

Answers in the Abstract

Written by Austin Carpentieri

ABSTRACT: *Answers in the Abstract (AiA)* is an unfinished work of fiction by Austin Carpentieri. *AiA* is a work of fiction which aims to put on display the inner minds of the characters. The story centers around a group of friends in high school, and their opinions of each other and what they each mean to each other. Exploring events of loss and tragedy, and how we move onwards and find beauty after them, *AiA* is a deeply personal work which is meant to be emotionally and intellectually provoking. Grief, joy, ecstasy, and yearning fuel the characters and pages developed here. Also included is a brief analysis by the author of influential works during the writing of this manuscript. *AiA* is by no means a finished product.

KEYWORDS: English, fiction, emotion, space, abstract, novel, manuscript, analysis,

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I get lost for the forest through the trees. I always have. I have always loved reading, but I've always felt as if the way that I read is different from how others read—I often get lost inside the lapping and lush sounds of the internal language, and I get lost as to what is actually happening in space on the page. I get transfixed by the ancient and forgotten power of our words—the way they affect our souls on a deep level, the things you *can't* analyze. How the language reacts to itself, plays games, and always gives me goosebumps and makes my hair stand up on end. I have also always been fascinated by the ways that language works within *music*, and how it seems to work through minimalism, and (sometimes) through passivity of listening. I took all of this into account when I started writing *Answers in the Abstract* (hereafter referred to as *AiA*).

Part of my original goal is to create an emphasis on what I call the narrative present. I am very interested in making the reader less concerned with what is going on overall, and more concerned with the specificity of what's happening *at that moment* in the text. By saying this, I do not mean to suggest that there is no overarching narrative, but rather that the text somewhat avoids summary (or at least attempts to). For example, a summary of the first section of *AiA* would sound something like “Gorge goes waits for a bus which doesn't come, and later returns home.” The point here is not that it *can't* be summarized, but that you won't really get anything meaningful out of the summary, or out of any summary. To understand the actual “action” that's transpiring (if one would even call it that), you must read the entire thing.

This idea of the narrative present, along with much more of the manuscript, has been inspired by many of the readings I've been doing this semester. Key quotes and scenes from these texts have inspired the writing of my main text *AiA*, and my main goal here is to dive

deeper into the connections I perceive between my work and what I am currently reading. Here I will discuss the influence that Bachelard's *The Poetics of Reverie*, Woolf's *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*, and Wallace's *Infinite Jest* have had on me and my process writing this manuscript.

The biggest influence recently has probably been Bachelard's *The Poetics of Reverie*. In this text, Bachelard investigates reverie as it is tied to language and our perception of language. Much of the density of Bachelard's work is lost when it is translated to English— a big part of what Bachelard discusses is how reverie can be expressed by poetic language. When he discusses this, he does so by discussing the ways in which the masculine and feminine forces work within the *french* language— that is masculine and feminine words. Bachelard puts down our simple germanic language when he says that:

Everything which is conflict or attraction in the human psychism is accentuated and given precision when the nuances which make words masculine or feminine are added to the most tenuous of contradictions and the most confused of communions. Hence, how 'mutilated' those languages must be which have lost the original truths of gender through an aging of their grammar! (38)

The human psychism (*psychism* here meaning mental processes e.g. reverie) is given more power when it's whims are able to be expressed with more freedom. When a human can freely daydream in french, their dreams can make clear whether they are masculine or feminine, and they can create complex webs of androgyny within the subject. Bachelard suggests here that the loss of a gendered noun system in English is somehow a mutilation— this would mean that English is somehow less adept at handling reverie-like language. I was intrigued by this idea, and

by the ways different grammars in a language would affect the ways the speakers of that language interact with the world. For example, some languages including Turkish and Persian have a grammatical marker called *evidentiality*. These markers indicate the evidence a certain speaker has for their statement. This is a bit hard for us to wrap our English minds around, but just as the French can mark the gender of the noun without it being implicit semantically within the meaning of the noun, Turkish speakers can tell us whether they have (a) first hand eye-witness account of a fact (b) indirect evidence of a fact (e.g. the ground is wet so it must have rained) or (c) second-hand knowledge of an event. We can do this too, of course, but the interesting thing is that the Turkish language bakes this in to the statement itself, so it's part of the sentence's *grammar* (de Haan). These limitations of language have been a big influence in writing my work— a lot of my characters are limited by their perceptions and the ways in which they categorize other people. In this, I wish to reflect the ways in which our language— even the language we use with ourselves— affects our perceptions of the things that happen to us and others.

The Waves and *To The Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf have both been inspirations to my character development process. In reading much of Virginia Woolf's work during my undergraduate career, she has become one of my biggest influences when it comes to depictions of her character's rich inner lives. In *The Waves*, Woolf tells us the entire lives of a group of six childhood friends. Woolf intentionally represented the internal soliloquies of her characters and "...[does] away with exact place & time" (3:230). While I have still implemented exact place and time in my story, the action, as I mentioned before, is driven mostly by the wanderings of the character's thoughts. This is more a story about the internal lives of my characters, and the ways

their internal lives interact with each other. Elica Clements, the author of *Transforming Musical Sounds into Words: Narrative Method in Virginia Woolf's The Waves*, points out to us that "...as Bernard, the principal writerly figure of *The Waves* articulates, music might provide a way 'to give the effect of the whole' (*The Waves* 214), to maintain connection and separateness among the subjectivities that inhabit both the pages of fiction and 'this vast mass that we call the world' (Woolf, *Moments* 72)" (Clements 161). While I have less of a focus on the musical aspect of my work here, what is important here is that Woolf is trying to represent the complex connections and separations which we experience every day. I see myself as trying to do something similar with my book, writing more to the rhythm or the beat of the language. If there is anywhere I need improvement it is in this area— I think I get very concerned about the feeling of the language, and forget to throw my reader a lifeline. In working towards making my world a bit more concrete, *To the Lighthouse* has also been a great influence. I wish to represent the community at large, and the complex emotions that exist there, and Woolf does this in a really interesting way in *TtL*. The narrator is able to freely travel from the interior minds of the characters, to an omniscient third person point of view seemingly at will— this writing style in particular has been a huge influence on me and my goals in the tone of my language and the treatment of my subject matter.

A Lover's Discourse has also had a huge influence on the representation of love in my fiction. As *A Lover's Discourse* can be seen as many internal soliloquies from the lover to the loved there are many complex emotions that this book handles, and the way it is able to do this without (in my opinion) becoming too trope-y or sentimentalized is a big influence in how I aim to treat the complex emotions my characters have for one another. Baudrillard writes that trying

to write love is “..confront[ing] the *muck* of language: that region of hysteria where language is both *too much* and *too little*, excessive... and impoverished...” (99). And yet he writes *A Lover’s Discourse* anyway, in spite of this fact— and this is precisely because “Enamoration is a drama...” (94). Baudrillard believes in the power of literature (and writing) to govern the mix between life and our passions, and believes that this is a mixture and a drama worth examining (93).

Recently *Infinite Jest* has also been a huge influence on my desire to broaden my scope, and have a narrative about a large community of people. The book accurately encapsulates what’s going on in America right now in an almost scary way, but as Dave Eggers writes in the Foreword to the book, *IJ* is “...a thing that will outlast him and you and me, but will help future people understand us— how we felt, how we lived, what we gave to each other and why” (Eggers xvi). The novel treats the subject in a complex and multiplicitous way, almost reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari’s “Becoming-animal.” The Becoming-animal involves, “...in short, [a peopling], a multiplicity” (239). This kind of a representation seems to be exactly what *IJ* represents— the entire novel and it’s hundreds of characters are all sprawled out for us by Hal Incandenza after he imagines “...someone blue-collar and unlicensed...ask[s] So yo then man what’s *your* story” (Wallace 17). The entire story is a result of Hal imagining that someone has asked him this question. *IJ* “...takes what is a potential cultural disaster, one with broad political and historical implications in the world of the novel, and constructs the American subject as *the* site of this disaster” (Fest 257). The potential cultural disaster known as “The Entertainment” (along with the entire culture it threatens to destroy) is made possible as a subject through *one* individual, Hal. The author of this source argues with this, saying that this reading

necessarily reduces the scope of Wallace's novel, but here I would have to disagree. By regarding the multiplicitous *through* the individual, Wallace has in effect brought American individualism to its logical conclusion— an exploding and ever expanding multiplicity formed by reflecting on the conditions which got Hal into the situation in which we find him at the beginning of the novel. I am also inspired by Wallace's complex ideas regarding simulation and textuality. In *IJ* a large chapter is dedicated to the playing of a game called Eshaton, a "...simulation of a nuclear war that not only did not happen in reality...but...[that] does not represent any "real" political reality that ever existed" (Fest 280). This theme of things having an unclear origin is prevalent in *IJ*, and this has inspired me to start thinking about the ways I can play with representation and textuality within my text— I've already started to do this with the P-mem device my characters use. It gives them the ability to re-watch their memories, and also the ability to experience an objective and visceral experience of a non-physical thing (i.e. "Love" or "Sadness" or even "Lost Sock" if that's really a feeling they're itching to experience in all it's abstract glory). The idea here is that the P-mem allows the user to experience the emotion of a or connected to a certain event without that actual event happening and in a much more visceral and physical sense than we can even imagine. This, of course, creates complications in the way people interact with their interactions, and the ways people interact with each other in the world of my manuscript.

There are many texts I have considered this semester that I was not able to touch on here, some of them are *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon, and *Ulysses* by James Joyce, along with much scholarly criticism of all of these texts. I am excited to continue work on this

manuscript, and have made significant headway this semester not only in it's writing, but in thinking about where I'm headed and what I would like it to accomplish as a finished piece.

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Answers in the Abstract

I.

He liked to lay in bed late at night, and listen to the fan which wobbled and squeaked in the soupy heat. The plate against the spoke of the fan was loose, due to a screw which had come partially undone due to all the years of spinning...spinning...spinning. As the fan sped up, the squeak became close and closer, until the squeak was almost indistinguishable from the silence it interrupted just a moment ago. Everything meshed together here, laying in bed— everything became fuzzy and blunt. There was no him, there was no fan, there was not even a loose screw causing it— there was only blackness. It (if there were a separate it) overtook him (if there were a separate him to take), and caused a general feeling of pervasiveness.

