

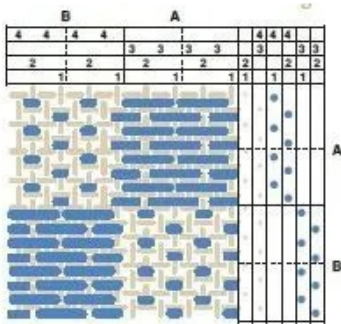
NOTE

This essay was composed following a weaving technique known as “summer and winter.” It is a type of blockweave, wherein the warp (vertical) threads are arranged on the loom in distinct groups, allowing the weaver to create designs by building up blocks of pattern against a plain weave background. The name comes from the fact that, classically, one side of the cloth is mostly dark while the other is light. If block A is more visible on one side, block B will dominate the other. Both blocks are equally present on the fabric; it’s a matter of perspective.

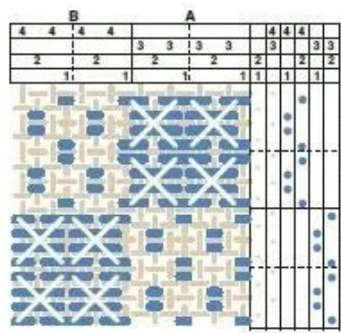
What distinguishes summer and winter from other blockweaves is its economic use of shafts, or harnesses—the rectangular frames that lift or lower certain warp threads. Two shafts are set aside to tie the pattern threads down. The order in which one engages these shafts will produce various effects in the background.

Alternating shafts 1 and 2 in the following sequences will produce:

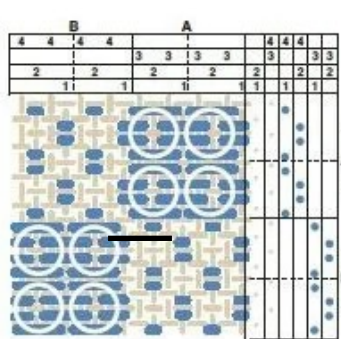
1212



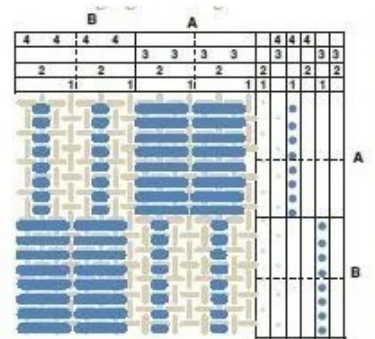
1221



2112



1111 (or 2222)



This question of background composition, in a type of weaving wherein the background is what holds the cloth together, plus the contrasting sides of the fabric, was to me highly suggestive.

I wove a summer winter cloth and translated its logic to text as follows:

BAB	AAA	AAA	BBB	ABB	AAA	BBA
1212	1221	2112	1111	2222	2121	2112
					1111	1212
					2222	1221

Block B takes as its point of departure the decline of the city of Roubaix;

Block A, the collapse of my marriage.

Shaft 1 is past tense;

2 is the present.

SUMMER WINTER

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The headline was from a few years ago: *Rats attack paraplegic teen in her bed in Roubaix*.

“Of course they had to add *in Roubaix*,” says the director of a hub for the creative industries situated in one of the many defunct textile factories that populate the city. Roubaix, “the city of a thousand chimneys,” had sprung up as the epicenter of France’s burgeoning fiber industry: a world capital of textile production by the early 20th century, with the enormous riches that followed and, with the deindustrialization of the 70s and 80s, the precarity.

“The whole country imagines this place a crime-ridden pit,” the director says, “where you’ll be devoured by rats in your bed.”

When I moved from Chicago to Lille, and my response to the question, *What brought you here?* was *I followed my husband*, I’d thought of Roubaix as Lille’s suburb, a city on the fringes of the metropolis, and—given the refrains I’d heard about “the poorest city in France”—not a particularly inviting one.

Three years and as many apartments later, I now bike to Roubaix twice a week to study with a weaver, D—, a woman of singular expertise. When I started haunting her workshop the summer before last, I became aware of two things on the fifteen kilometer ride: that Lille was not the heart of a metropolis, a principal city extending into its surroundings, but part of a vast conurbation, a network with no central point but many nodes, and that in the graffiti tagged over and over on the bike path connecting these urban areas, the letters

which read in repetition beneath my spokes, *Tu embellis ma vie*, the *you* the *tu* conjured wasn't the person with whom I'd built a life; I thought of someone, but it wasn't you.

