

Come Outside by Tanya Palmer (she/her)

I've spent a huge percentage of my adult life in windowless rooms, pretending. Pretending to be in a different decade. Pretending to be at home in places I've never visited, with people I've never met. I wasn't pretending alone; I was with a bunch of kind, brilliant people, and we got to pretend together. I've been lucky enough to dive into those other people's imaginations and the worlds and people and events they've created, worlds that they knew intimately even if they were distant or surprising to me. And although these imaginative universes were built upon decades of life experience, theatrical skill and dramatic history, they were also, in a way, built from scratch. Writers starting from a blank page, designers starting with a blank canvas or a black box, actors reading their lines for the first time, all of us entering together into an empty room to create a world together. Then, once we'd made the world durable enough to share with strangers, we'd move into yet another (bigger) windowless room where those strangers (and friends) would come, watch, and be transported, before getting up, getting their coats, and going back outside into the night.

I loved being in those windowless rooms. I loved pretending with all those amazing people. I loved sitting (or standing) in the back of a dark theatre watching other people watch the worlds we made. But now that I've been away from those windowless rooms for a while and my main leisure activities (when not cooking, washing dishes, or cajoling/arguing with my children) involve looking out my windows or walking in the park behind my house, I've been thinking about three strong memories that have nothing to do with windowless rooms, but somehow capture why art is so critical to my life, and why I think it's critical for everyone else too.

The first memory is from when I was twelve or thirteen, about the same age my daughter is now. My parents forced me to go for a walk with them in the country. We lived in Calgary, Alberta, and the place we were walking was a ranch not too far from town, in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The place was objectively beautiful, but I was a sullen tween and not so into the place where I came from, which seemed remote and desolate and devoid of culture. It turned out this particular walk was part of an art installation, and as we walked along pathways or across fields, we'd come upon these works of art. Sometimes you could barely tell they were art – hay bales that could have been hay except they were the wrong color, or fences that didn't function like fences. Other pieces were strange and beautiful and totally nonfunctional, but somehow, they all belonged in this place. It delighted me and surprised me and actually made me love the place I was from – at least for that afternoon, and every time I remember that walk.

The second memory is from the 1996 movie *Basquiat*, a biopic about the too-short life of painter Jean-Michel Basquiat directed by the artist Julian Schnabel. I haven't watched it in years, but there's this one moment that I think about almost every day. Jean-Michel Basquiat, played by the amazing Jeffrey Wright, is walking down a New York street. He looks up at sky, and sees a surfer riding waves in a cloud. I loved what that image communicated to me about how an artist sees the world, but I've also have carried it with me as a kind of mental trick: look

at what is in front of you, and transform it into what you want to see. Your imagination can do that. The world is there for us to both witness and transform. Enjoy.

The final memory is from my early twenties when I was living in Toronto. I was super broke, and trying to pretend like I was a “theatre artist” and not a “waitress in a shitty bar.” It was summer, and a friend, who was working as a bike messenger, told me that a bunch of other bike messengers were putting on a production of the musical *Hair* in a parking lot. We found a patch of grass on the side of the parking lot to sit on, and then the show started. These bike messengers were super committed. Some were talented, and all of them were singing and acting while *also* doing stunts on bikes. It was kind of incredible, and sometimes kind of boring, but mostly I was in awe that they’d decided they wanted to do this, and so they did. And they made something wild and beautiful in the corner of a parking lot not far from a highway on a summer night.

So, here’s my modest proposal, the transformation I’d like to see on the other side of this crisis: let’s spend less time in windowless rooms and more time outside in the world. Creation doesn’t have to happen in separate, closed off spaces, hidden from public view. We can play and experiment out in the open, in full view of cars, and dogs, and kids playing in the street. If we did, maybe more people would want to join in on the creation – not just the people who know how to get into the windowless rooms. Let’s build fewer worlds from scratch and spend more time taking in the world all around us. Let’s tell stories and stage events and make images that reveal the places where we live in new and surprising ways, and that connect us with the people who live alongside us. Let’s transform the spaces where we spend our time – from parks to parking lots, from libraries to empty storefronts, from backyards to back alleys – into spaces that can surprise, delight and even inform us. Let’s do it through our imaginations and our fearlessness and our willingness to embrace these places for what they are, while also inscribing on them what we dream they could become.

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