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ESSAY

FRANCES GUERIN

GRIEVING

A tightness has settled permanently in my chest. I say settled, but it migrates, independently, without permission, between throat and chest, sometimes venturing down to my belly.

We are now in an advanced stage of grieving. Otherwise known as re-opening. Our mourning commenced with the non-arrival of what became known as “the new normal.” The new was scheduled to spring up in the shadow of death. We didn’t know the old was gone, lost forever, until the newly arrived, itself, failed to show up. Its absence now fills my chest.

I was ecstatic when the President announced that we would be let out of confinement. Even here in Paris, where the numbers had skyrocketed and the hospitals had been overwhelmed, May 11 was to be the magical day. Like many others, I assumed it would be the upward turn following months of depression. I looked at a man sitting on a bench, his hands crossed on his knees, head down, as another rifled through trash further along the street. We all yearned for the city to start moving again.

The long-anticipated celebration never took place; the freedom has never been experienced. Not only did we never go back to anything resembling before, but we are again watching numbers, stalked by a second possible confinement. We have been through the denial, anger, frustration, resignation, guilt. We are meant to be in the hope stage, but we’ve gone back to grieving for this moment that was meant to be different. It was meant to be familiar, like before. Or, at least, new. Reality is an enduring uncertainty that has migrated into our bodies, a sharp anxiety.

Since de-confinement, I have felt guilty for being European. My American friends are still isolating while I go to museums, the movies, and spend my days at the library. Self-help books tell me that guilt is meant to come before depression. Websites reassure me that the order is irrelevant. Grief doesn’t progress in predictable, linear stages. I believe the websites. It’s okay to feel guilty.

In Europe, we think of ourselves as survivors. We pulled through the worst of it by obeying the government orders. Recently, *The New York Times* gleefully announced that we have more infections per capita than the United States, but that can't be right. It must be American envy. My guilt and goodwill towards Americans morphs into spite while I am not looking.

If it's not envy, how to explain *The New York Times* article? Maybe the facts and figures read differently on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean? Per capita infection rates are higher in densely populated areas, more deaths per rate of infection means higher death rate, more testing means more cases. Is that according to a linear or logarithmic scale?

It's easier to return to identifying as survivors; the alternative is to fall into a state of confusion.

Overwhelmed by graphs and data, I look outside my window to gauge reality. The streets are empty again. Maybe *The New York Times* is right. Are we all self-designating a new isolation?

No. I forgot. It's August in Paris. Everyone has gone to the Cote d'Azur. I naïvely thought that Parisians might work through August this year. So many months lost to the pandemic and all.

"Are you going on vacation?" I ask the man at the bike store.

"Mais madame," he responds with incredulity. "It's August."

"Yes, of course," I sigh.

It's August, and we never made it to a new normal.

I'm waiting for the President to tell us that it's over, that we can move on with our lives, and rekindle hope for the future. We did so well at flattening the curve in the first place. Surely we deserve to relax for the rest of the year?

"The Russians have officially approved a vaccine," I excitedly tell the pharmacist.

"The Russians, the Russians, the Russians are coming," he chants. A smile brushes over his face. "They called it Sputnik," he smirks.

When the new order comes from the French government, it's in the form of a city map. It is a spiderweb of red coloured streets on which mask wearing is obligatory. I anxiously wait for the map to download. C'mon, c'mon. I deflate. My street is red.

I am momentarily reassured because my building is on a corner. If I turn left outside my building, I must wear a mask, but if I turn right, no mask needed. The longer I ponder the map, the more confused I become.

It doesn't make sense. Do I need a mask to cross the street, and take two steps left, then when I turn right onto the boulevard I am allowed to remove the mask? Do I wear it on my bike? The all-important question: will the police be giving out fines to the disobedient? I scour the Préfecture de Police website for answers. Nothing. I look out the window; no one is wearing

a mask.

Here we go again.

At least we are not in America where confusion has been elevated to political ideology. In France, confusion pops up in familiar conversations with foreigners who eat outside of the designated hour, try to substitute fries for greens, or want sauce on the side in a restaurant.

I hesitate before writing formal emails to colleagues in America, especially those in states where the virus rages out of control. What do I say? I hope you are keeping well and ignoring your government's instructions to go about business as usual? Delete.

I could have told you there would be a price to pay for all those beach parties and "socially distanced" walks in the park. Delete.

At least in New York you flattened the curve. Delete.

I settle for: I hope you are keeping well.

No judgment, no assumptions about political proclivities, or mask preference. I don't want them to think I'm smug. Even though I am.

Guilt, resentment, compassion with a touch of conceit, I am losing my grasp. What am I meant to be feeling? How am I meant to behave towards others in the middle of a global pandemic? Will someone please write the manual.

The world as we know it has evaporated. Poof. Disappeared over the course of a weekend in March. If only I had known the end was coming. If only I had made the most of my situation, instead of always wanting more, wishing I was somewhere else. If only. If only. I might have prepared for survival of the oncoming unknown instead of scrolling through drivel on Twitter.

I may be in Europe, but there are days when I might as well be in America. I sit in my apartment – again – alone, imagining that everyone else has picked up where their lives left off. They're probably out at dinner, in one of the restaurants that spills over the sidewalk and onto the street. I listen to young people in the bar downstairs, talking, laughing, drinking together until the early hours. I follow friends' Facebook posts and envy their vacations: eating gelati in Italy, swimming in the Sardinian sea, hiking through the Carpathians.

Why aren't they wearing masks? I grumble at the screen.

I sit home, wondering when this will be over and what comes next.

"No one knows," my friend Kate reassures me.

Kate reminds me of how difficult it is for her cellist husband. "The venues are closed until May 2021."

I feel better temporarily. Until Friday.

