The Genuine Alacrity of Things

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The Genuine Alacrity of Things

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Abstract

“The Genuine Alacrity of Things” is a short story collection. Themes include personal identity, the Anthropocene, grief, family, and relationships. The story collection is introduced by a critical introduction.
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Uneasy Transformations
A Critical Introduction to The Genuine Alacrity of Things

*The Genuine Alacrity of Things* is a collection of nine short stories and a novella written over four years in the University of Denver’s Literary Arts program. Although each piece can stand alone, I enjoy the idea of a collection—it is a chance to think about how the parts speak as a whole, even and perhaps especially when the parts are dissimilar. Across this collection there is a conversation about the role of narrative in helping to create and also to question individual identity in a time when we are increasingly aware of our collective impact on the planet and on each other. As a collection, *The Genuine Alacrity of Things* seeks to interpret and to perform nuanced, self-aware operations of identity, narrative, collectivity, and subjectivity. The collection’s individual pieces do these things, too, but as a collection they have stranger, more idiosyncratic aims—along with all else the reader might draw from these pages.

Like all of the fiction I write, these pieces are aware of themselves as writing; throughout the collection there is an element of narrative-as-performance. My writing, here and in my other prose collections, begins with a belief that when we tell a story, we can’t help but perform “telling a story” since our sense of “story” is shaped by the narrative conventions of stories we have read and heard. I am often more interested in the narrative conventions and structures shaping the stories I read and write than I am in the
stories’ particular content. I believe that our identity is founded on a story we are constantly telling ourselves and others, revising it as we do, perpetually shifting how we are relating to others and ourselves. I am ever curious as to how we construct these identity-stories: the language we use to talk about our experiences and inner life, the structures on which we hang the language, and the conventions that shape what we believe is “true” and “possible” and “real” about ourselves and others. Lately, first-person fiction that is concerned with its own construction is often called “autofiction.” As I will go on to discuss, performing narrative is a characteristic of the autofictional text. Yet, regardless of their narrative perspective, all of the pieces in this collection are invested in the idea that narrative is always performing itself.

In this collection I am also interested in exploring how the concerns of the present era, which has been called the Anthropocene, are impacting how we are constructing identities. One of the defining features of the present time is an abiding awareness of the cumulative impact of our individual actions. Does this lead to a conception of individual subjectivities as constituting the collective? Do we now more than ever think of our self in the plural, envisioning the cumulative effect of our own, singular actions? Is the individual person transforming, in our own imagination, into a more hybrid, collective creature? How might writers represent this transformation in fiction—through narrative voice and perspective? Through form, perhaps fragmentation? How else might I show a doubling or even a duplicity of the self? These are the kinds of questions that have energized my writing in these stories.
In the following pages, I set out a context for the collection by exploring my thinking about narrative, identity, and the conundrum of being a human during the Anthropocene. As a writer and thinker, I am as porous as my body, absorbing what sustains me from other writers as well as filmmakers, musicians, artists, craftspeople. Inescapably, we influence each other and claim others’ material for our own stories. The work of filmmaker and photographer Agnes Varda has been dear to me, particularly for her skill at interweaving levels of discourse (“fact” and “fiction”) in ways that unsettle viewers’/readers’ expectations and encourage us to engage in more nuanced ways of engaging films/texts than consumption. The influences of Joan Didion, Marie NDiaye, Renee Gladman, and Han Kang also abide in the pages of this collection: Didion for her unabashed contrariness and plain way of articulating the ordinary strangeness and horror of everyday life; NDiaye and Kang for the transformations they effect on the page and in readers; Gladman for pressing language into modes and shapes that hand-drawn lines and unspoken subtexts might aspire to. There is also my abiding interest in language’s ability to materialize what only a moment before was unthinkable or unknowable—yet also to *create* mystery, which is something entirely else than allowing the unarticulated to remain unsaid.¹ Whenever possible, I have tried to allow this essay about stories to create mystery, not by eliding or glossing over or omitting, but by affixing between these words

¹ Proust: “After a certain age our memories are so intertwined with one another that what we are thinking of, the book we are reading, scarcely matters any more. We have put something of ourselves everywhere, everything is fertile, everything is dangerous, and we can make discoveries no less precious than in Pascal’s Pensées in an advertisement for soap” (*Remembrance of Things Past* via Gerald Murnane’s *A History of Books*, page 1).
and those in the collection’s stories approximate, syntactic bridges that cross unmappable and ludicrous plains and crevasses and deserts of the interior’s exiled landscapes.2

**Narrative Voice & Autofiction: Narrative Doubling**

The collection’s titular story, “The Genuine Alacrity of Things,” was written as an experiment in first-person point of view. I wanted to find a way to double the “I”; that is, I wanted to find a way to write both from first- and third-person perspectives as simultaneously as possible while maintaining a legible, coherent narrative. What happens when a first-person narrator is also, at times, omniscient?3 What other stories and identities become enmeshed with the narrator’s as a result of the narrator’s perspective? These questions explicitly guided me as I wrote this story, which was very much an experiment in the affordances of first-person narration.

While I did not set out to write this story as autofiction per se, the concern here with the affordances of first-person narration is very much in conversation with works of, and critical thinking about, autofiction. The term “autofiction” was coined by French author Serge Doubrovsky on the back cover of his novel *Fils*, where he described autofiction as: “Fiction, of facts and events strictly real, if you prefer, autofiction, where the language of

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2 Writing this sentence, I’m reminded of another, older influence: the way wind passes over new snowfall on the fields and suburban roads around New Brighton, Minnesota. Then there is also Gerald Murnane, a writer whose commitment to complex sentences and solitude continues to influence me though I often don’t remember that it does.

3 I think of Joan Didion in “At the Dam” accessing the Hoover Dam while driving the highways of LA—and showing us that our own minds let us, in mundane yet mysterious ways fundamental to their operations, access places we have not visited in years, people we have never met, times far in the past or in the future; or at least, versions and semblances of these, which we then graft onto our story of “reality.” I think of Didion’s migraines removing her to a quadrant of her life from which to consider that life and the shapes she is making within it, as a “doubled” space.
adventure has been entrusted to the adventure of language in its total freedom”

(Doubrovsky i)—as if autofiction were fiction turned inside-out. I agree with Marjorie Worthington (an academic whose work has focused on autofiction) in her critical work *The Story of “Me:” Contemporary American Autofiction* that “autofiction is meant to be read primarily as a novel”; plot and themes matter more than historical or biographical accuracy (3). Often autofiction depicts a “characterized version” of the writer, usually referred to by the writer’s name, in situations that may or may not be clearly fictional (Worthington 2); the presence of this “author-character” in part is what generally distinguishes it from memoir. There have also been numerous attempts, notably by Anglophone scholars, to distinguish between autobiography and autofiction. I find this distinction useful: Worthington writes, “For Doubrovsky, autobiography retraces a *life*,

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4 The argument about whether autofiction is a genre, or kind, or mode is ongoing and is not particularly relevant to my argument here, so I’ll remark on it only briefly: In “Does Autofiction Belong to French or Francophone Authors and Readers Only?” Karen Ferreira-Myers concludes that the major difference between how Francophone criticism defines autofiction and how Anglophone critics have defined it “is probably that the latter conceive it as a ‘modus’ of writing and the former as a genre” (41). The comparison between “mode” and “genre” draws on Alastair Fowler’s *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, in which Fowler, focusing primarily on Anglophone literature, distinguishes between kind and mode, the difference between the two being, he writes, like the difference between a noun (kind) and its adjective (mode). Modes are incomplete, including only a subset of the kind’s features. When viewed as a mode, autofiction does only some of what the novel, as a kind, is considered to be able to do. Viewed as a genre, autofiction loses the sense of being an incomplete or partial sort of novel. Having originated in France, autofiction’s history and connection with the language perhaps afford it greater autonomy and therefore status there as a genre. Ferreira-Myers notes that, according to the scholar Jagoda Dolinska, “the field of study of autofiction as a genre might in fact be assumed to be specifically French” (44; Dolinska 183). Yet, argues Bran Nicol in “Eye to I: American Autofiction and its Context from Jerzy Kosinski to Dave Eggers,” American autofiction has a tradition at least as long as it has had in France.

5 In his introduction to *Autofiction in English*, Hywel Dix, faculty of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University in the UK, explores the intellectual background for Doubrovsky’s definition (Phillip Lejeune’s research in the 1970s into different forms of autobiographical writing) and the historical background of autofiction in English. Whereas Lejeune associated autofiction with the classical autobiographical novel, Doubrovsky (and Lecarme) understand autofiction as a form that is new and specific to the cultural conditions of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, an understanding that aligns with my own, particularly with respect to contemporary American autofiction, which seems to be up to something in excess of, and even sometimes counter to, the project of autobiography.
while autofiction presents a *self*” (9). I have an abiding interest in what it means not just to present, but also to construct, a self or identity through fictional forms.

In the autofictional text, the real impinges on the narrative, changing the stakes and asking the reader to maintain a critical, questioning distance even as they participate directly in the work of identity construction. A narrator named “Sheila” in a novel by Sheila Heti, or “Marie” in a novel by Marie NDiaye, suggests an author-character who is closer to the person of the writer than the standard fictional narrator is assumed to be. What are the ethics of identification, or of suspension of disbelief, or of empathy, if the characters’ names are the names of real people in the writer’s real life? The nature of the quandary these questions pose, perhaps first and foremost, is what the autofictional novel aims to show and to interpret, often through a critical lens. It reflects a contemporary uncertainty—as to how the individual self, in a world saturated with individual selves, is constructed through language, and as to whether an “authentic” or “real” self can be constructed through language that has been drained of vitality by commerce and media—that no form of the novel has yet been able to represent. The autofictional text also invites the reader to take a critical stance toward the text itself, and in so doing, invites the reader to participate in the fluid process of questioning, interpreting, and meaning-making.

In “*The Genuine Alacrity of Things,*” the reader is asked to participate in both first- and third-person narration as the narrator situates their self vis a vis a narrated subject. The first sentence is wholly third-person; it was my intention that the reader would, based on its first line, begin to read the story as a third-person narrative, invoking all of their assumptions about third-person stories as they exit the first sentence and begin to read the
next sentence. And for a moment, the second sentence reaffirms the assumption that this is a story written in the third-person, told by a so-far effaced, perhaps omniscient narrator. But then, in the second sentence, “I” appears, outside of any indication of dialogue, interrupting (I say more about the power of interruption in the next section) the reader’s engagement with the story they assumed they were reading. The interruption is a declaration of love from what is now, it seems, a first-person narrator—and perhaps for a moment there are two narrators, or a single, doubled narrator. Our first-person narrator is now commenting on an observation (“he walked home slowly”) by what at the time had seemed to be a third-person narrator. In this sudden perspectival turnabout, my intention was to create a moment in the text that destabilizes the reader’s assumptions about what kind of story this is, and from this place of openness and uncertainty, to encourage the reader to take a critical stance toward the text. In doing so, I invite the reader to participate in a process of questioning (their own assumptions especially), interpreting, and meaning-making.

**Vardian Uncertainty & Parallel Tracking**

In my aim to destabilize the text in order to invite a critical distance from the reader, I am inspired by the work of twentieth-century French filmmaker and photographer Agnes Varda, whose work is known for interweaving fictional structures and documentary material—often in the form of specific settings, actors who are not trained as such and who come from different social and economic backgrounds, and Varda’s own presence, whether on screen or in voice-over, as investigator or instigator. Of the effect of this
interweaving, which often resembles the combinatory operations of autofiction, Varda has said, “‘You come away knowing it’s fiction yet feeling it’s true’” (Flitterman-Lewis 223). Another effect is that a criticality (of the narrative, and of narrative-making) gets woven into the film that a purely fictional film would lack. The viewer is encouraged to reflect analytically on what exactly it is they are watching—is it “real”? What constitutes the “real”? In reflecting analytically, the viewer gains a critical distance that prevents easy identification with the characters or narrative and implicates them in the film’s process of meaning-making.

Varda’s first film, *La Pointe Courte*, comprises two parallel, alternating stories, each five chapters long (the structure was inspired by Faulkner’s *The Wild Palms*), one about a couple in a seaside village working through marital problems, the other about a fishing dispute in the same village; further juxtapositions include professional actors (the couple, played by Sylvia Montfort and Philippe Noiret) and nonprofessional actors (the villagers playing themselves); metal (emblematic of the woman in the couple, who is from the city) and wood (emblematic of the man, whose family are shipbuilders from the village); and documentary footage (the village and villagers) woven with a fictional story (the couple). While the two stories share a setting, the film does nothing to explain or create a connection besides placing the chapters side by side. Montfort and Noiret contribute a much more formal style of acting, and their story has a very different stylistic flavor than the story of the villagers. It is left to the audience to decide for themselves in what ways these stories are connected. This—structuring the film so the viewer is encouraged to participate in the meaning-making process—came to define Varda’s style.
One of Varda’s later and best-known films, *Vagabond*, is also an exemplar of how Varda brings together both fictional and nonfictional elements in her work, and in doing so, encourages viewers to maintain a critical distance while watching her films even as they come to know the main character intimately. The aleatory nature of the film (and of all of Varda’s work), incorporating chance occurrences of documentary material that it is up to the audience to reconcile with the parallel fictional story, disrupts any easy interpretation of the film’s “meaning.” There is no one meaning; as Varda shows us, any attempt to construct a meaning here is a dialectical, deliberative, social process. How one engages in the process will affect how one views and interprets the film. Here and across Varda’s body of work, there is an “also-and” operation at work.

The film follows Mona, a traveler, during her final days. It begins with Varda, in voice-over, acting as a questioning investigator as we watch Mona’s corpse being sealed in a body bag. The film’s conclusion is foregone; right from the start, it is clear that this film will not follow a linear trajectory but a circular path, showing us first Mona’s dead body and then the events leading up to it, ending where it began with Mona’s death. The film has the structure of a detective story, and like a detective story, it relies on the testimony of witnesses to tell the story. These witnesses include actors and some nonactors—people Varda encountered while researching the film (the goatherd being one example). Yet unlike a classic detective story or film narrative, *Vagabond* does not try to

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6 About her working method, Varda has said, “‘My working method is often as follows: alone, I look for or find places where scenes will be shot about which I know nothing, and people who will be secondary characters of a story I can scarcely imagine. The reality with which I inform myself liberates my imagination’” (Varda qtd in Conway 66).
piece together a coherent explanation for Mona’s death, or to construct a character whose motivations are logical or easily discerned. The randomness with which Varda gleaned material for the film is incorporated into the discursive structure. Varda has said that her organization of Mona’s encounters “‘came little by little, here and there as I travelled. I roamed around the region, not knowing where to go next …. I decided that the people she’d met would be the ones who spoke of her’” (Flitterman-Lewis 303). The narrative consists of testimony from the people who met Mona in her final days disclosed in brief (about ten-minute) chapters interrupted by a tracking shot (Varda calls the film “a portrait in the form of a discontinuous tracking shot” [Varda By Agnès] and “‘a long tracking shot which is cut into portions where the “adventures” are inserted’” [Flitterman-Lewis 308]).

As yet another example of a contradictory impulse at work, the “long tracking shot” is always filmed tracking Mona laterally as she moves screen left, implying a linear progression while the narrative structure and chronology of the film defy linearity.

The tracking shots are important for another reason: they interrupt our ability to establish an illusion-indulging gaze on Mona. Film scholar Sandy Flitterman-Lewis argues that these shots are not moments of contemplation but “moments of critical distancing, textual spaces that provoke the viewer’s analytic reflection” (308). The camera moves laterally with Mona and then leaves her behind, coming to rest on an object (seemingly random, gleaned from Varda’s travels) in the landscape. This has a flattening effect in that it places on the same visual plane, and plane of relevance, Mona and objects in the landscape (in much the same way that images of bodies and vegetables are equated by the camera in Varda’s short L’Opéra-Mouffé). With her death Mona
becomes just another object in the landscape. Perhaps Varda is making a statement here about our regard for a woman who dwells outside of social convention—in the end she is no more important than a tractor or a gate. Yet Varda never tells us this explicitly. Rather, she gives us the space of the tracking shot in which to understand Mona by our own logic.7

I’ve been interested in how to achieve in prose effects similar to those of Varda’s parallel operations. I have wanted to find something similar to parataxis in poetry; in prose, it would need to take as its unit something larger than the sentence, since prose (generally) works with dimensions and distances that are vaster than those of poetry. One method I’ve experimented with is the interruption. In my first published collection of stories, Discomfort, I included a story titled “Interruptions.” The title is heavy-handed, and so is the formal approach, because the nature of interruptions is that they are sudden and abrupt and demanding, simultaneously ending the task at hand and beginning a new task or demand on one’s attention. The story was in part inspired by vague but persistent memories of interviews I’d read with Grace Paley and Tillie Olson: both authors spoke about how their writing processes had to take place in intervals between interruptions by their children and domestic tasks and jobs. In the present collection, the short piece “Marie-Hortense Fiquet” comes closest to the experiment of “Interruptions” with relatively short paragraphs, which may read like a list, and leaps between ideas, including, from the second to third paragraphs, a leap in narrative perspective from third

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7 She also suggests a visceral (and perhaps critical) distance from Mona by making it clear, through witness testimony, that Mona is filthy, smells awful, and is repulsive to men.
to first. The piece is as interested in charting the way one’s mind and ideas can change over time as it is in connecting and explaining the content of those ideas. The mind, like Varda’s camera, comes to rest sometimes on seemingly random or unrelated objects in its landscape, and the mind’s landscape is stranger and more mutable than the ones we can see on a screen. These interruptions of the machinery of prose and the reader’s assumptions are attempts to create space for both the reader and me to make the kinds of discoveries—about ourselves, our assumptions, our own interior landscape—that generally only happen when we are startled or find our expectations thwarted.⁸

Varda’s interest in how cinema can encourage audiences to explore their own positionality extends back to *La Pointe Courte*, her first film, as does the juxtaposition of parallel stories whose connection she does not explicitly draw out. In *Vagabond*, the “impossible portrait” of Mona is drawn through testimony whose contradictions and disagreements are never reconciled; it is a portrait created by a community, not by authorial access to interiority or “truth”—we are deliberately never given such access. Speaking of the importance of the tracking shot, Varda says, “‘By staying parallel to her with the camera, you never really reach her. The audience may not be actually aware of it, but it affects them anyway. The important thing was not to confuse the audience with phony emotions—to leave them space and time to feel something on their own’” (Varda qtd in Flitterman-Lewis 308). Alongside the camera, we are left to externals, surfaces, by which to evaluate Mona’s possible motives. As in *Cleo from 5 to 7*, the gaze or “look”

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⁸ All of the stories in *Discomfort* were about this in some way, and I continue to try to write stories that are uncomfortable because unwilling to conform to expectations generated by tactics of conventional prose.
here is not that of a male protagonist, but that of the camera itself; it is also not that of the author, since the narrative has made clear that there is no authorial insight to be had here. Varda is our co-investigator; along with her, we gaze through the camera, no one of us an authority.

In this collection and in my work generally, I try to write narrators who function similarly to Varda’s camera in that they remain parallel to the action, remarking and reporting on it incontrovertibly yet always from an unbridgeable distance, signaling to the reader that just as we do not have access to other people’s interiors (despite whatever they might reveal), we do not have access to characters’ (or perhaps, texts’) interiors—in other words, there is a realm of meaning into which language cannot take us. This can create a tone of eerie superficiality (I think of the tone of *The Driver’s Seat* by Muriel Spark and *Crash* by JG Ballard); my story “Marie-Hortense Fiquet” is in part about the ethics of maintaining this distance.

I agree with Flitterman-Lewis that through a narrative structure that subverts any authoritative interpretation, and through documentary-style footage that encourages us to gaze with and through the camera, “Varda proposes an identification with looking itself, a viewing process that allows a perpetual variability of spectatorial positions and favors indeterminacy over the rigidity of fixed meanings” (309). We are not seduced into the story but participate in its construction. In looking at Mona, we do not have power over her—as the “male gaze” as Mulvey describes it asserts power over its object. Rather, we are taking in all of the images of Mona alongside sometimes conflicting testimony, trying to put together the pieces of the “puzzle,” as Varda called the film, and becoming
increasingly aware of the meaning-making process in which we are engaged. Perhaps in Varda’s films we are looking at cinematic looking itself, coming to know a process that Flitterman-Lewis aptly calls “the social inscription of vision” (288)—apt because it includes in its purview all that the “social” entails here: the society that constructs Mona through its testimony, the social values and possibilities through which we construct our own perspectives that shape our interpretation of the film. We are invited to see Mona’s femininity, as well as the feminine more generally, as one such construct whose creation we are all complicit in.

A retrospective article on Joan Didion’s work speaks to the kind of distance I have been talking about in Varda’s work (and which I have attempted in my own). In “The Radical Transparency of Joan Didion,” Frank Bruni writes that Didion conceded her subjectivity. Traced her blind spots. Showed her hand. Instead of mimicking the swagger and voice-of-God authority that many other journalists affected, she stipulated — sometimes as the very subject of an essay, other times in its margins — to what a peculiar narrator she could be. She cataloged her own oddities, and she did so not as an exercise in narcissism but as an act of candor.

There is an ethics in this candor, which Bruni argues Didion pioneered:

In the news business over recent years, there has been significant discussion about whether any one writer can be wholly objective and neutral, whether it’s wise to assert (or, perhaps, pretend) as much, whether the idea that a particular account could have been produced in its exact form by any number of different reporters is patently false on its face. Some outlets now give their audiences more information about the people bringing them the news or permit those journalists to create profiles on social media that are a kind of piecemeal, steadily accruing autobiography. That’s not intended as a surrender to subjectivity. It’s meant as transparency.

As a writer of fictions, I find autofiction to be the mode that gives me most salient access to the transparency Bruni attributes to Didion’s writing. Varda’s work in film
gives me a point of access to the visual allowances of this kind of transparency, which I then seek out in prose (others’ and my own). Bruni points to the effects on readers of Didion’s transparency as a writer:

Didion had the boldness and brilliance to realize, ahead of her time, that she bolstered her credibility and cemented her bond with readers if she volunteered that her sensibilities invariably steered her in certain directions and circumscribed her observations. So she owned up to her prejudices and parameters. She coped to her leanings and limits.

Although she was ostensibly writing nonfiction, Didion established herself as a narrator in much the same way a fiction writer establishes a story’s narrator. Readers’ expectations of reporters of nonfiction and narrators of fiction likely differ, yet there is a gray area when it comes to first-person fiction, especially first-person fiction where the narrator shares even just glimmers of similarities with the writer; autofiction delights in this gray area.

