

Songs for the Struggling Artist 2020



Songs for the Struggling Artist 2020

Emily Rainbow Davis

Made Possible by the Generosity
of my 2020 Patreon Patrons:

Kim Beard, Agathe David-Weill, Bill Davis, Tim Davis, Scott Dinsmore, Johan Enfeldt, Millie Fife, Michael Harren, Shannon Harvey, Carol Lashof, Wendy Luedtke, Sevrin Mason, Andy Moysenko, Eleanor O'Brien, Allison Plamondon, Dan Renkin, Benjamin Salazar, Kerry-Fleur Schleifer, Donna Shaunesey, Kathleen Standard, Van Svenson, Andrew Troth, RM Weiner, Lizzie Andrews Wright and Sara Zimmerman

Songs for the Struggling Artist Table of Contents

All the Times I Wrote My Last Thing	1
Terry Gilliam in the Toaster Oven	3
There Will Never Be a Gen X President?	6
The Other Currency in Theatre Economics	9
Something About Warren	13
A Bereft, Heartbroken, Furious, Hopeless, Bad Mood	17
Performing Arts Going Dark	24
Toilet Paper and Art	27
You Don't Have to Write Your Lear. Or Your Venus and Adonis Even.	30
Digital Gentrification and Ontological Insecurity	33
The World I Imagined When I was a Teen	35
We Tried Asking Nicely	37
A View from a Small Apartment in NYC	41
Favorite Sons and Unicorns	45
The Benefits of No One Caring About Your Work	49
Do You Have Power?	51
Frustrated Artists and Tyrants	54
2020 in Review	57



All the Times I Wrote My Last Thing

As I thumbed through the first draft of the zine that I make every year for my Patreon patrons, I thought “I actually wrote some good stuff this year.” In the same breath, I thought “That’s probably all I have. I’ve written all the best things. The well has run dry. I’ve just been coasting the last month and I don’t see how I could possibly get my mojo back. It was nice while it lasted but all I have left to write are sad documentary posts about the rejections I receive.”

I’d worry that I was in the middle of writer’s block if I hadn’t felt this same way many times before. I have felt this way and then a few months later, wrote something I was very proud of. It is normal, in fact, when you’re not feeling particularly inspired to be convinced that that feeling is permanent and you will never be inspired again. I felt it when I finished my novel. I feel it whenever I finish a play. I feel it about a couple of times a year with the blogs. Every time I write a song, I’m sure it’s the last one. Last year, I wrote a lullaby, brushed off my hands and said, “That was a good one to end on.” But just a few weeks ago, I wrote a song for the year’s final podcast.

I don’t know why this is a pattern. But I don’t think I’m alone in this. The fear of dry wells may have something to do with respecting the capriciousness of the muses. They’re not always going to show up and they’re not going to always give you your best. Sometimes I write good things. Sometimes I write mediocre things. On some bad days I write bad things. I show up at the page every day and write something whether I feel inspired or not. Sometimes something that I think is pretty routine catches fire in someone else’s imagination and goes. Sometimes I write something that I think is marvelous and it disappears like a puff of smoke.

I know it is not up to me to decide what is good or bad or even what comes out of me. I just write and release. I make the paper airplanes and float them out the window. Sometimes they fly because I’ve expertly crafted them but most times they fly because a powerful breeze appeared at just the right moment. I won’t stop making my planes just because I don’t feel inspired. I often feel that the plane in my hands will be my last...but it never is. I’ve made enough Final Planes to know that I probably won’t make my final final one until I make my final one, if you know what I mean.

Anyway – if you’re sure your well has run dry and you’ve made your final piece of art, just know that I understand, I sympathize and I don’t believe it for a second. It’s not over til it’s over.



Terry Gilliam in the Toaster Oven

“Mum! Dad! It’s evil! Don’t touch it!”

This is the final line of one of my all time favorite movies, Time Bandits. I loved Time Bandits as a child and in the many subsequent viewings of it, as an adult, it has not diminished in my estimation. It is a delightful film made by one of my favorite film-makers.

And I didn’t just love Terry Gilliam’s Time Bandits, no. I also admired his Brazil, The Fisher King, and even his relatively unknown and under-appreciated, Tideland. Tideland is a deep cut in the Gilliam oeuvre and I was a big fan.

After reading his interview in The Independent, to say that I’m disappointed in him is a massive understatement. I’d heard he’d said some pigheaded garbage before but this was sustained pigheaded garbage. This was relentless pigheaded garbage.

As a feminist, I found it pigheaded enough to never want to hear from or see him again. I’d honestly prefer to have read his obituary than to have read his opinions on #MeToo. If it had been his obituary, I’d have cried and mourned the loss of his brilliant mind. As it stands, I guess I have to re-evaluate everything he ever made. Why, Terry Gilliam, why?!

Listen, he’s never been a particularly woman-friendly artist – but he hasn’t been actively terrible either. Sure, there are only a few women in Time Bandits but the main ones are Shelley Duvall and Katherine Helmond and they are remarkable. I didn’t mind that Time Bandits was a boy’s story. I really didn’t. It was perfect. The battle between Good and Evil, a test of the system, as it were, featuring an adorable kid and six hilarious thieves. But now that it’s clear that Gilliam has no idea that women are human, I’m going to have to sit in some discomfort. I don’t think I will love Time Bandits any less but I have to love it knowing the man who made it thinks that Me-Too is a witch hunt, that Weinstein’s rape victims chose to be assaulted and that white men are the real victims here. The man who made some of my favorite films is basically an MRA. (Men’s Rights Activists are not actually activists for men. They’re the folks who bring us many violent acts against women and some incredibly toxic thinking.) Gilliam’s become like the chunk of pure burning coal sitting in the toaster oven at the end of Time Bandits. Poisonous and Vile. I’m finding it particularly difficult to reconcile.

It’s not as if I haven’t had to reconcile this sort of thing before. I could probably still recite whole Bill Cosby routines from his albums. I was a fan of Louis CK. I have appreciated some Roman Polanski films. And, unlike those guys, we have no actual terrible deeds from Sir Terry. We just have his terrible thoughts. And his terrible thoughts suggest that he thinks my entire worldview is ridiculous. His terrible thoughts suggest that he has never thought of women as anything more than sex objects or archetypes. His terrible thoughts suggest that he thinks the systemic oppression of women and people of color are a joke. It breaks my Time Bandit loving heart.

It also strikes me as impossibly stupid. Because I am his fan base. I am his audience. And he just lost me. Who will go see his movie now? All of 4Chan? The darkest reaches of Reddit? The incel chat boards? Is that who he wants for his audience? I’m sure as hell not going to see his movie now and I’m sure I’m not alone in being suddenly very disinterested in what he’s made.

It matters what he says and thinks. If I’m going to go sit in a movie theatre and spend a couple of hours in the world someone created, I want to trust the mind of the person who made it. I wouldn’t go see a Brett Ratner or Bryan Singer movie. I no longer want to sit through the work of Woody Allen. The writer/director’s thoughts are intimately connected to the work they make. I know because I do those things onstage. If you don’t like how I think, you won’t like my creative work. How I think is intrinsic to how I make things. That’s true for most artists.

The upsetting thing about this Gilliam situation is not that Gilliam said some dumb shit and may now be canceled, it’s that he’s revealed himself to be the opposite of what I imagined him to be. Instead of a hero of creativity and bold imagination, he’s a stinky old dinosaur reinforcing the patriarchy. And he must have been all along, in such subtle ways, even I, who am very vigilant about these things, failed to sniff him out.

I have found myself re-evaluating much of his work through this newly revealed lens of his. I’m looking for the dark threads of misogyny and racism that must have been there all along before he laid them bare. I’m also working hard to somehow explain what feels inexplicable. I think, “Oh, he’s just trying to be funny. He’s enjoying being provocative. He’s purposefully sounding like an asshole because he enjoys making mischief. He is doing that classic buffoon style of clowning or something.” This is how I’ve explained away countless other asshole clowns but I don’t think it’s an in-the-past explanation that can fly anymore. I mean – it may explain the why but the why doesn’t matter.

It doesn't matter why, in *Time Bandits*, Kevin's parents reach in to the toaster oven after they are warned by their son not to. It doesn't matter if they ignore his pleas to not touch the evil because they are contrary or because they always ignore him or because they think it's funny. They reach in and touch the evil and the consequences are predictable.

Gilliam has surely been warned not to touch the evil in the toaster oven (he's said some dumb things before) but in the end, he just couldn't resist. To predictable and Gilliam has surely been warned not to touch the evil in the toaster oven (he's said some dumb things before) but in the end, he just couldn't resist. To predictable and sad results.

But what does it matter? Why not just enjoy the films I used to like and forget about the man that made them? Well, it's actually important that I look at this and not just forget about either Gilliam himself or his work. I have to dig in to some reflection on it because his work was so formative for me. I can draw a direct line from *Time Bandits*, from Gilliam's sense of humor, from his aesthetic, to my own work. I can see the threads of his influence in a lot of my plays and fiction. I may have unconsciously interwoven some of the threads of his misogyny or racism along with his aesthetic. Unfortunately, learning what he really thinks about things means I have to be extra vigilant about the foundations of my own work. He was important to me when I was a child and has continued to be important. I can't just brush off this development. It is a great loss and it will be a great project of reorganization. Even though it's evil, I still have to look at it. I will not touch it, though! I know better than that!



There Will Never Be Gen X President?

A few months ago, a friend sent me an article about Gen X and the presidency that was in the *Financial Times*. (Write a whole series on Gen X, people will send you Gen X articles.) In the article – the millennial writer expresses his admiration for Generation X while simultaneously declaring that we are about to miss our shot to have one of our own become president. I started to write something about it but then I let it go. It seemed to just be a fleeting inconsequential opinion piece in the *Financial Times*. I can't catch every single bit of silly Gen X-ery that floats by!

But then this idea came up again in a Gen X themed interview on the Brian Lehrer show. The guest host asked Ada Calhoun (author of *Why We Can't Sleep*, a book on Gen X women) about this idea that we'll never have a Gen X president and I got mad. Not because we won't have a Gen X president. I don't really care about that one way or another. But what I did get upset about is the weird ageism or bias that's built into that assumption.

I also got mad because I bought it for a second. For a second, I thought it was real. That we really had missed our Gen X presidency shot. I mean, sure, I can see how Beto O'Rourke would be a classic Gen X president. Cory Booker was a little more corporation-friendly than the typical Gen X-er – but he literally ran into a burning building to save someone back when he was mayor of Newark. I liked his chances of saving us in a burning country. And I was very very sad when we lost honorary Gen X-er Kamala Harris in this race. (She's just on the cusp being born in 1964.) I had no idea that Julian Castro was Gen X until just now and now I'm doubly sorry he's left the race. But this election is not our only shot.

I don't know if you noticed but we've got a lot of old folks running for President these days. Who's to say some Gen X-er won't win the presidency at age 80? We've got decades to deliver a presidential candidate. I mean, before I float this next idea, I need you to know that there is no world wherein I would like for this to happen – but Ted Cruz (a Gen X-er, I'm a sorry to say) could run for president in his 80s and in a cockamamie enough world, people could elect him. (Please, no!) What's this assumption that it's all over about? Is it the fear that we'll be skipped again? That we'll have a millennial president before we get a Gen X one?

Yeah. Sure. We could. But – whatever, you know? I'd be delighted to have Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez before Paul Ryan. Go on, Ilhan Omar, Lauren Underwood, Xochitl Torres Small and Katie Hill. Step on ahead my millennial goddesses!

