

BACKCHANNELS

FOR WRITERS, ARTISTS, AND READERS

On Standing in Line by William Thompson

Pre-COVID, lines were hard. Now that COVID determines how we interact, how we assemble, how we negotiate public spaces, I'm more lost than ever. But COVID doesn't consider age, sex, gender, ethnicity, or anything else. And it doesn't care that I'm blind. And it doesn't care how it affects my life.

It's COVID that has placed these barriers between me and those people who give me coffee, or eggs, or anything else I need to buy. And it's COVID that makes lines harder than ever.

Pre-COVID

It's coffee. It shouldn't be so difficult. I'm always somewhat awkward and self-conscious in lineups, concerned I'm going to offend the person in front of me. But it's a lineup, not a fucking accessibility issue.

This one's a straight line, more or less. This is good. If it were winding or wandering, it would be more difficult. Stanchions and flat, nylon strips direct this crowd.

Businesses understand lines. They want people in lines—each waiting his, her, or their turn, keeping order, keeping things polite. But lineups aren't just a human thing, I think, as I find the end of the line. Penguins line up, don't they?

In the coffee line, I shuffle sideways. I check my phone for the third time—this gives me something to do as I wait. I teach at a university, so chances are I'm behind a student.

I have developed a kind of trick for this coffee line. If I face the counter, then I'm shuffling to my left as the line moves. If I bump this person, then I'm doing so with my shoulder—I can usually feel proximity through my jacket, which helps me keep my distance.

I'm finally at the cash—two cashiers stand behind the counter taking orders. It's easier to wait here because I can stand by a display of drinks—expensive water, probably—and wait until the cashier calls me forward. They know me, so they watch and let me know when it's my turn.

The person who was ahead of me in line steps up. It's a young woman—definitely a student. She orders a caramel latte and a goat cheese and bacon bun.

Fuck, I think, it's 9:00 in the morning. I just want my black coffee.

Post-COVID

Thanks, COVID. You've made my line-life harder. And not just lines—any public space is now punctuated with signs and marks and lines on the floor. I suddenly don't know where I can walk.

You kept us all at home for months, then you backed off—ever so slightly. People venture out, back into stores and back into malls. They emerge like timorous mice onto a plowed field. And many people are masked. Social distancing is keeping us all two metres apart, which doesn't always work in tight places. I use this term automatically now—social distancing—the thing we have to do now, our new public responsibility. I'm still getting used to this phrase. I'd only said it for the first time this spring, as government and health professionals told people how to respond to the pandemic. But if I'm out on my own, I can't always maintain this new required space. But I like space—space around me, space between me and other people. But this isn't the same, and I'm having a hard time understanding the difference.

As the world opens up in June and July, it's clear where COVID has left its mark. Lines on the floor—go this way, not that, signs telling people where to stand, where to walk, where to line up.

If I'm on my own, I have to ask, or use my judgement, and I'm more anxious than ever about getting too close, about literally crossing a line.

It's August. Our city passes a bylaw—masks in all public places. I'm relieved, somehow. I wear my mask. But something else is

happening now. I quickly realize, especially the first couple of times I return to the university, that wearing a mask somehow interferes with my ability to navigate the world. This is especially disconcerting on the train platform. Somehow, the mask is fucking with my way of perceiving the world. Call it my echolocation. I'm feeling more blind than ever. I fell off the train platform once, walked right off the edge and fell onto the tracks. I fractured two ribs with that trick. I don't want to do that again.

I visit the university in August. I have to get buzzed in by security. It's like visiting a prison. Inside, the place is like a tomb. And even once the term starts in September, the buildings are empty. We're all mostly teaching online now. Again, the signs. The signs are everywhere, directing traffic, moving people down one hall and up another. I have to ask about these signs; otherwise, I'm going to walk in the wrong direction.

And my coffee lineup is still there. It's a ragged, extended line, with at least two metres between me and the next person. In some ways this is worse. How am I supposed to tell if someone two metres ahead of me is moving up in line?

I walk slower, now, wherever I am. I pay more attention. I listen harder, giving people the room they need. But it's still early days—we're only eight months into this pandemic. It looks like COVID will be here for a while—but who knows. And even when COVID is not leading the news and forming the chief topic of conversation, it will leave behind its marks—the signs, the lines on the floor, these generously spaced lineups of people whose lives will, in many small ways, never be the same again.

And I'm spending less time joining lines. I walk outside, where I don't need to wear a mask, where I can hear people coming, and where the only lines I have to worry about are the familiar lines of road and sidewalk and grass verge. And I walk; I walk and walk, appreciating this space, this open, generous space undefined by pandemic lines or the anxiety that comes with proximity.

William Thompson's essays have appeared in Hippocampus Magazine, Ponder Review, Wanderlust Journal, Zone 3, and COG Magazine. He is totally blind and teaches children's literature for MacEwan University in Edmonton, Canada. He also maintains a blog at www.OfOtherWorlds.ca. He considers coffee a food group, and he loves to walk and read, usually at the same time.