often draws a distinction between 'the vulnerable' and everybody else, as if our strength were not defined by our willingness to stand together. — Amy Davidson Sorkin*

*Postscript:* ESPN would go on to air a handful of Korean Baseball Organization games over the first few weeks of May here in the States. South Korea had to that point been able to control their outbreaks, the KBO regular season starting only five weeks late. Stands empty, no high-fiving or

spitting allowed, it was, nonetheless, sport. With a 5:30a US ET start time, we were up in time on May 7 to catch most of Doosan vs. the LG Twins. Doosan was dominant, winning 9-3, and sweeping a three-game series. *Go Bears!*



*A Big Wealth* . . . May 8

*An anvil sitting on my chest . . . what it's like to have COVID-19.* — David Hammer

That morning, the ceaseless flow of news, the hyper-drive of information, dread, hope, despair, data, data . . . *doom*. . . . There was more to drop into the journal than I could possibly get down, more to monitor than could possibly be processed, more that I felt compelled to document than could possibly be committed pen-to-paper prior to hand cramps interrupting the manic moment. And perhaps that was for the better, because there was the Spring—*that amazing cool weather Spring*. Years had come and gone since we had seen anything like such a Spring here, the steady drudge march of global warming seeping more and more Summer into May, April even. But the irony: this, the most fossil-fuel-free Spring we are likely to see for a decade (and that, only if we wised up and greened up, *now*), so many cars off the road, so few planes in the air; even the

volume of trains seemed less than was usual. And those clear crystalline blue skies, one day after another after . . . This was what could be. Here is what must be, the other (*right, that other*) existential crisis already on the scene too.

And the phoebes had successfully launched four chicks into our world, our well-wooded suburban sanctuary. So lucky, so very fortunate, an undervalued stock in the portfolio, this small "w" wealth making itself known as we sheltered in place. To have the wealth of home and space. Our space never did feel confining back in *before times*, a squat 1950s proto-ranch pad, a plenty big enough footprint for the two of us, a large yard for "urban" (half-acre+), more of an expanse than the typical urban property. The whole back half of it a contiguous run of forest intersecting with all of our neighbors' back yards and stretching the entire length of the street to its entrance, about a half-mile of wooded sanctuary. Our neighbors and their houses more spread out than the modern close-pack postage stamp developments. Yes, here was a specific "wealth," small in the narrow measurements of our monetary and size-obsessed culture, but enormous in our world, massive, in fact. A big wealth.

And ours was of a dozen contiguous neighborhoods of the same basic design that lined the eastern outskirts of what was still considered "in-town," urban Atlanta. A spatial Valhalla, a precious gem during a moment of reduced worlds, confinement, humanity under siege. It would reorient my take on "success," an expectation that I had so often marred via unrealistic financial expectations, a "success" that I had long simmered over not having achieved (so often limited in means, treading the waters of downturns personal and national, some induced, some far beyond our control). But then, it was so clear. Here we were all along: wealthy.

All the years spent carefully tending the quality of our lives at the notable expense of quantity in our lives was right then paying off. We knew how to live big with a little. And here, that well-honed skill was paying dividends hand-over-fist when we needed it most, a most trying time. And we had had trying times: 2004 - 2007, the causes: a medical crisis, a long-simmering post-medical pharmacological rehab, financial, unexpected deaths / 2010 - 2011, the causes: a relapse into post-medical pharmacological, crises of confidence (as in multiple) / 2015 - 2017, the cause: financial, purely financial. Personal crises all, too many in too short a time. We would often (and still do) joke about our "crisis veteran" bonafides, of how masterful we were (really, taken to an art form) at fixing the metaphorical flat tires, having spent so many years up on a jack along life's road shoulders, hazards blinking. And yet through all of those small years of living, having learned to size up, make "small" as big as possible. When life narrows, constricting your field-of-view, we had learned over the years to go big in our imagination, to live there if the situation required it.

And yet, we could now see that across all those trying years and all of their trying Springs the waxwings had returned to feast on our full-fruit mulberry trees, nonetheless. Our wooded sanctuary had delivered all along. It was delivering now when we needed it most, flocks of cedar waxwings under a cyan-deep clarity, those ringing blue skies. Even our on-property blackberry vines had produced like never before (12 mason jars of jam the end yield). All of these fortunate turns, this fortune, this wealth. It was with us all along. Here was our net worth in a windfall regardless of what any damned bank felt entitled to assess, deep-vault reserves pulling us through in the face of a viral killer running humanity down.

Most of our extended human community was responding well, pulling together, helping others, masking up, stepping through. But a lot were not. The nation in general seemed and felt rudderless, adrift. Thousands dying by the week, by the day, the hardness, the unrelenting real. Locally, the fitful, fraught, and (not unsurprising, if dispiriting) ideologically-driven "reopening" was underway and in earnest. I was willing to test a loosening of the small pod lifestyle that our recent days had demanded . . . *quarantine, shelter-in-place, slow the spread* . . . but there was no way in hell I was going out anywhere for long, especially in an enclosed space. Worry hung over it all; and if only because so many were claiming there was nothing to really worry about and it was overblown and we needed to open up everything now . . . *Are you an epidemiologist? No? Then maybe you should shut the* . . . Being turned on each other, instead of being turned into one dominant civic force with one goal in mind: defeat the virus in order to save lives, the economy, our national soul. Devastating, infuriating, it looked precisely like defeat before we even had a chance to succeed. The worry, the sleeplessness, the one-too-many nighttime bourbons. . . . But we had that Spring, that amazing cool clean Spring. The towhees and the crows and the cardinals all nesting close, the aroma of honeysuckle on the opiate air. Easy cool breezes. That, all of that.

And we had our little slice of this world, this big little life of ours in our home, having cultivated a very specific type of wealth: that of space and surroundings. We had invested and tended that crop for all of our years. Inside all of our lean years, it was often the only thing we had. But we did. We had it all along, the foundational wealth of space. It made grousing (about anything) in the midst of that devastating present seem petty, selfish. Many—*as in many*—had nothing . . . *Don't forget to be nice* . . . a pandemic having made life so small for us all.

All the restrictions on movement and travel and social / economic interaction, of going anywhere. All of this had revealed to us, under those blue marble high-cirrus skies, just how big our space and surroundings were, just how wealthy we were. We were realizing something that down-deep we must have known, if not having framed it just so: of how very rich we were, of how very rich we had been all along.



*Pandemic Fodder* . May 10

*To solve the economy, we must solve the virus. Let's never lose sight of that fact.*

— Neel Kashkari, *Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis*

Were we really on the brink of leaving behind poorly attempted home quarantine cuts, the too-long beards untrimmed and unapologetic, the Zoom, Skype, FaceTime happy hours (many more tying on roaring drunks what with nowhere to drive, or so I had noticed), the heartbreaking, yet heartening—*essential*—7 o'clock appreciations of medical workers, those putting themselves in the line of fire, caring for the stricken and dying, and all those even more forgotten: the crews cleaning up after this giant viral mess. This was about to be . . . past?

It had been a civilization used to its ways, not so willing to change its ways, adapting on the fly: lives lived as pixels, the reorienting of life, the reorienting of priorities, things improvised

under pressure. (Remote, distanced, *slow the spread*.) How much if any of this improvisation would prove durable, trends deserving to be cast in the permanent lexicon of "who we are to be" and imported into whatever the future was to be? Impossible to say. In lieu of all that had gone down, how would the future learn (not remotely, preferably), work (kill the commute, like for real), and gather (in person, preferably; via pixels in a pinch)? . . .

*With venues shuttered, people now realize music's communal power, how they cannot do without it . . . So long to bras? Work-at-home women are asking "why the hell should I have to wear this damned thing?" . . .*

There would be shifting and changing across the spectrum, if only because everything seemed to be shifting, everything changing. But one thing seemed dangerously stuck in a neutral gear and going nowhere: an unrealistic optimism. How much shifting / changing was to come was not known, not yet. How could it be? This new "not so normal" was still here. It was not past. It was not close to past . . . *This virus is going to be with us.*

Yet many were claiming we were done, or it was near to done, or that they were simply done with it, the situation was improving, that we had put in a solid month of sacrifice and that was enough and the end of this thing was at hand and that mentioned future was now . . . Really? No, really?! . . . *To be worse and last longer and be more challenging than you can imagine. . . .* Even if I could (and I could not) put aside my instinctual, often mocking cynicism in the face of breezy optimism, the answer seemed: Are you kidding me? No, really, are you fucking kidding me?! . . . *With us, in us. . . .* Our national answer to the challenge of a lifetime was in the process

of being a big-time botch, an abdication of responsible muscular governance up there with the motley "greats" of down-low American failures. And because of that, we would be with this—in *this*—for a much longer haul than might have otherwise been the case. (At least that much was now crystal clear.) We would continue with our adapting on the fly and all the mental sorting and distanced and psychological sheltering awhile yet. We were not, actually, about to turn a corner, but were still in the early phase of settling down and settling in. Regardless, societal or economic implosions need not be the foregone conclusion. ("We are the richest nation on Earth.") But for fuck's sake we would have to do this right. And in that present, the gulf of agreement over what was "right" was a canyon most grand.

At the very least, we should have been able to agree on this: Whatever and whenever that future did arrive, the appreciation of the army of anonymous essential Americans that pound the streets and aisles and grind the low-income gears that allow this whole fragile (we now knew) contraption to run seamlessly, getting all the shit you want when you want it, that—*that*—should never end even when this damned thing does end. We could, we should be able to agree on that . . . right?

Where would it all end? And I mean all of what the pandemic was showing to be flawed: our disjointed economic theories, their out-of-synch priorities fueling runaway billionaires at the expense of middle-class security, the gaping widening downward mobility, the raw toxic bullshit of racial and gender disparity prevalent still . . . still . . . *Racist policies that have endured since the days of colonization and slavery left Indigenous and Black Americans especially vulnerable* \* . . . *Black and Latino workers are over represented among the essential, the unemployed, and*

*the dead* † . . . . A crude system of winners and losers, a zero-sum game of tribes and insularity designed to make good on greed above all, to elevate above all the yardstick of money.

Over my lifetime, my country had become increasingly petty, mean, self-interested, often self-obsessed, traits that sink if not often zero-out all of the good, caring, compassionate, selfless progress also done. I don't know, maybe we were that way all along and it just took a fucking pandemic to make it obvious. Mean, petty, selfish, three things that seemed as prevalent as self-sacrifice, charity, the giving of aid-and-comfort. We were a country mile away from great, let alone exceptional. We were exceptional in how poor the collective response to a public health crisis was going, having over the few month stretch of mean tribal selfishness scotched the ability to even conceptualize large-scale societal action, innate community service, simple civic duty. Decency, giving of yourself, leading with respect in all of our micro engagements with those we do not and will never know, yet interact with daily. It only took a pandemic (maybe?) to jolt us, to force a good long critical gaze into the mirror, acknowledging that we have a problem and must take our first tentative steps towards curing the epidemic of careless, selfish, greedy ways. This—*this*—was a once-in-a-century opportunity to course-correct, if still for a future obscure and distant-seeming.

And yet some were saying: "now!" In the usual frame of modern self-interest, they were saying they were sick and tired and the future can wait because we have to make money now. And they were not wrong. But what did that even mean? Open up fully, risk mass infection, mass death? What that an acceptable risk? Was there not some other way to float the disrupted, to "freeze" things in place without letting people fall off the cliff into poverty, hunger, desperation? I am not an economist. I am not a politician. I did not know. But it seemed we could (we should)

be able to do this? "We are the richest nation on Earth, possible in the history of human civilization," we are fond of saying. Okay, then, would we do this?

And I had read that morning something to the tune of "the nature of nations is embedded in shared experience, shared commitment, shared purpose," and that other morning headlines went on to report "global markets are jumping amid signs of optimism." Optimism? But weren't they sharply down a full percentage point a few days ago, something about "continued fears over oil futures"? For fuck's sake. This was not the work of individuals within nations acting with civic pride to help stem a global pandemic, to improve things for all. This . . . I didn't know what this was. It made no sense. It seemed not designed to make sense. It seemed designed to make money, other peoples' fortunes.

And leaders were saying we need to get on with it, to move on past the virus. (20,317 new cases reported, 1000+ dead.) The single most important thing was to get back to the money-making, which sounded just fine and to a degree was what I wanted too—but that something about it all seemed not so right. Who exactly was calling for getting back to the money-making the loudest? Making money for who, exactly? How did we control the virus in order to get back to making money? What was the plan for reopening? On its face the plan seemed to fall in the fissure between carelessness and impatience. The plan seemed to be "move on," or "get on with it," or enough of this covid, covid, covid, leave it in the dust of money, money, money. "We need to get it all started again." Yes, of course we did. So then, if we might harken back to American moments of greatness, why weren't we moon-shot / interstate highway system / defeating totalitarianism / Marshall Plan-ing this thing? Why the fuck were we not fixing the virus thing (*let's never lose sight of that fact*). "We need to get it all humming again." Yes, that sounded

great. Now, what did we have to say about that to all those checking-out customers, delivering the products, trying to keep restaurants afloat, trying to keep the sick from dying . . . *Fix the virus. Fix the economy.* . . . Here we were two months into this thing and already the impatience of a planless unsupported "reopening" was setting us up for a lurching patchwork of minor short-term successes laced with a rollercoaster ride of spikes and surges, if not full-blown un-contained outbreaks. And yet, the national and many of the local leaders were expecting businesses, normal average business people without degrees in public health, all the small and micro businesses at the forefront to figure this all out? . . . *On our own. On our own.*

Normally, I would not want the government's help. Normally, I would prefer to be left to my own devices. But, was I an epidemiologist? A central bank reservist? A policy expert with the ability to craft impactful legislation in an instant of global upheaval? Was I an economist with past experience of the effects of public health crises on local / regional commerce? A civic servant having devoted my life to the ideals of foundational competent governance, generally? No. I was a middled-aged dude that could build you a website. I could tend a forested property. I could rewire a lamp. I could weatherstrip windows and install a faucet. I can talk on and on about the communal importance of music and of writing and books I have read. I know enough to drop a tree safely. I can replace a flat tire. I know a ridiculous amount about of American history. (I now knew more than I ever had wanted to know about the Great Influenza.) But, as admitted, I was not the best business person. I had run a business since 1999. It has enjoyed fantastic success and endured bitter defeats. I had not made as much money as I automatically, meritocratic-ly, figured a steadfast work ethic would yield. I did not grouse about it. No, that is false. I groused about it plenty. But then, I realized the grouching drifted up from the start point of a privilege not

enjoyed by many. (It only took a pandemic . . . ) And so, I groused, and then got back to work; and if only because it was on me. No one else was going to do any of my work for me and I would not expect anyone else to do it for me.

Normally, I would not want the government's help. But this was no normal time. I was then still confused as to what that moment was . . . *There Are No Hours or Days in Coronatime* § . . . . Shapeless, dictating its own physics, making our way through. I was making my way through. Yet I was doing so bringing what I knew and who I am along for the ride. How could I not? Why would one's own experience not be of value? Because it is coronatime? Perhaps. Some things simply cannot change (as much as so much should change). Example: there is still that piece of me that feels it is a failure to have to rely on loans and lines-of-credits and credit cards, or any kind of direct government aid. (So privileged, so advantaged.) But this was no normal time; and come to think of it, nor had any of the many *before times* either. My whole adult life had been lived inside the whirling churn of unpredictable and unexpected outcomes. When was it ever stable? Only when the mad broadsides of unpredictability were slightly less so, I suppose. Privileged / advantaged? Absolutely. Stable? Hardly a term I could use.

But then, a pandemic, a complete governmental shank of the public health response followed by those same bright bulbs telling everyone it was tailing off, or we would just have to live with infection and death, or it's not so bad as it seems—even though it seemed not just bad, but once-in-a-fucking-century bad. Regardless, we should table confusion and dislocation and all of the head-spin whirlwind of falsified contradictory vertigo, and just get "back to normal." To which, I could respond: "for whom?" Who would this benefit? A big-box store worker going back to a \$10 an hour job (if lucky) despite the swirling aerosols of unconcerned self-involved

unmasked American assholes in their midst—was that a return to normal? Kind of. (Were we ever really great?) The epidemic of undignified wages forced on a large swath of Americans with swat-away distracting chestnuts like "higher wages would stifle job-creation," or "mandating an increase in the minimum wage would tank small businesses" or innovation, or GDP, or the net gain stock-tick of portfolio growth, etc., etc., has been with us for over a generation without an answer to the five-alarm question: Who exactly constructed this crude punitive system and why? Why do we endure a system that delivers the indignity of un-livable wages for full-time work? Why do we heap all the praise in the world on cutting-edge entrepreneurs whose revolutionary products are often created by an invisible army of people—*people*—treading water at the poverty line? Why do we put up with poverty? Why do we put up with all the indignity all around us all of the time? What fucking difference does it make if an entrepreneur has conceived of a brilliant gadget and made billions on billions in the process if after shelling out the majority of their paychecks on food, housing, utilities, commuting, clothing, schooling, taxes, the rising cost of every damned *everything* half of working America can't scrape together enough to withstand an unexpected bill of \$500 or more? What the fuck? Why the fuck would we want to go back to that? Why would we want to go back to that?

*The rich here, as in all other countries, will have an advantage over the poor, in all cases where the services of eminent and learned men are to be commanded by the influence of money. — Civic Rusticus, "Reply to Mason's Objections,"*  
*January 30, 1788. Library of America: The Debate on the Constitution*

"Cannon fodder" was the phrase that I sent spinning off through the confused simmering between my ears that morning. "The Gilded Age in our age, the disposable workers, bodies as mere commodities in a puppet theatre of profit-and-loss." Why should a pandemic get in the way of the retooled narrowed idea of the American Dream coming to mean a rare-air few need a third house in the country, cash on the barrel head, and far from the infected masses with no such means to avoid the spooling clouds of infection—their only option to get back out there and risk it all for the same old shitty wages. And to know that many were actually holding the thought that it was mostly "other" people that were getting sick and dying, an observation appalling in that it was racist as fuck, but not at all surprising.

All of the creaking frames and corrupt insider-trading rot, the joke of a healthcare net and the never-ending racial profiling that corroded like a buckling rust, the navel-gazing on our place in the world, the general heaving social fracture, all of this was on clear display; that it had been a Potemkin facade of boom times all along, an economy of, and for, existing wealth. Why should profits be hampered because wage workers don't want to risk their lives? Why should we all not be happy to risk infection, disease, death to ourselves and others, so as to get on with a system designed not with the vast majority of economic participants in mind? No one seemed to be asking that question (aside from those few activists who were and are always asking that question). Instead, it was all about having to reopen. And it was true that we did. And yet why bother to reopen an economy whose pre-existing conditions of subsistence-only wage growth in the face of the rising costs of everything, the month-to-month exposure of small business America to the full weight of behemoth pillars looking to extract every last cent (but more than willing to open up full lines-of-credit at usury rates), the entrenched unwilling stasis of the head

of the household style patriarchy to allow anything like parity in pay between men and women, the unconsidered work-life benefits of guaranteed maternity leave, guaranteed child care, any whiff of a guarantee that our economic system gave a shit about anything aside from existing wealth maintaining its financial advantages and expanding its hold on power . . . Why?

That the fumbling botch of a response to this pandemic, as epic as this pandemic—and the botch—had so far been . . . *with us* . . . that it could, that it would, result in a cratering that threatened to collapse our entire national economy into depression, all of this revealed the rotten pilings holding up this teetering patched-together national enterprise. If all it took was a strong (if once-a-century) wind to knock the whole thing down, then we Americans—*all*—had work to do. And not just getting back to work work, but a fundamental structural renovation. . . . But then there was the prevailing gust of angry down-players playing things down, chanting, angrily, that they had put in their month and it is not so big a deal as all the experts say, fake even, and it was time to get back to the future. . . . As if proving the point: getting back to a future composed of rotten floorboards, crumbling foundations, economic insecurity hiding under the sugar high of a few mighty billionaires. In shining a light on all the structural instability, we were highlighting a great national inability, one tracking on a parallel vector with this damned pandemic, that being: our inability to settle in and deal with right now in all its unwanted unforeseen shitty-ness. The future would not matter a damn if we did not settle in, settle down, and deal with the overwhelming omnipresent now. There was so much "now" to contend with—the economic insecurity, the food insecurity, the overworked crash-cart of the only major developed country that did not guarantee baseline preventive healthcare to all—*all*—its citizens, the non-ending racism. All of that to sort through. All of that to sift through. This was not anything that PR could

fix (though it would certainly make the attempt). This was something only all of us who learn and work and gather and live and vote in America could fix, and only by demanding that it be better—*for all*.

Would we dare to be that great? Would we dare to be respectful and inclusive enough to establish opportunity *for all* as the default? All genders, all ethnicities, all those who are disabled or have been harmed and those struggling still? That despite all the shit consistently strewn in their path, that they still wanted to participate, still sought to dignify their lives and life efforts working a job worth the label of dignity? Could we do this for all economic classes, makes, models?

Would we dare to be so great? To construct systems that give everyone what they need to stand up, get in, and make good? To lead with decency and respect for all who participate, all who pitch in? Would we—could we—dare to be that great, if for the very first time?

*Dear Essential Worker: We regret to inform you that the sense of humanity and empathy you have requested . . . is currently on back order. — The New Yorker Daily Shout*

\* The Atlantic, How the Pandemic Defeated America, Ed Yong / September 2020

† The Atlantic, America's Racial Contract Is Showing, Adam Serwer / 0508

§ Wired Magazine Daily Headline



**Unknown** . May 14

*Returning the favor: The country of Ireland has sent along a seven-figure donation to Navajo and Hopi families to help them get through the COVID-19 pandemic . . . (this) came in gratitude for a donation by the Choctaw Nation to the Irish more than 170 years ago, when Ireland was starving in the 1845-1849 Great Potato Famine. — National Geographic*

Here was humankind at its best. Gracious unsolicited aid for others in their time of need. This, while . . . *Top infectious disease specialist, Anthony Fauci, warned a congressional panel that the nation did not in any measurable way have the spread of the virus under control and that reopening regular close-quarter activity too quickly and without a phased plan would risk an outbreak that, in his words: "you may not be able to control." Many Americans were already ignoring this advice.*

It had been a forgettable time. The only thing I was pulling from all of this was just how much work we had to do, just how rickety and careless and insular were the foundational aspects of a country supposedly "great." And this, on top of how far we had to go as a species, generally, in leveraging the innate goodness of human potential to offset the instinctual flaws of human nature. At least that much was now crystal clear. Still, despite all the work to be done, and with not a moment to lose, I just wanted to forget all of what had come down too, looking around for a century-sized broom and carpet under which to sweep it all. And so, it struck me that the fleet sprinting scrawl spilling out that morning across the final pages of the first (of two) journals I set aside to document this most abnormal time, ran over, under, and through thoughts leaping out from a piece titled: "Why Are There Almost No Memorials to the Flu of 1918?"

The first thing this piece prompted was recollection of a day trip taken decades ago, back when Kerri & I were still dating. It was October of 1997, and we were traipsing away an Autumn afternoon in the sprawling *Westview Cemetery*, what had in the early twentieth-century hung along the western outskirts of the city of Atlanta. No longer the outskirts (the city and suburbs having enveloped it long ago and now rippling far beyond the plot in all directions), nor as renowned or visited as the famous in-city destination: *Oakland Cemetery*, *Westview* was in its way more impressive; and if only for its grand sweep. And on that warm Fall day in '97, we found ourselves lost for hours wandering through—minds and thoughts wandering too.

But it was only in exiting that the visual from that day was fixed in my head. We passed by the "Receiving Tomb (or Vault)," a low sloping structure that seems designed to blend into the surrounding landscape. Here, in an era prior to refrigeration, unpaved roads often washed out in bad weather, and the building of the cemetery's solemn if beautiful mausoleum (still in use), the

bodies of the dead were temporarily interred awaiting burial. That was fascinating enough, to be transported a century back to how those "way back when" had to deal with, in so practical a way, the most common human fact aside from life itself. To traipse unwittingly across something so telling about where we were and where we have come and gone since, that would have been enough. But what stuck, was framed and hung in a back room of the "mind archives" for some unforeseen future recollection (or, as chance would have it: pandemic), was a stone-etched history fixed near the tomb's long ago closed entrance. It stated in "in memorium" terms of the Receiving Tomb's role during the Great Influenza, of how an overwhelmed city was forced to deal with the heartsickness and the grim logistical calculus of mass graves resulting from the lack of resources to handle mass death on such a scale. Here was a sidebar walk-right-past-it memorial to the thousands on thousands of Atlantans who had perished in the Great Influenza during its 1918-19 peak in the States. It was the only memorial I knew of in the city and the only one of any kind that I remember having seen anywhere; and even this seemed more a mention than really memorializing anything. It was right out in the open, as undeniable as the history of "that" pandemic itself. But still, it felt like a discovery. In plain sight, yet unknown—as if nothing that really needed to be noticed or remembered.

David Segal's article on the dearth of Great Influenza memorials had itself appeared in an out-of-the-way section, a read-right-past-it part of an e-news edition of *The New York Times*. But it caught my eye, if only because it was such an obvious question that no one seemed to be asking—let alone have an answer for. Segal wrote: "The flu ravaged civilization for nearly three agonizing years . . . But soon after . . . And for decades after, the pandemic somehow vanished from the public imagination." There was a lot in that, and there were a lot of reasons why this

was the case, not the least of which being this: Allied victory over the Central Powers in the First World War was the much more admirable and sought after kind of transcendent history we in the west, and America specifically, prefer. That plus the mentioned cytokine storm of mass death, the mass dying of the youth of America—especially those jammed together in military camps (that virus having selected to hit those with healthy overreacting immune systems to deadly effect)—struck down in droves by a damned flu bug. That just did not side up to the masculine tale male egos could accept as the narrative for a strong nation getting stronger. If not the soldiery and youth of the era itself, the patriarchy was not about to abide in such a down-look historical headline. Best to keep it out of view. Best to keep it out of the papers; this the very reason it was called "The Spanish Flu" in the first place, WWI neutral Spain having been the only country not openly censoring the worldwide firestorm of influenza in its newspapers. (The widely accepted 1918 origin source for the Great Influenza now pegs it to farm pigs in west Kansas, and not of avian origin in Spain; i.e. U.S. soldiers likely brought it with them to Europe, where it rapidly swept out across the world.)

Yet, as a newly-minted pandemic veteran I now held a certain qualification to claim what was likely the most significant reason: Why would anyone have wanted to remember the Great Influenza? Death by global plague is forgettable. Why would anyone need to remember such a thing? . . . The ink had not even dried on the page before I regretted the line, realizing the fallacy and, really, the lack of respect in such a statement. For that momentary lapse transported me to another graveyard visit a few years before our day out at *Westview*, a plot of Earth that has taken on something of a sacred site for me down through the years. It drops all the reason I would ever

need to know why we should remember such things, such stricken times and the humans—*individuals living lives*—that were struck down within it . . .

In my hometown of Tolland, Connecticut, there is a cemetery still in use whose original "ye olde burying ground" dates to colonial times. That old section is one of the hundreds of such plots scattered across the northeast—from York, Maine, to Copp's Hill in Boston's North End, to Tarrytown (Sleepy Hollow), New York—and up and down the Atlantic coast. It goes to a time when life and death were much more visceral, the expectation of security (be it financial or basic food stores) not known. It was a time of unpredictable hardness weathered by people heartier than we are today. It was also a time of constant rolling epidemic, if not outright plague.

And so, there I found myself: September 1994, having come home for the wedding of high school friends, and finding myself with a morning to kill before catching a flight back to Atlanta. With not much thought to it, I decided to head down to the cemetery off Cider Mill Road. When I got there, I aimed arrow-straight not just for the old burying ground, but a particular headstone in the back. To this day I cannot say what it was that drew me to it; but it did, and I did not ignore the mental cue. A cocked heavily-weathered silver stone design typical of the era, the lettering was barely legible. I sat down in front of it and slowly worked out the death tale carved into its face (the description of a soul's final days etched into their tombstone "fashionable" in the day). Here was Sergeant—the 1770s abbreviated spelling: "Serj."—Elisha Benton who, having joined the nascent Continental forces, had been captured at the disastrous Battle of Brooklyn. Fought on August 27, 1776, George Washington had come close to losing the whole damned war right there, his Continentals outnumbered, outgeneraled, and nearly captured

en masse by a huge British flanking force. Like many others, Elisha was sentenced ("captivated" as it read on the headstone) to a British prison ship anchored in New York City harbor. A barbaric state of filth and pestilence was standard for these ships, even the young and strong no match for the diseases that floated about and poisoned their hulls. Appalling as these hellholes were, even worse: once a prisoner contracted what we now know to be a bacterial or viral infection, they were dumped on land and left to their own devices to find their way home, or die—or both. Serj. Elisha Benton fell into the later column. Having contracted smallpox aboard the prison ship, the rolling epidemic of all colonial and early America, he was "exchanged" and somehow made it all the way back home, 150 miles give or take—and during winter no less—to Tolland. He died on January 21, 1777, at the age of 29.

That moment was such a bright electric instant that it has imprinted itself along with the more revelatory experiences of my life. In that moment, the first hints of Fall ringing the canopy, I recall a momentary state of shock from the weight of that tale, the random circumstances that had ferried me to that moment and that headstone. And though I would quickly learn that Elisha was actually buried elsewhere (likely due to "the pox"), and that this was only a memorial within the family plot, that stone has nonetheless become a regular pilgrimage for me whenever I find myself in my hometown. It reminds me each and every time to *not forget*, to remember, to memorialize; that though situations around living and dying can run hard, tragic, unbearable, they are in the end about individuals, humans who once lived just like me—and you.

Serj. Elisha Benton lived and died tragically like thousands in those times. Millions of first peoples contracted smallpox and flus and all manner of bugs that close-packed Europeans had developed an immunity to, a mass die-off (estimates approach 80-90%) that from 1492-

onward almost wiped them clean from both American continents. Malaria, yellow fever, typhoid, TB, epidemics all, killers of humans and upsetters of human "normalcy," millions having lived through their various spikes, millions dying tragically. Millions lived through 1918 and 1919 and the larger worldwide wave in 1920, millions of others dying tragically. Thousands on thousands were being infected and were dying right then. Who were we, the living—*still*—to forget about them? Who were we to forget such a thing if we gave a shit about anything at all?

And that is where it all stood in the middle of May 2020. "It" had come and it was to be with us awhile longer. We had work to do, but we had to get through this thing first. I settled in and waited for the next wave to approach. At some point, I checked the numbers a final time:

COVID 19 Cases — World: 4.3 Million+ / United States: 1.4 Million+

COVID 19 Deaths — World: 299,862 / United States: 85,438

*Postscript:* In late 2020, Jersey City, New Jersey, created what might have been the first U.S. memorial to victims of the C19 pandemic. It was announced that Skyway Park, the site of a former toxic garbage dump reimagined and remade into marshland green space, would host a new planted tree for every resident lost to the virus. At the time of the announcement, that number, sadly, had crested 500. It seemed we might actually remember this plague.



**JOURNAL 2** . *It did not just go away . . .*

*The "What Next?"* . May 15

*When you mix science and politics, you get politics.* — John Barry

It was a disheartening moment full of aspiration and heroics. It was a compassionate instant run-through by tone-deaf selfishness. It was clear and confusing, affirming and depressing, uplifting and horrifying; and it held all of these polarities inside that single atom of time and space. At any point a fissure could erupt into some unconsidered runaway chain reaction. And yet, it was just as likely to be a slow slog through more infection, more community spread, and more death as we waited for cures, or effective leadership, or something other than head-struck malaise.

The doom-clock clatter of nerves, days pulling up with a clang, in that quicksand present it proved hard to know *the what* of any minute of the day . . . *What the — ?!* . . . But within the fragmented spectral scraps of what had been predictable schedules, calendar pins, my well-trod

instinctual routines, one overarching thing was certain: IT *was still with us*. It had not gone anywhere. It had not been remediated, stopped, slowed. It had simply not been dealt with. We had not contained a thing. The country had not been able to rally enough public opinion around what was needed to contain the virus, the national project more often seeming to opt for long-running arguments vaulting out of split-screen realities amped up for a not normal time . . . "This was once-a-century bad" / "This was being overblown" . . . which, of course, bred the precise conditions C19 desired (the rubbing together of villainous hands, its ghoulish cackle). The virus could not have requisitioned a more fertile stage on which to ply its trade: the careless dithering of just enough human hosts. IT had not gone away. IT was just getting this party started.

And yet, a "next phase" had begun. If rushed, forced, anxious, it had arrived. Reopening had come along just as phase one was handing off the baton, the shock and mortality being triaged, the simmering reality of this thing settling in. . . . Or was it? The rush was on to proclaim unknowable things: long-term economic disaster, if . . . we have seen the worst, so . . . it is not that bad, and so. . . . In fact, it was clear that not much had been settled, not much learned, for wont of actively trying to settle in and learn. Instead, the shrill cries to reopen indoor retail, churches, stadiums—everything—*now*.

