

STILL POINT: Meditations on Silence, Solitude, and Social Sustainability

Written and Performed by Elyse Lamm Pineau
Videography by Jason Hedrick

I. Small Worlds, Built to Scale

At Rise: My childhood dollhouse sits in my retirement garden, framed by rose bushes and white picket fences, her life-size prototype rising up behind. It is a small garden, just an alcove of quiet seclusion, the width of a driveway really, bordered by asphalt, bare when I bought it. By American standards, it's little more than a 'doll-sized garden' tucked like a secret between house and alley. But this year . . . this summer dawning on the safer side of Covid, my garden came alive with a lush generosity that felt like . . . *grace* . . . that felt like sunrise after a year's sustained dark night of the soul, that felt like a callback to Roberto, last year, saying "*Hope* is an ontological need." Indeed.

Elyse Lamm Pineau is an Emeritus professor of Communication/Performance Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, where her work focused on women's lived and literary narratives, all aspects of stage production, and critically-engaged, arts-based pedagogies. Her research has appeared in *American Educational Research, Qualitative Inquiry, Text and Performance Quarterly*, as well as (in translation) for education journals in Brazil and Taiwan. Elyse was given the Leslie Irene Coger award for Distinguished Performance scholarship, as well multiple awards for outstanding teaching. The privilege of academic retirement has opened up new territories for community engagement, new demographics for collaboration, and new forms of artistic and political expression. This collaboration with videographer, Jason Hedrick, is one such exploration.

Jason Hedrick is a playwright, theatre director, and film obsessive who is currently completing his doctoral thesis on the intersection of film and performance studies in the department of Communication Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

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I've always been a maker of small worlds. By sensibility, by training, by profession, and by privilege, I rework the world on a small canvas: the length of a classroom, the width of a stage, the duration of a story, the circumference of my local community. Ever since I was small—so small I needed a stool to see into this dollhouse—I've had faith in the power of small things, in the catalytic force of a still life that can sit in the palm of a hand yet turn the world upside down and shake loose what you knew of it. I think worldmaking needs models, built on a sliding scale from doll-size to life-size, artifactual to actual, and each of us plays their part, using tools that are scaled to the task and the hand that holds them. For me, that's the poetic performative, a distillation of art and argument set onto the head of a pin, point, dancing. I am an autoethnographic performance poet and small-world-making is what I do.

So, in March 2020 when Covid-19 locked down the world and death counts rose daily, I made the strategic decision to plant myself inside a miniaturized version, the only version of the world that I could control, where I could feel safe, where I could stay clean, where I could wait out the virus unscathed as I could, assured I'd done all that I should—for myself and my neighbors—to ensure that Covid stopped dead at our doorsteps. And given the necessity of living *in voluntary, solitary home confinement as a matter of community survival*, I gathered my privilege close and hunkered down for the long haul.

And then I was alone, on my own in the garden I had built with half-hidden objects and skeletons of memory, little altars everywhere. Trying to keep my balance on a pinpoint of stillness as the whole world gasped and grieved and burned and yearned for relief, and turned itself upside down, and shook loose all that we knew of it.

To be *still* in the world means you cannot be separate, because *stillness* is not static.

Ask a sunflower, tracking the sun on its face in movement so small you might think the world is not turning over, on its axis, daily. Ask a dollhouse, that chamber of echoes crowded with ghosts, if stillness can seep through the walls and whisper round corners, calling out for response. Seclusion is an illusion and isolation does not insulate, anyone.

Be still. Listen. The world is wailing.

Be still. Pay attention. The world is shaking loose what we know of it.

Be still. And when the stillness is pointed, speak.

II. A Body Bereft

I am a body bereft.
I am a body bereft of Body's pleasures.
I am a body living alone, bereft of her kin.
I am an aging body, increasingly bereft of value.

Still,
I am a body of privilege.
Still,
My body teeters tightrope-taut on the highwire that
privilege can string across
chaos.

Still,
my body clings, as bodies instinctively do,
toes curled tight like claws around the cable
that takes me safely from here to there, wherever *there* is,
on the other side of *this*.

Still,
I put on my own mask, first.

