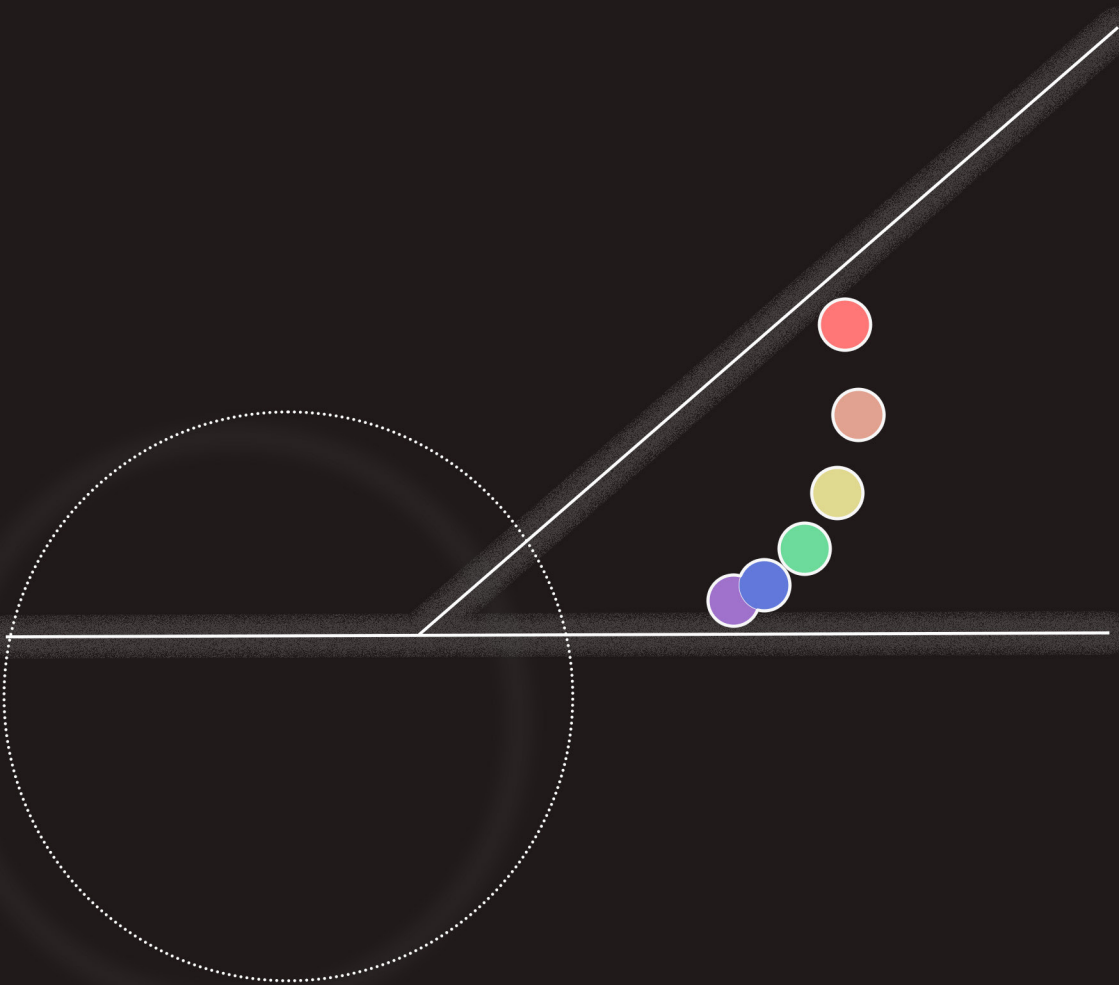


# Hello, June



Rynn Acker

**Hello, June**  
(A History)

By Rynn Acker

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Mine has been a life of much shame

[...]

but

[...]

Now I have neither happiness nor unhappiness.

Everything passes.

That is the one and only thing that I have thought resembled a truth in the society of human beings where I have dwelled up to now as in a burning hell.

Everything passes.

*~Osamu Dazai, No Longer Human (trans. Donald Keene)*

*For Ashe. So I can go on believing that the parts I leave behind might find a happiness of their own.*

**Hello, June**



## I .

Yes, of course I feel guilty for what I've done, I'm a criminal. Every day I commit tiny, casual crimes of existing unseen — little illegalities of facade for which I am responsible but it's impossible to say who's to blame. Misdemeanor whispering, statutory quiet, felony white lying.

Worst of all is how I get away with it, not because of cunning or deception, not because there are no witnesses or because there were no laws against it, but just because nobody does anything, because I'm too small for anyone to care.

And of course it hurts me. But it's not because I ever think it was wrong to do — I'm very right, fully justified — no not because it was wrong, just because the way everything turned out is awful and I'm pretty sure it's because of me.

It's taken me a while to figure out that what I'm feeling involves two competing kinds of guilt, one for being who — or what — I am, and one for changing what was. And while I've learned everything I can, did everything I could, studied the emotions as much as I was supposed to before stopping, the things I didn't do and don't know still haunt me.

So because of all this guilt, because of all this misery and fear and shit life I've lived and because nothing seems to work anymore and everything feels hollow and I'm not capable of changing even the smallest part of how I feel, I've decided to write.

And if I finish and it's not what I wanted I'll keep going, I'll write it again and again and again and again until I can't even remember why I fucking started and then I will have succeeded because I'll have finally shed the burden.

So, if you're wondering, that's the point of the book. It's got no themes, no symbols, no didactics, dialectics, or morals — traditional modes of analysis won't work because it's less of a novel, less of a book, more like notes on an execution, aimed at killing something that should have died a long time ago —no, it's not a book, it's an exorcism.

## II .

I want to write the Great American Novel. Actually, it would have to be 50 novels, plus two, give or take about five for the leftovers. Well, then again it should probably be 57 novels doubled for each side of the

debate. Well, then really it should be 114 anthologies of many novels, each accounting for a different perspective. But then it would need 114 anthologies published annually, each corresponding to a different thing with a different list of authors and ideas and it would be better if they could come out monthly, or daily, until *The Heat Death of the Universe*, then retroactively account for the history, the blood, the sorrow that came before and created them, and then there's a chance that maybe we could get it all, there there's a chance it could be about everything it needs to be about.

It would look something like the census, or the IRS tax records, those lovely stories.

I want to write the Great American Novel, but there can be no such thing.

I want to write the nothing that the Great American Novel can be, the inverse, the particular the specific the negative mass appeal the minimum profit and maximized loss the publishable unpublished the leftover stew that's been in the freezer not-rotting but not getting any better, not entirely forgotten but not remembered fondly.

The last thing I want to write about is myself but I find that I can't avoid it.

The last thing I want is to want but it always wraps back to desire.

I think the last thing I want is to be general but I want to write something that people, in general will relate to. Syllogism: One can only write about themselves, the GAN must be about everyone — the assignment is to derive the conclusion about who the author must be in order to satisfy both of the premises.

It's not me. *The* not me, the inverse of me the exact opposite of me, the me I am not, the me I left behind, the me that I remember and don't think I am anymore, the me changing, the me feeling the differences of place and becoming different people, the yam which I yam not, etc. until we arrive at the me who writes short sentences and uses correct punctuation to arrive precisely at non-abstract, non-esoteric, and non-specific thoughts that are non-American, or not-not-American and not-not-great and not-not-a-novel but not quite just-not any of these things or just any of these things at all.

Am I making sense?

No.

Not quite there yet, then.

A riddle: I can't be divided but I can be negated, I'm not an event but I can take place, you don't understand me but you know who I am;



who am I?

Who am I?

The moon is dark and there are no stars. I can feel them in their absence here.

I want to call Ashe, and I go to bed instead.

### III.

I woke up crying early this morning, thinking of the nights with Ashe where I felt so scared and alone, most of them weekends, when I would wake up hours before them and just lay there, trying to entertain myself by watching them sleep, not wanting to move for fear of disturbing them in one of those rare moments where they could sleep soundly, not wanting to leave the room and start my day because I couldn't stand the thought of them waking up alone. So I lay there half alone next to a body whose spirit is in another world altogether, feeling the weight of it but not hearing the warm life's waking buzz.

I'm thinking about those mornings now that I haven't been with them for a while because I'm starting to wake up feeling less alone and it scares me. It saddens me more. Does that mean I'm moving on? Does that mean I'm leaving them behind? I don't want to go. I never wanted to go.

Why does it feel like every time I think of them I'm left alone all over again, abandoned all over again? Why is every memory with them surrounded by this cloud of loneliness I have to fight through just to feel the littlest tenderness? Why don't I feel that alone all the time? I sure deserve it, so why not?

Maybe that would be too good for me. I always feel the strongest urge to write when I feel the most alone — in fact, all of my creativity and drive come from this horrible pool of emptiness I feel welling up inside me now and then, another dark heart I try to fill with ink — so I end up writing a lot about Ashe. You don't need to know much about them to understand the book or the point of it — if there was one — you don't need much of anything to understand the book because the book is a thing unto itself, not an answer to any questions, you'll get it if you just read it, live it.

But you deserve to know that Ashe was a big part of my life and now they aren't. I feel that absence as confusion, like when you enter a room and forget why so you just kind of aimlessly wander around your psyche with some vague implication of purpose not-long lost.

#### IV.

I'm getting ready to go home. It feels like I'm always just getting ready to go somewhere but today I actually have a trip. I have a flight to make. And soon I have to really get moving and get out of the house.

I hate the feeling of having somewhere to be. I hate having to fill the time until I get there, always with thoughts either useless or anxious, and I hate the sense of a destination. I'm fine with travel, just not with the directness of it.

I hate getting somewhere. Lots of authors try to drill down to the emotional core of the story. Why?

Well, I suppose it's a nice way of getting to the point if you have one, but this is less of a construction and more of a performance event, so no use drilling anything, but spinning might be a useful image.

In another vein, it helps to imagine love as a hole, a lack, as Eros the Missing. That makes a lot of sense(s) out of drilling but not so much out of the getting to part. The arrival in this one is not at some emotional *ore* but rather at the realization that the whole time we've been spiraling into a deeper emptiness as we stepped around, getting nowhere but lost in an ever-darker hole.

That's good and all, but a degree too critical. I think maybe it's just that it helps to understand that a strong story likes to have a direction but not necessarily feel like it's moving straight towards it. You need to get somewhere by waltzing there, hence spiral, hence down, hence the drill.

Now there's a metaphor. Hard to compete with cliches and traditions. Easy to remember the strong stuff. That might be why it's so hard for me to write — I never remember the bad parts of good books, so they feel so unattainable.

#### V.

Why did I even bother to write a book? People are too smart of books nowadays — there's so much art in the world, so much meaning to be found — why did I even bother writing a book when I could have spent the effort writing a good sentence or two for the same meaning?

No, I don't want to waste anyone's time, but at the same time I'm competing with the belief that the sense that one's time is being wasted by something boring or bad is a false implantation devised by people who sell books and don't write them. The idea that a book should have a point is devised by people who read books and don't write them.

I never once cared about making a point here. If you find one that's all well and good but you should know it's your doing, not mine. Fuck,

don't imagine that I'm some wizened fool here to teach you how to live — it's your life. The last thing I want to do is influence other people's lives more. Just look at what I've done so far. Nothing good.

No, no. I'm writing in an effort not to make myself present in others' lives but to make myself disappear, to efface the very parts of me I'm sharing, to erase by writing. I think the underlying motive for why the book is so dour and dense is because I wanted you to provide the levity yourself, I wanted to make the reader the antithesis of the thing I was writing.

Not like it's a warning, it's more like a hole that's supposed to encourage you to push your edges out a bit. Less like a novel and more like a yoga roller, there to fill and widen the spaces between the good things in your mind so they can relax a bit, something to give the joy a little break.

Not that I think that's how it ended up though. What you do with it is up to you as is what it becomes. But what I can say to answer the original question is that all I can pay attention to nowadays is how things in this world seem to waver and phase between real and imagined, how everything is caught up in heat waves that make it hard for me to tell the real from the perceived. I just wrote that down to maybe switch the attention off.

## VI .

It's a long commute back to my mother's house. The visits are good and all, but the trip always takes something out of me, always makes me feel this longing for the world that's involved with the smallness of the car and the cramped highway facing the wideness of the world.

I have this habit of trying to fill up the empty spaces I pass on the road. As I drive by all the abandoned lots and decaying buildings in the city I want to fill them with a future — coffee shops I could run, stores I could stock, homes I could make with hard-earned families and customers and friends. I imagine my life filling in the cracks in the slow-shattering concrete with various fantasies of community, love, or imagination, investing little parts of myself into these lost corners whose For Sale signs can't be read anymore.

I'm not very good with emptiness. Part of me thinks I'm just uncomfortable with unrealized possibilities. Another part thinks that's me projecting myself into spaces. Yet another thinks of it as a hope for how we can make the world better, little by little. The last part of me thinks I'm agonizing over what these places were, remembering the promises

of prosperity before it all went on the decline. It all comes back to grief doesn't it?

### **VII. VISIBLE LIGHT;**

the band of the electromagnetic spectrum that is visible to the human eye, i.e. the limited set of waves with which human vision renders the world; typically displayed all at once, in a gradient of colors in a process caused by refraction of composite white light through some kind of PRISM.

i can't remember when I first saw a rainbow but i do still get the feeling i learned when i was first told that all that color was held in the austere facade of white light. frustration, then sorrow, then awe before frustration again.

i am a fool for not seeing, beneath the plain veneer the variance in the composite, the beauty contained and revealed to me by glass. this should not require the glass, but the recognition always does, all those hidden multitudes never register until they are cut open and laid out for my pathetically dull eyes.

what else is hidden from me, what else stows itself in the invisible. i know i don't need to see the whole world and understand it all to get it but it still guts me to think so much of it refuses to reveal itself to me purely on the premise of my body and its organs. it still makes me feel empty to know how so much can be invisible to humans even when its right there, how tools can see so much more than us sometimes and how they can limit us at others.

and then i'm amazed at how much i can see sometimes, even with such a limited spectrum, how much i can make between 380 to 700 nanometers. it's a response to the despair of knowing how limited my field of view is, retuning the fixation on my lack to anchor instead appreciate its opposite, unwilling to dismiss entirely the feeling of being caged, and needing to rationalize away the want to escape.

since i know that it brings me back to the start.

see RECURSION

### **VIII.**

There's a storm ahead, I always love how you can see it against the road signs in the distance. The shadows setting in, the gentle patter beginning, the sublime sense of the road ahead — the only thing that gives me the courage to keep driving into, hopefully through, the storm.

I've sat through so many hurricanes now but the rage of them still amazes me, the whipping of the wind, the pounding of the water, the ripping in the atmosphere, it's such an amazing, beautiful anger that feels like it has gone on forever by the time it ends.

Then comes the waiting. The slow-to-invisible draining of the floodwaters. The power and land coming back. The cleaning of debris. The emergence of the bugs. The blooming of the hurricane lilies. The counting of losses. The final death toll. The rebuilding, one hopes, before it rains again, and the frailty of that hope pinned against the tearing and the scarring and the unforgettably catastrophic fact of the Earth's scale being carved into the city.

I've always liked the lilies. Flowers you've never seen before, but which were always there, waiting under your garden for their moment to restore color to a still-yellow atmosphere. The metaphor for the bliss of cathartic release writes itself: Mind like a Garden, Emotions like Flowers, Tending to them all to keep the Ecosystem, Mental Climate Change, Mental Natural Disaster, etc..

Notes from the almanac:

- Happiness grows as both sunflowers and dandelions.
- Joy Roses make wonderful crowns.
- Grief Clovers rise around burial sites — bodies flood the soil with nutrients, killing everything around them before growing it all back stronger.
- A lily can be any emotion, but they only bloom after anger.
- Anxiety grows hungry, tall, and fast. It must be managed carefully.

## IX.

Falling leaves realize again how my heart tangles so easily in the stems and vines I live with.

God, when did I become so aware of the seasons, so aware of the change that surrounds me? When did I grow to fear it? Where on Earth did all this fear come from?

## X.

I've never felt as American as I do when I'm on the road, moving. The speed of everything passing by, the forward momentum, and the sensitivity you have to have for the people around you seems to root me in the continent I'm trampling. I see the forests on the highways carved

through them and I know where I am, I get a sense of what it used to be, and I remind myself of how it was taken.

I can't think about it too much, because if I do I'll come too close to thinking I'm not just part of the problem but the whole thing, and I'll want to disappear. I can't go too deep, instead I have to imagine ways to keep going, ways to change, ways to end and repair.

Before that train gets to the futility of hope I hop off and get on another train about change, and dwell on the multiplicity, how I've glutted myself on possibilities and didn't leave room for the future. It's tight, but then I try to catch the line that goes from there to the hope there's enough future left that with some asceticism and focus I can still finish what I started, make up for the damage and lost time and get a good future going again.

But I miss that one.

Now I'm stuck between the eating guilt and all possible destinations again, so I take a seat, hide my face, and linger again on the multiplicities.

I keep a list of the names I would have liked. I have gone by some of them at one time or another, in one place or the other, in different spaces and contexts where they feel or felt appropriate.

- Jacob Ward
- Lyn —
- Simon —
- Penelope Acker
- Rynn —
- Blue —
- Simon —

They are all me. They are not parts, they are *all* me, they are not masks to fill, they are each individually completely me and I am completely them and if me being many people at once as is a problem for you — if me not being the fragmented person you expect me to be feels strange enough to require explanation — and you're upset that I won't explain it, this is your warning to pick another book off the shelf. That's the first of many things I can't help you understand and you'll just have to get it yourself.

It will be easier for you if you just hate me.

But yes, I'll say one last thing for you — I might have been born Jacob, but I was always someone else, always hiding behind that name, always hidden by it. And when I was only that shadow-casting name, it

was lonely, horrible, and small. And it hurt, god, I can't describe to you how much it hurt clawing and climbing over my self just to feel like myself. And I also can't tell you how great it felt and feels to have torn myself apart, dyed in pieces, and become the patchwork quilt I am now with all the seams to prove it. You'll just have to learn.

## XI .

I started writing mostly because I felt like I knew something and now I've come out the end to find out I know nothing at all. But at least now I know that. At its heart it's a love novel. Doomed as it seems, I find I mostly wrote about what I wanted love and loss to be and what I'm afraid they are.

I'm scared of it being a love novel because so many times I've read the words of someone trying to tell me what love is and that many times or more I've been disappointed, confused, and thought it's not quite right. I'm afraid to be wrong. But at this point it's already wrong if it is.

I'm just afraid of finding out how wrong it is. I'm afraid of what it will mean to admit that.

What I'm getting at is that I've already rewritten the novel three times and it doesn't seem to be getting better, and I just want to be done with it. That's enough for me.

## XII. INSERT I. HELLO, JUNE

At once it opened as a rift in front of me and settled like a veil over my eyes. It started as the past, diluting and paling the colors of the present — leaving just hollow things, subaudible echoes of crickets and lone birds practicing songs. Then came the susurrations of memory played over the present, the layering of films, two imaginary projections on the same screen—

*Say goodbye. The people are going now. It's time to say goodbye.*

My mother's words, a little party in which I am the subject of many remarks about an old soul and talent and sharpness of mind, phrases which I will only understand later but which lodge themselves in my mind here for the first time. Phrases that stick like that instruction, that first lesson in manners which marks for me the beginning of my suppressed youth, spent, as many other sad people spend theirs, trying to escape the cage of it, trying to find out what living means as a way to get older, trying to prod at time to make it go faster—

*Say goodbye. The people are going now. It's time to say goodbye.*

It flickers by in montage. It can all be summed up so quickly. It is so foreign now, so reduced. I can't say it was wasted, just that it seems sudden now, that it lacks the vibrant immediacy it had when it occurred. I can only say that it seems so much smaller in the distance, now that it has been made so easy to see, so trivial, after the smoke and fog of it has cleared.

I never know that I'm dreaming it when I am, I just subtly realize that this isn't real, and when I realize that I understand, it feels like I have always understood — maybe that's a result of the conscious and unconscious ways of thinking merging, or maybe it's because dreams can only recycle old things and turn them into something more mysterious, or maybe I really did always understand and somehow forgot — but it's as sudden as it is obvious, like when you're finished with a long day spent walking or working and you sit down to suddenly realize how tired your body is, how gravity actually does pull down on you and you push up against it, something obvious that becomes meaningful at once, and the true realization is that part of you has always known that, and has either kept it secret or went ignored until it was relevant.

*Say goodbye. The people are going now. It's time to say goodbye.*

The moment when the future comes to meet you in person is the moment that you discover just how wrong your beliefs about who — or what — the future could be are. That said, I suppose I should have expected it all. I did expect everything. It doesn't take hindsight to see clearly, just a moment of forethought which I was lacking. In that respect, it was on me. I got myself stuck. All of this was just me missing perspective, a lapse. That was all it took. All the strange weather must have stolen my attention.

It was an odd season in the city, with heat-wave humidity that weighed heavily on everything that stood, pressing down collars and towers alike, exhausting every motion. The only reprieve came with a rare seabreeze which vacationers chased down to the beach all day, and which we working people could only catch by the tails of sunbeams, hiding away from the high tides and hot sky alike under a jagged, well-weathered promontory.

June slept next to me as the sun set through the mouth of the cave. She was on me, and I was motionless.

Droplets of water from the stalactites formed rounded edges to encase the sun and distort the light into something less luminant. There was a ring of reflected white around the edge of every droplet before it



fell down to the limestone and sand floor, allowing a new drip to form and follow shortly after into the puddle below, which was slowly collecting more and more of the sky.

The sea was starting to foam up in anticipation of a storm. It made a sound as it did: a small scratching as the water flattened out against the sand, pushing up against a boundary that separated thick, drowned mud from coarse, airy sediment.

Our footprints were there in front of us — leading through both, crossing between them, up to where we sat. A sign that we had walked together, they interlaced and danced over, they passed in front of each other and turned around. They came together and fell apart but never more than an arm's length away.

I was breathing slowly, in time with her, who was resting her head on me. She was somewhere between sleep and the sunset. There was no tension in her, and I figured that I was the only thing holding her up. She'd spent a long day running around the city, looking to make a good impression on the interviewers in their air-tight offices. She deserved the rest. I could collapse with the soreness behind my own eyes, but I held against it, the dripping of the droplets reminding me to stay awake, the sea breeze making the evening cool, almost Autumnal, for a summer day.

Just barely, and only with close attention, I could tell her heartbeat apart from the silent rhythm of the falling water and the waves churning and the Earth spinning. Her breath was gentle, a voice among the wind, until it shot rapidly in with the passing of a train at the station behind us — a jolt enough for her to make a slow rise into the world of the living from her half-nap.

"Welcome back." I watched her stretching "You're just in time for the show."

Pretending to be less sleepy than she was, she said "Ah, the world of the living." She rolled her neck and there was a substantial, satisfying pop at the end. "It's good to be back."

"Really?" I said. "I would have thought the world of the dead would be better."

"Nah," she sat still, "they don't have sunsets there."

"Is that all?"

"Yeah, well, the absence of light is a downer"

"Fair point."

She leaned back onto my shoulder "They also don't have any Livies."

“I suppose that’s why you’re not there.”

She looked at the waves. “Well, that and being alive.”

“Sure, sure. Look at the sun, Liv.” Her eyes focused on the light, reflecting the orange and the indigo in equal measure. It all sat within the iris, distorted onto the sphere, but rendered all the more beautiful by the retina that doubled the sun and the eyelids that made the sand.

“I am.”

“You’re talking. That’s basically not paying attention.”

I gave a smirk of a laugh and looked outward. The clouds around it went from pink to amber. The ocean decided only to reflect the oranges. It was slowly going black on the edges. The low hum of the waves passed down into a muted noise as the grasshoppers and cicadas took over from the fields nearby.

The undying sun died for the day. It died like it did every other day.

It was the same death that the sun died last night and the night before and the first night June and I sat like this. Faintly burning, a dim ball of fire, the clouds reflecting the same amber on the bottom and took on the same purple glow. They were by a different part of the sea, but if it was the same sun, then it was the same water, too, and the same sky. There, the red silhouette of June’s sweater against the soft blues and hard oranges of night’s rising. Then, a soft press on her shoulder. The simple words: “I love you, June”

I had said hello first.

She was sitting down on the sand, comfortably watching the last minutes of the sunfall. She gave a little smile to replace a greeting.

“It’s a great twilight.”

“Yeah, the breeze feels good in comparison to that.” She gestured back to the little party someone was throwing for a magazine release. The whole department was invited.

It was a little chilly, an ocean wind cut my slacks and sleeves to pieces. She was right, though, the inside was worse. June was always warmer than me, so she probably thought this weather was perfect. The sweater would have helped, too. “It was nice while it wasn’t a dance.” I said.

We talked loosely about something unimportant for a few sentences underscored by the crickets, until they took the melody, rising above the volume of the waves. The breeze whipped in the trees behind us.

“They’re missing you inside.”

“Let them miss. I like the view from here.” She turned to me “And

I'd die before having the same conversation with another one of them." She invited me to sit down next to her.

The sand there was softer than the cave floor, but that didn't make it more comfortable. The time passed there as we looked out to the moving light, melting into the wine-dark sea. The sun died, naturally. And I said — after the quiet had become a fixture, nailed in by the minutes — I said to her, "I love you, June."

She said she thought I did, and then thought about it herself for a while.

Thoughtful to a fault, as always. Never working by reflex, she took a long moment to think about what the right reaction would be. She asked herself, "Do I love you too?" and answered the question in a proper courtly process before coming out with the decision.

With a pretense of fixing my neckline she took time far too long to hold my neck — softer, smaller than hers, she would say — meeting, for a moment, both of my eyes. She felt my pulse with rose-warm hands, and just looked at me with wide-open eyes as if she was seeing my face for the first time in her life, memorizing every detail.

"I love you too, Livy."

I must have looked the same, just then, seeing her for the first time as the June who loved me, fading in from the one who, moments before, had a heart more distant. She turned the pose into something more relaxed, saying, to end the game, "there, that's better" before pulling in, leaning together to form a mixture of heat that would watch the show as one. Heads touching, the last remains of sunlight fizzling out on the water, leaving nothing but the cold silver of the moon.

The cave went dark. Another train interrupted the bugs' run-on choir.

"We should probably go back home."

"Probably."

We did.

The waves kept splashing over the sand. It was the same sound as a sigh. The wind turned to a whisper. The sun was gone, and they were mourning.

—

We had coffee with the revival in the morning.

It was silent over the table as we stared across at one another, as was our habit. She liked to call it a coffee date, and I liked to look into her eyes. I had made her drink — a tablespoon of creme and a teaspoon of

honey; I liked to add a little cinnamon sugar too, which she either didn't notice or didn't mind — and she made mine — black; she admitted that it was an exercise for her, since she was unreasonably bad at anything that had to do with flavor.

June had tried to learn how to cook once — from me and all the sources online she thought would be helpful but ultimately left her more confused than before, now knowing a brief history of bread, some odd facts about olive oil, and a vague sound that implied the word that Romans would have called the dish.

We both found her failure here strange not only because she was a polymath in everything else but also because most of the people that don't know how to cook simply have a bad palette — they don't even know they're bad — but she had the unique burden of being bad and knowing it very well, which weighed on her immensely. For the life of me I couldn't tell exactly what made her bad either, she was just bad at it.

She could bake like a professional — it was more of a science, she said, like chemistry. So I guessed she just needed a firmer basis on which to work, so we tried to work with a recipe. I spent a week making sure that the measurements were right and she could just read the instructions and that everything would come out tasting good when we finally put it together. I would cook the little additions and do the slightly dangerous things like prepping the pans and boiling the milk, so she could handle most of the real work.

“I really think this is gonna turn out great.” she said, stirring the pot.

“You've really improved.”

“Don't flatter yourself, Liv.”

“Don't burn the chicken, June.”

She did burn the chicken. Honestly, that one was on me, but she oversalted the sauce herself. I wondered if it wasn't that she was bad, but that she was just a bit overzealous — it wasn't even that terrible, just not up to either of our standards.

She could make something excellent on occasion, but only when she was either distracted or recently humbled by some grand failure. When I brought this up she reminded me that she had been this way for years and it was unfortunate that I couldn't teach that habit away. I would never get the chance to find out what exactly she couldn't do right, since she stopped trying that day.

“It's a shame, really,” she said over the too-salty plate served to

look elegant.

“What is?”

“I’ve spent all this time learning how to cook and yet I’m still not very good.”

“You are good.”

“I’m not. All this practice and I still can’t beat the basic taste of a peach.”

A peach was pretty sturdy competition, I would tell her. To expect to surpass the million-year natural and human conspiracy of fruit was overreaching, and more so to expect to surpass that fruit in particular.

She was referencing a time when we went down to Georgia on a business trip. Our publisher had sent us to see something out about the sector — it was all very pointless in the end, an interview here and there about some vaguely meaningless figures concerning a magazine that was going to sell anyway because either the readers forgot they were buying it or it was the only thing they could think to read. We had just left the headquarters at Savannah and were due for a report call in three hours about the fate and becomings of the whole ordeal.

The fellow at the company knew what he was doing, and we knew that, too. He still had the courtesy to grovel and feign humility, because we had power. Sales were down 5% from last month. We made a whole big show of that. “5% how outrageous! In New York this volume is selling hot, sales are astronomical up there! How could it be that down here they’ve gone sour?” I don’t know. “Well you ought to know! It’s your responsibility! This volume is good, good as gold in New York, now make it sell in Savannah!”

In reality sales were down 15% in New York, and 33% in Delaware. He begged us to let him stay in position, saying that he would have his division work harder to encourage better sales, that they were on track to break records with the next campaign. We told him that we would talk to corporate about it — which was probably the first completely honest thing we had said the whole time.

We weren’t even real representatives, I was there to check the printing staff’s quality and June was meant to investigate the marketing, but only because the people who were actually hired to do that had missed their flight back from Venice and we were the only people the company knew within 125 miles of the office that were even remotely qualified to replace them.

When we left the building we bought some peaches and sat on a

park bench, hiding from the high sun under a large tree's canopy, staring at some statue of a person whom I never cared to read about and June found unimpressive enough not to share what she had read.

I made a small-talk comment about the fruit's color, and she made some joke about the texture. We laughed more at the situation than the peaches or the joke — what were we doing in Georgia, how did we end up flying in and out of this state on a Wednesday which we thought would be nothing special at the end of that Monday.

One of us asked, finally out loud, what we were doing here. Why were we doing this? What was the point?

Neither of us could come up with an answer. We were told to go, and so we went.

It was a warmer day than we were used to, and the peaches were cooler than we expected. They were going to be the most delicious things we had tasted in a while. The wind blew through.

"I wanna get a different job," she said.

I sighed "Yeah, me too." A car crept past on the road nearby. "They don't let me make art. I mean, they let me draw, but they don't let me make *art*. It's a terrible deception to call my role the role of an artist, I'm a designer at best, a rendering machine at worst. I feel like a printer. A scanner. A copy machine."

"I just feel like I can't make an impact anymore, like I'm disconnected from everything that they're doing with the place. I came here to be involved — I stayed because I was involved." She hadn't taken a bite yet and shifted in her seat. "You know, I started out wanting to make a name for myself and now I'm here. Writing other people's words down for someone else who I don't care about and who doesn't care about me. It's manual labor."

"Yeah."

"I feel like I've spent my whole life building up to doing something..." she pushed air through her teeth, looked up, and read the words from the sky "universally significant. I've been building up to do something great. This is not it." She said.

"That's some exceptionalism."

"I want to be exceptional."

"Me too." I wasn't sure what I meant by that: whether I was saying "I too, want to be successful," or "I want you to be successful, too." I tried to work that out for a moment, giving up right when it seemed that the answer wasn't obvious. "But I want a peach first." And I took the

first bite, inviting her along with me, the juice flooded in and unveiled, in bright flavors, the object of our anticipation, as if to seal the promise of our conversation in the rose-golden joy that only greatly pleasurable memories can be embalmed with.

“I’d rather have my peaches after, but now will do.” We took a bite. It was perfect.

It was the day after that she came to me and said “I want to learn how to cook.”

She had cooked before, but now she wanted to *learn*, which, to her, was something different. I was always the sort to learn by the process of doing the thing — because exploring intentionally enough was a lesson unto itself — but she was the type to need to hear what to do before doing it. This was probably a symptom of perfectionism, but she didn’t like for me to point that out unless she was already seeking to bring it up.

I tried to tell her how to make some things, the internet tried to tell her how to make some things, and she listened, but she was a little too inspired. In her line of work it was a positive to take instructions and surpass them. In food, that was a good way to make things taste lurid. It didn’t help that I had a very dull, insensitive tongue. She supposed that made me a very good critic, which was something she alone appreciated.

She was uniquely flawed because her things tasted too much rather than too little. She didn’t really know when to stop. Once I watched her taste a sauce and add basil for several minutes straight. Each time she tasted it I think she had set her taste for the herb down to the new level, so that the next increment tasted a little bit dull, leading her to add more. I told her to take a break and she told me she could do this.

Later I emphasized that the spices needed time to actually cook into things, but that didn’t really help her aside from solving her largest problem, allowing the next in command to take control. This resulted in the same issue, because the next in command was the *want* to make things that tasted bold and original. This too was rooted back in impatience, I think, that or immoderation. Either way it occurs to me now that I might have caused the problem by insisting on washing her dishes for her, unfettering her creativity.

Forcing her to make black coffee every morning was an exercise in restraint. For me to make her coffee every morning was an exercise in impact. I have always had quite the problem with being too subdued for my own good, leaving my feelings unattested or unrecognized. I am still quiet in this way, but now, in part due to June’s efforts towards a healing

covalence, I tend to say — add, do — more in order to mean more.

Thus the coffee carves at my vices too, as the greatest problem in my life thus far has likely been the problem of expression. It hasn't been the largest or the most meaningful, but it has been the most prevalent.. If anything in my life were to be called great, it would either be my ability to repress myself or my inability to express myself, which are, ultimately, the same thing.

They have the same effect, at least. There's not a practical difference between not expressing and repressing except for in the fact that they express my choice in the matter somewhat differently: sometimes it's not so much that I can't find the mind to speak my mind as it is that I don't want to find my mind at all — but sometimes it's exactly that. It's a real predicament.

It's not helpful to talk about it or think about it as much as I do. It's more helpful to make coffee with honey and milk. It's nice to have a complete break from my lifelong habits be a part of my everyday routine.

June once said to me offhand in one of her moments of inspiration that “scratching away at the surface of your vices only hones their edge.” You either have to give in and let them dull or take the full effort to break them. I don't know if I believe her on that one anymore — you can certainly chip away at metal — but she makes a good point. It's a bad idea to risk sharpening the edge of a knife that's going to be at your own throat. Easier said than done, though.

It was an exercise in pure sensation and reason. A part of me feels bad for treating the coffee like that, reducing it to a habit, an exercise. Coffee has been in my life for a long time, and it feels wrong to talk about it like a mere function, although it has always been close with my vices.

I first started with it when I was about 15, so that I could be awake for my early morning therapy sessions. My therapist liked to make jokes between methods which, at their subtlest, amounted to asking me if I was okay. I hated my life being treated like something funny. I hated being simplified, too.

He was a very bird-like man. Not only did he have a very high and large nose with a squeaky voice, but he also liked to peck. And peck he did. He wasn't my only therapist but he was by far the worst one and the only one I couldn't transfer away from at will. I dreaded our appointments.

I told him very blatantly once that I was there to stop having suicidal thoughts and he told me we would get to that. “Get to that.” He was fairly bold in thinking that it was a symptom of something different



and rather adamant about getting to the “root of things” before dealing with the problem. Right or not he was annoying about it and that made it hard for me to learn.

I was sent to him — as punishment, I think, since this can be the only reason the “treatment” continued despite my active protests — because I had tried to take my life with painkillers. It was an attempt to die that failed. When the pills were down I did not feel an embrace of warmth or a comfort or a sense of fear deeper than the baseline anxiety of living — I just felt the cold weight of a decision and then very tired.

I made the attempt under the loose impression that I would be coming back. And I did, just not in the way that I had expected. I believed — and still believe — that if there’s any chance at an afterlife it’s more like reincarnation, another attempt at life, a reset, if you will.

Death was meant to be my reset button, and I hit it because — dissatisfied with the constant state of my body as suffering and, more importantly, my awareness of that — I simply wanted to take the chance at getting somewhere better. I felt heavy and frankly didn’t think it would matter that much — I just wanted a better future. I still want that, I only really disagree with the methods I chose.

When I first realized I would die when I was six, I was scared. The uncertainty of it was as terrifying as the dark. The word death came with a sinking, terrible sense of not just the unknown, but the unknowable. Death was complex, death was terrible, death was Unimaginable. It was something so entirely unfamiliar it was as good as Nothing to me.

But then, as I learned what we think — and I thought, believe me, I thought — we know happens, it all seemed very simple. It is just over. You knowingly slip away — from yourself, from Everything — and you just end. It’s not some great uncertainty, it is the universe returning to the long-standing state of not having you in it.

Dying is as simple as stopping the brain. I thought it would be easy. I was wrong in numerous ways — instead of anything I thought it was just very, very cold.

I came back to life in a hospital bed. I have hated hospitals since. They, too, are a punishment. This white light and boring smell was to suffice as my purgatory-in-living, I think.

I thought, laying there, that God let me live as if to say “No, You’re Not Done.” You are Not Done suffering. The trial of this body has Not Ended. This is Not Over and you Will Continue to Exist.

According to some theories, up to this point I was just one of a

million attempts at me flowing through the stream and, unable to cope with my death, I became another me as soon as the deadly impulse sent me out of the water.

If that was true, then there's a good chance I would never die. I'm probably going to live forever, though that's not the only future.

In June's words, this first attempt was driven by a failure to recognize that a knife was being sharpened by attempts to chip it. I kept looking for answers as to how to get out of my head and into normalcy quickly.

I would do things like draw pictures and read books and go to parks because I wanted to get out of the room I had to myself alone. They felt like a facsimile of joy at the time, not because they were not joyous but because the whole of my reality was a facsimile of an existence that was only feasible 100 years ago, carried into contemporary set dressings.

There were some real, original things. I kept a garden which grew avocados and tomatoes and grapes and some smaller herbs that my mother would take to make tea (she liked to invest in making a long harvest longer). Tending to it was nice.

By the time I was 16 I knew when there would be weeds and when and I would clip them or cover them with rocks in advance — just enough so they wouldn't take over. I knew the right amount of water and sun and soil and time they needed to make something good for me and I didn't need anything but my head to keep track.

My mother was cutting an avocado for breakfast the morning I got back from the hospital. As I was walking in behind my brother, she smacked the knife into the core and pulled it out. She didn't even treat the whole visit like an item other than signing me up for therapy, which she announced as a matter of fact the next day.

I get the feeling that even if we did ever talk about it, it wouldn't get much further than sorries, platitudes, or never-again advisories. Later she offhandedly called suicide "selfish," and I decided to catch the meaning and leave it at that.

She hadn't ever been like me. I don't think she ever felt a knife unless someone else had been pressing it into her thick skin. I had only ever seen her cry once — once, on an Autumn day — and even then I feel like she was more sad within herself than anything else. She wasn't alone. That was her greatest advantage over her children.

I kept my liking for the garden in therapy. When the bird-man had convinced himself that I was cured — with no sway or swallow from how

I felt or didn't feel — I kept it still. The avocados were always good. I was told the tomatoes were exceptional, but I hated those and never ate them once in my life, so I just had to take my brother's word for it. We added some mushrooms later on, and they helped compete with the weeds. Nature is a beautiful thing.

The bird ultimately taught me two general strategies: *acknowledge and move on* along with *answer the opposite of what you really feel*. These didn't stop anything as much as they redirected the momentum away from my face and hopefully past my body. I was a veritable expert in directing my self-hatred into things that either disguised or did not suggest self-hatred. I was a master of the indirect statement. I can now see that this was just another form of repression. Mostly I could see that then too, but I can just see it now, without the "mostly."

I was so masterful at not expressing what I was feeling that sometimes I was so lost in the conceit that I had no idea what I was saying at all. I could use a lot of pen strokes to make nothing but collections of lines that vaguely hinted at the idea of the thing I was making. I wrote stories that I thought were supposed to be allegories but were really just collections of moments. Bits and pieces strewn across something like a narrative that more resembled my idea of a life than they resembled a story.

June would tell me later that she thought writing was the opposite of such a process: it was an act of stringing together interesting moments and descriptions into a narrative structure and I was simply missing the point of narrative. I think that this is largely incorrect, preferring to focus on the cohesion — any work is best when it is a manifestation of a singular vision, tailoring each bit to match with everything else, leaving the 'act', as she called it, in the progressive vision rather than the curation of moments. June was possibly describing an exhibition, or a museum — something more incomplete, more free, than a piece of artwork, though this is a matter of taste more than anything. I gave up on writing early on. I confined myself to drawing flowers, and thought I was quite good at it, but nothing that I drew could be identified as something real. They were pictures that you could tell got at what flowers were, but weren't quite like the ones you knew.

I made another attempt when I was 17. Something had happened in the world — probably something to do with politics or the law or some bit of both, which I cared about deeply then, as they concerned me directly — and I suddenly was not happy and felt very alone.

I got the feeling that everything would be better off without me

and I knew people like me were unwanted, dead-weight wastes of oxygen. After this — after everything — I just didn't want to be alive.

The plans came back to me. Only this was not so much as a want to reset but a want to test the theory that I could reach an ending, after the first incompleteness — always a bad idea, I should add. I cannot remember this well, it was something of a delirium, I only know I wanted a death without rebirth, an ending, not a future, something certain. This attempt left enduring scars.

When the knife pressed back down I wasn't ready and I was taken with it. It was one swift motion more than it was a series of decisions. If this taught me anything it was to make the things I didn't want myself to do require an arduous series of steps and otherwise to keep the knife dull.

It can feel like sharpening the knife makes it better, since under the same pressure it's harder to feel when it's sharper, but that doesn't mean it's better. It's just harder to feel. If the metaphor carries it probably does more damage in spite of the sensation of it being easier to handle.

I finished my coffee in a series of sips punctuated by smiles at the — slightly too strong — taste. June was getting better at this. She smiled back every time I returned my eyes to hers. I felt lighter, seeing her there.

She held onto her cup with both hands. She liked the warmth because she had bad circulation that made her hands chronically thirsty for heat. They were almost never cold, but they always wanted to be warm. The heat bled through the ceramic surface and she took it up with a greedy pleasure. The warm seeking the warm.

She always drank out of a particular mug. I'd bought it for her a few years ago. I'm not sure if she used it so much because she genuinely liked it or if she was doing it with a sense of humor.

It was a white ceramic mug in the cylindrical style with minimal embellishments. The surface of glossy white was interrupted only by an equally glossy collection of red strokes in the form of a cube. It was a well-made mug, she had maintained it uniformly, cleaning it rapidly once we had finished drinking, such that not a hint of the brown patina of old coffee stains could form on its edges.

I thought she would like it because she was a big fan of juxtaposition. Imposing unlike things onto each other to make some sort of insight. I had no idea what the implications of juxtaposing a two-dimensional red cube with a three-dimensional white cylinder would be, and I'm sure June didn't either (though not for lack of trying — she often looked at it like my mother would look at the sudoku puzzles she solved in

the little books she left on the coffee table — I didn't know how the game worked, but she seemed quite good at it, and never liked being stumped by puzzles).

I saw it at a farmer's market and figured it was just a nice design. I thought that June would like to have a mug. She apparently did.

She made a lot of jokes about the idea that a mug made me think of her.

“Of all the things to remind you of me, I'd never thought it would be a mug.”

There were certainly more romantic or interesting or flattering things. But I chose a cup. Later, for me, she chose a pen — a glass pen that was red and blue and made a very nice sound when it touched paper. Fragile, precise, and beautiful, she said when she gave it to me a few weeks after I gave her the cup. I didn't have the same way with words.

Later I would say bold, intriguing, and practical. She liked to hear that. Putting it into words took me a lot of thinking but I'm glad it came up to something substantial — something that gave her a smile.

My favorite cup was nothing more than a plain black cylinder with a handle, though I hardly ever stuck with one vessel.

She took her last sip and looked me in the eye. The left one, I looked to her right so that there was a straight line between the pupils. She seemed tired. I probably did too. Neither of us were very good at sleeping and both of us were thus extremely caffeine-dependent.

I'd love to be one of those artists who could muse over the bounds of waking and sleep, but I've never found a way to do anything but become more lucid each time I lay down in the dark to dream. June, for her part, could drift dormant with ease, which she avoided at all costs. So we sat there, looking tired at each other until the chemicals set in and we were ready to go about the day.

I had an assignment for backgrounds from the publisher that needed to be done within the week. June was a freelancer as of six months ago. She still wrote with the best of them, and it showed in her popularity with buyers, which was nevertheless not enough to secure a lasting position. Both of these were the things keeping us awake when the coffee wore off at night.

She was the first to break eye contact.

“Alright, I'm defrosted.” She said.

“What's the plan today?”

“I'll figure it out in a few minutes.”

She wasn't as accustomed to coffee before food as I was. It was something she was still slowly picking up because of me. I was already in full gear, and it would usually be a moment for her. It had been long enough that she should have adapted, but I wasn't one to ask questions, especially knowing how she enjoyed hearing the sounds of cooking while she sat at the table, wrapping up her thoughts before she got to work.

I stood up to move to the kitchen — more “away from the table” they were scarcely three feet apart, I moved more to a counter with a small, one-dish sink. Took a knife from the drawer to make breakfast, which was all the knife was good for.

I was cutting an avocado for toast. I cracked at the core with all the force of my arm behind the edge. It made a satisfying sound. I will always cut an avocado like this, both because it is the right way to do it and because it was at least a little scary, making it a good rush to interrupt the generally consistent and solemn activity of cooking.

