FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE GLOBAL BESTSELLER *THE ARGONAUTS*

MAGGIE NELSON

ON FREEDOM

FOUR SONGS OF CARE AND CONSTRAINT

On Freedom

ALSO BY MAGGIE NELSON

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On Freedom

FOUR SONGS OF CARE AND CONSTRAINT

Maggie Nelson

JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

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Leviathan

Truth also is the pursuit of it:
Like happiness, and it will not stand.

Even the verse begins to eat away
In the acid. Pursuit, pursuit;

A wind moves a little,
Moving in a circle, very cold.

How shall we say?
In ordinary discourse—

We must talk now. I am no longer sure of the words,
The clockwork of the world. What is inexplicable

Is the "preponderance of objects." The sky lights
Daily with that predominance

And we have become the present.

We must talk now. Fear
Is fear. But we abandon one another.

—GEORGE OPPEN, 1965

for Iggy

already & forthcoming

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Introduction

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STOP HERE IF YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT FREEDOM

I had wanted to write a book about freedom. I had wanted to write this book at least since the subject emerged as an unexpected subtext in a book of mine about art and cruelty. I had set out to write about cruelty, then found, to my surprise, freedom coming through the cracks, light and air into cruelty's stuffy cell. Once exhausted by cruelty, I turned to freedom directly. I started with "What Is Freedom?," by Hannah Arendt, and began to amass my piles.

But before long I diverted, and wrote a book about care. Some people thought the book about care was also a book about freedom. This was satisfying, as I, too, felt this to be the case. For some time, I thought a book on freedom might no longer be necessary—maybe not by me, maybe not by anyone. Can you think of a more depleted, imprecise, or weaponized word? "I used to care about freedom, but now I mostly care about love," one friend told me.[1] "Freedom feels like a corrupt and emptied code word for war, a commercial export, something a patriarch might 'give' or 'rescind,'" another wrote.[2] "That's a white word," said another.

Often I agreed: Why not take up with some less contested, obviously timely and worthy value, such as obligation, mutual aid, coexistence, resiliency, sustainability, or what Manolo Callahan has called "insubordinate conviviality"?[3] Why not acknowledge that freedom's long star turn might finally be coming to a close, that a continued obsession with it may reflect a death drive? "Your freedom is killing me!" read the signs of protesters in the middle of a pandemic; "Your health is not more important than my liberty!" maskless others shout back.[4]

And yet, I still couldn't quit it.

Part of the trouble resides in the word itself, whose meaning is not at all self-evident or shared.[5] In fact, it operates more like "God," in that, when we use it, we can never really be sure what, exactly, we're talking about, or whether we're talking about the same thing. (Are we talking about negative freedom? Positive freedom? Anarchist freedom? Marxist freedom? Abolitionist freedom? Libertarian freedom? White settler freedom? Decolonizing freedom? Neoliberal freedom? Zapatista freedom? Spiritual freedom? and so on.) All of which leads to Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous edict, *the meaning of a word is its use*. I thought of this formulation the other day when, on my university campus, I passed by a table with a banner that read, "Stop Here If You Want To Talk about Freedom." *Boy, do I!* I thought. So I stopped and asked the young white man, probably an undergraduate, what type of freedom he wanted to talk about. He looked me up and down, then said slowly, with a hint of menace, a hint of insecurity, "You know, *regular old freedom*." I noticed then that he was selling buttons divided into three categories: saving the unborn, owning the libs, and gun rights.

As Wittgenstein's work makes clear, that the meaning of a word is its use is no cause for paralysis or lament. It can instead act as an incitement to track *which language-game is being played*. Such is the approach taken in the pages that follow, in which "freedom" acts as a reusable train ticket, marked or perforated by the many stations, hands, and vessels through which it passes. (I borrow this metaphor from Wayne Koestenbaum, who once used it to describe "the way a word, or a set of words, permutates" in

the work of Gertrude Stein. "What the word means is none of your business," Koestenbaum writes, "but it is indubitably your business where the word travels.") For whatever the confusions wrought from talking about freedom, they do not in essence differ from the misunderstandings we risk when we talk to one another about other things. And talk to one another we must, even, or especially, if we are, as George Oppen had it, "no longer sure of the words."

