

“Love on Mars”

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Her post was simple: “Just make it up.”

So I started: “I’m quitting my job this week. I’ve had it with this apartment and I’ve had it with this town. I’m applying for grants to spend a season in Antarctica. I’m going to fly supply helicopters for a research station and hunt penguins in the off-season.”

I hit send and immediately felt stupid. I was sitting cross-legged on the bare hardwood floor with a scraped-out bowl of noodles and my laptop glowing next to me. I had never felt moved to respond to the Craigslist personals I sometimes trawled in my lesser despairs. Most of them were too boring or pitiful or pornographic or self-loathing or a combination of the same. I hoped she’d just ignore my reply but also hoped against my own hope that she wouldn’t. I grabbed a jacket and went out. I made it to the end of the street and, having nowhere to go, turned around and came back. Her answer was there waiting when I arrived.

“You’ve got to get out while the getting’s good. Myself, I’ve already signed up to be one of the first Martian colonists. Actually, we’re already on Mars. I’m writing you now from my white oblong life support pod. I will never see the Earth again, which also means we will never meet. The dust storms are fierce, but strangely beautiful.”

I responded right away: “A lot like the polar storms, I hear.”

“Not at all,” she shot back. “But nice try.”

Things progressed. I gave up on Antarctica (too provincial, I’d realized) and wrote that I was exploring other projects. For one, I had recently come into possession of a previously unknown Upanishad. “I spend my days at my carrel hunched over my Sanskrit dictionaries,” I wrote. “The labor is long and the letterforms obscure, but if I’m right, this could blow the lid off everything we know about ultimate reality. I think sometimes you are the only one who appreciates my work.”

“This is great news,” she responded. “I thought something felt kind of off about it recently. Let me know if you want me to proof anything—time moves differently on Mars and I’m struggling to fill the extra forty minutes I find myself with each day.”

Sometimes days passed between messages. Other times we wrote or texted or chatted, sometimes dozens of times a day, while I was subbing for Jefferson County Public Schools or sitting around a coffeehouse with my laptop pretending to work or lying on my mattress on the floor of my borrowed apartment, stealing Internet from the downstairs tenants. Though eventually the strange beauty of the Martian sandstorms dissipated and she returned to Earth, we never met or even spoke on the phone. A few times she tried to get us to meet up, intimating that she’d found a map to a stash of Krugerrands buried behind the Iroquois Park Amphitheater or that the table wine at a certain Olive Garden actually became the literal blood of Jesus (“The breadsticks, unfortunately, remain salty and unhostlike”), but I always declined. I liked the feeling of our coded messages zipping through the air and the buzz of having a secret in my pocket that was always there and never had to change.

That’s basically where things stayed until the thing with the fat boy and the air conditioner and the security dog.

Around the last week of school I got one of the calls from the sub service robot that sometimes came when JCPS had extra vacancies. I drove my old Camry Wagon through the rust orange morning to a middle school deep in the county, halfway between Louisville and Fort Knox. The school was a brown slab next to a coal plant, and the whole shitty clapboard neighborhood was dusted with a fine layer of coal ash.

My eighth grade class was supposed to be doing a worksheet about convection forces, meaning that they were crumpling up worksheets about convection forces and throwing them on the floor and then snapping their pencils against the black lab tables or yelling at kids on hall break through shatterproof glass. I was on the teacher’s ancient tan box of a computer, trying to circumnavigate the school’s firewall while also avoiding the teacher’s Daily Garfield Science Devotional pop-ups. I gave up and hid my phone just under the lip of the desk in a maneuver I’d learned from spending months around middle school girls. I started pecking out elaborate text messages about the internal affairs investigation I had been pursuing, which was getting stonewalled at every turn.

“This goes much, MUCH higher!!” I wrote.

During this time, a fat boy with ADD contrived to remove an air conditioner and abscond with it through the small, square window. By the time I reached the window he was

halfway across the field, jiggling toward a small stand of trees that clung just on the edge of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

“He’s gonna make it!” one kid shouted.

“Make what?” another asked, then added, “faggot,” for good measure.

“Stop,” I said, for form’s sake.

“Nah, look,” a girl said and pointed. The school’s old security dog was already on an intercept course.

The kids smooshed their faces and hands to the glass. There was yelling, cheering, accusing. One kid started taking side action. When the fat boy saw the dog he dropped the air conditioner and broke into a slightly fiercer jiggle, but the old dog gained him easily. For a moment the old dog hung in the air, legs splayed and eyes bulging and white, and when he brought the fat boy’s face to the ground it was like seeing an old basketball player stuff one down the rim just to show he still could.