I hear myself answer the question of how I ended up here, noting how accustomed I've become to the switch: *I followed my ex*.

In the "paternalist model" of the 19th century, the textile barons of Roubaix considered themselves the guarantors of the workers' well-being, responsible for not only their education, public health, and housing, but also their moral instruction and hygiene. Unlike the neighboring Tourcoing, which has a similar industrial history, the city of Roubaix has preserved much of the emblematic traces of its past: take the Art Deco building with its signature half-sun stained glass, a municipal pool where social classes met and mixed from 1932 - 1985, now known as La Piscine, the Museum of Art and Industry. Or the *courées* tucked in city blocks, those narrow alleys with the workers' modest brick houses crammed along the courtyard and the employer-landlord's not-so-modest house, also brick but bourgeois and imposing, situated street-side, guarding the entrance.

I'm getting lost in the metaphorical resonance: though our relationship was predicated on the subservience of my desires to yours — not only in your job relocating us to three continents, but in the quotidian organization of our days, the domination of your sense of time — and how, in this dynamic, I was the one who needed instruction, to be corrected, to be shaped, to be changed; despite this — no, I cannot say you were a patriarch exactly.

Last summer, while still teetering on the edge of blowing up my life, I noticed a street not far from where we lived (in apartment number two), which felt like an imperative: *rue Brûle*

Maison. I've just looked up the origin, since I'm fairly sure the city didn't call it that for me to read as omen. It's named after a 17th-century cabaret artist described as a "flamboyant" personality, who burned a paper house in the public square, and this feels appropriate: I was a sort of onlooker to the spectacle of my own life then. I also took the name of the cross-street as a nod to my circumstances: *Jean Without Fear*.

Apartment number two was where we were supposed to start a family. Such a small slip of the tongue, but I now hear the significance: I describe the would-be baby not as ours but yours. I'm still not sure of it, whether or not *I* want children—indecision, my lifelong companion! You'd wanted a baby for years, and my guilt for withholding that life from you, though monstrous, wasn't enough to ignore the doubts that had been plaguing me about the foundations upon which we'd built our relationship; to cover, as I had been in the habit of doing, the inner walls of our union fracturing.

The timing of my burning the house was not insignificant: I so dreaded late November, which would mark the thirtieth anniversary of my mother's death, that my sense of self and time blurred; my drinking, which had never not been a problem in my life, exerted a full-force grip on my senses; I felt almost physically blinded by grief. What if the only way to move through mourning is to mourn something else? The question, which I'd asked years ago about another thing entirely, I now regard with fretful suspicion. What if it was due to a misdirected sadness that I moved out that winter—was it the bravest thing I've ever done, or the most cowardly: self-preservation or needless suffering—and what to do with all the tenderness I still feel for you?

I have been preoccupied lately with the gaps we conveniently leave in narrating our lives, such that two accounts—though mutually exclusive—are both true: it’s a matter of perspective. In your version of events, I was scared of motherhood, I let myself be seduced by another, and I left you for him. It wasn’t the first instance of unfaithfulness in a decade of shared life, but this time, against my better judgement (the boundaries of reason!), I fell in love. Enough seasons have passed; I feel ready now to probe it, my insistence that I didn’t leave to begin a relationship with someone else, I left to repair the one with myself.

The story is banal, really. Couple met young. Couple changed in divergent ways. Something between them breaks.

I have been preoccupied lately with what the ruin leaves room for. After the initial enthusiasm—I absolutely belonged at this table with decaf coffee, surrounded by other alcoholics, whose stories, though the facts didn’t match mine, were of the same shape—after that immediate sense of belonging, a familiar resistance set in. I shrugged off the refrain about recovery being nonlinear—fine, maybe for the one speaking, but I and my addiction are exceptional, the sheer force of my will (also exceptional) exempts me—and, predictably, relapsed again and again. I don’t feel I’ve *hit rock bottom* in one, definitive moment; not a crash but a continual battering, like being stuck inside a laundry drum with a pile of heavy stones: the machine reaches the end of the cycle, and you think you’re out of it, wait for the door to click open, then feel it kick back on and pick up with the same ferocity—but *the many times I’ve been*

hammered by rocks in a laundry drum has less of a ring to it; I can't imagine anyone saying that over a cup of decaf coffee.

