

Steal Your Breath
(With Worry and Tension)

Fatema Islam

Abstract

My interest was in the effects of lockdown with the focuses of school/work, health, finances, and social relationships. Lockdown was a complete change in lifestyle as people isolated themselves to their homes and took to using technology to do what was once done in person. That has at the very least some effect on people, though depending on the circumstances some people were more affected than others. Lockdown is something that should be looked into more deeply, more than just the loss of jobs and money. It's those things as well as the full shift to online and the social isolation that have a deep, lingering impact on people. In my interviews I hoped to be able to record some of that impact and then wrote writing pieces from that content.

I feel like it was important, it was necessary. We had to do it. Um, and we had to adjust, when people's lives are at stake you have to do whatever you can to minimize as much damage as possible.

Tanvir Hossain

Introduction

Lockdown is larger and more encompassing than I realized even when at the start of this project I kept my focus as narrow as I could. I kept to four focuses school/work, finances, health, and social relationships but even then sometimes it would veer off into a different topic and I would have to steer the conversation back to my original aim. The accounts I got from the people I interviewed all differed from each other, even the ones where the people were living in the same place. Lockdown is something that needs to be looked into more deeply, and something that needs to be kept in mind when society finally opens up full again and there is little fear of contamination. Though not at the cost of everything that has been brought to public attention due to the pandemic changing things. But the experiences brought on by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown won't be forgotten anytime soon.

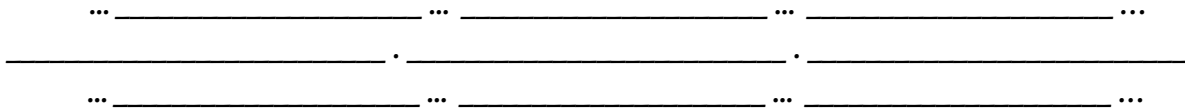
The situation for my family was this, we are a family of first generation Bangladeshi immigrants (my parents and I) and second generation immigrants (my younger sisters). My father is a taxi driver and my mother doesn't work and though my father still worked for a time because we don't have any other income he had to stop because there was no work for him. Not when everyone was staying home. It's a story that repeats itself among many immigrant families and among many families in our own community. And then my father got sick, we didn't know if he had the virus at first but my parents made sure we didn't go near him while he was. It was worrying before he went to the hospital but once he spent several weeks there that stress went up. And this was happening alongside doing schoolwork and worrying over rent, food, and the state of our finances.

We weren't the only ones who had to face and deal with these worries and uncertainties. And the accounts I got when interviewing different members of my family echoed my own narrative. There are added stressors as in the case of one cousin the shift from in person work to online which while difficult and fraught with problems was only one factor of stress and worry. The most common worries were worries on academics though it manifested differently for each person, at least those who were students. Even for those who didn't work the worries of rent, food, and future finances still weighed on them as they were living with someone for whom those were their primary worries. Those worries have not abated for many even now as lockdown has been lifted.

As of the current situation there's still a lot of uncertainty of what's going to happen next. Something that is not new to many communities though the circumstances can and do change either relieving or adding to the existing worries. For my family, my father's health was impacted severely by the virus even as he survived and has mostly recovered. He doesn't have his previous strength but he can't not work. I worry about how he will be able to cope with working as he has before because he can't. That would hurt him. How many others have this worry as well? Lockdown may be over but the worry and changes it has brought are not. What we will do next is the question.

Worry

There are things to do and
worries to soothe
Worry, worry
There's a good deal of worry
Between work and home
A change of pace,
A change of places
Even as some things remain the same
In the panic that comes
With abrupt change



Come I say, into
the slowly darkening mind

behind closed
doors, alone in the madness

full of meditations and
contemplation

I don't wish to
think of

Me (Fatema)

I think that personally for me, living through lockdown the biggest thing I dealt with was... well boredom. Boredom and not thinking about issues that have lingered long before the pandemic was a concern. I think something that really struck me was how I got used to seeing people maybe not everyday but often enough that when I suddenly couldn't it was jarring. And now I see my family 24/7 for months while my contact with everyone else was greatly diminished. Phones and social media can only help so much. I miss seeing people in person. Which was why boredom was such a problem for me although upon deeper reflection, I realize that boredom was also convenient because there are other problems that also need addressing in my personal life. Boredom however was easier to deal with than those. Where do I even start with those?