Living alone in functional quarantine, I have been a body made safe by becoming a body bereft of much that gave it pleasure, gave it meaning, gave it purpose. Small wonder I attended to those purposeful pleasures most ready to hand: Finger-combing dead growth from plants to touch the first sprigs of spring, greening. Learning to make sticky toffee pudding and 100 variations on cream sauce. Sinking into novel and after novel after novel, read aloud to me on Audible, as if any time were bedtime and being storied into sleep by a soft and soothing voice was proof positive that it's never too late to have a happy childhood.

So, I've been troubled this year, by social media shaming over feeding the Body with what it desires, what gives it comfort. Of providing my body with that measure of pleasure as I am allotted in isolation from the bodies of others. For a year. As if a body bereft of so much else, did not deserve the taste of creamy sweet. As if leisure were a pleasure too shameful to admit, too 'privileged and precious' to ever be a site for critical reflection or articulate witness.

And so when my daughter came to visit me on Mothers' Day, bringing 3 large bags of Dove chocolates, my heart swelled beyond my body . . . but found it had no place to settle. Because I could not touch my daughter's body; I could not hold her or hug her, or stand within the circumference of her breath, even.

Instead, we stood 10 feet apart across the span of my kitchen, this body of my body, chocolates in hand. And while we talked, I memorized all the surfaces she handled. And when she left, I wiped down all that she'd touched: counter, light switch, doorknob, bags of chocolate. I wrapped my hands in Clorox wipes and systematically erased all trace of her body, all trace of her smell, leaving behind the acrid scent of disinfectant.

And my body felt bereft, steeped in the unmistakable odor of absence,
keenly aware, that there is no permanence,
nor substitute
for flesh.

III. The Sound of 6000

I've a friend who turns to numbers sometimes, to operationalize the uncountable. I tried it, as one way to describe my Covid year living as a solitaire in self-isolation, living a year *in voluntary solitary home confinement* as the price and the privilege of survival.

There are 8,760 hours in a year. Subtracting an over-generous average of 7 hours nightly for blessed incognition, leaves approximately 6,000 hours, mostly consecutive,
Of solitude.
And of silence.

6000 hours alone
In the Quiet,
Whence comes the soliloquy of silence.

At first, I relished the quiet, tucked away safe, tucked away sound, snug as a bug in a rug I wrapped round myself, like the Hermit, like the Hanged Man, like the Turtle, inside looking out, my own voice too, gradually echoing into silence.

And then for a time I managed by breaking silence with a stream of disembodied voices: Someone reads me a novel, someone sings me a song, someone else talks talks on TV, strangers all of them, yes, but strangely comforting those days,

assuring me an Audible Other was present in the world with me, though the call-and-response of *human* interaction was, well, a bit one-sided, after all.

Some days when I was writing, I felt a bit like Emily Dickinson penning poems that would never be read but dropping them anyway, out my 2nd story window in hopes some chance passerby might catch them on the wind: "Because I could not stop for Death . . ."

On other days I felt like Winnie in that Beckett play, alone and immobilized, buried up to my waist, but talking, talking, talking a steady blue streak just to know and to show that I was still alive. "Another heavenly day!"

Still sentient.

Still a being of value.

Still speaking.

But most days, I just felt like one hand clapping.

Now this is not to say that my Covid year was wholly devoid of human contact. Not really, not *literally* in the numerical sense I started out tracking.

So, what happens if I punch that timecard again?

A friend for coffee each week, ticks off an hour. A daughter for lunch or for laundry

and even at 10 feet apart she's a Face.

A beloved face, and I'll risk that distance unmasked for those 100 minutes a week.

Then there's drive-through and curbside, and a wave to a neighbor, oh my! I've learned to pack a good 10 minutes of small talk going through a cashier line once a week and those minutes are like coupons, you know; they're like pennies that add up over a year.

So, thank you essential workers,

for the 520 minutes of small talk, some weeks my sole talk,

in the year 2020, and change.

Back to the silence.

Always and already at my door, knocking.

Is this how it will feel? I wonder.

Should the time come in my life that old age and infirmity again shrink my world to the size of a doll's house? —

—just me and the ghosts, memories roommates?

If that be my fate, that my body is buried to the waist, alone and untended,

—and let's be honest, that is longevity's price tag in my culture —

What have I learned, in this year all alone that might soothe me, solace me,

Companion me through the Quiet,

Should each day, once again,

Be an endless arrangement of silence?

