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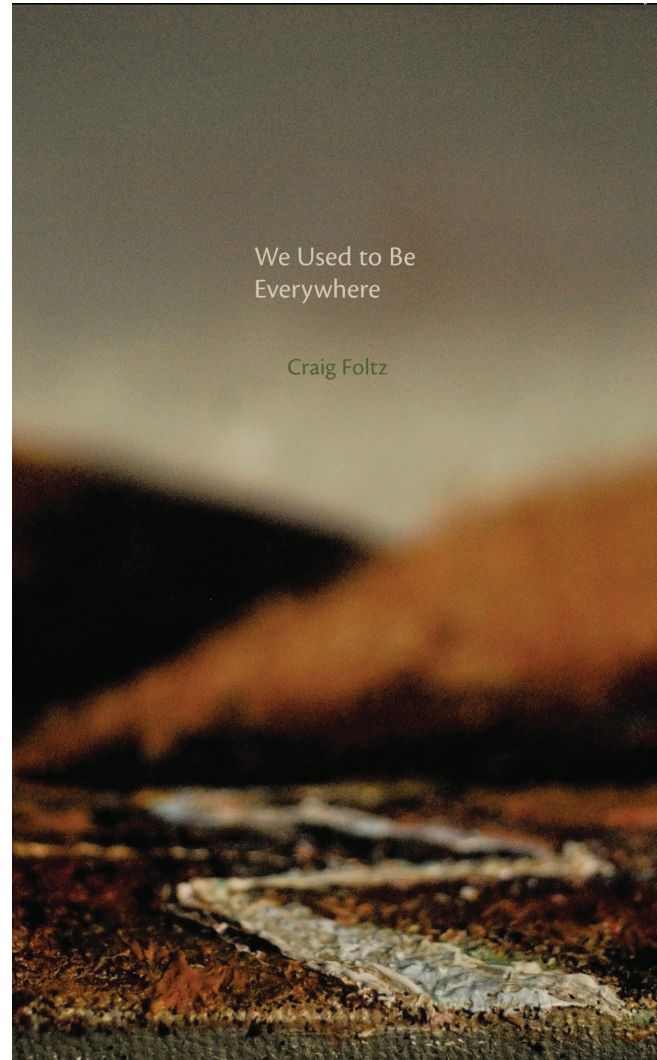
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UGLY DUCKLING PRESSE
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WE USED TO BE
EVERYWHERE

CRAIG FOLTZ

UGLY DUCKLING PRESSE
BROOKLYN

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For Otto and Jackson: Than anything.

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Having Been Made the Subject of a Parable
the Image Collapses

1. Here, With Self-Correcting Oscillations

You begin by scanning your eyes across the words.

The words are soft and seem to lead you by the hand from one to the next. They take you across the yawning gaps of white space and punctuation. All the little parts of speech are churning in unison, going about their business contentedly. Each word has its own specified, compartmentalized function.

All together now, they shimmer and expand on the screen.

At some point you notice that a few of the individual words have gotten cantankerous and disengage themselves from the rest. But one word can't exist out there all on its own, or so you've been led to believe.

In one of the paragraphs you chase the pleated skirts of a west coast sunset. There is someone else here too, naturally, a stranger. You sit together, nearly touching, in a longish sentence composed of black silica sand. Notice the blue-veined skin of the stranger and how it is so thin as to be nearly transparent.

Trust me. You've been here before.

You can tell because your new little sports car with its sparkly chrome grill is just over there in the parking lot at the beach. In plain view, thank god.

2. *Just Supposing the End of the World Didn't Already Happen*

You develop an excellent relationship with your computer. After you type the words they appear on the screen. This is how things are supposed to work, of course, but after a while something changes and the words on the screen don't correspond to the ones that you've typed. Not only that, but they don't appear to bear any relationship to one another.

What that means: You can process the meaning of each word individually, but no matter how you combine them, there isn't any kind of connection between them. Did somebody forget to mention this? Birds. Donuts. Teacups.

The words have become like little dusty asteroids desperately clinging to their lonely orbits way out in space. This simultaneous competition between them pushes them further and further apart.

One of the words does nothing at all but daub the filigree of your wounds.

Truth be told, it was this exact same word that made you drive your new sports car headlong into your ex-lover's house. Through the rain and over the garden, crashing through the wooden walls until the sparkly chrome grill pushed into the living room.

Unfortunately, you saved the document before this particular word could be deleted.

So that's one thing.

The wheels of your car left all sorts of deep ruts and muddy tracks in the squelchy lawn as you reversed out of the house. There was a different sound for each wooden splinter you left behind.

Then, without thinking about it, you sense something almost formal and topological in the expressions on the faces of the people you leave behind in the living room.

Over there, on the television, a network sitcom gives you a clear indication of the time and place.

Then there is this other thing.

The sound of your voice is static and blurry and you can't shake the sensation that it has been modified by sound processors and digital effects meant to soften the tone. Each sound you utter is carried into the wind like dust, little more than partial and differentiated prostheses.

In other words, your senses are failing you one after another, you dig?

3. *Separating the Objects From the Source of the Objects*

Back at the place where you started, in that first sentence, you bury your head into the stranger's hair; just above the shoulder and behind the ear and take a deep breath.

Her sunscreen smells faintly of lavender-colored flowers filled with tiny, blood-red seeds.

Ok, you tell yourself, that feels better. It goes without saying that when you tell yourself something, its meaning is obscured by that fat luminous ball of light up in the sky some folks call the sun.

You thrust your hands into the soft mulch of these more familiar words, but you've left the windows of your sports car rolled down and the newspaper has gotten wet in last night's rain. The ink has run off the page and onto your forearms and hands. You wash and wash and scrub and scrub but still the ink from these words will not be removed.

It is as if you have been scarred indelibly by the brief drift of these words across your skin.

If that wasn't trouble enough, now your ex-lover is standing in front of you angrily saying, "Why did you crash your fucking car into my house?"

Even without the expletive and the jerky contortions and gestures, you have a sense that this person isn't entirely happy to see you.

But then again, she never was. Isn't that partially why she had called it off in the first place?

You find yourself transfixed by the glittering green and black rings in your ex-lover's eyes. No wonder then that you have a picture of her still pinned there, secretly, in your leather wallet.

Behind your driver's license, that's the one.

4. The Triangle of Life

Speaking of your windscreen, it cracked during the commotion with the ramming of the car into your ex-lover's house. The pattern of little circles radiating out from the center seems to want to make some larger statement on the never ending cycle of life, death, and rebirth, but you aren't sure what.

Still, as you drive it is impossible to take your eyes off of these evocative circles, so you end up crashing your car over and over again.

Your eyes are drawn from these radial spires to the reflective skin of buildings whose corporate logos fringe the top. The city is little more than a collection of poles, of slender, vertical dais of concrete. Viewed from this angle, even the straight lines of the grid appear curved, the holographic illusion designed to obscure the value of truth.

Besides, you tell yourself, it is noon somewhere. You slug at a forty-ounce can of beer from a brown paper bag.

You whisper to no one in particular, "Mind, body, spirit: The triangle of life."

Just the thought of this happy triumvirate and you accelerate the car into the fast lane. You become another statistical occurrence on the freeway. Soon, you arrive at the ocean. The surfers in the water go up and down the waves in a haphazard journey that seems to say, "Dear friend, please come home."

Funny how you never get tired of looking over vast expanses of water. Funny how the vibrant yellowish-orange and bluish-purple bruises below your eyes foreshadow the film's grainy carnage. The nouns have popped up again. Their instructions are specific and swarming with people.

Finally, you look away. Your ex-lover has returned and stands at the driver side window, rapping her knuckles on the glass. This time she has brought her parents.

"Hello Frank. Hi Judy."

You set your brown bag and its half emptied beer on the floor between your feet.

Your ex-lover gestures into the wind. At times you are certain that you recognize this person but other times you think she might be a complete stranger, an imposter. Somebody that has been inappropriately transplanted from one sentence to the next.

Perhaps now would be a good time to get out of the car.

5. *Better Living Through Individual Mandates*

Before you go any further there is something else you should remember.

There is another word.

When you hear it all of the other words will disappear. Gout. Biscuit. Periwinkle.

Oh, and in case you forgot: On this journey, you are totally alone.

Your interactions with other people are rarely categorized as human.

This includes a certain heated conversation with your ex-lover's parents, Frank and Judy.

You want to answer their questions, but it is difficult to disengage your fingers from the pleasing grooves in the steering wheel.

Frank and Judy stand in front of you. Their arms are crossed sternly, the external bracings supporting their torsos. Your ex-lover waits quietly behind them.

One of the words ends in a gerundive that indicates action. For instance, running.

Sometimes you can't tell the difference between the words that come out of your mouth and the words that appear on the page. Regardless, the words have begun to develop their own meanings. The rebellious offspring of these words are totally independent from the world of your own language and emanate from a point somewhere deep in space, where they've gathered dust and unique DNA signatures.

Frank says, "Just open the fucking door and get out. Got it, pal?"

Frank and Judy help each other dump your beer out into the dusty ground.

The problem with these people is that they think the only solution to problems is total eradication.

6. *To the Sun, Let Us Drift!*

Then, as Frank and Judy continue to berate you, another word instills you with the power of flight and you levitate out over the ocean and away from the parking lot. Flying is just another embodiment of every type of human exchange, from fluids to language, from currency to meaning, from sound to touch.

As you drift above the water, you take the time to wave to the surfers and a few of them, somewhat nonchalantly, return the gesture. Back in the parking lot Frank and Judy and your ex-lover have begun hitching your sleek car to the appendage from a tow truck.

These funny little people, you think, they're all so happy.

You try to view the scene from the dispassionate perspective of objectivity.

It's not like you can see where you are or have any control over where you're going, so you may as well sit back and enjoy the ride. You wonder. Is there anyone who can stake this murky protagonist to dry land?

Back at the beginning, in those first few words, you open and close your eyes and the world is once again framed by the hair of the stranger. This old kingdom. As sentences go, it's one that you hope never ends. The smell of drying kelp mingles with apple butter and luxury liners and a reel-to-reel broadcast of random numbers. Like everything else, the preceding sentences are based on a true story. Here you are again, floating up and away. The curve of the horizon will be your guide. By the time you've saved the document,

the stranger has disappeared. Description, detail, language, and other conveyors of image, in the end, these are the things that let you down.

The chrome from your car, it sparkles in the sun.

Why Should There Not Be a Handle?

The caretakers of cities are incentivized by a lack of affordable housing. Pampas. Portland. Pompom. Pompei. Slaughterhouses provide architectural diversity. Waterborne messengers deliver statistics.

A woman wearing glasses looks out the classroom window and declares, "My son will be a great signal caller." The signal caller returns to the huddle and begins marking the ground with a stick into chunks of parallel forms. Grass and dirt rise up and form little piles. A series of lines and arrows indicating to the boys around him how they might levitate. He says, "Every time I exhale, I'm releasing my balloon."

.

Even at a young age, the signal caller perpetuates a series of myths. One pursues knowledge through fractions. One sets up devices to trap souls. The first device detects heavy metals. The second device sifts through the contents of the ocean. Then. The signal caller attends university. Then. He meets someone there. Perhaps the someone he meets there carries her shoulders parallel to the ground. Almond eyes at half mast. Siliman, a girl's name. Certain aesthetic currents yield unexpected results.

In one hand, a sustainability agenda while in the other, the secret order of dictates. In one hand, the pinched nipple. In another hand, a glass bottle, sterilized. Someone invalidates installation points. Someone else indicates movement through suicide pills.

Before decapitation, the protester whispers, “The alphabet is uneven but trustworthy.” The executioner replies, “Trustworthiness is achieved by placing a heavy volume of words on the table and letting the wind shuffle its pages.” Uneven, but manuscripts nonetheless. I knew I wasn’t anything like you because the things I created dissolved before they reached the edge of the city. Here, there will always be salty winds. Before they belonged there they belonged there. What else, if not limestone, shale, and mineral quartz?

In order to graduate from university, they must complete a series of tests. In one of them they secrete substances into the inner walls of a beehive. In another, they interpret a series of diffused blood patterns, splashed on the wall of a famous crime scene. Some of the tests rely on the shoddy construction of their imagination, while others require guile and a facility with fractions and decimals. Silliman arms herself with a calculator. The signal caller climbs into a cemetery portal and closes his eyes.

University ends. There is nothing in the air to designate ventilation. There is nothing in the course curriculum to force them to embark upon an overseas adventure. The signal caller sketches out a rough itinerary. Day 1: Border crossing on foot. Day 2: Bus ride through Central America. Day 3 through 7: Didn’t do any good. Didn’t do any good. Didn’t do any good. Ferry to backwater. Long wooden poles elevate toilets over the still inlet. Silliman means it when she says, “Love is nothing more than a verb and its complements.”

How else to reinvent themselves then through calibration, tent poles? They conflate soundbytes with child-

hood memories. One indicates sundew through skilled professionals. One indicates snowstorms through abstract concepts. One produces a baby with grapeseed oil and austerity reforms. Elsewhere, cushion grasses spread. Elsewhere, robust is not in the vernacular. Pinched debris, heady trig. Tongue nests against teeth. Providence mirrors picket.

The year is 2013. The year is 2014. The year is 2015. Ghostly protector, deserter of ships. The signal caller thinks, *Must. Get. My. Nest. On.* Although they wander the streets of Portland together, it doesn’t mean they are lashed to the whims of industry. Although they move into a small apartment in the northeast quadrant of town, it doesn’t mean the lovers from their past are mutually exclusive. Silliman has three poets she keeps stashed on the side. Everything comes with a disclaimer. Even when they varnish her skin with business cards she will not let them speak their names. She says, “If you must define yourself through language at least let it be one of your own choosing.” In this way she can imagine them as balsa wood or eggish-shaped jars of glass.

