Robert Catherine

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ROBERT CATHERINE

NOVEL

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
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BY

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Thank you to my community at VCU who have helped me grow intellectually and artistically over the last six years. Thank you for affording me the unbelievable opportunity: three years of being able to focus on the growth of my writing practice.

The amount of gratitude I feel is obscene compared to the sparse rigidity of formal acknowledgment. Without exceeding these boundaries, what I can say objectively is that I have met my favorite artists here. I have had wonderful students. This city is my home. I would be nowhere without my family.

I know I would be nothing without my friends.

This text is dedicated to the life and intellectual legacy of MARK FISHER (1968-2017):

“Depression is, after all and above all, a theory about the world, about life.”
Robert Catherine is an experimental augmented reality novel engaged in the speculative realist question: WHAT IS THE POINT TO ANYTHING IF EVERYTHING?
ROBERT CATHHERINE

The Objet Petit a
Non depressed

The real object
Depressed
ROBERT CATHERINE

7.................................................................start
9..........................................................forward
13............................................................SPL EEN
47............................................................DEATH
82.............................................................HEART
136...........................................................BREATH

......................................................................excess
181............................................................futures

203..............................................................SOUND

210..............................................................index
I know that truth is private. Truth is the information your ego lets in.

This book is an alternate reality game designed to help you explore the nature of your consciousness. It will not be for everyone. It’s a game about your own unavoidable mortality and the devastating effects technology has had on our cognitive experience, and the damage it has already had on our capacity for happiness. This book is also about suicide. It will most easily be understood by people suffering from a modern condition that exceeds medicalization, whose symptoms involve racing thoughts and panic attacks.

In order to enter this game, you should first read the 11-page academic paper, ARE YOU LIVING IN A COMPUTER SIMULATION? by Nick Bostrom. It is very easy to find and important to try. In order for the deeper mechanisms of the game to successfully change your experience of reality, you first need to be open to the scientific idea that we are living in a simulation. You do not need to come into the game already believing it, but
you do need to be familiar with it. The goal of the game is to get you to see that we already are within the event horizon of the singularity.

In order to succeed in the game, you need to be able to concentrate completely because the game is really hard. You should go somewhere probably alone. You can’t be around your phone or browser. Do not stop to text at all during the game. You can’t use any search engines, you should just pretend I know the truth. Everytime you want to remove yourself from the text, stop and sit with the feeling instead of doing anything outward with it. It will help you to take amphetamines and smoke weed.

If you feel fear, that’s just the feeling of reality. You don’t need to be afraid of it. It’s just the feeling of reality. You really win when you are no longer afraid.

If you are worried about me, you do not need to be. I am feeling happier than I ever have before because I finally got this game to work.
I saw it drawn out as the objet petit a in maybe the companion reader to whatever beautiful thing you were like: here, read, and then never saw again, but in particular it spoke to me as a clear representation of life through hieroglyph, but desire is like semen: opaque.

What is written here was inspired by the sound made by the three thousand year old mummy whose voice box was printed into our dimension again recently out of a sample of his D.N.A. You know the mummy I’m referring to. In some time, I will join my scream with his and then one day they will festoon a throat to my e-spirit and instead of his song, this shit will come out. In the future, someone will see this and know why I felt like I was going to commit suicide. So, writing to you, but towards that howl and by throwing my voice it will turn timeless again into ours.
Essays within this were written at different times over the last few months preceding the coronavirus and finished in the greenhouse on Easter in April of 2020. We have been separated during the quarantine not entirely by chance. I’ve found it easier to write only because my ego only exists to entertain you.

I started this project thinking I could use it as an explanation for why I thought I was going to commit suicide. Suicidal isn’t the same emotion as this. I didn’t know when, and I didn’t want my death to happen. Nonetheless.

I always thought I was sad because the world was ending, and now, my happiness—now here it ends, right on time for me to tell you that I never even got to love you as much I could have, and I couldn’t be fully present because I’m retarded. Now I think I can.

These are essays for you. I am glad I’ve gotten a sense of how I changed, because now I know what I want more then anything, which is for us to move somewhere remote without the internet or smartphones and develop a way of surviving that is as painless as possible. We wouldn’t have to be alone. We could go with my sister and the anarchist. There could be a town with a college and a bar nearby. You could leave for months to go on tour and come back and everything would always still be there no matter what.
This can explain how I have changed. Caroline, I want you to love me and run away with me, and I would be so lucky for it to happen. I am sending this out because I hope only to the pure, aleatory grace winding matter— for you, and for luck.

From my windows, up and left and right, I can see that the most illicit dream I can have was the one I couldn’t even let myself conceive of: happiness.

Love,

Bobcat
“If you had to live forever,

could you live with the idea of being yourself?”

Lacan
Do you remember the moment last winter after my older sister’s death, my younger one announced that she, too, would be leaving America, in an obviously different way than death, but possibly also for good? She was a junior in college and wanted to move to France and don a yellow vest. She was like that. She told us all humbled at dinner that we were lucky she wasn’t going to Syria to fight ISIS with the PKK. Were we? I kind of wondered, and knew very little about distant fires and distant crises. That was always my younger sister Patty’s thing.
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was also football and Christmas season. In the oil portrait on the wall in front of us, I was a rosy six and wearing a boy’s smock dress, looking partially distressed because that is the feeling of sitting still. Looking at it then, I was 25. You and I were sitting together with Patty and step-siblings, drinking Bailey’s and smacking Trader Joe’s chocolate oranges against the table to crack them into slices. The real adults were elsewhere and the real children were downstairs playing Mario Kart on the new Nintendo, which I think you can throw with your hands. We were supposed to play gin.

This was also when my mom got us the DNA tests for Christmas. She had cheated on my dad before their divorce, and I think it was a pointed gesture—look now, the box gave in a lungless whisper behind its stupid logo (“Welcome to You”)—look, I swear to god that your father is your father.

“This is so gay,” I said, judging the propagandizing earnestness of the DNA kit’s box. I shook it but nothing rattled. It felt empty. “Welcome to me, indeed.”

I didn’t say any of this in front of my mom, of course. She had gotten one for all of us, including you since we had been dating by now four years.

Patty cut her eyes at me.
“Sorry,” I added. I didn’t think she was gay or anything, although I do think she wished she was. I just understood her to be meticulously sensitive.

“It’s actually pretty cool,” Patty said. “We can see who we are related to. Like, on mom’s side.” We didn’t know them but we imagined their vague and woodsy lives in dim cabins. “They can also use it to figure out who serial killers are. Like with the Golden State Killer.”

I didn’t want that. I shoplift here and there and everywhere. Neither Patty nor you really knew about the stealing, because it was always Melanie who I called when I got in trouble at Target or Whole Foods back when it began and by now I was a master and getting off on the secrecy of it.

“I heard about that on a podcast,” you said. You looked really nice, in this small, soft skirt. It was your first time with my family since the funeral. “His second cousin submitted DNA to one of those websites and the FBI genealogically mapped it back to him. Through a cigarette. In his trash can.” Even a cigarette that awful makes you lust for another.

“You think you’re going to out some familial rapist by sending this corporation your spit?” I asked my sister. “Or that you will be able to squarely relinquish the social ills of being white, enter another demographic?”
“We agreed you would be nice. Do you see how you always start it?”

“What did I do?”

“They can also tell us why you are an asshole,” Patty said. “Besidess, I had already been looking at the better options and genetic counselors.”

Our older sister, Melanie, died of an “asthma” attack while in the Peace Corps. She wasn’t even any place that legit—just St. Lucia. Not, like, Ghana or Mongolia or anything. Patty thought it was something besides an asthma attack, because our sister never had asthma.

Patty had been pretty concerned about what was latently curled up inside her. She got so neurotic about what she would and would not eat. Not, like, as an anorexic, although her body was hidden behind a big black shirt so who knew. Instead, she was intolerably worried about chemicals in the cranberries, in the turkey, in the wine, in the beer. And she had been like that all night—checking labels and complaining the way she had back when she was vegan, eliciting annoyance from our boomer extended family and glaring at you for going outside and Juuling.
But what a beautiful gif you were, wherever or whatever you were inhaling. You stood out there in the ice darkness with your hair wrapped around and then down the front of your neck. The white pseudo-smoke ribboned up into a darkness pierced by the hologram Christmas snowflake lights. Out of all of your mouth came all of your breath, wafting smoke-machine white out into a cloud above you, sometimes appearing solid but always in its existence dissipating into air, vanishing maybe forever and maybe not as the space around us ate the warmth from your mouth.

Even if looking at you didn’t always produce the feeling of happiness, there are other moments that clench my stomach.

While Patty was interested in content, I was only interested in contentment because I suspected that these two things were mutually exclusive. Becoming aware of more things has only made me more miserable.

So I, for one, would eat whatever was in front of me and avoid Parisian social unrest. I would volunteer to shuffle the cards. I would go to work everyday and reliably reify social order. I would pass on the pot the high schoolers proffered around the time when the candles started to drip over the sticks until I shrug and say, “Well, maybe not,” and take the joint back and suck in smoke as white wax saps onto the white tablecloth beneath.
And in this way Christmas comes and goes, doing as Christmas does.

x

I do have my own neuroses, though they are different from Patty. One of them is privacy.

I would go through TOR even though I wasn’t buying fentanyl on the Internet. After the crazy media attention of my sister’s death, I felt very looked at and I didn’t want to be seen, so I shut down my social media. They have remained shutdown since, unless you count the anonymous accounts I used to crawl through hostile web forums. I texted through an encrypted messenger. It wasn’t because I was conspiring, like Patty was.

Maybe it’s also because I was in the industry. I worked in sales for a company producing those rideshare scooters, a job that vacuumed me in after college. I managed the local clients looking for advertising metrics through the digital management firm partnered with us, Soyby, who analyzed the data to offer targeted advertising. The scooters were only cheap for everyone to ride because they sold the data of where you would go to advertisers, which was where the profit was. The material scooters still needed to exist and someone was needed to tend them, so I was the vague shepherd of a herd of illegitimate sled dogs.
If you passed a Starbucks in the morning, that is useful information, and then you would scroll past a red holiday cup on Instagram, and your thoughts upon waking the next morning would be *Pumpkin Spice Latte*. And this happens, and we are supposed to believe in free will. I hate the internet.

You were a lot like Patty in that you shared a lot on social media when we first met but I’ve watched over the years as it has chilled out and become mostly about whatever projects you are working on musically. You never shared anything about me— besides knowing that I hated it on premise, I think you also knew it made me uncomfortable. I also suspected you didn’t like reminding your male followers that I existed because you do have an exterior life, as a hot girl and as a musician, but there’s this whole side of me swallowed in thinking of motives for everything instead of just looking at you and your observable reality. Because you are beautiful. very photogenic. And, you can curate a solid aesthetic. For instance, I have never seen you wear a t-shirt outside of athletics.

I constantly wished my living sister was a bit more controlled online. Patty shared every perceived microaggression on her Twitter. She livetweeted dropping out of college. On her Tumblr, she posted pictures of tiny, healed self-harm scars up and down her wrists, with comments about how she was staying strong since Melanie’s death. On Instagram, she shared when she got an abortion.
I almost wanted to demand proof from Patty. A Planned Parenthood receipt, a positive test—something material and indisputable because I thought she seemed to grow more powerful by absorbing other people’s sympathy—a wild katamari rolling against everything in the world, thinking she was doing good.

I am really no different. Maybe it’s the kind of thing that could run in a family. Some type of unreliable coding.

x

By the end of that January, I still hadn’t sent in any particles or parcels to the DNA lab. I was busy. The night the scooters were dropped in the city, hooligans had built a barricade out of the machines and lit them on fire.

It made it onto Instagram and then the evening news. I mostly tried to work from home because the office felt too open, but lately I had to actually talk to people because the city of Richmond was trying to initiate an electric scooter curfew of 9 P.M. We had to either stop operating or figure out a way to get them all to safely stop automatically at 8:59 without flinging riders into traffic. We outsourced for the coders. And so my genetics remained a mystery, but Patty had already gotten her results back.
Patty still hadn’t left for France. She had a ‘fight’ with her roommate, who was making breaking her lease difficult. It seemed like she had a lot of spare time now that she wasn’t going back to school. She posted a video of herself on Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, and Facebook. As a participant in the internet, you could see it all. We were side-by-side in bed and you pushed your laptop screen toward me.

“Want to figure out your sister’s identity?” you asked. Patty hadn’t always been nice to you so we were on the same page with quiet, respectful judgement.

“I don’t know if I can,” I said. You stilled the video on Patty’s face. Patty’s hair had been augmented to a shade of purple since we had last spoken at Christmas. You hit play anyway.

“Alright, folks,” my sister enthusiastically said. “I know, I know. I said I would be getting back to you on Tuesday, but...” Patty spoke dead-on to an undisclosed audience and began to cover some lapse of imagined time and Twitter battles to her followers, and the world got older; it fell through space while spinning at great speeds. According to quantum physics, subatomic particles collapse randomly, or the world splits into many worlds, and this is up for debate. A distant comet whizzed by our planet, emitting a curling binaural noise as it passed us. I had heard about it on NPR that morning. But wouldn’t we sing as we left earth, you said while we were drinking tea, which I found startlingly profound because you are a beautiful planet. And I was thinking about the
comet screaming, while my sister kept talking. “...Anyway, I am so excited to be sharing my results with you. This is really my first time looking at them.”

Patty screen-shared to show the audience her open browser window and I winced at how she had revealed her whole name to strangers on the Ancestry results. *I have no secrets*, she once said when we were at Chipotle when I brought up Cambridge Analytica. You had just passed on a sales job at an also-bullshit spinoff company. Even though there’s definitely a scooter office in L.A., and we are bored, we didn’t think we were ready to move there yet. You missed your family, in the Bay Area, and I needed to get away from mine, although I had wanted to talk with Patty about it first. The timing needed to be right, and Melanie had just died. “It’s not the company you should be worried about,” Patty had said back then. “Los Angeles is disgusting and when I am there I can never tell when I’m being sold something.”

Now, Patty clicked OPEN RESULTS! and the screen burst into colors. A chart appeared. The numbers added up, largest to smallest, flickering across the page like some decoupled Adam’s Family hand was hitting enter on a PowerPoint presentation that defined the limits of a human body.

55% Northwestern European.

It clarified:
25.1% British and Irish.
20.3% French and German.
0.2% Finnish.
9.9% something referred to as “Broadly Western European.”

Stuff like that. At the end of the chart, a surprise, of course:

8% East Asian and Native American.

Here it comes, I thought. Patty’s dream come true. More reasons for her to love Elizabeth Warren. (Did she love Warren? Or was that you?)

“Wow, guys. I had no idea.” Patty was clearly so proud. I hit pause on the screen right as she started to open a Spotify playlist the company created, one based on her ‘heritage.’ The algorithm threw up an Escape Room song, a genre also invented by algorithms, the matrix tying its own knot of itself in its simulation of human birth.

x

Late in the night, you woke me up. You were having a panic attack. They would only ever happen to you at night. Their intensity was indescribable for you. Sometimes, a shadow
stood at the foot of your bed and lunged at your legs, and you would turn to me as if you were about to be struck by lightning.

I dealt with these bouts of absolute terror, too. I only learned through you that they were panic attacks. What guy ever wants to confront something like that in the proctored daytime of medicalization?

You held yourself tightly, your muscles clenched. I stroked your back. You cried hard, a way I’ve never seen anyone cry in public, except almost everyone at Melanie’s funeral.

“Comet,” I thought you said.

“Breathe, breathe,” I replied, like I was whispering to a wild creature. But you were lost like a password to the world. You were thinking about how one day you will die, your ego will be wiped away, and everything will be subjectively over. As far enough in the future as that could be, the certitude of it was like a cat in a cage being thrown in a deep river. A trapped kind of panic, sinking one a day at a time. No way to alleviate it, really. Something about night time would remind you that you were always in that sinking cage. You could never remember the panic attacks after.

“In. Out. In. Out...” I whispered. I was already balding and a very melancholic man. But I could tell you to breathe.
Later, with the Costco weighted blanket wrapped around you, you said, “Maybe you should find out if you have asthma?” as if some stupid Ancestry test could ward off all immanent threats, such as the ones that pierce the veil to grab your legs. We both knew better.

In the dark after you fell back asleep, I read that only four percent of the population needed to submit DNA in order for all DNA to be able to be charted in every individual, whether or not they submitted it themselves. I knew then that it didn’t really matter whether I actually sent my spit in or not; it was only a matter of time until the world would be able to see what was inside me. Something I’ve never felt comfortable with, and I always maintained that my worst fear was accidentally dying in public.

Once, I broke my finger during one of our adult kickball games, and my dad threw the x-rays up onto an illuminated board. I couldn’t see the fracture, but I could see that the bones were beautiful. But no visible break, no justification to my dad for why I bitched about the pain. “You don’t need a splint,” my dad said when I asked him if he had one. I imagined how Patty would react if he had said that to her—she would flip—and it was her I grew mad at, not my father, although she wasn’t there and didn’t even know what was going on. And it was Patty who had already submitted her DNA, and therefore my DNA, giving the fractured world my hidden fractures. Thus heaving the blame over onto Patty, I decided to go ahead and send it in.
The next morning, before I brushed my teeth, I swabbed my mouth. Left, right, up, down. The elongated q-tip went into a special vial. Disgusting. I checked off everything on the paperwork. I would see my heritage, a chart of my family. Yes, it could be publicly accessed. At this point, why not. Famous ancestors? Go for it. I would see what genetic predispositions I was waiting for. Heart disease, for hearts. Sleep problems, for sleep.

At the bottom of the form was something called the “Caveman Gene.” Clicked yes. “Warrior Gene.” Highly doubtful. Clicked yes. “Other genetic indicators.” Whatever you say.

Yours was already in the package, waiting at the door. How you could wake up and go to the gym before work was beyond my comprehension. But your package had been there for weeks; part of me wondered if it was supposed to be refrigerated (spit?). I picked up both padded envelopes, and walked out the building and down a few long blocks on Broad to the post office, which from afar I imagined exploding until I neared and wondered why I was picturing that. There, I mailed ourselves into the future.

Melanie was the oldest out of our family including my dad’s second family and my mom’s nebulous stepchildren. Our parents wanted her to go to St. Lucia. Everyone
wants a Peace Corps kid, a do-gooder to coddle foreign children, to teach them whatever wavering Western ways. Melanie wanted to go to Ethiopia, but she missed the October deadline. Next on her list was Sierra Leone. Both parents put their foot down—wouldn’t she want them to visit her, someplace... with a beach? Always the easy one, Melanie consented. They never ended up even trying.

“Aren’t you worried about this being a colonizer practice?” Patty asked Melanie before she left. And that was beyond Melanie’s scope, because she was pretty normal, while Patty had just shaved the bottom half of her head. They were two people who looked like each other’s own evil twin.

“I just want to be helpful,” she said.

Mel sent me cryptic emails the weeks before she died. She was lonely because although the Peace Corps had said they’d pay for her to take language classes on the local Creole, there was nobody within a bike ride’s distance from her designated town to teach her, and the roads sucked. No volunteers were allowed to drive.

“We can go out infinitely far,” one of her emails read. “What if we can also go in infinitely far? Get smaller and smaller?” She linked to the Wikipedia page to something called a Sierpinski triangle, which to me just looked like a Zelda triangle and I wondered if she was on drugs, which wasn’t like her.
Melanie had been the type of older sister who in high school dragged my awkward ass to cinematic bonfires in the woods, inversely lifting me into my first keg stand. Kind, and principled, in an almost-boring way. She’d majored in early education and after college gotten engaged to her high school boyfriend whose parents died in a murder-suicide that had bonded them together around the same time as our own parents’ much chiller divorce. And then at 29, Mel cheated on him with their roommate. Very broken break-up. Then the Peace Corps. And then she choked to death on air itself in the Caribbean.

x

A week after I mailed it in, they caught the most prolific serial killer in American history. You listened to crime podcasts constantly. You were like a crow that’s biologically compelled to stare at other dead crows to learn how to avoid the way the wing gets broken. This was when we were living on the top floor of a hundred year old townhouse, close to downtown. No dishwasher in our place. Very, very tiny cockroaches. You had to do the dishes by hand, would never let me touch them, so I kind of just locally hovered by the fridge, as if someone had blown up a man like a balloon.

This man of the hour had upwards of fifty confirmed victims, according to the podcast. He couldn’t remember their names, but he painted pictures of the dead women for the
FBI, better than anything I could ever do. Investigators were asking for the public’s help to crossmatch his paintings with police reports of thirty years of missing women. The two hosts of the podcast were middle aged ladies who market themselves as being “openly anxious” and were very difficult to differentiate.

“Supposedly they caught Little through familial mapping,” one said. “Like with the Golden State Killer.”

“Yeah. Send it in, you guys! Wow, Ancestry should really be paying us to say that... Maybe we should bleep it out until they do. But I read in a press release that the FBI had been paying homeless people twenty bucks a pop for DNA samples, and it led to him.”

“Seems like a good way to make $20.”

“Hear that?” You said, over running water. “We were ripped off.”

My mom offered me $20 to pick my nine year old stepsister up from aftercare at school and drop her off at the ballet. I felt like a fraud walking through the school, like I was there to snatch a child. I was there for Isabella, lithe and friendly, super slow zipper of
zippers. We got gas station snacks and then made it to ballet, but my mother was late again.

This was for Isabella’s jazz class that started at six, and it was now 5:48. I knew her dad (not mine) didn’t want to pay for jazz classes, but her mom (not mine) who I’d never met was a former professional ballerina. She insisted on the classes. But Isabella only had her school clothes with her; the dance stuff was with my mom, who was supposed to bring it from the other side of town at 5:30.

I watched Isabella go into the lost-and-found and take abandoned black slippers out of a box. She didn’t realize how awful this was or that she deserved to be kind of sad with her dysfunctional, divorced parents. I wondered when that bow would drop.

Small ballerinas played Uno in front of me. Some women spoke Chinese. CNN reeled silently in the background of the lobby’s T.V. The great headlines read:

NEW ‘EMPATHY GENE’ FOUND IN SPLEEN DNA
DO SOME PEOPLE ‘FEEL THINGS’ MORE THAN OTHERS?

The pundits talked, but I couldn’t hear them. And anyway, I felt like I already knew the answer.
“This is my Big Brother Bob,” Isabella said to a crowd of weirdly elegant children. Some tension in me unclenched at the idea that this child who was almost a stranger considered me a brother. I shook their small and graceful hands and they lilted off into the mirrored room.

I sat in the big armchair and thought that the obsession with genetics was American. Very American. I thumbed through articles while my stepsister danced in a stranger’s shoes. Genealogy is as mystical as turning blood into wine. What is a spirit? Where is the spirit? I had never found it or felt it, and wouldn’t have known where to search anymore.

My mom finally arrived with the bag. 6:33.

“What are you reading?” she asked, but I brushed past her and left.

I got home and two identical packages were there, leaning against the door and the Blue Apron box. I picked them up and took them inside. You were supposed to be on your way back. I grabbed a Bold Rock cider out of the fridge. The temptation was there. I wanted to open the packages without you.

It turns out that I, like 15 million other Americans, had been waiting for the tarot cards to turn over, to reveal images of past, present, and future me. I cut open the box of food and as I put all the tiny, hermetically sealed plastic packages of measured ingredients
into the fridge, I wondered what this genetic information, what my “genome” would look like? Was the genome like a codex written in an arcane language that spoke only to specialized interpreters, like hermetic texts to priests in a gnostic order? Was it a recipe, a box of recipes, a blueprint for a kitchen? Was the genome like a computer program for a scooter, each gene one blinking dit or dash in a cascade of binary information that only the correct hardware could recognize and execute? Was the genome a recording of past events, or was it marching orders into the future?

