

AN URBAN WALKABOUT WITH CINDY SHERMAN'S PHOTOGRAPH, "UNTITLED #466, 2008"

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Article abstract

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AN URBAN WALKABOUT WITH CINDY SHERMAN'S PHOTOGRAPH, "UNTITLED #466, 2008"

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Abstract: In this article, the narrator of the story immerses herself in the interiority of a character depicted in a Cindy Sherman portrait on an art gallery wall. The narrator invites the character out of the photograph and immerses her in the pandemic-stricken city outside. In this way, the author engages with contemporary visual art while composing fictional text as literary art. Her encounter with the photograph becomes an aesthetic visual and literary investigation of art, text, and characterization set against the backdrop of the global COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: fiction; fiction as research; narrative voice; interiority; interior monologue; empathetic engagement; Cindy Sherman; pandemic; COVID virus

In my practice of walking and attending art exhibitions, I investigate the aesthetic reverberations of fine art upon mind and body. When I visited the Cindy Sherman exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG, 2019), I was struck by the artist's practice of photographing herself dressed up while role playing a myriad of expressive female characters. As I entered the "Society Portraits" (VAG, 2019) series gallery space, I immersed myself in the untold life stories reflected in the loss and apprehension in the eyes and demeanors of seemingly upper-class women. I began to create fictional narratives while walking through the inner canvases of the photographs. My encounter with the woman in the blue caftan that Sherman portrays in her photograph, "Untitled #466, 2008" (Sherman, 2008), inspired me to inhabit the image and bring her to life in a short story. In the story presented in this article, I investigate aligning her character with that of a female narrator, an aspiring researcher, who takes refuge from an outer world afflicted by COVID virus within the dream space of the art gallery. The inner consciousness of the narrator pulsates with her love of viewing and inhabiting visual art by weaving personal stories around it that invigorate her own mundane life. Her autobiographical story about viewing Sherman's portraits reflects my own fictional account of attending the exhibit. Through the narrator, I engage in an interior monologue of associative visual and perceptual ruminations inspired by the women in Sherman's photographs and the imagined health crisis evolving in the society outside the art gallery.

The fictional narrative enables me, the author, to inhabit the psychological space of this dreaming gallery visitor and her imaginative narrative about encountering the photograph, "Untitled #466, 2008" (Sherman, 2008). As she associates the image of the woman in the courtyard with memories of her own travels in India, she enters a deep introspective space that mirrors my own initial impressions upon viewing the woman standing in that picturesque location. Her story unfolds through her inner reflections. The genre of fiction, as Leavy (2018) asserts, offers "access to interiority through interior dialogue – what a character is thinking or feeling" (p. 194), thus enhancing the reader/character relationship through aesthetic, literary and "empathetic engagement." As a gallery viewer, I have found fiction an expressive way to explore my impressions and perceptions of visual art as it draws me away from the artists' intentions into my own stories of personal and imaginative discovery.

The tall woman in the blue caftan in the photograph, "Untitled #466, 2008" (Sherman, 2008) attracted my attention more than the other female characters depicted in the "Society Portraits" series (VAG, 2019). There stood a seemingly self-assured upper-class grand dame, clad in a stylish gown and opulent jewelry, in an elegant, exotic courtyard. Upon closer examination, I noticed that she wore pink plastic shoes that looked like discount store slippers and nylon stockings too thick to wear in

the humid environment reflected in the photograph. The flicker of fear, regret, apprehension, and loneliness in her dark, heavily made-up eyes caused me to wonder who she was, where she lived, and how she occupied her life. The architecture of the arches and the courtyard, in what appeared to be a tropical location, made me imagine that she lived in India, where she might wear plastic shoes and stockings inside and outside her home.

In this way, I did not find her apparel as incongruously matched with her satiny gown and gold earrings, as did Eva Respini, Associate Curator of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and curator of its 2012 Cindy Sherman exhibition (MoMA, 2012). In her comments on “Untitled #466, 2008,” Respini explains that Sherman, who creates “private performance[s]” in her New York studio, shot this self-portrait photograph “against a dark screen [with a] digitally inserted ... backdrop” (Walker Art Center, 2012) of The Met Cloisters, where the stonework arches resemble those of 12th century churches and monasteries¹. Captivated by Sherman’s creative dramatization of the woman in this photograph, Respini reflects, in wonder, on her identity.

