

*I'd like to think my lungs house a microcosm comprised of all my past selves
and every time I was scared or cold
or wanted a safe place to be,
each version of myself was preserved
and they decided to find shelter in the villi.*

*And so every time it gets hard to breathe,
It just means they need a little extra love and attention.
So I drink some tea,
And pull my blanket around me extra tight,
in hopes the warmth will reach them.
And I breathe in 2,3,4...*

*Once in a while they lose their way around the villi,
the bronch's was always hard to navigate.
it took the doctors four days at first to understand what was going on -
They still get confused sixteen years later.
It's really hard to tell which walls are closing in sometimes.
All we can do is take our best guess
So I take a deep breath and hold my breath for the count of five
take a pain killer in case it's a pinched nerve,
meditate if I just need to calm them.*

I sat on the couch in a half-zipped purple snowsuit, four years old and bewildered. One minute I was enjoying the snow, the next I couldn't breathe. It had been a week with no sign of the problem getting any better no matter how much Vicks Vaporub my mother rubbed on my chest and under my nose. Before I could process that my snowsuit was on, my father called up a car to take us to Jacobi Medical Center and we were on our way. I stayed in the hospital for four days and came home to have this foreign yellow device shoved in my face and was told I'd have to breathe in the medicine for a while. I quickly forgot about this time in my life unless I would go to the doctor's office and my parents would answer yes when asked, "do you have a history of asthma".

It isn't a coincidence that the asthma emergency department visit rate for Parkchester, 349 for every 10,000 children ages 5 to 17, is much higher than the citywide average of 223¹. It felt inevitable to have asthma as a child growing up in the Bronx because the Bronx is one of the biggest victims of environmental injustice and with the introduction of the pandemic, the disparity in opportunities afforded to people of color has become reinforced; structural racism serves as the foundation of this borough. It is home to some of the most congested roads in the country², has more lead in buildings than any other borough³, and has poor management of waste transfer. It's no coincidence that the asthma emergency department visit rate for Parkchester, 349 for every 10,000 children ages 5 to 17, is much higher than the citywide average of 223⁴.

The most important skill I learned as a kid was packing my "going to the hospital bag". Every trip meant I would be waiting forever before getting called in by the doctor and I knew that if I got bored, my parents would just tell me to take a nap. I was always ready with books, snacks, coloring pencils and some printer paper folded in half to fit my bag.

¹ <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2018chp-bx9.pdf>

² <https://traffictickets.com/blog/3-nyc-roads-named-most-congested-in-u-s/>

³ (<https://council.nyc.gov/data/lead-in-nyc-homes/>),

⁴ <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2018chp-bx9.pdf>

There are countless studies and statistics establishing the verity of the fact that people of color are disproportionately affected by the austerity of the healthcare system - the pandemic only worsened these conditions. After all, “health disparities are about racial and environmental justice. Pollution is disproportionately located where poor and black people are...”, as stated by Robert Bullard, the father of environmental injustice. The onslaught of covid patients only led to an exacerbation of the pre-existing issues. While the wealthy hospitals of Manhattan have had the luxury of utilizing reserves of cash and leveraging political connections in order to service patients with testing, increased capacity, and protective gear, other parts of the city cannot say the same⁵. The problem becomes apparent when neighborhoods like Parkchester and Soundview have high rates of hospitalization but the lowest quality accommodations available. In 2015, Parkchester and Soundview had the eighth-highest asthma hospitalization rate for children ages 5 to 14 in the city, more than twice the citywide rate⁶.

Even after changing hospitals, I have experienced poor quality health care. In 2018, I went to the hospital after experiencing breathing trouble for two weeks. I was prescribed medication before receiving test results from an EKG, I was treated with disrespect, and two days later I received a letter stating the doctor had left the hospital. The medication was to help if the problem was a pinched nerve but it made matters worse since that wasn't the problem. The doctor brushed it off and said “it might be anxiety or a pinched nerve but if it doesn't work you can come back”. When I went back, I asked for an asthma pump and it fixed the issue.

The thought of returning to this hospital was always a chore; I knew I'd be greeted with neglect. When I was having breathing problems in the beginning of the pandemic, considering going to this hospital felt out of the question. I would have had to commute for an hour to be greeted with hostile receptionists and a passive aggressive doctor and risk getting covid as an immunocompromised individual who lives with a large family. My asthma pump had expired but all I could do was keep my anxiety under control and hope that it would help alleviate the asthma-like symptoms. Thankfully,

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/26/nyregion/coronavirus-new-york-university-hospital.html>

⁶ <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2015chp-bx9.pdf>

practicing self care and maintaining habits to take care of my mental health was enough to curb the symptoms. If it had been an issue of asthma, these solutions would not have worked.

