Perhaps anticipating this horror, Sedgwick explained to us that the game had a kind of out. She said that we were free to offer up a fake animal, a kind of decoy identification, if we so desired—if, for example, we had a "real" totem animal that we would prefer to keep to ourselves.

I didn't have a real or fake animal, and so I just sweated as we went around the room. When it got to me, I burped out *otter.* Which was a form of true. It was important to me back then to feel, to be wily. To feel small, slick, quick, amphibious, dexterous, capable. I didn't know then Barthes's book *The Neutral,* but if I had, it would have been my anthem—the Neutral being that which, in the face of dogmatism, the menacing pressure to take sides, offers novel responses: to flee, to escape, to demur, to shift or refuse terms, to disengage, to turn away. The otter was thus a complex sort of stand-in, or fake-out, another identity I felt sure I could shimmy out of.

But whatever I am, or have since become, I know now that slipperiness isn't all of it. I know now that a studied evasiveness has its own limitations, its own ways of inhibiting certain forms of happiness and pleasure. The pleasure of abiding. The pleasure of insistence, of persistence. The pleasure of obligation, the pleasure of dependency. The pleasures of ordinary devotion. The pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realizations, write the same notes in the margin, return to the same themes in one's work, relearn the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again—not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life.

"Many people doing all kinds of work are able to take pleasure in aspects of their work," Sedgwick once wrote, "but something different happens when the pleasure is not only taken but openly displayed. I like to make that different thing happen."

One happy thing that can happen, according to Sedgwick, is that pleasure becomes accretive as well as autotelic: the more it's felt and displayed, the more proliferative, the more possible, the more habitual, it becomes.

But, as Sedgwick knew well, there are other, more sinister models. A famous example from Sedgwick's own life makes this clear. In 1991, the year Sedgwick was first diagnosed with breast cancer, Sedgwick's essay "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" was made notorious by right-wing culture warriors before Sedgwick had even written it. (They found the title in a Modern Language Association program and went to town from there.) About learning she was ill just as the "journalistic hologram bearing [her] name" became the object of ugly vitriol, she writes: "I don't know a gentler way to say it than that at a time when I've needed to make especially deep draughts on the reservoir of a desire to live and thrive, that resource has shown the cumulative effects of my culture's wasting depletion of it." She then names a few of the "thousand things [that] make it impossible to mistake the verdict on queer lives and on women's lives, as on the lives of those who are poor or are not white." This verdict can become a chorus of voices in our heads, standing by to inhibit our capacity to contend with illness, dread, and devaluation. "[These voices] speak to us," Sedgwick says. "They have an amazing clarity."

The way Sedgwick interprets it, it wasn't just her linking of a canonical writer with the filthy specter of self-pleasuring that struck her critics as depraved. More galling was the spectacle of a writer or thinker—be it Sedgwick or Austen—who finds her work happy-making, and who celebrates it publicly as such.

Worse still, in a culture committed to bleeding the humanities to death, along with any other labors of love that don't serve the God of capital: the spectacle of someone who likes her pointless, perverse work and gets paid—even paid well—for it.

Most writers I know nurse persistent fantasies about the horrible things—or *the* horrible thing—that will happen to them if and when they express themselves as they desire. (Everywhere I go as a writer—especially if I'm in drag as a "memoirist"—such fears seem to be first and foremost on people's minds. People seem hungry, above all else, for permission, and a guarantee against bad consequences. The first, I try to give; the second is beyond my power.) When I published my book *Jane: A Murder*—a book that took as its subject the 1969 murder of my mother's younger sister—I too nursed terrible fears: namely, that I would be murdered as Jane was, as punishment for my writerly transgressions. It took the writing of not only that book, but also an unintended sequel, for me to undo this knot, and hand its strands to the wind.

Now, this story is old news, especially for me. The reason I'm bringing it up again is that, in the months directly preceding Iggy's conception, I was interrupted for a spell by a stalker of sorts—a man obsessed with Jane's murder, and with me as someone who had written about it. It started with a message on my voice mail at work: a man called to say my aunt "got what she deserved," and called her a name. Specifically, he called her a "stupidhead." (Clearly "cunt" or "bitch" would have had its own spice, but "stupidhead," and the childish intonation in which it was delivered, generated its own species of alarm.)

I've worked in and around this subject long enough to know not to sit alone with such things, so I beelined down to the

Valencia sheriff's office, Harry by my side. The minute we opened the door, our spirits sank. The chubby white suburban teenagers impersonating cops were precisely the kind of men to whom we would have preferred *not* to unload this story. Nonetheless, I told the cop at the desk the briefest version I could manage, which spanned my aunt's 1969 murder to the writing of my two books to the voice mail left at my work that morning. He listened to me blankly, then pulled off a shelf a binder thick as a phone book, which he began pawing through at a glacial pace. After about five minutes, his face lit up. "Here it is," he said. *"Annoying phone call."* He proceeded to write out these three words in painstaking capital letters on a form. As he labored, another young cop ambled over. *What seems to be the problem here?* he said. I repeated the tale. He had me call my voice mail and play him the message, after which he looked up with theatrical indignation and said, "Now, what would someone go and say a thing like that for?"

I came home and hid the "annoying phone call" report in the back of a file drawer, and hoped that was that.

A few days later, after picking up my mail at work, I found a handwritten letter from one of my students in the mix. In it he said he was very sorry to intrude upon my day, but he wanted me to know that a strange man was on campus looking for me. He said the man was stopping people in the cafeteria, in the library, at the security gate, asking if they knew me, and talking obsessively about my aunt's murder, saying he needed to deliver me an important message. My dean got wind of the situation and whisked me into her office, where I stayed for the next four hours with the doors locked and the blinds drawn while waiting for the police to arrive—an experience that is fast becoming a staple of the American educational scene rather than a disruption of it. After campus security interviewed the

student who left me the letter, along with a host of other people on campus with whom the man had spoken, I was left with this description: "a balding, heavyset white man in his early fifties, carrying an attaché case."

