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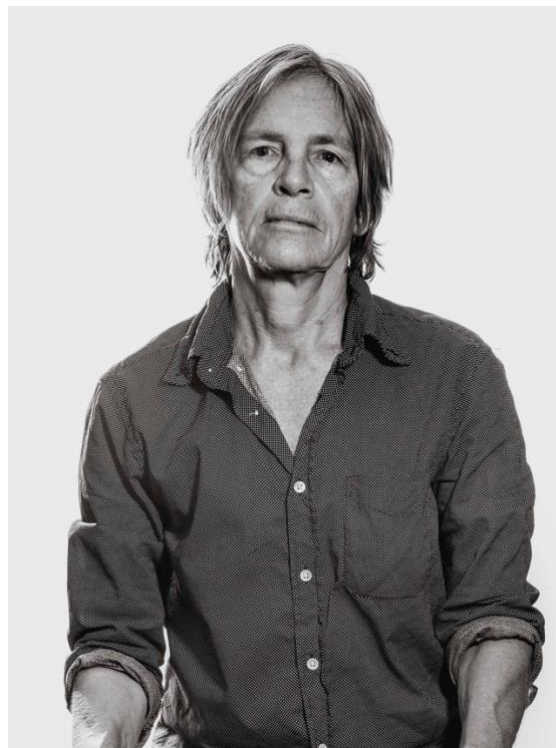
Dispatches from Eileen Myles, the greatest president we never had

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The poet on writing to balance their reality, the toxicity of American 'freedom,' and finally getting into Borges

In 1990, the poet and novelist [Eileen Myles](#) ran for President of the United States, putting forth their name as a write-in candidate and campaigning on college campuses and on MTV. Their candidacy envisioned the possibility of “a gay candidate, an artist

candidate, a candidate making under \$50,000 a year,” they told [Jezebel](#) in 2016. Progress could not wait—and so Myles pushed the needle forward themselves.

Myles has always been clearing a path, contending that an alternative to the status quo is both necessary and possible. [Maggie Nelson](#) once said that their work “is an object lesson in how literature, at its best, creates its own audience, rather than serving any existing god.” Myles forged their early work among the poets of the New York School, and as a disciple of Allen Ginsberg and the St. Mark’s Poetry Project in the East Village of the ’70s and ’80s. Since then, they have published some 25 books of poetry and prose, written art journalism, and earned a Guggenheim fellowship, four Lambda book awards, and the Poetry Society of America’s Shelley Prize. They are perhaps best known for their novel *Chelsea Girls* and the incendiary “An American Poem.”

On June 30, Myles hosted an iteration of the Rubin Foundation’s Performance in Place series, giving a tour of their home in Marfa, Texas, where they keep an extensive contemporary art collection—including work by Xylor Jane, [Zoe Leonard](#), Gail Thacker, [Jack Pierson](#), and Charline von Heyl. Just prior, I spoke with Myles over Zoom, and I realized after our conversation that it is not so much optimism as it is fearlessness—and zero-tolerance for bullshit—that has made them a lightning rod for so many admiring readers. Their voice cuts through the noise with uncompromising frankness and mesmeric momentum, charting every moment whisking by, be it one of pain or pleasure. Their work emerges as a proxy for living—even at moments when life feels inhospitable.

Tia Glista: What has isolating been like for you in Marfa?

Eileen Myles: Good. I mean, it’s normally a quiet place. I come here to be quiet; I live in New York and I live here. The main socializing we do here is just dog walks outside.

Tia: What are you missing about New York?

Eileen: People, friends, my girlfriend. But New York is not New York right now. I haven't seen these transitions myself, but anything I might long for isn't there in the way that I would miss it, so I have been in a good place.

Tia: In what ways does your location impact your writing?

Eileen: Hugely. I think sonically, the landscape, you know—density, population, the level of privacy, the amount of events. It's massively different. Every place I've lived has produced different results in my writing.

Tia: You wrote in [Afterglow](#), 'The writer spends her life reducing her own existence to that of a ghost... your time is winnowing to a close and you've spent a great chunk of it sequestered in rooms creating your double.' What does that quotation or idea mean to you, reflecting on it at this moment?

Eileen: It's a way of describing an ongoing practice that I've had since day one, so I'm in that, yeah.

Tia: I guess it stuck out to me because of the way that isolation is working now—because of how participation in life has been altered so dramatically, and so that notion of [writing to mimic life](#) feels especially true. What do you feel that isolation means for creativity?

Eileen: I think it's actually pretty good [for creativity], but what's interesting is that [isolation] is generally more of a choice. For a lot of friends, writers, and artists, the shock of suddenly not having the relief from isolation and privacy meant that there was a new obstruction in the work. I had to get used to not cycling away towards the regular doses of seeing people and doing things. It's also changed what I've been reading.