But... the door isn't closed for us. I mean – Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Tlaib, and Katie Porter are all Gen X mega-stars and I'd love to see any one of them with a shot at the presidency at some point. (Maybe we can get Julian Castro next time?) I get that we're all in the middle of a pretty brutal U curve and it really does pretty much feel like this is the end for us. Gen X men are knocking themselves off in droves and Gen X women can't sleep. I see why this bias exists. Most of the dominant voices of our generation are dead – so of course it's hard to imagine ourselves as old.

But we don't have to be president right now. I'm guessing most of us aren't interested. Given the current one in office, I'm not sure the presidency is quite the pinnacle of accomplishment it once was. But maybe, if we can survive past this year, we can prepare for a Gen X presidency in the year 2032. Or, you know, whatever.

Really, though, I give no shits about whether or not we get a Gen X president. The position has been a bit devalued these last couple of years and I'm not sure it's worth the wanting. But the conversation around it matters because of the ways it reveals our thinking around stuff like this.

I think a lot of us think the game is over because a) we have some kind of intense generational nihilistic tendencies and b) we grew up in a youth culture, not unlike every other generation still alive. Ever since The Who hoped to die before they got old, we've all seemed to think that was a reasonable position to take. The culture glamorizes youth and sends the old out to pasture and here we see the evidence that somehow if we fail to elect a Gen X president in 2020, we will have missed our shot.

Now – the nihilist in me can fully understand that 2020 may in fact be the last election we ever have at all – but in that case, all the generations have lost – not just Gen X.

But like I said, this isn't really about the presidency. This is about counting us out across the board. It's not over just because our youth is over. People can accomplish great things in their 40s and 50s just like they could in their 20s and 30s. And they can go on to accomplish great things in their 60s and 70s and even their 80s and 90s and on. This notion of having missed our shot is incredibly damaging. It sneaks in to most of us, this sense that it's all over now. We are vital. We are potent. We can do whatever any other generation can do. Come on now.

even their 80s and 90s and on. This notion of having missed our shot is incredibly damaging. It sneaks in to most of us, this sense that it's all over now. We are vital. We are potent. We can do whatever any other generation can do. Come on now.

There are decades to come for the Gen X-ers who can hang in there. One of them could be president. It might mean less or more by then but it could happen. Don't count us out yet. We've got decades until you can say there will never be a Gen X president. Talk to me about this again in fifty years. That's when I'll concede the point.



The Other Currency in Theatre Economics

When I write a new play, I'll usually gather a group of friends together, give them wine and snacks and we'll read it. It's a great way for me to hear what's on the page and for us all to see one another. Every time, someone says, "We should do this more often."

Because a large portion of my network has largely left town to go raise their kids or whatever, I am always trying to add new people. Those people will go on to be the people I recommend when asked for actors. They'll become the people I ask to join me if/when I get stuck into a bigger project. Fundamentally, it's a way to get to know one another in a low stakes, pleasant, creative atmosphere – which is, of course, the way I like to work. It's not a financial transaction. I make it clear I can't pay anyone and people self select for the experience.

I am not alone in this sort of methodology. Almost no writer has the resources on their own to fund a paid developmental reading in a living room. And even if they could, there are reasons not to. Those reasons have to do with the alternate currency that flows alongside money in the making of theatre – and possibly in the other arts as well. The alternate currency is essentially Good Will and it is just as easily lost and gained as money. It's not explicit but it can make all the difference in the world between getting a gig and not.

I started to think about this when I invited an actor to join me for one of these living room readings. They said they were interested but that they could no longer do things for free and would need some sort of payment. This message made me feel bad. It also means that I will never approach that actor again – first, because they made me feel bad and second, because they clearly do not understand a fundamental truth about the theatre business.

Now, let me pause to say that I am a fierce advocate for artists getting paid. I am sympathetic to the need for money and a desire to be paid for your work. I understand that there are a lot of people out there trying to avoid doing the right thing and I know that sometimes folks have to agitate to be valued. The need for money prevents artists from being able to do their work and if their art is not paying them, then they lose double. But I actually do fight to pay artists on every rehearsed project I do. I am transparent about what is possible, that I will fight to pay them and then I do. That's just policy. It's important. I do try like hell to put my fundraising money where my mouth is.

But – that said – a thing like a living room reading is not really part of that stream of economics. A living room reading is for social currency. It's for building good will. Instead of running auditions, we can get to know one another in a creative context and relaxed social setting. The actors have done me a favor by showing up and reading the words I wrote down and I will return it the next time someone asks me if I know any actors who are a real pleasure to work with.

Conversely, if someone asked me if I knew the actor I invited who asked to be paid when I've explicitly said there was no money, I'd tell them that story since that's all I know.

The sad thing about this is how this talented actor will never know this. As my friend said, they "probably read one of those books or listened to one of those entrepreneur gurus who told them to VALUE THEMSELVES and NEVER WORK FOR FREE and now they're making their stand at a living room soiree read, where all they're doing is shooting themselves in the foot. Nobody pays for these things. No one. Tony winning actors read my stuff for free all the time. Only the novices don't know that the building up of these experiences is how you actually have a career."

I'm not sure I knew this back when I was acting. I very possibly could have made similarly self-defeating stands back in the day. Maybe I lost gigs because I didn't understand what things were social currency and what were for literal currency. I wish someone had explained it to me. I wish someone had explained it to this actor. Actors get caught up in the world of agents and casting directors and can end up worrying only about who can get them an agent. They don't realize that agents and casting directors can't give them a job. Writers and directors give actors jobs. Agents exist to introduce you to writers and directors who are putting on shows.

Would you rather spend two minutes in front of a director whose eyes are getting blurry after seeing two hundred actors at an audition or three hours with them, doing a whole play and chatting over wine? I know which one I'd choose.

Is it all gold? No, of course not. You might have to turn up at 100 crappy readings before you find good work or people who you hope to work with in the future. But today's writer of a crappy play, might be tomorrow's writer of a hit play or TV series or whatever. You don't know.

The not knowing is why the social currency is not as simple as the economic currency. It's not transactional. It's not quid pro quo. It's not like, "You read a play for me, I recommend something for you." And it's not even like putting money in a special currency bank. It's more like growing a garden of wildflowers than anything. You have to scatter the seeds in a wide variety of places in a wide variety of conditions to allow for the possibility of some growth. You don't know what kind of seeds they are or what they need to grow, you don't know if they need wet or dry soil – so you just need to scatter those seeds far and wide. Showing up at things like readings are a way to scatter those seeds. A guy who read a play in my living room a few years ago just had his face on the side of a giant building on 42nd Street for his hit TV show. Those things have nothing to do with one another, really, aside from the fact that I know how widely that actor scattered those wildflower seeds.

Life in the theatre may seem short and transient but if you're lucky, it's long and full of unexpected connections. The relationships you nurture now may have surprising results later in life. There are many people I never would have thought would find success but did (and vice versa, of course). The more you care for and develop relationships now, the more likely those people will be to go out on a limb for you or fight to have you be part of their payday gig. This is why you don't fight for \$25 from writers and directors now – so that they'll fight to have you for much more than \$25 in the future. You want your voice to be in a writer's head, you want your cadence to be the cadence a director imagines when she envisions the show on Broadway or wherever. The writer and the director are the people who could, in the future, give you a job. People pay agents and casting directors to audition in front of them but those people cannot hire you. They can only put you in front of a writer or director who can hire you. Why not skip the middle man, read a play, drink some wine and show up as a hero for someone who might get you a gig in the future. You might not end up with your picture on the side of a building, but you'll hopefully have a good time and meet some nice people.

That's the best thing about theatre, really. If you're missing the social currency, you're focused on the wrong currency. Even the most successful writer who's auditioning actors for their hit show still wants people who like them or their show enough to want to do it for free. At that point, of course, no one's doing it for free anymore but beginning with social currency is always a good idea, even in the paying world. Have snacks with writers. Have wine with directors. Just go.



Something About Warren

About a month ago, I saw a tweet that made me sob for much longer than I expected a tweet could. The tweet featured a photo of a little plastic action figure nestled into a child's bed. It reads, in part:

I found my 5yo daughter's Elizabeth Warren action figure in her bed when I was making it this morning. When I asked her why, she said "I was scared and she makes me feel brave".

Because the thing of it is, Elizabeth Warren makes me feel brave, too. I am in solid agreement with this small child. I haven't felt brave in such a long time but something about Warren gives me hope and strength and a sense that safety could come again.

I know not everyone feels this way about her. It's clear from how the primaries have been going so far that a lot of people feel safer with other candidates. That's their choice, of course, but I feel as though I'm watching the possibility of a braver, safer world slip through our fingers. I know 95% of us haven't voted yet and there's still hope but I'm scared. I need an Elizabeth Warren action figure to make me brave again.

I'm continually surprised at the misogyny and sexism that continues to bubble up on the regular. I'd thought we'd sort of hit the apex of virulent misogyny after the last presidential election but there's still so much to go around. If you've somehow missed the multitude of articles pointing at the bizarre erasure of Warren in media polls, news, etc – take a stroll down google lane and you will find many a think piece that has been largely ignored by more mainstream media.

The latest bit of nonsense that is really getting under my skin was a hashtag that was trending suggesting that Warren should drop out. I've seen a lot of tweets that suggested that if Warren were really progressive she would drop out and support Bernie. This makes my blood boil so hard. Because I've been reading Rebecca Traister's book about the 2008 election season, and, let me tell you, we have been to this exact same rodeo before.

Back then, very early on, people went on and on about how Hillary should drop out and support Obama – which, of course, she did do, eventually, once the votes were in. But the sense of it is profoundly sexist. No one was shouting at Buttigieg to drop out and support Biden. (They apparently just had a nice manly chat about it yesterday and it was done.) When Warren was ahead, no one was shouting at Sanders to drop out and support her. It is clear that, still, in 2020, women are expected to support men, to sacrifice themselves for the good of a powerful man.

I should not be surprised at all the misogyny bubbling up – the erasure, the sexist language, the dismissive comments. I knew it would happen. I knew it would happen in 2016. I voted for Bernie in the 2016 primary, in part, because I knew that there would be a tidal wave of misogyny if Clinton was the nominee and I didn't think I could handle it. (BTW – Gloria Steinem had similar reservations at first in 2008.)

And I was right. I couldn't handle it. I don't think I've recovered yet. It feels like 2016's election season was like watching an enormous boil of toxic patriarchal misogyny get larger and larger and then finally burst all over us in November. And I guess maybe I thought that since the boil had burst, we were maybe on a healing path, where a woman could run for president without wading through a pool of toxicity. But the pool is alive and thriving.

I keep thinking about this thing I read in the Hollywood Reporter by a member of the Academy who said,

“When I fill out my ballot, I'm asking, “What movie did I like the best?” I believe all of our members do that. I'm not asking, ‘Is it a woman? Is it a person from a diverse background?’ I'm very proud of the Academy for nominating the movies we did this year.”

And guess who just happened to be under-represented at the Oscars this year?

It's clear that this guy has never heard of unconscious bias in his life. He's thinking, “I just vote for who I like! And if I happen to almost exclusively like stuff by white guys, that's just because that's what's good.” It never occurs to him that his response to the people he just doesn't connect to is probably due to his unconscious bias. It also would never occur to him that it might actually make sense to ask yourself such questions. It does make a difference when someone is a less represented person.