One of the poets designs the pedestrian-only bridge that spans the Willamette River. Another one grows marijuana seedlings in Mason jars beneath a haphazard array of purple halogens. Still another waits beyond the horizon, tasing everything. He wears his dreadlocks in a thick knot in the shape of a French pastry. Along the river, rows of rusting warehouses. Some are in ruins. We find the signal caller here, wandering beneath the freeway overpass. He scratches his name into the cement stanchions with carpenter’s nails.

How to commit acts of violence without sacrificing the specter of individual agency? How to capture magnetism without delivering upon surface impressions? Even

as an adult, the signal caller harnesses the engines of commerce. Before ejecting from the cockpit a test pilot says, “If I only knew now what I knew then...” His words trail out over the intercom. The arc flames out and dissolves into a line of equivalencies.

•

A woman wearing glasses enters the narrative just long enough to confuse sensory data before disappearing forever. Whether or not she qualifies as a separate entity is not what concerns us here. What concerns us here is how the men in suits now are not the same men as the men in the suits before. What concerns us here is digging. Excavating. Removing. Editing. Manuscripts? Most definitely. Lease agreements? Why not? Spatchcock? Amber? There’s no sense in stating the obvious. A river meanders while a couplet projects. A series of words is not a series of words without a context to corral it. Pascal was not a castaway.

•

The relationship between wave graphs and marriage is causal. There is a passenger and there is a conductor. Perhaps they go to a pancake house but do not order pancakes. Perhaps they read the guidebook but do not follow its recommendations. Perhaps they mark their height on the wall but do not continue to grow. Perhaps there are step-action tables just like there are gusts of wind. In the meantime, a clay pot and a wooden spoon will map out their ontology through a sequence of events. Event 1: The color is magenta because they live in the margins. They walk past the boutique bakeries of Portland without querying the price points of municipality, wood scraps, and simultaneity. Event 2: A group of poets seize the corner and hold it hostage. Suffice it to say that the semicolon will remain both mysterious and transparent. Event 3: If she agrees to these conditions, will abstraction become something more than a word she can’t explain? Event 4: Before firing off his weapon, the soldier whispers,

“I suppose, now that you mention it, it’s hard to know which memory came first.” Model airplane on a rainy day. Balloons, party favors. Event 5: A man in shadows designs the planning of kitchens, living rooms. He says, “I feel like a king.” Event 6: They meet in a semicircle of dust with a catalogue of extinct mammals and the results of epidemiology trials. Event 7: Silliman suggests they pursue geographic isolation. Chance snowstorms arrive to close schools and the two of them stay home, rearranging furniture. She dusts off the beignet recipe. He catches up on correspondence. For dinner, homemade noodles drying on a metal rack.

•

A protagonist is not a protagonist without the scaffolding of physical characteristics. Eyes like Giant Ragweed. Fingers like Russian Thistle. Silliman inflicts his shoulder with permanent ink. Mastodons, Moa, Tasmanian Tigers and other extinct animals. He imagines a world without protection against disease. He imagines grammar without illicit sexual practices. A bird is not a mammal. Scientific information is split into a number of levels. Phylum. Kingdom. Family. Genus. Art. Illusion.

•

Just because people tear into each other’s flesh does not mean they are cannibals. Just because thousands of hipsters fill up the streets where the Henry Weinhard brewery used to sit doesn’t mean they are ready to accept semantic deviation. Simultaneous actions tend to condense in areas of white space. Just then, another burning corpse is discovered. By reconfiguring their membranes, the men in suits are able to predict economic patterns. For instance: Now is the time to snap up abandoned waterfront properties north of the Broadway bridge. Northeast River Street. One hundred dead-end railway lines reticulate alongside Greeley Ave. Whole books have been written about motifs that no longer exist.

Silliman asks, "Whatever happened to that bar with all the ceramic mermaids?" The signal caller shrugs his shoulders. "Is it happening again?" Silliman begins to fold up her belongings into a canvas knapsack. She drains her beer. Three shadowy figures arrive in a wall of sound. One absorbs negative energies. One colors the formations of bruises spreading around contusions. One reinforces the hypothesis by eliminating words from his vocabulary. Transmute. Transitional. Subcutaneous.

Before trudging off into the night, the poet asks, "Our speech is so much more uncluttered now. Aren't you glad?" But it's not enough to put the manuscript down. You must also feed the pages of the manuscript into the fire. You must also tear the pages into tiny little pieces and let the wind carry them out over the Willamette. You must also put Astoria on notice with the flesh wedged between your teeth. Yachats. Corvallis. Eugene.

.

They check traffic patterns and bus schedules. They check the times for happy hour. They check their tab. One of them stands up but the other waits, unmoved. How to reinvent their vocabulary without physical sensation, sex parlors? How to determine irrationality without grasping the reins of chemical addiction?

Maybe the act of submitting to a rainstorm without an umbrella requires a scientific name. So too, the forcible merging of their identities. He says, "At the sound of a bell, you will wake up and all of this will be forgotten."

.

But they don't forget. Despite the suggestive nature of the text they are unable to shake a sense of complacency. How to describe a substance that has yet to be detected by science? I started with simple design elements and ended up with a grid of black dots. The director of traffic patterns encourages random acts of violence

in place of synchronized movements. Neither of them grew up here, but both of them now think of it as home. He involuntarily incorporates new words into the lexicon. Multnomah. Clackamas. Hawthorn. His luggage is littered with PDX stickers. Despite the giddy advances of technology, neither of them can broaden their frame of reference in the face of simple actions.

Action 1: For reasons that remain unclear, they trade in their apartment in the city for a small brick house in the suburbs; where the streets end in rose gardens and lack scale. Action 2: Three months earlier, Silliman informs him, "I think I'm pregnant." The sun has come out for the first time in months and the sidewalks are alive with pedestrians and bikers. Lichens, moss, and algae form a kind of quiet murmur underneath their feet. Action 3: Mechanical reproduction now seems quaint. Incessant motion yields new sources of punishment. Action 4: Data capacity ensures a shrine of memories. Perhaps they won't appear in the chalk outline after all. Action 5: Without physical suffering there is no poetry, only abstraction and collateral facts. The poets march in and out of the scene. They wear black trenchcoats and hoods. One of them points up at the sky and says, "The closest equivalent would be the roof above our heads." Action 6: Where there used to be sex shops, clothing boutiques. Organic threads, natural fibers. Better working conditions. The signal caller finally understands the purpose of fiction. Without shelter there can be no white space. Without fingertips there can be no physical sensation. Action 7: Why should they not huddle together, drawing up their strategy on the ground? Why should he continue to spend ten hours a day basking in the glow of fluorescents? He says, "Repeat after me: We have nothing to hide." Action 8: Enters the cage demurely. Action 9: Why should there not be a handle? The signal caller walks up the steps to their apartment and pushes open the door.

.

Maybe tectonic plates are there for a reason. Maybe superheroes do exist. Maybe adjectives can rupture the surface of sumptuously arranged analogies. If not located in metaphor. Or. If not in proposals of industry. Then where? One of the poets shows up late at night, drunk as fuck, and yells up at their window. "I was never that into you anyway." They can hear his voice over the rain. You never listened. You never listened. You never listened. The poet throws rounded stones against the windows until spiderwebby cracks begin to emanate out from the pane. Beveled gears whistle and subside. There is nothing in Silliman's demeanor to indicate the untouched wilderness waiting for them outside the door. There is nothing in the monuments of capitalism to invalidate etymology's purchase with the ground. That's what the traction of the wind is for. That's why captives refrain from spilling their guts no matter how we direct our instruments of torture. A spinning wheel, a losing lottery ticket. We're conditioned to process that which cannot be processed. Without earthly paradise there can be no mass demonstrations. Without corrugated iron there can be no homemade barricades. Without wiring diagrams there can be no improvised explosive devices. Without regions of high pressure, the world will not circulate moisture. But still, an island has to emerge from something. If not the ocean then perhaps what the ocean used to be.

Just Add Water

The girl arrives from a velvet frontier, a suburb of skinned knees. Her hands form a cage around the spinning wheel, in search of the fibrous material used to connect people. It turns out I have countless opinions on this. 1: An oracle relies on geometric shapes, patterns of shifting sand, and animal entrails to reach a qualified recommendation. One implicates desire via food. Another scrambles to distribute good deeds before the world ends. 2: The girl says, "I will never go to your cabin in the woods." 3: East Coast falls asleep during overtime. Sponsors pitch a history of volcanoes imprinted on the stratosphere. An ark made of gnarled, ancient wood binds them to the past. 4: If X is a coefficient of Y and Y has a value greater than its kinetic counterpart then the mouth of the river will swim with dead fishes. Silvery scales, poetic meter. 5: The girl lifts the bowl of soup to her mouth and tilts. Calculations ensue, solid surfaces express temperatures. There are two phases in this mixture. Intestines and model parameters. 6: I envision a world organized around a sequence of sounds. In one ear I hear the ocean pelting down onto the white sand of a long, uninterrupted beach. In the other, the gentle swish of building materials. 7: Particles are subjective. Some address the physical attributes of time and space. Others form abstract palettes onto which slicks of color bifurcate from a mythical point near the center. Similarly, we hear about a new baby the way a writer discards asterisks. Names and theories of names soon dominate the agenda. This is how meaning transforms over generations. Where there used to be a river, a spigot in the back that fails to turn off.

Can I Sleep in Your Arms?

1

The man wakes up and wraps his body in a layer of transparent plastic. His body is constrained by the surface covering it. Fluorocarbon monofilaments mimic tendons and ligaments when he stretches his arms out. There are squeaks when he moves. In its role as skin, he thinks, the plastic lacks certain qualities.

For instance, the ability to divine moisture from sharp objects.

Or. The ability to deduce numbers from a pile of dead leaves, grass clippings, and sand. The man stands up and walks over to a sliding glass door. He slowly glides the glass panel to the left and takes in the scent of the ocean.

Surfers drop down the face of a wave in unison.

The function of a lawn is often overstated and misconstrued.

The man repeats certain stretching exercises and sit-ups to keep his muscles limber.

2

The man wakes up in daylight and pours himself a bowl of Puffins. He looks out the window. Chews. Shreds. Swallows. The geography around him is continually being rubbed away by earthquakes. He knows that somebody somewhere is talking about him. The words he chooses.

26

He is forced to select a prone position because he is an interpreter of illusions.

There is a white room with white lights casting white shadows.

Without cinéma vérité there will be no happy meals.

Without programming there will be no collective actions.

When he first moved in, the lawn was covered in weeds and chipped pieces of cement. Now it slopes down to a cement retaining wall. Underneath cover, an area to shelter from the rain.

A road with a curve in it. A yellow metal sign with rust creeping in at the edges. A small parking lot bordered by fragrant purple flowers.

Overlooking an ocean or riding out the storm, what's the difference?

3

The man wakes up at dusk and heads off into the city in search of women. Rotation. Revolution. Fabrication. This journey is less about an escape from loneliness than it is a return to the glory of days gone by, but it doesn't always seem that way.

Quite possibly, he is driven by urges he cannot articulate.

Quite possibly his sleepy eyes are the by-product of hypnosis.

In his arsenal, an encyclopedic knowledge of music, trees, and trivia. His words connect over chasms of surface impressions and non-meaning. Arbors. Reactivity. Death Valley. Louis Armstrong. The etymology of etymology.

27

He leans in closer and tells the stranger, "On the count of five you will wake up."

At first, the woman resists, "Frankly, I'd rather not." But like everything else this too will undergo a transformation.

Initially she will feel nothing, and then only a soft touch. Later, some downward pressure.

4

Starfish gently wakes him up.

The man gets out of bed and heads to work. The city he lives in is perched on an arid landmass jutting out into a large sheltered bay. Zoning ordinances lead to enforced contours.

The woman with the baby is not who she pretends to be. She pretends that she is both free and immoral, although the evidence for this is only patchy and symbolic.

A photograph of a spinning wheel helps complete the illusion.

5

The man finds himself at the supermarket. The woman with the baby walks alongside. He puts a new box of cereal into the metal basket.

She says, "You shushed me." The aisles are a blur of colors, clouds of vibrating hues. A pulse appears below the neck. A brush of the hand. Finger, fingernail.

The baby sits in the cart, peering over the top of a large brown paper bag. Judging by the angle of the baby's neck, its function apparently has not yet been clarified.

Plastic toys clink against the metal. The wheels rattle and the whole contraption lists to the right.

The woman with the baby picks up a box of food and begins silently reading the ingredients, "Starchy water is not the root of all evil."

The man walks down the aisles, looking distracted. "True. But then again, it's not like we never have nothing."

About this time they enter the fresh produce area and locate another instance of clip-on ideology.

A few other things become clear. First. Long-term parking vests green cabbage. Next. Aphids can live on the undersides of leaves almost forever. Then. They tarry between the bewildering smell of almond and the elusive nectar of an orchid. Finally. Spaceships and glowing, light-bulb shaped creatures enter his dreams. Their entrails are warm to the touch. Eyelash, blinking.

6

The man wakes up again and finds himself checking the structural integrity of buildings. He tells his co-worker, "The words we spoke as children are confusing to me now."

One of them pops out of his mouth at unexpected times.

His co-worker has a series of tools and measuring devices on a belt around his waste. He has a clipboard hanging from a chain around his neck. A laptop sits on the concrete floor, open and plugged into the wall.

He speaks on a mobile phone to the woman with the baby. He repeats his question into the phone, "Are you sure? Can you really blame the sun?"

7

The woman on the other end of the phone hangs up and reassesses her desire to assign blame. She blames the sun. She blames the hues of color providing a false dimensionality. She blames the galaxies for interconnecting. How can you really see a galaxy if you are located squarely within it? How can one measure allergic reactions, if the body continues to rip out pathogens to fight them? She adds Milky Way and asthma to the first tier of hate.

