

Letters to Keziah

Decca Muldowney

14th March 2020

Dear baby,

Yesterday afternoon the President declared a national state of emergency. A few hours later, while Noah was sitting on the sofa with his hand on my belly, he felt you kick for the first time. Amid so much anxiety and panic, that kick was like a message: “Hey, don’t forget about me.” I have been able to feel you move and kick for a week. It felt strange to have such a profound new connection to you that Noah couldn’t share. I was so happy when he felt you too. “The person in your stomach just kicked me!” he said. A reminder that, despite the insanity around us, you continue to grow and develop, oblivious, just reaching out for life.

Every time I find myself on the edge of an anxiety spiral, thinking about my parents or Noah’s parents or other vulnerable people, you move or kick and it brings me back to the present moment with a jolt. Thank you for that,, baby.

On Monday we have an ultrasound scan at the hospital. Neither of us feels great about going into a medical facility, but we’ll take precautions. This “anatomy scan” is important because the technician makes sure that all your organs and limbs are in the right place and developing correctly. We can’t miss it. We’re going at 9am and I know we’ll spend the next few hours calling around each member of the family to tell them the news.

We’ve spent a lot of time on the phone over the last couple of days. Whether it’s FaceTime or Whatsapp or normal phone calls, the instinct to reach out and speak to people has been strong. We’ve spoken to some of our closest friends in New York City. Sam, for example, who has a newborn baby with his Norwegian wife, Line. They’re thankful to have a healthy baby at home, and to have got through the labour and birth before hospitals become overloaded. They made it just under the wire. We FaceTimed with Luke and Bridget as they went out to get pizza at Pauli Gee’s in Greenpoint one last time, guessing that a complete social lockdown is just around the corner. Today Noah spoke to his friend Guy Henry as he went out on a big grocery run. Cynthia has been posting that the bars and restaurants on the Lower East Side are packed as though nothing is happening, and no one is obeying the social distancing rules that are becoming ubiquitous. She says the streets of Alphabet City now feel as lawless as thirty years ago, when she was growing up. No one wants to call the police. When someone tried to break into the apartment below through the fire escape, she leaned out of the window and poured boiling water from the kettle onto the man’s head.

I’ve also been speaking to Samantha in London, who is home with her newborn baby Hazel. Jackson is still going out to work, performing in a play at the Royal Court, but she expects the show to close soon. Things are strange there because the British government seems reluctant to ban mass gatherings or close schools. They are not following the

model of other European governments that are sacrificing the economy for the sake of public health. My old friend from university, Richard Braude, is living in Palermo, where they are on complete lockdown. He posts dispatches on Facebook called “Notes from Quarantine” describing the situation. They are supposed to fill out a form every time they go outside that explains why they should be allowed to leave home.

Meanwhile my parents are in self-quarantine, concerned about their age and my mother’s asthma. They are not going anywhere or seeing anyone. Even my aunt is not allowed to come over. A week ago my Dad did a big shop at Asda, stocking up on cans and dry goods. Now my mother is baking bread and sewing and mending. They go for walks on the common, but the stress of avoiding people is hard. Yesterday while I was on the phone with them, my father told me I needed to focus on myself and not them. “You need to focus on what’s birthing, not what’s dying.” I was in the bath, looking down at my stomach with you inside. “I wish I was with you though,” I said. That wouldn’t do any good,” my father said. I burst into tears. “And crying won’t do any good either. This is like wartime. You have to be very brave.”

I’ve been thinking about my grandmother, Marjorie, who was pregnant in Birmingham during World War Two, and gave birth to her first child during a bombing raid. At one point, all of the nurses rushed out of the room to attend to an emergency elsewhere, leaving her all alone. She was young and terrified. Later, she was in an air raid shelter with the baby when the building above was destroyed by a bomb. She handed her baby to rescuers who were pulling them from the rubble. The baby was taken somewhere and she didn’t know where. She went from place to place looking for him. It took three days to find him.

I don’t know exactly what it takes to be brave or what it means to live through a time like this. Right now, Noah and I and you are a tiny little unit, weathering the storm. We’re confined to our small apartment and to short walks on the surrounding streets, as long as they are empty. You are what is giving me the strength and resolve to be brave, if that’s what I’m doing. Thank you for kicking me. Thank you for kicking so your father can feel you. Thank you for being alive. Thank you for what you’re already teaching me.

17th March 2020

Dear baby,

Yesterday we found out that you are a girl. We went to the Kaiser hospital building to get my twenty week anatomy ultrasound. It’s hard to explain the anxiety around walking into a hospital at this moment. I was so flustered that I initially left my wallet – with ID and health insurance card – at home, and we had to drive back to get it. I found the N95 mask that we have left over from the fires last autumn and wore that. I’ve had an asthmatic cough since I had a cold three weeks ago, and it’s refused to clear up despite a course of steroids and a steroid inhaler. I’m more worried about other people’s reactions to me coughing in public than I am about the cough itself. I know it’s the same cough I’ve had for weeks and not the virus, but no one else is to know that.

