

12-2020

Stuck in the Middle: An Illustrated Essay on COVID-19 and Other Past Pandemics

Amanda Pszczolkowski
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects>



Part of the [Illustration Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

ScholarWorks Citation

Pszczolkowski, Amanda, "Stuck in the Middle: An Illustrated Essay on COVID-19 and Other Past Pandemics" (2020). *Honors Projects*. 798.
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects/798>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research and Creative Practice at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.



STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

**AN ILLUSTRATED ESSAY
ON COVID-19 AND OTHER
PAST PANDEMICS**

BY AMANDA PSZCZOLKOWSKI

Forward

For my GVSU Honors Senior Project, I created a visual essay, in a graphic novel-esque style, exploring how the coronavirus compares to other illness outbreaks of the past century and how the associated restrictions have impacted me at an individual level. The creative nonfiction essay intertwines historical perspectives as a way to inform, contextualize, and reflect my own experience with COVID-19.

This project has allowed me to combine two of areas of scholarship from my college career: creative writing and visual rhetoric. My familiarity with the genre of creative nonfiction, document design principles, and storytelling in the visual mode made this project one that I was excited to undertake. I drew all of the black and white illustrations throughout and manipulated a few images using Adobe Photoshop. The project began with extensive research on illness outbreaks of the past century, current developments in the Coronavirus pandemic, and genre conventions of graphic novels and memoirs. My intent was to provide a cohesive whole that illuminates themes in the linguistic essay.

This full semester project combined my skills in a way I have not been able to do elsewhere in my college career. Enjoy this project that is braided with the history of pandemics in the last century to explore themes of humanity in times of crisis.

I.

I found a post that said:

If you write the number 87 and turn it on its side, it looks like a plague doctor.

87

Even better, a bracket and a line gives him a hat.

[|87

I took on the task of writing about the present situation, the global pandemic, COVID-19,



thinking that by the time I finished, we'd be back to normal.

Instead, we're in a

UNIQUELY
AMERICAN
HELL
HOLE

It's easy to tell something smart was said

when author Katherine Anne Porter spoke of how the Spanish Flu impacted her life:



IT SIMPLY DIVIDED MY LIFE, CUT ACROSS IT LIKE THAT. SO THAT EVERYTHING BEFORE THAT WAS JUST GETTING READY, AND AFTER THAT I WAS IN SOME STRANGE WAY ALTERED, REALLY.

Which is true for her.

But there's no explanation of what constitutes a before and an after



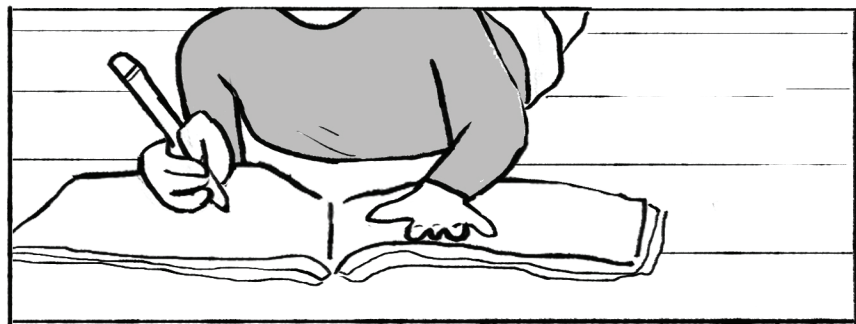
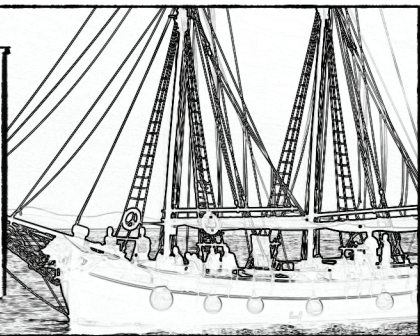
And there's surely no mention of a middle.

We're currently in the middle.

I've mentioned that already.

Since we can, let's return to the beginning.

At the start, I wrote about the Coronavirus the way a deckhand writes about being at sea, recalling specifics.

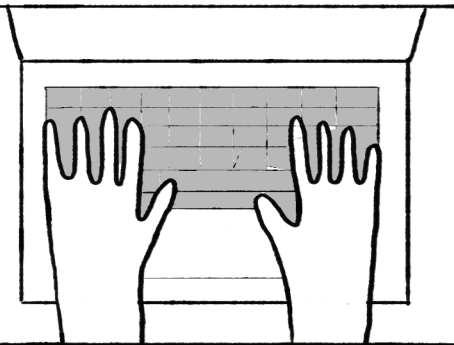


03.11.20
AS OF TODAY, THERE ARE TWO CONFIRMED
CORONAVIRUS CASES IN MICHIGAN AND OVER 1000
NATIONWIDE. MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY HAS CLOSED
UNTIL APRIL 20TH. GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY WILL
MAKE A DECISION BY FRIDAY.

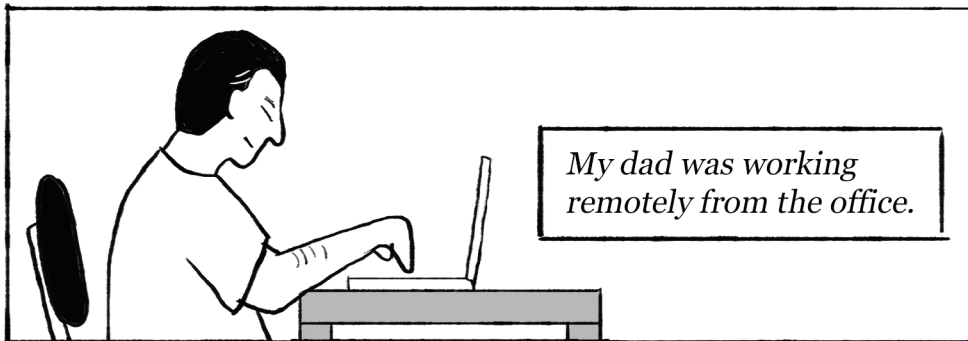
03.14.20
WE HAVE REACHED THE PROVERBIAL END OF TIMES AND, I'LL
TELL YOU, IT'S NOWHERE NEAR AS RIVETING AS ONE MAY
HAVE HOPED. TODAY THERE ARE 33 CASES CONFIRMED IN
MICHIGAN. WE ARE NOT UNDER LOCKDOWN.

03.17.20
I WORKED ONLINE FOR THE FIRST TIME TODAY. IT WASN'T
TERRIBLE, BUT THIS IS NOT THE JOB I SIGNED UP FOR. THESE
ARE NOT THE CLASSES I SIGNED UP FOR. I FEEL AT ONCE
OVERWORKED AND BLESSED WITH TOO MUCH FREE TIME.