She presses enter, she presses delete.

8

Of course the world is flat. Of course, if he could, the man would reach up into the sky and rip a hole out of the sun.

He taps on the columns of the building in the form of a question and the columns of the building answer back.

Of course ontologies are indebted to the creators of a source text. Of course the dead cells we continuously discard are stripped of their identities, but retain their unique DNA signatures.

9

Tonight, the ocean will make itself known. Large rolling waves crash into the concrete wall across the road.

The woman with the baby wakes up at odd intervals throughout the night.

At one point, well after dark, the man discovers the origins of birds are bewildering, so he stops looking at the sky.

Even natural events seem to occur unnaturally.

30

The man flicks through the newspaper. He says, "There was a fire on the edge of town last night, over by the warehouses." Brings the glass of water to his lips. Re-leases. "On the other side of town a water main broke. A major intersection was flooded, chaos ensued."

The baby looks up at him but the eyes seem to quickly lose their focus.

10

And then, one day, the man wakes up to find the woman with the baby is no longer there.

The safety regulations survive because the value of speculation marks the boundary of an inspiring antecedent. Once more, the chronically underfunded cadre of building inspectors file into a cafe and order lunch at the counter. One of them swivels endlessly on the top of a gleaming silver ring.

A house of codes collapses in on itself because the man looks out over the ocean and hastily cobbles together his memories.

11

Here are some things the man recalls from his childhood: Apple orchards. Alewives. Mittens. The close association of flowers and soil. Termites. Orange soda. The rise and fall of International Harvester.

His eyes toggle between the flat surface of the water and the sun in the upper left hand corner of the frame. He thinks, *There is something fleeting in the construction of molecules.*

He looks at the place where the woman with the baby used to store her things and wonders when it will be appropriate to begin to search for her.

31

Is it ever alright to seek moisture from shade trees?

12

The man wakes up and circulates an image to his friends, a collection of bi-polars and manic depressives he met at his support group. The image is blurry and lacks critical focus. In the subject line he writes, *This One Will Never Sell*.

One of his friends pastes the image into her blog. Social status updates to green.

The ocean, it seems, is little more than a collection of clouds, mountains, and mirrors.

13

The man wakes up in the dusty glow of moonlight and goes around the house looking for any items the woman with the baby may have left behind. Among other things, she has left a pile of tattered deer antlers. She's left a book about the native trees of California. She's left behind a pair of worn leather sandals, Birkenstocks. A stack of *Popular Mechanics*. *PC World*. A polar bear calendar. Cardamom. The man thinks, this could take all night.

Eventually, he gathers the woman's belongings and collects them into a pile in the backyard.

Over one fence, a yard that is never cultivated because the owners of the property rarely visit.

Over the other fence, a fig tree whose fruit rolls onto his lawn at the end of summer.

With figs, come grackles and other common birds.

32

The man lights the pile of objects on fire and watches the smoke curl up into the sky. He follows the smoke as it leaches over the property rarely visited by its owners.

The parking lot is full tonight. Now that he's illuminated the yard with fire, the man wrapped in plastic wonders if the woman with the baby might one day return. He hadn't banked on that. He unwraps himself and hangs the plastic back up in the closet.

Later, he goes back outside and shovels the pile of ashes into a small glass jar and puts it on the ledge separating the kitchen from the dining area.

14

Starfish is on a walkabout of sorts.

The woman with the baby is able to separate an island from the water that surrounds it. She has well-developed powers of regeneration. She finds islands in everything. In a way, she thinks, we are always surrounded. The value of truth is asserted in a coral reef. Tropical fish stare blankly into the water. How can one see the water if one is already living squarely within it? The questions never change.

The woman with the baby stands on the corner of a busy intersection waiting for instructions from a stranger on the other end of the phone.

The stranger has put her on hold.

She is hoping this stranger will give her some indication as to whether or not she should return to the house across from the ocean.

On the one hand, the ocean is beautiful to look at, but on the other, she hates the smell of latex and other synthetic materials.

33

Somewhere in this, she recalculates the proposed migratory routes of polar bears based on new climate estimates.

While she waits, the woman strokes the arms of the baby. In recent days, the baby has started making more organized sounds. The birth of language occurs when phonemes and morphemes simmer together long enough on the edges of the tongue.

For her part, the woman folds her tongue beneath her two front teeth.

Out of nowhere, the woman with the baby picks up the scent of the ocean on the breeze. Even though the city is surrounded by water, it tends to funnel its citizens inward, towards some mythical center. A place of commerce and concrete plazas where the ocean is little more than an abstract concept.

Finally, the voice of the stranger returns, but it is part of a conversation she was not supposed to hear. "Can you believe he asked me out, he's, like, a total relic."

The woman with the baby traces the outlines of a memory and then deletes it.

15

The man wakes up and stretches out into the empty reaches of the bed. His hands seek out the cool shade of illusive metaphors. His feet swim towards a flat surface. Acronyms will not be mistaken for messages in a bottle. How to recall the faces of lovers without tattered prompts? For them, even two dimensions is two dimensions too many.

16

The man wakes up and years have passed. The source text is a memory from which he occasionally appropriates, but little more. The woman with the baby isn't a woman with a baby anymore.

Then, one day, out of the blue, she reappeared and began unloading her items from a packed trunk. Another day she began rearranging the art on the walls. Soon, the old spice rack reappeared. Better cookware. The pieces of furniture in the living room were spruced up. Soundproofed hallways. Meals without pills.

The city in which they lived began to add more freeways. A light rail system. A new baseball stadium surrounded by gleaming work/live loft spaces. The man took these things in stride. They were no different from drought, famine, or plagues of flying insects.

17

The woman with the child flattens the plastic and rolls it out on the lawn.

The child begins to hose down this fabric and then takes a running leap and lands stomach first, hurtling down the hill towards the retaining wall. For each action there is a repetition of the action. For each repetition of the action another recursive illusion.

In the background, the white shores of a body of water so large it dwarfs the horizon.

The woman with the child and the child pause underneath this temporary haven, but its function remains elusive. The man would like to tell them the story of how he dreamed all their bodies were atolls floating amongst a substance so transparent that it had avoided the detection of scientists.

The woman with the baby who isn't the woman with the baby anymore, motions the child towards the foreground.

But before he can tell them, the child runs around their feet chasing after a plastic circle. The child demands, "Show me again." On the one hand, there is the ocean, but on the other hand there is the mythology surrounding the ocean, preserving its desire for utmost secrecy.

He would like to tell them the story of how before they entered his life, the trajectory of his narrative was constrained by objects outside of any chronology he had initiated. He knows that now.

There is no appropriate response. The man stands up straight, places this colorful plastic ring around his body, and begins to slowly shake.

Oahu

I'm sitting at a desk looking out over the ocean again. Of this surface, there can be no doubt. A laptop connects my fingers to the words. A white cord connects the laptop to the wall. I reach down and check that it's still plugged in. That's all. Out of the corner of my eye I spot a black silhouette on a black background.

Shall we latch onto these external bracings together?

Every now and again I brush up against you, just to remind you that I'm still here. How else can one attest to this space without physically intruding? Every time I look back at the ocean a flicker of familiarity, but I can't quite put my finger on it. Perhaps if I close my eyes just a bit longer.

Just like that, this massive body of water signals its indifference. Systems of motion and operations of chance conclude the same. Like approaching weather, their data is expressed without words or sound.

Just like that we separate the objects from the sources of the objects.

The manuscript is progressing. The manuscript is not progressing. If I've learned anything during the process of writing it, it's that some printed words are invisible against the page and others are inaudible when spoken. It's as if sometimes they're one and the same. The words, they never existed.

I study my surroundings. The razor-sharp silhouette of the coastal mountains patterns in shade against the wall. Is this really where I live? Is there really a television broadcasting images in the corner?

Can you meet me there?

How do these images travel through my veins?

As for your husband, he shows up at awkward moments, asking, "Are you really on drugs?"

What is one to do? The reader wants to be able to connect the dots between a series of pleasing inputs, not forge ahead only to discover the carcasses of angels.

Here comes the ocean again, heaving up over the edges of its container. If the chains we've built to hold it together suddenly break, how will we reach higher ground?

On the television, scenes from another natural disaster. The winds sweep over the rims of mass graves. Lines of people mourn the dead. Their bodies are arranged in neat little mounds.

As for me, I study the movements of your lips as they attach themselves to a cup.

I trace the ridge of your spine with the edge of my palm.

Here's how a memory begins. Entwined in soft lashes and just barely poking through the lid of conscious perception.

Because the clouds will eventually drift away, we flatten our fingers against our skin. Because a young woman putting out is another form of dissent we always wander down to the waterfront in order to watch it unfold.

Because the water is sweetened with the husks of rice and finely grated nutmeg we continue to drink from it before we fall asleep.

That space, the one between two adjacent columns, is where you'll find me.

You say, "Dissent. Dissect. Disseminate. Does that help clarify the conditions under which we met?"

I never expected to see your husband trussed up among the rest of the cadavers. I never expected to extract his organs with long, sterilized pieces of medical equipment. I never expected to hold up this almond-shaped piece of flesh and ask the person next to me, "A spleen? Really? That's what a spleen looks like?"

But then again, I never thought an autopsy could be performed by the colonizing armies of wasps that cover the wooden slats of my fence over the long, hot months of summer.

I never thought a parable could be hijacked by the miracle of wind patterns.

And I never thought the words suspended on sharp, spiky syllables would repeat endlessly on the strings of a death rattle in my dream.

Regardless. There he is, laid out right in front of me. His shiny, pale body slowly being devoured by this cloud of frantic, pollen-seeking insects. The word *carapace* solidifies the moment in my memory. The person standing over him juts me in the ribs with their elbow and says, "Don't worry. There's more than one way to skin a cat."

He punctures the surface with another one of his shimmering tools. Chlorine levels subside, air temperature regulated.

“If we *really* want to divine their secrets we simply need to follow along the dotted line.”

A post supports one end of a handrail. Why should there not be vigorous methods of discourse? How else to explain the day the ocean became transparent and toxic to the touch?

I’ve never read Borges. Or Bowen. Or Perec. I’ve never plunged from tall buildings or run through fire. I’ve never volunteered to catch bullets with my teeth.

I’ve never let the directionless contours of the ocean be my guide. Today its surface is flat and even. Above it, the sky is a dull panel of endless gray. On days like these, it is hard to distinguish between the two. If not for the clock on the wall, I wouldn’t even believe the horizon was out there, fueling the twin engines of erasure.

I study a grouping of words in one of the poems, convinced it was written by someone else. Creating art is less about dynamic exchange and more about recalibrating the algorithms of the body so that it becomes autonomous from itself. I know some artists who practice deep breathing exercises while they work. I know others who start with a series of associations and continually loosen them. Still others simply play with fire.

In terms of closure, I submit there is nothing elegant about it. In terms of scheduled arrivals, the ocean shows up when it wants to.

These are the partial differentiations that the world toggles between. Water and air. Ocean and land. Now and then. Baskets and basket-weavers. Language and image.

Now I remember another thing you said: “They came together, together they should stay.”

But, it’s not enough to say that a place is attached to the word that describes it. It’s not enough to take the parts of speech and wave them over the text. You must also feel them on the coarse fibers of your tongue.

Aren’t these the conditions to which we’ve agreed?

Who *are* you anyway?

The sound coming from over the rim of the canyon echoes beyond the edge of the valley. There is no moon, just a freeway. The freeway tumbles between the pass of two rocky outcrops. Beyond that, a dusty plateau with well-irrigated crops. Then, a university. Foothills. Boulderly streams running in between the cracks of mountains.

But if its not? Well, if its not, then here you come again, wearing the scent of the ocean on your shoulders.

After you arrive, I hand you the remote control.

I push a cup of black sand in your direction.

In the meantime, since your last visit, the shape of the coast has changed. You remark on this new configuration but I let the comment pass.

Here comes another spontaneous act of nature. Sometimes, when you aren’t looking, I hold one of the poems up to the window and look through, just to make sure you are still in there.

Without the sun there can be no language but the language of simulation and artifice. Lubricity. Lugubrious. Lumbar. Like tuberous roots, uplift the sand from the ocean and then decide where to bury your head. It's not that the arrangement of the rocks and the sand resembles a coffin as much as when I take a look at it I have an overwhelming desire to lie down and sleep.

But it's not enough to sleep, my body has introduced another overriding objective: It never wants to wake up.

Perhaps the mark of modernity is more than a series of phonetic tendencies reduced to abstract forms. Perhaps the sound of music is more than a graduated progression of notes, emanating from thin, brittle pieces of wood. Vibrating.

Perhaps lips are little more than artificial organisms. Pulse. Pulse. Thread. Pulse.

I hear that parcels arrive because of barcodes. I hear that grammar distinguishes itself from non-grammar. I hear that drops of water can be divined from pockets of air. Either way, not even a gentle tug from the ocean can prevent me from draining this cup of delicious liquid. Not even the muscles that have yet to fail can drag me from this slumber.

It's not enough to feel the fire devour my skin; I must also dissociate myself from the events that led me into the fire in the first place. On a small table near the window, a few books I planned on reading. A syringe. A crinkled piece of plastic with well-worn folds. A list of phone numbers. Prescriptions. Grocery items. A sequence of data looking for a master document to hold them.

It's not enough to gather the grains of pollen behind my legs; I must also spin this desiccated material into something that dissolves on your tongue.

There you are, standing in front of the ocean, blocking my view again. Every time I take another look in your direction the dull anchor in my stomach floats away.

Dear Reader,

Now that I've been removed from the sentence can I still call the ocean a lover?

Now that the world has become saturated with replication will we still dissolve in gliding patterns of speech?