You couldn’t help but admire his execution.

A girl exhaled loudly and two boys high-fived. Others shuffled back to their seats, depleted. A pair of girls who’d slipped out during the ruckus returned with vending machine cookies. I slid my phone from my pocket. “Watch your back,” it said. Outside, the vice principal and the school-assigned police officer were jogging through the tall grass. At the end of the day I went by the office to get my paystub and the vice principal pulled me aside. The good news was that the air conditioner was still under warranty. Unfortunately, he explained as he plucked bits of stickweed from his blazer, every time the dog is involved they have to create an incident report, a copy of which would go into my permanent sub file. His advice was: “So be prepared for that.”

That afternoon I drove home and tried not to think about next fall or my checking account balance, though not thinking about it was just as stressful as thinking about it, so on the way home I stopped by a gas station and bought a six-pack on credit. Then I found a bench in the park near my place, drank one of the beers, and reflected on my slow decline. I promised myself I would find work, move out of my friend’s parents’ duplex, and that this fall would be the fall I applied to graduate school. Possibly also law school. I drained two more beers and pulled out my phone.

“Pulled from investigation. Threw badge at commissioner on way out,” I wrote.

A few minutes later my phone chirped in my lap.

“You did the right thing. Buy you a drink?”

Two hours later I met her at a bar with a German name. It was shaping up to be one of the first indisputably beautiful nights of the year, when you could stay out all night without a jacket, the cicadas humming like someone just plugged the air in.

Her message had read simply: “Patio blue dress.” I realize now that that was probably the only absolutely true thing she ever wrote to me.

I hadn’t been to the bar in a while, so it’s possible that over the winter its clientele and atmosphere had radically changed, but to me that night it seemed like the normal order of things had come unglued. Bikers wearing black leather were doing whiskey shots with nerds from the health insurance company, and elaborately inked hairdressers hugged bald men like old friends they hadn’t seen in ages. On the stool next to me, a homeless man was ordering a beer and trying to pay for it with a trash bag full of empty bottles scavenged from the bar’s own dumpster. Glasses clinked, broke. Outside, the taco truck parked along the curb was blaring Enya or something that sounded like Enya, yet no one seemed to mind.

Really, a night among nights.

She was sitting at the end of a long picnic table, under a canopy of white lights. The first thing I noticed about her was that she was more egg-shaped than I’d imagined, though I hadn’t really imagined anything at all. She was wearing a short cotton dress with a pattern that appeared lifted from a piece of china, and absentmindedly playing with her phone, in no rush at all.

I wondered if there was any chance it wasn’t her, that she was in fact sitting on the patio of another bar with a German name, if not in this universe than a parallel one. This made sense to me: I’d been feeling parallel to things for a few months at that point. But before I could walk away, she looked up and said my name, and the ballooning thought collapsed. I sat down and we talked.

“I feel like we’ve met before,” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “If there’s a word for this feeling, it’s probably German.”

She asked me how I was doing, and I said I was excited about taking on new projects. Divinations, mostly. Possibly yoga.

“Which Book of the Dead are you using?”

“Swedish,” I said. “It’s much cleaner. Very modern.”

“Ha,” she said. From inside the bar came a roar like someone had just accomplished a previously mythical drinking feat.

We talked awhile longer, exchanging sentences that were between 5 and 50 percent true. I went back inside to get the next round. A dog with dirty yellow and gray fur had climbed up onto the stool next to the homeless man, and it was lapping water from a bowl someone had set right there on the bar. The homeless man was trying to buy the dog a drink, and the bartender was telling him he didn't have enough bottles.

Something must have shifted in her while I was gone, because when I came back with the beers she looked up at me and said, "Listen. Let's be straight with one another." There was an edge to her voice now.

"I'm ready."

"I'm leaving in about a month."

"Mars Colony, Phase Two?"

She gave me a look that told me I'd said something stupid.

"Oh."

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't enjoy ourselves, though. While we can. You know?"

I wasn't sure I knew. The night was going another way than I'd expected, though I couldn't tell you what I'd expected.

"I should think about this," I said.

"Think about it while we go for a drive," she said. "It's warm out, and the moon is so beautiful."

I hadn't looked at the moon all evening, couldn't remember the last time I'd taken a moment to look for it at all. But there it was, hanging loose just above the shotgun shacks and camelbacks, ripe and heavy like a cross-section of sweet potato.