“The 59 Realms” is very much interested in exploring the gray area, tracing my blind spots, showing my hand, and tracking these writerly acts of transparency alongside the first-person narrator-character’s actions within the story in a way that maintains a critical distance for the reader. The inclusion of images alongside the text is a nod to WG Sebald’s work, which is also known for delighting in the possibilities and conundrums of the first-person narrator. Maybe this makes it the most obvious example of autofiction in the collection; and perhaps this raises the question of what this sort of writing is doing alongside pieces like “The Projection of Jupiter in Zoo City” and “Billy Material,” which, because they are in third person, do not seem as invested in questioning narrative conventions. I have deliberately sequenced the collection so that these disparities are
highlighted; the reader moves from “Plant Journal,” a first-person narrative presented in the style of a journal, and “The 59 Realms” into “Billy Material,” and surely the transition is somewhat jarring. Yet there is also a kind of tracking (think Varda) going on here: suddenly the reader lands on a text that seems of a different order or world than the one they were just in, and this invites questioning: Where was I, actually? How did I get from there to here? Where am I now? My hope is that the reader begins “Billy Material” wondering where they are, perhaps sensing that as they move forward in the text, the past—the previous pieces in the collection, the worlds from which they were drawn—collapsing behind them as they go. “Billy Material” is working with the shards and aftermath of the previous pieces—their worlds, narrative conventions, characters, narrators, objects, forms. It is really a kind of impossible coda, coming after the autofictive mode of “Plant Journal” and “The 59 Realms,” yet told from a more “traditional” narrative perspective (third person). The sequencing of the collection resists cohesion on the level of narrative perspective or stylistic similarities, and in doing so preserves some distance between itself and its interpretation. And there is also the mode of the interruption: the style of one piece interrupting the style of the preceding one.

**Transformative Forms: Doubling, Repeating, & Looping**

In this collection, I am interested in how narrative forms can implicate readers in the text’s transformative process of meaning-making. How do narrative forms, as containers for language, afford or restrict making meaning in and through language? As a writer, what do I need to think about with respect to form when I am considering how I want my text to...
reach and affect readers? In exploring these questions here, I will consider work by Marie NDiaye and Renee Gladman through the lens of Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*.

Following a summary of Borges’ “Funes the Memorious” in which Levine highlights Funes’ deranging inability to abstract from his experience, so that he is immersed to the point of drowning in a disordered mental landscape of particulars, she writes, “How particular can we be? And how can we make arguments at all without abstract concepts to contain the potentially endless diversity of experience?” (35). This rhetorical question is asked in defense of formalism, suggesting that forms, which are abstractions, are indispensable for human dealings. Humans are creatures that make arguments; we rely on abstraction to do this.

Yet the forms of abstraction — concepts being chief among them — can put those who wield them in a bind, permitting us to make arguments because they limit “the potentially endless diversity of experience” while they necessarily also constrain the very arguments they allow. Levine points to this operation in Poovey’s work: “She cannot show us the dangers of containing wholes without relying on containing wholes” (36). Given our dependence as argument-making creatures on concepts, abstractions, forms, we should probably understand how to bend, break, and escape from them when we need to. The work of Renee Gladman and Marie NDiaye shows us how this can be done.

In *Calamities*, Gladman uses narrative to escape from narrative — or, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, to “detterritorialize” and “reterritorialize” sense (“Toward a Minor Literature”). One way she does this is by using quotation marks to delineate different
territories through which the narrative will move us. For example, on page 6: “I began the
day thinking that in order to write a talk on ‘The Ongoing Story’ I would need to
incorporate it into these essays I’d been writing about my life. I began, ‘I began the
day…””

Here, a way out of one form — “beginning of a narrative” — is to make another
beginning-form within it — “beginning of a narrative within a narrative”. Which is the
real beginning? I wonder if that is the most productive question to ask since, farther
down the same page, Gladman writes:

Recently, I had found that to talk about something that was in essence to talk about
everything was too exhausting, and that the only way around it was to talk about the question
of the thing rather than the thing itself, since in the end, it would become both.

Talking about “the thing itself” (“ideas of a general, Platonic sort,” as Borges writes
in “Funes the Memorious”) is perhaps beyond the human. But doubleness — duplicity —
is a way out.

This is an idea I explored in “The Genuine Alacrity of Things” with the sudden
perspectival shift in the first sentences. This narrative “doubling” creates an
indeterminate operation within the text. Varda has a variety of techniques for creating this
doubling; the most audacious, I think, are her own appearances in her films. In Beaches
of Agnes, Varda, voicing over footage of herself, states, “I’m playing the role of a little
old lady telling her life story.” Early on in the film she is arranging mirrors on the beach:
“In my mirrors, I met others,” she says in a voice over. Through the mirrors’ reflections
she actually doubles her own image. Which one is providing the voice over? Which one
is the “real” Varda—the image casting the reflected images, the voice providing the
narrative, both, neither? We are not really meant to answer these questions but to let them accumulate around the visual narrative as it continues.

In Gladman’s piece the doubling happens by way of the preposition “about,” which doubles how we can address “the thing”. To multiply oneself — to become-both — is to give the limited human subject the capacity to escape the singular and that which would contain the singular subject, in order to access the multiple. Both “the question of the thing” and “the thing” are real (though perhaps they are realities of different orders, c.f. Ronen in “Are Fictional Worlds Possible?”). At the same time, both “the question of the thing” and “the thing” are, here, figures: thus perhaps neither is real. And yet perhaps an affordance of the real is, through narrative forms, and more basically through language, to become-unreal, or to allow a becoming-unreal.

A similar, though uniquely deployed, operation is at work in Marie NDiaye’s *Ladivine*. In this novel, the operations of repetition and recapitulation are in a constant process (a process perhaps set in motion by the workings of postcolonialism, a form that remains outside of, yet adjacent to, the book’s narrative) of folding figures back into the book’s narrative, trapping them, and us as readers, in a seemingly inescapable function of narrative: to perpetually figure and refigure the particulars of experience. In contrast to Levine’s optimism in the power of literary forms “to set forms against one another in disruptive and aleatory as well as rigidly containing ways” (40), the function of form in
*Ladivine* is rather less optimistic, seeming, up until the novel’s final pages, to be able to constitute its own outside through this process of constant re-figuration.\(^9\)

The process can be seen at all levels of the narrative, particularly at the levels of characterization and the line. Over the course of the novel, the three main characters, Ladivine Sylla, Clarisse/Malinka Rivière, and Ladivine Rivière, appear to flow in and out of one another, their names and also the narrative itself blurring their separate identities so that the consciousness of one infects that of the others. At the line level, this blurring is achieved through repetition of words and images, which forms loops through which the narrative moves the reader, and also its characters, backward in order to go forward, down in order to go up.

An example of both the blurring of characters and also this looping operation can be seen on page 116, when Ladivine (the younger) is walking through Berlin. NDiaye writes,

> The cloying smell of the fallen, crushed linden flowers rose up from the pavement, stronger than the scent of the clusters still hanging — cloyingly sweet, too, she thought as she raced along, was the odor of Clarisse Rivière’s spilled blood, or perhaps rank and overpowering in

\(^9\) I am not *always* willing to follow Levine, such as when she writes, “Amid the complex and aleatory overlapping of social forms, there are *always* opportunities for unexpected and ideologically unsettling outcomes” (104) (emphasis mine). I’m not convinced that truly chance arrangements can occur, or be constituted by, *all* social forms; it seems here Levine’s argument depends on an idealized “constitutive outside” — idealized because her argument assumes that the “outside” is necessarily unaffected by what it contains and that it therefore permits truly chance operation; yet might there be forms (totalitarian political regimes, for example) that limit what their own outsides can permit? Is it possible for some forms to simultaneously contain and be contained by what they contain? I am not sure, in 2022, what or where the “constitutive outside” of the capitalist form is, since the form seems fantastically adept at blurring, appropriating, subsuming, and negating anything momentarily outside of itself. Something similar seems to be the case in *Ladivine*, where the legacy of colonialism constitutes an outside the outside of which cannot be reached save through a radical transfiguration of the human, as if, in order to escape the form and its discourse, one must become other than the kind of creature that created the form. If and when there are outsides of the colonialist and capitalist forms, they are momentary, providing momentum for their own appropriation by the container that, simply by their being outside of it, already contains them. Human forms may be as duplicitous as their makers.
Blood, which is connected with flowers through their “cloyingly sweet” odor, connects Ladivine with her mother, whose death overwhelms her thoughts as she walks amid spring flowers, which return her to thoughts of her mother — a circuit from which she seems unable to break free. At the end of this paragraph, “A whimper escaped her,” and then, in the next paragraph, the images of blood and flowers are recapitulated in a slightly different narrative sequence, which culminates in the following paragraph:

And the smell of Clarisse Rivière’s blood in the air, mingling with Charlottenburg’s springtime perfumes, the Langon calamity slowly flooding the faraway, unsullied heart of Berlin, left her quivering in terror—because then what escape could there be? (116)

Clarisse Rivière floods her daughter’s world and thoughts, the river in her name permitting this boundarylessness, making nowhere safe for Ladivine. The “escape” that is invoked here — an escape from associations that remind Ladivine of her mother, which is also an escape from narrative; that is, from the function of language that forges associations and connections — does eventually arrive for Ladivine, not through language but through its disintegration and absence. As Ladivine, “joyful and proud,” becomes dog, “she let out little cries that she alone could hear, immediately swept off by the rushing wind” (224). This release — into the form of a dog, and into the wind — is also a release for the circuitous, stagnant narrative of the last 100 or so pages as the looping language and imagery end with Ladivine’s transformation; language, which formerly bound her to a painful story, now lacks signification for her. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari, “Language stops being representative in order to move toward its
extremes or limits” (Toward a Minor Literature 23), a move that began with Ladivine’s whimper on page 116, when she was still trapped in the narrative circuit, and that ends when the wind sweeps off her “little cries.”

Yet this release from the seemingly inescapable loop of narrative is not, for Ladivine, a release from agency; in her new form, she can still mother her family, still “place them under her care.” Though she seems to have exited her human form, she retains the memory of her family and her loyalty to them. Here as in Gladman’s work, doubleness/duplicity — a becoming-both — is a way out of a particularly vexing narrative, and perhaps a way of approaching “the thing itself” (in the case of Ladivine, perhaps that thing is a basic mother-ness) without the burden of its endlessly proliferating particulars. “Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor,” write Deleuze and Guattari (22); this contrariness of metamorphosis is a mode of its argumentation that reaches beyond language.

Thinking about how repetition and looping appear in my own writing, I first feel the influence of contemporary musician-composers like Nils Frahm and Laurie Anderson, among many others, whose compositions often establish a phrase that is slowly altered, sometimes only one note at a time, as it recapitulates. I learn something about repetition listening to their music: that it doesn’t have to be verbatim or exact, and that it actually cannot be, since the listener and the context change, even just slightly, with every utterance. Perhaps repetition, because it draws our attention to a linguistic operation, can allow us to move outside of language. This was on my mind while I wrote “Repetition,” “The 59 Realms,” and “Plant Journal.”
“Repetition” is perhaps the most direct engagement with the idea that repetition doesn’t have to be verbatim; that it can function more like recapitulation of musical phrases, and that through recapitulated lines, the reader can move through and finally exit the piece. In this brief piece, two lines, “yet we are still a little inclined to disbelieve our own stories” and “yet we are still a little disinclined to believe our own stories,” bookend the text and may seem at first to be verbatim repetitions. The second line is a recapitulation of the first, with the prefix “dis” shifted from “believe” to “inclined.” My aim here was to experiment with repetition in the briefest prose form possible while alluding to expansive, subterranean spaces, the sort of space from which a text like this might emanate or seep. There is also a loop in the line “But consequences add to their causes,” which suggests that the result of an operation can alter the operation that produced it. My intention is that this line is in conversation with the recapitulated line, so that it may be read as an outcome of an operation (the text), which its presence changes since it may encourage the reader to question what they have just read and to go back and reread.

“The 59 Realms” repeats images and themes, situating them in different contexts, to move the narrative and readers through time and space. For example, water, doors, locks, and spiral shapes reappear in different forms throughout the piece. This repetition suggests the closed mental space of obsession, in which everything points back to the sole object of one’s focus. The first-person perspective adds to the sense of being shut inside someone’s mind, subject to the ruts of their mental habits. Yet the forms in which water, doors, locks, and spiral shapes appear are constantly changing, and this allows
reader and narrator a means of movement through narrative space and time. “Plant Journal” demonstrates the inescapably repetitive, diurnal work of the journal form: the narrator’s preoccupation with the same concerns day after day, as these concerns, and the narrator, slowly change. Here we might be able to grasp the mutability of duration itself: we can escape narrative loops simply by enduring them.

How narrative, and even language, can facilitate reaching beyond language, to a becoming other or becoming another, for writer or reader or both, has preoccupied me as a writer. In “Plant Journal,” the narrator explores her resistance to writing via a journal ostensibly about plants and her experiences with plant life. One of the entries focuses on Han Kang’s story “The Fruit of My Woman,” which preceded and clearly shaped Kang’s remarkable novel *The Vegetarian*. The story is narrated in the first person by a husband and tells of his wife’s slow transformation into a plant. In effect, she escapes an unhappy marriage, and apparently an unhappy life as a human woman, by becoming plant. Although she, the human woman and wife of the narrator, dies in this transformation, Kang suggests that the life that was hers will continue in plant form. In “Plant Journal,” the narrator finds, during a difficult time in her life, some solace in the idea of human death as a transformation that might bring one closer to the plant world. The journal form permits the diurnal to become transformative for both narrator and reader. Both plants and humans are connected biologically to the rhythms of day and night, and as the journal unfolds diurnally, we see how, through this cycle of days and daily observations, we can deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, and this process in itself can be transformative.
This affordance of the journal form can also be seen in Marie NDiaye’s *Self-Portrait in Green*: a series of vignettes, some dated in the style of journal entries, about various “women in green,” and through which we see a dynamic portraiture of the narrator’s changing interiority and thus gain a mobile way of understanding her transformation over the course of the narrative. The women in green all vex in some way the narrator, who is NDiaye as author-character; they can also all be read as parts of NDiaye’s self-portrait—parts of herself. Along with encounters with these women, there are accounts of the river Garonne, which is flooding—and which might be another of the women in green. In the book’s final line, NDiaye writes, “And then…driving slowly across the flooded plain, on the one passable road…I wonder…the water muddy and calm on either side of the roadway…is the Garonne…is the Garonne a woman in green?” (103). As the title reminds us, this is a self-portrait; we are invited to see the characters, including the river, as an aspect of, if not the writer as a person, the writer as a mode or extension of experience and the expression of that experience.

The “woman in green” is a type and a motif; she seems less a character than an ideation, the nuances of which NDiaye is working through by way of writing. As a result, there’s an opacity to the writing—for instance, for two pages (16–18) the narrator’s friend Cristina (whom the narrator begins to suspect is actually not Cristina, adding to the confusion) speaks in halting, elliptical sentences that only add to the sense of something irresolvable between the two women in part because Cristina’s identity is thrown into question. The novella presents a portrait of a state of mind invoked by contact, whether mental or physical, with “green women.” This is something that writing can do that other, visual
 mediums cannot: create portraits that re-present interiors, mental states, emotions, feelings. NDiaye’s novella suggests a close attention not just to the author’s worldly affairs but also to her mental processes. The result is a portrait of a person’s interior rather than exterior. In “Plant Journal” as well as my other first-person pieces, I have made attempts toward self-portraits of interiority in ways that encourage readers to have an experience of constructing their own interiority.

**Fiction in the Anthropocene**

One of my aims in *The Genuine Alacrity of Things* is to bring myself, and I hope my readers, to a more intricate consideration of our human perspective, its textures, affordances, and limitations. Life in the Anthropocene challenges us to be positively transformed by self-awareness; to act as an individual as if we were the collective, considering the consequences of our own actions—for the planet and its resources—multiplied by a million or a billion (e.g., if *everyone* drives to work like I do (or don’t), if *everyone* eats meat like I do (or don’t), if *everyone* flies internationally like I do (or don’t, etc.). Life in the present day encourages us to take a critical distance from ourselves and our own lives in order to examine how we are living—and even to investigate the basis and value of life itself as we continue to imperil it. What are the narrative modes (first person, third person, etc.) and forms that reflect this kind of hypervigilant self-awareness that is also willing to look at the individual life abstractly, statistically? These were the kinds of questions I had while writing “Billy Material.”
The story experiments with a close third-person narrative perspective that is particularly and deliberately recalcitrant. Although a disaster seems to have occurred, at no point does the narrator tell us what has happened; we are told only what is happening now in a present-tense that is fragmented by, presumably, that unspoken—perhaps unspeakable—past event. I was interested in the idea that a disaster—whether human-made or not—might disrupt, blow apart, or break syntax and semantics in addition to, or instead of, causing physical destruction. While the world of “Billy Material” does seem to have endured physical destruction, there is also the implication of a rift in language—in what is comprehensible and in what is communicable by the story’s characters and also by its anonymous narrator. Carrie, the main character, has written a letter to her mother (supposedly) at the start of the story; the language of the letter is unusual, and so is its material form: it is written on a piece of tissue (whether or human or not we are not told) that has been flattened to permit words to be written upon it. There is also the implication that Carrie’s mother is no longer alive; the letter, written on animal flesh for a probably dead person, points to the difficulties of communication in this world—particularly since we are told that “there is no way to send it.” The section ends “The End.” It is the third section of many to come; the ending it points to has already happened; it is an echo of “the end” of children’s stories after the action has happily concluded. It is mocking endings and, more covertly, the notion of “the end of the world.” As we are learning in a time of drastic climate catastrophes, “the end” is not sudden and final but ongoing, increasingly dire, and untethered from our ability to understand or communicate it.
Yet Carrie makes attempts to understand it; she keeps a journal, which we see outtakes from (“Root that grows by the old station——Emmenagogue; anxiolytic. Eat salt with it”). Since we don’t know who Carrie was “before” (the name “Carrie” was given to her “after,” by her boyfriend, whose name is or isn’t the postal abbreviation for the state of Nevada), we can’t know whether it’s reasonable for Carrie to have access to the kind of language in the notes she writes. By isolating these notes on their own pages, my intention was to further untether language from story, letting it intrude and disrupt and call attention to itself; letting it assert its brokenness and nonsense. If the reader must have an explanation for these journal entries, I am content to let them believe that Carrie has channeled them—like she seems to have channeled Billy.

This story went through several drafts before Billy emerged coherently, if anything about him can be called coherent. I knew that I wanted Carrie to be creating something living, probably against her own judgment and maybe even volition; I wanted life to emerge in a place that is inhospitable to the living. What kind of life would be shaped by an environment of collapse? I am always carrying around with me images from Varda’s *Gleaners & I*—of farmers and city dwellers sorting through piles of refuse for what’s still edible, coherent. Probably these images influenced Carrie’s gleaning. She makes Billy not out of the biologic material of her body, but out of the material she gathers of collapsed human-made structures, which, as we know in the Anthropocene, have biological consequences. Billy is a child of humans; he’s just not born in the common way.
At times, “Billy Material” reads like a zombie apocalypse story: Billy is animated but not clearly conscious; he can move but in a slow, linear, seemingly programmed way. When he boards the train, which might also be a zombified machine, his movements become even more linear, mechanical, predictable yet amplified by covert forces. The story calls back to other monster stories, like Frankenstein, in its positing a creature, assembled by one of the characters, gaining agency. Yet “Billy Material” does not work quite like other monster stories, which might want us to ask, “Who monsters the monster?” Here, Carrie’s energy is directed toward Billy as a son; she tries to parent the monster, as exhausting as this might sometimes be. She knows, as we know in the Anthropocene, that we are responsible for our creations, and she seeks and finds maternity in this bond.

Writing “Billy Material,” I wanted to move into a space where it could be possible to shed our worn ideas of the human. This space is strewn with the rubble of postmodernity’s excesses; it is an area around which the “powers that be” have inflected, and in which we must begin to suspect that our claims to agency have led us perhaps a bit farther beyond ourselves than we intended to go—we see that maybe we were never in control, though our proficiency in our own constructed systems might have briefly led us to believe otherwise. The place from which Billy emerges is a place where the “five-year plan” is a preposterous privilege. The force that animates Billy has always been aware of

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10 Bits and pieces of the language in this paragraph were inspired by Bayo Akomolafe in conversation with Ian MacKenzie in “These Monsters in Perpetual Exile,” an episode of *The Mythic Masculine* podcast. Thinking about Billy and sons and creation, I was also thinking about fatherhood and patriarchy and what inflections of these paradigms could look like.
the largesse of catastrophe in relation to the five-year plan. It is a force that comes out of the earth, rising up through its cracks and bioswales, whatever “the earth” is in an economy of denial and separation. Perhaps Billy is a kind of golem crafted by the intelligences that have always resided in the materials we try to refine and extrude.

I also wanted to make Billy, in his strangeness and repulsiveness, very funny. I haven’t said anything yet about humor, but it’s there, I think, in all of my writing. Maybe after the catastrophe, humor, because it doesn’t depend on creation or cohesiveness or intactness, is the one thing that is still viable and whole.
References


*Cleo from 5 to 7*. Directed by Agnès Varda, Ciné-tamaris, 1962.


The Genuine Alacrity of Things
The Genuine Alacrity of Things

He knows where a man’s heart is on display—during business hours one day he saw it. After, he walked home slowly, and because I still love him, I take some interest in his pace. Was he thinking about the man, a saint? Was he thinking at all about the person who removed the saint’s heart and placed it in preservative chemicals?

I am certain the saint’s heart is smaller than he had been expecting, though he had not been expecting a heart at all. He often goes into cemeteries; a cathedral is like a single grave, lavishly maintained. And here is the heart, in a case, with a plaque narrating the life of the saint.

He reads, “What is the secret of beauty? Not appearances, or that which passes, but a heart totally centered on God.”

Later he eats macaroni without cheese because cheese represents cruelty. Macaroni is the shape of nobody’s actual elbow. After he eats, he reads Classical Latin. For as long as I have known him, he has been searching for evidence that reality is not real.
Through the walls of his room he can hear a woman’s voice. The building’s walls are thin; she is talking about her liver, her concern that it has nearly stopped working. Or perhaps she said lover? A man’s voice begins talking over the woman’s; now he understands what neither is saying. He returns to his Latin.

There is so much raw evidence, but all it points to is itself, is the problem, he thinks. Nevertheless, he feels great happiness in these moments when he is sitting in a chair by a lamp, reading an exhausted language; great, almost unbearable happiness, as if he was made to be reading this language, in this chair, by this lamp.

Late in the night he hears the rocking of the neighbors’ bed against his wall.

I know how he looks when he is sleeping. He looks like he has just learned a verb.

—

His search is daily and ongoing, a part of him now the way bodily routines are, flushing and brushing and swallowing enough water. He does not want to be released from the tedium he has worked so hard to call a life. The tedium might be hiding something. The tedium might be alive.

