

Surviving the Summer Heat

Stories of the Pandemic: A Poetry Collection

Appel Fellowship Final Project by Hannah Doyle



Introduction

Four continents, many stories whispered to the wind
Four months and counting, and waiting...
Zoom interviews with colleagues and strangers
Spanning time zones, governments, yet united
It's a privilege to share a global experience unlike any other in our lifetime

(a sliver of each of their lives)

Loss:

Self-employed therapist, but no one wanted to be touched
Waiting for investors to lift us off the ground, now knowing salvation is out of reach
Separated from family by oceans and obsolete airplanes, some separated by lifetimes
Autonomy, certainty, safety... Our limited capacity to hold space for two atrocities

Acceptance:

The dining room chairs as makeshift handrails, passing the promenade they'd catch a glimpse
As I twirled, moving through stagnant space. Dancing in my living room was enough
One by one, the lights lit up in the houses near me, I knew *then* that they were alright

Appreciation:

The Jasmine on our fence wafting through the air, coffee on the porch in the early morning
The living room PlayStation, linking me to family thousands of miles away
The chewy chocolate chip cookies my cousin makes, brightening up the average Sunday
Even in chaos, gratitude deepens.

What do you hope the world learns?

Slow down, enough shoving it under the rug, this proves it: there's no excuse for inaction
I lived through the sixties, we had a hundred years to act, now we're merely reacting
The whole world can change in a precious instant, how do we prepare for the unknown?
Consciousness connects & we remember: we are one w o r l d

What is a virus? *It's a parasite.*

How do we cleanse the parasites from our lives, to make space for healing

How have you evolved?

I don't believe in God or any spiritual being. But I believe in us as a human race
& I believe in our ability to help one another, working together to solve problems, empathy
How many people live through something and don't admit that it made them stronger?

My grandson took his first steps last week, I otherwise would have missed out on too many
Precious moments, glimmering dew drops in the web of time...

What is your place in the collective healing of our earth and its divine inhabitants?

Free to dip my toes in the gentle ocean once again, I'd utter thank you, thank you all day long...



All photos taken by me in summer 2019/2020 - Houston, TX

This collection focuses on the themes and stories that emerged from months of virtual interviews about the pandemic with many brave & reflective interviewees from around the world: Germany, New York, Israel, Texas, Singapore, Los Angeles, Algeria, the place I call home...

Thank you to them for opening their hearts, minds, and mouths to share their stories.

If you held the pen to your own narrative, regardless of life's wild & unrelenting tidal waves, What would you write? How would it end? Or is this only the beginning?

From the Fading Memories of Your Daydream

Fill up space with your lungs where space wasn't before
The weight of heavy, humid air
Suffocating on the heat of summer
In a four-walled city apartment
High above the burning streets

You cough on smoke that escaped
From your nightmare; eyes wet & sticky
From tears that fell before you knew why

Ash & soot coat the grey cement,
Drifting weightless while they wait
For the ferocity of the September wind
To baptize the space where space was

Fill up your lungs with the remnants
Of what's left and of what is...
You'll need your strength to rebuild





Melrose Ave, Los Angeles

Walking into Walmart

I was in awe when I stepped into Walmart for the first time since it all happened
Seventeen boxes of every type of cereal, three brands of instant coffee, bunches of bananas.

Like a dream come true, we thought we survived the drought through the desert
And emerged on the other side where isopropyl & TP were the only rare commodities.

I was in awe when I returned home and read the news for the fifty-ninth time that day
Apathetically stirring a lukewarm bowl of alphabet soup, my stomach formed knots
& I was caught, breathless. The dirty counters wait to be wiped, pots stained tarry with use.

I was in awe that people's insides were knotted from grief, pain, longing, & hunger
Urges so deeply human, how could we not feel them too? Or did we not know how to care.

I was awestruck by the waste in Walmart. How many calories sit neatly on shelves in boxes?
While the family next door, frozen in fear, wait for a flimsy piece of paper to fill their bellies.

I was in awe that we were still fighting over the dirty silverware & how it all fits in the drawer
Why didn't we know we were lucky just to do that? & how long will it take until we do?

I am in awe at the focus and forgetfulness of the human race: all consumed with a madness
At the force against us, a tidal wave of helplessness & action. Don't forget we each play a part.

I am in awe at the web that connects us still. Stretched far and dabbled with dew, long after the
storm is over. The people fighting their way into Walmart checkout lines for those they love.



