April 2, 2022 Chicago, Illi.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Among the many and various digital projects I have been building my tech skills with is a little app for my laptop that has helped me to organize my writing. This little app has created for me a good, simple, easily accessible place to store words. Since the girls came along I have wanted to be more organized with my written memories and reflections, but for posteritylaug, but also to create a ready repository of memories and images to use in future writings. I am so please that this little app I developed seems to really be doing the trick of pulling together and storing these thoughts in a way that keeps them accessible and encourages greater organization over time.

At any rate, we are thinking of you both a lot and I wanted to send you some of the memories and images and moments we’ve laughed and cried through with the girls. I am not completely sure what the format of the rest of this letter (and/ or series of letters will be) so please forgive any disorganization of randomness. Above all, I think I am going for a “slice of life” sort of thing.

**November 8, 2014**

        betsy and I are on a walk with Esmé. She is in a stroller, bundled up against the November cold. It is the afternoon and this is her very first walk. We left our third floor apartment tucked behind the parking garage of the X-Sport Fitness building and walked north by the bowling alley beside the river and then on to the Diversey Avenue bridge where we stood for a while looking south down the river towards skyscrapers downtown.  The sky above was stunning.  November clouds low and full of color, cut up and layered, one slice on top of the other like scalloped potatoes in a Pyrex dish.  The buildings looked sharp and keen against sky. After two weeks hunkered down in our apartment with our newborn something in me leaps up and looks around and feels excited is a wondering just waking up sort of way.

        Dear Esmé is so sweet on our walk.  She stays silent and sleeping slung against my body in a cotton wrap, my coat zipped up over her precious shape, I keep looking down to check on her, making sure she isn’t being smothered, but she is fine and comfortable and dear, back in the womb of sorts, bidding time until her next feeding.  I love her little nose and her wrinkly fingers and the little scrunched-up expressions she makes that express such an incredibly wide range of emotions.

**January 18, 2018**

We drove to the park by the lake and parked and skied with the sled behind us and I pulled Esme up and down Cricket Hill. From Cricket Hill we could see the frozen Montrose harbor just down the hill and a bar graph of big downtown buildings further south. We skied and sledded until we were cold and then I skied down the hill with Esme behind me on her sled towards our car parked along the road beside the frozen harbor.

**February 10, 2019**

Still waiting on the Plum (Helena) one day before her due date. This morning while still in bed, betsy requested a glass of cold water drink and wake the baby up. Baby was asleep and felt too still to betsy. (Rereading this now, years later, I have to reflect that Helena is still a good morning sleep. She is consistently the last family member to wake and we all really cherish her groggy, sleep tousled appearance when she finally does make her morning appearance.) I am off today and have the option to go in tomorrow if there are no developments. We are in limbo trying to savor the approach of this next chapter, but at the same time anxious for a major development! Something to move the story forwarded!

**April 6, 2020**

Esme Poem:

Horses like hay

Kids love to play.

Lions half-tamed

Can’t be blamed

For their claws

Or their jaws.

So kids, it should cause you pause,

If the beast invites you to stay.

**April 22, 2020**

Helena is now 14 months old. She is active and squirmy and constantly toddles around picking up and repositioning (tossing somewhere else) books and toys. One of our favorite things that she does is pick up a board book, drag it over to the loveseat and cuddle up to “read” a book to herself. She carefully turns each page, and is getting more and more adroit with her long fingers by the day. She is not really talking, but is still very communicative. Her eye contact, often accompanied by a head tilt to the left is charming the engaging. Her calm vocal modulations are expressive. Her incisive “ah” with right hand outstretched into a furtive point is her catch all request making method. She smiles with her teeth even though at this point she mostly only has teeth on the left side of her mouth.

Sometimes before handing her over to mom to nurse before going down for the night. I will pick her up and she’ll cuddle into my shoulder and I’ll take her out on to the side porch and we will look out at the cool spring night. On clear nights lately, there have been some wonderfully visible stars. I think we saw Orion’s belt. We’ve looked for the moon. We’ve felt the wind. When we slip out onto the chilly side porch Helena will often let out a sort of sustained “ooooo” sound like she is surprised or impressed or perhaps a little chilly. She doesn’t seem to mind though and just cuddles into my shoulder even more.

Esme loves pasta and pancakes and all things sweet. She gobbles up cheese, she guzzles big glasses of Ovaltine. She was adorable in the run up to Easter. Talking for days ahead of time about how Easter would never come. We got lucky the morning of Easter Sunday with good weather and had an egg hunt outside with the girls. Esme was delighted to scurry around our still brown and muddy and thatchy spring yard, spying for a spot of color in the dun brown yard.

