DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

This Is Not a Rehearsal
by Hala Alyan

Illustration by Michelle Urra

Two years ago, I had an ectopic pregnancy. It was sudden and unexpected, and left me reeling. It happened during this time of year. The weather was slowly turning. The days suddenly getting longer. I sat in our new backyard and read and deep-breathed and cried. I scooted my chair to chase the sun across the lawn. I watched spring outside my living room window, the women in their sundresses and sandals. Their joy felt a lifetime away from my bitterness. I waited. I waited to see if my body would erupt.

This is what these days remind me of. These days of waiting and foreboding. I sit and wait. But there's one difference—this time, the whole city's doing it with me.

EVEN THIS IS hopelessly human. To connect with any pain, I have to turn self-referential. To understand a global pandemic, I have to make it about me.

ONE OF THE THINGS I like least about myself is how insular I am in grief. I give way pretty easily to self-pity and defeatism, like an overbaked cake crumbling under the slightest fork. During the ectopic I felt hard-boiled in rage—I felt worlds removed from everyone I knew. I watched the world in a daze. Those women in sundresses weren't just a different species; they were a different timeline, future or past, clearly not inhabiting the same days as me. How, then, to make sense of something happening to everyone? There are no women in sundresses. The eruption we are all dreading is already rupturing, and no border—neither physical nor intrapsychic—can separate me from others right now.

NEVER IN MY LIFE have I been so brutally aware of interdependence. I imagine I'm not alone in this. All day I think about my body in relation to other bodies. Everything is a calculation of intersection nowadays. The delivery box I touch has been touched by the mail carrier. By a worker at the warehouse. By anybody they've touched. Every subway pole is marked by the ghosts of hundreds, thousands, of hands. The stranger whose hand my husband shook at a wedding in Providence weeks ago has intersected with the dog walker of my coworker's neighbor. We are all suddenly sleeper cells. Nobody is impervious. Nobody can buy their way out of it. (Though certainly those without resources will suffer more.) We are all in an elaborate, complicated ballet with everyone else, and the only thing more astonishing than this new reality is that it isn't new at all. Only our awareness of it is.

THE DAYS BLUR together in self-quarantine. One evening, my husband and I curl on the

couch and discuss the situation. What good might come from this, we ask. It is the question of the lucky, I know. The question of privilege. Of those with jobs easily made remote and healthcare and savings accounts. Even being able to philosophize about bright sides implies the luxury to catch one's breath. Implies some pockets of calm and quiet and reflection. I'm not an ER doctor. Or a mother of five in a refugee camp. We live in a two-family house. We have our leather couch. Our dog. Our backyard, which catches and releases the sun. We are merely lucky and grateful and afraid.

I'm not an optimist by nature. I'm inclined to distrust and catastrophize. I have a body that tends towards adrenalized, a mind that tends towards obsessive, and when I have too much free time I spiral. It's strange that, in this time, I'd be looking for silver linings. I'm about to finish my nineteeth day of self-quarantine. My parents flew in from Beirut hours before the travel ban was enacted. I have still not seen them. Every day, for at least a few hours, I feel a pressure akin to brick mount in my chest. I've noticed it eases during meditation, which indicates anxiety. I live in Brooklyn, in the current epicenter of the outbreak, and every single morning I flinch when I look at the news. The air is sharp with anticipation and dread. We are here—we are told by the governor, by scientists—for a good, long while. We are to remain indoors with our tap water and canned goods. With our unease and traumas. Our sorrows. Our selves.

Still, I ask that question. What good?

WHAT GOOD.

I've turned to meditation in earnest this year, a year that's been marked by chaos, my Jesus year, a year that was already difficult and now feels absurd. In meditation I've thought often about abundance, how it exists in times of absence or suffering or resistance, how we can sit with dialectical truths about loss and rebirth at the same time. What good. This kind of experience has never occurred in my lifetime, but history has been around longer than thirty-three years. And the best indicator of the future, as the psychology adage goes, is the past. To look for hope, we must look to our history, to other moments when the world hurt together, to the fertility of those times.

