

108 Hours

Fear & Travel in the early days of realization

Wednesday afternoon, March 11, 2020

I am sitting in my university office, just having finished teaching my last class before spring break. Yesterday, the provost issued an email banning all university related international travel. I am finishing emails and eyeing the packed suitcase in the corner of my office. My flight for Amsterdam leaves in 3 hours and I'm justifying my trip as a contract pre-dating my employment with the university, and therefore not university related. This is true, but some part of me feels the possible thinness of it.

On Tuesday, all in person classes were suspended until April 13, replaced by remote teaching only. Some of the remaining productions in our season may be cancelled. A graduate student who has received university funding to travel with me to Amsterdam as my assistant for two productions with the Dutch National Opera is wondering what to do. I tell him to ask at the college office. He reports back that the woman there has said, "officially no college funded travel can take place." And then she winked.

My flight is today, but his is Saturday, so we agree that this is still unfolding, and that he should ask the rest of the faculty and not make a choice immediately. It still seems plausible that this is mostly overly cautious litigation avoidance.

In the last moments in my office, sending a final email, turning off lights, a colleague stops in the doorway, framed there.

"Are you still going?"

"yes, in 15 minutes."

That moment stays with me. His look. His unspoken words.

Then I left. I walked out to catch my lyft, wanting to hide the fact that I had a suitcase as I moved through the building.

Cincinnati Airport

At the airport everything seems normal. I take a conference call to advance an upcoming dance production in Vancouver. I have to run a little to get to my gate after hearing my name called over the paging system.

There is a moment of "you know you could just not get on this flight"

But the grey of the situation was still grey enough. One day ago, to NOT show up for a design at the Dutch National Opera would be a career ending move. Even if there was fear around a new virus, if the production happened and I was not there, it would be a professional disaster and paint me as another over-dramatic American, so extreme, so quick to panic.

The grey was still grey enough to consciously decide to board the flight and see what unfolded.

Delta Flight 228. CVG-CDG

Upon boarding I immediately notice that there are maybe 40 people on the entire flight. It's nice to have an entire comfort+ row to myself, but the feeling of having perhaps made a grave mistake is not eased by the nearly empty plane and the flight attendants wearing latex gloves.

My meal arrives, and I wonder how many hands have touched it. I can't stop thinking about Emily St. John Mandel's book, Station Eleven.

CDG Airport, Paris

We land in Paris and as everyone's phones turn on, we all learn simultaneously about Trump's Schengen zone European travel ban. This gives me pause and a sharp jolt of fear. It doesn't include US citizens we learn, although they will be funneled through 14 a- yet unnamed airports and may be quarantined.

In CDG airport many people are wearing face masks, it feels slightly underpopulated. I know this airport. I know most North American and European airports well from years of touring with musicians and other performers. Familiarity creates a sense of security. I stand in line at my favorite café, Paul, for a croissant before really considering again how many hands have touched everything. The jolt of fear comes again. I turn around and leave to simply sit at the gate and wait for my connecting flight.

There is a man sitting across from me and unabashedly staring at me. He does not break eye contact as he answers a phone call and begins speaking Italian. First realization: Italian. Even in a miasma of global unease, he is flirting with me. I think Italians would continue to flirt as the world burned. It is beautiful and life affirming, and I love them for this among many reasons. Second realization: Italian, from Italy. Outbreak hotspot. I want to move, so I do, as does everyone else sitting around him. He is very rapidly in a two-meter zone free of other people.

It will be like this. Every sneeze, every cough from anyone brings a collective shudder and re-organization of physical space.

A dear friend from London calls, "I hope you packed a big suitcase, because I think you're staying in Europe for a long time!" Does she seem almost gleeful about the level of chaos?

While waiting, I book a direct flight from Amsterdam to Vancouver, trying to avoid the US, and still get to my next lighting design job for the Vancouver International Dance Festival in 10 days' time. For the last few years, I have been in the habit of booking travel only a week or two out. It occurs to me that this habit will probably end now.

