
MARCH 20, 2020

tbd

A Mixed-Mode Response to COVID-19

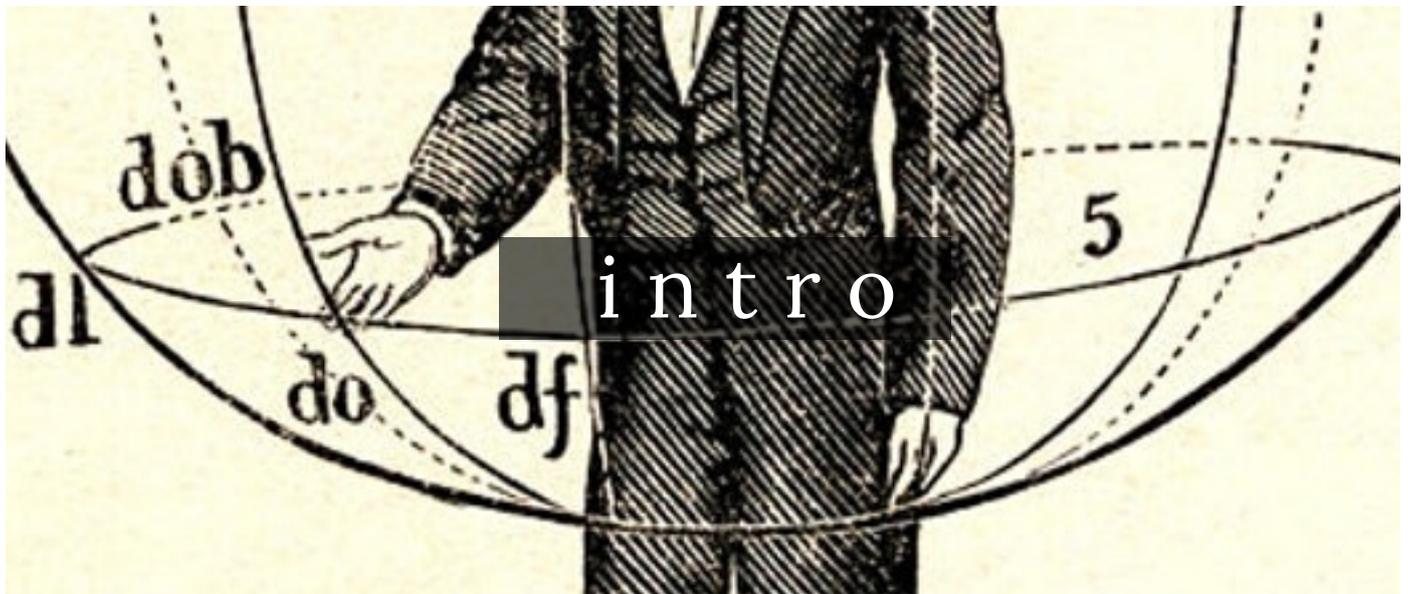


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HYBRID FORMS
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The store is crowded but quiet, almost eerily so. There are no carts left. No baskets either. A few late shoppers are cradling groceries in their arms. One young woman has created a hammock with her sweater and loaded it with bananas and an elderly man wearing gardening gloves is using the giant pockets of his wool coat to carry his Brussels sprouts. These Brussels sprouts are still attached to thick woody stalks.

Despite the difficult circumstances, this man has time for a smile and upon seeing that I am empty-handed he nods toward one of his pockets and offers me a stalk from his bouquet. I laugh and accept the stalk. Then he does a little hip move to adjust the remaining stalks and is on his way.

Teachers frequently have plans and these plans frequently go awry. Events intervene and suddenly we find ourselves empty-handed, left to question the validity of our usual ideas and assignments. What is the meaning of a deadline in a moment of crisis? What are the goods of education and literature when we are called to register and respond to troubling world events?

We are improvising. All of us.

