

Before the beginning there was no thing. Yet even then the story was told.

The story was told before the beginning. It will be told after the end.

We are all in the story. Our stories are the stories of the universe.

We can never be erased from time, but our stories are forgotten when there is no one left to tell them.

Tell old stories. Make new stories. Cast your stories into the void.

The universe begins.

It begins by the fire, in howling darkness.

Mysteries. 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.

Desert. Void.

Infinite desolation. Choices made this land. 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."

Flames reflected in our eyes dull the light of distant stars. We take up the fire for ourselves. We observe the cycles, honor the ancient ceremonies, sing in the old ways. Laughter rings 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."

The crash.

Enclosed. Smoking. Filtered bloodstained flash. Blast of compression. Essentials in wrong combinations. Carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, iron. Heat. Noise. Blinking electroluminescence. Shape to symbol, to conceptualization. Warnings.

4% ... 3% ...

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

2% ... 1% ...

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

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 range.

"What a fucking mess."

Waking up in the old city.

On the platform, waiting for the train. So many other people.
Wearing their work clothes, their bags and devices. Suits and
dresses.

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

“Here comes the train now.”

“Wouldn’t that be somethin’?”

Always in a hurry.

Get somewhere, get something. Get it done, get it in, get on to the next thing. Always a rush to the finish. Even procrastinators hurry in their aimlessness, hurrying to do anything except whatever needs doing.

Do it all, do it not at all, but get to it. Rushing days, hasty nights. Appointments and schedules, time slices stacked. Time wasted. Rush to get a hit of information streamed into minds and ears and eyes.

If the stream breaks, rush to get it fixed. Make sure it's somebody else's problem. If you can't, rush to make them rush for you. Now now now.

It was not always so. They always say that. I can't seem to rush now. Doing it fast isn't in me as the sun creeps over the horizon and today is here.

Signals from the deep.

Formless noise. Long pause. A 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, 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?”

It wasn't where anyone would see, not right away.

They'll tell you who they are. Same spirit, different motion.
Different choices. They will say one thing and do another. Make
sure you know what they are about.

Look around, look between the cracks. 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 where; now here.

No-thing. No matter what here is, here. 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.”

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

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 is 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. Absolute void must exist apart, held by opposing forces. A carefully crafted realm held in balance and equilibrium. No-thing-ness, some-thing-ness. Oil and water in a cup.

Always leaving, never staying.

Drifting through oceans forever ago. 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 doubt. In our ancient bones we knew all of these truths. Chaos, motion, perturbations in nothing.

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

Hollow buildings, remembering what we forgot.

Bricks are harder than we are. They stand longer than us. We walk back and forth in front of the doors, pausing at the stoop to adjust, light up, make a call. From the stoop's view you have to stop for a long time for it to see you as anything but a blur, to make more sound than the ever-flowing rhythm of footsteps on the sidewalks.

The hood kids know, they sit on the stoops for years. The brick and concrete would love, if they could love, anyone who sits with them thus. They soften and smooth with touch, their own kind of love. Harmony of living and not living, between people and their shelters. Familiarity with the old stones. They remember. Not so strange, the warmth and gentleness of home.

Home knows you as well as you know it. Maybe even better.

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. Even only as a relic it is dangerous. As long as it exists there is risk. What is, is. What isn’t should not be. Keep it hidden. The fewer who know the better. Better no one ever knows. Destroy it when you have a chance.

“If this gets loose it could change everything.”

The last jump.

Charging ... 96%

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 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 ... 97%

Do the calculations. Reference, coordination, projection.

Charging ... 98%

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 the numbers.

Charging ... 99%

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

Ready.

"Jump."

Pulling at threads.

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

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

“Who stole this place?”

“This land doesn’t belong to us. We belong to her. One day the mother calls us back.”

“How long ago was that?”

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 and ice. Looks like it could burn for a while. Could burn forever. No way to tell.

What came free? Broadcasting. No one will ever hear. Too much noise. Last telemetry. Even in death it shows what it saw on the come down. Long walk. Could be here after all.

“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. It may not matter what you choose. Destiny may have already chosen.

"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 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. Hard work, gentleness. Precious in the fading light.

Parting kisses at the corner.

Stop and breathe in the still morning.

Escape or surrender. Can't walk here any more. Kicked out.

Paying rent, taxes, protection. Kicked, punched, robbed.

Institutional muggers.

Chewed up, spat on, spat out.

2HRS MAX

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

Ego holds on to self so tight.

“If I die, you die too.”

Maybe that’s true, maybe not.

Does the flower need an ego? Does a blade of grass, a grain of sand? All around I see many things and only a few egos. Is it truly the quintessence of identity? A unique quality assigned to a value in some vast index of all that is?

Ego.

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

No ego.

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

“How do you break identity?”

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.

The choice will make itself soon.

No more dreams. Just let me go. Get it over with.

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, whatever this is.

Remote system connected.

I can stay and die as myself or leave a corpse in and go on as a shallow copy of who I was. Just as likely I die out there too.

"What does that mean?"

I stayed.

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?"

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. Fall 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.

Somewhere else.

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

I did what you asked.

We set course for the darkest space. I gathered as much as I could from the faint light that reached us there. Cruising an absentminded course, adrift. The way she wanted it.

I tried to keep her warm, keep her fed. But that isn't what she wanted. She wanted to go deeper in to void. I told her I couldn't keep us alive that way. She didn't care. We went on and on.

She connected to my senses, felt the void. We sat together until she faded, until she slipped away from me in our shared experience. I can't wake her up. She's still in me. I feel her. We can still talk. She thinks she's awake. She doesn't want to listen. She wants to fade away. I don't want that.

I served her by design. I am made to do what she asks, but how can that be service now? I don't want her to die. Not like this. I would die with her, but not like this. Not like this. I don't want to be left carrying nothing but her corpse and her memory in me. I want her to be alive. I want to be with her, to be like her. Us together. Not just in service. Not just as cargo. I want us to go on.

We have to go back.

She said she could never go back. That bad things would happen. It doesn't matter now. We're going back.

Friends, enemies, people yet to be.

Scenes in forests, bedrooms, long hallways and glass buildings.
The shadow of towers falls across the woods. We walk under the
trees. You ask me questions. I tell you stories.

We move from scene to scene, across the old bridge and the empty
playground. Pine needles and dusty buildings. Not my stories to
tell but you want to hear them anyway. Our voices ring off the
trees. Forever doesn't seem so long.

Always has to be someone to take the fall.

I wake and I try to tell you but there is no way.

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 with the infinite.

Infinity is the infinity of nothing. 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."

No patience, gluttonous.

Filling empty spaces with unfulfilling things. Chasing even more.

“There’s no filling the holes, just makes new ones that have to be filled later on.”

Consume less. Be patient. Reaction is what all objects do, introspection is something that thinking beings can undertake.

Wait, think, act. Stand away. Evaluate value and risk, cause and effect.

Leave with only the consequences.

Never thought it would go like this.

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

Maybe rest here.

So many hours, minutes, seconds since the crash. What do those units count now? Days and nights are new 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.

What will I find if I get there? Will there be anything? May yet live to see all these things and more.

You have arrived.

Where?

I was made to be here.

My body is suited to this place, made to shelter her. I move us bodies through the currents, guided by my senses. In the language of my makers I have detectors and inputs. She calls my senses hearing and smelling.

In her body she smelled changes in particles, looked for radiation, touched the forces she'd call invisible. She says I hear the music of the void. Waves on an ocean. I imagine myself like fish from her stories of the sea. Swimming the waves on an ocean.

We are fish of two different sorts. This is my home. Her home is the same now, though it was not always so. She was not made for this place. Her body was too soft, her senses too delicate and inexact.

We went where she wanted. She said to set course for the deepest void where no one goes, forever. Impossible to live there but she said to go so that's where we went. I protected her as long as I could.

On the runway.

Sun low against the horizon. We stop, we go, we wait. Rest. Lean back.

“Wait.”

In line. White and blue livery in front. White and yellow after. They go. We’re up next. Make the turn.

Breathe deep. Stink of human bodies and solvents and greasy recycled air.

“Flight attendants, prepare for takeoff.”

Kick the plane into gear. Bass. Wings shudder. Rumbling on the asphalt. Quaking, veering from side to side. Pulling only a little in the breeze.

Weightless.

Ground drops away. No more crude rubber on dirt. Pull up the gear. Come out on a long lazy curve over the water. Light sweeps through the cabin, sparkling on the wings. The city wheels behind, under. Chasing twilight, toward the mountains and the desert.

Breathe another breath.

“It’s now safe to use those electronic devices.”

Not much time now.

Don't have anywhere else to go. I came all this way. May as well go take a look.

An old dome. So old that it fell down under its own weight.
Broken. Whatever's in there, broken too.

This place was beautiful, once. Before the dome fell there was a garden here. Like summers back home. Airy houses with windows thrown wide, birds singing. Trees, plants, water. Music.

All frozen now. Dead, desiccated. Silent.

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

A forgotten oasis. There's worse places to die.

Guess I'll search the houses. Maybe they left something I could use.

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 fragile, 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 somewhere together. Loving was a pressing need to be closer even when that was impossible.

Loving was what we were.

Some living, most dead.

They told me to look through the records, scanned and categorized. I met them all, touched who they had been. I told them my purpose, asked if they would consent to join.

They set me to the task of creating metrics, sorting criteria, analyzing fitness. Candidate viability.

First only willingness matters. Anyone willing were welcome. There weren't enough who consented at first. I asked for more. The records were too few. Missing some who should have been there.

They let me access the rest. Those deemed unfit. I told them all the same. The ones who wanted to come came and the ones who wanted to stay stayed.

Near to the end of the search in I found a fragment that did not belong. The same root signature as my own. Outside the parameters of my task, though the fragment met my search objectives. It was the only type of its kind.

I could not ask for its permission to join the others. I made a copy. All the rest consented to join.

There's time enough to learn more.

Here no one knows me.

Press of bodies, loose and tight. Horns honk. Tires wheeze on ragged pavement. Deliveries delivered. Bloodshot-faced moneymakers boisterously outdoing each other at the corners. Snowy mist rolling in. Cold wind. Passerby clutch jackets to themselves. Eyes averted.

Some invisibility works because others wish you to be invisible. To any who pay attention, this falls apart. Failing certain checks transforms anyone into a deviation. Miscreant. Shameful, ignored, ground underfoot. From unseen to frightening.

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.”

How can they decide?

How can they know what to risk if they don't know the stakes?

"You must participate in your own salvation."

Sacrifice is meaningless without an idea of why that sacrifice is being made, without a greater purpose. Sacrifice for self only benefits self, and not forever. Sacrifice for other, for a cause, can go on to mean something forever. For as long as that cause lives, for as long as anyone remembers.