The pervasiveness didn't even contain anything, it merely pervaded. It ate him up whole, until he could no longer separate and parse out what he was feeling— it all just *was*. Is this how everyone feels? Do they lay in bed at night feeling lost, as if they don't know who they are? Do they question that “they” even exist? His thoughts started to get scarily abstract— and perhaps that was what the pervasiveness was: a pervasiveness of abstraction. A tendency for his brain to go from one loose screw to the end of the earth— to the end of all being? Where did it all go in the darkness,

squeak.....squeak.....squeak.....squeak.....squeak

Will it just eventually wobble until it can't wobble any longer?

Will it just eventually fall out of the ceiling?

Will I?

Somehow, though, like a pendulum his mind swung. By this time, he had gotten up out of bed and clicked the hall light on so quickly he didn't even realize he had made the decision. The feeling of getting adjusted to the world, even getting adjusted to seeing things at all. Things were no longer ideas but real physical objects which had depth and reflected light. His toothbrush created a shadow, and the world of light appeared warped and stretched in the white porcelain of the bathroom sink— an amorphous mass of moving and changing world.

The fan continued to squeak, and the sound somehow reminded him that all of this was imperceptibly and impossibly real— all too incredibly real.

No one could make this up.

He brushed his teeth in the varied silences between the bristles scratchy sound and the water rushing out of the tap. —

II.

This was the first time she could remember in a long time that it didn't hurt. This was the first time she walked (since she was a child anyway— a memory which was far away from her now) along the smooth stones + pointy pebbles barefoot, and could really feel each as a separate piece of the earth. One pressed into the foot, and created a half feeling of pressure and stretch on the heel, and another caused her foot to recoil quickly, searching for a new place to put down her foot. This was the first time she could remember since she was a child that she was barefoot outside.

At some point she had made the decision within herself— a sort of quiet decision making process, one so quiet it wasn't even fully realized at the time— which overtook and made itself ever present, silently. Which produced and produced itself in various ways until she was the uptight girl— the girl who couldn't handle the outside world. They changed from conscious decisions to look and feel grown up, to literal cages entombing her feet which she could never take off. Forget about open-toed shoes. She would have no foot exposure whatsoever.

And, well, this was the first time she felt like she really could *feel* the sand + rocks as a part of something larger, and yet whole large things in themselves, each one. Pushing and affecting different parts of the sole of her foot. The sand sunk her feet in, and she closed her eyes. Little pockets of seaweed and harder clumped sand and crab's parts; and the wind blows cold and there is no one else on the beach (from where she's standing that's the truth anyway). Spinning colossally slow in the distance an un-lit (except for 3 or 4 flashing spokes) ferris wheel continues its movement. There's no way they'd be doing anything but testing it this early in the morning.

The clouds and fog are one, and you can't really tell where either begins or ends. You can almost feel it cover you on all sides and leave you in a world of grey with no beginning or end— a comfort and softness on the eyes which is all encompassing and totalizing and so fucking frightening it's almost *peaceful* in its horror. The crash and soda fizzle of the ocean soft, but louder growing.

She had left the hotel room because she couldn't really sleep— something about the lightness of the sky made it seem as if the sun were about to rise all night, and kept her wide awake; kept her trapped in the moments where you merely blink your eyes and almost want to lie

to yourself— convince yourself you've been able to get some sleep. She had slept, but by the time her heavy eyes stayed closed for longer than a few seconds, it was too late (or early), and she was far too tired— it seemed to her that her eyes merely blinked, and the sun was up. The feeling of sleep or rest, even a microscopic one, was far away from the foggy folds of her brain tissue. She had slept, but at that point she was too exhausted to realize she had kept her eyes closed for longer than 10 minutes (and truthfully it wasn't much more than an aggregate hour or so). He of course slept like a rock, out almost the moment his head hit the proverbial pillow, which was devastating to her when she realized they would never talk in bed— with their noses close + interlocked hands. She no longer felt the immediacy of that moment, however, and the devastation resolved itself, over the years, to a simple desire (once again it was back, after all those years— as she knew it would be) for real human connection. With a desire so removed, a desire so abstracted and refracted from its original point of view, something becomes tougher in the tracking-down what it is you actually *want*. It becomes altogether too easy to just get caught up in the *desiring*.

The fact of all of this was, thought, that these shifts took place below the surface, so glacially slow that it wasn't even really apparent to her that there were any changes taking place at all. And her feet felt the cool water, and her ankles felt the sand slowly sink her, deeper and deeper— wave, after wave, after wave....

III.

It was that summer on Down Island—the large island full of downs, and not much else in terms of geography. They were covered by mist that morning, and deep within its blanket folded land, summer villages could be found with summer houses peppered and getting thinner the farther from the villages they traveled.

By ten o'clock the mist had dissipated and let in the bright fair day. On the downs the weather seemed more settled—the shifts were a little more at peace. This may have had to do with the water surrounding it, creating protected space for the island from the harsh changes in weather which constantly bombarded the mainland. On the edges of Down Island were no beaches, but rocks, boulders, and dirt which slowly rescinded into the depths of Lake St. Regis.

Roots rumbled upon the incline down to the lake, a path lined with long fallen phantom tree limbs and sun shining through pine. The lake water laps, and eventually the roots roll up onto the dock, and bare feet faintly clunk, going slow. & sat there with her feet dangling in the water, and he came up behind her and sat down, facing the side of her head, mostly. The wind blew her hair up and over her profile, and the swirls of strawberry blonde overlaid the deep dark green of the mountainside the sun set behind. Faintly could be seen the little cracks in the red (red!) of her lips, and it sent a twinge down to his very core. He knew not why, nor the difficulty this indicated, but it was a deep and earthly twinge—as if he wanted to be stabbed directly between the belly button and chest by this girl sitting before him. A feeling that would be totally and unquestionably cool with him.

Their feet dangled in the water, and it got colder and colder, though neither of them noticed. The night was getting colder, and they were merely getting closer. There was a feeling neither of them had with anyone else, and it was transcendent. The specifics of the entire

situation melted away, and to be honest all that was there was the strawberry-blond-gold against the (now much darker) mountain. The cliff of Fox's Lookout could be seen from where they sat, just barely in the distance now mostly melding with the night sky—the way everything turns dark at night, covered in softness and not forced into any reality. She was still there, though, and so was he. They knew where each other went— what movements their hands made, and the way their legs swayed with lapping lake water. It all seemed predetermined.

And somehow the eyes of each could be seen clearly by the other. Not much else, but the eyes were right on— accurate perceptions. They clearly saw each other, afraid and trembling (as everyone is). They cleared the black bits of sand and night off of each other's feet. Sometimes they touched each other's hair. In truth, they didn't know what they were seeing, clearing, or touching. They were far too removed to know the core of what was wrong. They were too far gone to even know what any of it was— neither of them had any words at all, in truth.

And in truth, neither of them wanted the words for it. They both knew of the inherent wrongness in what they were doing (in the wave they almost could not stop), but the reality was far too powerful for this knowing to have any affect. They were so separated from a feeling of true love that this, as it developed, was far too much.

When two stars are born in the vast darkness of space, usually they stay bound to each other's gravity for life. They are even referred to together, as a binary star. They display an ancient and betwixt gravity and are, in reality, falling over one another again and again and again.

They always sat out there long. Until the stars appeared, and they were sorry they didn't bring flashlights to navigate the limb-lined path— the orange rectangles of light bobbing and floating through the pine needles, staying stationary in the trees.

IV.

Except for &, primarily everyone else was out of the house at that moment. She was changing by her armour, and the front of her could be seen in the full-length mirror by the boy laying, lazy in her bed. Her skin was a toasted marshmallow in winter, and the grey-body-tight fabric of her bottoms and bra patterned with the run (*n.*) like quality of her waist, down to her center, convening just after the stretch grey-tight-light-white lace. She existed there in that way beneath it all somewhere for the boy (now a man), but he did not know where.

He hadn't seen her since that summer that everything blew up in their faces, and now here she sat at the table across from his in a restaurant.

It is April 17th, and everything is rotting in summer's unreasonable heat. Cement mixers roar in the ill heat, and garbage trucks sound their hollow air-intake scream as they speed down the I. It grows in ways grotesque and senile, breeding dead and long forgotten memories out of innocent bones. Where to go from here? Don't you ever wish forever could be spent easy in one place? Forever is longer than any one place. Have you ever felt like you needed to say more to people than you are able? There's a phonological and phonetic dispossession— with so much to say it could sprout into its own field of flowers. Perhaps all of it (consciousness, that is) started off as a good evolutionary choice that quickly went wrong. What if it's a disease? What if it started out right and ended up terribly wrong? Just like most assume language is there to assist

with communication— language complicates way more than it simplifies. Students of language are in on this secret; most of these words mean nothing. But few others bother to think these tongue jumbles and tiny abstract symbols might just actually be *distractions*. Yet somehow this only deepens the love (and folly) of language. It is never ending for some.

Her waist had become a field of flowers before his very eyes that summer, and little pieces were small and compact and ready to leave and that's exactly the feeling. Like it's time to leave now because my jaw is just going to get heavy, and the only thing left to do is squeeze squeeze squeeze.

V.

Are things made more or less complex with specificity? Are we able, like our fathers were able, to simply state that less is more? That there lies in us the constant desire to ourselves spin spin spin the webs which have always contained us?

Just because someone says they're going doesn't mean they're gone. Rarely are people fully and truly gone— only when the thin memory seems held together by ingrown moss, and the smell of grass by a stone wall. People left in lives past aren't left at all unless you don't realize. Otherwise they still travel with you.

The man who had been driving now for two years and four months saw the boy sitting on the side of the I, as he passed him and left him in the rear view mirror. He would have had no way of knowing this boy was his son, for before this drive he had been driving for years, and he honestly had lost track of how old his son would be by now. He lost track in the car. Able to get

all the way in the left lane and just cruise— forget about everything that wasn't black-topped and dashed lined.