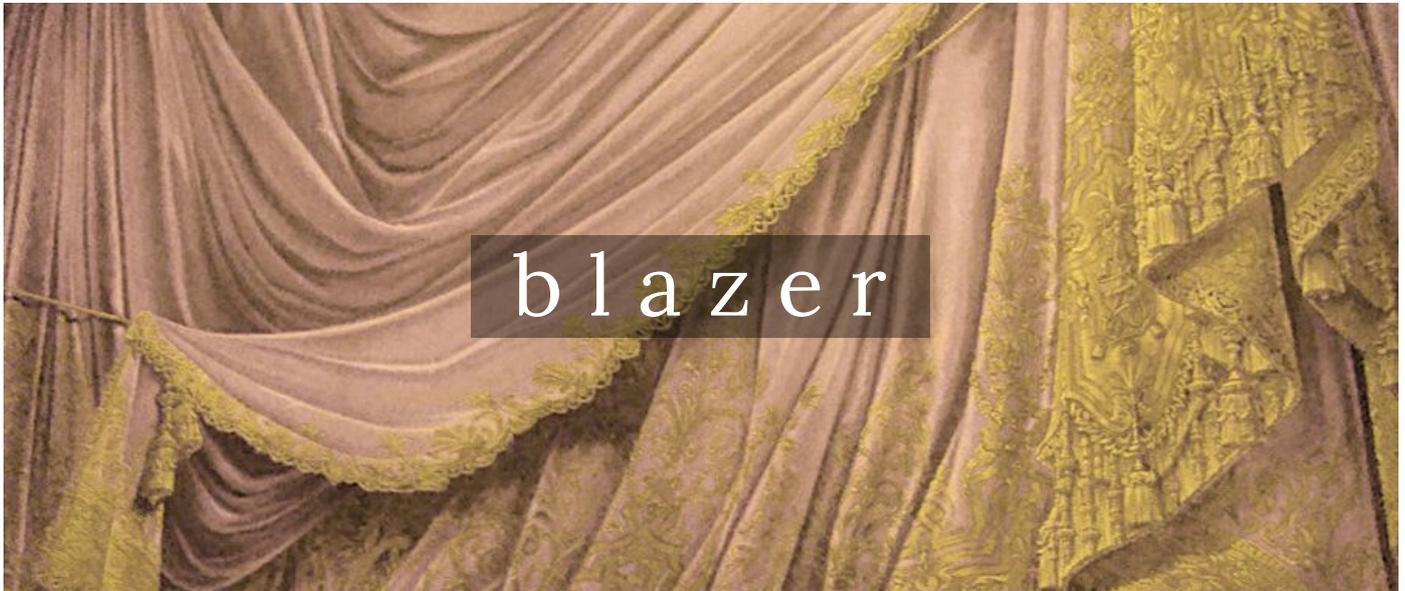
Through breakdowns, breakthroughs, frayed nerves and strange sequestering, we are moving beyond our own default responses.

The contents of this booklet came together quickly as a record of one writing workshop's early reactions to COVID-19. It is told through objects. The pandemic is escalating so rapidly that objects have felt unmoored from their previous associations. Objects are floating, one member of our group put it, as though lifted from a grim version of Mary Poppins' bottomless bag. What is a glove, a condom, a squash? And what can they tell us about this moment of quarantine and interconnection?

At a time when so much feels ungraspable, we are hoping this assembly of stories and congregation of words provides company in our isolation. It was brought together in the art of solidarity. Each piece is an incitement to feel, care, create and respond.

Stay safe, stay kind.

—Kyo Maclear and Writers of Hybrid Forms,
University of Guelph, Creative Writing MFA,
March 2020



blazer

My blazer lives on the chair at my desk, with my nametag on the left breast. The office, which I share with my manager, is tucked in the back of the building. At the beginning of my shift I walk in the main doors, and through the labyrinthine backstage. Our office is two desks and two chairs and my blazer lives on the chair at my desk. My desk which is also Marina's desk and Aimee's desk and Kai's desk and sometimes Nina's desk. When I am not in the Front of the House, my blazer lives on the back of the chair, out of the way of Conor's feet, which will inevitably end up on my chair as he stretches from his side of the office to mine. When I'm ready to head to the Front, I throw it on and I shift, become Supervisor-Me, who carries a clipboard and directs patrons and has all the answers.

On Sunday, which should have been a show day, my blazer stayed on the back of the chair, where I sat and worked through the list of names, calling name after name to inform them of the canceled shows. Two productions—four weeks of performances, 120 hours of labour—cancelled before they'd even begun. I understand the need for sacrifice, but it doesn't make the calls any easier, or the hours go by faster. On Sunday, I took my nametag off my blazer and tucked it into the cupboard above my desk. I folded my blazer and tucked it into my purse. I took my fear and tucked it behind a smile. I said goodbye to Conor, and my favourite technicians, and the theatre that will be dark for five weeks. And I came home with these things that should not live in my home.

—Nathanya Barnett



At the top of the gloves, my fingers show through.

I have been wearing these all winter thinking about how perfect they've been—keeping my hands warm enough, but still being able to touch objects effectively with my fingertips.

A glove is a quarantine.

As spring neared and the COVID pandemic became more apparent, my attention of where I should put my hand on each doorknob, if I had touched my face, and how my fingertips were exposed became an increasing concern.

Cream coloured, grainy wool weave, little steel buttons to clip on foldover mitten tops.

The gloves are not complete at the moment: two parts that can be separated and in their separation have left my fingertips poorly quarantined.

This talk of quarantine reminds me of when my brother had tuberculosis, how the doctors misdiagnosed him with pneumonia,

and for a month he took the wrong antibiotics until two days before Christmas, when he was told that he was stage 4 infectious and had to go into quarantine immediately, at Vancouver General Hospital, for an indeterminate amount of time.

Later he would learn it would be for three months.

Later my own skin test would show positive for contracting TB.

My mother, Theresa Bessette, would also contract the disease.

TB with TB.

