

Remember That Time When March Stopped? A Personal Account

By Catalina Florina Florescu

When a traumatic event happens, time appears to stop. Later, when we seem to have returned to walking and talking, we trace back “what happened.”

It was the weekend before my birthday. I knew that this year my birthday would be overwhelming because I would finally be at the age my mother died (45). By now, I have spent the most minutes with myself than anyone else, so I can *smell* when something is not right, after all life is nothing but a series of repetitions. True, every now and then they get interrupted like small incisions on the skin, or stitches. I grew up in Tulcea, Romania, a place where the Danube River ends its international journey. Now I live close to the Hudson River, at the border between New Jersey and New York. Water is my astrological sign and *my* blood. And yet the tears that were about to be shed on my birthday would also be akin to a spiritual baptism.

The weekend before I turned 45, I went to the Museum of Modern Art. I had no idea that that would be my last trip to a museum in New York City. We were starting to be aware of our surroundings, but in a different way than “spotting” for terrorists. We were starting to distance politely. I recounted the moment in a post on Facebook dated March 7th: “I went to MoMA today for the first time since its expensive renovation and reopening. There were fewer people on the bus. Even waiting for the bus, I didn’t realize that today the drunkards were celebrating St. Patrick’s Day, U.S. style, getting drunk by noon. The bus came. More stops, other passengers. One old man decides to join me. He says, ‘Beautiful coat.’ I thank him. ‘Blue,’ he adds. I smile. ‘Blue as in the sky.’ I agree. After a few seconds, ‘Blue as in the ocean.’ I keep smiling and agreeing. Silence. ‘What else is blue?’ he adds. ‘People say here, “They got the blue.”’ ‘Yes, blue Mondays,’ I say. ‘Nostalgia,’ he adds. Silence. ‘I don’t get this: blue moon.’ I say, ‘I think it’s about something that’s very rare.’ Silence. ‘Blue as in music, right?’ he says. ‘Rhythm and blues,’ I say. He smiles. Silence. ‘Blue as in someone’s eyes.’ I point to mine. He laughs. Silence. ‘Blue... Blue... Blue is a primary color, right?’ ‘Yes,’ I agree. ‘Is blue in the flag? The American flag,’ he adds. ‘Yes, red, blue, and white. But white is not a color.’ ‘Is not?’ he says. I add, ‘I think it’s a non color.’ Silence. ‘Blue, like in jeans.’ He points to his, I point to mine. He tells me he was born in China. I tell him I was born in Romania. The bus arrives in New York. He bows and tells me, ‘Thank you for talking to me.’ I wish him to have a great day. We smile. We part ways.”

Then, my birthday came. I talked to friends on the phone, I walked for an hour listening to music, I came back home, engaged in my routine, and let the day slipped into night. *Everything after this is going to disintegrate*. How can the word “disaster” have such a beautifully word trapped in it, a word that relates to something that is outside of us, i.e., “a star”? Etymologically speaking, “disaster” means “an ill-starred event.” If you ask yourselves, family members, dear ones, and strangers when they started to be aware of the disaster, you would see what I mean. Sometime around mid-March, life stopped. It turned our skin inside out, we could see our fears distorted on the other’s faces, and we felt we could not breathe. We became sick *without* being sick. Trapped inside apartments, not knowing when and how this pandemic will end. We are now

broadcasting ourselves on several social media channels, yet it feels we are part of a funeral procession that does not end.

Growing up, I spent hours outside. My intimate relationship with the TV had four major components: any theatrical event; any special show during the New Year's Eve; the Vienna Concert for the New Year; any sport-related event, especially soccer and gymnastics. Speaking of soccer, the night when my father and I watched live the first soccer team from a communist country winning the Championship League, that night in Seville -- May 7th 1986 -- was the first time when I realized the impact of live broadcasting. I was 11. That night I saw people going outside, chanting, cheering, and being free. It was special because we lived in dictatorship, so to see people acting so spontaneously that was indeed unique, a never-to-be-repeated moment. From that euphoric moment, the next one happened during the days of the Romanian Revolution in 1989. At the time, we thought everything was unfolding without a script, and in part it was. Those who had no agenda and wanted to end the dictatorship, they did not care for power. They wanted to stop being afraid. Watching a revolution live after years of rationed everything was surreal. I was 14. I was a teen whose world was shifting on many levels. I liked the newness. It was liberating, however temporary. The taste of freedom was sampled and no one would be able to take that away from me.