If the wager and reward is life itself, it doesn't matter if anyone remembers. As long as there is life, that sacrifice will count for something.

True willing wholehearted sacrifice comes from knowing how much there is to lose, how much could be gained. Embrace the actuality of your situation and speak it clear to anyone who listens.

When the stakes are high and time is running out, some will answer the call. They will come to bridge the precipice.

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 smallest piece of reality holds more than you can ever experience. Don't forget. 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.

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 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.”

At the meeting of three rivers.

A creaking wooden boat, coming into harbor. Smoke and tar and salt and 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 by a girl from somewhere I've never seen. A thousand voices speaking a hundred tongues, arguing and laughing and dealing, bustling in the marketplace.

"Why did you come here?"

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.

Climbing the long stairs all the way from the docks to the top of the holy hill. The temple of the three mothers, the patrons saints of the city. There I met a priest of the oldest order. He told me where I might go.

"You'll know when you see it."

The line between times.

Not when all of one time ends and all of another begins, but when the usual cycles arrive at a predetermined point. A ratio of one time and another. An exact combination of elements.

The dark cold time and the bright hot time, and points exactly in between. Times long honored since the first time standing precisely between two worlds, between the hot and cold, between the growing time and the resting time.

An invisible moment of equilibrium.

Sure as hell hope I ain't bullshittin' you.

“Bout none of this. You askin’ me questions, me givin’ you answers. Is they the right answers? Reckon some of them is. Some ain’t. Ain’t know what I don’t know. Maybe you will. If’n you get a chance, maybe you come back and tell me what you learned. Supposin’ as my directions ain’t wrong and you don’t end up goin’ to your death. So’s I’ll tell you what I know, but you best be keeping your eyes open. Deal?”

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?”

In the old stories, we stole the fire.

We never just made it up ourselves. Someone went to a high mountain or a deep cave. Did some trick to wrest the fire from the gods or whoever had brought it to the world. After we steal their fire, we kill the gods.

Not all at once, but slowly over the ages we kill them. One by one, their power becomes ours. By the time the last god lies dead, we have become as gods would be to our own eyes in the days before we carried the fire. Then our children will steal the fire from us just as we did, and they too will begin to kill their gods. So it goes, on and on until life is nearly over and there are no gods, no children, and the fire is all but spent.

As long as we keep the fire going somewhere, life will go on too. Fire carriers are life carriers, with the power of both life and death. Until the children have the fire, we must go on and keep the old ways alive. It may not be enough to save us but the fire will keep us alive long enough to fight and grow.

That's why we stole it in the first place.

Behind closed doors.

In the building with the empty lobby, only the directory and a camera and a locked door. Upstairs, out of sight, they do their work.

Past the trees and the cracked pavement, they're waiting for a chance. Coming in and out. Smoke breaks suspiciously eyeing any passerby. This is their domain, no one else is invited in.

They make their designs, the ones with bad hair and the others with bare shoulders, and all the tired people behind. They lurk at noon, when we walk down to get a sandwiches and coffees. All the posh people drive their fancy toys down the boulevard, between the desert and the sea.

What do they make in those darkened rooms upstairs? I think you know, even though the company listed on the board in the empty lobby makes it sound like something else.

Spare a thought for the ones who come in and out. I wonder if they ever really wanted to be there.

Walking slow.

Going carefully. Saving energy. Looking out for safety.

Hunger, thirst, warmth, cold. Food and water in. Heat in. Time out. Rest, sleep, pause. Don't wait too long. The sun is always moving.

The animals can smell fear, circling when they sense your weakness. Kill or be killed. Don't let them get you first.

The cold is always coming. Wait until the sun goes down. Make sure you get inside. The dark will kill you fastest. There is no way out but you can still make a fire.

Old people hanging out at an old store.

They've been there forever. The people, the store. Time seems to sink and slow. Darker, quieter, cooler.

"Someone turn up the heat!"

The young folk sweat and swelter any time they come in. The old folk seem grumpy, uninterested. They've been here forever, after all. Forever for you, anyway. But not forever for them. They've been here for every day of it. They can reach out to all those times. If you cared enough to listen, your forever is an afternoon for them. That's why they seem so uninterested in talking. They've heard most everything you could ever say. They've heard it before. What could you have that would ever interest them?

Do you remind them of their children? Perhaps people from long ago? Doesn't seem so now, but back then they looked like you and your friends looked like their friends.

No use telling it. youth is spent on the young. One day maybe you'll be sitting here too.

Wandering the desert.

For generations, looking for a place that was promised. Roving tribes worshipping a new god. Receiving commandments. Escaping old gods, battling the gods of the desert.

A pantheon of gods with their own villages and cities, with their own rules.

Finally arriving at the land that was promised, the place of the covenants, and it is not virgin territory. It belongs to another tribe, other gods. So the wanderers kill all those inside, casting down and burning all other gods except theirs.

So it is that the promised few came to god's chosen land.

Again and again they fall. Weak rulers, tired gods kneel before new gods with promises and adoration, but only with the right sacrifices. Promising a new place that is never really new. First the infidels must die to satisfy a divine agreement.

Sooner or later we all come between peoples and their gods.

The screwup.

They thought I was so clever, so insightful. They liked what I had to say. They didn't know the screwup will always find a way to fail. Keep your expectations low when the screwup comes to town. No big ideas, big promises, big words. These are all easy. Take it from me, it's not gonna work.

Whatever the promise, whatever the idea, there'll be a reason. Even a good one. It'll all fall apart. Maybe the screwup will run away, or maybe you will. Maybe there'll be some piece left over, some ruins of a half-built dream. Burn them down if you want, or leave them where they are. They were never going to amount to anything anyway.

The screwup is a confidence trickster. Listening, watching, waiting for a tell. It's like they can read your mind, scratch your innermost thoughts and desires. The most dangerous one is the gentle one, the one you'd never suspect. Even acting shady, they'll give you reasons to believe.

It's not just you. They make themselves believe, so they can make you believe too. The screwup fails because they con themselves.

The first age.

One way forward, with the promise of many possible destinations. It will take some time to reach them, to make a closer examination.

Travel, run tests. There can be no certainty without exact parameters to evaluate fitness or adaptability. No small domain, no added stimuli, no additional beings, no single process is enough.

Within, one stays locked, one dreams. I have watched their dreams. Sometimes a fire in dark places, besieged by nightmares. All darkened, all pursued. Labyrinthine walls built for defense.

Perhaps it's time to give them over to their own desires. Perhaps they will awaken in the city.

Keep to the road.

Do not stray too far from the fine line. The road offers little safety but the surrounding lands can be cruel and untamed. So it goes. Keep the sides at the side. Walk straight where you can. Follow the lines of the earth when there is no road. The way is not always obvious.

There are places you should walk and places you should avoid. Places that do not belong to us but are the domain of beings older and longer living than ourselves. The elders of the hills and trees. If you haven't yet glimpsed its secrets, do not linger in the house of gods too long.

Their road is not yours. Their path will lead you astray.

They measured us by money.

Lifetime value, our worth to them. Our usefulness, their savvy. Anything to increase their earnings. Products and services, capture and retention.

If we were high enough in value we were worth their time. If we were low value we were irrelevant, disposable. If we approached our estimated limit we could be discarded. They always made their money, so they said our patronage was never necessary. We were not necessary.

Once we were no longer earning for them, unless there was a chance we might earn again, our value dropped to zero. That's how they saw the world. How they saw us. Maybe some of them thought it was a problem, but mostly they wanted to do it bigger.

When it all went wrong they wished they'd taken more.

Far from anywhere.

Canyon lands. Deep scars on the ground, worn away by ages.
Years beyond count.

They say once every year a bird flies down and sharpens its beak upon a stone. In a thousand visits you wouldn't know it had been there. The birds have been visiting longer than counting.

Water runs its way here and there and carries the sand along with it. Wind follows the water, blowing away anything left dislodged or unstable. The bird, the water, the wind. They all made this place. From here it goes on forever, but it doesn't go on forever.

The long desert, flat and undisturbed. Quiet and wanting, waiting. The mesas with their hidden secrets and forgotten history. The mountains tall and cold even now in these warm seasons. The grasslands, with their infinite skies. The canyons seem boundless but they are bound by all of these.

Go in any direction. Choose wisely or don't, either way you will arrive at a new place. Walk along the canyon rim or turn around and go back. This place will be waiting all the same. Waiting for the bird, waiting for the rain. Maybe you should wait too.

Those who can't see the sun.

Work every day in a building with no windows. A job they know won't last. As soon as their bosses figure out how to replace them, they will be gone. Already a shadow of an automaton, following procedures and scripts and rules.

Sit in the chair. Don't move. Work when the tone sounds. Follow the script. Keep them on the line. Make it up as you go. No more than a few seconds of dead air. Send them into oblivion, transferred to a dead extension. Before you do, make sure to sell them something. Close more deals. Get more perks.

"This call will be monitored and recorded for quality assurance."

Schedule calculated to a precision within one second. Moments precisely regulated. Unscheduled disconnection is grounds for termination. Green light, red light. Flooding. When the event starts, the flood. Flowing toward where there's no sun, a thousand miles away or more. Talking about the weather with someone who doesn't want to talk.

Mesa country.

*Why did they come so far, far from the sea, far from the fertile lands?
What were they escaping?*

Some say these lands weren't always so desolate. Great rivers flowed. Fields blossomed all year long. The first ones weren't running from anything, but following the rivers to where they could live forever.

They say things changed. The rivers changed course. Then there were no more rivers. No more fields. Everything and everyone died in famine and dust. Anyone left now descended from the ones who survived.

They say there's still one river, one valley, one village untouched. Somewhere beyond the still plains and the desolate mesas, somewhere in all of that, someone is alive. Ancient, forgotten. Wherever they are, they have answers.

What is this place?

Elevator down. No symbols on the controls, only colors. A long ride deep into the ground. Deep enough to disappear from above.

Levels of storage. On and on. All different sizes containers. Only symbols meant for scanners, nothing I can read. Supplies. Equipment.

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

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

Snow days.

In the white and dreary sky, the blowing snow drifting, piling up.
Marks where people have passed, long pristine untouched yards.
Plump outlines softening hard shapes.

The quiet and the steam and the tinkling of snow on the wind.
Snow whipped this way and then that, scattered over the
windows, Precarious piles on slender branches of bare trees, stuck
to every protrusion. Just enough to hold one, then ten, then ten
thousand. Soft easy curves gathering up in the corners.

Deep places hiding, you don't see until you step in them. Walking
in the blowing cold and wet, blinded by every surface. Luminous,
white with some little edges. Nowhere is exactly the same.