CDG-AMS, Amsterdam

The flight from Paris was uneventful. I arrive jet lagged and into a super familiar environment. I lived here for some years, and slide into Dutch existence, putting my pin card and metro card into my phone cover, moving the Canadian and American ID and bankcards into wallet number two.

The Netherlands is practical. There is little in the way of magic, although there is room for whimsy and eccentricity. Efficiency is prized and the systems work extremely well almost all the time. Nonetheless, when I was living here, I always felt slightly outside. I felt an unease about being an expat, not from here. This feeling is in sharp relief now.

I take a train to Sloterdijk station, and uber from there to my old apartment where I've arranged to stay upstairs in my landlord's flat while they are in Surinam for several months.

The driver takes my suitcase despite my insistence. "We shouldn't touch things," I say. He offers me a bottle of pure alcohol and tells me how he got it from his cousin who works at a hospital, and how that hand sanitizer stuff is only partially alcohol. He tells me his fears, his lowered income, and how he will only drive during the day now. At night everyone is still going to clubs and bars, mixing with huge numbers of other people.

VanHallstraat, Amsterdam West

My old neighborhood. I went through a thorough spiritual and psychological disintegration and re-organization and re-creation while living here and the tug of these memories momentarily threaten.

What am I doing here, I wonder? There is nothing here for me, I feel it like a squeezed lemon, dry. Some fear of falling to the bottom of the well comes, and then the sticky key finally turns, and I walk myself and my bags up three flights of Amsterdam stairs to the top floor.

I was here a short/long four years ago, renting this entire flat with my then almost husband. Flashes of terror come, why am I in this country? Why did I not marry him and have a super safe life in small town British Columbia?

I walk out the door and go to the neighborhood café for breakfast and 2 x Koffie verkeerd met havermelk, extra heet.

Koffie verkeerd: wrong coffee, or coffee with more milk than is normal.

Two wrong coffees with oat milk, extra hot because this is a country that prefers lukewarm beverages. The sense of normalcy is extremely tempting. The cafés are open, one could read a book and enjoy a glass of wine canal side.

After breakfast I go to Albert Heijn for groceries. There is no evidence of anything odd. Fully stocked shelves, normal people behaving normally. I'm in constant phone contact with my parents, wondering if this is crazy.

I have waves of I DON'T WANT TO BE HERE. SO FAR AWAY. As an expat living here I would privately think, as I'm sure expats the world over do, that if the world ended, I wouldn't be the first one to be thrown to the wolves in this society that is not my own, but I wouldn't be the last one either. Back at the flat I'm extremely glad to be in this big space with no other people. They are in Surinam where there is no coronavirus, there is no possibility that anything in this flat is infected.

I open my email. The production manager for these two operas has emailed to welcome me to Amsterdam, and to say that the Dutch Prime Minister has banned large gatherings. Everyone at the opera is in meetings right now to come up with an action plan, but at this point of the two operas I'm

designing, one has been cancelled. The other is probably going to be filmed instead of performed before a live audience.

We have a quick phone call, but this is all the information she has.

I jump online to start re-booking flights. I'm gambling about dates. If we do film the second opera, I will be here for another week. It makes my throat tighten. I think it will be cancelled but can't book the flight based on that thought until it's real.

Looking at different flight options I see that all the airlines have waived change fees, although the fare difference still needs to be paid. I make strange calculations not knowing the weight of the different options. Should I pay an extra 600 euros to try and get to the US before the travel ban takes effect? If I wait two more days, there is no cost. Will that turn out to be a moot point in coming days? I could have made it out before the world ended, but I wanted to save a bit of money.

I DON'T WANT TO DIE HERE. The thought screams up from the bottom of the well. I don't want anyone to die. The unspeakable thought of my parents dying while I am far away surfaces. Unspeakable. I ask the thought to go away for now, it has nothing helpful to offer in this moment.