A grim joke at the time.

That period became defined by masks as a partial quarantine, like gloves, like rooms, like bodies, like minds, like identities, like.

I wonder if there are parts of myself that I have quarantined.

From myself.

From others.

From the world.

I don't need the gloves anymore because I'm not going outside, and, if I do go outside, I'm not sure whether I should wear them or not, whether it is necessary, and I wonder "what is necessary" as I write.

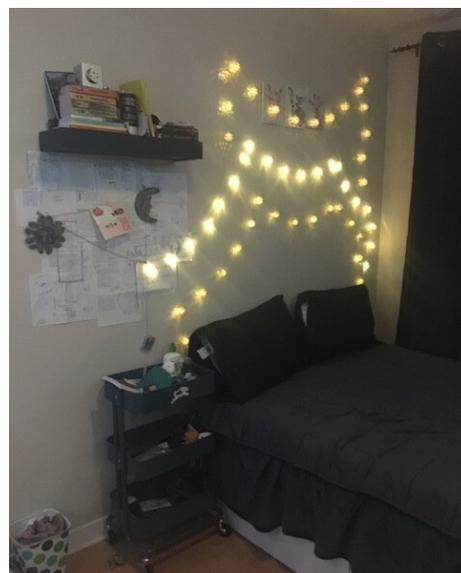
—Jonathan Bessette



h o m e s t e a d

I'm really struggling to write a piece concerning the current situation so I thought I'd share pictures of my room over the years. The art work on my walls are mostly pieces that have been bought for me as I was growing up. These are things that have lived through countless white rooms, three blue rooms, one purple, one brown and now some of them are here with me in a weird off-gray room in Toronto.

—*Farah El Bakkouri*





squash & transmissible thoughts

Squash last a long time so I bought a lot of them, he says, too many. He lowers his head, shy and sheepish. Take some home with you. I take one.

We haven't seen one another since I first moved back to the city, when we ate Chinese food at a restaurant with simple tables and 57 types of dumplings, and he told me his partner was pregnant. I said congratulations with a big grin on my face. And I meant it. Which meant I really was 'over' us in a good way. And that felt good. He didn't mirror my smile. He looked upset. A few months earlier, he'd texted saying he was going to propose to his partner and hadn't fully processed our relationship until then—a text filled with apologies, tenderness and acknowledgments of wrongdoing. I was sitting at a round table in a small café with a single shot Americano, marking. The message made me cry because I knew it came from a place of love and wildly delayed loss and grieving; it was also his final letting go before stepping into something new. I had done that a year earlier. Over dumplings, I learned his relationship wasn't doing well—he wasn't happy, they communicated terribly and they were pregnant. He didn't say how many months in she was. Have you talked to her about it? Does she know how you feel? He said he'd expressed his sentiments some months earlier. We spent the remaining hour talking about family, all the things we had missed in the year and a half since we had last been together.

His baby girl is just over a year now. He and the mother have separated, and he is in a place on his own, the apartment of a university prof who recently died—heart attack on an African Safari. I hope the guy at least got to see the animals before it happened, he says. The apartment has high ceilings and tall windows, and the décor of a leftie white man in his 60s or 70s—newspaper headlines and kitschy advertisements in frames, an antique rotary phone growing out of a gold elephant, and never-ending bookshelves with mostly white authors.

One of our parents will die, he says, statistically, one of them will die from this.

I'll probably die. I have asthma.

You'll probably be okay, it'll be like a bad cold. I've got the stats, people with asthma your age are usually okay. Wanna see them?

I don't, I'd rather trust him.



The squash is sitting in front of me as I write, blocking my view of the screen. Peachy-beige, tall and bulbous with curves, narrow in the middle, heavy at the bottom, a sturdy wooden stump at the top. I touch it. It's the only vegetable I've brought into the house and haven't washed immediately. Now I'm touching my keyboard. I figured it was on his shelf long enough that the virus would have died. I researched how long it takes COVID19 to die without a host the other night. It lasts longest on plastic, wood and metal surfaces, less on fabrics and other things. Days, hours. I can't remember the exact numbers now. Use soap and water on everything. There are no more Lysol wipes.

Go home, he says, go home. Just go. Who cares about your things? Who cares about a couple thousand dollars. You might not be able to go later. He speaks as if the apocalypse is coming. It is. It isn't. It is for him? It already has for so many. It'll be worse for the most vulnerable. He's a doctor. He's worried about the decisions he will have to make regarding who lives and who dies. He has seen people die beneath his hands before. I remember one of those nights. He's almost a foot taller than me but I held him like a baby. We did a thing called a gravity spoon, where I lay my body on top of his so that he could feel small, held.

He says China has it right and the West is lagging. In China, they have people delivering food to those who have the virus. Each person who comes in contact with the food is tested and their names are written on a receipt so that the chain of contact is known, so that each person can be traced. At 1am, we turn the dining table into a ping-pong court. I haven't played since Grade 9 but still win. 9-7.

