

THE BOOK  
OF  
ALCHEMY

A CREATIVE PRACTICE  
FOR AN INSPIRED LIFE

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## ON ANTI-BLESSINGS

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We have days that sparkle, days lit up by fireworks. Nothing can be ordinary, because we have stumbled into some kind of magic. An evening that unspools. A day that seems to wait for our decisions. We feel blessed to be, for a split second, at the center of the universe.

And then we have days of undoing. There is an undoing that is pulling apart every plan. We have the creeping sense that nothing can ever have been right. The future has disappeared over a horizon we can never reach.

I am a historian who studies the language we use for those moments of magic, that deep luck that makes us wonder if it's divine. It's the language of blessing. But so often our culture mistakes the language for a kind of shellacked certainty that good things should always happen to good people. So on the days like fireworks, we take to social media and proclaim ourselves #blessed. And on days of gentle or ungentle tragedy, then what can we say?

The ancient meaning of the term *blessing* can be beautiful and instructive for naming that strange mix of awful and lovely experiences in our lives. A blessing is a form of spoken poetry about the divine. It's an incredibly positive form of speech, but it's not simply "reframing." (We don't need to say, *Oh, never mind. Tragedy is great! I love it. This is my new mind-set practice!*) We might use blessing as a kind of act that scholar Stephen Chapman calls "emplacement." Calling something blessed can let us say: This goes here, that goes there. This is beautiful. This is awful. And all of it can be called true.

I started using that language especially on days when I was getting chemotherapy. There were moments of unspeakable sadness. And there were moments of surprising joy. Like I am sitting in the basement below the basement in a hospital in Atlanta, a place so comprehensively without light that I began to joke with the nurse that someone would have to be a vampire to work here. And then the nurse, every Wednesday, begins to agree. He strokes my vein before taking out the needle. He pretends to shrink from any light outside the door. He asks if I have any "extra" blood he could have for his own purposes. And I realize, *Oh, this is it*. The beautiful and the terrible right up next to each other, each setting the other in relief, is the only way I would notice blessing at all.

### THIS IS YOUR PROMPT:

Think of a time when you felt especially unlucky. The opposite of #blessed—the "anti-blessing," if you will—but then you noticed something beautiful, funny, anything that sparkled. Write about holding the tension of both the deep terrible and the fairy dust feeling.