My tickets are re-booked for earlier than they were before, but not in time to miss the Friday travel ban. I've calculated that this is not the end of the world and that it is still a time to consider my commitment to the National Opera and to consider saving 600 euros.

Thursday Night

It is a horrible night. Tossing, turning with FEAR screaming loudly. My father is texting over and over, "please come back. You could get trapped there." My best friend in Mexico, "your only job in this life is to find and feel joy no matter what the circumstances, even now, even here"

To myself, "it's time to grow up, to dig deep into myself and find the ground, this is what all spiritual practice is about, equilibrium in all things. Do not panic."

I am able to sleep for a few hours.

Friday morning

I prepare for this morning's rehearsal. It is a full run through for designers and everyone else. It will be the first time I've seen the entire production on its feet and not in a video.

I take an uber (don't touch anything) to the studio and arrive to find that the production and therefore the rehearsal is cancelled.

I get into a car with the production manager and show caller and some others. These people who up until two months ago were my reality. It was reality where I never really 100% knew what was going on- although all these people seem to like me, and I like them. They are curious about my new life in Cincinnati. Again, the illusion of normalcy. It's fine to be in a car together, it's lovely to chat about new developments in each other's lives.

We arrive at the National Opera and Ballet building on Waterlooplein to hear an official announcement from the Artistic Director. She tells us it's a beautiful piece (which it absolutely is) and that it will be rescheduled for next year, we are all so happy it will be able to breathe. I meet all the people who are involved whom I have not yet met in person. They are heartfelt, creative, enthusiastic. There is a cake. Two hours ago, it was a show prop. The cake gets passed around. I don't touch it. Too many hands, too many people.

I do a round of hellos and goodbyes to new and old colleagues in the building. I am nervous and jet lagged and probably a bit of the over-performing American in all my interactions.

My last stop is to a café for a tea with the director. If the world around us is not ending, these are important relationships. If the world around us is ending, human connection is even more precious. She and I invent the hip and butt rub as the new hug. The elbow bump has taken the place of a handshake, and now we enjoy this sweet way of expressing intimacy.

Friday afternoon

I spend hours on hold with KLM to re-book my flight. My earlier changes have somehow made it impossible to do this online, I now must speak with an agent. Four hours later I am able to get myself onto a direct flight to Vancouver for tomorrow (Saturday). I give my credit card number over the phone to pay the 1048 euro fare difference. I don't care at all.

I don't go outside. The relief that I'm going back to North America is astonishing, also for my parents.

By this time my university has extended remote instruction until the end of the semester and cancelled all productions this season. I craft an email to send to all of my students, hoping I hit the right tone, whatever that may be in this situation.

We have a faculty meeting with me on what's app, talking remote teaching strategies, updates from the university president and provost.

Friday Night

I realize I have not seen my new boarding pass from KLM, nor can I check in online. I spend another three hours on hold before giving up and trying to sleep. Trying to calm to growing anxiety which is getting closer to terror. I don't want to die here.

I wake up at 3am and spend another hour on hold with KLM before giving up again.

Saturday morning

I arrive at Schiphol airport at 8:00am, five hours before my flight. There has been reports of chaos in European airports with Americans trying to get home and I am expecting the worst.

Sharon Huizinga- 108 Hours

What I find, however, is classic Dutch. Organized, calm, efficient. I try and check in at a machine (so many surfaces) and get an unnerving piece of paper telling me to see a KLM agent. I walk over to the surprisingly not busy customer service line. A pleasant KLM representative takes my phone number and puts me in a digital que. She tells me to stay sort of close, but to go and get a coffee or call friends and family. They will text me 5 minutes before it's my turn. No lines, no standing, no congregating groups of people. Really almost no stress.

I'm shocked that you can still buy coffees. I'm very worried that I've ended up with no ticket at all.