Regular gloves are all too small for him so the hospital orders bigger gloves for him and three others. There are only three boxes though. The gloves are ordered special from Edmonton and cost \$8 each. He has already calculated how quickly they will run out. It isn't very long. I remember when Ebola was spreading, the gowns didn't fit him then either. He laughed about it as I worried. He's trained to be an intensivist, to do dangerous work in an ICU. I'm trained to worry about the people I love.

There will be a separation of people who have had it—and have antibodies—and those who don't. In socialist countries, those who survive have a duty to take care of the others. What's happening here? What will happen here?

A man printed something off one of those laser printers and is somehow testing a virus or vaccine on himself? I can't quite grasp what he is saying. I researched vaccines at 2am the other night—the process of making them, who is working on them, how long it takes. They usually make them in chicken embryos but some company in Quebec is making something quicker...and vegan? There might be something by next spring, he says. The earliest I saw was next November, I reply. Clinical trials take a long time but he hopes/imagines some elderly people will step up for society and try the vaccines before they'd normally be cleared for testing. I tell him the decisions he makes will probably be ageist and ableist. He nods, sadness and truth on his face. I don't know what else to say. I worry about elders who are knowledge keepers. Will doctors consider history or cultural survival on their checklists?

We hold each other. He will be in social isolation for most of the next year because of his work. No one will hold him during that time. He has devised plans for his parents to remain in their house and have all of their needs met so that they don't need to attend public spaces at all. The people who get them groceries will follow strict procedures. He will not go over? He hasn't figured that part out yet. Maybe you can once your body has antibodies? You'll just need to shower and wear clean clothes. No. That's not right. Not even then. I tell him my mother's death will devastate me but my father's will shatter me. I hope I finish writing my book before I die. There isn't really much else I need to do. People will be sad but I won't be leaving anyone who doesn't have other forms of care.

Go home, just go home. Now. Like in the next week. It's only going to get worse. He says it again. It's not easy, I say. Where will I live? I will have to quarantine for 14 days. My family is not always easy, there is no room set up. I have a home here, it's mine. I can isolate and quarantine and distance easily, without worrying about harming someone. I'm not ready to go back. I lived last summer in fear of bringing home a cold as I took care of my sick mother. I didn't think she was going to make it, he says. Neither did I, I reply. No one did. I can't fit it all in my head. I need someone to sublet my place so I can go home. But it's easier for me here? I don't know. I don't know what the answer is. It doesn't make sense for me to be here. No one needs me here.

It's a boomer killer. He sends me a meme. We are all sending memes. We have to. Ones about people who used to cough to cover a fart who are now farting to cover a cough. Ones about Snow White only having six dwarves because Sneezy got quarantined. One where a woman is getting ogled by two men, then turns around and coughs until they leave.

The tenderness between us is the same as it has always been. So are the differences that keep us apart. I comment on the fucked up things we did for one another. He says there was nothing fucked up about it—that it was the most creative, expressive love. He's right. When he was in a state of mind where he couldn't speak and we grew apart, we drew portraits of one another. When I flew home for three weeks and we were physically apart, I made him a storybook with all the pictures we'd ever taken together—collaging the photos first, writing the story after. He showed it to everyone. Still has it. He sent me away with an envelope for each day apart so I could open a note, or poem, or quote, or piece of fabric from his favourite t-shirt every morning. I left him a camisole with my scent on it to sleep with at night. He rewrote "Hey there Delilah" with my name in it and sent me two videos of him singing while pretending to play ukulele: a PG version with his scrubs on and another shirtless with a red hardhat. This time, I showed everyone. Our memories come flooding in. He holds one back. Say it. Remember when you got mad at me for using too much soap while washing dishes? I do. It wasn't about the soap. I was upset and didn't know how to express it. But I had also expressed it so many times and nothing had changed. After trying words, the soap in Ottawa and the yams on Cortes Island were the places my frustration came out. We are from two different worlds. Always will be. He didn't grow up worrying about scarcity. I never stopped worrying about it even when I could stop. He has over 13 squash sitting in his apartment, not just for him but for anyone he loves who might need one.



I try on the dead man's hat. It's on a satin throne in a white bandbox with black trim, placed on the highest shelf in the house. It must be worth several hundred dollars to live in a box like that. It looks good on me. I ask if I can take it. He says no, worried that the man's ex-wife will think he's a thief. I say I can leave the box and if she asks for it, I'll give it back. He doesn't want to rock the boat. I wonder if the deceased man's wife who divorced him far before he died and never lived in that apartment will know or care about this hat.

As I write, the squash with its big oval 'Fresh Farms' sticker is still in my way, blocking the middle of each sentence.