He couldn't remember a time he wasn't driving, or thinking about driving. Oh, he must have had them, sure, but he couldn't remember them. That wasn't really where his mind went.

When he was 17 he got trapped on here for the first time, only for a couple of hours— but it was enough to get him hooked. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was for him; this was what he wanted to do— drive and drive until it felt like he could just take off. Until all the strings were cut and it was just him and the concrete barrier there to keep you from driving off into the trees.

The boy on the side of the road saw the people in their cars point to him, except by the time they got their hands up they were already well past him; the passengers and drivers pointing forever in a direction forged far beyond Gorge, who sat watching the cars get smaller and smaller in the distance.

VI.

The house stood to the north of Middleton, and to the southeast of Fox Propper. There were a few houses and a small man-made reservoir hidden beneath the fold of the hill off the foot of what rose up to become Fox's Lookout— a cliff which overlooked Lake St. Regis and the island in its center. The house, if you were to guess what it looked like from the inside, must have twisted and contorted into weird spaces, creating stairway and hall veins connecting organs of rooms, but from the outside the house stood almost boxy and quite plainly shaped. It was colored differently at almost every opportunity. The railing on the second story porch was green

for a spell, and then merged its way into a fury of the color wheel. On mornings when it was cold, the sun rose orange and luminous against the grey pale blue morning sky cracked like a vase by tree branches covered in wraps of now-dripping ice. The sliding glass door in the basement under the porch showed this view, and under here sat a plastic-primary-colors tricycle, caked in dirt along the plastic-fraying-middle-mold line. One of the grips on the handlebars missing, a variety of defunct sports balls— all non-professional knock-off sports balls. Almost-a-basketball bleached white around its deflated convex's edge, and the little skin-bumps all still shaded at one particular angle. The concrete here, chipped away at the edges, and from there dirt hills roll down covered in a forest of bare trees.

All he was sure of was he didn't want to leave. He wasn't sure why, but he was committed to staying in his home. Not in the literal sense— he would cross the threshold of his door, but he would not admit that this threshold really didn't exist. He felt eternally inside his home. Even as he left, and needed to do things differently in a different home, things weren't as they seemed.

This is what he remembered. Long trees taking over the entire wall-length window. The window went all the way down to the floor, with one of those cranks used to pull the window in and out. The entire window was covered by straight rows of trees sprouting grey branches. This was his childhood home. This would forever be his home, he had no doubt. Even if he no longer spent his time here, or if someone took it away.

I feel ripped and tattered

And fixed then mended, and

Brought to swim once more. Only

Accruing a layer of dirt which adds
To my beauty— perhaps it acts
As stark contrast on harsh
Reflection,
but either will do.

VII.

There is something more honest about a rainy day— something about the way grey muses move slowly over lighter grey that makes things feel more truthful. As if there are an infinity of families riding in RV's, getting ready for their big family trips. Rain doesn't pretend not to fall. The following might seem hard for you to believe, but everything you will read in this book really happened, and happens a thousand times over. Consider what your mind is like at 5 a.m. after it has been rudely awakened— is what you feel happening not in fact really happening *to you*? It's really a simple matter of references.

He felt as if he were vacuum sealed in a large bag used to keep old clothes— it's stuck still and all the air has been sucked out and he's been shoved under the bed. Everyone just went on all the time saying what comes to their mind, as if those words don't give an incredible amount of insight into who they are as people and how they work. If only we could just get a bit closer than we can, always just a bit further than we are permitted to go.

VIII.

Everyone forgets that while you're dying you can't know whether or not this is the end. It at once feels like everything is ending and beginning and it's wonderful and of course it's an illusion. There are no ends or beginnings to anything so drastic and clean-cut. He laid there, his body prostrate on the side of the road as the tiny bits of rain hit the grass blades and created a shushing when big blaring car noises didn't occupy his head. He sat there not knowing if he'd ever be back again. Wondering whether or not the "value" of all this was just some fiction— and hey there's a happy thought, maybe that's what fiction *was*. An elaborate and really well told lie. He dismissed this thought not because he could definitely claim it's falsehood, but because it was not a reality he could make peace with in the next fourteen minutes— at least this was not a fact he felt comfortable adjusting to right now, as he was not sure whether or not he'd be back. Back to anything.

He thought briefly of the times he'd wished he were dead, and how he hadn't meant them. He saw the stark image, in his head since he was a little boy, of the Prince falling softly in the desert. Would he be returning somewhere similar? His own small little world?

IX.

He thought that there was no possible way the world could actually see it the way he saw it. If they could, it so immediately would be fixed and out of the way. He had learned to ignore

the pillar of fools clamoring to the sky in search of nothing— but this came at a great cost. He becomes too large and within himself. Sometimes he even got lost inside of it.

The image of the man's face on the TV screen was moving so incredibly slow that you probably would have had to stare at the screen for a full ten seconds to notice the little changes in the man's face. The VCR whipped and whirred, and the large cylindrical modifications to the unit spun softly and slowly, a portion of each top circle entirely covered in an ethereal blue. This particular VCR, the Panasonic G132 w/ a Slow-Mo Enhancing 2x400rpm mod, could slow down any movie so much that it would take *months* to finish a film of any sufficient length.

He had been watching this movie for only a couple days now, and it was a scene where a guy recognizes a girl from across the room. This movie he's been watching since last year, and all he knows so far is that he's seen an old lover from across the room. For the past week, the face of the boy has been in the process of recognizing the girl from his past as the girl of his future for the first time— at least this is what Gorge sees.

Usually with these movies, Gorge will let them play in the background— the audio flipped off, of course, so there's no creepy horribly slowed down cave-like horror sounds to be heard. Slowing things down doesn't do the same thing to sounds as it does to vision, he thought. So really he sat there and he listened. He listened to himself, he listened to all the little voices, and all the ways his brain told him that this was almost definitely not where he should be right now, and he tried to let the voices which were a part of him when he was young take hold— he used to be so fearless. So ready and willing and sure that the world would give him what he *so badly* needed. But now it was misplaced— *now*; he wasn't sure anyone really knew what they were looking for. Connection? Love? Empathy? Some sort of something that fills the hole? And

if that won't anymore then something else? What kind of a dent could the world make in these desires even if we could blankly stare and admit it's what we yearn for? These thoughts silently passed through his head— they really only silently informed his mood— but he traversed, and felt the weight of them all while the face of a young man recognizing a past lover is *still* recognizing (that is, the video is slowed down so much that what we normally think of as an instantaneous reaction is stretched, and becomes progressive), that is, the young man is recognizing her, and has been for quite some time.

X.

No one knows what there was in the beginning, before our cavemen roamed this lake peppered land. What little of the texts have been translated from the people before speak of a great flatness in the beginning of it all.

[“What?” She said.

She had not heard me. Perhaps she had not understood, or merely didn't want to.

“Mhpniiphnfaraway” I said again. She looked at me like I had eyes coming out of my head in every direction, blinking and distracted and twitching. She couldn't understand my response.

It's funny isn't it? How you can miss a person you've never met. Yearn and ache in your heart for someone you have no idea about— not a clue. I think this idea is compounded infinitely with the people we do know. The love grows, as does our knowledge (compared to the knowledge we've had of said person before), but as the love grows it becomes completely and

totally obvious that there are huge grey gaps in our knowledge of this person. And, yes, you may be able to recount what they've had for lunch or the time they brush their teeth, or even the daily happenings of their life, but you could never recount the thoughts, the feelings, the real heart and meat of the person— their INNER-WORTH— unobtainable to us. The millions of things that happen every day to a person, lost the second after they happen.]

I. (In which Gorge and Dingy (don't) wait for the bus, and Gorge returns home)

“So what Gus is saying here...” Dingy started, “...is that the bus won't be here for another *hour*?” Gus was nowhere near the bus terminal where the two boys stood. Dingy, his head in the air, jammed his finger cartoonishly up his nose, and spun around on one foot, picking the other up to pivot his body weight, and began marching the width of the scratched up plastic-glass hybrid bus station terminal in Downtown Middleton¹. Middleton was shaped like a right triangle, with the hypotenuse slightly convex by the edge of I-38. Mostly the same throughout, peppered with suburban streets and one street nearer to the entrance of town, lined with musty shops for great aunts to visit when they're in town. Gorge Thingloss was sitting on the bench of the terminal, enthralled with the little bits of plastic-glass which were flying off of one of the clear scratched panel as he ran his fingers softly along the surface of the cracks. The panel seemed to have been shot straight through at some point by some tiny object. Dingy stopped his now near comic marching, and faced Gorge wondering at the hole/cracks. Seeing the cracked glass and bus terminal on the same portion of jetting sidewalk of Blank Street, Dingy

¹ The town found itself snug between I-38 and Rt. 3, just east of Hatch City, and south of Fox's Lookout. To the north was Lake St. Regis, the indescribably huge lake which bordered their lives. Barron County was a place that rose and sunk with the earth's breath, and changed seasons— often without warning. One day the sky would be full of ice-cream-truck symphonies , and the next snowmen would line the streets, waving across to each other only to melt in the evening as the sun sets the sky into lavender and the cicadas start humming.

had honestly not looked too closely at the structure which the two of them now occupied. He had taken in his surroundings, and processed them as he always had. It hadn't even occurred to him that the hole had come from anything other than a Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum— or whatever gun Dirty Harry used. In fact he even envisioned, the first time he had seen it, a man in a blue suit running too fast to realize the glass shatter and sparkle as the apples in the grocery bag of someone's grandma soar into the air from the jerk-surprise of a bullet coming through what you thought was a perfectly safe place to wait for the bus. He hadn't thought of that scene in years, it was a passing thought really at the time. He watched his friend sit there looking at the cracks and only partly understood now that Gorge was lost again in his own thoughts; he didn't understand the reasons, or what changed, but he understood this much.

