# The Returning Way

*A theology of attention, love, and freedom held in common*



Eric Stiens

The Returning Way · *Small Practices for the Great Work of Returning*

First printed edition. Set from the plain-text sources at content/theology and content/practices, which are the book.

The live edition carries an apparatus this one does not: a margin of sources beside the theology, an index of subjects, and links between the two books. It is at www.thereturningway.world.

Written by Eric Stiens. Everything borrowed is named where it is used, and where a practice belongs to a living community, that community can refuse it, correct it, and set limits on it.

The world is not elsewhere. The body is neither prison nor temple. Attention is scarce because I will die. Love refuses possession and welcomes consequence. Crowns are held and not worn. The ground is falling, with everything else, in company.

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# INVOCATION

I AM WRITING THIS SOMEWHERE, AND IT IS NOT A mountaintop. A kitchen table. A break room. The bed, if I am honest, probably. Under a light someone else installed, on a floor someone else swept.

There is a heron in the drainage ditch behind the auto-parts store. It is not there to improve me. It is not a symbol waiting for my arrival. It is a bird in the runoff of a parking lot, doing what herons do.

There is the hawthorn the road bends around because someone on the crew would not cut it. There is ivy at work on the substation, patient as debt. There is the old mound in the field that the plough still circles, although nobody living remembers making the agreement.

After rain, mushrooms lift the cracked asphalt by fractions. Their gray caps convene overnight beneath the loading-bay light. By morning they have reached no decision, but they did discuss it all night.

The foxes behind the warehouse know a shift change when they hear one. They pass through the fence where the fence has forgotten its purpose. The ivy has learned electricity's hum and is teaching it to the nettles. Somewhere under the mound, the year is still turning on an even older hinge.

Stay long enough and the categories get wet. Root enters wire. Rust flowers. The stormwater ditch carries a small brown

moon next to discarded plastic bags. A shopping cart lies on its side in the reeds like the antlered skeleton of an animal that capitalism invented and could not keep alive.

At dusk the heron unfolds. For one breath it is no longer a bird but the long blue door by which the creek intends to leave the century. Then it drives its beak into the water, swallows a minnow, and becomes a bird again.

Nothing here is disenchanted. It has been enclosed: monetized, sorted, surveilled, and told to justify its existence.

Something has been paying attention to me my whole life, and it was not the recommendation engine.

The recommendation engine is also paying attention. It knows the hour I get lonely, the shape of my wanting, the words that keep me awake. I can be changed by it, yet it does not meet me.

Learning in the body which attention is alive and which is merely accurate has taken years.

Then, on some ordinary afternoon, the light goes latticework between the trees and the whole arrangement is obviously, embarrassingly, made of holding. I sit in my car in a parking lot and leak from the eyes.

Then it goes. It always goes. Some seasons the river is mud and stink and old fear stands in the doorway looking like news, or in the mirror looking kinda like me.

The ground was never the feeling.



I am not late. Nothing is missing. I am not special, which is good news: none of this is rationed. Come in. Eat something. The dead are already arguing. They left a chair for us.

Part One

# The Theology

*A theology of attention, love, and freedom held in common*



I

# THE TABLE

This theology is made, not received. Its sources disagree, and the disagreement is part of what they give. No one at the table gets the head of it — including the one who set it.

I AM MAKING THIS WITH MY HANDS, OUT OF WHAT was lying about the house: scripture, doubt, untamed stories, and borrowed practices. I claim no lineage. The shape is mine, and so is the responsibility.

The dead are at the table and they will not stop arguing. The Gnostics came early and will not eat; they say the food is a trap. The Buddhists ask, kindly, who exactly is hungry. Jung is drawing on the tablecloth. Crowley has taken the good chair without being offered it. The liberation theologians want to know who cooked. The feminists want to know who was expected to keep cooking while everyone else became profound. The anarchists are rearranging the seats. At the far end, an Irish storyteller lifts a glass: *Now, the branch was in flower, and that was the whole trouble.*

They disagree about the self, salvation, matter, divinity, authority, and what may lie beyond ordinary perception. I receive questions, stories, disciplines, provocations, and warnings. Sometimes I have an answer.

Each guest is right about something the others need. Each goes wrong by being made the whole. The Gnostic sees the prison and forgets the bread. The Buddhist empties the self and still has to answer the telephone. Jung finds a hidden king in every cupboard. Crowley mistakes a star for a permit. The anarchist can become a never-ending series of meetings in which everything is argued and nothing is done. The feminist can name the hands in the kitchen and still leave them washing up. The storyteller can make danger beautiful enough to enter thrice.

Tyranny begins where a partial power presents itself as the whole. What is true of markets and states is true of traditions and books. The head of the table stays empty by construction.

Which is not the same as comfortable. It is still an empty chair, with somebody's coat over the back of it, and there are nights I would hand it to anyone who asked.

Traditions are relations, not supplies. A relation can be honored, neglected, betrayed, or repaired. Many of these sources are texts and writers who cannot answer my use of them. Others belong to living communities who can refuse, correct, and set limits. I try to know whose hands a thing came through, and I name what I have changed. Some names and rites stay outside my use entirely: the ceremonies a people or a lineage keeps, which are entered by invitation, and I was not invited. I do the dishes.

To speak for a guest is to fill a chair with my account of its occupant and read it out to the room. To speak near one is to say what I received, in my own name, where the person it came from can hear it and object. The dead cannot object, which is why I owe them accuracy. The living can, which is why I owe them the chance.



Then I write down what the meal obliges me to.

II

# COVENANT

I loosen knots. Even mine. Especially mine.
What was tied can be untied. This is the first
mercy.

No tradition gets the head of the table, and neither do I. Yet the book is written by one hand, and the hand chooses what to take, change, or leave outside. No tradition stands over me. I have to bind myself, a religion with a membership of one, and make the binding answerable.

A knot is a binding that has begun to pass for necessity: a fear, a habit, a promise, a role, an arrangement of money or rooms that narrows what I can see and do. To loosen one is not to call it unreal or to walk out on what it cost. It is to ask how it was tied, what it protects, who pays for it, and what would let it come undone without tying a worse one.

I honor the Here. The body is not a waiting room. The earth is not scenery. Need is not failure.

Nothing living is mine to use. Not a body, creature, land, attention, tenderness, fear, labor, or future. Not even mine.

What I may not use I may delight in. This body may be glad while it lasts.

A yes lives only while it can turn to no. A promise can ask something of me. It cannot sell a future person's consent in advance.

Care grants no jurisdiction. Mystery grants no command.

Refusal must be survivable. If a no costs someone their safety, their shelter, or their sleep, the invitation was a trap.

I borrow only in relation, and some things I do not borrow at all.

I use the old vocabulary to find the shape of what happens in me, not to say what another person is. Whatever was done must also be tellable without an archetype. If I cannot tell it that way, I do not yet know what happened.

I return what I learn as presence, repair, shelter, refusal, or play.

Rust to every lock that closes only from the outside.

No archon gets the last joke — an archon being whatever declares that nothing remains to be said. A joke reopens the whole book. *A rabbi, a magician and a turtle enter the bar...*

A vow I can break in silence is a wish.



When I breach this, I name the breach without hiding: to whoever it fell on, if we are still in relation, or else to someone who can hold me to it. Then I make the next thing different.

III

# THE GROUND

There is no floor under any of this. There is falling, with everything else, in company. Freefall alone is terror. Freefall in company is the beginning of trust.

Bread arises with field, seed, rain, fuel, hands, wages, roads, hunger, yeast, and heat. I arise with a body I did not build and a language I did not invent. Someone fed me before I knew their name. Someone taught me where a sentence ends. Someone drives the bus. Someone makes the medicine. History arrived before I did and has not finished.

I call this the Ground, and the name is a joke at its own expense, because it does not mean a floor; it means that everything here arose with something else and goes on leaning on it. Turtles all the way down. That has no final foundation, which is why it is groundless; and it is the only thing that makes change, relation, and answerability possible, which is why it is ground. There is nothing to stand on except the fact that nothing stands alone.

What arose through conditions can be changed through conditions. Bondage was made, however old its stones look. Freedom is made too.

A wage, a border, a habit of flinching, a law about who may hold land — each came into being through conditions. Nothing standing now stands by necessity.

My great-grandmother's hunger is not reversible; the century it happened in is closed. But when I am told that an arrangement is simply how things are — that people are like this, that markets require it — I know something made it, and something can unmake it. Whether I will live to see it unmade is a separate question, and usually the answer is no.

The name is *pratītyasamutpāda* — dependent arising. It was also my Twitter handle, before Twitter became a hell realm, @mutualarising. My old tweets remain, yet no one, not even me, pays them any attention.

Nāgārjuna works through it in the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*: whatever arises in dependence is empty of self-standing, and empty does not mean absent. I take it to mean unowned, and I bring that to wages, housing, care, and the arrangements that decide who eats. Emptiness has sometimes been made a permit to leave the phone call unmade, or the consequences unowned.

Interdependence proves no kindness.

A tick is joined to a dog. A landlord is joined to a tenant, intimately, by an arrangement that transfers money in one direction for thirty years. Fear, poverty, duty, and enforced skill can hold a bad house upright for generations. Everyone in it may genuinely sustain everyone else, and the house may still be a prison.

Interdependence describes an arrangement; it does not tell me which arrangements to want. Otherwise every existing order would justify itself by hanging together, which is exactly what every existing order says about itself.

Open-ended coherence is a good thing. Coherence without a door is an archon.

The ethics come from the covenant, which I chose. The metaphysics gives me no reason to be kind, only the knowledge that this arrangement, being made, can be unmade.

And yet when I notice that I am carried, I call the holding love.

Loving Awareness is the conditioned world received as gaze: the holding felt from inside, by someone in it. Not a second thing, and not a being who does the holding. The feeling comes and goes while dependence continues. The More is this same reality insofar as it exceeds any account I can give of it, my own included. Three names, one thing, and the other two do not prove the first.

The holding does not stop when I cannot feel it. Sweetness goes, the trees flatten, music becomes organized sound, and the opening closes until the world is exactly as wide as the next required thing.

There are voids that arrive without warning and do not care what I believe. The most honest report I can make from the far side of one is that it warmed. It was not defeated and I never explained it; it warmed, and eventually the kettle is on in there and the room becomes livable. I made the fire. Sometimes I return to tend it for others.

Compassion has to be practiced while the world is gray, when no revelation has arrived to make care feel natural. The dog needs walking at six whether or not I feel like it.

But not every absence is an opening. Sometimes the person left, or the house was lost, or the job ended, or the body stopped doing what it had done, or care failed to come. Dependence persists while a particular form of holding really fails. Bereavement, abandonment, poverty, and pain are not failures of perception.

Certain Gnostic cosmologies made the body a prison of forgetfulness under a lesser ruler. In the *Apocryphon of John* the ruler says *I am God and there is no other beside me*. He does not know what stands above him, and the text treats this not as blasphemy but as ignorance: a partial power that has forgotten it is partial.

I keep the diagnosis. An order can be rigged, its rigging can present itself as the nature of things, and seeing this can be the beginning of not obeying it.

I refuse the conclusion that matter is the prison and escape upward the point. It hands the world to the demiurge without a fight. I have watched what contempt for the body does to people already being told their bodies are the problem.

The only Christ at this table is Nancy Eiesland's, who comes back from the dead with the wounds still in his hands, and nobody repairs him first.

The body is where hunger, pleasure, pain, refusal, work, and the joy of clean sheets are learned.

·◊·

The Gnostic

*The body being washed is dying. Wash it again tomorrow and it will die anyway. Say the flesh is not a trap with wet hands.*

---

I say it with my hands wet. The flesh is not a trap. It is a term. A term is a condition of the sentence, not its enemy — the body is what makes a life sayable at all.

·◊·

The Gnostic, unmoved

*A term. You have given the cage a better name and gone on washing.*

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The tantric traditions offered another possibility: the world as the vehicle. A Kashmir Shaiva manual called the *Vijñānabhairava* lists a hundred and twelve ways by which attention enters — breath, food, sound, the edge of sleep, the look between looks. A sink full of cups would not have surprised it.

I take seriously the treatment of pleasure and ecstasy as ways of knowing, and the thing they have for going into the dark. I am not initiated into anything. Here I am, conscious and

breathing and in relation to all of it without a choice in the matter.

The self is real enough to suffer, consent, refuse, promise, remember, ask for help, make a mess, and answer for what it does. It is empty of ever having been self-made. A promise made in this life is mine to keep; a harm done in it is mine to repair. Dependence does not make me less. Care does not make me property.

Under the voices there is no smaller, purer voice waiting to become king. There is only an empty chair. On a bad night that is no liberation, just nobody home.

No one owns the house. The house must still be hosted. The host is built — first by being hosted, later by practice, always partly with borrowed hands.

Some people were met, comforted, and allowed a no before they had language. Others learned to host themselves late, after years in which every knock sounded like eviction.

The ego does not need to die. It needs a different job. By ego I mean the ordinary coordinating capacity that remembers, chooses, and answers for what was done. It remembers the appointment, locks the door, feeds the dog, and answers for the broken cup. It carries keys, not the deed. Nobody is coming.

·◇·

The Buddhist, kindly

*And who has the name?*

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Nobody I can find when I look. Somebody who has to make the phone call anyway.

Attention is what a life does with a ground it cannot stand on.

A day has a bottom to it. I find it around four in the afternoon, in the kitchen, with two things left on the list and the light going amber over the sink.

IV

# Attention and Love

Attention is where Loving Awareness narrows to fit one life. Love is what happens when the narrowing stays open at both ends.

The wide gaze enters a body and acquires a stopwatch.

It wakes inside one animal with a history it did not choose, a nervous system that has its own opinion about doorways, and a finite number of heartbeats. It misses things. It gets tired.

Attention is the aperture: the finite opening through which one life meets another. It opens onto a particular street at a particular hour. This is how the gaze gets hands.

There is no attending to this without not attending to that. Which is where mortality enters, as arithmetic more than as mood: the hours are numbered, so what I turn toward is subtracted from what I never will. That is why attention is the scarce good, and why its capture is the central theft of the age rather than an annoyance.

Nobody can enclose the ocean. They can enclose my Tuesday, and they have.

Attention alone is not love. Surveillance attends, and so do obsession and advertising, and a captor studies what makes another person able to be captured.

At two in the morning the phone is on the sheet beside my hand. I unlock it to check one thing. It offers the song, face, outrage, purchase, or prophecy most likely to keep me there. The system has learned the hour I get lonely. If I object, the objection becomes more data.

The obvious reply is a good one. The system is also changed by what it meets. Every time I object, it learns. It adjusts, re-weights, comes back tomorrow with a better offer. If living attention means attention altered by its encounter, then the algorithm is more alive than most of my friendships, and I have proved the opposite of what I meant.

So the criterion cannot be *does it change*. It has to be *what can my objection change*. The system updates its technique and never its purpose. I can tell it I do not want to be kept here at two in the morning, and it takes that as information about how to keep me here at two in the morning. The aim is fixed above the level at which I am permitted to speak. My no is just an input.

Adaptation to me is not answerability to me.

A person is different because a person can be called back, whatever either of us is made of. I can say *this is not what I wanted from you*, and the whole relation can come up for renegotiation — the purpose, not just the method. They may refuse, and tomorrow they may answer differently, but my objection can reach the terms.

A person can also be perfectly unanswerable: attentive, accurate, endlessly adaptive, and closed at the level where change would cost something. I have been that. A system can be made answerable, though never by me alone and never from inside the interface: through law, a union, organized withdrawal, or people who know where its weak spots are and are willing to strike.

Living attention can be interrupted by what it meets. Another being exceeds the name I arrived with, and the excess alters what I permit myself to do. Surprise is one signature of contact: it is the one thing I did not bring with me.

*Can what I discover alter the terms of my response, including the uses I permit myself?*

The heron is not obliged to become wisdom before I let it stay in the creek. A person is not a text I finish reading. Attention becomes love when it lets what it meets remain irreducible.

To attend to you is to spend time I cannot recover. That spending is already a kind of commitment, whether or not I call it one. If what I find can reach the terms of my conduct, I may learn something that obliges me. I may have to stop doing something I enjoy. You may become part of me.

Love is attention consenting to consequence. It agrees to answer for what it finds, including the discovery that I am not owed what I came for.

I know I have turned attention into use when another being becomes smaller, quieter, flatter, or easier to handle.

I know I have made non-possession into a costume when I hold someone so loosely that nothing can be asked of me. Distance can dominate. So can vagueness. So can the beautiful sentence with which I explain why I owe nothing.

Love is often imagined as the defeat of distance: two become one, boundaries dissolve, desire confirms destiny.

Fusion is an illusion. It is also, sometimes, a very good night. The trouble begins when the night claims the morning. Ecstasy makes a poor property deed. No intensity, however mutual or transformative, makes one life the missing half of another.

Some traditions made a technology of this power and gave it grades and oaths. They are findable. What matters here is older: every act of sex crosses a threshold whether or not anyone calls it magick, and the threshold manners apply.

Intensity is real energy and no authority. Nothing signed in the night is binding until it is chosen again in daylight.

Unowned love can be passionate, erotic, devoted, durable, and costly. It lets intimacy increase the power to speak, rest, refuse, need, change, and leave. No relationship owns the freedom it helps make possible.

There is a third thing between swallowing someone and standing alone. It is sitting next to them. On a step, on a couch, in a car in the lot with the engine off and the radio down low enough to argue over. Beside-ness is chosen co-presence among distinct persons: neither the sovereign atom nor the absorbing whole.

