

Night Swimming

2020 was the year I chose to believe in magic. This was no epiphany, and neither was it an awakening, doubt giving way as the mind edges toward a different view. I chose magic like it was medicine: deliberately, knowing full well what I was up to.

Perhaps it would have happened whatever the year, because this was the year I gave birth to my first child. I discovered that having a child requires heavy-duty magic. There are too many risks, and almost too much wonder, in bringing a life into the world. A sense of magic is necessary. It must be magic that plods, that feels ordinary. It is the magic of 'we are safe', the magic of 'nothing can go wrong'. It is a trick, of course, a sleight of mind.

I'm calling it magic. It's also known as plain old storytelling. I've been busy with it. Haven't you?

Before

I lived most of my life without any magic. When I first knew my partner, Dan, I was fascinated by his description of his belief in God. 'Not believing in Him would be like not believing in my left leg'. I thrilled at this faith, ordinary and irrefutable, humdrum and yet unassailable. It was embodied. It couldn't be undone by mere questioning.

Although my immediate family weren't religious, the gaze of a Protestant God was present throughout my childhood. He was the audience for our school assemblies (the kids who couldn't sing well were told not to sing; God didn't want to hear *that*) and He was an ever-present authority for our baby-sitter Mrs Mackenzie, who also ran the Sunday School. I remember sitting by the gas fire while she knitted, and together we chanted, *Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers, Deuteronomy Joshua Judges Ruth*. Mrs Mackenzie was fond of the fire and fury of the Old Testament, less inspired by the do-goodery that came next.

So it was that I encountered my partner's Italian Catholicism as a lusciously exotic thing. 'God loves us', he had said, baffled by my idea of a God with an axe to grind. I told him about my great aunt Seonag's funeral in the village of Shawbost in Lewis. She had been in the Free Church Continuing, a splinter group from the more moderate Free Church, itself a splinter from the Church of Scotland. The funeral was conducted in a stark and austere manner, in an unadorned church that looked out over the Atlantic. There was no mention of her name, no mention of the life she had lived. We were left to fit our grief around the authoritative acts of faith conducted by the elders of the church. At the time, I couldn't square the woman I had known with her choice of church. I thought of her gentleness and her liveliness, her generosity with words and food: of drop-scones and sour cream, of her lifting a strand of my dull blonde hair and calling it *spun gold*. With no mention of her at her funeral, it seemed to me that the ceremony was an act of eradication.

'To pray for the souls of the dead', my father explained after the service, 'is, they think, a Papist tradition'. And therefore untenable.

'God loves all of us', my partner contended, 'no matter what'. I reacted to this with a squirming embarrassment. Did we deserve to be lavished with love? We certainly did not. I thought of a well-worn phrase from the Isle of Lewis: 'we'll pay for it'. A beautiful summer's day? We'll pay for it. I thought of the love that the Italian God dished out as if from an endless cornucopia. In Scotland we'd pay for that, and dearly.

I longed to feel a faith so real that it was in my body. Over the years I tried, but couldn't, and this convinced me that faith isn't something you choose. It's in us, or it isn't. What's more, the institutions near to me, Catholic and Protestant, seemed peevishly small and human, riven by human traits: heartlessness, greed. So church was not for me. Still, I was a born follower. I longed for rituals, for beliefs that gave shelter.

If faith was bodily, then the agnostic solution to my longing was to cherish stories. In the beginning was the word, and that would have to do. Storytelling was an absorbing, rewarding game of the mind, and it brought comfort, made sense out of senselessness, however temporarily. It started with those repeated 'j' noises of Mrs Mackenzie's liturgy (*Deuteronomy Joshua Judges*, and then end with a shout, *Ruth!*) which I followed before I knew how to read. The best words came from the little black Bible, but once you'd mastered them, you were off.

I read stories and I wrote them, and true faith, which resides in the body, remained impossible.

I had another brush with the Italian God and his foreign methods. We went on holiday to visit Dan's Southern relatives, and it was here that I was bewitched by a faith that incorporated acts of creativity, stories created in the present moment, and individual to the believer. In the streets of Naples were golden skulls on little obelisks, to be touched for good luck. I stared at the golden crowns, all worn down. I had never encountered a God who could be wooed like this, who could be persuaded and entertained.

Elsewhere, the ebulliently masculine culture of Naples meant that bodies were never far from our minds. Dan's aunty served us a rum-soaked phallic sponge cake – 'eat it, it's good luck!' and we were given a cornicello, a red ceramic chilli pepper. This is hung up in the house to promote virility, good luck, fertility, prosperity – accounts differed as to what it would bring, but it would certainly bring us *more*.