Within forty-eight hours of his visit, as if acting out cinematic shorthand for how to deal with an unexpected, intense stress, I started smoking again—this after over two years of treating my body as a prenatal temple, my vices reduced to a single cup of green tea each morning. Now I sat in the backyard of our new house, a square clump of prickly weeds we felt unable to attend to until we knew how much money the pregnancy adventure was going to cost, inhaling egg-shriveling nicotine in the dark, a cylinder of pepper spray by my side. Other moments of my life may have looked worse, but this one felt like its own kind of bottom: I'd never felt so scared and nihilistic at the same time. I wept for the baby and the life I felt sure would never be ours, no matter how badly I wanted it, and for the violence that the stalker's presence seemingly confirmed as impossible to outrun.

In the days and weeks that followed, I summoned the strength to call our donor and tell him we'd be skipping the month, and to begin the struggle of hoisting myself back onto the prenatal regime. I tried to return to reflecting on happy-making things, including a happy-making talk about Sedgwick I was due to deliver at my happy-making alma mater, the City University of New York. But the mantras of paranoid thinking—*There must be no bad surprises* and *You can never be paranoid enough*—had taken root. I couldn't wait around for some wacko to "deliver me a message"; somehow I needed to get ahead of the situation.

It's hard to explain, but I have a lot of friends who are private investigators. One of them gave me the number of a local PI,

a guy named Andy Lamprey, described on a "total security solutions provider" website as follows: "A detective for the Los Angeles Police Department for more than 29 years, Lamprey investigated numerous crimes, including homicide, and was a senior supervisor to the Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT). He is a court qualified expert in narcotics and vice enforcement and has performed several risk and vulnerability assessments, threat and management assessments and fraud investigations nationwide."

You never know—there may come a time when you, too, feel the need to call upon an Andy Lamprey.

Lamprey eventually connects me with a guy named Malcolm, another ex-LAPD cop, who will sit, armed, in an unmarked car outside our house through the night, keeping watch over us, if we want. We want. Lamprey says he can negotiate us a reduced rate of $500 per night (LA has unbelievably high rates for "cover," as I learn it's called). I call my mother to ask for advice, and also to alert her to the wingnut on the loose, in case he drifts her way; she insists on putting a check in the mail to pay for a night or two of Malcolm. I feel grateful, but also guilty: it was I who had insisted on writing about Jane's murder, and while I knew intellectually that I wasn't responsible for this man's actions any more than Jane was for her murder (as the caller had indicated), my less enlightened self felt sick with a sense of late-breaking comeuppance. I had summoned the horrible thing, and now here he was, attaché case in hand. It wasn't long before my image of him merged with that of Jared Lee Loughner, the man who, exactly two weeks prior, had walked up to Representative Gabby Giffords in a Safeway parking lot in Tucson, Arizona, and shot her, along with eighteen others. A form letter from Giffords was found in Loughner's home with the words "Die, Bitch" scrawled on it;

Loughner was known for saying that women should not hold positions of power.

It doesn't matter to me if both of these men are mad. Their voices still have clarity.

In the wake of the Patriot Act, during the second administration of George W., you made a series of small, handheld weapons. The rule was that each weapon had to be assembled from household items within minutes. You'd been gay-bashed before, two black eyes while waiting in line for a burrito (you ran after him, of course). Now you thought, if the government comes for its citizens, we should be prepared, even if our weapons are pathetic. Your art-weapons included a steak knife affixed to a bottle of ranch dressing and mounted on an axe handle, a dirty sock sprouting nails, a wooden stump with a clump of urethane resin stuck to one end with dull bolts protruding from it, and more.

One night during our courtship, I came home to find the stump with bolts lying across the welcome mat of my porch. You had left town, and I had been baffled by your departure. But when I ascended my front steps and saw the weapon, shadowy in the twilight, I knew you loved me. It was a talisman of protection—a means of keeping myself safe while you were gone, a tool to fight off the suitors (had there been any). I've kept it by my bedside ever since. Not because I think they're coming for us per se. But because it makes the brutal tender, which I've since learned is one of your principal gifts.

The year my father died, I read a story in school about a little boy who builds ships in the bottoms of bottles. This little boy lived

by the maxim that if you could imagine the worst thing that could ever happen, you would never be surprised when it did. Not knowing that this maxim was the very definition of anxiety, as given by Freud ("'Anxiety' describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one"), I set to work cultivating it. Already an avid "journaler," I started penning narratives of horrible things in my school notebook. My first installment was a novella titled "Kidnapped" that featured the abduction and torture of my best friend, Jeanne, and me by a deranged husband-wife team. I was proud of my talismanic opus, even drew an ornate cover page for it. Now Jeanne and I would never be kidnapped and tortured without our having foreseen it! I thus felt confused and saddened when my mother took me out for lunch "to talk about it." She told me she was disturbed by what I had written, and so was my sixth-grade teacher. In a flash it became clear that my story was not something to be proud of, as either literature or prophylactic.

When Iggy first came home from the hospital, in that ecstatic, disarranged week of almost no sleep, my intense happiness was sometimes punctured in the dead of night by the image of him with a half scissor sticking out of his precious newborn head. Perhaps I had put it there, or perhaps he had slipped and fallen into it. For whatever reason, this image seemed the very worst thing I could imagine. It came to me when I was trying to fall asleep, after many hours—sometimes many nights—of not sleeping. We were up so often that we put a red lightbulb in the living room lamp and kept it on all the time, so that there were periods of sun followed by periods of red, no real night. Once, while wandering in the red soup, I told Harry I was worried I was having a postpartum crash, as I was having bad thoughts about the baby. I couldn't tell him about the half scissor.