Once it's my turn, the KLM agent spends 30 minutes on the phone, combing through all the changes I've made in the last two days which have created a lot of confusion. She is wonderful, patient, helpful. In the end she hands me a boarding pass with a smile, "I upgraded your seat," she says.

Relief washing over me again. I race through security, wanting to get to the gate in case it is only a chimera. If I see it, it will be locked in form. I am at the gate three hours before departure. At some point the flight is delayed for 40 minutes. I feel the collective hope that this is not the first step of something unravelling.

KLM Flight 681 AMS-YVR

But we take off, 40 minutes late. A direct flight has so much assurance to it. If it takes off, most likely it will land in your destination. No other countries, no other airports involved.

Sitting next to me is an Asian woman wearing a mask. Who should be afraid of who, I wonder? Is it for protection from me, or of me? I have allergies and feel sneezes coming on. I don't want to sneeze. I can feel the fear.

My neck is incredibly sore. I imagine I have the first signs of the flu. But I stretch, and sleep. It could also be 72 hours of flights and fear.

Vancouver

We arrive in Vancouver, and Canada feels so incredibly safe. I lived here for a decade and I long for the secure and polite life I lived here. My life longing has always been for adventure, and now it has turned towards safety.

In near constant phone/app contact with friends and family. We all try to never think, "this could be it." We are all saying I love you with extra care. Every SINGLE time. I call a family friend to ask for a place to stay, prepared to go to a hotel if she is uncomfortable. I'm too well travelled for this situation.

But she is unperturbed, telling me where to go for keys, she is out of town on an island.

Breathe.

Where to go for keys is to dear lifetime family friends in East Vancouver.

Theirs is a house I've lived in at age 4 and again at 24. My mother lived in this house after leaving my father, there are deep ties spanning decades. We sit, these family friends and I, and I realize they are much older than in my mind. I am glad we are sitting far away. I'm so aware of the number of people I've been near in the past days. We talk of all the things. Their grandchildren, the communal experience we all shared treeplanting and living the back to the land, super creative life that I had the pleasure to

grow up in. We speak of musician friends we have in common, of the exile from my spiritual community and subsequent disillusionment that I experienced some years ago. We sit and speak of many things and many shared experiences and growth and heartbreak. It is so warm that I want to sob with relief. This is what I came from and believed to be everyone's experience. I never realized how precious it was until recently.

They walk me over to the other house. It is warm, beautiful, wood, copper kettles, red floor, art, books, woodstove, good smelling handmade soap, organic everything and every corner clean. Later I walk down the Drive, as beloved warm, funky, vibrant Commercial Drive is affectionately known. The hits of normalcy and familiarity land in rotation with hits of uncertainty and fear. Is this IT? The big one. A big one. Is this the moment I regret forever not recording my father's stories?

I email my fellow faculty, check in with the dance production that still seems to be going ahead, pour a bath and then sleep momentarily untroubled.

Sunday Morning

I wake at 6:00am unsure of my location. Suspended dread. "you have a choice. Anger and bitterness and victim identification, or not. It's your choice," says the presence that is often there in the just waking.

A lone step down a path. Then you are on *that* path, not another path. My mountaineering friend always talks about those first few steps, they're so innocent. You never know if you've just started on an epic journey or not.

I realize this morning that the dance tour will probably be cancelled, and even if it's not, I can't stay to do it. I arrange a last-minute meeting with a wonderful woman in Vancouver to take over for me if it does go ahead. We meet for coffee on the Drive and I give her the production laptop, take her through the video component of the show. The production is covered. We have a backup plan.

On my way to the airport I find a post office to mail some Bluetooth headphones to my father, who is also in Canada. I carefully unwrap the plastic and use tissues to seal everything, wanting to send him a coronavirus free package. I also mail myself everything European from my luggage, concerned about customs and travel bans. I mail A-4 paper, and letters from the Dutch tax authorities (the Belastingdienst, lit. burdening service) I mail speculaas cookies and all access passes from European tours past.

