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# GHOST STORIES

A MEMOIR

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# GHOST STORIES

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## Lost Time

I am alive. My husband, Paul Auster, is dead. He died on April 30, 2024, at 6:58 p.m. here in the Brooklyn house where I am now writing these words. He was diagnosed with non-small cell lung cancer in January 2023. But before that, in early November 2022, Paul had a CT scan in the emergency room at Mount Sinai West hospital. The radiologist spotted a mass in his right lung and noted it might be cancer.

We all die, but only some of us know our lives could end soon. Although I had often thought about what it would mean to live without Paul, I began to imagine it more often. I imagined walking around the house alone. I imagined grieving. If your father dies, I said to our daughter, Sophie, I will lose my everyday.

What I didn't imagine is that after Paul's death, time would be deranged beyond recognition. I remember and then forget what day it is. I remember it's the month of May and then forget. The hours skip ahead but minutes often move slowly. I want to root my body in calendar and clock, those reliable, if ultimately fictional, markers of time, but I'm not making sense of their regular beats. I'm afraid if I don't keep checking date, day, and hour, I will lose my orientation, stumble on the stairs, and fall or float away ungrounded. I make lists and calendars. Lists and calendars lie on various tables and surfaces around the house. I worry I will forget chores, appointments, bills that must be paid. I worry my thoughts

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will scatter into more pieces than I can recollect. I am now in the business of recollecting myself.

I have trouble breathing. My heart beats too fast, not all the time, in bursts. I have pains between my ribs, sometimes intense. My neck and head ache. My nerves buzz and hum, and electricity shoots up and down my limbs. My gut rumbles, and my bowel rhythms are off. Some of these are old ailments that have worsened. I imagine I've grown a tumor that mirrors the one found in Paul's lung, and I will die soon. I take the fantasy further. Maybe mirror cancer is a rare medical phenomenon outside the purview of mainstream science, one of those outliers that has been jettisoned from "cleaned data."

I'm glad I can still laugh at myself. Then again, hypochondriacs die from illness too.

I sleep by pill.

I pick up a paper or an object that needs attention and then see another that calls to me. I put down the first thing only to spot it hours later, an inanimate victim of the unfinished gesture. A pile of unopened condolence letters and cards lie on the red table in the dining room. I cannot bear to open them. Not today. I will wait. Tomorrow.

Tomorrow comes. I open the letters, but I don't always understand what I'm reading. The short, kind messages are best. There are also long, handwritten letters of many pages from people I don't know. Paul must have belonged to them in some way, but exactly how I can't always make out. I sit down to write the word *tomorrow* for a to-do list. When I look down, I see that I have written *yesterday*. I think of Freud's comment about opposites in dreams. In the world

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of sleep, your towering friend may shrink to the size of a bug. There is a dreamlike quality to my life now.

I climb into a half-filled bathtub and realize I have forgotten to remove my socks.

May 14. The widow needs therapy. I'm off to see a psychiatrist-psychoanalyst highly recommended by a person I trust. This need isn't new to me. I was in psychoanalytically based psychotherapy for eleven years. It liberated me. The pandemic threw Dr. C. and me onto Zoom, and in the spring of 2021, as the potency of the deadly circulating virus diminished, the treatment came to an end. We planned a last in-person goodbye session in the fall. It never happened. On October 1, Dr. C. died suddenly and unexpectedly, at age seventy-one, of a heart attack. The shock of her death was the first in a series of shocks. Had she still been alive, I would have been heading for her office. Because Paul was housebound at the end of his life and I didn't dare leave him alone, walking became a luxury. I decide to give myself plenty of time and take the subway to the Upper West Side.

For reasons I don't understand, I seem to have taken the wrong route to Grand Army Plaza. I recognize the arch and the statues, the circle of heavy traffic, the library across the way, but I can't find the subway entrance. I have been taking this subway for many years. What has happened to me? I ask three pedestrians to point me toward the stairs to the subway, but like residents of dreams, not one of them can direct me to the 2/3 train. I look at the time. I may miss the first meeting with the eminent analyst. Am I now officially demented? I call an Uber and arrive at Central Park West and Eighty-Ninth Street the minute the session is scheduled to begin.

In the days that immediately followed Paul's small graveside funeral, on May 3 at Green-Wood Cemetery, a compulsion to sort,

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throw, and scrub came over me. When I'm distressed or anxious, I often clean. I get my own little world into shiny order. I exercise some control by getting rid of dust and fluff and blur. I was not going to be one of those widows who leaves her husband's clothes in the closet for months or even years. A dead man doesn't need shirts, keys, shaving cream. A dead man can't be sick. He doesn't take pills.

