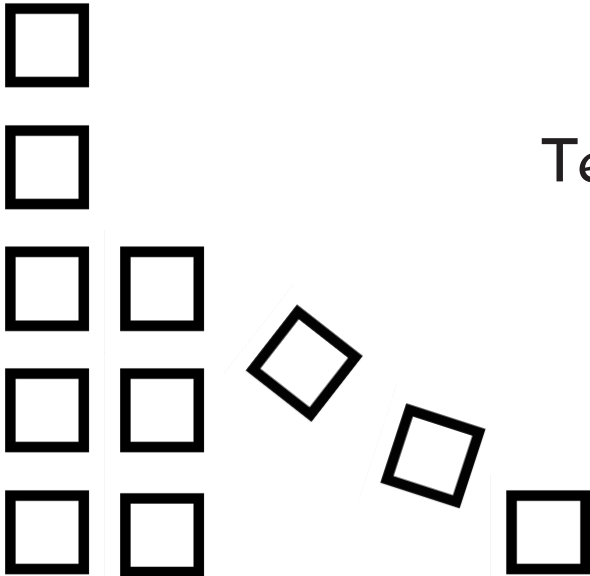
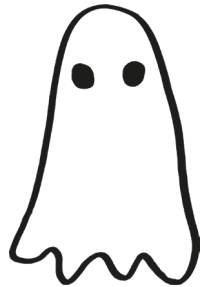


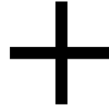
The fields here are
full of ghosts

Tessa Norton



For Leonard, who came up with the title.





Sorry I missed your party!

I missed a lot of parties.

Sorry I missed your party. I was at a different party.

Saint Simeon Stylites lived up a pillar in Aleppo for 37 years. He'd joined a monastery at 16, but the other monks thought his form of austerity was, frankly, a bit much: incredibly showy and quite at odds with the practice of living and working communally.

Simeon then tried living in a hut. After a while, that felt far too luxurious, so he moved on to a rocky precipice.

It would be simpler if there were a word for the state of not-born-yet that meant someone who exists only as a futurity, in the way that dead is a word that means being dead.

The animists call it the dreamtime.

It would be simpler because you could then describe what is happening more accurately: transitioning from pregnancy into labour, the body opens a portal between worlds.

It's always "follow your heart", as though the heart is a leader or a visionary.

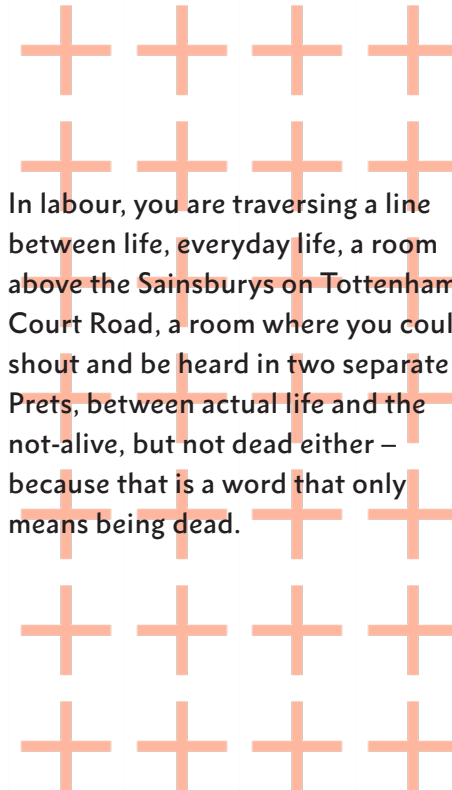
What about those of us who make all life decisions as though playing a grudge match of Yahoo chess against ourselves? Where are our motivational quotes? Those of us who like to spring out of bed each morning and say to our reflections, with a flourish of great triumph: try and get out of that one, you loser.



But the better Simeon got at hiding and punishing himself, the more that other people craved his company. Crowds of people swarmed around him whenever he emerged from his latest rock. It was driving him mad.

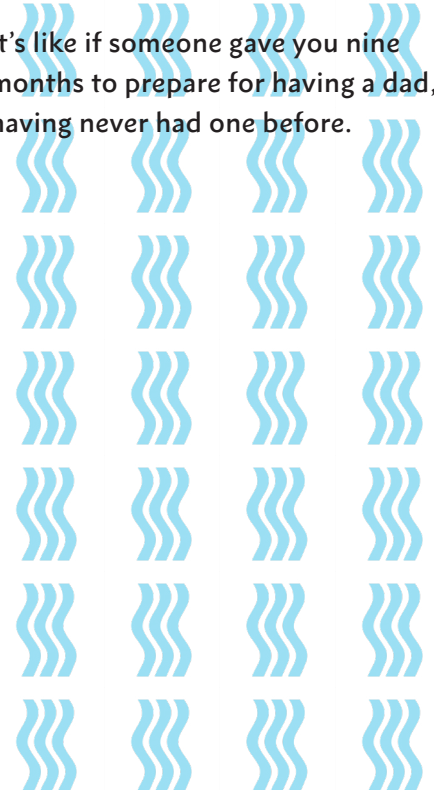
That's when he moved onto the pillar. Now he was even more popular. Fans would climb up a ladder to ask him his advice.

