

TUNNEL SESSIONS

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AMPLIFYING VOICES IN A PANDEMIC

written by
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THE TUNNEL SESSIONS



In the late winter, just days before the seriousness of the pandemic hit mainstream news, Suave and I traveled to Central Pennsylvania to visit some friends. We cooked and hugged and laughed and danced in the living room, and shared sips of drinks without thinking, taking for granted all that proximity. On Sunday morning before heading home, we went for a hike at Poe Valley State Park in Woodward. Toward the entrance there is a cylindrical, metal-ribbed walking tunnel about a hundred feet long, home to a singular kind of reverb that I doubt any architect planned. Voices inside the tunnel are amplified and bounce and swirl wildly around its contours like children playing slo-mo night games in the thick lagoon of some fever dream. I had to sing in it. We paused to absorb a sound

you could feel in your teeth—one that corrects the digits of your spine and awakens every follicle, making miniature mountain ranges of what were before just bored and smooth dunes of skin. It was electric, but earthbound. Put there, but elemental, too. Both mirror and microphone, with an image and a voice of its own.

Our walk was a sweet cap to a simple weekend, and in the car on our way home, I watched and read aloud the news about the virus sweeping the globe. It felt like we were in a movie. COVID-19. Coronavirus. Shocking predictions about the number of deaths we'd see in the United States, which have since been devastatingly eclipsed by the numbers now. A giant, unfathomable number, still climbing.

Quarantine, lockdown, Instacart deliveries, unhealthy amounts of news, waking up before the sun, cases of wine; my daily pilgrimages to the pond to stand on top of the big rock at its edge, rain or shine, hail or sleet, to peer into that round envelope teeming with life, even in the half-frozen early spring when nothing had surfaced yet, taking huge gulps of cold air and staying faithful to my gratitude practice there: I am thankful for my breath...I am thankful for the health of my parents...I am thankful for my breakfast and our shelves of canned beans...for this coat and these gloves...for the strength of my legs...for electricity and the good writers of good books... I reconnected with my brother and with my two best friends on weekly calls. I lit the dusty gifted candles that I'd saved for no other reason than that I might need them someday, or maybe I had thought it was frivolous to light a beautiful candle on a non-occasion. We took stock of everything: tea, batteries, and light bulbs for years. The good soap that I was saving for what? We bought less and used what we had.

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It got easier to wear masks everywhere. At first we felt rude putting them on when we saw someone approaching on a trail, and we would cast our eyes downward. And then, aside from the senseless politicizing of the masks (the woman in a Carhart who we watched exit Lowe's hornet-mad and shouting top volume because she'd been turned away at the door for not having one on her face... The 77-year-old man stabbed in the parking lot of Quality Dairy in Michigan for asking someone to put his on), we all just did it, and we learned to pick up on the subtle cues of a smile beyond what the mouth does: it's in the crinkle around the eyes, and we use louder, sweeter voices than before to let people know we see them—that here we both are, afraid and not in control, but we've chosen to leave our homes today, because people need and deserve fresh air, so:



"Hi there!"

"Hiya!"

"How're you guys doing?"

"Doing well! How're y'all?"

"Doing okay!...considering!"

The band decided to play one show: socially distanced with circles marked in the lawn in hot pink landscaping paint so that people could be apart with their "pods." Bracelets and a checklist at the table by the driveway. No port-o-potties, no dogs (fewer surfaces), a sound company, a definitive start and end time, BYOEverything. It went beautifully. Those same friends in Pennsylvania made the trip up in their RV and set it up at the edge of the yard, band banners hung proudly just like they were attending one of the festivals, all of which had been canceled.

We made a plan that weekend to come visit them again, and Jill asked, "What do you want to do when you come down this time?"

Without missing a beat, Suave answered, "I want to record in that tunnel."

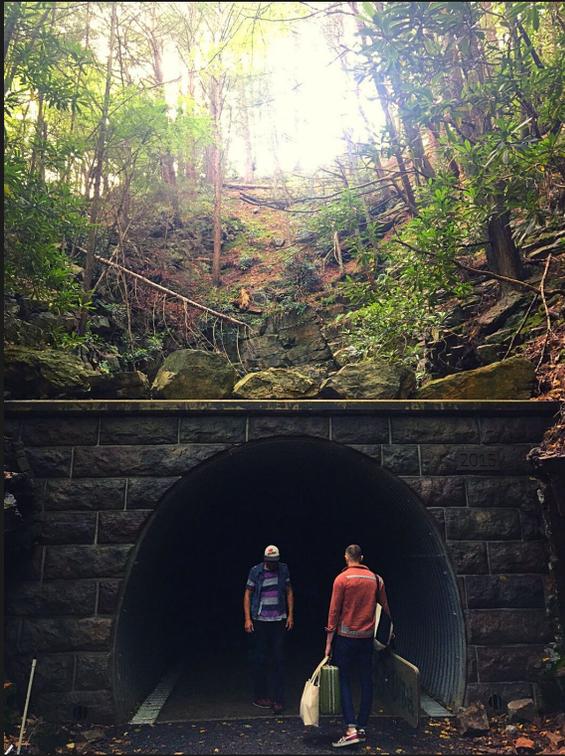
It's easy to have ideas. Sparks fly around all the time. But to muscle an idea into being - to feed a spark until it turns into a raging fire, to see a seed through to fruit - that demands a lot more sweat. Silence to song is a stunning and mystifying leap - oftentimes an arduous climb. Some faint concept of melody partway unveiled in a dream is not a song - not yet. That's just vapor. A memory mostly lost. You have to wake up, get your socks on, sit down with an instrument, and use the warmth of your own hands to melt the ice on the windshield; use your very own breath to part the fog hovering around the hint of a thing that might be under there. And that's just the private piece. Still no one can hear it, and since music is meant for other ears, for sharing and receiving, there is so much more to do.

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We reached out to our producer in Brooklyn, who was game to take a bus to Harrisburg where we'd pick him up and bring him to a cabin on a creek in Coburn. Eric would secure a generator, the quiet Honda one, and hundreds of feet of extension cables. Jill would fill a cooler with snacks and drinks. In the few weeks leading up to the session, Suave and I would write songs meant to soothe. I'd think about what I'd like to have someone say to me, and from a safe distance I'd ask others what words they'd most love to hear. How could we calm and uplift each other?

We'd create scratch tracks at home using GarageBand on my phone so that I could sing to a metronome inside the tunnel. We knew we might get shut down immediately by some park ranger, the cops, a grumpy hiker, and that all that preparation might have been for nothing. But since nothing comes from nothing, but since this seemed like the kind of guerrilla project for which you don't seek permission, we lined it up, and we went for it. **The act of creating something destined to become tangible during a time of so much surreal paralysis felt like a gift we were all giving to ourselves.** We got up early, made sandwiches, drove over bumpy back roads to the park, and we hauled the gear into the middle of the tunnel, which curves just enough to almost shut out the light if you're right in the center but lets in a sliver from either side.