THE HISTORY OF quarantine began during the bubonic plague of the fourteenth century, a practice to protect coastal cities like Venice. Ships remained anchored for forty days before the sailors entered the cities. The world was already entwined by then: trade and expeditions and colonization. In the intervening centuries, the world has only gotten smaller. What took years to travel from one shore to another now takes a six-hour transatlantic flight. The truth is humans have been spreading sickness to one another since the beginning of time. This only makes the xenophobia and nationalism in the political rhetoric around this recent outbreak more frustrating. Historically, colonizers brought the sickness, a quieter, more furtive form of invasion, decimating Indigenous communities.

Think of those sailors, I tell my husband. I tell myself late at night. I imagine their coughing and loneliness, the slapping of water around them. Look at your bookshelves, I tell myself. Your stupid phone. Your pantry.

What I want is to talk to those sailors. To those alive during the Spanish Flu epidemic, which lasted two years and resurged after each summer. But also, I want to talk to my great-grandparents, to the generations who lived through genocide and immigration. Never before have I been more acutely aware of the role of elders, a population that capitalism—and, by extension, our culture—tends to overlook and undervalue. Nowhere

does our history exist more vibrantly than in those who lived it. I want to line up my ancestors. I want to know how they survived. This part of the world knows shelter. It has been sanitized for several generations; even its wars are fought on others' soil. I think of the millions—past and present—pressed in basements with flashlights and stale water, waiting for bombs; my own mother in Damascus after the Kuwait invasion, awaiting my father's arrival for weeks. The time passed, she tells me. The time always passes. The secret to endurance, it seems, is to get good at waiting.

I AM NEITHER historian nor forecaster, and I can barely fathom what the implications of this crisis will be—I close my eyes and distantly envision healthcare reform, better international communication; perhaps this is wishful thinking. But I know every universal calamity, from world wars to crashed markets, has its legacy. Technological advances. Globalized economic markets. This pandemic seems to have at its core a lesson of kinship. What do we owe each other? What do we owe strangers on the other side of the world? Pull a thread here and you'll find it's attached to the rest of the world, Nadeem Aslam notes. Like reluctant marriage partners, we're in this—together—for better or worse. It's been easy to forget that. It likely won't be as easy after this.

Empathy is a powerful potion, not for the faint of heart. Empathy requires opening yourself to suffering. I wonder what muscles of empathy will be built through this experience—towards those who struggle with their health, those who are imprisoned, those who get detained fleeing calamity. Those living under occupation. (Even now, even in lockdown, even in the heart of the outbreak, such comparisons feel repugnant; we are empathizing with their status quo, and for many of us, from comfortable houses with stocked refrigerators and uninterrupted electricity. To consider these places are also experiencing what we are—Gaza has approximately twenty available ventilators for two million people—is incomprehensible even to the most open and empathic of hearts.) But the thread has been pulled ever so slightly, and for many of us, our togetherness is suddenly exposed, a raw, pulsing nerve.

AS A THERAPIST, a friend, a person, I've noticed a trend. The pandemic isn't necessarily creating fears for people. It's instead serving as a flashlight—illuminating people's unsteadiest, half-finished parts. It's showing us where our work remains. People talk about their ex-boyfriends, their long-resolved eating disorders, their childhood secrets. I don't know why this is coming up for me right now, I keep hearing. But it makes sense. Much of the world is on lockdown. There's nowhere to go, which means there are fewer places to hide from ourselves. From our fears, our sorrows, our obsessions. Modern life is one, long, built-in distraction, to say nothing of movement. Earlier generations spent their lives mostly at home, in their village, with their tribe. But modernity—and modern money—is marked by mobility: eating out in restaurants, going to bars, vacationing in foreign cities. Those distractions have abruptly ceased. As Blaise Pascal declared centuries ago, All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone, and we're all, like it or not, being furnished an opportunity to remedy that.

I like my distractions as much as the next person. I'm afraid of too much "empty" time, of being alone for long stretches, losing my routine and habits; this feels like suddenly being thrust into an exposure experiment without any scaffolding. This is not a drill. This is not a rehearsal. My life, along with billions of others', has been interrupted. But this is the best-case scenario. As my mother says, God willing, health. God willing, safety. So if God wills those things, then I'm curious to see: What will it be like to be robbed of all that scaffolding? In the end, will it be less theft than education?