You were late. *What is it with women*, I thought and mentally hushed myself for sounding like my dad. You had been late every night this week.

x

Some of the other emails my sister had sent before she died in St. Lucia were about bog bodies. That winter, more than one hundred more were found in a swamp in Florida by arrowhead hunters. Something about the nitrous in the peat preserved the bodies perfectly, even though they dated back to the Iron Age. There was still brain matter in some of their skulls. Their bodies would be pressed into the peat by a configuration of sticks that looked like bird cages, sinking them down, pinning them into the moss for millenia.
European bog bodies tended to have died violent deaths, as sacrifices. This wasn’t the case in Florida. Some of the bodies they found were eighty years old. There was a fifteen year old boy who had spina bifida, which is visible at birth because the spine folds over itself and juts out a baby’s back like a dorsal fin. The people around him took care of him. They were nomadic, so this means they carried him for fifteen years. Each bog body’s head faced west, but their necks were broken postmortem and twisted towards the same north but a thousand years apart.

When they tapped into the brain tissue miraculously still there, the DNA showed that the bog people were not related to any of the distinct Native American haplogroups that had been tested and mapped. Nobody knew why.

I received article after article from her about bog bodies, without commentary. It was the last email I got from her while she was still living. Cool?? was all I wrote back. She sent her actual final one with a delay of ten hours. It came to me after she was already dead.

x

I was hungry and a little bit drunk when I did a bad thing, which is that I opened your DNA box without you there. There was the parade of colors, the matrix of countries of
these things called ethnicities. I scrolled to the bottom of yours to see what I actually cared about.

You had the empathy gene.

Maybe this explained why the stray cats in our neighborhood would flock to you and how you could listen to and compose music, or why I couldn’t cry at my sister’s funeral but you did. I wondered what it meant, for anyone to feel things more than me. Was I frightened of that? No one thinks of questions they don’t know answers to, said a man.

When my anger was its worst, my sadness its saddest—were these only just the baseline for other people? How was feeling even measured? And here now, I’ve undressed you, babe: European, etc., you were also at risk for heart disease. And, you were a tiny bit Mexican.

When you walked in late, you were wearing your gym clothes again. Out of kindness to my feelings, you did this so I wouldn’t ask.

“I read here that you are empathetic,” I said.

“I thought we were going to wait to open it together,” you said.
“I didn’t think it would be such a big deal. Unless you were hiding something about you.”

“Say what you’re trying to say,” you said. I didn’t.

“Sorry I looked through it,” I said. I passed you the box with the results and my iPad. “I did, however, put the groceries away.”

“What did yours say?”

“I don’t want to read it.” I got up and went into the bedroom, and we sulked separately for a couple hours until you knocked on the door.

“Bobcat? You should see this.”

It also transpired that Patty had gotten an update from Ancestry on the same day. She compulsively emitted her personal press release on YouTube, and this is what you wanted to show me. Patty was not wearing makeup. Her hair was in a faded purple bun now, her upper body embedded on a Buzzfeed article which had just come out, releasing statistics saying that people of European and Asian descent were more likely to lack the empathy gene over other populations, such as South American or African. This had global, historical implications, Buzzfeed presumed. It was all over the news.
“Guys, I know some of you already heard, but I don’t have the empathy gene. I realize that this is another way I have privilege—” The light fell across the screen, creating a perfect triangle. A Sierpinski triangle is a type of fractal that can reiterate infinitely. You take a perfect triangle, and then you cut a perfect triangle out of it. Mathematically, you can do this forever, going infinitely inward, infinitely small. As hard as I tried to focus, this is the DNA I thought of while my sister cried on screen. “I just don’t feel things as strongly. My pain isn’t as much. I’m so sorry.”

And of course, this, of all her bullshit videos, this is the one that went viral. The comments on her apology got wild. Her video reinvigorated a hashtag: #WhiteWomenTears, and she quickly locked her Twitter to private.

It was one of those nights where I watched the internet unfold before me, like after one of the first big school shootings or during the Egyptian uprising. But instead of distant people dealing with distant things, it was my own sister's face on Reddit’s front page, her own YouTube being linked to within thinkpieces. And below her memed and dimpled chin, racists and anti-racists alike fought over her genetic contents and their meaning, casting her out into the abject social territory of: “someone I don’t want to be right now.”

A Guardian article came out later that night: “Empathy Gene: Genetic Hoax.”
People who received information about the new ‘Empathy Gene’ on Ancestry can breathe a sigh of relief after scientists at Harvard determined that the alleged spleen gene does not, in fact, exist...

x

Before the accidental asthma attack killed her, Melanie sent a suicide note. To me, and to her ex-boyfriend. It apologized to both of us, telling us she loved us, saying she was too embarrassed about being such a fuck-up. I had called her, but there was no answer. I called you. You told me Melanie had taken her Facebook down. I called my parents immediately. Her supervisor responded, drove over from another town. He couldn’t locate her. The American embassy then sent a team out to her village.

It took them an incredibly long six days to find her. Time lengthens this way, in suspension, what Walter Benjamin called Stillstellung, where experience exceeds reality. I had to read his essay, “On the Concept of History,” when I was in my first comparative literature class, and it was unlike anything. Reading of his suicide moved me so much that I wrote very, very repressed pseudo-erotica historical fiction about his final months in Spain from the perspective of the woman he travelled with, Henny Gurland, and this is how I completed my one undergrad creative writing workshop requirement,
answering the suspension of death with further suspension of death, somehow
eunuched and undying. Death can never happen.

There were search teams looking for my sister, and it made major news because the
famous British canine corpse dog, Mystery, was taken off a set in Barbados to allay his
nose with death’s scent on my sister. I learned uncomfortably that canine search dogs
are trained in a way that acts as a loose metaphor for the awfulness of all this: the
audacious trainer finds not the most active of puppies, but the one who responds most
to treats. When the puppy is brought home, he or she is given one toy and one toy only:
a red Kong filled with dead people’s flesh. It is the only toy that dog will ever receive, the
only toy he loves because it’s the only toy he’s ever played with. The puppy cares for it so
much he cradles it at night, even into doghood. Then, the trainer takes it away from him
completely.

The dog that was looking for his favorite thing (the only thing that he, professional dog
of the night who perceives the world (feelings and all) through scent in an unfamiliar
place catches a whiff of the only scent that reminded him of that time before he had to
work, that time he missed playing, expressing life without the social burden of having a
master you both love and need for a dose of dehydrated meat. Upon finding the scent of
my sister’s dead body, the dog’s tail began wagging. He thinks he’s found himself, as a
puppy, cared for and never alone. Her smell is the thing which represents an absolute
phenomenological relaxation from anxiety. This anxiety which is the cumulative feeling of existence-since-birth.

The dog circled around because he can only triangulate the path of his scent through the one point of his nose. When he focuses, he shifts and feels through his body the scent that is not only smelled, but felt, not as death, but as relaxation. He is his body, he followed the loosening of himself through the dense Caribbean marsh until he found my sister face down in the early embankment of a pond. She had weighed herself there until she ballooned up from the gasses released inside her, which is why I guess corpse dogs could not find her at first, and then could as time they say progressed. She had choked to death.

My parents refused to believe it was suicide. No autopsy was done in St. Lucia. Oh, no, no. The Peace Corps paid for her body to be returned to the States. My father’s friend, a coroner, determined that she had suffocated to death, likely from an asthma attack, and was rapidly cremated. I told my parents, *But I got a note saying she was going to kill herself*. And my mother said, *Don’t you ever mention that around your siblings, it would hurt them too much*. And, *You know how Patty is. Do you want her to kill herself, too?* And my dad said, *Melanie would never kill herself. It was just a horrible accident. Read what the doctor said.*

And so Patty didn’t actually know. Nobody really did.
“Check in with your sister,” you said to me, after we read through Patty’s hate mail.

I called Patty, which happened only rarely. She didn’t pick up.

I texted Patty The Guardian article.

Patty, it’s all bullshit, I wrote. All of it.

I told her that if you look at your ancestors from ten generations back, almost half of them will have no genetic connection to you. Millions are related to Charlemagne, but almost nobody carries his actual DNA. Most familial trees fold into themselves. There’s no measurement for feeling. That is completely impossible, and the fact that we all believed in it for a minute is itself kind of remarkable. Belief in the splenic is belief in medieval magic. Delete your Twitter, your everything. Get away from this.

“Add something, you know, loving,” you said, looking it over.

I know we fight sometimes, and we both are stubborn. Maybe that’s genetic. Haha. But I love you.
A half an hour went by and I still got no response.

_Can you text me and let me know you’re OK?_ I asked her. _I’m worried_, I said.

Thankfully, there were the blue dot dot dots...

_Yeah, she wrote back. It’s rough, but I’m fine. Thanks for reaching out._ And then, _I love you, too._

“Do you think we should go over there?” I asked you.

“I don’t know,” you said. I know from fear that it slows down time which is when I started to suspect [turn to the future]. It was already after midnight. And tomorrow, Bolt was supposed to go public with its sales from its first term, and things weren’t looking good because the market was flooded with scooter companies, and all of these scooters worse than just walking.

Truthfully, I was afraid of going over. I was afraid I would go over and she would be dead. Or that I wouldn’t be able to find her, and she would be somewhere, dead. If anyone had asked me the day before if I was the type of guy who would drop what they were doing to help their little sister in the middle of the night, no matter how scary the
context, I would have told them oh yeah, of course I was. And I wouldn’t have been lying, because back then I thought I was that man.

x

But I really never knew what was inside my sister. Either of them. And Patty surprised us all.

Three days after this all happened, both Patty and I were scheduled to meet with a lawyer over our sister’s life insurance, something we hadn’t even thought about, but we were her only named benefactors. The claim was for an accidental death, and it totaled out to $200,000 split between us.

And a week after all of this happened, she really did move to France. Some of her followers asked her to make a public apology— I guess: for crying, but I can’t understand the rules of the discourse she dwelled in. She said no. BuzzFeed asked for an interview, and she said no. She kept her social media, but she made it all private except the YouTube videos, which she left behind her the way she left the furniture and everything else she once lived in. We met only briefly before she left for France, and she handed you and me her prized cat to take care of. I made a dummy Instagram account and asked to follow hers, and she accepted.
Often but not frequently, I looked at it. She rented an apartment in Paris. She got her hair cut and dyed, bangs and brown. There were photos of her at actual parties in implicitly artistic spaces— how did she know anyone? But she did.

On February 15th, she documented the riots as they swept through the streets of Paris—by then, it was the 14th consecutive week of unrest. A crowd of 5,000 walked through downtown that day, and then again on March 16th, the protest labeled “The Ultimatum” by the *gilets jaunes* who took to the Champs-Elysées. The protestors looted (according to Patty’s Instagram pictures) the Hugo Boss, lighting, also, the Fouquet’s on fire.

My sister was in a yellow vest. My sister was in a riot. She wrote an essay about it for *The New Inquiry*, and in all honesty I could not understand it or the criticism of it laid out in the comments, except the one, *Hey, isn’t that the girl who cried about not having that fake gene thing? lol.*

And then on the 21st of September, she was arrested along with one hundred other people while trying to enter the Champs-Elysées. She sat in jail because there’s no bail there, but eventually she was released back to her apartment. She texted us to say she was OK, and in the following days she finally sucked it up and got a job working in a cafe.
Meanwhile, you and I looked at houses together. Ones without roaches. But it turns out, Patty’s cat was a practiced exterminator and the problem dissolved into a fine mist beneath her paws, and we thought, *maybe the bigger roaches on the porch should meet her*. We lost her, searched for her, feared for her, and found her, but she returned changed, flaring at us with PTSD of her troubles of whatever happened to her off of the porch. We could not touch her to bathe her. She ate everything with harrowing noise. We went to the porch to give her space and there on the cushioned loveseat before us was the original cat. Even worse, our captive imposter seized the moment to bolt out the door and back into the scattered randomness that is night.

Troubled, we decided to look for a new apartment. To rent or to buy? Leave or stay? It was only a matter of time before the scooter company went under. We decided that maybe it was better to keep renting here until then, so we could finally move to L.A.

And so I sat on the money the way I think I probably sit on everything, which turns out is not just emotionally a problem, but also physically. As we Mari Kondoed the house together, we learned that I have no trouble getting rid of stuff, but I do have a lot of it. You of course found the unopened Ancestry.com box with the lacrosse equipment in the closet.

“Get that shit away from me,” I said.
“This is me, getting revenge,” you said, ripping it open.

I held shirt after shirt and either everything sparked joy or nothing did and I never knew what to do next. My heart was as useless as my spleen.

“You’ll never believe this,” you said.

“What?” I asked.

“You’ve got the empathy gene.”

Even though it was fake, I was stunned.

“No, really. It says here that you have increased sensitivity. But, not the warrior one. I’m sorry. And, you might be at risk for heart disease.”

Boxes were given away. I was neither fired nor given a raise. Our kickball team got a little bit better, but I pulled my quad at our final game. Somehow, my sister’s cat had gotten pregnant and we couldn’t figure out when it could have possibly happened (we said). You and I felt like bad parents, but it was nice, because we still kind of felt like
parents. The kittens were born on the night before the anniversary of my older sister’s death.

And I don’t know if it was the cat pheromones or the tenderness of my spleen, but I took the day off and went to her grave by myself. It was unseasonably hot in the cemetery, and all that earthen junk smelled like a grave, or maybe everything in this city always did and I was only now waking up to it. I limped up the hillside and although I walked like a zombie, I felt like I was finally seeing the weight of the air for what it was in a more direct reality— weight, and air, and light. And this helical compression (suddenly, frozen through experience) felt right. There were already flowers on my sister’s grave. I felt strange stepping over her, but suddenly I wanted to close the distance between us, from the top of my six feet to the six down to hers, and I did fall to my knees, the ground soft and wet and physically forgiving. Praying felt right, and it started with Dear God, if you exist, but it stuttered into me just talking to her, telling her I was sorry, that I missed her, that it was unbelievable to me that she no longer existed, and as often as I would think this exact thing every single day, at that moment I started to sob, and I cried in a really maximal way— like when you cry and there’s no language that can access what you feel, or what you feel can’t access language— some space where all things infinitely, inwardly cleave.
DEATH

November 2019

I keep trying to tell myself that the feelings that pass over aren’t bad because they are the feeling of reality which is really only one thing. What was I always looking for?

x

When I was little I went to nice, Episcopalian schools. We had classes where we had to read the Bible. I used my older sister’s hand-me-down one. All mentions of sex were highlighted. So were all the harlots ho ho.
In lower school, I could write out proverbs in French and in English. I had good handwriting for a boy, a handsome cursive. I so enjoyed writing it all out in the most beautiful way possible. I actually thought: maybe this will help me believe in God. I will make it look nice— as nice as God would look, if he didn’t look like nothing. The adopted nephew of a then-president told me my handwriting was gay, that Santa wasn’t real (buddy, this kid was already onto God), that I would never be able to write fast enough to keep up in class if it looked that good. Later, he would be kicked out of school for peeing in a blind kid’s eyes.

It has always been this way: that I believe the same people who don’t understand beauty are also those people who pee in other people’s eyes meanly. Because of this, nothing stuns (and stunts) me more than the weird, small moments of moral clarity. Good and evil were gaseous in the hot, antediluvian lockered chambers of yesterday. Because this child sleeper agent was against beauty, I thought beauty was good. Which put me in a bad situation, because I wasn’t a beautiful kid (deformity and “lisp”) and I’ve never been good at being good for all the hot piss of it.

But I tried. I grew to know something about compensation. The speech impediment would get fixed, and there would be a real period of my life when I was a social tyrant because I had a ton of energy and wanted the prettiest girls to like me. And after some shaking, I got to be good at sports. I would have plastic surgery that summer after the pee incident of first grade, and then I would have to play rec league basketball with a
sweatband over my reconstituted ears to protect them while they were healing. My dad was a surgeon. He knew in effect that ugliness was an illness with symptoms and consequences. Nobody in my family believed in therapy, just like nobody in my family actually believed in god.

x

I always felt as a child that I could not believe in god. And I still can’t stop thinking about it. God never felt natural, and god never felt obvious. I think that the only literal stories worth telling are the ones where people find god, or the ones where everybody loses him. Somewhere in the stretching between of the two, there’s an explanation. If you have found that explanation, you have information that I wanted to know. I never had it. I never lost it.

x

I was deemed different. It did not help that I had started off with deformed ears. It did not help that they cupped inward, folding up with a kind of tip— a tip like the tips of snow cones (which are like the tips of actual bobcat ears). Because of the speech impediment, even my own mother called me Bobcat, since nobody wanted to hear me have to say *Wobut Cathwin* to the prodigal son’s secret service tamers when they asked who I was.
I wasn’t exactly deaf. I could still hear all their insults. There were few to my face, but I had this assuredness for some reason that there were whispers behind my back. My mom thought I was bullied more than I was, maybe, and I learned to care about what other people thought about me by imagining them in their private moments, saying the humiliating things they thought but weren’t allowed to say. I have always had the ability to look at people and see their bedspreads. This shame lasted. And of course it has because I have had this feeling all of my life. All from where? From my ears? That’s where I locate shame, and in your shins and sneezes. Hot. We never had pet cats growing up because of my pointed ears and stupid name. We were suburban middle class with dogs, until we weren’t.

My dad worked in a children’s hospital in Mount Vernon. Drove to work in a red convertible along the green parkway. He didn’t elect to work with children— he was an orthopedic surgeon. He dealt with people’s children’s husks. Certainly, he did not have the right personality to really talk to kids. When I was six and learning to think, I once asked him if he believed in God, and he said:

“No.”
I pressed him further. “Nothing,” he said, and I asked how “nothing” was possible. He said that he believed in a Big White Light. I pictured television static. I pictured refrigerators left open at night.

x

Years later, this essential scene repeated, but we were different people, doing different things. He would be old and decrepit, stoned out of his mind. I would be unrecognizable and high and on acid, in my 20s. We would be in this hunting lodge on Low Lake.

I’m not worth an animal that’s been shot, but we don’t shoot them. Instead, we enjoyed hearing the ping-ping-ping of a silenced .22 hitting a metal target in the distance when everything else was kind of quiet. We were inside, shooting from the windows. Sometimes, there was even a lightning storm going on around us. Then a radio would be on with the same story of all summer: two teenagers on the run in the backcountry of rural Virginia. A murder spree. We put Pink Floyd on, I had the acid-experience of time and music repeating, and it scared me— I thought: my dad, plus the natural power of the world— how is this not proof that god exists? I asked my dad what he believed in, and again he said nothing but this time he said it by not saying anything.

My mom was a lot younger than him. She sometimes did real estate, sometimes believed in god. Whereas my dad was always an atheist, she had been Episcopalian. She went to
church but we never outwardly spoke of Jesus at all at home, except when we asked where the tiny ceramic version of Him was when we unpacked the nativity scene in the box of ornaments. We treated god like a candidate we were committed to voting for whose political party never could get anything done.

x

All I can understand of God, I understand in negation.

Nothing has affected me more than this basic understanding that there is nothing.

I think about not-thinking of God, and I think about the absence of God in everything around me. At times—maybe even, sadly, at what is called the best of times—I can summon spiritual importance to the knowledge that matter gets recycled. I would say that this is objectively some kind of reincarnation. Or I get really high and believe this all is a simulation, and our source of everything is powered by our own need some day in the future to generate bitcoin when we are forced to abandon our bodies and enter the simulation after pedaling exercise machines stopped being enough. This could be an alternate reality somebody created so they could have sex with their sister without ruining their own life. That is on a good day for Robert Catherine.
But then I look out, and the world is stale. Not all matter has the mitochondrial swinging of life. I couldn’t see myself in every person, plant, or correlating object. I sometimes think it’s not worth hating people because this thing called “person” is ephemeral and make-believe. The things we do wrong are done by bodies misled by the experience of consciousness into believing they are something more than just their memories of themselves. I have found it as difficult to love as I have to hate.

x

It has not always been this way. I found everything really beautiful as a child. I had a huge ego (turn again to the future), which always gives the world a kind of Russian doll animism— everything existed for me. The for puts forth the spirit of everyday objects. I really connected with animals, though I accidentally killed a neighbor’s cat. I put a leash around its neck to take it for a walk. It escaped and hung itself on a fence.

Nobody in my family told me because I would have been insane with grief. This was still when I was six and gaining sentience. It was basically understood that I wasn’t handling the thought of my own mortality as coolly as my parents or older sister. This child, they said, is sensitive. That adjective was an intentionally abstract noun, from back when psyches were really allowed to remain unprobed or unplowed.
But I was ‘sensitive.’ My unnecessary, retrospective defense: if you do not have a plan for what you are going to tell your kid about god, how can you have children? Well, of course you can. You can do anything, as we have found out. And of course, my parents also paid the neighbor kid not to tell me how her cat died, even though she was rich and it was her cat. I had merely expropriated it and given it the means to truly escape. But I found out, as always. Ask enough people how a cat died, and someone will let it slip.

And I was sad. I ripped open the beanbag chair that I had dragged out into the playhouse that later would get smushed by a lightning-struck tree. I sat in the guts of the chair, the beans of the bag, the beanbag. I sifted and shifted around. The tiny plastic bubbles stuck to the snot on my face. I sat there the way a less sensitive boy would sit in a bank of snow: fixed and slow-winking at death to come for him, bastard.

x

And from then on, all I thought about was the fact that when something’s dead, it is dead. The cat called into question the limitation of life, and I have since doubted my sense of agency. It permanently affected the way in which I once saw everything as animate, with life-endowed objects only being stilled into objects when I looked at them. All of it faded when I realized it was terminal, and I thought that a property of beauty (goodness, remember) was that it was ceaseless.
So back when I saw how beautiful the world was, I felt that it moved behind my back because no existence could be empty. Everything merely froze in a panoramic game of redlight/greenlight when I turned the other way. It was all those movies I watched in the freezing basement playroom: *Fantasia, Beauty and the Beast, Brave Little Toaster*. When the world was still beautiful, it confirmed its own existence in every object, thereby confirming my own existence in every object—a type of megalomania’d material limitlessness. Of capital.

But then the cat “died by suicide.” And worse— it was my fault! It wasn’t even a leash I strapped on it. More like a rope. Perhaps that had more dignity, anyway. That dead cat ruined my confidence in eternity. Did I not command this power for everything to live and be good?

If I did: everything would be alive. This cat would be alive, I would be alive, you would be alive the way you, beautiful and good, always should be.

If I didn’t have that control: then it’s not for me, it can be taken away. When this became my mode of knowing, everything took on the appearance of fading. By being able to see loss, I gained access to feeling a loss that hadn’t happened yet. During long crying jags, my mom would put me into an ice cold shower and hold me there until I stopped. Even writing about it makes me feel like a pussy because this was the 90s.
Teacher after teacher said I had ADHD, and then my mom would pull some PTA stunt to try and get them fired because how-dare-they suggest I wasn’t perfect. The I who was: talkative, disorganized, forgetful. I said whatever I knew would please people but didn’t really make it a point to listen to them. (My reply to every adult ever: “Fine thank you, how are you?” which my mom had me repeat in the neighborly doorways until gotten right.) And, like a secretly rhetorical question, I left everything everywhere. I left everything at once.

I left things open, too. Open like a ghost operating with low bursts of ectoplasmic energy I could only tap into during heatwaves. Cabinets, the stove. Closets. I built concentric circles around myself with plastic toy horses. I talked to the faces I shaped out in the woodgrain of my bunk bed, and I spoke in what sounded like a possessed-person's babble. But my parents saw that I could read endlessly— I read all the time. I read on the fibery blanket next to my yellow lab in front of the fireplace. I read out loud to myself in my room (to the faces), then out loud to my new baby sister, Patricia (who would end up getting called Catty Patty). I had no difficulty with immersion. Doesn’t that require concentration?
The great thing about reading is that it controls your thoughts. You don’t have to control them. I have always narrated everything in my head in a way that seems faster than language. And it has been one long, unending monologue. Mostly about God.

I don’t think this is normal, but you never know what other people are thinking. It has always disturbed me that no matter how close you get to another individual, pressed up against them or in the same mental space, you can’t just feel their feelings or hear their thoughts.

x

Another necessary part about childhood to address is that during the period when my dad still had good health and my parents were still together and we were economically stable, the world was already really falling apart. It happened most acutely on the day I turned eight.

