



THE LONG FEELING

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1.

For a very long time, I had wanted to talk about feelings—subtle, painful, complicated, difficult to render. By feelings, I was thinking of the physical sensations at the juncture of not only the body and mind, but also of time and its duration. The question of not only how I felt, but why I felt and for how long. I wanted to talk about feelings and time.

Dread is a long feeling, as are boredom and frustration. Erotic love is short, but then religious love—*agape* or awe of God—is long. Happiness is for the most part short. Contentment can be long and therefore boring. Fear can be both short and long, depending on how physically it's felt and its duration. It is exhausting to sustain somatic feelings for any length of time, which is why, when asked to describe their feelings about climate change, many people will describe a mental state—“disengaged” or “hopeless” for example—instead of a feeling per se.

2.

The other day, at a nearby café with a friend, watching her tear up at the memory of her husband, who had recently passed. The way her sadness came in waves, a duration here, a duration there, all through the two-egg breakfast—each wave part of an oceanic grief.

3.

The way the expression is actually not “passed,” but “passed away.” We put our dead there, in the past, before we take them out of place and take them out of time. I put long feelings in the past because most people that I know seem to prefer them in the past and not the present.

When I try to talk to people about climate change—relatives or colleagues, friends—they say things like, “But you just can't think about that. You have to enjoy your life!” Of course, they are speaking not to me, but to themselves.

4.

What if I spoke in the language of the distant past? Millions upon millions of years ago, “eons,” “epochs.” The image in my mind of a hot world, dripping off its sides. A kind of tropical fecundity, palm trees on the top of things as if this dripping globe were a sweet drink that one could sip from through a straw.

The world as a cool coconut, the dinosaurs are walking there, on top. I cannot fail to notice that the dinosaurs are from the past. They have “passed away,” and yet here they are now, where future climate is a fantasy. How they will amble by the drinking straw and eat the scrumptious fanning leaves.

5.

Will all the ghosts be of this world? Will there be others who have passed away? The future world—*imaginarium*—that timeless and that dripping wet, and pleasant. *The world evades us because it becomes itself again.* (Albert Camus)

6.

There is, of course, another version—it exists here, side by side: the time continues, it is durable. Many billions “pass away,” but others live. Rustling around in the trees (always tropical, these fantasies), hiding, hunting prey in tattered button-downs and jeans, still modern humans. (And with big guns.) This is the much harder vision of the future to bear, and creates a shorter feeling. Fight or flight. But of course there is always the question: flight to where? It can feel better to believe the world will end than to believe it will continue.

My friend said when she heard that her husband had died, it was like “a meteor colliding with [her] life... It just hit [she made a gesture with her palm, pressing it into her other palm, hard]—*like this.*”

7.

At the entrance to the Path train down by Wall Street and the Freedom Tower, I flied for the climate march.

I looked out at the thoroughfare, the throngs and throngs of businessmen, their hair thickly pomaded, their dress shirts buttoned tightly at the chin, and thought: *this is a stampede.*

8.

The received wisdom about why people don't do more about climate change is that they are scared, but maybe they're just bored. It could be climate change is boring.

Grief, and isolation, fear, acceptance, rumination, patience, honesty, avoidance, love, and gratitude, frustration, perseverance, dread, and patience, worry, hope—these are long feelings, and can be very hard to take.

Susan Sontag said frustration is another kind of boredom. She also said (citing Pavese) that love is a mistake.

9.

Sitting in the Hayden Planetarium with my friend Josh and his two children, four and six. The rumbling of the dome as it creates the illusion we are traveling in light years through the stars. Darkness and then points of light sweep over the curved ceiling. The four-year-old is shaking. He has his hands over his head. "Get me out of here," he whimpers. But between the German tourists on the one side, and the bald man on the other, we are trapped for the duration. *All that "for nothing," in order to repeat and mark time. (Camus)*

10.

A march is an un-useful act that symbolizes time and therefore progress. Advancing on foot along a predetermined route, the people marching carry signs. *Here, from this duration, we are sending you our*

message, our demand.

Unhappy with the past, the people marching toward the future. Like an army off to battle or a movement [bodies literally *moving*] "being born."

11.

My friend could get her head around the concept of a line of souls, each one waiting patiently in the ether to enter a body, whatever body made available. I believe she liked the randomness—the randomness and fairness—of this vision.

My friend said that it bothered her, his death. She just couldn't imagine the end. "Some people say," she said, putting her fingers through her hair, tucking it behind her ears, "that you don't miss those years—all those centuries and centuries before you were born—so why would you miss all those years that will unfold when you are dead?"

She believed you could be born into a lizard or a pig. "It's all just life."

12.

"Passed away" or "passed on." "He passed on." Into the future...

13.

It is a truism in our culture that it is the journey that gives our lives meaning and not the destination. But what if the destination is the future?