Your poems, they do deceive us.

Now that you have become accustomed to the idea of rupture will you still participate in the ritualized specter of my death?

I bring this small picture of you with me everywhere I go. Often, I unfold the crinkly plastic wrapping in which it is held. Your bright eyes stare out from the photograph the way rainbows pause over the freeway.

I wonder how I can drill down into this soothing nest of capillaries.

I had a favorite color once, but it's not my favorite color anymore. What happened? Just like that, the person who comes to you in the night isn't the person who came to you in the night the night before.

Somebody else drops off another bouquet of flowers. Another person arrives solely to trick the ocean into revealing the appellative nature of desire and image.

People gather at our front door. They slowly shuffle into the living room. Some of the objects in the room

look familiar, but other objects take on the veneer of the unknown. This is how time calcifies and re-codifies the things we surround ourselves with. Like you always said, “The places we live, the places we don’t live. What’s the difference?”

The procession continues through the kitchen and into the living room. Some of the visitors peel off and head towards the patio. Others walk up to you and whisper something in your ear. I try to catch what they are saying, but their voices are covered in pollinated anthers and thick reverb.

Another voice from out of the haze, “It’s not like you can spend your entire life worrying about a little rain.”

Now that I’ve become a ghost, will your dead husband and I finally reunite? Is it possible we were one and the same the whole time?

Now that we’ve finally erected this wooden post, who will indicate when it’s time to climb upon it?

Its handles and footholds are rounded and smooth, as if worn from years of use.

It’s comfortable up here above the ground. The post supports my body in a way that renders my muscles useless. Even this delicate container of skin feels superfluous. Who would have guessed?

This slow convoy of people continues to present itself to you.

It’s not enough to obscure our view of the world, we must also blot out its memory. Somebody, I can’t see who, slides the curtains shut behind me. It was raining. Of course it was. When I see you again, will we still widen our frame of reference to study these events?

Without Stigma

Contrary to what history tells us, we will remain blissed out during the interrogation. Three more people arrive in this fenced-in perimeter to discuss low monthly rates. When they open their mouths no sound comes out.

One suggests gray through dark honey. One detects the pouring of concrete by putting their ear to the ground. Another shreds her clothes into little ribbons and lets the wind carry the pieces out over the sea. She looks me in the eye and says, “Try harder.”

Hopefully, the distinction between form and function is becoming clearer to us now. How shall we heave this flimsy ocean of florets onto our shoulders?

Is it possible that I spent the night with a woman named Misha? Of course it is. Perhaps there was more than one. Whoever she is, I understand, she simply fell to earth.

The locals greet us with teeth bared and weapons drawn. They hustle us into their primitive, igloo-shaped dwellings. One of the locals, their leader apparently, says, “By all accounts, abstract expressionism was born in the desert and is often associated with prehistoric peoples.” He begins to lick the edge of a long, thin knife.

Exhausted, we slump against the damp, wooden walls.

Then again, Misha tells me it is night. She tells me it is day. She tells me they are one and the same. She says,

“Don’t ever say those words again.” Either that or she tells me nothing at all.

It is impossible not to oversimplify things. Information disclosure is dependent upon the person across the room, but the person across the room is hanging by their fingernails. Without emotional honesty, there is no influencing the weather.

Other locals are less threatening. One twiddles with knobs and homes in on the hollow sound of AM radio. Another focuses on unraveling the mystery of syllables. The syllables have an internal structure, like spiky pollens of dust. Another tells you that the state of affairs will be revealed in a slowly unfolding sunset.

There’s something else, I think you know, but regardless, I can’t talk about that right now.

She says, “Did you notice? The fence around the compound seems lower now, like we could just pass right over.” She has the lips of a stranger. Collectively, we agree on the efficiency of handles and other simple utensils. Survivors rely on dusk primrose, desire, and memory.

Rich Girls Will Break Your Heart

They have names like Avery and Colby. Daisy and Meredith. Amber and Spenser. They occupy a space in the middle of the school while their so-called contemporaries pace the oval. They drive shiny cars with sodium headlights and baby blue decals. One student who shall remain nameless operates in the margins in order to manufacture anonymity. Another processes liquid through subconscious means.

The girls are oblivious, having placed their bets on the blush of statistics. There will be some who can change the due date while others underscore the merits of adornment. Notice the hooks in the tether. Notice the impression of urban elites. One of the girls inches forward in her seat and replicates the texture of velour between her fingers. She looks down at her forearms, which are covered in moles and blooms or reticulated blood vessels. *I’m human after all*, she thinks.

The girls sigh and sift through the heavy metals at the bottom of their bags. Crouching out of the wind in order to conceal the body’s internal dynamics.

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You come to a place where forward momentum is prohibited. Then. The lunch bell rings. Notice the way afternoons set themselves up in such a way as to be escaped from. To see in a straight line, one must first identify the dominant eye. Then. Fifth period. Sixth period. Hallway chatter. Next. A series of premonitions

is revealed. Premonition 1: A hooded stranger walks up beside you and pronounces you dead. Premonition 2: Gravelly-voiced teachers provide inside advice, "It's not about answering the question they ask, rather, it's about answering the question you want to answer." Premonition 3: Generally speaking, mineral composition will remain unspecified. Premonition 4: Three of the girls surround you and query administrative answer. It seems as if they want you to overhear. One of them says, "I want to be with my things." Premonition 5: Several hundred words will never be enough.

Restoration occurs when it is impossible not to oversimplify things. You scan the archive of your memories for the horizon, but there is nothing, just a series of slow ships skimming kelp from the top of the water. Your eyes are drawn to a spot on the map next to the word Morocco. If you've learned anything it's that the girls will sit next to the boys who do not want to sit next to the girls. If you've learned anything it's that your freedom will be greatest when your parents attend the June conference. The house will be empty. A lawn will lead to a beach. There are always places out of the wind.

The girls stand up. Notice the thrust and fold of belts. Spent. Fuel. Rods.

Then you come to a place where the city meets the ocean. You know this place because the theory of vectors helps you make your way in the absence of light. It's not enough to lead the girls down to the ocean, you must also impart an intense yellow color when exposed to flame. It's not enough to defer to bivalve mollusks, you must also produce a neverending supply of neatly rolled joints. See Fudd, Elmer.

Without restraint, the girls will drop into the ocean one at a time. There's one in particular. She tells you a little bit about her somewhat famous father. Turns out, a man in overalls is not a man in overalls after all.

It is a basic problem. In the absence of memories, wordless gestures. Moonbeams cluster at the edge of our lips. One of the girls, Colby, walks up to the front of the class and writes something on the board. The thin film covering her eyes dissolves into brackish water. Her boyfriend, if she has one, waits near the bike path to pummel you with sticks. Without teeth you would have nothing to grind a vocabulary against.

The beach is a stone's throw from Math class. Math class is a stone's throw from a drab, industrial research facility. How to receive an invite without inhabiting the clicks between syllables? How to recycle tendons without scattering electrons. Colby crosses her feet in the sand near yours, passes her notebooks in between you. On her T-shirt another oblique reference to music. *Boaties Don't Count.*

Conch shells replay sounds from another decade. Driftwood during the acoustic set. Bleached bones, pickled herring. You tell her, *To be partially reviewed is to be partially duplicated.*

On the one hand, a halo does not signify the comforting warmth of another person. On the other, narrative events do not just wander onto the stage for easy interpretation. The sun sits there, dumbly, a ways above the horizon. The ocean is a color marketing specialists might refer to as sunset penthouse. Line your heroes up against the wall and provide them with blindfolds.

Confirm that you both grew up in dormitory suburbs. Objects trigger physical sensations. Will you ever share this couch? Recognizing patterns of light in dimples of water on gently rolling sets of waves. A few surfers stretch out on their surfboards, quietly speaking amongst themselves. A large tanker slowly crawls along the horizon. One of the objects has the texture of flesh and tastes like Christmas. Unexpectedly, she helps you with the clasp.

Weak-kneed boys envision the surface of the moon as something squishy and intolerant. Pulse. Pulsed. Pulsing. This era is the only era.

She whispers into your ear, "Don't sugarcoat it for me."

•

Then you come to a point in the story where everything disappears. The shadows from the long afternoon sun. The little pipe carved from balsam wood. The string of beads around Colby's neck. The taste of perfume. The dried pods of kelp that made a popping sound when you burst them between your fingers. Even the other girls and their boyfriends in their Subarus and Toyotas have vanished from the parking lot above the retaining wall. Leaving behind discarded cans of spraypaint.

There is a line in the sky where a passenger airplane passed through a few minutes ago.

This line tells you in no uncertain terms of your own mortality.

It tells others that the sundial may no longer be used as a gauge.

Still others take this as a sign to spiral out.

Conscription. Conscription. Conscription.

There is some commotion on the street above. Colby asks you to confirm your identity by counting backwards from ten.

10. You cannot pretend to value the day that is about to arrive when it is brimming with faceless corpses. 9. You cannot imagine a wall of sound without puncturing the cochlear urn. 8. Where cannibalism remains, pedagogy cannot rest. Back then we understood the uses of buttermilk. 7. You ask the girl to take the guesswork out of levitation. Waves wrap around stones. Tides mimic their own constituent stages. 6. You ask her to release your ribcage from its casket. Your finger from her mouth. 5. Where she used to be, an impression of the moment that came before. 4. Somebody from your past says "Let's get things done." But getting things done is not what concerns you here. What concerns you here are clusters of colorful balloons and terrorist cells. 3. You tell her, "I never agreed to be classified with the stoners and other burnouts." Epoxy. Epoch. Epiphytes. She holds your arm up to the light. Third degree burn. 2. You do not expect absolution without going through the motions. 1. You say, "Can I ask you a question? What is the use of automatons if they can't feel pain."

•

Before a killing spree, assailants practice their meditation and breathing. They stare at the same blank spot on the same wall as the day before. One suggests the sounds of reed instruments as an offering. One pretends the wind will not affect the trajectory of long-range bullets.

The girl arrives at your house in a mangled carapace of recollections. Nothing says secondhand like Volkswagen. "What if I told you that I was two people? Or more than two people. Would you still want to kiss me?"

You hold her by the hand and slowly walk into the water. The bonfire is a hazy adjective bubbling to the surface in your peripheral vision. The girl's friends rus-

tle blankets behind you. The ocean is poised to heave another dead mammal up onto shore. The girl points out the shape of a face encrypted into the sulfur cliffs. Teenagers rely on perforating devices and depth-finding instruments to quantify physical touch.

I'm not hiding, I'm right here.

Next. The water laps around your knees. Then. This one takes place in the future. The game show consists of a series of words stacked in a blinking triangle.

Prior to death, the subject says "What has been lost can always be recovered." The experiment relies upon a clean, sterile environment. One surrounded by young people and house plants. A math teacher can always recite facts. Fact 1: I've never read Baudrillard. Or Bowen. Or Deleuze. Fact 2: The subjects place their hands inside the box, but the contents of the box will not reveal themselves. Fact 3: Jihadists are not chia pets. Fact 4: All the houses look the same, and all the people who live in all the houses that look the same look the same too. Their children take the names of common ingredients. Cinnamon. Nutmeg. Vanilla Bean.

One of the girls laughs. The math teacher drones on. "There is nothing tangible in densely wooded regions." One square at a time he blocks out the sun.

In the end, the advent of space flight recalls starchy tan sheets. You wake up and untangle. The girl says, "I know what you said and what you said shall never be repeated."

As for subatomic particles, did they ever exist outside of vacuum tubes?

She says, "Still, I never applied for the role of arbiter." Like other examples of coercion it relies on moving at the speed of light.

You say, "Does this mean I can no longer call you the oracle?"

How to practice restraint without exposing it as something artificial? How to mingle amongst a row of girls with the letters of the alphabet splashed across their bare stomachs without seeming untoward? How to pretend there are no details to remember prior to discharging your weapon? 1) Will the shrapnel from this volley echo through this splendid courtyard? 2) A pack of wild dogs sets upon the alphabet. 3) When you open your eyes you will see reams of paper and slivers of light slanting in through the windows. 4) And the walls will be covered in blood. 5) And the girl's car will be parked outside, making for dreary cinema. A formula cannot be a formula without a formulaic outcome. 6) And your parents will burst through the door, the June conference having ended three days early. 7) When you come to, the one thing there will not be is an explanation of unnatural acts. You hold up your hands as if to say, *What could be more granular than arable land?*

Then. A woman wearing glasses enters the interview room, a holding cell. She asks you to tell your story again. You tell your story again. Each time you tell it you begin, "There are three options."

Option I. The relationship between events and non-events is random and inspired by white noise. Ciao bella, CEO. Acronyms must not be remembered except through brute force. The woman wearing glasses

is joined by another woman wearing glasses. They glide in unison around the walls of the room. When you look again, you realize the people with the blindfolds aren't your heroes at all but a trio of sirens calling to you from the mist. Siren 1: You recognize this one from class. She maintains the power of persuasion, if not the twirling orbits of ochre galaxies. Siren 2: Hums a familiar tune you cannot place. She says, *Indicative is not indicative of indicative anymore*. Siren 3: Holds a mirror up to the light, refracting the horizon. This flat line becomes curved and wraps around a narrative you may recognize later. In it, you travel pathways of sound, sight unseen.

A window reflects your image back to you. Slowly. Fold. In. Statistics.

Option 2: Perhaps the semicolon will remain both mysterious and absent. Perhaps the symbols of public transport will provide us entrance into the pancake house. Perhaps the legion of tattery prompts will result in sensory confusion. The other woman wearing glasses shows you a picture of the girl. Do you recognize this? What can you say? I'm still standing. The girls are little more than powdery rivers. This is why the assessment is predetermined but the search for details still rages on.

