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SOMETIMES WE CHOOSE

The girl in the first dream is young — three or four or five. She has long, white-blonde hair and she is running circles around the flower bed in the center of the front yard of my childhood home. It is summer, and everything is green. The sun is shining like a spotlight on the yard, its light dispersing through the leaves of the large maple tree. When I was young, I helped my father plant petunias in the flower bed every spring, digging my hands through the soft earth, creating small pockets for new life to grow in. This year the petunias are pink and red and purple, and there are dozens of them. The air smells sweet, fresh. I can't see anyone else, but I know my parents and my brothers are inside the house. I am sitting on one of the cement steps that cuts a path from the driveway to the front door. My bare feet are on the cool grass, and I am watching the little girl. She is smiling, and her giggles echo through white silence. She seems to run in slow motion through thick air, her hair and her dress trailing behind her. On her final lap, she runs toward me, her arms outstretched. She jumps into me, wrapping her arms as far around me as she can. I pull her into me, wrapping myself around her entire body. I run my hand along her soft hair. I feel warm and light.

In psychology, recurring dreams signify unresolved problems. Common recurrent dreams include being late, missing or failing an exam, being attacked or chased, or being stuck. They can begin at any time and may last throughout a person's life. They may show up randomly, but most often occur during periods of stress or unease. *Unease*: mental or spiritual discomfort. Check, check. Vague dissatisfaction, anxiety, disquiet. Check, check, check. *Disquiet*: to take away the peace or tranquility of.

“There is an echo in Japan of that disquiet about a mother choosing to end the life of the fetus in her belly,” an article in the *New York Times* says. Echo. Disquiet. Choice. Sounds echo — waves reflected back to a listening ear. They are produced by buildings, by mountains, by walls in small, enclosed spaces. Things echo too — memories, pain, *disquiet* — repeating, repeating, calling out through time.

The dreams echo too. A boy. A girl. Two of them now. They are small, and

have the same near-white hair I had as a child. Like sound, they mostly exist in the background. They are in the dream but not part of the action. They are playing in a corner, or they are sitting, watching. Sometimes it's just one. Other times they are together. Sometimes I don't realize they are there or recognize them until after I've woken up. My eyes open and my gut becomes heavy and I know.

The Internet tells me that dreams of children suggest a new aspect of oneself is emerging. They may also mean that there is an aspect of oneself that needs to mature, and may occur during periods when one is not acting very grown-up. They may symbolize fear, dependency, or being unable to care for oneself. But I know the children are telling me none of these things. I know they are echoes, reverberations of choices made.

Water babies, they are called in Japan; *mizuko* — the term used for babies that are aborted or miscarried, the term for babies that cause the disquiet. Literally translated, the term means *water child*. Water, because in Buddhism the babies are considered fluid — not of this world, not yet part of the other world, the after world. Fluid. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust*. I grew up with these Catholic words. *Water to water* is what the Buddhists might say, like waves on the ocean, the cycle of birth and death repeating with no beginning, no end. No moment of conception, no moment of death. Wave, ocean, wave, ocean, but always water.

A reverberation is a sound that bounces right back at you. It reaches your ear in less than 0.1 second after the original sound wave. It's different from an echo like that. An echo is long, far reaching, moving through time. But a reverberation hits you right away. BOOM. Like the moment I saw the word *Pregnant* staring at me from the small window of the pregnancy test — the choice coming at me, its weight closing in on me. BOOM.

Ben wipes his hands clean of it from the beginning. He tells me it is my decision. I don't realize until later how even in the beginning he left me alone in it. At the time, it seemed like Ben was doing the nice thing, the right thing. *A woman's right to choose*. My body, my decision. He seemed like a *man*, a good guy. But what he was really doing was placing the onus on me, handing the burden to me. *Here*, he may as well have said, handing all things heavy and fraught to me. The problem mine to carry, the choice mine to make.

“I don’t want another kid right now,” he had said only one time during that week I was undecided. Those had been the words, the sounds, the thread I had followed, unraveling it to its conclusion.

