

**fuck
everyone
but us**

or [$We \times 10^{11}$]

Sarah Ciston

We – *Plural Pronoun, Objective Us,
Possessive Our or Ours. Ars Poetica.*
There is no we that excludes you.

We is a language of letters, of uniting across vast distance, of space and time between us, the accumulating moments of waiting or without. We walk through our lives composing letters to each other in our absence, making mental note of what we will repeat when we are together, how we will phrase the story for the best emphasis, how you will laugh when we give our rendition, how it would have been funnier if you had been there.

We set out only to say something. No. Only to mean something. It didn't matter what. Only meaning meant anything. What would it mean to truly mean what we said? To mean it fitfully, violently, transcendently, the way we jump off bridges and crash cars and limbs into other cars and other limbs, the way trees grow up and grow down at the same time. We wrote it down to pull it out of us — long rainbow handkerchief of guts spilling out and out. Or, we talked about it, even if we did not, as it were, actually do it.

We were champions of the suffix. Violent amenders. We were convinced the teleology of terminology was a dead end, that definitions could never be shared, that words did not mean.

We did not always operate like this. Once, before language got between us like landscapes, like distance, Once, we believed that if we said a word and you heard a word, they were the same word, meaning the same thing, found in the dictionary, found in our every exchange.

We may not remember such a time (or, rather, may claim not to) but that hardly means anything now.

We existed instead in the era of -ish. Our totem suffix, -ish marked imprecision and impermanence, the inability of meaning to mean anything, the general, existential what-the-fuck of it all.

We decided (though there was no committee, no consensus) to nevermind, for the moment, that our tendency toward -ish — toward hedging, toward fudging, toward noncommittal nods to the transient universe — would be our downfall. Our violent acknowledgment of imprecision, of absent solid ground, would become an enactment of it, leading us toward lives and jobs and relationships that embodied painful transition and groundless shifting ground, that created new false floors from our own psychological trap doors, telltale hearts thumping underneath to give us away, to stave off any chance of mutual connection or meaning or purpose or hope or feeling with the insistence that all was -ish, could only be -ish, until calling it made it so.

We would kill our darlings. We would take our red pens and wage war. What couldn't we cross out? What wouldn't we grade? What wasn't placed in our paths for us to tear down, or rather, detour around and avoid. It was too much easier to talk about what we would do, if only we were not bound by this constraint or another — poverty or tragedy or temporality or our own failed skins or a corporate job or a childhood too kind to us or a party next Friday night — it was much easier to talk about what we would do than to do anything else. This is how we would kill our darlings, in future tense: Someday we would be alive, someday we would be really traveling and really loving and really living and someday would be put off and off again. We would never age inside these cities. We would die, but we would never age. We were dying quickly. We were convinced of that and that alone. And still our days were spent on Internet comics and our cash was spent on lattes and our nights on idling conversation and other drinks. We were twenty something. We were thirty, and still. We were telling ourselves that, by the time we were old, people would live to be older. We were telling ourselves that we were going to die young, in fiery car crashes or dramatic overdoses, muggings or probably hangings.

We speak only irony, meta comments, even though we have declared irony dead, at least nine times. Declaring irony dead is dead, we have decided. And there cannot be an un-ironic comment about irony.

We use them anyway, but our words are growing inexact. We use “thing” for everything. Adjectives are stripped to pacifiers, “sorta,” “kinda,” “ish,” and hyperbolic opposites of “awesome,” “wow,” and “huge and shit.” Our vocabularies are failing us. The words erode from the salt water in our spit, pockmarked with what we have dissolved into flavor and swallowed. What replaces them is flavorless. What replaces words are genetically modified modifiers and chemical-sprayed nouns, easy to transport vast distances in trucks and ships, easy to preserve and serve in heavy cream sauces, but difficult to remember how they used to taste, how they used to feel against tongues and sliding down throats. We wash these new words down with other words to ease their diet soda aftertaste. We need a drink of water, a palate cleanse, we need the language of a still wild wilderness to put us back in service to these words and to the concepts they sustain, concepts that sustain us. We have pulled up their roots and asked them to grow from nothing — to suck nutrients from the thin and smoggy air into which we have transplanted them. We dress them up, bears in circus side shows, and ask them to perform tricks, trigger that same wild feeling they used to give us. We do this with

people as well, take a spark, a thrill of uncertainty, nail it down. We ask them to make us feel safe and permanent and then we ask them to make us feel passionate and reckless again. Then we blame them for not being both and everything, for not being the people we had decided they should be long before we knew them, before we knew what definitions could be used against them.

We type new geologies, tossing out huge words for our own small lives. And when we type subduction the computer spell check checks us: Seduction, it says. Or, Seductions. And we are unable to shake the connection between these two words that Word has decided are too alike to share a page. We must mean one or the other, it tells us; they are the same. Seduction and subduction share more than a page, they share a sentence, motive and means untangled.

We mixed metaphors constantly. They were the ingredients of our every discourse. Our substitutions were all we had, weapons against a world that had already substituted everything for its chemically manufactured or refurbished counterpart. Analogy was — no, analogy was like — the real thing, only better, explained, narrowed down, crystallized in our efforts to expand the landscape of what words could mean, the possibilities in a phrase, the unkempt dada wanderings of our own convulsive hearts.

We did not know how else to say it than to put one word in front of another, paying no attention to what made sense (even sense did not make itself), until something unexpected emerged onto a page, not from us but from underneath our fingernails, from the dirt we had been carrying around unwittingly, the gunk that got stuck in every crevice. This is where ideas came from, the real ones that would eventually tingle after a turned phrase. This is where we would stumble upon Truth, that hallowed capital T of a value we craved but still did not know how to speak.

We aspired to write epic poems, but only attempt this in a disconnected string of one liners. Words were only accumulating, like mold growing on the dirty dishes in the sink, cells dividing under microscopes — then analyzed for form and style. We could not see the epic scope of what we were doing, what we were a part of; we knew if we did it it couldn't be that hard. This was the way to accomplish great things, just continue doing small things. We had to believe that our actions would add up to something, that our days would not drift in and out like waves against a bigger tide that was only doing the same, against a bigger planet that was only doing the same, small concentric circles within larger ones, orbits in orbits in orbits, but what were we moving slowly around the outside of? There was nothing at the center, except the center itself, everywhere, and everywhere was outside, an uncrackable egg we were always knocking against, an unbreachable shell, where what was tiny would have to be epic and what was giant could only be small.

We run out of words before we have said anything, the letters wearing down around the edges. Our mouths crack at the corners before they can form the shapes we need; our blood pumping hearts dry up before they have felt the force of their own hydraulic rush. These are just reenactments of the words already used, the memorized scripts we said we would not be repeating without first revising, switching up the actors, finding new direction, but here you are again and here we have the cue to crumble. Here we know what was and what cannot be again.

We repeat ourselves, in search of just the right words. We replace the right word we cannot find with a thousand wrong words, ones that do not sit just-so on our tongues, do not roll off as they should, do not caress ears or assuage apprehensions. We hate words for letting us abuse them this way. We hate words for occasionally convincing us we are sane, for making us think that meanings can be assigned and that they might stick. We hate that they might stick, that there is no way to tell what anyone will hear when we open our mouths, that there is no way to guarantee that when we open our mouths we will mean what we say. How will we even begin to say what we mean? And if anyone manages, how would we begin to recognize it, to feel it, to hear a compliment or absorb wisdom or process objectivity? We know there is no such thing as objectivity and so when someone speaks to us we make faces. We do not hear. We do not hear ourselves, can not distinguish our own voices from the fray. We run into each other, we form relationships, we lose each other, we try to catch up, find each other and lose each other again. Perhaps we do not give ourselves enough credit, we refuse to believe what everyone else can see in us, refuse to

believe that anyone can see anything in us other than what we know to be true — our own flawed hopelessness — and then we pursue scenarios to prove such facts to ourselves, because facts cannot become facts without proof, and anything (fact or no) can be proven with enough tenacity. When he calls you an idiot for not wanting to stay, we weaken, but we still do not believe. We cannot just absorb. We hear maybe 10 percent of what is said about us to us, only the median sliver, what reconfirms what we have internalized. Truth is what we call ourselves when we are already convinced. We repeat ourselves.

We procrastinated as much and as quickly as possible, like it was going out of style, like we were getting extra points for style, pushing the limits of the world's expectations for us. How much later could we arrive to work with no one batting an eye? How much later, in that case, could we arrive without getting a formal talking-to? Deadlines were not suggestions but merely hurdles to avoid. We did not procrastinate out of laziness. We were thinking constantly of our responsibilities like little dark clouds hovering overhead and we were constantly checking the weather. We could feel in our bones the barometric shift of our shirked responsibilities until they were completed. Could it be that we put them off because we liked that feeling? The precarious tight rope walk of predicted panic waiting for a subtle breeze? It was a breeze that seemed never to come. We were strangers to falling. And so we kept testing the edges, pushing our procrastination harder and farther, as it was continually revealed just how much we could get away with. This baffled us, shamed us, the idea that we could have been getting away with this much more all along, could have been bare minimuming it and freeing up minutes and hours and months to do something more worthwhile. We had this idea

that there was something more worthwhile, always out there, always hovering just out of reach of whatever it was we were doing. We could stretch all day but if we wouldn't know it when we saw it we would never find it. We would never find it. We always felt guilty for this, and we felt guilty that we were not doing more about our responsibilities, and that we were not doing more to get out of them.

We accomplish nothing. This is how we accomplish nothing. Step One, have an idea, it sounds like maybe a good idea to start, just a casual What If that suddenly explodes into What If We Really Did. Step Two, remember we are in the world, that our feet are on the ground, that tomorrow we must go to work (must? must we?), that you can do anything but you can't do everything, remember that somewhere someone is counting on you not to drop everything, not to forget a future that does not exist. Because if we did, would everyone else consider the possibility? These are the kinds of common-sense revolution we must abandon.

We want to prevent a feeling that might not last, or a feeling that might. We want to prevent the future before it can happen to us, before it can become right now. Right now is what we are hoping all our dreams will become, but right now for us has always had a tinge of dissatisfaction to it, and we are afraid of disappointment, afraid to ruin what may not meet our outrageous expectations [everything].

We book trips we cannot afford, do everything but hit confirm, our maxed-out credit card numbers hovering in 16 digits blank white boxes fields of

our own identification. We cannot pull the trigger, we cannot really go.

We know how bad off we are, here, and that is oddly comforting. We have our script of complaints about the present that we would have to shed if we could shed all our possessions and do what it is we claim to wish we could do.

We risk heart attacks and lung cancer and driving drunk, but we will not risk traveling or living or falling hard. We will not risk what might return.

We were running marathons. We were slog-
ging through movements, moments, through
days, spitting out nonsense just to keep spitting it
out, sharks swimming in sleep to stave off death.
When we were alone, when we stopped, we didn't
know what to do, we feared we might just keep
on stopping, so we continued. We knew it could
not mean anything. In our marathons, we always
envisioned ourselves in the first mile, sprinting up
Sisyphian hills. We had no idea how far we had
come, could not acknowledge what was behind
us. Like Orpheus, we could not look back. We
mixed mythological metaphors. How else could we
lend an air of the epic to our minuscule struggles
against ourselves and our own tangible impossibil-
ity? We needed something about ourselves to exist
on a grander scale, above the bridge-and-tunnel
ants in traffic, above the swirling topography of
our neighborhoods made into airplane patchwork,
above the molecules in swirling galaxies beneath
us, elements shifting from solid to liquid, particles
dissipating, the night sky falling, our own hearts
failing, trees in the forest, none of this makes a
sound.

We are from the Midwest. But we have shed our
accents. California has absorbed us into its crooked
edge of continent before shoving off from the red
states to join Cascadia in a slow climb to Alaska. We
wish we could be alive for the continents' rejoining,
for the replacement of the land beneath our feet,
the forming of new moraines, sublimated moun-
tain ranges rising up from ocean floor and flooding
grasslands with coral reefs and glaciers. We are from
nowhere in particular, and this is part of California's
appeal. It is mythic, the location of verse and song,
the paradise of our collective imaginations. Where
we are from has no stories that have come before
us. Perhaps there is someone famous from our
town, or at least our state or general region. Perhaps
we have a landmark, but growing up near it made
it tiresome, boring, and we cannot understand why
anyone in his or her right mind would travel far
and/or wide to visit that snowglobe place, once our
only place. We travel here, each with a story that
is uniquely unoriginal, swapped like cheap base-
ball cards over a drink with someone we will most
likely stop talking to in a few weeks. At least, this
is something we must assume upon entering into
any conversation, whether out of defensiveness or
realism, we could not tell you. We are happy to be

proven wrong, but very surprised when it happens. We travel here, and when we arrive we find California just as we imagined — every cliché manifested, for better or worse, all fantasy made real. The appeal of this dies off quickly, along with whatever hope or dream we had packed along. The joy of finding a kindred spirit is quickly muted by realizing they all have the same dream, whatever it is, and that none of us is realizing it, merely realizing how many of us there are, that more are coming to push us out of place. They have that look in their eye. We recognize it. That look was our own, mere moments ago, before we were jaded, older and wiser and cynical and hopeless to a level beyond what we had known before. We thought we were cynical before we were broken, before we realized how much more cynical we could be, and even this, we were coming to realize, was an unbreachable boundary, we would constantly be in pursuit of our own cynicism, as though beyond it lay some idyllic field of post-cynical sincerity, where all our striving and our more difficult beliefs were proven right, where we were rewarded for seeing through the bullshit to its gooey center. But most of us would only find continent, unsolid ground, the edges of a city without center, the borders of our own erosion.