In the morning, I looked at my fingers, realized that I was two fingers away now from being ten, which is two full hands, and I thought to myself: Boy, am I getting up there.

Outside on the playground (it’s second grade), me—wearing my sweatband, keeping my reconstituted ears still warm and together— I heard a boom, like a dump truck emptying off in the distance, or like a washing machine blowing up in the sky. I was sitting in the
mulch, pretending to carve into a tablet like a Bartleby cave scribe. I had been playing at having an office job with other proto-bourgeois children. We had slid big slates of rock over to use as desks. I heard the boom, looked up, spent forty seconds aghast, then went back to imaginary work, chiseling away at a crack in what I now remember was only concrete. I sat there until the teacher hearded us inside, because this was 9/11.

Inside of the gymnasium, all the grades were crowded together. It was actually kind of fun, the whole range of girls. I was disappointed that my mom picked me up so soon. She had this prophetic dream, she said, to just drive and come and get me. I suspected she drove in circles around the school all day, everyday. She even beat the Secret Service to the school, who had arrived soon after my mom to pick up the President’s cluster-B nephew, who would go into some type of hiding for the next few weeks that we all honestly hoped he wouldn’t come back from. The teachers were panicking because there was a large, black cloud on the city horizon and none of the phones were working. Nobody knew if it was a chemical thing or not, and nobody knew what to tell the gymnasium of lower schoolers who hadn’t gotten to that part of world history yet. The other children asked my mom why she was taking me home, and she told them that my puppy had died.

How unfair the world seemed to me! A boy’s dog dying on his otherwise wonderful birthday, 9/11. I began my grieving process in the car, in the deadlock of an apocalypse.
Hours later, at home, I discovered my dog was still alive. Fat, white labrador from only the land of plenty, Phoebe.

On television, people were jumping out of the World Trade Center. Later, I would learn that maybe they were blown out. Ground Zero was a humming layer of ash. The hum came from the buried firemen’s location beacons, beeping up the rubble as blackboxes. I was being told that this was momentous, so I went and got an empty diary someone had given my older sister, Melanie, who played at illiteracy. I still have it today.

Page one says: *It is my birthday. There was a terrorist attack. I thought I should write this.* I opened up only one present besides language that day: a big, plush woolly mammoth, Mr. Woolly Mammoth. I held him close, and continued holding him pretty much for ten years.

x

And after that, school flashed by in the different colors of the Homeland Security warning levels. There were long stretches of time when we couldn’t go outside for recess. Our area was being stalked by a pair of unhinged snipers. We spent every roadside moment looking for white vans the way others might look for punch buggies.
In our neighborhood, some boy Melanie’s age died of cancer, and then Melanie’s best friend’s older sister, a teenager, comitted suicide. Some nights, I dreamt of nuclear annihilation: my hand gripping the metal street pole, flayed fingers being stripped of flesh while the hulking loser of Washington mushroom clouded in the distance. The thought of the dreams coming again made me cry before sleep. Melanie would try and comfort me from the top bunk by saying we would at least die instantly— it would actually be way worse, she posited, if we lived further away from D.C., because then we would slowly die of radiation while our bodies painfully transmuted into goo.

There was a girl in my class who never came back because her dad had been a pilot of the plane that was flown into the field. I mentioned this recently and someone said, no way. But I swear, and I was disappointed, because I had thought she was cute. I had faked being Jewish to try and get closer to her, and my mom was confused when her mom called to invite our whole family to Passover.

Of course I didn’t start believing in god then, for girls or for 9/11. Who would (for the latter)? But strangely, whenever I saw a plane in the sky, I crossed myself. My logic was that if I imagined it crashing, I could prevent that from really happening because, really, what are the odds? We lived near the airport. I was always praying for planes out of a trojan horse placeholder faith in statistics.
I did this crossing of myself for years. Sometimes, I still do. My parents started divorcing when I was in 6th grade, which is also when my dad retired. I did not feel like I lost anything the way other children sometimes do in divorces. Both my parents had been married before, and they would both marry again. They weren’t the types who could stomach public drama, and they still sat together on the sidelines of all my games.

x

I loved playing lacrosse because I liked going long stretches of time without being able to think. It had nothing to do with being able to hit people, which I inexplicably excelled at when even on the field, I caught myself apologizing. I apologized a lot. I lived predominantly with my sisters and mom. My mom would lock me out of the house until I went for a run in the morning, to keep me from getting fat off of the Chex Mix. I got good grades but never really applied myself. I had one folder for everything because I am one folder for everything. By the end of 8th grade, it was clear that I would be recruited to play lacrosse in college. I was on three— sometimes four— teams at a time. I knew I would be switching schools to play for a stronger high school program because that was everybody’s priority for me and when everyone asked me what I wanted, I said money and world peace.

I didn’t really mind the idea of starting high school in a new school. I had always felt like other people’s friendships were stronger than my own, like there was a distance between
me and my peers that by some personal failure and point of ears I could never close to a vertex. I had one English teacher there who liked me and gave me tons of praise for my writing. I didn’t really want to be praised— I had no real desire to make anything that this world would think was good, because I thought that meant it was probably bad. On the last day of middle school, that teacher pulled me aside and said that I needed to continue writing, sure, but more importantly, I needed to learn to make eye contact with adults.

x

During all this time, the only people I did have friendships with were girls. I think the idea of romance incentivized it for me. Just the idea. You don’t need to explain to anyone why you have spent hours on the phone at night talking to a girl— that’s supposed to be how the early version of love functions. I didn’t really see it as love, just as a willingness to be intimate. I wanted to talk about the inmate I saw starve to death on a 60 Minutes episode. I broke up with someone in 9th grade because she didn’t believe in universal healthcare. The girls who really stood out to me were the ones who had good tastes in clothing and music. Those were also the girls who were harnessing the early powers of the internet, seeing and imitating subculture without ever stepping low into any den.
My first love was actually my neighbor, Taylor. Her parents bought her piano lessons. She could sing. We went to our first concert together—it was a Bright Eyes show at the 9:30 club in D.C. We were 14. Her dad was a good-looking younger guy, and he stood in the back. Our “terrible” taste in music was a complex subject in both of our families. We didn’t have a CD player, but we listened to *I’m Wide Awake, It’s Morning* over and over in the stereo of her dad’s boat that sat backed-up into the driveway. We also watched a Cinemax *After Dark* special where a woman lay on a table while she was groped by a group of men, and later that night I lost my virginity when I stripped her naked and buckled her into her father’s car, fucking her while two of these other neighborhood kids pawed tentatively at her nipples. Then she went to the boarding school she was always going to go to, which was in town but fenced off by slave-built walls I would occasionally leap. But it wasn’t the same, and I understood my loss even then when, at a party, a freshman girl attempted to give me head in a crawl space, quitting and starting again twice, and the other girls humiliated her when they found out.

Back then, I only liked music that communicated to me that it was deep in a verbal way. I enjoyed narratives in song. I didn’t understand classical music. I couldn’t figure out why everyone didn’t think it was boring, so I never joined band. It’s actually because I didn’t realize that music like that *sounds* like feelings— or, the sounds evoke a feeling or some similitude of it. Although I did feel things like sadness strongly, I wasn’t constantly sad. I was, most constantly, empty.
So, high school: I was put in a Catholic school because of the strength of the lacrosse program. The piety I witnessed astounded me, and I couldn’t hide it. By then, I was 5’11, like my dad, and I would outgrow him by a few more inches.

In his retirement, my dad invested his savings outside of his pension in real estate. Both my mom and my dad remarried other real estate agents. It wasn’t sudden the way you would imagine, but when the economy crashed both parents ended up with foreclosed houses.

I almost took the loss of my childhood house hard. It was the one in Alexandria that my mom had kept in their divorce settlement. In my journals— which, inexplicably, I was always keeping, either physically or digitally, depending on the year— I recorded everything and every object in a list before I had to leave. There were railroad ties in the backyard. There was the half of a tree which had been struck by lightning; the other half like I said fell on our playhouse. There was a sickly apple tree that never grew any fruit but was consumed by the cotton of cocoons every spring. My mom only grew mint and tulips in the garden. I loved the attic, filled with creepy old beanie babies and daddy long legses. That was where I thought my sleep paralysis demon lived— the one who my parents thought was my imaginary friend who sat on my chest, “Stinky Breath.” A dentist lives there now.
The economy failing was the great volta of my life. I would hate the person I would have turned into if I hadn’t had to deal with precarity. My godlessness felt very justified, which is always kind of great— if you can get that feeling, get it while you can. What I really mean is that in some ways, being released from the middle class was a spiritual relief. Precarity gave my omnidirectional anxiety a visual source. I could see my future being swatted down by the open paw of a bear market.

Melanie threw a houseparty the day before the foreclosure. My mother even bought us a keg, but she also threatened to call the police on us after one in the morning. Up until then, I had never thrown a party because, remember, my birthday was also 9/11. We had so many high schoolers coming into our backyard that the fence broke. We put some of the ancient railroad ties into the bonfire. In the early morning, we sat side-by-side near the smolders and slow-wept into Dixie cups. I remembered a time when I was way younger when she had read my diary, found out who I had a crush on, and blanketed my room in sticky notes with that girl’s name on them. It was actually the name of the girl whose dad died in 9/11. Melanie remembered how I punched out a window of the door to the porch once because the babysitter wasn’t paying attention to me.
I wasn’t, like, a liberal, but when I recognized that banks would be bailed out but loans wouldn’t be forgiven, I lost faith in American democracy and it would never come back. I thought capitalism would find a vector through everything to ensure profit (its survival). I was actually sent to Brother Mike’s office because my religious studies teacher had heard it said that I had watched the conspiracy film, Zeitgeist. Wasn’t Jesus just based off the sun-god, Ra? I didn’t believe in God—I had never believed in God—but my identity was never that of an atheist, who all seemed vulgar because they were done searching. I wanted to find meaning in everything, but again and again all I found was meaning’s absence, which, you know, ended up becoming a thing in itself.

Brother Mike suggested I join a school club with altruistic intentions so that I could make meaning in my life. I wonder, now, who he really was. He also taught A.P. European history, he was very notoriously tough and somber, he wore a brown Franciscan cloak, and through him I heard about historical materialism and Nietzsche. I wanted to impress him, so I bought and read Thus Spoke Zarathustra after he mentioned it in class. I also tried doing eye contact. It didn’t make him love me. I joined his club, Helping Haiti, because I urgently wanted this man’s respect. I would dream, later, that he was an older woman that I was marrying under a tree.

I was the only boy in the Haiti club. It was my job to use my height to hang the posters the girls painted. Every few years, Brother Mike put together a team of his students from the club who would go to Haiti and help out at a Catholic non-profit school in
Port-au-Prince. He had me read *The Black Jacobin*, about the Haitian revolution. This was probably my first investigation into race as an existential issue. A few weeks before we were set to leave, Brother Mike’s sister and brother-in-law were killed by a drunk driver, and he was given custody of their two kids.

We went on the trip without him, accompanied by a kind of homely librarian. From the plane, you could see a definite line down the topography of Hispaniola, demarcating the tree-green of the Dominican Republic from the deforested-brown of Haiti. We landed at an airport cut between what looked like snow-peaked mountains, but that was actually just the white sand of topsoil erosion. We slept in a small compound with the family of the Catholic deacon who ran the school, which only took kids from the surrounding neighborhood, one of the poorest in the city. The children lived there, and the school fed them. Malaria drugs made me hallucinate instead of dream at night. In these dreams, I stood blankly in the bathroom and poured bucket after bucket of water to flush the toilet. Towards the day, I ran workshops with little kids where we read Langston Hughes. At five in the morning every morning, I was awoken again and prodded along to go to an early morning prayer service.

Exhaustion almost broke me, and I really almost believed in God just to make it easier for myself. God waterboarded my pores in the destitute humidity. There were a few days over the course of the two short weeks I was there that we left the school to see the neighborhood with a chaperone. Often, this was to go to a hospital for malnourished
babies run by the Sisters of Calcutta. There, we shoveled dried grits out of a truck and into sacks to distribute to the pregnant women who came there for food. Inside, we were only allowed on the first floor, because the second floor housed an orphanage composed of the malnourished babies who had been left at the hospital. The nuns held dying babies as small as puppies. I wondered if I would be able to fake a level of religiosity that could allow me to be a low-level priest or a monk, just so I could devote my life to humanitarian work without having to hold down a job. I knew it was all sad. I liked feeling needed.

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A week after I returned, the earthquake in Haiti happened. For a day, I had no idea what the state of the school was. People kept texting me and asking. I was sixteen and my sources were the internet. The news showed footage of the broken airport. The school collapsed, but everyone somehow survived. I should maybe have stopped clicking there. But the hospital/orphanage also collapsed, and everyone died. All the upstairs children I never saw, all the babies I had helped swaddle, all the nuns I admired despite their moral superiority (or perhaps for it).

I guess the way I can explain how I reacted to this is that I threw up into the dog bowl, locked myself into the basement of my mom’s new house, and the chest pain of grief was
so strong that I had to curl into the fetal position. I felt it. I cried so hard that I wouldn’t be able to cry again for years. I have also always had a weak stomach.

It made other people’s belief in god incomprehensible to me. There’s no god of this mess. What was the point of even trying to save babies? Buildings just collapse. I missed a few weeks of school. I had my first (as my mother said) “nervous breakdown” which again means nothing. I barely remember any of it, I almost never can. Also, I know I hate writing about my own depression. I know I probaly thought about suicide with total clarity for the first time while staring at the freezer section in 711. Somehow the earthquake became all about my own pain, and this realization actually made the pain even worse but nothing clicked. I probably needed real help. Brother Mike never came back. High school churned on. A group of seniors got suspended for running a betting ring on the beta fish they would fight in the school toilets. I could not believe how happy other people were. How?

I got offered a full-ride to a state college, and now that my family had no money, I was obligated to accept. I graduated the way one does. My future-coach sent me a regimented “summer workout packet” to get me ready for a “test” before off-season fall ball started: you had to run a mile under seven minutes, a half mile in half that time, a quarter mile in a quarter of that time, and then a 100-yard sprint. I think I opened it a total of two times between graduation and my first semester of college, hoping I could
wing it like I had winged twelve years of homework, all of my mental health, and all of my faith.

x

I was not spiritually cut out for Division I sports. We had to be in the stadium locker room by 5:30 every morning. We had to wear a different specific shirt with a different pair of specific shorts on each day of the week. That alone was a nightmare for me to even attempt, but if we messed either of these things up, our whole team would have to run suicides while we failures stood in the endzone and watched our teammates run the suicides while we thought about suicide. Then, we were expected to go to class. Later in the day: lifting. I hadn’t declared a major. My major was lacrosse. I thought about journalism, but my dad said there were no jobs in it. He wanted me to do business, but that whole program was a neoliberal lion’s den. I didn’t know “neoliberal” back then, though. But nobody expected me to.

I started in every fall ball game, which was great for a freshman. Games almost made the whole ordeal worth it. Which also means that not really anything could make it worth it for me.

There was a pool outside my dorm room. I fantasized about drowning myself in it. I felt tired all the time. My roommate was also a lacrosse player, Ivan. He wasn’t getting any
playing time and he had a really big nose, but he was having a way better go of it than I was. The hazing that wasn’t supposed to happen still happened. I broke up with a high school girlfriend a few years behind me back home. I didn’t want her to visit and see me like this. I would wake up after a few hours of sleep and panic, thinking I had slept through practice. My coach sent me to a “sports therapist.” I was put on Celexa and told to meditate. The doctor said Major Depressive. No kidding.

At the start of games, the “Christian guys” would huddle in the locker room and pray together. Our captain was very Born Again, some empty nook of sobriety he found for himself. Once, on a plane to Ithaca to play (and lose to) Cornell, a man a few rows in front of our team started to have a heart attack while we were in the air. The flight attendant asked if there were any doctors on the plane. This captain of ours stood up, admitted he was not a doctor, but announced he had the power of prayer. He spread his fingers out and started faith healing.

“You have to stop this,” our coach said to him.

x

I knew I was looking for a message from God. And I think that it happened, in the only way it can, which is to say that a few things fell into place in a way that only now I understand.
The first sign came when I developed a lump in the side of my knee, like a stigmata the size of a beer-pong ball. Every time I moved sideways (in the “athletic stance”), there was a sharp pain. I iced it, prodded it, joked about its grotesqueness, and kept playing for a week after it manifested. Then, one morning when I was doing defense during a drill, pop!

I collapsed on the turf, yelling a sound like the true name animals have for god. I know it was the most physically painful thing I have ever experienced but it wasn’t the worst thing I had felt. I was transferred to the college’s medical hospital. They said I had been playing on a torn MCL for weeks— which was some kind of feat, how had I withstood the pain?— and the stress of the tear compounded with general overexertion, which caused me to tear my ACL.

If you know anything about this shit, it meant I would be out for a year. Because I had only played in preseason games, I could still redshirt, my coach said. Meaning, I had five years of college lacrosse to look forward to instead of an abyss of only four. Overnight, my leg now contained a dead person’s muscle. My first experience with literal reincarnation.

x
I recuperated at Melanie’s sorority house. The women were beautiful and doted on me while I zoned in and out on painkillers. The only thing I could eat was applesauce. I watched Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* during this time and I could not stop thinking about it. Cosmic death. It made me sick. “Everything tastes like ash.” And I dreaded healing because it meant I would have to start physical therapy. I also would still have to attend morning practices and evening weightlifting even though I couldn’t do either of them— this would start as soon as I could stand, it was “part of being on a team.” I didn’t even think about my classes, and I knew little about the city I’d moved to. I missed the early registration for the next semester and got stuck in modern dance and comparative literature. My team and my sister and her sisters all wanted me to go out for Halloween still and I was their maypole. They crafted me a tophat out of the goth shades of leftover sorority construction paper, and I wore an Oxford unbuttoned with my lowkey-hairy chest exposed— “Babe Lincoln.” I was tall, sad, and honest.

Halloween party was at the girl’s lacrosse house. No idea how I got there. People were drinking vodka that came out of gallon-sized plastic bottles. They mixed it and packets of Crystal Lite in a blender with just ice. Writing that made me nauseous. I drank on the painkillers because the antidepressants only cured my conscious death drive. I crutched around the enormous party, the floor slick with beer and misc. paper in a way where I kept slipping on receipts and catching myself on the wrong leg. Don’t worry, I could barely feel anything.
Ivan the Roommate walked over. I was told a field hockey player was interested in me. How? I wondered. It was packed. There was a strobe light or several. That one there, Ivan said, and I looked out into this sea of people and there you were in white platform heels, a white spandexy dress, and a white fur hat. Your legs were tan and long, you had dark blonde hair, and the white cotton balls you had glued to your dress and clips made me think you were blurring through a nearby frequency. You were this light and this image. I didn’t know how to get over to you, past all the people who didn’t matter. I willed you to look at me, and you did. I started crutching toward you unsteadily but you furrowed your brow and walked over.

“Who are you dressed as?” I asked you, with an open-crutch gesture, like I was waiving a staff over unlocked land.

“Who. I am a cloud of vape smoke,” you said. “Who are you?”

A football guy walked up behind you and tugged your hair flirtatiously. Big handsome man. You jumped. You rolled your eyes when you recognized who he was while he ran away. Then you said, not to me, really: “I don’t even know him.”

“Do you want me to fight him?” I asked. I expected you to laugh. Instead, you said yes.
I crutched after him. You followed behind me. I was slow-going. I crutched through the garage where people with living knees and legs were dirty dancing. I crutched up a single stair and felt woozy. I crutched across the living room. “Come over here, I want you to meet someone,” my roommate said. I yelled back that I was busy, I was on a mission to hurt somebody. I crutched into the kitchen and looked around.

“I think he’s upstairs,” you said. You were following behind me like a new nanny on the playground. I crutched toward the stairs. We got to the bottom and looked up (different music, darker colors upstairs) and then at each other, neither of us saying anything. I put all my weight on my good leg and used my crutches to push myself up the first step.

“One,” I said.

“Okay, okay, you can stop,” you said. You had broken your deadpan now, you worried I was only crazy because I was drunk. I put both of my crutches under my other arm and then bunny hopped on one good leg up another stair.

“Two,” I said.

“Jesus Christ,” you said. “Please stop. I am going to get blamed for breaking the lacrosse team’s star freshman’s other leg.”
“Three.” It was the year I only heard “Hopeless Place” whenever I turned on the radio. Now it was playing.

“Four.” By constantly sticking my tongue out in involved coordination, I could put my foot up a fifth step.

I looked back behind me and downstairs you were watching me and sipping a drink, never a phone-out type person.

“You’re too slow,” you said. “I hear him getting away.”

“One second,” I said at the top of the stairs, dying. I came down slowly, sitting on the bottom.

“We can stake him out here,” I said. “It’s the only exit. What’s your name?”

“Caroline,” you said. “You are B—”

“Robert,” I quickly said. “You play field hockey?”

“Soccer,” you said.
“Uhoh,” I said.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You thought I was someone else?”

“No,” I said. Then, “You are the only person I saw.” Which I could only say because it was true. A couple trashed gymnastics girls started loudly planning their next move way too close to us. They watched me fumble around trying to stand up.

It was blacklit in the hallway upstairs and your costume stunned.

“Door number one,” I said. I started to knock and you pulled me back to stop, but it was too late. A murmur of voices on the other side suddenly halted. We froze. Nobody came to the door. I already couldn’t remember what this guy looked like.

“Let’s go back to my place instead,” you said, trying to stop me from slothing my way over to another closed door. I felt suddenly very embarrassed. Had you thought I had taken you up here to fuck you? Was that what I was supposed to do?
You brought me back to your house. Luckily, it was only a block away, on “Hell Block.” The front door was left open and girls in cat and mouse lingerie were coming in and out, evidently some were still pregaming. This was real. Your room was on the first floor, but you had padlocked the door. You had a nice bed with a white duvet low to the ground (as I imagined) and a big keyboard— I mean, the piano kind. You have no idea how badly I wanted to shower.

“Where are your things?” You made the face associated with keeping secrets I know from only you (a tilting of all features, withholding but starting to slide).

“Do you smoke pot?” you asked. I didn’t, really. But.

“Yes,” I said.

“Let’s get really high.”

“Yeah,” I said. Then corrected: “Well, maybe one time...” Were girls in California all like this?

“I’ll show you how it’s done.”

You reached into your closet and pulled out a large woolly mammoth stuffed animal. It was blocking the bong, it was there just in case a nosy predator walked by your window (as if that’s what they wanted to look at). But the woolly mammoth was terrifying in its familiarity. It was the same one I had slept with, from 9/11 on. I knew about holding extinction. And you did, too.

x

It was “just a” “really weird” “coincidence” but it wasn’t at all. We had the same stuffed animal, and I didn’t tell you, I let the secret get weird and then pretending you discovered it a week later. The truth is, it disturbed me profoundly to feel as if I had been led to your padlocked door.

I wondered about being naked. I had no investment in my own body, which was already rightly failing me, but yours brought me apart.
I tried just, like, touching your leg, and it scared me. Then you said, “That’s not even what I want,” and I sat back, feeling wrong and invasive. “Good,” you said. “More of that.” I sat forward again.

You had a full-blown restraint system tied to your bed. To me, this was unheard of for a college-aged girl. You snapped yourself in and lay there naked, and I realized then that sex was the production of an image, and it was this image. Of you. All those years of wondering what people felt when they listened to music and experienced art.

x

You wanted to know what God was but always knew. In Walnut Creek, California, you skateboarded around putting up posters for CrimethInc. Your dad was a lot of things, and he was also a republican. They asked you to be ambassador for Model U.N. but your behavioral problems got in the way. You disliked taking your Ritalin. At the end of a long neighborhood, you lived in a house that was half-glass. How do you rebel in California? You wanted to go to Brown, but they didn’t give athletic scholarships, which you thought was really sad.

