With my Daughter, Hannah Arendt, and the City of Futures

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An individual is no match for history
—*By Night in Chile*, Roberto Bolaño

One night after teaching class I go to my daughter's apartment in Brooklyn, and next to the floor mattress that is her bed are several of Hannah Arendt's books. I pick up *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*, a posthumous collection. I like this French verb, *essayer* (*j'essaie* or *j'essaye*), "to try." I am trying to understand what it means to be in New York in January 2011, a city very different from what it was in 1984, when I moved to Greece. I've come to New York City to get away from Athens. The future that felt so hopeful in 2004 when Athens hosted the Olympics is now in shambles. I am moved by this passage in *The Human Condition* on worldlessness: a shared principle that transcends the world —"a group of saints or a group of criminals." This resonates: "What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved . . . but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together. . . ."

When George Papandreou came into power as Greece's prime minister after the myriad financial scandals of the previous government, everyone was hopeful. It was comparable to Obama's election after the fiascoes of the Bush administrations. But when he walked into the White House and said, as the prime minister of Greece, "I feel like I'm at home" Greeks were crestfallen at his all-too-obvious familiarity; he spoke in fluent, unaccented English, unlike so many prime ministers before him, Greek-Canadian-American that he is. And, to Greeks, remains not quite familiar for that fact. I am intrigued by his desire "to get the house in order" as he phrases it in Greek and as my friend Alexandra, a sociologist, notes, "genders" these efforts to make national, political issues more familial, to gather his people together.

Yet, despite George Papandreou's efforts, Athens has not stopped seething. Riots, thrown Molotovs, transportation and public sector strikes make Papandreou's measures to control the public debt impossible to ignore. I think that had *Nea Democratia* not lost the last election to PASOK Athens would have erupted into something comparable to Tunisia, Egypt, and now Libya. The exploding Middle East and the rebelling Greeks, outraged at those who have mortgaged their futures, want more than "economic measures." It is suddenly strange to be in New York, a city without the paralyzing conditions of Athens. Everywhere here ads promise to solve problems from snoring to pet traumas. A business ad catches my eye: "GLOBAL: We make complications simple."

Before going into my class, I read on the New Athenian blog: "The government wants to secure a level of funding from its shrinking tax base that will persuade the troika to release vital loan installments. But its tax measures are becoming increasingly shrill and desperate. While it has refrained from raising income tax, its capitulation to higher consumer taxes (VAT has gone from nineteen percent to twenty-three percent) penalizes the poor." Measures such as these are part of what is disappointing about the current government. Jerome Kohn, in his preface to Arendt's *Essays in Understanding,* notes: "She is uncompromisingly critical of secular bourgeois society, of its deadly conventionality and alert to its tendency to rob man of his spontaneity and change him into a 'function of society.'" The Arab uprisings have been stunning in their spontaneity, though I am feeling as if it would be hard for anyone to erupt spontaneously in this city; I want, for example, to laugh out loud when I hear the PA system's announcement on the subway to Brooklyn: "Ladies and Gentlemen, this is a public announcement, please note that a crowded subway is no excuse for sexual misconduct."

A march in the west village made up of a scraggly group protesting issues from Nuclear power, cuts in Medicare, to Israel's settlements, are ushered through traffic by armed Police, the young robust officers next to the older protestors with their polite "Excuse me"s keep moving people out of the way. What would happen then if the protestors spilled into the day's traffic, or there was a spontaneous swell in their numbers? There is a palpable tension, but it is not from the demonstrating citizens who blend into the city

quite harmlessly. There is a certain policed politeness here: "Ladies and Gentlemen if you see an elderly, pregnant or disabled person next to you, please give them your seat," the PA voice announces, adding, as if the lesson needs learning: "Stand up for what's right. Courtesy is Contagious." Some ads even suggest that the simplest (spontaneous?) action might be a life threat: "SNORING is no joke! It can kill you! Call 1-888-SNOREGO."

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There's been snow all month. I walk past a group of the homeless huddled in a corner of Penn Station. The scents of perspiration and dank wool waft by as I pass. It is a good thing that they have these corners to themselves. When I get to the building where I have class, I log into the New Athenian blog again. I do it every time I have a few minutes, and read about what's happening in Athens. More talk about the government's effort to collect outstanding taxes. It has sent out notices on what have been calculated as back-owed debts, taxes on independent businesses, apparent culprits of the black market economy. The scandalous thefts are in professions like medicine and law; doctors and lawyers who ask up front whether you want a receipt or not before naming their fee. An email from a friend describes getting a notice for back-taxes on his deceased sister's free-lance music business: "What do you mean you want me to pay taxes on my sister's business? I told the guy it hasn't existed since she died eight years ago. The government employee insisted the next surviving relative inherit the debt."

I open another email from Athens: "Terrible things are happening here." There's an attached image of a policeman in flames. Today's national strike is the latest in a series that has brought the city to its knees. I have to get to class so I log off. I am in New York after all, and my students are earnest and disciplined. Elizabeth, who asked me the first day of class if she could record our workshop discussions because she had the beginnings of MS, can't write without pain. Something in my face must have said what I was not saying because Elizabeth smiled a wondrous smile, and said "I know it's sad." I had more conversations with Elizabeth during the weeks of the semester. We drank coffee together before classes. She is from Alabama, and plans on going back after graduating this year, but is concerned that she has outgrown her town. I suggest a move to another city, talk about it being okay to find new friends, a new home town, but the doctors in New York, she says, "don't know what they're talking about." She is going to have surgery once she gets back to Alabama. I remember this from one of her poems: "my hand's life-line is in the anatomical vortex of my life." Elizabeth is hoping to get a job and live to sixty. Like the old who stay close to the sides of streets, gliding shadow-like and grabbing at railings next to steps, Elizabeth reminds me of what happens to the weak, and how easy it is to slip.

