

THE BODY IS A CLUMSY
VEHICLE FOR LOVE

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Content warning: this work contains emotionally challenging discussions of death, grief, and suicide.

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Look:
I build my bellowing ark
To the best of my love
As the flood begins.

Dylan Thomas

So different on either side of a book. One side, you are reluctant to open it, you think you know it (literally from the cover). The surface tension holds you back, protects your energy, prevents you from engaging. On the other side, you've found a crack in the symmetry, you selected a book across all others, peeked inside, and read a few pages. It is a book about the ocean, its wild beauty, and how despite all the damage that it's suffered, there is still so much worth saving. The world, like an inflated balloon, is punctured by a pin on the map, which brings the tortoises and gannets into view. There are too many facts for the mind to process, and we put certain possibilities on hold. The symmetry needs to break—we have to think there is something worth reaching for, and reach with enough conviction that we can grab onto what we find—and the mere act of reaching toward this one particular desire (rather than sitting in indecision, or reaching for a distraction, a replacement) allows it to come into being.

Grief is distinct from mourning. Grief is inner, mourning is outer. Grief is the process through which we internally come to terms with the reality of our loss. Mourning, on the other hand, is a public display of suffering in honor of the dead, and the purpose is not to show our pain, but to show our love. Pain is only one manifestation of love for a lost object. Mourning can occur even if our inner experience is not of tumultuous grief, but of peace. This peace is the fruit of our grief. With this peace, then, our mourning becomes less of a wail, and more of a change in air, a presence. So here we are: at the beginning of my mourning.

The reason I am writing, then, is because I am mourning, and the reason I am mourning, is because it's a matter of love.

* * *

I would like to share my mourning with you. It wasn't recognizable to me as mourning at first—my own writing—because it came out dry and faintly sweet. But mourning is not necessarily bitter sobbing. Any articulation of love for something that has gone is an act of mourning.

And that's what this is. I am writing this as a matter of love. Strange to be compelled to do something so unnecessary, in a sense, because writing is unnatural for most people, including myself, and sits awkwardly in the frame

of the day. I have to work, teach, do research, and at night, I try to do my writing.

My grief and my mourning arrive in cycles. For some it comes all at once, but perhaps, I am influenced by writing this in Vermont. As Nora would have, I look toward the maple trees, who can exist in a wide range of climates, but they only produce sugar if they freeze at night, and thaw during the day.

Grieving, then mourning and writing. Freezing, then thawing and sugaring.

Some nights I don't know if I'm sharing the love I feel, or if I'm simply looking for her in the world.

* * *

Listen to this mourning. It is sweet. It is like an old castle at night. Our sadness is skyward facing, a lifting sadness, like a flight of swallows. The dead are not gone, not haunting, simply resting, showing us how to breathe—they are better at it than we are.

Take this mourning. It is sweet.

Sadness with great skyward lifting, upward carrying.

Grief light, airy, revelatory.

Meditation happening! Come, gather round, there's a meditation happening! The calls ring out across the valley, echoed by everyone who hears. The cry pops up across the fields as workers put down their tools, cup their hands, and echo, "Meditation! Meditation!" A little child tugs on your arm, "Come on, there's a meditation happening!" The excitement mounts as you follow the child, and the distant cries about the meditation become nearer, and you see streams of people gathering on the road toward the village, happily echoing the cry into the air, "Meditation happening!"

When a village meditation is called, everyone puts down their work, stretches with a groan, and makes their way to participate in the collective event. Although you've meditated before, and even in groups, this is something different altogether. It is meditation woven into the fabric of a community, as the center of their rituals and lives, like the fresh chiming of bells.

In the village center, the office workers press save, yawn, slip into shoes which they've tucked under their desks. They can hear the bells through the open windows, but an announcement comes over the speaker system anyway: "Attention everyone, there is a meditation happening." Everyone is gathering in the square. Already, even as people are trickling in, the early-comers have begun sitting, cross-legged, eyes closed. The square is dotted with colorful

blankets and pillows, but others sit on their jackets or just the ground.

You are neither early nor late, and there's the spot for you... you sit, and try to relax. You remember a meditation practice that you read about in a book. The practice is simple: take any two ideas, and try to hold them in your mind at the same time. You don't want your eyes or thoughts to flicker back and forth between them, creating an illusion of togetherness like a flipbook animation. What you want is an actual merging, so that a third thought emerges that contains both of those thoughts in the same breath. Two thoughts... Nora comes to mind, and Tulia the second. Focus. Breathe. Nora riding a giant greyhound? No... Nora sitting in tranquility, petting Tulia... yes, that's it.

This image balances the meditation, and you can cup the scene in your hands. As you breathe onto it, you notice that Tulia is exhaling in time with your breath. Nora's hand strokes her head, and as Tulia sighs, Nora smiles. Tulia snorts, horselike, and Nora is amused. She looks to you for the slightest sign to explode into giggles. The corners of her eye crinkle, and she holds back a laugh. That smile is the same one on your own face, carved through love and repetition. The recognition pulls her and Tulia closer to you, as you sit here, breathing.

Two thoughts to merge together... yourself and Nora. Nora, superimposed on your sitting body, inhales, feels your breath fortify her spine. As her shirt flutters on your chest, your mind fills with green things: snowdrops, grape leaves, fields of clover, people drinking clean mountain water.

Two more thoughts arise, waiting to be merged. On the one hand, Nora is dead. On the other, she is breathing with you. How do we bring these realities together into

the same cupped hands? A song from Sweet Honey in The Rock comes to mind: "Those who have died have never never left / the dead are not under the earth / they are in the rustling trees / they are in the groaning woods / they are in the crying grass / they are in the moaning rocks / the dead are not under the earth..."

Two more thoughts: sadness, and joy. You are sad that she is no longer here. But you are also aware of her presence, more and more every day. Remember, the goal isn't to cycle between the two, not like sadness on inhale, joy on exhale, hyperventilating in an attempt to unify the two... no, there is something cognitive required here. A new concept wants to be invented to encompass the two. Bittersweet? No: bittersweet is bitter, not sad, and sweetness is not joy. Sadjoy? Too sappy and moist, the word "sad" itself has these limp connotations. This is sadness carried on the wavelength of joy, a muscular, uplifting sadness.

Is that it? You rest your mind for a moment, and realize that you intellectualized, you looked too far ahead. The answer was once again staring out from behind your closed eyes. The synthesis is you. You are carrying both joy and sadness in every moment, and in fact, there is no way for you to avoid it. Nora is here, she is not here, the very capacity you have to sense her is what also notices her physical absence, the cost of her total presence is her total absence. Don't try to look for words, instead, just notice the fragments of your senses, because these are the objects, not yet accumulated or counted, which will slowly gather and sharpen.

A dream I sent to Nora on October 8th, 2015:

My dad and I were at a Japanese hotel. I was 14 years old, or so, and restless. I was looking for crud under the sofa cushions, lifting them up one at a time. Besides the crumbs, I found dusty little trinkets, like the spheres that come out of gumball machines. Most of these spheres were dull, cheap plastic, small and not worth investigating.

But eventually, I lifted a cushion, and found one that caught my attention. It was a snowglobe, about the size of my palm, one of those paperweights shaped like a hemisphere that you could shake and see the snowflakes flutter around. This one had a dirty plastic shell, so even as I shook and shook it, it was hard to see what was flopping around inside. I held it up to the light, and my stomach dropped to see it was a tiny, tiny bird.

How could they do this? How does it even stay alive?

I said to my dad, "Look, dad. It's a tiny bird." I was afraid to pass it to him because it was so small. I didn't want to hurt it by jostling it.

He froze when he saw it. He said, "I thought they stopped making these a long time ago." With a key, he pried open the cage. As soon as he wedged the key under the dome's shell, a massive black centipede slithered out from under it and crawled across his hand.