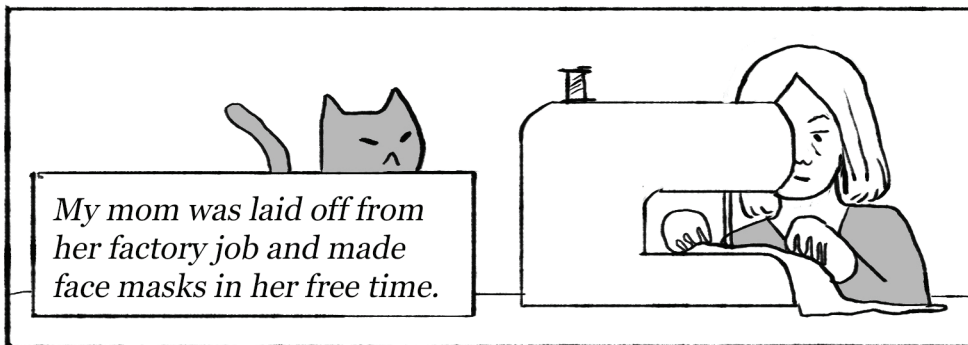
By the end of March, I was back home with my parents. I finished the semester online.



My dad was working remotely from the office.



My mom was laid off from her factory job and made face masks in her free time.



She only went for cigarettes and groceries.

What we did not do was talk about politics.

There was no longer the opportunity to hang up a phone mid argument.



The only escape I had was driving down to the river.



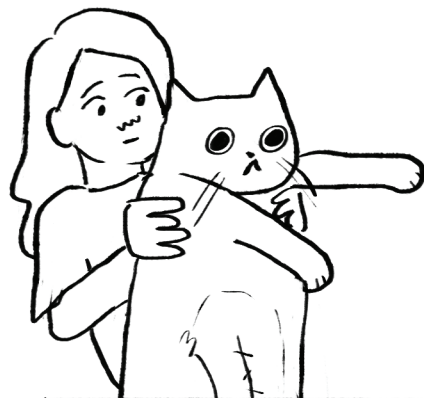
The online articles were saying going outside was good. The river made me want to make art.



I couldn't make art.

Aside from my cat's surgery post-eating-a-thread-from-the-sewing-machine,

things were mostly unnoteworthy at the start of the pandemic.



We just didn't discuss politics.

Except on the odd occasion when we did. Sometimes we talked about COVID-19.



WE MUST FIGHT THE CHINESE VIRUS.

I DON'T GET WHY PEOPLE ARE MAD ABOUT CALLING IT THE CHINESE VIRUS. THAT'S WHAT IT IS.

I DON'T KNOW.

NO ONE SAID IT WAS RACIST THAT WE CALLED IT THE SPANISH FLU.

THAT WAS ALSO A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

OR THE SWINE FLU. NO ONE'S MAD 'CAUSE IT CAME FROM PIGS.

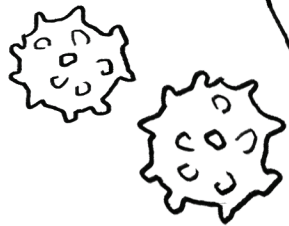
AND MOM STILL WON'T EAT PORK.

MOM WON'T EAT PORK BECAUSE SHE READ KEVIN TRUDEAU TWO DECADES AGO.

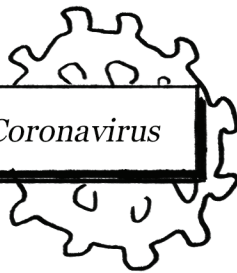




The Chinese Virus



The Novel Coronavirus



The 'rona

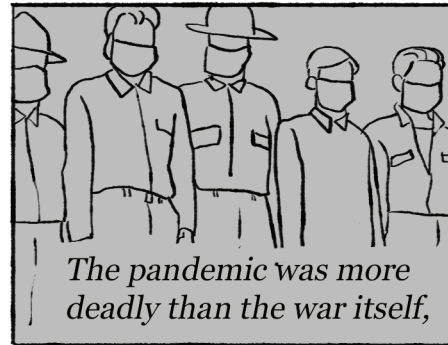


*Would not COVID-19 by any other name
smell just as sweet?*

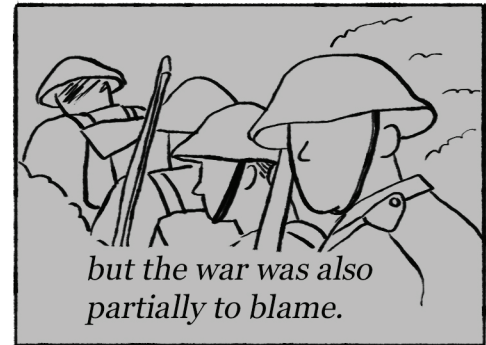
*I looked up how the
Spanish Flu got its name.*

*Let's go back to the first world war
and the spring of 1918.*

*The pandemic had grasped
nearly 40 percent of the global
population and may have taken
upwards of 50 million lives.*



*The pandemic was more
deadly than the war itself,*



*but the war was also
partially to blame.*

*The Allied and Central Powers alike had strict
wartime censors preventing news of the flu from
entering the mainstream.*



*It was thought that speaking of a deadly sickness would
weaken morale and support for the war.*

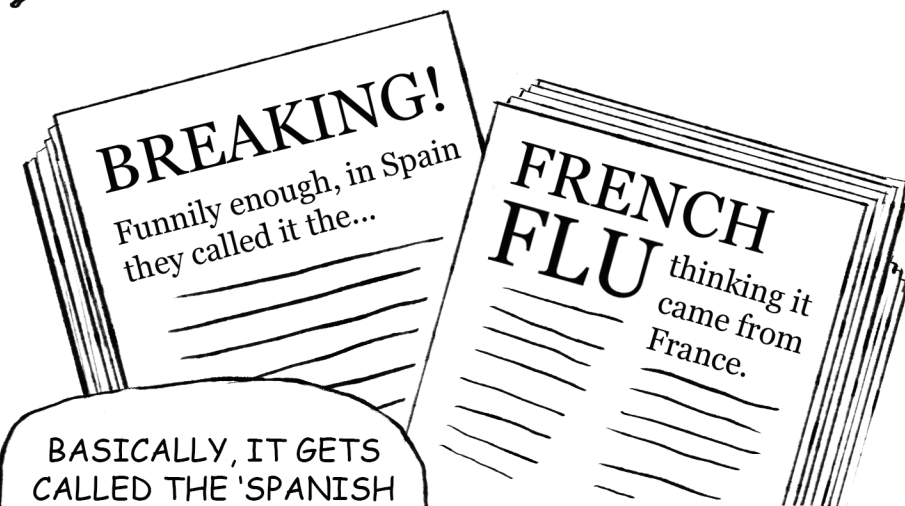
*Meanwhile soldiers on the frontlines
were dying of the very flu they failed
to mention.*

Here's where Spain comes in.

Spain was neutral in World War I,

and due to more laxed censorship and reporting codes,

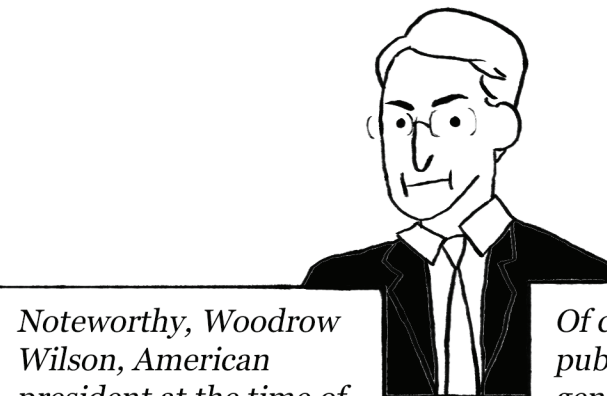
it was able to openly report on the flu.



