

Tell Me It's Over

By Guest Contributor

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Image Credit: Liat Berdugo, Hat Credit: Lee Tusman

Often we work with holes. In understanding. Often set out without knowing where. Often distrust narratives. Never need struggle over the meaning of death.

--Rosemarie Waldrop

1

My husband and I meet monthly to talk about how our activism is going. We made this promise once Trump was elected: a promise to commit to some form of activism, to not drift within a few months. Neither of us has stuck with one thing the whole time though—from phone calls and emails to representatives, to supporting direct action blockades, to cooking food for a Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) meeting and gathering gender justice discussion groups with friends, we're still trying things on.

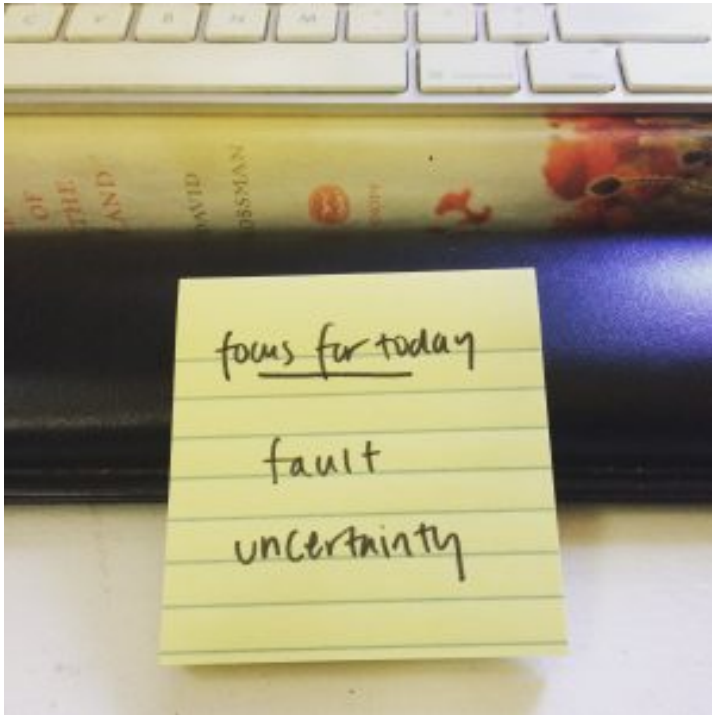
I'm embarrassed, I tell my husband, that I haven't been able to stick with one thing. I feel like I'm still figuring out what to do. He nods. He scrolls through our shared Google Calendar for the next month, scans for protests.

I wonder if it will take us years to get into a groove with this stuff, he says, and frowns, *but it's all so urgent—we can't take our time.* He swipes bread across his plate and shoves it quickly into his mouth.

We promise each other we'll attend two direct actions in the next month, and invite friends to a Cop Watch training this weekend.

It still feels too loose, I tell him, *like, isn't it supposed to add up to something? Aren't I supposed to have goals?* He reminds me that this is *our* perspective, as privileged white folks with Ivy League educations in Getting Things Done Quickly. He cites that part in the [White Supremacy Culture article](#) where it names Perfectionism as a key characteristic of training in White Supremacy.

This isn't about perfect, he says, taking our dishes to the sink, *this is about action.* His tall frame clenched over the sink, scrubbing, determined.



2

I want to know where all of this is this going. I want to know when Trump gets impeached, what strategy wins. All my friends are reading Adrienne Maree Brown's new book [Emergent Strategy](#), and we talk over and over again about how we can't know what a new world will look like, how we are crafting it on the run.

"But an American or female or queer writer can never be allowed to say, to irresponsibly suggest to the reader for even a moment that she doesn't know where she's going," says Eileen Myles in [an interview](#) with CA Conrad, "I'm thinking about a trembling or waylaid narrative."

Waylaid as in interrupted or held up. The dictionary gives the example: *waylaid on the stairs*. So here we stand, held up on the way we thought we were going, trembling on the way to productivity, waylaid on the way to a happy ending. I tremble at the foot of the Trump presidency, not knowing where to go.

What if, though, as Myles proposes, this trembling narrative is precisely what is required for this time—is actually what we need to stop it up, and perhaps even to survive it?



Image Credit: Rose Ellis at [Amuse](#)

In his book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, Roy Scranton describes this political moment as one that demands a death—a death of our old ways of thinking, making, doing, living – and a facing down of death, a coming to grips with its absolute necessity.

Scranton explains that our old ways of relating to death—pushing it off, trying to keep ourselves alive in the same ways at all costs—that these replicate the carbon-consuming, humanity-degrading modes that got us into this mess.

We need new relationships with death, Scranton argues, in order to encounter climate change. While death activates what Scranton calls our “deepest animal drives” of flight or flight, we must learn to redirect our instincts around death. Scranton cites the work of Peter Sloterdijk, who says that by not reproducing these typical stress drives or reactions one can also interrupt normative narratives that death is bad and to be feared. Sloterdijk describes an “interrupter” who relates with death.