The large transparent plastic bag that had once held a new comforter cover became home to the leftover medicines I stored behind a stack of sheets in the linen closet. It was the first thing to go. Vials of dexamethasone, prednisone, meloxicam, mirtazapine, sodium and magnesium tablets, levothyroxine, oxycodone, tamsulosin, trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole, sucralfate, famotidine, gabapentin. A few fentanyl patches. Hydrocortisone in 5-, 10-, and 20-milligram containers. A syringe and tiny glass bottle for injection of the same steroid in case of endocrine crisis, blister packs of Zofran, bottles of liquid sucralfate and lactulose. These I remember. No doubt there were other drugs in the bag that accumulated during the year and a half of Paul's cancer treatment, medicines prescribed, discontinued, and sometimes prescribed again, depending on the emergency of the moment. There were many emergencies. I saved a couple of charts I drew up for Paul's daily drug intake, with the name of the pharmaceutical and what it was for, followed by one, two, three, or four lines I filled in by hand: 7:46 a.m., 12:00 p.m., 4:35 p.m.

I knew unused drugs shouldn't be dumped in the trash or flushed down the sink or toilet, so the bag of medical detritus grew and grew until its ziplock top was hard to close. After Paul's funeral, my sister Asti took the bag and delivered it to a pharmacy in her neighborhood, where they do something with those medicines.

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What they do I don't know, and I, usually curious about everything, don't care.

Some of those pills kept Paul from dying sooner. Others made him feel better. Some made him sicker. When I placed the bag in Asti's arms, my feeling of relief was even greater than I had imagined. I hated that bag. If I had had the courage to line up those little vials and bottles, they might have served as a tangible temporal record of the sickness unto death, but the sight of the Rx numbers, dates filled, the sometimes-hard-to-pronounce drug names, and the instructions and warnings on the bottles not only screamed failed treatment at me, they were reminders of my own ongoing state of controlled panic, which waxed and waned for many months. I delivered the correct medicines, although a few times I brought them to Paul late. I sat beside my husband during the four- and five-hour infusion treatments. I sat beside him in the ER, and next to his bed day after day when he was hospitalized. I managed the Memorial Sloan Kettering patient portal and regularly composed questions for the doctors and nurses. I digested countless medical papers on non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) and its treatment. This helped me ask Paul's doctors reasonable questions, and yet my outward competence and fortitude disguised the fact that I lived in fear. I was afraid I would give him the wrong pills or fail to recognize a symptom of an imminent emergency, but mostly I was afraid of what I couldn't control—his death.

After he died, Paul's suffering and my vigilance were rendered moot, as were the cancer treatments and the treatments to treat the grotesque consequences of the same cancer treatments. The "adverse effects" of the immunotherapy drug nivolumab, a checkpoint inhibitor, ended Paul's life before the cancer had a chance to do the same. Nivolumab was not stored in the bag. It was given

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as an infusion, along with the chemotherapy drugs carboplatin and paclitaxel. Handing that bag to my sister didn't purge me of memory, but it freed me from looking at hard evidence of what Paul had endured and I had witnessed.

His jeans, T-shirts, shoes, belts, socks, sweaters, his single suit (he rarely wore it), a tuxedo, and coats have mostly vanished, given to family members or donated to charity. The leather jacket with sheepskin lining he bought in Argentina years ago (he would have known the exact year) and wore and wore and wore still hangs in the coat closet on the parlor floor. I intend to wear it when the weather gets cold again. I intend to wrap myself up in this remnant of the beloved for as long as it holds together. When I saw it on my closet rounds, I pulled the jacket out from its hanger and pressed my face into the fur. I hoped to inhale him in absentia, but I smelled only must and leather, nothing human.

The closet in our bedroom is now roomy. I still write "our." Although emptied of his modest wardrobe, it is still "our" closet. It is still "our" bedroom. As long as I live here, I think it will be ours. None of his clothes remain inside it, but time made it ours.

Where is that time now?

I tossed his boxer shorts. For many years, Paul bought Fruit of the Loom plaid boxer shorts in packs of three at a store on Fifth Avenue in Brooklyn. Early in our marriage, I learned not to interfere with his sartorial desires, which were simple but rigid. He liked walking to that inexpensive store to buy black Levi's jeans, a particular brand of heavy cotton T-shirt, and the shorts. I cannot remember when it was exactly, but we had started hospice care, and his general weakness made it impossible for him to dress himself, so I helped him on with his clothes.