The wobbly path we were on had its course-plot set in February and March: the brush-off demeanor, the on purpose play-down of a potential plague . . . *By Spring, the warm breezes will make it magically go away*. . . . Had we as a nation set our course for the duration of this thing? A (and I stress "a") political viewpoint was outshouting coordinated public health containment strategies in favor of a crude do-nothing herd immunity. (I was straight-line reminded of George C. Scott's character, General Jack Ripper, in *Strangelove*, and his response to the reality of many

millions of casualties in a thermonuclear exchange, his line: "I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed.") It would seem, to some, that we just needed to man up, "punch this thing in the teeth," reopening a way to stick it to that weakling virus. A gaslit political response to a public health crisis, the numb-dumb plunge of "plandemic," all the loose-wire conspiracy contagions aerosoling community spread all on their own. Individualism was not at work here. It was naked self-interest that was right then beating the pulp out of collective responsibility, all the rage-gripping, social media canceling, a towering crescendo too shrill to ignore . . . *Building, boiling . . . Still with us. Still everywhere.*

And I began to worry that the crystal-cut Spring air, that deep clean breath, would turn out to be the mirage. That a return to the fume-addled pollution bubble of national fracture, warped media silos, raw spite—re: "as it was"—was just a matter of time. But how could that be? How could we go through such trial / tribulation and not do all in our power to resolve and invest in the required edits and upgrades and outright rebuilds? The unreconciled everything was making itself painfully obvious, reckonings long past due. How could we not take it on? Had we reached the tank-bottom-dry of national ability? Was that moment a triumph of naked self-interest? Was it simple self-loathing? . . . *It had not gone away. It was with us, still.*

There were things having developed in the bath of pandemic improvisation that would / could disappear. I would be circling the calendar date when social distancing was no longer a vital health requirement. I would do a little dance when I did not have to rely on contact-less pick-up and could take clients out to lunch, indoors, at small tables, face-to-face, no mask. I would not ever again trade a real in-person happy hour for a virtual one, or real for a virtual damned *anything*. But these were just the small things. These were minor items that still rattled

about as some impinging cluster of bridge-too-far asks to some . . . *the tyranny, the oppression, etc.* . . . Yes, we needed to protect businesses, especially the smallest, most vulnerable, those hit squarely in the teeth by the economic dislocation of distancing, clearing indoor spaces, *slowing the spread*. We had to protect the rebar of local business that we could now see in unobstructed pang-strike tones made up the ligaments and sinew, the blood and bone of community. It had to do that *now* and the future *next*. We could and should see to these things: the wealthiest nation on the planet, what many Americans could not proclaim enough—this, the most exceptional nation the world has ever known. But, if so great, so exceptional, what of all the failure?

We had to reopen and save businesses and livelihoods and careers without the indifferent sacrificing of American lives to a virus not in any way having gone away, not in any way done with us yet—*or*—just reopen now, all of it, distance and pandemic be damned? Zero-sum. All-or-nothing. As with so many other things in the pined for *before times*, that was still with us, making the moment so much worse than it needed to be. So many were still at it. It was still defining us. The hot-headed reflex to drop every damned *everything* into a binary decision, extreme political renderings of all things readymade for exploitation by the cunning and tribal. The stark rot of extremism, a runaway epidemic in the pined for *before times*. Still with us. Still everywhere. It had not gone anywhere: the indifferent insularity, the "everything now because of me, myself, and I," this sere sad clutching to self-interest. . . . Right, and the virus. *Still*.

There was so much of the clever often ingenious improvisational tactics rolled out to save businesses, save educational opportunity, save sanity and lives, that in some future, with the danger past, we could and should jettison once the vaccines rolled out. There was so very much of *before times*, here, still, that we could and should jettison once the vaccines rolled out. But

could we, would we do what we should to be "better"? I was looking at myself. I as looking at my beautiful stricken country. I had work to do. The country had so much work to do.

And that mid-May instant: vast, expansive, existential, a constant overarching drear so present, so known, that it could be familiarized and compartmentalized (if levying a regressive tax on mental health). Normalizing a new and unusual, understanding and evolving the methods by which to withstand a long haul. And this was no *before times* build up of petty gripes, the "being done wrong" by strangers in traffic, a confrontation with a line-cutter, tech-support fails, home appliances crapping out. The cumulative—*minor*—inconveniences of living had been relegated, this clocking in amongst the first (if minor) revisions / upgrades to catch hold, edits I was making to normal ways that I could carry into the "what next." Of spleen-venting towards a selfish dick (so perceived), or the day-to-day uncontrollable if predictable disrupters of routine things (tech support fails, household appliance fails), I was a grand master. And right then I could see what a dumb waste of time it had all been, the additional time waste invested in the venting time I would not—and should not—ever get back . . . *Don't forget to be nice.* . . . A perpetrator of time murder, of time suicide, I had been. Here was a thing that had been with me over the long haul that I could jettison going forward. I should. I would be better if I could.

That moment was already demanding much. It was global and cataclysmic. (And that was not over-stated or over-exaggerated.) It was also unavoidable. A global unavoidable cataclysm. A constant present known. Only poor performance, a poor showing at "being a human" in the face of it could make it any worse . . . *Be better. How to be better?* . . . Normalizing this most unusual normal seemed the most effective route to easing the mentioned and usury toll . . . *Settle in.*

*Figure that shit out.* . . . And this, all while knowing there will always be the relentlessly selfish that simply cannot help but take a difficult moment and make it that much worse, that I would always be fighting the usual petty worries that run over days and weeks and years. But that in the fight—*fighting for "better"*—lay the very reason for doing it. That, plus, I might actually get there. I might actually pull myself up to "better."

This was existential. It was being shared by all the world over. The usual petty worries simply had no room in which to operate. They were, unbowed; but the obviousness of their dumb time-suck ways were now more present, even more wasteful. It was being crowded out for want of self-serving oxygen and the normal stage for its dramatic rollout. . . . Or at least it should have been. It certainly was to those settling-in, seeing the moment full-frame. Existential worry and crises were out there and would arrive on their own schedule. We were not immune, clearly, though it seemed like many thought we should be; and worse, that many still felt they were immune (to sacrifice, if not the virus). Many, many, the vast majority seemed to be settling-in, learning compassion, responsibility, a focus-ring larger than themselves. Some did heed the sage advising . . . *We must assist or die.* . . . I was a student of history. I knew of the Great Influenza, TB, Yellow Fever, the Bubonic fucking Plague. And some had expected a plague in our time. Asia seemed well prepared. They had had plague. Africa was seeming well prepared. They had had plague. We had not had a widespread epidemic shared equally and unsolicited since polio in the 1950s. There was—*of course*—HIV/AIDS. And yet, its devastation across the 1980s, having been politicized and siloed by the self-titled moralists leading things at that time meant it would not be a shared national experience; and it never was. And here we were: we knew nothing. We were arguing over masks, indoor dining, hair cuts. The accumulation of minor affronts inflaming

impatience was the easier lift for some. Some seemed not at all interested in the difficult work of slowing the spread. There was, instead, the shrill call to open up, now. . . . *We'll have a bed waiting for you.*

The country had to do this better. I had to do this better, if only to offset those doing a terrible job if they gave a shit about being better at all. This new normal spoke in a language foreign-seeming, a thing so titanic that it created its own atmosphere and rendered the petty just all the more. If only we could learn to speak the language. Some would learn a handful of words, enough to get by. Some were becoming fluent. Others apparently had no time for such "weak-kneed bullshit" and only wanted to get back to before. If only they could see that there was no *before*. There was only *next*. And we had damned well better start being better—*now*.

*In the century since 1918, technology has transformed so much, but the tools for curbing a novel pandemic haven't changed. Masks, social distancing, and frequent hand washing remain the only reliable ways to limit contagion until treatments or vaccines emerge. — Lawrence Wright, The New Yorker*

*Jerry Glowczewski, 97, fled Warsaw when the Nazis invaded, flew 100 combat missions (achieving the honor of ace as a part of the RAF's "City of Krakow" Polish Fighter Squadron), and made a life as an architect in Poland, Egypt and the U.S. He died of coronavirus in New York. — New York Times: At War*



*An Opening Scene* . May 16

*Tapping out stories of the dead, writing obituaries having become essential work . . . Department store giant and American icon, J. C. Penney, is filing for bankruptcy after 118 years. Will the pandemic be the final death blow for traditional retail? . . . All that morning as I skipped across a heaving sea of headlines, I had been going back over the timeline—all of those two months back. Those final days of *pre-this-moment* normal, back when my average everyday seemed so very average, routine, even dull, it all struck me as head-smack bizarre a line to write considering the mind-melt fury and troll-streaming fractious shitstorm that had been "that normal." It had been a normal and a nation in the throes of flailing partisan dysfunction, everything being forced onto the stage of an absurd political theatre that normalized spectacle and the everyday lie. And yet, that "fucked up" by comparison to the "fucked up" but two months later, how that *before times* was so average seeming. Given that, what would—*what could*—become of us?*

I went back over the timeline. That now miraculous seeming visit from sister and nephew in late February, a belated surprise to celebrate my fiftieth birthday, a now dream-like stint of in-person familial camaraderie (so, so brief) having been dropped in at the very last instant it was possible. It had seemed so normal, if exceptional. A surprise, an average seeming one, at the last moment it was possible. Air travel already unsafe. But, what the hell did we know? . . . *Are you an epidemiologist? . . . no . . .* those "in charge" already lying through their teeth and to our face. That weekend would have to carry me through (and did it ever), a precious cache of lamp oil that led the way into and out of the gloom-and-doom drear, through to what would again be.

But recalling the overnight change, within days of their heading home. A cleaved-clean break in my mind. I don't recall such a radical shift in thinking / attitude in anything before, ever. September 11, 2001, the only event that could qualify. And like that lightning strike instant, I was aware of the threat beforehand. We all knew about the embassy bombings in Africa in the late '90s and the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole. Terrorists were on the move. We were forewarned. But September 11th, damn . . . *Here's the thing, reality has the innate ability to be more than you think it will be. . . .* I had known what was happening in Wuhan since the start of the new year. It came ashore near Seattle in late January. We all knew it was coming. But the imaginative agility to picture just how f-d this all could be was not a gear that I at that time possessed. Plus, all the lies: the confounding fuck-all of lies . . . *This is going to get bad. Keep your head. . . .* Pulling away from the curbside drop-off, watching sister and nephew enter the terminal to leave on March 1, I did not know the half of it

Passing those early-to-mid March days over the weir of memory, I recalled my first grocery store trip, post March 11, 2020: the first time a general angst hung in the air, individual

doses significant enough to stoke collective fear. It was tangible, like humidity. It was visible if only by the taut tight on-alert sensitivity of facial ticks, side glances almost fearful of eye-to-eye contact. I clearly recall those that I did happen to catch in glance, looks in eyes doing the shoulder-shrug of disbelief for us . . . *Really? A fucking pandemic?! . . .* That steel-rod tense confusion having set nerves to edge, cloaking any and all *anywhere* in which more than a handful of strangers would normally congregate in public beneath an unsettled electric suspicion.

Yet, if only because of that—that no one was immune—things for the most part seemed to proceed orderly. It was rare to see someone either legitimately or selfishly losing their shit in a public space; and this, in a culture that had seemed to give itself over entirely to the comment-section sewer of cheap pointless sniping. There was improvisation to be had there, an adaptation to adopt and take forward beyond the moment . . . *beyond all off this to what will again be . . .* should we choose to carry such wisdom with us. That a viral contagion was among us, all of us. Angst worn as a particle coat, an aerosol atmosphere charged and trailing our steps in that 6-8 foot latent drift enforcing what was by the middle of May the normalized protective bubble of personal space. And how it seemed to appear, evolve into being overnight, back in mid-March (though we had known it was coming for months). And yet, how things seemed to proceed as usual, almost orderly, in the face of an unknown viral killer.

In the face of an unknown viral killer. In the face of any terrible unknown. To be able to handle yourself with grace and deference and self-control, compassion towards others, often having to do so inside the cage-match of white-hot me first emotional outbursts. The you-first / after-you slate of reactions evolving that we could—*that we should*—take through to the other

side. In the midst of a novel difficulty: grace, self-control. But two weeks out from a magical, if ordinary seeming, family visit, I was already improvising. I tried hard in those early days.

We had forgotten what this was like, though deep within we all knew what this was like. The human condition is nothing if not trailed by the heel-lick flames of rampaging indifferent plague. Our instinctual neural centers understood this, recognized this, even if our conscious selves refused to believe it, failed to recognize the recognizable. Everyone in that store that day understood this, recognized this. They did not want to do so. I did not want to do so. But we did, we all did. We humans, we know plague. It is in our bones, our DNA. We had simply forgotten the all of it from within our perceived "so modern" immunity to the past. But the past is funny that way: caustic, irrepressible, and here again. Grace, self-control. *Don't forget to be nice.*

"This thing is real. It does not look good," I said to myself (in so many words), moving among and past my fellow humans. We were all going about this most normal of tasks, doing so as if we had all been stripped of a piece of basic knowledge, dropped into a familiar usual routine but without that innate security and normal-ness of knowing how it was supposed to go, the metrics by which to gauge how to do it. And the most fucked up part? I knew that I was wearing the same look. We were all mirrors. The tense dread creeping in along aisles and hovering atop fidgety checkout lines having infected the bloodstream of collective activity, of public anything. How the mood swung between dread in the face of a rapidly developing unknown and self-preservation (re: all the damned hoarding). Suddenly everyone was, and had to be, suspicious of everything and everyone. But being complete, involving everyone, it crystallized into a tacit acceptance and that most odd piece of it: a strange, if anxious, calm. A low inaudible buzz

seemed to hang over that opening scene, everyone at once starting out on a journey that no one had signed up for or had any idea how it would go. *Welcome to the new normal.*

*Postscript:* I jotted a note after that trip about a woman in front of me, face buried in a mobile device, restless daughter acting up and hardly noticed (for, and probably due to the face burying). The soon to be self-enforced (mostly) and mandatory (mostly) deterrent of minding 6-feet in-between shoppers in checkout lines was not yet a strictly understood thing. She, I, we all were in stock-up mode. But again, it was proceeding orderly, tense but calm; the unsaid acceptance that freaking out would only make things that much worse. Still, I was close enough to watch this woman tap out: "It's a freaking madhouse @ Kroger!" and post it for her world of drama-hungry (I had to guess) followers to ingest. This, while those in line patiently waited their turn, shoppers generally reserved, engaged in internal mulling at best as we all went through those strange new motions. I almost wanted to comment—in real-time / real-space no less—but for outing my eavesdropping (a burnished skill I deploy agnostically, with stealth, and own completely). "What, your trip to the grocery store not dramatic enough? Was it coming up short of the reality TV chaotic freak-out you'd hoped for?" I wanted to say this, but did not. I felt I should apologize for holding onto my shit in the face of a fucking pandemic, coming up short of her madhouse expectation. But I did not do that. My silent off-into-space staring seemed a more effective antidote. . . . People.



*Art Never Dies* . May 18

*In art, we can find a humbling sort of wisdom. We see themes and ideas repeat over many lifetimes . . . our lives on this earth will always be part of something bigger.*

— Sonny Rollins

The pandemic, staggering into month three. I increasingly felt the need to push myself creatively, to stoke the fire within. It may have just been the circumstances, the relative isolation, the lack of the tactile, but those inner embers had blown up into a three-alarm blaze. It was, for sure, rolling out of having recognized the moment for all of its most fucked-up tonnage and historical weight (atonal grating things often found in tandem). It was no new thing, this arms out "get on with it" urging of self. I had had this thought bobbing about the rolling boil of consciousness since I

could recall. A single line journal entry from about 15 years ago, having stuck in my head since and available in just such moments, says it plain, true. A chipped exasperated spike, I wrote:

"Create, dammit!

Here, now, the miracle of living so so obvious, infection and mortality out there and spreading. Too close, too close. The seconds ticking away, a hammer-clang immediacy. Here, now. And I had damned well do something meaningful with it . . . *Get on with it!*

The tone was set in the first paragraph of that day's entry, "Every day: create. Every day: try something in the moment." The heightened sense of the instant was revealing nooks and niches that were always there, but had fallen outside the normal light of day, the ability to see it clearly from within the normal thrum and rush of *before times'* busy-ness. But this, now, the heightened sense aiming flashlights into dark corners, the unknown reservoirs of things needing attention, of national possibility unrealized. All of it: anxious, eager. There was the gnawing sense that it was right there in front of my face, in front of our national eyes, things neglected, things having not lived up to their promise: my creative output, my nation asleep at the wheel. This required urgent action, things long shoved into recesses for their seeming incurability, the everyday headache they would bring, the crude reveal of who we actually were as a people, as humans. We were not living up to our potential. I was not living up to my potential. This here and now was a time for art, for creative light to flood in and step up. Its tried-true ability / utility to shine light into corners, to illuminate in a way that allows a side entrance into difficult subject matter—personal, national—showing where and how light can enter, reveal, cleanse, remake.

Of course creativity and art could do this. It would make the most of this moment that it could. It already was. We could see the lid gurgling atop a nation locked down, locked up, bored, fed up. The creative use of time and talent underwritten by effort and ingenuity. A guy created an amazing playground for his kids out of hardwood lying about his property, having used nothing but a chainsaw. Photographers criss-crossing the country: four wheels, tents, recording the isolation, the beauty within it and just at its periphery. Musical groups recording in separation, creating the unity and synch of song after-the-fact with post-production software. My own band, our weekly practice night a rarely missed ritual—its moon-howl therapy, its recharging of the bone-bag batteries having just entered its twenty-second year—blown up. But, how we quickly sub'd in weekly video hangouts (something not even fathomable to those isolated in 1918). And this, followed by our own ambitious recording project: one member at a time, one track at a time, record and upload the digital master, hand it off to the next, and then the next, until the song is finished. . . . Art is the ultimate survivor. It has survived the purges and partisans, the puritans and executioners, the small, the petty, and all those come-and-go egos humanity must endure and has long endured. Art has survived wars, plagues, and fanatics, the church and the putsch. It has outlived them all. Art will never die.

But at that moment, there was legitimate worry about so much art in the moment dying. All of the shuttered venues: all of the live music, comedy / improv troupes, dance, theater; all of the movie theatres, the chains and independents; all of the symphonies and ensembles and operas and choirs; all of the museums large, small, in-between. It was a cultural wipe-out in the making, the hit landing hard on ventures whose profit is not measured in massive fortunes, but the flush of creating a rich creative world worth living in. There are the brain numb down through history,

and to this day, that would dismiss the arts as "not real work." And this, as they listen to music on their way to work, watch Netflix at the end of their days of work, consuming art as if another bag of chips. It has always been so. And yet, what is the first thing marauding conquering hordes have done throughout history? Destroy the culture of the vanquished. Destroy the heart of the vanquished by appropriating their culture. Kill culture and you kill the soul of a people. In step (if in a less dramatic slow-drip frame), allow the die-off of culture and you are but a pallbearer for the soul of society. What's the point if the only point is money-making and bill paying? Art is the sun that clears out the grey. It is the soft halide glow of the moon in the bone-dense dark. It is the light we seek, if not fully recognizing that fact. It is as indispensable as clean water, a roof over your head. It is the heartbeat of any nation professing to own greatness.

In the low depths of the Great Depression, the FDR administration rolled out the massive Works Progress Administration. A New Deal shovel-ready program designed to shock life back into private enterprise having flatlined, to curb the mass unemployment and suffering (something here again, too close, too close), the WPA included a sub-project: Federal Project One. "Federal One" was a direct work relief program that provided not only a stage and a voice, but a living for unemployed musicians, writers, painters, and actors. It stands, still, as the most direct significant institutional support the American government (voice of *We, The People*) has ever considered. Many decried the expense then. "Get a real job," many said. And then they went right out to attend one of the program's thousands of musical and theatrical performances staged in cities, suburbs, and rural blink-and-miss-it towns across the country; they went right out and bought one of the 48 state or hundreds of other territorial, city, and regional American Guide tour books, mostly hard-bound guides (some 300+ pages in length including fold-out auto-tour maps) that

flowed out of the prodigious Federal Writers' Project; they went right on without missing a beat to fix pride to the countless civic and post-office wall murals laboriously painted by artists with no other outlet for the skill-set that defined them as individuals. At a bucket-drop 1% of the WPA's average annual budget, the vast scope of creative output over its eight years in existence places Federal One atop, if not alone on top of the most cost-effective government programs in American history. . . . If we cared about the state of our national soul, we must care about art. Would we initiate a "Federal One 2020?" Could we? . . . *Get a real job. Not real work.*

Some cultivate their innate abilities to become carpenters or machinists. Some have all the skills required to find steady work in human resources or managing mid-sized companies that makes parts for cars, airplanes, shipping. Some have the frame of build and will to be shrimpers or to farm peanuts. Friends of mine have run restaurants, a few master chefs sprinkled in. In my family alone there are marketers and project managers, electricians and childcare professionals, account executives, an actual executive, engineers and computer scientists (including at least one actual "rocket scientist"), those having served in clerical roles, those working retail, teachers and counselors, a used car buyer, a boiler technician, a lawyer, a postman. A grandfather and two of my cousins gave the title "professional musician" a shot. They were both successful, though their careers in the arts were short-lived, all moving on to "more steady" work. For they found, as so many do, that in step with being a professional athlete, being a professional in the arts is a hard gig. There is little in place to ease the down-turn of fortunes in professions deemed, somehow, "not real work." And though the pandemic had made clear that we do not, and may not be able to live without the output of creative artists, still, the not infrequent claim: "get a real job." It is a fatally uninformed view most often falling out of those who have never taken such a risk, have

no idea of the raw financial exposure and monastic fortitude required to take such a leap, opting instead to throw weak-kneed shade at those who do and fail. It seems more of jealousy than a realistic op-ed on "legitimate" work, a leveling tactic by those unable and unwilling to understand what makes fellow citizens who happen to be *artists* tick.

Some have all the innate skills to take up plumbing or programming. Others are artists. And the irony of the mentioned slam is that to be a pro athlete or a professional in the arts, you have to dedicate yourself with near, if not outright obsessive zeal. You have to work harder and longer and for less than the average project manager or general contractor, if only because we are a country that—*still*—considers such professionalism to be novelty work. Situations and innate skills honed over time deliver ways to make a living. Some have HVAC repair. Some have a plumb account services job or a position in forestry / natural resource management available to them. Some have art. And being forced to wait tables, work retail, deliver packages, is sidebar to the core skills of a person whose product is creativity. No thinking person would say that a hard-working dedicated sous chef should be a full-time grocery store shelf stocker / part-time sous chef. Yet that was precisely the average working artist's lot in America, 2020.

And then, this thing gut-punching the professional creative arts harder than any other industry save maybe travel, restaurant services, event planners / rentals. Art would survive, but many careers in the arts might not . . . *Would we? Could we?* . . . Limping on into the third month of this mess, the virus calling the shots, there was that one thing gurgling up as painfully clear: as with the application of craft in professional sport, we could not do without the application of skill in music, theatre, art. Harry Hopkins, the director of the WPA (and by extension executive director of Federal One) said it true: "artists have to eat too."

The Actors Fund had picked up its megaphone and was reminding us all not to forget the performing arts. The rallying cry went up from the National Association of Independent Venues, asking: would we "Save Our Stages"? Would the heightened sense of a stricken moment, one having already come wrapped inside a fraught fractured real, the nation toying absent-mindedly with autocratic solutions to democratic problems, could we see through all of the quaking and clack-clacketing-along to reframe what seemed, now, to be for all times obvious: That we cannot let art die. That we are soul dead without art. That letting the livelihoods of project managers and cabinetmakers and distillers and civil engineers and warehouse workers and all the thousands on thousands of other ways to work evaporate for lack of logistical and organizational focus, that demanding the work of politics does something beyond the sugar rush of its performative power mirage trappings (and how about starting with giving their all towards containing the fucking virus, *let's never lose sight of that fact*) . . . that for all of these thousands and thousands of ways to work, we could, we should, add creative artists to that immense varied list and pledge to do what we must as individuals—as a nation, a culture—to save as many jobs in the creative arts as was humanly possible? We cannot know the all of what makes fellow citizens tick. But we can support their efforts to add to the world in pursuing their craft. That was where we were by mid-May. And creative artists were in the process of losing their careers, if not their shirts, as well.

I had no immediate logistical, political, or economic solutions. Few did. But I was every day mourning for those things of the immense varied national soul that we might lose along with all the actual souls we were losing every day. Here was the raw nerve reveal that ran through that day's entry. All I had was the ability to push myself—a long-aspiring, occasionally financially successful creative artist—to work harder than before: *to get to it*. What did I have to lose? Why

would I stick to a more conservative predictable path? This thing, staggering into month three, having recognized the trembling totality of this instant, why—*how*—could I hold back?

Go big. Create. Think beyond what I might have thought possible, what "normal times" had consumed in money-making, bill paying, the drone-on routine busy-ness of our unrelenting modern schedules. Go for it now. *Now*. Every morning, document this bizarre alternate world we had found ourselves in. Just get it down, capture the emotional *now*. I could come back to it later, pull out the central drift, try to make sense of it. In light of art withering all around us, here was my answer: See to your art. Document this moment. Do it with a creative slant. Rip quotes from headlines, dig out the themes hiding within. Be opinionated. "Stick to your guns," I thought. But do so while making sure it was all lit from beneath by compassionate common sense . . . *Don't forget to be nice*. . . . There was more than one way to interpret common sense in the moment, but there could be no mistaking the ultimate inevitable need to go about self-preservation with compassion and selfless respect, to go about both until it hurt, to look out for others as we all made our way through.

So immense. So much unknown. Beyond platitudes and prognostication and the sudden abundance of small frail egos. I would have to check mine at the door . . . Could I? I could push something meaningful into the world . . . Would I? I could and would attempt to do so through art. Every day: create art. Every day: work at compassion. And given the heightened sense of all things right then, the totality of it all, I felt not just released to do so in a way that the busy-ness of *before times* had invariably interrupted, I felt compelled to do so. All things that once stood in the way had fallen away. There was no time to lose. Reshape and remake my own existence around a driven creative pace stoked by the warmth of compassion, of caring, of giving a shit. It

was a way to live. And in the midst of all the terrible tragic weirdness, that thought, that goal, settled my concussed mind. *Art will never die*. Make sure that this was so. Attend to your art.

*Movie theatres are largely shut down. Concerts are on hiatus. Broadway has gone dark. The pandemic has turned the world of culture on its head. At the same time, the capacities of art—to soothe, to diagnose, to help make sense of these times—have never been more apparent.* — The Atlantic Daily e-newsletter

*Postscript:* In the midst of the terrible tragic weirdness of late March 2020, I received a left-field note informing me that a full-length novel I had labored over for a decade+ had been accepted for publication. It was to be my first "major label" release. In the mayhem of that moment I had forgotten all about submitting it the previous Fall, a light shaft that beat out the grey and found its way in. It was energizing. I got to it. Art was finding its way through too.



*Concussed, The Soundtrack* . . . May 19

*The Navajo Nation moved past New York State as the region suffering the highest infection rate in America, per capita . . . Our response to the pandemic is proving itself entirely predictable: consistent for its inconsistency . . . Many healthcare workers, it has been found, cannot afford health insurance . . . The Japanese economy has entered recession, officially.*

It had taken awhile to track down: *3 in 1* by modern jazz artist, Matthew Shipp. From an album titled *Art of the Improviser*, this lurching confused-dream-like work had lingered in the backdrop of a swaying span of time having passed for me (and others) in a speed-up / slow-down way—fitfully—month over month. I did not note the date, but one night in mid-April *3 in 1* had rolled out of a random playlist and into the charged lower atmosphere of our closed-up locked-down house. That instant, dense and boundless at once, tearing at the fabric of the usual by that point

complete. The abnormality of self-quarantine, the lack of knowing what was next, the possibility—likelihood?—of infection. And all the while, the bell-rung hammering of the death toll, all of that had coalesced in a swirling mind-consuming whole of days without borders or outlines.

Timeless heavy spans, disorienting, drifting . . . *and then, that song.*

It was about ten minutes long, or five, or hours for that matter . . . *no hours or days in coronatime.* . . . It was perfectly calibrated for the moment. It crept in like a fog, found its way past the liminal constraints guard-railing happy mediums, the expected. It looped slowly through a performance purposefully messing with time. The drummer moved the beat around, unsteady if planned that way, off just a bit. This left the piano to stumble and stagger out front. Notes landed where they were not expected. Halting, wary. "*Where . . . am I?*" Drifting, slightly out of phase, the piece came off like a controlled stumble. I had heard it that April night and scrawled "three of one," not catching the artist, not jotting the date. An ocean of returned suggestions met a search for three-of-one, but none of what I was after. Then, I forgot all about it. In the mind squeeze, it dropped off into the indistinguishable whirling scum of events, moods, anxious and aimless wandering . . . until, there it was again, another random playlist, a carom back into being.

"Right, that song." It was more soundtrack than song, a musical backdrop influencing a point in time, a moment of experience. Transported back to that April night, reliving the mood it struck: It was the soundtrack to a concussion, and especially that moment in its immediate wake; the confusing jumble of instincts and sensory input flowing in unfiltered, hitting the brain like unexplained rain—simple objects that require no more context than their being, their existing in the world (the drumming at points rain-like, rain on a tin roof). And in that moment of coming-to, whether it was to take ten minutes or five minutes, or . . . *time losing all meaning* . . . the blur

of recognition, the familiar recast in a context-less pulsing void of light and sound: a sensory spectrum having shifted (and quite suddenly) on its axis. The disorienting jag of linear time, the vertigo roll of conscious space. It is unrecognizable, but that pieces of it are recognized. You know what it is, but it is not entirely knowable. It is dense, empty, boundless.

That was that song. But what the hell was that song? On a lark that morning I had typed it into a search engine again, but must have typed "in" instead of "of." And there it was: *3 in 1*. A perfect soundtrack for that April instant, the perfect soundtrack still. The speed-up-and-down stumble induced an altered run-together of notes that mimicked, quite perfectly, the altered confusing run-together of hours and seconds and days and minutes stacked one on another like empty jars on curious curio shelves. It was the emotional frame of it that landed—was landing still—as it crept in along the ground, slowly, imperceptibly filling the whole of that confusing surround. The grasping at slippery facts, the overarching bleeding of hearts and minds the world over, the nation over: America, the undisputed epicenter of it all. *A fucking pandemic.*

*The gaussian lens through which the shock was filtered: a single thin-scrim layer sorting itself out on down along the spectrum of happenstance . . .*

There I was, a month later. My concussed state had settled on an uneasy calm, the known unknowns. The soundtrack of days flowed, imperceptibly: a slow-sprint, a run of notes white-noising the brain's cognitive restore having settled-in following the blow.



*Americans* . May 21

*It seems we have forgotten what sacrifice is, and probably because we have not paid anywhere near enough attention to the suffering that abounds. — Note to Self*

This, from Farhad Manjoo that day: *The coronavirus is like a heat-seeking missile designed to frustrate progress in almost every corner of society. . . . This virus, designed with careful random precision by the indifferent happenstance of nature, its spike-top determination having found our restive irreverence, our insolent and lauded liberty so tactile, so advantageous—a viral velcro. It had locked-in and was firing away . . . with us. . . . C19, having turned our great national traits against us; and this at a time of national fault-lurch fracturing. It would seem that it was to take all of a miracle for we Americans to not turn on ourselves as we moved through, the iceberg that*

lay dead ahead. But national dysfunction aside, would it even be feasible to do the thing we have all of our lives been trained, cajoled, and driven by ideological and actual marketing campaigns to not do: To think of others first and foremost? And not just others, but those we do not know and would probably never meet? Would we remember to be Americans in the end?

Given the late evidence (re: pulling together, collective sacrifice, selflessness), and this in the face of a targeted nationwide threat unlike anything faced in the lifetimes of most, there was not a lot on which to hang optimism at that moment. But still, my entry that day did not drop into a gloom-doom spiral. It could have, and it would seem after-the-fact like maybe it should have: to be unsparing, snap on the harsh lights and train it on the bullshit never fail selfishness running over our contemporary days and seconds. (This, as if shame actually worked anymore.) But there would be plenty of that to come, and right soon, that Thursday's entry circling wagons about a mote of optimism instead. I wrote: "It is obvious that we Americans are largely on our own here. But then, I'll cast my lot with the skepticism and the DIY everywhere abundant as an alternative to the alt-fact foghorns of an afterthought leadership. Really, as if governing never dawned on them, never occurred that it was part (let alone the vital part) of the program. A crude transparent kleptocracy driven by a primitive and privileged tribalism then driving a lurching and grasping country into a shit-slog ditch." Instead, I would prefer that the much lauded, much celebrated, "average" American take the wheel. "On our own, and maybe that is for the best," I wrote.

If running the risk of sounding cliché (and I was big-time), I still did believe that we were more conscientious, authentic, and compassionate than we were sullen, insular, and loathsome. A cliché serves up gloss-overs by those who would rather not do the investigative work. But just as often it captures a core iota of truth. And yes, I was leaning on the latter—*big time*. But it was

something to work with—*and*—there was clear evidence: the brave steady stream of genuine compassionate acts shown. There had been more good things done than ignorant abrasive things done. Clinging, perhaps. But there I was: clinging to optimism. Sure, it could be that I thought this only because I had been so long programmed to storyboard such a response (the long tail drift of national greatness, sleeves-rolled-up average Americans achieving the inconceivable). But did I truly believe it? Could what I was seeing as March turned on April and on through that May support an end-tally positivity with so much selfishness sloshing about in the well?