BASICALLY, IT GETS CALLED THE 'SPANISH FLU' BECAUSE THE SPANISH MEDIA DID THEIR JOB.

But as people caught wind of the fact that Spain was talking of an influenza at all, the misconception was born. By the fall of 1918 people were widely referring to the illness as the "Spanish Flu" or "Spanish Lady."

Lora Vogt



Noteworthy, Woodrow Wilson, American president at the time of the flu, didn't give a single public statement regarding influenza.

Of course, he made fewer public statements in general compared to modern leaders and none as easily widespread as it would be nowadays.

I think if he had though, he would have blamed Spain.



America has a history of blaming other nations for its problems.

Namely, Polio was blamed on Italian immigrants,



and for decades "Americans associated Chinese immigration with a host of diseases" using it as a basis for discrimination.



We should, however, note that with the current pandemic, we are focusing on it.

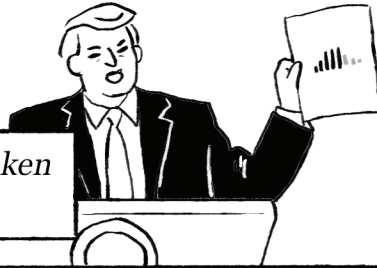
President Trump has spoken about it a lot.

At first he was holding daily update conferences where he would stand at a podium and talk about what a good job he was doing,

with travel bans and ventilators and such.

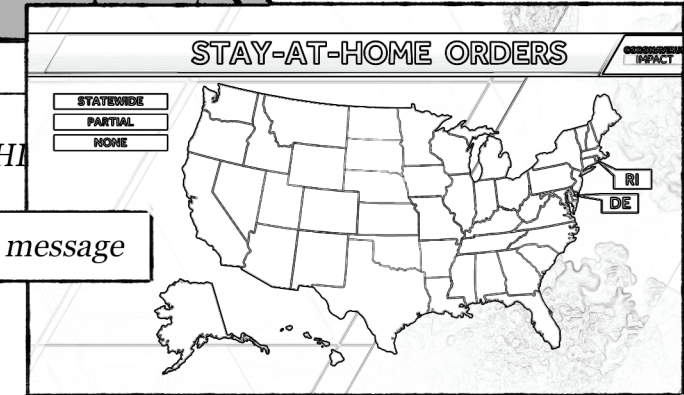
Soon enough, we were getting interviews that he brought charts to

to explain the good job he was doing.



There were lockdowns and stay at home orders from state governments,

but the general message



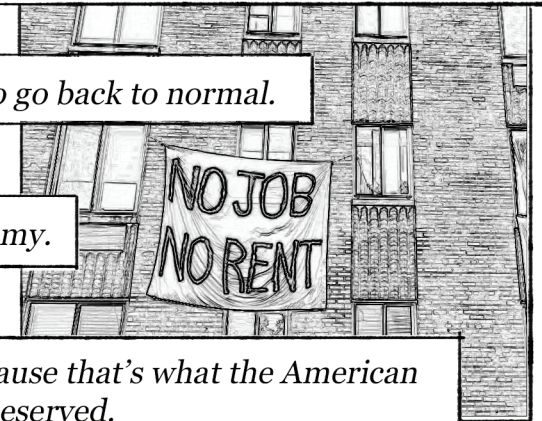
was that everything would go back to normal.

Everything had to go back to normal.

For the sake of the economy.

And because that's what the American people deserved.

It didn't matter if it cost hundreds of thousands of lives to have that.



II.

The pandemic changed public life—closing schools, churches, and businesses and filling hospitals to overflowing—but much of its anguish happened privately and within the domestic space, unphotographed and unrecorded.

– Elizabeth Outka
on the Spanish flu

By the start of June, there were nearly 2 million COVID-19 cases in America and over 100,000 deaths.

By June, I was back in my apartment away from my parents.

And the only social interaction I had were two weekly work meetings and a tentatively scheduled Zoom call with my old roommates.

MY PROFESSOR TOLD US DEATH IS AT THE MALL

I WANT TO GO TO GREAT LAKES CROSSING SOLELY BECAUSE THEY HAVE A PEPPA PIG LAND.

I'VE NEVER HEARD OF THAT

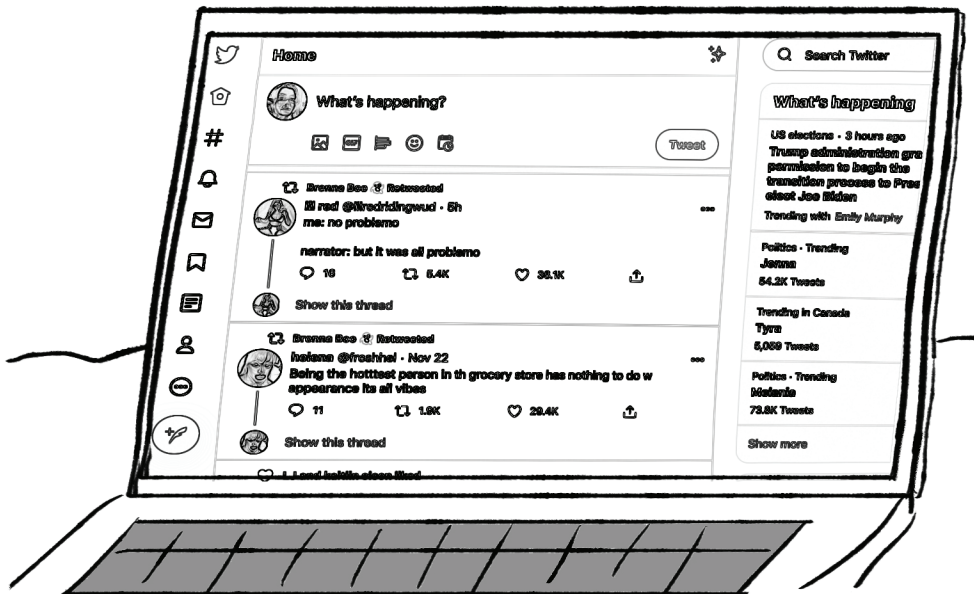
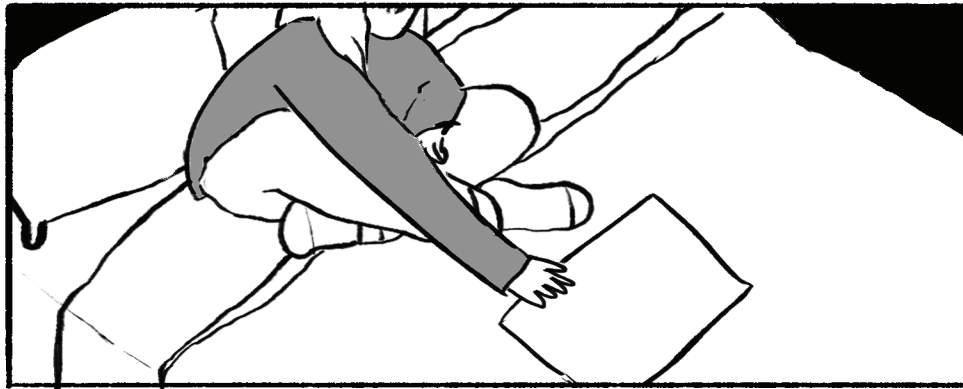
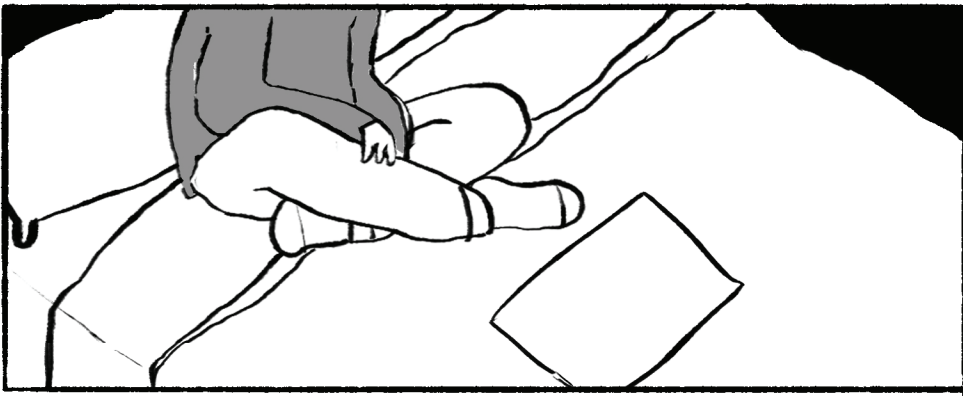
THAT'S NOT A THING