Respini asserts that the flicker of insecurity in her eyes, coupled with her “pink plastic slippers, the kind that you would buy in dollar stores, and ... thick hose, the kind that you would wear if you had varicose veins,” detracts from her otherwise aristocratic appearance, drawing viewers into a “darker narrative ... this truth that’s lurking underneath” (Walker Arts Center, 2012). Perhaps she casts a disapproving eye on someone whom she perceives has betrayed her, or whom she disdains, and, in so doing, turns a critical eye back on herself. Such a self-reflexive personal epiphany would enhance the complexity of her character. Because of the expansive size of the photograph hanging on the gallery wall, viewers can see intricate details of her image, such as the immaculately applied make-up on her aging skin, and reflect on her identity, as well as that of the other upper echelon female characters in the “Society Portraits” exhibit (VAG, 2019). They might go away from the exhibition pondering what darker truths the characters mirror back to themselves through facial expression, costumes, and posture. If they look at the images long enough, they may even experience their own epiphanies.

I plunged my story’s narrator into this gallery room, unaware of Respini’s (Walker Art Center, 2012) comments about the photograph and its Cloisters backdrop. When she sees “Untitled #466, 2008” (Sherman, 2008) she creates a character named Clara, whom she imagines to be a woman of European descent living in India unspecified decades ago. Curious to learn more about this mysterious woman, she slips inside the world that she perceives in the photograph. Her empathetic engagement with the

character emerges in her interior monologue, in which she becomes akin to a reader interpreting the subtext suggested by the photograph (de Freitas, 2003, para.14).

As author, I have composed a story about Clara, alluding to her privileged, though at times lonely life in India, told from the point of view of my narrator, who invites Clara out of the still image on the gallery wall for a walk in the troubled world depicted in the story. There, Clara shines her light of wisdom and merges with narrator, reader, and writer in a dream space. The transformation of her initial irascible disposition to empathic healer represents the narrator's idealized perception of herself reflected onto her fictional character. On the evening of the event, she merges with Clara in "transformative empathic engagement" (de Freitas, 2003, para. 2) through her dream of healing the "Society Portraits" (VAG, 2019) women confined inside their homes, the sick and dying patients in the hospital, and the pedestrians on the streets outside. For a moment in her life, she "profoundly understand[s] the experiences of the Other, despite ... radical cultural differences" (de Freitas, 2003, abstract). In this way, her encounter with the photographs inside the art gallery opens her to new imaginative possibilities.

Patricia Leavy (2020) asserts, "the ability to represent the interior life of characters is perhaps the most unique aspect of fiction" (p. 67). Through the genre of the short story, I connect visual art research with social fiction, engaging readerly and writerly empathy with characters acting within the backdrop of a social health crisis. I attempt to "breathe humanity" (Leavy, 2020, p. 45) into audience encounters with Cindy Sherman's photographs of "Society Portraits" (VAG, 2019) ladies that intensify when they step out into the pandemic-stricken city. Aesthetic encounter with the character in "Untitled, 466, 2008" (Sherman, 2008) incites readers' personal responses to the artwork through the experiences of the characters, thus mirroring "subjectivity or the consciousness of [oneself as] perceiver" (Greene, 2001, p. 111). Readers, and the writer, empathically engage with the narrative through the characters' ruminations. In the act of reading, as de Freitas (2003) asserts, they must navigate "interpretative gaps that are frequently deliberately inserted in fictional narratives ... to construct a highly intimate relationship with the imagined other" (para. 14). The narrative takes on an autobiographical aspect as, in imagining myself inside their world, I situate them inside my own world and that of my readers. Clara's story emerges within the narrator's story within this story that I, the author, have written. In this way, I engage with contemporary visual art while I compose fictional text as literary art. My encounter with the portrait and these characters becomes an aesthetic visual and literary experience within the backdrop of the current global pandemic.

An Urban Walkabout with Cindy Sherman's Photograph, "Untitled #466, 2008"

The city's under lockdown. There's a lethal contagious virus going around. No one can go out after 9 pm. The police enforce this curfew. Men dressed in white hazmat space suits, hoodies, and face masks patrol the streets spraying disinfectant bleach from canister guns on the ground, walls, windows, doors. I dart out of my office at the college, daring not touch anything lest I contract the disease. If I don't already have it. They say it can take up to fourteen days for the virus to manifest, and asymptomatic people may never show signs of it. I hurry down the deserted street and run into the subway station to catch the rush hour train uptown. Only five people enter my car. Tired workers, faces hidden under large white surgical masks, dreaming of nutritious hot dinners. A juicy sirloin filet sprinkled with lemon and pepper for the carnivores. Penne pasta in tomato sauce garnished with broccoli crowns for the vegetarians. I pine for neither dish. Tonight, I will prepare channa dahl on basmati rice with a garden salad. Light dining and a delicious night's sleep to cap a busy day.