Someone behind me whispered, “Don’t move, the centipede needs to reach the top of his head before he can remove it...”

* * *

A dream that I wrote on a piece of paper, and later found in a closet on November 11th, 2022:

Nora had been a porter or doorman at a hotel for many years. She hadn’t left the building during that time. She decided to quit, so she worked up her courage and told the director as she dropped a set of keys in his hands.

As she walked toward the main mezzanine stairs, the director came out and started talking to her from across the room. The director had some dark power which made him very persuasive, and his voice echoed with hypnotic power as if coming from the inside of our own skulls. I whispered in Nora’s ears, “Don’t listen, don’t listen, don’t listen, just follow the sound of my voice. It will be over soon.” Nora was clearly conflicted from having two voices competing in her ear. She hesitated for a moment, but she recovered herself and stumbled forward. She leaned on me. We staggered down the stairs as I kept on whispering, “You’re almost there. Just keep on going.”

We burst through the front door. The spell lifted. The quiet snowflakes under the streetlamps... the cool evening air... all of this wonder for the first time in years. I yelled, put my arms around her, and carried her up the street giggling and laughing.

* * *

Just past midnight between Friday February 23rd and Saturday February 24th, 2024, out of a great self-love and

dignity, my partner Nora ended her life. This concluded her decade of suffering from chronic illness.

The night she crossed over, I dreamt that I was looking at the earth through a telescope. Strangely, I saw not just earth, but a twin earth, normally eclipsed in shadow. It looked almost like an atlas, with grid lines from the telescope lens.

When I woke up, the entire neighborhood was blooming with snowdrops and crocuses. The morning was exquisitely peaceful. I walked around the block, and felt the winter exhaling, and the coming of the spring.

Nora wanted to reduce the trauma of her death to others, but staying was not an option. Her chronic illness had progressed to a point where she did not want to live in her body anymore.

"If you loved me, you would let me go." She said this to me many times before I accepted that it was true. She was leaving with or without my blessing.

My response, when I realized that I could lose her before I had a chance to say goodbye: "I will love you—in this and every life."

The couplet, our wedding vows: "If you loved me, you would let me go. / I will love you—in this and every life."

* * *

The night that Nora crossed over, I was lucky to have an unusual friend who I could confide in, halfway across the world.

We met at a layover. The summer before Nora died, I was sitting in the Vienna airport when I noticed a person walk by with a black dress and an angular face. Sometimes we have intuitions about other people, and for me, there was something serious in her gaze, and perhaps something geometric about her haircut. I wonder if, even then, I knew that she would be trustworthy about matters of life and death.

The flight was cancelled due to storms over Frankfurt, and it would have to be rescheduled for the following day. EU regulations require the airlines to provide us with hotel, dinner, and taxi vouchers. As we sorted out our collective confusion, I found myself talking with this person. We made small talk, and approached separate booths to collect our vouchers. I saw her leave before me out of the side of my eye, and I thought that was the end of that.

When I turned around, I was surprised to see her waiting for me. She said she knew a good Turkish restaurant, if I would like to share a taxi with her, and use our meal vouchers together?

On the taxi ride over, she told me about a class she was teaching on anticolonial cinema. I was a bit distracted, but I think I said that I would have loved to take the class.

I told her about Nora's illness, and how stressed I had been. It was a revelation to find myself eating dinner outdoors in the Viennese summer, weightless for the first time in months. I drew a doodle on a napkin. She scrutinized it, and suggested that I should consider drawing something like that every day.

The next day, I went to a store and bought a blank notebook. My first drawing was of two pigeons hanging around outside of my hotel.

Seven months and a notebook full of daily drawings later, I messaged my friend to let her know that Nora had made up her mind, and was dying in two weeks. My friend wrote back:

"Dear Sam, I would like to handwrite but I'm afraid tears would make the answer unreadable. I am deeply sorry. And thankful that you wrote me. I wish I had something comforting to say. I feel parts of your pain, although I can't of course assume to grasp what you are going through. I

also have complete understanding for Nora's decision and I profoundly admire her love for freedom. I also admire your empathy and strength to go through this with her, but also the walks of life that you have to do alone.

"Please know that I am here if you want to talk or also not talk. And I will be here in the future. Please don't worry about thoughts being scattered. How could a brain-heart-soul not be facing this, beside the general brutal disorder of the world we do our best to inhabit? Also please let me know if there's anything else I can do from the distance. I'm sending you peaceful thoughts, warmth and strength."

She accompanied me with words like this, over the next two weeks. On the night that Nora died, she lit a candle. It was, as she put it, "the only good thing Austrian Airlines ever did."

* * *

Nora was a fiercely anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist Jew, and the last years of her life were marked by rage at the plight of the Palestinian people. She inherited money from her grandmother Rivka (who was herself a Zionist), and she willed some of it to me. She was very clear that she did not want to leave lingering demands on the people she loved after she died, so she had no instructions for how I was supposed to spend the money. As an idea, however, she offered that I could try to help people in Gaza.

My airport friend was connected with activists in Palestine and Lebanon, and was able to help point me toward fundraisers and other opportunities to help.

One family responded and said, "Thank you so much for your generous donation. It's the largest contribution we've ever received, and it has brought so much joy to the children. Your support has helped cover all their academic

needs for an entire month and cover all the basics needs, and it means the world to us. We are incredibly grateful from the bottom of our hearts for the smiles you've put on the children's faces and ours. Please share this with your friends, as I'm sure you know other amazing people like yourself who would be willing to help."

* * *

Nora's friend, a birth and death doula, said that the moment of a death expressed an energy that felt similar to the moment of a birth. Suppose that accompanying Nora to death was like midwifing a birth. What had been born?

* * *

Recently, I decided to listen to some of the recordings that Nora made on her phone, which she transferred to me in her preparations for her death.

"Deliciousness of today. I went to Rock Point. Walked about, ate my first wild Vermont blackberry of the year. Said hello to all of the different plants and flowers. It was really, really nice, there was a lot going on. I just felt myself, I said hello to the hedge mustard, to the sensitive fern. I got into the lake by Leddy Park. I sort of wove through the streets, leading back out toward North Street, or whatever street it is running along Leddy and North Beach and toward Starr Farms. I was trying to find the white mulberry tree again but I couldn't find it. I did eat a couple of the black mulberries from that one that runs along the bike path, but they're very sour, and I wonder if that's a thing where when they're more shaded they're more sour, with all the rain there's been, I don't know what causes it, but still I was happy to say hello. I saw poke, pokeweed, for the first time

in Vermont today. They seemed amenable to sharing their roots for low-dose medicine. I've been drinking pau d'arco tea and curious to see how it sits with me. The moon was gorgeous—I mean the moon *is* gorgeous—it's just a sliver of a waxing crescent in that rich, vivid orange color..."

* * *

Nora scheduled an email to send on Monday, February 26th, 2024, two days after she died, with a detailed voice memo. She said:

"If I have succeeded in my attempt, I'm okay. And if you want to honor my memory in some way, do what it is that already brings you to a state of connection and joy."

"The places that I loved the most were places by water, near woods. I loved tiny things that grow and crawl over the ground. I loved trees, I loved small plants and animals and fungi and that is still the case. I still love music. I still love art. I still believe in a world that would work for everybody. I still believe in a world beyond borders and beyond oppression. I still believe in a world without police and without military, without wars, without empire. I still believe in a world that would have worked for everyone and I would have wanted to live in that one."

The actor Max von Sydow said in an interview that he was “a great doubter” about the possibility of life after death. Ingmar Bergman, the director with whom he worked all his life, told him, “I promise you you’re wrong. I’ll show you. When I’m gone, I’ll show you.”

Well, what happened? asked the interviewer.

“Well, I’ve heard from Bergman. Many times. Many times.”