When I finished with the knife, I cleaned it off, gave it a good dry, and then put it back in the drawer, where it seemed to belong. It would sit there in the dark with the scissors and the sleeping pills and the other knives until it was needed again. June liked to imagine that knives worked better when they had friends to rest with. I'm not sure she had the metaphor completely mastered but the spirit was there. They were certainly more effective when considered as a team.

She put her hands over her eyes to think. Probably about getting a job — scarcely anything else was on her mind then. The market in the city was shit. She had put out for many opportunities a while back and all of them came back with a firm “we would love to take you on if we had the capacity.”

As soon as she found a place to work and settled in I was planning to work on developing my career in the same way. I had a position secured with an old friend of mine in the inner city — she knew me well enough that as soon as I said the word, I would be in. We were going to become our own arthouse. It was just taking some time to find a place that would take June on board. I was willing to wait as long as it took for her to find something satisfying — a publisher that would let her go around the world and write about all the things she saw with her wide, stranger's eyes.

Even living together we wouldn't be able to withstand the transition period if both of us were to leave a stable job at once. The odds were that we would be on the streets if we both tried to dream at once. Someone has to be awake to keep watch.

I had waited fifteen years to say I love you, I told her. I would wait lifetimes for this, if it was necessary.

June got to dream first because I could stay awake. I had more practice and she had more of a reason for reverie. It had been this way since we were five years old doing the little homework we had that seemed so much back then. Both of us were picked up an hour later than school got out, and we went to the same after school camp. I would sit there and do both of our math assignments while June would doodle away with crayons — in a toddler’s craze for the colors and shapes, making nothing that was recognizable beyond her own mind — with an intense look about her. She would copy my work later. Sometimes she would even have me explain it.

The counselors would call this bullying, so we learned to hide it. They said it was because I “had more discipline” which I really don’t believe now, but I took it as fact then.

What the adults said was bound to be true to a child. To an adult, though, one with perspective, it was grossly incorrect, and that would be obvious in a few years. June had more discipline than I would ever have when she was five — the discipline to imagine something and give it a real attempt on paper.

She was a godawful artist then — and still not fond of lines and colors now — but that didn’t stop the attempt. She had the discipline to persist, which I would find to be lacking in myself.

When she had a more workable grasp of the English language she would switch to that, but for now she was trying crayons. She was imaginative at least, and she got a really big smile on her face whenever I could guess what it was.

She would ask me to read what she wrote in our high school days. It was very much the same thing as before. When she read over my notes she would smile when I said I liked a device. She took my advice when I told her to change something. She told me once that she wished everything she wrote was as good as what I read out of it. She respected me, and I still have no idea why.

We would study at coffee shops after school because neither of us wanted to go home — I because I had a habit of tattooing my skin with reminders and drawings in permanent markers and pens of all kinds, which my mother scolded would give me ink poisoning and, in doing so, end me; she because of the dreadful quiet of her family house.

My mother liked June, and June’s parents admitted that I was better than some other influences. They once told me it was easy for them to trust



somebody their daughter talked about so highly. June told me that was about the nicest thing they'd ever said to anyone.

Across the cafes, I learned the different sounds of June typing.

She would do it in bursts when she was writing creatively. There was an ebb and flow to her process that manifested in a rhythm. I would hear the final beat of the full stop for every sentence. The sound of the spacebar delineating the measures. When she was typing essays or otherwise doing school work, it was an uninspired cacophony of nonsense. There was no space between the thoughts for thinking.

We were packing up once and I asked her if she'd ever played piano.

"No. Why?"

"You type with a rhythm, and you have the hand posture right."

"Glad to hear it." She put something away. The barista called out a name and the window poised the sunlight to make June's hair glow. "I don't think I'd like the piano."

"Really? It seems like it would be something you would do."

"Well, maybe I would like it..." she thought it out. "I don't think I'd like to *learn* the piano."

"Why not? You like learning other things."

"Yeah well, learning is nice. I like to be familiar with things — to know all the insider stuff. I feel like that gives me a sense of appreciation for it. And I guess I feel the same about the piano. There's an intrigue there, but I would prefer it if it stayed a mystery to me forever."

I saw her eyes zoned out, squinting at nothing behind me "I don't think I get it."

"Knowing things is nice and all, but the world should have its mysteries. If I knew about the piano I would constantly be dissecting what I heard from it. I think it would be nicer to just enjoy the instrument as something foreign, that way I can love what I hear all the more."

I half understood: the world is built on things which you are and things which you are not. Each domain should have its size or things might get out of hand. If I were to be nothing then I wouldn't be very happy, for sure. If I were connected to everything I don't think I would be very happy either.

In another way, if everything is familiar to you then nothing can really surprise you; if you could fit the whole world in your wheelhouse there would be no reason to leave. June didn't want to learn piano because she didn't want to be bored. That is to say, she didn't want to



be everything. She was the same way about Biology, Anatomy, and Physiology, which she would fail despite my efforts to help. She didn't want to be able to explain life, she just wanted to see it.

But I was half confused: the journey towards knowing more holds the joy of being in the world, and learning about things, getting to know them, is most of what I loved — and love — about being alive. In my experience the more you learned about things, the *more* you loved them, the less you thought you owned, but she said the opposite with a confidence that seemed to know it was true.

At the time she wrote stories and diaries and manuscripts about the not-quite-everything she had learned in her life and they came out pretty good. There was still a naivety in there about so many things though.

She clearly didn't know some things about the world — like how it felt to be on a boat or in a big meeting or work a part-time job or even a job at all. She wanted to learn more in these areas of absence because she wanted to experience more life. She's still pretty convinced those two motives serve each other.

Though living can be a method of learning — one with live ammo and quite a bit of danger — I'm not willing to concede that learning can be a form of living. If it goes both ways that means those are the same thing. But they aren't the same, there's a different way of thinking about them.

June had once asked me — on a bad day, looking over my shoulder as I traced careful lines of ink to fill in after — if I thought she was “one of those people that *knew* a lot of things but ultimately *did* nothing.” I immediately told her she wasn't. She had a goal — something to do. That made it impossible for her to do nothing. Nothing was the opposite of June. Still it was easy to see that she was learning more for the sake of learning than living. She believed me with utmost confidence.

A week before our high-school graduation, June got a job at a magazine company — what was then a small, twice-a-year publication in the avant-garde that centered around art, politics and the intersection between living and social living — in order to learn what it meant to work.

She convinced me to join with her because they needed good design artists. I really joined because she made me happy, and I would have used any excuse to share some significant part of my life with her because despite her abilities as a chef or flaws as a friend, her name always tasted sweet on my tongue and felt warm in my chest. Something in me feels — knows, from an old bedroom conversation muffled by memory — she asked me to join because she knew this and felt the same.

Now, that monthly magazine no longer needed good artists, they needed artists who could be mass produced. We were fully on-board in college, and nowadays, after it had been sold to new management, they were beyond parties at the lead writer's house, entering into a phase centered around mass media production. They published spiritless, becoming what they were made not to be. They didn't really have heart anymore, and it was showing through their ever-expanding market.

When we were college upstarts, they cared about quality. By her third week there June knew the founders and told me all about them, by her third month she was friends with them. Slowly she was promoted because of her expansive mastery of her craft and social skills, where I gained status for my work ethic and efficiency. We were as high as we could be before management changed, and we loved it until the moment hands traded.

Every evening from five to midnight we would sit on the floor in pajamas and work together in our dorm, hearing the campus leak in by throngs, changing on whims between magazine productions and class assignments. There was always a clamorous tapping of keys and screens or scribbles against paper as we put each other in the mood to work. I would glance up, now and again, when I lost my rhythm, to see her focused, and she would often do the same.

Somewhere in the middle we would break for the day's chores — I would cook with the minimum we could afford and she would do the rest around the floor in a cycle she knew well. We would thank each other for what the other did (since it was never an expectation, always a favor) and share the space actively, talking without pause over dinner.

She did much of the speaking, as I peppered in my thoughts over the days when she asked and my responses when I felt it appropriate. She knew, after knowing me for so long, to never take my quiet as disinterest but to always take my sitting still as devotion.

But aside from that, most of those hours were spent working in relative silence. The loud sounds of the outer city broke in when the events outdoors reached a pitch the walls couldn't block, but we did well to ignore all but the worst interruptions. Their faraway quality made them unreal. Our interior focus was all that felt real those nights.

We would meet in the campus plaza, where evergreens gave shade in all seasons and we would share rant and tangent alike after a day of classes. Some days I could see the steam leaving June's ears with the words as we moved past the chilling flowers that made the walking lucid,

the fauna hiding in the trees or, in other seasons, roaming about the ground to find their food.

It is a haze now, it was a haze even then, but I studied every image I could see and kept them like a diary, all composed at various expenses of time and effort. I remember sitting with her, closing my eyes to concentrate on the memory, my fingers near the tip of the pen, aching over the details, marking the contours of the afterimages of my imagination. Opening to her looking at me, focused.

The night would be slowly falling in the city. On exceptionally clear days we would watch the sunset from our rooftop rather than just the changing of the light on the buildings visible from our window. We rarely made an effort to see the moon, but it peaked through on certain special nights (which were special for no other reason than this happening).

The silvering of the light would remind us to sleep, which we put off at all costs to spend more time awake, more time together, more time there, more time that, at that time, that we knew we wouldn't get back without ever needing to acknowledge it. We went to bed when the first of us found herself unable to work or crashed-landed in dreamland.

And in the morning, we would do very much the same thing that we did now. One of us would get up early and move as quietly as possible to start the coffee. She would drift into the world of the waking at the scent and sound of brewing and, after it finished, we would share the heat between our cups until one of us felt the need to move.

The size of the room had changed very little, only now we had a short hallway that led to a room made for sleeping and working, separate from the kitchen and utilities, and we had collected more of a clutter of mail and old books now that we were fully adults.

Back then it was most often me who was early to rise. We split the tasks more evenly now, and today it was almost always her who dealt with all that paper.

Early on, as we fell into our deep love there was a subtle, growing feeling, as if everything in our lives was doubling — two cups of coffee, two desks, two seats at the table, two bodies in the bed, two names in the mail, two hearts to manage and maintain — doubling and being split in half, divided evenly, if chaotically, carefully, if unusually. Parts of your life flowing out into their control, parts of theirs flowing in to fill that space, filling the same whole of time but in a different, plural way, which settles in as a broad sense of completeness, a constant embrace of something that isn't you but is close enough to be with you.

She stands to get the mail, I finish cooking the toast and frying the eggs. The plates are down and steaming by the time she gets back into the room, hers next to her empty cup, which I move to clean when she walks back in.

Her eyes are fixed on envelopes.

“Anything good?”

Automatically, disappointed, as always, by the power she vested in the morning mail: “No, just nonsense and bills.”

She flips to the last one, her eyes light up.

She tore it open carefully. She read slowly. Her eyes didn’t flutter over the words, they tracked them, like they would prey grazing the field. If she looked at it any harder the paper might have caught fire. She stopped and looked up.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I sent an application to a publisher in London last month. I just got accepted.” That sounded great! “Yeah.” But all the way in London? “Yeah.” I guessed it was travel media so they could manage her from everywhere. A company in Sydney could hire her and there would be no difference, it was clever to go looking overseas. But why London? “It’s a nice city. They want me to fly out as soon as possible.” An assignment already? “No Liv, to stay there.”

“What?”

“They want me to work with them in London.”

I stuttered in a failure to say something, and noticed a strange look in her eyes. Something I couldn’t decipher, which could be on account of her own rapid state of flux. “I suppose we should pack then?”

“You’re not going. You have a job here.” She could hold tears in her eyes exceptionally well. She was supposed to be crying, but held it back.

“I can leave. I’ll find something there.” I was pretending to sound assured.

“No. Don’t give up that chance.” She took a breath. “You’re rooted here.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean: You’ve got something good here. Don’t give it up for me, for chances in London you don’t have to take.”

“I don’t understand why you’re being so final about this. Shouldn’t we consider the options?”

She told me had booked a flight. One ticket, one way, to the UK.

The flight was at six in eight days. The mail must have taken a while to get here, or else she must have waited to say something until the very last moment. I put my bets on the latter. I remember exactly how she said “It’s already set.” There was a plan in motion.

“But I can still go, can’t I? Can’t I still choose to leave?”

“You’d be an idiot to do that.” I had friends to take me in here, I had a life outlined that could be something already. I could throw that away. I had nothing in London. Nothing but June in 250 hours. If it was a choice it was one that was already made for me. June could see that, and I could only pretend not to. I couldn’t ask her to stay. She knew what she wanted.

“So you have to go?” I did not want to be crying.

If there was any future for us, it was as things totally apart. Somehow I had known that for eighteen years and never was willing to acknowledge it. I was but another thing she had learned and learned from. The lessons were over.

“I’ll write about you,” She told me. “The people will swoon.”

I didn’t say anything.

*Say goodbye. The people are going now. It’s time to say goodbye.*

The Roman emperor Hadrian knew a boy whom he might have loved and whom he certainly cared about. The boy was named Antinous. Antinous was a controversial figure for him, since it was fairly out of practice to be as close to a Greek as Hadrian was to him. I wouldn’t call it forbidden — Hadrian was mostly the one to do the forbidding — but it was a point of discontent. An Inconvenient love.

They shared letters, shared afternoons, shared thoughts, and even shared meals. They constantly toasted to their friendship and their “love” as we might say it today. It could have been something different then, “love,” but it could have very well been the same. In my personal linguistics, meanings don’t change as much as words do. By either word of “love,” it is “love.” Whether it comes by friendship or *fati*, it is love.

They toasted once, to their friendship, while sailing upon the Nile. Under the vast expanse of the Roman wing, the Nile was a place to see wonders and broaden your horizons. Hadrian loved it so much he modeled a pool in his villa after a branch of it, among the countless statues.

In the history of Roman politics the world-touring ship was a place to drown your problems and the waterside a place to wash away your illness.

*Say goodbye. The people are going now. It’s time to say goodbye.*

I didn't say anything.

It felt like I lived the whole week in silence.

I finished my work while she packed. We walked, listening to the wind and low conversations on the city streets. Passively, absently, I let her pat me on the back when we hugged at the first hour of the break up, and I did that same at the last, letting her get on the train to later on. She held so tight, I was so shocked that I was nearly limp in her arms. She felt so big then, I hadn't noticed it, but she must have grown since we last touched.

For the first time that day, she cried. That was the first time I had ever made her do that. I felt like I was doing something evil. I know I wasn't. I was doing the best possible thing — the only right thing, but when faced with your opposite it gets hard to tell the difference.

On our last day the only thing I can remember saying is goodbye.

*Say goodbye. The people are going now. It's time to say goodbye.*

Hadrian said to Antinous, there on the azure-shimmering waters of the Nile as the sun burned high in the sky to tone it:

“You are lovely, my friend.”

Antinous replied: “You are lovely, my fellow.”

Hadrian said to Antinous: “I will make you a god.” He came close, gave the boy an embrace, a loving, long thing, then backed away. They were standing at the prow, looking out towards the setting sun, which, in the desert, burned over the land as it had never done in Rome. Hadrian looked Antinous in the eye, held him tight at the shoulders, like a friend, like a father. Something comes over Antinous, a great, imperial force, that sends him off far the boat, plunging him into the red water, to die — to either suffocate or be eaten alive.

The boy cannot swim, he could not fight. He just sinks.

The death was a good omen. Roman rule was sick with controversy and ill with the poisons of war. The world needed a sacrifice, and there was only one thing valuable enough to save it.

Hadrian made good on his promise, for sure. Statues from every corner of the Empire would bear his face. The boy would get his own cult, his own followers that called him the conqueror of death. Antinous was reborn as an image that persisted for centuries, one that could overcome what made him sink. He became a god, he was made a god, but he was no longer a human, and he had no choice in that matter.

*Say goodbye. The people are going now. It's time to say goodbye.*

I say “Goodbye” and the train whips off and makes my face feel cool and my body feel alone and, even then, I know I'm doing right by her.

I was letting her live. Convincing her to stay would be like convincing her to die — like convincing her to let me die.

She was so straight about it. She knew she was doing the right thing too. She had to know.

Just like I had to know she was saying something else when she was going away. It was around midday; the sun was balanced, smiling at its peak, departing soon; “Goodbye.” I had to catch the meaning she intended, and that meaning was goodbye. Not ‘see you’ or ‘until we meet again’, but goodbye. She intended to say hello never again.

*Say goodbye. The people are going now. It's time to say goodbye.*

It already seemed so long ago, even then. The moment she departed everything snapped and crystallized into historic clarity. I knew that this was eternal, I knew this was the past, and I felt myself floating in time. It was like living a memory.

### XIII.

Being surrounded by people at airports has always made me uncomfortable. Now, especially so, because I'm one of those lone travelers with nobody to talk to. Crowds feel so daunting without someone that I know next to me. So I shrink into my chair and wait until it's my turn to move again.

Life is different when somebody loves you.

Spaces feel smaller, sounds are more focused when you love someone.

Time seems to stretch and compress depending on them.

It's wonderful just to be surrounded by them, and you just feel so complete, so full.

And I left that behind. That whole world of growth and light and color, I left it to venture out into the deep gray of the unknown. I left it because I felt the call, and I was compelled to answer.

I was never much good at staying still. I always have to pace around to think, I always have to be presented with new things and new places and new people to feel like I'm living — or, well, not dying. And I got antsy. I needed to run away.

It was so cruel. It was so evil of me to revoke every promise of love and just go.

And all I could say was “I'm sorry, Ashe, I'm leaving.”

And yeah, it's fiction, it's narrative, because in real life you talk about how things are ending for months and then there's a whole month



that feels like silence. Where the two of you live together separated and there's painful thoughts of trying again mixed in with the general sense of mourning what you killed in just a few words.

And life is different when people leave you.

Spaces are quieter and wider when people leave you.

Time itself feels different when somebody leaves you.

Your whole life can seem to fold in on itself, and everything can feel like it is withering sometimes.

So I get it. Knowing that, now, I understand. I deserve all the guilt.

#### **XIV. NOTE — EPIGRAPH:**

And this is why I sojourn here,

Alone and palely loitering,

Though the sedge is withered from the lake,

And no birds sing.

~John Keats, "La Belle Dame sans Mercy"

*For June. That you may sleep soundly.*

#### **XV.**

I loved when we danced there, under the chandelier moonlight, on a taught, razor-thin wire above an unfinished past and unknown future, swaying, passing, eventually falling forward into a comfort we would find as sharp as spikes. It hurts the most because I can't make memories like that again. I hate how we have been constrained.

#### **XVI.**

And flights come with the terrifying realization that death at that speed can take place over moments. The very next moment can be different, entirely different. A matter of seconds can enclose a whole era of our lives, a whole novel's worth of thoughts distributed across billions of neurons. It's a wonderful thing, the capacity of those seconds to hold our changes.

Things and people can change, they can't possibly help it. The seconds give us a vessel by which that change can be distributed, held, and measured. The metaphor is complete, it has no mismatched edges: we really do swim through time like fish in water. Not just in memories either — I'm sure you've noticed, passing through the borders of your hometown, through the walls of your childhood home, you feel it, you



really do sense that you've walked backwards through time.

Soon I'll be back in my old home for the longest time in years. Even in just a few months, I'll feel it, I'll become younger, I'll be my old self again. It really makes me believe we were led to believe a lie when everyone said that time is strictly linear, that time travel is impossible — I've felt it, I know how free we really are.

I know my body is older, I know it hasn't really moved backwards — I'm not delusional — but that's not Time, that's just counting one vector in the massive field of motion and change (time, lowercase t) that is Time, really. A big, abstract fluid which our bodies are shot through and our minds move freely, changing back and forth, revising or reverting without any need for a sense of direction.

It's easy to walk into the past when it's right there in front of you — when all you have to do is open a door to see all the seconds you once lived. It doesn't take a portal or a wormhole or faster-than-light travel, just your old brain and a prompt. For Proust all it took was a cup of tea and a cookie. It's the *Ratatouille* moment — you know the one, where the critic eats the food and it reminds him of the simple joy of being a child at home.

There are things and places all over in which your past is stored — not hidden away, just waiting for you to come find it and feel the memory flooding over you(, around you, through you). And there is no better proof of the fact that we are so able to change than that feeling. For the second part — that we can't help changing — I cite the end of that feeling, the inevitable sense of the memory slipping away, as if it were a dream fading at dawn.

The moment we will inhabit — right now, right then — is connected to another moment not just by the spider's-thread thin filament of our timeline, but by the strange entanglements of time and space that make that seemingly-straight filament fold over itself countless times — into a ball, a knot, a web.

We overlap with ourselves; we meet different versions of ourselves at different points in time — that is what memory is, a conversation, a series of friendships with only one person. And depending on when we are we might like or dislike some of the versions of us we meet, that's good, that's fine, it shows we're discerning, it shows we're changing. We still live with them and drink the same water, but while we may be here with them, we had to go back to find them — that movement makes a world of difference.

Seeing this way, your life becomes open for your own exploration

of yourself. You are free, throughout time to explore, capture, and construct your personality, your mind, your self. You are free, so very free, but only at the cost of our own impermanence, only knowing what can be swept away.

#### **XVII. INSERT II. CUP**

I can safely say I loved June then. Loved, now with that extra “d” that I don’t want to be there. The apparition of the past — the constant foregoing of what was present — is such a terrible thing. I wish I could always say I *am* what I *was* in order to say I *am* what I *am*, because what I am is what I was, but what I was is made fundamentally different from what I *am* by a matter of letters and language conspiring to create time. Time is not stratified like the tenses make it. It is a continual stream by which we are connected to the front and the back and thus part of the same whole. We are what we were and what we will be. So when I say I loved June I really mean I love and will keep on loving. Perhaps not in every moment, but for all of these moments suspended in the thick water of time, I will be loving, I love, and I have loved.

Nevertheless I catch myself laying down and thinking that I love June because she was comfortable with me and I was comfortable with her. She loved me because I was different from her. In the infinite lattice of spiderwebs that is the world, I was the single thread connecting from June to everything I knew. I thought of this as a thick line in a sea of thin filaments branching from node to node. It seems that it is as thin as all the others now. It might have been stretched thin recently, or it could have always been that way. In either case, it wasn’t entirely unexpected.

Two spider webs in two different corners of a room. One long bridge to bring them together.

After she left I sat around for a few days and did the little work that I needed to.

I went to the bar after that. It was a seedy, dusty kind of place in the inner city. I called my friends from around the area — the ones that I was willing to drink with (who I felt wouldn’t ask questions) — and collected a small squad I thought I could talk to and ease the stress. Not stress. That’s not the word. I don’t know the word, but it’s not stress.

We sat under the dark sodium lights and talked about nothing. The drinks all looked like bourbon, and I really wouldn’t know the difference if they were just that. We talked. Nobody mentioned June because they all either knew she left or didn’t care. I didn’t care.

I can't remember who they were. I remember the night. I remember the texts and of course I have their names in my contacts, but there, in the bar, their faces were a warm blur. They made noise and little movements of the shadows, but they were unidentifiable. Shapes and colors that implied faces — that implied people — that I couldn't identify. Their features were made invisible.

The prism on the glass in my hand was something beautiful. A crack on the surface turned orange into everything. I stared at it and thought about nothing in particular — I thought by default. That is to say, I thought about it aesthetically — about taking a picture to show to June when I got home. She would like it, she loved this kind of picture. I framed it and pressed the button automatically.

I looked at my phone for a while after that, the hollow reflection of myself on the bright screen. I tapped around to pass the time.

My horoscope told me I'll be having a bad Summer. It told me I would have a good Fall and a happy birthday, too. The stars had thus made a conspiracy to make three months hot for everyone and shit for me in particular, which I found strange.

One of the faces interrupted my connection to the planetary schemes "How's it going, Livy?"

I put my phone away, smiled, told it everything was going good, and did my best to find its eyes. I nervously announced that I was glad to see them all again. Trying to read its face, I was looking at a kindergarten rendering of expressions. It was a swirl of meaningless colors and lines. Vaguely, I could find a square there, in the edges, lined in green.

"Good to see you too! It's been a while since you've gotten out!" It turned to face the bar and order something. It sat next to me. It wanted to talk and it got solemn "You look like you've been swamped." I smirked to say I have been. I had been a bit tired, that's why I was out. "They put a lot on you." It laughed, and the solid lines of the square became a momentary squiggle. A wave passed through and stopped. "They know they can trust you with it."

"I'm starting to think being trustworthy is more of a defect than a virtue." It didn't seem to catch the joke.

The bartender came and put a glass down. Its face was a swirl that came into a bright pink circle somewhere where the left eye would have been. It was a man looking out, gazing. The pool of colors that made it up didn't move. They looked like they should have, but they stood still, hardened.

The square must not have thought this far ahead. It seemed to pump itself up to say: “A lot of folks at the office think you’re inhuman.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s like you’re a machine!”

Was that supposed to be a good thing?

I cleared my throat with a fake cough. It caught the quiet through the air. It spoke to attempt a treatment: “I mean, like, they respect your work ethic and dedication. You have a lot of talent as an artist.” It was clearly trying to get at something. It didn’t seem to be a good writer. “The world needs more hard workers like you.”

“That’s very flattering.” It was starting to remind me of something else. “It takes some growing into I guess.” I didn’t mention “talent.” It wasn’t worth remarking on. That word was often used when someone meant skill, but it had the specific connotation that it wasn’t *my* skill, but the skill of something passing through me. When it came to my work at the magazine, this word was not even loosely applicable: certainly no god would sponsor me, and especially not for the menial labor that my work at the time amounted to. It was not talent. It was dry formal ability, which any *artist* would have seen.

Another swirl of colors atop a sweating, disheveled body sat down next to me. If it didn’t know better it would have tried to touch me. The lines traced at the edge of its face were stuck in place, forming a triangle. Still, the colors wandered about, shifting in an illusion that made the face both there and not there at the same time. Their expressions were a neon haze of hues.

It asked me something about June and from that I could tell it was from the editing department. They all knew her there, and knew of me with respect to her — as something like her mailbox, phone, or desk, on which they could leave her messages.

I told it that she was doing okay, very busy and very happy. It seemed to like that answer, as a warm glow inched over the figure.

The square asked “Who’s June?” I offered that she used to be the lead editor of the mag.

The triangle said something about her being a phenomenal writer in her time. It went on about us — June and I.

*In her time.* The fuck was that supposed to mean? She was still in her time and she would be in her time for longer than this isometric bastard could imagine. When it met her, she wasn’t even in her prime yet — not even close. Who was this to talk about her like she was a dead artist? To

talk about her like she was gone?

Someone old who felt solid about their worldview. That was who. Someone who believed working at an industrial magazine meant being successful.

Was *this* meant to be *my* time? What was *my time*? When would my time come? June was pushing towards hers — she always had been — would I be able to do the same?

There was a morning once where I talked with June about what gave her the ideas she would submit. The coffee reflected the light into something as close to a rainbow as the black fluid could manage. The steam still billowed off the top. She sipped hers and spoke.

“I don’t know.” She tightened her grip on the cup, the red square pointing towards me. “Little things, I guess. Like looking at the sky and in the mirror — stuff like that gives me the determination to write. Sometimes I just see things and I think: ‘I can make something with this’ and I do.”

She talked about it like it was a matter of perseverance. Inspiration was a constant flow that occupied her body, swirling like a heat through every inch of her person. She didn’t need to claim it or look for it, she *owned* it.

I had no idea what she was talking about.

“You wouldn’t. Making things is like breathing for you.” She knew how not to say ‘talent’. She went quiet, staring at me, squinting and dashing her eyes back and forth between mine. “Did anyone ever tell you that you have two different eyes?”

I told her that most people have asymmetric faces. Unfortunately, I wasn’t a perfect model of facial structure.

“That’s not what I mean.” She squinted and switched looking between my eyes. “The left one is brighter.” I checked to be sure: her eyes were both the same yellow-brown.

A week later she told me I looked at different things with different eyes. I was unsettled by the fact that she was studying me. Apparently I looked at her with my left — the same eye I used to look at flowers and paintings and coffee — and I looked in the mirror with my right — the same eye I used to look at budgets and the ink drawings I made for the magazine and cooking utensils. She spent a month telling me how I looked at things before finding something else to analyze.

She asked me once what made me choose what eye to use and I told her that I had no idea — that I didn’t choose. When I closed my left eye, colors seemed to dim, and when I closed the right the world seemed

brighter. Part of me thought of this a funny coincidence of biology, and the other parts knew that nothing was ever a coincidence — both in biology and in general.

I tried to look at things with my left eye more often, but it wasn't convincing. Mostly it left my face sore from closing my eyelid, which was more annoying than inspiring.

If the things that spark in my eye come at random, is it even possible for me to push forward to reach my time? Was it something that I could find, or would it have to find me?

I remembered I was supposed to be drinking. The triangle and the square were chatting about something completely nonsensical, probably concerning me. It was about the same sound that cicadas make. I was very suddenly uncomfortable with how my shoes fit on my feet and how the bartender was looking at me with that swirl of an eye and how the amber light was resting on my skin like dirt and dust and grime and germs.

I decided that I was going to leave and I said my goodbyes.

The triangle asked me to say hello to June for it.

“Rest up, we've got a good week ahead of us,” the square said.

The bartender took my money silently, and continued serving bourbon no matter what the customers asked for. The whole bar seemed to be melting together like wax in a pot. Everything was glowing with the colorful heat as I glanced back through the shutting door.

It was an icy night. It was snowing. It was Winter before the Autumn which came that Summer. I thought we might want a new calendar with new seasons to keep track of new cycles in the changing world.

I was wearing a raincoat to keep warm. This method was largely ineffective.

The cold was almost comforting, though. I was wrapped in it the same way that bedding wraps you in warmth. It coiled around me, tightened when I breathed, and made me smile. I made footprints in the thin snow blanket that rested on the sidewalk. My breath made semi-opaque puffs of gray in front of me.

Besides the cold and I, it was an empty night. Everything but the dim sky and the uncolored buildings was absent. Birds were hiding from the seasons, flowers retreated to temper their blooms, and people hid inside their homes collecting their heat in nests of cotton and stuffing.

The apartment was only a short walk away, but my legs couldn't take it somehow. They were weak and waving, they were tired and tremored, and they were ambitious, leading me to a bench in a park. It had

been some time since I'd sat in a park, and even longer since I had done so in the snow. I couldn't be sure I had ever done it at all, but some part of it felt familiar anyway. I wanted this, and so it was satisfying to do.

A little lamplight next to the bench intensified the shadow of my footprints. If someone were to walk to this same bench later, they would know that they were not the first, the light revealing that someone had done it — someone in the past was with them, the past-tense ghost of a present-tense person. It used to shed white light, but the translucent cover had faded over time and under sunlight and now it was yellow.

The amber-painted snow floated against the air like sparks playing specks of dust, making gentle, freezing touches against my skin. I pulled on the raincoat to make a better cover.

Maybe it was the alcohol or maybe it was the poor nutrition and the cold, but I felt empty. My lungs were filled only with air. There was no pressure behind them — they were continuous with the atmosphere. I laughed with the little force that they could manage, as if something was funny.

The cold reminded me of another day. “A vessel for you to fill with all your colors,” I remembered, the label on the glass pen's box read “A vessel for you to fill with all your colors.” It was a strangely general description for this item, and an inaccurate one at that — mostly you dipped the pen in something which was filled with colors; it was not something that was ever filled itself. It was probably a product of poor translation from Italian.

The pen was something blank that often propagated colors somewhere else, temporarily taking on a modicum of pigment purely for the sake of transitioning them to a home someplace else. The ink container held the pigment until it was time for the transfer. In fact, if the pen were to hold onto pigment for too long, it would probably be made for it. For most of its life it was meant to stay there, devoid of color, an unoccupied vessel.

I thought about how the words could have been twisted in transmission for some time before and after I stood up and finished the walk home. The footprints wrapped around the bench and came back into themselves in a teardrop. There was a loop, a circuit that united the past with the present and what one could assume would be a future.

I thought about how the square and the triangle might make good friends for each other. They could probably be happy at the magazine forever. I thought about how it might be to have a shape instead of a face and a job instead of a passion.



I sent my resignation warning the next day and called Rina, my friend with the job. I would start next week as a manager and guest teacher for her studio — a demotion into the future.

I woke up sore. It was hard to get through coffee in the morning.

I would start the coffee (typically brewing too much), knowing by routine that I had to do it, and grab a cup. When it was brewed and poured, a matter of automation made me sit down at the table where nobody sat across from me. I would do it for a second, frown, and then move to make my breakfast while the coffee got cold from sitting there. I had nobody to impress by cooking something good, but I did it anyway some days.

This morning, I noticed June left her cup. The red cube screamed out against the shadows.

She had been in a hurry, and many little things were left behind. Her soap was still in the shower, brushes were still on the mantle, and cups were still in the cupboard. Mostly they were things I could throw away — things that didn't have much value. This was not so easy to deal with.

I took it down and washed it while the brewer made little sounds of boiling and swirls of steam escaped from the carafe. It looked polished when I was done with it. The coffee was done and I made breakfast, and the mug was left on the counter to dry in the air.

The oppressive summer sun broke through the window and onto it while I ate breakfast to the tune of the morning's news broadcast. I held a strange discomfort with the idea of the outside of a cup being wet. I chose to ignore it, but the thought of a cup — a thing to hold water — being covered in a film of water was disconcerting.

At least this summer had the sun. That saved it from a full commitment into being a new winter, but made it more jarring when it was cold. The climate of deserts was once described to me as something similar to this, as days of deadly heat interrupted by nights of deadly cold.

Once I got into a good rhythm with the beginnings of my job at Rina's studio — where I would find that I was the only other worker — the heat was essentially the only villain in my day. But for now, I had to get used to working in traditional media again after a long while focusing on prints and digital designs. It came back about as easily as I would expect, which is to say it took weeks of nonstop practice to be anything close to passable, let alone worthy of being taught.

I knew how much I missed — and dreaded meeting again — the physicality of the traditional media. The way the pigments stuck to the canvas, the fraying of brushes, the dirty flings of ink from accidental



motions, the mere effects of gravity on the flow of substance — it was all such a messy engagement, with so much more possibility to it.

In the frustration of un-and-re-learning, I had to remind myself that making art is a negotiation between the physical restraints of the media and the fantastic ideals of the imagination. The artists I most admired were the most fluent translators from ideal to real, keen in both concept and construction. I was working to brush up on the language of the tools, and I forgot how easy it was to get lost in this simple, strange physicality.

As a supplement to the practice I helped teach her loyal students — almost all of them in high-school trying to build their portfolios for college applications, though with a few sessions devoted to real beginners. I mostly gave instructions in the fundamentals of sketch and design. They seemed to help younger students immensely.

I knew all of them by name at the time but in memory the room blends into a cloud of eyes, a hurricane of faces and noise with only Rina at the clear, quiet center. I remember almost nothing in particular except the clarity with which these people looked at me, the always-variant brightness of the eyes under the white light.

There was one day near the end of my third week, after one of the storms had passed, when Rina — stopping by the crowded little desk I had for my personal work in the back of a stuffy little supply storage room — stood over me without me noticing and said, in a very serious voice, “I want to talk to you about an exhibition.”

She explained the plan: Fabric and Fabrication, we each do a wall. I must have looked confused, she explained: “Things and making things up, faces and facades, stuff like that. The mask and the mask-maker.” When? “Three months. You can pull or make works, I just want a wall, can you do it?” I could try. “I need a promise.” I promised I would try. “I’d expect you to keep teaching on the schedule we’ve agreed upon.” She was giving me a chance to get my name out using hers. I accepted the gracious offer immediately.

The invitation to participate was her way of declaring her confidence in me as an artist, and she gave me full control of some lessons soon after that.

I did well, and the students appreciated the break from Rina’s generally gentle, but still stern advice. But there was always one student, a boy named Kerain who I could never motivate to put more than minimal effort into the page, which was strange behavior in a class his parents were paying for. After a few days of honest attempts I decided to ask Rina about

him.

She explained: “Oh, excuse his attitude. His father was a great artist, and apparently a very active teacher.” Was? “Was. He hasn’t handled it well.”

There was a lot of pain hidden behind that “was,” a great absence. Didn’t death used to be something sad? Didn’t it used to carry more weight than the simple insinuation of the past tense?

It was once something to be talked over, to be discussed, and to be considered. Death, in itself, used to be the tragedy, needless of any other figures or forms.

When I was a child death was something to be concerned over, words were hung on the dead to lift them up or words were not said of them at all. It was the picture of myself on the last bed, then of myself as Nothing, as free space, disarranged and never to return. Reborn or unborn, It was a departure, one that tightened the lungs and reminded me of a body that would go Away. It was significant and weighty. It was a crying, not a quiet comprehending.

Now it was. It just was. It isn’t because it *was*. The only thing it will be is gone, because it was and now it isn’t. To be something that *was* is not to be anything at all.

“I had a father.”

That was it.

*Had.*

Nothing is to be said about my mother’s tears or my tears or our mourning. It too only was. And, being of little significance and something that no longer *is*, it is nothing. It was worth mentioning only for the fact that it was happening. Now that it isn’t, it isn’t.

“How was your class?” Fairly good, I told her that they seemed to have learned. “You were a little easy on them.” I was sure they appreciated the change of pace. “We’ll see if it was helpful.” We started cleaning up the studio.

“For all the techniques, they don’t really seem to be getting the principles,” I said.

“That’ll come later.” But why not now? “There’s no point in using the principles if you don’t have the ability to wield the tools.”

“But don’t you think that’s a little funny? Giving them all the basics before telling them anything about how to use them?”

“What’s funny about that?”

“Learning so much and having nothing to do with it kinda has a

sense of irony, yeah?”

“In the same way that cleaning a studio that’s going to be used tomorrow morning has a sense of irony, sure. Laying the foundations of a building is ironic if you’re that generous with the definition.” Laying the foundations of a building before it’s even planned is certainly ironic. “What’s ironic,” she said, “is that you’re in love with a writer and you don’t know what irony means.”

I *loved* a writer. I laughed and sorted the supplies.

Night made the walks home cooler. The wind blew a chill through my body, leaving my joints to harden and scream at the effort. The drugstore’s conditioned air presented some solace in which to defrost, but my stiff fingers still hurt when I picked up my sleeping pills.

I passed through the stationery aisle and, for no reason in particular, a journal caught my eye. I squatted to look at it — something about the color made me lock onto it, something in my head made me stop to pick it up. The pills felt heavy in my hands. I held them by the cap as if threatening to drop them.

I checked out with both of them.

I hadn’t kept a journal for a long time, and never just for myself. The one I used to keep in high school is hiding somewhere my mother keeps the things I tell her to throw away. It was a black composition book, college ruled, and I would write things along the lines of:

“Saturday, September 2nd:

Today was a day worth living for...” perfectly between the lines. I knew she would read it, I wrote knowing that.

This one was purple, and tonight my calligraphy connected the dots sporadically to form often illegible words that amounted to a summary of the day in real, human speech. I wrote things like “I have done nothing today and feel terrible because of it,” with a line of space between the days that bordered it. Rows of dots were interlaced with moments of silence in between.

Then, I wrote with a ballpoint pen which I would have to press hard to form the words, now I write with glass, laced with ink to form thick, easy letters of arbitrary length and width. I still write with the same fervent motion that smudges ink in ways I know how to avoid but seem to still come out as the words seek their place on the page.

The ballpoint pen made my forearm ache, and the glass one made my wrist sore. The bones in my fingers always seemed to bear a tension deep inside them, yearning to be released onto paper, canvas, or silk.

Reveling in the shapes of the letters, I enjoyed the noises against the paper — ballpoints were silent, making the room seem more empty than the glass pen, which was — resonating, vibrating into my hand and down my arm, through the whole of my body. It broke into the air with a hollow, ringing hatch, thickening it.

I wrote a very long entry after dinner that night (and for many nights after, until the book was filled with everything I had the impulse to write). I had cleaned all the things and put them back in their proper places to be used the next morning, and I cleaned and dried June's cup again at the end of it, setting it back down in the cupboard when I was done. I didn't want it to collect dust and go yellow like the other cups it sat with. That would ruin the design.

Mom would peck at me for writing about things I should do or wanted to have.

I wrote about how I should clean the house and wanted to get rid of the heat.

I thought it was funny to be writing about something like cleaning, but it felt cathartic in a way. It was strange to express written hatred for something like heat, but it was at the very least therapeutic. There was no need to say any of the things that I had written — they were the obligatory and common thoughts in my head. It just felt good to write something down.

I polished the rooms before going to bed, dusting off all the cobwebs and dirt.

I thought about myself, awake in bed that night. I thought about how I used to write until the letters were perfect and then melt into the floor for a few hours of sleep before the morning. I thought about the nights and how, even in the exhaustion that was always consuming me back then, I couldn't sleep. I just stared at the ceiling.

I treated the ceiling like a mirror, looking at it to look back down.

I let myself meet my own eyes, pushed back my own shaggy hair, and judged the unfamiliar corpse that lay on the floor, covered, but only in my own clothes. They should at least put a cover over the empty eyes, hollowed by something from another room. A blanket or something to keep the body warm.

My eyes burned with thoughts about tomorrow and today and yesterday all at once. Time collapsed in on itself and the end of my life occurred at the same time as it began. Next week was today and my exams were in an hour despite being months away. I was at my final-exam

exhibition, I was unprepared. It was high-school again and I couldn't sleep. A child's weak heart could only be identified by a subtle rhythm to a lullaby.

My eyes were closed. The magic mirror in the sky was turned off. I could still feel what I was lacking, the emptiness I had wrapped myself around, I could still feel my weight, and I could still imagine how it should have been distributed. So I didn't sleep, I just let myself be there with my eyes closed to bring an imaginary peace. I felt cold, but had no motive to stop that, letting my hands freeze in the practice of restraint.

I can't remember it well, but I think that night I dreamed about being there and lifting myself into bed. I dreamed of tucking myself into sleep and letting me rest. I felt my hands and myself in my hands, and I felt the impending warmth. There was the soft reckoning touch of the future dipping into the past.

I felt a creeping smile to be in bed, I lost any tension at all.

I was put in a place to rest and so rested.

I hadn't grown much since then — I still lay in the bed the same way, I would still fit into the same clothes — if anything I might have gotten shorter. I wish I could say I taught the bags under my eyes to recede, but they stayed printed where they were. Something in the face made it look like a baby, something in it resembled a child, something that its eyes wouldn't see if it were to look up, awakened to the image of a ghost who hadn't even existed yet. I wanted to lean down and whisper a story or offer a hug. Instead I said goodbye and turned the lights off as I left the room.

I felt a jolting wake me up. It was a warm night, and somehow the power had gone out, leaving me hot. The night was walking steadily into dusk. I slowly became aware of another presence in the bed, and felt warm, so warm. I was wrong. The air conditioning kicked in, I crept back under the covers, hugged June loosely, and told her I loved her.

I woke up again, this time aching in every joint.

I was exhausted, it must have been a dream.

I only ever had dreams when I forgot to take something to help me sleep. Waking up after having a dream — especially a nightmare — was therefore the hardest thing I would ever do. Not only did the last month blend together with the present moment as if it existed in historical time, but I also felt tired — the sort of tiredness that resides in the lungs and heart, a sitting, patient kind of tired that eats away at your strength, but seems foreign to even the muscles that feel it.

I couldn't tell where my hands were, but I knew they felt heavy.

Someone would have to remind me to take sleeping pills just like how she reminded me what overstimulated me, what time to take my vitamins, and what feelings meant that I was getting a headache. She would do it subtly, but knowingly: “Are you ready for bed?” or “Are you sure you want to go?” giving a hint that something was off so that I could say “No.” on those days where caring about myself was like a series of bad riddles or “Yes.” otherwise.

Every movement made me aware of my soreness.

I would manage to make it through these days where the last night’s sleep offered nothing but a time sink, but not without a haze. The net effect was a day spent upside-down and mirrored, and there is no further way to describe it.

I made a bland breakfast with acetic and bitter coffee brewed in a desperate plot to make me feel awake that would ultimately fail by noon. I yawned the moment I finished it and noticed how I absently used the strange cup with the red cube, washing it down after with tap water.

It was strange to see it with water inside. Black coffee was a fine thing inside it, as if it was made for that, but in my mind it still normally held some caramel colored milk coffee that wasn’t nearly as prismatic and pure as this water, that let the morning light shine in on the white interior surface. I squinted at it and drank, then cleaned it thoroughly, being sure to dry it.

The light that made it squint-worthy was short-lived. A storm rolled in to cover the sun before I left for the studio. It was pouring rain, but the heat did not let up.

An umbrella could stop the rain, but nothing could stop the heat entirely. The water made the planet more humid — the air thicker. Without sunlight it was less oppressive and more of a passive weight which emanated up in limited supply from the concrete and asphalt before it bore down on all the things which wished to stand tall and solid. Foundations never once shaken by the turmoil of the world melted under its pressure.

The rain hitting the top of the umbrella was reassuring. It tapped rapidly and hit hard, but it was nice. Having rain was nice, it relieved the fear of drought. If the underside of the umbrella stayed dry as it should have, everything beneath would be dry with it. Generally, that is how an umbrella should work.

But I passed near a truck. For a moment I let the suffocating embrace of the car’s exhaust — a relieving warmth, even in the depth of the heat — snuggle up with my body, although, unwilling to stop, I had to

pass it by. The fumes fought the rain, and caught in the underside of my shield. I tried to position myself to let it out, but — prioritizing not getting wet — found myself able to do nothing more than reposition it, and so I held the staff a bit lower towards the handle, keeping the gas away from my head.

An umbrella might hold water if it were turned upside-down. If I didn't know better I would have flipped it over and used it to hold a drink. An umbrella could take in water just as well as it could keep it away. I wanted to flip the umbrella to test my theory, but was not in love with the idea of getting pointlessly wet. I certainly wouldn't need to though — the wind sent a force that whipped it away from covering my body, just long enough for me to get drenched.

