

I do remember the flowers

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Part I. Drifting

Lush house

I feel so many unfinished things, like a house that never got painted and never got doors, a house the wind blows through. A house full of loose leaves, half-thoughts and skin flakes, wild scars and holes in the siding. Gutters of anger and exasperation, trapped storms overflowing and running down the side of you. You have no inside, all of you is outside, all of you is rain, all moss, moss without a hat or a coat.

Life has no pauses and no backstage, things happen and happen and happen. Things echo and echo and echo, everything is dawning, nothing is staying. I feel like a game I'm playing with myself, a song or a hoarse chant by someone pretending to be something else, and the dawn is so pink now, so lush.

I don't know what love is anymore, sometimes, when there's so much of it everywhere but it's formless, unflattering, with clashing colors. Always you love too much, not enough, at the wrong moment. Love barely covers it all, all your writhing moods, the recoils, the jitters, the ineloquent gestures, the stumbles. Love barely covers them all up but it tries, like a thin blanket over a cold body. But you can't spend life under a blanket. Love follows you everywhere anyway. There's so much of it although it's formless, it's splashing everywhere, it's sweet and uncertain. It doesn't know who you are: it doesn't need to.

Vulnerability is an opening

“Why aren’t some people vulnerable?” I asked my friend once, years ago. He said wryly, “How do you know they aren’t vulnerable with someone else? Maybe they just don’t show their vulnerability *to you*.”

To be vulnerable, after *vulnus*, the Latin word for a wound, means that you can be hurt, but also that you are open to the Other. Maybe vulnerability is a scandal or a strength, a joy or a shame — in any case, it often takes us places. Being harmed or undone isn’t always the end of us. It might become an opening. If we are optimists about each other.

Vulnerability is an opening like a hole in the wall: you might see me through it, or I might catch a glimpse of you, or I might hide, or you might hide, or something mortifying might spill out through our vulnerable parts, or we might start covering up our wounds with eyeshadow or camouflage.

What happens next, after vulnerability? — only life, I suppose, only the exhausting work of breaking and repairing bonds and holding onto each other. How are we going to hold it all together, how can get through the endless work of it? Can we marry and find feminist utopias in patriarchal traditions? Can we conceal our flaws behind love or rage? Can we become different genders or escape to different cities? Can we have babies and save them from the world? Can we feel, can we do anything but feel? Can we get anywhere, can we do anything but repeat ourselves? Can we ever answer any of our own questions, tell me, can we?

The shadows of attachment

Sometimes it feels as if a certain tenderness in the body, or a shiver, is trying to tell me that I'm there, that life is really happening. We spend a lot of our time awash in feelings and forces that exceed us, since we aren't the authors of our lives, we are just their caretakers. Sometimes in a sentimental mood I wish: if only we could all feel the same feelings, be moved by the same currents of feeling, cry the same tears, mourn the same deaths, the same losses. Such a commonality of feeling will never exist, I know. People are different: so different. So separate.

At least we have in common that we are separate from each other, alienated, desensitized, in need of each other. We get vulnerable when we're too far from each other, or too close. But at least we can talk about it, can think about what life means now, can write about it. Maybe writing is less like speaking and more like holding. Maybe I'm writing because I love people, I want to trust people again. Or because I'm stuck, because I'm trying to get unstuck. To find the good ways of being held, not the bad ones. I don't need any more hugs right now, after seven years of holding babies and toddlers. But I'd like to touch other people's brains.

I've been uprooted and detached and I'm trying to reattach but I need to figure out how. How do you come home when you've lost your home? How do you raise children when you are trans or genderqueer? How do you find hope when you've gotten used to the darkness of bad times? In my head these questions all have answers, but they're the kind of answers you can't quite say; they can only appear here in silhouette, in the shadows that your life casts on the page. Life is a scrapbook. This is my scrapbook.

I'm usually more guarded about who I show my vulnerability to. Please don't make me sad I wrote this.

We, you and I

I'm going to write a lot about *you* and *we* in these pages, but to be clear, when I use these forms of address, I don't really mean that *you* the actual reader is included in my life, nor that there are any safe generalizations about people in general. What I mean by flailing around through *I*, *you* and *we* is just that there are parts of myself that I can't face in the first person singular. When I say *you*, I often mean a part of myself that I feel like I'm looking at from the outside. When I say *we*, I often mean that I hope I'm not the only one who is like this. "You" describes parts of myself I can't own up to, and "we" names parts of myself that are afraid of loneliness. Yet I should also repeat that I don't think individuality is the best way to think of a self. We get mixed up in each other in weird ways, as if our hearts were full of secret murals of other people's faces.

I see you as a girl

I've said this before: that sometime when I was a teenager, without having labels or a clear project, I started wanting to escape the gender I was supposed to be. "I see you as a girl," said the first girl I was involved with, a long time ago now. I felt impossibly named in that moment, which felt wild and surreal at the time, long before I knew any trans people, long before my brother identified as trans. Sometimes surrealism is the only truth you can live by. Sometimes a voice has a curious authority to bring things to life by naming them: *I see you as a girl* says a girl, a moment where a girl's eye sees something other than what it's supposed to see, projects femininity upon what's supposed to be a boy but really is something more indeterminate. More pliant. In such a moment, conventional gender can become undone, never to be repaired.

I'm glad it was never repaired for me. For many years afterwards, I lived in a zone of nonbinary experiments. I imagined androgyny as something stubborn, nameless, slightly radical, clandestine, wistful, and only recognized by those who were close to me. I didn't see this as a *model* for living. I didn't want to have a category. It just felt like me.

But it became too disappointing and exhausting to live in a state of silent protest, to feel perpetually misrecognized and in turmoil. I got so worn out by clandestine androgyny.

I got more consistently feminine, and then more trans, and learned to play with gender labels in a different way. And this is a story about that. But it's not only about that.

The dry ingredients

Our kids — by the end of this story, there are two of them — are still small. I'm living in Cleveland where my partner has a job. Night is falling.

Whirr: whirr: whirr: the clothes tumble in the washing machine, and each time they go around, a crackling noise rises up the basement stairs, while serpents of dark air coil round my ankles. A whistling siren is barely audible over the rushing night, more felt than seen. Cars pass our house again, again, again, hidden behind the blinds that hide us from the neighbors. The living room is so still, since I'm downstairs while my partner, Talia, finishes bedtime. I don't have to cook tonight; I only have to reheat leftovers. The washing machine changes to a new cycle, loudly dumping out water into the basement sink, and then shifting to a whir. It's Friday night and it's lonely.

You feel like the dry ingredients mixed in a bowl waiting for the wet ingredients to be poured over you and transform you into a cake.

Drifting and writing

It's hard to write when you're unmoored. We moved again since the previous page. Now we're not in Chicago, nor in SoCal, nor in Cleveland. Now we live in Atlanta. I'm supposed to know the place I write from, but often I'm not sure quite what it is. Most of what kept me grounded in a drifting world has slipped away: an academic career, political activism, my former communities of friends, my teachers, every place that ever felt like home, the older generations that now dwindle and vanish. When my father died, my friend William wrote to me, "Losing a parent is like becoming unmoored in the world. The drift is terrifying but also brings much to the surface." Now I'm writing through that drift.

It's lightening to give up my old forms of life – so many of which were also burdens, were already exhausting, confining and unacceptable — but it's also lonely, it's too weightless, it's like living in a blank book.

The blank book rapidly gets written on again, mostly by forms of conventional life that I feel ambivalent about: my partner and I own a house now; we work for a living; we look after our children; we negotiate with a series of impossible institutions like insurers and termite exterminators and pediatricians and banks and therapists and schools, and everybody else who makes ordinary life possible, and yet somehow everything is still hanging by a thread. We're not economically precarious at the moment (there are no guarantees), but we're perpetually uncertain. Working and caretaking are my everyday life, but are they who I am? Sometimes I feel like I come alive in the gaps in myself, in the tiny moments of joy or dream that glint among the long stretches of exhaustion, obligation and ego depletion.

When I was looking for a job I went back to Chicago for a day, and my friend took me to see their tiny commune — an anarchist space with a joyful kitchen and no privacy and a lot of utopian energy — and for an instant I felt like I had come home again, as if those spaces were what really felt right to me — whereas suburbia is still such a dizzying trap. But I don't see how I could go

live in a commune now; almost no one in my generation does that with kids. I think my friend's commune fell apart when Covid hit: it was a bad place for a quarantine.

Utopias are temporary while capitalist society still seems so eternal, and everywhere I look is an economy in perpetual transition, the delivery vans, the gig workers, the factories still more numerous than one would imagine, the cacophonous billboards and commercial art, the athleisure bike trails, the charter schools and hipster coworking spaces. These spaces are deeply divided along race and class lines, while patriarchy coexists with new queer spaces. I live in that world — it's all too tangible — and yet I'm so not rooted in it. I'm not from Atlanta. I just live here. In a way I don't even work here.

Now I work in software; it's remote, it's so remote; my boss lives in Ireland; his boss lives in Toronto; our headquarters is in California. My colleagues at work don't see me taking estrogen or see my body changing. In its own shadow zones, my life leaves me just a little room for maneuver, for inner rebellion, or at least for writing. Does my writing change anything? Sometimes it feels like escapism. But then, nothing is more central to global capitalism than the experience of getting displaced and uprooted, made to escape, made to be replaced. My dislocation doesn't make me outside the world: it makes me of it. Although this thought brings me no solace.

Maybe if I'm anchored by anything, it's the promise of writing: of love in a fragment: of collectivity in spite of shattering. It isn't about trying to be anchored again: it's about feeling held by the drift.

You're always working

Tell me you're working, you're always working, the work always more bare, more picked dry, more scratched, its bones so long ago come loose. Drag your nose along through your day, your words all tied up in their saddles, cradles of the face turned slender, dead gnats got in your lunchbox, upset syllables gone pale, shattering radios broadcasting your moods. Tethered and tethered and tethered, your periscope has cataracts like old dogs, you react angrily each time you're disturbed. Everything is so brittle, numb like an animal cracker, numb like a rat therapist, you dive on yourself like you had long wings like a seagull, your laziness is your best act, concealing a crazy sadness.

Tell me you're working, you're working — you are increasingly fried by echoes — tell me how you curl up, how you dangle, tell me you're working, you're working. Your mouth is an army of ugliness, your hand rotted in the light, each day is like a dandelion that lost its seeds, tethered and tethered. Cradles of the face show joy, or at least that's what you say, obsessively watching yourself, hearing static on the radio, cream of heart soup no sooner made than spilled.

Tell me you're working, you're always working, the work always more bare, more picked dry, more scratched, its bones so long ago come loose. Everything is so brittle, so negligent, numb like the wreck of a car, numb like the smear of a wing. Tell me you're working — tell me gently, gently, a slow act, a droll phonograph spinning — the face tethered and tethered — tell me you're working, you're working — *yes I wrote all this once upon a time while sitting outside at noon, the summer that this story started.*

Why

Why are there underwear on the dining room table, socks that can't be matched, toddlers that won't sit on potties, shoes strewn across the rug, bugbites on every body, toys underfoot that feel sharper than thorns, a sink full of dirt, a garden full of weeds, a summer sky full of thunderclouds?