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One of those mornings as I rummaged in his underwear drawer, he said, *Not the red ones*.

*Not the red ones?*

*I don't like the red ones.*

*You mean you've never liked the red ones?*

It seems he had never liked the red ones. They remained in the drawer. On examination, I noted that they looked newer than the others. He bought the three-packs for the blue and green plaids. The reds were sacrifice.

Years and years of plaid boxer shorts, and I had no idea he didn't like the red ones.

After I had pulled the T-shirt over his head, a white one that morning, not black, he said, *You're so good to me, Siri*. And I stroked his face and answered him in Norwegian, *Det skulle bare mangle*. Over the years Paul learned several phrases in Norwegian, my first language. That is one of them. Literally it means *It should only lack*. Translation: But of course. It goes without saying.

As I write this, I'm amazed by the determination with which I attacked Paul's study. He spent most of his days from morning into the afternoon writing in a small room at the back of our house near the garden. My heart wouldn't be in it now, but then I was on a mission. My guess is that there were at least one hundred fifty pens on the surface of Paul's desk: fountain pens, ballpoints, click pens, and roller pens, either laid out in uneven rows or sticking up from containers. He had a dozen or so mechanical pencils. He had a supply of typewriter ribbons for his manual Olympia to last him several additional long lifetimes or equip a small army of scribbling Luddites. He had little Tipp-Ex correction squares to place beneath the keys (not a vast supply of those). He had a number

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of well-used erasers and thirty-five Clairefontaine notebooks, the kind with graph paper inside them. Before he typed up his manuscripts on the Olympia, he wrote all his books in longhand in those notebooks.

We did not disturb each other's workspaces. They were sacrosanct. He never touched my desk. I never touched his. I had no idea he owned so many pens, ribbons, and notebooks. I often searched for pens I felt sure I had left in the kitchen drawer and didn't find them. He always had at least one (often two or three) pens in the front pocket of his jeans. If poignancy is a feeling somewhere between slight tenderness and pain, then it was poignancy I felt when I saw the pens and discovered all the ribbons. Pens are still sold everywhere, but typewriter ribbons and Tipp-Ex sheets are not as easy to come by, so it made sense for Paul to be prepared for their possible disappearance, not just from New York City but from the face of the earth.

I loved the percussive sound his typewriter made when he pounded on it, fast and then slower and fast again. *I like the resistance of the keys on my fingers*, he said. Paul kept time with his tools. In his writing habits, the young man lived on in the old man.

The typewriter sits on his desk just as it used to, a speechless thing that has now lost its place in the writing ritual. Habits, routines, rituals create meaning from repetition, and those repetitions can serve as a fortress against anxiety. Paul didn't jiggle or chew his nails. He was never visibly jumpy, but anxiety colored his life. We arrived hours too early at airports, the source of much familial humor. When I had taken charge of ordering cars or preserving tickets (in the days of paper tickets), he checked again and again to make sure I had done what I had repeatedly told him I had

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done. He was possessive of objects he regarded as extensions of his own body—pens, but also his house keys, his tiny datebook I ordered every year from Charing Cross, and his wallet—all three of which he kept in his right front pocket. These objects were not to be touched by anyone else. When he was in the hospital and suffered from delirium, the keys, book, and wallet were stored in a plastic bag in a drawer beside his bed, but they were no longer *on him*. When he woke in the foreign bed and couldn't find them, he would call me or our son-in-law, Spencer. He had scribbled down appointments he needed to remember. He had no money. How could he get a cab? How would he get back into the house?

The man couldn't stand up from his bed alone.

"The relation of anxiety to its object," Søren Kierkegaard writes in *The Concept of Anxiety*, is "to something that is nothing." Anxiety, the philosopher says, is like looking into an abyss. Paul used that word for death repeatedly in the last year of his life. *I have spent a long time looking into the abyss*, he said.

Paul's courage as he looked into the abyss astounded me.

His handwriting is all over the house on little notes and papers, on the checkbooks stored in a cupboard in the library. There is a white folder lying on a wide counter under bookshelves in the library that I haven't opened yet. The names of people he wanted to invite to his memorial are on a piece of paper inside it, as well as notes for his will, which he changed only days before he died. On the outside in his handwriting are the words:
*To Siri/Sophie*
*Notes on Beyond.*
*1/1/23.*

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Before Paul died, I smiled at the wry humor of *Beyond*. It's not at all funny to me now. Sophie and I are living in Beyond, and the logic of time and space is scrambled here.