Drying my feet on entering the studio was pointless. My socks were soaked through and I dried the soles purely out of habitual etiquette. I said hello to Rina as she sat at the front of the room painting and she waved back. She told me classes were canceled. She had tried to call me but I was already on the way.

I took the day to work towards planning my exhibition pieces. We sat quietly, often meditating on our thoughts for some time before I asked her a question which I found had been simmering in my head since she brought it up: “Who do you expect to be there?”

“The usual suspects, and Sylas Porter.” Him, of all people? “He sent me a letter about coming to my next show. I figured you would want a chance to have him see you too.” She smirked a little, her tiny smirk, invisible to strangers.

Sylas Porter was our advisor for all four years of university and Rina's favorite antagonist. In my estimate he seemed to care about the student body quite a bit, but he certainly had a strange way of sharing that sentiment.

“He hates every single student he has ever talked to.” Rina told me once.

“Not every student.” I pressed the button for the crosswalk. “But probably most of them.”

“He's a crabby old bastard who just hates new ideas!” She skipped breakfast and needed lunch, which accentuated her sentiment. I was planning to pay for her at the bakery.

“I'm sure he'll break eventually.”

“I shouldn't have to *break* him, he should *see* that it's a good idea.” The idea in question was an exhibition that Rina would later remark



about as ‘unfocused and amateur’ while reviewing her work. It was about fruit and that’s about all I can remember about it — a remarkable feat considering that I can’t remember most of my college life. “It’s like I’m not allowed to experiment at all. I mean, imagine looking at the way someone organizes their thoughts and life and history and saying that it’s dull, mediocre, and unable to be called a success!”

It was easy to see where she was getting that idea. Porter evaluated her last exhibition as a ‘poor expression of a great depth of feeling’. He looked at her like he enjoyed telling her that, like he was infatuated with his own words.

He had a face full of deep lines and dark shadows that made him look sixty at forty. His eyes were sharpened to cut and the hair over his mouth was polished to slice. ‘You should study your traditional forms.’ He seemed taken with his own words.

Still, she got a lot out of working under — surely beneath, as he made that abundantly clear — him. I think most of her improvement in the years I knew her came indirectly or directly from raging at his words. She took them to heart, for what that’s worth.

For my review he offered that “I feel like I’m missing the necessary history to understand what you mean to say. This needs to be a more contained experience.” He spoke to me with a softness Rina took as favoritism. Porter was one for favoritism — his student reviews indicated that *extensively* — but he didn’t have much of a liking for me, either. He didn’t think of me as much of an artist, more often calling me a politician because of how I structured my work.

He called me very literal, and that was the primary reason I accepted the offer to be a lead designer after graduating from university, thinking I didn’t have the capacity to be a true, independent creative.

Sitting down for lunch that same day, Rina and I talked about what she meant to do with our final exhibitions and what would make it unique as practice for her second attempt at selling it. It was soon after the coffee was delivered to the table that she said she made most of the pieces as a reflection of her “continuity with the tools that enabled her to put the marks on the paper.”

“What does that mean?”

She was taken aback “It’s... Well the artistic tools become an extension of your body...”

“I don’t really get that.” I sipped the coffee. It was sweet and made a warm feeling wash over my body which I particularly disliked. I took a



moment before sipping again and was glad the effect didn't repeat itself.

"Okay, well when you make art, are you thinking about the pen as a pen?"

"Usually. It's not anything else."

"Yeah, but it's not exactly the same way you would think about just a normal pen sitting on the desk in front of you, right?" I guessed that was true. It's in my hand and I'm using it then, unlike a decorative pen. I liked the thought of a decorative pen, even if it was a dreadful fate. "Well for me it's like it becomes an extension of my hand. It is no longer a case of me and the pen acting as separate objects, it is wholly a case of the pen, which I control." She sipped and took in the warmth. "To practice art is to practice oneness with the tools — it's part of being human to see it like that. I'm surprised you don't feel the same."

"I suppose I've always been more concerned with the matter of the piece than the matter of making it. It comes easy to me."

"I'm still jealous of that." She took a bite from her pastry.

"Where does inspiration come from for you?"

"Same place as you, I think. Why?"

"I guess I just don't see where you can be inspired if you constantly think about the tools. Like I've always thought technique was just a procedure to get across ideas that 'artistry' brings up. I've never heard anyone call strategy and tools 'artistic'. It's always talked about as fairly mechanical"

"Well there's obviously more than *that*. I'm there. I'm communicating with the tools to expand us into something that isn't just me or it but something entirely new. I guess the art would be like a rendering of that." She focused on something else, looking down into the coffee, mindlessly stirring so that it swirled and reflected the light on the rim. It was almost luminant, a candle burning within the cup.

I wanted to know more, but she clearly needed time to recharge and think before offering that. I thought of how her perspective appeared in her portfolio work. The emergence of her forms had always been interesting, everything looked as if it appeared out of nothing in a hazy burst of color. It felt to me like she was trying to say that everything is essentially nothing in color. It was uncertain if that was the intent or a relic of her subconscious — or mine — slipping in.

Nothing. Nothing onto which is projected in a glorious display of mythical colors and sounds that appear to effectively be emerging from the infinite surface of black. If we could peek back and stare long enough

at the light we might see the mill that was running the whole operation, but content to look forward I watched Rina watch coffee giving it the occasional sip without looking up, thinking “what a phenomenal thing.” What made it phenomenal? I didn’t know. I don’t know. I won’t know. That’s the magic of unfamiliar arts, it’s wonderfully indissectable — you don’t have to, you can see through the skin, but that opacity hides so much.

I couldn’t stop thinking about college, or really just Porter all day.

It would be a lie to say I hated him, and a lie to say I was fond of him. Porter was a judge of character as a part of his being a critic. He had a manner of reducing people, breaking them down into pieces which he could conceive of and therefore judge harshly and completely.

I agreed to the exhibition in a strange concoction of feeling — simultaneously wanting to show him how capable I was (in his face) and to demonstrate how much he had taught me (as thanks).

I was scared. In roughly the amount of time to get me to where I was when I left the magazine to where I was now, I would be expected to become exhibition-worthy, and then produce works at that level constantly until opening day. It was questionable that I had been exhibition-worthy at any point in my life.

I almost backed out every single day, but I couldn’t do that to Rina. I couldn’t make her face this alone. More than anything, I said yes to her because Rina said she wanted me to do it in the same way that someone would say they wanted you to get them something small from across the room.

“I want you to make a wall” which is to say, “please help me with this.”

I would have said yes to that if the exhibition were a week away.

There was a vow — a promise embedded into the very words of acceptance I uttered — not just to assert myself but to uplift another human being in doing so. That made it impossible to say no. There wasn’t ever another choice. It was over from the moment she said “want” — decided, the Fates sealed the rest of the story in an order sent down from the heavens, through the words, and thus straight to me. We were doing this together.

I knew what I was doing and I was hopelessly unafraid of that fact — I knew that I would drown myself in work and I was terrifically unafraid of that future. Now, knowing all that would come, I sat down and did what I always do — what I cannot and could not help but do:

I worked.

The short of the assignment was that I had to make something. There was no way to get around the fact that in the end I would either have the necessary material or I would not. At the base of the hierarchy was putting pen to paper — if I did nothing else I would at least have something. It was better to do too much and cut it down later than it was to do nothing and have to improvise at the eleventh hour. So I started by creating.

It wasn't simple — nothing is — but it was basic — everything real has to be.

If it was going to be a two-person exhibition then I would need to present at least 15 works for this to be serviceable. That would require nearly one piece every six days. With dedicated work I think I could get one piece out every three days, but the quality might falter. I couldn't afford to let that happen. Six days for something good was pushing it, considering that it required not just a perfect execution, but a perfect idea.

Pulling pieces was out of the question by the first day. I had studies and sketches, but there was nothing serviceable as anything but inspiration on the topic. I would have to do it all myself.

The alarm would wake me up and I would be forced out of bed by the sunlight invading through the window each morning. It would burn my eyes and I would have to overcome the pull to go back to sleep in that one-size-too-large bed. I would have to think about the look of pillowcases and satin and looms as I made the coffee and pondered folds over the toaster.

The taste of oatmeal would remind me of metaphors and I would make quick napkin sketches before cleaning the dishes and the cup I left to soak of the sunlight — softened by blinds so as not to let the color fade. I would hold those sketches until I got to the studio — through the heat and the class and the singular brat that never failed to seem dissatisfied — and I would have to place them on the table and see if they could fit in with some others or stand on their own. Most days I would copy it to realize that it would fail and then have to find something else evocative.

Rina played into her comfort zone with the ideas of light and dark and illusory luminance she liked to evoke, but I was a bit out of my element trying to mesh into what she was making.

“Obviously I would prefer if they mixed into a smooth gradient.”

I had asked her how far I could differ.

“It's going to be one room, so if they are totally dissonant it's going to be obvious. We could play into that but you'd have to let me know now.”

“No, I think I can work with it. Thank you.”

“Just let me know if this is too much.”

“No, no. It’s great. Thank you again.”

“Don’t say it twice. It’s—”

“Bad for me. Yeah. I’d say sorry if I didn’t know better.”

She smiled to be remembered. With the amount of times she said it to me there was no exorcising the words from my brain. She would never have smiled like that before.

She always had happiness known some other way, through some more-processed means of expression. I smiled back, if not just because I was happy to know she learned how to do it.

She seemed lighter in recent weeks. She had been making more plans with some friends she met in the city and she talked about how much they loved to listen to her talk about museums and pastries and really anything she found a passion for. I was glad to hear it.

I meant to tell her one day how much better she seemed.

It would have to be a day after the exhibition though. It wouldn’t mean anything if I said something important when she was stressed — there would be a thanks and a return to the day’s work. I had to say it when it would come out of nowhere. That would mean so much more.

I had to make something that meshed with what she produced. Pieces that — when interlaced with hers — would make you have to look at the cards to confirm your suspicions on which artist of the two created this. It was about crafting something which would exist close enough to her work to be indistinguishable in form but distinct enough to develop a separate, flowing personality.

I had no lack of experience, but that didn’t make it easy. I’m sure working with me put her in the same position. We worked under distinct and traditionally opposed paradigms. If you asked each of us to draw an eye they wouldn’t share one stroke — mine might even end up as the negative image of hers. Part of the passion of a dual exhibition was finding the points of contact between these completely dissimilar creations.

The negative might be the opposite, but that didn’t mean it had to clash.

It was a project of finding a point of contact — a hinge-point uniting two apparently free worlds. Looking at Rina’s work gave me an idea on what I was looking at. The primary piece of concept inspiration was an older piece in oil where a hand was concealed in a taught mask of silk.

The impressions were there to make a hand, but we were viewing it

from the side that could only ever imply a hand, making our space that one which the hand was reaching in to grasp at. Two worlds were divided such that one could receive only impressions of the other transferred through a sheet only permeable by the thinnest of things.

Like present only in the respect that it emerges from the stylistic motif. To see it, we must first accurately interpret the context, then look for the form.

The title of the piece was “Covers,” and it essentially recreates the cushion’s eye view of a scene. Just as the brushstrokes are visible only when you look for them, the personal element of the expression is visible only when you investigate the emotional effect, and even then it is distorted and altered by subjective undercurrents of what fabric means and what we find striking.

Rina called it “Empathizing with a bed” and, when I asked what we were meant to make of the barrier she said “A bedsheet, a shield.” She meant the hand as imposing, I think, and I found it desperate.

In any case every stroke contributed to an illusion and the symbolism was evidently circumstantial. It was a clear display of some confusing thing. My practice being that of making a familiar thing confusing enough to be newly meaningful, I would have had the fabric swallow the hand from the perspective of the hand’s owner if prompted with the concept of ‘hand, bedsheet, *Covers*’. In contrast to her work, my interventions would be more literal, getting at a similar symbolism — a different perspective would be successful.

As such, my early sketches dealt with fabric as a material. The effect I wanted to produce was one that had a general impact of unraveling the definition of fabric by detailing it precisely.

If I affected feelings with the material itself rather than its interactions and illusions it would stand against and complement the ideas that Rina put forth. The effect there would be the motion from study to incorporation into visual reality. To achieve this I needed a large number of sketches and later I would find I required a surprising amount of research into the process of weaving.

With that in mind, I worked on drafts that would get the impact I needed.

Almost from the beginning I existed in burnout time — a cyclical stream of progress winding about a central axis. Sleep was less an act of relief as it was a pause. It composed a seconds-long interlude between the waking thoughts, letting me wake up on the same line — as if on the same

day — I fell asleep. It was essentially the only break I took and it was more elliptical than anything else. It satisfied no relaxation and only served a brief repair.

The only other change of state would be an inversion of the difficulties at the start and end of the process. My mind would take issue with the prospect of sleeping as soon as my head hit the pillow and keep me up for hours only to become an impossible weight upon waking up. The problem inverted itself with careful bureaucratic timing so as to make the process of sleep as tedious and useless as possible. Nevertheless I slept and awoke.

The ink and lead was removed from my hands for sanitary purposes only, and even then it was somewhat sparse. It had very little actual effect on the taste of food, but it was unsettling to find it there.

On the weekend nights the only noise was the sound of the pen and pencil against the page. The glass one made a light scratching, almost screeching from some angles, it sang under the pressure and released that which it was made to carry. It was a delicate tool, and for some time I resolved to set it down and use the standard tools which could be more exact with less maintenance.

The hours in the cramped studio were the same, solitary thing. The nature of the hours made these places — my bedroom and that small space across the sea of heat — the same, just as every library occupies the same mental niche, these two rooms situated themselves on top of one another, the only point of disagreement being the tempting possibility of elision via somnambulant thinking.

After many long days it didn't take long for the momentum of starting to wear off. Quickly into the process of putting marks on the paper a fog would begin to build behind my eyes. The thoughts slowed down and petrified into nothing — a mind unwandering and unfocused — and each few seconds I would shake my head to try to snap it away so I could be productive.

Often it would work. The shake of the head would jumpstart the process and I would again know what I was doing — putting lines onto paper to represent, as valuably and realistically as possible — the fabrics I imagined.

For a week I would hold a particular thought and draw it out quickly to its furthest extreme of representation. Practicing the forms in various parts so that when I got to the final draft I could borrow the shapes and piece together something that manipulated those traditional — almost

compulsory — visions into something new, something which might never exist outside of the canvas but pretended to convincingly enough for it to be disturbing.

Hands formed from the silk, the silk formed to accommodate the hands. What was real refused to differentiate itself from what wasn't, and there was fabrication in the fabric. For a moment I convinced myself that it was a true image — a photograph — and I thought that viewers might do the same.

The irrational forms assembled into a perfect simulacrum that one could look at but never see, which was bound to make them feel something outside of their reality. These were the results of repetitive and preparatory practice, and they spoke to the confidence and dedication of a professional. These were days of dedication and ultimate creation.

But other days, the fog — a channeled spirit encircling me in rough-set rings resembling bats as they scan around their houses upon the arrival of twilight — a crowding, blinding stream investigating the familiar but unseen world, would settle, too deep to be dispelled.

And after all that time cooped up in a room, exhausted from the strain of thinking and so full of energy it was immobilizing, I would have to walk out to displace the settling inertia. The alternative was to allow a singularity of thoughts to form, a hole from which nothing would escape onto the canvas.

Outside, the fog that had wrapped itself around my head in all that time in the atelier, swirling there and gaining density such that in swirling around could belabor my breathing and cover my eyes, would release itself into the atmosphere, stringing out in all directions to touch the facades and the billboards, the cars and drivers and pedestrians, the floor and the clouds, putting me in connection with all that I could see, dissolving those false boundaries imposed by the presence of a self.

In time those walls would return — forcing the recession of my thoughts back into the usual container of deadlines and daily things — but for these walks the filaments of fog forced perspective-in-continuity which I could neither recall nor dislodge. I ate up the world, the world digested me. On these walks, I dissolved.

My hands held the air with the same delicate grip with which it guided a pen — stuck there as much from the long work of a day as much as from the habitual work of a lifetime — loosely guided the ghost of the same object. If the promise in the echo of the tools was true, the air presented everything as a mechanism for which I could conduct so as to



produce the effects of the real things the air touched on something which it didn't. With the ghost pen as with the real ones I could tease out real forms in the unreal space of the image.

I was burdened with the responsibility of merely finding the forms and shapes among the infinite supply that would work. Connection to so much — feeling so much — would be exhausting if I let myself fall into it, and so I did not. Rather, I would translate it, bit by bit, disinterested until the very last moment, standing back to appreciate those things only once they could stand on their own and not for a moment before.

There was no such thing as a lonely walk, nor a walk alone. I was walking on my own, but surrounded on all sides by things and people that disrupted the process of getting stuck in my own head. Just when a thought was picking up traction it tended to fall away at the sight of a person, or something like a leaf falling just before my eyes and the habitual regret that I hadn't been there, a second ahead of myself, to catch it. No, the only possibility was walking with everything, unthinking, in connection with everything by the virtue of sight, unable, on these clouded days under the burning sun, to discern what was meaningful.

But in order to create I needed to be creative — to draw something out that was worth creating. I could practice the traditional forms all that I wanted, but that wouldn't mean anything if I didn't have a good idea. To make something impactful, I had to make something inspired, and such a thing took inspiration — it took the clear(er) air of the outdoors — it took something other than myself.

Want for inspiration loomed over my every move. It wasn't a recent habit of the feeling, but it was a newly strong one. It was a desperate search for anything that I could render meaningful — anything that could be generalized. Everything had weight but nothing felt meaningful.

I hoped something would reach out and lift up like a brush might hope to be employed. I had a purpose that I was simply not fulfilling, dormant and desperate to be employed.

I spent a day staring at a large white page, knowing that I had to put something on it but incapable of lifting the tools to start. There was nothing but a void of white. I knew exactly each component that I could use and — in the details — I had explored so many ideas I was excited to employ, but there it was: absolutely nothing. Not a speck of real existence. I got the sense that something was watching over my shoulder as I stared at my hands, open wide and poised on my knees. Something — some ghost — might have been.



There was a knock at the atelier-storage-room door.

“Come in.” I said for Rina.

“Hello?” the door opened with a shy creak.

“Kerain? How was your class?” He was holding all his materials, a prominent notebook in his hands.

“It was class. I have something to ask.” The shyness was disposed of now that he had walked in. Perhaps he was afraid of empty rooms. I invited him to take a seat at the only other chair in the space otherwise crowded with books, old works, and spare instruments. “Rina told me you knew about history.” What did he mean by history? “Art history.” I knew slightly more than Rina, and mostly because she never liked the subject. I hadn’t really thought about it since I got out of school.

“What do you want to know?”

“Well, I want to know more.” He didn’t even have a start. I gave him an old book that I had and told him I was glad he was interested, but not to neglect practice for reading.

It was strange for him to take a sudden interest — why look at history, why so soon? “I found this and I thought it was interesting.” He showed me the notebook, it was worn and bore a last name the same as his. It looked like something I would use for lecture notes. “There’s a lot of things in it that I can’t understand though, so I thought I’d, like, get the background, you know?” I warned him that the textbook would be a bit dense, and that he could let me know if you have any questions about it. “Thanks.”

He closed the door quickly but made no sound. His disposition about my teaching hadn’t changed since the first day, but he had gotten more silent in his resentment. My comments hadn’t changed much either, he was still a bit hasty and unfocused — most of the lessons were like this, students made their improvements slowly since issues at this point were largely habitual, some newer students saw fast changes, but most were content with marginal improvement if they wanted to learn, which set them apart from Kerain. This might have been the first time he seemed to want to learn about something, which I was more than willing to help with — it was, after all, why I was here.

Thinking about our conversation on the walk home that same day, I saw a squirrel fall out of a tree. Its body locked in rigor mortis before it hit the ground. Its weight pulled down rapidly then, and there was nothing to lift it up. It fell quickly and found an immediate pillow in the loam of the turning tree. It was in petrified respite. Something vital — that thing that

animated it — was now missing. It was suddenly taxidermy.

I took it in. It reminded me of a stuffed animal — nothing but fabric pretending to be something else.

There it was again, inspiration, derived from me doing the one thing that would always bring it back when I needed it but that I was unwilling or unable to do of my own volition. Having seen something, and assessed the quality, I looked into it and saw something meaningful. I was suddenly gifted the sense that something was important — either by virtue of suddenness or significance — and I searched around to find why it was that way. In that sense, I did what I always need to do:

I investigated.

What hasn't been said?

The artistic urge was one to say something new but lasting — it was an endeavor to occupy a space in some unique way — and that is why it is impossible to satisfy. That's not to say there's no unique way to fill a canvas — there are many. Each student in the studio, for example, filled the canvas in a way that the world had never seen before each and every time they finished a piece.

That was exactly the problem — it is all too possible to be your own person, and as soon as you become that person you start getting stale and sick of it. In some way I had to make the me forgettable without fading into compulsory formations. I had to be within and without the piece, present throughout but hidden to serve a tendency of investigation — create a sense of mystery not so mysterious as to be obscuring but just strange enough for it to feel impassioned.

It was not so much a problem of making something new as it was a problem of making something that *felt* new. Nothing could feel new if you were able to understand it straight off, but the feeling of confusion isn't a new one to most people. Intrigue was an uncanny feeling just confusing enough not to be trivial and just trivial enough not to be confusing, and every new thing was some sublimation of this old, old process.

It had to be something new that everybody had already thought of. Something new had to be made to look old, something old had to be made to look new.

What made new things new?

What made things old?

Certainly the passage of time has something to do with it — the oldest things have lived the longest and the newest things haven't lived at all. But it wasn't everything: old things seen for the first time are, for

that moment, new. Hardly could I work under the assumption that nobody had seen anything old, but working under the assumption that everyone had seen everything there was wouldn't yield much to work with. But anywhere in between there was irresolvable uncertainty that no great work of art had to deal with — no true piece of creation had ever been seen as unoriginal by some but perfectly innovative by others.

No, they dealt with that somehow, perhaps by putting the old into a new container so that now it took a new shape, and from every angle the light hit it differently from before.

The ancient things were unstuck from their places and pasted onto a fresh canvas plane to say something different, the result of a singular vision condensing a whole spectrum of impressions into one expression.

I thought all of this — taking my breakfast and cleaning my cups — broken only by one other thought: it was nobody's responsibility to remove the taxonymized squirrel from its rotting place on the side of the street.

Surely I wasn't the first person in the world to think of that, nor was I the first person to depict a dead animal, nor even the first to consider an animal as a matter of fabric. But the odds that I was the first person to do any combination of things in a certain order easily improved as the number of things in that order increased. Each thing that happened to me happened individually as a statistic, but considered as a member in the sequence, they happened in an original permutation with a sense of its own.

An interminable series of past sights and actions led to the creation of any given piece, and a series of the same magnitude happened to create the me that made the piece. That much should have been obvious but it took a coincidental squirrel to make me think of that history: considering a work as a factual series of recently derived parts neglected that the selection process was influenced by an entire history of events that dictated what would and would not be seen as something remarkable. It isolated it as something exclusively material, rather than allowing that material to bear a meaning unto itself.

I asked myself about the few memorable squirrels in my life and what made me think that a squirrel falling from a tree was more important than anything else that day. As with any attempt to pull out a memory, there was nothing. I pulled back the image, the picture of a rodent there in the grass, lying on its side with the head tilted oblique towards the sky, angled perfectly to see my eyes with its no-longer-eyes. The suddenness

was effective, sure, but the image was lasting. It produced a distinct feeling of guilty disdain.

I was never much a fan of squirrels because they were the almost-adorable rodents that would try to steal from gardens and scavenge for scraps in the backyard. They tended to stare at me with those blank, far-sighted eyes that made me feel pitiful, like a predator as I tended to the soil and checked all the leaves for damage. So needless to say when my college town was full of them I was dejected.

They made the leaves rustle as we moved between classes and dodged away when we got too close, clinging to trees and waiting for the flow of people to end so that they could once again claim the grass as their own. Through the windows you could see how they swarmed back down to gather food, slowly creeping in to fill in every patch of grass and pick at every spot of loose dirt.

I noticed them once in a first-semester studio. The perspective from the first floor window made them statues watching over the fields from the sills. They took a focused, protuberant look at the model before darting their heads to look at something else, then darted back, and again.

The room was filled with unfamiliar people participating in familiar fields of craft. We all focused tired eyes a distance just beyond our reach to record the tones and shadows and forms of the thing in front of us. On different beats each one would lift their head, and, triggered by the time sufficient for a glance, they would put it back down.

Across the circle an unfamiliar face housed a pair of eyes that resolutely consumed that which they saw. It bore no expression but a tensionless absorption in the practice of the gaze. They seemed to be drawing in all the light, and they glanced at me — who was staring at them — before glancing at the model, and glancing back, and again. They looked on me with disturbance, as if I was intruding — and I likely was — which made me feel aware — aware of my body and my eyes and my gaze and the fact that I should have been working and not letting myself look around the room.

I worked with that self-awareness for the rest of the time. The texture of the pencil was strange to my hand, the seat projected against my body, and my clothes sat improperly on my skin which sat improperly on my muscles which sat improperly on my bones. The room was impossibly warm and by the time we left I was sweating through my socks.

“Hey.”

I turned. It was her with the all-consuming black eyes, giving me

the same glance. She was holding an eraser.

“You left this at your station.” Handing it to me she didn’t lose eye contact. I glanced down.

“Thanks.” I tried very quickly to leave, but she stopped that by asking to look over my sketches and compare techniques on the shading. Being incapable of saying no, we took some time to articulate our strategies, challenges, and advice at a little bench in the hall.

When that was done and thanks were said she mentioned loosely “I’m Rina, by the way.”

“I’m Livy.”

“You’re very methodical when it comes to sketches.”

“Thank you.” I rushed to think of a symmetric response “You’re very technically sound.” I was glad to have that accepted. “I’m going to meet a friend on the plaza soon, where are you walking?”

“The same way, actually.”

We left the building to a radiant display of sunlight piercing through the trees to warm the late summer air that had a still-looming heat. I shrank away from the conversation, not expecting to (or confident in my ability to) sustain it.

“How are you settling into the university?” She looked ahead.

“Pretty nicely I guess. I like all my classes.” I felt the silence well up in my mouth. “Campus is nice too.”

“What do you like about it?”

“The flowers, mostly. They bring a lot of color.” They were, in fact, explosions of color on the otherwise green and brown scheme of the setting. They were magnificently placed among the drab setting so as to free it from the confines of a forest into the realm of a garden — intentionally crafted to supersede the natural, though alluding to it well enough that the illusion would hold. “How are you settling in?”

“It’s alright. I feel a little far from home but the atmosphere is great.” I could feel her eyes “People aren’t too stuck up about their work.”

“Were people like that where you grew up?”

“Yeah, I went to a pretty hardcore fine arts school. Lots of folks were so concerned with the competition of entry that they didn’t really find the time to talk or, like, help other people learn.”

“That sucks, but I’m glad you found a bit more freedom here.”

We talked in the same small-to-medium vein for a while before we reached the place where I would be waiting. Getting little impressions of each other in responses to unimportant questions and maybe trying to

evaluate how well we might agree. I told her that I would be stopping to wait and she asked to join for a while, if not just to sit for a moment in the quiet peace of the garden.

We found a bench. My friend would come by soon — late on account of a conversation with her instructor — and end it with an introduction that would send us apart as the other students emerged from the buildings, but for a time we enjoyed the in-class emptiness of the grass.

“What are you here for?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean why come to school? Why try learning this whole thing?”

I wasn’t getting it. “I’m here because I want to get a more full experience in the world. I want to touch on things that I have never felt and derive from that a greater motive from which to produce art. I’m learning techniques and forms to expand my capacity for feeling. What are you learning for?”

In front of us, a squirrel dropped from midway down a tree to speed up its run from another. They chased each other in a circle for a moment or two before dashing to climb up another tree. They jumped across the branches in switching pursuit of one another.

“I suppose I’m just here to learn.” She gave a dissatisfied look.

“Well, I think that I can learn by doing just about anything, but if I’m asked why I’m *here*, in particular, I would have to say that I’ve got to refine how I express that feeling into art.”

She followed the squirrels and looked back to me “I can’t disagree. But consider that the quality of your feeling is just as important as — if not more important than — how you express it. In the same way that intelligence is the capacity to think rather than the capacity to express thoughts, artistry is the capacity to feel rather than express feelings. Speaking from experience, getting preoccupied with the expression doesn’t lead you very far.” I wasn’t looking at her face to tell if she was admonishing or preaching.

I disagreed. I didn’t say that disagreement but I think that a genius who has no means to express that genius isn’t a genius since they can’t be recognized as such. One won’t make it to acclaim and recognition without being able to speak for themselves. I would have said something if I could find the words. But I couldn’t, I could only barely grasp the sense that something was wrong before my friend came to break off the conversation and go with me for coffee.

It was a hotter season now than it was back then. Things

everywhere wilted before their time. If the heat could make squirrels pass out in the shade, it was more than enough to make the grasses wilt if they met its gaze, it was looking away with mercy so that the sharp Winter — teased by the false Winter that sometimes presented itself in the night — could come and at least freeze the corpses if they hadn't been plucked and replaced with desert flora.

Using my umbrella as a parasol relieved the stream of heat, but could not undo the supersaturation in the air causing roads to melt into waves and pools of illusory water to sublime. Structures towering overhead stalled the wind. The sun's gaze was particularly intent, today, on engulfing the whole of the city in its austere body of influence.

I was going home mostly for the change of space. Moving from one cool, solitary place to another. I simply took the sketchbooks from my room in a high-rise to my room to a rental space downtown or back, having the time in-between reserved for the little things, like waiting at stoplights and feeling the relief of the rare wind fade back into the static dread of the heat.

But in either place they were the same sketches. And mine were the same hands and legs and body and my head was the same head that was attached by the same neck and veins to the same heart that, in either place, would beat blood that was the same degree of just too cold to ever be comfortable without something to warm it up.

Things changed only by virtue of the chance encounters with reflections in buses, variations in the sound, and animals in trees that would be capable of reminding me — just for a moment — that I was here. Or there, I suppose — in a place, moving between places, and very much alive — possessing a body that, despite any changes, had been a body before and got to being a body now. By all means a normal thing, but a normal thing that I somehow forgot how to think about — a basic substance that disappeared into the periphery of life, like breathing and blinking and seeing the words and shapes on a page as more than blots of ink, space, and color.

It was an awareness that made the basic things different. Sitting in a chair made me feel my weight. The coffee cup in my hand, filled appropriately to lengthen the day into the night, felt like an object — a work someone created — instead of a basic vessel. I held it with the care of a body, and it produced a circulatory heat. The water over the vessels, mine and the white one with the red, felt natural and detailed — it had a palpable texture which I could only now penetrate. And then, the caffeine kicking



in, I felt capable.

I sat at the desk in the other room and flipped through the sketches.

They were mostly of trash. Of bags and bottles on the sidewalk and shards of glass that made me think “what if?” As with anything, there were goods and bads, superficialities and substances to sort through.

It was a misnomer to call what I was doing then creative. The creativity had already passed. I had selected — in sketching and seeing — what was to be on the canvas, and now that the moment of imagination had passed — the image having been created — I was moreover re-creating something which had already been born somewhere else, giving it real — though perhaps false — form. The image emerged from the conflicts in the moments of final renderings. Conflicts between inclusion and exclusion, between exact definition and gestalt, between saying and holding back.

What, of all the thoughts surrounding the piece, would be remembered on the canvas or forgotten, disremembered, or remembered as a haunting? How was I to polish the dirty old sublimations of the idea into something pure and representative — to make a mnemonic pathway into the exclusively previous existence of the idea?

How could I make cartography of a singular vision, distorted continuously through a malleable prism?

The lightline had to be interesting because of its twisting. The same idea — the idea of fabric composing a simulacrum of something real — had existed before the squirrel and continued to exist afterwards, refracted onto a crossing path by the temporary distortions in the air. Unless acted upon again — as it certainly would be — it would continue that way, venturing slowly, at such a detestably slow speed, through the scarcely populous depths of space.

It had evolved, and to show that it had evolved the depths of its path needed to be charted. Evolution evoked the whole history of the form — ontogeny and phylogeny. It needed to, since otherwise it was just a line, snapshotted to freeze it in time, unable to be something whole without assistance from the other parts.

It was going in a different direction from even yesterday, and a week ago was ancient history, let alone the months and years before, when it was first forming into an idea, and when the little things were first sown to grow. Other thoughts and iterations of thoughts had sedimented over the past and left the path obscured, some of it might have even been destroyed. The sketchbooks only went so far back, and after that I would be on my own, venturing back into territory where the charts had been lost, asking,



ultimately, something like where a squirrel got its significance and why, in particular, it had to be a squirrel. If restricted to just the impression that's no easy question, it's barely even a question as much as it's a paradox with a thousand probable answers that are made invalid by their equal validity with other resolutions.

What made an answer possible was memory. But memory, too had layers on layers of dust packed into grains that made it necessary to dig, so I did what I would always do:

I unearthed.

I dug, peeled back the layers, played the archeologist and expert on all things in the history of the distant land of past-tense me, looking to find where things came from and why they stood out. Telling people, in the end, the story that they needed to hear to be affected. I had to find the things that would tell stories on the canvas that people would want to hear. Drawing on the previous, I had to force the preterite towards futurity to make an effective form.

And so I would exhume, uncover the dead and make their story into something new. By fusing my past with the modern I would sublimate it into something significant from the traces. The little pieces of the past — the looks I could remember that made the modern impressions what they were — would come to construct the whole of the piece.

The fabric was that of the past, the fabrication was the stitching it together. The patchwork a quilt of all the things I thought on some path, invented into an expression. The form born of the past and the present, acting together and all at once, and the meaning born of their cooperation. Putting things together under a cohesive goal would be easy, the difficult matter was now finding the pieces.

I had to look for the past — the right past; the past that would make a clear meaning emerge — among collections of things that merely once were: those insignificant ideas like images of weddings we go to as children or impressions of our first injuries and the easily-crystallized pictures of habits (daily trips to school, doing our simple kindergarten homework) we felt day in and day out so that they were impossible not to remember to the same degree that they would be meaningless. There was an overwhelming sense that there was a right thing to say, a perfection somewhere in the biography that could be pulled out singularly from the tangle of a million trillion threads and spools and intentional and unintentional stitches.

The only way to find out was to test the threads.

That was the last thought I had before I went to sleep that night. It was the first thought I had when I woke up the next morning, only then it was bereft of context, present against a white wall, signifying only echoes of the process that brought it forth. I tried to call it back, the whole thing. But it was gone. An intermission of darkness had broken the stream from the rest of the show, and, as it continued, there was no time to piece it back together.

Pull at threads.

I made my breakfast and washed my cups and packed my things and dreaded the heat and wondered if umbrellas holding water would mean failure or success. I think an artist would say “I thought about cups and umbrellas and the heat and breakfast in a new light then,” but I didn’t. I barely thought about them at all, and if I did they were habitual thoughts, superficial at best: “It’s a nice cup” or “Could I drink out of it?” Nothing really changed.

It felt like something had shifted though. I looked at the canvas and saw the blank space with new eyes — open eyes. For the first time in years I wanted to occupy it, merge it with my mind and body and see the product of us as one. Somewhere deep down I wanted to feel a change and so I made one happen by now imagining things to be different from how they were.

I wanted to be better than the past, so I pretended to be. It was only natural. You can’t look up to dirt unless you’re willing to build your world upside-down. Being unwilling, I imagined myself entirely above ground, looking down.

How lost I was! That I had once believed I could tell a story without the past! Foolish! The story *was* the past. There was no convincing work of art without a context. Nothing existed outside of time, nothing was without a past. Nothing exists nowhere and everything started somewhere.

The only way to make nothing was to focus on everything, keeping nothing in focus.

Pull.

So I sat there and acted present. I put marks on the drafting sheets and, in time, had something to work with, tracing out the form that would tell the story that I needed to see. I would find the history that I needed, all I had to do was start pulling, and I was ignorant to that before. Perhaps I was paralyzed, thinking somehow that crossing the threshold into imagination could hurt, unwilling to dive in.

But finally doing it felt sublime. All the weight of fear was torn

off at once with the first light touch to the paper, the first efforts towards an actual design. I drafted ceaselessly, flickering through imagined and rendered forms to see what would tell me a story, what would unravel the fact of that initial spark of inspiration proffered by a conspiracy of heat and gravity.

At first it was something like puppets.

Little lifeless amalgamations made to look like something living.

Then I turned to the inversion. The opposite of a puppet, a husk.

Imposing forms that were something alive made to look like something non living. Effigies made from living things, poor imitations of other lives. Drones. I thought of myself, then, working at the magazine — a factory machine made to produce without thinking, made to live without existing.

There were living things that looked like they were dead, sleeping. This state — an uncertain one, found out only by coming up to close and being surprised at the sudden waking — between presence and absence, between invigoration and evisceration, would evoke the uncanny fear, unsettling the boundaries between one side and the other. Being horrific made it terrific which made it beautiful.

Both of these things, I thought, were pretending at being alive. It was all a performance, the puppet and the husk both knew all the movements that went into living and took to making them out perfectly, flawlessly, but without the fluidity of nature that would make them convincing. Maybe they were quite the same.

Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe the difference between living and death was a presence and each of us died each day with a lapse in thought and found ourselves revived the next morning, the next minute. Maybe each flight and motivation was a life of its own and when we thought of something new we let it — and that person who was thinking of it — die. It *was* a thought, and it probably knew that it wouldn't last forever but celebrated that it would have its moment to think and be thought.

In any case it had to be true that things both living and the nonliving wore fabricated masks that hid a truth that could only be deciphered through careful removal. These, too, were performances that reflected a history of who someone was and why they chose to be that way when they could, that and what it meant to them when they couldn't. Each thing bore a history on its surface, imprints made by the weight and pressure of the surrounding forces.

And there it was. A workable idea. A theme, a framework,

something in which all of this could fit and something which would make all those sights I saw on the walks out of the atelier something meaningful. Each thing could carry a story, a fantastic and overwhelming story that made it real. Each thing was pretending to be alive, performing the act of living in a way that the eyes betrayed. Each form could thus be beautiful.

Every time I would walk through the heat, with the unforgiving sun bearing down, those things which the air connected me to bore significance. In the eyes of one I saw something gazing back, in the windows of buildings I saw sore reflections that imitated the life they could not have, and on the sidewalk I saw evidence of movement, something echoing what had been there and was thus still there, remembered with discarded bags of chips and beer cans. There were far too many things to take down, and each glance up comprised a new muse.

I tried and tried to remember them all, to give them all the same attention, but how could I possibly? Each form deserved the attention of a lifetime, it warranted, for its existence, a dedicated craft of its own — a thousand hours just to approximate it alone, this one tiny representation of life that spoke so much of its own history. They all proposed addendums and corollaries, experiments and variations for which one lifetime might not even be enough, let alone one month. There was so much worth doing! So much history in this little world!

Thus it was so that finding my passion has been one of the most frustrating experiences of my life. When we people burn, we have so many ideas yet so little time to put them all in order! Let alone the ever-lacking talent!

I wrote in my journal all those things I had not the time to make in a single day, those ideas I thought might be successful, making every effort to explain to my future why they mattered. But even that was an approximation of the feeling that I wanted — needed — to capture but was destined to fade with distance and thickening dust. Something that entirely took me — the look of a landscape among the city, sparked by a moment's play of the light — could fade into nothing when the image was rendered in black and white words.

The same was true of the other ink. I wanted so badly for many images to work, but often they didn't translate. It was endlessly unsatisfying. I had a little journal full of souls and a pile of sketchbooks littered with their corpses, the failures to give them a body.

When it would work it was beautiful, astounding. I would take a step back and see the finished picture, now finally rendered in full and

think it was good. There was something real there, a traceable story of form that could not but be acknowledged, flawless in its structure and confident that no piece was missing or extraneous. They achieved formal excellence by endeavoring to understand the form as a thing itself, not just as an object.

But that satisfaction did not dislodge me from the cyclic downfalls of passion. It might have made my stasis worse by giving me the confidence to power through it. I spent so much time doing nothing but art that I forgot some things weren't art. Everything existed for the purpose of creation and nothing could get in the way of that, not even myself.

Then there were the nights where I felt lonely, lying in bed or working at one desk or the other. I think everyone has those nights. As quickly as the thought came I would dispense of it with the thought that I was not. I had myself and my art and that was all that mattered because creation was a dialogue itself. I wouldn't enjoy a night out anyway.

And when still some small part of me said that it didn't want to be alone and made me want to destroy it, I showed it what could be done on our own and for a day and a night it would go silent and that felt wonderful. But then the day or night after that I would be there — under the ceiling I knew all too well, as if it were my body — and think again of the fact that I was alone, only working.

In all the thought that I was having I would leave a short refrain as a bit of punctuation: "I love what I am doing." But, by god, that love was exhausting.

And that love always goes back to June! In the fire of everything I could forget — if only for a moment — she was gone.

That was why I felt this way! My life had consumed me with the little points of action that it presented. My vision had been spotted with stars placed perfectly to blind me to those things which were most important. Just like the other blind spots, the brain ignored it so well it simply wasn't there. I felt I was alone because she left me, taking with her the only person who made me feel together. My faults and failings lay with her being gone. My fault was the inability to get over it.

It wasn't that part of me felt gone without her or that I felt shattered from losing this person whom I love — we were adults, and it felt lonely, that was all. I lost someone with whom I could communicate on a different level, who could see me as a version of myself intangible to the rest and for whom I could do the same.

In one sense I was betrayed, and in the other tense I wondered how

it could have been different — asking, if there was no change, what would change.

With her I lost the only way to make myself feel human and so I lost my personhood. I was alive as a human and an artist but I was no longer “Livy” spoken from between the lips of a person who knew what that meant. That name ceased to vaguely mean “me” as it became someone’s impression of me, as June gave me a definition.

And now that person — June’s “Livy” — stopped existing. And there — exactly there, in the space between the full stop and the next letter — I started to be nothing. I was a bunch of thoughts in a head that didn’t exist anywhere but in the head. Maybe, occasionally, they came out on paper — and that would compose the paper’s “Livy” — but that wasn’t someone. I was a copy of a degrading original that was an ocean away if not already gone.

Everything started somewhere, yes, and everything, too, ended somewhere — though not necessarily somewhere else. I think eventually it had to die. Nothing was capable of immortality.

June’s “Livy” would eventually only exist in memory, and then shortly after not at all. No matter how well kept it was it would fade when exposed to the light for too long, worn down by too many accidents, or even just seconds.

Beginning to feel cold, I went to make some tea. Some time had passed since I had tea — it was rare for me to enjoy it, since it was of too weak a flavor to be stimulating and too precious a gift to use laxly — but I wanted a heat I could cherish — a heat which the overactive coffee couldn’t offer.

I started water on a boil and went for a cup, an absent mind here too taken with the word “June” to make the choice meaningful. My hand found a red cup in white. The white cylinder with the red paint. Nothing had changed about it since she left. Most notably it hadn’t changed place with her, that is, she left it behind, abandoned, forgotten.

It might have been that it was so unimportant that she hadn’t even thought to take it with her, a cup is a thing so casual and unremarkable that it might not even be thought of even on those grand days of change which uproot our world and take it all into consideration. It might have been, as I had believed, that she wanted to take it with her but couldn’t remember it on the day of the motion, so caught up on making the severance that the principles of it became a blur. She might not have been able to find a place for it among the small quantity of bags and carry-ons she could fit with her

on her way to the airport. There were an impossible number of reasons that could never be confirmed. Worst of all it might have been that she didn't want it and that she never wanted it in the first place, that she saw it as a mistake, a sign of my carelessness and insensitivity to her world of words, symbols, and juxtapositions.

She was gone, it was here, and I realized all of this only after I had used it for tea that was a bit stale and still savored over several minutes. I had no idea what to do with it.

I cleaned it thoroughly. I made sure it was dry and that the slip wouldn't chip and that it would find an enjoyable place in the cupboard. One from which it could be seen but not observed.

Even through a sweater the warmth it offered faded within the hour. I could open the window and let the residual heat from the fading day pass in. Instead I took a blanket from the bed and wore it at my desk. The blanket wouldn't bring humidity and noise.

I couldn't sleep that night — I could hardly work, either: the presence of that part of me that recognized June being gone was opposed to the idea of thinking about anything else, even nothing. I said nothing new, thought of nothing new, simply drew in circles, arriving again and again at the same ideas, the same voided definition.

I went into the studio early the next morning. The morning after that I had gotten only a brush with sleep, and soon the insomnia was again only limited to certain nights. I still thought about her, but not in the same haunting way as before.

Then I thought I could use this feeling.

I thought: she is gone, gone for now with the intent of being gone for good, but gone to a place at which I might eventually arrive. Disappeared, sure, but not immaterial. I hated that she departed and I had to be upset, but I didn't have to be resentful. I didn't have to pretend that she was nothing, there would be no use for that. I wanted to — I wanted to have the memories removed and lobotomize myself into the perfect artist, free of the conditions that would distort the world's messages — but there was just no way to do that.

My history was set in stone, an unchanging body of facts that put me on my trajectory. There was no freedom of movement to be had. And she is gone, implying that in the first place she was here and in the second that she would never be back. Another unmoving stone in the field of monuments — the tableaux of memory.

But like any other piece of the past she was a story. That end was



something powerful that could be captured by the presentation of the whole. I could use this feeling.

And I would.

On some off days I would come into the studio anyway, staying longer and longer as the date of the exhibition approached. Some days I would find Rina there too, working in the same vein as she found the week insufficient for an endpoint. It was on one of those days that I was working on rendering my sense of loss in a collection of fabrics that made up a marionette face, well used and stitched like the teddy bears of some more loving children.

“Your technique is good as usual,” said the air. I thanked it for the compliment. “But what’s it about?” Asked Rina. My immersion with the thought of myself through June broke and for the moment I was stuck rapidly moving back into the real world.