Tedium, from taedere: be weary of.

He walks in the park where racoons have recently been a problem. Around him in this northern city people are speaking French, and since he is always trying to interpret the world, he listens with an intensity that has become dull because it is so accustomed. To other people he often looks sleepy, wistful, as if inseparable from dreams.
An owl lands on the railing of the balcony outside his room one morning and seems about to speak. He stands on the balcony wearing only his boxers and waits. The owl waits with him for a while, then flies back to the trees. And he understands that perhaps he was the one who was expected to speak.

Does he think of me in moments when he passes over a threshold, for instance as he steps back through the balcony door into the apartment, his pale winter legs like two hands of an old clock, measuring spaces between dark hours? Do the spaces among branches touched by the owl’s wings know something? Do they hold a code that listens?

In his notes about love and lovers, Roland Barthes wrote, “I am the one who waits,” supposing himself to be in an abject, therefore feminine, position. But I think my position—as one who watches this man as if I am made to do just this, the way he is, perhaps, made to read and delight in an exhausted language—is not abject but simply watchful, even owl-like. Perhaps I am the one who sits in the dark spaces among trees, who once alighted on the railing of a balcony and waited for him to speak. I am often waiting for him to speak. But I cannot say honestly that I just as often listen.

Night. As he reads he feels the owl might still be there, on the balcony or just beyond it, watching, but that above all he must not look for it. In the book, written thousands of years ago by a Roman senator, he looks for evidence that someone else has seen an edge, a glimmer, of the thing bricked over by the word reality.

Experimental evidence suggests space-time is not smooth and continuous but bumpy, grainy, divided, he has read, the way a screen is pixelated. He reads in order to enlarge things enough to see the many minute areas of illumination. And I suppose it
bothers me that he feels compelled to do this—to scrutinize, to doubt, to believe without evidence that evidence is a fabrication. What we call reality, he believes, is being streamed to us from far in our future; we are being streamed to ourselves from far in our future.

I identify with that owl. I also want him to know that I am real. Or: I want him to want me to be real. But I am convinced he wants nothing to be real.

—

What is the use of a verb in a dead language? Yet language, to itself, is never dead—its verbs go on animating it long after mouths have forgotten how to pronounce its sounds.

This word: always. The same problem it brings to love it brings to reality.

—

Mornings he enjoys staying in bed, prolonging the moment when he has to choose to be either fully awake or fully asleep. Since I once shared mornings with him, I know that his joy comes from persisting in neither state indefinitely.

This morning he is going to walk to the caves, he decides. The decision moves him out of bed, into the kitchen, where it feeds him tea and cereal, then moves him through the tasks that are done every day in the same way, because the body is an organism that maintains itself by repeating itself.
It helps to have the assistance of a decision in moving the body through its routine.

His body, slim and elegant, is made more elegant by my watching it.

He picks up the book by the Roman senator and reads several passages. He thinks of the writer, all those hundreds of years ago, as echoing a sound through a landscape, with its deformities and valleys and ruins, distorted and opaque, back to him, the reader, who, in the distant future, discovers in the sound evidence, either sufficient or insufficient, for the moment he now inhabits.

“The book is a collaborative act of imagining a room in which the reader might become the writer, and visa versa,” he writes in a margin.

Once he is out the door, repetition blends itself into the particular aspects of this place: the city’s predilection for concrete buildings, the bulky winter coats standing and walking and bending alongside the bodies inhabiting them. The sounds of bells every quarter hour, the echoes of the sounds of bells, these shaped by the matter of the buildings. Repetition is everywhere buried beneath the genuine alacrity of things. Everything is unique though he has seen so much of it before; originality has nothing to do with whether he has seen it before.

He climbs a hill. The energy an object accumulates as it is raised to a greater height has a corollary in light, luminescence. He considers writing this down but has neither paper nor pen. I have paper and pen; I write it down.

If his heart had a plaque, what would it say? Perhaps: The secret of beauty has nothing to do with a heart or God. There is no secret of beauty.
Visitors must pay to enter the caves; he is a visitor; he pays.

A long time ago, sand was dragged out of these openings and poured into the concrete shapes of the city, giving back to the landscape the color of its own, genuine ground.

He skips the tour. He stands in a dim passageway between two dimmer chambers. He is waiting for the dimness to be a sound, perhaps of water trickling through walls.

In one of the chambers a child begins to sing. He understands the feeling of her song but not the words. Her voice is amplified by the size of the chamber and travels past him, along in the passageway, flowing and gliding, opening onto the contours of the walls. He determines to follow it.

He emerges in the café for visitors. Two birds sing in a cage beside the cash register. He knows they are finches, not canaries, though a small sign labels them such.

He orders coffee and drinks it at a table facing a window. Outside is a dense forest that undulates as one solid thing in wind that seems to be getting stronger. The cathedral is gone. The city is gone. He has no idea where he is, or what he will do next. That I know only increases the distance between us.
Some of the lines on repetition in this story are informed by Jos Charles’s “On Repetition and Opacity.”
Lovelock

I was in Mexico as part of a film crew. The film was called *The Longevity of Time*. I was one among a team of people. I had a very minor role; I myself did not matter, and perhaps this influenced my decision to fall in love. I chose another member of the crew and focused my capacity for affection on him. He was from Aargau, Switzerland, and I did not, until the moment when I willed myself to fall in love with him, like him at all. He interrupted women when they were speaking, because he could not hear their voices. He could talk endlessly about the differences between one kind of knife and another kind of knife. I felt there was no meaning in loving this man, a man from Aargau, Switzerland. That possibly, loving this man from Aargau, Switzerland, would drain my life of meaning and therefore direction, negating both past and future the way rot and decay negate the contours and features of a body. I fell in love.

Filming was going slowly. Early on the director became convinced that a frame had gone missing from the dailies. He looked at me as if he meant his gaze to break my neck. He
thought I was the editor. Another member of the crew said it was my red hair—I reminded him of his estranged daughter. It was the moment just after the protagonist lifted her hand to her throat and inhaled. A well-known actress, beloved. In the missing frame, she would have exhaled, let her hand drop. But the frame was missing: he was convinced of this. How does a frame go missing? Who would steal a woman’s breath? He waved his hands, he interrogated the air around his immaculate silver beard, trimmed with shears by his assistant. He had exquisite silk pajamas, handmade. Wearing them he would wander from his trailer into the night, smoking hand-rolled (his assistant) cigarettes. During the day, the light obliterated everything.

While I was in Mexico, I became sick. This was before my decision to fall in love. I was sick—if I opened my eyes, the world would whirl around me so fast, I would have to crouch down and vomit. The whites of my eyes became yellow. I was taken by another member of the crew to see a doctor in the mountains. The doctor was renowned for curing intractable illnesses caused by curses and spells. I don’t know how my crew mate knew about him, but I was lucky she did. He said that my animal spirit, which liked to roam the mountains, had been trapped. Someone must have wished me ill and cast a spell, he said. As long as my animal spirit was immobilized, my body would grow weaker. We had to do a procedure to release my spirit so my body could heal. I crouched on the floor of his home as he chanted. There were candles and incense. He cut the head off a chicken and made me bury the body, which was still squirming, outside. He said I had to choose carefully where I would bury it. I chose a spot by a tree I liked the shape of
that I reached by climbing down a ladder. The mountain was so steep, the people who lived there had cut terraces into its side. I climbed down the ladder with the squirming, headless chicken in one hand. The world spun around me. Blood spattered everywhere. The wind blew blood onto my clothes, my face. I buried the chicken and climbed back up the ladder. The doctor gave me a concoction of mushrooms, honey, and herbs to drink. I vomited until my lips could produce only air and tendrils of blood. I wasn’t sure if it was my blood or the chicken’s. The doctor made a bed for me in a corner of his home, on the floor. I collapsed into it and slept for a long time. When I woke he fed me small, sweet fruits, tea, and soft bread. I stood up and went outside. My friend from the crew was there. She said I had been sleeping so long, she had gone back to the city, worked, slept, and eaten before returning for me. We drove down the mountain in her red Peugeot. The world was no longer spinning around me. My body felt full of an energy I hadn’t felt in a long time. That was when I decided to fall in love.

The man from Aargau and I had two children. We lived in a small house on a mountain, not far from Aargau. Never in my life had I thought I would end up in Aargau, Switzerland. Even once I was there, living in a house, I didn’t believe I could possibly be there, in the place where I was. My children looked at me like I was a stranger. One night I stood outside our house in the dark and blamed the headless chicken for taking me here, where I felt like an outsider all the time. Our children were small for their ages and struggled to keep up with their friends when they played together. The man from Aargau made them special boots that lifted their feet far off the ground, though from the outside
they appeared to be ordinary boots. Our children began to claim to have the power of flight. They did not, but their belief that they did seemed important. The man from Aargau and I did everything we could to expose them to images of flight, aviation, travel by air. One is now a bird conservationist and the other is a commercial airline pilot. She gets me special deals on travel at inconvenient and unpopular times. I have not spoken to the man from Aargau for many years, though a mutual friend, his agent, tells me he lives in Los Angeles now and makes minor appearances, usually as part of an unruly crowd, in television shows and even, occasionally, in movies.

My children rarely visit me. I keep numerous cacti on a dry, spare patio. Dust accumulates and I sweep it away. One of the cacti is capable of inducing hours of vivid hallucinations, were I to prepare it appropriately. I like to look at the cactus knowing what is inside of it, what I could coax out of it. The other cacti interest me too, though for purely aesthetic reasons. For me it has become most important to live in a place that allows me to think. The place has to be windy. There must be little to no obstruction of the movement of air across the landscape, no stagnation whatsoever. Every year in the small mountain town where I now live, the corpse of a particular man is paraded along the main street. The man has been dead for many years, his body preserved on dry ice in a shed in the center of town. According to the story, which began before my time here, he, an immigrant from Norway, died in this town far from his family, who never came for his body. Perhaps nobody told them he had died. The townspeople felt unqualified to bury him on their own, so did what they could to preserve his corpse for when his family
arrived. They never arrived. His corpse is still in excellent condition. There is a tea shop on the main street and from there, every year, I watch the parade.

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I’m woken in the night by the sound of someone fumbling outside my front door, dropping keys and cursing. A sloppy, undisciplined person. Someone wearing a stained jacket, dark blotches around the sleeves and lapel. I open the door and look out; no one is there. Perhaps I am being haunted by myself. I often lose my keys into the bag I’m carrying or my pockets. I have to dig through my belongings, spilling them on the threshold of the place I’m trying to enter. Often the place I am trying to enter is my own home. That would be the twist, in a detective story: the detective, skilled at observation, and at linking together what she observes to form a story about what she’s seeing, ends up observing herself.

One night, after the fumbling sounds had woken me and I’d gone out onto the porch, I saw something.

There’s a light switch by the door. I had just turned on the light when a streak of gray went over the porch railing. It was so tall that once its feet were on the ground, the ridge of its back was still visible over the railing. I knew it wasn’t a coyote, or a mountain lion. Neither a coyote nor a mountain lion would be so tall that its back would rise higher than
the porch railing once its feet were on the ground. A wolf would be tall enough. Wolves did not live in this part of the mountains — they had gone north years ago, this was well known. I knew what I had seen, though. I turned off the light and went inside.

A story appeared in the local paper: a wolf had been sighted nearby, having wandered, it was believed, hundreds of miles from its home territory.

Then my ring went missing. This was my wedding ring. The man from Aargau bought it for me in Mexico. It was a gold band with a turquoise stone. I still wore it because I liked it. To me it had never symbolized marriage. Instead it reminded me of the tree in the mountains where I’d buried the headless chicken. One morning the ring wasn’t there by the bathroom sink where I always left it. Later at the tea shop, I was sure my ring was on the hand of the woman who owned the shop. I noticed it when, talking to a customer, she brought her hand to her throat. I tried to get a closer look, but she deftly kept her distance from me. Her composure was immaculate; she was an accomplished alpinist. In the winter she skied parts of the mountain accessible only by helicopter. Her face was tanned, creased. She told me once that she carried dynamite in her rucksack, as a precaution. The next day, the shop was closed. Due to a death in the family, the sign said. At the grocery store I learned that her body had been found early that morning at the bottom of a steep cliff, already frozen.
This morning, after a night of little sleep, I went out to my patio and saw, there on the ground beneath my chair, the soles of a pair of boots. Only the soles. I sat down in the chair, slipped off my own shoes, and rested the bottoms of my feet on the soles. They were almost my size, only slightly too large. I sat for a while like that, almost falling back to sleep. When I finally stood it was because three crows had landed on top of the wall and were screaming, I realized, at me. I went into the house and watched through the patio doors as two of the crows flew down and lifted, each one using its feet, the soles off the ground and into the air. The third crow, like me, watched from below. The soles become smaller and smaller as they ascended.

I own very little, and many things have gone missing. I know what I’m looking for, yet sometimes I long for other things: a lover, for instance. I want to build a secret structure, one only I know about — a complicated fretwork of wood beams and joints crisscrossing the space between my body and the sky, light coming in through the shapes made by the beams — and spend all my private time dwelling within it. I want to turn what I feel into something I can see. Eventually, I’ll let other people see it, too. They can dwell within it and look up at the sky through its beams. They can lie on the ground and look up for as long as they like, until they feel like looking at other things. My lover might want to live with me in my structure. My lover might be the kind of person who wants to live together, sleep in the same bed, share leftovers. The kind of person I am, who sits on a patio surrounded by cacti, doesn’t want to live together, can’t sleep beside another body, yet longs for togetherness, for the feeling of living with others. But feelings are
intangible, and to long for something as intangible as a feeling is like longing for water when you’re already drowning. Like you can’t get enough of what’s already taking away your life.

Once, on a set in Hollywood, a famous director disclosed to me that dreams were poor plot devices. They stood in for the difficult work: showing a character’s escape or transformation through the quotidian details of the character’s life. “You have to find some other way of realizing an escape,” the director ranted. I looked around for the nearest door and walked through it. There: I had escaped.
Cézanne couldn't see. Not normally. His mind stayed slimly on this side of the apple. Then one day through the aperture of a shadow his mind poured out on the other side, and he saw himself looking at himself from the shadow and laughing.

There are no edges to anything, he began to sing, only his singing did not take the form of a voice. It took the form of shadows that moved into the room from out of his wife's painted eyes. His wife bent to lift something out of a hot black square whose edges eased out into infinity. He could not place an "oven" over there, only a black square, only an edgeless infinity. Very well, he would eat. But he would not trust that where his eyes saw an edge between his napkin and the table there really was an edge — no no no no. Shadows. A wife, her eyes.
I cannot look at the world through Cézanne’s wife’s eyes, though I can see her eyes as Cézanne wanted them to be seen. Much has been written about how Cézanne wanted things to be seen. Cézanne’s wife’s name was Marie-Hortense Fiquet. Cézanne painted 27 portraits of her.

1. A door behind him. The handle of the door by his knees, though if he backs toward the door the handle will shift to align with his hips. The frame of the door framing him. Stop moving, he says.

2. Behind the door there can always be seen the feeling of getting free of some invisible language bound round one’s wrists, perhaps one’s very flesh.

3. To live with another person is to live with the flap and wheeze of their breath. A kind of weather that cannot be got out of the house even by opening all the windows.

4. The food they eat together they excrete separately. The rhythms of domestic life fill the house not his canvases.

5. There is a tone he uses when he thinks he is trying to help her. It bends sideways off his voice and falls heavily to the floor, crawls around on its belly, squirms. Have to be honest with yourself says Cézanne about exactly what? To whom?
6. He does not like to hear what she says; he says he cannot hear.

7. The door is absurd, the table is absurd, the motion of the wrist in flicking away a fly, that is the most absurd of all. And to see one’s world this way does begin to change it, she feels, though the change doesn’t register on his canvas.

8. She leaves the yeast out of the bread; they eat slices without butter; he pushes his chair back from the table and groans; she says she is going to see her sister later; he says, over and over, “Leave me alone,” speaking, it seems, to the canvases.

9. From then on she removes herself from his portraits of her. Her body appears on the canvases, but she is not there.

10. Where she really is, that’s her business. Her privacy is not something to be penetrated or breached, but something to be regarded as a face is, or could be — an agent of action.

11. There are edges, she says, to everything.

12. Cézanne is lifting something heavy. The urge to help him appears in red streaks within her. Alongside is the urge not to, which is an arrestingly deep blue.
13. A couple of things, forks and knives and something she is in the midst of folding, on the table. She does love the table. She likes to look at it, she admires its edges. It is a handsome table, a table of their life together, a surface that holds them both. Where it is least perfect, most damaged — her love touches there.

14. He tells her how to hold her head; she holds it a different way. He tells her again; she holds it that way. He paints the agreement, the assent, and fits her roughly into it.


16. When she is alone she poses for portraits nobody paints. These are the portraits that will not be remembered, and thus are the most accurate, she feels.

17. He remarks that the bread seems…different. She nods. Yes, she agrees, it does seem different. That we can agree on. Most certainly.

18. It is not so much that she is alone but that she is. Alone. Not seen by another. When she looks at the canvases she feels like a sack of grain. The bread, then, is her own disposition.
19. She would like to squander a great deal of money playing a silly game, then walk casually through a doorway into a room where music, good music, is playing.

20. She puts a pillow on the bed. But his portraits drain all action out of her.

21. Let’s go, he whispered to her once, in a dark room. Goosebumps all along one side of her body. They never show up in the paint.

22. Looking backwards, looking forwards, bending, sitting. Bending to pick up a spoon from the floor. The weight of the silver in her hand — would you like to buy it from her?

23. She looks at him. This looking omitted from the portrait.

24. Movement, so much movement — this is what’s left over, after his portraits. It lives in her skin, it lives in the curtain, it lives in the light, it lives — even in him, it lives.

25. On her way to her sister’s. She doesn’t have a sister.

26. The feeling of not being looked at, finally — a precious thing she holds in one hand, close to her throat, as she falls asleep.
27. Anyway, the bread rises anyway. The leavening lives in the house with them. It’s there in the portrait you just can’t see it.
The top of the forest’s canopy echoes the topography below, of the ground and, beneath, of the mother rocks, yet we are still a little inclined to disbelieve our own stories, not sure from which chamber within us they emanate, or organ. But consequences add to their causes; to tell the stories and to keep telling them expands the space within us from which they emanate. Did you know that within each person is a ballroom, an airfield, a city, a ground beneath which the city extends its functions through zones that are elaborated upon in dreams? Yet we are still a little disinclined to believe our own stories.
Nobody knows how our mother went south on Franklin that day, turned left at the taco shop, and laughed like a crow when she realized it was that easy to vanish. Dale and I know because we were walking through the mini-mall and we saw her shoes and then we saw her just as a parking lot captured her shadow. Everyone was skipping school because there’d been a bomb threat on the phone.

Ballistic spin cycle circumnavigates the globe, Dale said like he was reading a sign as we passed the laundromat where he used to work. There’s a machine in there that was busy digging a hole.

Where are we going to go? Where do you think she’s going? We let questions fold back into the sounds of traffic as we crept on. In Zoo City the sidewalk is an extra part of the road. Cars use it to turn without signaling. Dale almost got hit by a van that said Crap Delivery. Something might have been missing. Everywhere in Zoo City, the thing that makes what’s happening make sense, is missing, and people are proud of that,
civically proud that their city is missing its sense, as if sense were a kind of crime Zoo City didn’t have. Letters fall off signs and traffic signals die and people learn to navigate by listening to the noise of what other people are doing. Dale, who isn’t very good at walking because he has two extra toes on one foot so he gets blisters, almost gets hit by vans. The extra toes look like scrambled eggs on his foot, but are toes.

The city was busy. It was almost December. Since Zoo City was on part of the globe that doesn’t snow, the city had sprayed a substance around its monuments. It was gray, from the traffic fumes. Gray and covered in ants. Humans should never have come to Florida, but their biggest mistake of all was Zoo City.

We talked about Jupiter for a while. We sat on a curb and Dale ate a chili cheese dog that made him cough. I think Dale has a heart problem. Sometimes he can only whisper, because of the burning. His breath smells like bad bacon. I wish he would get some cleaner clothes. Or wash what he has. He doesn’t work at the laundromat anymore but he still has connections to a machine there, the loud one that leaps. But making use of his connections would go against Dale’s philosophy, which I don’t really understand.

If we stay this poor, we’ll vanish too, Dale said, feeding parts of his hot dog to the parking lot.

In the same way that nothing in Zoo City makes sense, my mother’s comings and goings are erratic, fundamentally disordered, chaotic, part of the heat death of the universe.

We could do the lottery, I suggested. Start buying tickets like Momma used to, before.
Dale was not my genetic brother and Momma was not his mom, but she was now, ever since her sister, who was his mom, died. Momma got money from an office because Dale lived with us, but Dale was almost eighteen and Momma said then the money would stop and Dale would have to leave.

Have to spend money to make money, Dale said in a voice that sounded used. He was good at impersonating unremarkable people because those were the only people we knew.

I was thinking of school, and how school was full of all sorts of things nobody used. I had an idea. We’ll pawn an overhead projector, I said.

Dale looked at a corner of his hot dog. Those things are heavy, he said.

But they have wheels. I mean we would take the whole cart, wheel it out the door, pawn it. It’ll be easy to fake a hall pass.

Dale looked at me. When he looks at me like that, it means we can stop talking because words don’t need our voices anymore.

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Mrs. Perot always left her classroom alone when she went to the lounge to eat bologna. I knew this because a Hostess cupcake takes no time to eat and every day I got back to the room before anybody else. I used the time to draw lines in my notebook and look out the window at the top of the dollar store, where there was a dirty pond and several crows hopping around and screaming. God made humans to make the world ugly and old. And
there were palm trees in the parking lot but with practically dead tops, like old heads bowing over a grave. It had been two days and Momma had not come home. I drew a crow by closing my eyes and remembering the dollar store.

I drew myself a hall pass, and then I walked out the door of Mrs. Perot’s classroom and in the hallway nobody stopped me to ask where I was going. The secret is to walk like you have Mrs. Perot’s bologna that she asked you to bring to her in the lounge. I wheeled Mrs. Perot’s projector to the stairs. Dale was there in a corner the doors make with the stairwell, a place we know well because it’s the best place to hide if you hear someone coming up the stairs while you’re trying to get down to the parking lot. He was there, clipped the single metal tether holding onto the projector, and put a blanket over the thing. We lifted it off the cart and got outside.

Through the parking lot, past the cars, into a kind of ditch on the other side, a ravine where there were scraggly trees and kudzu and mosquitoes. It was the last day before Christmas break only nobody said Christmas anymore, I reminded Dale, just winter. And there wasn’t even winter in Zoo City, at least not the kind with snow or cold or anything different at all from any other time.

While we were getting into the ravine I remembered something. I remembered my notebook in my desk in Mrs. Perot’s class. And in my notebook were all of my drawings and most of my thoughts.