We came from small towns or medium ones, possibly the suburbs, possibly somewhere smaller and actually rural, actually middle class. Some of us came from outside larger cities, which we would say we came from when in fact it was the upper class suburbs, no different from the middle class ones except that they would claim to be different from within and we would deny that difference from without. We emigrated from these homes where everything should have been certain but was not, and touched down in the strange city of our choosing, as far across a continent or state of mind as we could get from where we had been. We would define ourselves in this act of defiance, in the power of free will and a decision to Just Go (and find the others like us and form new small towns or medium ones, possibly suburbs, and still call ourselves middle class).

We have reverted to high school: We find ourselves smoking cigarettes in a parking lot in a suburb somewhere, and we find ourselves unhappy. We still do not find ourselves. We still concoct mistakes to put in our own way, indiscretions to stave off being handed responsibility. We make unnecessary photocopies, an excuse to stand, an arm stretch or a lap around the building to break up the breaking day. We know no other way to lift this burden. We know no other way except to surrender all our fear plus a passport and just skip town, retreat to a strange land and do it again. This is not something we would know how to try, plane ticket, just pick up and go, though it is something we have done before and suffered for it, suffered for not having done it sooner.

We were always afraid the sky was falling. On rare occasions of possible weather we would dress ourselves for disaster, rain boots and hoods and layers of thermal and wool to face the mildest shift in temperature. We were overprepared. We would go out in thin thrift store shirts, upon encountering actual weather, or velvet or polyester or other ridiculous fabrics that would not hold up to it.

We wanted to be permeated. We were wishing for puddles, for a car to drive past and soak us through to our possibly tattooed skins. We needed something to cool our boiling blood, the hot pulse that coursed through us, pulled like the tides by the same dark moon. We were water just like everything else and so what did it matter how wet we got, what did it matter if our cough would turn into pneumonia. We knew we were dying anyway. We could feel it in that pulse under our thin skins.

We always needed some small torture to occupy us. We dug up the past when we were bored, when things were going a little too well — a feeling we did not understand. This made us incredibly uncomfortable. It made us throw obstacles in our own paths. If we were not in love, we ought to be, or we were unlovable. If we were in love, it was not enough. If we were settled, we wanted to be free. If we were free, we were just drifting, how we would pine for solid ground, for roots to burrow. We were adrift without panic and we tingled a bit at the prospect of crisis. Our mouths did not exactly water, but our throats tightened, our muscles tensed. We half prayed for rioting in the streets, for more towers to fall, knowing it would have to get worse before it got better. We were mistrustful of anyone who said, “It’s not like things could get any worse,” because from what we saw, things always did.

We wanted to hope. We wanted to be a part of something. But we had watched too much fail just outside our grasp, and instead we wanted to watch it burn to the ground. We were keeping matches in our pockets, flicking lighters just to hear the sound they’d make, to remember that we could burn it down, that every day was a choice we were making

to continue to live in the world as is.

We were participating, even in the attitude that our hands were tied behind our backs, our fingers crossed when making promises. What was true enough? Honest enough? Too honest or too true? We couldn’t know. Words were just words, numbers, too, were words, and words were just guttural moaning, remnants of our ancestors’ instinct to be heard. All that could be said was said in the dark without words, in the glint of eye contact that did not break, in the hollow formed from the small of our back against sheets, in the way we had to cry and hurt each other when we got too drunk, the way we would not remember it in the morning. Meaning came from the places our tongues went slack, when we could not find the words to describe the feeling. It came from our covered up reactions and our amnesiac conversations, the stories we would repeat to tired audiences. What did it say about us that we could not grasp, what we would not remember?

We didn’t know what it said about us, nor what it said about us that we were the kind of people who thought it important what things said about us, who thought it important what kind of people we were.

We gather to be made into thankful creatures; if it works for a day we are lucky. We make pilgrimages to homelands past, foreign territories of the mind distorted by years of absence and the way things change while we are gone. Or we decide that these pilgrimages are not enough, that they do not satisfy the nostalgia that commands them, that these false pilgrimages hurt more than they help, dragging out the disconnect between what was and what is into something monstrous. Still, we are talked into visits. We are talked into being the people that we once were, flip of a switch, wear the discarded clothing of our childhood, adults made altogether small. We surround ourselves with those who have loved us and abused us. We will eat dinner with these people.

We drive across the country in vans, or else we dream about it, talk about it and plan it for some far-off future in our minds. Our bags are ceremoniously packed, our current possessions thought of as soon-to-be-former ones, our goodbyes breathed underneath other conversations, the only part we seem to get around to. The goodbyes we perform too far in advance, but the rest of the letting go lingers. It is harder to loosen our grip on the stuff and the expectations than on the people who could just as easily shed us.

We ATM, ATM, ATM, ATM. Another transaction. Food sustains us from paper, the feeling we get from (soon to be) losing it, just before we have to plunk it down. We trade complexes back and forth like paper money or viruses. We make more complicated variations, resistant to injected reinforcements. We trade in guilt for cash each time, constant voice in our heads of how we could be scrimping more, how we really do not need this fill in the blank, but if we were really going to look at what we do not need we would not be here. We do not need to live in cities. We do not need to eat out. We do not need to own books or buy clothes when we could write our own and darn them. None of this is sustainable. None of this is ever quite enough. We do it anyway.

We took the train and talked up public transportation. We were authentic. Like the slow food that we raved about, like the everything else that we were convinced we knew better, that we were convinced mattered more, because we were not driving, not hydroplaning like they were, whomever they were. We did not know there was no ground beneath us, only water, underneath the city built on fault lines and landfills. On the train the ground was above us and more solid than ever. The dark would float up past our eyes and absorb the train car into rushing metallic tomb, screeching tornado around us in an uneasy comfort, a return to something trapped. We loved this part of the train ride, when waves lapped over our heads as the horrible sound blocked out all thought, the nervous shudder of the wheels on rails reminding us that we were liquid and organs under skin.

We find each other on the Internet, friends turned strangers made friends again through photos of lives we don't recognize, portraits in strings of secret code and song lyrics. We need these archives. Or else cannot destroy them. We will find the people we are surprised we don't remember, who a decade or more ago seemed like the most important thing. When we remember you, we type you in and look you up, and we discover that there are thousands of other people with your name, that sound that made you you is shared by even less familiar strangers, with families with children with jobs with the same Ikea furniture. We can peek into living rooms of doppelgangers, a portal we have opened and cannot close. Bridget Harris married a dentist. Dave Dent is still alive. These are people not meant to exist in the realm of the still-possible. These are phantom names, like limbs, that ring in our ears after they are gone, that when spoken after vows of silence will fit right back in their old spots in the hollows of our ears, that have been moving through the same world just so much as we have been — and so what phantoms have our names created, where are our fates that end in dentist, On Kowara incantations met with surprise at how people who are more names than people are people after all.

We were fascinated with our own faces

— arms outstretched to capture ever-upward gazing self-portraits before parties. This is how we'd document the night, not in the night itself but in the looks on our faces before the night, or in its disheveled after. We were the best minds of our generation staring at ourselves. This constant character study was a memorization, a fight to recall something that would never happen to us.

We looked like idiots.

We spent nights after the night had ended back behind our computer screens where we began, following the computer trails of almost strangers, as they sat at home following our computer trails. We carved out orbits of arms-length observation. We yearned for contact.

We live in rooms. Most of the time we leave the windows open, but keep the door locked. The number of people who can fit in a room at any given time can change, ranging from at least a handful, possibly 20 or more if we are feeling gregarious, down to not even one but no one, not even a little part of us that we will let in to ourselves. We move within these rooms, pacing the floors, cursing the neighbors above for doing the same. We toss and turn in beds, sometimes in the middle of the day, sheets pulled up over our heads. We remember everything we have touched today and wish that we washed our hands more. We try not to think about this. The thought of hand sanitizer makes us sick, we know we can't cover all of it with alcohol.

We return to our rooms at night, even if we left for no reason, and we open the blinds to search the spots of light on our familiar hillside, wait for headlights to crest the hill and shine into our eyes. We are most aware of our own solitude in these moments, every night, we are most aware of ourselves, trapped in our own bodies but disconnected from them, most aware of how we are not all places at once and cannot be.

We freeze in flip flops and insist that sandals can be worn year around in California. We will not buy umbrellas, even though it is coming down in sheets, because it does not rain in California, this place outside of weather. We nestle into this state's anomaly status for comfort, even when it defies its own defiance, even when it lets us down, even when it fails itself, passing conservative ballot measures or growing closed minded in its own open mindedness. California will break off into the Pacific Ocean, we insist, and we are timing it.

We are waiting for Alaska to slide down the Cascadia plate and join us, cold and warm water swirling around us, starting storms. We need more wilderness in our nonsense, taller mountains and larger oceans — the things we need to collide until they explode, grow into the hyperbole holes we have made for them. We are hoping this will happen to us, but we are dying like glaciers melting, just trading solid state for liquid water cycle.

We still believe in weather. We wrap ourselves in scarves to defend against it in our minds, while our feet are bare in flip flops to let our chilly toes make contact with the ground where we have worn them thin, where the ground has been worn thin beneath us, the same paths of every morning and of our familiar week nights. We wear gloves because our hands will not stay warm on their own. We pile on sweaters and vests so that our limbs are thin in contrast. But please do not tell us that this is not weather, that this ache we are feeling is just a small percentage of the pain the world is capable of inflicting, that our complaints are days of halcyon sun to another 99 percent of the world, itself a fingernail fraction of the universe expanding past the all-weather parkas we wear when the temperature drops a couple of degrees. We still believe in weather. We still believe in feeling something, even something too small to be seen from space.

We were convinced of nothing. We were convinced of that alone, if we were convinced of anything. Our days were endless, numbered, like the Iron and Wine song we listened to too often on repeat.

We could talk about everything but what was convincing. Fabricated banter was an art, rapid-fire, electric charged like fences to make good neighbors. And did we have neighbors. These neighbors and these neighborhoods were identity. We gentrified them, and did we ever love to talk about gentrification, some dirty word that happened after we arrived, thanks to inauthentic followers of our begrudgingly trendsetting artistic passion. Our neighborhoods were badges of honor. Dive bars were our own personal dive bars. Our corner markets' cashiers were touchstones in the night, parental guidance by next day, a familiar face to come back home to, one short exchange of human contact with a stranger who was not a stranger, the kind of person neither would acknowledge is seen every single day, the person who would witness our purchases of toilet paper by the single wrapped roll, beer by the 12-pack and cigarettes by the carton.

We bragged about rent control, another badge of honor for just how long we had lived in our now overpriced apartments, how long we had called this city our own, a question of authenticity of origins, the all important where we were From, our one act of permanence — which even still was decorated with mismatched furniture from the dumpster and the street, which had walls only half-painted and framed prints leaned against dressers, waiting to be hung. Our books were stacked on the floor in giant piles because of a lecture at some point from someone whose voice would not leave our heads, because of talk about impermanence, about the nuisance of moving, the curse of accumulating, the danger of settling in.

We did not realize we were not yet unlearning these words. We had been trying to shed them for a decade (and when we realized it had been at least a decade we would grow very depressed, we would buy ourselves a drink). But this words would ring, these stories built in to us, notions conceived with us and fermenting with us in amniotic fluid and then alcohol. One day we would realize this was why we did not believe in love. But not just yet. We were under the spell of the cynicism we still

believed was our very own, we still believed that we had decided to become this way, that we had made a choice somewhere along the way, in the interest of — there's that word again — authenticity. But we would be careful not to use that word too much, certainly not in public. It made us sound like idealists. We wouldn't stand for that; we wouldn't stand for anything.

We were skeptical, or perhaps we had altogether too much optimism, but tomorrow the world could change. Tomorrow ballots would be cast and we could feel the sea change of a new era. The last shift we had not seen coming, with the century coiling around us. With this shift we pray for unknotting, with our breath already held in advance of what will strangle us, what will let us breathe out. Tomorrow, long time coming — the air tingled with it. We didn't know if the world would ever go back to the thing that we remembered. We didn't know then how unlike the world we knew the world would become in a few slow instants, how much worse it could get (because it couldn't get any worse, could it? We kept saying this. We kept saying this).

We regularly acknowledged the ultimate subjectivity of all experience and exchange; we knew the fallibility of our five senses too well, and felt burdened by the fact that there were only five of them. We would lie awake in bed, paralyzed with wondering what else there was to know, what we were missing. Whatever we were doing, we were aware of opportunity cost, of the fact that we were not doing something else, of what could be missing, of how we couldn't even tell what it was we were missing. Through all of this we held very, very still. What good would moving do? What help would belief be, when we knew it was just what our brains were telling ourselves, what stories had already formed and calcified around our experiences. Our stalactite skulls were dripping all over everything, forming stone from water, messages from minerals. Things would always be the way we had decided they were, before we even realized we could decide, that we were deciding even inadvertently.

We needed someone to prove us to ourselves.

Someone in the box with us, Schrödinger's cats, all of us, trying to test our own hypotheses without swaying any sample or affecting outcome.

We were constantly observing ourselves, waiting to see what we would do, wondering how the world would be changed if we were not in it. We imagined our own cardboard cut-out absence in our empty chairs and beds, in others' sleeping minds.

We could know only our location or our velocity, not both. The more we were certain of one thing, the more uncertain everything else became. What was known was fast rushing away from us, expanding out with the universe around us, distances growing and separating us from our secrets. We could not measure what was being taken away.

We are too young, too impatient, and already too old for what will happen to us. We do not do well with risk, with our own indecision, but when we make a decision about something, however rarely, we put it into effect immediately, no vetting, no waffling, just blind action, because we are afraid of our own tendency to flip-flop incessantly until the decisions make themselves, usually against us. Our every missed opportunity has happened over worry, and so we worry too much about worry, we cannot decide whether being decisive would help us (we know, we know) because we watch other people make up their minds with wild abandon and it seems like bungee jumping, like pointless acrobatics. We cannot do math without showing our work, and we cannot follow their lines of logic as they loosen and tighten and slack, how they "just know" when we only know that whatever we decide will be wrong somehow, will cause us to lose something. We are too aware and too afraid of what exists to be lost.

