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Saying Goodbye

Diary of a sense of time

English sample translation of Prologue to page 34

by Simon Pare

Prologue

A dream from last night is still gnawing away at my daytime courage. I was sitting typing on my laptop, but every word I wrote vanished from the screen as if it had been sucked in by an inaudible breath, erased by an invisible being, deleted by a mysterious adversary. It was disheartening to watch this letter-devouring departure of a text that was on the verge of being created. It is a common experience for writers to grope for words that flicker and fade, always just out of reach. But it was frightening how these lines refused so radically to remain legible.

And now?

It's a winter's day – cold, wet and bleak. Since morning the sky has hung dull and heavy over the city. An oppressive slab of clouds in a uniform shade of grey. As if the unchanging asphalt grey of the street beneath our feet were mirrored above our heads. The features of the city as pallid and weary as my own face. Had I gone out into the day, I would have donned a lavender-blue hat, wrapped a light-blue scarf around my neck, painted my lips rebel-red and smiled with those lips at anyone I encountered. But I stayed where I most like to be and where I feel safest: in my home. I didn't leave my peace and quiet, didn't fancy venturing into the human noise, didn't want my senses to be assailed, no honking, no rain showers, no excitement, none of those shallow scraps of conversation that hit you as you walk past – 'then he really did', 'she's so bitchy', 'you can't imagine the face he

made'. Chose to stay here instead. All by myself, haunted by dreams. Gave the flowers on the kitchen table some fresh water, cooked myself a couple of eggs and watched the morning shade into noon, the afternoon into dusk, and now I'm waiting for the the evening to depart and leave us to night.

Goodbye is always.

Goodbye is the place in the now.

Goodbye is a daily experience.

We say goodbye outside front doors, at railway stations, airports or sitting quietly at our kitchen table, say goodbye to people dying, to lovers moving on, to children growing up. To flats and towns and streets. But also to opinions and impressions, to hopes and coercion, to presumed social certainties. Goodbyes are grief and also desire. They are pain and bravery. Pathways and wrong ways. They keep our being alive because goodbyes involve not just privation and mourning but also change, emergence, adventure. They spell shock-pain and self-determination that help us take flight and chirrup fullthroatedly. Goodbyes are always a challenge for us, they require vivacity – in the instant, and also afterwards. They represent a gamble on entering places of uncertainty, both out in the world and inside ourselves.

Farewells also involve looking hard at our inner lives.

Goodbye also involves reweaving lifelong patterns.

Goodbyes are also the path to freedom.

I am at home. My sofa is over there. Directly under the window. And on it are cushions, newspapers, my phone, my laptop. On the floor in front of it are books, the thick black notebook and the little red one, next to them a large cup as blue as a flowering iris. I would guess it has ginger water in it. Some evenings a glass of red wine stands there.

I sit. I breathe. I am.

This is how living in a place feels to me. I absolutely love living in a place. Having a place to live gives me an elemental sense of security; it gives me energy. Here I can live out all my selves undisturbed. Even the ones that are frightened, feeling alone or anxious and overwhelmed. Here they can hide away or show themselves. They can argue among themselves or let themselves be comforted.

How privileged I am to feel at home where I live. To identify with the rooms I reside in, in the things that surround me and awaken in my gaze. To feel the solace of being at home somewhere. To feel protected in the envelope of my second skin.

This is where I want to stay.

Until the end.

Till the last goodbye.

If I can.

And again and again I dream of having to move out. Standing with a bitter taste in my mouth in unfamiliar rooms where I am now meant to reside, although I don't want to live in them. I have no choice, the dream tells me, I must move in here.

And so I crouch in despair in the bare hallway. A flightless humannikin, thrown out of the nest.