I loved these potent, symbolic gifts, while never allowing myself to touch upon the cold truth underneath. At the time, we were facing up to the reality that we might never be able to conceive a child. Under the colossal heat of the Campania sun, I felt enclosed in good fortune, certain of future wellbeing. It was a magic trick, my very first. Dan, meanwhile, tolerated my new-found love for the interiors of Catholic churches, the flowers that flowed and candles that melted and folded, undisturbed. I peered up at side-show altars, for specific prayers to appointed saints, and made plans to buy a litter of nativity figurines. I think Dan thought I was only in it for the accessories. Which was right, just about. I was drawn to this confident interference with fate, this sense that we might make up the stories of our futures ourselves, and best of all, there were physical props to assist this magic.

When we returned home, the sober Protestant God was waiting. I kept the cornicello in its little red box on a shelf. I felt guilty, for bargaining in bad faith, trying to force my way. To pray for a child seemed an ugly act, when I considered that so many people long for a child and endure the pain of never having one. I would never contend that they simply hadn't *prayed* enough. I returned to my unglamorous, atheistic convictions. Our future was a question, and the certainties of the present offered no comfort and assuaged no pain.

Then two bright red chilli peppers arrived in our monthly vegetable box delivery. They were cuddled together, gleaming. I forbade myself to think about what I was doing when I tied them with string and hung them up.

They cheered me up when I came in the kitchen each morning. I sometimes touched them, a prayer that was bodily, not something that could be put into words. I tricked myself and I let myself be tricked. In the autumn of the next year, 2019, I found out I was pregnant.

Soon, life would bring such extremes of pain and wonder that my romancing of the Catholic faith came to seem like a fad in a coddled, placid life. We all know what happened next, of course, but for me, there was a prologue to the pandemic. I was one of a small number of pregnant women (around 2%) who experience hyperemesis gravidarum, a condition of severe nausea and vomiting. While I was going through it, I thought it impossible to get the experience down in words. Actually, I thought I'd never write again.

One memory stands out: the community midwife would weigh me every so often and give me her practised look of disapproval when the scales showed that I had lost weight. I remember staring back at her blankly, as if she were disapproving of the clouds in the sky. I was desperate to hold on to this pregnancy, yet I could as much overcome this illness as I could order the clouds.

Physically, it was a case of living inside a relentless nausea, a panicky feeling that was always just on the brink of becoming unbearable. There was no escape. Unable to keep down any food, and eventually sickened even by water, I was admitted to hospital to be put on a drip. Back home with medication, I found that a chronic lack of nutrition had wrought havoc in unexpected ways. My mind had been cut down. I couldn't focus on anything, lost track of the simplest narratives on television, forgot words. In a strange foreshadowing of the lockdown to come, I was stuck in the house, tormented by how much of life was off limits. No cinema trips, no long pub lunches, and certainly no travelling. The bed and the sofa were the only places to visit. I swung between them, trying not to fall. Worst of all, I couldn't read, because nausea stuck itself into every moment and interfered in every thought. Shopping and shindigs, I could do without, but to traverse a painful illness without the respite of books was desolate.

A lifetime of adventures returned in memory, seeming like one long party, a world of freedom and revelry that I had thought would never end. I remembered a holiday in the North of France, and a beach on the Bretagne coast where we had gone swimming at night. As an idea, it comes fraught with danger (in the water, in the dark!) but we were ensconced in our own certainty that we were safe, and so I remember floating in the sea with a serene reverence. The beach was empty. There was only the sound of water lapping at sand. It had been hot that day, and we swam without a shiver. The deep, voluminous blue of the sky was losing its intensity, quieting down, before the stars appeared. This memory came and I held it, not thinking beyond it, not deducing or concluding, just holding on.

With medication and time, I managed to increase the amount of food I was taking in, day by day. I knew I was recovering when the itch to tell stories returned. It was a belated and humbling discovery, that there can be no estrangement between body and mind. When my body was a wreck, my mind was lifeless, and once my body was well, my mind made meaning. The first story I came up with was about ribs.