We saw the best minds of our generation destroyed by poetry and progressive politics.

We saw our hearts torn off our sleeves and dropped in beakers and observed, ventricles pumping, chambers opening and closing off, the painful involuntary muscle straining of our shifting shapes.

We saw what it would take to become what we had hoped, what we had been told was waiting for us when we arrived or Arrived.

We saw through it, past flickering coins in the underwater sun.

We saw what progress did to us and decided inertia would better suit our temperaments, decided we could do without.

We made false promises — that we would not fall into what was easy, that we would not jump through hoops for things not really on the other side (things we did not even want to begin with).

We gave it up and in its place we found a few others who agreed with us.

We would swim upstream. But one by one we would tire, would slow and settle, would take small measures of consolation until we were ready to be absorbed into its flow.

We arrive after dark in an imaginary place.

When we wake up we will have been transplanted here, to a world removed from the world, iPhones replaced with pay phones, locks on the doors replaced with trust (when we were counting on trust all along). Travelers leave behind the same artifacts, the same residues and memories. “I did not get engaged and I did not find myself,” they all seem to reiterate, as though getting engaged and finding oneself were all that was done here, even though pointedly not getting engaged and pointedly not finding oneself seems to be the trend. We are all searching for a common experience in contrast to the experiences of those before us; we want to share in something but also experience uniqueness. We want the hidden enclave, the secret passageway. We want it special but shareable, secret but told. We are chasing a golden age, nostalgic for when the world was a new and uncharted place, just starting to get a buzz about it. We are driving in circles in search of the next undiscovered territory, the next next big thing. We find ourselves in familiar places, amongst familiar people pursuing familiar newness. We follow our idols here, yet do not want to be seen reading their books in the places those books made famous. We refuse to ad-

mit that we like what we like, as though admitting we had not already read everything they’ve written, that we had not already been here before would reveal a naivety that is shameful. Where is the shame in true experience? There was a moment before we knew the cool spots to hang out, before we had read the books of this century or others. We do not exist outside of time; we did not invent these things; we cannot claim them. Our experience is not unsullied or unmediated by context, by the echo of fellow readers. It seems a cruel way to go through the world, just leapfrogging from amoeba to cave drawings to our holier-than-thought erudition, without tracing paths through art that finds us before we are wise. None of us is privileged to the most authentic, unique communion with a work of literature or a work of nature, yet none of us is prohibited from a communion of some kind; only this can be ours, and this is enough. We should not be ashamed of our own desire to know more, to live more. If we truly believed that everything worth doing had been done before, we would not be typing this.

We were often quite sure we would not be able to take it any more. We assumed we would burst at any second, out of rage or boredom or raw feeling or from attempts to absorb the simple beauty of the world. Our eyes were simply not equipped and our brains could not contain how big the world was and how simultaneously small it was against the sky. And when we began to think of our solar system, our galaxy, and then galaxy clusters and other tiny spots of universe against our limited imagination, it seems impossible to ever find our own bodies again, to ever leave the house, or to understand how the carpet stays beneath our feet. And if we could not accomplish that little, how could we be expected to find or do or believe anything more complicated than nothing at all? And what was more complicated than that.

We wondered if it was too late, as we checked our watches, as though the time we were looking for could be found on its face, or by reading the lines in its swirling hands like a palm reader. Our own palms were a mystery to us, how anything got done under their instruction and manipulation, how another palm could press against ours to warm it and still send shivers through us. These surfaces for prayer were unguarded. Vulnerable folds made up the center, where our fingernails would dig when fists were formed. We were tiny fists curled up as infants, forming new against the darkness. We did not know we would grow into what we are.

We made avoiding our jobs our jobs. Not taking things too seriously was serious business, more of an art than a cop out, a nod to a higher purpose of which this lowly job was just standing in the way. And yet we let it stand in our way. A job was a great excuse not to get anything done. A job was a great excuse to live a life not worth living, which was itself a great excuse to have something to complain about, a grand tragedy to inform our writing and our love lives and our real work and our sleepless nights. What were our other options? To live knowing we could be doing more, but weren't? To live accepting that there is nothing more we could do, that life is bland and not always grand and beautiful, that some people are meant to be garbage collectors and perhaps we are those people? These are questions not meant to be asked, but they have answers, obvious ones we will not hear.

We run into each other. We miss each other. Today I am not there. Tomorrow you are not. I will look for you where I know I shouldn't. I will fix my hair. I will hesitate over pronouns. I will imagine the net we've strung across town, ways to catch each other. I will not let this be only what it is. Try to ignore — remember feeling this before, remember how it hollowed you out — but this becomes too obvious, the way we still talk when we have nothing to say. We made plans but we do not make new ones. We do not discuss how messages can lose their inhibition and change everything for how nothing is changed, practicing for a question that does not come, concocting a refusal that pines, a rejection that sustains, a way to build futures out of impossibilities (that if they were possible would never be practical). What kind of mind forms thoughts and heartbeats this way? What do we try to undo, lacing the middles and ends of things with the beginnings of what will go nowhere?

We will have real jobs. We could be investment bankers or archeologists or physicists — there is still time. We keep saying this even though we will not be any of those things. We live in a mindset that we have yet to grow up, that our decisions are temporary ones, that this is not our only chance here that we are wasting, because the thought that we cannot do everything is what keeps us fastened down to nothing. “You can do anything, but you can’t do everything,” the finger wagging disembodied voice of authority figures echoes in our ears when we set out to try to something. This stops us in our tracks. We need an escape hatch, possibly parachutes. We need winning lottery numbers. We need to get the fuck out of here.

We wake up on a day when we are not supposed to be anywhere else. We cannot fathom it. Our minds are full of where we are not, what we are not doing, in the world that is usually ours — and so we cannot be where we really are, standing on a seaside cliff fighting the urge to hurl ourselves off, not out of pain or existential dead ends or anything morose but out of joy, out of a curiosity for what it would feel like, out of feeling so disconnected from our own bodies and in our own bodies that it is the only thing we can think to do, that it would be an act no different than any other act.

We do not jump. We know the slant of rocks below would send us tumbling, not in a free fall but in a rock polisher, breaking us limb by limb. We would be lucky to crush our skulls before we hit the water, save ourselves from immobilized drowning, though maybe to you it seems like a beautiful way to go. These are the things that cross our minds on impossibly sunny days off, when we have retreated to some kind of wilderness to find ourselves again, to find our words again, where this is what we find.

We are Sundays, spent overwhelmed that every day still seems too far from Sunday, the saddest day, where nothing seems quite right, unless you are under the mistaken impression that it is Saturday, and then the revelation is a bottoming out disappointment. Sunday is the day when what we hoped for for the weekend has not happened and now will not happen, the day when our imagination returns to our reality, the day when people leave to go back to whatever it is they do with their weekdays without us. Sunday is the day we feel most acutely in our bones, the day the most time passes. Sunday is the day that we are dying, the day that we know we are dying, the day we are less able to ignore it in favor of social distractions or obligations or chores or errands or hollow pursuits. Sunday marks us, scars us with its nothing to look forward to except what we have denied, it strips us of the handy trick of future tense, chucks us back into the past in order to reset and recalibrate to the present.

We do not want to go to work tomorrow. Please don't make us go. We can imagine staying in bed all day — it is supposed to rain, and rainy days are the perfect days for staying in bed all day, reading the forgotten Sunday Times. Please don't make us remember how close we are to dying; please don't make us remember what we are and what we are not. It's supposed to rain.

We wake up without words. It takes too long for the world to transform back into the place where we know ourselves and our responsibilities, the autopilot of our days. First, we are drifting in overstimulated sensory blindness. We are not mind and body separate and we do not mind, for a moment, that there is nothing to mind. We do not mind that words do not complete us as we once expected, as we asked them to in every pleading syllable, every postmarked letter and too many zeros sent across the space of nowhere. Until all that we do mind comes rushing back into the day where the day really begins, we are in love with this place.

We were powerless against the declining day. The time had changed from Daylight Savings to an already spent dark. This darkness was all we knew of the day, in the panicked fluorescence of a windowless office, the top of a cubicle wall for a horizon line, a recirculating fan air conditioning over our heads for the breeze, faxes arriving as calling birds, photocopier humming like waves on shoreline against a wide vista of taupe (or was it tan) particleboarded up walls, the mazes that would test whether we were smart enough to build mazes ourselves. Our skin was prickling in the unexpected cold we should have known was coming.

We make the bed once every couple of weeks, maybe, but when we do we love the feeling of climbing into fresh sheets smoothed and tucked, of being trapped that way, enshrouded, entombed in the dark. We like the constraint of it, how it holds on to us where we know we belong. It is a poor substitute for really knowing where we belong, but we will take it, beginning of the night secure for dreams we can't control, introduction to the days that will follow that we will confuse them with, lines blurring between what is and what could or should be, between what we can do and what we can affect. We do not mark these dreams down and we do not mark the days that follow them. We know marks can be erased, that maps are not good substitutes for mass, that we cannot fold land the way we can fold paper. We can only fold ourselves up for so long.

We let on and on and on. Our eyes roll involuntarily. Our hearts beat the same way.

We have to fight not to look for you.

We have to ignore every painful inch between us and everything, all those molecules, all those bridges and waves, all we react against, all we cling to without knowing why. Our shared suffering is a wave; it has frequency and amplitude.

We make graphs.

We make miles into mythology, stories of mistakes, of disappearing. So much past an imagined line, the horizon's letters take back a tendency toward subduction, undrawing the day into its line drawing, dot-dashed down a highway so impossibly long our arms make new lines that do not reach.

We talk to strangers in coffee shops against our will, because we are polite, we do not know how to stop them, because we know that everyone needs to speak, even just to hear the words come out our own mouths. We have been those strangers before, will be again — alone in public, willing eye contact as an excuse to move our vocal chords, practice our voices to prove that we can be heard, not trees falling in forests, that we can create ripples, equal and opposite reactions. And then, finally, another such stranger will enter our lives, or we will somehow pull them in.

We will be reminded that we exist, that what we do is not just what we do. These strangers will unnerve us with their interest, a once-again unfamiliar feeling. We will cling to these people until we unravel them, unraveling reminders with them. But, meanwhile, there will be middle-of-the-nights and messages and conflated thoughts, synchronicity as a demonstration that connection is possible, that meaning exists for those who do not give it up, but can let go of looking for it, turning every stone.

We do not know how to hold onto these moments,

so we recount them still-in-progress. We turn each moment into the story of each moment, to be filed away into the chapter of our lives where you appeared, give the minutes letters, give our vision snapshots, photographs tagged and bound. We will need these points of reference later — when strangers become strangers again — to keep us tethered to what is possible within all that is impossible. These are strings tied around our fingers until they grow red, grow purple and fall off. These are the ways we fill up the limbo of space, of meanwhile.

We let the universe go, but nothing else, let it pass away from us, one day at a time rotating around ourselves and revolving around the sun. And so what is there to do except throw ourselves against one another — make ourselves into the hurtling objects we recognize only from images taken by the Hubble Telescope? We set our trajectories and launch ourselves at foreign objects — in an interpersonal warfare that has no diplomacy. We have to ignore the fact that other people are people, in order to make war or infatuation work.

We met in bars. We talked about books, writing them, critiquing them, rereading them. We talked about moving to far away places. We met over coffee. Every interaction involved a mouth, a hand, a liquid, usually some kind of spill.

We fucked. We did a lot of fucking. We certainly did not make love. We did not love, except perhaps when it was convenient for literary purposes, only when we felt like getting our guts ripped out, or needed an excuse to get drunk or write a short story. When we fucked we were honest. Though we would never admit it later. When we fucked we dropped our guards along with our pants. We hiked our skirts and, so long as we were not sober, we sustained moments of eye contact, silent communions of skin. But it would be a mistake to say that we shared this experience with anyone else, that we were having these experiences together. Or when we were, it was because we were united only in our separation against everyone else who was not sharing an Authentic Experience, who was not truly touching or truly speaking, just fucking. We were honest only when we fucked, so perhaps we did not do quite as much of it as we claimed we did.

We are unsuitable for each other. We are too much of each other — paper thin cutouts unfolding silhouettes, our arms outstretched for fingertips, part of a chain we can't break. We are Venn diagrams that can never overlap enough to satisfy. Our fingers find instead of fingers the holes the overlap creates, stretching the tear, fraying edges until the gap expands, until our charts prove themselves too right, waiting to be erased to start again.

We had dreams about strangers who for one night were not strangers, who returned to their own strange orbits the next day, without any more discussion than an awkward kiss goodbye, in a car or standing on the street beside one. Sometimes we would go out for drinks with them again, months or more in the future, and we would find out they had really cared, that they were just as confused as we were about the world, that none of us knows how to act or how to react in situations like these, that we, us, not they, had created the nothing of it through our assumption that it was only that, that we had created that awkward goodbye by doing what we thought they wanted, by saying see you later and meaning nothing by it at all. Sometimes we would get a second chance, which we would ruin. Sometimes we would never have that follow up conversation, they would date someone else, or we would — and, in our sleeping selves, that alternate plane of existence would blur until we were not sure if any of it had been real, or if all of it was. Our nights were lost this way. We would almost make a real connection. We would almost fuck this way. We would almost screw up everything. We would almost fix everything. We would make it almost

home by some drunk miracle, and we would find ourselves the next morning the same people, with the same tightly knotted confusion pulled tighter still. We knew we could not return to the unknown, though in our daily interactions it was as though we had never spilled too much of ourselves or a drink on you when we meant for it to seem like we could keep the liquid of our hearts inside the glass. We were a marvel of surface tension. We knew too much about density, which things would float and which would sink. We would drown ourselves, a witchhunt act of purification. The liquid would be let from the dam in a trickle, first a beer, then maybe a cocktail, getting the order all wrong of course, and before we knew it we would be strangers again.