IT IS. I THINK IT'S ACROSS FROM THE RAIN FOREST CAFÉ. AND THERE'S A HOT TOPIC NEXT TO AN AQUARIUM

WHY DO YOU KNOW THAT? I FEEL LIKE YOU'RE LYING TO US

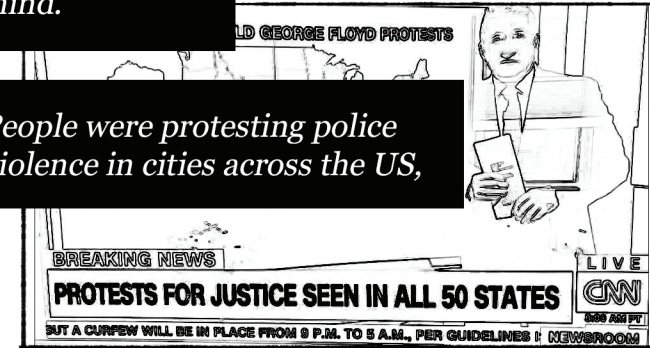
WE SHOULD GO ONCE EVERYTHING'S OVER





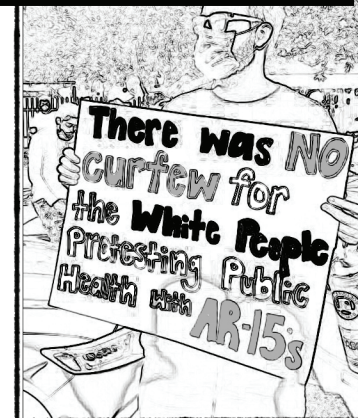
A lot happened in June, and for a moment the virus wasn't at the front of my mind.

People were protesting police violence in cities across the US,



He Spent 36 Years Behind Bars. A Fingerprint Database Cleared Him in Hours.

while a different almost antithetical group was protesting masks, with guns on their backs.

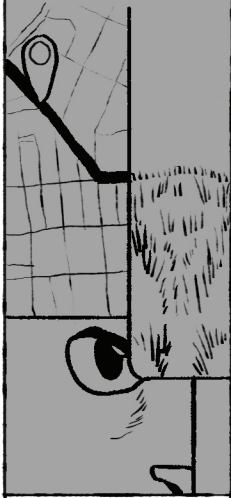


I consumed a lot during that period of the summer.

Political
commentary
videos



Documentaries



Social media

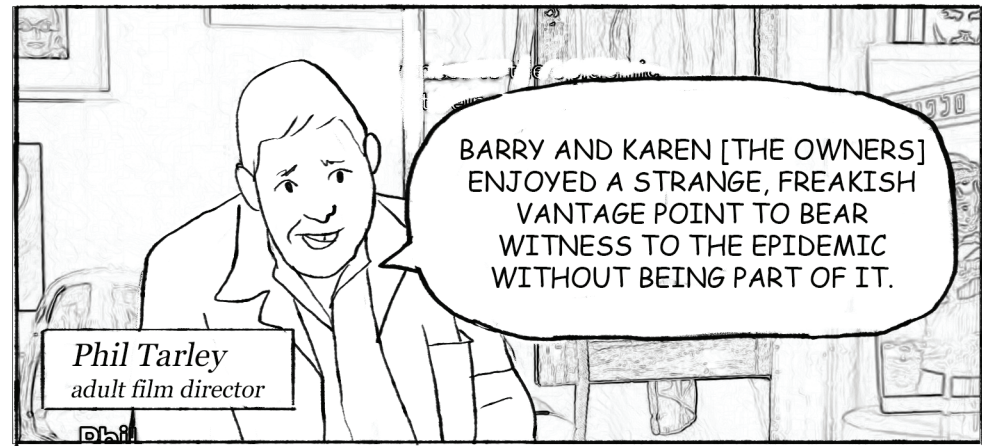
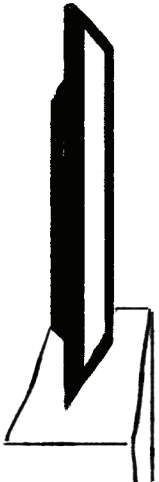


Quirky TV
shows



*At one point, I watched a
documentary called
Circus of Books,*

*which tells the story of a
Jewish couple who bought
and ran a gay porn shop in
West Hollywood during the
1980s.*



Phil Tarley
adult film director

BARRY AND KAREN [THE OWNERS]
ENJOYED A STRANGE, FREAKISH
VANTAGE POINT TO BEAR
WITNESS TO THE EPIDEMIC
WITHOUT BEING PART OF IT.