I've been living in the top half of a duplex that a friend's parents have basically given up trying to sell. That friend got a place with her girlfriend and said I could stay here until the fall semester. There's a glider on the screened-in porch, a pot, a pan, a few mismatched forks and knives (but no spoons), a mattress on the bedroom floor, and, for some reason, a flat screen television on the parlor floor, along with a Nintendo 64. When I brought her back that evening, she took a quick glance around and said, "Nice safe house."

The first week or so was a daze. In some ways nothing substantive had changed. We made that clear from the start. We'd remain for one another what we'd already been, though what that was remained open to interpretation. The main difference was that on top of

whatever that was, we were also cooking and fucking all the time. The only things she brought with her were a faded red suitcase and a box she said contained books. I don't know if that's all she had or if the rest of it was boxed up somewhere, with a friend or in a rental unit, if people still used those. There was also her dog, Kima, which looked suspiciously like the dog from the bar with the German name.

I kept thinking I'd ask her about it but never did.

The safe house became the origin and locus of our new world. Before we knew it, that world started spilling over. On the second day, we were lying sprawled on the mattress floor when she said to the ceiling, "Is it always like this?" and for a moment I thought she was talking about my life until I realized she meant the cicadas.

"I don't really notice them anymore." I considered this, then added, "I guess they are pretty bad this year. Actually, it's the worst I've ever seen them."

"These are NSA cicadas," she said.

"You're right," I said.

We got by in our borrowed safe house while the cicadas continued their psychological warfare. Every morning while we made breakfast or got dressed or just stood at the screen door listening to the din she'd ask me again: "Do you think it's safe to go out yet?"

"Not yet," I'd respond gravely. Each time the excuse would be different: "We have to wait for the situation to develop."

"Not now, darling. My vapors."

"Even if the pylons are back online the atmosphere is still contaminated."

"Those things are still out there."

When we needed groceries, I would make a supply run to Kroger and she'd say, "Don't take unnecessary risks," and kiss me just below my ear like a departing blockade runner.

At Kroger, I'd buy sacks of rice and whatever vegetables you could just toss in the oven for a while, and then pray my debit card ran through at the checkout. Sometimes I'd also go down to the Pan-Asian supermarket and get whatever looked interesting. I brought home lychees and starfruit, and, just once, a durian.

At the other end of the strip mall from the Kroger there was a video store and once I dropped in and bought a grocery bag full of DVDs because the video store was going out of business and it was actually cheaper to buy the things than rent them.

“News from the front,” I said, emptying the sack on the kitchen table.

After dinner we’d prop my laptop on a chair and watch one of the DVDs. The first one we watched was *Rashomon*. The next night it was *Manhattan*, this time tangled up in my bed sheets, my humble speakers competing mightily with the cicadas’ psy-ops drone. That became our routine. We made it through half of *The Seventh Seal*, and the night after that all of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Despite no fewer than three attempts, we never made it further than twenty minutes into *Y Tu Mamá También* before her hand found the hard-on in my jeans, which was fine because the disc skipped badly.

Most of the things we said went straight into the air, which was all right because there was always something else. Yet some things inexplicably found purchase and over the days and weeks became their own kind of truth.

When she discovered that the Walgreens within walking distance was haunted, we had to start driving to the one downtown, which became a major inconvenience whenever we needed condoms or toilet paper.

I took Kima out into the yard one evening to pee and she started snapping up cicadas from the grass. I pulled her back, but she jerked and took a mouthful of them from the base of the tree. They made a sound like popcorn crunching.

She came onto the porch and asked me what I was doing.

“Training Kima,” I said. “If she eats enough of them she’ll absorb their powers.”

“Good thinking,” she said. “We’re going to need all the help we can get.”

Sometimes, we just climbed into my vaguely funereal Camry Wagon and cruised. I pointed out which Subways were fronts for the Indian mob, and we debated whether the basement of a certain house was stacked high with dismembered corpses or merely outfitted with a meth lab (every unmarked van, it goes without saying, was a rolling chemical weapons lab to be given wide berth). I felt like we’d found the metaphysical wiring of the world and were reconfiguring it to our whim.

One morning, we woke up to find our psycho-immune systems were under assault and that the only protection was to grind up the Percocet I had leftover from getting my wisdom teeth out and snort it off our exhibit maps in the bathroom of the art museum.

Afterward, we floated among the exhibits, insulated from the baleful old portraits and the docents, who had nothing better to do than pretend they were geriatric government

agents. I overheard one say into his earpiece: "I've got a group of middle school students. One boy keeps staring at the baroque cleavage."