Vancouver Airport

My name is on a list. Despite three passports and multiple airlines, my name is on a list of people who have just been in Schengen zone European countries. They will have to route me through Seattle, one of the now defined airports for processing of American citizens who have been in Europe. I wonder about driving and the very sweet Delta agent tells me land borders are chaotic right now. I ask if I could re-book a different flight with a Canadian passport, and he leans in to tell me conspiratorially that with

the Americans, best to just say yes sir, no sir. If I try and book a different flight, they'll know, and it will be obvious I tried to get around something and it will be worse for me.

I'm going to Seattle. It seems like such a bad idea, to concentrate people somewhere where there are already major problems.

Denmark, Norway have both closed their borders. The UK is added to the US travel ban, which at least makes slightly more sense. Canada urges all Canadian citizens to return to Canada. A friend with DOD connections warns that the US may be about to close borders in a stricter way.

I go through US customs and immigration in Vancouver airport. I'm taken aside, into a little room where too many of us are too close together. The atmosphere is tense and distant from the officers, 'can-do' and 'OMG I can't believe this' from other US citizens returning home. I feel small and scared. I'm scared of my own country. I hesitate to leave Canada. Do I even want to be in the US during a world crisis I wonder? Jumpy, armed, easily offended, not into sharing, panicky. The officers are extremely firm with where we are allowed to stand and where not. There is absolutely no cell phone use allowed. There is no smiling.

I retreat to a corner of the small room and sit down to cry. The customs officers come around to all of us, one by one. "Is this going to be horrible?" I ask the agent who comes to my corner. "I don't know," he replies, but kindly. I was asking about the situation in Seattle, later I realize that he was talking about the situation as a whole. They have us fill out a piece of paper detailing which countries we've been to, and hand us a booklet in Chinese and English about self-monitoring. We all are ushered through into the gate area and set free.

Some people seem to be finding a grim satisfaction in how things are unfolding. They pass on every worst update, almost reveling in each new statistic, border closing, event. They imagine worst case scenarios, "If my husband was in Italy right now, he'd be one of the ones left to die because he has a heart condition." The invitation is to fear and darkness. My best friend in Mexico, "there is only the present moment. Find joy or you're fucked. If you let fear in, you're fucked"

I'm calling every older person I know. Welfare checks. I'm calling friends frequently, we live in different time zones, so the calls roll in waves with the sun. I have a growing awareness of just how international my life has been. My best friends are in Mexico, London, Vietnam, New Zealand, California, Amsterdam. My family is in Texas, Wyoming, Vancouver, Nelson. I'm calling Australia, Germany, Greece, Maine, Costa Rica for welfare checks on dear friends and colleagues. I wonder if our world is about to get very local.

There are intense hits of normalcy, of familiarity. A dog barking in the background, someone's kid asking for kombucha.

Delta 4481 YVR-SEA

The man sitting next to me and I have a tiny exchange. I catch a whiff of Trump supporter and fall asleep in order to disengage with minimum effort. I don't have the will or mental energy to engage with him, we clearly live on different planets.

On arrival I'm expecting guards, a quarantine area, testing, temperature taking. A long process, which the Vancouver Delta agents were also clearly expecting when they gave me a six-hour layover in Seattle.

There is nothing.

There is nothing at all waiting in this airport that is a funnel for travelers from banned countries. I ask the gate agents, “do I need to get my luggage and re-check it? Do I need to go somewhere for extra checking?” “No,” he replies, “your gate is S4 for your connecting flight. Here’s a boarding pass.”

I decide there must be another shoe that is yet to drop. It’s impossible that there is nothing. Impossible that people are being funneled into stressful and crowded situations in airports that are hotspots with no actual action being taken.

I walk out into the airport slightly dazed, avoiding the crowded bathrooms in favor of ones off the beaten path in a hazy inner risk assessment. On the way to my gate I stop to take a photo of something and realize I’ve left my phone on the airplane. I can’t remember my arrival gate and stop at the nearest Delta gate and proceed to have a delirious conversation with that agent.