Recently we watched Disney’s *Robin Hood* for the first time. Of course, Esme loved it. Her favorite characters were Robin Hood and Clucky, Maid Marian’s chicken Lady-in-waiting, because they were the toughest and best fighters. Esme also watched *Charlotte’s Web* recently and has been in her words “really into pigs”. We started Mary Poppins last night and she figured our pretty quickly that Mary Poppins is “quite wonderful.” We recently finished reading her *Danny, Champion of the World* and a hundred plus page chapter book from the *Hilda* series. She continues to be a really engaged listener and has an insatiable interest in stories. *Totoro* remains one of her favorite movies and was the first film that she saw in a theater. She went with betsy and Dan and Owen Chainer to see it at the Music Box this past January.

Esme- “Mom, I just pooped and I had such a big fat poop that now I feel like I am going to throw-up.”

Helena’s feet are getting a lot faster. She pivots and she rotates in these tight little circles. She moves like a surprisingly agile 80-year-old with a low sense of gravity.

**5/25/2020**

betsy was working with Helena on ‘little Miss Muffett” today carrying on the tradition from Esme. At 15 months she is starting to get it! I could hear here from the other room yelling “Whoa!” as she ran away from the spider. Her “Whoa” is one of here defining “phrases” at this point and it is breathy and sweet and full of enthusiasm. She is such a positive, curious, sweet beet. Though can also be pretty sensitive as toddlers are want to be.

Appreciating all of betsy’s talents and panache. Last night at Humbolt Park (beautiful day 80, meet up with Dan and Trisha and Owen in the early evening). she just jumped right in with an old Jazz band and played a couple of lovely fiddle tunes. Then this morning is working with Helena on her skit and playing violin for her, after waking up and making pancakes for us all that she had premade the batter for. I am working until 10 this morning and then from 10 to 11 she will be putting a few finishing touches on the loft project that she is doing for Esme- all the way from design to execution. She is such a clever person and so good at figuring stuff out!!

**5/23/2020**

Esme woke up early and came into the kitchen around 6:45. Betsy had been sanding or dremmeling in Esme’s room working on the new loft she had built. Bolted a six-foot platform at 5 feet high straight across the room, bolted into the studs. She had pulled the whole thing together from ideas off the internet and a couple of phone chats with a guy she connected with through a neighorhood social media app for building tips. Esme has been sleeping in the living room in the green three-person domed tent that we’ve had since I spent that summer in Orlando when I was teaching for IRD and living off Robert Kermit Jones Pkwy and McDonalds were the three closest restaurants to the long-term stay apartment complex the reading enrichment company was providing me with.

**7/29/2020**

Helena, while happily, mostly non-verbal is still quite demonstrative. She gets a long, long way with “naaaaa” accompanied by a furtive point to indicate somethings she wants. She loves to wave and greet people and say goodbye. Just beginning to say “up” (*ot)*

**8/1/2020**

Overheard:

Mom: “Esme, you didn’t finish your job!”

Esme: “What? I did a great job? Thank you!”

**8/3/2020**

Such a nice evening with Esme. We played Uno and Go Fish and chatted at the kitchen table and then got ready for bed and she was heartbreakingly good, changing faster than supergirl and getting her toothbrush all together in the bathroom dampened with toothpaste on and standing at attention beside the sink waiting to have her teeth brushed..

We then read the *Hilda* stories— a kid’s graphic novel she has been into.

**10/2/2020**

Up early with baby Helena wrapped in a blanket, pressed against my shoulder, the eastern sky brightening red, the clouds a canvas for day-glo galore and she is such a precious weight in my arms and a better fit in the crook of my arm than even the clouds in places in the sky.

Esme you are helpful, sweet, willful, joyful, a dedicated friend and an eager learner.

**10/14/2020**

*The Empire State Express*

Up into the huge black 999.

With you so small at five.

And me so small at fortywhatever.

And the whole old world still older still.

And little old you making everything new.

**11/03/2020**

Esme’s literacy has grounded me deeply in the magic of language once again. The wonder of WORDS! These subtly shaded abstractions, strange stews of connotation and rhythm and rhyme and image and logic, sensation, sentiment, something of stone, something of ether.