It wasn't only with age that I started dreaming about having to move out. These are not simply oblique dreams about life ending. I can taste the fear of universal defencelessness, as well as the desire for continuity, security and certainty. Because my flat is not the only place I live; I also live in my time. A time of crumbling alliances, of wars and floods and fires and droughts, of desperate refugees, a time of strengthening right-wing movements. Of spreading anti-semitism, even, of all places, in our country with its genocidal history. I keep feeling scared in the world as it is – and even more so of the world as it might become. The author Marko Martin finds it 'profoundly obscene' that we 'sitting in the warm talk about our fear of war'. And of course he is right, because we are scared only of what is happening elsewhere. But even on an island of the fortunate, any halfway open person surely cannot escape the stench of a world on fire and the fear of being contaminated by

the horror. Nervously, we watch our levity leaching away. Sitting in gardens under cherry trees or in a café, enjoying a glass of wine on a terrace, eating pizza in our kitchens, we are unhappy and ashamed. We really do have it good, we say.

The catastrophes are elsewhere, but they are also within us, driving us onwards into the arms of fear. Not a good idea, true, but it is a monstrous prospect when our path seems to lead to the provisional end of an era, the end of an époque.

Fear, Gerhart Baum once said, is the demon of democracy, and he is correct. Fear is dangerous. The fearful can be toyed with. If you are fearful, you can be manipulated. Fear is a narrow place, suffocating the imagination, paralysing impetuous courage, banishing curiosity. Fear sabotages a long-distance view that could find a place where we might think and feel and perceive things in the round. Somewhere we might register something else, something hitherto overlooked, if we cautiously explored the realm of the unfathomable. If we were open to feeling the effects of something we might not understand. At the very least we must carry on. Fear is the terrible sentinel outside the gates of freedom and the mind, of desire and also optimism.

Beyond right or wrong

lies a place.

There we shall meet.

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī

The bitter taste – *Homo sapiens* isn't just a thinking human but also a tasting human – is the fear of having to say goodbye to values, freedom, public spirit, respect and legal certainty, goodbye to liberal democracy with all its flaws, due to the advance of autocracy in the world.

How do I dispel fear? By spotting risks and considering them calmly, by throwing myself into life with passion and wit, by loving people and believing fiercely that a good and very smart fairy from the realm of change is sending us, feeble-minded figures of the present, into laboratories where a good future is being invented. It would be a major mistake to take leave of our desire for the future. It would mean surrendering to the temptations of resignation, and the result would be the situation we fear and do not want. Focusing on a good future doesn't mean dismissing losses but seeing the whole picture, experiencing the contradictions, putting up with the antagonisms, staying alert through the application of our reason, imagination and passion. Especially with regard to the depressing global prospects, the priority is to uphold optimism in the here and now. It is not yet time, for pity's sake, to bid farewell to democracy but to say goodbye to the lethargy of dozing democrats and to the system's shortcomings and weaknesses. What was it that long-standing figure of the American left, Noam Chomsky, said? 'Inequality is corrosive to democracy.' We have long lived with the horrendous and ignoble gulf between rich and poor, but Chomsky's image – the corrosion and decay of democracy until it collapses – is so striking.

Train your mental resilience: such was the advice of the future guru Yuval Noah Harari some time ago. He wrote that the main skill required in the future will be to be able to adapt to changes. That means learning to live with the unpredictable. Say goodbye to our often stolid complacency, our risky or simply tired social indifference or our dogmatically intolerant participation. The sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer calls it 'brutish bourgeois culture'. Maybe we would have a better appreciation of our society's poor future prospects if we had a better appreciation of how good we still have it for now.

A video by Patti Smith after Donald Trump's election as US president pepped me up again. The rock singer said we would now go through a period of farewell, as after the death of someone close to us, a period of mourning, but the priority now was that 'we have to create our own good world and continue with our own good work'. That seemed to give us a positive mission. Grieving without giving up. Refusing to lapse into a collective state of paralysis but to continue on our good paths and do our work in our small world. Continuing what others wanted to stop when they slashed funding for cultural diversity, protecting women, education, subversive thought, the sciences, and sexual self-determination.

Now, more than ever, our task is to cultivate and continue decency and rebellion, empathy and freedom, and to develop ideas. To team up with others and craft small spaces of openness or even tenderness together, spaces of mutual trust;

consolidate the foundations of liberty that still exist so that they are stable enough for the next generation to stand on. To practise argument so that we can resist. Grand words maybe, but often all it takes are small steps and small gestures – and close attention.