Valle de Angeles, Honduras

Queens, NY June 21st

Lazy boy recliner, AC blows the fraying curtains, all around the world
TV roars and scenes flash: masses of bodies; black and white uniforms; chaos
One dark and pungent night, 300 eyewitness testimonies from Queens
Our masks were removed, pepper sprayed in our faces, many left injured
We were corralled, forced by a crowd control tactic called *kettling*,
How does beating peaceful protestors with batons constitute appropriate use of force?

On the TV screen you don't hear from the 300 who were mowed down
With police cars, the family who's eighty-pound kid was forced into a chokehold on the ground
The men who hid their names and badge numbers because they must've known it was *wrong*
The police commissioner must've missed it too or maybe he forgot by the next morning,
When testifying for the state Attorney General, Ms. Leticia James, glistening black skin,
The first woman of color to hold statewide office in the great state of New York.

Who do you believe: one man afraid to lose his job or 300 protestors and eyewitnesses
Independently reporting the same story over & over again, hoping for anyone to hear them.

"We need to demand change, and it must come from leaders, but it must come from the young people who are marching in the street, because all the change that has ever happened in this world didn't come from elected officials, it came from young people who were marching, young people who were demanding change.

Listen to them. Take a moment to talk to them, to understand what they are saying, and how they want to affect change. Because they will inherit all of these institutions, and it's important that these institutions reflect their values and our values as a nation."

-New York State Attorney General Letitia James at a Town Hall in Queens

Lick It Off & Taste

The Secret to Life
Summed up simply
Cannot be found within
The soft pages of any book,
Instead it must be forged from flames,
Energy from the chemical reaction igniting
Within the velvet folds of your oozing mind
Sparked by the wisdom of the world before us
In the form of tiny black letters pressed on a page
Or the stories of a time before. People say our species
Has collective amnesia, but I believe that in fact we are the
Library of Alexandria, collectively, only capable of forging the keys
To understand our mountains, oceans, & the vastness of space
When we combine our most precious assets, a cosmic soup,
Of human consciousness, in dialogue with the truth of
The vastness beyond the reach of our fingertips
Sometimes it is merely banter with a stranger
That catalyzes the cracking of the glass
That used to separate the whole world
From you. Maybe with enough will
You can break it yourself, and
Dive head in, to the richness
You forgot life itself oozes
Down your sweet lips
Lick it off & taste



A temporary home....

100 Things That Scare Us

~Inspired by Jill Kolongowski's collaborative poem, "160 Things that Scare Me."

The night's deep darkness; spiders; anything that crawls; tall ladders; making a joke that falls flat; the apocalypse; telling you I love you; you not saying it back; you telling me you love me too.

Getting a car wash and forgetting to roll up the windows; the startle of a siren; red and blue flashing lights; politicians; the air your neighbor exhales; our future.

The fragility of your grandmother; the mortality of humanity; Donald J. Trump; anything made in China; voter fraud; the rise of cyber-insecurity; losing your paycheck to automation.

The cost of success in America; higher education; ICE; loneliness; too much time with yourself; too much time without yourself; that desperate moment where even Wifi fails you; the fear itself.

The feeling in your knees when you look down from the top; the feeling in your gut that you'll never get there; people too selfish to wear a mask; dying too soon; surviving, but just barely.

COVID-19; military grade assault weapons; ignorance that bleeds red; dying alone; never having enough time to succeed; pasty white eviction letters; being too afraid to try.

Bed bugs; C-sections; doctors struggling to breathe; disease & decay; flash flooding; the loss of everything you've ever known; growing old; being young; the cost of healthcare; change.

The kind of heat that suffocates; the kind of life that suffocates; the kind of sadness that immobilizes; therapy; bipolar disorder; cancer; salmonella; not knowing how to deal with it alone.

Any social interaction whatsoever; living by yourself; the seconds-long horror when your Zoom camera accidentally flashes on; revisiting childhood places & memories; admitting you'll never be the same again.

Admitting the World will never be the same again; admitting we have room to improve; admitting we can't do it alone; admitting we don't know how to do it together; admitting we are too often too afraid of failing to even attempt; admitting anything at all...

Getting lost in a city; getting into the car alone at night; amber alerts; feeling helpless.

Disorder; chaos; nuclear bombs; people intimidatingly more intelligent than us; people who think they're better because they're different; people who can cause hurt because they don't understand.

Grief felt by those we love; grief caused by those we love; the weight of grief so heavy it's suffocating even when shared; the lie we tell ourselves that no one will feel it with us.