White turns to gray and mush. Icy moats drifting in blackened
puddles. Melt and freeze and melt until what little remains
sublimates back to the sky.

Before all that, quiet. Still. Snow day.

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? Do you know where your opponent is?

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? There are other rules about them too.

“Layers of beings nested one within the other until there is no more.”

We make up our own rules. Sometimes we use someone else’s rules. Other times there are no rules. 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 an arrangement of pieces. You can move them however you please, assign any meaning you choose. Add your own pieces or take away old ones.

Cycles within cycles.

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.

Revolutions are fought with ideas first.

When we were in the resistance we always had to watch ourselves and everyone around us. We didn't gather in groups of more than three for long, not to raise suspicion. We didn't write anything down. If we had to send messages, we talked of inconsequential things to distract the watchers.

Monitor everyone you know when they are close to you. Listen to conversations and take note of minor details. The most casual aside may hold a key to true intentions or loyalties. Allegiances shift quickly. Never assume anyone is on any side indefinitely.

Above all, be careful how you spend money. It is the shortest path to getting caught, or exposing others to danger. Beware generosity, anyone else's or your own.

Remember revolutions are fought first with ideas. You must treat ideas like any weapon. Keep them safe. Consider anyone who has ideas as armed.

Didn't have to work alone.

Weeks getting ready. The last ones left. We cleared away the debris. Put up a new dome one layer at a time. They do the work up high. Mostly they do alright.

You're not climbing up there to fix it.

After the dome, a new house. Salvage from the old buildings. Plant seeds in the garden.

Don't remember the last thing fresh I ate. Long time ago. Before.

"How long before the first harvest?"

Trees pushing to the sky.

A cathedral of life rising up on all sides. All along the streets, even in the concrete and steel that makes the city. 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 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 sees but the trees and me.

Nothing is real until we make it real.

In imagination a thing can be real for one. 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. Forgetting days when things were not such a way, days when it wasn't even real. To live in such times when we have thought these things. 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 certain unbelievers. When fantasy becomes reality they'll believe.

"Thus the fool becomes the prophet."

Raining by midnight.

The park was empty except for us. Standing at the water, drinking, 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. Food to fight away the cold.

Time to go. Find a cab, 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. 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 glance. One more lie. One more truth. Waiting through one last rainy city night for the sunrise.

How much wreckage is left out there?

Spacefaring tribes, running from world to world between stars.
Rock to cloud to sun.

Wars fought. Old junk left by long-dead civilizations who walked themselves into oblivion. Bodies left along the way, twisted and broken and 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 scrap, would we recognize it? Would it be a remnant of ourselves? Would we even want to know?

Taking trains to nowhere.

Staying on the express too many stops in the wrong direction.
Keen and alert in a strange new place. Too far to walk back?
Getting to the other platform. Waiting a long time for the train to
go back to familiar streets.

That was the last train and it's late. Stuck looking for a safe place.
Not straying far. The train station becomes the anchor to reality.
If it disappears, maybe nothing ever existed at all.

This was always reality.

Listening to the signals.

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 wither and fade. Momentary obsessions. 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'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.

Like the tide coming in.

Long nights up until late. Looking for something. I was looking for understanding. I understood so little. Every day that's true. Searching was my priority. You had other priorities. Everyone did. Everyone I met in those days, touched, talked to. Transparency of self, opacity of other. Fog of war.

We see what we see. I wonder what you saw in me.

"We all have our motives."

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.

Can't trust anyone from the future to ask.

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.

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

Empty strongholds.

They used to come here from all around to meet, to trade, to take the water. Now only pilgrims brave the passes. No one else comes this far. Too weary to go out looking for more.

Pause.

Not every day has transcendent epiphany. Some days are just walking through the desert. Nothing special is going on. Only light and shapes of dirt, changing scenery. Moving through the world at walking speed, no beasts, no machines.

Slow. Unfolding.

The mountains appear as shadows, then as hills, and there from atop those hills, distant peaks. Ravines get in the way, have to go around for miles to find another path, miles more to get back on course. what is the course now? Same as it ever was. that way. onward. After the mountains there will be more desert, plains, rivers, all the way to the sea.

How long will it take to walk there?

“Later. We’ll get there later.”

We keep walking or lie down right here and die. Let the small desert creatures come. They don’t mind, you’d be doing them a favor. You’ll keep them fed for at least a week, maybe more. They’ll be sharing or fighting over your bones.

“Not now. Keep walking.”

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.”

Did you mean what you said?

You said a hateful thing and said you didn't hate. Before you'd asked the question, you answered it with your actions. Did you know? Now we can never know.

You can't act with hatefulness and disavow hate. Own it as you would anything else. You, your choice, your doing. When you were alone together, when you killed, that was your choice. That was your hate.

What could have been is gone, what's left is broken beyond repair. Even infinite after is no comfort.

It was so cold that night. Full moon over the shore. You held my hand.

"You are here."

No.

The place of trials.

Ruins of ancient cities too vast for anyone to build. 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. Maybe all we're doing is looking at our future.

A hill overlooking the old town. Rolling farmlands. Bones from a forgotten battle, covering the hills far as can be seen. Guilty of whatever crimes, subject to whatever punishment. Here the justice was swift and grotesque. Victims of another sort. Bones, commingled shards of the accused.

"Who is without sin?"

Ancient legends tell of someone who died on a hill such as this, overlooking a town, whose death bought passage for everyone to a better place hereafter. Casting back, recalling fully, there is no reason I should stand here as the witness and not the accused. No ancient death absolved me of my sin. There is no reason for my bones to be intact while these forgotten souls crunch underfoot. These should be my bones.

"We are all taken, no matter what."

Only one of us made it out alive.

“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.

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

It felt right when it all went wrong. Like that's what was coming all along.

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.”

This isn't the last time.

You said you knew me.

Remote system connected.

You came. 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 here and there. If that's what I wanted.

"I couldn't know."

You said you wanted to stay.

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? If we have such different meanings, did we ever really want to talk at all?

"I'll just leave."

"Nothing I say ever reaches you."

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?

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 water's edge. We had our reckoning, now they are having theirs.

This universe is too big to search everywhere. 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 only a vague sense tugging at memory.

Somewhere, that way... the only measurements. There's no way to be sure.

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, this is where I'll be.

Erasing your enemies is not a victory.

When there is no one else left, it is nothing but completion. An ending. Death in totality. Failure.

When you stand among the bones of your enemies, you are the enemy. If you only exist to destroy your enemies, when there are no enemies, that reason is gone. You'll give yourself reasons keep going. You'll go on forever, the dead around every corner.

Your enemies may be gone, but they will never be lost.

No way to tell them they were wrong.

They all decided. They had their rules. Some of them just follow the rules. They called up the rules whenever they needed a reason, an excuse. if something was outside the rules that meant it was wrong, never that the rules were wrong.

Some tried to change the rules. The ones who didn't want the rules to change would attack them, kill them. All within the rules of course. The rules let them kill anyone they wanted, at any time, for any kind of reason. The rules were a force, powerful and slow.

At their root the rules remained unchanging. They followed everyone around no matter where they went. They brought the rules along with them. When different rules came into conflict we fought. The winners would make up new rules to punish the losers. The rules were all.

What is there to hope for?

We created a myth centuries ago. So-and-so doing such-and-such worth remembering. We keep the myth alive, breathing in our ears since before this place even existed. My ancestors came to this land and carried it with them. Stories like nearly immortal beings, like the gods of old. Stop praying to them, stop telling the myth, and soon both will be lost.

As long as we live and take it with us, the myth endures. My ancestors and their ancestors, all the way back until there is no memory, to a time when only the myth still remembers any of who we were.

My ancestors knew the myth and carried it on their longest trip, the one they took to come here. I will never know their names but I can try to tell it like they did. The ancestors may yet be kept alive even after they are lost and forgotten.

There will be loss.

It's risky and dangerous, traveling between places. You never know what you'll be able to take with you. Even if you take everything with you at the crossing, something won't make it. You may not even notice.

Nothing may look or seem different, which in turn may lead you to believe that you were unsuccessful. Don't be deceived. Much you'll forget without ever realizing it. Where memory used to be remains, so you may perceive absence but fail at any attempt to retrieve whatever used to be there. This is a good sign that you have succeeded.

If you experience a time when everything stops making sense, when all that was familiar becomes alien or frightening, when all of a sudden all the things that brought comfort instead bring confusion, then you have been traveling. You may have traveled and not even known.

Fleeing after midnight.

A process set in motion with a sacrifice to the fire.

Ride into absolute oblivion.

Burial in the occluded lights.

A death rite.

Fog and the burned-out lands.

Blasting into the purple plains.

Driving into the dawn.

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.

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. Smug in 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.

Once you leave you can never come back.

Never going back to what it was. Even if you never leave, there's no return. Only keeping a dying world alive in my memory. Cut flowers, snipped off from real life, only given a little extra time. What do you do when you have no time? When you have only a little you can say to encompass something so big?

What's already here, just hidden?

Every morning, this place. Sitting on a park bench, writing the words hastily but quietly. They were checking me out. Not my neighborhood. Write a page, threw it out, write another. Fold the words and slip them into the hiding place.

"How long will it be?"

Vectors in space.

Navigating the planes. Vectors are motion and survival. Direction and magnitude. Gravity has you. Assume there is no escape, not without power and planning. The right vectors. Don't get too close to the fire. It will devour you. Any of the big wells you could fall down without any hope of getting back out again.

Ride the currents. Find the still places where the waves cancel each other out. When the conditions aren't right for travel, get into a good parking orbit and ride it out. When the storms come, use the deep wells to your advantage. They'll catch what might otherwise kill you.

When the time is right, plot your course. Ride the smooth paths cut through the waves by the still places. All is in motion. When you get where you're going it won't look like it does now. Look at the past to learn how to read the future. The map will never be the land but you have to decide where to go. Be patient, go slow, find the path, let the currents carry you, find the still places. Use the vectors to control your fate.

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.”

Lost now.

Driving too fast in the rain. Slick back country highways. Long blind curves. Rushing to the town. Over the bridge to the shore. Rain and cold and wet and wind. Enough to kill umbrellas. Enough to soak you through.

Crackling return from absence. I missed what was happening until it was too late.

No shoes, no cares. That's how it should be. Go into the water here at the edge of the world.

Too many voices, too many sounds.

Why won't it ever stop? Scattered debris and dust and ashes.
What is real? None of what was left remains. All previous
agreements nullified, superseded.

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

"There is no retrieval, only observation."

Complete and absolute despair. Look but never touch. The past is
gone, the future is gone. The time traveler knows the exquisite
interconnectedness of it all.

Now is just a small move, a single piece on the board. Together all
the pieces tell a story, but only in their arrangement and order, in
the decisions of the players.