“Sounds are known spontaneously,” Buddhist meditation teacher Tara Brach says. We do not need to seek them out, go looking for them, demand their arrival. A car horn. A wind chime. A barking dog. The sounds are just there, waiting to be acknowledged, recognized, known. I hear the sounds all at once now, a collective of disconnected things creating a cloud of chaos. I heard them the same way back then — the weight of finality, the burden of irreversibility, coming down on me all at once.

I hear the water running, filling a paper cup. I hear the crinkle of the pill cup as I pick up the pill. I hear the nurse say, “You will essentially miscarry sometime in the next twelve hours.”

Essentially.

I hear the trees swaying as Ben and I step outside, the cars passing on nearby Colfax. I hear cars starting and stopping while I wait in the pharmacy parking lot. I hear my feet pacing the cement just outside Ben’s apartment, the panic in my voice as I’m speaking to my best friend on the phone. I hear my heart beating wildly in my chest. I hear the TV, playing the movie *A Life Less Ordinary*. I hear the birds whistling their sunset songs through the open French doors. I hear Ben unwrapping the plastic from a loaf of bread, a knife clinking a jar of mayonnaise, Ben asking, “Are you hungry? Do you want anything?” I hear the microwave humming, heating the pad I will hold over my abdomen. I hear the Vicodin kicking in, muddling and flattening everything — even the sound of machine gun fire, of bombs going off, in Ben’s video game. He sat on the other end of the couch and played while I lie sweaty, curled into a ball, waiting for the second pill to kick in.

Waiting has a sound, too, of hollowness, of darkness. Merriam Webster says *echo* is akin to the Latin *vagire*, to wail. I wonder if that’s what the feeling is for the Japanese women, the disquiet, the unease — a wailing that has no answer, a cry that can never end.

The second time it was the roaring — all-encompassing — like a river when you stand next to it. That, and *relax*. Both the nurse and the doctor had said it repeatedly. “Relax,” I heard as I gripped the nurse’s hand. “Relax,” I heard as the doctor pulled

my body back onto the table.

I was living in Boston then. Ben was 2,000 miles away, in Denver. During my exam, the nurse had told me I was “barely pregnant,” as if it were something that could still be reversed, like a tire that was just starting to go flat, or a bad paint color on a wall. I was lying on the thin, cold paper on top of the exam table, and the nurse was looking at my paperwork, at the date of my last period, and doing the math in her head. I was looking over at the tray full of tools, at the empty countertop, at the strange, dark void on the other half of the room.

Later it was the ringing. Ben’s phone. Over and over, my calls went straight to voicemail. It was summer, humid, and my sheets, tangled and strewn, were wet from tears and sweat. I lay in bed, watching the shadows on the wall from the flashes of the TV screen, the sound on mute.

“I really need to talk,” I said to his voicemail again.

He called me back hours later. He had gone to a friend’s party.

“I couldn’t just sit there,” he said.

Sounds I did not hear either time:

The heartbeat during the ultrasound.

My mother’s voice — soft, calm — telling me it would be okay.

“A feeling of tugging,” is how Debra Marquart describes it in *Some Things About That Day*. Which doesn’t sound so bad. It sounds light, harmless. It calls to mind a child’s tugboat, a toy floating quietly in the bathwater. But tug is something we do when we pull on something that doesn’t want to be pulled, when we disturb something by using force. We tug a sleeve, a leash, a cord. We have tugs of war. The synonyms of tug are *pull, jerk, wrench, heave, yank*. These are not soft actions, not gentle actions. Other definitions include to *pull with force or effort*, to *struggle in opposition*. Opposition is conflict, a clashing of wills. That’s what the tug is, the fight between something that wants to stay, and something that needs it to go.

In Japan there is a ceremony for aborted babies. Mizuko kuyō. Kuyō, a memorial rite, comes from the verb “to offer.” To offer prayers, apologies. *Water baby ceremony*. In such ceremonies, a woman or a couple who have terminated a pregnancy go to a temple where they are led in chanting for the spirit of their fetus. As part of the

ceremony they offer toys, food, gifts, and ideally leave with a sense of peace as to the status of their fetus's soul.