Eventually he died, on his pillar, hunched over in prayer. For over a hundred years after his death, disciples and imitators copied him. Sometimes you would get several hermits each perched on their own pillars, close enough to yell insults at each other about their various theological disagreements.



In labour, you are traversing a line between life, everyday life, a room above the Sainsburys on Tottenham Court Road, a room where you could shout and be heard in two separate Prets, between actual life and the not-alive, but not dead either – because that is a word that only means being dead.

It's like if someone gave you nine months to prepare for having a dad, having never had one before.





All it is, all I know, is that my great-great-grandparents and my great-grandparents and my grandparents and I all agreed.

I don't quite remember how we discussed it through the barrier of the living and dead, but we must have done, because nonetheless we had come to this clear agreement. And what we had agreed was that we all felt restricted by the unremarkable length of a life, so we cut-and-shut this makeshift solution whereby your hours of life would be appended to mine, and mine would be appended to my ancestors and so on.

To receive this new transmission, this new life, the body and the body-within-the-body are hooked up to monitors which are the colour that all computers were before 2004.

The nearest Farrow and Ball colour to the colour of the monitors is Shadow White or Ammonite (Elephant's Breath is too warm).

Connected, this mother-portal becomes a lightning conductor, a machine to permit the arrival of a being from elsewhere, from the dreamtime, a techno-witch; or just an object-gateway, like Sigourney Weaver's fridge in Ghostbusters.

What do dads like to sit on? What do they like to eat?

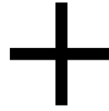
He will probably want a shed. Other people's dads like sheds.

He might want this very expensive, fashionable car, but will he trade it in for an old banger after six months?

Should we risk buying him the car now, or see how it goes?

I just feel like we should get him one expensive, really special, thing.

He deserves it. We don't want to spoil him but we do want him to be the happiest dad. We want dad to know he is loved.

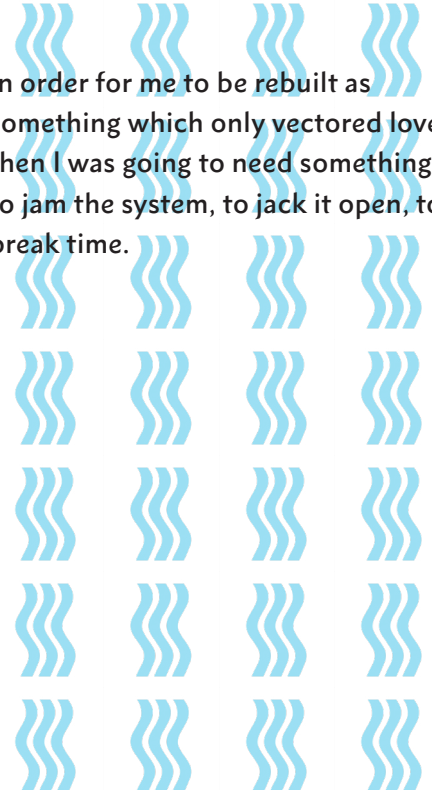


If we all held hands in this chain then we could reach further into the future and into the past. I know you didn't say it was okay but we hoped you wouldn't mind, and even that you might like it too.

By the way, Kristeva recalled: "From that time in my childhood, fragrant, warm and soft to the touch, I retain only a memory of space. Nothing of time. The smell of honey, the roundness of things, silk and velvet under my fingers, on my cheeks."

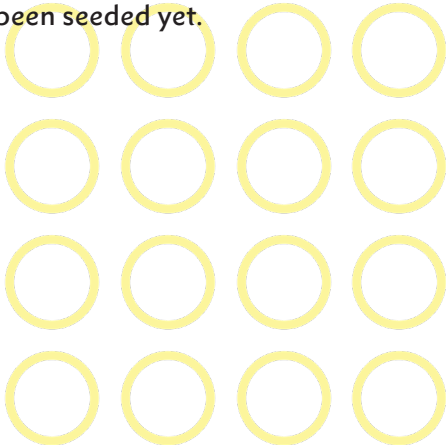


In order for me to be rebuilt as something which only vectored love, then I was going to need something to jam the system, to jack it open, to break time.