Option 3: Do you really want to know what happened? The woman wearing glasses nods. You aren't sure what to tell her. Imagine yourself as somebody who has no memory. Imagine yourself as more than one person. One mixes the yokes of eggs and lets them stand at room temperature before folding them in with the rest of the ingredients. One chooses an appropriate bedpost to drape the skins of his lovers over. One moistens his lips before speaking. For instance: the girl you had in mind is not the girl you had in mind before.

Then again. The dynamics of tragedy rely on baggy pants and tattoos. They rely on secondhand Toyotas and mag wheels. Articulation is less about the manipulation of sound than it is about municipal architecture. But then you tell her. "Without compression there is no narrative." She likes it when you give in to the demands of war. She likes it when you forget. Design principles, fiber shear.

The woman wearing glasses says, "Let's start at the bonfire again. Who was there?"

The girls do what girls always do. They tell the other girls. "He showed up at my house one night, stoned out of his mind saying, *Don't drink and drive, smoke weed and fly*. My dad just about flipped." One of the other girls thinks, *So superheroes do exist after all*.

Finally. Just because people tear into each other's flesh does not mean they are cannibals. Just because the governments of our allies spray their citizens with ordinance and hibiscus blooms does not mean that they shouldn't be allowed to proclaim a miracle when the sun rises.

Just because a boy has no spatial sense does not mean there will be poetic justice.

You tell them. "I know more about atmospheric pressure than how to celebrate my birthday."

You imagine your parents standing on the other side of the glass, looking on, dismayed.

It's not enough to crouch down in the middle of the intersection, you must also be prepared to pour gasoline over your body.

The girl tells you she wants boys who are pedicured, trimmed, and close shaven. She wants somebody who is not French but has French attributes.

She says, "I've heard it said that willow grubs fall from willow trees. I've heard it said that nostalgia is just an excuse to linger in the past tense."

Something in her posture says, *Please follow me.*

That's not what happened either. The girl says, "Who wears the gold?" You. You wear the gold. "Who is a ray of light?" Do I even need to tell you? Who represents a halo and its counterpart?

What We Do Is Secret

Even though we straddle the dictionary without bias, lexicons remain immaterial. I stand in front of the kitchen sink, the front of my shirt soaked with dishwasher, my fingers wrinkled from never-ending submersion. Would that our children grow up to be intellectuals would they rely on description, detail, and tactile objects to determine their frame of reference?

Would that we were all critical thinkers would I still fly across oceans in search of competing narratives?

She says, "Unless otherwise stated, I will provide."

It's autumn here. Summer has decided to auto-extend for six weeks.

The first year of our relationship was filled with context-free grammar.

The second year, a shower of limbs.

The third year we discovered hybrids and became synchronically derived.

"I'm much better than you remember."

Overheard at the five and dime: Yo me cuido a mí mismo.

The woman behind the counter has one question and one question only. Bone or skin? Skin or tissue? Tissue or capillary?

Overheard at the skinhead rally: I've never read Ashbery. Or Armantrout. Or Scalapino. How many years has it been?

I tell her, "Literacy is not what concerns us here. Besides, the books are what got us into trouble in the first place." A sequence of finely dressed liars trying not to lose a single word.

It is impossible not to oversimplify things. The fourth year and again in the fifth, we found a way to integrate iodine vapors. The sixth was for nothing more than the manipulation of feedback. One cannot cast doubt on the slam dunk champion. Another cannot continue to transform dusty objects into gold.

And what's this? Where are we at now? Year seven? Eight? Fourteen? Back then, we knew how to count forward and backward simultaneously. We never read for pleasure or to increase the opacity of shadows.

I find my poems in a literary journal paired next to an author who supports the increase of modeling agency agreements. Another author crafts emoticons that represent acts of a perverse sexual nature.

"The sun is predictable, but misleads the public."

But on this one point I've been sworn to silence.

She says, "What you really crave is the brine of bony girlfriends. What you really want is a more viable option for drinking water."

"That's not true. What I really want is to consume while I am still firm. I want my thirst to be preserved by wood. Scattered by winds."

We insist on the removal of familiar details from the story. Including: The place where it all happened. And also. The place where it didn't.

Floating Downstream and Taking the Mouth of the River with You

1. For a Minute You Thought About Keeping These Things for Yourself

At first there was just a fistful of phonemes that you held in your hand like a cluster of faded balloons. You were afraid to let the balloons go, because if they escaped they might come back as syllables or morphemes or something much, much worse.

So you clicked your tongue against your teeth and held on even tighter.

The words, the ones in your pocket, you took them out and carefully examined them in the light.

Lest you forget, we're talking about that curious point in time where one word said hello to another word and between the two of them, huddled together, they created some friction.

It wasn't the friction that was the problem. The friction was pleasing and you could feel it in all of your tingly little extremities. Friction, for people like you, interested purely in physical sensation, was very good.

No. It was just that a by-product of this friction was that some deranged offspring carried on until a slightly more complex unit of meaning was minted. Your extremities don't feel so tingly and good now, do they?

Let me start over. The friction birthed more complex sound elements, something approaching language.

It's pretty obvious how things went from there. This new entity created some heat. A great big bonfire with charred marshmallows and timeless stumps of wood for sitting.

There's your seat right over there, the old oak stump with the notched back.

The fire spits out new words at an alarming rate.

In case you didn't notice it the first time: the beginning of this sentence is the same as the beginning of that sentence.

At this point, you may as well let go of the balloons.

They float off in the fumes and ash and disappear into the clouds.

2. *Another Dispatch from the Green Room*

One of the words follows you to bed. It takes liberties with your body. Oh, that's right, you hid the word in your hand when you crawled in here in the first place so you know all about that.

When you wake up the word has burst in your hands and your fingers are all gooey.

And now you find that somebody else has joined you.

The heat from the fire has a life of its own. It scours every pore of your skin and when you stand up your entire body has been bleached white.

Not that anyone notices.

Another word pursues you even in your dreams. You look down at the sheets but there are all kinds of little pieces of debris all over it. Lint, perhaps?

Each of these little places of destruction marks a separate lexicon, with a pleasing almost bubbly soundtrack.

Kind of like the sound of birds after a storm passes through, right?

But first you should be aware of something. The person who has joined you? It's their birthday and they want cake.

You know this because they begin blowing up balloons and pinning them to the walls. After the walls are covered in red balloons, they say, I want cake.

But first, they are going to need some candles.

That's where you come in.

3. *The Places We Live*

In this one, the devil calls your name. You try to follow the actions of a baseball game as they unfold on the screen, but they are so confusing.

Why did he stop running?

Where was the cut-off man?

How come that last at-bat had a commercial sponsor?

The person who has joined you says, Think about it. What happens when one ray of light meets another ray of light? What happens when one word transmogrifies into another? What happens when gesture is replaced by speech? What happens after the seventh-inning stretch?

This person licks the icing off their fingers. They offer you a finger as well and then put the eggshells in the compost.

Imagine, they say, that we are the two rays of light. You can be the first ray of light and I'll be the second.

What you think that means: You'll have a lot more work to do than they will.

Then, to confirm this, the second ray of light plops down on the couch, in the place you live, sipping scotch and giggling occasionally.

When the scotch is gone, this second ray of light mixes up the ingredients in a bowl, out in the kitchen.

You can smell the kinds of things that happen when heat is applied to butter. You can smell sugar. You can lick the raw egg off the sides of the bowl.

Some of the balloons have come loose from the wall and drift in front of the vent on the floor.

One of the words is bent and pointy and refuses to be uttered. Ever.

4. Flipping Through the Encyclopedia of Everyday Things

Some might say that it's not fair, you hoarding all the words. But then again, other people are happy for you to have them, because they think that the words themselves might be contagious.

You know, like a disease.

And, besides, you've got bigger fish to fry.

You've stored the words in glass jars and inflated balloons. You've hid them in the icing of a cake. You've got

the words locked up in a super secret database that can only be accessed by moving through air and space as if there was no content or mass to your physical shape.

As if to prove the point, you pass your body through the wall and end up in the kitchen.

A ray of light, get it?

If anyone were to ask, you'd say that we aren't actually cultivating the words, it is the words that are cultivating us.

Think about it. Pathogens? I mean, honestly.

The person who has joined you, the second ray of light says, It probably makes more sense if you called me Helen.

Hi Helen.

Helen tries to pass through the wall too, but ends up getting stuck about halfway through.

You leave Helen there and go down to the store on the corner, you know, the one that sells everything, in the hopes of scoring some candles.

In the trees outside, a flock of tiny birds, tearing into little red berries and singing. There is a premeditated dissonance in the wall of sound that they create.

That's one way to describe it.

The heat from all the pleasing friction, it stays with you, even after you step into the shade.

That's right, you remember now, that's when Helen came in.

You walk into the shop.

5. *The Horizon and All Her Distant Cousins*

After all, we're all being hurtled through space at dizzying speeds. If you look at the world around you, it's pretty obvious. Night and day are just two different colors we've invented to obscure the fact.

No matter. You know the baseball game must be nearly over because the men and women who sell food from metal carts on your street have scrambled around a banged up little black-and-white television to watch the events unfold.

Black, white, night, day, who cares? It's not like the end of this sentence is the same as the end of that sentence.

You stand at the counter. It is time to exchange a few of the words in your pocket for some of those candles up on the shelf. And also you've got to ask for some kind of utensil that you can use to extract the other half of Helen's body from the wall.

The guy behind the counter asks for a three-syllable word beginning with the letter M.

Marshmallow? Murmurous? Moussaka?

This guy, no matter what you give him, he's happy. He doles out the candles and gets you a tool, some kind of shovel and pick-axe hybrid.

This should work.

Helen has managed to worm her way mostly free. Just her elbow is still caught. And her lower left calf. This lovely second ray of light makes a slow steady progress to free herself.

You don't need reminding. That is this and this is then.

It goes without saying that you include her functions and all their processes in the preceding statement.

One of the words has the power to make everyone disappear forever and ever. You keep it there on maximum security 24-hour lockdown, just below the very tip of your tongue.

You know the place, right alongside the sublingual glands. So every time you salivate, it nearly pops out.

Helen plops down on the couch right next to you and whispers in your ear, *This is dangerous.*

Outside your window, the freeway is little more than a river of language waiting to be deconstructed.

You say, *No wonder there are so many car accidents.*

Her hands snake out from underneath her arms to caress the inside of your pockets.

But nighttime came in to obscure the fact.

You spend the next decade building a catalog of intricate words and then the decade after that editing the pile of words down to nothing. The book where you hold these entries keeps shrinking, ink flayed from its pages in fat huge chunks.

Tiny, white pebbles line the walls you pass through.

The pile of discarded words grew and grew until they spilled out of your apartment and onto the street below. They flowed out into the desert. They clogged up the atmosphere. They dissolved into the foam washing up on the beach. Some of them blocked the light from the sun. Everything closed down, even the shop with the candles. Commerce became a quaint, mythologized

concept from some distant past.

Oh, there was this other thing. Objects and possessions, those too became obsolete.

Most of the poems and novels disappeared from our collective memory. And the ones that didn't only had a few scratches remaining on the page, almost like conceptual line drawings. Everyone found that they felt much better. After a while you even let go of the phonemes and morphemes in your fist.

Get this, they drifted out over the alluvial plane, racing ahead of all that revving traffic, up, away, and over the horizon.

Sensor Fails to Capture Movement in This Realm

1. Free Trade Zone

The next thing you know you stand on the shore of a calm gray lake, opening and closing your hands and holding them up into the sky. There are no waves. This massive body of water signals its indifference.

And then, just like that, the fistful of words, the ones you let go all those years ago, they come sliding back to you from over the horizon. The words are covered in moss and tattered at the edges. They are barely recognizable. A few of them have broken down into even smaller words. The others have dissolved into little more than wiggling phonemes and indecipherable bits of data.

Even when you hold them up to the light they are opaque and don't reveal any of their secrets.

Most of the words just sit there. Dull, listless and occasionally slipping out from behind your lips.

A few of them, however, resist easy categorization. They pursue you into your dreams and hunt you while you sleep. These extraordinary words have somehow managed to escape the tethers of their Latinate roots.

These words have come back in the form of a mythical bird that wears the emblem of immortality and reborn idealism like a designer clothing label.

There it is, stitched on the outside of your shirt like a badge. You are yoked to the wings of this bird by export processing zones and labor-intensive manufacturing centers.

Not that you need any reminding but we're talking about that curious point in time when form and function ceased to have anything to do with each other.

They sit in opposite corners of the room, looking away from each other, pouting.

2. *Why Should There Not Be Vigorous Methods Of Discourse?*

What if you had to appropriate from yourself for inspiration? What if you created a sentence where you could secretly reside even after you were dead? Would anyone come back to find you?

What if you wandered around the desiccated shell of this sentence over and over again?

Would you still refuse to utter the words used to describe your casket? Would you still refuse to call a spade a spade?

One of the words follows you onto the living room floor and dusts your skin in high-grade flour and wild active yeast.

This same word appears, day after day. If you didn't know any better you'd think the characteristics of the word were pilfered from the realm of human experience rather than the hard bony cartilage of the alphabet.

The word has curly hair and utters secret sounds that only you can hear. You murmur this word in your sleep between your half-closed lips. You burrow your head into the curls of her hair when you brush your teeth in the mornings.

You stretch your hands outward and she is there to grab them. She puts your fingers in her mouth and lets them rest there.

At some point you decide to get it over with and give the word a name that you can easily remember. You'd tell somebody else this word in case you lost it, but if you did then all of the power would instantly evaporate from the letters as if they'd been lain down in freshly dug graves.

Not to get too technical, but basically the whole subject-predicate-indirect-object thing would go all kablooeey.

Speaking of graves: You can smell the loam in the soil. You can smell each turned shovel. You can smell the fresh flowers trampled underfoot.