I stored the fax machine in the basement. Paul and I shared an assistant, Jen Dougherty, who is now my assistant alone. Jen would fax Paul the emails she received for him. He would then call her, dictate answers to the inquiries, or simply say yes or no, and she would carry out his instructions. My husband's investment in the rapid advance of communication technologies pretty much ended with the fax machine, although there were exceptions. Weary of seeing Paul at the door of my study, large-eyed and apologetic about the intrusion, with a question about a date or fact he needed to check on the internet, I bought him an iPad, an addendum to my own, which he used without email as a research tool.

No one faxes me.

Besides Jen, the only other faxes that arrived were from roofing companies. Advertisements for new roofs regularly chugged out of that machine.

*Probably roofing*, I would say to Paul.
*Probably*, he would say, and then walk down the stairs to check.

Paul didn't own a cell phone. When the landline rang, I knew it was for him. I never picked up. Since his death, it has hardly rung. When it does, it's usually Paul's agent, Carol Mann. She called him almost every day on that number. On Sunday morning, I know it's Paul's sister, Janet. They talked every week. I take the call now. The only other calls come from robots, real estate hawks who circle obituaries, and scam artists preying on old people who have kept their landlines.

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The four-story house in Brooklyn where Paul and I lived steadily for thirty years and where our daughter, Sophie, grew up, and where Daniel, my stepson, lived when he wasn't at his mother's, became vast overnight. The two of us occupied this space for a long time without children, and the house felt roomy but not huge. Looking at the many thousands of our books that line the walls makes my arms ache, as if I have been told I must box up the volumes and carry them alone to some other location.

When we first lived together, in 1981, we rented two top floors of a house at 18 Tompkins Place in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. I owned very little at the time except books. We gave away our duplicate copies, of which there were many. We picked the best edition to keep. I remember thinking to myself: This means we really have to stay together.

Sophie lives in her own house now in another neighborhood in Brooklyn, Bedford-Stuyvesant, with her husband, Spencer, and their baby, Miles, who was born on New Year's Day, 2024. It would be wholly reasonable to donate a few rooms from this house to the three of them on Halsey Street if such a thing were possible, but it isn't.

Although furnishings have been replaced over the years, the configuration of the rooms in our house is the same. The kitchen and bathrooms were redone, chairs and sofas have been reupholstered, walls painted; but sameness has dominated difference over time. As I navigate the house alone, I imitate the rhythms of before Paul died in the spaces of after he died. The house is a real house, but it is also an architecture of memory.

All houses occupied by the same persons for any length of time become zones of gestural repetition, of meals made and consumed,

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of garbage taken out and mail taken in, of coffee makers turned on and off, of kettles with boiling water poured out for tea, of beds made and laundry folded, of showers and baths, of toothbrushing and face washing, and on and on. These belong to various forms of embodied memory. I walk through these banal tasks just as I used to. My limbs move. I breathe in and out. My heart beats. The sameness is felt in my movements, and there is comfort in repeating them, but the rhythm of these acts is also irregular. The pattern has gone awry. I've lost the old timing.

Every Sunday, "the kids" (Paul and Siri's shorthand for Sophie and Spencer) come to dinner.

On Sunday, the kids were here for dinner. We ate swordfish on the deck in the spring air as the kids' kid, still made entirely of milk, stared at the climbing hydrangea with amazement, chortled, produced conversation-like sounds, and chewed on his fist. Spencer did the dishes. Monday morning, I pulled open the dishwasher in the kitchen and looked down at three clean, neatly stacked plates and the self-interrogation began. "The kids" were here yesterday, Sunday, as usual. Where's the fourth plate? Did it break? The broken pieces of a blue-and-white plate actually floated before me as a mental image. Why don't I remember? I asked myself these questions in all seriousness. My incomprehension was rooted in habit, and it took me at least a minute to reorient myself. Had someone asked me "Is your husband dead?," I would have instantly answered yes. My puzzlement over the missing plate had nothing to do with that certitude. It came from somewhere else, a visual perception that had become automatic, and my internal narrator, that conscious "voice" in my head, followed in obedience.

After my mother died, every day in the late afternoon I would reach for the phone to call her. I never actually dialed.