**11/06/2020**

We take a picnic in the Rosehill Cemetery and the day is bright and golden and vibrant and plans fly over and we spread out a picnic beside the grave of James Taylor. All these lives lived meaningfully, loved, missed, grieved, celebrated, thanked, helped by, murdered by, neglected, well met. All of these relationships, the golden maple leaves catch the sun as they fall around the concrete death statue, still in the park while real deer move amongst the gravestones with the Lord’s own Stag propriety. Geese cluttering in and out of the low lagoons in the cemetery’s interior. The wall around the cemetery keeps a lot of the street sounds out, but not the airplanes flying overhead, who call out and scroll across the blue with the stark white streak of their steady handed calligraphy.

**11/08/2020**

Impromtu hungry, hungry hippo match with Helena after she accidently spills her baggy of Goldfish crackers and banana chips on the kitchen floor. She gives me a run for my money as we snatch up the snacks and stuff them in our faces.

The spontaneous engagement of a child. Fully engaged. So much non-verbal cooperation. Opposition.

Over a week after Halloween Helena continues to love putting her Totoro costume on and dancing to the Theme song. Her cosplay is strong!

Frequent words:

Toe, totoro, Mummum, Daddy, Yie (like Jie 姐 but with a “Y”), wawa, up, Na (still her catch all for “that” used as an effective indicative expression)

**11/17/2020**

Esme: “Wait. Do people eat Koalas?”

Me: “No, honey.”

**11/29/2020**

Transferring Belle Belle from nursing with betsy on the couch to her crib she flops over sometimes soundly sleeping, sometimes drowsily awake, smiling her gummy greeting, arms extended towards me— “Daddy”. She loves naps and bedtime and rarely fights the process once we have her diaper changed and clothes changed. She is a long, sweet, ruddy cheeked angel, precious weight in my arms, her head on my right shoulder nested into the crook of my neck. I carry here to our room and untie the sash of the curtain to darken the room, then I settle her into her crib between the blankets, one lighter, one heavier, a few stuffed animals scattered about. I cover her with the lighter blanket and nuzzle her stuffed pig “Piggles” next to her. I turn on her sound machine. Slip out of the room and close the heavy, loosely latched bedroom door. Nap time on a Sunday.

**11/24/2020**

My girls in their long dark jackets and knit hats. Esme wearing the peaked knit hat that betsy knit for her in a variety of sizes over time. She is so talented at bringing these types of creations into fruition. So much of her artistry has been plowed into wonderful knitting projects and paper crafts alone or with Esme. Esme is picking up her skills and has now at age 6 folded way more paper cranes than I have at 41 and likely ever will.

Helena is sleeping. Still such a good napper. Marcel is chewing something. I am letting the girls get on they’re way. I will be spending the afternoon cloistered away trying to get through some paper, the desert. I am crossing the desert to the source… which is ATMAN… which is ME… which I apparently have to cross the desert to get to.

It’s November 24th, 3:42 p.m. It is raining, in the high 30s, and betsy and Esme are out at Jo-ann’s Fabrics. The blower kicks on and begins circulating another blast of dry air around our closed up cabin.

Esme was our talker.

Helena is our listener.

Helena: “Watch this”, “Daddy”, “Dah-di”, “Dad-di, hi!”

Typical cleanup. “Esme, can you please bring me the basket for the wooden fish. Helena wordlessly shows up with the basket as Esme manages to slink around the apartment distracting herself.

Esme has a leather bound word book that she has been writing her new words in. This afternoon she insisted that betsy add the word *vapid* to it.

Artificial, prolific, smitten, oblivious, empathy, melancholy, aggressive, ominous, rhetorical question, meticulous, vivid, livid, spontaneous, postpone, delirious, through, under, which, world, year

When we approach language naturally, wholistically, with enthusiasm and support and materials the flow of it is truly beautiful.

I need to read to the family more. More poetry.

Esme quoting Templeton the rat from *Charlotte’s Web*:   
“No one brings my dinner in a slop pail, I have to live by my wits.”

**12/07/2020**

Esme in her ankle length flannel nightgown that is creeping up to her kneecap as she seems to sprout taller by the day.

Helena in her pink footie pajamas— a mercurial beast, full of cuddle and chaos, kisses and teeth!

**12/26/2020**

Esme: “Your heart beat is perfect. If it wasn’t perfect I’d have to give you two shots, so the good news is I only have to give you one shot.”

**01/15/2021**

My fingernails are painted. Esme painted them for me. Teal thumbs. Blue with silver sparkles: index finger, middle finger; black with gold sparkles ring finger, black pinky.

