Leora Fridman

STATIC
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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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my soul knows no call to arms without bodily feeling

— Michel de Montaigne

I think of Feminism as a fragile archive, a body assembled from shattering, from splattering, an archive whose fragility gives us responsibility to take care.

— Sara Ahmed

Prologue

The writing collected here is bookended by rupture. I began writing these essays because my body gave out in November 2016, at a time that was eerily aligned with the moment when my last thread of faith in American democracy also gave out. Or gave in, or gave way.

The first time I wrote about chronic pain and politics was for an anthology curated by Essay Press just after Donald Trump's election.[1] In my essay for that anthology, I wrote about a trip to the emergency room just after the election. That trip was the beginning of what has now been years of managing mysterious and evolving and gendered chronic illness that often disables my body. This management occurred simultaneous to what I see as crucial moments of uprising and resistance to state repression in the United States. It was awful, at times, that these things were happening simultaneously. Awful because sometimes I couldn't get out of bed or couldn't go to protests that I knew would make me feel something — anything — good was happening. But at the same time, being both sick and being around and a part of collective resistance allowed me to feel both culpable and vul-

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[1] Leora Fridman, "On Bleeding," in *RADIO: 11.8.16*, ed. Essay Press (Buffalo: Essay Press, 2016), 35–43.

nerable. I began looking at how I could be both a victim and an oppressor, my white skin visible mostly, my illness invisible sometimes. What was slippery here? And what wasn't? I began to write to try to see this all more closely.

In that Essay Press anthology, I wrote about how I lay in the CT scan machine and found myself thinking that if I could survive this pain, I could probably survive giving birth to a child, because the pain of labor couldn't possibly be worse than the pain I was experiencing at that moment. I wrote, "will this pain make it possible for me to pass something on?" I began thinking about inheritance: of white supremacy, of genetic illness, of trauma. In this writing I was thinking not only about the origin story of our 45th president and then about rising global fascism, but also how this reach toward an origin story belied my own individualism. Why did I think it was about an individual? Why did the individual matter to me most?

I wrote then: "Part of who I am is not having my face shoved up against how we create each other." I meant privilege here. Also, I was not a parent (still am not, at the time of this writing) and until that sudden onset in 2016 I had been mostly healthy and mobile, though I had enough disabled and ill family members that I was not entirely naïve to the vulnerability of body and mind — and all that can fuse body and mind together. Need, I mean. I began to think mostly about need. How we need each other, and what forced me to see collective need. What had been in the way before that was not now?

I finished writing the essays collected here in the summer of 2021, during the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine. It was summer. I had begun hugging my friends for the first time in a year and a half. I ate grilled meat outdoors at a table at a restaurant with people from multiple households and found it incredibly opulent. I believed it might be possible to resume a more involved social life, and I also felt regret, even terror, as a hyperawareness of illness and access needs was brushed aside in favor of social desire. I felt scared for myself and for my disabled and sick friends, who had found during the pandemic that for the first time access needs were slightly more normalized and more rarely something to be ashamed of. I felt scared for my immunocompromised family and friends, who would now have to work extra hard to protect themselves, might even have to isolate further now that people were regularly breathing on one another outdoors.

Many of the people I knew and loved had been feeling and acting more human during the pandemic, human in the sense of being more willing to accept that no one could live and produce and work at the speed that late capitalism had demanded prior to this shutdown. That summer, we still wanted to resist the old normal, but we also missed each other, and were lonely and exhausted. It was hard to determine where to hold our boundaries, and where to fall with abandon into one another's arms. I had begun to doubt the importance of boundaries when it came to caring for one another. I was so tired of therapists and other well-meaning people telling me to hold myself back.

The two ruptures that bookended this work were a very long time coming. Both were felt much more deeply and earlier in time by people with less privilege than I hold. In both cases, I learned a great deal very quickly that I believe I should have learned sooner, and what you see in these pages is how I learned.

Because I am also a teacher, I am always trying to see how information gets integrated. The forms I am writing in here are how I learned over the course of years to integrate information. As a poet re-entering prose forms, I found myself writing in fragmented, inter-textual personal-critical essays about art, politics, and my own body. I wanted to use prose and narrative structures of normalcy while disrupting them, all to convey the constant estrangement that was happening in how I thought. I was trying to digest it all, to take in the multiple worlds that for years had remained closed off from one another: texts from different academic genres that were not supposed to go together, terms that were supposed to be used only by people with PhDs, casual conversations held alongside works made by exalted genius minds. I mean also that I had been afraid to talk about healing and revolution together, or to talk about theory and bellies together. I was now seeing how systems of cis-hetero-patriarchy and white supremacy were behind my desire to be only a body, or only an artist, or only an activist, and to keep those worlds closed off from one another.

I understand now that these were never separate, but my professionalization in some of them through art schooling and years of work in the nonprofit industry caused me to believe it was vital to keep them so. To keep my selves separate, and to keep my self separate from, say, yours. To some extent I still believe it is important to distinguish individual embodied experience; I write here very much of my own experience of embodiment and pain and confusion and desire, and I believe true solidarity can only grow from one's own personal vested interests and needs.

At the same time, the pandemic has emphasized the porous reality of the individual self. We cannot exhale on one another without potentially mortally wounding. And with our historical and growing knowledge about zoonotic ailments like HIV and COVID-19, we are finally learning that we cannot keep expanding our cities and living spaces into wild areas without viruses spreading between species.

I wrote this book because I don't think this is all bad. I don't think these events have to be the exclusive domain of horror and apocalypse. I hope to imagine how we can live more equitably and consciously with what has been thus far mostly violent and unjust forms of interdependence.

I am a writer, so I think about this with writers and with artists. I think of Tisa Bryant, who writes in another Essay Press collection about how intertextuality can thwart narcissism.[2] She defines "intertextuality" as treating one's own body and memory as a text in communication with others. For a long time, I only wrote poems and I insisted that the first-person voice in my poems not be pinned to me, because I was not interested in centering my own story. With the rise of COVID-19 and over the course of writing this book, I began to see that the "I" was inescapable, and that the ethics I was seeking could be found exactly in acknowledging this.

I began this book trying to understand chronic pain or, more precisely, to include disabling experiences of pain in a group experience. As opposed to isolating myself as I reckoned with illness and incapacity, I sought to wrap myself in. As I finished this book, I came to understand the delusion at the heart of where I had started: I had always been wrapped in. I had always been affecting others and effected by them, too, though fear and systems of oppression had kept me from seeing how much we were made by one another. I grew up a lot in this writing, and where I am now is different from where I began. In many ways, this book unraveled me as I went. My hope is that this unraveling can resonate or unpeel something, too, for you.

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[2] Tisa Bryant, "Afterword," in *Body Forms: Queerness and the Essay,* ed. T Clutch Flesichmann (Buffalo: Essay Press, 2015), 45–49.

On Breaking Up

to become a ruin, to ruin by becoming

— Sara Ahmed[1]

My favorite thing about my worst breakup was how far gone I got.

Mostly wary and noncommittal through my early twenties, I'd floated through the ends of relationships or executed them coolly myself. I was a daughter of a proper second-wave feminist with a bad-ass career and I had no tolerance for ditsy, dependent women — a stereotype I've been afraid of since as long as I can remember. I cherished independence from a young age, always split the check, never depended on boyfriends for emotional solace or any forms of support. Even with my close friends, I was careful to need very little, to make it clear that I could take care of myself. I always had a plan: for my semester, my evening, my source of income after college. I had a tight grip on all of it, and no one was going to interfere.

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[1] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 232.

But at the tail end of college I finally got swept. Noah, a man I'd been flirt-friends with for years but pretended always I wanted nothing from. That last week of college we found ourselves both single at the same time. We danced closer and closer together one night at a party and later that same night, in my sweaty bed, agreed we would partner for life. It was quick, it was intense and when he gripped me hard, I gripped him back, assured by the immensity of his passion.

Then we graduated. A few months of hot summer together and I got on a plane for a planned year many timezones away, which led into long distance months of pining and Skyping and planning our future. We wrote poems about the Skype gaze, the romance of distance, the ethics of sustaining a relationship that felt impossible. We were play-arguing over Gchat about whether Boulder, Colorado was too white a place to raise our children when I realized how far gone I was. I reeled, suddenly not in control.

"You're the first to really win me over," I told him, and his smile stretched in the Skype window.

At the end of that year the first thing I did was go to him. Just off the eight-hour plane ride, I wasted no time getting on a two-hour bus ride to his town. And stepping down from the Greyhound to his face, I could tell right away that something wasn't right. He didn't clutch me. His smile was small. Instead of the magical reconnection we'd fantasized about all year, the sudden ingathering of sparks sharpened by distance, he was withdrawn, withholding, and I had to quickly pull back into myself so as not to pool against him in the car.

Still, I thought, maybe this is awkwardness from so much build-up, from not seeing each other for so long — surely we would spend the rest of our lives together and just look back on this moment as a short skid before landing. I asked him careful questions about his home and job, but he answered slowly and held his body back.

Once we arrived at his house, he sat a few feet away from me on the couch and announced officially that his feelings had changed. He was over me, he said. Having fantasized about this reunion and been fed his love letters all year, I froze. I stared into his face as he spoke and nodded distantly.

I understand, I said. *Totally, I get it.*

It was what I knew to say. An automatic reaction. Trained well, I knew how to react politely, how to listen empathically and please the person before me. But as soon as he stopped talking, my body didn't know what to do. Without the future I'd fixated on having with him, I didn't physically know how to move. So instead, I collapsed. I slid to the floor below him on the couch. The cheap rug against my legs, looking up at the underside of his chin. Though a moment earlier I'd tried to keep it together, something about being down below made me ready, for the first time, to beg. I reached up for his limp hand.

But don't you remember Boulder? I said. *We are the only people who know what we like. You can't give that up.* He finally smiled then, benevolent above me, and unwrapped my fingers from his.

Oh, he said, placing my hand on the couch pillow, *I get that's how you feel, but it's not how I feel*. He was the temperate facilitator, his firm touch leading my hand away from his.

But you promised when I got home we would— my face began to heat, *you said we'd plan—how brave it would be to try*. He shook his head.

You need time, he said, *let's just go to bed.* Parental, he pulled me up from the floor.

But we — but we — I sputtered. He guided me by the waist to the bed, sat down on the opposite side of it, and turned his back. I remember the clock on his side. It was very late already, and I threw myself across the bed toward him and its red blaze.

Touch me, I said, *you'll remember.* We had always had strong chemistry, the kind where the rest of the world was lost to us as soon as we touched. I curled my body toward him, thinking I might find him again if I could just get enough of our skins against one another.

Please, Noah, I choked — I was weeping by then, and curled tighter against the wall of his back as he twisted away. I began to bang on his skin with my fists.

This was a new kind of crying that I was doing. Emptying myself, his lack of response pulling only more from my insides. Here it all welled and I bashed, a supplicant, against his silence.

Eventually he tired of this, left the bed, and said he'd take the couch.

Please, just tonight, I said, watching someone I'd slept naked beside pulling on his grey sweatpants. He patted my head and whispered, *I'm always happy to be your friend,* as if that was what I'd been begging for. He closed the door behind him.

I continued, though, to sob, loud enough so he could hear me from the living room, keening sounds from my chest surprising even me, as though releasing an animal. I couldn't stop. Or, didn't want to, as over that night I began to sense — there was something here I was enjoying.

“I’m excited by the power of sex to turn a woman into a beast,” writes Dodie Bellamy,[2] and the further I sunk into damp beastliness, a bravery rose in me, an appeal to the groveling.

In the morning I kept at it, staying naked, posing in the sun across the counter as he looked away toward the coffee pot, this man who once couldn’t take a piss without an arm around me. He padded over to my backpack and handed me my own hoodie.

You’ll be ok, he said. *You can always call me.*

I refused the sweatshirt, and sat stubbornly, my butt cold on the dirty linoleum. Face bloated and legs weak from sleeplessness, I felt a concrete core in me, a stone resolute to keep sinking.

He locked the bathroom door to take a shit, and we never kissed again. Eventually I gave in and dressed myself.

There’s something here for me, I remember thinking in the miserable silent car ride with him after, *there’s something here I want.* It wasn’t just him, but the sinking itself. Yes, I wept much of the month after that, but also wrote in emails to friends about the beast I’d felt swell in me that I didn’t want to let go, the weird power I’d had flailing against his back.

Running into the brick wall, my friend Bari called it, *once you do it, it becomes very hard to stop.* Because, I began to see, I liked it. I liked watching my anxious grip on power loosen, the restrained, disciplined part of me die off and open to something else.

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[2] Dodie Bellamy, “Low Culture,” in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative,* eds. Mary Burger et al. (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004), 230.

"Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego)," writes the theorist and critic Julia Kristeva.[3] Kristeva lays out her theory of abjection in her book *Powers of Horror,* which works to understand why we are drawn to the threat of breakdowns, and what meaning is built when we begin to lose control over, or collapse, the distinction between self and other, where our bodies end and other bodies begin.

Abjection "is an alchemy that transforms death drive in a start of life, of new significance," Kriseva writes.[4] As opposed to losing everything, we gain a new orientation. That night, begging Noah, I began to learn of Kristeva's resurrection and the new starts it offers. Scraped along Noah's rug, bed, and couch, I left a self behind, a self who was attached to restraint and containment. I made a joke to a friend about my Christ moment, called it "my resurrection" the first morning I felt able to meet her for coffee. But the metaphor ended well: as a Jew mostly unfamiliar with the symbols and rituals of Christ, I began to see something in prostration.

◊

Lately I've been reading medieval female Christian mystics. For several reasons, but the way they lie down is one. I mean *lie down* as in prostrate, as in give over control. These women have no power in the patriarchal Christian church of the time, though they may gain it through prostration.

Here's what I mean. Tracing across the stories of several Western European women who became known as mystics in the Middle Ages, it becomes clear that their narratives revolve around debasement before God, becoming a tool in God's hands, etc. The English mystic Margery Kempe took this so far as to stop

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[3] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 15.

[4] Ibid.

all sexual interactions with her husband so as to have "deeper intimacy" and what her visions depicted as "marital relations" with God.

Hildegard of Bingen, a German Benedictine abbess, wrote often of commands she received from God. When she restrained herself from speaking these commands to others or, as she phrased it, passing on God's will, she is said to have experienced immense physical pain in her body. Her pains are recorded as part of what led to her eventual recognition as a mystic. The pains were God's way of indicating that she should speak on God's behalf. Though her woman's voice wasn't welcome in the larger Catholic Church, when she framed it as the voice of God coming through her, she was allowed to speak.

"But I am always filled with a trembling fear, as I do not know for certain of any single capacity in me," she writes, "Yet I stretch out my hands to God, so that, like a feather which lacks all weight and strength and flies through the wind, I may be borne up by him."[5] Scholars observe that her purported lack of significance and her willingness to give herself over are what convinced church authorities that she was truly speaking the word of God, and worthy of beatification.

Here again prostration becomes power. In both Hildegard's and Kempe's cases, as with others, the mystic's relationship with divinity creates more capacity than the mystic believes or states herself to have on her own — spiritually, intellectually, and also economically.

Scholar Elizabeth Spearing studies the texts and lives of these women. Of Christine the Astonishing, raised in a cow-herding family in Belgium, Spearing writes, "a woman who three or four centuries later would have been burned as a witch, who nowa-

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[5] Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 168.

days might have been on medication, in an institution, or even living rough, in the Middle Ages moved from cows to castle, an honored and valued member of her community."[6]

The witch hunts of Europe were still to come, as were later carceral institutionalizations of people deemed mentally ill, but already in this time period we had the narrative of women as irrational emotional beings, who should be kept out of important decisions and positions of power. What's fascinating here is that by pegging this "irrationality" to a male-dominated idea of God, mystics like Christine were able to subvert the suppression of their voices.

Over her lifetime Christine came to be positioned as a famous and valuable asset to her town. Spearing writes:

> It has to be remembered when reading works which celebrate the lives and miracles of holy people that the local community and their clergy and religious houses stood to gain not only spiritually but also financially from the presence of such a figure in their midst, dead or alive. A well-known saint or relic could and did bring large numbers of pilgrims in search of help for their bodies and souls, and often a good holiday. Their money helped the local economy and church coffers.[7]

These women's debasements were thus, financially speaking, elevations. They were of great fiscal benefit to their communities, in addition to bringing value to their own bodies and experiences. Here, Christine the Astonishing came to hold economic value through her purported debasement — her manic periods of living in trees and rivers, her wild raving in conversation with the voice of God. Instead of being considered crazy or dangerous, she was championed as a self that gave itself up to power.

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[6] Elizabeth Spearing, *Medieval Writings on Female Spiritualit*y (New York: Penguin, 2002), 34.

[7] Ibid., 33–34.

◊

In a recording of her life written by a male priest on her behalf, Margery Kempe is said to have prayed: "If it were your will, Lord, I would for your Love, and for the magnifying of your name, be chopped up as small as meat for the pot."[8] To be made into bits of something meaty. I think of Noah here, his name biblically prescient, a mythological figure who became the first man to pull me open. I think of throwing my flushed skin toward him, how I got to be made into meat in that moment and didn't even need his agreement to do so. The way he turned his back, actually, was what made it possible for me to let go of a version of myself.

The poet Alicia Ostriker writes on Sylvia Plath: "Of course I too wanted annihilation."[9] Ostriker admits here that perhaps many of us have gotten closer to wishing for our obliteration. I love this confession of Ostriker's and have had it pinned above my desk on a post-it note for years. The more I write, the more I realize how common the desire for annihilation among writers is. To lose ourselves in what we do or how much we feel. There are important distinctions here. I don't aspire to be burned at the stake or stick my head in the oven, but I do like to forget my own concerns as I mix and mingle them with the voices of others, as I work toward the intertextual essay form that I tend to prefer. I do like to move away from my own story, letting it blend into a larger river. I do like to go liquid in the face of power.

Speaking of liquid, my favorite part about Christine the Astonishing: Once, she had run away from town in order to avoid being chained to a post by those who considered her possessed by the devil. She was starving in the forest but is said to have

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[8] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Barry Windeatt (New York: Penguin, 1985), 181.

[9] Alicia Ostriker, *Writing Like a Woman* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 44.

begun to give forth breast milk spontaneously, which she then survived on for nine days before returning home. This event was recorded as a miracle and a sign from God that she should remain alive.

But this didn't last long. She freaked people out a lot. After she climbed to the church rafters screaming and batting at the birds living there, she was bound to a stake by her family and said to have been fed "like a dog with nothing but a little bread and water." She became quite "feeble and faint" in this state, and another miracle occurred: "her maidenly breasts began to flow with a liquid which was the sweetest oil; and she took it and spread it on her bread to flavor it and used it as a soup and as an ointment, anointing the wounds of her festering limbs with it."[10]

Christine's captors wept and let her go.

Note the beastliness of this, how her femaleness in its capacity to nurture children becomes, God-like, a closed loop in which she can nurture, feed, survive upon herself. The scholar Spearing, again:

> Their gender meant that by definition these women were weak; many of them suffered from lengthy periods of illness, and yet they found ways to turn their weakness into strength. They were able to manipulate their families, their confessors and other bystanders into serving them, they gained status and influence in their communities, they founded religious houses and reproved and advised people at every level of society.[11]

As a white-skinned Jewish woman brought up to survive on independence and self-control, I'm compelled by this example of a different kind of power: weakness as subversive strength, vul-

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[10] Spearing, *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality,* 201.

[11] Ibid., 14.

nerability as an opening toward something much greater than patriarchal power. I read Hildegard, Christine, and Kempe as permission.

Permission to consider prostration a choice, that I might be able to interact with men — even, occasionally, be hurt by them — and still retain power. That instead of attempting only withdrawn control, I could play fully on the stage of power dynamics and survive.

◊

The first time I related to Jesus was at his birthplace. Twenty-two and newly traveling on my own, I'd gone with friends to cross the border from Israel to Palestine, to spend Christmas in the church of the Nativity. The womb-like church air fell around us, fogging the globe lights and chandeliers, throngs tugging us in the line toward the altar. As we neared it, the crowd pushed from behind, the smell of sweat, frankincense, and myrrh thickening everything. I remember points of red light and candles, and staying extra close to Dave, a man who had already turned his body toward me, although no words had passed between us about our mutual static. A press of five Jews toward the altar of baby Jesus, we didn't bow or make prayer hands in front of it, though we did take the taper candles offered and place them in front of a Jesus statue, where they quickly melted against the others inside a large urn filled with sand.

I probably wasn't supposed to, but I took a few photos there. One of the photos is mostly filled with the marble of the altar and hands reaching the light toward the metal star said to be the precise spot of Jesus's birth. In the corner of the photo, light shines onto the edge of Dave's sleeve and a piece of his neck.

Later I'd place my hand on this same neck and feel the folds of his soft skin. Later we all five piled onto one big bed in our coats, in a cold hostel on a bare mattress. Once everyone else fell asleep around us, he and I pulled closer, and I could feel his stare in the dark. I placed my hand to his neck so he would know, the sweat of my palm the first acknowledgment. We kissed furtively in the dark that way, between everyone else's elbows.

I think that's how it happened, or that's how I remember it. The sweat, the cold, a sudden flash of fear knowing I'd given something over to him by meeting his lips — the old story about sex, *giving it up*. The wordlessness of us wrapping together as it crept toward Christmas morning and bells began to ring, and we all rustled apart.

He and I did not make eye contact for the rest of the day. It snowed on the streets, and for all of us that day was the first time ever that we danced joyously to Christmas music. I danced with everyone but him, though there was a riptide now, a hallway between us that I knew I'd have to walk down.

"Intimacy builds worlds," writes the theorist Lauren Berlant, "it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation."[12] As Dave and I got closer there were new worlds to inhabit, worlds that interrupted what we'd thought would be.

We had set out to be friends, Dave and I, and we had set out to Bethlehem to discover Jesus, as we'd called it, hoping to understand something about devotion and Christ. But those between-elbow kisses, and more later, in Jerusalem, where he was studying. Where he would give me very intense eye contact while telling me I was the most special woman he'd ever met.

This fixation on exceptionalism — to be like no one else — made sense for someone as absorbed in the study of religion as he was. Not to mention our millennial births, our precious liberal arts educations or how the phenomenon of manic pixie dream girls

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[12] Lauren Berlant, ed., "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 281–88.

had instructed us to behave. For so many reasons, it was the best thing he could do to call me "most special," to place me on a pedestal of self-contained remarkableness.