An elderly man steps forward as we approach 41st station. Trips over my trolley cart laden with books and student essays I plan to mull over all weekend. The man rights himself and scurries off the train. I stumble over the loosened shoelace of my boot, reach out and grab a pole, follow him onto the concourse. I bet I've walked a hundred kilometres in these boots. Their worn-down heels signal that I need a new pair. Gathie Falk's (1973) boot installation springs to mind, a glass display case lined with torn old black ankle boots, zippers broken or, at least, open. Boots that carried their owners everywhere, people who refused to stay home, who ventured into the world in rain, sleet, snow, fog, and sunshine. Walking. Walking. Walking. When their feet ached, bled from blisters, or soaked in soggy leather. Busy folks who did not live in an era of viral death.

I step off the escalator and rush across the street to catch the bus. I'll be home in ten minutes, in time to cook that tasty dinner before falling into bed. I'll make it through this crisis; we all will if we keep cool heads, calm minds. It's our collective karma, an outbreak of a contagious virus that's spreading far and wide. A new world will ascend out of the ashes of death as we cleanse our bodies, homes, cities, and countries, but we must scour our troubled minds for it to happen. The 41 screeches to a halt right in front of me, and I hop on, savoring channa dahl and luminous dreams.

I'm walking. Gallery walking. Walls upon walls of portraits of the artist posing as fictional female film characters. Paintings so striking they look like photographs. It's the eyes that stand out for me, dramatic expressions of fear, apprehension, disdain,

dominance, curiosity. Lightning looks of society women that could pierce the core of any unsuspecting viewer. I enter the "Society Portraits," gallery space, where I see a woman in a brown skirt, brown and beige leopard patterned blouse standing in a den or office lined with sketched or photographed head portraits (Untitled, #474, 2008, Sherman, 2008). Her silver-streaked auburn hair and drop earrings accentuate the clear, dark pigmented skin on her face, the long nose crowning ample lips dabbed with lipstick that matches her outfit. Her neatly manicured eyebrows and carefully applied eye makeup accentuate her appearance of lost purpose, nostalgia for a past gone by, evenings sipping cognac with her long-departed husband, martinis with the luscious, dressed-to-kill women she thoughtfully selected to attend her afternoon socials. I fancy I catch her eye. I reach for a goblet then drop my arm. Beside her, two society women peer out at me from a ballroom or the living room of a mansion. A fair-skinned, curly haired woman of a similar age, clad in a sleek sleeveless red dress, sits on a chair, a sheer reddish shawl sliding down her bare arms (Untitled #475, 2008, Sherman, 2008). Her smile parts just enough to activate the laugh lines on her soft, clear face, the serene feeling of being supported by a woman standing beside her in a green floral dress and white sweater sliding down her arms. Her right hand rests on the back of the seated woman's chair; her left hand touches her belly as if to massage a stomach pain or protect her inner core from an unseen presence (Untitled, #475, 2008, Sherman, 2008).

The colorful sprinkling of flowers on the standing woman's dress fails to animate her droopy eyes. She looks out at me with a shade of boredom, tired confidence, relieved that it's the end of a summer social, agreeable to posing for this portrait. I slip into the picture, crawl into a blood orange spaghetti strap dress, squeeze into the narrow gap between the two women. I run my fingers gently down the standing lady's back. She stiffens as if a gentle draft swirls around her, suspicious of an intrusion into the space she shares with the woman in red. I murmur an apology, but she doesn't hear me. It's as if I have no voice, or I'm invisible, but she seems to have felt my hand. Perhaps, to her, I am a spirit or a light breeze. I feel like I'm in the American South, where these women might be socialite housewives confined to estate mansions. Women of exceptional intelligence and artistry, gifts destined to lie fallow in their lifetimes.

I decide to leave them alone and slip back onto the gallery floor. I pace up to the next wall, where I see an elegant older woman in a shimmering blue caftan sprinkled with a silver floral design standing erect in a villa opening through archways into a garden (Untitled #466, 2008, Sherman, 2008) somewhere in tropical India. She presses her left fingers into the skin under her collarbone, while her right fingers rest on her hip. Her heavily made-up eyes gaze to the right with a fierce look of apprehension as she stands her territory, waiting for someone or something to happen. I slide into her portrait, slip through the elegant archways into the courtyard, and melt into the lush

green shrubs. As I step closer, my eyes rivet on the glittery blue hue of her dress, chunky gold dangling earrings, and bulbous gemstone rings. I wish she would talk to me, but she fixes her gaze on the distant, unseen object. I linger outside for a while, hoping for a cup of black tea or masala chai, but I don't even get a nod. I try to imitate her elegant stance as I move awkwardly in the intense heat. I trip on a loose brick along the patio walkway. I stumble back, one foot in the garden, a bead of perspiration sliding down my cheek.