Our own shame; the vastness of the Universe; the wisdom that existence is impermanent; the realization that we will never touch knowledge's farthest walls; the knowing that we are as insignificant as a piece of sand in the ocean of time; the chance that our life is an anomaly in the infinite blackness of space.

Our own potential; the vast possibility of all humanity; the melting of our only home; the centuries of collective consciousness that might disintegrate in a second if we fuck up.



Trusting each other to not forget what's at stake.

Trusting each other to choose humanity.

Trusting ourselves to hold onto hope.

Facing our fears. Without letting them define us.



Ashland, OR - the place I called home

Sweet Summertime

Last summer I danced barefoot in the streets while the rain washed away what was left of my youth. Last summer I thought I fell in love. Last summer tears fell down my face when I left. Last summer I left a broken heart. Last summer I found the sun, streaming through my window before my eyes could see the light. Last summer I bought a ticket to another country; I bought a beautiful escape. Last summer my mom shattered the last picture of her wedding on the back porch. Last summer I picked up the glass and we fought as her moans echoed through the house, collapsed on the bathroom floor. Last summer I told her I had to move out. Last summer I believed I was alone.

Last summer I was awakened. Last summer I stomped my feet to the beat of strangers' drums, and I let my body dissolve into something greater. Last summer I felt God. Last summer my dad moved away, but he still called. Last summer I drove to the mountain top so I could feel the day disappear into night. Last summer I danced blindfolded on a roof. Last summer I rolled down my windows and drank in the stars. Last summer I was afraid to let go of everything I had ever known, but I had to say goodbye.

Last summer my mom survived her darkest days. Last summer I got high on the idea of the future. Last summer I sipped wine by the crackling fire, surrounded by young souls just as lost and found as me. Last summer I watched the moon grow huge over the lake. Last summer I watched the ripples blur reality. Last summer you were my best friend, but I held a dream of leaving home in search of a new one.

This summer started early. This summer was hot. This summer left me on the curb, car packed, too far from a place I could call "home." This summer I made my own home. This summer I waited in long lines to buy groceries, hiding behind a mask, holding my breath, hoping. This summer I read the news. This summer left tear stains on my cheeks while I waited for the world. This summer brought me you.

This summer I drove to the mountain to escape the city. This summer the ocean lived by me, painting my feet with sweet salt. This summer my mom was left with two broken arms, but hundreds of miles lay between us. This summer I danced barefoot in my living room, under the haze. This summer the intoxicant was longing for the past. This summer we learned to get high off the present. This summer I slept on a strangers' couch, a thin mattress on a dusty floor, a hammock. This summer I learned I didn't need much to be happy.

This summer I had to be an adult. This summer I got to be a kid. This summer I fell in love & all we really had was each other. This summer the power of freedom imprinted in my brain, the power of fear caught in my chest, the power of love inked just below the skin. This summer strength grew in my bones. This summer we clung to hope for another summer to come, while I waited for the sweet rain to wash it all away.

How many months?
~through it all, the friend who never stopped asking if I was okay

I

Cheap currency & flimsy rights, trapped half-way across the world
Now infinite time & space separates your birthplace and death –
How many months since you wrapped your lips around your
Mother tongue? and shared the sweet embrace of an era before.

The first whole week he never slept, a sickness in the stomach dulled only in time.

Airports abandoned, embassies left empty, even mosques stopped listening
to prayers for shelter. A part time delivery job to get by, but please don't tell.

The eighth prayer – but now he celebrates alone.

II

How many months since you held your family? beating heart against heart
The mania between your eyes the day you learned they could be lost too soon.

*In our religion, when someone is born,
God has already set the date that he will take their soul*

If we are scared of death, then we live in fear of everything. That is why I have faith.

III

Soon enough, Not-His-President declares war on foreign bodies
Souls who surrendered to the great American melting pot
Not even the privilege of academia can preserve their rights

