

**Before the beginning there was no thing.
Even then the story was told.**

Time holds many stories. This is one.

Our stories are the stories of the universe. We are all in the story. We can never be erased, but our stories may be forgotten when there is no one left to tell them.

The story was told before the beginning, it will be told after the end. Tell old stories. Make new stories. Cast your stories into the void.

The universe begins.

I

It begins by the fire, in howling darkness.

Mysteries of the universe. Visions. Unknowable space past space. Existence. Degrading memory. Eternal life recovered pieces without context. Infinite light emerging.

Waking dreams. Plains, mountains, valleys, canyons, rivers, cities. A palace, a garden, a boat. Sanctuary. Culture. Arrangements in continuum. Meanings changing, narratives twisting. Moving on. Forgotten relics. Pieces of history. Bones and dust.

"There's always still hope, so — I love you."

Message undeliverable. Signal lost.

Choices made this land.

Desert. Wasteland. Infinite desolation. Nothingness and potential, there, just out of reach. Beyond the horizon. Hidden life revealed. Waiting at the shore.

"Don't know where, don't know when."

We begin by the fire, beset by darkness. Flame reflected in our eyes dulls the light of distant stars. We take up the fire for ourselves. We observe the cycles, honor ancient ceremonies, sing in the old ways. Laughter rings out at the end of sorrow.

Sun traverses sky, horizon to horizon, day upon day. We rise up and fall again. Years pass in shuddering seasons. Wind and water etch their marks upon the face of the earth. We carry the fire.

"Upon entering such a universe, there is no way to return."

Crash.

Enclosed in smoking ruin. Filtered bloodstained flash. Blast of compression. Essentials in all the wrong combinations. Carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, iron. Heat. Noise. Electroluminescence. Shape to symbol, conceptualization.

Blinking a warning.

4 ... 3 ... 2 ...

Flowing onward. Streams to rivers. Scintillating fragments. Glimmering surfaces reflected. Mesmerized. Falling head-first into warm deep water. Breathe, breathless. Airless void. Infinite embracing.

Glowing halos descend upon anointed heads of saints. Safe. Menacing. Rehearsing familiar scenes. Flowing cloth. A dance. Silhouettes howl, singing wordless words.

1 ... 0 ... Shutting down ...

Pressure. Pushing, squeezing, creaking, crunching. Bone and metal driven past integrity. Viscosity indistinguishable from solidity. Cracking cleavage. Riven bergs floating in motes of vacuum. Medium rushing to fill the spaces. Complex chains, sweet and aqueous. Silken, sugary.

"Here. Swallow you down some water."

Blood and air and silence.

Remember ways, combinations. Sore gestures rendered alien even in familiarity. Pain yet to arrive. Coming soon. Face first. Swollen and bloody. Change in focus. Hot like sand, creaking and shifting and cascading.

"What just happened?"

Error. Signal outside expected range.

"What a fucking mess."

Nowhere. Now here.

No-thing. Nothing but here, no matter what here is. Infinity of oblivion. Unbounded, undirected. Absence. Any direction is the same as all direction. No way to say where here ends and there starts.

“It’s all here, nowhere.”

Apart from each other, did thing and no-thing really exist? Or did they just come into being precisely then, at their first encounter? A violent meeting in imbalance. Kicking and screaming. Twisted and broken. Bloody, like a birth.

Breaking through the wreckage. Shattering the quiet dark. Taking something into nothing. Even information taints a flawless void, carrying memories and stories through nowhere into somewhere. To name a thing to separate it, to bring it out of the void.

There is so much nothing in every something. Clear away every thing. Practice no-thing. Study the balance. Absolute void must exist apart, held by opposing forces. A carefully crafted realm in equilibrium. No-thing-ness, some-thing-ness.

“Oil and water in a cup.”

Signals from the deep.

Formless noise. A long pause, low baseline drone, rough harmonies. Modulations. Pulses and tones. Regular. Exact. Wet and bubbling like a stream, uneven in its precision.

The signal repeats. Again and again. Communicating.

How much presence followed by how much absence? It means something to someone. Nothing to me. Just tones, sounds. They make me feel a certain way. Deep fear. Something is wrong. An alarm?

What is happening? Should I prepare? Is the alarm meant for me? It could be coming from far away. Removed from its original purpose. Propagated and echoed until arriving here.

It goes on and on for a while. Tones. Silence. Again.

Eventually nothing more.

“Did I miss something important?”

“Jump.”

A deep rumble to a whine. Ramping, spooling. Up and up.

Collapsing. Pinched, squeezed, compressed. Pulled both forward and back. Great noiseless noise. Pure weightlessness, absence of all gravity beyond even subtle perturbations. Acceleration without motion.

Crossing the threshold.

Illusory direction. Luminance drawn out, radiating pure energy. A blast of light. Impossible speed past speed. Ploughing into infinity. Ragged disturbances in the flow reveal shaken afterimages of invisible bodies beyond. Riding rushing currents of ebbing swirling energy.

The other side.

Jumped.

Burning wreckage.

Smoke rising. An undisturbed column in the windless sky. A timeless place. Still if not for shadows moving, tracks on the ground. Only pale hills and sun.

The wreck is too hot to touch. Something in the ground made it burn. Fire ice. Looks like it could burn for a while. It could burn forever. No way to tell.

Best get far away from here.

One pod thrown free. Could have supplies to last a while. Still broadcasting a beacon. No one will ever hear the signal. Too much radiation.

Last telemetry. Scans. Even though the ship is dead I can see what it saw when it came down. Shows a structure. Long walk from here. Could be someone lives here after all. May as well try.

“Guess this is it.”

“What do we take with us?”

Then isn't all that different from now. The whole doesn't change. Pieces realign. All the same. Destiny may have already chosen. It may not matter what you choose.

“If you don't have a choice, what do you choose?”

“There is another way.”

Fly against destiny. Fly until there are no more choices. Fly headfirst into the void and fear no darkness. Fly and fly until the last of you is spent. Fly until words lose meaning and the old universe itself is nothing but a faint glow on the horizon.

Follow whatever you're going to follow. Follow the tears, scattered on the wind. Follow the path set before you, glittering in the darkness.

