

The UnCure

a collection of poems
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Dear,

Here in the emergency, we need emergency lunch. We need an emergency doctor but they're all busy with the other emergencies. We're wearing our emergency masks and trying to find something emergency funny on our emergency phones but there's only emergencies that are not so funny. We have one emergency bed, one emergency needle in J's arm giving them emergency fluids and an emergency bruise I can already see, one folding metal chair and one plastic door someone hastily cut and mounted to slow down a different emergency. The emergency nurse says I can't leave my emergency even to get food because they're only 15, and if I haven't noticed, it's an emergency. We send emergency texts to grandparents and friends and say, *it's probably not an emergency but...* The emergency looks a lot like nothing at all. We need the yelling emergency and the vomiting emergency out in the hall to please the shut the emergency fuck up. We need a nurse to answer our emergency questions and while we're at it, we need an emergency parent to show up and tell us both what to emergency do. Can we go? We would like to exit the emergency. We cannot leave. Can we go? The emergency does not leave.

Dear,

I write these in my head at the grocery store, and they disappear. I write these in my head in the shower and they disappear.
Sickness

the unseen line that grabs the collar on the dog's neck as she barks, leaps, then is snapped back to the ground. I write these and I disappear.

Dear,

Did I have feelings, in the hospital?
What did I think about? Were there pictures in
my mind? I tell you there was

nothing. My job was to make my mind a
cup and empty it. *How often do you look into a
mirror and not recognize yourself?* J's pain
and fear and anger were a fire and I had only
an empty cup. The nurse said, *How's your
pain, scale of 1-10?* J said, *11.*

*How often do you have the experience
that the people, objects, and the world around
you are not real?* I walked one block to the
grocery store, my phone filled with texts, *how
are you, how are you?* I called. I tried to cry, I
really did. I sent my cup down into the well and
the cup clanged on the empty stones. *How
often do you feel that your body does not
belong to you?* There was no room in the
hospital room for my—

I pulled the cup back up, put my phone
back in my pocket, picked up the little green
plastic basket and filled it. Passion fruit, sushi,
How often are you not sure

*if the things you remember really
happened or if you just dreamed them,* rice
crackers, mango, a soft stuffed puppy, *how
often do you find that you are able to ignore
pain?* My mind was a cup and I emptied it. Do I
regret it? Yes. Do I regret it? No.

Dear,

before I sign the papers saying we're leaving the hospital against the doctor's orders : before the nurse says the ambulance isn't going to be here in time to transport us before the rehabilitation center closes : before she explains the hospital shuttle isn't wheelchair accessible : and no I can't drive J in my own car because insurance won't allow it : before J cries for an hour and finally agrees to go to the rehab for a week : before the doctor tells me J may never walk again : before we've already been in the hospital for a week getting tests and questions and tests : before all of that

on our first day I've borrowed J's black hoodie to walk through the sleet to buy them dinner and when I pull up the hood, they look up from the hospital bed at me and grin and say, *You look just like me!* and I kiss their beautiful forehead and I say, *Yes, love, I look just like you—*

Dear,

I peel open the morning I stand
before the mirror I have the head of a woman
merciless I will not ask you the riddle I have
rigid stone for muscles merciless I stand before
the mirror I twist my arms to strap the
kinesiology tape down my neck across my
shoulders squeeze together all that is supposed
to be held the skin is so soft looks so young I
am the monstrous riddle the living rock how
does sickness look so good so polished how
does sickness look—

Dear,

When we got home from the hospital, I started making bread. I ordered sourdough books from the library. I borrowed a Dutch oven, I pulled out the old spiral proofing basket. *When your child is in pain* the doctor's survey asked *do you feel like you can't go on?* Look, I didn't think bread would cure them. I had once been a mother who had baked sixty loaves of bread a day, a hundred loaves. J had stood next to me in the bakery and mixed a metal bowl full of flour and every spice he could reach. *When your child is in pain, do you do tasks for him?* Cinnamon, pepper, nutmeg. People had called them the bakery baby. I didn't think. Bread could cure them. We went to physical therapy, to acupuncture, to massage, to the doctor. Repeated. *When your child is in pain, do you feel hopeless?* I had to know that I had done absolutely everything, tried everything. I went into the kitchen, where I had made the food that had made them. Take this water. Take this mound of grain and salt. The old voice in me said, *You broke them.* *Now* *fix* *them.*

They Have Attached Many Words To Me: Broken Cento

The upside was paranoid attention to
detail. Curled skins
of clementines in the compost bucket. Juice making
a trail

down the slope of the baked yams. The downside
was also
paranoid attention to detail—
to be pathologized is
to be allowed

to survive. The crumbs
and dishes still
on the table, and a small glass bottle of
milk and an open jar
of raspberry jam. When you're very

sick once, they'll call you strong,
but if you're very sick over
and over, you're

Sisyphean. No one ever wants
to imagine themselves
as the boulder. Malingering, a

burden, a drain
on resources, possibly faking
it, certainly
hysterical, a thing resplendent
with pathology, agave, persimmon,

stick ball, the purple
okra I bought for two bucks
at the market. Think of that. The long night

distinguishes *fear*, a state of worrying

anticipation in relation to
a definite object, from

fright, the momentary
response of our mind to a danger that has caught
us by surprise but is already over—I confess. I

want the clarity
of catastrophe but not
the catastrophe. The clock
rewinds/ starts over / *what*
if your worst day never ended?

Foolish. I am
home. Half safe. My
tea mug with the blue stripes. The cloud of
milk unfurling. A layer of grief as fine as

ash just beneath
the surface & yes this too is a

song just not one I want to
keep singing & yes I will
have to keep singing. Fuck

the bread. The bread is
over. I want to close
my eyes and find a quiet
field in fog, a few sheep moving

toward a fence.
I'm talking to
the anvil of darkness:

when I'm grubbing
on my knees, what is the hammer?
How much of you is left

afterward? A wooden
spoon clutched
in my hand, the smell of chicken broth.

My face

after the ravaging,
it was not mine
but something whittled, honed down,
chronic, incurable, fallen
out of time
in the poems

and I write
them to stay
awake, to remember.

Doctor, you say there are no haloes. I
tell you it has taken me
all my life. I
remember. My color's

green. What it touches—
a yellow table and a cupboard
painted blue. How infinitely the heart

expands to claim
this world, blue vapor without
what if your worst day never—

We Have Some Questions About Your Ill Child

Have you tried

taking them on a walk, reading them books, a gentle bath filled with flowers

picked by hand in your garden? Have you tried

therapy, psychiatric drugs, art therapy, committing them

to a mental hospital? Have you tried being grateful?

Have you tried not eating gluten, or dairy, eating a rainbow

of vegetables and fruits? Have you tried not worrying

so much? Have you tried public school, private school? Homeschooling? Herbs,

acupuncture, prayer, meditation, yoga, supplements, asking Jesus—

Have you tried getting it right?

Have you split the husk of your own pitiful life open for your child, like the mottled bananas you peel to make pancakes? Don't answer. If you had, we wouldn't

have to ask you these questions. Have you tried blaming yourself?

Have you?

Diagnosis: Winter

Hi it's February again and I have nothing to say, little clock of ice in the pipes melting, tick of water trickling all night. The nurse gives me three rabies shots after I woke up to a bat in my room—both arms, and one in the thigh. An elderly man, confused, pulls down his scrub pants and starts urinating on the floor next to me, where I sit on the gurney in the ER hallway, it's ok, I tell the nurses, I have kids, I've seen a lot of body fluids, and we laugh as they wheel me to a different section of hallway, away from the stench. Little clock of vaccine humming through my body, come back again day 3, day 5, day 7, day 14 for more shots. I am telling you all this so I don't have to say it's been one month and three days since a doctor told me my child may never walk again. The grey tabby cat watched with a kind of rapture as I pulled on rainboots, a jacket, rubber gloves, the tiny claws scrabbling horribly against every horror movie in my memory. Against the wooden beams of the ceiling. The sound as the bat screamed and screamed as I put the basket over it and carried it out into the night and set it loose.

Dear,

Meanwhile. I have another child—G—, J's younger sibling. He still speaks to his dad, so he stays with him while J and I are at the hospital again. He facetimes me, crying, saying, *You have to come home right now.*

I miss you too sweetie, I tell him. We're still at the hospital.

I tilt the phone, show him the machines and tubes on the wall behind me, the hospital bed with J in it, curled up around a stuffed animal puppy I bought yesterday.

G keeps crying. He is about to be the age J was, and I was, when we began having symptoms. He loves bunnies. He used to call peanut butter "ice cream" and eat it off a spoon.

No, G says, you have to come home.