A CRISIS OF FREEDOM

Looking back, my decision to stick with the term appears to have two roots. The first involves my long-standing frustration with its capture by the right wing (as in evidence at the young man's card table). This capture has been underway for centuries: "freedom for us, subjugation for you" has been at work since the nation's founding. But after the 1960s—a time during which, as historian Robin D. G. Kelley recalls in *Freedom Dreams*, "freedom was the goal our people were trying to achieve; *free* was a verb, an act, a wish, a militant demand. 'Free the land,' 'Free your mind,' 'Free South Africa,' 'Free Angola,' 'Free Angela Davis,' 'Free Huey,' were the slogans I remember best"—the right wing doubled down on its claim. In just a few brutal, neoliberal decades, the rallying cry of freedom as epitomized in the Freedom Summer, Freedom Schools, Freedom Riders, Women's Liberation, and Gay Liberation was overtaken by the likes of the American Freedom Party, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Operation Enduring Freedom, the Religious Freedom Act, Alliance Defending Freedom, and so much more. This shift has led some political philosophers (such as Judith Butler) to refer to our times as "postliberatory" (though, as Fred Moten notes, "preliberatory" might be just as accurate).[6] Either way, the debate as to where we stand, temporally, in relation to freedom, could be read as a symptom of what Wendy Brown has called a developing "crisis of freedom," in which "the particular antidemocratic powers of our time" (which can flourish even in so-called democracies) have produced subjects—including those "working under the banner of 'progressive politics'"—who appear "disoriented as to freedom's value," and have allowed "the language of resistance [to

take up the ground] vacated by a more expansive practice of freedom."[7] In the face of such a crisis, sticking with the term seemed one way to refuse this trade, to test the word's remaining or evacuated possibilities, to hold ground.

The second—which complicates the first—is that I've long had reservations about the emancipatory rhetoric of past eras, especially the kind that treats liberation as a one-time event or event horizon. Nostalgia for prior notions of liberation—many of which depend heavily upon mythologies of revelation, violent upheaval, revolutionary machismo, and teleological progress—often strikes me as not useful or worse in the face of certain present challenges, such as global warming. "Freedom dreams" that consistently figure freedom's arrival as a day of reckoning (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr.'s "day when all of God's children . . . will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, Free at last, Great God a-mighty, We are free at last'") can be crucial to helping us imagine futures that we want. But they can also condition us into thinking of freedom as a future achievement rather than as an unending present practice, something already going on. If ceding freedom to noxious forces is a grievous error, so, too, is holding on to rote, unventilated concepts of it with a white-knuckled grip.

For this reason, Michel Foucault's distinction between liberation (conceived of as a momentary act) and practices of freedom (conceived of as ongoing) has been key for me, as when he writes, "Liberation paves the way for new power relationships, which must be controlled by practices of freedom." I like this proposition very much; I would even say it is a guiding principle of this book. No doubt it will strike some as a giant buzzkill. (*Power relationships? Control? Isn't the whole point to ditch all that?* Maybe—but be careful what you wish for.) This is Brown's point when she says that the freedom to self-govern "requires inventive and careful use of power rather than rebellion against authority; it is sober, exhausting, and without parents." I think she is probably right, even if "sober, exhausting, and without parents" is a tough rallying cry, especially for those who already feel exhausted and uncared for. But I find this approach more inspiring and workable than waiting for the "final

'big night' of liberation," as French economist Frédéric Lordon has put it, "the apocalyptic showdown followed by the sudden and miraculous irruption of a totally different kind of human and social relations."

Lordon argues that letting go of our hopes for this big night may be "the best means of saving the idea of liberation"; I tend to agree. Moments of liberation—such as those of revolutionary rupture, or personal "peak experiences"—matter enormously, insofar as they remind us that conditions that once seemed fixed are not, and create opportunities to alter course, decrease domination, start anew. But the practice of freedom—i.e., the morning after, and the morning after that—is what, if we're lucky, takes up most of our waking lives. This book is about that experiment unending.