A while back, the Ukrainian-German politician Marina Weisband spoke at a conference about how important it was to look out for one another, for example by placing a bowl of warm soup outside a sick neighbour's door. A man whose name I forget explained to her patronisingly that the disastrous state of the world wouldn't be solved by serving warm soup. He hadn't understood her message, hadn't grasped that this is *precisely* where the peaceful and friendly cohabitation of society begins: with a bowl of soup outside someone's door.

Farewells and the future almost always go together. Every departure, no matter where to, is also a farewell. And almost every farewell, no matter where from, is simultaneously a departure.

Farewell and departure. Every decision is a departure from an alternative. If I decide to turn right at a fork in the road, I forego the left-hand path, which may well lead to even prettier forest clearings, across broad meadows with benches on which to sit and rest and smile and admire the view. But do we really wish to ruminate constantly about what there might be and what it might be like where we

are not, letting our jitteriness about what we might have missed undermine our full sensory perception of the path we did take.

Adapt to changes, Harari said, which means saying goodbye to things that have had their time, and imagining new ones. We are not the people we used to be either. Developing our inner selves will not work if we do not say goodbye to our various former selves, which may appear to have vanished into the thicket of the past but are surely stored in a niche somewhere inside us.

Goodbye is always. Goodbye is everywhere.

We cannot escape goodbyes. Neither the temporary nor the permanent, not the gradual or the sudden; and, of course, no one outruns the final goodbye. Anyway, we don't want to avoid goodbyes and we don't want to stay the same person for ever, clinging on stiffly inside ourselves. The world changes anyway. We must accept that, and we can even help to shape and reshape that change to save ourselves from the taste of fear. It is time for constructive thought and action, for, as the American philosopher Michael Sandel puts it: 'Only difficult times make us agile.'

Breathe goodbye.

Think departure.

There is a beginning in every goodbye. Hermann Hesse wrote in his poem 'Steps' (here in Walter A. Aue's translation), 'for each beginning bears a special magic':

Like ev'ry flower wilts, like youth is fading
and turns to age, so also one's achieving:
Each virtue and each wisdom needs parading
in one's own time, and must not last forever.
The heart must be, at each new call for leaving,
prepared to part and start without the tragic,
without the grief – with courage to endeavor
a novel bond, a disparate connection:
for each beginning bears a special magic
that nurtures living and bestows protection.

We must rehearse social goodbyes as much as we do everyday farewells – romantic, professional, due to sickness or age. Goodbyes are our daily companions and teachers. We bid goodbye to winter, spring, summer and autumn; to dreams, fears and hopes and to certainties, untouched countryside, a healthy planet, dwindling biodiversity (44,000 species are on the Red List of endangered species); to our youth, to muscular strength and mental agility; to flights of fancy and obsessions. Politicians say goodbye to the promises they made to win elections, but that is a whole different subject.

Frequently we don't even register goodbyes: they just happen.

Every evening we say goodbye to the day.

Every morning we say goodbye to the night.

Goodbyes are often an amalgam of curiosity tinged with sadness. How will the day turn out, how will it feel in the autumn when the summer is on the wane. How free will I be when the children have left home, how can I learn to live all by myself when I am left on my own. How will I cope with my new job in a new city where I don't know anyone, don't have a doctor and haven't yet located a favourite café. When the outer goodbye is already complete, still the inner goodbye lags behind. Not every goodbye is a loss. Quite the opposite. Sometimes there are new, open spaces where we can breathe and settle. And not everything that disappears from our lives is a gloomy reduction – for example, the man who calls us darling while cheating on us.

Becoming conscious of these daily goodbyes and the chances they offer may help us to overcome our fear of social goodbyes. How about we take on the challenges of our time – get rid of our car, heat less, save water and reduce our consumption because the Earth is ablaze.

And here I'm not even talking about those who have to bid a radical farewell because they're fleeing from drought or war or despots. According to UNHCR, globally there were 122.6 million displaced people in June 2024. Germany has a population of just under 84 million. Imagine if we all had to flee, then add another 40 million to that number.