After class I log back on to read more of what is happening in Athens. The policeman, who was burning on the street from a thrown Molotov, had been extinguished by another policeman. I log off and decide to pick up some groceries for my daughter at Trader Joe's. Outside there is still snow on the ground. Pools of slush gather around the curbs. I step into one up to my ankles. Trader Joe's is mobbed, and I am quietly frantic, overly concerned with getting soy milk, juice, vegetables, toilet paper; how will I carry it all to Brooklyn, along with binders of student portfolios, books? I am unable to control a surge of panic. The Trader Joe's employees are holding up cheerful bobbing signs, telling people: "THE LINE ENDS HERE." Space is tight; people like me are trying to reach the cheeses and broccoli. A young woman in black leggings leaves the line to pick up something from another part of the store; a space floats between me and the next person ahead. People wait patiently. I move ahead. It's ridiculous to be standing with that open space the woman in the black leggings left in front of me. I'm almost at the cashier when she returns with her basket and looks at me like I should have known better. I roll my eyes. She is about to say something then thinks otherwise, moves back in front of me. I know in Greece there would have been an argument. Here the spaces of protocol are quietly assumed. I could have spontaneously refused to let her back into the line; she could have spontaneously argued that she had only momentarily left her place. In the end I let her assume what she assumed.

When I finally get to the cashier he is upbeat and asks if I'd like my paper bag doubled so it won't tear. He tells me he's exhausted but is looking forward to the gym after work. I smile, nod, thank him; he says, "You know those days when you just want to sit on the couch?" I nod again and smile and he continues, "When it feels like it's too dangerous to even go out the door?" I am still smiling, and say "I guess we could be in Libya." He nods and smiles. There's a short pause before he shakes his head, "Those people, man.

Amazing. . . ." I agree, thank him for the doubled bag and make my way to the R train. When it starts to drizzle I keep thinking the bags will get wet and tear. Someone next to me, waiting for the street light to change, is talking about a brand of dental floss; he keeps repeating "it's exceptional." I listen, next to him at the light, as he tells his friend it's because the floss is made of "something elastic," and is excited, "It *never* tears . . . ."

On the packed subway platform I'm with everyone else waiting for a train to Brooklyn. I wonder why I didn't go back to New Jersey, where I sometimes stay with my brother's family. I am especially tired. My daughter, over the phone, asked me to stay the night, cook dinner so we could catch up. We have fleeting conversations between her classes and mine. I sometimes wake up in her apartment to a 4 a.m. Skype conversation she is having with someone in Greece. She'll say she's going to bed soon, that she's finishing a paper, a project. I'll find myself lying awake, listening to her breathing when she lies down next to me.

The myriad thoughts of those early dawn hours are full of rain, sirens, voices from the street, someone drunk, passing cars with the music amped up. One night I listen to a couple having sex in the next apartment. My daughter had the flu. I came in from New Jersey to find her sweating in her bed, her eyes glazed with fever as she kept murmuring that she didn't want any medication. I had some Advil sinus tablets, which aren't given over the counter anymore, made a vegetable soup and took it to her upstairs; the world, and her fever, somehow tamed by the vegetable soup. After that I lay awake on the couch downstairs when I hear the couple next door. I notice the pacing of the woman's breathing; the jagged rhythm of it like breath between birth pangs, the man's exclamations, and then—it seemed a long time, they climaxed, his drawn out moan more audible, while her exhausted murmur sounds like she has collapsed. After some minutes a door opens, a car revs up, there's a quick honk. I wonder who they might be; she a secret lover? He returning to a family somewhere else, working a dawn shift in another part of the city?

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"Are you coming home for dinner?" I call my daughter on her cell phone after making a spinach pasta casserole. The rain is turning into sleet. I've made it to her Brooklyn apartment without tearing the paper bags from Trader Joe's. I hear some background sounds, but can't make out where she is or what she's saying. When she calls me back I hear even less clearly as I boil water for the beets. Then the phone rings again, there's a garbled voice. Someone is crying. I am asking, now emotionally, what the matter is, where she is. I think I hear her say her father's name. I wonder if it has something to do with the day's events in Athens, the strikes, the policeman in flames. "Your father?" I'm nearly hysterical. "I *can't* hear you? What are you saying?" I am now screaming into the phone. "Tell me what the problem is!" I hear the garbled sounds again, and then nothing.

I stare at the spinach casserole, something has happened. Someone has died tragically. Someone we know was hurt in the crossfire of today's demonstrations. It's been a long day. I open the front door to let in the rain turning to sleet. I don't know why I am even in New York. Or I do know. I needed to get away from Athens. I wanted to be closer to my daughter. Living in Athens made me feel like I was dying with the city. The news in Greece always grim, the opposite of the upbeat faces on U.S. television; despite the foreclosures and unemployment, there is always someone who believes the U.S. economy is "back on track" or better, much better than it was in 2008. My brother, who is in banking, makes the simple statement that "the U.S. has the great advantage that it can keep borrowing." Perhaps the future is borrowed, but it is, still, a future to look toward. Greece's bonds have been reduced to "junk," and people are being told the next decade, at least, is looking bad. People have to face it, face the past crushing the future: the new marble banisters of the Panepistimiou metro station in Athens smashed by rioters, the newly polished steps chipped, and chipped again. I turned away, arriving in New York where acquaintances and friends talk about their current projects, where signs and ads give directions and promise cures.