A feminist wedding

After we had dated for a couple of years, Talia and I had a feminist wedding — *feminist* meaning that we started out with a critique of marriage. Our wedding invitation (I'm still proud of this) cited Emma Goldman: *Love, the strongest and deepest element in all life, the harbinger of hope, of joy, of ecstasy; love, the defier of all laws, of all conventions; love, the freest, the most powerful moulder of human destiny; how can such an all-compelling force be synonymous with that poor little State and Church-begotten weed, marriage?*

Goldman was bothered by the thought that love could get trapped by patriarchal conventions. Which it certainly can. But I realized gradually that marriage — like all relationships that have histories — is a space where you put lots of different things together — some more problematic than others — and ask them all to coexist, awkwardly or not. We may have gotten married for love, but we picked our wedding date so we could start sharing an insurance plan. Relationships demand a degree of contentment with inconsistency. I remember being sure I didn't really know what marriage meant when I got into it. I remember saying: I'm making a promise without knowing everything I'm promising. In the end, if our relationship comes down to any one thing, it's a commitment to repairing whatever needs repairing. Sometimes when something goes wrong for us, we just do it all over again so it goes right.

The officiant, our friend Elizabeth, declared in the ceremony that “families and households are social institutions and sites of struggle and politics that remain deeply unfinished.” And she added, “We recognize that love can co-exist with ambivalence and fear, that connection is a necessary struggle, and that the structures that support us can also betray us.” Someone told me later that it was queerer than many gay weddings. But the participants didn't really imagine how queer our relationship would look, a decade later. If they pictured the transitions and struggles, fears, mixed feelings, sadness, stuckness, time apart, exhaustion and turmoil that were coming, they didn't say so.

“Marriage is the end of history on the personal scale,” as my friend Vineeta

wryly puts it. I'd like to tell you about what comes after a wedding. About things deeply personal and yet deeply structural, about the comic and disturbing moments in queer family reproduction. I have things to say about things that have happened to me, but this little book won't be an autobiography. It's more like a meditation on closeness and its impossibility, which is to say, on motherhood. I'm not a bio mom, but I still struggle with those questions.

Part 2. Inventing new sounds

You are dreaming of dreaming

It's windy, long after sunset, windy like the walls have turned to mad waterfalls and scimitar earrings and babbling drums and ogre stomachs and horse fists and harried mornings shouting in the shower into their cackling wrinkles and — suddenly, rising above the clash of stormy windows and the dishwasher's digestive wormsong, the windchimes on the porch glimmer and ring and — then for a long moment the electricity goes out — and returns. The dream subsides like a tumbleweed rolling off into a ditch. You feel momentarily like you were made for any other century than this one, in your fantasy you live far beyond the tired world, you are ancient like a witchy spinning wheel, even as you are already half virtualized and living half your life online, you are anywhere but right here in your dream, the present is so hard to live in, you are lost in thought, you are dreaming you are the windchimes, you are dreaming you are the lamps' reflections, you are dreaming you are a dishwasher for words that have gotten too dirty or smudged or crusty, you are dreaming of dreaming.

Rosebush feelings

I somehow have so many desires that I feel like I'm overflowing, but not like a fountain and not like a bottle. More like a bushy rosebush climbing up a jabby tree and overflowing with sunshine. In my imagination, our baby in the womb has become half a person already, has become half addressable. I picture them not really conscious, but clearly there, dreaming a long, obscure dream, faced with a dim glow, not yet breathing like we think of breathing, but rolling around, maybe or maybe not interacting with us, maybe just taking up space in the world. Sometimes it's hilarious that there's a baby inside my partner's body.

Heart in your pocket

Happiness is like a little box, carved faces in the distance, dimples in the ground where you were lying, it won't save you, not now, little boxes, all of them open, hinged, unhinged, fanged, ornate, piled up with pickled tinsel, happiness is a big advertisement for loss, an outrageous ideal, you already ate the edible arrangements and made yourself up like a blue dawn, heart in your pocket, you're happy.

Late in the second trimester my dad died suddenly from a heart attack.

A shock, and then what?

Two days after the funeral, I'm on the flight home from Britain, where my dad had lived for ten years. I feel ready and not ready. Detached from everyday life. Hollow like a comedy. There's so much to do at home, but I'm more ready to move away than I ever was, and I'm ready for a new city. I'm so stunned; yet also a little less stunned than I would have expected. I'm slightly numb; I'm afraid of the return of feelings.

My dad, whose health problems had been mounting, had said several times that year that he might not live long. At first I told him to shut up, and later I had told him the truth: "I'm not ready."

"I don't *want* to go, Eli," he had said.

I count time by flowers

My mom wrote us a letter late that summer that said, I count time by flowers. Right now there are sunflowers, gaura, nasturtiums, and the marigolds are coming along. And there are the most beautiful morning glories on the fence, a marbled blue and white in one flower. These bloom and fade and march the summer by, and then it will be fall again, the nicest time.

Sometimes I re-read this and feel held.

Kitkat baby

The future comes closer and closer and closer and then rushes past you, falling away into the distance. Claude was born on a dark, beautiful autumn day, wrinkled like a limp goblin. He was born sleepy and with a concerningly low heart rate, and soon he was lying on his side in a little cart in the newborn intensive care unit. He spit out his pacifier and cast off his striped hat. He was tightly swaddled like a soft rectangle or a Kit-Kat; the lights were dim and orange; the staff watched him with electronic monitors. He didn't seem to suffer, though he shifted around from time to time. I was tempted to pet him. Then I remembered that my whole repertoire for handling small creatures came from cats. We find our way through life using whatever we have, with all the meager tricks we've learned, and every other moment we're stumbling, or we're doing it badly, or we can't tell what we've gotten into. Then, later on, we will euphemistically term this our "experience."

Things you can't repair

Experience is full of unfinished histories and lingering wounds. I've learned to feel touched by the ways that people try to repair things in fantasy that they don't know how to repair in reality. I think often people crave to fix things that they don't entirely realize are broken. But sometimes nothing is fixed, and in the end, we just let go.

I was furious with my dad as a teenager, above all because he drank, until the day I realized in an argument that he was vulnerable, that my anger could hurt him. It then felt as if my anger had served its existential purpose and it mostly vanished from my body, and from then on, we were flawed but mostly gentle with each other.

Sleeting

It's sleeting and our beautiful apartment in Chicago is being taken apart and put in a truck. The windows are rainspattered, the snow is drab, and the buildings are tired brick fortresses holding back the winter. Claude is tiny and smiling, sleeping, waking, eating, squeaking, poorly regulated but highly permeable, dragged around with us everywhere as we pack. The hallway is all boxes, piled too high, we have too many things, now they're being carried away one after another. And then with a dull shock everything is gone except one last rug, upon which Claude sits, like an orphan floating through an empty space. Finally we are gone too.

Too little to remember

A thunderstorm at dawn leaves the day unexpectedly clear, the windchimes overflowing with their trill, loose wild oranges fluttering, clouds looming. It feels like something ought to be happening, but nothing is. I'm outside on the wicker couch holding Claude, who looks up curiously, but sometimes waves his arms, coughs and groans. The leaves rustle and you feel alive, sort of, even though a dead version of yourself follows you around, dragging its memories like hematomas just under the skin. It's splendid and silly. I guess this house in southern California will be Claude's past, or maybe his first memories. It's a city called Whittier, just outside L.A., a place of historical white privilege and conservatism that has more recently evolved into part of the "Mexican Beverly Hills." Set high up on the slopes, it looks down on more working class neighborhoods like Pico Rivera. Claude will remember nothing of this day: not the damp leaves or peeling paint, not the empty fire extinguisher or propped-up old rake. It is wild to me that we live in a tiny house that costs \$2200 per month. A tiny house full of problems.

"Why were the kitchen tiles broken?" we asked the landlord upon arrival.

"Because the firefighters cracked them."

"Oh, why were the firefighters here?"

"Because the house caught on fire from the last tenants' candle."

It was sobering to live in a house that had already burned.

Drowned ocean

The first thing I remember, when I was terribly young and not the same person I am now, is dawn in the woods, looking out from the window, sitting on the staircase of my parents' house. It must not have been summer, since the summer leaves weren't yet keeping out the light. The sun rose over a long bluegray valley whose bottom was lost in the blurry feet of the hills, and whose top was the flat line of a long ridge to our east, bordering Chaplin, which was almost totally covered with a featureless, nameless, deciduous forest, whose canopies were only broken very occasionally by small clearings, or possibly hints of a few roofs. By night, a radio tower farther north on this horizon blinked like a red lighthouse on a black shore. At dawn, the view was more abstract. The sun came in like a nail in a jumbled board. The sky like a drowned ocean pouring out from a pitcher. The arched branches like a wreath of shaved tails.

The land where I grew up, in New England, was a wild space, mostly post-agricultural, rearing up beneath you, rolling over on itself, or lying down in fits of sleepiness, leaping in tresses of trees, picketing itself with sly trough indentations like teethmarks, folding itself over like curtains, stuffing the light down into dark pockets, in caves of the leaves or cracked hemlocks, days so easily getting bent and unhitched from their colors. I would not be so arrogant as to call this land "ours"; my family had only moved there in the 1950s, for my grandfather's job. But we got so attached to it anyway, that land, a land where the past refused to vanish and instead lived happily among its ruins, its overgrown orchards still growing their fruit, its overgrown fields keeping up their brambled fur and roughening, its streams bundling up together like dried veins coming together on a hand. Some piece of the land still has a hold on you, like a trickling duct you don't know how to trace through your body. You adore your history of barely dissolved fantasies, the image of one layer of summer and then another and another stretching out over your body, letting you get mesmerized and then leaving you glum.

You're nothing, you realize, except through the claws of your memories, and even then, you have to wonder, why does your skin have this particular pattern of scars, and not another? That first house I remember is the same house where, after the divorce, my father kept getting drunk.

Lavender bath

I just gave Claude a bath, with lavender oil in wee drops. There's a great struggle to clean beneath the neck, in the folds of the skin. Then a long period of screams, tedious attempts at soothing, pacing, rocking; eventually a stray burp and a dose of aimless singing gets him to sleep, "nice sleep" as we call it sometimes. In our ordinary life it always feels like we're out of time, rushing, cramming; coupled to much idleness, long hours of baby care, braindead Facebook checking, time spent watching TV. Being fully present all the time would just be so draining; sometimes it's hard to feel present at all.

In the early days of having a child, we were largely overwhelmed, nearly broke, and perpetually stuck in our house. As adorable as babies are, it was a hard time.

Raven

A raven creeps along in the breeze, over the huge long-needled pines with craggy bark. The wind says rustle, rustle, rustle. The place where I felt most real that year was in the hills and mountains above the LA basin. Right behind our house they started, these looming, empty slopes and arcs. The first time that Claude walked any distance by himself, it was along a dusty fire road in those hills.

Now it's another day and I'm high up on the Windy Gap trail in the San Gabriel Mountains. An old man had told me to come up this way. I watch a hiker stagger and sway as he approaches the hilltop, and down below the San Gabriel valley is haze, haze, smoggy murk, while here it's clear and quiet, with that hot dust California smell that feels so wild.

It's hard not to feel happy out here, more alive. Everywhere are stray granite boulders dotted with pink bits, black seams, red-brown splotches, shadow tendrils. To the north you can just glimpse the desert through the trees, and a fallen tree lies across the landscape like a person lying on their side, hand on their hip. It's peaceful.