Dear,

Instructions for ruining your favorite scent: decide your hands are too dry, your body desiccated by the too-hot air in the hospital. Put your sweater and your jacket and your hat back on and walk through the sleet to Whole Foods and buy body cream in your favorite scent. Roses. A thousand roses.

Bring it back to the hospital, and share it with your child. Tenderly, apply it to your hands, your legs, your arms, your feet. Use it to massage your child when everything hurts. Everything hurts. Use it again the next day and the next. When you go home, even when you know you are not in the hospital any more, even when your child is walking again, every time you smell roses your heart will seize, you will be back with the IV looped around their arm, the doctors a tourniquet around them, the splintered lights, roses, roses, roses, you never left, roses, roses, you never leave.

Dear,

Crumpled onesies and exquisite little buttoned sweaters in the dryer. Electric beeps and whirs. Plastic upholstery. The fish mural in the hallway. The golden retriever who stood patiently as one child then another petted and hugged her. Not one child asked another, *Why are you here?* Peppermint powdered hot chocolate in the family room, Guess Who, hooked rug kits, the guitar they loaned us but J refused to play. The stunted flashing Christmas tree on the nurses' station. The neurologists waking us up each morning to give J all the same tests—squeeze his fingers, try to lift his legs, push one foot down then the other. The questions we asked and they said, We'll have to look into that, and then never came back, never answered. J's rage tears. Mine. The gold dome on Beacon Hill outside our windows, yes, real gold, and somewhere, the moon above the river, surrounded by concrete and cars.

Echocardiogram

It's the same
hospital where 15
years ago,
the midwives brought me
to check how
much fluid buoyed
the fetus,
how strong
the heartbeat was.
The same tenuous
cloth gown around
me, the same crinkly
paper sheathed the table.

This time,
grainy moonscape
of my heart
on the screen. Not
my baby, whose image
I turned from.
I don't want to see
their internal
organs before
I meet them,
I'd joked, and when
the nurses pressed
again, asking
if we wanted
to know the sex,
I said a sharp No,
I already told you
no. Today

the wand follows
the curve of my breast
instead of belly.
The nurse presses
the wand into

the base
of my throat.
Take half
a breath, she says,
good, now let
it out.

When my baby
was born and screamed
and screamed for weeks
and would not
stop, I walked up
and down
our road, named
each leaf and
blossom, as if
it would make
a difference,
as if honeysuckle
and wild iris
were enough.

Exquisite petals—
those traitors.

There have been so few crumbs
of pleasure
in parenting.
I have never
said this, even
to myself.

I am afraid my heart
has stopped working.
Has been smashed
and hollowed
by fear and grief.

Two quick breaths
like a bunny
through your nose,

the nurse says. When
did you get diagnosed?
I say, This summer,
my children
too, they had their
tests already,
their hearts
are fine.

The baby, screaming
against my chest
where I carried
them, bundled
in soft tiny clothes.

That's good, the nurse
says, hopefully
it just affects
your connective
tissues, not
your internal organs.
I tilt my head
so my tears veer
under my mask.
So she won't see.

I glance at the scene
on the monitor. Not
that I could parse
the meaning anyhow.
Not that I know
what to look for anymore
in these pulsing chambers.
I, who used to say
I so loved
the world.

Dear,

We are the lucky ones. With state health insurance for the children because I make so little money. Still. *Big fat checks big large bills* \$60 a day to park in the hospital garage. \$903 for J's prescription migraine glasses. \$26 a month for electrolyte supplements. \$89 for the vagal nerve stimulator for migraines that didn't work, \$100 a session for shiatsu, \$90 for acupuncture. \$600 a month in groceries. \$50 a week for CBD for pain and sleep. \$178 a week in child support from their dad. *Pay me what you owe me, don't act like you forgot* \$6 for the lilac fabric cover for their port access, \$8 for the one printed with strawberries. \$50 to replace every soap and shampoo and conditioner and lotion in the house when we realize fragrances are giving them rashes. *Cash rules everything around me* \$160 when J is in the hospital for a week and I have to buy us underwear and t-shirts at the grocery store I can walk to. \$45 for the mango and the salad and the chicken fingers I buy when J is sick of the hospital grilled cheese. *See no future, pay no rent* What does it cost, I asked, and I meant, what was the damage but also what does it really *cost* to be sick, to go on being sick and sick and sick and sick. \$50 copay a week for my therapist. \$25 a month for the meds they say will keep my OCD less intense. *She works hard for the money* \$25 for the computer game I bought to distract J in the hospital and \$25 for the game I bought G who had to stay behind. \$16 for the squishy blue water holder on J's wheelchair. \$10 for the rainbow wheel spoke covers. *I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it* \$15 for my dinner when I drive J to support group night and sit in my cold car until they're done, one other parent sitting in their cold car across the lot, then J is back and

we're singing and they're smiling and these are
some of the costs—

The Un-Cure

*What's the un-cure
for a broken nose?*

Hot sauce,

they answer
and cackle,
gleeful as I pretend
to be horrified.

In the waiting room
at the crisis clinic after school,
the un-cure is to drink water in little
plastic cups, sit
on plastic chairs, wait
for our crisis to be next
in line.

*What's the un-cure
for a rash?*

Sandpaper.

Laughter to find any edges
of us that loss
has not yet serrated.

*What's the un-cure
for diarrhea?*

Fire ants.

The un-cure for my child,
eleven, is to tell us again *consider
medication. We do not
recommend hospitalization
yet.* The un-
cure for self-harm

is another safety plan they sign
and violate. In another year
I will be here
with my younger child, and then
again, and again. I ask

*What's the un-
cure for a broken leg?*

They say, *Drop
a piano on it.*

It Is Advisable That You Have Someone to Hold Your Hand

one hungers so for ritual that's portable
the evening rose and lilac find me

one must strive to be the kind of patient rewarded
with adequate care, the one who redeems bodily experience from itself

everything will torrent with orchids and streams of honey—
poetry fails me because it's not written plainly

people, especially women, especially sick
women, do not want to draw too much attention

to themselves—since the emergency I feel such
sharp tenderness toward common objects

as if salt or money or even lust would keep us
calm and prove us whole at last

the truth of the chaotic body is to reveal the hubris
of other stories, how quickly the props

that other stories depend on can be kicked away
the limitation is that chaos is no way to live

“any woman” “may already” “be dead”
imagine it repeating like a GIF

are you okay does it hurt what
can I do still still I think if I worry enough

I'll keep you near
because they lie who say it's over

that moon too bright forking through the bars to stick me
with a singing in the head, I drag me like a broken wing

trying to hum a few bars of the wind
oh help be somewhere near so I can endure this

invisible illness with uncertain
causes, and imprecise diagnostic criteria

wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking,
witness the night and the water for those

who are not yet touched for soon
they will beg us to teach them how to bear it—

winging wildly across the white
orchards and dark-green fields—

the moon's lovely but illusory scarf
in which we are the material to be dissolved

the clock is stuck there, stuck on pain
no pretty turn of phrase or clever enjambment

no curvaceous silhouette or delicately
tortured meter, an unlovely thing

I do not want to tell the story in the way I have been taught
to tell it—the pressure to suffer

correctly, meaningfully, and usefully
I don't know how to stop writing this, it won't un-happen

just because you don't say it, you
whom I could not save, listen to me, we must

leave evidence that we were here

Dear,

The ER receptionist calls to ask for my permission to admit J to the ER. I'm on the west coast for a work conference, then two days to try to finish the book that used to seem so important.

My dad, staying with my kids while I'm away, dropped J off at the ER and went to get groceries. I text and try to call. No answer. My boyfriend is a half hour away from my house. I text several friends to see if someone can go and be with J, or with G. My dad calls back and says, *Oh hey, yeah, just dropped groceries off at the house with G and I'm headed back to the ER. I told G to make whatever he wants for dinner.*

G is eleven and it's 7:30 at night. I am furious and also feel that I can't complain to my dad—he's the one taking care of my kids while I'm away on this stupid trip. He lost his second wife two years ago after she was sick with cancer for years and years. He has his reasons to avoid the ER. My boyfriend goes to be with G, makes sure he eats and goes to bed. J and my dad are in the waiting room for hours, then get IV migraine meds, then wait to make sure they help. They go home at midnight.

I walk on the beach in the rain and cry and fill my pockets with little smooth pieces of driftwood and stones that look green when wet for the children. I eat enchiladas for dinner, then ice cream. The woman who owns the Airbnb where I'm staying has a three year old, and the whole house smells like toddlers, like applesauce and slightly sour milk and cloth diapers. It smells exactly like when J and G were babies and it makes me want to flee. I lock myself in my room and slough into the same old nightmares. I am such an asshole.