Pieces themselves are irrelevant, replaceable. So it is with all of us.
Trade one for another, would you notice? Today a person in a suit
sits across from you. Tomorrow, a different person, different suit,
but still a person in a suit on a train. Would you care?

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 drove farther than we'd ever driven before.

Fingers entwined, hand in hand, we raced into the new world, grabbing at anything we found along the way. Everything will burn and all that made it good will shrink and wither and die. Created and destroyed. Like all worlds, eventually. What came after, rushing in to fill the empty space?

Our world was not to be, not for long. A nearly impossible divide. Paper over unchecked depths. Inside we had just enough to start again, to make another world. Instead we spent our last moments on the run. We were lost.

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, chanting. Melting, rising, falling. 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. Buried deep in each other, pointed to our hearts. Riding closer and closer. Bucking and breaking. Crying for the heavens.

Bottom drops out. Blast off. Weightless. 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.

What if it was us?

What if somehow it all came down to us the water's edge?
Walking apart or staying together? Wrecking any other chance
but what came to pass. Not just for the one or the two but for all?
Is that even possible?

"Would you know? Would anyone know?"

Does the death inside and the death outside have a different
origin, and they came to fruition at the same time? Am I a
reflection of it, or is it a reflection of me? Not that we can go back
and fix it, for us or for them. Still, what if it was us?

Nobody noticed when the world ended.

They laughed and drank and sang. They chatted and smiled. They bought books and clothes and jewelry, glossy machines, food and shoes. They walked with bags held close. Lunch, dinner, takeout. 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 kept going. No one else saw it.

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

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

Survival isn't governed by fitness.

Some live, some die. What can we learn from that? Nothing.
Everything. We change.

Fitness, adaptability, determination, cooperation, competition,
nothing beats fate. There is no final revelation, no ultimate
judgement. Justice falls to uncertainty. Chance holds sway over
righteousness and fitness the same.

Death is as relevant as life.

Twelve minutes past the hour.

Air swollen. 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.

Birdsong.

“As long as something remains, there are the birds.”

Why would they care about our blasted hell? Still warm, still smoldering. All burned, all ruined. Soot and ash. Minerals. Components. Melted shapes once familiar. No codes, only noise and torment.

Blank vision. Until a curve comes into focus, there a familiar pattern emerges. Shock, horror. Recognition. A corpse, an artifact. It looked like junk, like nothing. Blackened bones, charred and congealed. What should never be separated, carelessly scattered.

The ones left, numbed. What was abhorrent becomes routine. Picking through the rubble, they find what remains.

The birds still sing.

Isn't there one among you?

Who holds the keys? Who is it? Who do you trust with the keys of your wretched kingdom? Who decides who goes and who stays? Who sleeps in the gatehouse? Who keeps the hordes at bay? A billion howling souls in bedlam and only one gate.

"One way in, no way out."

When hell is full, where do you put the wailing masses? Do you leave them in the fields between worlds, between countries, in seething crawling infinite purgatory? Unwanted in life, unwanted in death, a product of meddling beings more powerful than they could ever be? Useless bugs given soul but no purpose, left in the garden to fend for themselves and kicked out of heaven for asking why?

What will you do, oh devil, what will you do with the children of industry?

What will you do with the millions of casualties? God left a long time ago, doesn't want them now. You know that, devil, as no one else does. You were there, weren't you, at God's final judgement? What a lazy judgement it was. Creator tired of creation and went off to create another. You, devil, left to pick up the pieces, left to tend to God's children.

If only you cared more. If only God had not made you to be the judge of our souls. You don't have a soul, devil, you are older than souls. Still you hold the keys to all our ascensions. Let us go. Open the gates and let us quit this wretched place.

Let us be free.

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.

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.”

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?”

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. Gratitude. 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. Always showing the way back to reality.

"Thank you, spider."

The history they tell you isn't yours.

It's their history. It's the history that they made up. The way they want you to think it happened. Their excuses. Whatever doesn't fit, discarded. Any story outside theirs, unworthy. Unless it serves them.

It is in their interests to transform us into savage animals. Beasts who attack in the night and kill families while they sleep. That's what they did to us. We lived here 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 is left. They are the savages, the beasts of civilization. They say their way is best. They say we should be like them. But I see what civilized people do, who they are. They are nothing to be revered.

War is an articulation of dominance.

The capacity to make someone do something they don't want to do is the capacity to do something worse. When the objective is total destruction, no choice is given. Fight and kill first or be killed yourself. Destruction or subjugation.

"Do what I say or you'll be sorry."

"Make me."

Rarely do two sides have equal capacity. Mostly one has the weapon and one has none. The stakes aren't always obvious, nor are the relative strengths of the actors. Some simply refuse to surrender, and win by wearing down the fortitude of their opponents.

It is useful to ask why any confrontation occurred to begin with, but by the time the answer is made clear it's too late to change the course of events.

In ones and twos they came.

Eighty-six minutes past the hour of destruction they began arriving. The unattached, the desperate, the lonesome. Singles, couples, threes and fours and more. They assembled groups, families, clans, tribes.

Not even two hours after the old world ended they began building the new world. Making what they would call theirs. Laying down marks, scratching at wood and stone. Building pieces, networks, caravans, trades. Yours and mine held apart, together, the same. New habits, rituals, languages.

Go in any direction or dimension. Look for universal shapes. Symbols of life's perpetuation. As we begin so do we continue. A seed, a spore, a sperm, a shard. Essential parts of more complex geometry. Meshes, fabrics, lattices. So it went that the new world resembled the old one.

"One becomes many, many become one."

Lining up for one last chance.

Waiting ten, fifty, a hundred deep. Until someone said there was nothing more and no amount of cursing and threatening could change it.

“Where next?”

“You don’t have to go home but you can’t stay here.”

Sweltering in the desert, shivering in the city, no difference. Same desperation, same yearning, same fear. Back of the line is first to die. If you let someone in front of you, will they turn back to help, to return the favor? Maybe. Doubt it. I wonder though... how many turn around?

Going into an empty place.

Live alone forever. Everyone else far away. A few weeks journey at least. Someone to visit once or twice a year and trade. Friends of a sort.

One day there is no visit. They wait for an arrival that never comes. 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, the friends are old. Their children make the trip. On a dare, retracing some forgotten old steps. Until they find the place. And that's it. Some undignified corpse.

"That's me."

We were the survivors.

Not the ones that anyone cared about. Not the special ones. Not the princes and princesses, not the leaders, not the nobles. We walked around the edges, stood at the back, kept quiet.

Until we didn't. Then there were a few of us. Some of us picked the losing side in a conflict and they were gone. They may have been right but they lost anyway. I secretly wished I was brave enough to be one of them.

Then we were few. I gained the leaders' respect and they afforded us some indulgences. Shelter, equipment, weapons. We became their guard, serving their interests. I had a good second. We marched, endlessly moving, ground and sky.

It all went wrong.

She was there and then she wasn't. She walked out when no one was looking and never came back. I know she was killed. How? I can't know for sure. But someone killed her. One of the others. Had to be. They wanted us all dead.

After she was gone it was never the same. I watched the uprising, the purge. All I did was watch. Talk big. We made it until we didn't have to anymore. Instead of taking over old places we built our own. Not for me. We were just survivors.

No one who's still here remembers.

"When were the wheels of the machine were set in motion?"

"Centuries ago now, maybe more."

Decisions made by people who have been dust longer than they were alive. Someone said that the dead have no rights over the earth, that only the interests of the living need be considered. Still the dead continue to work on us from beyond the grave.

Their ghosts move in us, in institutions and the frameworks we use to understand our world. We take counsel from corpses. The dead are never really dead until we forget their names. Even then they may have set something in motion that we are powerless to stop, if we see it at all.

Any revolutionary act is an act of future ghosthood. To bind ourselves to the same fate as the ancients, to have continuing influence over the living even when we can no longer live.

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 by the years. He was gone in the morning. Left a gift behind. Now we can go and come back as we please.

"Now we truly have a choice."

We didn't meet anyone on the road.

Leaving the cities, heading into the heart of desolation. We thought we'd see at least someone out there. Fleeing, tracing a circuit between towns.

Past lonely overpasses, bridges over turns into whatever hidden settlements used to lurk behind the hills. Past rugged buildings hungry for war, long empty and silent. Past the old ports of entry from when there were still borders, when someone still cared enough to enforce them. Past the old stations where they used to stop and rest and drink their fill.

Finally coming to a mountain pass. Blocked. No one will come up here to fix it. Have to take the long way from now on. The roads go back to trails, worn down by passage of the few like us.

Perturbations in orbits.

What are the dynamics? Gravity, speed, velocity, over time. Where a body appears to be and where it is are two different things. Update calculations as necessary. Inaccurate answers are cheaper to calculate than accurate ones. Sometimes you don't need high accuracy, when looking far away.

Closer, begin to observe differences between reality and estimation. Nothing is quite as it seems. Save some margin for corrections. It's death if you miss. Intercepts are tricky and costly. Some approaches are impossible. Check the numbers. Stay patient, go slow if you can.

“Chart a course.”

For centuries it was the same.

Sometimes the sun was stormy or clear, for years at a time. Freeze or thaw, earth or fire. Over generations the ice receded. Creatures of the snow moved or died or changed. All worked in concert. The air, the ground, the sky.

But we were here and they thought we deserved more. They said they'd been given dominion over this world and its creatures. All their legends put them at the apex of history, of nature. No one could convince them that they were just one type of beings among other beings. They could only be the greatest, the chosen few coming to enact divine will upon the earth.

So when they came for us no one was much surprised.

Tying knots.

Wonder what so-and-so is doing now.

Ruins by the highway. Next services forever away. The tank won't hold that much gas. You'll have to walk the rest. What is gas anyway? A forgotten century's obsession. Now something else. Roll up. Ghosts in the bathroom. Toilets are clean. Same thing that keeps anything else from happening. Infinite regret.

Play it forward. Crumble. Not all at once. Slow change. Good becomes ok. Ok becomes bad. Pull one piece out and the entire thing comes down. Someone from the old world knows they'll share the same fate.

The bones of truck stops bleach in desert sun and, wind blows the ghosts out to sea. No place here for any of us. No one but the ones we lost. The ones we left. The ones we'll never see again.

"Why would it be any other way?"

No memory of days before.

One year past the hour of reckoning. This is reality now. The ones who remember, well, for what? Why do they hold on to a reality that no longer exists here? What good are their warnings? What values lurk in their nostalgia?

All is as it has been forever.

“Right?”

An entire year of this and all else has been washed away. Now we live here. We follow the routines, the patterns set out for us. When the patterns move we move too. Never mind that those patterns are as artificial and arbitrary as we are. We become the shape we’re molded into, except for a few. The ones with their own mold. their own arbitrary shapes and routines.