**01/18/2021**

From a word game betsy and Esme were playing together where they collaboratively worked on transforming a less interesting sentence into a more interesting sentence.

“The boy gave the sad cat a pat.”

“the tender-hearted youth gave the melancholy feline a gentle nuzzle.”

**01/19/2021**

Playing with Esme, she tells me—“you have tetanus and you are delirious and your mouth is clamped shut. Later I regain my speech, but she instructs me to forget how to talk. She then comforts me in the tragedy of my forgetfulness. “Oh, Daddy, oh, daddy,” she soothes, attempting to comfort me in my bewildering dumbness.

Helena word list:

Honey, up, down, yo-yo, go, Mum, Ya (yes and esme nick name depending on inflection, my, mine, no, ball, Dad, niao (cat), moo (cow), milk, wawa/water, baby, one, tofu, two, three, gain, more, circle, walk, cold/hat, you, Totoro, Kiki, Laurel, hi, bye, woo-woo (aka woof-woof dog), poop, toot, haunted, knee, toe, eye, nose, shoe, key.

She is babbling so much and is so engaging and often addresses us with exhaltations. Mom! Dad! Followed by some excited announcement that sounds like speech (intonation etc) but is of her own invention. This pseudo speech seems really important. Gibberish. She feels like she is making a meaningful expression and she is in the sense that she is making a meaningful transitory expression

**02/05/2021**

Belle Belle’s broken heart calling for mother’s milk on the first night of its denial. And then on the second night screaming in her bed arms extended up when I reenter the room to comfort her, she needs me now and comes readily into my arms and nestles her head and neck and shoulders into the crook of my left arm. She snuggles in and then turns her face towards me and mumurs “Bee-bee” which is her way of requesting our perennial lullaby- *Oh, my little baby*, a little ditty I have been making up verses to most nights for the better part of 6 years now. The melody is the same, but the words are always shifting around and rearranging and rewriting themselves. Soothing is the main intention here. Takes a lot of pressure off the content, so long as you can keep it all from being too sharp or jarring.

02/14/2021

Waking up today to Valentine’s Day and Helena’s second birthday!

Helena’s two-year-old vocabulary:

* “Da-dee” daddy
* “Bla-loon” balloon
* “Lo-lel” Laurel

**02/25/2021**

We had a circus last night after dinner. We clipped up a utility lamp as a spotlight and cued up some circus music on the computer. Let the show begin!!

**03/28/2021**

Helena:

Ear Whack = ear wax

Enthusiastic, expert cat sound = “neeeoooww”

**03/30/2021**

*Little Girls* from Annie has been Esme’s favorite movie lately. She’s cued it up a bunch of times on Youtube for an impromptu Karaoke style-sing-along.

**04/04/2021**

Helena golden up on my shoulders—“me happy”

04/17/2021

Helena; “Sure!” Her enthusiastic affirmative response to most offers of activities or snacks. She muttering and mumbling and jabbering peppering the incomprehensible with some of her catch phrases: “one”, “sure”, “that”, “this one”, “book”, “Hilda”, “Mona”, “Mum”.

Her screeches of indignation. Her complaining diatribes when mother upsets her and she runs to dad to complain or describe her injury or her frustration. She gets frustrated with toys a fair amount. When something won’t fit together or won’t fit inside. She gets mad. Throws things. Throws herself down on the ground. Not always. But her temper will flare up not infrequently from frustration.

04/29/2021

Helena: indicating where the purple reuseable bag is to be rehung in the utility closet: “No right, der. Right der!”

“What’s your name?”

Helena: “Bo-bo.”

04/29/2021

A rainbow. A double rainbow after a very grey day and then light shows and then suddenly heavy showers right when betsy and Esme went out to walk down Lincoln to buy the special flour that she needs to make traditional Irish soda bread. While none of the of 4+ different grocery stores betsy frequents (Trader Joe’s, Aldi, Fresh Tyme, Harvest Time, World Market, Whole Foods) carried it, but the Irish pub that also has an assortment of Irish grocery products has it available for purchase between 4 pm and 10 pm each day! betsy recently made a load of Soda bread with a substitute flour and it was definitely tasty. She was not completely satisfied though, so we will have to see it we notice how the authentic flour works its magic. My absolute idea homemade bread will probably always remain Mrs. Sigried’s Swedish Rye. That bread, toasted and buttered was just delightful. I think you guys would be baffled by how fast we’d go through it. I just loved it and I’m sure others did too.

