You hear the weary call of a distant train. Stories and dreams are easily spun in its wake. Memories float up from the past. The world's flow will momentarily pause as you reconsider.

* * * *

My toe hurt. "Toe" referring to one of the extremities of this vehicle I have been given to operate, my assignment of many years now. Of course "now" and "years" are very relative, especially given the nature of my assignment's duration. Doesn't change the fact that the toe is hurting again and it is a long way to travel using this other extremity to rub it.

For a long period, such procedures were done so smoothly it was as if the vehicle was operating on cruise control. But as my assignment has dragged on, this vehicle has begun to exhibit signs of wear and tear, internal lubricants not as effective, small ruptures and breaks disrupting easy movement. I was instructed that sooner or later these things would happen.

This particular vehicle that I have been assigned to operate is a VH3208XF, series 108, a model that if cared for properly can function with high efficiency for quite a number of the time units used in this place. Of course, one must never mention this designation when interacting with the inhabitants. Suspicions can be easily aroused thus interfering with the mission. Recently I almost made this mistake when talking aloud to myself about another aggravating breakdown in the vehicle's mechanics, letting the serial number slip from my speech. My inhabitant partner then looked at me with an unusually concerned and questioning gaze. I quickly recovered from my slip and was able to redirect our interaction back to normal parameters. Close call though.

* * * *

When you are eight years old, the world is still new and fragile in its solidity. Sunday School teaches you that a loving God has made this beautiful world and all the lovely creatures that inhabit it. And in your naive animism you feel a kinship with all the animals that romp and play in the neighborhood like you do and you believe that they too are loved by the same loving God that made you. When the subject of death comes up, you are assured in your nightly bedtime prayer that

your soul will be lifted to heaven, embraced by large warm hands, not unlike the hands of your parents, to live in eternal happiness and you feel reassured that all of God's creatures are inviolate in their beings and forms and all will continue their romping and playing in heavenly forever. You, your Mom, your Dad, your brother, your happy spotted dog, your beautiful orange tabby cat. The forming solidity of your world depends upon this reassurance. Nothing to worry about.

Until the day that you find your cat, dead by the side of the road, just under your mailbox. Lying on her side, she has been ripped open, eviscerated, her intestines spilling out on the ground and you didn't even know there was an inside to her, you don't know what this is you are seeing. The sudden horror of it jolts your eight year old mind, blasting apart the fragile solidity of the world. For the first but not the last time in your life, you swoon, almost faint. Shaking, you run to your house, to your mom. You are too horror stricken to cry, that will come later when the finality of your cat no longer being in your world settles in. The horrific image of your dead cat will forever stay in your memory, planting a seed of terror in your soul.

* * * *

His son came over on the Day of the Dead. The village bedecked with red and yellow and skeleton black and white. Pinon and adobe sun hovering the air between street and house and cerulean view. His son's dog sat barking in the car.

"Hey Dad, how's it going? Hey, I found this thing I wanted to show you, I found it out back, in the shed where I've kept a lot of my old stuff. I wanted to show you, thought you might like to see it."

He pulled a roll out of his backpack and slid off the rubber bands. Unfurling it on the pavement, a drawing was revealed. "Remember? We made this together when I was a little kid, we sat on the floor in my bedroom and we drew it together."

It was a very intricate drawing, filled with robots and monsters, great spaceships and mountains. There was red blood on the ground. White clouds in the sky. It was panoramic, crayon colors vivid and bright, like midday sunlight. Seeing it again made him remember that afternoon with his boy, sitting on the floor, taking turns

with what they drew, each one trying to outdo the other. He remembered the joy he felt, the joy of uninhibited making, the joy of this time spent with his son. So young.

* * * *

These vehicles are quite ingenious in their design, mimicking the look of the inhabitants of this place with such precision that the inhabitants can rarely detect any difference from their own forms. The vehicles also have extremely sophisticated software that provide the operator with complete narratives of childhood and family to allow for optimal integration with the inhabitants. The design has provided everything needed for the success of the mission.