There was no toilet paper on the shelves at the supermarket. When people started stockpiling, the big-box grocery store near my house put a sign on the door that said limit of two. I heard Amazon even put a limit on the price of something at some point—sanitizer or Lysol wipes? Some motherfuckers bought all the Lysol wipes from all the Costcos in Vancouver and sold them for an exorbitant amount of money. I saw an Instagram post that said we should have compassion for even those people because it's capitalism that fucked them up, but I don't have any, not for them.



It's much worse than it looks now, he says to me. There might not be any flights soon. Go home to your parents and your family now. I tell him I can't go now. I can't wrap my head around it that quick. I'd need to get rid of my place. I need to have a plan. I can wait a month or two. I need a month or two. I need to give notice at least. I'll rent a car and drive across the country if I have to. Or buy one and drive across. I'll need a car once I get there. I'll have to quarantine for 14 days on arrival. I'll have to scrub my body from head to toe, wear a mask and change my clothes if I see either of my parents after that. But even that's not enough. I would never see friends or go out. I just want to get the damn thing so that I can't get it anymore, so I can take care of others. But what if I'm one of those few it kills. I should write my novel first. Though isn't writing a novel right now kind of pointless? I wish I had a fancy microphone like the one at his house. He was going to start podcasting so he bought it. I imagine he never made a podcast and might never. It must be nice to have so much money that you can buy state-of-the-art equipment for short-term fancies and whims.

The antibodies test is quick, he says. A prick to the finger and ten minutes later, you know. The do-you-have-it-right-now test takes time.

I have rambled for almost 2000 words in less than thirty minutes. I do not want to edit. I am tired and have too many thoughts. Have read too many articles. The New Yorker or Wall Street Journal said our destruction of the ecosystem is going to keep doing this—that wildlife are moving into different spaces and more and more disease will spread from animals to humans. Another article says the worst flu will come in ten years. This one is only the beginning. Wash your hands, wash your hands. How will Indigenous communities with limited water or no running water or boil water advisories stay safe without water to wash their hands? A newborn in the UK has the virus. Children seem to be surviving well.

Some people in their twenties seem to carry it without any symptoms at all. It has come to kill the old, some say. We will see we need different ways, to take care of one another.

I wonder if I should sing in the park somewhere. Would that make people feel better? Now is the time to create. What else can we do? Rest. Finish what we came here to do. I move the squash so that I can read through this piece at least once. I want to wash the squash and wipe down my keyboard, but I also want to preserve the one pack of Lysol wipes I bought before a flight a few months ago.

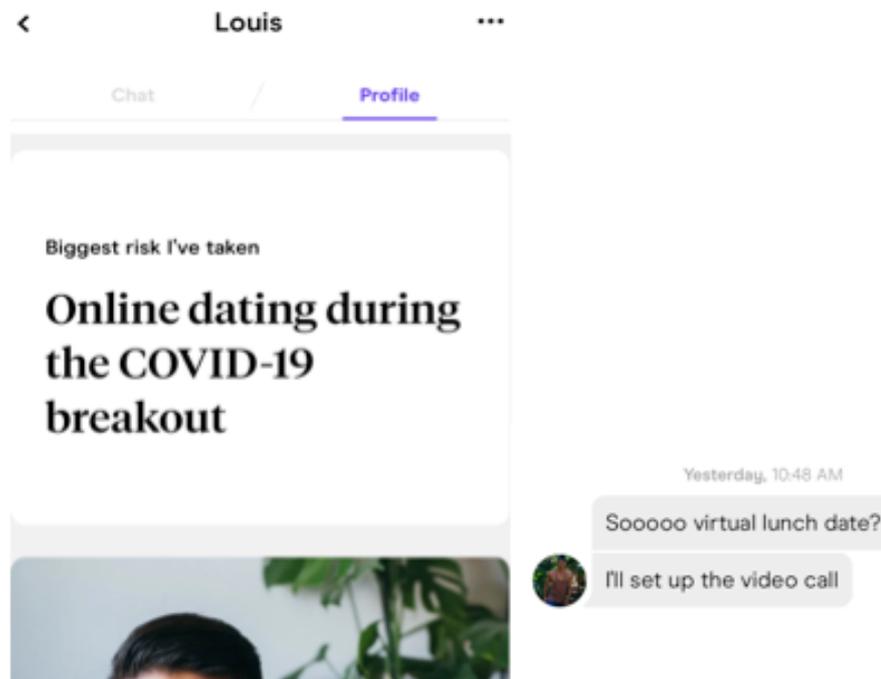


—*Manpreet (Preeti) Kaur Dhaliwal*

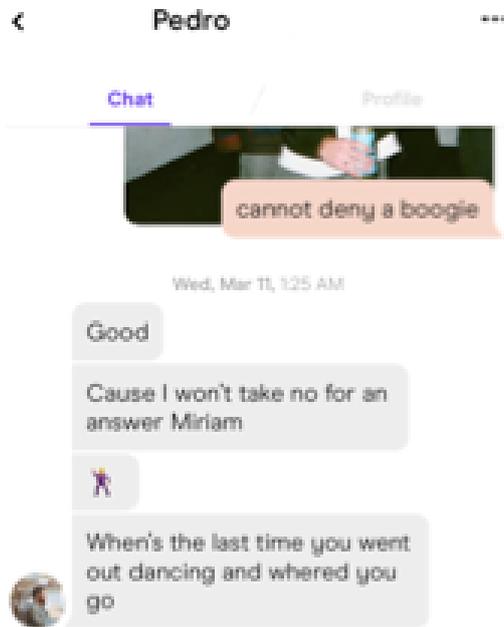
love in the time of coronavirus

Me - “Condoms might keep me from contracting venereal diseases but they won’t protect me from COVID-19.”