Diagnosis: The Name

Why should I tell you the name?
I did not hear it for thirty eight
years, and anyhow it is just
two dead men's names, plus a word
for pathology, and a word for
several symptoms
traveling together.
It is a basket,
a container for collecting.

If I tell you what it means,
the words below the words,
we can put these new words
into the basket. That which
joins together. The texture or
substance from which
an animal or plant is made.
A confused state, an undoing
of the regular arrangement.
The basket is unraveling itself
even as we put the words
inside. My body, this
textured substance
from which I am made,
my joinings
confused and undone.

What the name hides—
every long
strand in every coil
of the basket
is touched by this unseen
unmaking. When they tested me,
measured me, they said,
Pull your thumb
towards your arm, and, Show us
your scars, and
they ran their fingers over

the heels of my feet. Unseen:
the vessel of my stomach
warped, the muscles
of my shoulders and hips
and ribs snarled,
the sheaths on my nerves
crookedly stitched, all
noted but not counted.

They gave me
a score. They said,
You have Ehlers-
Danlos Syndrome.
They wrote it down
and when I said,
What do I do now?
They said, When
you have a problem,
make an appointment,

and they left me.
With the name.

Dear,

They're asking who this is addressed to. They're suggesting maybe it's a little forced, a little much to suggest this is a letter. Dear, most beloved—self. Most beloved not-there. Most beloved who has also seen this, done this, loved like this. Most beloved, I need to hear this and there must be someone to receive this and I need to not be the only one who—

Dear,

—and when did J become sick? When they had to take medical leave from college? When they bought a cane from CVS? When they were so nauseous every day and we tried ginger and we tried tinctures and we tried acupuncture which they hated and we got in a screaming fight about it and I told them if they really felt that sick they would try anything? Meant that *I* would try anything. Was it when they were 11 and their eyes hurt and gave them headaches and the optometrist said nothing was wrong and to keep this child away from eye doctors? Was it when they refused to speak for a month and hid under their desk at school and the teachers said they'd never seen a child this age self-harming and sent us to another school? Was it when they screamed and screamed every moment they were awake when they were two months old? Or when they went to the hospital for the first time? The second time? And has G become sick yet? And when did I—

Dear,

It's a bad week. Again. March rains, stomach flu, J in pain and in pain and his incision from surgery has not healed. We take off their bandage and it gushes fluid, like guts spilling from a slit fish. We are at the bottom of the water and we can see our friends out there, breathing air. *How are you* they text me *howareyou?* I'm pissed and I'm scared and I'm worn out like a stone smashed by the waves until it crumbles. *I hate everything*, I text back. I hate the question, it is the wrong question, and I know they don't know what else to ask. We're at the bottom of the water. There's a bottle bobbing in the water and we are under the water and we are the message inside, hoping someone will lift us out and read us.

Dear,

G refuses to get blood tests done. Cries, runs away, slams his door. He likes to know the why of things, so I explain through the door, patiently, that the tests are so we can get more information about his headaches, his nausea. We want to find out things we can't find out without the tests, I tell him, I want to be able to get him help if he has the same things J has. G is sobbing now, refusing, pushing me away. We want to help you be healthy and grow up strong, I say. I'm not growing up, G says, if I'm sick I don't want to know about it, I've already decided that I'm going to kill myself before I'm an adult. Slams his door again. When he'd talked of the future, G wanted to program computer games, wanted a house filled with kittens and bunnies, he—

Diagnosis: Spring

The boyfriend says, *you're so hard,*
you're such a tough motherfucker.

Outside, spring. Coral pink and yellow
tulips, their tender mouths closed

tight against the rain.

Dear,

They are asking me how J is doing, how I am doing and what they mean is, Are you better? What they mean is that it's unbearable to watch a young person be sick. To watch them go on being sick, to watch them go to the doctor and come back still sick. I am making it worse by being angry about the fucked medical system. I am making it worse by feeling guilty for not being sure how sick J was at first, not sure whether to believe them or the doctors, for not knowing exactly what to do. I am making it worse by having my own unresolved issues about the care I did not receive when I was a child. Could I fix that, please. Could I keep everyone updated and also just shut up about it. Could we just be better already.

Does the speaker of this poem have to assault someone for you to know she is angry?

I sauteed the verdant bok choy leaves and I was angry

I hammered my hands on the steering wheel in my car and screamed
and then I walked into the pharmacy that refused to fill abortion
prescriptions and required me to tell them my child's dead
name to get his meds and I was angry

I smoothed my child's blanket and read him a comforting
story about rabbits and I was angry

I drove my child two hours to the pain clinic and answered
questions for four hours so they could tell us nothing
and drove him trying to make him laugh so he wouldn't lose
hope—yes, I was angry

I slicked the ruffled cake batter in the pan and slid
it into the oven and I was angry

and when we were on the waiting list for a therapist for years and then she
disappeared after the first two appointments

and when I went into the garden, sharp smell of rosemary and musk
of the tomatoes on my hands, too furious to be around people

and when the clinic finally called to do an intake and said they couldn't
do trauma treatment until my teen stopped self
harming for at least six months

and when each new doctor asked my child or me to unfurl our joints as far
as possible, to prove again that the diagnosis was real

and when I cried—I was angry

and when the ex-husband texted that if only J would start
speaking to him again, he could fix everything because no one loved
J like he did

and when I was the only one

and when I met the new baby in a handmade
sweater, with the mother who was well rested and having
fun, I was angry

and tucked below my anger,
grief, and below that,

terror—the layers of the ocean
drop down into bleak

unseeing cold where I am distended,
grotesque and brute

as any creature fed
volcano plume and blood-jet

others said they did not see,
could not feel,
and it does not stop—

Dear,

After months of appointments
and diagnoses and symptoms and
appointments, I—

No. The worst of it is hope. Which can

be taken away again and again.

Diagnosis: Summer

and how many summer days did I say, I will harvest
the wild rose tomorrow
or the tomatoes or the calendula surely
there will be another chance
meanwhile the bees never
hesitated to take exactly
 what was being given

and I came back to the fields empty
 and left the same.

Dear,

What you cannot allow yourself to want in the hospital: an impossible list to begin because it is everything. Your life. The turquoise espresso cup, the ticklish pink toes of the grey tabby, the sound of your youngest son humming from his bedroom, the fierce stars in the cold night sky, the feel of your boyfriend kissing the back of your neck, the purple face of the poppy opening, the smell of onions in butter in the cast iron pan, the brass handle in your hand as you open your own door, step inside and close it behind you. The soft click as you close it in your mind. Return to this choked room instead.

Dear,

It's August again unwanted month it's been one year since the cardiologist said *I think you have Ehlers Danlos Syndrome to J and dysautonomia* and then turned to me and said *a lot of parents find out they have EDS when their child gets diagnosed* then the call ended thirty years of my life snapped together pain mysterious symptoms *they weren't diagnosing this in the 80s* he said but J is a child is sicker than me I make appointments for him I make appointments for him I—the evening primrose and the goldenrod are shining in the yard again I am undone again it's been twelve hours since J was in the ER again the bees are frantically filling their cells with gold again what are you supposed to do when the emergency doesn't end when it starts and stops again and starts again and stops again and starts the first leaves are turning again little scabs of rust and orange the youngest maples always the first to give in—

Dear,

A day so beautiful. I woke up and my love pulled me closer in his arms. Tomatoes lined the windowsill. Bees in the tulsi. Bread dough rising. J only in bed half the day, our new definition of good. G telling me about the new game he created. Goldfinches on the sunflowers. Truly, I was happy.

Inside the House

To hold the syringe of heparin
To hand my child the syringe and watch as they slowly press down
To watch them pull back to check that there is no clot in their port
To watch the flagrant red line of their blood enter the tubing
To say this is good
To push the blood back in
To want to ask who first named the device a port
Place of entry into a larger system
To say to oneself—harbor, shelter, refuge
To know the line goes directly into your child's heart,
where the medicine enters,
where infection may also enter
To be grateful and also afraid
To hear the robotic purring of the electric pump,
moving saline into their body
To answer the questions:
why do they need this
why are you doing this
haven't you considered
don't you know
To gather the discarded tubing, the packages, the gloves, the used wipes, the green caps
To think: we're creating our own personal plastic vortex in the ocean
To wake in the night to visions of your child bleeding out while they sleep
To ask: is your clamp closed?
To ask again: is your clamp closed?
To want to wake them and check, to want to turn on all the lights and check, but—no
To let them sleep
To do these things
so your child will get better

Send friends a video of the white cart they covered with stickers, filled
with all the supplies and the red sharps bucket beside it
Feel guilty about sending the video and immediately try to delete it but fail
Get no response from your friends
Bend your ear close to your child's lips as they slur words clogged with anesthetic
To fear they're in pain or need—
but you can't understand what they're saying
To finally hear, they're telling you the surgeon played their favorite

music in the operating room

To begin to cry then, after hours not crying, now that they are waking up and speaking

The old nightmares return

Your boyfriend brings dinner, asks: how is your stress manifesting?