And I think that same principle is happening for some people with Warren. There's a lot of "There's just something about her I don't like" and I'm sorry to tell you but that something is probably an unconscious bias and a world that privileges some folks over others. We all have unconscious bias. All of us. Check your bookshelves. Who do you read? Even women have unconscious biases against other women. We've all of us been marinating in patriarchy for a long time – so it is hard for a lot people to get behind women leaders. I know this is true but it is still incredibly difficult to watch the one candidate who gives me hope and makes me feel brave when I'm scared be sidelined and told to drop out.

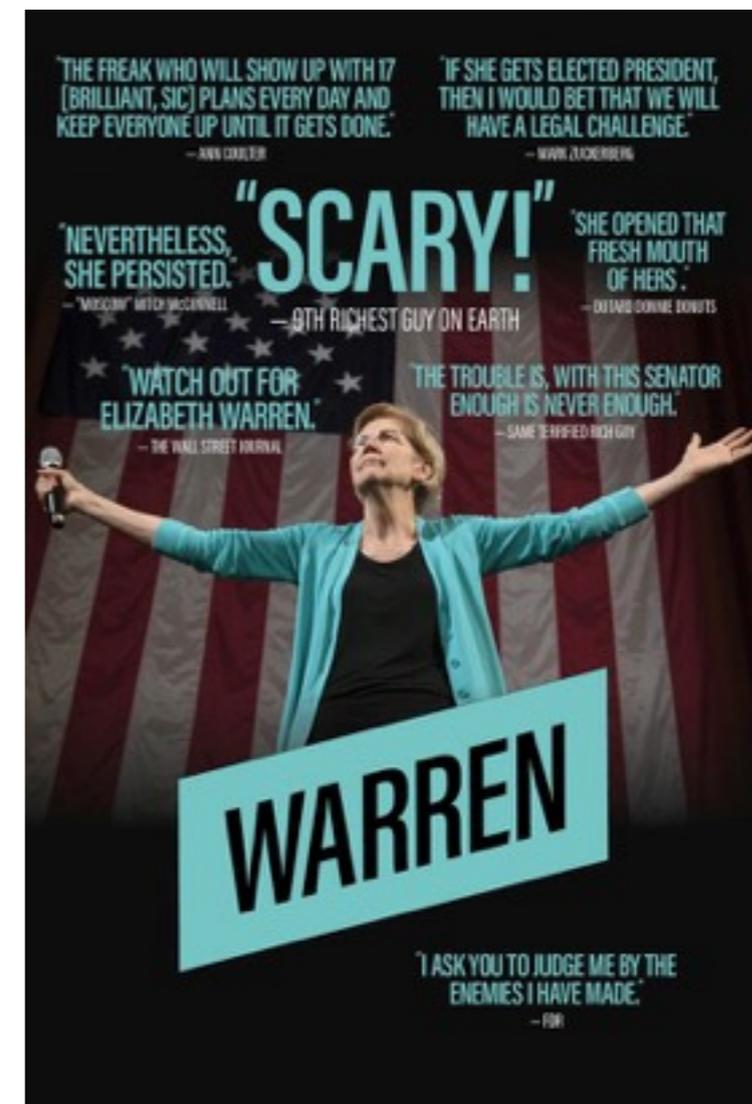
There are so many reasons I am excited to vote for Warren. She's my dream candidate, as Rebecca Solnit put it. I admire the way she has reached out to so many communities directly and personally and then come up with plans for each and every one of them to address their concerns. I admire the way she acknowledges mistakes she's made and continues to work to redress them. I admire her ability to adapt and learn. I admire how fierce an advocate she can be. I love that she's a progressive who came to it later in her life. Her progressiveness is practical and hard-earned. Ever since she got kicked out of the senate confirmation hearing for Jeff Sessions, for reading Coretta Scott King's letter and then read it to a camera right outside, I have admired her fighting spirit. Many people remember the line that emerged from this event – "Nevertheless she persisted." But there's more of it. Mitch McConnell said, "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted."

Many people continue to give her explanations and warnings and nevertheless, she persists. That sort of commitment makes me feel less scared. It makes me feel brave.

The kind of person who can take on an entire banking system, who will speak truth to power over and over again even when no one will give her the floor, that kind of person makes me feel safe. And I know that she is working hard to help others who may have never felt safe in this country to one day experience some safety. She embodies everything I look for in a leader. I cannot understand how people are not lining up to vote for her.



But I know not everyone is like me and the little girl who keeps her action figure close by for safety. There are those who don't need to feel brave because they're not scared. There are those who just want a return to the old familiar status quo. I understand the impulse. Warren's vision of America involves change and change isn't everyone's thing. Her vision involves bending some things to make the country work for more people than it is. It involves health care for all and universal child care. It even includes artists (sign an artist endorsement here). It is really scary for billionaires and scary for a lot of Republicans. That's not safe for them. But it would be for me, it would be for me.



A Bereft, Heartbroken, Furious, Hopeless, Bad Mood

The morning after Super Tuesday, I woke up with a song in my head. It's a song I put on my feminist playlist a while ago and every time it comes around I think, "What is this? And what is it doing on this playlist?" Then the line about the glass ceiling comes along and I understand why it's there but then I have to see who it is. Many times I have said, "Miley Cyrus? Really?!"

But now, I know "Bad Mood" so well, I will never forget again. I've been listening to it on solid repeat and I've been crying. I feel ridiculous about it but I am in a bad mood and feeling very discouraged about the possibility of any glass ceilings ever breaking. Miley Cyrus is, weirdly, helping me through it.

I know I shouldn't take Warren's losses to heart but I just can't help it. I was invested in her and her candidacy and I hoped she would win. The good news is that I apparently haven't lost the capacity for hope in this current climate. The bad news is that feeling hope can lead to a big let down. I'm accustomed to hope hangovers but this one is a doozy.

In this case, the hope led directly to a feeling of hopelessness. To see a candidate, as qualified and capable and clear and prepared as Warren, be rejected by so many American voters, and specifically Democratic, liberal voters, is just devastating. I think if it were just the rejecting, I'd be alright. But it's not as simple as American voters rejecting my candidate. I'm here listening to "Bad Mood" on repeat, crying and trying to piece together why.

Sometimes, it's little things – like some dumb Tweets before Super Tuesday suggesting Warren would make a good Secretary of Education or Secretary of the Treasury and should therefore have dropped out of the race. Those jobs may technically be prestigious but mostly it seemed like a way to suggest that a lady shouldn't be in charge. Why can't she just be a secretary like the other ladies? Why does she want to be President? She could serve the president instead. Maybe bring him his coffee.

There's also the Methinks-They-Do-Protest-Too-Much-ers who say "Why do you have to bring gender into it? I'm not sexist, I just didn't like this one." If you think gender isn't playing a role in your choice to choose man after man, you are fooling yourself about that "something" you happen to like over and over in men. (It's unconscious bias and Rebecca Solnit wrote a great piece about it last year.) What you see as "leadership qualities" are actually gendered. You're just missing it. I know there are plenty of people who chose the white man they did for very important reasons but a lot of people chose the white man they chose because they thought other people would choose him. This is called pluralistic ignorance and it's basically everyone assuming everyone else is going to make the less sensible choice so they all make a choice they didn't want together.

"Would you vote for someone just because they were a woman?" People love this one. And obviously the answer is no. I would not vote for Tulsi Gabbard or Marianne Williamson. I did not vote for Sarah Palin. But when a highly qualified woman shows up who could do the job better than I can even imagine, you bet your ass I'm going to vote for her. Millions of people DIDN'T vote for her because she's a woman. Not because they're sexist, no, but because they're sure their neighbors are. In other words, while feminists get hell for voting for women, people are, en masse, choosing candidates because they are men. So, yes. Warren's womanhood was a big factor in my enthusiasm to vote for her.

But guess what? I can't. I couldn't. Because our voting system is so ridiculous and disenfranchising, I didn't get to cast a vote in the presidential primary and my choice was eliminated. And I feel absolutely cheated. (My sense of disenfranchisement is, by the way, nothing compared to people who lost their polling places and had to wait eight hours to vote. We have a lot to fix. Help Stacey Abrams defend voting rights here.)

When I started writing this post, it wasn't yet clear what the Warren campaign was going to do. But, even before the nail was in the coffin of her candidacy, I knew a lot of people were going to be jerks about it. They were jerks about it immediately. Many of them are still being jerks. Almost every woman I know is grieving, deeply, and the internet is not helping the situation one bit. I started snoozing people on Facebook when someone implied that if we weren't tough enough to take some abuse on the internet, then maybe our candidate shouldn't be president.

Oh, don't get me started on the ways women are targeted on the internet. I don't have the strength to break down how attacks on a female candidate can feel like surrogate attacks on her supporters. Suffice it to say that this shit is personal. Sometimes women can be afraid to say who they are supporting for fear of these much publicized attacks. It happened in 2016 and it happened just now, too. I'm struggling with how much misogyny there is to go around.

I mean, the guy most people voted for is a guy who has a LOUSY track record with women. And you might roll your eyes and say, "Oh, that touching thing? He's just a touchy feely guy. Big deal. MeToo has gone too far!" But it's more than him not respecting the bodily autonomy of women and children. He has, in his many positions in government made women's lives harder. He threw Anita Hill under the bus and thereby threw women experiencing sexual harassment around the country under the bus and got a serial harasser on the Supreme Court – the repercussions of which we are still dealing with today. He sold out women's reproductive rights in so many ways. Aside from his vigorous support of the Hyde and Hatch Amendments, he named an amendment after himself that would have limited foreign aid to biomedical aid that might connect to abortions. He liked that bill so much he named it after himself!

I mean, of course I'll vote for him if he's the nominee, of course I will, relax, ok? But for all the talk of women making progress (women getting elected to Congress, Women's Marches, etc) – this is one area there's been not even a hint of progress. For all the talk of #MeToo "going too far" – only a handful of people have experienced any real consequences. There's just as much sexual harassment to go around, it's just that now it includes the extra "joke" of a "I hope I don't get #MeToo-ed!"

I'm just so mad. I'm mad, again, about the voters who said "I'm not sexist but I think other people will be." Which is just... You're right. They were. But you just voted for sexism. You were like, "Sexism, I see you and rather than fight you, I will encourage you by voting for you." Thanks a fucking lot.

People are out here voting like it's a horse race and they're worried about the money they have on the winner. Actually that's what IS happening for the democratic donor class – but if you don't have actual money riding on these people, you can just vote for who you want! That's ideally how it should go.

But, no. Hordes of my fellow democrats felt that they needed to bet on a winner and now I'm not going to be able to vote for my choice in April. Thanks. Thanks a lot. You strategized my vote out from under me. And now I'm not just mad about Warren. I would love to have had a chance to wonder if I should vote for Julian Castro or Kamala Harris or Kirsten Gillibrand. But this system chewed them up, too.

I'm taking this all very personally. It feels like the world keeps inventing new ways to tell American women that we don't matter. The 2016 election was the first major blow, the Kavanaugh hearings were the second and now this loss feels like the patriarchy held up the football for us and told us to kick it, go ahead, and then knocked us down like Charlie Brown.