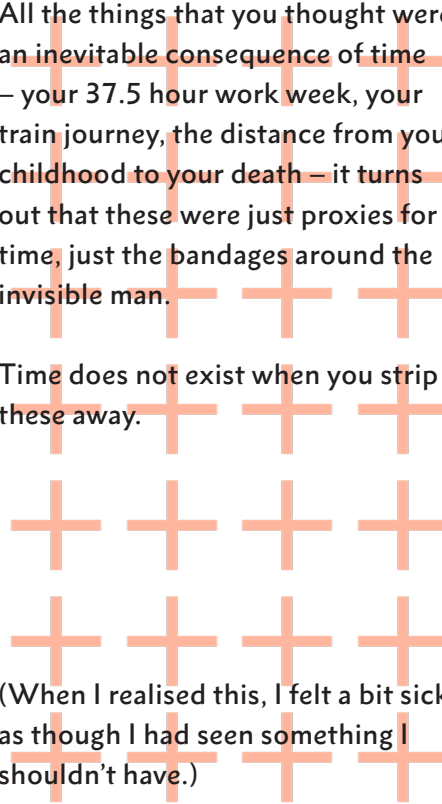
Personally, although I didn't really tell them this, I was jealous of my ancestors for pluming up into the air like clouds of house dust, for swirling around in a time and space that their bodies couldn't manage, for their fingerprints and eyebrow twitches to hang around and become futures, touching blades of grass that haven't been seeded yet.



All the things that you thought were an inevitable consequence of time – your 37.5 hour work week, your train journey, the distance from your childhood to your death – it turns out that these were just proxies for time, just the bandages around the invisible man.

Time does not exist when you strip these away.

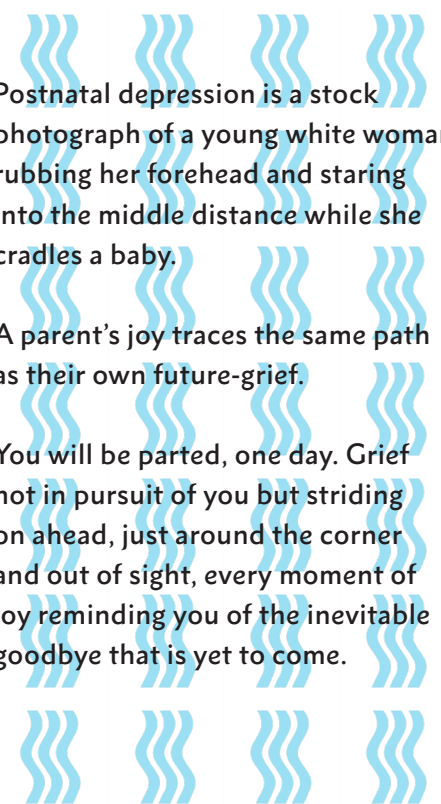
(When I realised this, I felt a bit sick, as though I had seen something I shouldn't have.)



Postnatal depression is a stock photograph of a young white woman rubbing her forehead and staring into the middle distance while she cradles a baby.

A parent's joy traces the same path as their own future-grief.

You will be parted, one day. Grief not in pursuit of you but striding on ahead, just around the corner and out of sight, every moment of joy reminding you of the inevitable goodbye that is yet to come.





I have never wanted the best for myself, not really; but I thought that maybe I might like to be an ancestor too, one day.

I had a baby because I wanted to be better at something than Anne Boleyn.

Maybe we could be a dynasty, me and the baby, a legacy; maybe we could create some cosmic meaning where none would otherwise exist.

We could be pharaohs.

“The world is made of nows”, writes the physicist Julian Barbour, because “the world does not contain things, it is things”. Space and time are not a stage on which the world’s action can happen. Time does not actually exist. The only thing that actually exists is nows.

We can all experience a now. We know what an instant of time feels like. Only in an instant we are able to take stock and understand what is happening.

A rave gap is the silence that exists in a noisy party record — the interregnum, the drop out, the moment where that *now* stands still and allows you to catch your breath.

1. I have been able to laugh and see the funny side of things.

As much as I always could

Not quite so much now

Definitely not so much now

Not at all

2. I have looked forward with enjoyment to things.

As much as I ever did

Rather less than I used to

Definitely less than I used to

Hardly at all

3. I have blamed myself unnecessarily when things went wrong.

Yes, most of the time

Yes, some of the time

Not very often

No, never



“It’s not like you think it’s going to be”, you hear yourself saying.

It’s not like you think it’s going to be, because what it is like, is that you will not be able to stop thinking about death, not even for a second, calmly assessing any possible situation for its potential to bring death, but also drinking in your new-found daredevil proximity to the world of the dead.

