



Postcard From the Early Days of the Pandemic

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*...If
you pull the arms off a clock, you still
have the clock. Time keeps going
because the arms measure time but
are not time.*

—Victoria Chang

Time is on everyone's mind right now—except my mother's. Not for her, the daily wrangle with the coronavirus calendar: *How much longer? What's ahead? Will the familiar routines of the past ever be restored?* For my mother, addled by Alzheimer's disease, the calendar is not a functional map of time. It's a Paul Klee drawing, all abstract pattern, shape, and rhythm, only less jaunty, less delightful. The clock, which she wears now on her wrist with a new, compulsive regularity, measures nothing that she can comprehend. As often as not, she puts her watch on backward, with the face upside down.

She's not particularly disturbed by the pandemic. It doesn't sink in deeply enough to register as a terrifying threat. It comes as news—truly new news—countless times a day. She asks what my plans are for dinner, and can we go out? When I explain that restaurants are all closed now, and tell her why, she is shocked. There is usually a brief pause, and then her own skewed internal clock resets. What are your plans tonight, she asks. Would you like to see a movie? How about going out for dinner?

Lately, I've heard people say their lives feel like Groundhog Day, a confounding temporal loop with no traction, no progress. Those of us around my mother mark time in Groundhog Minutes. There is an abiding unreality to her world and now ours, too, feels alien and elusive. Every night, I struggle to reconcile the dark confetti of the day's news. I try to piece it together into something whole, continuous, credible. Her neurological condition has freed her from that obligation and desire. Nothing makes much sense to her, minute by minute, nor does it need to. She is discontinuity personified.

One of the classic communication strategies with dementia patients is to meet them where they are. Don't rely too heavily on reason. Don't use logic to make a point. Humor works, and so does the therapeutic lie. Enter their story and go from there.

Through neither fault nor effort of her own, my mom lives nearly exclusively in the present. In this respect, her debility comes perversely close to a state of Zen enlightenment. While I reflexively resist a redemptive arc to the unspooling trauma narrative of COVID-19, I recognize her default mode as an ever-more relevant survival strategy. So I'm trying, for her sake as much as my own, to meet her where she is, in the only-ever-now. In the clock of my own body, shorn of hands.