Tia: What have you been reading?

Eileen: Well, one person who became interesting to me was [Jorge Luis] Borges, and I never really got it with Borges before. He's kind of into this burrowing into a library and constructing fantasies from there, so he's been great. I read Hervé

Guibert's [Mausoleum of Lovers](#), his diaries from the last 15 years of his life. The poet Simone White. Robert Walser. I'm editing an anthology on Pathetic Literature that is going to come out in a year or two.

Tia: Right now, it feels like people are talking so much about isolation either being an opportunity to be hyperproductive, to bear down and focus, or as a moment of reprieve and relaxation. How do you approach that?

Eileen: I'm trying to be less judgmental about relaxation or lethargy or low energy or procrastination or laziness or sloth. I mean, it's just like, which is it? Or is it COVID? [Laughs]. All these things have been cycling. I started doing yoga, which I never really did before, and I just think being a little more attentive to what quietness feels like has been good. Sometimes I'm just lying on my bed, just not looking at my phone—I'm just going to kind of be there. And then I'll start thinking, and get my notebook, and I'll make lists of things. So it's weird because quiet comes in different surges now, and I am feeling like trying not to frame them negatively all of the time.

Tia: How do you continue to push yourself and challenge yourself as a writer? Are you more interested in consistency or in evolution and new terrain?

Eileen: I'm desperately bored and desperately lazy, you know—I don't like to work. And yet I do know that I really do need to write as a way to balance my reality or something. Like, if I'm not working, I just get kinda weird. I actually tend towards depression, I tend towards self-deprecation, I just have a lot of qualities that make it mean that this thing that I do makes me feel I'm present, makes me feel I'm making something that means my life has value. Lots of philosophies or therapies push you away from that...

I always think of something I heard the poet Lewis Warsh say a million years ago on a panel, which was that when he was a kid, reading was the first time he discovered that other people were thinking. There's just this loneliness of having a mind. The mind changes shape and I have to attend to that in my writing. It's weird... I have a desire to make something that everybody will want, and then as soon as I start to do that, it just

deviates into its own form, and becomes something that only certain people will want. So I feel like the way I write is always a mix of a desire to be the popular kid and then this persistent tendency to be a weirdo, to go off into the closet to talk to myself. My own unevenness is represented in my work and in order for that to stay alive, I have to keep finding new ways to represent it.

Tia: In 2016, you wrote in an essay for [Buzzfeed](#) that you felt we were nearing the end of the world—this was several months prior to the election. Four years later, how do you feel about that idea?

Eileen: Oh, I think it's really true. Worlds are realities and they are always kind of forming and ending, and certainly, I think when we got what we got for President... it's been such a revelation for so many people that the great American myth of 'checks and balances' is just... no. You can stack the game completely in a dictatorial fashion, and play the machine your way.

If I was in New York, I would have been protesting, and it was very strange to be here during [the recent Black Lives Matter uprisings]. I felt really bereft. But I make what I can make, even in what I was writing at the height of the protests, and during this uprising we are having, I feel that my work is in conversation with [the protests].

So many of the things I read in the '70s—[Guy Debord's] [The Society of the Spectacle](#), or Walter Benjamin talking about fascism, you know—we're simply living in that. I would like to do more reading and thinking about what America is in a historical sense. Because even the stuff with masks is just horrifying—that we are so wed to this idea of freedom even when it's clear that it doesn't mean anything, it just might mean freedom to have a gun or to not wear a mask. American freedom—it's a fucking idea, rather than a practice.

Tia: What is something crucial that you have learned during this time?

Eileen: Huh. I guess maybe that the chickens always come home to roost.... So if art organizations have people on the board with money made in oil or whatever, they're

going to act like that eventually. If somebody gives big gifts, they're going to want big favors. Nothing comes without control. I've seen that in a public sense. It's the same old thing and I'm responsible for my own awakening.

Tia: Is there anything else that you have been thinking about recently, and might want to share?

Eileen: The thing I've been kind of obsessed with is my dog. She's a rescue and I have had her for six years. She was minutes away from being put down. It's a funny moment right now because we keep hearing that dogs are being really adopted like crazy, but America is the same old deal, just loaded with kill shelters. So I would just like to say [laughing] if you have any doubt about getting a dog at this moment, push it aside. If you don't know what you're doing, save a dog!

Myles' next book is For Now, an essay/talk about writing from Yale Press (fall 2020). You can watch their iteration of 'Performance in Place' from June 30th, 2020 [here](#).