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Paul loved the library on the third floor of the house. He was largely responsible for the arrangement of the books in that room, parts of which I still find irrational. About fifteen years ago in early summer, he was possessed by a need to reorganize the books, not just in that room but in all the rooms of the house. We gave away many hundreds of books we decided were no longer important to us. I made several logical suggestions about a system, including to just stick to the alphabet. We compromised on an order, classifications by genre, language, and century. It took days to organize. One evening near the end of the project, with a few hundred books still lying on the library floor, we went to bed. Around two in the morning, I woke up. Finding no Paul beside me, I walked into the hallway, noticed a light from the library, opened the door, and saw him teetering on a ladder as he pushed books into the shelves. He was wearing nothing but boxer shorts (they must have been either blue or green plaid). I laughed and told him to come to bed. He could finish in the morning. He remained. In the name of finishing the task, the "order" degenerated into eccentricity.

*Where's Gertrude Stein, for God's sake?* I would yell at him.

The TV is also in the library. Every night we were at home, we watched a movie in the evening. Paul saved films with a DVR (another technology he liked). *I kept this one with Lucille Ball for you. You want to try it?*

When I turn slightly to my left here at my desk, I see Paul's handwriting on a piece of paper that lined one of his boxes of Schimmelpennincks, the small cigars he smoked for decades. It's pinned with a tack to the bulletin board in front of me, a space for flotsam and jetsam—postcards, a couple of honorary doctorate citations, prize notices, three old drawings of mine, a WE ARE SALMAN RUSHDIE button, a YES WE DID from after the first Obama election, photos

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of Paul and Sophie, my parents, and my sisters—Liv, Asti, and Ingy (Ingrid)—the dearest ones. On the cigar paper: "I have 17 cents in my pocket and the clothes I stand in, but I have an idea. *Dames,* Joan Blondell, 1934."

In the early days of our love affair, Paul and I went to the movies all over the city.

One memory that returns: In 1981, not long after we met, Paul and I saw *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* at the Thalia, the now closed, dingy, smelly, but endearing revival house at Ninety-Fifth and Broadway he and I had both frequented before we became a couple. Was it empty or crowded? Was it the afternoon or evening? I don't remember. I do remember I was heady in love with him, electrified by his presence beside me, but also attentive to the movie. In one scene, the young heroine, Francie, picks up her dead father's shaving mug from his barber. I don't know if Paul made a small noise or took a breath, but I turned to look at my new lover, and I saw a heavy stream of tears running hard down his cheeks, the liquid shining in the reflected light of the screen. I looked away instantly and wondered, Who is this person?

I didn't know who the person was. Years later, I would say to him, *You cry in fiction. I cry in life*.

I have no idea how to use the DVR, although I could easily learn by looking up the procedure online. It isn't my ignorance that prevents me from settling in to watch a film every evening. Since Paul died, I have read books or science papers in the evening with mixed concentration. I have listened to the radio. I have turned to a public TV station with no commercials, preferably a dull British detective show, to which I give only half my attention. To immerse myself in a film would mean reliving a repeated experience that now has

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ragged holes in it. Paul isn't here to name every actor on the screen, to tell me a story about the director or cameraman, to point to a shot and explain how it's done.

*I want to die in the library. I imagine putting a hospital bed in here*, he said to me long before the hospital bed arrived and well before we knew the cancer had returned. He knew he wanted to die in that room filled with light. Light became more and more important to him as he neared death.

I have been sleeping on my side of the bed. So far, I haven't found myself taking up more room than I used to. When I wake, I do not expect him to be beside me. I do not expect him to walk into the room. I know I cannot conjure him, as much as I would like to. I dreaded his imminent death for far too long. I occupy the same space in the bed where we coupled and slept, year after year. It's the bed of his snoring, and, less often, of mine, the bed of his half-conscious muttering in the final months of his life I tried hard to decipher but mostly couldn't, except that he once said *meloxicam*—an NSAID (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug) he had to give up because it may have caused his sodium numbers to drop, but which had given him considerable relief from the terrible pain in his spine.

We slept together in that bed for the last time on April 28, two nights before he died. Spencer wheeled Paul into the room and helped me lift him onto the bed. He, Sophie, and Miles had come to stay with us. After I crawled in with Paul, he stroked my hand and arm for what seemed like a long time. We talked. He wanted me to live on, live long, to write more. I woke up several times that night and reached out for him to make sure he was breathing. I used to do it with Sophie when she was an infant. Sophie does it with Miles now. She checks. *I just want to hear that he's breathing.*

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When did Paul say *This is going faster than I thought*? "This" being dying. Maybe a week before.