* * *

I don’t want to claim that I have heard from Nora—that implies a distance between us. Instead, I feel her looking out from behind my eyes, typing these words with her fingers, longing—lusting—for this sweet life through my still-young, still-healthy body.

Forgive me if I look absent-minded sometimes. I am not lost in grief. I am enraptured with everything.

* * *

Where do we go when our bodies die? Imagine something crumpled up, like a page torn out of a book. Where did the uncrumpled piece of paper go? The text is still readable, just covered in layers of creases, if it were to be flattened out. But the uncrumpled piece of paper is no longer there, nor the untorn book.

* * *

Dylan Thomas: "Out of these seathumbed leaves / That
will fly and fall / Like leaves of trees and as soon / Crumble
and undie / Into the dogdayed night."

There will be stories to tell. Like a river that's rising with the rain, soon the stories will overflow the banks, and run through the streets. A flood of stories—leaking and flowing where they're not supposed to go. We built our mental levees to protect us from stories like that. They are supposed to flow through the storm drains, in the designated gutters, away from the businesses and the schools. When stories overflow, they carry emotions with them, which sog up the capitalist engine and slows down the extraction of the world.

* * *

But the stories won't be of my time with Nora, or the days of her dying. Let us find Nora—the living Nora. She did not want to dwell on her disintegration and sickness, or to be defined by how she chose to die. Beguile me, as I will beguile you, with descriptions of botanical gardens, fog-towed dreams, nautical charts and wind measurements, and the pleasure of our living minds. "Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,/ Strong and content I travel the open road."

Walt Whitman continues: "The earth, that is sufficient, / I do not want the constellations any nearer, / I know they are very well where they are, / I know they suffice for those who belong to them."

* * *

Yet Whitman continues, in parentheticals, as I do: “(Still here I carry my delicious burdens, / I carry them, men and women, I carry them with me wherever I go, / I swear it is impossible for me to get rid of them, I am fill’d with them, and I will fill them in return.)”

* * *

Nora loving me on my birthday. Her face on a cold winter day, cheeks slightly red, skin grainy with cold, warming her cheeks with my nose, poking through the fuzzy purple hood of her knee-length parka. Her body, naked, swimming in the water above me, glowing in the ripples. Her arms, rippling outward on the dock, as she pushes qi out, then pulls it in, while facing the setting sun over Shelburne Bay. Her hands, holding mine, comfortable and other-worldly from the very beginning, handholding so strange of a gesture to me but familiar to her, walking barefoot around her neighborhood. Her toes, smaller than I would have expected, and her toenails, even smaller. She loved me and I’m not sure she knew why. I loved her, and I felt happy with her. Our comfortable pose on couches, lying in opposite directions, with legs criss-crossed, but the person with leg on the outermost side needed their leg held by the other’s arm so that it wouldn’t fall. Lying like that, reading to each other. Nora and I reading to each other Braiding Sweetgrass and crying. Falling asleep like that, under her blue blanket.

Holding her exhausted head, so exhausted she didn’t even want head scratches at those moments, or any levity, just my silent holding. Herself, rocking back and forth in the grass outside of her parent’s house, holding her knees, whispering that she’s had enough, that she wants to die.

* * *

Nora and I, sitting on stage at a friend's talent show, singing *The Book of Love* as a duet, on stage together for the first and only time. She memorized the lyrics, of course. I had them written lightly in pencil on a page next to a drawing, so I could double check.

* * *

Singing into the 8-track in your car, tucked away inside canyons around Boulder, or in empty parking lots at night. Scattering your ashes from the top of the Indian Peaks wilderness. I had to ask the wind which way your ashes wanted to go, so that my body wouldn't get in the way.

* * *

Walking barefoot with Nora outside her family's home, the tulip poplars looming overhead, violets and snowdrops tucked into the woods on either side of the road. No sidewalks, our feet on the asphalt, Nora squeaking in excitement to see a small plant in the cracks (purslane, or chickweed), and squatting down to pluck and eat it. Grapes counting the shoulders of things. The immensity of a memory-world worth preserving.

* * *

And the delicateness of my own mind and life. What if I never write these thoughts down? How do we theorize about that which we have already lost? On one hand, Nora did not want us to get fixated on her and stop our living. On the other hand, would it not shortchange her to simply

move on? Aiming to avoid conjuring forth what Emily Dickinson called “the hour of lead.” Aiming to write into motion, spinning forth a rhapsody of mourning.

Certain stories are important to tell. This is not a line of words rushing by that a poet needs to seize by the coattails before it vanishes. This story, about Nora, Tulia, and myself, has moved into my house, chosen me, and lived with me for a decade. So forget the urgency of minutes... what is another month or year of silence? There is a paradoxical lack of urgency around our deepest and most personal stories. Those stories love us, and out of that love, will remain loyal to us until we are ready to speak.

There are three motivations to write about this, instead of sitting and waiting further.

The first motivation is a respect for death. I could die at any moment, so my opportunity to write this is extraordinarily finite. Moreover, this is a meditation about death, so in writing, I practice orienting myself toward death, organizing my thoughts about how I would want to live during my own aging and dying.

The second motivation is a love for Nora. Already, this story loves me enough that it will wait all my life for me to write it, and happily allow itself to be extinguished if I died before telling it. But that love is a mirror of a love of my own, and I want that love to be shared. Writing the story is a practice of mourning—which is to say, of love—and should we not be striving to practice the greatest love that we can?

The third motivation is that telling our story may help other people. Nora wanted to live in a different world, and she spent her time, especially in the last few months, dreaming about a world that she could have lived in. I want to push this world a little bit towards that utopia.

* * *

It isn't worth describing what actually happened during Nora's death.

Nora was terrified of putting others at risk, so she couldn't tell her friends about her plans. Her last few months were dominated by fear and worry—about whether her choice of method would succeed or if she would end up brain-dead in a coma; about whether I would get arrested for knowing and not stopping her; about a million little things.

Nora was chronically ill, but not terminally ill. If instead of living in Vermont, we lived a few miles to the north across the border, Nora might have qualified under Canada's medical assistance in dying (MAID), which in its most recent iteration, has been expanded to allow assisted suicide for anyone with a "grievous and irremediable" illness that is "in an advanced state of irreversible decline, and are experiencing unbearable suffering," including when the sole underlying condition is a mental illness.

Beyond Canada, Nora could have sought legal means to assisted suicide in a variety of other countries, such as Switzerland, Germany, Spain, and France, among others (though some, but not all, have residency restrictions). But the effort to apply to foreign programs and then to travel was beyond her at that point.

The United States remains far behind—as of this writing in 2026, only thirteen states and Washington DC have legalized medically assisted dying, and only in cases where

the patient has a terminal diagnosis with a life expectancy of six months or less.

* * *

This is how Nora's death should have gone. She should have been allowed to choose her time of departure without fear of putting herself or her loved ones in legal jeopardy. We would have informed her closest friends about her plans, and they would gather with us. We would share memories, laugh, sing her favorite songs, cry together. They would hug Nora tightly, for long minutes, and she would hold their crying heads and tell them that it will all be okay; that there is only love on the other side; that she will always love them and that will never change. She would comfort them with exactly the words they needed to hear, and sing songs on the guitar until she burned up the surprising reservoir of energy that dying people have.

Then, lying on her back in a bed of wild clovers, she would put medicine in her mouth, look up at the flaming sky for the final time through those calm blue eyes, lay her hands onto her heart, and fall asleep. The butterflies would alight on this perfectly still body, the sun would set. We would let her remain like that, until the site, sanctified, becomes a sanctuary.

Now, finally I'm old. I have lived long enough that looking back, I can't see all the hills I've walked over anymore. Until now, I was fairly cautious, and kept the origin in sight. Now my own memory holds mysteries for me. I never know exactly what will unlock them, such that the streams overflow their banks, the floodwaters containing bits of people who I had previously wanted to be.

