

Dear,



Adrie Rose

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Diagnosis: Summer

and how many summer days did I say, I will harvest
the wild rose tomorrow
or the tomatoes or the calendula surely
there will be another chance
meanwhile the bees never
hesitated to take exactly
 what was being given,

and I came back to the fields empty
 and left the same.

Dear,

Here in the emergency, we need emergency lunch. We need an emergency doctor but they're all busy with the other emergencies. We're wearing our emergency masks and trying to find something emergency funny on our emergency phones but there's only emergencies that are not so funny. We have one emergency bed, one folding metal chair, one emergency needle in J's arm giving them emergency fluids and an emergency bruise I can already see, and one plastic door someone hastily cut and mounted to slow down a different emergency. The emergency nurse says I can't leave my emergency even to get food because they're only 15, and if I haven't noticed, it's an emergency. We send emergency texts to grandparents and friends and say, *it's probably not an emergency but...* The emergency looks a lot like nothing at all. We need the yelling emergency and the vomiting emergency out in the hall to please the shut the emergency fuck up. We need a nurse to answer our emergency questions and while we're at it, we need an emergency parent to show up and tell us both what to emergency do. Can we go? We would like to exit the emergency. We cannot leave. Can we go? The emergency does not leave.

Dear,

We woke in the hospital night to doctors and nurses rushing the curtain closed around us pushing in a tiny bed with clear plastic walls around it a hospital crib with someone inside it beeping lights flickering a nurse saying *I'm sorry* doctors speaking urgently two parents shoved into the corner gripping bags and each other wires the whoosh of oxygen clattering urgent beeping then all of them together like a swarm of bees with the crib clutched at their center flowing back out into the body of the hospital into another chamber and the lying silence they left—

Dear,

Did I have feelings, in the hospital? What did I think about? Were there pictures in my mind? I tell you there was

nothing. My job was to make my mind a cup and empty it. *How often do you look into a mirror and not recognize yourself?* J's pain and fear and anger were a fire and I had only an empty cup. The nurse said, How's your pain, scale of 1-10? and J said, 11.

I walked one block to the grocery store, my phone filled with texts—how are you, how are you? I called. *How often do you have the experience that the people, objects, and the world around you are not real?* I tried to cry, I really did. I sent my cup down into the well and the cup clanged on the empty stones. *How often do you feel that your body does not belong to you?*

I pulled the cup back up, put my phone back in my pocket, picked up the little green plastic basket and filled it. Passion fruit, sushi, *How often are you not sure*

if the things you remember really happened or if you just dreamed them? rice crackers, mango, a soft stuffed puppy, *How often do you find that you are able to ignore pain?* My mind was a cup and I emptied it. Do I regret it? Yes. Do I regret it? No.

Diagnosis: The Name

Why should I tell you the name?
I did not hear it for thirty-eight
years, and anyhow it is just
two dead men's names, plus a word
for pathology, and a word for
several symptoms
traveling together.
It is a basket,
a container for collecting.

If I tell you what it means,
the words below the words,
we can put these new words
into the basket. That which
joins together. The texture or
substance from which
an animal or plant is made.
A confused state, an undoing
of the regular arrangement.
The basket is unraveling itself
even as we put the words
inside. My body, this
textured substance
from which I am made,

my joinings
confused and undone.

What the name hides—
every long
strand in every coil
of the basket
is touched by this unseen
unmaking. When they tested me,
measured me, they said,
Pull your thumb
towards your arm, and, Show us
your scars, and
they ran their fingers over
the heels of my feet. Unseen:
the vessel of my stomach
warped, the muscles
of my shoulders and hips
and ribs snarled,
the sheaths on my nerves
crookedly stitched, all
noted but not counted.

They gave me
a score. They said,
You have —.
They wrote it down

and when I said,
What do I do now?
They said, When
you have a problem,
make an appointment,

and they left me.
With the name.

Dear,

It's August again unwanted month it's been one year since the cardiologist said *I think you have Ehlers Danlos Syndrome to J and dysautonomia* and then turned to me and said *a lot of parents find out they have EDS when their child gets diagnosed* then the call ended thirty years of my life snapped together pain mysterious symptoms *they weren't diagnosing this in the 80s* he said but J is a child is sicker than me I make appointments for them I make appointments for them I—

the evening primrose and the goldenrod are shining in the yard again I am undone again it's been twelve hours since J was in the ER again the bees are frantically filling their cells with gold again what are you supposed to do when the emergency doesn't end when it starts and stops again and starts again and stops again and starts the first leaves are turning again little scabs of rust and orange the youngest maples always the first to give in—

Dear,

Instructions for ruining your favorite scent: decide your hands are too dry, your body desiccated by the too-hot air in the hospital. Put your sweater and your jacket and your hat back on and walk through the sleet to Whole Foods and buy body cream in your favorite scent. Roses. A thousand roses.