We retreat to the same positions in the same beds, fetal comforts, substitute pillows, baby blankets, the crook of an arm under a head — and when those things go missing, when the bed is a stranger's or the owner of that arm puts back to us to sleep (wide swath of cold sheets) (oceans rather than inches) (every abandonment pent up or perceived) (our orphan status or our small town childhoods or the way you would never move in, would always go home after Sundays). We find a new arm to crook under our heads, and for a while it does just that — without even asking — until one day out of the wide white nothing of 300 thread count it too overturns or is gone, and the absence that has always filled us returns reinforced, new layers of trauma to cover us where warm skin once was. Another sheet, this one bullet-proof glass we will be talking to the world through, until someone knocks to be let in. “This branch carries no change,” we will tell them. We will make a sign and then we will point to it the next time, because they cannot hear us through glass. Next we will have bullet-proof vests, when our glass does not prove bullet-proof enough. Install a tiny microphone for strangers to speak into, but the words will turn tinny, metallic, come out in static fourths and fifths of sentences instead of real feeling.

We will follow you, make caravans across crowded highways toward the reenactments of our past selves, repeating descriptions, dropping business cards in booths and ordering drinks we know will make us sick. We do this because someone else will have to do. We do this because we cannot be swimming in the bioluminescent ocean of night, because we cannot be perched on the side of a continent naked under the full moon. There are too many things we cannot do and so we choose this default setting, a way to spend familiar regrets. There are too many things we will not do, because of all the things we cannot do, because we cannot tell the difference. The distance between those two types of things is too sharp to hold onto; it is a darkness in which we would lose ourselves. It is the limbo we cannot tolerate, our awareness of Flatland. We watch for each other, try to make decisions for everyone else, try to encourage others to do whatever it is we will not do. But we want to be the intrepid explorer, discoverer of new continents and seas, hipster progressive at the forefront of the trend toward melting ice caps, the song we will hear before anyone else, that we will hate before it hits their ears, while we are humming the next bar of an up-and-coming landmass or a brand new satellite, built from scratch somewhere in the sky.

We could not find a flow chart that would accurately predict the human heart. All our boxes were leading toward dead ends, arrows without returns and parallelograms we would fill with reverse engineered conclusions about how the world worked, how it would always work, who people were when they were not with us. These flow charts were useful only in convincing ourselves that making sense of this mess was the goal. These flow charts were not in the least like the flow of anything else in the world — rivers or blood or breezes — where we could not choose a point, draw a box around it and hold onto it forever. These boxes faded until their washed out inks were the entirety of memory. Arrows could be spun in circles, on street corners, advertising sandwiches or open houses in neighborhoods we would never be able to afford.

We tried to tie on tourniquets to staunch the flow of this mess we could not chart. But we did not know what we wanted to hold in, when there was already so much we held onto. We were carrying suitcases full of the stuff, seams bursting, zippers ripping teeth, wrinkled clothes and stale words spilling out on airport tarmacs or

under incriminating X-rays. We carried too much around with us — never perfecting how to pack light — suitcases full of nothing we would need and buying more burdens, souvenirs, though we had enough at home. We were going to need bigger suitcases.

We talk over each others heads. We talk near each other, around each other, in an attempt to get attention from each other by ignoring each other. We are being fantastic, eccentric or intelligent in their presence in hopes that their ears will perk up when we are around, in hopes that they will be more interested in us than we appear interested in them. All of our efforts to appear fabulously disinterested belie altogether too much interest.

We are starting to worry about you. We think you should be dating again, get out there, play the field, or at least visit the field, admire the smooth flat surface of possibilities, admit that there is a field, that you have arms and legs and a vested interest in who wins this game, that you like sports — or at least you once did. We are starting to wonder if maybe you are not sure which team to play for. We are starting to wonder if maybe you don't understand our sports metaphors, having all together zero interest in actual sports, or if they are trite and insulting to all involved.

We were afraid of running into our past lives on the street, the ones still living right under our noses that we had expunged only with words and a tenuous agreement not to use them. We were afraid of asking the people with whom we were still speaking (let's phrase it that way because, when we ask questions like we're about to ask, who knows how long these things will last) whether they had past lives on these same streets, the ones we walked together today, whether they had stories they were clamming up about as we did, as we abridged stories in progress, words coming out of our mouths. We knew they must, we asked, we stupidly believed that honesty was what we wanted to hear, that we should be comfortable sharing anything, that we wanted to know about lives the way they were lived before our own intruded. We thought we wanted a context we could not offer. These were not questions we should have asked, we did not have the good sense to know that not everyone thought of things the way we did. These questions shut down and made us shrink into inevitable smallness. They suddenly made double beds double in size, made you something about to be lost.

We create scenarios to find each other, but these are tricks of the mind that will ultimately fail us. These orbits are keys we turn with timing. Countdowns through the nonsense of our days toward the nothing that comes after, the legacy we imagine we are building but unbuilding. Our deconstruction tightens up the knots inside our hearts, those tangles of strings threading blood up to the surface of our skin.

We let you put your tongue inside our ear, as though this is a regular part of conversation, as though we are not ignoring our friends to flirt with you, we are not building up to something that is already broken, we are not setting ourselves up for confusion and failure. We let you talk to us this way, hand to thigh, we let you buy us another drink until we cannot make sense of the nauseating night. We let you invite us home, but we don't go. We are headed home to something waiting. We are sure you have forgotten us by morning.

We will decide too late to be good. This is called regret. We make it our own, dress it up with excuses, and write letters to it, but we cannot send it away. It will not leave us. We will build monuments to it instead. We will need something to tear down. We are desperate for confetti, for the shredded paper scraps of everything. We will do whatever it takes to increase surface-to-volume ratio. We would be all rough edges if we could be — we cannot be whole, so we must try to be raw and be hollowed — it is our volume, dark center, which has always been problematic. If all surface, impossible to hide, if we could see every inch of each other inside and out, if we could make edges and surfaces from all the intangible stuff that forms from firing synapses and buried knots, perhaps. If we could see the entire world in a map, make what is too small larger and what is too large smaller, lay the metaphor of a year or a lifetime over geologic time without crumpling, if:

We are the pen you lent us, the matchbook we've held on to for months now, clung to out of boredom more than anything else except a fear of having our hands free. We are no good at standing still at parties without a drink in our fist, no good at not lighting a cigarette, at not having some place else to be, at not having something else we are wishing you would say as you say whatever it is you say (whatever it is we do not hear through all our wishing), we are not good at going before the going gets however that expression goes. We are not good at remembering things, except the gestures and phrases you lent us, tongue in an ear for a time, tugging hair, a comment about • • • • • or the politics of sleeping, exchanges made public record later removed or encoded in track lists, appropriated letters we should know better than to read into but we will, the way your green ink bleeds on our skin. We will absorb. We will not be content wherever it is that we are, and when that wherever is near you, we will know better. We will know better than ever before that your teleology would destroy us, but we will hold on to it like breath, the strange nebulous Almost of it making pulses quicken from folded messages on stolen time.

We do not know how to shrug you off for good, except by finding someone else to shrug against, someone else who will make ripples in our world again. If they'll have us, if they won't make us too miserable, we will make them that way instead; because we cannot increase love in our universe without increasing misery and entropy as well — it is the law of thermodynamics that theorists forgot, that quantum way we have of never being able to get too much in our lives that is good, the way moving forward is also moving backward as seen from the darkness of a space that contains all unanticipated angles. We throw our weight against all that is constant, the rushing speed of light against fragile bones and against trees dropping mismeasured fractals on the ground. We are tugging out the light (slippery chain wanting to click) we know will go out; we know what is constant fades and flickers. We blink against our own relativity, its too tender photosensitivity. Our eyes do not adjust to the light.

We create calamity when it does not find us.

Our borders test us and we tense against them. Let us make more trouble. Trouble is what we are used to. Let us tempt fate, double check to make certain the ground stands where we left it, that things are still awkward between us, that we can put a mouth near a neck without letting the sky fall. We have to make sure of these things, closer and closer until we prove them wrong, until we ruin them with questions or lines drawn and then stepped over, just to see what it would take to break. We are waiting for an excuse to burn it down, and as it turns out we will do it anyway, no matter how much hope you manage to muster up for us in elections that are not botched, in tender moments and weekends spent away, here, take them back and with them we will hand you the rest of what is good in us.

We prove that we like what we like by destroying it. Here, take this for example:

Here, take this for example:

Here, take
this for example:

Here, take this for example:

We are used to the state of panic that comes with screwing things up, inadvertently, or advertently. It's just our bodies working against each other. It's just how we diagnose these things. It's just that we make ourselves dizzy with the weight of it.

We build fires. In trash cans on beaches, in wood stoves in cabins, with lighter fluid — fires are one thing we have not lost. We know how to burn things down.

We know how to keep ourselves warm with what we cut down, from what splinters off of what was once alive, from what has dried out, fallen and hardened.

We do not know how to plant — for that we rely upon faraway farmers and truck drivers and grocery store stockrooms and gourmet chefs. But we know how to uproot, how to consume and engulf and destroy.

We know how to sift through ashes, cooling embers, and find the one still too-hot spot to burn our skin.

We know how to lose oxygen and fuel, how to take heat and make it multiply until it sucks all the air out of a room.

We know about fire safety videos, not to put out cigarettes in dry brush.

We know we are supposed to make a fire pit, we are supposed to guard our hearths with rocks and dirt, we are supposed to douse these inklings with water, keep the kindling away from the matches.

We know we are not supposed to touch the rings on the stove top when they are still glowing hot. Our hands have the scarred impressions of this knowledge, we carry the reverse of it in fingerprints. But on cooling autumn days when we smell wood smoke in the air, when the crisp wind blows dry leaves against our shoes, it is all we can do not to rub two sticks together and ignite them into something, and burn up everything around us, leaf by leaf, city after city. It is all we can do.

We do not know how to talk about much of this. There is a standardized list of taboos, and the list of taboos is on the list, so none of us really knows what the list includes: Any mention of exes, any talk of doubts, any question of motives, any hesitation, any deep breath, any faraway thought, any close up thought or any future thought, any word that might disrupt the flow of words or the flow of waiting for words, any notion of progress, any query about new loves, any repeat query about the honesty of prior queries, any thought of making a fling into something more or something less, any catching of breath in the throat, any rubbed in happiness, any drawn out sadness, any dislike of friends' lovers, or for that matter any like of friends' lovers or any love, never love. We cannot bring up the glitches behind what won't be talked about, the spilling over and out that won't abide our lock-and-key mouths, the darkness behind everything else that we utter. We fumble against these dark edges. We talk of nothing but talk and talk.

We are easily taken apart, once you get to know our Ikea anatomy. We are assembled from the cheap plastic parts we came with, holes plugged with wooden dowels that never quite fit, rickety legs to support a particle board surface, paper veneer in a wood grain print. We go soggy at the first sign of rain between our joints. We are cheap and can be taken home and put together, but we are difficult to move. We cannot be returned, not without blemishes, not without original packaging. We may not fit with the rest of your decor. You may grow tired of us too quickly.

We are stupid. We are done with feeling stupid about stupid things. We insist that we can put them out of our heads, as though our heads were some suitcase into which we could choose what items to pack or unpack, what items to carry on or stow away, unpressurized, as though our minds were well filed, orderly, hanging swaying with the weight of paperwork in triplicate, the flowcharts of our every reaction and justification. But telling ourselves we are done with being stupid is about as smart as all the stuff we are trying to stop being stupid about, the stupidity is par for the course of humanity, the thing we have not learned is how not to call it stupid any longer, how to evolve past stupid toward some sort of stupid oneness with the universe. It's stupid.

We will not know how to finish what we start, so we start nothing. Or perhaps we say that we are merely dabbling, this is just an experiment in projects with no consequence. We can chart this, keep it on the graph where it can be controlled, where it can exist in lines with slope and other quantifiable qualities. Take your pen across it, make notations in the margins, make margins in the margins, find the edges of the edges, make new edges within them to keep from spilling over, draw air locks and reservoirs to save us from vacuums and drought. Our evolutionary brains have not learned how to stop when we are full, because we are able to calculate the past, extrapolate a future when we will be empty. We lose now in the pursuit of present, just to make more of it, to create more now. It is already now and it is already now and passed.

We do not know how to tell when something is finished, a manuscript or a love affair or an operating theory about the world. We will not recognize when to stop talking or when to change the subject, it is not like changing out the filter on the vacuum cleaner, something you know to do when dust starts spitting out the sides, clogging the tubes or filling your lungs. Finishing a sentence is harder, there is punctuation involved and a breath that will have to be taken. Finishing things releases them from us, to operate as us without our authority, stolen identities making new lives on their own. Finished love does not leave the air like it should, the way a burnt fuse hangs in sickly electric sweetness under your nose. Finished love becomes a monstrous version of its former self, like finished stories, when theme and meaning are pronounced and analyzed. What is finished is ready to be evaluated, what is finished is discarded for what will be begun, and in the interim it seems as though nothing will ever begin again, as though the world has hollowed out from the inside and left us behind. We do not finish anything. We leave finishing behind before it is done, we prefer dragging out the inevitable close, holding on to just the last of it, saving one last bite and one last sentence to hold in our mouths until it too dissolves.