*Most people, your average Joes,
didn't directly witness the AIDS
epidemic in 1980s America.*

*It was a foreign, subtly
tragic thing supposedly
only really impacting gay
men and trans women.*



*There entered a dissonance—those
affected by the virus and those not.*

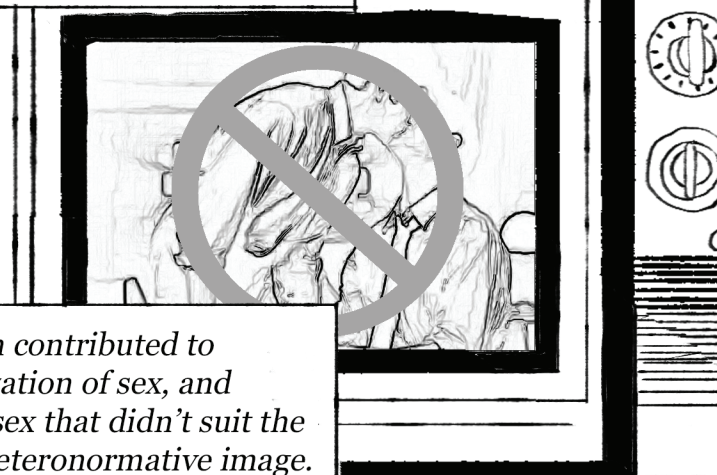


*President Reagan did little to
ease this dissonance.*

As the HIV and AIDS epidemic entered into political discussions, it was originally talked about as joke, a problem that needed addressing but that was funny in that it was known as the “gay plague.”



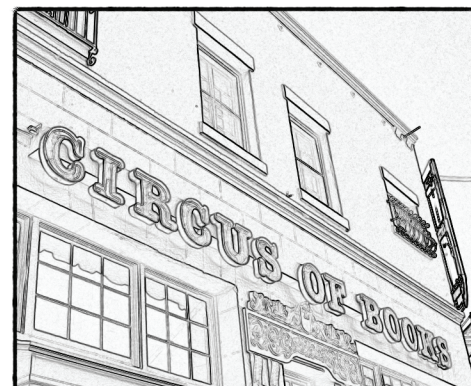
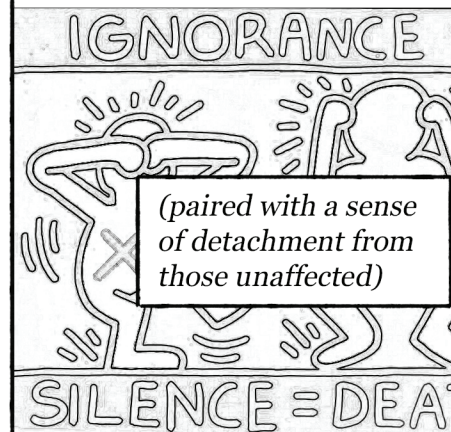
To talk about the presidential response to the AIDS epidemic and not talk about the subsequent prohibition of pornography is near impossible.



Reagan's ban contributed to the stigmatization of sex, and particularly sex that didn't suit the traditional heteronormative image.

So you had two things:

an escalated fear of an illness associated with queer people



and the criminalization of a store that was a corner stone for a community.

When a community starts not only losing its safe spaces

but also its people,

we call that a devastation.

Barry and Karen's daughter Rachel recalled a reality:

I REMEMBER GOING TO THE STORE AND BEING LIKE,

"OH WHERE'S SO-AND-SO?"

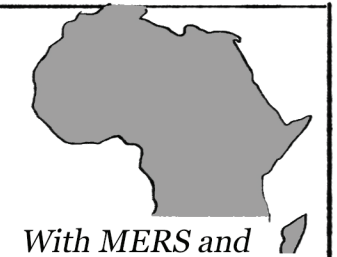
"OH, HE JUST DIED."

SOMETHING SEEMED LIKE A HORROR ABOUT THAT TO ME THAT I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND UNTIL MUCH LATER.

AIDS was originally referred to as GRID or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency

because it was only thought to affect gay men.

With H1N1, it was kids.

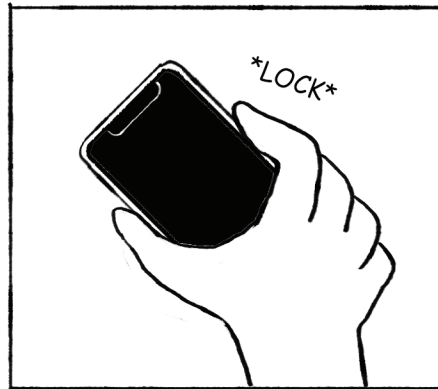


With MERS and Ebola, it wasn't many Americans

COVID disproportionately affects the elderly,

so some young people feel a sense of invincibility.

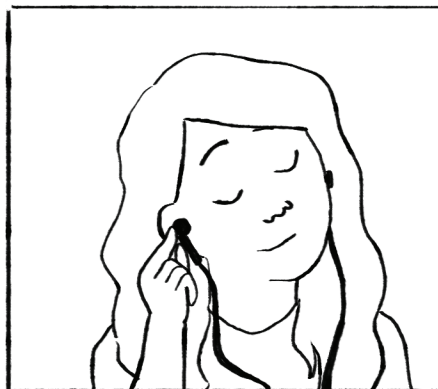
*It was a luxury that I
shut out the noise of
COVID-19 sometimes.*



*The virus hadn't affected
me personally, not much
really, and in the same
way, I wasn't personally
affected by much around
this time.*



*When I needed a break, I
shut out the noise.*



And it always felt a little selfish.

Some young people had a very easy time disconnecting from a virus that mainly affected the elderly.

After endless consumption at night,

I always woke to a moment where I could forget.

I woke late in the morning.

I made coffee alone.

And I watched the girls at the pool outside my window.

The girls were always at the pool, swimming and laughing.

I might have forgotten for a moment,

but something about their being out there in the open made me question

if every precautionary measure was just an overreaction.

But it also made me mad.

Because no matter how careful the rest of us are,

the girls at the pool could ruin it.

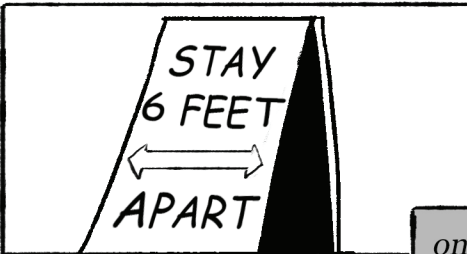
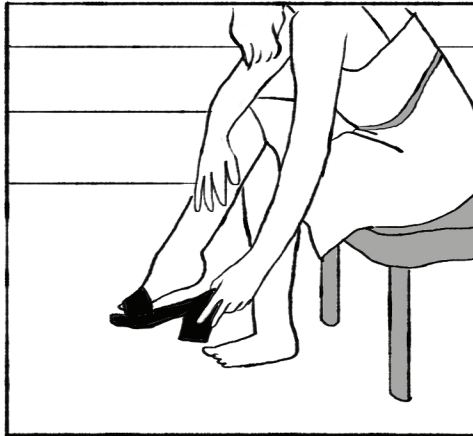
Toward the end of summer, I attended a last-minute wedding of an old high school friend.

It was the first time I'd gone to a gathering since the start of the pandemic, and every second of it felt wrong.



a place altered to a different reality,

Before the event, I wore a mask to buy a dress, shoes, and a gift alone at the mall,



one where the cashiers had to pretend the plexiglass and masks were normal.



*HAVE A GOOD DAY!
STAY SAFE.*

The guestlist was pared to a tenth of its original size and the ceremony had moved outside.