Then the sun breaks through a rainbow appears to our south and Helena and I go out to se it and her reaction is even better than I expected. She’s excited and pointed and saying her “Over der. Over der.” I ask her if it’s a huge one and she say “No! It’s a tiny one!”. And I suppose it does look kind of tiny way of in the distance. It would be much more imposing if it were right next to us, just an impenetrable wall of color cascading up into the sky. That might pass as a huge one in Helena’s book, book today rainbow was a tiny one.

05/01/2021

Where does the line in conversation and letter writing and especially in letter writing perhaps because it is both our form at hand and so seemingly more emphatic, statement black and white upon the printed page. It’s a very exposed position to be in. And yet our modern world has embraced the instantaneously publishable word. Making words to some extent worthless. That said, literacy has never been more valuable. Esme’s literacy would have probably taken off right about now anyway, pandemic, or no pandemic, but I have to think that all the extra reading time she got at home with betsy and I and betsy’s mom regularly over facetime and down in the garden with the weather warmed up with our downstairs neighbor Anna. Esme has 5 fairy lit mothers: Jinn- an artist who has relocated to Berlin but keeps in touch via letters and occasional facetime. Her last letter to Esme included some flash cards of some particularly delightful words. Esme of course has a sense of the precociousness of it all, but its just a game so she’s game to see a new word and roll it around on her tongue and add it to her word list on the fridge and make up elaborate rambling stories linking together this sometimes macabre collection of words: typical, optimist, pessimist, versatile, nonchalant, neglect, humiliate, offend, subtle, mammoth, essential, zealous, contemplate, minute, enforce, epilogye, cloying, frigid, foliage, fragrant, evidence, miniscule, discreet, taunt, consistent, unanimous, morose, bizarre, glum, persuade, orbit, monotonous, partially, foul, despise, loathe, meticulous, irrelevant, precise, unique, livid, remote, postpone, delirious, temporary, spontaneous, vapid, solitary, vigorous, drab, artificial, prolific, smitten, oblivious, quarantine, empathy, chaos, melancholy, aggressive, simultaneous, exaggerate, specific, massive, agile, incredulous, vacant, ominous, taper, rhetorical question, numeral, noble, inevitable, fraud, swindle, reluctant, onerous, ceaseless, dismal, euphoric, dissolve, disintegrate, predict.

05/22/2021

“Your perfect just the way you are.” (Esme to betsy)

Library- picked up Harry Potter

Bottled water from Dollop

Frozen yogurt in Lincoln Square.

Took a reading walk, stopping along the way home to read a few chapters of the book.

‘This is my lucky day!”

05/26/2021

Helena’s Valley Girl – “ah-K”

06/14/2021

Me: Do you want a piece of toast?

Helena: They she grabs one—“want honey on this.”

I spread butter and honey on the toast and cut it in two. This cause her to freak out—“You broke my toast! You broke my toast!”

You want a new one? No. No, new one.

**07/15/2021**

Helena is sitting on the couch with betsy who is in the process of getting dressed for the day. *You have nipples. You have big, big nipples mom?* (as she pokes at them). Betsy is getting ready for the day. She combs her hair and then pulls the excess hair off the comb and tosses the clump into the toilet. As she continues to get ready to go out Helena toddles into the bathroom to check things out. She notices the hair clump floating in the toilet and asks. *“You have hair in toilet? You poop out.”*

*I go Library Book! I can come with Esme and Mommy! Yeah I do! Now! Daddy, you not come. You stay here and work. Bye-bye!*

**07/23/2021**

Esme lost her first tooth- front left.

Helena has just started 2 yet a little bit more excited about using the potty. When I was coming in from outside she greeted me with the proud announcement that she had “pooped in her tiny potty.” This was not true, but she is getting the idea at least.

**08/25/2021**

Hey, dad, what does fatal mean? Oh, so the Basquelus in Harry Potter is very powerful, but there are some things that can kill it, including the crow of a rooster. The crow of the rooster is fatal to the Basquelous.

The Basquelous came up the other night when I was trying to put Helena and esme down and Esme complained that every time she closed her eyes she was confronted by the venomous fangs and murderous stare of the Basquelous. A well articulated fear is still a fear, so I tried to comfort her as best as I could.

**08/26/2021**

Now it is on to first grad for Esme. More focused mommy time for Helena, suddenly an only child during the school day. Longer stretches of focused study and job transition time for me. Life feels awfully locked in and not super agile, but we are settling and stable, good things ahead, good things behind.