We remember when there was nothing, before feelings had faces, before our hands fidgeting in empty pockets of the universe switched from distraction to distraction. We don't remember, not really. We were always defined by what distracts us, except for the memory — more sensation than anything else — moments that sucked everything toward them and then clicked into place. We don't know how to hold on to those moments when we find ourselves in them. Somewhere in the night they unclick silently and float out from their tethers and into the vacuum of space, creating vacuums within us. What we fill those vacuums with is up to us, though full is temporary. Nothing keeps these holes from staying empty for too long, fullness draining out in a slow drop that leaves wet residue on the sides, or in one mad splashing rush where the bottom falls out, where our mouths are left dry and cracked. We are parched with thirst for a new distraction, one that will stick, a cool drink of water that we can hold in our mouths before swallowing, an absorption that never comes, just the long fast esophageal drop, like how the weightlessness of space compares to its roller coaster counter part — the same feeling has nothing in common.

[Fuck everyone but us.] **We** make decisions we may never understand. We make weeks move past us like treading water. We talk about everything before tearing it up, tape together new versions of the events from their perforated edges. Fuck everyone but us for having their shit together, for making it work in the face of all that is important or impossible, for going to the movies, for making dinner, for climbing into bed, for climbing back out again. We sleep away entire weekends pretending not to wait for something. We hold each breath until the seconds stretch like ligaments and tear. Fuck everyone but us, wherever they are tonight, making midnight prayers and calculations for the morning, singing you to sleep. Fuck everyone but us. We contemplate it regularly. Wouldn't it be easier if we were boring? We know we are too important not to be in pain. Fuck everyone but us. We are far better equipped to make a mess of this.

We are microbes, or smaller still, just multiplying molecules, bonding and unbonding, building and breaking each other down. We visit sacred spaces to feel small like this, but we are always small under the sky, when life is happening to us — not even Life in capital letters, not the big weight of catastrophe, just the Life of daily life, the swell of a song or the wind. We are planets, or even larger, entire universes spinning inside jars like lightning bugs. We are the way things bend and break. We are the way water always levels out, the gravity of fluid and the fluidity of gravity together. We are tightly wound balls of rubber band tension and depression. We are expanding at the speed of light; we are all the exponents of its expansion; we are the numerical short hand for it. We are the outside internalized, nature implanted within us and conscious, the natural whole made multiple. We have infinite places to be in infinite moments, and each one is a choice, each permutation is a decision — this is what consciousness is made of, the multiplying choices of every moment in space, the ones chosen and not chosen, selected and left behind. What map is large enough to see this all at once (not a map at all but the very it of it)? How do we begin to make bigger versions of the small

and smaller versions of the large and understand them all in relation to ourselves when they cannot be contained by what they are, let alone what we are (at least what little of what we are we even know how to understand)? It is too much to process — so much of this all of it — too much to undo. No matter how we choose to rearrange the particles, they move in waves through us; no matter how we push against the waves, they are particles dissolving, they are particles resolving. This is the downhill slide into everything, and we are frozen in the now of it, condemned to imagine the future of it we can never reach. We are what we are accumulating, dust and detritus, money and neuroses, memories and expectations, energy recycled, radioactive waste and overprocessed food and false chemistry. What will we have when this is accumulated and how do we know it is enough? How do we learn to say enough (accumulating words), or even just the word “enough”? We can make the world out of this stuff, a dollhouse version of whatever is behind it. But we cannot build a small enough simulacrum, cannot imitate the world in words or equations or answers or images or advertisements or mimicked moments small enough or big enough to hold.

We are the reason you're alive. We move through arteries full and fat with the molecules of the outside world. It's our only taste of it except for accidents where we spill free, where we coagulate and dry. Most often we are trapped, squeezing through tubes whose walls thicken from bad habits and buildup. We never reach a destination, but keep circling past skin, the cells that suck us dry, that clean us out; oxygen is pulled from us. We return to the heart thin and void, pale and anemic, through veins different than those we've traveled before. This giant loop is all one-way streets we'll never see again. We are the reason we're alive. We are dying daily and so are you.

We shed cells as we move, as we hold still, the soft breezes of colliding stars are abrasive over time, vibrating sand particles until our skins slough off — in bed sheets, in shoes, in the same old coffee shops and bars, on the shore or a mountain road. The molecules that make us are not alive but we are. We cast them off as proof of this. We shed everything from us, pushing it out from inside, somewhere nuclear and poised, where a new and nascent us is growing stronger, waiting to shed us, to defeat us.

We are radioactive. We shed ourselves and infect each other with the fallout of our reactions. We have no insulation from the radiation of others, the cancerous influence of our surroundings. Our death will be slow, the product of what we absorb: conversation, insecurity, philosophy, misconception, inconvenience, darkness. We do not know how to duck, how to cover our head and necks. Tornado and earthquake drills will not be enough to quell the natural disasters growing within us. We do not believe in preventative medicine, but we'll test out poison cures. Toxins purge toxins. Faulty logic sustains us.

We grow what will have to be cut out of us eventually, every day we feed and water it. We make anniversaries for it, we check days off the calendar in defiance against it. We tuck it in to bed with us at night, and we tell it stories. Sometimes we can hear it whispering to us in moments of stricken silence or crushing crowds.

We are made of heavy collisions. Our parents better judgment colliding and cancelling out, their cells colliding and ours dividing, our own collisions making up the material of our fictions and our every days. We will not always have handled every one of these collisions, each situation, right — though we would like to think we are good people we cannot say how our friends or acquaintances see us, the tics and troubles they spot in us from miles away that they would never mention, the way their eyes roll when we look away. All this worries us too deeply to admit. We do not want to hear hard truths about ourselves but do not want to be kept in the dark. We remain paranoid about this dark, even though we know we must all fall asleep alone in it. The universe forms and reforms in our collisions.

We tenderize, growing more vulnerable to the elements even as we build up thicker skins, knowing that in seven years we will have different skins, that these will be shed with our other youthful expectations and burst bubbles. How many skins will we have to shed to reach what we know? How much can be scrubbed off from what we've tried to cover up? Our layers are not us, and yet we are only layers. Our ventricles, our peeling onions and the hands that reek of them — we are made of boxes instead of what they contain.

We are inoperable. The very fact that someone with a knife can cut us open seems improbable at best, the fact that we can be sewn back up, put back together, improved, seems downright impossible. That we are not impenetrable, that our flesh is flesh and that it heals are both phantasmagoric tales, Claymation nightmares with all the fits and starts of stop-motion photography and time lapse, the way flowers shudder in the wind and turn with the sun, the way stars move across the sky though seemingly fixed in our gaze. We are moving, not the stars, not the wind, but us around them, through them, caught every day by barbed wire and telephone poles and the cold, waiting to permeate us, already within us more than we care to acknowledge, inside out, on the digital chopping block of an MRI, powered by huge electromagnets and influenced by invisible waves. We cover ourselves with clothes and homes, with words and the drama of love, so that we will not be able to see what lies just under our own skins, the sheer transparency of it, our own redundancy. When we catch ourselves in the act of bleeding, it is stage blood, cut by prop weapons, performed by stunt men out of the fascination we have with our own destruction, our ability to throw ourselves off tall places, to fall.

We found each other's next of kin through numbers saved in cell phones, the only parts spared from crashes, precious metals sent sputtering across sidewalks.

We panic about having strokes, which is probably what causes strokes. We hear stop, drop, and roll in our footsteps; we hear the acronyms for emergency in all of our letters. Quick, what are all the things we ought to remember, who are the people we will not be able to protect, and if the house is flooding, what do we burn, if the room is on fire how might we drown? Batteries and blankets, but not phone numbers. Canned goods not credit cards. What will stop our hearts from stopping?

We want you to live. We did not think, nine (that many?) years ago, that you would be alive for us to miss you. We are not exactly missing you; it is more that we are surprised you are still here. We are not there. We are always waiting for you to be gone and we live as though you are, which makes our phone conversations that much more difficult, downright strange, really, talking about today as though it will happen every day. If we were really going to say all that we would say to you if you were really going to be gone (going, going, gone), we know you would never speak to us again (either too angry or dead): “Just calling to say Hi, and to tell you we are beginning to think your words will never dislodge themselves from our heads, that your fucked up way of looking at the world has become our own, that we are proud of most of it, we are proud of how you raised us, with vast stores of strange knowledge choking up our minds, with the right way to do things always hovering under our tongues. But this comes with a price, and we are only, slowly, now beginning to see where we have sabotaged so much of ourselves to be something suitable, where you were wrong about the way we should feel about people, where you were wrong about empiricism, about the way we should always

believe our own five senses had our back. You said, “You can do anything but you can’t do everything,” and now we are plagued by the thought of all we cannot do. We cannot pick something. We do nothing at all. You said, “Whoever cares more has already lost,” and now we care too much about everything, we cannot pass a highway exit without caring, we cannot leave a bar. You said, “Sex changes everything, makes you care when you shouldn’t.” It isn’t sex that made us care too much about the people we already know are bad for us; it isn’t sex that created care, just cemented it. We cannot stop this tidal wave of caring by making ourselves parched with thirst, denying ourselves water altogether in the interest of not drowning. We need these complications to survive. You have run out of one-liners and misconceptions, but these repeat, echoing forever. We repeat them in our every forward step; we will probably repeat them to our children if we can ever get over our childhood enough to have children without fear of scarring them, without fear that we will care too much and suffer too much for them as you did, without fear that they will be too selfish to appreciate our care as you so often insisted we were, without fear that they will make us parodies of ourselves and hollow

out all that was unique and free in us until they have nailed us down into the monster you became to us. And then we will die, in ways that will keep them from being able to say to us what we have not been able to say to you, besides I Love You — even just something to the effect of Wasn't That Fucked Up would do, without blaming us, as we have always you, and further still, without sucking it back into guilt, into our very muscles and bones, until it becomes us, until it becomes them against us. Father and mother, what a strange combination you have formed inside us, our tugging opposites, colliding failures, what seduces us into thinking our logical minds can be in control of the world we were taught could be ours if we would only reach for it. We cannot reach because of you; we are too afraid of falling. If we could take back everything you said to us, if we could take back every indoctrination of our childhood, we probably would not. But if there were a way to step outside of it, just breathe ourselves out through the permeable cells of our younger skins, we could see ourselves outside ourselves, we could be free. We would probably not know what to do with this freedom, without the umbilical cord of our thoughts tugging placenta behind it in deep

psychological wounds and sun-drenched memories of mosquito bites and our own young voices, the way adults did not seem that much bigger than us, not nearly so big as they seem now, and the way we were too scared of everything, the way we are still too scared of everything now. We cannot cut the cord that we will one day strangle ourselves with, because then we would have to live, actually live, without that easy out of the tough childhood or the social ineptitude or the convincing fear that we will always be alone. These fears are easier, they ground us to the the place we will not return to even on holidays, not anymore.

We are undone by each other, taken down a peg, clothes taken off, sentences torn off in anger. These are the same untangling, unraveling, when the moment before and the moment after become two separate worlds. Some things are too apart to come undone.

We replace we other we with we. You we I we not we it we the we. You we I we always we held we by we frightens we. We we not we able we stop we other we destructing. We can we you we right we. Please we leave. We stay.

We fold paper in half and in half again. We are obsessed with symmetry, with difference and sameness meeting on a line. Where are those invisible lines in the remainders of our lives, the parts that cannot be folded or matched or overlapped? We are compelled by repetition, by the cadence of a thing turning over on itself like a starting engine, like a runaway shopping cart, like a simile, like a song thump thumping inside our chests. The overlap slips again, synchronicity locking and unlocking, a paper fortune folding and unfolding its mouth.

We look at the waxing moon and think of shifting fractions, integer numbers spinning wildly into irrational divisions of themselves, numbers as pieces of circles, the quantifiable incomplete against the complete night sky.

We were relinquishing the month in tiny pieces, checked off, crossed out. We were forcing it out in moments the size of sand. Each night uncoiled itself from the electromagnetic tangling pull of the month going sour within us if we could not shed it fast enough. We could not learn fast enough how to let it go and so it was bubbling over within us, the way cheap poison overcomes a villain in a badly staged play. This month would be the worst, thirty symmetrical days of cold and the cancer that brought them here.

We make time move slower with our own impatience, and we know it is a ridiculous impatience for something we do not even want. We know many a thing about ourselves we would like to amend, but we also know that we will not do it. We are smart enough to know what is wrong with us but not smart enough to fix it even if we know just how to right the wrong. We will do whatever it is we know better than to do, we will do whatever it is we think we want, we will bleed our want right out of it and into the gutters of night. We will find no repair except in the band-aid solutions of temporary other people, except in the dark's lost and found.

We clench our jaws without realizing it, as some sort of defense against a world about to punch us in the mouth. Part way through the day we will separate our teeth and they will ache inside our faces until the muscles begin to fire on their own inconvenient notions and we cannot open our mouths. Our clenched tension is self-perpetuating, the ache in our jaw sets our nerves on edge and then our necks are aching, we are hunched over in cubicles aching into our shoulders and backs and thighs. We sit until we cannot stand. We break until we cannot bend.

We are afraid to speak in public.
We are afraid to speak in private.

We cannot find balance between being who we are and being better, between caring and not caring. We embarrass ourselves on the sidewalk outside of a bar this way, crying into someone else's shirt as though we will not have to see that someone else again the next day and pretend like nothing changed. We push the limits of it, make you tell us; we make you disappoint us.

We want knowledge to make us feel better when we are swimming in uncertainty, but more often than not it makes us feel worse, strips us of what little power we might have had, but it also strips us of the pull of it, the What If wondering that would tangle up everything else. We are too good at being caught up in our own momentum's terrible orbit. We are too good at striking the flint of confusion, pushing polite conversation over the edge into something darker — these are the only ways to burn off the kinetic energy of whatever we are holding on to, spinning tops of worry that are eroding our insides.