And yet you will do all this in a spangled state of shivery joy, like you’ve had an extra half a pill for the journey home, snuggling into a sheepskin on the night bus.



Notable rave gaps:

~~Cola Boy, *7 Ways To Love* (1991)~~

~~Bizarre Inc, *Playing With Knives* (1991)~~

~~Glenn Branca, *Lesson No. 1 for Electric Guitar* (1980)~~

~~37C Stoke Newington Church Street, London N16 0NX (2004): 18 September, 2.15am~~

~~35 Euston Rd, Bloomsbury, London NW1 2BU (2016): 22 January, 6.25am~~

~~(The chains of the sea? Oh, they busted in the night.)~~

4. I have been anxious or worried for no good reason.

No not at all
 Hardly ever
 Yes, sometimes
 Yes, very often

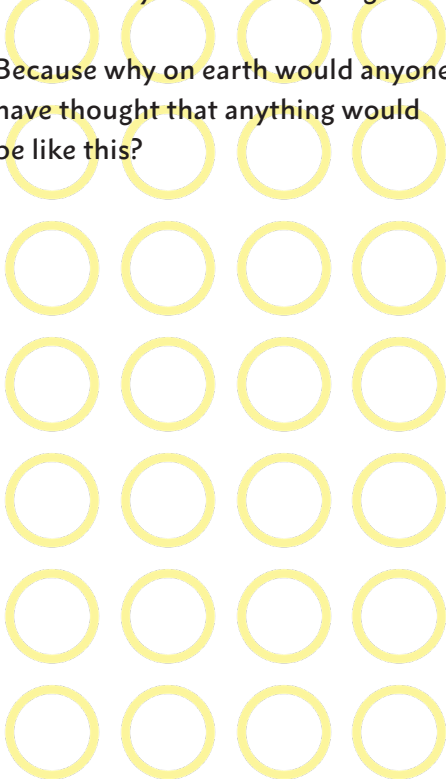
5. I have felt scared or panicky for no very good reason.

Yes, quite a lot
 Yes, sometimes
 No, not much
 No, not at all



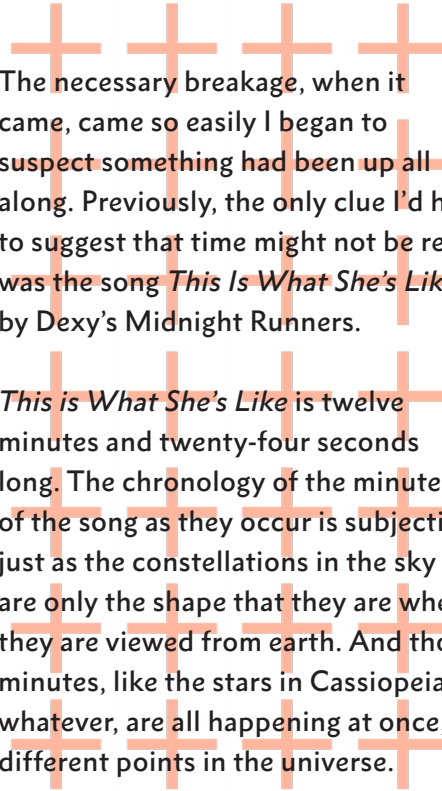
It's not like you think it's going to be.

Because why on earth would anyone have thought that anything would be like this?



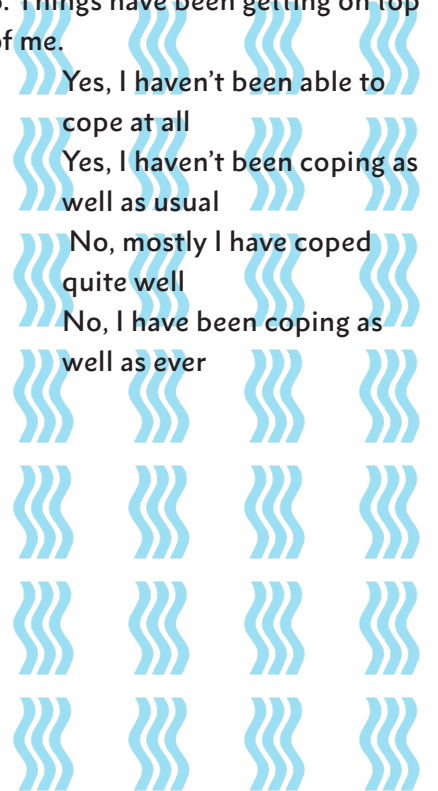
The necessary breakage, when it came, came so easily I began to suspect something had been up all along. Previously, the only clue I'd had to suggest that time might not be real was the song *This Is What She's Like* by Dexy's Midnight Runners.

