

excerpts from *Out of Grief, Singing*



I have come to Tom's office to look at paper. I'm feeble, struggling with post-surgery trauma & my flatbed truck of sorrow. I leaf through binders of paper, relieved by their exotic names, the polish of their surfaces. My mom is here, I'm glad of that: she is able to watch me fold up & unfold again. She seems to have confidence in me. By moments, I have it too.

I am here to invent an announcement of Chloe's death, a birth announcement that can do double-duty. Tom, I know, will make it beautiful. He aches for me, he aches for Bill, he aches for our small daughter. He's a spirited man, this friend, & today's task requires of him a complex dance: protect the mourner, approach the mourner. He's gentle but sunny; I'm relieved that he has found a way to make room for his own energies & talents. I flip through binders of paper, & keep returning to parchment: there's something ethereal, fragile, lovely about parchment, yet some density too, echoes of scrolled announcements, biblical injunctions, meticulous record-keeping by solitary scribes in some other time & place.

I've brought the inkprints of Chloe's feet, perfect prints of perfect feet, unutterably small. They signal, better than anything, the unthinkable of this place I'm living. How could any feet be this tiny? Could the fierce, spirited baby, the baby who has died, have had feet this tiny? Perfect, human feet. My daughter's feet. How could I be a mother of a child with feet so tiny? How could the wearer of these feet be dead? How could I be the mother of a dead baby? I skitter toward the feet, I skitter away from them.

I try not to think about this part: the footprints were made after Chloe died. A nurse, gentle hands cradling this lost body, washed her, dressed her,

photographed her. She printed her hands, printed her feet. She did these things, last rites, out of respect for the feisty spirit of this baby, & for her father who stood watch hour upon hour, for her damaged mother, for the grandmother who hovered between loving the baby & attending her own daughter. I think of that nurse, there in the quiet room with my mom, the grandmother, each of them mourning the dead infant. I expect they engage in gentle talk, practical woman-talk, buttoning small buttons, coaxing cool feet onto an inkpad. Both of them marvel at the sturdiness of a body so small, both of them marvel at the finality of death. My mom, surely, holds this baby & thinks also of her own gone baby, of all that she hadn't been allowed to do or feel or say, the great weight of silence around infant death. My mom, finally allowed to visit old bruises, to offer herself & this baby the grace of attention, the human longing for dignity, respect.

I've brought the inkprints of Chloe's feet, & I'm leaning toward pink parchment. I've never been one to link girls with pink, & resolutely refused pink myself as a child—I was too proud for pink, too determinedly independent, too sensitive to the unstated equation of femininity & weakness. But now I know something else: the body of a premature baby has so little fat that the narrow arms & feet, the round belly, the ears & fingers & neck & ankles are ruddy, the deepest pink. The blood that streams furiously around the tiny body is scarcely below the surface, boiling with resolve, on an imperious mission to feed, defend, rescue. How could I choose green, or beige, or burgundy? Pink is a softer-than-Chloe color, but it's her color. She spent her days naked, wearing her skin bravely & with determination. Pink is a tough color; this is something I've learned, something I am learning.

I am suddenly overwhelmed with the enormity of this task: how can I announce the death of my daughter? Are there words for death? Tom hovers, solicitous, anxious to know how to insert his professional self into the murk of my horror at this thing that must be framed. He scans the footprints into his computer, clucks over their perfection. He listens, he leaves, I sit next to my mom & reel into the bottomless lake of sorrow. I have a pen in my hand; it, too, is paralyzed by the magnitude of the task. I weep. *I can't do this*, I say to the air, *I can't do this*. The pen writes Chloe's name, her birth date, her weight. The pen stops, I struggle for air. The pen writes, *she was a surprised package*—yes, that's exactly it. The muscles of my face pull in unfamiliar directions; I am an animate cubist painting. The pen writes, *she earned her wings in the quiet of the afternoon*. The pen marks & marks, scratches meaning onto a scrap of paper. The woman holding the pen careens away from her breath-holding agony.