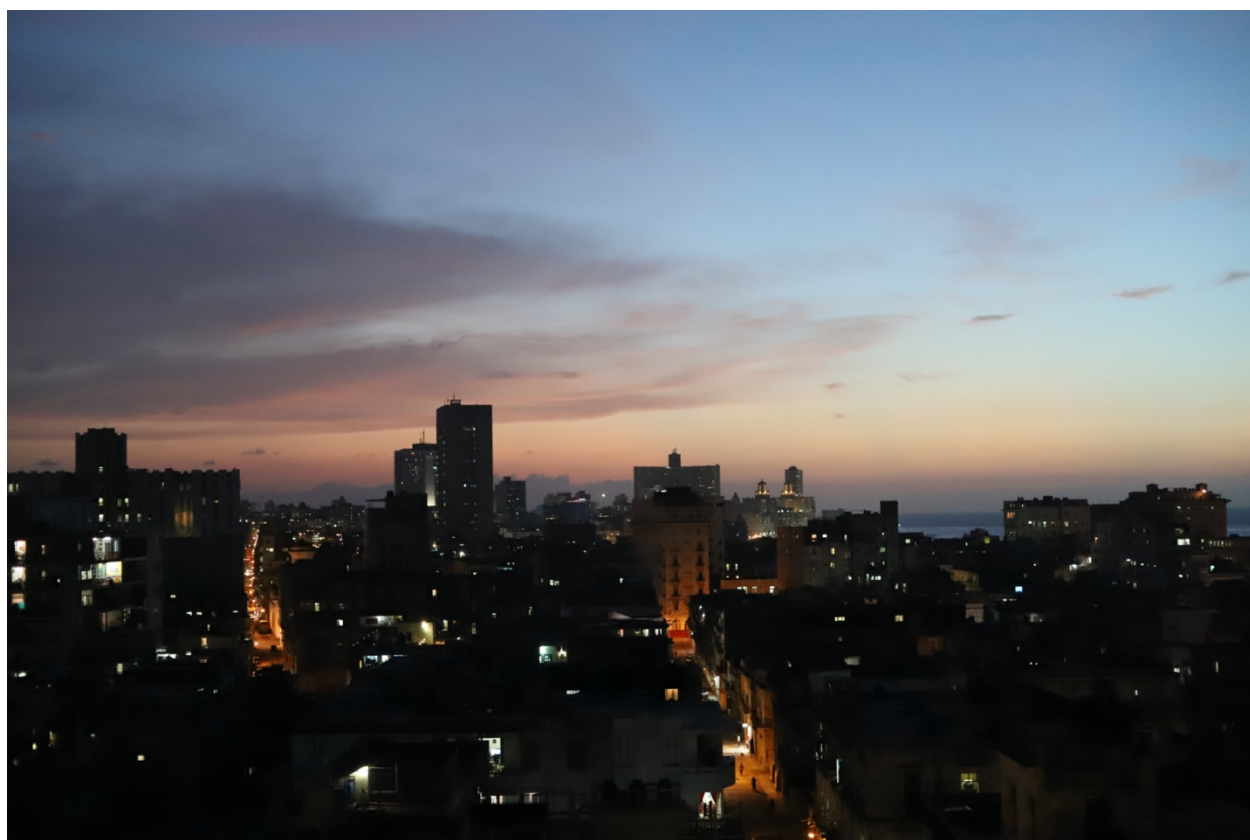
Counting the days, I ask: what can you do?

His frail words ring in our ears: *Prayer* is the only avenue left. Thank God, humanity
answered his cries.

IV

Too many bodies held within one house. Grandfather, uncle, brothers, and sisters, now
mom & dad. Soon they all test positive. Yet all he can do is wait... still a lifetime away.





Havana, Cuba

A Dream of The City
~an old friend

Nearly nocturnal, he works at the quiet town's loudest bar every day of the precious week
But soon day breaks & he dreams. Now in the city, starting a business, building wealth
The only hope for an escape from the only world he's ever known: a fresh beginning
For the women that raised him, freedom from a seventy-hour work week & a chance for a future
Taking a leap of faith: apartment picked out in LA, job interviews linger, then March arrives
Community college abandoned when Zoom took over for teachers. *A waste of time anyway.*
Storefronts shut their doors to exasperated customers and desperate workers alike
So, he's home: six little kids (all adopted), two exhausted mothers, and no bread to be broken
At least there's finally time: play school, skim novels, risk your life for a jaunt in the park
Reconnect with those separated by time & space, and reconnect with himself

Days, weeks, months: loneliness, depression, acceptance, peace.
Doors reopen, windows shed light, back to babysitting drunk adults: *One strawberry twist,*
Please. But the four walls and wood floors were home, more than those that housed his body
Til a pair of white lips uttering forbidden words transformed sacred space into a war zone.

Then June: Skin as dark as rich chocolate, lungs dry from his calls, while a steady white hand
Aims a 9mm Beretta between star-struck eyes. At the soft, fleshy matter that makes us more.
All he wanted was to march. All he wanted was to "matter" in the eyes of the law.
It was like a dream, what flashed before him. *Twenty-two years was not enough.*
A firm white hand and a badge poised to end the life of a son, a lover, a survivor
Someone who's already seen too much, but will withstand more. A black man in America

Who refuses to give up the dream.