Doctors and nurses had told me not to worry about the baby, because he would get all the nutrition he needed from my blood, my organs, my bones, even my teeth. The miniscule extractions of calcium being taken from my teeth made me think of the worn-down golden skulls in Naples. I instructed the baby to take what he needed and grow big. The work of building a new body seemed wonderfully straight-forward in this analysis: parts of me were siphoned off to make parts of him. I thought of the story of Eve being made from Adam's rib, which had always seemed to me a travesty of the truth, a transparent reversal of the reality of reproduction. It was my ribs that made him. My bones, my love. 'He is safe in my body', I told myself, 'no matter what'. I made the story of ribs anew. I touched my belly, willing the work to be done.

I came out on the other side in January 2020. I was well enough to return to work, and by then, there were rumblings in the news about a highly contagious virus. The virus was crossing borders but people were contending that it was nothing worse than another flu. Others conjured up memories of a flu pandemic from a century ago. I was convinced that I wouldn't get the virus, and neither

would anyone I love. When I read in the news about a projected worst-case death toll in the UK of twenty thousand, I dismissed it as alarmist. Mostly, I didn't care. I had a story that had proved itself to be true, and it was this: I was still pregnant, the baby was safe, and nothing could harm us. There was no logical reason for me to feel this way, but logic was irrelevant – useless, even detrimental, at such a time as this.

During

It was 11th March when the World Health Organisation declared a pandemic, but for weeks before that, a feeling of unease was transmitted around the world. In January, it seemed that a war was coming between the US and Iran. Fires raged in Australia. I spoke to a friend there who was all but trapped indoors some days, the air outside filled with ash. The National Health Commission in China reported a third death from the new virus. Then the Pope slapped a woman's hand after she grabbed him. This footage caught the imagination of the young. It was perfect for meme culture, that celebration of weird messaging, images and stories that could be either cryptic or inane. The joke was that the world's end was signalled by a moment of rash irritation from a man appointed as God's representative on Earth. Or perhaps the real joke (the joke behind it all) was the insistence on interpreting this impulsive moment as highly meaningful. News of the virus kept arriving, and meanwhile, in increments of memes and tweets, fragmented online dialogue, a feeling was spreading that the world was wobbling. Memes about a plague kept forming and dispersing. This was more than the performative nihilism ('I'm tired of living in unprecedented times') of much online culture. There was a nervy edge to it.

The declaration of a pandemic broke the spell. The caustic, speculative chatter on Twitter gave way, and instead I saw updates and comments that were unambiguous and urgent. There was no need for jesters anymore because the audience was not bored, we were frightened. Full lockdown was implemented in the UK soon after, and it seemed that the world went silent overnight.

Now there were narratives being told across the media about connection and causation, about rescue and hope. They competed with the bleak reports of the spread of Covid. Air pollution plummeted and this was reported as a glimpse into a possible future without a fossil fuel industry. In this story, the virus would help us make the leap in attitude needed to restore a healthy environment. 'I am very conflicted about this', said the author of one analysis, 'People are dying'. What was unsaid, but painfully clear, was the spectre of many more deaths to come from man-made climate change. The virus was a ghost version of our future. I was drawn to this idea and its compellingly mythic undertone.

'I wonder what the birds think of all this', I said to Dan, as he and I sat in the garden looking up at a blue sky, no longer criss-crossed by plane trails. He was unconvinced that the birds had opinions about all this. I wondered what they saw from their privileged view. All those roads and suddenly, hardly any cars. The prevailing theory at the time was that Covid-19 originated in the unclean conditions of a live animal market, where wild animals were slaughtered before their buyers. It was easy to make a connection between the virus and our callousness. Logically, I knew that infectious diseases have no moral dimension, no lesson to impart. They just *are*. Nevertheless, I yearned to make meaning. I tried out another story: perhaps the natural world had conjured a disease to show us its formidable and inescapable superiority. We'd been hemmed into our homes, stopped in our tracks, and made to see that the birds would continue to soar without us.

I was toying with stories, as if surviving a pandemic was a cerebral exercise. I knew what I was doing, too. I was looking for magical intent in a world which was really, terrifyingly arbitrary. As I

grew round, I became ever more self-absorbed. I told myself: we are safe in this garden. The virus belonged to the outside world, and the outside world had receded. The sun shone almost every day that Spring, and the air was clear. I lay sunning myself on a blanket on the lawn, communing peacefully with the feeling of heaviness, and marvelling at my body in which another life also lived. The noise of traffic had gone, and I liked the idea of a hush descending before our son's arrival. I lay in the heat and thought of the quiet of a church interior, contemplative, anticipatory, extraordinary.