Best Friend - “No dick is worth the sick!”

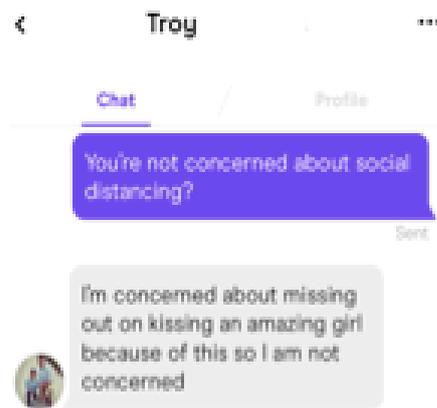


Earlier on Tuesday, Doug Ford announced Ontario's state of emergency, which includes a ban on public events of more than 50 people – Toronto City News

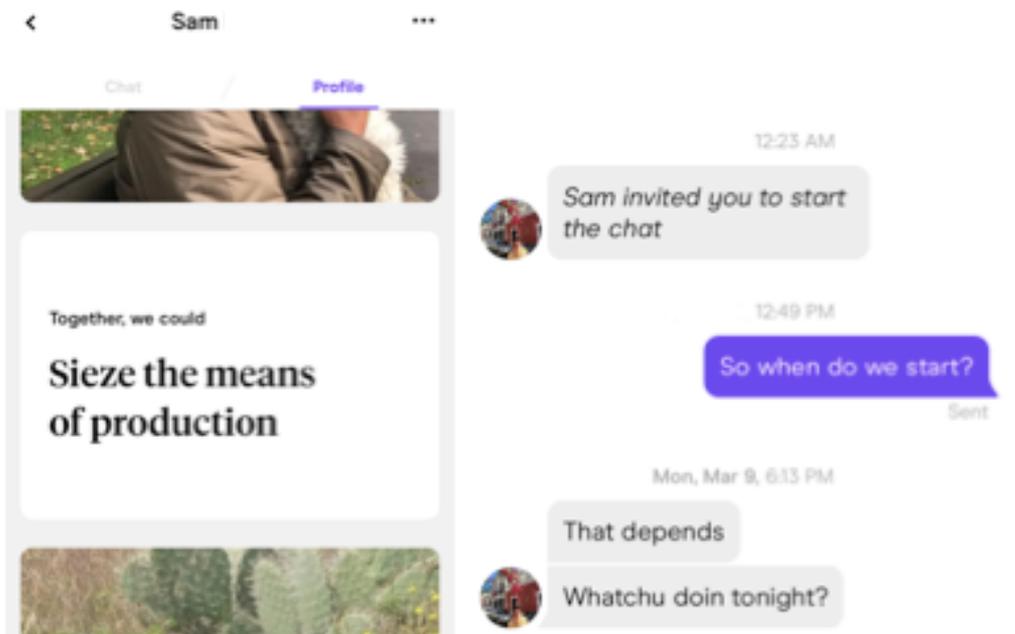


A patchwork of recent measures – New York Times

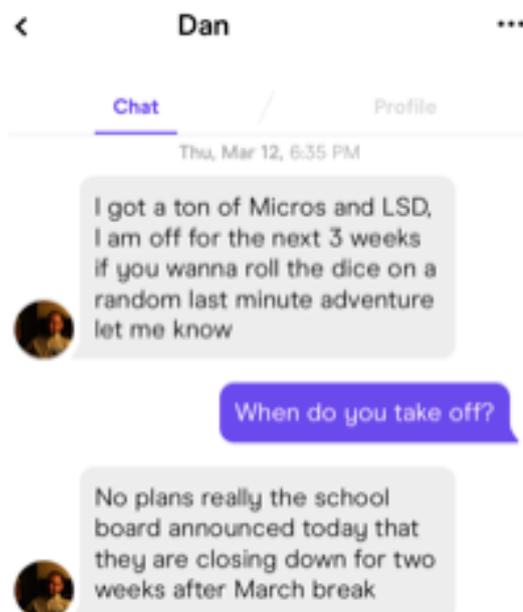
Typical Sunday
**Coffee. Bike rides.
 Parks. Exploring**



A grocery store clerk explains what it's like on the front lines of coronavirus panic. – Vox News

