

The Right Time: Life, Art, and the Road Not Taken by Luci Kershaw

Age & Opportunity's Creative Ageing Essay Award 2025, written during Bealtaine Festival's 2024- 2026 theme *Lust For Life* [after Iggy Pop]

In 1996, I accidentally stood next to Iggy Pop. I didn't realise it was him at first, I was just very aware of two people with a presence that towered - even above their actual height, standing next to me. It was the Brit Awards, and I was an agent for musicians. The other person was David Bowie. It was the same year that Jarvis Cocker, the lead singer of the band we were working with, Pulp, invaded the stage whilst Michael Jackson performed Earth Song.

I had no idea in that moment that I would return to this memory so often in my mind and wonder where my life would have gone had I continued the career path I was on. But in the world that I was in, and as an agent that hated negotiating money, the reminiscence feels far more glamorous than the reality.

In fact, at this monumental moment in pop music history (when Jarvis mooned at the audience whilst Michael was being dramatically raised into the air by some crane contraption, blasted by a wind machine), I was a few streets away, attempting to push start my broken-down car out of the snow, so I could go home to the cat.

It had been a bad winter and I remember sliding through the streets of London on the way to work, hoping that the car, with no heating and a questionable grip on an icy road, would actually stop when needed. Back then, I slid through life like I slid into those T-junctions. The fear and caution seems to creep in as we age. There comes a time when you realise that your sliding days are over and life becomes more of a cautious stutter, a hesitancy, a doubt and a fear. It is then we can feel that we have left things too late, when life has taught us that it is too risky to take chances.

I remember back now to other journeys home in unusually heavy snow. Tube lines sparking, walking across the city on a treasure hunt of working transport. But the difference brought with it the opportunity for adventure - the beauty of your everyday world dusted in white - somehow cleaner, somehow foreign, made things seem timeless. The fact it took hours longer to get home did not matter, the snow made things brighter, the day longer. Time itself took on a new meaning.

We take for granted the concept of time, yet there are moments when it stands still, or takes on a different scale. The experience of time in hospitals, for example, or at airports.

Society likes to dictate to us the timescales we are supposed to work on. Leaving us feeling inadequate if we haven't reached those milestones at certain ages. But maybe actually we should challenge those conceived norms of adulthood, as Iggy said in Rolling Stone in 2017: "Don't grow up. Really, don't do that. At certain points in my life I said, you know what? I need to grow up and do X or be Y. Most of the time, it was a mistake."

We often measure our lives through the lens of what if and if only, the paths not taken, the creative ambitions put on hold, the moments that seemed full of possibility but slipped away. As we go through life those societal and financial pressures can make us follow directions that may not be in our heart but are just necessary for survival. I look at these moments; missed opportunities that I was never brave enough to take, and wonder how my life would have been different. I watched years go by with an increasing realisation that it was too late for me to have an actual career as there wasn't enough time to become expert in anything.

In that same year, *Lust for Life*, which Bowie collaborated on, wrote and co-produced with Iggy, was enjoying a new lease of its own life, when it featured in the film *Trainspotting*. The film was released just four days after The Brit awards. To put this into context, two months after that, Age & Opportunity held their first official Bealtaine Festival in May 1996, celebrating older people's engagement with the arts.

Discovering later in life what you want to do is refreshing. You have learned, you have experienced and it somehow gives you less to lose. We can enter into things with renewed energy and this is what the Bealtaine festival represents – the opportunity to take your ageing foot off the brake and start sliding again, into all manner of adventure.

It can also bring a sense of urgency, where opportunities must be grasped and you finally accept you cannot reverse time. A word of caution on that front is to leave space in your focus for everyday life.

Two weeks ago I fell out of an attic in London. I hazily remember the moment when I lost grip, hitting every step of the loft ladder until I reached the bottom, but as I landed and my crumpled body lay on the floor, my immediate thought was for the workshop I was due to deliver at an Arts and Health event the next day, back in Ireland. It was so important to me, it felt like it had taken me so long to get to this place in my career and that I didn't have time to get this opportunity again. I was so prepared that it was consuming my thoughts and possibly my concentration. With pure luck, a body full of pain and bruising, my mother's stoicism and my determined adrenalin, I got up and, rightly or wrongly, left for the airport for my flight back. Sometimes, maybe, we need to keep our foot hovering over those proverbial brakes.

The workshop was based on Yoko Ono's *Instruction Pieces*, a series of poetic and conceptual artworks, brief, open instructions that encouraged the viewer to imagine, reflect, or engage— blurring the boundaries between art and everyday life. I had noticed these in an exhibition at the Tate in 2024. Although some of these were impossible to follow, some struck me as a way in which you could look at your work and approach things from a different angle, maybe challenging your own norms or getting motivated.

Yoko Ono and Iggy Pop collaborated over the years and hold a mutual respect for each other's unconventional creativity. Yoko's singing has been highly criticised over the years but she carries on regardless.