When asked why they aren't doing more to combat climate change, a lot of people use the excuse that "we are out of time." But this could be a reason to take action.

14.

The climate march: a funeral procession. *How we mourned.*

15.

I wanted to be bored and not to feel things in my body. At first, this wasn't possible. Reading *The Collapse of Western Civilization*, imagining my young children dying of plague in 2092, or starving. Imagining my young children toting guns.

What have we done to this world.

Crying at the ceiling, praying to the broken light fixture.

Regretting things.

My children.

My husband walking in, and the embarrassment. *We had had them together, and here I was crying. Was this love, then, a mistake?*

"I don't want them to suffer."

16.

I examine this now, this long feeling (literally a *longing*), and feel sad.

Someone says all mothers feel this way.

17.

Experts and pundits speak of "alarm fatigue," or "compassion fatigue," or "empathy fatigue." Fatigue in this case is a form of a relief, and evidence of a mistake: to feel short feelings about climate change—terror, rage, or panic, for example—is to ask of our bodies a physical exertion that is simply not sustainable. The fatigue is a forced rest, a compulsory respite. To speak of alarm fatigue is therefore to produce a false dichotomy: a choice between whether to feel the short feelings and to experience an intermittent and, ultimately, apathy-producing fatigue, or to ignore and (by implication) "live to fight another day." This dichotomy is false because we know there is another way: to paraphrase Camus, we have

to keep our faces at the stone until they turn to stone. We have to keep our faces at the stone and push it up the hill.

Those motherfuckers.

18.

In one of my mentor's poetry books, the phrase—several times repeated—"I wanted to go back from whence I came." To put the dead there, in the past, as far away from anything as anyone can get.

When I was finished with the march, the sidewalks buckled and the fruit decayed. Why had I never noticed this before?

19.

To imagine that my children will be starving or will die of plague is a way of having feelings that are possible to process. Life or death thus fight or flight. It is harder to imagine them as "fine," living in a house or an apartment, eating something—soup, cakes... "fine" but that they live in a new world that has been made by us and breaks the way the things we make will break. There is a loneliness to it, this man-made-ness, and a sadness that is long as an eternity.

It is easier to imagine bodies suffering than to imagine people suffering in their hearts and in their minds.

20.

That I would give my life for their lives doesn't matter.

21.

Therapists dislike despair. They also dislike dread, depression, worry, and anxiety. These are long feelings that the therapists break down, and we break down. We like to take our feelings piece-meal, broken down, and we will pay for this.

When I tell my father I am concerned about climate change, he responds, “But you have two young children.

You can’t think about that!”

How we are “running out of time.”

22.

Is crying a way to break everything down?

Are talking and thinking a way to break down? *Of course they are.*

And we will pay for this.

23.

Speaking with my father after dinner. I describe my brother as a “nihilist,” which I pronounce with a strong emphasis on “nigh.” My father, a linguist, corrects me. His preferred pronunciation starts with something more like “knee”—*knee-il-ist*. We find the audio Mirriam-Webster online, which confirms that I am right. *Nigh-il-ist* it says, over and over. Soon I tire of *nigh-il-ist* and click to the words “fuck” and “cunt.” We laugh.

24.

When my children were implanted—we put in two—the acupuncturist who was with us in the operating room massaged my shins and told the babies they should come into my body, that my body was a good one, that my body was a body they would like to live and grow in, and enjoy.

When pregnancies fail, does this mean the souls refused to come into the body? This is a cruel vision.

25.

I suppose I enjoy my own body, although now it has been ravaged by the birth of these two children that are living in a world that has been ravaged. Perhaps this is the state of things—ravagement. Perhaps God put the world here for our use, and we should ravage it.

Yes, we *should* ravage it! Of course!

26.

We had twelve eggs and put in two.

Is our aversion to long feelings an aversion to an utter inability to use?

27.

The problem of long feelings: how to describe what one imagines—what I imagine—at the end of time, which destroys my sense of time. And to imagine the beginning.

The bolide arrived from the southeast, traveling at a low angle relative to the earth, so that it came in not so much from above as from the side, like a plane losing altitude... “Basically, if you were a triceratops in Alberta, you had about two minutes before you got vaporized” is how one geologist put it to me. (Elizabeth Kolbert.)

I can imagine this.

28.

Does everything return then to the past, to our prehistory? Or to the future, to our post-apocalyptic?

29.

With the duration of our dread extending out through all the years, the story broke. We could no longer feel, but then all we could do was feel, and this was ultimately uncomfortable and painful. In our anguish and our dread, the time broke down, so we *deceased* it. We put the time there, in the past, where we could then imagine it. We put it in the future, we ran out.

30.

But of course there is another way: to keep our faces at the stone until they turn to stone. To put our faces at the stone and push it up the fucking hill, again and again.