"What?" I am shouting into the phone when I call my daughter back. "What's wrong?" there is the garbled sound again I think is sobbing, my daughter overwhelmed by whatever it is she is trying to tell me. I am sure it has to do with her father and what happened today in Athens; history no longer distanced by a TV or computer screen. I hang up again, unhinged. Why had I not gone back to New Jersey—would that have made any of the news any better?

At least there, I could hear of it with people I knew. My perspective, if you could even call it that, was devastated. I drank some wine, and hoped my daughter would be home soon.

The sleet hitting against the roof and windowpanes is loud. About an hour later the lock turns in the door. My daughter is furious. "What's wrong with you? I was in the middle of a department meeting and had to leave because my mother is screaming over the phone that she has cooked me a meal." I stare at her blankly. "What's wrong?" I ask, confused. "Did something happen in Athens?" She looks at me as if she has not heard right or I have lost my mind. "*What*?" She takes off her coat. "Did anything happen to your father in Athens?" I say. She looks at me like I am crazy and repeats less loudly, but still irritated: "Mom? *What* are you talking about?"

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I try to keep focused like the many moving so purposefully up and down the city's subway steps. Arrivals, like destinations, never feel less guaranteed than when most possible, the almost-there of the finish line, the essay (this essay? *j'essaye*) shaping itself out of myriad strands, the body mentally and physically exhausted tries not to give out or give up. Elizabeth wrote, "My health is weaker than most my age. Maybe this is why my will is so much stronger." She gave me an immense smile when I found her after class stretched out on a couch and asked if she was all right. "Mind over matter" she said, explaining to me that she resists pain killers. But the matter of the mind is something else altogether.

I am thinking "mind over matter" as I travel with the wheeled cart my friend Ella insists I borrow. I am always carrying things, my Netbook, books and handouts for class, sometimes a change of clothing, sometimes groceries, too. It helps to take the pressure off my back, but it's cumbersome to lift up steps. I'm climbing up the steps at Penn Station, the cart in my right hand and a bag on my left shoulder, when a woman says, "Excuse me.," I try to go faster, but I am wary of tripping with the lifted cart. "Excuse me" she says again, irritated. I try to look back at her, or maybe I glare, and tell her I can't go any faster. In less than a few seconds we're at the top of the steps when she blurts: "You're taking up *two* spaces."

Mind over matter is Ella telling me that she wants to unclutter her living space to free it of matter, lighten her mind. She is adamant that I "don't buy *anything* to eat from the street." I look at her quizzically when she says this. "Most of the food vendors sleep on the streets," she adds. This has never occurred to me. I'm not sure how convinced I am, so Ella goes on, "I've seen it more than once, someone getting up off the pavement to put kebab sticks on the fire." I say maybe the vendor is squatting in a corner to get out of the cold. She shrugs "it's the same unwashed hands cooking the food." Ella's studio, that she generously puts me up in when I am not staying in Brooklyn, is neat. When I am there, Ella gives me my own toothbrush, a towel, explains why she never buys shampoos from organic stores like Whole Foods. She tells me they contain sulfates but I don't know what sulfates are. She explains they clog pores and eventually your hair will fall out as a result, "especially curly hair because it tends to be drier." In fact I should avoid "anything with silicone in it, or with any of the 'cones.'"

I learn other terms from Ella, like dimethicone, polymer (which she explains is a scientific word for plastic), sodium lauryl sulfate, all to be avoided. I tell Ella these are first world preoccupations, there are choices. But Ella is matter-of-fact and serious, "No one is looking out for me." Intrusions might be threats, and contaminate. When a man sneezes loudly on the subway, a young woman opposite him moves down two seats. The singular self feels so much more single in this city: the woman behind me at Penn Station was openly irritated that I took up more than my single allotment to get the wheeled cart up the steps. When I sit down at Au Bon Pain in the Port Authority bus terminal, I'm repulsed by the table's sticky surface; crumbs left by an unfamiliar someone. These spaces do not share any common Arendtian principle; this is space that "has lost its power to gather [people] together . . . ." We are un-gathered if together. A man asks if he can use the empty seat next to me. I nod yes. He starts to eat his bagel and continues the conversation he is having on his cell phone.

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A Jamaican woman on the NJ Transit from Chatham yelling furiously at the people on the train gathered our attention, insisting we focus on a young white woman's insensitivity. She had her laptop on the seat next to hers: "I'm SICK of coming from Morristown and never finding a seat! You put your laptops on these seats, you don't care 'bout no one, you have no decency . . . . " People were looking, some shaking their heads. The young woman, probably a student, removed her laptop but the Jamaican woman kept on,

incensed. "You don't want to listen to me because I speak the truth!" Someone quietly laughed. The young woman, now pissed, said "Take the fucking seat!" The Jamaican woman continued. "Even when I have my son with me there's no respect. In Jamaica they give up a seat for a mother." A woman went to get the conductor. Someone said, "Someone has to get her off this train." When the ticket collector appeared he had a smile on his face. He is white, and said something to the Jamaican woman that seemed to gather her because she started to speak less loudly, " . . . it's called freedom of speech" she said, when another ticket collector turned up, he is black. The three of them talked. The woman who said the Jamaican woman should be taken off the train repeated that she should be taken off the train. Both of the ticket collectors seemed at ease, chatting with the Jamaican woman who stayed standing until the train pulled into Penn Station.