*The World Health Organization reported the largest single-day increase in infections since the pandemic began, as global confirmed cases passed 5 million . . . The virus spreads easily between people. The virus does not spread easily in other ways. Contaminated surfaces aren't a big risk . . . 33% of Americans surveyed say they are preparing more meatless meals because of higher prices and limited options at grocery stores. \**

Were we devolving? Had we blown so far off course that the expectation of a nation based in the rule-of-law, founded from equal parts devout religious observance—*and*—temporal mind expansion having flowed from the Enlightenment, holding both at once in the lobes of the body politic, was that all dissolving? A nation in which being a generally good person (and let's just define that here and now as: leading with dignity and respect when among those you know and do not know, and not being a public asshole) guaranteed a certain uninterrupted measure of security? But, had we ever achieved that in a way approaching total, or even kind of? Native Americans and African Americans and Latin Americans and Asian Americans and LGBTQ

Americans, all those in the past and all of those *still today* considered by suprema-racists as "other" would—and *should*—laugh that thought out of the room.

The pandemic was an X-ray, exposing all of the rot-gut insecurity, the gross systemic financial inequality, the appalling tribal drooling that segments people out for toxic doses of scorn, derision, and blame-the-victim primacy. This, when—as the X-ray had made clear—the thing that we needed more than any other thing to repair this mess of a present was to accept and reckon with our fuck-ugly past, prepare to do and to be better, to live under the banner of selfless compassion snapping in the strong gusts of what was next. Reverse the tick-tight epidemic of naked self-interest with the curative flood of community obligation. *Assist or Die.*

*In a state of nature, each man is free and may do as he pleases; but in society, every individual must sacrifice a part of his natural right. — "Civis (David Ramsey) to the Citizens of South Carolina," February 4, 1788. Library of America: The Debate on the Constitution*

What had been the face of America's pandemic response to that point? People hoarding toilet paper and stripping shelves bare out of selfish motivations, all of it made magnitudes worse (in part fueled) by the laissez-faire response, the blackhole of national executive leadership void of an iota of how we pull in one direction, rely on each other to get through. And yet, maybe that was for the best: To be done with a response washing its hands of all responsibility so as to avoid any charge of culpability—"something best left to the states" their actual strategy, one resulting in negligent homicide. Fuck them. Fuck the selfish. We got this, Americans . . . *right?*

This was never going to go smoothly in a country such as this. And into that third month we were beginning to see just how un-smooth it could get. Which brought me back to that earlier point: *On our own, and maybe that is for the best.* All that was needed was for we Americans to be better version of ourselves, and to do this not for ourselves alone, but for all. That was all. It did not seem like a lot to ask. But at that point, it seemed like an awful lot to expect.

*This is a patchwork pandemic—don't expect a unified national experience. . . .*

*This type of splintered outbreak is 'psychologically perilous' . . . The disease progresses slowly . . . The disease spreads unevenly. — Ed Yong*

*To be an American in this moment is often to be beset with a sense of ambient fragility. — Megan Garber*

\* CNBC / Revised CDC Guidelines / National Geographic



*The Future Of Now* . . . M a y 2 2

*6 Feet Apart Folks* — An electric road sign in St. Louis

*Is the future ever anything but a complete void?* — Note / Question to Self

"What comes next?" I could not get the question out of my head that day. "What the hell was next?" It was a question with no answer, as was the case with most of these improvisational entries-turned-essays. There was a time, but a few months prior, when I had at least a vague idea if simply from the inertia of expectation . . . *Get up. Take care of things. Do the work thing. Do the non-work thing. Sleep.* . . . There had been more than a heavy dose of upheaval across the recent past (re: *before times*): personal, national, global. But none of that had erased the

expectation that, eventually, it would sort itself out. It always seemed to do so, as uneven and unsatisfying as it could often be. And even lacking immediate answers / resolutions, history would handle it. It always did . . . *right?*

Perhaps. But right then, the outlines of what that could be spun out vague, fragmented, opaque teasers only. More over, the expectation, the general layout of "future," was done and gone. The future was only what was in front of my face. And it was bound to be that way for some time, if only because the present sucked up all of the oxygen, starved the brain of the oxygenated blood flow enough to imagine or even consider what was next. The present eclipsed all else, collapsing past, present, future into this moment. Here, where the focus must be; and not for light reasons. It was an inescapable real, for all. Given our modern interconnected state, here was a thing that all of humanity was experiencing at the same time, and this while all knew that all were experiencing it at the same time. *Amazing*. That had to be a first. All of humanity knew of the ice ages and volcanic winters and all those global contagions past. But all of humanity back then had no way to know that all were in the same straits . . . until this: *our strait*.

*It was a refresher reminding of all the insular patterns that they had so lately come to embrace; this, and now, why it was time to move on. For this was shock. This was the thing that would, that could, bring them back from the brink, retire that reclusive routine having hardened into instinct, having petrified into petroglyphs captured in long ago stone, a languid long ago "now" . . . This now, this here and now, making a small-caps mockery of it all, a flash-pan nothingness made obvious, and in real time.*

The overwhelming real vaulted this out and over any one person's ability to scale up. This was too large. It was total. Our brains were not designed for *total*. They were designed for simple fragments of totality (minus the vague, opaque). And yet, despite inherent design limitations, we are apt to try; and we are better for the trying, if never able to fully contemplate *total*.

Here it was: too large for one mind to thoroughly pin down. It was up there on a plane with contemplating the infinite reach of space, or God, a present stepping beyond the capacity to process and filter into life's normal categories . . . *Clean the dishes. Seal leak in bathroom faucet. Take out trash. Provision.* . . . This was in its own category: unknown, unknowable, so vast that it voided out what was past and what was to possibly be, leaving only now, all that the brain and its oxygenated blood fuel had the capacity on which to hazard a guess. An historic present.

The only sufficient answer seemed: accept, strap in, ride it out. And that felt somehow comforting, an easy digestible reality. It felt innate, because this is what humans have been doing forever. This here was not new. It was only new to *now*. The future had no currency to leverage. The past, even with its usual authority and pull, seemed second-chair. Here, *now*, this thing so big—*so total*—that it consolidated perception onto a single plane, a zip code in which we needed to reside for some time; and this if only due to the harsh X-rays circulating, diagnoses informing us of the troubled state of said zip code. Yes, sinking resolve into the future—*now*—seemed an investment well worth the risk.



*Distant, But Social* . May 23

*Hertz, company that pioneered the rental car, is filing for bankruptcy . . .*

It was the first "socially distant" gathering of more than two humans that I had felt right about since this shit-slog had started, my band banding together to record a music video. It felt odd. It felt great, but very strange. In and among a group so known, their quirks and individual ticks and tacks not at all odd and least of all strange, familiarity eventually won out . . . kinda. There was still the transparent sheen between us all, walking talking bubbles having evolved a force field deflecting anyone coming too close; which I stumbled into doing, regardless, because I have never needed to do any such thing for all of my fifty plus years of living. Aside from respecting another's personal space, I never had to think twice about stepping right up to a friend and a pal,

or even the friend of a pal. And I was doing so this day; and no, I wasn't always masked-up when I should have been, and would realize that, but would wave it off as a one-off only to then repeat the scene over and again because we were all outside on another—*yet another*—beautiful Spring day. But this, precisely the guard-down behavior C19 was praying for, was ringing its hands in hunting for . . . and . . . but . . . well . . . it was a great day, and it was odd, and it was great.

Into our third month, the band had been gathering weekly and virtually via video-link, as had much of America and the world—the friends / family / co-workers as pixels an innovation that would most definitely screen-capture define this moment. We had met every week save the one right after it was declared, that week of St. Patrick's Day the only miss since our final in-the-flesh practice: Tuesday, March 10. Thinking back on that night, how it had seemed loaded; but was more of an anticipation. "Something" was certainly up. But "the what?" still not known; and we would know soon that we did not know the half of it. It would seem like we would come up on that feeling about every week or two, the compounding half on half on half, a piling on. But in those early days we knew almost nothing of what it would be, what it could be. We could see what was happening, but stood warily behind our protective transparent sheen, the one that must surely shield an exceptional America from the fate of China and Southeast Asia and Australia and Iran and Italy and Spain and all those scattered global outposts of vectors blooming. March 10, but hours away from it being made official: *a fucking pandemic*. We knew we were on the precipice that night, but carried on as we have almost every Tuesday or Wednesday for decades now . . . *moon-howl therapy, recharging the bone-bag batteries, the blessed reprieve of band practice night*. . . . We did not know. How could we fully know? *Now* we knew, fully.

And we ventured out on that Saturday, the start of Memorial Day weekend. For a few of us, it was the first in-person thing outside our homes that we had done. We had all done the friends as pixels thing. That was a great thing, a solid alternate to the real thing. But this day reminded me of it not being the real thing. As mentioned, having ginned up and then gearing up the band's virtual recording project, an ambitious thing for a band having shown little to no ambition down through the years . . . *one member at a time, one track at a time, record, upload, hand it off*. . . . The shoot itself captured multiple angles, shots, takes, the video to accompany our initial release—*start off with a bang!*—in what would become a year-long song-release-a-week marathon that would take us through the whole of 2020 into 2021.

It had all started as a simple "what the hell do we do now?" way to keep the band thing going, developing out of an earlier idea to get decent recordings of our vast back catalog of original songs quickly fading into digital archival dust. And the project was already generating its own momentum. The inertia of it, subservient to the larger goal, would keep us all in line; lest a lazy week intercede. ("Hell no, we can't miss a week. Get on it. Get to it!" was the chiding we gave ourselves the week of Christmas 2020.) It carried on almost of its own accord, carrying us along in its creative current, its flow numbing the blade-edge strain, all the f-ing mystery and the selfish being shitty and selfish. It came to be beyond question, a settled thing: a song-release-a-week. Keep it going . . . *hand it off, hand it off, until finished*. . . . And on that warm clear Saturday, it called the band out to a nearby cemetery, the perfect backdrop for "Over And Over," a song of living and dying, the need to celebrate the former, and recognize the latter. In service to the thing we had created and could not, would not, let down. This recording project: the bob-to-the surface spotlight in our "pandemic year." That day in late May: when it really got rolling.

We set up on multiple levels in the older section of the cemetery, the rolling top of a hill graced by red cedar pine, dogwood, ringed of poplar and oak. Fantastic, and under a blue slate sky, a lazy drift of clouds hinting the summer heat to come. And it was during the shot-blocking and phone camera set-up / staging that it finally settled, our reverse polarities kicking more into gear in yielding a safe distance: the distance responsible, the social inevitable . . . *6 feet, boys*. . . . But the distance proved no match for the usual stream of sarcasm, snark-riddled joke crack, all self-deprecating and good natured (though no one immune from a good pile-on). And this: ringed by the unspoken concern for the well-being of the others, a general well-being for all. A micro and macro focus. Good folk, this band. The long shots of the entire band, tight shots of strategically placed cameras zoomed-in. The distance noticeable, but of no matter.

If one had been picked up from the same day in 2019 and dropped without any advance knowledge into that upended unknowable year, it would have been a scene odd enough to bring a mind's sanity into question: everyone purposefully trying to avoid each other (if they could remember to do so). And yet, here was our new "odd," our new "strange." . . . It is all one big long odd strange ramble-through, this world, this life. But this, the oddest, the strangest. And yet, we evolve. And we were figuring out this "odd." Months in, we were getting how to do this, how we push through. There we all stood on a late May Saturday: in our spots, marked by distance, but the "social" unaffected. A social evolution experiment in real-time. Distance alone would amount to little in our determination to remain social. And perhaps, in the end, that was the propulsive reality of the day, an act of defiance stating clearly: *We will prevail*.



***The Experiment*** . . . M a y 24

*The president has called houses of worship essential and urged governors to let them reopen . . . Americans venture out for holiday travel in test of virus containment . . . States and beaches reopen ahead of Memorial Day . . . "Out of respect for each other, as Americans that care for each other, we need to be wearing masks in public when we cannot social distance." \**

Would the U.S. prove worthy of the title: *a truly great nation*? Reopening economic activity with such a lurching fit-start, the irresponsible down-playing wave away talking heads going on (from safe secure studios) of the need to reopen it all now. And this, despite clear outcomes: an inevitable (planned?) jump in infection rates. Here was the experiment then in motion: Could we reopen and not begin a chain reaction? We were about to find out, because it was underway.

Memorial Day weekend crowds were already assembling.

Over it. Ready to move on. Reopen it all now. But would we Americans do so in a way that showed respect for our fellow citizen? Early indications were not encouraging, starting with: reopening things closed without having in any way contained a rampaging novel virus. It was an experiment, one conducted not after careful consideration or consultation or preparation, but with forthright serious-seeming press conferences proclaiming freedoms. Of course these staged ops conspicuously failed to mention the part about how many who would take actions in the name of said freedoms were likely to infect, even kill, other freedom-loving Americans by the runaway thousands. There was not any of that, but only the vapid shouting into microphones at lecterns and on sets and in safe secure podcast booths . . . *Can't we just let it wash over us?* . . . A soul numb expelling of hot air.

It was obvious that little effort was being trained on the "how we save both the economy —and—save lives" part of all of it. You know, the hard part? The part that required actual effort, actual exertion and creativity? And therein lay the real experiment: Would we care enough for each other? Would we project basic consideration on our fellow citizen, act in ways that said without saying: "I value your life enough to take simple precautions, to take on slight temporary discomforts for you, the person I do not know and probably never will?" We were opening the bulk of economic activity at a clip. That was the easy part. But there was another far more important experiment underway too. Could we be better? Would we care?

*This pandemic is flattening time . . . I run a restaurant in a seaside town. I am not an epidemiologist . . . The W.H.O. said countries that relax restrictions too soon are at risk of a second peak. †*

I got it. I wanted to move on too. I did not want my livelihood to tank. I wanted no one to lose their livelihood. I wanted prosperity broad and wide, broader and wider than it had ever been. I wanted go to the movies again, attend concerts again, go to baseball games (that should have been occurring nightly by then), and shop without real-time diagnosing the vector potential of a fellow shopper's distance. I wanted to go back to our favorite restaurants and hoist pints in a singing chanting crowd at a pub. Not having those things, not having the ability to consider those things, sucked like few things before: a captive in forced detention. I got it. I understood people being scared to death over the loss of a business, a job, both. I understood just wanting to go out and do things and being tired of not being able to do those things that we never thought twice about doing . . . *meeting up with a friend as one does, or as one did at the time.*

Such an individualistic people. No one could ever tell us Americans what to do. One of our greatest traits having been turned against, a cunning microcosm turning us on ourselves. And therein lay the rub. We could choose to starve it of its ability to infect or kill. We could take on sharp financial and cultural inconveniences in order to wage heavy compassion. We could choose to temporarily deny ourselves *some things*, do things that others were telling us we needed to do —*or*—we could do just do whatever the hell we wanted because we were born in America and no one could ever tell us what to do or not do during a pandemic, or at any other time.

And this whole argument spun beyond the difficult and necessary debate over saving businesses, saving livelihoods, saving careers and life savings and fellow citizens from financial ruin. We were having that debate too. And we were failing that debate too. And if only because we were proving unable to get past ourselves. Most seemed to be, at least, trying; and in that

there was hope of slowing the spread. But some were not, enough were not, and that was all it was going to take to unleash more serious waves than anything we had seen to that point. Here was the grand experiment: Could we save ourselves from ourselves? Could we be better?

That morning, I read that in the fall of 1918 Americans had found themselves over it and fed up and had begun to demand that businesses and schools and theaters (all having been closed for about a month) be allowed to open back up, and that big public events go on as they once did. And they did this and Americans let their guard down and the spread amplified and "washed over" America big-time. In the end, some three-quarters of a million Americans would die.

And here we were, having endured not quite two months of things being shut down. And it was all opening back up and we were doing this because Americans were over it and fed up and. . . . I got it. I wanted to move on too. We all wanted to move on. But mass death was the iceberg lying straight ahead, and in our path, and the only way for us to lean port or starboard of a titanic fuck-all mess was to lean into compassion for those we knew and those we did not. . . .

*Mask up and shut the fuck up.*

Would we be able to get beyond ourselves, evolve a default respect and dignity so sorely lacking in *before times*, in *those times*? Or would we amplify waves of infection beyond control because we were, in our infinite exceptionalism, incapable of concentrating—or even caring—about anything but our own individual thing? That experiment was underway too.

\* Fox News / The Guardian / CNN / Dr. Deborah Birx, *White House Coronavirus Task Force Coordinator*

† Atlantic Daily / Axios



***Decoration Day*** .      M a y 25 — *Memorial Day*

*They survived the worst battles of World War II, and died of the coronavirus . . . You shouldn't gather, but you probably will. Some ways to do it safely. \**

Given the rousing rise-up to applaud, commend, or even simply—*finally*—recognize essential workers, that underpaid, under-appreciated, disposable workforce (in practice and pay, if not in bend-over-backwards public relations) of Americans who are the gears—*and*—the machine, those whose absence would render our over-abundant mindless consumption impossible, would dissolve all those multi-million / multi-billion dollar "self-made" fortunes in an instant, that these Americans were quite suddenly vaulted to the top of the appreciation list . . . well, to say that it was overdue would be my contribution to the flotsam of over-obvious gloss-over appreciations tossed out as good optics prior to going right back to thoughtless mindless callousness.

But . . . maybe . . . a sea change? A clearing out of the stagnant waste pools of our piss poor treatment of fellow Americans? Were we finally—*finally*—on the cusp, that close to ridding ourselves of our long-accumulating Great Pacific Garbage Patch of examples by which we have culturally, politically, economically, failed to dignify "menial" work? Of course, now that it had been crowned vital; and this, though it had always been so. It was work we could not be without, this country having long failed to recognize those who do the "essential" work (and I for sure must sherd the blame). This once invisible national "staff," having failed them by forcing them into punitive unpredictable hours and shifts for not anywhere near enough money to grasp even a basic rendering of the American dream. Could we finally agree that must end? That 40 hours a week should, at least, deliver stability, if not outright financial security? That one need not be a gilded entrepreneur or slick-dressed executive or celebrity or sports star, but only—*only*—an average person, an average American, who gets up and shows up every day for minimal pay and even less appreciation for helping keep the whole thing afloat? Was even this low bar possible? The notion that ONLY showing up and doing the work would be enough to command not just a dignified slot in our socioeconomic conscience, but a for real living wage? Could we?

Our modern capitalist system, having devolved from rewarding work to crowning wealth and celebrity and position, a crude punisher of those on the "lower rungs" of the ladder (so often through no fault of their own), those that keep the damned ladder upright if denied access to its middle / upper rungs. And, having come to realize this class of work includes the healthcare worker who intubates, the EMTs ferrying the stricken to hospitals, the army of nurses and the invisible army of hospital and healthcare facility janitors cleaning up after all this rampaging sickness, all those having passed (adding mortuary worker to an already thick resume of tasks)—

and doing all of that while risking their own health for no hazard pay, no overtime, no anything aside from showing up and doing the work. To toss out the hero label from my relatively secure comfortable station seemed so inadequate, more ashamed ass-covering at having made good on early life privilege and the good fortune enough to escape the "lower rungs" for the somewhat more secure middle rungs. Yet, it was all I had; and it was only true. But, it would only matter if we *all* could put a shoulder into a redo, to remake / reshape a dysfunctional system in order to make sure that it works for all, not some . . . *Assist or die*. . . . The time for dedicating ourselves to this most important task was here . . . *It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us* . . . and it could start right there on "Decoration Day."

The origins of Memorial Day flow out in wake of the worst mass tragedy in the history of our country: our Civil War (worse even than the higher death toll of the Great Influenza, if only because it was planned and carried out consciously). Though long unrecognized, it should be no surprise that what has become generally accepted as the first "memorial day" was put on by blacks (a purposefully forgotten event unearthed, for which we have modern day historians to thank). Held in the then recently surrendered Charleston, S.C. (and while hostile forces for the Confederacy continued to hold out, if not for long), a group of newly freed slaves sought to properly commemorate Union soldiers who had died at a city horse-racing track turned prison camp during the war. Buried hastily in unmarked graves, this group rearranged the dead into neat rows, erected fencing and an air of honor to the then hallowed field. On May 1, 1865, as many as 10,000 residents, mostly black, came out as part of a rousing and moving day to honor these dead, its ceremony dedicated to the "Martyrs of the Race Course." From David Blight's volume *Race and Reunion*—by way of *Time Magazine*—this: *The New York Tribune described the*

*tribute as a procession of friends and mourners as South Carolina and the United States never saw before.* † Each grave was covered in flowers. And so began a civic rite of Spring.

Starting in May of 1868, it would be taken up by white Union veterans who more than likely did not even know about the Charleston event, but put out the call for a national annual "Decoration Day" (riffing off the older established "decorating day" tradition of remembering those having passed with flowers and wreathes placed on graves). Of course, white Southerners would spin off their own mythic version of events and defiant misguided attempts in honoring the least honorable thing any American has ever done: fight and, or support the Confederacy. But it was the drive of Union veterans that set the modern day holiday in motion, "Decoration Day" giving way to the more encompassing "Memorial Day." By World War II, the day was firmly established as an annual moment.

Memorial Day puts me in a reflective mood, it always has. Having grown up in a family where military service was rightly canonized—my Dad a peacetime veteran, all of my great uncles and both grandfathers having served at home or abroad in World War II—the notion of personal sacrifice for some larger collective goal had flowed directly into the boom times of post-war America, a time when straight-shot wealth creation was infused into all of the nuclear and extended family funnels that led to my own. That sacrifice and the national drive to fight and win a global war was directly responsible for my own sterling good fortune in having been born to who, when, and where, I was born. In fact, victory in WWII may be the single most significant reason, a reality I caught hold of early and have come back to a lot. Having grown up under the still strong glow of America's victory over fascism and world-trashing totalitarianism, knowing it

is the reason that I have known such security and prosperity and have been elevated beyond want in all of my days . . . ya, I can get a bit reflective come Memorial Day.

But (*and there is always this "but"*) to say that my experience was and is not the universal American experience is a "no shit" realization I'm not sure I'll ever know the half of. All I could do was try to get it more fully, and my start points were obvious . . .

#1: The security, prosperity, and freedom from want that I knew was in no way universal across post-war America. It seems odd, a kid born in 1970 still referring to his youth as falling within "post World War II America." Yet it very much was, and continued as such through the end of the Cold War. But, the general prosperity that exploded across mid-century America, and was still very much the standard (if fraying in now noticeable ways) during my growing up years across the 1970s - 80s, was anything but complete. Black veterans and all veterans not of distinct European descent were next to completely shut out from economic, educational, and mortgage-backed benefits in the G.I. Bill. In operation from 1944 to 1956, this act was more responsible than any other single act for subsidizing the expansion, wealth accumulation, and the resulting security of the mid-century American middle class. But, this much fawned-over achievement, having created more a wealth secure reality across a larger portion of the population than at any other point in American history, went disproportionately to whites. This is not to say that whites did not work to maintain it. But . . . Ira Kaznelson, by way of *History Magazine*: (*There was no greater instrument for widening an already huge racial gap in postwar America than the GI Bill.*)

§ In step, my other start point was an uneasy outgrowth of the first . . .

#2: My family escaped the security-imploding disillusionment and prosperity-detonating effects of the Vietnam War almost entirely. I was lucky. My family was lucky. My Dad had once

considered a career in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Instead he decided not to re-enlist in 1963 and got a plumb defense industry job with Pratt & Whitney Aircraft instead. He was set. We were set. I was set. My folks raised kids and worked hard within the frame of good fortune they found themselves in, accumulating wealth, security, and the freedom that goes with both. My family was able to see that most gruesome conflict half a world away in headlines and on the nightly television broadcasts, and then close the paper and turn off the set. It would come to be a head-scratcher across my early adult life: How did so devastating a war have virtually no effect on my family and life? At least in part because of the G.I. Bill and the way it ordered the who, what, and where of wealth accumulation in post-war America. The Vietnam War did not effect my family because my family had been elevated beyond the economic class on which that war so very much preyed; that, in step with a pure stroke of luck: my Dad deciding to not re-enlist. At the time, he was worried about being shipped off to Korea, not Vietnam. He could not have had the imaginative ability to conjure up the appalling shit-storm that the Vietnam War became. We were lucky to find ourselves when and where we did on the historical timeline. Other Americans were anything but so lucky. That war devastated families, brought young men with raw potential home maimed in body and mind, if not in caskets, thereby crippling wealth creation in those families and communities and in a country where it was becoming only more challenging to do so. Add in that the war evaporated trust in the institutions that could have averted it all—a distrust having since mushroomed, still evident, still everywhere.

And so, fast forward to 2020: country in a Cold War with itself, unable to collectively fight off a disease because we seemed incapable of doing anything together. And yet despite all of it, I still felt the tug of Memorial Day; a civic, national, nostalgic pride not dead yet. I was

thinking all that day of the fleet drivers delivering stuff, the grocery store clerks and the big box store clerks, all the small businesses closing their doors day after day after every damned bloody day. Damn. Feeling next to ashamed inside my relative comfort. Yes, my business was taking a hit. We were circling our own wagons, and who knew what the summer would hold (a significant client of ours reliant on apartment + commercial sales, which were then tanking). But I was pre-approved for a low-interest Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) in addition to the minor big-bank throttled PPP loan (re: April 27). I had an insurance policy to stave off the abyss. My class station, the one I had been born into and known little but, was still delivering me to security.

A system having delivered stock security for some and a highly specific inequality and inequity for others had *now* introduced the possibility of contracting grave illness into the mix. Great. And I was thinking that day of the long-haul truckers still on the road despite the warping and cratering of certain supply chains, airline employees impressed into flying cargo instead of human cargo, those still out in the sun and the heat and the storms working on roads and power lines and (the now all-important) cable / fiber lines; all of the cops, all of the firefighters, all of the sanitation workers and plumbers and HVAC techs and automotive repair shops—all of them—so often in the background, but no longer. But . . . for how long? This damned pandemic was to pass, some day and in some way. Probably not any time soon. But when it did, then what? A return to thoughtless mindless callousness? Or, a redo, a remaking, a wholesale reshaping of the socioeconomic compact, one that might amble about this simple goal: show up, do the work, be rewarded fairly. Were we a great nation? If so, we had this one way to prove it.

Out of what was a long sprawling entry for that day, all of the above tacks and turns of subject matter flowed from ink to page. But as free associative and looping as it was, it delivered

a succinct end: on that particular Memorial Day, along with honoring the hallowed memory of fallen martyrs, that we could carve out a special 2020 edition of praise, adding in civic memory. Perhaps we consider (if only for that one most f-d up year) expanding our appreciation and the rites that go with it to those living and sacrificing in real-time, as well as those having sacrificed all. Perhaps we decorate those living souls with more than a three-day weekend at the very front-end of the Summer season (one on which most would probably have to work anyway), but an appreciation that goes beyond speeches and wreaths. Why not make that day a starting point by which we *dedicate to the great tasks remaining before us*? How about decorating the effort of the essential worker, and all those who work and add by the act of showing up and doing the work with more than just simple gratitude. How about making IT work, for all?

I could not think of a better way to honor the selfless sacrifice of those who had given their all for this great, if often troubled, country than by giving all we the living had into making sure it delivered security, prosperity, and the freedom both of those things bring for anyone willing to show up and do the work. The thought brought an actual smile to my usual starting point of dispirited glum, a rush of possibility that if only for a moment cleared out the grey then normalizing itself more and more as the thing dragged on. It would be a decorative ideal on which I could hang a hope, hoping that our future selves could and would get to it.

\* Headlines: The New York Times

† Time Magazine, The Overlooked Black History of Memorial Day, Olivia B. Waxman / 0520

§ History, How the GI Bill's Promise Was Denied to a Million Black WWII Vets, Erin Blakemore / June 21, 2019



***Out Of Body, In My Mind*** . May 27

*The vicar (John Bretchgirdle) noted . . . 'hic incipit pestis,' or "here begins the plague." On that occasion (late 1564), the epidemic took the lives of around a fifth of Stratford-upon-Avon's population. By good fortune, it spared the life of the infant William Shakespeare . . .*

— Stephen Greenblatt, *The New Yorker*

*One Small Ask. Please Wear A Mask.* — *Random Signage*

*The official death toll (in the U.S.) from COVID-19 passed 100,000. Statistics suggest we are undercounting.* — *The Wall Street Journal*

100,000 deaths (an undercount, it was being suggested) in three months. The country was losing people as if bloody battles with heavy casualties were being fought on far-off continents every single bloody day. (And to imagine how much worse it would get, said a voice from a very near future.) It was that cataclysmic, but the suffering so ICU-centric and anonymous that it did not seem so. That, and because this was no war. It was no declared thing. We did not foment this for socio-cultural reasons. It did not result of power politics or the struggle for ideological primacy. It was the simple, if cold and cruel, gear-turn of nature. This was evolution, the vital inescapable shapers of human existence over which we humans were being reminded, in stark terms, that we had little control. Some were saying that we were at war, that we were fighting a war. But we were not. Humanity was but a microcosm finding itself at a disadvantage in a larger planetary system over which we all had little say. For my part, I would just try to get through.

It would prove to be an end point (when all was said and done), a pin on the timeline. It would by no means end the steady indifferent trod-along of history. History is not held to finite frames. It, like nature / evolution, records whether we like what it is recording, or not. But it was clear that from that point on there was only what was ahead. There would be no "going back." And over this we would have some manner of control, if only because what came before no longer made sense going forward. To go back "again" was a futile grasping at a phantom sense of control. We controlled one thing at that moment: how we would get through that moment. Okay, two things: how we got through that moment—*and*—what we were to do with the next one. But in that present moment, "forward" had no outline. There was no discernible future, not yet.

I had thought that and written that down in the journal entries preceding this one. It was no new thing. Nor was I the first to think it, write it, say it. These entries were full of repeats and

redundant themes . . . *But, those were often redundant, often recursive, repetitive days.* . . . The headlines were full of redundant themes, the video interviews, periodicals, science journals, and podcasts filled of them too (Longform's Max Linsky interviewing the great seer of life, Cheryl Strayed, May 6, 2020, a stand-out). But far from droning on-and-on, as repetitive as things and themes might have seemed (and they did), it was more, I felt, an offshoot of being thorough—of holding a shared present up to the light so as to examine it from all angles. It was a full 360° immersion in themes that needed to be repeated. They were multi-hued. They were more than they appeared to be. We were all experiencing and documenting (re: 0417) this thing together. But, we were all experiencing "our" pandemic. Getting that down, that was my charge.

I would later hear a dead-on phrase for that moment, that a life's history—or history in general—can trace its course by the light thrown from "flashbulb memories," an old-timey flash-pop photography reference recycled and pushed out to describe instances from your past, and the general past, that land with such profound impact they are burned in for good—*for good and for bad*. These are the road shoulder luminaries by which we look back and, imperfectly, construct the trails we have tread. The "flash" part assures that you will not capture the entire immersive experience in a recollection, but sure as hell can cede to the visceral weight it contains regardless of how hazy the fine detail. And this here—"my" pandemic—it had come to be a series of daily flashbulb pops inside one long exposure, the kind of thing you experience when flying over a thunderstorm: all the individual lightning strikes, scattered, random, discernible, within the larger methodical system. C19 had created its own weather, to which my armchair meteorology seemed poorly matched. Recording as much of the soon-to-be-forgotten detail did not seem like nothing. But sans actionable answers to go with the larger questions I was the first admit to this effort's

inadequacy beyond simple documentation. Still, if that is all, it did not seem like nothing. And if only because for all of the moment's redundancy, it was still all new, *novel*.

All of the usual reliable supports that prop up the not-often-questioned frames of security and predictability had been knocked out. Again, not a new theme and anything but mine alone. But its visceral weight: a heavy metaphorically pack that I was carting around wherever I went (which was hardly anywhere, for the most part still sheltering-in-place). For the first time in this privileged life I had lived I had no clear expectation, no grasp on what was next. I made use of all the sheltering, all the furious anticipation. I had time to process, sketch, reconcile. I was provided a beat by which to mourn.

That theme was so especially present to any one who cared to pay attention: this moment, unmoored from the precision of time, was a drag-on dirge in light of all the mass death. Time had slowed in memoriam, in lieu of any concrete destination, confused by the concussive effects of such loss. It was flag-at-half-staff all day and everyday. That is a hard place to live. But it is a necessary place to go, visit, pay your respects. Eventually, we all must live there. And so, it seemed only right that we do this for others too. Flags-at-half-staff all day, everyday.

If not official policy (which it was not, re: the numb dumb down-play), it sure as hell should have been . . . *Americans, all*. . . . Journalist David Brooks gamely attempted to channel the mounting death toll into a call to action, to recognize *our shared vulnerability*, to let it breed a *profound natural sympathy for one another*. Yes, David. All of that. And yet, the many bitching about the "tyranny" of having to wear a mask while inside a store. There was also all of *that*.

