

Sep 29

## Sheltering in a Weird Place

*Over the spring and summer, Dr. Randy Lewis collected small essays and bits of writing on quarantine in Austin. He is graciously allowing us to republish some of those essays here. This first contribution is the introduction to the series, from Dr. Lewis himself.*

### Editor's Introduction

What are you seeing, thinking, feeling during this time of quarantine? To understand how we are muddling through an unprecedented moment in our city's history, I sought out short bits of writing that could form a collective sketch of Austin during the pandemic. Below you will find some incredible writing from all sorts of people: some dark musings; some hopeful visions; some comical takes. They're like dispatches from a surreal battlefield—people cooped up, waiting, goofing off, scared out of their minds, lonely, going broke, thwarted, cautiously optimistic, and a thousand other feelings that are bubbling up in neighborhoods under the violet crown.

Why here? With a focus on how things are changing, transforming, and dying in the fastest growing city in the US, *The End of Austin* is a pretty good place to wrestle with the pandemic blues. Since 2013 we've published more than 90 articles that have garnered almost 250,000 page views from Bhutan to Finland. For funding reasons (I used to have an editorial collective of UT American Studies students but am now a one man band) we have been mostly quiet for the last two years, but the covid crisis provided a spark to get us into gear again. Two weeks ago, while struggling to assemble a long-overdue issue, I saw an opportunity to use this space for conversation and commiseration about living through a tense moment in a city known for being laid-back, funky, and upbeat. The weather may be perfect, but people are suffering, some more than others, and parts of civic life seem unrecognizable. Rather than working out at the gym or gathering for drinks and music, we spend our days largely inside, shut off from other people, often with a painful new awareness of our body's fragility. Often excluded from our city's cult of exuberant youth, older Austinites are now at the center of our

thoughts, along with the immunocompromised and the uninsured. If we are lucky enough to still have jobs and houses, we work and wait at home, watching too much news and reaching out to old friends online. Meanwhile the streets are quieter than ever. Restaurants, bars, and clubs are silent, the music has stopped, and the traffic has been cut in half. Friends tell me that the air feels cleaner, though I haven't noticed. I have noticed how grateful people are for small interactions: self-isolation means that the dog walk becomes an important opportunity to smile at strangers, even from beneath a mask, and to check on neighbors from a good six feet away. *Six feet away or six feet under*—that should be the motto of these anxious weeks in sunbelt semi-quarantine.

No one knows what the city will feel like after the pandemic, and no one can say how long it will take for life to feel normal again. And not everyone wants to return to the old status quo. With the pandemic highlighting the grim disparities around us, some Austinites are hoping that something better will emerge after our months inside. Whatever it is, I suspect the city will feel different, maybe in ways that our writers have captured below. Their small impressions of life during pandemic might even help you process your own Austin story, one that was never supposed to include an ominous word like “quarantine,” or a numbing focus on the news coverage about an invisible contagion. Yet here we are, wondering if this is the End of Austin as we have known it, wondering how to stay healthy and sane, wondering how to keep ourselves afloat without the usual money coming in, and perhaps wondering what kind of good could come out of something so bleak.

This week I took some comfort from an interview with the novelist Anne Tyler, who was asked if she had difficulty being optimistic right now as the country recedes into ill-health in more ways than one. “Not up close, if you know what I mean,” she said. “Up close you’ll always see things to be optimistic about.” I agree. So let’s look closely at the city from some creative angles that come from artists, photographers, retailers, retirees, stylists, students, professors, engineers, and others; let’s keep sharing our impressions and experiences with one another; let’s offer commentary and feedback to these terrific writers; and most importantly, let’s all stay safe, healthy, connected, hopeful, and weird. There is solidarity in solitude and even in suffering, if we know how to reach for it.

— [Randy Lewis](#), Editor, EndofAustin.com



Introversion and Social  
Distancing

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student Zoya Brumberg  
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