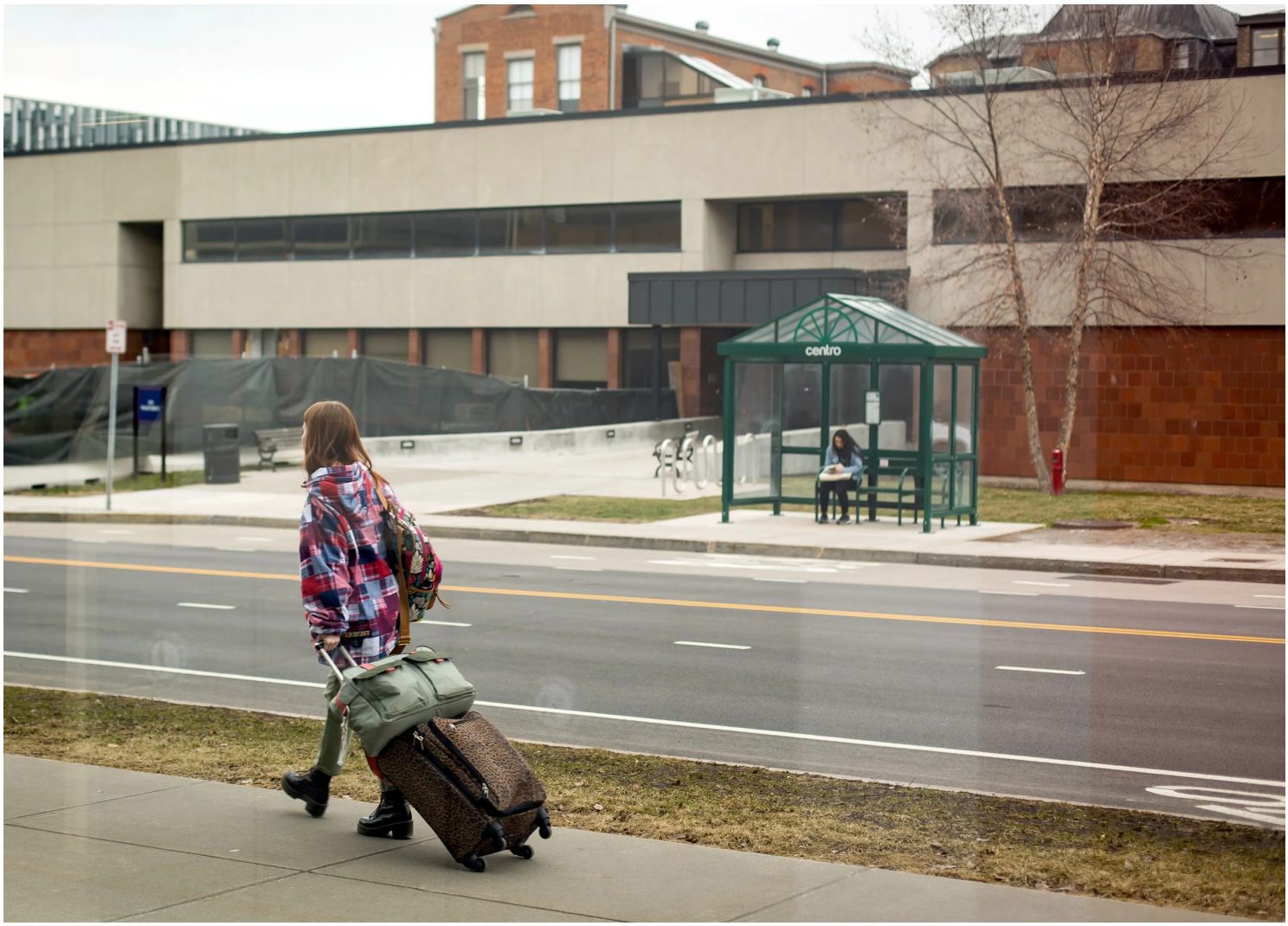
PAGE-TURNER

A LETTER TO MY STUDENTS AS WE FACE THE PANDEMIC

By George Saunders

April 3, 2020



A woman carries her belongings on the campus of Syracuse University on March 12th as students prepared for spring break and an extended period of online classes owing to the coronavirus pandemic.