Here I am talking about goodbyes small and large in our daily lives. Goodbye to habits, to all kinds of certainties we have internalised, to sweets or smoking, to a dog that needs to be put to sleep, to beloved characters in the novel we have just finished reading; I'm talking about past events but also exciting fresh starts and, of course about our final goodbye as we enter the unknown.

Goodbye, like transience, conflicts with our most cherished, yet unfulfillable, desire for permanence and certainty. Not every goodbye is a departure to a new refuge, a new love, a new job or a new flat. We seek out anchors and ropes and safety nets everywhere we go, but sometimes we set off into emptiness, into uncharted territory, and we have to learn not to be afraid of what we do not yet know but to look forward to it. Leap out into the fast-flowing river of life. A challenge for control freaks who so often cannot and will not spot the liberation amid the risk.

And we always change when what used to be is no longer and we no longer have what had accompanied us up to that point. When the youthful ambition that sucked in so much energy has been tamed; when our fear of not belonging to the life we lead has faded, when democracies are under siege. Do we have to reach the point of no return before we realise that we are under attack? And who defines that point of no return? Goodbyes are experience and knowledge, truth and poetry, becoming and decaying, curiosity and loss, solemnity and play. It isn't just a song of woe; there is also the hum of desire.

Will I still be humming when the path takes me to the place no one has ever seen or described because no one could describe it – the moment of taking leave of life.

Now and again, I practise dying. I try to feel the moments when the here and now and the hereafter merge, when you risk losing your orientation in the complicated fabric of the end. Will death devour me like a gigantic wave or welcome me like a soft cloud. I try to figure out whether I will be scared. That is what I wish to know more than anything else. Do I want to practise dying to be able to die?

As if that could work. As if I could avoid being potentially surprised, overwhelmed, flung out or pushed over – or whatever it feels like. Death – unless I have invited it – does not reveal its plans. It comes and takes. And so the final goodbye is also the definite loss of control. So far I have generally celebrated goodbyes as the results of my own decisions. I have also learnt, and am still learning, to take my leave of my earlier selves on the way to myself. Take leave of my own rigid attitudes and characteristics. Of the culture instilled in me, of the imperative of efficiency, of a craving for harmony, my forced adaptation, of my permanent (typically feminine) guilty conscience, of my cruelty towards myself.

It is probably not dying I am practising but a loss of control, out of fear of not being able to determine the last moment. The fear of someone, me, who loves to have 'a grip' on everything. We say we have a grip on our lives when we wish to

placate questions about our own ailing existences. But our task is to surrender to the bewildered tumult of real life, to plunge into its murky, roaring waters.

Don't talk so grandly, my sturdy aunt would have said. And yes, it is true that I often prefer the waters to be clear. I don't just practise dying; I stage it in my imagination. Then I know where I'll lie, where I'm looking, how I'm breathing, how my facial features dissolve as I try to smile to overcome my fear and sadness, how I strive to cross over willingly and picture the sea as the path because I believe that I need wind and open space to be able to die. To take my leave of my nearest and dearest, of my memories, of my present – and then of myself. That, I think, is something best done alone. Because it requires strength and concentration, devotion and courage. Or does it? In my death scenario I am alone. By the water or beside a fire in the stove. Or my field of vision is simply full of emptiness.

So I fantasise about what it might be like, dying, and I apparently believe – another illusion – that death will follow my script. Novalis called dying a philosophical act. And the script I write is very simple.

Pirouetting swiftly back to reality . . . So I am not practising dying, I'm practising a loss of control, letting go. Because if I wanted to keep control to the very end, I would have to kill myself if I want to beat death to the punch.

To bid goodbye is to walk away. However, we walk towards our final farewell. Or we try to ward it off, as Sheherazade did by telling King Shahriyar stories for

1001 nights so he wouldn't kill her. Every evening her story ended with such a cliffhanger that the kind absolutely had to hear how it continued the next evening. After 1001 nights, the kind pardoned Sheherazade and gave her back her life.

Fending off the seemingly inexorable with stories. Stories to ward off goodbye. That is how literature is born. Yet death is no king and no novel. It is relentless and takes us without mercy.