I cleared my voice. “The relativity of the self.”

“Don’t you think you could be a bit more subtle?” What was it lacking in subtlety? “I dunno... maybe hide something in it. Make it less obvious, add a reason to investigate.” I said I’d have to think about it. The air conditioner protested against the silence.

“You were really focused there huh?” You could say that — my eyes were still adjusting to looking more than a foot away. “I’m glad you’re excited but don’t overwork yourself.” I could say the same to her.

I took a glance across the room at her work. There was a weft and weave set against an off-black background. She, too, was being rather literal, it seemed. She said it was a piece about love. She met a man who made her feel like a person and I smiled and felt happy for her.

The weft and weave, in two different colors and meeting inexactly as if done by hand was meant to represent them being together. She told me he encouraged her to start an exhibition, to make a more professional move, and she wanted to do right by him.

Again, I told her I was happy for her. Two strands bound together. The technique was an impeccable emergence as usual, and it told its story quite well. It felt kinetic, quite living, and it made me think that perhaps the major separation between our works would be whether or not the subject could be said to have a beating heart.

She told me I was lucky to find someone so early. She asked me how June was, anyway. I tried to tell her that June was okay before I— my lying heart— was overthrown.

All at once a chill ran through me and it felt like every piece of me



went quickly to sleep to even faster return with full life in them, sensing with the cold each and every sensation that affected it. The weight of the pen in my hand, the torsion of my spine, my toes touching the ground, and the clothes on my skin erased my ability to speak before I even passed the first syllable of “June is okay, busy as usual, but happy.”

She was gone, and despite knowing it, the need to say the words shot through me with the rapid sense that it was greater than anything I had ever been. I clasped my hands and my eyes felt warm.

Everything, all the sudden, felt wrong. All the while I was simply mad this was happening, and stumbling through the waves of discomfort and the contractions of my lungs to say “June is doing fine,” as if to affirm the same with myself the subject. Rina didn’t know what to do so she made a kind of laugh and asked what’s wrong and I told her June was gone, and she said “what?” and I told her June was gone and she said “where?” and I told her “gone” as if to say the only Place that wasn’t Here or up There and then she got it and told me she was sorry as if she drove the train. I let her know I wanted to keep working and she looked at me with that strange disturbance that she did when she saw anything unfamiliar, uncomfortable.

But then she shook it off and looked at me again like I was Livy, that person she knew. Her eyes didn’t look up or down or through me, they just looked. She came closer and sat, careful to keep a distance.

“Liv. If there’s anything you need, please don’t hesitate to call.”  
Her best attempt at consolation.

I took the lull in speech to mean it was my turn “Thank you.” My brain was still unwaveringly small a vessel for the feeling it meant to hold, with the sensation running over onto the whole of my body in waves of cool and warm sensation. Each nerve made a bid for my attention. I let my hands shake as they held each other griping in a rhythm, twisting fingers in attempts to relax and lashing out in tension at the failure to see any progress.

“I’m serious. I’m here for you.”

What did that mean? To be there for someone? Weren’t you always? For a person you really cared for weren’t you supposed to be there? What difference did it make to say it? Wasn’t it obvious? I let slip “That’s just something people say.” It was. It was something that people said when they wanted someone to feel better or when they wanted to feel better. It was a turn of phrase, it was a cliché, and it was utterly pointless to say. It was a bandage for a dismembered body.

But I didn’t mean to say it. There are many times like this, when

we don't mean to say something that we think because our brain is just thinking of the words for fun, as an exercise in dancing circles around the part, taking up most of the space that's somewhere beyond where thought is willing to go.

"So is everything, Liv." She shook her head. "That doesn't make it less important." I was thinking of the mornings when I used to see June. "I'm here," she said. "I'm with you, right now," she told me. "And if you need space that's okay but I want you to know you don't have to be alone" she paused.

For a brief moment in the words there I felt seen. I still feel seen when I hear them now, as her eyes glance at me through the spaces in the words she wears as a mask, and for some time I would still get chills when I replayed that "to be."

I told her thank you, took some deep breaths, and said I wanted to get back to work. I took several minutes to stare at the canvas. I wasn't even looking at the picture, just a bit of the white space in the corner. It was a portion I hadn't reached yet, a little segment of nothing bordered irregularly by the interstitial everything that proposed an intermission before getting to another unfinished portion.

When my breathing came back to normal I took a look at the picture again, and worked on it until night. Shortly after Rina left with a good wish and a reminder to call, just to check in that night. She would ask me to do the same the next, and every night after that until she was sure I was really okay.

There were times I hated her for it, but there were more times that I felt bad for making her feel like she had to. It hardly helped with sorting anything out, and it wasn't meant to. I can't remember a single thing we ever talked about, but I remember the comfort of being wrapped up in somebody's words and having someone wrapped up in my own, and that was enough to make it beautiful.

But I had to ask, when I felt like talking made me feel better and when I found myself laughing over the phone: am I using this loss to selfishly assert my own humanity? This whole thing must have been a farce, a pretending game to get someone to talk to me, something to make me feel human in a pathetic venture.

I could only hear those words — those questions and unfounded insults — in another voice. My own voice. It was in another tone, from another time, but it was still me. Those were still my words, and they would continue to be. I — that I who wasn't me but who I found myself

reverting to — thought those things in a place I could remember distinctly enough that I would rather not be there.

On those nights when I found myself falling back into the well-worn groove I would stay up late, thinking of Sleep, pacing and wondering whether I should have sharpness so nearby at all. The space below my right rib ached, the tender skin sending me in a writhe at the memory embedded there.

True, embodied memory was a powerful thing, unmasked and unscreened and made only in the way to remind me that this was not a place to come back to — not a place in which I would find myself welcome. I was afraid to be back in any respect, even sharing a loose feeling was enough to make me afraid.

I — that person I was — needed to be gone forever. If every thought of them was put to rest and every reminder was scraped away I would be someone else — that person would be better, I thought. They needed to be erased, rationalized out of existence never to return again, but, like a mirage, the second I approached it, it already faded away. I could rush and try to grasp it and hold it in my murderous hands, but it was already gone, there again in the distance, looking back at me from the horizon.

I would force myself close to the thought of it, putting those words that would eviscerate it on the tip of my tongue before I — another part of *me* — pulled it away. And it huddled back crying into the arms of an imaginary caretaker who would tell it that mean person couldn't hurt it.

After that I couldn't get close again until it came back apropos of Nothing. As I walked closer it would stand there as a taunt, always in my peripheral, just barely in the spot to be eliminable at certain angles. Constant, a part of each horizon, it was the point against which every view could be defined — a mountain against which each season, storm, and setting could be established, with a certain measure of similarity, built to highlight the faithful stability of the unmoving figure.

For a time, June being there next to me had hidden the figure, but now it was revealed, intent on making its patience known. It was there watching the reflection of every sunset, attentively wondering about every lovely change in the color of the atmosphere, marking the points of alteration from yellow to orange to red, and wondering how it would come back the next morning, performing the same motion, only backwards. It was in the sand, unsheltered to feel the white-and-black pressure the moon and stars exerted on the ground, physical, feeling, haunting from its

position in obscurity. Nothing about it had changed, it was only me.

It was hard to tell if it was watching or waiting.

Was something supposed to happen?

“No,” I said.

Isn't there something you were meaning to do?

“No,” I told myself

Surely there was an intention you forgot about, right?

“No,” I spoke to nobody.

I'd paced in a back and forth tug towards the kitchen. The bedroom, the hallway, the tables, and now the sink. At some point in the wandering I realized I had left the cup unclean.

The buildup of dust would ruin the color if it weren't constantly cared for. How could it possibly hold the same meaning if it developed a patina that made it look less than fresh — less than new?

Fading, a terrible thought.

The red would blur with the white as it yellowed and the effect of the juxtaposition would be ruined. The effect would perish if it was not clean as intended. It had to be clean, it had to be safe.

Something successful had to be kept as it was.

If it changed, so too would the story it told. Letting the meaning change would mean effacing the original effect, constituting an act of destruction. A successful piece was singular, and the slightest alteration made it no longer itself. For this — for what I made — to be successful it had to be indivisible and unalterable, perfect and thus resonant, pure and thus potent. Something worth making — worth being created and thus kept — could not become something else.

I dried it and let it sit on the countertop.

It felt cold. The glazed surface was smooth when covered in a film of water, and it gleamed in the heatless LED sun the room presented. I looked at it and I was exhausted. The weight, the tension in my shoulders set in, and I knew I would lay in bed exhausted and sleepless, and I would wake up sore and cold again.

Something in me went weak, inattentive, slipped away, then snapped back with a sharp sound.

The fragments of the cup lay broken in the sink, bits of red that would have made up a cube were separated forever, isolated on different, jagged islands of white across the linoleum-wood floor. A fatal accident played itself out across an imitation background — and made an incredible mess in doing so.

Now, instead of a cup, all I had was this shattered thing on the ground, a once complete and sensible composition of the fragments that was instantly nothing, a collection of shards. It was ruptured, shattered irreparably, and now gone.

Gravity had acted swiftly, and I was just left to stare.

All very suddenly, that cup now was a cup. It will be what it was: it is a cup, now it simply isn't a cup but that didn't change the fact that it is — it was one. It simply was, would be, and isn't — wasn't. It had been, it will then be what it was even if it isn't because at heart, it was what it was: a cup, a continual, uninterrupted cup. This had to only be a change of state — a minor aberration to which normal people would assign undue meaning but which a wider perspective would reveal to be an only temporarily significant alteration which ultimately would not matter. It was but a chip to the surface of the thing that, in time, would be resolved as a normal part of it, since, despite the changes, it was a cup, still is a cup, and will forever be a cup by having been a cup.

All that in a simple thought: *it was a cup*.

#### XVIII .

Landing comes with a lesson in parallelism — the equivalence of ascent and descent, the fear on both ends and the turbulence in the middle all remind you of just how much life wavers. It reminds you that this, like every story, is the story of an apocalypse. A minor one, of course, just the end of one little world and, in it, the beginning of a new one.

We've arrived at the point of no return, the shattering, the "effects of this are going to do irreversible damage to our planet" stage of things — we've arrived at the point of greatest helplessness.

You have stumbled once again on a great crater in yourself, tripping just on the edge of the pit and looking in, feeling a pain that is often compared to hunger but which is more like the opposite. Something that grows in you like an emptiness, yes, but which worsens as you fill it in, as feeding it widens the emptiness. It's a hunger, to be sure, but a hunger that makes you want to starve.

If you could narrate your own fear you would tell us how afraid you are to fall in, to die, and how that fear strangely excites you. You would tell us how tightly you wanted to hold on to who you were, to the life you had, to the cup and everything, and then you would tell us how crushing that made the fact that it rushed out of your hands like sand, faster and faster as you squeezed harder and harder.

You would tell you just how terrifying it is to have to reach for a new identity, one that is enough to withstand the world, now that your habit has been disturbed. You feel it like falling. Something like vertigo, a sudden fear that the ground has dropped out beneath you.

So at the same time as you're afraid you'll have to remake the world, you're still grieving for the world you're losing to memory every day.

Thus a kind of paralysis ensues. You want to move, get up and change, and you've done a half decent job so far, but now the weight of the past feels too heavy on top of you. You have to push back against the past and the future, both feel like they're crushing you, so you can't move.

You like to think people grow with the past but the reality is we're just building it up, pushing forward the snowball, staying the same all the while, which you're keen to realize now that you've run out in front of it and let its momentum barrel over you.

We always are tiny things we're born as, the only thing that grows after our bodies are done are the stories we spin around ourselves, and they get monumental. They just keep growing. After a while it takes some real work to unravel them. That unraveling is the work of a dutiful editor and their scalpel eyes, the job next to godliness.

### **XIX. LETTERS TO THE EDITORS**

Hello Karan, apologies for the delay in getting back to you on this

I'm just getting onto a redeye back to Michigan and it's about 6:42 am here, so honestly I'm writing in a bit of a haze but I thought it most punctual to get back to you now.

I haven't slept much this week because I would rather talk with people than dream alone. I don't want to go home. I don't want to close my eyes, and I'm going to be writing emails on this plane to mimic conversation for the same reason: I just don't want to let myself sleep. I'm afraid of dreaming.

So now, in consequence, my brain is dreamwaking, rafting on the warm-smooth crystal surface tension of reality, not quite swimming or going under but doing something like both at once; waking mind, sleeping thoughts.

I'm coasting. The movements of the plane feel unreal. The letters on my keyboard feel unreal. I feel my tongue in my mouth and although none of them are here with me the people I am thinking of (factual or fictional) seem more real than the children screaming or the people sitting

next to me.

Yes, I am on a plane, but the imagination of me sitting by your pool feels more true.

Life alone isn't any sadder than being with people, it's just more porous, it just floats on the air a little easier, it just tends to blow more in every direction, let more in, let less out. I think more when I'm alone, and that's why it's so important for me to be with people.

Like now I'm wondering how all the trash accumulates at the airport — how all the scratches and etchings get into the chair and how long they take to go away, how all the broken screens got that way and how long they've been like that. I try to look for patterns, find the stories that everything can tell me, try to listen to the silence when nobody is talking, and maybe talk to myself a little, too.

I'm just such a glutton for stories that, when I'm this unfettered from rationality, I find them everywhere. I want to listen to what everything has to say, I want to drink in the reasons why, discover how things become what they are, and I listen to the patterns building themselves out of nothing, to the slow, breathy emergence of logic from disorder, to the faint sounds of a heartbeat monitor on can always hear beneath the radio static.

All I want is the time to wait; for the rocks and trees and TV screens and souls of people that are always moving too slow for me to stop for them to say something; for the whole planet to unravel itself to me and show me how it was folded into this oddity; for the slowest currents of the universe to turn themselves into speech.

Anyway, as for the manuscript, it's funny, when I submitted it to everyone else they rejected it out of hand, saying it was too long per their rules like,, nobody uses paper anymore babe, the fuck does a few thousand bytes matter when it comes to art? I know they're just being pragmatic, but I hate it. I hope you find the time to read it, and enjoy it for its utter lack of rationality.

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Hi Marsha, it's 9:24 am in Michigan.

I'm writing to you in tears because I'm thinking about earlier, when I hit a bird with my car.

I didn't even see much, I just heard enough to know what it was and when; that little thump of information still haunts me, playing over and over in my head all day. I just can't handle it. I feel so scared of having taken so much from the world on an accident. I feel so unfortunate.



I'm not an unlucky person but it feels like bad luck accumulates when I'm in my car. Some of the worst things in my life have happened to me when I'm driving and I've never even been in a crash but horrors just flank me on every side of the panoramic cage I'm moving in.

I've seen so many crashes, so many accidents, so many little things shattering or left shattered by the road, and each one reminds me of all the others. I always feel so bad just for looking, as if my bearing witness has brought this about.

I am bad luck, after all. Always to blame for the problems around me.

The bird evokes the memory of the possum — a large, red spinal column on the road, surrounded by variously ripped and decaying parts just barely intact enough for me to determine their species of origin.

Pink tail. That's all you need. Seeing that kind of shit just craters me.

I didn't even hit it but I feel like in seeing it dead I killed it again. Just the body is enough to reconstruct the scene and of course I do, and I do every time I see something die and I think "this must be hell for the thing, dying over and over again with every death in the world."

And fuck, people are dying out there, in the world. Bombs are killing people by the truckload, famines by the boatload, and other human malice by the trainload. When I think of all that death I have to think of how hard it is to see it, how hard it is for the people living in it to have to report it and relive it, and how easy it is to want to ignore it, shut it out, not think about how the tendrils of the industrial death machine are always winding closer and closer to your home (in my case, their seeding ground). Ignorance won't fix it, but it sure will help me not want to vomit when I think about where my coffee comes from and where my \$4.95 is going.

And fuck, it's late March and I still have to file my taxes. It's not hard to keep up with, it's hard to think about. And you know me, you know how I can never stop thinking. You know how your brain gets after night flights, how all the anxieties about the world bubble up when you land, all at once rising to the top in a wave like when a glass of soda hits the countertop.

It's in these moments when I empathize with sunchasers and snowbirds, always looking for the longest day, wasting so much time running towards levity, running away from the chilly reality that winter confirms each night, whispering unconscious notes about just how close you live to death and disaster. I want to plug my ears, close my eyes, and



run, too.

But then I'm reminded of all the sunny afternoons in the tropics I spent staring at the ceiling, as if there was nothing else to do, as if the textures in the drywall were clouds and I was watching the blood pumping through my eyes like shadowy lightning arcing, arcing, arcing. I remember the feeling then, too. I remember that when you run you want to hide, even when you're safe. That you never really get away, even when you're gone.

I'm specifically thinking of lockdown but hey things aren't so different for me all the time, before, after, and now, so, well you know, take that as you will — cages and such.

It feels like I'm either afraid or guilty and both of those come from the same confused grief over the belief that I can't do anything right, that I do all the wrong and that nothing I do turns out okay, and that no matter what the world is fucked. The perfect combination of knowledge of futility and delusion of grandeur.

For my part I have to disagree on your main point of feedback. The book deserves to keep its rough edges. A few points of justification:

- The roughness in it makes it more real, It mirrors my own,
- Nobody has it all figured out and neither should a book,
- The jagged switches of style replicate real-day-to-day experiences
- I want people to touch the book: polished surfaces make us fear our fingerprints, honed edges cut.
- Earlier I saw this bumper sticker on the road home and it said something like “No I don't know how to fucking drive[...] not everybody knows how to do everything” and I feel like that's a sign, as for more signs:
  - The cracks in the sidewalk by my mailbox have accumulated in such an adorable way, were it not for their roughness, I never would have noticed them,
  - I fondly recall the unsoftened fabrics of my youth,
  - This one time I fell off my bicycle and scraped the fuck out of my knee and it bled so much it ruined my shorts. I mean, I had asphalt under my skin, mixing with the blood, and my brother and his best friend who I was tagging along with had to carry me home, saying I was lucky my face missed the road because at six years old I didn't have the

muscle to lift my head away from it. I remember sitting in my parent's bathtub as my mother picked stones out of my wounds, I remember the bubbling of hydrogen peroxide disinfectant and having to dip my leg in the water when the stinging was too much to bear, and I remember watching the read build up, diffuse, and stain the water in deposits left in the time between putting it in and taking it out to apply more peroxide, on my own now, as my mother had gone away for a reason I can't remember. It's the roughness that makes this memory what it is.

- Ashe always liked the roughness of my pockmarked skin, the way the scars had built up on my back and hands over the years of picking and carving. Call it an homage.

I hope to hear from you again soon, sorry for the delay in responding, life has been throwing curveballs.

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Hey again, Victor, it's 9:29 am in Michigan.

I'm thinking of a time when I took too much Benadryl last year and I found myself floating on the thin line before sleeping, when you can't remember anything and

You're barely capable of forming words but you feel so light, you feel this love for the world and

You don't want to be asleep because you know when you wake up the feeling won't be there and

The allergies will probably be back because it's too much work to dust, too many thoughts and

You begin to wonder if you should dust now but you can't bring yourself to get up anymore and

Now that I write about it I understand what I wanted to say to Ashe as I lay on their legs drifting and

It hurts to know my tongue couldn't find the words other than I love you, it hurt to feel so much and

Be so in my body but to have my brain to distant to work out how to process that into meaning and

I'm now thinking of when I was 12, before the depression had

really blossomed into much and

I would speak the words young people who are unabashedly fluent  
in cruelties always say and

I feel bad about that, too. I promise I'm a better person. I just had  
to learn the hard way that people who don't work deserve to live, too.

That we're not weak, just rejected, and

What we can do about it doesn't amount to much (because of  
people like me).

I feel bad for all the thoughts against my mother, because, for what  
it's worth, she tried.

I always remember her behind a sewing machine. Always mending,  
repairing, never spending extra, a little thread suture was cheaper than a  
whole new garment. But no matter how much either of us did to make  
them disappear I always felt the new seams pressing on my skin, resisting  
disintegration and coming out with embarrassing scars.

I always thought of sewing as widening the holes in the weave, as  
anxiously pushing wider the gaps in the body and tightening the edges. I  
often catch my depression doing the same, poking pinpoint holes through  
me until I feel transparent, trying to keep me together but not knowing  
when or how to surrender to change.

I hurt people because I give up so easily, or because I don't give  
up soon enough. Things either slip through my hands or get shredded as I  
claw for them.

Then I'm back on the possum.

I'm on the vultures eating the possum.

I'm stopping traffic just to look at the possum.

I'm crying over the possum.

And the possum

Isn't the problem, the possum

Is dead and I understand the beauty of roadkill, of the possum

Dying, the wonder of the chemistry in working in the possum

The problem is sometimes I want to be the possum,

And sometimes I want to lap the sweet rot off of the possum

's soft fur, and have someone lick the sweet rot off of my

Soft fur. And so my

Brain rejects the thoughts of the young me and the benadryl and  
the possum,

It rejects thought entirely it rejects feeling entirely until the possum

Or something worse than it is the only thing that I

Think about anymore, until everything feels empty and nothing feels full and I

Want to venture into that fullness, to be that nothing, to taste the sweet rot of change.

And if I

keep going with this I'll cry so let me finish the email.

I'm sorry for not getting back to you sooner. Everything's been kind of a jumble since I left a few notebooks back down in Florida. I should be back in working order soon enough.

Oh— by the way, did you get a moment to look at the manuscript, by any chance? All good if not, just wanted to check in.

\*\*\*

Katie, It's 9:30 am in Michigan.

And I begin to wonder why

It feels like the time always slips away from me, why

Between the two hours of eating, three hours of writing, four hours of sleep or sex, and fifteen hours of faux-poetically asking myself what the fuck the point is i feel like i haven't got the time for myself anymore, why

Do i feel like i'm written in on the margins of my own full-page prose, well-wrought, and justified stream of consciousness, why

— fuck, there it goes. What was the thought? It was there, in a knot that my brat of a brain just untied, ugh, why

Can't I seem to put anything together, why can't I ever get anything done when I want to, and why doesn't this stupid fucking pen ever work on my terms?

Yeah, the idea is gone. Dead on the train tracks of thoughts. I can't put it back together. It rots as vividly as it lived, a bright red splatter which is all I can show you now. Sorry.

I agree with your points, by the way, the story is missing some of the usual style. But there's one caveat: metaphors *in general* are boring, not just mine. That's why I rarely use them and when I do it feels dry. My favorite implications are fairly literal.

And yes, much of it comes off as Livy complaining but one should also consider what they're complaining about and why. It's not just me voicing self-frustration through a protagonist, it's me trying to render the interchanges inherent to a depressive vision of the world. Things don't really get out of Livy's rooms because nothing else matters to them, in fact, on a certain level they believe that the whole world exists to come into

their room — in the transitional space between imagination and reality that we mostly think in, they can't tell one (themselves) from the other, and they mostly side with it being themselves.

Recall: narcissism.

\*\*\*

Hey again, Kat, it's 9:39 pm in Michigan,

The clock in my hotel room barely works, and the nines sort of look like fours, so it's hard to tell.

I still feel bad for forgetting the point of all this writing.

I'd like to clarify that while I don't know what I wanted to say, I know exactly why

I had to say it, and I feel like I should write that down instead.

It's not a substitute.

It's barely an apology.

Basically, there's misery where the joy should be (in the simplest things), and

A kind of perverse joy where the misery is still lingering.

I think the world's just becoming a bit too much for me right now.

## XX.

Cleaning up the apartment after lunch I think about dying in my dreams. How when I was younger something blacked out the dream before I could die, how sometimes the dream would start over every time it reached that ending, ceaselessly playing the same cycle over and over, the snake lunging at me from the bushes as I stood there, things going dark, me seeming to flash back into existence at the border of the jungle and walking back in and just to find death again.

I wanted to get to know the feeling. Somehow, half conscious, I was thinking scientifically, recording every observation, every new pang of fear, trying to stay calm, trying to believe that I was okay, trying to push my brain into turning the safety off, into letting me walk into the dark, into really believing it was dying, but not quite actually dying. I want to push beyond into the dark. I want to know what glows in it. I want my brain to show me what could happen.

I don't dream as vividly as I did back then. I rarely remember a dream and if I do it's never about dying. But there was one night, years ago that I can't forget. The snake — or whatever killer it was this time —

bites and I die and I don't come back. The lights stay off in the theater. For a while I just hear the fading whir and twitter of dreamwork fizzling out into nothing. The machine quiets. It is dark. My body knows the warmth of reality, but it hangs here before waking up, balanced on the thin line between a dying nightmare and awakening.

It feels like all my life I've been folded up and crumpled and slowly I feel that tension fall away, spreading out like a stretch in the morning, but without the body to stretch. The body has fallen into the deep. The body can only rise or sink, it cannot float. I'm not afraid to be without it. Raw nerves, spreading roots into the very fibers of reality.

This is the metamorphosis, the beginning of the change which death really is. Whether this is — perception or feeling or anything at all — is uncertain. It's like anything that was me has dissolved into acid. I'm feeling something that's not me, I'm feeling the diffusion of me and there's nothing to feel it with and death should be empty and I when I wake up I'll realize that dreams don't show you death because they can only get it wrong, the closest thing they could do is show you nothing, because perceiving this everything is less like death than nothing, or maybe the same, or maybe it's something like both at once, a becoming of everything, a being of nothing, the floating, the sinking, the floating on one thing and sinking in another and being in both at once but being in neither completely.

Somehow I feel remembered here — not seen or felt or heard or touched or smelled or tasted or sensed at all but remembered — like walking into a childhood home, except it's the exact opposite; I don't remember the space, the space remembers me, who has come back so soon. Yes, I think I missed you, I'm not sure how long I'll stay, or how long I've been gone, all I remember is going, and that doesn't matter here does it? In the vast Darkness (or boundless Light — don't know, haven't got eyes anymore) there is Love felt in a way that can't be explained or understood, but I'm racked with it and I know that I should go. I know that I'm not ready to be so Loved. *I'm going now.*

I become aware of a hand on my back, in the real world I am shaking. *Goodbye, I have to go.* In the real world I am sweating. I do not have the words with me to tell them what was happening, so I just hug them tight and sigh. It's the closest thing I ever felt to what Ashe described their near-death as.

I once again forget to clean the plates on the table, which stay there until supper.

## XXI .

It is so quiet here when it's just my mother and I. We're both people who rarely find the need to talk, so we usually spend the day in a thick silence chilled by ticks and beeps of machines that can all tell you the time.

In the silence I tend to remember the loudness of the days when we first got together. The early years of college. Something about them feels lost, even though I remember it all even now, something about it all seems missing. Something was missing then, I still feel it missing.

I spent so much time drifting, I was always drifting, always learning, there was so much to learn, so much that seemed worth learning.

I read theory and liked philosophy mostly for their completeness, their dedication to systematic uniformity down to the very specific, which is especially ironic considering the then strong and still ongoing incoherence and contradiction of my private life and probably everyone's.

I remember all the long walks home, though I can hardly pin down exactly what happened when I know what happened where and the routes I walked all come back to me quickly as memory works in its unfolding way, with roads springing out from each other around the pistil of my little apartment.

I recall all the cooking and cleaning, the dinners and movies, all the nights spent working and writing and the sense that I could never, ever get enough sleep or enough warmth or enough food or enough love.

I dwelled so often on how temporary it would all be, always thinking about how the frenetic energy would dissipate and this life would fade away along, I hoped, with me, and everything that made me suffer.

I remember just how enamored I was, with Ashe and with life, and also how reversible the affect of that was — how much I hated life, how upset Ashe could make me. I remember it especially in juxtaposition with just how little I cared about life before, against my own indifference.

I remember it all against myself, I refine all that I remember against what I see. That is what tells me I am still in love, because whenever I remember anything the love is magnified, refined, ever more detailed with each recollection.

## XXII . PRISM;

optics; a transparent object with refracting surfaces at an acute angle with each other, used to separate light into a visible spectrum of

colors, most commonly an equilateral square pyramid of class. this term is often used figuratively to denote the particular distortion afforded by a narrator or character's viewpoint.

if one could stack a series of prisms in such a way as to diffract or magnify a further reducing spectrum of a single color — say, red — arriving recursively at a more and more fine spectrum of red — the red's red, ever reddening — reducing, selecting, reducing, selecting, reducing, selecting until the finest bands of wavelength down to the smallest-measurable quantum could be distinguished — by a well-trained red-eye — from among the noise of the neighboring colors — as if we had another rainbow in red alone — we might have a serviceable, though perhaps too straightforward, metaphor for the phenomenon of postmodern storytelling.

prisms upon prisms. light upon light.

SEE recursion

SEE visible light

### XXIII .

We are surrounded by Multiplicities. As the kind of person who sips their coffee on balconies, thinking of the Multiplicities, I can't help but other myself, reduce myself to the normal nothings I do in other people's lives — silly things overheard, glances caught at the grocery store, passing accidental touches.

When I do I feel subtracted, removed, negated in my smallness by the breadth of the multiplicity that I can't know, a feeling which, on inspection, makes me feel even smaller on account of how subtracting myself from Infinity changes nothing at all.

That should be reassuring but it's not. I am so small and I want to be smaller. I wish I could matter less — less than nothing; Nothing. I can't stand the thought that something as small as me could change lives, even in little ways, I can't take the thought that I'm acting on other lives, doing things, that I exist within the contingent weave of cause and effect.

Moreover I don't like the comfort of my subtraction. I don't like the peace of being outside of it all, disassociated with the mass. I am worried by how the silence embraces me in its own strange show of affection.

I'm scared of how everything in our life is subject to change and everything slips away without our knowing or being able to change, often in spite of our attempts to change it. If you're scared too I dare you to try holding onto something — tight enough to burn your hands and break your



knuckles if it comes to it. See how it works out, see how much hurt you will withstand just to keep it with you.

And if it works out for you, and you can manage to keep everything the same, I'll be the first to applaud and the loudest, I will thank you for proving people can be stronger than me, and they are the ones endowed with hope. I hope, in reading this, you become stronger than me.

#### **XXIV.**

We never really talked about dad.

I think we both made the silent assumption that the other didn't want to say anything about it, so even in the moments where the pain came to the surface, we never talked about it. We just shared the burden in silence, and never asked.

And she never asked me about Ashe after I told her, just like how she never asked about the new book or the new clothes or the new voice or anything, because she didn't want to know. There is a kind of immunity in her silence, a guard I cannot break. Hers is the silence of the world, the quieting not-even-an-echo you get when you shout to a mountain.

The truth is I don't know how to feel.

I honestly don't know whether it's more comforting to know that you can hold onto things or make it past losing them. I don't even feel the same way about either from day to day.

I don't know if it's more comforting to be able to change without losing anything or stay the same without losing anything.

I don't know if I want to have stayed with Ashe or still want to have left. Either way I'd feel bad. Either way it's the wrong choice.

Most of all I don't know how to live with the guilty feeling that I've killed someone.

I feel the need to cry.

#### **XXV.**

I sent a text to Ashe telling them how I feel about being here but I don't include how I feel about having to write that text to them, having to remind Ashe who I am because the time and distance might have been enough for them to forget or for that to change. This is how I find out their number has been terminated and reassigned. I apologize to the stranger.

## XXVI. INSERT III. UMBRELLA

It was a cup.

I cleaned everything up quickly. A ring hung in the air as the used-to-be cup slid across the floor into the pan of the broom that was replicated as it slid off the pan onto the counter. I took a plastic bag and dropped all of the pieces in, careful to differentiate the dirt from the dust. It made the same sound. I harmonized with a small sound of laughter.

I placed it down, back on the counter, where it was, and when everything was in its right place, as if trying to go back by congruence of position. But I was still where I was, the cup still was a cup. Nothing faded back to how it was, nothing had changed.

It was still past midnight, the moon was still somewhere in the sky barely and imperceptibly displaced, and I was still nowhere near tired, only now I felt the compulsion to yawn. It was a bitter stretch of my strained lungs and shallow breaths. The air was stale and unmoving, the new silence outside reflected in reverence for the echoes of the crash, now held lightly in the air in small vibrations that, too, would disappear. Any trace of the moment was soon gone, leaving only the memories and relics. The heartbeats slowed, the breaths deepened, the sorrow faded into a quiet caring, a mere dull ache, now that the blood had stopped rushing.

It had fallen. It is shattered.

The broken vessel could hold nothing, it could only hold everything. I thought, for a moment, that I could glue it back together, but the cracks would always show as scars, the change was instant and irreversible, from the very first impact there was nothing to be done.

I looked at the pieces. I took some out to hold in my hands. What used to be the laminated surface gave way to a dry and porous inside. Even at a low pressure, it made an uncomfortable scrape when it ran against my skin. The red cube now forms sporadic drips on the fragmentary surface of white, an incomplete and incompletable picture.

There was new damage, that was the change. Some kind of integrity had been lost and the world in its local vicinity — I — was forced to mourn the entropy. It stung with a kind of burning feeling in an afterimage.

I felt horrible — of course I did, there was no other way to feel — for having broken this thing that was once so precious, once so meaningful and so living. It was once a gift and now it lay broken on the counter, it once had a use and now it was little more than trash, rubbish which I couldn't bring myself to get rid of.

The urge to throw it away was countered with the understanding that this was a valuable object, the compulsion to keep it for when June came back to get it, remembering that she still had work here to do, that she still had things to gather.

There were the other things too — a clock and some of her books — and she would want those one day or at least not want them to be burned. She might ask for them and I would be ready to send them her way. Even if she was gone I might hold onto her things. Even the dead would hate to know the end of what they left behind.

But, then again, she was alive. She could have come to get them, or could have sent for them already. If she was going to want them, why would she have left them behind? To want them now, all of the sudden, would mean that she hadn't wanted them and now she did. If she hadn't wanted them then, she wouldn't want them now. They were abandoned — then, now, forever, — because she didn't want them.

They were left behind.

I kept them somewhere between ownership and abandonment, unsure whether they were mine or hers and unwilling — because something in me didn't want to know — to open the box to find out.

Again I got the sense that I was alone, something worse than feeling watched. The terror of being utterly unperceived. I noticed again the body from which the sound distracted — the texture of the clothes was still annoying, the hands were still shaking, the spine was still contorted over the counter, only now the eyes were heavier, hinting at a sleep that would not come, though maybe not for lack of trying. Again it was the usual: a banal, silent distrust.

For just a moment there I thought that I was free from this. For a moment the phone calls or the shattered cup would free me forever from the sense of negative eyes around me, unseeing, unwatching. But they only took me away from it for a time, stealing the feeling to sharpen it and have it return reinvigorated. But no, still here, in the lonely hours of the night, it was just me, just the unknowing, just the unknown.

It was the feeling you get in the hallowed places — the chapels, churches and graveyards — where you hesitate to make a noise for fear of the sound. Where each action comes with the subtle hesitation at the space's reservation: *you are not supposed to be here*. And when the air of that silence surrounds you, coats your ears with pressure, takes you back into yourself despite — maybe because of — the sight's grandeur, so you only feel your own impassive glow, derisory even on the scale of the time

and space closest to you, small in the consuming abyss.

Somewhere near the bottom, I was looking up and back, still sliding down.

I was so close to getting somewhere, too. I was so close to being able to paint something that now sat half-finished at my desk where it sat since I came back that day and gave it up because the feeling just wasn't there. I was so close. Why did I have to fall back down here, to the place I was before I started and twice before that? Did I have some nostalgic fetish for the bottoms of holes dug for myself? Some atavistic compulsion to sleep in some past hovel carved out for me to curl up and hide in when winter came?

I felt as sick as I did cold.

I wanted to do something. I couldn't lay down and I couldn't stand around because something needed to happen, something I couldn't really make happen, so I sat frustrated, viciously trying to go beyond myself.

I was as warm as I was productive — which is to say, not at all.

I fell asleep at my desk that night.

Certain days after weren't much better.

Again and again I would wake up and soon glance the shards against the backdrop of coffee. Shards of white and red against the black made the smell of the fresh brewing an unpleasant sign that time was moving forward. They stayed there for some time, close to the cupboard which used to hold it but now unfit to enter, having passed permanently into the space outside of the glass.

Looking at it I seemed to break it again, as if my gaze itself cracked and shattered the body. I would repair it eventually, and be allowed to bring it back into a home, but there was no time for that now, as there was always work to be done larger than cups.

Seeing it there, then, made me guilty, it was a physical indictment that sealed the case forever: this thing was broken and it was me to blame. My culprit heart sank at the thought that I had blood on my hands that could not be cleaned. Each time I saw it, I would try to think of some way that I could make it up — some genius solution that would nullify the problem. I would hate myself, then wonder how June could ever love someone like me.

For a time I thought it was nothing, that I could just rid myself of it and history wouldn't mind the insignificant difference. I never had the courage in me to act on this.

For more I thought about the pen: maybe if I broke the equivalent

thing it would all balance out and I would again be able to think. If I could destroy in her what she destroyed in me and she could break on accident what I broke in folly the universe's book of debts would show a balance and I would be granted some mercy or at the very least enough Mercury to make it through the day. It would be quick: a sudden snap and that vessel would never be filled again. It would shatter nicely, and they could fill the same bag. But that too, took too much faith to muster.

Most of the time I just thought about it, reaching an empty space where I had guessed a solution might be and then, on the sight of the void, finding that I forgot why I came, so I would just end up staring, for the morning, into a pool of black coffee, housed in a blank, black vessel that I'd probably picked up in college for the sake of having something to drink out of or stolen accidentally from some nameless diner when I was too young to think it wrong. Then I would wash that cup and think again how strange it looked with water inside of it and that perhaps if it held it upside-down, it would keep the liquid out of the indent, which would, of course, be rather counterintuitive to the goal of cleaning it.

There were many cups — not all of them had stories or designs or memories, but all — sat in the cupboard, collecting their dust and rarely used. I had a favorite. The rest were safeguarded against the wear and tear of their use, protected from the possibility of ever being needed. They need not face the heat, they need not be put at risk, they could stay up there, quiet and pure, for nothing but to fill the cabinet space. I was used to this one and I wanted no more changes.

If ever I thought about using another, the guilt would come back.. I would be putting it in danger: it would be near edges and next to hands that could hurt it. Far too close to harm's way.

A vessel didn't deserve to be put at risk if it didn't need to be.

No, one cup — one choice cup — was enough for the necessary service.

As it happened, this was the same way I knew everyone to use their cups. June never objected to the habit; in college my friends rarely kept more than one mug and if they did they did have more than many they only really used one; at home in the past my family had a cabinet full of novelty cups that was filled to the brim and kept filling past the brim, but there was a rack for the four that would ever see use, and several other families I'd visited had a rack just the same. Really it was just a matter of habit — yes, only habit — that made us reach for the same cup each morning so that it could sustain the same test in the same way. Because why would anyone

think to do it differently? It's just a cup — no need to think too hard about it.

But these mornings the shards of grief told me otherwise. Objects had significance and for someone with as sentimental — and neurotic — a disposition towards ceramics and handicrafts and human-touched objects that I had, there was no avoiding the consequence that the unused cups were happy to be such. They could sit there on the shelves and gather that comfortable patina of savorable age not intensified by exertion, and they might see the shards in the distance and think “what a terrible thing” followed shortly with “there but for the grace of god goes I!”

Abstracted from the possibility of tragedy, they were ornamental.

I would, on such days, finish my breakfast and move quickly to my work, which was becoming increasingly partitioned to focus on exhibition pieces with classes being cut back for the school season. Little was different about them: warm-up, study, ponder something bigger; try to make something impressive; try to establish a story. Pinning down the right form of telling was mostly an exercise of the eye, and when I closed them to try at sleeping, they would always give a crying burn.

It was raining more often. To avoid getting wet as much as I could, I stayed home. Staring, as was the style, at a white canvas, taking reference and ideas back from the annals to make a form carry its weight.

The blankness was a bad omen. Moreover it was paralyzingly hallucinogenic: I would see on it all the things that it could be — the phantasmagoria of the future, as it were (was, is, would be) — I was told to choose from the infinity of states the one, singular, isolated thing that would *work*. Despite what my eyes made on it, the thing would stay blank for some time — it wouldn't change until the moment I marked it, and after that it was permanently altered into something workable, something I was capable of doing. The piece was done from the first mark, if only I could mark it without regret. I would be there for a while, staring, on so many days, at a white canvas.

That, or I was making the things to draw from, on the whim of their striking, molding the white surface of a page into a brief sign that would remind me of the idea. Often, this succeeded in its purpose, drawing out the same state of mind I was in, giving me back some of the thoughts in the same neighborhood. But they never were the same.

I couldn't make them the same because memory and thinking about memory take up two different parts of the brain, and this was memory alone. It was not like some other reminders, those also fleeting, also austere

moments that don't just draw out a memory but drag you in, those visions that fold the fabric in on itself for a moment, making your body move and speak old words as if you were there again, working like a dream that wakes you up talking.

A powerful enough — often embarrassing enough — recording might unite recollection and thought, but mostly the power is reserved for things that didn't need to be recorded — those scars that remain in your body always and, on a whim, resonate with anything that glances the mere idea to which they are attached.

Still, I recorded it all, in the hope of that rare circumstance of its working coming to pass. If it passed the test of odds, it could transcend the limits of time. It could live forever, it already did, had it survived more than a few minutes.

Once I had written all these things down, they lived on the page and not in my head. With a long enough difference it was as if the ideas were entirely new, like someone else had written them down. Of course, I knew it was me who did this, but it was a me who had seen something else and who worked with other ideas, existing in a different state of mind, it was a me who was someone else. Either that someone was a retrievable version of me, existing only in the platonic sense, or they went far beyond myself, creating something meaningful — more so than them — that could step outside of time and thought and stand on its own.

All that beating the odds would take was as many chances as possible. I scribbled like hell, the motion against the surface of the paper becoming a fervent series of beats in imperfect — impossibly perfect, for the speed was too much to keep — time. I worked until my hands were sore, my wrists were tired, and my mind was still nowhere near settled about the ideas. I didn't want to stop. I could push my limits and put myself somewhere else doing this — feeling like I was serving the future while knowing the future had a high chance to misunderstand. And when I was done? What then? What else would there be?

Nothing. There was nothing. There was rain or heat or frost outside, maybe a few dusty books or a half-day-stale cup of coffee inside, and scarcely one person in my phone whose number hadn't been relegated to the status of keeping-for-the-sake-of-keeping, with me not knowing what the name attached to most of them meant.

But all of that was nonsense. There was an entire universe of nonsense and only the most infinitesimal part of it was ever capable of being done, let alone worth doing. It was better to stay at my desk and push



through the fits and fog with a stretch, a curl of the wrist and the subtle acknowledgment that this was better than the alternative — something I could, and often did, find out in thirty seconds of being alone in a room.

In time, my hands would grow accustomed to the effort, bending more and more towards holding the passive grip on the tool, folding in on itself when it didn't have it to stabilize the formation. In time, the creases in my hands mingled with the faded scars, now just old aberrations on the surface. They were the same as the scars — the same principle at least. They became the new scars — prominent, fresh, newborn — in contrast to the old ones which were now a standard feature — supervisual, faded, antiquated. In time, they too might pass into obscurity, fading as the cells replace themselves, but still there, to be found with enough looking. For now, though, they were reinforced as the work continued at the same erratic pace.

The occasional class, however, did well to interrupt the lack of variety. We were mostly leaning towards more complete pieces now. Studies still made their way in every now and then, but portfolio-building forefronted itself for the season. I was mostly advising, on stylistic touches, technical aspects, and creative directions, rather than on the real nitty-gritty subjects that the free explorations allowed. I was advising artworks instead of artists, teaching case-by-case to clear up what was missing.

From a teaching perspective this was less conceptually engaging but leagues more stimulating. When they were given the freedom to choose everything they would do from all that they knew, the students displayed their personality on canvas as they would like to present it. I saw what students discovered by chipping away at the fog that concealed their expressive character from themselves. Exploring the unfamiliar had allowed them to discover new aspects of their expression and restate that visually. Their voices described them. With practice they might learn to speak loudly, too.

In preparation for admissions, Rina and I tried to advise the students to make the best choices possible to demonstrate their particular strengths, honing those and masking the weaknesses to be later refined. With this, and sufficient work on their part, they could carve the future they wanted. Several students showed marked improvement from their exercise, and several more had a positive outlook for a later time.

Kerain was one of the former, illustrating a steady growth towards becoming one of the latter. While he was occasionally very capable he was often devoid of the spirit required to even try improvement. For a long time



it felt like he was doing everything out of obligation — that every form was compulsory and ultimately meaningless — but in the rare instance where he was properly impassioned, his understanding of space was excellent and betrayed no lack of passion.

Still, day in and day out he would come in and sit stalwart. I had hoped that his interest in history would spark some vibrant inspiration, but that, it seemed, was dead in the water. He treated this like day care, but at least rarely spoke a word any more, except for when he would come to me with brief, shy questions on his reading. He left as soon as the time came most days, packing his things early to be the first out the door.

There was a Sunday morning, later into these days, that disturbed this habit, however, when he told me about his father.

It was not a day for class — it was not a day for much of anything, according to some — but I was in the studio trying to work out the final touches for a large piece, exacting the smallest details into a refined expression. It was growing harder for me to deem a piece finished, as I wandered over the smallest effects, those imperceptible from more than centimeters away or thought about scrapping the whole thing and going for a different effect.

A deeply methodical thing, I would contemplate the potential for change by reviewing the minor components, the insignificant, and only when all of these things were perfected could the larger piece work. A cohesive thing, it blended the elements of the piece more effectively into the vision, correcting any momentary deviations from the idea, no matter how small, to make a more complete vision that ultimately felt more considered. A slow, quiet thing, it was mostly a process of staring at the canvas, making careful touches to correct the rhythm, the line, the feeling, the everything into a more certain state that would ideally be self-justifying and merit consideration as a work of art.