Double-book classes you're teaching, email to apologize and reschedule, then realize you actually weren't double-booked

Email again and apologize again

Watch your child pull back on the syringe and not get blood

Meaning: a clot

Meaning: maybe surgery again, maybe the port is removed, maybe all of this for nothing

Text the nurse to tell her

Call the nurse's supervisor because you don't trust her answer

For the first time in your life,

begin smoking pot each night

to release the mind from its bear trap

Hide this from the children

Go out into the cold night behind the rhododendron or pretend to check

on the chickens, then light the joint

Put it back into your pocket, go back inside and brush your teeth

Smoke with your boyfriend and then actually feel his hands on your back, in your hair

His lips at your neck

Press yourself to him

To cry while driving, while writing, while cooking dinner, while waiting on hold for the next available—

Look it up: how to structure your day when you work from home

Look it up: the correct technique for administering medication at home using the CADD autopump

Listen as your child showers for the first time after surgery,

with the bathroom door unlocked just in case

To watch the nurse try to insert the port access needle into your child's chest and fail

To watch her try again and fail again

To see the incision still open and weeping fluid, a month later

To say to your child: *it's probably fine, I'm just calling the surgeon to check*

To close your bedroom door so they don't see you crying as you call

Cancel plans with your boyfriend because you have to take your child back to the surgeon's office

Scrub the connections with alcohol wipes

Scrub them again

Know that under the skin, just beneath the bough of his collarbone, sits the port
Hear the nurse tell your child: *insurance might not pay for this*
To not trust the nurse, and to have to trust the nurse
To do these things so your child will get better
To no longer know what getting better means

To have them tell you, you have to get blood return in the line *every time*, and then a
week later, tell you: *every port is different it's fine if you don't get blood return.*

To not trust—

To unbutton his black and white flowered shirt,
to check that the fluids are not going into his skin, swelling up
Say goodnight then go out for three drags on your joint
Feel your body again, as a body that feels, that touches—the sheets, your boyfriend
To worry that your jacket is starting to smell like weed
To smoke again anyway,
to have these few moments where the body is not only a site of pain,
not only your child's body superseding your own, a more fluorescent outline
laid over your muted one

To do these so your child will get better
To no longer know what getting better—

To want to tell everyone, this is happening to us
To want to tell no one
All of this, all of this, all of this happens inside the house
And no one sees but us

Dear,

There was a moment, delicate and illuminated as the tip of the celosia flower in the garden, when it seemed there was an answer. To the nausea, the fears, the pain. And then it was gone.

Poésie Pure: They Tell Me Beauty and Joy Are Not Allowed in a Poem with Illness

[symptom tracker] [wild turkey and her two fuzzy babies in the yard]

[silky smooth pebble] [do we need to go back to the ER]

[vomiting three times] [hot Krispy Kreme doughnut]

[potential to develop anaphylaxis] [rain on the new leaves]

[cat crosses his paws over his eyes] [wakes up with a headache. again.]

[calendula glowing in the early morning garden] [blood]

[curl of freshly made ice cream] [crowded shelf of pills]

[another diagnosis] [leaving the appointment furious and crying]

[moon on the orchard] [sleeping in the circle of your arms]

[calls me in a panic attack] [I hear them humming]

Dear,

After J has surgery, I start playing a video game where my job is to liberate ghost bears trapped on an island. Before bedtime, I read to G for an hour on the turquoise couch then say goodnight, I scrub the bratty dishes in the sink, I feed the elderly grouchy cat and close the door so the younger cat can't steal her soft food. I kiss J, I plug in their fairy lights, I ask again if their clamp is shut, I make them show me the incision to be sure there are no red lines crawling a trail towards their heart, at last at last I close my door. If I try to sleep I will just cry. If I try to sleep I will just picture their access needle coming out in the night, blood swamping the sheets. I do not try to sleep. The young grey cat tucks her face beneath my arm and I play the game. I harvest chestnuts and I stand on the beach in my little scout beret, cast my line for fish. There is work to be done, there is work here that can be done. I gather tulips in every color, I plant more chestnut trees, I catch more fish. I tell myself J is not bleeding. They are sleeping. I tell myself G is not sick yet. I do not have a body as long as they have bodies. I ask the ghost bears for another job. We do not have bodies as long as I play the game. I search the leaf piles. I bring lost items to the ghosts and they say thank you, thank you. Here is another task. We're going to need more tulips.

Read Me—Or Rather, Read What My Body Has Become

for Jen, Chris, & Cailin

Speaking of failure, I've noticed:
mothers' disproportionate responsibility for children,

underdocumented, private work—work often seen as not “real
activism.” Mothers in a circle under the soft lights,

and for 20 glorious minutes they screamed and screamed and screamed,
merged into an anguished chorus, according to

the black cohosh, the blood red sap
of the bloodroot and its small white petals that open up in sunlight.

The elevator will be broken at the BART station and paratransit will
be three hours late. These are not surprises. These are deliberate acts

in a world that doesn't value or fund access. No place to escape and
no time to take a break, deranged with responsibility, vigilance. Love.

We pass the hot sauce, the salt, the plum jam. We make more toast.
There are so many ways to lose our children, and I have imagined most of them—

wandering the outskirts of town, angry, unforgiving
of those who still find happiness.

I'm trying to write you a love song but
if I sharpen my rage, will it cut through—

an oval around the egg of light
and the words all soft bones inside.

Me, a service robot who is always open to more and more
and more tasks that might or might not help her disabled []

Hysterical,—he breathes my way
Good, how are you I breathe because I was raised to believe

women should be optimists
screaming in an open field—

You know, I think that men love wars.
I am trying to show what love—

responsibility—does to a mind.
My incurable anger, furnace of my rage

rough against the fingertips.
Command me to be well.

Allow no escape, like a hospital room.

Dear,

Also, we loved watching The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, and boba tea, and camp fires. Also, I loved stepping out into a frozen night and seeing the fiercest stars. Lying under the apple tree in spring to look up at the blossoms and new leaves. Toast with a great deal of butter on it. Sauteing onions, hot milk with cinnamon, gathering rose petals in the park and drying them for tea. The friends who brought peonies, the boyfriend who called just when I needed it, the family who loved us. Also. We loved.

Dear,

When does a story about sickness begin? When does it end? Only with death or with full recovery? How many stories never get told if that's the requirement? How about:

Today is a Friday. It snowed and iced in the night and I drove to work this morning and now J texts, says they can't stand again. I call the neurologist. Maybe today we go back to the ER. Maybe we go back to the hospital. Maybe they get better. I don't know. There is no end.

Dear,

I said I wanted the field for sheep to browse in, the orchard, the book of poems. No more. I want my children, rolling down the grassy hill shrieking. I want them swimming in the river, pretending to drown and pulling each other onto the rocky shore, laughing. I want to give it all back—the robin's egg blue espresso cup, the silver ring, the black boots. I used to want but now I am too tired. I used to want but now. Sometimes when J has a flare, a friend will say, *you'll get a poem out of it*. As if that's a trade. As if there's any getting out of it. G and I are in the garden shoveling compost and that night he says his hand hurts and again the next day. He is the age that I was, and J was, when we started having symptoms. G spends two weeks with his hand in a brace. J hasn't recovered from surgery yet. I used to want. Now I am too. Tired. I go into my room and cry, go into the car and scream. You were right. I got a poem out of it. Take it back.

Dear,

I haven't mowed the lawn in two years and already I can see how the forest will take it back and I feel a little guilty, that old longing for tidy open spaces, but whose fucking dream was that, anyway—was it mine? Who wouldn't want a body taken back by black locust with its honeyed white blossoms, taken back by wild rose, sumac with its red drupes and fringed leaves, the black walnut, the white pine above it all. The feral bees churning honey inside the split catalpa tree, the purple loosestrife through my palms, the mulberry tree flush with birds ready to claim the fruit, the blue cohosh, the foxglove, and when they come to punish me, I will be nowhere to be found. *A woman lived here*, they will say. And I will be nowhere at all.