Bring it back to the hospital and share it with your child. Tenderly, apply it to your hands, your legs, your arms, your feet. Use it to massage your child when everything hurts. Everything hurts. Use it again the next day and the next. When you go home, even when you know you are not in the hospital anymore, even when your child is walking again, every time you smell roses your heart will seize, you will be back with the IV looped around their arm, the doctors a tourniquet around them, the splintered lights, roses, roses, roses, you never left, roses, roses, you never leave.

Diagnosis: Autumn

How many years was I
my own Rumpelstiltskin,

my hands busted
spindles and my house

filled to the eaves
with dross—

Dear,

Crumpled onesies and exquisite little buttoned sweaters in the dryer. Electric beeps and whirs. Plastic upholstery. The fish mural in the hallway. The golden retriever who stood patiently as one child then another petted and hugged her. Not one child asked another, *Why are you here?* Peppermint powdered hot chocolate in the family room, *Guess Who?*, hooked rug kits, the guitar they loaned us but J refused to play. The stunted flashing Christmas tree on the nurses' station. The neurologists waking us up each morning to give J all the same tests—squeeze his fingers, try to lift his legs, push one foot down then the other. The questions we asked and they said, We'll have to look into that, and then never came back. J's rage tears. Mine. The gold dome on Beacon Hill outside our windows, yes, real gold, and somewhere, the moon above the river, surrounded by concrete and cars.

Dear,

We cannot trust the doctors. We

have to trust the doctors. We cannot

trust the doctors.

Dear,

When we got home from the hospital, I started making bread. I ordered sourdough books from the library. I borrowed a Dutch oven. I pulled out the old spiral proofing basket. *When your child is in pain*, the doctor's survey asked, *do you feel like you can't go on?* Look, I didn't think bread would cure them. I had once been a mother who had baked sixty loaves of bread a day, a hundred loaves. J had stood next to me in the bakery and mixed a metal bowl full of flour and every spice they could reach. *When your child is in pain, do you do tasks for them?* Cinnamon, pepper, nutmeg. People had called them the bakery baby. I didn't think. Bread could cure them. We went to physical therapy, to acupuncture, to massage, to the doctor. Repeated. *When your child is in pain, do you feel hopeless?* I had to know that I had done absolutely everything, tried everything. I went into the kitchen, where I had made the food that had made them. Take this water. Take this mound of grain and salt. The old voice in me said, *You broke them. Now fix them.*

Diagnosis: Winter

Hi, it's February again and I have nothing to say, little clock of ice in the pipes melting, tick of water trickling all night. The nurse gives me three rabies shots after I woke up to a bat in my room—both arms and one in the thigh. An elderly man, confused, pulls down his scrub pants and starts urinating on the floor next to me, where I sit on the gurney in the ER hallway, it's ok, I tell the nurses, I have kids, I've seen a lot of body fluids, and we laugh as they wheel me to a different section of hallway, away from the stench. Little clock of vaccine humming through my body, come back again day 3, day 5, day 7, day 14 for more shots. I am telling you all this so I don't have to say it's been one month and three days since a doctor told me my child may never walk again. The grey tabby cat watched with a kind of rapture as I pulled on rainboots, a jacket, rubber gloves, the tiny claws scrabbling horribly against every horror movie in my memory. Against the wooden beams of the ceiling. The sound as the bat screamed and screamed as I put the basket over it and carried it out into the night and set it loose.