In the middle of this, there came a surprised knock at the studio door. He was there, well dressed and standing just beyond the threshold of glass, looking half as surprised to see me as I was to see him.

I said hello to Kerain, letting him in.

“Hello, sorry to interrupt. I just was passing by and saw you were in.” Sitting down. He wasn’t an interruption. He must have been on his way home from church, perhaps remembering something he left behind. His mood was that after a solemn service. Was there something important?

“No— Yes. I wanted to ask a question.” He seemed not to think too hard about the words, despite, perhaps, thinking very hard about them.

“And see if you could help me answer another.”

I nodded to have him continue. He took from a small case he had with him — a backpack he always seemed to carry — the old notebook with his family name on it. “My father left a lot of notebooks behind. Most of them are nonsense or journals, but this one feels like it’s more important.”

We moved to a table as he opened it to reveal pages loaded with scrawlings of quotations and statements with small scribbled diagrams, all in several different colors and written at various angles in handwriting that almost looked like it from a different person if not for a distinctively claustrophobic spacing between the letters. We spent some time looking, trying to read it.

It was equal parts diary and restaurant napkin — sketches filled the pages along with notes, crossed out notes, or amended notes that filled in every inch of paper until it almost looked like it was an elaborate scheme to cover the page in ink. And it might have been one, too, since the words themselves were senselessly abstract, what you could decipher you could barely read because they made only a glancing kind of sense: remarks like “the word dog barks god” and paragraphs on paragraphs of jargon derived from some books and theorists whose names were noted like they were roles in a play:

“GILBERT: *‘form without meaning is lurid meaning without form is absent’*”

He asked me some names and I told him as much as I could, leaving him with a list to investigate at the library. It was an interesting book, but nothing he couldn’t have looked up with ease relative to coming here.

When we were finished, I asked about his other question.

He paused and asked “What’s the point in making art?”

I told him what I thought: “To express something.” There was obviously more to the question. “I think what you mean to ask is ‘what’s the point of art?’ And that’s a much harder question.”

“What’s the answer?” Impatient.

“There isn’t one.” Sincere.

“But it’s a question, it has to have an answer.” Frustrated.

I told him that not every question has an answer, it can just be a question. You can come up with a solution to the question, but that’s not an answer. A solution is something which would occlude the need to even ask the question here, something like “art is dead” or “art is a form of

expression” or any suitable definition of what art is without defining why art is. You solve the question by ignoring it or answering an easier one.

I had once had this conversation before, though on the other side, with someone much less tolerant of questioning. He would have called it “the wrong question”; what I asked then was “of cursory importance to the discipline” irrelevant to what *should* be investigated, the meaning of artistry.

I half heard this past as I tried to keep up the present speech.

“But then how do you get past it?” he was saying — I had said.

“You don’t.” Porter said “You confront it constantly and come up with a reason of your own. The process is largely supported by your experience and desire to know. The point of this for me is expression. It will, inevitably, be something different for you.” I hastened to add. “It will sound unsatisfying, but it *is* ultimately fulfilling.”

He made slow little glances in various directions — towards me, towards the book, towards the canvas — and came back to the conversation “Can you ever know why someone else does it without them telling you?”

“Even when they do tell you, you can’t really know. What’s important is that you find out for yourself.”

A breath’s moment hollowed his eyes. “My father suffered for this. In his last journal he talks about how, every day, waking up was a painful affair, his life was a chore, and enjoying any single moment was not only rare, but guilty. He said ‘art consumed [his] everything’, that it was so important nothing else mattered. And even that was a struggle, days of toil just to get that monetary satisfaction that would fill his words with inspiration, where I could see that it was really him, my father and not a husk, someone who loved me and the world. I need to know why he would do that.”

And where could he possibly start? He had learned more than ever who his father was through those journals but he wasn’t close to understanding him — he might have even been further. He was desperate to understand more about him, hoping somehow that knowing would recall him to life.

We talked about who his father was to him — a person, experienced in three dimensions — until the pages of the journal over which he leaned had dried. The words in those books might have made it look like he lived in an emotional void, but we all are hollow when we are alone. We empty ourselves of vice and virtue when the doors shut out all

other eyes, so unencumbered we become capable of perfection — perfect joy and perfect misery.

After that day I would find that he worked harder on his art, which showed in the quality.

Later I would ask Rina about his father. As it was, they found him dead in the washroom, his feet off the ground. Supposedly he was prone to depressive episodes, one just went too far and, bang, *is* became *was*. It was a shame, too, he could have done a lot more.

He didn't leave any notes — any new ones, I mean.

It was a terrible thing to think about, all the things he left behind. A son, a widow, a career, a future; his was a valuable life, filled with so much potential for and present joy, even joy beyond the horizons of imagination. The thought that he would leave that all behind — that he might have been rational for that — kept me up at night.

Not that it was easy to sleep before knowing. It's possible that I would be awake no matter what, and the thing that kept me up was a matter of choice for my mind to disguise the mere want to be awake. Whether I would think about him or the exhibition or the cup or June or squirrels or drawers in the kitchen, it wouldn't matter, as long as the habit kept me awake.

The few nights where I did sleep well were always a matter of course — those days when all habits feel inverted as the experience of living is torn open by lucidity of thought. An unattributable cause made everything feel changed, as if I were suddenly rocketed to another dimension where things were “different,” but with all the memories of that person — that “different” me — who was from this “different” place and to whom this was the habit, such that everything was “different” but still I knew them to be exactly right.

My habit was a thing I knew, but not a thing I understood, and in making the effort to understand it I could only arrive at the conclusion that there was nothing I was capable of understanding about it — obviously, since it was a part of another me.

All this change happened at night, it seemed, and in the morning everything right felt wrong and everything wrong felt right. Those mornings I woke up exhausted from a terrible dream and the first thing I saw made me want to cry because it reminded me that I was human, that I was me, that I was, am, and will be alive this day. They were days of sudden softness, where the meaning of everything was put into question and habits felt so unnatural that they often failed to work.

I never knew what caused them to come about. I blamed many things: perhaps the dreams, something in my dinner, but none of it came to satisfy the magnitude of the effect. There must have been something massive that could have caused this, nothing small could do it. Something terrible must have happened — something mythical — to set about such a feeling that nothing at all could possibly be right.

Or maybe it could have been something small transcending its inanity to operate momentarily on a higher order, setting a great work into motion. A mere thing, perhaps the sound of the police sirens outside I ignored as I went to bed, thereafter barreling through my memory throughout the night, connecting this with another sleeping night and gathering further and further significance along the way. It would gather so much that when I woke it would be like one of those thoughts that decenters — if only for a moment — the one's entire basis for understanding the world — forcing a new perspective on everything they could see. Those too, were often small things that pulled linchpins on the frameworks one relied upon.

But what could be so terrible to change the world but so easy to overlook — to forget — as a cause that I couldn't even see it? Perhaps it's that the worst things are those that can hide the best, the things that we'll never see. They could change the world without us knowing it and leave us sifting through the ashes for even the slightest hint at how. The subtle things, the quiet things, those we forget as quickly as our glance passes over them would make the most dreadful monsters — ones we couldn't even know well enough (or perhaps know too well) to be scared of.

No matter the cause, they would make that same disturbance that forced me to choose what would normally be habitual, the natural order of things deconstructed.

I have a poor memory of the exact things I do each day. Most of the tasks are informed by the feeling that I should do them from the last. I do many things because I feel like I want to and only after doing them do I realize that “this is a thing I do every day,” a fact that contributes to the initial feeling but goes unnoticed during the process of choosing.

It is difficult to do this backwards — to know that I do something everyday and so have it feel like I should be doing it — because the feeling that something should be done is more significant than the merit of tradition: there are many bad habits, and their consistency does not merit their continuation — in fact, their consistently negative implications and results make them regrettable and are grounds for their disavowal.

I was pushing against a current of anomalies to do even the simplest of things, like make a meal or brush my teeth. Things often happened out of their normal order — with varying levels of inconvenience, depending on the task — and on a particular, fateful morning, I found myself checking the mail before making breakfast, and shortly after brushing my teeth.

In another rare disturbance, there was a letter in the mailbox. From June. I could hardly wait to have it inside, tearing at the seal before I had even reached the door. I reached a table, sat quickly, and read it whole and hungrily, tearing through the words as a stray dog does a gift of food.

The following words were typed and printed for me and me alone, never to be shared with others:

Dearest Livy,

Doubtlessly you've not stopped thinking about the morning I left for more time than a day since. I'm sorry for that. I want you to know that I have done the same. Like all separation, it happened in what must have been a matter of seconds and yet felt all too slow. That is no way for this to be done, and I sincerely regret the way I went about things.

I know, and knew, doing it that way could give no sense of closure, no sense of feeling, and not even a modicum of understanding to you. I have kept you in the dark for far too long, regrettably for the simple fact that I have, for far too long, been unable to find the right, precise words to tell you why.

This is as much a struggle for my sensibility as it is to articulate the feeling precisely.

Shortly, I have been caught between the proverbial rock and hard place.

You deserve those right words, but I still cannot find them. This letter is long because of that. I hate that it must be so long, it makes me want to sink into the Earth and hide away until the problem disappears. I have hidden until now. But each time I emerge it is there. It is pushing me underground. It won't go away, not unless I do this.

Let me be clear: I have left you intending to never come back. I continue that intent and you should know that it won't change. Part of why I haven't kept in touch was in an effort to affirm that. I did not leave you because you hurt me and I do not believe that our love died (I still do not think, in fact, that love really can die at all). Loving you, however, did hurt often, and I think that

if it had continued it might have wounded us both far too deeply to even scar. This is what much of this letter must endeavor to explain.

I left because I loved you. I know it was painful for me to do that, and it must have been painful for you. I want you to know that I didn't want to hurt you, but I had to save you. Leaving was the only way to do that.

I needed to release you from the jail I had put you in by looking for success. The magazine was drowning you. It was easy to see with the smallest shred of attention. Yet you stayed there. You would have stayed there forever if I never found anything to keep us afloat while you looked. You were ready to destroy yourself for me, and I loved you too much to let you do that. The only way I could push you to grow was to leave. I am too invested in your growth as a person to stay with you.

I must admit there is selfishness to underlie that martyrdom. I was afraid to be useless, too, afraid that I would be nothing and that you would have to buttress me for the rest of my career as the failing, fed artist. Neither you nor I would be able to withstand that possibility. When I was inside that apartment, I felt a homely guilt; when I was out or you were away, I felt alone. We were poisoned by the notion that I would succeed, and it was slowly killing us. We were both too set on being good at what we wanted to do that any failure would destroy both of us.

—  
You may not understand what I mean by this. I will try to clarify. As I have known you, you have been a person of yearning, fixated on your own improvement. I suspect that this has not changed, and it might have only worsened since I have gone away.

What I mean is that you try to be happy constantly, you try to be the best at everything you do, and you try to erase even the smallest of errors from anything concerning you. You are a force of creative erasure which you tend to call refinement. I have been the same, but having seen the necessity of imperfection I have made lifelong efforts against that tendency. They have not always been successful, but they have never failed to be a useful reminder of my perspective.

You want a great life, but I don't think that it is possible to navigate towards such a thing with the name of the destination alone.

You have tried so hard to be good, that you have forgotten the possibility of finding your path by being okay. I admit to having



done the same. If we were content to stay the same all our lives this might have been a wonderful thing, but, as it is, such a thing would destroy us both.

If one believes they need to be good at all times as they grow, they will suffer constantly and shrink. A person is good only after they have suffered some time with being okay. Success requires a persistence which we had lost.

I have thought this in variations for some time, likely since we even thought of quitting, but I didn't want to accept it. I was being intentionally and selectively blind in believing that we could succeed like the unbound and uncaring kids that we were when we did the first time.

When we made our first break with the magazine it was as a result of pure persistence. We had failed and failed relentlessly over our lifetime until we had a tower of rejections so high that it was fit to seat something successful. I thought that this would be it, and I let myself think that for a long time. I could admit to loving you then because I was allowing myself, for perhaps the first time in my life, to rest, assured in my everlasting future of making good things to rival the first. I couldn't have known that things would change, but they have. It was right at the time, but things have changed.

Moreover that we had succeeded, we had been willing to fail for the sake of making something. When I was applying for jobs, I found myself thinking back to this and could only see how different it was — how much we had changed. We were trying to make new successes on the ground level. Sure we had experience but we didn't have the drive to put it into effect. I was distracted by wanting to be with you. How can you improve when you feel like you're perfect?

When I was applying for the job I hold now I didn't think of you. I'm sorry for saying this but doing that felt like I was free. I was floating on the water for the first time since we had discovered a boat that was supposed to carry us to success faster than swimming and, by god, it felt fantastic. I realized something then, in the freedom: we stabilized each other. We were tied together, loving but constricting, confining. I realized we needed to split to each get what we wanted. I'm sorry I couldn't say that to you. I'm ashamed to say I couldn't find the words until now (but the fact of that is a testament to what I mean).

I surely felt bad for applying, but the results speak for themselves. The jobs here were no more scarce than they were here. My spirit was the differentiating factor, and unbound it was more



capable of growing because I was content with being okay — I was fine to just swim..

I made the promise that if I were accepted in Britain I would leave. It would affirm what I had feared. I knew that I was leaving before you, but I didn't have the heart to tell you. Waiting was a great mistake, but when I saw the love in your eyes each morning I couldn't bear to say anything that would hurt you. Whenever I think back to that look in your eyes I want to stop writing this letter. That's guilt — a thing that stops you in your tracks, reaching out to enshroud you.

The short of it is that we had stumbled into an ideal life without realizing it. We thought it was us, came to know each other, and founded our love on that mutual misunderstanding. We failed to see it slip away as we enjoyed it, so it was stolen away under us, and as we took our last step out of the paradise I realized that we couldn't reclaim what we had if the memory of it were to haunt us.

So I left you in hopes of dispelling the specter of the past into just a memory. That way we could both look for something new. There should not be sorrow in that parting, even if there is. I'd be lying if I said I didn't think it would hurt you, and I almost wanted it to. In order to feel better you first have to feel something.

Haven't you always needed pain to change?

—

The parting of ways is a cosmic thing, there is a moment where one body exits the orbit of another and in that instant the connection is gone. The tie uniting them has been severed by a sudden outward push or pull, but still one exists on the horizon of another for a time beyond what my life could reckon with. I do not mean to give us celestial importance, but I cannot understate how much human experiences can appear celestial from inside of them.

Separation is a lot. Just know that even if you think of me, even if you remember us, and even if I send you a letter detailing the physics of us falling apart, that the bond is severed and cannot be stitched back.

If ever we were to try to enter into each other's orbits again we would be doing it as something new and entirely unnatural. One world would be launched at the other and the orbits would be entirely different, they might even crash into each other and tear the whole thing apart. I trust that you understand: even if you force something back to how it was, you'll never be able to see it the same. There will always be a gap — even if you pretend not to see it —

between the fantasy you want and the evidence of the past that you want to support it.

It's not your fault that things ended. I left on my own accord. I was glad to know you for all this time, and even gladder to be so close to you. I am proud of the love we had, so complete now, so invincible it had to fall apart. If fate had presented the opportunity to keep things as they were when we were happy working and living together, I would have taken it in a heartbeat. You know I've thought on it quite a bit, and there was never such a chance. You and I had been too good for too long, and in some unsleeping midnight auguries I see that we might have found another rock on which to sink our good ship. I could only have hurt you, I would never let you get hurt.

—

England is all I wanted and more. You would love the museums. I want you to know that I am well and that I am doing what I have dreamed of during every second of sleep I've ever had. I hope you are doing the same and can find it in yourself to be everything I know you can.

Love,  
June

A tightness formed in my jaw and moved down into my hands. I wanted to move away that day so she wouldn't know the address. I wanted to dash the letter into pieces and burn it in a confetti of fire. I wanted to write back, wishing for a return.

I couldn't though, because it was the morning and I had to go about today like any other day. That was the worst part of something bad happening in the morning, you had to go about the rest of the day like it hadn't, all the while only being able to ruminate on it. I swallowed *that* down and I was expected to make breakfast? To brew the coffee for the cup? To feed myself when I was already so full of grief? What a terrible thing; to expect me to do anything but cry would be too much. But to perform such negligence, a treason against my emotions, was what the day expected of me.

I would think about nothing today, nothing but this.

I looked on the world with eyes dead of light. I looked with two half eyes, closed top-halves of the pupils, under the eyelids, still reading the letter, word for word, back to me. The other halves interacted with the world out of pure necessity, preferring to be closed, longing to go back

home, but forced to situate me in another space, though unconvincingly, poorly and carelessly superimposing me into places where I was not and should not be, where I was an obvious anachronism shot someplace else and patched in with an abundance of feedback.

I reacted poorly with the others in the restricted frame — not really being there, after all — and forgot the scene the moment it faded to another. There was nothing to remember, nothing was happening, at least, nothing that wasn't dwarfed in scale by the magnitude of the distracting action behind the camera:

What a joy to read her voice! To see her words! But what terrible things they said! She cared enough to send a letter — to come back and make her unmeasured cut more precise, to execute me again. How beautiful and complete it was — a carefully-crafted cataclysm, a rapture full of tactful love.

What was I supposed to do with this, June?

The words denatured the very fibers that catalyzed the process of recovery, as you thought the limb's wound might begin to scar you came back to cut off and called it surgery. In sending back these words, you left again, this time more completely. You came back to kiss me goodbye and leave — but you came back, you came back with a “[Hello,] Dear” so silently, as if it were only natural.

She returned to me, sent me a letter to show she cared. There, that letter showed that I hadn't died for her, her version of me had degraded, sure, but she cared for it in her fast-moving trip to then render its stationery death.

I made sure to understand every word, as she would want me to — the boats, the galaxies, the deaths and rebirths; the Ship of Theseus, the Woolf and the Shakespeare, the Bible; every syntactic flaw and feature and failure of the language to process what I knew she was feeling because the words were only a splinter off her cross. There, in the letter, was her revival, momentary and eviscerating. Words have no mechanism to approximate the feeling. I won't even try, it must suffice to call it devastating.

And what an absurd premise for this revived pain! She sacrificed herself because *she didn't want me to do just that*. What I had received was a suicide note from a person promising to save me — no, even better, to save *us* — through the action, asking me not to follow. And for a moment — for many moments, indeed — it was convincing, keen and brief enough to make me think she was right, that I was the one who set this rolling

downhill! Was I meant to be convinced into placidity by *that*?

Really, what was supposed to happen, June?

Did you really believe that such words — crafted from an ocean away — could fix this? This, the fallout of your disappearance — specified, as I know how you so dislike undefined antecedents, since you so seek *precision*. That you might be so excellent a wordsmith you could fire them over that infinite distance directly through my skull to excise the tumor you left inside, then we might be saved, you would have the power to end the world's problems with a glorious flick of the pen. I believed, for a time that you could have, that you might have, done that, too, that it was even possible — for a moment there you might have had me believing in ghosts, too!

So long a letter, you called it — too long, you said. How absurd! Not even a novel would be enough to express this profound of an aporia.

Your words have failed. With this casserole of florid expressions and sentimental references, you've only succeeded in spattering my blood and sinews across the page — what a picture! what a story! an artist, not just dead, not just tortured, but murdered, following the modern fashion, precisely, remotely, and thoughtfully in digital typeface; with eyes so cold and a heart so warm — with such icy empathetic understanding.

Perhaps you're right, perhaps we have become worse. But I, at least, would have been willing to hit the ground and stay at the bottom instead of regretting the direction that I had chosen. You would try to hedge your bets if they gave you the option to be born, endlessly curious about what unlife would be like once you made your choice — you can't commit to even the simplest choice! And if you did you'd hate it either way!

So obsessed with being places, you forget to be somewhere — that you have to be somewhere; so taken with learning everything, you know nothing. People can't live like that! You won't ever get anywhere!

It's not that you're inhuman, June, it's that you're afraid to be human — or whatever you are. You walk down a path and turn around and write it off as impossible because you're not comfortable without having every option. You constantly want to do everything and so end up doing nothing. You're so terrified of missing out that you're paralyzed. And it's pitiful.

And then you have the gall to say that I caused this — maybe not the ending, but certainly the momentum. You've been this way since I met you — since you were a *child*, without a single change in that nature. You haven't changed because you're afraid of becoming something different

— of becoming anything at all — because that would mean giving up your heart to something that isn't either you or everything. You're shielding yourself from the harsh reality that you might be a failure by (a) refusing to even try and (b) explaining your inadequate endowment in that category by the closest confounding variable you can find. You've always needed a villain — your parents, the corporate structures, the nation, and then me.

Fine then, I'll be your devil.

If you weren't willing to respect that we were changing and weren't even going to make the minimal effort towards understanding me or the situation or yourself, then that's on you. If my demonifying sin was certified only by my fundamental personhood — my very presence in the situation of loving you — then I would gladly take on that mantle. Because you need that, I'll do it for you — call me your permanent failure, blame every issue on me, I'll carry that weight.

I would have, too, because I loved you, and I wanted to see you, to help you change. But that's not something I could force you to do, that's something you had to find for yourself, and if finding that involves damning me down, so be it. So long as we both know — and I assure you, we both do know — that calling yourself the cause of our death would be a higher honor than you deserve.

Thanks for the letter, June, it was good to hear from you. I'm glad you're doing okay.

I should be happy for you. I am. I see now that our unionization hurt you. I am sorry. Your roots are in England, your family's oldest bones are buried there. Who am I to pry you away from them, just to keep you lost here with me. You just turned back, full of love, forgetting that it would send me tumbling down again. I should be glad you have the courtesy to write to me.

And back to one, so on, all day, starting from the first loop thought entirely while zoned out and listlessly stirring the contents of my coffee cup, past when I was home again, at the same table, with my first meal of the day nearing midnight. It was still there, across the table. What was I supposed to do? Just throw it away? Burn it? Paint over the pages to leave the text an unreadable black? Never look at it again? Cherish it?

I was pinned to the wall by this paper, impaled by those words — “Love, June,” that is to say, “Goodbye, June” without needing to say it. A euphemism, a manner of saying what you want to say without the trouble of actually saying it — a figure of speech for an ineffable reality. Because I suppose you must be afraid of that too — being discovered for what you

actually *are* — since, if the language falls apart, you have no mechanism for living in the world, no way of falling back on the fallacies that it supports you with — the lies of the artifice. What a language! What an art, that which lets you speak the opposite of what you say!

It was so invertibly invertebrate that I could make it mean nothing for sure. Truth and lies in the mimetic masquerade; which of these things — each pretending to be the color of the other — would poison me if I took it in — what was the hemlock and what was the wine? Each time a conclusion seemed reasonable the uncertainty made it unbearable to accept: the other truth was so tempting! What a bind! She cast half the thing in light and the other half in its absence and so made it an impossible puzzle. I made a half-hearted attempt writing a response, it began:

June,

Reading your letter, I am filled with an overwhelming conspiracy of strange emotions that I cannot hope to express but which I must nevertheless try to.

I am in stasis. I feel like doing nothing. I feel like nothing. I feel like typing just to have words at my fingertips (you know that they will come nowhere closer to me). I want to have everything in order. I want to be everything.

I'm sick of waiting. I'm mentally sick. The noise of the world is dwindling slowly into the negative decibels. It exhausts me. It is me. I want to sleep, but I am far too awake to even lay down. I can't focus. I need to focus. I want to focus. Everything is blurry. Everything is sharp enough to cut me like a knife. I'm asleep. I'm just waking up. I haven't slept in weeks.

I had also planned the ending. I knew these words before I wrote the first line: I wish you had just told me you hate me. Then I would know I never had a chance. Then I could move on.

And it went no further than that. I wanted to tell her everything but I couldn't find the words, so I ended up saying nothing at all.

The following days I hardly thought about it less, if it's presence did decrease, it was because there was no way to think about it more than that first day. Much of my time was spent working, and so these words inevitably invaded my creation.

This was not as bad as thinking about them otherwise, and the effort of the art put the paper in the background, but they were there, weaved into the threads of the fabrication. Perhaps I even rewrote them,

translated, transformed, but entirely conserved.

I've heard people speak of art as therapeutic, and to the extent that numbed the feeling it was indeed psychiatric. Art was anesthetic, at least. But the work would end and the feeling would still be there. I was getting rid of it — expressing it by pushing it out of myself — but it was ultimately so powerful that I seemed to be subtracting from infinity. There was a brief lightening before the reminder that it was all the same, that nothing had changed but the state of the canvas, and, even then, barely so. It was merely displaced from my heart for a moment before it would spring back with all the force of the movement.

It was the same as when, for a brief time, I painted the image of the cup's shards. When the pen was in my hand and the page was incomplete, I felt like I was unraveling and engaging with this tragedy, but when the motion stopped the white and red ceramic bits were still there, unchanged in either form or meaning by the expression. It resolved nothing, and painting the words of the letter did not decipher them.

I looked at it, to change the angle, I closed one eye, then the other, then both. It was still there and I would still look and there still was an absolute void underlying this thing. I could stare at it, and try to piece together the meaning with the tantalizing little information it offered, but once I tried to go further than conjecture, I instantly found myself stuck in space. Floating untethered, disgustingly free. It was enough to make me sick. The fact of it having a corollary existence traced back on paper or canvas added nothing to the reality of the thing.

In fact, its having a physical form at all meant nothing. They could have been spoken — been *thoughts* — and had the same meaning, what did it say in them being written down other than sharing something already extant just as it was? What did that create? Confusion. Not even that, merely spreading something that was there from the beginning. This letter traced out every thought that June had along a line — along history — and outside of her head it meant nothing. The words were just ornaments that had no meaning. She had sent me a blank page.

If all that historiography could amount to nothing, then what was I doing? If the form, even when it was capable — and it rarely was capable — of rendering the feelings of time passing in something concrete could fail to mean anything, then what did my refabrication of stories actually mean? Nothing (Nothing real, at least).

The thing is not the form, forms are simply another tool. They are analogs and conventions which are to be exploited in the same way that



one exploits the physics of a brush, paper, pen, and pencil. The form, in other words, was a manner of expression. That much was obvious, but it was hardly convincing enough to call it true. This is because it certainly felt like it was; it was a convincing illusion but an illusion nonetheless. However, an illusion should cease to amaze once it was gone, and this was not the case. I have chosen the wrong word: the form is a spectacle. The feeling was merely a displacement.

Displacement of what onto what? Of meaning into reality. I had been rendering forms as real all this time in the hopes that, by some reversal of voodoo, the effigy would take on the reality of the thing enough for it to be transferable. I thought that I might take the letter under my control by effecting an image of it, but that was impossible, and in copying the form I was really wrestling with the meaning the whole time. I was putting on canvas an analog of the real thing that hopelessly hoped to match the real for detail and significance.

But the canvas isn't a space for anything real — these renderings were not real — and they could never be. Certainly they would pretend to be, but for what? To maintain an illusion that isn't even really an illusion? Rather, the canvas was a fictive space on which we write meanings as forms. The subjects are units of meaning, morphemes of communication. It was entirely possible to create a vacuous thing made of accurate, well-rendered forms, just as it was possible to make an accurate, grammatical sentence that was entirely meaningless.

I felt very tired then, on that last thought, because I knew that I had done so much work, and all of it was for nothing.

I was going to have to work harder. For a day or two I did, but just after that I couldn't bring myself to raise the tool. My lines slowed down, dragged off to infinity; my hands were tired. My back ached, my brain turned to stone from the eyes back. When I stepped outdoors my ears heard only the muted sound of the Earth turning on the air, which stifled all but the most piercing cries from the animals and machines. I was severed from the air, the world, it seemed, was shedding the weight of me.

There was so much to do and I didn't even have a starting point. I could continue on the path which I knew ended in failure or start all over again and I would have rather laid down than do either. Anything was too much, the sound of the brush on the paper was enough to make my skin crawl — the imagination of ink on paper put me suddenly inside my body by taking, weighing each limb by the removal of the spirit's force to move them. I could touch the pen to paper, but it revolted me, I hated it, and it



did it anyway.

I had something to prove and nothing to lose. Rina was counting on me and the world — no, worse, Silas Porter — was watching. He was the hinge — the single person who could still tell me if I'd improved where I hadn't before and so had finally found myself a person capable of artistic expression. He knew where I fell short before and he would be looking for it. He would find it in those other works — those things devoid of any affective effect, any means of engaging the humanity outside of me — and he would expect to, I could still surprise him.

This was a chance — perhaps my only chance — of proving that I was an artist. After everything, I had to be. I had to do this, and I had to push through. And I did, for some time, even as the pain intensified for lack of relent. I began to hate it.

When I thought of art as painful I knew I was thinking as a human, not an artist. That didn't prevent me thinking that way, that didn't prevent me wanting to step away. The feeling grew stronger as the effort became greater, as even waking up became a challenging matter. All of that willpower about the significance did very little.

I was losing heart anyway, and this all didn't help.

Day in, day out, just rote producing from within really had a way of draining me. When I started painting for this I felt the drive of anxiety, the want to impress, the need to succeed, but now when I was working I could barely feel my heart was even in my chest, let alone beating. I sat there, holding up my head, and tried to feel it, but it almost felt like there was a negative space inside, where the thing should have been, no weight, and not even a lack of weight: a complete absence of sensation, of motion, of any desire to keep going. It was stupid to think I could be an artist at all.

I thought, for a moment, I wanted to give up, and the next I added that horrible word.

I wanted to give up *again*.

Repeating the motif of every other time I tried to achieve something in my life, I got partway into it and thought that maybe this wasn't the best idea, that there could be something better. Sometimes it was another concept breaking its way into the current one — the want for a different piece, the idea of another habitat, the thought of another trail to walk — sometimes it was a distracting event, but still more often it was like this: the thought that it wasn't working out, that it would end poorly.

Really, those are all the same: a change of intent.

And, really, wasn't the greatest artist the one who could give up

any project instantly at the thought of a new, better one, in pursuit of something perfect? The one who knew when and how to ax the failures-to-be? The greats could leave things unfinished without regrets, knowing there was something better to be done. Let failures be failures.

They would give up *again* and *again* and start *again*, too. Quitting wasn't a bad thing, it just opened avenues. So why, *again*, did I feel wrong in doing something that was right? On top of that, it would hurt to continue obliging myself to make something with neither the energy nor the mind to form anything valuable. Here, the *artist* should give up, so why didn't they want to?

I had half the mind to call Rina and ask for the chance to stop, or to have a reduced place so I could take some time for myself — something she would feel impelled to concede to and so something I would feel bad doing, leaving me — with the other half dedicated to precisely the opposite, thinking of nothing but the pieces that I could make. Both were constant, passive forces and when one took the lead, the other would drive from the backseat, making sure to emphasize the importance of the directions to the point that we would come to this — pulled over to the side, trying to read the map.

I wanted to give up again, to leave and try something else, but I promised that I would do this. I made a pact to work together with another person, I made a pact to become an artist and I needed to fulfill that. There was no way through but this one. Even if it hurt, giving up meant more than a change. It meant Nothing — losing everything I had — and it meant lying in bed with only my thoughts. But still, that might have been more comfortable than this. Contracts — promises, pacts — could be broken if doing so meant enough. But then, how could I know it was enough — that this was more than a momentary lapse of the heart? I was really stuck, and for a long time I sat there, wondering what — of all the possibilities, of all the tasks — I should do.

In the end, I must have decided that I wanted a break.

I put it all down. My hands would lie dormant for some time, resting, regaining their capacity to think though the shapes. There would be no noise against the canvas in my home for some time. The only sounds of creation I heard came from a distance, from the others, from the students who worked so hard to apply those lessons we gave them. They were frantic, they were capable.

As the lease expired on the apartment we chose for the long walk to the sea and I made the preparations to move someplace new

— I took a hiatus. It was not all at once, it was not monumental, it was barely even a choice. I simply woke up one day and didn't even think to make something. Nothing felt wrong with this, every habit was in place, each feeling was the same, there was no liberation, no grand reversal, no discovery, just a simple difference, a cutting of a habit. And with a motion of unintentional speed it atrophied into non-existence — non-consideration.

Surely it feels like it once was a decision — I would look back and think *I decided to take a break* — but I hadn't made a choice. In fact, the data would show I *couldn't* make such a choice. Thinking to stop and actually doing it would be an aberration in the typical process of continuing in spite of it all — in spite of myself. So no, I didn't choose, like every other watershed moment before, it happened on its own — a fault-line shift, sudden — as if instant — but so impossibly slow that it went unseen. I simply broke the habit one day, and it stayed broken.

What followed was a series of days where none felt like another — which, I suppose, made them all quite the same. If it is right to say the mind is a floating garden, then I had spent some time away from the outdoors, in the shed of an atelier, ignoring the plants for they were of less concern to me than the order of the tools and the thoughts I could have in the unnatural shade.

No, it was more like I had spent all the time sitting on the floor as the time was siphoned away into the ground, going unnoticed as I pondered but one brick wall of the interior, letting myself escape into an inky black mantra. When I broke the trance, I had regained time to think and do the things that I needed, which were quite wide-spanning and deep-seated, for I had spent so long away from them that they had all nearly wilted.

There were the chores — cleaning, shopping, sorting — and the fun — cooking and reading, watching, listening to the backlogs of content I had been recommended — but more than anything there was time to fill. Free time which was open to anything I could conceive. Empty time, which remained to be occupied even once I found my lists complete and needs met. Voracious time, which ate endlessly without any sign of wanting less, stomach grumbling after all the full courses and all the buffets. It loomed, and in time I was anxious for something to do.

I went for walks. They didn't do much but make me tired, which they didn't even do. Either the sun exhausted my skin or the increasingly frequent rain battered my umbrella with the wind that exhausted my arms. There was nothing in the process of walking that yielded any results, just

the corollary of being outdoors. I could have achieved the action by just standing outside, but I walked.

The sun, I should mention, was only getting hotter. The few plants that had cropped up out from the concrete sidewalks wilted, lest they were fortunate enough to find their home in the limited pools of shade and moisture that still remained. Would it rain, the heat would quickly suspend the moisture into the air, turning the city into a broiler for some hours. Yet I still walked, promptly, each day, around noon, for the sake of schedule, of exercise, of exploration.

I didn't know where to walk — or even how, as surely I looked like a fool, meandering around a city with nothing to do, trying to look for something to see with some strangely inspired look on my face, garnered by the fact that, despite not being an artist, I still saw the world through one's eye, with a strange fascination for pointless and even tedious things — but I would walk, and I would just pick a direction, a new one each day, but always just a direction.

I once walked to the university park to see the well-cultivated flowers of my days there. I walked to see again the explosive sprawl of colors manifest against the grass and red-brick facades. The flowers were a symphony in every hue imaginable (that is, every hue I had ever seen, for rarely can I imagine what goes unseen) warm bursts of orange in the Spring, red in the Summer, complements of those in the Autumn, and veils of white amid the dying in Winter. The groundskeepers would maintain them in the sharpest outfits of the season, and they were a pillar of my time there. I could go nowhere without passing them — that is, I was free to avoid them, but could never choose not to.

I had been teasing with the idea of walking back there for some time now. There was, inevitably, some excuse not to go back — not to outside in general even — as any good aversion can supply. Perhaps the day was too hot, the streets were too crowded, I had too much work, or the inside was just too comfortable to leave. Really, I just didn't want to walk. I was never a particularly physical person. The smell of sweat revolts me and I don't derive enough benefit from exercise to warrant that. Walking — to the extent you could call it exertion — was only ever something I tolerated for the sake of getting between two places. Back then, the flowers did the most to make it more bearable.

I am, however, a terrible florist. I know a few flowers by their common name and mostly by their colors. Terribly informed as I was, I found the displays quite impressive, with no comment save for the simple

beauty of the thing.

Raising there, triptychs and diptychs of well-ordered color designed to bloom perfectly for the seasons and recede for their time off state. They would burst on the scene in Spring, and by the time of winter there would only be a few lonely remnants. If ever there was a reality to the pathetic fallacy, it was in the flowers. By now, glory was at its fullest from the ground, a peak of colors which melted into each other, pooling together their hue from irregular splatters into a whole, climactic scene befitting the student's journey through the seasons. They too, were confident, beautiful, and sure to survive the Fall.

But I had walked for nothing. There was nothing. Perhaps a few unregistered cacti and some lichenous stragglers, but nothing of what I came for. A bed of dead plant matter dressing the dirt, rotting, hiding hundreds of insects (out of the previous thousands, millions) from the stare of the sun. All around, at every place I wanted there to be flowers there were graveyards, memorials to the dead or dying world. I processed the colors — the lack thereof — the sights, superimposed against their memory, an image that clouded all thought and eclipsed all reasoning into a dim circle of the same epiphanies that bashed themselves into my nervous system, starting from the skull: things have changed—they are gone—I am here—why am I here—I was here—things have changed. In the end, I had one lucid refrain:

These used to be gardens.

They didn't maintain them — how could they? With the sun so hot, how could anything like that be kept alive? But *how* could they *not* be? Why hadn't anyone done anything about this? Why hadn't *I* done anything about this? But what could have been done? The slow movement of time had swiftly reduced this place to dust. I came back and found them dead before I even thought they could die.

Time had kept itself busy as it replaced the lilacs with corpses. A progressive march, it always had, hence the intermittences of blooming, the matter was that the flowers stopped coming back. There was nothing left upon which they could blossom again, just detritus, food for the worms. We were not so attentive of our things as time was, so it took them — it wanted them more. I thought maybe the flowers would make me want to paint again, but they only hammered in the futility of that desire.

This, merely a stop on a walk, threatened to bring the whole habit to its resolution. But then I would be alone again, deprived of even the simple rhythmic pleasure of moving my legs against the ground. I would

get no sense of doing something special for myself — of walking against the solemn crowds to places unvisited.

In sensory deprivation, shelled in that blanked out space of the apartment, I would only be free (to do nothing at all, just laying there, watching my thoughts pass by). Maybe, if I could put forth the awe-inspiring effort, I could consider one, pursue it to an extent — though incapable of ever reaching the furthest — and try to get myself standing. But, unstimulated, I would have nothing to support myself on, lose balance, and fall back into my head. My endangered bones would soften and soon even standing would become impossible. I would melt into nothing.

I might find the mind to want to get up and do something — read a book, cook a meal, take a nap — but the act of starting would recall the countless other tasks — the more important tasks — left undone, the density of these things together again forming and again pulling me into the singularity.

Unconsciously I would know this, and never act on the want. In avoidance of confronting Everything I would do as much Nothing as possible: I wouldn't move, I wouldn't think, I wouldn't even breathe if it meant that I had to take an action. I would feel nothing save for the occasional burning at the edges of my body to see another human — but even that would be dull and fade. All things would be so routine that I not only wouldn't think about them, but that I couldn't. I would become absent.

Rather, it would be much better to walk, then, at least, I would have fresh air.

I passed through the streets, each day feeling the effect of the winds and changing temperatures, those sudden dips and chills that blew through to interrupt the supremacy of the midday sun. I saw the same buildings that I would before, the same trash, the same storefronts and people, and thought much the same about each one, this time in a kind of memory — the novelty and ideation now inactive — and so in a more general sense, unfocused and complete, like a camera without a lens, letting things play out, blurry and whole, softly and carelessly.

It would be a stretch to say they meant more at this uncertain time, but they certainly were more — they felt like more, and touched me more directly than before. Unprotected by immediate interpretive aspects things fell less into patterns, becoming at once intelligible and unfamiliar. Being that I could recognize nothing, I could understand so much more. I took it

all in to succor my standing steps and justify my survey.

Time was, I felt distant, alien, and disconnected from the world, wanting only to link with anyone, and now I found myself in the other state. Not the opposite, just the other. Then, there was nothing that could pierce the cloth veil over my eye, yet now there was nothing that couldn't — each thing struck my heart like it meant everything, and it likely did. Feeling this sense I quickly found myself racked with emotional avarice. I was compelled to gather up every sensation I could, hoarding them in the inexact annals of the heart's memory, where they would all mix together and become the same sensation, a chilling warmth spreading from my breast to the end of every fiber, an amalgam of time.

I took every opportunity to be in touch with the world.

That's the thing about being loved so much for so long and then having it disappear. When you begin to look again thinking, hopelessly, that it might be anywhere, you seek out love in every single thing you can sense. You open yourself to every possibility, hoping that love will pour in like it used to and each morsel's taste tempts you — with its second-long intoxication — with the prospect of finding again that full feeling that you had for so long. But these things are so small — that momentary feeling of affection, that loose connection you must tighten, that compassion you feel for a passing butterfly, that awe at the plain air — and you know they are nothing.

After such a concentrated feeling of connection, all else is but a poor imitation.

So when Rina called and asked if I wanted to come to an evening “party” she was throwing (“party” meaning a small gathering of a few people who she wanted to drink with as an excuse to take a break, a routine she started shortly after I met her and which she never really seemed to lose) I told her yes for the first time in over a year.

I didn't want to go. Not that I would dread the company, but I would prefer something less social and more involved. I confirmed before I even thought about who would be there. I might not know half of them — more than half, I might not know anybody in the room — and that was a great thing. I wanted to see those one-time associates be friends with others and smile and laugh like true people before they faded again into strangers, people who would forget my name in a week, but who, if we saw each other on the street before that week had passed, would wave with a smile, recognizing the slowly fading image of my person in their head as me, that person who they see in front of them.



It was selfish — and I knew it was — but I wanted to use these people to feel a bond. They would be something to mark my place in the world, tethers to the moment, sublimations of reality. For all that I wasn't painting, I was still finding subjects. I kept a record in my phone — mechanical, sure, but practical. The pictures of people I didn't know were liminal at best. They were faces, only faces, hardly people. Nothing tied them to any of the things that made a person real — they had no story, no history, no involvement with the world through which they walked — the occasional wrinkle made their face bear some kind of memory, but only insignificant and superficial memories of habitual motions. Most of them hardly ever said a word and made no indication of wanting to.

There were so many faces and bodies with rapidly moving legs passing through the street in their office clothing. They showed in their speed no signs of haste, no indication in their posture or expression of having shrugged off their deskism, and not a single point of regard for the world around them, gazing blankly on it as if it could never surprise them, and it didn't.

Their uncaring eyes looked nowhere and many times fell on me by accident. They moved between their places and made no effort to see much of anything. How nice that must have been! To exist as one of those false people I passed, with no compulsion to look around, to investigate the world for lies, to have faith that the ground would hold you and the air was breathable and that an umbrella was just an umbrella! They were able to see without perceiving and so able to really see the world which was so naturally boring that their lives could outperform it for entertainment value if they were locked in a box six feet underground. They seemed to know the truth, and I wanted to understand how.

I come to think that one walks surrounded by hundreds of versions of oneself moving through different times and places, living in a different chronological space. Some move backwards or forwards, some move faster or slower, but they are all the same. One is surrounded by hundreds of possible walks, possible identities, hundreds of possible realities, intersecting now, at once. Even when time and space limit each other, they still seem countless.

But there were so few of them that one couldn't get close to them if they wanted to. The few that walked covered their ears — myself included — not wanting to hear the rare word that someone had to say — for good reason, considering that what a stranger had to say to you on the street was often insulting and almost always of little importance — or the growing



rumble of engines on the road beside us. If nobody was walking, then everybody was driving.

Public transport was only useful for long distances and private transport was more comfortable, though rarely faster, than walking. The few cases where driving was, indeed, faster were always when speed was least important, as it happened, since speed mattered to everyone at once, it was achieved by no one.

And you certainly wished it was faster when it was slow. Nothing is more frustrating than sitting idle in a machine designed for no purpose other than motion, either solemn before the wheel or watching the seething cabbie from behind that spot. I'm convinced that the rage of the drivers contributed more to warming the traffic air than the engine smoke, as it more often felt like driving was a brief interruption to the primary action of stopping than the opposite.

That stopping, however, was the only way to get around safely alone after dark.

Rina's "party" was a short walk and a long drive away. The ride I ordered far before it was set to start would get me there right on time. The driver kept notes all over their dashboard, the cabin replete with various pens and notebooks to mark the passing time by the growth in variety.

I began to weigh the risk of the dark alleys after I told him the address.

"What's got you dressed up so pretty tonight?" he asked.

"A party." I wanted to add 'where I am deeply expected and where a moment's lateness will be a cause of incredible worry', instead I added the shorter "with some close friends."

"What kind of party?" The slow and rare acceleration of the car pressed my back against the seat each time we moved, punctuating the uneven fettering of the seatbelt that, were we to crash, would do very little but redirect the force to less vital bones.

'One that is none of your business or your notebook's,' — instead: "A birthday." I knew that many drivers, consciously or unconsciously, kept a track of their passengers and the happenings around the town as a way to stay in touch. Never did I see one with the audacity to write it down in front of me at the next red light. "What's that you're writing there?"

"Oh" he chuckled, as if I had caught him in the middle of some solitary action "I have to keep track of my route" he clicked the pen as the light changed "for logistics." I kept a firm track of his route against the map of the city, for logistics. "How old's the lucky lady?"

A joke, “a number too high for saying it to be decent,” instead of ‘stop asking questions.’ Beyond pens he had every mode of inhaling nicotine into the lungs that I knew of on the dash, an open paper cup of coffee black in the cupholder, letting off no steam, and a few books in the passenger seat, presumably to shackle the free time. I was afraid he wasn’t getting the message of my words, so I looked to the window after catching his eye on me in the rear-view mirror. Most of the city tended to make its own light in loving memory of the sun. The streets near mine possessed only remnants of that practice, dimming into almost complete darkness in the absence of the star, now with a small amount of silver in the half-moon light.

LEDs and house lights lit behind closed windows, but few flooded into the streets so ardently as the neon signs and glass fronts of the uptown city proper. Through the windows open in the day, we would take the light as it was generously rationed and hold it in reserves for the night, as do the trees, utilizing the excess — now cooled by reflection, like that of the moon — as needed, when cloistered by darkness. None of it by ordinance, but just by generality of practice, thus not in totality. There were pockets of lamplight and open blinds that swam shallow into the watery dark between, providing small pockets of yellow-orange lucidity that, for a moment, standing underneath them and looking nowhere beyond, broke the illusion of the night, revealing that the visible world did, indeed, remain even when it was unseen.

