

HEALTH

The Empty Space Where Normal Once Lived

In the heat of COVID-19 and climate change, it's too easy to forget what flourishing feels like.

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On the first day of summer, Siberia and I were the same temperature. In Verkhoyansk, roughly 3,000 miles northeast of Moscow, a searing week ended in an afternoon hotter than any before recorded north of the Arctic Circle. Half a planet away in New England, a thermometer under my tongue gave the same

reading: 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit. In a human, this is the clinical threshold for a fever.

We had also been too hot for too long, Siberia and I. Most days since mid-May, I have lived in a body a degree or two and occasionally three above normal. Siberia is even more pyretic, averaging more than nine degrees above the 20th-century norm from January onward. Russian friends sent photos of berries flushed ripe a month early. Dark clots of mosquitoes stuck on window screens. In places, the land itself is wobbly and out of joint, as melting permafrost opens large slump pits and gullies. By May, tundra peat was burning. The boreal forests broke into wildfires. These conflagrations are now the worst that Russia has seen, blazing on toward autumn.

The heat across northern Eurasia is uncanny but not mysterious. Our atmosphere, saturated with the carbon of burned fossil fuels,

is becoming that of a prehuman time, one last present on Earth 3 million years ago. The poles are warming at about twice the rate of temperate regions, making Siberia's current climate anomalies the future of those regions too. Such transformations crack open ecological worlds and the lives within them. Given the scale and implication of events in northern Eurasia, calling this season the Summer of Siberia would not be hyperbole.

[Read: [America is being pummeled by disasters](#)]

Yet it is my malady, not Siberia's, that rules conversations and headlines. I am too hot because of a persistent case of COVID-19, what its sufferers have begun calling "long COVID." Mine is one case among millions, a pace of infection that, like distant wildfires, will roar into fall. So perhaps it is no wonder that, from America, Eurasia's heat feels like an abstraction. Siberia and

its inhabitants are far; much suffering is close. How do we take in the ruptures of a burning world when our own bodies are alight?

My body has been alight for months now. From within this illness, I have come to think that Siberia and I endure more than a coincidence in temperature. Our fevers are stoked by related patterns of economic production, patterns both relatively new and seemingly inevitable. And my corporeal fire says something about how a continental fire can go unseen, offering a lesson in the implications of duration: how as a condition lingers, its origins or significance grow harder to see. Long COVID and climate change are alike in this: live ill for long enough, and the absence of health threatens to become normal.

Two summers ago, I was in Russia, on a comma of rocky

Bering Sea beach called Napkum Spit. It was August, the turquoise water free of ice and full of spotted seals. Far off, a gray whale spouted, its breath tracking a shimmering mist against the horizon.

North and south from this place, Indigenous kin and culture are nourished by hunts of grey and bowhead whales. For Yupik and Chukchi, peoples whose ancestors have lived along the Bering Sea for thousands of years, whales' flesh is food, their beings woven into the necessities and ceremonies of daily life. I was on Napkum Spit because of a different kind of whaling. My work as a historian had led me to the logbooks of the New England fleet, which began killing Bering Sea cetaceans in the 1840s. These sailors hunted whales for oil and baleen, to light homes and brace corsets where I now live, in Rhode Island, and all along the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. I wanted to see what marks remained in this whaling

ground.

I expected something tangible, even monumental. In 50 years, the Yankee fleet killed tens of thousands of whales. Around that loss, the Bering Sea ecosystem transformed, likely feeding more squid and fish in the ecological spaces once home to bowheads and grays. But these species were inaccessible to Yupik and Chukchi. By the 1880s, famine claimed families, then whole villages, many also suffering from epidemic diseases transported north by wooden ships.

Had I lived in Rhode Island then, I would have lit whale-oil lamps at dusk, with baleen cinching my ribs, and seen nothing of that suffering. A hundred and twenty years later, to one recently arrived on Napkum Spit from New England, the traces of commercial whaling were imperceptible still. There were no hulking shipwrecks, or graves, or mounds of whale skulls, only

that single whale spout on the horizon. The memorial to market killing is absence. The Yankee fleet ceased harrowing the waters off Siberia by 1900, yet bowhead and gray-whale populations are still shy of their former plenty. The only Bering Sea I have ever seen, the only one I can experience, would have seemed eerily bereft in 1840.

That same year, I visited an abandoned mining town to the southwest. Shakhtyorsky was a Soviet creation, wrested from the tundra's green sedges. A vein of lignite coal ran under the hills; miners, or *shakhtyory*, came here to peel away dirt, permafrost, and stone, then haul out fuel by the black, dusty ton. At its peak, the town was coated in a thin layer of grime, exhaled from the mines and the generators that powered heavy equipment. Coal dust stunted plant growth; coal heaps leached acid into streams. All around Shakhtyorsky, the process of extraction left the

earth hollow and pocked. In miniature, it did the same to human lungs. Years of breathing sulphur and black dust caused coal workers' pneumoconiosis, or black lung; in severe cases, lesions in the lung tissues necrotized, leaving empty, dead cavities. Yet had I flipped a switch powered by Shakhtyorsky coal in 1970, or 1980, I would have seen no sign of the scarred lands or bodies behind the light.