Tom returns, gently takes the scratches & enters them into his computer. He moves the perfect feet around, a bodiless dance, finally sets them at the bottom of the page. The text bends & curves, makes a lifepath of six days. I remember to breathe again, drop into the relief of having spoken the untenable truth that has become my present self. I am the mother of a dead baby. I will send this beautiful note, this pink parchment with its bravely dancing feet, this

missive of birth & death. I will send it & send it. Every mailbox will carry traces of the cubist woman; each reader will feel the shudder of shifting planes. Their hands will quiver, just slightly, holding this parchment shard of terror with its words that spell a life. The promise of death for each of us, the promise of beauty.



I'm jittery. For the first time in my life—in my conscious life, anyway—I'm in an operating room. It's cold in here; at least I'm cold. I'm nervous, too. What will it feel like to have a baby cut out of me? The room is white, bright, cluttered. Denise, one of my nurses, bounded into my room late this afternoon, announced that they'd found a slot for my emergency surgery at 6:30; she's relieved because she won't have gone off-shift yet, & can attend at the delivery. I have no idea if I met her yesterday when I arrived, or today; my sense of time is scrambled. Right away I felt something solid in her, something that cut through the surreal haze of this experience. Perching on the edge of my bed this afternoon, she detailed the steps in a caesarian birth: spinal block anaesthetic, incision, hurry the baby into the care of the waiting neonatal team, attend to the mother. She is clear, offers detailed descriptions. She doesn't pretend there is no risk, no pain, no terror. She expects I have the resources.

I do. I am jittery, but I'm focusing on my tasks. I have to stay calm, I have to stay calm. In a way, it's all I can offer my sick baby. It's precious little. Teetering on the lip of this enormous event, I'm determined to be present. I'm relieved that Denise will be there; she feels like an ally, someone who sees through the complicated panic of this situation & finds *me*, a woman with fear, a woman with resources. We smile at one another, breathe the same air.

Now here I am, in the operating room with its bright lights, its million unnameable instruments. The anaesthetist, gentle & funny, helps me heave my legs over the side of the bed. He asks me to hunch my back & stay perfectly still. This part, I know, has its risks: all those prickly vertebrae evolved for a reason. He will ease his long needle between the bones, through the outer sheath & into the cord itself, numb sensation from mid-body down. A spinal block, it's called. I shiver with the chill of nerves, remind myself to breathe, whisper *I can do this, I can do this*. This is my mantra, my participation in this inexorable story. The anaesthetist hums country songs, absent-minded. The room is silent while he prepares. Then Bill coos softly; his voice lifts me into my courage. I open my back, hunching myself down & over the inflated ball of my womb. Suddenly I am present to my grandmother, her dowager's hump a message I'd never been able to read while she was alive. My grandmother: mother of thirteen, graceful in poverty & difficulty, a woman of generosity & fortitude. I push out my spine, feel myself connecting in an unfamiliar way to my mother's mother, to my mother, to the mothers. Our bodies at the mercy of forces we'll never quite comprehend.

The drug slides in, I'm rolled back & strapped onto the bed. I'm relieved by the straps, to be honest: I can't imagine balancing on this sloping surface; I've lost the ability to shift my weight. I can't feel myself. That's not true: I feel huge. I laugh up to Bill: *my legs are enormous, elephant legs. Can you see from there?* He's at my head, determined protector, steely with intensity. He rests his hand on my shoulder, peers over the curtain that drapes across my chest.

