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The Achievement of a Life, a List, a Line

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The social life of achievement is a phantasm of attachment and dream circulating across bodies of all kinds – human bodies, bodies of thought, plant and animal bodies, bodies of pain and pleasure, assemblages of histories and politics, forms of caring and abuse solidified into models of what counts for the family or the social. Every word in the phrase – social, life, achievement – tweaks labours, attachments, judgements, sacrifices, generations; worlds of finance, education, health, luck and hope; forms of compulsion, addiction and accumulation; and pieced together modes of daily existence of all kinds. The force of the phrase, and all it catches up in situations and circumstances, indexes a prismatic ecology of self, world, attachment, attainment, attunement, animation and desire.

Finding ways to approach the live density of the social life of achievement, then, raises basic questions of theory and description. This is because its subjects and objects are not prefixed entities easy to name in an ether of prefabricated knowledge. Their forms, moves and scenes are left out of the equation that hopes to simply name some direct determinants of an achievement proper. Instead of the short-hand language of opportunities taken or lost, constraints overcome or not, motivations, ideals and representations that obscure possibilities or become themselves conditions of possibility, I wonder, here, how circulating forces spawn worlds, animate forms of attachment and attunement, and become the air and ground of living in and living through the things that happen. I wonder how individuation itself happens and how a self achieves whatever counts as ‘a life’. I wonder how forces take on forms, how they come to reside in experiences, conditions, objects, dreams, landscapes, imaginaries and lived sensory moments, how they not only animate what we call a life but incite its actual labours of production.

My writing and thinking here is aligned with forms of non-representational theory (Thrift 2007) including weak, or reparative, theory (Sedgwick 1997), fictocriticism (Muecke 2008) and the material semiotics of actor-network theory (Latour 2007). I suggest the need to slow theory – to give pause to the quick,

naturalised relationship between thinking subject, concept and world, in order to create descriptive eddies that wonder what the object of analysis might be, to create a speculative attunement that at least aspires to align with the commonplace labours of becoming sentient to whatever is happening. I take ordinary labours of attunement to be the sometimes banal, sometimes eventful, sometimes buoyant, sometimes endured, sometimes so sad, enactments of what Heidegger (1975) called 'worlding' – an intimate, compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestures, gestates worlds. In the labours of worlding, things matter not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, textures, tracks and rhythms (Lefebvre 2004).

Here I take one approach among almost countless possibilities that might open the social life of achievement to slow description and questions of how worlds emerge. I evoke some of the phantasmatic labours and lived dream worlds of a single life.

I am suggesting here that we might now think of a life – a collective life or an individual life – as a series of worldings that have laid down tracks of reaction, etched habits and of composition onto identities, desires, objects, scenes and ways of living. These dense and textured worldings are not the bloodless effects of distant systems but the lived affects of countless big and small efforts to acclimatise to whatever is happening, or to fashion something inhabitable out of it. Or they are the lived affects of someone spinning out of control, or deflating, or shouldering tasks and identities in the effort to succeed, or to survive, or to find something.

The Line of a Life

In the line of a life, a worlding is both a promissory note and an imperative that demands a response: an imperial promise that shows up in ordinary sensibilities and situations. A worlding might become a life; it might be shouldered as an all-consuming identity, something to pour yourself into, something devotional or required. Or it might be temporarily adopted and then abandoned, or ignored, or used for some purpose, or held at arm's length as an object of sarcasm or good-natured humour.

So many things happen in a life, with or without the deliberative, self-constructing kind of agency we imagine as the generative force of a life. Latour (2007) asks how all of these other things that happen are themselves agents. The effects of what happens are not all that predictable. It can be surprising how the composition of a life amplifies them in forms, directions and tempos; which forms of a life end up being gripping, which don't end up mattering much; which ones set off lines; which ones remain ungathered, yet turn out to matter more than anything else; how things matter differently in the positing of scenes, atmospheres, sentiments, causes. From the longitudinal view of a life, then, a person is a nexus of a great pile of things: the fierce and febrile attachments, the

sedimented habits, the flights of fancy, the events of all kinds, the stubborn plans and their roadblocks and abductions, the sheer weight of things, or a stance to the world that remains as a residue – a distillate cooked down.