“Who would you be in any other time?”

Walking down the old train tracks.

Most everyone's gone home, for the evening or weekend or both. Sun hasn't quite set. Idling between afternoon and night. Old rundown part of town. Junkyards and overgrown weeds.

Going around the edges, gravel and dirty grass. Places between the fences to slip through. Places to hide. Some days it's needles and bottles under the trees. Some days it's riders in caravans.

There's a man and his dog I see sometimes. Set up high with a chair. Watching the day, watching his place. I try to go around. Don't want him to see me cutting through. He yells at me.

"Why would you want to walk so far out of your way?"

I tell him I didn't want to upset him or the dog. He shakes his head. Comes down, takes my hand, leads me through.

His hand was dry, dirty. On my hand there's dirt and grease now. Stains where he touched my shoulder. I smell the grease and sweat. Marks of hard work and friendship.

A precious gift in that fading light.

The choice will make itself soon.

What do you do when there's only one way out? When that way is almost certain death? Here, soon, there won't be a real me. No supplies. No air. Hours left. Dead, alone on whatever rock this is. No more dreams. Just let me go. Get it over with.

Remote system online.

"What does that mean? Where will I go?"

The pod still has power. I can stay and die as myself or leave a corpse in the pod and go on as a clone of who I was. Just as likely there's no one listening and I'm sending myself to die out there too.

I decided to stay.

What's between nowhere and somewhere?

How would you know when you got there? Does nowhere become somewhere while we're standing in it? Standing, sitting, driving, crawling. Different experiences, all leading to the same place.

Nowhere. The gateway to heaven. We all pass through here on our way, one at a time. The river becomes a dusty creek. The ferryman used to pilot the boat, now he drives a cab.

Losing perspective. Can't tell what is in or out. Forced perspective, overemphasis. Shapes become dreamlike. Is that bridge over the stream, a doorway in the hall?

"Where am I?"

It isn't where we are, it's where we aren't.

What is something? Maybe it's anything, or everything. Do you know? Can you? Start with process, with action. Start with what it isn't, or start with the infinite.

The infinity we start with is the infinity of nothing. We dream of infinite something, of infinite is. In the infinite, everything is. No isn't. Isn't cuts away at infinity and leaves nothing but the smallest piece, the part we get to hold.

Just on the other side of infinite nothing is infinite something. You are the all-being, here and now. Everything else, everything extraneous, isn't. You can have infinite is in infinitesimal isn't.

We are children of isn't. We don't know our boundaries but we are still bounded. Isn't knows love and loss, knows here and now. In isn't we find ourselves, our identities, our egos, our places.

“When there is nothing left, we become forever.”

Never thought it would go like this.

Wrecked, forgotten, cold, hurt. Lonely like a force of nature. Impossible doubt. No escape. Marooned. Small and cold and alone. Only by changing the planets and the stars would it be any other way.

“Maybe rest here.”

Log says it's been so many hours, minutes, seconds, since the crash. What do those units count for now? Days and nights are different here. Watch the motion of the spheres.

Always over the next ridge. Never seems to come any closer. Maybe after walking a hundred years there's something else. Keep walking all the way into another age. May yet live to see all these things and more.

What will I find if I get there? Will there be anything?

You have arrived.

Arrived, yes. Where?

How quickly can things change?

Pivot points where all our stories turn. One way to one reality or another. Almost impossible to explain later. In between it could be moments, generations. That is the speed of change. Learning takes time.

We forget why things were the way they were, why we thought as we did. What seems important to parents seems trivial to their children. Reliving the lives of ancestors.

“Some things you have to learn the hard way.”

The children taught themselves. They learned in their own way in their own time. Some learned what came before. No amount of history or collective memory could save them all. Little by little they discovered more, stopped repeating some mistakes.

“The lesson that kills is no lesson at all.”

How much wreckage is left out there?

Spacefaring tribes, running from world to world. Nomads of the stars. Bodies left along the way. Rock to cloud to sun.

Wars fought. Old junk left by long-dead civilizations who walked themselves into oblivion. Left twisted and broken, forgotten on some airless sphere. What were they fighting for, and who were they fighting?

Nomad kin finding bones of ancestors. If we ever found some lost scrap, would we recognize it? Would it be a remnant of ourselves? Would we even want to know?

This place was beautiful, once.

An old dome. Maybe it's so old that it fell down under its own weight. Broken. Or something broke it. Whatever's in there, broken too. May as well go take a look. I came all this way. Don't have anywhere else to go.

Before the dome fell there was a garden here. Must have been pleasant. Like summer back home. Airy homes with windows thrown wide, birds singing. Trees, plants, water. Music.

All frozen now. Dead, desiccated. Silent.

Some the dome stayed up. The rest crushed houses underneath. Impossible to say how old. Old enough. Markings worn away. This place must have belonged to someone. Some or people or company or government. No one any more.

A far away private oasis. There's worse places to die. Guess I'll search the houses. Maybe they left something I could use.

Not much time now.

Going into an empty place to live alone forever.

Everyone else far away. A few weeks journey at least. Someone to visit once or twice a year and trade. Friends. One day there is no visit. They wait for an arrival and there is none. Eventually they forget.

Something kills us all. Some things kill us sooner if we don't get help from someone else. The loners die early when they can't get help to live. Solitude until the end.

Years pass and the friends are old. Their children make the trip. For the first time on a dare, or retracing some forgotten old paths. Until they find the place. And that's it. Some undignified corpse.

"That's me."

“What is this place?”

Elevator down. No numbers on the buttons, only colors. A long ride deep into the ground. Deep enough to lose signals from above.

Levels of storage. Boxes going on and on. I haven't looked in any of the boxes yet. All different sizes. No markings that I can read. Only symbols meant for scanners. Maybe there's supplies. Equipment. No reason not to look.

They built this place to last. Whoever came here, they came correct. Thought they were going to stay. Enough supplies for a clan. Enough for many, enough for one. They left everything.

How long have I been down here? Long enough. The air is fresh, recirculated. There's food I can eat, and water. Seems like I could be here for a while.

“There was something, I know it.”