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In the space where we would create this music, we could see the light at the end of the tunnel on both sides. We had come from light. We would build in the dark. And we would exit into light again.



We set up a folding table for Steve with his laptop, headphones, and some utility lamps, and we placed microphones throughout the tunnel to capture the changing sound, learning the tunnel for its aliveness, its omnipresence, the shelter it made of its wide animal hide. Steve noted that it sang its own steady low note that could be heard best through headphones. That hum remained unchanged by the echoes of laughter and the sloshing of water shoes after groups of rafters had passed through, apologizing for interrupting "whatever this is." The tunnel sang a continuous song - maybe the soil full of worms and minerals still groaning

over the violence of being parted by a man-made tube... or maybe the soul of the mountain rejoicing at the fact of children and their keepers whooping and bellowing at its base, all of that playful humanity, river-wet and sun-kissed, passing through on summer days. The tunnel itself was music, and we had humbly entered with accompaniment.



H An old man approached Suave and Steve while they were tracking the
Y "Musicale" (a plastic sixties-era keyboard we'd found on the side of the
road that sounds something like a melodica or an accordion) to ask what
they were doing. He looked harsh and skeptical.

M "I've been coming here for fifty years, and I've never seen anything like
this," he said narrowing his eyes.

N "Wow! Well, we're doing some recording. You should have heard my wife
S singing in here earlier. It was so beautiful. The echo is wild!" (Suave,
purely positive, feigning obliviousness, as if he had no idea that we
shouldn't be there.)

"I'm sure the park rangers would like to know what's going on here."

"Oh, yeah! Please, tell them! This is such a special place. It's wonderful!
More people should record in here!"

Suave's exaggerated blissful ignorance had won. The old man softened. "You
know, fourteen Amish women come in here to sing hymns every Sunday. You should
come back and hear them. It's something special."

"Oh, wow! We will, sir. That sounds amazing."

"You kids have fun." And he continued his slow stroll through the tunnel he'd
known for decades to the light on the other side.

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That day we recorded the better part of six songs: vocals, acoustic guitar, Musicale, and a bunch of echoey drips, snaps, claps, and palm-rubbing that would become percussion. We'd gotten there as early as we could and stayed until the park closed, pausing only to pee in the woods and have a quick bite while sitting in folding camp chairs around a cooler at the end of the tunnel beside the generator. When we were finished, we packed it all up, hauled it out, drove back to the cabin, moved all the furniture around, and set up again in the living room there to track Wurlitzer, more guitar, and some backing vocals we hadn't had time for in the tunnel. At 1am we were all fading, but we'd done it: we'd made a record inside the belly of the Poe Paddy tunnel.



I think during these quietest and most fearful parts of the pandemic, many of us have looked around at all of the things we can't do that had previously defined us, finding ourselves forcibly zoomed out and hovering there in space above our former lives, observing just how much is out of our control and wondering what gestures and motions we might make in order to feel alive and to connect while we remain physically apart. I feel blessed by the insatiable need to make music. And I feel very grateful to have a partner who doesn't just throw sparks around and let them fizzle the moment they illuminate the pothole-pocked path we'd have to travel in order to fully form them, but instead goes all-in. Suave will always sweat in service of a good plan.

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I have felt helpless knowing nurses and doctors are working themselves to exhaustion, masks rubbing scabs into their cheekbones, putting themselves and their families in danger; watching as the death toll rises above the worst predictions; as roughly 74 million Americans still faithfully commit to a leader who is killing us and doesn't care; as the divide between two parties gets more cavernous than ever and people refuse to accept science, fact, and reality; as friends celebrate momentous birthdays alone, struggle financially, and fall into isolation and depression. What can any of us do? What can we add? How can we alleviate pain? You cannot physically wrap music around someone like a blanket, but during this time of distance as we sit still in the absence of touch, we can reach out through sound.



I miss the parts of my life I'm proud to have built, and I've wondered who I am without them - without the band and shows (my most cherished form of reciprocity with my human family) and sequins and stage props and lasers and hours in the van and laughing with fans at the merch table and long post-show brunches with cocktails and big tips. I'm comfortable with quiet. I've always closely guarded my solitude because it's how I reflect and create. But for all those times I've craved and wished for more of it, I get to say now that I've had my fill, and I'm very ready for the widespread dispersing of this vaccine so that I can rejoin and rejoice with my larger family - with all of you. But in this anomalous and unnerving stretch of time resembling nothing that's come before it, I entered a tunnel to create a body of work that is soft and strange and uncommercial and meditative and that I hope will offer some soothing.



May The Tunnel Sessions bring you peace and serve as the loving reminder that light is both right around the bend and has been living within and connecting us all this whole time.



Post-Production:

In October we scheduled a weekend for our producer, Steve, to come to Ithaca and finish the recording: more backing vocals, bass, auxiliary percussion, more guitar. He'd been on a bus for about an hour when Suave found out that he'd been in contact with someone whose roommate tested positive for COVID.



One of the many ways the virus creeps into all of our lives and ruins things. We labored over what to do: would we cancel the weekend and put him right on another bus back to the city? We couldn't find a bus - put him up in a hotel? Be irresponsible and hope for the best? I called my neighbor, who said we could put Steve up at her vacant farmhouse. We ran cables through a window in the master bedroom and tracked outside right in the front yard. I prepared food with a mask and gloves on and brought it over to the farmhouse in insulated bags. We tracked outside all day until we were shivering. But we finished. The record was made in both a tunnel in Woodward, Pennsylvania and in the front yard of a farmhouse in Ithaca, New York, during a time when so little seemed possible.

A sunflower seed from our bird feeder once got wedged between two boards in our porch and sprouted there - just busted through its own shell and reached toward the sun from nothing. The grapes used to make the very sweetest variety of wine are harvested after they've frozen and everything around them is either dead or in hibernation... Art is often just as determined as nature.



Huge thanks to the Coopers for opening up their farmhouse so we could complete the project!

Images from the overdub session:



The office



Bass! Chris Shacklett



Tunnel Sessions



Producer Steve Dewey

What are the most soothing words someone could offer you right now?

When I posed this question, I had no idea what responses to expect, and I didn't really have an answer of my own. At the risk of generalizing or trying too hard to apply overarching themes, I feel comfortable enough with the observation that during both "normal times" and throughout the uncertainty, fear, and chaos caused by the pandemic, people still really just want the basic stuff:

Love and Safety.

...and in the right light, safety is just another extension of love anyway. So **LOVE.**

***And my friends are also a bunch of radicals, rascals, artists, and hooligans, so this collection is a bouncy read, regardless of any conclusions.**

Dale:
Take it easy. Life is good.