I said I left some stuff in my desk, I’d go back and get it and then we could go to the pawn shop.
This thing says Southbrook on the side, Dale said. He tapped an edge of the projector.

We’ll paint it, I said. Or maybe they won’t even mind at the pawn shop. People in Zoo City don’t mind about most things as long as they’re not trying to be fancy.

While I was walking through the parking lot I knew already that Dale wouldn’t be there when I got back. He would leave and let me deal with what we had begun together. That was his way. Begin a thing with you and then leave you to solo your way out of the middle of it. I could tell he would be gone because he had already backed away inside his eyes and was seeing the future and where he would be. And it was a future I couldn’t see, though I had a few guesses about where I would find him, because there aren’t that many places to go to in Zoo City, and Dale didn’t have the kind of friends who left or even knew it was possible to leave.

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The year before, I’d come home from school holding the yearbook and I showed Dale how I had been voted Most Likely to Succeed and Dale laughed and laughed and said they were playing with me, they were having fun at my expense, and I said I thought he was being mean and he tried to stop laughing but couldn’t and finally he said, Not long as you’re in Zoo City, meaning I guess that there is no way here that leads to success, no path or road or avenue or even a secret alleyway, and I suppose Dale thought he knew this because he himself was looking for it and still had not found it, though for a while he
hoped the door behind the washer in the laundromat would lead somewhere good, but when he finally got the lock picked, it turned out to be just a closet full of old burst bottles of detergent seeping on the floor, and mouse droppings. And one enormous mouse that could barely move that had become fat lapping up the sloshed detergent.

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There was no brook by Southbrook. And the school was east of the city, south of nothing but a swamp. And the ravine led to the swamp, and I sat down in the ravine with my notebook and the projector wondering what to do now that Dale had abandoned me, as I knew he would, because you don’t have to be psychic to grasp the habits of people you live with, when I heard something coming up behind me.

Well, I thought, time for detention.

But it was a black dog and not the hall monitor sent out to get me.

And it was a big black dog.

And I recognized the dog, but the feeling lasted only for a second — I thought it was my dad’s dog Jupiter because it was the same shape and size and color, but then it cocked its head to one side and I realized it wasn’t Jupiter. It was like Jupiter, but reversed, like I was seeing Jupiter in a mirror. It wasn’t wearing a collar and had a look like it might have been living outside for a while. There were pieces of leaves in its fur and its paws were dusty and it looked like no people had tried to clean it for some time. And it looked lonely.
Hey, I said to it. It turned its head to look at me straight on. I wondered what it could see of me, because sometimes when a dog looks at me I feel like it’s seeing parts of me that I can’t see, like I have a funnel-shaped shadow growing off one shoulder, or something wrapped around my head, or a ghost standing behind me about to lay its shadowy hands on my neck. I put my hands on my head and touched around my hair like I was picking cotton balls out of it. Then I put my hands down, embarrassed, and the dog thought this gesture, the lowering of my hands, meant something, and it barked at me. And in this way it was like Jupiter — my dad did this thing where he would pretend to pluck a treat out of his ear, or from the air above his head, or from behind Jupiter’s ear, and the dog got used to this and whenever she saw me touch my head, she would bark, thinking I had pulled a treat out of my ear for her.

Are you Jupiter?

She barked.

Sorry, I don’t have a treat for you.

I was thinking about the projector. If I could pawn it then I could buy treats for Jupiter. And I would go grocery shopping for myself and Dale because we needed noodles and milk and once Momma had been gone for two days there was no telling how much longer she would be gone. I would buy cheese and potatoes and bread and peanut butter and strawberry jam too, and … I was hungry. I couldn’t carry the projector by myself. I felt stuck, and when I feel stuck I get angry at all the people who aren’t there helping me, which was everybody. I hated everybody.
I looked around at the ravine. I looked at the dog and the dog looked hard at me. The dog kept looking at me. And there’s something about being looked at like that, so hard it’s like you’re being buried inside the face of another creature — it snapped me out of myself and my pity. Nobody wanted a projector. I didn’t want a projector. I gave it a kick, and the dog started to spin around and it squatted and it took a big shit right next to the projector. And that seemed to decide something about everything, and I walked toward home.

And the dog followed me. She stayed behind my feet and I felt like I had a living shadow. As if my shadow had decided to become its own being and that being was a dog that looked a lot like Jupiter, but wasn’t. Jupiter was a he, and was getting gray hairs, and this dog looked young as almost a puppy, and it was easy to see that she was a she. I tried to walk in a way that would signal to her I didn’t care that she was there, because I thought a dog would only add to the trouble of mama being gone and there being no food and me being so hungry. I didn’t want to have to feed her something I wanted to eat. And I knew I would have to if she followed me all the way home and into the house, because once a living creature is in the house, it means something. I mean it means a certain responsibility. I was seventeen and I knew enough to know to avoid responsibility, to try to scare it off before it came in the door with me.

When I got to my block I stopped and turned and the dog stopped and sat on the sidewalk. She looked at me, wagging her tail, swishing leaves and ants away, and this reminded me of the man who lived for a while in our neighborhood who refused to kill any living thing. When he went anywhere — he only ever walked — he carried a broom
made of feathers that he used to clear ants from his path. Step brush brush. Step brush brush. Everybody thought he was nuts, but I liked to watch the care, almost tenderness, in the way he used the broom. It was like he was always saying, Love, love, love. That I liked to watch him and think of love is something I would never tell Dale or anybody, because they would laugh at me the way Dale laughs at me when I show him my drawings. Because most people do not think of love or care if they crush small things.

Shoo, I said to the dog, which, when I said it, I felt ridiculous. Shoo is what you say to a fly, and even then it is a silly thing to say. Scram, go, go home, I said. She looked at me and her tail was wagging. I don’t even have a leash, I said. I don’t have a bowl for you, or food. There’s nowhere for you to sleep. Nobody here can care for you. There are probably people who are looking for you. And when Momma comes home…

She was looking at me and her tail was wagging and I could hear my own voice and in my own voice I heard how unlikely it was, the one about Momma coming home. Not anytime soon, anyway, and then not for long.

I waited for what I knew would relent in me to relent. And finally it was like a grip released.

Okay, I said, okay. And we turned onto my street. And I saw Dale coming up the street with two bags of groceries — I didn’t want to wonder just then how he’d got them, so I didn’t — and he saw me and he saw the dog and he shook his head, a little sadly, and didn’t laugh, and then did laugh. And we all went into the kitchen.
The trouble with the cow was the cow had an adumbrated esophagus, which caused a gastrointestinal incursion from its first stomach into its second, so that nothing from the first could flow into the second. After a while of living in this configuration, the cow began to regurgitate not cud into its mouth but unchewed food, which prevented its ever fully swallowing nutrients. In time this would lead — said the vet who came and spoke to Mimi — to a general perplexity of the cow’s amygdala, which in turn would cause the cow to stagger over the field and possibly to fall into the pond. We called it a swamp, but others, trying to be kind and respectful of our forlorn property, often chose pond, or in less certain times, for instance when the weather was dry and most of the pond water evaporated, depression. The cow seemed sad, forlorn, uncertain, and staggered over the tufts of grasses past the swamp, or pond, or depression, searching, it seemed, for something that its eyes would not anyway be able to see. And it seemed to know this. It seemed to know with the perfect lucidity that all dying animals possess that it was
searching for its own death. And when Mimi brought home that trumpet we both knew what it meant. I watched her take it out of its case, which was lined with purple velvet and was like a coffin, and Mimi taking out the trumpet was like the dead rising up, and when she put it to her lips it was like she was swallowing a specter, for we both — I am certain she knew it too — knew that something slipped up from the dented silver bell and through the twisted silver pipe of the horn, whose shape made me think of a pristine intestine, past the valves and out the mouthpiece into Mimi’s mouth, down her throat. And when she blew into the mouthpiece it should have shocked us but it didn’t, how the sound that came out was a perfectly mellifluous C, not sharp or flat, not tilting to either side but coursing purposefully over the floor, out the window into the pasture where the cow was standing puzzledly. I stood at the window and looked out at the cow and when Mimi blew again the cow stepped forward, holding two opposing feet, front and back, aloft, like a horse stunned still mid-trot, and when Mimi blew a third time the cow tipped to one side and fell to the ground very lightly and delicately, barely disturbing the earth, not even sending up a bit of dust, because by then the cow weighed almost nothing, was practically just a hovering image, it had been unable for so long to swallow. That was the day Mimi swallowed the shadow of the perfect C note, we both knew she did, and when you swallow the shadow of a perfect thing, it’s true you are going to die soon.
In *Book of Living Things*, a labyrinthine work completed around the middle of the 8th century CE and attempting to classify all knowledge of its time, al-Jāhiz, the book’s author, acknowledges humans’ many capacities, among them “reason, mastery, the ability to act, sovereignty, the spirit of reconciliation, rivalry, the desire to understand, to enter into the game of emulation, and also to consider, with lucidity, the consequences of [their] actions.” But humans are, in his estimation, still the lesser of the animals. Even “a man gifted with a keen sensibility, possessing all the intellectual qualities, trained in a great number of disciplines, excelling in many domains of knowledge, is incapable of accomplishing spontaneously most of the actions completed by animals.”

In fact, argues al-Jāhiz, what humans are best at, our natural capacity, is failure — if we do accomplish something difficult, we have the ability to cut corners next time, to perform less awesomely. He gives the example of birds — they sing with metrical...

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exactitude, making sounds “prepared for modulation and harmony, obeying prosodic and rhythmic laws,” and they have no choice but to learn how to do this, and to do it again and again, repeatedly and reliably so. But even the most skillful human singer, capable of hitting virtuosic high notes, can also sing easier, simpler, less strenuous songs, can sing out of tune, can perform badly — and even fail to sing anything at all. Failure and performance are thus, for humans, entwined: to perform well is to leave open the possibility of performing badly; to perform badly is to invoke the possibility of performing well. Human actions are freighted with their own opposites, alternatives, inverses, shadows; we’ve invented representational art forms (theater, fiction, sculpture, painting) that let us explore this murkiness. I wonder if it’s this — our great capacity for failure, our awareness of this capacity, our enjoyment in exploring theoretical alternatives — that predisposes us to cynicism toward acting at all.
Colchicums are coming up——first buds visible today (it’s sunny). Snow tomorrow. I saw them when I was walking home from the park.

I think I saw some daffodils just emerging.

& tulips or maybe daffodils coming up in the yard of the guy who obsessively tends his lawn. When I see him out there I think he must have buried something dire in it.

Everything looks groomed yet not healthy. The daffodils’ leaves are misshapen and brown around their edges. I don’t think plants need us as much as we want them to. Or, we’ve chosen to cultivate the neediest ones——“needy” because they don’t easily grow where we’ve put them.

3/31
Yesterday it snowed and today warm weather is back for as long as the forecast pretends to see. It’ll be warm enough over the weekend that I can leave the San Pedro and fig outside overnight. It’s funny how much I worry about remembering to bring them in——plus they’re awkward and heavy to carry. I can’t yet give myself the grace of forgetting them.

I think the fig might be dying——very dry leaves no matter how much water I give it. Maybe the roots aren’t working anymore. Leaves are droopy, yellowish and brown spots.

The big leaf of the monstrosa cutting is also dying, but it has two young healthy ones. That one leaf has been doing all the work for six months. I respect its decision to die.

I want to like the aloe more than I do. I don’t really understand it. It has to do with its leaves. They don’t really seem like leaves.

The stick plant (should I learn its real name) perplexes me for similar reasons. Its leaves, when it makes them, look like tiny propellers on the ends of its branches. It uses them to make new branches, then sheds them.

Its leaves are where I can most clearly see my contributions to the plant. The begonia is very satisfying for this reason. It climbs toward the sun through its leaves and in spring and summer is constantly making new ones. This feels like progress to me. I know the roots and soil are just as important but they’re not easy or satisfying to observe. Maybe if I was better at chemistry.

When I meditate in the mornings I sit near the window where the plants are. The begonia, cactus, fig tree, and even the date palm are all taller than me. It’s nice to feel small next to them, like they’re protecting me while I sit.
The bouquet from V. is dying but I haven’t thrown it out yet. Until the moment I decide to throw it out, throwing it out will feel impossible, its absence from my table intolerable.

4/1

I threw away the bouquet. It looked bigger in the garbage than it had in the vase.

Brought a few of the dying flowers to the cemetery in Castle Rock where Adam and I agreed to meet.

I didn’t leave the flowers in the cemetery like I’d meant to. Instead I carried them around with us while we walked. I felt like they gave us an alibi for being there (there were groundskeepers around, though we probably didn’t need an alibi——people visit cemeteries all the time). When we got back to my car, I put them on the dashboard. We drove around until we found a good place to park. Neither of us wanted to go to a cafe. We sat in a ravine (a drainage ditch?) and saw deer. Adam spotted them through the trees. It took me a while——they were exactly the color of the dead grasses and trees. In a few weeks things will be greener and alive, and the deer won’t blend in so well.

We parted without making plans for the next time we’d meet.

I’m taking care to guard my heart, but through all my efforts I can already feel the heartbreak.

4/4
I watched *The Last Honey Hunter*——it’s a documentary of a man in Nepal who harvests honeybee hives from the sides of cliffs. The work is perilous, and he feels cursed. He took this job after he had a dream as a boy about being caught in a spider’s web on a cliff and grabbing a monkey’s tail that was hanging over the cliff’s edge, and being pulled to safety by the monkey. The dream meant he had to do this terrible work. The honey is medicinal, so much so that it’s poisonous——it makes you piss, shit, and vomit at the same time, and you can’t move your legs. It’s highly purgative, and this is what makes it good medicine, the honey hunter says; it gets the toxins and viruses out of your body. It’s suspected that the toxins are grayanotoxins from rhododendrons that grow in the mountains.

The flowers, by way of the bees and their honey, which humans desire, are consumed by humans, which makes us purge, helping rid our bodies of other, possibly sentient life forms that are trying to survive.

I haven’t been sleeping well. Very warm weather arrived this weekend and I often don’t sleep well in the first weeks of spring. Early this morning, I went for a walk to try to calm my thoughts. The sun was just coming up and the air was already warm. The creek in the park is flowing again, and it smells like it did last summer. I don’t know what that smell is——maybe the dead grasses that end up in the water, and there’s algae——but it’s fragrant and pleasant, almost floral or like a good smelling soap. I remembered walking in the park last summer almost every day and smelling that smell, and I felt anchored for the first time in weeks in my own life. Then a big sense of release, and I felt myself let go of all my expectations around Adam, and all my worries. It was really a
sense of physically letting go of something, putting down a heavy and awkward thing that I’d been carrying. I feel better——still exhausted (it’s 9 a.m. and my body feels like it’s midnight) but at peace.

It’s already a warm day—— I should put the San Pedro back out on the patio.
Whenever I carry it, I think about the tremendous effects its flesh would have on me were I to eat it. Possibly for hours I would not have a clear sense of my own identity; I might panic, or I might be bathed in waves of bliss. I like imagining this as I move it into and out of the sun, helping it grow and become stronger.

4/5

This journal is becoming a grounding presence during what has become a turbulent time for me. Part of me wants to make this writing less personal, more fictional or artificial. But lately I’m not able to write that way. I can observe what’s happening in my immediate surroundings and state it as clearly as possible, but moving beyond these modes feels too stressful. I have to keep myself away from situations——writing fiction is one——that encourage me to obsess over and fine-tune details. Even listening to songs with lyrics is dangerous; I don’t want any language looping in my head right now. It’s too exhausting. In spring I can only dryly observe the obvious and listen to instrumental music.

It is really terrible, I’m remembering——falling in love. I try to be as still as possible, yet I feel only turbulence. Adam is almost entirely inaccessible to me. It’s like he has
found a way of being in the world that is a crouching, and a lurking, always just beyond
detection. It’s like I’m unable not to fall in love with men so adept at hiding from me.

When he told me about his spider plant, which is special because of where he got it, a
place he showed me a video of and which I agreed was magical, I was expecting him to
offer me a cutting. It would have been the sensible—or maybe I mean the romantic—
—thing to do...spider plants are easy to propagate! We could have different parts of the
same plant! We could feel connected despite the distance. He didn’t offer; it probably
didn’t occur to him to offer; it occurred to me to ask, “Can I have a cutting?” but I didn’t.

I decided to clean the patio to try to occupy myself with something else. I swept up
mounds of dust and cleaned off the chairs. The San Pedro has been out there the last two
days; they’ve been sunny and warm. It’s growing again after its winter pause. It’s starting
to get unwieldy to carry in and out of the house—-if I move too quickly or harshly it
sways and almost topples out of its pot.

I’m thinking about the temporality of letting go and the temporality of plants. I’m
thinking of all the plants, mostly fake, that decorate the cemeteries. What do the
groundskeepers do, if they never need to clear dead plants away?

I woke up feeling impending doom, so I got dressed and went for a walk. There are two
windows I look for when I pass the assisted-care home——the two filled with plants.
Shelves of plants. They’re separated by a floor and must belong to different people. I
wonder if they know each other, and I wonder if the plants in one unit can sense the presence of the plants in the other.

There’s a tree in the park I’ve seen hundreds of times, but it caught my eye poignantly this morning. It’s almost dead; its trunk is ragged and twisted around itself, and it’s been pruned drastically, so that it has no crown and no branches except one, which has also been pruned drastically. Yet it still has a few shoots, which are budding. Though it looks nearly dead, it could yet outlive me. All the emotions and problems that feel so big and real to me are taking place on a scale that is so small to this tree, it’s negligible. So many people walk by this tree every day, feeling so many things. Seeing the tree and its stillness reminded me that while all of this is passing through me, I can let it do just that——pass through.

While I walked home I cheered myself up imagining my feelings as purposeful agents slowly, or on a timescale I can’t even imagine, making their way toward their respective destinations. Each one has their own private route, their own agenda. I’m just one stop along the way.

4/8

This morning I got an email from a Welsh water company asking Evelyn Horan to pay her bill. Through the internet I’m connected to other Evelyns the way trees in a forest are connected through mycelial networks to other trees.

I worked for a few hours this morning then went to the park. Sat by those four trees that make a diamond-shaped shadow. I could feel that I’ve changed since the last time I
sat there, maybe it was in October, but I can’t articulate how. The light seems clearer and also emptier. Maybe that’s just how it is there at noon.

While I was there I decided I want to keep a voice diary. I’ll record myself while I’m at specific places. I wanted this place to be the first recording, so I downloaded a recording app and recorded myself. It was a lot like this journal is—rambling, unable to find what it’s about because I don’t know what things are about right now. It felt good to sit there under the trees and record myself talking. I didn’t quite feel like I was talking to someone else, but I also didn’t feel like I was only talking to myself. The recording picked up the sound of the wind—it was windy. I was talking to the recording, to the sound of the wind in the recording.

4/9

While I was walking today, I passed by a crow hopping over dead leaves on the ground. I was walking over the leaves too. They were loud under my feet, and the sound helped me form a kind of image of my body as I moved across the ground.

I wondered if the crow hears the sound of its feet in the leaves, or the sound of its wings in the air, and if it also forms an image of itself from the sound. As I thought this, I felt a closeness to the crow that felt tender and strange.

4/11

Have been thinking about something I read recently: “She gently cultivated our autonomy and subjectivity by giving back to us, with love, the interior space that we so often give
up willingly in the hope that power will govern us from the inside out and relieve us of
the burden of being ourselves.”

Thinking about autonomy and subjectivity as spaces or grounds that can be
“cultivated.” As sites of potential for growth. As actual plots in a garden or yard.

And about cultivation—there is something about my life right now that feels dry,
empty, barren. Everything I turn toward seems to lose its meaning as I’m turning toward
it. This isn’t depression; I’ve felt that. It’s more the empty feeling of waiting,
anticipating…

I hiked in the mountains today, and now—it’s evening—I’m remembering the
feeling of being among the trees in the warm light, the smell of the trees and rocks, and
how that feeling restores my interior space. Any time I spend outside without an agenda
restores that space. This helps me understand what a healthy “being in relation” to
another feels like, for me—I don’t have to give anything up, and I am restored.

The voice recordings I’ve been making are a mode of relating to that space—my
own interior, and to the space in which my interior is restored. Maybe they’re one and the
same.

4/12
Still thinking about “giving back to us, with love, the interior space that we so often give
up willingly in the hope that power will govern us from the inside out” and how this
resonates with Kathleen Harrison’s vision of the transparent woman: “When she passed
her hand through my chest a second time, I saw a tiny, ornate wooden door in my heart. It
was carved with flowers and vines, and had an intricate golden filigree handle and hinges. As her grand spirit fingers brushed it, I felt a strong breeze open the tiny door and a pocket of hurt blew away into the sweet air of the garden.”

The plant vision helped Harrison regain her interior, comfortably occupy her own heart again.

I’m very sluggish today. I pushed my body a lot this weekend. I don’t feel like doing much, though I’ve had to go out and do a few things, and while I don’t feel acutely awful or depressed, there isn’t much pleasure in anything for me right now. I guess I’m recovering, and with recovery comes a renewed capacity for pleasure.

Google tells me that “Luce Irigaray” means “light irrigation” in Basque.

4/14

Today I was walking and noticed a person, a short distance ahead of me, reach out and tenderly touch the branch of a shrub as they passed it. I felt an almost overwhelming empathy for this person (who I’ve never seen before) and their life——their sadesses, struggles, joys, losses. The feeling took my breath away.

Later, the begonia dropped a leaf, and the sound of it startled me out of my seat. It is a surprisingly loud, almost percussive sound of wood hitting wood as the leaf clatters on the floor.

4/15
It’s been cold and gloomy. Right now it’s evening and it’s snowing. The branches of the pine tree outside my window are heavy with snow. The roads are white. I felt cold and withdrawn all day. I woke up feeling grim and drained. I decided to go to the sensory deprivation float tanks I’ve been wanting to try for months. I felt like I needed to indulge myself—or maybe, submerge myself—or I would become totally hopeless and lethargic.

It was really delightful. The light inside the tank was purple. I turned it off, the music too, because I wanted complete darkness and silence. And it actually was completely dark—I could keep my eyes open and gaze into the darkness and feel like I was floating through vast space. Sometimes my proprioception faded away and I couldn’t tell which way my body was oriented, horizontal or vertical, face down or face up. I could believe that I was breathing underwater, an entirely different kind of animal than the one I am. The water was incredibly salty, so I floated easily. It was much more relaxing than floating in the ocean because there were no waves; I could completely let go and relax. Without a body or sensory input to deal with, consciousness feels vast and effortless, like something I don’t have to do but just am.

Do my plants feel this way when I water them? Does the San Pedro experience some of its own psychedelic effects when its roots or bathed in water, or always? Does it hallucinate in the sun? In the darkness?