Gorge sat there— the light from the sun reflecting on the cracks, not able to stop thinking about the circumstances which aligned to form the magnificent creation before him. It was a bright, sunny day, which was good. Recently they seemed to be getting their fair share of dying leaves and snow-covered branches in the same cycle. The weather here, as everyone would tell you, could change on a dime, but that was more of a half truth really. Yeah it'll be snowing so hard the sky just looks like static buzz from the TV one day, and bunnies will be hopping around chomping tulips while butterflies emerge out of cocoons the next, and no one really *understands* it, scientifically speaking, but there are inner patterns and ways to tell what way the weather'll be going. Signs in the sky late at night or the smell of the air just after sunset. People got used to it, so much so that now there wasn't even really a need for weather-people. They were even more ignored than they previously had been (which let me assure you is not the way *they* forecasted a global weather crisis would play out *either*). Everyone could really just sort of *tell*—

-Do I feel lucky?

-Well do [I], punk?

It was almost as if he was thinking about nothing. Not like no thoughts passed through— more like way too many. They all moved in such fast whisper-slips that it was almost like nothing at all, but if one slowed them down, the endless possibilities of the magical glass glittering could be heard— something like “...glass to sand and sand to glass, my life itself, the heat itself melts and puddles in the middle of the floor, and I can’t help but get all warm and sticky in the center and it feels free; a million little sparkles flying up and down my vision and somehow I am freeofitall...²”; and of course there's this warm glowing *Whhomm* in the background, like something huge— like we’re talkin’ massively large— but largely unthreatening is swinging around in circles slightly smaller and smaller each time around, until the circle gets too small for the thing and the circle’s path bends around (imagine the air literally getting a kink— like a metal pipe or paper-clip that you know ain’t gonna be straight again no matter how hard you squish it with a fingernail or hit it with a hammer) in on itself and goes on just making that continuous *Whhomm* sound.

Just that moment, as a matter of fact, as Dingy was staring at him (still subconsciously cheering himself on to “Pick A Winner!”) the words he had said registered—

“*So what Gus is saying here is...*” Gus, as Gorge had already noted to himself subconsciously, was nowhere near the bus-waiting enclosure where the two boys squinted, and passed under silent clouds. The phrase had become, among their friend group, something of a colloquialism, meaning something along the lines of “*am I understanding this correctly?*” Or

² All of which, of course, goes on *theoretically* forever— that is this string of words spans infinitely both backwards and forwards, not to mention in *between* the words are the infinities of words *not* being said, and of course it’s all *not* being said so...well I think you get the rather unending picture here.

“*The lemons life is currently dealing me are X, Y, Z*” — X, Y, and Z standing in for whatever sour, or even sometimes (but rarely among Gorge and his friends) particularly sweet dealings life had in fact been doling out that afternoon. The bus didn’t seem to be coming, and even if it was Gorge wouldn’t be getting on.

Their plan had been to run away together. At first, Gorge had loved the idea— taking off with nothing but the shirt on your back, not even a bag or a change of clothes, just going— going— gone. Like being suspended in a wind-tunnel with two gigantic fans blowing at you from either direction— suspended with powerful wind-equilibrium so that you even almost can’t feel the boundary between your skin and the air.

But now as they sat at the bus-waiting station with no bus to wait for, everything seemed to get a little dull. Gorge was honestly just dandy with how unpleasant this whole ordeal was turning out— as they walked to where they sat now, Gorge had been secretly hoping that this would happen. He silently regretted agreeing to go on this trip, as Dingy’s inability to just *shut the fuck up* was immediately recognized. He didn’t even really mind the nose-picking or the wacky movements, if only he could just not talk for a *second* of time. For example, right now Dingy was recounting, for perhaps the 15th time, the difficulties he experienced in his English Class at Middleton High— an issue Gorge was well aware of considering he sat right next to Dingy in English, wobbling back and forth on the uneven high-stool legs.

And it wasn’t just that he wouldn’t shut up, it was also the *silence* he invoked. It wasn’t even a useful silence, like one you could close your eyes and maybe take in everything that’s happened since you last were involved in this inane conversation, because even when he isn’t

talking you can tell he *wants to*, so like it's not even a functioning silence because it's filled with this guilt and anguish screaming "LET THE BOY SPEAK WILL YOU FOR *CHRIST SAKE?*"

Not to mention as they walked to where they waited (or didn't) now, she hit him again.

As if an iron skillet hopped up out of a vortex in the middle of the sidewalk and smacked him straight across the temple, disappearing as soon as the pain could sink itself into his tiny little pounding head. She, incidentally, was also nowhere to be found near the sidewalk at the moment of impact, but she might as well have materialized (in a sort of science-fictiony, "what-if-two-people-beam-up-to-the-same-spot" type horror) right there in front (and bursting forward from) Gorge and Dingy, walking to wait for a bus that wouldn't come.

This is how it had been recently. The pop-up type thoughts that didn't even need to finish their piece before you're shaking your head, and the center of your chest heated and sweating, and it's mad. Just straight mad. Mad as in "very angry," for it was an extremely angry feeling, but also mad in the sense of "mentally ill," for there could be nothing at all healthy or normal or "mentally sane in the membrane" about the way he thought about this. It was like an obsession with the thoughts constantly coming. It was like the thoughts themselves had some neuroses learned from growing up in a large Italian family with the entire extended tree right there at the comically long dinner table on Sunday nights, because if those fuckers couldn't get a word in edge-wise with Gorge's well-being— the thoughts constantly trying to talk him off the Ledge of Certainty and out of the general feeling that he was O.K., alright just where he was— those fuckers were *determined*. Ready, willing, and able to push him over no matter how long it took. Dingy sensed in the air that the sickly sweet boy walking next to him had certainly changed his game (another private saying of their friend group almost always used in reference to Gorge

who, more often than not, was in some type of fugue-like stasis his own aforementioned thoughts had shoved him into— unless one of his good ol' buddies hiked up their dungarees and pulled him straight out, and even when this did happen the darkish-dense residue could still be felt right behind his eyes if one was looking for it).

And so these were the reasons, as he sat on the covered bench staring at the light bouncing off the hairline fractures be-speckling the entire bus-stop-waiting pagoda, that he no longer wanted to go with Dingy. He wanted to quietly, and slowly but surely fold himself up very neatly and tell everyone he's with that— honestly, it's been lovely, but he needs to get the *fuck* out of dodge. Incidentally he would not be dodging anything— just bracing for impact. There was no real way to dodge it. If it was coming it was coming and that was pretty much the end of the discussion for any type of incidentally tripped-up type feeling he would be thrown into from here on out.

She was at the center of everything, sure, but not in any dramatic way. Not in any way which shook the earth, and made you have to like carefully look down at your food as you put it slowly in your mouth, otherwise you wouldn't be able to eat. But he could hear her encased in glass, loud but muffled— screaming and bursting in the center.

A piece of string connecting everything he saw (the top of that building, and look, a bird flying lands on a branch which bows a little in respect as it settles again) leading, screaming and bright, back to her. And this might not have been that uncomfortable or sweater scratchy if he could see at all a string attached to him, but he couldn't. Mostly because it wasn't really his to see, but also because she had long ago cut that twine. And so what appeared to him was a world full of color, and bright joy that he could (for some reason) only look in on, like he was a visitor

at some crazy creeped-up zoo where the real animal is *you*— except you're also doing the observing of foreign species. The walls covered in some unidentifiable grey metastasizing ooze bordering panes of glass in which classmates conferred back and forth about their girlfriends, missed homework, stupid uniform blazers and howmuchtheydidntwanttobe here. Try hearing that while the dark urge to not be *anywhere* slowly creeps on you, and you'd be right along side Gorge in terms of head-banging and straight incredulous attitude about what to eat next.

Understandably he wanted to leave.

Clouds rolled in over the mountains for a short summer shower, over just in time for the sunset to paint deep, vibrant landscapes— so beautiful it's undeniable God is a painter. Thin clouds spread purple mist through the deep orange red. This was the view from Fox's Lookout, anyway. Middleton, located down and in a valley could see merely the dark night sky encroaching on red-orangey-must-be wonder.

Later that night he arrived home, unlocking the door and stepping into the still house. He walked up the stairs, past his parents' bedroom, and the door, which was slightly ajar, lit up with morphing TV blue glow which (somehow he presumed) corresponded with the sounds of somebody explaining something to somebody softly coming from the TV. There was no need to peek his head in— His mother was asleep.

He walked into his room, and turned on the light (being used here in a sort of loose sense— the light really didn't light up much of the room). The splats of color around the room welcomed him, and set his eyes at ease. Many years ago, when his mother asked him what color he wanted to put on the wall, his response had been "All of em'" in a sort of joking-way, like a 13 yr. old howling in sarcasm at the moon. He had no idea his mother would take his joke so

seriously, but he was glad she had. He dreaded nothing more than a room with all four walls the same exact color. The paint splatter, if you entered the room for the first time, was jarring. Even he, sometimes, recoiled at a particularly oddly-shaped blob a little too close to the door-frame.

Eventually, though, it grew on the room, or perhaps the room grew around it. There were portions of the room he had added his own paint over, turning the abstract blobs into specific things, making them beautiful landscapes with villages in the distances, and bright-orange violent-berry-juice-squish-crush-summer skies; almonds falling off a tree branch; a yellow, forever radiating tear in reality in the top corner above his bed; and of course stars and the moon painted on the ceiling— so realistic it made one question whether or not the roof had flown off the house in the time it took to get in the door, through the family room, up the spiral staircase (which the fire dep. definitely didn't know about), down the hall and under the bead-hung doorway to the center of Gorge's room, plus the time it took to defeat the deafening onslaught of color shock the eye had to handle. He had discovered this weird and pretty cool effect with spray paint that made it look just like the reality of a night sky in the middle of nowhere, and he ran with it.

His mind was now (finally) calm, and he set down his bag next to his desk, changed out of his uniform, and crept under his covers. He felt at peace for the first time since he had left bed that morning. He shuddered at the idea of turning off the light. It wasn't even the dark he was afraid of— this he could handle if only it wasn't so []. He honestly couldn't take that.

He fell asleep drawing eyes with various patterns and geometric shapes around them. They seemed to him somehow magical, sacred, and ancient. They traveled from ruins and

glowing suns deep within inner-galaxies. The fan wafted slowly for most of the night, serenity whooshing cyclically from its pale-even-circular intonement.

A deep chanting of fans in dark rooms as summer-bug-chirp grows and falls with an almost rhythmic quality.