“What do you do for a living?” The reverie was broken. I told him I was a teacher, and asked why he asked, rather than saying ‘don’t ask.’ “Just trying to fill the air.”

‘You have a radio.’ rather, “Sorry, I’m not much good for conversation.”

“Ain’t much to it, you just gotta talk.” The pauses made the acceleration jarring every time. “What do ya’ teach?” The low engine rumble was brought to full prominence when it wasn’t moving anything. It shook the car. I told him I taught the 5th Grade. The cars all honked in unison at a second-long failure to move at the front of the line prevented their long-awaited motion, the driver, being quite unapathetic, had no hesitation in joining the chorus. “What are you teachin’ ‘em?” It was hardly intoned as a question.

“Oh, you know, the curriculum. It’s a public school.”

“Nah, but what are *you* teachin’ ‘em?” More like a statement, really. I hardly knew what he meant. He looked back at me, his sunken

eyes glowing subtly with anger to support the jack-o-lantern features of his pale-red face, bleached by the headlights behind us. “Kids are sensitive to information, you know. You have to be careful with what you tell ‘em ‘cause it’ll stick. Can’t show ‘em the wrong thing else they’ll think it’s right. It’s a critical time to get a grasp on reality.”

“Yes, of course.” Nevermind that in the hypothetical he was telling a professional teacher how to do their job. I couldn’t think of that, lacking the capacity to see a lie out to its fullest reaches. “Really it’s just math, science, and grammar in the fifth grade. Not much epistemological significance to it. Just a gateway into learning” instead of ‘this is not something I want to talk or hear about at the moment. Also how much longer will the ride be? It seems we’re only really part way there.’

“But there is! There really is!” Forgive me for paraphrasing now, but he went on with a quarter-hour soliloquy — which I can only remember in general notions, considering that halfway through I started to think about something else, catching only the occasional phrase — followed ten minutes of burning silence — almost all the heat of which being on his end — that stood between it and the end of the ride. The highlights: children are impressionable and keen on replicating what they see — I would say “perceptive” (young people do more thinking than we tend to give them credit for) but wouldn’t dare stop an actor mid-scene — because of that perceptiveness we need to show them the “real world” — which I take to mean the world as it is commonly seen (if it is commonly seen at all) but which this character spends a great deal of time attempting to explain in terms of case studies in what is “real” (that is to say “proper,” which is to say “pre-accepted”) — so that, shown that “reality,” they come out as “normal, functioning members of society” — a collection of words I put in quotes for the purposes of citation, since I could never come up with them and cannot begin to parse for meaning (possibly because I am not — and have long since resigned hope of being — one such person); copying them without quotes would constitute plagiarism of the highest degree of villainy — those citizens who “function” — which, I take it, are the prioritized opposites of citizens who “form” — “function” by contributing to the structural performance of the society that assigned them the capability of “functioning” — thereby validating it and allowing the collective body to “function,” as it were, to prevent general hardship and produce productively (something of “value,” which means something “valuable,” more generally, something which has been deemed worth having and, in the modern conceptual sense, refers to a number in a made

up system of tracking a made up system of units that refer to an imaginary standard of fluctuating material worth which, because of its rarity, I am supposed to be interested in having — meaning I am supposed to be interested in having the representation of the representation of it — and, by altruistic proxy, in seeing the collective body gain), that is, to produce at an accelerated pace, without structural interference or friction — with the value of their contribution apparently being in direct correlation with their goodness-of-fit with the “normal” — that is, their level of acceptance of the “real,” this is about where I started to tune out — that fit, of course, being their degree of “normality”; around here he returns to the mechanics of good teaching, which consists of teaching “objective facts” about reality so that they can think critically about what is really good for them and “their people” — he presumably meant “their society,” but used the vague “people,” a boring fact that I am shocked to remember considering that I was impressed that he could confidently accept the existence of “objective facts” meanwhile I wasn’t even sure that a cup was a cup. He talked in circles from there, which isn’t always a bad thing, but in this case made it easy to care less when I was already sure I couldn’t. He went silent at the end after presumably asking a question that I didn’t register, the sound of cars was breached thereafter only by the cutting of the pen on paper.

I wished I’d just told him I worked in management, but I would wager on him having thoughts about that, too.

I got out and gave a good tip. Rina’s apartment complex was about the same distance from our studio as mine, only in the opposite direction, towards the inner city. The place was a small high-rise and the room — there was just one — would barely be enough to fit a “party” of four without anyone needing to sit atop tables, counters, or other people. She kept it cozy, allowing it the singular function of “life” in the standard “work-life” dichotomy.

Getting to it took a confusing sequence of elevators or stairs leading to identical empty hallways that all ended with doors into either another hallway or a stairwell. The room numbers would count up for a certain time, then, at an invisible threshold, suddenly reverse their direction, switch parity, or stop entirely, so even if I knew what room she was in, it would take an act of divination to find it without a map. She came to the entrance to walk me in, navigating the maze like it was as straightforward as two and two making four.

We talked, passing the eggshell walls and heather-tan carpeting occasionally interrupted by spots of red curiously mal-designed to look like

dots of acne on the floor. I avoided stepping on them. It was hardly hidden that this was a building of metal and concrete, without a hint of mock-wood or texture aside from the painted stucco wall. It wasn't something that you were really meant to talk about, just walk through without it leaving the margins of your consideration, which made it at least self-aware in being the space between "out" and "home." At some point after the standard pleasantries we got to the notion of what was new with me.

"Oh well, not much."

"That's a good thing sometimes, especially for you."

With more tones than usual: "So direct! I feel attacked."

With a little punch: "You should, I'm attacking." Her eyes lit up like they never did at work. I think I might have agreed to be there every now and then just to see that again, to know that we were friends and that her professional mask was really just a mask. "Have you found a new place to lease yet?" I was still looking. Frankly I had forgotten I was planning to move out and silently thanked her for reminding me. "Well I heard about a few open singles here, so just let me know if you want any details."

She always refused to call a studio apartment anything but a "single" or "single-room," which is the same way she would refer to dormitories. I had found over time that she had something of a domestic vocabulary that differed from her working vocabulary, and she switched dictionaries when she changed settings. Some other words that were used in specific contexts like this: what she called "seats" in the studio she called "chairs" when she was at her "single," "notebooks" were "journals," and a "desk" became just a "table."

I asked her to send over the leasing information whenever she had the chance. She would be happy to. We took the elevator — I was glad of it, since the thought that the stairs might just go on forever became more and more believable each time I walked through the building. Though the normality of the space was always restored upon entering her cloister.

Rina's room was choicely lit with a burnt amber collection of lamplight and tinted ceiling lights such that the color was as uniformly warm as possible. She had a lofted bed under which sat a "table" made for working at, a set of drawers holding a wardrobe, and a small library — the books within were a collection of her work in "journals" and the work of others in serialized form, organized by author's last name, the more interesting of the two varieties being the journals because of their wild variance in size and type of notebook — to give the room a soul, a coffee table before a blank wall on which a projector could display anything her

laptop could, and looking at that wall was a what looked in the light to be a brownish couch that could act as a chair for three people — if you tried reasonably hard to make it do so, bringing the total to four chairs if you included the one at the desk, which Rina did.

Her walls had a collection of pictures she had framed from some of her favorite artists and friends, one of which was an old work of mine. Historically speaking, she would use the “work table” to write — slowly now, much more slowly than before — in her journal at the time or notate something she was reading, drink coffee — made in a kitchenette just after the entrance, which never felt like it was part of the room because it had white lights that were usually off and a tile floor that really only served as a place to keep shoes before walking on the carpet, or, more privately, as a place to make food, including coffee, which she would be sure to drink every workday morning — at the coffee table while reading something. She hardly sat on the couch alone except for reading before bed, when she had to let her hair dry before laying on a pillow. It — like the pictures she knew quite well — functioned mostly as a reminder that other people were welcome into this place.

I remembered it every time before I came in and nothing about it ever seemed to change.

We didn’t speak much substance before anyone else came — nonsense about our lives and the inevitable processes therein, the easy things you barely think about, with their innumerable gossamer ties up to the difficult things you always think about, that are arranged such that the question of your breakfast was as hard as finding the purpose of your life and the question of your purpose was as simple as “oatmeal” — it felt like conversation — for all intents it *was* — but it was also empty.

I can remember talking and the nice feeling along with it, but I can’t recall a single word. I would have liked it to be the opposite — to have not been really there but then remember all of it, like a secondhand story. The sense in memory is that of “this was great” but also “this is nothing,” and I would have rather had it that my life was filled with things. Things which would actually happen and be significant and resolve some of the countless questions that actually mattered.

As it happens, I can only seem to remember good conversations — those in which I learn nothing, have a nice exchange, and come away warm — in vague details, while the bad conversations — the ones filled with mistakes, offenses, and newfound knowledge — with cutting accuracy, word for word, flawless. The effect is that the good talking memories

slowly lose potency as I can only barely hear them, where the bad ones can only gain impact through their high-definition stereophonic revival evoked in the instant that the memory is even hinted. If memory is orchestral, then the worst memories make up the melody as the others — more abundant, and less discernible — carry the sound.

The noise leading this movement's melody: a knock at the door. I had to go home — all of the sudden, I had to go home.

The knock at the door and the closed portal in bearing the sound shocked me immediately into realizing just where I was. In a chair, sure, but moreover in the room — throughout the room — thinking more about it — the decor and the corners and light-burned edges that I remembered more than I saw — than what I was saying, feeling, or thinking. And now I was thinking about the thoughts that I was thinking and then the hands that were knocking and how they could be attached to a body I had never been near with a face I had never seen — things that were soon to be in the seat next to me, things that I hadn't considered on the prospect of accepting an invitation. I wanted to get in touch with the sense of humanity in being here, but I was hardly in touch with the very things I was touching.

I had a body, a perceptible body, which other people were looking at and conceiving of and remembering. I had a look that I had never seen in three-dimensions, which I never knew like others did. I had a voice which I had only heard in recordings and through my own head, which others understood differently.

I was next to Rina as she opened the door. My body was moving seconds before I thought about moving it. I felt the handshake and the hug before I knew what I was touching — before I saw the half-there half-not nose forming one of the swirls of the numerous inside the triangular face, before I registered the solid lines that shifted rigidly or squiggled with noise, but mostly remained orthogonal, in the shape of a square.

Rina didn't know I knew them — she couldn't have, she thought I hardly knew anyone in the city except for her, and I thought she was mostly right when she said that (which was supposed to be a point of advice, though I remembered it as an insult for some time). She found out when she told me to introduce myself and I knew their names.

They said it was good to see me and I confirmed that it was good to see them. I knew them from work, she knew them from D'Andre, her partner who — I learned that night — worked for a company that managed sound production for several musical performance venues around the city and met them, by a likely coincidence, in a bar (more facts about him: he



speaks three languages, loves to read, talks to people like they're people, and plants trees, crochets, and bakes as hobbies).

We didn't really talk much to start — that is, what we said amounted to nothing, preceding the obligatory phase of any gathering based on conversation where everything went silent until the host proposed that we play a game, which would provide ample material for more nothing to be said guiltlessly. Despite myself, I wanted to have fun and let myself be unaware of the nothingness of this conversation. I can only know that we said nothing based on the fact that I remember the conversation as a low rumble preceding the events of and bridging into the countermelody — as a collection of vacuous time that served only to support the remarkable part — meaning nothing must have happened more than the chatter before the curtain rises.

When it does rise, it is in the middle of a conversation and a sentence. I can only work the whole thing out in pieces here's what I've got:

“[I understand that you're trying to take a new path, but] Don't you want to be somebody?” I told him that I think I'd rather just be okay (their voices blur together, even despite the clarity of the sound). There was a glance to make sure the other shape heard that, then “I can respect that.” Which I took to mean the opposite of what was said.

Many people talk like that, I just assumed that it was how you were supposed to interpret what they were saying. I slipped into it every now and then as well: “[And I can respect your way of doing things as well].” It was close enough to a naked lie that it had to have been a little cold.

Triangle face and I were talking about the prospects of a career in illustration, and what I would recommend he do to get ahead in the industry. I felt compelled to tell him all that I could. He was one of those people that could never stop talking about his career. No matter what you said or did to bring him off of it, it all went back to that, back to his “network” to his “skills.” I appreciated this only as it was an easy way to get him to fill the silence. He would talk about promotions when you played a board game and if you even mentioned the word “career” he could probably talk for hours without even a hint of affirmation from anyone else, though square-head was always giving it to him. When he wasn't on his job, he was talking about something he got from it — how he financed his car, his house, his bourbon, and his pomeranian (he showed me pictures of this dog, she was adorable and very pampered, her name is Daisy).

I worked with him for years and drank with him twice and I still



have do idea who he really is (I could maybe guess that his car was red). He talked about a lot — did a lot — but anything deeper than what he owned and what he drew was either a mystery or a void. I could barely say I knew him. I could hardly tell he was human sometimes. He was someone I could look at and never really see. He seems to prove that the more you stand for the less you *are*.

The square was, like me, a natural listener. What he did say consisted of little jokes or platitudes that would move the conversation along when the two talkers lost their flow. He had a good wit at times, but we never really talked. I think he might have been scared of me, though I have no idea why. Also hardly a person, someone who just drank your gazes and ate your words and gave nothing back.

When I said that I had left the magazine because the corporate pressure was too much, the square told me that “Diamonds are made under pressure.” I think when he said this he failed to realize that, in that line, the artist is not the diamond, but rather the dirt and stone that, when pressed elsewhere, press down onto the carbon to make the crystals.

The triangle vibrated in agreement: “[The pressure keeps me productive].” As it squeezes you for all your value. “[I feel like I’m pushed to create more than I would on my own].” I didn’t answer the question of how many pieces I made since I quit concretely, just with:

“About the same amount. It’s been about the same.”

“[I suppose you’re just self-motivated.] I could never do that kind of thing[, creating something that I didn’t know that people would see].” Or maybe “[wanted to see].” at the end there. I supposed if I were to ask about creativity, I would hear that ‘Inspiration is dead. People have seen it all.’ I would hear that the artist was useless beyond being a frequently-faulty ink machine.

He kept asking questions. I kept answering. The square kept joking, Rina kept laughing.

My skin was crawling, these people weren’t looking at me, they were looking through me, dissecting me. They wanted to get into my head, to see my organs, to pull at my fibers and see what twitched. My body was glass save for my heart. They wanted to know everything. Or they already knew everything, and they were testing me. I was being looked down on.

I was blessed by the proposition of something other than talking. Anything but talking.

I wanted desperately not to hate triangle-face and square-head, but, as that miserable word “wanted” with its lamentary tense implies, I had

only failed. Something about it was very important to me. I knew them before, they were the only people still working where I once did that I had even the slightest chance of befriending, and I couldn't bring myself to do much more than dislike them, either because I was immovably stubborn or simply unlucky.

I supposed I was hewn apart from that old life and tossed into this without a chance of retying the bond. I wanted the severance to be incomplete, even if I never wanted to go back to drawing magazine pictures. I wanted to hold onto people from that time like they were important to me, when all that really mattered was the past.

And I wanted to stop talking to Rina. For these few hours I didn't want her anywhere near me, despite her — no, because of her — knowing so much. We talked over the phone and she told me she was my friend and I half believed her, the other half disgusted with the notion of something that was neither me nor her but felt like both. I would have tried to stop talking — make something up, say “I'm okay, actually, everything's alright; I'm fine” — if I thought for a second she would believe it.

I never tried.

We kept talking over the game, though in a much less involved manner, that, of course, had to do with work. Rina was beginning to frown. I was simply getting bored.

He said things that didn't produce anything in terms of thought. They hardly indicated that he was thinking or aware of anything but himself. I couldn't look him in the eyes, but I'm sure that if I did I would see a glimmer that flared up and blocked him from seeing the people right next to him. He showed no indication that they were meaningfully influencing his conversation. The words demonstrated little hint of their presence. The most they evidenced was a determination on the road to promotion and fiscal success.

I felt bad for him. I began to think he didn't have much else. Maybe his career was as important as he said but maybe it wasn't enough, and it could never be. He would say things like “I'm climbing the ladder” or “I'm driving up the hill” to mask the latent feeling that he wasn't allowed to stop, that he was nothing if not gaining status. You could speed up that road your whole life — that is, forever — and get nowhere — or at least, not get somewhere. He might have known that, and this whole persona could have been a mask for that knowledge, to make more interesting the process of following an empty road to nowhere.

I thought if I could ask him what he wanted out of his life I might

be able to help him pin down how he could change his life. Why did he go to school? Why did he start working for a popular magazine? Why did he need a house and a car and a life full of occupations and progress? If he wanted to be a better person he genuinely could have. With just a moderate effort towards being human, most people are capable of achieving that goal within a lifetime.

He was still young. With enough care he could find a way to fill his life with something more full. He could find a group of people who cared about dogs or art or where he grew up and make a human life out of the industrial one he had. He could have something worth having in the time that he was alive — rather than just having what was worth money. But he instead spiraled upwards, things stayed the same all the way, and he didn't change.

If only I could say “Listen to yourself! This hardly matters! It's just an artificial copy of something like human achievement! It's not grand or profound! It's products and money! What does that have to do with being a person, here and now?” Nothing. “An impressive person needs none of that. They need only let themselves live.”

“That's bohemian. These things are a part of modern life!”

“And they are an apology for its exclusion of anything resembling real human satisfaction, a way of accounting for the emotional vacuum. Can't you tell that they're useless?”

“A car is useful.”

“But a vanity car is a waste. If you bought a used Volkswagen off the side of the road and spent the difference visiting your family outside of the holidays or off seeing the world, don't you think you would be happier?”

“I might have more car problems.”

“But you might also be able to do more!”

“Look: I just wanted a nice car. I got a nice car. It's not that deep.”

“But then why talk about it so much? Why is it all you can find to say to people who have you over for a fun night?” Maybe he just couldn't think of anything else when he was on the spot for conversation, or he was just closed off, but that wouldn't explain the insistence on the work. There had to be something more. Square head would nod and laugh at his joking tone, but was this really their idea of fun? Talking work gossip, money, or participating in their own judgmental economics? It couldn't be. He wouldn't respond. I would say: “If nothing you can do can get you what you want, don't you think that maybe you should change what you want?”

And I don't think about what happens after that.

Of course, I said none of this. I was afraid to say something that would come off as insulting or dismissive. Many of the times where I have insulted people and been insulted, that result often comes out unintentionally, the rudeness emerging from an utterance which we think is a small remark but which happens to have a different meaning in another dictionary aside from the one with which we are most familiar

Many little things which I have thought to be empty vessels in terms of meaning have come to acquire abundant significance when confronted under the right circumstances — the acquisition of which I was hopeless to grasp, given the entropy of the process — and that kind of misunderstanding was endlessly uncomfortable. To reach the desired level of linguistic precision, I would need to try to say the exact meaning several times before saying it, to be sure that it was exactly what I meant. So really I was terrified of saying something which meant more than what I intended it to (that is, more than nothing; I was afraid of talking to someone).

I cannot remember what I said. I'm sure that I said something — I had learned to do that from June, who had a way of talking to people without talking to them, a bit of which rubbed off on me (and, I should note, I had a way of not talking to people that rubbed off on her, making us both just a little better at speaking appropriately) — but I'm sure of my speech in the same way that I'm sure I was there, purely by factual knowledge. I know I must have been there but the sheer lack of memory makes me doubt that I was.

I would wonder if I had succeeded in exacting my fantasy to have a voice but not be heard if not for the particularly vivid recollection of having accidentally said something which I quickly followed with a reactive apology.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“I don't know.”

“Then don't.”

The urge to say “I'm sorry” after that tone was phenomenal. I was at least a little proud of myself for fighting it off.

To complete the phrase: for existing. I said the words in an attempt to appease the time that I took up, trying to make even the pain I thought I caused by simply being. If I was right about how much of an inconvenience I caused, then I would need more apologies than I could ever utter to balance the books, even without considering how the principle of supply and demand would slowly make the words worthless. It might

have been nice to take up very little space, to be something unburdensome.

Like a book, a little book on the library shelf that gets remembered and occasionally revisited for the memorable highlights and then put down; yes, I would have liked to be a book that could never be sorry for the space it took up because if — in a wild case of animism — I could think as a book, I would have been chosen, looked upon, maybe even admired, with any inconvenience I caused being no fault of mine, but that of the Author or the Reader. Just a collection of words that started and ended naturally and doesn't require anything else — an economical, memorable, story.

A lot would happen in my book. There would be lots of big moments and emotions on a grand stage and after them, when you thought the volume could get no louder, something new would change and reveal whole new layers of reality. All the while the conflict would grow. The hero would venture into the darkness and come out the other side, triumphing when all seemed lost (again). There would be epiphanies and light would shine over the eyes of the people as the sun cast down gold on its rising. Lives would change for the better, things would grow, and people would like it for the happy ending. Diving into the layers of meaning people would find phrases to remember — the same phrases that changed fictional lives would change real ones — and they could imagine themselves growing as people. It would lift people up unequivocally and innovatively, expressing something entirely new to the world and which was enough to change it.

And it would be almost entirely made-up. Everything that wasn't a complete fiction would be a hyperbole of something real. But it would never even hint that that was the case. It would hit all the beats of a normal story and convince the people that it was normal enough to be real while being sensational enough to still be interesting; the simple structure would house complex ideas, and there would be no semicolons, as they wouldn't be necessary — it would be perfectly content with only four marks of punctuation, three tenses, one voice, one mood, and one person.

“I won't.”

I laughed then, he smiled and laughed with me. I kept laughing at the irony of it. He was certainly laughing because he thought I was joking about saying sorry, a reason completely different from mine, which he couldn't have possibly known. I didn't know what to do but laugh at this: I thought that I could have ever been with people without being afraid that I was sharing the same air as them, without having to make up for my presence within thirty yards by bowing my head, compliantly listening

in, and letting them have any wish they liked. What a farce! They have put Thor in the bride's clothes, dressed up like something palatable to be welcomed into the castle, only for the hero to unveil the disguise, revealing incongruence, and ruining the party. It was a terrible joke, but it was here, for a moment, the most hilarious thing I could have ever cooked up. An ingenious brand of stupidity, so bad there was nothing to do but laugh.

I got the sense that I wasn't even there. Like everyone was looking just past me, faking a glance at something over my shoulder, something unsurprising and simple, and never looking at me.

I made a fake look at the clock and said I had to head home.

Half of my heart wanted Rina to catch the lie and stop me, but she didn't. I would have been disappointed either way. For a long time I walked among the blank walls, half expecting to turn a corner and find Rina's door and give a knock to announce my arrival, and half expecting to finally find an exit. I paced in circles for what felt like hours, with nothing to guide me, looking for an exit into the cold, dark night.

In my head I hear her tell me "You've got it backwards, Liv."

"I'm not trying to be straightforward."

"But you are. You're being straightforwardly backwards." The bakery, again. This time she buys for me. "The point is to inject joyful expression into harsh reality, not to inject joyful reality into harsh expression. Or, well, you know what I mean. They're both obvious. You're choosing the less interesting option."

We were talking about something in particular, but I think she means this more generally. "In my experience the less interesting option is the more truthful one."

"In your experience the cart pushes the horse."

"In my experience, the cart pulls the horse, same as in yours."

She scoffs in amusement. "I mean that by focusing on the meaning you want, you're not actually looking for what it could mean, you're looking for what you want it to mean."

"It could mean anything. I'm just constraining it to what it means to me, because that's what I know. I could never understand it in any other way."

"You can try."

"I do try. If I'm faithful enough to what it is, then putting it in the mold of what it means to me reveals what it isn't like."

"That's not the same thing."

"I know, it's more vivid."

“At the cost of precision.”

“Again, I’m not trying to be precise.”

“Again, you are. You’re scared of being understood. Your work says that more precisely than you could imagine. Get over that phobia.”

Tearing someone down to build them up. Rina had a way of doing that, breaking you down into pieces, making those all you were for a moment, splitting you up so you could look at yourself. It makes you aware of what parts of you are exposed and what parts aren’t, as does the wind of a chilly night, biting every part you’ve left vulnerable.

I had a quiet walk home. Interrupting the wind was only the distant sounds I couldn’t discern as being from joy or murder. Again, the halves of my heart weighed against each other, but both wanted to be screaming. There were screams — none of them mine — and the occasional buzzing of the cheap storefront lights.

Cheap signs blinked out the windows. They never said much; if I did read them it wasn’t a feat worth much effort. All down market streets they blared through, half-working attention grabs that implied the original message but only really said “O N” (it sure was), or some other fragment of the message, still calling the attention of the passers-by and nightwalkers that were sober enough to use their eyes, which I, unfortunately, was.

The gentle cold of the night began to set into my bones. There was a draft wind down the street. I began to walk in a rather unbalanced way to account for the shivering. I was shivering, thinking in sentences which were only prepositions and conjunctions.

Somewhere in the distance, a lamplight was flickering off of any rhythm. The bulbs were at various stages of dimming all around, and that one was nearing the last days of its life. Soon enough a city worker would come through, replace the bulb, and maybe polish the glass. Soon enough the bulb that was there to begin with would be recycled for spare parts or trashed. The softer orange of the dying lights was nice while they were in phase. It almost felt warm to stand under them. I took note of this as I began to walk faster, fearing the road beside me and the cold.

I suddenly found it very hard to breathe. The cold burned in my lungs. I only moved faster.

The night sky was very dark and impossibly wide. The black extended from the edge of the horizon into every corner of the city. It seeped into the edges like water. The waves reached above the towers, the currents erased them slowly. The blinking light stabilized finally into black. As did the others. It was all tar. I was buried.



I wouldn't run. I couldn't run. There was nowhere to go.

Among the simple sounds — shoes clicking against the street, air flowing, motors humming, the stars breathing (they do breathe, slowly, in a circle, like birds, in all the ways we don't) — I heard one of those loud noises that shakes the bones up from the feet and into the chest. It only grew louder. The slow burning of an engine I couldn't place anywhere.

I was nearly home. I thought I was nearly home.

I couldn't think. There was nothing to think about. The world was brutally empty of any solace from this. What went through my brain was a breathless series of attempts to avoid this at all costs. I thought I might swim up, but I was weightless and surrounded. My legs found nothing. They kept moving. I was flailing about in an empty space.

I was running, and I only realized that as I slammed against my door, fumbled with the keys, and locked it behind me. I slid against the floor, crumpling.

I covered my eyes and couldn't think of anything — didn't want to think of anything — but my heartbeat. Walking alone at night was stupid enough, but for me to do it was even worse. I wondered what I was thinking, and I sincerely had no idea. I probably wasn't.

To be alone, in the dark, outdoors, where anyone could see me. I should be glad to have made it home. I was shaking. I shouldn't have even gone to the party. I shouldn't have left the house. I shouldn't have left home. I shouldn't have gotten out of bed. I shouldn't have even tried to stop dreaming. Or maybe I shouldn't have started. I kept on like this for some time. Not much changed for the next few hours, so we can skip those.

I fell asleep from exhaustion and woke up feeling the weight of my skeleton and an impossible, unbearable pressure in my skull. I couldn't stand.

It had been years since I had a paroxysm. I thought I might have been done with them. But, like many things, just when I thought I had thrown it away, it swung back and hit me in the back of the head so that I would bleed. I guessed that was by design: I was made to think I was doing well enough that I could disregard that part of me, giving it the perfect occasion to come back.

It was different from the last time. It took on a different tone, asked different questions, played on different fears.

It was still similar in principle, though. I remembered it well. I knew people back then, in college. I had made an effort to know people. And, well, I guess I had just fallen out of that habit, too, again, back to



where I was to start.

June and I had taken a night off from our usual routine to go to a small party. It was a rare occasion for me to go to something that wasn't associated with class or work, but she had convinced me despite my reservations that it would be fun. It was mostly people that I knew that would be there — and consequently most of the people that I knew would be there — and it seemed like a nice chance to loosen up a bit.

As a part of being one from that brand of person who feels every stimulus intensely, my idea of spending my free time was sitting in silence and doing something thoughtful. If ever I had a day off before or after this, I would spend it reading, cleaning, or, if I had to leave the house, at a museum. The less that was going on — the more singular the experience — the better. Sometimes I spent whole hours just breathing and it was wonderful.

One of the many things that made me a different person from June is that she was the opposite of me in this respect. There were times in her life where it was agonizing for her to be alone in silence for more than five minutes. If she had more than an hour to herself the first thing she would do is find someone to share it with.

We arrived early and as soon as I saw someone walk in I felt the sickening need to go home. By the thirtieth minute I was exhausted, the music was far too loud as it bounced around the living room — 50 square feet at most — and into my ears shaking several times each beat, and I could barely think. People tried to talk to me and I either didn't respond or barely managed to process the question into an intelligible sequence of sounds, leading me to return something confusing to the same degree that I was confused.

At the passing of the first hour I had a thought — “I am wasting my time” — that sent my soul tumbling down to the center of the Earth while my body sat still on the surface. The degree of generality heightened with each pass over the same message. At first it was that I was wasting my time here, then that I had wasted my day, that I had wasted my week — having done very little, I supposed, since I hadn't made a new magnum opus each hour — my month, my year, my time at college, my education, and, ultimately, the limited span of time that I was given on the planet to do that work that I wanted to. I could die any second from a random impulse of a man on the street or a poorly trained chef or a terrible driver, but here I was, spending my time at a party I wasn't even enjoying.

I sent June a text that I was feeling ill from dinner and went home

— ran home. In defense of that lie I did actually throw up. I shook and convulsed and flailed about for the whole night before my body found itself too exhausted to keep up the motion.

I heard knocks all around in the night, from everywhere. There were bumps against the walls and ceilings, rhythmic bangs outside the window, things falling far away.

Before crashing to sleep that night, I write something down that I do not remember: *I haven't had the capacity to engage in any meaningful artwork these past few weeks. It is as if something has departed from me. It might have something to do with this feeling of being trapped inside. I do not know. I just feel it, and feel it violently. I must have lost the ability to think, or maybe I've just lost June.*

I didn't remember June coming in, but I woke up next to her in the middle of the night and just looked at her face in the little moonlight there was. I thought, for a drowsy second, I saw myself. We looked so similar sometimes, with our hair in our faces. She looked younger than me, as the bags under my eyes made me seem to age faster, but here, in the dead of night, I was looking at myself for a second before I was, as usual, looking at myself by looking up in the bed; looking at myself, now with the knowledge that the alter-ego nestled next to me was just an alter, just June. I thought — drowsy, moments before falling back to sleep — I thought “This is what time is for.” as I pulled in closer in the most careful way my rough body could manage.

Pushing myself out of bed was near-impossible. But I had to, just as I had to make the coffee and the breakfast and remember my keys and force myself past the weight of the door.

It was one of those room temperature days, where you step outside and feel no change at all, which was concerning, for the season, as it meant that rainfall would be coming. I caught this feeling at the door, and hesitated at the frame.

I glanced out to see the trees in different stages of Autumn, one invading the other, with the offensive party being indiscernible amidst the mixture that disposed of any notion of boundaries. The leaves seemed pressured to fall more than usual, but still they refused to do more than bend (if they did remain, I would later find the ground was littered with the inflexible ones). It was a heavy day, the air had soaked up all the weight of the ocean.

I went back into the outdoor-temperature room and put on my rubber shoes along with the other preparations for rain. It took some

time to find my umbrella. The search was as frantic as it could have been as I realized that I might be late with any more delay. In some lapse of judgment I left it on the kitchen counter instead of by the door. I hardly thought about how it got there, as the rush compelled me to do more moving than thinking.

The moment I found it I went outside to make it to class. The threat of rain loomed in overcast clouds, and I raised my umbrella at the slightest drop in anticipation of a torrent. In a rare dose of instant-gratification, the search was rewarded with the exact circumstance it prepared me for. But the torrent never came. In fact, the drizzling rain shortly stopped. But I didn't know. The cover protected me from knowing whether or not it was raining at all, and since I was dry I ascribed some use to the tool, even though it was dry too.

I saw others without their umbrellas up, and figured they were just more willing to put up with the light specks of water that were falling. They gave me no more glances than usual, and the puddles on the ground from earlier rains vindicated my position. The sun broke the clouds and turned the puddles to steam, bouncing off of the umbrella, and I thought about the rarity of a sunshower on the walk.

I only found out it wasn't raining when Rina quipped about me using a parasol in the overcast. Embarrassed, I told her the sun was out. My umbrella might have dried off on the walk over, but the underside collected a puff of vapor that was now condensing (and before, leaving a touch of wetness on the backs of my pant legs). I found this out later when I went to open it at the end of the day — at which point rain was coming down in seas — and found a collection of water on the interior, which hit me and set the tone for the walk back. The heat made it so that, for the duration of the walk, my inner and outer states aligned as the sweat in my inner shirt matched perfectly with the rainwater on my outer shirt.

I began to think that this is exactly what I didn't want out of a day. Between the exhaustion and the rain and the day of loved work that still felt like working, there was little to redeem it for me.

I began to wonder what I *did* want out of a day.

I couldn't think of a single thing. The opposite of this, for sure, but that meant essentially nothing: did I want awareness, a cold sun, and a day that didn't feel like working? I had that once before, that wasn't the epitome of days. But if this was the worst day, that meant its counterpart — at least, in theory — had to be the best day. Inverting the inconveniences of the day, however, would only describe a day I would call standard. It

wouldn't make anything exceptionally good, just not exceptionally bad.

The best day would share a good deal in common with this worst day, in that they would both be horribly disruptive to the normality of things, but in ways that were quite different. There might be snow and quiet and time to warm up by the fire, or a cloudless sky, a hot sun, and cool water. I imagine if I liked the rain and chose to stay nestled up with a book today, this day would even be lovely.

Picturing the opposite of what I didn't want revealed nothing about what I wanted. Thinking only with respect to opposites like this would make understanding anything practically impossible. If everything was defined by its relationship to some other thing then nothing would be defined at all. The opposite of black was white and white was red and red was black but what did that tell you about the colors? A great day being the opposite of a terrible one means nothing. If Everything was just the opposite of Nothing, then it would hardly be anything.

I asked myself, covered in water, shivering by now: What was the point in antonyms anyhow? Opposites? It all seemed so absurd. Why define a binary or put boundaries on things at all? It's pointless outside of the purpose of putting labels on things, which is debatably pointless in its own right. If I should like to call my cup an umbrella or my umbrella a cup, what should stop me? An umbrella and a cup can be the same thing, easily.

They are opposed, sure, but they share a center point around which they can be said to differ. Absence is the opposite of presence as they express different states of the central concept of "being somewhere." By the same measure a table is the opposite of a chair because they bear different states around the central concept of "surfaces on which things sit at dinnertime." A chair is a short table on which people sit, but if I sit on the floor and put a plate on the chair, it suddenly inverts itself into a table.

It can't be said that it's not a table in this case because it clearly is one, so then what makes a chair different from a table other than the orientation of a space which can be freely manipulated? What makes a chair a chair other than it's not being a table and yet being close enough to one that they can be associated as opposites?

If the positive and negative are defined exclusively by their being opposites and a simple change of orientation makes the negative positive, what makes them actually different?

I suppose the answer to all of those questions was nothing.

I thought that if it held the water just fine it would be a cup. Done.

Just like that. Nothing more to say. I'm in the camp that we should use definitions as they serve us. I don't care about the class of things we call cups, I care about what the idea of a cup is and what that makes cups. An antonym is nothing but something identical to something else called by another name and told it's an opposite — a definite cage on an infinite thing, made to constrain something so that it could be manipulated more effectively.

Such things we observe to fetter the uncertainties to each other, matching force to antiparallel force, producing in the tension a zero — a nothing. In tying them down we do kill the uncertainties, but with them dies our potential for a realization outside of the terms we've set. The moment where we try to know what something is well enough to pin it down and frame it shares its time with — parallels, pulls against — the moment where we cease to regard what it could be and finally ensure its stasis.

I slammed my head into my pillow when I got home. I was tired, I was wet, and I was beginning to shiver. My head was emptied by the effortful push of my pulse into my ears and the weight of my eyelids.

I thought I heard June outside of our door. She was talking on the phone with someone. Something about an event or a deadline next week. I thought I should warm up, but couldn't find the muscles to move, clueless as to the place of my own body.

I was focused on the sound.

I knew it was her. How? How did I recognize her voice? She didn't have any particular way of speaking, no accent outside of the state, no dialect or favorite words that would pin that sound to her. I couldn't describe her voice beyond platitudes and generals. So how did I know, so surely, from behind a door, that it was her?

Thinking about it, years later, I can still imagine what it would sound like for her to say anything I think of. Without having seen her in months I can still recreate the sound of her voice in my head without even a pause to think. I can still hear her recite the prose when I read her books.

It might be that the memories of people we love take up permanent residence inside of us. So that even when they are so long gone from us we can not exhume the ghost of what they were. We become their haunt. We create their ghost.

If I'm right to assume I'm quite like every other person, that means she must remember my voice much the same. Were she ever to think of me she could replay my phrases exactly as I said them. If my error in this

assumption were anywhere it would be towards discrediting her. She might still have in memory every word I ever said, indexed in order and rated by importance, stored next to all the other facts she knew about me, just as I kept many of hers.

For someone to appreciate your subtle nods and little qualities like this is infinitely romantic. The sugars in your coffee, the words you love to hear, the way you keep your clothes, your favorite food, what they find interesting, and what you like to drink on the days you're feeling down. While we might have an affinity for the dramatics of love, the tiniest parts keep it together. Respecting the little bits of people hardly anyone knows makes it a pleasure to be with someone every day. It is why I could love June for so long, the memory of all this is why I say I loved her.

This is something I have avoided discussing for some time. Bringing it up at each instance would be nothing short of tedious as so many microscopic things reminded me of June. For a time, I defined everything in the world relative to her. Nothing didn't remind me of her, especially in those early phases on my own.

I could hardly read anything without thinking June might like it. I took a thousand photos to send to her that just piled up in the gallery. I tasted something too-sweet and thought to say "you would love this" to the empty chair across from me. Half the mornings I woke up I made her coffee before myself.

As I got further away in time, June more often felt less like a person and more like a loose collection of facts which implied a person. She was, of course, always there, but now more or less vaguely. I saw her less and thought of her more, such that she became more like an idea than real. More than a noun, she became an adjective that modified the things she was attached to. Tulips were June-loved, the paper was June-liked, the sunset sky was June-amber, and the pillows were June-soft.

But, ultimately, she was a real person, and I had to remind myself of that before she became an afterimage:

June was a professional writer and a passionate photographer. "Passionate" of course meaning "amateur," and that of course meaning a dedicated hobbyist who would never share her work. In her time at the magazine she was known for her precise and cutting prose that would dig into the depths of her mostly artistic and literary topics. In her private writing, she cultivated (along with her pithy sensibility) a deep love of aphorism and a certain personal intensity you could feel in her descriptions.

In this context, she wrote mostly work that aspired to be important to the whole of humanity, speaking to the general through the behaviors of the specific. Her particular talent was in universalizing and utilizing her experience as a person to inform the motivations of her characters. She had a remarkable memory for the real world and for the content of her novels, and the two were often interdependent.

For when her experience could not inform her work, she had a tremendous imagination and a vividly real world inside of her head. She could justify a decision that never happened, and tell fiction that felt entirely real. Lying, after all, is a tradition among novelists.

She was an avid social volunteer and advocate for municipal politics, both as part of her work as a journalist and as a volunteer. She had a distinctly enlightening personal philosophy that, while I could never hope to restate it as well as she could, might be captured in all of its optimism and existential flirtation by the summary she once gave me at the rise of a full moon on a hotel balcony. The words, said with a bright smile, I remember: “we are all caged by our notions of who we are. We might be free — really Free — were we to just give up the keys to someone outside.”

Nevertheless, she struggled her whole life to escape that cage. She was nothing if not herself. She judged many things exclusively by the capacity to which they aligned with something she had already thought. The more it repeated her voice, the more satisfying it would be to her ears. It was difficult for her to see things in other people’s ways, and that was mostly on account of her serious difficulty with the notions of irrationality and novelty. She was plagued with the need to be both original and right, and, as long as I knew her, she never wrote something that could satisfy both desires, for what was right was what she accepted and she heard only what she accepted in everything.

She could at least convince herself that what she was thinking was right — for my part, I could hardly convince myself to think. I commend her for having the courage to use her brain.

Overall, she was a radically unsuitable human being. Despite our constant efforts, she could never convince herself that she was capable of producing anything good or meaningful, or even worth looking at. She tortured herself over her notions of what it meant to her and resigned herself to accept only exactly what she wanted from herself and others. At her best she was outgoing, insightful, and welcomed the world with open arms. At her worst he was judgmental, a fraud, a citadel of a person,



shielded by her cage, and a raging narcissist, capable of empathy only in the degree that she believed could feel what others were feeling more intensely and understand those feelings more deeply than they could. She was perfect material for an artist.

And she was gone, she had left.

I was done thinking about it. That only ever aggravated the issue. I would let there be no reminders.

I spent a chilling night putting all of her things and all of the things that would remind me of her things — the books, the gifts, the cups, her palette, everything she forgot and everything I remembered — into boxes. When I had finished with that, I sat up reading, by lamplight, a book of poems about nothing but the Earth and the walks in the wild.

If sleep wouldn't change the state of things then what was the point of sleeping anyways? To dream? My dreams had stopped being fun years ago. Words of insomnia were much more interesting.

And when I did drift — against my will — into that exhausted, dreamless sleep, I thought I could hear the snow falling on the lakes outside. It was one of those times in my life where sleeping no longer felt like dreaming but just a different state of waking awareness, but this time it felt more like waking was just a different state of dreaming, and for a while I was never really dreaming or totally awake. It felt like I was in two realities at once.

I still did wake up though, peeling myself out of bed the next morning, awakening to winter, true winter. Not a winter that would freeze the lakes and lacerate you with the wind, but a winter that started chilling you from the bones out.

It was as if the air was freezing in my lungs. It would enter with the warmth of the atmosphere and exit ready for deposition. I figured it would be best for me not to leave the house. There might be something to remind me outside.

I told Rina I was feeling under the weather. I couldn't tell if I was actually sick or not. If I was, I would hardly feel it anyway. I just felt inadequate and inhuman. Not wanting to move, I nevertheless did a very human thing, and became one with my bed, wrapping my sheets in the weak grip of my thinning hands.

I just stayed there, unmoving, unaffected. I soaked in the texture of my clothes and skin against the covers and the mattress. My head sank into the pillow as my indentation in the surface became deeper and deeper. I felt the cloth as an extension of myself, and it rooted into me.



I couldn't force myself to move. I feared I might have turned to stone.

The occasional sounds of activity came muffled through the walls to break the illusion that time had stopped entirely. The recurrence of silence made their interjection absolutely necessary. They brought me back into my own ears from my position on the other side of the bed or hovering above myself, watching the body lie there. To this choral noise was added the cello sound of the vibrating call-phone alarms I couldn't move to silence and the violin tremors of the car alarms in the parking garage some yards away from the window.

These were the only external influences to populate the weeklong winter that placed itself in my life after that party.

When I did move out of bed, it was out of pure necessity with lethargic effort. The fluid in my ears would launch a revolt against the standing that threatened to send me tumbling against the floor. The unstretched limbs were slow to awaken and hit the ground in uneven steps. The tendons that moved my knuckles would heed no command and spasmed or dropped whatever they were given. This in the mere motion to fetch a meal or maintain my hygiene, made the tasks an exercise.

Most days the work therein was of no concern, and I just stayed under the covers in feverish thought. Thought about nothing in particular. About images, about old words, old and new selves, about my past, about flowers, or about the feeling of being in my skin and all the ways it didn't seem to fit.

Some days I thought about my death, though not particularly interested in the project this time. It was painful to inhabit this planet. It hurt to breathe, the sun was unforgiving. The very things I did to give myself the hope of living — everything I needed — burned away my skin and left me more open to the world, invariably making me more sick. It was as if I was unfit for the very atmosphere of this place, and I had to take it in at least every few seconds.

But that was all a very low simmer and not well out of the ordinary. The change was that I was forced to be with this idea, alone in our bed and my body. I was forced to fight for control over my own thoughts as these would rise to the surface and deter me from thinking about anything but them.

I had to fight harder when I was out of bed. With my balance off, it was easy for things like this to push me out of my body and into the vast expanse of the imagination. There, I was adrift, omniscient and utterly

impotent. I would be doing something menial and then freeze as I was instantly warped to another place and watched something else control my body.

These times I watched myself take a knife in my hand, I watched it move towards my body. Like looking down on the street and seeing a car moving thirty miles-per-hour towards a parked bus. Behind the glass I couldn't scream out for someone to stop as they showed no signs of slowing and I just had to hope it would happen. Then it didn't. It kept moving. It speeds up from a foot away. An inch before it collides all I can do is silently jump back at the prospect of the damage to come. I prepare for the worst. *Someone is about to die in front of me and all I can do is watch in terror.* The thought of the police report passes my mind. I cannot even process the violence. It is too much. To watch another death. To see the metal crumple in and hear the muted alarm and the wrinkling sounds as they pass through the walls which my voice and theirs could never penetrate. And then it passes by. The car was in another lane. I go on cutting the vegetables.

It was like this every time.

For an hour or a day or maybe the whole time I thought that I might really die. I couldn't possibly take that seriously. I couldn't consider that it would really be over. Death was not so much a place, it was a state — a reversion to the original, the essential — of being capable of forming something new. It was another world.

I had more conviction about that in the past. It would be a Way Out. The Red Button. But now even that was quite boring and hardly serious. Another cliché — third time's the charm, isn't that right?

