

Amelia Bande

El Estallido / The Outbreak by Amelia Bande

On October 14, 2019 protests erupted in Santiago, Chile. For five days, public high-school students protested the rise of the subway cost by organizing massive fare evasions. By October 19, the uprising had gone beyond the subway price and the students. The entire city was in the street protesting. No specific political group took credit. It was a combination of exhaustion, fury and nothing else to lose. The facade of normalcy, of 30 years of democracy since the end of Pinochet's regime in 1990, was broken. Latin America's "strongest" economy showed the many leaks and failures of its capitalist experiment. My friends were in the street. My mom sent me and my siblings several reports via WhatsApp audio messages—we all live abroad. This one is from October 20:

Mis amores, here I am back home, what do you want me to say, yesterday was an unbelievable day. Everything started as just another protest and it ended with Santiago in flames. What else can I tell you? Piñera [the president] went to eat pizza with his grandson in Vitacura [a rich neighborhood], while Santiago burned away to then return to La Moneda [the government palace] and ordain a State of Emergency, sending the military to the streets. This is how things are. Very strange, very intense and today is a pseudo calm day, we are already with the emergency over us. We will see what happens. Everything was very surprising and people's anger was evident. I hope you are very well, I send you thousands of kisses, I love you very much, and I will see you all soon. That's it. Bye mis amores.

It didn't calm down. The whole country erupted. Buildings, car dealerships, subway and bus stations were burned down; toll plazas and highways were blocked; supermarkets were looted around the entire country. For the first time since 1987, a curfew was installed. Back then we were still under Pinochet. I was 10 years old and having the military in the

street was a daily occurrence. An ocean of barricades was the landscape over which my mother drove me home from school. Somehow those fires were never scary. I knew the barricade was on the right side of history.

By November, Chile was still up in flames. We saw videos that showed cops staging the fires and the looting. And so many videos of military and police shooting and abusing people in the streets, with reports of torture, rape, and people being illegally arrested.

A friend was shot on the face by police with a rubber bullet. We used to work together in a theater more than ten years ago. I wanted to know how she was doing. She sent me this audio:

Beautiful Amelia, I was in really bad shape, but I'm coming out of it. People send me so much love and that is a very concrete thing that nurtures you and saves you. I started the procedures in the National Institute for Human Rights. I'm documenting my injuries with the National Medical Association. I'm doing better every day, I'm going up like a plane. But I was not doing well. They were facing me and then they shot me, I saw it, it's a big trauma. I'm gonna press charges. That's what I'm doing. The situation is complex here, Amelia, if you could see it. You would not believe it. The imagination is not enough to see what I am seeing. But oh well. Okay. Let's fight with everything. Thank you my friend for thinking about me, you don't know how much it helps.



The protests in Santiago take place in Plaza Dignidad [ex Plaza Italia], a geographical circle with historical markers of class divide. Important avenues run from the Plaza south, west and east. The subway station Baquedano rests below,

usually a combination point between two of the main lines that direct workers back home, far out, to the city's periphery; it's been closed for months. On the top floor of a building by the Plaza there is an art gallery, Galería Cima. During those first days of protests back in October, they started filming the Plaza from up high. It became a 24/7 live broadcast on YouTube. When I was still in Brooklyn, their channel was a fundamental way of staying informed. After teaching my last class of the day, I would use the classroom's projector to connect myself to the protest, watching the multitudes of people, the smoke, the singing.

In December, after the semester ended, I flew to Santiago. Before going down to the Plaza I would always check on Galería Cima's channel to get a sense of the situation. I would text with friends: *Cops are not letting people come down / Looks like there's way too much teargas / They've regained the square! ok, see you there in 30!*

Galería Cima's daily archive—they are still filming and keeping all footage, even though the protests have been mostly interrupted by coronavirus quarantine policies—has served as an audiovisual document of the many clashes between cops and protesters. It's possible to study in detail the movements and strategies of cops in their effort to reduce the crowds. Like when they approached from all sides forcing people to jump to the Mapocho River. Or when they used that extra strong tear gas that made everybody throw up, the one that left clouds of green and yellow smoke. Or the time they water cannoned an ambulance, delaying the rescue of injured protester Abel Acuña, who ended up dying. From above, the camera provides a miniature record, a choreography of resistance. We see protesters raising their organization and defense mechanisms to maintain control of the Plaza regardless of police violence. Running through the alleys, throwing rocks that hit police trucks, people open up the doors to their houses. They are not scared of strangers.

The mob was suddenly a friend of the city, because it was the city who had come out to the streets to tear it all apart.



On March 4th I landed in Los Angeles, California. A short visit becomes a long term life change with the arrival of COVID-19. I know very well I fit in the high-risk category as someone with advanced lung disease. The priority is to keep myself as far as possible from exposure to the virus. Within this framework, I turn toward an extended shelter-in-place with no end date.