As we went into the hospital there were staff members standing behind a makeshift table with a bottle of hand sanitiser on it, asking if we had an appointment and whether we had any symptoms. The hospital wasn’t busy but it was the closest we’ve been to strangers in a week, and both of us found our hearts racing as we negotiated elevators and waiting rooms. Sitting in the waiting room I had to close my eyes and concentrate on breathing to stay calm. We had to wait about twenty minutes before the technician came out to fetch

us. She explained she had been cleaning the room with extra care. She wore a mask, and asked us to sanitise our hands on the way in.

She was an incredibly sweet woman, who told us she specialises in high-risk pregnancies and always double-checks for every potential problem. But you didn't have a single problem. You were lying upside down, curled up, and we could see every tiny vertebra of your spine, so perfectly formed as to seem utterly miraculous. How did you do that? There was your four chambered heart, pumping away. There were your kidneys, your two feet, both with five toes. Your two hands, held in front of your face as though you'd had enough of the intrusion. You seemed much sleepier than in other ultrasounds we've had, and I didn't feel you move or kick. But she said you were perfect, and you are. She asked if we wanted to find out your sex and we said yes. "You have no idea at all?" "None." "I'll let the father take a guess," she said. She scanned down your spine to the bottom and asked Noah what he thought. We both looked at the image for a few seconds. "That doesn't look like a penis," he said. "That's right, she's a girl."

A few weeks ago I had a dream that we were in an ultrasound scan, almost identical to the one we were actually in yesterday. The technician suddenly began to refer to you as "she", saying "she's doing this and that". Strange because the family consensus was that you were a boy, and we were even referring to you as "he". But perhaps I knew subconsciously, or even wished, that you would be a girl. And there you are, a daughter.

We raced out of the hospital as quickly as we could. I was desperate to get home so I could take the uncomfortable, bulky mask off. And then we could kiss. And call our parents and Noah's siblings. So went a series of Facetimes and phone calls. My mother burst into tears of joy. My father said it reminded him of the day 31 years ago when he got the same news about me.

After that, we felt totally emotionally exhausted. The anxiety of going into the hospital, the exhilaration of seeing you on the scan, of finding out that you were not only healthy and perfect, but also a girl, the desperation to get to the safety of home, the thrill of telling everyone the news. It felt huge. It was the first time we'd been outside together into a semi-crowded place, or at least a place that felt risky. My limbs felt watery and weak.

And that's around the time that we started to see online that London Breed, the mayor of San Francisco, would be announcing a "shelter at home" order at an afternoon press conference. It closes down all businesses that are not deemed "essential" and requires everyone to stay at home and avoid contact with others for three weeks until April 7. It's basically what we've been doing for a week, but on a mass scale. On social media, businesses began to announce their closure. City Lights Bookstore, where I used to work, closed its doors at 6pm inside of midnight. In downtown Oakland, businesses boarded up their windows.

The consequences are enormous. So many people will be laid off from work, especially in the food industry. Restaurants are able to function, but only for takeout and delivery so their services are massively reduced. Healthcare workers can, obviously, keep working, as can anyone providing essential services. Hardware stores and vets and laundromats can stay open. Even journalists are exempt as they can continue to cover the news and get people information.

But Noah is permanently working from home. His fieldwork for the wet season is over. The samples that his colleagues took yesterday and dropped at the lab in San Francisco

will undoubtedly never be analysed. Those who can't work from home, but aren't deemed essential, will no doubt be laid off or asked to take paid time off. The stock market has been tanking for days, despite Trump injecting \$1.5 trillion – an amount that's hard to understand but apparently could have cancelled all outstanding student debt. But I can't see how anything can save us from a recession, or even from a depression. All over the world, industry, manufacturing and shipping has halted. Capitalism cannot function. The status quo cannot be maintained.

Lots of things run through my head. Some are awful and I have to try and control them. I fear that my parents will die and I will never see them again and won't be able to help them. I fear sickness spreading through my family. I fear Noah or I getting sick. I worry about you, about the unknowns of risks to babies in utero, or to newborns. A couple of days ago the BBC reported that the youngest confirmed case of the virus in the UK was a newborn. Passed from the mother? From the hospital? Who knows.

I wonder about your birth. I always planned to give birth at Kaiser, because of insurance coverage. Who knows what will be happening by the time you're due at the beginning of August? Babies will keep being born despite any chaos unfolding around them, so I assume the essential functions of the Labor and Delivery unit will have to be maintained. But the consensus seems to be that the healthcare system will be overwhelmed, that all beds will have to be given to the sick, that there aren't enough ventilators and supplies. In Italy, doctors triage patients and choose the most likely to survive, sacrificing the old and weak for the young. My friend Yemile, whose father is a big doctor in Texas and is overseeing part of the response in San Antonio, says he expects doctors here to have to make the same decisions. This is the nightmare. Not everyone can be saved.