'I am a glass path' is a sentence that stuck in my mind from last night's dreams, and I have no idea what it might mean. Maybe:

First come the goodbyes to my former selves.

Then comes the final goodbye to the final me.

Yes, I try, in spite of my word-devouring dream, to write about goodbyes. I'll keep a diary for a year about political goodbyes and personal ones: I'll look for pictures, for clever thoughts by clever people, for goodbyes in novels and poems, and for truthful emotions.

Of course, all writing is an adventure, but writing about goodbyes means writing within reach of the gaping crocodile's jaws, peering into its black maw, fearing the dark, searching for the light, sidestepping chasms or falling into them. Thriving in the glow of departure. Again and again, I fear, I will feel tears, crouch in crevasses, stand outside walls and try to flee. And maybe I will continue all the same. Try again and again to look into this giant space of goodbyes, fill some of it with

memories, stories, questions, horrors, dreams, with hope, nostalgia and courage.

With the quest for freedom.

Still I sit under the dense skin of cloud. But if I pierced that greyness with a few beats of my wings, it would take me into a brighter world. Sometimes we need to fantasise about flying in order to reach somewhere more cheerful than here.

Farewell and departure.

Maybe I want to write about goodbyes to understand them better and to ready myself for the final farewell.

So I shall start, and we'll see how it goes . . .

RILKE'S 8TH 'DUINO ELEGY'

Who has turned us round like this, so that,
whatever we do, we always have the aspect
of one who leaves? Just as they
will turn, stop, linger, for one last time,
on the last hill, that shows them all their valley - ,
so we live, and are always taking leave.

Rainer Maria Rilke

(*12.04.1875 †29.12.1926)

English translation by A.S. Kline in *The Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (2015)

24 November

What happens when we paint a picture of our own lives?

Standing there, brush in hand, we discover that the canvas isn't empty; there are the figures of our parents, siblings, relatives, ancestors. To whom do we say goodbye as we paint over him or her with pastose verve. Which lines and sketches do we leave? And where do we add ourselves? How often? Which of our former selves come into the picture? What colours do we use to show our lives, and in what style? Finely pointillated or daubed with broad brushstrokes, with wild drops or delicately smeared? Would we like to be recognised or remain incognito? Might the picture turn out to be more beautiful than life was, and would that be a good thing?

The American psychoanalyst Robert Jay Lifton once said that we humans are 'meaning-hungry creatures'. Are we actually searching for the meaning of our lives or for a purpose, a *raison d'être*, the reason we are alive. Or is that the actual meaning of our lives – being alive and in life.

And what is the meaning of death? Is there a *raison de mourir*?

Quite a lot is demanded of us - as living creatures and as dying creatures. We are called upon to be able to live, and condemned to die. We need to have the courage to live and the courage to die.

We are not mountains or lakes or trees that are allowed to remain unpredictable. We are humans, and we must progress predictably. Where do we find meaning?

So over there is my sofa with the cushions, the blanket and the open laptop no one is typing on. What is missing from the picture is the woman who is supposed to be writing. It is the middle of the day. Work time. She can be heard sighing, and then we see her. She has pushed aside documents and newspapers, turned off the phone. She lies there, spent, trying to recover from being ambushed by an annually recurring phenomenon.

It was my birthday again.

Once I enjoyed looking at death announcements and could comfortably think: They're much older than me.

That isn't the case any more.

Once was. Now is.

I am of dying age.

And so now I'm yet another year older. Yet more new wrinkles and wreckage on my face. Yet again the journey ahead has shortened a little. What a bother. The nerve of it! Who could have guessed it would happen this quickly. That is, by the way, what we oldies always say, with an astonished expression on our faces like a

toddler standing up for the first time on its wobbly legs. I too believed, against all logic, that I would be able to carry on trotting along into my small future. Despite knowing it was finite, I obviously still imagined it was timeless.

'If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans' is a phrase that I have loved for many years, probably a Jewish proverb, as I have never heard of Christians wanting to make their God laugh. Plans, wanting, time, goals. I have wasted time. Time that I need now. But that's like telling a daffodil to flower at Christmas, and being amazed when it doesn't.