All Those Things

We are stories and statistics,
Numbers and feelings,
And all those things
You'll never understand
Because you lived after our pandemic
You'll never know the quiet
As people stayed indoors,
You'll never know the weeping
As to the hospital they go
I can't explain my stress,
I can't explain my crazy
I can't explain all those....
All these inexplicable things
As we try to move past it all

Pound it's Blessings

The rain pounds it's blessings
Along the windows,
The trees outside my window
And the dusty sidewalks down below
Desperate and grasping
Pressing cold kisses outside my window
There's something out there you see
The world is choking
And needs to take a breath
Rain over it
And wipe it clean with blessings
Fallen from the sky
Accept my unspoken words of prayer
And pleading
Let this pass
Amongst the rain
That pounds its blessings
Amongst the world

A lot of stuff happened during quarantine and I wasn't really used to it so my way of coping with it was disconnecting. Stupidest mistake ever but it's okay, it's alright it's over now.

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Fahmidah

Talking to my youngest sister Fahmidah was interesting. From what I have seen so far talking to those I have, they all have different priorities. There are some worries that remain the same regardless of who was speaking, such as worry over the pandemic and the safety of both themselves and the people close to them. My sister says that she wasn't worried about much although I wonder about the truth of that. My father's time at the hospital had left her stressed and stressed everyone else in different ways. Hers was to distract herself with shows and webnovels. I wonder at the tone at which she speaks with me because I can't help but wonder how much of what she told me is the whole truth. I think that it's important to remember that there are things that she won't feel comfortable telling me, something that most likely is the same with all my interviewees so far.

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Then there is the fact that I have to do online schooling and I hate online schooling cause me and technology are not best friends if anything we're enemies. So I was like what am I doing. And then I also had to stay with my family 24/7 mind you if I have to see them more than I already see them I say ew.

Aches of Online Learning

This is to all the dry eyes
and aching ears,
I have headphones on
For a semblance of privacy,
My ears are the one
Paying for it,
For all the hunched over backs
The curve of it leaning,
To the screen of what is there
Phones, desktops, and maybe even tablets too
Cramped legs from sitting too long
The world is quiet
As the days pass
With dry eyes, and aching ears

Words on a Screen

Words on a screen
Sometimes I go back and look
Upon old conversations
Catalogue the dates and times
I'm so bad at this
Talking, even over a screen
Words can be so misleading
I don't know what to say sometimes
How are you?
Are you okay?
How are you holding up?
These are strange times we
Are living in
I'm not fond to be honest
Living through history
We can't quite explain
To be misunderstood later
By those who don't understand
The changing times

I don't know. It was just like whatever. I was like okay. I just didn't like... um... I go to school so I am an in person kind of learner.

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Fawziyah

Talking to Fawziyah was different from talking to Fahmidah. She was strangely more emotional than Fahmidah but then again she has her own depths she doesn't always show the rest of her family (namely me or perhaps I don't pay enough attention). What interests me the most here was the fact that she felt that Fahmidah used our father's circumstances as an excuse for her slipping grades at school. The situation is actually a little more complicated because Fahmidah didn't say that our mother did when on the phone with her guidance counselor because she was still asleep at the time. The actual reason was due more to technological problems. Clearly all that time spent together didn't foster too much closeness. The three of us talked more but there are still problems there due to personality clashes and unresolved issues that stem from our childhoods.. There are still problems there between us that I have no idea how to address.

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I think Ammu, I think like- she said it like, I think that um, I didn't physically show that I was upset and stuff cause I'm not the most expressive person but I think Ammu is so like the only I really saw was in her. In everyone else there was really no type of change to our lifestyles or anything like that.

Whatever,
 How flippant of
 an **A**ttitude you have
 bu**T** are you the only
 on**E**, there's a story here
 in the silence, a **V**eil
abov**E** words unsaid
 whe**R**e do we go from here?

Story in the Quiet

There's a story in the quiet,
In the silence that lingers behind
 What is said,
And all those thoughts kept
Hidden behind lip and teeth
 I smile,
 It's fine, really,
My quiet will mingle with yours
 I can't see yours
 You can't see mine
But it's there all the same
 Tangled together
 Like string and wire
 It's fine, really

I wouldn't say that I didn't care about the pandemic but it didn't concern me as much. I didn't have to go outside for anything. I guess the only thing I had a problem with was remote learning.

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Nahian

A boy of few words it was hard getting him to speak even as he agreed to speak with me about this. There seems to be this sort of quiet among the younger of my interviewees that I don't quite understand. Is it their age? Do they truly not have much to worry about? Is it trauma? How does one define trauma? Would this count as trauma?