A strategy then gaining popularity was being called a "load bearing" approach, or shifting sacrifices from locality-to-locality, state-by-state, region-by-region, with national scale in mind:

How, for example, phased reopenings in places not hard hit by this initial wave could test what works and what does not across the many industries so hard hit, providing a path forward for those local economies coming out of the abyss; the strategic inference being that those places then sacrifice for those places not initially hard hit once they inevitably find themselves in a bad way. And though the idea of some modern blend of shared national sacrifice came across as not just sound, but vital, could I dare hope that we had *that* in us? There was plenty of proof that: *yes, we did*. There was plenty of proof that: *no, we did not*.

And this, set against what was another redundant theme I kept coming back to: that this was a shared experience like no other. Even if the realities of this shared experience were wildly different (re: "my" pandemic), it made the possibility of collective action against a common threat seem load bearing, of sacrificing now in knowing that others could do so for you later. It made this wish of collective something—*anything*—seem . . . possible? We were all reduce-able to one specific carbon-based life form under siege by one specific virus. That base empirical fact was unimpeachable. But, if knowing that could not muster collective will, could anything?

It was a concept, really, "too big to wrap your head around," another phrase I heard—a lot. That this thing we were in right then was affecting every single human being alive at this moment—*and*—that we all knew this was so? How do you process that? We are trained by the immediate impact of life whirling about to zero-in on the small, the minute, the personalized. To keep a tight focus, to train your sights on that in your immediate periphery, is key to making your way through. That is normal. That is necessary. And so, such stratospheric scale-up is, well, hard to wrap your head around. That has no frame. That requires a mind on par with those that are paid to consider the depths of space or God. Even the serial daydreamer (an odd fellows club of

which I am a card-carrying member) is not drifting off into some mass public consciousness with the stated goal of understanding it better. If anything it is the opposite: a highly personalized zone of drifting free-associative repose. No, this was a whole other plane of consciousness. How could the scale, the scope, the mind-warping reality ever find itself feeling redundant, over done, repetitive? . . . *This thing was happening to everyone, everywhere, and we all knew it was so.* . . . And yet, even that was not enough to bring around those "some" to do the right thing?

As mentioned, I began by writing entries in the third-person. As much as I wanted to claim it was simply a literary trick, an approach that would allow me greater insight by way of objectivity, with a few months down (and many many certainly to go), that thing I had been telling myself seemed to ring more and more with a dead metal thunk. As a friend quite easily pointed out, "you sure that isn't just your need to separate from the moment?" Well, ya. Yes, of course . . . *impossible to wrap your head around . . . everyone, everywhere.* . . . Yes. Of course. But not necessarily to be free of the mental slog of it. That was not a difficult quadrant to wander about in my mind. I could deal with a nose-down teeth-grind. 50+ years had trained me for that. No, it was more of my coming to grips with this: How does one process the un-processable?

That I had given up on the third-person point of view, a trick designed for separation, I now thought telling. How could I separate myself from all of this? More importantly, why would I want to? Why wouldn't I want to embed myself? Here was a thing so all-encompassing, once-a-lifetime, that there was no way any individual could pin all its angles, uncover all the hidden contours or define its full scope. But me, being me, wandering about the deep hidden lobes of my mental self as I do, had to give it a try. It was the thing I had. This was a thing I could do. Well, that and wear a fucking mask . . . *Mask up and shut the . . .* A global collective experience that all

Homo sapiens were trudging through at the same time being filtered through hyper-local highly-personalized experiences. Our own personal pandemics. Get that down, Dave.

The surreality of knowing that what you, in a given moment, are going through everyone else is also going through. But that at the same time knowing—*definitively*—that what you are going through is entirely unique, that by itself had this whole thing feeling like an out-of-body experience. I did not need to be putting this all down in third-person. Just living it was creating enough separation from all that I had known, or had thought I knew. That was third-person enough. In fact, the only unnecessary redundancy seemed trying to document this thing in the third-person. It is an out-of-body experience every damned second of every damned day.

And that is when it clicked: My initial attempt to document this in the third-person was my attempt to document what this all actually felt like: hovering, looking down on myself going through a once-in-a-lifetime thing at once universal and unique. How does one wrap their head around that minus some separation? I was giving it my all in the attempt.

*The surreal pounding fiction of it seemed the pulse, the blood and bone of the whole damned thing; a killer prowling about in their midst. And a braver people might have questioned all the lax behavior within so upending a reality. But many preferred to look the other way, hoping that this too (like it once had) would somehow sort itself all out, nice and neat.*



*Fuel For A Fire* . May 30 — *The Death of George Floyd*

History had already found us unprepared. It had found us boastful and pretentious within a confidence that had proved vellum-thin. We thought ourselves so advanced, beyond things that had pestered and cracked up the past. It would seem that if we had thought on it at all, most would have placed our modern contemporary times beyond the reach of a distant past more ignorant and pestilent-rife and racist. I did. It is obvious that a lot of others did too. This modern *now* often seemed a "post-history" or "end-of-history" stretch on the timeline, in so far as human history had unspooled to date. And yet, doesn't that smack of what the unprepared would want to think in order to assure themselves that they are prepared, that things are ultimately under control?

This attitude, or temper, or whatever it is, could only serve as a whirling red siren in attracting the dark humors of that most effortless of levelers: history. For history will deal with

such breezy confidence rudely. It has no patience for the over-confident, the cocky, the arrogant. It has no time for the unprepared, the complacent, the lazy. It will blow through perceived states of security and backward-looking stand-the-test-of-time principles alike if only to demonstrate how vellum-thin such bedrock-seeming convictions were to begin with. History does not do this because it enjoys chaos. It is not inherently malevolent. Not at all. It is an objective recorder. It has no skin in this game. It is simply biding its time, allowing inherently shitty traits to float to the surface for reexamination. History does not do this because its aims to make of us fools. But in the same thread, it will not long suffer fools. It will point out the obviously shitty among us. It will spotlight the vellum-thin bluster of the arrogant. It will do this by simply recording such things and biding its time, waiting for the prevailing winds of "just" and "equity" to sail in and get to work. For history has time on its side. It does not have to make a snap judgment. It can, and will, wait things out. It will evade any and all attempts to interfere with its doing so. It will mock all the blind-eye wave away attempts at "move-on-ism." It will bide its time until it has simply had enough. . . . The best one can do is try to harness history, bridle that thing, get up in that saddle knowing that you sit perched atop a bucking bronco. It will drift for long spans unbothered and peaceful. But there will inevitably come a day when you must hold on for dear life.

If I have learned anything across my madcap (occasionally mad) life, it is this: The more you paper over your unreconciled past, choose to ignore instead of harness what it has to teach us, to school us, the more—and more recklessly—it will barrel-roll into your present. And so, *now*. . . . Once again humans had to face a deadly viral pathogen because we were never beyond such a thing, though we may have thought that we were. And once again America was having to deal with the vile bigotry and slip-quick murder that is the most predictable results of systemic

racism because we were never beyond such a thing, though we may have thought that we were. The past had a bead on our complacency and our arrogance all along. It had long ago drawn a bead on our inability to look it square in the eyes and was proving itself a crack shot.

That Saturday, May 30, was a day when it seemed the national binding—whatever that amounted to anymore—was coming apart at the seams, unraveling as if a huge sea fish running out wild smoking line. Yet another young black man was killed during what should have been a routine arrest; and even the arrest itself, the reasoning itself suspect, an over-reaction. Imagine that? A young black man finds himself in a confrontation with law enforcement, an over-reaction to a petty crime, or to none at all, and then winds up dead. A routine "incident." And days later, the protests were swelling nationwide: angry, committed, serious. "We have come this far only to have come this far?!" a sign read. Our soul-weak culture, simply incapable of dealing with this, unable to dig deep into THE thing that has always been the flash grenade separating us from true national cohesion. We cannot deal with race. It had been handled indifferently, fumbled mightily, stoked relentlessly, roiled politically and strategically, approached honestly and with conviction and with the hope of cracking its dire grip only to have it torpedoed by those who would profit from its stoking, fumbling, roiling, vellum-thin supremacy. Half-hearted "cure alls" had fallen on our heads like cold sleet: a raw, miserable, inescapable drear. And we are left to watch another young black man die over a petty crime, or none at all.

Here we found ourselves as a nation, twenty-eight years after the Rodney King beating and the disgusting grainy VHS footage of that violent violation being plastered across that way back then "modern beyond history" era. Here we found ourselves as a nation, the systemic tattoo of our original national sin still—*still*—imprinted in this more "modern beyond history" era. That

another, yet another ( and another . . . ( and another . . . ( and another . . . ) ) ) young black man was dead for a minor offense, or a routine traffic incident, or for no other fucking reason aside from his blackness, his brownness, his other-ness. For that reason, and often no other reason, another young American was dead.

And the protests had been remarkable and improvised and grew nightly. And of course, destruction and riots had grafted onto and spun out of the protests as the week continued into the weekend, just like they did in 1992. This, because societal chaos stokes nihilism—and calls for "law and order" prod, fuel, and encourage the continuance of systemic violence—and a century's worth of violent suppression was preceded by a few centuries worth of violent oppression, etc. This, a cycle of violence responding to violence and to violation being as American as anything else in the national archives, a thing that TRULY defines us, always has, and some days seems like it always would. This, because we seem simply incapable of dealing with race.

At a time when global interconnectedness was breaking down with the front-and-center failings of globalization, watching nations and cultures the world over retreat behind their own borders, here, still, we were proving not only unable to break the spell of "tribe," but seemed to be falling under its wicked destructive spell, again. In step, we were failing to summon capacity to break through the bullshit paper-over of racism—now, when it was needed most. Until we could drop the instinctual suspicion of "the other," we would get nowhere. We would continue to see the relentless trot of racist tropes, surface-thin differences turned into spit-invective vitriol, a technologically advanced species consumed by the heart hate it substantiated, validated, encouraged a century ago, centuries ago . . .

*The protests are spreading across the entire U.S., as cities impose curfews in lieu of massive crowds . . . White supremacy cannot conceive of a black protest that it could condone . . . Are only the well-off allowed the choice of being "good" or "bad"?*

"Again," I thought, discouraged and angry; but mostly flattened, incredulous. In our loud awesome modern-ness, this: blatant, systemic, violent death for a petty offense, or for none at all. And only because one of the parties was "other." We could not break the cycle because we would not break the cycle. It was not that we "can't," but that we "won't." And it would go right along accelerating the retreat behind borders, mental and literal, personal and societal. Unless, maybe, just maybe, this time—*this time*—something WAS done, something dramatic DID take root and refused to let go. But what? How? Where? Why was now different? Why was now the time, and not the last time, or the time before that, or the twenty times before when a pointless violent stupid tragic petty offense, or none at all, devolved into the death of a young black man or woman? Why now? *Why the hell not now?*

And the pandemic was still on. Across the backdrop of this—*this*—a mass sweep-up of emotion pouring out into streets, public health officials worrying over the effect that these mass spontaneous heart-felt / heart-sick memorial marches and protests would have, how they were likely to flare up hot-spots, super-spread wherever they were being held. "The bad about to get worse," the phrase rolling around my head all of that day. That and this: "What you fail to deal with will come back and it will have mutated into a more deadly strain and be indifferent to the present's already thick set of problems, troubles, traumas." This, fuel for a fire already burning white hot, a centuries-old bed of coals requiring but the slightest stir to stoke an inferno. And

how could it be any wonder? All—*all*—the attempts to douse this inferno with a squirt-gun since 2014 and 1992 and the mid-1960s and 1921 and 1876 and, and, and . . . one more young black American man dead. Perhaps it was high time to burn some shit down.

*One can be, indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of mankind has been best at since we have heard of man. (But remember: most of mankind is not all of mankind.)* — James Baldwin, *Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation*



***To Distraction*** . . . J u n e 2

*Snapshots of May during the pandemic . . . being separated from grandchildren . . . the challenge of running a restaurant . . . life on the road as a musician and what has been lost . . . struggling to celebrate Ramadan . . . the unexpected joys of living in a multi-generational home . . . 2020 commencement addresses, all virtual — The Atlantic "Ideas"*

The all of that abstract moment, virtually and literally, a floating in motion. All the usual metrics had been upset, known rhythms disrupted by new upsetting rhythms . . . *the daily case count, the daily death count, the simmer of the besieged.* . . . The expectation of solid ground with each step seemed not even certain, a sandy bottom moment giving way . . . *I am a wave. I am a well.* . . . And the strategy, previously mentioned, of my taking it in third-person, hovering above it all, untethered. I ran the gamut on all of those things, the weird, the disorienting, the very real.

For that moment really was as tethered to reality as a moment could be. It was as real as anything I could recall, lashed quite firmly to the empirical, the tangible, the "you could get very sick, you could die, you could exhibit no symptoms but pass it along unknowingly to an elder or an immunocompromised American who would then get very sick and die." This odd new real having begun in March as would the start of an eclipse, the expected routine light of the sun incrementally being edited out, the not at all normal darkness during daylight of April, those stark (if fantastically clear / pollution-free) Spring days, and onto May, a moment for white knuckles to loosen some, kind of, sort of, the slipshod rage-vent of the reopenings. The jumbled mind settling in, settling down, attempting to gauge what was next, an effort made grindingly difficult by the inundating waves on waves of distracting overload. Circuits sparking, everything upset all at once. And all those distractions, the mass confusing slog-through of a new normal that I was fighting hard to not normalize, not internalize.

There was just too much by which to divert your attention, the side-to-side head-snapping "what the . . . ?" The omni-directional sirens of moment on moment on . . . And then, adding in a nation roiling in rightful protest. And this, on top of a public health crisis. And that, made all the worse because so many were so lax and so invested in ram-air injecting hyper-individualized takes on freedom, or just not giving a shit, either / or scuttling what that moment was pleading for: an interdependence, a sense of love and decency applied outward, and in heavy doses, in order to save the lives of those we do not know. Of course, the very possibility of that having been torpedoed right out-of-the-gate by the exhausting gobsmack waves of bull-fucking-shit peddled by leadership hucksters distracting us by design. Waves, one after another after . . .

*Like pandemics, infodemics quickly become uncontrollable unless caught early.*

— Ed Yong

But, it could also have been seen as just the next chapter in a state of general distraction, this having been well entrenched, well advanced, in *before times*. We Americans had been driven to a bother by every damned everything, being poked and prodded the planned design of keeping things at a constant low-rolling boil (and if only to obscure the sorry state of things implicating the pokers, the prodders). It was a world driven by and to distraction, all those profiting from the cultural, political, economic distractions—as if this was the best a society of entrepreneurs and hard working innovative individuals could yield. All the damned screen-time screeds blowing up a society already sallow and sickly from having ingested so much on-demand carbon dioxide and nicotine-laced content, hooked and binging an over-processed digital sugar / fat / salt diet having landed us in a virtual, and often enough literal, ICU. Wallowing in a national diabetic coma, instead of working on "better." More and more and . . . distracted to death.

You would think that the sheltering and the quarantining and the physical distance would have broken the spell, that reevaluations and the obvious temporary-ness and wonder to be had during this short time on Earth would have become more . . . obvious? And yet, it all seemed to have only made things worse. There was plenty of innovative use of isolation and lock-downs, as celebrated in earlier entries. There was much being done with down-time otherwise filled up with a once over-bothered schedule. But then, there was even more screen-time. In part, that vaulted out as a modern advancement separating this modern experience from such an unconnected and ultimately more fraught time as was 1918, 1919. More screen-time could have seemed a godsend

saving us from a more fraught, more anxious moment; but for all of what was pouring out of the damned screens and into our brains: the slow rolling boil, as by design. It could all seem planned, the distracting bullshit tossed out to muddy up the really bad real, confusing our way through. It could all seem a godsend, distracting from the thing we needed distracting from . . . *a fucking pandemic, the damned toll of bells* . . . but for the distractions themselves being so disorienting.

There was the headshake worry of super-spreader events, a state of rolling viral blackouts exhaling aerosoled atmospheres that punched the moody weather. There was the post-lockdown (though not sure how locked-down the country ever really was) desire to rush out in large groups and be distracted from the late unpleasantness having been, apparently, "solved." This, of course, an act that drew the virus out all the more . . . *thrilled by the sight of those waving it all away* . . . *weak-spines the real epidemic* . . . distracted from sense, from decency, from reality.

To be, just, distracted. I got it. To lose one's self in whatever was at hand. But then, how would that really help? . . . *Everything had its way, even the lockdown mind.* . . . How could it? This new exasperated unease, a moment to lock in on the ultimate prize: a better place in which we could ALL live. Would it take in the swirling cloud-speed front of societal ills, invisible to the naked eye, but solid, always there? It seemed that distraction may have finally met its match, that what we needed all along was that one significant societal earthquake to rock complacency, scare us into some future better. There was now something to focus on, and for real . . . *The COVID-19 pandemic has been a public health crisis since late Winter. Structural racism has been a public health crisis for centuries.* . . . If only the screens would let the distracted see it through.



*Better* . June 3

U.S. Cases: 1.8 Million / U.S. Deaths: 106,195 — as of June 2, 2020

Yesterday was #blackout, the widespread posting of all-black squares as social media avatars in solidarity. It struck me that almost all of the ones I had seen were posted by whites. Good, I suppose. Great, really. But that I did not have more black friends.

Back in April there had been no police tanks or violent escalation stoked by the police or security guards of any sort, though "freedom loving Americans" (self-titled so that we can tell them apart from those Americans that apparently care not for freedom) all aggrieved and put upon by the attempts of state and local governments to halt an un-contained contagion (if in the heat of mass infections and death having over-stepped, mandates in need of refining, fine-tuning) showed up with rifles and in camo-fatigues and looked very serious. Though, in the end it did not

seem all that serious, standing around yelling and cheering and live-streaming everything with camera phones as they paraded about menacingly (but not really) with semi-automatic weapons ("what? they were following proper trigger finger discipline"), even taking over a state capitol building, if briefly. There was a distinct lack of the riot / military-gear clad escalation by way of appearance alone, or any noticeable law enforcement presence at all, in fact. It came off as, almost, whimsical? As if to say: "Hey, look what we can get away with."

That previous Monday, the president had throngs of unarmed and peaceful, if earnest, loud, and serious, protestors about Lafayette Square in front of the White House cleared with flash grenades and pepper-spray bombs so that he could stage a photo-op of him holding a Bible, a holy volume he had certainly never read, in front of St. John's Episcopal Church in D.C. Slide that scene in alongside the April lockdown protests of almost all white people having gone down with hardly a traffic cop in sight and so continued the black experience in America, the brown experience in America, the experience of all those viewed by some—*still, today*—as "others" in America; not forgetting all those not "colored" Americans who would stoop to support their wanting things to be better. . . . Flash, bang, repeat.

And I could count only a handful of my friends who were not white. I did not feel guilty about this, but only found myself lamenting the divide having been so great across my life as to yield but a handful of "others" that I could consider "friend." A life lived inside the bubbles that our culture had created for me long before I was on the scene, this life spent inside the confines to which I was relegated by matter of my skin tone. I had no grand thought on this. I wished that I did. All I had was to think over how stark that seemed across all of my life to this moment in time: how invisible one experience can be from another experience, how we all experience this

life in a hyper-personal way based on what is put in front of us and what we put there. All of this, while realizing that what I could "put in front of me" was the product of a whole other plane of freedom (from want, from bigotry, from gender-bias, from barriers to opportunity, from living life on my own terms, etc. etc.) than those many "others" who were after the same basic things.

I grew up white, surrounded by whiteness and all that centuries of white primacy had secured for that experience. A lot of it was revolutionary, world-changing and for the better; exceptional, even. It was easy for me to accept and be indoctrinated by such views of my home country growing up. It had treated me pretty well, indeed. I was a white kid that grew up inside a secure white life. I was rarely surrounded by the black experience. And then, once I was (and still am, a resident of DeKalb County / Atlanta, GA) I could confidently dub myself among the more enlightened set on race, how as a form of societal sorting it is preposterous and fracturing, tribal and hateful. Over time, I would come to know the appalling alongside the exceptional about my home country, the violent exclusivity alongside world-changing achievements that made things better. I came to understand just how brute the violence and just how precious (and fragile) were the victories of those more expansive freedoms that had been secured. It had come at a very steep price and often in the face of the vile opposition of sadistic bigots. I was aware of all of that. I wrote in an entry margin: "Race is a myth, and one of the shittiest ones at that." I had come to know well the deep wounds in bodies and blood and soul that systemic racism had sucked from American marrow. And yet, I did not—and *do not*—know shit about the black experience.

I knew of the 400+ years of institutions sculpted by racism that had, and does, imperil the black life in America simply due to its blackness. I knew of this and to a high-degree the specific horrific history: the convict-lease system, the redlining, the Emmitt Tills, the lynchings, murder,

and rape. But this was an academic, not visceral, knowledge. I did not know and do not know shit about "blackness." How the extractive trauma of centuries of slavery and bigotry settles over generation after generation after generation, post-traumatizing an entire new generation before they are even born: the ugly sub-humanity that was defined and often justified using the very same Bible held up during that photo-op in front of St. John's Episcopal Church—how it was enforced by a bigoted violence that was in every way VERY American. The result of this: a constrained and anxious mental pinball that accompanies every step for those not white, those most definitely black. The thundercloud of mortal violence hovering, hinted at, inferred, often delivered—and often with little consequence—against the black body. How would I, how could I know any of this? Even if I had more black friends and friends of color, and engaged those black friends and friends of color on this difficult fraught subject, how the fuck would I know even an ounce of it? I grew up in white America. I was raised to be respectful and inclusive and to deny prejudice, sure. And yet, despite those active steps, I knew nothing about Black America.

I had heard it said by a contemporary celebrity of color that a reason blacks smoke so much pot is due to that inherited and lived through PTSD. Therapy, constantly; this place, this country that often denies basic access to healthcare, mental or physical, as a matter of course—a *choice made*. . . . And then, C19. Only months in and it was already clear that this was hitting communities of color much harder. This pandemic (as all pandemics?) seeking out and exploiting those that were already weak and in poor health and strained by a myriad of stressors, segments of the American population that for reasons of class, or racism, or both, are outright fucked because of their class and their race—because of who they are.

I was a white boy born when being a white boy was about the most beneficial thing an average human on down the long scroll of history could have lucked into. I was born into a place and position that landed me in a slot above almost all other humans who have ever lived: coming into this world as a white male in 1970 to a financially-secure white family living in the United States of America. I view this, increasingly, as the signal stroke of great fortune that it is. But—*but*—to do it full justice, I could not measure that lucky stroke as anything outside the frame of what it is: a position of privilege, one that I damn well had to do something with outside of and beyond myself and my tidy little universe of wants, needs, desires. Only these questions remained: Would I? Could I?

I could not look at how my parents lived their lives and fault them for living their lives as secure opportunity-rich white Americans. If participating in a system systemically unfair, they were not consciously choosing to uphold the unfairness. They just knew nothing of it, as I knew nothing of it (and to a larger degree can never know anything of it). One can say that ignorance is no excuse, and that would be right, but . . . was that on them? Was it on me? Sort of? Is there no difference between active knowing participation in a purposefully racist system and participating in a system that is racist but does not readily appear to be to those within its bubbles of security, ones that are rich with opportunity and the financial advancement that such security from want and bigotry provides? Well, it would seem that was what the country was right then weighing. And that was fair. And it is fair to call unwitting participants in a racist system participants nonetheless. But, what of those who were not consciously racist, and those who did not espouse any such thing. . . and, well. . . . I did not know. I did not have any thorough answers and could never know what it was like to live a life under-served, or outright unserved, all the daily wounds

and trauma of subpar healthcare, subpar nutritional options, subpar housing options (and the often toxic environmental conditions of areas where they put up such housing), the subpar educational and economic opportunities—*all choices made*.

This, then, having funneled tragically to this point in time and in more ways than one. It had led directly to a segment of Americans (who, I have to guess, prefer freedom too), who found themselves unhealthy at least in part by design, having been set up over decades, centuries, to be wiped out at a far greater clip than the average white American by a roar-through novel coronavirus. Here was a system having been designed and enforced by choices made serving up a perfect breeding ground for a pathogen to do its bloody work. This, as if one final racist insult. And on top of the all of that, racist cops and white racists exercising vigilante "justice" here in the twenty-first century, armed and ignorant white people suspicious of blacks killing young black people over minor offenses, or mistaken identity, or nothing at all, heated situations that would almost never end up in the death of a young white person. Could we . . . ever?

Was I racist for having been brought up participating in a system that produced this? Did it require that I somehow atone? I did not think that was it. The system has done other things that were not this and do, seem, well, good? White people are not monolithic. Black people are not monolithic. We are physiologically the same walking talking bodily containers of blood and heart and soul. We are 99% exactly the same. And yet, we still—*still*—cannot fully overcome the 1% of tribal instinct that renders the 99% irrelevant. Acknowledge my own participation in a system inherently racist? Certainly, but with caveats. Atone for the actions of others? Atone for racist assholes? Fuck no and fuck them. But, even if I called on myself to do and be better, would the actions of one white man who had, without question, benefitted big time from such a system

matter? The question itself hurt my brain for all its pretzeling contortion around just how hard this seemed; and this was a conversation of one that I was having only with myself.

Would my actions matter? I had to believe yes, if only due to it being better than nothing. There would still be a world full of assholes, and I had no answers on how to cure a world full of systemic assholes, especially all the racist ones. I did not feel a need to atone for that so much as acknowledging "my poor power to add or detract" to the work at hand and simply try to be better than my parents' and grandparents' were in their present, and be better than I had been in my past to that point. And I should do this if only for the sake of the present and future. It was what I had. Would history judge me harshly for that being all I felt I had? Maybe. Probably. It would almost certainly judge me harshly, and most likely deservedly so, for something if not that. (From 2120, someone will look back and they will say: "Wait now, they did what in 2020?") But, that was all I had in the moment: a call to be and do better. It did not seem insignificant . . . but . . .

*Protesters ignored Tuesday's 7 p.m. curfew in D.C., a large group gathering and taking a knee in front of the White House. — NBC*

*Most Negroes cannot risk assuming that the humanity of white people is more real to them than their color. And this leads, imperceptibly but inevitably, to a state of mind in which, having long ago learned to expect the worst, one finds it very easy to believe the worst. — James Baldwin, Letter From a Region in My Mind*



*All The More* . June 4

*New cases of coronavirus are multiplying at their most rapid pace yet . . . Germany has approved a €130 billion stimulus package to revive its economy . . . Patients with Type-A blood are proving to be at greater risk of serious complications brought on by COVID 19.*

In the very first entry, I had warned myself: "the real will overwhelm even the most extreme edge of my imagination." It (whatever form "it" would take) was going to be more substantial and require more of me than I could at that time think possible. How did I know that? Because I had read history, a lot of history, and that is how it has always gone down. Even those prepared for the worst have yet to live through it; and living through a thing is different, very different, from preparing to live through a thing. All things are always in a constant state of churn and change, moving and shifting in ways inconceivable. Complete predictability is impossible. And yet

preparation is what we have. It was what I had. It was what we all had across March, April, May. Be ready. Prepare. Prepare for anything to happen, hope for the best, and then hold on for the ride.

It is something to know that a current "real" was a truly historic instant. It is a hell of a thing to know that it was so profound a moment that it would change all (or most) things, that in the process of living through it the rushing force of it all would carve deeper and wider channels than you could fathom. Yes, I had said it before. Yes, I was saying it still and would continue to say it. The notion of living through a "big history" moment, how it could have been so different, could have been propellant, delivering a take-on-the-world motivation. That could have been the way the pendulum swung. But we got a viral shit-storm instead and none of those things applied; at least, they had not—yet. For just when the real was as real as I could have imagined it could be, here was all the more. It was the damndest thing. If a pandemic was not enough of a big bright-line historical instant, that it might also—*also*—prove the tipping point on race and the country's long appalling inability to deal with it? Who could have ever deduced that ahead of time? Amazing and motivating. That a public health disaster would be the thing that could turn America on its most obvious, most residual, most systemic, lurching and most seriously fucked up thing. *The thing*. And it did seem, somehow, different: the protests, the anger this time around. There was a focus to the anger. There was a charge in the air. It was a lightning striking instant. I did not see it coming. The real was suddenly all the more.

But despite the potentially Earth-shattering game changing blood rush amazement of what could be the actual start of something so profound, there was also this thought rattling about between the ear drums: At what point does the brain simply begin to sputter out blankly,

overload and juice some instinctual circuit breaker to pop? Many days it seemed that point was near at hand. But then, there I was every day. And there we all were every day. Knowing that was oddly comforting. And that is when I could say to myself: "it is not about me, it's not about me." Here was the task at hand, the civic part of "civilian." Here was duty . . . *Push on, push on.* . . . It was a call to action, for those with compassion to (ironically) bring the hammer down, beat the racist holdover senseless—knock that fucker out for good. Racism was a cultural hue so central to the American story that there is no way to paint our portrait without it. 400+ years of trying to whitewash our history, the near 100 years of Jim Crow having *very* successfully done so, the lost fucking cause—that it all could be coming to an end? I did not trust my imagination on this one, though I wanted very much to.

And the Virginia governor backed the idea of removing the towering statue of Robert E. Lee from Richmond's Monument Avenue. And our modern era having seen the adaptation of Jim Crow pushed from race law into actual law in the epidemic of mass incarceration: wars on crime, on drugs, doing what Jim Crow could no longer legally do. And this, in the wake of decade on decade on decade of housing and opportunity discrimination. And the black kids being shot by white racist cops for things that no white kid would ever be shot for (again and again and again and . . . ). Here was a seismic change, maybe. A pandemic. A national uprising. My brain shorting out with grief, with extreme joy.

And one had prompted the other, it seemed. It all seemed of multiple chapters, a riveting narrative. That a certain type of white person (most?) had been unwilling to be discomfited by black and brown economic inequity and general inequality, that no form of protest against "the system," non-violent or no, that it was worth anything but a crackdown response, re: "law and

order" . . . *the system working as it was designed to work*. . . . This willingness to look past what is just, what can be a greater degree of freedom, for the sake of a head-cracking "order." The sadism. The nihilism. The self hate that has driven so many to hate and vote for those who are likewise filled of hate, fearful that someday they may be called to account for the horrific shittiness driving the hate and fear all the more. . . . And now—*now*—this could all be coming to a close? It seemed too big a thing for my imagination to muster.

For so long preservation of tradition and the wide comfortable channels of a known white privilege and standing and position has led many to not question why—*why*—so many not white people live with so little in comparison. Personal choices, a lack of moral standing, the failure of parents, laziness, and a dozen other cynical creative dodges to absolve one's self of any need to feel guilty about their hate and their fear. Larry Wilmore had said it 100%: "to be better than, something has to be less than . . . this is not a bad apple thing, this is rotten soil."

Was this, finally, the great leveling? Head in hand, I could only hope. A call to action, to duty, this as the real became all the more.

*In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation* — James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*



*Now, Greatness?* . June 5

*COVID-19 thrives on ignorance; an ignorance of it and ignorance in the face of it.*

*(The) biggest problem lies in the relationship between governments and the truth ... (And that) requires political leaders to understand the truth—and be able to handle the truth.*

— John Barry, *The Great Influenza*

*Did my own generation—GENERATION X—fail to move the needle? Did we accomplish much? If no, it did not seem for lack of desire; but only because for all our youthful railing against the systems and the institutions, we did seem go along with them all in the end.*

— Note to Self

The Great Influenza of 1918-1920, coupled with Allied victory in World War I, was an immense seismic rocking of the world order, and America's "order" within it. And in its wake this country did two things: took firm hold of its place at the table of global power—and—fell into the most overtly xenophobic moment in the country's history beyond the nineteenth-century.

And here we were, this most unexpected twist: Was "our pandemic" setting up to roll out the exact opposite America as had bled out of "their pandemic," what can only be viewed by the honest as the bloody racist-as-fuck 1920s? It was far too early to tell how this would end, the pandemic, the protests.

Systemic societal retrenchment back-sliding into an often bloodthirsty assertion of "order" (executed by "law" and, or lawlessness where it was more convenient) ran over 1920s America. It was the Jazz Age. It was also one of lockdown segregation, rampant lynching across the nation (not just in the South), and displays of white power super-spreading hate and fear—the later achieving its peak on August 8, 1925, as some 30,000 fully-robed / hooded Klansmen came together in Washington, D.C., and marched proudly down Pennsylvania Avenue. I had recently come across images of that day. They are shocking, but mainly for their not being that shocking. The rebirth of the KKK (its ceremonious reconstitution having occurred atop Stone Mountain, but a few miles down the road from where I sat pecking away at my keyboard), the cold murder wipeout of "Black Wall Street" in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the killing of blacks and browns without so much as a hint of consequence. Yes, we were decades on decades of progress away from that. But—but—if not probable, that some form of deep societal collapse was still, in our pandemic moment, possible . . . *We would most likely muddle through. But that it could not be ruled out, completely.* . . . Remote. Distant. Yet, for the first time in my fifty+ year life span, a thing.

