"I can’t believe I still have to protest this sh*t,” read more than one sign milling around Logan Square at the Philly installment of the Women’s March on Washington. “I’m usually not a sign guy but GEEZ.” “Unpresident him.” “More feminism, less bullsh*t.” And a sign featuring a whale, who has just spray-painted onto his own sign, “Save the humans.” In Philly, this was the sensibility on January 21: exhaustion, combined with the defiant attitude of people for whom all bets are off. If anyone had ever bought the fiction that American democracy serves all equally, the chant of the day told the story of that breakup: “Tell me what democracy looks like? THIS is what democracy looks like.”

My partner and I had arrived at a nearby coffee shop south of the march, a half-hour before, to gather with other students from my grad program. It was chilly outside, and the atmosphere on the street matched the steeliness of the air. People passed by with signs, offering smiles when our eyes met, but not particularly seeking a look or a conversation. A woman walking south smirked and assured our group, “I’ll see you later.” There was potential energy there, like the anger underneath a shared cynical joke.

When we streamed into the square, people coming from all directions, it was like walking into a crowded party where everyone is someone you want to meet. We entertained ourselves with reading the signs – heartened by some, sobered by others – as we awaited the signal to get moving. I was happy there because at protests, the dominant emotion I feel is curiosity: How did everybody get here this morning? What are others here for? What inspired that little girl to identify as a feminist? On this chilly morning, we spent as much time chatting as we did chanting. Here were a bunch of witty, angry people gathered to hear each other.
Looking around, there wasn’t as much anger in the air as there was hope. A young 
woman held a sign, “Proud 12-year-old feminist.” A mom hoisted a little girl up onto 
her shoulders, who in all the excitement displayed her sign upside down. We got a 
thumbs-up for our pride flag. One member of our party played disco from a Bluetooth 
speaker, and as the wind carried the music, our nearby compatriots joined in on Donna 
Summer lyrics. Every once in a while, a cheer would erupt and ripple backward, like a 
wave of simmering energy boiling over. We stayed on the same patch of road for an 
hour and a half before we wondered aloud whether we were supposed to be marching, 
considering this was, well, a march. One person responded, “Where do we need to go? 
Isn’t that the point, for us all to be here together?”

We knew the route was on the short side, leading from Logan Square up to the steps of 
the Philadelphia Art Museum, but it did seem strange that we were still at the square. 
Discovering none of us had cell service to get local updates, a classmate suggested, “I 
just want to see what we all look like.” One of our friends sought higher ground to get a 
better view of the parkway and reported, “It’s people all the way down!” The evidence 
was on her phone when she returned: a picture of the parkway, in which I couldn’t see 
the end of the dense crowd. We hadn’t missed a memo; no, we had gathered together 
for a protest block party!

When we began to move closer to the museum, someone picked up data service for a 
brief instant, and we caught a flood of tweeted photos from marches around the world. 
Knowing people everywhere were protesting, even a few steps’ movement seemed 
monumental to us. The energy could pick up from nowhere and suddenly everyone was 
yelling, like we’d had stuff to yell about for a long time and were waiting for the space 
and the solidarity to do it. This was, without doubt, a self-reflective march – a march by 
people in the social media age, who know they are marching, who know that the march 
is not a moment but a movement, and that the movement is long. And in many ways 
that was the point, for us to all be there together.

A few days after the election, I spoke with a mentor about the sensation of feeling 
suspended, as though in gel. How are we going to keep fighting for this long?

To me, the co-presence of energy and exhaustion at the Philly march offered one model 
for how to sustain the resistance emotionally. How to show up, genuinely, for each 
other and everyone victimized by Trump/Pence. We’re already exhausted because this 
should not be normal. When we see each other like we did at the march, we can’t forget 
that feeling, that this reality is absurd, that it is wrong, and that it’s been that way for a 
long time. I keep telling myself: like January 20, like January 21, take it one day at a 
time. Call your representative that day. Wake up the next morning to a different New 