The cast for this drama is in place; behind that curtain, act one is about to begin. I breathe awkwardly into the oxygen mask, gaze up. Denise is at one side, Bill at the other; the curtain divides me from the unfolding drama. I can feel pressure on my abdomen: *the incision*, I think. I'm uncomfortable, but I don't feel pain. One arm is folded across me—that's the way I've been arranged—& the blood pressure cuff wrapped around my folded wing inflates frequently. Each time it puffs up, the holes from yesterday's blood samples strangle & throb. I'm irritated by these intrusions; they distract me from the real event. My chin begins to wobble violently, knocking my teeth against one another. I make an effort to relax myself; the banging stops, then starts again. I'm frustrated: obviously I'm not managing my nerves. Denise bends over, asks me again how I'm doing. *I can't stop my teeth from chattering*, I say, apologetically. She smiles, squeezes my shoulder: *that's the drugs speaking*, she says, *you can't do anything about that*.

She & Bill are increasingly absorbed in the process beyond the curtain. Later, Bill will say proudly that he's one of the only people who can say he loves me inside & out. *The layer of fat just under the skin is like a string of pearls*, he will say; I will be both repulsed & grateful. The abdominal pressure is taxing, perhaps because it is so abstract; I can't tell what is happening, or even where. I'm surprised by the whoop of excitement as the baby—a tiny girl—is lifted from my body. A huge hand holds her near my face for a brief moment before whisking her to the warming table & the ministrations of the NICU team. She has pre-dawn eyes, deep blue & clear. She takes my measure as I take hers. We gaze across the gulf of air & challenge, assert our collective will. Both frail & tough, she is an ordinary miracle: a newly-minted human. She is my daughter.

I laugh & cry, the world careens off its moorings, time stops to mark this arrival. My laughter silences, for a moment, the violence of my rattling teeth, the wheezing of the blood pressure cuff, the orchestrated traffic of the many workers here. Bill has followed the baby's magnetic trail; alone, strapped to this strange narrow table, I am released into my awe. A birth.

Denise leans down, quietly explains the post-birth tasks: removing the placenta, repairing the incision. The pressure is suddenly excruciating, I am nauseous from the heavy hands digging & digging. I think I might cry; I am small & sniveling, unable to tolerate these last intrusions. I am worn out.

In the recovery room, Bill & I gaze at the Polaroid photo of this beautiful baby, awed by her steady gaze, the small rose of her lips. Denise, scrubbing alongside another nurse, remarks on her mouth, on the wooly halo of hair, the balance of her features. We are drunk on the photo. We look & look, try to

imagine that this being, this extraordinary wee soul with her hat perched askance, has made us a family. There's a carnival feeling in this room, clatter of nurses & running water, joyful chatter siphoning away the tension of the surgery. I am aware of the oddity of a small bed parked in a large room, but the swirl of quiet voices & ordinary activity counters the peculiarity of being *a patient*, & distracts us all from the pervasive worry about the fragility of this new being. The nurses ask what we will name her. *Chloe*, we say with absolute confidence. She arrived wearing the name we'd imagined; we will only come to know later how unusual that is. Bill & I confer, then ask Denise if Chloe could have her name too. She blushes, sputters her surprise. *Chloe Denise*, our perfect baby. Later I will discover that we've settled on names which mark out the reach of growth & chaos, the body in the world. *Chloe*, a green shoot, issues from Demeter, the goddess of the green world; Denise winds back into Dionysus, god of wine & revelry. It's a tall order, to fold growth & dissolution into a small body. Then again, it's the tall order we all face, the human challenge—painful, exhilarating, a whirl of flesh & dreaming.

Denise slips a needle into my intravenous line. *Morphine*, she whispers, drug of choice. *I'll check on you in a couple of days, when I'm back on shift. Rest & mend. I'm so pleased: you have a daughter!*



My room on the ward is an arbor, the thick smell of lilies & roses a curtain nurses must pass through. Everyone remarks: *the flowers, the flowers here are amazing*. They are. When I can muster the stamina, I am swamped with gratitude for our friends & colleagues, & for the florists who lovingly gather & group these blooms. Close by, I keep the vase of large white lilies, their smell less funereal than celebratory for me—my wedding memories are saturated with lilies, the smell of joy. I am awed by the extravagant simplicity of this cluster of white blooms. Shooting stars speaking to a life that's here & not quite here, mysteriously available & yet beyond us. In my room are roses, too, a burst of sweetheart roses, perfect ivory buds & blossoms, & daisies & mums & freesia & whispery things I don't recognize. Every flower has been cradled in someone's hands: each one has been chosen specifically, & placed into visual conversations that require no words from me. They speak, & I am released into the quiet of my listening.