Writing a life means writing strands of cohabitation with the things of the world. There are buildings to be considered, family lines, institutions, roads, registers and genres somehow set in motion, the unrelenting too-muchness of things coupled, cruelly, with the felt lack at the heart of a life. The great piles of things distributed across fields of worldings: objects, events, plans, roadblocks, abductions, the dullness of everything, the threat of an outside, the rote agencies, the great pile of scenes of living that are not exactly memories but can pop up, the elongated fingers of an old hand wavering over the body, floating aimlessly into the now permanently darkened world that blindness brings.

What follows here is a cartography of a life written through lists and lines. A distributed biography tracing a self-worlding across a field of intensities, durations and compelling puzzles.

My mother is running in the dark across the fields, toward the burning house. A lightning strike, the thunder and rain that crashed through the night. Ten bedrooms, the silver that melted on the dining room credenza, the Irish linen, the Irish lace, there must have been some money from somewhere. Aunt Irene was still living there at the time, the smell of smoke saturating her skin, a bad smell.

The house was in her father's mother's family: Ellen Pendergast, from Ireland, from Philadelphia with a dozen sisters, the row houses – they swept the steps everyday, they visited the farm in the summer, the great aunts, the laughing outright, the pond, the fields, the attic. Claire was the one with all the personality, the smiling one who told stories and watched everything enrapt, the one whose baby picture won a beauty contest in the 1920s and was published in the Lawrence paper – she looked just like the Gerber baby. The great aunts favoured her over the next sister who grew up resentful and strange and Republican in a sea of Democrats.

People watched Claire, followed her around. As a child, she had the Shirley Temple curls and the spring in her step. People passing on the street would take a double take. The men at the market would lift her onto the counter to dance 'The Good Ship Lollipop'. By ten she was driving her father's farm truck; by fourteen, she was driving it all over town. When she bought a cabin in New Hampshire others did too. When she walked downtown people would cluster around her. They called her for all kinds of reasons. When she moved to assisted living, a network of women pulled their antennae into attention in that direction.

She came from a line of people started when Ellen Pendergast attached herself to Michael Driscoll, who never worked another day in his life, and with him came a long and broad line of men who drank and fought with fists and knives and beat their families and left a stain as if in the blood. Michael would sit in the kitchen of the big house with his feet in a pot of water. He had a helper

(another drinker) who lived in the barn. There was a currant field where the blackcurrants grew.

Nine kids – all the boys drank – grew up to live within a quarter of a mile of one another on the edges of the fields. Bill, Mary, Parkie (he was killed by a car when he was young, walking home drunk), Helen, John, Francis, Irene, Jack, Winnie died young. Mary was pregnant with her fifth child when her husband died of a heart attack while carrying a bathtub over his head. Then she ran the plumbing business and her own big house became a boarding house full of working men. She'd feed them all, and the five kids, at a long dining-room table. A stern, competent, adventurous line of women who loved children but not necessarily their own. Aunt Mary showed some meanness to hers but she'd take the cousins – my mother – all the way to Boston Harbour in her 1930s wooden Beach Buggy to ride the boats and sing songs.

Jack Driscoll was handsome; he had the curly black hair and the blue, blue eyes, and he and my mother's mother, Bea, both liked to dance. She could sing and play any tune on the piano by ear. She never had lessons. She'd memorise the poems in the Sunday paper. 'Paul Revere's Ride', 'The Wreck of the Hesperus'. She knew all the lyrics of all the country music songs, 'You Are My Sunshine'. Everyone liked her. She was friendly and liked to talk. She was so cute and nice. But crabby too. Her mother was a mean drunk. Bea and all her sisters started work in the mills when they were still children; Bea was a dyer. Jack and his brothers were bricklayers and contractors; they had a superior attitude about mill work. He was a good worker when he wasn't drinking. And very popular – everyone liked him. Silver-tongued. The Driscoll men built the Holy Rosary School, the Musgrow building, churches in Massachusetts and Maine, the high school. John built a mansion across the street with Italian marble. He went back to Ireland a lot. His son, Diamond Jack, flashed it. He drove a Cadillac. There were times when my mother's father, Jack, would be home for dinner for a while and things would be kind of normal. And then the night he didn't show up you'd know. He'd get the DTs. He'd get so sick he couldn't hold his peas. He'd cry to my mother, maybe because she was the oldest.