Arendt writes "to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity" which leads to "the murder of the moral person." The *murder* of the moral person is a powerful phrase, who is the murderer? Everywhere on trains, buses, subways, the PA voice suggests that we might be, at any moment, in jeopardy, the murderer in our midst. Politely modulated words remind us, always, to "Protect" our "Personal belongings." They tell us not to "display cell phones and other electronic devices." I assume this means laptops, too. The consequence of this murder is: "ghostly marionettes" (Arendt again) once the destruction of the moral person is complete: "Backpacks and other large packages are subject to random searches by the police." The PA voice always ends its announcements with some polite combination of "Have a good day. Stay Alert. And be Safe." I am bizarrely relieved when the guy at the Trader Joe's cash register asks me, "Do I look like a Michael?" A woman who has just paid, quite out of the blue tells him: "You look like my ex-husband." And he answers, "What was his name?" She answers "Michael." I am suddenly friendly, grateful for this young man's spontaneous question. "I don't know," I say to him with a smile, "What does a Michael look like?"

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There seem to be more homeless on the streets since the last time I lived in this city; perhaps they are just more visible, huddled together because it is winter. A girl outside Whole Foods on Union Square looks like a student reading, sitting on the pavement on top of a relatively clean backpack. She has a sign in front of her: I'M OUT OF MONEY & DOWN ON LUCK. ANYTHING HELPS. Someone was crouched next to her to, I assume, talk her out of her bad luck. I watch her put the book down and shrug as she says something to him. Another day on my way to class, there is what looks like a middle-aged guy, probably not past forty, lying on the sidewalk against the wall of Dunkin' Donuts. People glance down at him as they pass, but no one pauses. He seems to be asleep, in jeans and a surprisingly cheerful yellow fleece. Maybe he is an out-of-towner sleeping off a bad night.

When I come out of the subway station on the corner of E.14th St. and Union Square, a group of the homeless remind me of the Greek pensioners that gather in the National Gardens off of Syntagma Square in Athens. They are always immersed in fervid discussions. This group at the corner of E. 14th is shabbily dressed and if I get close I can see some have missing teeth, their appearances are disheveled but they speak with a similar fervor as the Greek pensioners. I hear a reference to a "fucking asshole . . . out there to screw us out of every dime." They slap each other on the back in familiar greeting. I start to think of them as remnants (or is it the consequence?) of a lost Arendtian spontaneity, so opposite of the scripted language I see and hear from shop assistants and salespersons to the large, eerie poster I notice the first day I take the New Jersey transit into Penn Station: "Did you SEE something suspicious commuting to work or grabbing a bite to eat? Then SAY something to the NJ Transit Police to make it right. Report Suspicious Activity. Call: 1-888-TIPS-NJ."

I write to an American friend in Athens who isn't very good at keeping in touch, but maybe she, an American living in Athens, will understand my bereft state in the midst of so much of the impersonal. Perhaps words are less needy when the speaker is more firmly placed in the world. The more confidently modulated the voices over the telephone and PA systems, the more anxious I become. Arendt's words help name these spaces where I find myself. From "The Public and the Private Realm" in *The Human Condition*, there's this reference to "behaviorism" that my daughter has underlined: "the more people there are, the more likely they are to behave and less likely to tolerate non-behavior . . . . In reality, *deeds* will have less and less chance to stem the tide of behavior, and events will more and more lose their significance, that is, their capacity to illuminate historical

time" (my emphasis). I read this one morning on hold, waiting for someone from the Geek Squad at Best Buys to tell me why my Norton Anti-Virus that came with the Netbook I bought was inactive. Deeds indeed! I wanted to scream.

I was listening to Best Buy's recordings: "*The easiest way to install something is to let someone else do it . . . . Can't make it to the Best Buy store nearest you? No problem. You've lost your manual? Hey stuff happens. . .* " A real voice introduced himself as Agent Andrew after some twenty minutes. He asks me cheerfully how he can help. I am less cheerful when I ask why I can't activate my Norton Anti-virus. I have the software, and the Norton key code, but it isn't being accepted. Can I hold Agent Andrew wants to know, still cheerful, assuring me that I have reached the right person; he quickly comes back to say that the Norton was not activated upon purchase. I tell him that is why I am calling him. I repeat that I bought the computer with the software. He asks me to hold again and comes back on to apologize for the time it is taking to find out how to solve the problem. Another twenty or so minutes pass, when he asks if I want to hear the good or bad news first. I say "Give me the bad news." He says that I will have to return the computer to the Best Buys store where I bought it since the cashier didn't activate the anti-virus upon purchase.

It is Saturday, and I am leaving the city for a research project which means I will need my netbook. "Actually," I say to Agent Andrew, "I won't be able to get to the store for at least another week." There is a brief pause in which he asks me to hold again, if I don't mind, that he is going to get back to me as soon as possible. I wait. He returns to repeat, "Because the computer was not activated at the cash register—" I interrupt him, "Best Buy should be more careful about what they advertise. You do tell people that they don't have to worry if they have to go out of town. And in fact you can't do anything about a situation like mine." Agent Andrew pauses again then says he is very sincerely sorry. I say I understand, and we hang up. I am tired and realize nothing has been resolved except now I know that I have to go back to the store where I bought the computer. This is not Athens on a strike day, or so much worse, Libya, I am not starved, or being shot at, or physically threatened in any way. I am in New York and quite privileged to be here but I am coming apart.