My friend goes to my room in Brooklyn and packs all my things to take to storage. She video calls me and we go through my paperwork. I need to decide what I want sent to me, but I don't know what things will matter.

I speak to my doctor. She recommends I postpone the start of an immunosuppressant treatment we had planned. I create a fictional balance where I tell myself I'm safe by not going to the hospital to get my routine tests. My health insurance does not cover me out of state. In reality I know I'm being told to neglect the treatment of this chronic illness. My window of tolerance is a mirror to other people's situations. I am one person facing certain consequences. I know these are amplified for others with less resources than me, or sicker than me. Deaths begin. They precipitate and mount vigorously, COVID-19 related or not.

I'm staying in a big house where my lover lives. We joke about being stuck with each other. Coronavirus propels our story forward without much of a choice. One day I fell to the floor from so much laughing, a good sign. If one thing, I will not reject love, not now. I surrender to this sweetness, allow myself to be cared for.

I find it difficult to track down traces of how I move over each surface. Who in the house went where and what were they in touch with? Are we going to keep a tab of everybody's intimacy footprint? I touch my face too much.



The mask appears. While I was in Chile, we wore masks and protective eye wear because of teargas and rubber bullets. I had all these masks with me from the protests there. Back in November, Chilean congress passed an anti-hoodie law, giving longer jail sentences to anybody covering their faces while disrupting social order. Now, it is required to cover our faces to go outside. A few weeks ago, a young mother in New York was arrested for *not* covering her face correctly.

As I finish writing, there are buildings up in flames in Minneapolis, following the massive outrage for the racist killing of George Floyd at the hands of four cops. Quarantines are being lifted nationwide and a new wave of infections is projected at some point. In the streets of Los Angeles, New York, Denver, St. Paul, Minneapolis, Atlanta, Phoenix, and Washington DC, people gather with signs and anger. Exhaustion is palpable. Social media is exploding in avalanches of campaigns and inspirational quotes on systemic racism. Cops in riot gear spray chemicals, military grade tear gas, shoot rubber bullets. Protesters protect themselves with make-shift shields. Lots of them wear masks. PPE is a new normal in times of a viral pandemic. My hope is that the mask will make it impossible to recognize their faces. I was worried yesterday seeing photos of young unmasked demonstrators celebrating the Minneapolis 3rd Precinct coming down in flames. That's always the silent aftermath of a protest, the arrest and later conviction of the protester for destroying property, public and private. Even if the fire was started by an undercover cop. Governments are juggling through different absurdities

of control. In the dissolution of categories, it's always the underdog who is killed.

The virus gives permission to restrict how much closeness is allowed and under which circumstances. Still, cops will use all bodily force to subdue a citizen if they decide their movement is disruptive. I see a cop throw a black man to the ground for not following social distancing practices. The cop wears no gloves, no mask, a definite arrest, an invasion of skin, risk of contagion, all to teach a lesson. It is painful to watch him enforce policies of public protection during a health emergency by breaking all the rules himself.

Safety and risk are a spectrum in which we exist and make decisions. I left the house one day to see a friend and I hugged her. I don't owe anyone an apology for this behavior. Maybe we spoke about what kind of practices we've both been following in order to minimize our exposures, maybe we didn't. It seemed safe to hug, I wanted to do it.

Health and sickness are a continuum too. There are no clear-cut borders between the healthy and the sick. We are all both things, at all times, in different stages of thriving or decay. The more visible my disability becomes, the less I can escape a public assessment of my health.

When the *estallido* happened in Chile, those fighting the police directly were called *Primera Linea*, a First Line of bodies against reprisal. These revolts were happening simultaneously in many places worldwide. When the pandemic came, we had to conceive of our bodies differently, still in a type of warzone. Medical workers tending to the coronavirus are called First Responders. Both the protest and the hospital are scenarios of body exposure. In such physical vulnerability, interdependence is what propels us into awareness and survival.

I've been curiously rubbing my heart against the limits and texture of nostalgia, things I've lost in the past few months. I don't know if this is productive. When the violence we encounter is systemic and global, we become fugitives, running away from the threat that keeps biting our feet in all places. What I know is that self-care alone won't keep my neighbor alive. I want to say *hi* to you and ask, *what do you need, how can I help?*

There's an empty spot, it gets activated when we text each other. A reaction of closeness, despite actual distance. We create lines between us, to remain together, not only for storytelling or anecdotes, more like electric signals of connection, a photo you took of some dish you made, a song I sing on a Zoom call, a package that arrives from the pharmacy with my medication, all of that money donated to the bail funds, the dykes everywhere and their mutual aid, our acts of solidarity not being enough, to drive your friend to the testing site, the flowers you picked up for me on your walk, and the flames, the burning, all those buildings coming down, the fear, the rage, our faces, our love for each other.