You met two guys in high school that you dated. The first you met when he was demonstrating to his friends outside the movie theater how he would throw himself under cars so he could then try and hustle the drivers for money. He picked peaches
over the summer, he bragged about it. He accidentally threw your valentine out in the trash when you were at lunch in Whole Foods.

The second guy’s a different kind of guy: he was always and already an artist. He read *Al Jazeera*. He asked you to your prom by having the news anchor announce it on air. Maybe in the background, the news story about the escapades of a certain local mountain lion ran on: where had he been spotted next? He had mauled a bounce house with the swipe of a paw. It exploded around a group of children, plastic flapping in the wind.

You were in the car together your senior year, driving from Walnut Creek to Davis, streaking across Yolo County in his Prius, the first Prius you had ever been in, light as a plastic car. You and your friends once turned his car around in his space as a prank but he didn’t notice. Now you’re trying to get to a Halloween party at Davis, a college whose strongest programs are viticulture and brewing, but it’s where your boyfriend was a freshman. It’s where he’s driving when his front left tire blows out. The car “trips” when he hits the brake, toppling over itself across traffic, slamming into a metal barrier.

It doesn’t matter that you were wearing seat belts—car safety is an illusion. His head hit the steering wheel and he was nodding at an awful angle when you looked up after the car settled upside down. You tried to listen to him, he was making noise like he was
underwater. A nurse got you out of the car, and you stared at the wreck like you’d been promoted to Ghost.

The backup on I-80 East curled around the prairie-dry mountain, where mankind sat, phone in hand, while the jaws of life tried to draw your boyfriend out to the dry land of the living. Although there was brainmatter around his face, the firefighters said suddenly he started furiously screaming. “Scream” is too high-sounding of a word for what you heard through the rip of metal. One of the firefighters said your boyfriend said he “wished [the firefighters] died in 9/11,” which were possibly his last words. You can’t think of one reason why he would have said this, but then you remembered he hated cops after some weed charges.

The road wrapped a quick nautilus around the rough land, and the traffic jam watches the jaws of life unjam traffic as a giant mountain lion emerges from the scrub to cross behind the wreck where your boyfriend was low-screaming and dying, and the lion bolted up and away, cat-blooming the same color as smog in a battered sunset. Besides your own tragedy, it’s what gets remembered from the accident: a viral photo of a mountain lion walking surreptitiously away from the most car-crash-looking car crash. It would become brand new fodder for that era’s bold-text memes. And several hours and a wide country away, my younger sister would point to the footage on the evening news, say, “Bobcat!” while gesturing at the mountain lion sprinting behind your wreck, the overturned Prius like a flicked-over stink bug, the mountainside carrying the scene

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like God’s cast iron skillet hands— flipping and frying life, in whatever sudden, tectonic maneuvering and aleatory salt.

x

You told me about the wreck firsthand, but it’s after a few weeks of dating. You had actually warned me about how you had already dated the captain of my team— the airplane faith healer. Was I not supposed to mess with you now? I told you it was OK, that I wanted to quit the team anyway. Had you taken his virginity? I wanted to know, not because I was in any way jealous. Just very bleakly curious. You got a grim look on your face, which could have just as easily suggested anything.

You said: “Nobody knew how to deal with me after the wreck. You get to college, you move your life across the country. But I couldn’t make sense of it. I couldn’t talk to anyone because I couldn’t make sense of it. It was like wearing an invisible, heavy garment. And then you just get paired with the religious guys at formal, because your teammates believe sadness and piety are different lights over the same sink with you in the mirror.”

And seducing a religious man was fun. You were certain you were irresistible, and that desire was good. You asked him how he believed in god, and he looked surprised. “Don’t
you ever just feel like you know?” You both waited for the beat. “Like, things come together?”

“They come together. But maybe not like that.” He thought it was OK if he spooned you in his dorm bed. You pretended you were asleep so that you could rub your ass into his crotch until he was hard. In your head, you’re thinking about the stars in Walnut Creek. You would ride BART all the way back from Berkeley, from a house show, and you would be balancing your bike against your legs, trying to stay small. Those drunk 49ers fans, they were awful. You still would like their hands on you. Sound, black, tunnel, sound, white, light.

x

You weren’t starting, but you were getting playing time. You were a sophomore. You could run a 5:30 mile. You liked the idea of getting concussed. You were always doing headers and saying you didn’t do the things you did. At first, you’re not attracted to me.

I seemed terribly uncultured to you, because I am, but I am learning so much, so quickly. So were you. You thought you were going to a feminist book club someone sent out on the World Studies listserve, but it was actually a “queer feminist book club.” Soon the administration building was “occupied” after the college’s president announced not
a tuition increase, but a “fee” increase. You met with your book club there. You were smitten with a girl with one hand, a small one.

Had I heard about polyamory? You told me about people you were meeting, and you felt like they were revolutionaries. They were your TAs, and they were LARPing, at best. But how or why would I be the one to stop you from doing whatever you wanted to do? I wanted to know nothing because then I wouldn’t have to feel something. I met your mother at a tailgate, my polo tucked into shorts. “A southern man,” she said to me with my crutches, but kind of like I was dodging the front of an unbearable war.

We went out to dinner downtown. Your mother saw you flip your new septum piercing down. She stopped dinner by waiving her hands over the table and yelling until you took it out. You ripped it out. I wanted to disappear down onto the floor where blood and tidbits dripped on the crunched soup crackers. The ring was crusted when you handed it to me because you didn’t have pockets. I have kept it in my wallet since.

x

A scientist giving a talk about Fisher’s runaway theory of evolution and mating said he grew sick whenever he thought of peacocks, whose tails were driven to be as big as possible while still conserving enough energy to make survival off-of eating seeds happen. We are all birds, he thought, in this difficult balance.
I was writing only on the right side of my notebooks, like Nietzsche did, flipping them over and using the other halves of pages once I finished the other right side. I tried to pass writing off to you as some kind of productivity tool, but you were never believing it and of course encouraged it, but you’ll tell someone I’m a poet one night and I will feel sick enough with embarrassment.

There was one evening after months of dating before we quit sports altogether, when we really felt something strongly about death and our extinctions. It was 2012, when the Mayans prophesied the end of the world. “Or rather,” as you said, “a large social change.” Tight. Was it the mass adoption of social media and smart technology? Would it be “Strange and Unusual Weather”— the name of my weird lecture I always missed on Wednesday mornings? I thought the end would announce itself in parhelion, lasering a c-section into heaven for all our risen to tumble out. I actually didn’t think that at all.

You said: “The end wouldn’t be so bad.” You dragged me to an End of the World party at a local fetish club. Inside, there were metal trash can fires and tons of torn newspaper on the floor. Someone drove a Harley around. You recognized the music playing— always something Morrissey, at least at first. There’s cage dancers, jello wrestlers. There’s libertarians sitting at the bar, and a woman cleaning shoes with her mouth. I realized that I wanted one of the grimy cowboy hat-wearing redditors to tie you up and suspend
you from the ceiling while I watched. I told you that I knew it would be painful, but the point wasn’t not to feel anything; it was to be disturbed.

At first you thought it was a test. There was no rush. So you pushed me up to a booth with what looked like an old-time traveling 4-H saleswoman, but sexy, and she had me crawl into what she called her travelling “vacbed”— a latex plastic sack you would step into and then lay down in, putting your mouth up around a tube while a vacuum sucked all the air out of the latex, clinging it to your body and immobilizing you. I was almost too tall for it, but, she said, “we can make this work,” and I stripped down to my briefs and let myself be stuffed into a happy baby position. I only barely got my head inside the latex— I thought I heard a crack and imagined this horde of kinky people pointing at me, this giant fake pervert they had caught in an elaborate trap, and I wanted to cover myself but couldn’t move.

There was total darkness, and a loud rushing of air, like being on the tracks when the metro flies by without hitting you. I could feel strangers' hands all over me, pushing through the latex. I knew some of their hands were yours. I wanted those hands. I wanted to be pulled. Touch really wasn’t enough.

I felt like I was dying in 360 degrees of panic. I wasn’t getting enough air and had no way of signifying it through the narrow snorkel straw— the plastic sucked me to the
table, suspending me in time. Every touch became an opportunity of being saved, and
my heart lapped it up like a dog.

I thought of praying, but got caught on who to address it to: God, or no god... Then, No
god. There’s no god, I thought, and I’m stuck in the plastic.

Then: if I’m stuck, I would rather be stuck unconscious. Should I stop breathing? And
then, I am touched by what I want to believe is your hand, and I think: if I am stuck
while conscious, I can at least feel all of this. I don’t have a choice. It has already
happened. I relaxed, then, and imagined existing knowing only this until it started to
actually happen. I could not tell you how long I was there, hanging inside of myself

x

The suction stopped, the pressure around me easing. Absolute darkness around my face
still. My body was jostled a bit from above. Someone was having trouble unsealing the
latex because I am so huge. I could feel her starting to figure it out— she had to pull it
back very slowly by a different seam. She worked upward, releasing my feet first. Heat
rushed into them.

Hands on my leg. Slowly unzipping the tight material, the blood rushing into my lower
limbs. I bristled as the hand passed over my bad knee, but a touch on my neck distracted
me. I could feel my cock pressing hard against the plastic. Holy shit, I thought. All these people were going to see my erection. I tried to move but couldn’t hide or adjust myself, and I was glad my face was hidden.

Hands up my leg, up to my thigh. Those hands were going to have to go near my cock. My heart raced, my balls tightened. The hands paused there. I felt as though they were hesitating over my cock, disgusted by it and disgusted by me. Were they talking about my erection? I was breathing hard with my mouth open wide around the tube. I felt a hand on my chest and my skin jumped, right as the latex unzipped up my thigh to my balls and asshole.

Once they were released, every touch felt like the end of touches. My lower body hung out of the plastic, exposed, and there were hands on my feets holding them back. Finally, she pulled the latex over my cock, which was hard but bent forward and down. She worked the latex over the sensitive head of my penis which had nosed its way out of my briefs. My erection popped up right as she released the latex from my cock up my happy trail to my belly button. In the undertowing rush of it, I felt myself starting to orgasm so quickly I knew I could not stop it, but at the same time couldn’t completely *start* it, either. I just needed her hand to brush the head of my cock, in one spot, but her hands were elsewhere. Mine, restrained.
No such touch came. Right as I worried it never would, I felt wet lips on the tip of my cock. Everything charged up inside me released, my hips jolting forward as though from great shock, semen spurting into the well of a mouth, pushing itself in and filling her, spilling over the warm band of her lips and down my cock. Mouth forced open, I still made a sound I had never heard myself make before, one I couldn’t control— the sound of the thing itself.

My chest. I was breathing. I realized there was cheering, and that it might have been for me. I was glad my face was covered, until suddenly I was ripped back into sound and light. I saw the mouth cleaning up my mess wasn’t yours but the older woman’s. “I am so sorry,” I said, as she tucked my cock back into my briefs.

She smiled at me, reached over to you, and kissed your mouth. The two of you made out above me, a dozen spectators who had also just seen me ejaculate all over myself were now looking at you both. I was dressed by the time you pulled away from her, saying, “Thank you so much,” like she had just given you the permission to do something.

x

There are medieval paintings of creation, with all the animals gladly jumping out of non-existence into existence again. That is what you show peasants to communicate faith. Wouldn’t that be the most illiterate way to depict the most basic aspect of the
miraculous? The deer wasn’t, and now it is. Isn’t that enough of a miracle? Isn’t that enough? An animal jumping out of nothing into something is more than what a painting of an angel could ever communicate.

When I peeled back the vacuum-bed and antlered my way out of the plastic, that is the animal I emerged as: one whose life announced itself as lucky, as the winner of a life-lottery. Bright-eyed, all will powered by motion suspended. Wet and ready to cry, like any animal’s newborn, when I came out.

This motion, I found, of leaping out of nothing into life. That is good. That is god.
I found out how I will probably die right after the company I worked for folded.

Richmond was filled with the cicaden buzzing of electric scooters one night, and then that buzz was gone. Who can really say why. Certainly not my manager, or her manager, or his manager (of which we are all managees). Everyone is alienated from the real production and distribution of all such commodities, even the ones whose scooting intent is distribution.

In this particular instance, the fast failure of the scooter business had given consumers the impression that the scooters merely packed up and left on their own, seeking
greener pastures in complex parking lots where they could coral themselves and fill their own empty metal chambers with scooter juice. But in reality, the last of the worth-getting scooters were tracked down and loaded into long semi-trucks, to be resold at auction or thrown into lakes by boys. I oversaw their packing away—me, and Bill the driver, who communicated only in sign language and quick notes written on the same paper he also wrapped cigarettes in.

I didn’t need any more reminders that even businesses were mortal. My dad was now in the hospital for peeing blood. I had been getting updates in that side of the family’s group chat for a few days. It was only a soft crisis. He was 71 so that’s a thing. His third wife, my step mom, was more than twenty years his junior and she summoned me to his bedside over iMessage and then messaged you over instagram when I didn’t respond. I went, but first I finished up my last official day of work, where we rounded up seven stranded scooters outside an abandoned Arby’s, where I also found a piece of mail with a name similar to mine on it propped outside the long-shut door.

Robert Katrina. Also unfortunate.

The last name was almost like a typo of my own, but it was also just an advertisement for heart disease prevention checkups at Walgreens, distorted by decay and left on the door of a place that used to have an address. Are you sure of your heart?
My dad had been a physician for over forty years. He now took pleasure in hospital stays with the same quiet superiority I imagined inundates the spirits of secret shoppers and sky marshals. I got to his hospital room after dinner time with a set of shitty iPhone headphones for him to borrow and a pocket Sudoku book I had already done all the Medium-rated right-side puzzles out of, but my dad was already asleep.

His mouth was open and bearded; he looked like Jack Nicholson playing a post-Hemlock Socrates. I knew he was only sleeping and I was under the impression that whatever was happening wasn’t life threatening, but his Terri Schiavo-mouth seemed to say: *unplug me, please.* Nancy (stepmom) awake: tapping an iPad with teetering acrylic fingers. I could see her slipping and groping me, like it was an accident of heavy nails plus muscle exhaustion. She beckoned me over with one claw the same way one coaxes a parakeet to step out of a cage. The hair on my neck raised up.

“What do you make of this diagnosis?” Nancy asked, like I was some kind of doctor and not just the neurotic son of a doctor.

She handed over the tablet glistening with my dad’s medical information. I thought, I hope this man knows better than to grant this lady power of attorney one day. But I looked down at the iPad. And as ultimately banal as it is, this is how I found out about Huntington’s disease. The words were just there, light on a lit screen.
“Never heard of it,” I shrugged, handing her the stuff and the iPad back.

I got out of there before my dad woke up, grateful to not have to talk about my newfound lack of job with a man dedicated to literally dying in his workplace. It wasn’t until I was home on my laptop that I realized the magnitude of this new information.

x

You hear all the time never to Google anything medical, because frequently freckles appearing in your retina will turn into tiny flecks of eye cancer. You were actually queen of this type of layered health anxiety. You were just a bit too old to have received the HPV vaccine, and one day a bump appeared on your asshole, which made you both ashamed and horrified.

First, you saw a nurse practitioner who told you it was a hemorrhoid, but this didn’t really live up to your nightmares, so you followed this with a full Pap which was A-OK and so you then asked the nurse to do a biopsy of the hemorrhoid, which the woman of course refused to do. Instead, the nurse brought in an older doctor, who happened to be my godfather (who were you really looking for?) but we’ve never talked about that. The man said, this is a wart, and you said, you mean, like, the herpes kind? Even though you had just gotten completely screened by the last medical professional. And so he replied
no, the bump was just a bump that appears on skin, like the ones that strike clammy hands of sticky kids. So small, he said, that it was essentially inoperable and would just go away with time. You told me this in your room, and then you said we didn’t have to worry about it but we also could use a condom if I wanted. Which is a no.

I hadn’t even noticed it. I spent a lot of time around your asshole, too. At first it was just to prove nothing bothered me. I researched everything mercilessly and I don’t mean watch porn. I could fit two fingers inside of your pussy then you stopped. What I love the most about the process was treating you like a horse I had to calm to get the tackle off of, feeling you relax and then relax more. Popping my cock into your ass.

But that didn’t stop you from going down the long, dark annals of Googling every anal blight known to man. Soon, you were convinced it was herpes. When this all happened, we were still in college, but never incredibly monogamous. Your song that sampled, “Have you ever seen a commie drink a glass of water?” played on the college radio. One day while I was in a comp lit class we were supposed to be in together, you texted me that you had done something really bad. Really bad. Like what? I asked you. You told me you had to go to Patient First because you had given herself a third degree burn on your ass. I told you to walk me through your thought process that caused this, step-by-step.

Anxious and embarrassed, you said you had gone to Walgreens and purchased a can of liquid nitrogen, the type usually only recommended for warts on sweaty feet. You also
bought a metal (“diamond”) emery board (stepmom). Then, you took turns repeatedly freezing and then sawing off the almost invisible-sized wart on your butthole until there was no wart left— but also no skin. Now you couldn’t sit down, you said.

I asked you to send pictures and you complied. Stooped over in a mirror, your long brown hair obscured your face like some Tumblrized girl from *The Ring*, and I imagined myself as my own father, examining my girlfriend’s mutilated butthole for damage already done. It looked like a steak that was starting to gray. I understood that once you saw the flaw, you couldn’t stop until you had carved it out. There’s at least a type of vivid honesty in that, even if we would never have top-notch anal sex again..

In class, we had just learned about Montaigne, who through some drama involving a 16th century street horse nearly died from a damaged skull and from whatever causes you to vomit blood. From then on, his writing became consumed with death, which was obviously his worst fear— the same man who re-asserted that to philosophize was to learn how to die. How this was all related, I can only say I knew somehow it was.

All that aside. Huntington’s is maybe the one instance where Google is always going to understate how fucked you completely are. I became more uncomfortable with Google since I discovered that if you Google suicide methods, hotlines come up. But what if you
just, like, want to know? Perhaps there’s been a hotlinification of death. Hotlinearity causes a kind of periphrasis, where you can no longer arrive directly at the event, you just must circle the drain of meaning blindly until you are swallowed whole by hole.

For instance, Google quickly surmises that Huntington’s is an inherited condition in which nerve cells in the brain break down over time.

Meanwhile, the Huntington’s Disease Society of America states that Huntington’s is a fatal genetic disorder that causes the progressive breakdown of nerve cells in the brain. It deteriorates a person’s physical and mental abilities usually during their prime working years and has no cure.

I saw this when I got home. Genetic? was my first question when I started tapping away while eating yogurt. I had been existing in that kind of solipsism where I didn’t really care what my dad had until I knew the way in which it was personally imminent. You and I also had just moved into this house a few days before. In order to afford it, we switched neighborhoods and most of our kitchen stuff was still in boxes, but we had at least set our beds and our wifi up.

I learned that Huntington’s is genetic. So genetic, in fact, that it is frequently used in science textbooks to illustrate how dominant genes are passed or not passed via simple probability to offspring. You can remember how a monk and his peas went from Aa and
aa to Aa, aa, aA, aa. With one parent carrying the mutated Huntington’s gene, a child has a 50% chance of inheriting the disease. Aaaaaaaaa.

Where did that leave my father’s peas? My older sister committed suicide, my younger sister was in France practicing pansexuality and throwing roman candles at the wreckage of the free market. My dad, by my count, had fathered three more of my half-siblings, all of whom were still in school. Statistically, three of us were probably doomed, and one already was. I called you, but you didn’t pick up. I scooped one of our kittens off the floor and held it to my chest. I was met with small claws.

What were the symptoms? I hadn’t seen any in my dad that I could think of. It read like a cross between Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s. Your brain deteriorates along with your nervous system and your motor functions. I had no clue what that meant. I considered it all and decided that the rough senility described actually did remind me of my crotchety father. However, he had always seemed this way. And, he didn’t seem to have the telltale chorea or palsy, nicknamed Saint Vitus’ dance after the martyred patron saint of dancers. I read that the length of the mutation determined when you would develop the onset of symptoms, which then took around ten years to kill you, if you didn’t kill you first. There was no cure. And if you inherited it from a father, you were more likely to develop it younger—around midlife. It was the Oedipus complex made real.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
I would get tested, I determined. After all the drama in my family with the Ancestry.com tests, I felt somewhat prepared. Not so fast, Google responded. Because of the high risk of suicide associated with just a *diagnosis* of Huntington’s, you had to go through at least one year of gene therapy before any doctor could tell you what your deal was. You can’t test children for Huntington’s, since it is fatal and there’s no cure.

Most people choose not to get tested even if they know it runs in their family. A specific type of IVF was even invented so that mothers who potentially had Huntington’s could have doctors fertilize only their non-Huntington’s-carrying eggs without ever revealing to the women whether they actually carry the disease or not. Meaning, that if a woman only produced eggs carrying the Huntingtin gene that month, the doctors would pretend to inseminate her just so she could live another day without knowing for certain that she had this disease, while also being sure to not pass this (particular) existential crisis of not-knowing on to a new life.

By the time you came home, this affliction had taken over my life. You told me to stop Googling immediately. But I was way past Google. I had already found the tiny, 400-person subreddit that functioned as a support group for this rare and confusing condition. I immediately hated how you could sort by top posts, click a username, and browse through their chronological descent into madness. I knew you thought that I was
overreacting, like you had with your own asshole. I get why you would think that. But this was real, I said. I am probably going to die, I said. Patty is probably going to die. I am never going to have kids. There was no way I could cut this out of me.

“You don’t know any of that for certain,” you said. “Don’t react to something that hasn’t happened yet.”

You brought out the special occasion bong, the indestructible one made out of “tank glass” that we had held onto since college. I told you about the Arby’s, showed you the piece of mail with almost-my name on it that I saved for you. “Do you like that? Do you think it is a warning?” I asked you, after bong rip.

“No,” you said. “Bobcat, most people just see this feeling of low-stakes, agential interference as luck.”

x

Since I never quite believed in God, I didn’t know what to fall back on, and my life became a constant state of falling. And, because there probably is no god, this falling came to be inseparable from being. I also never tried to go to church so hey maybe that’s my fault. I thought the point of worship wasn’t for anything to be aimed at anything, but just worship itself. I saw analogs of worship everywhere in times when I could do things
without being aware of myself: sex, kickball, swimming. I never picked up a lacrosse stick again and felt ridiculous running outside of the gym.

But this incredible thing happened the next day. We were returning from brunch at my mother’s house, where we agreed not to talk about my dad’s diagnosis. It felt weird being there without either of my sisters, like I was outnumbered now by all the half and step siblings, and they just look and feel like side characters. But they all, as a group, had gotten really into playing farming simulators together, which you and I could get behind in small doses. In the game, you picked pixelated trees for candy apples, which you could then feed possums that lived in a forest filled with geodes (in turn, seeds).

You and I didn’t want to stay too late because we had wanted to go to that hippy guy’s cafe to read, but it ended up getting too late to go there, anyway. We both had our backpacks. Well, yours was a big purse. For some reason, I had my passport in mine, because I had lost my I.D. during the move and had been using the passport to get into bars like a jackass. You told me about these possums you had seen at this ambiguously operational body shop near our new house. I told you that we should go feed them, like the possums in the game. I was actually a little bit drunk but it didn’t matter. We walked into 7-11 and picked up a bunch of industrially produced pastries, like Twinkies. I walked out without paying for any of them. I still can’t help but do this. We went down to the lot by the junkyard with all the possums and sat on a big tire, placing a few unwrapped Twinkies around us. We try to lure them out.
At first, none came. The night moon went from huge to just big. It was one of those unfamiliar times when there was nothing to occupy us. That’s what we talked about. Neither of us were thinking about the diagnosis, although we did think about how we weren’t thinking about it (if that’s not the same thing). And then, one by one enormous raccoons came out. They picked up and fondled the Twinkies with their strange, little-star hands. I looked over and your eyes were wet. We tossed them Ho Hos, but they threw the Snoballs back.