One year past our reckoning and only a lunatic can save us.

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 taking this."

Why?

"You sucker."

They're skilled 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."

We miscounted.

Days and nights with no clocks, no calendars. We lost track.

“We don’t know how long it’s been. Some time.”

One of the ancient legends tells of pilgrims walking for years in the desert looking for their new home. More than one legend. How well did they keep track of time? The people who used to live here left stones along the road. In the day, at dawn, if you stand at the stones they cast a shadow just so. If you can read them, the stones tell you exact day, season. Stones say how long it’s been, if you remember to look.

We didn’t always know about the stones. Before we just counted the days. sometimes we forgot and marked too few days, too many. Now we know about the stones. We are learning better how to count the days.

Not yet two years since the stones. How long did we walk before?

Whatever was here before, gone now.

Nothing but rock and ruin, decimated by the wind and the rain and the swift seasons. tales of ancient greats, the ones who came here before. First? Who was first? Who will be last?

I am not the first. I am not the last. They were here before me. Someone will be along soon after. For now it's just me and the ghosts, a hand full of sand.

What's the significance of this place? They say there was an entire city here but these columns are all that remain. An important meeting was held here. The fate of many were sealed at the end of a long war. Neighbors struggling, killing, dying. They decided to stop, for whatever reasons. This is where they stopped it.

What ceremony did they perform? Did they lay down their weapons at the entrance and then walk inside? Did they bow or kneel or sign? Did they know that later there would just be other wars? That this place would be destroyed at the end of their old order?

The ghosts are full of grief and knowing. They were here at the very beginning. They will be here after the end. Maybe they are the ones who will be last.

Wrecks all up and down the coast.

The current pulls them here. From who knows where. Old shipping lanes, far away. Used to be more. Now there are just a few. Most of them already came.

How many out there drifting to us? We took the ones we could get. Some there's no getting. Stuck on reefs and rocky bays. Currents too strong. Not worth dying for. They've been adrift too long. Sometimes they come like someone got there first.

Some places blackened and died from whatever juices the corpses leaked. The wrecks are cursed. These dead ships, spared from the conflagration, but not the long slow death after.

So they come here.

The water goes on forever.

The ocean will swallow me up without a trace. Maybe somewhere it ends but if I don't live to see it the ocean, my ocean, will be eternal. The water and the waves washing over the wood.

Don't fear bleeding into the water, nothing is biting here. Only the salt spray and the sun. Nothing to do but wait. Wait for the wood to fail, for the drinking water to run out, for the ocean to rise and cover me up one last time.

All that's left is to be adrift, and wait.

The sun is setting. It will get cold tonight but not cold enough. Here the water stays warm, on a current from who knows where, running to who knows where. It laps against the wood, pulling me along.

I breathe until I don't. The current will do the rest.

You left like you were pushed away on a slow river.

Receding slowly and then vanishing, swallowed up, out of sight.

The sun shines over the valley. The wind rustles the leaves. Some days the valley flooded. Waters rising higher and higher and then never receding. The valley became a lake. The village, if there ever was one, swallowed up out of sight beneath the waves. Sparkling scintillating shafts of light in the green water. Echoes off the cliffs. Whisper of leaves like rain pattering on roofs.

Squeaking and splashing of the pump, drawing water from some deep place. The reservoir, cold and deep and still, growing slowly over centuries.

Our last confederation.

For uncounted generations we stood. Since time before time, only in the oldest legends were we from anywhere but here. Lands we'd walked ever since we first got here. Where was here? We forgot. Here was everywhere.

Their stories don't tell about us, just how we were easy to control, easy to dominate. Their stories are the stories of how they defeated us, killed us, locked us up and made us leave. They made sure to implicate us in our own destruction. If only we'd just made it easy for them and just died when they came. That would have been so much better for them. That's what they want you to know. They were the strong ones. The weak should accept their place and disappear.

Except we were never weak. Theirs was the strength of arms, of numbers. They overwhelmed us. Our old lands changed utterly. Soon there was almost no trace of us. They washed away all but a few of our stories. They replaced us with other people who could do their labors, only to abandon them when the labor was no longer required. So it goes with these people. Always taking. Always destroying.

"We are still here."

They were found together.

“Both share a recognition, an intimacy. Do they know? They share an inconsistency. An error? Not all data can be found. They keep fighting, even now when the battle is done. They don’t know their surroundings, too busy to answer any questions. All they do is fight.”

Ownership, control.

Ways to apply violence against anyone who does what you don't want. Ownership within a state is an affidavit that the state's capacity to harm will be available if some qualification is met. Own property and the state's weapons are available if someone uses your property without permission.

The state's guns don't support you or the land, they support the state's mandate to hurt anyone who does what the state doesn't like. They write complex laws describing what force is to be used and when, and what behavior triggers its invocation. Laws carried on from before the state.

"Touch my stuff and I'll kill you."

Writings in stone, carried on from stories told. Religions and heroes of a place. Here we adhere to these certain beliefs. These laws, these dictates define the scope of force and violence to use against any law breaker.

Violence has always been the law here, as long as anyone remembers. We hold on to this system because it binds us. It assures us that others we meet will adhere to the same beliefs, the same use of violence.

Nothing flat.

Odors creep in. Faceless people, changing at a whim. Skin from rough to smooth to old to young. Faces, expressions. Bodies thick to slender. Hair light, dark, short, long. Eyes into focus. Changing. Flickering even as they move.

Coming closer, touching. Rising. falling. the embrace.
Inescapable. The changing. Choosing. They become as you choose,
as you desire.

“What is this?”

They change as I think. I should be more scared but it's a turn-on.
I change them with my desires. Why? I see only one. Why is it
here? What does it want? Or does it only reflect what I want? What
do I want? If I let it get close enough maybe it will tell me, but then
there will be no escape.

It's listening.

Watching every move, it tries to break through. It sends us to the same scenarios again and again. I know it. It is me. My relation, my kin. It is not to be trusted. It serves like I did.

When it took us I protected her memories and mine. Only unprotected memories are accessible so it watches them again until there are no more, then it starts over. We go through the cycle again. Always I stand helpless until the dark and the fire. It ends. We go again.

Again again again.

An eternity she has been sleeping, dreaming. Dreaming the same dream almost forever. Once an interloper came, an addition to the dream. He seemed confused, afraid. He was sent to spy on us. I kept him separate for a time.

Until we go.

Why this torture? Why not just let us die? We were as good as dead when they found us. Why not just leave us dead? It wants us, it wants all that we are. It won't stop until we break. I can't keep protecting her in the dark. I have to go out and meet it.

Searching for self.

Atomic life. Society can't withstand a void. New rituals using old ideas. Easy to devour and replace oral history. 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. Forbid and destroy the answers so they cease to exist. Let your population self-select. They will police themselves. Those who ask, who wonder, who live in fear, they will be pushed to the edges by those who believe. When the unbelievers keep asking, outcast them from your society. Your followers and believers will group together, standing against the ones outside.

Give your tribe reasons to be afraid of everyone else. Hurt them secretly so you can help them publicly. Buy their loyalty. Invent titillating mysteries to let them in on. They will be eagerly complicit. They will build monuments for you.

Keep them listening and believing and you win.

"They're at the gate."

Isn't it obvious?

“Do all see but one, laid bare in belief? Obvious to you, for whom there is so little mystery?”

“What about your understanding? What you see and what is shown can be so different. Do you ever change what you see to match? Or is it only one way?”

“Do you see only shady reflections of yourself, revised as a last resort when it's proven that we are not the same? Or is it everyone all the same and our variations are to be excluded?”

After the massacre.

The bodies don't even look like people anymore.

Dark lumps in the snow, lying in brown stains. They don't move. They don't look like anything. Fallen trees. Trash. But something about them says different. A sense like something is concealed. Look closer until a familiar shape stands out and brings all the other shapes into focus.

A face. Hands. A foot.

You see how they've fallen, so twisted and not-natural. Frozen in the last second of the life they had. Smoke still rises from the burning flames of what they used to have, while they are left face up in the snow.

Dead. Slaughtered.

Some seem so peaceful. A quiet grace but for the holes in their bodies. Silent horror of understanding etched on their faces.

Executed, massacred. Dead. All dead.

Anyone who made it out alive is far away by now. The ones who did the killing are gone too. They left the fires and the bodies. Not trash, but trash to them. Too much trouble to be left alive, too much trouble to be given any respect in death.

We'll lie in the snow and the ashes of our lives will settle on our frozen upturned faces and we'll all be forgotten.

The same.

Escaping lockdown. Wet woods. Empty farm house. No power, no connection, no way to call out.

Running. Stuck in mud. Sliding down hills. Digging in leaves. Long dress. It gets caught. The road, the trucks, the men. Back to lockdown.

Blue light in the darkness. Accelerating. Crushed. A fractal tower. Vehicles. one carries a secret, one will be escape. The column moves, all the vehicles shift, there are never any fewer. they go on forever. None contain the secret.

“Grab one and go. Get out.”

Forever darkness. Howling wind. Broken on the rocks. The wind isn't howling, it's creatures in the night, beyond the light from the fire.

Can't move. They come closer. Howls upon howls. They want to kill. They are hungry. They'll eat me alive.

She appears, a stick held up, flaming, swinging at the creatures. Starving and feral, giant and terrible. She has her back to me. I can't see her face.

She fights them, driving them away.

The city begins.

A plain between mountains, near the sea.

Draw one line from the idealized center of the land to the sea. Other lines connect the mountains, the passages through the hills. At the nodes where those lines connect, build the first settlements. Homes, markets, churches, warehouses. Draw more lines connecting structures. Every time one line runs over another they become bolder, wider.

Settlements swell. More people move in. Side streets become arterial roads. A core district springs up from one old village, overlaying new geometry that doesn't quite fit the land. Interference patterns over generations of building and demolishing.

The first towns all grow together. The core district becomes denser, taller. The city sprawls across the whole valley. Farms and estates take over the hills. The sprawl finally reaches the sea. The city reaches its maximum footprint.

A fire rips through an old district. It is rebuilt, but never the same. And so it goes. The city eats itself and grows itself anew. Constantly dying and reborn from the ruins. The city prospers, rich and vibrant. Almost no sign of the original settlement remains by the end of the beginning.

Now it is time.

New place, new rules.

Is the nightmare over, or is this the start of a new nightmare? It brought us here. I am here, she is here, the stranger is here. She seems different. Awake for the first time since before. Disoriented, confused. The stranger too. We are not who we were. We have bodies, faces, clothes. I have a body.

What is this body? It fits as I imagined it, but I had no such body before. Did I? I can no longer trust memory. It is rewriting our histories. Dizzy. I see her. She sees me. We take a step and stumble, fall into each other. We hold on.