What says the voice of the quiet in the 6000th hour?

What are the lessons of solitude falling, still,

Falling, again, for the 6000th time in the 6000th hour?

Just these:

When your body is forced into stillness, reverberate.

When the world is broken, help gather what is shattered and sow it like seeds.

And when the sound of 6000 strong knocks on your door . . . open it.

IV. Sundown in a Small Town

Small town. Sundown town. Town of renown, three times listed in the historic registry of the American mythos. 1st as the town where Abraham Lincoln gave an anti-slavery debate in 1858, right there in the village park where I walk my dog on a sunny day. And later, a town listed in Victor Green's "The Negro Motorist Green Book," an underground travel and survival guide thru the Klan clusters of the 1930s. And for every generation since, a town name whose acronym still stands for . . . well, "Ain't None Allowed" after sundown in this town where I can walk my dog down Main St any night of the week, after dark. My town. Hometown. Everytown USA in the long hot summer of 2020 when the state sanctioned murders of black folk hit critical mass and ignited a movement that flooded the streets and washed all that shit right into the open in the broad light of day.

Labor town. Old King Coal mining town. Town that still carries a lunchbox and a union card, and where most all the lil' chickens come home to roost another generation on the family farm. Town of blue collars and bootstraps, and biscuits-and-gravy, (northern in name only, y'all). A 'town vs gown' kind of town, where the silhouette of the university's ivory towers cast shade across the farm's back

40, marking a generational divide as deep as the coal mines your granddaddy worked and as wide as the orchards where 'brown-bodied families' still pick fruit on a seasonal cycle of race-based poverty, though their families too have lived in the town—well, surround—for generations now.

Lockdown town. Keep away town. Just one little town in the mask-averse MAGAverse of the U.S. Midwest Bible Belt, where Covid-19 might be a deadly global virus, or it might be a biblical revenge plague, or it might be a 'libtard hoax for sheeple' depending on which storefront door you open along our 3 block Main Street. Or don't open, ever again, making note of whose 'personal choice for freedom' trumps all of the lives in our town, and surround, collectively. Shame on you, neighbor, wearing your ignorance as a mask of entitlement on your bare face, flaunted.

Election town. 2nd time around town. Deep red town in a blue state, seeping purple as fast as we can ink it; won't be enough but hope springs eternal. Divided town. Town rent down the middle by every thing, on every day, and everyday a crisis, as we lockdown-countdown to chaos. Trump Train town, honking hate speech down Main St right past my front door, Confederate freak-flags flying. Town where a Trumped-up Rambo points his AK47 at me from my neighbor's colonial flagpole when I open my front door, but the neighbor from the back alley, the guy with no bootstraps to pull on, asks if he can stand in my yard with his Biden-Harris sign when that train goes by and so we share some sweet tea and shade on my front lawn and watch the neighborhood line up. One side or another. No middle of the road. Not now, not here. Not any longer.

National headline town. "Black Lives Matter in a Sundown Town," and there we are, my hometown, marching down Main Street, pictured above the fold of an article on the historical legacy of American Sundown Towns, where Black lives mattered only as open season targets after sundown, when the darkness masked over a multitude of sins, then, as now. But not today. Because on this one fine June day, in this small town, all day downtown, sun up thru sun down: black folk, white folk, old folk in walkers and wheelchairs (and most folk were masked folk), business folk, church folk, folk who sit on the town Council, folk who hadn't left their homes in months, folk who knew the risk and took it willingly, folk who thought they'd never live to see the day, folk who'd never risked a stop in town, folk who'd rejected town history but still lived in the bounty of its privilege. White folk, my folk—enough folk, finally?—marching and kneeling and praying and call-and-responding, and saying their names and calling out the names of our neighbors:

"We see you!" we say. We see right thru your smirks and your slogans, your slouching in alleys behind Dixieland crosses. Well today

it is daytime in downtown, so consider yourself seen, 'neighbor!' standing there behind the blue line on the wrong side of Main Street, on the wrong side of history, making. It's a new day dawning in this small town, our town, everytown USA, and we will make safe, and we will make sure that *your sun never sets here again*. Neighbor."



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