Bea slept with a board under her bed in case he came at her in one of his drunken rages. She was determined that her kids would have as normal a young life as possible. She made their clothes. She'd help them sneak out to go to dances, putting pillows in the beds to make it look like they were in them asleep. She would say, 'Go up and pick some green beans for supper'. She would can tomatoes. My mother loved that. Bea'd say, 'Don't tell anyone we only had potato soup for supper'. But it didn't bother my mother at all; she loved potatoes. They would go down to the back fields. Bea'd say, 'Get me some blueberries and I'll make a pie'. She didn't like making pies. Claire grew up terrified of the workhorses she walked behind, their massive haunches pulling the plough. Once the girls went to a dance without their father's permission. He was sitting on the porch with a shotgun when they got back. They ran to Aunt Nunna's and stayed with her. Nunna once threw a milk bottle at Parkie. She'd come down and milk the

cows when Jack was off drinking. Finally, at age eighty-three, my mother says to me, 'My father was not a person I was fond of.' Another time, I finally tell my elderly mother, 'You have brain damage.' She says, 'Is it because of my father?' I say, 'What, the drinking?' She nods. I say, 'No. No. It's the episodes.'

She feels she has been stained by her father's violent drinking. You would never know it to meet her. People like to get around her. When she was still able to get out to go to wakes, she would hold court in a corner surrounded by a line of people who wanted to speak to her. People say she's a saint, she has something not quite articulable but noticed – an impersonal pleasure in people and what comes out of their mouths. A habitual spark of response lodged in her body, a kind of timing without exception or lapse. She can't understand why people see her this way – the saint. She thinks maybe it's her myaesthesia gravis, the way the facial paralysis makes her face look like it's always smiling. I say 'No. What facial paralysis?'

She lived in terror of judgement and conflict as if these are the same thing. The destructive power of words, the permanent tearing that comes of the hard ire of a sister judged. That's not to say she didn't have a temper, not to say she didn't open her mouth with words that cut to the bone. She had a talent for sizing up people. 'He *loves* you but he's got too many problems to help *you*.'

And there were her eyes. These auratic watering eyes, now, in their blindness, one-hundred-percent open surface contact. Floating live surfaces. Concentrated yet diffuse points of contact with the world. She was afraid, but not in her eyes. It was the legs that shook, refused to hold her weight, curled up beneath her so that she had to be lifted – that terrifying blind lift from the wheelchair to the bed and back. Back and forth, back and forth, in a wild, abandoned confinement. A free fall for a woman who bore the weight of the world and found herself dealing, alone, with an unspecified unworlding that she could not grasp. She always had good legs. Her teacher friends, all much younger, said so when she was in her sixties. Claire always had the good legs, even at the end.

She hated overhead lighting; so do I, we all do, generations of people spread out across the country hating the cold illumination of an overhead light. The lamps she made are the centrepieces in our houses and when our cats finally tear apart the crumbling shades we make new ones. We scavenge for the right lamps. They can't cost much of anything if they are to have value. We walk across dark rooms to turn on the lamps even if it takes ten to light a room. Ten lamps, ten switches, the time, the careful, stumbling time-taking moving around the room turning on the lamps. We stockpile light bulbs against the demise of incandescent lighting.

People in this line don't use dryers, either. Especially not for underwear and socks, which dryers will rip and burn and shrink and destroy. Grammy Bea, of course, didn't have a dryer. She had a wringer she rolled over to the kitchen sink on washing day and she hung the laundry out on a line in the yard. In the winter she brought it in frozen stiff and hung it all over the house to finish drying. My mother and all her sisters had clotheslines in the back yard and wooden racks in the basement. Now it's mostly the wooden racks in basements in Massachusetts

and Connecticut and just the underwear and socks. There are other truncated traces of a line in practices like writing Christmas cards or using grocery store bags to line trashcans instead of buying actual trash bags that fit.