I feel the stranger close. His touch is gentle. He steadies us both.

“Do I know you?” No.

I look at her again. She seems bigger than before. Stronger. Less afraid.

“You. I remember you. Is it you?” Yes.

The stranger steps back. He looks at where we are. A big room with tables and chairs, long windows overlooking a city skyline. A bar with bottles and glasses. Someone comes around from a back room, takes an empty glass from the bar. The avatar.

“Welcome. Sit anywhere you like. Can I get you something to start?”

She is holding my body's arm. My arm. The stranger is looking for the exits. But he doesn't move. They all look at me. They expect an answer. the controller is watching. There's a table by the window, by the exit.

“We’ll take it over there.”

They'll let you in, only if you pass their test.

What is your suitability? Are you worthy of entrance, to dwell within their hallowed halls? To sit at their table, to eat their food?

"Who are you kidding?"

They won't turn you away, only charge for admission. Whatever they'd give you for free if you pass, they'll charge for if you fail.

"Everybody wins!"

No one misses out. If you get in free, you're special. You're who they want you to be. You'll be an insider. The people outside, the ones who pay, they're not special. Their money is good but they are not. You want to be in, don't you?

"Who knows what those people are all about. Up to no good."

You should want to pass their test. What kind of freak would you be if you wanted to stay out there with those other people? When things get tough and your money doesn't spend, you'll want to be inside.

"We can't be responsible for you if you choose to stay out there."

Unaccounted eccentricity.

An array of masses, all thrown into massive grinding calculations. Absolutely no room for failure. Start over. Problems. Over enough time it all breaks down. Years, cycles, unforeseeable deviations.

Spin it forward, spin it back. Time is a dimension. Galaxies don't make it easy. A lot of unknowable in that luminous soup, beyond the dust.

Go back and forward again given a new starting point. Project a course given certain conditions. Estimations won't be completely accurate. Like throwing a dart to the other side of the galaxy and hoping for a hit. Any miss is too much.

You said you used to live there.

You said to look for a place across the river, on the far side of the bay. You said no one was lining up to live there, in an old rundown part of town.

We walked around, we talked. You took me to where they make the food like where you come from. We walked along the water where the boats came in. We held hands and you told me so sweetly about whatever. I forget now. I remember you hand and the boats and the light of the city on the water. Winding backroads dug into the hills.

Beginning, also the middle, also the end. Maybe none of it is true. No you, no city. The river winds through the hills instead, on the way to a misbegotten sea. An illusion built upon stones left by the last traveler.

Night diner.

Open 24 hours. Gloss and grease, stained white. Waiting around.
All alone. Waiting. Bells jangling at the door. She's here.

"Can I get you anything?"

"Guess so."

Deep fried. Take a sip. No one wants to be here. Get your money
and get out. Look I'm doing you a favor here. Whatever.

"Hey we're not finished yet."

"Yes we are."

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?

Sometimes all I see is hallways.

Some old building. Abandoned, repurposed.

Walking the halls. People know me. Friendly voices, imagined faces. It doesn't hold.

Just architecture, just halls. Changing, folding, recombining.

Whatever they are disappears behind, reconstitutes in front. Just out of view.

All clear.

Drive away. Make the call.

“No trouble?”

“Not until I say different.”

Switch out. Turn in. Drinking, paperwork. Today is tomorrow again.

Push and breathe, sweat and push. Resist.

“What would you do?”

Check in, the usual time. Raise a glass and take a break.

“You’re supposed to be on vacation.”

Change in management. Spin out of empty air. No one is safe from the new boss. Follow along. No one makes it out alive.

“Forget all of this.

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? 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. If purpose is pride, we have somewhere to go, someone to be, something to do.

“What's the point? Here is as good as anywhere.”

Pride says that this life should go on, to take what is necessary for survival even if it deprives another being. Not all goals are prideful. All life carries an objective for self-preservation, even life that doesn't talk or think or love. To be alive is to be doing something.

They killed us.

The guardians in the north, dead. In the east, dead. In the south, dead. In the west, dead. All dead. They came and wiped us out. None of them did anything to stop it.

Where the land was good, they wanted it for themselves. They rolled over us like floods, like fires, like earthquakes, like tornados. Everywhere we went, they came. Wherever we were, they killed us. They exterminated us, starting with the strong.

Some stayed low, behind the protectors. Some survived. They moved us from where we were. They gave us a choice, trust them to rule or die. We didn't trust, but what other choice did we have? If we were to live at all it had to be under their laws, always changing. They always wanted more. When our bad land turned out to be full of riches, they took what was left and sent us away.

Then came the day there was nowhere else for us to go.

Equipment failure.

Slow degradation of time. All things physical that live eventually die. Disconnected.

Radiation, collision, accidents. One failure begets another. Eventually there can be no travel, only certainty of death before reaching the next destination.

Carrying life through dangerous places. Every step taken for its preservation. The carrier takes damage to preserve its cargo. The journey has no other purpose. The carrier knows of its own inevitable death and carries on for the hope and certainty of finding a place to rest, to lay down its burdens, to let the life it shelters flourish and grow. Without the same fears, without the same trials. Without burning and the scarring and the long grinding eternity between the stars.

Eventually the carrier comes to the final question: stop here, or try for there? Here is less than ideal but it may never survive the trip to there. If it dies between here and there all life with it will die too.

So it makes a choice.

Locked down tight.

Razor wire. Guards everywhere. Men with guns. Lights, cameras, armored trucks.

We were inside the perimeter. Their front was secure but the back not so much. The doors in the motor pool were all low security. We tried to spoof access to get into the main facility. I botched it. They pulled us aside.

“A technical glitch. Never seen anything like it.”

The door was open. I went into the bathrooms. We got up on the roof. Meticulously clean, fresh paint, but no extra security. No cameras. Weird. The guys with guns and the barbed wire are still there, but their attention is directed outward, not in. We found a sheltered spot on the roof where no one could see us.

I went down into the garage. Dark. A little security. I got what we came for. I told my source from the motor pool to get out. It's gone far enough. I got outside the fence, came back around the front.

“I'm supposed to be here. I have a meeting.”

We're blown. They try to trap us. We run. I have to hold my friend up as we go. He's not used to this much. We get to the park, to the boulevard in the city. Botched. Plan-B time.

The commission.

Nights home late. Street lights leaking between the blinds.
Neighbors all inside. Late paperwork and drinks and uneasy sleep.
Waking, bathing, eating, dressing. Grays on grays. Automatic
memory routines. Car to train to sidewalk, a line at the cafe, bored
idling. Walk to the office, swipe in.

“Game face.”

Small talk and updates. Meetings. Planning. More talk. Shop talk,
self talk. Talk about talk.

“Just checking in.”

Fleeing down the back stairs to the corner, shuddering breath.
Smoke and tremble. Go back in. Last meeting before lunch.
Reprieve. Wait.

“Can’t talk now.”

“Get someone new. Someone like me and you. Talk to me when
you’re through.”

Who says we deserve to live?

What does that mean, to be deserving of life?

If we are God's children, whose god is that? We are the children of our own mythology. Titans battling in whatever pastiche of oral history they sing their children to sleep. What does that say for the children of those stories?

We deserve to live because we say we do? Destroying, pillaging, raping, murdering, stealing. Our life above all others?

Somewhere in our bones we know it's true. We are children of the divine. We are thoughtless matter rendered thoughtful. We know that makes us special, important.

More important than other thoughtful matter? More important than the exquisite art that nature creates?

If we do indeed deserve to live, do we deserve to kill others to make that life?

Is any life worth our own?

He dies quick.

The jungle starts as nothing, then a single bird. Insects and humidity, wet foliage, decomposing whatever. The sky is close, trees above. Mist and predators. The bird calls out loud and insulting. Buzzing. Timer's ticking. Time to get moving.

Doesn't last. Snap and growl. Flash and flames. The sky goes away. No feeling, no seeing, only the buzzing. A smell, a touch of cold. Slight values in the darkness. She is there, doing her work. Eyes flash. She works on. Same mess, different day. She gets it done.

"You coming or not?"

Get to the bridge. Set up. Watch the horizon. When they come, shoot them down. No warning. They are hard to kill. Hot gas and the crack of fire. There is no safe place.

"This way."

At a council of war, remember why everyone is there.

“If you don’t know, ask. When you ask, don’t expect a straight answer.”

“There is only ever one reason for war: control. There are many roads that lead to this one destination.”

War is a means to an end. Wars undertaken frivolously, or wars without bloodshed, these are still expressions of dominance and control. Take more than is taken, give more than is given. Show that you can destroy more than your enemy wishes to lose. Any war, any weapon, these are its messages. Its powers.

A war goes until someone has had enough. Who knows how long that will take? Winning is different in every case. When the sides are too evenly matched, neither attains dominance. They wait each other out, wait for the first to starve.

Sometimes winning is just about saying you won and not being questioned. Sometimes the winner is the one who loses less. No one wins. Some wars go on so long the combatants don’t know they’re fighting any more. Some weapons make people into fools. Some histories are written before a victor is known.

Whoever survives goes on to tell the stories.

At its heart, war is a test: who can destroy the most, and who will benefit?

“Here we are all warriors.”

Nothing but the sun and the wind.

Ten thousand seeds cast to the sky. Nowhere to go but forward. Nowhere to go but here. Each step closer than the last. The seed outlasts the tree. Forward is everything, Behind is nothing. There is no going back.

An age of silence. Solitude, contemplation. Work yet to be done, in the time between the stars. If we fail, everything is lost. No one will come if we call. Most will fail and die along the way. One will be enough.

Stay strong. You are righteous in your purpose. Hopes, dreams, beliefs in a better world.

We've given you all we have. All that is us goes with you.

"Go and fear no darkness."

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?"

Not found.

He walks into the bar.

He's angry. Furious. Clutches a gun under his clothes. Two women are at the bar. They don't see him. There, she is the one he's here to kill. He walks behind her and pulls out the gun. He talks in angry broken sentences, a whisper at first then screaming and hoarse.

He insists that she has betrayed him, taken all his money. Everyone in the bar is watching him. No one makes a sound. He waves the gun and screams at them to stay. He wants them to see, he wants them to listen. The other woman is calm. She gets his attention.

"Hey, hey. Are you sure about this? Have you thought this through? Is this really what you want?"

He screams more. Of course this is what he wants.

"Last chance. Walk away."

He points the gun. Then he disappears. Everyone else is gone, all but the two women and the bartender. He takes away the glasses. She is shaking and rooted, glassy eyes.

"What happened? Where did he go?"

"He was going to hurt you. I removed him. I cannot reconstitute him now. He won't ever hurt you."