And when after a few months he ended things between us, saying I was the most exciting relationship he'd ever had but the timing was off, I would feel first frustration but then a softening, a mud puddle sliding from the pedestal. For a short relationship it didn't feel appropriate to mourn hard, but I found myself picking at it, writing him longer emails than needed, asking for more and more explanation of why he didn't want me anymore.

"Is it play acting or possibly perversion?"[13] asks Kristeva, considering the draw to hold on to abjection — from Latin *abject,* that specific combination or staying with the piteous, sinking into a position of debasement, to keep oneself re-jected, thrown away.

Kristeva argues that abjection is more than a perversion or roleplay. It is "better than that," she writes, "a yearning after meaning together with its absorption, ingestion, digestion, and rejection."[14] It is the desire to stay fully with an experience, including its downsides, to fully process an experience and be changed by it. For me, to take in what was made by that kiss on Christmas Eve and to see the way it altered me, then us, and then just me again. Instead of needing to hold my particular specialness, to perceive myself as overwhelmingly malleable, remade.

I think of the Russian writer Boris Pasternak writing to Olga Freidenberg of their long-term, on-again-off-again, always confusing relationship: "You can never understand how you yourself, expanding, entered into me as a distant, distant debt."[15]

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[13] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 136.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Olga Freidenberg and Boris Pasternak, *The Correspondence of Boris Pasternak and Olga Freidenberg, 1910–1954,* ed. Elliott Mossman, trans. Elliott Mossman and Margaret Wettlin (London: Secker & Warburg, 1982), 11.

This debt is one of possibility, a relation with the other that expands one's insides. This is how I felt that night pounding on Noah's chest, and how I felt hearing soon after our breakup that Dave had said to many other women how they were *the most special, the most unusual,* how he'd *never felt this way*… versions of that same line, and for years.

I felt debased initially, made small, manipulated. But also, in sharing this experience came a power: shared knowledge with other former partners of his, an absorption into a larger known narrative about romantic manipulation. A kind of knowledge I couldn't have gained if he had been honest with me, met me eye to eye.

Margery Kempe writes that she "gave thanks and praise to our Lord Jesus Christ for the high grace and mercy that he showed to her, unworthy wretch."[16] More than ten years later, I'm ready to thank Dave for the way I felt pressed down. Because it took me someplace bigger, where I didn't want to be put on that pedestal, *most special.* To a place where I could understand myself as part of an extremely common experience, a broad, open landscape.

"If we are to have a sense of the other that is not projective or selfish," writes the feminist theorist Luce Irigaray, "we have to attain an intuition of the infinite."[17] As in Noah's bed, when a sense of loss coursed through me so large, my sadness suddenly infinite, not exclusively my own.

And as in a few months later when I met Emma, a willowy-tall woman I watched carefully fold herself into the passenger's seat of my car. I didn't know Emma yet, but a friend hosting a mid-summer potluck had asked me to pick her up on my way there. Emma had a slow smile and active hands and was grace-

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[16] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe,* 16.

[17] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference,* trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: A & C Black, 1982), 111.

fully accepting when I quickly got us lost on what should have been a fifteen-minute drive. Eventually I U-turned and we spent our first hour together in traffic on the Massachusetts Turnpike, plenty of time to get into our recent break-ups.

He said I wasn't ready for him, not mature enough. Emma slid her hands under her thighs and rocked slightly. *But at the same time, he's flirting with this other woman who's even younger than me.* She shook her head. *I guess it's just not actually about me.* I nodded vigorously. By the time we arrived at the potluck, Emma and I were bonded for life. Before we went in, we bowed our heads together in my parked car, our four hands clutched together over the emergency brake. *We get it,* we said, our foreheads touching.

In that moment my breakup served a larger utility. It connected me to Emma, and, later, to others; a "distant debt" that by its very yawning open made room for new connections, other functions, as in Berlant: "intimacy creates spaces and usurps places." Places, new worlds that established their foundation because of the distant debt before them.

◊

I'm tired of looking at the broken-up-with woman as pathetic. I'm tired of a story that stops there. I'm beyond tired of a fragile white feminism that insists on self-sufficiency and cuts itself off from engagement with risk and interdependent forms of power.

For those of us white-skinned cis women who already hold so much control, I'm interested in a playful, even perverse sense of power, that sometimes means giving something up in order to play the game, knowing perhaps that it's a long game, even a historical one.

I think here of Francesca Lisette, a poet and mystic, who argues for what she calls "revolutionary tenderness," which, she writes, "signifies 'the negation of negation.'"[18] What does this mean? Lisette argues for a kind of caring politics which, rather than attack or blame another, seeks to offer care and inclusion with its revolutionary framework.

"In reaching for an affective politics," she writes, "I ask that we make ourselves sociologically weaker." This is the negation of the negation — the sense that by making oneself weaker (or, from Irigaray, "more porous"), one allows more to occur and thus negates the initial stance of weakness.

As a cis white woman who relates often with cis white men, I am trained well to be angry when I am manipulated, or my voice suppressed. But I am excited by what *else* can happen around a knowledge of these patterns. I am excited by swimming around male power, playing with what it wants to do to me and turning it into something I want, splashing it back.

To my mind, flailing up would mean repositioning weakness itself. It would mean changing how we think about power. "Lisette calls for an active revaluing of the gendered position of tenderness, for a tenderness that escapes its patriarchal value," writes Brittany Billmeyer-Finn.[19] The tender: the sore spot where one has been hurt before and could be hurt again easily. In regard to heartbreak, I think of a tenderness that escapes male power by being peremptorily motivated to accept the debased position.

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[18] Francesca Lisette, "Francesca Lisette's What I Want: A Manifesto for Revolutionary Tenderness," *revolution and/or poetry,* October 15, 2013, https://revolutionandorpoetry.wordpress.com/2013/10/15/francesca-lisettes-what-i-want-a-manifesto-for-revolutionary-tenderness/.

[19] Brittany Billmeyer-Finn, "Final Outcome: A Conclusion of Sorts by Brittany Billmeyer-Finn," *The S.L.o.T.,* February 9, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20160803221145/https://timelessinfinitelight.com/blogs/news/86997697-final-outcome-a-conclusion-of-sorts-by-brittany-billmeyer-finn.

I think again of how oil sprung from Christine the Astonishing's breasts. Christine literally expresses an over-the-top capacity to nurture via a traditionally dis-empowered female role of breast-feeding, but in that same act gains her freedom, power over and from the structures of the Church and of her village.

In all of this thinking, I owe so much to Audre Lorde, that essential foundation in her essay "Uses of the Erotics: the Erotics as Power," in which she instructs us to unseat the embodied power that has been oppressed by gender. "The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge,"[20] Lorde writes. When Christine the Astonishing feeds on the oil of her own breasts, she works with this nursemaid nurturer role, and lets it take her even deeper. Christine invokes the erotic and simultaneously dashes the patriarchal hope. That which is expressed from her breasts is not for the survival of another, but solely for her own. Pressed down upon, she does not break; she gives in for the expression of a new form.

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[20] Audre Lorde, *The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Brooklyn: Out & Out Books, 1978), 4.

Admission

I get monthly ultrasounds these days to track what's happening with my body, the cysts that won't stop growing on my tubes. So far there aren't any answers.

Each time I go in, I crane around on the crinkly paper sheet to watch the screen, even though they tell you not to do that because you won't know what it means. I stare at the gray triangles on the screen as they fill with empty clouds. Every time I think only, *there's no baby in there*. Though we aren't looking for a baby. Even my doctor doesn't know what we are looking for exactly.

But I go in anyway. I submit again to the cold lube on the big plastic wand that goes up me. I stare at the screen and wait for some perfect sharded star that I can blame for where it hurts.

◊

In *Gravity and Grace,* Simone Weil writes: "It is impossible to forgive whoever has done us harm if we believe that harm has lowered us. We have to think that it has not lowered us, but has revealed to us our true level."[1]

The cyst and its burstings have done me harm. They have lowered me so many days onto the bathroom floor where I writhe and try desperately to shit. I wait for revelation. I want a diagnosis so that I can feel my true level of illness has been revealed to me, that these days of pain amount to something. If that, then this will be somehow useful. Maybe this is capitalism living in me, wanting each action or moment in my life to somehow be useful on a market, traded in for something of use: not a useless sack of lost days or bloated belly pain. The story to resolve itself, the moments to resolve themselves, me having been lowered to that tile floor *for a reason.*

But also, I'm beginning to get used to being lowered. I'm used to the routine of the few days a month I can't do anything but clutch myself as my belly blares out.

◊

Recently I reached out to someone whom I dated briefly when I was in college. I treated him like shit back then; I was careless with his feelings, lied about what I wanted from him. Generally, I'm pretty nice to people, but the way I treated Alex nags at me more than eleven years later.

From the internet I find out he lives in the same city as me, frequents some of the same bars, and from then on it is only a matter of time. Soon a friend tells me she ran into him, that he mentioned he knew me, and a moment of fear flashes through me.

Did he say he hates me? I laugh tightly.

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[1] Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace,* trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 6.

Why would he? she asks. When I tell her the whole story, how I started dating someone else without telling him, how I laughed high and loud and blinked away his feelings when he stood caved over at the door to my room, she suggests I apologize, even this late.

Imagine you're in a twelve-step program making amends, she tells me, *sounds like you need to clear that slate.*

It takes a few obsessive drafts, but I write him an email. In it I apologize, and I mean it. I feel remorse in the sense that I wouldn't do today what I did then and wish my younger self had known better. Though I can't help but remind him in my email that I was young, then, after all, hadn't learned much yet, that perhaps he doesn't remember what I did, that it may not even have mattered to him.

(But he had very expressive eyes, his most marked characteristic. I knew it mattered to him, even so long ago when I got into a different car outside our apartment building and glanced back through the thick desert wind.)

◊

Lately my husband and I joke about how we're both sexually submissive and wonder whether that's a mismatch. We say that maybe we will find a dom for us both. We both desire to be guided, told what to do. We are not sure yet of how far this goes, but we both have a sense that we want to be pummeled and pegged to feel our anxious minds drop away in the bare reason of sex.

Chris Kraus on Simone Weil: "She wants to lose herself in order to be larger than herself. A rhapsody of longing overtakes her. She wants to really see."[2]

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[2] Chris Kraus, *Aliens & Anorexia* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2000), 27.

To really see: to allow something to overtake us. See, I wait for the crush of pain that will lower me again this month, the plans I will have to cancel, the sick version of me who I will become.

Or, see, I write the apology email to Alex and await a response, visualizing his reply like an axe falling on my house. I daydream that he will tell all my friends what a bad person I am, that any efforts I've made toward nonviolent communication will seem like bullshit. I imagine that everyone I know will turn against me in disgust. Quickly, in this daydream, I become an evil, shunned outcast. Everyone hears about an ugly part of me and everything else I've lived up until now crushes easily. I drop out of the bottom of the dream life I've been living and lose all semblance of a cared-for life — no friends, no family, no food, no home. In a few moments of thinking this through, I'm lying alone on the sidewalk, sunburnt and sick. The story speeds wildly away from everything I understand to mean wellness.

◊

The daydream that I have about being shunned is speedy, but not irrational. I've learned over years to enact my will — forcefully, with all my might toward not being ill, toward not being rejected. These two have come to blend for me, and for good reason. My context is one in which it's not customary to be cared for. Care is contingent.

In "Sick Woman Theory," Johanna Hedva lays out how sickness is determined by its social and economic surroundings. They write:

> "Sickness" as we speak of it today is a capitalist construct, as is its perceived binary opposite, "wellness." The "well" person is the person well enough to go to work. The "sick" person is the one who can't. What is so destructive about conceiving of wellness as the default, as the standard mode of existence, is that it *invents illness as temporary.* When being sick is an

> abhorrence to the norm, it *allows us to conceive of care and support in the same way.*
>
> Care, in this configuration, is only required sometimes. When sickness is temporary, care is not normal.[3]

As the pinpoints of sickness have increased in my life, I require more care, and I am more scared that I will be rejected from life, from work-life and domestic life and sex life, and other acts that we tend to think of as living. It feels near likely that I could have to stop doing some of these living-acts. I can stay here in them only if my will works well enough to keep me well.

The binary deepens between well and not. I rub gently around my belly at a work meeting and try not to vomit. Later I get another ultrasound and am the opposite of will: I submit. I know nothing, but I get in the stirrups again. I admit myself to the hospital again. I admit that I don't know what's happening to this body, haven't been able to keep it in line. Hoping that admitting will make the pain go.

◊

I read over that Weil again: "It is impossible to forgive whoever has done us harm if we believe that harm has lowered us." I was careful in my apology email not to make Alex feel lowered — didn't want to imply that he'd been reduced by the careless way I'd treated him back then.

I bet you probably didn't even notice, I write, though I know this isn't true. I want to place him as blankly powerful, unaffected by my gross, human relational mistakes, priestly now in his moral capacity to absolve my sins. If I keep him high and don't lower

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[3] Johanna Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory," *Mask Magazine,* January 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20200719163713/http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory. Emphases in the original.

him, maybe then he can forgive. I keep him perfect in my memory, looking down at me from the tiny square windows of the brutalist concrete dorms where we lived in 2005.

But also, I like being down there in my memory, looking up at a window at Alex's righteous face. I realize as I write the email that I am enjoying the groveling. It feels soft. I grow pliable as I admit that I didn't act as I would have liked to, wasn't in control of myself back then, that I was sick and wretched, that I am sorry and deserve to be plied, changed, fixed by someone else.

I admit. The admission requires help, invites relationship.

◊

When we meet up for drinks, I see Alex across the bar before he sees me: one last moment of control before I humble myself before him. In response to my email, he has agreed to meet me after work. He is dressed for an office and looks dignified. He sits upright on a stool in the early-summer Oakland sun. I watch him for a moment from a corner of the bar, and picture myself briefly entering church to be absolved of my sins. I get a small thrill. I wonder what I will have to do, be *forced* to do, to gain his forgiveness. Will he give me an assignment, four days of fasting, Hail Marys before bed?

I dip into the bathroom to fluff my hair, and then approach his end of the bar properly frizzy, sweaty from my bike ride, and penitent. But he smiles right away. We hug and he accepts my apology within just a few minutes.

Of course I forgive you, he says, and smooths a wet napkin. *I haven't had hard feelings in years,* he says, and, *neither of us knew better.* He moves on, asks me about my new book, what he calls my *great, weird life.* He asks about my husband and I say quickly that my husband knows I'm here, that I am not trespassing in that sense. That my husband and I tell each other everything about fleeting crushes and past partners.

And you're fine with that? he asks. *I love it,* I say. I tell him I love hearing about my husband's attraction to the woman who cuts his hair, his fantasies about the people who pass him on the bike path on his way to work.

I get that, Alex tells me. *I love hearing those, too.* He pauses, then tells me he is in an open marriage, that just last month he found himself talking his wife through a heartbreak when her other lover broke up with her.

It was wild at first, but now it's starting to feel normal. Just a different kind of normal shape of marriage, he tells me, and we laugh in the soft summer light about how no one back home in New England would think any of this was normal. But here, in the Bay Area, it is nothing special.

We both glance up at the Warriors game, and Alex asks how my family is doing. It's comfortable and easy, suddenly, to answer, to be finishing our beers together, reminiscing. But something in me feels a little bit let down by the effortlessness. The fog-breaking ease of his forgiveness, the normalcy of it — it leaves me feeling minorly robbed. I'd liked presenting myself as guiltily soft, loose raw material that needed fixing.

Dare I say *spanking*? Dare I say *punishment*? Dare I say *straightening out*? I face Alex and smile, but hunch on the bar stool, one last attempt to make myself small, though I am strong enough to sit up straight.

"Like bones before they are bones," writes Bhanu Kapil, "Like eyes in the time that follows talking."[4] There is a pause in our

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[4] Bhanu Kapil, *a poem-essay or precursor: NOTES: for a novel: Ban en Banlieues* (Brooklyn: Belladonna*, 2011), 6.

small-talk and I want to go primordial, elemental. I want to feel the parts of my body that are pre-human, to let my eyes be soft orbs, post-verbal. Alex and I catch up like regular old friends, but when we hug goodbye I long for the anger I saw once in his huge eyes, the kinds of eyes that my Yiddish scholar friend once called *shtetl eyes,* after their sunken expressiveness that invokes the stereotypes about a pre-Holocaust Eastern European Jewish town. They are eyes that look always older than the person they stare from, the kind of eyes that carry generations of ancestral grief.

◊

I know nothing about Catholicism, but *Christianity for Dummies* tell me that, "Just as tumors are benign or malignant, Catholics believe that sins are venial or mortal." The venial ones can be absolved through penance. "Your penance is for your benefit — to remind you that God comes first and you come last,"[5] I read.

I like the order here, the stage directions: Alex and I, two dark curly-haired Jews who met in Israel/Palestine, now on the West Coast playing priest and sinner in my head. But he refuses the role I assigned him, doesn't show up for our rehearsal. I don't know, then, how to resolve the story, find my proper place in line.

◊

You search long enough for a diagnosis and you'll eventually find something. I've been in pain for many years by the time I find a doctor who says that I likely have endometriosis. It's a condition that often takes years, even decades to be diagnosed,

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[5] "The Catholic Sacrament of Penance," *Dummies.com,* https://www.dummies.com/religion/christianity/catholicism/the-catholic-sacrament-of-penance/.

but once I start down the path, I begin talking with other people who I know have it. My friend Arisa tells me that if you have it, they can do laparoscopic surgery (she fingers her belly where it was done on her) to remove tissue, internal scarring, and cysts.

But that doesn't solve the pain totally, she says, *unless you want to be on hormones for the rest of your life.* That's what doctors recommend, she tells me, hormones that will put you in a perimenopausal state for the foreseeable future so that no more endometrial tissue will grow. She doesn't want those hormones, Arisa tells me, so she mostly just does what she calls *pain management.*

I keep a low profile and don't ask the doctors for much, she tells me, *since I'm not doing what they say I should*. She looks up at me from under her lashes, demure, maybe even *a bad girl.*

Then she laughs and sits back, practical. She sips her iced rooibos tea. (She tells me caffeine is out entirely to manage her symptoms.) She tells me she changes her diet when she needs to, does acupuncture and massage and smokes weed when the pain pounds too intensely for her to sleep.

I just give into the pain when it's at its worst, she tells me, *after years of this, I've learned to look forward to those times when I have to give in.* She tells me her pain brings a regular monthly routine now when she descends into that world, and it becomes one of altered states and possibility. She tells me she wrote all of her last book while in one long swoop of pain. Being roughed down by the pain is generative for her. Or, she finds her own way to top it.

I write, I walk, Arisa tells me, *I ride the pain instead of collapsing.*

◊

I have a flare-up while my parents are visiting. When I tell a few friends about this after, they nod sagely and remind me how we all regress around our families.

Of course you had it then, sweetheart, Jo texts me. *The little girl inside you wants to let go.*

I feel resistant about this, though; I think because it implies that I have some agency I don't feel, or don't want, in how and when I get sick. If I got sick when my parents were here, does that make it my fault? There could be an unconscious reason for my body to weaken in the presence of someone who parents me, the expectation that I will be enclosed by care. But it has been many years already since my parents have managed my medical conditions. Even if there is an unconscious behavior here, *a little girl inside,* I do not want to turn toward or hear what she has to say.

I can't let that be true, I text Jo. *I can't let the little girl be true.* This would mean, or at least imply, that something inside me is willfully turning toward the pain or inviting it. And I already must fight too hard for the grown up to deserve care. Yes, the little girl would provide an explanation for some of this mystery, but to follow a psychoanalytic read here is a level of risk I just cannot afford. Literally, I mean, afford. If I let something inside me be even partially responsible for this, how many bills, then, am I responsible for? How many insurance fights must I drop?

My new ob-gyn has another thought about the parent flare-up. She says stress exacerbates my symptoms, the way it shifts my hormones, *and maybe*—she is being polite and so shrugs and averts her eyes down at the keyboard where she is inputting my information—*maybe parents visiting causes you some stress.*

I can't get away from this story entirely, even if I stick to the purely medical treatment. Did I intentionally lower myself at the feet of that porcelain throne and throw up while my mom was on her way over for breakfast? Even here in the specialty clinic, pain is something that in part I cause upon myself, even if it is the hormones mixing in my blood, reacting too strongly, too anxious, perhaps, to external conditions and so shifting the internal. I hear the ghost of hysteria here, all those generations when women were told that symptoms of physical pain were their own doing, their own unwillingness to submit to their proscribed gender roles or household duties. I choose the medical route because I hope it can work against this history. The risk of self-blame is slightly less, if just slightly. It gives me just slightly more agency to decide how I behave.

Thank you for taking this seriously, I say to my ob-gyn. *I've had a lot of years of people saying it's no big deal.* Even though I don't love everything she's said to me, I am trying to ingratiate myself because I want her to be better. I want her to like me.

I'm very grateful, I say. I am fawning, just a little bit. I want her to see that I am a patient who is doing everything she can, and so is not to be blamed for this.

We don't ignore women here, she replies. She stands from her stool and rolls her shoulders back, straightening her spine, *you'll be in good hands.* I wonder whose hands, exactly, are going to catch me this time. Hers are very busy opening the door and gesturing me out.

◊

In a more awake moment, I tell my husband about the meeting with Alex and about the emails in which I apologized. My husband is proud of me, excited for me, commends me on my *courageous adult communication skills.*

You're an emotional adventurer, he smiles, *and I love how you plumb these depths.* I feel myself begin to glow with specialness, oceanic and deep. It seems I have succeeded in plumbing depths while being good, maybe even special.

Wayne Koestenbaum writes: "I may be humiliated, but because I am seen in the process of exhibiting my shame, I therefore gain *the pleasure of exemplarity.*"[6] I am special in my humility, as in my morning pain and my amends.

I'm impressed, my husband says, *with how willing you are to make yourself vulnerable.* He wraps his big body around me on the couch and I shiver.

Willing? I say, *I don't know if I will it.* I feel more bendy than will. Riding the pain is more a relaxing of will than a decision. I ready myself, slow my work pace, cut all spices from my diet, have to cancel plans. I tuck my will into bed.

◊

Here I am lying on tile again, waiting for my husband to rush home and take me to the ER. My body jerks from the middle outward and the moan isn't mine, just a groaning voice that inhabits me as I focus on continuing to breathe. I think of nothing but when the next jerk will come, like how my mom-friends describe contractions when they were giving birth. (We breathe. We know it will pass.) I ride one wave of pain and wait for the next. I sweet-talk myself, *yes, baby girl, you're going to be fine,* I croon in a whisper, *this will be over soon.* I will talk to the girl inside me only to usher her out.