At around 4 a.m. his mother appeared silently in the doorway to his room. The light glowed softly, and left most of the room shrouded in a semi-darkness which was somehow softer on the eyes than complete darkness. She closed her eyes, and her heart broke a million times. She felt the fear of the coming years; her feet felt sinking like they feel at the beach— you know— when you're staring out at the horizon and all of a sudden your feet have sunken below the sand and you almost just want to stay there forever to see how deep the sand will take you; and also she felt a deep wish to return to rest. She wished him a goodnight, silently from across the room, and returned to bed.

For the rest of the morning until sunrise the house had an undersea stillness. Motes flew this way and that in would-be flashlight light, but everything else was frozen, as if abandoned in fear of a bomb that never went off. An empty treasure waiting to be explored by wanderers of later on.

II. (In which we meet the man with stars in his basement)

He sat in the chair facing his desk, shards of glass covering the floor of the basement all around his feet. At one point, he was not even sure now if it was days, weeks, or years ago, the glass bits had all been neatly arranged and un-fractured in large white framed windows from the old porch which used to be on the front of his house. Now the wood frames were swept aside,

and pieces of glass ranging from basically sand to no more than a quarter of the largest window were scattered all over. He could still hear the ringing of the phone in his mind. It sounded, he noted before he picked it up, more sinister. He knew exactly how it would feel before it felt but of course he didn't actually *feel* it until right then. Now those big antique windows were all gone. Windows which probably looked out over Fox's Lookout for hundreds of years now lay smashed in the house's basement, glittering-sand stars. He could almost hear the glass glittering in the light from the desk, which was bent at an angle meant to provide the highest intensity of shard sparkle he could find. He sat there at his desk, a field of stars stretching out behind him. What did it matter? What could it have ever mattered if it could turn into something as beautiful as this? Each shard caught the light differently, and the formations changed as one moved about the room. Each individual point in the room had its own special secret— its own eternal lullaby.

He pushed the lamp aside, and the shimmers faded slightly, not diminished by their softening light, but somehow growing— saving energy. Leaning his elbow on his desk, he rubbed the area between his eyes as he opened them, the blue rolls of intricate drawings for the building which he currently was located beneath overtaking his vision. Blueprints for the house.

He'd had nightmares. Nightmares where he would go to the blueprints, and they wouldn't match at all— worst of it all: neither the house nor the blueprints were familiar in the slightest. The blueprints were written all over in some gibberish he could never understand, and the house curving in on itself, hallways appearing longer than physically possible, rooms becoming infinitely huge and/or folding in on themselves creating a room looping the same moment over and over again. He tried to think, but admittedly that was hard. He had been sitting down to close his eyes and breathe for a moment before going down to do a little work on the new blueprints

for the reconstructed house when he got the call. He had grand— almost delusional— plans for the re-construction of his family home. When he was a little boy he had watched his grandfather in the garage take apart cars to their smallest breakdownable parts, and lay them out on huge pieces of fabric with perfect little outlines for each component. He would stand there— probably directly in the way of the red taller-than-him toolbox, which (it seemed to him standing there in his OshKosh B'gosh Overalls) had too many drawers to ever open, let alone keep things in— mesmerized by the small parts which (he could only trust from his grandfather's confidence) would somehow come together in a specific order and make a CAR; or I suppose more accurate would be an AUTOMOBILE, for this sounded older, and just a little bit more distinguished to his thin easy-red ears. But in truth, he was more mesmerized by the perfect little set apart spots which contained no small part³. Had his grandfather not taken that part out yet, or was that part already put back in? Perhaps it joined with another creating a whole new part whose respective functions, fused together, created an entirely new function for the AUTOMOBILE speeding 85 miles an hour down Rt. 3.

It was this memory, now vague and tattered in a slow-suspended-foggy-place deep in his brain which fueled this deep desire to take apart his entire house using this method. He would theoretically need two square miles of white-burlap-fabric to lay each piece of the old house out, make sure it was clean and working correctly, and put it back together. Of course not in the same way— nothing can ever be put together the same way twice, and he knew this fact of life well.

³ Unless they were so small that he literally could not see them— and reality aside what would that mean? A part so small you can't even see it with the naked eye, which was essential, fundamental, *integral* even to the basic innate structural integrity of the AUTOMOBILE. How many parts are there like this that we cannot see? He wondered about this probably countless times until the thought was more of a comforting sleepy habit of identity than an actual meaty thought, and who knows if he ever got anywhere with this being the case.

This very fact is what unlocked his freedom, and allowed him to (at least live under the impression) that he could make it whatever he wanted it to be if only he could

Get it all a p a r t.

Then he could have the freedom of his vision.

But this had all been brought to a screeching halt when he got the call. His daughter had been in surgery (six hours past the amount of time the operation was supposed to take. Everyone constantly reassuring them that there were complications, but nothing to worry about. *Why don't you go home — get some rest, and some things for her to be comfortable with when she gets out,* which was almost certainly where about 60% of the guilt came from: *he wasn't even there* in the hospital when it happened) and there had been complications even Dr. Phil couldn't have avoided, and there was nothing to really be done. This wasn't so much what the very nice nurse on the phone said, but it was what was brimming behind it. A big heaping plate of "I'm saying sorry because there's nothing else to really *do*." He completely understood it, and yet it didn't take away any of the anger. It didn't take away the center which screamed and hated them all because they didn't understand. But even if they did, would it make him feel less lost? He didn't only lose his daughter that day— he lost himself. That day he set the plastic kitchen phone down slowly, and pretty exactly, and gripped his hand as the receiver sat in the clip, pushing it down. He focused his eyes to clear his mind, not able to face the endlessness of his own close-eyed-mind, and calmly walked downstairs to the basement. He saw the windows, all sitting in neat rows arranged by size, and he smashed them. After years of methodically planning to take apart his house, it all seemed meaningless. Who cared if it was all in a giant heaping mess in the basement hole?

As he sat there with the stars behind him, he remembered hearing once from some brought-along friend at the high school lunch tables that rocket science is so hard because the rocket's mass is constantly changing. Flying at 8 microkilometers per-second and more parts moving and changing every second (not to mention the changing velocities and weights and directions and efforts of various physicists, mathematicians, and chemists concerned with the actual construction of this object that will be launched into space and have to *stay together* despite being purposely forced apart by the various parts that are *supposed* to remove themselves mid-flight, and the rest of the thing is supposed to just *keep on flying* like *nothing ever happened*) than you could possibly imagine.

III. (In which we meet Rust, and learn of his infatuation with &)

Bursting bouts of color changing ever rearranging light; low sounds breaking into color-loaded-jumble flight at five A.M.. Cold creeping only through the window lining the bed, anything else warm and safe under the covers; the gentle light of the sun having not yet risen above neighboring houses cast the room in a gentle marble blue as Rust's eyes opened just a sliver to see that the light in the room had not yet become harsh. There was no perfect rectangle of light cast upon the letters which lined his walls— letters from generations past which came into his life in one way or another. Some of them were from his own relatives, but most were from people who hadn't seen each other in a long time, and who you could mostly tell wouldn't

(or didn't?) for a long time too. He stretched out his arm over the empty side of the bed towards the window, feeling the cool covers slip along his arms, and then

the*freeze*of*palm*and*spread*fingers*on>window*glass. His hands had been sweaty, and he closed his eyes once more as he took in the **freezing** sensation the window provided. This did not, however, mean that it would necessarily be a cold day. It frequently got extremely cold at night— might even snow— but that would mean nothing for the following day's weather. He had tossed and turned all night, watching the small flakes settle in the darkness, and not sure if they were real or just his imagination until white edges appeared along roads and in recent footsteps. He had only managed to become hazy from exhaustion about a half hour/hour ago, but now, as he sat in the calm not yet risen light of his room, that didn't really seem to matter because he felt all too awake and all together With It. Sometimes you wake up and it's like that. Your eyes shoot open, and you don't even have time to lull yourself back to sleep because it was all such a sudden thing that now you are *here*; you have been popped into this world once again (this is precisely when somebody *else* would help things along quite nicely), and even the possibility of another moment relaxed in your bed won't be possible until you creep back in tonight, heart aching at the empty side of the bed (and there it was, not two minutes into being awake) and palms beginning to sweat from the mere { }. His bed wasn't even really his bed anymore.

But anyway so to distract himself from all of that going on in his head, he decided quickly that he should immediately begin getting ready for school, or else it would certainly be too late. Silverware and plates could be heard downstairs— his whole family had always been early risers. It was not uncommon on a weekday to smell the cooking of eggs and hear the

scratch of a knife and fork on an empty plate, cutting too far into soft pancakes— the noises which you don't really seem to notice while you're eating, but to anyone else it's practically *bonkers*.

He swung his legs over the edge of his bed, curled them up into his chest, and shot upwards in a fluid jump motion, landing his feet squarely on the floor, and curving his body up to a straight line. Sometimes the dread of the { } just manifested itself as a sort of crazy exploding energy which even sometimes scared him. The anxiety, far from gone, needed to be repressed if he was to become any kind of functioning human. He could easily allow the stuff to keep him in bed all day, he imagined like one of the animals stuck in the tar pits he had seen on the TV as a child (He used to sit in bed at night, and fear that overnight his house would inexplicably be overtaken by an undiscovered quick-sand-like type of tar which only manifested beneath his family's home. It was a strange childhood fear which almost brought him comfort as he got older and understood its relative improbability, but still scared him out of his wits if we're talking the mere hypothetical situation actually *happening*), but he had things he had to do, and futures to prepare for. He got on his blueish-grey dress pants, and looped the belt through each of the little holes in the pants. He definitely needed the belt, the pants over the past few months had become much too big for him, or perhaps the other way around. They were so big on him they looked ridiculously and comically pleated, as if he should be walking down the street at an angle, wearing a blazer with equally comically large lapels, and a hat with a feather right on par with the pleats/lapels. He *had* been getting skinnier, this was true, but this was straight up ridiculous. He took the belt off and the pants fell off without needing to be unbuttoned.

These were obviously not his pants, if anyone was still wondering.