THE KNOT

"No matter what cause you advocate, you must sell it in the language of freedom," Representative Dick Armey (R-TX), founder of "FreedomWorks," once said. Whatever my feelings about Dick Armey, I began this project presuming that his dictum was, in the United States, fated to remain pretty solid. By the time I sat down to write, however, it was the fall of 2016, and Armey's dictum seemed to be swiftly unraveling. After years of freedom fries, Freedom's Never Free, and the Freedom Caucus, the rhetoric of freedom appeared momentarily in retreat, with protoauthoritarianism rushing into its place. In the run-up to the election, I spent more hours than I care to admit watching Trump's online supporters come up with new terms of despot endearment, such as "the patriarch," "the King," "Daddy," "the Godfather," the "Allfather," or, my personal favorite, "God-Emperor Trump." And I'm not just talking about the 8chan crowd; after the election, the Republican National Committee sent out a Christmas tweet heralding "the good news of a new King," an indication of all that was to come. Multiple word clouds have since confirmed: "freedom" is scarcely to be found in Trumpspeak, save in the cynical invocation of "free speech" deployed as a troll, or in Trump's ghastly iteration of freedom-as-impunity ("when you're a star, you can

do whatever you want").[8] Even the administration's 2019 effort to brand natural gas "freedom gas" sounded more like deliberate scatological farce than earnest ideological branding.

Over the next few years, the airport kiosks had lit up with titles such as *How Democracies Die*; *Fascism: A Warning*; *On Tyranny*; *Surviving Autocracy*; and *The Road to Unfreedom*. Wendy Brown's warning about "an existential disappearance of freedom from the world" felt newly corroborated, as did her worry that decades of privileging market freedoms over democratic ones may have led some to lose a longing for the freedom of self-governance, and to develop a taste for unfreedom—a desire for subjection, even—in its place. Such concerns many times brought to my mind James Baldwin's observation in *The Fire Next Time*: "I have met only a very few people—and most of these were not Americans—who had any real desire to be free. Freedom is hard to bear."

In such a climate, it was tempting to write a book that aimed to "reorient us as to freedom's very value," or to encourage myself and others to join the ranks of Baldwin's very few people with a real desire to be free. Such entreaties typically begin with a strong argument about what freedom is or ought to be, as in sociologist Avery F. Gordon's *The Hawthorn Archives: Letters from the Utopian Margins*, a collection described on its jacket as a "fugitive space" for the "political consciousness of runaway slaves, war deserters, prison abolitionists, commoners and other radicals," in which Gordon asserts (paraphrasing Toni Cade Bambara): "Freedom . . . is not the end of history or an elusive goal never achievable. It is not a better nation-state however disguised as a cooperative. It is not an ideal set of rules detached from the people who make them or live by them. And it is certainly not the right to own the economic, social, political, or cultural capital in order to dominate others and trade their happiness in a monopolistic market. Freedom is the process by which you develop a practice for being unavailable for servitude."

I have been moved and edified by many such entreaties.[9] But they are not, in the end, my style. The pages that follow do not diagnose a crisis of freedom and propose a means of fixing it (or us), nor do they take

political freedom as their main focus. Instead, they bear down on the felt complexities of the freedom drive in four distinct realms—art, sex, drugs, and climate—wherein the coexistence of freedom, care, and constraint seems to me particularly thorny and acute. In each realm, I pay attention to the ways in which freedom appears knotted up with so-called unfreedom, producing marbled experiences of compulsion, discipline, possibility, and surrender.

