My mother was a librarian. I remember that hallowed day at age six when I finally got my own library card. I don’t mean this as a joke—I’m pretty sure that gravitas was similar to what the Catholic kids felt at their first Communion. It was that important.

My mother loved books. She believed in the power of stories to guide us and the power of ideas to transform us. There’s a reason the First Amendment is first. For democracy to work, people need to be able to gather and they need to be able to speak. It really is that simple. For my mother, anyone engaged enough to be hungry, she wanted them fed. We live in such cynical times, but that was her calling, not just her job.

My mother was also a feminist. In 1968, the poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote, “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open,” Propelled by collective pain and inchoate rage, women like my mother found the words, saw the pattern, called it political, created theory, and built a movement to liberate women.

And the world did split open. A short history of feminist accomplishments: rape crisis hotlines, battered women’s shelters, abortion and birth control on demand, sexual harassment laws, equal funding for girls’ sports, a storming of the barricades in the trades and professions, and a flowering of lesbian culture.

We are now supposed to sneer at them for knowing that women are women, but it was exactly that knowing that let them change the world. We owe them everything.

As for my father, my father’s people fought off the Nazis to then lose catastrophically to Stalin. My father survived by being a child refugee and then an immigrant. And that’s why I was born in the United States and why I have no extended family. I am not the only person on this stage tonight whose lineage is a pile of corpses. Given the global horrors of the 20th century, that shouldn’t be a surprise.

The thing that does surprise me: we—and that’s human race “we”-- were supposed to have learned from those horrors. But if you had told me twenty years ago that one day I would not be able to speak in public unless surrounded by a phalanx of armed men, I would not have believed you. We expected authoritarians from the Right. We weren’t prepared for it from the Left. So a brief catalog of what the Left is doing: Women have lost their jobs, they’ve lost publishers, they’ve lost custody of their kids, they’ve been threatened so badly they’ve had to move, and they’ve been physically assaulted. The most basic facts of biology are now considered a hate crime, which means the realities of women’s lives are back to being unspeakable. Children’s bodies—
especially their future fertility and sexual function—are being destroyed, permanently. The worst part is that no one believes us.

Civic institutions that were built as a bulwark against power are crumbling. Journalists are afraid of losing their jobs, and if that doesn’t chill you nothing will. Academia has fallen, though Hogwarts still stands. And people I counted as friends and comrades just want to keep their heads down so they can keep their jobs, hoping that the fever will break because this can’t go on. It can. That’s the thing. It can get worse.

The Left has become unrecognizable. We are in terrible free fall—not because we’ve come unmoored, but because we’ve been thrown from the movements we spent our lives building. And for what? For knowing that a woman is an adult human female. I will never stop knowing that. I will never say five when the answer is four. My parents, as people and as small participants in human history, taught me better. I’ll end with my favorite words, from, of course, Andrea Dowrkin, “Remember. Resist. Do not comply.”

So it is my great honor to introduce three other women who will not comply. They are brave, they are smart, I’m in awe to say they are my friends. First up is the incomparable Meghan Murphy.

Meghan is a writer in Vancouver, BC, and the founder and editor of Feminist Current.

Saba Malik is a longtime radical feminist and environmental activist. She is a founding member of Deep Green Resistance and a board member of Fertile Ground Institute.

Kara Dansky is a lawyer and long-time feminist. She serves on the board of the Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF), where she coordinates legal, policy, and media work.