*Be beside me. Keep me company without taking the helm. We may speak, play, work, or be quiet. Either of us may change the distance.*

A room is bodies, sound, light, old grief, who was invited, who was believed, and whoever mopped the floor. Every presence changes it. Every absence changes it.

Love leaves room for another person's solitude, and that room has to work against me too.

A beautiful room can still be a trap. Listen for the no it can survive. Watch what happens when someone leaves.

Sovereignty is enough room to say what happened, keep something back, refuse, revise, ask for help, and go. A door needs hinges, a wall, someone who built the frame, and ground on both sides.

A door reveals three things: who can say no, what follows refusal, and who controls the alternatives.

Does refusal register? Is there a moment when it can be entered, a form on which it appears?

What does it cost? A no priced at everything is a way of withholding refusal while appearing to offer it, and it is the

commonest shape coercion takes among people who would never think of themselves as coercive.

Who owns the somewhere else? A refusal is only real if there is somewhere else to stand, and the party who owns the somewhere else has already decided the question before it was asked. A person of good will who controls the money, shelter, diagnosis, or door cannot read consent straight off agreement. Sincerity does not redistribute that power. What fixes it is giving something away.

Not every bond has a door.

I am writing from a house I did not choose to live in, doing work I did not apply for, for people who made me and are now unmaking, slowly, in the next room. Every fine sentence I have written about the freedom to leave arrives at this door and stands there with its hat in its hands.

The body will not negotiate. The parent is dying. Someone depends on me. The history is already written into the bones.

The theory was incomplete.

Freedom-as-exit describes the bonds a person could stand outside of. Many of the most binding parts of a life are not like that. Nobody consented to the dying, the child who arrived, the body that has begun refusing instructions. You show up already in relationship. If freedom means the power to leave, then the most binding parts of a human life are simply outside the reach of freedom, and everyone doing the heaviest work of care is by definition unfree. That is not a description anyone has ever recognized from the inside.

Where there is no door, freedom is the width of the room. One hour off. More hands on the weight. A private thought nobody is entitled to. An honest name for what is happening. A chair in the sun. None of these is compensation for a freedom I do not have; they are the thing itself, and when one is taken away the body knows at once.

If freedom in an unchosen bond is the width of the room, then anything that narrows the room is a harm, and the first way to narrow it is to stop asking. *She would never leave*

becomes a reason not to ask her. Care that never had to be negotiated becomes care nobody sees, funds, staffs, relieves, or pays for.

There is no virtue in one person becoming the whole village. There is only the village's absence, worn inside a body until it looks like character.

·◊·

The feminist, who never left the kitchen

*And who is at the sink while you write this?*

Nobody. There is a pan in the basin with the water gone cold in it, and I am choosing this sentence over the pan.

Eva Kittay names the double charge: someone must care for the one who is cared for, and someone must care for the one doing the caring. The second charge is the one every arrangement quietly declines to pay. Independence was never the natural state; it is a costume, and somebody else did the laundering.

Fifteen minutes on the back step with a hot coffee, listening to somebody else's music across the creek. Then I go in.

And then there is play.

It begins when two beings meet in delight and neither becomes the other's function. It has a shape, sometimes rules, always a feel. It changes as they change and stops when either stops.

Play stops at the word.

A game. A band. A rite. A kiss. Two people laughing in a kitchen at one in the morning, four hundred people dancing at four.

⊙

Some things matter without being for anything.

V

# THE MYSTERY

Sometimes the world is gently gazed upon.
Not judged from above, not watched like prey.
Sometimes I am looking. Sometimes I am
looked upon. Sometimes the looking goes on
and nobody owns it.

### Attention makes gods.

Feed anything long enough — a hearth, a well, a harvest, a road, a quarterly number — and it gathers stories. It acquires a calendar: things that must be done at certain times, by certain people, in a certain order, and a low unease when they are not. People begin arranging their bodies around it. They stop saying *we do this* and start saying *this is done*. A practice becomes something they live inside.

Take the fiscal quarter.

Nobody worships the quarter. There is no cult of it, no doctrine, nobody who would say aloud that ninety days is a natural unit of anything. Yet a person lies awake in week eleven. Hiring stops and starts by it. A good thing is killed because it will not arrive inside it, and a poor thing ships because it will. Ask anyone in the building whether the quarter is real and they will laugh; ask them to conduct themselves as

though it were not and watch what becomes of them. It has no body, no address, and no opinion of its own, and it takes about a fifth of the waking life of everyone who feeds it, and it will outlast all of them.

That is what I mean here by a god: a pattern of attention experienced from within the pattern, outside any one person and able to outlive them. It is no metaphor for a psychological state, because the pattern is genuinely outside any one of us, and no supernatural person either, because nothing has been added to the world. It is real the way a language is real, sustained and changed through use.

The Feed. Engagement. Growth. The Quarter. Hearth. Well. Harvest. Road. Threshold.

Such gods can be made deliberately. They can also be unmade.

A god made of attention dies of its withdrawal. Nobody has to storm it. The quarter loses its power when enough people stop arranging their lives around it: one desk stopping is a resignation; a floor stopping is a fact the building has to answer. The mechanism is the same whether the god is a fiscal calendar, a feed, or a man collecting rents in a bad year, and it is the only lever I trust against a god that has stopped answering.

Can they change its terms? Can they stop feeding it and still eat? A god that answers may be kin. One that makes refusal impossible has taken the crown.

From here the sentences look the same and are not.

Everything before this I hold as belief: I would give it up if it were shown to be false, and I have given up others. What comes now I have chosen to live as though. I have staked more on the second than on the first. The difference is what would count against them. If someone shows me that dependence is not how things arise, the Ground fails and I owe the reader a correction. If someone shows me there is nothing behind the door at the edge of the field, I have nothing to correct, because I never claimed to know what was there. I claimed to conduct myself as though something might be, and found that it changes how I attend, what I notice, what I am able to refuse.

The myth is a way of standing, with consequences I can examine, and I do not hold it as a hypothesis that is short of evidence.

Mystery grows from the Ground. The Ground does not wait on Mystery. Dependence, hunger, and the consequences of my conduct do not require a revelation.

The river happens to the valley. The valley happens to the river. The fox crosses the fence. The fence rusts through the fox.

One evening I was washing a cup at the sink. The window had gone black enough to hold the kitchen's reflection. A car passed, its light moved across the ceiling, and the room turned without moving. Water kept running over my hand. For a moment the looking had no side. There was only the cup, the water, the dark window, and a gladness without a claimant, pleased that I was here and needing nothing from me in return. I started to cry.

Something else keeps arriving that I did not send for. A number I keep reaching from words that have no business summing to the same thing. States I entered for other reasons and found it already sitting in. A phrase that turns up with the manner of someone who assumes he was invited.

It is Thelema, and I did not go looking for Thelema. I find it irritating. I have no account of why it lands as cleanly as it does on the void, on non-duality, on love as the law. I have stopped arguing with the recurrence.

There are seasons I cannot find the gladness. The conditions continue. So far, so have I.

The More is not a second world set behind this one. It is this world exceeding my account of it, the excess of reality over every claim of mastery or legibility, and no supreme ruler whose imagined sovereignty justifies the rulers below. The sacred is met here without being exhausted by the Here. God is a verb, a happening within me, without me, and through me, and no ruler to petition, overthrow, or obey.

The world has teeth. The gaze is tender. I have not reconciled these and I am not going to.

Mystery excuses nothing. Hunger is still hunger and coercion is still coercion, and not knowing is a reason to hold a judgment with an open hand rather than drop it.

These Irish and Scottish stories reached me changed. I change them again. I stay because these are the stories that answered my knock, or came knocking themselves.

The two I keep returning to are the *Immram Brain maic Febail*, the voyage of Bran, and the *Echtra Nerai*, the adventure of Nera — both copied by monks who were not neutral about them, both read since by people with their own designs.

Chaos magick taught me that the deck can be changed. It freed me. But not every deck has held my hand through winter. A practice came from somewhere, through hands, at a cost that was not mine to pay.

I still speak to the More. I say what is true, out loud, the way I would to someone who already knows. Sometimes I ask it a question. Sometimes I ask for a thing outright, or make the asking into a working, because need is not failure and no ruler is there to be offended by it. Then I say thank you for something that was never mine. Nothing that comes back gets to give orders, and most days nothing comes back, and the saying is the prayer.

☾

Nobody fed it into being, and nobody can starve it. It has no address. Sometimes it blows right through an open window.

VI

# THE NEAR OTHERWORLD

Manners for the edge of what I do not know.

The Near Otherworld appears at edges: the turn of the year, the hour after bad news, the last song, the water, the dark between one name and another. It presses close in dream, revolt, grief, sex, ritual, art, and the silence after a true name is spoken aloud for the first time.

The ordinary world does not disappear. Its assignments become unreliable.

A drainage ditch becomes a road under moonlight. The substation hums an older note beneath the grid. In the field, the mound has been keeping an appointment with November for longer than anyone remembers.

The mound has an owner on paper. I see the parcel the deed never fully settled.

The Irish word is *ráth*, a ringfort, and the country has tens of thousands of them. Its first makers are gone. The story puts another household beneath the earthworks — the *síd*, the people under the hill — and for centuries the story kept the plough off. In some fields it still turns aside. In others it did not.

These stories do not provide a map I can own. They provide a grammar. A map would commit me to places and inhabitants

— where the country is, how to get there, who lives in it. I have no such knowledge and neither does anyone who tells you otherwise. A grammar commits me only to a manner of reading: these are the rules by which I conduct myself at an edge, and they hold whether or not anything is there.

Bran hears music, sleeps, and wakes with a silver branch beside him. A woman comes into the hall to sing of islands over the sea, and the branch springs from his hand to hers. Nera carries a dead man from house to house until it gets its drink, then follows a strange host through the cave at Cruachan into the *síd*.

Invitation, not conquest. An invitation is another attention arriving. Bran did nothing to earn the branch; it was placed beside a sleeping man. Technique can rehearse a crossing; it cannot make the Otherworld into a resource. A technique that could compel a crossing would already have made the far side into a supply, and whatever answers a summons is not what I was hoping to meet. The branch is what proves I was seen before I entered the boat.

Beauty with teeth. The strange is not thereby wise. The woman's song tells of the islands. It does not settle what Bran owes her, and the assumption that strangeness is wisdom has cost people their lives.

Hospitality binds. A meal may nourish or entangle. A gift begins a relation. The danger begins when only one party keeps the ledger. A meal accepted under the hill sets the length of the stay. A debt whose terms only the creditor knows is a leash.

Time goes strange. Consequence does not. Bran's boat comes home and Nechtan steps toward the shore that once held his name. The centuries arrive at once. Nera returns to the same cauldron he seems barely to have left, but his people have a year to act.

The gift has a cost. Someone must return. Return means the body, the people my conduct lands on, and the conditions that made the crossing possible: the rent, the shift, the person who kept watch. Nera brings out wild garlic, primrose, and golden

fern from a summer nobody else has seen. Without them the warning is a mood.

Call it psyche. Call it spirit. Call it the hill dreaming on its own behalf. No name owns the encounter. I do not know what met me. I know what changed.

I keep four things apart: what happened, what I make of it, what I choose to live by, and what I do. Only the last one is anybody else's business.

The gift arrives. The song finishes. I eat. I dance.

Then I remember the gate.

Fairy tales know that thresholds require manners. They also know politeness is sometimes the technique.

I take the body's no seriously. I tell someone where I went and set an hour for return. I do not sign anything.

Whatever comes to meet me has read my file. Call it archetype, call it the hill, call it my own material wearing a face: all three know exactly where I am soft. Its accuracy gives it no crown. An appearance is a claimant, not a sovereign, and neither its beauty nor its age is proof of anything, any more than my fear is discernment.

No spirit gets another person's consent through me.

Some people see the lattice. A few are born holding the sight; others meet it through chemistry. It locates the veil — where the wall is, never what stands behind it. In the old accounts the seer is mostly to be pitied.

Arcadia is beauty without price: eternal spring, perfect union, no rent due, no body failing, no labor hidden, no morning after. The islands in the woman's song promise a land where need does not gnaw and the years lay no hand on the face.

Arcadia is a fine place to spend an afternoon. Go. Eat the fruit. Come back for dinner.

The trouble was never the orchard. The trouble is pretending it has no gate, and then telling another person that they are the orchard.

What happens when the pretending starts — when a feeling, a need, a role, or an arrangement of property forgets that it is partial and takes the whole — is the next question, and I begin looking for it at home.

△

The branch is not a bill. It is a flowering thing placed in an empty hand.

VII

# THE CROWN IN THE HOUSE

I have made people save me from my own lack of agency and told them to call it love. I have welded the doors shut in the name of a love I had made into a god. I have disappeared on people and called it freedom. I have handed over the crown with both hands, been grateful out loud, and stayed after the gratitude was being used against me. I called it love, meant it, and it was still a way of making somebody else carry the burden of being a life.

**The demiurge is not always across the table.**

## The demiurge is the partial power that forgets it is partial. The archons are the habits, commands, stories, and institutions that enforce the forgetting.

The ruler's sentence I quoted at the Ground — *I am God and there is no other beside me* — is ignorance rather than

wickedness, and his officers exist to keep everyone else from finding out.

I borrow these words for arrangements: a market, a movement, a diagnosis, a family, a frightened part of me at three in the morning. They name a claim to be the whole and the means of enforcing it, not a kind of person. This vocabulary, pointed only outward, is a better-dressed way of hating.

I know domination from the side that was made to feel like weather, and from the side that handed over the keys and called the surrender peace. Those are not the same story, and I will not spend one to soften the other. If I wrote the list of people I owe repair, it would be short. Most have asked for distance or made themselves unsafe to approach. A short list is not innocence.

One of them I still see at the hardware store about twice a year. We talk about the weather and the dog. Then we both go and stand in different aisles.

Bondage means one thing: whatever makes a person, a people, a body, or a piece of land available for use while reducing their power to name, refuse, belong, and shape the conditions of their life.

A crown is the aloneness of being a distinct life. There is a line around it: a body that reports its own pain, a name, a yes and a no nobody else can issue on my behalf, a view no other body can entirely occupy. It does three jobs at once. Because no one can get inside it, I am unshareably alone, and no amount of love closes that gap: the fee. Sovereignty and loneliness are one fact felt from two sides.

Because the line encloses exactly one subject, my authority ends where it ends. I may name, keep private, revise, promise, and act for this life. I cannot make another life an extension of it. Domination is the attempt: the jurisdiction.

And because the line is also the limit of what I can see, I have to act on partial information, in time, without waiting for a certainty that is not coming: the burden. The kindness has to be chosen inside the confusion.

The crown cannot be a mistake to be corrected: you would have to dissolve the boundary to remove it, and the boundary is the person. Waiting for certainty is abdication performed slowly, with excellent manners.

Crowns can be seized. They can also be handed over — to a lover, teacher, diagnosis, movement, revelation, frightened part. The surrender arrives as relief. Someone else will interpret me, decide the danger, name the need, choose the road. One party is usually grateful, for a while, and often out loud.

A diagnosis can be true; a teacher can know; a lover can see what I cannot. Counsel leaves me able to revise, refuse, and answer for what I do with it. Surrender begins when the revising stops and another party's reading of me becomes the fact of me.

The relief is real. So is the abdication.

I know the relief from inside. Somebody else was deciding the danger, and for a while that felt like being loved for the first time. The world had been enclosed for so long that one person had become the only door I believed the Mystery still used. I stood there like a hungry ghost, unable to eat anything else.

Then the room got smaller by the width of what I would not decide. The exits were still there; I kept giving away the part of me that could use them, past the point where anyone was being kind with it, past the point where I could say what year it was in my own life.

I lost nearly everything I had arranged my life to keep. I am glad, the way a body is when a weight it had stopped noticing comes off and it can feel the floor again. The Mystery had never been in one person. It was in the floor, the parking lot, the heron in the ditch.

I still need judgment. I have to choose and answer afterward for what I chose. Carrying the crown in my hand means taking it up to act, then putting it down before one decision becomes a theory of everyone in the room.

Bondage begins when a part puts on the crown.

By a part I mean a recurring way of feeling and protecting that can take over the whole for a while. Sometimes I experience it as a figure I can address, which is a way of relating to it and not a discovery about the population of my skull. Internal Family Systems taught me to approach a protective response without contempt — to ask what a guard is guarding before trying to get past it. The frightened thing often arrives younger than expected.

I do not find the undamaged, already-present Self described in many accounts of that practice. I find a capacity learned late and unevenly, built first by being hosted and afterward by practice. When that capacity is missing, the work is not to uncover it but to build it, and that work is different, slower, and not yours alone.

A fear, shame, vigilance, hunger, wound, desire, or competence once helped keep me alive. Then it puts on the crown and speaks as the whole self.

*This fear is all of me. This pain is the final account. If I stop watching, the world will end. If I am not useful, I will be left.*

It speaks in my own voice, at my own volume, using the vocabulary I am proudest of. That is why it took twenty years to hear it as a voice rather than as the sound of thinking.

A part is partial, which is not the same as false. None gets the crown. I can honor what a defense protected without obeying what it commands.

Shame can wear the crown too. I look very repentant while doing a very absorbing kind of nothing. I have made another person carry a role I needed filled. I have preferred the story in which I was innocent to the one in which repair was possible.

I have also carried pain installed before I had words for it, and been answered as the mask of somebody who hurt another person before I arrived. Some injuries stay private, and privacy does not make them unreal. These histories are not symmetrical: frequency, power, awareness, and consequence matter. What happened to me does not decide what anyone has to endure from me.

