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## YOU WILL BE AFRAID, BUT DETERMINED: TO MY UNASSUMING, PRE PANDEMIC, PRE PROTEST SELF

By Mary Geschwindt



Illustration by Ceciley Hill



NEW YORK  
CITY,  
NY

2018: Do you remember moving to New York? You arrived focused on a new life, on cramming into the Upper East Side, a short commute to Midtown to design and build dreams.

2019: Do you remember falling in love (with the City)? But

2020: The City will be still. January 1st will arrive already haunted. You will ride the Q train for the last time in February. Apprehension will occupy the subway platforms absent of bodies who no longer sip coffee from the street vendor at Lexington and 63rd. You will clap for the frontlines, feeling helpless as your cheers echo in empty streets. You will be unsure of what you're cheering for: the end of the beginning, the beginning of the end? There will be such blanket silence that new sounds will emerge: You will fall asleep to the rumble of trains speeding underground. You will awake to eerie quiet and birdsong. Remember that planning program in Europe that you had dreamt of attending? You will be accepted. And you will decline. You will walk the middle lane of Park Avenue at 7:00am and 7:00pm, the only other movement a shift of the buildings' shadows. You will see the world turn upside-down: with their faces hidden, but bright eyes eager, your neighbors will not cease to be people. You will stay despite pressures to flee. You will know you cannot leave this place you've made your home, this city you've seen transformed by tragedy. You will watch as it hesitantly rises.

And as the city rises, so too will its people. Bright lights will flash red and blue across your face as you witness police blockade your street, arresting protesters. The New York Times will publish photographs of the scene within the hour. You will support Black Lives in protest with your bicycle, the people's vehicle, wheels of democracy. The pixelated screens of Times Square will contrast 10,000 riders clothed in black. You will hear the distant drumming and chanting approaching every afternoon while you're on another Zoom call. You will wish you weren't so that you could chant, too. You will critique every piece of architecture and planning idea you've had – ideas which would have served you, but never the lives of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. You will write letters every Saturday: senators, governor, mayor, city council member – will they listen? You will challenge the desire you once had to study in Brussels. You will grasp how New York, your city, needs you.

December 31st, 2019: You will feel uneasy about the New Year without a hint of what is to come. And yet - 2020 will ground you in time and place; it will awaken you to your purpose, fueled by the lessons you will continue to learn, the year still stretching its remaining time before you, knowing what needs to be done.

### THE URBAN REVIEW

Student Journal at the  
Harvard GSD

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#### ABOUT THE URBAN REVIEW

The Urban Review was originally created as a digital urban planning journal run by Master in Urban Planning students at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Our publication serves as compilation of critical engagements with themes relevant to planning and their social, economic or environmental implications. We collect and share ideas from urban planning, design, and architecture students at schools across the U.S., seeking to create a cross-institutional dialogue between students of the built environment.

#### LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear readers,

Students of urban planning know there is always something more to consider, and this summer we've been busy. As we navigate new systems in school and at work, we are also keeping a close eye on the ways the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered or accelerated transformations to the built environment. New plans are being made and old ones are being modified to accommodate life under pandemic conditions. While 'social distancing' restrictions may come and go, planning and architectural interventions will persist, suggesting that we may soon enter an era explicitly designed to facilitate isolation. In flux and under lockdown, it's hard to see what's next; fortunately, planning's interdisciplinary nature offers a particularly fruitful lens to read, interpret, and intervene in the future being written today.

Though we are students of urban planning, we are also people who are students of urban planning. For our first mini-issue, we chose the title 'Distance' to describe the quality of our lives today, and to gesture toward a new set of concerns emerging in the planning and design fields. The four short pieces in this issue are reflections of the uncertainty of this moment, views on isolation, protest, and planning that offer a window into the lives of a group of students who, shortly after meeting, found ourselves abruptly scattered across the map, left to grapple with questions both large and small about what it means to live in a city.

Take inspiration in reading.

Asher Kaplan, MUP '21  
Jiae Azad, MUP '21

# DISTANCE



SUMMER 2020

### THE URBAN REVIEW

# 2

## MINT TEA

By Elifmina Mizrahi



Illustration by Ceciley Hill



SOMERVILLE,  
MA

I am going over my notes, occasionally glancing out the window in front of my recently assembled white desk, as I wait for my office hours appointment to begin. In the distance, behind a few layers of city trees, electrical wires, and buildings, I see the tip of Memorial Hall. At the top of the hour, ready to fire away my questions and make the most of this 30 minute slot, I open the event on my Outlook calendar and hastily click the Zoom link. Redirected to the "waiting room," I anxiously await "the host" to let me "in." I sit there for a moment, unsure what to do with myself. A few seconds later the screen switches, indicating that I entered her "office."