I was woken by the first labour pains at five in the morning, one day in June. There was just a little discomfort, a not-unusual cramping sensation, but I turned to Dan and said: 'this is it now'. By the evening, we were tearing down the motorway toward the hospital. By then the pain was surging and I felt it everywhere, even my face, even my fingertips. I said, 'I miss my mum', thought, *fuck lockdown*, and burst into tears. Danger had broken in. I had reached a point of such vulnerability that I could not glide on, complacent and unthinking, any longer.

Illness in early pregnancy had forced me to understand the connection between our thoughts and our bodies, but this was nothing compared to the unravelling of the mind that giving birth entailed. The room we were in was dimly lit – that much wasn't my imagination – but I soon realised that the process of labour meant entering a profound and otherworldly darkness. The pain that came in enormous waves was so arresting that the rest of the world ceased to exist. Entonox rocketed through my body and I lost my grip on time, so that it rushed and then lagged. The midwives and doctors were distracted and exhausted, the corridors were empty, and everyone was wearing masks, which led me in my delirium to believe that I recognised the nurses from some other time and place. Déjà vu persisted. I said to Dan, 'I've done this before. Hasn't this happened before?' Most frightening of all, the people I loved, family and friends, became temporarily abstract. They existed in another world, beyond a drawn curtain, in a different dream.

I had always dismissed the hokum that surrounds labour and birth as feminist kitsch. Birth as a site of female dominion, even bonding – it was so schmaltzy. Too convenient by far. Once I was in the midst of it, I understood the aura of witchcraft around midwifery. The risks are so great (still, even now) and our ability to mitigate the danger is patchy. The fragility of a baby and the violence of their entrance into life was a shock, no matter how much I thought I knew. It is one of those parts of life where we are still beholden to our essential animal nature, the inescapable, bedrock savagery of living in a body. All we have to sooth ourselves is magical thinking.

I held on to Dan with an iron grip. He was my only connection with the real world beyond my dream and the time on the clock. In moments of exhaustion between each contraction, I met our son in my mind, and asked him to be safe and stay with us.

He was born at four in the afternoon. I was numb from the arms down (magical thinking had given way to an epidural and a forceps delivery) so he was placed on my chest and my arms were arranged around him. I felt his small weight and his breath against my skin. Everyone had told me there would be a rush of love, and I had fretted – what if there wasn't? It turned out that it wasn't up to my mind to dither over it. It was a bodily feeling, wordless.

It turned out that the altering of the world during childbirth – time at a slant, everything hushed – never went away. The early days were mostly as people said they would be, no sleep, many small panics, but that was only part of the story. I was told it was adrenaline and oxytocin that helped me stay awake, lost in love, and I agreed, although I knew something more mysterious was happening. Another mum of a little baby boy told me, 'everything makes sense now that he's here', and my heart sang with recognition. Each time I woke up in a daze, I would look at the little being asleep by my side and feel quiet excitement, like a flame igniting. I was able to keep going, at any hour of the day or night, because I had discovered inside of myself an inexhaustible, ordinary, plodding, limitless

strength. This was faith, and it was in my body at last. It was at last undoubtable – unquestionable – that love was the greater part of our existence.

Some family were able to visit in the late summer, after the first lockdown was lifted and before the next one came, but there was an abiding sadness about the people we couldn't see. The restrictions we lived under were dreary and dull, undeniably so; but having a baby in 2020 also meant that, by an odd quirk of timing and circumstances, we had all the time in the world with our son. For the first weeks of his life, we had been granted a perfect, inviolable world of privacy and safety. Some sleepless nights we sat up, all three of us, getting to know one another in the small hours. Our baby studied us carefully, enthralled by our big faces which must have filled his days and his dreams. Sometimes out of nowhere he got himself into fits of giggles, as if he saw how ridiculous the world was, and loved it anyway. I liked to introduce myself formally whenever he stared at me: 'I am your *mother*', I would say, finding it funny. 'We are your *parents*', we said to him, hardly believing it ourselves.

We had every day, hour and minute, all to ourselves. I gazed at our baby's eyes. I saw in his irises flecks of gold and tiny tiger stripes of darker brown. I felt that I could look forever and find new colours, and I had forever on my side.