No matter how true I thought it was, it was just a boring way to justify suicide — something utterly unjustifiable. If the past had proven anything it was that trying to die — successfully or unsuccessfully — had significantly worse results than trying to live — even if that could only be unsuccessful. It was that the control it would offer was meaningless and artificial — that it was neither a solution to the problem nor an exercise of agency, but simply a bad choice. It was an exercise in futility and a demonstration of hubris. And, as for the more platonic yearning to die for the process itself, it was simply morbid.

To crave finality is to crave the stability of the past. It is a want to be free of the contingencies of being alive and have the order that seems lacking. A cessation of being is a removal from an overdetermined world. It is absolute freedom — that is, a freedom which is cripplingly lonely,

since to be free from the world is to be outside of it, removed from it, in a pure white space composed of nothing but yourself. In wanting to have everything, I would force myself to have Nothing.

I would much rather just sweat out the fever under the covers. It was a brutal paralysis that extended its roots into my brain. Time passed as a dark sleep before my eyes, and stood still when I was awake. My head was empty, it must have melted out through my pores.

Someday I woke up and thought it was time to leave, and I started packing.

I moved weakly, slowly to start. Everything I touched sent a spark from my skin, down my arm, and into my head, jolting the whole path with electric pain. I got through one box before I was sent to the ground and, after some time on the floor, back to bed.

So large a bed. I could sink into it and it would bury me. I could never fit in that bed, and I wouldn't ever stretch to the appropriate size. I could flail my limbs out like a starfish and my fingertips would be still far from the edges.

I hadn't had a smaller bed since I was a child. From the moment I left my parent's house I had only had beds that were too large for me alone. They might have been stiff or soft but they were the right-size mattress, and they were enough. This bed made me feel small — I am small, but I didn't need to be reminded every time I went to sleep.

When I awoke I packed again, with more vitality, with fewer aches. I became faster everyday, regaining my strength. It nevertheless took the rest of my recovery to have everything in boxes. Nothing like having to tear it all down makes you realize how much you have.

There were some things that slowed me down among the trivial accumulations. There were pictures on the shelves and mementos in the cabinets that I picked up with a distinct care and gave a cushioned home. There were many hard decisions about whether to donate things that stood on the border between too sentimental to give and too useless to keep. There were ancient little things that had made their way there without ever leaving boxes.

I found a collection of old sketchbooks that went back to high school, when I would draw anything and everything that came to mind. I was drawn into them, and flipped through them all, laughing at the mistakes and quirks and amazed at some of what I could do with the little knowledge I had.

I came to a point in the books — just after the beginning of college

— when one of the openings struck me. It was two pages, consecutive and facing each other, the drawings were smudged to the point just before they would become unrecognizable, as if someone had tried (and failed) to erase them, but I could still make out the images. I could have made them out if they had been erased. It was a portrait diptych of June and me.

The years had pushed it to the edge of memory, but the book had brought it back. I painted them at 9x12 and framed them in a mahogany box as an anniversary gift. I was certain we brought it with us, but I didn't find it while I was packing.

I sat there staring at the fuzzy image of my face. The haze over their eyes made me chill. As it rested on my lap my right hand, resting, curled into a D shape with the thumb meeting the forefinger and its followers copying the shape.

I got the sense that I was peeking in on something I was not welcome to, but I could not stop looking. I wore my hair shorter then, I wore different clothes, I wore different glasses when I took out my contacts, and I wore my face differently. I drew it differently, too. I faced more upward, I used brighter hues. If you held this up next to me or a picture of me, you would think we were siblings, not twins.

On the contrary, June's smudged face could hardly have been different from the memory I had of her. She had, of course, changed too, in many of the same ways, but this and the last picture I have of her still carry the same youth, the same essence. Her smeared pupils followed me. She was looking out to the right, dreaming, reflecting, as her eyes always did, the light of the world.

I intruded here for a very long time before moving to the other pages. Everything felt so free-form, so natural. I felt no impulse to ask why I was creating then. (When did that feeling start? When did I get so caught up in reasons to do that it stopped me from doing?) Creating was, indeed, like breathing, a simple, natural rhythm— you cannot live asking “what's the point” of every breath.

There was no academia in any of these books. That began to appear gradually, later on, and slowly took precedence until they reached the point of total utility. There was the occasional expression, but it became more and more infrequent. I stopped looking before I reached that point.

Looking at the sketches, I smiled bitterly at the thought that I had learned nothing in my life. I had forgotten more than I gained: everything I had built up had only gotten in my way.

I set them all back in their box, and opened a window. I sat for a

while, just listening to the nonsensical sounds of cars. There were many other things, over the next few days, that would bring me back to this. I wondered, if I could nearly forget that, how much else might I be missing?

That night, I dreamt of the sea.

I had stood up from the beach — the soft white sand, the dark horizon plastered with stars that I would never see save for in imaginations, the capricious, black water churning, swallowing and regurgitating the moonlight — and made my way in.

Dream time had sent me from a conversation with an old man to myself and, of course to June, and the railroad ended here. I became lucid on the beach. I knew, as soon as I saw the moon and stars, I was dreaming. So in my sub-waking mind, I knew I was free.

Were I to fly, to fall, to construct a city of my making, or call back the set sun for the limited time I had here, it would be so, it would be just as I thought.

But, tired, sick, sweating, I stood and began to walk.

The water was tar. Still the salt had, at first, a refreshing contact with my skin. The breeze cleared the air and chilled me through the thin cotton of my clothes. The water felt warm. My clothes were dry. As the tide took me over, a bubble thinner than my skin surrounded me. I was a fish. The new weight of the water pressed me down and tucked my body in for rest.

I woke up sweating. The midnight water put the blood back into my body. I was hungry for it, I swallowed with ferocity and I felt it welling up behind my eyes and my hands.

I finished packing and moved out shortly after this. Going to a smaller place, I sent many boxes of spares and nonsense away. I would later find that this was still not enough, and many boxes remained boxes until a time came where the season called for another cleaning.

That last day, after everything was out of the old place, and I stood inside after one last check of the floor, I hesitated at the door. I stood there, the prospect of the change now finally setting in, the place filled with memories now finally sitting empty behind me. My lungs were suddenly weak, my ribs were suddenly ready to shatter with the momentum of this transition, given velocity by the present and mass by the past.

I turned and looked back, seeing nothing, seeing chairs and counters and cupboards that were empty and years that felt the same. I heard the words we had said, all in order, all very quickly, the sounds from the first closing of the door to the last goodbye to the footsteps I had just

placed down as the last clause in the last utterance that would take place on this stage.

I could discern little but the last parts. The early things were impossible. I thought:

Time is like the ocean. The crushing weight of the things above makes it impossible to go deeper and the density of the things at the bottom so much greater that everything is pushed together. You can look in only from the top, where little is visible, and you can dive in only with your eyes closed, lest they burn against the salt. Here, on the present shore, the surface was impenetrable and homogeneous.

For so long it seemed so inaccessible to me. But looking from above the surface of the water, when the lighting is just right and from an angle so perfect it can only occur by accident, one can still see the stellar glow made by the specks of low-lying memories, still so well charged as to let their light spill forth far beyond them.

Seeing my reflection in the water, I thought perhaps I was there, beneath the surface, living the future's history.

But soon, again, I was blind to the depths. No glimmers escaped. The room was, again, a room. It all became the same, the relative distance condensed and again became indistinguishable from the long road away.

Indeed, the past is so far away from the present that the internal distance ceases to matter. It is the same with the future. They are both so impossibly distant from now that they are beyond the horizon, never visible, but not quite invisible.

We live our lives balancing on the taut, keen, hairline wire, like the edge of a knife, separating the past from the future. At risk of falling a great distance into either of them, we look down, tempted by vertigo, by curiosity. I wavered, and when I felt stable again, I turned back and reached for the door.

## XXVII .

My parents tried to keep a memory book about the first few years of my childhood.

I say tried because most of it was blank. When I first opened it, that's the first thing I realized: the book was mostly a failure. It looks like they largely gave up on it when things got strained, almost totally gave up on it after the divorce, and it was all but scorned after father died; the only reason I found it was because I had to move some things out of mother's shed.

I would have been named Penny, if I was a girl, they wrote. I would have liked that name. I imagine them as a different person, a different me born into a different body world, as me in a different body, one that made sense for me.

Add another name to the list.

I was small, early, and ugly. Always in a rush. Always chasing hunger.

I mostly just looked quiet. I think I was afraid of cameras.

I bring up the book mostly because I see that baby the same way I see some future me: vaguely, as a was/will-be me that looks more like a collection of hopes and traits and possibilities than a person. I see both selfishly, narcissistically, as a reflection of me, always wondering how like me these were/would-be people are and judging them accordingly.

I change so much that I wonder what parts of myself will survive, what I'll hold onto and let slip away. I wonder how I'll be remembered.

I've always been so good at losing, at changing, but I suppose even that changes after a while. Now I'm terrible, now it wrecks me to think of my own contingency. The thought of letting things grow, letting myself grow, hurts.

I remind myself what narratives do. Yes, it is by thinking that we know that we build cages around ourselves. Yes, we destroy those cages by unlearning, by forgetting, we free ourselves. But I deserve to be behind bars.

### **XXVIII.**

But we sang in that cage, oh how we sang!

There was a time when I never wanted to be free. I was finally happy to lock myself into something, to be trapped as something and contained. And I tore it all down because I was afraid to be wrong, I left because I was afraid to be comfortable with something so small, because I didn't want to give up the world, and because I didn't want the world to take it away from me.

Then it did. Even after I had given it up the world found a way to take my love from me.

### **XXIX.**

I want to believe in a world that hates me. I want to believe I've done something horrible, I'll be shunned, and everyone hates me. I want to believe I'm a totally sickening person and all-around irredeemable.



Because then everything is easy. The pain of living is justified as malice, my perseverance is justified as spite, I am easily defined in opposition to what hates me, so all of my hardest choices are made and I can just do the easy part, focus on the small stuff.

Besides, it would make sense if I failed in such a world. Oppression is bigger than any one of us is able to conquer. I was simply born a tragedy — that's what you call it when thick hopelessness slowly fills in the gaps as the irrational hope bleeds out. It's also what you call it when there's nobody to blame, and life (or death) just takes away.

The more crushing reality, however, is that the world is hard, unfair, and awful, yes, but it's also full of people trying to help me and I'm *still* a failure — that nobody was really a villain, I was fighting nobody in particular, and I still lost.

It hurts to think that yes, there were people against me, and yes systems weren't made for me, but I had friends and opportunities and chances and I was loved and that wasn't enough for me to make it, it was hardly enough for me to live.

It hurts the most when the illness mixes with the oppression so it's hard to tell them apart, it's hard to tell internal from external and it takes so much time to sort that out that I feel like I can't do anything — I can't fight anything without fighting with myself. In the face of so many contradictory signals I want to give up. Either on myself or the world. I just want to shut it all out.

Obviously I haven't. Not completely. Only sometimes. I have to stay sensitive to the fact that I hate myself, people hate me, I love myself, and people love me, all at once, in that order, all incompletely, because feeling that is the only thing that gives me strength — real strength — to keep going trying to make something that changes the scale and proportion of all that.

### **XXX. RE: EPIGRAPH**

This is, of course, a highly manipulated quest for knowledge. It's the business of the artist to convince his [i.e., her, their] audience that what they haven't learned at the end they can't know, or shouldn't care about knowing.

*~Susan Sontag, In her Review of Ingmar Bergman's film "Persona" for Sight and Sound magazine*

*For Livy, My Closest Reader and Dearest Speaker.*



**XXXI .**

Night is closing in and I still have so much to say. I feel like I'll never sleep again.

Empathy fails, understanding is pointless. At some point you have to say that you can't understand what it's like to live in a world without you, that you're just not capable of being anyone else at the same time as you're incapable of being any one version of yourself at all, that what is contained in I/Me/Myself is a broad, infinite system of changing parts which you can only be tricked into thinking is stable enough to be one thing. The same is true for the other pronouns, they're just about bigger infinities.

So that's why I find people talking insufferable, the moment you mention something the terms of it have already run away. The next time I mention empathy it's a different thing, the next time I mention I, it's a different thing, the next time I call something different the meaning of different is different. We just can't keep ideas stable enough to understand anything.

Why do we have to understand anything?

**XXXII .**

Hi, Liza.

It's 3:24 am. You already know where I am.

Your email interrupted a memory of a family Christmas from when I was eight or so. It's a silly one; coldest winter of the year and our shitty radiator broke the afternoon of the eve and we couldn't get it repaired so we spent the night shivering, the morning doing the same along with the next month or so. I remember it hurt my hands so much — that they just wouldn't go numb like my father suggested and so it just kept stinging. Everyone was so quiet.

There was a movie on to fill the air. Some 25-days-of-marathon that we caught for entertainment because those things lifted the spirit, because Christmas movies were the only ones that still believed in the magic we — or maybe just I — wanted, huddled up in blankets with my family closer than they had ever been before.

It must have been some kind of winter clad, heat of the cabin romance. I saw the heat on her skin and his, beautiful, bright and full with the charm of innocent attraction. I longed for the feeling they had, for her and for him, for the heat of them, and so I became the fire between.

Sometimes I still think of that cold when I can't sleep and the silence begins to set in, the kind that makes you hear every minute detail of the world with full clarity. Even in the depths of exhaustion I couldn't set aside the pains and irritations for long enough to drift away. I sometimes remember it as the first time I felt tethered to my body, and othertimes I remember it for the exhilaration attached to it, the buzzing desire for that warmth, the need to keep thinking about it, lest it be lost by a night of neglect. The morning after I secretly think I'm the reason no gifts were delivered under the tree, and the regret of that still hits as a pang in my chest when it's late, a reminder that the foundations of your heart stay intact no matter how much you grow.

In any case, no, I don't think I'm wrong on the theme in question, and if it seems esoteric that's my point, not my problem. I think a large part of the work needs to make a rather concerted and clear effort to be misunderstood or else we'll be not only monocropping the rich, composted pages but also missing the point entirely.

and so like dickinson / that poet paragon of the feminine /  
made so by men misunderstood / in her seclusion / i am made  
half a woman / by half attempts not to see me and / i also  
dream of the ocean / where it meets the shore / something in  
me is floating and i know it as the end / the door / the waking  
/ apart from which i keep away / not wanting to prod the  
rational thing that will tell me i can't have it all my way /  
proving it wrong as i stay / and try to whisper for it to stay /  
to say / believe me we can have everything play / at serious  
work be gay / we can have it / anyone / who says otherwise  
is a liar / i have lied / too /more than once / don't hold it  
against them / just know that nothing else is true / believe  
nothing but that.

Take me as proof. I died and came back as a cinder to tell you  
— it's easy to be anything, just as easy as being what you are and you're  
expected to be.

Thank you for your timely response and feedback, I look forward  
to reviewing everything in more detail soon.

### **XXXIII. RECURSION;**

of a process; characterized by the repetitive application of a

rule, often successively in an execution designed such that a part of the process requires the application of the whole. a spiral, in another word. a redundancy, in another.

the first night that ashe and i slept together, i felt, not for the first time, like i was only half of myself, half in the room, half there, half in their eyes and half hiding behind the light of the ceiling fan; half the night was gone in half a bottle of wine and half the movie done after the half-off takeout was finished and half their hands on me had me halfway to bed already.

i spent a long time just looking at the fan turning, moving rigorously, shaking from time to time, but nonplussed, ceaselessly cooling the room, endlessly turning the air. the drifting got to me. i was deep inside myself, which is further away than you can get by moving your body anywhere around the world or the universe, for that matter. i had fallen back into myself and seemed to be nowhere, as close to somewhere or anywhere as everywhere and i might have been speaking or just making noise but the inner thoughts were quiet, shelled away in the bunkers of the heart.

i swear i wasn't breathing. i swear that all the hollowness inside your body is there so that the soul that generally floats around you can retreat inside if it needs to. i swear that when you breathe in so deeply you're letting your spirit in, and when you hang on an exhale and feel hungry for air it's because you can't live for very long without that inspiration.

half asleep, i had to fight to stay awake just to be next to them for a little while longer. i half dream all the loving things i will whisper to them on the other half of the bed.

#### **XXXIV. INSERT IV. GOODBYE, JUNE.**

The door opened to the day.

And it was here I could feel it, almost touch it, the boundary between two places. It was as if the atmosphere itself was changing around me as I locked the door for the last time and turned towards an indifferent world. I held the key in my hand. It looked alone off the ring. The brass was still cold. I turned it in at the desk.

And it was here I imagined the rooms turning to stone behind me, a real necropolis, carved so as to make it look like the fossilized versions of the wooden originals. I thought, if I could open the door, I might see it changing, watch the paint rapidly chipping and dissolving into the air. But

it was over the boundary already — no going back.

And, outside, I smiled at the sun, juxtaposing itself with the cold, presenting a vital, yet distant warmth that I could taste as the bare skin on my hands lapped up the droplets of heat that seemed to be only a minor leak in the turned-off faucet. I felt sick with myself as the pressure gathered in my chest, pushing out on my lungs.

And it was here, at this most unusual place and time and for the first in years, that I felt weightless. I was floating in the open air. My feet did not brace against the ground, they did not conflict with it, they did not hold tension, they simply floated. I got the sense that I was free — that, after so long, I was unfettered. I had understood this feeling once before, but I had never known the sensation of it; I now felt it, and pinned it down, and that made it so much worse. My heart sank, heavy.

I was empty now. It was boring more than anything. It felt profound the first time, but I was six, then, when I first fell out of love with the world. Many things felt profound when I was six.

Hasn't this all been done before?

The first time you fall out of love you think it will last forever. You think — in broad disenchantment, when you first feel the bitter taste of ennui that tells you just how empty you are and how ill-equipped the world is to fill you — you think “I am done with this place, it is full of lies and pain” and you shut it out.

That is, you shut it out until something gradually reminds you that the chambers of your heart cannot stay closed forever, wrenching them open as you fill with an incredible warmth that brings you back into love.

But now, and each time after that first closing, that first reopening, you ask yourself if you'll fall out of love again and then when and then how. So that each time you are overwhelmed with the sublime notions of happiness that the world presents, the moment is underscored by its ephemerality. You know that it may change. You think that it will, and that is all you can think because if you are falling in love with the world any time after the first, you must have fallen out of it before.

No matter how overdone the feeling was, it was always crushing, because for a second each time I could genuinely believe that this could last forever, and in the next second destroyed that hope. This sensation — what I have learned, since six, to call by a real Noun that constitutes more a pattern than a feeling and is thus more properly termed this Thing — didn't stop there. It was a general phenomenon.

This Thing wasn't awful because it's consumed everything, it's

awful because it's *consuming* it and all while I had to stand as still as possible watching the beast slowly teethe on the sinews of everything living that comes near it. Knowing that it was going to be digested into the Standard Process made it hard to enjoy anything new.

That there were glimmers to be reclaimed beyond the stomach was something I wouldn't think of as significant for some time. Because when, in the midst, you find some perfect piece of art and love it and then think, that next instant, "This can't last. Everything passes." it feels more crushing than if you'd just been left alone. You can think of nothing but that ephemerality. But they did come back, each time just as wonderful. The good things weren't dead forever.

When it felt like I was retracing the same steps in the old cycle of grief it's because, flattening it that way, I was. I was doomed to walk the same spirals over and over, changing, always, but never enough for it to be significant, for it to free me. The senses, the feelings, the memories, the world itself would die and revive over and over, as if tripping on themselves and somersaulting like children first learning how to run.

But it's not quite the eternal return I was looking for. Not entirely. You can still learn. I was still learning how to grieve, and getting better at it. What that takes is the determination to love the world despite knowing — or fearing — that it will tumble over — to love knowing it will pass, and even after it does — and imagine, believe, that you can live after it's gone.

I was detached, cynical in the face of the beautiful world before me, because I knew it would be gone, eventually. I didn't even try to hold it. I just wanted to move on. Because of that it died the moment I saw it, it didn't even have a chance, I wouldn't give it one, hoping that would keep it from hurting me.

I shook this thinking out of my head. The short drive to another place would take a long time, moreso with this.

I arrived tired, and, with the boxes inside and the car returned, I sat down on the floor with increasing exhaust. I could feel the difference in the air. It smelled sanitized and unfamiliar. It was small, small as Rina's comfy little place but, in the white light, it seemed a world apart.

It was a home made for one.

I began what would be a protracted process of unpacking. The new room would hold it all. I unpacked most of it, but, when the night came, some of it stayed in boxes that I would only open much later, long after that sleep.

In my mind I ran through a thousand ways I could place the things about the room. I moved the imaginary shelves about, re-arranged their imaginary contents, and thought about my imaginary inhabitation of the place. It was only after nearly an hour of this thinking that I placed the first thing on a shelf.

As I opened the boxes with the hope of getting it all out that night, I received a phone call from my brother.

I answered quickly and with hello. I couldn't control the suspicion in my voice.

He shared the greeting and, after asking how I was, began to tell me about his life — which I already understood quite well. I interjected rarely with sounds of approval.

“Liv I've been meaning to call you because I need to tell you I love you. I really mean it. Y'know it's so hard living out here [Vermont? I'm not sure if he moved since we talked last.] on my own. And I wish that I could— that I could see you.

“I remember when you were so little and you would jump around the room saying the words and playing out the moves in that movie [Peter Pan?] before they even did it. The way you would doodle for hours and then show it off and smile all big when mom said good job and I would tell you it was bad and — I'm sorry — I would say that to make you cry and you would and I would... [incoherent] ... you were such a special kid, I don't know how to say sorry.

“I remember when I would sit you down and ask about that thing and you would go on for hours about all the things that it made you think and they said and then you would tell me to put it on and I would put it on and you would smile and I would think this little [person] has so much energy and dad would— dad would... [incomprehensible silence]... Do you remember that?”

I said yes. I didn't.

“I know you would, you have that damn memory. What did he say again?”

I told him that our father would always say that “you need to take care of the octopus inside your head.” He seemed to really appreciate this phrase despite it being utterly meaningless both then and now. He was quiet for a moment. “Are you drunk?” Stupid question. The holiday was such a compelling excuse to consume.

“No.”

He continued, unphased.

“I’m sorry I haven’t called in a while I have such a hard time with these phones. I leave them somewhere and... poof! I never see them again.”

He stopped talking for a long few seconds. When he resumed I couldn’t make sense of the words, but stayed on the line for the next hour until he signed off and said the first thing I could register: “I love you.”

Hollowed, I spoke: “I love you too.” and the call stopped.

The ending — as I brought the phone away from my pulsing ears — made me aware, for the first time, of the silence inside the apartment. Were it on, the new air conditioner would run with a different noise; were it Saturday, the distant sounds of music would filter through the thin windows; were it another season the rain would patter; but there was none of that. No sound broke the deaf veil in the air.

I looked down at the phone and then out at the wall. I knew him all my life and still he felt distant. I knew more about the supermarket clerks than him — at least I knew what it looked like when they faked a smile, with him I didn’t even know where he lived or what he did anymore. But at the same time I felt like I knew so much more — in stories of course, with mnemonic fractures and bandages like a chipped tooth, a pointless argument or two, and a drive or two from the hospital.

I fought to remember anything substantial. I wrung out my memory for anything that would remind a tender, soft moment where we were briefly human together. There was nothing. I became very aware of a certain emptiness in my lungs.

It’s hard to think about people you haven’t imagined. Real people are hard to understand.

I had this picture of him in my mind as a warm person who I liked to be around, but I could recall nothing but a firm disinterest towards me. I could remember sharing a house, an old house, where the wood would creak on the wind and the windows would let the heat in or out depending on the season. I could reconstruct faintly the smell of the carpeted floor and the sight of his tall shadow bursting from the fireworks on the new year. Then, from there, I could tell you everything we ever did together and how he felt about it.

But none of that was *him*. None of that was even a semblance of his voice, nor a fragment of what it would have been like to be in a room with him — at which sound or sight, all of those things are returned to presence all at once, in a singular, cohesive form. I lived a whole life with him and I couldn’t possibly describe anything about his life. I understood

nothing about him, despite knowing very much.

I sat there for some time and tried to stitch together a person from the knowledge. My mind wouldn't let me. I lost my words. I'm glad I did. Still, I spent that time, open eyes unseeing, trying desperately to think.

When I was done failing to put that effigy together, I finished the unpacking and got ready for bed. I opened the soaps and cleaners at last: the bars of body wash, the lufa, the bottles of shampoo and conditioner that never seemed to run out at the same time anymore.

The shower was capricious with its heat and the pressure was so low I might have preferred a bath. Being that I was at the end of a week's freeze, I hoarded the heat, soaking it in at the hottest the water would go. My skin tightened and went briefly tender at the touch.

The temperature lingered in the closed room. A small, loud fan worked — tirelessly, hopelessly — to pull it out. The steam splattered and enmisted me in the mirror. My body was a silhouette, my face was a blur.

I jumped when it caught it on my periphery.

I turned, more calm, to look closer and thought, for an instant: that's not me.

That face was not mine.

Rather, it was my face, but I recognized it barely, with little detail about what it was. Illness and the heat had turned my skin as pale as marble. It was like the face of a person who you knew by living on the same street or in the same city as them — and so by sight — but having never met them you knew nothing about the person the face belonged to aside from their once-nearness to you — thus knowing them by sight alone. You could pin them to a place and knew you had a connection to them, almost like that of a friend, but if you were asked about something as simple as their name you wouldn't be able to start an answer. You could call them a familiar stranger, it was rather a strange familiar — I knew it, knew it well, but it was like I had never seen it before.

I stared until the fog cleared, slowly clarifying my form before I dressed in clothes I had taken off my own dead body. The reflection had created something that was not myself. I thought it might have been because of the light or a warp in the mirror, but I felt that something had really changed.

In the acheless moisture of the bones inside my hands made itself evident with the tension in the unworked muscles, some of which twitched — slightly, rhythmically — in unfelt attempts at taps on my palms. The eyes in the mirror investigated me. I was being seen through.



That is not me. Just as a house is not a home — as a “sure” is not a “yes” — I am not myself. *That* is not me.

It was an overlaying of two figures, which slowly faded from one to the other — they who were not who they are and they who are not who they were.

I try to shake it off and then touch my face in a soft reminder. But I am haunted by that person I am not. The childhood of missed appointments and apologies looms over me because it knows what I have done. What I see on the mirrored horizon is an afterimage of what was once a person — the superimposition of a thousand of such images, seen as one shadow. I can remember them still, as one might remember an old relative, and the way their faces understood the mirror. Suddenly, it is as if the fog rushes back, blowing out of the vent with a reversal of the fan.

For a long time, I saw most faces as a blur. I developed terrible vision before I could speak and never said anything about it until it became a problem in the fourth grade. Until then I would have to squint to see people’s faces.

I wondered all of the time what people were thinking. I wanted to know what was in their heads. I wanted to read minds before I could read. I would stare at people and try to guess what was on their mind.

When I got glasses, the clarity gave me my wish. A whole unknown world of meanings was unveiled to me in faces that betrayed exactly what was going on behind the eyes. This is especially true for elementary school children.

So many little motions told exactly what was being thought. I paid close attention to all of them — the width of the eyes, the creases of the eyebrows, the movement at the corners of the mouth that would warn of tears.

I would memorize the faces of the people close to me — if they would have stopped moving, I would have known every detail. I recall them vividly. Every twitch was a signal that let me in on a secret world of personal goings-on.

Every line was important. If I could pay attention to all of them, I would know it all. Nothing would be hidden from me — nothing could be. In the new, clear world, I could have it all. Clear sight meant power to me.

I cultivated a memory of faces. With hard effort, I made a mental index, and began to put many of them on paper. These were my first portraits, and I have lost them. I still remember some of them distinctly, though they are gone.

It is because of this skill that I remember my father. The little bit I knew of him: he was good at mathematics, had green eyes, and owned a face that, over the short course of my youth, slowly sunk, sallow, down.

A faded orange day, a sleeping face, the wind, the air, the falling leaves. June was there at the bridge into autumn with her family. That was the first time she saw me cry. I spent much of my youthful time with her after that.

Mother was busy most days so there was no time for games, and I went to see June. She had an especially expressive face. It told me everything she thought. I would spend most other days locked up somewhere studying for tests.

I felt my old, overburdened heart beating in my chest. It was, nevertheless, my face in the mirror — despite the tiredness, despite the changes. It was mine. But I didn't recognize it.

It's a wonder I didn't have a panic attack every morning when I felt the fillings in my teeth: those parts have been replaced, and I have changed because of them. The person with cavities filled was different from the other one — they held food in their mouth differently, they had a different mouth, they had felt the effects of anesthetic for the first time and, by all reports, ceased to be a person for at least a few hours. If everything is so liable to change me, then how could I be confident that I am me, or that I even *am*? How could I be sure what I was at all?

There was a sort of math in the process, and speaking in terms of statistics I could say that I was doing this or that for so many years, weeks, days, and hours. For how many minutes was I an artist, and does that qualify me to call myself such a thing? For how many seconds was I kind to people, and did that make me more human? For how many years was I in love with June, and does the discontinuation of the phenomenon at its source provide immediately for the discontinuation of the facet of my identity dedicated to her or does it finally crystalize it into another memorial museum among the theme-parks of things that continue?

By timing things out strictly over the seconds I could assess my actions as a stochastic process and derive from the distribution what I was, which might tell me who I was, were I to assess myself as an actor (or character) who is judged strictly by their actions and circumstances without regards for the layers of thinking that do or do not go into those things.

But then there was still the issue of the frame of reference. This sort of thing analyzed over the weeks, months, and years would yield different answers that might not even be accurate to my assessment of the

time (were you to do it over my whole life at this point, it would still tell you I was a child). Hell, it would yield different answers at different times in the day. It would surely tell you I was a new person every hour and all it was doing was providing uniform evidence for countless conflicting arguments about equally-viable solutions to the answer.

Approximating over the lifespan of the universe, you never even happened; over the Anthropocene, you are part of the only thing that really happened; and perhaps for two seconds after your birth, or over what you might call the best moment in your life, your time in the limelight, or your favorite few seconds, you are one of the most important things that ever happened. The dataset is just too abundant and inconsistent to analyze, and that might be the best description of me that will come out of it.

Besides, I'm not exactly a mountain. I rotate in and out of certain tendencies and smash the new with the old constantly. Most of the ideas are molten and subject to the currential circles that ebb and flow such that anything active is mashed so homogeneously there is no telling old from new at all. They stay hot in their well-insulated chamber, which will freeze over with Hell.

That which does escape the chamber solidifies into geological strata, recording old information that can be measured only from the date that it was cast out onto the slate. But if, at any moment, that record is thrown back into the magma, it will melt again into the indiscernible mass. This system might make a mountain eventually, were it not for the natural auto-iconoclasm in earthquakes that periodically shatter the rocks and send them tumbling back to the red-hot core.

I had once reveled in that change. I once wanted to be a totally different, enlightened person who would save the world. I wanted a revolution, but what good would that do if I couldn't even handle a renovation?

Nothing. Worse than nothing. Because, at the slightest change, I was utterly lost. Even if I might fix one problem, the euphoria was short, and the others would remain. I was so pressured to be better, to be whole.

Was I going to change the world? Probably not. It would be a far cry to say I could even change my own mind. I don't really think I have that kind of power. I don't want to. The world in my hands would be tedious and nervous.

I come to think that if I were Atlas, I might find myself confused for the opposite myth, famous for his own boulder. I'd surely start looking for a hill's peak to reach for the purpose of letting slip the Earth so it could

fall back down the slope. And if I did know who I was I would find it quite difficult to stand still for all of that Fatal Eternity. Now and again I would tap my Catastrophic fingers to cause the habitual apocalypse.

The memory only comes in sensations. Passages of feelings or words without any action or mnemonic symbolisms: if I could complete my suicide, I could be a complete person, else I would be stuck in this incomplete, lasting present.

Death would be a warm bath; I would emerge from the water feeling new; the frigid simplicity of my own death, as it was, was nothing — when you hold something so close, you can't focus your eyes on it.

I still see myself as they found me, after prying open the bathroom door, like David's Marat, one arm over the side of the half-empty bathtub, depositing flecks of red onto the white linoleum ground. Only here, the knife was left on the scene. Only here, I was found in absence of my craft, with no quill in hand. Only here, I would rise out of the water and breathe again, cursed.

I am in purgatory. I am in the dark. My heart sends the blood uphill to send it back again when it falls back into the chamber. The beeping reminds me of the task. I am awake. But I cannot move. My eyes are closed. A dream.

I am looking into a hole, a deep hole, which proposes infinite shade. I do not know why I am here, I do not know how I am here, I scarcely know for sure that there is a hole, or anything at all. Vertigo pulls, another force resists, I remain.

If I am the way that my particles are connected, I die every second and revive the next. If I am those particles, I will live until the end of the universe. Indeed, if I am both, I will die every second despite the fact that nothing ever does.

I will fall asleep again. Something is breathing next to me. Something wanted me to wake up. It is something that wanted me to persist. They have woken me up. I've survived. I murmur. They say: "I won't. I won't let go." I begin to feel tired and fall asleep again.

I had thought so strangely then. I couldn't think — I still can't think — of what ultimately made me do it. I was pushed into a corner, into a place where to be myself and to be with my family was impossible. My remaining parent had clearly expressed that I was to remain who I used to be while in the house I grew up in. I was trapped in an old body. She told me she would only love things when they can stand alone. Alone, I had fallen.

The worst part wasn't the pain or the fear or the anticipation — those all arrived and faded quickly — but the complete indifference I felt towards my own life. I tried to die. Why didn't that make me upset? Why didn't that seem to affect me in the slightest? Why did I wait until now to get mad about it?

I didn't think about what would happen, or what it meant. I just crossed a boundary, one which, at the time, I could barely perceive, and suddenly I was immersed in a flood of feelings I hadn't known for some time, choking on the water which dissolved what I had let out. But when I revived, they were closed up again. Nothing had changed, aside from the phase of the moon.

I woke to a faint sound of pecking at my window. In full, half-dreaming irrationality I thought I saw a magpie before I even opened my eyes.

The morning window showed a small light of the sky, falling unevenly over the room and making my warm face glow. The firelight outlined black buildings in orange, feeding the lone tree in the square beneath them. It had a little pool of soil for the roots to swim in, which ended in a border made of the bricking around it. It was growing new greens among the Spanish moss, peeking out to test the atmosphere. The bricks were kicked up by years of outward growth.

There, on the boundary between the natural order and the human order, was a bundle of motion I couldn't make out in the morning blur. Nothing was moving when I came back with glasses, clarifying only the loosely set, cracking rocks.

“What did you call it?”

“Mutilated stone.”

“It's a beautiful marble.”

“Dressed and embalmed. It's a petrified corpse.”

“It's a masterwork.”

“Yes, we do tend to love corpses, don't we?” She looked pale. Her eyes widened. “It's horrible. How could anyone see a stone and think ‘this is the perfect thing to go and tear a human out of’.”

Rina and I moved quickly through the statuary portions of any museums, avoiding them, if we could. The sight made her shake.

These were thin, walking things, without faces or features. Twigs of people. Their particular austerity had little more effect than usual for Rina, and made them harrowing for me.

They weren't meant to be dead. They were meant to look very

alive, and that was the scary part — the tortured living. Marble Aphrodites were the dead things — killed by embarrassment; stone wounded until it was no longer stone — these were living, the disgusting living — stone that still looked like stone, but still somehow “mutilated” just the same. I was happy to move along quickly too.

*How could anyone be horrible enough to see reality and try to tear a theme out of it.*

I rubbed the dreaming from my eyes and bumped in a thousand different ways before finding my desk and then my way to the kitchen. I was slow to put breakfast together, working through the novelty and the urge to go back to sleep on this day off. After the coffee was brewed, I would decide, instead, that it would be best to work.

I sat at the desk and, in the instant that I touched a pen, it all came together: I hadn't gone far enough before: the form was the appropriate vehicle, but it wasn't the meaning. It was a sign that carried significance only insofar as the subject was distorted by the artist's-eye view. If the focus is on the mechanism more than the meaning, it was something absurd, a critique more than a work itself. This was something obvious, something I knew, but now was the first time I seemed to understand it. I was just defying the terms, I wasn't subverting them.

I was making a critique this whole time when I was meaning to create something else. Something I wish to call art but cannot because it is so minor a subset of the notion this word provides.

A notion. I wanted to create an idea. Meaning to write a paragraph I had written just that: “A paragraph.”

I had made, in my pieces, a tapestry to commemorate the idea of that thing I actually wished to make, but failed to represent in the fact that I was creating a specular effect on a canvas that would now only reflect the audience, never warping or obscuring the view so that I could be seen from my hiding place behind the layers of pigment. In making so much noise I had said nothing, screaming just to make a sound to make catharsis of the fear of making something wrong. I made nothing at all, not even mistakes.

“Shit.”

I closed my eyes and pressed my palms against the lids. I had forgotten to brush my teeth, and I was still wearing my glasses. I made quick work of getting ready for a day that I wouldn't spend outside.

I tried to wash my face to clear my head. But again, as soon as I sat down:

Vision is the essential tragedy of human existence. One can never

recreate it, they can hardly even see it. In my work I wasn't really creating anything, I was writing the instruction manual to create the instruction manual to draw a facsimile of an interpretation of an original impression that — if the cartographers are right, and we do, indeed, all live in the same world — might then lead to the original place of the sensation.

Sight and sound are not enough. My senses were not enough.

This whole time I had been imagining things which were, in fact, entirely impossible. Reaching for things beyond our universal limits — grasping for things beyond death — was demarrowing me, bleeding me out, and making my hands cold. In a subtle reversal of the finger-trap, I had pressed so hard into the unmovable, viscous fluid at the frayed edges of physics that I was repelled away, and thus trapped further. Going as I had, I couldn't have ever succeeded.

The thought moved down my back from behind my eyes. A chill ran from there through my arms and into my hands. I began to feel tears forming. I closed my eyes and took a breath to push them back.

I shook, incapable of forcing the pen to make a stroke. I set it down and paced. Not the contemplative pace which manifests in a calculated rhythm of the steps, but an irregular, gesticulating dance of almost-forced jagged motions.

A black hole of wanting centered in my chest was erasing me. Bit by bit and slowly it was transmuted all of me into it — a void so dense it renders itself into nothing at all. It felt like I was freezing.

I bumped into a stack of boxes, sending the topmost tumbling to the ground. It banged with a noise that made me feel bad for my neighbors, breaking the folded top open and sending the miscellany rolling about the floor: loose pencils I hardly ever used with their worn erasers, frayed old brushes, vials and wells of ink I was glad I sealed so tightly, and other things of the sort. I crouched down to gather it all up, and, at the bottom of the box, there was a smaller box, holding the glass pen I thought I had lost in the move.

I wiped the thin layer of dust from the faded sepia patina of the box.

“What's this?”

“Your birthday gift.”

“Oh, you know I don't like things like this. Tonight was enough.”

I made a small gesture to the credits rolling after a film about a young painter and her subject. I placed one hand on her wrist, and the other over the box. “This was already more than enough; anymore would be too



much.” The icy snowfall outside had just ended, as if to underscore my point.

“Not to me. Not if it’s you.”

“You’re spoiling me.” I took it into my grasp, looked down at the red-white wrapping, and smirked. “Tell me what it is, love.”

“Something fragile, precise, and beautiful. Something you will hold with care.” I felt a touch on my wrist signaling “go.”

I opened it. The padding in the box was designed to make the refractive transparency of the pen obvious, using colored foam to create the illusion of a kaleidoscopic prism ringed in luminant colors. In the center was a dense twirl of material, slightly more opaque than the smooth crystal surrounding, but still blank by choice — still not so hazen as to be impervious to light.

The box might have been worn by the years, but the pen had barely changed, only differing by the flecks of ink I’d left on the surface — were it cleaned, it would be the same. Were it given ink, it would still transfer. Were it dropped from that height without its container, it would still shatter.

It felt the same in my hand when I took it out to hold. There was an inhuman chill to it that faded the longer I held on, twirling it in my fingers, letting it take in the warmth from my veins.

In time, after tears, the turbulent feeling that brought them out settled into a tangle beneath my breastbone. It remained as the tenderness and warmth went from my cheeks and as I gathered myself back to sit and work, feeling guilt at the pity I’d just had for myself. I needed to make up for the lost time. I gathered the resolve to express this, which was blocking me from sitting to express anything else. I felt a tingle of numb electricity in my fingertips, I felt an urge to strike at the page, and the wet ink on the nib filled my mind with all the thoughts on what I would make. Now I got as far as touching the page, but, still, I couldn’t do it.

I thought that if I painted this feeling I could pack all this grief away in the black space. I put pen to paper, and the moment I did I felt better. The simplicity of the sharp nib scratching the paper relieved the weight. When I set things down to think of it, it found its way back to my chest, only to evade again at my next attempt to have it down in ink.

It made a game of this. If I went to express something else it would tease at me on the margins of my thought, saying “you will never put me down,” taunting that I might direct my attention to it so that it can flaunt its impossible caprice by escaping me and refusing my engagement. It wanted to be seen but never looked at.



After a few turns of this cat and mouse I decided I wouldn't bother trying anything direct. I'd pretend to go on with what I was doing, and watch this thing as well as I could at the edge of the apparatus. Take in every detail that I could, and do with that what I might. What I gathered told me that it was nothing new, just presented, by the change of circumstance, with new clarity. It was a truth I knew: The cause and cure of the issue of art was artistry. I could never feel the conflict as I rendered it as doing so resolved it. Giving into the problem sated it. It was the only thing that would abate the issue and it fed it.

Grieving guilt would beget guilt, expressing would beget expressions, and art would beget artistry. The remedy is the same as the poison. Abused, that kind of cure is worse than the disease. But it is necessary in that it makes existence bearable, albeit redundant. If I could render that feeling in ink, would that erase it, or just make it more lucid, more sharply focused, more terrifyingly present without ever making it entirely real? I couldn't get out of this. I was still me, after all.

I began to create out of a traceless obligation — an ephemeral want — along the lines of thirst. I drank deeply and was quenched, then stopped where previously I might have taken more water. I would, again, become thirsty — because I had drank — which would beget another quaff, taken because the alternative was the bitter taste of the dehydrated air.

Sober, I could expect that it would always be this way, seeing that it always has been. I'm not a different person, really, just a different persona. Drunk enough (on whatever, be it by the natural means, the classical means, or the traditional ones) I could take that idea to its furthest extent: if the persona changes, so does the person, we are a collection of these things and the smallest alteration makes Theseus's Ship another boat: I could change — I couldn't help changing.

And I would believe it, only capable of doing so by shutting off the idealist of the mind that makes the paradox a paradox, thus ending the conflict by disqualifying a combatant — a tactic that solves any paradox, really, seeing as they work by pitting one side of the mind against another just as strong: not thinking about it enough does tend to simplify an issue. I suppose alcoholism (be it moral, intellectual, or genuine) is one way out of the loop, but not one that I'm willing to pursue — it's a bit overdone. In all likelihood, this state would endure.

Even if I did change, it would be so slow that nobody could possibly notice. Nothing comes out of Nowhere. Everybody is stuck like this.

How terrifying was that: I was not alone.

Hair grows and grays slowly. Skin wrinkles overtime. Words come into circulation in passing phases. Everything is terribly subtle. Even death — that single thing which sent me down this way — that creature probably didn't even know what was happening. It probably thought it was hot and that it would rest its head because it was feeling quite off. It would think "I'll wake up in the morning, then I'll be okay" before it didn't even sleep, instead falling down into that final state of never waking up.

Its life was over, all signals stopped, all memories gone, all tomorrows unpromised; it fell into that temptingly sweet darkness without ever noticing the pull of gravity. Maybe it didn't even know what it couldn't know, suddenly and finally passing into the depths without any indication that the infinite possibilities were even a possibility. Like the others — that would stand like stone on their bench perch, watching me until I turned, noticed them, and they started, suddenly reminded of their reality — the weight of death might have been lost inside the dark, warm, quiet canopy. Words are too sure of themselves — to precise — to communicate just how scary that is.

But therein came a thought: again, I had failed at a complete understanding. Only appreciating things by their ability to tell a story was not only disparagingly solipsist, but anachronistic. Another meaningless pursuit of meaning. Things only storyate when they are remembered, altered by the flow of time. Stories are only created with distance, they only happen in the past.

In truth, it wasn't the vessel that mattered — it wasn't the form that carried the story, it was the fact that there could ever be a story at all. The fertile ground of the soul was far too grand to be captured in a mere object, even an object permuted through time and space to tell a story. No, they were but fragments, those little objects that, on a touch or sight, released the smallest, most ecstatic burst of humanity which was all they could muster. They were grand, sure, but only in the sense that they transmogrified from and aligned with something grander.

And that grander thing would be unrealizable. Moreover, immovable — non-transferrable — even if you (or I) *could* realize it, it would crumble to dust at the slightest motion of transmission, the slightest effort to spread the word. It would be such a fragile thing, threatening to fall apart at the slightest stimulus.

We like to think of our reality as a solid thing, but — like one of Prince Rupert's drops — the slightest pressure in the right place might

bring the whole thing to a violent, atomizing ending — with a keenly focused, laser-accurate explosion of light, piercing the protective shroud. I wanted to make a work where the world was torn to shreds and the truth was visible, oozing through the cracks and wounds, like the red heat of rocks forming out of magma.

But I was too devastated to think of how. I was reduced to nothing knowing that in all my years of studying I had never learned this, never even had it mentioned. We can only hope to match form with meaning, we can never hope to capture it.

The students, I thought in a moment that I was teaching them wrong, too. I was failing them and they should be learning all these things about substance and significance. It only lasted a moment, countered by the thought of: How do you teach that? Could you learn something like that, from someone telling you how it was? No. No, some things could only be learned in mirrors.

I took a breath, and with a looser grip, began to paint again.

When I needed a break I took to wandering through the boxes to find if I had packed anything else I didn't know about. At some point in the middle of looking I remembered what I was looking for and where I put it. I fished June's cup out of its box — full with things I would find a place for in a few months — and set it on the counter so that I would remember it.