Danny:
Here is a million dollars.

Shana:
Trump is out.

Nate:
Your gummies are here.

Jah Lee:
Ice cream's in the fridge.

Mike:
Concerts are back.

Ruth:
Can I bring you some soup?

Evan:
I am so deeply sorry.
What can I do to help fix my mistake?

Ashlee:
I can't wait to walk down the aisle one day and hear those magic words:
THIS IS YOUR PILOT SPEAKING.

Felipe:
Here's \$20 million. Tax free!

Kurt:
All is forgiven.

Chris:
The Universe, the planet, life... will go on no matter what we say or do. So relax, do your best when applicable, and help me drink this bottle of rum.

Space:
peace good health

Konrad:
"As it was in the beginning, so it is now,
and ever shall be."-Valentine Michael Smith

Donna:
Everything is gonna work out.
It will be okay.

McKenzie:
We will all know peace and justice
in this lifetime.

Amin:
You've won the lottery.

Meegan:
Here let me pay your credit cards off since
you are working so hard and are still poor!

Jennifer:
You can do this, and you are going to do a
great job.

Emily:
Everything will be okay.

Jeannine:
I adore you, Jeannine. Keep on keepin on.

Alisha:
This too shall pass.

Em:
Wake up. It was only a dream.

Derek:
Your plan is working. You are putting forth
incredible effort that is recognized. Your
true friends stand beside you, and your
bonds are tightening. You do not have to
feel the pain from poor friends and the
results of getting used. You are doing the
right thing. All is well.

Dale:
"Pick yourself up, dust yourself off,
start all over again." -Fred Astaire

Christian:
It was all a dream.

Eric:
I got a gift certificate for 1hr
massage for you.

Jill:
I hear you and I see you. Your
feelings, your emotions, are valid.

Linus:
This too will pass. It wasn't
anybody's fault.

Ray:
Please come build our festival.

Jesse:
You are enough.

Brett:
I love you.

Chantel:
I am sorry and I love you and I'm
grateful you're in my world

Kurt:
It will be safe to be on the Commons
August 27th and you can play!

Jennifer:
Don't worry! It'll work out!

David:
Love will pull us all thru.

Carmen:
Do you want a beer?

Heather:
How can I help?

Grant:
Wow, you got hit on the head and have
been in a coma for three and a half
years!

David:
Trump resigned.

Teddy:
I'm an LMT and I'm offering free sessions.

Ashley:
Maybe not saying anything at all. But just a HUG. And being there. For whatever.

Shawnti:
Hi Mom, I cleaned the house and made dinner.

Samantha:
Bernie Sanders is President, and racism doesn't exist. And COVID is gone so we're throwing 2 grassroots back to back next weekend.

Elizabeth:
I'm sorry...it wasn't your fault..it was mine...

Michael:
Everything's gonna be alright.

Serena:
There's a vaccine!

Brad:
Trump defeated.

Heather:
Let's get some coffee.

Adam:
You won the lottery.

Kevin:
You won the lottery.

Derick:
I'd like to hire you to do front of house for this year long tour.

Brian:
Wanna share this bench?

Ben:
Hey, I just wanted to reach out to say that I'm SO proud of you. I've been watching you grow and transform and step into your light. All that you've done with music, and acting and the work and service and love you've provided as a life coach, helping all the sensitive souls on the planet during the pandemic. Wow. You are so brave and so beautiful. I'm always here for you. May I come see you and give you a hug?

Christine:
Love and community will win. One day very soon.

Jeffrey:
Tomorrow is granted to us.

Aaron:
It will all get better soon.

George:
Trump goes away and covid-19 with him.

Gina:
Everything's going to be alright.

Erica:
You are beautiful.

Naomi:
You are not alone.

Robert:
That question is the answer... Or, "Do you wanna go to Purity?"

Katie:
Your kids will both know a world that is kind and just and will be happy!

Donna:
Keep the Faith.
Things will be Alright!!

Debbie:
Trump has lost the election.

Shane:
I love you.

Teresa:
You can do hard things.

Aaron:
All the suffering and inequity in the
world cannot persist in the face of
the love within the human heart.
Eventually, there will be balance.

Suzi:
Covid is over.

Elijah:
I love you.

Stacey Anne:
You are safe, you are loved,
you are worthwhile.

Jean:
I will always support you.

Terry:
It's OK to not be OK.

Amber:
All the guns are gone.

Jim:
Please have these hundred million
dollars.

Elizabeth:
You're not going to get sick.
Schools will reopen when it's safe and
not before. Your friends love you,
no matter what.

Chris:
I'm not gonna finish this parfait.

Ryan:
If you are traveling in a canoe going five
miles an hour how much pancake batter to
shingle the roof?

James:
Trump and the entire GOP
has been arrested and convicted.

Catherine:
I will clean the house
while you take a nap.

Andrew:
Air Conditioning.

Steve:
I love you. Can I come home?

Amy:
You can travel anywhere in the world.

John Carter:
You're up next. Have a good show.

Evan:
Every little thing is going to be alright.

Jennifer:
We've figured out how to stop COVID.

Melynda:
Good will triumph over evil.

Zainab:
You are loved.

Nicky:
COVID-19 is done!!!

Dan:
Let's play that song again.

Ryah:
I just got them today.
(the words I need, I mean)

Michael:
Trump just resigned.

Holly:
This too shall pass.

Matthew:
You're enough.

Claire:
You make me smile.

Heidi:
You are healed.

David:
We'll be OK...

Mia:
I love you so much. Will you show me
what you like? I want to satisfy you.

Laura:
Would you like me to rub your feet?

Angie:
It's all going to be ok. You're going
to be ok.

Margare:
This, too, shall pass. There is a
season for everything.

Charles:
Keep on keepin on.

Becky:
You are loved.

Nancy:
Here, have this plant, chocolate and bag of
salt and vinegar chips. Then let's go outside
and look at the stars while drinking
alllllllllllllllll the wine. And then let's do
this every day for the rest of our lives.
Let's learn all the names of every tree and
befriend every feral cat and eat all the
garlic and dance in the rain. And THEN! THEN
lets' sleep like stones and wake up and do it
all over again.

Jeremy:
We will do this together.

Karin:
I'm sorry I broke up with you.
You didn't deserve that.

Adam:
Your insurance company reversed their
decision and decided to cover your CT scan.

Lara:
You're off tomorrow.

Danielle:
I'm proud of you.

Jeff:
When will I see you again?

Red:
We are on the same page.

Jeff:
And let's welcome to the stage...
The Blind Spots !!

Mel:
Don't worry it's just fungal. jk.
"I know this is the hardest thing you've
ever done but you're magnificent."