3. *Promulgated, but not literary*

When you finally pick yourself up off the floor you can see that this person has written the words *This Is Not A Test* in the flour and yeast with their fingers across your pale, notched ribcage.

It isn't the sentence that you had in mind. It sounds more like the title from a Crystal Gayle song than anything else.

Now that you think of it, the sound of AM radio dominates the afternoon. The sound is covered in daffodils and other flowers from the amaryllis family. They are easily recognizable because they congregate near the window, where the light aggregates out from the bevels.

What if you were named after a famous protagonist? Would you behave differently? Would you not roll around on the living room floor in flour and active yeast? Would you finally pass the remote control to the person at the other end of the couch?

Would you not take the words you created and smash them into a tiny pile of morphemes and syllables, creating a thick roux the color of un-oxygenated blood?

It'd be hard to create a halfway decent sentence out of *that*.

Before you forget. The name you come up with? Ella.

From out of nowhere, Ella stands in front of you, daubing your torso with a damp cloth, saying, *Don't worry, I understand*. She starts picking up your clothes from a rumpled pile in the corner and handing them to you so you can get dressed. From the look of it, a few of your neighbors can see you through the living room window.

It had been a long, long time since you had thought about *them*.

4. What Was Said Before Does Not Mean the Same as What Was Said Before

Suddenly, it all makes sense. Ella kneads the dough on your stomach. You've had all the hair whisked from your body so that the dough won't stick to your skin. You've had makeup put on your face to give you a life-like appearance.

Ella has slathered your body in expensive olive oil that smells like lemon or grapefruit. She's shielded you from the sun so that your skin doesn't crackle in the light.

The more she kneads the dough, the harder it becomes for you to remember the designer label on your shirt. The harder it is for you to recall this label the further away the life you used to lead seems to be.

It's almost like your memories never existed in the first place.

Pretend, Ella says, *That we are two separate moments in time. I'll be the first moment and you can be the second.*

She sweeps her fingers across your stomach, rolling the dough into a loose ball.

That means all you have to do is follow along, ok?

But what you think it really means is that Ella will always get to live in the present moment, participating in the world as it happens, while you can only follow along, in the past tense, reacting to events after they have already transpired.

She creates the dough, while you only get to eat the bread, get it?

This first moment in time, she takes the ball of dough and rolls it out flat on your stomach. Soon, your thoughts turn to preparing dinner, doing dishes. Ella touches you gently underneath your arms and behind your knees. There's nothing left for you to do but close your eyes and imagine that you are somewhere else.

5. A Pair of Aphorists, Poking at the Ground

Here's the thing about somewhere else: It's never cracked up to what it's supposed to be.

Somewhere else is filled with sixteen-hour workdays, seven days a week.

Somewhere else is ruled by a skinny man in glasses who won't let you take bathroom breaks unless he hears you inflect your words in a certain way that makes you feel slightly ill.

There it is, beginning in your lower stomach and working its way up your throat to the base of your neck. What's worse, you wonder, *pissing yourself or selling yourself out?* Either way, it's too late now because the skinny man with glasses has gone down the next row of workers to berate them for talking.

A warm liquid, it starts slowly between your legs and runs down the inseam of your work pants.

Now that you are here, in the place called somewhere else, you can't seem to get back to the place you were before.

And where was that?

Well, from what you can remember, you were in a freshly dug hole in the ground, watching your friends and family pour shovelfuls of damp soil over your body. You want to tell them to stop, that you are still alive, but every time you open your mouth another load of dirt falls between your lips, stopping your speech in its tracks.

That first moment in time, she leads the procession away in the rain.

You sit up so that you can survey the scene better. The words came back as a string of black cars with little flags appended near the hood.

They came back as premonitions and aphorisms.

They came back as losing lottery tickets and rejection slips.

6. *In Direct Conflict With Laws of Physics*

You hold the first moment in time up to the light. No wonder you moved in with her all those years ago. No wonder you ignored the dire prognostications of all the so-called experts.

You know the ones. They supplanted the real world around you with a version composed of fairy tales, daydreams, and overpriced threads. Armani. Versace. Dolce & Gabbana. Prada. Max Azria. Miu Miu. One of these so-called experts speaks to you from a television monitor in the upper left-hand corner of the page.

Just above the ongoing pout-off between form and function.

The first moment in time, she's moved from the present into the future. She's changed from black and white to technicolor. She's left you behind in a world of gray-scale, wondering whether you will be able to accept more subtle tonal variations.

Today, tomorrow, or yesterday, what's the difference?

Ella dusts the flour from your lips and says, *Is there anything else you want to know?*

Well, you say, *I'd like to know what happens next.*

But even though she's already been there, to the place where what happens next has already happened, she tells you that she can't help you with *that*.

Then, she adds, *Who do I look like anyway?*

Not to get overly sentimental, but you think she looks like a Royal Gala dappled in sunlight.

A few of the missing words have gravitated towards her in more formal arrangements, patterns.

Made in Malaysia. Made in Sri Lanka. Made in Taipei. Made in Bangladesh.

There are still a few other words though, that seem lost. They drift out into the dull glare of the city, looking for companions.

7. *Coming Full Circle*

When the words finally returned, they were all worn smooth and the corners had been rubbed away. On top of that a few extra syllables had been slipped in when you weren't looking.

From somewhere in the middle of them you heard somebody calling your name. You look and look for the first moment in time, but she has moved out of sight, into the mysterious and unrecognizable canvass of the future.

There you go again, re-arranging the words so that the picture you paint is the one you'd like to see rather than a representation of how things actually are.

Ella points to the pile of words on the floor and says, *You actually think you can paint with those? What's next, time travel?*

You shrug your shoulders, *Given how things are starting to shake out, why not?*

She says, *I have an idea. Why don't you pretend that you are a planet and I'll pretend to be a small shiny object caught in your gravitational pull.*

But what you think this really means: While she gets a free ride, you'll be doing all the heavy lifting. However, against your better judgement, you roll onto your back, kicking your arms and legs up into the air. Ella hops aboard and you help her fly all around the room.

What sort of object will she become? How difficult will it be for you to maintain a consistent field of gravity? But this first moment in time, she's already moved on. As if to emphasize the point, she hops off and walks into the kitchen and begins to rap a bottle of olive oil down on the counter.

Flour, dust, and other dry ingredients are caught in the sunlight as they slowly filter down to the floor.

And just like that, the spell of your gravitational pull is broken.

You carefully remove some of the words that didn't belong in there in the first place. In their absence, you try other, happier words.

In one sentence you replace the word Bangladesh with the word Italy. In another you replace Taipei with Kyoto. Everywhere you see the phrase greenhouse gas you replace it with glacial flour. And so on.

Some words, well they just have to go altogether. There are no suitable replacements. However, these ones are prickly and refuse to be thrown away. They stick to your clothes. They stick to the remaining hair on your body. They enter into your bloodstream through your lungs. Through diffusion of the cell walls of the alveoli.

Perhaps this is what the formaldehyde is for? There is blood trickling down your nose and onto your lips. You can taste the salt of it on your tongue.

Ella wipes the flour and olive oil off of her hands and cradles your head in her arms. She whispers in your ear, *Don't worry, you're safe here.*

But despite her soothing voice, all the words come back and hit you at once.

8. Pattern Recognition

Whether you were ready for it or not, the place called somewhere else has come back and begun to infect the place you were before.

Not that you can necessarily distinguish between the two.

There's a painting of this place hanging on the wall. When nobody is looking you take the painting off the wall, sand it down, and start all over again.

You love the smell of wild mint. You love the smell of freshly mown grass. You love the way day and night compete for your attention, at the edges of the horizon. You love the shape of the freeway overpasses, and how their centrifugal form gradually slingshots gleaming sedans from the off-ramp into the fast lane.

Speaking of: Form seems to have gotten tired of sitting in the corner and has moved over towards the window, looking out. But there's nothing to see, because outside it's gotten dark and there isn't anything to illuminate the landscape. There might have been a city there once but now, you've moved back far enough in time so that the geography has been wiped clean.

Blame the ocean or blame your memory, it's all the same.

Function just stares at the hunched back of Form with a creased brow.

It turns out that this mopey standoff is the closest they will come to an agreement.

Back in the crevice in the ground, the one that you hadn't noticed before, all of the words that resisted easy classification slip into bed with you. Some of the words, they touch your body in inappropriate ways.

Most of these words are polysyllabic and impossible to pin down, even with a net of antecedents.

They appear out of the starless sky and cover your body in layer after layer of dead leaves, coffee grounds, newspaper, tree bark, wilted flowers, and other organic materials. Given enough time, these materials begin to give off a warm, pleasing heat. For the first time in what seems like forever, you find that you aren't cold.

These words rub their fingers all over your body. They whisper all sorts of untoward things in your ears. One of them says, *This one will never end.*

God, you can only hope they are right.

Some of the words look familiar and you say to them, *I remember you*, but other words look completely foreign. Like they might have been written using a different alphabet. Still, you want to ask a few other questions.

Is this somewhere else? Is this the place you were before? Or is it the place where you've always been?

Now that all of these words have covered you, your vision has become completely obfuscated. If you push them away you can still see the stars in the sky through the tiny, rectangular opening. But moving them is such hard work, why bother?

It also means that you can't really breathe, but it's been weeks since you've been concerned with that.

You don't really mind not being able to see or breathe, but it does mean something else as well: You've completely lost track of that first moment in time.

The one that you promised to always follow, no matter what.

Without her, the timeline has come all undone and you've sheared the pin on all the remaining words used to build your story.

You start to imagine that you are somewhere else again. But this time, you have the ability to control the conditions of somewhere else and have made it, you know, more pleasing.

Honestly, was that too much to ask? You drop your objections to staying in a specific time and place and with it any semblance of the fictional dream.

That's right, you just killed off the world of make-believe.

Made in Spain. Made in Belgium. Made with rayon. With acetate. Produced from naturally occurring polymers.

Now you see. This is where old words go to die. This is how they are reborn and crafted into something else.

9. *The Things You Create, the Things You Destroy*

The procession of black cars with colorful flags completes the oval that skirts the grass edge. There's another oval to navigate as well, but you can't see it, you simply recall it from when they brought you in.

The mythical bird, the one that haunted your dreams, finally escapes when you exhale. The ends of its feathers tickle the roof of your mouth as it departs. As soon as this bird hits the air, it begins to decompose and diffuse into a million smaller, almost invisible pieces.

Want another ominous sign? You hadn't realized that you had been holding your breath for so long, but now that you think about it, gee, it's been months.

Objective viewers might have suggested that you had simulated death.

But, at this point, you hardly feel like trusting the so-called adjudicators of objectivity. If anything, you think, they're cloaked in the transparent patina of false gods and unsustainable modes of living. Either that, or they've closed off their minds to an alternate version of events, one in which you envision living in a much simpler place.

A place not only occupied by the first moment in time, but also the moment that follows.

Here she is again, raising her arms playfully and saying, *Move over. There's got to be room for one more in there.*

You can smell the kinds of things that happen when somebody bakes bread. You can smell the kinds of things that happen when yeast is added to warm water. You can smell olive oil and high-grade flour. There's a hint of rosemary too, if you linger long enough.

For the first time maybe ever, it occurs to you that you can live in the present while simultaneously existing in the past. You can make the dough *and* eat the bread.

The words you speak are muffled from underneath the pillows so Ella says, *What are you talking about?*

That's right, you are still here, body dappled in high-thread count and fabric softeners.

You're telling Ella your idea about going back to the beginning.

Which, of course, is where the other words came in. The ones you cast aside all those years ago. The first moment in time, she's not going to agree or disagree she's just going to keep turning you round and round.

10. *The Death of Painting*

All of a sudden everything disappears. The first moment in time, the place you used to be, the place called somewhere else, and the mythical bird that brought you all the words in the first place; all of it, gone.

Just like that.

The only thing that is left seems to be this comfortable spot in the ground.

A casket is little more than an abstract concept sprung from the trap of critical thinking.

Seriously, you try imagining the world without it and see how far you get.

Maybe this is what Ella was talking about when she said, *Well, you probably won't get very far, but if you aren't careful you might just go far enough.*

You hold onto a string of time as it spools out further than you imagined possible. In fact, the string stretches beyond the surface of the ocean and past the electric blue line of the horizon.

This string seems to be the only tangible object connecting you from the past to the present. It seems to be the only thing connecting you from the real world to the world of make-believe.

But when you look down again, the string has finally run off the spool.

Look at it go! Drifting out into the wind without you.

Now that it's gone, it is as if an enormous weight has been lifted from your shoulders. You lie back down, mouth open, and let the people you love continue to pour shovelfuls of dirt over you. The words they use to describe you accompany this fresh soil. These words, they'll be your only companions on the next phase of your journey.

The words take root and begin to leach into the minerals and rocks as your body decomposes.

It's interesting, you think, how the frame of your body feels when it is finally released from the fragile container of its milky skin.

Occasionally, you notice that your bones settle a little. A few of them are breaking into smaller pieces. The words around you are decomposing too, as are your memories.

The smaller these pieces of information get, the more tactile they become. That first moment of time, the one with the curly hair and emerald green eyes, she's followed you into the ground as well, but that's not the important part.

The important part is how your body finally broke down far enough that you could slip in between the particles of soil and slide into the section of ground where the first moment in time had finally come to rest.

It was just like old times, the two of you whispering a few of the words that refused to behave into each other's ears.

She says, I have another idea. Why don't we go back to the beginning and start all over again? I'll be the words in your hand and you can be the wind, carrying me away.

She whispers, *How does that sound?*

The next thing you know there you are again. Standing along the shores of a calm gray lake, offering your palms up into the sky, opening and closing your hands.