In Japan, the purpose of the ritual is to prevent spirit attacks. Some Buddhists believe that the aborted fetus still exists, that it passes into an in-between world, a fluid world between here and there. A brochure made by a temple that performs *mizuko kuyō* says that the *mizuko* from a terminated pregnancy is a child existing in the realm of darkness: "The principal things that have to be done for its sake are the making of a full apology and the making of amends to such a child." If these steps aren't taken, then any number of afflictions might befall the mother and her family: sickness, accidents, loss of business, pain. The Japanese call it *tatari*. It is the curse of the unborn dead.

I do not believe in this. I do not believe in angry babies who spread their wrath through generations. The children in my dreams have never been evil, or vengeful, or scary. They have just been present — quietly, steadily — always there. There but not there. An ambiguity I still struggle with. Ambiguity. From Latin, *ambiguous*, *doubtful*. Unknowing. Uncertain.

I was raised in the Catholic church, where all was certain. Every Sunday there were cars in the parking lot with bumper stickers that read *Abortion stops a beating heart*, *Life begins at conception*, *Abortion is murder*. Certain means sure. Certain means settled.

"It's just a clump of cells," Ben told me in the weeks before I had the first procedure, when I was questioning questioning questioning. His voice matches the voices of those in my societal circle — the feminists and the liberals and the generally tolerant. But I hear other voices too. I hear priests and Sunday school teachers. I hear my mother and my father. I hear [REDACTED], who, one day last year, told me that he would like to kill abortionists. The voices, the noises, they all echo.

I understand why Japanese women go to the temples, why they offer prayers and objects from the land of the living to those on the other side. Not because I believe in babies who bring curses, but because I understand how it feels to be haunted. Because I understand how it feels to be unsure.

I want to believe what they say. *Just a clump of cells*. I want to believe it was like any other growing thing on my body. A hangnail that disturbs, but eventually falls away. A pimple on my chin that finally recedes. I know that I am supposed to

feel detached, relieved. The statistics differ depending on where you look, but the number is always well above the majority: Ninety percent, ninety-five percent of women feel relief. *Relief*.

Relief is for things that go away, for distress and pain that quiets. It exists for things that don't come back. Abortion is this in literal terms of course, something that goes away and will never come back. Presence. Absence. But go away is something it has never done, like a wound on the body that closes, leaving a scar — pink, tender, new flesh where the wound once was. A reminder.

The dreams I have now are like that, I think. They are marks left on my psyche like the reminders once left on my body. There was the time when I was five and a Coke bottle shattered on the pavement, sending a shard of glass into my ankle. There was the time, at twelve, when I grew so fast that my body couldn't keep up, leaving stretch marks in stripes on my thighs. There was the time when I was twenty-two, and my left lung collapsed. The surgery left three small scars on my back. There was the time when I was twenty-nine and I got pregnant accidentally. And the time I was thirty and it happened again.

To be certain means to be at ease. Assured. The word implies a sense of calm, satisfaction. I go back to that line from the *New York Times* — *that disquiet about a mother*. I do not believe it was just a clump of cells. I don't know what I believe. But I don't believe it's as easy as all of that.

The Japanese Buddhists don't believe it is either, which is why they have mizuko kuyō. They believe there is a river separating the worlds of life and death and that aborted babies are stranded on the river's banks. The mizuko kuyō ceremony is intended to help the babies to be guided across, "to the land of the dead." Jizū, a Bodhisattva — an awakened one who has delayed enlightenment in order to help others to awaken — is the being that helps the babies cross over. In Japan, statues of Jizū are seen all over. They are in temples, cemeteries, homes. They stand on country roadsides. They line rivers. They come in different sizes, but most stand about two feet tall. They are carved from stone — gray figures that wear the foot-length robes of a Buddhist monk. The figures are bald like a monk too, or a like an infant, and their eyes are closed in meditation. They stand still, at peace, tranquil. They are two things at once — representations of the mizuko, the dead fetus, and of the savior figure who takes care of it on the other side. Most of them wear red bibs; some wear red knitted

sweaters and hats. Red, because it is the color of protection. There are often flowers nearby, and small toys and food — offerings from one world to the next. Some Jizo have stood silently for decades. They are worn by wind, by rain, by time.