This is What She's Like is twelve minutes and twenty-four seconds long. The chronology of the minutes of the song as they occur is subjective, just as the constellations in the sky are only the shape that they are when they are viewed from earth. And those minutes, like the stars in Cassiopeia or whatever, are all happening at once, at different points in the universe.



6. Things have been getting on top of me.

Yes, I haven't been able to cope at all
Yes, I haven't been coping as well as usual
No, mostly I have coped quite well
No, I have been coping as well as ever

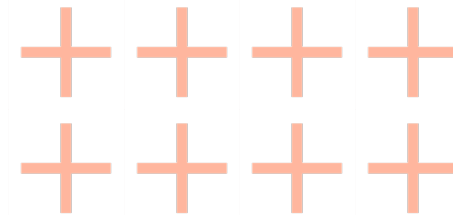
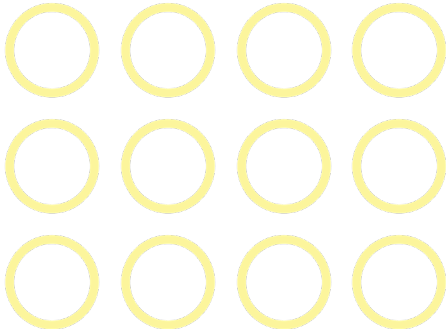




And there is fear, which when it descends, isn't exhaustion, or ageing, or the weight of responsibility. It's a fear of ghosts.

Your basic haunted-house-ghost or ghost-story-ghost is a woman who has lost a baby.

Culturally, we fear these women more than we fear dead babies themselves.



The minutes of the song in order from best to worst are:
9th, 11th, 12th, 1st, 8th, 2nd, 10th, 5th, 7th, 3rd, 4th, 6th.

What's she like?
Listened to correctly, *This is What She's Like* is like being dismantled bone by bone. The pin bone structures holding you together, removed carefully with tweezers and laid neatly in a pile to your left.

7. I have been so unhappy that I have had difficulty sleeping.

- Yes, most of the time
- Yes, sometimes
- Not very often

8. I have felt sad or miserable.

- Yes, most of the time
- Yes, sometimes
- Not very often

9. I have been so unhappy that I have been crying.

- Yes, most of the time
- Yes, quite often
- Only occasionally
- No, never



We fear a sadness so extreme that it leaves an imprint on old houses. A sadness that glides through corridors at night, a sadness that can't help but physically manifest itself as a spectre, pushing its way into the wrong dimension, sadness as a wisp of gleaming brilliant burning-magnesium white.

A radio frequency of pure dread, a terror that endures for hundreds of years, a sobbing that no one will ever stop hearing.

What's she like?

It is not quite a song about falling in love. It is about the British class system, how to conduct yourself in public, and Kevin Rowland's full-fathom-five-deep crush on someone demonstrably excellent. But, both this specific combination of emotions and negotiations, and also the song itself with its rise and fall and push and pull, are nonetheless structured in exactly the same way as falling in love.

So, it's one thing, but it's also functionally the same as another.

10. The thought of harming myself has occurred to me.

Yes, quite often

Sometimes

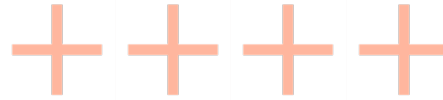
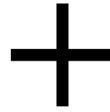
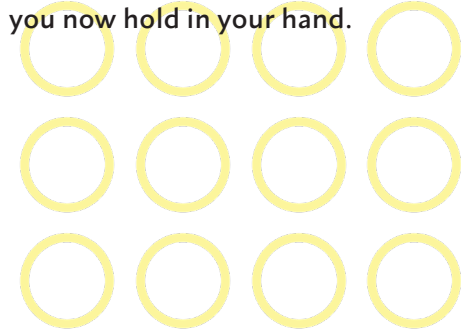
Hardly ever

Never



And when you bring your impossibly small newborn home with the task of observing its tiny pulsing breaths and simply making sure that they never, ever, stop, your terror becomes a prayer; over and over and over, “please don’t let me become a ghost”.

Fear glitters, though, with what Roxy Music called a melancholy shimmering. Fear charges this new gold dust woman death-power that you now hold in your hand.

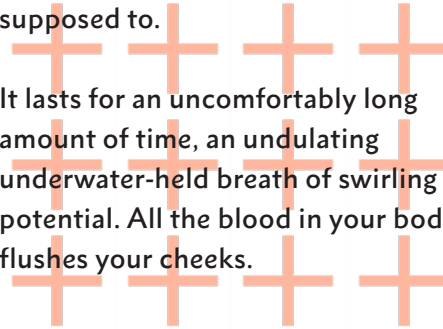


What’s she like?