Notes:

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The UnCure

a collection of poems
by Adrie Rose

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Dear,

Here in the emergency, we need emergency lunch. We need an emergency doctor but they're all busy with the other emergencies. We're wearing our emergency masks and trying to find something emergency funny on our emergency phones but there's only emergencies that are not so funny. We have one emergency bed, one emergency needle in J's arm giving them emergency fluids and an emergency bruise I can already see, one folding metal chair and one plastic door someone hastily cut and mounted to slow down a different emergency. The emergency nurse says I can't leave my emergency even to get food because they're only 15, and if I haven't noticed, it's an emergency. We send emergency texts to grandparents and friends and say, *it's probably not an emergency but...* The emergency looks a lot like nothing at all. We need the yelling emergency and the vomiting emergency out in the hall to please the shut the emergency fuck up. We need a nurse to answer our emergency questions and while we're at it, we need an emergency parent to show up and tell us both what to emergency do. Can we go? We would like to exit the emergency. We cannot leave. Can we go? The emergency does not leave.

Dear,

I write these in my head at the grocery store, and they disappear. I write these in my head in the shower and they disappear.
Sickness

the unseen line that grabs the collar on the dog's neck as she barks, leaps, then is snapped back to the ground. I write these and I disappear.

Dear,

Did I have feelings, in the hospital?
What did I think about? Were there pictures in
my mind? I tell you there was

nothing. My job was to make my mind a
cup and empty it. *How often do you look into a
mirror and not recognize yourself?* J's pain
and fear and anger were a fire and I had only
an empty cup. The nurse said, *How's your
pain, scale of 1-10?* J said, *11.*

*How often do you have the experience
that the people, objects, and the world around
you are not real?* I walked one block to the
grocery store, my phone filled with texts, *how
are you, how are you?* I called. I tried to cry, I
really did. I sent my cup down into the well and
the cup clanged on the empty stones. *How
often do you feel that your body does not
belong to you?* There was no room in the
hospital room for my—

I pulled the cup back up, put my phone
back in my pocket, picked up the little green
plastic basket and filled it. Passion fruit, sushi,
How often are you not sure

*if the things you remember really
happened or if you just dreamed them,* rice
crackers, mango, a soft stuffed puppy, *how
often do you find that you are able to ignore
pain?* My mind was a cup and I emptied it. Do I
regret it? Yes. Do I regret it? No.

Dear,

before I sign the papers saying we're leaving the hospital against the doctor's orders : before the nurse says the ambulance isn't going to be here in time to transport us before the rehabilitation center closes : before she explains the hospital shuttle isn't wheelchair accessible : and no I can't drive J in my own car because insurance won't allow it : before J cries for an hour and finally agrees to go to the rehab for a week : before the doctor tells me J may never walk again : before we've already been in the hospital for a week getting tests and questions and tests : before all of that

on our first day I've borrowed J's black hoodie to walk through the sleet to buy them dinner and when I pull up the hood, they look up from the hospital bed at me and grin and say, *You look just like me!* and I kiss their beautiful forehead and I say, *Yes, love, I look just like you—*

Dear,

I peel open the morning I stand
before the mirror I have the head of a woman
merciless I will not ask you the riddle I have
rigid stone for muscles merciless I stand before
the mirror I twist my arms to strap the
kinesiology tape down my neck across my
shoulders squeeze together all that is supposed
to be held the skin is so soft looks so young I
am the monstrous riddle the living rock how
does sickness look so good so polished how
does sickness look—

Dear,

When we got home from the hospital, I started making bread. I ordered sourdough books from the library. I borrowed a Dutch oven, I pulled out the old spiral proofing basket. *When your child is in pain* the doctor's survey asked *do you feel like you can't go on?* Look, I didn't think bread would cure them. I had once been a mother who had baked sixty loaves of bread a day, a hundred loaves. J had stood next to me in the bakery and mixed a metal bowl full of flour and every spice he could reach. *When your child is in pain, do you do tasks for him?* Cinnamon, pepper, nutmeg. People had called them the bakery baby. I didn't think. Bread could cure them. We went to physical therapy, to acupuncture, to massage, to the doctor. Repeated. *When your child is in pain, do you feel hopeless?* I had to know that I had done absolutely everything, tried everything. I went into the kitchen, where I had made the food that had made them. Take this water. Take this mound of grain and salt. The old voice in me said, *You broke them.* *Now* *fix* *them.*

They Have Attached Many Words To Me: Broken Cento

The upside was paranoid attention to
detail. Curled skins
of clementines in the compost bucket. Juice making
a trail

down the slope of the baked yams. The downside
was also
paranoid attention to detail—
to be pathologized is
to be allowed

to survive. The crumbs
and dishes still
on the table, and a small glass bottle of
milk and an open jar
of raspberry jam. When you're very

sick once, they'll call you strong,
but if you're very sick over
and over, you're

Sisyphean. No one ever wants
to imagine themselves
as the boulder. Malingering, a

burden, a drain
on resources, possibly faking
it, certainly
hysterical, a thing resplendent
with pathology, agave, persimmon,

stick ball, the purple
okra I bought for two bucks
at the market. Think of that. The long night

distinguishes *fear*, a state of worrying

anticipation in relation to
a definite object, from

fright, the momentary
response of our mind to a danger that has caught
us by surprise but is already over—I confess. I

want the clarity
of catastrophe but not
the catastrophe. The clock
rewinds/ starts over / *what*
if your worst day never ended?

Foolish. I am
home. Half safe. My
tea mug with the blue stripes. The cloud of
milk unfurling. A layer of grief as fine as

ash just beneath
the surface & yes this too is a

song just not one I want to
keep singing & yes I will
have to keep singing. Fuck

the bread. The bread is
over. I want to close
my eyes and find a quiet
field in fog, a few sheep moving

toward a fence.
I'm talking to
the anvil of darkness:

when I'm grubbing
on my knees, what is the hammer?
How much of you is left

afterward? A wooden
spoon clutched
in my hand, the smell of chicken broth.

My face

after the ravaging,
it was not mine
but something whittled, honed down,
chronic, incurable, fallen
out of time
in the poems

and I write
them to stay
awake, to remember.

Doctor, you say there are no haloes. I
tell you it has taken me
all my life. I
remember. My color's

green. What it touches—
a yellow table and a cupboard
painted blue. How infinitely the heart

expands to claim
this world, blue vapor without
what if your worst day never—

We Have Some Questions About Your Ill Child

Have you tried

taking them on a walk, reading them books, a gentle bath filled with flowers

picked by hand in your garden? Have you tried

therapy, psychiatric drugs, art therapy, committing them

to a mental hospital? Have you tried being grateful?

Have you tried not eating gluten, or dairy, eating a rainbow

of vegetables and fruits? Have you tried not worrying

so much? Have you tried public school, private school? Homeschooling? Herbs,

acupuncture, prayer, meditation, yoga, supplements, asking Jesus—

Have you tried getting it right?

Have you split the husk of your own pitiful life open for your child, like the mottled bananas you peel to make pancakes? Don't answer. If you had, we wouldn't

have to ask you these questions. Have you tried blaming yourself?

Have you?

Diagnosis: Winter

Hi it's February again and I have nothing to say, little clock of ice in the pipes melting, tick of water trickling all night. The nurse gives me three rabies shots after I woke up to a bat in my room—both arms, and one in the thigh. An elderly man, confused, pulls down his scrub pants and starts urinating on the floor next to me, where I sit on the gurney in the ER hallway, it's ok, I tell the nurses, I have kids, I've seen a lot of body fluids, and we laugh as they wheel me to a different section of hallway, away from the stench. Little clock of vaccine humming through my body, come back again day 3, day 5, day 7, day 14 for more shots. I am telling you all this so I don't have to say it's been one month and three days since a doctor told me my child may never walk again. The grey tabby cat watched with a kind of rapture as I pulled on rainboots, a jacket, rubber gloves, the tiny claws scrabbling horribly against every horror movie in my memory. Against the wooden beams of the ceiling. The sound as the bat screamed and screamed as I put the basket over it and carried it out into the night and set it loose.

Dear,

Meanwhile. I have another child—G—, J's younger sibling. He still speaks to his dad, so he stays with him while J and I are at the hospital again. He facetimes me, crying, saying, *You have to come home right now.*

I miss you too sweetie, I tell him. We're still at the hospital.

I tilt the phone, show him the machines and tubes on the wall behind me, the hospital bed with J in it, curled up around a stuffed animal puppy I bought yesterday.

G keeps crying. He is about to be the age J was, and I was, when we began having symptoms. He loves bunnies. He used to call peanut butter "ice cream" and eat it off a spoon.

No, G says, you have to come home.

Dear,

Instructions for ruining your favorite scent: decide your hands are too dry, your body desiccated by the too-hot air in the hospital. Put your sweater and your jacket and your hat back on and walk through the sleet to Whole Foods and buy body cream in your favorite scent. Roses. A thousand roses.