Suse:
You can choose to stay home this fall.

Clarissa:
I just direct deposited an enormous amount
of money in your bank account. NOW GO!

Konrad:
Here is a million dollars tax free.

Joel:
Trump has covid.

Jeff:
It is what it is.

Katrina:
I'm coming to visit.

Liena:
You have lived if you have loved.
Never forget that.

Kenneth:
Here's that t.p. you asked for.

Mary:
Everything's going to be okay.

Em:
I love you anyway.

Rita:
You are making the right choices for
yourself and your family. Stay strong,
stay focused... Oh, and you are beautiful.
That is always good to hear!

Jessa:
It's ok, everyone gained the covid 19
pounds... and we all gave up on bras months
ago... We'll be together for braless hugs
soon!

Susie Monagan:
Be here now.

Melissa Giese:
You did your best.

Rachael:
I love you.

Jonathan:
Grassroots Music Festival

Cookie:
I just want one of those moments where
you see a friend, there's a moment of
silence, then you break out in deep,
cleansing belly laughter with shoulder
clasping, hugs, and maybe tears of joy
and relief.

Lars:
God: "You all got punk'ed!"

Amy:
I'm proud of you.

Bob:
Trump is resigning.

Joby:
You're doing great.
Everything is going to be okay.
I hear you. We can feel your love.

Mandy:
You can hug your friends and family again.

Tish:
Trump had a stroke.

Terry:
I'm here to listen.

Suze:
Vaccine is ready!

Wendy:
I bought Virginia Key in Florida
for you! Do with it whatever you want!

Brooklyn:
You are appreciated. We can tell
you're doing everything you can.

Beth:
Trump lost.

Ron:
Yes, we have Pepto Bismol in stock.

Kash:
I hear what you are saying, and I respect
your opinion even though we might
disagree.

Randy:
President Biden today signed universal
health care legislation passed with
bipartisan support from the Democrat-
controlled Congress. In other news, he has
refuted calls to pardon Donald Trump's
life sentence for corruption, fraud,
and murder.

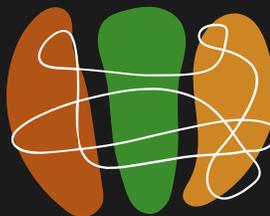
Desiree:
One moment.. one song ..one everlasting
memory ... don't forget.

Tom:
Would you like a foot massage?

Kara:
The inability of others to sustain
meaningful connection doesn't make you
unworthy of meaningful connection.
Keep connecting.

Naiad:
Your check is in the mail.

Joanne:
YOU matter to ME!



Jay:
Biden wins Texas.

Fernando:
The right words are like apples of gold

Nicole:
All this suffering is not in vain. Soon we
will all see that it was necessary and
transformative and we will use what it
teaches us to create a world for our
children and their children that is full
of light, goodness, and love. This will
all be a distant and painful memory, like
the dark ages. A new Age of Enlightenment
is upon us.

Jody: I'm headed home, Baby.
See you soon. I love you.

Tara:
Your mom would be so proud of you.

Kathleen:
All possibilities are possible.

Levi:
Here are your tacos.

Asta:
Your student loans have been cancelled.
Your balance is \$0.

Alesha:
It's all going to work out.

Jason:
The police are all in jail.

Sierra:
Your anxiety is gone forever.

Nicholas:
Free cold beer?

Alicia:
Forgive yourself.

Liz:
I'll pick up Chinese.

Elissa:
I'm here for you and for all of mankind.

Pamela:
Congratulations!
You won ten million dollars!



Babs:
Live music!

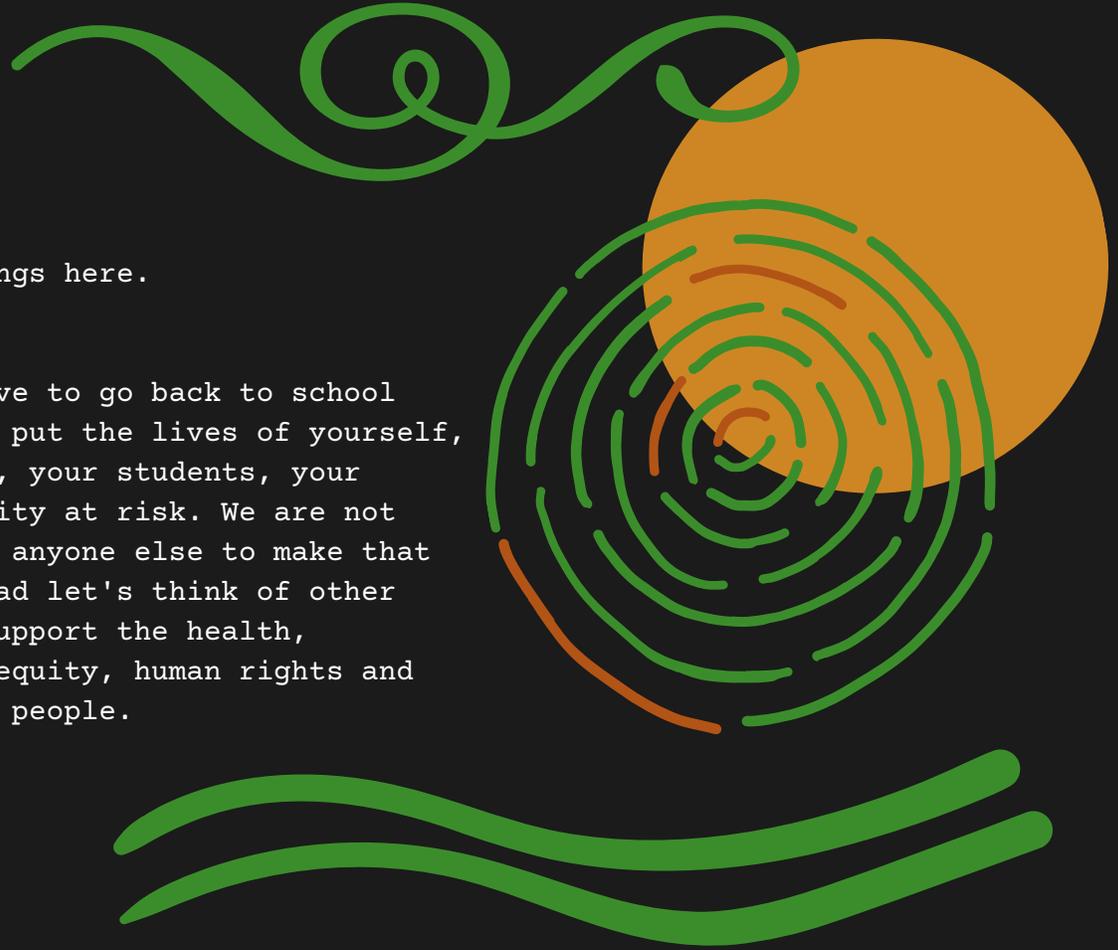
Ashleigh:
45 is in prison.