And it works, this time. It is over soon. By the time my husband gets home the pain is done for today, and there is nothing to do but recover and rest. My body is still jelly so we lie there for a while, him stroking back my hair like I would never let him do any other time.

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[6] Wayne Koestenbaum, *Humiliation* (New York: Picador, 2011), 89.

Just relax, my sweet baby, he says, *oh, my baby.* Because there is no other word. I let him say it here, where no one else can hear us, where no one else is keeping track.

On Conditions

Good morning. It's a crisis again.

I manage to hold off social media for a little while, but soon go to check the time of an event on Facebook and am lost, lost in reading about the current battle, which on this day is about Obamacare, TrumpCare, and the resulting memes. That pre-existing conditions list from last month is going around again. The image reads "217 REPUBLICANS VOTED TODAY TO END YOUR HEALTHCARE IF YOU SUFFER FROM" followed by a very long list of so-called conditions listed in grey text, with a few particularly questionable ones (acne, migraines, pregnancy) listed in pink.[1]

The pink text bleeds out from the grey, and I learn things about my friends. Next to the image, in the comments, my friends begin to self-identify with certain of the conditions listed. Most of these conditions I knew about, but some I didn't. Some only bleed out today because today it seems worth it to admit.

There is a reason today to say you are sick, and so my friends are doing it. For a moment, instead of a weakness, it is a service.

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[1] "217 Republicans Voted Today…," *Meme,* May 5, 2017, https://me.me/i/217-republicans-voted-today-to-end-your-healthcare-if-you-13523296.

We admit ourselves to the list of conditions, confess to the hospitals we've entered over the years. Through my glowing phone screen, the material of bodies pokes through.

◊

In the ultrasound room, I crane to the side to watch the curving Vs on the screen but can't understand anything from the forms there. I hope the tech will see me turning around to look, but she doesn't — doesn't see me, or doesn't feel like acknowledging it. She is brusque with me. I imagine she is trying to finish as quickly as possible the part with the cold probe up my vagina. Perhaps that's what it means to her to be nice: to pretend not to see that I am naked underneath the paisley gown, that she is not reaching inside me.

"The nude body spills color," writes Bhanu Kapil.[2] So much information could come through me right now, so much color, so much could be filled in. Perhaps the tech has to turn away from this color so as to not be flooded by the intimacy of what we're actually doing here, my body on the table letting internal information out.

It helps how odd an ultrasound looks on the screen, that scooped-out granulation. In my brief glances there, I can see a grey spillage, though I do not trust my eyes to know its significance. It's not clear to me until I get my results back that this spillage is actual.

"Cul-de-sac of free fluid is noted," the test results read. My doctor says the fluid from a cyst rupture has streamed out into my abdomen, and that is why I am bent in pain. It's a liquid that burns when it floods the place it's not supposed to be. The term "cul-de-sac" seems intentionally placed there; a suburban kind of neatness that is trying to assure me that the arc curving out

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[2] Bhanu Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue* (Brooklyn: Nightboat Books, 2015), 41.

inside me will loop back from whence it came. Soon, things will go back where they belong. My doctor predicts that in a few days the fluid will be reabsorbed.

◊

My ob-gyn says *assumed endometriosis,* though no surgery for now, just *reduce stress.* If the cysts get bigger, they will need to operate. My acupuncturist says, *adrenal fatigue.* My primary-care doctor says, *insomnia due to chronic stress.* They all say *rest.*

We'll keep you in a holding pattern for now, my ob-gyn tells me, *unless something ruptures or twists, in which case you'll need immediate care.* When I ask about the acupuncturist's recommendation to change my diet, the ob-gyn shrugs. *It can't hurt to remove irritants,* she says, *if you can tell what those are.*

The acupuncturist has guessed for me that gluten, dairy, and caffeine should go, but I am doubtful; I can't see a direct link between when I consume these and when I feel like shit. In the doctor's office, I look at the hazy gray cysts on my ultrasound that push out crassly from my ovary and cling to the walls of my abdomen. My ob-gyn says they are called "chocolate cysts" for the brown blood that swells them.

I know, she winces. *Sorry we gave them such a bad name.*

Later I say to a friend: *There are a million other things that are red-brown. Did they have to ruin chocolate?*

◊

It's one of those times in the United States when people who leave the country remind us that everywhere else is better. On Instagram, Kevin posts a video of a stick dripping into fondue with a caption, "PSA: Switzerland has good-ass cheese and is not undergoing a constitutional crisis."

I look over the trickle of glistening white cheese and am nostalgic for an un-ruined place. Perfect Switzerland. Perfect cheese, unlike the rest of us over here on this continent, bellies and brains swelling with crisis memes. I know this is delusional, that no place is free of problems, but years into the Trump presidency, the urge to run has not gone away.

Also, I miss cheese. Which is to say that I'm attempting to give up dairy just in case, as my acupuncturist says, it will help. *For inflammation,* she says, *let's try to reduce all swelling.*

◊

It's also a time when doing small projects around the house feels comforting, the small world I can shape with my hands. The herbal tinctures I've been half-heartedly taking for my digestive problems cost too much money, so I decide to start making my own. I walk to the liquor store and ask the man across the counter for "your cheapest vodka" to infuse herbs into. I feel worried, suddenly, about his judgement upon my cheap vodka choice, and add, "it's for a project, so it doesn't matter how it tastes." He smiles sideways as he reaches behind him for the plastic jug and asks for my ID.

I getcha. He smirks. *People are always coming in here for, um, projects.*

I fight the urge to tell him about the tinctures, to tell him I am not another neighborhood alcoholic. Instead I take the vodka from him and dip my head. I squeeze the plastic neck of the bottle, which gives easily to my hand as I lift it off the counter and leave.

I refrain, because who am I to judge people for what they turn to. *Sloshed* to deal with pain, *juiced* because it's awful out there, sad and *hitting the sauce.* The longer I live with pain, the more I feel it's important to see any coping mechanism as an attempt to adapt, to continue. Just because my white skin and stable home make me look *functional,* I am not any better than anyone else.

◊

I feel like I'm living in the End Times, my Lyft driver says as he eases in the clutch on the way up to Tilden, the expansive regional park in the Berkeley Hills. It's foggy and I've told him I love it when it's like this in the Bay Area.

When I was growing up here this fog is how it always was. He shakes his close-shaven head. *Never this hot-ass heat we have now.*

He brakes as we reach the trailhead I'm aiming for. He runs his open hand over his head, that smooth cut of half-bald muscled men, nothing there but what needs to be, and a soft pate left.

It took so long to build this place, he gestures out over the Bay, *and it will probably all be ruined soon. Like, under water.*

I feel a rush of tenderness for him, him picturing his hometown under water, palming the round of his own head for comfort. How many men have shaven down their head hair in order to meet ruin? The arc free for palming, baldness invisible, any contrast between hair and its lack eliminated from view.

Have a beautiful day, little lady, he says as I leave the car and shut the door behind me. He reaches through his open window to place his hand briefly on my forearm. I shake his hand off quickly, walk a few steps away, and then wave back at him. I let it go, the annoyingly diminutive *little lady* and the non-consensual physical contact. I wonder suddenly if he wants a child. It didn't feel like flirtation, but more like his desire to touch something as the weather burns hotter, as the hills fill with confusion and, later in the season, wildfire smoke, as the patterns he knew as a kid are gone.

I am up here in the hills to get away from my screen for a while, to walk until I find a spot without phone service so that I can sit down and read. I've been so distracted by working, writing, and being sick in the same small house that I've organized myself a little getaway. I've brought a few books with me, choosing carefully ones that have been difficult to concentrate on at home and ones that I hope will not remind of work. I open the Alice Notley I brought and read:

It's not that the planets are put out one by
one — the stars, the lights
        as they are said once to have been
turned on
        But this is a story of the end. don't
you want to hear it
                no you want
        your wife
                who is always young, so much
        younger than you[3]

I read the poem into the afternoon I've already had. When can we hear that things are over? What bodies comfort us in a feeling that the end is near? "your wife / who is always young" — The Lyft driver was older than me, after all. Looking to touch something younger as the future blinks.

◊

Many of my friends are talking about whether they can *bring children into this world.* On the night of Trump's election, I

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[3] Alice Notley, *Certain Magical Acts* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 75.

watched the results from a sweaty basement with a tight roomful of people, including a pregnant woman who was past her due date already. Late into the night, as it became clear where things were going, she began to instruct her fetus aloud.

Nope, not now, she shook her head and stood, pulling up on her ballooned belly, *time to swim back up.* She has a loud voice, a performer's enunciation, and the tone was firm: a joke, but not really.

I'm not so interested myself in the question of whether to have babies. I'm more interested in how to float the medical bills piling up from my ultrasounds and check-ups, my high-deductible insurance plan that I signed up for because *how much will I really need doctors,* because *I'm young and, so, healthy.*

◊

I'm getting more and more used to talking with people about my health and including that in what makes up our friendship. Friends who are under forty and have never been sick have to be reminded over and over that I'm not outside of the realm of these worries. They forget. They assume health information and risks are about someone else, people outside of our peer group. It's easier to talk about these things with people who have encountered them through sick family members or through their own bodies.

I believe in people more now than I did before I got sick, I tell Stephanie, *like, I'm better at trust because I have to be.* I mean that I am needing to depend on people more as my body is occasionally disabled by pain. Stephanie nods. She has my same pain patterns, though she hasn't been diagnosed yet.

Desperate times, you know, she says. She stirs the coffee that neither of us are supposed to be drinking and shrugs. *Sink or swim.*

It's like how people have been falling in love more since Trump Times, grabbing onto each other and fucking because why not.

I think of bodies meeting wet and grabby on the streets, in beds and kisses and ache. I think of the colored text on those pre-existing conditions, floating up to surface from the grey. Our sweaty needing, our pink spilling out.

Later in that same poem I picked up in the hills, Notley writes:

> Are you prepared to
> lose everything
> and be one with
> your fellows
> a migratory wound

And so the wound migrates between us, between our pre-existing conditions and our new unfamiliar weathers, each time becoming more common. Common as in shared property, common as in what swells up to belong.

One Last Letter

> *Capital, or money, is at such a level of insanity that psychiatry has but one clinical equivalent: the terminal stage.*
>
> — Gilles Deleuze[1]

When I was a kid my father always worried that I *swallowed* books, the way I would read for hours and not look up.

Yoohoo, are you in there? he'd call to me as I read, waving his hand in front of my face, as if in fear that I'd die or disappear if stayed inside of the book long enough. As if his waving hand could maintain the appropriate distance between me and the book.

In *Heroines,* her meditation on the (mostly ignored) wives of famous writing men, Kate Zambreno writes:

> (God, the experience of reading her life. So abject and gooshy. It makes me cringe. I experience an absolute intimacy coupled with a desire to protect myself by distancing. Like

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[1] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium," in *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotex(e) Reader,* eds. Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 215.

> a toxic girlfriend. I lose a sense of equilibrium reading these books — I get too inside.)[2]

My father would say I *got too inside* when I swallowed books, that I disappeared. I emerged from books stun-eyed, and it would take me a while to function again in this world.

(So maybe it was the books that swallowed me? But I was the reader or the eater.)

(And: do I only think they swallowed me because I'm used to being the object of gaze, not the gaze itself?)

◊

Of her television version of Chris Kraus's novel *I Love Dick,* Joey Soloway says, "I don't necessarily know what the female gaze is, but I'm in the process of excavating it."[3] The show was lauded for turning on its head what it means to obsess about — and address — a traditionally empowered male figure. In the final episode of this first season, this turning occurs as Kevin Bacon's Dick and Kathryn Hahn's Chris seem about to consummate their sexual tension.

"You're so wet right now," Dick crows to Chris, "that's me that's making you wet."[4] And then, as he slowly withdraws his hand from her, we see Dick's hand covered in menstrual blood. (Not just him that's making her so wet, after all.)

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[2] Kate Zambreno, *Heroines* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 133.

[3] Amanda Hess, "Chris Kraus and Jill Soloway Talk About the Show 'I Love Dick,'" *The New York Times,* May 5, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/05/arts/television/i-love-dick-amazon-chris-kraus-and-jill-soloway.html.

[4] Joey Soloway, *I Love Dick,* Season 1, Episode 8: "Cowboys and Nomads," Amazon Prime, May 12, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/amzn1.dv.gti.64adf769-2e10-533c-4256-6a975743f642.

When Dick leaves the room to wash the blood from his hands, Chris reflects for a moment. And then, unrushed, she dresses herself in Dick's clothes, glances around the room, and leaves his house. Closes the scene.

While the sex act in a traditional, penetrative, heteronormative manner is not "complete," Chris is finished. Limbs easy and loose as she opens the door and tromps off down the road, sun rising in front of her, menstrual blood smearing down her thigh.

She's complete, has had enough, and does not need to continue the conversation or process it with Dick as she has a few moments earlier, when she blurts that she feels scared, and then takes it back and tells herself to *shut up.* Or, in an earlier episode's aborted sex scene in which she asks him, "Wait, isn't this weird? Can we talk about what's happening? I feel so weird."

This time she does not need to feel weird, or to be present for Dick to reject her due to the menstrual blood, nor does she need to comfort him vis-à-vis any awkwardness he might feel. Instead she pulls on his shorts and shirt, boots and hat, and walks off down the road.

At first I resented that hat, having been a sweaty teen on whom suburban boys placed their baseball caps in conquest, but the hat becomes her (as my grandmother would say, meaning to suit her, look good on her), and she doesn't shiver or shrink underneath it. Rather, the hat guides her off down the road in the pink early morning light, and then becomes her, in the word's additional meaning. She takes what she wants and walks off with it.

◊

So, too, reads the gesture of the Museum of Capitalism, opened first in the summer of 2017 in Oakland, in the sense of deciding that something is over. An institution intended to "educate this generation and future generations about the ideology, history, and legacy of capitalism," the museum attempted to display "the epic saga known as capitalism."[5]

Just the idea of a retrospective museum does a lot of work, said Andrea Steves, an artist and curator who opened the museum with partner Timothy Furstnau. I spoke with the two of them in 2017, during the museum's first installation, though it has since been installed in several other locations and forms. The initial act of setting up the museum is important to me, the way that Steves and Furstnau name capitalism as an object of study makes it possible to perceive. As Sylvère Lotringer writes in the introduction to *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader*: "What happened is that we forgot that capitalism even exists. It has become invisible because there's nothing else to see."[6]

At the museum it is on view, organized for study. *The museum is open,* Steves said, *so that must mean capitalism is over. What happens next?*

Talking with Steves on a high summer night, I felt the sense of agency coming off her in waves, the excitement, the ability to decide "what happens next."

Zambreno again: "Is making someone a character giving someone life, or taking it away? Perhaps making someone a character is a way of alienating them from themselves, so that their lives are read through the character."[7] And so the museum allowed us to read ourselves through the character of capitalism, as opposed to capitalism just charging unbidden through our daily

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[5] "About," *Museum of Capitalism,* https://www.museumofcapitalism.org/about.

[6] Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer, "The History of Semiotext(e)," in *Hatred of Capitalism,* 15.

[7] Zambreno, *Heroines,* 207.

lives, our veins. We gain agency by alienating ourselves from capitalism, by observing it in display cases, behind glass.

Just as Chris walks off in that closing scene in *I Love Dick,* the red and white text indicating her letters to Dick returns, and the voiceover — *Dear Dick: I am going to write you one last letter.*

The Museum of Capitalism wrote one last letter with its collection. It collected the tools, artifacts, and rhetorics of capitalism (Steves noted that befuddled tourists wandering into the space have found solace in its gift shop, where they "understand what to do") and arranged capitalism's remnants as an archival, re-collective institution. A display of wands, from wizard wands to Hitachi massagers and television remote controls, sat around the corner from a recreated Police Mindfulness Meditation Chamber. A display of colorful abandoned pens lay end to end in a glass case against the Museum's clean glass windows facing the San Francisco Bay.

The museum itself is the one last letter. In witnessing the museum's presence in Oakland we also witnessed its construction in process.

We put this together as quickly as possible, Steves noted, *in part because of the insane real estate market in Oakland. We were so afraid that the spaces we looked at to have the museum would be gone before we could make it into them.* The sense of speed and rapid construction pumped through the museum's space, just as it pumps through Oakland.

We basically had six weeks from when we got into this space until our opening, Steves said. *And once we got a sense of our timeline, we realized the impossibility of finishing all of these walls before opening, so we began to think about how to integrate that into the project. Tim spent a lot of time matching paint colors to the mud of the dry walls, and the construction itself became part of the design of the space.*

Steves described a piece in the museum by Futurefarmers, a group of artists, designers, architects, anthropologists, writers, computer programmers, and farmers who create work together. Their piece in the museum references Robert Oppenheimer memoranda on the making of the first atomic bomb.

That piece itself has mud halos on the wall behind it, Steves said, *so the wall itself can become a part of the piece.* She laughed and gestured toward a ladder propped in the nearby window. *We like to say that showing the seams is part of the process of dismantling capitalism.*

As late capitalism declines, various alternatives and systems come to place (have been coming into place for generations, as Oakland's history of anti-capitalism organizing can testify) and remain emergent, seams still on view. The museum allowed us to turn back to look at capitalism as if it were complete, but also allowed us into the tenuousness of creating something else, something new in the shell of the old, and precarious.

We like to give the impression of a longstanding institution, Furstnau added, *even though we won't be here after August. We're not intentionally trying to confuse people, but we're interested in the institutionalized temporary.*

The museum held power as an easily recognizable museum (well-branded design, display cases, etc.), but also confused. "Because organization of power — that is, the manner in which libido invests the economic, haunts the economic," writes Gilles Deleuze, "and nourishes political forms of repression."[8] The ways in which the Museum of Capitalism was slightly less organized — the confusion about its temporary/long-term status, a gift shop where one can't quite tell whether it's a joke or not, ongoing construction in the space — had the potential to prevent us from nourishing repression.

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[8] Deleuze and Guattari, "Capitalism," 216.

Just as Dick's desire to make Chris wet is frustrated by the menstrual blood, so too capitalism's desire to determine our value entirely was frustrated by the stance of the museum. Yes, capitalism moved through the space, through the monitors used to display the work and the gift shop and the beautiful fluttering flags that faced the port outside. But in turning to generate its own emergent gaze and walking away after just a few months, potential blue-balling the viewer expecting a museum to stay, the museum, in its way, both frustrated and confused the capitalist stance.

When I asked about how they planned to respond to visitors who review the museum on Lonely Planet and Yelp as if it was a static, established space, Steves and Furstnau both shrugged. *It's not that strange, when you think about,* Steves said. *Pop-ups are normal these days. And museums close all the time. That happens.*

Steves noted that the Museum of Capitalism used materials in its construction that were salvaged from the closing of exhibits in other Bay Area art institutions.

We're interested in museums as infrastructure, said Furstnau, *What can be repurposed and can't? What is worth saving?*

It's a question that seemed ever relevant that summer of 2017, as the Senate slashed through our health care policy and then tax bill, as Berkeley police beat protestors at a City Council meeting where protestors gathered to show their disapproval for militarized police. The events beg: What is *worth saving* about our existing institutions, and what do we gain by gazing back at them?

◊

Every year that I lived in Oakland I looked forward to the Garden of Memory, a summer solstice celebration of simultaneous performances by Bay Area composers and musicians throughout the Chapel of the Chimes, Oakland's columbarium and mausoleum with its grand and gorgeous gardens, halls, nooks, jars, and shelves of ashes. It is always hot and sweaty and full, and the peak of summer hammers the claustrophobia in, makes the setting of experimental music next to memorial plaques even more strange.

As the sun set this year, we marched dutifully to the central hall and began ringing the tiny bells that had been passed throughout the crowds of hundreds. We'd been instructed to ring our bells from 8:34 to 8:50 p.m. to mark the sunset on this solstice day. The space filled quickly with tinny ringing, people intoning and humming, people without bells jangling their keys or playing bell sounds on their phones.

By the central patio a few people stood with their arms outstretched and eyes closed, just listening as the sound rose and peaked and dropped and rose again. So many people smiling, ringing, watching, just looking around at the hundreds of faces orienting toward a center of sound. One man stared into my face.

What is happening here? he asked, but it was soft, genuine, open. I shrugged, and looked away from him out at the crowd, because there was no other answer.

It was so moving to stand there sweating with everyone, I said to Deb later, *so sweet to recognize together that this day is over.* Not just the day but the summer, its peak; the longest day over, the light heading now toward its decline and the darker days. Not knowing what they would bring, but the peak marked by this strange and specific communal making, by the ringing of so many tiny bells.

Slack Channel

Ok, let's take a
poll:
how many of us
grew up praying for
the end of the world? Is it
so bad to desire
the end of the world?

— Tatiana Luboviski-Acosta[1]

In the summer of 2017, I attended the fourth annual World Wide West summit, a gathering of about fifty artists, writers, technoogists, and other people interested in new media arts and digital culture. Most of the weekend was run un-conference style; people signed up to lead virtual reality drawing in the living room, painted with smashed computer innards, and held domain-hoarding self-help circles. Everyone cooked and cleaned and camped out in a clump around a fire pit. We awakened each morning with the amniotic sac of the fog around our tents.

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[1] Tatiana Luboviski-Acosta, *The Easy Body* (Oakland: Timeless Infinite Light, 2017), 3.

On day two I crawled out just as the damp was peeling back from the fields and walked over to a pit dug into the ground with wooden benches sunk just inside its circumference. Artist Nancy Nowacek was leading what she had announced as an "Alt Slack Channel," and though I wasn't yet a heavy user of the team organizational tool Slack, I was curious. I was also drawn to Nancy's strong stance, muscular arms, and repeated assertion that though she's a graphic designer, it's crucial to her to "show up with a body."

She described feeling that she's expected to be always on Slack and receive messages instantly. She said that she wanted to model this experience with bodies and rope. Our job was to loop a round of the long nylon rope around our waists and attempt to communicate wordlessly with one another. Should we need to get the attention of the team we could tug on our section of the rope and participants would pass it on.

Instead of the different micro-actions you can use to respond in Slack, she told us, *feel free to put your hands on someone's shoulder to communicate care.*

We slung the rope and giggled as it grew quiet and the sound of swallows and wind floated in. Every motion rippled through our circle and caught as each of us tugged and gained the slack we needed. One participant arrived late, and we managed to include him without verbal instruction, and when post-its and pens materialized, I used my hands to form a writing surface. These small status updates drifted across shoulders and arms; some fluttered down to the ground, lost to the dust.