"Sorry for intruding," I say, my thoughts racing.

"I'm looking for my husband. He's out with an old friend of mine." She sets one delicate sandal in motion, turns on her heel, the silver sparkles on her caftan shimmering along its blue fabric. Her breath seethes as she heads into the house. "Bloody bastard said he would be home today. In time for tea!"

Somehow, I start to believe I'm familiar with the man absent from this woman's photograph. It's like I've known him all my life. He runs a lucrative import export business, marketing tea, teak, and silk products to Europe and America. Business is booming. He travels to towns and villages around the country, procuring quality goods to sell abroad. He leaves his wife alone for long periods. Interminably alone. He knows she might have been a doctor, professor, or writer given the opportunity. It's a relief to him that she's not, to know where she is when he's out of town. He loves her in a gently possessive way. It's just that other women he meets on his domestic travels allure him with their quiet hospitality. He hopes he can keep his wits about him and not impregnate anyone. His wife would eviscerate him with her stone-cold silence. Banish him from hearth, home, their precious children, and his octogenarian mother, whom she cares for with the soft, sensitive hands of a nurse.

She looks vulnerable yet strong, her eyes flashing clear and bright, so I decide to call her Clara. I begin to see myself in this refined woman's portrait. In the arches of her eyebrows, the curve of her lips. I imagine she's seasoned by years of walking the streets, mingling with street vendors, pedicab drivers, children playing, a rainbow of women in saris, golden bangles jingling on their arms. Like me, she secretly relishes solitude. It gives her time to read and wander the garden. Study the classic novels of Tolstoy, the Bronte sisters, Lawrence, Forster. Contemplate Gandhi's writing on Ahimsa², meditations on non-violence and compassion that complement her wish for an end to war, disease, poverty, and the social isolation she feels living inside the walls of her home. If only I didn't dwell in another time and dimension outside the photograph, I could remain inside, another character in the story of her life, sipping spicy masala chai and chatting with her in her garden.

I decide to coax her onto the gallery floor and take her on a walk through the city, except there's a plague out there. It's draining the life out of thousands of people, young and old. They're choking to death on respirators, while their caregivers stand by helplessly and their families wail outside the hospital walls. I wonder if she could help the sick with as much care as she might give to her loved ones. I slip out of the portrait and circle around the gallery floor, my boots thudding on its surface as I meditate on her. "Come out. Come out. I'm over here. Can you see me?"

Perhaps it's my voice, boots tapping on the hardwood, as I conjure a welcoming wave of energy. Clara ventures out of her garden, clutching the hem of her caftan. "Such a magnificent place. Where is this?"

I walk out the main door of the gallery and stride onto the concourse. Dusk has descended upon the city. People move around like shadows under the cloud of micro-dust pollution. A large white ambulance rushes by, blinding me with its whirling red light, its siren piercing my eardrums. The dark pavement rises upward and spirals into the sky. I turn back to Clara, who walks behind me, peering at the eerie scene. I had ventured into the gallery in search of a brief respite from this disturbing scene, at the very least to wipe the stream of tears that drowned my face. So much death in such a limited time as the mysterious virus swept through the community, mutating at an alarming rate.

A disheveled man huddled at the main intersection of town steps in front of me, injecting me with an electric shock of fear. He points in the direction of the white dome down the street and whispers a clandestine message into my ear. "They're transporting the dead to a morgue at the stadium." He shakes the rain off his jacket, splattering it on my sleeve. "Coffins are piled up on the football pitch. It's not green no more."

Clara stares at the street person, piercing him with her sharp brown eyes. She reaches out to jostle his arm, but her hand passes through it. "Who brought me to this frightful place? Let me go back to my home!"