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A young couple jump onto the #3 train as it pulls out of the Borough Hall stop when the PA announcement goes on, this time telling us to "Be aware of wallets in back pockets." The guy is flirting with the young woman he is with and their energy has people noticing them. He laughs, then almost slurs "I don't need no idiot tellin' me bout who's gonna slip their hands into my ass." She giggles swinging close to him as the train jerks to another stop. "I mean *really. . . Tellin'* me what hands are gonna get close enough to pull a wallet *outta my ass*." A man with a straw hat who looks like he's an out-of-towner seems concentrated on staring through the dark subway windows. Station stops flash by, there are Broadway plays and movie posters advertised on the walls, people waiting on the platforms, the screeching sounds of other trains. The couple is giddy, "Hey, I *mean* it" the guy says, then asks the young woman "What you starin' at?" She giggles again, leaning into him, "Tryin' to know you," she says. He smiles "I don't sit still enough for anyone to know me like that."

When I get to Brooklyn my daughter is studying for her midterm on Arendt. She tells me of Arendt's insights in *The Human Condition*, how remarkably she differentiates labor from work, how she emphasizes the plurality of political action. Plural, because one of the disasters of Marxism for Arendt was its assumption that political action "could *make* people act in certain ways" whereas it is individuals who make, create, "*individuals* together become the opportunity for action," my daughter says, giving emphasis to Arendt's italics. "What Arendt calls the *vita activa*" she explains. I write this down thinking again how to gather the un-gathered strands, *essayent*. She is suddenly irritated. I explain this helps me understand my resentment of the PA announcements, for example, that are so patronizing. She says, "This is my test mom, not your essay." I put the pen down.

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I go to visit my brother and sister-in-law in New Jersey. It will do me good to get away from the city and my daughter for a few days. My sister-in-law has the TV on while she cooks. A horrendous-looking father (unshaven, overweight, bloodshot eyes that look mad) has run his car into his daughter and killed her because she dared to leave their house and escape marrying a man he insisted she marry. They are Syrian. The girl's picture flashes over the screen, a smiling dark-eyed beauty. It is the news commentator's tone

which keeps me focused, when she says, "Here's a man who believed he had a right to murder his daughter because of gender and religion." I notice the assertiveness of her words, their confidence, firmly placed in a world whose values she is very clear about. "There is a part of society that believes this is their right. What we have to say to these people is that here in the United States our laws prevail no matter what your God tells you." Arendt's consequence of destroyed individuality, the "murder of the moral person" is enacted by an old world father's murder of his daughter's new world individuality: his deed of revenge against her refusal to behave. When I get back to the city one of the first things I see is a man sitting outside of Walgreen's with a cardboard sign asking his God for help: DOWN ON LUCK. NO FAMILY. NO SUPPORT. GOD HELP ME.

In the subways' arteries I am given pamphlets announcing the coming Rapture. One titled "The Great Tribulation" begins: "Very briefly, the Great Tribulation according to Dispensational teaching will commence after the rapture of the church. Its vortex will take place in Palestine, and it will entail death and suffering affecting the entire world. . . . " Further down, in bold: "**Truth is one. Truth applies to the whole, and therefore, it cannot contradict itself. . . .**" For some reason I keep the sheet of paper. My essay weaves it in, another truth converging with other truths: the Jamaican woman on the NJ Transit train speaking hers, the Syrian daughter's murdered truth, her father's murderous truth, and this leaflet's rapture of Truth. I had tears in my eyes. There was a large rat in the corner of the subway track. I forgot to ask if this was the right side for downtown trains. I ask a young woman reading a book if the A stops at Union Square, she shakes her head. I decide to go back to Brooklyn.

When I get to the apartment there is no one there. It's midday. My daughter's Arendt notes are on the kitchen table. Among her underlinings in *The Human Condition* is this: "Wherever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being." The individual becomes political, part of a body larger than the singular self when it can speak of itself as more than itself, part of (an)other. Does this make motherhood an inherently political state, the body, from pregnancy, tied to its embedded, umbilical, other? In Athens, my daughter was part of a world we were both familiar with. Home was our shared familiarity, where we ate, slept, had conversations and argued. But my daughter has left that world, grown up. Who she is in New York is not someone I always recognize, shaped by what she is experiencing of the world's plurality. I buy more groceries than I need to. She tells me to stop because she ends up throwing out the rotting tomatoes, the browned lettuce she doesn't eat. I get her a packet of Trader Joe's pop-up sponges (these were Ella's suggestion); they are "Made from Natural Vegetable Cellulose"; I get wire drain guards that catch food particles in the sink and let water filter through the drain. An effort to make her space more familial, an essay she tells me she does not want to be in.