The night in Seville when Steaua București won and the nights of the Romanian Revolution in Bucharest were my major live televised events that I experienced back home. I did not see Apollo 11 Moon landing; I did not see the funeral of John F. Kennedy; I did not see the Challenger explosion; I did not see Katie Couric's colonoscopy. I did not see the Beatles' '67 "All You Need Is Love" as part of the Our World satellite broadcast. If I want, I have access to their respective tapes. Naturally, it is not in the least the same.

My third big televised event happened on 9/11. I was 26 and I was a graduate student at Purdue University. That day, I was supposed to have a professor from the Classics Department come to evaluate my teaching of Latin. I was ready to perform. I was waiting for the PC to start to see what happened overnight in my beloved Europe and I had no idea that in New York people were screaming and the chaos was just seconds away from unfolding. I watched what was broadcasted and almost lost the sense of time. I finally left the apartment. By the time I got to school, the first Tower collapsed. I did not have a cell phone back then. I taught my class. I went into my office or returned back home or went to my grad courses... I still cannot remember clearly. But what I remember was the sense of shock and paralysis. We got calls from back home. We reassured our dear ones we were fine. A year or so after the attacks, we went to New York to visit a friend. I remembered we passed by the marred sites. By now they were wrapped in fences with "Do Not Trespass" signs. My fascination for scars had to be satisfied. I was *famished* to see how it looked. And so I moved closer and peeked. A policeman ordered me to stop. I smiled. I followed orders.

My fourth "wished it had not happened" live event was during the night of the last U.S. Presidential election when I could not believe what I was seeing. I went to sleep late, around 2. I am not sure if I slept at all. I knew it would be excruciatingly tough and I just hated everything. I asked again myself why I was here. The next day I went to school. Half of my students were not in class. Those who came were sad and you could tell they cried. We talked and hugged and I knew that I had to be there for them, masking my own fears. That was in 2016. I was 41.

We interrupt our lives. Our lives are interrupted. Not sure which one reads less terrifyingly. We take a moment to digest events that are almost impossible to understand, to reason, to cope with, and yet we do that. I'd suspect we brush over these collective traumas either because we cannot fully assign a meaning to them, or because we want to protect our fragile systems, or who knows? Who *really* knows? Lately, I think of life as a series of beads. We do not know when one may fall making all the other fall. We roll from day to midday to evening to night to day.

That almost seamless time frame happened during hurricane Sandy. We were watching live as the hurricane was moving like a beast and all of a sudden I heard some screams. I went to my room. I looked outside. I have never seen so much dirty water in my life. The street was full with brownish water. I was terrified. In an entry that was written and published at that time in a blog for mothers, I wrote: "The neighbors and I were in a trance taking photos, making short video clips, documenting the disaster. I trembled. But I told my son: 'Let me sing you some lullabies... Let's sleep...' I thought that if I reconnected with my routine I would feel better. But I did not. I kissed my son good night. I left his room. I stayed in bed to observe the others' impromptu play of flashlights. I imagine people being fireflies. But that thought was not poetic. It was a side effect of Kafka's *The Metamorphoses*. My mind was contaminated by fear: 'What if the water grows bigger and bigger? What if we stay here for so many days without supplies? What if one of us gets so sick we need to go to the hospital?'" That night, I got off of bed so often and squinted my eyes to see if the water miraculously receded. When I finally woke up, around 5, the water and the smell were still there, an awful omnipresence. For no reason, I remembered how badly I wanted to visit Venice. With electricity off and flood outside, we were stuck in the house. We stayed there for three days. It got colder and colder. We were wearing our winter coats and stayed in bed covered in blankets. The house and the neighborhood resembled a hospital with a careless, poor administration. A day after Halloween, there was no water on the streets any longer. We jumped off of bed and got out. We went to visit friends in Queens. The traffic was impossible. On top of that, policemen did not allow cars with one or two people to travel. There had to be at least three people. I started to fear again, even though we were three. But I do *not* like restrictions. After three days of nightmare, in cold and awful smells, with interrupted connections on the phone, with no Internet and contact with the outside world, I did not appreciate that traveling restriction..." That was in 2012. I was 37.