Because we tend—often correctly—to associate unfreedom with the presence of oppressive circumstances that we can and should work to change, it makes sense that we might instinctively treat the knot of freedom and unfreedom as a source of perfidy and pain. To expose how domination disguises itself as liberation, we become compelled to pull the strands of the knot apart, aiming to extricate the emancipatory from the oppressive. This is especially so when we are dealing with the link between slavery and freedom in Western history and thought—both the ways in which they developed together and have given each other meaning, and the ways in which white people have, for centuries, cannily deployed the discourse of freedom to delay, diminish, or deny it to others.[10] This approach also makes sense if and when one's goal is to expose the economic ideologies that align freedom with the willingness to become a slave of capital.[11]

But if we allow ourselves to wander away—if only for a spell—from the exclusive task of exposing and condemning domination, we may find that there is more to be found in the knot of freedom and unfreedom than a blueprint for past and present regimes of brutality. For it is here that sovereignty and self-abandon, subjectivity and subjection, autonomy and dependency, recreation and need, obligation and refusal, the supranatural and the sublunary commingle—sometimes ecstatically, sometimes catastrophically. It is here that we become disabused of the fantasy that all selves yearn only, or even mostly, for coherence, legibility, self-governance, agency, power, or even survival. Such a destabilizing may sound hip, but it can also be disquieting, depressing, and destructive. That's all part of the freedom drive, too. If we take time to fathom it, we might find ourselves less trapped by freedom's myths and

slogans, less stunned and dispirited by its paradoxes, and more alive to its challenges.

ENTANGLEMENT/ESTRANGEMENT

In *The Story of American Freedom*, historian Eric Foner describes how Americans' conception of freedom has long been structured by binary opposites; given the foundational role of slavery and its afterlife, a Black/white divide over freedom's meaning has been, for four hundred years now and counting, chief among these.[12] In a 2018 essay on musician Kanye West, Ta-Nehisi Coates lays out this binary in stark terms, describing "white freedom" as

> freedom without consequence, freedom without criticism, freedom to be proud and ignorant; freedom to profit off a people in one moment and abandon them in the next; a Stand Your Ground freedom, freedom without responsibility, without hard memory; a Monticello without slavery, a Confederate freedom, the freedom of John C. Calhoun, not the freedom of Harriet Tubman, which calls you to risk your own; not the freedom of Nat Turner, which calls you to give even more, but a conqueror's freedom, freedom of the strong built on antipathy or indifference to the weak, the freedom of rape buttons, pussy grabbers, and *fuck you anyway, bitch*; freedom of oil and invisible wars, the freedom of suburbs drawn with red lines, the white freedom of Calabasas.

—all of which Coates contrasts to "black freedom," which he describes as that which is built on a "we" instead of an "I," "experiences history, traditions, and struggle not as a burden, but as an anchor in a chaotic world," and has the power to pull people "back into connection . . . back to Home."

This book takes it as a given that our entire existence, including our freedoms and unfreedoms, is built upon a "we" instead of an "I," that we are dependent upon each other, as well as upon nonhuman forces that

exceed our understanding or control. This is so whether one advocates for a "nobody's free until everybody's free" conception of the term (à la Fannie Lou Hamer) or a "don't tread on me" variety, even if the latter attempts a disavowal. But it also recognizes that even the most impassioned insistence on our interdependence or entanglement offers only a description of our situation; it does not indicate how we are to live it. The question is not whether we are enmeshed, but how we negotiate, suffer, and dance with that enmeshment.

Despite Coates's useful and accurate bifurcation of terms, it becomes clear by his essay's end—including to Coates, I think—that a freedom rooted in a "we" rather than an "I" comes riven with its own set of complexities, complexities to which this book is devoted. In contemplating the demise of Michael Jackson, for example, Coates writes, "It is often easier to choose the path of self-destruction when you don't consider who you are taking along for the ride, to die drunk in the street if you experience the deprivation as your own, and not the deprivation of family, friends, and community." Increased awareness of our entanglement can offer sustenance, but it can also confound and hurt; if and when we ascertain that our well-being is linked to the behavior of others, the desire to impugn, control, or change them can be as fruitless as it is intense. Coming into full, acute knowledge as to how one's needs, desires, or compulsions might conflict with those of others, or bring others pain—even those one loves more than anything in the world—does not necessarily spring the trap. The state of addiction makes this excruciatingly clear, as we shall see. But addiction is not the only ring of action in which this predicament shines.