I went back to this place sometimes, years later in my daydreams, even in meditations, when I needed to imagine being someplace peaceful. Fantasies come from places like this. They take us back to the wild moments we've lived through, the moments before we had to move away again.

Two meteors, two roosters

Now that Claude is one, he is very alive and resisting sleep. He's more alert, more easily bored, more curious, more ambulatory, more gregarious, more possessive of Talia, more expressive and interactive. He likes games where you hand an object back and forth; he likes to invent new sounds to express delight. Today he woke up at 2am and I never really got back to sleep. The parent's body can be a great mystery, with huge reserves of energy and despair.

The next night, Claude woke up before dawn so I took him out to see stars. The North Star was hidden behind a tree, but Orion was as bright as a whistle. We saw two meteors and heard two roosters. The morning star rose slowly; the stars dimmed and vanished; and a wide blue light turned to dawn, with low clouds stark against the sky. Claude was very quiet outside, seeming to contemplate the lights and the darkness. It's easier to teach kids the meaning of language than the meaning of silence.

Ado

On a more ordinary California night, the long jagged roofs running uphill make cutouts against the sky. I'm aimlessly surfing the internet while Talia writes the bibliography for her dissertation; the water boils so I can make Barilla Medium Shells and the broiler heats up to cook fish. Claude runs around the house; his new words are *rug*, *ado* for avocado, *arms* and *legs*. Soon the whole house will have to be disassembled again, as if our life is coming apart.

So many things were set in motion in these first years of Claude's life, so many beautiful and damaging things, things that would tear us up and crash us together, things that would take years to repair. Attachment can be so delicate.

Part 3. Sad patriarchies

A machine for silence and hesitations

Lost in the leaves of a brain like the leaves of a table folded up or the wings of a machine, a machine for fluttering, a wind tunnel for dried eyes and dried colors and dried blossoms from last year, and no way to get far from home, or far from fluttering, like an insect that only loves stress or storms of hunger — like us, the insects get no vacations.

The tall dill plant fell over in yesterday's rainstorm — everybody here is adrift in love, everybody is frequently unhappy, we're deeply tinged with the wrong smells, like deet and lawnmowers, decayed leaves and sulky piles of compost, warbly singing and crusty lotions.

In my dreams someone is yelling Where Are You — then there's a silence like a machine saying stop — a machine for silence and hesitations.

Shadowy

When I was little there were gothic places in the woods where the land bent down into narrow valleys and hollows, where you felt held closely and guarded. The hemlock trees grew close together, their branches entwined, and the light was permanently soft and shadowy. As a child, I loved those places: their self-protectiveness echoed mine. Magic lived in shadows: that's I wanted to imagine when I was 13 and still hoped that something in the world could resist shattering.

My first day feeling depressed was the day my parents announced they were splitting up. Their arguments had become increasingly intense at that point. We heard the announcement while all sitting on the beds in my siblings' bedroom at the front of the house, which had once been the sunniest room. I plunged into a grim silence and returned to my bedroom. My parents followed me, concerned. But I said I didn't want anything. There was nothing to want after that.

Depression then became my nameless emotional horizon. I didn't imagine leaving it; it felt real to me; it was solid and dependable when the world around me had let me down. As time went on, it became a thing I could bond over with my equally depressed friends. It felt emotionally honest to confess my dark feelings to someone. Depression was soft and final and glimmery like the velour drapes at the edges of the stage in a theater, another shadowy space I loved.

But sometimes I'm surprised I ever romanticized it, because I remember what depressive rooms felt like: like a horrible stillness, like the deepest loneliness you could imagine, like being bad drunk and hopeless. I remember what depressive rooms felt like: like sudden outbursts of anger. Like nothing was reliable but the breakdown, the stuckness.

As a sad teenager, I became fascinated with shadows and hooded garments, developing an overactive fantasy life involving wizards and magic. I carved a

wooden staff and took it for walks like a sorcerer's apprentice. I longed for things that made me feel in control. I loathed being asked if I was fine, or even how I was doing.

I didn't begin to have language for this until I turned 18. My first partner explained to me that depression was the word for the feelings I was describing. She added — tenderly, I would say now — that I should consider finding a therapist or another coping mechanism. But in that moment I didn't like the thought of subjecting myself to clinicians.

So instead I spent a long time drifting in a soft and familiar darkness.

Are you writing a story?

“What are you writing about? Are you writing a story?”

A server in a Heathrow airport restaurant, a woman with sad eyes, wonders about my notebook.

“I’m just writing about life,” I say, feeling suddenly self-conscious but also, of course, touched that someone is asking.

“I used to write a lot,” she says, “I lost my grandmother when I was eleven, and she was my mother, she raised me, and some things I couldn’t express to anyone, but I could in writing.”

“You should keep writing!” I say.

“YOU should keep writing!” she says.

Under a streetlight

In 2017, I had a choice. An 8,000 mile commute, or unemployment.

The day before the job interview, I went for a walk and saw mountains, which seemed vast, nameless and near. The day was so bright; the streets largely empty; the earth adrift in heat. Dizzy with exhaustion, I felt out of place. I was tempted to climb the mountains up towards the radiance. I did not imagine how much these mountains could become a trap, leaving a hole that could swallow you up.

The scene was Stellenbosch, South Africa. Stellenbosch is a small city not far from Cape Town. One could characterize it as a capital of wine and white supremacy, a patriarchal city that was equally hostile to queer and trans people. The beautiful colonial houses in the city center were defended by electric fences and high gates, maintained by the labor of working-class Black people. Bourgeois white culture reached its apex in the heavenly voices of the university choir, a centerpiece of a classical music scene that catered to overwhelmingly white audiences, even though the choir programs by then incorporated a prudent selection of African compositions. Some called this place the intellectual home of apartheid. Its eponymous university handed out credentials to generations of white Afrikaans-speaking elites, whose right-wing descendents still dominate the campus and attempt, sometimes violently, to exclude the growing Black student population. It was not an obviously great fit for me, as a genderqueer white person with left politics from the North. But after a few years of failing to find permanent academic work near home, I had begun looking all over the world. I had classmates who had gone to teach in Kazakhstan, Australia, Singapore, Germany.

I went to the interview the day after my walk under the mountain, barely having slept, shivering from too much coffee. I was doing my best to look masculine; I had taken off my crazy nail colors and put on a tie. In a daze, I talked to a crowded seminar room about my research. I explained that I was exhausted, and the students smiled at me. A few hours later, there was a panel

interview chaired by the Dean, a white political scientist. To the west, Simonsberg Mountain loomed blue and green through the window, and I was pleased by the good atmosphere that seemed to emerge from the room. The department chair smiled at me and asked what my plan was for the next five years; I said I wanted to finish my book and get better at teaching. Someone walked me out of the room afterwards, and said encouraging things in the hallway.

I had enjoyed the surreal interview, but I went home frightened that getting a job offer would be an impossible dilemma. The condition of my continued academic labor would be separation from Claude and Talia, who would stay in America; my “commute” to work would be three flights and 25 hours long. An unbearable situation, a moment of complicity with neocolonial structures of economic opportunity (why was an African academic not hired instead?), and a deeply gendered one too: resonant with the history of “men” traveling for work.

I did get offered a job, and I kept my unbearable feelings at bay, and I left for Stellenbosch in early September. I missed Talia, who had just moved to Cleveland, Ohio for her own new job. I missed Claude, not yet two years old. I left for the airport before dawn on a Monday. The shadowy form of my partner standing under the streetlight, watching me get in a taxi, was so overpowering that I immediately hid it away in a secret room of the hardest memories. Meanwhile Claude was too small to really understand my absence.

I do remember the flowers

The first time I came home from South Africa — was *home* even the word, at that point? — it was for Claude's second birthday. A mad weekend trip in October. Four days in transit for three days of visiting. I recorded that I was "so excited, so dead-tired, so hungry, starving; so little in the face of life, of longing-for-longing, for lovewish; damp feet from biking in the rain; so much commotion, inner agitation in search of composure." Organically, I no longer remember this moment. All I have are these notes, these traces of someone coming out of hiding. I suspect that I cannot remember because the weekend was such an anomalous episode in such a long moment of stony inner silence.

Another time, my partner sent me flowers. I do remember the flowers. They were delivered to my work, delighting the administrative staff and making me feel slightly self-conscious, since it was a spartan office building with few traces of our personal lives. I went about my day, but then a few hours later, I suddenly found I could not bear to be apart from the bouquet, as if it had become a symbol of otherwise inaccessible sorrow. "The more Talia needs me to make things OK for her, the less I can be un-OK myself," I wrote that day. We always liked talking about our family system of feelings, about the shifting emotional equilibrium. "I'm invested in emotional stability and dampening because I have to be — because beyond liking my work, my job is basically to do affective buffering for all these freaked out students and tutors (with their role ambiguity and terror about finishing their masters) while mandatorily telling my colleagues how happy I am to be here..."

There was something perversely self-protective about emotional labor that year: It took me out of myself. By taking refuge in care work and all its repressive, performative strictures, you can put off feeling your own feelings for quite a long time. The unconscious can steer you away from them when they become impossible. But in the end, to defer is not to cancel. By spring, I cried all the time. Daily. A complete mess.

Student chronicles

What stays with me most is the students and their thoughtfulness. I asked them to write about their lives, and I learned something about them this way. Sometimes it was cheerful or banal. Sometimes it was a chronicle of social suffering. Female students commented that it was exhausting to get stared at at the gym, to dodge harassment on the street, to have to smile at work for eleven hours a day. Genderqueer students described being mocked for their looks. Black students faced persecution for their activism against racism. A poor student wrote that they did not like to go home, because their family already had too many mouths to feed, and every visit was a burden. Another said they usually pretended that their dad had died, when actually he had abandoned his family and was nowhere to be found. And I'm haunted by a young woman who divulged that, after her parents' divorce, she had chosen to live with her father, only to suffer bitterly from her mother's absence.

I hope I was good enough to deserve what was shared with me.

Unsure

In April, a few weeks after a visit to America, Talia called to say that she was pregnant. We were both surprised and, honestly, overwhelmed by the news.

A few days later, I resigned from my teaching job, and after a few more weeks of teaching, I packed my bags. It was hard to leave my job so soon, after not even a year, but I did it, and it needed doing.

Only a few years later, after the gender transition, some people were quite confused to hear that we had had an unplanned pregnancy. They couldn't imagine how that could have happened to a queer female couple...

Leaving checklist

- [√] Prep the last class
- [√] Teach it
- [√] Give away office plants, houseplants
- [√] Old student work, keep/ditch it
- [√] Buy an extra suitcase
- [√] Clean up the office computer
- [√] Give back the office keys
- [√] Bring home the office art
- [√] No crying
- [√] Give away the teddy bear that I used to amuse Claude on FaceTime
- [√] Bring home my work sweater that kept me warm at my desk

The fingernails of the waves

In New York, where I'm changing planes, the grass by the highway is long like green eyelashes. The border guard forgets to hassle me for once; the rush of the air on the road comes and goes in little gasps and shudders. It's about an hour to Newark, says the handsome driver with sideburns that are just beginning to silver. It's summer, with the aging high rises raised up towards indistinct clouds, with the fingernails of the waves stretched out beneath the airport approaches, with memories of life out here when I was younger. The East Coast: where I haven't lived for almost twenty years, with its odd ethnocentrism, its patches of joy, its cramped traffic, its aging senses. It's a landscape fuzzy like unbrushed teeth. In the van everybody is very quiet and probably wishes they were sleeping. It's summer and now we're about to cross the Verrazano Narrows.