I can't remember now the connection between the little boy's building of ships in the bottles (*Argo*'s?) and his commitment to paranoid anxiety, but I'm sure there was one. Nor can I find the original story. I wish that I could find it, as I'm pretty sure its moral wasn't that all good comes from repeatedly imagining the worst things that could ever happen. Likely a wise old crinkly grandpa drifts into the tale and disabuses his grandson of his rotten notion by taking him to see some wild birds flying over a hillside. But now I think I'm mixing and matching.

That wise old crinkly grandparent has not yet waltzed into my life. Instead I have my mother, who lives and breathes the gospel of prophylactic anxiety. When I tell her that it would be easier for me if she could keep her anxieties about my newborn to herself, rather than have her e-mail me to tell me that she's having trouble sleeping for fear of bad things happening to him (and to everyone else she loves), she snaps: "They're not all irrational anxieties, you know."

My mother thinks that people don't really know what they're in for in this life—what the *risks* are. How could there be such a thing as an irrational peril, if anything unexpected or horrific that has ever happened could happen again? Last February a sinkhole opened up under a man's bedroom near Tampa, Florida, while he was sleeping; his body will never be found. When Iggy was six months old, he was stricken by a potentially fatal nerve toxin that afflicts about 150 babies of the 4 million+ born in the United States each year.

Recently my mother visited the Killing Fields in Cambodia. After she returned, she sat in our living room showing me her trip photos while Iggy motored around the shaggy white rug, doing "tummy time." *I barely want to tell you about this, because*

of the baby, she said, nodding in his direction, *but there was a tree there, an oak tree, called the Killing Tree, against which the Khmer Rouge would kill babies by bashing their skulls. Thousands and thousands of babies, their brains smashed out against this tree.* I get the point, I say. *I'm sorry,* she says, *I really shouldn't be telling you this.*

A few weeks later, talking about her trip again on the phone, she says, *Now, there's something I shouldn't really mention, because of the baby, but they had this tree there, at the Killing Fields, called the Killing Tree . . .*

I know my mother well enough by now to recognize, in her baby-killing-tree Tourette's, her desire to install in me an outer parameter of horror of what could happen to a baby human on this planet. I don't know why she needs to feel sure I have this parameter in mind, but I have come to accept that she feels it necessary. She needs me to know that she's stood before the Killing Tree.

For the week after the man's visit to my work, campus security will assign an officer to stand outside the door of my classroom while I teach, in case he returns. On one of these days, I teach Alice Notley's grouchy epic poem *Disobedience.* A student complains, *Notley says she wants a dailiness that is free and beautiful, but she's fixated on all the things she hates and fears the most, and then smashes her face and ours in them for four hundred pages. Why bother?*

Empirically speaking, we are made of star stuff. Why aren't we talking more about that? Materials never leave this world. They just keep recycling, recombining. That's what you kept telling me when we first met—that in a real, material sense, *what* is

made from *where.* I didn't have a clue what you were talking about, but I could see you burned for it. I wanted to be near that burning. I still don't understand, but at least now my fingers ride the lip.

Notley knows all this; it's what tears her up. It's why she's a mystic, why she locks herself in a dark closet, why she knocks herself out to have visions. Can she help it if the unconscious is a sewer? At least my student had unwittingly backed us into a crucial paradox, which helps to explain the work of any number of artists: *it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices.*

Sedgwick

In Annie Sprinkle's performance piece *100 Blow Jobs,* Sprinkle—who worked for many years as a prostitute—kneels down on the ground and gives head to several dildos nailed to a board in front of her, while recorded male voices yell degrading things like "Suck it, bitch." (Sprinkle has said that out of the approximately 3,500 customers she had as a sex worker, there were about 100 bad ones; the sound track to *100 Blow Jobs* derives from the bad ones.) She sucks and sucks, she chokes and gags. But just when someone might be thinking, *This is exactly what I imagined sex work to be like—haunting, woman-hating, traumatizing*—Sprinkle gets up, pulls herself together, gives herself an Aphrodite Award for sexual service to the community, and performs a cleansing masturbatory ritual.

Sprinkle is a many-gendered mother of the heart. And many-gendered mothers of the heart say: *Just because you have enemies does not mean you have to be paranoid.* They insist, no matter the evidence marshaled against their insistence: *There is nothing you can throw at me that I cannot metabolize, no thing impervious to my alchemy.*

The realization that I could incorporate the stalker into my talk about Sedgwick eventually became an incitement for me to get back to work. *Yes, get back to work.* It even became a source of comfort, as if bringing such an episode into the orbit of Eve would neutralize its negative force.

Not everyone believes in the magical powers of such an approach. When I told my mother that I was thinking of including the stalker in a public talk, for example, she said, "Oh honey, are you sure that's a good idea?"—meaning that she didn't think it was a good idea at all. Who could blame her? She's spent over forty years warding off the specter of wingnuts with attaché cases who tell women they deserve their violent deaths before they occasion them. Why give them any more attention than they deserve?

Most of my writing usually feels to me like a bad idea, which makes it hard for me to know which ideas feel bad because they have merit, and which ones feel bad because they don't. Often I watch myself gravitating toward the bad idea, as if the final girl in a horror movie, albeit one sitting in a Tuff Shed at a desk sticky with milk. But somewhere along the line, from my heroes, whose souls were forged in fires infinitely hotter than mine, I gained an outsized faith in articulation itself as its own form of protection.

I am not going to write anything here about Iggy's time with the toxin; it is not precious or rich to me. All I will say is that

there is still a loop of time, or there is still a part of me, that is removing the side of a raised hospital crib in the morning light and climbing into it beside him, unwilling to move or let go or keep living until he lifted his head, until he gave any sign that he would make it out.