And that's when it happened.

I bumped into one of my classmates who graduated a few months ago. The surprise I felt was a familiar yet distant feeling, given how intentional our actions can seem in this new online world. The chance encounters that make life, particularly urban life, so exciting have largely disappeared. Sure, we "run into each other" at Zoom panels, but we are hardly caught off guard when bound to our familiar rooms, choosing when to turn our cameras on and when to keep them off, conveniently hiding away the unpredictable.

This encounter was different. Neither my classmate nor I were expecting to see another student. Similarly, our host was not expecting to see us together. There was a glimpse of surprise on all our faces, visible through a widening of the eyes, a sudden raise of the eyebrows, a smile accompanied by the simultaneous unmuting of three squares.

Shortly after, our professor confirmed that I was early for my appointment. I excused myself and

promptly left. Still feeling the buzz of spontaneity, I wandered to the kitchen to make myself some tea.

A few months ago, if I accidentally showed up early to office hours, I would have probably done something similar. Only then, I would have walked along the narrow corridor looping around behind Gund, making my way to the shared kitchen next to the plotters. My chance encounter in the office might have been followed by another spontaneous sight of a classmate warming up their lunch. I would have probably made myself some tea, walked to my desk, and chatted with friends.

Standing in my relatively empty kitchen, waiting for my water to boil, I glanced at my collection of plants that started accumulating over the past few months. I smiled, happy to be sharing my kitchen with them, sad that their entrance into my life was prompted by unexpected cross country moves of friends.

I hear the boiler click, pour hot water on a bag of crisp mint tea and make my way back to my desk to prepare for my meeting.

I miss the layers of surprise that make the mundane so thrilling.



Illustration by Ceciley Hill



SAN  
ANTONIO,  
TX

# 3

## NO MASK NO TACOS

By David Bemporad



Photo by David Bemporad

Ruthie's Mexican Restaurant in San Antonio, Texas, is a northside institution. In a city marred by growing economic segregation, but bonded by a shared cultural identity of passion for the San Antonio Spurs, Fiesta, and neighborly love, community establishments like Ruthie's play a vital role - cutting across lines and uniting San Antonians around a cornerstone of that cultural identity: tacos.

Ruthie's largest consumer base is the students of nearby Winston Churchill High School, a base of which I was a proud member for four years. Every weekday after swim practice, every weekend for a snack after swim meets or ultimate frisbee games – I went to Ruthie's. I may have consumed more Ruthie's tacos during those four years of high school than salads in my lifetime.

I have the same three breakfast tacos there (Bean and Cheese, Potato and Egg, and Bacon and Egg) for over a decade now. I have seen every change to its photo wall, every failed expansion, and the end-less patchwork repairs to the parking lot outside, but upon visiting last month, I noticed one striking change: a sign on every door reading, "NO MASK NO TACOS."

Texas is handling the pandemic poorly. Governor Abbott has implemented consistently cryptic policies, stripped cities of their ability to fight the coronavirus, and made it almost impossible for residents to understand the gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic and respond accordingly. Events are canceled, rescheduled, and canceled again - city leaders canceled our beloved Fiesta after pushing it back to November. Texans put their masks on,

took them off, and, sadly, have had trouble putting them back on again. Clarity is in short supply.

When I saw that sign, I chuckled, "Well, that's it! Put that sign everywhere, and we'll be the most masked city on earth!"

NO MASK NO TACOS captures the simplicity and severity of my hometown's situation uniquely and effectively. Tacos are essential to the ethos of San Antonio, and its residents donning masks is essential if this city is to weather the pandemic. If refusal means residents lose their favorite breakfast, lunch, and dinner, wearing a mask should be a natural choice.

This story is not about a community anchor lost to COVID-19 – Ruthie's faced tougher odds in the 2008 financial crisis, and according to its management team, its take-out business has never been more popular. This story is not about my commitment to support my favorite local small business through a difficult time—I still go there as often as I can; it's not like I can just stop eating their perfect tortillas. This story is about a lighthouse in a storm, a local effort to lead by example when leadership and communication from the state government are useless at best and harmful at worst. This story is about a simple sign that gave me a whole new level of love for my favorite taco shop.

# 4

## MOORING

By Aron Chlewich



HUDSON  
VALLEY,  
NY

Cities have never been more irrelevant to my life. I am residing in a rural part of the Hudson Valley, and although I worked this summer for a big public agency in New York City, the daily hours at my computer were utterly disjointed from the homebound rituals that structure my pandemic experience. I remain ambitious and desirous, but the objects of those feelings are as foreign to me now as the cities where I have lived.