I noticed a change in our communal storytelling around Christmas time. By then, our willingness to accept curbs on our freedoms had worn thin. It became apparent that Christmas was the unspoken deadline for our suffering, and I sensed a tentative outrage being prepared, that the pandemic might dare to impinge on this most sacred food-and-booze-fest. The government clearly felt the need to assuage the public by offering the chance to meet indoors. Then they thought better of it, and botched the plan, so that we were left to spend the day alone, or with the one or two loved ones who managed to fit into the timetabled twenty-four hours of licensed mixing, and scarper by midnight on Christmas Day.

The mood turned palpably sour. Around that time, I had a brush with conspiracy theorists which revealed the prevailing attitudes around me. In a fit of irritation, I posted a complaint on our local community Facebook group about a lack of social-distancing and mask-wearing amongst people on the high street. I was met with derision and told that Covid was a hoax. The same phrase kept coming up: 'prove it'. 'If it's real, then prove it'. *You can't prove it*.

I told myself for the hundredth time to delete Facebook. Then I began to wonder about these people. I assumed the virus hadn't infected them or killed anyone they loved. The proof they asked for would need to be something they could see and feel, and the virus was imperceptible – until you got it. Mainly it was transmitted through our screens, and it was not the virus itself but the idea of a virus. For those of us who accepted this, the news was enough to change our behaviours, make us keep our distance, miss our friends and families. The hoaxers, on the other hand, wouldn't give up their freedoms because of orders on screens issued by governments. Their attitude reminded me of a leaflet that my parents had received through their letterbox, which showed the horizon and over it the text: 'Trust your senses. The earth is flat and does not move'.

I wondered if the conspiracy theorists were frightened. They sought to overcome what was happening by trusting only themselves and the tangible world before them. It was one kind of story, for people who cannot tolerate too much turmoil, but whose trust in authority has, somewhere along the line, been thoroughly obliterated.

It was one kind of story, but not the kind that gave hope or protection. I read an account from a nurse in the US, of a patient who had continued to rage that the virus was a hoax, even as he lay dying of it. He spent the last days of his life in anger, fighting phantoms. I read news articles about a mental health crisis, and shared a dry laugh about it with friends, because what about that was news? Gone was any mention of air pollution, and with it, a far view of humanity and our

predicament. Now, we attended to our troubled psyches. We had relinquished the bird's vantage point, and were instead bogged down in each other's nightmares.

Meme culture had regained its place as communal therapy – the chatter was once more welcome, in our lockdown boredom – and I began to save every meme and tweet I saw that told a story about Covid. One comment that appealed to me: 'Can't believe we used to go to bowling alleys and stick three fingers into a bowling ball that countless other people touched and then we used those same fingers to eat fries and wings and pizza like god couldn't touch us lol'. I loved this meme for its sad lol at the end (the sign-off that was coming to mean *nothing matters*), the panache of the language, and the marvelling at our own carelessness. Another one, in a similar vein: 'dinosaurs literally got taken out on the same planet as we walk on today and people still think we're invincible. Ur not better than a stegosaurus'. These were throwaway comments, unserious, typed and then pinged off into the internet to disappear, but I treasured them, each an example of the new lucid humility that the pandemic had brought. These were the kind of stories that might help us.

I tried to forget about my clash with the conspiracy theorists, but I had to admit that it had shaken me. The lunacy of what they believed had exposed the frailty of my own stories. Unlike them, I approached the pandemic with a fundamental trust in the extra-sensory, a belief that the things we know to be true, we know through intellectual exploration. Like them, though, I was just making up the spells that I needed to believe in. I collected memes about humanity's hubris, while lying to myself about how safe our family was. I covered the truth in so many interpretations and meandering wonderings, that I thoroughly sedated myself.

After

Two and a half million dead, and counting. One hundred and twenty thousand of those lives lost in the UK. What happens to faith in a crisis? What use is there in storytelling, after the worst has happened? Karen Armstrong, in her book 'A History of God', writes, 'Despite its other-worldliness, religion is highly pragmatic. [...] It is far more important for a particular idea of God to *work* than for it to be logically or scientifically sound. As soon as it ceases to be effective it will be changed – sometimes for something radically different'.

As the death toll of the pandemic grew, I thought a lot about my Aunt Seonag's funeral. The story of her funeral is also a story about trauma. At the time, I thought the service cruel and hard-hearted, because I didn't understand it. It had been something of a pastime of our childhoods, making fun of the Lewis faithful and their extreme views. For example, in Stornoway, they chained the swings together in the playpark on a Sunday, to make sure the children would have nothing to do except stay home and think about their unhappy God. Over time I was able to see that unhappiness, wherever it lives, has a lineage. In Lewis I accredited it to the unsurmountable hardness of generations of subsistence crofting. When I was older, I learned about the sinking of the HMY Iolaire. This was the ship that sank in the early hours of New Year's Day, 1919, as it was bringing home the men who had survived the first world war. Two hundred and five men drowned within sight of Stornoway. It took me years to understand the ripples that kept coming from the ship that went. Crofts without men to work them, women who never married, children that never were.