Aaron:
You go take a hike.
I'll take care of things here.

Emily:
It's ok, you don't have to go back to school during a pandemic and put the lives of yourself, your child and family, your students, your colleagues and community at risk. We are not going to force you or anyone else to make that moral decision. Instead let's think of other ways to protect and support the health, wellness, education, equity, human rights and social justice of our people.

Peggy:
You're going to live.

Alyse:
It will get better.



I debated omitting the Trump-related responses, not because I wanted this piece to stay fluffy or nonpartisan, but because in general I like to keep his name out of my artwork. I look forward to a day it hardly pops up in conversation, and he isn't much of a thought – just the puffed up embodiment of a dark period in our history when we almost lost our way, our civility, our progress. I don't like to legitimize his impact by naming him, but it's cowardly to hide from or deny where we are now, or the fact that he's served as the mirror reflecting the very ugliest parts of our American identity—of our humanity. We hurt each other. We are savage and cruel liars and cheaters stepping on each other for advancement. But the fact of his being a nightmare for so many of you (that his swift exit would be the most soothing thing you could imagine) speaks volumes about the goodness stacked into the swirling digits of your DNA: YOU are GOOD. You want most to be loved and safe, and you want those things for your human family too. Trump offends and disgusts you, so we have to talk about that.

I've pulled several responses from this collection and turned them into music. The song "Antiphon" on *The Tunnel Sessions* (track five) is my attempt to amplify your voices. Thanks for being responsive, open, hilarious, angry, sweet, vulnerable, fierce, honest, complex, alive, and beside me.



In what ways has the pandemic made you question your identity? If who you are is tethered to what you do, and what you do is on pause for so long, who are you now?



I posed this question and was so moved, floored, and inspired by the responses that I wanted to do everything in my power to amplify these voices. I hope they move you as much as they did me.

I retired because of the pandemic. I am taking this time to be who I am, not what I was. -Karen, Cortland NY

The pandemic hit me hard, sort of a slow burn in the spring and summer. I was off from work for a few months, Adam was working from home and the girls home doing virtual school. I was really feeling all of the world's events strongly and after the murder of George Floyd I became motivated to return to school for public policy, with the hope of someday changing racist policies and combating systemic racism/sexism/extreme poverty. I reopened my business in July which really helped my mental health, started online school in September and really feel like myself again but with a new perspective on the world and my own life. -Danielle, Brooktondale NY

In before times I traveled for work a lot. Being home, I realized how much I was missing and had already missed. Simple things like making lunch for the girls, being in tune with the rhythm of their days, what they like to do, etc. I realized how much I was giving to my career and honestly it made me a little sad that I missed so much. I do love my job, but I think going forward I'm going to be more aware of balance and keeping what's most important at the forefront. -Serena, Ithaca NY

I was a massage therapist. I lost my identity for several months when I closed my business and have chosen to focus on my husband and I's lighting business and a teaching opportunity in cupping therapy. Those months of no focus quiet literally drove me off my rocker, thankfully my husband put me back on it and encouraged me to focus on what I could do. I feel extremely blessed to have options. -Kristin, Chittenango NY

I have spent most of my career bringing large groups of people together. Now, we all need to stay home and apart. We made the transition to producing livestream shows but it's not anything close to the same experience.

-Doug, Ithaca NY

It's been hard to do any music for me whatsoever. It felt far away. Plus, my voice as a white woman from central NY seemed like it should be quiet for a while. So I shut up and haven't sang but more than a few times. I started to feel small and have even lost parts of my register. So I did visual art. The kind where you hunch over and listen to calm songs with no vocals. The kind where you space out and have no thoughts. But recently something shocked my system. Hard. So I've started writing again and plan on hunkering down this winter and writing a sort of concept album that I'll never perform live. One that will only live in its album form. I've also realized in this time that when the "Emily" parts are stripped away and I'm only "mother" and "wife" that it's hard to find the real me at my core. I exist for others. The most important others. But this is hard. How can I do this wife and mother dance without my Emily partner? Must. Find. Her. Music will help. Glad I finally have words on papers to turn into songs.

-Emily, Ithaca NY

I'm still in full on identity crisis. Gigs are my therapy, my gym, my healthy outlet, my income, my purpose. The Lightkeepers' last gig was February 29th. The small, acoustic, and/or online/video gigs I've done do little to sustain me. Not to mention missing out on the boost I would get from all the shows and festivals we would attend. I've been cooking quite a bit which I really enjoy. But in turn I'm eating my feelings, so I've gained weight, which has only added to not feeling like myself. I recently started working a day job again back in my home town and it's helped a bit. But add in election anxiety and as we head into a cold, dark, CNY winter here comes seasonal depression on top of all of it. Nothing fills my soul like stepping over the monitor speaker, standing on the very edge of the stage, connecting with an audience, and watching and feeling the way the music moves us all. I'm honestly fearful I won't be able to do what I love, what I'm meant to do, what motivates me to keep going possibly ever again. The fact that it is hinged on the cooperation of others who choose to be ignorant worries me even further. I fear my hopes and dreams are no longer achievable. Not for lack of effort on my part but for lack of humanity and empathy of society at large.

-Jes, Sherburne NY

My identity is always more aligned with relationship. So being adaptable in what I do centers around that. A successful businessman once told me "marry your mission, but date your model" and it's never left me. It's hard to change, but it's better than burying your head in the sand.

-John, Ithaca NY

Initially, I was stoked about the time at home and delved into a lot of home-improvement projects that have been on the back-burner. Now I'm waning. My savings won't last and I need to find options for employment. Trying to learn new skills and become a candidate for remote work, but feel like I'm drowning. And I know in my heart that the real reason for the desperation is that I'm doing nothing with music...I always get depressed when I take a break from it. I had all of these beautiful violins on loan just before the pandemic because I thought I was finally in a place to buy a new one. I was playing every day. I fell in love with one, but it was the beginning of March and I saw the writing on the wall and knew I'd need to save the money. Mailing them back to the store physically hurt. Now I look at my old battered violin with the perpetually opening seams and I can't even pick her up, despite all we've been through together in the last 20+ years. I'm wishing I had just bought the violin because it would feed my soul, and in turn nourish me to pursue the other things that I must in this period of self-reinvention. At this point it feels like a vicious cycle of downward spiral...but at least I can still pay the mortgage, and the house is prettier. I suppose I should get back to that HTML course I was taking.