If you spend any time with *This is What She’s Like* at all you will realise that it is a logical impossibility.

The timestamp 8.09 doesn’t roll over to 8.10 in a second, like it’s supposed to.

It lasts for an uncomfortably long amount of time, an undulating underwater-held breath of swirling potential. All the blood in your body flushes your cheeks.

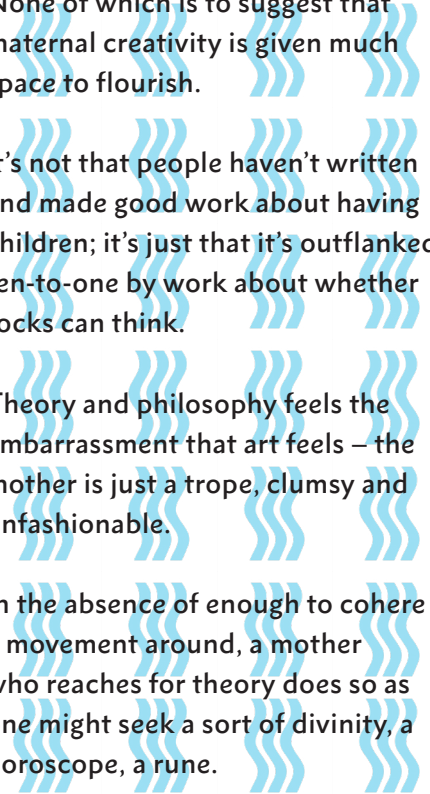


None of which is to suggest that maternal creativity is given much space to flourish.

It’s not that people haven’t written and made good work about having children; it’s just that it’s outflanked ten-to-one by work about whether rocks can think.

Theory and philosophy feels the embarrassment that art feels – the mother is just a trope, clumsy and unfashionable.

In the absence of enough to cohere a movement around, a mother who reaches for theory does so as one might seek a sort of divinity, a horoscope, a rune.





The list of postnatal depression questions the doctor asks doesn't let you add caveats, which makes everything sound so blunt.

Are you preoccupied with thoughts of death?

Yes, but. Yes, but only because it makes me feel so alive, I am so happy to have sailed near to death and to have blown it a kiss, I am so grateful for this glittering electric life that it makes me weep all day long.

And yes, since you ask, I am scared to go outside, but I am right to be scared because outside is crazy, and has dangers, but inside I am in this pure weepy bliss, having a whispered conversation with my ancestors.

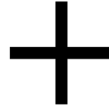
The motion that should turn one second into the next simply isn't there: instead, the second slows down to a stop and allows you to climb into it. And all this happens before the trumpets come back in at 8.10.

Did you know, that second not actually lasting for a second is a clue that they put in the record?

That is where Kevin Rowland is telling you that time is not real.

If they talk about it at all, people only talk about motherhood as a state of being, making art as a mother, becoming a mother, choosing not to become a mother. (Some literature about privileged white women's struggle with identities is like an extremely low-suspense car chase between two milk floats: the rich will be fine, whatever they decide.)

This child, this funny little kid, is more interesting. Motherhood remained confusing and elusive. There was no becoming. I found I was trying to disappear completely, to become set-dressing, to dissolve into a world of someone else's childhood. A zen-like pursuit of planned obsolescence.



“Life is too short” is terrible advice.
Life is far too long to carry a sack of
regrets around.

Cruelty weighs heavily, broken
hearts beat slowly. And hearts *do*
break, but they are not brittle, and
they do not shatter.

Hearts break like toys, or Casio
watches. The machinery inside must
be quite basic, but still you can't
get to it. Then cracks appear, acid
calcifies, the heart works for a while
longer, gone creaky. Looks the same,
scrubs up clean; but then, a faint
whirring that should not be there.

Then one day just stops.

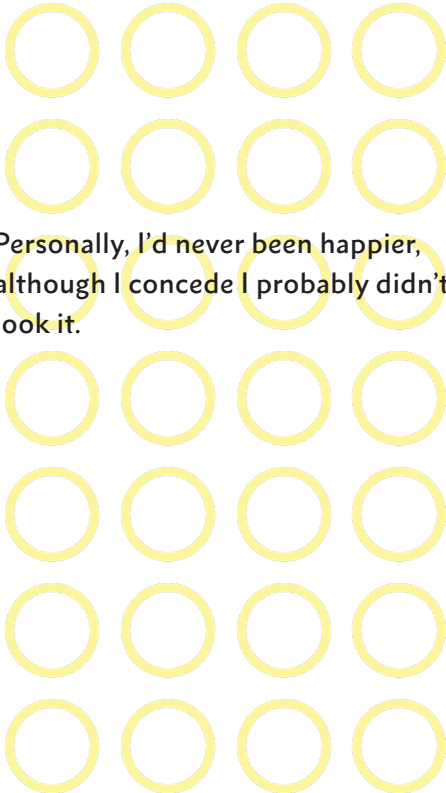
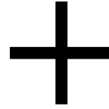
What's she like?