4/16
I’m wondering this morning why I don’t dream about plants more often. There was that one dream a couple of months ago——my begonia was in the dream and so large it was difficult to move around it——but otherwise I can’t think of the last time I dreamed about a plant. Do I ever dream about trees?

4/18

The weather has been cold and snowy, and I haven’t been spending much time outside. That has made the days feel long and monotonous. I spend a lot of time inside with my plants, so now they feel too familiar, and I don’t notice anything interesting or different about them. I’ve been longing lately for a garden——a big one, in my own yard, that I could put a lot of physical effort into building and maintaining. When I don’t feel like writing, which I don’t lately, I have a lot of energy I want to put into shaping and making living systems. I didn’t realize that this is true until just now as I wrote it——it’s not very satisfying to me to draw or paint or sew or do some other craft as an outlet for my creative energy. Dance is more satisfying because it involves a living body; building and planting a garden is even more satisfying. For some reason I’m optimistic that I’ll have a garden in the not-too-distant future.

It feels good to be able to say that. There’s so much that’s “up in the air” right now, and I’ve been telling myself that it’s all going to end terribly——that I won’t find a good place to move to this summer, that I won’t find enough work, that I’ll be alone forever…It’s like in trying to create a sense of certainty, I’ve decided that everything has
already turned out badly for me. But that feels worse than just acknowledging that I don’t know yet how it’s going to turn out.

My garden will mostly be edible plants, but I also want an area for flowers and thistles.

4/21
It’s difficult to keep coming back to writing lately. Partly it’s that I don’t feel like my writing brings me any closer to plants—they don’t care about it or understand it.

Yesterday I dragged my armchair close to the patio doors, where all my plants are, and sat with them for a while. Proximity and attention bring me closer to them; language doesn’t.

I’m thinking about the sounds I make as I go about my days…I would like to leave behind a recording of these sounds spanning all the years of my life. It wouldn’t be the sort of thing anyone could actually listen to, or maybe they would listen to ten minutes from one year, then fast-forward years ahead and listen to another few minutes. Compared with such a recording, this journal doesn’t seem accurate or honest.

4/24
Thinking about how cows have digestive systems specialized for turning plants into themselves; for extracting as much as possible from the plants.

4/27
I’ve been reading a lot, preparing to teach a class, “Nature Writing in the Anthropocene.”

I finished “The Fruit of My Woman” by Han Kang this morning. The end of the story made me feel a little better about my fig tree dying. And I realize it’s a kind of anthropomorphism in the story that makes me feel better—a character who is unhappy as a person, especially as a wife, becomes a plant. This feels like an intense kind of anthropomorphism. The plant is humanized by the human who actually becomes the plant.

I know the fig tree has not had a human life, but now that it’s near the end of its life, I’m thinking of what human fatigue and exhaustion feel like in my body and extending that sense to the tree. Its leaves look sick, tired of doing what they’ve had to keep doing to keep the tree alive and produce fruit. I think I know how that feels. The fruit was entirely for my benefit; or maybe not entirely—I don’t know what kind of satisfaction the tree gets from producing fruit. But clearly it’s done with that now. And I feel like it’s a courtesy I can extend to let it die.

This morning I also read parts of The Uncreating Word by Irving Massey, mostly from his essay “The Descriptive Style: Chateaubriand, Rousseau, Camus.” I’m not really sure how to teach this class, even though I proposed it, and I’m trying to figure out ways of talking about “nature” and “nature writing” based on how other writers have interpreted those ideas. So far the essay is helpful for that—it’s focused on the conceptual categories we apply to nature, like in descriptions of landscapes in fiction, and the relationship between these categories and the actual things being described. Massey
writes, “There is an intentionality detached from us, which description is an attempt to reach” (52).

There’s a particular kind of dread I feel before teaching. Someone once encouraged me to think of this feeling as the anticipation of growth: all things must hesitate before suddenly changing shape, extending beyond their previous boundaries.

5/10

The class went fine. I can’t remember what I was so anxious about, yet I know there’s no way around the anxiety except to do the thing I’m anxious about doing.

I started reading *Plants of the Gods* (by Richard Evans Schultes and Albert Hoffmann). It’s a compendium of information about all sorts of plants with entheogenic effects, many of them I hadn’t heard of. When I read something like this, it highlights for me, more than reading a history text does, how long humans have been around—maybe relatively, cosmically, a short time, but long enough to have amassed a lot of knowledge about plants and their uses. It also highlights how serendipitously some of this knowledge was acquired—the example people like to point out is ayahuasca: it’s made by boiling a vine and a shrub, neither of which alone is psychoactive. The shrub is necessary because it acts as an MAO inhibitor, which lets the psychoactive substance in the vine have an effect on us. How did people figure out that these two had to be consumed together? I’ve heard people speculate that it to otherworldly entities involving themselves in human affairs, like by giving a shaman a vision directing them to combine
these two plants. Maybe the plants themselves communicated how they were to be prepared?

My fig tree is outside on the patio. I plan to leave it there. It’s supposed to snow tonight.

5/20

I was hoping for plants in my dreams last night.

I put the fig tree in the dumpster today. A few more of its leaves dropped off and the rest were going to fall off soon. I don’t think I’ve ever been so attached to a plant. I think I liked being a person who has a fig tree—I decided a while ago that when I had a fruit tree, that would mean I was rooted, and that has meant a lot to me. So I had to let go of being a person who has a fig tree in order to throw it away. Our bodies are enmeshed with the lives of plants and that can’t be otherwise—we rely on them for everything we eat. But I think I was using the fig tree in a different way. I ate its fruit, and in that simple way it added something to me. But I was also trying to add something to my identity with it, or the idea of it, and that is why I suffered when I realized it was dying.

I’ll keep reminding myself before bed to dream about plants. It’s strange that they’re so absent from my dreams. I’ve also considered that maybe I dream about plants all the time but take them for granted, just part of the background?

I haven’t heard from Adam in almost ten days.

5/23
The tree I wrote about on 4/6—the ragged, twisted one, with no crown and no branches except one—has fallen down. There’s caution tape around it as though its fallen form is dangerous. It’s been very windy the past few days.

I sat beside it, and while I did, I remembered that I’d made a voice recording here about a month ago. I listened to it, and it was strange hearing my own voice, recorded at this very spot, speaking to me from a past when this tree was still upright. I imagined I could hear the tree’s leaves rustling in the background, but the tree didn’t have leaves yet when I made that recording. The rustling was the sound of traffic, cars or people walking by, or else wholly imagined by me. I wondered how the tree was experiencing the sound of the recording; could it recognize the sound of its own surroundings? How would a tree experience the sense of the past conveyed by a recording? A month is such a small amount of time for a large, old tree… I felt like an accidental tree chaplain, sitting beside that fallen tree, listening to a time when the tree was rooted and apparently healthy.

Later I read about inosculcation: “when branches or roots of different trees are in prolonged intimate contact, they often abrade each other, exposing their inner tissues, which may eventually fuse. It’s not so much one tree feeding another as the formation of a new hybrid organism.”

The writer goes on to remark that “plants have an astounding ability to merge with one another”—as in grafting. It’s common for a fruit tree to be a hybrid of a fruit-bearing “scion” (the top, branched part) grafted onto a hardy rootstock well adapted to local soil. This might mean oranges growing from the trunk of a lemon tree. Or one kind of apple growing from the trunk of a different kind of apple.
I’ve cut Adam out of my life. His presence was too painful. I’d rather not know him at all than know the meager bit he’s willing to share.

While I was watering my plants, I thought, *I envy you because you don’t know what it’s like to have a mind filled with hate.*

I went for a long walk this evening, through a neighborhood I’ve never visited before. At one point, a particular tree caught my eye because of its tremendous size and also its refined, almost delicate shape. I stopped to gaze at it. One of the neighbors working in their yard noticed me. “That tree is magnificent,” I said. They looked at the tree and nodded slowly. “It might be a champion,” they said.

Today would be my mom’s birthday. I have memories of learning to appreciate plants from her——the garden in the yard, the part of it that I got for planting tomatoes and peppers, my summer job of watering and weeding. I resented the weeding and still think it’s a waste of time. But I think I got something out of spending time with the plants and the dirt. I have vivid memories of that garden——more vivid than most other happy memories from that time——and they feel like a place I can return to in order to be close to a part of my mom that was safe. Even today plants feel like the only safe part of my mom, a way for me to be close to her without fear of being hurt.
6/9

I read that an early use of “daughter” was as a verb meaning something like “to bend in the direction of that which affirms life.” Today on the balcony nasturtiums & San Pedro are daughtering.

6/12

Early this morning I dreamed I had a seed collection that I kept in a lovely wood box. The lid of the box was carved with intricate leaves, vines, flowers—a thicket. In the dream I was walking up the stairs to my apartment and suddenly there was a great deal of smoke. I knew it was coming from my apartment. I couldn’t actually hear the seeds bursting in the heat of the fire, but I imagined I could, and then in the dream I heard them clearly. They were hissing at me. I recognized the sound as a recording of my own voice.
We both knew our three months in this city would be our last together. One afternoon I came back to the flat and the door was locked, and B. wasn’t there. I stood on the landing trying to operate the key. I’m not good at unlocking unfamiliar doors. Especially when I’m traveling, I don’t remember how the mechanism works, can’t yet feel in my hand whether I’m supposed to turn to the left or to the right, to the left then to the right or vice versa, whether there’s a click that’s supposed to happen and when. I try to apply to the new lock the behavior of the mechanism of a familiar one. This feels less like being unable to remember, more like being unable to forget, because the past always occludes the present.
The door wouldn’t open. The lock spun and spun in its socket but wouldn’t release. I sat on the top stair of the landing. My phone was useless but I held it anyway. Later, after B. returned, we were talking to the landlady. B. joked about how I couldn’t unlock the door. “You should have told me!” she said loudly and scoldingly. Her voice seemed connected with the faulty mechanism of the lock, something emitted by its arcane motion. But I didn’t want to talk to anyone except B., who wanted to talk to me less and less. The waning of another’s desire for oneself feels, I decided, like a diminishment of one’s own body, a lessening of its limbs and its ability to move itself, or to desire to move itself, which is effectively the same paralysis.

The entryway in that building was lovely in a quiet, dignified way. The stairs spiraled toward a glass roof that was slightly domed. Metal framework holding the panes of glass gave the roof the appearance of a snail’s shell. Nothing in that city made you think of a grid. Back in the US, packed into a twelve foot by ten foot by five foot compartment containing mine and B.’s belongings, neatly sorted by B. so that our boxes didn’t mingle (for easier, separate retrieval), was an image of a snail that I had framed. The flat at the top of the stairs belonged to the landlady’s brother, an architect.

_The fifty-nine realms_, writes the author of a book I begin to read in a dream, _are trust, occlusion of the faculties, intense regret, an unexpected journey, a nighttime offering, a jewel you had forgotten you owned, pristine loneliness, absolute silence_...
I walk up the stairs, pass the landing to our flat, and keep going up. I get to the top, stand on the landing of the architect’s flat. I knock on the door before I can stop myself. Then I retreat quickly down the stairs. I’m about to close the door to our flat when I hear him opening the door to his. This dream, over and over. I don’t know what else to say about it.

I have read about the odd, sometimes intense sensation of a spiraling movement, from the base of the spine to the crown of the head, written by yogis who undertake practices to bring about bodily stillness. They describe the sensation as being snake-like, serpentine. I experienced this sensation during a ten-day meditation retreat in Massachusetts. “Do not follow the spiral,” was the teacher’s advice. She offered no explanation. The sensation was so intense, I must have appeared to be rocking forward and back and side to side. It had its own energy and trajectory; I was simply the thing surrounding it, impeding its motion, trying to get out of its way.

There were a few boulevards near the government buildings, but mostly the streets were narrow, even for walking, and curved and intersected in ways that defied my sense of narrative. B. and I took a tour led by guides who described themselves as communist architects. The city was famous for training architects, they explained, but too poor to employ them. There had once been a strong socialist government here but, as in other cities, that sentiment seemed to have been replaced. Now there were “developers.” Most
of the development was in redesigning interiors, work the architects considered beneath
their dignity though many did it anyway.

They led us to see the islands. Large as city blocks, the islands floated behind tall
walls that were inconspicuous from the street. The guides pointed out the gates and led us
through to one. Most islands’ gates were locked at night, our guides explained, once
everyone who lived there was home. It wasn’t a curfew so much as an understanding
among the residents.

It was late morning when we visited. “I never would have noticed this was here,” an
Australian woman said to the man walking beside her. “I think that’s the point, dear,” he
said.

Inside the walls was a conspicuously large building. This, said our guides, had been
the house of the owner and his family. It was made of stone onto which newer stones had
been layered. Mountains erode as they get older, I thought, but human structures accrete,
claiming more earth.

Most of the city’s islands had been employed in manufacturing textiles. The old
factory buildings were still standing on some islands, dilapidated, “undeveloped.” People
who worked in the factories lived in tiny apartments, single-level dwellings so narrow my
arms could span from one wall to the other, arranged around the main house. These
apartments, old and inexpensive, were mostly still inhabited. Bathroom and shower facilities were outdoors and communal: a row of sinks around a stand of toilets and urinals were concealed by a low wall. I could smell urine. There was a large communal stove and oven. Cats wandered, passing through holes and open windows.

It was quiet, the high walls blocking the city’s noises, and I felt I was far away from where I had just been. A child played outside the open door of one of the small apartments. I felt entitled to look inside—I was on a tour and wanted to see something surprising. An adult came to the door just as we were passing by and stood in the doorway, looking at us, so I looked away. We left through a gate different than the one through which we’d entered and were suddenly back in the city, which I suppose we had never left.

We stayed in the architect’s building from the beginning of November to the end of December. It was in an old part of the city. The building’s cold seemed old, too. The cost of heat was extravagant, according to our landlady. She lived with her child in the apartment one floor above ours, across the landing. The child seemed very fretful and uncomfortable all the time; inconsolable. I would hear him screaming and crying in the morning, at night. His cries echoed in the staircase, gaining acoustic momentum from the cold stone of the spiraling stairs. Sometimes the landlady and her brother, the architect, had loud conversations on the stairs between their flats, shouting up and down to each other, the sounds of their voices entering our flat by way of the locked door, the walls.
I would leave the flat and walk around the city. My route was guided by how much more I wanted to cry before returning home. One day I arrived back at the flat to find that I had neither my handbag nor the key to the outer door. I couldn’t even get to the lock that usually troubled me, the one on the door to our flat. Without a key, or identification, or money, I felt more acutely the contours of what I am. I felt very small, and close, and tender — at risk of being stepped on and ground into the cobblestone sidewalk by the people passing by.

When B. answered the intercom, the tone of his voice told me that he was uncertain which language he should be speaking, and also uncertain which language he was speaking. He said “hello” so tentatively the word was more of a sound, a cry. I was startled and felt protective — I didn’t want anyone passing by to hear this cry, a sound I had never heard B. make. As he unlocked and opened the door, I clearly recalled how I had set down my bag in a supermarket to pay for a container of yogurt, which I remembered to take with me at the expense of my bag, because I knew B. would want yogurt.

From late December on, most days were overcast and rainy in an unmoving, dense way. We moved by taxi to a newer building across the city. From the living room window I could look down on a needle exchange. People would go in, come out, and walk the half block to a ravine, where they would slouch down for a while. The
sidewalks, made of small stones, were dark and slick; they looked wetter than they were, wetter than water. The rain made crying outside convenient; I could hide under an umbrella when the rain was heavy. If my face was wet it was because it was windy, or I had walked all the way to the ocean and the water was spray from the waves.

I saw, through the water in my eyes, out through the haze of droplets that accumulated on my glasses. They fogged from the heat of my body. I traveled with an old pair in case these broke. The old prescription would seem like an impediment, but it would be better than nothing, I told myself. I got used to being damp and cold and seeing through dirty glasses—seeing the obscuration of my vision. I was becoming a part of the weather. I felt like a metaphor. A framed picture of a snail.

Why I was there in that particular city didn’t make sense to me, and I didn’t try to explain it to myself or anyone. Maybe I felt that an adequate explanation would have been an instantaneous transportation to a false elsewhere; as if, during that difficult time, I had to be, could only be, in a place of uncertainty. Maybe a reason for going to new places is to figure out, once we arrive, why we’re there.

I left one rainy morning at the end of January. As the cab pulled away, I turned around and saw B. standing on the sidewalk, his arm raised but not waving, his body motionless. By then the city was for me as much a mood as it was a city, a mood of
sadness, a photograph. The fog and mist had made the mood pervasive, but I was leaving.

What was I leaving?
In *The Wall* by Marlen Haushofer, a woman and her dog find themselves trapped inside of an invisible wall. They are in the forest, staying at a friend’s cabin. The friend has gone into town and that’s when the wall, an enormous impenetrable bubble, materializes around the cabin, the woman and her dog, surrounding them completely and isolating them from the rest of the world. They learn how to survive being trapped: the woman (I think she’s never named; she’s by herself for most of the novel after all; there’s nobody who would call her anything) learns to hunt, though eventually her dog dies, I forget how. The wall is transparent; she can see through it but her body can’t pass through it. She can see the forest on the other side; she can see other cabins, immobile cars. Through the wall she sees people standing in the same place in their yards for days — this is how she knows a unique disaster has occurred outside of the bubble in which she’s trapped, or preserved. The implication, by the end, is that she dies too, in a future just a little farther off in time than the book can reveal, in the cabin or in the woods nearby.

Reading this book, I enter a zone inside my life that is sealed off from the rest of it, all of it: past, present, future — a peacefulness and also a disastrousness abide here, together, sharing the same face (mine), which I can’t see.
I see J.’s wall every time I drive north or south through the city where I now live, though I am increasingly unsure why. I could go a different way, but I don’t — the route by J.’s wall is the most convenient. Why am I writing about J. again? Because I drove by the wall this evening on my way home. “See that wall?” J. asked me one of the first times we drove anywhere together. “I designed that,” he said. He quickly qualified: “I mean, I worked for the firm that designed it. I helped.” When I drove by the wall this evening, There’s J.’s wall, I thought, and I laughed. I wanted to feel happy about his absence from my life, because I want my life itself to be what he, for a short time, was to me: tenderness and protection. Though I laughed, I didn’t feel happy. I don’t know how to be for myself what another person (very different from me, who often surprised me and just as often bored me, who liked to eat different, blander things than I did, who often slept poorly while I often slept well) so easily and unknowingly did, and was. Who but a man, I asked myself vengefully, laughing, would brag about designing an ordinary brick wall? A truly unexceptional structure that I would not have noticed otherwise, or might have noticed but would not have given any thought at all? Who else but a man would be so afflicted by pride yet so weary beneath the weight of its armor it imposes on his chest and shoulders, which tighten day by day, forming knots of tension around his spine, which has begun to warp? The human body is not built to withstand the dead, rigid weight of our pride. It folds in on itself, it breaks down, it fractures. J.’s heart had already begun to fail: he wore a pacemaker beneath the flesh of his left shoulder, in the hollow formed by
shoulder and clavicle. The small, boxy shape of machinery interrupted the contour of his chest. At first he flinched when I touched him there — I was the first person since the surgery whom he allowed to touch that part of him, which, with delicate wires threading into his heart, was more vulnerable than he was comfortable being. Eventually he relaxed, and the flinching subsided. His wall forms a barrier between the backyards of the wealthy and a major traffic corridor. I want to tear down J.’s wall; I want what this wall separates to fuse, become one thing. The wall isn’t so tall or thick: the separation it provides it really only a suggestion, a possibility—an idea, which by its nature shares certain qualities with the invisible and unreal.

Yet an image describing how a lock works does not reside in my body; the hand that holds the key is not the image, or knowledge of the image. Knowing happens elsewhere. That’s what I’m trying to get to.
When I was seven, I swallowed the key to my diary. I was lying semi-supine on my bed, holding the key in my mouth while I wrote. This was my first diary. As I remember it, it was late morning on a Saturday. I was absorbed in my writing. Suddenly I coughed, or laughed, and the key went down my throat. I found my mother and told her what had happened. She said I was lucky I hadn’t choked. She called the doctor’s office and asked, Was this an emergency, should she take me to the hospital, was there the possibility of a rupture or tear? No, the nurse said, it would be fine, the key was a small one — and if she wanted to reassure herself that the key had made its way out of me, she should watch my stools for the next several days.

Having the key inside me prompted me to search the encyclopedia for a picture of the human digestive tract. It wasn’t that I wanted to know what I was made of, but that I wanted to be able to see myself from the key’s perspective. I read about the intestines and examined a diagram depicting them; the human digestive tract is meters and meters long, the encyclopedia informed me. All this distance is packed tightly behind the abdominal wall. I pictured the swimming pool where I went for lessons. Was it 25 meters long? Yards? Either way, for something as small as the key to my diary, that distance would seem much longer than it seemed to me. What if it got tired and gave up before it got to the end?
My mother wasn’t satisfied by the daily examinations in the bathroom. Standing over the toilet, she would say, “I still don’t see it.” After five days, maybe a week, she stopped trying to find it. “I’m sure it came out,” she said. I was still able to lock my diary — it had come with two keys. Because I could still lock it, I felt it was safe to write about my mother and did so often.

Eight years later, during my first MRI scan, I thought about the key. Inside of a powerful magnet emitting the cryptic sounds of its hidden machinery, I imagined the key being wrenched through the flesh of my stomach, tearing open the many meters, or yards, of my intestine while my mother waited in the waiting area, reading a magazine about dream vacations or nonstick cooking or the flora and fauna of the African savannah.

Intestinal fistulae is a possible effect of the condition I was eventually diagnosed with. According to the encyclopedia, a fistula is an abnormal connection, usually in the form of a tube, between two hollow spaces. I imagine the labyrinthine, subterranean space inhabited by the creature in my favorite story by Kafka, “The Burrow,” which he began writing six months before his death and perhaps did not finish to his satisfaction. The creature, an ambiguous burrowing animal, is obsessed with keeping its burrow, a redoubt from everyday life, secure against invaders.