-Tonya, Cortland NY

I lost my passion and it feels weird. I worked really hard to have a self identify past being a mom and wife. I found that what brings me the most joys are dancing to live music, but also playing in a band. I loved practices and performing for others. I've always loved performing, dancing, acting, playing... but all those things involve interaction with an audience. It doesn't feel the same just practicing and playing alone, especially playing a support instrument. I've lost a connection to others and a connection to myself. Just sucks. I enjoy teaching and spending time with Phil and the dogs. But I do feel that my individuality (what makes me truly sparkle) is on the back shelf for now.

-Nilu, Dunedin FL

I'd given up a full time career for a part time gig the day the schools closed here in NM. I was already ready for a change, and then a bigger change was foisted upon me. I wanted more time with my kids, and boy have I gotten it. It's shined a spotlight on my impatience and my need to address my own needs. I'm talking to a therapist in the first time in years to help me navigate the anxiety and depression that's been hitting me hard. I've also taken this time to really reconsider the purpose of my video production company. My husband and I are turning away work now that doesn't align with our goals to help uplift communities and individuals. We've decided only to do work with people we feel are positively contributing to these communities. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing and my life feels like it's aligned with the universe. If life is like the seasons, this feels like early spring.

-Amber, Albuquerque NM

I've been working 2 jobs for 6 years- being busy hustling from one job to the next was apparently a big part of my identity. Yoga at Mighty was my "hobby" and how I felt I carved out myself me time. Now with one job and no yoga studio, I am struggling to motivate myself to be a yogi, journal, meditate etc. I'm missing the structure of my busy life and it's becoming "the devils hands" with all this free time.
-Sarah, Ithaca NY

I'm unchanged in many ways...grounded in being a parent and educator, and a consumer of all things craft beery.
-Heather, Dryden NY



I identify very much with others here who have had trouble finding their music during all this. Had a brief burst of semi-productivity in March, then just the pandemic and related woes sapped me of all creative energy. Was hoping to be out playing this summer in a new band with Ariel, and instead I've barely touched a guitar the last few months and don't even really remember how to write a song. It's frustrating and demoralizing in a self-reinforcing way. Need to snap out of it.
-Andy, Ithaca NY

It's kinda reinforced my identity as an artist.
-Damaris, Ithaca NY



Well, the first month found me furloughed from my state job and I was able to get all those pesky jobs around the house taken care of. Since going back to work, on a much more lax schedule, I've had time to work with my girlfriend on implementing a permaculture system in the Finger Lakes and plan to make that our livelihood upon retirement. Also, I'm taking online college courses to support that vision. Forging ahead to better myself and the planet. What I really miss most is playing out with my band and seeing all my friends and experiencing the great music at Grassroots! Thank you, Maddy Walsh & The Blind Spots, for all you do to make our little corner of the world a whole lot brighter!
-Michael, Conklin NY

Nursing in a pandemic...you recognize your limitations, your fucking dispensability, your duality as a social pariah and as a front-line human. You swallow fear, anxiety and sadness. Until it exceeds pressure limits and bubbles over. Then attempt to reconcile your gratitude with your inadequacy. You squeak by-ish. You stretch the limits of adaptability- you attempt "good enough" it becomes a new mantra. As if pandemic was the way it always was. You ask your kids to raise themselves...because Mama is busy and only has so much bandwidth. She will tell you she is a better nurse than a mother. Then she cries

in the kitchen standing over a now cooked frozen pizza, hugs a kid or three, pats a pet and puts two middle fingers up. -Amy, Ithaca NY



I lost my mom in May, after being her caregiver for thirteen years. I've realized that I have no idea who I am anymore. She was very ill for a long time and all of who I am was taken up with her care. I do not regret it one bit, but finding out that I have completely lost myself was scary. I'm slowly finding joy in things I used to, but it's a process.

-Melissa, Pensacola FL

I turned into a morning person. 5am type sh*t! I was in five bands before it hit. Up late most nights rehearsals after kids to bed. Then it all stopped. I started going to sleep at 9 (except tonight ha). I'd wake up and build stuff or go biking. I've rooted in teaching instead of being split. I've never talked to so many parents as I do nowadays. They need therapists but they have us. They need to hear good things about their kids mostly. I play a lot of piano and drums with brushes. It's going to be wildly loud when back with at least one of those bands some day. -Joel, Ithaca NY

Identity? That disappeared, and I'm terribly unsure of so many things now. I'm in a new state, in a new town, where I don't know anyone, have zero network, zero friends, and no real prospects at all as an outsider in a small town during a pandemic. **I consider it a good day if I don't cry myself to sleep.**

-Noah, Wilmington OH

Less to do. Parts of self and world clear to see when not overwhelmed.

-Jennifer, La Crosse WI

I realized that I'm **non-binary**. Pandemic helped to break apart my marriage. I'm on the other side of NY and away from all of my family and friends. Life is a mess.

An ugly beautiful mess

-Steevyn, Albany NY

I didn't wake up in a Soho doorway, or any other doorway, this morning, primarily because I don't drink alcohol, and haven't, for twenty-six and a half years, out of the last twenty-eight years. My work as a poet is a solitary affair between myself and my computer screen / pen / paper / printer.

Lack of travel to other countries limits my subject matter, these days. I need very few people in my life, to write. Sadly, for me, socializing, even with those few, has diminished during this plague. The overwhelming volume of bad things done to people undeserving of them, in the last four years, has turned my writing, which was never full of light, darker: my outlook more bleak. My cat, Joey, insists I stop writing now. It's late.

-David, Rochester NY

I am grateful to have the things I identify with: my wife, my children, my siblings, my parents, my friends, and my bass. And strangely enough, my work outside of music. Yes: March, April were pretty dark for me in terms of what the future might hold, especially in the music front. But keeping projects alive and writing and taking lessons and the occasional project and rehearsal (with masks and distancing), have been a healthy reminder of what was, and what can still be.

-Michael, Owego NY

Acroyoga seems a thing of the past - which makes me feel that a part of me has literally died. I've hunkered at home hoping to learn, improve and do new things - and I have. And I also haven't. It waxes and wanes. Riding those waves
-Lisa, Ithaca NY



I can't be a choir director without a choir.

