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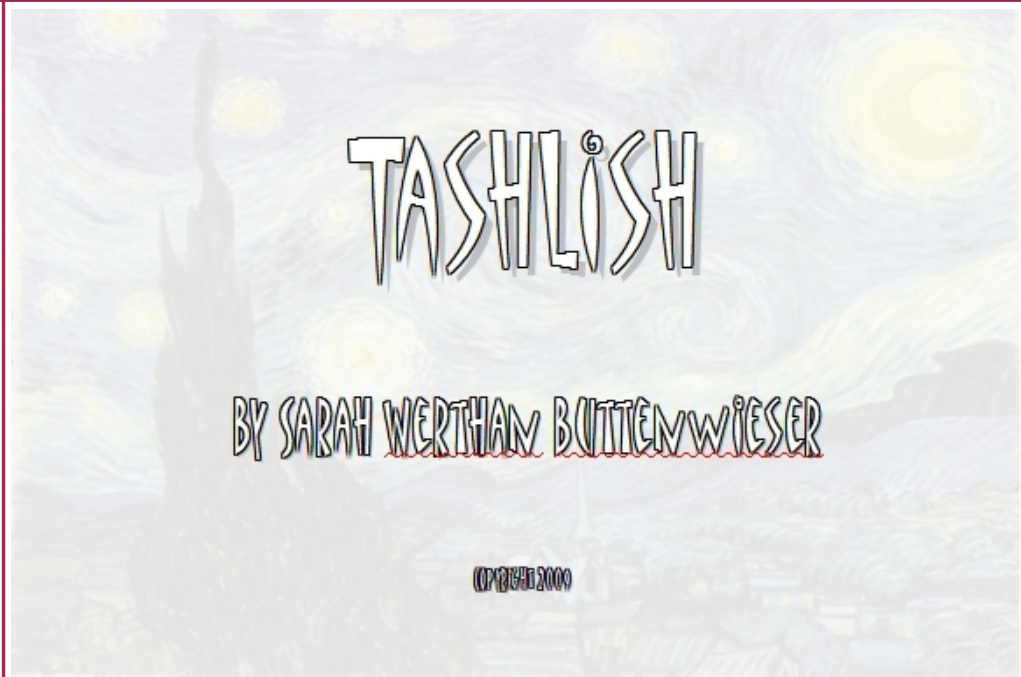
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The New Year arrives at different times.

By calendar year, newness comes from the epicenter of darkest days, just pushing back—barely—toward the light. On the face of it, that time feels more like middle than beginning, save for its tiny nod back toward longer days. But it comes with celebrations involving fanfare, fireworks, and a national holiday, a vacation, resolutions. *Happy New Year*, we repeat into the darkness, as if to push ourselves that much closer to the light.

At the beginning of September, the new school year commences. After so many years as a student, I worked at a college for nearly another decade. Not so long after that, I had kids, the first starting daycare as an infant. We had openings and closings, vacations, shifts in September to the next class. Now, my kids span middle and elementary schools with one at home (she's not yet beholden to those routines). Living in a college town, though, the rhythm of a school calendar is the rhythm of life. The whole place pulsates differently in September when the students return—like ants to a picnic—to the Valley, which houses five colleges (one of them a large university, two towns over, in Amherst). But even in our town, the leafy Smith College campus experiences a specific jolt of energy in September when the students overtake. The most singular marker comes from seeing the new crop of young women accompanied by their parents land. There are young women with eyes wide: some elatedly so, others blinking back tears. The new students move those first weeks by herd. They are so young. Over the years, as that age recedes further from being my own I've shifted from annoyance to tenderness at the ritual. Now, I think things like, *how do their parents let them go, when they are only babies?*

On a different Gregorian calendar date each year arrives Rosh Hashanah. Now, here's a fitting moment for New Year's. Summer cedes to autumn, harvest season. From such delirious bounty—including leaves popping like natural fireworks—the Jewish admonishments to remember, to reflect. To atone—something I read not as repent but *sit with* and find in yourself whatever you need, something of forgiveness, compassion, letting go—and to quiet. Whether you gather in a place of worship, or whether you just walk to the river—Tashlish—to toss some breadcrumbs into the water, or simply think about releasing, you can join the ritual sense of renewal that accompanies joyousness and somberness. In Judaism, these two things—joy, sadness—are seamlessly accepted as integral to life. They are not constantly separated or compartmentalized.