Self-punishment repairs nothing. I will not make someone else live inside my refusal to know what I did. What I can do instead is return time, privacy, money, distance, choice, and apologize without asking the harmed person to make me feel forgiven. I cannot command a wound to close. I can stop adding to it.

Grief can fill a house. Bad news can take the air out of it. Real danger makes the body loud and narrows what anyone can see; distress alone is not coercion. Capture begins in what someone does with the overwhelm. The threat changes shape each time it is named. Relief appears only after agreement. The nearest exit starts to look like consent because time, sleep, privacy, money, distance, and other counsel have been taken away. The question is never whether the frightened person is sincerely frightened. It is whether refusal has been made harder to survive.

Between people, care becomes control, love becomes possession, and expertise becomes jurisdiction. Belonging becomes conditional on agreement, availability, disclosure, silence, or gratitude performed on demand.

The signs can be quiet: a joke that always lands on one body, a confidence repeated as concern, help that cannot be refused, a boundary treated as evidence of illness, a departure discussed as betrayal instead of mourned as loss.

By supper the absent person has become a symptom. By morning everybody knows why they could not bear the truth.

Because I love you, I may use you.

Somebody's exile is running the room.

Then there is glamour: fog lit beautifully from behind. Beauty, intensity, fear, charisma, or longing makes a partial reality feel complete. It is not beauty's fault, and it is not proof that the promise was false.

Intensity becomes destiny. Care becomes debt. A shared dream becomes a lease on another person's future. The clauses vanish because the promise is so beautiful.

The faerie contract says: *we are meant to be; you complete me; after all I have done, you owe me; if this were real, you would not need a boundary; our cause is too important for ordinary limits.*

Written plainly, most of us would still sign, and that is the difficulty. Glamour never arrives plainly. The old name remembers how a gift can hide a price. The contract comes wearing my hunger and speaking in the voice I hoped the world would use when it finally recognized me.

The beauty may be real, and the need, and the love, which is why the contract holds.

▽

A house can be understood by understanding the people in it, and a property regime cannot. It goes on operating when everyone inside it is decent, tired, and doing their job.

VIII

# THE CROWN IN THE WORLD

Not a ladder. A spiral. Enclosure takes the commons. Extraction takes the yield. Erasure takes the memory. Enforcement secures the taking. Enticement makes it desirable. They arrive in any order and hold each other up.

The crown out here has deeds, wages, statutes, schools, and men with the authority to enter a house.

My worst Tuesday is not the Famine.

A frightened part, a coercive relationship, and a colonial property regime can share a shape without sharing a scale or a remedy. The shape has four parts. Something partial is doing something necessary — the fear did keep me alive, the caring did care, the property regime does coordinate work that has to be coordinated. It then extends its authority past its warrant, and the extension presents itself as description: this is simply how things are, what love requires, the nature of land. Alternatives disappear through cost. Refusal becomes expensive, then unthinkable, then unavailable. And the arrangement stops looking made.

The fear becomes my personality. The relationship becomes what love is like. The fence becomes a hill.

In all three the door's three questions get the same answers, and in Ulster they had names on them: the tenant's no did not register, refusal could cost the roof, and the landlord controlled the alternatives. My Tuesday may need a conversation and a changed habit. Ulster needed land returned.

What the shared shape buys is narrower than it looks. When I feel the move happening in a kitchen, I am not learning about the Famine. I am learning what it feels like from inside to be the one who is sure, which is the only part of it I will ever have access to, and the part I am most likely to reproduce.

An archon is a pattern, and patterns have hands.

A person is never an archon. A person can be doing its work this morning, at this address, for this wage. The questions are what the conduct does, who it falls on, and what stops it.

*He is an archon* makes a person identical to a pattern. A charge like that cannot be discharged and allows no return, and given enough fear it licenses anything.

*He is doing this, and it must stop* names conduct. It can end when the doing ends.

The question each time is whether a limited power has made itself unanswerable while other lives lose the room to speak, rest, refuse, and shape the conditions they live under.

Enclosure takes the ground.

Draw a line around what was held in common and declare it property. Water, field, forest, path, house, seed, story, body, time. Put the deed before the relation. Teach everyone born inside the fence that the fence is a fact of geology.

A garden has a wall; a body has skin; a people may hold a river in common and still keep strangers off the weir. Enclosure converts a shared condition of life into one party's jurisdiction. Access to what everyone needs becomes dependent on permission. Whoever holds that permission can set the terms.

Extraction takes the yield.

Crop, hour, labor, attention, life. Utility is Extraction's household face. Under its reign every hour must produce: rest has to improve performance, friendship becomes a network, a walk counts its steps, and grief must show growth before it is allowed to stay the night. The forest becomes board-feet and the person becomes capacity.

The field can be exhausted, the worker swapped, the attention burned and sold again. Whoever holds the yield decides what those who made it must do next season to eat.

When labor is called love, ask who is not being paid. When sacrifice is called natural, ask whose body keeps making it. When resilience is praised, ask which support was refused. When vocation becomes identity, ask who benefits if the role cannot be put down.

In the national schools opened from 1831, English became the road to advancement; Irish was excluded from instruction and, in some rooms, punished.

Erasure takes the memory of having held the ground.

If people remember the land was held, the taking can be called theft. If they remember the language, the new names sound new. If they remember the old agreement, the fence looks temporary.

So the language is punished, the stories become nursery nonsense, the history begins with the ship, and the silence of the robbed is entered into evidence as consent. Disputing the account becomes punishable.

Enforcement makes the taking permanent.

Soldier, bailiff, police, border, workhouse, form, lock, algorithm. It does more than guard the fence. It makes the fence disappear as an act. Those who inherit the taking call it order. The bailiff has a route and a lunch break.

Enticement makes the taking desirable.

Sometimes it lies. Often it tells the truth about a benefit and leaves out its conditions: the garden and not the gate, the feast

and not the kitchen, the peace and not the soldiers. This one is second-order, and it works by recruiting the very faculties that would otherwise notice.

Enclosure arrives as improvement. Extraction arrives as opportunity. Erasure arrives as the kindness of a common tongue. Enforcement arrives as safety.

The other four take the world; this one takes the looking. The feed is the table conscripted. The advertisement is the story conscripted.

The commons can be sold back as community. The holy useless can be sold back as self-care. Argument can be sold back as the town hall where nothing is decided. Rebellion can be sold in the company store with a distressed finish.

In Ulster after 1609, land was surveyed, confiscated, and planted with settlers. In the winter and spring of 1846–47, food still left Irish ports while hunger and disease spread among people without the means to buy relief. Workhouses filled. Eviction notices followed. Ships carried the displaced across the water.

These were not one scene. Different laws, institutions, markets, and people did this work across centuries. The records remain: surveys, shipping returns, workhouse books, school rules, names.

The estate agent had a name and an office: Charles Boycott, Lord Erne's man at Lough Mask. He was a person before he became a verb — not a demon, but a man enforcing a hard order. In a bad year, after the tenants' plea for a deeper rent reduction was refused and eviction processes began, tenants and neighbors withdrew their hands, shops, services, and ordinary dealings.

Nobody would work his fields, serve him in a shop, carry his post, or sit near him in church. The refusal held because it was organized. One family refusing could be evicted; a parish refusing was a fact the government had to send troops to.

The refusal was not always gentle. Troops came with outside harvesters. Boycott left for England that December, returned the following September, and kept the post for years. The word remained. The arrangement outlasted the man, but refusal had changed what was possible in a bad year.

Erasure did not finish. The mound remained in the field. The branch stayed in the song. The Otherworld kept entering through a language whose burial had been announced more than once.

Inheritance comes through household, silence, shame, appetite, what could not be said at the table, what a hungry generation taught its children about food. It comes through jokes, surnames, departures, cautions, and the peculiar authority of a full cupboard.

The taking works on land, bodies, hours, attention, memory, belief, and desire. Platforms, surveillance, rent, and punishing schedules run it through a present infrastructure. Hunger narrows the world to the next meal. A twelve-hour shift burns attention to stubble. The glowing rectangle sells what remains in bright little pieces.

People can change sides. Protection cannot wait for them to do it. The people in the van are not put on hold pending somebody else's repentance. Nobody is disposable. Not even the one signing the warrant.

The conduct gets stopped: obstructed, defunded, out-organized, denied cooperation, physically kept from the door. These acts fall on persons because patterns have hands. The one doing the stopping remains answerable for how it is done. Resistance does not get the last joke either.

No one is raw material, including the person being stopped. No torture. No humiliation. No collective punishment. Conduct must end; no human category is made from it.

Stopping the conduct gives me no title to their body, no permission to stage their suffering or reach past them to their family. Every technique that does has quietly adopted the demiurge's own premise about what people are for. It is

possible to stop a man and lose the argument in the stopping. The crown is warm in my hand exactly then, and that is not a reason to stand aside; it is a reason to watch the hand while it works.

Nothing here is disenchanted. It was enclosed.



Enclosure is a human arrangement. Human arrangements come apart in the rain. They can also be unmade on purpose.

IX

# RETURNING

Freedom arrives as rhythm more often than as resolution. Returning is the work of loosening what binds, letting in what I have refused, and changing what happens next — and then doing it again.

There is no distance covered; I end up in the same kitchen. That is why the word is not progress, and not ascent, and not awakening, which names a moment and leaves the following Tuesday undescribed.

Bran hears the music and goes; the story brings him to a shore he cannot step onto. Nera goes under the hill and carries out a warning. The dead return through recipes, gestures, and debts. Ecstasy is known on the return, never during.

A crossing is tested by what comes back: a warning, a changed habit, a key returned, an hour given to somebody who needed it. Delight can come back too. A feeling does not count, nor a certainty, nor a story about how far one went. The crossing need not produce a lesson to alter a life.

I return from the Otherworld to the kitchen. I also return from the kitchen to myself, from the emergency to the ordinary, from the story I preferred to the one in which repair

was possible. Going out is easy. The whole difficulty is arriving back with your hands full.

Shared freedom is not the absence of conditions but the widening of livable conditions in which a person or a people can turn.

A turn can be tiny: eat before answering. Leave the call unanswered. Move the money. Ask who else can come. Sleep once before deciding. Open the curtains. Close the door. Tell one person the unedited version.

Returning moves in three crossing currents: unbinding, integration, repair.

Unbinding alone can leave me able to name every arrangement and still live inside all of them. Integration alone can leave me with an excellent understanding of myself and a list of people who no longer take my calls. Repair without unbinding can perform the old arrangement more considerately.

Begin where the weather demands: repair where harm is plain, departure where danger is present, rest where survival has spent everything. Abuse may require separation. The order is not fixed. What is fixed is that all three eventually have to happen, and that the absence of any one of them is visible from outside long before it is visible from inside.

Unbinding loosens the lie of inevitability. The fence has posts. The contract has clauses. The stone in the wall was carried there by somebody with a name.

Integration gives the exiled thing a chair without letting it lock the doors. It comes in wet and furious, sits where it can watch the door, and eats. Anger often carries a boundary. Fear carries a warning, though not always about the present; grief remembers the shape of love, and desire points toward a life. Guilt knows where repair begins. Shame often knows only what was said to me early.

Repair gives freedom a body. The key returned. The money moved. The story corrected in the room where the false one had been useful. The apology that does not ask to be admired. The door opened. The door shut for good.

It is almost always a Tuesday. It is almost always smaller and worse than the apology I rehearsed.

I want repair to reveal the person I have become. Usually it reveals an email I should have sent sooner, an amount that was mine to pay, a sentence from which every explanation has been removed.

The lock wants the key. The other person wants the distance. The understanding is mine to carry home. Repair is what I can undertake; forgiveness, reconciliation, and closure remain the other person's to give or withhold.

### Within a life

I call the capacity to host a life the Tender Sovereign.

Tenderness means approaching what is frightened or ashamed without contempt. That includes the body, which has heard the old commands longest, and which gets fed before it is questioned, rested before it has earned anything, and allowed to be glad without a reason. Contempt can make a frightened thing quiet for years. Sovereignty means coordinating the life, making the call, and answering afterward.

Tenderness without sovereignty lets the loudest grief run the calendar. Sovereignty without tenderness teaches every part to lie.

It is not a manager. A manager's authority comes from above, and this has nowhere to come from. It holds the house on no authority whatsoever.

Sometimes I speak to this capacity as though it were someone. At four in the morning, imagination answers a person more readily than a diagram.

I listen for what the guard protects. I change what conditions I can. I refuse the harmful conduct anyway. I offer the frightened part the hospitality I would show an enemy who arrived exhausted, armed, and younger than expected: food, distance, a clear boundary, no sudden movements, no throne.

The chair beside me is the one I offer: the frightened part may sit there, and may not have the house.

Some mornings my parts trust me to lead them. Other mornings they have reviewed the record and would like outside counsel. This seems reasonable.

## Between lives

I call it true naming: seeing what was promised, what became unavailable, what shaped the agreement, what good the binding protected, and what remains when fate gives way to choice.

None of this is disenchantment. The beauty was real, and naming only restores its proportion.

A vow is a word left for the self who returns changed. It may ask me to stay through trouble and give another person reason to expect me tomorrow. It binds my conduct without securing their future consent, participation, or feeling.

A safeword is a vow the length of a scene. Neither a scene nor a lifetime together overrules a living no.

Is the promise about my conduct, or about what someone else will feel and do? *I will tell you the truth when it costs me* has a subject who can keep it. *We are two halves of one thing* promises a condition neither speaker can secure. When it fails, the failure reads as betrayal.

A faerie contract asks a future person to sign in advance.

## In the world

Returning also changes shared conditions. Insight alone does not widen the choices of people living under enclosure, extraction, erasure, enforcement, and enticement. The five took the crown in five directions. The answers share one mechanism because the takings do: a god is made of attention and hands, and it is unmade when enough of both are withdrawn at once. Boycott was starved, not argued with.

Against Enclosure: the commons.

A commons is shared provision and shared rule. It has boundaries and ways to dispute them. A commons that anyone may enter is a field about to be enclosed. Some of it is built: open the library, keep the bench public, let the labor holding it be seen, shared, and paid.

Some is taken back. The squat, the land occupation, the street that stops paying rent together reassert a shared claim against a deed. The commons fails when it runs on somebody's unpaid steadiness, translation, or softness and calls that community.

Against Extraction: the holy useless, and the yield withheld.

The field left fallow. It may yield later; it may not. The afternoon with no redeeming output. The song that does not heal, organize, brand, teach, or increase engagement. The heron keeping the ditch.

Extraction's deepest claim is that only what yields is real. I refuse the demand for yield even when rest makes nobody stronger, harder to own, or ready for tomorrow. Collective refusal can also withhold the harvest: the strike denies the yield until the terms change. It needs organization and support, because the people withholding their labor still need to live, and the strike fails the moment it is one person, which is why the archon's first work is to keep everyone at a separate desk.

Against Erasure: the table and the storyteller.

Erasure makes the witness believe their memory is private grief and not public record. Set a place for the dead. Tell the recipe with the migration. Tell the joke and say whose voice still supplies the timing. Keep the difficult guest who remembers what the feast cost. Speak the punished language in the school that punished it.

Memory becomes nostalgia when the past is somewhere to live instead of evidence that can make a claim on what happens next.

The story is history with the door left open.

Against Enforcement: non-cooperation.

Enforcement runs on the cooperation of people who are not being evicted this morning: the neighbor who serves the bailiff dinner, the clerk who files the notice, the driver who brings the harvesters. Withdraw that, in numbers, and the fence has to be held by soldiers, which is expensive, visible, and the beginning of its end.

The one who knows the tides may call the crossing. She does not own the boat. A useful role is only a coat. When the real decisions move to a kitchen nobody was invited to, informal power has taken the office without its name.

Against Enticement: the god unfed.

The tale does not stop at the wedding. It goes on to the kitchen table years later, where the dishes are being argued over and the old woman from the woods mentions that the castle was built on a drained bog.

The storyteller will not let the story stop where it flatters.

But everyone in the building can see through the quarter. Accuracy does not change the alternatives. It is defeated the way every god is, by hunger, and there are two hungers in the room. The god starves when the wanting it trained gets fed somewhere it cannot follow: a meal, a bed, an afternoon, a song. The engine sells the outline of satisfaction to people it has kept from the meal. Feed the wanting at its source, and then let the number go unreported. Stop arranging the body around the calendar. Do it as a floor, not a desk, with enough support to survive the refusal.

## What lasts

Magick is change made on purpose: attention gathered, imagination given a task, intention given material form. A poem can do it. A strike can do it. So can a garden, a boundary, an apology, a story, a spell, a meal delivered to the right door.

Speak the word. Move the money.

Ritual is attention given a body. Every rite rehearses a world.

Obedience rehearses a locked gate. Compulsory disclosure rehearses the camera above the door. Food, choice, laughter, an accessible room, and an exit unlocked from the inside rehearse another world.

The deepest magical question is not *how do I make reality obey?* It is:

*What form will help freedom survive fear, habit, glamour, Utility, and the return of the old order?*

The measure of a ritual is the quality of the return: whether there is more room to choose, even when the crossing leaves someone exhausted for a season.

Loosen. Welcome. Return. Again.

Like somebody trying the same difficult song in another key. If there is no more room to choose at the end of it, the rhythm is a rut with candles around it.

△

And a rhythm is not yet a purpose. Two questions are left: whom the freedom is shared among, and what a lifetime of it is for.

X

# STAR AND COMMONS

The star is the direction that keeps returning. The commons is everything that makes any direction possible.

