



Abstract

I wrote this in June 2021, at a time when the COVID-19 vaccination rollout in my hometown of Iloilo City was still awfully sluggish, the city dependent on the national government's limited supply. Desperate to be immunized as soon as possible, people resorted to all sorts of measures to secure that elusive ticket, allowing power and privilege to become the name of the game. This piece, then, is both an act of commemoration for the year-and-a-half that has passed—one that began with the city being hailed as a bastion of resilience and self-sufficiency—and an effort to historicize my pandemic experience from a place I will always call home.

Keywords

Vaccines, COVID-19, Iloilo City, health inequity, politics of health

A PARTIAL LIST OF THE VACCINATED¹

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1.

The first vaccines went straight to a hospital run by nuns, its façade fashioned like a church front—chalk-white triangle topped by a cross blushing three dots of red at sundown, one miniscule bulb for each arm. I was born in this hospital three decades ago. At the turn of the millennium, my grandmother died in one of its rooms, her rotten kidneys overrun by diabetes, her body bloated with all the water it couldn't flush out. In 2018, my mother lay anesthetized on an operating table while her surgeon removed a lump of muscle from the walls of her womb. The day the vaccines arrived, the nuns made a list of the doctors and nurses who kept the hospital running, a precious vial to a name. But the next morning, an elderly man came—the richest man in the city, who had poured money to build two new wings for the hospital, donated MRI machines and refurbished entire wards. Walked in with his posse of wealthy friends like they'd entered a party. *We want to be vaccinated now*, he said. And the nuns, in the grand tradition of so many churches yoked to the wealthy, gladly

obliged. Crossed out the names of some doctors and nurses on the list for that day—what’s one more day of waiting, anyway? My best friend is married to the elderly man’s son. This man, her father-in-law, she calls him a philanthropist. He has touched the lives of so many people.

2.

I live in a city of 500,000 people, which means the price of salvation is 350k.

Scientists call this “herd immunity,” a random number derived from the R-naught, which is another random number that predicts how many others a person can infect with a virus. For smallpox, that number was six, which means that high up in the Andes in the sixteenth century, every Spanish soldier killed six Incas without drawing a sword. In the valleys of Mexico, the Aztecs were similarly decimated, their empty temples left to sate the forest’s hunger.

For COVID-19, the R-naught hovers between two and three, which means a sick man can infect his wife and kid, and leave his other kid unscathed. Or a sick man comes home for dinner, and days later his entire family is crippled with fevers.

The R-naught dictates the HIT, the herd immunity threshold. For an R-naught between two and three, that threshold amounts to 70 percent. The mathematics is complicated, but logic dictates we must trust the scientists when it comes to numbers.

500k times 70 percent is 350,000. That is the number of people my city needs to vaccinate to achieve herd immunity. That, according to scientists, is what it will take to save my city.

3.

In 2008, a storm swept through the city in the dead of night. People awoke to their beds nearly submerged in floodwater, like that scene from *Titanic* with the elderly couple resigned to die in the frigid Atlantic. Those who had enough time clambered to their roofs and waited for the rescue trucks. Meanwhile, slippers drifted alongside dead leaves and branches, forks from a neighbor’s house, a drowned kitten. Meanwhile, the rain mapped the city, drop by furious drop, and the city saw its future sinking.²

When the virus came, and the city locked itself down, newspapers likened us to a fictional African utopia from that Marvel movie. This city,

proclaimed the journalists, has saved itself. And we've believed them since.

Every afternoon, when the mayor gives out warnings to stay at home, we pay him no heed. He says this disease has invaded our most intimate spaces. We only like his Facebook post and keep scrolling. We do not lose a night's sleep. Every day the city counts a hundred new cases, but a hundred cases a day still amounts to less than a thousand cases a week. This is a city of 500,000. We have colossal cathedrals, riverside esplanades bursting with buskers' music. On Pride month, we paint rainbows on the flanks of bridges and flyovers. We feast on fresh oysters.

4.

Today's radio headlines:

An outbreak at a sugar mill: 86 new cases.

Random swab testing at city hall: 45 new cases, including someone from the mayor's office.

All ICU beds in the city are now occupied.

5.

Two days before my birthday, my godfather calls. He runs a nonprofit founded by Taiwanese Buddhist monks. The last time we talked was at my father's funeral four years back.