In one dramatic moment, a participant leaned her back against the rope, her weight tightening it around the waists of those around her. Distress moved quickly across faces and several of us gasped as we rushed to place more slack in the rope. As the sun moved high above us, we raised a nearby plank of wood above our heads in silence, carefully launching a rusty shovel off it for our crescendo. It felt like a huge accomplishment, but as we laughed and broke our silence, Nowacek was only half-satisfied.

I meant to communicate to everyone that the purpose was not to do anything, she told me later, *not to try to accomplish anything, but just be together as a group.*

◊

Jay and I are at the Joanne Kyger memorial reading at Moe's Books in Berkeley. We are near the back of the packed room, perched on the stairs. The poet Alli Warren references Kyger's "dailyness," and another participant reads a letter to Kyger, reminding her that one must just wait until the moment comes for writing. The audience exhales audibly at this.

A different Bay Area, Jay whispers to me, as nostalgia leaks across the rows of us. We no longer live in a world where it feels attainable to wait around all day for inspiration, to smoke grass and be in leisure under redwoods.

"In this world that has got closed over by houses / and networks, I fly out / from under the belly," Kyger writes,[2] and we sigh for it.

We are all cluttered by our devices and our day jobs, gentrification having made this place no longer an affordable one. When evening comes, we are just tired enough to swoon over Kyger's backyard fog life in Bolinas, a California era lost to us as we hunch again over our phones.

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[2] Joanne Kyger, "When I used to focus on the worries, everybody," *Poetry Foundation,* https://web.archive.org/web/20210331014403/https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54953/when-i-used-to-focus-on-the-worries-everybody.

"The word *nostalgia* — which comes from two Greek roots, *nostos* meaning "return home" and *algia,* "longing," — could be problematized as not only a simple 'longing for place,'" writes the curator Natasha Boas in an introduction to an exhibition catalogue focused on Bay Area artists, "but also a yearning for a different time or, even more abstractly, a different 'sense of time.'"[3]

It is this yearning for a different sense of time that I feel in the sighs at the Kyger reading, and also in the tenderness of the roped-in Slack channel. We long for a California in which we do not have to work three jobs, do not have to wait three weeks to schedule a coffee date with our closest friends.

It's our fucking phones, Jay says, and raises hers in her fist as we walk out of Moe's to the damp Berkeley night. *Our phones keep us too busy to live Kyger's life.*

It's an easy argument to make, and not without significance. But I bore easily with it, the way it collapses those who can afford expensive, distracting phones with those who must work multiple jobs to survive. Too often being busy wraps this mysterious disempowerment around us, and I find myself wanting to poke around in there for the specific.

I mean, Kyger just wasn't hustling for money, Alex says a few days later when I whine about how I want the poet's mythical life. *I don't think she ever had a job.*

And this settles me in its way, this practical assessment in contrast to the romantic charm of Kyger's life. Alex shrugs.

It doesn't make her a bad person, or any less of a good writer, he smiles, *she just wasn't writing under the conditions of someone*

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[3] Natasha Boas, *Energy That Is All Around* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014), 27.

who has to work. And my friends do have to work, so things are different for us.

"If the nostalgia is a longing for something concrete," writes Valeria Luiselli, "it may perhaps be weakened by eclipsing the memory of what was with the overwhelming presence of what is."[4]

What interests me more than whether a pre-phone era was somehow better than now is what we *do* now, with our phones, our jobs, our different positions in relationship to privilege and work. We are not living Kyger's life or time, Lewis Warsh's time, Allen Ginsberg's time. What do we make, then, with this one?

This question feels especially intriguing at World Wide West, surrounded by people who work in or with technology (so often postured as the rich bad guy in the fight against gentrification and constantly skyrocketing rents in the Bay Area), in the golden open fields of Point Arena. Benjamin Lotan and Tara Shi's land is walking distance to the renowned Highway 1 and the cliffy beach of the Stornetta Public Lands, preserved by President Obama as part of the California Coastal National Monument. And Point Arena is a town with a large population of 1960s back-to-the-landers and marijuana growers panicking about legalization, each in different ways prototypical Northern Californian desires to live unbothered by the realities and needs of an interconnected, organized, and legislated world. So many have run away to the West, specifically to Mendocino and Humboldt counties, chasing dreams of escape. What does it mean to bring technology to these foggy grasses, these grey-wood cabins? The internet, after all, has finally come to Point Arena.[5] What does it mean to admit defeat in the dream of escape?

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[4] Valeria Luiselli, "Alternative Routes," in *Sidewalks,* trans. Christina MacSweeney (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2014), 45.

[5] Ingrid Burrington, "Where the Cloud Rises from the Sea," *The Atlantic,* November 12, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/11/where-the-cloud-rises-from-the-sea/415236/.

◊

On the opening night of World Wide West, the event's organizers (Lotan, Shi, Liat Berdugo, and Sam Kronick) held a satirically somber opening ceremony by the pond on the property. They gave some serious admonitions ("check your body for ticks," "watch out for large holes on the property") and some lighter ones ("remember, there are bugs in the internet," referring to a literal infestation of termites in the fiber optic cable box).

They also introduced what would become the symbols and catchphrases of the weekend, captured on blue and white buttons and magnets reading "take care," "ruin," "maintenance," etc. Participants were enlisted to form the letters www with rubber cords, and from them, vault two crystal balls (the symbol of last year's summit, the theme of which was "forecasting") into the pond. As the balls plunked into the water, the four founders shouted: "Forecasting has failed us!" The crowd gathered in the dark was invited to echo their words in a murmur.

"Apocalypse poeticizes the entire discourse, gives it tragic stature," writes Michael Sorkin in his introduction to *California Counterpoint: Architecture 1982,* "The 'big one' could strike at any moment. Potential Apocalypse gives nature an edge. Things are so beautiful and yet…"[6]

It wasn't only beauty (the silk-dark pond, the bright blue jumpsuits) that snagged me that night, but a whiff of invention and play that I'm often nostalgic for but just too tired to have.

"The Internet is defined by openness," writes Bettina Korek in her foreword to Doug Aitken's *The Idea of the West,* "The spon-

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[6] Michael Sorkin, "Explaining Los Angeles," *The Horizontal Fault,* https://petermartinezzellner.substack.com/p/explaining-los-angeles#footnote-1.

taneous order that once characterized the West is still at play in the digital universe."[7]

Of course, we are no longer in the early days of the internet, and that "spontaneous order" has largely given way to many harmful things. We can't avoid hateful trolls, fragmented focus, and existential digital loneliness. The optimism that once characterized the internet is itself reckoning with ruin.

I'm curious how people behave when we decide something is ruined, said one participant during the free-form reading group I held under a cypress tree at World Wide West to discuss, among other texts, Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene.* They paused, touching the bark of the tree next to them, then continued: *Like how apocalyptic thinking makes us act our best or worst.*

From one stump I picked up *Illness as Metaphor* and read aloud: "the disease is viewed as the occasion finally to behave well."[8]

Now that we know an ideal future is dead, what are we free to do? World Wide West is one small answer. In response to our illness (née apocalypse, crisis), it is a beauty made of the material we think is eclipsing us, its theme of ruin, its Western reinvention impulse, as if the fog muddling the wild oats each morning might wash clean our rusting foundation. It takes the materials that ruined us and uses them to make something instead of pretending they could go away or could be prevented from ruining us.

I feel this in World Wide West's cross-section, as well as in its Domain Hoarding Self-Help Group, where one self-professed

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[7] Bettina Korek, "Foreword to Doug Aitken: The Idea of the West," *Bettina Korek Archive,* January 31, 2010, https://bkorekarchive.tumblr.com/post/63757708571/foreword-to-doug-aitken-the-idea-of-the-west.

[8] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador USA, 2001), 56.

addict said, "I feel like I owe [my unused domain names] something, like the least I can do is make something of them."

"I have great nostalgia for the future," Sorkin goes on. At World Wide West I feel this as a nostalgia for when we thought the future would bring answers. No one here seems to believe myths of technological progress. In the absence of that belief in the future, we are invited "finally to behave well," as Sontag notes. We are invited to pursue means more than ends, actions without conclusions. We are invited to care for one another while ridiculing the forms of what we used to believe in, like the Domain Name Hoarding Group, like the somatic sculpture imitating Slack.

As participants departed World Wide West on Sunday, organizers shouted to their cars *take care! Do take care!* their tone landing somewhere between admonition and kindness. We were, after all, near steep drop-offs and dangerous riptides. And any of us might be prone to texting while driving.

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World Wide West did not restore my faith in technology's forms of innovation, nor assuage my critiques of digital culture. Of course, tech start-ups, too, go "off the grid" for the weekend, bring in mindfulness experts and outdoors people to lead employees in bonding exercises and skills for collecting the scattered mind. World Wide West evokes this, in the way participants said they felt "refreshed" afterwards and "ready to make things again."

There are dangers here: of never escaping capitalism's compulsion toward productivity, innovation, and pivoting, of following that screen off a cliff to one's death. But what World Wide West presents best is canvassing the material of digital ruin — the ruined capacity to focus, the ruined earth, a ruined ethics of care— to make things from that ruin itself. We don't get to throw up our hands in defeat, or pine sentimentally for a Bolinas of the past, especially when so many of us don't have the privilege to escape for more than a few days at a time and others of us don't have that capacity at all.

We don't want to descend into ruin porn, reflected Berdugo at the weekend's final circle. *We need to stay implicated and conscious of where we stand in relation to particular ruins*. And I sense that this stance is an underlying project of World Wide West: to be conscious of its, and our, relations.

The mime Marcel Marceau is said to have reflected on remaining friends with one of his ex-wives: "In this sense my life is not a failure" (per Shawn Wen[9]). I imagine the mime must have used his multiple complex break-ups as material for scenes. I imagine his stark painted face moving from exaggerated frown to smile as he salvaged his relationship with his ex-wife. And I think of the participants at World Wide West who constructed a painting from smashed parts of obsolete computers.

"The world of transformation / is real and not real but trusting,"[10] writes Kyger. I read this as a reminder that in an unstable field one can remain constant with the available material. We might also choose to interpret nostalgia in this way, a necessarily fraught but consequently trusting friendship with the wrecked, the transformed.

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[9] Shawn Wen, *A Twenty Minute Silence Followed by Applause* (Louisville: Sarabande Books, 2017), 73.

[10] Joanne Kyger, "September," *Poetry Foundation,* https://web.archive.org/web/20210414112835/https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54952/september-56d235ec984d8.

Get It Together

There is a specific feeling to arriving in a place and being told it is in danger. Even more specifically, to arrive in a city rich in creative community and being told it is in danger, especially by the artists and radicals of the place, especially the kind of danger we mean. Of course, this is what they say to me when I arrive in Berlin. *For years life has been so possible here, and now it is not. It is tightening.*

It is hard to tell from the outside how new this tightening is. Of course it's been happening for years, just as it's been happening for years in Oakland, where I am visiting from. But it seems to be reaching a fever pitch — an appropriate metaphor in sound. Quickly, I encounter the activist happening "Noise Against Google," held on a street corner near my studio on the first Friday of the month to protest a potential Google campus in the neighborhood (now abandoned by Google, as of late October 2018[1]). One of the organizers tells me you don't even have to come to the street corner, that people are welcome to make

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[1] AFP Berlin, "Google Abandons Berlin Base after Two Years of Resistance," *The Guardian,* October 24, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/oct/24/google-abandons-berlin-base-after-two-years-of-resistance.

noise from anywhere nearby if that's better for them. *It's about the moment in sound,* he says, *even if it's dispersed.*

A sound, and a story, that has been dispersing for years. Though mostly defunct, I also come across Haben und Brauchen (To Have and To Need), their manifesto and series of open letters. "At the very moment the conditions for people engaged in cultural production are worsening dramatically, the city prides itself on artists," the manifesto reads, and provides a few suggestions about "safeguarding their conditions of production,"[2] which strikes me as sweetly parental, nurturing. I imagine insulation packing in around a house, pillows propping up the belly and lower-back of a pregnant person.

I am thinking about nurturing because I've been learning about the work of The Feminist Health Care Research Group Berlin (FHCRG), a group of three women artists and mothers who research a constellation of issues including feminist and radical therapy forms, the health movement of West-Berlin in the 1970s and 1980s, and the politics of illness and healthcare. From this research they produce exhibitions, zines, events, and exercises, broadly focused on collective modes for dealing with crisis and mutual care structures.

When I first meet FHCRG member Inga Zimprich, it is on a grey morning in Kreuzberg. She suggests the gluten-free chestnut cake, which I accept with excitement, though later it attracts a wasp to our table who doesn't want to leave. Inga waves the wasp from my hair and watches it closely as she speaks. She tells me about FHCRG's recent exhibition at District Berlin, which for the fall has moved to M.1 Hohenlockstedt. The exhibition examines the emergence of feminist self-help in West Berlin,

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[2] Haben und Brauchen, "TO HAVE AND TO NEED – AN OPEN LETTER ABOUT THE PLANNED BERLIN CITY TAX," *Haben und Brauchen,* April 2013, http://www.habenundbrauchen.de/en/2013/04/haben-und-brauchen-offener-brief-zur-geplanten-city-tax-in-berlin-2/.

including vaginal self-examinations, self-help groups, and legal abortion. The collages, collected books, images, and zines on display convey a sense of study, longing, and relational desire, particularly in the way they place these materials as a subject of curiosity and even ancestral lineage, especially as the exhibition is often accompanied by events in which people involved with second-wave feminism in Berlin reminisce about their methods and intentions, often to a group of young artists and cultural workers in their twenties and thirties.

I am trying these methods, and they have been very helpful to me, Inga says. *I am trying also to be a mother to a small child and an artist and to live.*

I admit to her that I was surprised to find out she was a parent, even given the content of the group's work, as so few people I know making work as actively as she does are mothers. I feel angry even to express this.

I'm bored of that statement, I tell Inga. She nods. She seems more patient than me. She tells me that part of her work with FHCRG involves developing relationships with the people she terms "protagonists" of second-wave feminism, and I am charmed by this translation, the way "protagonists" shines the spotlight on the humans at the center of this story. She tells me it can be difficult to make connections across generations of feminism, that there is such different language around gender and queerness and trans-inclusivity. She tenses her jaw. *But this is my work, I see,* she says. We speak of the dynamics around feminism and race in Berlin, how they differ and don't from where I live in Oakland, and the predominantly white feminisms present in FHCRG's exhibitions. *I am working a lot on this now, she says, and I am trying to include this in the conversations we are having between groups and generations of feminists. I think we are beginning to have the relationships to actually learn from each other.*

Later, as I look over images of older women speaking about their experiences doing self-help practices in front of a room of people younger than them, I think about how deeply relational FHCRG's work is, and how edgy that feels to me. I ask Inga several times about research methodology, even though what I find most compelling in her work is FHCRG's dedication to relationship-building. The archives, the zines, the libraries present in their exhibitions: they are all so much about what it takes to maintain ties. Ties of support, ties of understanding, ties of solidarity to one another and to our bodies.

I think we are beginning to have the relationships. So much of FHCRG's work is the deeply practical and logistical production of care, from their zine translating the Künstler-sozialkasse (KSK), Germany's state-provided health care for artists, into English so that this health care can be accessed by those without fluent German, to their zine "Sick Time, Crip Time, Caring Time," in which they begin by reflecting on their own interpersonal dynamics and how to process them to make collaboration possible, and include a series of prompts and guided visualizations about how to proceed with "cultural work" in a more sustainable way.

I talk on the phone with my friend Ellie. She says she is in a bad mood and having trouble connecting with the art-making she wants to do. I tell her I'll stay on the phone with her until she remembers the work she wants to do. We talk about what is sexy or not sexy about art-making, and how we try sometimes to talk about the unsexy parts, the most logistical, specifically to explore the inner workings of this kind of production. The more we repeat the word sexy, the less important it sounds.

Another friend, Katy, emails me to consult about how to make a visually compelling newsletter to share updates on one's creative work, and her email subject line is "banal, but important." I tell her I love this stuff, and I do. And I love the people who do this work and do it in public, the way FHCRG does.

This public re/productive labor seems made possible in part by FHCRG's focus on health and illness. "In our disabled state, we are not part of the dominant narratives of progress," writes Alison Kafer in *Feminist Queer Crip*.[3] As Kafer and other theorists of disability have shown, illness and disability provide a rupture in normative performance, and often a reminder that the body (and all the bodies serving to re/produce it) is working all the time, and can, will, and does, eventually break down. This rupture and reminder can also be a point for what Mia Mingus has termed "access intimacy," the encounter in which all parties fully understand one another's needs and "we are able to start from a place of steel vulnerability."[4]

Through Inga, I meet a group of other artists loosely organized around what they call a Sickness Affinity Group, which meets both for support as well as collaboration around what it means to be a sick or disabled artist, maker, thinker. The group includes representatives and collaborators on the creative projects Power Makes Us Sick, Coven Berlin, FHCRG, and others. At the meeting I attend, much of the focus is on process: how the group wants to work together in the future, what they will do at their meetings, and how they will incorporate the various access needs of those present. Romily Alice Walden, one of the artists at the meeting, is at work developing a primer on access needs for groups to use to train themselves to be more actively inclusive when planning gatherings.

This intentionality is familiar to me from other groups I've been a part of that consider and present access and dis/ability, and I am struck by how immediately I feel welcomed, gathered-in by the consideration of how to gather. I think of Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition,* her book examining the binary be-

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[3] Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 28.

[4] Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link," *Leaving Evidence,* May 5, 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/.

tween the "contemplative" vs. "active life." Arendt writes: "Power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse."[5] Antiquated use of "men" aside, this acting together — *holding together,* I think as I squeeze over to make room on the couch for a latecomer to the meeting — is so present at the Sickness Affinity Group. As is the precarity that Arendt implies, a knowledge that we hold together in this room in a way that is tenuous and fragile given forces and conditions beyond this room, and within our own bodies, appreciating our capacity to be physically there and acknowledging that not all bodies can. *Getting together* in a way that acknowledges that this togetherness requires work to maintain.

This feeling is present also in FHCRG's public work. The sense of research as in-gathering, as a keeping-together of books, zines, photos, collage. *We try to speak from our experience, and not create a distant aesthetics,* Inga says. She is concerned about research-based art practices that re-present existing political movements and ideas as their own. *That's an act of privatizing, she says. We are not trying to own this aesthetically. We try to be transparent about whom we're relating to.*

I think of theorist and scholar Sara Ahmed, who writes, "Citation is feminist memory."[6] The ways in which the collaged and patched together make it possible to spot intellectual and creative ancestry, and to spot the labor keeping it all together.

Inga says: *We want to make something that remains sketchy and inviting, not intimidating.* She mentions that FHCRG has allowed themselves to publish articles and zines that are not proofread, because *we couldn't live up these standards of producing supposedly proper art pieces, because of our real, limited capacities.*

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[5] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 385.

[6] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 15.

What does it mean, I wonder, for something to be beautiful but still real and limited, for a body to be vulnerable but still legitimately creative.

Disability theorist Susan Wendell: "Some of this knowledge, for example, how to live with a suffering body, would be of enormous practical help to most people […]. Much of it would enrich and expand our culture, and some of it has the potential to change our thinking and our ways of life profoundly."[7]

For a body to be shaky, but still profoundly helpful and beautiful. Or, for that matter, for a city to be desirable but still accessible, porous, alive. FHCRG's work references a Berlin of the 1970s and 1980s when there was mass availability of open buildings that made possible radical squats and habitation by artists and organizers with minimal financial means.

Conditions are increasingly precarious, Inga tells me later as she looks across the busy street toward Kotbusser Tor. She reminds me that Südblock, the café where we are meeting, is the endpoint of Berlin's yearly Behindert und Verrückt Feiern (Disability & Madness Pride Parade), because this café is one of the few truly accessible public venues in the city.

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I'm trying to meet a new friend for coffee, but she texts asking if I can just come over to her place. *I'm feeling a bit fragile,* she says. In Berlin this appears to be code for hungover or, at the very least, *partied late last night*. Though it is a Wednesday, last night was a party night because today is a holiday.

Reunification Day, my friend tells me, also known as German Unity Day, the anniversary of the falling of the wall between

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[7] Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 69.

East and West Berlin, and the end of the divided city, divided Germany. I'm struck by the sensitivity of "reunification" as a term, the reckoning that the city has been stitched together, the wound preserved now as a tourist destination in segments of wall across the city. But even these curated segments, and even a holiday for Unity Day, can't disguise the fact that unification has also had many subtle and long-term effects on German lives and communities.

I'm feeling a bit fragile. The work of admission of fragility, of wounds remaining raw or needy, even over years and generations, expectations of healing and solutions. A vulnerability clamorously remains.

A bit fragile. The phrase makes me picture my new friend's teeth chattering, her bones close the skin. *No problem,* I say, *I can come meet you there.*

On Stakes

My doctor says my body is *very inflamed,* my husband says, *you shouldn't be living like this,* the mold test diagnostic man says we need to get an industrial dehumidifier as soon as possible to *take charge of your health.*

It's been more than a year now since I first started having debilitating migraines because of allergies to toxic mold in my house. On top of other chronic illness and pain, it's downright embarrassing. It's been more than a year now that we run a dehumidifier in the bedroom twelve hours a day. I've been told that if I run the machine at max my brain will stay clear and I will stay healthy, but *you have to stay on top of it,* my landlord says. He's done some repairs in our house to improve the mold situation, but now, my landlord says, *the rest is up to you.*

You need to take action as soon as possible, says the mold test diagnostic man who comes to measure the levels in our house, *you are risking your health.* His machine for measuring allergens beeps wildly as he waves it in my closet and its lights blink from green to red. He recommends 24-hour de-humidification and air filtration because, he says, *this situation is not a joke.*

I am obedient and purchase everything he says to, but I also work from home. Once in a while I can't think across the dehumidifier's booming rattle, and I turn it off. My husband looks up, shocked: *but it's for your health.*

I feel guilty, caught red-handed. I must beep for my health or be implicated in any resulting illness. "I wear the noise on my shattered body,"[1] writes Kate Zambreno. I beep the machine back on for now and struggle to concentrate on grading student papers.