* * *

Perhaps the biggest moral risk of old age is a willingness to take advantage of the forgetfulness of human nature. They've noticed through a lifetime of experience the sacred fact that most moments will be forgotten, and evil arises when they are willing to exploit that to their own advantage. This is what allows older people to be cruel in a way beyond the young—they view their actions as causing harm that is temporary; something that will be forgotten with time. These old people believe that people are very small, because they can only hold a sliver of their own experiences in their mind at a given time.

But consider the way we change over phases of our life. There are entire ways of being that we have forgotten. A bigger way to live is to use our forgetfulness as a source of humility, as compassion for who we used to be, including those lives we've forgotten. We cannot even understand ourselves, so what is the chance of understanding

somebody else? The extent to which we can deny our own desires, our own past, is also a measure of our capacity for cruelty.

The first place to begin in writing about Nora is to admit that I am overwhelmed; I am lost. A thicket of memories rises up in every direction. A temptation to avoid: simply cataloging the memories. What would be the point? Nora has vacated these scenes long ago. Perhaps she was never there. On the other hand, why not? Remembering and forgetting at the same time. Remembering so that we can forget; forgetting in order to remember.

* * *

Nora and I first got together on May Day, 2015. We had been friends in high school, lost contact during college, but our friendship was strong enough we decided to meet up. She was dogsitting her parents' greyhounds, so I went over to their house.

I don't remember much about that evening except that it was overcast. We talked about our respective disappointments with college. She had dropped out of Amherst after getting sick and the college failed with their disability accommodations. I was mostly lonely and miserable at Swarthmore, and left with fewer friends than I had entering.

Relationships are circuits. We deposit our emotions, memories, and dreams into them, and they return to us later. In bad relationships, aggression and negative emotion pass back and forth, like fighting over a blanket that is too

small on a bed. Good relationships bring memories and feelings back to us, ripened, right when we need them.

Nora and I were both able to remember something about the other that we struggled to connect with in ourselves. I saw that she was the same brilliant, funny person she always was, even more radical now that she was sick. I affirmed the reality of her illness, and held the grief of her athleticism and ambition. Likewise, she saw, without trying, that I was the same sincere and good-hearted friend that I was in high school, only deeper, wiser, and a better listener for my loneliness.

We sat and talked on an old wooden porch swing on her patio. Then we played some guitar. She had just started taking guitar lessons, and was getting the hang of Travis picking. I remember she played some wonderful Josh Ritter songs, which suited her, because her memory was a sponge and she loved doing intricate finger movements while reciting paragraphs of lyrics. Our reintroduction had been facilitated by a mutual friend named Marie, so she sang, "If this were the Cold War we could keep each other warm, / I said on the first occasion that I met Marie."

Josh Ritter formed the spine of her repertoire for many years. Toward the end of her life, I recorded her singing on my field recorder, as if I were a folklorist trying to capture the songs of the country people before they vanished forever.

Her parents' greyhounds Murray and Tulia must have been around us, and we must have even walked them, though I don't remember that walk from the thousands of walks we gave them since. Her mother later gave us Tulia when we moved out to Colorado—a transformative act of generosity on her part.

I stayed the night. Our evening wasn't sexual, and we laid on the bed next to one another without touching, like children. As I was falling asleep, I said to her, "I love you," and she said, "I love you too."

The next morning, we picked up her sister, Michaela, from a sleepover. "We're getting married," Nora announced. "Oh that's great! When's the wedding?" Michaela said.

It's strange to think back on what's gone and what's left. Nora is gone. Murray and Tulia are gone. Nora's parents got rid of that decaying porch swing. Memories of much of the evening are gone, or never existed—what did we eat? surely we walked the dogs? And strange, still, are what remains: her parents' house, her guitar, that initial jolt of love as we fell asleep.

* * *

We never did get married—Nora didn't believe in it. She already knew by the age of 12 that she never wanted to be pregnant in her life, and her opinion on marriage formed soon after. She was open to getting married for logistical reasons, but it never made sense for us.

Nora's curiosity expanded my intellectual life in more ways than I can count. One such way was introducing me to feminist theorists. Starting from the beginning of our relationship, we read her favorite feminists together—Silvia Federici, Sophie Lewis, Amia Srinivasan. We read Charlotte Shane's *Prostitute Laundry* out loud to each other. Nora was critical of the traditional nuclear family (*Abolish the Family* was a favorite book), and we decided to have a non-monogamous relationship from the beginning. She was skilled at diving into the nuances of communicating sensitively: non-monogamy did not mean bringing libertarian attitudes into our partnerships; we watched online

seminars about non-violent communication; she, first, then me, later, read Polysecure.

In the last few weeks of her life, I asked her whether she wanted to get married before she died. She said no, nothing has changed in her opinions about marriage, but she would do it if I insisted. I didn't, of course.

* * *

Our first real date was to canvas for Bernie Sanders in Youngstown, Ohio. We drove up in her Honda Civic (which is still my car over a decade later; another gift from her parents) and stayed in the empty spare bedroom of an old activist couple.

Nora became enamored with their life. Their living room had a triple-decker office printer for printing propaganda, and they regaled us with tales of solidarity and direct actions. Many of the buildings on their block were abandoned. Throughout our relationship, Nora dreamed that one day we could move out to Youngstown together, rehabilitate an abandoned rowhouse, and start a wildflower garden in the yard.

I would like to give you a tour of another empty room. All the furniture has been moved out. The rose and the mulberry tree we inherited in the front yard remain. Nora and I lived there for three years.

One looks upon an empty room that one is about to depart in a very different way than one is about to inhabit. No longer are we imagining ways to fill the apartment with things. Instead, there is a calmness due to their absence. It is perfect in a way that it could not have been before.

What remains are several objects:

1. A 25L backpack filled with clothes and various objects, to be taken to the Camino de Santiago on the next day.
2. A tri-fold memory foam mattress which has served us very well throughout the years, ready for me to sleep on, by the door. Incidentally, Nora died on an identical mattress to this one.
3. Residual cleaning objects, like a broom and a bucket, soon to be taken outside and donated.

The midnight summer breeze, coming in through the window, is now unimpeded by our furniture as it wraps around the room.

* * *

Nora loved through-hiking. She was the one who first told me about the Camino de Santiago. A few weeks before she died, I proposed walking the Camino with her in images. Every day I would draw a new stage. I found an image of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, and drew it for her with colored pastels. She looked at it with wistful sadness, and our Camino ended where it began.

Half a year later, after Nora died, her sister Michaela and I made it out to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. I stood at the exact spot as the vantage point of the drawing. Perhaps I did not cry much on the Camino because I used up all of my tears there, before I took a single step. By the time I started walking, I mostly felt like Walt Whitman: "Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road, / Healthy, free, the world before me, / The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose."

It took us two summers to walk the entire thing, and then I went back alone on a third summer to see the total eclipse. It was a poetic walk for me, literally, as I used the empty time to memorize and recite poems. I especially enjoyed the poems of García Lorca, which I memorized in Spanish, and I recited to some of the Spanish-speaking friends I made along the way. I received puzzled looks from the Spanish men who said they were from Córdoba, and I responded, "Córdoba—lejana y sola." After three caminos walking toward Santiago de Compostela—a destination with no intrinsic meaning for me—I finally made my own pilgrimage to García Lorca's house in Granada, by train.

I felt calm and wise and contented. I shared about Nora whenever the topic came up. A Camino friend asked me what I would wish for if the Camino were to grant me any wish. I said I didn't have any wishes for myself, and that I wished that everyone else's wishes would come

true. I meant this sincerely, and she snorted, and told me it sounded pretentious. I thought in that moment that perhaps she was right, that people's wishes are vastly contradictory, and having them all come true at the same time would be impossible, and that I was being egotistical. Yet I believe it now again, at night at my writing, that Nora's death certainly leaves it possible for me to hold the space for exactly that impossibly collective dream.