Autumn

Rustling, rustling, it's all rustling just outside in the night, which has deepened abruptly into a different, darker season, as all the fireflies have been extinguished, the plants are pondering the thought of frost, the moody cars on the street are collecting fallen leaves on their windshields, the windchimes have taken to muttering weakly, and the sailing rainclouds are interspersed with a gaunt brilliance. Behind the rustling is a continuous lower roar, a hushed wave of noise that stands still in the sky of the ear. The pages of Talia's book almost crow and scrape as they turn, and the old windows cramp and rattle in the gusts. Things start to feel solid again: houses and children and restless thoughts. But even when things seem solid, how can you know you can trust the foundations, without seeing them rattled in a gale? I didn't write much today but I walked in the woods—one of those oceanic experiences—nobody else was out in the chilly afternoon—the cattails puffed up from the swamp and little paths emerged suddenly where you hadn't seen them before—and suddenly everything was too slow and too quick to write about, it seemed like.

Unemployment is a void

You can put so much effort into not saying this word:

Unemployed.

You dodge it. You come up with alternative things to say. I'm working on my book. I'm looking after my kids. Of course these are both true. That's what makes them good euphemisms.

But somewhere in there, there's still a void. The void of having your self-worth and your self-concept defined by wage labor, and then not having any labor, and not any wages. A three-part lack, really: lack of money, lack of social recognition, lack of anything to do outside home. They go together but they're separate.

Arguably in a house with small children, it ought to be enough to do childcare. To clean the house and cook. To get groceries and do laundry. To bring in the mail and do emotional labor to keep up our social ties. To fix broken gear and make the house livable and change sheets and empty potties. To put away the dishes. To plan outings and bring your kid to daycare (a daycare which underpays its workers, but is also a vital source of sanity for you because if you were alone with a toddler the entire week, your composure would shatter).

But when you say you quit your job, most people don't say, *Care labor is also a valuable kind of labor.* They don't talk about feminist theories of social reproduction. Instead they say, *What's your Career Plan B? What's next? What's next what's next what's next what's next...*

A powerful academic writes to me that my publications are impressive, and I should put the publications section higher up on my CV. But I've been out of graduate school five years, and it seems to me that the academic job market has no interest in me. I'm a worthless commodity in that market.

Hey, at least I have some gig work starting. I tell myself. It will help pay for

groceries. The line between unemployment and precarious employment is so blurry, really. Gig work never provides much of an identity, even if it provides some cash. Not very much.

Faye, our second child, was born since I started writing this.

Gradually, I begin to realize that this is an interminable text, and that to maintain its honesty, I would have to rewrite it every week, as life changes...

And it's spring and the wind is consuming the blossoms.

Two children

I kept notes on a day of being unemployed with small children.

At dawn: First I tended Faye, after Talia already got up at 3. Fed Faye. Made coffee. Looked out at the rainy darkness. Answered a text message. Wrote a poem on scrap paper. Changed diapers (it barely registers now).

Helped Claude wake up. Induced Claude to eat. Opened the curtains to let the light in. Made Claude breakfast. Made self breakfast. Made Talia breakfast. Made Talia coffee. Shower. Eyeshadow. Clothes & shoes.

Induced Claude to go to car. Drove to preschool. Argued with Claude about whether I parked in the wrong place. Recaptured escaping Claude in the hallway. Smiled at numerous mothers on the staircase. Put away Claude's lunch and gear. Located Claude's misplaced boots and socks. Soothed clinging Claude until he let me leave. Drove home.

Started the wash. Tended Faye. Tried to clean diaper pail but ran out of cleaning spray. Moved old book boxes to the attic. Let Faye nap in baby carrier. Ensuing backache from wearing baby carrier. Felt overwhelmed by too many todo lists.

Chatted with Talia about health insurance. Ephemeral guilt about unfinished paperwork. Answered doorbell. Showed the insect exterminator where to spray. Decided not to take Faye for an errand; heavy rain. Hastily hung up the delicate laundry to dry, the rest in the dryer.

Soothed Faye. Fed Faye lunch. Cooked food for future dinners. Ate sundry food while standing up and doing other things. Put aside boxes of old papers to sort later. Piled up empty boxes for recycling. Tidied living room. Played with Faye. Tidied kitchen, but only halfway. Made this list.

The day is only half done. Is it all banal?

Warrior drama

Around that point I discovered I wanted to have what you can call a gender transition, which is a strange word for a long process of finding new names and renegotiating how people see you. I didn't experience this as a destiny or as the revelation of a formerly hidden essence of myself; and yet I had wanted to do this for decades, but had been too scared. So much of gender is symbolized by clothes and looks, so I found myself buying a bunch of new clothes and accessories. I soon found out that there was nothing stopping me — except anxiety — from going out and buying all the femininity I could afford. Which wasn't much.

One day I left the drugstore in a hurry, with my disposable razors and my coconut chapstick and my colossally overpriced mascara, and I had on my teaching clothes for my adjunct job. This outfit was intended to express a slightly deadened, business-casual femininity, to discourage people from ever calling me sir, and to send solidarity to my nonbinary students. I was starting the car when a woman made big gestures to open the window.

“I wanted to give you this,” she said, handing me a bracelet, “I already have one.”

I burst out smiling because she seemed full of joy, and then I examined the bracelet, which said “warrior.” She showed me her warrior bracelet too, and as I looked up at her and saw the shaved head, I realized what she thought my short haircut was saying about my life: cancer. She made a huge air embrace and walked away, as if trying to send me all the warmth she had, and afterwards I cried a little, astounded by her warrior drama of feminine solidarity.

Leaving academia

I never did find another academic job. I found it deeply depressing to be unemployed or precariously employed, after investing so much in academia and getting so little.

In the end, I announced this:

I really think I'm done with academia. In spite of some good moments, it's been 15 years of a lot of sadness, anxiety, heartbreak, cruel optimism, overwork, precarity, desperation, rejection and resignation. The longer my CV gets, the smaller I feel. And in the end, I can't mourn something I won't leave.

That was what I told my friends.

When I went back to work in software a little later, what I told my new employers was more prosaic. *I liked doing software and doing academia*, I said, *but I left academia because it just wasn't compatible with flourishing.*

Can both versions be true?

Visiting a dying man

A few weeks before Faye's birth, I found myself in a kitchen with my oldest uncle. He didn't have white rice, which I'd asked for on behalf of Claude, but he did have soup and bananas. The house was old, old, irregularly jointed, like a strangler vine that had latched to the ground, like a crooked old face with ashy wrinkles.

We sat next to each other with our soups. There were little crackers on a platter, a hovering anxiety about what my kid was doing so quietly by himself in the other room. We checked our phones, since the snowstorm was coming.

The man's habitual rush of overwhelming energy had dwindled, and he didn't speak unless spoken to. His spouse had to take care of him nonstop.

I said optimistic things. I didn't have much to offer but my ridiculous ordinariness. I said our lives were going okay, and I was trying to finish my book, though I was afraid I wouldn't manage to. I didn't know what I would do without an academic job, I said: maybe teach high school, since I liked teaching. He said he had taught high school once, but he hadn't liked teaching junior high. We talked about his new house under construction, and about couples counselors.

I remember clearly that we didn't say the main thing — which didn't need saying — that he was dying, clearly and yet ambiguously, different parts of him, different organs dying at different tempos, that he was dying quietly, with a certain courage, that he was not asking for great efforts on his behalf, at least not from me, but he wanted it to be clear that we would probably not see each other again.

He was in the business of managing expectations, or at least of insisting that the future had become unknowable. I said I wanted to introduce to him our daughter, who was due six weeks later. He said we'd see. But I also thought he had some optimistic part: he refused to resign outright from his band. He was a 1960s folk-rock musician who had lived his life off the interest income

from his decade of mainstream fame.

He had an odd grace in the way he lived through this last moment of life. I thought I would have been more angsty, more melancholic or more angry.

The sky darkened and darkened and I was afraid of being trapped on the road in the storm. I decided to leave earlier than planned.

We hugged and I said I loved him.

Being a coatrack

Life continues and continues, no matter what its losses are. It reshapes you. Taking care of children makes you into a cyborg. Your body becomes a coatrack for other bodies. It becomes a trolley, a racecar and a street sweeper. Also it becomes a mobile storeroom, a walking lifeguard station, a fire lookout tower, a walking stick, an echo chamber for other people's voices, a portable escalator and bridge for crossing obstacles, an affect mop-up kit for emotional meltdowns, a documentary film crew on call, a nature education center, a route planner for dependent creatures, a jukebox, a lost & found, a food truck, a crossing guard, a multilingual interpreter, a treasury and occasionally a guardian angel.

It's a curious feeling, to feel like you have become infrastructure for other people's lives. Sometimes it's great fun. Other times you think, "I just spent the entire day being infrastructure and it feels a little lonely."

The bare venue

My partner found a different academic job so we have to move again. In the moments of departure, the home seems more than ever to become a theater. The show ended. The set must be struck. All the curtains come down. Only the bare venue is left. Was it ever really a “home” at all? Or was it actually a permanent art installation that abolished the gap between protagonists and spectators? It’s by leaving that you discover your clandestine attachments to a place. “Leaving town” is one of the only American rituals that I love. But it comes at a price, partly (and significantly) in cash, partly in letting go yet again of everything that had grudgingly become familiar: the best routes through tangled local streets, the smell of the sky, the detailed layout of the grocery store, the smiles of the pony-tailed mail carrier, the places where wildflowers grew in summer. In exchange for everything that was familiar about the everyday world, all you get is an abstract chance at a future. I remember with hallucinogenic clarity the August trees that bordered our block when we first got to Cleveland. It seems inconceivable that Faye was not there in the car, and ironic that she will never remember this place, except in whatever cryptic ways an infant can remember places.

Meanwhile, we haven’t let Claude see the house now that it’s all packed up — it’s being loaded as I speak into a moving truck. Yesterday he was interested in pictures of the piled-up moving boxes, and he understands that we’re about to move to Atlanta. But I can’t bring myself to tell him outright that he will never go back to the old house. Even though he’s thought about it in passing, it just seems too sad. Meanwhile, the teachers at Claude’s school have lately been almost in tears over his departure. It feels as if, by staying, they have more latitude to feel their feelings. It feels as if, by moving, you expose the precarious underside of attachment, which today feels not like numbness, but like vertigo.

Part 4. Tired mothers

Flooded moon

One night, long before kids, you're trying to escape your ordinary life, your sadness, your losses, so you go on a solitary trip out in the countryside, where you have never been before. But soon you have to abandon your effort to sleep outside in the dire heat and damp of the woods near the Mississippi River, and you stumble back to your bike to get back on the road, find your way to some town, pay somebody for an indoors bed. Between you and the road where you hid your bike, there are spiderwebs, spiderwebs so huge, so round and so manystranded in the stab of your flashlight. Spiderwebs like a little nightmare that you shove your way through, the thorns of the brambles, the thorns of the rose, the thorns you pull out of yourself later, the dirt that coagulates in patches like scabs, the arcane red dots, the scraggly bruises.