Go ahead girls, you can do anything! You're strong, you're smart, you can achieve anything you set your minds to! Go for it! Except we're going to put every possible obstacle in your way and when you fail we will make a long list of all the ways you failed. Girl Power! #GirlBoss #WomenOnTop

In addition to the Miley Cyrus song, I've found myself listening to Taylor Swift's "The Man: as well. (Maybe because of this video of it featuring Warren. Don't watch it if you don't want to get sad.) I've been thinking about how odd it is that two of the major female pop stars of the last decade are expressing feminist ideas. It's not that I thought that they didn't experience sexism – more that I thought their success within the system would make them unlikely to challenge it. But age and experience makes feminists of even the strangest beneficiaries of the patriarchy. The rest of us might look at Swift and Cyrus and say they're at the top of the pile but they know all the ways they have been held back and they're old enough now to be brave and sing about them. What I'm trying to say is that even the world's best #GirlBoss is still being held back by the patriarchy and she knows it. Taylor Swift may already be The Man by some standards but she knows how much more The Man she could be. I don't think these are the ladies who will provide the anthem songs when American women finally reach absolute capacity for sexism and start a bloody revolution (Is it now? It's not now, is it? I didn't buy a machete yet!) but for this moment, when we're looking at these large scale losses, they're doing some #GirlConsoling.

Anyway – I read this article that came out this week that demonstrates that 9 out of 10 people are biased against women. So that's nice. There are only 5 countries that have equitable sensibilities. America is, no surprise, not one of those countries. Not even close.

I don't know what to do with this information. We are losing ground. Even the countries that experience equity are losing ground. It feels like there's not much to hope for now. We can hope one of these white guys defeats the horrible white guy in the president's chair and thereby maybe regain some of the footholds we had before – and we will, of course, work to do that. But –

Personally – and this is, really, all very personal...all I can do is write through it. This is long and messy and that is surely how my healing and mourning will go. I have less hope now than I did but it's good to know I CAN hope after the blows we've experienced.

I could start falling into the conspiracy theorist's tunnel here, if I let myself. You know the theory? It's the one that recognizes how incredibly terrified of a Warren presidency so many special interest groups were. Warren's plan to cancel student loan debt on the first day of her presidency was simple, clear and lays out exactly what would happen. When I saw the headline on her website, I thought, "Wow. That's a big promise. How could she possibly do that?" Turns out, she's spotted the way to use executive power to do it and she explains it step by step. It's so clear, any president who doesn't do it now is going to look like a real jerk. If the potential to have student debt canceled didn't make the loan companies quake in their predatory boots, I'm not sure what would. The same is also true for a multitude of immoral businesses – like health insurers and Wall Street brokers. Many of whom are political donors. My conspiracy theory brain leads me to suspect that a lot of these places made sure that Warren's campaign didn't get coverage in a lot of media outlets. So much so that they just left her out of their graphics of primary results. (What, is she the Gen X of Presidential campaigns?)

Or it could just be sexism. Just regular old boring sexism. Just everyday, every minute, every second sexism. Others have documented the many ways sexism tanked this campaign but for me, the bits that are most painful are the ways Warren's language was so willfully misunderstood by the sexism machine. It feels like an attempt to gaslight voters – to tell them: "No, no, you're NOT listening to a reasonable clear speech suggesting how we might change the world for the better, you're listening to a shrill harpy with boundless craven ambition." I think you'd need an Orwellian level of denial to see her that way but we are maybe moving ever closer to the 1984 style of denying your own eyes and ears so I guess that a little of that messaging actually fucking worked?

And I suppose, one of the things that shakes me most is how it makes clear that this funhouse mirror is happening to all of us – even the ones who aren't running for president. That is, even at my most reasonable and clear, I will be seen as bitchy and shrill. No matter what is actually happening. I used to think I could sweet talk my way out of gender bias. But now I understand that a lot of people have a filter that hears women's voices as duplicitous, annoying and overly ambitious no matter who is speaking or what we are saying.

The bulk of the terrible media coverage was mostly just erasure and not the old school "but her emails" sort of thing. Leaving her out of highlight reels and lists and things was seemingly the most effective strategy. Maybe that's because we're not actually at peak "deny your eyes and ears" levels yet. So maybe that's the good news?

There's been a lot of great articles and a lot of press now that it's safe to talk about Warren without risking actually having her give us health care. Here are some of my favorites from Lauren Duca, Megan Garber, and Elie Mystal. Warren is the most popular she's ever been, now that she's lost. Apparently this is a thing we do. In the closing of her book about the 2008 election, Rebecca Traister points out that women only win when they're losing. Clinton's popularity soars when she's lost something. Gloria Steinem explained it to Traister this way. "It's always been okay for women to sing the blues, just not so good for us to win. We all know deep in our hearts if we want to be loved we have to lose."

Rachel Maddow managed to make me feel a little better when she asked Warren about all the women who are just "bereft" at this development – because that's me, that's so many women I know. Maddow included us in a national conversation – which felt sort of monumental in a moment wherein I feel as though I'm being reminded (again) of how little I matter. Warren's loss made me feel as though I don't matter as a woman and it made my actual vote not matter because I live in New York. I know I do matter and that my vote in April WILL matter to the man I choose to give it to – but wow, do I feel tossed aside! And learning that so many other women I know were also bereft, also paralyzed, also weeping, also raging, also just done, done, done...well, it helps.

I get it. I got it. The GOP have basically taken the country hostage by saddling us with this administration and blocking witnesses for the impeachment and refusing to vote on vital legislation. With this many guns to our heads, Democrats are not inclined to take risks. Rather than thinking about who would be the best at planning and negotiating our escape from our captors, American voters are just trying not to get shot. We're all huddled together and Elizabeth Warren says, "I have a plan to get us out of here." And a lot of people say, "Shhhhh. Why do you have to be so shrill?" and Joe Biden says, "I think I know these guys. I can talk to them." And a lot of people seem to have made the calculus that the captors would like the candidate most like the captors themselves. And I don't know. At the moment, I'm not thrilled about our odds of getting out of this hostage situation. Nor do I have any hope that I would ever be listened to with my lady "school marm" voice.

One of the reasons I find Warren's loss in the primaries so distressing is because I hoped her competency, her passion and skill would shine through the sexist ocean we swim in and the country would follow her light out of the murk. I take this personally because I also have competencies, passions and skills that get obscured in the sexist ocean and if Elizabeth Warren can't shine through, what the hell hopes have I? I'm not running for president but trying to survive in the arts has pretty low odds as well. After so many years of struggling and the patriarchal set backs of this hostage situation, I've lost a lot of my fight. I felt like I was just starting to get it back watching Elizabeth Warren take on the bad guys. I know she wants us all to keep fighting and of course, we will – but I don't feel very up to the task right now. Which is why I need "Bad Mood," I guess. The lyrics aren't particularly deep but they do the job. Here are some of them.

*Oooh, I wake up in a bad mood
The glass ceiling's gotta break
All together, want to hear you say
I don't know how much more I can take
You know it's gone on way too long
And you know it's wrong
But I know I'm strong
I don't give up
And when t gets rough
I get tough
I've had enough*



Performing Arts Going Dark

Have you all read Station Eleven? I mean, don't, if you haven't. Even the author recommends waiting a few months to read it. It's a little too relevant right now. It hits a little too close to home. It begins with a pandemic that leads to the radical upending of civilization. You can see why you might want to wait a minute to get into it. But I've been thinking about it a lot this week – not just because of the pandemic – but because of what happens after the pandemic. The heart of the story is a traveling Shakespeare company that tours the devastated country. When nothing is left, we have the arts.

At the moment, with all the performing arts cancelled, it can feel like our work is unimportant or inessential. Suddenly, it is, technically, palpably dangerous to do what we do. Suddenly, it has become reckless to gather people in a room and share things with them. Suddenly, the very thing that makes the performing arts so magical is the thing that makes them dangerous. Almost everyone I know in New York works in the performing arts in some capacity and almost everyone I know is in a state of absolute disarray. As show people, we are built with an intense drive for the show going on. We are used to pushing through any numbers of difficulties in order to make it to the stage. To have the stage pulled out from under us is counter to everything we feel in the very fiber of our beings. The show must go on! It can't be cancelled! It goes on! Isn't it better to do a show? Isn't it always better to do a show than not do a show? Won't the arts save us all? Not in this case, no. Not in the way we're used to.

What's happening for us is not just a crisis of economics (though it is that and quite a serious one at that) but also a crisis of faith. If the shows don't go on, who are we? What is all this for? How can it not be good to gather a group of people together and share art with them? To laugh? To cry? To tap our toes to the beat together? To have our heartbeats sync up as we watch? How? How? How?

But, of course, in a pandemic, it is very bad for us all to be in a room together. I am interested in the connections we share with other things that have had to shut down recently. Sports and religious gatherings are experiencing the same unilateral canceling. We are all shut down together – all the things that bring people together, that unite us, are dangerous.

But this does not mean they are inessential. Things that bring people together, like the performing arts, like sports, like religion, are key to our survival, to our thriving as a species. It feels to me that in losing that ability of being all together in a unified state, I've come to appreciate it anew.

Sometimes, you may have noticed, I get a little cranky about theatre. I see shows and they make me angry and sometimes I tell you about it. I get mad – partly because I want shows to be better and partly because my ability to make shows has been hampered over the years so I get mad about shows that have a lot of resources and squander them.

But here we are in the middle of a pandemic and almost all theatres have been shut down. And it becomes instantly clear that I would rather watch the worst show there is (It's Bike. You know it's Bike.) over and over and over again than have no theatre at all.

For all my ranting, I do love the stuff and I'm sad for even the worst show that has closed. It suddenly feels very important to me to know that shows are running, even ones I'll never see, even ones I hate.

I hope that when this is all over, there will be a renewed appreciation for the performing arts and their important place in our culture. We were all shaken by how quickly the entire theatre business was shut down here in New York. It was as if someone flicked a switch and thousands of people lost their jobs and thousands more lost their dreams. Like that. In an instant. But this doesn't mean the arts are a frill that get dropped in a time of crisis. It's just that being with people is what the performing arts are all about and suddenly being with people is dangerous and so the performing arts become the most dangerous. And not because theatre people are some of the most touchy feely people out here, either. It's because a bunch of people breathing the same air is the heart and soul of the work – and right now that air is treacherous. So we have to stop.

But maybe, once this has passed, we can come to appreciate what we lost when the theatres went dark.

Maybe it doesn't need to be as extreme as Station Eleven – where survivors form a community building Shakespeare company. Maybe we don't have to wait for the destruction of civilization as we know it to support the performing arts. Maybe we can support them right now so that theatre spaces will be able to open again, that shows can continue their runs, that freelancers can survive this terrifying downturn. As this article in Vulture says, "As concert halls, theaters, and museums around the world go dark, we all need to move quickly to ensure that when it's finally safe to emerge from our lairs, we still have a cultural life left to go back to."

Personally, I've come up with a project to keep some theatre folk creatively engaged with a project that we can do from our homes. I was working on it prior to this disaster in another form and it just happens to be possible this way. So I'm just rolling forward on that and it's already delighting me.

The skills that help us bring people together in real life are stepping up to help keep us together while we are separated. Here are two that I know about – The Social Distancing Festival and Musicals from Home. Many many theatre folk are going to find this social distance thing very very difficult (as I'm sure most people will – but I think it hits our community driven community especially hard.) I feel quite certain this will drive a lot of them to become very inventive to create distance community and whatever those inventions are will benefit us all in the long run.

There will be theatre when this is all over. And concerts. And dances. And hopefully we will all appreciate them and being with each other all the more.



Toilet Paper and Art

My improviser friend used to talk about his craft being toilet paper – that you pulled off a square and then threw it away. It was impermanent and that was its appeal. It was a uniquely disposable craft.

In our new toilet paper obsessed society, I'm not sure this analogy works anymore. No one is hoarding improvisers. They're stuck at home like the rest of us – their skills going wanting.