Trauma: *a deeply distressing or disturbing experience or emotional shock following a stressful event or a physical injury, which may be associated with physical shock and sometimes leads to long-term neurosis.*

The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown were definitely distressing and can be considered a disturbing experience depending on who is asked. It was an adjustment that not everyone took to well and one that also took some time to work out properly as well. How much of an effect did that actually have on the people I am interviewing even if they say otherwise? Nahian (naa-hee-an) had also answered some questions on paper as well and I find that this doesn't add any more clarity to this question. Is there an answer to this question? One that is satisfactory anyway?

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Yeah. I didn't see anyone from school so I spent more time with him.

Words on Paper

Words on paper
Who do you believe?
Living history that is me,
Or words on paper
That don't quite convey
The grief, the stress,
And the panic
Of a virus that had done
What no man has not
Take over the world
And upend all our ways

Perhaps surprisingly, the proportion of people reporting they feel lonely often or always during lockdown has been similar to pre-pandemic, at around 5% (2.6 million) during April. But groups that have been disproportionately affected by loneliness include working-age adults living alone, those in poor health, and people in rented accommodation.

[Emerging evidence on COVID-19's impact on mental health and health inequalities]

[The Health Foundation]

In addition to presenting new or enhanced stressors, the pandemic has diminished many of the mechanisms people typically use to cope with stress. The most popular coping mechanisms during lockdown have been staying in touch with friends and family and taking daily outdoor exercise, which has helped nearly half of the adults surveyed. Work has also been important, with the value for mental wellbeing extending beyond the financial benefits.

[Emerging evidence on COVID-19's impact on mental health and health inequalities]

[**The Health Foundation**]



Whatever
Whatever, how flippant
How deflecting
You don't really want to talk
But you will
Because I asked
Whatever, a story in silence
Left unsaid
Because you talked didn't you
But not really



Overrun spaces
As the ambulance goes
With more to come

Both because workwise it was an adjustment period you know, especially cause working with the stock market, as I'm sure many of you know the stock market kind of took a nosedive. And while that was taking a nosedive we had to deal with transitioning from the office to home.

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Tanvir

Now, the first interview I did was with my cousin Tanvir, or as I call him Bhaiya. Bhaiya's was interesting because for most of our childhoods we didn't get along but now that we're both older we seem to have matured. Bhaiya is the position of both being in the workforce as well as being a student, though as he is going to be a master's student he didn't have to deal with the shift to online learning. However as he is still working the shift from working at the office to working from home took a bit more time to adjust to. And it wasn't just because of the sudden lockdown either, there was a lot of work that happened to make sure that everyone was able to work from home. As my cousin is talking about this it only highlights just how unprepared the country was regarding the pandemic. But his interview also highlights other issues that seem to pop up again in my other interviews. Worries of the academic and work variety although to different degrees depending on the person I was speaking to.

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Initially I was scared for both my health and my family's health but it felt like I was a healthy young adult. Um so if I contract it, it...it wouldn't... I wouldn't know if it would hurt me but I hope it wouldn't.

Communication is at a standstill, but
social media is a strange beast
just made an instagramM, but
I'd Much rather send a text
Understand that this
Is Not a slight against you
I just made these accounts
Calling or texting has been
my wAy
These many past years, but
It's important that
I dOn't lose you
Now

I wanted to be proactive and since my internship fell through I worked with my academic advisor and I'm taking four different classes during the semester over the summer semester. I'm taking one class summer 1, one class summer 2 and then I have two engineering courses that go through summer. And yeah I'm getting summer classes to get ahead and reach my goals.

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Taslim

Looking back on it now, talking to Taslim was a lot like talking to my sister Fawziyah although he was a bit more open than she was. As he was staying with his parents and eldest brother Tanvir during lockdown his worries seem as different from Tanvir's. He was also worried about his parents, particularly his mother who has problems with her health. But he is also the youngest of the family though that doesn't make him any less capable. But in a way perhaps he was shielded a little by his older brother staying with them for part of the duration of lockdown.

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Yeah for sure, um, my dad is- I think well into his sixties so he's not the worst demographic for the virus, that's typically around the seventies but he is pretty old and the virus attacks the elderly very significantly so I was definitely for him especially because he still had work and he had more of a chance of getting exposed to it however my mom was the one who I was most scared of just because she has a lot of respiratory issues.