Then you're on your bike on a back road through flooded fields because the Mississippi is in flood, riding clinging to your handlebars under the orange crescent of an anemic moon, a bruised moon clambering up above the valleys, up above the clouds that soot in the night, that darken the dark, up above the noses of the angry dogs, angry about unknown noses, angry about you, about unknown sweat, unknown sound, unknown rattle, unknown bicycle. A scene so lonely, so eerie, so uncertain that you never quite forget it, and then you have to ride over a bridge over the enormous river, ruffled water darkly below you. When you ask for directions at a gas station in Cape Girardeau, a decrepit river town with a history of open white supremacy, someone takes pity on you and puts your bike in his pickup to drive you to the local motel. There you can rest for a while.

The week before we leave

It's the week before we leave Cleveland. The house already has big empty spaces.

On Thursday: The students applauded at the end of my class on gender. The last class I'll teach at a university.

On Friday: Claude ran away from me far down the block. Was he scared of the move? Of the passage of time? Afterwards I was a mess all day, scared he had run so far from me so fast, too sad to do much of anything.

On Monday: The sky is the darkest, most pitiless shade of black you could ever find, and it feels like time has stopped, but a sudden dawn lurks just over the horizon. I'll miss this. I'll miss the libraries where I wrote, the staff at the Goodwill where I bought all my new outfits, the Polish lady working at the fish counter who we always chatted with.

On Tuesday: I sold five boxes of my academic books for \$60; does that come out to 60¢ a book? They're all but worthless.

Some days nothing can be written, as I'm at the limits of exhaustion and haste, with bouts of suppressed panic, long moments of confinement and boredom. Is this the present, the past, the future tense?

On Thursday: The moving truck comes early in the morning and parks outside, before we're even all dressed. Claude had a fit about putting on his shirt, Talia took him to school, I tried to set aside the things not being packed. The packing crew came a few minutes past 9. It's expensive to pay people to box up the house, but we're overwhelmed and have no family here and need help. There are five men on the crew, and I'm carrying around the baby and showing them what to do. *Don't touch our toolbox yet. Don't pack the tin foil.* They bring in their boxes, lay down their mats, and four hours later everything is in a box; it's both slow and swift. Faye takes a nap in her car seat while I drive the car in ragged loops. When the packers finish up and leave at 2, there is an unearthly

silence and the house is a thicket of boxes. That night at the rented house where we stayed nearby (since our house had become uninhabitable), bedtime was very hard. Days later, I'm still so tired.

We crash

I wanna crash. I wanna break. We break. I wanna break again. I wanna see it again. Let's see crash. I wanna break. Can you help me see it again? We crash.

(toddler dialogue)

Can a mother be a comrade?

It's dawn and the sky rattles with light though it's still. I'm fumbling for coffee and letting Faye eat Cheerios off the kitchen floor. We talk to each other in babbled words that she invents and loves and I try to repeat. Some part of me is full of love and some part of me is sad, possibly the same part.

There's something sad about reproduction. It can seem like a glorious hiatus in loss.

I'm in my trapped recollections. It was long ago and I was a small child. It was a big clattering fragrant day with too many sparkles and too many mountains tumbling over the fishscales of a river. I went to play in a little stream that emptied into the river, and splashing among the pebbles a current caught me, much stronger than I had expected, swept me sideways into a deep hidden pool, the water was smooth, cold, keeping me held and carrying me out towards the rocket gurgles of the big river, and as I was swept I soon went under, and the lips of the water were above me with so many sparkles, pebbles of the sky peering down, and I don't even know if I struggled much, or at all. I got a little deeper down underwater and further swept — suddenly writing this, I am still afraid — the fear can get so buried, so scattered, with hidden currents like the river — and my mother appeared suddenly. She caught me, dove down in the stream, saved me from being washed away into the sparkles and being cold and drowned.

In later years, I was always afraid to swim.

You can save your child's life — it feels like we do this daily — but how can you understand their fear? You can satisfy their needs, but you only partly know the unconscious landscape that grows up around them. Caretaking can carry you closer to that unreachable thing somewhere within the Other: is it terror, or a desperate hope for transformation? A family can feel like this: a clattering valley of hopes and dark currents, of saving and forgetting.

I used to be a boy and now I've become a Shaba, which is a word Claude

invented for me as a nonbinary parent. I embraced it. I needed it. Today Faye — now 17 months — is tottering around wearing a stethoscope around her neck and fiddling with a marker, still speaking her private language, *Awo bo boo, ah hey bya bang go, yay whew we*. It's the height of Covid (or is the worst yet to come?), and Claude tells me how he hates shots, doesn't want a vaccine ever, hates doctors and dentists, wants to hit all the doctors and break their houses, and hates me, if I take him to get shots. I remind him that yesterday, he said he did not want to fight with me so much. Pensively, he agrees. He rises and activates a plastic toy that plays canned music. The baby dances to it gaily, arms like a windmill, hips like a seesaw. All reproduction is in spite of something, a dance to the canned music of loss.

Now I'm remembering my dad's funeral and I'm crying as I write, as if it were cathartic for me to get swept along by these memories of past tears. In the Covid moment, it's often better to relive than to live. A week after he died, my dad was buried in a "natural burial meadow" outside Cardiff, in Wales: an eco-friendly deathplace without grave markers where sheep grazed occasionally. Many of my dad's friends belonged to the Cardiff Reds Choir, who went around town singing non-denominational radical songs, and suddenly before the funeral ceremony, they began to sing:

Because we all are comrades, wherever we may be,
One union shall unite us, forever proud and free.
No fascist shall defeat us; no nation strike us down,
All those who toil shall greet us
 the whole wide world around.
My comrades are all others, forever hand in hand.
Wherever people struggle, there is my native land.
My comrade's fears are my fears,
 I shall not let them down.
My comrade's tears are my tears,
 the whole wide world around...

I loved that song, the closest thing to a communist spiritual. (My father was a socialist, did I mention?) They had rewritten it, I later learned, to be less patriarchal, since the original version began *Because all men are brothers...* But now I'm no longer sure about the harmony of loss that the song evokes. Are my

tears really those of my comrades? My heart is in my throat while my kids play with blocks. Perhaps kids can become comrades by ganging up on the parents. But what do you call a comrade's mother — an Other? Who can be more Other than a parent? Am I an Other now, too? Why was I socialized not to identify with mothers, but against them?

I came to empathize with my mom's long care labors later, after I had children. When I turned 30, my mom showed up to surprise me on my birthday. She delivered a box of my childhood things and stayed with us a day or two. When she left, I was suddenly heartbroken, struck by an unprecedented intuition that my mom was finite, that one day she would vanish, would no longer be there. It was a bitter thought, and I remember the loneliness that set in as the evening went on, since we lived far apart, and always had since I had grown up.

Now it's still morning at our house and my kids and I are eating together. Childcare alternates between the dire, the boring and the surreal. "Try and make a hole in your stomach, so you can touch the challah in your stomach," Claude says. "Ewww," I say, which he construed as high praise and encouragement. "Make a hole in your throat so you can touch it [*i.e. your food*] in your throat. Make a hole in your eyeball so you can touch your eyeball. Make a hole in your bones so you can touch your bones." He laughs uproariously and I jot it all down; I read it back to him and we laugh. "That's really funny," he editorializes, "it makes us laugh a lot." Already he forgets that he threatened to hate me an hour earlier. I wish we didn't live in this atmosphere of permanent turmoil, of love and hate like a washing machine spin cycle. I had a bad moment once when I realized that just as I had faced my father dying, so too might Claude have to face me dying, and I felt so sad for Claude to think that he would have to suffer through that sort of big loss. Then the feeling passed. I'm crying, I'm fine, really, I'm fine, crying is fine. All comrades are ephemeral, but their love can save you from drowning.

One year, my mom wished me "Happy Mother's Day," telling me that all caretakers are mothers. Maybe mothers can be my comrades after all. *My comrades are all others*: it's been a harder thought for me than I would have

Night walk

Night walk. No one is stirring but a cat and a distant train, a dull fan whirring and a glimmer of wind chimes against the long line of the streetlights. I keep wondering if I'll meet anyone else on the sidewalk, half hoping, half dreading. In the end all I can do here is look, listen, wait: I'm not sure for what.

My worry stays

“The overalls have a snap, right?”

Lately Claude ends every sentence with *right?*

“Yeah,” I said.

“Hey, how come you say *right?* all the time? Are you worried that you’re not right?”

Claude looks sad and thoughtful. “Yeah.”

“You don’t have to worry all the time, you’re right a lot! I’m giving you a hug. Sometimes hugs make us feel a little less worried.”

“But my worry still stays,” Claude said, “it was still here at nighttime even.”

Home

I just came home and the house is a mess. Home is where the heart is. Some people's hearts. Not everybody's. Home is where the mess is. Home is where the broom is, where the stains and the blood and the love and the mold is, home is where the trapped brain is. Home is where the bed is, where the sleep is, where the night cries out because something happened. Home is where you get so sick, where you get so scared. Home is where things are going to have happened, where nothing happens, where no one knows what's happened. Home is where a clock crashes down on you when you try to open a window, home is where you cry out but no one hears you from the other room. Home is where the anger comes from, followed by the reconciliations, followed by the sadness. Home is where you don't get rid of things, home is the optimism of getting attached, home is the refrigerator hum and the darkened closets, home is where things get lost. Home is *I don't think so*, says Faye who has just learned to say *I don't think so* for the first time in her life. Home is where the words are a mess, where the heart is a mess. Home is where you don't have time to finish writing. Home is where we get tired. Home is where we begin again.

Her own hands

Faye claps and whimpers, the year before we move to Atlanta. The sun retreats across the grass, leaving us in chilly shadows. The sky is the deepest, most crystal blue.

Faye wants to walk. She reaches skywards, inspects the ground, the grass, the blanket, the green toy ring, her own hands. She looks away, afar, with her dark brown eyes, pools of anxious love and dreams and mirrors of us looking at her, all at the same time. She claps and groans and looks uncertain. The madness of ordinary sounds.

Then we have to go in, to cook dinner. Faye hates that moment every time.

Screech owl

On a rainy night in Atlanta the screech owl spread out its wings, like a big black dart against the whirly leaves and the pockmarked shadows of the streetlight, and then settled down on a higher branch, screeching eloquently that it preferred me to keep my distance. The violent storm had gone by, leaving a soaking darkness with a jittery sound of trees waving and insects chattering. I loved the screech owl just for being there. I loved it for soaring through a place where I only ever plod. I loved it for talking to other species without selfconsciousness.

The eyes feel so heavy & I'm flustered

I can't remember the last time I got a normal night's sleep and I'm flustered. This is somehow a very confusing state of being, even if it's so predictable — the cumulative result of taking care of small children and also cramming in a long workday and housework, with no breaks or outside, no visitors or voyages, for — has it been a year?

I don't count; I just notice that a night is now a series of short blocks of groggy, scattered slumber, almost never more than two hours at a stretch, always interrupted by screams or dawn. It all adds up, even though I don't count it. Genuinely, it is hard to remember what day it is. Existence is a haze.

In the haze it's hard to know what I should be doing, beyond the barest necessities and daily rituals (which we cling to). So much is happening that nothing is. It's less like being crushed under a heavy load than like being in a state of free fall and not knowing what's coming. I make lists of things and then I ignore them. Desires come without saying and then they go away without saying. The lists end up becoming a way of ridding myself of my needs, punting things to a future self who will not want to handle them then either.

The eyes feel so heavy. I have nine minutes to myself between work and dinner. The wrists have typed themselves down to the bone. The neck is sad from its unhealthy exertions. But honestly I'm fine; I'm not down; I'm just drifting.