* * *

A dream told to me by a woman walking with her sister-in-law. The sister-in-law's mother had died three weeks prior. The woman said she once dreamed that she was pulled into the air, above the ocean, by a giant beam of energy. It was filled with love. But as she ascended in that direction, she saw her children waving from the shore, and she knew she didn't want to leave them behind. She tried to twist her body and move toward the shore, but the beam was too strong; the intentions became criss-crossed, and she plunged into the water.

* * *

The night of the eclipse on the Camino, I slept outside in the wheat fields to see the Perseid meteor shower. I wrapped myself in a sleeping bag liner, pulled a camping blanket over me, and wrapped my head with some clothes to keep warm. I slept with my glasses on so that I could see the stars whenever my eyes opened.

I'm surprised whenever I look up at the stars, knowing that Nora, freed from physical constraints, is just as much there as she is here. More than bones and muscles, our existence takes the form of repetitions. Sometimes I think

that we live in a kind of Fourier space of reality—that colors and emotions have an independent existence, and that we are canvasses on which these living colors paint out their dramas. An alien that sees across time will see a ladder of heartbeats, an ocean of brain waves, and something almost like a leaf inhaled and exhaled on the air, never touching the ground. And when the Organizing Principle ceases to be, these heartbeats stop, the ocean stills, the leaf gently falls to the ground, and consciousness escapes the grid of rhythm in which it was kept, flowing beyond its edges, like a shooting star.

* * *

On my very last day of walking, I experienced an ignition of energy that I hadn't felt before or since. It started with a strange red bug buzzing across my view. It looked as if it was airlifting its own abdomen; alarmingly red, yet so burdened by its own weight. I had to slow down to dodge it. The kind of joke that Nora would play on me. I laughed out loud. With that laughter, the world blew open. I suddenly noticed the undulation of the white birds in flight. The brushing of wind across the wheat. A seagull, doing a funny twist to face its own buttocks on a roof. It all reminded me of Nora, delighting in herself, showing off her joy to me.

I cried as I walked. It occurred to me that Nora's presence is only revealed to me in measured doses for my own sanity. There is such a deep saturation of Nora all around me that most of the time my consciousness protects itself from being overwhelmed. Perhaps one day, when it is my time, it will all come flooding inward.

(Al romperlo, un gran chorro de sombra, / inundó la quimérica alcoba.)

Where does the light come from? Illumination, not just in the dark, but at any time of day. Time of day as irrelevant, or simply a filter, through which our life passes through. Suppose we could sense the illumination arising from all things. Not just when the sun streams through the clouds, like it did just now, but even through gray clouds. Our consciousness shining through closed eyelids. And ultimately, as Nora is exploring, even with our death. What radiates on when the light is gone?

* * *

Illumination from within the dark. Not just the physical lack of photons, but the spiritual dark, the confused, foggy, gray. Grayness is a lack of everything, even darkness. Darkness that is absolute conditions you to notice every pinprick of light. Grayness doesn't raise that sensitivity, and sits there like an absence of questions, absence of answers. After God says "Let there be light" and before separating the light from the darkness, what was that uniformity of presence like? What distinguished it from the total absence that came before?

The living thing. Nora with her bare feet in the grass, hands in prayer position, eyes looking up at the trees above. During a time when she could barely digest any food, her self-regulating practice consisted of creating visions and inhabiting them. She would spend hours narrating them out loud in detail.

She would have a smile on her face, entranced, as she narrated how she was sitting at a long wooden table on a cool summer evening surrounded by a loving community of friends... fairy lights strung overhead, acoustic guitar strumming over the happy burble of conversation and laughter... there are young kids chasing each other, kneeling on the bench, smearing food around their cheeks; old people with their wrinkly faces, looking kindly at Nora, giving her their softened hands. The guitar and the conversation pauses for a moment, and the sounds of crickets emerge. Even with the fairy lights on, the stars are so bright that Orion is visible leaping across the sky. Someone sitting nearby inhales deeply.

"This is so perfect," Nora whispers, as murmurs of assent ripple across the table, and the two people sitting closest to her hug her arms. She leans her head on an old woman's wiry hair, and breathes it in. It reminds her of her grandma. And in her other eye, the moon looks back at her, like a cosmic grandma, giving her a slow wink.

She walks away from the party to breathe on her own. Bare feet in the dewy grass, looking up at the moon. A chorus of frogs and crickets. Sweet singing and guitar strumming escaping from the house nearby. Air visits her lungs, and it leaves her to rejoin the wider air. If this were a dream, she could wiggle her toes into the mud beneath the grass, like roots, and transform herself into a plant. If this were a dream, she could leap up, and start doing breast strokes in the black ocean of air toward the moon, the roof of the party fading below her. But it isn't a dream, so she stands there, solid as a living, waking person can be, parting the wind that blows past her.

* * *

Nora stands on the dock in her bare feet. It's summer. She watches the seagulls circle Lake Champlain as the waves splash against the shore, and the floating dock clanks against its moorings. Warm, but not too warm, a cool Vermont breeze through her hair and caressing her belly and leg fuzz. She leaps.

A period of joyful recalibration. The body, cold but not too cold, the waves rocking. From the water, the seagulls overhead. An appetite in Nora as ideas flare up and connect with the floating senses. There is still homelessness, there are still children dying in Gaza, killed by people who are doing it in her name. She lets herself sink under the cold and quiet underwater. And when she emerges again, she has no thoughts this time. Vermont does not let us forget the cold, even in summer, and for Nora, this is a sacred reminder.

* * *

Nora stands on top of the continental divide, breathing, hands on her hips, legs sore and strong. Under blue skies, she watches an eagle circling under the big white clouds. She takes a gulp of water from the tube over her shoulder, and looks out over the alpine zone, at a geometrical landscape that looks almost like the moon. The vegetation starts to appear below in a ring, like she is standing on top of the rocky head of St. Francis. The wind is stronger at the summit, and she puts on her windbreaker, which whips against her body in the wind.

Nora sits down cross-legged on a boulder, and notices a nearby companion: a marmot. The whiskers on its face are pushed back by the wind, and it tilts its head up with an meditative smile. It reminds her of the guinea pigs she had as a kid, but larger and more rugged, released from their suburban cages filled with wood chips, reincarnated into beings destined to live their whole lives around 14,000 ft.

Nora settles into the strange silence above the tree line. She closes her eyes, and starts doing *la qi*: putting her hands in front of her body, as if holding a ball of energy, and then pulling her hands apart, drawing the energy outward toward the rim of the horizon. Then drawing them back toward each other, pushing the energy like wind through pine needles. And then opening again... the world, exploding with life, microbes and pollen in the clouds, suspended in the luminous air, refracting colors like crystals. And pulling in... the damp smell of the sky, the eagle, watchfully circling nearer, its yellow eyes, the breath on which she balances, this thin, precious air.

* * *

Nora by a tropical waterfall, a warm sensorium of mist, foam, and speckled green. Giant philodendron with dewy

red frogs perched on its leaf, the tips of its toes slightly bulbous. She inhales, breathes in the wet air. The top of the waterfall is blinding, a few stories up, because the sun reflects on the water so perfectly, like a mirror. A rainbow arches down from there to the tops of the trees below. The water is surprisingly warm—she expected it, for its dark colors and mysterious mountain origins, to be cold. She slides into the pool, and finds a smooth rock that cups her body, and rests her entire body in the water.

Lying there, Nora is humming, eyes closed. As Nora's chest warms up with the humming, her voice begins to ripen, and blossoms from her opened mouth and throat. A beautiful tune. I see the veins behind her closed eyelids. Her eyelids seemed very thin to me, like papier-mache. When she does this long enough, her hair dries. A memory of how soft her hair.