The bummer about stalkers, Lamprey told me when we first spoke, is that the best thing that can happen is nothing. *You don't really want any form of contact that would merit a court date or a call to 911,* he said. *You just want the days of silence to add up.*

By the third night of Malcolm's watch, I started having delusions that he could sit outside our house forever, to protect against whatever. But the money had run out, as had the logic of the enterprise. We were on our own.

The task of the cervix is to stay closed, to make an impenetrable wall protecting the fetus, for approximately forty weeks of a pregnancy. After that, by means of labor, the wall must somehow become an opening. This happens through dilation, which is not a shattering, but an extreme thinning. *(O so thin!)*

This feeling has its ontological merits, but it is not really a good feeling. It's easy enough to stand on the outside and say, "You just have to let go and let the baby out." But to let the baby out, you have to be willing to go to pieces.

Thirty-nine weeks. I take a long walk across the campus of Occidental College. It's a hair too hot, as it always is in Los Angeles, where the sun has no mercy. I come home frustrated,

taut with baby, anxious for it. Harry has friends over; they are getting ready for a movie shoot, wearing dingy white outfits and hats with skinny white ceramic horns that Harry inexplicably asserts make them look like lice. *Don't let the lice talk to me,* I say, pulling down the shades. I feel feral, a little sad, very full. Backache.

The previous day, walking in the arroyo, green and fresh, I had invited the baby out. *Time to rumble, Iggy.* I knew he heard me.

Some pains start. The lice go home. For no good reason we decide to rearrange the bookshelves. We'd been meaning to do it for weeks, and Harry suddenly feels frantic to get it done, make things right. I keep sitting down to rest amid the books on the floor, arranging them into piles by genre, then by country. More pains. All these beautiful pages.

Harry calls Jessica, says, Come now. Tried to sleep, but the night began to cavern. New dim lights in the house, new sounds. Birds chirping in the middle of the night while I labor in the tub. Jessica asks if the birds are real. They are. She rigs our tub with duct tape and a plastic bag so the tub can grow big with water. She has tricks. I keep wondering bleakly why she's texting through my labor; later I learn she has an app on her iPhone that times the contractions. Night passes quickly, in the time that is no time.

In the morning Harry and Jessica persuade me to go for an hour walk, briskly, in the gray day. It's hard. *The contractions aren't going to stop if you stop moving,* Jessica keeps telling me. OK but how does she know. We walk down to the Rite Aid

at York and Figueroa to get castor oil, but when we get there, no one has a wallet. I squint in the gray light. I am going, almost gone. Back to the house for wallets, back to the store, we pace the parking lot, which looks scabrous with trash. I want to be somewhere more beautiful, I think, and also, everything is right.

At home I eat the castor oil mixed into chocolate ice cream. I want what's inside to come out.

We'd been living together for just over a year when your mother received her diagnosis. She had gone to the doctor for back pain and was there told that she had breast cancer that had already spread to her spine, a tumor threatening to crack her vertebrae. Within months the cancer would reach her liver; within the year, her brain. We flew her out from Michigan when she became bedridden from radiation with no one to help. We gave her our bed, and started sleeping on our living room floor. We lived this way for months, all of us staring in dread and paralysis out at our mountain. We each anguished differently and severely: you wanted to give her the care she'd once given to you, but could see it was breaking our new household to try; she was sick and broke and terrified, utterly unwilling or unable to discuss her condition or her options. Eventually I, villainous, drew a line; I couldn't live this way. She chose to go back to her condo in the suburbs of Detroit and decline alone rather than accept the substandard care of a Medicaid facility near us—all her assets liquidated, a TV blaring from behind a neighbor's canvas curtain, nurses whispering about accepting Christ as your personal savior, you know the place. Who could blame her? She wanted to be at home, crowded in with her beloved Parisian-themed knickknacks—all her I LOVE PARIS plaques,

miniature Eiffel Towers. All of her passwords and e-mail addresses were variants on Paris, a city she would never see.

As her time grew near, your brother took her in. His family situation was under strain, but at least she had a bed there, her own room. It was almost good enough.

But really none of it was good enough, even though it was better than many get. When she began to lose consciousness, your brother had her moved to a local hospice; you flew there in the dead of night, desperate to get there in time, so that she wouldn't die alone.

Now I'm sick of these two clowns who aren't in pain. I say I want to go to the hospital because that's where they take the babies out. Jessica stalls; she knows it's not time. I begin to get desperate. I want a change of scenery. I'm not sure I can do this. We've spent hours on the red couch with a heating pad, in the tub kneeling on towels, in the bed with me holding Harry's or Jessica's hand. I have to think of something that will convince them that it's time to go to the hospital. "The baby feels low, and I'm having it at the hospital, and that's where I want to be," I growl. Finally they say OK.

The car is where the pain turns into a luge. I can't open my eyes. Have to go inside. Outside there is a lot of traffic; I squint and see Harry doing the best he can. Every bump and turn a nightmare. The pain cavern has a law, its law is black shudder. I begin to count, noticing each one takes about twenty seconds. I think, any kind of pain must be bearable for twenty seconds, for nineteen, for thirteen, for six. I stop making sounds. It is horrible.

Hard time parking, no one around, even though every other time we've been to the labor wing there has been a bevy of attendants with wheelchairs. I am going to have to walk. I walk as slowly as a person could walk, doubled over down the hall. Jessica greets some people she knows. Everything around me is normal and inside I am in the pain cavern.

We check into the labor wing. The nurse is nice. Freckled, heavy-set, Irish-seeming. She says five centimeters. People are happy, I am happy. Jessica tells me the hard part is over, she says getting to five centimeters is the hard part. I am nervous but relieved. Jessica asks for room number 7. The hospital is blessedly slow, quiet, empty.