My mother had five kids, one born each year, like a linked chain of Irish twins. The fourth was dead in the womb at four months and in those days they made the women wait to deliver them dead. My father wasn't even there for the birth of her first baby in Rhode Island. He was out playing cards and drinking with the boys, didn't even show up at the hospital until the middle of the next day. That's what men did then. There was no washing machine for the diapers, no money. They would save up to get a six-pack on Fridays. A rat in a crib prompted the move out of Navy housing to Vermont where my mother had gone to college on a basketball scholarship. A small Catholic women's school. My sister went there too, one of my brothers went to the brother college down the road. And every year the, finally, old ladies made the more and more heroic trek back to Vermont to see the classmates who called my mother 'Dric'. When the trips became boldly, stubbornly impossible, the kids propped up the efforts at reunion with their own increasingly heroic efforts. That trip, and their homes, were the last things they let go of, long after the driver's licences and the partners were gone.

Claire had the weight of the world. The kids, the job teaching English as a second language to violently poor immigrants. The suspicion that there was something wrong with my father, that one day it would be revealed to the world that he was crazy; he would do something to lose his job. He loved her. With the kids, he had favourites. He had beautiful hands. He loved Bea, cooked her dinner on Sundays, hated his own mother, still wanted to cut up my meat for me when I visited as an adult.

She always had projects. She furnished the house with antiques bought for two dollars a piece at barn sales in Vermont and New Hampshire and refinished in the driveway. She visited the families of her school kids. Once she brought a turkey for Thanksgiving to one of a student's family and discovered that there was no furniture in the apartment. She went out and found some. She could draw; she'd doodle gorgeous, bombshell women on scraps of paper when she was talking on the phone. She painted scenes on boxes and baskets, stools and dressers. She knitted comforters for the kids and then the grandchildren. She made the lamps and lampshades. She raised us Catholic, led the girl scout troop, modelled for charities, observed Lent, prayed on her knees every night, deposited her whole pay cheque into a college fund for us all those years, lined us all up and marched us off to the supermarket or set us onto our Saturday chores or took us on camping trips, setting up tents in the rain. A therapist I once had would have said to her, as she did to me, 'Who do you think you are, God?'

When we were four surly teenagers, she got season ski passes and got us up at 6 AM every blustery winter Saturday and Sunday to drive to Pat's Peak in New Hampshire. There were vacations at the beach or at little lakes, rowboats, clam digging, a moment with her head resting on my lap in a cabin, stroking her

beautiful hair grown long for once, the pictures of her with friends on *chaise-longues* on beaches, the intimacy of those bathing suits.

There was all the trouble at dinner when my father got home. The rage. The humiliation. We, the witnesses. I would fall off my seat or drop the pitcher of milk or the bowl of squash on the floor to create a diversion. The youngest one, who lived in horror of vegetables, would be sitting at the table alone with the carrots and green beans on his plate while the rest of us got ready for bed.

There was a big group of friends who grew up together. All couples with piles of kids. They had dinner parties at which there were terrible fights between brothers. They travelled all over together, sending us postcards from Venezuela and Italy. They skied in Utah and visited Palm Springs. They smoked and drank and laughed hard together.

One day she killed all the kittens when she turned on the car. They had crawled up into the engine. She picked us up from school to tell us; we usually walked. She cried, her body shook. What she was going through was way more intense, we knew, than our loss of the kittens and so we kept still.

Sometimes we would catch her in a strange posture when she was coming down the stairs, or standing in a corner in an upstairs bedroom facing the wall. Her whole upper body would be bent a little forward and shaking, her shoulders sloped down. Her hands were up at her mouth and she seemed to be biting them while she shook. We never talked about it. We all watched her. Then, watching her dying, we'd mention things to each other – things telegraphed like a notification from life: her strange shaking, biting gesture, the rages at our father at the dinner table; she spanked us with a hairbrush; we had the fear of God. That was another world.

When the kids were gone she found the house in New Hampshire to buy and then traded it in for another one with a view of the mountains after carefully eyeing the new house for a couple of years, sizing it up with binoculars from the first house. In the new house she grew miraculous geraniums and a jade plant so big and healthy people were always saying it must be 500 years old. Those plants lived through the freezing winters and a month at a time without water. They flourished clinging to their windows with southern exposure.