Photograph by Maranie Staab / Reuters

Jeez, what a hard and depressing and scary time. So much suffering and anxiety everywhere. (I saw this bee happily buzzing around a flower yesterday and felt like, Moron! If you only knew!) But it also occurs to me that this is when the world needs our eyes and ears and minds. This has never happened before here (at least not since 1918). We are (and especially you are) the generation that is going to have to help us make sense of this and recover afterward. What new forms might you invent, to fictionalize an event like this, where all of the drama is happening in private, essentially? Are you keeping records of the e-mails and texts you're getting, the thoughts you're having, the way your hearts and minds are reacting to this strange new way of living? It's all important. Fifty years from now, people the age you are now won't believe this ever happened (or will do the sort of eye roll we all do when someone tells us something about some crazy thing that happened in 1970.) What will convince that future kid is what you are able to write about this, and what you're able to write about it will depend on how much sharp attention you are paying now, and what records you keep.

Also, I think, with how open you can keep your heart. I'm trying to practice feeling something like, "Ah, so this is happening now," or "Hmm, so this, too, is part of life on Earth. Did not know that, universe. Thanks so much, stinker."

And then I real quick try to pretend that I didn't just call the universe a "stinker."

I did a piece once where I went to live incognito in a homeless camp in Fresno for a week. Very intense, but the best thing I heard in there was from this older guy from Guatemala, who was always saying, "Everything is always keep changing." Truer words were never spoken. It's only when we expect solidity—non-change—that we get taken by surprise. (And we always expect solidity, no matter how well we know better.)

Well, this is all sounding a little preachy, and let me confess that I'm not taking my own advice. At all. It's all happening so fast. Paula has what we are hoping is just a bad cold, and I am doing a lot of inept caregiving. Our dogs can feel that something weird is going on. ("No walk? AGAIN?!") But I guess what I'm trying to say is that the world is like a sleeping tiger and we tend to live our lives there

on its back. (We're much smaller than the tiger, obviously. We're like Barbies and Kens on the back of a tiger.) And now and then that tiger wakes up. And that is terrifying. Sometimes it wakes up and someone we love dies. Or someone breaks our heart. Or there's a pandemic. But this is far from the first time that tiger has come awake. He/she has been doing it since the beginning of time and will never stop doing it. And always there have been writers to observe it and (later) make some sort of sense of it, or at least bear witness to it. It's good for the world for a writer to bear witness, and it's good for the writer, too. Especially if she can bear witness with love and humor and, despite it all, some fondness for the world, just as it is manifesting, warts and all.

All of this is to say: there's still work to be done, and now more than ever.

There's a beautiful story about the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. Her son was arrested during the Stalinist purges. One day, she was standing outside the prison with hundreds of other women in similar situations. It's Russian-cold and they have to go there every day, wait for hours in this big open yard, then get the answer that, today and every day, there will be no news. But every day they keep coming back. A woman, recognizing her as the famous poet, says, "Poet, can you write *this*?" And Akhmatova thinks about it a second and goes: "Yes."

I wish you all the best during this crazy period. Someday soon, things will be back to some sort of normal, and it will be easier to be happy again. I believe this and I hope it for each one of you. I look forward to seeing you all again and working with you. And even, in time, with sufficient P.P.E., giving you a handshake or hug.

Please feel free to e-mail anytime, for any reason.

George

Author's note: I wrote this letter quickly and sent it out. Later I was able to find the actual Akhmatova quote, from her poem "Requiem":

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with

lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):

"Can you describe this?"

And I said: "I can."

Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.

That last line is, maybe, the real point of the anecdote—Akhmatova's confidence gave this unknown and tormented woman some measure of comfort.

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George Saunders first contributed to The New Yorker in 1992. His book "Lincoln in the Bardo: A Novel" won the Man Booker Prize in 2017.

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