The nurses remark on the flowers, & the rare times I leave the room I am struck on re-entry as well. The visual glory of it all, but even more, the earthy smell, subterranean messages for my primordial brain. Mostly I am confined here, in the dark quiet of this bower, trying to imagine my way out of hell. I struggle to see through the blur of the headache, to breathe through the terror of this version of motherhood.

I am grateful for the flowers. They're a buffer between me & all that I can't bear. They soothe me with their uncomplicated beauty, their generosity. They

are quietly separate from my wracked body, my anxious bewilderment over the sick baby I can't even visit. They shine in the low light of my room. They remind me of the people who've sent them, but mostly they remind me of the thick sweep of living things, the barrage of beauty & spirit that animates the world.

Flower brains are different from human brains. They know serenity, offer beauty without expectation. When the fluid stops making the climb up to their heads, they nod silently. And then they die. The ones in my room have already begun to die, began the moment they were severed from their roots, but they don't entertain notions like *injustice* or *rage*; they neither rail at nor resign themselves to the mysterious workings of the gods. They would never, in their quiet way, murmur *I suppose it's for the best* or *these things happen for a reason*. They never think *if only...*

As I leave the hospital after a week in the company of flowers, our social worker suggests I carry something into the house. *Nobody should come home empty-handed*, she says. She is, it strikes me, the most compassionate stranger I've ever met. I ride through miles of pain in a car with a million blossoms, all of them willing to stand in for what I cannot have. I walk up steps with white lilies, shooting stars straining for release from the plain earth. Their dusky smell tells me I'm home. I live in a body which will nod & die.



I've made it through the gate of a new year, which in itself feels like cause for celebration: when I'm startled & drenched these days by the frequent tidal waves of anguish, I can't imagine making it through the next hour. But here I am, riding home from a quiet evening with friends, riding home to my parents' place in the back seat of their car, alone in the dark. The engine drones, the car murmurs over the gravel road. This dark is the dark of my childhood: private, secure, I am riding home from Grandma's house, faking sleep in the driveway to be carried in by strong arms.

I have made it through the gate of a new year, & so has Bill, back in Ontario preparing for another teaching term; our friends have offered him a safe envelope of company tonight too. We have spoken gently toward one another on the phone this evening. Together we have gathered in the weight of the unspoken, offered our winnowed selves into the safekeeping of the year ahead. Over the next months, he will escape into the relief of structure, the relentless rhythms of teaching & research; it will cost him & it will console him. My doctor will caution me, several weeks from now: *don't overlook the therapeutic value of work*. Her counsel will haunt me, even as I flee to unmarked canvases: a sojourn on the winter prairie, unprogrammed hours at home. I will suffer guilt for my lack of efficiency & productivity, but I am beyond the discipline of work's demands & routines. I am desperate for space; it is my way.

In the back seat of my parents' car, I can't see past this minute, & that is a gift in itself. I stretch, shift positions, wish I'd eaten less turkey. By the time