Some people do not find—indeed, cannot find—refuge where others imagine they could or should find it; some forgo anchors for lines of flight; some instinctively spurn moralistic edicts set forth by others; some find—or are forced to find—solace or sustenance in nomadism, cosmic hoboism, unpredictable or uncouth identifications, illegible acts of disobedience, homelessness, or exile than in a place called Home. *On Freedom* pays special attention to such figures and wanderings, as I do not believe they always signify an embrace of toxic ideologies. Seen from

a different angle, they may reveal themselves as further expressions of our elementary entanglement, rather than signs of our unresolvable estrangement (the terms are Denise Ferreira da Silva's, from her essay "On Difference without Separability"). How to forge a fellowship that does not rely on their purge, or that does not reflexively pit freedom against obligation, is this book's deepest call.

To pit freedom against obligation perpetuates at least two major problems. The first is structural: as Brown puts it in *States of Injury*, "A liberty whose conceptual and practical opposite is encumbrance cannot, by necessity, exist without it; liberated beings defined as unencumbered depend for their existence on encumbered beings, whom their liberty in turn encumbers." The second is affective, in that the call to obligation, duty, debt, and care can quickly slip into something oppressively moralistic, more reliant on shame, capitulation, or assuredness of our own ethical goodness in comparison with others, than on understanding or acceptance. (Think of the exasperated slogan, "I don't know how to explain to you that you should care for other people," that started showing up on T-shirts and murals during COVID: while I may think some variation of this sentence ten times a day, I can also see that its conviction of a "you" in need of my explanation is likely obstructing the very change I want to see.) In an interview at the end of *The Undercommons*, Stefano Harney addresses this moralism, and tries to imagine another way: "It's not that you wouldn't owe people in something like an economy, or you wouldn't owe your mother, but that the word 'owe' would disappear and it would become some other word, it would be a more generative word." I don't know yet what this word would be, nor am I sure that, if I found it, I would know how to live it. But I feel certain that such querying leads in the right direction.

FREEDOM IS MINE AND I KNOW HOW I FEEL

As luck would have it, Arendt's "What Is Freedom?" was a wonderfully perverse place to start. For it is here that Arendt offers an extended meditation on her conviction that "inner freedom" is not just irrelevant to po-

litical freedom—that all-crucial (to Arendt) capacity to act in the public sphere—but its opposite. Like Nietzsche before her, Arendt considered inner freedom a pitiful delusion, a booby prize for the powerless. By her account, the idea made murmurs in Greek antiquity, but absolutely bloomed with the advent of Christianity, whose basic tenets regarding the blessedness of the meek Nietzsche famously described as "slave morality." There is, Arendt says, "no preoccupation with freedom in the whole history of great philosophy from the pre-Socratics up to Plotinus, the last ancient philosopher"; freedom makes its first appearance in Paul, then Augustine, vis-à-vis their accounts of religious conversion, an experience notable for producing internal feelings of liberation despite externally oppressive circumstances. Freedom's appearance on the philosophical scene, she says, was the result of persecuted or oppressed people's efforts "to arrive at a formulation through which one may be a slave in the world and still be free." Arendt sneers at this apparent oxymoron, presuming there is nothing worthwhile to be found there. And why would she, believing, as she did, that "without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance. To be sure it may still dwell in men's hearts as desire or will or hope or yearning; but the human heart, as we all know, is a very dark place, and whatever goes on in its obscurity can hardly be called a demonstrable fact."