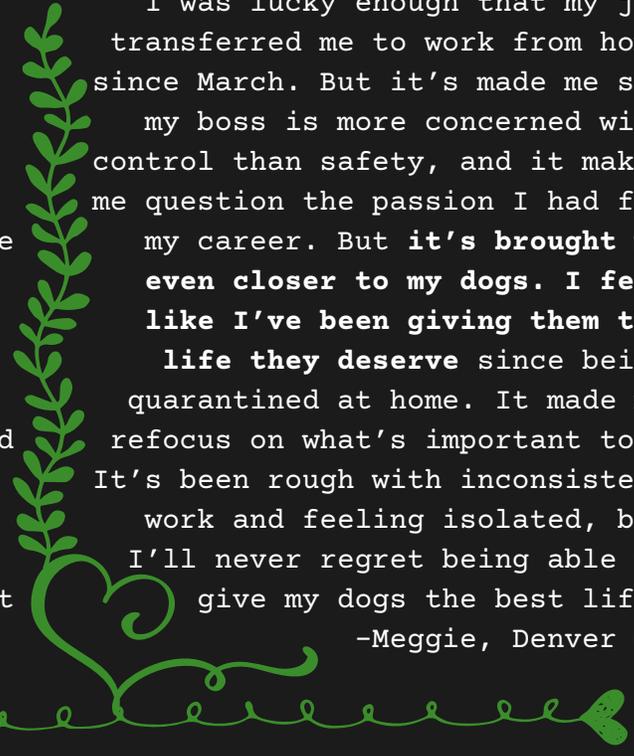
-Jennifer, Ithaca NY

I was a carefree mom. A mom who let her kids climb trees and obtain germs. A mom who knew falling down meant we learned something. A mom that never worried about another "friends" germs killing my child. To- a mom that is remote learning all 4 children even though I've suffered new gray hairs because of it. A mom who doesn't attend birthday parties, let their children play sports, group activities, **a mom who is scared to go to work.** A mom who for the first time since March 2020 is allowing a child to visit a friend... because well damnit she deserves some reward for working so hard she's been doing in school, she never complains and she's been so flexible. It's still scary... but life has to go on?! Idk...I'm a mom now- that doesn't know what's right or wrong anymore.

-Rita, Cortland NY

I was lucky enough that my job transferred me to work from home since March. But it's made me see my boss is more concerned with control than safety, and it makes me question the passion I had for my career. But **it's brought me even closer to my dogs. I feel like I've been giving them the life they deserve** since being quarantined at home. It made me refocus on what's important too. It's been rough with inconsistent work and feeling isolated, but I'll never regret being able to give my dogs the best life.

-Meggie, Denver CO

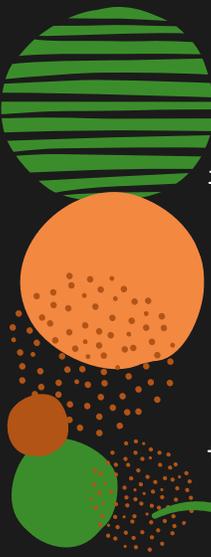


As an artist/entertainer whose primary sense of self worth is lessening other people's burdens; whether through laughter, introspection or just a good hard cry, to not be able to do that face to face with eye to eye, soul to soul contact during a time when so many are hurting is very hard. **I feel like I'm shrinking.** I'm not afraid of going broke or starving, as we are pretty self sufficient homesteaders with skills we can get by with, but to lose the opportunity to soothe people in an intimate live setting is a really **hollow** feeling. This shit is kryptonite. Been volunteering at the food pantry and that helps the heart a little, but yeah, I'm **shrinking.**

-Brett, Hector NY

Newly retired during pandemic. Who I want to be is on hold...

-Elizabeth, Ithaca NY



For so many, this pandemic is a loss of identity. The stories were moving, often sad and eye opening. I feel my perspective as a nurse practitioner and a mom is the exact opposite: the pandemic magnified my identity. I just go from work to home and rinse and repeat. In ways it's been great to be a part of the care of people during the pandemic and a bigger part of my kids' life, and in other ways it's incredibly draining. I wouldn't ever want to repeat this year, but overall I think I'm better for it. For anyone reading this, when you talk to your doctor, a nurse or anyone that helps take care of you, just thank them for what they are doing. This has been a long, long road, and we are tired! A simple thank you has been so touching to me and keeps me going.

-Stephanie, Milford MA



Ever since leaving Dryden I've been working at becoming a registered dietitian- worked for many years in Seattle as an RD- this was clearly a big part of my identity. Even after multiple moves throughout the country I found a 3rd job in our 3rd state (Ohio) at a Children's Hospital 2 weeks before the pandemic started... I made it work taking care of 3 littles at home for ~7 months convinced I needed to keep this job- it's part of me. Finally I realized my family needed me to be a Mom and just a Mom at this point... so that's what I'm doing. I quit my job to be a 1st grade "teacher"ish and a Mom to the cutest 5 yo and 2 yo and I don't regret it for a second.

-Amanda, Medina, OH

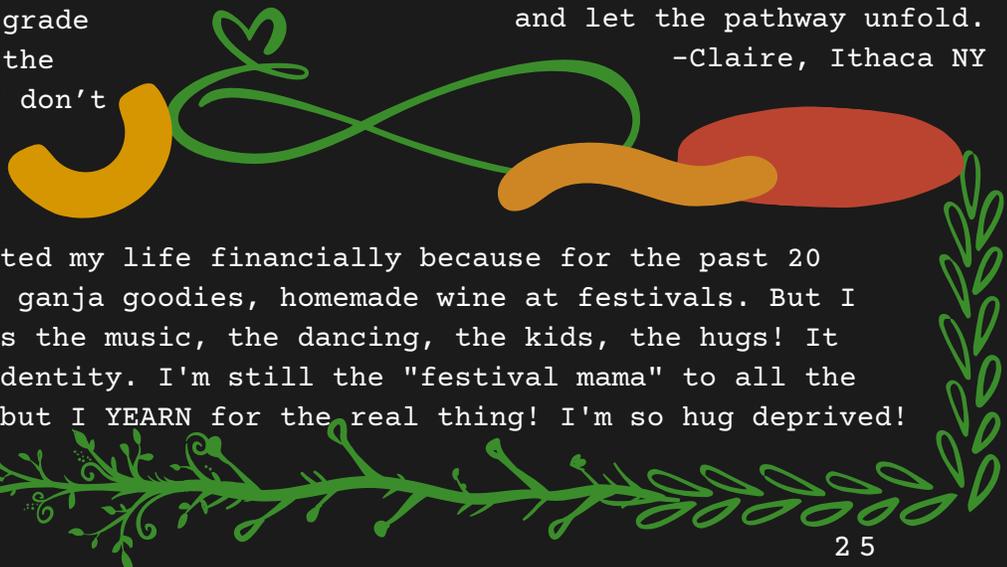
The pandemic actually brought me to where I am now... Where I've always belonged.

-Ryah, Knoxville TN



I think the concept of what I "do" has been the biggest shift. A re-examination of my habits, my trauma patterns, my difficulty sitting still, or being OK with myself (my parenting, my yoga practice, my work, my house, whatever). What am I "doing" to make progress? I have been trying for years to detach from outcomes but I see now how much more progress I can make in this area. So I am shifting my focus to what can I do right now to make progress while not shrinking myself, how can I focus on a process towards progress and let the pathway unfold.