Familiarity domesticates the unfamiliar. George Papandreou wanted to find a way to domesticate the disastrous effects of the Greek debt by speaking of it as a family affair; his ministers make statements like "We ate it all together," referring to the EU loans that built the infrastructure for the Olympic games in 2004 and paid for public works. But for some, like the ministers, these borrowings also funded private homes and personal pleasures: *adj* L *familiaris,* fr. *familia* **1:** closely acquainted: INTIMATE <a~ family friend>. . . . **3. a** of or relating to a family <remembering past ~ celebrations> (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1988). In the 2011 spring issue of *Gulf Coast* there's an interview-essay on six poets' responses to the language used to describe the catastrophic BP oil spill (spill being one of the contested words).

Patricia Smith quotes George Carlin's statement: "Smug, greedy, well-fed white men have invented a language to conceal their sins." If this language of concealment remains unfamiliar to those not invested in the game of hiding, if we feel George Carlin's "greedy, well-fed," or George Papandreou, are not being sincere (after all GP expressed more familial sentiments in the White House than in Greece), we are no longer fed on the same words, even if, as GP's ministers insist, we eat at the same table. When she gets back to the apartment in Brooklyn, my daughter sees me reading *The Human Condition* and reminds me that her education is not my essay. What is it I am trying after all to understand—my letting go of her familiarity, my words that no longer feed her?

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In the Franklin Avenue subway station the drilling sounds like gunshots. It is early morning. A young black man sees the expression on my face. I have stopped walking, reluctant

to go down to the platform. He says, reading my mind, there is construction going on in the tunnels. I'm on my way to the post office to send a gift to someone in Greece. I haven't slept well in my daughter's bed while she slept on the couch downstairs. Someone I know on the Greek island of Patmos wants a Hello Kitty wrist watch; the postal worker with a neatly combed pony tail speaks English with a Spanish accent. He's efficient and terse but smiles. "Can I tape this some more?" I say, not confident that the priority mail envelope won't open. He says it's secure, "I've glued this down well." I say since it's going to Greece who knows. He interprets this as my being distrustful of Greeks. "If they want to open it they will open it," he continues. I say "I know but it makes me feel better to tape it." He answers, "That's the most important thing. Do whatever makes you feel better." He wishes me a safe and good day. To speak, and recognize, the language of others builds familiarity. The political person for Arendt is the person who can, above all, articulate a relationship to others: "Thus the language of the Romans, perhaps the most political people we have known, used the words, 'to live' and 'to be among men' (*inter hominess esse*) or 'to die' and 'to cease to be among men' (*inter hominess esse desinere*) as synonyms." Do I feel, here, among: to live.

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Images of a destroyed Sendai are on all the TV channels. Elizabeth tells the class she was a study-abroad student in Sendai, and has been trying to contact her Japanese host family; she also tells us the word "Itae" in Japanese means one body. It is a Shinto Buddhist belief that when one considers the self, one simultaneously considers the community; the body is not singled out to be singular. That week the class assignment is to begin a sequence poem. Find the small, telling detail, I say, "Especially when you're dealing with big ideas." Leo, originally from Puerto Rico, writes a poem in which he describes Puerto Rico as one of the last colonies of the world, still called a commonwealth. Someone says the Puerto Ricans have voted for this; the popular majority, by a slim margin, has made this choice, though it enrages Leo. Elizabeth writes about Sendai. She shares a Japanese proverb: "After a great storm you can see more clearly where there is solid ground" and describes the TV image of neatly gathered chopsticks some survivors have whittled from the wood of destroyed homes.

Roberto Bolaño has characters whose teeth are missing, the main character in *Amulet* for example, and another in *The Savage Detectives*; none of his characters are in the best physical shape, yet these imperfections are secondary in importance to his character's larger bodies, the body of Chile, the body of Mexico. During an undergraduate student reading, a student from another class reads of yearning for a neighborhood where "things other than disaster and drugs bring people together." What will gather people—a common value, a common hope, the impending rapture? The Tsunami that turned Japan into a single *us*. In Bolaño's *Amulet*, the protagonist calls herself "the mother of Mexican poetry" because she knows "all the poets and all the poets know me." In Athens' Syntagma Square enraged citizens are peacefully taking over the space in front of the Greek parliament. They call themselves "Indignants" or αγανακτισμένοι in Greek, and have grouped together as a body, set up tents in corners of the square. There are now banners from almost every lamp and sign post warning of the encroachments of the three-pronged European Central Bank, IMF, and European Commission, known as the troika, the foreign body that has intervened with massive loans to "domesticate" the national debt as George Papandreou wants us to believe, "us" being the Greeks with their body of grievances.

When you are lost any doomsayer is a prophet in the dark. Ella says "I am a nobody" and she means no body is familiar or familial enough to inspire her with what Arendt describes as a shared principle to gather her like Bolaño's "mother of Mexican poetry." The Greeks are wary of George Papandreou's assurances that Greece will be saved by the troika with its own body of interests. When Ella's mother was alive, Ella says "I would hang up on her sometimes," her overprotection suffocating until cancer destroyed her. Ella tells me she still has a hard time accepting that her mother is gone. She keeps the glazed ceramic bowls and cups her mother made, using them regularly for soups and teas. But outside the space of her studio apartment she is sensitive to her body's vulnerability, the kinds of dust and temperatures that cause her allergies, the products that produce skin irritations. I chide her about carrying baby wipes everywhere, cleaning table tops and seats before she sits down or eats.