[Read: [America's coal consumption is in free fall](#)]

Napkum Spit and Shakhtyorsky are alike in this: they are monuments to how, in the 19th and 20th centuries, people of comparative wealth could consume parts of the Arctic—as they consumed Indian cotton, Caribbean sugar, Middle Eastern oil, South American bananas, and dozens of other products from distant parts of the world—at a remove from the costs of their manufacture. Long before COVID-19 turned grocery

stocking and Amazon delivery into dangerous work, consumption was healthier at a distance. And that severed use from consequence. If most Americans now pay little heed to Siberia's burn, perhaps it is because recent history has made material plenty and heedlessness coincident. Wealth is freedom not just from bearing the consequence of using up the world, but from paying attention to it.

That might have worked 200 years, ago, a century ago, even a lifetime ago. Today, the speed and intensity of 21st-century life erodes the space between the costs of production and the benefits of consumption. What starts far off in the Arctic—or in China, or anywhere—does not remain there. Or, put another way, the same dynamics that warm Siberia also warm me.

There are many examples of this, how burning trees and fossil fuels alter the composition of the

atmosphere while moving people and, with them, viruses. Modern agriculture, which turns petroleum into fertilizer, concentrates sites of possible infection and transmission between livestock and humans. Industrialization replaces animal homes with human ones, and with markets for fauna such as the bats that gave us this coronavirus. As loggers turn forests into furniture, they push more species into new intimacy with people. Deforestation also emits billions of tons of carbon each year. That carbon warms the planet more; a warmed planet forces more animals to move, which makes viral transfer more likely.

Siberia's wildfires are deforestation at an immense and terribly efficient scale. This year, about 50 million acres of forest and grasslands have already burned, more than a Greece's worth of plant life blown into a pall of smoke so massive it now

sits over Alaska and Washington State. A month of such burning releases as much carbon dioxide as a small country—Portugal, or Sweden—does in a year. No summer on record has seen less ice in the Arctic Ocean; the greatest losses are north of Russia's baking landmass, in the Barents and Laptev Seas. Ice at the poles anchors the stability of our climate. Even if we pay it no heed, this hot summer in Siberia is shifting the terms of what normal is out from under us all.

Playing host to the coronavirus for three months has made me think about normalcy—its shifty character, how it plays with my sense of time—and the drive to pretend that things are at stasis, despite all evidence indicating turmoil. My case of COVID-19 was never acute; I was not on a ventilator or even close, nor do I have the harsher ills of many long-haulers, who report roving

pain, memory loss, tachycardia. My experience of the virus has not been an event so much as a shift, erosion rather than earthquake. The most enduring symptom is a corporeal heat wave that shows no more sign of fully lifting than the warmth in northern Eurasia. As the weeks drag on, the hale clarity of my normal self is receding. Perhaps this is just what I am now: weaker, wan, soggy-brained.

An amazing and terrible thing about being human is how quickly we adapt to circumstances unthinkable just years, or months, or weeks in the past. The marine ecologist Daniel Pauly calls this the problem of “shifting baselines”: assuming that observations this year or this decade represent life at its most flourishing. A whaler fresh to the Bering Strait in 1850 saw thousands of bowheads; 50 years later, a new sailor might have assumed that the species was naturally scarce. A miner who came to Shakhtyorsky in 1980

would never breathe air free of coal dust. In April I assumed I could wake each morning and work 'til evening; now I route my days around my body's weather. People born in Siberia early this century have watched summers warm dramatically. Their children may never know it otherwise; unless carbon emissions halt, this year's average temperature in Siberia will likely be the norm at the century's end.

[Read: [This is your life on climate change](#)]

The danger of acceptance is in how ill it leaves bodies and the places they live. I am not well, at 99.8 degrees, or 99.2, or 100.1, even if those are the temperatures I experience more days than not. The swaths of Siberia choking in smoke are not well, nor are their people. But the very slowness, the week-in, week-out constancy of climate change or enduring infection, is lulling. It is tedious to tell people I am still sick. Sustaining alarm at a thousand

people dying in a day is more difficult in August than it was in April. Siberia is too hot, still, but it has not exceeded the record of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit set in July. A 98-degree afternoon in Verkhoyansk is now not an event; it is just a day. The phenomenal becomes mere background.

As summer tips toward autumn—an autumn in which there will be too little sea ice and too much virus—I do not want to forget the possibilities of my April self, or of Siberia without fire, or of whales by the tens of thousands. The need to build a society that cares for all, that does not let some hide in the safety of distance, has never been more acute. The habits of wealth need reconditioning to account for the real costs of consumption. These are forward-looking projects. My experience of this virus makes me think, however, that we should not forget a longer view, one able to see how the conditions of 2020 are not inevitable. The line

of heat that connects my body
and Siberia has existed for only a
few centuries. It is not inevitable.
Thinking past it, as this summer
of our many discontents moves
into fall, requires a kind of split
imagination: to conjure moments
of past flourishing, and a future
where we might flourish again.

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