Whatever it is, gone now. Walking in circles. No map or memory. Thought, sense, idea. Snuffed out at the moment of waking, when it could have taken on a life of its own. Now, nothing. Shallow shapes given to the shapeless. Making plans for the future. Can't trust anyone from the future to ask.

Forget it all. Learn nothing. Until the next time.

Could just go only from one moment to the next. Keep no records. Nothing deliberate will ever happen. Repeat past mistakes, solve problems that already had solutions. Going round and round.

“What I know today I forget tomorrow unless I write it down.”

Didn't have to do the work alone.

Weeks getting ready. The ones before left bots. I activated them to help me. We cleared away the debris. Put up a new dome one layer at a time.

The bots do the work up high. They mostly got it right.

You're not climbing up there to fix it.

After the dome, a new house. Salvaged most of the old buildings. Planted seeds in the garden. How long before a harvest? Don't remember the last thing fresh I ate.

Long time ago. Before.

Listening to the signals.

Momentary obsessions. Not everything comes all at once. Sometimes old ones arrive first or repeat more than once. Some strong signals come for a moment only, then withered and faded. The ones that come again and again get picked up eventually.

What order do they go in? Later transmissions don't always supersede earlier ones. Do you know when they were originally sent? How long were they in transit, and from where?

I don't know. I'm just the receiver.

The messages come and go. Whatever you get from me won't be as clear and precise as what I got from the deep. I hear a signal, I try to write it down. I know my transcription is faulty. Easy to get distracted.

Set up waiting for the rain. Go outside and watch the sky. Maybe nothing will come. Maybe today will bring a big one. Can't know unless I go outside every day to look.

Maybe there's some coming right now.

Playing games.

A grid of spaces. Players occupy one space each. Pieces can move to other spaces using special rules. They can be in the same space together, or interact with each other across spaces. Signals and weapons and what else?

The object of the game is survival. The winning state changes. You may survive by destroying all your opponents, or by reaching agreements with them, or by escaping. Who else is playing?

Don't do what the rules of the game tell you to do. The game isn't what anybody tells you it is, it's what you make of it. The game is just a set of pieces. You can move them however you please, assign any meaning you choose. Add your own pieces or take away old ones. We make up our own rules. Sometimes we use someone else's rules. Other times there are no rules.

Cycles within cycles.

"There are layers of beings nested one within the other until there is no more."

There is no plan, no way to win. Only loss, only death. Winning means going as long as possible without dying. Eventually we all lose. Revel in whatever comes your way. Be careful with resources. Embrace impermanence.

"Death is just a chance to begin again."

Where are you on your path?

Is there even any way to know? Do you ask someone else, outside, far away? From their distant perspective, can they tell you where you are? Or will they just compare your apparent place with their own maps and render a judgement? Can we ever know?

Sometimes I think my soul is not my own. It's as if someone else has inhabited me. Is it a version of myself, or something else?

An ancient timeless being, turning off its infinity and coming into me. Taking a ride, watching with my eyes, speaking with my mouth. Someone who's seen all my life and only steps into me to watch the special parts. Times of destiny and change.

When I feel that extra presence, I can use a little of its power. Then the moment passes and it leaves me when it gets boring. Leaves me to live through the long stretches between destinies.

Somehow I trust that timeless being to know how to guide me through destiny. I wonder if it deserves my trust.

Wild heaven's whispers.

Tamping down the dreams so visions stop. No more screaming from beyond.

What is madness? Seeing things that aren't there? How do we really know what is and what isn't? Can you tell? Is reality what you perceive with your senses, what you can measure with tools or instruments? Sense comes from no one sense, rather it is built up from all senses poured into us. Even the immeasurable ones. Who made these tools, and what are they specialized in?

"We see so little, can we really trust these eyes?"

"Am I insane?"

What is the difference between vision and delusion? Is a delusion always false? Something that never comes true? Is a vision something that must be true in order to avoid being delusion? What if a thing could be true but never comes to pass? Is a vision of what could have been a delusion, or reality somewhere else that isn't here? Are all delusions a reality somewhere?

If a universe was big enough, could anything happen?

Awoken by a spider.

In the moment, a fear. Startled. Kicked from dreams. How long has spider been coming into my dreams? Years that I remember. Probably forever. Honored ancients. Beings from the early days, nearly eternal and connected. The web-minders.

Year after year, visiting me. Waking me with a jump.

Jump.

Still the same. Plus one more thing. Grateful. Thank you, spider. Thank you for always showing me the way back to reality. Before I thought you only came to scare me. Now I understand you've always been helping me on my way. Keeping me from getting lost.

"Thank you, spider."

Nothing is as it seems.

When you think things make sense, when there seem to be no lingering questions left, that is when you will be surprised the most. The smallest piece of reality holds more than you can ever experience. Don't forget that. Don't trust easy sensibility.

Whatever holds today may not hold tomorrow. You never can see it all. Remember your limited information. Know what channels you have open to receive input. Sometimes just knowing where you get your information can help you to determine any gaps or missing data.

Sometimes it's enough to know the borders of the slice of reality that you inhabit. Just remember, borders always change.

Tomorrow, remember to look again.

You came for me in the night, just before dawn.

Barely stirring when the light was dim and gray. With quiet words and caresses you came, a cry in the stillness. I touched your cheek, soft and sweet. Once was not enough. Two was too many. Still children. Pantomiming love and lust. Swirling dance with no ending and only one place to go.

Breakwaters. Holding breaths in watery twilight. Salvaged sticks and stones. A forged life. Stuck together at awkward joined intersections. Desperate for control. Nothing stands up forever. Nothing was as pretty as you wanted it. Nothing was as tender as your kisses, timid and sincere.

Holding on at the edge of darkness.

You said you knew me.

The pod activated again. You came through.

Remote access detected.

You said we were together, outside. Another you, another me. You said you wanted to come so I wouldn't be alone. So we'd be together in both places. If that's what I wanted.

"I couldn't know."

You said you wanted to stay.

What was the reason?

There was one. A reason. Why did we come here? Don't remember now. It's been so long. Don't remember anything. Memory can't be trusted. Illusion everywhere. Forgetting. It all runs together. Unending, once I forget the forgetting. Was there a time before? Once. There must have been. We weren't always here.