* * *

Nora, barefoot on the beach, water digging her toes into the sand, chanting. Her voice is loud and clear above the sound of the waves. She is illuminated by a bonfire on the beach. As the melody of her chant loops around to the beginning, those of us sitting around the fire join in, weaving in and around her with harmony, this three-dimensional chant emerges over the crackle of the fire and the sound of the waves. We've each written things onto pieces of paper that we're ready to let go. We step forward and put our paper into the fire, one at a time. We watch these stories, each the size of lost mountains and buildings and decades and marriages and cities, shrink into the size of the paper that contained them, disintegrate into flaming fragments, crumble and undie upward toward the dogdayed night. Suppose this story were to be written on such paper.

Imagine this book is out there, on paper.

It is a physical book in your hands, or more of the time, sitting on a table, standing on a shelf. It contains these words I've written. It tells the story as I've wanted it told. Anyone I meet could have gone and read it.

It is a book of the dead. Not just of Nora, but myself. Seneca: "We are mistaken when we look forward to death; the major portion of death has already passed. Whatever years be behind us are in death's hands."

Even as I find the living Nora here, she moves on—I move on with her.

* * *

The immense span we have to traverse emotionally just to exist. This is the unfathomable aspect of being an adult. When you are a kid, your reality already seems so full and complete, how can there be more? Not just a little bit more, but many lives more. Even "How are you?" is a fraught question if taken seriously, and why should we not take each other's words seriously? When it comes to Nora, I'm not sure where to even begin.

This is the condition of ripeness from which writing can occur. The way we write when we are full to the seams of memory, love, and desire for change.

Continuity at the level of months, a mid-level perseverance that I'm developing, writing with an aim that is met

through wandering, or wandering with slightly more of an aim in mind; wandering while navigating.

But isn't writing about Nora precisely something like this? How do I wind around this massive theme? It is like trying to take a walk to the horizon, or around the sky. We can wander around all our life and never encircle it, only describe other scenes illuminated beneath.

* * *

Writing is like navigating a landscape. Sometimes we can sprint, other times we need to carefully pick our way with our eyes looking down at our feet, yet other times dedicate all of our attention to climbing so that we don't fall.

* * *

Walter Benjamin: "What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about."

* * *

A moundful of dirt I bring every day with the hope that it is worth something. I imagine it imbued with certain powers—that it can compel someone to read, "compel" in the sense of a warm fire drawing somebody in from the cold.

I grab onto it, even as my floating life floats another day away from Nora and our years. The love surrounding me settles, distills, and most of all abstracts. This is something I did not expect from death—that without a physical body, we drift toward abstraction.

A certain wisdom and growth is necessary to remain in touch with the dead. They remain with us from the moment they die onward, but their perceptions are not our perceptions. For that reason, they are able to exist within our conscious subjectivity, which is after all, part of the greater manifold reality. I think, therefore I am, but also, everything that I think, is. This turning inside-out of our subjectivity, to see it as objective, to see our inner world as real and therefore populated by the love of those who have crossed... it requires a gradual abstraction of our broader proprioceptive sense, which is to say, all the ways we perceive ourselves and narrative ourselves and flow through the river of time. She has been here the whole time, including in the times that I felt her absence. What does that mean about those perceptions of absence? That they are limited, an illusion, something that we have to surmount to perceive reality, which is greater and more populated.

Our ability to grasp laminations of memory slowly unfolding and recognize our living involvement in their narrative; to have the courage to pluck a direction out of the bouquet of symmetries and walk forward into it; to have the patience when nothing ventures forth.

* * *

Throughout her life, Georgia O'Keeffe returned to the Cerro Pedernal as a subject in her painting. I went to see it on Nora's second deathday anniversary at Ghost Ranch, New Mexico. I read on a plaque there that she said the mountain belongs to her. It was her own private mountain. God told her if she painted it enough, she could have it. Ultimately, she painted it close to thirty times.

A dream in Santa Fe on May 5th, 2025:

In this dream, I was having a conversation with an older woman in hippy clothing in a park in Boulder. She told me that she didn't see herself as a writer. Instead, she tended to an inner writer. The days when she wrote at least 1,000 words were "writer days." At the end of a week, if she could look back and see a string of writing days, her inner writer was happy.

She was writing a book about her body as a holy object. The subject was too complicated for her to write to a single audience, so she imagined writing to five different synonyms for God. Her audience consisted of God, Yahweh, Allah, Jesus, and Granni. Each of those faces of God brought out a different quality of her writing, so she would alternate which one she was writing to: sometimes a little bit to each of them every day; other times she would focus on just one.

Granni seemed to be the one most personal to her. When she showed me examples of her writing, her hand initially covered up "Granni", as if subconsciously trying to hide it. I remember she had made a doodle of a six-fingered fist, with the word "G-r-a-n-n-i" tattooed on it, one letter per finger. The third finger was amputated, so the "a" was written on the stump.

I woke up, and I decided this was as good of a push to start writing as any. I've been writing some words, if not quite a thousand, every day ever since.

* * *

It is interesting. Suppose I used this dream as evidence to claim that I now have an inner writer myself. Yet that dream woman, herself, didn't identify as a writer, and deferred to her own inner writer for her sense of satisfaction. Could it be that my inner writer is her inner writer too—somebody twice removed, whom I never met, who may not actually exist?

It is too complicated. Far easier to just say: I am the writer. When I write, I am happy.

* * *

Dream, March 22nd, 2026:

I dreamed that I was journaling, and wrote down the line, "I hope that I can be humble in your presence." Then I woke up into another dream. I repeated the line to myself, even as the rest of the inner dream was forgotten. I wanted to write it down so that I wouldn't forget, but I didn't have anything to write it on. I had a pencil, but no paper. So on the palm of my hand, I gently wrote, "I hope that I can be humble in your presence." It didn't produce any written lines, only indentations in my palm where the words would be.

Around that time, I received an email from Nora, saying that she had arrived on the Camino de Santiago, and that she wouldn't be sending too many emails while she's walking, but that she loves me. It was a dry, short email,

but I still felt hopeful reading it, and I was excited for her to experience the Camino.

But that was a dream. I woke up in a darkened dormitory, perhaps in an ancient stone building. I went to use the bathroom, which I did barefoot. I was thinking about the concept of demons, and when I returned to bed, the darkness pressed on the edge of my consciousness, as a challenge or an invitation. For some reason, I felt lucid, and I welcomed the challenge. I said, "Well, bring it on then." Immediately, my surroundings became dark, I felt my hairs stand on end, and I knew that I was being watched closely. My senses were heightened, but I wasn't in danger as long as I maintained my awareness. I laid there and just breathed, letting the fear and energy flow through my body.

I had a train of thought as I laid there, wondering what it was that people found so objectionable about the way that demons are typically depicted. What's wrong with having long fingernails or dirty hair or scaly skin? As long as we have goodness in our hearts, it's not a problem to have a disheveled appearance. In fact, we can develop very rewarding relationships with demon-looking beings who are actually pure, since they will be grateful for our recognition. Isn't this the premise of so many fairy tales, like the girl who kisses a frog, or the beauty and the beast? For looking past their superficial ugliness, we are rewarded with gifts. I felt the energy that came from the demon's presence, and I realized that I could do a lot with energy like this if it was on my side. "Perhaps people who exercise and run late into their adulthood draw their energy from demons like this..." I remembered thinking to myself.

As I communed with this demonic energy, I felt powerful enough to share my dream insights with Nora.