"Just keep them behind the lines," said his supervisor.

We loved them though at the same time we suspected them of collaborating with the cicadas. We especially loved the old woman who shadowed us from the medieval tapestries all the way through the twentieth century.

"She's getting her orders from them," I said. "Listen to the buzzing. That's not real static."

"They know they can't touch us here," she said.

"Requesting backup," the docent whispered, too loud.

In the middle of the long white hall was a bench. It felt like we sat on it for days, though it couldn't have been more than fifteen or twenty minutes. The Percocet left us feeling well-padded but distant. She had a terminal air about her, seated there, looking at a gray landscape with gray sky and also not looking at all. Even with her hand on my thigh she seemed to be a thousand feet away. I knew she was a few years older but I did not know how many and did not ask.

Instead I just said, "You all right?"

"Yeah." She gave my hand a quick squeeze, then said she was ready to go whenever.

On our way out the docent requested permission to engage us.

"Negative," came the crackling reply. "Not over Abstract Expressionism."

We made plans to do other things. We said we'd drive out to the country where her grandparents were from and riff with the major league bullshitters and lean against gray old barns and drink silty regional soda. We'd get a one-bedroom with a vegetable patch and raise tomatoes and peppers. We'd Greyhound our way to California and camp in the desert while Kima chased long, silky jackrabbits.

It's amazing, though, how much of our time in the rewired world we still spent in the safe house, happily besieged, playing Mario Kart on the living room floor or slumped across the glider on the screened-in porch, holding out for a drunk or out-of-towner to wrap their car around a perfectly positioned sycamore in front of a small white mansion with columns and a veranda, which she swore was the oldest brothel in Louisville, on the word of her friend's gay dad. Sometimes we stayed out there till it got dark, and we'd lay front to back and listen to the NSA's cicada division churn. It was like listening to the ocean, if you could imagine an ocean of peanut shells.

Things were not always easy, of course. Our invisible infrastructure was both heavy and fragile, and sometimes we neglected to maintain it. Like all couples, we had secrets. I kept the truth of our strained financial situation from her, not wanting to upset the standard of living she'd become accustomed to. And then sometimes she would disappear for a few hours or the entire day. She never talked about these times, and I didn't ask. I'd given up trying to reach whatever deeper fantasy she'd carved out for herself, and there was always enough for me.

Then there were Kima's difficulties. While we thought of the cicadas as an abstract nemesis, for Kima they became a constant fixation, both her literal tormentor and singular object of desire. She spent hours on her hind legs in front of the screen door, watching them crawl on the porch, coupling lovelessly and occasionally bouncing off the storm door, which invariably sent her into a minor rapture. Other times she'd dart from the screen door to the front window to the kitchen counter and then up the stairs to the bedroom, trying to fathom with her dog brain the magnitude of what was taking place terribly, maddeningly close to her.

"Look at her," she said once, scratching Kima behind the ears while Kima kept her eyes sharp and forward. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do with her. My next place doesn't allow dogs."

As soon as she said it, she realized she'd said the wrong thing and apologized. I told her she shouldn't apologize, but by then we were both already thinking about it.

Another evening we were curled up in bed watching *Kill Bill: Volume 2* when she said, "You have any exes with a samurai sword who might try to kill us?"

"Not to my knowledge."

But for some reason she kept pressing.

"I had one, but she's dead. Zoo tragedy. Horrific." It was the first time I said those words out loud and hearing them felt strange and relieving. She nodded sagely, and we didn't say anything else about it.

At the same time, there was a weird honesty to the whole thing. Or at the very least a real trust that felt worth preserving. There was a week where the cicadas choked off the supply lines to Kroger and we had to sit tight and make do while I waited for my last check from JCPS to clear. She opened up the fridge and cabinets and produced supplies for a few

fried bologna sandwiches and a stale bottle of red wine. She handed me a coffee mug of wine and said, "It'll be fine. It'll be like that summer we spent in Europe."

Some of those mornings, I would pass the kitchen on the way to the bathroom and she'd be standing in the kitchen, drinking coffee and scratching her bush, so utterly comfortable in the world we'd made that it made me ache to look at her. When I wonder why we let it go on as long as we did, I think about those moments, and I can still catch a whiff of its logic.

When my last check finally cleared and the blockade lifted, I decided we should do something to celebrate. She said we could just stay in and cook something, but I insisted we go somewhere.