The physical symptoms are indistinguishable. Transitioning from a life where I spent fourteen hours outside six days a week to staying home for five months straight was not easy. There was so little I knew about the severity of the virus because of how neglectful and dismissive the public opinion was at first. There is a symbiotic relationship that exists between anxiety and asthma. At the beginning of the pandemic, when I once again started experiencing breathing problems, it was hard to tell if it was from anxiety of being in a pandemic or from asthma because it had gotten colder, or anxiety from the fear of getting covid and not having the means to treat it or recover because I had asthma. This pandemic has exposed the socioeconomically driven inequalities that have been ignored for so long, the healthcare system and those working in the healthcare industry serving as the paragon. In exposing these issues, there have been people who are working to fix these issues, but it is imperative the momentum of activism galvanized by the pandemic continues as the number of cases start to diminish.

I was never a person that understood tight knit families

It was always about survival and doing what we had to do to get through the day and have food on the table at the end of it

But seeing my baby cousin grow up through Facebook pictures hurt in a way that I never imagined, FaceTime calls only go so far

I had grown up with all three of his sisters around but he was the first one who wouldn't know me as well as they did since they had moved out to Long Island

Although my cousins left, the house was far from empty

In August my grandparents came to stay,

With them they brought whispers of death,

and assumptions my grandfather might be on his way out

His brothers have been dropping like flies, and he had been suffering from coughs that seem to have no cure or end

Didn't help we were in the middle of a pandemic that causes breathing troubles

Even though he's still coughing, no one seems to be scared anymore

I guess we'll chalk it up to beginning of a pandemic anxiety

My days of hopping from train to train,

school to work, borough to borough

Was replaced with hours of being confined to four walls

that felt like a mausoleum for my last teen year

There was a lot of learning and unlearning to do with the new found time

With the extra hours in my day returned because I was no longer commuting four hours a day,

I began dedicating myself to creating

Photographs, animations, breathing new life into rejected clothes

And cooking everything from whipped coffee to birria tacos

Watching the world unlearn preconceived notions of equality

and fight for anti-racism and Black Lives Matter

truly shed a light of how the pandemic could serve as a moment of growth

And that our energy doesn't necessarily need to be focused on getting back to the world we had

But rather building a better one to return to

And with that

I dedicated my energy to unlearning my conception of self care

That the world wasn't going anywhere and I could take time for myself

To make myself meals, to meditate, and create art

Deadlines are pressing matters, but I'd never make them if I didn't sustain myself

And as exhausting as honey and banana toast got,

it was definitely better than grabbing the first snack off the pantry because it was the easy thing to do

I was given an opportunity to grow, and it would be a shame if I didn't leave this time of isolation as the best version of myself I could possibly be

Some days were about survival

but giving yourself days off is part of growth

And that's a lesson I hope to remember long after the world is okay without masks

There were a lot of changes in the world that i hadn't expected

I never thought I'd see the day we'd need matching embroidered masks for wedding outfits

And that people would take another's hand in marriage

when we should be staying six feet apart

So we don't end up six feet under

Or quarantine babies coughing hairballs

because they grew up with cats instead of seeing other babies

Or pointing a temperature gun at the head of a four year old

becoming a part of my job

Isolation definitely made being alone feel more profound than it was

There was the sigh of relief when you could be yourself

And acknowledge all the things that had been pushed away

But there was also the emptiness in your day

Where you would have spent the hour talking about bubble tea and troubling coworkers

So I understood why everyone wanted to be heard

and made podcasts and tiktoks

There was a lot to talk about

even if the world had moved indoors

There were a lot of changes to navigate

People became displaced or couldn't go home again

But the only thing we could do was take it one day at a time

We were all making our best guesses on how to deal with a virus that was seemingly impossible to trace, cure, or stop

So we wear a mask or two

Cover our noses

And carry on until the world looks a little different again.



Images to Supplement The Final Poem, with captions:

This is the meal I was most proud of learning to make. Chicken Tikka Masala and Daal (lentils) with jasmine rice.



The temperature gun I had to use at work. I work as a tutor at a local tutoring center for children.



This is a mosaic I decided to work on with my brother at the beginning of the pandemic. However, this became incredibly tedious and exhausting and it was never completed.



I joined a company called Jhal NYC in August of 2019 and during the pandemic, I connected with a few people to start a podcast called "Jhal Talk". It was a really important part of my experience with the pandemic because we have never seen each other in person but we developed a really important connection that allows us to explore our identity as South Asians and also educate others about being Bengali Americans despite the limitations on social connections due to the pandemic.