The dream shifted out of focus, and I found myself at a crowded stone arch, still late at night. I was with a companion, trying to get through the gate. The security working at the gate made a joke about my companion and denied them entry, and I laughed unwittingly. I immediately felt bad. The laugh came so reflexively to me that I wondered for how many years or decades had I been a bad friend? My thoughts were interrupted by a different friend—a postdoc at the Santa Fe Institute—appearing on the other side of the gate, who gently guided me toward the stairs of this giant cathedral. The stairs were wide and emitted a soft glow from the lights. To our left, a series of arches paralleled the staircase, and people mingled about those stone pillars. I could see the distant entrance up above. It occurred to me that I would have a chance to speak to Nora at the top of the stairs.

My friend walked with a peaceful seriousness. I felt every step ascending me closer toward the point of Nora's crossing, and a choir sang beautiful variations on the word "hallelujah." I knew what I wanted to say to Nora when I saw her. I had forgotten about the words I wrote on my palm. It wasn't so much a specific set of words as it was to share the grounded quality that allowed me to pass through demons unharmed. I felt that anything I said to her would be holy.

* * *

I've retold this following dream so many times that I'm not sure what are my memories, and what are my memories of my memories.

I was being bullied by some motorcycle gang by the side of the highway.

The crucial moment is that I realize I'm dreaming, and decide to meditate. The idea came from nowhere.

Prior to this dream, I tended to fly in my lucid dreams, or spin around and try to conjure specific scenes from my imagination. I had done this ever since watching Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* in high school.

Something changed in me this time. It was a spark of courage that continues to burn through my dreams to this day. I realized that I didn't need to use my dream powers to run away, or even to have fun. The dream was inside of me, and nothing could hurt me. With that switch in perspective, I could experiment with doing extraordinary things, such as facing this group of spitting, yelling, leather-clad bikers, ignoring them, and sitting down cross-legged on the shoulder of a highway, with my hands forming a meditation mudra in my lap.

I remember the fear as I sat myself down. It remains one of the weirdest things I've ever done. I've come to recognize this sensation of weirdness as correlated with how lucid I am in the dream. The strongest dreams are ones where I achieve lucidity from underneath the most solid-seeming realities. It is thrilling and lonely to look out at the world and realize that it is fully inside of your own mind.

So I sat down, against all social and natural instincts, bikers still yelling. I put my hands in my lap, palms up, one in the other. I breathed, and gently rested my awareness, and noticed the distant mountains.

Was there a single transition point? There must have been, but how can anyone describe it? It was like I suddenly remembered that I had a distant, far-off body, one massive and mysterious that contained this one, but I didn't quite know where it was yet. This mountain range and asphalt highway and angry stranger and distant sun and medi-

tating body all comprised no more than an eyelash in my larger being's eye. It awed me.

At that moment, I had three separate layers of being: a temporary body within the dream (the "dream body"); a body that felt itself proprioceptively (the "felt body"); and a larger sleeping body, whose boundaries I could not yet sense (the "sleeping body"). The dream body and the felt body were still identical, and the sleeping body was nowhere to be found.

It was too much to maintain the physical illusions of the dream while contacting this higher awareness, so I closed my eyes. The world capsized. The highway I was sitting on inverted into my closing eyes. I was released from my dream body, but the felt body remained sitting, holding a mudra. But where was my sleeping body? The boundaries of my felt body were starting to flicker, being deprived of its illusion of being physically anchored.

I became scared. The disconnect between my felt body and my sleeping body made me anxious, because my felt body was disintegrating without a corporeal form to attach to. I was searching for the dream body, but my meditation pose seemed to stubbornly prevent them from connecting—my mind was probing for my sleeping body to be also sitting cross-legged. (I was actually lying on a couch in my parents' house).

During that time, my mind attempted to interpolate between my felt body and the larger universe. It searched outward, as this image of myself as a meditating being inflated to gigantic proportions. I don't know how to describe it except using superlatives, because the entire process operated as a superlative: I was the largest thing I could think of, but that would imply boundaries that I could further transcend, and so on.

As this happened, I felt a buzzing electricity, which became more intense as I disintegrated further. I don't remember the ending with much clarity. I only know that I felt an overwhelming energy rise up through my body, which overflowed the boundaries of my typical proprioceptive senses. I felt more like a giant cloud of electric stars than a human body.

I short-circuited, and woke up with a jerk. I also felt an immense relief. I knew that I had touched on something powerful. My meditative practices were not advanced enough yet to face whatever lurked beyond that particular horizon. I intuited that I had probably escaped psychological damage—something like Kundalini syndrome—and it was dizzying to feel how close to bodily annihilation I had come.

Despite the dangers and fears, I've tried to replicate the experience often. Lucidity is a funny thing in that way. You think you're lucid, but you're really only halfway there. Old thoughts show up and present themselves as if they were new thoughts. So I think, "I'm going to meditate now," even though in my fully conscious mind I know it's a bad idea. I go through the motions, sit down, hold the mudra in my palm. But the world shakes a little bit, and I wake up, as if the anticipated earthquake was only a small tremble. It has never felt as intense since that first time.

To be fair, I don't have a consistent meditation practice in waking life, and that would clearly help me move in this direction. I don't have any reason to expect this to work if I only ever practice it in my dreams. I'm a little scared about starting though. Is this what dying feels like? To lose contact with one's physical body? I know that it is waiting for me—Nora is too—and I'm not ready to meet her in this way yet.

* * *

There were some exceptions to this pattern. One time, I did an entire qigong practice in my dream. I was proud of myself for finishing it, because the practice was difficult. I felt an eerie presence around me the whole time, and the energy flooding into my body when I pulled inward was very intense. I needed to regulate how much energy was coming in and out, while maintaining the overall “shape” of my body, while not becoming so excited that I woke up.

I had a dream a few weeks later that I met with one of Nora’s qigong teachers, someone who didn’t impress me very much when I met him. In my dream, I told him I did a whole qigong practice in a lucid dream. He looked at me skeptically, and told me that was very dangerous.

* * *

Gradually, over years of coming up against the dead end of the dream meditation, I began to develop a new objective in my dreams: to simply be kind to the dream people instead. I found this to be a surprisingly rich practice. Characters in dreams possess a robust appearance of selfhood. Even once I realize that I’m dreaming, other people in the dream act no less real in my encounters with them. I have had conversations with people where I said, “You’re in my dream,” and they look at me in ways ranging from incredulity to a kind of defeated shrug, as if to say, “What can I do about it?”

Since the dream people act so real, I feel a similar self-consciousness in facing them as I do encountering people in real life. Flying, having sex, using my omnipotent powers to transform the world—these are ways of exercising my control over the dream world around me, and meditation is

an intense version of the same. Being kind toward strangers, however, seemed to get at deeper obstacles within my psyche that affected my interactions in waking life. What kind of dream god would I be if I wasn't capable of infinite love toward others, even the seemingly inconsequential?

This thought has offered me a secular entrypoint into thinking about Christian ethics and metaphysics. One way to see the Christian myth is that we are characters within God's dream. Jesus is the the dream body and God the father is the sleeping body. Admirably, in my view, Jesus decides to use his lucidity to heal the sick, fight injustice, and essentially spread love. He seems like a good role model for an ethic of lucid dreaming.

I thought about Jesus, and wondered what it would be like to heal people in my dream. I still haven't had the opportunity to do that—my mind just doesn't take me there, so it is a real spiritual challenge for me. The closest I have come is that I have given several strangers lucid hugs in my dreams. I think that's better than nothing, and unlike dream meditation, it leaves me warm when I wake up, and it doesn't seem to risk frying my nervous system.