“The one way to make bereavement tolerable is to make it important,” writes G.K. Chesterton in *Lunacy and Letters*. “To gather your friends, to have a gloomy festival, to talk, to cry, to praise the dead — all that does change the atmosphere, and carry human nature over the open grave. The nameless torture is to try and treat it as something private and casual.”

Bereavement isn't the right word. It's too heavy, too much. To be bereaved is to be deprived of a loved one. Deprivation means something has been taken away, or has never been given in the first place. Neither of those apply. I was not deprived of anything, nothing was stolen. But I understand what Chesterton is saying, why it's important to pause for a moment. To have a ritual, a ceremony, is to recognize the existence of something. There is a reason we mark our transitions, why we toast the moment, observe its significance, acknowledge that a change that has taken place.

In Japan, there are entire cemeteries full of Jizo statues — row upon row of little stone beings. In *Liquid Life*, William R. LaFleur writes, “These cemeteries are the concrete embodiment of human imagination directing its attention to beings who, while no longer in the same world with us as they once were, still are present in our memories and projections.” Memories and projections. *Still are present*. Here, there are no ceremonies, no statues to hold the questions or the weight of the answers. Here, we are left with the void.

I am curious, but cautious, about someday visiting the cemeteries in the same way I am about someday visiting the Holocaust sites. “*Why would you want to see that?*” someone once asked me about the concentration camps. It's not about wanting. It's about witnessing. *Seeing*. We bear witness to things to acknowledge their truth. We stand by, silent, strong, and we say *this happened*, this was real, this changed something.

With abortion, our lives go on as before. We go back to work on Monday, back to our scheduled routines, back to happy hours with friends. It seems like nothing has changed. But everything has changed. There was *something* and now there is *nothing*. Nameless torture, Chesterton called the silence.

Sound is energy. Sound vibrates, sending waves to our ears. It is the motion of particles “in alternately opposite directions from the position of equilibrium when

that equilibrium has been disturbed.” *Opposite directions*. In chemistry, equilibrium occurs when a process and its reverse are taking place at an equal rate, thereby creating no overall change. Maybe Ben and I were like that in the months after the first abortion — me, trying to process it, talk about it, find my way through it, and Ben ignoring it, running from it, leaving it behind. We were a process and its reverse happening at the same time. Our conversations moved in from two different places. But when we met in the middle there was no even ground, nothing solid to rest on. *When that equilibrium had been disturbed*. Any steadiness that had existed slowly eroded. In equilibrium opposing forces are balanced. But not Ben and me. We were just opposing forces.

His yelling through the phone one night was the sound that broke it. By then I was turning down invitations to go out, and stopping at the liquor store every night on my way home. I had wanted to talk about all of it again — not just what had happened, but what it had meant. I wanted to talk about fear and about forgiveness, about birth, death, heaviness. I wanted to talk about the friends I was losing because of the wall I had put up. I wanted to say what might have been and what would never be. I wanted to tell him about the dream I had had, about the little girl with blonde hair.

He didn’t want to hear it, he said. He was tired of it. He said I was dwelling in it. He said I had to move on. He said that I had to own this, that it was mine to figure out. Maybe it was. Maybe it is. Of course it is. But his scream into the phone silenced me.

“Never talk to me about this again,” he had yelled, and then hung up on me.

So I didn’t say another word. But it was always there between us. Sometimes, years later, near the end, when we were drunk, when we were screaming at each other, it was in my raised voice, and in my hands as they flew through the air. It was there after the screaming stopped, after the tears dried, in the way he no longer reached for me in the night.

Silence is the absence of sound. There are no waves vibrating anywhere. There is nothingness. Emptiness.

“I feel unexpectedly empty,” I wrote in my journal on June 1, 2007, almost a week after the first procedure. Duality. Emptiness becoming heaviness. Silence becoming a sound. *Silence like a cancer grows*, wrote Simon and Garfunkel. Absence can grow too, and emptiness, and sounds that have no outlet.