THERE IS SOMETHING about the pandemic that reminds me of diaspora. The way everything becomes makeshift—makeshift traditions, makeshift remembrance. There are suddenly no physical markers of familiarity, and, just as in the diasporic experience, in the absence of the familiar, you create ritual wherever you are. The world has shuffled indoors, and amid all this isolation, community is springing up everywhere. From the university to the Islamic Center, from the writing groups to the social clubs, the experience of going remote has distilled—underscored—the value of these connections. All over the world, the arts endure—late night hosts doing monologues from their living rooms, master cellists livestreamed in front of empty auditoriums. With the physical mosque no longer an option, people haven't stopped praying. They've just learned to pray from afar. They've learned to create a different kind of mosque.

SOME THINGS WE learn only by remove—if you want to know how much something matters to you, take it away. If you want to know the role community plays (or doesn't) in your life, take it away. See what you miss. I'm on week three of self-quarantine, and I miss the subway. I miss my family, even though we're within miles of each other. I miss the soft, warm fold of bodies on game nights, how we'd pile on the couch together, blissfully unaware of our closeness, taking it for granted, my brother's girlfriend braiding my hair. I miss Washington Square Park, the L train platform benches, the easy knocking into one another on crowded streets. I wonder if social norms of closeness will change after this. I wonder what it will take to casually fold our bodies into another again.

LISTEN. The virus is not a blessing. It is not a personal awakening. It is a virus. It is indifferent to epiphanies. A pandemic that is wreaking havoc on systems that—at least in the United States—should have done far, far better. Reflecting on how the pandemic is impacting the ways we love and connect and cope—this too is hopelessly human, a way of trying to impose control, through perspective, if nothing else. I know the truth is that we are limply powerless in the face of what is happening. These are real people who are dying. Every siren that pierces the air in Brooklyn is attached to a person, an address, a family, a whole library, as the saying goes, that will be burned to a crisp if they die. I know this. I don't want to know this, but I do. And beneath this public, shared grief are millions, billions, of private griefs, too. Cancelled weddings. Missed deathbeds. Griefs that have nothing to do with the virus and happen to be coinciding with it. Miscarriages. Divorces. All those dreams—new job, a transcontinental move, trying to conceive—deferred. The work of being human never stops.

STILL … THERE'S SOMETHING starkly moving about a global hurt. We are so driven and primed to think of ourselves as nations and individuals; we are fed so much messaging about borders. But what happens when we are devastatingly, unequivocally, reminded of our alikeness? Tell me there isn't something achingly exquisite about scientists—from every corner of the globe—frantically working for one united goal. Tell me this hasn't reminded you of how honorable and ancient the role of healer is. Yes, I want nothing to do with this pain sometimes—there are moments I feel myself closing off. Taking stock of my life. My safety. That of those I love. I want to wall myself off. In those moments, I would marry any border in the world. But it doesn't work. The scarier thing, the truer thing, is not to look away. To be with the suffering. Regardless of where they are in the world, countless people are wondering if the tightness in their chest is worry or virus, if their loved ones will be okay, if they are the only ones feeling this lonely, this overwhelmed,

this unsettled. That kind of kinship can’t be feigned.

I HEAR ABOUT a friend afraid of giving birth in this time. I hear about another finding out she’s pregnant. Another can’t stop cleaning her front door. Another nurses a broken heart in quarantine. All through Brooklyn, the ambulances come and go like birds with no migration pattern. Every morning, I hold my phone to my ear and listen to the voices of others. Their joys aren’t exactly mine; nor are their griefs. And yet—even with all this distance, it doesn’t feel so distant. There are no other timelines. I feel stapled to this moment, to the present. I can almost taste the whiskey my friend pours in Beirut. I can step into the dread of giving birth in an emptied room, the mewl of an infant’s first cry rippling through the air. These are the things I want; these are the things I fear. And I can feel them in other people. I see my mother’s face on video. I hear the sirens. The airplanes. People leaving. People returning. It doesn’t feel that far away anymore.