

BOARD OF HEALTH.

NEW YORK, August 3, 1832.

Report of cases and deaths by Cholera for the last twenty
four hours, ending this day at 10 o'clock.

1	case 277 Front	dead*
1	278 do	dead
1	Orchard	
1	122 Ridge	
1	Corner Beach and Hudson	
1	88 Sheriff	dead*
1	57 Chrystie	dead
1	65 Walnut	
1	62 Anthony	
1	91 Norfolk	dead
1	99 Beekman	dead
2	53 Elm	1 dead
1	Forsyth	
1	Spring	
1	136 Laurens	dead
1	22 Oak	
1	234 Orange	dead*
1	111 Broome	dead
1	14 Willett	
1	125 Clinton	
1	92 do	
1	39 Attorney	
1	3 do	
1	Division	
1	6 Goe.ck	dead
1	Barrow, near Bleecker	
1	19th, near 8th Avenue	dead
1	Ludlow	
1	117 Suffolk	dead
1	Forsyth	
1	272 Walker, (rear)	
1	Clinton	
1	65 do.	
2	19 do.	
1	5 Water, near Moore	
1	115 Willett	
1	115 Orange	
1	112 Franklin	
1	24 Elizabeth	
1	79 Mulberry, (collapse)	
3	18 Chesnut	
1	130 Orange	
2	69 Ludlow	
1	6th Avenue, between 13th and 14th streets,	dead
2	6th Avenue, near 13th street	
48 cases		14 deaths

Emily Waples//

1.

In the beginning, I refresh endlessly. A thumb hovering over a search bar icon. An enter key tentatively pressed over a web address. *Coronavirus update*. There are always open tabs: the Johns

Hopkins COVID-19 Dashboard, the CDC case data, the *New York Times*'s coronavirus map. You can watch the red dots bleed out across the illuminated world just like every movie told you they would. You can watch the numbers climb in near-real time. Every refresh brings death.

I stop because it begins to feel causal.

I stop because it begins to feel casual.

2.

During the summer of 1832, a cholera epidemic devastated New York City. Every day from the beginning of July to the end of August, the Board of Health published a report listing all new cases and deaths that had occurred in the city during the previous twenty-four-hour period. Each report is arranged in three tidy columns: in the first, the number of cases reported. In the second, the address where the case or cases occurred. In the third, as applicable, a single-word status report: *dead*.

The editors of *The Cholera Bulletin*—a special periodical issued three times a week by “an Association of Physicians” as a corrective to more sensationalist reporting—offered a comparative perspective on mortality data. In 1831, for the week ending July 23, there had been 144 deaths in the city. For the same week in 1832, there had been 887.

5.

In April 2020, the *New York Times* reported that deaths in the city had skyrocketed to six times higher than average.

7.

As a humanist, my role is frequently contested. The field of the health humanities has worked to invest health and medicine with habits of critical inquiry, socio-historical contextualization, and ethical deliberation. But really, as a humanist I'm expected to “humanize” things. Specifically, “the numbers.”

This was the effort, it seems, of the *New York Times* front page from May 24 of this year, with its six-column headline mourning the “incalculable loss” of almost 100,000 Americans to COVID-19: a “grim milestone” that is both meaningless—why this particular figure?—and saturated with meaning. In the interactive online feature, you can scroll through a digital landscape of shadowy bodies. An aesthetics of devastation that is simultaneously an aesthetics of excess.

By “humanization,” what we most often mean is storytelling: narrative as vital force. In his 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin memorably juxtaposes “storytelling” with that most “menacing” mode of modern communication: *information*. *Information*, Benjamin tells us, is

characterized by its “prompt verifiability,” its seeming transparency: “The prime requirement,” he writes, “is that it appear ‘understandable in itself.’”

The *New York Times* feature masquerades as information, though it does not offer stories either, of course—only obituary snatches, ten words or fewer. Just enough to gesture at the insufficiency. *Could quote Tennyson from memory.*

Why this? we are left to wonder. *Why Tennyson, of all things?*

As the nineteenth century’s most notable elegist, Tennyson offered a somewhat muted endorsement of his own role:

*But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
A use in measured language lies;
The sad mechanic exercise,
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.*

The humanist’s “use” of verse—I bristle at the rhetoric of utility, but I think this is the point—lies in its very ability to obliterate feeling: not humanization, but mechanization.