On Fridays, the anxiety is higher than usual. It begins when I wake. The UK university at which I am employed will be writing to notify me of how



THE LACEMAKER by **JOHANNES VERMEER**

many million pounds in debt it has fallen this week. The figure grows steadily. There will be too much information about the number of jobs on the line, how many colleagues have agreed to take salary reductions, and the reasons why we should all agree to a pay freeze.

There will be details of the ongoing search for a Public Relations manager, a new Marketing team, a Financial overseer. Academic departments are shrinking, management is bloating. I don't need to know any of this; I am employed to teach the next generation, not to carry the management's guilt for

the past ten years of bad investments.

I ignore the emails, until my mind wanders to the question of what I will say to parents at Open Day: sorry, we no longer offer this or that degree, but do send your child to this university because we have a world-class Marketing team.

An email from HR informs us of administrators being made redundant. "They know their jobs are at risk, but it will still come as a shock. Be nice to them." It reminds me of a primer: Help your family in times of grief.

I guess this must be a British thing. The UK government had the same strategy: you need to take responsibility for our mistakes. The slogan plastered to the podium at every press conference comes quickly to mind: "stay home, protect the NHS." Translation: Don't go to hospital if you are sick because the health system is too fragile, thanks to the fact that we have de-funded it.

In Paris, we are privileged. Even when the spread was at its most virulent, we were not reminded of mortality on a daily basis. There were no triages on sidewalks. Ambulance sirens didn't blare around the clock. There were few tangible signs of the virus spreading, no visible panic in the streets, no stories of the dead being buried in mass graves. We respect the dead as much as the living here in Paris, I think. Unlike the university and the British Prime Minister, the French government didn't expect us to be nice to those who suffered as a result of its wrongs.

I worry out loud to my friend Mary about what I will do if I get sick, given that my health relies on the British NHS.

"In France, we have a centralized government," Mary responds.

"What difference does that make?"

"Oh, you know," responds Mary. Clearly, *she* doesn't know.

I have spent too long tethered to events in the UK and realize it's best to go back into denial. Or to the Louvre.

I make the most of the recently open museums by visiting some of my favorite paintings in the Louvre. I shed a tear to be reunited with them; we are like old friends. They are a great comfort to me in this time of transition between confinement and who knows what. I ask them how they cope with this madness, the confinement, isolation, mask wearing, and social distancing.

Reflecting on Vermeer's *The Lacemaker*, I am assured that her life would have gone on as usual in confinement. She would have toiled away at her handwork with only her thoughts for company. In the early stages of de-confinement, she may have made more money than she could spend. She would have been sought after to make masks. We would have all lined up for her services. That is, before the heatwave when we realized how hot it is behind a fabric mask, and how often the fabric masks need to be washed. Then when we all started using the disposable kind that we could throw on the

street after use, *The Lacemaker* would have returned to fashioning ladies' lace nothings for the rest of the summer.

Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* would also have thrived in confinement. I imagine the demand for services in the pleasure industry continuing, business as usual, with or without a pandemic. They would have continued to recline on sumptuous cushions, playing games, waiting to receive visitors. I am fairly certain that the patrons of both the *Women of Algiers* and Ingres's *Bathers* would continue their habits during the Coronavirus. It wouldn't seem right to deprive these lovely ladies of business on account of a crazy bat flu.

I am struck by how little difference a global pandemic would make to any of the belles at the Louvre. Luckily for them, shelter in place would be no different from every other day of their lives. The *Mona Lisa* might be the only exception because she is not used to being alone. She probably took the opportunity of a room empty of tourists to sneak into the celebrations on the opposite wall in Veronese's *The Wedding Feast at Cana*. Since the museum opened for de-confinement, it's a different story. She has been removed from display on account of her seduction. She draws too many ogling visitors, the hundreds and millions each day, packed together, jostling for the best perspective of her ambiguous face, risks the spread of the Coronavirus. That said, I am sure she has found a nice man in the conservation department to look at her all day and night. She will be downstairs, wearing her wry smile as if she has the secret to ending this nightmare.

The men are a different story. Little Louis on his horse would have been frustrated and angry at not being able to parade his greatness in front of a crowd of adoring fans. Even Jesus would have yearned for his usual public, his audience of followers, worshippers, disciples.

I am reminded that not all the men are as egocentric as Louis and Jesus when I look at Mantegna's poor *Saint Sebastian*. He is tethered to an ancient column, his body bleeding from the arrows piercing his translucent skin, suffering the same, with or without a crowd, global pandemic or not.

I wish I could take up residence in the Louvre, away from reality, cocooned in the dramas of oil on canvases.

It's Friday again. The president of the university is filled with compassion and care for all of us. She knows how it feels.

"We are all suffering," she writes. "Know that you are not alone."

There is so much compassion in her email that I can almost hear tremulous violin strings.

I sense the pain of Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian*, his body like target practice for the archers, surrounded by death and decay. That's empathy.

I hit Reply All and compose the response, continuing the empty platitudes. Facetiously. "Know that somehow you will survive." "Allow for

numbness.” “It’s okay if the pain never goes away.”

I pause before hitting send. This doesn’t need to be said by me. I save to draft.

I watch a sheep being shorn in a documentary on television. The animal writhes as the fleece is lifted from its back with an electric razor. One slip of the blades and it could bleed to death. The shearer turns the sheep over and it nuzzles its head into the man’s legs for safety.

My anxiety continues. There is no way to take control of the future. I am learning to live with the uncertainty of not knowing. The grief may be here to stay. []

FRANCES GUERIN is a professor of art and visual culture at the University of Kent in Paris. She has published five books, many articles, and her essays can be found in *Zocalo Public Square*, *Artslant*, *Art Houston*.