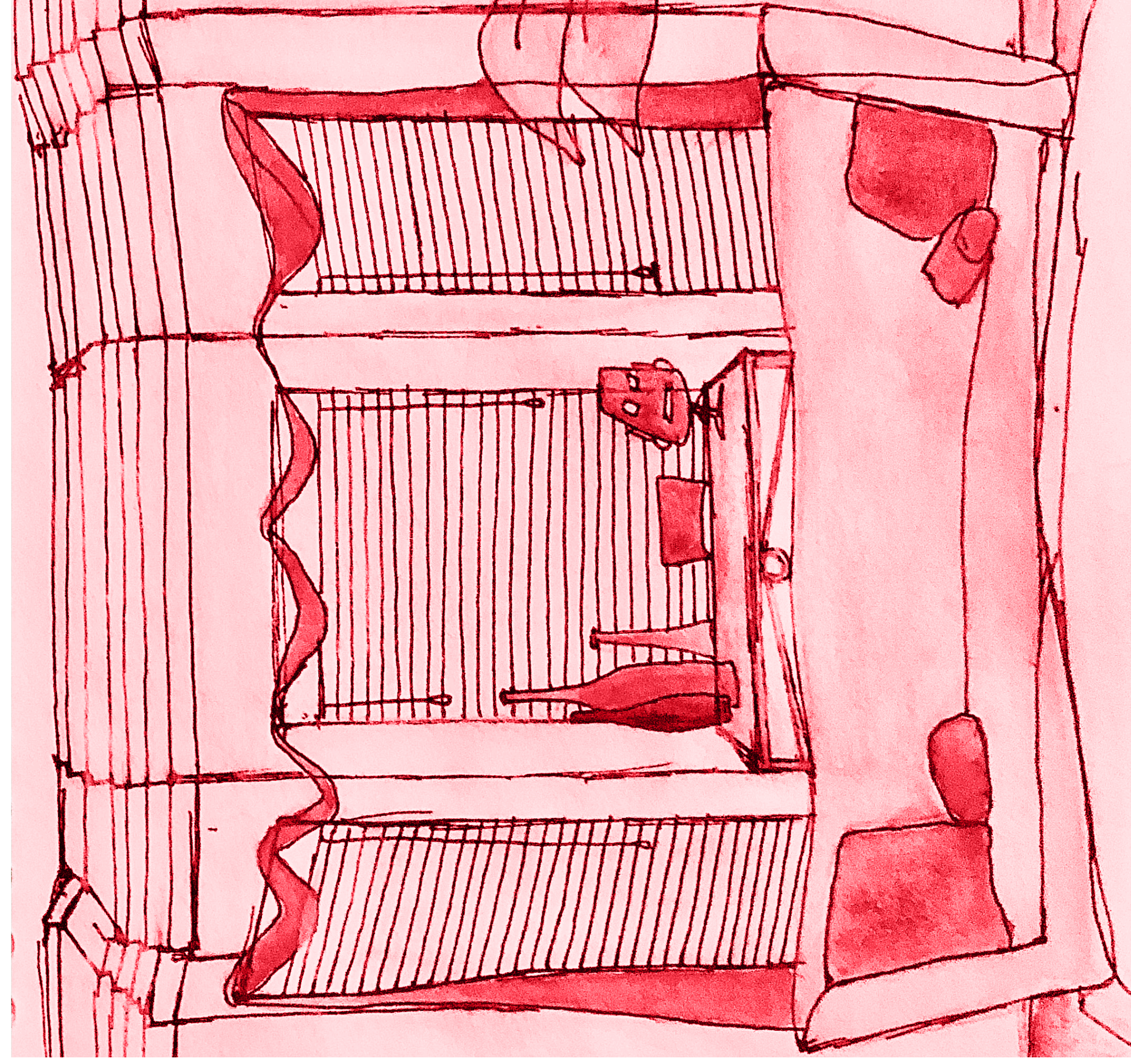
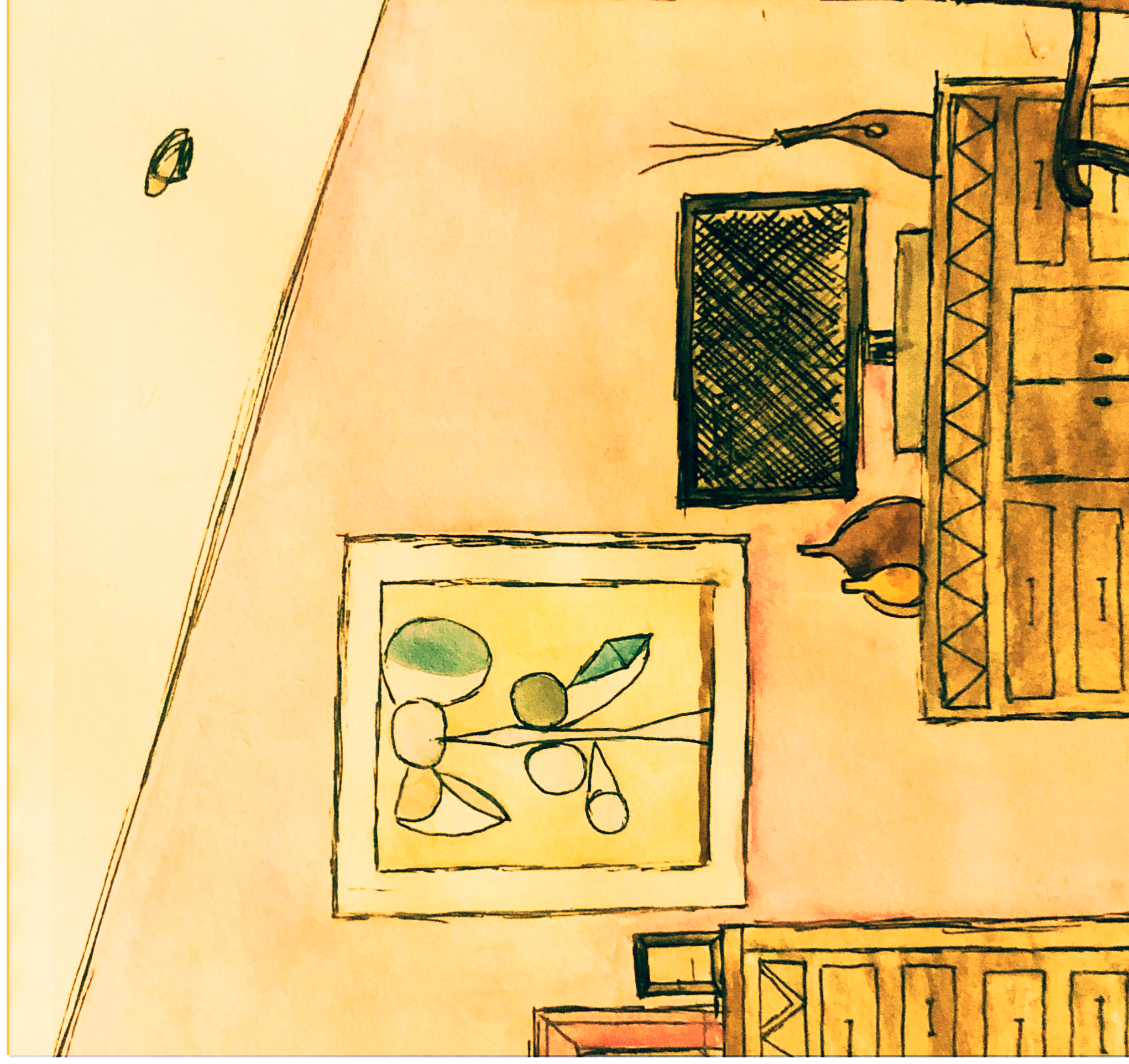
I have seen so few people in recent months that I project disproportionate import onto any plan or interaction, and disquietude penetrates more deeply than before. The inner turmoil that arises as a consequence of an unintended slight by my girlfriend—a comment about the dirty pants I am wearing, for example—requires sustained focus to divest. A Saturday lolling around the house is newly burdened by the specter of my former life: I no longer worry about making evening drinking plans with busy friends, whether a new acquaintance I met in Prospect Park took offense to my joke, or if next week my urban historiography professor will comment on my persistent tardiness, but the anxious feelings associated with those experiences remain as prevalent as ever. Without the usual distractions, my mind cannot escape itself.

In solitude we discover that the emotional travails of urban life do not abandon us just because we are surrounded by some other scenery. Indeed, their psychological nature is ramified. No one has affirmed this so clearly as Michel de Montaigne: "It is not enough to withdraw from the mob, not enough to go to another place; we have to withdraw from such attributes of the mob as are within us. It is our own self we have to isolate and take back into possession." Accidentally or unconsciously, though certainly fittingly, I chose this summer to read his complete essays for the first time.

A few weeks ago, washing dishes after a rare afternoon hosting friends in the yard, my stomach and chest were filled with dread. I gazed out to the swallows dodging each other above the shed. One at a time, I imagined my feelings—anxiety, loneliness, self-reproach—streaming out of my body and into a small cube floating outside the window. I will return to them later, I thought.

I am learning, during this period, a deeper kind of humility than I previously understood—to not allow my personal afflictions to overwhelm the capacity of my mind. Montaigne reminds: "a ship's cargo is less troublesome when lashed in place."

# DISTANCE



SUMMER 2020

THE  
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