Do you know how much running both all those machines all day costs in electricity? I ask my husband later, but he smiles and reminds me we signed up for the all-solar plan, so we can delight in the sun coursing through the buzz of our appliances. Thank you to the genius of the sun and our technology that makes use of it, and *thank you,* I say to the mold test diagnostic man, and he nods deeply, almost into a bow. *You've got to take this seriously, he tells me, the stakes are very high for your brain.*

Stakes so high, almost high enough to block out the news of Rodrigo Nunez, just deported by ICE. As I scan discount websites for the cheapest best dehumidifier I almost miss the news, also, of Hugo Mejia, a Bay Area father of US citizen children, arrested by ICE on his way to work.[2]

I catch the news after all because my friends are at ICE Headquarters, blocking a hallway holding up signs that say #FreeRodrigo, #FreeHugo, and "Stop Deportations," kneeling and standing and smiling.

I flip between the dehumidifiers and the @BaySolidarity Twitter just before the migraine hits. When it does, I close everything

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[1] Kate Zambreno, *Heroines* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 55.

[2] Dan DiMaggio, "Painters Union Fights to Free Members from Immigration Jail," *Labor Notes,* August 23, 2017, https://labornotes.org/2017/08/painters-union-fights-free-member-immigration-jail.

and lie down, even though probably I should leave the house instead.

Your house is not safe for you, the mold diagnostic test man says to me, *it's in your clothes and your sheets and your curtains.*

It is safe, though, in the sense that no ICE officers meet to arrest me on the way out of my house.

The petition to bring Rodrigo and Hugo home tells me that they were detained on May 3, 2017 by immigration officials at the Travis Air Force base on their way to the military base hospital. They were detained by an ICE empowered by Trump[3] to deport undocumented immigrants, even those, like Rodrigo and Hugo, who don't have felony backgrounds and who have families and lives in the United States. The least I can do is sign this petition with my name and email, but I can't focus my eyes on the screen as the migraine shifts forward over my face. I put my phone down and leave the house, hoping a quick walk will head it off.

Don't look at any internet while you walk, my husband texts me as I lock the door. And so, I miss that all seven of my friends protesting at ICE Headquarters have been arrested, cited, and then released on trespassing charges by the Department of Homeland Security. (Trespassing inside the building, they must leave the house, must be removed to be released.) I walk by the tremendously cute cottages of West Berkeley, cottages that my librarian friend tells me are so cute and small because they used to be the summer cottages of wealthy San Franciscans. And also, West Berkeley was the site of the West Berkeley Shellmound, a burial site and sacred place of the Indigenous people of this area, now referred to with the name

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[3] Chris Walker, "Immigration Lawyers Face Dilemma as Clients Are Detained at ICE Check-Ins," *Westword,* June 27, 2017, http://www.westword.com/news/attorneys-struggle-to-give-advice-to-immigrants-ahead-of-ice-check-ins-9199132.

Ohlone though not currently recognized as an official tribe by the state or federal government, so they have no federally designated land.

In two weeks is the Berkeley City Council meeting where they'll vote about whether to build another building on top of this Shellmound, a building whose foundation will tear through these burial sites to build foundations for mixed-use apartments. This is the third City Council meeting scheduled and rescheduled for this purpose, and my husband and I are signed up to bring water and snacks for protestors, who last time stayed until two in the morning waiting for the public comment section of the meeting that never came.

I tell the organizers that I would love to bring supplies, but they should be sure to pair me with someone else *because my health*; sometimes I just have to go home and lie down, sometimes I am in too much pain for the meetings.

"My irritable bowel. My raging periods. My howling headaches," writes Kate Zambreno. "Our maladies speak crassly and loudly for us when we are supposed to be calm."[4]

Try to calm yourself, my love, my husband tells me when he gets home and I am crying on the couch again, *so many things are great in your life.* He's right, of course, but also not right, not right the way I hear the helicopters circling overhead again and wonder which nazis, this time, are trying to hang in downtown Berkeley.

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The mold test diagnostic man pauses at the door on his way out to pull his face mask down.

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[4] Zambreno, *Heroines,* 63.

Let me be real with you, he says, *I had awful allergies for years, too, and it's taken a huge toll on my brain.* He moves his hand in slow circles in front of his face. *I used to be an engineer and now all I can do is this stuff.* He gestures to the mold diagnostic equipment in his rolling cart pulled up to my door. He smiles a small, sad smile. *Don't wait until your brain completely fogs out to do something about it.*

I feel that it is my job to do, that no one else will take care of it if I don't. "Governance then becomes the management of self-management," write Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in *The Undercommons*.[5] I nod compliantly at the mold diagnostic man.

Thanks, I say, *it can just be hard to motivate.*

There are always steps I should be taking. *If only I had taken the right steps sooner,* I think, *I would be well.* If I had voted differently, and sooner. If I had showed up at that one march.

But also, I think of Rodrigo and Hugo: should they have taken different steps? *If only* they had not gone to work that day? *If only* they had sought green cards?

No. It is not their fault, or their fault that Juana Cristina, Rodrigo's wife, is fundraising for help to pay for rent while Rodrigo is detained by ICE. Looking for logic here is not the steps to fix it. Neither is arrest — arresting Rodrigo and Hugo, arresting my friends in the blockade, arresting ourselves on our way to infuriation.

Calm down with the ICE memes, a dude comments on my Instagram posts. *You're making it seem way worse than it is.*

In *The Wall Street Journal*:

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[5] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 55.

> Relaxing on command is physiologically impossible if "the body is already too acutely stressed to turn it around," says Wendy Mendes, a professor of emotion at the University of California, San Francisco, and a researcher on stress.[6]

(And so, I follow other commands, but not that one: not the one to calm down.)

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"It's said that the disabled are the largest stigmatized population of which any person can become a member at any time," writes Esmé Weijun Wang.[7] The most porous of oppressions, and I leak into it. Which is not to attempt a hierarchy of oppressions, nor to say that chronic illness stigmatizes me in the same way as living as an undocumented person in the United States. My own struggle to work is on a different plane entirely from the stakes Rodrigo and Hugo face just trying to get to their jobs, to leave their homes, to stay with their families. I do hope though that my difficulty will point to how much more difficult it is for them, how systemic these conditions I stumble upon that govern my responsibility and how I move through space.

"When we believe that our sickness will soon pass, and that we have a choice in *when we get better,* and *that it's all up to us and us alone,* the exploitation that capitalism requires of its laboring bodies continues," writes Johanna Hedva, "It violently divides you from a community of support. […] It insists that your situation is your own doing."[8]

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[6] Sue Shellenbarger, "Why You Should Never Tell Someone to Relax," *The Wall Street Journal,* August 16, 2016, https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-you-should-never-tell-someone-to-relax-1471370408.

[7] Esmé Weijun Wang, "I'm Chronically Ill and Afraid of Being Lazy," *Elle,* April 26, 2016, https://www.elle.com/life-love/a35930/chronically-ill-afraid-lazy/.

[8] Johanna Hedva, "Transcript of 'My Body Is a Prison of Pain so I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I Also Love It & Want it to Matter Politically'

I want environmental allergies to mean more than just my mold, for our calm to be shattered, as Zambreno might say, by relation.

“Conjugating is about yoking together,” writes Donna Haraway, “conjugal love is yoked love; conjugated chemical compounds join together two or more constituents. People conjugate in public spaces; they yoke themselves together transversally and across time and space to make significant things happen.”[9] I want my access needs and illnesses to conjugate, extend transversely and beyond fault.

I don’t want the care for my body to be so high stakes that I can’t do anything else. I want it instead to tip us over, to tip over those of us who aren’t tipped over already, who don’t pay attention to @BaySolidarity or don’t feel that they have to, who are trained to turn their backs to ICE arrests.

“We need a hardy, soiled kind of wisdom,”[10] Haraway goes on, a wisdom in which no one gets to have clean hands, in which I do not get to absolve myself from my own complicity in these arrests.

We cannot blame the arrested for this sickness. Our whole bodies are allergic to racist policing, though some of us are significantly more affected than others. Our city is allergic to Urban Shield, the international conference that trains police in military weapons and techniques, and we protest over years to eject the conference. My neighbors suffering from asthma are allergic, are fighting off the effects of the coal trains pressing through their neighborhoods. But of course, we are treated for the aftereffects, and not the causes.

Reading and Audience Discussion,” *Sick Woman Theory,* February 1, 2016, https://sickwomantheory.tumblr.com/post/138519901031/transcript-of-my-body-is-a-prison-of-pain-so-i.

[9] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 110.

[10] Ibid., 117.

Again, Hedva: “Getting back to work is what keeps the capitalist patriarchy going, so silence, denial and erasure are necessary.”[11] Hedva suggests an image of a callus instead of a scar to represent illness and pain, because a callus builds over what is being worked in the body and makes that task easier instead of making the work invisible. With the callus, Hedva argues, we can take one step in the direction of pointing out the ways in which work is not, well, working for ill bodies and bodies otherwise rejected as legal or functional “persons” in a given context.

Alice Notley writes:

> Are you with me? I speak to any patient,
> in the battle against the illness of living as we do —
> the horizon our healing wound, seen by our noncellular
> eyes, our eyes new images.[12]

I scan @BaySolidarity on an early morning — not yet morning, really, up before dawn with pain gripping my abdomen. But there is nothing new on the Twitter feed, no new images. Someone is at rest. In the meantime, I peek out from my cellular eyes toward the almost sun. I scan the news to conjugate, to speak the verb of what will happen next. I peek toward this grey horizon, in the battle against living as we do.

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[11] Hedva, “Transcript.”

[12] Alice Notley, *Certain Magical Acts* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 111.

Sandstone Spines

I am thinking about sandstone. Before I look it up, I have a vague impression that it is porous and sponge-like. After I look it up, I see that while this is true, sandstone is often used for building structures because it is resistant to weathering. I read that it can erode quite a bit before this causes any structural issues in a building. If said buildings are drained properly, they can remain sound and stable for eons.

I am thinking about sandstone because I am looking for the right metaphor for receptive bodies. As a participant in Keith Hennessy's *de(composition)* workshop held at SFMOMA in early 2019, I began to watch how a body receives. The workshop did not invite expertise but did invite a kind of erosion. Each session of the four-part event — a mixture of activities, conversations, and movement-oriented prompts — began with a land acknowledgment and attempted to destabilize what it means to make art "locally" in a Bay Area with historical and ongoing acts of colonization. Hennessy continually granted agency to participants, inviting us to participate (or not) in activities at will. He offered three levels at which we could take the class: the class of the actions done together; the class below the class, a.k.a. the witch bruja class: the emotional, psychic, or energetic undercurrents of the class; and the class above the class, a.k.a. the anarchist activist class: the power watcher who tracks how power functions in the room.

I stood and watched, and tried to guess which class I was taking, which class other people were taking. I don't understand the mechanics of how dancers stand, but I tend to be in awe of them, the way posture is present while invisible, the balance between muscular control and looseness. I observed Hennessy's posture as he invited questions or challenges to the histories he scrawled out on his trademark plastic sheets, histories of colonization and racialized oppression in the Bay Area, or of the relationships between artistic practices engaged with possibilities of art and healing. I watched how his spine functioned, head and neck curving to the side when he asked us: *How do we get to bring our politics and still work in abstraction?* Or a short series of head nods, and then: *You decide how awake you want to be.*

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I am thinking about sandstone because I'm thinking about how something gets built, and for whom. I thank Hennessy for this, for the remarkable ways he chose to break down how much he was getting paid for this teaching gig, for the ways he got me to dance with a stick as if it were a secret part of me, and then to dance with the same stick as if it were the body of someone else who had their own desires and needs, and then to contemplate the difference between these movements.

But I don't just thank Hennessy; the stance he invited made the class about much beyond him. Hennessy is well-recognized and historically well-received in the Bay Area's dance world and beyond, a status that certainly makes it easier for him to risk authorship in the way he did. Hennessy invited guest performers and writers into each class, which encouraged a sense of continual re-settling of the room. On the final night of the series Hennessy explained that, instead of him leading that night's land acknowledgment, we would lead it ourselves in small groups. A classic organizer's move: after offering a few loose tools, he hands it over to us to make it our own.

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Hennessy has discussed elsewhere his struggles to participate in radicalized spaces while owning his privilege, saying: "I've recently been invited to queer dance events and queer safe spaces, presumably as an elder, and nobody really expects a white cisgender gay man to walk in! […] It feels like, 'I really don't have a place here.'"[1]

Even as Hennessy gesticulates away from ownership, his audience remains ingrained in systems of power. As Ryanaustin Dennis writes to Hennessy: "The workshop was painfully white, but not bc of you. Bc the history of this estuary that is 'the Bay' exceeds you in ways you can't control."[2] Dennis quotes another participant on Hennessy's discussion of racialized history in San Francisco, noting, "as one of only four Black people in the room and one of the few poc (it was a mostly white audience) I did notice that that audience didn't necessarily reflect the diverse histories he was bringing in the room, and I sometimes questioned who the lecture was performed for."

Hennessy remains himself, in his own body, and the failures experienced in the room dance upon this body. During a discussion about land acknowledgments on the final evening, he asked participants: *When are we as settlers re-settling ourselves through this practice, and when are or how can we instead use*

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[1] Marke B. "Keith Hennessy's Fiercely Political, Achingly Intimate 'Crotch' and 'Sink,'" *48 Hills,* May 28, 2018, https://48hills.org/2018/05/keith-hennessy-crotch-sink/.

[2] Ryanaustin Dennis, "My Letter of Atten(dance), or, Letters to Keith's de(composition), or, A Faggot Reads a Room," *Open Space,* March 26, 2019, https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2019/03/my-letter-of-attendance-or-letters-to-keiths-decomposition-or-a-faggot-reads-a-room/.

it to destabilize our position as settlers? The "we" crept in here, excluding some and giving away the "we" that Hennessy is able to speak to authentically.

As Hennessy moves, the cloud of "we" moves with him. Sometimes a brief gap hovers between them, but the cloud surrounds him still. "We" are the assumptions he's making about the bodies gathered for the workshop, and "we" is also the form the workshop gathered us into: a white-walled box of a gallery, albeit one in which something unpredictable was happening. The white walls of a gallery tell us that something is occurring on (or inside) them that matters, and that what is happening outside them matters less. Even without desiring it, a sorting occurs valuable and value-less.

◊

This week my friends are all talking about Nellie Bowles's article in the *New York Times* about how human contact has become a luxury good. She writes: "The richer you are, the more you spend to be offscreen."[3] Our conversations about the piece contain a kind of gloominess familiar from operating primarily in Bay Area communities not involved in tech. With little power to change the conditions, we often avoid rather than brainstorm about how to change.

In many ways, Hennessy's workshop interrogated the power to change anything. Who has this power, and how it is performed? When Hennessy introduced Valentina Desideri's practice "Fake Therapy," in which two participants attempt to "heal" another while simultaneously acknowledging that they have no healing powers and there is nothing wrong with the other, he asked: *What if there's nothing wrong with the audience?* And smiled.

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[3] Nellie Bowles, "Human Contact Is Now a Luxury Good," *The New York Times,* March 23, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/sunday-review/human-contact-luxury-screens.html.

Take note social justice artists! Or high-art trained artists! What if the artist has no power to change the audience?

This note could apply to the workshop as well. What does it mean to make a situation under conditions one cannot change? What does it mean to be present in a group in which the conditions of different bodies remain?

Hennessy's was a workshop in reality, just as his work operates in person. The work centers on bodies in person and how they work to stay alive, how they give in to the conditions of being alive. As he invited our corrections and dismissals of his directions, Hennessy invited that his words be sandstone, worn down, flushed through.

Fittingly, the final activity of *(de)composition* was to "practice dying" via Joan Stempel's script,[4] in which we visualized the series of events up to and including our own death. After this exercise, Hennessy led us through "grounding" exercises to close the night and encouraged us to return to the realities inside our own current skins. I walked out with a friend among many of us heading back to the BART, where we huddled with our screens and frowned at other people in fleece vests muttering about their Series B. The world seemed the same outside, even after our "deaths." Only so much can actually die while hosted in that gallery's white box.

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[4] Joan Stempel, "Through the Fire – A Dying Exercise," *Home Care Information,* https://homecareinformation.net/handouts/hen/205_Through_the_Fire_Dying_Exercise_Handout.pdf.

On Saying

I've always been wary of oversharing with my husband. I often tell my friends my news before I tell him. I base this on something I read a long time ago that stuck in me, something about keeping boundaries with the people you love so as not to overrun their love with too much knowing, to keep the relationship exciting — some Esther Perel shit that I can't actually source in her book. For many years I had that book at my bedside but let's be real, I never actually read it. My husband did and I asked him to summarize. Anyway, I clearly tweaked Perel's message in some weird avoidant way to mean *never tell your partner about your life.*

When my doctor finally diagnoses me with endometriosis, I don't tell my husband for a few days. A weekend passes and at the end of it I tell him on the couch on Sunday night, and he leaps up, *WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME,* alarmed and gripping my hands. I stand awkwardly with him and say, I'm telling you now. But it's the wrong time, I see, and I've been somehow disloyal by not doing it sooner.

Who else knows? he asks, then, shaking his head before I can answer, *you never tell me anything.*

But I don't know how to tell. Or, how to tell him what I think he wants to know — what I think my friends and my family want to know — that I am cured or at least on the road to being better or, at the very least, have useful information about my condition. I delayed in telling him because I didn't want to offer a non-solution. I know he wants to see hope in the diagnosis. How do I tell him when that isn't what this is?

To diagnose endometriosis is ultimately an uncertain game. My new ob-gyn, who is an endometriosis specialist, has diagnosed me with the condition based on a specialty MRI, though officially you are not supposed to diagnose the condition until you can surgically remove tissue from the patient's body and study it under a microscope to confirm that it is endometrial tissue growing outside of the uterus.

This doctor says she is fairly sure I have multiple endometriomas but it is not certain. Until we do my surgery, it is a guess. I am not to *get worked up* about it but to come in if there is another crisis of pain.

Aren't you so relieved just to know you have it? one friend asks, *isn't that helpful?*

I don't know, I say, *I feel validated that my pain adds up to something, but even if it is endometriosis, I'm not sure what that means to me.* I'm not sure, because endometriosis is not something most people get better from. It's a diagnosis of a chronic and ongoing condition.

"This is just a text / Meaning nothing is recoverable / Except your recovery,"[1] writes poet Laynie Browne. It is very hard to tell anyone anything but that I am on my way to recovery. My descriptions of my pain are my "text," in Browne's sense, mean-

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[1] Laynie Brown, "Ps(alm) for Expectancy," in *Lost Parkour Ps(alms)* (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2014), 52.

ing that even when they are detailed there is not much you can recover or resolve from them. The text is here in the language I use to tell other people there is something causing me pain. But it seems thin, bare, this text. What does the text hold for other people if it's not my recovery? When my condition is uncertain or the next steps for treatment are unclear, I withhold this text, awaiting a narrative that I can speak more clearly.

Is this genetic? I ask my doctor, ever cautious of my family line, *or is it caused by environmental stuff?* My doctor tells me no, not at all, that cysts happen to some people and usually reabsorb, but don't in my case. That endometriosis crops up in some people and there is no answer to why. She cautions me not to Google it because, *there are tons of kooky, unfounded theories about where endometriosis originates, and I don't want you to get confused.*

But I have already made this mistake, reading about genetically modified foods and pesticides and their effects on hormones for hours, making lists of which food I absolutely must eat organic. I have the academic texts too, the book in which Kate Seear reviews shifts in thinking about women's health and how they influence attitudes toward my condition.[2] She summarizes the various guesses about where it comes from, which include the theories that it results from excess estrogen levels in the food we eat, and the "retrograde theory," which guesses that endometriomas are menstrual blood prevented from coming out that flows backward and climbs back up into the pelvic cavity.

No one knows. All the guesses are guesses, and, as Seear reminds us, each are influenced by the social context in which they were formed.

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[2] Kate Seear, *The Making of a Modern Epidemic: Endometriosis, Gender and Politics* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014).

We don't know where it comes from, my doctor says, my careful doctor, the expert in this condition, *at this point there is no proven scientific explanation.*

"When doctors are confronted with a seemingly random or scattered collection of symptoms that cannot be interpreted with certainty, the pronouncement that there is no origin attempts to seal off, to quarantine a disease as ideolect and aberration,"[3] writes Eleni Stecopoulos in *Visceral Poetics,* her hybrid book of literary criticism and what she calls "autoethnography" of her own health crisis. Stecopoulos describes the way such "sealing off" uses language to de-legitimize a disease that is not understood.

If it's not fully understood, we are robbed of how to talk about it. Any way that exists to speak about it is an aberration, a departure from how we should be speaking, how we know to talk about these things.

Please don't believe what the internet freaks say, my doctor says. And I think: *what is this, if not a freak?* My freak, my aberration, the disc pulling on the threads of my ovary on the ultrasound screen — no origin but itself, grown out mutant on its own.

◊

The word "idiopathic" (or, sometimes, "ideophatic") describes a condition whose cause is unknown, or, according to *Merriam-Webster,* "arising spontaneously from an obscure or unknown cause," and "peculiar to the individual."[4]

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[3] Eleni Stecopoulos, *Visceral Poetics* (Oakland: ON Contemporary Practice, 2016), 10.

[4] *Merriam-Webster,* s.v. "idiopathic," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/idiopathic.

Peculiar, with its implication of privacy from Latin *peculiaris,* "of private property": my condition as my private property, and any sharing of it peculiar, too — odd. Hold onto it, keep it. Keep it to yourself.

"The diagnosis of 'idiopathic' attempts to contain a challenge posed to medical knowledge, effectively rendering the condition meaningless and isolating the patient," Stecopoulos writes.[5]

I think Alex's mom just loves getting diagnoses, Lisa says. *I'm not sure what she actually, really has, though.* Lisa is warm and kind and says *I'm sorry* several times when I tell her about my pain, but I squirm back from her questions. I change the subject and sip my beer because it feels like what I ultimately "have" amounts to nothing.

Without an elevator pitch of a story, there is never enough time to fully explain. There is never a right moment to tell someone about your illness, not over beers or breakfast by the BART, not at the march against police violence, not at work, not between tired kisses at the end of the day. It's too peculiar.

This leaves me very little time. Then, when to tell? What to tell? What do I owe people, to tell?

On the other side of the spectrum from me there is my friend Kelin, who has been chronically ill much longer than I have, and she will tell anyone, anywhere. She moves through the world with the armor of an extroverted sick person, telling people right away what she needs and can and can't do. Because she must, because she will be debilitatingly sick if people assume she can do, eat, see the same way they do.

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[5] Stecopoulos, *Visceral Poetics,* 10.

"I was made to believe there's something wrong with me — sorry this noise is all my honesty," Kelin writes in one of my favorite lines from her first book.[6]

I know it's exhausting for her (*I wish I could just eat and work like everyone else,* she texts me from an artist residency) but Kelin also seems used to it, used to being peculiar but as in "strange," recognizably odd in public; not peculiar as in privately held.