After a while of this back and forth, I noticed behind us six or seven young teenagers walking down the block, kind of laughing and staring. You and I felt like maybe they were just witnessing something that is really strange to randomly witness—people feeding a pack of possums in this way. And maybe they were laughing at that at first, but this guy who had to be at least a decade younger than me pulled out a tiny gun. And so suddenly, you and I were being mugged at gunpoint. The possums split with a loud lack of grace.

There wasn’t even a second when I was afraid. I never felt scared but I also did nothing to stop it. I just knew you were supposed to cooperate when this happened, so I handed the kids my backpack and you and I gave up our phones and wallets. I guess that while I was willingly proffering up all my stuff, I handed one of the kids my hat to hold for some
reason—this Dolphin Rescue one that someone left in my car when I briefly drove Ubers.

When we told them we had given them everything, the one with the gun told us to have a nice night. Wait— I called out to him. He looked surprised. What if I told him that I was probably going to die a long, awful death in my 30s or 40s?

I asked if I could have my hat back, and I think then he realized it was still in his other hand, the one that didn’t have the gun. He handed it back and they all walked away.

We waited for them to get out of sight and we walked as calmly as we could to the car, which was just up the block and to the left. We got in and just sat there. These guys had our one set of new keys, our phones, our wallets. We weren’t sure we would be able to get into our house. They had also gotten my journal and my library book, which I think was The Savage Detectives at the time, but I could be wrong.

You were crying in the car in a pretty underwhelming way, like you had these big, hesitant, what-next tears. I looked out the front windshield and could just make out in the church park two blocks away figures cast under a streetlamp the same pack of teens who had just robbed us. They were there standing in a circle and going through the dumped contents of our backpacks. So brazen, I thought. I still hadn’t felt afraid at all during any of these interactions and I didn’t feel afraid then. It felt like a joke.
It did all actually feel kind of funny. Like, I wanted to laugh. I told you that I was going to get out of the car to ask for my keys. You told me, absolutely not. I got out, walked a little ways in front of the car, and shouted out to the teens who were probably a football field away. I hailed them and said, hey, teens. They didn’t verbally respond, but they silently looked up and stared, like I had called on them in class. I shouted and asked for my keys back. They just kept looking. You hit on the horn and I jumped 35 feet. Get in the car, you yelled at me, furious. I got in, sat back down, and you hit the lock button. You were now crying very hard. I watched the teens walk away quickly from the park, away from us, suddenly discreet middle school alumna.

I told you that I had no idea what we were supposed to do now. You agreed, you had no idea either. We could try and get into the apartment, I suggested. That meant walking back there together, in the dark. You said: I don’t think they’re coming after us. I said: I don’t think we should bother with the police. They were just kids. You also agreed, though there was a lot we didn’t know how to say about that at the time. We felt like we had probably deserved to get mugged, because we were white people who had just moved to a neighborhood under rapid gentrification. We were a target covered in smushed Twinkie grime and twigs, our visible sins. Even the possums were probably in on it. And then, on our way back to our house, we saw a lone possum, looking moonish in the dark’s dark.
“Where were you, my knight?” you asked it. No answer.

I hoisted myself over the metal gate then held it open. We tried all the windows, and I ended up popping out a screen and you slid in through it, you are sometimes so small. We cancelled our credit cards and bathed. Water everywhere on the floor because we hadn’t unpacked the mat yet.

x

We drank a bottle of red wine. We wished we knew how to do more sinister drugs.

“A toast to agential interference,” I said. I had become unemployed, “told” I was going to die, and been robbed while feeding racoons in practically 24 hours.

“I can’t imagine unpacking all of this,” you said. I thought you meant my emotional problems, but then I looked around. You had labeled the moving boxes using a personal index of symbols which looked like stacks of runes on ruins around the small house.

“I think we should take this as a sign that things aren’t going great,” I said.

“Why don’t we just leave? Take some time off?” you said.
Where would we go? We had all of these questions. We also had my sister’s life insurance money, which we had intended to put away for when we moved. Your licence had been stolen, but not your passport. My passport had been stolen, but I knew where my licence would turn up if I looked hard enough in a couple of the boxes labeled ◯. So we were limited to the United States. But not the continent!

We thought about Puerto Rico or Hawaii. You had been to the Virgin Islands when you were a little girl, since your parents had once eloped there. We didn’t know the difference between the three main islands, but we felt compelled to latch onto Saint John, which was mostly national park.

“My parents will think we’re getting married,” you said. I shrugged.

“We could get married,” I said, indifferent.

Bratty, you told me not to be an idiot. Winter break was coming, and as a grad student you would be able to leave.

Figuring out all the details occupied most of my time that followed. I didn’t want to visit my father, and I didn’t have any job to go to. I didn’t want to tell my sister Patty where I was going because even though she lived in fucking France, I knew she would judge me and call me a late-life, colonizer Rimbaud.
I deserved it. I had never been to the Caribbean and actually didn’t have much to go off of, so I read different travel guides. Everything was extremely expensive, but I tried not to even look at it. It was just the Peace Corps blood money from my sister’s secret suicide, I told myself.

We found an AirBnB with a pool. We quickly ordered bathing suits from Amazon. You put your twelve-step Korean skincare routine into twelve bottles. You got me a new journal. An Uber picked us up in the very early morning, eight days after the robbery. The driver’s name was Cory and he lived by the quarry, he said for the ten millionth time on the ten millionth sunrise.

We had to fly north to a bigger city so we could fly south to Florida, where we could then get on a smaller flight to Saint Thomas, which is the Virgin Island with the airport. We would then have to take a cab across the island to a ferry that would take us to Saint John, where we would then have to take a cab to the rental car agency and then a car to our house. I downloaded an audiobook about meditation and bought a brand new Sudoku book. We had to sprint from gate to gate. The flights got progressively worse, the way they always do. But I began to feel nauseous on the third, about two hours into that flight. I looked around and I guess airlines do not have vomit bags anymore and I willed myself to recalibrate while the plane flew through a storm of irrational intensity. I
didn’t want to disturb the lady next to us in order to go to the bathroom and dry heave, so I held it in. We landed.

Even as we taxid, this great, radiant Caribbean heat started to filter in. It was my first time feeling it since Haiti. I felt pressed by the strange, low light of the equator. I pushed through the seats like an asshole to quickly grab my bag. It wasn’t an airport airport, so we had to walk out onto the tarmac down this old-fashioned JFK-is-waving-at-everyone airplane ladder. As soon as my feet touched the hot cement, I vomited. A stewardess waved her hands and ushered me toward an orange cone, to the side of the runway. I felt bad, for some reason, vomiting on the ground and so I threw up in my hands until I realized what a huge mistake that also was.

“Oh my god,” you said when you finally got off the plane. You asked why I hadn’t said anything and I told you about how there were no vomit bags anymore. I was crying, but not because I was sad. You held my stuff. I washed off as best I could in the bathroom while you got a painkiller for yourself at the bar and this nice grapefruit soda, Ting, for me. Considering how many people were drinking in the airport, it occured to me that there would be a ton of drinking here, which would be strange because neither of us really drank that much anymore— although we originally did meet at that party, drinking too much now so long ago.
We took our bags and grabbed a weird van-cab that heaved us around the island. We had trouble understanding what our driver was saying, and he had a towel over his dashboard to hide all the various Check Engines.

The roads all seemed perilously narrow, and everyone drove on the left side. We passed through a crowded market area, past beach houses and churches, up into the mountains. We were halted briefly by wild donkeys. Giant hotels and houses were still missing the rooftops from two major hurricanes (Irma and Maria) a few years prior. We wrapped around to the other side of the island, where we waited in a long line with tan locals carrying boxes of Keurig canisters and other supplies to take back to their houses on St. John, alongside other tourists of varying degrees whiteness and middle age. The ferry then took us across Mingo Bay to Cruz Bay, from one island to the other. A large bird with a fish in its jowls kept pace, flying alongside the ferry, like it was showing off its catch. I suspected we were the youngest people there who weren’t there as somebody’s baby or sugar baby. I saw enormous yachts in the water, women in bikinis onboard, and their older male defilers behind the masts. I couldn’t imagine their lives echoing with the same level of objective sentience as my own, but this didn’t trouble me.

x

There were chickens everywhere. It felt like everytime I opened a car door, I would nearly miss a large rooster. I joked that it was always the same one, sprinting across the
island, cutting through the parkland at the center to catch me at my car door wherever I went.

We had to hunt for someone to take us to the car rental, although I already regretted my confidence at having decided to rent a car while there. Driving past other cars on the narrow road made me wince in whatever eye was the closest to oncoming death. The rental place was filled with Jeeps and more Jeeps, bright colors. You guessed it was so they could find tourists if they drove off the road. You had been listening to seven hours of true crime podcasts. We had even watched a documentary on the disappearance of Hannah Upp, a young teacher who had Jason Bourne-style amnesia that made her forget who she was and vanish. The last time anyone had seen her was on this island, the day before Irma hit. I held my breath as I tried to back out of the narrow space. You offered to drive and I feigned resilience because I’m the guy and you were somehow more at ease than me at this, despite having been in a serious car crash.

The last time you had been to the Virgin Islands, you had the original iPod and had listened to the Postal Service’s *Give Up* over and over again, greedy. You were just a kid when it came out. We played it on the speakers. We stopped at the grocery store where there was a surprising amount of vegan products for you, and we stocked up on the most expensive food I have ever encountered. It dawned on me then that upscale tourism was the only economy here. Coffee creamer was $15. These are space station prices, I told you.
There were no visible road names because the island was replacing all of the telephone poles on the side of the road with these enormous, hurricane-proof poles, five times the thickness and twice the height. The roads sort of terraced up the mountains. I was pretty sure all the trees had somehow survived the hurricanes; they were dense and very green, like we were paying for.

We had to drop into our driveway at a 45 degree angle. It felt like a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. Our AirBnB looked like the guest house from The O.C., and the pool was almost an infinity pool. We looked out onto this beautiful light blue inlet with a white beach, uncomfortably called Chocolate Hole.

The houses around us seemed unlit and empty, and the house directly above and next to us was ready to be burned down in insurance fraud. We showered in this weird shower-room made out of stone, and the water came out of the ceiling like hot rain. Then we felt too tired to move anywhere, so we just sat on the deck and played gin while I ate deli slices of turkey directly out of the bag. Life felt like a gift that I was anxious of holding for fear of accidentally dropping and breaking. Like when someone tries to hand me a baby. And there were so many stars. I can’t even tell you though you know. It seemed like the spaces between them were actually just extinguished sockets, and the night sky could at one point have been very bright, and all light— maybe, in another time.
We didn’t have sex that night. We hadn’t in a couple of weeks. I didn’t feel like there was pressure to do anything from you, but I did feel like, hey, isn’t this supposed to be romantic? Although I don’t actually think sex is romantic. I think the idea of love is maybe how we rationalize this thing that indicates we are animals who evolved consciousness out of some awful and peripherally related accident.

The next day, we drove perilously from beach to beach. By we, I mean you. You drove. We rented snorkeling gear for the week from a lady with a leg tattoo of a lady with a leg tattoo. I tried not to think of whose mouth had suckled from the mouthpiece before me. I had only ever snorkeled before when I was a teenager in Tulum, for my dad’s second wedding. I always looked back and thought: those are the most colorful colors I’ve seen in my life.

My island research wasn’t that up to date. I wasn’t prepared for the fact that the hurricane had basically ripped all of the coral reefs out of the water. Some older, serious snorkeling-types were saying it could take three more years for the reefs to build back to even resembling what they once were. Nothing was as colorful as I remembered— just swatches of greenish grays. We still saw these super blue fish. At Maho Bay, sting rays, sea turtles, and a massive, concrete sign of the beach that had been pulled into the ocean by trouble.
I loved hunting through the murky water for the turtles. We had to rent a paddleboard to get out deep enough, but the turtles were the size of one of those circular childrens’ sleds that don’t really work. They appeared to have narrow, small sharks that lived symbiotically with them, resting on their shells. They’re buddies, I thought. When I tried to swim closer to them, the sharks would dart under the turtle’s belly, and the turtle would then kick up sand to obscure itself from me. I just really wanted to make eye contact with it, so I swam above it until it came up for air. Its dark, black eye fixed on me. It looked horrible, and omniscient. Too tired to pretend.

When we went to return the paddleboard, I told the woman with the leg tattoo how cool I thought it was that the sharks and turtles were such chill homies.

“Sharks?” she said. “Those are parasites.”

That night, we ate mahi sandwiches at Woody’s and interacted with a loud, French Canadian couple with almost no manners. The good snorkeling was gone, they told us again. We had to scuba dive to see the deeper reefs who were only threatened by the gradual and inevitable warming of the entire planet. We could get certified in a couple of hours at the only resort that hadn’t been flipped over like a table by the hurricane, the Westin.
“It is another planet,” one of the Canadians said about deep sea diving. “In Canada, we feel so close to the woods, we are always hunting. So the wild is only beautiful the way your mother is beautiful. But the ocean,” he said. “The ocean is like another woman. The other woman you can never have.”

We also asked them how to buy weed. You just need to go down the street and find a West Indian guy, they said. I didn’t ask what that meant, but then they said: West Indian is black. I had ordered this type of very thick, milkshakey tropical drink, a bushwacker, that was impossible to drink quickly. You had already downed your painkiller before me. You were buoyant and better at having fun then I will ever be.

“Stay here with these guys,” you said. “I’ll go over there and buy the weed.” There were three West Indian men outside the convenience store, sitting on a ledge. I asked you if you wanted me to come. You rolled your eyes and left the outdoor bar to go over there. You were wearing a black dress and straw hat. You looked famous. I’m sure people thought you were.

“She is brave, no?” a Canadian said. You talked to one of the guys out front. He said something, and you walked into the corner store. “They are probably making her walk inside in case the cop is watching. It is cool.”
A few minutes later, one of the guys who looked Rastafarian got up and followed you in. I imagined you standing in a narrow aisle, and how easy it would be to bring these guys back to the house where I could push their semen back into you with a joint.

You walked out smiling, handed something to one of the guys sitting down, and then made small-talk and shook their hands. Then, you turned and tried to walk quickly away, but tripped over a metal chain suspended between two fence posts to cordon off the sidewalk from the ever-dangerous traffic. The drug dealer held out his hand, helped lift you up, and you were both laughing. I was absolutely hard in my pants.

“They were nice,” you said when she got back to the table. “I asked them to roll the joints for us because you are so terrible at it.”

We bought the Canadians their drinks to get away from them and told them we would see them scuba diving. You drove us back to the house, and our steep driveway took us a few tries to find. We went out to the pool, lit a joint, and looked at constellations. Nice, right? I said. Your music taste had evolved in the last decade from the Postal Service to Swans. I had started to give you space to go to shows alone, and you weren’t showing me your new music anymore. Here, you had Manuel Göttsching playing from the speaker on your phone. In the shower, we washed each other with your Sol de Janeiro body wash. I tried grabbing your ass, and you pulled away, but I pulled you back into me with your back up against my chest. I went down on you in the shower, you went down on me.
in the bed. You only liked normal sex if it all went very slowly, which could be hard because I always felt like I needed to orgasm quickly but didn’t want to give you that. Semen both disturbed you and turned you on.

After we fucked, we smoked more weed and started to fall asleep. My leg twitched. Was it Huntington’s? I wondered. I felt like my heart started beating fast, which in turn made my heart beat very fast. Was the weed laced with something? It felt like I was actually dying. I felt like I had to get out of bed, so I abruptly stood up. What’s wrong? you asked. My heart, I said. I think I am dying. Get back in, you said. You’re just having anxiety, you are OK. One day, I am going to die, though, I said. You said: yes, but not for a long, long time. The same conversation all the time.

I curled into the fetal position and wrapped my arms around my legs while you stroked my back and told me to breathe in, breathe out. I was worried I was having a seizure. Sometimes, I told people I had epilepsy rather than bother explaining what was really going on. I kept repeating: I don’t know what’s happening to me. I was crying. It felt like five hours. I kept thinking that you had called the police because I really was dying, and you were just pretending that everything was fine to make my passing go easier. We were waiting for medics who looked like agents. I didn’t want to know my diagnosis. Shhh, shhh, shhh, you said and said. Finally, whatever it was, it stopped and I sank into badly shaped sleep.
Diving certification was so easy that there were actual children doing it, who you liked to boss around. We practiced in the swimming pool at the Westin. I learned that when your ears pop, you could plug your nose and try to force air out of your nostrils and this would alleviate the pressure. It baffled me that nobody had ever just explained this to me on an airplane before. I also learned that we could only come up from the oceanic depths if we didn’t rise any faster than the bubbles we exhaled. Otherwise, different bubbles would form in our blood and we would die from “The Bends.” A child next to me in the pool said he had actually been certified in Jamaica, but his mom had faked his age from 12 to 13 so he could go out on a dive, and it almost got him deported.

Our instructor said he could take us all on an easy shallow dive on a charter boat, out to a place called Eagle Shoals if we wanted. It was the middle of the day, so we took a break and looked up a catalogue of local fishes. All the names sounded fake: silvery horse-eye jacks, queen triggerfish, vibrant blue tang, spiny Caribbean lobster, spotted eagle rays, Creole wrasses, cleaner gobies. Those could be anything, I said. You copiously applied sunscreen. You know, maybe we should just go tomorrow? you said. The boat is going to be packed with all these students, plus it was already late in the day. But we checked the forecast, and it was going to rain tomorrow— it was actually supposed to storm later on tonight. Let’s just do it, I said.
We signed up for the trip out to the shoals at the last second. People were already being set up with tanks and suits. We crowded into a glass-bottom boat with two dozen other people, some we recognized from class, but there were also other, more experienced divers from the hotel, including the weirdly loud French Canadians, who sat next to us.

We were careful on descent, holding a cable the whole way down. There were tons of female sea urchins, which are the white ones (the suctiony ones you can touch). There was a school of the *Finding Nemo* fish, which we followed to a reef that resembled a large human brain. I had difficulty staying in the moment, because I was worried that if we stayed down too long, we would be left behind. I had read a story about a man whose respirator (breathing thing) failed on a dive, but he found a pocket of air in a shipwreck and survived two days off of eating urchins and drinking stale water he found in a kettle. We worked our way back to the cable and followed our bubbles up.

We were the first ones there. The Canadians briefly came on board to fix a problem with the weights on their belt, but they went back in again. I couldn’t see land anywhere around us. Your hair was thick and curly from the saltwater, you had a strip of sunburn on your nose. You looked smart and athletic, the perfect scuba diver— you looked like you had been doing this all of her life. I was suddenly aware of how grateful I was for you to be here with me. I hadn’t even thought of what it would mean for you, if I were to really have Huntington’s. I hoped we would still be able to be friends if you chose to leave me.
The Canadians were running late, and as soon as they were back on the ship, the boat took off. Another bird kept pace at us. Did you see that? you asked. You were looking out into the ocean, where we came from. I shook my head. What? I asked. A flash of light, you said.

x

That night, there was a real storm. It was like all the water in the sky was dumping down at once. Like someone had pressed a button. Chocolate Hole was a hot mess. I heard a thunking noise, and when I went out to look, I saw that an iguana had fallen from a tree onto our deck’s table, but still looked ancient and composed. The rain took the pressure off of us having to explore the island or be social in this tropical snowglobe. In truth, we liked doing nothing.

I wasn’t sure if I should smoke weed ever again, but I did it anyway.

“What if we can’t ever have kids?” I asked you.

“I know we couldn’t,” you said back. “I don’t think we need to be thinking about this.”

What concerns me, I said to the storm, is the question of why is anything created?
You put on Susumu Yokota. That was for me. I closed my eyes and started swaying back and forth, like the way the plants and weird worms on the coral looked, which looked incredibly similar to the way mitochondria look under a microscope.

I thought to myself: what keeps me swaying right now? I could decide to continue to do this until my body gives out, but really I couldn’t because of the anxieties that pop into my head. For instance, I am afraid that you— and you are dancing, too— would think it was weird if I never stopped dancing.

But I am also aware that one day my body will fail, and I am also aware that I need to do different physical things, like working, banging rocks and eating food, so that I can stay in this room with these legs to dance on. This idea of cause and effect even mimics the movement of dancing itself— back and forth, back and forth. Without fear, we wouldn’t be able to contract and retract our comprehension of ourselves in the universe. We would just be, without knowing or caring about our own preservation.

But consciousness isn’t fear, or it doesn’t have to be. If you could live a life where you were sure that the essence of who is you would somehow always rebound continuously, like in the belief in god and your own safety or in procreation or reincarnation, you won’t have the fear that will stop you from living. It’s the very thing itself—
consciousness— that produces its own needs, in the way stimulation around us is felt and deciphered at the same time.

In order for the world to feel like we have agency, we need to feel like we were put here to do things— hence dancing. We need to feel involved in the general sea-sway cause and effect of it. All sensory experience— hunger, thirst, pain of any kind, desire— all of that is just a failsafe to keep our will going, to keep our experience of experience right on experiencing in this great back and forth.

And when this storm clears up, because they always do in order for whatever it is we call a storm to really be a storm at all— the light you witness all the world moving in will change again.

Now, the tide glowed softly into Chocolate Hole, and out into the ocean itself, spreading and rebounding in luminous force. The water was literally glowing. And you know the light in the water is caused by microbial life— the same movement back and forth that exists at the bottom of trenches and deep inside hot springs. The water is teeming with tiny DNA. We’ve only captured and catalogued a small fraction of what abounds our planet. It could, very well, be one essence, because you never know. Or, rather than solid essence, the essence itself is the back and forth. How did it go from explosions of gas in that first quiver of light out of nothing, from this one thing existing one way into this motion of back and forth?
Maybe it’s in the way everything was supposed to have been exerted outward. For outward to even exist requires something to either have a boundary or for it to come back into itself again.

What separates these two things, inward and outward, is time. Time, to the point that if the universe were counting upwards to the creation of itself, it would also be counting back down to its own absolute, entropic negation— but these would still be the same number. It would be six days to the start of the world and six days to the end of it. The thing we think of as time is just how we manage this continuous, unified process of cause and effect that is being alive and conscious.

When we look at the sky, no matter from whatever point on earth we are looking up from, we are always looking into the center of the universe. Still, we think our creator is personified because we exist as a person. For us to exist as a person requires other people to exist as people to engage with and against us in the big back and forth, bucking and sawing of existence. It’s why it’s such a paradox that we need to consume energy and life of some kind in order to exist. And we aren’t wrong— we are created by something personified, only, it is our parents. And this is the case for all of eukarya.
The things outside ourselves move us. We react and exist to move, in response to energy and heat and mass. Coldness doesn’t exist. It’s the absence of heat.

I woke up sweating on the couch the next morning to a loud knock on the door. I tried to just lay there. But then I remembered that you had fallen asleep in the other room, on the bed. The knock came again.

“It’s the police,” behind the door said. I quickly did a glance around the room to make sure there were no drugs. Had we been busted?

In front of me were two USVI police officers, in their light blue uniforms. My first thought was the pot you bought.

“Are you Robert Catherine?”

The “yes, sir” and “I’m fine thank you how are you?” came out quick and then my mind quickly flipped through the murky rolodex of names of people who could have possibly died. Hello, the guys said. You came out in your beach coverup. Are you Caroline Cauffield? they asked. Both officers had island accents. We nodded.

“Do you recognize either of these two people?”
We looked down at the photos. I thought for a moment that the Canadians had driven off a cliff, but this couple had different bodies, different hair. You said, I think we saw them yesterday. Wasn’t that one of the couples who went on our dive trip? I nodded, and then felt ashamed at how awful I am at being observant. I literally had no clue.

“You last saw them on your trip?” the officer said. “Do you remember when?”

“I don’t know if I can be sure. It was really crowded.”

“Try to picture them,” the cop said. “What about them do you remember?”

“I remember the girl didn’t swim with a wetsuit on. I remember thinking how cool she looked, like she knew what she was supposed to be doing.”

“Do you remember if she put anything on after the dive?” the officer said.