Room number 7 is lovely, dark. We can see Macy's from the window. Whitney Houston has just been found dead in a hotel about ten blocks away, the Beverly Hilton. The nurses are talking about it in hushed tones as they come and go. Was it drugs, I manage to ask from the cavern. Probably, they say. In our labor room there is a bathtub, a scale, and a baby warmer. Maybe there will be a baby.

The pain luge continues, the counting, the dedication, the quiet, the panic. I am phobic about the toilet. Jessica keeps wanting me to go pee, but sitting down or squatting is unthinkable. She keeps telling me I can't stop the contractions by staying immobile, but I think I can. I lie on my side, I squeeze Harry's or Jessica's hand. I pee without meaning to in a slow-dancing position with Harry, then in the tub, where strands of dark red mucus have started to float. Incredibly, Harry and Jessica order food and eat it. Someone feeds me a red Popsicle, which tastes delicious. I throw it up moments later, fouling my tub's

waters. I throw up when the contraction hits bottom, over and over, tons of yellow bile.

The tub has a jets button we keep hitting accidentally, which is horrible. Jessica pours water over my body, which feels good.

They measure again: seven. That is good.

Hours later, they measure again. Still seven. Not so good.

We talk. They tell me the contractions are slowing down, getting less powerful. This could go on for hours. They say maybe five more hours, or more, to get to ten centimeters. I don't want that. It has been twenty-four hours of labor, maybe a little more. We talk Pitocin. The midwife says I have to be ready to get a lot more uncomfortable than I am now. I am scared. How deep can pain go.

But I want something to change. I want to do the drug. We do it. The pic line keeps getting bent, a small red alarm goes off each time, I am frustrated, the nurse keeps having to redo it. Twenty minutes go by. Then twenty more. They up the dosage once, then again. Turn into the new cavern, a cartoon turn. I grow very quiet and concentrated. Counting, counting. Jessica says breathe into the bottom and I can tell that's where the baby is.

Harry

each of the volunteers told me that my job was to let my mom know that it was ok to go. i believe that i was unconvincing for the first 33 hours of my time with her.

however on the last night, i put a pillow under her knees, and i told her i was going to take a walk. that i would smell honeysuckle

and see fireflies, wet my shoes in midnight dew. i told her that i was going to do those things because i was going to stay on earth in this form. "but your work here is done mama." i told her that she had set us all up very well with her love and her lessons. i told her she had inspired me to become an artist. i told her that i loved her so much, that we all knew that she loved us too, that she was surrounded in love, surrounded in light. and i walked. after my walk, among other things, i told her i was going to go to sleep, and she should too. i said it firmly. i told her to not be afraid, to relax, that it was ok if she had to go. i told her i knew she was tired and that all accounts of heaven (from those who have so briefly visited) are that it is pure bliss. i told her not to be afraid. i thanked her. i said, "thank you mom." i leaked tears but tried to hide them from her now. i turned on the bathroom light and closed the door so a long foot thick rectangle of yellow reached her from feet to head. i touched her feet over the blanket, then her thighs, her torso and bare chest below her throat, her shoulders her face and ears. i kissed her all over her beautiful bald head and i said, "goodnight mama. you go to sleep." and then i laid down in my little chair bed there put my jacket over my upper body and silently cried myself to sleep. the sound of her breathing, deep and gulping and certain.

It's very dark now. Harry and Jessica have fallen asleep. I am alone with the baby. I try to commit to the idea of letting him out. I still can't imagine it. But the pain keeps going deeper.

At the bottom, which one can't quite know is the bottom, one reckons. I've heard a lot of women describe this reckoning (it might also be called nine centimeters), at which one starts bargaining hard, as if striking a deal to save your conjoined lives. *I don't know how we're going to get out of this, baby, but word is that you've got to come out, and that I've got to let you, and we've got to do this together, and we've got to do it now.*

They tell me the baby is facing a weird way, I have to lie on my left side, with my leg elevated. I don't want to. They tell me twenty minutes this way. I see a collection of hands holding my leg. It hurts. After twenty minutes, he has turned.

They measure again. Fully effaced, fully dilated. The midwife is ecstatic. Says we're ready to go. I want to know what will happen next. Just wait, they say.

Harry

at a certain point i woke up. i listened for her breath, which i heard after a moment. much shallower, faster. i became alert, just then the AC unit went on, aurally overtaking the sound of her. this had happened innumerable times before, and it was always a strange bardo for me. would the breath still be happening when the fan went back off? i strained to hear her breath over the grinding of the fan but couldn't. my torso leapt and sat up to check if her chest was moving. it didn't seem to be. the AC roared. her left hand puffed the sheet up suddenly, the tiniest, instant halloween ghost. her first movement—a signaling. i leapt to her, to that hand. her eyes were open now, illuminated, looking up, her mouth was now closed, her face no longer tilted, akimbo. she was beautiful. and dying. her mouth was in slow-motion rounding up little bits of earth air for her lungs, or just an echo of that i guess. her eyes were in light and open. she was jutting her chin in the sweetest, most dignified little coquettish juts. she was in the doorway of all worlds and i was in the doorway too. i forced myself not to disturb her, she seemed all at once to know where she was going and how to get there. her map. her job. the goal at hand. i cupped her warm hand in mine and let her go. i told her one more time, you are surrounded in love, you are surrounded in light, don't be afraid. and her neck was pulsing a little bit? her eyes were looking at something in another place. her mouth needed less air, less often and her chin moving more slowly. i never wanted it to end. i have never wanted

infinity to open up under an instant like i wanted that then. and then her eyes relaxed and her shoulders relaxed of a piece. and i knew she had found her way. dared. summoned up her smarts and courage and whacked a way through. i was really astonished. proud of her. i looked at the clock it was 2:16.

