

**Ella Latham**

## **Chronicle of My Blood-Summer**

**S**ummer 2020. Pandemic summer, summer of uprisings, summer of record heat. I'm not introducing it as a character. This summer has no agency here; this season of the earth did not make any decisions or cause any harm. I am setting the scene. It was the summer of 2020, and I meant to be in the streets and in community, building and breaking and building. Instead I spent the summer stitched to my couch by pain. Netflix ran low in the background and I stuffed my face against my ratty couch cushions and I howled.

I was stitched to my couch because I had an abortion during the first spike in COVID-19 cases in my city. The abortion did not go well. I attempt to say this without blame. I didn't die on the table. I wasn't pregnant anymore. I didn't contract COVID-19 from the cautious but exposed clinic staff. I also didn't stop bleeding for two and a half increasingly painful, desperate months. It took passing a blood clot the size of my fist to get me to a follow-up appointment. On September 18, a few days after we learned that ICE was forcibly sterilizing women imprisoned in their camps, and hours before we learned that Ruth Bader Ginsburg had died, I had to get the abortion redone. Medically: a second suction procedure. What I gathered: they didn't get it all out the first time, and they had to go back in for the fetus scraps.

I spent the summer with my body falling away from me. I longed and yet was dead weight. I reeled with the blood, dizzy with deep exhaustion. My body fell away from me in blood and it fell further away from me and further out of me every day. My days, my time, evaporated. Were endless. Were a nightmare of the clock and a nightmare of the tumbling dominoes of events. There was nothing to do but look. Nothing I could do, with even my body my enemy. My energy contracted. Contracted like internal muscles. Left only enough room. It was enough, and yet it was *just* enough.

What counted as *just enough* from the starting block that was my little corner of the world before the pandemic hit? I held onto my shitty but salaried job, and therefore my health insurance, by the skin of my resentful former-labor-organizer teeth. I cooked meals for myself, especially summer vegetables, raised by friends or a local farm. In this I behaved like any good American, operating under the delusion that I could fix it by *consuming* something of a higher quality—that if I put better food into my body, the rest would take care of itself. I consumed horrifying event after horrifying event

through my eyes, through my phone screen, through streams of the endless internet. I had feelings about these events and sometimes I said words about them, but I didn't succeed in doing anything about them. I paid my bills. I didn't get COVID (that wouldn't come until much later). And I bled. I bled a lot. I produced and cleaned up and managed a lot of blood.

I'd gone to a march for Breonna Taylor on her birthday. On what would have been her birthday. We shouted her name through our masks while bros in suits hovered warily around the Lexuses in the windows of a dealership. They were guarding the cars. I swayed in the heat, my body pendulously heavy. Cops were there and cops were marching there and I was all eyeballs and confusion and fuzzed out fear. I spent three days afterwards pinned to the couch. I couldn't shake my exhaustion. I thought it was the emotion, the heat. Unable to move or to think, I dozed through more Netflix. When I still was too tired to get up into the middle of the next week, the sudden knowledge that I was pregnant thunderclapped against my fool skull like a gong.

I went to Wal Mart for a pregnancy test even though I already knew what it would say. This was the same Wal Mart I'd gone to during that wild vertiginous three-day period when the entire non-medical United States suddenly realized that COVID-19 was a real threat and went loony for canned beans, sanitizer, and toilet paper. I'd watched live birds fight in the auto care section, totally ignored in the broader pandemonium. I'd watched harried upper-middle-class couples negotiate for toilet paper and threaten to come to each other's houses if things "got really bad," whatever that meant to them. I'd been futilely kind to a clerk with blood streaming from the backs of her hands as she'd reassured me, "I don't have it, I promise, it's just from scraping with all this bagging." Never mind that COVID-19 actually wasn't about the blood, but the breath. I'd wiped her blood from my shopping bags before I loaded them into my car, trying to imagine how many items she'd handled to make her skin tear like that, my heart helpless and seized.

Wal Mart is very worried about people stealing off-brand \$3 pregnancy tests, so I had to ask a sixteen-year-old boy to get it out of the case. Shuffling his feet, he told me he couldn't hand it to me, that I could collect it at register 20. I mustered all the patience I possessed to ask him why. Apparently pregnancy tests were a frequently stolen item, and customers weren't allowed to take frequently stolen items in their carts.