Oh, wanting in old age. There is a daytime wanting, a night-time wanting, a sunshine wanting and a cloudburst wanting. Sometimes you get the feeling they are not even related. One heated, the other tired, and the next wanting has already fallen asleep.

Another birthday. Another year older. Another lessening of strength. I don't hurtle through my days, at least not every day. Get annoyed and tired. Things I don't see want to see during the day I dream at night. Like recently when I was at a European airport, and there was Chinese writing everywhere. Because the Chinese had obviously bought the airport. That afternoon, I had read that Chinese hackers had attacked the American finance department.

I am no longer bursting, I am decaying. I am not flowering, I am wilting. I am no longer growing, I am shrinking. My once straight back is bending. How I would love to wither with the wearily mellow grandeur of the trailing stems and wilting

blooms of my tulips in the spring. They're beautiful. Beautiful in a different way every day.

Another birthday. Another year older. And a different voice inside me saying, how lucky you are to have made it this far. Not only saying goodbye to the old year but embarking on a new one. I am an old woman now, shuffling cautiously through the streets and hoping that her thoughts are in better working order than her joints.

Tomorrow I'm going to go into the woods. I read somewhere that studies showed growth in the brain's hippocampus of people who walked in the woods for 40 minutes three times a week.

It might do these old bones some good. These bones that don't like the cold and also hurt in the warm. They keep leaving me in the lurch. I have long said goodbye to the idea that two steady legs will carry me safely around. Pain and goodbyes are my two daily companions – and yet they don't always glide smoothly with me through my days and nights. Close friends whom I genuinely don't always love, but then again, that is often the case with old associates.

How I have envied old couples hobbling through the streets shoulder to shoulder or with hands interlinked, surely longing to end, I thought, like Philemon and Baucis, the old people who loved each other so much that they asked Zeus to be allowed to die at the same time so that neither would outlive the other and have to cope with the other's death. But perhaps one of these two friendly walkers has

long harboured a secret hope of being rid of the other person soon so that they can drink their morning coffee alone without having to listen to the other's constant whingeing about the coffee being too strong or too weak, the world being a pit of misery, the weather unbearable, either too wet or too cold or too dry or too hot, and that the children haven't been in touch for ages again, why on earth did they bring them into the world . . . Then the two of them sit there sadly, side by side, because everything has turned sour between them. And many many years ago, too. But their fear of being alone was more powerful than their courage to take their leave of each other. And now? He starts knitting, she starts drinking, or vice versa. And they end up as figures in a fairground shooting gallery where young people take potshots at to win a rose and hand it with a chuckle to their beloved. You know, the way love is born. Today I met a man in the street who has been married for 40 years and unhappily married for about 25 of those years. The two of them have now divided up their large flat and only write each other emails. Can you call the electrician please. Sometimes he cooks enough for her too and writes to say he'll leave a plate outside her door.

He shakes his head. It's too late to split up, says this man, who is now 70 and sits alone at his kitchen table with a bottle of wine almost every evening. Come by sometime, he suggests tentatively. The price of the unconsummated goodbye seems high.

Maybe he should look up at the sky every morning and give it a quiet smile, as the protagonist of Win Wenders's wonderful film *Perfect Days* does every day, greeting the day every morning with the same look and the same smile before he sets off to clean Tokyo's public toilets. Especially in winter, now that this impenetrable grey fabric hangs between us and the sky, sucking up an outrageous amount of daylight, we absolutely must direct a smile upwards and keep the sensation of that smile on our faces and keep feeling it throughout the day.

I live on my own. If anyone nags at me, then it is myself. Every morning I drink hot water with a little honey in it. Every morning the water comes reliably out of the tap. Every morning the kettle starts to boil. Every morning my pot of honey is there. And yet I still keep forgetting to smile at the sky. As if I didn't have all these reasons to do so, and many other reasons to be grateful for what I have.