Attacked.

Who would have attacked? Nothing worth protecting but the dome. If they couldn't fix it, would they kill for it?

"Was there anything else?"

"Can't remember."

Always leaving, never staying.

Forever ago nomads, drifting through oceans. Little flakes of organisms riding the currents. Year after year, directionless, dragged by the tides. Washing up on shore, laying down roots, holding out leaves. Steady and loose, letting out seeds.

Even trees so firmly planted for an age know their rootless roots, give their seeds to animals to carry far away, or release so the wind can do the job. Even in motionlessness they understand motion, the uncertainty of their own mortality.

“Where are you?”

“Here.”

Even unknowing can know. Only later when the animals started asking those questions did they seem contradictory or difficult. In our ancient bones we knew all of these truths. Chaos, motion, perturbations of the void.

We are everywhere and we are nowhere. We make truth true.

An unspoken promise to return.

How long was it? Stopped counting so long ago. Black hairs turned to gray. Years if there were years. Decades if there were decades. It all runs together now. A lifetime.

When he lands on the plain and comes out to meet us he too is gray and old, just like we became. Alone. Our paths diverged all those years ago. He walked a different road. We'll never know. Still he kept the promise.

"I see how he looks at us."

After so long, didn't think there would ever be a choice. Not really. Distant hopes remained ever distant. No choice became the norm. We knew where we'd always be. Now we have to decide. Go with him into his world and leave our own?

"Do we go or do we stay?"

There was no choice. Of course we stayed. Where else would we go? He said yes he understood. Wilted under the weight of years. He was gone in the morning. Left a new ship behind.

Now we can go and come back as we please.

"Now we truly have a choice."

You came to me in the twilight.

We held each other close despite all that's happened.

You said... what did you say?

"Peace."

That's all I remember.

"Go be at peace."

The sun came up and you were gone.

Interconnectedness of all things.

Change anywhere is eventually reflected everywhere. Even some distant cousin of a forgotten family cannot disappear silently. There are always repercussions. Any encounter binds us together and we all encounter each other sooner or later. We can't even perceive the linkages that bind us together, or to our common purpose. We see the disconnection, difference, distance.

"A universe away could be closer than the next seat over."

When there is nothing left between us we will remember all this again. Separation was needed. Stretching out the links that tie all things together. All being was divine but led to profound forgetfulness. Adding some nothingness was bitter and sad but also made everything worthwhile and beautiful.

"We know this with every breath though we often forget we breathe."

No one remembers because no one knows.

Living in two places. Dwelling in the past and the future, all in the present. Different bodies. Friends. Family. Whatever we made from was left of what was here before. The work of building is past. Now the long waiting, watching.

Keep the lights on. Tend to the garden. Become the custodian.

“In the end there will be no higher calling.”

The last jump.

Charging.

Plot your course. Your ship will break after this. You know all you can know. Millennia of stellar observations, catalogs, indices. Could it ever be enough? Wherever you end up, there is where you're going to stay. Choose well. Can you even choose?

No one else is coming. Just you and whatever you brought with you. Who should be here but isn't, lost along the way? Who more than anyone else do you wish was here? Doesn't matter now. Can't change the past. No going back.

Charging.

Do the calculations. Reference, coordination, projection.

Charging.

You've known for a while this was where you were headed. Waiting in anticipation. Death rushing up to meet you. All the hope and fear from prior epochs, all focused ahead. Nothing to do but wait and check your calculations.

Charging.

Not long now. The accumulators are almost full. The ship strains to do its task this one last time.

Ready.

"Jump."

Whistling in the caves. Whispers in the grass.

Crouched under the moon, telling secrets. Butterfly rests, mosquito tends the fire. Burrowing animals asleep or out hunting. Cool dirt crunches underfoot. Leaves and trees crack and creak. Gray and colorless as the sky.

“Too many timelines.”

Folded into the mother’s mysteries, her embrace. Disappearing and being reborn. Stillness of infinite motion. The smoke and the fire and the sparks, all that tells. God is everywhere.

“Wherever I was, an odor would arrive in my nose — the perfume of this place.”

X

Waking up in the old city.

On the platform. Waiting for the train with so many other people. Wearing their work clothes, their bags and devices and suits and dresses.

“Here comes the train now.”

“Wouldn’t that be somethin’?”

Important to keep moving. Moving is life. Stillness is not death but death dwells in silence.

Here no one knows me.

Horns honk. Tires wheeze on ragged pavement. Deliveries are delivered. Bloodshot-faced moneymakers boisterously outdo each other at the corner. Press of bodies clothed loose and tight. Snowy mist rolling in. Cold wind. Passerby clutch jackets to themselves. Keeping eyes averted.

Invisibility is valuable.

Some invisibility works because others wish you to be invisible. This falls apart easily, to any who pay attention. Failing adherence to certain rules transforms anyone into a deviant. Shameful, to be ignored or ground underfoot. From unseen normal to frightening miscreant.

Invisibility in the city gathers aspects from above and below. Find middle, average. Gray. Mystery is a dangerous courtship. Powers to be used with care. Adopt a friendly manner. Guide conversation without threat. Say little. The few who notice will forget soon enough.

“They make up their own minds.”

Look around, between the cracks.

“It wasn’t there where anyone would see it, not right away.”

They’ll tell you who they are. The same spirit moves in them. almost. Same spirit, different motion. Different choices. Everyone will say one thing and do another.

Make sure you know what they are about.

It may mean life or death. If they tell you who they are, listen. Listen even if you hear something you don’t like. Don’t try to make up a different story that you like better. If the story you hear is an ugly story, tell an ugly story. Don’t shy away from their truth when they bring it to you.

Their truth doesn’t have to be your truth. As long as you both live the same universe, their truth may change your reality. You won’t know for sure until later. Trust no one, believe everyone. You have to decide.

Assume everything is in motion. The true form of things will eventually be revealed.

No patience, gluttonous.

Filling empty spaces with unfulfilling things, then chasing even more.

Consuming.

Stand away. Evaluate value and risk, cause and effect. Leave with only the consequences. Nothing to do but consume less. Be patient. Wait, think, then act.