He thought he had more time. He believed he had months. I felt sure he didn't, but I said nothing. No one can know for sure how long a person has to live, after all. Why should I advertise a hunch? In March, Paul had begun what he hoped would be a small book, *Letters to Miles*. The thirty-five pages that exist are mostly devoted to stories about Miles's parents, Sophie and Spencer. He was going to tell stories about the two of us and other family members, but exactly what shape the letters were meant to take, I don't know.

He was unable to go on. He wrote the last letter to his grandson in early April.

On May 17, I woke up afraid. Where was I? After several seconds of high alarm, I understood that my head was at the foot of the bed and that my legs were pushing against the pillows. The day before, I had written the sanguine statement: "I have been sleeping on my side of the bed." Did my sleeping self rebel? No, you are not sleeping on your side of the bed. Life has been turned upside down and you with it. Look, you're sprawled out on his territory, usurping dead space.

I have named my state of mind "cognitive splintering." It sounds like a term scientists might come up with for grief and its confusions.

Forgive me, I have cognitive splintering. My husband died recently. The house, the bed, my body are out of whack.

This is the house of our calling out to each other from one floor to another; of reading each other's manuscripts aloud in the green

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chairs in the living room; of sitting in the garden, of my pointing to newly opening tulips or to the roses at peak bloom in the garden because I'm afraid he might forget to look and miss the moment. The roses are blooming now without him. They are pink and lush and bursting open without him. This is the house of our short talks and our long ones, of our disputations and declarations of love, the house of our suffering over events we couldn't control or prevent. Lightning strikes. It strikes again. This is the house of a long ongoing dialogue about little things and big ones, a dialogue that has now ended.

Time is passing. It passes seemingly without me. Do I want to be in it? Or is this temporal paralysis something I need?

On Sunday, May 19, I made the following note:
"Siri Hustvedt walks around the house and talks to herself. She asks a question and answers it. The woman who now conducts a dialogue alone is subject to intermittent collapse. Only seconds after she smiled over a witty remark she had made to herself, she looks at his chair in the dining room, the blue chair where he ate breakfast every morning and ate dinner every night, the chair underneath which are scratches in the floorboards because he sat heavily in that chair and sometimes moved it while he was sitting. The scratches that annoyed her before he died are now traces of his body's living weight after he died. She buckles over, and, with her arms folded across her chest, she howls at the insensate walls, 'I want you back. I want you back.'"

Grief is not constant. I can seal myself up for days against the storm, and then gale winds come and knock me down.

More condolence letters arrive, but fewer now. The big pile of mail is lying on the mantel in the dining room. So sorry to hear about

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Paul's *passing*. Everyone uses this word. As far as I can tell, hardly anybody *dies* anymore. They *pass*. When I was a child, I heard people say *He passed away.* My mother detested the euphemism. *People don't pass away*, she said. *They die*. Conviction made my mother's voice a little hoarse. That's the voice I hear in my head now. The *away* has mostly vanished. The first dictionary definition I found of *pass* as a verb: "to move or cause to move in a specified direction." As a noun: "an act or instance of moving past or through something." It's like reading nonsense.

I'm living in a haunted house, inhabited by a ghost Paul and I made together, a "we" that doesn't exist anymore, not in the present anyway, but it has penetrated all the rooms. It's a hugging, touching, lovemaking, laughing, soothing, arguing, quietly talking double figure of the past with secret jokes and references known only to "us."

Paul once said, *If we lived together for another hundred years, we would become the same person*.

When exactly the same thought appeared in each of our heads at exactly the same time, ignited by the same catalyst, we would joke that we were well on our way to that conjoined reality.

But clouds of obscurity and ambiguity in him are also present in me as I write.

Human beings die. This fact is undeniable. Whatever time might be, and the arguments about what is and what isn't time are many, I know I used to feel I was *in time*.

The shape of time.

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Sophie told us she was pregnant on April 24, 2023.

According to Spencer, Paul and I had dinner at the kids' house in Bedford-Stuyvesant on April 30, 2023. We dearly hoped the pregnancy would last. Exactly one year later, around the same time of day, Sophie, Spencer, Liv, Asti, Ingy, Andrina, our housekeeper, who started working for us not long after we moved to this house, the hospice nurse Kettlie, and the oblivious Miles, a day short of his four-month birthday, were with Paul in the library when he died.