I watch her gently remind people not to pet her service dog. Yet another mother makes Kelin food that could potentially stop Kelin's breathing, and in her response Kelin uses a polite, practiced speech. She makes an honest, forthright noise, even in a constellation of diagnoses that are overlapping and sometimes difficult to parse or understand as she lists them off for you. But she proceeds. Kelin is able to inhabit the weird part of peculiar, the noisy part, without the part that means put that away.

◊

A writer I know posts on Facebook that she had a cyst removed from her ovary that was *the size of a grapefruit,* and mostly I am resentful. I mean, it's out of her now. She posts that her doctor said the cyst was *wearing my ovary like a hat.* Hers is gone, and so her post is easy to understand — and funny — but my cysts cling to me, privately held beside my lymph nodes so I can never tell what is swelling when my hips twitch and throb. She seems so clear in her knowledge of the problem and in the fact that it is fixed. If only I could be so triumphantly cleared out.

◊

I meet Tim at a conference. It's our second time meeting, but our first time chatting more casually. He is an artist who wants

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[6] Kelin Loe, *These Are the Gloria Stories* (Amherst: Factory Hollow, 2014), 23.

sometimes to be a writer, he tells me. He knows that I'm a writer, and it's one of the few things about me that he knows, because I've interviewed him for a piece about his own work. I notice that because he knows me first as a writer, I move more into that part of myself. There's this tendency I have — maybe you have, too — to gravitate toward the parts of me that someone can already parse or understand. I know generally that he is interested in art about crises and endings, so I begin to tell him about Dodie Bellamy's essay "When The Sick Rule the World." I reach into the tote bag hanging from my shoulder and hand him the copy of her book I've been carrying around with me.

And it's good? he asks. He looks down, flips through it, pausing every few pages. I smile.

Are you learning something about it that way? I ask. This gesture of flipping through a book is something people do when it's in their hands, showing us that they recognize a text is there in front of them, even if they are not taking in anything from said text.

Oh, ha, I don't know, he looks up at me, and then back down, closes the book, looks at the back cover. I've pulled something out from under him, an opportunity to engage lightly, I realize, and now he seems more awkward, his body hunching a little.

What drew you to this book? he asks. He's moving toward me now; toward the way I'd prefer to talk about these things. I wonder whether to tell him about my own pain, whether that will make me too confessional to seem smart, whether it will be out of place at the conference where we find ourselves. Instead, I muster something vague.

I'm interested in pain and embodiment, I say, having learned from years around contemporary artists how to express my interests vaguely and in the form of broad projects so as not to imply my indiscreet, leaky body before someone has shown they're willing to hear about that.

But that's the first time he looks me right in the eyes.

I've got this book on hurt that I wrote, he says, and then looks quickly back down at the splintery wooden deck below us which will later stab both of our heels. *It's a good thing to read alone.*

I have to ask Tim three times where I can get a copy of the book, which I understand. I too have trouble believing anyone wants to know about physical pain, and also in this scene where we are careful not to push our own work too directly. We have to know someone really wants to hear about it so we don't look like a forceful jerk.

Finally, a month later, he sends me *How It Hurts* in a plain brown envelope. In the book, Tim pulls from texts about naming and assessing pain to create a patchwork narrative that is both citational and tender, as in the section *NOTE*:

> It should be noted.
>
> *(When)*
>
> When it hurts,
>
> "it"
>
> can be a specific location. *My chest hurts.*
> It can be a specific activity. *Breathing hurts.*
>
> But even in cases that are *acute / local,*
> "it" remains *chronic / generalized:*
>
> At my chest, *it* hurts.
> When I breathe, it hurts.[7]

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[7] Timothy Furstnau, *How It Hurts* (Portland: Publication Studio, 2013).

In Tim's work, the peculiar hurt remains the subject of the verb, and the body the object. The hurt is so very peculiar that it remains its own "it." It is isolated at once from the body and pulled out from the body to explain itself, as if the body cannot explain the "it" and so rejects it, jettisons it in order to observe it from the outside.

NOTE goes on:

> And then it disappears
> and tends – even if not
> intending – to separate us
> and lay blame:
>
> *My chest* is hurting *me*.
>
> The very same "it"
> that comes and goes
> without saying, that
> was before and still is
> worth mentioning.

The hurt is unstable, the "it" is unstable, continuous but spectral in these short lines. Its irregular presence involves an obligation to say, "worth mentioning" when it keeps appearing.

I still want you to tell me what's going on with your body, my friend Cailey says, *even if you don't know.* And so, it still is "worth mentioning," to some people, if only because the "it" continues forward in time. I think maybe the "it" here is me.

But why do you want to know, I ask Cailey, *when there's nothing certain to say.*

Because it's what's going on with you. She smiles. My continuation, then ("going on") is what I am supposed to communicate, even if I have no words to explain the experience itself.

Well, I say, *usually it hurts in the middle of my cycle and while I'm bleeding, but sometimes cysts burst other random times.* I pause, glance at her, and wonder if this description is enough. Am I pathetic enough?

Sometimes that means I have to cancel things and lie down. I shrug and fold myself over in a vague gesture towards how it feels. (Is this what she wants? A demonstration?) *When that happens I can't read or even watch TV, so I just take pain meds and cry.*

"If the body finds relief in lamentations, let it;" writes the classic essayist Michel de Montaige of his own ailments, "if it wants to toss about, let it writhe and contort as much as it likes; if the body believes that some of the pain can be driven off as vapor by forcing out our cries — or if doing so distracts us from the anguish, as some doctors say it helps pregnant women in their deliveries — just let it shout out."[8] Here is a *shouting out* that doesn't have to reach an end, doesn't have to explain itself.

"Do not order the sound to come but allow it to do so," Montaigne goes on. I hear again a sense of allowing, continuing, flow, a sense of sound or words that are more indications of ongoing experience and aliveness than they are determined language.

◊

I guess it was a mistake thinking I could backpack through California's isolated Lost Coast in the middle of my cycle, near enough to that dread time when my cysts most often rupture. I hadn't had a major flare in a while and I was feeling positive, but two days in we heaved our packs back on for a long pebbly beach stretch, and the thread of pain started to creep in toward

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[8] Michel de Montaigne, "On the Resemblance of Children to Their Fathers," in *The Essays: A Selection,* ed. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 205.

my stomach from my hip. I tried to tough it out for a few minutes, but soon I began to lag behind and my husband tuned in to what was happening.

Leora is having some uterine pain, he announced to the hushed group. I hunched further under my backpack and slowed to a shuffle as the pain stabbed up toward my ribcage and down through my thighs, in my knees.

How nice, I remember thinking, *that he knows what's happening.*

Reaching a flat spot, I rolled my pack off and curled to the ground. I whispered an apology to the group that no one could hear, and above me my husband explained to Emily and Jarah that this might take a few minutes or a few hours, that it was hard to know but it would end eventually. As I focused my attention on breathing deeply (the doctors have taught me that holding breath intensifies this pain), I could faintly hear his voice and their empathic murmurs back, feel the pile of jackets he threw over me for a blanket, sense him growing taut and decisive the way he does in a crisis.

As I breathed out, I began to whimper the soft sounds I make only when in that specific kind of this pain. They are something like *oh-woah-oh-woah,* and I watched the golden grasses near my face twitch slightly with my out-breath. *Oh-woah-woah-woah,* I went, followed by the hee on the sharp intake of breath, the language that means nothing but is the only kind for that time.

"Perhaps learning to speak is realizing, little by little, that we can say nothing about anything," writes Valeria Luiselli in "Stuttering Cities,"[9] her essay on her own relationship to language. This kind of thinking comforts me in these moments of total

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[9] Valeria Luiselli, "Stuttering Cities," in *Sidewalks,* trans. Christina MacSweeney (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2014), 63.

submission to pain. It's a rare moment when I allow my speech to say nothing.

"And even in those who still have the power to cry out," Simone Weil relates, "the cry hardly ever expresses itself, either, inwardly or outwardly, in coherent language."[10] There is really nothing much to be followed, much as I might try here, or for the sake of people who care to come along.

And I did then, on the Lost Coast, tried to explain, once I felt better, the experience and how it takes me out of speech, converts me into only throbbing abdomen. We lit a fire and started dinner, and I held a mug of hot water to my middle as it slowly began to pull back from its distended state. And my friends listened as benevolently as a person can listen to something so physical that isn't their own, something that sounds bad but doesn't really come across.

"Whatever pain achieves, it achieves it in part through its unsharability," writes Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain,* "and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language."[11]

You seem like a different person now, Emily said, meaning of course that I seemed better again, was smiling, sitting up, getting ready to eat my bowl of reconstituted refried beans and instant rice. But also, that I was different as I came back to the personhood of attempting to explain, away from the speech-surpassing experience of body.

"Language isn't transcendent," writes Wayne Koestenbaum in *Humiliation*. "Every sentence, however stuffed and upholstered with confident maturity, attests to that earlier, infantile

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[10] Simone Weil, "Human Personality," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology,* ed. Siân Miles (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 53.

[11] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

time when we couldn't master words."[12] Chronic illness, for me, means that the infantile time is not just in the past. It could always be about to happen again. It interrupts me on the way to being a mature adult.

I swaddled myself in my sleeping bag and smiled at my friends, *I'm okay now, it's just hard to explain.*

You don't have to explain, though, Emily said, and winced, *we could hear you moaning.*

Tim's *NOTE,* again:

> The very same "it"
> that comes and goes
> without saying, that
> was before and still is
> worth mentioning.

"It" is not just the pain, but the language, that "it" that comes and goes, that mentions and masters poorly. Mastering is not something I can expect it to do.

We're just glad you're back, Jarah said as we scraped the last of the meal from our plastic bowls. She handed me a hot chocolate packet which I slapped again my thigh to loosen the clumped powder. It felt good to hit myself lightly there, where moments before the stabbing had shot through, paralyzing me. Now I could tap it lightly and recognize that the pain wasn't present.

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[12] Wayne Koestenbaum, *Humiliation* (New York: Picador, 2011), 34.

> “it”
> that comes and goes
> without saying

The pain does not “say” in language. But what we can expect of pain-language is more about remaining, about indicating to another that we are still alive. It’s not about getting the experience right for them. It’s about affirming we can return. It signals that we haven’t yet gone under enough to stop saying for good.

On Taking Charge

You need to be a big girl about this, the doctor says to me when I tell her I'm not sure about the pills. I have been in monthly debilitating pain, and the prevailing and first wisdom is that birth control is the answer. But birth control fucked me up in all sorts of ways for the first twenty years of my fertile life, and I want to try other things first for my pain.

I'd like to hold off on hormones for now, I tell my doctor.

My doctor shakes her head. *Are you refusing treatment?* Her hands poised above the keyboard.

(*She used to like me,* I tell a friend later, *but now that I said "no" to the pills I am the bad kid.*)

I try to ask a question about my combination of pain medications, if there is anything I need to be careful with, but she is done with me already, ushering me out.

Being all-natural is all very nice and good, my doctor says as she shoves the EXIT door for me toward reception. She shakes her head, *but there comes a point when you need to take charge.*

◊

I want to take charge, but I don't know what that means. I suppose I will know if it makes me get better, if I am able to find and pull the right trigger to master the pains and problems of my body. This is what it means to be productive while ill: no work counts until the ends of the means are met. Until I possess conclusion, I am not working enough.

"Self-possession and self-mastery are the most legible and preferred forms of selfhood within a society built upon the ideology of possession," writes Johanna Hedva.[1] Hedva is an artist, writer, and musician whose essay "Sick Woman Theory" gestures at the narrowness and restrictions of the options for political engagement available to sick and disabled bodies.

But in the essay I'm quoting here, "In Defence of De-Persons," Hedva revises and builds upon the thinking of "Sick Woman Theory" to consider the political potential within the diagnosis of "de-personalization," one that Hedva themself has received. Hedva argues that the state itself creates "de-personalization" and then demands that the individual hold complete responsibility for their individual maintenance and, as above, display "mastery" of themselves.

I turn to Hedva for a more specialized kind of taking charge. I work to take charge of the ideology that blankets me in moments of so-called "medical management." In reading Hedva, I gain a bit more understanding of why I think I'm meant to figure this out myself, why it's demanded that I possess whatever has possessed me.

I feel the defense of theory rise around me. I want to call it "armor," or "weapon," but I am trying not to meet violence with

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[1] Johanna Hedva, "In Defence of De-persons," *GUTS*, May 10, 2016, http://gutsmagazine.ca/in/.

violence. What is a structure to protect from force if not a defense, if not a rigid place? Hedva's theorizing, as well as their work between forms, lays some groundwork for me here, helping me to understand how a "defense," could be offered (as in their "Defence of De-Persons") that refuses mastery, rigidity.

"My address is from an affirmation of messiness, a testimony of and to disorder, an honouring of incomplete-ness," Hedva writes.[2] In my story and experience of illness, so little coheres. If I am still to attempt to write into it, or write with it, this writing has to occur incoherently, to some degree, if it is to attempt to truly represent it or take charge of it or be in dialogue with it.

As I do here. I bring in Hedva and engage with some of their words, fixating especially on the words of theirs that mirror or engage my own words and sounds, the images that I use or comprehend around illness. I do not pretend to have a complete mastery of Hedva's text or Hedva's experience, nor do I claim command of all of the sources that Hedva cites, personal and intellectual.

"The affirmation of de-person-ness that I'm proposing is not so much a refusal of discrete-ness, of personhood as such, but rather: an affirmation of indiscrete-ness, of a tremendous indiscretion,"[3] they write. I affirm what Hedva's words affirm in me and attempt a gesture toward an indiscrete knowledge, a thinking perhaps not taken charge of but perhaps instead charged through with the thinking and being of others. This is not a lack of force or willingness to exert, but a redirection.

◊

Sometimes you just have to tell the doctors "no" and put together your own treatment plan, my friend Arisa tells me. *They can't*

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

legally force you to do what they want. Arisa has known she has endometriosis for so much longer than I have, and so has strategies and knowledge that I don't.

I ask myself: shall I *take charge* by treating my disobedient body with pills — or does *taking charge* mean standing up to my doctors and refusing what they're offering? Is there another way through, a way that doesn't pick a side?

"For consent to treatment or refusal of treatment to be valid, the decision must be voluntary and you must be appropriately informed,"[4] reads one website defining patients' rights.

Appropriately informed: I will read you your rights. No one must be handcuffed into a treatment decision. Information swells around me and presses in. I feel panicked that I will not be able to appropriately let it all in. If I am not appropriate, I am indiscrete. I am not acting as a discrete person in the way the doctors need me to be in order to treat me.

◊

Julia explains to me how she's organizing with her neighbors so that no one calls the police on each other, a self-regulatory strategy to combat police violence in Oakland.

We put up posters around places where the cops usually hang out, she tells me, *pretty letters on stationary that say, "Dear police, thanks for your service, but we're taking charge now." We're trying to communicate that we've tried their way, but we're no longer interested.*

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[4] "Do I Have the Right to Refuse Treatment?" *NHS UK,* https://www.nhs.uk/common-health-questions/nhs-services-and-treatments/do-i-have-the-right-to-refuse-treatment/.

Is this what makes refusal truly voluntary? Having tried the offered alternative and understanding that it does not serve you?

I think of my grandmother serving me a food she knows I don't like and saying, *you've got to take at least a no-thank-you-portion*. Must we take a no-thank-you-portion of police?

I long for the no-thank-you-portion as a patient, to engage with doctors but not be obligated because of it, not be obligated to complete or follow all of a proscribed path. I want the ambivalent place that still has the integrity of listening.

"I keep saying *I don't know*. It seems important. When so many around me claim to," writes Stephanie Young in *Ursula or University*,[5] her book of hybrid prose-ish poems invoking community under threat of environmental disaster and oppressive social conditions. By both inscribing the boundaries of a community in time and space and gesturing toward her hope to work as a traitor against exclusive structures, Young holds a position of authority and attempts to deflect it. She continues:

> So many books diagnose conditions. So many posts claim what is to be done. With a trail of comments to argue the finer points. While the conditions keep repeating, proliferate. Where so little changes, I don't know, it seems important. [6]

Young advocates for *I don't know.* Young places it in the middle of her sentence, something we could read as a vocal tic, the kind of self-effacing many of us do to make the other feel welcome, *I don't know, you might be right.* I think it is a little bit this tic, but it's the tic realizing itself as such. We realize we stick *I don't know* in there to help others relate to us. We notice this, and then, intentionally — in our books, those that have been edited

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[5] Stephanie Young, *Ursula or University* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2013), 149.

[6] Ibid.

and thought through by others — we leave it in. Intentionally we leave in *I don't know.*

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Over the years, many friends have sent me Lena Dunham's editorial in which she argues that birth control is a health necessity for people who live with endometriosis. She writes:

> I am one of the lucky ones. I can continue to do my job as a writer and a director, work directly with doctors to ensure my disease is controlled, and feel the support of millions when I am let down by my own body.[7]

I don't know, Stephanie says, *she annoys me, but Lena has a point.* Years ago, I read Stephanie's book, and then she was Stephanie Young to me, but now we have become friends, mostly through navigating the mysteries of chronic pain. Here, now, to me, she is Stephanie, first name casually like I've learned to write from the New Narrative writers to whom she and I both owe much of our aesthetic and literary community, who gave us permission to cede our bodies into the writing.

Stephanie and I became friends when we both started to write about cysts bursting, about emergency room visits, and mutual friends at both of our readings began to tell us we were circling these subjects together. We became friends over years when we both guessed we had endometriosis, were charged $650 and up for ultrasound after ultrasound and told to "keep an eye on it," and then eventually we were friends through the year when we both had our first surgeries and were finally diagnosed with this thing.

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[7] Lena Dunham, "Losing Birth Control Could Mean a Life of Pain," *The New York Times,* June 9, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/opinion/lena-dunham-losing-birth-control-could-mean-a-life-of-pain.html.

I don't know, Stephanie is good at starting her sentences this way. We are sitting in the park the summer of our surgeries. She's a month past it, and me less than two weeks. Her *I don't know* comforts me as I can barely sit up straight on the bench, and the post-surgery pain meds make my attention drift in and out. If she doesn't know, maybe also I don't have to. Maybe this brain is okay to take out in public.

The problem with Lena is that she makes it seem sure, Stephanie says. We've cycled back to Dunham. Neither Stephanie nor I had a hysterectomy during this surgery because it wasn't recommended, but we don't know; maybe we will need one in the future.

In her editorial, Dunham's prose is direct, uncluttered, able to do a job. In the face of losing coverage for birth control, she turns down the dial on her goofy persona and writes a clear, concise, even dry, argument. She does not jiggle or waver.

"Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning," writes Susan Sontag in her classic essay on illness and metaphor, "that meaning being invariably a moralistic one."[8] It's not exactly the moralism that's the problem, for me, with Dunham, but the rhetorical strategy it emphasizes.

I stand with all of those fighting for the basic human right of health care, or, rather, I do not "stand" with them because of the ableism inherit in this phrase, but I place my own body in this mass, asserting this tremendous need. I respect Dunham for massing here, too, for using her celebrity position to make the case for people getting the treatment they require. But I also want there to be a way for this massing to live alongside rhetorical and literal options, to avoid the language of defeating the pain or buckling down. To my mind, the fight for healthcare is

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[8] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador USA, 2001), 75–76.

not accurately characterized as a fight — to, again, closely parse the language. Far more basic than a fight, the assertion of this right is a foundation. It's dug underneath us. It's only once it's dug under securely that we can even begin to imagine what we need. Without it, it's very difficult to imagine, because I am instead caught up in the endless, cyclical process of proving what — that — I deserve.

◊

Dunham's piece is years behind us now, and — perhaps building upon it, thanks to it — new ways of speaking with illness and pain are proliferating. These texts open up the options I search for: the jiggle, the whine, the ambivalence about pain killers and hormones get to stay in the room. My friend Avery reminds me that ambivalence means of both valences, as in two elemental powers, chemically tugging in multiple directions. Ambivalence seems less flighty defined this way, with the scientific backing of electrons chemically bonded, pulling and pulling again. I feel this pull inside the force of Caren Beilin's 2019 book *Blackfishing the IUD,* in which she describes her medical nightmare with the copper intrauterine devide (IUD), resulting in rheumatoid arthritis, and entree into the backdoor, gossipy (in her own words), secreted narratives of chronic gendered illness. Beilin collects the stories of many others alongside her own, along with the kinds of folk knowledge and internet knowledge that are created by those of us in medical limbo, in total despair of certainty.

Beilin opens her book by considering what it means to collect and own books, and through them gain the capacity to perform or possess knowledge. It is a fitting opening for a citational book that reads through multiple urgent compulsions at once. Beilin writes:

> I have thought that to collect, to purchase, is to own, but that to *read* is to save, if it is to preserve the tremoring, the forevering gerund, of what was said, and said, a gelatinous threading, saved in the seas of present consciousness.[9]

What if instead of searching for the correct way to take charge of medical information, we were to understand illness with this forevering?

Beilin threads her own practice further. The release of her book was accompanied by a podcast in which Beilin interviews people about reproductive healthcare and the medical industry. In the first episode I struggle to tell the difference between Beilin's voice and the voice of the person she is interviewing, which seems actually appropriate, *ambi-valent,* the two voices threading as they pull against one another, even when they feel differently about something or disagree. This aggregation of opinion and selfhood assembles insight, rather than competing for it. Beilin refuses the utility of the simple story for a massed accounting that builds furiously in the book and then further in the podcast. Its heaping form invokes the undisciplined ordeal of physical swelling, as Beilin writes: "Inflammation is protection that came out wrong, like saying it wrong, like writing too long or the wrong book. It's hard to stop it."[10]

In this I hear something similar to Stephanie's "I don't know, it seems important." No one wants to invite inflammation, but now that it's here, it's hard to stop it. What if we paused on trying to stop it because we can't, and wrote with it instead? What if instead we wrote a book that is inflamed? I mean inflamed as Beilin's book is, inflamed and swelling in its endlessness, the way we live.

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[9] Caren Beilin, *Blackfishing the IUD* (Oakland: Wolfman Books, 2019), 17.

[10] Ibid., 75.

Johanna Hedva calls their video "Sick Witch"[11] the "performance id" to the theoretical work of "Sick Woman Theory." The video opens with Hedva completely bent over, moaning. They stand in front of a white couch. Throughout the video Hedva makes noises that seem to indicate pain, but also, "wobbles, regurgitates bullshit people have told her to do," as the video's description says. Hedva seems to channel or act out a variety of different persons including those saying, "have you tried exercising more?" and "have you tried Vitamin B?"