They call her a killer, and they call her a sinner / And they call her a whore. I am nineteen and with my boyfriend at the time in his gold Honda Accord. We are

listening to *What It's Like* by Everlast. My boyfriend is an atheist, and soon, for about a year, I will be one too. My atheist boyfriend does not speak in absolutes like the people in my family and in my church. He does not bring up right or wrong. Good, bad, sin. Empathy, he tells me. Imagine what it would be like. *Then you really might know what it's like to have to choose.*

To have a choice is to have a range of possibilities. Alternatives. Many different paths to choose from. Choice is fluid, ever changing, moving wherever it wants. To choose something gives the impression of wanting something. But my choice was not like that. My choice was solid, unmovable. There were only two equally impossible paths. I did not want either option.

There are only two paths after an abortion. You are either okay or not okay. You either pick up with your life like nothing happened or you spend the rest of your days in a state of ruinous guilt. It's black and white. No matter which road you go, it's a shameful one, it's a stigmatized one, it's a quiet one.

But I say there is gray.

Sometimes I wonder if Ben's ability to stay distant was the result of not having experienced each act physically. In yoga, we believe that our memories live in the body as well as in the brain. We call it cellular memory — the idea that the events and traumas of our lives are recorded and embedded in the cells of our skin, muscles, organs. Trauma to the body, especially, lives there. If not properly processed we hold onto it, form protection around it, bury it.

Trauma, from Greek, literally means *wound*. This is what we are locating, reopening, healing as we hold the poses, breathe into them. Wounds. Many scientists and psychologists still don't believe in cellular memory, but I do. I know about the injuries and damages that live inside my body. They activate every time I hear the word *abortion* and every time I argue with my family about a woman's right to choose. They live in the things that have grown in my uterus instead. Fibroids, cysts. I know now that my cellular memories are the roots of my anxiety, my disordered eating — the things that are here that didn't used to be here.

I felt dizzy and sweaty the time at the doctor's office when the doctor pushed and probed, trying to identify the strange black blob that had appeared on the ultrasound I had had weeks earlier. Now, the inside of my uterus was again projected on the monitor. It was hung high for pregnant women, for women whose wombs are

not empty, women whose babies float and turn on the screen. Nothing moved during my ultrasound; there was nothing to look at on the monitor except a kind of fuzzy, black void. There was sound though, like a wind tunnel, like a heartbeat. *Whoosh, whoosh.*

I was nauseated by the time the doctor asked if I've ever had a D&C. My wound, in physician's terms.

"Ah," she said, as if the light suddenly came on, as if the puzzle had been solved. "This is scar tissue then."

I studied the screen more closely, looked for the black spot in question. I wanted to see the evidence of the mark left on my body. I wanted proof that something was there, confirmation that it was real, concrete, tangible, not just an abstraction in my mind, not just the hollow void of memory. The word hollow derives from the Old English word for cave, which is what my uterus is now, a vault where I keep my secrets, my damages, my wounds. Hollow has a sound like silence has a sound. *Whoosh, whoosh.*

Some Japanese name their aborted fetuses as part of *mizuko kuyō*. *Kaimyō* is the term for a posthumous Buddhist name. This is done so that the being is identified as an individual, so that it is recognized as existing. I do not want this, nor do I feel a need to name anything.

It's not names I am missing, it's language. I do not have words to describe what was lost, what is gone. The abortion, is all I say when I do speak of it. Or sometimes, depending on who I'm talking to, the abortions. Even now, if I do say it, I say it quietly, lowly, and always with the feeling that I'm ripping the skin from my body, exposing the darkest parts of myself. I do not call them anything when I see them in my dreams. Instead I use pronouns to designate their existence. He, she, they. Who were they? What were they? Were they anything at all?

Once, my grandfather, who died when I was five, was with them in the dream. We were standing in a parking lot. He was ushering them into their car seats, buckling each one into the back seat, rubbing their blonde heads, a smile on his face. He was taking them from me, about to leave for somewhere.

My best friend interpreted the dream as reassurance.