Reaction is what all objects do, introspection is something that thinking beings can undertake.

“Stop fucking consuming. It doesn’t fill the holes, just makes new ones that have to be filled later on.”

Too many voices, too many sounds.

Why won't it ever stop? The flood, the flood, the endless flood. Why can't I ever say what is real? All previous agreements nullified, superseded. None of what is left remains. Scattered debris and dust, scattered ashes.

"No one can ever find the body. Only if you go looking in the past."

"There is no retrieval, only observation."

The time traveler knows the exquisite interconnectedness of it all. The complete and absolute despair. You can see it but never touch. The past is gone, the future is gone. Now is just a small move, a single stone on the board. Together all the stones tell a story, but only in their arrangement and order, in the decisions of the players. Stones themselves are irrelevant, replaceable. One for another, would you even notice?

So it is with all of us. Today a person in a suit sits across from you. Tomorrow, a different person, different suit, still a person in a suit on a train. Would you ever care?

Late for the train.

Missed appointments, considerations. Snubbed, spurned, ignored. The train pulls out, carrying its usual cargo.

We are together finally. You make me go down on you extra long to make up for the snubbing.

Awake.

Pale walls, strange place. Not home, not now, not then, not later. Nowhere. The tunnel collapses. Jump into a different dimension. Far away. No trains, no nights or days. Just daze. Your memory fades, falling back into me.

It's us again, carrying more than one inside the shell of one. Time flashes and slides, unconnected to anything seen or sensed. Slipping in fits and starts, uneven, unpredictable. Falling, falling, faster into nothing.

Awaken.

Another place, another unknown.

The thing that's supposed to be there seems uneasy in its usual place.

How do you break identity?

“If I die, you die too.”

Ego holds on to self so tight. Maybe that's true, maybe not. Does the flower need an ego? Does a blade of grass or a grain of sand? All around I see many things and only a few egos. Is it truly the quintessence of identity? The unique identity assigned to a value in some vast index of all that is?

Ego.

Ego is me, but I am not my ego. Remove my ego, do I cease to be? Maybe I stop being human only. Maybe without it I am just wetware. Squishy brain driving squishy meat.

No ego.

Would that mean I couldn't differentiate myself from the flowers and the grass and the sand? Is ego nothing but a focal point and a lens through which to view the world?

Easy to lose each other.

We didn't think we could, but we did. Our fragile gravity was broken. What stuck us together now drives us farther apart. Drifting into forever. Uninterrupted until we encounter some other body.

Laws of gravity. Smug in their clarity, their self-assurance. By the numbers. Can numbers ever understand? What it is, what it means to be a soul adrift and tangled up with another soul? Like pieces of wood and seaweed. Caught, dragging each other this way or that. Trapped in a current. Off-balance.

That is all the safety we ever knew. Cast together after a storm, or after a lifetime drifting. Set in motion by the rains and the flood. Just as easily untangled, broken free.

The current carries us on.

“Nothing happened the way it was supposed to.”

The snow came down. Slow at first, thicker and heavier, then blowing whiteout. Rushing like star trails in the lights at night.

Only one of us made it out alive.

He was right, nothing went according to plan. All our ideas, fantasies, careful preparation. All wrong. All unprepared. Reality has a coarse shape. Not smooth, not to be tamed by some mortal being's plans.

It felt right when it all went wrong.

Like that's what was coming the entire time.

We all knew it, even though we claimed not to know the future. The future was always there. The shape of things to come is always written in the shapes of what is.

“Not that it makes it any easier.”

All I could think in the moment before I died was *this isn't the last time*.

Searching for self.

Society can't withstand a void. Atomic life. Inventing new rituals, using old ideas to start. Oral history is easy to devour and replace. Eat it up so no one knows anything different from what you say. Only a few will remember the old ways. They won't be convinced.

"What happened?"

Tell them whatever you want to tell them. If they keep asking, outcast them from your society. Make sure their answers are forbidden and destroyed, so that they cease to exist. Those who ask, who wonder, who live in fear, they will be pushed to the edges. Let your population self-select. Your followers and believers will group together.

Tell your tribe to be afraid of everyone else. They will build defenses for you. Invent some mysteries to let them in on. They will be eagerly complicit. Hurt them secretly so you can help them publicly. Buy their loyalty. They will police themselves.

Keep them listening and believing and you win.

"They're at the gate."

Pulling at threads. Ripping at the tear.

“Whose uncle stole this land, and how long ago was that?”

Pull the thread. Pull for ego and tribe, for god and country.
Pull as if your very existence depends on it.

No way to be graceful now. No matter how beautiful the tapestry, no matter the cost. Pull.

“The earth doesn’t belong to us. We belong to her. One day she calls us back.”

"Don't look at the elephant."

Not looking is the only way. Do not acknowledge the elephant. To admit its existence is to allow total collapse.

"It's just a goddamn elephant. Fucking look at it, don't look at it. What difference does it make?"

"If it's hiding in the corner, if it's trying not to be seen, why make such a fuss?"

"Walk behind the elephant."

"Fucking elephants. It's not their fault. What did they ever do?"

What qualifies as reality?

Is it a common understanding, shared perceptions? Does something cease being real when not everyone agrees that it exists? Or does it exist without consensus? What if it is seen by one but not by anyone else? Then does it cease to be real? Can we tell anyone what is real or not?

“There’s no way to tell what’s real and what’s illusion.”

“In dreams there can be ways, but in waking? What is real?”

What are the qualifications for a reality-seer? Are there ways to determine if someone is more susceptible to reality than others? If we go to all this effort to decide what is one and what is the other, what difference does it make? Real is not always consensus. Real is not always measurable.

“Does it matter, then, what is reality and what is illusion?”

“Don’t believe them. They won’t tell you the truth.”

When they take what’s yours and leave, do they ever return? Do you ever get a chance to reclaim what they stole? They write laws to keep you from having what they have. Then they mock you for not being them. In this way they can reinforce their superiority.

“We’re going to take this from you.”

“Why?”

“You sucker.”

I don’t want to be them. You don’t want to be them. They’re very good at making us think that we want what they have. But when we follow them and get too close, they change the rules again. They don’t like us close. They want us far away where they can’t see us. Where they can make up their own stories about us.