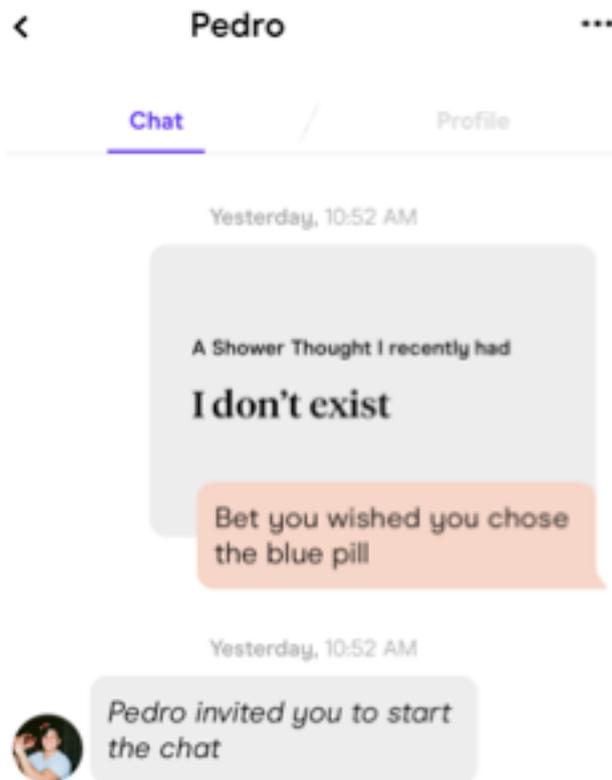


If social distancing is going to succeed, Canadian workers will need better supports – Globe & Mail

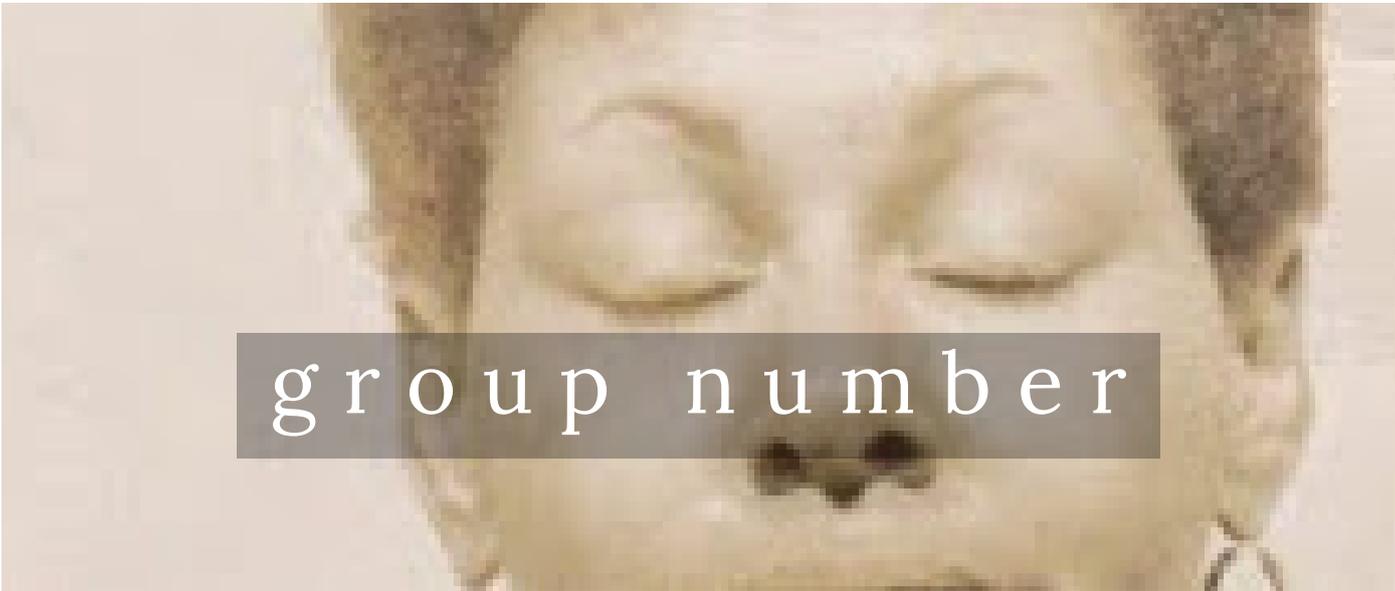


Wed, Mar 11, 10:17 AM

Thu, Mar 12, 12:25 PM



—Miriam Gallou



group number

Light flashes. A shutter closes. An image captured.

“How is it? Can I check and see?” I ask.

It’s March 16, 2020, 11:59 pm and the current coronavirus death toll resembles my birthdate. The first number is my birth month. I was born on its seventeenth day. The last is the first number of my birth millennium.

I know none of the dead but I know what they add up to.

A big picture was taken and I peer at the screen only to examine how I look.

I swear, I care about others. (7,171)

I just thought I could use the pandemic to notice myself. (7/17/1)

“How does it look to you? Is it fine?” the photographer asks.