“No... no,” you said.

“Did you see her after you got out of the water? Got out of the boat?”

The couple had gone missing. They missed their ferry back to St. Thomas, and they failed to return to their children.
“Jesus Christ,” I said. “What do you think happened?”

An employee had found their clothing and wallets still in a bag on the boat that morning. There were several search parties out now, in the water. The cops were wondering if anyone had seen them since they went in the water on the dive.

I had the strange sensation that I was in trouble. I think it was just the proximity to authority, when I, as a fallible human, know I have done something wrong. But these guys were totally nice. They handed us their card and left.

As soon as we could, we divided up so that you were trying to figure out how to watch the news on the complicated smart TV, and I was looking for any report on the internet. None yet, except an unofficial post on a local forum where people were discussing the activities of the search and rescue.

Later, you drove us around the island again to the wildlife rescue. Several donkeys walked up to you as soon as you got out of the car. I watched them come to you like you were the very thing that created and named all the animals. It was hot. I wanted to make you the mother of everything. Hold you in a farm. The older woman who worked there mentioned the American couple that went missing, and you excitedly jumped in that we were actually on their boat, and the woman and you shared a moment over how near we
all were to awfulness. There was a baby goat wearing a sweater. He has a temperature, the woman offered. I tentatively stroked a muddy cat. A donkey bayed. She wants something from me, the owner said. We gave her some of our cash— the lady, not the donkey.

We drove to the bar Skinny Legs. It was packed full of people, and the bartenders were all talking about the missing couple. Now, it had finally made it to the news. They were from Massachusetts. They had been in the Peace Corps together— when I heard this, I looked over at you. Cursed, you said. None of their equipment had been found yet, and their phones, cards, and identification had been left on the boat. Planes and boats were searching a wide perimeter, but everyone mentioned that the storm had been a rough one last night, so rough it had drawn the deep sea plankton into the bay, lighting up the water.

“Wouldn’t this be the way to go? Maybe they killed themselves,” one of the patrons said.

“Or, they faked their deaths,” the bartender said.

“It could have been us,” I said. But we felt alive.
Your dress barely covered your ass. I love grabbing you, forcing you over and against things, smothering and massaging you until all your weight relaxes for me to ceaselessly cup.

x

The next day, we decided to walk along the beaches on that side of the island as detectives. We were doing a bad job of not constantly looking for updates about the couple on our phones.

We found their social medias. They both had tweeted a lot. The man sang in a band, and the press looked closely at his writing, which was prone to surface-level melancholia. Tweets about: feeling empty, global warming, unfair federal policies. But there were also tweets about: loving his wife, excitement about travel, and interest in scuba diving. The woman in the duo was an artist, whose exhibition had been an actually pretty cool collection of mall fountains. They both were also teachers. Their marriage looked outwardly happy. Like everyone, they were also in debt.

But because the man ruminated on life a bit too much, there was some talk from pundits and police about how this was still a missing persons case and there was no sign of death or foul play yet. I imagined the police thumbing through my journal, seeing me flip out
over existence and death, and immediately assumed I had drowned myself and poor Caroline and every virgin and every baby. I was an unhappy person.

We collected strange corals. We hopped over rocks to approach a wild goat but it vertically fled us up a cliffside. We went back into town, to the fake rough bar where we met the Canadians, but they were gone. There was nothing to do but drink, so we got drunk. When we returned to the house, we watched a French crime series involving a mysterious, sentient woods where nothing was really ever dead. You fell asleep.

I carried you like a fireman into the bedroom. I laid you down and looked at you.

You were still asleep. Were you good at faking it? I lifted your leg, the darkest part of your body, and I pulled it over to the side. Your hair was covering your face. I pulled your other leg over and your dress up. I touched your knee and there was sand. I stood there and waited then rearranged your arms. Should you look drunk or thrown back? I got up and got your phone and entered your password and opened your photos. Who did the selfies go to? I'm not the type to look and see. I turned your flash on like I’d just left it off on accident and took a photo and turned the lamp on and took another. I kept your eyes covered with your hair but I pulled almost all of it out of the way of your mouth, but your lips were too closely closed when I tried to stick my thumb in without touching anything down to the back of your throat.
First their diving weights were found nearby the reef, and then over the course of the rest of our week in Saint John, their flippers and masks showed up on the beaches, too. It would be another week and a half until a dented canister of oxygen was found on a southerly atoll, long after we had flown home. Shark experts were brought in to talk about the indentations while disoriented children pled on camera for the search to continue. My dad was out of the hospital.

On the day we got a call from an FBI agent, I tried talking to my dad about the disease, but he denied it and said it was a mistake. I asked him what his parents died from, and he said breast cancer and Parkinsons. I looked back online, and another symptom of this shit was anosognosia, which is when sick people do not think they are sick.

You and I both had to give interviews to an FBI agent, but this time they asked us about our full day and everything we remembered. I finally had the opportunity to use my journal as proof, letting my own written I-did-this-I-did-that stand in for memory, somehow validating this strange habit. After you got off the phone, we settled into listening to a podcast and unpacking the kitchen. You froze, hands on the cutlery.

“Do you remember how when we were on the boat, I asked you if you saw something glinting in the water?”
I could imagine that, but as soon as I remembered, I doubted myself.

“I think so.”

“What if that was them? And they were trying to signal the boat with a mirror?”

We stopped what we were doing and contacted the agents again. You were self conscious and rushed to explain what you had seen, and you said you weren’t sure if it meant anything. The Fed thanked you.

x

It was the following week that a French man I recognized from my sister’s Instagram showed up at my mother’s door with flowers and asked if he could marry Patty. Somehow, this elated my mom, who had to be socially pressured not to immediately tell my sister and ruin the oncoming proposal. Not long after, Patty was on the phone, telling me she was pregnant.

And now I had the dilemma: was I supposed to tell her about Huntington’s? I didn’t even know it was real, and she was already pregnant. By the time she could get tested, it would be too late for an abortion. You told me to tell her, and you make the most sense.
I discovered that the local university had a Huntington’s center, and I scheduled an appointment to meet with a doctor, but when the morning came I couldn’t make myself go. In these two ways, I am totally a failure.

 Bodies sink the ocean floor, but over time, decomposition fills them with gas and causes them to float back up to the surface. A few things can hinder this process: if the flesh is torn by fish, the gas just escapes. Then, it’s a matter of how long it takes for the ligaments to wear down around the joints, separating bones from bones. Freed parts of the body might float up, especially if they are made more buoyant by rubber or plastic. It was the guy’s foot— still in a flipper— that washed up on the shore of Water Island. Later, this was confirmed through DNA testing.

 We were told you might have to testify at the couple’s murder trial in both courts. Charges were being brought against both the dive instructor and the company. You never ended up having to go to the trial, but did give a sworn statement. You told them you had seen the light. Prosecutors blamed the boat’s dive master, our instructor, for not having double checked the head count, for leaving too quickly, for not having seen the glint in the ocean that you had seen, for not telling you how to recognize the signal for what it was— which you interpreted as confirmation that you had failed to save these people’s lives and nothing else.
We felt guilty for our inaction in everything. Our guilt hung around the house like sunbeam dust. We also knew that we hadn’t done anything wrong, but the feeling resisted intelligence. We felt like we had both learned a lesson that was terrible, but we couldn’t say what it was.

When it finally happened, the not guilty verdict was all over the news. We didn’t feel one way or the other about it, but we were, of course, objectively interested in the trial because we knew it was related to us. We weren’t sure the diving company had done anything wrong— the defense had argued that the Canadians, coming in and out of the water twice, Thing One and Thing Two had thrown the whole head count off by two, giving the dive instructor an overestimation of who was in the boat. And, if you’ve seen one scuba diving couple, you’ve seen them all.

I picked up a call from an unknown number, thinking I was finally hearing back from an employer. The voice on the other end was a woman, asking if I was Robert Catherine. I said, yes. She told me she had found my water-logged journal on the roof of her apartment building, the one the kids had stolen long ago, and she asked if I wanted it back.
She was across town. I got to her apartment complex and she came out to the security fence and stood on the other side. She was an indeterminate hippy-type who could have been a freshman or 27. She had gone up on her roof to take photos of the sunrise a few weeks ago and found it there wet from rain. She said read all of it. “I thought about not giving it back to you,” she said, hands hanging onto the bars, white nailpolish.

It is different when a stranger wants me. I could barely picture myself, I looked so normal, an open map. I didn’t enjoy deciding who to be.

“I really liked what you wrote about your sister.” I froze, looking down. What had I written?

“I’m sorry you are so sad.”

I said the old, “You know... it’s okay.”

That night, I had this dream about the ocean. I was swimming above a huge turtle. I stuck my hand out of the water, to signal for you to come over, I had found something. But the turtle swam incredibly fast. I could only keep up if I did freestyle. I noticed that the turtle only had one back flipper, hanging on by a few sinews. I was scared that
chasing it would hurt it more, so I stopped and watched it swim off. When I surfaced, I was way out in the ocean and I could barely see the shore. There was nothing and no one around me. I was being pulled further and further out. I thought, oh, I am actually dying. And what’s strange is the immediate acceptance I felt just at having the clear opportunity to die. If I closed my eyes, and if I let my body go numb, there was no barrier between me and the water. I felt both liquid and absorbed. But I kept kicking, like those dancing mitochondria, a movement beyond heart, beating and taking beating. Somewhere, on the shore, I knew you were sunburnt and scared, and towards you on this receding horizon, I did the old Australian crawl.
Right before the outbreak, I felt solicited by fate and decided to take an acting class.

I thought, I have never been an actor before, maybe I could then learn improv, someone would realize I am funny, and I will get offered a job table-writing for a talk show. You and I could move to Los Angeles to try and be successful and famous. How could anything beyond this (we live in now) get better here? In this reality?

I mean: in Richmond?

In our home, you had been working really hard on an electronic project on the synthesizers spanning your half of the living room. The retro machines all had tiny cockpit lights, putting you at the helm of an unimaginable craft.

“Her work has gotten so much darker,” your classmate said in the throw-an-axe bar we both thought was gay. “I don’t think I’ve ever cried harder in my life. Except, maybe, 9/11.”
I felt uneasy because I knew I spent my days with a woman in a ton of pain, and I was either powerless to help or an awful person. Jesus, what if I am a piece of shit? And anyway, I always wanted sound to be your space. I could find another dimension.

x

As a big dummy, I could only pick up part-time work after the scooter scheme folded. Now, I was a stagehand, unpacking trucks for performances at the Altria. I didn’t find it as unpleasant.

It fluctuated between being both a strenuous and boring labor which attracted many other made-of-hotdog men. Sometimes, I had nothing to do, no real idea where anyone was, no knowledge of the intricacies of stage handery if they existed, and no work friends yet (I missed my mute companion). I would go and look for a bathroom, and then another bathroom, and I explored the enormous building through excrement increments.

The layout of the place was frustrating and incomprehensible, like the Shriners hadn’t bothered to stand up and look around from their little toy cars when they were putting the building together. I had grown up in view of the Masonic Temple, in Alexandria. It was a fireproof Chichén Itzá-style monument to capitalism (she said). The Altria was blockier (like a mosque for the god of spectacle) but it had the same ludicrously transparent nefariousness, or something. The theater had an empty pool and shooting range in the basement where all the doorknobs were can-cold. The top of the building had what looked like unfurnished hotel rooms and hidden apartments. I went up there, found a great window of which I climbed out onto the roof, where I stood two-thirds of the way up and joked to myself, Adios.
I am only afraid of heights because whenever I’m up there, I imagine jumping. Down the side of the building was scaffolding where they were repairing the tall minarets. I could see the entirety of the newly-sterilized Monroe Park, which fit into the city’s patchwork like a button I could hit.

And then, another familiar stagehand leaned out from behind a minaret where he had secretly been smoking pot. In my own very physical astonishment, I felt this swing of panic. I started falling over my center of gravity. I landed (hands out) further down the incline near enough to the edge that I (on my stomach) was no longer looking out but over the city.

“You alright, dude?” he asked. I lay rigidly in a decompression of time and heart panic.

I heard a siren across town but then suddenly in my head, right there— I could hear into the siren’s roll and there I could find no purchase. I knew with all the spiritual certitude of the temporarily insane that this was my ambulance I was communicating with telepathically. In fact, I was already dead. I must have fallen— did this man push me? Hey, buddy. Hey, buddy. Hey, buddy, I realized my back must have broken. Of course, I cannot move because I am paralyzed. I had fallen. I thought the ambulance was coming not to cart me away, but to mercy kill me, this racehorse who tripped.

This is my last moment alive.

This is my last moment alive.

This is my last moment alive.

People can’t think when they’re dead.
I am still thinking. Is this like *Ghost Story*? Will I be stuck inside here forever?

People can’t think when they’re dead. Soon they will unplug me.

This exact exchange only took seconds for my fellow packer and unpacker on the minaret. All he sees is me, Bobcat, feral and fetal on the roof where I tripped. He would see me give a bit of a dazed blink— and that blink is all that has really physically happened in this situation, and this is the best way for me to explain what happens to me.

After I blink, it starts again.

x

When I came back to finish setting *Cats* up, my bosses had no idea that I had even left. Everything was done, and I clocked out. There, by the ticketing booth, was a small information stand from the Virginia Repertory Theater. I picked up a flier for acting classes— “Living on Stage.”

It dawned on me that I could do this. I had become interested in acting because during my period of unabashed unemployment and depression, I watched a lot of movies. I started to really like films where nothing happened— the Jim Jarmusch-type shit. It felt representative of how life was actually going. You could not stand this.

“Adam Driver plays the same person in everything,” you said. We had taken to feeding a colony of cats and kittens in our neighborhood and by now, they had organized and could recognize the sound of your car (out of all cars) and come running up to you. I was too sore from lifting equipment to bend over and open the cans.
“Maybe that’s because he’s a great actor. He makes roles seem like himself.”

“His face doesn’t move. He could be mayor of Uncanny Valley. Look, here comes Roof Cat,” you said, and a husky tuxedo leapt down from our neighbors’ roof.

Driver’s the only celebrity anyone has ever said I looked like. John Oliver said he looked like a redwood. Adam Driver was from Indiana and enlisted to become a Marine after 9/11, right out of high school. He’d been discharged after a mountain biking incident and applied to Julliard. If he could act, couldn’t I?

x

I didn’t know anything about acting. I had been cast in one silent role in a lower school Dr. Seuss-related play, where the teacher had me stand inside an enormous pair of pants and hop around. I didn’t have any lines but I would have bungled them anyway. I think the speech impediment made public speaking very horrifying for me, but nothing was as horrifying as death and the entire meaninglessness of everything, or so I thought, and so I could at least suck it up and see what the limits of my anxiety were. By chance, the class I signed up for was a method acting class.

What does that mean, “method” acting? Rather than pretending to be someone else, you organize your life in such a way (through different steps, methods) so that a character’s experience becomes your own. At first I thought this meant that if you were playing a role of a drug addict, you would become a drug addict, but that’s overly simplistic and not how it works.

“This is going to be a very boring class,” our instructor, Mike, said. He was gray-haired and weird-toothed, svelte. I didn’t know where he came from but I trusted him. “This is an anti-sexy acting class.”
The crowd was about what you would expect from a local beginner’s acting class—racially pretty diverse, mixture of ages. There was a weird abundance of personality: an overweight former comedian who had done some commercial work, a middle-aged trial lawyer for a coal company (the only other guy), a woman who just got out of the army who I immediately did not like, a very young looking pharmacist, a female drag queen (I did not ask how), a youth choir director, an ancient looking old lady, and a beautiful, curly-haired woman preparing for a role in Mike’s theater company and she only came twice. The class met in the Children’s Theater, in that non-descript labyrinth of retail, Willow Lawn. We sat in a circle of chairs, like an AA meeting, and we introduced ourselves.

Why did we want to take an acting class? I brought up Adam Driver and introversion and an inability to perform emotions in front of people. I told them I, Wobut Cathwin, “had had” a speech impediment and so I became Bobcat, and they laughed which was what I wanted and then it was over. After our bathroom break, the curly-haired actress showed me that the background over her phone was a collage of Driver’s face.

The lawyer next to me interrupted and asked for a box of tissues before he began, and I laughed because I thought it was also a joke. He then proceeded to tell us about his BFA in acting thirty years ago, how he was meant for the stage, how he had been good. Here came the tears, tissues. He had hurt his back, was bedridden for a year and ended up in law school after. We were all asked to read something (anything) we wanted to read to the class. This lawyer-man sang a slow blues song about two brothers in love with the same “dark skinned beauty” (he was white) only for one brother to accidentally kill her during an attempt at fratricide. Four minutes. “I wrote that,” he said, after.
I read a story I tried to write a couple nights ago about a couple who had a miscarriage. After it was over, the old, old lady, Maryanne, asked me if my story was true, which means I accidentally acted because it wasn’t.

When Maryanne introduced herself, she said she was 73 and had always been a fan of theater (musicals) and just wanted to know more about acting so she could further appreciate the plays she saw. To describe her mannerisms as theatrical in an acting class does little for you but that was how she talked, theatrically, you know, like she was always in front of a microphone. She pulled out a few yellowed sheets of paper from her bag and unfolded them. “I wrote this story 55 years ago,” she said, and probably on that same paper. It was about a little girl who saw Santa at Christmas. I looked over and the Army woman was staring at my open journal, where due to Nietzsche’s system and my own oblique brain sickness I had written upside down on all the left pages weeks ago:

X, wearing black latex gloves, disinfects you, rolls you in industrial sheeting (thick, clear crime scene-style tarps), and cuts a hole out where your pussy is and puts a dental dam there. X could wear gimp hazmat suit. X fucks you, at some time injecting you with a lube syringe filled with my semen, like in that horror movie where the teens break into that old guy’s house where he has the drunk driver who killed his daughter tied up, and he tells the teens he’s not
raping her but he is having her replace his daughter and brings out a syringe.

We had watched a documentary about the flu, this was normal for us. I closed the book quickly and felt the heat of my own embarrassment in my face to the point where I sneezed. Surely, she would tell the instructor and I would be cancelled and the police would arrest me for bringing such smut into a children’s theater, and then I would be put on a list... Our homework for next week, Mike said, was to bring in a task we needed to do and to do it in front of the class as if we were doing it alone. I got up and left as socially fast as possible.

I got stuck in the parking lot and wanted to scream. I pressed play on one of your CDs and Dark Side of the Moon started. Was this an acid flashback? It was the first time I had ever genuinely wondered and not known the answer. I pulled over and put my head on the steering wheel and tried to figure it out. It felt like the onset of another panic attack, which had been happening with greater frequency. I manually relaxed my body parts, from my toes to my head, and I counted my breaths.

I told myself I was okay, that she probably didn’t even see it, that nobody can read cursive anymore, that in this day and age an obvious alternative sex life is par for the course, but I knew every possible thing that could go wrong. Then, I wondered, what tasks could I even do for class next week?

What did I need to do? The question bothered me because automation left my life pretty devoid of petty tasks. I thought about bringing in the litterbox and scooping it in front of people, but that was disgusting. I couldn’t wash dishes in front of them. I could fold laundry. I settled on shaving, although I worried about how badly I could mess it up in
front of people—what if my hand slipped, and I slit my neck, and I spurted blood over Maryanne’s open face like some Flannery finale.

I tried each task that night and imagined people watching me. I clipped my toenails and it made me hard. The sound of you coming through the door filled me with awful anger because I knew I would be interrupted. None of this was right. I knew my thoughts were racing so I closed myself off into the bathroom and meditated in the bathtub.

In the morning, I started watching myself shave, suspiciously. How did I act when I was alone? What was I even like? I had no idea. I felt vast, empty, and ephemeral. But I was even more startled to find that I had habits that looked a certain way, that I could be a certain, imitable person when all day I felt like no one, empty inside.

x

In the middle of that week, I drove to Charlottesville to set up the Kiss concert at John Paul Jones, working three ten-hour shifts and sleeping in my car on the first night. It was so cramped, I was too tall for a human, so on the second night I slept in a tent in the K.O.A., but there were too many partiers, so on the third drive I made it back to Low Lake—only about an hour away, but I had been putting off going back there since my sister’s death.

My dad’s wife said the key was inside an umbrella they had left on the porch last summer, the porch where he used to pay me to kill bees with a yellow plastic bat when I was a kid and this wasn’t considered to be a crime against humanity. On the highway, I listened to NPR go over reports of a new, SARS-like epidemic in China that they said originated in a factory farm and caused you to slowly suffocate. I couldn’t remember SARS. Like anthrax and a whole host of global existential issues, it was lost in the compounding compression of world traumas in my post-9/11 childhood. Wasn’t the
world always dying? I had gotten the flu shot at my dad’s request, since his health was no better.

It was late when I drove up to our cabin on the gravel road. I immediately noticed strange, terraced gardens my sister had installed with her new partner, Victor. The back forty was dotted with circular, above-ground planters divided into V-shaped wedges. At the center of each planter was a hole that you were supposed to fill with compost, so nutrients could radiate out through the wedges of dirt.

Victor was of course a permaculturist and already trying to propagate several paw-paw trees. As I understood it, he was from Tarnac, a small commune in the South of France independently run by anarchists who lived on a self-sustaining farm together. His brother had been prosecuted for domestic terrorism, having allegedly sabotaged a high-speed trainline, but this wasn’t all that concerning, as really noone had died. Since he had impregnated Patty, they had moved back to Richmond so my parents could help with the responsibility of the whole thing. Patty and Victor had been coming here on the weekends to be woodsy, and so Victor could pursue his Frenchman vocation of imitating the Unabomber.

Inside the cabin, I found baby books and insurrectionist propaganda on the coffee table, a greywater system connected to the roof, and barrels full of dried staples (lentils, rice) inside the pantry. I FaceTimed you and narrated the whole thing like it was a prepper’s edition of MTV’s Cribs. You didn’t dislike Victor— he was interested in your projects, he “loved sound,” and he was aggressively non-judgemental. “He reminds me of you,” you said, and I cut you a look. “Plus, it’s not like he’s wrong. We have, what, a maximum of 15 years left until ecological collapse? We just don’t think about it.”

“What’s the point of surviving in tropical Virginia?” I asked.
“There’s no point. You do it if you have to. They have to think of the future. They have a kid.”

“They have a fetus.” Mock-denial. Their entire project of having a child seemed like a very bad idea to me, but I am the type of uncle who doesn’t think people should be born.

“Ew. I miss you,” you said. Yes, I did, too. I set the phone up by the sink and had you watch me shave while I pretended you weren’t watching. It was too quiet, you said. Unnerving. I stared at myself. You were right.

I told you to let me see you piss. You turned the camera on yourself and squatted over the toilet.

x

When time came to shave in front of the class, I played Spiritualized’s “Ladies and Gentlemen We Are Floating in Space.” The chairs were now pushed to the back of the room in rows, so that the audience could look more like an audience but we were never allowed to clap because clapping, Mike said, was faking an emotion. I had always hated clapping.

I was scared, waiting for my turn. The army woman didn’t come to class. What if it was to avoid me? I could barely feel the tips of my fingers. Meanwhile, the comedian went up there and nonchalantly ripped up a large pile of junk mail, the type that sits in an apartment lobby and smells. The lawyer strung his guitar while we all secretly worried he would sing. I thought I could tell by a strange twinkle that he knew he was being watched. Is that what Mike was looking for? It was hard to tell. A couple of people folded their laundry. Maryanne glued a commemorative plate together that said: 1996 Albino Lodge. I loved it. “My husband’s last ski tournament in Wintergreen.” After five minutes
or so of letting us do the task, Mike would start peppering us with questions, asking us what we were doing.

It felt too strange to sit and shave, so I balanced your makeup mirror on the window ledge so that the audience saw me in profile. I brought a bowl, a jug of water, shaving cream, a razor, and a towel and placed them up on the ledge like they were on top of the sink. I pressed play on the album and took a deep breath.