Look. Look everywhere around you today. Look to history. They are clever. This is what they’ve always done. Maybe it seems like they are winning, but they have always been few and we are many.

They never told the truth. All they ever did was take.

You could have asked.

When things went wrong, you decided what it all meant and went ahead. By then there was still time. You could have asked and found out that you were wrong. But you didn't and here we are. If you decide how things are, that's how they'll be.

Doesn't matter if everything and everyone tells you something different. Once your mind's made up, that's it. Your entire universe has been set, your focus determined. If they say something different you ignore it because you're right, they are wrong or just stupid, and your way is best.

How can it be best when this is where it got us? You obviously missed something important.

What was it? I don't even know any more.

You could have asked.

Saying different things with the same words.

Doesn't matter how similar we are, we come to a place where we don't share meaning and there's no way to start again. The same flawed tools that got us there are the tools we'd have to use to get us out. And first you have to see the problem.

"Do you see it? I see it."

Lost meaning. Arguing. You see what you see. I see what I see. Do we cross the bridge together or go to different places?

I'll just leave. Nothing we say ever reaches the other. If we have such different meanings, did we ever want to really talk at all?

The history they tell you isn't yours.

It's not even their history. It's the history that they made up to tell themselves. The way they wanted it to happen. Their excuses. Whatever doesn't fit, discarded. Any story outside theirs, unworthy of telling unless it serves them.

It is in their interests to make us into savages. Wild animals. Beasts that attack in the night and kill you in your sleep. Never mind that's what they did to us. We lived here, cared for this land for an age before they came. Will they last as long? No.

Their way is ravenous, destructive. They will strip the land of all its riches and move on, leaving us with whatever ruined earth is left. They are the savages, the beasts of civilization. They say civilization is good, the epoch of our lives. We should want to be civilized. But I see what civilized people do, who they are.

They are nothing to be emulated or revered.

Roads from here go there.

If i knew the right turns on the road I could find you. none of this world is truly disconnected. Rails of blood and bones.

Would you even take me if I found you? We make the disconnection. Nature makes deserts, people make wastelands. The desolation is ours. We weren't listening when they told us. We went our own way.

Weight of yesterday, today, tomorrow. Today weighs heaviest, it's the only place you can do anything about anything. Tomorrow weighs more than yesterday, there's more at stake.

Walk with care.

They'll do business together, while each telling how you shouldn't trust the other. They'll lie out of both sides of their mouths. Laugh at you in your face while taking your money, your time, your life. You are not valuable to them the way they are to themselves.

You are a resource, something to be captured and exploited. If they can no longer exploit you, you may as well be dead.

They will make the stories to tell whoever comes next, and they won't tell your story unless it can be made to benefit them. They'll use you until it becomes too difficult, or expensive, then they will find someone or something else. Something less expensive.

Don't be deceived by them. Don't trust them. Don't let them make you believe that they care, that they are your friend. They aren't. They are only here for themselves.

What answer is anyone supposed to have?

The ones who want something, don't give them what they want. The ones who don't ask, how do you know their intent? If they're peddling answers, they want you to believe as they claim to believe.

Do you know what they really believe? Two versions, at least. Outside and inside. The real answer and the answer that was given. Sometimes the same, or mostly not. Everything is true. Nothing is true. Hard to tell the difference. Later when you know the answer it's too late to make a change.

You carry that stuff with you over the threshold. Some you can change. Most it's just not worth it. Until you come back around again for another shot.

Most of us, we're stuck here. Living by our wits alone.

We didn't call it loving.

We called it something else. When we were in each other, that's what it was. Something else. Desperate fleeting acts of mortality. Reaching for divine when our bodies were too small, too frail, our hearts too broken. Call it many names. Call it love, call it nothing. What is loving after all? Here and now, enriching.

No past, no future. Bodies bent and folded, hard and soft. Poetry in motion, shuddering prose in stillness. Loving came during, after, before. At all points but one. Loving was waiting together somewhere after. Loving was a pressing need to be closer even when that was impossible.

Loving was what we were.

Raining by midnight.

The park was empty except for us. Standing at the water, drinking from a flask, watching the wet misty glow of the city rise to meet the clouds.

Uptown, looking for a place to eat. Soggy and leaden, no way to get a light, no way to see. Blurry and stumbling until there, a sparkling sign, the smell of chopped meat and onions, the piercing strike of metal against metal, fragrant steam mixing with the stink.

Time to go, to find a cab, to shiver in the back seat. Transverse, bridge between dimensions. Black-white-black-white-black. Accelerating, chasing, tearing through the night.

TRIP IN PROGRESS.

Ripping out a loose thread. It all starts to unravel.

Swimming from the drink, from the anticipation. Sweating and dripping, screaming back into the night. One step closer to the end. Flipping the wet page to the next chapter, the last chapter. Dragged through time and space for one last encounter. One last tense chilly argument. One more lie. One more truth.

Waiting through one last rainy city night for the sunrise.

How much is left of you?

Who has the most of you? Where, in what timeline? Which intersection is the one where I find you?

This universe is too big to search everywhere. I don't have much time left. This timeline is collapsing, reforming itself. Soon I won't be able to go back to where we crossed paths. That meeting could cease to exist. I will be left with a vague sense tugging at memory. Somewhere, that way, my only measurements. There's no way to be sure.

The people of this world, most of them missed the hour of their reckoning. They thought something else was happening. But we knew. We were right there. Lingered by the river, at the shore. We had our reckoning, now they are having theirs.

My world ended when I left and went to another reality, when I traveled forward to escape the dissolution. Now this world too.

I can go no farther forward. Whatever happens next, I'm stuck here.

Cathedral of buildings rising up on all sides.

All along the streets, trees pushing to the sky even in the concrete and steel that makes the city.

Come spring, covered in blossoms for a little while. A week or two of electric green and pink and white. Purple and orange and blue. Every color that can be seen with these eyes, it seems. Cascading wherever flora holds sway in this geometric noisy realm.

