COUNTING DOWN

Susan Moldaw

image credits

BEFORE MY FATHER DIED, before my small boys became young men, before the green glider swing in my parent's yard turned into a haven for a nest of rats, my father and I spent an afternoon cocooned on the then-new glider while my sons played in the pool, talking and swinging, back and forth, amidst light breezes and children's laughter, shrieks of joy, sun splashing bright ripples on the pool. When I put the boys to bed that night, I lingered in the hallway listening to their quiet breathing hush, trying to keep hold of the day.

Years later, after my father's death and my mother's move, my sister and I put the house up for sale.

In my mind's eye, the green seat still sways, the same sun gleams, the afternoon has no beginning and no end.

A few years after we sold my parents' house, I came across the writings of philosopher Henri Bergson and what he called *la durée*—time felt as a flow of experience rather than fixed moments. I thought of the afternoon with my father and the sometimes generosity of time, stretching beyond what is measurable.

Bergson influenced Florine Stettheimer, an artist whose solo exhibit I once hurried through at the Jewish Museum. I remember she painted scenes of herself and her social circle that I'd dismissed as frivolous, merely decorative. Why hadn't I slowed down and really looked?

At a recent group exhibit, Stettheimer's *Portrait of Myself* calls to me. In her painting Stettheimer is floating in space, wearing a large red cape and a transparent gown, loosely holding a flower bouquet. She looks ephemeral, a goddess or divinity that might float away, beyond space, beyond time. Her name is painted in the top left center, barely discernible in off-white on a white cloud, as if it too will vaporize and disappear.

The narrative paintings I'd passed over years ago were described in Barbara Bloemink's Stettheimer biography as "continuous, unfolding, intimate, visual documentaries of an era and class . . . like the experiential flux of moving through time."

In another painting, *La Fête à Duchamp*, Stettheimer repeats the same figures throughout the canvas in asynchronous events—seated at a table for lunch, lying on the grass, in conversation under a tree, entering the garden. The viewer enters the flow and spirit of the afternoon, embodying Bergson's idea of time not as a "measurement of duration," but of "duration itself." Duration, he says, "is what one feels and lives."

By the age of seventy-two, Stettheimer would be dead from cancer, the age I am now.

Dying in one's seventies, while relatively young, would not be considered the same kind of tragedy as dying in one's fifties or younger, as

did my father's best friend who died from a heart attack on the tennis courts at thirty-nine, simply dropped dead in tennis whites on a green court. He left three young children and a wife, who died ten years later.

I was sleeping on a cot in a corner of my parents' hotel room over a weekend during college when a 3:00 a.m. call brought the news. My father bolted upright and answered tersely. My mother jerked up next to him, her hair pressed into short, irregular tufts. "What's wrong?" she cried. I startled awake, unsure of what to say or do.

My father asked the caller a few questions and hung up. In the shadows he turned to my mother. "Thirty-nine years old." My father was six years older. "Those poor children," my mother sobbed. My father held her. I asked what happened, and my father snapped at me, "Go back to sleep."

More than fifty years later I can still hear the jangle of the hotel phone before my father yanked the receiver midring, instantly awake.

My father was thirty-five when his father, sixty-three, died of a heart attack. After his father's death, my father feared his own, but it wasn't until his friend died that he began making lifestyle changes. He became a proponent of the Pritikin diet, a low fat, low salt, low cholesterol regime with an emphasis on fruits, vegetables, grains, and lean proteins. The diet addressed my father's certainty that he'd die of a heart attack, like his father, like his friend. In fact, he died of bladder cancer. When our family went to a restaurant for dinner, ordering became a lengthy lesson in heart health and a history of my father's cholesterol levels. He'd like the fish, dry, bread but no butter, a plain baked potato, salad dressing on the side. He'd always order first, while the rest of us waited, a little embarrassed.

He held to Pritikin and other low-fat programs for as long as I can remember, convinced that through diet and exercise he could outsmart death. He didn't eat steak again until his eightieth birthday. He knew his key daily metrics and more—how long he exercised and at what intensity, his weight, the sales volumes of every retail enterprise he invested in or ran, his running golf scores, how his age compared to the ages of those in that day's obituaries.

I don't know what it was about his own death my father feared. It may have been leaving his family without his protective care, perhaps letting go of the life that he loved and lived with vitality—maybe both. When death was near our family each had a moment at his bedside. I held his hand, looked into his eyes, as past and present coalesced simply into the fullness of life.