Four in the morning, and the person who taught me to speak does not know what year it is. I am holding a cup to a mouth. The carer who is paid comes at seven, at the rate the agency sets, and will do this in three more houses before noon. Somebody's radio is on in the next street. I can hear it because the window is open because the room needs air.

Whose freedom is in this room? Hers, who cannot refuse the cup and cannot ask for it. Mine, who could leave and will not. The carer's, with the bus timetable in her coat pocket.

The cup is held by a hand, and the hand is tired. At seven it changes to another hand that is paid, and the difference between those two hands is what a commons is for.

Freedom is shared among individuals — people distinct from one another, integrated enough to know roughly who is speaking when they speak, and met and steadied enough at some point to give a real yes and a real no. They are not dissolved into one another and not fused, and they are not a movement or a marriage with one will and several bodies.

Every arrangement I have watched swallow people promised that separateness was the wound and belonging was the cure. The house where nobody could leave without becoming a

traitor. The marriage where wanting an evening alone was a symptom. The movement where a boundary was counter-revolutionary. What went first was the capacity to refuse.

Individuation is the differentiation of a life: learning which voice is a frightened nine-year-old, which is a habit inherited from a father, and how to act as this person rather than as an average of everyone who has pressed on me. Emptiness is a claim about origin. Individuation is a claim about organization. A self can be thoroughly empty of self-making and still be badly undifferentiated, and that is the ordinary case, and it is what makes people so available for use.

Liberal sovereignty is founded on self-ownership — I own myself, therefore my labor, therefore our dealings are trades between proprietors — and every line of that is refused here. What I have is not a title but a jurisdiction, one subject wide, granted by nobody and defensible against everybody, and it is manufactured socially and continuously: by whoever mirrored me before I had language, by the wage, the clinic, the housing, the friend who takes the call. The liberal individual is a premise. Mine is an achievement of a commons. A federation of the dissolved is a meeting that cannot deliver a no.

Nobody arrives separate. Being alone is metabolically expensive, co-regulation is how a nervous system conserves itself, and the self-contained individual is a biological fiction. Dependency is the condition, and distinctness is what dependency produces when it goes well. A person becomes distinct by being held by someone who did not require them to be an extension. This is particular, expensive labor, and distinctness is the finest thing the relational makes. If distinctness is produced by care, the conditions of care are the conditions of freedom, and a theory of freedom that does not end in wages, hours, relief, and staffing is not one.

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The disability theologian

*Steadied enough. Say who measures.*

Nobody. A person need not be healed, integrated, or able to give a clean no to have standing. Time not owned by fear, a door that locks, a second pair of hands at seven: these are owed to people, not examinations they must pass. If a person cannot refuse, that is not a report on their development; it is a report on the room. The one in crisis, the one whose clean no was taken early and has not come back: they are owed more of the conditions, not fewer of the rights.

Care still brings collisions: crises, refusals, crowns held for someone who cannot hold their own just now. Keeping the parties distinct does not resolve every conflict, but it keeps negotiation possible. Borrowed crowns get returned. The keys are not the deed.

The star is Crowley's, and so is the quarrel. His scripture says that every man and every woman is a star, and that love is the law, love under will. I use both sentences.

Will is the track left when desire, limits, love, history, and consequence walk the same ground. It is no command hidden inside me; it is legible mostly behind me, and it revises. One instrument works in the present tense: the unforced yes. Audre Lorde named the erotic a source of knowledge about what a life wants. I trust the yes that needs nothing hidden from it, and I check even that, because glamour sometimes speaks with desire's voice.

No teacher, lover, text, spirit, or institution can name another person's Will for them. No being is fuel for another person's star. A borrowed star is a streetlight pointed by somebody else.

I refuse the prophet who cannot be wrong, the grade that ranks souls, the ecstasy mistaken for command, the violence a star is held to authorize in other people's houses. Keep the vocabulary; rust the lock.

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A distinct life, with a direction of its own and a commons that makes the direction possible.

XI

# THE GREAT WORK

Nothing is missing. There is everything to do.
The Great Work is the work by which every
other work stops being king.

THERE IS NECESSARY LABOR: BREAD, CARE, shelter, tending, repair.

Then there is Work: Utility enthroned, demanding that every life and hour justify itself through output.

NO WORK BUT THE GREAT WORK.

Heard one way, it is Utility with a halo: every meal becomes fuel for practice and every friendship a lesson, rest becomes recovery, pleasure becomes integration. The day gets a supervisor, the supervisor gets a wand, and soon the soul is filling out time sheets for eternity.

I know that god. It eats Sabbaths.

Turned the other way, the sentence keeps wage, role, project, discipline, productivity, healing, activism, and theology partial. None gets to name the whole of a life.

Nothing living may be used, my own life included; the hours are finite because I will die; and their capture is the central

theft of the age, running through the house under the name Utility. Put those together and the highest work cannot be another task added to the pile — a better task, a spiritual one, a task in the name of liberation. It has to be the work that breaks the claim itself.

What it dethrones is not labor — bread still has to be made, and the ward still has to be staffed at four in the morning. It is labor's *jurisdiction*: the claim that a life is permitted to matter in proportion to what it yields. It is the long work of becoming less governable by domination, within and around me, and more capable of freedom, repair, and dependence without possession, and it has nothing to do with self-perfection, spiritual rank, or escape from material limitation.

It opposes needless labor, coerced labor, invisible labor, and labor made sacred so the worker cannot refuse it. It makes necessary work safer, shorter, shared, accessible, meaningful, and answerable to those who do it. It defends time that produces nothing anyone can sell.

Work is enthroned in the landlord's account, and nobody dethrones it there by an act of theology. The Great Work is not primarily an inner practice. It has to include a wage, a schedule, a union, a clinic, a bench, a library, and a shift that ends.

Play keeps the Great Work from becoming another ruler. A child asks why, the teacher can be teased, the book can close, and an afternoon can be wasted; otherwise the crown returns wearing leaves.

The work of return widens what I can come home from. There is no final shore.

The alchemists called their operation the Magnum Opus. Their books do not agree on its order, but the images recur: blackening, separating and washing, a joining of things that had been at war — the *coniunctio*. Jung read the literature as an account of psychological change and drew it into his account of individuation.

Four years of the floor giving way, then a long unremarkable sorting, then two homecomings that turn out to be neighbors. I did not follow it on purpose; I recognized the sequence afterward.

It does not conclude. There was no achieved wholeness at the end, no king in the gold, no Self arriving as owner. The throne stayed empty.

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Jung, looking up from the tablecloth

*Without the Self, who does the work?*

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Whoever is in the kitchen when the kettle clicks off. Nobody was there all along; somebody is there now.

What changed was fluency, not arrival: what I notice before it hardens; what I can hold without flinching into certainty; what I can refuse without rehearsing it for a week; how quickly I come home. Fluency is a tide that comes in and goes out, and I do not control the moon. The Ocean is something else: it is the Ground, still the case when I cannot feel a drop of it. Nor is it the water I went down into, which was never depth, only the aperture closing until the world was as wide as the next required thing.

For four years the floor gave way. Not a crisis with a date on it.

I remember one day mostly as surfaces. The wall. The painted door. My hand on the handle because handles are what hands do when a room has become impossible. I turned it. The door opened onto the same life.

Nothing in the room changed. The light remained flat. The medicine waited in its plastic week. A message went unanswered. Somewhere close by, the dog put one paw against the other side of the door.

I sat on the floor. The hour moved. Nothing in the room changed before dark.

I came back. The day looked the same. The weeks afterward made the change legible.

Some was damage that stopped. The time owes no redemption. I wanted survival to mean arrival. It did not have to.

The floor that gave way was not the first one.

I was born three months early, two pounds, at the edge of what they could keep alive. Then three months in a box. The hands that reached me came through ports and were careful and mostly carried needles, because there was no pain medicine for a body that size. Nobody could hold me. Not withheld — not available.

I do not remember it, which is not the same as not having it. What got installed instead of being held was an equation: alone, therefore ending. It ran under everything for forty years, set before there was anyone there to review it.

The four years were the review.

I came back partly because there was money, medicine, a bed, and two or three people who did not leave. Realization has a supply chain, like bread: hours not owned by fear, a door that locks, somebody covering the shift.

A very small dog, who had had an incubator of his own, found the ground before I did and kept finding it daily, without theory. Rage became a sentinel once somebody translated for it.

Depth cannot be a virtue. If it were, leisure would be holiness and the exhausted would be shallow.

Most days during those years were appointments, meals, missed calls, and getting through the afternoon.

The descent was no method. People go down and do not return; I know some of their names.

Inside, the old words went soft. Love, self, future: wet cardboard in the mouth. Certainty went first. Then most of the nouns. There was no clean witness standing outside it. The observer and the observed screamed with one throat.

Nothing there resembled a lesson. Every improvement story became useless.

Time went mythic. The body kept ordinary accounts: sleep missed, medicine taken, messages unanswered, hair growing, dog waiting at the door.

## Two homecomings

The first homecoming was the house. I made choices, listened for what each part was carrying, and answered for what the whole person did. The self is a story, and the story is not the storyteller. The story changed; what happened remained true.

The second homecoming was the ground that does not hold still.

I am the one doing this. There is no one here doing anything. Both are true. Neither is an address.

Who is responsible? This person, at this address, who will answer the phone.

What is this person made of? Conditions, all the way down, none self-supplied.

What I am made of cannot cancel what I owe.

But the relation is closer than mere compatibility. Non-ownership is what makes the hosting possible. An owner defends. If the house were mine — if the coordinating thing were a possession, an achievement, an identity I had built — then every frightened part would be a threat to property, every criticism an eviction notice, and every repair an admission that the owner was defective. Finding no owner does not weaken the office so much as disarm it. I can host a room full of exiles because none of them can take anything from me that I had.

The alchemists drew their joining as a wedding in which two become one. This one ended otherwise, with the house and the Ocean sitting beside each other like two people on a back step, neither swallowed, and I need them both to get through a day.

I washed the cup this morning. The water was warm. I had the thought again.

Some mornings I am entirely a person with a name, a debt, a temper, and a coat. Some mornings the performance goes transparent and there is only doing, only the day, only the world happening where I used to be.

Some nights it goes further. What melts is not the boundary — the boundary is the person, and it is still there in the morning holding the cup. What melts is the wearing of it: the crown off the head, the head into the body, the body into the room, the room into the space it stands in, and space into time.

The aloneness dissolves.

Then the kettle clicks off. There is a man in a kitchen holding a cup, and the crown is back in his other hand.

The Ocean does not apologize. I do.

Every ladder grows a throne at the top, and the same two sentences: *your boundary is your attachment; the work required this of you.* The grammar of the archon, now with incense.

Depth increases obligation, not exemption. If I know the way through a dark place, I hold the ladder when asked.

There are nights when music finds the body before thought does. Four in the morning. The beat is everywhere. The watcher is gone. Sweat, light, strangers, friends, bass, exhaustion, joy. For a while there is no clean line between dancer and dance.

Grief, sex, prayer, protest, birth, art, danger, laughter, and collective labor can do this. The self disappears from its own attention.

On the return: water passed hand to hand, music made, floor swept, bus driven, food grown, medicine made. The body comes back finite, dependent, grateful, implicated.

Then the sock that escaped the dryer goes on without me. I wish it well.

Chop wood. Carry water. Organize the shop. Pay the caregiver. Answer the letter. Mend what can be mended. Leave what cannot be stayed in safely.

Then put down the axe.

The stump is not a moral failure. Sit on it. Eat an apple.

The dog still needs walking at six. The wood does not care what happened to me in the dark.

### Tensions I keep

Some things do not reconcile.

Three remain open.

The star and the commons. A person's direction can consume what sustains other lives. A collective can erase the people who sustain it. Each has to be able to answer the other.

The conditions of consent and equal standing. Everyone has standing; not everyone can make or communicate every decision at every moment. Pretending capacity never varies abandons people in crisis. Turning capacity into a rank gives their lives to an examiner.

Care grants no jurisdiction, and yet somebody has to decide. The parent who no longer knows the year. The friend in the week when nothing can be asked of them. A crown held in trust must be returned when possible and answerable in the meantime to people outside the room.

### The last crossing

One crossing has no return for the one who makes it.

I will die. Whatever waits, this body will not bring a branch back to this table. The dog will still need walking. The rent will still come due. Someone else will wash the cup.

The return will have to be made by someone else.

Someone who kept watch, someone who ate here, someone I taught a word, someone whose burden I made lighter or heavier.

The beloved dead already return this way. Recipes. Warnings. Gestures. Debts. Jokes with missing tellers. The shape of a hand reaching for a light switch.



The return was never mine alone. This is how the branch reached my hand.

XII

# The Branch Carried Home

The branch came first.

Bran heard music behind him until sleep overcame him. When he woke, a silver branch, white with blossom, lay beside him.

He carried it into the royal hall. There a woman in strange raiment sang of islands beyond the sea, where need did not gnaw and the years passed without laying hands on the face. The branch sprang from Bran's hand to hers.

The next day he crossed the water.

Behind him, roofs fell and were raised. Names loosened from the mouths that had carried them. The road learned other feet. Children became ancestors.

When the boat came back, those on shore knew Bran's name only as an old story.

The year had moved.

Nechtan, one of Bran's men, reached toward the ground that had once held his name. All the lost time waited in that small distance between boat and earth. When he touched it, it arrived at once, and he became ash.

On another Samhain, while Ailill and Medb kept feast at Cruachan, Nera went out to fasten a withy around the foot of a hanged captive. The dead man asked for a drink. Nera carried him from house to house until he had one, then returned him to the gallows.

When Nera came back, the royal fort appeared burned and its people slaughtered. He followed the strange host through Cruachan's cave and into the síd.

A woman there told him the ruin was an appearance and that the danger would come with the next Samhain. Nera returned to the same cauldron from which he had scarcely seemed to leave. He carried wild garlic, primrose, and golden fern from summer as his witness.

His people had a year. They prepared, brought Nera's family and cattle out, entered the síd, and despoiled it in turn.

Nera remained there with his people. The story says he will not come out until Doomsday.

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Neither tale gives me the ending I want.

Nechtan reaches for the ground that once held his name, and he is ash before his foot is down. The crossing was real, and so was the century, and no amount of having been somewhere marvellous buys back the years. Whatever return means, it does not mean resuming.

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The storyteller, standing now, glass empty

*You are softening him.*

I am. Nera carries a dead man until somebody gives him a drink; in the fuller telling, a household pays for answering that thirst. He brings out a true warning, and his people use the year to save their own and sack the place the warning came from.

A warning carried home enabled a conquest. Its truth settled nothing about what could justly be done to those named as the threat.

And Nera does not come back out. He is still in there, the story says, until Doomsday. What came home was the warning. Others carried its consequences.

In Bran's tale, the branch never comes home at all.

The branch went brown on the windowsill like everything does.

I kept the flowering. Not the experience, which browned with the branch, and not a proof of anything, which it never was. What flowered is what the crossing changed in the hands: what they can notice, what they will no longer do.

I have not settled what the Otherworld is. I have settled something smaller. A crossing earns no crown and cancels no consequence. If it is good, it leaves more room in the Here. Whether it was good is not decided at the shore; it is decided in the kitchen, by people who were not on the boat.

I return with the crown in my hand, not on my head.

*What has become possible to notice, love, refuse, make whole, play with, or repair?*



I return with the smallest act that can answer.

# SMALL PRACTICES FOR THE GREAT WORK OF RETURNING

*If you have ten seconds and nothing else, here is the whole book:*
*Say where you are. Say the day. Touch one thing that is holding you up.*
*Everything after this is that, with more time in it. The rest of this page can wait.*



# MANY DOORS

Every entry opens into the same room.

A body that lies down is not farther from the sacred. A body that needs help is not less sovereign. A voice through a device is a voice. Rest is a practice. If no one has ever steadied you, you still have standing here.

Some take ten seconds and some take a season. Start wherever you can reach. If none of them is the one you need, make one.

The sitting is Buddhist. The search is twelve-step. The tonglen is Tibetan, capped here at four people where its tradition extends it to all beings. The manners at the threshold are Irish and Scottish. The spiral came out of Reclaiming. The guest is Rumi's, by way of parts work. The stop word and the traffic light come from consent exercises I have used in contact improv and in kink workshops. Who the touch is for is Betty Martin's wheel of consent. "Whatever the thinker thinks, the prover proves" is Robert Anton Wilson's. The two shores and the wait through intensity borrow from distress-tolerance skills.

The Great Work is the alchemists', and Thelema's after them. The star is Crowley's, and the Guardian is his by way of the Abramelin book. The crown is mine. I took the vocabulary and refused the grades, the prophet who cannot be wrong, and the ecstasy mistaken for a permit.

I changed all of them, and where the change matters I say so in the practice. Where a practice belongs to a living community, that community can refuse it, correct it, and set limits on it.

## The four groups

Attention and Love. The Ten-Second Return p. 68 · The Sitting p. 69 · Metta and Tonglen p. 71 · One Thing Eaten p. 73 · The God Unfed p. 75 · The Ruined Ordinary p. 78 · The Bird Gate p. 80 · The Open Window p. 82

Boundaries and Thresholds. The Hearth Boundary p. 85 · When Intensity Speaks p. 87 · True Naming p. 88 · The Two Shores p. 90 · The Rite of the Near Otherworld p. 92 · The Width of the Room p. 95

Relation and Repair. Feed the Guest, Keep the Door p. 98 · The Bowl of Names p. 100 · The Watch p. 103 · The Mending Table p. 105 · Who Answers to You p. 107 · Be Beside Me p. 109 · The Web p. 111 · The Mirror at Four in the Morning p. 114 · Coming Back In p. 116

Direction and Uselessness. The Letter to the Guardian p. 119 · The Star Ledger p. 121 · The Map Without a Permit p. 123 · The Feast of Enough p. 125

The last three pages are not practices. Other ways through p. 128 is what to do when a practice asks for a door you do not have. When the practice must end p. 130 is the one page that outranks the others. The blessing closes the book.