Okay, there was that. But, how about seeing the cup as half-full: the more likely scenario being an inversion of the 1920s. America in 2020 was not America in 1920. We were better—*way better*. Still, we needed to get to better than this—*way better*. We were not "there" yet, not by a long shot. And here, this unexpected twist, the result of a grotesque camera-phone-streamed death—a lynching—one having tapped into ALL the others that had proceeded it, all the others that were not caught on live-stream but had proceeded it, all the wretched past full of lynchings and murder and "legal" law and order segregation, etc. etc., all the way back to August 1619, all of that: was all of that about to be buried for good, systemic change knocked into place by this moment and all the generations coming up behind mine?

I thought long and hard that day about my generation's response, what we had been able to do. And what had we done? It seemed we had moved the needle towards better, somewhat, but for the wavering needle and its regression, its aggrieved revanchist backwards-to-the-future-ness, the lockstep brick-and-mortar systemic-ness still there, still firmly entrenched. And some of that was on some of us. If anything, we had grown too complacent once we could see complacency working in our favor. Systemic change was messy, unruly, occasionally lawless (while new laws are forming), and without order. But, it is always thus. It is John Lewis's "good trouble." It moves needles for good. And yet, had we, Gen X? It was hard to tell within all the public battles still raging after all the twenty or thirty years of my generation having had any manner of clout to deal the old order a blow; and in part for the lack of wanting to strike blows. But also for the inability to escape the still looming shadow of the generation directly preceding our own, the raucous ideological and political field-salting that had come along with the Baby Boomers having never fully let go.

I felt regret for all of this, but stowed my tiny violin long enough to think: It is a time for the young to lead, and those older to follow. Guide, support, give wisdom if it was there to give; but mainly get the hell out of the way and fall in behind the lead ranks, those with the message, the mettle, and the bullhorn. Here was a moment for the young to change things and to do so *now*. Would it end in violence as it always had? As it did in 1992 and in 1968 and in the 1950s and in the 1920s and in the 1870s and the long tail violence that set its appalling course for its eventual (*now?*) oblivion in August of 1619? Would this all end in the usual course rebuttal flying its blood-soaked banners of law and order? Or, would the waves of protesters right then flowing down and over American streets finally crest the institutional levees having held the racist program together for so very long? Would this go to the vote, or the gun?

*I have watched this week's unfolding events, angry and appalled. The words 'Equal Justice Under Law' are carved in the pediment of the U.S. Supreme Court. This is precisely what protesters are rightly demanding. It is a wholesome and unifying demand—one that all of us should be able to get behind.*

— James Mattis



*More Better* . June 7

*. . . the violent river of racism coursing through the blood of America — Josina Guess*

It is reality's instinct to dodge when it feels it has become too predictable, flowing with impunity and reckless disregard whenever a channel opens up. This perpetual momentum, an ocean of time, history, memory at its disposal. And right then, in the midst of the first global pandemic in 100 years. That would have been enough. And yet, quite suddenly (and perhaps not surprisingly, re: first two sentences of this entry) that was not all. Again—*again*—we had found ourselves at that perpetual loop-back crossroads of confusion and pain brought on by violence and ignorance and disgust and brutality and inexplicable / interminable repression. America's original sin, its most dangerous sin . . . *Resolve, resolve now. It is time for collective action, far past time.*

I was sick that day. Not viral sick, but a sick that comes by way of exhaustion. I wrote:  
"SICK. I am sickened by Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner and Breonna and Ahmaud and George Floyd and the hundreds of other anonymous lives now dead whose living names I do not know. I am sickened by having to know their names, knowing why I have to know their names. I am sickened by Charlottesville and Emanuel A.M.E., by Tulsa in 1921, Atlanta in 1907, Wilmington in 1898, Colfax in 1873. I am sickened by 1619 and all of the tortured sadistic cruelty that has come since . . . I am tired and sick of it all."

Time and again, the "race thing" would flare up, some things were done, or some things were not done, the timeline rolling on ocean-like, forgetful, tossed into a warehouse archiving the similar. Americans (if African) preyed upon, hunted down, oppressed with whips, chains, sadism. Some things happened in response and whatever that was seemed good, or not. But regardless, it was eventually consumed in the busyness of events and days running wide-open, indifferent and uninterested, on into the open ocean. There, just another drop within an ocean of the same, never resolving, looping, recycling itself, ocean-like. That was the "race thing" in this country.

But this time, this moment, it did seem different; in that it might not be entirely subsumed in the same old ocean. It might just bob to the surface, a clanging metal buoy on the open furious sea of past and present racist hate; but there, bobbing, riding out the frothing foam of hate and fear. Slowly, maybe, it could find its way to shore, a zip line speeding for something more, something better: a beachhead of *better*.

It felt different. June 2020 did not feel like a tossed about buoy, a lonely outpost stationed by design forgotten at sea. Hard truths had been laid naked, in the streets in the forms of more dead black people and an ocean of those protesting that this, *now*, must end. "We are a broken

country," I wrote. But then immediately pivoted: "And so, we must fix things." The protests: massive, national, multi-racial, pissed. That was a start, the four syllables: "Black Lives Matter," echoing far and wide in that ubiquitous sporting event rhythm of chant. Catch fire and let it burn through the inequality, the economic inequity, let it unleash the future we want. And if it was not the future that some wanted, then let them stand their ground before history's artillery. It will judge, and it will do so with impunity and disregard for those convinced of their ignorant rightness. History has the range, it always does. It will take you out should you fall to its wrong side. Best to let those in opposition to more expansive freedoms and more multiracial democratic futures twist in the wind of their own twisted justifications in the name of self-preservation, all those self-righteous claims to tradition, and law and order, and a privilege no more secure than anything else before history's eventual reckoning. The undertow would suck it out to open sea too. . . . Just when the real had taken the world for a once-in-a-lifetime ride, it had opened another front here, closer to home. And it was letting it ride.

I went back that day to my secure, comfortable, privileged upbringing, how solid it had been. Again, I felt no need to apologize for having lived it. It was the American Dream, my folks having achieved it. Had they done so within a system inherently unfair and unjust to blacks and browns and "others"? Yes. Did that injustice underline the security, comfort, and privilege I had enjoyed? Yes. And here was history—*amazingly*—allowing grace enough for us to give it one more shot, to figure out how every American gets that shot. To make it more better, for all.

Killer Mike: *plot, plan, strategize, organize, mobilize.*



*e-Newsletters* . June 9

*The YMCA of Metro Atlanta has been actively monitoring the spread of COVID-19 and its impact within the communities we serve. We have been informed of a possible case of Coronavirus / COVID-19 at our branch. Out of an abundance of caution, the branch is being closed for a deep sanitization. We will keep you informed over the coming days.*

— YMCA of Decatur, Georgia (March 15, 2020)

*The telehealth doctor can assess your symptoms, help you understand whether you're at risk for COVID-19, and let you know whether you need to visit a local health care provider for COVID-19 testing. You can use LiveHealth Online at no cost through June 14, 2020.*

— Anthem Health Services (March 23, 2020)

One of the first things that I started collecting in March of 2020 was the mass digital stack of e-newsletters flooding in. The normal flow in *before times* was steady. As March trudged into April, it turned into a firehose. From retailers to services, local biz to the mega chains and corporations, the entire healthcare industry (of course), grocery stores to hardware stores to local donut shops and salons, periodicals and publishers and media outlets large-and-small, nonprofits across the spectrum of causes, and celebrities on behalf of nonprofits of all causes. Even utility providers got in on it. Anyone with a list-serv and the ability to communicate did just that. It seemed right. It seemed overwhelming, a bit much; but we would and could be forgiven for overshooting the mark . . . *All new. Finding our sea legs. Unlike what was.* . . . Besides, it would be all the damned under-reacting that would, and already to that point had given us the most grief, invading the creep-high infection rates, a death count begin to whirlpool about us . . .

*Introducing the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Virtual Stage.* (March 26) . . . *Wired: The White House reconsiders a ventilator deal, the UK prime minister tests positive for COVID-19, and conspiracy theories continue to endanger lives.* (March 27) . . . *To help small businesses affected by COVID-19, Quickbooks is teaming up with GoFundMe to launch the Small Business Relief Initiative.* (March 28)

At the start, it all seemed right: the correct reaction, if overreacting some. I took note and began to collect. In that moment, it seemed an important archive of a moment. I was a diligent archivist; for awhile, at least, back when the novelty (right word?) of this whole thing ran hot. Most e-news and email statements ran around admirable calls for compassion and our need to

care for one another, this mixed with the more defiant "together we'll pull through" / "together we're stronger" themes. Both categories hit me as positive, productive, occasionally inspirational. But there was always the lurking sense of grasping. With the solidity of reality having slid under an obscure weirdness, here were familiar calls attempting to call us back to our senses . . .

*Our mission at Freshtix and Ticket Alternative is to serve those who love and create live events. Unfortunately, amid the outbreak of COVID-19, serving that mission has temporarily been put on hold. (April 7) . . . Kroger Health, Safety & Store Update: As an essential business, we're taking additional steps to keep our customers and associates safe, and to flatten the curve (April 10) . . . Fernbank Museum of Natural History: Nature is never cancelled. Connect with nature at home while helping to document Atlanta's unique nature diversity. (April 20) . . . Nextdoor Business "On the Block": On top of this uncertainty, the government Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) stopped accepting new applications last week. (April 21)*

It struck me as an attempt at centering, finding sea legs via recognizable calls to action. And, I admit, as quick as I normally was on the delete key, I found it all reassuring; if only to be reminded that this was a collective thing being experienced individually and felt personally. But as honest and genuine as they seemed, the firehose did not cease. Eventually, the volume of it—like everything in our digital lives—grew to a swamping cacophony and had me tuning out or turning to the delete key all the more. (I had to stop with the archiving by mid-late April, lest it become a full-time gig.) It had begun as sincere and heartening, but a month in, it all took on the air of automatic and required. There was a clear limit to being reminded a dozen times an hour

that we are in the midst of a pandemic and we needed to see it through, stay strong, and, and . . . Even positivity was being infected by a cynicism I was having trouble keeping down. (Back you, down into the dark soul lair where you belong!) At its worst, it could come off as tasteless corporate pandering, a tidy keeping-up of appearances. That, plus, there was the chemo-therapy angle: bombard the public body with an overwrought positivity in order to kill the malignancy, though it seemed likely to overload the body in the process—an in-box cytokine storm.

By May, it had slowed to a mere rushing river. I found it easy at a glance to pick out those few that were still at it for the right reasons. (Good on you, local YMCA, having stuck to the cause: the mental / physical health of its members.) All others met the cool practicality of my delete trigger-finger. By late-May, the river had slowed all the more (to a swift-running stream?) . . . and then, George Floyd . . .

(insert deep sigh here)

Overnight and across those late May / early June days, the flood again grew to a torrent. The heartfelt pleadings, the instructive responses, the fists in the air. And yet, this time around it was easier to pick out the automatic and required. Quite suddenly, *everyone* (quite miraculously) felt that black lives do indeed matter, and that they had (apparently) felt so all along, and they wanted to tell you all about their commitment. Again, there was the heartfelt, the strong, the instructive, and rightfully pissed . . .

*The Bitter Southerner: This time of reckoning . . . McSweeney's: Committed to fighting racism and listening to the unheard . . . YMCA: Our hearts are heavy.*

And though no individual human (especially no middle-aged white dude) can or should be able to claim lockdown authority on what is or is not sincere, still, there were many *many* email'd e-newsletters and e-statements of mission whose corporate sponsors seemed quite suddenly, and a bit too obviously, to want us to know all about it.

And yet I already did know all about it (Michael Brown was 20-fucking-14), and could only ask: "Now is when you weigh in? Now, when there is societal cover and this C19-captured-audience roving the ocean of digital pixels like never before? Now, when it is most beneficial to proclaim compassion lest PR signals drift towards the un-right side of history?" How capitalist. I came to see the "devastating authority" of my delete key quite suddenly justified, if just some middle-aged white dude and it being the most micro of things that I could do to help.



*( I Was ) With Hope* . June 11

*The coronavirus is hitting societies that regarded deadly epidemics as things of the past, like whale bone corsets and bowler hats. — Charles Mann*

*The coronavirus caused a spike of 5.83x the normal mortality rate in New York City this April. That was only outdone by Bergamo, Italy, this March @ 6.67x. The only worse single month spike in U.S. history occurred in Philadelphia: October 1918 @ 7.27x — Vox*

*The future, what's next . . . it's wide open. — Marc Maron*

The confluence of two rivers of chance and historical reckoning, it was mind-melting, still. A historic disruptor of the sad sack status quo. And what seemed likely? That might not be the most

significant occurrence, that those colliding forces would cause an even larger tectonic shift, a collision so monumental, so long-haul in its grinding, that the underwater earthquakes it unleashed would bring a tsunami of societal change.

What had poured out into the streets was the result of THE can having been kicked down the road until there was no more road left . . . *Streets once silenced by the coronavirus outbreak are filled with the cacophony of collective action . . . (There is) a far more representative cross-section of America out protesting in the streets than in the 1960s* \* . . . . Justice for all. Not just all property-holding white men of means, but for ALL. An oft-used phrase I had heard a lot across those early months fell in most succinctly here: *It only took a pandemic*.

It was THE thing that we had proven unable to approach in a way that pointed at thorough lasting change, one in favor of the ALL, not the few. Significant steps forward had been taken, for sure; a few lamentable steps backwards, for sure. There would be more of both. For the heat that the "race thing" generated, the tribal racist flare-ups, had been fought to a draw of late. Obama was rapidly followed by The Tea Party, white people using taxation as a stand-in for the true animating factor: a slip of unchallenged white privilege—Obama, seemingly, the ultimate violation. Boston patriots were not upset about the taxes, but the autocratic reality that allowed those taxes to be levied against them without any say in the matter. It was the king, not the taxes. But that was apparently lost to those who could only focus on property as a means by which to measure personal quality; for the mind numb irony of those modern day play-acting "patriots" across 2009 and 2010 etc. etc. was this: It was Obama, not the taxes. And all the proof we need? Tariq Rice, Sandra Bland, Philondo Castille, etc. Colin Kaepernick did not take a knee to diss the military or denigrate patriotic sacrifice. The military does not own the national anthem. But

understanding the nuance of a brave act of (at first solitary) protest was not the point. Kaepernick was met with a storm of vitriol that only preconditioned tribal hate can subsidize. Protests against the public executions of blacks for minor offenses, or none at all, were right then being met with a police presence indistinguishable from the U.S. Fifth Army . . . *Blacks cited by overwhelming majorities for minor moving violations. Blacks overwhelmingly populate prisons as a percentage of ethnicity totals in America. . . .* And these protests, being met with the riot gear vitriol of law and order, of protecting property. (Three-fifths of a human?) This was not so much about law, as it was about order. It was about position. It was about the knowing your "place."

Though we could look back over the past sixty years and see much to support the "moral arc bending" in the right direction, of late the call to justice for all and the tribal fury it drew in response had the project sputtering to a draw. But then, it only took a pandemic. And I was with hope. Could Can Kick Road finally be in the rear view? From my travel notebook that mid-June day: *Through the devastating dislocation, thin lines of hope. Through the shitty sediment of our many, now obvious, national flaws having been churned up into a cloudy roil by this pandemic—our current state of mass dysfunction—thin rays of what was possible. Reset, redo, rebuild. This was our charge. Now we knew and there was no longer any excuse. A better U.S. A better us.*

U.S. Cases — 2,015,692 / U.S. Deaths — 112,311

\* Headlines: The Washington Post



**Flag Day** . June 14

*It's a bad week to be a racist statue — The Atlantic Daily*

*Flag Boosts NASCAR Ratings: NASCAR's decision to ban the Confederate flag didn't seem to hurt viewership. — Yahoo Sports*

*Must it be that we have to float about in the sludge pooling up at the feet of great masters? Those statues to long past elders of dubious claim? The ones we are so eager to remove for reasons justified and obvious?*

— Note to Self

I read that public health officials had urged that the key determining factor in how, when, and where we reopen the economy, the culture, should have been the "reproduction rate." A rate of 1 meant that the average transmission rate was 1 person to 1 person. That should have been the target, and once explained it should have been obvious why: Even a tick over that and infection rates would increase; but well over that and infection rates would set up on a runaway course beyond the capacity to control national community spread. At a transmission rate of 2, the rate doubled: 2 people infect 2 others, or 2 people infect 4 total. Once it got on that track,  $2 = 4 = 8 = 16 = 32 =$  we were fucked. Then, having read further it was clear that the U.S. had not even come close to reducing the reproduction rate to 1 prior to reopening things, getting back to Americans gathering in communal and commercial settings. For even though the majority had gone with the recommended public health protocols in place, many enough—business owners and citizen-patrons alike—did not care a lick about some overblown disease, this "weakling flu."

And there we were, mid-June, and quite suddenly (I would find myself using this phrase a lot), rates were rising. Across the South and further into the interior out west, cases were rising sharply. Florida and Texas both recorded their highest single day totals yet just the day before, or maybe two days before? I had long ago lost track of the days' once sharp clean divisions. All that did seem sharp, clear, and divisional in that run of pre-Summer days were those who understood this for what it was: *a fucking pandemic*—and—those who did not, or did not care either way. And so, largely due to the later, cases were rising sharply.

It had been going badly from the start. It seemed almost a foregone conclusion that the nation as a whole would fail to concoct a suitable balance that could both contain the disease and save the economy from a teeter-drop toying with a deep downward slide. Instead, we had settled

into two great tensions: an anxious need to heed the requirements of a public health disaster in our midst, and an over-it selfishness shouting down all those who would tell a person what they could or could not do. Instead of a dint of national uplift, a thing that America could add proudly to historical annals yet documented, our persistent push-and-pull had founded a great muddling through instead. The U.S. was mired in an unexceptional down-shift, nationally, culturally; as if having accepted a tragic failure while fellow citizens continued to die.

And that it seemed seemed inevitable . . .

*Americans are pretending that the pandemic is over. It certainly is not.*

— Yascha Mounk

*(Dr. Anthony) Fauci sounds alarm on surge of coronavirus cases across U.S.*

— NBC

June 14. Flag Day. How could I pull on national pride at this point? It seemed easier to make the opposite case: that America had let itself down, that we Americans were proving to be as sloppy and dissociated as had seemed evident even in *before times*. But—*but*—it could only continue if that was allowed to continue. I vowed within my "poor powers" to persist in not doing so. It would be my Flag Day promise. Instead of looking to the past (because that seemed to be failing the current moment anyway), perhaps this Flag Day could be about looking ahead. Instead of honoring anything having come before, how about drawing up a blank slate? Toss out the automatic regimented nod to the past and put energy into what could be, what would be if

only we Americans could want it to be, that is: *to be better than we had to that point been*. To be more creative. To challenge ourselves and rise to it. To be more situated and settled and caring, more unsparing on our faults, and rededicating the effort to correct them. Again, that go to phrase: "be better." Flag Day, no better day to start.

But of course, it would be nothing without the grey slog absurdity having been ladled over this June, this May, this April, this . . . for it struck me that the only reason I even registered that it is was Flag Day was that I had actually looked at a calendar, and registered what that calendar had said. "Huh, it was June 14, not June 13, or June 28, or May 4. It was June 14: Flag Day. The long-scroll blend of days and minutes and hours and minutes, the jumbled exploder of anxiety, an unknowable now. It was the mess of this viral disruptor. It was the mess of how we had and had not acted in the face of it. . . . *The complete unknown in all its terrifying magnificence*.

A month seemed to contain a year; and yet, it had run by in a flash. March was distant to that moment, but only a quarter-of-a-year had passed. March and February seemed to reside on another planet of consciousness; and indeed, they did in scanning back over where we had been, looking back over the lurching time-deleting expanse of those few short months. The backward, the forward, the leaping and loping, halting and lurching all overlapping and intermingled and impossible, now, to even pull apart. A jumble disrupted of any sharp clean orderly divisions aside from those blaring alarm bell things that were pulling us apart, our damned split-screen realities. And that inability to find consensus on any-damned-anything had sent the reproduction rate through the fucking roof.

When you are in it, moving through a history you know is profound, it is less reducible. For there is still the living to do. This was all still being fit together. It had yet to run its course. And here, now, in the looming shadow of a reproductive sprint . . .  $2 = 4 = 8 = 16, etc., etc.$  . . . it made the concept of celebrating any grand gesture towards national greatness seem not just an empty exercise, but absurd. And that was a thing I just could not abide. How could celebrating our great and extraordinary, flawed and mean country, one that has done so much right despite the all of what it has not done right—all the lifting up, all the pushing down—how could it seem more pointless at that point, on that Flag Day? Here, *now*: America was at a viral tipping point, the future a blank slate.

And that's when it came to me, a lightning strike: *persist. Persist.* Flag Day is a simple holiday. It can be a simple appreciation for that which has been done right. But more over, it can also be an annual call to do and be better—to *persist in the work of doing and being better*. The headlines were busy capturing the tenor of Americans wanting to forget all about the pandemic, forget that it was ever a thing so that they could get on with lives. I fell in line with that concept as I hated its guts . . . *It is certainly not over . . . with us. . . .* This was no time to give in. This was no time for any old warmed-over routine appreciation. We could honor the flag, we could honor the best that this country could be in one simple way: *persist in the work of "better."*

There was no going back because the past would no longer do. Many were looking back and were choosing to trust in its nostalgic mirage; this, because they could not see that there was a future. Yes, it might have seemed of a fog blanket void at that point, but it was there. A blank slate, a blank canvas. We had not seen this on such a scale since 1918. Our minds were going to

have to ascend to that level of commitment: *Do not give up. Persist. Do not fail in the face of it being hard and unwieldy, grief-smacked and crushing. Stand up, and do so every bloody day.*

Defeating the disease would require persistence. Defeating institutional racism and the discriminatory mind in general would require persistence. Zeroing in on what was next seemed of vastly higher utility than scrum-stumbling over some past over-the-shoulder greatness. Who cared what that amounted to if we as a nation failed to rise up to greatness in "our" moment. We would fail past, present, and future, if so. No, I could not abide. And so, if only to persist in the requesting, here I was again requesting a rededication on a national day of observance / memory. I would keep at the great work of persisting, try like hell to measure up. I could only hope to infect others with a call to greatness.

*. . . act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city — Martin Luther,  
From: "Whether One Should Flee from a Deadly Pandemic" (an open letter  
urging aid to the stricken during a severe outbreak of the plague in 1527)*

*Let us be thankful to an all-ruling Providence, which has enabled us to discover  
the clue by which we may finally extricate ourselves from that labyrinth of  
profound darkness and perplexity in which mankind have hitherto wandered, with  
only now and then a glimmering of light. — Americanus X (John Stevens, Jr.),  
December 5 & 6, 1787. Library of America: The Debate on the Constitution*



*Abstracted, Refracted* . June 16 — *Bloomsday*

*The abstraction of it all, that seems the most durable through-line.*

— Note to Self

June 16, the day on which James Joyce's epic *Ulysses* takes place. Leopold Bloom. *Bloomsday*. A day to celebrate (or revile) that wandering, often infuriating, confusing, and more often than not surreal scrawling tome having been run out in the (then) lingering Dadaist style. A modernist disruptive intervention of staid repressed tradition, cards thrown into the air—*anarchy*. ("And I thought it was the U.K.!!") No past, no future, only a weird odd *now*. Having been published in 1922, the Great Influenza (let alone the historical wipeout of World War I) having just blown through, abstracted and upset the world into which that book fell, I could not help from my 2020

quarantine fire-tower but see this angle: Did the broken mirror refractions of that plague, that f-d up upset world, come out in the "wait, what was that?" ink-wash of *Ulysses*?

*Bloomsday*. Such a perfect observance for "our" pandemic moment, considering the great trundling word salad that is *Ulysses*. It was a book I put off reading for years, if only due to the lip-curl reactions of those I had known who had. At turns they had wanted to claim it the greatest literary work ever created—and—hurl the thing into a dumpster. But after stumbling across a stylish late '50s edition in a book shop one night about a decade ago in Charlottesville, Virginia, I decided to take the plunge. It was all of what everyone I had known who had read it had said: a phenomenal creative masterpiece and the most infuriating mess of absurd rolling rambling adjective piles I had ever read. . . . *And what of now? . . . A fantastical imagination run out as if just any everyday reality . . . It is without boundaries, without any real guidelines. . . .* I could not describe my reaction to reading *Ulysses* any better. I could hardly describe my pandemic experience any better. Unfamiliar, absurd, this COVID-19 world.

The rolling rambling disruption of all that was average, routine, normal, had required us to reframe how we thought and talked about the average, routine, and normal; just like they must have in 1918, 1919, 1920. "Are you all okay? No, for real?" It was as if I was learning a foreign language . . . *Este foarte ciudat* (or "this is very strange" for you non-Romanian speakers). . . . It was at the very least a new version of a known language—like cubism, Dada.

And yet, as I wandered about the newly defined circumference of public proximities, the newly distant way that, mask-muffled, we interacted with each other, the old phrases rarely used put onto the contemporary conveyor of the oft-used (*stay safe*), it hit me just how absurd *before times* had really been. Fissured and fractured, we had been carrying on a ridiculous dance in

which our ideological tribes could barely understand each other, had looked on at the absurdities of the other, treated those not "us" as unintelligible and other. That had been disorienting enough, a ridiculous thing to look back at longingly and call "normal." Sure, we had Spotify and Netflix and Zoom and 5G. But we were failing at decency, common purpose, camaraderie.

This here, the surreal whirl, *a fucking pandemic*, was just a more honest representation of an already upset world, refracted, not at all what it had seemed and anything but average, routine, normal. Here I was actually measuring out the length of time a roll of toilet paper would last (by dating the previous empty roll, if you must know), evaluating our meager cache and projecting out how many days left until we were onto leftover gift wrap. And the while, we Americans continued as before to publicly hate each others' guts over guns and, or God and, or LGBTQ, living inside the hot gusting selfishness of a clown car executive branch intent on fiddling while democracy and an independent press burned, young blacks being executed in their drivers' seats for failing to properly signal or an untreated mental illness made untreatable by another long raging and now fentanyl-laced epidemic—outrage, outrage, outrage, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner . . . that had been normal? That we had so thoroughly normalized a so thoroughly abstracted real?

We had all forgotten what a fucked up mess we had made of things. Modern American life had been an abstraction of normal all along. It "only took a pandemic" to see it.



*In A Bad Way* . June 19

*Vice President says the U.S. response to the coronavirus pandemic is 'a cause for celebration.' A new poll finds more than half of Americans calling it fair or poor. — ABC*

*Centuries-old underwriter Lloyd's of London has apologized for insuring slave ships. — BBC*

I had read that final headline just before sliding into my journal duties for the day. It struck me as, perhaps, the most craven of all the face-saving corporate marketing e-proclamations that I'd seen across that June. "Just coming to that realization now? That there had finally been enough killing of unarmed black people over minor offenses, or none at all, that now—*now*—is the time when something should be said?" I had not realized that there was a benchmark tally in the body count of blacks killed at the hands of police for petty offenses, or for no offense at all, before the

threshold was met to trigger apologies for centuries-old crimes against humanity, overt over-obvious proclamations of unwavering public support. I stood corrected.

Even the NFL had "come around" and was now loudly trumpeting its support for racial justice. The NF - f-ing - L, the very entity that had blackballed a player for courageously risking his career in order to leverage a high-profile position to protest—peacefully, non-violently—the murder of unarmed black people at the hands of police for petty offenses, or for no offense at all. Now, those same plutocrat owners who seemed unable to conceptualize that the flag and national anthem did not belong to them, or to the honoring of military service only, but to each and every citizen equally, those same mostly old white rich men who'd said "shut up and play football," they had suddenly seen the light? Right.

Now, there were genuine heartfelt expressions of solidarity and support and calls for universal justice. Some hearts were changed. But so much of it, maybe even most of it seemed strategic rather than revelatory, more safe now that the markets seemed to support the fact that, perhaps, black lives did matter. The exposure that "radical" statements of solidarity could pose to bottom lines seemed less controversial, more manageable—if not, even, profitable. I wanted so very badly to believe that I was being the craven cynic here. But all I needed was to slide the previous 401 years of American history through the microfilm reader in my head.

*The United States of Coronavirus? . . . If the outbreak was defined early on by a series of shifting epicenters—Wuhan; Iran, northern Italy; Spain; and New York City—it is now defined by its wide and expanding scope . . . Worldwide Cases — 8.6 Million+ / Worldwide Deaths:*

458,276. \*

And there was another thing swimming around inside my head that day. Well, okay there were dozens, and it was more like they were thrashing about. But—*but*—there was one phrase in particular that I was beginning to realize seemed more a poison seeping into the air supply of our isolated daily pandemic lives: "Well, what I think is . . ." and if only because it was taking the shape of an authority too many were laying claim to, as in: "Well, I think that indoor dining is probably okay." / "Well, I think that Sweden is doing it right. They haven't shut down a thing." / "But what I think is that these numbers are all being overblown in an attempt to scare the shit out of us and make us susceptible to government overreach; and what I think is that most of these people are dying from things other than COVID, and COVID is just being slapped on it."

*What I think.* Such a fantastically American phrase. *What I think.* And if only because that is the bargain; or, that is supposed to be bargain: that we are free to think and say what we want, even if what we say and think is some stupid shit based on an uninformed / misinformed hunch, something that "sounded right" or was aligned with what you wanted to be right, right or not . . . *Truthiness* [ n, informal ]: *the quality of seeming or being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true.* . . . "What I think" was fast-becoming the default mask Americans were willing to don in order to assert some measure of control over a situation that, deep down, most had to know they had no control over. And it wasn't all in bad faith. America was, mostly, thinking over things as it had not in recent memory. But what good was all the "I think" if it was only in service to "I"? What good was all the thinking if all the thinking did not better inform "We"?

I could understand the grasping for control thing. I, too, was grasping, daily: in my mind, with my pen, with my friends and family and work colleagues, those I did not know and would

never know at the store and at the YMCA (the only two public places that I dared frequent, and if only because of the recent groundswell of free "what I think-ers" claiming to know things). It was overcompensation, authority overreach at the worst time to be guessing and calling it "fact." This thing was already so bad, so much worse than it had to be. It did not have to go down like this. I was looking at two countries at that point: Germany and South Korea, two modern, small "I" liberal democracies that exist due to not so distant American feats of arms, who would not exist in their modern form without our intervention during particular twentieth-century moments of mad tribal apocalypse. Both countries, doing something right; and probably because both countries were not thinking about "I," so much as they were working on "We."

If anything, this was all just one more note in the prosecution's folder that would show beyond a shadow of a doubt just how raw things were, how riven we were. Here was even more proof of a nation not meeting a challenge head-on, but unraveling in the face of it; not winning, but losing its shit. That fear gnawing away at the back-bench of my thoughts, that here was even more proof of an America in decline. It came over me in a swell. When a country's citizens start insisting that we are all our own experts on all things, does not the country part of that fall into the dustbin of things that were, but no longer are? And it is true, many Americans had all the reason in the world to question and be skeptical of collective-seeming programs that sought to tell them what they must do. That is our right, our skepticism of centralized control one of our more incisive cultural scalpels. But then, one vital marker was missing in that moment: that all of this skeptical self-deputized authority seemed not to care much about others, about the ALL of America. It seemed very much convinced of its own authoritative standing: "What I think is . . ."

But in the end, was what so many thought aiding a society-wide response to a once-in-a-century

global health crisis? When grasping at empty authority on a mass personalized (and quite often weaponized) scale was the best we could do, I could only think that despite "what one thought," we in America were in a bad way.

Faced with a bad on its way to worse, and if only because so many felt so certain about so much in that fraught viral moment, I leaned on an old trope (re: 0404) that day, leaned on it hard. It was that declarative statement whose usefulness, I had a feeling, would outlive this moment—this fucking pandemic: *As that I can see no way out but through. . . . Keep your head. Move through. Good luck. Words from an authority on the matter.*

\* Headlines: CNBC



*Pained, Resolute* . June 21

*We must finish up with the past if we are to get at that inferred future.* — Note to Self

*There will be no Johnson County Old Settlers celebration in Kansas this year, no Riot Fest in Chicago, no National Trailer Pulling Championships in Ohio \* . . . .* Was this the "new normal" that everyone had been alluding to all this time (all of this time equaling all of three months)? I had found a routine, for sure. It had a rhythm. But it was of an odd shape and texture. "Normal" seemed not the right fit. When surreality is the most normal feature, can that moment actually be called "normal?" Here was a viral contagion and a not insignificant segment of the American population downplaying it, not taking it seriously, "some kind of hoax." This, as stats ticked off human lives interrupted, lives ended: well over 2 million cases, well over 110,000 dead.

Brushing off mass death. Mass denial. Surreal. And yet, that was the new normal? But then, how abnormal was it, really? Ours was a culture specializing in mass denial. Ours was a culture ever in denial. To look at the protests in the streets was to see something a functional society does not require. And yet, it was required—*big time*. Mass denial had made it so.

I could dig those simply not capable of getting their heads around such a moment as this. It was once-a-century, a "no way this could be real" thing with which I could sympathize. Raw nerves reacting, calmer heads having not yet prevailed. To see "normal" folks who were over it (only three months in) and downplaying a viral pandemic if only because they were over it and wanted a non-surreal normalcy to again reign supreme, I could sympathize with that. But it was no time to give in. It was time to move through. . . . But then, the blasé, the belligerent calling for a "do nothing" response, all the outright deniers. It had me pained. It had me resolute.