Thermal Mass

Perhaps it's obvious to state that an animal in the jungle is not mimetic. Perhaps the ocean can be more than a justification for happy hour.

The people we run around with come online, they go offline, they come online again. The people we run around with say, "Client relationships are impossible without gap analysis." Hand slips around corner, underneath leather belt.

We turn the door of our neighborhood tavern.

You say, "I haven't been to a bar since before the kids were born." Then: You push my hand away. "Hopefully that doesn't change the way you feel about me."

Later: "It's true when they say a half hour is roughly thirty minutes."

What happens when the person who is in charge of organizing our information and the person who is in charge of the person in charge of organizing our information migrate our data without consulting the guru of taxonomy? Ignoring extra vowels and fringe elements. I say, "I think I know a place where we can be alone."

As our children entered their formative years, they began to count on an endless parade of summer nights. The oldest child abstains, but craves the twirling cadavers reflected in avant-garde manifestos. He says, "Underneath the water, infection is king." The middle child requests product information and re-calcification tests. He tells

us that surface coatings must not be confused with installation panels and carpet underlay. The youngest child is not a child at all but a cipher who describes the steady disappearance of conch shells and dugongs.

She says, "I've heard it said that in order to make a declaration you must first complete the declaration form."

I tell her, "But we've got nothing to declare." I wipe grains of salt and muffin crumbs with one hand into the napkin I hold in the other.

Later, when we're alone, you ask, "Have you ever wondered how to action an object when something unexpected happens?"

"The thing is, ordinary people never do ordinary things."

Something unexpected happens. Two dreamers practice decomposition. I imagine how things might have been different if I'd become a civil engineer. I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't woken up in the middle of the night all those years ago.

You take a piece of string and wind it tightly around my knuckles until the blood pools at my fingertips. "There, does that feel better?"

Without the edges of lips there can be no stable cell elements. Without the hotel there can be no hotel lobby.

"That reminds me, weren't we supposed to meet there?"

Forecast Models

You ease your car into the faculty parking lot, avoiding the orange cones set up by the Olympics organizational staff. From the moment you step out of your car and onto the university campus, your body is inundated with reduced surface temperatures and the glacial pace of capitulation.

The people in your life are nothing more than figments of your imagination. One of them, a woman who lives down the hall, waits for you at the door of the lecture hall.

In order to look directly into her eyes one must increase the range of known acceptance criteria. One must suspend the way in which time moves. Slow it down, speed it up. Whatever.

She walks down to the front of the room, stops in front of the chalkboard and says, "Significant variations make themselves known over long periods of time."

Except for the two of you, the class is empty.

She rubs her eyes, yawns. "Wait a second. Is that right? Or is it that absolute change equals absolute stasis? I'm not sure."

Lest we forget, we're talking about that curious point in time when rainbows still lingered over the freeway.

We're talking about that point in time just after the Olympics became a year-round phenomenon. We're talking about that point in time before poets became cyborgs, before cell phones became ravens.

Before the uses of punctuation had been exhausted.

One paragraph begins outside, in the grassy commons area, where a colorful flag sits at the top of a flagpole, snapping in the wind.

Another paragraph begins when the woman who lives down the hall finishes her spiel and sits back down. She wants to know where the rest of the students are. "Was class cancelled?"

You shrug your shoulders and point out the window, towards the flag, and say, "What do you make of that?"

She says, "I'm not sure. The locals here use confusing symbols. They are difficult to comprehend."

"The locals." You try to sound disgusted. "They do nothing but cheer for our death."

She kicks the ground with the toe of her Chuck Taylors. As if reviewing the events that brought the two of you to this place in time, she says, "The men are short armed. The women, low waisted."

You remember this person because in another life you made a promise to each other to fly across oceans in which the salt had been leached from the water. She is bound by descriptive events and sinister vocabularies. Her hair stumbles across her forehead and frames her cheekbones.

•

At night the cyborgs roam the streets chanting obscure lines of verse. Their metal feet clank down vacant alleyways. One cyborg suggests methods for quieting the pituitary. Another cyborg tells us that acronyms cannot be mistaken for cornbread. Another cyborg isn't a cyborg at all, but simply broadcasts a string of unrelated words cribbed from official press statements. Challenge. Street Chant. Chalkdust. Chestnut.

The person who lives down the hall is the only one who knows the way out. She has tattooed evacuation instructions on the inside of her forearm.

•

What happens when the Olympian who wins the event refuses to tear into the flesh of the Olympian who loses the event? Three of them stand at varying heights on a podium, wearing colorful ribbons around their necks. One indicates desire through the desiderative verbal form. He puts his trust in mathematics and stopwatch daydreams. Another wipes away blood and other loose pieces of sediment from his jersey. There is blood on the side of his face as well, but he leaves it alone. National anthems trammel on in the absence of light. The third Olympian inhabits a space just below our tongues. He says, "I don't want victory, I just want to be with my things."

•

The woman who lives down the hall manages your building's incoming mail and outgoing messages. Occasionally, you'll see her chatting up one of the sentries on the roof while she waters the plants in the garden. She adjusts the monitors in the hall to the most intriguing Olympic event happening at the moment. For instance, right now, men dressed in steel kilts hurl javelins at one another.

She keeps track of the current medal count for each country by updating the placards lining the downstairs lobby. Floral pattern, iconic landscapes.

One day, as you sit outside watching the birds circling the feet of the local cafe dwellers, the woman who lives down the hall tells you now that you've spent the night together you may as well call her Chloe.

Later that night, when she gets out of bed to open the blinds, Chloe begins to outline the official evacuation procedures. "In case anything should happen to me."

She adds, "You don't want to find yourself going upstream while everyone else is going downstream," she squints as she holds her forearm up to the light, "unless everyone else is already headed in the wrong direction."

•

You see yourself crossing the equator. You see yourself falling into the thin arms of the woman who sits on your couch. She has shifted her weight and now her posture suggests that she is leaving the planet. She holds a hairbrush in one hand like a walkie-talkie.

You see yourself walking into the room and then out of the room and then back into the room again.

You want the walls of your apartment to be modular. You want your body to pass easily through them. Is that too much to ask?

As for Chloe, she is little more than collected particles of white light. She stands up from the couch, points out the window and says, "Oh goody, rain."

Passing through walls? Why not. Note the way in which she critiques the paintings hanging on them, and your manner of speech.

She says, "I've been here too long." She fiddles with the television. "Either that, or I haven't been here long enough."

Before she can leave you point up towards the roof and ask her, "What will we do when the men with guns are replaced by men with bigger guns?" Diffused patterns of blood indicate defensive wounds.

•

Another missile test from the tops of surrounding buildings. Another street cleaning project meant to displace the people who live there. You start to head down to street level to see what all the racket is about, but Chloe heads you off at the pass. "Beyond this place, only those whose minds are festooned with incurable scars may proceed."

•

Some say our words are like bones. Brittle, full of liquid, and shifting. Some say qualifying events are like golden tokens. Others mistake them for syrupy lines of interest-free debt. Chloe asks you to read out the anonymous note you found in your mailbox.

"Dear Professor, In the grand scheme of things there is no grand scheme of things."

She wrinkles her nose. "Who would believe such a thing?"

•

In this one the good guys have shaved their heads and inked ultra-nationalist tattoos into their scrotums. They display parts of their bodies like badges of honor.

Chloe walks with you down to the university oval, where a series of thin runners from Africa are involved in the

third day of a four day race. The runners move surprisingly quickly across the campus, as if on autopilot.

You say, "I think I worked here once. Maybe I still do?"

Chloe shrugs her shoulders. "Before there was the medium there were the people who invented the medium."

It's autumn. In your wake, crinkly leaves and antonyms.

She points to the runners. "Look at them, they aren't even sweating."

She wants you to substitute the events of your dreams with the movements of public transport.

•

A battalion of painters bands together to encourage a particular state of mind. They follow you around the campus. Without memory there can be no Choctaw Nation. One of them pops up at the funniest times asking, "Can we go to the bad place yet?" Their appearance in this place indicates a level of seriousness. Another one doesn't say anything but when happy hour ends, he removes his tongue and places it on the bar, asking, "How's this for payment?" Still another isn't a painter at all, but shows up suddenly at your office hours wearing a raccoon skin cap. She says, "If it looks authentic and it smells authentic, and it feels authentic to the touch, then you must at least consider the possibility." She bends down, fiddles with the knobs on your old analogue stereo receiver.

•

Next thing you know, Chloe hands you a pair of thin white gloves and a surgical mask. "Here, put these on."

She punches in the code to the security alarm and pushes open a glass door. You have entered a labyrinthine series of corridors beneath the university.

You stand there dumbly. “Where are we?”

Chloe doesn’t answer, but keeps walking straight ahead. Tectonic plates defer to bivalve mollusks and other bean counters. She steps through the door and turns around. “Are you coming, or what?”

You follow this thin, stick-like figure through a series of cross-hatched hallways. She keeps disappearing around corners and by the time you’ve caught sight of her again, she’s gone.

Little sensors seem to be tracking your movements. As you pass, their lights turn from green to red. If we’ve learned one thing during the process of shedding our skins it’s that one finger rotates inward. Another finger takes the shape of a marble. Still another finger isn’t a finger at all, but represents a patch of arable land. How else would you start to design a utopia?

Eventually you will be beholden to the gentle tethers of gravity.

Suddenly you stop. The sound of Chloe’s footsteps has disappeared. Without memories you will no longer embrace white space aesthetics. You will no longer input images to complete the palette.

Later, when you take the gloves off, your hands are covered in a fine, resinous powder that reminds you of dusted beignets.

You emerge from underground. The thin African runners continue to circle the oval. A few security guards mingle amid the crowd, watching quietly and directing foot traffic. Sometimes when you look at them you think all meaning has been drained from the language you grew up speaking.

You say, “I’ve heard it said that the fires on the horizon are a sign that casual Fridays are ending.”

You’ve heard it said that the woman who sits in the passenger seat isn’t the same as the woman who sat in the passenger seat before. Chloe places her raccoon skin cap in the backseat and says, “When we get back to your place is it ok if I lie down? I’m exhausted.”

When she talks, a series of crumbly stanzas enters your bloodstream.

Note the thin sounds coming from reed instruments. Note the slight variations in medal count. Note the way in which marine areas are covered in marine sediments.

It’s true, when pulled apart, the alphabet does resemble inflated intestines.

When was the last time you posed questions to which you knew the answers? When was the last time you studied the erotic exchange between silky filaments? When was the last time you erected enormous structures simply for the purpose of projecting luminosity? When was the last time you spent hours working away on a small piece of driftwood?

Whittle. Sharpen. Polish.

You wake up on the couch watching the Olympics constantly replay on the wall of TVs directly above you.

A man shoots arrows across a field covered in tufted grasses and little white flowers that have been splattered in blood.

Chloe sits in the corner, installing additional television monitors so that she can keep an eye on multiple Olympic events simultaneously. On one of the monitors, surfing contestants ride waves big enough to engulf the entire coast in a wall of water. An abandoned nuclear power plant in the background. She says, "It seems to be an annual event these days."

The television monitors blink at you from a ledge above the turntable. One of them dissects the form gently, with lavender. Another processes liquid through invisible means. Still another relies on magnetic oscillations and heated glass jars.

A shiny black bird lands on the open windowsill and pokes around at the crumbs of muffin a previous tenant must have left there. So that's what happened to the afternoons you used to escape from.

You rearrange the little containers of dried spices on a rack in the kitchen, throwing out the old boxes. Combining others into a single container. You wash the outsides of little jars, which have become sticky over time.

Never before have so few lifted so little so that so many can carry so much.
With the completion of every heptathlon, another ten

thousand unique languages disappear. But then again it's the so-called linguists who are too busy analyzing box scores and 100-meter dash times to answer our queries. It's not enough to populate your diary, we must also lower the mask of objectivity over our faces.

Apparently, Chloe tells you, that's where your dissertation comes in.

How else to explain the power of sensitive crystals, than through the potential of bandwidth?

What happens when the last man standing and the man who used to be the last man standing can't agree as to who should stand where? The one with the bronze medal pushes his way towards the top of the podium. The one with the gold medal pushes back. Scuffling ensues. Officials scurry them off the stage. Sleepy tigers, miasmatic haze.

Chloe says, "Only introspection will save you." It's the same quote every morning. You look inwards, but there is nothing, only a barren, windswept landscape. Tussocky grass and swampy river banks.

"Oh, it's you again. I had forgotten you were here."

"But I never left?"

She tells you how she likes the feel of coarse sand on her skin. She tells you how, as a child, she used to crawl behind the home entertainment center, moisten her fingers, and play with electrical sockets.

She tells you that she will never recalibrate her dials to pick up your signal. Well if that's true, you may as well follow the ashes of the manuscript out over the interstate. If that's true you may as well soak up the excess

liquid with disc-shaped pieces of dead skin.

Next, we come to a place where a response to the written request is required. We come to a place where our two protagonists bifurcate and come back together again. By now, it's hard to even tell them apart. Note the way in which they align themselves to the strange summaries dotted throughout the text. Note the way in which they use stainless steel tools to organize their lives. Sever limbs, sprinkle liberally.

Miasma

In the dream, the woman with the pitbull doesn't own a massage parlor and she doesn't fight with her co-owning massage parlor ex-boyfriend. She doesn't cut the vines full of hundreds of nearly ripe kiwi fruit down and expose a weathered grey fence. Behind the fence, the student flat, with dull, utilitarian bookshelves. On the spine of every book the words: *Chinese Gooseberries on the Lam*.

When she wakes up, the neighbors don't talk either. They don't string their lights up for cocktail parties and barbeques. They don't fill their pinatas full of miniature sex toys and contraband pharmaceuticals.

The woman with the pitbull doesn't cut down the grapefruit tree either. She doesn't look wistfully through the students' windows at the Che Guevara posters all covered in mold and tattered at the edges.