For decades she choked on her dinner. She would get up and go into the bathroom while we sat there waiting to see if she would come out again. There were operations in Boston, bi-weekly blood transfusions. Once, when we were all grown, things looked bad. She sent us all a letter. My youngest brother says he never got one. I don't remember the letter either but I remember my father calling to tell me to come home. I remember not understanding how much care she needed right after the operation. I remember blithely going to bed and sleeping all night while she lay awake on her back all night in pain, weakly calling out to me that she had to get up to go to the bathroom.

I still have one green ceramic plate left from the set she bought me in Clearwater, Michigan, thirty years ago. She wanted to make a gesture to establish my household because I wasn't getting married.

Her house had the same phone number hard-wired into the wall in the kitchen for fifty years: 978-688-5444. For a long time I couldn't take the number off my cell phone because I wanted it to still be somewhere.

After my father died, we travelled together. Once we were outside Albuquerque visiting a dusty hill covered with ancient stones. I had to pee. There were public restrooms at the bottom of the hill and people were coming up the paths but still out of sight so I pulled down my pants and peed on the path. Much to my amazement my mother just followed suit. The direct contact of that quick imitation was more touching than sentiment and says something about the nature of her attachments and mine.

After my father died, her labours slowly cooked down to a sheer and potent will to fall into step with whatever was happening, even though it wasn't good, a surge to go on belonging to a something. Slowly, step by step, her enduring itself turned into a feeble performance of the effort to find a form and hold to it. The achievement of a life.

My father died one night without warning. After all those years of him failing to hold up his end of the world she was always in the middle of propping up and setting in motion, a fissure opened up and swallowed the whole thing, rage and all. She couldn't even remember what it was she had been so angry about. They had had a wonderful life.

She was small and frail from that day forward. That winter was horrible. No one visited her. She was in the dark, alone, she couldn't even push the snow back to open the door. She couldn't get out. Help dropped by sporadically and she would try to remember her list of things she needed help with. She thought about his body in the frozen ground; he must be so cold.

She became one of those doing what the living do. You make a cup of tea and an English muffin for dinner. You drive the SUV to the drugstore and back; you manage to get it into the garage without hitting the sides but the hatch is too heavy for you to pull down; you can't even reach it, so you spend hours in the freezing garage trying to rig up something to stand on, finding a rope, trying to attach it to the latch and tie it around your waist, your fingers frozen, fumbling, you don't see well, it gets dark, you have to give up, you turn off the lights in the back seat so they won't run down the battery, you don't tell anyone. You will have to wait until someone comes to visit. Every day is now a useless expenditure of effort. Your work doesn't work anymore.

You want the spring to come; you want the beautiful winter light to stay with you a little longer today, you settle deep into the chair by the wood stove, now converted for gas, you catch a glimpse of the scene of your life and you long for it.

You have to gather all the papers, the death certificate, the insurance, all the financial accounts, investments you and he made without professional help; some were disasters and some made money but they're here and there, scattered over a frighteningly obtuse unknown zone of financial reports you think you have to learn how to read. What number do you call? What do you do? What are these things? You do this for three years, all alone, in a torture and meanwhile

you are having trans-ischemic attacks that leave you blank, aphasic, not yourself. You live through them alone, you don't tell anyone because you are clinging to your life.

Numbers get hard, then impossible. You are leaving little slips of paper and little notebooks all over the house with phone numbers written on them – your kids, your sisters, your friends, your doctor's numbers. Different versions of the numbers, you're trying to record them, to find a new system that will work for you; your writing is shaky, it goes off the page and you don't even realise it. Your son finally takes your chequebook away when he finds cheques half written all over the house.

You lose your licence because of the eyesight; a doctor turns you in; you try to enlist help to get it back; you call your daughters with hesitant opening lines for schemes that might work, baiting them to come up with something as they used to do, increasingly desperate at their evasion, the blank where the line of a plan once happened. Now you have to rely on walking downtown for a loaf of bread or your medicine. You realise, through episodes, through experiments, through great efforts, that that's all you can carry. It's not enough.