* * *

I dreamt last night that I was standing by the plaza in Santa Fe, looking out over the adobe buildings at the vast, blue sky. I felt, with heaviness, that I needed to let Nora's remains go. All I had left was her hair, mingled with Tulia's fur, and I had associated so much meaning with it. But I felt the truth of the matter, too, that neither she nor Tulia would want parts of themselves locked inside of a plastic bag. They would much rather float freely in the wind. Besides, it seemed like the time was ripening for a blessing: that when we release parts of our loved ones, it quickly spreads

throughout the whole world, and they can surprise us out there. We cannot predict where they will end up, so it isn't important to control where they are released. We are given the joy of knowing that they could be wherever we are, a little bit of their dust, coating everything.

I woke up before I could release her hair in the dream.

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Dream, Thursday Feb 19th, 2026:

I had just failed at an assassination attempt, and my co-conspirator was nabbed before she could get in the car. I backed the car up, and started speeding away, but a group of postal workers hemmed me in with their trucks. As I left my car, one of the postal workers approached me, with a look of rage upon his face. "How curious," I thought, "I rarely see Asian people look as angry as him." He reached out his hand and violently grabbed my face.

As his hand tore at my face, I thought, "Wow, I'm dreaming." I became excited. This was a perfect chance to practice what I've been wanting to practice, which is to love the people within my dreams. This was such a tense, fearful dream, and I liked how I was going to introduce love into this atmosphere of guns and conspiracies and violence.

The postal worker let me go, and I saw this other guy standing there watching. I opened my arms and I said to him, "Hey, do you want a hug?" And to my relief (I was going to hug him regardless), he said, "Yes!" We hugged for a while, and I may have even picked him up a little. It felt very warm.

It seemed almost too easy though. When I let go of the hug, I felt a bit disappointed, because I hadn't really confronted the darkness of the dream. I transformed it too

easily, and used my dream powers to make it into a happy dream instead. So I walked away, and tried to reconnect with the creepiness of the earlier dream.

Fortunately, the former world was still intact, and still somewhat paranoid and small. I remembered being chased and my failed assassination. It felt like I was on a deserted movie set, but I couldn't tell if the movie was real or not. This was perfect for my intentions. I didn't want love to surround me, I wanted to be submerged in fear. I was so delighted knowing that I had brought my love to such a strange corner of the universe that I started singing. I sang my gratitude to love being far, far away, because only then, could my love really stretch out its wings. I sang and sang and sang, into this empty, hollow, haunted, loveless dream.

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I had just hugged another stranger in a dream.

We ended our hug, and saw that we were in a trailer at the base of Swarthmore's campus, perhaps near where the SEPTA station would be.

A group was mingling outside of the trailer, in the sun, and saw us exit, and someone called to me, "Professor! Sam! Do you have time to walk with me to campus?" I would have preferred to integrate the powerful hug that I just shared by walking alone, but I thought, well, this is a dream, and I am being challenged to be nice to people in my dreams, so I agreed.

Once we started walking, the person started telling me about their problems, and I started to fatigue. I can't keep this degree of concentration forever... I thought to myself. I have been experiencing a startling amount of lucidity for a while now.

As we were walking, the sun suddenly flickered out. The sky turned black, and it became night. This was ominous to me, because I knew it was daytime. It was like the world collapsing in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Frightened, my voice became extremely weak. With an immense effort, I managed to croak, "If we can just get ourselves to say 'sun', then the sun will come back... sun! sun! three, two, one, sun! voice! voice! voice!" I felt myself collapsing into a fetal position as I said these words, and my attempt to counteract the darkness was so futile that the ridiculousness imposed a certain lucidity upon me.

I smiled at that thought, that even if I didn't have the energy to uphold the dream world, I could at least maintain my awareness. My dream had weakened to the point where I felt my smile in my sleeping body. My dream body was fading, and my sleeping body was coming back online, and I knew that soon my consciousness would eject from the dream. Even though I didn't want to do that, I was so tired from trying to remain lucid that I didn't have much desire to remain sleeping either. I knew that I would find myself in my bed, barely whispering, "Sun! Sun! Sun!", and sure enough, that's where I was, and that's what I was doing.

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I dreamed about Nora again last night. I had been walking around with Chinese school friends, or school bus friends, and introducing them to one another. Someone started teaching me a particular squatting exercise, and I did it, enthusiastically. In fact, when they counted to ten, and told me to stop, I said, "No, I can keep going." They insisted that I stop, because going further would harm my long-term progress, and it was better that I do exactly ten every night than fluctuate. So I did twelve, and stopped.

After I stopped doing squats, I found that I could lift up my legs instead of squatting down, and it would cause me to float into the air with my arms around my knees, like I was floating in a pool. So I did this, and floated around the room, bouncing against the counter, walls, and ceiling. People admired my ability to float, and I laughed and explained what I was doing. It occurred to me that I had such mastery over reality at this point, that I could even speak to Nora. So I closed my eyes, and floating around the room, I screamed, "Nora, I love you! I miss you so much!"

I woke up soon after that.

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Nora in my dreams. Nora under my fingertips, in the air around me. I told a Camino friend about my love for Nora, and how I feel her everywhere, and my friend showed me the goosebumps on her arm. Nora in my lungs, in the tiny veins in my eyes. Blood circulating. Nerves firing. Electricity flowing like a river across the landscape in copper pipelines. Dams, waterfalls, storks compiling giant balls of twigs above church bells. Nora in the dimming sun reflected off the windows. The swallows flooding the evenings from the eaves.

Nora aside me, watching, wisened with the crossing. Nora actualizing who she wants to be, strong, supple, swaying in the wind. Nora in every ladybug, Spanish snail, butterfly, and worm. Nora in the endless chorus of wildflowers. Nora with me looking up at the stars before the sun rises. Nora in the stars, looking back, at the tiny blue dot, stretched out across time. Nora as collective intelligence, the world spirit composed out of humanity as a whole. Nora in the sea, in plastics, in metals, in clouds. Nora is flying, crawling, evolving, unfurling, enfolding. Nora is the funny

mustache growing on my face. Nora is smiling, twirling, dancing, singing. Her song is in everyone's songs, in the sound of the leaves rustling, which sounds like rain. Happy talking. The world is something that continues.

Nora in these feelings, in the relationship spirit that loves so intensely. In crying, drawing, push-ups, bonfires, jazz, bicycling, crystals, light in its most basic form. The sun.

Nora as Camino. Human river, always changing, as we flow past the same places generation after generation. See the same friends again and again. My guardedness. Mysterious strangers who are just boring people. Alcohol in livers. Crying in rivers. Walking over fallen pedals that line stone bridges, following parades of trombones. The wind encircles the planet, ruffling wheat and hair. Long grass hair. Wind over ocean, waving, playing with shapes on the water. So it goes on. Dreams: hawks, poisons, something under the soil. Flight. Kindness toward people in my dreams. Perhaps they are Nora. That is another reason for me to be kind to the people in my dreams. They might be Nora trying to visit me.

Anything we do without love, we are doomed to repeat. We will find ourselves marveling at the structure of that encounter tessellated over the moments of our life, like a mosaic on the walls of the Alhambra.

Look at the things you find yourself bored with. What is boredom except an implicit repetition? A puzzle confronted and forgotten that we were supposed to solve.

Are we able to look at things and say, "This is good," even at the moment it comes out, while it's still misshapen and not yet formed?

All words come out good—with the potential to be good. Nothing needs to be deleted so urgently that it cannot be written first. All words have the potential to grow into (be pruned into, be surrounded by, be developed into) the right words such that they communicate love.

By these measures I'm partially succeeding. I think this is good enough. Yes. I think this is good enough.

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To know a theorem's proof is to be able to state it with joy and exuberance, just like positive identification of a plant. One should be able to confidently yell out the plant's name like greeting an old friend.

When Nora died, new words entered my vocabulary: conifers and broadleaves, dark arches of beech, bromeliads

and gesneriads. Someone has to name them now that she's gone. A tiny daisy, even in the heavy night.

A gasp of air as the clearing emerges. The swelling dark does not mix with the light, it simply partitions it.