I feel flustered; it's not such a bad thing. Flustered is an almost beautiful word for a state of perpetual embarrassment at not finishing things, not managing things, not knowing what to do. To be flustered is to find an art of being in the moment that isn't premised on rational action, self-control, or even psychoanalytic depth. At least some part of you is still here when you're flustered. To be flustered is a good way of being in the world. In any case, I can't do better.

Babysitters

Now that we both work — and we have no family nearby — we have so many babysitters. Could anything be more awkward? I don't think I had thought it through, before we had kids, quite how hard childcare would be, how much of it you'd need if you had a day job, all the ways that daycares can go wrong. How the babysitters would nevertheless love the kids, how the kids would love them back.

I keep meaning to finish writing this section. I look at this page again and again.

I want to write more. I don't write more.

There are things you can't finish writing, things you are still busy living.

She

After a few years of fabulous genderqueer outfits, I decided that in the end, my relationship to gender was mostly about femininity. It's not that I didn't identify with being nonbinary, abstractly, but most of my life was with and around women, and I identified a lot with *them*, with their modes of expression and mutual identification. I think so much of gender is less about what you identify as than who you identify with.

I loved, and still love, what being nonbinary *represents*. It's a protest against believing that gender is ever natural, or that our identifications with it are ever settled. It invites life outside cis/het categories. And yet I never did find much of a nonbinary lifeworld. As a nonbinary person, there was only one of me most places I went. It felt unstable to have my gender be a state of permanent exception. Also, it was exhausting and I was always so tired.

Meanwhile, it became surprisingly nice to participate, in a bunch of ways, in everyday femininity. There was a world out there for that. And when people started calling me "she" because of my appearance, it didn't feel like the least wrong option. It felt nice. I liked thinking about femininity and parenting and our emotional existence in the largely feminine online spaces that I found. (For me, femininity was always an extraordinary social space compared to masculinity, which was mostly emotionally dead.)

I began to wonder if "nonbinary woman" might be a good way to see myself. I have never thought that femininity is just one thing — race matters, class matters, socialization matters, social locations matter, identification isn't essence, and women's spaces are sites of struggle. But even if it's awkward and always a work in progress, femininity is a space I like being in, somehow. In spite of it all. I changed all my pronouns and things. I would change my driver's license if it were legal in Georgia. I finally found an unambivalent part of myself, after all.

(I reread this passage. I'm tempted to delete it, because it's unambivalent. I

You enjoyed it?

Claude and I were talking about how he'd protested coming inside for a bath.

"It was kinda fun making you a little mad," he said.

"You enjoyed it?" I asked.

"Yeah, I really enjoyed annoying you," he said wryly.

Kid with a cold

Faye, now 2 and a half, just has a cold, but we've gotten out of practice at sick kids. It's like a sudden reversion to having infants — tiny, soft, floppy, messy creatures who seem horribly vulnerable, cry, cling, are inarticulate, infinitely needy, and prone to suddenly falling asleep. The sleep is peaceful while it lasts, though I'm no longer used to spending hours at a time trapped under a sleeping body; it's just as awkward as I remembered. When Faye's awake she's incoherent: we do one thing and then the opposite and then the opposite of the opposite. When she's uncomfortable, she grasps at straws, barely talking beyond "yesss," "noooo," and "Can I hold you?" There are moments of normalcy mixed in there too, of ordinary walking and playing, but they're fleeting. It's apparent that Faye wishes, very deeply, that everything were ordinary again; she can't understand being sick; it's new to her, confusing, and scary. I can empathize with this in a way I couldn't quite empathize with infants: I can't remember being an infant, but I do remember being small and sick as a child, and having that sense of fear, along with the comfort of being taken care of. I try to emulate what I remember my mother doing: being there, being calm, being unphased by everything. Faye was playing with dinosaurs when I started writing this but now she's despondent, soft, and sitting on my lap while I stagger through a few last sentences. I think she likes being held while she waits for this moment to end.

We're not all good enough mothers

Everything is usually so noisy; right now everything is quiet; there's a bout of anomalous sleeping; Faye says *uh oh*; she is fine; kids are vulnerable and tough; never let them get hurt; they're constantly getting hurt; it's usually never too serious; it always could be a disaster.

Be hypervigilant; be laid-back and don't stress too much; throw yourself into it, be proactive, maybe even hyperactive; seize every moment of rest that you can, live for the rare downtime; do it all; you can never do it all; everything needs cleaning; you can't clean everything; get a plain rug so you can find the dirt; have a paisley one to hide the spills.

Your kids will imitate everything you do; your kids will be revolted by what you do; anything might get infinitely repeated; anything might never happen again; everything is patterns and rhythms; nothing is.

You are the best person; you are loved and needed; you are the worst person; you are awful and hated and ridiculous; you are good infinity and bad infinity; your kids feel licensed to have infinite laments; you are not licensed to do that; everything is reciprocal but everything is also so one-sided.

Childcare is blissful and oceanic; childcare is tedious and overrated; you're full of love you're going mad; always get help always do everything; you're just a human being; you're just a magical container for human beings; what you do is never enough; why then do things usually work out fine?

In conclusion, we are all "good enough mothers," as Winnicott famously put it, except that we're not all good enough, and we're not all mothers.

The other day, our neighbor called us a "two mom family." At first it took me by surprise, but then I started to get used to it.

A more important job

“I have a more important job than you,” said Claude, the month he turned five. “My job is to make the world a better place.”

Nothing is more valid, more urgent and yet often more unreal than listening to what kids actually say. I found myself thinking about how hard it is to make the world a better place, how hard it is to make a living that way, and how hard it is to decide whose work is the most important. And yet — before I get carried away in skepticism — what could be more serious than listening to the voices that are destined inevitably to replace our own?

Part 5. Stillness and Repetition

Darkness comes with the end of autumn

A few years ago we sent out a New Year's card to our friends that said, *now all life is motion*. But now life isn't motion anymore. Life isn't always what it was. It changes shape.

I've changed my mind about things. I've learned. I've been wrong. We've stayed in Atlanta since Covid started. We've barely traveled. I miss having close friends. I stopped shaving my head. I grew out my hair. I got stuck. I became porridge, a person marred by indefiniteness. Claude turned 7, and loves karate and soccer. Faye loves toy cars and is about to turn 4. I turned 40 this year. My colleague at work was shocked to hear it, saying that I looked 30, at most. I said, *I don't advertise my age, because the software industry is such a prejudiced place*.

Everywhere around me is schedules and hierarchies. Everything is superficially orderly, is fraying into confusion, and you can only pick up where you left off, and you're stuck in a small cement park covered in your own graffiti, echoing like tensions. Things break down when they shouldn't. Suddenly it's hard just to climb the stairs. Too overwhelming to even do your ordinary life well. A vitamin deficiency, possibly, or an enigmatic anemia. The gutters lie uncleaned, the rainy season turns to a long drought, and the plants are suffering. Darkness comes with the end of autumn, bringing with it fears that something is wrong.

Now it's early winter and I feel a sense of stillness. Sometimes it's a peaceful stillness, and sometimes a stillness that's trapped and scared. *All life is stillness*. That's what I would say today if I were in the mood to generalize, but I understand better than ever that generalizations are just errors in waiting.

The sense of precariousness comes and goes. The tech sector is having layoffs, but they haven't affected me yet. Our managers promise us repeatedly that our jobs are safe. Are their jobs any safer than ours? One week I can barely walk because of a knee injury. My body is just an infrastructure for a life

anyway. Talia suggests that I should take less estrogen. So far I'm unpersuaded.

I'm less and less like a biographical person who feels that she is at the center of her own life story. I'm scattered and intermittent, I'm fine and I'm not, I'm absorbed in children, I'm holding myself together and pulling myself apart, I'm guitar picks and mittens, dresses and frequent embarrassments. I'm neither a faithful robot nor a suffering begonia, I'm only patterns, I'm words I can't remember saying, I'm a residual part of myself, I'm a house.

Your favorite car is Taxi

It's night and Faye is talking to her long line of cars in a giant parade. She's asking me over and over if I like them. Each toy car.

I say, as gently as I can, "Well, they aren't my favorite."

So she sulks.

So I say, "OK, they are my favorite."

But she senses something about my mood.

"Are you frustrated?" she asks.

"Yeah."

"OK," she says nonchalantly, letting the question drop.

The next second she's showing me each car again. There are maybe 60 of them. She wants me to tell to look at them, to praise them, and to tell her the names of each of them.

"Do you want to know my name?" she asks on behalf of a toy school bus.

"Yes."

"School Bus!"

The next car comes. It is called Black Car.

"Do you want to see me fly?" says the car.

"Yes."

Faye tosses it across the room. It lands safely on the carpet.

This whole game was adorable the first ten times or so. Now, increasingly depleted, I'm just doing my best to play along. It's 7:30 on a Friday night. What a glamorous existence we lead. I wouldn't even believe this scene if I weren't in it.

“Which car is your favorite?” she asks me again.

“Ice Cream Truck.”

“Nope, it’s Taxi, because Ice Cream Truck is sleeping.”

“Bedtime is soon,” I say, apropos of nothing. Sometimes we have to voice our unconscious, even when it speaks in a shameless non sequitur.

She keeps playing quietly, without response.

Writing is what makes interminable situations like this into something more bearable, more comprehensible.

I tried to leave the room dry-eyed

Even in bright rooms our shadows come with us, as our selves are full of shadows — not necessarily ours: perhaps other people's. Other people's shadows hang over us, and we realize we aren't feeling anything new, but only an echo of someone. What some would call ghosts I would call histories, as the afterimages of past moments tend to linger. My mother's father was a German Jewish refugee who had escaped from Berlin in 1938, losing much of his family in the camps, and although he did not speak about his past, he left behind an account in writing, which I find very hard reading. Above all I'm shaken by this moment:

Going to see my father on my last day in Berlin was probably the most difficult moment I ever experienced. I recall dreading going up to his room and trying to think of what to say while there. It was worse than saying goodbye to my mother upon her death — that, at least, did not call for a response from me except in my thoughts. I suspect my father knew more intuitively than I that we would not see one another again but he steered the conversation as much as possible towards practical and immediate matters. Not that he — or anyone else — suspected what was to come but even a continuation of the present was nothing one wanted to dwell upon. He was astoundingly calm and collected and I think he was trying to make it easier for me by steering the conversation toward the immediate present — like what time is your train tomorrow. This charade doubtlessly made it easier for both of us; as for me, I was constantly telling myself that I would be able to rescue him from America and that I would definitely see him again. No question about it. He clearly did not and could not know to what fate he was resigning himself but he was happy that I had at least a chance in life. I tried to leave the room dry-eyed; I don't know if I succeeded. I do know that after leaving the hospital, I walked to the other street, looked at the lighted window of his room, and broke down crying.

My grandfather was very, very hard to picture crying. He was composure incarnate. And yet now I'm struck by the shattering precision of his memories, and by his own father's desire to care for him even in the worst possible moments — and here I was feeling forlorn but —

Just then, as I was writing, Claude stuck a drawing of a rainbow right in my face, and said it was a present for me. And then I felt torn between joy and the history of desolation, and I smiled, and didn't try to explain to Claude how I felt.

*The diamond is what powers the tree to keep
growing and never die*

After giving me the rainbow, Claude drew an epic diamond attached to a tree.