One day, a short time later, I would find the time to piece it back together. I made a solution of epoxy resin that came out as an oily black, and very carefully brushed it on the delicate, sharp shards. After attaching each piece, I would leave a window for it to dry up so that there would be a solid base on which to attach the next. The most difficult part was solving the order in which the pieces went together, but even with that included it only took a few quiet hours of work. Still too worried to put water into it, I would leave the repaired thing for display on the kitchen counter.

It reminded me to be careful, to be aware, and — when it was once again a cup — that some things can be recovered. Before that it was a reminder of what it was on the floor — a precious gift that someone I loved left behind, in pieces on the floor, destroyed, which I had no idea what to do with. But when it was back together, it had changed, just as much as when it had fallen, into something different, a precious memory.

It was a cup, then it used to be shards. What those things meant only occurred to me when they were gone.

Things become habitual when they're normalized. When they from break the bonds of their category, they become something excellent

again for us. Maybe that's why, on hearing her say "goodbye," I loved her so much more — more what? More everything. More original. It was like I was a child viewing her face for the first time and thinking "this is something I want to see every day for the rest of my life." A new person was created right there, before the train's open door, someone that I knew without knowing — someone that was June, but not my June, and never to be with me again. The taxidermy person I thought I'd wanted had picked up and begun to fly, and I was reminded why I had wanted to be with her in the first place.

I loved her because she was a human, a living breathing human who I could move with and be with and change with. And either I had never realized that until this point or somehow forgotten it along the way and murdered her, realizing all of this only at her last world, her last breath so that I would be left in a world of my own making, thus a world with none of the things I could ever want, smaller than a jail cell and vaster than the universe — a punishment befitting the Fates who, if nothing else, have a sense of irony.

I had lost a muse, and she was never coming back.

I began to think: you were here, June. I'm sorry. I am here because you were here.

I just wanted you to be the best writer in the world. I knew you were. I wanted everything for you, and I forgot you could want the same for me. I erased myself for you. I can't imagine how sad it made you to see me fade away.

I wanted to take to writing, to send you a letter in reply, but I couldn't hope to write this down. The words would never come to me like they did to you. Even if I could speak the truth it would be indecipherable, lost in translation.

Again, I felt paralyzed. This time not because I was caught up with myself, but because it was hopeless. Nothing could fix this, nothing could solve this. It was really done. My June had passed.

I finally felt the weight of the months passing. A lapse in time — a noiseless, heatless interval in being shunted from one world to another, absent of gravity, arbitrary in direction — was ending — with the satellite pull, the reassertion of matter's weight in a comforting spiral accelerating towards the surface, concluding the directionless fall.

For the first time in two seasons, I felt the ceaseless tremor of time marching on. Not time, no — Time. The time on the clocks was just a symbol of the larger motion; Time itself is not in gears. Watches attempt to

reckon with and break time into understandable instants, they abstract and represent it so that the notion “time” can differ completely by what I mean. Clocks will stop ticking long before my “Time” comes to an end.

I mean by “Time” the constant forward motion of the present, the momentum downhill, the slope too steep to climb back up but the fall too long to ever look down. The unforgiving change which makes yesterday different from today. Every moment ends, and Time goes on, indifferent.

And I remembered that there was no time. There was no way for me to succeed. Most of the material I had was useless. I couldn’t possibly produce enough paintings between now and the date of the exhibition. I would have to use what I had made before — before I knew what I was doing, before I realized what a story in ink meant, much too late.

Nevertheless, I tried. I started for no reason, a simple pull, a matter of habit, apropos of Nothing, and I continued because it felt right, like I was playing, not working. There would come a point where lacking would say more than presence and that would be when there was nothing left. That would be the time to stop and move on to something else.

Still running between desks, still holding the air, I labored. In making I took myself back into myself and forward into the world.

I was terrified at the excitement of the upcoming event. I continued with my compulsive passion. It was only in the days we spent setting the space up that I gained a moment to reflect:

Since I began painting, every change in tone became a scene that wildly expanded in my mind. Stains ceased to be stains, spills ceased to be spills, and many views went down one dimension. I transformed it all into something that could be put onto paper without even thinking. Every sight was a muse that effused passion like the light off its surface, endlessly, in bountiful, fluorescent quanta — what a terrible compulsion!

I was tied so tightly to my art that it became everything. How much color had I missed from the views? How much depth had fallen away, deflected by the retina? How many days had I lost to thinking of nothing but ink? It had brought me out of the world, into a house, then a room, alone.

This should be left out, I thought, of the art. In the oeuvre, as in the opus: the empty space matters as much as the filled.

I had always chosen what to include, but I had wasted my time, nevertheless, on the useless extremities that would never make it into the final product.

Art functions in unities — of forms, of people, of the artist and the

piece — it doesn't concern itself with every little thing — it can't. It selects curious little bits to focus in on, to take apart and examine as contours in an otherwise blank space of creation. It's a particular task, it's a game of selection — finding things that we can take into our confined hearts and taking them in fully then, expressing, in little gestures, how we hold it within. Things, in reality, are too disparate to all come together at once, but art erases that reality with a wave.

That I wanted to put everything on paper is a reflection of my inability. I wanted to see myself in everything.

Of course, we see everything implicitly as ourselves. We conceptualize the world through analogy, the very first of which is “you are like me.” Every object, in our eyes, contains an imagined fragment of humanity. Everything is like us, we are like everything. The degree of accuracy in each analogy is variable, but their presence is indisputable. It only makes sense that what we create, if it does reflect what we see, would be a mirror — starting from where we are, it could only ever be a mirror.

But my error was in thinking that the world was itself a mirror, that anything really did contain a part of me, hidden away, when they really only suggested a way of looking.

On the eve of the exhibition, I thought I might finish a piece that night to be put up in the morning. But I couldn't. I was terribly bored with it. I wanted badly to finish it, but I couldn't hope to do so. Some things just have to be unsatisfying, and so they have to be set aside.

I thirsted for a cup full of water and the mug ceased to be shards that night.

All throughout the time, I recalled softened, blurred memories of June; the sharpness was gone and a part of me missed it. So many parts were unclear, so many words over coffee were lost, but the imprint of her there, looking at me, made me feel warm.

Her form was made out in a thousand layers of memory with minimal opacity. Superimposed, they made something that looked like a ghost. I wanted to say I loved her, but I couldn't do it. Like the years before I said it first, it was stuck in my throat. I wanted to say sorry, and the same. The words couldn't come out — they never would — but they sat there, within me, hoping to be understood.

My pen withdraws from the page. This gesture alone dries the ink. I smile.

On the road to the gallery space which we had transformed from a classroom, the air was crisp and hollowed by the lacking leaves. It was one

of those rare days where I felt like me. Like I was a full person and nothing was missing. I was captured by the simple motion of things — the wind kicking leaves and trash off the ground, the careful falling of the light, the bumping roll of the bustling world out the car’s window, starting and stopping, starting and stopping. No matter how fast we traveled, the clouds overhead — the ring over the horizon, stopping to blue just before reaching the ground — never seemed to move. Everything was a silhouette against that sky.

Rina was driving quiet, slow, for the last pieces and party-fares in the back. If she was panicked, only the slightest tremor betrayed it. The radio buzzed and slurred slightly between stations, muted by the wind through the open window.

Among the new pieces I painted — a portrait of a drinker superimposed on the semi-thick brew of black coffee that was beginning to absorb into a cotton rug, a rare burst of my colors as a white cup sat with water running over it in an almost calligraphic weave of lines painted on silk — was a last minute finish: a re-made diptych of June and I, blurs and all. I got a jolt at any sense that it would rustle and be ruined, but it stayed intact.

She parked, sirred, stood, and sipped a cup of coffee she made at home. “Nervous?” Of course I was. “Don’t let it get to you, it’s still a pretty small deal.”

I’d given up all my big deals when I chose to become an artist. I snickered. “Yeah? Figure next time we should get a few more folks in here, hype it up a bit, and hold it at the hotel across from the MoMA. Stir up some controversy.”

“And maybe cause a riot while we’re at it.”

“Sounds fun.” I mused about the old days. “People don’t have enough riots about art anymore. Really a shame we lost that.”

“Truly the Alexandria of the prewar years.” She adjusted something imperceptible, then adjusted it back, then back again. “The sheer violence of that passion really was something to admire.”

“And grieve.” I fixed my own imperceptible thing. “It’s long gone.”

“But it’s only moved. The *young* people burn over movies.” She said *young* with a marked sarcasm to poke at my sense of being an anachronism.

“But they don’t combust.” I sighed at the failure of metaphor. “It feels that art is dying.”



“Our students are a testament against that.” She was right. “And so are we.”

I noticed her concentration building, I complied “But we, too, will pass.”

She smiled and spoke with an encouraging flourish: “Everyone at every time in the world thought art was dead or dying, just like everyone thought hope was gone when anything imposed a threat. Those things don’t die, Livy, not as long as we don’t. You might tune it out, but it’s everywhere and ever present, ringing. It’s our job as people who can hear to tune others into the sound of the song.”

Dread, too, rings that way. The bell tolls constantly. The sound unwarps reality. It shows us the Vanishing Point. If you’re just listening for a noise, it can be hard to tell them all apart.

“Are you ready, Liv?”

I took a deep breath. I looked back. From their beginnings beside the front door, our pieces walked along each side of a dividing line in the center of the room, progressing from the middle of the entryway. Mine were on the left, hers were on the right, but two pieces transgressed the division, in which we emulated each other. It was hopefully a less obvious effect than it seemed to us. “Were I working with anyone else, I wouldn’t be. Thank you for this.”

“Don’t thank me until it’s over. Ready?”

“Yeah.”

It was at this moment, at the sight of the opening door and the sense that I would now be observed and discussed, the knowledge that I was being regarded, that I realized June would not be back. I had known the whole time that this was true, but it was a realization then. It was astounding. I felt a pang in my heart. I wanted to show her what I had done. I wanted her to see what I had done, despite spending so much time trying to erase her. I had become so much in her absence, and she would love that. She must have done the same, I thought. I would love that.

When the first of the audience began to wander in, the whole thing felt persistently thick with illusion — as if it were a dream. I wondered when it would become real, and I had been wondering for some time. Somehow I convinced myself that I was doing all this for something that was ephemeral and able to be called off at any second, for something that was likely never to happen, since it was going to happen in the future — which is neither today nor tomorrow, but just in the distance, where certainties can be played off for nothing by perspectival shrinking or



massive by the uncertainty of the frame which provides no real information about the scale at which reality occurs. But it began, really, the reality set in, after the first few minutes of talk. People seemed to really be liking it. There were a few silent bids and tips of the hat. Many students came with their parents, probably as a way to see if their teachers were worth their wage.

When I talked with the people that wanted to know what I meant when I painted, I could only explain it to them like they were an old friend, prodding at a distant memory of ours, tossing us back in time to a place where we can know each other. The rest of the talking points were rehearsed — what it was, how it related to the theme, the choices — but the meaning bore another significance altogether, something that could only be explained by a pair, and hardly prepared on either end.

About midway through the event, an old man in a stocky suit and bright-red button-down made his way in. The wrinkles in his face had set in harder, but it was surely the same gray-haired man I hadn't seen in years. He hadn't changed the thick mustache, the low, confident glare, or his tone of voice when he said hello with a reminiscent smile. He wore the same slouch in his formal gilding, as if it were weighted. I recognized Porter as immediately as he recognized me.

There were the standard how have you beens and stilted exchanges of platitudes. He was busy, he said, he would have to be quick, and he would start from the left.

The other visitors had inflated my sense that this was good, thematic, and powerful, but I couldn't help but crumble at the thought of standing next to Porter as he looked at what I had done. It brought me right back to the anxiety of being a student, to the last reviews he gave me, where the first thing he said after a long gaze into a piece, filled with head tilting and stepping and noting was:

“It doesn't seem to mean much.” Initiating a dance of words, which I readily took up.

“Nothing has meaning.” I said “Until you give it meaning.”

“That's your burden.” The painting ate the gazes it drew in, pulling them and teasing their attempts to involve themselves with it. “What you mean to say when you state ‘Nothing has meaning.’ is that ‘Everything has no inherent meaning.’ which doesn't disqualify discussions of meaning but rather opens them for investigation. Be precise.”

I was stunned, and indicated an understanding.

“It's as technical a work as I'd expect from you, but we know

there's more to it. You can't take shortcuts in expression and try to make up for it in style. You have to make it mean something. It's common sense."

Precise, common sense, meaning — his favorite words when I was in the room.

"There's no doubt about your ability, but I wish you'd just be more thoughtful."

"What about in particular?"

"The whole thing! I mean it's full of platitudes of the pen — if you'd just rehearsed the idea more you could really iron it down to the necessary strokes — get right to the heart of it, don't dwell on the pointless generalities. You've left it all unjustified."

We moved along — I explained the pieces as best I could at his prompts.

"I never understood why you chose to resign yourself to black ink alone. Your understanding of colors would be phenomenal if you practiced with them."

Nobody, really, can hope to understand anyone. To size-up a person as something you could understand is to come into knowing them under the presupposition that you are somehow better than them — capable of reducing them to something which only took up a portion of your mind despite filling the entirety of theirs. It's an attempt at subjugation. I muttered that I didn't expect him to *understand* me, but I at least expected a bit of dignity — some baseline respect. The problem is that some people are built just such that they can't offer that dignity. Is that something, too, that ought to be respected? Can I be expected to hand someone to tools with which to pull out my heart, or even just to validate them?

"I'm sorry."

"What?"

"The words. Your paintings are saying 'I'm sorry.' The talk of others must have muted me, or he must have never been listening.

"For what?"

"You would know that better. Likely for something you thought was a failure on your part. The way you cover certain flaws in the formal method is by pointing to them or the patch you put over them and saying 'I'm sorry,' you don't have confidence in the piece."

"You make them sound human."

"It's just a way of speaking. I don't know what you're saying by that. It's not like 'being human' means something. It's a tautology: there is nothing humans are like. But this certainty has a sense of voice, it wants to

“speak like it’s animated, if that’s what you mean.”

“Human beings are like nothing.” I said quietly. “We’re very small things, aren’t we? Small things that struggle against an indifferent universal current that sweeps the seafloor itself from under our feet if we do not move.” I glanced again at my half of the exhibition, entreating my partner to follow. “That struggle is a part of this.”

“The universe is indifferent to your struggle.”

“You are not the universe.” We carried on, him imbibing the images, me advising his view. “Despite our best attempts, we must see through our eyes.”

“Though those eyes can see some facts.”

“As many as they see illusions.”

“If you want to see how illusory the world really is, lean off a bridge, see if that feels fake.” As if the point needed to be resolidified, or just to show he wouldn’t budge, he added: “The dead are dead. They tend to stay that way.”

I laughed, as if to say “I don’t really believe in anything anymore. I guess that means I believe in everything. It all gets equal credit. This conversation, in my mind, bears the same precedence as the theory of gravity.” I held back, he surely had a response.

I met him once at another exhibition, where he was flanked by a thousand critics and writers desperate for his attention, and that was when I first realized he was more than an advisor at a university, but a monument in the discipline. I understood then how foolish and young I must have sounded when I spoke to him, and I resolved to speak very little. “I saw then, for a moment, just how much you had done, how much you had seen.” And how small a part of that could comprise my entire life so far, everything I had ever done. “I realized, then, that realistically I could never impress you within the brief overlap of our lifetimes. You were being merciful.”

“I was being hopeful.” He glanced towards another piece. “You’re thinking in bad faith.” He gave me his final remarks, hoping to finish up in time for his next appointment, which was surely more important than this, but still speaking slowly. “You’ve improved your work. But not significantly enough for it to be exceptional. You still don’t have a sense of what makes art tangible, or even really that good; it’s the execution, the process, the act of making something that all of the sudden exists — aesthetic, illustrative, *and* mimetic, corresponding to something. Not that your use of concept is meaningless, it has a place, just it’s secondary to the

project of doing ‘art’.”

“Still I feel that I have said something here, there’s value in the concept.”

“You *have* done something. I’m not saying you haven’t. You have said the same thing over and over but you’re not *doing* anything significant.” He took a long drag of the air. Everything he said made perfect sense, I had even expected most of it.

“I agree with your feedback.” What a stupid thing to say. That was probably the most unsatisfying response the man ever heard.

“I’m glad to see you stepping out of your comfort zone, but all you’ve really done is move the same old problems to a new place.” He said it with a growing wrinkle under his eyes and a dropping voice, almost disappointed and almost completely masking that feeling.

He went to Rina, and she got some of the same treatment. He still treated us like students. The rest of the day went on well despite him, though the next half-hour was a crestfallen mire.

Rina let me know that, while I was with Porter, Kerain passed through with his mother on their way home from Worship. They were in quite the rush, but they had time to say hello and sing some praises. He wanted me to know his applications were mostly accepted, but one university was overly stingy about his imprecise and melodramatic use of color. I’d have to give him congratulations later.

At the end of peak hours, just before everyone packed into other places for dinner and evenings, we packed everything neatly back into its home and set up for tomorrow’s class. I stayed behind to fix a few final things when Rina left for dinner with her eventual fiancé — it would take him some time, but he would stop dragging his feet soon enough.

We spoke once. She asked “Porter hasn’t changed, has he?”

“No, same old critic.”

“Still treats us like students. Doesn’t that make you furious?”

I’m sure she asked rhetorically, but I responded anyway, in a dry, completely honest way, saying “Yes.”

Then it was quiet. As I sorted my mess of a desk from the months of clutter, it was consumingly still, the world inaudible. I felt the need to make a noise, but I couldn’t produce a hum. I was afraid it would echo down the halls like a cathedral, drawing the attention of the whole world in mild annoyance. This deaf world persisted as I left, wanting to touch the water.

I opened the door and there was the sky. It was open, blue, and the

world was bright without the sun, the star now hiding behind the buildings, still casting light on the rooftops, still not fully down. I thought it would be nice to take a walk to that always-waving shore, I might just barely beat the sun to the ocean.

As I walked I had nothing to do but think. Finally, with the time to do it, I replayed what I'd heard from Porter, parsing my way through it. The responses came in bursts, and they came with fire.

If you try to produce a thoughtful piece of art under duress, it doesn't end well. There's a myth about a composer writing a work of genius in the worst throes of suicidality. It might be called a story, but it is surely fictional; speaking from experience, if you try to produce genius under the pressure of suicide, you typically die.

Was I meant to pretend that I wasn't sorry? That I had, indeed, thought quite a bit about what would go into this piece and was quite confident in it?

Sure, I could put anything I wanted — be anything I wanted — on canvas, but wouldn't that be a lie? I could fabricate an image for you to engage with, which stood on its own terms, but it would be nothing but deceit. Wasn't the goal of this whole thing to say something genuine, to get at something real? What good would a web of lies do in conceiving of the world?

But what was in this without imagination?

The whole endeavor is to make something that engages two imaginations, to create a dual subjective. It's not about meaning, it's not about audience, it's about a game of aesthetics, experiments in the tentative reality the canvas allows for. Surely I might have been quite literal at times but the fault couldn't be placed fully on me: Porter, as always, refused to see anything in my art but the me he "understood" after the first month we knew each other. That person was long dead. He hardly made an effort to even see that.

No matter how hard he tried to see the piece objectively, he would only see me, and I had no idea who that was for him.

He must have been casting me in some role, and I must have been playing it. I must have never stepped out of his box, I must have been sure not to break character. I must be the simple thing I felt like when I was talking to him — the most reduced version of myself that one could achieve; the Columбина to his Pierrot. That or my whole life is a web of lies. Else I am nothing but a collection of masks, donned and doffed at to please the passing audience with something they knew, something that they

could understand and recognize.

But it isn't so! I'm maskless, if anything, I'm more human than character. I am beyond his eyes, I am out of anyone's hands. How else could I create? How else could meaning be formed? Sure, there is an illusion of a stable character — an abstracted, entropic, colorful swirl of a mask — but if I were a stable, monolithic person, I could only produce static things, only mimesis, nothing like a meaning.

Meaning, in fact, emerges from a brilliant convocation of coincidences that allow us to generate associations. Saying that this is coincidental and therefore “unjustified” is the same as saying blue is blue and therefore “blue.” A fantastic aporia, hardly noticeable, but brutally self-defeating.

It may all be artifice, but that doesn't make it artificial.

And what a terrible remark: “The dead are dead.” No. They aren't.

I can say it over and over. There is, at least, some value in saying it, no? There is some ‘doing’ in ‘saying’, some discovery unveiled in rewriting the same sentence, teasing out a new fact, now that the utterance is surrounded by a new frame. The effect was in the plural, the effect transcended from the particular, the effect was general, all over the catalogue.

I should have told him outright: “Hate me. I want you to hate me. Hold nothing back. I can't stand how silently you judge me.”

I paused. A glimpse of the sky, burned by the sun.

I was still taking sides in arguments that were over, participating in conversations that had long ended, treating every one of those crystallized events as if it were some iteration of the first rather than what it was: something that could never be the first again. And there it was: the past was gone, evaporated into a haze and condensed into memories, but *I was still living it*.

Was that wrong? It hurt, sure, it rekindled the fire. But was it incorrect?

The past is an old film we know too well. When I look back, I shine my light on the frames and they project over everything, and I live it again. It may be corrupted, it may be grainy, but we see ourselves make the choices that we know will lead the wrong way. We know now. When the images are played back we see them with our knowing irony, we see ourselves knowing, and choosing anyway. Memory is a tragedy. It is the original tragedy. The comedy is in everything we forget.

No, I wasn't wrong. At least, not entirely (I believe that nothing

can be entirely wrong). I might have been doing the wrong thing for the right reason or the right thing for the wrong reason, but that didn't change it, the deed became its own object that existed independent of why I'd done it. In his own words, that is what Porter was trying to say: you've got it half right. I heard the negation: you've got it half wrong.

I wanted so badly to do things exactly right I forgot to be partially correct. But what was correct: a feeling, but what a feeling!

And how the world goes quiet at sunset! There, with the other drifters about, musing in their own silence, the others inside to watch the evening decline, I wondered what they could possibly be thinking. If I was here now, where could they be going?

Briefly, the thoughts were interposed by a slight sound, just at the edge of my ears. There were two young voices, shouting something an invisible distance away.

There, on a street somewhere else, they were playing a game. It was a simple game, with basic rules and not a tool involved: one boy would ask a question, and the other would respond with yes or no. They went back and forth, asking their questions and gathering their information until one of them — the winner — could make a declaration: let's do something else.

“Do you like green?” One said.

The other: “Yes. Can you jump high?”

“No. Can you run fast?”

“No. Do you like math?”

“Yes. Do you like science?”

He thought for a moment, and gave his answer carefully “No, I don't. Can *you* run fast?”

“Yes!” He seemed proud, “Can *you* jump high?”

“Yes!” He giggled and made a little leap, “Do you like dogs?”

“Yes” said in the tone of ‘I haven't considered it, but I suppose I don't not like dogs’ “do you have dogs?”

“Yes...”

And so on.

They would likely go on for some time, exchanging their yeses and nos, and hearing the repetitive sound, I came to consider the meanings. They spoke their positives and negatives fluidly, together, saying yes and no as if they were the same thing, hardly ever changing their intonations and certainly not affecting different meanings. It was as if they weren't even saying different words.



The way they played, they really weren't when I thought about it. Surely yes was different from no, but only in the exclusive sense that they were different words. The functional information they gave wasn't any different: both of them opened the box and revealed whether the thing inside was alive or dead. Either answer, at that point, served the same function: dispelling the uncertainty.

It didn't matter if one boy said yes or no because both answers were functionally the same, an acknowledgment of the question, a revelation of the answer. Whether a boy says no as if to say "I do not say yes" or yes as if to say "I do not say no," it doesn't matter, both of them answer the question well enough and acknowledge the presence of the other. The answer itself didn't matter then, it was the question, the question did the work. The answers might be opposed responses to the same stimulus, in particular, a yes and a no were invertible, artificial, merely capable of responding to the question and closing the door where the question opened gates.

All in all, it was a terrible game.

The boys seemed to get along well — there was no noise of crying or objection. From what I heard, they were terrifically different, but so seemed to enjoy the game more, as if each question brought them to another realization of something that could be liked or disliked in turn. So, in asking, they would seem to find new things about their own feelings, and about the other. They were posing next to each other, and finding all the ways their differences made them the same.

Like words that name the opposite, like spaces in the inverse, like analogies in reverse, like colors across the wheel, the putting together of opposites reveals their clandestine harmony. As the putting together of similars reveals their secret difference — words renaming the same, spaces reforming the version, analogies in order, colors and their neighbors.

I was wrong, I was half-wrong, I was half-right, I was right, but incompletely.

I was a lot of things. Memory, moreover, was like a revision of my own history. I omitted that which I rejected. It was an act of interpretation and expression in itself. Our memory is part of what makes us human (possibly the only part), we must remember rightly — we must be willing to create and destroy, but we must remember that it is all vitally important, that it all was once real.

I allowed things to become imaginary. It was like a dream. I allowed myself to live in memory or I allowed myself no memory at all, I



never let myself just watch it, distant and associated. I created a memory I could either suffer within or suffer without it.

We cooperated to make something that could only fail, because when we were together we assumed we could be perfect. Either inside and suffocating under the weight of the past or outside and freezing in the unforgiving snow.

Was that it, June, was that why you killed it? To end the turbulence? To resolve the tension?

It had started, then it ended, then it was. Most things are like that. I had thought for some time that it was made to end, but it wasn't. Nobody ever started a sentence to place to full stop after the last syllable — no stroke was ever made just to mark the end of the line — there was more to it than that. It might begin irrationally and arise from the absurd, but it continues, not to end but simply to be. Same goes for paragraphs and chapters and books and series and collections and libraries. Logical points to stop do come, breaking up the clauses, but things must keep going — there hasn't been a single idea in history that everyone could put down forever. The full stops come only as a formal intervention to make things comprehensible.

The history of anything is a ceaseless arrival of beginnings tacked on to the formal endings of other things. The future will be just the same, in general terms. Something will pick up from the stopping point, here and everywhere else, and not just because it ended or because it began. Why exactly is a mystery, but for sure a sentence is more of the things between the convention of periods than it is the conventions themselves. I spent so much time fixating on the conventions I forgot what it meant to use them.

Sentences are cycles, running round, only sensible to count in periods. Each turn affects the last, runs continuously with it, prolongs it without making it any longer. Each turn is independent from the last, different, it ends the other in order to remake it. Each turn starts something new inside of something very old, it creates by leaving things unchanged. If you're looking for something new, you must remake the old, but cannot not replay it, not to the same effect.

I hope there will be a future for me. Just the same I hope there will be one for others. Things have seemed uncertain for all of time and I suppose they will continue to do so because that idea is also one that cannot be put down. All I can be is miserable on that front, which makes me hopeful.

Drawing a line to begin the line or to end the line or just for the

stroke to be there so that it might improve on and be improved by others are all fragmentary solutions to the greater idea, but I can't find a better way to say it. I'm no wordsmith. Making to make and making to have made something are the same folly: they both need a reason to start, which implies a reason to end — when the starting reason was completely expressed when all that really matters is the justification of continuing, which is often reason enough — self-justifying — but can all the same be a sense of incompleteness or just a want for more.

Creativity is only a moment between two full stops. It means nothing except for when it happens for but that moment.

I kept jumping to conclusions, but there is nothing to find. There is nothing to really *discover*. There are only things to *explore*. It's all been seen, we've felt every feeling art could bring about in the first month of our life, but, narcotic, they call us back. Nothing will have changed — how strange it is that nothing always seems to be changing! — nothing will have changed by the artistic movement and though the dazing motion of time might leave us so disoriented that we feel this thing as new — and it might be, as new as we are — it is something that has always, already been there, dormant. Rare to hear, but always audible — there they are, those are the words — genius works are white noise, static.

There are things we cannot say. Things which no symbol can process. Places in our mind to which language cannot venture, to which expressions cannot bring us, but which we can nevertheless reach. Where we cannot speak or hear or see or touch or smell or taste but only sense — and sense so strongly — where we are.

The space is vast and ineffable — more: inarticulable. It is Nothing — Nothing we can express, a Nothing which does not imply a simple absence but a more complete void, a Nothing antonym to nothing (which is the opposite presence of everything); there is nothing we can say about it but it is not nothing, not empty, indeed, more full than the material world; there is a Nothing that we can feel and the simple nothing, and between those two “nothings” is a world of difference — but there is, in that vastness of overwhelming Nothing, a networking cosmos of glimmering, terrific things. And when you feel those things you must think: this is the only thing worth saying. But, having thought for but a second on how you might say it, it disappears. On first contact with a tongue or a pen or clay — with a material thing at all — it vanishes, leaving you only with a flower, a song. It is a fog you can only see with your eyes closed.

The power compels you to nevertheless try with the expression —

try with the saying, the sketching, the singing — it becomes imperative to try before the need to speak destroys your life with yearning. It is in this tension between speech and the unspeakable that genius art is made.

A machine could make something that looked genius and inspired thought, it might produce the same effect — replicating the human, but nevertheless doing the same thing, bringing us to the boundary between sense and the senseless — but it couldn't answer the Question either. Because there's just not an answer, simple as that. The goal is to get as asymptotically close to the root of reality (whatever that is) as possible. Thinking about a work — the process of making it — facilitates the conceptual goal and gets us closer. But only closer, never there.

There's nothing in the world that's perfect; everything is incomplete (Dear, how can you say this without the negativity?); it's always all changing.

But that doesn't mean it's not worth trying to say these impossible things. The words aren't good enough, sure — they aren't reality, just a part of it, not the real thing but a real thing that connects to other real things — but if they could even brush the real they would affect it — recording the reality changes it, as soon as a record is made it is rendered incorrect in the same gesture. It's hopeless then — to chase your tail hoping to catch a rat, but you got somewhere chasing your tail to catch yourself — or just for a bit of fun, something to alleviate the sense that we're lost in a sea of change we couldn't step in even once.

We are born into free space, in desperate need of an atmosphere, with a planted need to find a sense of direction. In the beginning, the only way to live was to pick a way to drift by the ways we are pushed, without the promise of air to settle in. If we do land, we look for North, but there are no poles in space, only on our little rocks, and even that one is tough to find sometimes.

When we settle down, we think we know solid ground, we think we know permanence, but it is all unstable, it is all in a tense equilibrium, easy to disturb. We think it's the same old world, that it will never end. Let the ice melt and flood it over. Let gravity cast it off into another galaxy. Let the sun flare out and consume it down to but another cinder on the surface. It will not be over. It will only change. It can only change. And that hurts.

I began to imagine a world in which, if they'd like it, people can be people, mice can be mice, and I can be me. It was a world where how is the same question as why, where the being was the justification, where everything is so stable it doesn't need to prove that it is. Is that why I hold

onto all these old things — decay, dead flowers, broken cups? Because I still want to prove the world is stable?

*I want to touch the water.* I had walked fast. Faster than the sun, seeing as I was at the beach far before it, early as usual, waiting again.

The whole walk over I was trying to grasp everything; but here, when my feet touched the shifting sand and I slipped to keep my balance, I thought that there really is no way to understand it all the way. Insight is an illusion, a way of feigning integration, a way of complacently pausing investigation, a way of feeling satisfied. There might not be any true solutions, just the sense that everything is solved. Going into new problems with that sense was a great way to get nothing done. When you think of a question as solved, and you think you know how to solve it, it easily becomes very disinteresting.

I figured it out, June, right when I stopped trying, too. I'm sorry it took so long to get here. I know what you meant, now, when you said goodbye. It wasn't ended because of you or me, it was both of us, so the fault's on neither of us because our only mistake was just wanting to be happy together. That was taken from us, we didn't lose it, we were robbed. And I loved you even after we were supposed to have nothing. How merciless of me. Still, that's not much of an error in my book, and I find it hard to think you would consider it one either. I'm glad it could end like that, it's better than most of the other ways.

I knew, we knew, it never could have worked. The world we made together had to end.

We had the wrong idea, we founded ourself on the notion that love could be a compassionate understanding, an act of seeing and knowing and caring so completely we never had to worry. We thought we could grow together like that, supporting each other with knowledge of who we were and are and would likely be. We thought seeing each other meant knowing everything, even if the sight could change, we thought we could understand, and, in doing so, stand together. That can't be right. True love is a promise to never understand, and that's only a small part of what we needed.

We thought we only needed the togetherness, the hearing, the caring, and the little things that show that off, all the rest can go. Love was there, love was strong and free and true. The unfortunate fact is that all of this isn't enough to keep us together, even if it kept us in love. That we went into it with any idea about what it would be doomed it as such. But we gave it our best, didn't we?

I'm glad to say I've misunderstood, June. I never got it. I still don't get it. I can only imagine how you felt and I will never, ever know what it was really like. I'm sorry for assuming I could think just like you. I can't. Nobody can, probably not even you.

I'm still acting like I can talk to her. She can't hear me. June is gone, but she is endlessly with me. That permanent person in my head introduced herself when she said goodbye. Really, that was a "hello," and when we met for the first time, that hello wasn't meant as a goodbye, but it was one, a goodbye to all the other lives that we could have lead — to the pasts and futures that were and could have been and were now being usurped by the present, a moment that could change everything. Goodbye to the unknown person, hello to the new, each signifying and predicting what would be a hello again to the unknown, a goodbye to the newly old, to the forgotten — each hello implies at least one goodbye, and one that will be the last, and each goodbye, the same hello, though nothing is ever quite the same.

*I want to touch the water.* The sun said hello to the ocean again, a goodbye to the sky. Setting again, as always, a smoldering ember just over the horizon, with the pink smear on the clouds toward the other side of the compass.

It was quiet. Not in the painful, absent way it was before to be, but silent in a soft way. Peaceful. Waves sloshed lightly and wind stuttered over the sand, but the winter had silenced the crickets, there were no trains coming soon. I planted myself in the sand, facing the open horizon, and watched as the light receded. Why was there no noise of the sunset, nothing declaring it, no anthem to sing it along? It left space for conversation that I wasn't having, it left space in which I hardly even thought, just accepted.

In that silence of thought, what was I? Without a single thing going on, who was I? With closed eyes, where was I relative to the landmarks? I listened for the answer, and the wind said nothing. Unfilled, unfettered, I was nothing but a body to hear the ocean, and a mind to hear the body. If I could be considered thinking, it was about my heartbeat, about the rhythm, about the coolness of the air in my nose and its warming in my lungs, about the sensation of the sand — all this, so much nothing.

Empty in this way, I could almost feel the gentle pull of the Earth turning, my pulse with the waves, my eyes with the sun. I realized nothing, and I felt much better. There was nothing to be thought of, just things to be sensed.

One strange part of the sunset that comes to me between the waves: it looks just like the sunrise. Unless a painter gives you a hint in the title or a compass in the frame, you can't tell if the sun is rising or setting as it appears under the cover of the horizon. And, of course, one is just the other from another frame of reference. The direction is the only difference, it's only about time.

The light went out. The moon had risen, hours before, it was prepared. The unbroken ocean, stretching out forever before me, reflective darkness meeting the matte black of space, showing a scarcity of stars.

They were no more than pinpricks against the half-moon night. I had hardly ever seen a sky full of stars — I had never stayed anywhere long enough that it became anything but a rare thing — but I imagined that kind of full sky tonight. Against the foregrounded moon, a backdrop of more stars than you can discern, receding into the now less dominant darkness. There are so many of them. Infinity exists in that empty space.

Unlike forever or Everything, Infinity is a product of negation — a simple turn from finity. It is like the timeless and the Nothingness; it is like death. But it is composed of the very finite things to which it is the antithesis; a vacuum made of everything. Now made somewhat less imposing by the notion of near-infinite stars.

I could plunge forever into that space, and never reach another sun. I could search out another new light every night of my life and make a new “discovery” there everyday while never finding another sun.

You cannot salvage hope from loss. You cannot solve loss for hope. There is no alchemy, no magic. You can only hold them both as what they are, you can only lose yourself looking for one in the other.

That the moon still shines means the sun remains. It will rise again tomorrow, as usual, and we can expect that it will on the rarer nights where the rock hides from the light. It will come up and give warmth to the world in a flood of colors. For your sake and mine, let's just imagine that part, it's better that way. It is time now to view the formless motion of the future, never looking back.

*Touch the water.* Watch the flow rise onto the sand, now close enough to warm the lower parts of my legs, extended down to the darkening seafoam as I brace myself against the rocky sand. Watch the ebb protract the water into the ocean's mass, now the counterpoint to the stars, textured only by the occasional float of the moon's clarity, otherwise jet. Watch each return, hear the sloshing — in and out, in and out, in and out.

**XXXV .**

I figured it out, and the answer was boring.

It's something I heard a thousand times before, something that people figure out young and something that makes them carve out and choose some middle path between good and evil because everybody has the capacity for both and so you just shouldn't even try.

I figured it out and I was so pissed off that it was the answer I came up with that I got to work looking for a better answer for the next year.

Won't someone finally be brave enough to say that people are good — even the evil ones — people are good, that it's not about finding a way between them its about realizing that they're the same — the exact same — and finding a way between them pushes you away from both of them until you become nothing — everything, ugh — until you realize that you only wanted to be kind and warm — and inconsiderate and cold — for the people you love.

I figured it out and I was so confused by the answer that I had come up with to soothe the uncertainty that everything seemed to take place in a deep haze.

That there are opposites but that opposites are the opposite of what you think opposites are and so opposites aren't the opposites of sameness but instead the opposites of opposites such that sameness is the same as sameness (the opposite of sameness) while opposites are the opposite of opposites (the same as opposites) because you can be between up and down but east and west are the same thing and from that you can draw the conclusion that opposites on the surface of the earth are the opposite of absolute spatial opposites because the earth is a sphere, which is true (the opposite of true, which is the same as true).

I figured it out as a way to pass the time, I tossed the answers out as they got boring again.

Isn't that what we do with stories, just pass the time?

**XXXVI .**

The funny thing is the novel was supposed to help me move on from the grief and, yeah, that worked, but only by replacement. I went into writing feeling so fragile and pathetic and just wanting to get rid of this burden, and I did that by transferring it all into this new body that I am now just as afraid to lose and feel just the same way about. Coffin for a body, coffin as a body, coffin as a fetish.

It ended up as a repetition of the very obsession that I was trying to get rid of, and now I'm stuck at the same point, writing about writing



the novel to get over the grief of losing it, too. A novel about losing the past becomes the very past that I'm losing and that comes with the full realization that I haven't solved anything, just given myself another avenue in which to explore the same thing.

This is why I think I'm no good at writing irony, because life is so much better at it.

And look, nowadays I don't even want the novel anymore. I just want to do something else but I feel like I have to finish this first.

I don't care about the details anymore. I just think we need more stories about falling back in love. I think we need more novels about dying and love and hating living and I don't think my story matters but everyone else's does.

I just want to tell you, everyone, that the world is going to change, and that's going to hurt so much, but we're going to be okay, we'll live with it, but I don't have the heart to say it straight, I don't have the heart to just tell you you're going to lose everything and have to live without it, but you will, and I'm so sorry.

I've spent the whole novel writing around the pit where that was supposed to be and now that I've said it I'm afraid to say goodbye.

### XXXVII .

It's time to go home.

Why did I even start? Well I think I had a good story in mind but on trying to write it, I found that I was too young and talentless to create the story that I want to tell you, so I wrote this bad one, and many others. I'm only giving it away now because it's been eating me alive since I started and I need to get away from it. I need to escape and try something else, but until this is out I won't be able to stop.

I want to believe that this was a useful exercise. I want to believe it shows my growth. Part of me wants it to have a pointed meaning and the other part admits that it doesn't because it thinks brutal honesty will help me finally find a point in my own life.

Point is I've had something to say but I can't find it in me to make the words happen. I feel like a baby, just shy of having the language I need to express the reason for all this crying, all this.

But unlike a baby I can't just cry. For some reason I just keep pushing off that feeling, trying to find the right way to tell someone, trying to build the right phrase to set things in order.

I just can't get it, and I keep getting more and more disappointed



in myself over that inability. Thus the transformation is complete: from pain to grief to frustration to disappointment, a sharp spiral drilling ever deeper into me, deepening the cavity left by something I didn't know how to defend against. All that because I couldn't just cry.

So it's a novel of fragments, a puzzle missing pieces. What was the word? Gestalt? It's one way of saying incomplete.

Because I don't like it, I feel like I should offer something else. Here's another story, hopefully better this time:

I had finished the first draft of the novel a month before my Senior year of undergrad was supposed to start. I was home, and the most deeply depressed I've ever been. I was so lost.

All summer I had holed myself up in the makeshift office we set up in a bedroom, just writing and writing, hardly taking in any part of the world, just staring at myself in my computer screen. I was hiding, pretending to be busy, to be a writer, just so that I didn't have to go out into the world and pretend to be a real person.

The evening when I had finished I was devastated. I didn't even know why, but I just wanted to die so badly, everything just hurt me, and I couldn't contain it. As soon as my mother opened the door to say goodnight I began to cry.

She brought me tea and that pushed me further into tears. I know she didn't know what to do, but she tried to care. She always tried to care. But she, like me, was made to be a specter, to pass in and out of and between lives, so she didn't know how to help except with a hug. It wasn't much but it was something. I think it kept me alive.

After that breaking point, I left the novel cold for a year. During that time I graduated from college, started lots of other stories, and began my transition from one life to another.

But the whole time this novel nagged at me from the margins of that new life. Its incompleteness burned me, all the work I had put into it for nothing haunted me.

I wanted it to mean something, and it was only in the aftermath of all this change I had realized what I was trying to narrate but I never could put my finger on — the loss, the pain, coupled with the realization of its necessity, the always uncertain hope that what you leave behind survives.

I opened my computer and honestly realized what I had left myself: a story of fragments, a shattered mirror poised to look in on itself — the old name had left behind something torn apart, something I could stitch together. You know the trope: a dead man's novel, double authored to

double the meaning.

So I started to sew. But I've never been good at that kind of work. I always prick my fingers on the needle, I always bleed myself into the fabric, patching the little holes with my own skin, punching the needle under, weaving myself in. So it became about losing someone and losing yourself in order to become someone that feels more like yourself, it became about the discomforting freedom of becoming who you want to be, it became about the tension between old and new about their doubling.

Among other recontextualized meanings, the notion of evisceration became both surgical and suicidal because I tear my skin open to reveal the next life underneath. On several of the occasions where I opened up that new life to the world, I recall the cheap stitches most distinctly. I remember the hard feeling around the hole they left. The novel became about those holes.

#### **XXXVIII .**

It's time to go home, even though I want to stay.

But before I go, I suppose I should give it at least one try, as a good author should, knowing they will fail: I think love is the third entry defining insanity according to Mariam Webster, by which i mean it is the first definition of absurd, but which I mean it is the third definition of incongruous — inconsistent within itself, determined by and consistent with that very inconsistency, being both the fullness and emptiness of desire, the presence and absence of the things we love. It is both wanting to be around someone and being around them — the desire and its fulfillment — a careful balance between feeling haunted and seeing the ghost.

There is so much in the world that I have loved, so much that I will love. There is so much that haunts us, and so much power in that imagination.

Just promise me you'll stop trying to prove you're human. Please just live without the need for evidence, dwell in that incompleteness, dwell on the wavering you feel. You will be empowered, to love the whole planet, then, you will be able to love the world as it changes and you leave it behind.

#### **XXXIX .**

I'll finally say it: I'm sorry, Ashe. I still love you, and I'm sorry it took so long to write this and I'm sorry you had to read it and I'm sorry not just for leaving anymore but I'm sorry for being there in the first place

and I know that's not something to be sorry about but instead of having the will to change that flaw I'm just sorry for being sorry about it. I write this whole novel about change and all these letters and memos about how wonderful it is but the whole time I'm just honing my old vices, believing that some great other change will come along so I don't have to do anything.

Sometimes I still love you — I still love you, I mean, since I always loved you sometimes, but my point is that even after it's been shredded by all this time and all my effort to forget, sometimes the same old love reforms from the parts, takes the old shape, and aches. The love was always changing, it just hurts when it comes back to you. But you're gone now, and I have to move on.

Yes of course, I've missed and will miss the love and tenderness but more than that I'll miss the Eros that I placed in you as I go on to find my own, digging down into myself, looking for some core feeling to keep me going.

But I have to leave. I finally have to leave. I'll always keep you with me, but I have to go. I'm going now. We can change without leaving anything behind; I promise it is safe to change.

I'm so sorry. I didn't know. Nothing prepares you for the pain of being closeted, the way the violence and emptiness well up inside you when you exist as someone you want to leave behind.

Nothing prepares you for the future. Nothing prepares you for the past. Nothing prepares you for the loss that will pass through your life because nothing can. Nothing prepares you for being lost. Nothing doesn't do much at all, it's fairly free-form.

And if the point of writing it was to get rid of this, then the point of sharing it is so that others know what it means to leave something behind or choose not to. It probably won't help. Nothing does. It will, I hope, at best, give you a glimpse into what it has meant for me.

#### **XL .**

I am the vulture on my own corpse, the albatross on my own clavicle, eating. I became myself as my body entered my stomach, and before that I was nothing, and before that I was a possum which was displayed in chaos before being reorganized, before I became me.

I have found so much comfort in taking myself apart and showing each part to you. The grotesque decay of my own story from inciting incident to novel and back has been, if nothing else, a little fun.

It was nice of you to drive around my body. At least you had that kind of respect. Goodbye, for now, say hello to my memory for me.

If I see you again, on another road in another place, hopefully another world, I wish that you would think of me fondly, and find courage in the fact that I have appeared again. I wish for you to look again, out from your cage and into the wide open world, and see in the grass, see me in it, dying again, dissolving again, coming back and promising again that things do heal eventually, promising in a new way, always the same thing: that it is safe to change, that you — We — will be okay.