But I had already been thinking about this analogy fairly often, even before the coronavirus made us fetishize toilet paper. I was thinking about it in relationship to things made on the internet, which often feel like toilet paper art as well. That is, we make something, we put it on the internet and the internet does whatever it's going to do with it and then it gets washed away in the flow of whatever happens next. Almost nothing has a sense of permanence.

The first website I was a part of making was back in 2002 and it really felt like we were constructing a building. Our designer created a bit of art out of the art we had made and we felt it would be around forever. When I made a MySpace page, I thought of it as a place – and a place people would visit and spend time in. I thought they would click around and listen to everything.

I continue to have this old fashioned view of what happens on-line. When the virus sent everyone home, I thought, "Oh, now's the time that someone will start reading the back catalogue of the blog. Someone's about to go very deep into the library of Songs for the Struggling Artist." But, of course, no one's doing that. They're not even reading the most recent blogs. In fact, the views on both my blogs have never been lower.

I suspect that this is mostly because everyone is panic reading all they can find about the virus and shutdowns and quarantines and such but ALSO because everything on the internet is disposable.

We don't go looking for interesting corners to click around in anymore. We don't read anyone's entire oeuvre or listen to anyone's entire repertoire. We just watch the stream of information and ideas go by and pick out whatever looks

interesting to us. Sometimes something comes up from the past – but for the most part, we consume our internet in an ever present present. It's all toilet paper now.

As a person who makes things that live in this digital space, I don't love this. I don't find it encouraging. It's hard to put one's heart and soul and sweat and skill into something and watch it sink into the stream never to be seen again. It can be just as discouraging to, say, put on a play and have not many people come to see it – but at least in the live medium, you have the moment, you have the exchange. One of my favorite performance experiences ever was a show we put on for one audience member. No one showed up but her but we didn't cancel and it was extraordinary. In remembering watching her watching it, I am transported to the sense of wonder on her face. That look is sustaining, even all these years later, in a way that a few likes on a post that disappeared into the internet ocean are not.

And now everyone's livestreaming because what else can they do? It feels like you could fill a day with all the live concerts and performances that are suddenly popping up in a Facebook feed. Now, it seems, with everything shut down, the disposable nature of making things on the internet becomes even more disposable. We do it today and forget about it tomorrow.

The endless scroll of many social media sites makes it feel like the internet happens in front of us and it is seductive and hard to break free of. I know it's hard for me to stop watching the flotsam go by to go purposefully look at something more permanent that I want to know about. But I suppose that's my plea, that while we're stuck at home, largely on-line, that we all go clicking around in the weird places on the internet like in the old days. Go investigate somebody's entire web comic. Watch all of a choreographer's [re-corded](#) dances. Explore the back catalogue of someone's writings. There are so many stories that got placed hopefully up on the web never to be seen again. It's not like watching someone's live performance in a theatre by yourself, of course, but taking a deep dive in some artist's pool might offer something a little different than what floats by every day. It might all be toilet paper but some of it has been carefully sculpted into something wonderful somewhere. There are a lot of undiscovered treasures that have sunk to the bottom of the internet ocean, hoping to one day be revealed. Go diving, if you can.



You Don't Have to Write Your Lear. Or Your Venus and Adonis Even.

As soon as the theatres shut down, the King Lear memes started. Over and over, people urged us not to bemoan our sudden retreat to our houses because Shakespeare wrote King Lear during the plague. This was meant to encourage us to believe that it might be highly productive to be sent home. Instead, it gave a lot of people anxiety about having to produce a masterpiece while navigating the challenges of social distancing.

I suspect some historical context might be useful and since most Shakespeare scholars are busy trying to figure out how to adapt their courses for Zoom, I thought I might offer some interim thoughts on this topic.

First, Shakespeare only PROBABLY wrote King Lear during the plague of 1606. The only evidence we have is that it was produced at the end of that year. It's entirely possible he wrote it before the plague broke out – along with the other plays that came next, Macbeth and Antony and Cleopatra. So, it's not, like, hard fact that he wrote those plays while people were sequestered and/or dying nearby.

Second, the Lear/Macbeth/Cleopatra plague was not Shakespeare's first plague. During the 1592 outbreak, Shakespeare wrote poems. He wrote Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece then. In her book, Shakespeare's Wife, Germaine Greer theorized that he wrote these erotic poems out of dire financial need. She compares the poems to porn of the time. That is, without the theatre to sustain him, Shakespeare didn't write his masterpieces, he wrote what he hoped would sell or get him a patron. He hustled to keep his family going.

I think this is important. For a lot of us, this is our first plague. This is the plague where we worry about paying the rent (good god, Cuomo, please hurry up and #cancelrent) and resorting to whatever schemes we can come up with. This is our Venus and Adonis plague, not our Lear/Macbeth/Cleopatra plague. If we have another one (lord, please let's NOT have another one) and we're a little more financially secure, maybe we can write our masterpiece. Meanwhile, I think the key for this one is survival.

I mean, if you have a King Lear in you to write, by all means, write it. But most writers I know are paralyzed with fear or worry or anxiety and none of that is conducive to productive writing. Frankly, I'd be pretty grateful to write a Venus and Adonis in this moment. Or even just one freakin' sonnet. Lear can come when I'm less worried about my neighbors dying and my friends getting evicted, you know?

And maybe you're laughing at me writing this because you know I'm already knee deep in a creative project that I started as soon as we started social distancing. "Ha ha!" you might laugh. "You say not to worry about being productive when you're over there producing a podcast!" Which is true. [I am](#). But I wrote it last year. The conceiving, the writing, the editing, the dreaming all happened in a non plague time and now is the time I got practical. "Ah," I said to myself, "if I produce it now when theatre journalists have literally nothing to talk about, it might stand a chance to get a little press." So... it's actually a crass practical choice, not a burst of inspiration type choice. It's Venus and Adonis, not King Lear. Also, starting and making things is apparently what I do in crisis. My theatre company [was born](#) on 9-11. When a boat starts sinking, I grab onto creativity for a raft. That's just my way, I've come to realize.

An artist's life is almost always a mix of the fanciful and naked practicality. I think it's important to remember that even Shakespeare didn't write King Lear in his first plague and he may not have even written it in his second.

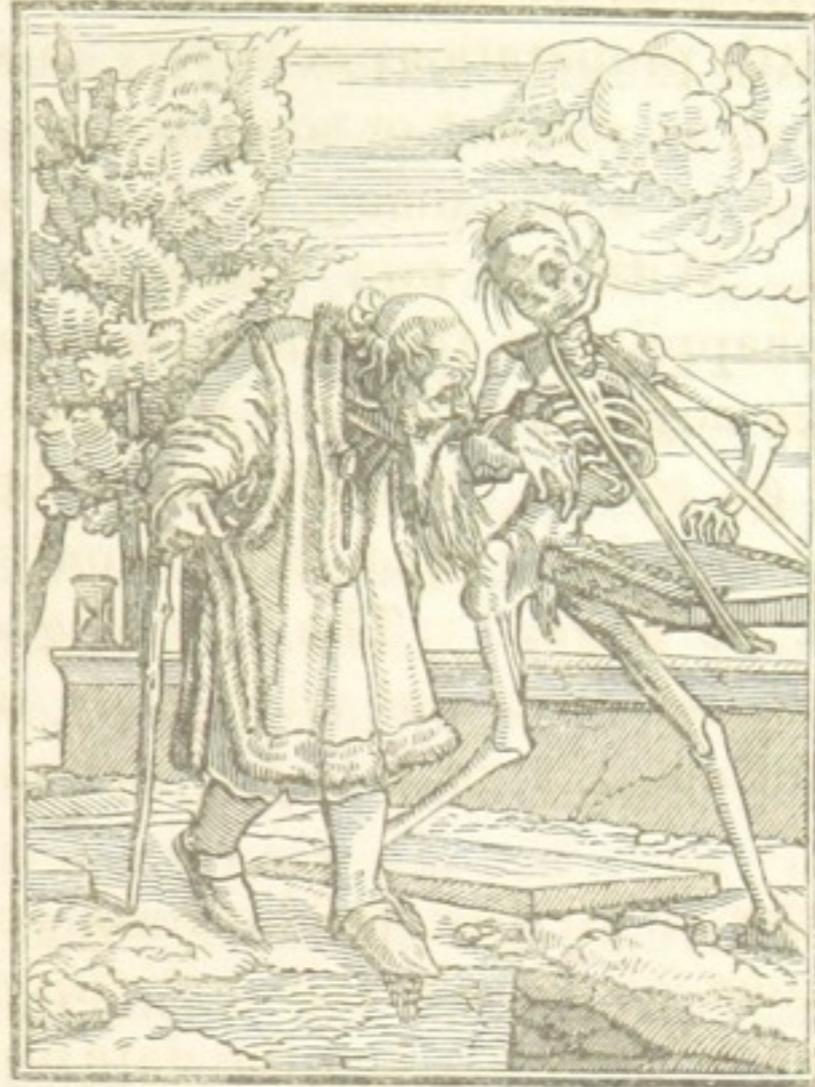
Macbeth, though, that's definitely a plague play.

Just kidding – we don't know for sure about that one either.

And listen, I don't want to be discouraging, but Shakespeare wrote an awful lot of really terrific plays before he wrote the plague ones. He already had Hamlet, A Midsummer Night's Dream and Richard III under his belt by the time he had to flee the plague. So, if you haven't written your Hamlet yet, maybe don't worry about your Lear. Get started on everyone's favorite, Henry the Sixth.

Side note: He also likely didn't have to look after his children or meet with his colleagues over Zoom for his day job.

Write if it helps you. Don't if it doesn't. It might not meme quite as well as Lear in a plague but it might get you through and that is the important thing.



[Death and the O'd Man. From Holbein's Dance of Death.]



Digital Gentrification and Ontological Insecurity

When it became clear to me that my big break in theatre wasn't coming any time soon, I began to create things in the digital space. If I couldn't book a gig in a theatre, I could at least, play a song on-line or have some words I wrote get read. While I appreciated the opportunity to share with people around the world, I also felt somewhat banished into that space. The difficulty and expense of producing things pushed me there. The many barriers to entry exiled me there. Given a choice, I would have chosen a career of only theatre. I would not have become a blogger or podcaster. But I wasn't given a choice and so I did (and do) do those things. I love them but they're sort of a substitute for theatre for me.

And now, due to the virus, my entire field has been sent home and all the people who have never not worked steadily in theatre are catapulting into the digital space. And I feel super weird about it.

I would like to be magnanimous and welcome everyone to my world, put up a banner and give everyone a cocktail and some snacks. But I'm not feeling quite that generous yet. Because it's not like I'm over here holding the secrets to getting lots of views and downloads. I'm feeling a little bit encroached upon, I have to confess.

Suddenly, the internet is full of theatre folk – live-streaming, zooming, creating that digital content. Meanwhile, my work garners half the views and downloads as usual. I guess it feels a little like digital gentrification.

Like, here I am, living over in the part of town no one else wants to live in and suddenly when the lights go out on all the stages, everyone rushes to the one place the lights are still working (for the time being) and it just happens to be my neighborhood. And because all the new arrivals are sparkly and have followings, all eyes turn toward them. It just suddenly feels very crowded on the internet. Which is funny, because it is huge.

My response to all this makes me feel a little petty, like I should, for sure, have put up that magnanimous welcome banner instead of shouting "Get off my digital lawn!" (I did not do this, to be clear. But I wanted to.)