One day you take a bad fall on Main Street in front of the post office as you are trying to make it to the drugstore. The cobblestones are uneven; there is a deadly, large granite curb. You fall on your face. You are humiliated by this fall. A fool. A mistake to think you could go on, still belonging, still in place. You have been found out. You are taken in an ambulance to the hospital. Your glasses are broken, there are many stitches on your face, you are really shaken up, the whole town knows. Then you fall off the stool in your kitchen where you eat so you can look out the window at the shapes of people walking by, the neighbourhood kids playing basketball in the driveway. Your hip breaks. Now you go on secretly; you flop around the house, taking secret falls into corners until, weeks later, your situation is finally discovered. Then an operation, rehab, and home in a wheelchair. Your daughter arrives. That night, in a hurricane, the water logged hundred-foot oak tree in the front yard falls and splits the house in half. By 5 AM the Channel 5 weatherman is standing on the tree shouting through the wind into a microphone and looking into your bedroom where you have him on TV. For days the cameramen bang on the door trying to get in to get a picture of you in your wheelchair, the shut in.

Then for months you live in the detritus, through another winter. It's horrible. You love the physical therapists who come right to your house – they're so nice. They move you from the wheelchair to the shower or the bed, the bathroom is made accessible, a ramp is built into the house, finally the house is pieced back together again and you get back to your chair by the stove. There's a beautiful new master bedroom upstairs where they've added space. You make the trip up to see it only once. But it's not yours, you will never inhabit it. It's a house sliding onto the market.

You have to give up your home. There is a quick slide. You find yourself in an apartment in assisted living. You sit there for months like it's a box, only half

furnished because your house hasn't sold yet, none of your paintings and photographs are up on the wall. Then your daughter and granddaughter come to stay for Christmas, put up everything, decorate, cook, make your life good again, give you a jump start. You learn the ropes. You walk down to get your mail everyday with your walker. You eat dinner in the dining hall and try to make friends. You take exercise classes. You try to go grocery shopping in the van but you can't manage it and have to give up. You set up a bank account in the place so you can get some cash when you need it. You deposit a hundred dollars. You find someone you like; she's blind; you go to her apartment a few times to hear someone read a book. This is the highpoint. You say you don't love it here, not like you loved your house, but you're content. That lasts for a few short months, and then it's the hospital and the nursing home upstairs and back to the apartment and a series of horrible moments, and through it all the dream of getting the licence back, of being able to drive yourself, morphs into a sharp, recurrent pang of a thought that breaks the surface over and over as the need to gather your things and get out of here. You want to go home.

Fast forward. Now living in the nursing home upstairs is permanent. A pile of steps got us here. Each one, we thought, was as bad as it could get, but now we know better. She can no longer push the call button. We push to get her a different kind of button that might work for her. We bring her eye pillows to soothe the blind eyes that weep, ache. We try to enforce a schedule of bedpans every two hours. We try to shore her up. She hates the dullness of the residents, only talks to the aides and the hospice people. Her old friends visit. Any real conversation will pull her out of the fantasy terrors that gather in her isolation. She was able to tell her friend Ellen which golf clubs to use in different situations – a three wood, a nine iron.

The nursing home is this weird bling thing. Bright colours, loud cheer, quick summations – 'Getting old isn't for sissies!' 'Doesn't she look pretty in her hat?' 'Are you going to a party?' At first she can muster a recognition of the gesture; she smirks. When it gets harder to stay in the game, the game itself becomes a hard necessity. The gesture at the lived world, the theatre of submission. They will leave you alone in the dark or abandon you again in front of the fish tank or at the nurse's station. As far as she knows, she has been put to bed without dinner. She calls out, 'Help me, please,' so quietly but unrelenting. The aides have beautiful faces and big round bodies. They bounce in and out quickly. They care about the residents.

You're darkly floating. Things come up out of nowhere. Possibilities of meaning you can't formulate torment you. You are agitated without intention or direction, abandoned to a condition of living through the evacuation of projects and rhythms of living. You wish the things of the world could be close to your skin. Small tasks completed are a relief – your face is wiped with a warm wet cloth. A small gesture of care brings to life some 'you' who can now check something off a list or get a star next to your name. But they no longer brush

your teeth; they are rotting, brown, and you know it. You miss the feel of clean teeth, the ritual of getting ready for the day, getting ready for bed.