Breathe their air. Barely a smell over the city stink. gas and dirty basements, the crisp cold wet of water just evaporating off the sidewalks. Crinkle of trash thrown into a can. A dog shakes a musical rattle. Cabs caught behind a truck lay on the horn.

The city awakens from its slumber of night and winter.

No one seems to care but the trees and me.

Nothing is real until we make it real.

In imagination a thing can be real for one person. In stories it can be real for all. So much depends on individuals who simply decide to act a certain way, do a certain thing. When they make it real, they leave the door open for others to follow.

It will seem so obvious. Foolish. To live in such enlightened times when we have at last thought these things! Forgetting days when things not such a way, and the days when such a thing wasn't even real. Someone came here before, and their story was forgotten.

"Why didn't anyone think of this sooner?"

"That's just the way things are."

"It's just fantasy."

Our view was too narrow, exclusive. To the unwise, what does not exist within their view does not exist at all. When an idea comes directly from imagination and goes to story, it skips the manifestation required to satisfy unbelievers. Later when fantasy becomes reality they'll believe.

Thus the fool becomes the prophet.

Nobody noticed when the world ended.

They laughed and drank and sang. They chatted and smiled. They bought books and clothes and jewelry, glossy new machines, food and shoes and novelty mugs. They walked with crinkling bags held close. Lunch, dinner, take-out, table for four or six or eight.

Two by two they came, but not us. We were one less one. A nothing, a fragment. In-continuous. A shattered line. The world ended and the world just kept going. No one else saw it.

At the terminus, yesterday becomes a different yesterday. Tomorrow is the same as it ever was yet to be. Collapse. Crossing into the other domain. Folding other universes into one domain.

“Sometimes I can’t see it. Sometimes I can’t forget.”

Parting kisses at the corner.

Stop and breathe in the still morning.

PARKING 2HR MAX.

Escape or surrender. Can't walk here any more. Kicked out by the city. Chewed up, spat out, spat on. Kicked, punched, robbed. Institutional muggers. Paying rent, taxes, protection money.

"We don't have to think like that any more."

Inside was the key.

Both versions of reality. The one that was, the one that is. What became and what could have been.

I know what I chose, because it's what I always chose. No changing it.

Lock down the other reality. Destroy it when you have a chance. As long as it exists there is a risk of contamination. What is, is. What isn't should not be. Leave it only as a relic of another universe. Even then it is dangerous.

Keep it hidden. The fewer who know the better. Better no one ever knows.

"If this gets loose it could change everything."

No return.

There wasn't any way to pull back from the edge by the time we came to it. Already traveling too fast.

Screaming rhetoric, chanting revolution. Melting ice, rising ocean, falling bomb. Nuclear fire. Escape, ignite, engulf. Creation, destruction, purest of absolutes. Fucking our way to sweet mutual release.

They called it freedom.

A long runway. Rattling and groaning, bumping, screaming. Air becomes thick like water, like ice. Thick enough to stand, to fly. Thick enough to ride. Cocks and cunts, buried deep, pointed at their hearts. Riding closer and closer. Bucking and breaking. Crying for the heavens.

Bottom drops out. Blast off. Weightless. Cumming. Tidal waves crashing, steel melting, hearts afire. The plane pulls to the sky, the city disappears. All is black and orange and blue and white. Love and bodies, madness, earth, machines and calculations. Escape. Orgasm.

We make the new world.

We are both killers.

Of course it came to this. It was never going to be any other way, because it wasn't any other way. Tautological, oxymoronic destiny.

"Six ways 'till Sunday."

We tried to warn each other. Neither of us was listening. Just walking, talking, fucking. Two lives, two lines running next to each other. We were supposed to be together, but we were always separate. I didn't trust. Still don't. Maybe I should have trusted you. Maybe there was always another way.

Too late now.

I held my hand where yours was supposed to be.

Twelve minutes past the hour.

Air swollen and thick with dust and fire. The hour of destruction, of re-creation. The new world begins here, now. Day zero, year zero, hour one.

Fires burning, ash falling. The old world fading away, shredding itself into nothing but soot and debris. Screams and sirens rise like a tide of swelling misery. Groaning like the damned in their first moments in hell. Crying like babies taking their first breath. The end of all things, the beginning of all things.

The dead we'll never have a chance to bury. The stories we'll only remember by telling children for generations, until they too forget this is the new world.

To them it simply is.

The longest day.

Before anyone else knew, we knew. We knew all of this world was crumbling, washing out to sea. We drove like driving was all there's ever been. We drove like our lives depended on it. We went farther than we'd ever gone. We knew we had to make a new world.

Fingers entwined, hand in hand, we raced into that new world, grabbing at anything we found along the way. Later it will burn and all that made it good will shrink and wither and die. Like all worlds, eventually.

Ours was not to be. Not for long. An illusion. Paper over unchecked depths. A nearly impossible divide. Inside was just enough to start again. To make another world. Instead we spent our last moments on the road. Created and destroyed. What came after, rushing in to fill every empty space?

We were lost.

How did it come to this?

“Swift river currents.”

Seventeen past the hour, five minutes late. Waiting for the train. Everyone else is waiting too. More every minute. Crowding in. Nothing to do but wait. I'll walk instead.

Clouds scuttle overhead while we make and lose our fortunes. Rattle and roll the bones. In our self-importance we have no idea how tiny and fleeting we are. Spirits vying for a seat in heaven, ghosts jockeying for immortality.

“The dead come back to life.”

“Like the tide coming in.”

Long nights up until late. Looking for something. I was looking for understanding. I understood so little. Finding it was my priority. You had other priorities. They all did. Everyone I met in those days, touched, talk to. Transparency of self, opacity of other. Fog of war. Every day that's true. We see what we see.

I wonder what you saw in me.

“We all have our motives.”

Where do we go when we can't find the way?

Do we just go forward blindly, do we go back? What do those things mean when we are lost? In thoughtlessness, motive is impossible and irrelevant.

Not us. We are alive. We have a goal. We are proud.

Pride is a choice. Do we embrace loss? Do we surrender to aimlessness? Or do we choose pride? Perhaps pride means looking for a way out, for meaning in the meaningless. Pride is asking for directions to learn the way. Pride is not asking and finding your own way. In either case, you may be lost but you have an aim.