In her reckoning with neoliberalism, Brown extends this argument, maintaining that "the possibility that one can 'feel empowered' without being so forms an important element of legitimacy for the antidemocratic dimensions of liberalism." I take the point: feeling free or empowered while, say, uploading all our personal information into a corporate surveillance state; driving fast in a gasoline-powered car whose emissions are contributing to the foreclosure of planetary life; partying hard at Pride while leaving mountains of ocean-killing plastic in one's wake; writing a book about feeling free while corrupt, geocidal racists push us toward autocracy and loot our collective trust could all seem the delusions of a tool. The question is how to recognize such imbrication without making a fetish of debunking, decontamination, or bad feeling along the way. (Think, for example, of former Democratic representative Barney Frank's stunning equation, which he used to lay out as a truism

to activists, about good feeling signifying bad work: "If you care deeply about an issue and are engaged in group activity on its behalf that is fun and inspiring and heightens your sense of solidarity with others, you are almost certainly not doing your cause any good." Forget the question of how we're supposed to build and inhabit a world that is fun and inspiring and rich with a heightened sense of solidarity with others if we have no lived experience of how to access or enjoy such things along the way. Feeling bad is a prerequisite for bringing the world we want into being, get it?)[13]

For his part, Baldwin well understood the dangers of focusing on so-called inner freedom at the expense of gaining and wielding political power. But he also sternly warned against ignoring the former in pursuit of the latter. In fact, directly after his comment about freedom being hard to bear, he writes, "It can be objected that I am speaking of political freedom in spiritual terms, but the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of that nation."

Always menaced and ultimately controlled by. What does it mean? Try as pollsters might, you can't quantify or chart such a relation. You can't take a hard measurement of a spiritual state that would pass Arendt's test for a demonstrable fact. But if there's one thing the Trump era, along with the disinformation campaigns that ushered it into being, has made clear, it's that "politics is always emotional."[14] And somatic: our libidinal upsurges leak from us, get transformed into binary code, are fed back to us as social media warfare, which reaffects our daily emotional and somatic state, in addition to results at the ballot box. People develop hand tremors, high blood pressure, or acid reflux upon witnessing the separation of migrant children from their parents at the border; a Black Lives Matter activist mourning the death of her brother at the hands of the police has an asthma-induced heart attack and dies at age twenty-seven; chronic pain, abuse, and self-harm surge due to the government's failure to manage a pandemic. Given such a swirl, we need not be scared off by the so-called obscurity of the human heart, or buy into a firm partition between it and what Arendt calls "worldly reality."[15]

Instead, we might wonder: Why is the project of *feeling good* "almost always considered an obscenity both from the perspective of the ones who run shit and the ones who resist them," as Moten has put it?[16] What do "feeling good" and "feeling free" have to do with one another? What effects has the insistence—so intensely American—that liberty leads to well-being, or that more liberty leads to more well-being, had on our understanding (or experience) of both terms?[17] How are we to discern—or who gets to discern—which kinds of "feeling free" or "feeling good" stem from or breed bad faith (or sin itself—hence the evocation of obscenity, which literally means "to stand before filth"), and which kinds are nourishing and transformative? How to talk about feeling free or feeling good without forgetting, as Nietzsche reminds us, that the will to power "feels good" to some people?[18] What about the good feelings that derive from experiences of constraint, duty, or the surrender of freedom, and the bad ones that derive from feeling unmoored, unneeded, or hoarding freedom for oneself? What to do with the electric, catastrophic freedom of having "nothing left to lose," wherein death can serve as asymptote or endgame? *Freedom is mine, and I know how I feel*, sang Nina Simone, in a song titled—what else?—"Feeling Good." Who am I, who is anyone, to accuse her of false consciousness, to conclude that her feelings of freedom had no potency, no capacity for transmission, no value in and of themselves? How can anyone pretend to know or judge the full nature and extent of that transmission, when it takes place across time, is ungovernable, is still on the move, even as I write?

In grappling with such questions, I have taken as my guide the words of anthropologist David Graeber, who wrote in *Possibilities*: "Revolutionary action is not a form of self-sacrifice, a grim dedication to doing whatever it takes to achieve a future world of freedom. It is the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free." The pages that follow highlight figures who act this way, as I believe the border between acting "as if" and actually "being so" to be blurry if not illusory. I go wary of those who pretend to be able to police the difference, as well as of those who aim to diminish or obscure the ways in which feeling free, feeling good, feeling empowered, feeling communion, feeling potency can be literally

contagious, can have the power to break up the illusion not only of the separateness of spheres, but also of our putative selves.[19]

PATIENT LABOR

That the book about freedom you are holding in your hands ended up also being a book about care didn't really surprise me; I've felt out that weave before. What surprised me was that writing about freedom, and, to some extent, writing about care, also meant writing about time.