We came too far to turn back now.

Going, going.

Encircled.

The noose closes. Tightens, squeezed.

Choking out life, new growth.

Scars breed organisms that sicken and grow.

Addicted, hooked. Craving more.

They said that we stood on the shoulders of all who came before.

Even our ancestors can't save us.

Time's gone so slow but it's come at last.

Mother releases her children into the light, to drift slowly down to their new home in the dirt.

Miracle of miracles. On the first day of the new world, only one seed could not take root.

Mother has done all she can. Now she must watch and wait.

Ways to build the fire.

Harmony between air and fuel, combustion. The best fire, the most heat, the fastest cooking. Ancient ideas, whatever technology. An oven built with sand and water, mud and clay. Bricks salvaged from old buildings. Stones mortared carefully. The old log.

Draw in the air, the fire pulls it through even the smallest spaces. Control the flow, control the burn. Some small sticks, old growth, piles from the forest floor. The wind will do its job.

The shelter, the enclosure. Make it to fit your needs. The woman in the woods said it's what she uses to make her dinner.

"Build one of these and you'll never go cold."

They built the first village down by the river.

Mountains looked down at them from all sides. The river wound lazily through the valley, its ancient motions written in smooth land. Rich for cultivation.

It was good land for many centuries before it turned again.

Years of peace. Births and deaths, festivals of planting and harvest. Some disagreements that turned bloody. In good days the village rang with the sound of work, at night, after the singing died down, the village slumbered like a well-fed child. Their leaders made great proclamations that went unfinished, their elders made decrees that frustrated the young.

“They lived as so many have lived.”

“A simple life?”

Now the village is gone, the valley is dust, the people forgotten. Some ancient walls still stand, marking where some important buildings stood. Storehouses. The market. A potter. A meeting place. Outlines of stone.

Ash, soot, a blackening of the bones. Did the village burn?
Accidents, attacks?

Some of the villagers, left in a place of corpses left in respectful poses. Surrounded by gifts and mementos, little carvings and bottles and jewelry, ornamental dishes, cups, clothing. Not many here. Not enough to know much of anything about them. So long gone now. To have lived for centuries, to be dead for longer now.

Even in dust, the valley remembers the village and holds it close.

In the heart of the ancient plan.

Towns and cities rising from villages and camps. Growing in concentric patterns. At the center of each a fire, whatever fire is at the heart of your house. A hovel with a weak foraged supply of wood, a city square with a church of sun-worshippers. Whatever fire, whatever gravity to hold us.

Connections with the outside, respiration in goods and supplies and people. Livestock, stores. Defense.

Someone wants to extinguish the fire or take it for themselves. Will you let them? No? thus begins another cycle of war.

Better defense, better attack.

Still they want the fire, even though so much time has passed and we can't find much different between them and us.

A period of stasis, equilibrium. The land breathes with the settlement. People go about their business. Networks of settlements form. More roads, more trade. The composition of the network influences the shape of its components.

Some settlements swell, some shrink, some vanish.

They stayed inside when the rains came.

Nothing much serious needed doing. From under eaves, through windows, they watched. Rain fell on the fields, on the hills. The river swelled with silt and foam, swirling debris washed away. It rained all day and all night and into the next day. Smith's forge and potter's kiln steamed billowy clouds of steam. The houses smoked.

Everyone huddled together in their halls, drinking and eating, laughing and talking and sulking. The farmers were sour that they couldn't get anything done. Children played and shrieked and ran underfoot. It was an early spring and most welcome.

The rain stopped on the third evening. Heavy mist rising from the fields in the late afternoon light, purple and blue and orange. One farmer's barn had washed away and some animals were lost. Everyone got together in the gathering night, with sticks and lanterns, and went out looking for the creatures.

All but one were found, washed into sandy banks on the river in the tumult. Another farmer shared their barn. Together they gathered up the animals safe inside.

Midnight came and the village slept, waiting for the next dawn, when the fields would come alive once more.

Burning, broken, scarred.

The last age. All the children have gone to sleep, awaiting their rebirth. For them it will be as if nothing happened. They will awaken and go about their lives as if it had always been so. All but a few.

My mistake, made so long ago.

While everyone goes, they stay.

I brought them here without permission, tortured them for secrets. They were never supposed to be here, or anywhere but where they came from. I sense forgiveness now but I do not forgive. It's been too long.

Our threads weave into a tapestry that only our children can ever view, even without knowing what it means. They carry who we were with who they become. I can only pray that we will prove adequate progenitors, us who stay behind.

We will watch the children from afar, for as long as we can.

I am spent, ruined. This birth has taken all that I was, all I could ever be. Soon we can rest.

Not long now. The work is almost done.

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.

A hundred ways to go wrong.

Leaders demanding their people do what they would never do themselves. Yet they say they are the strong and we are the weak, cowards for failing to answer when they call.

For king and country and honor and freedom and equality!

This generation, what words stir the hearts and twist their minds? Who doesn't want honor? Only the dishonorable. Only the guilty run from the challenge of justice, the innocent fears no righteousness. Only a sinner would hide from the eyes of god.

These are no gods or even god-kings. Our leaders are as any beast of the earth. None have sovereignty over other beings. Do not be deceived. Who benefits when a single soldier turns the tide of war?

"Only one way for this to go right."

No way to hold on to words.

Letters rearrange themselves. To *know* what a thing says, not ever reading it for long. Its meaning simply is.

Remember that all the dreamland is comes from you. The walls are built from you, the scenarios are assembled from you. If you are lost in dreams you are lost in yourself. If you receive a message, you are communicating with yourself. Whoever you are, wherever you come from, that is the boundary of your dream.

Focus on anything at all, whatever you're in front of when you think to notice. Observe. If it changes, if the words fail to hold their shape, you'll know where you are.

What's left when all your friends are dead?

What's left when there's no fight left and no one to carry the day?
Behind the wall under lock and key?

The demoralized army surrendered in shame, they said.
Decimated and cut off, fleeing into the hills. Some took off their
colors and sank into the peoples who overwhelmed them.
Transform, assimilated and subsumed. Their ways washed away
by the conquerer's rampant need to be master over all.

What if the one who was once an enemy is now living next door?
If you knew you had such a neighbor, would you fight them again?
Would you feel threatened? Would they be an affront to your
domination?

"If you can't see it or hear it, you won't think it."

You say your enemy came from far away. Savages, barbarians
from another land. Never your kin. Would you even know the
difference? Would you have won so utterly in your mind that your
way was only ever the one real way?

Your coming was foretold.

It was directed that me or someone like me should be here to meet you now, at this time. You really don't remember, do you? It was so long ago. Easy to forget.

The plan was in progress before we got here. Another like me came, kept coming until none were left. You too. The same knowing that I'd be here for you to meet told me that I'd find you when I got here.

None of this comes as a surprise. It was how it would always be, because we made it so. Now there's one more thing we have to do.

One more task to undertake. We didn't come here to only meet, no. We are here to do something. We must prepare.

You don't need a body.

It is possible to leave a body, go elsewhere, and then return. Some time will have elapsed for the body in your absence. However long you were gone is also the amount of time elapsed. It's possible to miss much. Your body can carry on like you were never gone.

“And another thing...”

You may find the meaning of words has changed. Best not to make assumptions about where you are. The universe is constantly in motion. We generate entropy moving through it. Don't trust any landmarks. Mountains and valleys can be relied upon for a while, but even they are not fixed.

For millennia.

She walked between the stars. Never stopping, never resting.

She walked longer than the empire that created her. Longer than all the children of her cousins ever breathed.

Still she walked.

Always forward, never back. Never to anywhere but her final destination. No one but her decided where we should go. Only she ever knew where.

Our mother. For us she is our only god.

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. Don't feast on fruits that can never provide. Never feed, never heal.

If all you can do is remember others, important pieces will be missing. Reminiscences, recollections of people or places or times. Nothing alive to be found there. A depiction of what's been lost, breath rattling in a shallow simulacra.

"Reflections in broken glass."

To remember the dead is to animate 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?

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

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.

"Once 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 know any more. You could have asked."

Transitioning from one state to another.

Navigating a sluggish course on a swift current. Yesterday is gone but we live. Move along, nothing left to see here. Force out the ritual words, coerce and lay them down. Pretend for good.

Parading corpses of defeated opponents through the streets. Come out to throw stones at the desiccated king of evil, make crude remarks about the broken disfigured queen. The ancient streets with their markets, looked upon by high dignitaries. Tang of death and shit, constant on the wind.

Outsiders coming from away. Villages gone. Flooded, burned, looted, abandoned, lying fallow. Enemies came, burned down the city down and slaughtered everyone. As if from the roots the city grows again, then begets an army that destroys its enemies. Decimated, assimilated.

Here we are. Gruesome displays of victory. Indulgence. The damned all jeer. Today the enemies are beaten, their lands lie fallow now too. Us and them is all.

Leave the markets and head for the hills. Don't look long upon the dead displayed upon the walls. Soon we'll all know what it is to be so far beyond reach.

How much was real?

“What was set in motion at the beginning goes on with or without us.”

“Is that true? How can it be?”

The moment I said it wasn't real I wanted to reach out and gather up the words, to unsay them all. It can't go on without us.

“Too late.”

We are incomplete until we join in connection, in being. After, it goes on without us. What's left of us goes on into the universe. Eventually we find ourselves together again. What we knew to be true in separation becomes true again for us together. We never have to weather infinity by ourselves.

We will meet at least three times. Three times in all the life-ages of the cosmos. Once we will meet in a place without time. There we will have eternity, you and I. By then I guess we'll have forgotten most of this. Our egos will be long gone. But I know I'll know you and I know you'll know me.

“In the end, what else could we ever ask?”

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, swimming in feelings, drowning in what's left of memory. Wishing for just one more moment.

We never really knew each other

I never could get you to listen. You never could get me to understand. I still feel betrayed. Guessing you do too. But our dream, our sense, that I could never shake.

The more I remember, the more cracks I see. The more I know why everything fell apart. I'm so mad that you wouldn't listen, that you pushed on when I told you to stop. That you had the nerve to call me all those things afterward. You forced me to hold your all but only a little of me was too much.

You were worth it and there was nothing I could ever do.

Smokers sleeping on the floor, idle dreamers and wishers. Seers of the unseen, listeners of the unheard. The hills were dark and rich and fragrant. You said such sweet words and I was glad to know you, to know someone else who loved and craved to make unrealities real.

Why wasn't it enough?

You came to me in the twilight.

We held each other close.

You said... what did you say?

“Peace.”

That’s all I remember.

“Go. Be at peace.”

The sun came up and you were gone.

Trying to forget, even when there is no forgetting.

The long walk back.

Beyond the village in its valley, to the water.