One of the things I noticed when the performing arts were shut down a couple of weeks ago was a sort of fundamental panic that seemed separate from the more obvious panics arising. The most obvious panic inducing elements were the loss of income and the loss of time and efforts invested in heartfelt projects. There were jobs lost, shows closed, rehearsals cut off in mid-process. But the fundamental panic was one of identity – the "If there is no theatre, who am I? What do I do if I don't do what I do?"

I've just learned that this phenomenon is something called Ontological Insecurity and as restrictions have increased and mobility decreased, more and more people feel it. Performing Artists were, perhaps, the first people hit by this ontological crisis but many others were soon to follow. I learned about this concept while listening to [a podcast](#) about a woman escaping a cult. The concept came up because, having spent 12 years in this cult, her entire sense of self, her ontological security, of knowing her place in the world, was wrapped up in the cult. To leave the cult created intense ontological insecurity.

I'm not saying we're all in a cult that we suddenly were compelled to leave but I think the structure applies. In my on-line podcast groups, everyone was talking about how their numbers dropped when this all started. In a matter of days, they lost half their listeners. The factors are complicated and some are practical, like, commuters aren't commuting and are therefore not listening. But I suspect that the ontological insecurity is also a factor. People, without their jobs to go to or to hang their identity on are a bit at loose ends and so they are not really up for their usual podcasts. What I'm trying to say is, it might actually be the worst time to move to my digital neighborhood.

When this is all over, I hope all the folks who moved into my digital neighborhood will return to the stage (and that there will be stages to return to). I'd like to return to the stage myself one of these days, though I don't love my chances now that the entire field has been laid low. I mean, the theatre in which I just did a show last month is [unlikely](#) to reopen, as are many of the spaces that have historically been available to me. It's clearly going to be a different field when we return to it. And I don't know what will come of my little digital neighborhood once the stars return to their stages, but I hope we will all be able to recover somehow and spend many ontologically secure hours in many welcoming communities. I'll put up the banner for that, for sure.

The World I Imagined When I Was a Teen

Once upon a time, I dreamed of the world I would inhabit as an adult. I thought I would grow up to be Ann Magnuson or Annie Potts. I thought I would hang out in the cool clubs from *Desperately Seeking Susan* and be taken to a restaurant that had glass tables where I could watch myself while I was eating. The adult world I imagined featured a lot more cool haircuts and funky suits than I ever see in my actual adult life.

I have been thinking a lot about the way we create expectations but also how we create our worlds. The world I imagined no longer exists. It may have only existed in film and TV and it was created by the adults of the moment.

It may have been the underground in the 80s but that underground is long gone.

I find I'm a little disappointed. I live in the very city that used to look so cool in Jonathan Demme or Susan Seidelman's films but there is nothing here that is as cool as those films. There are so many banks and yogurt shops and hardly any funky thrift shops. You will never stumble upon a crazy cool jacket like Madonna wears in *Desperately Seeking Susan* – but you can find a dozen high-end cupcake shops.

It just strikes me that every generation probably imagines that their adulthood will look like the cool adults in the previous generations. We think we will grow up to live like what we saw in our youth, despite the fact that when you look backwards, the common denominator is change.

No one grew up to live in the world they imagined when they were children. No one. The first generation to grow up reading novels probably imagined they'd have a life like the ones in books but those lives were already in the past by the time they read them. The children growing up reading the first novels likely lived in a world that looked nothing like the one they imagined.

Maybe a few decades ago, someone dreamed a future full of banks and yogurt shops and so created a New York that reflected that dream. Possibly a yogurt shop and bank New York looks very cool to young people coming up now and they will be disappointed to arrive here in ten years time when yogurt shops are no longer in fashion and there are no more brick and mortar bank branches.

I suppose the tragedy and gift of the world is that change is so inevitable, no one can ever live in the world they imagined when they were young. In so many ways, the world I live in now is far superior to the one I imagined. A South Korean film won best picture and there's so much interesting TV. There's been enormous gains in social justice (though not quite as many as I'd hoped for) and technology is like magic.

There's better coffee and abundant Poke to be had. I bought a pair of glasses for \$15 and the Affordable Care Act has made health care a possibility for me and many of my artist friends.

There are a lot of things that are way better than what I imagined but some things are worse, too – and mostly a lot less cool. I'm an Ann Magnuson girl in a bank and yogurt world who knows the world is ever in flux and will never be as it was or what we imagine it will be. That's just the deal. I know it and I still think it's weird.



We Tried Asking Nicely

The former prime minister of Australia was on [a podcast](#) talking about how the gender pay gap won't be closed for decades at the current rate. She found this "frustrating." I found it enraging. And it's not new information. I know that every single measure of equality is moving at a glacial pace.

But it struck me as I listened to her that the problem is that we are attempting to make change without making waves. The current pace, the current rate of change is unacceptable – but anything faster or more aggressive will rock the boat. The waves will be too big to allow us to go along as we've always done. If there's anything we've learned so far in the current pandemic moment it's that going along as we've always done isn't going to work anymore.

The upshot of it is – we won't see real change without pissing a lot of people off. For all these years, many women have advocated for change, but, like, a nice change, a change that doesn't really upset anyone. Like, just give us the right to vote. Just an itsy bitsy voting privilege. If you don't mind. If it's not too much trouble. We just want a tiny slice of reproductive rights, nothing greedy. You can have a slice first, of course. Yes, please.

I've been this kind of feminist myself. I called myself a Hello Kitty feminist a few years ago. You know – a non-threatening, cute, smiling, sort of feminist. The kind who'll ask for her rights and give you a greeting card. I was nice and polite and didn't want to trouble anyone. And honestly, I still don't. I'd really much rather give you a slice of pie than demand one for myself. It is very confusing to have spent a lifetime trying to avoid confrontation and now be leaning into radical change. I've found myself in deep admiration of the early suffragettes who created chaos and anarchy in order to be heard. I'm impressed by the bomb makers, the balloon dropers, the strikers.

Did I really think equality would be given us if we just asked nicely enough? I might have. Or at least I hoped that the world would see reason and begin to adjust itself. It won't. The rate of progress is embarrassing. The blatant misogyny that has risen to the surface is impossible to smooth away. My former self would have attempted it, would have found a way to see the good in even the worst perpetrators. No more. I'm in a head knocking mood now.

And not just about feminism, either. I saw [a show](#) about a coal mine disaster that was caused by corporate neglect and malfeasance and while I was touched by the stories the actors told us about the workers' lives and attempts to get justice, all I wanted to do was go storm that CEO's mansion. I came home and listened to The Coup's "[5 Million Ways to Kill a CEO](#)" on repeat. I haven't stopped listening to it since. In this world of glaring income inequality, I have found The Coup to be my music medicine of choice. It's always a good time to listen to "[The Guillotine](#)" for me these days. ("We got the guillotine. You better run.") Do I really want to kill a CEO and/or bring back the guillotine? No. Of course not. I can't even watch someone get an injection on TV without hiding my eyes so of course I don't want to see an execution. But I think the fact that a peacenik like me is so thoroughly enjoying revenge fantasies in stories and music is a sign that a corner has been turned. I'm at the point where if I saw an angry group of Amazon employees who've been denied PPE and bathroom breaks drag Jeff Bezos from his home, I might just cheer them on. The revolution may be upon us and it might be violent and that might be just, actually, and what has happened to me that I feel this way?

I find myself in a constant state of flux – feeling both the, "It's fine. I don't need anything, thank you so much. You're so sweet." And the flames shooting out of the side of my head.

Watching [Elizabeth Warren take Bloomberg to task](#) was one of the most liberating things I have ever had cause to see. I'm sure Warren is a real sweetheart when ordering a tea but get in the way of her and someone's rights and you're in trouble. There she is, the best listener on the block, a model of feminine compassion – but not everyone deserves her kindness. Some deserve her fire. Just as some deserve mine.

I have to figure out how to find that pathway – how to be as courteous as I want to be and knock heads when it's time to knock heads.

I find, having never really learned how to channel my anger, I tend to toggle back and forth between fury and accommodation and I don't always get the settings right. Sometimes I automatically accommodate someone and then suddenly realize that they were not worthy of my accommodation. That makes me mad but it's not nearly as tricky as the moments where I'm more aggressive than I meant to be. Those are harder to forgive myself for – because the niceness is the baseline and deviations are disruptive, not just to the person I am not nice to, but to me –

because niceness is my baseline. But as the reality of possibility of change in the world sets in, as I realize how unlikely it is that we'll see any gender parity in so many arenas, or economic justice, my baseline starts to shift. I feel less and less uncomfortable with not being nice and more and more ready for wave making change.

We tried asking nicely. We tried incremental change. We tried pointing things out in calm, bright, friendly voices and writing polite well reasoned articles. It got us next to nothing. Those in power will not release their hold on it until we wrest it from their cold dead hands, I guess. Maybe it'll be [the guillotine](#) that gets them. Or just their own venality. There are five million [ways](#) to kill a CEO.



A View from a Small Apartment in NYC

It was when I noticed I was pushing our building door open with my hip that I started dedicating clothes for inside or outside. With the pandemic raging outside, no extra precaution seemed too crazy at a certain point. So I take my clothes off at the door and go wash my hands before putting on the inside clothes. When Scott started wearing outside pants, I thought it was overkill but then I noticed all the times I made contact with the world when I went out in it – like that door and my hip.

I've started to realize that things are a little different for folks in other parts of the country and world, and so, in the interest of preventing other places becoming an epicenter like this, it seemed like maybe a little recounting of what has become normal for us might be useful.

It's different in NYC, in part, because we are all so pressed together here. If you go out into the world at all, there is no escaping other humans. Take a walk around the block, you will likely pass at least twenty people. New York grocery stores are tiny and the shelves are pressed together to save space. One other person in an aisle is a crowd. You cannot pass someone without getting very close to them. Other humans pass through our apartment buildings every day – even if it's only for each family to get a daily walk in. And we need to get a daily walk in because many of our apartments are small. The longest walk I can take indoors is seventeen paces and that's if I walk from the bathroom, through the kitchen, living room and into the bedroom. Getting 10,000 steps by just walking around one's home is not going to happen for many of us.

Outside, I walk more or less the same route now. It's the one that seems least populated. It does have its pitfalls. The souvlaki truck on the corner is always surrounded by guys who seem to have very little concern for masks or social distance. They will happily eat the souvlaki right next to one another. Same with the bagel shop. There's a fruit and veggie stand that juts into the sidewalk and is always surrounded. But about halfway through this route, there is a bleeding heart bush in front of someone's house. I have developed a relationship with this bush. I visit it. Say hello. I notice when its blossoms fade and when it puts out new ones. Towards the end of this walk, if I need to, I go to the grocery store. It is not the best grocery store in our area but it is the least crowded and unlike all the other ones, there is never a line to get in. The produce section is a little too tightly packed, though, so I have often waited a lonnnng time to be able to dart in to collect some spinach or berries.

Before this hit, NYC implemented a plastic bag ban but nearly everywhere has given up on it and will give you plastic, just automatically. I mean, those reusable bags are a little dangerous now suddenly – especially if you reuse them. I have two and as soon as I've used them, they go in the laundry.

Once a week, we do our laundry at the laundromat down the street. They were closed for a month or two and we had to go to the smaller and more treacherous one around the corner. We try and only touch surfaces there with rags but it's not easy. I use a new rag every day to go in and out of our building. Watching our neighbors open the doors with their bare hands reminds me to toss the rags in the laundry as soon as I've used them.

There were weeks wherein every trip outside felt like stepping out into speeding traffic without a crosswalk. We did our best to be careful but were highly aware that we could be hit at any moment. We developed some dark jokes about being careful not to step in any coronavirus out there – as if it were just sitting in easy-to-avoid puddles instead of lying in wait for us on any possible surface or in the air.