Aimlessness is devoid of pride. Nowhere and no one and nothing. Purpose is pride. We have somewhere to be, someone to be, something to do. Without pride, what's the point? Here is as good as anywhere.

Not all goals are prideful. Or maybe pride is in us at the most essential level. Pride says that this life should go on. Pride to take what is necessary for survival even if it deprives another being.

All life carries an objective for preservation, even life incapable of talking or thinking or loving.

Little by little, time takes it all.

First the smells, the sounds, the exact shape of things. Time leaves the feelings. It takes more. The shape of things change. Impossible to put the pieces back together. There's no way to reconstruct an exact scene. Artifacts break, degrade, get lost. All of it ends up as trash at the wayside.

Eventually only the feeling remains, a wisp of old music recovered from some archived recording. Memory overwritten so many times that even its configuration, the arrangement, is in doubt. The smallest feeling now. Residual warmth in the heart from a sun long gone, a season past.

Anniversaries are the hardest. Swimming in feelings, drowning in what's left of memory. Wishing for just one more moment.

Starting out on a cold rainy morning.

When all the miles are ahead and there's dull ache of sleeplessness combined with the rush of anticipation. Long way left to go.

What they won't tell you is this is your only chance. On the empty early morning streets, none of them know. at the gas station, they won't know. At the restaurant, maybe they know but they won't tell you. So you'll drive on through the day, through the rain and into the sun, from the depth of the city to the desolate nowhere.

You'll ride together as long as you know how, but as soon as you forget it'll all fall apart. Just not right now. Not this chilly morning. Not while walking down these hills looking for the car. Not while this hunger still craves something more. Not while there's still so far to go.

Maybe none of them will tell you because you already know.

Sunrise in a place with no mornings.

Daylight in a place with no sun. Rock in a place with no ground. Compassion in a place with no love. Loss when there's nothing left to lose. Only tomorrow can tell but tomorrow never comes. The day of the end of all things.

They said it was so important. They said it was the only way. They said this is just how it is. They said it was unrealistic to hope for more. To pray for sun in the sunless sky, for earth on the unsteady ground.

Instead we came here.

Z

At the meeting of three rivers.

Creaking wooden boat. Coming into harbor. Smoke and tar and salt, spices carried on the wind. Rowdy sailors down by the water.

Stepping off to stone, sturdy land. Walking terraced steps. Eating some kind of warm sweet food I've never had, sold off a cart by a girl from somewhere I'd never heard of. A thousand voices speaking five hundred tongues, arguing and laughing and dealing, bustling in the marketplace.

All strangers, coming together here to meet the other strangers. For the waters of the rivers, for the trade, for the food, for absolution. Dragged onward by a desire for something forever out of reach.

"Why did I come here? Looking for something. I'll know it when I see it."

Climbing the long stairs all the way from the docks to the top of the holy hill. Temples of the city's patron saints. The three river mothers. I went to the temple on the hill. There I met a priest of the oldest order. He told me where I might go next.

Camping in the ruins of ancient cities

Too vast for anyone to build. now These ancestors with their unknowable skills and secret wisdom. We find their remains but never know them as they were.

Nothing but some stones standing where a sacred site once was. Bones from a forgotten battle, covering the hills far as can be seen. Maybe all we're doing is looking at our future.

Waiting before war.

You know what's coming. You see it with eyes closed, with eyes open. Storm clouds gather. The birds and beasts have fled and it's just us merry band of idiots versus them and whatever horrors they've invented just for us today.

Weapons buzz in the air. Soon there will be a battle. Soon we'll be able to make our point in a way they'll hear, or fade away in the attempt. It either works or doesn't. If we fail we may as well not be around to see it. They won't give us another chance. We'll throw everything else away and fight the fight that's in front of us.

None of that happens now though. Now is the waiting. Now we have to be alright with silence and tension.

"When will the first stroke fall? How long do we have to wait?"

"No one knows. "

"Could we wait them out? Could they just leave?"

"Doubt it."

We'll stare each other down a while longer. Watch them gather their strength, as we gather ours.

Not forever.

Soon the wait will be over.

Faults in forever.

Every day sends out its signal, its light. No other light will guide us here. There is no way, no path. No way forward. Only broken stars, the ones that fell to earth. Predestined accidental collisions. After, before, all around.

“They wouldn’t listen.”

“You feel it or you don’t. You make your own determinations.”

Every day the rain falls on the water. Every day the raft rises and falls with the tide. No one remembers the way it was before. They tell stories to remind themselves, but none of it is true. There is no true. We all have a different vision.

“How many times did we come here? No one remembers. A long eternity.”

“Eternity’s not that long.”

“How and why and who, what difference does it make? What is old, what is new?”

“We’ll all come back around again. Eventually we’ll change places.”

“We already have.”

W

No way for memories to provide sustenance.

You cannot eat the memory of a fruit and receive nourishment, no matter how sweet that memory is. It can only distract, never feed. Never heal. Don't feast on fruits that can never provide.

Reminiscences, recollections of people or places or times, they are the same. Nothing alive to be found there. At best it preserves a depiction of what's been lost, giving breath to a shallow simulacra.

If all you can do is remember others, you don't have access to their true selves. All you accomplish is holding on to who you perceived when you knew them. Important pieces will be missing, always.

To remember the dead animates their ghosts. To remember the living fragments their spirit, separating who they were from who they are for themselves from who they are to you. Can any one fragment contain their true being?

"Reflections in broken glass."

"We may be children of the infinite, but we are beings of the present."

To be a cell in some beautiful creature.

To be a molecule in a flower. To be an atom in a mote of dust. To be far away from everything else and close to the source. Not the center, for there is no center. There is us, there is all.

Be a part of all but not all yourself. Stay close to the source. To the land, to the sun. Transform, with the death of the organism, with the seeding of the flower, with the settling of the dust. Folded into the earth and over an age worked back up to the surface to be consumed by a new flower, eaten by the animal, incorporated into a new being.

From bone to dust and back again. The endless cycle, repeated for however long we have in this place. Until there is a new place. Heaven is the infinite together where we are all one.

Then scattered to the wind to begin again.