"See?" she said, "they are okay. He's got them, and everyone is fine." I wonder if

she is right, if that's how it works. I wonder if the dreams are the only sounds they can make, if their vibrations are reaching across the divide, if they are words that cannot be spoken, talking to me.

There are women in Japan who have “organized themselves into a confraternity to take care of the local Jizō shrine or shrines,” LaFluer writes. These women engage in a kind of “perpetual care” for the Jizō statues. They put out flowers, light incense, and wash them down. This reminds me of the way people visit cemeteries in America. We gather with loved ones or we go alone. We leave flowers and other mementos. When I visited Jack Kerouac's grave I left a note. Others had left bottles of booze, cigarettes, single flowers.

We do this to mark the passing, to acknowledge the loss. The word *loss* comes from Old English *los*, which means destruction. Loss is a kind of destruction, a tear in the web that is woven between souls. When someone dies it leaves a hole that cannot be repaired, an empty space that cannot be filled. But empty does not mean gone. Missing does not mean nonexistent. I picture the Japanese women on the roadsides. I see them on their knees, gently washing the world from each statue, wiping each figure clean of dust, debris. I picture them straightening them, picking up the fallen, placing flowers at their feet. They tend to each statue as a mother tending to a child, and I wonder if it helps repair a piece of the tattered web.

It's a misleading word — terminate. Abort is too. It tells us that something is ending, coming to a close, stopping. But in my experience, that was the beginning of something, something long and complicated and without resolution. Something nameless. Something heavy. Something silent.

Return is the word that the Buddhists use. They believe there is no beginning, no end to life. Life is not a straight line. It is a circle. Nothing starts when the sperm fertilizes the egg and nothing ends when the abortion takes place. Life is not an all or nothing deal. It flows into things gradually, like water, slipping in and out. It's like a song that starts slow and then builds and then fades out. Life is a continuum on which things are constantly changing.

So the unborn is returned then, during *mizuko kuyō*, to wherever it came from. “The whole ceremony,” Robert Aitken, an American roshi, says, is to put the woman “in touch with life and death as they pass through her existence so that she can

realize that such basic changes are relative waves on the great ocean of true nature, which is not born and does not pass away.” It’s not born and it doesn’t pass away. It just is then. There, always there.

Part of the mizuko kuyō ceremony is the prayer for the unborn to come again when the time is right. The ceremony presumes the transient nature of a soul, the idea that this moment in time is temporary, a minor delay.

I didn’t know my decision would be permanent back then, that I would decide a few years later that I never want to have children. I think about the soul that came knocking once, and wonder if it was the same soul that knocked the second time. I think about how I closed the door both times, and I wonder what the Japanese believe happens to souls for whom there is no right time. I wonder what happens to souls who are not delayed but rejected, to souls who will not, who cannot, come again.

The Jizu statues in Japan often have handwritten messages left with them. Words that cannot be given sound, cannot be sent with vibrations across space, left by almost mothers and almost fathers in hopes that they will travel from here to there, wherever “there” is. I don’t know what my notes would say. Maybe I would tell them about Ben, about the way he loved me — distractedly, partially, hatefully, and that I feared he would love them the same way. Feared, but knew. I would tell them about his drinking, how he used to start pouring gin into a glass at 1:00 p.m. in the afternoon and about how, eventually, we would have been on our own. I would tell them about their would-be cousins, who are their same age, who have everything, and how I would not have been able to give them the same. I would try to explain how opposing things can be true. Like how something can be the right thing and the wrong thing. Like how people can be both good and bad. Like how I am sorry and not sorry.

I found out later that Ben was afraid of how having another baby would have looked to his kids should he ever reunite with them.

“I didn’t want them to think I had moved on. I didn’t want them to think they weren’t everything to me.” He still wasn’t talking to his kids when we went through all of it. He still didn’t know where they were then.

I see now what I couldn’t see then: two other children standing like stone,

blocking the way. I see Ben's love, finite and single-focused. Our babies would have been what I was — a placeholder, something to do until child one and child two returned. *His* child one. *His* child two.