Bring it back to the hospital, and share it with your child. Tenderly, apply it to your hands, your legs, your arms, your feet. Use it to massage your child when everything hurts. Everything hurts. Use it again the next day and the next. When you go home, even when you know you are not in the hospital any more, even when your child is walking again, every time you smell roses your heart will seize, you will be back with the IV looped around their arm, the doctors a tourniquet around them, the splintered lights, roses, roses, roses, you never left, roses, roses, you never leave.

Dear,

Crumpled onesies and exquisite little buttoned sweaters in the dryer. Electric beeps and whirs. Plastic upholstery. The fish mural in the hallway. The golden retriever who stood patiently as one child then another petted and hugged her. Not one child asked another, *Why are you here?* Peppermint powdered hot chocolate in the family room, Guess Who, hooked rug kits, the guitar they loaned us but J refused to play. The stunted flashing Christmas tree on the nurses' station. The neurologists waking us up each morning to give J all the same tests—squeeze his fingers, try to lift his legs, push one foot down then the other. The questions we asked and they said, We'll have to look into that, and then never came back, never answered. J's rage tears. Mine. The gold dome on Beacon Hill outside our windows, yes, real gold, and somewhere, the moon above the river, surrounded by concrete and cars.

Echocardiogram

It's the same
hospital where 15
years ago,
the midwives brought me
to check how
much fluid buoyed
the fetus,
how strong
the heartbeat was.
The same tenuous
cloth gown around
me, the same crinkly
paper sheathed the table.

This time,
grainy moonscape
of my heart
on the screen. Not
my baby, whose image
I turned from.
I don't want to see
their internal
organs before
I meet them,
I'd joked, and when
the nurses pressed
again, asking
if we wanted
to know the sex,
I said a sharp No,
I already told you
no. Today

the wand follows
the curve of my breast
instead of belly.
The nurse presses
the wand into

the base
of my throat.
Take half
a breath, she says,
good, now let
it out.

When my baby
was born and screamed
and screamed for weeks
and would not
stop, I walked up
and down
our road, named
each leaf and
blossom, as if
it would make
a difference,
as if honeysuckle
and wild iris
were enough.

Exquisite petals—
those traitors.

There have been so few crumbs
of pleasure
in parenting.
I have never
said this, even
to myself.

I am afraid my heart
has stopped working.
Has been smashed
and hollowed
by fear and grief.

Two quick breaths
like a bunny
through your nose,

the nurse says. When
did you get diagnosed?
I say, This summer,
my children
too, they had their
tests already,
their hearts
are fine.

The baby, screaming
against my chest
where I carried
them, bundled
in soft tiny clothes.

That's good, the nurse
says, hopefully
it just affects
your connective
tissues, not
your internal organs.
I tilt my head
so my tears veer
under my mask.
So she won't see.

I glance at the scene
on the monitor. Not
that I could parse
the meaning anyhow.
Not that I know
what to look for anymore
in these pulsing chambers.
I, who used to say
I so loved
the world.

Dear,

We are the lucky ones. With state health insurance for the children because I make so little money. Still. *Big fat checks big large bills* \$60 a day to park in the hospital garage. \$903 for J's prescription migraine glasses. \$26 a month for electrolyte supplements. \$89 for the vagal nerve stimulator for migraines that didn't work, \$100 a session for shiatsu, \$90 for acupuncture. \$600 a month in groceries. \$50 a week for CBD for pain and sleep. \$178 a week in child support from their dad. *Pay me what you owe me, don't act like you forgot* \$6 for the lilac fabric cover for their port access, \$8 for the one printed with strawberries. \$50 to replace every soap and shampoo and conditioner and lotion in the house when we realize fragrances are giving them rashes. *Cash rules everything around me* \$160 when J is in the hospital for a week and I have to buy us underwear and t-shirts at the grocery store I can walk to. \$45 for the mango and the salad and the chicken fingers I buy when J is sick of the hospital grilled cheese. *See no future, pay no rent* What does it cost, I asked, and I meant, what was the damage but also what does it really *cost* to be sick, to go on being sick and sick and sick and sick. \$50 copay a week for my therapist. \$25 a month for the meds they say will keep my OCD less intense. *She works hard for the money* \$25 for the computer game I bought to distract J in the hospital and \$25 for the game I bought G who had to stay behind. \$16 for the squishy blue water holder on J's wheelchair. \$10 for the rainbow wheel spoke covers. *I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it* \$15 for my dinner when I drive J to support group night and sit in my cold car until they're done, one other parent sitting in their cold car across the lot, then J is back and

we're singing and they're smiling and these are
some of the costs—

The Un-Cure

*What's the un-cure
for a broken nose?*

Hot sauce,

they answer
and cackle,
gleeful as I pretend
to be horrified.

In the waiting room
at the crisis clinic after school,
the un-cure is to drink water in little
plastic cups, sit
on plastic chairs, wait
for our crisis to be next
in line.

*What's the un-cure
for a rash?*

Sandpaper.

Laughter to find any edges
of us that loss
has not yet serrated.

*What's the un-cure
for diarrhea?*

Fire ants.

The un-cure for my child,
eleven, is to tell us again *consider
medication. We do not
recommend hospitalization
yet.* The un-
cure for self-harm

is another safety plan they sign
and violate. In another year
I will be here
with my younger child, and then
again, and again. I ask

*What's the un-
cure for a broken leg?*

They say, *Drop
a piano on it.*

It Is Advisable That You Have Someone to Hold Your Hand

one hungers so for ritual that's portable
the evening rose and lilac find me

one must strive to be the kind of patient rewarded
with adequate care, the one who redeems bodily experience from itself

everything will torrent with orchids and streams of honey—
poetry fails me because it's not written plainly

people, especially women, especially sick
women, do not want to draw too much attention

to themselves—since the emergency I feel such
sharp tenderness toward common objects

as if salt or money or even lust would keep us
calm and prove us whole at last

the truth of the chaotic body is to reveal the hubris
of other stories, how quickly the props

that other stories depend on can be kicked away
the limitation is that chaos is no way to live

“any woman” “may already” “be dead”
imagine it repeating like a GIF

are you okay does it hurt what
can I do still still I think if I worry enough

I'll keep you near
because they lie who say it's over

that moon too bright forking through the bars to stick me
with a singing in the head, I drag me like a broken wing

trying to hum a few bars of the wind
oh help be somewhere near so I can endure this

invisible illness with uncertain
causes, and imprecise diagnostic criteria

wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking,
witness the night and the water for those

who are not yet touched for soon
they will beg us to teach them how to bear it—

winging wildly across the white
orchards and dark-green fields—

the moon's lovely but illusory scarf
in which we are the material to be dissolved

the clock is stuck there, stuck on pain
no pretty turn of phrase or clever enjambment

no curvaceous silhouette or delicately
tortured meter, an unlovely thing

I do not want to tell the story in the way I have been taught
to tell it—the pressure to suffer

correctly, meaningfully, and usefully
I don't know how to stop writing this, it won't un-happen

just because you don't say it, you
whom I could not save, listen to me, we must

leave evidence that we were here

Dear,

The ER receptionist calls to ask for my permission to admit J to the ER. I'm on the west coast for a work conference, then two days to try to finish the book that used to seem so important.

My dad, staying with my kids while I'm away, dropped J off at the ER and went to get groceries. I text and try to call. No answer. My boyfriend is a half hour away from my house. I text several friends to see if someone can go and be with J, or with G. My dad calls back and says, *Oh hey, yeah, just dropped groceries off at the house with G and I'm headed back to the ER. I told G to make whatever he wants for dinner.*

G is eleven and it's 7:30 at night. I am furious and also feel that I can't complain to my dad—he's the one taking care of my kids while I'm away on this stupid trip. He lost his second wife two years ago after she was sick with cancer for years and years. He has his reasons to avoid the ER. My boyfriend goes to be with G, makes sure he eats and goes to bed. J and my dad are in the waiting room for hours, then get IV migraine meds, then wait to make sure they help. They go home at midnight.

I walk on the beach in the rain and cry and fill my pockets with little smooth pieces of driftwood and stones that look green when wet for the children. I eat enchiladas for dinner, then ice cream. The woman who owns the Airbnb where I'm staying has a three year old, and the whole house smells like toddlers, like applesauce and slightly sour milk and cloth diapers. It smells exactly like when J and G were babies and it makes me want to flee. I lock myself in my room and slough into the same old nightmares. I am such an asshole.

Diagnosis: The Name

Why should I tell you the name?
I did not hear it for thirty eight
years, and anyhow it is just
two dead men's names, plus a word
for pathology, and a word for
several symptoms
traveling together.
It is a basket,
a container for collecting.