Police barricades cordon the street that's usually a racetrack in rush hour. I grimace and step off the curb just as another truck roars by. After what I've been through, nothing scares me. Years of loved ones dying like flies. Accusations ricocheting off the walls like shrapnel, leveled at the family by my elderly grandmother, an otherwise spritely creature, and my sister in her perpetually angry state. It crosses my mind that, since this woman likely does not go by Clara, she might, by a very slim chance, know the name affixed to her photograph. Fortunately, I take after my Italian grandfather, the foreman who had presided over fifteen hundred workers at the lead zinc smelter in my

hometown. He had spoken such fractured English that he would call them by their man numbers. He had an enviable photographic memory.

“466, 2008!” I cry.

She curls her lip and frowns as she sets off toward a black tarpaulin barrier, fastened by yellow tape around a fenced off area. I tread warily behind her and peer through a hole at a cluster of white tents. People stream in and out of them, clad in protective blue hazmat suits, faces covered with white masks. It looks like an extraterrestrial medical community.

A long white freight truck eases through the gate and parks in front of the largest tent. Some people rush out and open the back door, their voices rising above the sirens and the bird calls piercing the city soundscape. They start pulling square boxes into the tent, boxes upon boxes and then more. A man who looks like a security guard walks up and waves me away, grimacing. “This place is strictly off limits, Ma’am. Go home now.”

“Look at him. He can’t see me,” Clara says. She gazes incredulously at her hand as it wafts through her gown. “That means I can go inside.” She walks over to the gate and passes through it, shivering at the memory of falling off a fence in childhood and spraining her wrist.

I take a deep breath and slip through the gate. I’ve known since the age of three that I can transition into light. It’s a calling, a social and ethical responsibility. I’m here on the planet to help people in need: the sick, the elderly, at risk children and adolescents, struggling adults. I’ve even been known to rescue sick and abused animals. I’m also riveted by art, any kind of visual art: paintings, sculpture, textiles, pottery. You name it, I admire it. I may not be the one who stumbled across the Jackson Pollock original at a thrift shop (Kennedy, 2006), but I’ve made some startling discoveries at galleries online. I’m a fine art researcher, yes, indeed, one of the best. My current area of research lies in historical war and plague paintings, to name a few, Caravaggio, Judith Beheading Holofernes; Goya, Third of May, 1808; Picasso, Guernica, 1937; Munch, Self-Portrait After the Spanish Flu, 1919; Kubin, Epidemie (Epidemic), 1900-1901. Images of people contorted by pain and disease. Some might think it a morbid preoccupation, and I can’t say I disagree. It’s not just that I conceal a dark side. I’m a healer. I want to heal people suffering from physical and mental dis/ease. It’s an extension of my rather repetitive day job as an English teacher, only I don’t get paid for it. So, in effect, I’m a fine art researcher and intuitive healer. English instruction pays the bills. I maintain a librarian appearance with short dark, slightly greying hair, thick eyeglasses, black midi skirts or jeans, and, of course, the fashionably worn-out black boots. I’m a former competitive swimmer, I mean, that was about forty or fifty years ago. I still swim now and then, and I

try to remain spry by walking. Walking. Walking. That's what I do best, and that's what I need to do right now because Clara has taken off so far into the tent city that I can barely see her through the grey cloud of micro-dust.

I sprint after her, hobbling on the cracked heels of my beloved boots. She moves forward, wide-eyed, as I begin to catch up. I follow her into the largest tent, where thousands of small square boxes lie piled one on top of another. A man and a woman clad in white lab coats, faces covered in surgical masks, walk around, clicking devices in their hands and making notations on clipboards.

"We must be way over a million now," the man says. "No one's going to identify them."

"Yeah, like you go to bury your grandma, and you're not even sure it's her in the box," the woman replies.

The man nods and takes a breath. "City Hall's being pretty generous offering space in the parks."

"Why turn them into cemeteries? Parks are supposed to be about walking dogs and playing with your kids." The woman slaps her clipboard on a stack of boxes, knocking one over. She looks around, hastily picks it up and rights it on the pile. "At least, we haven't caught it yet. I don't want to end up in this tent."

"We will if this goes on much longer," the man says, expelling a rush of air. "I do my deep breathing exercises morning and night. Got to keep the lungs in shape to survive this one." He tucks his counting device in his pocket. "That's it for the day."

The woman follows him outside, careful to maintain the obligatory two-metre distance. "I can't even go home. My husband and son are begging me to," she chokes, tearing up. "I'm like a street person huddling in a pup tent. I can hardly wait for the weather to warm up. If I don't get this goddamned virus, I'll die of pneumonia."

Clara picks up a box and shakes it. "What could be so heavy?" She puts the box back on the pile. It slides off onto the floor, tearing open. She runs her hands over a shiny silver vase and tries to take the lid off, but it's glued on tightly. She takes hold of the vase and gives it another shake. "Dear god, they're cremation urns. Otherwise, why would she be talking about a virus?"