After listing what sounds like a drug's potential side effects while clutching themselves and the air, Hedva blurts: "You must remember! — your doctor — has chosen — to prescribe you — this medication — because its benefits! — outweigh-ay-ay-ahhh — its side effects." They bend again to their knees and gather their long dress to their crotch, then continue, bobbing: "Do not operate heavy machinery… or perform any tasks that require alertness… focus… or concentration." They whip their arms apart and the video ends.

In its way Hedva's video reads as a no-thank-you portion of prescribed medicine. As a viewer I assume they are taking this medication, potentially experiencing some of its side effects. They display the narratives of their doctor(s) on their skin, but also do not swallow them completely. The performance is the no-thank-you portion because I take what you give me but I take charge in the way I will.

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Anne Boyer's 2019 book, *The Undying,* has also been broadly received as a no-thank-you portion. Boyer is treated for breast cancer throughout (and after) the course of the book, but, like Beilin, even while detailing her treatment, Boyer refuses the

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[11] Johanna Hedva, "Sick Witch (2016)," *Johanna Hedva,* http://johannahedva.com/sickwitch.html.

traditional illness narrative of a happy ending or pathetic fadeaway. Instead, she interrogates the experience of ongoing illness for what content it might contain that is woven with capitalism, surveillance, and the political and economic utility of the sick body. Boyer writes:

> *What will be the outcome of this illness?* resembles the questions asked by detectives, art collectors, and graphologists, or anyone who moves some unobvious incidental detail into the heart of a story. Enchantment exists when things are themselves and not their uses. That's why enchantment begins to fade the moment we believe that a collection of cells can predict the agonies of next June.[12]

What I respect most in work like that of Boyer, Hedva, and Beilin is that they back away from utility while still developing new thinking. This thinking gives up on "uses," even "outcomes." It is thinking that grows indirectly in relationship to productive ends. It is an enchanted thinking that stays within experience, and that may conflict with or refuse taking charge in a normative sense. Only in this enchanted light can we begin to see an actual body.

◊

"I hate all details of the individual life," writes Virginia Woolf in *The Waves,* "But I am fixed here to listen."[13]

I love this "fixed" with its duality — fixed meaning *placed* or *stayed,* and also, at the same time, *improved*. An enchanted coexistence of state and process. As I write this, I feel a sense of listening, a kind of conglomeration that allows me to continue to parse these writers, even through the varieties of brain fog

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[12] Anne Boyer, *The Undying* (New York: Penguin, 2019), 44.

[13] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 251.

that come with certain pain medicines I take or long days in bed with pain.

I imagine Woolf as herself a lifelong Sick Witch, to use Hedva's term. I extend it here to mean people identified with being sick and continuing to generate knowledge as they think in company with this state of being. It's a state of being that threatens to eliminate precisely the capacity to think. Woolf was diagnosed with various things that these days we might refer to as bipolar II disorder. Because of her symptoms, Woolf was fixed (positioned as well as attempted to be healed) in the garden, in the sick room. In *Heroines,* Kate Zambreno writes that Woolf was commanded by one of her doctors to treat her illness by gardening for four hours a day and cooking for an additional four, with the conviction that traditional domesticity would cure her. Woolf was not permitted to write more than one hour a day,[14] as doctors believed that writing would make her worse.

I imagine Woolf hating the life that passed before her in these confined moments but remaining committed to listening for the details of the moments themselves. As Boyer does, when she alchemizes her experience of cancer into poetics, but in a book that in its form and politics works to avoid the profitability of transformation or predictive technology. Boyer uses her illness, but does not make it submit to her, or us, her readers. It continues to twist, rhizomatic, and take in the varieties of light that Boyer holds it up against.

And as Beilin does, porous to the stories of others, a gathering snowball of icy revelation about the realities and dangers of the IUD. Her illness becomes a methodology as opposed to a problem that invites solution. Beilin works toward a political speech that includes the foundation of the right to access health care, but requests even more than this. Such speech requests a capacity to generate one's own medical narrative, too, to validate

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[14] Kate Zambreno, *Heroines* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 93–95.

the ways in which different subject positions experience a body and to attempt a discourse that does not subjugate any of these.

I keep coming back to Woolf, though she is also an imperfect narrator who meets the experience of illness from a variety of financial and cultural privileges that she does not necessarily address in her work. I keep coming back to her because of the position of cumulation she animates in me, how she uses her confinement periods as time to absorb the language and characters around her, to absorb medical speech into her work. I started writing this long before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the last years have found us with much more widespread experience of what it means to be stuck inside. I have watched many of my favorite disabled and sick artists and writers post about their hopes that one result of broadscale quarantines will mean a broader understanding of creativity with/in restriction. Each of our individual experiences of this time are specific to our positions. But my hope is that for those who never endured medically related confinement prior to shelter-in-place, a new stance might be acknowledged, even required.

“But I am fixed here to listen,” Woolf writes. Though she’s often referred to as the patron saint of shut-ins, I don’t think this phrase quite works. Because speech does not have to shut us in. Actually, and instead, it forces us to reconsider the permeable states of our bodies, the ever-present potential risks of gaze and language and body. My hope is that we take a stance at the window, making our confinement a way to look out.

Brace for It

I'm notorious for hating goodbyes — I prefer to get it over with, to detach. Once, when a dear friend was moving away, I hugged her distractedly on the porch and rushed back inside, where I began to take photos of her through the window, photos I'd later post on Instagram. She looked up and shouted, *No phone! I'm here! Look at me! I'm still here!* She made me take pictures with her instead, and we laughed. I benefit from instructions at times like those.

I thought of this friend at the start of Jess Curtis's performance *(in)Visible,* which opens in total darkness. The performers are scattered through the space. One by one they calmly state, *I'm here.* Listening, I began to get a sense of their voices and their locations. My eyes were still pulsing a bit from the sudden transition to black, but I resisted the urge to turn toward each voice, knowing I wouldn't gain anything from looking. It felt intimate, and kind, like a friend guiding me into an experience I might not be equipped to handle.

I thought then of Harry Dodge, who writes in *The River of the Mother of God: Notes on Indeterminacy, v. 2:*

> We don't tell ourselves stories in order to live, we tell ourselves stories in order to locate. Living is in some sense autonomic, the shit just keeps on. We tell ourselves stories in an effort to become relative.[1]

It was my second time seeing *(in)Visible,* but this time I was seeing it in something like home, in the city, or at least the metropolitan area, that I currently call home. I first saw the show when it premiered in Berlin, though I found out about it because many of the performers are based in the Bay Area. I'd been traveling almost two months, but the moment I joined the waiting crowd in Wedding, I felt an immediate familiarity, particularly during the prelude around consent. Before we entered the theater, Curtis explained in detail that much of the performance takes place in darkness and that if we chose to sit in certain areas of the room we might be touched by the performers. *Tap three times if you need them to stop,* he said, *or just, "no thank you."*

The concept of Curtis's show is a dance performance that decenters the visual. It is performed and informed by visually impaired artists. By limiting the amount of light available, introducing props that rustle and crinkle and whip as the performers interact with them, and involving the audience, Curtis asks us to experience through other senses and to notice, even monitor, our body's reactions.

Bay Area artists often include an awareness of trauma in the spaces where they present or perform, from the consent talks at the beginning of Keith Hennessy's de(composition) workshop to the way the disability justice performance project *Sins Invalid* offers educational workshops alongside performances. When I think about access-informed art making, I think also of local

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[1] Harry Dodge, "The River of the Mother of God: Notes on Indeterminacy, v. 2," *Harry Dodge,* http://harrydodge.com/portfolio/the-river-of-the-mother-of-god-v-2-notes-on-indeterminacy/.

artists like Jennifer Christine Williams, who work professionally as therapists or healers of some kind, and whose work is influenced by expressive-arts therapy schools like that at San Francisco's California Institute of Integral Studies. I think too of art whose content and form engages directly with embodied experiences of such trauma, as Amy Berkowitz's book *Tender Points* does. These experiences are touchstones of a network I've lived inside for much of the last ten years, one that has taught me to expect a level of awareness of trauma that — I remember when I travel — I cannot assume in all arts spaces.

In the warnings Curtis gave in Berlin before audience members entered the theater — what I've become used to calling "the consent talk" — he acknowledged that it's risky to ask people to be in the dark and possibly receive an unexpected touch. Even though I am used to this language, I could feel the way my skin prickled when the body was named, when the possibility of trauma was brought forth.

Such naming brings the realities of each individual audience member's body into the room. It can feel formal, but it can also elevate the sensual. Recently I participated in a workshop on Pauline Oliveros's Deep Listening, led by the artist Steph Kudisch. Prior to beginning, Kudisch reminded us to pay attention to the needs of our bodies, and to feel free to move to be more comfortable. I stretched out on my belly and dug my fingernails into the dirty carpet beneath me, suddenly self-conscious, aware of my own flesh. *No big deal if you need to leave,* Kudish said. I wondered about the standards of "need" here.

in(Visible) audience members were also reminded of the possibility of removing themselves. We were handed glowsticks as we walked into the theater and told that we could break them if we felt that we must leave in the middle of the performance. My friend Elisabeth called them "ejection devices" and there was this hovering feeling, that some danger might alight. I felt this not necessarily because of a specific history I have with trauma, but because of the belabored speech around it, the feeling throughout the performance that something intense is about to happen. I waited for it, braced for it.

In a way this is my primary experience of the show: expectation. After the performance in Berlin I talked with several audience members who said the consent talk was too much, that it made the work fall flat. *If you're going to talk that much about something that will happen, you have to really shock me,* one said. I didn't hear this reaction at the San Francisco performance, I think because we are more used to these instructions. But in addition to the pleasure and positive confusion I experienced while watching, I also experienced boredom. It's a flavor of boredom I feel in other consent-heavy spaces, and not one I much mind, as it seems a necessary sacrifice for safer spaces. It confuses my sense of how to judge a performance, but perhaps it's this confusion that an accessible space most presents and requires.

"But bafflement is an integral part of the pleasure and sometimes the comedy of the intimate, just as disbelief is a core affect of the political."[2] That's Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman in their collaborative book, *Sex, or the Unbearable,* in which they discuss the "unbearable" contradictions that arrive when an individual encounters the disintegration that sometimes results from physical intimacy. I move between spaces where consent is officially inscribed and spaces where it is not. With this movement comes a confusion, and in both directions. Yes, I feel unsure when I leave a space with specific rules, suddenly muddled about whether it's okay to take off my shoes and lie on the floor after a dance workshop. When does the community agreement begin and end? But I also feel unsure when I move into the proscribed agreements themselves, as I watch a facilitator write "step up, step back" on a whiteboard or listen to a painter tell

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[2] Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, Or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 116.

me to ask permission before applying paint to someone's skin. I am confused as my body slowly adjusts to new invitations. It's a body that often performs as an able body, and so it's not a part of my regular everyday experience to feel alienated by social rules.

What does it mean for art to be accessible? I think it is this choice: for alienation not to be immediately imposed upon a given set of people because of their specific abilities, but for alienation to be placed on view and offered as part of the experience. *Sins Invalid* centers disabled people of color, often framing their performances about sexuality, embodiment, and the disabled body with the idea that this work is "provocative" (according to their website) because it challenges "paradigms of 'normal' and 'sexy.'"[3] Discomfort from this "provocation" is named from the start. In relating to their own disability status in their multimedia work, Steph Kudisch rewrites inherited stories of monstrosity into new material,[4] while Anna Landa's *Sight Unseen* installations foreground non-normative experiences of sight and accompanying neurological function.[5] Each of these projects works not just toward a simple visibility of the experience of the differently abled but offers this experience to others as a possible way of approaching the world.

One of the most effective moves in *(in)Visible* are the performers' descriptions of what they are doing. *I am trembling,* said a performer behind my back, much like an accessibility-oriented image description on a photo. *I am noticing you,* one told another as they peered across the room toward the sound of a person tumbling. After wrapping an audience member in a section of cloth and putting on that person's backpack, a performer knelt and, as they did it, stated, *I place my head in the subject's lap.* And later, *I am dripping sweat on the subject.*

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[3] "Our Mission," *Sins Invalid,* https://www.sinsinvalid.org/mission.

[4] Steph Kudisch, "Imagining Dust," *Steph Kudisch,* http://stephkudisch.com/imagininGodust/.

[5] Anna Landa, "Sight Unseen," *Anna Landa,* https://www.annalanda.com/sightunseen.

The clinical word "subject" is used several times to refer to audience members as performers touch them. There's an unpleasant association, for me, with doctors and scientists poking at a patient or object, but with it comes the connotation of distance, of a desire to do things correctly by a given system of ethics. Both the use of "subject" and the narration of what performers are doing slowed time in a way that allowed me to actually parse each interaction as it was being named. This is a rare experience, one I don't often allow myself, in part because I know that if I slow down fully, I might feel unpleasant things. I might remember shitty experiences I've had in my body, injuries and transgressions, losses of connection to people I've loved.

But it's only when I do slow down that I can see where I am, that I am in one single place at any given time. I keep returning to location. I came home to the Bay Area from Berlin, I saw a show that I'd already seen, and I chose to sit in the same inner circle of chairs. That bit from Harry Dodge continues: "Where we are is fundamental because it comprises who we are. We locate, become relative, and manifest in relation. To accomplish this we need things to crash into."[6]

There is some crashing in this performance, but it's heavily padded by prologue and choice. This is ultimately about how much we are willing to set ourselves up to be altered. Truly accessible performance does not make this decision for us, but rather asks us to assess what our individual bodies can withstand in a given moment, based on who and how — physically, concretely, and emotionally — we are.

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[6] Dodge, "The River of the Mother of God."

Ode to the Clumsy

Men always want me to share more. From my first boyfriend on. Craig slurred at me in a dorm room hallway that I'd never really *let him in,* never talked about my feelings or had a single serious talk with him throughout our senior year of high school.

I shook his grip from my arm.

But you didn't either? It was a question how I said it, my voice rising at the end. I stepped back against the damp wall. We'd been broken up for months, the way I'd expected us to when high school, and what I saw as our role for each other, was over. I was less drunk than him (always) and couldn't quite follow his logic.

But then, it wasn't actually a logic I could cross into. At its heart was the belief that I should open myself to him, and fully. My thoughts along with my legs. And because I hadn't, he explained to me, I was "super fucked up" around relationships. He teetered and slumped to the floor.

You never even gave me a chance to know you, he looked up, his lush eyelashes in full effect. I was *fucked up* because I didn't open instantly, easily, for him. We'd known each other since we were twelve, but he felt he'd never gotten *enough* of me. He wrenched up his face and twisted toward the floor, and so, across the narrow hallway from him, I sunk down too.

I'm sorry? I said, hoping that would end it, but regretted it as soon as I spoke.

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In *The Body in Pain,* Elaine Scarry addresses biblical depictions of the inside and outside of the body, and the dynamics of the divine that operate between. Scarry observes that when a person in the Bible resists God, or belief in God, "the withholding of the body […] necessitates God's forceful shattering of the reluctant human surface and repossession of the interior."[1]

I can't help but see here a masculine God, one that refuses any scenario in which a person refuses to fully give themselves over. As Craig did, pulling at me in that dorm hallway for something he felt he wasn't getting.

It's not fair, though, to make this only about cis men.

He just wouldn't open up to me, Cara sighs. *We spent a whole weekend together and I barely feel like I know him.* I'll readily admit it's not always the case that the one prying open is gendered masculine; the penetrating gaze of women and queer people all around me bores toward the deepest darkest secrets of the people we want to know.

I want him to let me in.

She's hiding herself from me.

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[1] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 203.

I want more of you. All of you.

As if there was only one way in to where we're trying to go, and the tunnel is to blame for not being open.

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One weekend camping with friends in the Sierras, we laugh the whole time and I feel closer to them than I have to anyone in a while. My eyes tear and my throat is sore from laughing about our sad and weird experiences learning sex at summer camp from older kids, the stupid things we've said while trying to be cool. We are academics, therapists, entrepreneurs, and artists, adult people whose intelligence (emotional and otherwise) I respect. But in this weekend, I get a break, mostly, from speaking this intelligence. And in these conversations that I've sometimes termed *more surface,* I feel something more like closeness. More like trust.

Yes, because we're trusting each other to know we're not stupid, Ellie says from her perch on the granite boulder. *We don't have to spend the whole time proving we're smart or emotionally articulate, or have good politics, or have worked through our childhood shit…* She trails off and scratches the back of her leg, reaching awkwardly around to where a patch of calf got ravaged by mosquitos. I look away instinctively, not wanting to witness her weird body position. But then I look back.

"[T]he pose of awkwardness is very dangerous, because at this post-feminist moment one should be a top, one should win, etc," writes Eileen Myles in "Long and Social."[2] Myles is speaking here about the ways in which their own work is "a bad recording"[3] of lived experience, as opposed to the careful cura-

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[2] Eileen Myles, "Long and Social," *Narrativity* 2, https://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue_two/myles.html.

[3] Ibid.

tion of a memoir. They term this position of “bad recording” dangerous for women expected to be getting things “right,” topping the narrative, so to speak. Myles points here also to the precarity of power by noting their refusal to top. This choice to maintain an awkward pose (a crouch, perhaps) leaves their narrative body vulnerable to risk. The awkward narrative allows for others to also enter and also make claims upon the truth. The awkward body leaves the story open, incomplete.

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I want to see this awkward body—in part because I have it. I’ve been managing chronic illness and pain for years, and the answers from the doctors are always changing. The ob-gyn reminds me that too much estrogen in my body is forming the cysts on my ovaries, and the herbalist says my diet has too many estrogen-heavy foods, that I need to eat less of everything on the list she hands me.

It’s important not to feel defeated if the diet changes don’t fix everything right away, she tells me. *You are managing a chronic condition.*

I’m still trying to understand what exactly this means: how to explain that I’m incapacitated by endometriosis pain one month, but the next am out late and energized at night. I’ve been turning to sick, crip, and disability theory to try to better understand, even though of course I know these are not all the same. What I’m trying to understand between them is how to manage a condition that is largely invisible much of the time, how to manage something intentionally or inadvertently pushed out of view.

But: “disabilities are not exactly ‘visible’ or ‘invisible’ but *intermittently* apparent,” writes theorist Margaret Price in “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” “a better metaphor than vision for some kinds of disability might be *apparition*."[4] I latch immediately onto this, the way "apparition" flickers and returns at unpredictable times, often frightening those present when it appears.

The idea of chronic illness as apparition also feels soothing after years of trying to bore down into the core of how to fix this, how to find one thing I can do that will eliminate my symptoms — and failing, failing to nail it down. Sometimes I feel better, but I don't know why. I get up from bed, then later fall over, over, and over. It's never over. I stumble on my words when anyone asks how I am, and I try to explain.

"Clumsiness might provide us with a queer ethics," writes Sara Ahmed. "Such an ethics attends to the bumpiness of living with difference, so often experienced as difference in time; being too slow or too fast, out of time."[5]

The apparition of chronic illness is also "clumsy." Because my body moves clumsily in pain, but also because it is out of time, unpredictable, inconsistent. It does not respond well when asked to be consistent or reliable. ("Sick time is always escaping the institutional technologies invented to contain it,"[6] writes Anne Boyer.) It does not respond well when asked to be fully seen and understood. And it does not respond well to normative relations, queering the sense of my relationship to others in care, in attraction, and attractiveness, always incomplete and refusing the happy ending.

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[4] Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84.

[5] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 166.

[6] Anne Boyer, "This Imaginary Half-Nothing: Time," *Full Stop,* July 8, 2015, https://www.full-stop.net/2015/07/08/features/anne-boyer/this-imaginary-half-nothing-time/.

This is why I began with my teenage boyfriend. Because what's awkward and clumsy if not one's first relationship, one's first times attempting sex? Especially in a relationship where I was primarily attracted to the *idea* of sex, the performance of relationship and its accompanying teenage drama, not to any kinds of hot sex we were actually having. I didn't have the knowledge or communication skills at the time to redirect or explain this, and so remained stilted in what I told him, how our bodies moved together, and the way, ultimately, we broke up. *I guess we should stop dating now,* I bumbled on his porch steps the week before we left for college. I bolted away across his lawn into the night.

He remained angry at me for years for this breakup, and for refusing to "let him in" on what I had been thinking, wanting, needing. Things I didn't exactly know myself at the time. And I've come to understand the ableism beyond the misogyny in his anger, the insistence that a body and mind should even be available to seamlessly open.

But also, I am grateful now for the clumsiness that surrounded us then, my hormonal body ineptly attempting to work alongside another. I remember us in basements pretending to listen to *Dark Side of the Moon* on a couch we couldn't figure out how to arrange ourselves upon. Our limbs not knowing where to go against one another, yes, but also the emotional inelegance, how I rarely knew where to look or what to say.

"I considered how one cannot continuously manage one's emotive surface and, mostly, that this lack of control is something to be grateful for," writes Caryl Pagel.[7] So I am grateful to my teenage self, the self that stuck her ass in boys' laps while dancing and didn't know what it meant, genuinely shocked later by their desire. I am grateful to the awkward teenage self who avoided

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[7] Caryl Pagel, "Lost in Thought," *The Collagist,* June 7, 2018, http://thecollagist.com/the-collagist/2018/6/7/lost-in-thought.html.

intimacy wherever possible, terrified of risk and then on occasion spilling it all, with Smirnoff Ice.

And not just me but him, her, them, us, crouching underneath bathroom stalls because we'd locked ourselves in and didn't know where else to go but the sticky floor. The sense that we did not need to blast one another open in any male-, female-, God-like, or therapist-way, because, really, we already *were* shattered (à la Scarry) open, slithering on the floor and around in our hormones. Our unpredictable bodies our first hint that we might be that way — forever.

◊

This is how I've found myself embracing the clumsy, as a body half performed and half messy, half closed and half open. A person allowed to open only sometimes, a body willfully aware of change and potentially shifting states. To be clumsy is not to be fragile: it is to know that one is breakable, and to live, speak, interact, knowing this.

Clumsy might come in any gender, but because they're the ones I use, I'll use "she" pronouns here. She's been a beacon to me when I'm in pain, and a beacon to me when I try to explain my illness. She lets me shrug: *it's hard to know how I'll feel next week*. She lets me refuse to talk about it when I don't want to. She performs gender as she is available. She lets me spend forty-five minutes on my eyeliner and then say *fuck it* and smear it off.