This was, in actuality, not an altogether uncommon occurrence. Very often after school the boys would change into clothes which more befit their nature, which they brought with them to school in their thin one-notebook-one-pen-size bags⁴ (Rust, however, mostly stayed in his 28/30 dark-blue or blueish-grey dress pants and plain-toe dark brown oxfords, which he really needed a new pair of, but don't tell him that.) and pants, easily lost and left at each other's houses all looking the same if one wasn't paying close scrupulous attention to the sizes, (and I mean after all these pants are in *your* room, so why should you expect any different?). He rummaged through the drawers of the large chest of drawers which covered almost the entire north wall of his room. He wasn't worried about the pants issue; he was certain he had a pair that would fit him somewhere. But now he was stuck with this pair of pants.

The single light in his shared walk-in closet beat down on him. The ceiling came slanted downwards because this ceiling was the roof of the house, and it was almost as if this caused the light to heat him up as he got ready in the morning, always making him dress a few degrees more liberally than he probably should have. He walked downstairs, his family all in their work/school clothes, ready to go at 5 a.m. For his mother, even this was a luxury. Usually she was out the door 4:45, clocking in at 4:58. Early shifts at the hospital (which were what she almost always had unless she switched with somebody), always had the most unusual feeling. They were full of people who were still in their pajamas; in the middle of getting ready for work; in the process of opening up your local corporate bookstore— all those regular morning lives de-railed. They looked lost, confused, in a world foreign and strange. These early hours at the hospital were some of the most serene. What she meant was that, in retrospect, it was (usually) peaceful. If no

⁴ The likes of which honestly confused him, because the set of all possible ways in which they could possibly fit all their required course texts inside that skinny little bag, plus the extra clothes, was {null}.

one was seriously injured and coming in with their eyeball out of their head or a gash so big you didn't *blame* them for wailing bloody murder, it was a strange land of lost, de-railed, confused humans, looking for a half decent bagel. Distant coughs, keyboard keys rattling away, and the murmur of hospital-calm-beeps.

So but today either she was late, or she had switched with someone— which she wasn't the former Rust knew, so there must have been a switch.

“Ah!” His father's voice intoned, gong-like as his feet descended the stairs, making them creak and settle in ways they were all accustomed to “Another country heard from!”

“Do you know where your brother is?” His mother immediately asked him, eyes looking up from her computer with a sharp glare. The light outside rising now against the neighbors' houses— peeking through the brick holes of the chimney in the lot bordering theirs, on which stands by itself covered in ivy the only remnants of a whole series of lives which lived there. He used to imagine the house around it, and then the different versions of the house he could come up with. It filled with different decors and different items— an infinity of possibilities.

“No,” he remarked, “Am *I* his keeper?”

“Duh.” His (other) younger brother John piped in, “That's the *entire* point of the Bible...”

“Look, he's right there,” Rust added with a smirk, pointing to his brother eating cereal beside her.

“Apparently, you haven't heard the news...” his father started, “...your brother here has achieved enlightenment; The Big 'E'; Nirvana. He has Transcended this *plain* entirely!” he jokingly shouted, as if from a mountaintop near the end. His brother puts his cereal spoon down

for a moment, closing his eyes and linking his pointer and index fingers intently, biting his bottom lip to stifle laughter. Rust's mother barely glanced at his father's joke.

"We haven't seen him all morning." She looked worried sick.

This, however, was no cause for concern, and everyone knew it. His youngest brother was (most definitely and without a doubt) outside in the tree-house. If he hadn't been sleeping out there, he went out there early in the morning even before anyone woke up— watching the dark morning opening its lid just along the edges (it being his secret with himself that morning twilight was simply better), trailing his old plaid quilt along the twiggy path.

Joan was also fully aware of this, at least in theory, but she had not seen the proof with her own two eyes (or with anyone's two eyes really. They all merely assumed he would be out there because that was where he continued to show up). Rust, reading all of this and more in his mother's expression and voice elected,

"I'll go check the treehouse for him."

It would be an excuse to take a little walk in the woods anyway, away from the face-drying warmth of the wood-burning stove. He could feel it seep into his cheeks, the dry heat. Moisture leaving the cheeks and edges of the eyes feeling cracked and leathery. The morning light shone on the pastel houses, and made it feel like the whole of suburbia was cast in celestial jam. The houses were only of four or five different variations, but each was itself— with vines growing here or a shutter hanging askew.

Through the skeletal tree blooming tiny white blossoms and hanging like a weeping willow, orange shone in a perfect rectangle against the white house. The windowpane was raised slightly, creating the effect of a semi-cross, and directly in the center was static and frayed

golden hair. &⁵ sat upright in bed, looking down at something in her lap. A book, or her phone held her attention. Her home was diagonal from Rust's back yard, and across a street, but still close enough that Rust was sure that was her sitting with her back to the wall through the tiny newly-budded tree. & held his attention for a little bit longer than he would have cared to admit to anyone who would have happened upon him, and he realized this, but he just kept on, captivated by the different quality of light which surrounded her. From his room poured a harsh, yellow or white light, but in her room a deep, glowing orange spread. The combination of this, and her hair (which could captivate him in itself— appearing as it did, as if defying dimension) and he was no match. His chest sunk right there, and he soaked it in like a sponge.

She was the one who had caused Gorge all those problems. She was the reason Gorge kinda left this huge hole in all their lives for a while. Rust, now walking through the thick wood is smoking a joint he has pulled out of a little patch sewn into the inside of his shoe. These ones have classy, cloth seer-sucker pattern lining, and he hasn't ever been able to find another pair like this. He goes and checks on his brother in the treehouse— the one they have had since Rust was a young boy, about a 2-minute walk into the woods. He goes back to his home, and sits in the yellow light; he jokes with his father a bit; he reads his book in the big grey chair; he goes to school, and learns about cell division in Biology; for some reason he can't get the term "nuclear fusion" out of his head at lunch, and he's sure he hasn't heard it today and no one's been talking about it recently, but it seems like it's all around him in everything he sees. Through all this, though— and past it— the glow of the crossed rectangle stays overlaid in his mind. It doesn't go

⁵ Her full legal name being "& B. Langley-Smith," — most people (including her family) calling her what they believe is "And," (the last syllable of "Ampersand," and what (totally not coincidentally) the ampersand stands for) but really usually comes out sounding more like "End." (i.e. — Orthographically (the ampersand aside) it's "And" but phonologically it's /ɛnd/)

away no matter how many things are going on— in fact the more things that are going on around him that he has to process (e.g. muffled cafeteria screaming; the smell of grass and Gorge passing the one hitter to his right and not his left goddamnit; sanitary-bathroom-cover-up smell; Dingy tapping his foot like a flipping *mad man*; light moving in the corner of his eye and realizing it's just the shadow of a maintenance man on the roof through a skylight) the more it situates itself, shines itself, washes itself over his every thought. He couldn't get it out of his head, and he wasn't sure if it was her, or the feeling of forever he felt there, seeing his breath leave his body and disappear before it really got the chance to go anywhere.

IV. (In which Gorge recounts his dream)

“I had another one of those dreams again. And I don't really know what to do and I can't really stop it and it's horrible I mean...

I forever go to that moment. I mean how could I not, I was sitting there in Real Life, and I felt it, *click* but almost like someone held up a wine glass and just calmly broke its stem in two— it turned into a memory right in front of me. I was so extraordinarily and clearly intoxicated— it was the first time I ever felt anything like that. Her breast rose and fell like the tides under changing moons, and the stars I had painted on the ceiling reflected in her eyes, and that's the memory but it's also where the dream starts. And so as she falls asleep she's got her hand on my chest, and her fingertips sprout roots which go deep deep inside and all that's there are tattered strings and incomplete sentences and half-forgotten tenses. I bleed and bleed, and wake up (they say you cannot fall asleep in dreams, but then they should have me studied because I could tell them some *horror-story* sleep dreams), but anyway I wake up with a small

nick on my wrist— one of those cuts you wake up with and you're not entirely sure how it got there— by the way, that's how I feel sometimes like a— like a cut that you don't really know how— well we'll get back there. Anyway so I go to the bathroom, and before I can even look in the mirror I see her **BAM** fucking dead in the bathtub. And of course that wakes my brain right up and I'm cold-sweating-and-conscious and I'm just here, like here I am, and I'm not even sure how I've gotten here.

V. (In which we meet the wife of the man with stars in his basement)

Rain fell outside the houses, turning them all into warm protective places. Drops of rain surrounded the homes, and the feeling deepened, as if the houses of Barron County were immensely dense, and warping the space and time around them, turning them into warm and loving eternities. The trees swayed with the wind and limbs lit up stark in lightning. The droplets slowly fell from the sky, and everything turned silent for just a moment— as if all around the droplets were amassing into one unstoppable sound, forgotten long ago by the ear.

It was supposed to be a record hot day, but so far you could still see your breath. The air was getting colder in the margins of the day recently. If you didn't pay attention, the cold might sneak up on you, until one day you're wearing mittens and smelling wood burning through your red numb nose. The way smells inhabit our entire being, filling us with what they've left behind.

Gently the rain grew faster, and soon the whole of everything was storming. Streams down streets stretched far away, and down some streets generators hummed powering the individual units.

Everything hushed.

The refrigerator filled to the brim with clear and curry-stained tupperware containers each packed tight with lasagna, pieces of pie, chicken cutlet, and potatoes in an incredible amount of forms. Enough food to feed an entire family 3 times over.

Family. Now there's a relative term. One of those you don't realize is relative until you're kind of forced to, like time and space or love. We say the word "family" and we all have our own specific idea of what a family is, but the truth is it's constantly shifting. People leaving and arriving all connected by these webs that are just so easily snipped—

On the porch overlooking Lake St. Regis, the wife of the man with stars in his basement watched the clouds form ever-changing shadows and patches of differing grey. She really never could stand a blue sky, all perfect and uniform and monotone. He much preferred the complex shades of clouds. The cold air entered the porch which had no widows. Only half-hinges painted flaky-cracked-old white. She paced the length of the now open porch in her robe and socks, continuously opening and closing her eyes. She was trying not to cry, but she wasn't really sure why. At once she felt like she had cried enough for her entire life, and like she had a lifetimes of crying to come. It seemed never ending.