I looked at my cart. It was pretty full. There was some potting soil. Some of those still-elusive paper products. A couple tank tops, groceries, the cheap made-in-America candles I buy in batches. It was a cart that wasn't going to walk out of the store. I immediately saw that thought for what it was and was ashamed. Feeling that I had earned the right to be trusted with a \$3 pregnancy test because my cart was full of other items that made it look like I had more than \$3—and not because I was a *person*—that was the boot-heels inside my own mind talking. I set down the argument I'd been formulating and I walked over to register 20 and made my purchases and I went home and I was too bone-tired and ashamed to think about it anymore. I saved the test for that weekend.

I've always had spectacular blood. Years ago, I was inexplicably ill in ways no doctor I could afford seemed to be able to identify or diagnose. I went in to get some blood work done; they drew a *lot* of blood. The chatty lab tech was somewhere between vial three and vial four when she drifted off midsentence, staring at the vial, and then turned back to me.

"Your blood," she said, "is just the most *beautiful* shade of red."

"Uh," I said. I can't remember if I thanked her; I know that was my first reaction, but I had no idea how to thank someone for such a compliment. She said it was *so much redder* than everyone else's. She asked for my permission to take a photo of a vial of my blood. It was the perfect brilliant shade, and she wanted to have it matched at the paint store for an accent wall in her guest room. "It's just the color I've been looking for," she told me. Half-delighted and half-discomfited, I told her that was fine. But I couldn't get any information out of her about whether extra-red blood was a medically significant indicator for whatever mysterious underlying condition I was on the hunt to uncover.

In my mid-twenties, I'd started bleeding after sex. I got a lot of tests that kept coming back negative. I asked at least four different doctors about the bleeding; their advice ranged from "Stop having sex that's so rough" to "Stop worrying about it, there's nothing wrong with you." As I went through some bad years of active addiction, it happened a lot more, and a lot more often in situations I didn't want to be in. I started to check for blood all the time when I was fucking someone. I started to be afraid of it.

And then, about a year before I had this abortion, a man assaulted me while I was on my period. I woke up and there was blood—and I mean this very seriously—*everywhere*. There was blood on my face and on the floor across the room. When I wiped my face the blood came off on my hands and that's how I knew it was there.

There was blood in my sink and blood on all of my towels. There were bloodstains on my bed that I let sit for three days under a potion of baking soda and white vinegar. I spent those three days on the couch. My face stuffed into the pillows. Howling.

What happens and what should happen, they're often irreconcilable. The gap between what is and what should be, the gulf between the people who fight alongside you and those who fight to shove you down. You can't close it. You can't square the circle. You can't bridge what can't be bridged.

I spent a lot of my early life resisting the pull of the religion I was raised with and its corollary, the yearning to be otherwise born again. Coming through trauma and addiction are the clearest ways I've found to wean myself from the American compulsion towards the mirage of a resolution.

It is what it is—we love to say that, here, now. But *what it is*, often, is irreconcilable. Addicts know this. Trauma survivors know this. We live it. It's not a fact we carry around lodged in our brains with other facts. It's a fight, and we fight it out just beneath the visible surface of the body, every single day. When other people, people with more power or more money than we have, start fighting their fights, but inscribing those battles and their consequences onto our bodies, what does that do to us? What does that do to people?

I say this as a cis woman whose sexuality and reproductive capacity is the subject of a lot of legislation and an immense amount of moralizing, all of it deeply damaging. And these questions hold for so many of us. For so many who bear the brunt of the consequences of richer, more powerful peoples' battles on their bodies. It holds for Black and brown people murdered by police. It holds for working class and poor people who have no choice but to work through a pandemic, no matter how dangerous it is for themselves or their loved ones. It holds for all of us on our dying planet, poisoned by the same capitalists who are now racing each other to make the most luxurious getaway to outer space, surely to leave the rest of us in their dust.

I fear often that I am too preoccupied fighting it out inside my own body, me v. me v. the internalized horrible world, to direct that fight outwards, upwards, in the direction that it should go. I am afraid those in power are succeeding in pitting us against each other, and even before that, against ourselves.