we arrive home, I have a champion gut-ache. I chew down antacid tablets, wrap a hot water bottle in a towel, perch at the big table strewn with puzzle pieces. My parents hesitate—they must be tired—then join me. It's two in the morning, the world hushed, suspended like the ice crystals in this prairie air, & we pick at pieces, three bodies that have outgrown this particular nest. Except for the pain in my belly, I am completely at peace. I grunt, sigh a bit, shift on my chair. *I remember*, my dad begins, *when I was a kid, sometimes the cows would get The Bloat*. I hear the capitals, grin to myself. I've always loved my dad's stories, their economy, their shrewd translation of particulars. I have no idea what The Bloat is; I'm a town kid, & a different generation. My mom nods, smiles lightly at the piece in her hand. *If cows get into something they shouldn't—alfalfa, or grain spilling out of a granary—they get terrible gas, it just swells them up, their bellies hard as rocks*. I think about this, press the water bottle onto my own distended belly. This is good, this is what I need. *Yeah, it'll kill 'em, The Bloat*, says my dad; *that stuff ferments in there*. In the inner monologue that parallels the story, I pause: *it'll kill 'em*. I stretch, try to breathe down into the pain. *You had to let that gas out, before it killed 'em. We used to pierce right through the hide, a knitting needle'd do it. Just poke through, let the gas out*. He places a piece into the sky.

I laugh out loud, then shudder: how much force would you need to poke a hole in cowhide? What kind of desperation? *Got any knitting needles around here, Mom?* I ask. *I could really use one*. I stretch my back to make enough room for the ache, settle into the puzzle. I'm aware of being the child of these two amazing people; I'm aware of the calm spaces they create for me here in the nest of my childhood, & of their own younger selves, the decades-old & newly-fresh grief of infant death that shapes their days as well as mine. I am aware of the adult I have become in their presence, of the new configuration of family we're learning to realize. They are grandparents to my child, a child my father has never seen. I imagine they have spoken together about her, about me, about the aching ordeal of loss & survival. They let me speak—they will always let me speak—but they don't seem to need me to speak; somehow they hold enough in their hands to make sense of where I am. They reach out, leave me room to move toward & away.

I take a fresh hot water bottle to bed, fidget my way toward sleep. I doze, then wake. I get up, head to the bathroom, return to bed. I'm gasping, sweating, struggling with the discomfort. Mom materializes beside the bed—summoned by sharp hearing or intuition, this is my child-universe—& wonders if we need to head to the hospital. I hesitate, hobble to the bathroom again, decide *yes, yes, I need help*.

New Year's Eve, halfway to dawn, & I'm in the emergency department of my parents' small town hospital. Nurses flurry around, call the doctor to come; many of them know the shell of my story already, & they're anxious to bring what ease they can. I am nearly blind with the pain: a belt cinches around my rib cage, robs me of breath & voice. I hunch up on all fours, grimacing. The belt

tightens. I'm a cat, or a bloated cow. Or a woman in labor. I suddenly see it, am stiff with embarrassment: how could I have come here, crippled by a dream of labor? I can hardly bear myself.

The doctor arrives, burly & affable, asks me to describe what's happening. I choke out bits of information—spasming diaphragm, acute pain—and bits of story—pre-eclampsia, baby death. He digs his fingers under my diaphragm, searches behind his eyelids for insight. A shot of Demerol, a dose of muscle relaxant, gradual easing of symptoms. Acute indigestion, that's what he supposes. He returns to his sleep, I curl toward my mom.

Before they can move me to the room I'll stay in tonight, I am overtaken by another bout: my face pulls out of shape with the pain. Mom catches my eye, laughs, then sobers: *I thought you were making a face*, she says, *that would be like you to make a face*—My belly shudders, taut, beleaguered. *I am trying to have a baby*, I think, *I am trying to have a baby*. It humiliates me to witness this misguided will, my body's determination. I sit in a hot bath, delay the next dose of Demerol as long as I'm able; I don't like the thickness that blankets down on me after I take it, the disorientation, the paranoia. I add & add & add hot water, struggle toward the dawn.