“No, I blinked. My eyes are completely closed. It looks like I’m not paying attention. Could you take another?”

The coming calendar date is forecasting more fear. The skin on my hands is peeling from the washing, but I’ll pose again.

“Okay, we’ll just get one more.”

I nod and tilt my head rightward.

“Alright, this is the last shot.”

—Sahar Golshan



A friend's daughter has a fever and is vomiting. They flew home the day before you. This friend's mother, who is in her seventies, lives with them. Your friend tells her mother to stay in her room, but she refuses.

(See also: What to Do If You Are Sick)

Another friend is still away, where you were. The drug she takes to keep her cancer from coming back puts her at higher risk. Her parents are in their eighties. They're also away. Her mother tends toward bronchitis.

As much as possible, an ill person should stay in a specific room.

You tell your son to sing the happy birthday song when he washes his hands. You don't say, *in your head*.

So every time your son washes his hands, he sings out loud, this version of the song:
Happy birthday to you, you live in a zoo, you look like a monkey and you smell like one too.

Then you hear you're supposed to sing it twice.

Source and spread: this virus (like the other two) originated in bats.

The bright green wooden frog you bought for your parents at the airport (the one thing you bought and brought home) sits on your desk wrapped in brown paper and clear tape.

It follows a certain progression (see "Pandemic Intervals Framework").

—Geneviève Paiement



“They still have soap?” I stare at the rows of solid rectangles. The world has run out of hand gel, though soap is better anyway, and to my surprise, no one is hoarding it. Not like tofu, or carrots—“they’re gone,” my daughter tells me while we’re waiting in line at the supermarket. At the organic food shop, I’m transfixed by a happy splash of colours, an entire wall of soap, their hard corners shining like bare shoulders in sleeveless evening gowns. I quash the urge to buy twenty, thirty, the whole wall, and stick to Oatmeal, Shea Butter, Evening Primrose Oil.

An hour later, I buy ten more bars in a drugstore, Irish Spring and Dove, hoping that will be enough.

I saw scarcity up close when I used to visit the now defunct Soviet Union, the land of no toilet paper, ever. They only had one type of soap, and it was hard to find in the stores, and it was rough on the skin, and smelled bad, so when I visited from Canada I brought my friends bars of soap as a gift. Years later, I’d visit the same friends and find all my soaps lined up on their shelves, still shiny in their dust-free wrappers, too good to use. They were collected and displayed like tiny Buddhas or embroidered elephants brought back from a distant world.

—*Baṇuta Rubess*

contributors

Nathanya Barnett is an emerging queer poet, playwright, and performer. Find her poetry album at nathanyabarnett.bandcamp.com

Jonathan Bessette currently lives and works in Tkranto. Having both mixed settler and Métis ancestry, his work is a playground that tries to examine hybridity, identity, landscape, and his belonging through these. For more information, visit www.jonathanmbessette.com.

Farah El Bakkouri is a Moroccan-Canadian wordsmith who is currently completing her MFA at University of Guelph. Her works in poetry and non-fiction attempt to capture the complexities and contradictions in individual and societal identities in a world that prizes itself on singularities.

Manpreet (Preeti) Kaur Dhaliwal is a critical race feminist, writer, lawyer, prof, facilitator & sometimes performance artist whose writing tends to examine the subjective and experiential “I”, race, culture, trauma, bodies and/or sexuality. You can find her on IG/Tw @jadooberry.

Miriam Gallo never knows what to say about herself. She likes to make art and that’s probably the best way to get to know her.

Sahar Golshan 杜秀秀 سحر گلشن is a question asker living as a Teochew and Persian guest on Turtle Island. She is a language learner, writer, and director of the short documentary KAR. If you’re curious about her art-making or want to connect, follow Sahar on Twitter @SaharGolshan.

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Banuta Rubess is a theatre artist who is moving to prose. She’s a Toronto-born daughter of Latvian exiles and creates in several languages and countries. www.banuta.com

i m a g e s

Cover: *a physician wearing a 17th-century plague costume, as imagined in 1910.* publicdomainreview.org

p. 2: *A Manual of Gesture, embracing a complete system of notation, together with the principles of interpretation and selections for practice, by Albert M. Bacon; 1875; J. C. Buckbee, Chicago.* publicdomainreview.org

p. 3: *theatre curtain*

p. 4: *tuberculosis sanitorium, 1910.* publicdomainreview.org

p. 6: *author's photos*

pp. 7-11: *author's collage*

pp. 12-15: *author's collage*

p. 16: *found images via Robert E. Jackson, Vintage Everyday*

p. 17: *Wear Celluloid Collars and Cuffs, Trading Cards (ca.1870)*

p. 18: *Agnes Catlow, Drops of Water: Their Marvellous and Beautiful Inhabitants Displayed by the Microscope (London: Reeve and Benham, 1851).* publicdomainreview.org

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