**T**he law in my state requires people to consult with a doctor a few days before an abortion. Unlike many others, we can do so via conference call. This was a larger than normal relief as, in late June and July, there was a regional spike in COVID-19 cases. Lawmakers in multiple states had pushed to have clinics shuttered and abortions

declared nonessential at the beginning of their shutdowns. I was afraid of getting COVID-19 by going into a medical facility; I was more afraid clinics would get shut down before I could actually get there; I was most afraid of being forced to carry a child I didn't want to term. Fear of a deadly pandemic shouldn't be dwarfed by fear of losing, or of being unable to access, your basic human rights. But how many have felt that shadow in these long months?

I joined the conference call from the parking lot at my job after making up some ludicrous excuse. When the doctor came on the line, her voice was flat and rushed. It was the most relieved I've ever been by a medical professional's indifference.

While she sped through the basics of abortion procedures and every conceivable complication, I tried to listen through her to the other people on the other ends of all the lines. I wondered who was out there. I wondered if this part was hard for them. If anyone had had a harder time than I had sneaking out of work, or didn't have work at all and wasn't sure how to pay, or was dreading an impending trip into the city. I live in a fairly sizeable city close to borders with two other states that have much more restrictive abortion laws, and what for me should have amounted to an awkwardly-timed conference call in the parking lot and a half-day off work was surely to other people a major disruption requiring significant travel and significantly greater expense.

I managed to tune out most of the expected litany of alternatives to abortion. But then, astonishingly—the doctor robotically informed us that by having an abortion we were *giving up* certain rights. Most important, apparently, were the rights to child support from the father and to government assistance available to mothers of infants and young children.

I'd been prepared for legally required, thinly disguised attempts to convince me that having an abortion was somehow a form of loss, instead of just one of the many ways I exercise my autonomy over my body, life, and future; but I'd been totally unprepared for the angle that choosing not to carry a pregnancy to term was somehow a *financial* loss. And—most stunning of all—that it was better for me to rely on government assistance than to not have a child I didn't want. I tried to picture the mental gymnastics the men who'd surely written the law behind this had to tumble through. I tried to imagine what they said in every single other context about women on government assistance. I started laughing. I started laughing because I was still in sight of my workplace and otherwise I would have started screaming.

There were none of the anti-choice picketers I'd been braced for outside the clinic on July 1. When a meticulously polite gentlemen in the building's security booth gave me further directions—once he'd finished searching my belongings, wandng my body, and copying down my driver's license number—I thought I'd made it through the hard part.

But instead of buzzing me in, the woman behind the glass stopped me as I grabbed futilely at the locked door.

"You should know," she said, her gaze steady on me but completely unreadable, "that we've had a staff member here test positive for COVID-19."

"Oh," I said stupidly.

"We also have several people who are out sick with symptoms. Everyone who is here today feels fine, but like, we've all been around each other." She waved her hands back at the open floor plan visible behind her. "We are still performing procedures here today, or if you'd like, you can reschedule your appointment for later."

*Later, later, later.* The words clanged around in my brain like a terrible runaway bell. *Later* was the most malevolent word on earth to me in that moment. The only one worse was *never*. What if there weren't any abortions at all, *later*? My rational brain reminded me that under normal conditions it would take more time to shut down clinics than it would take to reschedule my abortion—probably. But the hypervigilant, catastrophizing little trauma survivor who I can't quite evict from my mind was drunk with power from repeated pandemic-era vindications. And she was screaming at me that **THESE ARE NOT NORMAL TIMES** and **THEY ARE COMING FOR THE CLINICS WE HAVE LEFT** and **IF YOU DON'T LEAVE WITH THAT FETUS OUT OF YOUR BODY TODAY YOU MIGHT NOT GET IT OUT TIL YOU ARE FORCED TO CARRY THAT CHILD TO TERM AND THEN YOU'LL HAVE A GODDAMN BABY THAT IS NOW A HUMAN BEING YOU'LL HAVE TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT.**

"Um, I mean, I guess I'm fine with it," I said. "With doing it today." I meant to add "If you're fine with it," or "Thank you for being here," but I didn't, and then I felt terribly guilty for making her still be at work during a pandemic, and then I wanted to apologize for wanting to still get the abortion, but it was too late, she'd buzzed me in and someone else was giving me temperature checks and extra screenings and then the sonogram and the counseling session, all while being shuttled from one waiting room to another, waiting all day for a ten-minute procedure.