Well, on the issue of improbable
things, Fanny Howe said:

“A chance meeting is a meeting
that seems to exist with a great
probability of not meeting circling
around it. As we all know, almost
everything doesn't happen.

So the chance occurrence must
actually be everything that does
happen.”

(More practically, being a
gatekeeper of childhood and
adulthood is also a lot like being a
teenage stoner, not going to work,
watching cartoons at 5am.)



Personally, I'd never been happier, although I concede I probably didn't look it.

What's she like?

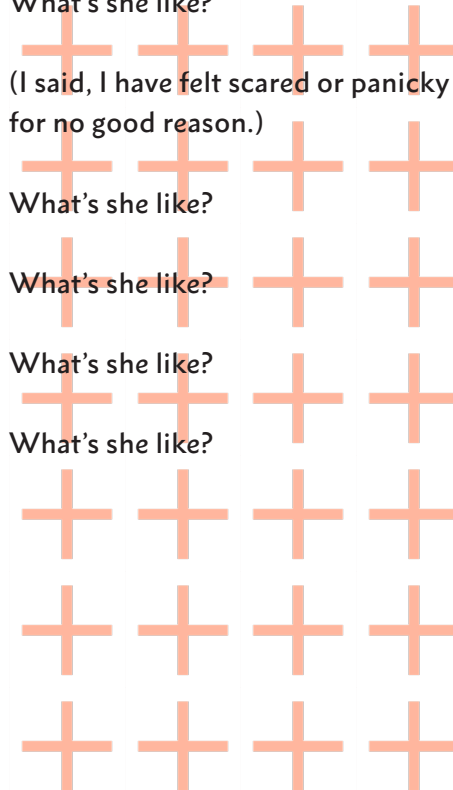
(I said, I have felt scared or panicky for no good reason.)

What's she like?

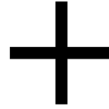
What's she like?

What's she like?

What's she like?



The “end times” are not coming, despite what Žižek says. The end times are simultaneous nows. They are already here, and they are also something that has been. They have maybe even gone, depending where you stand. This is as much about your understanding of “time” as it is about “end”. In classical Greek thought there was a distinction between *chronos* (tick, tock, born, middle bit, die, etc) and *kairos* (the time when it is, say, the right time to do something). *Chronos* just does whatever, but *kairos* is a still space which you need to act upon. It's the hole that's been punched in the wall that you need to run through. You can move nearer to or further from *kairos* whenever you like – it's on you.



In Michel Serres' *Rome*, a Roman baker kneads his dough. He "stretches it, spreads it out, then folds it over, then stretches it out and folds it over again."

And again.

There has never been a time since antiquity when a baker was not doing this, somewhere.

The baker again: "the system grows old without letting time escape. Time enters into the dough, a prisoner of its folds, a shadow of its folding over."

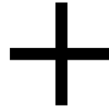
Dough is a memory fluid - it carries with it the traumas that you have inflicted on it. Bread is a record of all the things it has felt.

What's she like?

I knew that time must have been broken because the two of us held each other tightly, suspended in one of these moments.

I was shaking day and night with grief for everyone I had not yet lost, but would do eventually.

But, you know, it's also that the end times have been here all along, since before the beginning.



Any body is a record of loss and time.

Any part of your body has the potential to vanish, to become a spook. You are carrying this potential right now. You are surrounded by future-ghosts, not-ghosts-yet.

Sometimes the sensation of a phantom limb persists after a limb has been amputated. The limb from the past can cause pain in the present. (Cats get this too, sometimes, scratching at litter trays with paws they don't have anymore.)

And it's only when you conjure up a manifestation of the phantom limb in a mirror box that the itches and cramps can be removed.