We work in tiny increments, and these increments become our days, become our entire calendars. Summers leave us this way. Winters blow through us. We can stretch out time, take interminably long to complete an insignificant task, but this does not make life move faster or feel full. This just absorbs.

We are not our photographs, and afterward we are nothing but. We look through lenses instead of putting our naked eye against the air; this frame is where our lives will land regardless. Acid free paper staves off forgetfulness, but replaces memory with memorization. We have an unquenchable need to capture everything within the fluttering of a shutter, but a shutter must blink, must close off and finish to catch. We must blink. We must look away. It is the spaces in between gazes that catch up with us, that hold meaning or make it meaningful. We are those spaces, created in darkness, we are bookends and we are the gap between frames. We lose track of the edges, but it is all edges, almost all horizon, where the borders of the borders fade quickly into their own endings, the way all beginnings must.

We ask for fortunes instead of facts, a way to chart imaginary progress. We visit machines and wait for our futures to spill out. This penny arcade unfurls paper as slick as a fax machine's; each becomes antique before our eyes. Here's your future hand-me-downed. Feel for its holes, for the days that will slip through it.

We do not make the most of situations.

We do not follow advice from parents or well meaning friends. We let our bad attitude be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We do not write back to friendly emails.

We do not want to hang out with you, we just want to know that we could if we wanted to.

We do not get involved in organizations or clubs. We cry in public at inappropriate times. We cry in private and maybe drink in private too and write it all down even when it is awful.

We do not send out finished work.

We do not ignore the fact that there are great geniuses out there, not us; we do not know how not to let that intimidate us. We let that stop us.

We do not say the phrases that would smooth things over.

We do not ride bicycles or bring our own reusable

bags to the grocery store. We recycle plastic containers, but ignore the fact that we should not have bought them in the first place.

We do not sing at karaoke even though our voice is probably fine.

We do not call ourselves smokers. We smoke cigarettes one after another and then do not smoke for months and we call ourselves non smokers.

We get paranoid about protection; we still take risks, but then panic about them. We know the unthinkable has no ultimate prevention, that people get knocked up all kinds of ways, hit by cars or unexpected news, though we like to think we would know what to do if that happened.

We do not know what we would really do.

We do not stop you when you tuck our hair behind our ear and whisper something into it. We will not stop you when you do not talk to us again.

We keep our hands full with distance. We keep our minds sharpened on the crossword puzzle permutations of our potentially crossing paths. We make unnecessary laps to find you. When we find you, we will pretend you are not there. These are the ways we maintain status quo, the way gravity and karma adjust the sides of the scale. We pull; you push. You initiate, engage; we cannot find the exits fast enough. We invent ways to avoid kissing you. We break lips to form conversations, just to want you all over again, to crave something — because the having of it is too much to bear. The ache, now that is something we can believe in. If there were not these mere inches of distance between us, we know that we would soon grow to dislike you: We would learn the things about you that are kept from us now in your vague way of having conversations about nothing. You would not round out how we have rounded you out in our minds, and the inconsistencies imagined would disgust us, we would be sure that you had let us down or lied to us or we would simply wonder what we ever saw in you in the first place. We knew this was bound to happen, so for all the pain of distance it was easier to maintain. Worse yet: We knew you might learn these same things about

us, that we might let you down before you could us — it was only the race to the finish, deciding how the story would end (so that we knew what it had meant). We needed Theme for all interactions, settled and analyzed, close readings of our lives to learn what they were About. We needed to make outlines, timelines, follow threads that lead to reasons, to prove that the world worked this way, even though it certainly did not.

We are not everything to everyone. We were afraid of the way things waxed and waned from our lives. All manner of logic and rational thought could defeat this, were it not for instinct, forged somewhere in the furnaces of our upbringing and our biology, despite what we knew, that holding on was the surest way to amputate ourselves.

We can tell from your bookshelves that some not-too-distant day you will leave us. You have the guidebooks and the poetry of half-planned trips to prove it. We know that we will not be joining you — you have not asked us, or when you have it was in passing, not exactly after the fact but after the fact was already true, opening and closing a door in a single sentence.

We cannot stand to hear about a future without us in it. We spent too much present plotting against futures, dragged out from fear of their arrival — though it proved to be the simplest thing in the world to make that future now. It's not that we don't want you to have ambitions, we have our own, and the people we meet without them do not interest us. We hope that you are planning great futures and that you will find people to put in them,

to stand next to when the world is ending, or at least to stand near at a concert. We are not those people. We have those people, but we are not theirs, it's why we like them in the first place — we found them so that they could lose us.

We visit the places we lived before now, places we had not since traveled, as though they did not continue to exist just four miles or nine or three hundred miles away from us, as though the trees we did not pass did not continue to grow. And when we remember these places and return to them, like shutting our eyes to trace a memory lost or a thought on the tip of a tongue, we find that they fail us. They are not the formula for regurgitating days, any more than our scribbled long division can explain our fault lines. We are wounded by these changes, by the way the world continues without us in the room, the way the people we encounter have conversations we will never have no matter how they are reiterated to us, no matter how we may never hear of them. They are still places, even if we have decided not to touch them, they are here. This makes the decision an actual one, not something decided for us by circumstance. This is what makes it more difficult, more real when it sticks. It is not an act of courage to accomplish something that it is not hard to do, that it would have been impossible not to do. But we replace places with other places. We begin to forget the certain something of which was only certain, only something, because we did not know anything else.

We meet again as though time does not pass, as though lives do not continue on — but here, where nothing's changed, you are a stranger. It is not your face I miss, but the way faces mean something to each other. It is not your voice, the sound of it in my ear, the smell of it neck to neck, but the way all good necks have that spot where they are about to decide to become shoulders. These are spots we all have, made for missing, but this missing is only the entirety of ache, unbranded by specifics. Limbs and the freckles they contain are not unique once they have been forgotten. The lines we make between our points do not make them any softer.

We often wonder how people meet other people and manage not to hate each other, how people meet at all and then communicate. The number of variables required to fall randomly into place seems unfathomably astronomical and impossible. Once we meet, how do we even talk? How do we then decide that we have anything in common, that we might like to meet again, that our personalities' parts fit together with the right kind of friction, that we can eat sitting across from each other, or perhaps, if we are feeling romantic, sitting next to one another, that we can wake up in the same way next to one another without regret and rinse repeat? How? People are not slot machine permutations, dice cast, coins flipped or tops spun. People are not paper dolls to trim down to a size that suits us. People are not going to appear when we want them, disappear when we don't, and like it. People are going to make us nuts. Except,

We align, sometimes, conjuring a synchronized, ionized, convulsive exchange, in speech or contact, some impossible disembodied moment happens which the before and after cannot hold. We push into each other, stretching our arms out to push the walls apart in this apartment. The pace changes or the mood shifts; we push on, find a space that accelerates.

We align, but how — these mutually agreeable groups of people mutually agreeing tolerate each other, to deal with all the bullshit of being human in the general proximity of other humans? What great confluence of star dust and chemistry is required to make this possible — the fact that life exists on our planet and has managed to tolerate itself for this long is baffling on the days when we are not skimming the surface, not just not stopping to think of it. Let's not stop to think of it, how these planets will swirl and ocean currents too and how it could all just stop but won't not even for us but whatever petty stupid shit is occupying us will stop, our aching sides or our absent love (perhaps these are one in the same, perhaps not). The news of the day will say nothing of the moment when everything stops, there will be no day to report upon, no literature to critique and no smoke to inhale and no way to break down, just this. And if all of this is not enough for us, then nothing will ever be enough for us, and maybe that is not so sad after all because whether we are empty or full it's the same when it comes down to the physics of it, whatever holds us to the land just like it holds the sea and sky. And if all of this is not enough for us, then let it be not enough, let it be nothing at all to us.

We told each other, at first, things we thought would make us like each other more, the stories we had told and retold that we knew made us sound at least a bit impressive, that we could tell with practiced carelessness at parties. Later we would begin to divulge less flattering stories, but these were the pathos stories, the same practiced pain, the See How Complicated And Dark And Interesting I Am I Am Just Barely Holding It Together Over Here As Amazing As I Seem stories designed to make you know that we took nothing for granted, to make us know that our lives were as hard as we knew they were, because we would play them off as everyday pain while presenting them to you as extraordinary strife. It wasn't that we wanted to be talking about this, so much as we did not know how to stop. Somewhere under all of it, these things were true, truer than anything else we had talked of up to date, and yet because they were too true to truly talk about we had to turn them into just another way to pull you in. And our attempts to pull you in were really tests to see at what point you would push away, at what point you would prove our theories right, about the universe's equal-and-opposite reactions, that we wouldn't be a member of any club that would have us as a

member, that when you really got to know us you would run.

We would one day tell each other something true, once we could find it hidden in the folds of what was obvious. What we took for granted as foregone conclusion and not worthy of a mention was the very thing we should have been shouting from the rooftops at each other all along. It was the very thing we were aching to hear, in all our Where's Waldo searching for that perfect something.

We wanted to hear the obvious: I like you. I think you've really got something here. What you are doing matters. We are the same. We are in this thing together. As much as we rail against all words for having so little to say in so many of their crowded numbers, these cliches might just be the only things worth saying, the only things that will buoy us up in the midst of our insignificance (is this mere vanity or something more important than anything else?), between laws of thermodynamics and entropy, theories made of tangled strings.

We talk about time travel and other impossible things, increasing the rate of banter and nonsense as we tire until we are babbling in our sleep to warm separate beds that should contain each other. Our days begin to contain one another, and with this comes parts omitted, dark matter spots and gaping holes we fill with vague summary, the thoughts we may be thinking that do not connect to the brightness between us, the parts that undermine us.

We stay up late, insisting that it is early, that we have plenty of time. We always fall asleep before each inch and permutation of time is conquered. We talk about how nothing else is like this, and perhaps that is true in the way that all variations are true. We are different people together when you are here, when I am there, when we are nowhere — the versions are unrecognizable when transposed. We walk down the street and are strangers to us just hours before, when our field of vision narrowed to only each others faces, when the world got incredibly small and we were large within it, all that could exist, no newspapers no war no errands no other rooms in the house anymore, no other streets or towns, no other time before or after. Then, when those lost distances seem lost and distanced again, we are alone, recording the way space narrows, and space suddenly feels too far and too wide.

We do the crossword together. The crossword is a metaphor, of course, for the ways words intersect, the way people pass each other on the street, how every answer infiltrates every other answer. The crossword is us, always incomplete, lots of cheap puns, white space that connects us, capital letters in block increments, an obsession with clues, the answer to last week's problem upside down in the margin (as though disguised enough to prevent the temptation). We do the crossword together but never finish it. We cannot fill in all the blanks. We fold and set aside.

We fit our conversation between the intermittent screeching of the train, between the gaps in cell phone coverage, through text messages or touches in the blinking tunnel dark. We make this trip twice a week at least, and like it is with all travel, some sort of strange distance math, the more we make the trip the shorter it seems, perhaps because as we familiarize ourselves with the world around us we begin to overlook it. Looking at something and overlooking it become one and the same endeavor, just like covering something and uncovering it. Pinpointing is the same as excluding, defining the same as denying. We find the borders to decide what stays within them.

We were suddenly aware that we were responsible for something. The world had just changed. Our bluff had been called, our dream was coming true and now we were going to be asked to put up or shut up. It was suddenly the scariest thing we could imagine. The alternative had been scary enough, but was coming on slowly, there was no marker for when the world had finished bottoming out, had finished failing us. Now things were looking up, and what would that mean for us if we could not rise to the occasion? All our excuses for wasting time and drinking too much fell away with a handful of swing states and we were left holding empty bottles under brightening lights.

We were surprised by our tingling scalps, our real ability to be moved, something we always supposed was possible but we had never felt, what we were waiting to feel: possibility. What would it mean to begin to believe anything was possible? Would it be liberating or ultimately handicapping, even more paralyzing than having our hands tied by circumstance and excuse, by bad timing and high standards, by each others conflicting needs, or the stack of books by our bedside tables?

We start fights because we are lonely. We eavesdrop on others fights when we have no one else to fight with. We end the night with a bad taste in our mouths no matter what we say. The days when we actually get in fights hollow out the nights that follow them, when the panic that everything has changed overwhelms the fear that nothing has changed, and you are at arms' length and our arms are growing longer. We want to undo everything with these fights, and then when they are fought we wish it could all be put back together. The world does not accommodate these wishes, it does not work this way, this business of entropy, this process of mending and bending again.

We read others love letters, the works of great writers, finally as just people, whose connection fueled their works but could ultimately not be reconciled with it.

We worry that this is us, that our work and our love will never work together, let alone apart or at all. We worry that we will die just as they died.

We worry, too, that this is all over-hyped, part of the machine of commerce, convincing us of the impossible love affair as a concept, a model for our lives, and if we take weekend trips and buy more souvenirs we will feel whole, connect with that indefinable, unique and irreplaceable something — you too can have all this!

We worry, too, that our cynicism on this subject belies a certain resistance to opening up to any legitimate chance at just such an experience, that possibly we are already having these experiences, that these giant moments we have been waiting for need to be acknowledged in the moments we are having, that they are self-contained. We try to realize the choices are not so binary, that we do not have to have or be the greatest or nothing at all.

We can live a life of meaning for ourselves alone and we do not require witness. Plenty of people have normal lives all the time.

We must learn not to presume we deserve more for ourselves. Having been raised on gifted education and white American privilege, this proves difficult. Having been reminded of said gifted education and white American privilege on a regular basis, it becomes even more difficult to presume we deserve anything we have or have worked for. The reverse effect leaves us too humble, too guilty to enjoy ourselves or make the most of an opportunity, constantly worrying that maybe we are not as good as we want to think that we are.