Normally I don't mind a wait. I was hyperaware, as I waited, that I was in a clinic where all the workers had known exposures

during a pandemic, and I was grateful to still be there. But with each extra medically-unnecessary step, knowing this was all legally designed to make the process as unpleasant for us all as possible, I got madder and madder. I split hours between two desolate waiting rooms with most of the chairs removed, leaving us languishing at a safe distance of six feet or more apart. By the time I could finally have the actual abortion, I had nearly split myself in two toggling back and forth between anger at the people outside the clinic walls responsible for this and intense rushing gratitude and guilt toward the few overworked staff members there that day, and me sitting there dumbly, wishing there was anything at all that I could say to them.

**T**here were red flags.

The abortion itself didn't feel like all that much. I took a couple of extra deep breaths; I gritted my teeth. When the doctor asked whether I wanted silence or distraction, I chose distraction. She chattered away admirably while she performed the procedure.

But when she took the tray full of fetal tissue and blood out for inspection, she didn't come back for a long time. The assistant with me got visibly anxious at how long it was taking. She went out to check twice. When she told me all was well and I could get dressed, I didn't believe her. When the doctor came to check on me in the recovery room, she barely slowed down while walking by. She didn't meet my eyes as she asked me how I was feeling.

I've learned the hard way to avoid self-recrimination for how I've handled navigating the American medical nightmare. I try to constantly add to my arsenal of strategies without losing sight of the fact that I shouldn't have to have these strategies just to access the bare minimum of medical care. I try to remember that healthcare workers—especially during a pandemic—are doing heroic work in a system that's not set up with the well-being of humans as its primary concern. I try beyond that to remember that people who work in abortion clinics must face stress and challenges going about every single task on every single workday that I can't imagine. In this case, I try to remember that I don't know all the information, or what went through their minds when they chose not to tell me whatever it was that kept the doctor from giving me the all-clear for so long. I also don't know how new fears might have affected doctor-patient communication that day. How bad the outbreak was, how sick their colleagues were, how each person there was managing their own combination of worry and fear and confusion.

But if I hadn't felt so guilty over my very presence in the clinic—not for reasons of internalized misogyny, or so I'd like to

think, not because all those nebulous but very real and powerful haters out there wanted me to flagellate myself, but because *it was a pandemic and much of the staff was sick*—would I have stopped the doctor? Would I have been more assertive, pushed her to answer my questions instead of avoiding my eyes? Would I have learned something about what took her so long? Whether there were concerns, symptoms to watch for?

It was only later that I realized how many people this must have happened to. This or something, sans pandemic, very much like it. Shame, guilt, a vague feeling of wrongness—all of this encourages women to refrain from asserting our needs in medical situations. In *all* situations. How much worse this must be for a person struggling with her decision for *any* reason, with all that guilt and shame inflicted on her from the outside.

I want to tell you some things about my blood.

In the post-abortion landscape of my body, what blood did and what it looked like turned inside out. There were clots, solid and so dark they were almost black. Like something from the center of the earth, barely molten. Behind clots there was gushing blood, brighter than even the blood so bright it stunned lab techs and made it onto their accent walls. It smelled sharp, like mountain water does when it's so clean and pure you drink it and taste nothing but cold. It would come out of me as fast as piss, as thin and vivid as food coloring.

The bleeding was supposed to stop after a few days. Instead it grew until it had carved out some comfortable spaces for itself in my life. About half an hour before a blood clot would dramatically exit my vagina, I'd be suddenly struck stupid by debilitating cramps, barely able to stand. Like the worst period I'd ever had had hulked up, hunkered down inside my legs, and was pummeling out at my exhausted muscles from inside my skeleton, cackling, just waiting for my bones to splinter. Several times at work I'd caught myself gripping the edge of my desk or a counter, hoping no one was watching, that I wouldn't fall. I often walked with a limp.

And then would come the great exodus of blood. I could *feel* the clots working their way out. I always had a tampon in, no matter what, often a pad too; the clot would stop behind the tampon but more blood would just seep out around it. The muscle contractions required to pass clots of that size often just pushed the tampon right out of my body.

For a couple of weeks it always happened very early in the morning; I would wake up to feel the cramps rolling through my body, and would sprint to the bathroom before the tampon fell out into my underwear or my bed. Then I was on a cycle for a few weeks where it



happened almost every day while driving home from work. Multiple times in a row at the exact same dangerous merge point, where I had to simultaneously cross several lanes of traffic and a bridge. I almost crashed a few times.