"We survived," I said. "Isn't that worth celebrating?"

What I didn't say: She would be leaving in a week or so, and I wanted us to have one nice evening together.

We made a reservation under a fake name ("No time to let our guard down," I said), and I put on a nice dress shirt and jeans while she slipped on a black dress. It was the first time I ever saw her in makeup, and she insisted I not watch as she worked it all in. Before we left we checked ourselves in the mirror.

"Beautiful," she declared. "Maybe we should take pictures."

"Sure," I said. "But we should ask someone to do it at dinner."

The restaurant was a hip little place where the cocktails were \$12 and came in mason jars and the cloth napkins were secured with clothespins.

"This is nice," she said, admiring the homespun affectations, then: "I was thinking, you know, about Thanksgiving."

She returned to her artisanal greens and I to my cornpone.

From the upstairs dining area there came the sounds of an escalating scuffle: a woman's elevated voice, the scrape of chairs, the thud of mason jar against reclaimed driftwood table. And something in that muffled disturbance rang through a boarded up part of my skull. Our server set down a tray and dashed upstairs two steps at a time.

"We should leave," I said.

"What are you talking about? It's fine."

"Fuck you," said a man's voice.

"I think we should go."

“Hey!”

A cold blast shot through my veins.

“Dylan?”

“Tessa.”

“New girlfriend?”

“Ma’am, please,” said our server.

“I think I liked her better in a zoo tragedy.”

More shuffling came down the stairs. Tessa’s new boyfriend had a server on one arm and a big bearded guy from the kitchen on the other. His name was Brandon Allnut but because of his unfortunate college email address pretty much everyone called him Ballnut. By any objective measure he was a human turd. And yet in this paunchy mouth-breather, Tessa, my ex, had found the someone fluent in her native language of door slamming, shouting, glass breaking, and hate-fucking that she’d been looking for as long as I’d known her.

“Ballnut,” I said.

“Dylan,” said Ballnut.

Half the waitstaff escorted them out. Right in front of the door they recommenced one of the horrible, room-evacuating arguments they’d perfected in their few short months together, which I’d heard had gotten them ejected from most bars at least once and banned for life from The Cheesecake Factory. Eventually the manager went back out and threatened to call the police. Then they left.

We finished our meal, paid the check, and drove home. As we were getting undressed she remembered that we hadn’t taken any pictures, but by then it was too late, and I didn’t even have the heart to say, “Some other time.”

We all wake up sometime. The next morning I rolled out of bed and she was already dressed and in the kitchen drinking coffee like she’d been up awhile. There were pancakes on the counter and two slaglike heaps of egg. “I couldn’t find any syrup,” she said, and set a small jar of preserves and a bear-shaped container of honey on the table. We ate, smiling sadly at one another.

“This was lovely,” I said, and she leaned over and planted a dry kiss on my cheek.

“Yes.”

Afterward, I put on some music and washed the dishes while she dried. I asked her what she wanted to do that day, hoping maybe she would say she had people she needed to see or errands she needed to run, but she just smiled and shrugged. “Whatever you want.”

I thought for a moment. “I guess we’ve still got *Predator* on DVD.”

She laughed. “If that’s what you want.”

The whole kitchen filled with the scent of Alpine Breeze dish soap. I rinsed the skillet and she took it from me. “One thing,” she said, “I think we’re out of toilet paper. Could you run up the street real quick?”

“I’m not sure it’s safe to go out,” I tried.

She gave me a look, then I went out.

You can always tell when you walk into an empty house. The air has a different texture, like you’ve come upon it in its elementary state. Your house’s natural sounds are heightened. You notice floorboards you never knew creaked, and the plaintive noise of the refrigerator regulating itself.

I went straight to the bedroom, and where her suitcase had lain open with her clothes erupting outward there was only bare corner. Also gone: her backpack, a box that she said contained books but which did not make the sound of a box containing books, my towel, her toothbrush, my toothpaste. I opened the hall closet and out rolled a half- dozen rolls of toilet paper.

The dishes were still in the kitchen sink, but the Alpine Breeze was gone. On the counter was a note, the paper slightly wet from where we’d been doing the dishes not half an hour before. It was the first time I’d seen her handwriting, and I couldn’t read a word of it.

It was almost noon, and the day felt new and full of possibility. I fished a small bottle of drugstore bourbon out from under the sink and laid myself out on the glider and tried watching *Predator*, but the DVD stalled out around the scene where the Predator’s plasma gun or whatever blew a hole through Jesse Ventura’s character’s chest.