This year, the eve of Jewish New Year's arrived as a strangely summery wind blew, the result of a hurricane. New England's autumn—leaves turning, cool, dry air swirling, days fading earlier than during the summer—seemed to have taken hold, so this balminess—after a weekend which included torrential rains—threw me off. The weather seemed, that morning, a little sad, almost wilted. This mirrored one part of my current state so well. Because I am—even as the date for finalization of Saskia's adoption draws closer—still so drained, along with all else. While not consciously haunted, I feel as if stress and fear are practically embedded inside me like tiny shards of burst glass or filaments of the spider's silken threads. The hold perhaps unseen, felt. Although I am slowly, consciously, as gently as possible trying to let go, I am not sure whether I will unfurl as exactly the same person. I suspect I won't.

No parent takes for granted the children's presence. We think about them—as my friend Andrea said, whether they are physically in the room or the house or not, we keep track of where they should be for so many years—so much that in this way they take root in our psyches. And yet, of course, they are physically tethered inside the womb, only just till they make their appearance in this great big world.

With Saskia, I was never so tangibly secured as that. Her New Year—her new life—started in February. Ours with her began, too, right there at Saint Vincent's Hospital. In fact, it started sooner, with our waiting for her to appear. While we knew that moment of arrival well after having three children, this arrival was different. Added to it was the pass-off when her birth mother, Caroline, entrusted us with her. Think of the delicacy it takes for Olympians to pass a baton during a record-setting relay. We hadn't practiced any of this. And while the stakes were exceedingly high, we had to forge our way through it all blind. Those incredible days in the hospital were scary, tedious and annoying with the hospital bureaucracy, surreal, and also glorious. We marveled at Saskia and drunk her in as parents to newborns do. Atop the usual wonderment was this profound sense of gratitude: we were receiving a very specific gift from her birth mother.

And from there, on one hand, on we went. Saskia's weight accrues in our arms; her smiles shine at us and we think about her constantly. She gazes at us with pure love and trust. She's "ours." I wouldn't say that I took the others for granted. I can say I never stared down losing them in nearly so concrete a fashion as we have with Saskia over the past months. On some level, a naiveté had been mine before legal strife, which potentially jeopardized the adoption occurred. Even with three children, I had never lost this self-assurance before. Sure, I'd been scared, had nightmares, feared. But I couldn't, as a waking, levelheaded person conjure up the specific path that might cause me to lose one of the other children. But with Saskia, news came that literally stole my breath and replaced it with terror: birth father Ruel's calling the lawyer, Ruel's contesting the adoption, Ruel's showing up in court... With those threats came looming dates and deadlines. Meantime, I could imagine the Fitchburg apartment where Ruel lives (and deals drugs in the bedroom). The scent of cigarette smoke (which she'd be breathing in) sent me to a clutched, breathless place every time it wafted by me—wherever—scent of utter fear. I can tell myself it's over. Still, the experience remains inside me, dug in with tiny claws.

Traditionally, at Jewish New Year, we dip apples in honey to celebrate life's sweetness. The taste: sweet upon sweet. Crunchy, juicy, sticky; all these textures of sweet at once summon up why we try so hard not to cede a moment. We shared apples and honey yesterday with our friends. The house thrummed with children. Saskia was making her screechy laugh. Amartya toddled all over with monkey in hand and Arella rearranged the plastic cups in the lazy Susan. Remy and Emily hid under the table to protect their shared secrecy. Lucien hovered near the apples and honey with Ezekiel, and the two of them polished off more than their shares. Laughing, we sent out one message into the no longer balmy air: Obama '08. Woven into the noise and hilarity, we said, *even through the hardest of times—unspoken, possibly losing babies, recent losses of mother and grandmother, friends' illnesses, come what may—we cherish being in one another's lives. Family, in whatever form, a cause for joy, friends like this grow into family over time.* Our Tashlish: let go of what we've lost and acknowledge who we

are now. Hold onto what we've lost in as yet unimagined ways because holding on and letting go, clenching and unclenching, holding breath and then breathing beyond what seemed an impossible situation during which to find that next breath or step or smile has occurred. Now, we all understand better what we do have, what we do cherish, maybe even how to cherish all of life that much more. The kids got too crazy and Remy melted when it was time for Emily to go to her house for supper. We set aside New Year's thoughts and turned our attentions to the next. There was dinner; there was homework; there was bedtime.

What I've started to think is that having reached this point in life when some of its sadness and some of its struggles wear me in, I become like sea glass, tumbled into new shapes, edges dulled. Or, my edges remain intact, and it's as if my experiences are the glass, which I can hold in my hands, feel what's been smoothed out through the battering of so many waves, the sea a ceaseless tumbler. I can hold the glass up, gaze at its faded color and marvel that something so hard-won remains so beautiful.

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