Nowadays, incidently, I no longer envy those supposedly idyllic couples, so often an illusion. I only envy people who walk with a bounce in their step, swinging one leg elegantly in front of the other, apparently without any trace of pain, yet also without any pleasure in their elastic strides because they take them or granted. The fools. I falter and groan with almost every step. Shuffle, stumble and have to raise my feet like a cockerel to make it home in one piece.

It wasn't like this in the past. At my age, 'the past' comes back to haunt you more and more often.

In the past, I would have . . . In the past I could . . . In the past I did . . .

I wouldn't want to live in the past, but the past lives in me – and sometimes, I admit, I would live to send the now into the past.

For example, when I stand on the beach and don't know whether to venture into the sea because the tug of the waves might knock me over, or because the sandy rise getting out is too steep for my painful knee.

There are so many things I could do in the past but no longer can. So many goodbyes.

I can no longer drink one mug of coffee after another. It sets my heart racing.

I can no longer hurry up and down steps in a railway station with a suitcase (or without one) because the train is once again leaving from a different platform.

My energy is dwindling, as is the energy to feel genuine delight sometimes.

I need more time – for decisions, for thinking, for doing things, to myself during the day.

I need more time for nothing. For faffing about, for looking, for guessing, for marvelling.

After three hip operations I cannot dance any more.

I will never make it to New Zealand, a trip I've dreamt about for decades.

I can't even seduce a man any more.

I can no longer cycle to the Eiffel Tower with my grandchildren in Paris any more.

I haven't been able to wear high heels for a long time now.

I don't dare to do outside when there's black ice any more.

I can only sit down on a lawn for a picnic with difficulty now – will I ever get back up again?

However, I no longer need to pretend that I was sailing serenely through life, had everything under control and was immune to helplessness.

I no longer need to pretend that I am occupying my days with useful and meaningful activities – although I increasingly wonder how meaningful the useful is. Sometimes, useless watching is the most meaningful thing to do.

I no longer need to measure my remaining time on Earth in terms of efficiency.

I no longer need to surrender to my inner demons and try to be something I am not.

I can be whoever I want to be – if I can manage it.

I am at liberty to change my mind, including about myself. Now, that is an act of emancipation.

I am at liberty to say no.

I don't want everyone to call me by my first name, don't want to call everyone by their first names, don't want to say goodbye to formal forms of address. I like the small and subtle distance with its inherent, discreet courtesy.

I can dare to say goodbye – for example, I don't need to spend any more time with people I don't actually want to spend time with.

I no longer have to prove that I can get by without a man.

I no longer have to buy any anti-ageing creams because at last I know that they don't work anyway.

Nor do I have to blow away every tiny speck of dust before people come for dinner.

But I do want to know what comes before and after this constancy.

God has always existed – so what came before that?

Was that why we were cast out of paradise, because we tasted from the tree of knowledge and started asking questions and seeking answers? Did God get scared of losing his uniqueness if humans also 'knew'?

What comes after the eternity we are allegedly going to enter? Is eternity motion or stasis? What does infinite, perpetual or permanent mean? How am I supposed to understand all of this if my life is finite? Why do we have so many words for the opposite of what is certain: time-limited existence. Did we want it to be unlimited?

Was it Kurt Schwitters who said that some people don't care so much about immortality? I'm one of them. That's because the moment you become conscious of our transience – which might happen at 14 or at 65 – life is tinged with death but not darkened by it. On the contrary, you see the many colours of life much more clearly and allow them to pervade you. You appreciate the beauty of trees and rejoice at the first catkins flowering in the barren woods.

Recently I asked a friend who is in her late eighties and truly worried by world affairs what she found beautiful about life. It took her no more than a second's

thought. Everything, actually, she said. My Gustav (her copper beech) on the balcony, my fresh morning roll (she lives above a bakery), the fact that I can make it to the cinema on foot, chatting to my neighbour, your phone calls, people being kind enough to hold the door open for me. So many beautiful moments.

When she recently needed a stent fitted, she explained to the young doctor that she was fully aware that she was old, but she would love to stick around for a few more years because she found life so wonderful.

The young man smiled and said, That's exactly what I wanted to hear. I shall do my very best.