The city refused to satisfy the narrative impulse to a single climax. The fall of Roubaix—the end of its golden age in the textile industry—was both sudden and slow, caused by a confluence of factors, and, because the gold was not distributed equally, far from the same flavor of ruin. Those who had less lost their livelihoods; those who had great fortunes had less. Factory after factory folded.

After half a century of activity, Craye & Son Textiles, known for its upholstery fabrics—velvets and jacquard weavings—began to specialize in industrially-produced medieval Flemish tapestries. This strategic turn to the past allowed the family business to weather the decline for a few more decades, but it was eventually taken over by a Belgian group. The new owner created a jacquard museum, and, when it closed, left the collections to the city of Roubaix, which renovated it and renamed it La Manufacture, the Museum of Memory and Textile Creation—a *museum of memory*! I'd planned, here, to go on what is a familiar diatribe to anyone who knows me, the one about textiles as a long-overlooked and universal form of record-keeping, but a new idea has gripped me: isn't all of it—life, art, the stories we tell ourselves until they start unraveling—manufactured memory?

It was the Nuit des Arts in Roubaix last winter—shortly after I'd moved into the shoebox apartment I love despite the rent, which borders on abusive—and a group of us had decided to dip into one last venue for the night. I'd been told it was one of the more out-there spaces,

which could mean anything in a scene that's distinctly DIY, with varying degrees of anarchy. Fatigued is how I felt stepping into the perfunctory vestibule-covered-in-metallic-paper with some made-up runes to announce a new language, but then an installation stretched across the back corner caught me, where something was germinating in webs of fiber; were those — ?

“The textile stuff is new,” the artist said, “I mostly work with potatoes.”

The problem, I decide, has been the cyclic experience of time clashing with a world that insists on linearity. Without alcohol's convenient blanket-of-snow muffling effect, the patterns of my mind are glaringly exposed. That incessant loop of enthusiasms and disappointments; there must be (I tell myself) an approach less shamefully earnest (though I don't believe I'll ever be able to adopt it); if I could only stop investing in *every* new passion, person, place (there it is again, the despair mounting) a user's guide to the life worth living!

Friday evenings at meetings, I'm there mostly to listen: M —, an old-timer, describes circling above the same inner landscapes — still the same *me* to contend with — but one's altitude has changed.

When one hears, “I embroidered a lot of potatoes during lockdown,” there is only one response, and it is to ask to see them. When the box is brought out with beaded figures on grey-black slabs, it is to ask to hold them. Because the needle repeatedly pierced the skin, all of the water has evaporated from the potatoes; dehydrated, they are shriveled, dense rocks. One's remark that they call to mind little mummies makes the artist smile and add that her focus has shifted from decay to growth, gesturing to the nodes in the fiber web wherein potatoes are sprouting.

V— is the kind of friend with whom, within minutes of her bus pulling in from Dortmund, I launch into a conversation about tradition and modernity, personal and collective rituals so engrossing that we miss our metro stop. We're already late, but it doesn't matter what time we show up to La Manufacture because, as is often the case, the exhibit opening consists mostly of both figurative and literal shoulder-rubbing; it's especially packed since the city sponsored the exhibit displaying the successful transformation of industrial buildings into cultural spaces.

As rebirth has been on my mind, I thought it all might speak to me a bit more, but the scale models and self-congratulatory speeches bore me; I feel much more of an affinity with a videographer friend's work displayed against the exhibit's back wall—his answer of what to do with the past shows dancers in the museum playing with the tension of their bodies against the looms' beams; through headphones, we hear voices: those who once operated the same machines.

Here they are, in the room with us and towering above the scene on screen: Jacquard punchcards—relics from another century, which led engineers to the beginnings of binary computing—draped over the looms' frames like massive, perforated sails: immobile, for the time being.