Dear,

We are the lucky ones. With state health insurance for the children because I make so little money. Still. *Big fat checks big large bills* \$60 a day to park in the hospital garage. \$903 for J's prescription migraine glasses. \$26 a month for electrolyte supplements. \$89 for the vagal nerve stimulator for migraines that didn't work, \$100 a session for shiatsu, \$90 for acupuncture. \$600 a month in groceries. \$50 a week for CBD for pain and sleep. \$178 a week in child support from their dad. *Pay me what you owe me, don't act like you forgot* \$6 for the lilac fabric cover for their port access, \$8 for the one printed with strawberries. \$50 to replace every soap and shampoo and conditioner and lotion in the house when we realize fragrances are giving them rashes. *Cash rules everything around me.* \$160 when J is in the hospital for a week and I have to buy us underwear and t-shirts at the grocery store I can walk to. \$45 for the mango and the salad and the chicken fingers I buy when J is sick of the hospital grilled cheese. *See no future, pay no rent.* What does it cost, I asked, and I meant, what was the damage but also what does it really *cost* to be sick, to go on being sick and sick and sick and sick. \$50 copay a week for my therapist. \$25 a month for the

meds they say will keep my OCD less intense. *She works hard for the money.* \$25 for the computer game I bought to distract J in the hospital and \$25 for the game I bought G who had to stay behind. \$16 for the squishy blue water holder on J's wheelchair. \$10 for the rainbow wheel spoke covers. *I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it.* \$15 for my dinner when I drive J to support group night and sit in my cold car until they're done, one other parent sitting in their cold car across the lot, then J is back and we're singing and they're smiling and these are some of the costs—

Dear,

I peel open the morning I stand before
the mirror I have the head of a woman merciless I will
not ask you the riddle I have rigid stone for muscles
merciless I stand before the mirror I twist my arms to
strap the KT tape down my neck across my shoulders
squeeze together all that is supposed to be held the skin
is so soft looks so young I am the monstrous riddle
the living rock how does sickness look so good so
polished how does sickness look—

They Have Attached Many Words To Me: Broken Cento

The upside was paranoid attention to
detail. Curled skins
of clementines in the compost bucket. Juice making
a trail

down the slope of the baked yams. The downside
was also
paranoid attention to detail—
to be pathologized is
to be allowed

to survive. The crumbs
and dishes still
on the table, and a small glass bottle of
milk and an open jar
of raspberry jam. When you're very

sick once, they'll call you strong,
but if you're very sick over
and over, you're

Sisyphean. No one ever wants
to imagine themselves
as the boulder. Malingering, a

burden, a drain
on resources, possibly faking
it, certainly
hysterical, a thing resplendent
with pathology, agave, persimmon,

stick ball, the purple
okra I bought for two bucks
at the market. I confess. I

want the clarity
of catastrophe but not
the catastrophe. The clock
rewinds/ starts over / *what*
if your worst day never ended?

Foolish. I am
home. Half safe. My
tea mug with the blue stripes. The cloud of
milk unfurling. A layer of grief as fine as ash just beneath
the surface & yes this too is a
song just not one I want to
keep singing and yes I will
have to keep singing. Fuck

the bread. The bread is

over. I want to close
my eyes and find a quiet
field in fog, a few sheep moving

toward a fence. A wooden
spoon clutched
in my hand, the smell of chicken broth.
My face

after the ravaging,
it was not mine
but something
chronic, incurable, fallen
out of time
in the poems

and I write
them to stay
awake, to remember.

Doctor, you say there are no haloes. I
tell you it has taken me
all my life. I
remember. My color's

green. What it touches—

a yellow table and a cupboard
painted blue. How infinitely the heart

expands to claim
this world, blue vapor without
what if your worst day never—

Dear,

It's a bad week. Again. March rains, stomach flu, J in pain and in pain and his incision from surgery has not healed. We take off their bandage and it gushes fluid, like guts spilling from a slit fish. We are at the bottom of the water and we can see our friends out there, breathing air. *How are you*, they text me *howareyou?* I'm pissed and I'm scared and I'm worn out like a stone smashed by the waves until it crumbles. *I hate everything*, I text back. I hate the question, it is the wrong question, and I know they don't know what else to ask. We're at the bottom of the water. There's a bottle bobbing in the water and we are under the water and we are the message inside, hoping someone will lift us out and read us.