Time moved extremely slowly. I could feel the class as a hot miasma in the edges of my present. It occurred to me again to slit my throat and I smiled, then thought, should I smile? Quick, frown. No, that’s not right either. I focused on slowly lathering up. My hand was shaking badly, and I thought the class would be able to see this. I manually relaxed the tension in my body and focused on shaving the straight lines a surgeon’s son should be able to do.

“What are you doing up there, Robert?” Mike asked after a few minutes into the second track because, he said, he wanted to see what it would be like. 7 minutes.

“Shaving.”

“What are the circumstances that made this task necessary?”

“I need to shave tonight, otherwise I scratch my girlfriend, which annoys her,” I said. The class laughed, which surprised me again. “I even skipped shaving for a day so that I would have more shaving to do in front of you guys.”

“That’s good. How do you feel up there?”
“Nervous,” I said. The other students hadn’t admitted it, or maybe they genuinely weren’t nervous in front of people.

“What did you do to manage that emotion?”

“I just ignored the feeling of being watched. I pushed it away. It wasn’t so bad. Watching other people was scarier.”

“Watching people was scarier? You are an empath. Did you have any desire to entertain us?”

“Not so much entertain, but to go faster so that you would have less shaving to watch, which I suppose is a type of entertainment. I just focused on going slowly instead.”

“Very good,” Mike said. “Very, very good.”

When I got home, you asked me how class went. “Very good,” I said. “Very, very good. The instructor really liked how I shaved.”

“...And so the audience loves him,” you said to me. You were still getting ready for your show, but I didn’t ask any details about your work, just the very general. I might have felt emotionally threatened by the music, but shows were my least favorite thing. There’s too many people

For next class, we had to bring in an unfamiliar task to do in front of everyone as if nobody was watching, and we had to think of circumstances that would make it necessary for us to do this task. I felt like I understood what the point of all this was, but I couldn’t have articulated it. I knew the purpose went beyond just getting us acclimatized to being watched— beyond learning to be alone when unalone.
How do I know how I act when I am alone? I began thinking about it during my workday and writing about it when I could. I didn’t know how alone we really were anymore. On one hand, we were more alone than we ever had been before. Godless, with zero sense of nationalism for obvious reasons, stuck unlivable lengths of time away from other stars, absolutely alienated from our work which frames our social existence and the mind with which we even see ourselves with— I don’t know about the play, man. I just lift these boxes.

Those are the conditions for loneliness. But are we ever alone? We are also constantly emitting observable metadata in our actions, generating revenue somewhere down the line. As a result, we are under constant, ongoing observation with or without god. There’s also our technology, constantly waiting in the stirring heat for its marching orders (but hearing everything that happens in the general’s tent). And maybe sociality is essential to my comprehension of the world such that it’s inseparable (all my habits and behaviors and borrowed language unconsciously framed by my father and all fathers beyond fathers, etc.). And then there’s our relationship (you and me) living together as one unit, as if being a couple is the only oasis of companionship in the unlimited desert of the real.

Were we, then, extremely lonely but never alone?

The human body is teeming with microbial life. Microorganisms, bacteria, viruses. A virus is kind of alive: they reproduce and evolve and carry genetic material, but they are non-cellular. Viruses are the most abundant entity on earth. On an evolutionary scale, viruses predate any of the branching of life.
Weird, because a virus can only replicate its DNA in the living cell of another organism. This kind of depressingly suggests that life originated out of molecular self-assembly—given the way viruses dwarf cellular life in both number and diversity, viruses are thought to be older; otherwise, cells would contain the entire range of genes available to viruses, but as it happens some viruses have genetic material completely different from anything found among cellular life.

So viruses at least existed before the last common ancestor of all life on earth got fucked. If they can’t replicate without a cell, how can they predate cellular life? I don’t fucking know how that works, maybe the creation of life was concurrent with the creation of destruction, wouldn’t that be dialectical?

Who knows, but it does mean that ‘life’ is even less personified than we imagined and possibly indistinguishable from what we just know are chemical reactions and energy, soulless and planetary, but even that does not matter because I still don’t understand where the need to twitch that overlaps between both cellular life and viral not-life comes from. I don’t think this is that sad. It is nice that we are the same as everything else and (leave me alone) it is very *Leaves of Grass*.

But I don’t feel part of everything. And I wonder about aloneness. Real aloneness. When I write for myself, it reads one way, different from how I write to you. If I didn’t know how I wrote when I was alone, I wouldn’t be able to understand the difference between that which nobody sees and this— how there are some things I can only communicate to myself, can almost communicate to you, but the further away from me it gets the language breaks down when I try breaking through to reality. I can imagine that if I wrote online everyday instead of privately, I would not even know what I was talking about.

x
In my post-pandemic ordinary days, I don’t do a lot. I still record all of this into my journal because it helps me plan out the stupid tasks I need to do in order to create and conserve energy. If I were to address my thoughts on this situation just to myself, I would get caught in my own phenomenological limitations, like a non-cellular virus that needs another life to reproduce itself into the world, this world which is you.

x

News of the virus came in the coming week. The Chinese news about it was heavily ventilated, so American media filled it in with its own implications: in our news, the virus might as well have arisen in a dog factory.

I set up a stage for the hoisting up of a super large American flag that would be able to be seen from a highway in Chester. We had a threesome with your friend who was in town for your show, but it’s not my best because I keep expecting myself to get tired. In the morning, we noticed that the kittens we had been feeding outside weren’t really coming around anymore and we invented reasons to make that not have terrible implications. We still went out and poked around the bushes a little while. Our neighbor’s daughter who could speak English came out and told us she had buried four kittens out in the backyard with a shovel. She and the family wept together.

“Theyir breathing,” she said. “It was haggard. And then they just lay down on their sides in the shade and died.”

You held your face together until we were back in the house, and then you fell to the stairs, inconsolable. Our inside-kittens came up to your face, bragging about their life in a way cats always do. I told you we still had our kittens and could take care of the cats
that were left, didn’t we want to build them cat shelters? You retreated from me under the comforter.

But it gave me an idea for what to do in front of my next acting class. I found plans online for how to build shelters for feral cats and I drove to the hardware store and bought plastic storage containers, a small saw, and straw. I carried everything in the bins into the Children’s Theater. There were posters everywhere being put up for an Ibsen play, warning audiences sensitive to sound that the play had “actual gunshots.” What kind of kids read Ibsen these days?

In class, the lawyer man was wearing a full suit, with a silk pocket lapel or whatever. Someone you would want to either hit you in their car or marry your sober cousin. He followed instructions to build a bouquet of flowers in front of us. He threw the bunches of different flowers out on the ground—Saint John’s Wort and roses. “What are you doing up there?” Mike asked him after five minutes.

“I am learning to build a bouquet,” he said.

“I can see that. What are your circumstances?”

“Well,” he said. “It’s this second Thursday of March, and I am getting these flowers ready for my mother’s eulogy.” He dabbed his eyes with the silk thing. “She always loved flowers. She just wanted a small memorial service, and I have to give a speech so I thought she would have liked it if I made the arrangements.”

“Why did you have to make the arrangement?” Mike asked.

“I wanted it to be special for her.” Wet eyes. I was 50/50 on his grandmother being very much alive.
“Wow,” Mike said. “Do you mind me asking, is this real?”

The lawyer recoiled a second. “Do you want me to tell you?” he said, then smiling: “My mother’s alive.”

Maryanne spread out a tablecloth in front of us and unpacked a bag of baking supplies and plasterware filled with different pre-measured ingredients. She followed a physical recipe book and clobbered together moist lumps of dough. Cookies, I thought. Of course the oldest person in the world would make cookies here. But I was wrong. She told the class that she was making no-bake dog treats to leave with the dog she’s been dog sitting downstairs. She loved the dog, she announced.

I managed to run out of battery on my phone so I couldn’t read the instructions for the cat house. This performance wasn’t as smooth. The saw kept feeling too flexible, and again I fantasized about impaling myself in front of everyone. I managed to cut out a good enough sized square (of the plastic container, an entrance for cats) in five minutes. Mike wasn’t impressed. “Did you know what that is supposed to look like?”

“Vaguely,” I said, sensitive about unmanly sawing.

“But you didn’t have a clear series of steps to follow for this task,” he said. I nodded. “It will help you in the future,” he turned to the class, “to be able to return to the moment if you have a series of steps to follow.”

I told you later that I felt embarrassed and you said not to be. “He wanted to show you that he could somehow still physically see your awareness of the audience. He wanted to tell you that you needed the instructions to come back to help you focus.” You had been
in the bathtub for several hours. You had tiny hard nipples and a very flat chest that looked sexy in the water. “I am glad you made the cat houses,” you said.

“You don’t have to go back there with me if it’s too hard for you. I’ll just set them up in the woods.” You had disinfected everything that could have come into contact with the germs of the sick cats outside, so fearful you were of our indoor cats dying.

* 

For next week in acting, we had to complete a familiar task as if we were learning it for the first time. I raised my hand. “Are there any times you can think of where someone has done a task that crossed a line?” I immediately regretted saying that (because what if people thought I meant masturbating?) but I had been thinking about cleaning a fish, even though I had only ever seen it done as a kid at the cabin.

“What exactly do you mean?” he said. “I mean, I wouldn’t want anyone to shoot up heroin or anything.”

“No, of course not,” I said. “Not realistic on a Tuesday night.”

When I got home, you were stoned on the couch, listening to a record and huffing whippits you bought at the tobacco store. I crawled up next to you and tried to decompress, too, but I felt like a child trapped in the production of an Ibsen play and I tried to count my breaths. “I want you to hypnotize me,” you said. “And then just do, whatever you want.”

“I don’t know if I can right now.”
“I can’t relax and I don’t want to be in control of my emotions.”

“Maybe there is one that could work for both of us.” You were kind of pouty, part of the play. I hit play on the video about twin brother and sister incest.

At some point in The History of Sexuality, Foucault writes (or, at least I think he does, which might be more revealing) that future, alien civilizations will look back on our time and rebuild us skeleton-up like that horse cut in half at the Louvre, and then they will read our books and watch our movies and think the total absence of sex to be a sign that we are completely fucking crazy, because we clearly we were having it. The panic I feel when I really think about how crazy it is, is phenomenal (as in: blinding and unwritable) and the strangest part is to get through it, you have to feel your body.

Your mind produces an unreal fear because fear is part of the body it controls to stop you from doing things, and taboos are so completely physical that they are rendered inconceivable in certain ways from the mind. You made this joke once that only the real perverts would survive this pandemic, like the ones whose fetishes are so awful that they are compelled beyond their control to do them and to live, because there can be no other explanation for their behavior besides that they must behave that way because of the sex act’s consequences and stigma (the easy ones to grapple with first are like weirdo diaper people, because on one hand, it’s funny how much it sucks for them that that’s their thing, but on the other hand it is still somewhat enviable that they know a clear path to fulfillment) but then like serial killers: the serial killer who stalks and murders victims and hides their bodies seeks to manifest life because of their need for the victim is a violent urge.

I am not a serial killer. But sex absolutely supersedes every part of my existence so that even communicating about it is only possible through a lot of peripherasis because the thing that produces my sex drive will not let my mind (which is also part of my body)
fuck things up for them. It has to be private because the existence of its privacy and forbiddenness is part of what produces it in the first place, and its production is absolutely necessary for my survival.

Every single person has an existence and then they have an experience. Not every part of existence becomes experience because we have limited space for storing information. But all you are aware of is your experience, not your existence, but both of these are operating through the same forces for two different types of concurrent and competing preservations: protecting the body and protecting the mind. The mind only has enough access to its own complete experience to ensure the ego's voice continues to be authoritative over the body, since it exists through its own deception.

That's why people like Ted Bundy can only give confessions in the third person. The bouncing back and forth between what we are aware of and what we know produces a neurotic spectacle of shame.

x

Writing this now, I hope that language is like math and this is somehow building meaning by these patted out empty chunks of shit that are words. The experience of repression is part of my life force and my mind displays itself through neurotic communication by producing the fear of my own suicide if I write what's real. Your sex drive is beyond you and your control. I can hear a pattern of gunshots in the distance but even now I doubt if it's real because this thing beyond our control is capable of producing reality— that's how pervasive the fear is. It's absolutely in my head that anyone gives a shit about how I have sex but this thing in my life is taboo beyond communication; it has to be tied to death (pun).
But the truth is, maybe even that feeling my brain creates carries with it that reality like some spell cast in blood, but I still hold out hope that the part of me that actually communicates (my body) can somehow override it. Even at my most liberated, it will be impossible because its absence is creation.

It dawned on me after we were done that a YouTuber had just told us to have sex and we had it. What if algorithms somehow joined us? I wondered again why there were these hard boundaries on our bodies, two tubes of one milky paste. Why is language limited by sex on an existential level? People who answer this question and most questions with “because why” have sex that hasn’t hit the transcendent wall of taboo, where you know you are being led around for a reason but it escapes logic. It sheds logic. Like a kidnapped girl, I have to say I can’t explain it, but I know I can.

Often writing in the greenhouse, the panes fill up with steam.

x

Still there were concerts to be unloaded until there weren’t, which, like scooter evaporation, happened almost overnight. I can tell you we got two more acting classes in before things closed down for good, and I became infatuated with Maryanne. For our third assignment, she misunderstood the directions, to bring a task we needed to do and have done before and to do it as if we have never done it before (which has more to do with Mike’s prismatic directions than her own senility) and she showed up with one of those huge boxes of assorted electronics and huge boxes of assorted batteries, and she started to replace the batteries in a swath of a dozen or so flashlights.

It was the most incredible performance I have ever seen. She was truly befuddled by the flashlights in a way that suggested she wasn’t being watched. And then she shook one of
the flashlights and it extended into a surprise police baton — she’d had no idea for years that this had been a weapon. You could really tell it scared her.

“What are you doing up there?” Mike asked her.

“I am replacing batteries for things that need their batteries replaced.”

“What are the circumstances?”

“The power went out and it was really scary, and I thought, Jeez, you know, I really should fix those flashlights and here I am, getting to do it.”

“I see. But you have put batteries in flashlights before, yes?”

“Well, yes.”

“So this isn’t a new task?”

“No, not like that. It used to be my husband’s task because this type of thing is really, as you could see, quite difficult for me, but he passed away last spring. We were married for 51 years.”

“I see. Well, you’re going to want to be careful with your stage tasks and look for ones with directions because it gives what they call in Zen Buddhism something called your Monkey Mind to play with.”

“Can I show you one last thing? There’s just one more light...” She fumbled around and there was the sense oh no, this could be forever and we all have to fold laundry in front of each other tonight, but once again I was surprised. She lifted up a mason jar, stuck
batteries into a compartment, shook it, and holographic fireflies flew around inside, dazzling all of us. Her face came on like a light when she looked at it.

I watched a yoga instructor and did yoga on a mat in front of the class. I had done yoga, kind of, back when I needed to rehabilitate my knee. In the moments between the directions, I remembered I was being watched but instead I began counting my breaths in and out. The intake and outake get the same number. Instead of following the directions stiffly, I focused on extending the feelings that felt good as intense and as long as possible, leaning into the stretches. The army lady was back in the audience, she had said hello to me in a normal, friendly way.

I could bring my circle of attention as far away from the audience as possible and into myself if I followed instructions from the YouTube guru, and if my physical movement wasn’t restricted. It at least stopped my racing thoughts. I did a pretty good job. At home, I mentally started narrating all my tasks to myself as if I was explaining it to my replacement. Our homework for the next class was to tell a story of an event that changed your life.

“Can you give us an example?” someone else got to ask this time.

“Sure,” he said. He pulled up a chair in front of the class and sat down. “I have a daughter, and our relationship is good now, but when she was little, I did something that hurt her and hurt our relationship, and I regret it.” He started crying in front of us and he struggled to look up. “Our relationship is good now, we’ve worked to repair things, but let me tell you for years I couldn’t see her or talk to her because of what I did to her. It made me change the way I lived, how I think, what I do. And, if I was doing the assignment, that is the story I would tell. I can tell it because I’m past it, so you might want to consider something you have worked through already because we will be doing this for several weeks.”
The night before, I had driven to the house where your show would be at. It was so crowded and loud, I started to have a panic attack. I sat in the car, unable to leave, unable to go in. I worried someone you knew would see me sitting in the car and think something was wrong between us. I worried you would hate me for missing it because you had worked really hard on your record. It was too recent, but it was what I thought of because after I missed your set, I decided I needed to figure out what was going on with me.

And in that class, a week later, Maryanne, the comedian, and I were the only ones who presented. I told the story about going on the mission trip to Haiti, and then coming home and immediately having the earthquake happen. Vomiting in the basement and an arterial ripping feeling. When the comedian went, she told the story of watching her mom go through chemo and die. “And you’re right,” she said. “When it finally happened, I remember vomiting.”

And to my delight, Maryanne worked in the Port Authority in New York on 9/11 and was looking out the window when the second plane flew in.

x

At the start of the outbreak, I tried to keep a running list of funny situations I came across having to do with the spread of pandemic. Max, our friend from college visited us overnight with a hacking, cat-allergy cough, freaking everyone we played Secret Hitler with out. Your anxious pal’s cast on her broken wrist, preventing her from showering off germs. All this has to do with timing which is as they say: everything.

We stocked up on supplies: cat food, kitty litter, clean socks, toilet paper, hand sanitizer, frozen pizzas, PB&J shit, tea, seltzer. Walmart price-gauged small things of antiseptic
one night, and the next day when a state of emergency was declared, the prices legally had to be dropped back down to their “always low prices.” That was ominous but so far nothing surprising.

We stayed in the house. My thoughts kept extending. I learned Yahtzee and we could not stop playing. I kept thinking of Evan Rachel Wood as the vampire queen in True Blood, and the scene where she’s by the pool with her bisexual human concubines, and she just makes them play Yahtzee eternally. And the game of Yahtzee is just the game you invent to rationalize luck. If we played through multiple sheets a day, luck took on the shape of a tilde that twisted back and forth between us. I smoked pot and imagined a system whereby if I did the bottom half of the sheet first, which I consider more boring, I would be making an “offering” to Lady Luck and she would reward me when I finally could roll for the top section, and because of this and only this I would get the bonus.

I could not get my medecine no matter what I tried to do. I didn’t have insurance or a regular doctor, really. But since adderall is a controlled substance, every two months I had to go in and see my dad’s friend, the same family practitioner who looked at your ass.

Normally, he would refill the prescription and send me on my way, but with the influx of sudden sick patients that was kind of out the window and he missed two phone appointments spread out and rescheduled over a week. All future shows at the Altria were cancelled, and I had to file for unemployment because I was suddenly out of the stagehand job, but after two hours of ersatz consumer jazz on hold, the line disconnected. I could not make myself call again, even for free money.

That week, I had the experience of being able to feel food in my mouth but not taste it. I tried smoking pot to force me to have an appetite, and then I tried doing whippits for inspiration and ended up doing two-hundred of them which caused a type of time travel.
The theater finally emailed to say that we all might have been exposed to the virus, and I worried that somewhere Maryanne was alone with the lights out.

All the while, the thinking thing got worse.

What causes racing thoughts?

In quarantine, we spent the bulk of our time with the two kittens and my sister’s cat, who she left with us because she didn’t want to separate her from her kittens. They all have distinct personalities. You can observe this.

My goal was always to make the kittens purr and different kittens, I have judged, want different things. What began to worry me wasn’t that objective existence of cat sentience, because I’ve always thought that animals are complex emotionally. Factory farming is a genocide that the next version of empire will look back on as a world historical embarassment. What worries me is that cats might have a dynamic mind, a mind with an ego.

I wondered if cats purred when they were alone. What would it mean if they do (purr, when alone)?

That purring is the accomplice of intense cat relaxation. There’s no human comparison, because we don’t vibrate when we relax. Relaxation is when your body untenses all its muscles. We don’t relax when we are in pain. That’s why anxiety makes us “tense.”
If cats purr when they’re alone, it would be because it’s their fetal position. Humans curl up the way they were once curled in a womb. Humans suck their thumbs because they sucked their mother’s nipple. We do these things alone, but they can be done around other people. Think about kissing.

If cats don’t purr when they’re alone, it would be like dogs yawning. Dogs don’t naturally yawn. It’s a learned behavior, and the learning of learned behavior is something that caused dogs to split away from wolves to domesticate themselves. Their number one greatest survival skill became their cuteness. We wanted eyebrows, because we wanted dogs to scrutinize us, and we wanted dogs sincere because we can’t trust anyone (not even ourselves, not even dogs). We want to be convinced it’s not just about food even though it is about food. It’s always about food. It is maybe like this between all creatures alive. However, no dog will yawn in the wild. Dogs do not yawn at other dogs. It’s all for you.

We don’t know why we yawn. Supposedly the air chills our brain and gives us a burst in research. We have to take in information constantly at roughly the same speed for some reason, and that’s why we dream. If we stop...

Dogs yawn at us because they’re acting. The greater the degree that you humanize them, the further with which you’ll empathize with them and give them what they so deeply desire: a treat with a wider range of taste than their rationed dry kibble; a break from their prison so they can smell other prisoners in their short walk around the block; a space off the cold, hard floor of their life and into your bed.

I trust cats more than dogs because they’re more clear about their motives even if those motives aren’t always great. If they were capable of turning their affection on and off like a dog, I just suspect they would be able to do a better job at it. If the purring is for you and only you, you would know you were being played by a dog.
But cats purr when other cats groom them. The older cat exclusively grooms only one of our younger cats who was her kitten. But she does not groom that kitten’s cross-eyed brother, who can open doors and who likes jumping in the bath. One of the kittens is a loud purrer, whereas the only way I know the other is purring is if I touched his throat, which I would do when he cuddled up by my legs. How else would I know if it loved me? 

And of course cats purr around the cats that are providing for them. It’s like it’s Lacanian or something. Or something. The cat’s mother was their original self— with no faculty of object permanence developed yet, the kitten doesn’t know of itself yet. It is only a will to life. But then there’s that first break. The mom cat gets up, stretches, does something else (and she’s scientifically, I swear to god, known as a ‘queen’). And that feeling of absolute connectedness is broken for the kitten.

What do they do? Kittens cry out before they’ve developed their vocals, and it is just a pleasant, low hum. Perhaps the hum originally functioned because it was conducive to stimulating the milk in the queen’s tit. And so the kittens stimulate into dark impressions of the void, abject and alone, hoping for the golden return of warmth and nourishment and cat milk. The queen returns. She knows where they are based on the low vibration the kittens emit, because her hearing is incomprehensible magnitudes of development beyond ours. Her world is mostly sound. And once she is united with that sound, the kittens keep purring.

This development of the cat psyche can only help but manifest itself when a cat is in its most based state of relaxation. It expresses pleasure, but it’s pleasure at the cost of the existence of absolute pain. It is happy right now, but please don’t leave it.

All I found on the internet is that cats do not purr alone, even when they’re relaxed, but there are two exceptions:
One is when they are cuddling with a toy.

The other is when they are dying.

I read today cats could now catch the virus.

I am not sure if cats are conscious, but because the purring is involuntary but directed at a cat, person, or plaything, it is obvious they have the schema in place for the type of drive that could produce an ego that is aware of its own mortality.

In order for us to be able to use language, our brains evolved to divert energy away from short term memory into long term. A chimp has a faster, better short term memory than a normal person but none of the long term memory we have that even allows us to learn language.

If experience is one thing and our brains are the center of experience, the same evolutionary development of the brain that redverted energy to the long term storage in our skull—this causes our mind to split.

Julius Bahnsen, a now-obscure follower of Schopenhauer, the ‘father’ of philosophical pessimism, is just remembered for saying ‘Man is a self-conscious nothing,’ and for having Vita Mea Irritus Labor on his tombstone: my life was irritating work. But Bahnsen, I prefer in some ways because of his adherence to seeing everything as dialectical. Like Schopenhauer, he saw the will as being able to recognize itself as an object but incapable of really grasping the nature of its own existence, that it is nothing.
Schopenhauer calls this miraculous (not miraculous as in birth, miraculous as in, we are to some degree spared from reality on an ontological level), but Bahnsen sees the inseparable opposition of everything as the cause and reason of consciousness. What the will is, is the ability to know itself as an object, but this process of knowing itself is the object itself (which is not actually an object, just movement of some kind that thinks itself whole when it is only a brief spark). This is the tearing or splitting of the mind: logic will not work on the thing that logics. It can never stop turning because its existence is to turn.