The *New York Times* feature claims its function is to “help us to reckon with what was lost” by supplying more—but not much more—than mortality data. “A number,” they write, “is an imperfect measure when applied to the human condition.”

As a humanist, let me just say this: I am so sick of the “the human condition.”

9.

I once team-taught a seminar on sexually transmitted infections with a colleague in public health. He calculated R₀s on the chalkboard. He explained the mathematical models that epidemiologists use to anticipate the logarithmic growth of outbreaks, differential equations built of betas and gammas, a *t* for time.

I don’t remember the math. I only remember the metaphors: a bathtub, for instance, evoked to make a point about disease incidence and prevalence. As in: it matters whether you’re running the tap. It matters whether you’ve stopped the drain.

As a humanist after Sontag, my job is not to deploy metaphors, but to interrogate them. One of my contributions to the syllabus was a screening of *It Follows*, the 2014 horror film in which teens are stalked by a shape-shifting supernatural figure that is bequeathed to them through sex. The climactic scene occurs in a swimming pool. The protagonist, Jay, has been pursued by *it* since a backseat encounter. She waits in the swimming pool, bait in a one-piece bathing suit, because her friends believe they can electrocute *it*. They come armed with eggbeaters and hairdryers, toaster ovens and irons. But the tables turn on Jay: *it* flings the appliances at her; *it* grabs her ankle and

tries to drag her under. The male lead attempts to save her as all male leads are wont to: by shooting *it* in the head. The catch is that only the afflicted, the one who is followed, can see *it*.

It Follows has been read as a reflection on the anxiety of intimacy, as commentary on sexual stigma generally, as a metaphor for AIDS specifically. My own fascination is less with the film's depiction of transmission than in the ways *it* might be read as a metaphor for manifold forms of invisible violence: chronic illness, trauma, structural racism. As in: the people who are trying to help you cannot see the underlying cause but can witness its effects. Your testimony is the only point of reference. As in: the effort to eradicate it (a "magic bullet," if you like) is unthinkingly violent, and also imprecise; it might kill you as collateral.

Point at it, they'll tell you as you cough and sputter, *Show us where it is*.

Meanwhile, it's hurling televisions at your head.

14.

*willow trees, willow trees they remind me of Desdemona
I'm so damned literary
and at the same time the waters rushing past remind me of nothing
I'm so damned empty*
Frank O'Hara

In Ohio, we have a snowstorm the first week of May. I spend hours collecting branches from the sickly willow that I don't have the heart or the money to have cut down: a "sad mechanic exercise" if ever there was one. I engage my two-year-old in the Sisyphean task, brittle limbs raining down on us even as we bend and gather. He counts them, in his way, an inexplicable sequence that is always the same: *one, two, five, seven, nine, fourteen*. We pile them at the curb for mulching when the city trucks come.

It is difficult for this not to turn metaphor.

In "The Storyteller," Benjamin identifies death as the ultimate contextualizing frame, "the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell." He laments the obfuscation of death and dying that arose from the sanitary and social restructuring of the nineteenth century: "Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one," Benjamin writes. "In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living." Indeed, contemporary conspiracy theorists who deny the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic in movements like #FilmYourHospital are responding precisely to its fringe position in the "perceptual world" of the uninfected.

I am not ready to "reckon with what is lost" by combing columns of mortality data clothed in language. I am interested in other kinds of reckoning. If the history of AIDS activism has taught us

anything, it is that “humanizing” the numbers is less effective than somaticizing them.

Bring out the dead. Scatter the ashes on the White House lawn. Tell them where to dump our bodies.

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Cover image: “Board of Health.” *Commercial Advertiser* [New York, NY], 4 Aug. 1832, p. 2. *Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers*, infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A1044E924036998A0%40EANX-12FFF2491F3D3140%402390400-12FFA2319FoF7638%401-1333600622EF3482. Accessed 27 Jul. 2020.

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