We dream of sitting on decks in the morning sun — preferably somewhere by the ocean or a mountain stream — and writing down big ideas. When we find this deck, the one of our imagined greatness, it turns out to be too hot to write in the sun, our coffee adds insult to sweaty computer screen glare injury, and we can wring nothing out. We become restless when we enact; we have not learned how to get what we want. We have only learned how to want it.

We are squinting. The brightness is growing and somehow this is enough, but frightening, because it is so easy to tug a chain and turn out the lights, unscrew the bulb and shake it for the sound the broken filament makes inside its dome. The sound you make when you enter my day is ding, ding, ding like a bicycle bell, the sound of text ground into particles, and it sounds just like dead filament. The day gets brighter, granulated and recontextualized under touch screens. They say the oil in fingertips makes bulbs fade sooner than they should, but I want to keep touching anything too bright.

We will watch for the darkness to approach, and when the sky has leaked out all its color we will wonder about the next day, the next light before the night is through. We will make promises to each other in this darkness, short bursts of hope sent across thresholds under porch lights and with the chime of a new message or softest mouth upon a shoulder in an already warm bed. These are the kind of promises that sleep forgets, the expectations for tomorrow, the impossible set up and the inevitable take down of what could be.

We get Gumby-armed and -legged and -fingered when we have too many beers on a rainy day. We try to type, because writers drink, don't they, they drink a lot but it turns out they do not do this while they are writing, because they turn into Gumby. Our Gumby hearts cannot take it. Our Gumby hearts want to send messages across vast distances, want to keep using phrases like vast distances, want instantaneous acknowledgment, want you here now, yes please, and we want nothing more than the impossible, if you could just give us that, already, we would be satisfied.

We get anxious when there is no plan, as though plans will save us from uncertainty. We get anxious when there is a plan, but not a hard and fast one. A vague suggestion or a twittering possibility is worse than no prospect at all. We try to counteract this anxiety by making plans that stick, going over them again and again until we are sure the plan is the plan. This is how plans are broken. This is how sure things are split asunder, forcing a wedge of What Must Be in the charged What If air between two people.

We will retreat to cabins in the last lost places.

Here we will spread brief wings before losing our posture and curling back into our usual days' hunch over liquid crystal screens. Here we will not be able to turn away from the waves, our eyes get caught on horizons making lines that drop off horizons' other sides, tugging flotsam and jetsam through cold water currents to places we will never travel. We will never see the entire world and the pain of this keeps us fastened in one place.

We would fast forward the last day of a trip in instant replay of its other days, speeding up so memory would have to stick, saying, "Remember when we climbed that rock up to the gorgeous view of the sunrise?" And you would say, "I do remember. That was this morning. Let's do it again. Let's add more sunrise to the almanac." And I would say, "Remember when the sky felt so incredibly huge and the earth so small?" And you would say, "Remember when the forest smelled like mint and sage?" This spot, this conversation, this creek beneath us moves. And I would say, "Remember now?"

We walk switchbacks under the fullest moon night, toward a rocky coastline cliff we do not know by day. The color has been sucked out of the light and the view is a shuddering silent movie projection of the view, of the crashing waves.

We are suspended on the edge of the world in strange hot water wombs, aqueducted mineral hot spring baths evaporating from around us and, here.

We watch the stars trace circles around each other — if we squint hard enough and look long enough we see their trails, our own rotation. Sometimes a star will decide to change, slip out of orbit, streak across the night and (smell of gunpowder) disappear.

We spot a shooting star and, when we tell you to make a wish, you do. You pause for a long breath, as though you are wishing in sentence form — and then you turn, with a peck on the cheek and a matter-of-fact “Okay” — because wishes are things that matter to you, not to be rattled off, but real intentions really intended, full sentences diagrammed like mine. Meteors burn into nothing and we make paragraphs against the ghosts of their brightness. Our run-on sentences make chapters, miles logged

against the night, one truck stop to the next, highway mile markers reflecting under the uncurling moon.

We keep the water running hot until our skin is flush, until the cold of the night is a tingling spark and we are ready to jump into the dark sea — this is how heart attacks happen, you say. Really, this is how contrast cures us, sensation shifting from one extreme to the other, hot and cold becoming the same until our fingers and toes and then palms will shrivel. Our skin will become alien to us, like the night has become an alien planet, lit only by a foreign moon and shrouded in noxious fogs, no specific horizon.

We will make this pilgrimage again, in our minds or in another darkness, return to this moment as a true one, present, a totem for other moments, matter-of-fact, yes, this is possible.

We will give up the woods again, give up the cliffs and the sea beneath them, give up switchbacks and guardrails, return to the city’s own poetry — but we give nothing up. We cannot give up things we never had in the first place but were always ours.

We return to reality begrudgingly. We have forgotten what it feels like to be immersed in this traffic of nonsense, slaves to routine. We have forgotten life without the mountains, waves crashing into shoreline, we have forgotten life without this collision, a life where the days end in small and average rooms rather than on the top of a glorious fiery view in a place where things mean something. We have forgotten meaninglessness, until we are dropped back down into a world of it, growing claustrophobic as the city encroaches upon us, growing closer from our shrinking rural space. We have forgotten the words for all we were not feeling, the filler from what used to fill us up. We were convinced it did not exist, when we were standing among tall pine trees at night breathing air that smelled of everything truthful. We were starting to believe this over romanticized hyper-real world could be true all the time. And it could be. But we return and soon we will decide that it cannot be true any more, and so we will make ourselves content with what is in front of us again. We will decide that this is what really exists, that maybe we were remembering wrong that huge fucking unconquerable majesty. We will lay waste to ourselves once again in offices with fluorescent

lights, in bars where the night changes length according to the crowd but always ends the same, in the fog of an empty city and a drink too many. We will make waves with small dramas in our lives instead of letting real waves crash against us to feel something larger than us move us in its wake. We will make trouble, and we will find things to lament. We will lose track of this feeling, which now seems in such stark and penetrating contrast to all that came before it. “You must change your life,” echoes Rilke, and right now we still feel as though we can, but we have already begun to wonder how quickly that feeling will fade if we let it. Our lives are the same, and completely unrecognizable.

We memorize each other this way:

constellations in the freckles of new skin, markers for navigation, strategies for familiarizing travel.

We are cartographers, made from unfolding maps. Constellations follow us.

We build predictions on the positions they tick through. The night sky dips against the land. Our hands traverse its distances, between swirling points, approaching and expanding space, we move around and past each other.

We need pocket reference. What waits to be read off your skin, what myths of yours will toss themselves into expanding heavens? These are just dots — dot matrix printer crunching its way through paper down your back. These are just dots — halftone ink droplets on newsprint, cyan, magenta, back far enough to let specifics blur. These are just dots — punctuation, pinned to map paper, perforating oceans and running small cities clean through with specimen needles. How else but through dissection can we discuss the cells that divide in us, what divides us? All continents shift.

We are tagged and archived. Geography makes words for these formations, and so we find geography against each other.

We make claims on surfaces with lines and letters until we think we know our own compass direction. Still, tectonic plates and days move beneath; blood pumps hot magma under our thickening crusts. Words are anchors that do not hold, scraping shifting ocean floor.

We begin to count on skin like we begin to count on land to stay put.

We are not sure. We will probably never be sure. We were never sure, it was just a feeling that snuck up on us, it was the signifier we attached to any signified — this is just a theory we are working on, but one can never be too sure, there are not qualifiers or tests for this sort of thing, even though it seems very important right now to distinguish the difference between the real thing and whatever it is we are afraid this might be instead of the real thing, as though there is some better something else out there hovering on a horizon we will miss for all the colorful sunset exploding in our UV-protected eyes. What would being sure look like? We are equally compelled by the concept and convinced it does not exist. “You just now,” they insist.

We wonder if we might always get pulled in all directions like we do now. Sometimes we feel too much like Pangea still cracking its bones apart to want in all directions, still drifting across the water to split the ocean into its three or several parts when water really just wants to run together, every secret wants to know about every other secret, every love about the next, in case it is larger or better or more, when really it is all the same everything, not in a generic way but in a transcendent way, and so of course this is real, if we are really

alive — but it will take us years to realize this and by then we will be aching for new oceans to form between our reaching fingers.

We are not sure, and yet we expect to be, as though we could know the future before it happens. It does not work this way with anything, yet we expect to be able to say just what the rest of our lives will look like on this path as soon as we take a step. We expect to be able to know you as soon as you are a fraction less than a stranger, before we can even remember in any detail your face from one meeting to the next. We expect to be able to tell how you will go about unmaking us — exactly what we will fight about until we slowly hate each other, when right now we cannot imagine this will ever happen, although we have to know it will, because we have seen it happen more often than not, we have not found the recipe or combination of volatile chemicals and vitamins and minerals that can keep it at bay, this malignant boredom that grows between each pair of us, and so we are not sure, or perhaps we are sure, that this is what sure is and what it turns into and perhaps that is how we know something is working, when it falls apart and tears our guts out with it. These are the ways we prove we are alive, to be mortal and malleable.

We are weird, both to and around each other. Weird is a wave crashing over our heads when our backs are turned, and hopefully we have happened to take a deep breath we can hold while it tosses us or sucks us down into its pressured swirl. We revolt from weird by not bringing up subjects, by dropping them when they are brought up: This is how weird happens, because we do not have the strength of will, the belief that weird could pass, necessary in order to dismantle it. In some rare instances we can outlast weird and arrive at some safe harbor of a knowledge that weird does not dismantle us, that we are worth struggling through weird, that it would take more for someone to give up on us. We breath a sigh of relief at this, when we are lucky enough to find it, but we are never sure that we have found it. The residue of weird lingers and we create more weird just from the hoarded scraps of it. We cannot simply let a thing or two go.

We are made of questions we know better than to ask. We do not want the last echoing word, wood stove smoldering too hot through the night, we stay silent to avoid the echo of our own voices. We wish we had not been raised to run the numbers this way, quantity not quality, unable to take you seriously when you depart red-eye and say, “

.” There are some words we simply do not hear the way they are meant. They come out distorted, as though we invented them for ourselves while you climb stars in a jet with little televisions in the back of every seat, 30,000 feet of limbo overhead.

We suspected we might not be capable of being where we were in space and time without requiring something more. The few moments this was not true fled with the acknowledgment of their existence, usually when staring at the ocean, mouths agape at the majesty of the natural world, how it could dwarf us until none of this mattered, until all faces and desires were the same. But their sameness would fold back on itself in renewed discontent.

We started to think of other people when you were around. This caught up to us, disturbed us. We were scared we did not know what this meant for us, if we were trying to displace some happiness with some unquenchable desire. Or if we were meant to be somewhere else. Or if we were realizing we were meant to be here and that we were fighting this realization by conjuring up unresolved pasts to reenact in this new coupled dark, when we were beginning not to be able to remember other people in the midst of the way you were eclipsing them.

We will try to remember what it was like to be with them, sense memory features fading into

photographs, those nervous tics and the timbre of a voice while falling asleep — these will wane and be lost in new features against our own new cells of skin. We shed those features, but our brains will fight against the nature of forgetting, conjuring up memory at inopportune times to remind us that we do not remember in the same way, not anymore.

We will realize finally, and repeatedly, what we will not return to, no longer able to imagine who we once were. This, we will think to ourselves when we have enough distance to call it that, is progress. And now we begin, already, too soon, to imagine the day when this fresh you is a fading memory, another growing distance, eclipsed by another moon after this one (this glowing and inexplicable thing), when this has morphed, malignant, into its own parody.

We hear this is what happens. People sink into one another until we cannot imagine what it would take to escape their gravity. And yet. We have seen once or twice, through a misplaced word, how easy it would be to let something spark off and quickly cool, not war or fireworks, just a few more days of

silence.

We have seen how tenuously the ground is balanced on the edge of the sea, how the Department of the Interior can try to hold it back with reinforcements against its fate, its suicidal desire to rejoin what will destroy it, picking up debris and us with it to spill into its own chilly womb.

We have seen how tenuously the earth clings to its orbit, what scraps of planet keep other scraps of planet from floating off into the sky.

We have seen what conversations we are not having, the ones that keep this thing teetering instead of falling into the sea that sucks the ground from beneath our feet.

We have heard these conversations already, the ones about past and future, stories with pronouns omitted, futures with faces left off, gray manuscripts best left unilluminated. These are the unsewn edges, frayed and waiting for us to tug at their strings, to unravel it all. When we have these conversations, when they sneak up on us in the worst possible moments to deconstruct whatever

bliss we have temporarily uncovered, dismantling the assumptions we fought so hard not to make in the first place, we will finally begin to see where something new that we could never have imagined being like that something old may be the same thing after all, that all of everything is just a matter of what we say, how we choose to replay these same scenarios in the next version of the loop. Let's have these conversations now, forget that they can demolish our little buildings with strategically triggered explosives — better to destroy something merely on the verge of existence, better to know if, in the fire, we will melt or harden.

We wonder if we are just trying to prove that everything breaks, that everything was already broken in us, flawed, unmendable.

We wonder if it is only because we are trying to prove that everything breaks that we make this broken statement true, manifesting our own entropic vision, our own breakdown and the crumbling around us.

We are not to be mended. This cannot be amended. The versions of this in which everything works

out seem too impossible and empty, with their talk of being too full and beautiful.

We are slowly beginning to uncover secret places where possibility is possible, where the earth confirms its promises to us and lets us stand our ground.