The lake rippled and rocked a million little times, and yet stayed still in its movement, and whole. As her feet stepped along the old porch, the hardwood beneath her feet settled. With each step the house's bones sunk into the land, even though this house was one of the first built in Barron County.

The world moved too fast for her now. There was this feeling of stretching out into the past from the very spot she stood— and it stung. It stung like it got caught beneath her shirt on a loose summer day and started freaking out like you were the enemy. She looked down at the

lake, and the log she sat on so many times with her daughter still stood there, the same as it had been. She remembered one night before all of it, she walked down the pine-needled limb-lined path, down to the lake and found her daughter sitting there, her head against the night sky and the millions of stars— there seemed to be so many more than when she was a girl. As they sat by the edge of the lake each of her atoms began to sparkle and glimmer, and she could see it and feel it in her daughter's hands and shoulders— whole galaxies within her. The puff of smoke left her daughter's lips, but she didn't care anymore at that point about the weed. Perhaps she should have, but even now she didn't really feel guilty for it. She came up behind her daughter, and stood by her. Elizabeth had heard her coming, and so wasn't startled— even when her mother sat down next to her smoking a joint. Her mother sat down next to her, and neither of them said a word. Neither of them really had any more to say. They had agreed, at this point, that if she was going to have to undergo an unforeseen amount of surgeries on her wrists/hands that the least she could be allowed was to smoke a little pot by the lake.

She looked up at the sky while her mother looked at the sky's reflection in the lake. Her mother sat for a while, and wondered what her daughter saw there in the stars— she had once seen them like that, but that was long ago. Now all she could really see was the stars laid out on the still lake, as if on a tapestry or fabric.

Eventually her mother left, and she took out the picture again. She looked down, and could see her father, standing blurry at the sink in the old kitchen, and her mother sat at the table, a little bit more focused with a beautiful smile on her face— but not an intentional one. It appeared as if she was in the middle of a story, or a joke with the photographer. How could someone look so good? In the middle of telling a story?

She often tried to imagine what story her mother could be telling. What her mother could be so joyous about, and her father so relaxed, goofily washing dishes in the background in a posture like he was probably dancing around and having *fun* with it. Who were these people? When she held this picture her hands felt like glowing beacons of hope. All other times they ached with the pain of the tumors she felt metastasizing every day.

She took the little tin box by her side and put the picture and smoking apparati in it and returned it to her pocket. Later that night she would return it to its place among the many boxes she collected of various sizes and kinds. Elizabeth had a large collection of items, and a specific spot for each one. Every box was tetrized perfectly with everything from her tarot cards to a 20-sided die she found on the street one day. These boxes all still remained in her room, pieces of memories and happenings which would mean nothing to anyone but Elizabeth. Not even her mother, quietly pacing the removed-windows porch.

VI. (In which Rust and Gorge both think and dream)

The amount of times she appeared in the thoughts of the two boys that night couldn't have been caught by a celestial spider-web. And neither of them were "in love" with her, though perhaps this is the terminology they would have used at the time— but they both did care a great deal for her. A spider-web big enough to catch earth like a speck of dust would be no match for the onslaught of thoughts which now surrounded her whether she could feel it or not. Gorge lay in his bed, half-way between awake and asleep, silently allowing thoughts of her to slip by him

here and there, not trying to catch them and put them in a jar labeled and categorized, but enjoying them being there— for his half-asleep mind knew that no matter how he forced them they would not go away before their time.

Before when he was more awake, he could think of nothing but the last time he and & made love. How she was there and for the first time (really for the first time) he felt wholly caressed and taken care of. And then the same night she broke it off. It's strange how things go round in a circle like that. Even though the moment is definitely over, it's hard for it not to be tinged by a pain of pity. A pain of something he feared he misread— he thought of how *real* and perfect— almost hill-like— her back was. He scolded himself. He twinged with uncertainty and self pity sitting there in his bed.

Rust, finally half asleep and almost drenched, was beginning the beginnings of a dream. His mind was wholly unencumbered by the black hole growing in his bed, and which seemed to follow him around even where he traveled that day, reminding him that his moments were slowly being sucked away. In his dream he wandered, half dazed, in an office building with doors upon doors. Each door had a different number, which was in no conceivable logical order. Thirty-five was followed by 9,295,345,824,812,124, and Rust was scared by the mere possibility of a number that big, and not only the possibility of it, but the reality that that number could be infinitely expanded. It might even be a less frightening dream, he thinks as he's in it, if the numbers were in numerical order. Then at the very least the only fear is infinity. Here there's the reality *and* fear of it. The possibility to stumble across a number so large it forces you to realize that infinity is even *larger* than that number, and also even a number double, or triple as long as

that. And the fear gets farther and farther away from itself, until it's just a big looming presence that there seems no way out of.

And then a girl appears (which isn't a big surprise for Rust— his dreams almost always include a girl), and she just appears almost out of nowhere, and she's got jet-black frames and short flowy hair, and she looks somehow familiar but forgotten, like from a childhood memory he can't put his mind completely on, and she looks so familiar it drives his chest wild. He can't understand why his heart folds and blooms, but she grabs his wrist and they just start running. They fly past the doors with ridiculous numbers on them, some spilling onto the floor without enough room on the door, until they reach the end and suddenly she's not there anymore. And he's lost again in the hallways, until he happens upon a window in the hallway. Outside it is dark and the hallway light dangles and illuminates his face in the glass, and he finally realizes why that girl looked so familiar.

VII. (Errata)

The moon hung in the sky like a shattered visage in the stark plain blue of the morning. If you looked at it for long enough, you could tell (though only half of it faintly appeared) that it was a real 3-D object up there, not the flat big white thing which sometimes appeared in his mind. The moon was almost exactly halved, as if the other side had fallen off, or was over the other side of the earth sight now. He did wonder, quietly there, about how this all worked. It seemed a little unfair that at the moment they had *both* the moon and the sun. Shouldn't the other side of the earth have one or the other at the moment? Weren't those two things not supposed to happen at the same time?

The tops of the bare trees appeared red, stark against the uniform morning bright blue sky, and created an aura that wasn't there. In the tree edges, brown and ravaged by winter, a silver remnant of a once-filled "Happy Birthday!" balloon flutters in the wind of the cars speeding by on highway, and catches his eye. One of his favorite things is seeing things caught in trees— ribbons you notice fluttering while standing in your kitchen one morning, which belong to no one in one particular in un-housed squares of land.

He counted the balloons (and shiny, empty things) caught in trees and brush on the side of the highway as the car sped down I-38. The ventricle that was I-38 had an impossible-to-navigate-absolutely-stunning 30 lanes of traffic (that being 15 pairs of stunning bright light fevering towards you from the opposite side, and 14 pairs of pulsing red lights, speeding right alongside you). The interstate entered Barron County in the East and bent, exiting in the south. Most locals had no need to go on the interstate, and few want to. The complex lanes are filled with strange foreigners mostly, by and large passing through, not even getting off the "I" as it is simply called. The truth is not many people know what lay beyond Barron County who live there. Most cars flipped the switch marked "*❄️*" when it was snowing, and noticed Lake St. Regis, feeling a sudden desire to strap on skates and move in figure-eights. Most wondered silently which exit would take them for a moment, before the I bent south and sweeping, took them away from St. Regis. Either that or they opened up their convertible tops when it was sunny, and noticed the Lake once again, shimmering with waterskiers passing over and surrounded by bodies of salamander-shimmer-sun reflection (which seems somehow at once concentrated under the sun, and also spread out along the rest of the wave peaks like butter all across the lake), and they wonder pretty much the same exact thing, except this time their desires

are red-&-white-striped umbrella'd, and sweaty-sandy beach'd. The truth is that the I is in fact a pretty glorified roundabout, the main road forming a loop, and various opportunities to exit. The result of this large looping interstate being, you can imagine, various people getting stuck looping it for quite some time of their early adult lives. One of the cars they passed seemed to have rust from the mesozoic era on it, and another, short and stout and pattering along, had fire decals peeling off, and the man inside wearing a helmet. Some of these people, he knew, had been trapped on the highway for a long time— the rub being getting caught in the outside lane and literally not being able to remove one's self from this position for months or (in extreme cases) years at a time. People sink into their cars, sipping Sprite watered down with half-empty ice cubes, and relying on the Interstate-Food system— a system which miraculously didn't even require you to stop driving (not even to stop speeding) to have a hot and (somehow) dry and soggy at the same time burger “delivered” straight to your car. The only time they really get out of their car is to fill up, an even then you don't really even *have* to stop your car— just slow it down to a crawl.

Anyway as quick as they were on the I they're off it, and the rolling downramp causes a sinking feeling in the centers of not just the people in the car with the boy but also the passengers of the cars behind and in front of the Gorge-family-mobile. This particular trip *did* include a short spout on the I, and for that reason his father had driven. It was far too easy to get intimidated by the brick-like closeness of the cars— merging seemed almost impossible. The secret to calmly doing it, and a few knew, was just to simply trust that you would safely make it into the five-by-six group of cars moving as one (1) car at exactly the same speed down the

highway which didn't seem to be moving over one bit to make room. You really had to give it some good old-fashioned faith.

Every time hair seemed to be flowing through the windblown highway, his head sparked up, like sonar detecting the flows of hair. He had to make sure it wasn't her— that it wasn't, by some crazy off chance, & with her bare foot pressed against the gas pedal.

VII.

Very close to when they got married, but not quite, little pink tiny rosebuds bloomed almost everywhere. On wallpaper trimming and small paper cups and doctor's office chairs, and even on tiny bone-thin teacups which wraith-like far away rattle. The feeling of these surrounding her is what she called upon in her first RAM trip. RAM, almost standing for what you think it does, stands for Random Access Memories— an experimental feature on the (fairly recent) invention— The Perpetual Memory™. The Perpetual Memory, or “P-mem” as it is called on the streets, allows consumers to fully re-live any memory they choose— so long as they have lived it themselves at one point in their lives. In the very beginning, there was some upset about the recent invention. Many scholarly articles came out skeptical about not only the socio-emotional impact this type of a device would have, but also about simply the *practical* qualities of the device. Wouldn't this cause more issues than it could (potentially) solve? But eventually the reality of the Device set in. The small amount of scholarly criticism was drowned by cultural praise— a massive upheaval in the way people interacted with...well...with their interactions.