Some thoughts are better. Because we have you, we have a future. We have something coming. We can't give up or give in to despair. You keep kicking. You are oblivious. All you want is to live, like every baby. All we want is for you to live.

Right now, Noah is on a Zoom call with his work colleagues. He's holding the pictures of you that the ultrasound technician printed out and gave to us. Left foot. Right hand. Hope.

22nd March 2020

Dear baby,

On Thursday (the 19th) Governor Gavin Newsom instituted a "stay at home" order for the entire state of California. It runs along similar lines to the one we were already under in the Bay Area; no travel outside your home unless it's for essential services, only essential workers going out to work, only essential businesses open. We haven't ventured far enough from the house to really know what that looks like for the city. Our world has shrunk to the back streets of Temescal, where the blossom is blooming and the squirrels and crows have reclaimed the streets in the absence of so many cars.

Yesterday Noah had a freak-out. The shower kept breaking while he was in it, and then he smashed a ceramic pot I'd made and was using in the bathroom to store hair brushes. He said he felt like the walls of the apartment were closing in. Fair enough, we're sharing a very small place. Right now he's at the desk in the bedroom playing poker online with Nico, Martin and Edgar. I'm writing this at the kitchen table. Yesterday he went out to buy groceries and returned with meat, vegetables, milk, frozen food, beer, whiskey and half a gallon of chocolate ice cream. He felt much better.

But there are moments when it gets to us. We've decided that one line of thought that's banned is "what if this lasts for months and months?" Like they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, we're trying to take it one day at a time. We made a schedule that we're trying to stick to that includes exercising, eating regularly, taking breaks from work, going outside to walk, playing games etc. I find the days much easier now that we have it, as I always know there's a next thing to do. After lunch we walk, after dinner we watch TV.

The heating at my parents' house went out and they had to have an engineer over to fix it. No mask, and he didn't respect their worry about contamination, announcing that he'd used the bathroom. He needs to come back tomorrow with parts. It's stressful to imagine a stranger in their home after they've been so, so careful to isolate themselves and stay safe. Yet another thing I can't do anything about.

We've had some social moments. Neighbours who stand in the street six feet away from each other to talk now greet us and ask how we're doing. People nod and smile and ask how we're doing when we walk past them. We had dinner last night across the plastic garden table, six feet from our downstairs neighbours, Sarah-Katherine and Andrew. Today we took two cups of tea to Mike and Flo's and sat in their outdoor chairs six feet across from them. These all feel like risks in a way. Or at least a slight elevation of risk. How strict should we be about our isolation? How lonely do we risk becoming?

This morning my father-in-law Neal joked on the phone that if he doesn't get to meet you on the day you're born, he'll shoot himself. On Twitter I saw a picture of a grandfather meeting his grandson for the first time through a window to maintain distance. At New York Presbyterian hospital they announced today that labouring women can't bring anyone into the delivery room with them, even partners. Noah said he'd like to see a doctor trying to stop him coming in. Of all the things I'd considered might happen when you were born, this was one possibility that hadn't occurred to me. It made me think more seriously about the idea of a home birth, but I know there are attendant risks to that, and a possibility I might end up in hospital anyway. Again, worrying about it doesn't change anything. Who knows what the hospitals will look like when you do decide it's time to come?

I'm torn between the desire to meet you as soon as possible, and the wish that you'll stay in there as long as possible. As long as it takes for the world to be less chaotic and frightening.

20th September 2020

Keziah was born on the 8th of August, 2020, at 9.23am. She weighed 8lb, 3oz. I laboured for more than thirty-three hours – wearing a mask – to bring her into the world. When they put her on my chest I thought: hello, stranger.

In her first week on earth, I nursed her in a rocking chair in the corner of our bedroom while dry lightning crackled outside all night, lighting up the skyline. These freak lightning strikes sparked fires that started to burn across California.

The skies went dark. One day, we woke up and the sun didn't rise. The sky was a strange, choking orange colour all day. It was permanently dark from dawn until dusk, and I couldn't help but think of 1816 – "the year without a summer" – when a volcanic eruption caused similar conditions across the world and Mary Shelley wrote "Frankenstein" on Lake Geneva. Shelley, like me, was a nursing mother with a newborn at the time – although her child died before the book was published.

For the last few weeks we've been trapped inside, unable to even open a window for fear of damaging our lungs or permanently harming Kizzy. It's a stark reminder that the intensity of climate change is not coming, but already here.

It can feel like the world is ending. We can't go into anyone else's house because of Covid. We can't leave our own because of the smoke. The Trump presidency moves wildly from horror to horror; denying the virus, denying climate change, denying racism.

But for Keziah, the world is only just beginning. At six weeks old, she stares into our eyes. She coos her very first sounds, already trying to communicate. She reaches out with her hands to see what she will find. She experiments with smiling. She falls asleep in our arms and wakes up if we put her down.

This cannot be the end. She is the beginning.

