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.
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, November Eight, 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.
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.
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.

4-22

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.*
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.