In 2015, On her 82nd birthday Yoko Ono released a music video called Bad Dancer, Critics were once again scathing about her singing. She responded with an open letter addressing ageism in the music industry. In it she said:

“You don’t get that way, with Iggy [Pop] for instance, a grand rocker, who is creating his own brand of Rock, just as I am.” “Let me be free. Let me be me! Don’t make me old, with your thinking and words about how I should be. You don’t have to come to my shows. I am giving tremendous energy with my voice, because that is me. Get my energy or shut up.”

Having ambition can easily be knocked out of you, particularly if you are following a career in the arts. I remember working in theatre and overseeing chorus line auditions. The corridors would be full of the same people, competing against each other again. A cattle call of rejection and desperation. My partner at the time, despite being barely 30, dredged through her mother’s wardrobe to find a horrendous outfit for a commercial audition as ‘mother of the bride’ only to turn up looking completely inappropriate as her agent had misheard the call for ‘mother of small child.’ Oh, how we laughed as we dug through the bargain bins in the supermarket! Shortly after, on the London Underground, she saw an actress she knew, clothes ripped, dirty and covered in blood, only to find she had just been at an unsuccessful audition for a popular hospital drama! How long could they battle before they had to give up and get a “proper job?”

I recently watched a video of Iggy Pop presenting the best male award at The Brits and it immediately sent me into a spiral of nostalgia that twisted my stomach. It is sometimes difficult to see beyond the sadness, loss and grief of the past. But, if you stand back you realise that this feeling comes from the knowledge that you have experienced so much, formed so many incredible memories. Nostalgia comes from a deep sense of having lived.

When I was about 13, I had an amazing art teacher called Mrs Strupinski. She was so encouraging I considered putting aside my ambition to become a palaeontologist to pursue a career in art. I remember to this day her excitement as she declared I was like a young Picasso when I had accidentally added an extra finger to the hand of a portrait I had painted enthusiastically with a glue spatula. I was so proud, and that moment has stayed with me.

Art, like life, can be a series of happy accidents, a moment in time or a chance encounter. Paint to paper, foot to path, marks made, words spoken, the capture of an expression, the way a story is told. What brings something to fruition at any time and what results from that.

In 2016, 20 years after Iggy, I finally embarked on studying art here in Ireland and it may have taken me a lifetime to get there, but it was without regret as it was the right time for me.

The student group was mainly of a similar age, whose lives had also got in the way of any dreams about art. As a result, there was no competition, no desire to be better than each other but a sense of solidarity, support and encouragement. A room full of Mrs Strupinskis and walls full of our own Picassos! It was wonderful. We went on an art trip to London, and

for four days we laughed, we talked and we lived. It all just felt needed, not only in that instance but at that point in our lives, as we realised that days of discoveries aren't reserved for the young but sometimes inhibitions are.

In 2010, Bealtaine had the theme, "Have dreams and speak them without fear." The time has to be right to have that dream and if we were too busy to have it when we were younger, then that's okay. We may not have the possibilities of a lifetime of decision making ahead that we had when we were 20, but how amazing that we can strive for them now. And as Picasso himself once said, "It takes a long time to become young."

I dreamt last night that they had created this very convenient thing which enabled you to walk through the sky. Finding myself high in the clouds, I stepped into the air when it occurred to me that I didn't have the gadget that would allow me to do this. Free falling, I realised that this could be the end, but I was enjoying the process. I walked and tumbled and turned and flew, eventually landing very softly on a planet made of blue material, surrounded by animals that looked like soft toys. Maybe this was symbolic, maybe it was just a dream, but I like to think it was saying, if you take a leap into the unknown you will land, and it may not look like or be in the place that you expected but you can turn it into something that works for you.

Falling is another moment when time stands still. Whether you fall from an attic or the sky. I once did a parachute jump, it was a few months after my mum died, and I remember sitting in the plane filled with a numbness that only comes with deep grief.

As you jump from the plane you are told you must scream as it prevents you from holding your breath, I know I opened my mouth but I don't think any sound came out, a bit like the time I was forced into performing a karaoke duet with my new friend Bernard in a bar in the early 90's.

Finding that voice gets easier as you age, be it through loss, experience, menopause or just the realisation that this is your life, it's happening to you and it's not going to happen again. It never gets any easier to realise you are the oldest in the room, rather than the youngest, but you can become more comfortable in the awareness that who you are is more important than your age or what you do and that's the biggest achievement you can make. And this reflects on the kind of art you make, the life that you lead and the memories you create. That's what the Bealtaine festival does every year, encourages people to celebrate ageing, try something new, have fun, take chances and find their voices. We are far from invisible, we are, in fact, invincible.

In her book *Grapefruit* (1964), Yoko Ono says: "The instant is eternity. When you enter the moment, you enter eternity."

I think back now on my Iggy Pop moment, not for the fact of missed opportunities or the fact that I actually thought he was Martina Navratilova from a side glance, and not even for the reason that both Iggy Pop and David Bowie were younger in that moment than I am now, which skews my whole sense of time, but because life happens.

You create your own memories, history and adventures and perhaps that particular moment happened then, so that I could write about it now, in this moment, in order to prove that sometimes, when the time is right, you might just find that strength to fulfil your Lust for Life.