I follow her out of the tent and step through the back door into the hospital. We enter a corridor bursting with people, children, young, elderly, lined up, sitting in the few

available seats, lying on thin mats on the floor and on stretchers pushed up against the walls. A woman's voice pierces over the intercom: "Code 99! Code 99!" A young doctor jostles through the crowd, her stethoscope bouncing around the neck of her blue hospital fatigues. Another woman with a Centre for Disease Control tag on her white lab coat emerges from the door of an office cluttered with paper and some technical equipment.

A young man pushes me into the line with a gentle smile. "It's a long wait, Ma'am."

"For what?" I ask, tugging my disheveled hair.

"Diagnostic. To see if we have it," he says, turning his back.

The voice on the intercom goes silent as does the corridor. The ticking of the clock echoes off the barren walls. I had an inspiring afternoon at the gallery, communing with many visitors and the elegant portrait women. Now I co-mingle with a different group, their faces contorted with apprehension. Fear lingers in the air like a storm cloud dying to burst. My knees start trembling, nearly toppling me onto the floor. I step out of the line and wind my way through the crowd, my hand sinking into the neck of an elderly woman sitting on the edge of a stretcher. She draws back and cries out. I gasp and whirl around to go back out the door I came in, but the crowd surges forward when a man in a white laboratory coat opens the glass window of the testing clinic.

I squeeze by and shuffle down the corridor until I hear uncontrollable coughing coming from a closed room on my right. Through a glass window, I can see a woman on a hospital bed, attached to a respirator. When I gently push the door, it resists the pressure of my hand, so I slip through the wall into the chair beside the woman's bed. She's an elderly Caucasian woman, olive-skinned, her wavy black hair streaked with wisps of grey that cling to her bleached white pillowcase. As if sensing an unseen presence, she looks at the ceiling. I take hold of her hand, caress its cold, wrinkled skin, infuse her spirit with a ray of love. A bulbous green emerald on her ring finger glitters in the shard of light that shines through the open doorway. Emerald, the gemstone that balances the heart chakra and permeates the wearer with love and emotional wellbeing. Its vibration warms my heart with its evergreen glow. I send its light back into her, watching the gentle rise of her chest as she inhales air from the respirator.

My great aunt, who came to Canada from Calabria in the fifties, wore an emerald ring set in a cluster of tiny diamonds and a pea-shaped pendant on a gold chain. She still had the ring on when she took her last breath in hospice with her son and daughter at her bedside. This story has lived on as a family legend that we tell, and we never

forget to praise our dear auntie, whose braided white flour scalille, the old country pastry dipped in a vat of honey, tasted better than anyone else's in town.

Now, the woman lying on this hospital bed begins to channel stories of her life, silent murmurs that shake me. She had taken a steamer across the Atlantic to Halifax with her husband and two young children to start a new life in the New World far from her parents and siblings back in the old country. The beginning of a life filled with hope for a happy, prosperous future for her children and grandchildren. They had settled in a mining town in the western mountains, where they filled their house with love and laughter, a joyful life. Easter and Christmas midnight masses, summers at the cottage by the lake, winter skiing and ice skating, weekend community socials. And now, after all that, to be alone, wracked with pain, rhythmic breathing out of the question.

She inhales. Gasps. "My husband, he died long ago. Suddenly. He was out on the driveway in a blizzard, shoveling the snow away so he could drive to the smelter the next day when he ... dropped dead, just like that. Heart attack. No second chance. Just an abrupt meeting with the Lord I'm sure he hadn't prepared for. I was in the kitchen making dinner. Oh, it happened so very fast. Then there was nothing for years. Visits from the kids and my grandchildren, but most of the time there was just me, the walls, and the clock ticking and ticking and ticking. Everything was okay until I caught this sickness. I have no idea where it came from. It just fell upon me, sent from God."

She trembles as I whisper a lullaby in her ear. Her facial muscles shift into a gentle questioning expression as she peers intently at me. "Can you call my children? They brought me here then disappeared." She coughs uncontrollably, spews up phlegm, chest heaving. "My ... my daughter phoned me this afternoon. I thought I ... I heard my son's voice on the other line. I didn't know what they were saying." She raises her hand and paws the air. "I'm sensing something, ... Mother!"