“The diamond is what powers the tree to keep growing and never die,” he explained.

“I made the rainbow coming into the diamond to keep the tree rainbow.”

Our kids treat art as a way to experiment with gift-giving; so many of their artworks — which range wildly from brilliance to randomness — are given straight to the parents. “It’s for you, Shaba!” And I never feel more like a fantasy parent than at that very moment. It feels like a big deal to be the person who sustains someone else’s fantasy that their creations will be loved, that their work will be deemed good. I feel like a stunt double for unconditional affirmation. If I’m ever ambivalent about the art, I never say so. I praise everything when it comes to the drawings.

Having been crying earlier

I'm not chronically depressed anymore, but I have these odd periods of sadness.

There's something clingy about sadness. The exhaustion of having-been-crying earlier, the lingering mopey-ness that can feel like an inner tension, the inability to let go of feelings because you don't know what to do with them yet, or because they won't let go of you. Sometimes sadness just seems like an accumulation of different things that you can't give an account of. When it has no clear object and no narrative, sadness can just be a hesitation, a way of holding on that might also be a holding back.

I'm blundering around through moods, trying to find something solid in something formless. Sometimes I have periods that seem like minor depressive episodes; I never know quite why they happen, or when to expect them. I think I know myself, and then I realize it was an illusion.

Sometimes I feel very lost in writing, and then I remember that it almost always works to write about what's real, what's close to home, what you're really struggling with, even if it's often delicate to describe since it touches on our real relationships to others. No one has ever taught me to write about all these things. I'm making it all up, trying to find a way to narrate the static and silence of our situation.

Some big departure on a long voyage

I'm sitting at my desk with its big sunny windows when I notice Talia leaving the house. I find myself waving sadly at her through the window, as if it were some big departure on a long voyage, and not a minor errand that will take an hour. She can't see me. She's busy driving. I'm sending a signal with no recipient. Why do we do this — love? Optimism? Habit? What is a relationship if not a place where optimism can become a habit?

How you got so weary

I dreamt I was a tree as delicate and broken as you are, as vast and shadowy as you are, trembling like the water falling over you, warm as someone nestled deep in the ground until winter came and you froze, you shattered, you were not able, you reached for us, and you spread yourself out above us like a big umbrella, saving us from the storms and the thorny lash of raindrops on our skin. This is how you got so weary, merely by keeping us dry and sheltering us.

I'm not a fish

Today I'm just a dolphin, a plastic dolphin that someone grabs and fights over, makes swim and wallow in a bathtub. Half the time I lie there sticky and drying like a moldy bottle, and I like to splash and sway, and I am desirable only because someone else desires me, and I'm small because someone else uses me as their toy, and I'm a fish because someone incorrectly calls me a fish, and I fight with the other toys because I am made to fight. I'm just a dolphin, lost in a dry, dark bathtub world beneath a sky of tile, and I'm loved only when someone chooses me to love.

I can't help empathizing with the toys. Like them, we all have our inert moments.

Months pass, and one day I ask Faye if she wants to have a bubble bath.

"No," she says, "because then I won't see the dolphins."

They exist (*we exist*) when someone desires them to be there (*or desires us to be there*)...

Part 6. Spinning and overflowing

We would spin and spin and spin

If I could dream again maybe I would run east through the valleys of Chicago brick apartment blocks and greasy shops and keep going until I ran deep into the waters of the lake at sunrise and dove deep into the crystals of the water and the hollow crest of the water and the gleamy shifts of the water and then somehow in the depths my skin rushing would be clean and so cool like dolphin skin and we would spin and spin and spin and the sun would split up into ribbons and the city would only be nesting shadows and tangled briar stars and our eyes would be fire crescents and our thoughts would crash ahead of us like fins carrying us all the way to the bottom of the deeps where we might hear a laughing music of tin bones and copper lungs and soft cravings, and then at the end of my dream, I would wake up no longer in the water, but asleep like a scavenger bird dreaming of being eaten.

You can't get in the ocean

"You can't get in the ocean, Shaba," Claude says out of nowhere. I'm writing at dawn, on Saturday morning after the night of the 60 car parade. The sky is cold, the trees are stark, and Faye went upstairs to wake up her cars, which were sleeping until someone played with them.

"You can't get in the ocean, Shaba," he tells me. "King Benthomaar would stop you."

"Oh?"

"King Benthomaar would say you were a trespasser."

(I have no idea who King Benthomaar is.)

Claude continues, "I want to meet King Benthomaar. I'm a fan of him."

He pauses to let it sink in. He's smiling. I hear the smile without even looking.

"I want his weapons. His trident can blast. The trident's basically a blaster too. It can power down mechs, even."

There are a lot of battles in the TV show he's watching, it seems. When my mom came to visit last month, she was taken aback by the constant fighting in Claude's preferred shows. But I'm used to it. Sometimes if we watch them together, I enjoy the adventures, the excitement.

"I like it," says Claude, still thinking about the blaster trident.

"I want it."

He returns to his screen without another word.

No, listen to your partner

We can get so attached to ourselves, familiar with ourselves, comfortable with ourselves, and then something happens, the ground shifts, or we crack or spin, and then we're different from ourselves, revolted by ourselves, or just drifting far from ourselves, like the ruins of ships blown far offshore. I see I keep coming back to the drift, as if the very image has become something I could rely on, since I started writing this. It's hard to process becoming different from ourselves.

Sometimes we drift slowly from our point of departure; suddenly everything changes in an instant.

I used to hate the thought of therapy and I refused to go for many years, without knowing quite what I was refusing. It was essentially your typical "men would rather die than go to therapy" stance; I couldn't stand the thought that I couldn't manage my moods without help. My partner dragged me to therapy in the end. She tells me that my initial reaction to her invitation was, *Over my dead body*. But I had a close friend in those days who loved psychoanalysis, and when she heard about this, she told me incredulously, *No, listen to your partner, go to therapy*. And then I went.

What's interesting is that now I catch myself repressing my own past resistance. I can't relate to that earlier version of me who abhorred therapy, to the point that I can't even remember it accurately. I have to ask Talia to help me revisit that moment, where I held my anti-therapy views with such ferocity. Part of me doesn't want to acknowledge that I used to be that person: that if this is no longer me, it is at least my predecessor.

I do, at least, remember many earlier years of not knowing what to say when my friends told me I sounded depressed and sad. What I can't remember is why I didn't do anything about it. It hurts to realize that people said the right things to me again and again, but I wasn't ready to listen.

Sometimes I don't know what I amount to. Sometimes I feel untrue to

myself, but true to something else.

I remember you, she said

We come to realize that even memory is a scene of struggles.

There was an old woman who, in my memories, really loved two places. From her couch the daylight came in through three ancient windows, the sills lined with tchotchkes. Outside you saw a row of hemlock trees, a tumbling stone wall, some meadows in the distance, and a circular birdfeeder that attracted chickadees. In the afternoons she would lie down with her novels, which she read voraciously, as they took her far from herself, away from her house. She had trouble walking as she aged, and her memories had begun to slip away, not all, but quite a lot of them, a loss which made her feel ashamed. For the past few years, her ironic greeting had been this: "I remember you." Her loss of memory bothered me intensely. But the novels, which she no longer purchased, but always borrowed from the public library, still carried her through her days.

In front of her kitchen (where most of us see the sky or maybe our neighbors' houses), she kept a sunroom full of plants in terracotta pots. With long leaves like animal ears perking up. And if you went down among the plants, you could water them with mist, or pick a miniature orange that grew indoors, or look out from the plants at the garden. Outside the plant room were a step and a little walkway, and then there were rough stones amidst the little flowerbeds. In my tenuous memories she kept pansies, marigolds, lilacs, dogwood, roses.

One day she went out past her plants and was standing among her flowers when she fell, having had a stroke, and was taken away in an ambulance, and from there to a hospital, and then to a bigger hospital. After the stroke she kept living very softly for weeks, dependent on machinery and medicine. I saw her then, just once, but I didn't know what to say, not to her, not to anyone else. Sometimes she moved her arm as if to tear out the breathing machine. I wanted to know what she felt. And I remember her spouse, lost and overwhelmed, hoping that she would still come home again.

“Do you think she’ll be able to read?” he asked us.

“There’s no way,” someone said.

“Well, the doctor said she couldn’t speak, but he didn’t say anything about not reading,” he said, with the most despairing hope I have ever seen.

But soon they turned the machines off, and she didn’t read again, nor look out through the ancient windows at the hemlocks, the tumbling walls, or the sky. Her ashes were scattered later in the river.

Sometimes now I cook the meals she used to cook, or wear the sweater I still have from her closet, as if memory could be more than just images. Memories can be so close. They can keep you warm.

The coldest morning

Now I'm drifting into clouds of silence, through shadows in the lungs, through inner opacity and its dull din. I'm moving through the stillness as if it were a torrent, as if statues could whisper. As we drift, we change form, and drifting isn't terrifying anymore, it's just the motion of leaves caught in the water, the promise of seeing another dawn, the stillness of feelings unsure where to go. I feel archaic loves. I still love people who are dead, who are gone. Warmth becomes a memory of warmth. But this isn't nostalgia, it's not wanting to go back in time, and it's not that the past was perfect. It's just that warmth has a long reverberation, and it clings to us.

And yet the condition of writing this, of writing anything, is a long and unendurable loneliness that I'm not quite sure what to do with, not sure what to make of. It's the coldest morning of the season. In the end, to be able to write again, I had to block off all my other outlets, so that all the unmanageable feelings *had to be here*. Now they can't run out somewhere else; they can't spend themselves in tweets or half-written songs or anywhere else where they fade too fast. For an instant, there is only writing. Loneliness isn't an absolute lack of people; rather, it's a particular relationship to people, the state of overflowing with things you'd like to share, but can't manage to divulge. Loneliness is where you are at once guarded and alive to the other.

Faye's first dream

Sometimes everything is small and peaceful. Somewhere inside me there are still secrets. Faye reports having her first dream, *The sky said hi to us*. The same week, Claude runs into our room at 2am with a terrifying nightmare, *The sun was exploding*.

This has been the premise of many scifi movies, I said to him groggily, falling back asleep.

Easily defeated

A few years ago, a friend of mine was struggling with cancer, and one day, when I asked how their energy was, they responded, *I'm not as defeated as you, Eli, but I'm more dissociated*. And then we talked about other things, and I knew I didn't really know what to say about a long struggle with cancer, so instead we talked about what Faye was playing...

I'm not as chronically down and dark as I used to be, even two years ago. But I still keep thinking about what it would mean to be a *defeated person*. It's not wrong; I still feel so easily discouraged. So many things seem not worth holding out for, since the universe is so exhausting, so depleting, and in the face of my own inadequacies, I'm not sure if I'm being soft or just weak. Sometimes I read eloquent defenses of radical softness, but I can't help thinking there's something ironic about being assertive about softness. Sometimes I feel defeated in ways that defy all rescue or repair, defeated in ways that resist softness and optimism.

But maybe I'm also not as defeated as I once was.