In this hospital, I will spend a night & day, be released, then return. My nurse will bet that I have gallstones; the doctor will shake his head, unpersuaded. In a few days, the ultrasound will confirm the nurse's suspicion—*your gallbladder is full of gravel!* the specialist informs me—and the nurse will collect a ten-dollar bill from the laughing doctor, right in my room. Pregnancy hormones, I discover, often rev up a sleeping gallbladder, a ridiculous design flaw. After that I will live for weeks on such a restricted diet that the day I introduce fish into my clear soup, I think I will faint from the flavor. Six weeks later, I will lie in another hospital on another gurney, prepared for the drug doze that will let a surgeon poke holes to remove the offending organ. It will not escape me that I am losing this small, useless thing almost exactly on Chloe's due date, but I won't speak of it for fear of hurting myself. I will walk through the end of winter watching scars deposit their thick silver over all the holes the knitting needles poked to save a body's life. Each night my husband will buff those scars with his tender mouth, buff them until they shine.



In southwestern Manitoba, the trees aren't tall & stately. Children in stories made their way through *woods* or *forests*, but we had *bush*: tough, narrow aspen & birch stretching skyward, with dogwood & hawthorn underbrush to impede the passage of all legged beings. In southern Ontario, I discovered, trees tower overhead, & you can prowl the forest floor in search of trilliums & trout lilies; in the fall, the green islands turn a spectacular scarlet. My bush, tangled & determined, turns yellow, only yellow. The leaves clatter, increasingly desperate, then suddenly disperse, leaving their branches shivering in the cold

air.

In the back seat of my parents' car, a few weeks after Chloe's death, we're driving through the bush. It's winter, the sky an impossibly blue backdrop for bare branches. I'm trying to think—of anything, really: my mind is apparently frozen, stretched taut like the sky of my childhood. I am present & absent. I stare out of the windows, relieved to be unhitched from the life that must be going on without me. I'm not at work, I'm not at home, I'm not writing or reading or talking. I'm in the backseat of my childhood, considering the bush.

Today, each branch is a startle of hoarfrost. On the prairie, we don't see a lot of mid-winter hoar frost; perhaps we don't have the suddenly moderate days that pull glitter out of the air, or perhaps the air is simply too dry. When I was a child, my mother would sing us out of sleep on a day like today: *it's fairyland!* Her delight would carve through sluggish brains, we'd lunge toward the window to check for ourselves. The place I live now is no fairyland, but the brilliance today is something beyond beauty, something beyond astonishment: it compels me to hold it in my eyes. Branch upon branch, my scrubby bush is furred with crystals. It's cold, it's clear, it's bluntly ravishing.

A lift of sparrows—dull brown, nondescript—suddenly materializes above the treetops, stark against the blue. A ribbon of movement, they traipse haphazardly after an accidental leader, resettle in another tree. *Who begins?* I wonder, *who knows who to follow?* I am drawn into their story, watch them lift & settle, lift & settle. They flurry across the highway behind us; I watch the shape they create together, an undulation, a thing—both whole & inadvertent—which could, at any second, disintegrate into its separate, insignificant particles. I see my daughter, released from me.

This cluster of birds, these blinding branches: I am being offered something. A lesson, of sorts, about accidental beauty, about the human wish to see meaning in every performance. About the mystery of ephemera, these small birds acting in concert. About the safety of childhood, about my own history of mourning. I weep while the birds lift & settle. Far above, a white line appears in silence, a jet unzipping the blue sky on its way somewhere else.



Time doesn't move quickly for a mourner; time doesn't really move at all. The heart—a hawk, an eddy—spins & spins around its absent wish. I play music, I listen to silence. I move from one chair to another, pick up a book & put it down again. Each day I empty the mailbox, read cards & letters from faraway friends, hear their struggle with distance, dismay, disbelief. I sit next to myself, watch the relentless desire for comfort shudder through my bones. The cards & letters warm me, but they don't reach to the middle of me; they don't interrupt my circling.