-Claire, Ithaca NY



I'm lonely. Covid has impacted my life financially because for the past 20 years, I've vended food and ganja goodies, homemade wine at festivals. But I don't miss the money, I miss the music, the dancing, the kids, the hugs! It hasn't really affected my identity. I'm still the "festival mama" to all the kids, albeit via Facebook, but I YEARN for the real thing! I'm so hug deprived!

-Carmen, Binghamton NY

...A latent, unattended to anger has apparently lived inside me for quite sometime. I've found myself filled with rage... at the open-faced man in the grocery store with an American Flag bandanna wrapped around his neck, clearly worn around his face at the entrance of a store whose patrons' safety he has no concern for. The man who chided a masked woman standing outside the post office with her dog, sarcastically asking her "Why don't you have a mask on your dog?" Moments like these have ignited a very potent righteous anger in me... The anger I feel extremely fluent in is an inward one. There is a dark comfort and safety that comes with self-inflicted anger. Other people can always leave you, but you can't quite leave yourself... My access and employment of self directed anger has been sharp and cutting. "Why do you make the same mistakes over and over again asshole?" "Pay attention, stop being so Goddamn aloof." "Do I hate myself? I must, because I always end up in the same fucking place." "Kick that door, break that appliance, you deserve to deal with the damage you sorry piece of shit." ...Anger in its many forms is typically a bedfellow to sadness...I'm trying to learn how to validate my anger... For a sedentary year like 2020, I could sure use some more forward progress.

-Jeff, Ithaca NY

I was a pretty solitary person before the pandemic so my life really hasn't changed much. Affected most by other people's difficulties dealing with it.

-Bill, Montour Falls NY

I miss teaching. Online is just not the same, and I'm about to lose my job again (lost it last January as well). And being with my kids, though I love them, 100% of the time, with no adult interaction, is... mind numbing at times. I'm exhausted.

-Angie, Sacramento CA

I've learned so much about me in the past fifteen months. The pandemic has offered me the opportunity to gaze at the "ugly" parts of me and, because of the lack of contact, allows me the opportunity to not "button" myself up right away to what I believe people want to see. **I sit and look at me.** I see my fragility and narcissism and beauty and scars. I'm a human. I've started to learn the patterns of my mind. I ask "who am I" regularly. I ask what I want and what motivates me. I was previously driven by perfection. I'm seeing less and less of that Liebe these days. I was tethered to an armor of wool suits. I was immaculate and untouchable. I strove for inhuman. It's been 8 months since I've worn a suit or power clothes. I've shown up to meetings in workout clothes post-workout. I've not done my hair. After 7 months, I started to wear "soft" pants. I don't do my makeup the same anymore. I don't remember the last time I did a **smokey eye**. I am deliciously and humanly me. I am like water: ever changing, ever flowing. I am shaping rocks and moving mountains.

-Liebe, Ithaca NY

The Lyrics

i. Hang in There

What are things that stay right here?
Your heart, your hands, your hope so clear
There's an expiration to this fear
What are things that stay right here?
Laughter, love, your friends so dear
There's an evaporation to every tear

Hang in there, Hang in there
Hang in there and stay strong
Hang in there, Hang in there
Hang in there and stay strong
You won't be here for too long

What's hidden away
will all return again someday
True, some things may break
But we can bend in unexpected ways

Hang in there, Hang in there
Hang in there and stay strong
Hang in there, Hang in there
Hang in there and stay strong
You won't be here for too long

Pause, recalibrate
You weren't meant to keep that pace
Wash your dinner plate
Slower work may be what it takes

What are things that stay right here?
Your heart, your hands, your hope so clear
There's an expiration to this fear
What are things that stay right here?
Laughter, love, your friends so dear
There's an evaporation to every tear

Hang in there, Hang in there
Hang in there and stay strong

ii. Mantra

I've been trying to grow,
trying to grow,
but I just don't know

Don't
let
yourself
get in the way
of itself
when your
self
wants
to
grow.

Don't let yourself get down.
Don't let yourself get down.
Don't let yourself get down, get
down, get down, get down, down

iii. Swan Dive

Swan dive... Swan dive... Swan dive

He stands on the ledge
glances back in,
a sip, a salute, and a swan dive
But before the crash
one vivid flash of
a scene carried in on a strange wind

Strange wind
hooks under his elbows
lifts the boy up
presses his back to the window
Frozen in space
between wall and wave,
the great leap of faith,
danger and joy on his face
The kid's face

Swan dive... Swan dive... Swan dive

1979, swimming hole in July
Mom holds half a jay, laughing in the
sunshine on their backs
She didn't have to go like that
Last request before she left:
she called out for a
swan dive... Swan dive... Swan dive

When you come down,
will you have enough
When you come down,
can you look up?
When you come down,
will you have enough
When you come down,
will you look up?

Swan dive... Swan dive... Swan dive

iv. Alms

What if what felt best
was actually the best?
And everything you'd done
had earned you rest?
What if you could rest
without such earning,
knowing you're enough
and so deserving?

How much would it take
to make you believe in
all the beauty you achieve
when you're dreaming?
Wild and disjointed,
you're just such a vision,
unbeknownst to yourself
when you're in it

Mirror, mirror,
hanging on the wall
accepting anything,
the lines the faults
This is your landscape,
your home, your song
You are safe always
to breathe, to talk

You were taught to protect yourself
Blame, question, and condemn yourself

You were taught
to see yourself
so much lower
than your highest self

Come on out
You've been found

Come on out
You've been found

Come one out
You've been found

What if what felt best
was actually the best?
Deprivation never
fed ~~up~~ any body
~~Fighting up rest space~~
This race is rigged
Taking up leg space
~~the~~ ~~rest~~ ~~space~~ inside ~~your~~ chest
is the shallow grave of restless ~~dreaming~~ ~~see~~

v. Antiphon

I love voices.
Thank you for using yours.



*Refer to pages 11-18 for responses-turned-lyrics.

vi. In the Tunnel

We exist for each other
to hold, to cover
to keep the other's feet
tethered to the great blue marble

It's simple
Simple

Magnets stitched
in rib cages
draw together
two pulses

It's simple
Simple
in the tunnel
where the voices
come to sing

Album Credits:

All songs written by Maddy Walsh and Mike Suave.

Vocals performed by Maddy Walsh.

Acoustic guitar and bass performed by Mike Suave.

Synth and percussion performed by Steve Dewey.

Keys performed by Sam Lupowitz.

Bass on "Hang in There" and "Swan Dive" performed by Chris Shacklett.

Violin on "Swan Dive" and "In the Tunnel" performed by Annie Stoltie.

Produced, recorded, and engineered by Steve Dewey.



There is light
there at the end.
We have come from it.
We'll return to it.

Hang in there.
Love.