Diagnosis: Spring

The boyfriend says, *you're so hard, you're such a tough motherfucker.*

Outside, spring rain. Coral pink and yellow tulips, their tender mouths closed

tight against—

Dear,

After J has surgery, I start playing a video game where my job is to liberate ghost bears trapped on an island. Before bedtime, I read to G for an hour on the turquoise couch then say goodnight, I scrub the bratty dishes in the sink, I feed the elderly grouchy cat and close the door so the younger cat can't steal her soft food. I kiss J, I plug in their fairy lights, I ask again if their clamp is shut, I make them show me the incision to be sure there are no red lines crawling a trail towards their heart, at last at last I close my door. If I try to sleep, I will just cry. If I try to sleep, I will just picture their access needle coming out in the night, blood swamping the sheets. I do not try to sleep. The young grey cat tucks her face beneath my arm, and I play the game. I harvest chestnuts and I stand on the beach in my little scout beret, cast my line for fish. There is work to be done, there is work here that can be done. I gather tulips in every color, I plant more chestnut trees, I catch more fish. I tell myself J is not bleeding. They are sleeping. I tell myself G is not sick yet. I do not have a body as long as they have bodies. I ask the ghost bears for another job. We do not have bodies as long as I play the game. I search the leaf piles. I bring lost items to

the ghosts and they say thank you, thank you. Here is another task. We're going to need more tulips.

Dear,

Today no one is sick. Is that even true? J went to the ER yesterday and I went to the physical therapist this morning and sat as she measured the movement of my neck, my elbow, my shoulder. Today, there is no emergency. Today, I can't stop crying, spilled blueberries all over the kitchen floor, there is no emergency, I walk from room to room, touching quilt, book, bowl, quilt, book, bowl, not sure how to re-enter my life.

Dear,

I write these in my head at the grocery store, and they disappear. I write these in my head in the shower and they disappear. Sickness

the unseen line that grabs the collar on the dog's neck as she barks, leaps, then is snapped back to the ground. I write these and I disappear.

Dear,

When does a story about sickness begin?
When does it end? Only with death or with full
recovery? How many stories never get told if that's the
requirement? How about:

Today is a Friday. It snowed and iced in
the night and I drove to work this morning and now J
texts, says they can't stand again. I call the neurologist.
Maybe today we go back to the ER. Maybe we go back
to the hospital. Maybe they get better. I don't know.
There is no end.

Dear,

Today it is not an emergency. The incision still has not healed. The crocuses are up. I prepare myself to go to the appointment and argue with the doctors instead of agree. Today we are planning J's 17th birthday party. The sun is out, and I wear a green sweater. There have been emergencies but today is not one of them, I tell myself. Today the president says yes, we will keep giving money for guns for war for death. He says there is nothing that will stop it. Today we are not in the hospital. Today J can walk. Today I tell my students for the first time, I have a child who is chronically ill and I may have to leave class early. The cost of living adjustment for inflation is 8.7%. Today is not an emergency. Can I even tell anymore.

Dear,

I said I wanted the field for sheep to browse in, the orchard, the book of poems. No more. I want my children, rolling down the grassy hill shrieking. I want them swimming in the river, pretending to drown and pulling each other onto the rocky shore, laughing. I want to give it all back—the robin’s egg blue espresso cup, the silver ring, the black boots. I used to want but now I am too tired. I used to want but now. Sometimes when J has a flare, a friend will say, *you’ll get a poem out of it*. As if that’s a trade. As if there’s any getting out of it. G and I are in the garden shoveling compost and that night he says his hand hurts and again the next day. He is the age that I was, and J was, when we started having symptoms. G spends two weeks with his hand in a brace. J hasn’t recovered from surgery yet. I used to want. Now I am too. Tired. I go into my room and cry, go into the car and scream. You were right. I got a poem out of it. Take it back.

Dear,

I haven't mowed the lawn in two years and already I can see how the forest will take it back and I feel a little guilty, that old longing for tidy open spaces, but whose fucking dream was that, anyway—was it mine? Who wouldn't want a body taken back by black locust with its honeyed white blossoms, taken back by wild rose, sumac with its red drupes and fringed leaves, the black walnut, the white pine above it all. The feral bees churning honey inside the split catalpa tree, the purple loosestrife through my palms, the mulberry tree flush with birds ready to claim the fruit, the blue cohosh, the foxglove, and when they come to punish me, I will be nowhere to be found. *A woman lived here*, they will say. And I will be nowhere at all.

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About the Author



Adrie Rose lives next to an orchard in western MA and is the editor of Nine Syllables Press. Her work has previously appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Graywolf Lab: Games*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Ploughshares* blog, and more. Her chapbook, *I Will Write a Love Poem*, was published in 2023 by Porkbelly Press, and her chapbook, *Rupture*, was published in 2024 by Gold Line Press and longlisted for the MA Book Award. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson College.

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