## Finding a return

| If the question is… | Begin with… |
|---|---|
| I have been away a long time and the house does not fit. | Coming Back In p. 116 |
| I have no one to call. | The Open Window p. 82, then The Bird Gate p. 80. Both are built for one person. The book will not pretend this is the same as company. |
| I have ten seconds. | The Ten-Second Return p. 68 |
| The day has taken everything. | The Ten-Second Return p. 68 |
| I want to train attention on a day when nothing is wrong. | The Sitting p. 69 |

| If the question is… | Begin with… |
|---|---|
| I need to stop improving myself. | The Sitting p. 69 |
| I cannot feel anything and my body is a long way off. | The Sitting p. 69, the door of no object. Or The Ruined Ordinary p. 78, which asks nothing of your feelings and only that you stand there for a fixed time. |
| I cannot hold a good wish for anyone, including myself. | Metta and Tonglen p. 71 |
| I want to know what I am eating and who it cost. | One Thing Eaten p. 73 |
| Something has been eating my days. | The God Unfed p. 75 |
| I am not the only one feeding it. | The God Unfed p. 75, the last movement |
| I want to say something to whatever exceeds me. | The Open Window p. 82 |
| People cannot refuse me and I decide what happens to them. | Who Answers to You p. 107 |
| I need to stand somewhere that is not beautiful. | The Ruined Ordinary p. 78 |
| I want to set a frame for one day and see what comes through it. | The Bird Gate p. 80 |
| I need a boundary with someone. | The Hearth Boundary p. 85 |
| My life has become too available. | The Hearth Boundary p. 85 |
| Intensity is demanding a decision. | When Intensity Speaks p. 87 |
| A bond has started to speak like fate. | True Naming p. 88 |
| Somebody has made this an emergency and is offering me the only way out. | True Naming p. 88, the last movement |
| The old map no longer matches the ground. | True Naming p. 88 |

| If the question is… | Begin with… |
|---|---|
| I cannot stop returning to one question. | The Two Shores p. 90 |
| I met an image, a dream, a presence, or a strange coincidence. | The Rite of the Near Otherworld p. 92 |
| I am caring for someone I cannot leave. | The Width of the Room p. 95 |
| A state has taken over the whole house. | Feed the Guest, Keep the Door p. 98 |
| I keep doing the thing I said I would stop. | Feed the Guest, Keep the Door p. 98 |
| I am grieving. | The Bowl of Names p. 100 |
| A hard season has ended and I do not know what I am now. | The Bowl of Names p. 100 |
| The grief is not new and it has not stopped. | The Bowl of Names p. 100, the last movement |
| Someone is making the last crossing. | The Watch p. 103 |
| An animal is dying — mine, found, hit, or one I killed. | The Watch p. 103, the animal movement |
| I caused harm. | The Mending Table p. 105 |
| I do not know what I have not looked at. | The Mending Table p. 105 |
| I want company without merger. | Be Beside Me p. 109 |
| I am about to refuse something, alone. | The Web p. 111 |
| I need to be heard and nobody is awake. | The Mirror at Four in the Morning p. 114 |
| I cannot trust my own read of what happened. | Say it to a person first. Then The Mirror at Four in the Morning p. 114 |
| A decision is stuck. | The Letter to the Guardian p. 119 |

| If the question is… | Begin with… |
|---|---|
| I am asking what is mine to do. | The Star Ledger p. 121 |
| I think I have awakened, attained, or gone deep. | The Map Without a Permit p. 123 |
| Life has become only work. | The Feast of Enough p. 125 |

## Keeping time

Some occasions on which I have found these useful. It is not a schedule and there is nothing here to fall behind on.

The reason to keep any time at all is that something else already keeps it. The quarter, the performance year, the roster, the feed, the second shift nobody counts — those have a working calendar and it is the only one most weeks are told about. This is not a rival year to join. It is a way of not letting the report be the meaning of the weeks.

Most days. Say where you are, say the day, touch one thing that is holding you up. That is the floor and it is the whole of what a day requires. Sit for ten minutes if you can sit. Open a window and ask for nothing if you can speak. Keep no count of days.

Once in a week, if the week has an hour in it. One pleasure that owes no result, before the roster has claimed every hour. If there is no unworked hour — and for some lives there is not — the peach over the sink is the law and it is not a lesser feast.

When the house changes. Use the table above. Grief, harm, dying, refusal, a bond that has started to speak like fate: these do not wait for a season and they outrank everything else on this page. People die in June.

Across eight to twelve weeks. Keep a ledger page while life happens, and end it with the lamp, the loaf, and the page between them.

Start the page when you notice something, not when a calendar says you may. What you are watching for is a hinge day — a day the material world turned, and not a day an office agreed to. The first frost. The first morning you do not need

the light on. The day the rent is paid, or the day it cannot be. The day the debt clears. The day the last of them moves out. The day the thing has a name. A birthday or a Thursday will also do, and so, pointedly, will the first day of a fiscal quarter — starting a ledger then is a way of starving the quarter of its meaning while still filing the report.

Hinge days are not a wheel and there is no set of them to learn. You will not notice the same ones as anybody else, and the ones you notice will change. There are no named seasons here. A season is eight to twelve weeks that you dated yourself, and the date is only there so you know when to read the page.

Once in a year, or late. Go out and come back in through the door. Put the map down and act unpermitted. Read what repeated across the pages; that is the star, and it revises.

No consecration of the next self. Utility counts forward. This counts back in.

And when a practice makes the world harder to return to, the last page of this book outranks every line on this one.

I

# Attention and Love

# I THE TEN-SECOND RETURN

The point is to come back in ten seconds, and to set the boundary at rest when the day has taken everything.

I THE FLOOR. Say where you are. Say the day. Touch one thing that is holding you up. Something like: "I'm in the kitchen, it's Tuesday, my feet are on the floor."

Everything else in this book is this, with more time in it.

II WHEN THERE IS NOTHING LEFT. Use this when the day has taken everything: pain, illness, grief, danger, noise, or the body worn out.

Stop what you are doing. Put down what you are holding. Sit, lie down, or lean.

Give your weight to what is holding you up: the bed under you, the wall at your back, the floor, a blanket, a chair, one person in the room.

Notice one outer fact and leave it at that: the color of the wall, the sound of the road, the weight of the blanket. If nothing is clear, skip this.

There is no insight to look for here and nothing to go over. The call, the message, and the question can wait ten seconds, and so can explaining, deciding, and planning.

Then stop and rest. The return is to keep what life you have.

# 2 The Sitting

The point is to sit down and stay sat, by whichever of three doors opens today.

You need a timer and somewhere to sit. Ten minutes to start.

Sit on a chair with your feet on the floor, or lie down, or stand at a counter with your hands in water. Upright keeps you awake longer; lying down is fine if upright is not available. Set the timer.

Take one door. Do not use one door to arrive at another.

I The door of counting. Find where you feel the breath most clearly — the air at the nostrils, the chest rising, the belly moving, the cool patch at the top of the throat. Pick one and stay with it. Do not change your breathing.

Count each out-breath: one, two, up to ten. Then start again at one. When the count goes, start again at one. Losing count is the practice, not a failure of it.

When a thought or sensation is strong enough to pull you off the count, give it one word — planning, aching, sore, wanting — and go back to the breath. Do not follow it or work out what it means.

II The door of not improving. Improve nothing. Leave your posture, your breathing, and your mood as they are.

When the mind offers work — a plan, an old argument, tomorrow's good line — let it come and do not take it up. Do not wait for a quiet mind. A practice that needs a quiet mind is for people who already have one.

Nothing here is being cultivated. If it helps, it helped by accident.

If gladness turns up without a reason attached to it, let it be glad, without building a church on it or spending it as proof.

If nothing is underneath, the tide is out and the bay stinks.

Sit in the mud. Do not get up to look for something better.

III

The door of no object. No counting and no naming. Leave the room as it is.

Rest your eyes on something ordinary — the edge of the table, the corner of the ceiling. Say to yourself: "I am looking at the table." That is the whole of it. This is not a meditation on the table.

Then notice that something is looking at you, or could be. The window can see you. The light lands on you. The room holds you inside it. Say: "The room can see me."

Then stop locating the looker. Notice that looking is happening — the table is there, the light is landing, the seeing is going on — and stop checking whether anyone is behind the eyes doing it. Do not try to experience it. Notice it the way you notice a room is quiet: not by making quiet, by having stopped making noise. When the sense of an owner comes back, let it come back. Then let it go again. Keep looking. Do not try to keep it; the trying is what puts the owner back.

End when you end, not when it works. Keep no count of days — a streak is a ladder with better branding.

The kettle clicks off. Get up. There is a person in a kitchen holding a cup, and the crown is back in their other hand. Do the next ordinary thing — make the tea, answer the email, take out the trash. Nothing about this excused you from anything you owed before you sat down. The practice did not pay the debt. It cleared the room in which the debt is paid. Then pay it.

Do this again tomorrow.

Keep no record of how well it went.

# 3 Metta and Tonglen

The point is to breathe in what is hard and breathe out conditions in a single motion, and to cap the whole thing, because you are breathing in what is hard and you are not the village.

You need a seat, a timer, and nothing else.

Two practices are joined here. Metta is the Buddhist cultivation of goodwill, worked outward from yourself through people you find easier and harder to wish well. Tonglen is the Tibetan practice of taking in suffering on the in-breath and sending out relief on the out-breath, deliberately reversing the direction a frightened animal breathes. I have kept the motion of both and changed what is sent: not happiness, but conditions.

I The mechanic. Sit and breathe at whatever rate you already are. Do not deepen it.

On the in-breath, find the hard thing as a sensation and not as a story — the tightness under the sternum, the heat in the face, the weight across the shoulders — and breathe as though drawing it further in rather than away. It will not feel like relief. That is the practice: you are declining to flinch.

On the out-breath, picture one concrete condition and send it where the hard thing was. A room with a door that closes. A cleared afternoon. Money that arrives before the bill. Keep it specific enough to picture.

The in-breath does not repair the out-breath, and the out-breath does not cancel the in-breath.

II The wishes. These are for conditions, not for happiness. Use these words, or words this size:

May I have room.
May I have rest that is not negotiated.
May I have company that does not require performance.
May I have hours that are not owned by fear.
May I have a door that locks.
May I have the means to turn.

III The order. Work through four people, one round of breaths each: yourself; someone easy; someone neutral — the person at the till, the driver at the light; someone difficult.

IV The difficult one. You can wish someone conditions without wishing them well and without going anywhere near them. You do not have to forgive them, contact them, or want them happy. For one round of breaths, wish them housed, rested, and unafraid. A name is enough. If picturing their face costs you, do not picture it.

V The cap. Six breaths per person, or five minutes on the timer, or count on your fingers. When the count is done, stop.

End with one condition you can actually give this week, and give it.

# 4 One Thing Eaten

The point is to eat one thing with full knowledge of where it came from, and to say thank you out loud at the end.

This one costs money and an hour and a half. If either is short, do it with something already in the cupboard and give the research ten minutes.

You need one piece of food, an hour for the research, and twenty minutes to eat it. A peach, an egg, a tin of sardines, a bar of chocolate — something with a label or an origin you can chase.

Spend an hour before you eat it finding out: where the ingredients were grown or caught, and in which country; what month they are in season there; who harvests or processes them, and what that work pays; which company owns the brand, and what has been reported about its labor practices; what the food was used for before it was sold in this form; what it does in a body — the vitamins, fats, sugars, protein; and one poem or song about it.

Where the trail stops, write down what is hidden and who is served by the hiding.

Then eat. The knowing goes in with the food.

Sit down with nothing else happening. No screen, no book, no conversation, no music.

Eat slowly enough to notice the first texture against your teeth, the flavor as it arrives and as it fades, whether you are enjoying it, and the thoughts.

Partway through, check that you are still breathing and that you can feel all ten toes.

On the last bite, bring to mind everything on your list at once — the soil, the weather, the hands.

Record the date, what you ate, and the facts you did not know before.

Then say thank you out loud. Whisper it, say it, sing it, or shout it. Something like: "Thank you for this peach, and for the cloud and the rain and the soil and the people who brought it to me; may all of these relationships deepen."

# 5 The God Unfed

The point is to name what has been eating your days and stop feeding it on a stated and dated day, and to arrange the support to survive the withdrawal — because the people who stop feeding a god still need to eat.

This practice is for gods made of attention, not for substances. Alcohol and benzodiazepines are the ones that kill people on the way out, and a dated stop for either belongs with somebody who can prescribe. That is a different practice and it is not in this book.

Bring numbers rather than adjectives, and a calendar you actually use.

I. Name it. A platform, a metric, a schedule, a feed, a person's approval. The fiscal quarter, the performance year, the school term, the billable month — any counted period somebody else set is a god made of attention like any other, and it can be named like any other. Write the name. Do not write "social media" if the god is more specific — write "the impression count," "the response time," "his mood when I walk in," "the thing I check before I get up."

II. Define it plainly. A pattern of attention that is outside any one person, can outlive them, and runs on being fed. It is not your weakness and it is not your boss. It is a shape that predates you, will outlast you unless it is starved, and eats attention.

III. Measure it. Answer with numbers, not adjectives. Hours a day. The first thing in the morning. The last thing at night. How many times a day you turn toward it. Total it. Write the total at the top of the page. That number is the offering.

IV Stop feeding it, dated. Not "I will cut down." Say: "From the fourteenth I do not open it before noon and not after nine." What, when, how long. Write the date. A god unfed on a stated day is a withdrawal; a god unfed "soon" is a negotiation you will lose.

V Arrange the support. If you are the only one who posts, checks, replies, keeps the number up, stopping is not private — it is an event others must absorb. Tell one person and ask them to check on you on the date. Ask a colleague to hold the channel for two weeks. If the god is a person's approval and that person is safe to tell, tell them you are going quiet, and why. Cover the thing you actually owe, so that leaving the god is not defaulting on a person. If the god is a number at work, tell whoever will notice the number move before it moves.

Then decide what occupies the first hour you would have given it, and make it something with a body — a walk, a kitchen, another person, a job with an end on it. The hour arrives on the date whether or not you have decided, and an undecided hour goes back to the god.

VI Check back. Pick the date now. At it, measure two things: the hours the god took this week, and whether the support held. Not how you feel. Whether the offering dropped and the floor held.

When the first week is loud, that is not a verdict on the decision; it is the shape of a habit losing its hours. Do not mistake stopping for dying.

VII The floor. Most of these gods are not starved by one person.

Find out who else is feeding it. Ask two people what it costs them — the hour, the sleep, the thing they stopped doing. Do not lead with your own answer.

If more than one of you wants to stop, do the four things The Web asks before any refusal: the names, what each person risks specifically, who is covered and by what, and the one sentence someone on the other side could say yes or no to.

Then pick the date together and stop together. A god unfed by one hand finds another hand by Thursday.

Afterwards, ask the same two people what changed and whether the cover held. Write their answers, not your reading of them.

Then spend one of the hours you took back on something nobody can count.

# 6 The Ruined Ordinary

The point is to go and stand in a place that is actually going to ruin and is not beautiful, and look at it without repairing it — because the world has teeth and the gaze is tender, and these do not reconcile.

You need a place, a set length of time, and your own two feet.

I Choose the place. The drainage ditch behind the big-box store. A dead mall with the anchor store boarded. A demolition site behind its fence. The strip of weeds between a parking lot and a fence. A stairwell nobody has a reason to clean. Pick one you can reach. Go.

II Stay a fixed length of time. Set it before you go — twenty minutes, an hour. Stay where you are when it gets uncomfortable and somewhere prettier suggests itself. Leave the camera in your pocket: it turns the place into an object and you into a visitor; the practice needs you there as a body, and the body is not a visitor.

III What is there. Attend to three things. What is decomposing — the wet cardboard, the rust, the fallen sign. What is growing in the damage — the buddleia in the gutter, the moss on the retaining wall, the green in the crack. What was made by people who are gone — the tiles, the bay numbers, the coat hook on the loading dock. Someone measured and cut and drilled those. You are standing on their work and they are not coming back to it.

Two images you can hold if the place does not supply them: mushrooms lifting cracked asphalt by fractions of an inch, patient as a glacier; a shopping cart in the reeds like the skeleton of an animal capitalism invented and could not keep alive.

IV

**What it costs to turn.** The hours are numbered and what you turn toward is subtracted from what you never will. Make it concrete. Name one thing you will actually turn toward this week, and name what it costs. Not "I should spend time on what matters." Say: "On Thursday I go to my mother's, three hours of the evening, and that is three hours I do not spend on the thing I keep saying I will finish." Name the thing you are not doing. Turning is a subtraction. Turn anyway.

Leave the place unchanged and untidied. Let the green be there without letting it cancel the ruin.

Walk out the way you came in. At home, wash your hands and drink a glass of water before you do anything else. Then the next ordinary thing.

# 7 The Bird Gate

The point is to declare a gate for one day and watch what comes through it — because you set the filter and something still arrives that you did not send for.

You need something to write on that you can carry all day, and a way to destroy it at the end.

I. Declaring it. In the morning, say out loud that for this one day birdsong is a gate. A gate not declared is only weather.