Yeah I mean it was definitely difficult, part of it was things like groceries and such, so... uh... this year I was on a half meal plan, basically I ate at... I would eat at their college dining halls once a day and make food for myself once a day at home, so I was going from that to having to make food for myself to getting groceries delivered and things like that.

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Zahid

Zahid is another cousin, he is also the brother of Tanvir and Taslim, both who I have also interviewed as well. Zahid is the middle of the three brothers and as of right now is the furthest from everyone living with roommates in Rhode Island. Some of the most prominent worries for him were academics, same as it was for most of the other interviewees who are also students however he also had different circumstances to take into account as well. As mentioned before he lives in Rhode Island where he lives with roommates who are also college students. There is the additional worry of rent as well as changes to his academic routine. As he goes to Brown, which is an ivy league school he didn't get much back in terms of refunds regarding his tuition. There's a lot to worry about here, there's his own circumstances but also worry over his family as well. Even with technology and communication being the way it is now, there is still worry over them as he resides in another state. Although he seems to have managed well enough during lockdown.

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No, so um I know there was the whole cares Act- cares Act thing so um but Brown has been a bit uh- well Brown had a covid transitioning fund, so essentially when you apply for you explain hey I need x amount of money because of covid for this thing and they would you know approve it or deny it or whatever I didn't end up using it because I didn't have a lot of upfront costs living off campus.

I Do the Same

What holds your tongue and quiets your lips?

I don't know,

But you've been strangely

Quiet these days

For all that you still speak

Your silence rings all the louder

But what can I say,

I do the same



Why so Nonchalant?

I don't understand this nonchalance that seems to appear in all my younger interviewees. Is it cultural? Is it a wider phenomenon? I'm not sure but I find it rather problematic. Because it reinforces learned lessons (even if they were learned unconsciously) from previous problems. The situation many found themselves in and will most likely continue to be in the foreseeable future doesn't allow for deeper looks into these problems such as deflection of personal problems, lack of self care, and problems with communication. There's so much attention to things such as underlying problems with healthcare, rent, work, and just plain prejudice and inequality that have been brought to light. But problems such as lack of communication and trust between people are also problems exacerbated by society as well. These kinds of subtle, more personal problems get pushed to the wayside because of more pressing concerns such as rent, food, utilities, work, and money. And those are important things that have to be kept in mind but how many people have unresolved issues that they don't really try to resolve before the pandemic. They are pushed even further back during the pandemic and will most likely stay that way after the pandemic is over as well.

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Zabed

I interviewed my uncle through a set of questions I emailed him. Of course it took some time convincing him to let me do so because he was reconsidering after agreeing to an interview the first time I asked him. He was the only other person I interviewed who worked and was the only one who was out of work as a result of lockdown. He had the additional worries of taking care of his family in addition to rent, food, and finances. From the answers he gave and the few times my sisters and I facetimes with him over the lockdown, he seemed fine, his youngest son is now around 13 months old, taking care of him occupied his time. But he is also an adult, one who is much older than I am. As someone who has watched me grow up there's a lot that he might not tell me for those reasons as well having the mindset that there's some things I don't need to know about his situation.

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Ode to My Mother's Stress

To all the tears shed,
And words snapped
I understand you're worried
But that is no reason
To snap at us
Even as lines carve themselves
Onto the plains of your face
And grey hairs appear
Where they weren't before
And every phone call
Is a game of tension and waiting
Nothing seems to have changed
But isn't that a good thing?
If it got worse
They would say
But waiting is tension all it's own
As another tear slides down your face



Parents

I find that it is hard to go up to my parents and ask them to speak with me. I don't know why? I think that they have information that can help me but at the same time, do I wish to hear it? Am I afraid of what I may end up hearing?

Cough and cough

as the days drag On

Rattling chests and shaky

Breathes, hOld these

quivering luNgS

And hope for the best

Steal Your Breath

Rib shaking,
And lung rattling
I know the feeling
Of breaths stolen,
Gasping for breath
As your body shakes
And shakes
But I got better
And you didn't
Not for a long time

sLowly the seasons change

as **O**nce cool rooms

warm with the **C**oming

heat and dar**K**,

as min**D**s

cl**O**ud, as cooler days give

Way to hotter days
and sticky **N**ights

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For this project I did interviews and then from the content of those interviews I created writing pieces. The process of securing interviews and then actually doing them took a bit of time to do but what took more time was creating content from the interviews. I wrote poems, reflections, with excerpts from interviews and some occasional excerpts from outside sources.