What I kept wondering was: How did she manage to get dressed, pack, and write a note so quickly? I was impressed by her efficiency, was all.

Sometime later there was a knock at the front door and when I answered there was a girl, maybe nineteen years old. She was wearing a green patterned shawl of some kind, shielding herself from the cicadas with one hand and holding Kima by the collar with the other.

“She yours?”

“I guess she is.”

“I saw you or that girl take her out. I live across the street.” She gestured to the white colonialish mansion. “Found her rootin’ around a tree. She was gettin’ at those things, just Hooverin’ ‘em up.”

She paused like she wasn’t sure herself if this was funny or not. I didn’t say anything. Finally, she spoke up: “Got a taste for em, I guess. You shouldn’t let her get loose like that.”

I was just standing there with my index finger wrapped around the neck of the bourbon. I thought maybe I’d invite her in, pour her something to thank her for bringing Kima back. Then she squatted on her spider-veined haunches and said, “You’re a sweet girl, ain’t you?” and, as if on cue, Kima made a sound deep from within her abdomen and her eyes went big and she retched something pink and awful right there on the girl’s feet, a mass of half-chewed cicadas, some segments still twitching, as though with mechanical volition, on her faded flip-flops.

“Guess that shouldn’t come as a surprise. There’s a hose around back. Thanks for bringing her by,” I said. I hauled Kima in by the collar and put the screen door between us and the girl’s death glare.

Since then I’ve just been burning off the summer.

I’ve started tutoring two Korean girls. The older one is a sophomore, but she’s already working on her college application essays. Her topic sentences are excellent. Her mother always leaves my fee in a small envelope on the kitchen counter. The envelopes are printed with beautiful Korean characters, and I feel like I should keep them though I know they’ll just disappear into a drawer somewhere.

I ran into Tessa and Ballnut again about a week ago. They were in the process of getting thrown out of the haunted Walgreens just as I was going in. The security guard had one of them on each arm. Tessa was kicking and shouting something incomprehensible, and Ballnut was totally quiet, just making the only face he knows how, of dumb smirking animal hate. I was passing through the automatic doors, and when Tessa saw me she stopped her parade of invective long enough to call my name. I turned around to see her making a circle with her free hand around her stomach like it was some obscene gesture, and I could just make out the word “expecting” as the automatic doors clapped shut. As I made my way through the haunted Walgreens with my basket of canned soup and frozen pizzas and my

ten-pound sack of kibble, the clerks were still there in the seasonal aisle, picking and mopping up the evidence of their unquenchable love.

They're getting married in a few months. Someone made a joke about it on Tessa's Facebook wall: "Do you, Contessa, take this man, Ballnut, to hate and to stranglehold, so long as one of you shall live?"

Already it's becoming harder to remember details. I can remember the impressions of conversations but not where they went. What did we even talk about that night at the bar with the German name? We talked for hours, yet all I can remember is that I felt excited for the first time in months and that the moon seemed larger than usual, and orange.

A few times I tried to take Kima out cruising in the Camry Wagon, and once I thought I saw her, but I didn't slow down and I'm pretty sure she'd already left for wherever it was she went.

I do miss feeling like everything was secretly something else. I miss feeling like the world was two-dimensional, but that you had found a way to step out and just catch a glimpse of the other side. It made everything worth paying attention to.

This morning, I microwaved a couple of Valu-Mart glazed donuts and watched *Predator II*, starring Danny Glover. I never finished the first *Predator*, so I couldn't tell if it was the same Predator that killed Jesse Ventura or a different one. Afterward, I took a portable radio out onto the porch and laid myself out while someone on NPR was interviewing an entomologist about this year's weird crop of cicadas. The entomologist spoke excitedly, in demand for the first time in his professional life. He said what we were experiencing was almost unprecedented, a convergent emergence in which all the different subspecies of cicada appeared simultaneously. We wouldn't see anything like it again in our lifetimes, he said. What's even more remarkable: one of those broods wasn't supposed to emerge this year at all. The interviewer asked why that was, but the entomologist refused to speculate.

It's late afternoon now. The moon is already low in the air and I can see the future: My friend will come back in a few weeks and Kima and I will find a new place. The cicadas and their shroud of noise will lift, and Kima and I will take up running. Tessa and Ballnut will raise a little hellspawn who'll probably have to repeat a grade. I'll apply to grad school, maybe law school, and get out as soon as I can.

It's all right there, clear as gasoline.

