

DISPATCHES FROM AN/OTHER PLACE



Dispatch 5:

*"The covenant
between us"*

Dear students,

That's Coney Island, on a reportedly ordinary day in 1940, when then record temperatures of 89 degrees drove the masses beachside. [Weegee \(photographer Arthur Fellig\)](#) climbed up on a lifeguard stand and began shouting and jumping to get the crowd to turn to him, then shot this now famous picture of summer in New York. A few months ago, even seeing a photo like this would have made me claustrophobic - but now, I find myself longing to be in throngs of people, rubbing shoulders in rowdy markets, crammed into packed subways, exchanging pleasantries with strangers without fear. In lieu of our usual ways of experiencing community, we've all been finding new ways of connecting in this strange new world. Today, a few reflections on the lure of the crowd:

I know he's garnered a previous mention in these dispatches, but I'm starting with another nod to fellow nurse-poet Walt Whitman. A few verses from one of his characteristic epic poems, [*Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*](#), which speaks to the power of connecting across distances, across time, addressed to a reader "scores or hundreds of years" hence - that is, us:

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever
so many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a
crowd,
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the
bright flow, I was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the
swift current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the
thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.

And:

What is it then between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not,
I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,
I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters
around it,
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,
In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came upon me,

One more, which I found especially poignant, so particular I felt he had written it just for us, just for now:

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores
in advance,
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows but I am enjoying this?
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for
all you cannot see me?

For some, the specter of daily crisis has been present since long before the tenure of this pandemic. Peoples who have long lived with uncertainty and turmoil have always relied on forms of community building that the larger public is now discovering - mutual aid, intergenerational networks, inventive means of connecting when scattered by circumstance. For a very different take on community across generations, I want to share [a poem by bell hooks](#), *Appalachian Elegy (Sections 1-6)*, which demands to be read in its entirety:

1.

hear them cry
the long dead
the long gone
speak to us
from beyond the grave
guide us
that we may learn
all the ways
to hold tender this land
hard clay direct
rock upon rock
charred earth
in time
strong green growth
will rise here
trees back to life
native flowers
pushing the fragrance of hope
the promise of resurrection

2.

such then is beauty
surrendered
against all hope
you are here again
turning slowly
nature as chameleon
all life change
and changing again
awakening hearts
steady moving from
unnamed loss
into fierce deep grief
that can bear all burdens
even the long passage
into a shadowy dark
where no light enters



3.

night moves
through the thick dark
a heavy silence outside
near the front window
a black bear
stamps down plants
pushing back brush
fleeing manmade
confinement
roaming unfettered
confident
any place can become home
strutting down
a steep hill
as though freedom
is all
in the now
no past
no present

4.

earth works
thick brown mud
clinging pulling
a body down
heard wounded earth cry
bequeath to me
the hoe the hope
ancestral rights
to turn the ground over
to shovel and sift
until history
rewritten resurrected
returns to its rightful owners
a past to claim
yet another stone lifted to
throw against the enemy
making way for new endings
random seeds
spreading over the hillside
wild roses
come by fierce wind and hard rain
unleashed furies
here in this touched wood
a dirge a lamentation
for earth to live again
earth that is all at once a grave
a resting place a bed of new beginnings
avalanche of splendor



5.

small horses ride me
carry my dreams
of prairies and frontiers
where once
the first people roamed
claimed union with the earth
no right to own or possess
no sense of territory
all boundaries
placed by unseen ones
here I will give you thunder
shatter your hearts with rain
let snow soothe you
make your healing water
clear sweet
a sacred spring
where the thirsty
may drink
animals all

6.

listen little sister
angels make their hope here
in these hills
follow me
I will guide you
careful now
no trespass
I will guide you
word for word
mouth for mouth
all the holy ones
embracing us
all our kin
making home here
renegade marooned
lawless fugitives
grace these mountains
we have earth to bind us
the covenant
between us
can never be broken
vows to live and let live

Though we may not be able to gather right now, we are finding ways of reaching one another. Perhaps, like Whitman, we consider the power of shared experiences that draw us together, though we experience them apart. Or like hooks, we regard our ties to land, ancestors, brethren, diaspora, as unbreakable bond. We are lucky to be living in a time when distance can be bridged by countless virtual means - Zoom, Skype, Facebook, Instagram - our generation's own "avalanche of splendor," and why not? I look forward to finding you there. Stay tuned for the last dispatch next week.

Be well,
Tamanna Rahman
your friendly neighborhood nurse practitioner



Tamanna Rahman is a psychiatric nurse practitioner who joined the CAPS team in January 2019. She completed her nurse practitioner training at Yale University and holds a BA from Williams College in American Studies, where she studied social movements and literature. Outside of work, she enjoys engaging in activism, gardening, cooking and baking, and hanging out with her Russian Blue cat and giant Newfoundland dog.