And then, rising out of the mist of that obscure *now*, that thing having always been there, untreated, un-dealt-with, ever present. Was this yet another crossroads in the long sad violent can-kick campaign (re: 0611) to stand this country up to its stated intent of: *All, Equal?* Or, was this the end of it, where the lingering bullshit of foundational bigotry that had stained the colors of America from Day 1, since before we were a *We, The People*, since European outposts of the Spanish and French and English blew up into something resembling a united nation with some work to do, a structural racial bias to overcome, some constitutional / legislative errors to correct, straighten out, and finally hit the bullseye of: *All, Equal?* The pain of the past. It was a storm having knocked repeated attempts to course-correct offline. But—*but*—the achievements built up, bulwarking an eventual equality. To not feel the pain of the past in the present was to not be paying much attention. There had been much progress. There had not been enough progress.

There was resolution in this present. It did seem different this time. I had heard that a lot. It is an easy thing to say. But then: the pain of the past, that thunderclap past. And yet, this "new normal," seemed anything but. And if so, it seemed that previous unachievable goals were now, maybe, inevitable? The old normal had control of the narrative. This new normal was a whole new script. And the race was on to write it. It felt different. Maybe, maybe this time.

It should not have been a surprise to realize that the brainsmack of living through a hinge of human history would then find itself grafted onto a deeper current of darkness running four centuries deep. That these two illnesses—one viral, one racial—had, in a way, mutated into one, and if only because of all the willing hosts . . . *This thing is being overblown . . . White privilege is not a thing. . . .* Just when an abnormal normal was settling in, "that other thing" having been normalized in an ever-increasing distortion of unreality ever since 1619, weighing in. That its judgments were not kind should be of no surprise. That the statue of Robert E. Lee towering with paternal purpose over Richmond's Monument Avenue had finally found the "re-interpretation" so many defenders of "heritage not hate" had been calling for in lieu of its removal, that and dozens of Confederate memorials like it now appropriately re-defined beneath color-wheel explosions of BLM inspired spray paint, the graphic likeness of George Floyd . . . *Say Her Name!* . . . That the global, national, local epidemics of structural and social and casual racism were finding in this viral moment of local, national, global same-boat-ness the bullhorn by which to, finally, yell: "enough" . . . well, if I was surprised by it then shame on me.

But I had been. In the course of my bouncing between micro- and macro-focus, the fast-moving lethargy of normalizing a pandemic, this had been a lightning strike. How could I have seen it coming? How could I not have seen it coming? It is always thus: epidemics go after the

disadvantaged with a vengeance. As with racism, a virus has no shortage of human hosts. As with racism, a virus will seek out the most vulnerable. It is always thus. During the Black Death, those well-off vacated crowded Middle Age cities for rural settings. The poor were left to die alone in their crowded homes. Since 1865, non-whites have been killed in America for things no white American would have been killed for. It has always been thus. . . . But finally, enough?

And therein lay the core of this thought seed: That what this country sorely needed was to upset the normalization of a racism so fluent, so subconscious in its structural upkeep, that only a not so normal upending could undo it. To jar the country out of its lazy security and force the issue. It was always going to be this way. How could it ever have been any other way? The pain was so deep, the channels running so deep and so swift for so long. And yet, that it had been normalized, having settled in as foundational? Only dramatic earthquake weather was going to blow through and reset where we went from here. Only an abnormal "new normal"—*a not so normal*—would do. To stare down that odd, strange, anxiety-laced moment, and see through its fragmented lens to a "better" beyond it, on the other side of it, if only we would—*we could*—reach for it. That would be a new normal worth a thousand *before times*, and then some.

*But whatever comes next, I will draw strength from the stories and memories of the thousands of Americans who confronted catastrophe before me . . . and persevered. — Vann R. Newkirk*

\* Headline: The New York Times



*On Us* . June 23

*In a free government, every man binds himself to obey the public voice . . . And the whole society engages to protect each individual — Noah Webster, "A Citizen of America," October 17, 1787.*  
*Library of America: The Debate on the Constitution*

*It did not just go away . . .* How could we not see this coming? There had been the truly heroic and self-sacrificing, the amazing selfless giving of time, material, spirit, soul. All the doctors and nurses and primary care-givers, and those who had to go to work because there was no option for them not to go to a place with people and crowds and work. There was all of that. Sacrifice. For fellow citizens, for the stricken, for one's own family and those that relied on them. And if only I could have concentrated on that across that most real of reals. But there was the having to watch it all tread (and occasionally go under) the deep-end churning of un-unification, un-imagination,

serial distraction via made up bullshit, those unwilling and those incapable of seeing beyond the thin scrim of self—all the hoarding, all the god-damned hoarding. It had gone about as poorly as it could have gone. And just thinking over how it would have been magnitudes worse, but for the selfless many and all the sacrificing done on behalf of those who did and did not deserve it, just made my head hurt. To know that it could have been that much worse. My heaving mind in a time of disease.

Even all the mass dying was not enough to trigger a moment of collective sacrifice as sacrosanct, for survival. So easy, minimally invasive. For your fellow American . . . *Simple acts like wearing a mask and staying at home, which rely on people tolerating discomfort for the collective good* \* . . . too much, just too much to ask. Failing in this, our time of disease. Every era has had to deal with some indifferent bacterial or viral threat in some collective way. Whether it chose to do so or not was where it was won or lost. And here was ours, our moment. And many were choosing to do the right thing—many more than not, in fact. And that was a bright buoy in the sea-foam froth of an uncertain time, stilled, dislocated. But it was only ever going to take a selfish handful to infect the well, as it always does, the careless asymptotic spread of a contagion likely to kill someone other than your own self-deputized selfish self. That, having come to pass; community spread now beyond containment . . . *The U.S. infection rates have climbed to a two-month daily high. Several states are enduring severe surges in case loads. The South and West look to be the new hot spots.*

Despite *the all* of the right things done, the personal sacrifices made, the caring for others by sacrificing personally, there was the willful ignorance of the gravity of the moment by just enough having hung failure on this: our time of disease. The pop-eye "what?" of the alt-reality

executive bumble-on, an aerosol cloud of infection clouding up in its wake. Here was a public health danger all unto itself, providing cover for all others who would act selfishly, would not feel the need to give a shit about those they do not know and never would suffering over the long-haul, dying.

The grief that the selfish had already wrought, grief passed on as the usury tax levied by selfishness masquerading as some principled stand for freedom, or restoring liberty to a free country, or however the fuck this inexplicable ignorance and selfish me-want-ism was pretzeling itself up to justify a viral reckless arrogance. Having missed the point entirely, failing to grasp that being a member of a free country requires citizens to do the right thing, of their own accord—*on their own*—to exhibit that personal responsibility they deem so sacrosanct, doing so when the moment calls for personal sacrifice. That in a time of disease it is on you to do the right thing, not for you—*for all*. All else is failure in such a moment. And despite all those that did see to a sense of duty in a time of disease . . . all those that did not.

*6000+ California shatters its single-day record for most new coronavirus cases.*

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

*Coronavirus has brought the U.S. to its knees, says CDC director.*

— *The Guardian*

I had wanted so badly for it to be a time of hard wrought national success. I had wanted it to glow across the ages as "our moment," going down in annals as "the moment" when we finally

shed the pretense of frail ideological ego and went to work—for *each other*. I had so wanted my near-to-daily entries having begun on March 18 to increasingly document a string of successes, to beam the fist-pump celebration of campaigns hard-fought and hard-won—to show to those who might (for whatever reason) want to revisit this moment somewhere down the road, to read about what we were really made of, of what we did in our moment: to show that we rose up in a time of disease. I had so wanted that. But it seemed by that point not any of that.

The grief, the shock, the searing disorientation and one-step removed sense of everything and everyone—the abstraction of it all—that was inevitable. But the resolute lack of empathy, this sclerotic unbudging self-involvement in thrall with itself having led to failure, a community spread now raging uncontrolled—I did not see that coming. And yet, how could I not see that coming? Here we were dead-center of the worst national failure since, at least, Vietnam. Here I was documenting it over and over, day after day: so many Americans not giving a shit that others got ill, that others got C19, that others did the dying; that because they were Americans they had every right in the world to sit in a crowded bar in a time of disease and eat wings.

I had tried—*hard*—to convince myself that I was the cynic, that I was just not seeing the silver-lined heroics at scale, or grasping the scale of economic anxiety many were feeling, and that I was the one being overtly cynical inside these entries. There were heroes in this fight. But they were so obviously true and authentic and heroic that I found them getting less and less ink in these pages. There was less the need to even mention them, day to day. History had already reserved pedestals for the food pantry and food drive volunteers serving the under-nourished hundred-on-hundreds-of-thousands, all of the front line janitorial crews, EMTs, checkout clerks, those still picking and packaging and delivering fresh food to grocery stores. They began to find

less ink because for all of what they were doing a very serious and severe-seeming group of Americans had decided that this was all overblown, that they were born in a free country, and that their personal distillation of freedom need not extend to their being public stewards of responsibility in a time of disease.

119,852 confirmed deaths. Foreshadowing hinted that we were still in for the worst of it, that we were still near to the beginning. And that if only because of the selfishness, that ongoing epidemic having pounded away at our weakened national immune system for years on years on . . . So many, just giving no shits. Fatigue, anxiety, confusion, fear, having led so many into an insular cocoon of primitive self-interest instead of dialing up the bravery of a stalwart sacrificial response. It reeked of decay, what Roger Cohen would peg as "ambient ugliness." That moment was not going to be remembered as we remembered the America of December 8, 1941: shocked, yet snap-to-attention resolute. We were going to be remembered much much differently. Despite all of the heroism evident and everywhere, all of the silver-linings, the stoic, the brave with their pedestals reserved, I feared that would all be submerged in the deep-end churn: the blinkered insularity of mask-free faces, badges of honor-bound righteous indignation, the echo dust emptiness of the toilet paper aisles. That, all of that.

Though each and every one of these entries underwent significant after-the-fact edits and reworking and re-ponderings, on this day, it shot arrow straight onto the page:

*We have allowed "leaders" to be elected simply to tear things down. We are the ones to blame. We have allowed the carelessness and the nihilism, this relentless me-first approach to all things, and we are the ones to blame. To allow space for selfishness to metastasize into instinct,*

*for that, we are to blame. A shit show presidency, a shit show Congress, the multiple shit show election cycles that seem to be developing as the norm. We are to blame. We, this once respected now sad sack world power who in all its superiority boasts a significant segment of the adult population having been deputized to feel they are public health experts with an authoritative opinion waving off a once-a-century contagion as if such things did not happen to "the greatest country the world has ever known." We were above the petty problems of the rest of the world, because our rich people are so very rich. Period. Full-stop greatness.*

*Having allowed this great country to fall so hard on breathless disrepair and dysfunction, for that we are to blame. Failing, for hundreds on hundreds of years to grow the fuck up, evolve, end institutional prejudice, plow under bigotry and ignorance. Having failed, mightily, to turn our great runs of economic growth and prosperity into engines equal in scale and might to deliver a just for all, failing whatever claim we might have had to that "beacon on a hill." We long ago primed a country such as this to be run over by a pandemic, all the chaotic flailing about—all of it: our fault. And now, we are fucked. We are now: The United States of Coronavirus.*

\* The Atlantic, How the Pandemic Defeated America, Ed Yong / September 2020



*Fever* . June 25

*How are we here, on the verge of completely fucked?*

— Question to Self

*Incompetence would infer that they had tried and failed. But you have to actually try in order to fail. This did not even rise to the level of incompetence.*

— An Answer to Question to Self

Fever [ n ]: A siren-lit warning sign that you have contracted C19. Feverish [ adj ]: A flash-red metaphor for things seriously sick beyond just C19. . . . Fevered hot spots were right then popping up all across the country, no longer a coastal city / port-of-entry thing, if it ever really was. It was now a full on American thing: running over the interior middle-west states, the Deep

South, those states bordering the Mississippi, the plains from Canada to Mexico, the mountains west, deserts to southwest, the Pacific snug states—all. And this direct string of hot spots seemed to flare up other feverish states-of-being long simmering. Some were long ago diagnosed and had long been left untreated. Some were new, or new seeming in that they had been long ignored. In a way, C19 was just the next line-item in a long running multi-faceted list of fevers that Americans had gotten used to, normalized, refused to reckon with, or even acknowledge.

As a general cultural trait, working through an illness has long been an American thing. Continuing to work while ill is for some a point of pride, an odd cultural asset signaling resolute seriousness and toughness. And there is a time for toughness; most every day, in fact. A fever, or feeling feverish, is not one. It indicates a time for repair, the need for a restoration of health, and to take whatever the best course might be towards regaining health. I would argue: rest, not work. I say this knowing that we have developed and sustained a culture that forces the sick to work, that many many Americans cannot afford a day off. To which my answer is simple and imploring: "Why is that? Why do we not attack *that* problem?" There are those that feel the need to project the seriousness of their will by choosing to "tough out" illness. There are many many others who have no other choice. Doing either in order to, simply, work? It would not seem to signal strength in a culture, only a surefire way to spread disease.

There was a time in the past when it was all hands on deck, sick or not, lest a family starve. That was centuries ago, or at least "century" ago—not now. Or, it should not be now? The U.S. has long been one of the wealthiest nations, ever. We had been the wealthiest country on the planet across my entire short-seeming fifty years atop this orb. But somehow those centuries past, or century past, was still now. It was a manufactured now, legislative / policy / economic

decisions made across our contemporary now that forced sick people to work. Americans like to think it part-and-parcel of some noble hard-work ethic, meritocratic. And I had to suppose in that instant that many still bought into that bullshit, though its modern incantation seems little more than a marketing dodge for greed: a manufactured guilt-trip typed into the spreadsheet of crude quirks we seem to enjoy dumping on ourselves, we Americans. To work while feverish is held up as a sign of mettle, of "toughness," instead of what it is: a lack of societal compassion (regardless of the disease), a sad fevered state in which market-forces drop a higher value on commoditizing work hours and bottom lines than caring for the feverish, the stricken. This has never made us tougher. Guzzling DayQuil and getting back to work has never made a dent in collective and, or individual mettle. All it has ever done is make people sicker for longer than was necessary, making society all the sicker in the process . . .

*How are we on the verge of completely fucked? How has community spread overrun all measures to contain? A novel virus bullseye pinned to our backs. We did this.*

Were we really such a frail and masculine-insecure society to admit that illness has nothing to do with one's toughness or one's mettle or one's societal fitness to be recognized as a human worthy of respect and compassion? And that when one of our own—a fellow citizen—is sick they should be sent home to get better? Sure, sick days are designed to deal with this, and that is all well and good. But not everyone has the luxury of sick days, and why is that? Why does every American not have a bank of guaranteed sick days regardless of where or how you work? . . . *The wealthiest nation, ever.* . . . Because you have fallen sick, and must rest in order to

regain health, you should not lose compensation, or your job, or the ability to keep the lights on (let alone the cruel density of medical emergencies being THE #1 cause of personal bankruptcy). Even illness had been dropped into that old chestnut of one's "personal morality," that those ill somehow deserved it, if only in the eyes of God. For fuck's sake.

That illness is random, and that it can strike anyone, and that (in the middle of a fucking pandemic where illness is random and can strike anyone) we all might be better off recognizing that, as a nation, America should have the collective humanity enough to decree an individual's health as THE most important thing. Our health, our fellow citizen's health, should be sacrosanct. How is it not? I felt the need to ask the health insurance industry on that day: "How is that not"? I felt compelled to ask those right then waving away the health of others as not their problem: "How is it not?" If America was so great and so exceptional and so wealthy, how could we stand by when there was so much illness, the feverish state of so much inequity? How has America for so long invested national character in a vain paper-thin toughness and the spreadsheet calculation of an employee's output v. bottom line, both of which only prolong a sick individual's state of unhealth and leads directly to the infections of others you do not know and probably never will? And how this all sounded so sadly familiar on that late June day, as if we Americans had chosen the policy course of being completely fucked all along; as if in our blessed *before times* we had been working towards this titanic omnivorous failure all along. It was incompetence. Worse. It was selfish arrogance. *We had primed this country to be run the fuck over by a pandemic.*

*The American dream died for me when I realized just how many of my fellow Americans valued selfishness over community, power over justice, prejudice over fairness, greed*

*over generosity, demagoguery over science . . . How sick our national soul is! The old dream should pass away. Isn't it time for us to dream new dreams, better dreams, that include us all?* — Marsha McDonald, Milwaukee (Guest Contributor, New York Times)

It was all sounding depressingly familiar on that late June day. And yet, suddenly, if lessons were to be learned, was this not a learning moment? And for all time? We had to pull those with a fever out of the public pool of people, needed them to get better and over their fever: for that person, *for all persons*. What did America get out of the bargain of "powering through" a fever? A useless personal satisfaction played to the score of a concussed delirious conception of toughness that meant nothing once a person—or the person that they would go on to infect—found ourselves hooked up to a ventilator fighting for every breath.

Working through a fever, be it an actual 102° temperature, the cold sweats, the joint pain, the vomiting—*or*—absorbing the mass shootings, "powering through" because to own guns is a right; absorbing the execution of young black people for petty offenses (Philando) or none at all (Ahmaud), "powering through" because there are just some bad apples out there; absorbing an economic structure that allows for dozens on dozens of 100X billionaires within the same rickety scaffolding that allows American citizens to work full-time for not enough income by which to live outside of poverty in the richest nation the Earth has known, "powering through" because those "complainers" can always get a second (or third) job and it was probably because they just weren't working hard enough anyway. . . . The distance between our conception of "powering through" and it being a sign of health, regardless of how tough it makes one personally feel, was proving itself a master of jiu-jitsu in the case of real v. not. There was a balsa-thin "powering

through," and then there was "moving through," one a nice little tale by which we distract ourselves from long simmering societal fevers—the other of real unvarnished mettle.

It all felt like the delirium of a fever dream, telling ourselves to power through things that should instead be tended, mended, corrected. All the societal illnesses having been "powered through" until they had receded from consciousness, burying them under tales of greatness and exceptionalism and toughness. All those fevers having been dealt with by taking some DayQuil and going to a job. But that is not what the fevers were ever saying, not ever, not at all. They were telling us to lay down and get some rest. They were saying: *there is work to do*.

These were fevers that could not be ignored, though many were trying. It revealed all the long-haul illnesses, the fevered fissures denied their reality and having been "powered through" to oblivion. All of the institutional epidemics long raging had caught up to us, and were aiming a bad-enough pandemic at catastrophic. The fevers had caught up to us in more ways than one. Toughing this one out, under-reacting, falling to "caution fatigue" meant mass infection, mass death, and a worsening of all the simmering societal fevers we had long endured. There was no toughing out the failure of lungs, the ICUs, intubation, a gurney-bound death in a hallway.

And yet, on a recent stop at a treasured neighborhood liquor store (perhaps frequented too much of late) there were many—as in many—maskless Americans sauntering in who could not be bothered with the inconvenience of caring for individuals not themselves, or any tyrannical freedom-impinging act of civic responsibility. . . . In 1918, the "Anti-Mask League" had been formed to protest and defy the public health mask-wearing mandates ordered into place to help stem that once-in-a-century pandemic. This was our heritage as a people, a nation too: To be irresponsible and to be militantly proud of it. Luckily, the modern day maskless seemed to be

outlier for the moment, falling into the bullshit tale of toughness documented; or at least that is how it seemed in my little corner of the U.S. Just one fever among the long simmering many.

It was a dangerous moment; critical, in fact. It was getting worse; way worse, and fast. There is an electrical term called "wash back" that describes when a power line, having been violently dislodged, forces all the contained electricity along it to pool up and rush out in a surge aimed directly at its intended destination, where it overloads all circuits. We were right then in the wash back surge of Memorial Day weekend, a fevered response to March and April and May that seemed an apt metaphor for a nation long simmering with countless fevers. *It* had not just gone away. *It* was just getting geared up to have *its* way with the U.S. of A.

My local YMCA, its pool having reopened under strict physical distancing protocols and by lane reservation only, had proven a vital return of "normal." As part of my check-in process that Thursday morning, my temperature read: 97.4° . . . Fever free, still. And yet I did not feel well. I felt sickness all around me.

*. . . a largely private medical system designed to maximize profit rather than deliver public health — Bloomberg News*

*Stay Healthy. Stop COVID-19. Mask Up, AZ*

— A highway sign in Arizona



*This Present Sea* . June 27

*Founder of the "Reopen Movement" Who Refused Masks Tests Positive for Coronavirus . . . Is It Safe to Go Back to the Dentist? . . . After Asking for Great Sacrifice, Leaders Fail to Control Virus. \**

*The reality of this pandemic is that nothing is definitely safe, and nothing will definitely give you a bad case of COVID-19 . . . We almost always exist in grey areas now.*

— James Hamblin

A vast ocean of fathomless present. That is how it seemed. That was not a new sensation, but was still a most observable trait. In a row boat, a simple pair of oars, no land in sight. This sea did not necessarily seem angry or forbidding; more tepid, rolling, endless. There was so little motion it

made it hard to gauge what was happening, at all. Were we turning a corner? Well, no. One thing was obvious, things were getting worse. But how much worse? Was this the end of the "wash back" of Memorial Day weekend? Probably not. Hope wanted this to be so, even as reality wanted to shout: no, and not by a long shot. In a boat on a horizonless sea. If only to beat the fatigue of inaction—*the quarantine blues*—rowing in circles, around and around and . . . rowing in circles preferable to the brain-numbing evaluation of a contour-less void, this grey sea.

And again, there was no immediate and obvious malevolence on which to fixate, just a fucking microbe beyond the ability to size up with the naked eye, but for its watershed effects. And that lack of a discernible enemy, the invisibility, the world as same-seeming as it had ever been to the naked eye; this, though we knew—though we all should have damned well known—that it was not the same, not by a long shot. It was a real we had to sense as much as feel, though we dared not touch it, or breath it in too deep. Suspended in mid-air, an uncertain gravity having rewritten the rules of physics and mortality: the malevolent tick-off statistics, the infected, the irreversible death. Those remained the same, as true as they had ever been.

This sea of the present had spread out beyond all visible horizons. Deal with the virus. Deal with the new normal. Carry on, keeping calm. Row in circles if you must. Continue on. An unknown like anything most of the world had faced in a century. The horrid face of Ebola and SARS and HIV had been limited in scope to those caught in its whirling malevolence. But this was global. A great global unknown . . . *It's a virus we don't know enough about.* . . . And yet, there were those attempting to lay claim, grasping at overarching truths, proclaiming those truths as certainties—these people all the more coming off as people we should not be listening to. A

healthy skepticism queried those who claimed to know all. For they, like we, still did not know shit. We would have to row through this non-storming grey in circles, if need be, awhile yet.

All that, even though it seemed more obvious than at any point since I had first put ink to page back on March 18, that though this be a fathomless present, a grey void, we already had the ability to move through—and always did. We just had to scale up, be as big as the void is wide. Answer the listless roll-along drone of an invisible killer in our midst with constant motion. Move, do so relentlessly towards bigger better versions of our previous selves. To sweep away the ideological sludge that had turned our mechanisms for complex government into some nihilistic cult of ideas. To redress 400+ years of economic and societal privilege having fallen on the backs of the brown and the black and the "other." Restore a galvanizing sense of equitable reward for work, and do this by revoking the hall-of-mirrors distortion that was rewarding wealth above all else. We did not have to agree. To agree was not the point and never was the point. But we did need not devolve on ideological religion in which each side casts the other as arch-angel v. demon. We need not face-plant into a talking-point oblivion, a carnival of chaos capitalizing on the fury of extremes. There was work to do. It was work worth doing.

If this was the beginning of a national reset, a reboot, a retooling (and if it was not, then shame on us), then what now? At present, there was grey sea. A boat. A pair of simple oars. And yet, quite suddenly, here on June 27, that did not seem to me like nothing. We were three months into a state of suspended animation. The world at a glance still seemed very much as it always had. But the world, we knew, had been upended by what we could not see. I was *still* hammering on hope, leaning on the playbill of "better" . . . *Coming soon, if only via Zoom, to a screen near you.*

If this next act was a great remaking, then we would have to straighten our course, and soon. Where were the lines to be drawn? George Washington was a slaveholder. We need not tear down the Washington Monument, but we must deal with the fact that the symbolic father of our country held human beings in bondage. "We hold these truths to be self-evident. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men." Indeed. How did we forget that? At what point did we dismiss the act of democratic governing as important? Why did we forget that? "We must historicize more, memorialize less." Statues are not history. Statues are an interpretation of history most often told long after the fact to clear the way for nostalgia. Instead of letting statues prolong half-truths, if not flat false myth, how about we tear down those that symbolize the many having chosen the wrong side of history and reckon with that history, as painful and ugly and vile as that might be? This would all require a thick skin and mettle, at the same time requiring equal doses of civility and modesty—all of those things and more. We would have to widen the aperture, greatly. Did we have it in us as a people? Did I have it in me?

Circles. In circles. This listless, often listing grey void. It had done us one solid, having revealed from its obscure oceanic depths all the foundational cracks, all of the quiet relentless suffering, that all of our modern grasping at greatness was as void as this grey sea was obscure. It had been a mirage of enlightened progress in its best moments, a mockery in its worst. But that we now knew. *That was not nothing.* And that listless present, as lethargic as it seemed, was passing through rays that hinted this tragic mess would not be in vain, that deep systemic bedrock change was possible, and possibly inevitable. . . .

*Mississippi is to replace Confederate emblem-emblazoned state flag.*

— CBS

*COVID-19 is an assault on America's body, and a referendum on the ideas that animate its culture. Recovery is possible, but it demands radical introspection.*

— Ed Yong

This grey, this present sea might yet reveal sun-soaked horizons in what was next to be. We just had to be willing to see it for its long game. And if that meant I needed to row in circles for some time yet to come, if only to keep up strength / fortitude, then so be it. I still believed with all that I had in this country, this world. It would, it could, seem a relentless slog-through journey yet to go. But there it was, in a spot-lit corner of my brain: *In Union, Strength*.

\* Headlines: Newsweek, The New York Times



*Equality* . June 29 — *The American Dream, Born Again*

*Have we enabled a passive apartheid in the U.S.? Have we done this by not demanding, for once and for all and with all we've got, that this bullshit ends? — Note to Self*

The case for reparations. What would that even look like? I did not have the economic or policy wonk neurons enough to calculate the immensity of such a project, if in some form necessary.

But what I could say is how about we start with basic dignity? How about treating people with respect as the default? That lack of basic dignity, respect, humanity, lay at the core of the cruelty, the base dumb-mean treatment of non-whites—and a lot of lower-class whites to boot. All those preposterous historical douchebags having tied themselves up in sad sick knots of obscure Old Testament verse buttressed by their "modern scientific proof" that the biological inferiority of "black" rendered anyone non-white (which, lest we forget, included the Irish and Italian prior to

the twentieth century, and always included the Jews of eastern Europe) somehow less than deserving of basic dignity, basic respect.

The carefully calibrated metrics of Jim Crow America, in which a denial of basic dignity was, with significant effort, codified obliquely through "interpretive" laws. A notable lack of direct references to the actual discrimination was the point of laws and rules unwritten, economic constructs, banking and housing practices, etc. etc. etc. It was all done with a shocking degree of deliberate effort, while adding significantly to the actual cost to maintain it than would have been otherwise necessary; all of this leveraged into one steaming systemic pile that denied blacks access to the basic building blocks required for wealth accumulation, middle-class achievement, the American dream. The early twentieth-century lock-down of such constructs sunk ever deeper, as a root ball will slowly grow to encase all man-made constructs, all things in its path, denying generation on generation of human beings who just happened to be not white the ability to work towards "better." And then, the sadist irony: following all of that miserable shitty-ness, whites of means grousing on and on to the privileged tune of "if only blacks would try harder, show some self-respect, stop doing drugs, stop having sex, submit to the authority of the police, kneel before God / stand up for the flag, pull themselves up by their bootstraps (such straps having been reserved for white boots), turn off them ghetto blasters, pull up your damned pants" . . . all of that. To pull the rug out from under an entire race and then ask why so many had fallen.

*... there can not be anything more absurd than a distinction between LAW and EQUITY — "Reply to Wilson's Speech: A Democratic Federalist," October 17, 1787. Library of America: The Debate on the Constitution*

*There's a racial component to COVID-19-associated death that is shocking but not surprising. — OZY*

*We are inextricably connected to each other. We can't stay healthy unless our neighbors can do so, too. — Bryce Covert, The New York Times*

Heaping scorn on the victim has been one of the most consistent historical American pastimes when it comes to how whites have treated black and brown and not white Americans. That racism defines us as a people, historically, is impossible to deny if *We, The People* are being honest. (Case in point: The War on Poverty pivoted to The War on Crime, the systemic nature of racism evolving to infect anew.) But then, dishonesty in the name of tempering just how bad blacks have been treated in this country is right up at the top of the list too; which is not to say that Americans treating other Americans poorly and regardless of ethnicity or economic class has not been equally malicious or distributed. But there was always THE distinction: whites were not by spirit or letter of the law codified out of the right to a basic dignity. And it seemed painfully depressing to me that in 2020—*20-fucking-20*—crowds were still having to mass and march in the street and yell all this from bullhorns. That even after having documented all the inequities, inequalities, and injustices, I was still having to say—in *20-fucking-20: black lives matter*.

The lack of basic dignity is what has been denied the generations. For fuck's sake, the G.I. f-ing Bill, the thing that masterfully designed and delivered the comfortable middle-class majority America that I would find myself privileged enough to be born into, even that had been

denied those blacks who bootstrapped up and served their racist bigoted country in World War II. That you could die in service to this country, but to then expect such devotion to pay off in the form of having a home of your own in a stable neighborhood with all the built-in buttressing of mental, physical, economic, and socially-secure benefits that such a vision intends, that—*that*—was too much of an ask? Some cruel cynical bullshit having defined us, historically.

I was so very tired of this bullshit. For what it mattered that one more white Gen X-er was prattling on about the *still* systemic inequities—me, having grown up in one of the most privileged settings in one of the most privileged times in all of human time on this rock—I felt it did not mean too much, actually. . . . But, it meant something to me. It meant something for me to come to terms with, to fully grasp (if not ever able to fully grasp) that economic progress in America has been concentrated in very specific, finely-curated verticals, silos of wealth that left, by design, many out in the cold. That this was the single most direct reason why so many who do not necessarily look like me, but are Americans nonetheless, filled out the ranks of the lauded "essentials," those forced to take on more risk than I could ever conceive in the midst of a silent rapidly-spreading disease. If for no other reason, it was important for me to know it, digest it, ponder it, and pledge this: to lead with dignity, to lead in all cases with a basic level of respect. It would not be out of some paternalistic need to give back, but because beneath the variable tone of skin I was no better than anyone else. In the name of equity, in the name of equality, that seemed an American dream worth fighting for.



*All For Naught, Naught For All* . June 30

*Don't let that line for ice cream fool you. Because of incautious reopening in some areas, the pandemic is actually speeding up . . . "This is really the beginning," CDC expert warns coronavirus spreading too fast in the U.S. \**

It was becoming clear that the Spring lockdowns had been abandoned, or were in the process of being abandoned in so piecemeal and contradictory a way state-to-state that we were on the cusp of runaway uncontrollable community spread. Shifting back to "normal" had been the goal. And yet, how could we have been so naive? *Before times* "normal" was of a distant past. "Going back to normal" seemed about as useful going forward as would dial-up internet or an iPod. It was to be all new. *There was only what would be.*

And that did not have to be a bad thing. I could not see it as a bad thing, if only because the previous thing—the previous "normal"—had been exposed as nothing we needed to emulate going forward, nothing this country could or should maintain: the inequality, the billionaire fetish top-heavy economic inequity, the selfishness petty and mean, etc. "Next" could be slate clean reboot. That was a good thing. . . . Though, at that moment, it was unfolding in a bad way. Before the backdrop of the brave and heroic doing and being both, was a sloppy foreground of the piss poor petty and mean. It was a scab replacement present brought in to fill the essential job of "back to normal," all the recently triumphant ideological warrior governors down-playing the wildfire infection rates caused by their tone-deaf political decisions, a general widespread lack of respect and dignity and basic common courtesy goosed on by the "reopen it all now" / herd immunity ("I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed") / plandemic crowd. It was not going well. It was nowhere near an end. We were at the very start of "the troubles."

What was happening as the end of June rode into the valley of summer was precisely what had been warned against back across Memorial Day weekend: Do this too fast and without something like a near universal application of simple conscientious public health measures—individual responsibility for the common good endorsed and personally implemented by all country-loving Americans—and this thing was going to spread into a national fever beyond control. Millions more would get sick than should have to, tens-of-thousands more were going to die than should have to. That was what getting back to "that normal" was going to look like. . . . And, that is precisely what it looked like on the final day of June, 2020.