I almost screw myself to the point of deciding to emigrate to distant parts and take up my old comfortless life again, which had no security whatever, but was one indiscriminate succession of perils, yet in consequence prevented one from perceiving and fearing particular perils, as I am constantly reminded by comparing my secure burrow with ordinary life.
Somewhere still the creature is within me, enjoying the relative stillness and silence of my interior and its own unfinished story, hoping never again to have to contend with the chaos and noise beyond, having added the key to its Keep…
Consider the weight of water. Imagine passing beyond the curtain formed by its continuous fall. Imagine opening water and entering it; what do you see? When we arrived in Las Vegas I was thirsty and young. I wanted to see the hotel’s swimming pools. The desk attendant said there were three. My brother, four years younger than me, could not stop crying. My mom decided the plane ride had hurt his ears. His crying stopped the moment she pronounced this. He was, after all, much more like her than I was, according to my dad. I could not yet tell the difference between feelings of anger, fear, and fatigue—all three felt like an irritable craving for candy. I practiced flip turns against the pool wall, where the water was deepest. My dad, who was supposed to be with me, had gone to play the slot machines. When my mother found me I was happily swimming in the pool. She bought me a candy bar from a vending machine. Later she fought with my dad. Who was winning and who was losing—a question with invisible architecture that structured our family’s movements. I liked to go off by myself and “explore,” a word and a way of being I’m certain my dad taught me. Places of potential danger and sordidness were preferred—derelict buildings, seedy inner-city industrial zones. During a pit stop on the way to the Hoover Dam, walking across a casino parking lot, my brother fell down a manhole. He was just behind me, and then he was not. The hotel owner offered my dad a drink and me macaroni and cheese from the buffet while my mom rode with my brother in the ambulance. I remember him as tall and bald and anxiously affable. He gave my father his business card, then, after it seemed something
between the two of them had been settled, drove us to the hospital. I remember desert, desert, boredom, desert. A popsicle in the hospital cafeteria. Ice packs to bring home with my brother, who seemed to have grown even smaller as a result of the day. The casino owner bought us a limo back to our hotel. The driver told us we really ought to try to see the dam.

A dam is a barrier; it is a wall. Beyond the wall is water that once moved unobstructed. Surely there exists a kind of memory, diffused among water’s atomic parts, of the brilliance and ease of its former travels?
SINCE THE AFTERNOON in 1967 when I first saw Hoover Dam, its image has never been entirely absent from my inner eye. I will be talking to someone in Los Angeles, say, or New York, and suddenly the dam will materialize, its pristine concave face gleaming white against the harsh rusts and taupes and mauves of that rock canyon hundreds or thousands of miles from where I am. I will be driving down Sunset Boulevard, or about to enter a freeway, and abruptly those power transmission towers will appear before me, canted vertiginously over the tailrace. Sometimes I am confronted by the intakes and sometimes by the shadow of the heavy cable that spans the canyon and sometimes by the ominous outlets to unused spillways, black in the lunar clarity of the desert light. Quite often I hear the turbines. Frequently I wonder what is happening at the dam this instant, at this precise intersection of time and space, how much water is being released to fill downstream orders and what lights are flashing and which generators are in full use and which just spinning free.

- Joan Didion, “At the Dam”

I have never seen the Hoover Dam, the actual dam, but in my inner eye lodge images of the dam and Didion’s writing about it, which seems to me to be luminous, bathed in “the lunar clarity of the desert light” and the aura of migraine, which Didion suffered chronically. I will be driving down a boulevard that is not Sunset, or about to enter a
freeway, and abruptly Ansel Adam’s photograph of the dam will appear before me, and I will think of how Didion frequently wondered what is happening at the dam this instant, at this precise intersection of time and space, and then I myself will wonder “how much water is being released to fill downstream orders and what lights are flashing and which generators are in full use and which just spinning free.”

To wonder by way of another’s words is perhaps an act of love, one I’m most practiced at, and a lonely one. By way of another’s mind, diachronic time becomes synchronic; the dam becomes an image that cannot be contacted except by wonder, imagination. The kind of travel required to reach it is the kind I am most comfortable undertaking—I am comfortable staying where I am and imagining the vast elsewheres of others’ images and descriptions. Perhaps others find this sort of travel too solitary, too abstract, or just not as satisfying as touching “the real thing,” whatever that may be. Sickness, and melancholy, prepare us to travel by way of image and word, and to sense, with the full richness of all the senses, which include the faculty of the mind, not only the monuments of the world, but also others’ experiences of those places.

The lunar clarity Didion remembers of the dam now persists through her description of it, and perhaps only there. To experience it I recall her words, wherever I am, and then I am again at the dam I got halfway to seeing before my brother fell down a hole.
The gateway between the world of the living and the world of the dead is called Mitla. The name comes from the Nahuatl word for the place of the dead, or underworld. The first Spanish colonist to write about Mitla, a friar, claims the word means “hell.” People lived in the area around Mitla as early as 900 BCE, though only kings and wealthy men were allowed into the temple itself. Nobles (men) who were buried here (only nobles could be buried here) were said to become cloud people who, floating above the earth, watched over the terrestrial mortals below.

The mosaic fretwork adorning the walls at Mitla is made from thousands of stones dragged somehow, or rolled on wheels of which there is now no evidence, from the surrounding mountains, then broken precisely, polished, and fitted together without mortar. No two patterns of the mosaic are repeated exactly. It’s as if the builders, in cutting large blocks of stone into smaller pieces and slotting them together, were enacting and thereby protecting against the effects on their dwellings of earthquakes. Though the walls have had minor damage in some places, and the colors of their paint long ago faded, the fretwork has been mostly undamaged by thousands of years of weather and frequent earthquakes.

The reason why I’m in the underworld remains as murky and opaque to me as the light in this locale is crystalline and revelatory. Six months ago I stood in a hotel parking
lot in the rain, knowing a relationship had ended. Sorrow had seeped through the hotel walls like a plumbing catastrophe, my own mind appearing to me through the architectonics of the hospitality industry, a watery grayness that affected everything. Traveling seemed the best remedy for the sorrows of stasis — rising rent, beige carpeting, domestic ennui. Setting out, I clung to remembered bits of a documentary about Maria Sabina, the Mazatec healer whose generosity made knowledge of psilocybin mushrooms available to Westerners in the 1950s. Sabina had lived in the mountains near Mitla and called psychedelic mushrooms “the saint children.” Desiring a remedy for what I suspected was irremediable except perhaps by time, I made my way to Mitla.

I stand in white hot sunlight that casts shadows that are as much a part of the mosaic as the stone and watch the patterns. Some Australians on a tour stand nearby, speculating about the effects of psychedelic mushrooms on the temple priests, perhaps the temple’s builders too. The fretwork patterns do remind one of the visual distortions brought on by psilocybin, someone in the group observes. Indeed, says the tour guide, the temple priests used hallucinogenic substances during rituals held in a windowless, intricately adorned room at the center of the temple: If you’ll follow me…

The backs of the departing tourists look like shadows casting before them, on the ground’s pale dust, the forms of people.
The body is a system ruled by the larger systems around it, which here means mountains — piles of dust — and urbanity, and poverty. On windy days, I have to remember not to open my mouth.

I think about what dust is. Here it is the color of crumbled teeth.

Leaving the temple I see a man hitting a man in the face with an empty plastic bottle. A sick woman’s feet look like ground meat. A turning away is also a turning toward, of course. I make a promise to myself so vague, I feel I’ve dropped something and go back to search the tombs for it, not knowing what I’m looking for. On my way out again I buy a packet of gum from the woman with ravaged feet. Sensing the packet’s small shape in my pocket, I no longer feel I have lost something.

In the efficiency where I stay, I come across this line translated from Wittgenstein and record it in my journal: “Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning.” The family that lives in the house behind my apartment invites me to supper; I decline, thanking them.

I spend my evenings reading novels and studying the transitions between scenes in order to understand how to move my life forward. The trouble is that my life is not a
narrative but one long transition that has come unmoored from both its origin and any sense of having once had a destination.

Occasionally B. emails me. He is in Marrakesh, then he is in Normandy, then Montreal. The rainy season begins in one evening: torrents sweep down the mountain, the street in front of my apartment becomes a river, and within an hour the kitchen floor is a slowly rising pool of water that smells like dust. A child walks through my door, water up to her thighs, and asks me if I need a bucket, holding one out as she asks. It is a red bucket. I say thank you and the child nods solemnly.

The water moves elsewhere while I sleep. In the morning along the walls there is a rim of filth at waist height. I book a flight.
Ansel Adams, “The Hoover Dam” (photograph), 1942.


MadelineClaire95, “The Burrow: Franz Kafka.” December 10, 2014,


“It will be called Billy,” Carrie says to the forming form, the thing itself, having decided it’s to be a he.

She does not want a son but what she is getting looks more and more like a little Billy.

He asks her, once he has his mouth, whether they will go to the fountain so he can piss on the marble pissing boy, then splash in the pissy water. He wants to gather the spots of dark gum or bright money from the bottom.

Yes, she thinks, he could be useful, a kind of miner.

Though maybe he does not quite see. Or sees as a machine sees——only light and the absence of it. Every thing a degree of shade.
So: She will use him to pry from the world all she needs.

A scrap, she wants to say *escarpment*, of fabric printed with leopard spots. It’s gross and funny that people once wanted to mimic the skin of predators. For fashion. But what even is an escarpment? Words get confusing now; they’ve been unsettled, too.

When she closes her eyes she sees a steep, rocky slope covered in trees that ends in the sea.

Huge waves, their deep troughs.

When she opens her eyes she sees a concrete floor, dirty, a torn vinyl shower curtain hanging from a pole suspended just below the ceiling by loops of twine. Hooks in the ceiling——she found the hooks. That’s how she gets anything.

Billy also found, the many pieces of him drawn together by a force called Carrie.
I am sending you a small stench, she writes on a hamstring (or tendon, dried, flattened) to her remaining mother.

The mother-remains. The disjecta membra of mother scattered over the surface of Cleveland.

Ohio.

Hello mother, I am also enclosing a hollow bone.

My son found it under a pile of garbage.

I think it could have once flown through the circle of sky to a different circle of sky.

Don’t you think the dinosaurs enjoyed pissing as much as we do? And watching the steam rise.

Goodbye,

and she signs it and puts it inside a membrane to send.

But there is no way to send it.

The End.
A root she likes to gather grows berries by the old railway station.

The old railway station is collapsing. Therefore “old.” And unusable for its intended purpose.

Billy is not yet bold enough to send on errands. He is still quite stupid. She goes there alone on Sunday.

The berries look at her like tired eyes. When the world looks that way, she knows she needs to rest.

She puts them in a sack of intestine.
At the old railway station, a sound still travels on the tracks. An old hollow moan, it goes up and down the tracks touching, at each end, its goal, a piece of rusted signage.

“HALT,” the signage used to say.

Now it says “HA.”

Some other kind of sense should be gathered, she thinks. Something as ripe as what these roots produce.

She will dry the roots and then soak them in a tincture of distilled spirits. It has to do with having no other course of action concerning her body and its agonies.

(All of her agonies live in her stomach.)

She wonders why the present has to be the point of most ignorance and chews a berry that has fallen.

With her knife she pries out the thick tap root and wraps it in black material. This will be her medicine.
Berries that grow by the old station——

The throat heals; the kidneys excrete hypervigilantly under the guardianship of the flower, a known diuretic.
She feeds berries to Billy. She lies on her aching belly. Billy drops the same empty tin
over and over, trying to communicate something with its clatter.

Eyes on the dirt, she swallows another drop of the tincture. (Best to watch the ground
when drinking root broth, the horizon when eating meat, the sky when thinking——this
from her unwritten book of remedies. They are, some of them, spells.)

She thinks maybe she feels a tendril of relief growing behind her left iliac crest. The
descending colon maybe a little assuaged.

Billy tries out a sound: “Mommy.”

She looks at Billy. Billy looks at her. Each thing seems individually and collectively
hopeless, all things together the most hopeless thing of all.
Billy: asleep. Does he really sleep? He lies with his eyes wide, his mouth closed, nothing transiting the passages but a sigh, just one, once. She remembers it. How it passed like snow on a smooth planet. A Billy-sigh. Reminded her a little of the home in Ohio, for people of advanced age and senility, where she would visit her grandmother (mother’s mother) on visiting days.

Outside the home there had been a human-made lake, drained. The stuff of the bottom lured her to touch it, though she was afraid of it. Had felt like a brittle carpet. I am touching the bottom, she had told herself as she put her hand on it. (Touch the bottom of a lake and, if nothing happens, you know you are awake.)

She listens. During the night, lately, there is a kind of whine. A noise, almost nothing, yet it keeps her from settling. Some system of the city’s. Somebody should dismantle that. Seems about to breathe.
NV (he calls himself NV, after the state) arrives in the night to tell her about a dream he’s just woken from.

“I’m in a stadium, or maybe it’s an arena.” He sits kneeling. Dirt curls in the lines behind his knees like filthy smiles. “And there’s nobody else there but me, but I have a sense of being just one of many, that the stadium or arena is actually crowded, but with a kind of being I can’t see yet. But I feel like I’m about to be able to see this thing...

“Then I notice——ahead of me, hovering in the air above the field, is a giant, I mean an enormous naked woman. She’s saying, without moving her lips, ‘Enter through me. You must enter through me.’

“Enter what? What do you think she meant?”

“Me?” Carrie looks at NV’s teeth. They are perfect teeth. “She said, ‘Enter through me’?”

“You,” says NV. He turns to put her fully in his eyes. “She looked just like you.”

They fuck on the floor. Billy doesn’t wake, though maybe he doesn’t sleep. In the morning, NV leaves.
NV named her Carrie. It wasn’t her mother who gave her that name. He called her Carrie the day they met, the day of the collapse, or maybe by then it was the day after. Carrie (not yet Carrie) had been wandering dazed in what had once been a street, bleeding all down her legs, her face.

“Carrie! Hey Carrie!”

She had turned to see a man waving.

“I’m not Carrie.”

He came closer. “But you look just like her,” he said.

“And who are you then?”

“NV,” he said.

She’d heard “envy.”

“Why ‘envy’?” she asked.

“Cuz that’s where I was born. Where I’m from. Where I wanted to get back to before all this shit fell on my head.”

She pondered. She could feel she wasn’t thinking well. A lot had happened, none of it, yet, or perhaps ever, explicable.

“So,” she said, “you were born in envy?”

“Babe, I was born in Reno. Where my ma still is, if she is.”

He kneeled down in front of her. Was he proposing? Did that make sense? It was a bandage, or part of one, and he was wrapping it around her knee.
“Gonna want to disinfect that,” he said, standing up. She saw beige dust in his eyebrows, his eyelashes. “Let’s find a liquor store, Carrie,” he said. He put a thumb in the blood by her eye.

That was how she got the name Carrie and how she met NV. She kept the name and felt it was hers, now, more than the name her mother had given her, because the collapse had been a kind of severing. It even made her bleed.

The period she got a few days later was the last one she can remember.
Root that grows by the old station——

Emmenagogue; anxiolytic. Eat salt with it.
Her body changed: dried up (water was work to find and carry), lost weight. Slept less, resting in a plane just below the surface of waking, rarely descending into dream. She started seeing certain things more vividly: anything loosened, cracked, dangling, shattered. The edges of pieces had an undeniable gleam. She had to pick them up, save them in a canvas bag she found. They were all on the verge of meaning. Not knowing what the future held, she felt anything could take on new use.

Words were the same——she spoke strangely to herself, making sentences out of words she’d never before put together. She spoke them aloud because there was nobody else to speak to. When NV arrived she felt less need to speak, but the words still eddied inside her, drawn together by currents her body seemed to circulate with her blood’s oxygen.

She gathered scraps and spoke to them silently, imbuing their broken edges with the electrical energy generated by new combinations of words.

She even saw the synapse firing——the light purple arc that flowed from her arm into a piece of metal broken off a crushed chassis. It had been a bus. She said “shambling pastor” to it and it nearly breathed. Then formed a crust.

She could see lips in it. A toothless mouth.
She finds Billy an empty garage where he can play. He thuds across the concrete, slides in old oil, crashes into her and demands an ice pop.

“Ice is difficult,” she tells him. Ice is in fact one of the most difficult things to provide.

She explains time to him.

This leads to a description of the sea.

When she finishes, it is evening, and the garage must be vacated before the person who sleeps here at night arrives.

“I’ll see what I can find,” she tells him. As far as ice.

She leaves Billy at home, sitting on dirt and listening to the radio. There are voices he can be with until she returns with the ice, or without it.
She walks to the old railway station.

Daylight is quietly evaporating from the roof, nearly all of which has fallen in.

She goes inside.

Pieces of what was once a frescoed ceiling crunch like ice under her shoes as she walks to where she’ll find ice, if there is ice. The will-call window in former times is now a frameless hole.

Above her, bits of plaster still intact reveal a portion of the mouth, the mole by the corner of the lips, the shoulders lowering into a body that has all fallen except for a hand wearing a glinting ring formed by a fixture of light.

The only thing not yet broken that should have been broken a long time ago, by mere time or something thrown, is the fixture.

And who is the woman? Carrie doesn’t know. She might have been advertising a beverage held in the hand that’s fallen. Or maybe the ring was the central show.

She shouts hello through the hole, waits for the woman who lives among the offices to appear. If you need something, you’ll get it here if you’ll get it anywhere. The woman who lives among the offices knows where to find what’s supposed to have vanished. She knows how to speak to the old ties. She understands the whispers that still travel along those lines. Nobody else understands them.

To everyone else, it sounds like the wind is laughing.

“HA,” it says.
The woman who lives among the offices consults the rail ties. She squats beside them, speaks inaudibly, puts one hand on the rusted metal, leans down to listen to what breathes through the tunnels.

“No,” she says, finally, “there is no ice this time.” She sits on a half-collapsed bench by an old cat that seems to have hiccoughs.

“He swallowed something this morning,” the woman says. “Since then things have got out of hand.”

It occurs to Carrie that this woman could be her mother, but isn’t. “When did it begin, do you think?”

“When did what begin?”

“I remember there used to be ice.”

“Perhaps there will be again. Listen——”

She does. Hears nothing. But the woman doesn’t want to explain. She turns away to fixate on the wracked cat.

“I think he’s trying to speak,” she says.
That night when NV arrives, he’s carrying ice. A bucket of it.

“Last ice in all of——whatever the hell. I got it from that lady at the old station.”

“She told me there’s no ice.”

“That was yesterday, babe.”

“She told me today. No ice.”

“Her cat sick when you talked to her?”

“Yeah. Maybe. Hiccoughing.”

“Well, when I talked to her, babe, that cat was dead.”
She sits crunching ice with NV on the floor. Billy is in bed (a designated corner of floor) sleeping / not sleeping. With every thought of Billy, there is always an “or.”

NV wants to talk. She listens but does not want to hear. Something worrying her? She says there isn’t (there is——the ache in her belly, worsening).

His idea: His dreams are a prophecy. The enormous woman is some sort of door. “We have to find the door, babe,” he says, repeating.

“We,” she says.

“Okay, babe,” says NV. “I have to find it, then.”

Billy makes a movement.

“Did you know,” says NV, “a domed ceiling is supposed to be your head after you’ve left your body, traditionally——after you’ve transcended the flesh.”

Carrie watches Billy. One hand opens and closes rhythmically, gently squeezing.

“I have to go away, babe.”

“Alright,” she says, still not entirely listening. She thinks Billy might be about to shit. But only a sigh comes out of him. The sigh——she recognizes it. From the railway station. He’s speaking. Billy is speaking in the whispers that travel on the tracks. Which the woman who lives among the offices deciphers. The woman who lives among the offices knows what those tracks are saying.

Tomorrow, in the morning, she’ll take Billy to the old woman.

NV leaves.
She lies on her belly. She watches Billy until she falls asleep.
Keep gathering him in what you see.
Memories form around things gauzily.
Assemble in close proximity various and unrelated objects, letting proximity be, for now, a vessel.
The act of holding together many disparate things is an act of communion.
Communion is an act of creation.
The transparent mysteries of the propagation of emotions.
Billy doesn’t want to go. He sits on the dirt floor putting nailfulls of dirt into his nose.


She feels a pang of anger angling off toward NV. For leaving. Now her troubles swirl around her, and there’s nobody else to help.

She tries to coax Billy with ice. There’s still slush in the bucket.

Billy projectile vomits. Some comes out of his nose. His nose / his no’s. Is Billy a message she’s supposed to know how to read?

“How about the fountain then,” she says. Her belly aches. The berries have stopped working.

A cure, she thinks. I need a cure.

“We’ll go to the fountain. I’ll let you go in. I’ll tell you about water. I’ll show you where it flowed.”

Billy sits on the floor, putting nailfulls of dirt into his nose, clogging the vomit.

“Alright,” she says, “Billy. We won’t go.”
She feels as if her face has slid sideways and hangs off her body, dangling. It’s the unrelenting heat. There’s no weather report anymore.

Billy presses fingers into her as if her body was a panel of buttons.

Get wide, she tells herself, bigger than him—so big he can’t annoy or fathom you.

Billy pokes her shoe. He pokes a tender place behind her knee. He laughs. Dirt is smeared across his cheeks.

With her knee, not gently, she pushes him sideways to convey a sense of the sea’s strength. She wants to be a wave toppling him, or just the shape of the wave. But when he stumbles, she thinks, No, I’m just acting out, I wanted to see him fall.

Her desire to topple him isn’t a wave’s. It has no shape.

That night she falls asleep out of embarrassment.
Since she was a child living with her mother she has wanted to inhabit secret spaces, live in a nook only she knows about. She imagined her bedroom was such a space, and sometimes it was and other times it wasn’t. She saw how a place or a thing could become more than itself, then collapse back to being only itself. She wondered what would happen if she, inhabiting a secret space, like the back of her closet, when the secret space was more than itself, became trapped inside it when it collapsed back to being only itself. Was it possible to be trapped in the more than? Was the more than something that lived in the closet, or something that lived in herself? Or did it live somewhere between the closet and herself?

She dreams of the empty lake. In the dream it’s full of a plenty she can’t see, yet senses.

She wakes with two new remedies and a desire to go wandering.
She takes Billy to a gray space near the garage where he likes to play.

“This is the ground, Billy,” she explains. “It’s where things people use come from, and also where things people used to use are buried.”

“Buried,” Billy says while trying to form a grin. Some saliva seeps.

“Buried,” she repeats. When is the time to tell about cemeteries? There are no longer holidays that occasion soft explanations of death.

Billy makes fists around the dirt and flings it. He makes a sound of glee when pieces of it scatter across Carrie. She enumerates aloud the names of the bits of garbage:

Dart
Thimble
Plastic bag fastener
Piece of chain link
Penny
Red reflector
Army action figure

A new animism of trash. Random bits of an old order, strewn together by chance. A recipe to make a new . . . world?

Billy places the action figure in his shirt pocket. He pats the pocket; he says, “Son.”
Pain moves through her dream. It writhes through the images, distorting them, until she can’t make sense of anything anymore. With a surge of nausea, she wakes.

Billy is saying “no, no, no” in his sleep, if he sleeps.

She rolls over so her head hangs off the bedding, dangles above the ground. She is inviting the pain to pour out: through her eyes, through the lines in her forehead, the pores in her scalp. Through the strands of hair delicately touching the ground, through her crown, down into the ground and back into the root system, where her pain can communicate with the roots she uses to heal it. Seems like the roots would work better if they could just talk with the pain, learn its story, what it wants.

Billy is on his belly, dragging himself toward her.

Behind him in the dirt, a path the width of his body.

