Confined to her home in New York City, the author Siri Hustvedt reflects on the dangers and ironies of President Trump’s divisive rhetoric at a time when we have never been more dependent on our fellow human beings. Photographs by Pelle Cass

‘I have come to think of the sirens as the city’s heartbreaking music’
of New Yorkers have fled town for
rural areas; and within a city, the degree of suffering varies from
district to district. In NYC, it depends on class, income level, and
occupational status; and within a single country, it is different in
different regions and even in different communities within a single
city. The contrast between the haves and the have-nots is most
acute in the inner city, especially among those who live in
public housing projects. While the wealthy can afford
private schools, expensive clothing, and luxury goods, the poor
must settle for public schools, second-hand clothing, and second-rate
goods. The failure of the Trump administration to address the
income inequality that has existed for decades and the pandemic
only serves to exacerbate this disparity.

The nightly instalments of The
Daily Show are a perfect theatrical
embodiment of the Congress, the
president, and the vice president. The
language of hubris, isolation, and
distrust has a long and ugly
history in the US. An article in The
Observer from 1898 reads:

"Immigrants constitute a "stream of
impurity" and a "stain of pollution." In 2018, the American Journal
of Public Health published "The
1918 Influenza Pandemic: Lessons
Learned and What to Do," a series
of articles on how to prepare for the
coming pandemic. That same year,
the Trump administration largely
disbanded the pandemic response
team. In their introduction to the
depicted in the title, "virology, isolation,
and distrust." The hubris is scientific,
autonomous, and technological – a faith in fancy
technologies, a belief in the inevitability of
progress, and a disregard for the
dangers and clear about safety
measures. He has also shared with
the American people the need for
"social distancing." The
president is profoundly anti-intellectual.
The income inequality that has
been growing in this country since the
1980s, and the resulting disparities in our
crime rates, health care, and education
are all symptomatic of the perfect
theatrical embodiment of a ruinous
ideology.

The failure of the Trump
administration to prepare for an
infectious pandemic, to listen to
virologists, epidemiologists, and
public health experts, and to act
decisively and quickly when the
tide threatened to turn; the
community of mind, the collapse of
democracy, the rise of
defensive nationalism, the
xenophobia, racism and misogyny,
which the Commander in Chief
has cultivated, serve as the
perfect theatrical embodiment of
a ruinous ideology.

But it is not just the
president and his administration
who are to blame. The
American people have
complicity in this failure. We have
allowed ourselves to be
distractioned by the
trivial, the
irrelevant, the
self-interested, the
self-righteous. We have
been seduced by the
simplistic, the
pathological, the
illusory. We have
allowed ourselves to be
distracted from the
real work of governance, from the
real work of democracy.

This is where the irony
becomes most acute. In his
televised speeches and
rhetoric, Trump
demonstrated a profound
understanding of the
human psyche. He knew
how to tap into our
fears, our desires, our
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