It can never be reached. The chasm between the idea of our ego and our physical existence can only be bridged metaphorically.

If the kitten purrs at a toy and at a human, it means that it purrs consciously and unconsciously: it is inadvertent, but a self-conscious process, because the cat considers its own state of being as an unhappy separateness that it attempts to satiate through relaxation with another, but its expression of relaxation is also the expression of its own inherent separateness.

And they purr when they die?

So the question of cats purring alone made me have a panic attack, but this time I am alone x.

A panic attack is what it’s like to die consciously without any drugs. They aren’t caused by things in front of me. They would happen at night, mostly when I tried to sleep. The first time they stopped, it was because I went on an experimental dose of Celexa, but I couldn’t get hard on Celexa, so I stopped. Benzos caused me to have complete blackouts,
and I would get very full of myself and confident. I’ve always felt like Klonopin is just the drug in *White Noise* that causes you to forget about death. I was at one point so addicted to it that it tasted sweet when I crushed it between my teeth. A year off of it, I slipped and tried eating one again, but it tasted like the way fresh asphalt smells. My brain made the drug taste like sugar, since candy is my other addiction.

I didn’t think there was any way of avoiding panic attacks. My mind would think really calmly about itself, and about impermanence, and it goes from soberly knowing its own mortality to thinking that this knowledge is killing me. My mind just thinks I’m dying, you know, the way everyone is in the long run, but then it will invent reasons to see how it ‘is’ immediately dying and this abstract, distant threat will feel like an immediate threat to my body even though that threat isn’t there.

Time is relative even in the way it needs to be indirectly constructed in our heads, because there’s no actual physical clock inside us but several mechanisms working together to give us perception. During a panic attack, my mind really becomes trapped in time. You once said you read that death could be one last moment repeating itself infinitely into existence, and it feels like this is what happens to me. If someone had a gun to my head and was counting down, and I knew beyond hope that I would be shot, it would feel exactly the same as the way I feel during a panic attack.

So the part of a panic attack that is scary is that because it feels like it never ends, it never ends. Perception is amplified by feeling, adrenaline. When your mind fights the thought of its own death, it can’t win and it can’t admit defeat because at least in this case, admitting defeat (yes, I will die) is what causes it (panic).

I’ve learned you can watch things to forget about it. This speeds something up, keeps you from falling in. Panic can’t go on infinitely because of death, but it is caused by death. The thing that causes it is it’s solution and also what causes it.
Panic is a physical barrier around consciousness.

One of Scopenhauer’s students asked him, before his death, what one should do as a philosophical pessimist, without religion or anything, how should a normal person spend their days in a way that bettered themselves. He responded, “People should just spend more time in graveyards.”

Cats don’t just purr on humans. They extend and retract their claws, making, as they say, biscuits. It’s how they stimulated their mother’s milk, and they do it on you because that’s how they love you. My mother had been feeding a cat that now basically lives on her porch, Portia, and when you pet it, it purrs vigorously and then sticks its paws in its mouth and sucks its toes, in a way that reminds me of when I saw a homeless guy kind of violently masturbating outside 7-11.

Toe sucking suggests the purring is an involuntary release of tension, much like crying. I have learned that when we think, the muscles of our larynx involuntarily twitch, as if we are speaking. So when I am thinking thoughts, it is no different from speaking, except in that it is silent. This also means thought has a physical limit, at least in some way.
Speech is directed at others, and thought is internal speech directed at others, except that other is yourself. Some people don’t even have it.

Why do we hear internal speech? Maybe we heard speech as babies and so similarly to purring, thinking it is self-soothing and an expression of the awareness of separation and death. Like, we want speech and we want orders on some primal level. This desire to obey and panic at disobedience has to be really strong not only for children to follow their parents, but I think this desire is necessary for us to think at all because our body needs to be inclined to obey in order for us to recognize our internal voice as our own consciousness.

But why couldn’t I just think about purring and have that be that?

x

I couldn’t look at my phone during the outbreak. I would look at it for a couple of minutes and shut it down. Attempting to communicate with me was like those people who use shortwave radios to talk to the international space station, which only works in the small window of time when the station passes right over your sky.

We weren’t supposed to leave the house. One afternoon, Patty called and asked if I wanted to go on a walk and maintain social distance. I hated the term because somehow
we created an even more alienating term for alienation. Or, because capital had gorged itself on the sphere of reproduction by removing now even access to those places we traditionally conceived as ‘the market’ (stores, bars, restaurants, schools, farmer’s market)—places that at one time somehow physically helped rationalize formal labor to people back when informal consisted still of the untapped terrain of lawless rickshaw drivers and child prostitutes living in walls and not the Uber drivers and online sugar babies of today. I felt we had gone through and were now seeing things from the other side of the mirror and were left to look back at the wonders we had made with glassy eyes and regressive comfort foods.

“You need to move around,” Patty said. We met by the boat launch, and she was wearing a black adidas tracksuit, five months pregnant. “This is happening because you’re still just a jock.”

“ Aren’t we not allowed to advocate exercise anymore?”

“You’re just out of shape.”

“If I said that to you, you would flip out.”
“Well, I can have a belly. I’m pregnant.” A couple walked near us and she raised her voice so they could hear. “I can’t believe you would call me fat when I’m this pregnant.” I shushed her.

We reached an embankment where it looked like a family was living by a tent, fishing for shad roe.

“We’re going to move out to the cabin,” she said after a while. “I think you guys should come with us. We can fish and we have the garden, and I need to be isolated because of the baby.”

“For how long? The next couple of weeks?”

“For forever. I need to be able to picture a life and this is the only thing that feels real. It wouldn’t have to be just us,” she said. “We could expand eventually.”

I tried to picture it, too. The previous day in a vision I saw the Nationals playing in an empty stadium, the players sitting in an inflatable FEMA-style dugout six feet apart, the sky filled with drones broadcasting the game. I didn’t really want to live in that world.

x
I felt better when I got home, at least better enough to go back outside in the short gloom of warm evening. For whatever reason, our backyard was entirely cement, and luckily I had bought a cheap skateboard before the change of era. I just like learning things. I imitated yoga and rolled around on my back. Instead of following any instructions, I just considered myself another creature caught in warm light. Everywhere and into feeling.

I was shaky on the board and could go up our slanted hill just a little and then quickly back down again. After a while, I got it into my head that if I looked at a spot in the ground and really believed I could get there, I would go there. Unbelievably, it worked, and I had this intense and prolonged Yahtzee feeling that I am going to begin to describe.

For this, you’re sitting on the firm mid century couch and I’m on the matching chaise, and you’re a hot Virgil and the outside is unbearable, but in here there’s a muffled darkness. I find that with you it is easier to relax and I miss you so much (here I am, crying in the greenhouse like your overgrown fern).

When did my racing thoughts become a problem? Since my sister’s suicide.

Why this phenomena then, of thinking? The experience of thought is attached to emotion, because certain thoughts are attached to emotions— if not the words but the
type of thought (a thought is a relation to the self as it occurs) and the progression of thought-occurrence (curiosity) happens because thought occurs with some type of resonance as an expression of something physical— as a physical need for completion that can only occur through its own absence.

In the actual world I am writing from, the sound changed suddenly into the pulling static of crazy wind. It’s ridiculous and I have to stop. Confetti pollen everywhere. A light across the street flickered on and I looked into it like, what? And it flickered out. The sky is the color of wet toilet paper; a quilt of every kind you’ve ever seen. I am just a normal person who loves storms.

The expression of racing thoughts isn’t isolated to grief. It is so physical that you can see it twitch over people in subtle ways, uncontrollable but not subconscious. It’s that kind of physicality that makes me think that if no other part of your body feels good, your brain will continue to think because it is endlessly looking not for truth but for a dopamine rush.

We come back to the other moment of the idea itself. I am on the skateboard, I am so considerably depressed all the time that I can’t think (dopamine), I can’t taste food (dopamine), I’m not attractive to myself (dopamine) or to you, and the mind mentally squeezes for purchase because the physical lethargy is leeching its life which threatens its existence, but it’s existence is the inevitable leeching of life in the general drain of
mortality. Regardless, it’s absence unfigurately rolls around and around in search of dopamine which gives the mind mental relaxation for the preservation of self.

ADHD is just technology withdrawal. Everyone talks about the singularity as something that could happen, but we are in its event horizon and it has already happened. The existence of digital information gives the brain fast answers, but the long answers of experience require the mind to rotate around phenomena in a manner that constitutes what we think of as “mind” itself. I think that some brains have already evolved in a way that maximizes the capturing of information to the point where part of our nature is to hit enter, enter, enter as a command that blinks endlessly as an idea swivelling around and looking for dopamine because its emergence is dopamine. But some part of me doubts that I will get it; but doubt is an expression of a type of pain that is ultimately desire at its most vibrant.

This is saying nothing because it is nothing, it’s an idea.

Why are there desires that supersede pain? Because the stream of consciousness that confusingly twirls isn’t real. It’s there to prevent pain, of which there is a need because the mind exists. Pain escapes its grasp, it is beyond conceptualization because it is the material of conceptualization itself.
I’d begun to approach my tasks as if I had never seen them before and introduced the parts to myself. I could relax. Nothing the monkey mind does is concerned with the actual minimization of pain because it’s existence is pain: ultimately that thing is only looking for itself because that’s all it is. A thing looking at itself. I think this happens at an order so inconceivably small, that if we train it to keep looking as long as possible, we let what constitutes our existence become the minimization of the pain through a minimization of reality. Whatever neurotic muscle grew in our brain out of the need for the release of dopamine through thinking will never cut it but it still needs to exist.

Focusing on physical activity (letting your thoughts be your thoughts) stops the production of the rolling mind and releases dopamine. Direct experience is much slower and more vivid when I move than when I think because the increased search for information has developed a peacock’s tail through constantly affirming itself with fluff, and the mind even moves to restrict the body physically by invoking itself so that it exists. Physical exercise releases this dopamine and has a material limit, while thinking expresses its limit through pain (the level through which we can withstand life).

I think this problem is widespread. At a certain point in the future, if access to digital information finds a way to increase the speed of comprehension to maximize the direct experience of physical dopamine, the sensation of being alive replaces the direct experience of life (pain). But because of the psychological limit of the physical brain, whose thoughts need to race so as to hit enter and receive whatever dopamine— because
thought is the difference between nothing and dopamine—information will outpace our ability for complete comprehension. Existence becomes split between simulated experience, racing thoughts, and direct experience, and at some point we will have to simulate physical reality to the brain so that the monkey part of consciousness can work faster—to keep pace with the information unloading on the screen. If this is the case then it is likely that barring extinction, it has already happened but we haven’t understood what has happened to us.

There’s no better time to suddenly decide that this is a simulation.

If it’s a simulation, how do we know what we are supposed to do? It has nothing to do with knowing and everything to do with the reproduction of self and the pursuit of experiences beyond knowing and outside language: relief, desire, love. Laughter and aesthetic pleasures.

Without adderall, the brain slows its processing rate and causes a backload of thought, which swelters neurotically and rushes in when adderall returns.

And of course, because I’m thinking all of this on the skateboard, I stop looking where I’m going and fall into the cement ground. I hit my front left temple and I swear there was a crunching noise. I thought nothing, it was more like I assumed I was dead and I was so scared I was crying. I called your name like I was in pain, still breaking down. But
you were someplace else, headphones on, into whatever, forever away. I lay there and I
thought, I guess I’m OK. My temple throbbed and I continued to roll back in the sun,
effectly as one stretches when dead. Each and all the same fears occurred to me, but
instead of cringing, I just accepted it as reality and sat in it.

The key is sitting, relaxed. Instead of thinking: “I could die,” I thought, “I am dying.”
Instead of, “People could think whatever about me,” I thought: “People do think
whatever about me and this is how that feels and this is reality.” All my fears are about
the future and they’re gonna happen anyway.

Anxiety is just the feeling of reality, and I don’t have to turn away or do anything about
it. I don’t have to blame anyone, feel guilty, or change. I got back on the skateboard and
I was fine. I could smell things again, and I had memories from a time when I was
relaxed and time moved slowly and there was this big, beautiful backyard, and when I
started crying about the loss over my family, my face was totally relaxed. I just breathed
through the loss of it.

x

I now try to move more and stretch, I haven’t stopped skateboarding in the mornings. I
meditate whenever.

ROBERT CATHERINE 177
Now, I don’t put the feelings aside just because I’ve thought of the feeling of an experience that could come. I don’t think of the event of crying outside myself. I just cry. Instead of curiosity I have begun to feel wonder.
the pain (of anxiety) is just the feeling of the reality of existence as it is perceived Xs time, and when time slows, that is you maximizing your experience of a reality that is limitless at it’s phenomenological limit (which is itself) which is time at an integer so small it can only express itself in Being or Not Being (1 and 0) and the difference between the two isn’t life or death but the sensation you have of experience in a certain magnitude.
It’s the feeling of reality slowing which causes fear because it’s not the speeding up of life that leads to death, but the slowing down. The person who you think you are obviously wants to live forever, and the person who you are is just the rapid accumulation of thoughts sharing the same broad gesture of experience (exp. as in: a thing that keeps itself alive willingly because it has already been propelled to be).
1. Technology is causing ADHD. Rapid thoughts are technology withdrawal. Certain brains are trying to think as fast as computers. It is hurting us and making us crazy. The only way to manage ADHD is through regular meditation, medication, and exercise. Only, your medication will run out during pandemics.

2. The H in ADHD isn’t caused by an individual’s natural energy production, but through the restriction of natural movement and by sexual shame. High brain activity used to be associated with high physical activity, like hunting. Obesity now is a sign of depression or low brain activity.

3. When I concentrate my coordination, I stick out my tongue towards the object. It’s also the monkey reaching for what I want. In all directions, it is you.

4. The children are sticking post-it notes on each other’s backs. These notes all say, “Do Not Resuscitate.”
5. A prohibition on real feeling and a demand for immediacy has left me very unable
to express myself normally.

6. A generation of people in the future will have insane oral fixations because of all
the facemasks children 6-12 years old today now have to wear. There will
probably be erotica about kissing.

7. I have to withdraw myself from the world.

8. The singularity already happened. Through the internet, our subconscious which
we can’t access directly is actually just the many, many grains that make up
experience (the grain sifter).

9. These grains also include all the information our conscious minds have
experienced beyond what is possible for our consciousness to perceive in time
(because of language’s purring in our throats).

10. The ego is like a magnet drawing the grains toward it and then releasing in order
to keep the momentum of its own survival. The grains look like magnetic dust.
DEAR CAROLINE, it is possible

we both exist as a collection of brain spirits and thoughts
are an electric frisbee, throwing us forth electrically
emanating from a blackbox,
the empty beacon
which is consciousness

some exact gravity
thrown forth in strange exchange
eccstatically, until
the moment the search team flying frisbee
finds something
hits the information
or begins limp dick return
to the head

training our brains to send these quote
search parties out constantly
we have strengthened the armada
of our own final agonies
dying inside ourselves
unless instantly
not only is technology killing us
changing
how we are conscious
now getting more reps in
per second

more people’s last seconds will go on forever
that is what panic attacks are like

and we all have one final panic
experience leaves a material resonance
in our brains, that is accessible
unless it has been recycled
to make room for resonance
then it is gone from existence
this resonance is an electricity

which exceeds time
I love you

the resonance inside of your black box
the resonance is constantly swirling
inside the blackbox
like grains in a silo

grains always shifting
without purpose

around the silo’s empty center
which is you
it is you

you and your experience
experience of consciousness
you have no center

since you are electric

    you exist as an electrical

    an electrical magnet
you as a magnet

swirl through this resonance

and all that you touch through experience

gets stored in this resonance

but the magnet is small

it has no center

only gathers grains it needs

to continue propulsion
I love your empty center
I love what gathers it

I love you at the interior
which is beyond ourselves

and so I love everything
at the end of experience

the electricity which exceeds time gets released

imagine scattered light
what keeps the self divided?

I imagine the entirety of what is containable within the blackbox:

all the resonance is always there, until they are

disassembled and reassembled by the trailing magnet

which is your experience as carrier of a blackbox

your brain and its material forms bound time

that is the mind through which we, in our experiences

swirl

a swirling magnet
the swirling magnet cannot type
it is all your direct feelings
your sensations

this thing has desires but no wants
the blackbox exists for our bodies
which evolved to contain the blackbox
into two parts
which separated
forever
only meeting across the electricity
never through contact
one part of this divide is bound to physical reality
bound to where matter is
contained by matter
because it is matter

and then we know there’s electricity
which is a swirling resonance
and when the mind divided
it did so to create this resonance
in order for the divide to be bridged
while still remaining just one thing
there has to be a codependent exchange
absolutely necessary
which is consciousness
an exchange the self has with the self

contained within the self
when you are born without sight
it is like you are thinking through your skin

when we look outside ourselves
we read the world in a concentration
spatiality
changing through difference
for consciousness to shift
through the electrical resonance
we understand
through our perception
that has caused the movement into the mind

if the brain is conditioned by dopamine to reward
the electric with answers that satisfy it completely
it rewards it
the more it rewards it
its capacity to flare away from the self increases

thoughts
extending time through panic
  the centerless magnet of electricity
is searching through ourselves
faster than physical speech

we used to think and not find answers
and then just forget about the difference
or wait and ask someone
now
I am not nostalgic for anything
except for not being nostalgic
Today is Easter, and I am writing about rebirth.

I woke up and walked into the greenhouse and said hello to the plants. It’s where I have been thinking and writing, quarantined where the corn grows. I did not know that you plant the actual corn kernels until I planted them, and I didn’t know the strange silk strings inside the husk were seedlings until one pushed through the dirt and then pushed through itself until it turned green. I’ve never planted seeds until now or really known what any of this is like. I am finishing this because tomorrow they will go somewhere in the ground.
I imagine that when our light scatters it travels until it collides randomly with other light. A property of whatever this is inside us that it is always moving. At the tiniest size beyond what’s imaginable, belonging to no one until suddenly it does.

I thought I could write something to convince you to move to nowhere with me that would be hopeful or at least be lighter. I put off writing what I imagined leaving this life and trying another would be like because I don’t actually know what it will be like. I say that we should stop using the internet and start a commune with the people who think like us. I can’t romanticize it because nothing more romantic than that is possible.

I’ve been moving. Narrating my actions to myself without rushing has kept my circle of attention close to me, where I really need it. I lifted a kitten into my arms and I felt an involuntary pull of feeling, like a sneeze. It was love. It’s just that love wasn’t coming from one place in my body now.

I thought, is everything kind of different? And I knew how I wanted to test for the limits of it. I imagined that if you were here, I would take you out back, have you get on your knees naked, and piss on you, down your face and running down through your mascara and your hair. I wanted to watch you come like a train off its tracks.
In your absence, I decided that I would get through all the doubts I had about myself and listen to your record until I understood it. I thought because of the crying I’ve been doing that listening would have the same emotional spill. I continued to use a constant narration of my actions to myself, explaining why I had to reach what I needed to reach for like someone was watching completely without judgement.

Our pandemic mailman brought an Amazon package ordered weeks ago, and it contained a dish rack. I opened the box, which incredibly contained over thirty parts. I thought, oh, I can build this as if my acting class— who may very now all be dead— I can build this as if they were watching.

This type of task used to frustrate me, but when I focused on doing it slowly and in the best way possible instead of just trying to get through it to something else, it actually made me happy because it occupied the monkey searching for meaning in my head. I’m trying not to lie anymore, and now I’m laughing out of sheer discomfort when I tell you that as soon as I saw the double-paged, languageless dishrack instruction sheet and dozen identical metal rods of different lengths, I thought: this is the perfect thing to listen to Caroline’s record to and do. And then I still didn’t put your record on, until the metal screwing noise was so sharp and agitating, I thought, O.K.. I will do it.

On my first listen through, your record sounded the way it did when I had heard it the other times. I knew it was you shouting, but nothing caught on that I could understand.
The dish rack instructions were too associative. I kept reminding myself to come back to the instructions, and I was past halfway through your album when I realized the instructions were for the wrong thing, that this was not a rack for dish-drying (as in: a kitchen sink) but for some other undisclosed dish activity, and it was so large it would not be able to fit on the counter, and I knew I wasn’t feeling what I knew other people felt when they listened to your music because I have watched them and I know it happens, so I slammed the whole project into the ground three times. Then, I sat back down, completely disassembled it, and then I put it back into the box. I was smiling at how extremely unpleasant the entire experience was.

I put headphones on and sat on the couch to just listen and listen completely. It was louder, and I felt as though the decibile of distorted sound hurt my ears. Then I realized: this does not hurt my ears.

I turned the volume up much louder than I would ever comfortably listen to music, and it still did not hurt. I had always braced my head muscles without realizing it, but that bracing had no relationship to real pain, just an anxiety of pain which itself has always been causing discomfort.

I’ve always been sensitive to loud sounds. When I first started having erotic thoughts at night as a kid, it would cause me to sneeze which I worried both awoke everyone. I also mistakenly suspected it also alerted them to the fantasies I knew were bad about
merwomen. I worry always about making sounds that would disrupt people. And then problems talking, ear surgeries. I had been told loud noises would damage my ears, and I internalized it into this constant ontological wince which is this voice I write in right now.

The sound did not hurt me. A pain I had always felt and just assumed everyone lived with was gone. A tension in my temple immediately left.

My experience of your music was completely different after that. I quickly noticed things I never had before. Your yelling in my head made me nauseous, but something changed in the way I was hearing the abstract places of music that went on between songs, which I could familiarize with because it is more like the psychedelic rock and krautrock I listen to. The voices you sampled reminded me of the hypnosis, calling for attention in a way that induced some type of paranoia that slowed time, and at that point beyond the first break, I was caught in the music.

The times when other sounds dropped away except for some pattern left me unwillingly breathless. And then, when the song began, I felt greater nausea I just accepted, and when you began yelling again, this time I felt the big arterial ripping of being absolutely upset and pessimistic on a cosmic level, but I didn’t try to fight it and there wasn’t any pain, and I thought: this is my favorite thing. And this time, when the record left with the gray holding tone noise, I felt the most enormous release at the moment of silence.

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My heart was beating like I had tried jogging. I wanted to try listening again immediately while writing about it, but your music is as physically distracting as you would be, if you were here. It was the first time something like this was moving me—head up, head down— in a way that was involuntary. It reached past the barrier of skin and into my blood, like I had one of those tumor-searching cameras they stick down people’s throats inside of my head and subtly changing direction.

I had always thought until now people moved their heads with the beat and not from it.

I could breathe. The strange thing of consciousness was being carried. My face felt opened. The thing clenching each tooth up inside of my gums released all its unnecessary drops. I couldn’t pull away from the music because it had the part of my mind that pulls away, the part that is always running because it would only keep sliding if it stopped, like a large hand reaching down and controlling the hamster’s wheel.

When it’s over the third time, I sat with my hand over my mouth, breathing mentally dazed. I know that if I were to start it over again, there is no way I would ever be able to stop.

I paused and thought that if anything, it’s the inverse of ambient music. Instead of slowing it down so that you relax, it takes you, instead, through the fear of existence, and
past this fear is the blind exhilaration of reality where we touch what it’s like to be whole.

I heard other noises now that weren’t you echoing in the neighborhood. They disturbed me and they made the silence behind them ugly.

Muscles I have no control of were now untensed. My greenhouse was brighter but no lighter. I could feel now across the entire width of my chest. My whole body. With this tension gone for the first time, feeling could reach into the places that had opened up. This feeling is stronger than anything I’ve ever felt, and it is a raw type of desire: a love uncontaminated by any fear and a movement in reality.
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