Paul said that when he was a boy, his mother explained human reproduction to him with the planting-a-seed metaphor, and Paul imagined his father as a farmer with a straw hat and a pitchfork.

Miles grew inside Sophie as she had grown inside me. The shape of time is sometimes perceived through natural rhythms, the circling of the seasons, night and day, the pull and push of the tides, the waxing and waning of the moon, the menstrual cycle. Fertility is timed; it doesn't last. I think of the repetitions of cells dividing and multiplying to become over time a complete body lodged inside another human being. For the first trimester of pregnancy, the embryo is nourished by what is sometimes called "womb milk," a lyrical description of the food produced by the mother's uterine lining. The placenta and its cord are not fully developed until fourteen to sixteen weeks. Think of it: We make people. In the early story of Sophie's pregnancy, a flat sheet of cells inside her was turning into an oval disc that would eventually grow into the infant named Miles. Around the same time, Miles's grandfather had just finished his infusion treatments to retard the growth of the malignant tumor in his body. The burgeoning cells in Sophie promised a being that could thrive outside her, but in her father, without intervention, the multiplying cells meant his certain death.

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I am now Mormor to Miles—the Norwegian word for "mother-mother." Paul chose Papa. He called his maternal grandfather, whom he loved and wrote about, Papa.

Paul's paternal grandmother murdered his grandfather, a secret kept for many years in the Auster family. It didn't come to light until one of Paul's cousins met a stranger on an airplane. The two chatted. The man recognized the name Auster from Kenosha, Wisconsin, and he told her the story of her grandmother's trial. *The Music of Chance* is the title of one of Paul's novels. If you listen, you hear that music everywhere. On the parlor floor of our house in the hallway hang old pictures from the two families, Paul's family of Jews with origins in Eastern Europe and my family from Norway on both sides. In a tiny frame is a photo of Paul's startlingly handsome grandfather. He had run off with another woman and had returned with new coats for his children. Paul's grandmother shot her husband while he was changing a light bulb.

Betrayal, fury, and murder in the book Paul was writing when I met him, *The Invention of Solitude*. His grandmother was acquitted. Paul said that as a boy he was afraid of the tiny irascible woman who was his grandmother. He felt no affection from her and felt none for her. So much is unknown in these stories. Was there ever love between his grandmother and grandfather? Was the marriage bed ever one of pleasure, or merely duty? Exactly what did she suffer over all those years?

We are all made of parental copulations, happy, sad, or brutal, and those unions become part of our own stories, whether they are told to us aloud or not. Paul felt his father's traumatic past well before he knew anything about the murder. We often feel what we don't know and can't say. The ghosts of the past haunt a person's posture, gestures, gaze, and words, which then mingle with

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another person's posture, gestures, gaze, and words, and between them, they create something more, a shifting mixed atmosphere, the product not of one or the other but of both. Paul's father, Sam, lived behind a protective screen that allowed him to function in the world, but intimacy was probably impossible for him.

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty uses the word *intercorporeality* for our entwined bodily relations with others. I have referred to the idea many times in my writing. When Paul was in college, he read the philosopher closely. I read Merleau-Ponty after we married, and noted my husband's underlining, which didn't correspond to my own mental italics. Paul skipped all references to neurology. Reading differences.

Merleau-Ponty uses pregnancy as a metaphor, but he never discusses the fact that human beginnings are literally intercorporeal, made from two bodies. We all grow from a diploid cell, two in one, are fed and develop inside someone else, and emerge from that body.

I feel Paul as a gaping hole in my torso, from neck to guts, as if parts of me have been cut out, but I also feel he should be out there beyond my body. I want to pull him into me, but there's nothing to embrace. The habit body and the thinking body are at odds. I continue to think well. My internal narrator spins away. Grief splintering hasn't affected my ability to ponder the questions that have long absorbed me.

Paul had stopped reading philosophy by the time I met him. He never read any science. He read history and politics steadily, however, and thoroughly researched the nonfiction books he wrote in the late years of his life. He ingested massive amounts of knowledge about Stephen Crane for his book *Burning Boy*, and, after

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that, thousands of pages on gun violence in the United States for *Bloodbath Nation*. Spencer (Ostrander) had traveled the country taking photographs of the places where mass shootings had happened, and inspired by the project, Paul offered to collaborate and write a text for his son-in-law's images. Paul also read novels, but not many, most often those written by friends.