“Hi, I just came in from Seattle and this isn’t my gate. My phone is on the plane”

“you’re in Seattle”

“No, I’m looking for where my flight from Seattle came in. I left my phone on the airplane”

“right now, you’re standing in Seattle.”

.....

“you arrived in Seattle, where did you come from?”

.....

I eventually geolocate and she directs me to the right gate, where Michael, the all benevolent gate agent, is about to start boarding that plane for Kansas City. He is someone who feels angelic almost. Supernaturally calm, with actually twinkling eyes. He goes onto the airplane and retrieves me phone. “you’re fine,” he says.

“IDIOT!” I berate myself, thinking of the logistics involved in getting a new Dutch sim card from Vodafone sent to Cincinnati, cancelling US bank cards and credit cards from an institution that is in Canada, having no cash. A life spread over multiple countries has always seemed adventurous and romantic and engaging. Right now it only seems complicated. Pieces can only be adjusted while I’m in the right country to adjust them, and now the ease of that equation is shifting rapidly.

“Hey, be kind,” says a different internal voice. I am on hour 95 of travelling.

Spikes of fear followed by relief as these events unfold. “When you encounter the things that make you want to freak out..... don’t freak out.” That is something I have written on my wall. Words from my teacher, Sharon Gannon. I’m somewhat disillusioned with spirituality as a whole, but still..... but still..... nothing is helped by the freaking out. Terror has its own energy. Gripping. Cold claws, cold teeth sinking in. It feels real. Fear is COMPELLING.

There is a sharply surreal moment of finding a fully vegetarian restaurant next door to the gate that had my phone. They are playing a loop of tiny and cute animals on the TVs mounted over the bar. I text my

mother about it and she thinks I am talking in code about something distressing. I take the moment of rest, as one would in rock climbing, and enjoy eating while watching baby sloths.

There is a long boring stretch, where I discover there is NOWHERE to lay down in Seattle airport. I break out in itchy hives at some point which is a first. I'm glad I have the brain capacity to think Benadryl, and that I'm currently in a place where that can be purchased. I have a little contact with a once upon a time friend who became distant a few years ago.

Delta 620 SEA-CVG

Finally, I am at the gate, we are boarding for the red eye to Cincinnati. The gate agent stops me after the machine makes the wrong noise. I anticipate the other shoe. There is some room to go to, some test to take. He takes out a pen and crosses out my seat number on my boarding pass. He writes in a new number; I've been upgraded again, this time to first class.

That hand out and questionnaire in Vancouver, that's all it was. There was no system. There was no test, there was 30 minutes of me scared and crying in a room full of other scared people. There was no reason to go through Seattle, no reason for me to purge my pockets of euro coins and my luggage of A-4 paper. I was nervous in the face of remote and cold heavily armed American government, but I am far more scared that none of this is thought out, none of it is for an actual benefit to the population.

No one is healthy on this airplane. Not coronavirus but dehydrated maybe. Chronic overwork or disappointment perhaps. National fear. I sleep the entire way, vaguely aware that my seat mate is another Italian man. Arrival in Cincinnati at 6:00am Monday morning. An uber home and collapse into bed after 108 hours of travel.

Monday Afternoon, March 16, 2020

I ask the neighbors if I can borrow their car, and drive for groceries, wearing gloves the entire time, deeply conscious of touching door handles and steering wheels in someone's car after so much travel.

In whole foods (go ahead and mock) I witness my first looting. A woman steals a white onion from someone else's cart when they're not looking. She's allergic to red onions. Okay. It's a funny moment, even a ridiculous moment. It's impossible to know how a society will crack until the pressure increases. Then the communities pull together or tear apart. We choose for community or we choose for ourselves. We're holding social distancing parties on my block, all sitting on our own porches, keeping distance, but still talking. Friends and family around the world are all okay. We have the sense of a breath held in, waiting to see what's next.