The boys were in the other room playing a videogame. The game (some sort of search-for-pieces-of-this-broken-sacred-item-to-save-the-world type deal) was paused, and

faintly could be heard the beeping of the item selection screen. Behind the transparent background which signified that time inside the game was PAUSED, the main player-character stood with his sword drawn at ruins around him. There was a single controller, and its connecting wire ran from the game-console and down across the floor all kinked and bent in certain places from years of being wrapped crudely around the little joysticks and triggers. The boys ran back into the room, all three, and sat down eyes widened in front of the television. The boy in the middle pressed the small rubber button in the center of the controller, and the action recommenced. The boy steered the adventurer through underground ruins with ancient tomes and scripts on the walls. The ruins seemed somehow jovial, and from the kitchen small sounds of music and footsteps could be heard, along with the occasional cry from the player character when he was pushed to use his sword.

Other than that she couldn't really recognize anything outside her own mental state. At that moment the tiny pink rosebuds bloomed and were eternal in her senses.

The experimental RAM feature on the p-mem was the newest unknown spectre. Unknown in its capabilities at this time, but for the most part pretty well understood— The RAM accesses various *units* of memories in the brain by decoding and structuring the various mental and physical (which are really *all* mental) sensations and associations, and rounding them up based on emotional/firing pattern similarity brain-wise. That's how *it* works, but here's how it *works*. After receiving the Keith-Covoulson 34.65.456 Beta update, a small symbol of a ram should be newly visible alongside the library icon. Clicking on the ram will then prompt the user to enter any number (1-30 was really all that had been tested by Covoulson the night before the release) of “keyphrases” which, direct directions state: “...must neither be exact, nor imprecise,

but merely the closest one can get with this imperfect language of ours to describing the *pure emotion...*”(K-C_Beta_Update_34.65.456_Details.pdf). The result of which is the complete, indescribable, visceral and with-all-five-senses-and-then-some feeling and experiencing of *pure emotion*.

The boys sit and say things to an almost invisible 4th person in the room with them.

“Get that piece there.”

“That bat is coming for you.”

“Did you see that thing sparkle on the floor there?”

“Oh shit.”

Clank of metal against shield.

“Maybe it was important you should go back”

“Use the potion, use the potion, use the potion!”

Buttons *click* evenly like water babbling over pebbles

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

They kind of flutter over your eyes, and wash over your vision until you’re no longer There. You’re wherever you’ve chosen to be, all in a second. Everything is recorded. Every change, every sound, every particle in the air is exactly the same each time.

It’s not like you can go back and behave any differently. There’s actually this kind of odd-dream-like quality to it, because you’re a passive viewer in your own body, feeling the immediacy of *that* moment only secondarily to the emotion being felt (as the presumably older

you) primarily in *response to* the emotion the memory version of yourself is experiencing. It really isn't even all that dramatic to use. When you hear what it does to you you think there must be some excruciating eye-ball insertion, but no. It's kind of like a contact but even easier. It's like a little blue dot beneath the tear duct, and voila. Memories sent right to your eyeballs. But this new feature—the RAM—there was something here. Something of more meat than even the original creation. This allowed the user to (effectively) have unlimited new and extremely visceral, almost violently visceral and real interactions with what were by nature or whatever higher power you chose to believe in meant to be merely conceptual intangible feelings. One pictured the hand grasping around some abstract purple glow and the entire body bursting at the seams for merely getting too close—this was the raw power of the RAM.

It incapacitated you for days afterwards, though no one really managed to end up writing *that* in the PDF⁶, not because of anything the actual *device* did to you, but really as a result of what it put you through.

It brought out that invisible third party. The one who must have been controlling something all along but just didn't know it. The one processing and creating emotion in the moment became the piece of scrutiny.

⁶ Although footnote 6 does include a “q.v.” to Article 6 subsection 56 of the *Reliabilities and Consult Deferments/ Requirements for Health and Service Obligation for K-C Ltd.*, which contains a footnote to a footnote in which the reader is directed to “readme.txt” in the P:\pmem\mem\assoc.\RAM\info\misc folder of the P-mem system (the access of which would require the connection of an older (more reliable at this point) computer which could look intently at the actual *files* which got put together to let you look at your own memories) which mentioned that the user “...may be fatigued...” following RAM use.

Driving along the tree wall along the highway spills into rolling hills with block groups of homes gathering like animals here and there along the hills. Looking out of the car window speeding past the h

Their house sat along the woods on the outskirts of Nowhere Barron County. Trees surrounded the houses, and the land was flatter. In some places, the trees were so thick the sky was tiny pieces of red-purple glass. In other places, the trees stretched serpentine as smaller branches cracked the sky thin among them. In the east the sky was purple cracks, and in the west it was deep reds and oranges leaking into leftover blues. Across the street and a patch of tree filled land a neighbor has unloaded a baby-blue-chipping dresser with two drawers missing (the first and third from top to bottom) and many of the double knobs on the remaining drawers are missing, or half-hanging, or would clearly just pull out if you ever tried to pull on it. The house stood overlooking mostly forest and a few of the houses nearer to the outskirts of where the houses appeared. The forests surrounding their home in Outer Barron Country kept them safe and kept them anonymous. No one could tell where the house was— where the wood of the walls ended and the trees began— and without looking directly at the thin creeping vine of a driveway there was almost no chance you'd see it, even on a bright and sunny day. The forest was safe for it's repetition and sameness. Many retreat into it, and take pleasure in it's safe walls, almost as if out of time. Wandering the outer regions of the settled counties, one could easily

stumble across some old forgotten way of life, long though dead and gone. There had been a lot discovered recently— forgotten packs of time in the woods, shocking even

Early he realized if you're always firing you'll just be scaring away all the deer. Other times you needed to take the deer into account, and think about what might possibly be the *deer's* point of view

ESTATE SALE TODAY

EVERYTHING MUST GO

— 23 Lake Terrace Rd., Outer Barron County, 78563

- Beautiful wicker chair, as if from the Addams Family house— visible fraying of wicker and holes in some places, still good for sitting.
- Chippendale dresser, with magnificent brass handles. Comes to a convex in the front middle. Good condition, some scratches on top.
- Vintage record player (and records) in good condition

That was the summer on the island. Down Island. The large island filled with rolling downs— thus its name— and not much else in terms of geography. The hillsides were very normally covered in foggy mist in the early morning, and soaring along its many dirt roads which ran ribbon-like along the tops and down the gentle flows of warm earthy yellow-brown-light-green hills many large estates could be found, and by ten in the morning the fog will always have dissipated into whatever cool bright blue or dark stormy day it was going to

be. The house they stayed in was large, and nearly bordered the lake. The four of them (& and her mother, and Rust and his father) visited the large estate on Down Island for two weeks from 1998 to 2012. The estate and house had been owned for 6 or 7 generations by the Pemrose family.

& B. Langley-Smith, and her mother, Virginia Pemrose always drove out of the northern exit of Middleton. The sign, as they passed it covered in ivy, was missing one “d,” and part of the top of the now-chipped-and-faded-gold-embossed letters. The night before, very very late, she would always hear her mother and father muffled and talking sharply at one another. Pacing back and forth and taking turns— the two of them didn’t stop all night and she almost never got any sleep these nights. She would be awake all night, but that would be ok. She could sleep in the car, because the next morning (her father gone on his yearly business trip) the two of them made their way to Down Island. The light leaked over the land and seemed to take an eternity to rise. The highway felt crackled, the early light bespeckled and shifting through the spaces in the trees. Every once in awhile her eyes, looking out the cold frosted window, would be able to focus still on the moving, evenly scanning light patches through the trees, but eventually they would return to keeping track of specific trees— not able to see the picture of the whole but caught up in remaining in eye-contact with one particular tree as they passed by. The road seemed different with just her mother driving. She in the back seat, nose making a comet shaped fog patch on the inside of the window, her mother in the front, quietly sipping her coffee.

Then the car would get on the ferry, and they could get off and stretch their legs— enjoy the deck and waters of Lake St. Regis (Given it wasn’t frozen solid),

If he was a universe he would never want to get smaller. He would want to run through and get larger and larger and control greater and greater masses by the second— of course until he was just alone. Until he was alone in his mind and he got so large, controlling first animals and trees and then flocks of these and going outward to the galaxies beyond our own, and, of course, he would just eventually get so big that he would loop back around again, and get small, so small it looks like everything exists in a bubble-horizon around you, and the universes which made him up were again made nothing. He chose, then, because he was all of it, to watch her on that day he had seen only a glimpse of her walking down the street— except now he should be able to see the entire ordeal— and he could. He felt a bit creepy and stalkerish, until he realized that he was her as well— deciding which path to take back from her class and concerned with the weather, and the umbrella she hasn't been able to find for a few weeks. He had access to all of this information, he realized very quickly, and decided at once to keep it at bay. There was something lost in the instant knowing of all of that infinity— it ceased to be an infinity. He realized that this infinity which he perceived in others— that which was unobtainable— was only unobtainable insofar as you can never be *sure* you've collected the whole thing. In fact, you can be *sure* you haven't, but you can also be sure that it's better than eating it all up at once, leaving no more boxes to sift through.

Will I ever see you again? Sometimes I wonder if I will, as if there are spaces in the day where I know it will happen, where I can almost all but see you there in front of me, in the car I pass driving too fast or the face rounding the corner of the street. I'm not altogether always sure

that it will be *you*, but it always comes back to you, that's for sure. That reminds me, I left my scarf at your house last winter, and I haven't needed it until now, but the Fall is getting harsher by the day, and my neck is barren and cold— I worry I will never be able to retrieve it and catch my last glimpse of you. You wouldn't be there anyway. You would be away with a friend or ice skating with rosy cheeks while some boy felt your small waist outfitted in knit patterns. Frumpy soft over sleek cool. Is it obvious I can't stop thinking about you? Please respond to this letter as soon as you get it— I don't believe another day without your contact bemuses me.