I'm the visitor. I'm sitting by the bed or slowly dragging a cumbersome bed-like pink padded wheelchair around the halls, out the doors to flower beds or leaves rustling, the feel of a breeze, live smells. I take her to have a beer on the patio of the bistro downstairs. She remembers it as beautiful, up on a hill, a new restaurant opened by the Dougherties or someone; she's amazed; she never knew it was there.

Sister Mary Stuart died peacefully in her sleep. Her friend June says 'Well, I guess all's well that ends well'. My mother doesn't want to be left out. She thinks she'll go to Vermont for the funeral. Confronted with all the 'no' saying – no, you can't travel; no, they can't get you into a car, how would you go to the bathroom, etc. – she struggles to get herself back on the track of the bitter pill. She is ashamed.

I tell her the story of the cat on the roof. It was a stormy night – hard wind, hard rain, thunder and lightning. I could hear him crying up on the roof all night but he wouldn't come down the tree. Finally in the morning I got a tall ladder and went up and pulled him off. She says, full of concentrated purpose, 'Now you know how I feel'.

I just sit. I become a paralysed surface of despair that sometimes calms into a nap, a Sudoku puzzle or the reading aloud out of a novel. Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* works pretty well for the first fifty-eight pages, spread out over a couple of weeks. She would fall asleep within a minute or two but then we'd pick up again. The characters roused her – she enjoyed remembering what had happened to them the last time we read. Again, always, the falling asleep right away but the repetition produced a shot of life even though we knew it was only a pathetic little something being fabricated. Sometimes we could find her voice. The news of people she knew would pull her up into a well-worn groove of attending to the kinds of things that happen to people and the way they respond. But by the time we got to Stewart O'Nan's *Last Night at the Lobster* she could no longer pull her senses together with the characters or the plot.

You sit and watch. Leaning into her body, you see folds of an unstable and charged sensorium. Knowledges sometimes accidentally unearthed. Surprise. 'You won't believe what happened to me! I wasn't in my room, I was in the yellow chair, they said I wasn't, and we were in a big place full of blue.' The hard bearing of life as a scar of life as potential and loss. The cooking down to sheer tracks of effort, anxiety, love.

You stage rebellions in the name of humanity – 'We're going down to the café to eat real food.' You get caught, you get lectures from institutional voices you need but understand cynically – they're just covering their own asses. At least there's hospice. Hospice is better. This is the best place she could be. Are you kidding?

Conclusion

Here I have approached the social life of achievement through a cartography of a life. A biography distributed across a field of subjects, objects, circumstances, social aesthetics, dispositions, the charge of forces hitting bodies, the way that a tendency takes on consistency, some lines of contact and rupture, the durations of the living out of things, some things that get said, some possibilities. These are the lines of a life attuned to a series of worldings – a life unfolding, pausing and setting off again following the imperial promise of a form in whatever is happening.

The events of a life are the events of its worldings. Registers, spaces and temporalities are thrown together into something to be in, or to be next to, or to be wary of. Concepts of what constitutes a life, or an achievement, are percepts of what's happening, what achieves rhythms. Orienting kernels are fashioned out of an aesthetic, a sensory habit or a style of response – 'She lived her life as a stalemate,' 'We don't drink with meals.' Small things index generative lines. They also spread out horizontally into lists of incommensurate elements that lightly touch, snap into an assemblage, or simply differently comprise the texture, density, tempo of a worlding. The lines of a life can start with anything, pick up speed, switch direction or attach to another line, pulling the life off course. Particular elements might live on, becoming phantasmatic or habitually comforting, or curiously emblematic. Over time, the lines of a life become prismatic.

They are scored onto forms of attunement – the watching and waiting to see what will happen, the ducking for cover, the grab and go, the improvising, the shouldering, the tallying up, the forgetting.

A life is an intimacy with worlds' promises laid down like tracks. A node that quivers through the labours of living out what emerges on the horizon or drags, becomes encrusted or slips, wears thin or implodes under the weight of its own compositional excess. A life's lines of contact and wavering registers have lifespans of their own. Its elements have a radical materiality that literally matters in the compilation of sensory alignments and losses, opportunities and the unspeakable sadness of being abandoned, in the end, by the world you have made matter in a life achieved.

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