

Dear Luisa,

Here is what I know
for certain: the tulips
are blooming. My son
brings me their heads
as gifts in cold spring sunlight.
He doesn't understand
my anger. How effortless
he kills. *We'll put them
in a cup with water,* he says,
they'll drink and be alive. If only
it were that simple. He screamed
for an entire hour today, Luisa,
because I didn't tell him
the fairytale he wanted.
He kicked his bed, screaming.
I confess I didn't have it in me.
To imagine anything beyond
this moment, invent adventures
of Baba Yaga and the Snow Queen
and him, always the hero.
He hadn't earned them, I said,
a half-truth. On day 32
of countless stories, I woke
wanting a day off
from motherhood.
He heard me
crying downstairs and asked
his father why, *You know why,*
he answered, and the guilt
of every dead tulip
on my counter bloomed
inside my gut. I blame
myself, Luisa, like
we've been taught,
from mother to mother.
No matter what, someone
is at fault. I wanted
to run upstairs. To tell him,
It's not your fault. Not yours.
How much we need

to hear this. Here
is what I know for certain,
Luisa: my son's head
will nearly leave his body
to rest on mine, his sister's
infant mouth will find
my pink-bud nipple,
effortless, in any light.

Dear Julia,

My son tells me in his sudden bursts
of joy, *Mommy I LOVE YOU*
and I scream, Yes! I love You TOO!
Mommy I LOVE APPLES
and I say, Yes that's lovely dear!
Mommy, I love Daddy
and I say, Yes, Daddy loves you so much!
Mommy, I love my socks
and I say, Well, yes, they keep your feet warm.
Mommy, I love pooping!
and I say, Oh, OK.
Mommy, I love looking at my poop!
and I say, Please flush the toilet.
Mommy, I love the moon!
and I think, Yes, a poet
like when he calls pistachios
Pee statues, or how he tells me
We love all of the people we love
and I try to hold these words
in my chest and let the innocence
wash over me, a body that has seen
too much, a body full of joy and terror
held together by anxiety and bad jokes.
Julia, it is often my anxiety that gets me
out of bed every morning and puts
my pants on. Today, my anxiety has chosen
the gray velour and walks me into the kitchen to
crack the eggs, and I remember my grandmother
talking about bursting with passion
and my grandfather who was a professional
boxer erupting in violence
—they called him the Odessa volcano—
and he would often talk about his sexual
exploits, and Julia, none of it seemed strange
until my grandmother revealed her lifetime
of lovers. And here I watch the soft head of a dandelion
become white and weightless,
torn apart by a gentle breeze.

4-21, Yom HaShoah

Dear Luisa,

He peed himself twice yesterday, twice today. Just steps away from the toilet. He's doing it on purpose, Luisa, I swear. He knows he'll be five, *Nobember Eighf*, and some days, he wants a Black Panther party and other days a Harry Potter one, but always the cake and candle and wish. He has more wishes, Luisa, than hairs I've pulled out of my head with both hands. I always thought this was just an expression, but no, Luisa, it's a mother-body's compulsion. After the second pee, I tried to force diapers onto his lanky body, already the size of a schoolboy. He screamed and kicked, *Ya ne baby!* not a baby, not a baby, so I gave up on such punishment, already guilty for even letting my hands try it. But today, Luisa, after two hours of refusals and piss on the floor and all the threats and promises, all the wishes shattered on the floor in the bits of my favorite pastel-pink "Don't Go Bacon My Heart" mug, I shoved Mickey and Pluto pull-ups over his thighs, snug, not painful, and tore my throat yelling, minutes before he fell quietly asleep while I dug my hands into my head on the stairs. This is not complaint, Luisa. I know you've had such days, and far worse. *It's not that bad*, we tell ourselves, and hours later, we read poems about our dead ancestors while our children scream in the background, raging against our history, already inside them, against an isolation that is the antonym of Jewish family. And I think how Babushka loves to tell me they barely had enough money for underwear after the war. How she had no childhood and still, she pities how hard I have it. She wrote me tonight,

that my Yom HaShoah reading put tears
inside her soul, *Держись*, she said, *Derzhis'*,
hold on, hold on, be healthy, so I say,
Luisa, in our ancestral, unending
present tense, our generational imperative,
Держись, Держись, Держись,
we have so much, so much to hold.

4-21, Yom HaShoah

Dear Julia,

I can't help but think that my son
is the same age as my grandmother
and I am the same age as my great-
grandmother when I hold his body
tightly and run toward
the field of trees behind
our yard and here
there are only wild turkeys
whirling their strange music
in the sunlight and not a symphony
of bullets ripping open bodies
of woodland creatures. It's what
she remembered, Julia, one moment
a redtail brighter than the burning
bush, so bright she was struck
by its beauty and then the world
erupting in the darkness.
By the time they reached
the train, everyone on board was dying.
The conductor shoveled bodies
off the cars, as if he were unloading
firewood, another memory
but not as searing as the tail.
She thinks it was a squirrel
maybe something from one
of her picture books,
perhaps she imagined it,
not yet a writer, but already
knowing the importance of beauty
as a means of survival.
By the time they arrived at the mountains,
my great-grandmother had already lost
her husband, her mother, her aunts, her brothers.
I let my son walk toward the turkeys
and they let him, too. No one is afraid here
and the air is golden.

4-22

Dear Luisa,

Just imagine, one day we will ask our children,
Remember when the whole world stopped
touching? They'll hug us and answer, *No.*

4-22

Dear Julia,

I can't decide what I'm more afraid of. My son
barreling across the room to hug strangers,
or my son barreling back away from others,
permanently terrified of touch.

4-25

Dear Luisa,

You haven't written
and so I think
you must be
a better mother.

Dear Luisa,

*The walls can only take
so much of this*, a fellow
poet-mom wrote me,
confessing she locks herself
in the bathroom and thinks
about running away, *I haven't
though*, she says; that's
what's important. And Luisa,
when she said walls,
I didn't think of the hole
my husband punched
in the bathroom wall trying
to take out our son's first
splinter, *I didn't punch
him*, he says, *that's what's
important*, didn't think
of the drywall chewed out
by nobs of slammed doors
any time my son doesn't get
exactly what he wants exactly
when he wants it. I thought,
if his small hands hit or hug
my body just once more—*I want/
I don't want you*, he says, so much
anger and love, so little difference
between them—my walls will break.

5-16

Dear Julia,

Two days ago, the neighbors left
a plastic tub of Legos on our doorstep.
Hundreds of colorful blocks with
a note on top: *we thought your kids
could use the distraction.* I spent hours
sanitizing every individual
piece. Some looked brand-new—
tomato-red, electric-gold, emerald-green—
others had been played with, loved, thrown
against a wall during a tantrum, destroyed.
A dinosaur with a fractured jaw,
an astronaut without a helmet, the hose
to a fire hydrant, doors that opened
to nowhere, train tracks that won't fit
together, what I think was supposed
to be a family, smiles forcibly
scraped off, a half-melted tree
that somehow looks like a mountain
and a mermaid who is missing
a tail, which means
she is just another broken woman
with seashells on her chest.