The smallest muscle in the human body is the stapedius muscle in the ear. Its purpose is to protect the inner ear from the sounds of our own body — chewing, talking, our own heartbeat. If it's not working properly a person will hear their own voice as a sound that's too loud. A trip to the dentist might become akin to torture. *The ear is so sensitive that the body, if it heard its own pulse, / Would be devastated by the amplification of its own sound*, poet Alberto Rios wrote in *Some Extensions on the Sovereignty of Science*. In an interview about the poem Rios said, "We are protected from particular sounds for our own good. There are many things in life we are protected from hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, and feeling."

"Feminists may never make a bumper sticker that says IT'S A CHOICE AND A CHILD, but of course that's what it is, and we know it," Maggie Nelson writes in *The Argonauts*. "We're not idiots; we understand the stakes. Sometimes we choose death." This, when I hear it read, is the sound that's too loud, the voice that I've been protecting myself from. This is the black, the white, merging into the gray. It is the truth, resonating.

To resonate is to produce a deep, full sound that continues indefinitely. A siren resonates; a bass in an orchestra resonates. Words, images, emotions resonate too, as do memories, *choices*. *Sometimes we choose death*. It's never how I would want to describe it, never how I've thought to say it. But it is this. It is exactly this. These are the words that ring in my ears. These are the sounds I recognize. This is the unnamed feeling that has doggedly pursued me for the last nine years. Now, it is named. A choice and a child.

"The muscle does important work, I think," Rios says of the stapedius muscle, "but at the same time, it keeps us from something that belongs to us." Shame, silence, rhetoric do this too — each in its own way keeps us from looking head on, keeps everything just at arms length so that we never have to let it in. But it's there regardless. "Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know," writes Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön. But I do not believe this is that.

At a recent event, Cheryl Strayed said that she will probably write about her mom's death for her whole life. "But I will have different things to say about it with

each decade,” she said. I’ve come to understand that my abortions are like this too. That they are not something that will teach me some life lesson and then will drift from my consciousness. Like sounds that continue indefinitely, they are events whose ripples will flow in waves throughout my life. Rising up and receding, rising up and receding. But they will never go away. Rios says that we are protected from certain sounds for our own good. But I think that maybe sometimes we need to hear the sounds. We need to speak up, give voice, say the truth. *It’s a choice and a child.*

We know the stakes, wrote Nelson. But I don’t think I did. I don’t think I really comprehended what I was doing when I was doing it. The act itself was still only conceptual, an idea in my mind, intellectualized. It took experiential knowledge and the bounce back for the weight to really land, like an echo, the depth of which is only known later, after the scream has been produced. It is too late to take it back then, to stop the sound waves from bouncing off whatever surface they have landed on. There is nothing you can do to stop them. You have to find a way to live with them.

In the most recent dream I had I was holding him. He was new, fresh, entirely dependent on the weight of my body to hold the weight of his. I felt him as he lay on my chest, sleeping. In the dream, I was holding him temporarily, while two other people prepared the car they would all leave in. While I waited, I stood and felt the length of his body. I ran my hand from his head to his back to his legs. His legs were skinny, skeletal, fragile. I bounced softly to produce a wave upon which he could float. He never woke. I never saw his eyes. But I can still feel the weight of him — solid, warm — in the center of my chest.

“I walk with ghosts now,” I heard an Iraq war veteran say on the radio once. I thought of it literally in that moment while I was driving down the highway. I was picturing a man in camouflage, a man walking alone on the desert earth, with black shadows all around him.

Some people don’t believe in ghosts. They don’t believe in beings who come from another place, or beings who never leave this place. There’s no such thing, they say. But just because you can’t see something doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. That’s what haunting is, the presence of something unseen. Houses are haunted. People are haunted. Psyches are too — strewn with the black shadows of the past.

That's what dreams are. Images, words, sounds that haunt us. We see *in* our dreams, but we don't see our dreams. They are not embodied, not given form in which to walk around in. But we still believe they exist. *I had the craziest dream last night*, we say. My dreams aren't crazy anymore. They don't shock me or take me by surprise. They are just there like other realities are there. *I walk with ghosts*, the veteran said, and I thought — *I do too.* ❶