

## AMERICA'S FUTURE IN DEAD PIANOS?

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Several years ago, I stumbled on a dead piano on New York's Upper West Side. It was an upright thrown onto its soundboard, keyboard facing skyward like so many teeth in an open jaw. Two out of four legs had been snapped off, the whole of it naked and unsheltered. I stopped, initially to mourn its demise, then to consider what kind of broken soul would cast off a piano with such violence, and then in dread of the piano's exposure to the elements—rain, dog pee, bugs, and rats.

The piano was so damaged that even a good Samaritan could not have saved it. No one would tickle its keys again. The piano's days of cozying up against the wall in someone's cramped living room had brutally ended.

It felt like the saddest thing I'd ever seen.

New Yorkers are rightfully proud of who and what they see on their streets. Everyone has a story. I have my own—Itzhak Perlman tooling down Broadway on the way home from Citarella; Woody Allen opening a car door for Sun Yi Previn; and my favorite, a sheep at the end of leash named *Meryl Sheep*, of course!

But a dead piano?

The discovery of the dead piano put me in mind of a safari I'd gone on the summer before. Under a spectacular night sky, our guide drove us in an open jeep to see a dead elephant.

I'm not a poet, but I wrote some verses about our sighting:

Tires skid to an abrupt stop.  
Guide spotlights a thicket.  
Bull elephant, silent as prayer,  
Circles cow's carcass.  
She's tipped to her side,  
Her trunk devoured.  
Only the bloody stump remains.

Bull paces, trunk swaying left, right, left,  
Swishes across her open casket,  
Padded feet noiseless despite the tons of him.

Two, three, five pairs of green eyes through the brush.  
Hyenas at the ready while bull rounds cow  
Methodical as call and response  
His grief a private requiem,  
Muted hymn to map his mourning.

That dead elephant cow had things in common with the dead piano. Just as the elephant was missing her trunk, the piano would soon be missing its keys, especially if they were ivory, too valuable to leave on the sidewalk.

Missing keys put me in mind of an artist in Minneapolis who makes sculptures out of silverware, and yes, piano keys. We were visiting that city when we happened onto his studio on the grounds of an old gas station. Curious, we went in. The initial impression was of a room filled with junk. On closer inspection, we began to admire figures of all kinds—human and animals—composed of old spoons, forks, knives, and pots and pans.

And then there were the piano sculptures. Each of them is carefully crafted from keys, strings, pedals, hammers, and felt dampers. The faces of these creations ranged from ominous to loveable.

In no time, I became obsessed with these repurposed pianos. My husband's sixtieth birthday was approaching, and I had to give him a piece made from piano parts. This entailed several transactions with the maker, who wasn't always sober but was fully attentive. I explained what I was looking for, and after six or eight weeks, he sent me pictures of three samples, from which I chose one.

August arrived, and with it, my husband's birthday, on which I proudly presented his gift. As soon as he opened it, my family agreed that the sculpture was the spitting image of his late father, my beloved father-in-law. It's been hanging on our wall ever since.



I love that a new sculpture was wrought from an instrument that can no longer sing, that is so broken that its musical days are over.

Which gets me to thinking about America. We are broken and tired, divided and angry, impatient and anxious, untrusting and untrustworthy. We were born on a genocide and grown up on slavery. We have more guns than people, more school shootings than anywhere, and one of the world's highest prison populations. We shut the door on immigrants and refugees. We cause global warming but claim global warming is a hoax. We claim religiosity while defying the teachings of our spiritual forebears. We want to be intellectually competitive while banning books.

On the other hand.

From sea to shining sea, we live in a spectacularly beautiful country. We host hundreds of diverse cultures, a shimmering rainbow of people that contribute to our well-being every day. Who says we can't imagine a kinder future? Who says we can't rebuild and reinvent ourselves?