Our friends from afar want to know if we know anyone who has it or if we've lost people. I have a fair number of acquaintances who probably had it but cannot be sure – but, as far as I know, no close friends have been struck too low.

But we are all deeply impacted – if only by the refrigerated trucks that are parked outside our local hospital to store the dead. If only by the sheer risk in taking a trip outside. If only by being confined to our neighborhoods because of the treacherous quality of public transportation right now. And for most of us, public transportation is really our only transportation, so here we are. But where would we go? It's actually hard to imagine going anywhere right now. Especially somewhere far from here. I feel like a walking virus. I would not want to bring what's here anywhere else.

I see photos of friends and family sitting on their porches, out in their gardens or on walks through the woods that they were able to go to via their perfectly safe cars and I realize how wildly different our experiences of this are. I can see how abstract this virus might seem to someone who lives in a house that is not pressed up against another house and can get in their private automobile and go many places where there aren't many other people.

I can imagine that it's harder to understand why you can't get your haircut or go out to dinner when so much else is the same as it's ever been. I don't think it's an accident that these bizarre protests of the lockdowns are coming from folks who live in less densely populated areas. They're not used to worrying about what the people around them are doing. If you drive from your bubble of a house in your bubble of a car, it probably seems like everywhere you might go is still in your safe bubble. Why would you wear a mask if you cannot conceive of the danger?

But here, we are (most of us) acutely aware of what the people around us are doing. I give the souvlaki guys a wide berth and cross the street to avoid the overly busy fruit stand. But I still go out every day because I need to get more than seventeen paces of walking in. I'm sure there are people who are truly quarantining that look at my daily walks as a luxury or a crazy risk, in much the same way that I look at someone going to (even a socially distanced) party right now in North Carolina. I keep thinking about this piece that Dahlia Lithwick wrote about how the country's responded to NYC now and how it responded after 9-11. The difference in response is extreme. I was here for both and this time we're on our own.

And I'm not at all interested in sympathy for our situation. We are the lucky ones here and we know it. We live here because, usually, when we're not in a pandemic, this city has an abundance of things to offer that we cannot get anywhere else. It may be tight quarters but it's not as tight as a refrigerated truck and I know how lucky I am not to be in one.

Did you see that post that went around Facebook by Carlos Avila, when folks first started to protest lockdowns? Well, it is a work of swearsy glory about what it's like for us here and what opening things up prematurely seems like to New Yorkers. All we want here is for other places to take this seriously as we know it is. Just because most other places are naturally more socially distant than us here in NYC doesn't mean you won't get clobbered. Just because it's easier for people in other places to hang out in your gardens, doesn't mean you should leave them. Probably, nowhere is likely to get hit with the relentlessness our city got hit with just because of our density of population – but that doesn't mean other places won't get hit.

I keep thinking of that choir in Washington State that had one fateful practice and lost at least two of its members to the virus, with 45 members contracting it. Please please don't get complacent. And don't let itchy thoughtless governments pull you out of safety if it's not time. This virus has had plenty of time to spread out and make itself comfortable in communities far beyond New York. If the scientists want you to stay home for a while longer and you can, please do.

Drive your car bubble out to the woods and shout at the trees about how much you hate wearing a mask (I hate it, too) but then put it back on around other humans. For now. We all want this nightmare to end. And the longer we resist the things that will help, the longer it will be. Check your state's numbers on the Johns Hopkins coronavirus map and if your little tracking chart isn't going down, maybe stick around your house for a while if you can.

For us sheltering here in NYC in our tiny apartments with little respite or escape, all those protests seem especially absurd. Oh, are you tired of roaming around your yard? That must be tough. Are you tired of driving out to look at the lake already? Yes, of course, send hairdressers back to work then! Makes perfect sense. Welp – there are plenty of refrigerator trucks here. We'll send them to you when we're done with them. And no, we're not done with them yet.



Favorite Sons and Unicorns

Over the last few years, I have leaned into making work for young people – both as a theatre maker and as a writer. I dove head first into Theatre for Youth and then, later, into middle-grade fiction. I went to conferences for both and found that they shared something I didn't expect. They were both fields that were largely run by women. Women were the decision makers and the middle (wo)men. Women dominated – which was very nice to see. There aren't a lot of fields where that is true.

But work for young people is, like education, a kind of feminized subset of the greater whole. The rest of theatre and the rest of literature are dominated by men. It's a very interesting phenomenon. Even more interesting to me is how this domination does not extend to the artists. There are the odd exceptions but the artists that these women choose to grace their stages or their publishing houses are mostly men. If there's a commission to be handed out, I can almost guarantee that it will be handed to a man, and in all probability, he will be a white man. At the several theatre for youth conferences I attended, I saw many all male performances and not one single all female show. The ratios were staggering. I saw male writers hailed as geniuses and male directors applauded for their mastery. I did not see one single woman so honored. I saw artistic director panels without one single woman. Similarly, at the children's book writer's conference, men in artistic positions of outnumbered women two to one, while the membership of the organization had women outnumbering men by 10 to 1.

In both places, I saw men being coddled and catered to. I saw them lionized and adored. I did not see the same for women. Ever.

There's a quality that reminds me of the stereotypical Italian mother from fiction. This bella mama adores her sons. She'll do anything for them. She pinches their cheeks and calls them heroes. She treats them like kings. In women's spaces, like work for children, men who go there become the favorite sons.

It makes me think of a phenomenon that Deborah Frances White talks about on her podcast, *The Guilty Feminist*. The podcast is a distinctly womanly feminist space and whenever a man shows up, he tends to be very interesting to the audience.

Deborah Frances White has lately been inclined to talk about how much credit male feminists get for just showing up. "The bar is so low," she'll say. And it is. All a male feminist had to do to get a whole bunch of credit is show up at a feminist event and he's a hero. She compares it to the applause men will get for caring for their own children.

"Look at him holding his own baby," people say. "What an amazing man."

I think this happens in other feminized spaces to varying degrees. Men get handed goodies just because they showed up in a place men don't always go. They get all the privileges associated with maleness and then get an extra layer of laudatory attention for being unusual. But the fact is, men in these spaces are NOT unusual. They are the norm. They are the norm over and over again. The favorite sons are chosen over and over again. They seem like unicorns to the women who are choosing them but it's a 98% unicorn world so unicorns just aren't that special in it. And the horses are left kind of wandering around the paddock going "I thought horses belonged here. There are so many in charge."

Does it have to be this way? Of course it does not. I know at least one presenter who brings in women's work much more often than her colleagues do. She'll do the occasional unicorn show but she makes special room for horses. While her colleagues are pinching the cheeks of the latest It Boy unicorn, she is giving space to a group of horses to try a new idea. The bar is high for women feminist heroes and to my mind, she meets it.

I'm not saying we should never do another unicorn show. Unicorns are great. But I would like for their bar to be a little bit higher and I would like for the bar for horses to be a lot lower because at this point, only the occasional magic horse can get over it. And usually, it's because someone's favorite son is riding on her back.

And don't think I haven't noticed that most of the favorite sons are white. The majority of the women in charge are white and they choose their boy geniuses to be as like them as they can. On a rare occasion there is a son of color but he is usually treated as a kind of pet project. The white boys are geniuses; the boys of color have "so much potential" that needs to be cultivated and shaped and pruned. In these spaces, men of color can be called inspiring but they're rarely called brilliant. In some rare moments in these spaces, you'll find a woman of color but she somehow has to lean into a culturally specific lane. A Black woman can make some

inroads with Anansi tales; Agents can sell her show for Black History Month. A book about Chinese lanterns can be sold around Chinese New Year lessons in school, so that means there might be space for a Chinese woman. I mean, I love Anansi tales and Chinese lanterns as much as the next person – probably more than the next person – but what if our artists of color could just make cool stuff that they felt like making? Like we could have a South Asian company make a show about trains. Or an Iraqi writer could just publish a cute story about a frog. Or maybe, as a temporary remedy, white artists should only be allowed to make culturally specific work for a while. Like, no more cute frog stories for us white folks. It's just Betsy Ross myths, muskets and tea cozies in our repertory now. See how we like it. (We wouldn't like it.)

In any case, I'm no longer attempting to make any inroads in these spaces. I gave them my best shot but I didn't see a path toward success. I was no one's favorite daughter there and there is no such thing, really. The favorite daughter of folktales is the one who does all the chores and sacrifices herself for the good of her loved ones, not one who strides out into the world to make her fortune. I'm keen on striding out into the world to make my fortune the way the boys do in those stories. And one day I hope to encounter someone who can actually champion me the way the boys get championed by their arts mothers and arts fathers. And I hope all the bella mamas, of all the feminized spaces, find a way to make favorites of more than just the white boys one day.



The Benefits of No One Caring About Your Work

When a friend of a friend asked me for some advice about starting a blog and Patreon, I told her the truth – that most writers struggle to find an audience and the internet is largely indifferent to our work. I realized after I hit send, that this might not be the kind of advice a writer might want to hear. I mean, I know I expected that the internet would fall at my feet and deliver me instant recognition when I first began writing and posting music there. I think imagined that there were people who spent their days just running their fishermen's nets through the internet's wide oceans looking for gems. This is what I thought despite the fact that I never used the internet that way myself, nor did I know anyone else who did. But I suppose hope springs eternal? Anyway, there are no gem finding internet fishing boats and putting things up on the internet is largely like going outside in a thunderstorm and shouting your latest sonnet. It's not likely to be heard or even noticed. Very few people, besides the ones closest to you, are likely to care about a piece you put up on the internet.

This might seem harsh but there are benefits to no one giving any fucks about your work. I mean. Let me pause for a second to say that a lot of people care about my work now. Not all of it, for sure – but I have been at this long enough that I am no longer operating in total anonymity on the internet in most places. I don't want to underplay my own success. But I do have a lot of things on the internet that in all the likelihood no one has ever seen. There are over a thousand posts on my Hamlet blog that no one has ever clicked on – or at least that have never registered as viewed. They're mostly the tiny words, which are actually my favorite posts – but no one has a reason to click on them, so they remain as invisible as any other neglected post on the internet. And I have a following. That Hamlet blog has over 107,000 views altogether. But...even so.

But I was here to tell you why it's good when no one cares. It's good because you can really grow in peace. The pressure of publishing where a person MIGHT see it means that you're working on your writing (or your art or whatever) and growing it and developing it outside of what can be a bright spotlight.

It is exciting when posts go a little viral. It is a roller coaster to watch stats and comments roll in. But it is also a distraction from writing. When no one cares what you write, you can develop and share your own voice without worrying so much about what people are saying about it.

And in retrospect, I'm very glad that no one was reading the very first blogs I wrote here. They weren't that good yet. I think being out here all the time without too much push back has led me to discover my own particular style and confidence in my voice.

There are a LOT of gems in my internet corner and many of them have never been caught in anyone's net. This one is still one of my favorites and it never got the attention I felt it warranted. And I love this little bit from The Hamlet Project that has only two views. But somehow even though not everything gets seen – the gems do sort of add up. And occasionally one will get caught up in a random google search and become accidentally popular. For example, I tossed off a piece called How to Congratulate an Artist a couple of years ago and now it gets a handful of views every day. I could not possibly explain it to you. It's not because it's a great piece. It's not. It's just accidentally google-able and the more people click on it, the more people click on it. I guess google is the internet fisherman.

And all of the things do add up to a rather substantial body of work, which is maybe the biggest benefit. I have written a LOT of things and the evidence is right there on the internet. Some gems, some fish, some old boots. But a substantial body of work, regardless. Benefit #1.