I haven't the heart to tell her it's me, the healer, wearer of many hats. Mother. Father. Daughter. Son. Doctor. Nurse. Caregiver. A wisp of cool air brushes my back. It's Clara. Had she drifted off somewhere? She walks right through me and stands on the other side of my chair. Runs her fine-boned hand along the woman's heaving chest, pausing at her heart. The woman stares at the white ceiling, a shaft of fluorescent light blinding her. Her erratic breathing subsides, regulates. Clara's gentle vibration settles my own arrhythmia and starts to lull me to sleep.

She stands tall in her silk caftan, looking out the window at the distant white-capped mountains. Snow, the likes she hasn't seen since she visited the Himalayas. Many years, she's sat in her courtyard, listening to the shrill sounds on the street beyond her compound walls: temple bells, taxi horns, vendors hawking their wares, the

passing of men, women, and children on their daily business. When she stepped outside to purchase food for her family, she would bow her head and nod politely as she skirted past the fruit, vegetable and grain sellers, the cobbler who sat along the road repairing worn-out footwear, the men and women who proffered their palms for small change, all proud, enduring people who stood firm on their great land. When pestilence swept through their settlements, they would pray to the Bhagavan for healing from deadly maladies, such as malaria, typhoid, hepatitis, polio. They would take great care to protect their families.

Clara strokes the woman's hair and wipes the sweat off her forehead with the palm of her hand. "A woman so lovely, and now this. I remember my gran lying on a gurney in the hospital when we came to see her off, mother and me. We could hardly recognize her; she had become so emaciated, nearly blind as well, but she still had spirit. I held her hand and wept like a baby. 'Don't cry, my child,' she said. 'Seasons come and go. Winter, she's taking me. Lay me to rest up on the hillside by that big old oak, and I promise I'll sprout another one for you.'" Clara fondles the emerald on the woman's finger and sighs. "I've always loved green. A jewel fit for a queen."

The woman trembles at the touch of Clara's hand. She looks up, sees nothing but the ceiling light. A wisp of her silver hair slips off the pillow onto the cold white floor. She drifts off to sleep, wheezing ever so slightly. When darkness falls, she gently stops breathing. Outside, a nurse strides down the corridor, heels clicking in rhythm to the ticking off the ward's clock, a sound rising in intensity as her footsteps draw nearer.

Clara slips away, leaving me there by the bedside. I pull the blanket up over the woman's shoulders then follow Clara out. I've laid a healing hand on many dying men and women. They've expressed their gratitude in a myriad of ways. A smile, a nod, a tear, a word, or simply a blank look mirroring a life story. Clara's presence today has given me hope, and that's what I need right now.

I brush past the nurse as she strides into the room. She's a tall, slender younger woman with broad swimmers' shoulders nearly bursting the seams of her pale blue uniform. Her blue surgical mask shields her face, the faint downturn of her chestnut eyes an indicator of compassion fatigue. In the corridor, I see exhaustion pouring out of the eyes of doctors and nurses like beams of murky light. I elbow through the line of people seeking virus testing and catch up with Clara, who stands over a young man curled on a stretcher. Such clear skin, a face like an angel, yet so deathly pale, his watery blue eyes imploring someone, anyone, to come to his bedside at a time when no family members may enter the hospital to attend to their sick loved ones. Clara lays her hand on his chest, slows down his breathing, releases loneliness trapped in his heart

and lungs. He coughs up sputum onto the bed sheet, closes his eyes and drifts off to sleep, his breathing labored, continuing.

“So much suffering. Spiritual destitution. They smile through their pain in India. Here, they die confused. Alone,” Clara says. “Fear eats away their very being.” She places her palm on my aching shoulder, its warm vibration gently tickling me. “In India, they shower the dead with flower garlands then scatter their ashes in the Ganges, the great river of Lord Shiva. They believe those who live virtuously may be reborn in a better existence beyond poverty and despair. It’s the path one travels that matters. If it’s navigated well, love will overcome fear.” Clara squeezes the man’s hand and leans over as if to kiss him on the cheek. His lips curl ever so slightly into a smile then fade into his pallid, lined face.

I step outside into the fresh evening air and pass through the gate of the compound into the crowded street of the business district, dazzled by neon letters flickering in shop windows and on top of buildings. Lines of people wait outside stores for their turn to enter. Many of them wear blue surgical gauze covering their chins and mouths, while others adorn themselves with multicolored cloth masks, the newest fashion apparel. Pairs of brown, blue, and green eyes gleam in the shadows of dusk like surveillance orbs shining in the moonlight. I tug at my black and white polka-dotted handmade facial cover, inhaling the light odor of my breath. We’ve only been wearing masks for a month, and already I wonder if I’ll ever breathe fresh, or even polluted, air again.