I got used to cleaning myself up. I got used to getting straight into comfortable already-stained pajamas every day after work. Giving up my already-constricted daily aspirations to walk or video chat with friends or work on a project. Wallowing instead in a few hours when I wasn't panicked about when the blood would ambush me, wasn't forcing myself to work through pain. Relief took new forms. Relief was no longer relief, just a lessening.

September 17. Panicked over the ever-increasing blood, I tried calling the clinic to speak to a nurse again. I'd called in early August and been told that I could come in "if I wanted," but that bleeding every day for over a month was not concerning. *Wanted to?* I flinched away from the suggestion as from a hot flame. I remembered the eyes of the woman who buzzed me in when she told me their colleague had COVID. Of course I didn't want to. Instead, I traded my deep sense that something was very wrong for my desperate wish that the nurse was right, and that it would all resolve itself soon. I allowed her to convince me it was my fault for not being meticulous enough about taking my birth control at the exact same time every day.

But September had been bloodier and bloodier, and I knew I had to dig up some guns from somewhere in my depths and find a way to stick to them. The clinic had just closed; I left a message asking for a call in the morning. I went to a friend's for a rare distanced patio visit; just before leaving my apartment, I carefully changed to a fresh maxi pad and set the internal timer on my blood clock. The night hung like a pall. The coming winter hung like a pall.

I was uncomfortable. I was uncomfortable with the world and the tight thread of it in our conversation. And my body felt wrong, even from its new always-wrong baseline. I would have stayed longer, but I had been there two hours and I could feel that I had started bleeding again. By my typical calculus, I still had time on the blood clock, but the clock was ticking and I needed to get home.

(You see—you see how fast, even as you fight it, even as you call doctors about it and ask the right questions and try to advocate for yourself—you see how fast something becomes *normal*? How quickly you accommodate it? We must never forget that most of us are capable of calling the doctors and making it normal all at once.)

I had only taken a few steps towards my car when I could tell

something was very wrong. I felt damp all over. No, not damp, I was *soaked*. This pad is really full, I was thinking, I'd better get home. And then I felt it as I walked.

It felt like a blood clot and it also felt like a planet. I didn't feel it exit my body, like I normally did. Was it half inside me still? Had it fallen out when I stood up? What the fuck *was* it? Whatever it was, it was enormous. I could feel it as I walked. I was walking *around* it. It *hurt*. It felt solid, alien. I felt impaled. I tried to picture it by what I felt and I pictured something horrifying, black like a center-of-the-earth clot but the size of a small fetus. I pictured it with a face.

I was panicking, I realized from somewhere far away. My breath was fast and I kept my hands tight like wires on the steering wheel as I chose to drive past the hospital, to drive straight home instead. I talked to myself the whole way. I told myself I was ok and I listed out loud the things I would do when I got home. I made a plan and then I had a plan.

I didn't begin to look until I had the door safely locked behind me. I took off the long sweater I'd been sitting on, looked at the bloodstain spread across it. I folded it carefully and placed it on the bedroom floor. I took off my shirt, folded it carefully and placed it on top. I went into the bathroom. My method was practiced: I rolled up the bathmat, so it wouldn't get any blood spatter on it. I hovered over the toilet, so too much blood wouldn't get on the floor, and I pulled my pants down slowly so that whatever was in there wouldn't fall into the toilet bowl and be lost to me. I needed to see it, I needed to investigate.

First I could only see a blur of red and black. There was blood *everywhere*, an ocean of blood on my pants, streaks of it down my inner thighs. I could feel it separate from my body as I pulled my blood-sticky underwear away. I looked at it for a while without doing anything else. It looked like a blood clot and it also looked like something else entirely. It was the size of a jumbo egg. It was bigger than a jumbo egg. It was the size of the meaty part of my fist. It was the size of my fist. A thing the size of my fist had just come out of my body, two and a half months after an abortion.

I took photos, in case the doctors didn't believe me. (They never do.) I poked at it. It reminded me of how I imagine a heart might feel in the open air, the tension it would hold against the world outside the body. Black and solid, with little dregs and strands of something just a bit more liquid around it. Almost elastic. Tensile. Tense. Gathered against the world.