Time is suspended when you're mourning. Hours move past, but moments hang, swollen drops at the kitchen tap. The light leaves one room & wanders

into the next, the grieving mother migrates with it, but she's still inhabiting the same moment she met this morning when her feet eased themselves out of bed for the day. She has showered, she has dressed, she has checked her email. Perhaps she has played solitaire with her computer. The day floats past, or she floats through it. Vertical time: there is no story here, no narrative to press a body from one moment into the next. A cup of tea, a pile of letters, a dream of comfort. She moves up & down in her own body, navigating a deep pit of sorrow. She weeps, often without warning, then, just as suddenly, she finds herself lifted into something approaching relief.

She can bring herself to do almost nothing. She cannot read a novel: she simply cannot follow a plot, & doesn't trust it anyway. She can stand in the shower, at home in a pounding drama that has no point, no direction. She moves from room to room. New baskets of plants dry out, wait patiently for attention; she plans to water them & doesn't, she reminds herself & forgets. Their parched voices rebuke her.

In the first weeks of sorrow, there isn't much to be done. You remember, you forget. The wish that animates your days is also a wish you may never again hold. Its eyes are closed to you, its ears deaf to your calling. Sometimes the anguish of that will cripple you, sometimes you will shake it aside & glimpse something entirely neutral, something before. Always, though, the longed-for is at the center: it tethers you to it, a solid absence, a hole, a gash, a rent. A scandal. You would do anything—or, truthfully, anything but *this*, this endless circling, this suspension, this torpor. It's vertiginous.

The inside of a cocoon is dove-grey, soft as ash. Away from the press of the world, a body hovers, inactive but not inert. Another life, a life after confinement: anything is possible.



I have come with my parents to their friends' home at the edge of the bush. Tom has offered to hitch his horse to the cutter, give us rides in the winter brilliance. My father's sisters are here, their delight ricocheting through the frozen air: they remember taking a cutter to school, one time tipping out the teacher who boarded in their crowded farmhouse. Accidentally, of course. The stories tumble & tease, transport us.

For weeks I will be two simultaneous selves: one remembers how to breathe & sleep & eat & converse, the other retreats in pain. I'm surprised by my own alacrity; I can absent myself in an instant. It always takes longer to come back.

Tom brings the cutter up from the barn. My lively aunts, steeped in a genuine love for their own younger selves, are suddenly bashful. They wonder if they remember how to clamber into a cutter, they wonder what it might mean to ride in one at a distance of so many decades. Tom grins, sparkly-eyed boy hiding inside the moustached man; the women settle into the seat.

When they come back up the lane twenty minutes later, they are pitching

their joy in all directions: they bless us with memories, with the riotous laughter of aging widows suddenly offered their youth. Aunt Alice throws her head back—I can see the tender skin of her neck tucking out of the scarf—& swallows the early dusk. She can't remember when she has been this happy. I stand still in the snow, an eager witness; I watch their faces crack open in the brilliance of what is gone. Then I am careening toward the roaring silence which partners me every minute. I grasp for the thing I see in those faces, whatever it is that imbues precious losses.

Tom helps the women out, waits quietly for me. I am almost too freighted to move. My dull limbs climb in, he chuckles quietly to the horse, it paces down the snowy track. The sway of the cutter, but also the quiet, the ease, the proximity of this man I hardly know, loose me, & I fly into the late-day sky, first scatter of stars. *I have lost my baby, I have lost my baby:* chant of hooves, song of snow. I am suddenly certain that I am running toward rather than away. It's a palpable relief.

We ride in silence, half-buried barbed wire fences marking our progress toward no goal. I could ride all night. At some point, we turn around, head back to light & people & the work of contact. *Don't worry about your mom & dad.* Tom clears his throat, glances sideways to hold my eyes. *We'll be near, we'll let them speak.* I nod. A piece of me shifts into a new position, relaxes toward ease in this frozen, open space. *Do you have someone to talk to at home?* he asks. He is gentle, respectful. *You need to have people who will listen, you need that. We all need that.*

The cutter turns into the lane. I am running toward, heart broken open & ready.