If I tell you what it means,
the words below the words,
we can put these new words
into the basket. That which
joins together. The texture or
substance from which
an animal or plant is made.
A confused state, an undoing
of the regular arrangement.
The basket is unraveling itself
even as we put the words
inside. My body, this
textured substance
from which I am made,
my joinings
confused and undone.

What the name hides—
every long
strand in every coil
of the basket
is touched by this unseen
unmaking. When they tested me,
measured me, they said,
Pull your thumb
towards your arm, and, Show us
your scars, and
they ran their fingers over

the heels of my feet. Unseen:
the vessel of my stomach
warped, the muscles
of my shoulders and hips
and ribs snarled,
the sheaths on my nerves
crookedly stitched, all
noted but not counted.

They gave me
a score. They said,
You have Ehlers-
Danlos Syndrome.
They wrote it down
and when I said,
What do I do now?
They said, When
you have a problem,
make an appointment,

and they left me.
With the name.

Dear,

They're asking who this is addressed to. They're suggesting maybe it's a little forced, a little much to suggest this is a letter. Dear, most beloved—self. Most beloved not-there. Most beloved who has also seen this, done this, loved like this. Most beloved, I need to hear this and there must be someone to receive this and I need to not be the only one who—

Dear,

—and when did J become sick? When they had to take medical leave from college? When they bought a cane from CVS? When they were so nauseous every day and we tried ginger and we tried tinctures and we tried acupuncture which they hated and we got in a screaming fight about it and I told them if they really felt that sick they would try anything? Meant that *I* would try anything. Was it when they were 11 and their eyes hurt and gave them headaches and the optometrist said nothing was wrong and to keep this child away from eye doctors? Was it when they refused to speak for a month and hid under their desk at school and the teachers said they'd never seen a child this age self-harming and sent us to another school? Was it when they screamed and screamed every moment they were awake when they were two months old? Or when they went to the hospital for the first time? The second time? And has G become sick yet? And when did I—

Dear,

It's a bad week. Again. March rains, stomach flu, J in pain and in pain and his incision from surgery has not healed. We take off their bandage and it gushes fluid, like guts spilling from a slit fish. We are at the bottom of the water and we can see our friends out there, breathing air. *How are you* they text me *howareyou?* I'm pissed and I'm scared and I'm worn out like a stone smashed by the waves until it crumbles. *I hate everything*, I text back. I hate the question, it is the wrong question, and I know they don't know what else to ask. We're at the bottom of the water. There's a bottle bobbing in the water and we are under the water and we are the message inside, hoping someone will lift us out and read us.

Dear,

G refuses to get blood tests done. Cries, runs away, slams his door. He likes to know the why of things, so I explain through the door, patiently, that the tests are so we can get more information about his headaches, his nausea. We want to find out things we can't find out without the tests, I tell him, I want to be able to get him help if he has the same things J has. G is sobbing now, refusing, pushing me away. We want to help you be healthy and grow up strong, I say. I'm not growing up, G says, if I'm sick I don't want to know about it, I've already decided that I'm going to kill myself before I'm an adult. Slams his door again. When he'd talked of the future, G wanted to program computer games, wanted a house filled with kittens and bunnies, he—

Diagnosis: Spring

The boyfriend says, *you're so hard,*
you're such a tough motherfucker.

Outside, spring. Coral pink and yellow
tulips, their tender mouths closed

tight against the rain.

Dear,

They are asking me how J is doing, how I am doing and what they mean is, Are you better? What they mean is that it's unbearable to watch a young person be sick. To watch them go on being sick, to watch them go to the doctor and come back still sick. I am making it worse by being angry about the fucked medical system. I am making it worse by feeling guilty for not being sure how sick J was at first, not sure whether to believe them or the doctors, for not knowing exactly what to do. I am making it worse by having my own unresolved issues about the care I did not receive when I was a child. Could I fix that, please. Could I keep everyone updated and also just shut up about it. Could we just be better already.

Does the speaker of this poem have to assault someone for you to know she is angry?

I sauteed the verdant bok choy leaves and I was angry

I hammered my hands on the steering wheel in my car and screamed
and then I walked into the pharmacy that refused to fill abortion
prescriptions and required me to tell them my child's dead
name to get his meds and I was angry

I smoothed my child's blanket and read him a comforting
story about rabbits and I was angry

I drove my child two hours to the pain clinic and answered
questions for four hours so they could tell us nothing
and drove him trying to make him laugh so he wouldn't lose
hope—yes, I was angry

I slicked the ruffled cake batter in the pan and slid
it into the oven and I was angry

and when we were on the waiting list for a therapist for years and then she
disappeared after the first two appointments

and when I went into the garden, sharp smell of rosemary and musk
of the tomatoes on my hands, too furious to be around people

and when the clinic finally called to do an intake and said they couldn't
do trauma treatment until my teen stopped self
harming for at least six months

and when each new doctor asked my child or me to unfurl our joints as far
as possible, to prove again that the diagnosis was real

and when I cried—I was angry

and when the ex-husband texted that if only J would start
speaking to him again, he could fix everything because no one loved
J like he did

and when I was the only one

and when I met the new baby in a handmade
sweater, with the mother who was well rested and having
fun, I was angry

and tucked below my anger,
grief, and below that,

terror—the layers of the ocean
drop down into bleak

unseeing cold where I am distended,
grotesque and brute

as any creature fed
volcano plume and blood-jet

others said they did not see,
could not feel,
and it does not stop—

Dear,

After months of appointments
and diagnoses and symptoms and
appointments, I—

No. The worst of it is hope. Which can

be taken away again and again.

Diagnosis: Summer

and how many summer days did I say, I will harvest
the wild rose tomorrow
or the tomatoes or the calendula surely
there will be another chance
meanwhile the bees never
hesitated to take exactly
 what was being given

and I came back to the fields empty
 and left the same.

Dear,

What you cannot allow yourself to want in the hospital: an impossible list to begin because it is everything. Your life. The turquoise espresso cup, the ticklish pink toes of the grey tabby, the sound of your youngest son humming from his bedroom, the fierce stars in the cold night sky, the feel of your boyfriend kissing the back of your neck, the purple face of the poppy opening, the smell of onions in butter in the cast iron pan, the brass handle in your hand as you open your own door, step inside and close it behind you. The soft click as you close it in your mind. Return to this choked room instead.

Dear,

It's August again unwanted month it's been one year since the cardiologist said *I think you have Ehlers Danlos Syndrome to J and dysautonomia* and then turned to me and said *a lot of parents find out they have EDS when their child gets diagnosed* then the call ended thirty years of my life snapped together pain mysterious symptoms *they weren't diagnosing this in the 80s* he said but J is a child is sicker than me I make appointments for him I make appointments for him I—the evening primrose and the goldenrod are shining in the yard again I am undone again it's been twelve hours since J was in the ER again the bees are frantically filling their cells with gold again what are you supposed to do when the emergency doesn't end when it starts and stops again and starts again and stops again and starts the first leaves are turning again little scabs of rust and orange the youngest maples always the first to give in—

Dear,

A day so beautiful. I woke up and my love pulled me closer in his arms. Tomatoes lined the windowsill. Bees in the tulsi. Bread dough rising. J only in bed half the day, our new definition of good. G telling me about the new game he created. Goldfinches on the sunflowers. Truly, I was happy.

Inside the House

To hold the syringe of heparin
To hand my child the syringe and watch as they slowly press down
To watch them pull back to check that there is no clot in their port
To watch the flagrant red line of their blood enter the tubing
To say this is good
To push the blood back in
To want to ask who first named the device a port
Place of entry into a larger system
To say to oneself—harbor, shelter, refuge
To know the line goes directly into your child's heart,
where the medicine enters,
where infection may also enter
To be grateful and also afraid
To hear the robotic purring of the electric pump,
moving saline into their body
To answer the questions:
why do they need this
why are you doing this
haven't you considered
don't you know
To gather the discarded tubing, the packages, the gloves, the used wipes, the green caps
To think: we're creating our own personal plastic vortex in the ocean
To wake in the night to visions of your child bleeding out while they sleep
To ask: is your clamp closed?
To ask again: is your clamp closed?
To want to wake them and check, to want to turn on all the lights and check, but—no
To let them sleep
To do these things
so your child will get better

Send friends a video of the white cart they covered with stickers, filled
with all the supplies and the red sharps bucket beside it
Feel guilty about sending the video and immediately try to delete it but fail
Get no response from your friends
Bend your ear close to your child's lips as they slur words clogged with anesthetic
To fear they're in pain or need—
but you can't understand what they're saying
To finally hear, they're telling you the surgeon played their favorite

music in the operating room

To begin to cry then, after hours not crying, now that they are waking up and speaking

The old nightmares return

Your boyfriend brings dinner, asks: how is your stress manifesting?