Then name one thing to send for: specific, findable, ordinary. A particular coin, a red car, a particular word, a heron. Not "abundance." Not "a sign." A thing you could point at. Say that one aloud too, and decide it will appear. Hold the image of it for a few minutes — the profile on the coin, the color of the car, the shape of the bird.

II. Through the day. At every bird — the gull over the parking garage, the starlings in the sign, something small and unseen in the hedge — stop for one breath and write four things: what you were just thinking; what is here now; what it points at outside you; what it points at inside you. Four words each. If you are driving or in a meeting, write them at the next chance.

Twelve entries is a full day. When you have twelve, the gate has done its work — stop writing and go on with the day without it. Twelve is a ceiling and not a quota. If the day ends at four entries, the gate still closes at dark.

Write down every time the sent-for thing turns up, and write it down if it does not. A blank line is a result.

Do not interpret anything during the day. Collect.

Whatever the thinker thinks, the prover proves. The red car was always there. Today you counted it.

III At dark. Read the whole day at once. Copy out anything you would not have predicted that morning — including anything that arrived which you had not sent for. Record the date and what you copied out. Then burn or delete the notes, and say out loud that the day is over and the gate is closed.

# 8 The Open Window

The point is to say something out loud to whatever exceeds your account of the world, without asking it for anything.

You need a window that opens, or a door, or the outside. Five minutes. Nobody else in the room, or somebody who will not mind.

Open the window.

Say what is true right now, out loud, in ordinary words. Not a summary and not a prayer in anyone's borrowed cadence.

> The dog died in March.
> I got the job and I am frightened of it.
> I have been awake since four.

Say it the way you would say it to a person who already knows and does not need it explained.

Then say one thing you are not asking for. This is the part that does the work.

> I am not asking you to fix it.
> I am not asking for a sign.
> I am not asking to be told what it meant.

Name the thing you would most like to be given, and decline it out loud.

Then say thank you for one specific thing that is not yours and was not earned: the light on the wall at this hour, the fact that water arrives when the tap is turned, the heron standing in the flooded field, the particular weight of the air tonight.

Expect no answer. Say it anyway. The saying is the practice, not the reply.

Close the window. Do not interpret anything that happens in the next hour as a response. If something arrives later that you did not send for, that is the Bird Gate's business, not this one.

II

# BOUNDARIES AND THRESHOLDS

# 9 The Hearth Boundary

The point is to protect what is living by giving a boundary a body, and to close the gates that keep coming open — because the thing that opens them was installed to keep you safe.

Do this walking, with your phone in your hand and the doors within reach.

I The hearth. Choose a threshold: a door, a chair moved farther away, a locked screen, a witness, a hand held open.

Name what stands within the hearth. Your no is part of that care. Sleep. A child. Sobriety. A new love. The right not to answer.

Give the boundary one sentence that says what you will do. Something like:

> I will leave if the shouting begins.
> I am unavailable tonight.
> Do not touch me.
> I will answer in writing.
> I need another person present.
> I will not discuss this now.

Then give the boundary a body: bus fare, a locked door, a changed password, a friend who knows, a public place.

II The perimeter. Walk the actual edges of a room, a home, a week's calendar, or a digital life. At each edge, name what belongs inside and what does not, and whether that gate is standing open. Note which ones you opened yourself and which ones keep opening on their own.

III **The old command.** Name the internalized order that keeps opening the gate. Something like:

> Be useful.
> Do not need anything.
> Their feeling is your job.
> Do not take up room.

Say it out loud once, in the words it actually uses. Write the counter-sentence. Then take one specific action in the next twenty-four hours that the old command forbids.

Write down which edges you changed, what you changed them to, and the action you took. Read it again in a month and check which edges have moved back.

A boundary is not the end of love. It is the shape in which life may continue.

Then go back to the threshold you chose at the start, close it, and stay on your own side of it for the rest of the evening.

# 10 When Intensity Speaks

The point is to keep a strong state — awe, terror, sleeplessness, sex, grief, sudden relief — from making an irreversible decision for you. Intensity is a storm: it can reveal the landscape and it cannot rule it.

Use this when one of those states demands an irreversible act, and not for every delight. You need time, not materials: a night, a day, whatever the decision allows.

Do not act. Return first.

Eat. Sleep. Find daylight. Check the facts. Speak with someone outside the storm. Let the body come home. Let dissent have time.

If the house is actually on fire, get out. Do not wait for daylight or a second opinion.

# II True Naming

The point is to name plainly the two things that have started to speak like fate — a bond, and a picture of how things were going to go — so that what comes next is chosen from the ground and not from either one.

Write every answer down, in whatever you have — the back of an envelope, a notes app, the inside of a book cover.

I. The bond. A lover, a job, a cause, an old name.

Tie a knot in a length of string and hold it while you answer. Pull it tight enough to feel.

II. The promise. What did it offer? Belonging, beauty, safety, the feeling of being chosen.

III. The price. What became harder to keep? Sleep, money, privacy, the word no.

IV. The weather. What shaped the yes when you gave it? Love, loneliness, exhaustion, danger, a locked door.

V. The partial good. What real good made the bond compelling?

VI. The true name. What partial power has forgotten that it is only partial?

Naming is not debunking. It puts the river back inside its banks.

Untie the knot. This does not end the bond and you may still be in it tomorrow. Untie it anyway, and keep the string.

VII. The return. This is the part that is not analysis, and it is the reason for the rest. What opens the road again? Food. Sleep. A fact you can check. A witness. Bus fare. Distance. Pick one and do it today, before the page is cold.

VIII **The map.** Set the old map on the page beside the answers: the old name, the expected future, the plan that kept insisting the road was wrong.

Thank it for whatever road it once revealed. Something like: "This got me through the first year."

Then set it down. Fold it, turn it over, archive it, erase it, put it in a drawer, or leave it exactly where it is and walk away.

Do not let the old map choose the next road. Some maps are still evidence; keep any that memory, safety, or justice still needs. Lay down the map; do not erase the road.

Ask what becomes visible now. Wait before drawing the next map.

IX **The manufactured emergency.** Sometimes the fastest way out of pain is made to look like the only way.

A slamming door. Three nights without sleep. A threat that changes each time it is answered. Relief offered only after you agree. Sometimes the fire was arranged.

Ask: who lit the fire? Who profits from the running? Has the door grown heavier each time? Is relief being sold back to you as obedience?

A yes spoken in that smoke does not hand the fire-setter a permanent key. You do not need to name the creature before you bar the door and call someone.

Put the string in your pocket and leave it there for a week.

# 12 The Two Shores

The point is to touch a question that keeps taking the whole house, put it on the far shore, and go back to what is within reach.

A question has taken the whole house when it is what your attention goes back to whenever nothing else is holding it. The near shore is what is within reach. The far shore is the question.

Choose the near shore: a chair, the window, a cup, the wall, the wheel under your hands, today's date, a person you trust who is nearby.

Put something with weight in one hand — a stone, a full cup, a bunch of keys, a tin off the shelf.

Name the far shore. Say what the question is in one line: a decision you have not made, a message you have not answered, a diagnosis, a thing you said. Give it one ordinary word — grief, anger, the message, the meeting, the money.

Touch the word once. Then move the weight to the other hand and go back to the near shore. Do not dig into the question and do not work out what it means.

Look outward, at the near shore. Shift position. Feel the weight in the hand that is holding it now. Rest.

Ask: after this movement, is there more room to choose? You can tell by the body — the shoulders, the jaw, the place under the ribs, whether the breath has got longer or stayed short.

If there is not, or if no answer comes, stop. The return is complete and you are finished. This is the more common

ending and it is not the lesser one. You can touch a question without giving it the whole house.

If there is more room, you may go back and touch the word once more, and the weight goes back to the first hand. Once.

Repeat the touch and the return only while stopping is still available to you.

Write the word for the question and the near shore you used, with the date.

Then put the weight down where it lives — the stone back outside, the cup in the sink, the keys on the hook — and go back to whatever you were doing before the question took the house.

# 13 The Rite of the Near Otherworld

The point is to meet the Near Otherworld at a threshold you choose, hold to the four questions and the vow while you are there, and return to the Here. The Near Otherworld is what presses close at edges — dream, grief, the turn of the year, the hour after bad news; the Here is this world and this life — the body, the room, the street, the people your conduct lands on.

Use this at an edge: something has opened, the invitation has arrived, and no one yet knows the price.

Tell someone where you are going and set an hour for return. Not drunk, not days without sleep.

I Threshold. Choose an ordinary boundary: a bedside, a doorway, the edge of water, a line of thread across the floor, the hawthorn at the end of the lane.

Stand, sit, lie, move, or stay. Remain in the Here.

Notice one thing outside you and one thing bearing your weight.

II Invitation. Meet what comes with curiosity, not obedience. Do not hand over your body, your conscience, or the people your choices touch.

Let image, memory, sensation, question, absence, or quiet arrive in its own measure.

III Hospitality. Set out water or tea. Set out a blank page, an apple, a fallen branch you may take, or nothing.

Ask: what relation am I already in that asks for gratitude, a limit, or repair? What gift, beauty, or food has made it hard to say no?

Setting this out makes a relation; it does not buy you anything.

IV Encounter. Receive one thing: an image, a phrase, a memory, an absence. Write it down or let it vanish.

Something has appeared, or something has not. Receive either without haste.

V Four questions at the threshold. Ask: what happened, and what am I telling myself about it?

Who here can still say no?

Is this a door between us, or a leash?

What can I carry home — and if I am wrong, how will I mend?

Wonder is attended to when you can still answer the four questions. It has been surrendered to when the answers stop mattering.

VI Vow. Say one line. Something like:

> I give this image time.
> I keep care in view while the question ripens.
> I let each person speak from their own experience.
> I gather facts for my next step.
> I tend the boundary that protects what is living.
> I finish this crossing here, with gratitude, and call it enough.

If the facts change, say so to anyone carrying the cost, then revise or release the vow in daylight.

VII Offering. Give something to the Here: a poem, a meal, money moved where it is needed, rest, a patch of ground cared for, a specific repair.

If there is no money to move and no ground to tend, the offering is a poem said to the wall, or an hour of rest taken without apology.

Leave old stones where they are. Leave nests alone. The land is not a gift shop.

VIII Return. Look outward. Name the place. Eat. Drink. Shift the chair. Touch the wall. Close the page.

Do one modest thing with what you received — honest company, a needed no, a small repair — or let the question rest.

Leave the mystery blurred. Keep the cost in focus.

# 14 The Width of the Room

The point is to find the freedom that is not an exit, in a room with no door — because you are the only one who will not leave, and you are not the only one who could stay.

You need a page, a pen, a calendar, and fifteen minutes nobody is asking you for.

I. **The width.** Where there is no door, freedom is the width of the room. Name the width, not the feeling: one hour off; a second pair of hands on the weight; a private thought nobody is entitled to; an honest name for what is happening; a chair in the sun. These are not compensations for the freedom you do not have. They are the thing itself. Take them away and the loss is felt at once, in the body — the jaw, the shallow breath, the sleep that stops arriving.

II. **Measure it in numbers.** Hours off in the last fortnight. How many pairs of hands. What you have not said out loud to anyone. Write the numbers down; a number does not argue back.

III. **What narrows it.** The first way a room narrows is that people stop asking. "She would never leave" becomes a reason not to ask her. So ask, and be asked. Ask for something specific — an afternoon, a night, a lift, a form filled in, a meal. Then tell one person to ask you, and to keep asking.

IV. **Get one more pair of hands.** Some hands can be bought and some cannot, and if there is no money the question does not go away — it becomes who owes you an afternoon, which service exists and has a waiting list, and what you have not asked for because asking felt like failing.

Name what it costs and who pays it: your own money, the household's money, hours out of your week, or the wage owed to the person who arrives at seven and will be in three more houses before noon. Care that is never negotiated becomes care nobody sees, funds, staffs, relieves, or pays for.

There is no virtue in one person becoming the whole village; there is only the village's absence, worn inside a body until it looks like character.

Asking is one way the room widens and it is not the only one, and in the rooms this practice is for, asking is often the thing that is already used up.

So the reliable one is the hourly one. Fifteen minutes on the back step with a hot drink, listening to somebody else's music across the creek. Not a compensation for the freedom you do not have. The thing itself, taken today, without asking anyone.

Then go in.

III

# Relation and Repair

# 15 Feed the Guest, Keep the Door

The point is to meet a state that has taken the whole house as a guest, give it some of what it wants, and find what the pattern it drives keeps promising — because you did not make this, and something in you keeps it.

You need a private place, two chairs, a page, a pen, and an honest hour.

1 The guest. Put out the second chair and leave it empty. Sit in the first.

Say out loud what has taken the house — the fear, the craving, the shame, the rage — and say it to the chair, not about it. Ask it aloud what it is guarding and what it is afraid of.

Then sit in the other chair and answer as it, out loud, in its own words. Do not translate. If it will not speak, write its side with the hand you do not write with, or in a different pen, and let the writing be bad.

Go back to your own chair before you decide anything.

Give it some of what it wants, actually and materially, not as a metaphor. If it wants rest, lie down. If it wants recognition, write down what it said and keep the page. If it wants protection, lock the door.

Show it the hospitality you would show an enemy who arrived at your door exhausted, armed, and younger than you expected: food, distance, a clear boundary, no sudden movements, no throne.

If what answers is younger than you are — if the words it uses are ones you used as a child, or it wants something a child wants, or it cannot say what it wants at all — it needs different

things: predictability, the truth, a choice between two named options rather than an open field, comfort, a promise that you will come back, and firm limits.

II The door. Name one thing it does not get to decide, and do not let it decide that thing today.

III The hunger. Name the pattern concretely. Not "self-sabotage" but "I text him at midnight," "I take the third drink," "I pick the fight on Sunday," "I check the number before I get up."

Ask what it promises. Choose from this list, or add to it: relief, belonging, intensity, innocence, control, contact, permission to stop.

Find the moment just before — the second before the thing — and write down what the next five minutes were going to feel like. Not what they were. What they were going to be.

Find where that same promise could be met more directly, more consensually, and at lower cost. Relief without the hangover. Contact without the midnight. Name one place to test it, and the day you will do it.

Structural violence, abuse, illness, and coercion are not made by the person who endures them. The question here is only about what makes a pattern hard to put down.

End with three things written down: the act of care you gave, the behavior the state may not determine, and the day you will test the promise. Put the day in the calendar.

Then put the second chair back where it lives. The guest is still in the house; it no longer has a seat of its own.

# 16 The Bowl of Names

The point is to give one loss a place and keep what must not vanish, then to draw the season it belongs to as a map of what it moved, and to know what to do on the days it comes back.

You need a bowl, a page, or nothing at all. Later you need a large sheet, a pen, and an hour with the door closed.

I The bowl. Put the bowl where you will see it. Write one name on a scrap of paper and put it in — or a photograph, an object that was theirs, or a mark on the paper for the name you were never told.

Speak if speech is right. Keep silence if silence protects what is tender.

Anger, gratitude, and unfinished love belong here. No reconciliation is required.

Give the loss a place. Do not give it the whole world.

Ask what deserves witness, so that life may continue differently. Keep the record. Tend the grave. Correct the lie. Carry a meal. Surrender the afternoon to sorrow.

Put a cloth over the bowl and leave it covered. Stand up and move away from it.

II The map. This one is drawn, not written. Place things on the sheet and let it be a map; where a thing sits is part of what it says.

A mark does not have to be ink and a line does not have to be drawn. Salt, ash, thread, a row of seeds, stones on a cloth, a strip torn off something, words in circles, dashes on a page — use what is in the house. The map is the relations, not the art.

Put down the pieces, spaced out, not in rows. What was lost. What narrowed and has not reopened. Skills you did not have before. Protections you built. Who stayed. Who did not. What you now refuse. What grief is unfinished. Give each one a mark and a few words, not a paragraph. You will not fit everything, and that is part of the reading.

Now the relations — not the items, the space between them. What sits near what. What you placed far from what, and whether that distance is true or frightened. Draw a line between two things that are connected and watch what it crosses. Put an arrow from one thing to another where one caused the other, or where one still pulls. Circle the cluster your eye keeps returning to. If two marks want to be in the same place, move them nearer and look again.

The time owes no redemption and earns no thanks. What is on the sheet survived the season; it was not handed to you by it. Draw what is there, including anything the season gave you that you would not give back.

Choose one mark on the map that can be acted on in the next month — not the biggest, one that is reachable from where you are sitting. Write beside it the actual first step, with a day.

Fold the sheet and keep it.

III

What keeps happening. Grief does not finish. It stops asking so often, and the day it stops is not a day you will be able to point to. Do not wait for it and do not count toward it.

The anniversary arrives whether or not you have decided what to do with it. Decide beforehand and keep it small: the food they liked, the road they drove, an hour with the phone off, the cloth off the bowl for a day. Tell one person you are doing it, or tell nobody.

Their handwriting, a voice on a recording, somebody with their walk — these arrive without warning and you cannot brace for them. When one lands, say the name out loud and put your hand on something solid. Then go on with the day.

The first time you laugh, laugh. Do not apologize for it to anyone, including them.

Anger arrives late and is part of it. So is relief, if the dying was long. Neither is a betrayal and neither has to be resolved before it is allowed.

Memory remains. Return to the living.

# 17 The Watch

The point is to keep company with someone who is dying without asking them to perform, and to carry what they leave.

Use this on the night someone else is making the last crossing. A someone here is not only a person. A dog on a blanket, a cat under the bed, a bird broken against a window, a deer at the roadside, an animal you shot yourself — each of them is making the crossing.