This is soon after Chloe's death. In the instant of waking, I've already lost the dream, but I am saturated with the timbre of it, sombre, weighty, like Verdi's *Requiem* or the smell of hyacinths. It sticks to me all day.

I hear my voice echoing along the contours of a phrase: *the descent into history.* This is the dream's offering, an incantation that haunts me. I carry it around with me, practice it under my breath. I cannot make out what it means.

A week later, I think I've solved it: *the descent into history* is the map of my daughter's flight. Birth is a descent, the old poets explained that. A mixed blessing. I think of my intrepid traveller, finding & losing a mortal body. It's an incomplete map.

Another week passes, & another. A month gathers itself & flies away, another month, a year. I live without skin, then I gradually grow new layers, leave my cave, make excursions into the world again. I become well. I have a baby, I have another. One day, watching my young daughter perform astounding feats of 2-year-old magic for her big brother, the phrase rises, unbidden, echoes around the back of my brain. It has changed, I see, & so have

I. It speaks to me now about my own descent, my own lowering body. I watch my children play, am struck again by the weight of this miracle, ushering them into the terror & joy of living.

These two intense beings drag me, over & over, into the absolute present moment, the complex flood of information which makes & remakes us. Together we explore the reach of affection, of passion, of desire & determination, together we agonize over the distance between a fully-bellied whale of a wish & the daily slights & disappointments which keep threatening to defeat it. We reach toward, we draw away from, we burrow, we fly, we stand stock-still. This, it strikes me, is not history: this is the perpetual, resolute, endless present.

When I retrace where I've been, though, or when I imagine where I'm going; this is the other face of parenting. Of all relationships which matter, whether with children, partners, friends, even work. Dreaming is a descent, it pulls apart the tangled skein of present moments & lowers you in, lets you follow particular strands, like a shuttle with potent magnets at each end. You gaze back, find stories to explain where you are; you lean forward, rehearse your life of days. History: a narrative soaked in time, a sensible dream.

Love places you, relentlessly, in the flurry of the present moment, the flux of feeling, the intense, expanding instant of being present to an other. I am swallowed into the company of my children, their exuberant joy, their passionate sorrow. I am there only, accompanying, overwhelmed by the pulse of my own life. Love insists that you dream it into the literal folds of the day: hands peeling an apple, checking a sleeve for the second mitten, drying a damp boy after his bath. A parent & a child cuddle under a blanket to read the last story of the day. A mother & father lock eyes above the heads of the brilliant suns at their table. Love: the force that animates each single, startling moment, sets it apart from the blur. Love: the provocation to hook those charged moments together, blast a channel through a life.

How to love an absent being, perhaps that's the question that crouches mutely, the hungry terror beneath the daily observations of grief. In the early days, it's an unthinkable dilemma: a precious dream has been stolen, the stunned self must fly & fly, a tireless searcher, & only a shell attends to the world which whispers against the body. A heart carved from a living body, the torture of loss. It's desperation, the clench of empty arms, phantom pain—it's a long way from love. Days, weeks, months, then one day, I am startled to know, with absolute certainty, that I will never be without this dreamchild, this sprite who is something more & something less than imaginary. She is folded—fully, intimately—into my being. Some bonds are more potent than history can record: a child will always have a mother, a mother will always have her child. It is astonishing.

I think about that a long time. I am trying to understand something about how we dwell in our bodies, in our lives, in our loves. I am learning that I don't have to lunge toward the fleeting presence of my gone daughter; if I am quiet,

in my own skin, I will register her, a singing flutter of light. She is my inhabitation.

I consider my scarred self, its laborious move back into the fullness of a life. Some descents offer you better vision, stronger lungs, more nerve. Wreckage can bless you, I am learning to believe that, wreckage can crack you open, make more space for the world to get in. Love is an awkward dance of pain & celebration, & here I am again: out of grief, singing.



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