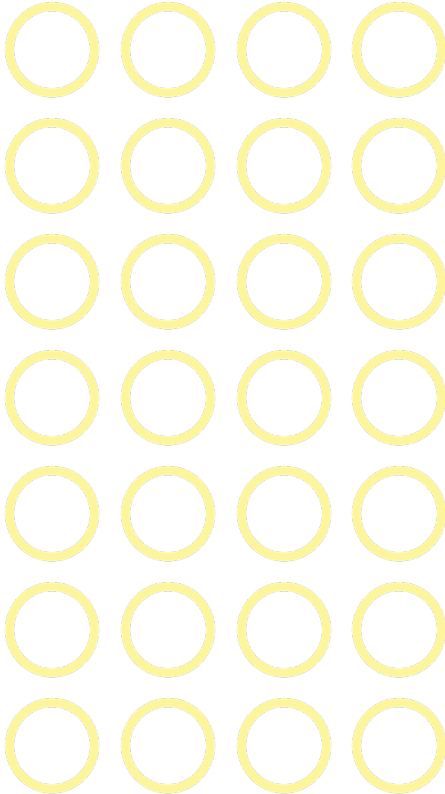
All anyone wants is to feel as though they are in control of the universe.

Or, perhaps more accurately, all anyone wants is to confirm the suspicion they have carried with them all their life, which is that they are secretly in control of the universe but not allowed to tell anyone about it.

The tragedy is that the only time that this is true is in the split second before something happens: in that moment of suspended animation, the moment before the moment.



There have been many points in my life when I would have liked someone to make me an Instagram meme or a motivational tote bag in solidarity but it was not now, shuddering, unconvinced of the solidity of anything – not a strident “you got this” tiger mother, but a shaky little ghost holding on so tight to something else that is as untethered as itself; a moving thing tied to another thing that is moving too.



Part of it's about the weight of responsibility. There's that great zinger of Frank Stella's: "I just wanted to keep the paint as good as it looked in the can."

So it's the moment right before you plunge your whole arm into the brand-new pot of yellow paint.

The moment right before the custard pie.

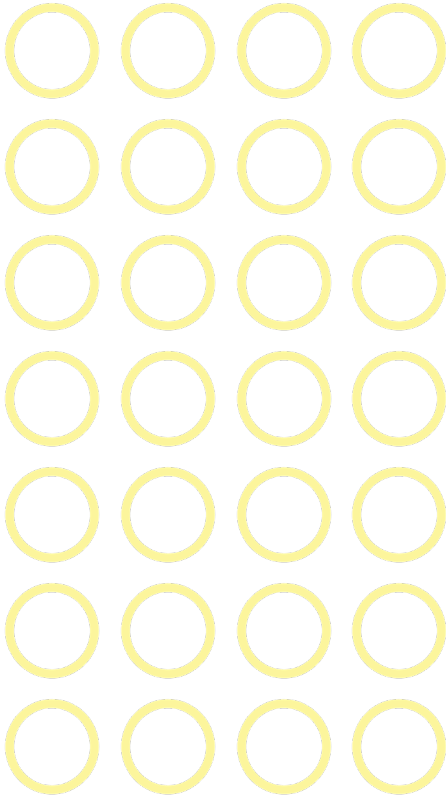
The moment before the moment.

The moment before that, even.

Everything was happening at once. I was feeling grief for you too, little sausage, presumptuous grief for when it was me who was lost.

It was efficient to grieve in this way, in advance, when I was not at all busy and stuck just in an endless fractured day-night, and I could really linger on it.

I'd say it was a good use of time, but I think we have already established that time is not a thing which is there for us to use.



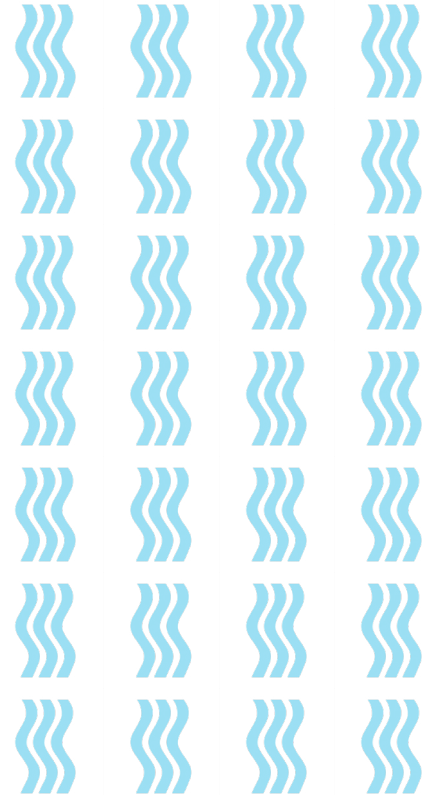
Potential is the most power we'll ever know.

Teetering on the edge of multiple courses of action, the possible futures shine like bright lights.

When all the possible futures are still swirling round in the cosmos, it's like you own time and space. If any of the futures could be yours, then they are all yours.

But when you act, pick a path, create a timeline... well, don't you feel it too?

The lights going off, I mean.





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