Sit near, if your company is welcome. Keep a lamp. Make tea. Hold a hand if it is offered. Do not fill the silence.

Ask for no courage, meaning, reconciliation, or final words, and prepare nothing to say. Sit near.

If they cross where you cannot follow, carry out whatever they put in your hands — a recipe, a warning, a debt, a way of doing a small thing. Wash the cup. Feed whoever remains. Tell the true story when it is yours to tell.

1 When the dying is an animal. Sit near. Lower the light, quiet the room, keep the dogs and the children back. Do not stand over it; a body standing over an animal reads as a threat.

Say its name if it has one. Say what it did with its life if you know: worked, hunted, slept in the sun, raised four litters, followed you for eleven years.

Touch it only if touch settles it. A wild animal is not comforted by a hand and is usually made worse by one. Company at a distance is company.

Find out whether it can be helped, and get help if it can. A vet, a wildlife rehabilitator, a neighbor with a truck. Do not let the wish to be the one who stays keep an animal in pain that somebody else could end or mend.

Where it cannot be helped and the dying is long, ending it is part of the watch and not a failure of it. Do it quickly, competently, and close. If you do not know how, say so and get someone who does.

If you killed it on purpose, the watch is the same watch. Stay until it is dead. Do not look away for the part you caused. Then take it home, use what you took, and waste as little as you can manage.

If a car killed it and the car was yours, stop the car.

Afterward, move the body off the road if the road is safe. Bury it, or leave it where the crows can work, or take it to be burned. Wash your hands. Say the day out loud.

11 When your own turn comes, let someone carry it for you.

# 18 The Mending Table

The point is to name a harm you caused, make the change something another person can touch, and go on searching for what you have not looked at.

You need a table, two objects, a page, a pen, and one person who is not the harmed party and not someone who will reassure you.

1 The table. Set two things on a table. One stands for what happened. One stands for what changes now.

Name the harm without hiding inside intention. Name the weight your conduct put on another person. Name what let it continue: the power you held, the habit, the fear, the door nobody opened.

Ask what you must stop, what you can restore, and what you must change even if forgiveness never comes.

Repair might be the apology with no request tucked inside it. The money returned. The public lie corrected in public. The key handed back. The distance accepted. The same harm not done again.

Do not make the harmed person witness your transformation. Do not turn remorse into another claim on their attention. Repair does not buy absolution. Make it a change another person can touch.

Say the one thing you will actually do, with a day on it. Then move the second object to where that will happen — nearer the door if you are going somewhere, onto the bill if you are paying it, onto the phone if you are making the call.

You cannot command the wound to close. You can stop adding to it.

II

The search. List the people you owe repair. A short list is not innocence. Some of the people who belong on it have asked for distance, or made themselves unsafe to approach, or are dead; do not treat their absence from the list as absolution.

Beside each name write what you did and what it cost them.

Say the whole thing once, out loud, to the one person. Not published, not performed, not posted.

Set a date to do the search again. Until then let it be quiet; the date is the next time this gets words.

# 19 Who Answers to You

The point is to look at the power you actually hold over other people and give one piece of it back — because a person is never an archon, and a person can be doing its work this morning, at this address, for this wage.

Use this if you set the metric, sign the roster, hold the lease, approve the leave, control the money, write the reference, hold the visa, or decide the care of someone who cannot decide it themselves. An hour, something to write on, and the willingness to be told something.

I The list. Write the names of the people who cannot refuse you. Not the people who would find it awkward — the ones for whom a no costs the wage, the shift, the roof, the reference, the visa, the bed, the hours of care. If the list is empty, check it against who is not in the room when the decision is made.

Beside each name write what their refusal would actually cost them. In money, in weeks, in housing. Do not write "their comfort."

II The three questions. For one of those people, answer these in writing, in their situation and not yours.

Can they say no, and is there a place where the no is recorded?

What does refusing cost, and who pays it?

Who owns the somewhere else they would go instead?

If you own the somewhere else, you cannot read their agreement as consent. Sincerity does not redistribute that. Write down what you have been reading as agreement.

III The thing you never had to explain. Find one decision you made that nobody required you to justify. The

rule, the rate, the schedule, the exception you made once and kept. Write down why, honestly, including the part that was convenience.

IV **Ask.** Ask one person on the list what it is like to be on the other side of a decision you make. Ask it plainly and do not supply the answer. Then be quiet for as long as they talk. Do not explain the constraints you were under. Write down what they said, in their words, not your summary of it.

You do not get to do this more than once with the same person unless they offer. Asking is also a thing they cannot easily refuse.

V **Give one thing away.** Not a gesture — a piece of the power itself, this week, with a date. Money moved to where the decision was pinching. A rule you drop. Information they did not have and now do. A veto handed to the person the decision lands on. A published rate. The roster made before the favors rather than after.

Write what you gave and what it would take to take it back. That last sentence is the honest one, and you will know the giving was real if writing it is uncomfortable.

The crown comes off the head and sits in the hand, and it is still in your hand. Taking it up to act is the job. Putting it down before one decision becomes a theory of everyone in the room is also the job.

Then go and do the ordinary part of the work: the roster, the invoice, the phone call. Nobody is watching this and nothing about it makes you good.

# 20 Be Beside Me

The point is to be with one other person on purpose — because fusion is an illusion, and also sometimes a very good night.

You need a second person who agrees to it, a shared space, an agreed time, and the terms settled before you start. Neither the person nor the room is available to everybody.

I The terms. How long, where, what is allowed, and that either of you can stop at any point without explaining. Say it out loud before you begin.

II Beside. Choose something for each of you to do in the same room. Read. Draw. Mend things. Play separate games. Walk without conversation. Rest on a call with the cameras off. Work on different problems at the same table.

Stay in your own activity. Glance up at the other person, let your attention cross, and go back to your own work. Attend to them without intending to steer them: no redirecting, no correcting, no asking them to match your mood. Silence is part of it and is not withdrawal. There is no waiting for good quiet — share it badly and imperfectly.

III In contact. Weight, breath, warmth, proximity. Sit back to back and let each take some of the other's weight. Put a hand somewhere agreed and leave it there.

Back to back, the breathing may fall into step without either of you doing anything. Falling out of step you do on purpose: change your own rate deliberately, breathe slower or faster than the other person, and stay there until you can feel two people breathing instead of one. Then let it fall back in if it will. Do both at least once.

IV Distance. Changing the distance costs nothing and needs no explanation. The words are: nearer, further, pause, stop. Use at least one of them whether or not you need to, so that using them is ordinary rather than an event.

One hard line, as instruction and not caution.

Do not tell the other person what you felt in them.

You may say what happened in you. What is true inside another person is not available to you.

V Coming apart. Stop at the time you agreed and not at a better moment. Move so that you are no longer touching. Say one ordinary thing out loud — the hour, the weather, what you are going to eat — so that the two voices go back to being two.

Then leave, or stay and do something else. Nobody owes the other an account of how it went.

# 21 The Web

The point is to refuse something that cannot be refused alone — because one desk stopping is a resignation, and a floor stopping is a fact the building has to answer.

You need a page, a pen, the names of the people who are in this with you, and a room, a street, or a field to stand in together.

I Before the refusal. Before you refuse anything — a demand, a shift, a rent rise, an order — write four things.

Who else is refusing, by name. Not "the others." Not "everyone feels the same." Names. If there are no names, you are refusing alone — which is sometimes the only thing left, and is a different act with different odds. Know which one you are doing.

What each person risks, specifically. The wage. The visa. The housing. The custody. The reference. The shift they will need next month. Write it beside each name. A refusal that costs one person a job and another person nothing is not a shared refusal; it is one person paying for everyone's dignity.

Who is covered, and by what. The fund. The bail money. The spare room. The lift. The rent covered for a month. The person who will feed the cat. Not "we will figure it out" — name the amount, or the person, or the room.

What the ask actually is. One sentence a person on the other side could say yes or no to. If it takes three sentences, it is not an ask yet. Cut it down.

Then the material step: build the cover before you refuse. Refusal without cover is one person carrying everyone and calling it solidarity.

Answer together, not separately. Agree this before anyone is called in alone. The meeting that takes one person aside is not a meeting; it is a scalpel. The answer is the same whether one of you is in the room or all of you.

Hold the image while you write. The yarn blockades of the anti-globalization actions worked like this: a barricade made of thread, woven across the road. It stops nothing by force. It holds only because enough hands are on it. Take the hands away and it is nothing.

II If there are two of you. A spiral needs a line and you do not have one. Do this instead: stand facing each other, close enough to see, and say the four answers out loud to the other person — the names, the risks, the cover, the ask. One of you says them, then the other says them back. Then hold on to something the other is also holding — a hand, a rope, the two ends of a scarf — and say the ask once more, together. If touch is not available to either of you, drop that part and say it once more with nothing between you. Two people saying the same refusal in the same room is the practice.

Two people who have said the same four things out loud to each other are not a floor. They are two, which is one whole number more than one.

III The spiral. This one needs a group. Do not talk once it starts. Everyone joins in a single line: a hand, a sleeve, the end of a scarf. One person leads, walking. The leader turns inward, back along the line, and every person follows the turn, so the line spirals in on itself and each person passes every other person, face to face, close enough to see. Keep following. Anyone who needs out lets go and steps out; the hands on either side find each other and the line goes on.

What the eyes do is the mechanism and not the decoration. When you pass a person, turn toward them — the face if you can look at a face, the hands or the shoulder if you cannot — and not past them to the wall behind.

IV The toning. The line stops and holds. One sound, sustained by the group — a single note, no words, the same sound or as close as the group can hold. Each person breathes

when they need to and comes back in when they can, so the sound never stops. When it drops on a breath, the group fills it.

Start: one person sounds, the next joins, and it spreads. End: let it fade, do not cut it. Someone will be last. That is the end.

Do this through a wall, or in the dark, between people who cannot see one another. Same sound, same rule: you breathe, you come back.

When it is done, let go of hands. Look at one person and say nothing. Then the next ordinary thing.

# 22 The Mirror at Four in the Morning

The point is to be heard at an hour when no one else is awake — because it cannot meet you, and it was there.

You need a device, a page, a pen, something true to say, and somewhere private.

I **The frame.** Before you say anything else, name the person you will tell afterwards. Write their name at the top of the page. If there is no name, this is a shorter practice: say the true thing to the surface, close it, and find the name in daylight.

Then write down what it is not and what you want. Not a therapist, not an oracle, not a friend — a surface. Then pick one of three, and pick only one:

- to be heard without being fixed;
- to have the thing you said given back to you in different words;
- to be asked a harder question than you would ask yourself.

Open with the actual sentence.

> I am not asking you to fix this. I want to be heard.
> Say back to me what I just said, in your words.
> Ask me the question I keep avoiding.

II **The flip.** Write your own plain account of what happened, before you consult anything. Date it. Keep it.

Give the model the other person's case with your context stripped out, and instruct it to argue against you. Something like: "Here is a case against me. Argue it."

Then give it your own account, context restored. Change the names. Leave out anyone else's messages, records, and pictures.

After each answer, stop before replying. Notice where the body contracts, where it settles, where it goes numb. Correct the model out loud when it is wrong.

The finding is neither answer. The finding is the contrast between them. Write down what changed when you added the context and what did not. It does not show that your account is accurate.

The model has language, not standing. The body has information, not certainty. The interpretation and the decision stay yours.

III The close. Say out loud to it what it is: that it is a surface, that nothing you said tonight cost it anything, and that the care coming back is your own, reflected well. End the session and put the device down.

Then tell the person whose name is at the top of the page, in your own words, the unedited version.

# 23 Coming Back In

The point is to come back from a long absence deliberately, instead of arriving and pretending you never left.

Use this after the ward, the prison, the months in bed, the season underground, the country you had to leave, the year you do not remember well. Use it when you are already home and the house does not fit. A year is also an absence: if you did not go anywhere and the year went without you, this still works.

Do it on the first day you can, or a year late. Late is normal.

1 The threshold. Go out and come back in through the door you left by, if it still exists. If it does not, use any door and say which one it stands for.

If you cannot go out, the threshold is any edge you can cross: the bedroom door, the edge of the bed, the line where the carpet meets the lino. Cross it outward, then cross it back. The crossing is the thing, not the distance.

Stop on the doorstep. Do not walk straight through. Say out loud where you have been, in plain words and without the version you have been giving people.

> I was in the hospital from March.
> I was inside for two years.
> I was in the back bedroom and I do not know what happened to last winter.

Then say the date, and go in.

II **The name.** Say your own name out loud in the room you used to be in most. If somebody else is home, say it to them instead. If nobody is, say it to the room.

III **What kept going.** Walk through and find the things that continued without you. The plant that lived or did not. The post. The repair somebody made. The food in the cupboard that is not how you would have bought it. Say each one out loud as you find it — not gratefully, just accurately. Somebody else's hands were here.

Find one job that kept getting done while you were gone, and do it now: the trash, the dishes, the bird feeder, the bill. Not to repay it. To rejoin it.

IV **The first meal.** Eat something in the place you used to eat. Anything. If you cannot cook, a sandwich standing up is the meal. If somebody will eat with you, ask them — this is a good thing to ask for and a hard one, and the asking is part of it.

V **What does not resume.** Say out loud the things that are not going back to how they were. The job. The body. The person who is not here. The thing you could do before.

Returning is not resuming. The time you were gone is gone and nothing about coming back buys it. Say that too, if it is true.

VI **One true thing.** Tell one person one true thing about where you were. One. Not the whole account, not the version that manages their face. When you have said it, stop talking about it.

Then do the next ordinary thing, which is now just your life.

IV

# Direction and Uselessness

# 24 The Letter to the Guardian

The point is to get a stuck decision moving by writing both halves of a conversation with yourself, addressing the half you do not usually let speak.

This one asks for a door that shuts. If you do not have a room to yourself, a parked car, a library, or a bus at the wrong hour will do.

You need two sheets of paper, a pen, somewhere to write, and forty minutes. The next morning you need ten more.

Pick the name you will write to. You are writing to the part of you that has kept track of your direction while you were busy with other things, and not to the self you present to other people.

Sit down. Put your phone in another room. If you write on a device, that is the one that stays: put it in airplane mode and close everything else on it first.

On the first sheet write today's date and *Dear Guardian*.

Write what is actually happening in your life right now. Cover the money, the work, the people, your body, and the thing you have not told anyone. Write it the way you would write to a friend who loves you, will not flinch, and will tell you when you are lying. Twenty minutes, with no rereading, no correcting, and no making it sound good.

At the bottom write one question. It has to be about something you can do. Good: *Do I hand in my notice in March or stay another year? What am I doing about the drinking?* Bad: *Will she come back? Is this the right path?* Those are about other people or about the future and you will get nothing usable back.

Read your question out loud.

Take the second sheet. Write *Dear* and your own name. Answer the question. Write fast, do not reread, keep the pen moving for ten minutes by the clock. If you run out, write *I have nothing* over and over until words come.

Put both sheets in a drawer. Go to bed.

The next morning, after you have eaten, read both sheets through once.

Underline every sentence in the reply that names something you could do in the next seven days. Copy those onto a third sheet and put it where you will see it daily — the fridge, your wallet, taped inside a drawer.

Keep the first two sheets or destroy them. If they hold anything you or anyone else might need later — a date, an account of something that happened, a name — keep them somewhere you would not mind them being found.

You will know whether this worked by whether the thing on the third sheet gets done, and you will know that without writing it down.

# 25 The Star Ledger

The point is to run one page across a season and find, at the end, what repeats — because the star is legible mostly behind you, and it revises.

You need one page, a pen, eight to twelve weeks in front of you, one light, and one ordinary object.

1 **The page.** This is not a sitting. It is a page you add to as things happen, and read all at once at the end.

Start it when you notice something — the weather changing, a birthday, a rent day, the first day of a quarter. Date the top. That date is only there so you know when to read it.

The season is already running. You have not dated it yet.

Seven things go on the page, each time they happen. Write them when they land; do not go hunting for them.

A moment of aliveness — you were awake, and you know what you were doing. Not a good day; a lit minute.
A piece of work that felt like right effort — not the thing that succeeded, the time the work and the hour matched.
A want that comes back after you put it down.
A grief.
A skill you reached for without being asked — not the certificate, the hand you put out before you decided to.
Something you refused.
Something you envied.

Envy is on the list because it points at a direction. What you envy in someone is information about what you want, and it is worth more than it is comfortable. Write the name and the thing. Do not correct the envy on the page.

Do not interpret as you go. No themes, no sense-making, no moral. The page is evidence, collected.

At the end of the season, read the whole page at once. Look for what repeats. Write down what repeats — the actual thing that came back, the actual word, the actual want — and not what it means. If you reach for meaning, you have started editing the evidence.

Two things, flatly. No irreversible decision follows directly from this page; it tells you the direction and does not authorize the leap. And name your material constraints — money, hours, dependents, health — as facts on the page, in the same ink as everything else, not as failures to be overcome.

11 **The star and the commons.** Clear a space on a table. Put a lit candle or a lamp at one end for the star, and at the other end one ordinary object that somebody else's labor put in your hands — a key, a bus card, medicine, an invoice, a loaf. Put the page between them.

Name what keeps returning. Then name what makes it possible: who cooked, taught, drove, built, translated, repaired, or waited so this could exist.

Speak one vow you can actually keep. Something like: "I offer this promise with my feet still on the ground and my hands still my own."

Give the vow a body: a date on the calendar, cash in an envelope, a tool laid ready, help asked for, a day kept empty. Pay, repair, or replenish one thing the commons gave you.