Do You Have Power?

The neighbors were walking through the neighborhood checking out the damage caused by Tropical Storm Isaias. I asked them if they had power and they shook their heads. None of us had power.

And of course, I'm talking about electricity. I was staying at my friend's place and the storm had brought down trees all over the area, knocking out power lines everywhere. Rich neighborhoods, poor neighborhoods, the power grid was out for everyone.

There's an idea that's been making its way around the internet during these global pandemic times, about how we're not all in the same boat, as some have said, but we are all in the same storm. How the storm impacts us depends greatly on what kind of boat we're in to weather it. If we're on David Geffen's yacht, we're probably okay. If we're on a rubber raft, we're in for some trouble. The week-long power outage on Long Island was a result of a literal storm and the metaphor applies to its aftermath. There were those with generators whose lights only dimmed for a moment as they switched from one power source to another and those for whom the loss of a fridge full of goods may have meant ruin. Your access to power could allow for a cramp in your lifestyle or a full-on shut down.

Our lives are so dependent on electricity and the ways we rely on it are legion. You discover how much when you are without it. It's not just lights out at night. It's hot water heaters powered by electric switches. It's refrigerators and freezers. It's your phone and your computer and your tablet that become bricks when you run out of batteries. The all-powerful internet is meaningless when you can't turn anything on that will get you to it. You cannot grind your coffee beans. You cannot run the air conditioning. You can't turn a fan on. When it's hot, you're going to stay hot.

The fact that we call electricity "power" strikes me with great force after a week without it. I walk around in my daily life with extraordinary power at my fingertips. I turn lights on, grind coffee, charge my devices, heat stuff up in a microwave. It is non-stop power. I don't think of myself as powerful but I do have access to power. There are those that do not have that access.

There's something about the literalness of this metaphor – something about those with access to power and those that do not have access – that lines up perfectly. When you have power, you take it for granted. I was cavalierly freezing food, running fans and letting my phone run out of battery because I knew I could just plug it in and charge it some more. I previously did not think I had power because I didn't have artistic access or couldn't get my art sold or produced or whatever. But I did have access to the sort of power that powers a modern life and until I lost it for a significant period of time, I took it entirely for granted.

When you have power, it is largely invisible to you and highly visible to the people without it. I was acutely aware of the neighbors' generators – how loud they were, sure – but also how some would power even their driveway lights with them, while others just lit up their kitchens. The house I was in was entirely dark and became invisible to those WITH power at night.

This dynamic is at play with less literal power as well. The powerless can track the levels of power they do not have while the powerful don't see power at all, they're just using their juicer at breakfast or investing their money or taking that meeting with that VIP, no big deal.

I feel like this is a central difficulty when trying to make social change. The invisibility of the power structure to those that benefit from it is one of the largest obstacles to making it more fair.

I wonder if we need these occasional power outages to at least just remind us that our hold on power is not something to be taken for granted. It is not a given.

It makes me think of the charitable donations of solar powered lanterns. The ones that are given so students can study, so doctors can practice even when there is no light. They're particularly useful in disasters. A little solar lamp is not a big dose of power but it is a start. The lights are powered by the power source we all have access to. Sometimes I think this is why the powers that be are so dead set against solar and wind power – because our current leaders are power hoarders. If we powered our electricity with wind and sun, they could not so easily control the power source.



I don't think of myself as someone with power but I can use what little bits of electrical power I have to type into this machine that I plug into the wall where I get that electricity. And then I post onto the internet which I can access because of power and receive support through that same electric internet for my work. I will then, with the support I receive for this post, buy someone, without power, a light. I want to give power, not just take it. If you want to join me, here are the lights I'm going to buy when my electric powered payment comes in.



Frustrated Artists and Tyrants

From listening to the Bunga Bunga podcast, I learned that Silvio Berlusconi started as a singer. He was reasonably successful and having a great time when, apparently, his dad shamed him, asking him if he was really going to be a singer for the rest of his life. So Silvio Berlusconi quit singing. Even though he loved it. And became a shady ass real estate developer instead. This led him to becoming a shady ass media mogul and then the shady ass prime minister of Italy. Did that go well for Italy? No, no, it did not. Would Italy have been better off if Berlusconi had just continued to do what he loved and just kept singing? I think so. I blame Berlusconi's dad for the problems of Italy. I also blame the world that denigrates the arts and deems them not enough.

This makes me think about Hitler, of course. Hitler wanted to be a painter. He was rejected by the Academy of Fine Arts of Vienna, where he'd moved to pursue his dreams. He had a go of selling his work and found a few people to buy it. He was fucking serious about painting. Was he any good? No. But some people liked his stuff. They even paid for it – so hey – that's something. But his failures in art led him to politics and the world ended up with a disaster. Do I blame the Academy of Fine Arts? Nope. No one wants to go to school with Hitler. And he was bad. So. Of course they had to reject him. But someone, somewhere might have encouraged him. I don't know who but somebody could have kept that man painting and it would have saved millions of lives.

The stories of frustrated artists going on to do terrible things are many. And there are many frustrated artists who ruined the lives around them when they took their own. What I'm trying to say here is that I think we need to take frustrated artists seriously.

Think of all the tyrants we could have avoided if we'd just managed to be supportive of artists or even just gave them some time, space and resources to do their thing. I mean – good lord – Just give artists the space to be artists and the ones who would have turned out to be tyrants can just happily paint in their basements or sing in the clubs.

But – golly gee whiz – what if they're no good? What if they're a terrible singer or a lousy painter?



To that, I say, wouldn't you rather have a gallery full of shitty paintings than the fucking holocaust? Live with the shitty art, for crying out loud!

Embracing art and artists is a great thing to do, just because art is great but it ALSO could be seen as a preventative measure. Prevent a tyrant! Support an artist! Even a shitty one! I swear everyone is so concerned with whether things are good or bad when, really bad art is entirely tolerable in a way that, say, genocide is not. And I say that as someone who, when I'm watching something terrible, acts as though I'm being quite melodramatically tortured.

I'm not trying to say that all frustrated artists are genocidal maniacs (if so, watch out for me!) but an awful lot of genocidal maniacs really wanted to be artists. They would have rather been singers and painters or authors or actors or whatever. I think a culture that encouraged these things would see a lot fewer genocidal maniacs. Support an artist! Prevent a possible global catastrophe! Buy that weirdo's ugly paintings! You don't have to hang them up. Go to that terrible play! Listen to that awful album! Do it for the world.

I feel like sometimes when people talk about supporting the arts, they really want to make sure they only support the really good stuff. Organizations have extensive applications to make sure they get work of which they approve. They require references or degrees or resumes to try and insure quality. If you propose running a lottery, they worry about how they will weed out the bad stuff.

But true support would mean supporting all of it – the wonderful, the good, the mediocre and the terrible. It's like trying to save a forest by just saving a couple of the tallest trees. The forest thrives because of all of the trees, even the fallen rotting ones and to support a forest would mean supporting the widest variety of forest life. The same is absolutely true of the arts. The more supported the entire ecosystem is, the more good art we get out of it.

And if just having a robust arts culture isn't enough of a reason for you, just think of investment in the arts as tyrant insurance. Support all the arts, even the bad, and maybe you'll save us from the ravings of the next frustrated artists.



2020 Year in Review

Happy New Year! Cheers! It's 2020! What a nice round number this is! Maybe this'll be my year!

Twenty Twenty, so exciting.

Oh yeah, January and already things are looking up! I'm back in the rehearsal room, getting back on stage next month. It's looking good.

Oh, February – the joys of being in a theatre full of people, pressed into a tiny dressing room with way too many actors and some unidentified randos, trying to warm up in small corners, whispering backstage so close to one another.

Oh hey, March – what's up?

What? You want us to what?

But I can still take the subway to go see a show, right?

And hugging my friend is okay, right?

They wouldn't shut down Broadway. They'll never shut down Broadway.

Oh fuck, they shut down Broadway.

They shut us all down. No more theatre. Anywhere. Uhhhhhhhhhh.

This is just a moment. It's just a moment. We'll be back to normal lickety split.

Let's have those margaritas we were going to have in person on-line! So novel! So crazy, virtual drinking via Facetime.

And now it's April and now the invitations to Zoom shows roll in. And they are all equally terrible, regardless of theatre size or reputation. Zoom is the great equalizer. Theatre on Zoom is not theatre and I should definitely write something about this but I can't figure out how to because Zoom just fills me with existential despair, like every time, not just for theatre either. Why does every encounter with this app end with me in tears on the floor of the living room?

Tiny apartment. Tiny apartment. Terrifying trips to the grocery store. Walks past the freezer morgue trailers.

It's May and the only thing keeping me going is my weekly on-line theatre watching "with" my friend via text and jigsaw puzzles. Thank goodness I have a silent scream practice. June – Arggggh! Arggh!

July – Arggh! Arghh! But outdoors. I'm staying at my friend's place with grass and trees and flowers so it's nice. But I'm on my own, which is good after being pressed together for so many months but also, I get so desperate for hugs that I start hugging trees.

August – Argh! Argh! It's my birthday. I saw a friend. It's my first time in 5 months. Also before I come back to the city, the power goes out for ten days from a Tropical Storm and I go full Laura Ingalls Wilder.

September – Arghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

October – Arghhhhhhhhhhhhh but colder and with Halloween decorations.

November – A one day celebration in the street on the day the election is called. A day of euphoria and a lot of cars blaring YG & Nipsey Hussle's "FDT" – which frankly we should have been blaring for the last four years but it was very satisfying to hear everywhere on this day. In fact, it's how I found out the election had been called. Our downstairs neighbor started playing it at top volume and then I heard some cheers and I knew what all that meant.

Later in the month, a neighbor has dressed his scary chainsaw wielding psycho dummy in a turkey suit and just like that Halloween décor becomes Thanksgiving décor.

December – Time to collect the year's best into the yearly zine and sum it all up and it's...argghhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

*

It's been a brutal year. And we are the lucky ones, just by virtue of surviving it. May we all have a better year next time around. Thanks for keeping me company through it, lovely readers.



Songs from this year's podcast

If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out
Hello
Schadenfreude
It Ain't Over til It's Over
Rubber Duckie
Dream Away
All At Sea
Every State Line
Chariot
Listen to Me Now*
Beautiful People
Judy Schmooder*
Bad Mood
Charm School
Dragon Ate My Boyfriend*
Any Major Dude
Ocean Song*
(Sittin on the) Dock of the Bay
Won't You Be My Neighbor?
Left of Center
Behind the Mask
Marte, Sebas, Guille y los demas
Goodbye Earl
That Is How She Knew*
Red Vines
Romeo and Juliet

We Close Our Eyes
Apartment Four
I Just Said That*
Water River Stone*
C'e la Luna
There's No Business Like Show Business
High Hopes
Sonata*
I Saw Her Standing There
Supra Genius
Power
Too Close for Comfort
Wild World
Back in Time
Smile
Not Ready to Make Nice
Waste*
Love Cats
Somebody's Something
Behind the Mask
Sexy*
Detachable Penis
William It Was Really Nothing
Girl on Fire
Ship of Fools
Would You Like to Swing on a Star?

Songs for the Struggling Artist is at artiststruggle.wordpress.com

Podcast version Songs for the Struggling Artist hosted on Anchor and available everywhere you get podcasts

Emily Rainbow Davis

© 2020

Most photos courtesy of Pixabay, Snappy Goat, Unsplash

and the NYPL Digital Collection