**I** didn't get a next-day appointment when I told the on-call nurse the size of the blood clot. I didn't get a next-day appointment when I

told her that with the exception of about a week in early-mid August, I had been bleeding non-stop for two and a half months, and it had been getting worse. I was asked *lots* of questions about whether I took my birth control at the same time every day. I lied. By that point I was bold with the confidence that comes from panic, and I *knew* that wasn't the problem. The thing that finally got her to make a next-day appointment was when I said I was having surges of bleeding at the same time every day.

“Do you feel like you need to go to the hospital?” she asked me then. I felt a bit of relief that I was finally being taken seriously—but then, that question itself is one that I can barely take seriously in turn. No one but the wealthy in America can hear it without thinking first about money and about insurance. I had bad insurance and little money. I said I didn't. But what the fuck did I know? I wasn't the professional, and I've played medical-debt-roulette before. I *always* say I don't need to go to the hospital. I once walked on a broken foot for twelve days before I gave in and went to urgent care.

So, the next day, there I was. Back at the clinic, greeted by the same gentleman at the front desk, who was just as polite to me but this time also grumbled about how nobody upstairs ever told him anything. Nobody seemed to have had any idea I was coming. I waited for almost two hours in the first, overflowing waiting room before I saw anyone at all. Everyone on staff seemed to be teetering on the edge of panic themselves. A couple of times loud crashes rang through the waiting room, and everyone was moving so fast they seemed to be restraining themselves from breaking into a run. There were so many women they had to send some people to other floors in the building, promising to call them over the PA. The clinic, in short, was in the weeds.

A nurse finally met with me, and after listening wide-eyed and taking copious notes, came back with a doctor. This doctor was kind, attentive, careful, and by this point everyone was apologizing to me—for the wait, for the last two months, for not holding the door perfectly. When the doctor took another sonogram, she explained every view as she went. “There's definitely something in there,” she said. “There's always an option to do nothing. But that's not what I'd do if I were you.”

Doing nothing was absolutely not, after the last two and a half months, an option, not with my feet back in the stirrups and that demon-clot lurking fresh in my memory. I've spent as little of my life as possible dwelling on my reproductive capacity, and I don't tie that capacity to my understanding of womanhood or gender. I also don't believe that womanhood is defined by pain, or by particularly female forms of suffering. Like motherhood, or the avoidance of motherhood.

But in fear, my thoughts seemed to have galloped away with me, and ever since I'd looked at that clot I'd been thinking and trying not to think all at once about how many women, how many people over the centuries had seen something similar come out of them, a similar amount of blood, and then just died. If I had lived in a different time and place, I kept thinking, or had just a little bit less going for me in the context of this time and place—well, it was a grim alternate reality passing very close by, and I was shivering from it and trying not to think about it, and there was no way in hell I was leaving that clinic without the rest of it out of my body.

The second procedure—after I put my clothes back on, went back downstairs, waited a long time, got re-counseled, came back upstairs, and waited a lot longer, by which point I'd been there almost six hours and was one of only two or three patients left in the building—was a different universe in pain. There was medication I didn't remember that made my ears ring so loudly I thought my brain would leak out. I was ashamed to realize I was crying from pain. The doctor asked the assistant for implements with big-sounding numbers, said, "I'm going to try for this." They had to remind me how to breathe to keep me from passing out. I tried to suck my mask into my mouth with each inhale because that was the only way I could tell I was breathing at all. At one point, the speculum fell out of my body. By the time it was over, there was blood splashed on my feet and on the floor. They cautioned me, said, "Don't be alarmed."

As if at this point there was anything about a few little drops of my own blood that could possibly alarm me.

When the doctor did the second ultrasound and gently showed me the difference, I was reassuredly numb. Relieved. I didn't feel angry for a while. And really, I knew it wasn't anyone in particular's *fault*. Bodies are unruly, and they bleed. But it is definitely *someone's* fault, a whole nightmarish bevy of someones, that the world is like this and all of this is so much harder than it needs to be—so much more secret, so much more logistically sprawling, so powerfully shrouded in shame that even though I didn't think I felt any shame it infected the air everywhere around me, making it so much harder to speak into it. To say, no, this is not normal, I need help, I won't let anyone tell me I don't, which I could have said any time in the seventy-eight days of bleeding between abortion one and abortion two, but which, despite all my feminism and hard-won experience and knowledge and awareness, I somehow couldn't say until there was a truly terrifying amount of blood.