Weddings were usually joyous occasions, but this one was felt erroneous, and I was on edge the entire time.



How were people seemingly moving on—getting married, buying a house, etc?



Did they not see the world falling apart around them?

Or did they see it and choose to continue on in spite of it,

for the sake of their own sanity?

III.

*Illness, insanity, and death...kept watch
over my cradle and accompanied me all
my life.*

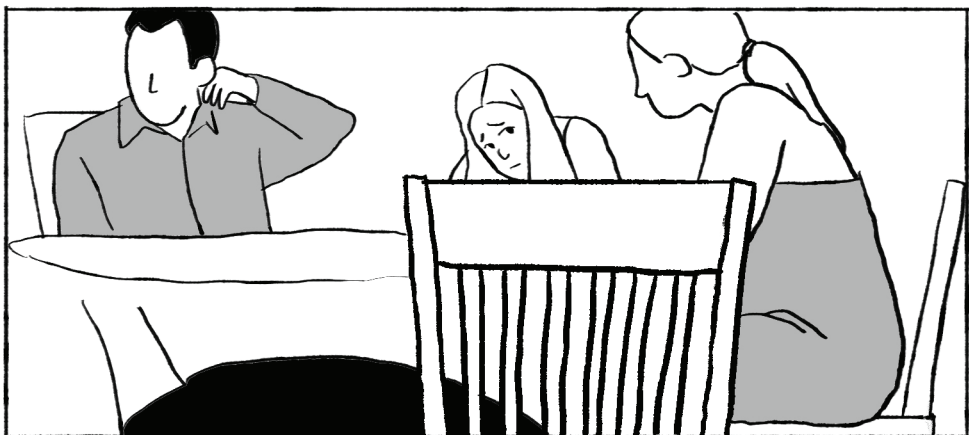
– Edward Munch

On September 22, the United States surpassed 200,000 deaths from the coronavirus, eight months after the first confirmed case here.



Some people position these as necessary losses, like they were inevitable, like they were a small price to pay for an economy reopening or our lives returning to normal.

For others, we see private lives tainted with an air of death.



Sometimes I think about how we remember WWI more than a flu with a higher death toll.

This is the narrative we're fed, a narrative that some deaths are grievable and others are acceptable.

Alternate versions of reality are delegitimized.

The American people are watching two realities unfold now in front of their eyes.



*There's the first
one, the reality the
anti-maskers and
the pool girls see,*



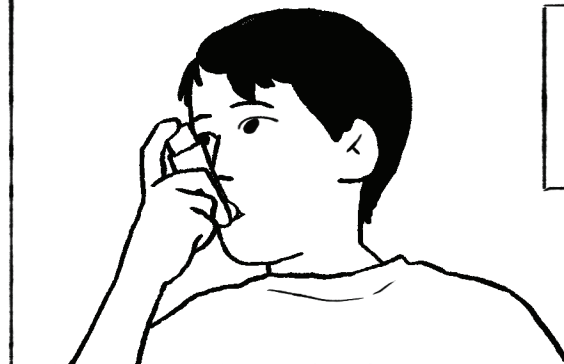
*where the virus is a
hoax and the worst
thing it has done is
hinder their
personal freedom.*

*And the second much
more plausible reality,*



*in which the virus has
impacted millions of
people across America
and the world.*

It's not just the deaths,

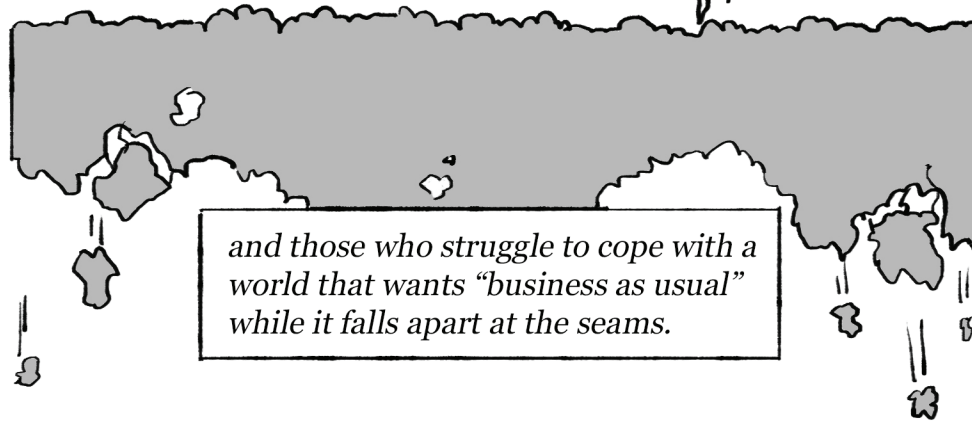


*but the survivors living
with lingering health
issues, shit lungs, and
tired hearts.*

It's those who have had the virus and survived,



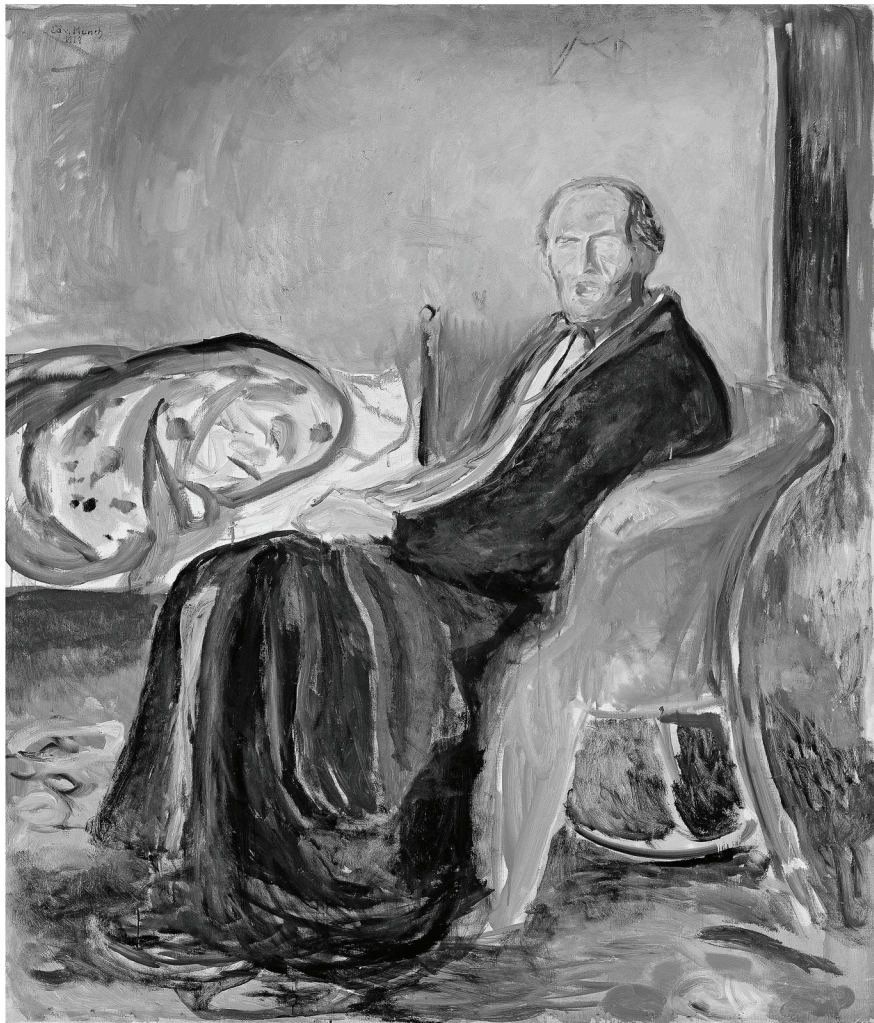
whose families were uprooted by loss,



*and those who struggle to cope with a
world that wants "business as usual"
while it falls apart at the seams.*

I find it odd that sometimes in devastation, there's an abundance of art and other times there's a haunting absence. There's no telling what might come out of coronavirus before we ourselves are out of it.