They think my bladder is too full, that it's in the way. I can't stand up to pee anymore in the slow-dancing position. They put in a catheter. It stings. Then the doctor comes in, says he'd like to break the water, says it's enormously full. OK but how. He brandishes what appears to be a bamboo back scratcher. OK. The waters are broken. It feels tremendously good. I am lying in a warm ocean.

Suddenly, the urge to push. Everyone is thrilled. Push, they say. They teach me. Hold it in, hold in the air, bear down wildly, don't waste the end of the push. The midwife puts her hand in to see if I need help pushing. She says I am a good pusher and don't need any help. I am happy I am a good pusher. I want to try.

On the fourth or so contraction, he starts to come. I don't know for sure if it's him, but I can feel the change. I push hard. One push turns into another kind of push—I feel it outside.

Commotion. I am gone but happy, something is happening. The doctor rushes in, I can see him throwing on his gear: a visor, an apron. He seems agitated but who cares. New lights come on, yellow, directed lights. People around me are moving quickly. My baby is being born.

Everyone is watching down there intently, in a kind of happy panic. Someone asks if I want to feel the baby's head, and I

don't, I don't know why. Then a minute later, I do. Here he comes. It feels big but I feel big enough.

Then suddenly they tell me to stop pushing. I don't know why. Harry tells me that the doctor is stretching my perineum in circles around the baby's head, trying to keep the skin from tearing. Hold, they say, don't push, but "puff." Puff puff puff.

Then they say I can push. I push. I feel him come out, all of him, all at once. I also feel the shit that had been bedeviling me all through pregnancy and labor come out too. My first feeling is that I could run a thousand miles, I feel amazing, total and complete relief, like everything that was wrong is now right.

And then, suddenly, Iggy. Here he comes onto me, rising. He is perfect, he is right. I notice he has my mouth, incredible. He is my gentle friend. He is on me, screaming.

Push again, they say a few moments later. *You've got to be kidding—aren't I done yet?* But this one's easy; the placenta has no bones. I had always imagined the placenta like a rare fifteen-ounce steak. Instead it's utterly indecent and colossal—a bloody yellow sac filled with purple-black organs, a bag of whale hearts. Harry stretches its hood and photographs its insides, awed by this most mysterious and gory of apartments.

When his first son was born, Harry cried. Now he holds Iggy close, laughing sweetly into his little face. I look at the clock; it is 3:45 A.M.

Harry

I spent another 5 hours with her body, alone, with the light on. she was so incredibly beautiful. she looked 19. i took about a hundred

pictures of her. i sat with her for a long long time holding her hand. i prepared a meal and ate in the other room and returned. i kept talking to her. i felt like i lived a hundred years, a lifetime with her silent, peaceful body. i turned off the AC unit. the ceiling fan above her was whipping air, holding the space of cycle, where her breath had been. i could've stayed another hundred years right there—kissing her and visiting with her. it would have been fine with me. important.

You don't do *labor,* I was counseled several times before the baby came. *Labor does you.*

This sounded good—I like physical experiences that involve surrender. I didn't know, however, very much about experiences that *demand* surrender—that run over you like a truck, with no safe word to stop it. I was ready to scream, but labor turned out to be the quietest experience of my life.

If all goes well, the baby will make it out alive, and so will you. Nonetheless, you will have touched death along the way. You will have realized that death will do you too, without fail and without mercy. It will do you even if you don't believe it will do you, and it will do you in its own way. There's never been a human that it didn't. *I guess I'm just waiting to die,* your mother said, bemused and incredulous, the last time we saw her, her skin so thin in her borrowed bed.

People say women forget about the pain of labor, due to some kind of God-given amnesia that keeps the species reproducing. But that isn't quite right—after all, what does it mean for pain to be "memorable"? You're either in pain or you're not. And it isn't the pain that one forgets. It's the touching death part.

As the baby might say to its mother, we might say to death: *I forget you, but you remember me.*

I wonder if I'll recognize it, when I see it again.

We wanted a longer name for Iggy, but Ignatius seemed too Catholic, and other "Ign" names too-close cognates of undesirable concepts (*ignorant, ignoble*). Then one day I stumbled upon Igasho, a Native American name, meaning "he who wanders," tribe unknown. That's it, I instantly thought. To my surprise, you concurred. And so Iggy became Igasho.

The spectacle of two white Americans choosing a Native American name made me uneasy. But I remembered that, when we first met, you told me you were part Cherokee. This fact buoyed me along. When I mentioned this to you in the hospital, as we were filling out Iggy's birth certificate, you looked at me like I was crazy. *Part Cherokee?*

A few hours later, a lactation consultant came to visit us. She talked to us for a long time, told us all about her family. She was a member of the Pima tribe from Arizona and had married into an African American family, raised her six kids in Watts. She nursed them all. One of her sons was named Eagle Feather, Eagle for short. Her mother had insisted on a ceremony at which Eagle learned to say his name in his tribal language, as Eagle was the white man's language. *I don't know why I'm telling you guys so much about my family,* she kept saying. You were probably passing, but I like to think she had an intuition that something about identity was loose and hot in our house, as, perhaps, it was in hers. At some point we told her about wanting to name Igasho Igasho. She listened, while giving me tips

on how to nurse him. *Let your boobs be the guide, not the clock,* she said. *Whenever they feel full, bam!, you pull that baby onto your chest.* On her way out, she turned and said, *If anyone ever gives you trouble about your baby's name, you tell them that a full tribe member, from Tucson and Watts, gave you her blessing.*

Later I learn that Pima was the name given to the Othama tribe by the Spaniards. It is a corruption, or misunderstanding, of the phrase *pi 'añi mac* or *pi mac,* meaning "I don't know"—a phrase tribe members supposedly said often in response to the invading Europeans.