This book has taken me a long time. Or what feels like a long time, anyway. Of all the genres, criticism always seems to take the most time. Perhaps this is why Foucault once described it as "a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty." This sounds about right to me.

Patient labor differs from moments of liberation or itinerant feelings of freedom in that it *goes on*. Because it goes on, it has more space and time for striated, even contradictory sensations, such as boredom and excitement, hope and despair, purpose and purposelessness, emancipation and constraint, feeling good and feeling otherwise. These vacillations can make it difficult to recognize our patient labor as a practice of freedom in and of itself. "Art is like having a nail file and being in prison and trying to get out," says British artist Sarah Lucas; over time, I've come to feel something of the same about writing. This is a change: unless I'm misremembering, when I was younger, "feeling free" through writing felt totally on the menu. Whereas now it feels like a forced, daily encounter with limits, be they of articulation, stamina, time, knowledge, focus, or intelligence. The good news is that such difficulties or aporias do not determine the effect of our work on others. In fact, it increasingly seems to me that the goal of our patient labor is not our own liberation per se, but a deepened capacity to give it away, with an ever-diminishing attachment to outcome.

Shadowing this idea of patient labor, or of freedom as unending political struggle, is the Buddhist discourse on liberation, in which freedom is treated as absolutely and immediately accessible via the most mundane

activities, such as breathing. Listen, for instance, to Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh on how to attain liberation: "When your in-breath is the only object of your mind, you release everything else. You become a free person. Freedom is possible with your in-breath. Freedom can be obtained in two, three, seconds. You release all the sorrow and regret about the past. You release all the uncertainty and fear about the future. You enjoy breathing in; you are a free person. It's impossible to measure the degree of freedom of someone who is breathing in in mindfulness." I'm not asking you to believe it, nor am I saying that I'm able to experience it. But I'm open to the possibility. *If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do it*, said the Buddha.

On Freedom will not argue that mindful breathing will immediately deliver us social equity and justice, or reverse the course of global warming. But it will propose that, if we want to divest from the habits of paranoia, despair, and policing that have come to menace and control even the most well intentioned among us—habits that, when continuously indulged, shape what's possible in both our present and future—we are going to need methods by which we feel and know that other ways of being are possible, not just in some revolutionary future that may never come, or in some idealized past that likely never existed or is irretrievably lost, but right here and now. This is Graeber's point about "acting as if one is already free." And while this sometimes means more protest and puppets (as is Graeber's wont), it can also mean the development of more understated practices by which one develops a greater tolerance for indeterminacy, as well as for the joys and pains of our inescapable relation.

1. Art Song

THE AESTHETICS OF CARE — THE ORTHOPEDIC AESTHETIC — REPARATIVE, REDUX — WORDS THAT WOUND — COPS IN THE HEAD — GO WHERE? — I CARE/I CAN'T — AFRAID TO DO WHAT HE MIGHT CHOOSE — FREEDOM AND FUN — AESTHETIC CARE — COERCED AND FREELY GIVEN

THE AESTHETICS OF CARE

A few years ago I was asked to be on a panel at a museum discussing "the aesthetics of care." The invitation read, "In a year [2016] marked by divisive political rhetoric and acts of exclusion, the question of care has newly—and forcefully—emerged within cultural discourse. . . . What might an aesthetics of care look like, today, as a deep structure that might drive artistic practice, formally and materially? How do ideas of care—as a form, too, of love—transform the aesthetics of protest? How does art survive—how can we care for it, and how can it care for us?"

The event never got off the ground, but the invitation got me thinking. In a world in which so many do not have enough care, indeed are aggressively, often punishingly *un*cared for, or are regularly coerced into caring for others at the expense of themselves or their loved ones—not to mention a world in which the regular triumph of something we sometimes call "freedom" over and opposed to something we sometimes call "care" may very well end up responsible not just for much past and current