When I was thirty-five—my father's age when his father died—I became pregnant with triplets. The pregnancy was termed high risk, "geriatric," due to advanced maternal age and because I was carrying multiples. Fear of losing the pregnancy and of preterm birth punctuated my excitement. I organized meals and snacks so I ate the prescribed nutrients. I refused even a drop of wine. I committed to heart a baby's development for each week of gestation. Thirty-four weeks was the goal, when babies are born small but healthy.

image credits

By week twelve I knew the pregnancy was viable. Twenty weeks and I steeled myself for an amniocentesis. Three days following the procedure the greatest risk of miscarriage passed.

Week twenty-six and I started home bed rest, where I counted contractions. Week thirty I had too many contractions and was transferred to the hospital. Days passed in the hospital from breakfast to lunch to dinner. I took one hour to eat each meal—a small lemon yogurt for breakfast, a grilled cheese sandwich and a handful of grapes for lunch, tiny pieces of meat and broccoli for dinner. I worried about getting enough nutrients, but my doctor assured me I was getting what I needed. In between meals I counted forty-five minutes to turn from one side to my back, another forty-five to rest and consider my next move, forty-five to turn to the other side.

I spent hours in the hospital with the nurses on duty, some of whom sat by my side or held my hand while we talked about the limits of what we can control. By then I understood that no matter how many nutrients I consumed or what I did or didn't do, the pregnancy would follow its own course.

Thirty-five weeks the team said I was ready, and I delivered by caesarian

section. As each baby was lifted from me and I heard their otherworldly wails, slow tears fell down my cheeks. I felt lighter in body, in spirit. I had done my job the best that I could. I had given everything I had to give. I'd carried the pregnancy for thirty-five weeks. A great peace enveloped me, a peace that stopped time completely.

As a mother I experienced other moments when it felt as if time

stopped: bedtimes nestled together holding picture books; pointing to and sounding out words and reading stories; slow walks to preschool, finding rubber bands and other treasures in doorways; squished into my big yellow chair, yelling songs from the *Boy Scouts Songbook*—"I'm bringing home a baby bumblebee / Won't my mommy be so proud of me"—sprawled on the kitchen couch, the dog lying on her back spread between our laps; gently brushing out tangles after the bath. I didn't recognize the expansiveness of those times until now, when I have less time left.

Thirty years after giving birth I'm still learning to practice the art of appreciation, of presence. One day, coming home from the gym, I saw three monks going in the opposite direction on our street. They said they were living in a house at the end of our block with Thich Nhat Hahn—also known as Thay, or teacher— the spiritual leader, poet, and peace activist born in Viet Nam, while he got treatment at UCSF after a stroke. I asked if I could join their daily meditation and they invited me to come mornings.

The next morning, I sat on a pillow, listening to the rustle of monks arranging their robes, the sound of wheels creaking as two monks led Thay in a wheelchair down a short ramp leading into the room. A gong sounding brought me to attention. I followed my breath and sometimes was able to harness the thoughts, plans, and ideas that floated through my brain. For thirty minutes each morning I'd periodically forget about time, trying to settle into my body.

Everyone stood when the meditation ended and put their hands together in prayer as Thay was pushed up the ramp and from the room. Eighty-eight years old. I imagined he would credit his longevity to his calm mind, his ability to live in the present, his community, love—to a lifetime of awareness, of practice. How did he hold on to the moment when every moment brings its claims, its pulls, its pressures? I thought how I'd never spoken to Thay directly, or many of the monks, yet in their presence, as if by osmosis, I'd sometimes experience what I now think of as lived time.

At home I sat at my desk and closed my eyes, opening them to a quote by Rumi that I'd hung on a bulletin board next to my computer—"What you seek is seeking you."

After my parents' house sells I drive by one last time. Everything seemed as it once was, plans and permits most likely not yet begun. I idle on the street, looking at the large oaks shading the front, the ivy covering the gate. I remember the "Slow, Children at Play" sign my parents posted as my sons and I began spending boundless afternoons at their home, the children racing from one end of the house to the other, splashing in the plastic wading pool, playing bumper cars in the driveway.

Now that two of my sons are engaged, planning weddings and families, I find myself counting down—wondering how many years I'll have with future grandchildren before I die. If the first grandchild is born in two years and I live to the age of my mother, now ninety-five, I'll have more years than my father had with my children. If I live to my father's age, that will get me to my grandchild's elementary and middle school years.

I think now my hope for as many healthy years as possible reflects my fear of dying before I know and am known by my grandchildren, that it reflects more than just my desire for life.

Do we always leave wanting more?
To know and be known—
The desire for life—

I want both, and this too—I want to feel lived time, the quality of time that slows to encompass the past, the present, and future longings, time that is felt, remembered, endures. A green swing swaying, the sun bright and warm.

image credits