A few months after your mother died, we got all her papers in the mail. One afternoon I sat on a milk crate outside our storage shed to give them a cursory look, trying to decide where to file them. Amid the mountains of medical bills and threatening collections statements, a certain set of papers stood out—papers with smiley faces and flowery mastheads, exclamation points and carefully handwritten signatures. Your adoption paperwork.

When you were born, you were Wendy Malone. Perhaps you were Wendy Malone for but minutes, or hours. We don't know. Your adoption had been arranged prior to your birth, and at three weeks old, you were delivered to your parents, whereupon you became Rebecca Priscilla Bard. Which is who you were for the next twenty-odd years. Becky. In college, you made a loose stab at renaming yourself Butch, though, hilariously, you didn't really know what it meant. It had just been a nickname for you, used by your father. After you knew, you could tell who was gay by introducing yourself. "I'm Butch,"

you'd say, swinging your long blond hair. "No you're not," those in the know would chuckle. Then, after dropping out of college and moving to San Francisco, in a Judy Chicago–style rebirth, you renamed yourself Harriet Dodge. After you had a child, you inched toward the state and made the change official: you placed an ad in the paper, filed the paperwork at the courthouse. (Until then, you'd kept your distance from "affairs of the state": no one had your correct Social Security number until you were thirty-six; you'd never had a bank account.) Over time you became Harriet "Harry" Dodge: an attempt to conjure the feeling of *and,* or *but.* Now you are simply Harry, the Harriet a distasteful but sometimes indicative appendage.

When the *New York Times* ran a piece on your art in 2008, the editor said you couldn't appear in their pages unless you chose *Mr.* or *Ms.* You'd been waiting your whole life for this kind of recognition; now here it was, but with this price. (You chose *Ms.,* "to take one for the team.") Around the same time, your ex wouldn't agree to a custody deal if you checked the box on the second-parent adoption forms that said "mother," but you couldn't by law check the box that said "father." (I judged you then for not having adopted your first son at birth, which would have obviated this torturous second-parent adoption process; to my surprise, I find that now I, too, am unwilling to undertake such a proceeding, vis-à-vis Iggy—I'd rather gamble on national LGBT legal momentum and the relatively progressive state of California than pay $10,000 in legal fees and allow a social worker into our home to interview our children, to deem us "fit.") When we visited your mother in the hospital, she would sometimes say how glad she was that her daughter was there with her; the nurses would then wheel around the room, looking for her. When we take Iggy to the doctor together now, the nurse always says how happy it makes

her to see a father helping out with a baby. *I'm certainly doing their team a lot of favors,* you mutter. Conversely, there's at least one restaurant we don't go to anymore because the waiter had a Tourette's-like addiction to calling everyone in our family "ladies" every time he so much as deposited a bottle of catsup at our table. *He thinks we're all girls,* my stepson would whisper to us in bemusement. *That's OK—girls are very, very cool,* you would tell him. *I know,* he would say back.

In your early thirties, you went on a hunt for your birth mother. You didn't have much to go on, but eventually you found her: she was a newly sober leather dyke—quick, articulate, tough around the edges. One of the first things she told you was that she had worked as a prostitute in Nevada. You offered her some probable excuses; she cut you right off, saying she liked the work, and *if you got it, use it.* During your first phone conversation, you asked about your birth father; she sighed, "Oh honey, I'm just not sure." But when you met her for lunch at a Chili's, upon seeing you approach, she exclaimed, "It was Jerry!" She said you looked just like her other child, whose father was Jerry. She had frosty gray hair and wire spectacles, wore lipstick and wide-bottom linen pants. She told you her father (your natal grandfather) had just died and left her a little money, with which she was fixing up a craftsman in San Jose with her on-again, off-again butch lover.

All she told you then about Jerry was that he was "not a nice person." Later she said he was violent. She said she wasn't in touch with him anymore—the last she'd heard was that he was living on an island off Canada with holes cut out of the armpits of his shirt, to air out his shingles. A few years later, she told you he had died. You never wanted to know more.

Your birth brother, who was raised by his father, has long been an addict—in and out of prison, on and off the streets. He wrote you once from prison, in a style that uncannily echoed your own—the same careening prose, shot through with a meticulousness, a darkness, a hilarity. The last time she heard from him, your birth mother tells us, he had been found unconscious in a parking lot, covered in blood. Once he came to, he called her collect; she didn't accept the charge. She threw up her hands as she told us this story, saying, *I didn't have the money!* But we also heard her saying, *I can't carry him anymore.*

You had your last drink at twenty-three. You already knew.

It can be hard not to know much about one's parents. But, you tell me, it can be awesome too. Before you had thought much about gender, you attributed your lifelong interest in fluidity and nomadism to being adopted, and you treasured it. You felt you had escaped the fear of someday becoming your parents, a fear you saw ruling the psyches of many of your friends. Your parents didn't have to be disappointments or genetic warnings. They could just be two ordinary people, doing their best. From a very young age—your parents had always been open about the fact that you were adopted—you remember feeling a spreading, inclusive, almost mystical sense of belonging. The fact that anybody could have been your birth mother was an astonishment, but one tinged with exhilaration: rather than being from or for *an* other, you felt you came from the whole world, utterly plural. You were curious enough to track down your birth mother, but after your real mother died, you found yourself unable to answer your birth mother's calls. Even now, years later, the interest you once took in finding her feels clouded by the

memory of your mother, and your ongoing grief at losing her. Your longing to see her again. Phyllis.