Kid thoughts

A child's consciousness can be wilder than an April snowstorm, so sudden, so immense. Sometimes a child's thought is awkward, even clumsy, lurching from one place to another without finding its balance, but one can rarely call it vague: it is frequently clear and precise, reaching for its own limits and then questioning them, moving in a determinate way from one point to the next, refusing to take much for granted. It feels feelings and its clarity is brash; it feels unashamed of its feelings, it tends not to mix them all together. In this, it is the opposite of my perennial state of muddled ambivalence. Whenever I think a kid's thoughts are stuck, I'm always wrong eventually. When a river seems to vanish, the water keeps running through the ground, suddenly reappearing as if from nowhere. This week, as if out of nowhere, Claude was easily able to multiply 1024 by 2, and he asks questions about the meaning of divorce and love, and explains what nonbinary people are to his friends.

Even so, this kind of consciousness remains aggressive, demanding, one-sided. Everyone in my family is very stubborn, which I love. But our kids' rage is hard to be around. Rage is a state of unfinished consciousness, an unanswered question. Claude got annoyed today about something and went inside in a fury. Faye, still outside, really wanted to play with him, and burst into tears. We coaxed Claude into coming back.

Everything is changing, but so slowly, and we cling to our rhythms, our illusion of timelessness that helps us compensate for the extreme volatility of this space. All these scenes are so lovable and so fleeting, and I know they're destined to become past, or even forgotten, and I'm still trying to make things seem as solid as they can.

Don't go, come back

I always used to say goodbye to my dad at train stations, one of his favorite places in Britain. He would stand on the platform and watch me board. I would find a window seat and wave at him. Sometimes we cried as the train started moving. It was like a rehearsal for the big losses, the irreversible ones that life has so many of.

Some days my inner voice just sounds like this:

hiiiiii where are you?
where did you go?
come back!
come back!
come back
come back
come back
come back?
come back!
come back...
where are you?
come back
i miss you
come back

Some part of me never wants to let go of anybody, wanting to erase every loss and absence. I know it's a pure fantasy because if it could come true, I wouldn't want it to. Loss makes so many things possible; it makes *us* possible.

And yet. *Come back. Where did you go?*

Four

Faye is turning four and she seems so proud, so swift, so certain of her own desire to grow, so delighted. And I feel so proud of her (or of us for taking care of her?) and somehow I can't help feeling this tiny sense of loss, since the enchanted part of early childhood will soon vanish — or is vanishing already — that odd part of someone's life where things are mostly joy and mostly not anxiety.

How is a fourth birthday possible; how is this a real child; so recently Faye was just concept art, a possible future, an abstract desire among the parents; but reality has long since outpaced us, we're becoming obsolete, or even if we're deeply needed, we're still headed for obsolescence...

"What do you see?" I asked her one day as we sat outside.

"Leaves."

"What do the leaves see?"

"The sky."

"What does the sky see?"

"Clouds."

"What do the clouds see?"

"The ground."

I feel I have almost said enough. I have processed whatever I could process. I have let go of things I needed to let go. I should let you go soon.

Part 7. Mornings

Optimism

The only honest way to get to optimism is by working through everything that's happened to you. Including the darkness, the rage, the tears, the emptiness, the stuckness, the possibility of losing everything, the despair. "After the despair comes the despairing of the despair," said a poster I saw somewhere. Something always comes after despair, but it is not necessarily the despairing of the despair; it might just be a sigh, a moment of restlessness, a blink, a reckless leap in some direction.

It's a devastated optimism. What other kind could we still believe in?

Rue Nélaton

While I was in Paris in 2018, I walked past the corner of Rue Nocard and Rue Nélaton, a strange bourgeois neighborhood in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower, where eight years earlier I had said goodbye to my old partner Heather for the last time, before she got in a taxi with her cat, leaving the country. It was a grotesque street in the history of France, I later learned, since at this spot in 1942, in what had once been a stadium, the Vélodrome d'Hiver, thousands of Jews had been detained before being deported to the camps. When I came back to the street, I found that the faint spring leaves were unfurling gradually, and pigeons hid up there in the trees, clumsy and furtive like flying rabbits, while so many façades frowned down at you. We had only lived in this apartment for a few weeks, at n°8 rue Nélaton, sub-subletting from some wealthy family away for the summer; what had stuck in my head from those weeks was the glass coffee table, the brightly lit kitchen, and the fractured state of our relationship at that point. Eight years later, I sat on a bench down the block and the light brightened, as if fighting to escape the fatal weights and shadows of the clouds pressing down on me. At the end of the block was the river Seine, where I found myself the only evening visitor to a memorial recalling the “racist and antisemitic crimes” committed by the French Vichy government. The memorial was artfully worded to avoid taking too much present-day official responsibility. All around me were soft brown flower husks and cigarette butts. This is just a place, I wrote in my diary, just a place, with no trace that I had ever lived here, no trace of any last embrace by a taxi, no trace of any kind of loss. This is just a place full of other places, a place full of hidden rooms, closed doors, bourgeois towers, mirrored windows, spaces within spaces, feelings within feelings; and all of a sudden the sun rose out from under the clouds, almost harshly, almost starkly, and I couldn't help being a little warmed up.

The absence of an absence was somewhat painful to me, somewhat disconcerting. I don't know what I had expected to find on that corner, but all I had found was the anonymous city, the ordinary city. We rarely know what anything is when we're still in the middle of it: it takes time for histories to find

their meanings, and we make sense of things later, or too late, when we see what things were on their way to becoming. It's hard to feel loss directly, in the form of an absence. Instead you meander, you ramble around these scenes, like a worm in a broken garden, as the pigeons make hissing sounds above you. You're here but a part of you has gone back eight years earlier, wishing that your history didn't have to hurt. The sun comes out at dusk and yet a night wind hints at night and creeps in through your clothes. You think you know exactly where you are, but you're completely lost; you can't write, even though you're writing; you want to vroom, but you are a caterpillar; you are sad but you're not stuck; you are half in the light and half shutting your eyes so hard; you are stuck and trapped but the evening is beautiful, and there is nothing to see here, but seeing that nothingness makes the words pour out of you. I had thought that coming here might bring me closure, but what I found instead was a place where I felt the indeterminacy of everything that exists, the absolute openness of life to its own losses. Loss isn't necessarily an endpoint; it opens things up, it's some kind of beginning. I found nothing that day. It was just what I needed to find.

Do you pick the music?

One year I went to get my ears pierced at Claire's. I had to sit in the parking lot outside for a while first, finding my nerve.

I was the only customer in the store. There was a truly astounding level of purple everywhere, enough to probably make a dragon feel like a My Little Pony.

"Are you nervous?" asked the woman behind the counter.

"Not really," I said inaccurately, "but I have to say that the level of femininity here is quite intense."

"Oh, Claire's is for everyone."

"Thank you for saying that," I said, and I smiled.

While I filled out some paperwork, she started to dance to pop music that was playing in the background.

"Do you pick the music?"

"No, they send us a CD that we have to play. It's not my music; I don't like it. But I still sing along and dance to it."

Thus reminding us that women make history, but not under conditions of their own choosing.

The lions are not flowers

If the lions were flowers maybe I would love them. The lions are Claude's favorite creatures. They're such carnivorous blossoms. Flowers lodged in the shadows of the rocks, not so far from ourselves, too close, wilting, leaping, flying off like balloons tingling, roaring only with the noise of the petals falling. The lions are not flowers. They're anything but flowers. They're antigentleness. If the lions were seasons then every season would be a disaster, and it almost seems that the lions are there to eat us, are there to torment us, are there to make us fall down, to crash, to erupt and to crave, as the lions chase us from one day to the next; since the plastic lions are nothing but desires, the lions are toys of desires and dreams of pride, the pride of dreams, the dreams of things, the roars of things, the roars of things.

Stop idealizing femininity

Femininity and feelings are such obvious things, in a way, yet they have been so hard for me. They make me feel possible and impossible at the same time. I feel constantly tossed around, a jumble of delight and shame, clarity and nonsense, fear and patience, failure at being adequately feminine, failure at being adequately anything. But I also feel sure that I'm happier than I was, less constantly scared and less shadowy than I was. The emotional baselines have changed even though the everyday moods still flicker. It feels like a gentler kind of consciousness, with less rage at the world's contradictions and more tenderness towards the people struggling with them.

The radicality of gender transitions is just this: *If something as supposedly primordial as gender can change, then what cannot change?* Sometimes I feel utopian about that; sometimes I just feel unsafe or freakish. But often, when things start to feel uncertain or alarming, my friends show up and I let myself lean on their optimism a little. I remember the day that I posted on the internet that actually I liked being called *she*. And I remember the vertigo and potential shame that I felt in that moment. But then my childhood friend Dianna, whom I haven't even seen in years, wrote the most welcoming comment, inviting me to "stay just as long as you like" in women's spaces. And it made me feel able to keep existing to hear someone say that. I had drifted for so long through the world, and then, somehow, femininity became a place where I wanted to stop drifting, a place where I wanted to feel anchored.

I had a conversation with Talia a year or two later. "It seems like no matter how much I inhabit femininity, I still never feel like I'm quite there, like I'll never belong," I said. "No, you do belong," she said, "but maybe the next step for you is to stop idealizing femininity, to realize that women's spaces aren't utopias. Sometimes you get a sense of belonging from them, but it comes and goes."

I've lost most of the utopias I grew up with, and it still hurts. The hippie dreams of living with the earth, with the trees, with peace, with each other, it

somehow fell apart. Families split up, people died, the woods were too lonely. I've mostly left that world. Yet I don't feel that I entirely lost touch with the values that my family believed in. I've tried to continue them in another way. With slightly more glitter.

Every way was up

If you lay down in summer under the oak tree and looked up, the dizzy towers of the leaves were all askew, the branches overlapped like too many forks stuck in a cake of baked colors, the leaf strata in geometrical dimples, the darkness shattered everywhere into long bright lines like clay in the desert. You lost track of which way was up, since every way was up. A few twigs lay bare, the sky twitched in the background like a detached leaf, the world hid its usual echoes in the lost movements of the daytime.

You felt peaceful.

One day he asked me

Claude spent a few years processing that his grandfather had died just before he was born. It's always a struggle to understand the presence of an absence.

One day in the midst of his processing, he asked me a question.

"Are you going to die some day?"

"Are we all going to die some day?"

I was undone by his perfectly logical, curious questions.

"Come here, I just want to hug you," I said.

After the hug, Claude continued his questions.

"Am I going to die some day? When am I going to die?"

I tried not to cry.

People said to me later that these were all completely reasonable questions, that it was a normal part of child development to inquire into death, and that Claude deserved sober answers from me rather than sentimentality.

I think I eventually gave sober answers, but Claude already knew them anyway.

Writing this, I'm still trying not to cry.

All life is motion

There are no endings, there are only feelings, only openings, maybe you can see our vulnerability through them, our foolishness, our grandiosity, our lovability, and maybe there are things to see in each other before we part ways again.

I'm not sure if I'm writing for you, for me, for ourselves, or for our future collectivity. We are always part of each other, and always awkwardly, always with a struggle. All life is motion, is stillness. All life is collision, and then the aftermath.

Our lives are always a struggle for something, a continuation of what feminist weddings are supposed to be about. A struggle to figure out what is worth struggling for. Gender too is a struggle, a space where we can be held, where we can be seen, where we can bargain with each other. A place where we bargain with ourselves.

Faye is sick again today. I want to hold her, but all day she just wanted to play. Holding isn't always enough. I hope she's better in the morning. Before she sleeps, she wants me to sing to her. Then the ritual hug, the ritual kiss. Then I leave and shut the door behind me. But I won't go far away, just in case I'm needed.