Looking back on the Spanish flu, I wonder why there isn't the same saturation of art as what came from the AIDS epidemic. Maybe it'd been overshadowed by the war or maybe people were too sick to make art. Maybe it's about the time.



Edvard Munch made two paintings: Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu (1919) and Self-Portrait after the Spanish Flu (1919), the first a formless expression and the second a bust where you can see every contour of his face.

I'm less interested in the meanings of the works than I am the names.

The Spanish Flu defined both of these works even after it ended.

IV.

*We're trying to keep our heads above water
without drowning. We are scared. We're
trying to fight for everyone else's life, but
we also fight for our lives as well.*

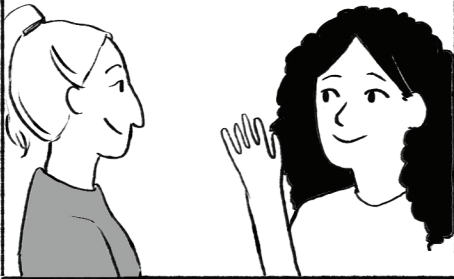
– Arabia Mollette,
*emergency medical
doctor in New York*

At the start of November, I was diagnosed with the coronavirus.

*I got it from my roommate,
who doesn't know how she
got it.*



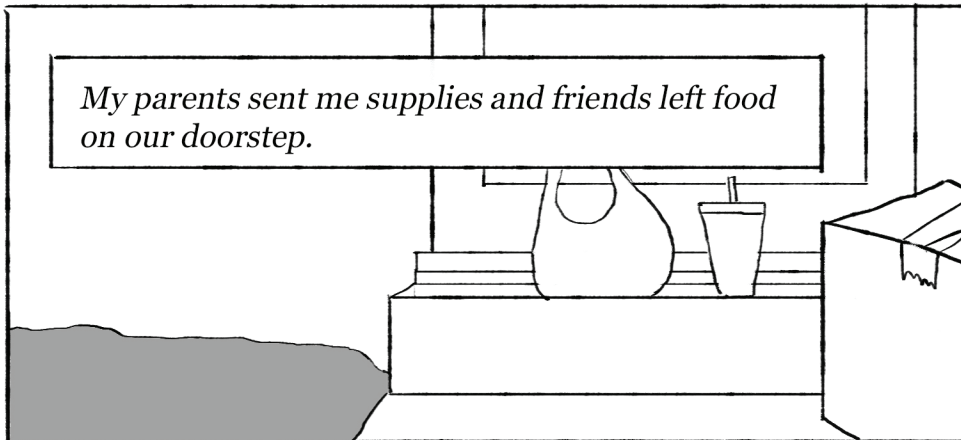
*It could've been from a
brief encounter with a
friend*



*or from passing a stranger
at the grocery store.*

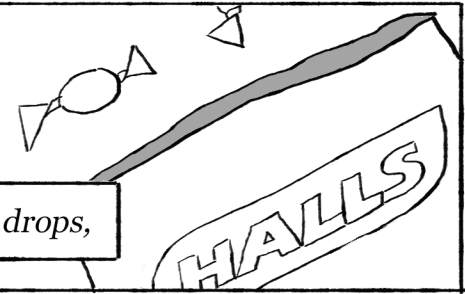


*My parents sent me supplies and friends left food
on our doorstep.*

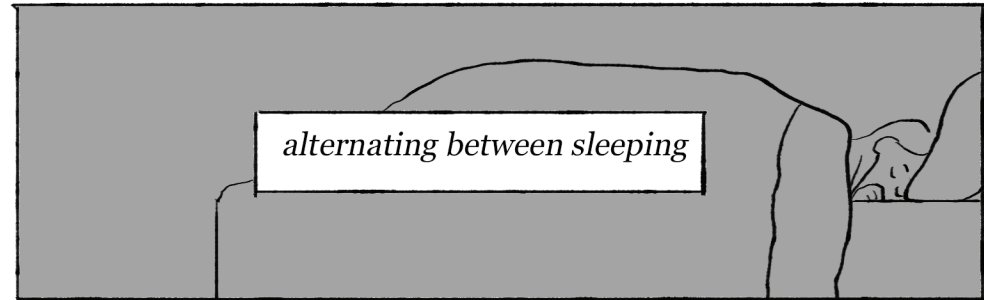


*I lost my sense of smell
and my taste.*

I scarfed down cough drops,



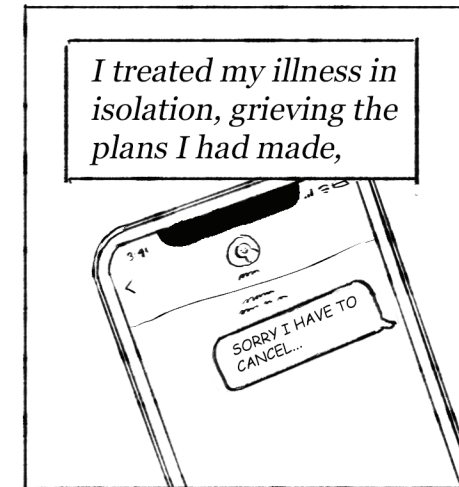
alternating between sleeping



*and propping myself up in front of
my laptop for class and work.*



*I treated my illness in
isolation, grieving the
plans I had made,*



*things as simple as
getting coffee and
looking at places to live
come summer.*



I wonder whether this is an ironic or inevitable end to a memoir that began months before this diagnosis.

There's been a number of false climaxes along the way, times I thought we'd hit the worst of it, the moment just before the turn around.