My godfather says he is a lucky man. A blessed man: spared from the blight that has hit his whole family, all twenty-seven of them. My godmother is now in intensive care. He assures me her breathing is still *fine*, so I take his word for it. Everybody's breathing is *fine*—until it isn't, until the virus colors the lungs cirrus-white on x-ray. Salt flats from a satellite. Feathers gleaming in the dark.

Must be the Sinopharm vaccines I got, he says. I say yes, that must be it. I do not ask if he meant Sinovac, since Sinopharm vaccines are still illegal in the country; the only ones who've had them are the president's goons, jabbed with doses smuggled in by who knows how. Maybe by C-130. Maybe by jet ski. We say goodbye, my godfather and I. Can Buddhist monks even run a smuggling ring?

6.

The mayor says, *We do not want to become like India*. He says it like it's a dirty word, *India*, a curse word, an innuendo, cause for Catholic-school

detention. In India, the cities reek of roasting human flesh. Every corner, a mass grave, pyres that never burn out. Public health experts say the system has collapsed, as if the system were a condominium hastily erected using substandard cement, built on marshland that nibbled at the building's foundation and never really went away. *The situation in India is out of control*, the mayor says. I remember a YouTube clip—the plagues of Exodus, animated for kids. In one scene, men lying on the sidewalks, lifeless men, though they looked more asleep than dead. Bright-green locusts landing on the sores of their skin to take a quick nip before flying off.

7.

Today's headlines:

The mayor accuses the Health Department of negligence, says the city hasn't received enough vaccines.

Israel reports breakthrough infections despite having achieved herd immunity with Pfizer jabs.

A freak accident involving two trucks and a tricycle: the truck drivers are unharmed, the tricycle driver is dead, and the tricycle's passenger, an 80-year-old man on his way to be vaccinated, is almost unrecognizable in the wreckage.

8.

My city is almost unrecognizable. An infestation of condos. Malls sprouting like weeds. Here, a reconstructed road. Here, a new hospital. In 2014, a fire gutted our ancestral home in Chinatown, one in a row of wooden houses birthed by the postwar years. The reports blamed faulty wiring, but rumor claimed arson at the source. Chinese mainlanders with money troubles. On the eve of the festival of the child Jesus, my parents watched helpless as flames illuminated the canvas of night, tongues of orange punching holes through my father's childhood windows, the walls crumbling as firecrackers fountained in the sky. In the morning, I strolled down the old neighborhood one last time. Fire trucks hosing down the last embers, a sea of onlookers. I swore never to walk down that street again.

Seven years later, my city closes its borders and shuts itself down. An eerie quiet blankets the streets at midday. It is possible to hear the crack of the spark that starts a conflagration. It is possible to hear the most distant sirens, be it from a fire truck, or an ambulance.

9.

I live in a city of 500,000, run by the fortune of a few hundred.

Which is to say I could be anywhere in the world, only maps put me at the heart of the country. Some nights, when the city keeps very still, I can feel the ground beating, a faint pulse pushing against my feet. Our own version of gravity, which is to say the earth pulls at us twice as hard, those of us who've lived here all our lives. To be born here is to never leave. To leave is to keep returning.

10.

Three months since the first vaccines arrived, a partial list of the vaccinated, compiled from Messenger chats, Facebook posts, Instagram stories, and gossip:

My gastroenterologist, also a poet.

Nurses.

The people paid to draw blood.

Those who operate MRI and x-ray machines.

My ophthalmologist who wears Italian leather shoes.

Medical students who will be graduating soon, but who have never dealt with real patients and are probably wracked with quarter-life crises centered on that predicament.

Hospital administrators.

Family members of hospital administrators.

The mayor and his city councilors.

The priests at our local parish.

My high school teachers, most of whom I haven't seen since graduation in '09.

The owners of the city's biggest businesses, though when pressed, they might deny the fact, say they're still waiting for their turn—"just like everyone else."

A fashion designer who has never been and will never set foot on the frontlines of this pandemic, but who is tight with the daughter of a hospital administrator.

RKWLTPs (rich kids who like to party).

Our neighbor across the street who sells pesticides in bulk.

My remaining grandparents.

My mother.

Notes

- 1 After Danielle McLaughlin.
- 2 These lines owe a debt of gratitude to Conchitina Cruz's "Dark Hours."