Clara’s long legs propel her ahead of me, her caftan rippling seductively in the breeze. Her lip curls up ever so slightly. “The fabric on those models in the window. Such lush wool coats and shiny leather shoes. Who is this woman carrying so many packages? The governor’s wife?”

A young lady in a long black merino coat brushes past me, the fragrance of her perfume permeating my nostrils. I sneeze, my molecules spraying the street ahead of me. A man in an infusion restaurant take-out line-up steps sharply out of my way. I nod an apology. I’ve forgotten to sneeze into my sleeve. A middle-aged woman and her young son come out the door carrying white plastic bags full of peppery hot fast food, perhaps white flour noodles, seasoned meat, and vegetables. My stomach growls. I remind myself that I vowed to eat my own cooking until this virus passes, the forecast for its peak being such a hot topic of debate the bookies can’t even settle on a date. I nearly choked on my French toast this morning when a doctor announced on the news that this pandemic could resurface for years without a cure. The woman in the black coat picks up her step, her heels clicking on the frosty pavement.

"This one's so dreamy. It's a wonder she can find her way. And where is she going?" Clara edges past a spanking new black Benz parked in front of a teahouse. "A Fiat, is it not? My husband had one. Ran it off the road one night, and that was the end of it." She stops abruptly in mid-stride, her eyes smoldering. "What is this?"

A woman's piercing scream rattles everyone on the street. Heads turn as a heavy-set man in a black suit strikes the woman in the merino coat in the face with the sharp finial of his umbrella. His eyes smolder with rage. "Bitch! Go back to your country. Take your goddamned virus with you!"

"This is my country!" She tries to run away but he grabs her shoulder and rams her into a shop window, nearly smashing the glass. The string of white pearls gracing the soft skin on her neck shatters, scattering the beads onto the pavement. She clutches her jaw, her face soaked in tears of pain. A trickle of blood seeps down the front of her coat, droplets falling onto her white pants. She huddles against the wall and circles her hand around her slightly protruding stomach.

"She's so lovely. Why strike her?" Clara stretches her arm out to pull the man away, but her hand, transparent under the blazing streetlight, runs right through him. She scowls and holds her palm up to the streetlight.

A young man strides out of the nearby clothing store and grabs the assailant's jacket. "Get your hands off her! Racist pig!"

The attacker pulls away and shouts, his sputum spewing into the young man's face. "The virus killed my mother. Fine one day, dead the next."

"My wife is not a virus!"

I melt into the shadows. My cell phone drops out of my trembling hand and clatters onto the sidewalk. I crouch down and retrieve it just before it slips through a ventilation grate into the bowels of the street. I've snapped a couple of head-on photos of the scuffle. Proof positive of an assault. I stuff the phone into my handbag, blinded by the whirling red light of an approaching ambulance, its siren wailing over the babble of the people gathered on the sidewalk. I cup my ears with my hands, beads of sweat gathering on my neck. "I'm not the only one who saw it happen," I murmur, fingering the phone tucked inside my purse.

Clara frowns and gapes at me. "Whatever happened to love? And not just for oneself!" She caresses my cheek with the palm of her hand, eyes dilating. "That's it, isn't it?"

I gasp. Brush away a tear and head down the street. Polaris twinkles in the night sky, a diamond glittering in the light of the new moon. A perfect evening to crawl in bed with a good book and a cup of chamomile tea. The virus hadn't been heard of a few months ago, the streets back then bustling with people, buses, and cars. I pass by the front of the gallery, where the food vendors have begun to close their stalls for the night. The expansive concourse had become a gathering place for street musicians playing erhus, guitars, even a cello or two, and now the city has fenced it off. A couple of young skate boarders cruise across the makeshift walkway to the street beyond the gallery. I suppose I could email the photos to the police tomorrow morning. Things like that shouldn't be allowed to happen. To think the entire world has changed in just a few weeks, and now, who knows how long they're going to be safe. I push the gallery door to let Clara back in, but it's locked. I turn around to tell her we'll have to wait until morning. The woman who grills delicious hot dogs at the bright red food truck smiles and waves, fades into a dream.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See *The Met Cloisters Audio Guide: Highlights Tour* (2000), for guided talks about the museum's medieval art and architecture. <https://www.metmuseum.org/visit/audio-guide/the-met-cloisters>

² See Gandhi (1958/1999) or other works on the author's notion of *Ahimsa*.