“Jamais, jamais,” he repeats.

Every form of horror is contained in the everyday, she thinks. Maybe she once read this.

When Billy is close enough to touch, she wipes the dirt off the tip of his nose.
The days and nights have been hot. Walking, she feels like a worm tunneling through wet, warm earth. She wears her only shirt, which is thin but still clings. Feels all they do is sleep, her and Billy, or tilt toward sleep from a humid horizon. It won’t just rain.

One night, she can’t do it: sleep. The heavy drowsy feeling becomes intolerable—she wants to move, to make the air around her move.

Billy, he’s still barely Billy—barely the Billy she supposes he will be—seems to be asleep. His body’s form is still faint, amorphous. She carries it easily. She has a case, a thing she found on the ground. The perfect size for Billy. She lifts him into it and mercifully he doesn’t wake. His body rests against her belly, the aching pit of it.

She walks to the station. She barely has to heft Billy. His body still isn’t much.

The pains in her belly come and go like spectators at a museum. Now she feels fine; two steps later there’s a sharpness and she has to crouch until it goes.

In the station she walks across the shards of the place, to the will-call window. Waits.

She doesn’t recognize the face of the woman who appears.

“She isn’t here,” says the woman.

“Who isn’t?”

“The lady you’re looking for.”

“She’s away?”

“I don’t know. She got on a train.”

“There are no trains.”
“There was a train, and she got on it. It was late.”

“The train?”

“The hour. It was dark. Maybe a day ago, two days. She said a train was coming. A train came. She got on it. Now she’s gone.” The woman turns and goes back into the office.

“Then who are you?” she calls to the back of the woman. There’s no way to see the woman’s face.

Before she leaves the station, she looks into the case. Billy is whispering. She listens. She wants to know what he’s saying. The old woman would have known.

She walks through the station to the platform. She stands by the tracks, looks into the tunnel. Like veins, red with rust.

There is always a sound here of whispering, the slightest breeze.

She opens the case.
Billy wakes. Looks as if he has heard his name.

She takes him out of the case, stands him by the tracks.

He waits.

Is he listening?

She waits.

He stands like he expects anything. His spine seems to have aligned itself with whatever is coming. He starts moving his mouth, his lips still messy and somewhat unformed, his mouth without teeth, in time with the voice. Still a spot of vomit in one nostril.

“Billy. This is important. Do you know what the voice is saying?”

He doesn’t say. Only keeps whispering. Billy and the tracks seem to be speaking.

Soon she sees a train. Or: sees its headlights getting bigger, brighter in the tunnel.

Trains haven’t run since the collapse. Since the collapse, there have been no trains. In the tunnels: only darkness. Why, now, would there be a train? And where would it go?

It’s close now, filling the tunnel with its light and sound.

It stops in front of them. A door slides open. Billy goes through it.

She picks up the empty case and, ready to board, curious to find out where this train will take her and Billy, watches the train slide away with grace she’s observed only in snakes.

Snakes live only where she goes to gather herbs, flowers.
Hawthorne, sage, plantain.

Billy: she feels a pain. It moves laterally through her torso, a severing.

It’s period pain but flattened, sharp and empty.
She thinks of the tunnels while she lies awake. Of the sounds they make, the whispering that seemed to call to Billy. Of how far they go. All she would have to do is follow. And endure whatever they led her to.

Does she want to find Billy?

This isn’t really about Billy, she thinks.

Is this about Billy?

The thought of Billy brings her to the tunnels.

The thought of the tunnels brings her to…

She becomes very drowsy, falls asleep, dreams something she doesn’t remember, wakes warm and hungry and not in pain.
NV is back, making toast and talking about the dream again.

“Babe, I know where the door is. It’s in the station. On the ceiling. The enormous woman. I don’t know how I never noticed.”

Carrie lies on her mat on the floor. She feels pulled down, depressed by tiredness. When NV is talking about his dreams, she doesn’t need to say anything for him to continue to speak. He hands her a piece of dry toast (he took the toaster from a café, the electricity is spotty). Jam is something Carrie would have to make from the berries; she always eats them too soon.

“It’s crumbling, but you can still mostly see it,” NV is saying. “Lady Justice or some shit. Or maybe Hermes——was Hermes a chick? Anyway it’s so obvious she’s my dream lady. I need to enter her.”

“She’s…the ceiling. How are you going to enter the ceiling?”

“I know where there used to be a ladder. I’ll go there tomorrow.”

Sometimes you enter a thing by it passing through you, Carrie thinks. She eats a bite of toast, imagines her body surrounding it. It’s so dry she can feel it as it moves to her stomach.

“What if,” she says, “your dream is telling you to eat the plaster. That’s falling off the ceiling. Bits of your dream lady.”
He looks at the backs of his hands. Turns them over, looks at the palms. “I like that. Yeah. I like that. You think that’s what the dream is saying? Eating plaster is gonna kill me?”

“A little bit won’t kill you. Start small.”

NV paces in a small tight circle. Carrie goes back to being almost asleep. NV stops pacing.

“Hey,” he says, “where’s that weird kid? Billy?”

“He got on a train.”

“Ain’t no trains anymore, babe. No trains, you know?”

“Yeah, but there was a train. Billy whispered by the tracks and then there was a train. But a silent train. And Billy got on it. It seemed like he summoned it. He got on the train and it went in the tunnel.”

NV shakes his head slowly, then vigorously. “Whoa, whoa. Sounds like some supernatural shit. I mean, what the hell is going on, you know? Got on a fucking train. Damn.”

NV goes back to pacing, Carrie, to lying still. It might be the kind of morning when she decides to sleep all day.

“Dream lady will tell me,” NV says quietly, crouching to speak near Carrie’s ear.

“I’m gonna eat her and she’s gonna tell me what the fuck is going on.”
Out walking, she finds a kit for cutting hair. Scissors, comb, hand mirror. At home she starts cutting. Without hair, her head feels less heavy in the hot air.
NV dances. He holds a crescent-shaped knife and hacks a piece out of the ceiling.

He catches it, climbs down the ladder, puts the piece of plaster in his mouth.

The messages begin pouring in. He has to bend over, crouch down, put both hands on the ground. They pummel him as they go in, overwhelm his body, twisting organs, contorting fascia as they move through. He tries to decipher them by moving in tandem. Sort of dancing, spitting, vomiting occasionally. After a while the spasms subside. Then he feels himself kingly, a regal being of a bless’d realm of knowledge he must share with everyone he meets.

Carrie finds him kneeling in the garage where Billy played. Various bits of garbage splayed around him, he seems to be divining. He touches a plastic knob, closes his eyes. Moves his hand slowly to touch a piece of bag.

She should never have suggested eating the plaster.

Seeing him like this, suddenly she feels too exposed, vulnerable. She finds a filthy hat in a pile by a wall. Red hat with a white pom-pom. Santa Claus. She puts it on and feels safer with the newly cropped crown of her head covered.

“Cavities,” says NV. “Systems of them. I am a man who knows. I see them.”

She nods, hopes he can sense her body agreeing. No words feel right to say to someone standing outside of present time and logic.

“Openings, in-gresses, gaps. The air is full of them. Get inside the air. Get inside the air!”
NV stands. He shuffles his feet but doesn’t go anywhere. She tries to follow along, hoping in this way to bring him back to himself.

This——shuffling, kneeling, speaking——goes on and on. Eventually NV stands and doesn’t shuffle. He looks at her. “Babe. I need spaghetti.”

“Let’s get you some food.”
“If you tie ribbons to a tree, you can hear the wind,” NV says, and then he falls asleep. She lies down beside him on the floor.

“Grave,” says NV in his sleep. “Grave!”

Carrie barely sleeps.
Early in the morning NV is awake, hyperlocutive, talking about a new regimen, the need for dedication now to physical health, preparation for something called The Great Awakening, etc.

“Babe, in any new civilization you need those who have a sense of usable history and can reconstruct at least the basic concepts from science. Also there is the literalization of all literature because the sky is falling, if you know what I mean. It’s no longer just a phrase, Babe. I ate it.”

From where she lies on the floor, she watches NV. While he speaks he gyrates his hips in a circle first in one direction, then in the other. Then back in the other direction. As if preparing for strenuous athletic exertion or sex. Silences in his speech she at first thinks are final are only in breaths, autonomic. “A lot of people can’t handle it,” he goes on, “how everything becomes hieroglyphic. So much of the information enters us now through our skin, pores. Pores are the poets of the skin. Can you interpret it? I mean, do you understand what a metaphor is, babe?”

Carrie stretches, rolls over, gets to her feet.

It makes sense, she thinks, for anyone to lose their mind.

NV starts talking again, his voice glinting like eyes. Her impulse is to get away from him; he’s unstable. But knows that instability like this can’t vanish into any past: it’s already waiting for her in the future.
She puts a hand on NV’s shoulder. She says, “What’s happening to you makes sense.”

“I mean it about the wind, babe,” he says. “You can hear it.”
NV punches out the plastic that had been covering the window.

“It was talking to me,” he says.

“What was?”

“The flapping. The plastic flapping.”

She watches him crawl through the open window.

He sticks his head back in. “I gotta go, babe.” He’s wearing the Santa hat.
NV returns. He’s covered with paint. It’s early in the morning.

“Like for houses?”

“Yes,” he says, “Latex. ‘For indoor surfaces only.’”

His arms: “Eggshell.”

His legs: “Cranberry soufflé.”

His belly: “Nightingale Blue.”

Vaguely patriotic, the colors of a national flag.

He smells like a refurbished rental. Around elbows and knees the paint is cracking.

Around his groin he wears a kind of sling. Carrie suspects it was a pillowcase.

“Babe,” he says. “I rode the train.”

The Santa hat, her hat, is gone.
NV brings home a roll of Tyvek——the most helpful, normal thing he’s done, Carrie thinks. She can use the Tyvek to cover over the open window, repair other small holes in her home.

Also brings several small yellow flags that read, BURIED FIBER OPTIC.

“Babe,” he says. “It means fabric that can see.”
Carrie wakes up to NV kneeling by her head. He’s holding a knife.

“NV?”

“I need hair from your fontanel, babe.”

“Fontanel?” She sits up. Something metallic drops to the bottom of her gut, clatters there. “Do you know what that means?” Keeps her eyes on the knife, the blade resting now in NV’s lap.

“Soft spot, babe. It’s a kind of a ritual thing they do to the dead to help the living stop mourning.”

“I remember reading about it once. You take a little hair from where the skull’s barely fused. But NV, I’m not dead.”

“Kind of strange that we both know about this, isn’t it?”

“I think it’s strange you’re doing a death ritual when I’m not dead!”

“Actually I don’t know what’s strange anymore, babe, but I’m making a bundle. I need your hair. For protection.”

Carrie, unsure why, lets him hold the blade of the knife against her skull and saw off a swatch. She should’ve given him her shears, she thinks——the knife was dull.

He shows her hair to her before tucking it into a small pouch he wears around his neck.

For a passing moment Carrie wonders if NV has decided to make his own Billy.
From the station, she follows the track in the direction the train carrying Billy departed.

The top of her head bald, the need to leave, get moving, has never been clearer to her. If there is a train running, she wants to know why, how. NV said he rode it, and maybe he really did? Also there’s a feeling of obligation, which she resists precisely defining, to find Billy, make sure he’s safe.

The tunnel is not as dark as she’d been expecting thanks to light shafts she’d never noticed as a passerby above.

After maybe twenty minutes of walking, there is her Santa hat. It’s on the tracks, a little dirtier than when she last saw it on NV.

Why is the hat here? The question grows loud in her head.

She picks up the Santa hat, puts it on.
An opening appears to her right——she can turn and follow those tracks or keep on straight.

She turns.

Then turns back.

Then turns around and goes on.

Pretty soon she can see someone ahead of her, sitting on the tracks.

When she’s up close enough, she sees the person has their arms cross over their knees. Their head rests on their knees.

She stops a little ways from the person and wonders what to do. Walk past? Sit down beside them?

Suddenly the person lifts up their head. Their hair is filthy and matted and partly covers their eyes. “I was asleep,” they say. It almost sounds like a question, the way they say it.

“Sorry,” Carrie says. “I was just passing by.”

“Wow. Probably shouldn’t get in the habit of sleeping on train tracks.” They rub their eyes, stand. “I’m Harriet.”

“Carrie.” Harriet appears to be young, healthy, and very dirty.

“There aren’t really trains anymore, it’s probably fine,” Carrie says.
“A train came through just the other day. Maybe a week ago. I don’t know. But not that long ago. I watched it go by.” Harriet takes a filthy cloth out of a pocket and wipes her nose.

“Wait, you saw a train? So did I. My…Billy got on it. I’m looking for him, I guess.”

Harriet puts the cloth back into her pocket and pulls something else out. A small, clear baggie filled with gray dust.

“This is my umbilical cord,” she says. “I’m going to sprinkle it on a tree. Want to come?”

Carrie looks behind her. She looks ahead of her. “Sure,” she says. “Though I don’t really understand what we’re doing.”
“I think the tree is pretty close to this station coming up,” Harriet says. She walks fast; Carrie is breathing hard trying to keep up.

Pretty soon the tunnel opens into a station. They get off the tracks onto the platform. Harriet is smiling. “This is definitely it.” She turns and Carrie follows her up the stairs to the street.

They walk to what used to be a park and is now an overgrown ravine. Harriet leads them to a path above the ravine that follows its course. It’s like walking along a river, Carrie thinks, only the river is full of trees, not water.

“Right there,” Harriet says. She points to a bridge that crosses from one side of the ravine to the other. “That’s the tree.”

They get onto the bridge. Harriet holds the baggie between two fingers as if it’s a fish. She leans on the rail above the ravine. Just below her, its upper branches almost touching the bridge, is a big tree.

“Why this tree?” Carrie asks.

“My mom found my umbilical cord when she was cleaning out her garage. This was years ago. She put it in an envelope and mailed it to me. I freeze dried it, put it in a bag, and hit it with a hammer until it was dust. I used to talk to this tree when I was a kid. There’s just something about it. It has a certain quality. I’d call it receptive, I guess.”

Harriet opens the baggie and dumps it over the railing. Some of the dust coats the tree’s leaves but most of it becomes airborne. A little collects on Carrie.
“That’s that,” says Harriet. She hops off the bridge on the other side of the ravine. Carrie watches as she seems to find a steep, narrow path, which she follows down into the ravine, nearly tumbling through the growth.

“I’m going to take a nap!” Harriet shouts. “Good meeting you!”
Carrie sneezes. Harriet’s umbilical cord dust.

She’s pretty sure she’s back on the track where she first met Harriet. She tells herself it’s the same track because the thought that it’s the same is reassuring. The track suggests the possibility of continuity. Very little is reassuring. Lately nothing that happens to her is what she imagined happening to her. Like when she was a girl, in her bedroom, imagining what would happen to future her? None of this.

“Hey Santa!”

Carrie turns. She’d forgotten she was wearing the hat. There’s a man sprinting up the track. He catches up to her and leans forward, hands on his knees, breathing hard, like a smoker. “Do you know when that train came through?”

“When did a train come through?”

“I heard one did. I dunno. Maybe a few days ago. Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Carrie says, “I think I saw it. You didn’t see it?”

“No, just heard from one of my housemates that they thought they saw a train, but they might’ve been ripped.”

“Ripped.”

“We make moonshine. Moonshine for the Masses. We’ve got a whole thing.” He stands up, breathing less hard.

“Masses?”
“Just us, though we’re a pretty full house. Seems like every day I see someone in there I haven’t seen before. We were thinking if there is a train, it would really help with distro.”

“There aren’t any trains, though.”

“But you said you saw it.”

“I said I think I saw it. There was a lot about it that didn’t seem real.”

The guy laughs. He takes a cigarette out of a back pocket. A cigarette. Carrie hasn’t seen one in…however long. A long time.

He sees how Carrie is looking at him as he lights it. “You smoke?”

“Not anymore,” says Carrie.

“Forced Cessation. That’s what we at Moonshine for the Masses call our present era. Here, just take a drag.” He hands Carrie the cigarette and she drags on it. Her stomach turns and her knees almost buckle. She hands it back.

“When was the last time you had a drink?” he asks.

If this were a different time, and they were, say, at a bar, Carrie would roll her eyes and walk on. But there’s always something intriguing about another person now—who knows what information they have, or resources.

“Where did you say you live?”

“Come on, I’ll show you the palace.”
They exit the tunnels at a station Carrie always just thought of as “suburbs.” It occurs to her how strange it is that she hasn’t explored the tunnels before now. Staying hyperlocal seemed safest, but likely at the loss of food, building materials, and connections with other people.

Carrie walks alongside the guy. They turn down a wide, wealthy looking street. The trees here are old and dense. The houses are spray-painted, windows broken and boarded over. Obviously occupied, though without sentiment or long-term interest. They’re just something to put between skin and the weather.

“This is us,” the guy says. He points to a house of several stories at the end of a footpath made of broken dishes. There’s a guy with a fierce dog sitting outside the door. The guys nod at each other and they go in.
There’s an odor like antiseptic sweat, and the interior has been divided into small quadrants by big sheets of what appears to be foam and insulation. Some of the foam walls have foam doors cut into them. Carrie remembers a photo she once saw, maybe in a magazine, of a tenement in China. Individual closet-sized apartments stuffed with the person’s every belonging, mini-fridges, hot plates. She remembers reflecting on how precarious a life is, how thin any wall actually is compared with the enormity outside it.

And now, as she walks in what could be that image’s twin, she thinks how superficial and cloying her reflections had been, coming from comfort she’ll likely never know again.
The guy turns a corner in the narrow, foam-lined walkway and when Carrie turns it, she doesn’t see him, just another corner. So she turns, turns again, seemingly back in the direction she just came from. Unless he went into one of the cubbies/apartments, he has to be here. Carrie keeps following the walkway.

The place is strangely quiet for being so supposedly full of people needing the privacy of these foam walls. Except for the guy outside and the one she’s trying to find, she hasn’t seen or heard another person.

Another corner, and there in the walkway is a cat. It’s all black, with one white paw, just sitting there, its tail moving from side to side. In its mouth, held by its teeth, is a scrap of fabric that makes her think, Billy.
She crouches slowly. The cat watches her warily.

It’s a piece of fabric. Billy wore a striped jumper, blue and white. The fabric in the cat’s mouth is blue and white striped.

“Hey,” she says. She puts a hand out, wishes she had something besides just a hand to offer. But if she’d had anything edible she would’ve already eaten it.

The cat lifts one paw, puts it down. Then it stands, turns, and goes into a foam cubby. Carrie follows, crouching to fit through the opening.

Inside it’s very dark. As her eyes adjust, Carrie sees no cat, but there’s another opening. It seems to lead into an adjacent cubby from which a little light emanates. Carrie goes through the opening.

The light, it turns out, is from a flashlight. That’s all there is, a flashlight, its light dim, on the floor. No opening except the one she came through. No cat.

Carrie picks up the flashlight, switches it off. She keeps the flashlight.
The walkway leads her to stairs. Up or down. She decides she wants to get out of this place, this “palace,” so she chooses down. She thinks she sees natural light at the bottom of the stairs. She goes down the stairs.

Again a narrow walkway between foam walls. But just a few steps along the walkway, there’s a window up by the ceiling. Someone has tried to use a piece of foam to plug the opening, but the foam has been chewed away by critters. If Carrie can find something to stand on, she can easily get herself through the opening.

She starts down the walkway, knocks on the first cubby’s foam door. No sound. She opens the door. Nothing, empty.

She goes to the next door, knocks, opens it. There’s a filthy sheet on the floor, and what might once have been a pillow.

Next door. In this one there are used condoms and empty bottles.

Next. A wooden crate. She drags it to the window, steps up, and climbs out into what’s left of the yard: piles of trash, a rat apparently asleep between two of them.

She goes toward the front of the house, waves at the guy and dog, and follows the footpath to the street.

Well, now I have a flashlight, she thinks.
She knows she’s going to have to sleep. Wondering how exactly that will play out is starting to make her anxious. She doesn’t want to leave the tunnels, at least not until she has more energy. She decides she’ll find a platform and settle there for a few hours, or until she feels like walking again. She’s pretty tired; maybe she’ll be able to sleep sitting up.

After a while she chooses a station. She goes to a corner of the platform and slides her back down the wall until her butt’s on the ground.

A dog is barking somewhere.

She can hear it—it’s coming from the stairwell on the other side of the platform. The stairs lead to the street.

She slides her back up the wall, shoves herself into motion. She’s exhausted but she wants to know if there’s really a dog. A dog would be a good companion.
Walking in the direction of the barking, she comes to a low mound of brown grass covered in dog shits. In a park, swings move in a slight breeze, which smell of feces. She passes a block of towering apartment buildings. The barking is getting fainter now. It occurs to her that the dog might be moving too, and not in her direction.

She passes over an eight-lane highway that appears to have been recently constructed; there are no cars on it.

After several more blocks she sees a market tucked into the ground level of one of the tenements. A boy leans in the doorway, smoking. His skin is filthy. He does not move when she passes through the door, forcing her to touch his body.

As she does, she has the sense that she has lost something valuable forever.

“Nice hat,” he says.
Billy? No, the boy is not Billy. He doesn’t even look like Billy. Billy was more than just filth.

The store is mostly empty. There’s one rack of packaged fruit pies. “How much?” she calls to the man at the register.

“What do you have?”

The flashlight is in her pocket. It’s too big to hide.

“This.” She shows it to him.

“I don’t need that. Just take the pie. It’s expired anyway, probably tastes like shit.”

“Thanks.”

On her way out the door, the boy grabs her arm. “Enjoy that pie,” he says. He licks the filth off his lips. Carrie sees that he has only a few teeth.

I paid too much for this, she thinks, ripping open the wrapper.
The pie is stale but eating something lets her fall asleep. Three, maybe four hours, curled fetally on her side on the platform, no dreams, just total, exhausted slumber.

When she wakes up her neck is stiff and she misses NV. Actually, she misses the water NV is so good at finding. She needs something to drink. She feels wild with thirst.

She walks to the next platform.

Bridgerson Street. It sounds familiar. She goes up the stairs.
The neighborhood was once hip. She can tell by what remains of signage outside the small storefronts. Coffee, specialty donut shops, cactus boutiques.

She was here on a date not long before whatever happened, happened. They got coffee to go and window shopped. He talked about wanting to move into a van and drive back and forth across the country, seeing everything there was to see. She would have gone on a second date had there been no disaster. Too bad he never got his van. It might’ve provided a more reliable shelter than these brick apartment buildings. Bricks turn back into sand so easily.

She feels dust all along her throat. As if her insides were just more space for dust to fill.
Passing what was once a convenience store, she notices people inside. Two people; this seems to be their home. They’re raising bottles to their lips. She goes inside.

They both turn mid-swallow, bottles frozen in the air.