I've come back to apartment number two for mail and—since you're in Singapore visiting your sister I adore (and her daughters whom I can't bring myself to call not our nieces but yours)—stayed for a moment. (Confession: I opened the fridge and ate a yoghurt.) The French government has officially recognized our marriage; we've finally received our *livret de*

famille, a green, rectangular booklet with many pages left empty for future children, which announces we are a family and without which we could not un-family.

I stared at our administrative selves side-by-side in the little green book's pages, then took a nap in what was once our bed.

You'd asked me to promise you I wouldn't have children with someone else. I couldn't.

Couldn't fully digest, either, my ever-pragmatic and honest godmother's words at the end of my marriage: "In terms of pure probability, you've lowered your chances of having kids."

At the same time, a line from a novella-memoir-hybrid felt written directly to me, although the writer is describing her resounding certainty that she, unlike her ex-husband, did not want children: *I had, like so many fools before me, gotten right up to the edge of one life in order to learn I had to run in the opposite direction.*

I've been thinking this is a story about collapse and recovery, or maybe loyalty—loyalty to one's self, without which genuine loyalty to others cannot be extended. But it's about doubt. I doubt everything. Things I have doubted include: my own memories, the stability of self, the necessity of sunscreen, the possibility of inner peace, that we can or should attempt to keep our minds from bending around the machine, inherited morals, "clean" living, the notion of progress, the purpose of literature, that anyone can truly know what they truly want, historical narratives, personal narratives, narrative itself, whether free will or destiny or any version of god exists, and the one that has intensified over the past years to a deafening roar,

the one about what shape one's life should take: *Whose voice or face keeps signaling / crying out from a great distance in the mind, / from a life I know I should live?*

It's a three-hundred-year-old loom with linen heddles, two harnesses, and oak frames reminiscent of a box-bed; one can easily imagine it sitting in the farmhouse from which the weaver, D—, rescued it. She let me weave on it once, and I sat not *at* this loom but *inside* of it, within the frame, on a bench worn down by centuries of use that rocked, gently, as I wove.

When my godfather told me, in the final glimmer of hope that my marriage might be salvageable, that he saw me as a leaf in the wind, needing something solid (meaning someone solid) to latch onto, it was not you in your steadiness that I pictured, but this loom.

D— has dressed it with linen-viscose warp thread and begun a cloth where, were it really a bed, the mattress would be; because the two harnesses limit the possibilities of interlacements, all of the cloth's complexity derives from color patterning—as always with threads, the colors not blending but vibrating off of each other.

It was either in the '70s or the '90s; either at Orly Airport or Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle; either due to faulty equipment or a handler who, underestimating the cargo's proclivity for escape, un-secured the latch for a fraction of a second. Details differ, but most point to the airport to explain the arrival of the bird from subsaharan Africa which, having no natural predators, is now a fixture in Roubaix; you can't spend an afternoon there without seeing the rose-ringed parakeet—or rather, seeing and hearing several of them: a *pandemonium* is their justly-earned collective name, though, given how the sudden, green flashes dart down from nowhere, it might also be correct to say *bombardment*.

But it was not a parakeet, no; the bird that marked me last spring was an ordinary pigeon—how it dropped from the sky, its body torqued by a broken wing, how its head exploded on the cobblestones before my front door.

I keep denying the climax, the single, definitive crash, yet the image of this pigeon shook loose a long-tangled knot inside of me—did it cause the sequence of events that followed, which led me to push open the door to the addiction support group, or was it just a signal of what was already going to happen, what was already happening—my own corkscrew plummeting?

Somehow, I survived.

For all the talk of gratitude in recovery groups, I still tend to drop the thread about how astonishing it is to find oneself alive.

Solid things: the farmhouse loom in a studio in Roubaix, working with material, weaving; the habit of sharing and listening in meetings, the collective in solidarity; no longer turning to my partner for the kind of life they might offer me, but asking what life I want to build for myself; letting the narrative evolve (the question of how I ended up in the textile capital of France now answered *I came for someone else's reasons and am staying for my own*); a moral architecture founded on honesty; reframing doubt as possibility; and—the big one—accepting the past's immutability.

My phone auto-corrected the note I took in Oslo about the woman, so sloshed at 4 pm she could hardly stand upright, whom we put in a taxi with a half-emptied bottle of whisky in her purse: what separates us from her is a *fiber* line.