The erosion of public decency, the exact opposite of the thing I had anticipated, or at least had hoped to see, seemed the dominant viral strain in that moment. And worse, the majority of

Americans did seem to be doing the right thing; and if not getting it all right (the hoarding having continued, even the careful throwing up of hands and going to bars, beaches, etc.), the wearing of masks, the 6-8 feet of physical distance, common courtesy had at least come to be widespread. But—*but*—over three-months in and self-interest, if pursued by the minority, was being donned as a numb-mind badge of honor and at such a mass scale (despite it being a minority) that it was feeding all the algae bloom we would need to spike a national fever. This pandemic of ignorance or selfishness or carelessness, all three and more: malicious, insular. This *fucking pandemic*, already so much worse than it should have been.

And it was getting worse, daily. We had needed time to ease the run on hospitals, ramp up the production of vital equipment, establish a national system of test / trace / quarantine, reduce stressors on the already overburdened legion of health care workers and caregivers and all those having to deal with the vulnerable and the occasional young healthy person lying stricken and dying. . . . But, it would seem, selfishness was winning out, "back to normal" meaning back to not having to worry a lick about something other than your own god-damned self. And this, because "normal" could only be such once we had restored the metric of "I" as central to all that was important. Only then could things be normal—*American*—again. Only then could we proudly puff up our chests, unfurl the bunting, and proclaim that we would be not be giving in to a weakling pussy virus like only a nation of weaklings and pussies would. . . . Only then.

It was not normal. It was not going back to the *before times* normal. It was going to require those who did not want to change, to change. And in the modern temper, fevered as it had already been prior to C19, good luck with that. . . . Of course, this was where we were. "They" were not going to let some virus tell them how to live, even though the virus did not give a shit

what *they* thought. If anything, it was happy to see such public ignorance, such foolish disregard for common courtesy in the face of a public health crisis. The virus could not have scripted an ally in this dark comedy any better. It could not have scripted a lead role in this knee-jerk selfishness of freedom-loving pandemic play-down patriots any better. C19 was thrilled, was throwing a lung-collapsing throw-down party of its own with all those mask-defying lib-tard tweekers partying down poolside, beachside, barside. I could only think that C19 itself could not believe its luck, floored by the good fortune of such categorical disregard, such a wave away aerosol jet-stream having run out under the banners of the "brave" and the "ain't afraid" beating down the doors to reopen it all, and now. C19 beamed before the warm glow of its head-smacking good fortune. It was thrilled by such impatient stupidity.

I was hating this. I was hating everything about this. I had wanted March 11, 2020, to be our December 8, 1941: our time to do what must be done, our time to carve out our slot in the ticker-tape annals of our history, those many MANY things we should be proud of, those many MANY things that this country had done right down through the years. I so wanted that. I could right then see that I wanted it so badly that I had fully formed it into an imagined future to come as far back as March of 2020. I had talked myself into coming together to fight a common enemy so thoroughly that I had, for an instant, blinded myself to the likelihood—*the normal*—of my fractured nation, society, culture, all the various racial and economic American tribes continuing to trundle along down their worn pot-holed thruways of thinking and reacting, a likelihood that could only yield one likely outcome: a dispiriting disorganized disarray of mass infection being fuse-lit by the monolithic "birthright" to be as selfish as one god-damned pleased.

*We need to learn to recognize others in pain. We do not, and cannot, inhabit the pain of others; we just have to know that they are in pain and to support them however we can. — Note to Self*

How could I have been so blind? Watching the tail-end of Mardi Gras slither off in the contagion of careless pandemic-be-damned revelers, all heading back beneath asymptomatic clouds of carefree aerosols to superspread viral contamination; all the fucking kids yucking it up on late Spring-break jags, taunting the "nay-saying grannies" who only wanted them to grow the fuck up and show some respect for their fellow American, elder and younger alike. I should have seen where this was going to go, those two key transmission lines having mainlined the early tragic surge right then resurfacing in all the packed-full mask-free barsides, caution and conscience be damned . . . *I am a wave. I am a well . . . Breath, just breath.*

Sure, doing the right thing for others not yourself is a learned behavior, even for those predisposed to such compassion and respect. But we had no time in that moment for the gentle current of maturity to find its way into the national soul. People had to grow the fuck up, mask the fuck up, and shut the fuck up. They all—*we all*—had to do this for ourselves in order to do this for all others. And yet, it was crystal clear there would be a segment of self-loving vectors that would never yield, and that we were destined to lose this fight. The second surge was right then coursing like lead through the national bloodstream. It would prove as unavoidable as the sun having dutifully risen to the east through all the tumult, all the disruption, all the dismay shadowing the Earth's most parasitic inhabitant. We had done so badly here in the States that it did not even seem like a second surge, but only a reemergence of the initial surge that never

really went away, having patiently bided its time and covertly followed our soul-leached selfishness into whatever community the careless deemed their "right" to inhabit.

*The number of states rolling back reopening is rising . . . Refusing to wear a mask is like driving drunk . . . New coronavirus cases in U.S. up 80% in the past two weeks. More than 47,000 cases were announced on Tuesday, the most of any day of the pandemic. †*

*Don't forget to be nice, I had told myself. And I had not forgotten. But neither had I seen that sentiment scale up to anything like the national rallying cry I had hoped it would become. I had hoped to see an all-consuming national purpose unfold and sweep through America, had prayed for it. It had not been forgotten. It had never been fully considered, at all.*

*A virus a thousand times smaller than a dust mote has humbled and humiliated the planet's most powerful nation.*

— Ed Yong

\* Headlines: Axios, CNBC

† Headlines: USA Today, Wired, The New York Times



*Respect* . July 2

*U.S. daily coronavirus cases top 50,000 for the first time. — Johns Hopkins*

It should not have been a surprise. This was not the much worried over "second wave." This was the first—*still*—after a minor dip. And it did not look good. That first slashing Spring storm (re: 0503) was looking more like the initial outer band of a Summer hurricane about to make landfall. And, it would seem as if we had invited the damned thing ashore, that spiral-up spikes were, in fact, inevitable—brought on ourselves. The country as a whole had clearly failed to grasp hold of the complete, or near-to-complete buy-in that was needed on what needed to be done. Instead, we were left with a monumental fail, this nation claiming greatness.

Many had done what was needed to be done: sheltering-in-place, having risked solvency to help save lives. At least a great many had sacrificed, had been moved out of compassion and

care to give a shit and do the right thing. That so very many had by then done so much, given so much, sacrificed so so much. So many had gone to work at risk of their lives and the lives of family members under their roof, so many having risked their own health to save American lives. There were many feeling the sudden thunder of economic dislocation, a thing done in order to slow the spread; pang inducing, a sacrifice made. There had already been bankruptcies. There would be more. We, as a nation, a set of intertwined cultures, had to understand others' pain, aid and help them. There would be many many more absorbing the carving pain of loved ones lost: *aid them, help them*. Aid and help a grieving process cleaved from norms and customs, of saying goodbye forced to video uplink, at best—many dying alone. Funerals, that most important ritual, cancelled, families and friends coming together in memorialization of a life lived not possible. Deep breaths . . . *I am a wave. I am a well*. . . . Most Americans, it seemed, had pitched in, had done their part, mourning from afar, having sheltered, having distanced, having masked up. Still relatively unaffected myself as July rolled in, still working, breathing in / out sans rattle, not infected (if asymptomatic). So so many not so lucky.

And yet despite so much of the right thing having been done, there was so much in the way of targeted specific-seeming sabotage enough to see the ship of state listing. Nothing at that point would indicate any corner turned, a "wave" survived. Caught in the undertow's suck, that initial wave had cycled back around to crash and pound us into the sandy bottom. Anger and impatience, reactive and petty, an inability to acknowledge others and their pain. All the dull-edge selfish emotions being channeled into a dumbed-down ideological pissing match. A torrent of insularity and reaction, energies that could have been productively steered towards just giving a fucking shit about someone and something other than your own damned thing. Those at

volume engaged in their confident wave ways could have come to understand it for the once-in-a-lifetime magnitude that it was, come along to meet it head-on with something like the once-in-a-lifetime fortitude and actual mettle required to face down a common enemy. But, no. Instead of personal sacrifice for the sake of the common good, we were being treated to lazy indifference to mass infection / mass death and worse: the selfish doubling down on their god-given right to be as selfish as they damned well pleased.

And it was the carelessness of this few among the so so many that had aimed us at more and increased mass infection / mass death, more hospital workers having to defrag and defray their scattered mentalities in increasingly rare off-hours (and think, a future voice said, this was only July 2020). They would have to shelve self-restoration inside another 18-hour shift that often consisted of filling in for fellow hospital staff now stricken, in quarantine with C19, ICUs full of the elderly and those previously bent by comorbidity, the generational effects of shitty housing and shitty diets and shitty body-breaking work-for-next-to-nothing employment, scattering in those few young healthy 20-30-40 year-old bodies right then gasping, pleading for oxygen to break through into ravaged lungs, that most involuntary of life-affirming acts.

All of this, the expiry before its time, all those heart-fractured scenes, all of this would have happened anyway. But, the volume, shackled to what was to be a runaway viral evolution ("variants" having only then made their first appearance). It all coalesced into a pounding inescapable undertow, one that was about to suck harder, get worse, *way worse*. And this, chiefly, because a clutch of freedom-lovers felt a mandate to wear a mask on par with: *quartering large Bodies of Armed Troops among us . . . suspending our own Legislatures . . . bring(ing) on the Inhabitants of our Frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages. . .* The Constitution uttered nary a

lick about red-blooded American patriots having to wear no god-damned mask, but only the right to do whatever the fuck one felt like, whenever the fuck they felt like doing it, regardless of how that might bring injury or disease to anyone else. *God Bless.*

That moment, having felt every inch of a significant national failure, one that would not soon loosen its grip. And this, at a time when other places around the world had begun tamping down C19, places that had prepared better on the fly, had gone right into a full-on "answer the crisis" footing. These places had somehow sold national and societal buy-in. They were making their way through. Our executive leadership and the incomprehensible others in league had not even bothered to try; which prompted a frantic question: What could they possibly think they would get with a laissez faire approach to a viral contagion aside from more infection and death, requiring more of the lock-downs they were railing against, and more severe damage to the only thing they did seem to give a shit about: a rosy economic outlook? Were they thinking at all? Hardly? Most days the most plausible answer was that they were simply lazy, just not wanting to do the work of civic responsibility. It often felt that the country on the whole, and if only because of the actions of a minority, had lost all respect for itself. It was not good. It was, clearly, still not a good situation the world over. But other places were doing better. Some were doing a lot better. In many places, citizens had understood the weight of the moment to do what needed to be done en masse, without reservation, understanding that sacrifice was how they move through. We in the U.S. were left gargling salt-water, having barely had time to come up for air, nurse our beach-sand rash, before the next wave pounded us into that oblivious *now*. We were #1, for sure. For once there was no question: We were #1 in the world. And it was about to get way worse.

I felt a moment of extreme shame across that day, and all the days leading up to it for that matter (re: 0621, 0623, 0625, 0627, 0629, 0630) . . . *often redundant, often recursive, repetitive days*. . . . I was beginning to grill myself on my call to others: Don't forget to be nice. Was I right in forgetting to be nice? I had lost patience. I was all the time simmering at all the selfishness. (Again, this was July 2020 . . . ) Was I ignoring my own high-set standard for a feel-good rush to hate? It did not seem so. It seemed justified. "Don't forget to be nice" was not a phrase removing the occasional need to fight for the right thing. But that it was coming to this. I reeled an off-the-top-of-my-head list of the MANY things done right in my country's past. I did that to prop up and prod on my own conviction: Lexington & Concord, Trenton and Guilford Court House, the first peaceful transition of power + *Marbury v. Madison* (re: an independent judiciary), Seneca Falls in 1848, *Leaves of Grass*, Gettysburg and Vicksburg and Atlanta and *Union*, the post Civil War Reconstruction Amendments, the immigrants, the muckrakers, the 19th Amendment, the Model T, Social Security and rural electrification and the W.P.A., December 8, 1941 (having met that era's call to service), Anzio and Omaha Beach, Guadalcanal and Okinawa, Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby, The Interstate Highway System (but for the part about tearing through poor inner-city neighborhoods), Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin, *The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*, Medicare, Soul Train, The Muppets, the wall falling, the end of the Cold War, the digital revolution (the early part, at least), *Obergfell v. Hodges*, and the thousand-on-thousands of other national trials and grinding tribulations and triumphs—all the political, economic, cultural, existential crises having been answered by hard-wrought victories—fighting for right—the need to be constantly reminded, the need for flag-waving celebration . . . and then . . . *this*.

I later wrote: "We were already so sick a nation, that it's no wonder it went down like this, the exasperating insularity, the full-on fail of legislatures, the greed of corporate and financial sectors, the conspiratorial delirium tremens. We were walking wounded all along, key incubators of a viral deceiver having picked its host nation with care." It was no wonder things seemed to be falling apart, in that they had long been falling apart, if in slow-motion. And then *this*: the stroke of natural violence that was COVID-19, having devastated New York City and Los Angeles and New Orleans early on (March and April already seeming of an arcane past come July), and how it was now inundating Houston and Florida and Arizona, visible viral violence answered by what was an act of passive, if not homicidal violence in and of itself: those refusing to wear a fucking mask. A violent act aimed like an AR-15 at fellow Americans. All of the self-inflicted wounds. And all of the actual violence: Ahmaud Arbury, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, etc. etc. etc.

"We were a pre-existing condition all along."

*If we allow incoherence and mob-think to have any sliver of space in the national conversation about what kind of society—what kind of America—we want to be, we will inevitably wind up with a society and culture that cannot take care of itself. Are we already there? — Note / Question to Self*

*A new strain of the coronavirus has a mutation that might make it more infectious, a team of scientists say . . . In an about face, Texas governor orders residents to wear masks . . . To the world, we're now America the racist and pitiful \* . . . But, if only to carve out some slight sliver of positive from the avalanche of depressing news, I also wrote that day of "flickering lanterns"*

to be found strung nationwide, this in the midst of a creeping catastrophe. And though not in any way contained, still—*still*—the country could be seen to seethe with determination. It was there. I could sense it. It was pouring onto streets. This was how we push through: *by simply pushing through*. Get up each and every day. Go to it. Do and be the best we can be. *Repeat*.

Would we ever be able to recover from the addled state that infected this nation's (now painfully obvious) decades of decline? Could we be better? Yes, I could see it. It was there. I could sense it. Strange in that it was possible, there in the depths of sickness, far more probable than the drift-along asymptomatic illnesses that had blanketed America in *before times*. And it could simply have been a by-product of there being nowhere else to go. We were down. We had bottomed out. It could seem that the whole show was being run by lazy clowns without a damned thought in their head. And though "up" was a heavy lift, there was a strength to be had if only because of the extreme fed-up-ness percolating, reacting in real-time to the embarrassment of a very public national failure. It somehow seemed more probable than ever, in fact. It had been waiting for us to come around, set to roll when we finally decided: "enough, enough."

There was work to do. There was a failure to reverse. And I could sense the will to get up and go at it. It had been there waiting for us all along, patiently waiting for us to proclaim from atop high buildings, or from the C19 recovery ward: enough, *enough*. "Stand up. Reset. Be better. Go do it." That is what I wrote that morning.

\* Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal, Robin Wright (New Yorker)



***Interdependence Day*** . . . *The Fourth of July*

*The Fight for Independence Happens Every Day . . . This is an awkward time to be celebrating America . . . Populist leaders are presiding over the world's highest COVID-19 death tolls . . . BLM May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History . . . We should be celebrating our disobedience and discontent about inequities and injustices in all forms.*

— OZY, *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Policy*, *The New York Times*, Ibram X. Kendi

*Each American, on their own, was going to have to sacrifice for themselves—and—for others in order to get through. On a parallel track, each American will have to work for a better America—first for others—and then themselves. What kind of America would we be?*

— Note / Question to Self

"In a way, there was no past to go back to. It had all changed. It was all changing, finally." Those were the first words I put down that day: hopeful, oddly, for it was not going well. Independence Day, 2020. We had come so very far in our national development, our national maturity. It was leaps and bounds better than a century ago. But what of a decade ago, or two? Why did it seem that we just kept landing right back where we had started in all things of late? We seemed less free, less wealthy, less powerful, less tolerant, much more stricken. What was this endless loop, this cycling that we seemed incapable of breaking? The distance covered—mentally, socially, societally—the edits and the improvements in national attitude, consciousness, the state of things, accomplishments by orders of magnitudes. And yet . . .

. . . in the immediate present it could seem so out-of-step, out-of-balance, just plain *off*. A once-in-a-century viral dust-up having blown in, the kind of thing that tests the mettle of nations, societies. And quite suddenly all the improvements, all the distance covered, seemed to shrink into insignificance. *There was now this challenge*. It had changed everything, the weeks and months of seconds and minutes, the concussion of reality. So much distance covered, too much to feel like I did that morning and how I would feel across that entire Independence Day—one like no other. That for it all, the sleepless trauma, the wide-awake fear, the "fuck it all" resolve, that for all of that distance covered over the decades and centuries of days and years, to feel like we were be right back at square one in so so many ways. The Fourth of July in a nation of pre-existing conditions sent reeling by a novel contagion.

"Crucible" was a word I did not want to use. It sounded too dramatic, trying too hard. But what else was the moment if not a dramatic point on the timeline? Was it even possible to try *too hard*? Why should we not have digested the moment for all of its grim, distressing, humiliating,

raw nervousness, its pathetic, angry, violent, sinking depression? All the thick-head attempts to blow dumb sunshine, when the real disinfectant required was hard honest truth—light akin to a bank of snap-on fluorescents in the middle of night: shocking, frightening for what it reveals. Why not take in the negative deep and push it back out as opportunity? A crucible. Yes, why the fuck not? Was not this entire American experiment to date (still, as had become too obvious, an experiment that could yet blow up the lab) one long slow-rolling crucible? Wasn't that the point, really? Ever-changing, ever-evolving, casting off what it does not (and should not) need to move ever forward? This was no time for stilling the timeline. This was no time to plant flags, puff up chests, and bath in the projected glow of greatness. It was the opposite of all of those things. It was a time to get to work. We had come so far. There was so far to go.

How could we ever think that the moment we were in, pandemic or no, would be free of struggle? How could we ever dare think such a thing, ever? We would get no pass. Why would we? Why would any American expect such a thing? Why would any human expect such a thing? A fucking pandemic. *Of course, it was a fucking pandemic.* That is history: organic, with us always, forever in motion. It will find you. It had found us. *Of course it had.* But the reaction to the pandemic, the continued reaction to all those things the pandemic was spotlighting, harshly. It was not to be the indifferent gears of conscious acts and the resulting reactions and motions of human and nature leading to specific circumstances, the gravity of history defining how it would all fall. That was the pandemic itself. That was the product of indifferent (if discernible) gears. But our reaction to it? That was on us. History is what we humans make of what happens to us. What we did in the *here and now* was the history we would make. And at that moment, on this most unusual Fourth of July, it was not going well.

I wandered about the (relatively short) timeline of America that day, running it over in my head, the wall-to-wall crucible that it seemed. The Europeans arriving for reasons of religious expression and temporal excess, bringing germs to which they were immune and native peoples were not. And the resulting epidemics and war and loss delivered upon those humans who had been wandering about the coasts and the hills and the watersheds and plains of this big varied beautiful place for generations and millennia, the several cycles of first people civilizations having come and gone long before these white people even knew such a thing had ever existed. And those Europeans, the whites—*my people*—went straight to it, developing new religions and counter-sects to the new religions, ideas and countervailing ideas. They argued and they bickered and they wandered and took and confiscated and developed ever greater swaths of the land they saw, settling ever deeper on the interior, visiting ever more conflict, ever more disease upon the various tribes and among themselves—the French, Spanish, English. There were epidemics, and there were takeovers and reversals, global wars fought in backwoods settings among deep forest and along wetlands and inlets, and up and down rivers and streams. There came a Revolution, a Declaration, and Independence. There was a Constitution, a remarkable document that has aged amazingly well, aside from the many parts of it that have not aged all that well. And there was the slavery, the slavery, the slavery. There was ever more war and a non-stop tidal surge of westward wanderlust inviting more exploitation and extermination on the way to ever brighter fortunes, treasuries funded, ideas and philosophies expounded before they were proven to be appalling and were reformed so that they could again be proclaimed forward-looking before again being made irrelevant (if not appalling). And through it all: a percolating restlessness. The amazing accomplishments and the appalling death and destruction, the galling alongside the

greatness, always, always, always. Civil War, abolition, emancipation, a historical abomination corrected via bloodbath and put on track by a Reconstruction in turn undone by a "redemption" and a "reconciliation" and a fervent youthful nationalism that all whites could get behind—the sub-humanization and re-subjugation of newly freed blacks to be the subsidy for a century of privileged racial status to come. The country would allow in the Chinese to build railroads and send the nation hurtling across the continent before murdering them and banning them outright. Blacks were put back into the field and banned from the public square, aside from a handful of subservient roles reserved for those who "knew their place" and the "acceptable" demoralization of minstrelsy for white audiences—laughing at them, not with them. The amazing, the appalling, the galling, the great. There were always all of these things. There was the one-percenter cage-match of laissez-faire capitalism, unhindered, unregulated, and unconcerned about the white and black and brown backs broken in building obscene wealth. And there were counter-movements, uprisings on the farm, the unrest of urban labor, the rolling strikes of miners. And the reactions to gross systemic inequity, largely snuffed out, but not before heads were knocked, bones snapped clean, and blood spilled in the name of "property." Roiling, roiling, roiling, it has always been thus, this America. And the whitewash, the purposeful lie—*the biggest whopper of them all*—the "lost cause." Mythology enshrined as fact, blacks put in their place even as progressive minds attempted to hit back at an engineered poverty, muckraking the cruel weather systems of extreme selfishness, exposing the feudal inequities and the racism, the racism, the racism. The white power impulse, having invested in building beyond its borders, an infant empire strutting onto the stage, the White Fleet sailing seas, the harvest of a great youth having been sailed across the seas to the rescue of the old sclerotic powers in world war. They brought with them (now likely

held) the Great Influenza, and yet brought home to the U.S. victory on a world stage, a prestige and power that roared and played and danced its way across a decade until it crashed, crashed, crashed into the dust. The devastation of the crashing, the destitution and foreclosed-on masses, the failing banks and the dust storms, the need to not fear "fear," the New Deals it stoked, the bigotry unimpeded. The Big One, a global violent catastrophe still (thankfully) unequaled. And with victory: the "American century," a prosperity for many; that and the racism, the racism, the racism. But, then there was the Communism; as if starving populations of free will and a voice and all but a meager scratch-Earth existence was ever a sound societal plan. And it was good that we stood up to it. And the presence of thermonuclear war was not enough to stop (and perhaps the reason behind) rock 'n roll. And the patient non-violent victories piling up high in the heat of vitriol, fire hoses, hate, and murder down South. Acts, bills, legislation ending Jim Crow—*kind of*. This, followed by our supposed best and brightest leading us down the dark hole of Vietnam. And though Korea had made some sense, and by the looks of modern South Korea still made an awful lot of sense, what in the world were we doing in Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam? Despite all the white prosperity, the age-old fight against bigotry and how some big victories were won in the 1960s . . . Vietnam . . . But then, the moon shot. But then, the "Southern strategy," and Watergate, and then the gas lines, and the hostages in Iran. All the while, the nuclear arsenals, the threat of atomic winter, annihilation. A conservative ascendancy, a crack epidemic, an oil war, a crime bill, mass incarceration, an Electoral College victory, another oil war and clear ideological fracturing, a chasm, a canyon, a black president, white cops killing black kids for petty offenses or no offense at all. Crucibles. Amid the victories, crucibles. Victories because of crucibles. Crucibles caused by perceived victories . . . *a fucking pandemic*.

*For Houston Hospitals, It's Like New York All Over Again . . . The newest U.S. challenge is, quite simply impatience . . . July 3 U.S. Case Total: 53,9244*

— CBS, *The Atlantic*

*The coronavirus's rampage through America threw a spotlight on its failings—on the galling inequality, the fatal partisanship, the susceptibility to fiction and the way in which rugged individualism had curdled into plain old selfishness.*

— Frank Bruni

How was this going to go? The future a blank slate, and like a blank canvas: intimidating, exhilarating. Was this the crest of the first wave of C19 coming to a close? Having been made intolerably worse by incoherence, impatience, selfish dicks, would we collectively learn our lesson, learn what this experience had scrawled across the sky clear for all to see: that we needed to be better versions of ourselves, that no one got a pass from this work, and that is what would in the end deliver greatness? Would we drop an historical pin on the timeline on which we could beam an earned pride? Like the Great Influenza (which after having run its course actually mutated to a lesser version of itself), would C19 just burn itself out regardless of how small we acted towards fellow citizens, fellow Americans, however one deemed the title earned?

If ever a prayer were warranted, it was right then. To end a pandemic. To end the rolling epidemics of selfishness that clearly made living in the richest country on Earth an intolerably incoherent existence for so many that just so happen to not be of the executive class, a (too?)

much lauded entrepreneur, a followed-by-the million influencer, a celebrity for whatever commodified reason. If ever it was a time for prayer, it was to see an end to the "normal," the "usual," the "regular," the exceptionally "average" American being treated as a disposable revenue source, a profile on which to pin a personalized advertising experience. That was my prayer on that Fourth of July. That we might actually see the usual, the standard, the average American as a resource for an extraordinary future—and begin treating them that way. Here was a challenge. Here was a present crucible. Again, I was not the praying type, but a mind amongst the millions wandering a landscape having trouble filling its lungs, drifting, at points listing, pre-existing conditions having been programmed across my youth (and not without reason) to expect some kind of automatic abstract greatness, to expect the best to befall us as a matter of course—this, though a quick glance at present revealed a great many chinks in the armor. If ever such a prayer by a non-praying man was warranted it was right then, aching for assurance, a shield, a church tower tolling peaceably from the town green of nostalgia anchoring the unknown.

Here was crucible. A people divided and subdivided and beset with lazy expectations and impatience and the reduction of all human form to simple data-point profiles further preyed upon by algorithms. And all the dumb-numb ideological brawls, and all the dumb-fuck discrimination and demonization and calls for "how things used to be" (which to the tuned ear sounds an awful lot like what used to be unfiltered racism, racism, racism). But here was opportunity. Aware in no uncertain terms that all of those things were the fraying suspension cables of the bridge being traversed, thrown across this modern chasm, this grey concussed void. One by one by one, the repairs to be administered cable by cable by . . . It was time to get to it.

Civic responsibility. Economic equity. Social equality. Passivity was a dead letter. There was always a new shameless low to be hit (and we were finding them out with a humiliating regularity). But never mind, for this simply meant there was more to be had in the repair. The lower we sunk, the more ocean demanding a sea change. The more inward many went translated into that much more to gain. If we had failed to grab hold of March and April and make of it our moment, our April 13, 1861, our December 8, 1941, our September 12th, 2001, then perhaps July and August? Perhaps. Here was the moment that we would or would not grasp, that we could or could not put into action. Would we? Could we? For now and that future unknown?

*We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.*

A good start, America, at points great. But fairly rocky in the centuries-long rollout, at points very much so. The good. The bad. The work to do . . .

*. . . and accordingly all Experience hath shewn, that Mankind are more disposed to suffer, while Evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the Forms to which they are accustomed.*

And did not this define our era to a T? Suffering with the surface-thin lie of spoils, of greatness, all the caterwauling catalog of self-imposed evils, suffering with hobble-the-day

selfishness, a lazy accepting of our own faults as somehow beyond repair, or (amazingly) not a fault at all; content instead with this endless lauding as some form of defense mechanism saving one the reckoning, the hard work of being and doing "better." To claim greatness via decibels is to do nothing but attempt to lull the unsatisfied shrill into submission, hoping beyond hope that it all eventually goes away, finds a rug to be swept under, becomes—*again*—"not one's problem." And it keeps on shouting, lazy proclamations pumped out onto social media wires at volume, obscuring the penetrating ground radar focus required to get up off the mat, face the music, and get in the game. Democracy is not a spectator sport. Ending discrimination is not a passive act. Social equality and economic equity will not magically form themselves full-frame from the benevolence of gilded entrepreneurs, or those planting flags and greatness at lecterns. A present infected with a virus: the viral volume of calling something great that may have at points been, but was in sore need of a refresher on what that would be, what that should be. We had yet to earn greatness of any sort in our moment, ignoring via bullshit instead of dealing with the reasons for all the bullshit . . .

*. . . a History of repeated Injuries and Usurpations . . .*

And it was ironic, in no great way, how that phrase well applied to not just a Declaration aimed at a selfish ye olde world power having put a boot to the neck of restless colonials, but to all of our own damned history too. For all the great things done (again, they being legion) there was all the things not great that had also been done. And it had often been done to ourselves. The work ahead. The work to be done. And so . . .

*. . . we mutually pledge to each other our lives . . . our sacred Honor.*

Would we? Could we? In this most modern interpretation, could we as a country, or even a basic majority of the country, come to believe that ethnicity, skin-tone, gender, sans gender, economic status, sexual orientation, whether you were a fan of pop country or trap, the Phillies or the Dodgers, Columbus FC or Atlanta United, red or blue, mattered less than the root thread tying this whole ramshackle and highly imperfect experiment together—*Americans, all?* Here, 244 years out, it seemed, amazingly, that the jury was still out. It was long past for white dudes holding property to hold all the reins. It was time for mass equity, mass equality. For if C19 had any silver lining at all, it was that *Experience hath shewn* how very far we were from delivering on ideals, how far from done we were 244 years into this trial, this crucible—how very infected this nation and its varied cultures were. And yet, all the pieces, there. Not to be great again . . .

*To be great, finally.*

Work to do. The critical work of finding vaccines, doses of a cure that early indications were showing could roll out at light speed, a record-shattering minuscule amount of time. It seemed to date the one thing this muddling aggrieved horde of faux-executives had done right: open up the Treasury's firehose to fund, hopefully, a light speed record-shattering vaccination effort. Of course, it was the least they could do, which followed suit. Still, it was something. And

if I could pull any positive from the red-clanging alarm of where we seemed to be headed, well, maybe, just maybe, a collective response was still possible. At least there was that.

Deflating, in having to lower expectations, *disposed to suffering*, when the abolition of suffering—*all of it, and for all*—was, and should be, the intent. For it was that clank-along modern disposition, the incoherent incompetence that seemed designed to pull out, at volume, the worst in us, stir with a red hot poker all of the other more amorphous, more complicated, attempts to cure with cultural inoculations having been so long kicked down the road. In the midst of this humiliating national disaster there seemed a choice: suffer as if it were our lot, or pledge to do better, to be better. We had the cure right in front of us all along . . .

"It is us," I wrote that day.

And in the twilight of that most unusual national birthday, the steam of summer settling in, I wandered around the fact that it was going to get worse, much worse, before anything got better. C19 was going to have its way with a nation intent on playing the victim card inside an unabridged aggrieved selfishness. It was going to feed on this, evolve, have its runaway day. To think that we had not even seen the half of it yet, that despite a solid majority of Americans having stepped up to do what needed to be done regardless of the minor personal discomfort, the potential for major economic discomfort, we were—*still—disposed to suffer* because so many were disposed to not give a shit about anyone / anything aside from themselves. That alone pointed at a pandemic getting worse, way way worse, before anything got better, before we were returned to any recognizable "normal." The proof lay everywhere in the headlines and journalism

of those days. If hunkered down within our relatively safe spacious shelter tucked deep into the urban forest of Atlanta, we could hear, see, sense the whirlwind. The heavy tax of American selfishness was coming due.

The previous morning I had received a public health alert on my phone, a thing usually reserved for tornadoes bearing down, the wind shear storms that blast through and make kindling of civilization. The alert advised me, and all, of the extreme rise in the viral caseload in my home county, of the need to display extreme caution, wear a mask, stay home for the Fourth of July. This was bad. It was getting worse. But then, it was already bad. It had already been worse long before C19 had decided now was the time to leap from bat to human to unsuspecting world. "It only took a pandemic," that stock fated line anymore, to make us realize: we were in a bad way, and had been for some time. It framed the national reckoning to come, if only it would come. For there was a future. And from within the concussed float away of a pandemic summer, it was clear that it was on us. Would we be able to rely on each other? Could we depend on one another? How would this all go down. I was about to find out. We were all about to find out.

*Persevere* — Note to Self



## P O S T S C R I P T .

These entries are the thought-through, pored-over, fully formed journal pieces that I wish I could put down every time, in real-time, day after day after day. But the depth of the swoon and heave-ho swing of developments across those initial smothering months of COVID-19 here in the States made it clear that I did not have time for that. I just needed to get it all down. These 72 entries are stand-alone daily journeys—*and*—all of a piece. And by the time I was done shaping them up from scratch-out origins, this whole set of memoir / essay / creative-nonfictional rants-and-rolls had already sailed off into the historical record. But the wide-range of themes, the few recurrent core themes and the one-offs alike, seemed to retain relevance as a whole—and if only because of an equally recurring undercurrent: "what will be." Despite all of America being over it by the time I was done with this here work, I could see that I had (in equal parts) skillfully and luckily tapped into universal and timeless worries, issues, realities, failings + flaws in need of

constant attention. That which seared my mental neurons across the Spring of 2020 would be with us yet and for some time, a foundation for "what will be," good and bad.