“While life beats its red rhythms and human swarms dance to the compulsion of strife, the interrupter practices dying,” he writes. This is what Donna Haraway calls “staying with the trouble,” what Scranton calls “learning to die.”

“And since we can’t ever really know how to do something until we do it,” Scranton observes, “learning to die also means accepting the impossibility of achieving that knowledge as long as we live.”

Impossibility of achieving, like emergent strategies, like the stretch we make toward activism without seeing the end. To say the happy ending is not coming, the planet is dying. What narrative happens when we surrender in this way?

Wayne Koestenbaum writes, “To be seen surrendering: that is humiliation.”

I wonder if humiliation is the key thing to surviving both a Trump administration and surviving climate change—specifically as a person of privilege. I have to be humiliated, to turn away from the oppressive power ingrained in my white skin and my inherited class position.

“Mortification is arresting for everyone present,” writes Brian Blanchfield. I have, then, to be mortified—to surrender up my comfort in order for this system to actually be able to die.

3

In the introduction to her exhibition *Take Care of Yourself*, French artist Sophie Calle writes,

I received an email telling me it was over.

I didn't know how to respond.

It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me.

It ended with the words, "Take care of yourself."

She goes on to ask 107 women to interpret this breakup letter, and from the pieces they make she creates the exhibition. Instead of getting stagnated in the humiliated stance (the spurned woman), instead of buying something, consuming something in the name of "self-care," Calle presents a collective response to the admonition that she "take care" of herself.



Image Credit: [Paula Cooper Gallery](#)

All around me in Oakland I hear people talk of self-care, but this often means getting a pedicure, renting an hour at the hot tub place, or buying a rose quartz tincture for heartbreak. Calle's move is a different one, distinct in its generative as opposed to consuming action—she reaches outward and asks for others to make things for her, with her.

On what she requested of these other people, Calle writes that she asked them to: *Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me. Answer for me.*

She calls in the troops—for lack of a better metaphor—of people who *make* in order to answer, in order to understand. She receives a death knell (of a relationship), and so she calls in the artists.

I received an email telling me it was over. I love the way this is only the beginning of the story.

And: *I received an email telling me it was over.* What if I got one of these from capitalism? From the planet? In Calle's case, the End of something became the generative moment. What stance, I wonder, allows or encourages us to *generate* in the face of death?

Of working on *Take Care of Yourself*, Calle [says](#), "After 1 month I felt better. There was no suffering. It worked. The project had replaced the man."

So too must our projects work now—replacing the Man. The generative stance here is one of replacement: replacing the reality of one system with a new system of re/production. One that is trembling, as Myles would say, and flawed—one that admits to vulnerability as Calle admits the vulnerability of being broken up with.

I think of my friend Michelle, who is a nurse, listening for the 100th time to a friend at a dinner table recounting mysterious symptoms and asking for free medical advice. When the person pauses in their list of symptoms and asks Michelle what she thinks, Michelle nods and shrugs.

"You know," she says, "it could be a lot of things, but it might also just be aging. Sometimes the body just doesn't work as well as it gets older."

Michelle sips her mason jar of wine and we are quiet around the table.

And I think: *it's like the planet.* Older and not working well, slowly dying. Hetero-capitalist patriarchy, slowly dying.

Dissect it, Calle requests, Exhaust it. Understand it for me.

This state slowly being replaced with a state we can't yet understand – a future state that won't be perfect, either, but will—ala Calle—*replace the man.*

*

Recently I visited the fiber-optic cable landing site in Manchester, California that used to connect the United States to Japan and to the global internet. Though now replaced by more sturdy cabling along the ocean floor, the original cabling remains on the beach as a ruin, jutting out from a sandy orange cliff-dune for passerby to lift its heavy piping.



Image Credit: Ingrid Burrington [at The Atlantic](#)

My friend Noreen makes a brief attempt to heave the piping over her shoulder, but drops it quickly and swipes the sand from her pants. *I'm too old for this*, she says, and instead sits down next to the cable and leans her head against it.

I wonder if the new one will last longer, she sighs, and I sit down next to her to stare out at the sea.

I don't know, I say, *I kind of like the idea that this is just the end of the internet*. I dig my nails into the sand. *They tried, and now it's broken*.

My body feels soft in the sand, ready to heave over against Noreen, against the stiff cabling, against the dunes. I want less to know that this problem has been fixed, and more to know that attempts continue. Ruin porn aside, there's something optimistic in the eroded piping, the traces of romance where someone reached for Japan, and for beyond. Where strategy emerges from the bluff.

I turn my face to the soft whips of cold from the Pacific and close my eyes. I picture the infrastructure of cabling running beneath me, connecting me to what I do and don't know. To the ocean, I whisper Calle's call like a mantra:

Exhaust it.

Understand it for me.

Answer for me.



Leora Fridman is author of *MY FAULT* (Cleveland State University Press, 2016) in addition to other books of poetry, prose and translations, and is currently at work on a collection of essays. More at leorafridman.com.