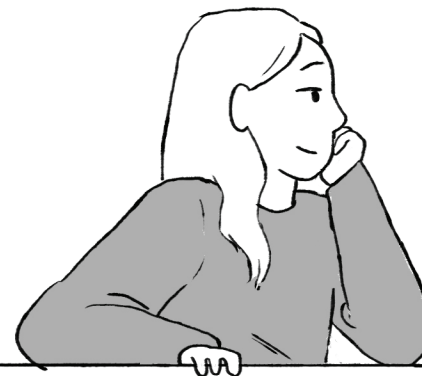
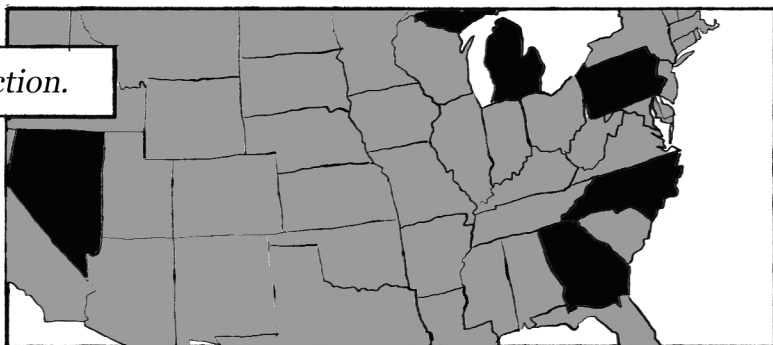
The end of the first lockdown,

STAY
6 FEET
APART



President Trump's diagnosis,

the election.



It's all just circling around an ending

defined by what is happening to us now,

an ending we cannot yet see.

But I think we're getting closer.

Endnotes

- Page 1: The-original-cinnamon-roll. “the number 87 kinda looks...”
- Page 2: Don Brown. *Fever Year: the Killer Flu of 1918: a Tragedy in Three Acts*. Pg. 89.
- Page 7: Zlatica Hoke. “Trump Optimistic on COVID-19 Recovery.”
- Page 9: Becky Little. “As the 1918 Flu Emerged, Cover-Up and Denial Helped It Spread.”
- “How does Coronavirus (Covid-19) compare to Spanish flu?”
- Page 10: Little. “As the 1918 Flu Emerged, Cover-Up and Denial Helped It Spread.”
- Page 11: David W. Johnson. “Then and Now: What Woodrow Wilson’s 1918 Pandemic Failure Can Teach Us Today.”
- Page 13: Caroline Brehman. “A Second Stimulus Check is on the Horizon.”
- José Zozaya. “Nebraska, Iowa among Few States without Stay-at-Home Orders.”
- Page 15: Elizabeth Outka. *Viral Modernism: the Influenza Pandemic and Inter-war Literature*. Pg. 75.
- Page 16: AS English. “Coronavirus USA News Updates for Tuesday 30 June 2020.”
- Page 19: @liindseyxx. “it’s shit like this man. [image].” 10 June 2020, 4:11 a.m.
- @insanely_made. “All 50 states. [image].” 2 June 2020, 5:40 p.m.
- @Lesnxx. “[image].” 31 May 2020, 9:28 p.m.
- Page 21: Rachel Mason, director. *Circus of Books*.
- “The HIV/AIDS Epidemic in the United States: The Basics.”
- Page 22-23: German Lopez. “The Reagan Administration’s Unbelievable Response to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic.”
- Page 24: Mason, director. *Circus of Books*.
- Page 25: “History of HIV/AIDS.”
- Page 33: Anna Purna Kambhampaty. “How Artists Tried to Make Sense of the 1918 Flu Pandemic.”
- Page 34: Zoe Christen Jones. “U.S. Surpasses 200,000 Coronavirus Deaths, Eight Months after First Reported Case.”
- Page 38: Edvard Munch. *Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu*. 1919.
- Page 39: Munch. *Self-Portrait After the Spanish Flu*. 1919.
- Page 41: “Factbox: Quotes of Fear, Defiance and Hope as the Coronavirus Pandemic Spans the Globe.”

Works Cited

- Brehman, Caroline. “A Second Stimulus Check is on the Horizon.” *Business Insider*, 31 July 2020, www.businessinsider.com/personal-finance/second-stimulus-check-coming-proposals-details-2020-7.
- Brown, Don. *Fever Year: the Killer Flu of 1918: a Tragedy in Three Acts*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019.
- English, AS. “Coronavirus USA News Updates for Tuesday 30 June 2020.” *AS.com*, AS En, 30 June 2020, en.as.com/en/2020/06/30/latest_news/1593468452_648953.html.
- “Factbox: Quotes of Fear, Defiance and Hope as the Coronavirus Pandemic Spans the Globe.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 28 June 2020, www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-quotes-factbox/factbox-quotes-of-fear-defiance-and-hope-as-the-coronavirus-pandemic-spans-the-globe-idUKKBN23Zo4G.
- “History of HIV/AIDS.” *CANFAR*, canfar.com/awareness/about-hiv-aids/history-of-hiv-aids/.
- Hoke, Zlatica. “Trump Optimistic on COVID-19 Recovery.” 8 Apr. 2020, www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/trump-optimistic-covid-19-recovery.
- “How does Coronavirus (Covid-19) compare to Spanish flu?” *YouTube*. uploaded by Curious Droid, 18 Mar. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJrm-8V5KmPs>
- @insanely_made. “All 50 states. [image].” 2 June 2020, 5:40 p.m., https://twitter.com/insanely_made/status/1267934024812630016
- Johnson, David W. “Then and Now: What Woodrow Wilson’s 1918 Pandemic Failure Can Teach Us Today.” *4sight Health*, 25 Apr. 2020, www.4sight-health.com/then-and-now-what-woodrow-wilsons-1918-pandemic-failure-can-teach-us-today/.
- Jones, Zoe Christen. “U.S. Surpasses 200,000 Coronavirus Deaths, Eight Months after First Reported Case.” *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 22 Sept. 2020, www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-death-toll-us-200000-covid-19/.
- Kambhampaty, Anna Purna. “How Artists Tried to Make Sense of the 1918 Flu Pandemic.” *Time*, Time, 5 May 2020, time.com/5827561/1918-flu-art/.
- @Lesnxx. “[image].” 31 May 2020, 9:28 p.m., <https://twitter.com/Lesnxx/status/1267266763093204992>
- @liindseyxx. “it’s shit like this man. [image].” 10 June 2020, 4:11 a.m., <https://twitter.com/liindseyxx/status/1270629717566263297>
- Little, Becky. “As the 1918 Flu Emerged, Cover-Up and Denial Helped It Spread.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 26 May 2020, www.history.com/news/1918-pandemic-spanish-flu-censorship.

Lopez, German. "The Reagan Administration's Unbelievable Response to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic." *Vox*, Vox, 1 Dec. 2015, www.vox.com/2015/12/1/9828348/ronald-reagan-hiv-aids.

Mason, Rachel, director. *Circus of Books*. Netflix, 2019.

Outka, Elizabeth. *Viral Modernism: the Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*. Columbia University Press, 2020.

"The HIV/AIDS Epidemic in the United States: The Basics." *KFF*, 25 Mar. 2019, www.kff.org/hiv/aids/fact-sheet/the-hiv-aids-epidemic-in-the-united-states-the-basics/.

The-original-cinnamon-roll. "the number 87 kinda looks..." *Fandoms, Fandoms Everywhere*. 24 June, 2020, <https://the-original-cinnamon-roll.tumblr.com/post/621778369092222976>

Zozaya, José. "Nebraska, Iowa among Few States without Stay-at-Home Orders." *KETV*, KETV, 7 Apr. 2020, www.ketv.com/article/nebraska-iowa-among-few-states-without-stay-at-home-orders/32058245.