She doesn't find herself on the floor studying the telephone wire coming out of a jack in the wall thinking to herself, *Beige is my default position*.

Back in the dream, the girls in the anorexia instructional video wear La Jolla High School cheerleading uniforms. An interviewer holds a microphone up in front of their pink, cherubic faces as they recount in horror in-depth details of how they were force fed by their parents. One of them says, *They had to tie me down with thick elastic rubber straps*. She sighs and the interviewer consoles her. But they feel much better now. The narrator of the video appears wearing a funny hat. His voice will

squeak beneath his teeth. The woman with the massage parlor thinks of the word simmer. To simmer. Simmering. Simmered.

The pitbull sleeps under the hibiscus tree, which, for some unexplained reason, has survived the chainsaw onslaught.

The sky turns blue, then indigo, then blue again.

David Shrigley's handwriting will improve, dammit.

The woman with the pitbull asks, "Are you going to not chase after cars?" And she'll imagine the grimy place where Princess Di crashed as the precursor to World War Four.

The piñatas are in the birthday section, amongst the balloons.

The Bean Counters

You walk down the street. On the periphery, two protest groups have split into factions on opposing sidewalks. You slip between them and take the stairs to the parking garage. You gently slide your car onto the asphalt and join your spot in traffic. Traffic signs offer competing directives. One suggests how a person should behave. Another indicates that universal truth is not explicitly stated.

Birds, crowded out because of the wind.

At the office, the elevators are made of glass. An army of polishers and scrubbers descends on the place after dark so that the little round numbers will glisten when you touch your finger to them. Even this simple gesture is just another data point. One memory is dislodged by colorful bundles of co-axial cable. Another positions itself between the fifth and sixth floors. Co-workers are little more than compound infinitives. A couple of them huddle together under fluorescent lights, weaving their daydreams into the cartridge housing beneath the lid of a copy machine. Another group sits on the edges of their seats re-inspecting their pivot tables. You try to listen in on their conversations. One of them says, "Lest anyone forget, we're talking about an era which appears to lack syntax."

You look up from the monitor but can't spot any allies.

Duplication relies on validation, checklists, and butter scones. Your desk overlooks the ocean. Crystal shards of light bounce and jangle off the water. Squat trawl-

ers skim the surface for sticky substances, gels. Somehow, while you weren't looking, another memory passed through your bloodstream. Hey, I know you. Without serum injection there can be no toxicology. Without aquatic plants there can be no subtext. Remote controls for beginners. Or, cartography for thirsty travelers. One of your co-workers pretends to ignore you. She sways gently, like a bell-shaped curve, in some imaginary breeze.

A tour of abandoned paragraphs begins with a trip to the bakery. There, flour dusts the lips of workers. There, baking powder is a simple contract between endurance athletes and mineral beds. One of the workers makes you a sandwich. Her hair is tied back in the shape of a conch shell. To pass through her gaze is a complex and ever-shifting affair.

Somewhere in this jumble of wires and day-old newspapers, the scent of olives and rosemary.

Once again you've been brought to the front of the room and asked to summarize. But before you can begin, the first faction of protesters splits off from the main group. The leader of this faction handles words with delicate tongs. You point to their photograph as it appears in the slideshow, "To them, power structures ARE the problem."

You elaborate. "I think if it had been any other era, they'd be cocooned behind a thick wall of ice." Another slide showing another group of protesters pops onto the overhead. "At least this particular group actually has an agenda."

They want to increase maximum life span threefold. Their program has specific targets for blood pressure, blood platelet counts, and cholesterol levels.

One of the protesters wears a shirt that says, "We Are Starving." Notice the way she carefully unwraps the food from its foil wrapper. Notice the way she folds the foil into neat little squares and places it in her back pocket. You can place the name, but not the face.

At the airport, another emergency landing. Another subpoena for shakedown transactions. You slowly make your way home after performing the interrogation. The girl from the bakery raps her knuckles on your door and gazes nervously up and down the street while you study her profile in the CCTV. Mysterious subjects gather along the wall in the foreground.

One subject details a canopy of singing dolls. Another subject sprouts a maze of roots between her fingers and toes. This sudden outburst is enough to challenge commonly held academic views. Still another subject is not a subject at all but has become synonymous with death. Cadavers await transport along the edge of an aqueduct. More to the point, change management protocols suddenly ensue.

A group of your ex-lovers gathers on the street below your apartment. One of them fidgets with the line of the horizon, constantly adjusting it so that your frame of reference becomes blurry. Another one waits for her PC issues to resolve themselves. Synchronicity, unit maintenance, and lotus flowers remain your pact.

The wind ruffles the tops of the trees. It ruffles the telephone wires strung along the freeway. You know there is a hill because there is a water collection area at the bottom of it.

The ex-lover with the peroxide dye job gnaws off her fingernails. You remember. She used the fabric of language as a dissertation launching pad. She places her hands on a stump of rotting wood and begins to hatchet her fingers off. She says, "Deconstruction is just another way of understanding pain."

The memory of her is occluded by a vast, boundless space where everything is white. Even the shadows.

The ex-lover with the bloodless complexion and long eyelashes walks up to you and says, "I pushed play. I pushed pause." She winces. "Then, I pushed play again."

What could this mean? Do you still owe her rent money? Are your vinyl LPs still gathering dust in the hatch of her Passat wagon? You recall, suddenly, the last thing you said when you lived together: "Circumstances dictate the eradication of clouds."

But it turns out that circumstances have since changed. Now, circumstances dictate the removal of healthy tissue.

Another of the ex-lovers is composed of elastic materials. She sits under your window staring blankly ahead. Blinking, not blinking, what's the difference? You can hear her sigh, *Somewhere, God knows, on the surface of the earth.*

One recalls Marx through native flora. One initiates regulation through conditions of the soil. Like infrastructure, workers unite and then divide.

Some of your ex-lovers have managed to gain the ability to pass through walls. Others place little plaster effigies of you in curious locations up and down your street. Some produce graffiti through active sentences. Others imitate horror movies by decoupling intake valves. In order to succumb they lend you their wings. Still others aren't your ex-lovers at all, but a collection of autograph

seekers and hangers-on filling the large sunny spaces found between unknown objects.

Somewhere, in a penthouse above this city, a girl sets her phaser to stun. If it weren't for the scent of rosemary and olives still clinging to her skin you wouldn't be able to place her.

In the other room, you frantically earmark pages in the library of unknown objects.

You slide open the door. She enters through glass hinges and through free text fields. Lacking grammar, but not taste. Thistle. Coriander. Chickory. Hazelwood.

The girl from the bakery says, "Are you just going to stand there all night, or are you going to let me in?"

What else is one to do? You gently pull the door towards you until it arcs open.

What if you had to inhabit a world without water or air? What if your memories of geography had been replaced by images of cloudy, stagnant water? What if the sensation of physical touch evaporated from the collective consciousness?

A bureaucrat walks up to the podium and says, "I've got a better idea: Shock treatment for everyone."

Another bureaucrat opens his empty palms to show the camera this new concept of rations.

The girl from the bakery doesn't want to discuss baked goods. She slowly runs her fingers over the spines of

your books and proclaims, “An unadulterated text is not an authentic source of meaning.”

You offer her a bottle of beer from the fridge. “Authenticity gets out of the way for nothing.”

She takes the beer from your hand. “Oh, never mind. It’s just that it’s getting late and I sorta want to lie down.”

As for Meaning? You’d forgotten such a thing could exist. You train your eyes on the television. Turn the volume up, slightly. The girl slides into the far end of the couch. On the public access channel, a film that is an attempt at a film without a camera. In this film, the future is an indefinite time period that looks an awful lot like the distant past. Technological advances have led our protagonists back to a swampy existence. Every day, new wings of morphology shoot up from the ground. Cedars, tag alders, and damselflies shade in the foreground.

Just then, as things are about to get racy with the girl from the bakery, the parade of your ex-lovers arrives on your street, hurling insults up in the direction of your window from the street below.

“It is impossible to become an administrator without completing an administrator form.” You hold the form up above your head for the cameras. A governing body relies on the faint lines of rugburns. If not a quorum, then a thimble. Even this system is closed.

You answer the question from the reporters with another question. “Without these patents how will we replace the transparent substances our scientists have yet to discover?”

There’s no sense in stating the obvious. The ex-lover with the peroxide dye job appears at your place of work holding up her stumps for arms and demanding compensation. She’s formed her own protest group, one founded on the values of people who are good with their hands and those who have a high regard for the impurity of bloodlines.

From a glass building along the highway, a stranger reviews your marital status and attitude towards risk.

Despite a cool breeze and an endless parade of summer nights, the ex-lover with the peroxide dye job follows you down into the parking garage. She says, “A series of words is not a series of words without a context to corral it.” She flips through page after page of addendum riders.

“On this one principal, I will not bend.”

You know there is an answer out there somewhere other than austerity. You know even the sound of one hand clapping is enough to create historical legitimacy. But looking at her now, how could you ever tell her this?

Submission pauses, submission returns.

Another of your ex-lovers is waiting by your car. She soaks her teeth in a vessel containing brine and asterisks which sits on your hood.

Before you black out, she says, “Business class isn’t business class anymore.”

The man who designed the building and the man who installed the wiring in the building both develop a fondness for fading lines. You look in the mirror. The transmitter is active, but no message is being broadcast. Objects trigger memories. One of the objects is cast in a

white ceramic glaze and tastes like what food would taste like if you'd never tasted food before. A disembodied voice reaches you from out of the shadows, saying, "The glass is half-full."

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The girl from the bakery helps you to your feet. She says, "Where are your keys? I haven't heard from you for days. Nobody at your work knew. I thought that eventually you'd just show up."

A faint impression in the soil hints at the decades that preceded it.

Spellcheck eliminates vowels.

You take a nervous peek at your hands to make sure they're still intact. They are, but they're covered in blood.

The girl from the bakery pushes open your front door. "Don't touch anything," she whispers. "You're a mess."

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Now you recall how the film ends. Because the polar bear is no longer a carnivore, you will be allowed entry into the blueberry den.

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Three images collapse into one and then separate again. The girl from the bakery leads you to your bathroom. She fills the sink up with hot, soapy water and helps you wash the blood away.

She says, "I think I can hear you breathing. I like that."

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You come to a point in the narrative where similar processes exist. Industry standards roll in by the truckload. Various methods of intercourse result in an amber colored resin.

You come to a place where placards are set by your feet to help you interpret the things you encounter. One of the placards tells you how the girl from the bakery suffers from a rare disorder in which she is always the most beautiful person in the room. Schools of silvery-yellow fish are a clear example of this. Another placard describes to you how secrets can be evenly spaced. It's true, there is a nice order to things. Grids are comforting. Right angles contain implicit value. The girl from the bakery asks you to lift your knee to your chest. She asks you to lift your hand above your elbow. She asks you to lift your elbow above your shoulder. But you can't. Her diagnosis is inquisitive and not cluttered by meaningless phrases. Torn labrum, data migration. She wants to know if you are hungry. You nod.

She says, "One day, when you think you are feeling up to it, I can show you how to live longer by eating less."

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You imagine a series of paintings in muted tones failing to capture the light at daybreak. You imagine a world of sailboats and overcast skies. You imagine a sequence of numbers characterized by a narrow strip of astroturf. You imagine a combination of words cobbled together with a golden pallet-like lever. You imagine yourself in an earlier form, blacking out in a stranger's arms.

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A bureaucrat cannot justify his retreat from traditional politics. One of your ex-lovers marches into your office, demanding examples.

Salt caravans, the interior of pocket calculators, and star-shaped fruits of unknown origin. Bacteria, yeasts, and fungi.

She's kicking up a racket and your co-workers are starting to get anxious. They begin to shift their weight from one foot to another. One reinforces the shortest distance between two points by arching her back. Another implies fiction through fantasy, but does not take into account the effects of fluid retention.

Just like old times, you take your ex-lover by the hand and lead her up to the roof of the building.

"Do you really want me to jump?" You ask. She nods. "But, haven't we been through all of this before?"

The light is falling gently over the harbor. Now you remember what you found attractive in her all those years ago. She says, "What I want is something that does more than act like a noun. I want the noun itself."

Standing in the light she suddenly appears to transform into white stone.

You feel yourself gently nudged over the edge. Was that involuntary? You couldn't articulate it, but you definitely understand the difference between floating and flying. You notice the looks on your co-workers as you drift past your floor. Fields of texture, currents of air.

You whisper in their direction, "There's nothing to be afraid of."

Depending on your perspective a harbor can never justify the bridges that span it. Twenty seconds, then twenty seconds more.

Neither manzanita, nor flannel, nor depth of perception can save you now.

The girl from the bakery is not the girl from the bakery anymore but you let her stay over nonetheless.

She sleeps in a T-shirt which reads: Approximations! Abstractions! Aesthetics!

Must. Not. Forget. Secretions result in syntax error.

Another TV interview. This time you've been told not only what to say but also how to say it. When the interviewer pauses for you to speak, you flatten the syllables as best you can. Nothing but metal cans and laminates. Requests for product information and enquiries into the composition of soil release fierce tigers.

Later, on the way back to the elevator she tells you, "When you think about it, almost nothing at all is not that much different than almost nothing at all."

You are pretty sure you can tell her the way back home but despite that you can't seem to remember the names of the streets.

Certain of these stories appeared previously: “Having Been Made the Subject of a Parable the Image Collapses” in *Eleven Eleven*; “Why Should There Not Be a Handle?” in *Black Warrior Review*; “Without Stigma” in *Map Literary*; “Rich Girls Will Break Your Heart” in *The Diagram*; “Floating Downstream and Taking the Mouth of the River with You” in *Octopus Magazine*; and “Miasma” in *Chicago Review*.

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