It was not spoken of, but it was in the air, a feeling that something bad had happened long ago and was somehow still happening. Our relatives had gardens and milk for stray cats and pockets of toffees, and seemed to live lives of many small pleasures, but perhaps they seemed especially lovely in their kindnesses because their words and sweets were in such sharp relief to the melancholy all around us.

I came to see the gloom of the Protestantism there as a reflection of the world as it was found – after all, how cruel it must have seemed, to a faithful community, to have lost a generation of sons and brothers who so nearly made it home. It would have been an obscene charade to contend that God was love, and that this love was to be celebrated. Perhaps a bare church felt closer to the truth of things. In this emptiness, there might be room in a believer’s mind for a kind of truce. Even a kind of peace. If not peace, then a temporary undoing of tension. If I had initially found it incredible that God Himself had survived on the island after the *lolaire* sank, I came to understand that it made sense that He continued in a changed form, distant, brutal, incomprehensible. He was still needed, in some way, however far He had receded from human understanding.

I wonder what articles of faith we will follow in the future, if and when the virus is quelled. Amongst friends, there are some who await a return to life as normal, and others who seem resigned to a new reality. The way life was before lockdown now looks like a sickening carnival, everyone rushing, everywhere crowded. I remember ‘fear of missing out’, and how it was aggravated by social media posts of expensive holidays and adventurous hobbies. The narrative then was that our lives were ever on the up; but in the context of the long history of human suffering, this seems an astonishingly irrational creed to have lived by. And yet, we did. I noticed when lockdown put an end to all those fancy Instagram posts that people began to look backward. I posted photos of past holidays, longingly. I saw people pining for ordinariness, even the commute, even the hangovers. The narrative of bigger-and-better had been extinguished, but we have so far been unable to build new stories in its place.

The greatest blow must be the realisation that we are not invulnerable. Of course, this is something that only a privileged few, in rich countries and in modern times, have ever been able to ignore. How will we assimilate this renewed awareness of our fragility? My first bet is that we won’t, because we can’t. My brush with the Covid hoaxers showed me that it is impossible for some people to accept feeling unsafe. Any kind of story is preferable. Then I think *ur not better than a stegosaurus* and the indignant tone of that meme makes me laugh. These little bits of text I found online prove that the work of acceptance has already begun. We will never get back to the carnival atmosphere, but perhaps we will find a better way of thinking about ourselves.

As our son grew, my newfound faith in magic grew alongside him. Day by day, into the autumn and winter, I discovered that so much of parenthood is about imbuing life with benevolent order. Each day is replete with rituals. We sing him songs to teach him about the shape of a day, heralding playtime with loud, silly songs and bedtime with soothing songs. We carry out these acts of faith, hoping that our prosaic routines will accumulate into an overall sense that life is consistent and trustworthy. Or to put it another way, when I became a parent, I became a shelter.

As I watch the work of making meaning going on everywhere, I am reminded of a phrase from Viktor Frankl that I read just after our son was born: ‘those who have a why can bear any how’. A sense of life’s meaning allows us to cope with almost any circumstances. He was paraphrasing Nietzsche: ‘If we have our own why in life, we shall get along with almost any how’, and the original statement contains the added condition: *our own why*, a reason to keep going that may not be collectively agreed upon, but is true for the individual, perhaps only the individual. All of this speaks to the same thing, a pragmatic magic that is what we live on, and how we get through the days. I have been extraordinarily lucky, to have a child and to have lived in peace and safety. The hairline between our good fortune and every possible tragedy that could have befallen us is something I find hard to think about. As it turned out, toward the end of my pregnancy Dan caught Covid. He recovered fairly quickly, and somehow, miraculously, I didn’t get it (or I was asymptomatic). Throughout this, against all evidence, I never doubted my reverie of safety.

Every day we build up the shelter again for our son, and I lose myself in ritual, and try not to think about life's risks. I have left the chilli peppers hanging up in our kitchen, and I lay a hand upon them, mindlessly, time after time. We trick ourselves and we let ourselves be tricked. There is no other way to live.