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NONFICTION

Life As You Knew It

Susan Hodara · August 31, 2026

Morning coffee in a Marimekko cup, a Japanese maple, the garbage truck: ordinary life, held against an unnamed dread.

nonfiction essay

You open your eyes to a new morning, raise your chin to look upward out the window above your head to check on the sky, then turn to your left to see if Paul is awake, too.

You consider what the day holds: doctor's appointment, teaching, lunch with a friend. Will you have a chance to swim? And what would you like to wear? You lie there a bit letting these thoughts drift around.

In the kitchen, coffee. You place the paper filter in the black plastic cone and drop in enough coffee grounds to produce a strong dark blend. You choose one of three cups: the Marimekko one with black and white circles that matches your

bedspread, the Marimekko one with the red and white pattern that matches your duvet cover, or the heavy blue and gray ceramic one with the flower that Sofie gave you, which makes it special. But they are all special, and you alternate, washing them by hand so they will always be available.

Remember the water, which flows from the faucet whenever you want.

Breakfast is either avocado toast or cereal with raisins and chopped walnuts and oat milk, taken upstairs with the coffee to eat in your office in front of your computer. Remember, too, the calmness, the focus, the curiosity those moments allow.

You lift your eyes often to gaze out the window in front of you, at the street, at the Japanese maple that has grown so tall over the years you have lived here. Three decades. So much has grown. The leaves turn crimson in the fall and don't drop until all the other trees are bare. Now it is springtime and they are a mixture of green and red, glistening today with this morning's rain.

What will be lost? These normal things – all the small things that make up a lived life – have become precious to me in the shadow of fear, where an unspecified dread lurks.

Sometimes I remind myself that I get to drive to the supermarket to buy milk and apples and anything else I need. I get to sit at a restaurant and ponder the menu and what I might like to eat, right now, right there. I get to put out the garbage before the truck comes to take it away and to throw in a load of laundry that will be clean before I know it. I get to lie beside Paul every night watching a show together before we decide it's time to go to sleep.

I get to pause, look out my window again and listen to the calls of the birds, so many this afternoon, after the rain.

EDITORIAL NOTE

What Hodara offers as an essay about mortality is, more precisely, an essay about ownership — the quiet, recurring assertion that "I get to" drive to the supermarket, "I get to" put out the garbage, "I get to" lie beside Paul each night. The anaphora is telling: gratitude here is structured grammatically as entitlement, a private possession of experience rather than a shared condition. The unnamed dread that supposedly organizes the piece never actually threatens this structure — rather, it intensifies appreciation of it. Fear functions as some kind of seasoning.

Consider what the text renders invisible in order to produce its effect of plenitude. Water "flows from the faucet whenever you want" — a sentence that treats a century of public infrastructure, unionized labor, and municipal engineering as a fact of nature, on par with rainfall on a Japanese maple. The garbage truck arrives unbidden; the coffee grounds become "a strong dark blend" without the plantation labor, the shipping routes, the retail chain that put them in a Marimekko cup matched, with some care, to a duvet cover. This is commodity fetishism in its most domesticated form: the soft mystification of the breakfast nook, where use-value floats free of the social relations that produced it and reappears as pure, private sensation — my coffee, my cups, my tree, my thirty years in this house.

The essay's political unconscious surfaces most clearly in its silences. We are never told what the dread is — illness, prognosis, mortality in the abstract — and this indeterminacy is not incidental but structural. A named diagnosis would locate the speaker within a healthcare system, an insurance regime, a class position that determines whether "doctor's appointment" means a five-minute co-pay or a catastrophic bill. By keeping the threat unspecified, the text keeps its subject unlocated: dread becomes existential rather than economic, universal rather than stratified. This is precisely how bourgeois interiority reproduces itself as literature — by translating a fundamentally social and unevenly distributed condition (precarity, mortality, access to care) into a private, portable affect that any reader, regardless of position, is invited to share.

Even the labor of maintaining this idyll disappears into voice: you wash the cups by hand, you choose what to wear, you swim if there's time — a seamless first/second-person merger that erases whoever else's labor might make this schedule possible, and erases the fact that "will I have a chance to swim" is a luxury of time that most lives under capital do not possess.

None of this makes the piece dishonest — its craft is real, its attentiveness to sensory detail genuine. But it is worth naming what kind of nonfiction this is: an aesthetics of gratitude produced entirely within, and legible only from within, a position of comfortable enclosure. For a magazine whose project is to denaturalize exactly this kind of enclosure, the essay is most useful as a specimen — a text that performs, with unusual clarity, the ideological operation by which private property, private health, and private mortality present themselves as simply life.

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