Whether any of the 100K+ words I pumped out would move the needle on any of what I harangued-over for 3+ months seemed not the point. For all of the effort, I am not sure I gained a lot of answers—admittedly—providing few in all of what you have just read. But then, neither did I have that idea or any other clear goal at the report of the starter's gun: *March 18, 2020*. I wish that I could have stumbled across more in the way of bedrock answers to help lead the way. But then, that is rarely my way, if only for having enough trouble trying to find my own way.

This was not meant to be an op-ed that eventually landed on supposed fixes to issues addressed. This project was not designed to spit out a treatise. My only conscious intent was to document the shape and mood and contour of that unusual historic *now* as I wandered through. I did this knowing that if I tried to do it later the results would be warped and flattened and exaggerated by the missing-frame slip-mind scrum of whatever "what will be" was to be.

And so, I settled in around this goal for lack of any other:

*Document this now. Do it for later. Just get it all down.*

The pop-eye shock of that first clutch of titles: *The Unknowable Next / Assist Or Die / Barbarians Inside The Gates / A Slow Moving Avalanche*, makes the "just get it down" case on their own. Sketch the themes of the day, jot down the seething topical brooding and the worries. Capture the mood. There was so much in that early cacophony, the swirling headspace of news and media and opinion and such, that only an outline, a sketch, was possible. It was not possible

to capture it all full-frame. It was global and total. No lens with depth-of-field expansive enough had yet been developed to take in all of it; which left me with one thing: my own daily step-through of a riddled most not normal time.

Here was a rendering that would, at once, drop as entirely unique—*and*—familiar / common to all. It was the first draft of my own history ingesting it all. It was the first draft of a common history unfolding in the present, living the days and hours, weeks and minutes, each and every one clanging all the more to be heard, to be recognized. At no time in my life had so many points in time been so obvious in the present. It all usually swings by with hardly a notice, our roll-through modern lives streaming their gigabits and terabytes per second, then gone. But not so in *that present*, the momentum of a history *so very present* that it actually slowed things down. Those first several months (and the many many more to follow) would achieve an odd kind of zero-gravity, suspended in time. This allowed for a more studied glance, if one cared to wander through; that, plus, most of us were marooned in our homes, once removed from the usual bustling throughput of "normal."

But if momentarily stilled inside this new routine, the situation on the whole seemed to speed on recklessly, frantically. It was a most odd distortion: static and frenetic all at once, all inside the same moment. We all had a front-row seat. Sheltered-in-place, it looked as if the whole national contraption was setting up to fly apart at the seams. The ventilator shortage, the dead being stowed in freezer trucks outside overrun hospitals, the supply chain disruptions—all the damned hoarding. It was the first time in my life I was faced with this question: "what if it all comes apart?" (re: 0329) Dislocated, concussed, disorienting, day after shambling day.

Adam Gopnik would later write that *pandemics make people feel precarious, and feeling precarious can either focus our minds or fry our circuits*. Those were two symptoms I exhibited in equal heaping doses, often at once, if powering through . . . *Capture the moment. Capture the heightened string of moment on top of moment on top of . . . Capture the fear and heartache, the courage and simmering waiting-room-like unease of it all . . . Breath in. Breath out. Still no rattle. Still clear . . . I am a wave. I am a well. . .* Above all, I was capturing the deep-stir of emotion, the one thing not transferable through recollection alone. That is the thing put down in the present that stamps words with a timeless authenticity: *how it all felt in the moment*. And the pile of bone-dry Pilot Rolling Ball black ink pens (as mentioned, the one item that I had selfishly hoarded) were serving up yeomen service, dead soldiers having given their last full measure of devotion to the cause line after line after line.

A "note to self" towards the end of the second journal laid out what would be the eventual inspiration, a vital reminder on a relatively clean page (most pages run over by clots of headlines, notes after-the-fact, out-takes, the word swells of scrawl). It said, simply:

*This project is two things. A place to vent off this absurd surreal sad historic event and a place to sketch deeper truths, meditations, observations, all those things not yet obvious. This is first-drafting in the moment. It does not need to be perfect.*

I could dig in and round out each entry's theme once the concussed jumble had settled, once the blur had dialed back into focus. But in that moment, I just had to get it all down.

Inside a week of my dropping a period on the final entry: *July 4, 2020*, the reports from everywhere here in the States confirmed that not only had we lost all containment of community spread, but that we were in for a viral rampage. A month after my state had "boldly" reopened, case loads doubled from the April-May days of quarantine and were setting record highs every single day. The U.S. hit 50K+ every day across the first five days of July. At the time, it struck me as calamitous (if I only could have seen what was coming). *The Atlantic Daily* dropped these lines: *confirmed cases are on the rise, and this time like never before*. The entire scene cemented in place the one thing that did seem clear: no one in the role of strategic national leadership seemed to be at the wheel, or if they were they had jerked us wildly into a ditch.

The correct impulse to minimize the economic damage done had been run out as some sort of zealot's measuring stick, yet one more depressing love-it-or-leave-it / black-and-white / zero-sum marker of fealty. For fuck's sake. This, instead of the balance of taking care of our own in full: those left exposed by the necessity to shut down close indoor economic activity in order to slow the spread, and those who were proving most vulnerable to disease. It would have been a truly bold balance of wealth equity and civic responsibility, sharing the sacrifice under duress as citizens of a single nation. It would have set up as a national moment pinned to the timeline and to be proud of. . . . But, no. . . . Public health was left in the drag-strip dust to reopen "everything, now." Some even suggested that mass death in the name herd immunity was a toll worth paying (re: 0326); that, and the conspiratorial maelstrom shin-kicking this shit along.

We had re-opened too soon, too fast, and without precise targeting where it made sense to do so. As with all things in the fractured *before* and that fraught *now*, reactions were knee-jerk and partisan in instinct, devoid of common cause, and without much if any sense at all. It opened

up all of America, not just "lib-tard coastal bastions of socialism," but all of the red-purple-blue American hues, opened us all up to the indifferent tidal evolution of a viral opportunist. Impact payments, some (I stress some, re: 0427) of the PPP payments and stimulus had and would help. Opening up wide swaths of close indoor commerce on May Day had not. We had come through March and April into May, what we could see even back then as only an initial surge, and were left looking at being completely dead-eye fucked. *Is it time to shut down again?* was already a question being asked by July 4, 2020.

But, of course, that was not ever going to happen in any national way inside the moment's toxic echoing canyons of fume-addled argument, steps removed from reality as so much of it was. That we could no longer talk to each other, let alone agree convincingly in a majoritarian / collective way on common action, meant we would be left simmering across all the rest of 2020, and for however long into the future, with a continual rolling and tolling of infection and death as the tax that we, a free people, had to cough up for all the wave away down-playing—all of which had numb-skulled us into a trap: that of a microscopic viral opportunist fueled by carelessness, complacency, misinformation. C19 had, indeed, picked its host nation wisely.

Increasingly, I was feeling the fried over the focus. *Sit down with your negative emotions, do not push them away*, an article advised. "No worries there. Got that covered," my response. *You will not be prepared for the coming of the new normal*, another claimed. "You don't say?" my response. And yet, a normalization was under way. As fried as I was, as difficult as I found *not forgetting to be nice* in lieu of all the carelessness and complacency, I could sense another gear. Low gear, for sure; but one that allowed a slower pace to slot into a new normal.

We were all figuring things out. We were all moving through. Well, some were. There were also petty infantile fights over local mask mandates, dumb-fuck pissing matches among trite egos that we had somehow delivered up into positions of leadership . . . *Future generations will find it difficult to connect public health mandates advising the wearing of masks during a global pandemic with the red-faced crowds angrily shouting tyranny . . . Don't forget to be nice . . . Don't forget to fight for what is right. . . .* And it had become glaring and pathetically obvious that rollercoaster decades of insular privatization and the cultish trickle-down selfishness that drove it all had added up to a chronic underfunding of public health across all of that time, short-term profiteering and the untethered expectation of a no-limits self-gratification having contributed directly to our unacceptable death toll in this: *our moment*.

*America's reticence to risk the economy for public health's sake has left both in shambles,* reported *The Atlantic* . . . *July 16, 2020: 77,000+ new infections in the U.S.,* tolled *The Wall Street Journal*.

We were in the process of losing this thing—and—we had done it to ourselves. That it was a certain minority whose flailing and flouting was chiefly responsible for making it all that much worse almost seemed besides the point. We would all face the consequences, regardless. That, plus, all the other now obvious non-virus related issues in need of crash-cart attention. We had kicked so many cans down the road that the dark humors of the universe were sure to post them due in a panic as everything came roaring to a halt. That clattering head-struck present exposed all that *We, The People*, had failed to take on—for all that had been taken on.

It proved a confluence of crises. Confronting (maybe and finally?) the un-dealt with rat fuck bullshit of racial injustice. Recognizing the malaise of partisan culture warriors who, having

previously tanked the utility of the public square (insert any of a dozen spot-on indictments of recklessly un-managed social media algorithms here), were in those bleak early hours tanking a once-in-a-century public health response (and if only because it wasn't "the thing they wanted to be doing"). All of this had coalesced to royally fuck the economy, if momentarily (keeping in mind that the economy was going to be fucked, regardless of who did what). And then, of course, there was that mightier and steeper Mount Everest to climb that we weren't even talking about at that point, if only because so many cars and planes and all the heavy industry had momentarily disappeared, showing us (re: 0416) in crystal clear resolution what an alternatively-fueled future in which we aggressively mitigate the dirge of climate change could look like. There was all of that . . . and then John Lewis died. A warrior, an American hero having spilled blood for this country. A true patriot.

The protests and the infection spikes continued at pace, atoms bouncing about ever more frantically in the swelling heat of Summer. Seattle and Portland were set to explode, the absent-minds hiding behind the paper-thin masculinity of "law and order" about to light the fuse. All the statues of Confederate leaders and generals, the retrograde memorials to the "lost cause" toppling and dissolving into the mist of myth to which they had always belonged, sad sack milestones on America's blinkered journey across the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century's lock-down of white supremacy, finally coming down—*finally*. . . . And yet, all the new myths that charged in to fill the void.

There was always—*always*—the sense of a profound signal history in every waking moment . . . *The timing of when you pop up on this Earth, the timeline points of history that you are allowed to move through*. . . . It was literally the first thing I thought of every day for most of

2020. But how this was then coupled with routine (re: "clinging to," 0403). How this once-in-a-century present settled in as, simply, the day-to-day, a calm carrying on, the normalcy of living out life's days and hours and weeks and minutes. How it was that profound—and—that normal-seeming all at once. That was a hell of a thing. And it threw open a window on how people get through moments of highly concentrated fear-lit trauma: that they have to continue living, and the instinct is there to do so. Through all the fried circuitry, to be able to focus on routine and carry on. It can seem impossible to look back at history's significant pressure points and think that humans made it through, at all. But then, what other choice did they have? What other choice did we have?

*As that I can see no way out but through—*

I was struck by how intuitive and rhythmic it was to settle into a new mental space, as if it were something I already knew how to do (ghosted imprints on all human DNA arguing that it was). And though I more often felt like I was floating untethered and uncertain through those first four months of the pandemic, by mid-summer 2020 I could look back and see that instinct had clocked in fairly quick and picked up the slack. I was able to tread the uncertain waters well enough, compartmentalize enough to hone in on the one thing that I knew in a beat: that I just needed to get down as much of the whirling disorienting vertigo of this event as possible. Just get it down: *document the now* (re: 0417). I never did have trouble stirring up ideas to write about. But that first fraught stretch of C19 blew through as the first time when I literally did not have enough time in each day to get down all of the ideas, all the thoughts, all the ricochet material

sprinting through my head. And that was at least partly true because I had to get up everyday and continue the work of living. The work continued on without a pause, as it always does—as it always will. That is the point.

And the work arrived in various forms and formats. Through the flash-bang clouds of tear gas and aggression, there appeared a "Wall of Moms," a bulwark to the thousands in the streets putting life and limb on the line to nightly demand: "better, now." There was the impressive news of the Moderna vaccine (one of a handful of American-led efforts using the revolutionary state of the art mRNA delivery method) already entering late-stage trials. A ray of light, a bright ray of greatness. *Better, now*. There was also a settling-in, calls to dial back "hygiene theatre" as surface transmission became less of a concern. That, and the sad sight of home runs plunking down in empty seats, a truncated 60-game Major League Baseball season having started in late July.

I found myself leaning heavily on this new normalizing, tunneling through the ocean of contradictory flotsam otherwise drowning out that sick surreal summer. I was needing to shut it out all the more, circuits frying in the bluster-screed scrawling across the backdrop of each and every day as the election geared up. It was clear that many had learned nothing, were refusing to adapt to anything, and were doing so as some self-affixed badge of honor. That it was coming to this. That it had come to this. That the best some could do was devolve on empty gestures of individualism symbolizing nothing of the rugged mettle they claimed was the point, but only scoring one more notch in the widening belt of evidence that this truly great country needed its people to be better, way better: to themselves—to others—*and now*. And yet: "Could it?" A question with no immediate answer.

*Hubris has a way of biting back . . . though it invariably hurts not those guilty of it, but those most vulnerable. — OZY*

*In recent decades many Americans have conflated liberty with selfishness, adopting the notion that freedoms are self-sustaining, that liberty is a birthright that no longer requires sacrifice or collective action . . . These attitudes are societal comorbidities. — Scott Galloway / Medium*

If only out of habit or inertia, or both, I continued scribbling the more pointed headlines and mind wanderings from each day across the back fold-out boards of that second journal. But all of the cut line ink-to-paper had come to feel obsessive, the sick electrical smell of internal circuit boards toasting. Days were blending into weeks and hours, stretching and pulling on what seemed an uneven conveyor belt as they passed fitfully. Even the history of the moment seemed to have difficulty squaring up temporal time and space . . . *The Atlantic Daily: Keep in mind that what you see in daily COVID-19 data is oftentimes a look into the recent past. . . .* I needed to let go of the close-quarter documentation. I was done. I could tell. I called a halt to it all in late August, ending with that one word, again, this time written in all caps: PERSEVERE

What good is it to be a nation, a proud society, a (too proud?) culture defined in large part by our individualism, if we cannot come together in times of national crises and pull in a single direction? How is America any good, for its citizens, to the world, if we can't agree to disagree in exercising our birthright-bestowed freedoms, at the same time teaming up to engineer solutions

that tackle big-ticket items nationally, globally? If we cannot hold both in our collective national skull, then what good are we? What good is our proud democracy if we cannot harness the unique power of individual thought and action for the benefit of all individuals in moments of extreme stress? What good is our uniqueness if we cannot hold to a common cause? What good is individualism itself when interpretations take the term to such an extreme as to evade all civic responsibility in favor of self-interest, when individualism becomes the actual armament used to torpedo our ability to achieve great things together—and that, when such a thing is sorely needed? How could greatness ever come out of the mess we had made?

Through all of that pandemic year of 2020, I was unable to shake loose this rambling set of tethered questions. Again, I did not gain many answers along the way, but could only ever see these as an existential set of if / then dilemmas with our very future as a nation among nations hanging in the balance. At some point (strangely, I did not note the date), I wrote this:

*How we are to be judged in the end as a nation worthy of greatness, whether that judgment comes in one hundred years or a thousand, will be because we did the hard uncomfortable things when it mattered most; because we went to the mat and confronted what we had to that point failed to confront, did what was hard to right long generational wrongs once-and-for-all. How we do as a nation, with the pandemic, and everything in its wake yet to come, will eventually come down to how well we do on one key metric: how much we are willing to do and to sacrifice for those we do not know and probably never will. That had always been clear. Now it was unavoidably so. It was on us. Would we assist or die?*

There was a growing awareness, or at least I was becoming more aware of a key split in how many had been defining risk. Life is always a risk. We take our life in our hands just getting into a vehicle and driving on a highway. I understood that. But that is a calculated risk. I could do all within my power—buckle up, pay attention, not drive like an invincible entitled asshole—to get from point A to B safely. Never a guarantee, a calculated risk of injury to myself or others; but one worth the venture in order to live life. Life is not without risk. But it does come with consequences. And when we step out into the public square we cease to be individuals with civil liberties only. We enter society where personal risk assessments and the individual decisions they drive have consequences for those we do not know and likely never will. Personal responsibility opens up a much wider front. It is no longer about "me, I" only.

I had hoped beyond hope (re: 0623) that these entires would document a groundswell of individual Americans deciding to answer a civic call to collective sacrifice, that in a stroke we could wipe clean the past several sigh-worthy decades of adolescent foot-stomping, of red-faced over-exaggeration to perceived micro-slights, all the head-scratching spittle-flung overreacting to every damned *everything* by simply growing up, realizing the ridiculous futility of all the go-nowhere ideological fits (realizing in the process that we are all different and that is an okay thing)—and then—doing what must be done to mitigate risk for ourselves, as well as for others we do not know and likely never would. But again, that was not how it went down and I was reduced to documenting another chapter in our sad cyclical trudge through troll-dredged sewage instead. (And if this all sounds overtly cynical, just go back and read the news from any of a hundred forgettable days from March - July, *Two Thousand & Twenty*.)

I had heard the arguments about individual risk assessment and how this led an individual to not wear a mask because they were young and healthy and this was a free land. And yet, in all of their oddly confident words (given the human animal's cartoonishly poor record on assessing risk) all I could hear was: "me, myself." I heard those standing atop the hallowed turf of civil liberties, flags unfurled and claiming a stifling over-reach and exaggeration (alongside their clear, often proud, ignorance of viral germ behavior), claiming despotism and tyranny and the like—and yet all I could hear was: "me, myself." I listened to the thousands on thousands go on at length about an individual's freedom to choose being crushed beneath the boot heel of abstract public health declarations, and that we had lost all spine as a nation / culture, and that thousands died from the flu every year—and yet, all I could ever hear was: "me, myself." My pleading hopes for *better* had run full-speed into a brick wall of "me, myself, and I."

There is the need for calculated risk in life, but being "calculated" infers a thoughtfulness in how your actions might impact others, as well as yourself. This was not that brand of risk, but one prodded up out of a willing ignorance that seemed not to consider either of those things. The freedom to not wear a mask in public, the freedom to claim on civil libertarian grounds that no public mandate had the gall to expound an authority over individual desire, this was a brand of risk that seemed all about "what I wanted" and had nothing to do, right then, with what we ALL needed. What we needed was collective sacrifice to end a viral contagion spinning rapidly out of control. What we got was a good deal of that, and a heap of selfless heroism; but that it was so thoroughly spoiled by just enough who claimed that this was all an over-reaction, and was only killing old people and those who were already immunocompromised . . . *only*.

People were dying. Americans were dying. But it was only those "other" Americans, not "me." That mind sick and ancient discriminatory category of "the other," even that was being reconfigured and tightened around an ever untenable plot of validity constricted to "anyone who doesn't think like me," full stop. How was anything that requisitioned a high degree of selfless behavior and collective sacrifice in modern American ever going to go any other way than very poorly. Derek Thompson hit it pitch-perfect when he wrote: *The United States suffers from a deficit of imagining the lives of other people*. How could it have gone any other way? An epidemic of selfishness. We were fucked from the very start.

That six, seven, eight months into this thing and still a vast count of the population had not reconciled, or even recognized, that all the social / physical distancing, the wearing of a mask indoors *always* and outdoors when in a crowd, the washing of hands, the washing them again, the being over-considerate of an individual's space to the point of what would have seemed *before times* rude, that all of this, the reason for each and every one of these instructive, often changing, occasionally confusing, guidelines was not about "me" or "I" or "you" so much as it was and had always been about "we, all." That we were so far into this world-upside-down fuck-all of a moment, and the unwieldy adaptations it required, a moment like no other we were likely (hopefully) to see again—*and still*—so many having failed to grasp that success or failure in this moment would come down to how we acted in the name of one thing above all others: "we, all."

As infection rates aimed towards the stratosphere and deaths dove ever deeper into the hundreds of thousands, I was getting an answer. It had not looked good in April or May or on July 4. It looked worse—*way worse*—as 2020 stumbled towards an exhausting close.

But, there had been an election. . . . I had no appetite to get into all that in these pages: the election itself, the sore loser / fever dream aftermath culminating with fantastically misguided dupes storming the f-ing Capitol on the day of the Electoral College vote, all of that crap having been dramatically documented and slathered all over, and everywhere. But I could say this without getting into the weeds: democratic elections exist to deliver consequences. This one had the future hanging by a thread. It was a great collective act. It was heartening at a time when I needed something, anything, to disperse the dark-cloud spitting as it hovered above my head wherever I went, whatever I did. As rupturing and schoolyard stupid mean as the whole election cycle had been, there was something in the voting piece of it that transcended that most shitty year. It would be the most participated-in act in the history of American elections by numbers of votes cast. The highest percentage of voting-age voters in over a century had exercised their right to the franchise; and this, while a viral storm ascended unchecked towards a Winter peak.

There was, just maybe, a pulse of civic engagement after all (this, despite the head-smack disparity of the act's stark choice for leadership, America continuing to toy with a discriminatory authoritarian future). We had been careening reckless and ignorant about the canyon's rim, on two wheels at points, embankment giving way at points, a crash and burn instant imminent for the entirety of that pandemic year. Yet, somehow, we had found just enough pavement at just the right time. A moment of rehabilitation, if not redemption, seemed possible. The only question: Would it be that? . . . *Maybe*. . . . That was the best I could suss out from the whole mess. But in a year spent inside a country enduring a mind-melt public health crisis made unfathomably worse by obfuscation, a more often than not purposeful dithering, the hubris of the selfish and uncaring of the lazy, the outright sabotage of a solid portion of fellow citizens having spent the whole of

that mind-numb year dancing about the Vesuvius rim half out of their wits and wholly under the spell of their own bullshit—tempting, *daring*, jealous indifferent fates to do their worst—holy fuck did a slender patch of tolerably solid asphalt seem like transcendent deliverance.

A student of history, someone who has read a great deal on the horrific history of human warfare, there was something in that post-election month akin to surviving a rotation along the front lines. The guns continued to hammer away, but were at a distance enough to allow a full breath, a respite not unlike a fever breaking. Short shallow breaths gave way to lungs filling up to full. It was the first time I could breath without an anxious arrhythmia since the previous March—a break in the clouds, knowing overcast days were forever close.

That, and the coming of the vaccines. This would go down as THE miracle of modern medicine to be lifted up a century from now: a little over a year from the first genetic blueprint of SARS-CoV-2 being rendered, to shots in arms rendering efficacy against the COVID-19 virus to the tune of 80%+. *Miraculous*. In the immediate wake of the election, it was clear that the cutting edge mRNA vaccine delivery approach (something R&D'd to death over the previous decades but missing the kind of mass cash-dump emergency to go all in on its development) was going to deliver—and right soon. They were first rolled out in the final weeks of 2020 and got rolling post-inauguration. *A miracle*.

We would go on to chose a vaccination site with symbolic heft: the massive sports dome in downtown Atlanta, a place where over 70K were meant to gather elbow-to-elbow and release mass aerosolized clouds of chants, repressed emotion expelling cheers, yelling to hoarse in the escapist thrall of sports (re: 0505). It was a "mass vaccination center" to beat all. The sheer scale

of the operation, run by active-duty military, shots given by army medics, the scope of what was being administered, the vast canopy of dome, it was as glorious as a functional scene could be.

We got the first shot (the American / German combined Pfizer-BioNTech) March 25, 2021. I left feeling a calm come over me, one having been absent for over a year. The second and final shot found our forearms on April 15. It felt like liberation, a victory. And as we sat through the fifteen-minute post-shot wait (a precaution against rare but possible allergic reactions) in and around thousands of other Americans I did not know and likely never would, it was undeniable that we had all stepped through a shared civic experience. Even those who were there for purely self-motivated reasons had nonetheless engaged in a collective act aimed at *better*. It threw a tangible energy into the air, somewhere between relief, confidence, and joy. We were all there, from those working long hours to administer the shots and the process for getting the shot, to those who sat down, rolled up sleeves and "got the jab," we all were there for a single purpose: vital pieces and parts in the machinery of BETTER. In that brief moment I was able to see what it could look like, what a mass societal act of coming together and pulling in a single direction towards a shared goal, of what that could look like. It came to feel like a duty fulfilled. And that tangible something in the air, I like to think it was pride. Given the battered droning malaise of the previous thirteen months, I don't know that I had ever felt more free to live.

*In order to move on, I must first move through.*

— Note to Self

It was going to end, even if it was not clear how or when it would end. It might simply abate, downgrade to a thing we can muddle through. But for the most part, and despite the raft of more contagious variants to come, it did end for those that got the jab; or at least the plague-shrouded phase of worrying over catching C19 ended, and abruptly. From that point forward, "breakthrough" infections among the vaccinated would, most often, run out like a flu, if not more mild (the frustrating fact of Long COVID entered into the record here, if only to recognize those poor souls suffering its cycling debilities). Not great—but—most definitely not being intubated in an overwrought ICU, or slowly dying on a gurney in hallway at a hospital that was over-capacity, its exhausted resources being rationed. But just knowing that, the security, the shield it awarded you within a world that will often throw everything it has—viral, circumstantial, etc.—in your path, most often doing so indifferently . . . well, that was at once an end point and a start point. It felt jubilant, if celebrated within (and if only out of a repressed exhaustion, being able to again breath). There would be no ticker-tape parade, no signing ceremony. There would be no pour-out-into-the-street celebrations—though there would be many a party at homes, on decks. There would still be much much grief, simmering and societal, at the scale and scope of this thing. If we were, or were to be a great nation, there had better be.

There was to remain a skeptical minority that grew only more skeptical and only more desperate to hang on to . . . well . . . whatever the hell it was they were trying to hang onto. It was hard to tell through all the vein-bulge fuming and shouting, a fun house mirror distorted sense of freedom and reality itself that did little to aid their going about days free of a potentially life-threatening illness. But then, neither did they seem to think that was such a big deal, either. In keeping with much of what I had observed / absorbed for the previous year, they seemed free to

not have to give a shit. And since that seemed core to the program itself, I suppose they were getting precisely what they were after. That, plus, it freed them up to be mongered into fear and aggrieved indignation—*the real victims, the "real" Americans*—by dis- and misinformed egos with agendas unrelated to their own puffed up desire that "no one dare tread on me."

All of this would go on too. There were to be those poked and prodded incessantly into an extreme sensitivity about every damned *everything*, a hate for hate's sake cynicism that not even a pandemic had dissolved (and in many ways, seemed to only make worse). C19, as suspected, was not going anywhere, would be with us (re: 0331) in some variant or mutated form (modern strains of the HINI virus the long-tail legacy of the Great Influenza of a century ago). And this, if only because of those skeptical who were incapable of seeing a new real emerging from its hibernation right there in front of blinkered eyes. It was going to end. But it was not going to end with a mass celebratory event, just . . . release . . . a precautionary session in which to reset. . . . From the depths of the exhausting head-scratch spectacle of national failure had emerged a slow bore restoration, an easy downshift into history's continuum as a routine normal slid into the unknowable next. It would be with us still, a downgraded threat for the vaccinated something more like the seasonal flu. Or, that was the hope. We could not know for certain. But we could hope (re: 0611). For what lay ahead was an uncharted course. But then, it was and always is so. And it was so right then, if a touch of faint dawn light to go with it.

Knowing that this most recent past would continue to shape present and next for some time to come had me thinking in the weeks following our second shot about *The Unknowable Next* (re: 0318) and *The Unknown* (re: 0514). Those two entries were the bookends of Journal 1, of my attempting to render the furious fog of a pandemic bearing down and then revisiting how

the collective memory of our forbears had formed around the same type of event a hundred years before. My answer to a not normal time had been to pick it up and turn it over in my hands, view all the curious mortal angles; or at least all those that I could presently see, knowing that others would reveal themselves—*or would not*—eventually. I knew unknowns would abound and like anyone writing of history in the present that I was bound to get some of it wrong. But misplacing a thought or two under duress seems par for the course and even acceptable if the goal is to emerge *better* for the wandering through.

I was continually considering my choice of writing all the first draft journal entries in the third-person, something I had done until well into June. A friend had guessed that that had been my way, conscious or not, of creating some separation from all the emotional turmoil; and though on some level she was certainly correct, in the end I could see that it was also an honest interpretation of the moment. It was so abstract, so abnormal and f-d up strange, that I had no choice but to always be a bit distant from it. I often felt as if I were floating above myself, observing myself at a distance as I wandered through.

In the coming-to phase of my oft-referred to "concussed state," the initial double-vision slowly, eventually, aligns back into focus. If still a bit blurry, it reveals, again, the world as it is. I can now look back and see that by mid-June my adaptation was complete. It WAS a new normal, and that I understood it. I hated every inch of it, invective-laced rants still just a raw over-worked nerve away. But I saw it and more importantly could process it for the moment it was. I had done what we humans have been programmed over millennia to do, whether we realize we can or not: *deal with it*. Whether "it" is war or pestilence or the thousand-and-one other ways the human species has and will continue to be afflicted, in the end we must face it in order to move through

it. And I had not been alone in this. Article on top of article by other writers all the way across 2020 and deep into 2021 were also working it out, trying to pin this thing, give it shape, wrap it in context, so that we might deal with it . . . *What the History of Pandemics Can Teach Us About Resilience* . . . *Who Are We Now?* . . . This thing sucked ass. I hated every minute of it, the pandemic, the painful and often pathetic unstable state of the country. But I could see it in full, and in first person. There was no longer any need for separation. I was ready to deal.

"Would any of this effort even matter?" seemed the larger fraught question. I had poured all this time and energy into dropping several hundred pages of entries that could likely drop into the dead letter bin of disinterest. Would anyone want to read about this, recall these times once we had passed over into whatever was to be that unknowable next? Probably not. I'm not even sure I would. The Great Influenza disappeared from popular culture and to a large degree fell away from history itself because most people just wanted to forget all about it and move on . . . *The truth was that people really wanted to forget.*

I got it. I did. Still, my scribbling knew no bounds while I was in the thick of it. It was historic. It already was. It could very well be that anyone who ambled up on this wordy rambling slab of pandemic-era scrawl in a few years or ten or more would prefer it found the ash-heap of history, be it good history or not. And there it was: There would no celebratory moment, no flyover fireworks exploding across the sky; just the notion that I had, inside my poor power to add or detract, attempted to add, not detract. Even if this whole project proved one long exercise designed to keep the wolves of despair at bay in the midst of a most not normal time, then so be it. The writer's reward was my sanity intact. Battered, bruised, jabbed, but also, somehow, *better*. That something so upending and so very fucked up, that all of the battering and bruising and

trauma of mass death, that it all might, in the end, result in a *better* me? That would be a hell of a thing. That it could result in a *better* America? Well, that would be well nigh miraculous.

As I thought through how to end this ramble-on product of a wandering mind, I could think of no better scene than this one from late June 2020. . . . Out on the then routine "new normal" once-a-week provisioning run, I had braced myself for the inevitable let down of striding up through the cobweb-masked paper products aisle. Its empty rattling echo had become so predictable that I felt the need to confront it each and every week as the first step of each run. Just get it out of the way, the practical let down of there being not a square of toilet paper to be seen, the heart-sink rumble of realizing that we were a nation unprepared to handle big moments and the gross selfishness that was its most direct cause. Just get it out of the way, process the disappointment, move on down the list.

But then, there it was: what was clearly a just arrived, not picked over and torn asunder shipment. It took up maybe one-eighth of one of several shelves usually devoted to toilet paper, what in *before times* would have seemed next to empty. But at that moment, in that context, it was an overindulgent abundance. I stood there in momentary shock. And that's when I realized there was another guy standing about ten feet away doing the same thing. I looked at him, he at me. "I'm not even sure what to do with this," I said. "I think I could just stand here and look at this all day," he said. In that moment, it felt like we were in it together, a guy I did not know and would probably never see again. And yet, linked together in this most basic—if most ridiculous—commoditized hope . . . *Please, please, please . . . Yes!*

And for that one minute, the thought never entered my head that as a black guy his life experience had been of a whole other plane, a much rougher ride than mine. That though we seemed about the same age—and if so had come through a lot if only because of the fifty plus years on the odometer—that by the hard-knot calculus of my being a white guy and he being not white almost certainly reflected an imbalance in how we had been able to interact with, navigate through, and day-to-day deal with this strange, occasionally mean, occasionally beautiful, more often neither, America. For that one moment, there was no need of my having to reconcile the appalling lack of progress made, for the sheer scale of progress that had been made. That despite what was likely a vast disparity in our life experiences, how we had to consider and perform our usual run-through routines, how our lives had set up by way of access to opportunity, credit lines, fair housing practices—*common fucking decency*—in that ridiculous moment all of that was just not a thing. Right then, we were just two dudes shocked into elation by a thin but nonetheless existing stock of product where for months there had been nothing but wanton emptiness.

He grabbed a 12-pack. I grabbed a 12-pack. I want to say that I wished him "good luck" as we went about the rest of our run, and if I did not I should have. For it was the one thing WE ALL were going to need in order to move through, and for real.