In the dark of the subway's arteries the doomsayers treat me with familiarity, handing me pamphlets. There are signs on makeshift stands in the passageways. One advertises a "Published Poet"; another, "Organic Sweets"; one announces "Christ Sent You Here" A local *AmNY.Com* paper reads: "supreme court rules cops can burst into your home if they suspect you're smoking pot and are reading [sic] to destroy the evidence." The front page shows a full length photograph of two policemen in uniform with a background graphics of marijuana leaves. I thank the guy who hands me a copy of the cheaply printed paper with its garish snaps of "Maria on pg. 2," who says "It's painful" referring to her split with Arnold Schwarzenegger. I see mice darting across the subway tracks. In the distance, someone is playing drums. One woman urges me to keep going straight for the Downtown A, even though the sign above the tunnel says Uptown. She says "You have to go through the tunnel before you see the other sign." I have to trust her.

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The lecture I attend on "Difference and Self-Determination in a Global World" focuses on how the multicultural origins of the immigrant experience in modern city states complicate efforts at social cohesion. "How to define cohesion apart from homogeneity?" one speaker asks, since all the way back to Plato's *Republic,* homogeneity and consensus was maintained through exclusions. Andreas Kalyvas phrases it as "egoism at the cost of the other." But the erasure of otherness in modern cities is more subtle than it was when Medea and Oedipus brought on catastrophes that reconfigured their worlds. Before I left Athens in January there were ongoing outbursts on the metro and station stops, people frustrated with the strikes, the protestors; some supporting them, others against. One man at the Panepistimiou station kept yelling that "We should *remember* the Occupation!" He got sympathetic nods. Someone patted him on the back. "We'll relearn what we learned then" he yelled in a confused jumble that included declarations of how people survived the Occupation, how everyone walked everywhere, ate apple cores tossed from windows by Nazi officers, rationed water, chickpeas.

Re-member. This is both the danger and hope. For the Greeks there is a suspicion that re-members what threatens to dis-member, what will un-gather them, the too overt dissonance in the essay, what will unravel the braid, maim the body. Otherness needs to be re-membered as Arendt defines it; to become a consciousness of plurality, "the condition of human action." Elizabeth, who lives every day in a plurality of pain, is continually made conscious of her body's otherness, of the dissonance that, at any point, could dis-member her. But the threat re-members her, too, as she pushes her maimed limbs *essayent*, as she tells me why she makes the effort and resists pain killers.

Arendt writes: "The Greeks, whose city-state was the most individualist and least conformable body politic known to us, were quite aware of the fact that the *polis*, with its emphasis on action and speech, could survive only if the number of citizens remained restricted." The cost of the other in Kalyvas' phrasing of the politics of antiquity, enforced homogeneity; the ego, refusing to be dismembered by the foreign or estranged, banished its threats from the polis. In today's culture, Zygmunt Bauman writes, we live "by seduction, not normative regulation; . . . creating new needs/desire/wants . . . " the kinds of behaviorism Arendt mentions which have reduced the individual "in all its activities, to the level of the conditioned and behaving animal." The energetic salesperson at the entrance of American Eagle for example, asks with enthusiasm: "So *what* are *we* shopping for today?" and when I say "Nothing" his smile vanishes and he says, bluntly, "Well then you're in the wrong place."

I am in the wrong place, unsure of how to find my way back to the familiar. Like everyone else, I am given instructions of where to go, suggestions of what to do: the always patiently modulated voices over the PA systems in stores, stations, on trains and subways, tell me and everyone else how we can take care for ourselves; to "please offer" our place "when an elderly, disabled, or pregnant person is next to you," to continually "be aware of" our "surroundings" that are full of instructions and advertisements, sale items that assure us that we can save money: "a FREE pair of underwear with a purchase of three panties"; at the cash register in JJill, the women's clothing store, a sign reads: "SALE: *shhh*, it's just between us." But who is "us"? Home Depot; TJ Max; Target; Best Buys; Verizon; The billboards all along strips of highway under yellow umbrellas of light remind "us" of how and where we will find the bargains.

"Meet Us In Person" reads one billboard on the Jersey Turnpike, in large black letters, next to a smiling

young man and woman who look like well-meaning employees. Underneath their attractive figures in the same black letters is: "('Billboards are so impersonal')." It is an ad for People's Bank. Like the salesperson in American Eagle, the billboard figures want us to understand that "we" can be a member too, receive a CVS Rewards card, a Gap members' card, "Have you opened a preferred customer account with us?" asks the young woman at Barnes & Noble. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes that a function of "modern privacy" is to "shelter the intimate." The social "we" is never, for Arendt, reflective of a private self, certainly not any part of the "us" in JJill or People's Bank. But in this city, intimacy too is for sale: "Don't let IMPOTENCE Ruin Your Sex Life. Call 1-866-866-MALE."

On the R train one evening, I overhear a strand of conversation between two guys I notice, because one of them with his curly blond hair makes me think of the young Art Garfunkel. "Everything was great until it was just the two of us. And that's kind of important." His friend is nodding. "It was so weird that it fell apart when it was only her and me. We worked fantastically together but yeah . . . she totally changed when it was just us. . . ." I strain to hear more, but their voices are too low after that. "The intimacy of the heart," Arendt writes, "unlike the private household, has no objective, tangible place in the world." And yet, in this city, the signs and ads and PA voices are there to "localize . . . with certainty" by making public that which will, Arendt points out, destroy the very nature of subjectivity and individualism. There are numbers to call for anything from debt and family guilt to impotence, gambling and snoring.