Now we have even more sophisticated devices to connect with others and the world. I map my friends' reactions, either by talking on the phone, or reading what they post, or corresponding via e-mails. This map is moving and is unreliable, altering by the second, and extremely vulnerable, like us. This whole collective experience feels like a plane ride hit by massive turbulence. Last time when I experienced something like this was on a flight from San Francisco to Honolulu. For 6 hours straight, it was so bumpy. I hated checking the time on my wristwatch. It felt like the seconds were too stubborn to move. And then, I realized that the ride would stop. We could all die. We could all survive. But it could *not* last forever.

This is how I feel about this pandemic, Covid-19. I absorb what I see. I use my love for theater to devise my own show that, at the moment, I keep only to myself. I am trained to know what it means to study the body in hospital, in pain and humiliation. I am trained to longing for the touch of a dear lost one.

But

I will not talk about my events and premieres that got cancelled and/or have been postponed indefinitely. I will not talk about how remote teaching is like making love with a condom. I will not talk about how the medical system is ill prepared, despite the medical staff's involvement. I will not talk about how the skin of my hands, usually very dry during cold months, is even drier and cracked. I will not talk about how social distancing makes me restrain myself from hugging and gently touching the other, including strangers. I will not talk about my infected chalazion and the very likely possibility of having minor surgery. I will not talk about how Madonna, naked in her bathtub, said the virus was the "great equalizer" while she was surrounded by rose petals. I will not talk about at greater risk people, like those in tribes and refugees. I will not talk about homeless people. I will not talk about lonely people. I will not talk about the curfew (from 8 p.m. until 5 a.m.) imposed by the mayor to flatten the curve and his "bedtime story" delivered every night around 9. I will not talk about how I cannot see food anymore because it feels that all we do is eat. (Now I understand why people obsessively bought toilet paper.) I will not even talk about borders closing, a move that seems to suggest a reaction that surpasses a virus, a Cold War that is definitely happening right now.

We will learn how to touch by washing the beloved's hands, by kissing their neck, by looking into their eyes from a distance. We will learn how to approach touching by using synesthesia. We will learn how much it means to enjoy our choices and, maybe, make better ones.

Right now, though, I am trying desperately to avoid another Year of the Rat. It was exactly 12 years ago when I had the longest and most harrowing depression of my entire life. It did not happen when I lost my mother, grandmother, and father (1992; 2003; 2005, respectively). It did not happen when I could not work because I did not have a green card. It happened when I wanted to return back home. It was 2008. I was 33.

My story of immigration is plain and boring. I came here to explore another country. I got married and hopped on a plane. I had no idea where West Lafayette, Indiana was. I had no idea how it would be to hear everything in American English. I had no idea that simple things, like bread and fish, would taste radically different. My story of "no return possible" was the trauma that made me reevaluate all my relationships, mostly those related to belonging. I cried so much in 2008. I went to Romania and spent 4 months, my longest period of time since transplanting my roots here. Everything hurt. And I wanted to die.

But...

My son was a toddler. I had to live for him. I wrote and published my first book in my mother tongue.

My son is now a teen. He suffers more from social distancing than I do because he misses his classmates. We think their generation is better equipped to face this moment because they "are born" fluent in technology. They are not emotionally strong enough, though. Now they learn a tough lesson in how vital direct interaction is. But I am neither an expert nor do I have all the information I need to conclude how well or not they would pass over this historic tragedy.

In 2008 when he was a toddler and when I had the darkest thoughts of my entire life, I discovered all the joys of *sensational time*, when small kids have no clue what time means; instead, they live without questioning life.

Now we are *all* trapped, and we learn the value of time, of presence, and of social identity. Until this pandemic is lessened (because it will not truly end), we are asked to be ... *patient*. Unlike any other spring, we watch nature from behind a window, and that ought to teach us *a* lesson of how we depend on one another and how we pay an even greater price when a tragedy happens in a country and we turn our backs to it.

Later edit/PS: As I compose this short note, we are about to reach the end of April. I lost a friend to Covid-19. Spring semester is almost over and I am glad to have survived the brutal and alienating remote teaching. We are still in quarantine and we fight not only with a virus, but also with an administration that feels the best way to deal with the disaster is to retaliate and misinform. *Stay safe and informed.*