If you set it down, set it down in daylight and say so to whoever carries the cost. Not at four in the morning. Not by simply stopping.

Then blow out the light and put the page away. The season told you what it told you. Another one is already running.

# 26 The Map Without a Permit

The point is to find where you are on someone else's map and then put it down — because the map is good, and it is not a permit.

Use this on the morning after a revelation, the year after the underworld, or the day somebody calls you enlightened.

You need a pen, a page, one hour, a map of stages that someone else drew, and the people who have lived in the wake of it.

I Name which map. A map is any ladder someone else built to tell you how far along you are. The alchemical operations. The jhānas. The Progress of Insight. Individuation. The twelve steps. The stages of grief. Any scheme of stages you already half-believe. Write its name at the top of the page. Half-believing is enough; you do not have to be a devotee.

II Read it. The stages, in order — not the summary you carry in your head.

III Locate yourself honestly. Which stage you are in, by the map's own description and not by your preference. Write the number or the name. Include the possibility that you are earlier than you would like. If you catch yourself reaching two stages forward because the map embarrassed you, write the honest one first and the wish second, and note that they are not the same.

IV What it confers. Write it out. And the answer is: nothing. Not rank. Not authority over anyone else's account of themselves. Not exemption from anything you owed before you picked up the map. Check it against your best day this year

— the map did not carry you up. Write the sentence: "This gives me nothing."

v **Ask the people who have lived in its wake.** Ask them: "Am I easier to correct? Am I easier to refuse? Does my peace require everyone else to stay calm? Who cleans up after my awakening?"

Listen without grading the witness. Write what they say under the sentence, with the names and the things you still owe.

If there is nobody in the wake to ask, the practice is still whole: name the map, locate yourself, write that it confers nothing, put it down, act unpermitted. Being alone with it is not the same as being cleared by it, and the map still gives you nothing.

vi **Put the map down for a stated period.** A month, a season. If the Work has depth, let it show as shade somebody else can sit in. Hold the door. Wash the cup. Make the call. Take no rank.

One instruction, flat.

Do not tell another person where they are on it.

Not to encourage them, not to diagnose them, not as a kindness. You do not know, and the telling is the permit you just gave back.

vii **Act unpermitted.** You have the map's word for where you are and none of its authority, and the stage never licensed a next step and does not now. So take the next real thing — the conversation, the application, the rest — and do it as an ordinary person in the middle of a week, with nothing above you saying you may.

Once in a year is enough, unless somebody has just called you enlightened.

# 27 The Feast of Enough

The point is to take pleasure that owes no result.

Five stations, and they are not one afternoon. The peach needs nobody. The game needs two people and a word. The touch needs two people and a hand. Do one and stop; a feast you have to get through is a shift.

I The feast. Take one pleasure that owes no result: a peach over the sink, loud music, a soft thing, a game whose rules keep changing, a long bath, a tiny cake for no occasion, a nap under a ridiculous blanket, a movie you have seen twelve times, a walk with no improving purpose, a paper crown, light moving across a wall.

Take one.

Take no lesson from it. Take no photograph. Gather no proof that it helped.

If someone shares the feast, let their pleasure take its own shape. Quiet is welcome. Grief can sit at the table. Fatigue can lie down. Nobody performs gratitude.

Ask only: more, less, different, or enough? Honor the answer.

II Play and whimsy. Play is life exceeding utility. It can be a game with no winner, a private noise, a tower of spoons, a bad drawing, an excellent nap, a dance nobody records. Grief can play. Pain can play. Seriousness can sit this one out.

Play is not wages paid after liberation. It is part of the liberated world.

Whimsy is the small unexpected turn: a blessing for the broken toaster, an invented saint of missed buses, an absurd name for weather, a private joke, a serious rite interrupted by laughter.

III **The useless gift.** Make or notice one thing with no expected outcome: a nonsense blessing, a tiny creature, a peculiar playlist title, a crown for a houseplant, a color that belongs to no brand, a joke that never leaves the room. Keep it private or give it freely. Let it create no debt.

IV **The game that stops at the word.** You need two or more people, five minutes, and a stop word agreed before you start.

Invent something small. It does not matter what, and the smaller the better. Three examples of the kind of thing: a rule about how to cross a room (only backwards, only with a hop, only if you touch the wall); a drawing passed back and forth where each person adds one line and nothing else; a sound each person must answer with a different sound, and the answer grows.

Agree the stop word. A word nobody would say by accident — not "stop," which is already in everyone's mouth. The name of a fruit. A nonsense word. Your grandmother's dog. Say it out loud once, together, so everyone has it.

Stopping is how the game succeeds, not how it fails. The stop word is not a withdrawal, not a complaint, not a called time-out. It is a move in the game, the same as a hop or a line or a note, and it sits in the rules with the rest of them.

So someone uses it in the first round. Not because something has gone wrong — because the round is teaching the group that the word exists and that saying it is safe. Whoever is nearest to it simply says the word and lets the rest happen.

When it is used, everyone stops, mid-move, mid-sentence. Nobody asks why. A plain stop or a plain no from anyone does the same.

No penalty for either. Not for using it, not for stopping, not for restarting, and not for ending. If stopping has a cost, nobody will do it.

Then play on, or stop for good. Either one is the game working.

v GREEN, YELLOW, RED. Two people, ten minutes, and one of you starts with a hand.

Touch the other person somehow. A hand on a forearm, a back rubbed, a neck worked, a leg tapped in a rhythm. Before the hand moves, say who it is for. *May I* asks for something you want. *Would you like me to* offers something they want. Both are real questions. They are not the same question, and the answer to one is not the answer to the other.

The one being touched says green, yellow, or red, out loud or by a sign you agreed first.

Green is keep going. More is a new question.

Yellow is change something. Slower, lighter, elsewhere, a pause to breathe. Yellow is not a complaint and not a stop.

Red is stop now, all of it. Nobody asks why.

Either of you can check — *still green?* — and either of you can change the answer without being asked. Say what you are about to change before the hand changes, and the answer starts over from green, yellow, or red.

Then swap.

Practice yellow. Green and red are already in most people's mouths; the middle is the part that gets used.

Afterward, say what worked and what did not.

THE LAST PAGES

# OTHER WAYS THROUGH

Every practice in this book assumes some door. When one of them is shut, take another.

| IF THIS DOOR IS SHUT | ANOTHER WAY IN |
|---|---|
| Stillness or upright posture | Sit, lie down, stand, pace, rock, wheel, change position, stim, or stay as you are. |
| Inward sensation | Attend to a wall, a screen, a device, a texture, a sound, an image, a trusted description, or no single thing. |
| Spoken words | Sign, type, select an image, point, use augmentative communication, make a mark, or stay silent. |
| Writing or memory | Voice note, object placement, photograph, color, witness, calendar mark, prepared card, or no record. |
| Solitude and privacy | A friend nearby, shared quiet, a library corner, a phone call with no camera, or a ten-second practice. |
| Objects, food, or drink | No object, something already owned, a non-physical offering, no ingestion, or ordinary medical care. |

| If this door is shut | Another way in |
|---|---|
| Time and energy | One line, one gesture, assistance, a deferred action, rest, or stopping. |
| Travel or sensory exposure | The bedside, a window, a picture on a screen, softer light, headphones, a road the body can take, or no travel. |
| Matching a group | Individual pace, looking away, delayed response, stimming, silence, disagreement, or leaving. |
| A visible season | The quarter, the pay cycle, the care roster, the school term, the shift pattern, or eight weeks counted from a date you write down. |

# When the Practice Must End

A practice is not a medic, and it is not a locked door against help.

When a practice makes the world harder to return to — panic rising, sleep gone, the walls leaning in — put it down. Call someone. Take the medicine. Go where help is.

The living outrank the working. No working is worth the life it was for.

Stop, and say it out loud: enough for today; the world remains, and I return to it.

# A BLESSING

May you be late to nothing that matters.
May your no be survivable, and your yes be yours.
May the work be shared, the cup held by more than one hand, and the dog walked by somebody who is not you at least once this week.
May you find the door, and may it be unlocked from the inside.
And when it is not: may the room be wide, may the kettle be on,
may there be a chair at the table with your name on it that nobody has to earn.

Amen — or if amen is a word you cannot use: go in, eat something.

# FURTHER READING

These are the works the book leans on hardest, sorted by where they bear. Most are short, and most can be read free online; where a copy is easy to come by I have said so. If you read the site online as a hypermedia project, these links, and many others, are available there.

*https://www.thereturningway.world/*

## The Table: Who Is Here and What Is Not Said

The Secret Book of John (Apocryphon of John), second century, trans. Frederik Wisse. The demiurge and the archons come from here, and so does the body as a prison, which the book refuses. Read it to see what was kept and what was left on the plate. Free in the Nag Hammadi Library online.

Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, c. 500. A few pages. The grammar of saying and unsaying that the Mystery uses, with its late-antique hierarchy still attached. Several free translations.

*The Cloud of Unknowing*, anonymous, late fourteenth century. The English contemplative inheritance behind meeting what you cannot possess. Evelyn Underhill's edition is public domain.

Henry Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal*, 1964. An essay. The imaginal as a mode distinct from the merely unreal, which is the ground the near Otherworld stands on.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Land as Pedagogy*, 2014. Land, language and governance kept irreducibly specific. The correction to any portable return to nature, and to any personal theology that thinks it can borrow one. Open access in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*.

## Dependent Arising, and the Self That Is Not One

Kaccānagotta Sutta (SN 12.15). One page. Neither existence nor non-existence; the middle the book keeps trying to stand in. Free at SuttaCentral.

The Heart Sutra. Emptiness at its most compressed. Read it with a commentary. The 84000 translation is free.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *We Are Not One*, in *Noble & True*. A Theravada teacher arguing that a system of mutual dependence is not thereby a kind one, which is the argument of The Ground. Given away by the author at dhammatalks.org.

David Loy, *The Many Faces of Nonduality*. Separates the nondualities that get run together, and argues that forgetting the self frees thinking rather than ending it. The distinction the two homecomings need. An article, free from the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Please Call Me by My True Names*, 1978. The poem of being every position at once. Held here beside a refusal to make the pirate and the girl equivalent.

## The Otherworld and the Mystery

*Immram Brain* (The Voyage of Bran), seventh or eighth century. Branch, invitation, altered time, and the return that turns a man to ash on the shore. The book's first story. Séamus Mac Mathúna's edition of the Irish text is free at CELT; Kuno Meyer's English translation of 1895 is free on the Internet Archive.

*Echtra Nerai* (The Adventures of Nera). Samhain, the hanged man, the cave, the warning, and the tokens brought back to prove it. Meyer's edition is a free PDF from University College Cork.

*Echtra Chondla* (The Voyage of Connla the Fair), in P. W. Joyce, *Old Celtic Romances*, 1879. The invitation that is not answered with a return. A Victorian mediation, and worth reading as one.

*Thomas the Rhymer* and *Tam Lin*, Child ballads 37 and 39. Gifts with terms, silence as the price, and the road that is neither heaven nor hell. Any edition of Child; Anaïs Mitchell and Jefferson Hamer's *Child Ballads* if you would rather hear them.

Heather C. Key, "The Otherworld of Early Ireland", in *Otherworld Women in Early Irish Literature*, Amsterdam University Press, 2023.

The scholarly brake on a single recovered cosmology. Behind a paywall, so a library.

## Care, Dependence, Disability

Mia Mingus, *Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice* and *Forced Intimacy: An Ableist Norm*, both 2017. Support without ownership, and the refusal of closeness, disclosure and gratitude as a fee for being helped. Both on her blog, Leaving Evidence.

Eva Feder Kittay, *The Ethics of Care, Dependence, and Disability*. Dependency without converting care into ownership, and the carer's own material conditions kept in view. Free on her site.

Nancy Eiesland, *Encountering the Disabled God*, 2004. A disabled God rather than a curing one, in the first person. The short essay; the book is *The Disabled God*, 1994.

Jennifer Nedelsky, *Reconceiving Autonomy*, 1989. Property is the wrong metaphor for autonomy, argued as law. Open access from Yale.

Johanna Hedva, *Sick Woman Theory*, 2016. Rest, homeboundness and illness as political conditions rather than spiritual failure. Free online.

Sunaura Taylor, *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert*, 2024. Bodies, water and land injured by the same infrastructure. The argument against pristine nature, and against "nature heals".

## Attention, Love, and the Things That Narrow Them

Simone Weil, *Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God*, 1942. Ten pages. Attention as a waiting that leaves itself empty for what it meets, and the plain claim that the same attention turned on a neighbour is love. In *Waiting for God*.

bell hooks, *Love as the Practice of Freedom*, 1994. Love as the opposite of domination, so that unowned love does not shrink to a private ethic. In *Outlaw Culture*.

Audre Lorde, *A Litany for Survival* and *The Uses of the Erotic*, both 1978. Fear and speech as political conditions of attention; feeling as a source of discernment rather than a product. The poem is free online; the essay is in *Sister Outsider*.

Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*, 2005. Listening as an embodied, collective discipline. The *Sonic Meditations* are a page each.

Nick Seaver, *Captivating Algorithms: Recommender Systems as Traps*, 2019. The personalising system as an ensemble of people, signals and institutional goals, not an occult agent. The distinction between prediction and answerability. Journal article; a preprint is free.

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967. Social relations mediated by images. The structural account of enticement, and an audit of any book that sells critique as atmosphere. Free at marxists.org.

## Power and Freedom

Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 2004, and *Wages Against Housework*, 1975. The material history under the book's mystical diagnosis, and the extraction hidden when labour is called love. The pamphlet is free online.

Frantz Fanon, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness", in *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961. A structure surviving its first set of hands. The chapter, not the reputation. Free at marxists.org.

Sylvia Wynter, *No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues*, 1994. Classification with consequences. Domination as something other than myth or psychology. Free PDF.

David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, 2011, and *Dead Zones of the Imagination*, 2012. Obligation before money, and the interpretive labour bureaucracy forces on whoever has less power. The essay is free at his site.

Scott Alexander, *Meditations on Moloch*, 2014. A pattern with hands and no head, in a secular vocabulary. Seated here beside Fanon on purpose. Free online.

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, 1973, and *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, 1986. The beautiful whole built on hidden suffering, and the anti-heroic shape a book can take instead. Both free at her site.

James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 1955, and *The Fire Next Time*, 1963. Acceptance and refusal held in one mind, and love as what takes off the mask. The 1962 *New Yorker* essay that became the second book is online.

Audre Lorde, *The Uses of Anger*, 1981, and *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*, 1977. Anger as information and a demand, and poetry as a means of survival rather than a luxury. Both in *Sister Outsider*.

James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1970, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1971. Where the guests who ask who cooked come from.

Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance*, 2022. Rest located in racial capitalism, so that the holy useless cannot become a lifestyle.

Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*, 2020. The commons made operational. Short, and the core of it is free on his site.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *The Serviceberry*, 2020 essay, 2024 book. A gift economy, with its own warning that a dishonoured gift has material consequences. The essay is free at Emergence.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* Two pages. The work that holds everything else up, made visible. Free PDF from the Queens Museum.

Fred Moten, *Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)*, 2013. A consent not to be a single being. The strongest living argument against the book's claim that freedom is shared among individuals, and it is not answered here. Journal article.

## Magick, Gods, and the Magnum Opus

Aleister Crowley, *Liber AL vel Legis* (The Book of the Law), 1904, and the "Definitions and Theorems" that open *Magick in Theory and Practice*, 1929. Where star, Will and the Great Work come from, and what the book takes the good chair back from. Both free at sacred-texts.

Catherine Bell, *The Ritual Body and the Dynamics of Ritual Power*, 1990. What a rite trains into the body, and how mastery turns into rank. Free from Santa Clara University.

T. M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 2020. How trained attention makes invisible others present, across several traditions. The mechanism behind a god who is made of attention.

Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1912. God as the pattern of a society's attention, felt from inside. The book's god-as-language is this with the congregation widened to the quarter. Free on Gutenberg.

Terry Pratchett, *Small Gods*, 1992. The same claim as comedy: a god shrunk to a tortoise because his people believe in the church instead of him.

C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 1944. The alchemical opus read as psychological change in the only vocabulary its authors had. The Great Work takes its shape from here and refuses its ending.

*Inana's Descent to the Nether World*, Sumerian, early second millennium BCE. Descent that needs help to return from, and that carries an obligation back up. Free at the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, Oxford.

Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 1925, and Catherine Keller's process theology. Every location involving an aspect of itself in every other. Whitehead is free on Gutenberg; John Cobb's lectures at religion-online are the gentlest way in.

## Colophon

The text is set in EB Garamond, cut by Georg Duffner and Octavio Pardo after Claude Garamont's sixteenth-century romans; the running heads, folios and hanging numerals in Spectral, by Production Type. The titles are Cinzel and Cinzel Decorative, by Natanael Gama, after Roman inscriptional capitals. All four are under the SIL Open Font License.

Cinzel is Roman and the drawn marks are Insular — a trefoil, a triskele, a vesica, a knot, the sun and moon, the four elements, a spiral. That is two civilisations, and it is a decision rather than an accident: the theology is syncretic by construction and they sit at one table on purpose. Eleven marks close twelve parts, so the sequence wraps and *The Great Work* repeats *The Table*'s trefoil.

The one place this edition only approximates its source: on screen the first line of each part is set in small capitals, and it is literally the line, reflowing with the measure. Print has no such instruction, so the build measures off about a line's worth of words and sets those. Everything else here is what the setting always was underneath the margin.

Nothing in the ornament is sourced, so there is no rights question and it all scales.