We are having more nights like this, the nights begin to bleed into days we stay awake through the entirety of the sky's dark rotations, awake and tingling in a place where conversations feel more Real than real. We have rejected the notion of Real or Authentic (there's that word again), but we have yet to find other words that better describe the difference between these nights and the once and usual world we previously inhabited and will probably, soon, inhabit again. We hear this is what happens.

We hear the earth will soon sink back into the sea. We visit wild places and marvel at how the world could crumble beneath our feet, how it is already crumbling. These wild crumbling places remind us that our homes are crumbling, that we are perched on impossible land — the cliffside highway no

different from the fault line landfill we have put cities upon — we are just clinging, to each other, building clinging to building, nails digging in and seams popping from the strain of a question, how to stay on top of our tiny islands.

We are mesh upon the surface of nothing, holding back the continent from the sea.

We plan for departures, push limits and miss flights to deny all necessary goodbyes. We push back arrival times as well, trying to anticipate that the world will not meet our expectations we amend them to more realistic expectations, which the world will still not meet. Perhaps the answer to this is to panic sooner, longer, in order to make life fall into place faster.

We have not yet developed the skills necessary not to panic at all, not to let the too-big world become great and overwhelming on its face, like the face of the moon slipping out of its orbit to roll against the earth. There is a short story about this, a story started from a dream in the mind of a friend. She will tell us to write about nothing less than everything, make small fictions about the universe — because why say anything large about anything smaller? Why say anything less about anything more? Or anything more about anything less? We are afraid if we zoom in we will be unable to zoom out, our five senses continually narrowing their focus until the details of what lies outside our interest are lost in the flood of other. We are afraid to cross anything out, this small nothing might be too important to lose. We try to keep our options open, keep our vision focused on everything, but we lose what these words cannot cover, what these sounds forget.

We imagine nightmare scenarios, where you do not text us back because you are dead, and won't we look insensitive for imagining that you hate us. We always make it about us. And when you are dead, Finally, we will have an excuse to suit the degree of emotion we are already feeling. Until then, it is the disproportion between our own bodies and the sky overhead, between us and the microbes that invade us that upsets us most — these are the things we are talking about underneath the surface of everything else, fear of the very large and of the very small. All of it at once — Google street level to continental shelf, 100X microscope to 10,000 mile telescope, the span of light years and the broken sound barrier and our tiny hands, as giants, moving against the nerve endings of skin.

We meant to say everything the last time that we spoke. We meant to do everything before it got dark. We meant to make it so we would not have to chose what to do with our own limbs from one moment to the next, it was meant to be pre-terminated. It was meant to be easier, more lucid, that the words would come out the same way our feelings understood them, that their catching against the open air would not oxidize them, turn their corners rusty in a fine film that would come off on each of us. We meant to make the middle more important than the end, meant to hover in it, float in the warm-water present, but we drown in it instead, or we meant to.

We wait for you to unhinge your voice from the phone, and we cringe at the way it carries through the air and cannot think of how it must carry over the extra space we fill with wires in between us. What kind of wholeness does that offer, bridges across distances that are then clicked off, hung up, set on the receiver, recreating unspanable space, now cursing space that could have been possessed, crossed, traversed but will not, due to impossible facts, a law of the universe that says these objects cannot touch. What impossible buildings will we construct to fill our days with toppling them down, what Jenga games of off-balance chance — and when we realize these are not games to fill up time until life begins, how will we keep that hurtling urge from its flattened result, its ominous echo: “We are making our final descent”?

We are lost but you have our neighborhood as an annex to the map of the world in your head. We are an extra fold, an inset detail of a separate city block, an office park or a train stop, annexed by the world in your head. We are a new apartment with an empty refrigerator, a trip to a coffee shop that stays open later than yours, a walk down the same dark sidewalk, up the same small hill.

We send lifelines over binary zeroes, thinking of stars that form most often in pairs, little orbits of each other taught to circle and flare out. These messages will do the same, reaction and reply, cause and effect wrapped up in their elliptical ellipses, the dot dot dot paths of our dash dash dashed notices, treasure maps that lead to treasure maps, the map is an empty treasure chest, but the dots themselves are worlds bigger than we can imagine and too close to be ignored, if we could only see all of it at once, see the map unfolded with its meaning in the creases. We are making our own dots, one at a time, to connect back to ourselves through someone else, through every day — a light on in a window after dark, a secret whispered. Two bodies affect one another in the warmth of a galaxy or the orbit of a double bed. We will quote ourselves to remember what we have said, what was meant in the moment before meaning sways in the breeze of what happens next. We will make maps out of these transit routes, marking over the lines in a new wet ink jet smear.

We were cultivating compassion for gravity and the ways the world would turn on itself.

We had made difficult choices that shifted the world beneath our feet, choices we knew we could go back on but that we must not, choices that solidified what we had always suspected — that we were not meant for each other, that it was just as possible to be alone, that all it took was saying the word, that words were these dangerous things that could spill from our mouths at any moment and change the world. Sometimes they could break something that they could not mend. Sometimes they could mend something that would not break.

We were now living with the power of our choices in a smattering of words, heard and filed away and said before they were even quite felt, the kind that would ring in our ears afterward until we realized that they were true. Our words had their own gravity now, tiny orbits that we asked you to escape.

We will work past midnight, fly past the night to make ourselves alone in it, hover over last messages wondering what will boomerang back. The wait is hollowing. The wait carves stalactites from our stomach lining and makes the edges of night shudder. We know the stars will disperse, and as we pass through other constellations we will be pulled in all directions. We will board planes and have conversations we don't mention. We will take apart a past still fresh and hang it up in strips of film and come home smelling of chemistry. We are cutting room floor, frames snipped apart, meaning dismembered. We do this only to have something to lose, something to come untethered, to trail away from us into the dark, something to long after. We may have lecture notes and slides but we do not have the universe they attempt to explain; we do not have the very night that makes them what they are. We cannot grasp even what we can see, let alone the more that hangs beyond. We are merely a little bit of everything, which may be made almost entirely of nothing.

We are a continent apart, divided now by land instead of water (an entire bay of it) (think of all the gallons) (think now of the miles). For some reason, land masses seem closer. We have a car and you have temporary interstates, meanwhile this inlet is the Red Sea rushing back in. Here we rely on bridges holding up the weight of the sky and tunnels straining against the ceiling of the ocean floor. It is too much to think of for too long. Put three hours ahead of us. What strange folds time zones crease into time — it is already tomorrow where you are. You are already returning sooner than the time we have to wait. Faulty logic sustains us (better than bridges or tunnels which must stand). Double logic spins centrifugal force into forward momentum (the way a song can turn over on itself, four-four triplets in half-time feel) into a place where we are lines instead of waves.

We imagine the continents recombining and dividing in new patterns, Africa against Asia, Australia near North America, Antarctica in the center, and our smooth clean sheets the flattened Mercator maps of elementary school classrooms, with our fingers making spaced out capital letters against the faded sea blue, someone else's skin (or more likely the memory of it) an uncharted land mass in crooked shapes, the dark continent of the dangerous other, fading. When we feel we can reach anything a map can hold, we send out sonar pings, the arrows of a compass rose. Our thumbs form words on number key pads of navigation, text message CB radio transmissions of, "Is anybody out there?" then "Which of us is lost?" Sometimes it takes weeks for a transmission to be heard, for response to follow call — and we are adrift and only holding paper, not a path to anything but folding.

We were overwhelmed with vertigo. We were fascinated by maps, by the impossibility of location, by the visual spacial emotional distances between things, between the molecules between them. We could not get over how giant we were, how many tiny particles we contained, how small we were with all of science swirling around us. We remember when we were young and our arms would not create a wingspan wide enough even to read our parents' newspaper. We remember that small feeling because it has never left us, because we are sure we will always feel this small in our cars and our homes and moving across an elevated rail line and hyper aware of gravity's plans for us, one by every single one. We knew that we would fall, so we would practice it, preemptively reenact it at every opportunity, like a stuntman could save us, a trick of the eye or the camera could set us free from our own mortality, unchain us from gravity and by extension from the earth itself so that we could float up into the atmosphere and look down on ourselves from above like we did in so many cell phone self portraits instead.

We still like each other. I'm as surprised as you are, surprise hidden too well, shrugged shoulders as though everything were nothing — and is — because all we can say about the universe is (that it is big). All we can say about each other is announced to the wilderness. Ground grows beneath my feet, so I must learn to expect hope (though beneath feet before ground is vulnerability). We have been trained to ignore the ground, both what is solid about it and what shakes. These tricks keep the inevitability of heart attacks and buses crushing us from crushing us, keep curveballs from curving every permutation into useless calculus. But let us find the lines that curve toward us and let our feet be surprised at finding the ground. Let our necks crane our shoulders unshrugged so that the sky can fill the hollow between with a kind of awe that undoes molecules. We will all be hit by buses (no matter the inbound or outbound line); there is no purpose in prediction. But for a time, until then, we have still, and we still like each other, and other such surprises, the ground beneath our feet.

We have lost coasts — edges lost to the tide and the swell of what's between, lines lost to the magnitude of all that resists mapping. Some places find us, familiar before we've found them. But in our everyday, pressing against our chests, they are unreachable, no matter how this will kill us. We have lost coasts, the way we feel about each other, locations made unmentionable. This coast, too, will one day be lost, the when and where of it insignificant against the geography of what comes next.

We perch on the continent's edge, acutely aware of the mass of land behind us pressing back against the sea that makes its slow and steady assault on its ragged edges. We are dwarfed by the mountains' rough curling into the sea floor, subduction pressing against subduction in geologic collision, merging basic elements. With the stars shifting against the more human scale of the hills, we're undone by our own smallness, unwoven from our giant scale against cars and conversation, conversions of our giant significance.

We read too many articles about the cosmos.

Then we find ourselves interchangeable, for all our separate tics and idiosyncrasies. We get baffled by our own responsibility to this insignificance, our fractured fractaling. We are not snowflakes. Or if we are snowflakes, it is only our cumulative effect that makes a difference. How do we begin to cover the land? We may be unique but we are still only white spots tugged down by gravity to melt against the ground in a suspended instant of uncapturable, unendurable magic.

We are people who build galaxies and people who build stars. The astronomer describes himself. We write this down to catch it like he catches a moment of the universe on a chart with numbers instead of looking up. Some objects move too fast to stay together, even with their immense density. He says this but I think of people, swirling hives of strangers colliding and whizzing past each other. He talks of self-gravitation, the way the weight of something can hold itself together, and he means galaxies, but what else is white hot and aching under its own weight, held together by the glue of weighty destiny, defined by nothing else but our cells' proximity. Star clusters form behind clouds of molecular dust, which they shed to finally be seen. He calls them ungrateful children, because what binds them is the gravity of the cloud they drive away, and when the cloud is gone they too disperse, forgetting families and homes. Some stars form so fast that we can barely catch them, hovering just over a few million years in adolescence before unsticking themselves from the sky. Some are the slow protracted growth of others' cast offs, recycled from what they have shed in their own growing pains, scraps swept into a waiting cosmic dustpan — all this takes place behind the curtains

of molecular dust, in a darkness behind which stars bigger than our sun are waiting for their cue to eject heavy elements and push apart the sky.

We say we can't see a thing. There are too many headlights down the highway. We are the least known and understood of what we see, unable to go outside ourselves to study how a galaxy spirals out into the universe and, if no one is around to watch it, is as beautiful and as loud as we suspect. All the mirrors and optics in the world cannot give us the image we want, the thing as such, the image that is not an image at all, cannot give us ourselves, invisible.

We have astronomy in our letters. Platable curves come apart in our fingers, like water spilled on sheets, like sentences diagrammed and dismantled.

We stare into the heavens and see only spots, unable to grasp swirling gasses and cosmic forces at work. We do not understand the speeding movement of things that are standing still, fixed signposts of the universe hurtling past each other in slow motion time. How are we to talk about this, these tiny dots up there, these tiny dots we are. The dust of it forms everything we know, swept up in moments of immense scale or immense density. By the standards of the empty everything, a sparse collection of gasses is incredibly dense — nothing else for centuries of light — but even in their mass they are vacuums more perfect than we can create. Meanwhile the smallest particle can be packed so tightly as to contain everything we have up to this point understood. Density is everything, how merged or un-merged we are, head of a pin with a mass greater than the sun. Time takes an incredibly long time to move objects that are holding still, but time is moving even what holds still. Each thing is shaken to its core and turned into something else. Every hollow thing can be filled, and every near thing will be far, dispersed and lost. For brief centuries and eons we are clustered, but elements will act upon us, the unfathomable nearness of the universe will fill its

every distant crevice, expanding the borders but losing the center, every particle and mass attracted by the collective gravity of everything else.

We must run the movie backwards to see how we were once connected, to discern original configurations and all of their potentials. This is how to learn how we are coming apart.

We, what stars are made of, talk in clustering constellations held together by space. Stars are not so close together. It just looks that way from here, our eyes constructing them into stories, separated by millions of miles of meaning we place in their particles, connecting the dots if we stare long enough, turning spans of space into ways to exist. We cluster, re-cluster, when gravity is not strong enough or when we shift into unrecognizable shapes, knowing there is no cluster big enough to protect us and none small enough to hold us, to let us hold it in our hands.

We retell the story of how we met, until it is a story, until it is the story of all the things we did not do, the story of what would have changed the story, until it is the myth of it; Myth: the impossible story that is always true. If you had —, If I hadn't —, or If we both —, we might have —. If I hadn't been —, If you weren't — either, we wouldn't —. And If is the only myth, since, here we are. The story is how its counterfactual versions combined to eliminate themselves. I still hear in my head the incantatory babble of a stranger on the pier: This. Is the way. It's supposed. To be. This is the way it's supposed to be. We tell the story again, until it becomes that impossible story, heartbreaking for how it will never happen again, for how it is (process, elimination) happening all the time.
