

## Lifetimes

As I was sitting down to work on this essay, my husband stuck his head out of our shared home office to ask about the plan for the day.

“I’m working,” I said, though I was in my bathrobe, sitting on the couch. “I just need some time to work on this.”

“How much time do you need,” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Until our baby wakes up.”

“That could be three minutes from now,” he said, correctly predicting the future. “How long do you *actually* need?”

I stared at him. I could not answer. Time, it turns out, has dissolved.

Reading Ted Chiang’s book “Stories of Your Life and Others,” I was confronted over and over with the idea of time—reimagining a mythical past, for example, in “Tower of Babylon,” where workers tire endlessly to get to heaven. In “Story of Your Life,” we see Dr. Louise Banks live her life, replete with joy, even though she knows her daughter will die: the immutable future.

Time disappears with an infant. Day and night are the first to go: yes, the sun goes down, but there is no reprieve in the darkness, no sleep. The day shrinks, suddenly, to a 2 hour window, marked not by the earth’s orbit, but by my baby’s digestive system. Every two hours my breasts swell with milk, my baby cries, and we start again.

“Six hours?” asks my husband, offering a generous guess at how long it will take me to write a draft of this essay. I blink. I can no longer comprehend that amount of time.

Six hours of work, four months inside the house: our daughter was born at the very start of the pandemic. Just as everything in New York was shutting down, she arrived, blue from mucus in her lungs, not ready to breathe yet. The whole world changed; my whole world changed. Suddenly she screamed, alive and angry; suddenly it was not safe to go outside. Suddenly I would be a mother forever, no matter what. The immutable future: to live is to understand that we will all one day die.

So it is lucky that parenting through infancy feels like the eternal present—no sleep, no sleep. I start to see the world through my daughter’s eyes, this strange new world to both of us: the delight of her toes, useless and grasped in her little hand. The deep purple leaves of the chokecherry tree in our backyard, the poop-like fungus that grows on its branches, the shadows it casts on the brim of her car seat. The slow steady movements of the bedroom ceiling fan, entrancing in its rhythmic cycle. Her grandmother’s face, always half-hidden in a cloth mask. The sharp astringent smell of the hand sanitizer we keep by the door.

The past also begins to reshape itself. My mother, also a new person now—a grandmother—alternately forgets and remembers what it was like to raise me. Did roll over at three months? Was it four? I understand that haze now, the impossibility of remembering. I understand her exhaustion now, her fear, her love.

At night, fireworks crackle over the sound of our white noise machine. During the day, protests fill the city streets, demanding racial justice, demanding a new clarity for our past, present and future. The past, no longer so immutable. The idea that if we could remember differently right now, the future might change. Endless, imperative work: to become better than we were before. All of it crowds together in my head, as though I am one of Chiang’s heptapods, seeing all of time at once.

“Forever,” I say to my husband. It’s the only answer that feels true.