Double-book classes you're teaching, email to apologize and reschedule, then realize you actually weren't double-booked

Email again and apologize again

Watch your child pull back on the syringe and not get blood

Meaning: a clot

Meaning: maybe surgery again, maybe the port is removed, maybe all of this for nothing

Text the nurse to tell her

Call the nurse's supervisor because you don't trust her answer

For the first time in your life,

begin smoking pot each night

to release the mind from its bear trap

Hide this from the children

Go out into the cold night behind the rhododendron or pretend to check

on the chickens, then light the joint

Put it back into your pocket, go back inside and brush your teeth

Smoke with your boyfriend and then actually feel his hands on your back, in your hair

His lips at your neck

Press yourself to him

To cry while driving, while writing, while cooking dinner, while waiting on hold for the next available—

Look it up: how to structure your day when you work from home

Look it up: the correct technique for administering medication at home using the CADD autopump

Listen as your child showers for the first time after surgery, with the bathroom door unlocked just in case

To watch the nurse try to insert the port access needle into your child's chest and fail

To watch her try again and fail again

To see the incision still open and weeping fluid, a month later

To say to your child: *it's probably fine, I'm just calling the surgeon to check*

To close your bedroom door so they don't see you crying as you call

Cancel plans with your boyfriend because you have to take your child back to the surgeon's office

Scrub the connections with alcohol wipes

Scrub them again

Know that under the skin, just beneath the bough of his collarbone, sits the port
Hear the nurse tell your child: *insurance might not pay for this*
To not trust the nurse, and to have to trust the nurse
To do these things so your child will get better
To no longer know what getting better means

To have them tell you, you have to get blood return in the line *every time*, and then a
week later, tell you: *every port is different it's fine if you don't get blood return.*

To not trust—

To unbutton his black and white flowered shirt,
to check that the fluids are not going into his skin, swelling up
Say goodnight then go out for three drags on your joint
Feel your body again, as a body that feels, that touches—the sheets, your boyfriend
To worry that your jacket is starting to smell like weed
To smoke again anyway,
to have these few moments where the body is not only a site of pain,
not only your child's body superseding your own, a more fluorescent outline
laid over your muted one

To do these so your child will get better
To no longer know what getting better—

To want to tell everyone, this is happening to us
To want to tell no one
All of this, all of this, all of this happens inside the house
And no one sees but us

Dear,

There was a moment, delicate and illuminated as the tip of the celosia flower in the garden, when it seemed there was an answer. To the nausea, the fears, the pain. And then it was gone.

Poésie Pure: They Tell Me Beauty and Joy Are Not Allowed in a Poem with Illness

[symptom tracker] [wild turkey and her two fuzzy babies in the yard]

[silky smooth pebble] [do we need to go back to the ER]

[vomiting three times] [hot Krispy Kreme doughnut]

[potential to develop anaphylaxis] [rain on the new leaves]

[cat crosses his paws over his eyes] [wakes up with a headache. again.]

[calendula glowing in the early morning garden] [blood]

[curl of freshly made ice cream] [crowded shelf of pills]

[another diagnosis] [leaving the appointment furious and crying]

[moon on the orchard] [sleeping in the circle of your arms]

[calls me in a panic attack] [I hear them humming]

Dear,

After J has surgery, I start playing a video game where my job is to liberate ghost bears trapped on an island. Before bedtime, I read to G for an hour on the turquoise couch then say goodnight, I scrub the bratty dishes in the sink, I feed the elderly grouchy cat and close the door so the younger cat can't steal her soft food. I kiss J, I plug in their fairy lights, I ask again if their clamp is shut, I make them show me the incision to be sure there are no red lines crawling a trail towards their heart, at last at last I close my door. If I try to sleep I will just cry. If I try to sleep I will just picture their access needle coming out in the night, blood swamping the sheets. I do not try to sleep. The young grey cat tucks her face beneath my arm and I play the game. I harvest chestnuts and I stand on the beach in my little scout beret, cast my line for fish. There is work to be done, there is work here that can be done. I gather tulips in every color, I plant more chestnut trees, I catch more fish. I tell myself J is not bleeding. They are sleeping. I tell myself G is not sick yet. I do not have a body as long as they have bodies. I ask the ghost bears for another job. We do not have bodies as long as I play the game. I search the leaf piles. I bring lost items to the ghosts and they say thank you, thank you. Here is another task. We're going to need more tulips.

Read Me—Or Rather, Read What My Body Has Become

for Jen, Chris, & Cailin

Speaking of failure, I've noticed:
mothers' disproportionate responsibility for children,

underdocumented, private work—work often seen as not “real
activism.” Mothers in a circle under the soft lights,

and for 20 glorious minutes they screamed and screamed and screamed,
merged into an anguished chorus, according to

the black cohosh, the blood red sap
of the bloodroot and its small white petals that open up in sunlight.

The elevator will be broken at the BART station and paratransit will
be three hours late. These are not surprises. These are deliberate acts

in a world that doesn't value or fund access. No place to escape and
no time to take a break, deranged with responsibility, vigilance. Love.

We pass the hot sauce, the salt, the plum jam. We make more toast.
There are so many ways to lose our children, and I have imagined most of them—

wandering the outskirts of town, angry, unforgiving
of those who still find happiness.

I'm trying to write you a love song but
if I sharpen my rage, will it cut through—

an oval around the egg of light
and the words all soft bones inside.

Me, a service robot who is always open to more and more
and more tasks that might or might not help her disabled []

Hysterical,—he breathes my way
Good, how are you I breathe because I was raised to believe

women should be optimists
screaming in an open field—

You know, I think that men love wars.
I am trying to show what love—

responsibility—does to a mind.
My incurable anger, furnace of my rage

rough against the fingertips.
Command me to be well.

Allow no escape, like a hospital room.

Dear,

Also, we loved watching The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, and boba tea, and camp fires. Also, I loved stepping out into a frozen night and seeing the fiercest stars. Lying under the apple tree in spring to look up at the blossoms and new leaves. Toast with a great deal of butter on it. Sauteing onions, hot milk with cinnamon, gathering rose petals in the park and drying them for tea. The friends who brought peonies, the boyfriend who called just when I needed it, the family who loved us. Also. We loved.

Dear,

When does a story about sickness begin? When does it end? Only with death or with full recovery? How many stories never get told if that's the requirement? How about:

Today is a Friday. It snowed and iced in the night and I drove to work this morning and now J texts, says they can't stand again. I call the neurologist. Maybe today we go back to the ER. Maybe we go back to the hospital. Maybe they get better. I don't know. There is no end.

Dear,

I said I wanted the field for sheep to browse in, the orchard, the book of poems. No more. I want my children, rolling down the grassy hill shrieking. I want them swimming in the river, pretending to drown and pulling each other onto the rocky shore, laughing. I want to give it all back—the robin's egg blue espresso cup, the silver ring, the black boots. I used to want but now I am too tired. I used to want but now. Sometimes when J has a flare, a friend will say, *you'll get a poem out of it*. As if that's a trade. As if there's any getting out of it. G and I are in the garden shoveling compost and that night he says his hand hurts and again the next day. He is the age that I was, and J was, when we started having symptoms. G spends two weeks with his hand in a brace. J hasn't recovered from surgery yet. I used to want. Now I am too. Tired. I go into my room and cry, go into the car and scream. You were right. I got a poem out of it. Take it back.

Dear,

I haven't mowed the lawn in two years and already I can see how the forest will take it back and I feel a little guilty, that old longing for tidy open spaces, but whose fucking dream was that, anyway—was it mine? Who wouldn't want a body taken back by black locust with its honeyed white blossoms, taken back by wild rose, sumac with its red drupes and fringed leaves, the black walnut, the white pine above it all. The feral bees churning honey inside the split catalpa tree, the purple loosestrife through my palms, the mulberry tree flush with birds ready to claim the fruit, the blue cohosh, the foxglove, and when they come to punish me, I will be nowhere to be found. *A woman lived here*, they will say. And I will be nowhere at all.

Notes:

The following poems are centos, with quotes taken from the authors listed in order of their appearance in the work:

“They Have Attached Many Words to Me” uses lines from: Johanna Hedva, Martha Wells, Marie Howe, Leila Chatti, Hanif Abdurraqib, Ross Gay, Sarah Manguso, Franny Choi, Alexis Renata, Adrien Stoutenburg, Sarah Waters, Sabrina Orah Mark, Kim Addonizio, Mark Doty, Cynthia Huntington, Matthew Zapruder, & Lisel Mueller

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