He once said that when he was young, he marveled at the fact that the older writers he met were indifferent to the work of up-and-coming poets and novelists. As he aged, he understood that he had been formed as a writer through his early passionate reading.

He said that I read the way he used to read—that I was driven and insatiable. My reading in neuroscience, neurology, psychiatry, medical history, and psychoanalysis was foreign to him, and my thoughts on those subjects seem to continue inside me untouched by his absence.

Miles is born. Paul dies. A circling in time. I knew death would come, to him or to me first, but I rebel against the brute fact—I feel it in my muscles, tissues, bones, circulation, heartbeat, breathing. I'm a reactionary. I want what was.

I don't miss the young Paul, the one I first met, dashing as he was. I long for the old man before he was crushed by cancer treatment. I am not the twenty-six-year-old graduate student who had published a few poems in literary magazines, the one who sat beside her lover at the Thalia watching *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. When he died, Paul was not the thirty-four-year-old poet hard at work on the "The Book of Memory," the second part of *The Invention of Solitude*.

Saturday, June 8, 2024. 1:50 PM. 1:51 PM. I see the numbers and watch them change on my laptop, but my paralysis continues. I

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move. I eat. I do. On June 5, I flew to Washington, DC, because I am a member of the jury for the Berggruen Prize for Philosophy and Culture, a million dollars awarded every year to someone who has changed the world's idea climate. I was one of several people who gave a short talk to present the prize on June 6 to Patricia Hill Collins, a brilliant sociologist and a hero of mine. I sat next to her at a small dinner on June 5, and I felt honored. I enjoyed our conversation. Grief and depression often converge, but in my case, grief doesn't make pleasure impossible. I had a good time.

And yet a feeling of immobility dominated my walking, talking, and flying in planes. As I rolled my little suitcase in JFK, my eyes on the signs directing me toward the exit; as I passed one numbered, lettered gate after another with their rows of aluminum seats; as I stepped on and off moving walkways, barely registering the baked goods in plastic wrapping, bottles of water, juice, soda, perfumes, shoes, baseball caps, and T-shirts with slogans on them that briefly intruded into and then vanished from my peripheral vision, a series of partly conscious expectations began to unfold. The familiar rhythm of my feet, the tug on my shoulder as I pulled the carry-on weight behind me, the sights, sounds, and smells of that seemingly interminable airport geography marked by the global sense of *I am returning home*, unleashed the anticipation of an immediate future that would *not* happen.

I lectured myself harshly to prevent being gutted: You will *not* call Paul from the Uber, just as you could *not* call him last night from the hotel to report on the event and how much you liked Dr. Patricia Hill Collins. You will *not* be going home to him. The house will be *empty*. He will *not* be waiting for you in one of the rooms. There will be *no* storytelling. You will *not* share the fact that after the prize ceremony, you sat next to your affable fellow juror David Chalmers in the hotel bar, the man who was a young

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philosopher in the 1990s and is now an older philosopher, a man who became famous in analytical philosophy and neuroscience circles for articulating the easy and hard problems of consciousness. You will *not* joke to Paul that Professor Chalmers ordered a cocktail called the Last Word. You will not remind Paul that what the young Chalmers believed was "the easy problem" at the Tucson conference in 1994—locating the neural correlates of consciousness in the brain—turned out to be hard. No last word has been had on that front.

Sometime in the early 2000s, Paul said, *Siri, you may be the only person in the world who has subscriptions to the* Journal of Consciousness Studies *and* Vogue.

In the car, I keep up the lecture to harden myself: You will not wonder with Paul what to do for dinner. You will not feel Paul's hands on your body tonight or his warm skin against yours. The intimacy between you and him that grew and changed over many years is dead. That immediate, dynamic, intercorporeal reality is finished.

Merleau-Ponty wrote about grief as an amputation that generates a phantom limb. The body part has disappeared, but it remains in the person's sensations, a kind of sensual hallucination of the missing part. In *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis compares the death of a beloved person to the amputation of a limb.

Paul was sick when he finished his last novel, *Baumgartner*. Beginning in September of 2022, every afternoon, like clockwork, a fever arrived, and he had to stop writing early. Paul's widower hero uses amputation and phantom limb as metaphors for mourning his wife, Anna, who has been dead nine years. While Paul was writing, neither he nor I remembered Merleau-Ponty's discussion of amputees and their bodily ghosts in *Phenomenology of Perception*, even

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