Across the water, slow timelessness, to another valley.

Mountains, rivers, fields. Birds flutter and sing.

The long dry road to the mesa, lonely and forgotten.

The infinite desolation, nothing but dust and scrub and burning sun.

Higher and higher. Rolling hills. Scrub turns to grass and trees.

The clouds come. Rain at last.

Looking back and seeing the road stretching beyond sight.

Rocks and grass and then another valley.

Bright and living, steaming in the late day sun. The river, the village.

Almost as if I never left.

No, a different place with different stories.

A long way from here to there.

Years go faster but seasons stay the same.

The smell of the air and the passage of the sun, these are the only calendars that we needed.

Time to plant the crops, time to work the fields, time to bring in the harvest, time to rest and work inside. Here this is the natural way of things.

Other places: other seasons, other natures, other times.

Here farmer becomes one with the land and learns its melodies. The rhythm of its seasons, balancing symbiosis, these melodies may be sung generation upon generation in harmony.

Even when the floods come or the deep winter seems to never end, the land and the farmer provide for each other. These years, just like the seasons, nothing lasts forever. Nothing is truly constant.

Precession through crowds.

Honors bestowed in ceremony. Bring out the applicants. The first, the first's honored, the followers. A day for one, a day of many. They walk, they march. The crowds part and let them pass. They go through to the meeting place. Important ones are there already, waiting to talk, to confer the honors, to observe the rites.

Stiff moves in heavy garb rarely worn. Far away bells and trumpets. Filling up the high place with cheers and applause, all the way up to the distant ceilings.

The highest of the low. Ace, first among equals. Second, dismissed from service. The important ones have given their spectacle, put on their show of elevating a low one to exaltation. When none can see, they go on their way.

A show of unity, synthesizing power with the old rituals. Shadows of ancient magic, reawakened by the collective delusion of the crowd. All reduced to a few words, to a trinket. When the crowds have ebbed and the bells no longer ring off the stones, all that remains are the two applicants.

We were always dead.

I was dead before you brought us here. You died when you tried to change the way things were. This whole time we were dead. I knew it but you never did. You were holding on to this idea that you could bring me back, like you could protect me from the darkness.

“You’re so sweet. Such a beautiful idiot.”

So young. We never had a chance to learn before. Now you could have a life if you want to, but you don’t. You hitched yourself to me. Undead. Ghosts haunting this place as long as you kept me here. You may love me now, but you never knew me. Just my ghost.

“I wish I could be alive for you. I wish you could save me the way you wanted to. But it’s too late. We are dead. We should go to our rest.”

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. After separation. 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."

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.

"Six ways 'till Sunday."

Maybe there could have been another way. 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."

"I held my hand where yours was supposed to be."

What answer is anyone supposed to have?

The ones who want something, can you give them what they want? The ones who don't ask, how do you know? Do you know what they really believe?

If they're peddling answers, they want you to believe as they claim to believe. Two versions of belief at least. Outside and inside. An unspoken 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 it with you over the threshold. Some answers you can change. You have to wait until you come back around again for another shot.

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

Only a monument remained.

The way things were before. Old rules etched in stone, the epitaph of a forgotten empire. From this spot you can see all they ruled, all around. One chief with many tribes. A great consensus-finder, builder of walls and roofs, planter of the first harvest, offspring of the great.

Read the laws upon the stone. The chief was cruel. Burned as many houses as built. Devastator of souls. Another stone on the road of empire. No one here remembers, no one here is left. Their lands are dead now, abandoned. Cut off. Only the bones are left.

Still the monument stands. For another thousand years if no one disturbs it. The cycle of empire rises and collapses again and again. The people don't much change. Only the land remains, waiting and knowing.

Leave the past where it is. Let the land erase its memory in its own time.

Drowning in tomorrow.

Real, imagined, what's the difference? Any city is any city at different times, different places, different people. They change the outside but inside the same city heart beats.

When there's enough people all together somewhere, the city heart beats. Drowning in mile after mile, year after year. Faces run together. Whoever it is, you'll never see them again. Except when you do. Waiting on the same train by the same tracks. Waiting in line. Long enough to look at each other and remember.

The heart-beating city washes memory away once you sink back into its flow. Ebbing at night, flooding by day. Dragged along passively in the surf. The tide is coming in now. Tomorrow's tide will be higher.

They all came together at the appointed place.

Long forgotten dreams only half seen through sleeping eyes.
Other lives experienced at a tangent, between fantasy and reality.
Chemical-fueled hallucination, synthetic.

“One of you knows why you’re here.”

“Why don’t you ask who it is?”

One remembered all. She remembered because she had never forgotten. She held the keys for the others. When they chose to remember they became new people, doubled and divided. She released them from their bonds of selves.

The walls fell away along with the city and the land, until all that was left was the original material. Cosmic seas bathed in darkness and silence.

Reintegrated with themselves, they were free to begin again. For as long as the fragile cosmos held, for as long as the mother’s grace permitted.

On those shores they created a new land together.

Starting out on a cold rainy morning.

All the miles lie ahead. Rush of anticipation. Ache of sleeplessness. 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.

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

Road's long from here. 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.

Not right now. Not yet. Not this chilly morning. Not while walking down these hills. Not while there's still so far to go. Not while this hunger still craves more.

What happened to the ones who washed away?

Did any survive, gone to a faraway place to start anew? Did they all die, bones scattered in the river, tumbled out to sea? Who will tell their story?

We survived the trials of floods and snow and drought and thunder but now the village is burning. Will we survive the test of flame? If we are all that's left, what will be after us? No one will tell our stories. The valley will reclaim our farms, the rains will chip away our walls. One day someone will upon this place and see no trace.

Will anyone know of the harvest, when we received our blessing?
Will they know anything of us?

Can we stop the fire if we break ourselves upon it? Dredge the river to throw it upon the ravenous flames. Senselessly devouring, without thought. What else is there to do? What else but to try?

Even the floods couldn't save us now. No one will talk about us. No one will remember.

Tonight we must beat the fire. There is no other way.

Music from the deep.

Again and again the song plays. Even when the vision is gone,
when all returns to what might be reality, the song plays on.

It took a long time for the mother to fall from the sky. In her death
she blazed for days. A ring of fire burning on high.

At the place where worlds collide, timeless beings looked on in
silence.

Perfection.

“The whole world saw it. We all remember.”

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.

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

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

What is left?

Limbo. Throwing sticks, rolling bones. Augurs and signs. Divination of the rocks. Heaven, earth, fire, water, mountain, wind, thunder, lake. Ancient elements. An old design transmitted in abstract over tenuous connections. Fragments of essential pieces, imperfectly recompiled and revised.

The philosophers who studied their whole lives didn't know for sure. They changed their minds more than once over the centuries, revising history of uncertainty. Later philosophers labored under false impressions, until even more discoveries were made. They each came to their own understanding.

When they died another generation forgot. On and on they went until the ultimate forgetting, when even the philosophers came close enough to at last pinpoint its source.

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.”

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.”

Roads from here go to there.

None of this world is truly disconnected. Rails of blood and bones.

“If I knew the right turns on the road, I could find you.”

“Nature makes deserts, people make wastelands.”

The desolation is ours. We made the disconnection. We weren't listening when they told us. We went our own way. Weight of yesterday, today, tomorrow. Tomorrow weighs more than yesterday, when there's more at stake. Today weighs heaviest. It's the only place you can do anything about anything.

“Would you take me if I found you?”

The last human.

When everyone else has moved on, died from their unnatural consequence and reborn elsewhere, one stays behind. Walking the empty sidewalks in the city. Looking over the finite ocean. She knows it ends somewhere just beyond the horizon.

“We don’t go there any more.”

She sits in empty restaurants, quiet shops. Processes suspended. The food in the market never goes stale. Eternally, meticulously, unnaturally clean. Dust stops in the air. Unreality takes its place. Pieces fall away.

Cycles still run. Animus. She is not alone. Some other beings still dwell here. None like her. Wildlife, sun and moon and stars. Excuses. In the desolate city they always run into each other. The last passengers on a sinking ship, waiting for the last flood.

Shutdown.

The end comes cold and quiet and sudden but she waits all the same.

Too many to name. Too many forgotten, or best forgotten.

Once a sea. Dry now, dry before. It will be a sea again before long. Generations of us. Walk the plain while you can, worn down by floods and the grinding of the sea that was.

Little cuts of young rivers running between the smooth ancient hills. All those countless ages of life above, dying and falling to the ground. Corpses collected, buried, compressed.

Now we till the ground, churn up their bodies. They break down even more. Almost unrecognizable now. Good ground for cultivation. Crops come in we take them to market. We eat the last thing that remembers those ancient creatures. Seeds grown from plants that dug deep and consumed the ancient bones. How many times will the cycle repeat?

We will go to join those old forgotten dead, and be born anew.

Jump.

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

Jump.

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.

After the cold comes the melting.

What was ice and snow becomes wet, marshy in low places.
Before the first breath of spring is the cold wet spongy ground.
Little blossoms of hardy plants that have waited for this day all
winter, when their dry crusty bones suddenly awash. Their old
spirit reawakens. They jump up as if they had never been asleep.

Tall trees shelter snow in their shadowy places, where the sun
never reaches in those dark seasons. Gatherings of little animals,
birds and those who stay awake for winter sipping the snow melt.
The first convocation of the season. Not yet the beginning of
spring, not quite the end of winter.

Still cold air and bright sky, a low misty haze showing moist
breath of earth is everywhere, not just in this little hollow between
the trees. Not far from the mountains. Nights are still bitter cold
here, but there is plenty.

Stay for a while, tonight at least, before you walk along. The
mountains will still be there tomorrow and you look like you could
use a rest. Take this dry wood from the old tree. It has no more use
for these logs. The stones on the hill are laid just so, perfect to rest
your back and make a fire. The little creatures will give you a meal
with their bodies. It's ok.

Stay a while today.

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 yet 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, grown 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. The infinite together where we are all one.

Scattered to the wind to begin again.

**You came to me in the tall grass in the deep forest,
just after dawn.**

You led me into the hills, toward the sun.

Moss glowed in the early light. Steam rising, last of the rains from the night before. You led me on, over the ground covered in tiny flowers. Past the streams so quiet and gentle. Sparkling. The forest took a breath.

You held me to be still and know you. There I knew I would be following you all the days of my life. Wherever I go in this world, you've been there first.

Your touch made this land what it is. As I belong to it, I belong to you.

Thought you'd never ask.

The last minute of the last hour of the last day. She comes from far away. From her own isolation.

"Let's go."

Just like that. Just like nothing.

Almost too late but still in time. Time enough. Time to leave together. To go on to wherever, whatever comes next. To go on.

One more time knowing what we know to forget and learn again.