

weathering

allostatic load

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On my nth visit to a medical professional, I try to sit calmly. I'm done up: bright red lipstick black liner, fancy red glasses—the lenses polished to a high shine—hair flat-ironed.

I have my white voice ready—polite, calm, devoid of inflection or Blaccent. My heart is racing nonetheless dreading the scale, dreading the sound of Velcro ripping, and the increasing pressure on my upper arm. The cuff might pop open because it's too small.

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Forecast calls for rain on end, incessant drip. Wet coldness seeps thru exposed wrists and ankles, behind fogged glasses—reflecting a bright screen filled with the latest viral horrors.

Back braced, teeth clenched, pelvis squeezed. The red dots encircling white digits on my various email and social media accounts, a testament to ignored messages.

Bookended between images curating aspirational perfection I don't want to read/perform horror # no filter

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A few years ago I woke up in debilitating pain, my lower back on fire. I crawled out of bed, crawled to the bathroom. Called in sick, and thought the pain was the result of the new old chair I had inherited.

For three days I crawled. On the fourth, I walked bent over to a clinic stressed about getting a note for my absence. Stressed about the pile of work I would go back to. I am an instrument tuning this way and that, sensing a climate pattern; this body's a weathervane pointing out the direction of bad winds to come.

Body parts creak and groan, refuse to stretch — dangerously taut, close to snapping. Some days are good days to *call in Black*.

On a good day I have a dull ache in my lower back and pelvis. I am fatigued and brain fogged. On a particularly bad year-long stretch of racial injustice, extrajudicial killings, work microaggressions, and a general climate of anti-blackness, my body betrays me, seizes, and won't get out of bed.

The weather is bad out there. I know the weather is bad out there; the unceasing pattering of rain erodes, wet dampness lodges — settles and makes an awkward home in the joints, muscles, and inflamed tissues. I get up anyway, braving the climate.

Put on a happy face.

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At the doctor's office the nurse practitioner expresses concern about my blood pressure. I swear up and down that it's fine, it usually goes up because doctors stress me out. And work too.

She says she'll pretend this number did not happen, says she'll give me 5 minutes, and try again. When she reads me the numbers I start to cry.

She offers to write me a note excusing me from work for three days *but talk to your doctor to get more time.*

At work when I log in, my emails number in the 3 digits. Still catching up from my 4-day migraine, and before that, my two-week ~~vacation~~ working-at-home-catching-up staycation, and previous to that, a number of breaks that have done nothing to bring my stress or workload down.

I start the 20th to-do list that never gets shorter, and my heart begins its loud erratic thumping.

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In the doctor's office I'm asked multiple times if I have diabetes despite my lab results showing that I do not. The locum, with equal parts belligerence and awkwardness, tells me *when I look at you and people of your ethnicity, I would say you should start on Metformin.*

Scrawling on her notepad, she tells me to have a think.

By the time I've stepped out of my house to start my work commute, my heart is pounding a steady, anxious drumbeat. I wear loud pink earbuds jammed deep into my ears to drown it and the public transit slurs out with the remixed version of Aretha Franklin's *Struggle*.

I get up out of bed, I put on my clothes 'cause I've got bills to pay.

Hood up—block out the daily (micro) aggressions.

The world is a filmy grey. Other days it's like looking through a sobbing tear-tracked window. Even on sunny days. Those rays, though, make it possible to weather the rest of the year. Somewhat. Shortness of breath, panic attacks, migraines, sore joints, back pain, fatigue, debilitating depression—all are weather indicators.

I casually admit to another woman that I read Goop. I know. What in the world can Gwyneth Paltrow tell me? And out of morbid, disconnected fascination I read the health and wellness articles, fantasizing about implementing some of the tips to lower my stress:

make room in your schedule for free time and activities that you truly love or start the day with a breakfast that helps manage blood sugar levels.

My mornings start with a jolt as my iPhone screeches an alarming tone meant to get me out of bed immediately, with just enough time to get dressed, and head out the door—so much for Goop.

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That time clots clawed their way up my leg to lodge themselves in my lungs. The feeling of dizziness and needing air, feeling tired but I *weathered* it till I got off the Sky Train. Before going to the hospital, I showered, out of breath, heart pounding, packed an overnight bag just in case, and made sure my makeup was flawless and on point, my underwear clean and not raggedy.

My partner is hovering anxiously by the bathroom pleading with me to *just go, who cares?!?!?* Because Black and health care don't go hand in hand. In the ER room the doctor on duty is yelling at me *DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE?!* After informing me that I have a pulmonary embolism.

I don't know why he's yelling or how they know that I'm having a PE event. Maybe he's stressed. I look it up on my phone—find out Serena Williams had one (don't finish reading the Wiki article), anyway, sounds exotic; I crack some jokes that belie the dread. I try to relax thinking if an athlete can have PE, then I'm fine.

The forecast says 100% rain for the next week and my eyes mirror the streaming windows as I lie in bed trying to decide if I should go to work or not.

It's a bad pain day; my back is aching something fierce. I have a mountain of work to do and people need me. I want to cry. I don't want to be needed. I want to abdicate from responsibility but I'm the clean-up crew so to speak (if you know you know).

I read a vigorously debunked theory that women with endometriosis put their careers first before themselves. Some theories persist. And here I am: work before health.

I'm at the gynecologist's office. It's my second time seeing her. The first time she sent me for a round of tests to determine if I had endometriosis.

A laparoscopy is the *gold standard* for diagnosing endometriosis. She tells me it's not necessary to do one. This time I'm in her office for an IUD, as recommended by the ER doctor, following my embolism; I am high-risk and would be a high-risk pregnancy.

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At work, sitting most of the day, catching up on emails that I will never catch up on, worry gnaws; I wonder if the ache in my calf is a sign, if my heart racing is another sign. I mean they are signs, but are they *the* sign, *signs* of another embolism? The risk of another PE event remains at 30% in the subsequent (10) years after the first, and I continue to be at (high) risk.

I'm only four years in.

At work I am called a racial slur by a client. At a meeting with various Health Directors no one will look at me or talk directly to me.

At another meeting I am constantly talked over. I politely ask the man to let me finish as he has spoken at length and over me. *I do not need a dressing down by the likes of you*, he says.

In yet another meeting I am told that in an ideal world I would be handling $x y z$ in my work portfolio.

I have not been provided access or the tools. I am de-skilled and, for a *de facto* admin assistant, I am well paid. My title holds power that I do not feel; my title is often ignored.

At the gynecologist's office we realize that, despite the referral, I was not given a prescription for an IUD, so my appointment consists of me talking about my event, and her tapping her lip thoughtfully looking at various contraceptive options.

So, I guess birth control is out...

tap tap tap. We could consider sterilization (laughs).

She then describes in specific and graphic detail all the things that could go wrong when she inserts the IUD: *I could accidentally perforate your uterus or introduce an infection (more laughs). You should see the lists of risks for Advil (mock horror)!*

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measure systolic and diastolic blood pressure any allergies major surgeries have you travelled by air recently draw some blood samples you have markers of inflammation cortisol levels high check for c-reactive proteins elevated cytokines check for autoimmune diseases metabolic markers like waist to hip ratio total cholesterol albumin triglycerides estimated glomerular filtration rate chronic stressors sleep hygiene John Henryism Sojourner syndrome respectability behaviour vigilance