Surrender
~Honoring what we've lost

It's up to you
But who is you
What are we
& where are we going

Coming from dormancy
Earth now spins too fast
Dizzy, dumfounded, & drunk
We all gravitate toward loss

Holding tight to the temporary
Like clutching the wind as
She disappears into ethers
Emergence grew giddy
In the changing times

No, not acceptance
But it is a prerequisite
To honor what sinks
Into the muddy earth

Before Future can
Be born in flames
Still, the storm circles



Bend, OR



BLM x Pride Protest down Hollywood Blvd

Morning Routine

~because of my mama

The stench of wood & darkness from the night before
I wake up alone and cold to the touch; oozing with dormant
Energy, but slumped, drugged with a prescription
Dose of daily depression

The emergence of a new sunrise and fraying dog leash –
My slippered feet & starstruck fingers when they find the
Petals of neighborhood's spring

My morning routine transformed – humbled by my own fragility
I weep at each emerging bud like a winter storm so fierce
It only stops when the world spins slow enough to hear its own heartbeat

Each bloom: an ember of hope for many sleepless wanderers
Waiting for a spark. What beauty surrounds the mundane?
When we pause to watch the world grieve & shatter,
Remaining to water new life that roots in the crevices,
Feeding off the sun's devotion to the new day

The Perfect Storm

~while I was living in LA...

Yesterday – suffocating in the Los Angeles heat, afraid to breathe too deep
Thousands of feet. In Unison. Stomping out the stardom of America's greedy
While marching down Hollywood Boulevard.

Months of isolated humanity & centuries of hope for a future without fear, yet somehow
We are more than the sum of our parts: together saved from the terror of shared air &
Another generation of submission.

A mass of dormant energy,
Alive for the first time in months,
Fueled by a need for freedom like oxygen

So why can't you let us breathe?

Peaceful protest ends in police blockade while sweat drips down flightless faces
We take a knee shouting, shouting, throats parched and voices groaning
Hands Up Don't Shoot. Why aren't those words enough?

Masked but fierce as heavy hearts, thirty-thousand humans in one place at one time.
But this is only the beginning.

Every country & color represented
Democracy dies in darkness
How do you explain to the world
That we are nothing
Until we care more about the suffering of others
Than the comfort of ourselves?

How did humanity get so lost? Why is it still so hard to talk about race?

Together: we paint a rainbow in the sky with our minds while we wait for the storm to pass,
Humans built to survive, yet we forget. It's too late in history to not know that we need: each other

Dear world, wake up. COVID-19 isn't the only pandemic roaming around in this summer heat.





A new home

In the Face of All Eternity

I don't know if the sea taught me to love salt, or if I was born
craving the musky pungent scent of the great beyond

A brilliant distraction from misty city lights & skylines: distant memories of collective chaos

Here I find the solitude of a thousand star-lined nights, drifting
into the tarry depths my mind as clear as your salty spray, free
as the migrating Arctic tern loyal only to her compass within

I could be swallowed up in the magnificence of earth's depths, insignificant
As a single grain of chalky sand in the burning book of time

The tide will push & pull at every corner of dark space long before & after humans even exist

How do we use these few smoothed stones to leave our mark
in this great salty sea?

Past, present, a future filled with purpose — seconds slipping through the cracks of the
hourglass. We learned to throw off the veil of illusion, cast aside the farthest edges of our limits

What remains? But an infinite potential. History collects in the rivers and streams
Slowly meandering toward the end of an era. Each freed bird becomes a new tributary
In the ever-flowing cascade of our rebirth.

And yet —

There is still light within the darkness
Like the early strokes of sunlight that
Paint our fragile world a new beginning each day

There is still life among the decay —
Soft, dusty soil makes way for new growth
Even the lady bugs chewing circles in your
Leaves just yearn to exist for another day

There is still the charcoal, cracked cement
Eagerly awaiting your rugged beat-up wheels
& an afternoon of sundrenched kids
Creating laughter out of thin air

The core of our earth trembles,
Her melting heart heavy with sweet hope
There has always been love among the fear,
We feel it too, our chests too massive not to

No human is an island, alone in this great vastness
But an archipelago of belonging, each of my precious
Choices are yours, as yours reside within me

We are our own greatest weakness, slumped
With the weight of our collective grief
A reminder of the power we each possess:

To rise again like the mourning sun
Someone must paint the emergent day
In hues of gold



"the tree of life"