It's easy enough to say, I'll be the *right* kind of finite or sodomitical mother. I'll let my baby know where the me and the not-me begin and end, and withstand whatever rage ensues. I'll give as much as I've got to give without losing sight of *my own me.* I'll let him know that I'm a person with my own needs and desires, and over time he'll come to respect me for elucidating such boundaries, for feeling real as he comes to know me as real.

But who am I kidding? This book may already be doing wrong. I've heard many people speak with pity about children whose parents wrote about them when they were young. Perhaps the stories of Iggy's origins are not mine alone, and thus not mine alone to tell. Perhaps my temporal proximity to his infancy has led me into a false sense of ownership over his life and body, a sense that is already fading, now that he weighs two pounds more than the heaviest baby ever born, and I no longer have the visceral sense, when beholding him, that he ever could have emerged from me.

Eula Biss

The mother of an adult child sees her work completed and undone at the same time. If this holds true, I may have to withstand not only rage, but also my undoing. Can one prepare for one's undoing? How has my mother withstood mine? Why do I continue to undo her, when what I want to express above all else is that I love her very much?

What is good is always being destroyed: one of Winnicott's main axioms.

I considered writing Iggy a letter before he was born, but while I talked to him a lot in utero, I stalled out when it came to

writing anything down. Writing to him felt akin to giving him a name: an act of love, surely, but also one of irrevocable classification, interpellation. (Perhaps this is why Iggy is named Iggy: if territorialization is inevitable, why not perform it with a little irreverence? "*Iggy:* Not a good choice unless you're planning for a rock star or the class clown," one baby names website warned.) The baby wasn't separate from me, so what use would it be to write to him as if he were off at sea? No need to rehash Linda Hamilton in the final scenes of *The Terminator,* recording an audiotape for her unborn son, the future leader of the human resistance, before she sets off toward Mexico in her beater jeep, storm clouds gathering on the horizon. If you want an original relation to the mother/son dyad, you must turn (however sadly!) away from the seduction of messianic fantasy. And if your baby boy is going to be white, you must become curious about what will happen if you raise him as just another human animal, no more or less worthy than any other.

This is a deflation, but not a dismissal. It is also a new possibility.

When Iggy had the toxin and we lay with him in his hospital crib, I knew—in a flood of fear and panic—what I know now, in our blessed return to the land of health, which is that my time with him has been the happiest time of my life. Its happiness has been of a more palpable and undeniable and unmitigated quality than any I've ever known. For it isn't just moments of happiness, which is all I thought we got. It's a happiness that spreads.

For this reason I am tempted to call it a lasting happiness, but I know I won't take it with me when I go. At best, I hope to impart it to Iggy, to allow him to feel that he created it, which, in many ways, he has.

Winnicott

Babies do not remember being held well—what they remember is the traumatic experience of not being held well enough. Some might read in this a recipe for the classic ungratefulness of children—*after everything I've done for you,* and so on. To me, at the moment anyway, it is a tremendous relief, an incitement to give Iggy *no memory,* save the sense, likely unconscious, of having once been gathered together, made to feel real.

That is what my mother did for me. I'd almost forgotten.

And now, I think I can say—

I want you to know, you were thought of as possible—never as certain, but always as possible—not in any single moment, but over many months, even years, of trying, of waiting, of calling—when, in a love sometimes sure of itself, sometimes shaken by bewilderment and change, but always committed to the charge of ever-deepening understanding—two human animals, one of whom is blessedly neither male nor female, the other of whom is female (more or less), deeply, doggedly, wildly wanted you to be.

After Iggy is released from the hospital post-toxin, we celebrate with one of our living room dance parties, just me and the three Irish guys, so called to honor the otherwise unaddressed genetic link each of them has to Irish stock. We play "Tightrope" by Janelle Monáe over and over again (after years of noise metal, Harry now also keeps abreast of the Top 40, so that he can discuss the finer points of the new Katy Perry, Daft Punk, or Lorde). Iggy's big brother holds him by the armpits and spins him around in a wild circle while we scramble to make sure Iggy's chubby legs don't hit any windows or end tables. As one might expect for brothers seven years apart,

they almost always play too rough for my liking. *But he loves it!* his brother says whenever I tell him to take the heavy faux-fur blanket off Iggy's head for a moment, so we can be sure he hasn't smothered. But for the most part, he's right. Iggy loves it. Iggy loves playing with his brother and his brother loves playing with Iggy in ways I could never have dreamt. His brother especially loves dragging Iggy around his schoolyard, bragging about how soft his little brother's head is to mostly preoccupied peers. *Who wants to touch a really soft head?* he yells, as if hawking wares. It stresses me out to watch them play, but it also makes me feel like I've finally done something unequivocally good. That I've finally done my stepson an unequivocal good. *He's mine, all mine,* he says as he scoops Iggy up and runs off with him to another room.

Andrew Solomon

Deleuze/Guattari

Phillips/Bersani

Don't produce and don't reproduce, my friend said. But really there is no such thing as reproduction, only acts of production. No lack, only desiring machines. *Flying anuses, speeding vaginas, there is no castration.* When all the mythologies have been set aside, we can see that, children or no children, *the joke of evolution is that it is a teleology without a point, that we, like all animals, are a project that issues in nothing.*

But is there really such a thing as nothing, as nothingness? I don't know. I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song.

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MAGGIE NELSON is the author of four previous books of nonfiction: *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (2011; named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year), *Bluets* (2009), *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (2007), and *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial* (2007). She is also the author of several books of poetry, including *Something Bright, Then Holes* (2007) and *Jane: A Murder* (2005; finalist, the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for the Art of the Memoir). She has been the recipient of a 2013 Literature Fellowship from Creative Capital, a 2011 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship, and a 2007 Arts Writers grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation. Since 2005 she has taught on the faculty of the School of Critical Studies at California Institute of the Arts. She lives in Los Angeles.

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