What then is intimate, my sponging the sink in my daughter's bathroom to clean away anything unfamiliar? I tell Ella that for some reason I don't do this in Athens. I let the dishes accumulate in the sink; I forget to take out the garbage. Ella tells me I am overcompensating because I am far from Greece, that everything feels unfamiliar, including the dirt. I ask about what she did when she visited Africa two years ago, surrounded by all the dirt there. "I can't imagine you with some endless supply of baby wipes." She laughs and says she went to Africa expecting the dirt, and learned how the Africans lived with it, rationing water, cooking and washing in communal groups; she agrees that these village gatherings are intimate.

The unfamiliar can also be intimate with potential. Potential disaster is also potential. The wheeled cart Ella had given me got caught in the turnstile at the Franklin Avenue stop as I was going quickly through it one of my last days in the city. The handle lodged inside of the metal bar and I couldn't pull it out of its locked-in state. A young man behind me, speaking in Spanish to a young boy with him, immediately grabbed the steel pole of the turnstile and moved the locked-in pole, what I thought was impossible to budge. "Do you want this pushed frontwards or backwards?" he asked. "Frontwards" I said. He nodded and miraculously pushed the handle from out of the steel-rod clasp.

"Oh God, thank you so much" I heard myself say, relieved almost beyond words. He smiled, holding the hand of the young boy with him. "This was *so* sweet of you!" This stranger had averted a potentially disastrous moment, as potentially disastrous as the moment I might have fallen down the steps at Penn Station, taking up two spaces. The young Spanish man was beaming. I kept thinking how spontaneous and immediate his gesture had been. Ella described a similar stroke of luck when she had to navigate the subway on crutches. Getting off at a stop her crutch slipped into the gap when a man flew out from the crowd, lifted her up from under her arms. She said she barely had the chance to thank him; he was gone as fast as he had appeared.

Weeks after the Tsunami there are still images of destroyed towns and villages on TV and now, also, anxious coverage of the nuclear meltdown in Fukushima. My daughter's roommate, who is Japanese, shows me a shirt she bought online in support of the Tsunami victims. I show her the electric blanket I bought on sale for their couch. She thanks me for stocking the refrigerator, cooking, and buying cleaning supplies. I tell her it's my pleasure. When my daughter gets back and sees the economy-sized bottles of shampoo and hair conditioner, a body wash and the electric blanket, she is furious. "My room looks like a store Mom! I now have two bottles of body wash, an extra sponge, three kinds of face cream, sun blocks and acne creams, and a bag of Dunkin Donut coffee that will last me 3 months. *Not* cool!" I am amused, but vaguely hurt. "It's the immigrant syndrome," I say, "I don't realize I duplicate things." She is unimpressed, and tells me I am encroaching on her space, and resents "this dependence on *things*." I answer

"you might need them when you run out of what you have." She is clipped, "then let me run out. It won't be a disaster."

Because I am going to leave the city in less than a week I find myself thinking of what she might run out of first: toilet paper, olive oil; it is my way of domesticating what is not disaster but uncertainty. My daughter is rarely home during these last days. I'm surprised that I've written "home," another uncertainty. On a page torn at the crease, there's a paragraph from a William Saroyan play pinned to her bulletin board along with receipts, postcards. A character named Kitty says, "I dream of home. Christ, I always dream of home. I've no place. But I always dream of all of us together again. We had a farm in Ohio. There was nothing good about it."

That night I dream my daughter and I are in a large body of water, the sea or lake is washed in spectacular blues and bronze-pinks, the kind of dawn-colored light of northern white nights. I am carrying her. She is perhaps six or seven. I am buoyant as I have her lifted above the water line which is glazed in shades of added gold and azure. We're both transfixed by the colors. Gradually the surface begins to darken and I can feel the water losing its buoyancy. Weeds are making it difficult for me to move. She senses my anxiety and looks tense. I reassure her that I am wading toward the shore and able to carry her. For the first time her weight is a burden. The water has become threatening and very dark but I keep focused on getting us through what has turned into a swamp.

When we make it out of the water, she suddenly stands up, much older. There is another, much younger, child on the shore we've walked onto, a dark-skinned toddler with beautiful eyes sitting by herself. My daughter is impatient, she wants us to get going but I am exhausted. She tells me to pick up the toddler playing in the sand so we can move on. I shake my head and say "She's yours."

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One of the first things I notice when I get out of the Athens subway at Syntagma Square is a man on crutches moving in the middle of the platform. People let him pass, making space. Some are wearing white cloth masks, available at any pharmacy, to protect against the tear gas. Large doses of it are being sprayed above ground in Syntagma. It's the second day, June 29, of the forty-eight hour national strike organized to protest Parliament's scheduled vote to pass the first troika loan package worth billions of Euros. The metro is working because the employees decided to call off the strike so transportation was available for protesters to get to Syntagma square. My eyes are tearing and my cheeks sting. The next day on TV channels journalists and news reporters will talk about the criminal amount of tear gas the government allowed to be used. Their aim, among other things, was to break up the protesting groups who have gathered over the past month in Athens' main square.

I am home, but Athens has changed. Familiar shops and landmark stores have closed down. "For Rent" signs are up everywhere. Syntagma, Constitution square, has turned into a tent city, occupied by the "Indignants"; they gather every day, and every evening a 9p.m. a list of speakers is drawn up from among them to address the crowd. I think Arendt would have been impressed by this body of people who have chosen quite literally "'to live'... [and] 'be among men' (*inter hominess esse*)." And lay claim to a future.