I hadn't experienced shame, in other words. I didn't feel it. But that didn't keep me from acting in a way that accommodated shame; that made room for it; that gave it plenty of air to breathe.

The doctor looked more closely at the ultrasound. “It looks like you’re hungry, too,” she said. “You need to get something good to eat when you leave here.” And I laughed. And I went home and ordered Korean takeout, and I put my face into the couch and I put Netflix on the TV, as I’d done all summer, but lighter, hopeful that this time around I’d feel better in a few days.

Later that night, Ruth Bader Ginsburg died.

I never held Ruth Bader Ginsburg as any sort of unproblematic hero. But the news that she’d died, with the blood still pooling between my legs—it hit me like a knife through the heart. *There goes Roe*, I thought, and how could it be that with the death of one human woman so many of us are convinced that the ship is sailing on a fundamental human right?

As I felt that ship sail away, I also felt another world drawing closer. One where the minimal, haphazard, highly regulated access we still have to abortions in parts of this country, the deeply insufficient protections that remain under the law and within the realities of the medical system, were gone. In that world, which had just drawn near in the same way that I had felt the nearness of other women who had died before me when I stared at that enormous blood clot, this story had other endings. And none of them were good.

I am lucky. I’ve recovered. I didn’t hemorrhage and bleed out. I live in a city with clinics. I have a car. I could get off work on short notice. I got the abortion completed, the scraps cleaned out. I have health insurance that covered part of the procedure. I could pay for the rest. I could go on, back through my litanies of luck, all the way back to the fortunes and accidents that carved out the little scrap of the world that I stand on.

And I can be lucky and I can be furious at once. I can hold the knowledge that parts of this experience were bad luck, or a fluke; that it’s perfectly normal for bodies to react in unexpected ways to surgery and to trauma and to pain; that it’s no one’s fault. And I can know at the same time that I didn’t have to spend seventy-eight days bleeding before someone would listen to me. I can know that it shouldn’t have taken a blood clot the size of a fist and my own true, bone-deep fear to get me back in the clinic. I can recognize that I could have insisted more loudly, pushed my guilt off into a corner and advocated more for myself, without believing that was the only path to a better outcome.

And even though to all appearances I’ve made a full recovery, there are other losses. Say, for example, the loss of seventy-eight days. That’s not such a big loss in the cosmic scale, or even the scale of my whole life. But in those seventy-eight days, I set myself against myself, fighting with all my might to suppress and to manage

pain instead of to remove the source of that pain. Me v. me v. the internalized horrible world: I was desperately trying to navigate between my certainty that something was very wrong and the self-doubt that crept in when medical professionals told me that what was happening was normal.

This sapped both my physical and emotional resources to the point that I could barely function, much less try to organize other workers at my job to push back against my employer's horrible handling of the pandemic, or keep my little window garden from dying, or return to the streets to join other marches, as I'd intended. The march for Breonna Taylor on her birthday was the last I'd managed to attend. I knew deeply the importance of putting my body on the streets and in community, in solidarity, with those fighting for justice, but my body had to fight its own battles. Medical complications may have come for me regardless. But I could have fought back harder, recovered quicker, if not for all the ways reactionary fundamentalists and disingenuous politicians have conspired to make getting an abortion as difficult, as furtive, and as diminishing as possible for people who can get pregnant but don't want to have a child—and if not for the associated deep shame I thought I had escaped.

And so, instead of fighting against injustice, I spent the summer at war with myself. And on a planetary scale, this is a crucial way that injustice persists.

Abortion clinics were already under intense pressure—those that have managed to survive. Over a year into the pandemic, and I fear all that's changed politically is further stratification of power and resources, deeper oppression, more entrenched injustice. Abortion clinics are far from the only places where the pressure from above has been ramped up, where people's suffering has increased, where oppression has dug in its nasty heels and doubled down. It's just the room I happened to step inside during the thick of it—twice. I'll never have all the facts about what exactly happened during my first procedure. But I can say two things with certainty. One is that, while there's no one in particular at fault, my entire experience was highly pressurized, and all that pressure seeping in through the cracks definitively worsened the medical outcome for me. I suffered more. And the other is that many more people will suffer, in ways directly and indirectly caused and worsened by the pandemic, by reactionary attacks on reproductive rights, by poverty, by racism, by the nightmarish ways these things all intersect in the American health care system. And many other people won't be so lucky as me.