The man stands, puts down his bottle. “Hello there,” he says, his voice prospecting for agreeableness.


“Sure, no trouble. We have lots of water.”

His accent, she thinks, is Russian. The woman is still quietly watching her, sipping occasionally from the bottle.

He goes into a back room, or maybe a closet, comes back with a bottle like the ones they’ve been drinking from. He takes a bottle opener out of his pocket and pops the top off, hands her the bottle.

“Thank you so much.” The bottle is in her mouth before she finishes speaking.

It scintillates across her tongue and down her throat. It’s best water she’s ever tasted.

She gasps inadvertently when she opens her mouth for another swallow.

The woman laughs. “Tell her about the banya, Sasha,” she says.

“The banya,” he says. He smiles.
“What you should know is that it’s a portal.”

Carrie sits inside a plastic bubble with the couple. They’re all three naked. Steam generated by a small blue box billows and eddies around them.

“To where.” Carrie feels lulled, dreamy. She hasn’t had much sleep, but it’s not just that. It’s the heat, and the undulations of the steam, and something about the way Sasha speaks.

“To wherever you need.”

“It’s a space ship,” Darya says. “To inner space.”

Carrie tries to think about this—the place where she is, this plastic bubble filled with steam, is a portal, but also a space ship—but gets confused, which exacerbates the sense that her head is slowly floating away from her body. What was it NV said, when he was ranting? “Enter the air?” She puts a hand on her forehead and sighs. This causes a swirl of steam to form around her face, slip down around her shoulders and fall gently across her thighs. She has the sensation that parts of her are evaporating, becoming steam and billowing away.

She remembers the bottle of water beside her and coaxes herself to take a sip. The water seems to move through her throat in the same ethereal way as the steam. Is she actually what’s generating the steam? She tries to see the blue box but can no longer find it.

“It’s okay,” Darya says. “Just relax and let what’s happening happen.”
“But I don’t know what’s…” She has the sense of rising slowly up off the bench of the banya. Then she’s looking down on the heads of Sasha and Darya as she rises higher, passing easily through the banya’s permeable membrane.
Effortlessly she floats up over the banya, which is now a circle receding below her, floats up above the neighborhood. She’s certain that if she were to try to figure out how to control what’s happening, she would drop like a folded kite. She’s steam now, and there’s nothing she can do about that, she tells herself. So she lets herself rise.

She’s naked, but that doesn’t seem important——there’s nobody else up here. She doesn’t see anyone on the ground, either. She’s alone in the wide openness of the sky.

She starts trying to notice entrances to the tunnel, notices how it more or less follows the contours of the main thoroughfare. She looks back in the direction she believes she came from and there’s the electrical tower she could see when she stepped out of her house, if a pile of garbage can be called a house, and looked to the west. The tower is tiny, which means she came a long way——also that she’s very high up now.

She looks in the direction she’s heading, and the direction she believes the train was heading. The city becomes denser over there, the district that used to be called downtown. Now it’s just glittery piles of rubble. That’s where the big train yard is; if she were a train, that’s where she would go.
But when will she be on the ground again? As soon as she starts to think about the fact that she’s suspended high in the air for reasons she can’t see or know, fear grips her gut and she gasps.

She thinks about birds instead, because there’s one flying toward her.

Is this going to be strange? she wonders. These days any encounter could be.

It’s strange, she thinks, that she hasn’t seen a bird until now. This one stays high above her, circling. Its body is stocky and wingtips pointed like a predator’s. She wants to call it a hawk.

“Hey!” she calls. “Hello Hawk!”

It stops circling, manages to somehow hover above her. Then it drops, suddenly and gracefully. It swoops down and she can feel its belly brush the bald spot on the top of her head. Her fontanel, her fountain.

And then it’s gone.

She’s been given something, certainly, though what it is, what it means, she isn’t sure. In any event she feels the valuable thing she lost earlier, in that doorway, has been returned.
She’s still rising, slowly. She can see far beyond the densest part of the city now, out into what would have been suburbs and even beyond, to the swathes of land for farming and grazing. Were she able to see beyond those, she’d be looking at the place where the mother-remains are, or were.

*Hi mom*, she thinks toward Ohio.

She wonders, if Billy looked up right now, would he see her?
The rising levels off and for a while, she just drifts. It’s quiet up here, like being asleep if she were a fish, she thinks. Drifting in air feels like floating in water.

She remembers doing somersaults in the pool as a kid and wonders if she could manage one now. Why not? Everything that’s happening feels utterly beyond her control, also inexplicably benevolent, this gentle rising and drifting through the air.

She swings her head down like she’s trying to kiss her backside, which goes tumbling over her head. Yes! She does another, then another, then a back flip. The sky spins around her.

She does more somersaults and then finds herself wondering when the air is going to let her come down. She’d like to put her clothes back on. She misses the safety of walking.

She stretches her legs toward the ground to signal her readiness. Slowly she descends.
The descent gently deposits her not far from the banya. She walks over, opens the plastic flap and ducks inside. Sasha and Darya are fully fucking on the bench. Darya sees her come in and laughs.

“She’s back!” she says. “Sasha, we can stop!”

Sasha shudders and eases himself into a sitting posture on the bench. His shoulders are skinny; his head droops over his thighs. His cock is still hard and very red. Carrie tries not to look at it but it’s impossible not to.

“Healthy inflammation,” Sasha says, gesturing at his crotch. “Inflammation promotes healing.”

Carrie finishes the water in her bottle. “I’m just, ah, I’m going to get dressed and take off. Thank you both so much.”

“You’re very welcome, Carrie,” Sasha says.

“Take some water with you,” Darya says, “you’re probably dehydrated!”
Nestled in the pile of her clothes, on top of the Santa hat, is a cut crystal. It’s the size of her palm, mostly clear with some brownish-yellow veins visible in some of the facets. It belongs indubitably to her, she senses. It’s a tool she’s to keep, along with the flashlight, though she doesn’t know when she’ll need either.

The light of this day already starting to fade, she hurries back to the tunnels.

When she’s walking again, headed toward the train yard, she feels at ease.
The situation she’s in is not unlike that of a game she distantly remembers playing. She played it obsessively as a kid, though only for a short time, because her mother suspected it was the reason for her declining grades.

In the game she designed a character, a stout, strong woman trained in several martial arts who possessed extraordinarily sensitive senses——she could smell, taste, see, feel things other people experienced faintly if at all. Moreover she could grasp emotional resonances in what she sensed. For instance, she could tell instantly whether an odor foretold the coming of good or ill.

The purpose was simply to explore: walk around a bombed-out city, gather supplies, talk to people willing to talk, try to put together a coherent story of what had happened. If you were good at asking questions and sussing nuances in what people said, you could get more accurate information, a clearer picture. If the guy hiding under the bed of the pickup truck mentioned a woman who made candles, it was good to think to ask him whether he had any matches or a lighter he’d be willing to trade. You could be clumsy about how you went about things or you could be smart, but sometimes it was hard to tell which you were doing until some major catastrophe either wiped you out or revealed your advantage. If the catastrophes were determined by chance, then in a sense your fate in the game was, too.

The thing was, though, that the game had a creator, an author. There were storylines decided upon in advance by an intelligence she occasionally sensed when she was able to
make an important connection, like asking the guy who talked about candles for fire. Her situation now has no creator, at least not one she has been able to discern. Whether the flashlight or the crystal will be useful in the future doesn’t depend on whether she decides to keep them and figures out a way to carry them; the choices she makes don’t necessarily unlock any future gains. Some might; some might not. Not only does she have no way of knowing, she also has no frame—“this is a game, there are rules”—in which to place her trust.

Even a law like gravity, she thinks, remembering how her body felt floating up from the banya, can’t necessarily be thought of as constant.

Thinking back on her slow ascent makes her incredibly sleepy.
Carrie can sleep sitting up now, something she could never do before. Not even in the long ago when she had a bedroom, a room all her own just for sleeping and gazing.

Nobody has a bedroom anymore.

The flashlight and crystal are there in the crux of her crossed legs when she wakes up.

There’s a person sitting beside her on the platform.

“I’m not supposed to be here,” he says.


“I had a chance to get out and I didn’t take it. I almost did but I didn’t.”

She stands, picks up the flashlight and crystal, holds one in each hand. She examines the crystal because she doesn’t know what to say.

“I should have left with my teacher. All I have left of him is a certain color of blue.”

*Blue, blue, electric blue*, she thinks. She loved to dance to that song in her bedroom.

“Where are you supposed to be?” he says.

“Nowhere, I think. I don’t think I’m supposed to be anywhere.” She wonders if NV has started to notice her absence.

“You’re on an odyssey then,” he says. “You left without knowing where you were going.”

“I left because I needed to be empty again.” As she says it she realizes it’s the truth. Going into the tunnels was a way to empty herself. Or like sloughing off an old skin.

“Going to the core of your deepest losses,” he says.
“I think that’s probably too much. I just needed to leave for a while.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s citrine.” He points to the crystal in her hand. “It can bring clarity to what you’re feeling. It’s like a compass. Of the interior.”
The interior, she thinks, walking. The tunnels feel interior; the citrine, then, might it lead her through them?

She looks at it in her hand. In the dim light all she can see, occasionally, are its veins. They seem to be a part of her own hand, holding her own blood.

She doesn’t use the flashlight because she wants to save what remains of its battery. For an emergency.

She laughs at that thought because the emergency—the collapse of everything she once had—has already happened. What would qualify, now, as an emergency?

Steadily she begins to hear what might be feet running toward her through the tunnel.

She stops walking.

Yes, someone, something, is coming closer, approaching her from behind.

Is this an emergency?

She turns on the flashlight and points the dim light into the tunnel.
A pale face appears in the beam.

It’s NV.

He’s mostly naked, just a strip of Tyvek tied around his waist.

“Hey,” he says when he catches up to her. He’s breathing hard, looking at her, and then, finally, he sees her. “Oh wow, it’s you. Babe, this is unexpected.”

“Who did you think I was?” She keeps the flashlight on because the light, though dim, feels like a shield between herself and NV.

“Just somebody, I dunno. Some person. I guess I should have recognized the hat.”

“Why were you running?”

“Cuz that kid was chasing me, babe.”

“What kid?” She thinks of the sad guy back at the platform.

“Billy can’t run yet. He can’t even walk.”

The thought, though, is creepy.

That’s what Billy does——Billy creeps.

“Well, he knows how to run now, babe. He learned.”

The strip of tattered fabric slides slowly down NV’s thighs, encircles his feet. He’s naked now.

“Hey, is that a flashlight?”

She clicks the light off.
“He’s just weird, babe. He’s super, super weird. Why is he so weird? Couldn’t you have made him less weird?”

“I guess if I ever make another one, we can find out.”

They walk for a while. NV seems to have come down from his plaster high. Though not entirely——occasionally he stops, tips his head back, and makes small gestures with his lips, as if he’s whispering to the tunnel. She left to get away from him——she thinks about this, and about whether she’ll have to leave again——or leave her leaving him——as they walk.

“When was the last time you ate, babe?”

“Not sure. Maybe yesterday. I lose track of the days in here.”

“We should eat.”

“Yeah, I agree, eating would be nice.” Eating has become an abstract thing occasionally visited on her by circumstances beyond her control.

“I know a good brunch place.”

She laughs. “Nobody eats brunch anymore.”

“I do though. I crossed paths with some people a while back who, that’s their thing, they make brunch. They’ve got some kind of connection.”

“That’s bizarre, but okay. Where do we find these brunch people?”

“Yeah, that’s the thing. I’m not sure. But I think they’re around here.”

“You think?”
“I have a hunch.”

NV stops, tips back his head, whispers into the tunnel.
“Do you think he’s looking for us?”

They’ve branched from the main tunnel, following NV’s “hunch.”

“You mean like does he need us? Is he searching for us because he’s helpless without us?”

“Maybe he just misses us? Or me?”

They walk for a while. This tunnel is dimmer than the last, and cooler. It reminds her of the exhibit of nocturnal animals at the zoo; also the room in the basement in Ohio where she and her mother went to wash their clothes.

“I guess I don’t really understand the little guy, what motivates him, but I have to say I don’t think he misses us. I just don’t think he grooves on those kinds of feelings, you know?”

What kinds of feelings might arise from the assemblage called Billy? Carrie tries to imagine.
NV says they should get out at the next station. They cross the platform, climb the stairs. The light is just light but its pervasive brightness startles Carrie.

There’s a small handbag on the ground at the top of the stairs. Carrie picks it up. She looks tentatively inside; it’s empty. She puts the flashlight and citrine in it, carries it comfortably over her shoulder.

“We’re looking for a building that used to be a bank, babe.”

“Brunch is in a bank?”

“In the building next to the bank. The bank is bigger, it’s easier to see.”

The Tyvek around NV’s waist is coming unfastened again. Carrie watches the ground for anything to help hold it up. String, rope, paperclip. Either NV’s become totally unaware of his body, or he just doesn’t care. Both, maybe.

Carrie isn’t sure why she cares about NV. She supposes part of it is tenderness for anyone who, at this point in the unraveling of things, doesn’t actively work against her.

NV points to what was once a revolving door. The glass of it is shattered; they step through; nothing revolves anymore.
In the busted lobby of whatever this building is, Carrie finds a couple of inches of wire. She helps NV bind the Tyvek so it stays on his waist.

He twirls like he’s modeling new pants in a department store.

“You’ll be the best dressed at brunch,” Carrie says.

“Babe, I might actually be. Let’s go to the roof.”

The elevator doesn’t work, of course, so they start climbing stairs.

A person—the body doesn’t stink so Carrie assumes it’s not a corpse—lies on the landing between the third and fourth floors. Between the fourth and fifth, they have to pass through what is clearly someone’s dwelling, a sleeping pad and some neat piles of personal belongings.

At the sixth floor, Carrie starts to smell something pleasant. The smell of something baking. Cinnamon.

“I’d say that’s a good sign,” NV says. Carrie marvels at him. He’s a creature of chaos, but sometimes chaos includes baked goods. Or actual fucking brunch.

The stairs end at the thirteenth floor. Of course. But what does superstition even mean anymore? It feels antiquated, like believing everything revolves around Earth or that bleeding a lot cures diseases.

NV says the stairs to the roof are at the other end of the building. They walk along a carpeted hallway onto which identical office doors open; the ceiling panels have all been removed, so the services are exposed. For just a flash of a moment Carrie has the sense of
having been here before, in a dream maybe. Or maybe she’s remembering a time when she was in an actual, normal office building, maybe with her mom——they were going to the dentist? There’s enough light from windows in the offices to see clearly in the hallway. The carpet is covered with bits of what’ve might once been the ceiling, plus trash: empty food wrappers, cans, crumpled things. The air is redolent with cinnamon and fruit and, Carrie suspects, coffee.

NV stops at a door marked “Service Personnel Only,” opens it. A brief, steep flight of metal stairs, more like a ladder, leads up to a rectangle of sky.
The sight affects Carrie powerfully and unexpectedly. She remembers lying in bed as a kid looking up at the sky through a rectangular opening in the ceiling. This would have been in her bedroom. It was the attic, essentially—Carrie remembers how heat and odors from the house would gather there stuffily. Her mom called it the skylight. The skylight could be opened but it was a chore. Her mom would use a broomstick with a hook on one end, and sometimes Carrie would have to hold the stick too and they would both push. Carrie once dreamed she floated out of her bed, up through the skylight, out into the sky above her neighborhood. From up there, she looked down through the skylight and saw herself in bed. Her sleeping body. It looked so small.

She feels that same feeling——of rising up out of herself——as she and NV start climbing.
They stand on the roof of the building beneath a tree. People above them in its branches wave and call to NV. The tree: quartered, apparently, and hoisted by a winch to be reassembled on the roof. The trunk’s pieces are held together by metal braces attached with screws; its branches too. About midway up the tree a table straddles three branches, and the people up there are eating from it. They are eating brunch in a reassembled tree, and they want NV, and now that they notice her, Carrie, to climb up and join them.

“Babe, let’s eat.”

He goes to the base of the tree, grabs a brace, and starts climbing. NV is forever unafraid of the fragility of fragile structures. He trusts…something. Something Carrie can’t access—some secret syntax, maybe, through which meaning, and thus tensegrity, spreads throughout the material world.

It comes across as a knack for not thinking, which isn’t, Carrie realizes, the same as thoughtlessness. NV stands on a branch beneath the tree and reaches up to the table. She watches someone closer to the table put a pat of butter on a biscuit, then honey. NV holds the biscuit out, aloft, to show Carrie.

“Babe, you gotta get up here. They’ve got real butter. And honey from bees! When was the last time you saw a bee, babe?” He puts the entire biscuit in his mouth.

The world still amply rewards a man who’s good at not acknowledging his precariousness, Carrie thinks. That’s one thing that hasn’t changed.
She goes to the base of the tree, grasps a brace above her head, and swings herself up.

There’s a sound of structural elements groaning to bend, but they hold.
With the first bite Carrie remembers exactly how honey tastes; she remembers butter, she remembers the softness of flour raised with warm milk and leavening. There are omelets, slices of cheese, bites of quiche with bacon, coffee with what feels in her mouth like genuine cream. Carrie keeps eating biscuits. Their scent is so comforting, and the butter gives her confidence in reality. How broken could things be if there’s still food like this? If there are still people who know where to find it and how to prepare it? The tree isn’t totally reassuring——its seams creak whenever anyone’s weight shifts——but the fact that it hasn’t yet fallen apart only makes the food more delicious and reassuring to Carrie. Things are going to be okay, maybe. The tree even has what appear to be leaves.

NV stands with his elbows resting on the table, his feet on a branch below. A woman across the table feeds him bits of cheese. Carrie recognizes her——Harriet. Harriet who sprinkled her umbilical cord dust on that tree in the ravine.

This world, whatever it is now, takes care of NV. Carrie decides she has to keep him with her in her search for Billy, no matter how unhinged he’s likely to become.

She takes two pieces of quiche and another biscuit, puts them in the waistband of her pants, and climbs down the tree. She doesn’t trust any longer than is necessary to assemble a small surplus.

She wonders why the tree’s leaves seem so real.
She stays in the shade provided by the neighboring building, the bank. She leans against a large air vent structure, looking up at the tree. In her well-fed haze it seems to have taken on the reality of a dream.

NV lolls in the tree for some time, drinking coffee and laughing with the brunch people, his friends apparently——they all seemed to know him comfortably.

Carrie, after not much time, falls asleep.

When she wakes up she’s still on the roof. The sun has gone down and someone is sitting beside her. Harriet.

“NV says you’re looking for your…”

“Billy.”

A strong odor of pine wafts from Harriet’s body. Half awake, Carrie wonders for a moment whether Harriet might actually be part tree.

“Yeah, your kid. Is he your kid?”

“Yeah, kind of, though I’m not sure he’s a kid. We’re headed to the train station downtown. I watched him get on a train a few days ago, and we’re looking for the train.”

“I saw that train, I’m pretty sure.”

Carrie wakes up more. “You did? You’re sure you saw it?”

“Not everyone can see it. None of them did, even though they were with me.” Harriet waves their hand out in a gesture indicating the rooftop. In the darkness Carrie starts to notice the bodies. They are prone; sleeping. NV sleeps with his head on a sleeping
person’s stomach. He is oblivious to how much space he takes up, Carrie thinks. She envies, loathes, and admires him simultaneously.

“What do you mean? Why couldn’t they see it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand it. We were walking on the tracks, on our way to where we pick up flour. I heard a train coming and hopped off the tracks and shouted at them to get out of the way. They laughed. I guess they thought I was being crazy. But the train was getting close and I thought they were pulling a mean prank on me, and I started screaming. It fucking stressed me out, I don’t know. I didn’t get why they were being such dicks. Finally, when the train was about twenty feet away——I could see its headlights, and I could smell it——they got off the tracks. One of them said they felt wind, but that was it, they didn’t hear it or see it. For me it was a real fucking train, you know, loud and real. It smelled like real exhaust. They said they believed me only because the way I was acting didn’t make any sense otherwise. But none of them saw it or really, I think, actually believed a train had come through.”

Carrie is quiet. She wants to be reassured that the train she saw was real.

“Sometimes,” Harriet says, and yawns. “Sometimes things just use us. They use us to get into the world, and then they move on. You know? We’re just a door for some of the things that appear in our lives.”

Carrie yawns.

“Nothing’s meant to live in a doorway,” Harriet says, “or even stay there for longer than it takes to pass through.”

She settles her head on Carrie’s shoulder and is asleep.
Sitting beneath the reassembled tree while the others sleep, Carrie thinks about what Harriet said. None of it really makes sense to her—not the train’s appearance, not the idea that not everyone sees it. And Billy getting on the train: that doesn’t make sense either. Billy, actually, doesn’t make sense. What even is Billy? How did Carrie make him? She assembled him out of scraps and garbage she scavenged after the collapse. She remembers having the feeling that she knew what she was doing—her search for parts had direction, purpose. But now she can’t recall what that purpose was. It was like something else was guiding her. And then put something inside the amalgamation of parts that was Billy, some extra spark or life beyond the materials those parts were made of.

Billy was metals, scraps of fabrics, pieces of glass and stone she whispered weird words to; there were a few bones, possibly human; hair from a collapsed wig shop; some netting; valves and wires of various gauges. And then one day Billy was spitting, crawling, trying to chew on Carrie’s shoe.

Is the reassembled tree a tree the way Billy is a Billy? She hears leaves rustling. Carrie can remember, vaguely, a version of herself that would have been embarrassed by such questions.

She waits for sunrise.

In the dark a leaf drops into her lap.
“Babe, remember how it used to be? How you could never tell how rich rich people were?”

“Yeah, I think so. Why?”

“I wonder about those people now. Like if they’re all in their luxury bunkers or whatever.”

Carrie holds the crystal tenderly, her body enveloped in the caress it exudes of great, loving confidence and utterly unbothered by NV’s loquaciousness. Around the sound of his voice she hears, she thinks, the sound of flowing water.

“You have to wonder, you know, babe? I mean, place has memory. I heard there used to be an underground waterway where these tunnels are now. How long do you think before the rich people come crawling out of the ground? Before the water forces them out?”

This startles Carrie——does NV hear the water too? The sound of rushing, flowing water——she has heard it for the last hour or so that they’ve been walking.

She stops, looks at him. Out of a corner of his mouth comes a trickle of blood.

She puts her hand on her own face. “You have——”

He raises a hand, touches his blood. “Huh. Why…” He reaches into his mouth, into the back of his mouth. He pulls out a molar.

The blood runs down his chin, drips to the ground, soaks into the towel the brunch people gave him, which he tied around his waist.
“Good thing we got a towel, am I right babe? Here, this is for you.”

NV hands Carrie his tooth.

Billy, she thinks——she never did give Billy teeth.

She notices NV’s beginning to have an unpleasant odor.