She wants to be seen, but at the same time refuses to be seen completely: a position I'd want, for any person; the understanding that a public presentation doesn't necessarily mean she wants to be taken, opened, or entered entirely. Or that she'll be available in this same way tomorrow. Her hormones, her blood, her gender, her feelings, her laughter, none of it demands to be shattered or unwrapped for consumption.

I summon the spirit of clumsy from my teenage self, picking nervously at the pimples alongside her mouth as she tries to end the conversation with Craig on the porch. She doesn't know how to break up with someone gracefully. Her legs are half-shaven and bumpy, and her shorts are the wrong thing to wear in this late summer chill. She blurts and runs. She'll learn more later about what people want to hear. But for now, she doesn't know what to say, and I love her for it.

Kimchi Daily

> A witch desires to walk rather than be carried or pushed in a cart.
>
> — Elizabeth Willis[1]

Last night I had this dream that I was studying a famous person who'd become mentally ill. Unclear who, exactly. I was reading a lot about this person's life: I think maybe I was an actor trying to play them, or I was doing some kind of doctoral research.

But soon, because I was studying this person so closely, I started to lose my mind in just the same way they had. Their first hallucination had been seeing someone across the room who wasn't there. And so that happened to me, too — I saw a dark figure standing across the room from me by the window. No detail, just the outline of a dark figure who I knew was a hallucination.

So, in the dream, I went to get treatment. I found myself in a living room in a hospital and the room was it was full of plush couches and musical instruments. The nurse smiled at me,

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[1] Elizabeth Willis, "The Witch," *Boston Review,* March 1, 2011, https://bostonreview.net/poetry/elizabeth-willis-the-witch.

picked up a notebook, and asked me what I thought she should do when my hallucinations started to happen.

You know best, she said.

I looked around. There were crayons and finger paints and fuzzy blankets with unicorns on them. I thought: *Waldorf for mentally ill people.*

I know what you should do, I said to the nurse. *Give me kimchi daily — each day give me one serving of kimchi. It will help because it's fermented.*

She began to write it down, but out of the corner of my eye I saw a headless man across the room. I knew I was hallucinating again and getting worse.

Things started to move more quickly then. I began pulling out wet clumps of kimchi from the pockets of my broad-skirted black witchy dress and yelling urgently at the nurse, *kimchi daily! Kimchi daily!*

I moved into the center of the room and made a series of small piles of kimchi on the floor in a line, like a pill box that tells you what pills to take every day. I remember wondering in the dream if there would be enough kimchi in my pockets for seven piles, one for each day of the week.

See, you don't even have to make the kimchi, I said to the nurse, *I make it myself at home, so you can just give it to me.* (Which is true in waking life.)

But then I started hearing a low roaring coming from the direction of the headless man across the room, and I knew I was sinking quickly into hallucination. Even the kimchi wouldn't be able to save me in time.

And so, lying in my bed at home, I scream aloud. As I often do when the dream threatens to annihilate me. My husband next to me in bed shakes me awake.

Only a dream, love. He is used to this. I turn my face to his chest.

Kimchi daily, I hiss into his skin, *kimchi daily.*

◊

In my waking life people often congratulate me on taking care of myself so well, *with your home-cooked meals of whole foods, all your homemade ferments.*

You have the healthiest diet of anyone I know, my mother-in-law tells me, *you're going to live so long.*

You must have the happiest digestive system, a new friend remarks, *those probiotics.*

This is the fantasy of self-sufficiency: healthy in a closed loop, without needing anything from anyone else. So many of my friends are part of some segment of what's been referred to as "DIY culture," in which — though not necessarily reared with these skills — we cook "slow food," weave our own rugs, build our own tables, etc. We make beautiful handmade things painstakingly, proving ostensibly that post-industrial late capitalism has not left us without the capacity to cultivate our bodies and homes. We "develop skills," and become "craftspeople," everything a precious work of art.

"The idea of one's life as a work of art, as something to be invented or composed, transforms the occupational insecurity that faces contemporary workers," writes Micki McGee of contemporary self-help culture. She argues that self-help, among other social narratives, emphasizes cultivating oneself in order to make one feel that happiness is in one's own hands as opposed to those of social forces. "Instead of foreboding, the literature inspires a sense of possibility."[2]

And so, my life seems long and fruitful because of the ferments I make to keep my biome healthy. I am in control of how well I live up to that possibility. Clearly, though, a sense of foreboding has stuck around in my unconscious, the sense that if I don't work hard enough to cultivate or care for myself, there will be no safety net. I will lose myself, and it will be no one's responsibility but my own.

◊

There's a desperation in my dream to get better. And, as in many nightmares, an overwhelming impending doom.

"Still having, having it taken from your very hands, Whistle, or having no choice but to watch it, to let it, go, is exactly the moment most painful in the dream," writes poet Lisa Olstein.[3]

This is the point at which I always scream myself awake, the moment when I realize things are inevitably and irretrievably going badly.

But, more and more, I wonder what would happen if I stayed in my dream for that part, if I went past the point where I could manage my own care, if I stayed and listened then.

"Rather than pathologizing illness and self-destructiveness as disorders to be cured for efficiency's sake, we could reimagine self-care as a way of listening into them for new values and pos-

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[2] Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46.

[3] Lisa Olstein, *The Resemblance of the Enzymes of Grasses to Those of Whales Is A Family Resemblance* (Buffalo: Essay Press, 2016), 11.

sibilities," write members of the CrimethInc. Workers' Collective.[4]

But what does it mean to listen in to disorder? Or, what does it mean to listen to illness? If I gave over to my illness in the dream, what would come next?

◊

At my first twelve-step meeting the part I hated most was everyone talking about how they couldn't do it alone. I'd come to Al Anon, the group for family members of alcoholics, ostensibly to deal with the relational ripples of my uncle's alcoholism.

I'm turning to my Higher Power, said the first person to share, eyes to the ceiling, *because I need to stop pretending that I can do it alone.*

I'm learning what it really means to say we're powerless, said another person who fidgeted with their keys, *it means I can't handle anything by myself.*

I didn't share at all that first meeting, just listened and silently wept.

But I can *do it alone,* I thought it myself. *I am smart and strong-willed and well-educated.* I was physically repulsed by the first of the twelve steps: "we realized that we were powerless…"

I walked out quickly at the end of the meeting and evaded the hugs.

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[4] CrimethInc., "For All We Care: Reconsidering Self-Care," *The Anarchist Library,* December 2, 2020, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/crimethinc-for-all-we-care.

What am I doing in a meeting, I thought, *where people can't handle their own shit.* A meeting just a few weeks after that kimchi dream.

McGee again, this time summarizing Gloria Steinem:

> The popularity of 12-step groups and the rise of the "recovery movement" suggests that a large portion of the population had embraced a "liberation psychotherapy" notion of the individual as sullied during the socialization process — in need of liberation from the strictures of society so as to "recover" a lost self. [...] Steinem asked the difficult question: what are self-help and 12-step groups offering people that feminism, the Left and the Labor movement have failed to provide?[5]

McGee suggests, as have others, that the answer is, primarily, community: a sense of interlaced care that relieves some of the pressure on the individual — or, more precisely, instructs the individual to show up for communal experience to formulate an activity that will then benefit *both* them and others, a benefit that is only possible via this gathering in. Evelyn Nakano Glenn terms this, "making care central to citizenship,"[6] in contrast to making care an individual practice or the devalued work of mothers, grandmothers or, as is increasingly the case, underpaid migrant workers of the global South.

In their controversial piece, "An End to Self Care,"[7] B. Loewe proposes removing the emphasis on self-care from its acceptance in social justice movements, because of the way it divides us. They suggest we reorient toward "community care" in order not to isolate us in our own individualistic concerns and recommends that movement work should itself be the way we care for

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[5] McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.,* 97–98.

[6] Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 190.

[7] B. Loewe, "An End to Self Care," *Convergence,* October 16, 2012, https://convergencemag.com/articles/an-end-to-self-care-b-loewe//.

ourselves, instead of turning to individual activities, alone with a cup of tea or going for a solo jog.

Loewe's piece ignited a series of responses across activist communities, including an essay from writer and disability activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, in which she points at Loewe's romanticization of the person who needs nothing *but* work.[8] It's dangerous, she says, to instruct those experiencing pain or disability to just work harder or be more connected to community projects. Piepzna-Samarasinha reminds us that if we really want "community care," we need to move toward accessible spaces that actively care for the needs of individual marginalized bodies.

A crucial reminder and always necessary: not all of us are equal under a politic or belief system. Nakano Glenn writes of the "negative impact of coercive labor regimes on the ability of workers and their families to receive care from and provide care for their own kin."[9] Those working multiple jobs and barely making ends meet, those working with disabilities and under racist oppression cannot provide care in the same way more privileged individuals might.

What options do we have for a "community care" that does not force us to ignore the difference between individual bodies' needs nor take the labor of care entirely on to an individual's shoulders? Healer Dori Midnight suggests a "collective care," of interlaced and exchanged services (childcare, healthcare, cleaning, etc.), "but," she writes, "collective care doesn't have to

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[8] Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, "For Badass Disability Justice, Working-Class and Poor-Led Models of Sustainable Hustling for Liberation," *Organizing Upgrade,* October 17, 2012, https://www.organizingupgrade.com/archive-for-badass-disability-justice-working-class-and-poor-lead-models-of-sustainable-hustling-for-liberation/.

[9] Nakano Glenn, *Forced to Care,* 37.

be *instead* of self-care," collapsing here the hierarchy between two.[10] Midnight imagines situations in which care-related roles (giver, taker, needed, needy) are more fluid, in which self-, other-, and community-care form more of a continuum. I imagine this continuum also to allow for a continuum of *identities* that acknowledge histories, social positions, and oppressions. I imagine my care-worker friends –nurses, doulas, parents, nannies, etc. — being able to care when they have the energy, and being cared for when they are tired, as opposed to a system in which exhaustion means care-workers must remove themselves from collective experience in order to recuperate.

◊

I love that in my kimchi dream I am a witch, dressed in all black, cackling and screeching as my visions grow more intense, pulling preserved vegetables from the deep pockets of my broad witch's skirt and cloak, swooping across the room, pulled by forces no one else can see.

"One of the most common accusations of witches is night flying," writes Aurora Levins Morales, defining this act as

> the ability to change shape or endow a household object, a pot or a broom, with magical powers, and soar above the landscape of daily life, with eyes that can penetrate the darkness and see what we are not supposed to see. From these forbidden heights, one can see the lines of extinct roads and old riverbeds, the designs made by private landholdings, the relationships between water and growth, the proximity or distances between people. Those who can see in the dark can uncover secrets: hidden comings and goings, deals and

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[10] Dori Midnight, "More Healing, More of the Time," *Transform Harm,* https://transformharm.org/more-healing-more-of-the-time/.

> escapes, the undercover movements of troops, layers of life normally conducted out of sight.[11]

My witch sees madness coming from afar and attempts to stave it off with her own skills, pulling nourishment from her pockets — this witch who over the course of a few dream moments goes from a self-sufficient researcher to irretrievably dependent on the care of others.

My dependent self in this dream, she sees in the night. She knows it's not safe to have to depend on others, that there is not collective care ready in place, not yet. Under these conditions, my dependent self knows she will lose it, she will melt like the witch in the Wizard Oz. My dependent self: I scream myself awake so as not to stay in her body.

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[11] Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 93–94.

Static Palace

> To be seen surrendering: that is humiliation.
>
> — Wayne Koestenbaum[1]

Have you had those Chinese medicine tea powders? The kind so bitter they warn all the white people about them?

Have you tried these before? My acupuncturist's furry brows are raised high.

If not, you should play around with what time of day you can stomach them. She tells me to try dissolving the powder in more water if I can't get it down.

But that doesn't make sense to me, I say to my friend Johnny. *Wouldn't less water be better?* Just a short shot of herb gunk, as opposed to a whole glass, and less time spent drinking it? I wonder what assumptions are backing up how my acupuncturist chooses to recommend I take the herbs.

I want you to be able to tolerate them, she says, and *tolerance* is not a word in fashion in my worlds these days. I know it's

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[1] Wayne Koestenbaum, *Humiliation* (New York: Picador, 2011), 57.

different in a medical context, but *tolerance* to me rings of a 1990s diversity consciousness, a United Colors of Benetton ad in which bodies of different shades of beige and brown and pink dance separately from one another on a white background. It's a context where you don't have to take in information, only see it outside of yourself. It doesn't seem right for an herbal medicine that is supposed to significantly shift the adhesions in my abdomen where new cysts have fused my ovaries to my abdominal wall and other organs.

In any case, I've been taking these herbs for four months and they seem to be doing something. I've had less pain by far, and almost no nausea. I'm grateful, though mystified, so I gulp down the shot of murky powder water in the early morning light of my kitchen and stare at the Chinese characters on the bottle. The only English on the label tells me that these herbs are intended to treat *Stasis in the Lower Palace.*

It's because the blood isn't moving in your abdomen, my acupuncturist says, but I also imagine the herbs unsticking flesh from flesh inside me. I imagine some sort of fizzy substance like the way a denture cleansing tablet looked in the television commercials when I was younger and found those tablets totally unrelatable, any kind of health needs years and years away. But the imagery stuck: of an effervescence that purifies everything it touches. I imagine that *Stasis in the Lower Palace* is released inside the dark cavities of my belly, and every adhesion it touches eases away.

As soon as you menstruate you can take a break from the herbs, my acupuncturist says. She smiles and drapes a blanket over the needles between my toes before she leaves me to it. *I promise this is all worth it.*

Later at the ob-gyn they play back the sound of my womb on the speakers to test for — I can't remember anymore what precisely they're looking for this time. I listen to the *whomp-whomp* of my womb but understand nothing, and, later, the doctor understands nothing, either. *Come back next month for another one,* she says.

The whole appointment was a waste, I tell Michelle. *I'm not sure why I'm even spending my time on this.*

But it's your health, she says, *Nothing is more important to spend time on than your health.*

It's hard to know if this true, though, when the time spent results in so little accomplished or known. As a freelancer who bills by the hour, I'm accustomed to accounting for how each hour is spent, what was produced from each segment in time.

I read Kathi Weeks, a feminist theorist who friends have recommended to me for years, but I was too busy, I guess, to get around to it. This month I've spent enough time in bed, though, to get around to that list of books. In *The Problem with Work,* Weeks argues that waged work, and the drive toward productivity that it teaches us, has too closely and automatically come to define what it means to be human.

"Productivist ethics assume that productivity is what defines and refines us, so that when human capacities for speech, intellect, thought, and fabrication are not directed to productive ends, they are reduced to mere idle talk, idle curiosity, idle thoughts, and idle hands," writes Weeks, "their noninstrumentality a shameful corruption of these human qualities."[2]

In other words, Doing Things is what keeps us human, valuable, well-defined.

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[2] Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work* (Durham: Duke University Press: 2011), 170.

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My husband once told me he resented his ex-girlfriend because she had once been sick for a long time and she, he said, *always used it as an excuse.* An excuse to be idle, I guess. I panicked when I heard him say that, and that panic has stuck under me for years, even though he has apologized and retracted the comment. I pull myself out of bed even though my body doesn't want to, even though my body is weak with abdominal pain and I can't bend at my hips or knees.

I pull myself up for work, put on makeup and a dress and neaten my hair. Just for a video call with a client, but I pull myself up so they will not think I have been idle. I blow dry my hair so they will not know I just showered, since it is late afternoon. Even through the COVID-19 pandemic I do this, even when memes and newspaper headlines alike say that no one wears pants anymore and everyone is severely burned out and can barely concentrate. Even then, perhaps even more so, I feel the need to prove that I can work.

A few days later, I lay myself down for the ultrasound while the nurse creaks up the stirrups, and I spread my legs.

Where do you feel the pain, the nurse asks me, her tone not quite a question. She sounds more like she is listing the information she needs, and I am meant to list it back in her direction. I search back under my ribs for the stabbing I buried under oxycodone this morning. It's still there, though now as a quieter tugging. I point in that direction.

Afterwards, the nurse tells me my ultrasound has no new information, that the cysts from last month are stable in size. *We'll keep monitoring this,* she says.

Anna texts me while I'm tugging off the gown to ask how the appointment went. I hesitate, fingers over my phone screen. *Okay,* I text, *I think I'll be back to work tomorrow.* I return home from these days of medical appointments and try to stuff any useful task into the hours left, accomplish something so as not to feel I've wasted a day of my life.

Kathi Weeks again: "This fear of free time, whether manifested as idleness or indiscipline, should not be underestimated. If nothing else, it can testify to the ways in which models of both the individual and the collective have been shaped by the mandate to work and continue to be haunted by [...] the 'immense, nervous power' of the contrast between work and laziness."[3]

My husband walks in later and I am laid out on the couch clutching at various parts of me. I skipped the second oxy and the pressure of the pelvic ultrasound has set me further back tonight.

Just lay back, he says, *and don't move a muscle.* I lie there as he places tea into my hand, brings the ratty plastic heating pad for my aching static palace. The pain stiffens the muscles in my thighs and down into my calves, and I catch and hold my breath, an automatic reaction even though I know freezing up doesn't help. I tumble my stiff joints to the floor to try to stretch, something people are constantly recommending to me.

Why are you moving right now? my husband asks.

I'm trying to do something about it, I say. I wince into a barely-there forward fold.

Just lay back, my love, my husband says. But I feel the tenuousness of my worthiness, how easy it would be for someone to see me lying here and say that I am not trying hard enough, that I should be doing something (anything) to try to get myself unsick, back to a higher state of functioning.

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[3] Ibid.

In *Illness as Metaphor,* Susan Sontag writes of the central character in Akira Kurosawa's film *Ikiru* ("To Live"): "With one year left to live, Watanabe wants to do something that is worthwhile, wants to redeem his mediocre life."[4]

Being worthwhile, worth living, here, again, is contingent upon action.

> *worthwhile*
> *adjective*
> *1.*
> *such as to repay one's time, attention, interest, work, trouble, etc.*[5]

Not just action as in motion, then, but also as in financial exchange — *repay*. We know something is worthwhile if we have been adequately compensated for our time spent on it. If a life, then, is worthwhile, the person living it must adequately compensate others (the social world) for the expense of their being alive. Watanabe's "mediocre life" has not been sufficiently worth the while of the space it takes up, so he sets out to prove that in his last year of life he can use time (and embodiment) well.

So, *I'm busy,* I say, and reach from the floor for my phone. From here on the dusty carpet caked in strands of my own hair, I make up half-hearted stretches that don't help me. I shoot off typo-ed emails. Because I want to be worth my while.

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I hardly billed any hours this week. I was in bed. And when I wasn't in bed, I was reading, or writing this, or at least mak-

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[4] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador USA, 2001), 56.

[5] *Dictionary.com,* s.v. "worthwhile," https://www.dictionary.com/browse/worthwhile.

ing notes toward it, not sure what would become of any of it. I'm noticing, though, that my tolerance is growing for making notes, for this kind of uncertain time. I think because time spent sick, or tending to health, is also uncertain time, and I've been forced into lots of it lately. This kind of time feels less static than it used to.

The introduction to the exhibition *Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism's Temporal Bullying* refers to this kind of time as "non-compliant," and "dragging on and circling back, with no regard for the structure of the work week or compulsory able-bodiedness."[6] I am obsessed with this exhibition, the zone it makes for non-productive time to exist as interesting, as an object of art and art making.

For many years I've felt that to be sick meant to stop making, but this exhibition, and the (thankfully growing) body of work by sick and disabled writers and artists, some of whom you see in this book, points me in a different direction. It's a direction in which stepping off the track of productivity allows more important work to be made. I hesitate to call it "work" here, now, but I can't think of a better word in its place. Let's say, stepping off this track allows more important art, time — life — to take place.

Elsewhere in *The Problem with Work,* Kathi Weeks proposes what she calls "a feminist time movement."[7] Here she suggests that feminists do not go far enough when they demand that employers provide time off for people to fulfill traditional family duties. Instead, Weeks proposes shorter hours that "should also enable them to imagine and explore alternatives to the dominant ideals of family form, function, and division of labor."

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[6] "Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism's Temporal Bullying," *Bemis Center,* https://www.bemiscenter.org/exhibitions/sick-time-sleepy-time-crip-time-against-capitalisms-temporal-bullying.

[7] Weeks, *The Problem with Work,* 170.

Weeks argues that shorter hours are necessary to make way not just for existing commitments as they stand, but that idle time not already slotted toward a hobby or a family need is necessary for people to have the space to deeply consider the roles and actions they take, to be full agents in their own lives, in determining which roles they want to take on.

She continues: "The point is to frame it not in terms of the relentless choice between either work or family, but to conceive it also as a movement to expand the range of possibilities, to secure the time and space to imagine and practice the personal relations and household configurations that we might desire […] time for pleasure, politics, and the creation of new ways of living and new modes of subjectivity."[8]

Weeks's analysis argues for time itself that allows us to explore, to — as we might call it in kink or BDSM worlds — *switch*. Idle time allows us to switch our roles, to consider ourselves more fluid in our identities as opposed to rushing to fill our days with actions that shore up the identities we've inherited or taken on full force. Though we may on the surface appear "static," we may be actively switching, magically and invisibly.

"[T]here is reason to expect," Weeks writes, "that if given more time, people will find ways to be creative — even if those ways do not necessarily conform to traditional notions of productive activity. Rather than imply a state of passivity, it is important to recognize the potential social productivity of nonwork."[9] I love this non-productive productivity. I love the people who insist on exhibiting it and making it public. Being alive as a chronically ill person feels possible, even exciting, because of them and the worlds they make visible.

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 169.

Which is not to say that I don't still feel useless, don't sometimes fall into the pit of manic emails and productiveness. I do. But above my computer, the place where I do most of my writing and also my earning of money, I now keep a post-it on which I've written my favorite stanza from Emily Dickinson: "'Nothing' is the force / that renovates the world — "[10]

Which is to say I'm trying. I'm trying not to try. I'm trying to write in a way that renovates toward nothing, that renovates and believes in making without conclusion. Maybe this is statis still. Maybe I circle and circle and swallow the gunk and nothing changes. I do not *tolerate* it; it changes and swirls in my stomach and it's invisible what is produced. It's not in my control. The only way to keep going, for me, is to let go of belief in what this will yield, or that this will yield any one thing at all. I write, I think, and at the very same instant it all shifts in front of me. I'm trying to write in a way that allows me to believe in this kind of force.

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10 Emily Dickinson, "By Homely Gift And Hindered Words," *PoetryVerse,* https://www.poetryverse.com/emily-dickinson-poems/by-homely-gift-and-hindered-words.

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