Well, almost everything. When working in the field for enough time units, the operator may experience the onset of certain mental confusions. Like beginning to believe that the memory narratives running in the software represent the reality of the operator's own self. The advice from Training on how to deal with this was rudimentary at best. Besides, when these delusions tend to occur, enough time units have accumulated that the operator tends to not remember the exact procedures for delusion mitigation. The best an operator can do then is to repeat to themselves the failsafe mantra, "realhome, realhome, realhome", again and again until proper mental alignment and subconscious imagery is restored. Usually, that will work.

The ecstatic swelling surge that then occurs is what restores.

* * * *

He was rowing the car down the suddenly risen river. They had just made love in the back seat and now she sat up front beside him. She had left her panties off, saying that the warm seat felt especially good on her pussy after sex. Did she smoke a cigarette? Or pop a candy in her mouth? Memory's hazy on this point. "Your cock," she said, "is so sweet and limpid and shriveled after we fuck. Like he's exhausted after a big fight. It's cute."

"Well, he's gotta recharge, baby, take a little R and R, you know. Tuck his head, lie low for a while. Be ready for when the next time comes."

She smiled and kissed him on the cheek.

He said that soon the waters would abate and the road would show and toward the mountains they would resume to go.

* * * *

The terror doesn't set in until after. Long after, days maybe, weeks. Maybe years. When you're sitting here in your favorite chair at 4:00 on a Wednesday afternoon, safe and comfortable in your home. And here the memory comes back, the memory is replayed. The popping shots, the screams, the shouts, the running, the falling. The feel of the rough pavement on your face, the smell of the warm tires you hid behind, the sight of the blood coming towards you on the ground and you remember you saw him fall, you saw him hit, his head opening red, just a kid, going to the store with his mom and you saw the guy with the gun, an ammo clad monster searching for more. You put your head down, he doesn't see you, then more shouts and shots and the whole thing is over. Flashing lights, wailing sirens, cops everywhere, you are saved, you are ok. But you are not. Here, now, not. Replaying this scene, the terror rises within, terror beyond fear, terror unrelenting. Black stone encloses your heart and a dark shroud veils your vision, as if all joy has been banished from the world you now see. Here, now, the darkness is unrelenting.

What is worse, the terror of the violent event or the terror of the inevitable end?

* * * *

How and when the operator is relieved of their assignment is one of the directives that is only given later on in the duration of the work, usually when the vehicle begins to decline beyond reasonable repair. Reassignment will then be made in a way to be determined when the time unit is appropriate. None of us noviates knew exactly what that meant, but we were reassured that we would completely understand when the appropriate time unit was upon us. Eager as we all were, we took it on faith. Faith, patience, and perseverance: the bywords to keep us true.

Thus we were all sent on our separate ways, our separate tasks, and so here I am still. I have been diligent in the upkeep of my vehicle, exercising its capacities every day to ensure continuing smoothness of operation. These were some of the most enjoyable periods of my assignment, pushing to see what the vehicle could do, usually alone with minimal interaction with the inhabitants. Long sessions of running, over mountains and hills, across golden fields, alongside long stretches of blue black water. Almost like realhome.

The ecstatic swelling surge that then occurs is what restores.

* * * *

His memory is a bit hazy on all of the details. Like what the driver was like, the one who was showing him the route and how to deliver and receive the laundry carts. What was not hazy was the fall itself and how lucky he was not to have broken his neck. It was the first day in a new job, driving a laundry truck for a firm that specialized in doing laundry for hospitals in the northern Rhode Island and South-eastern Massachusetts region. The carts were eight feet long, three feet wide and six feet high, with ten inch wheels for smooth rolling. Fully loaded with freshly laundered linens, they were quite heavy. Fully loaded with wet, smelly, dangerously dirty hospital laundry, they were even heavier and completely disgusting. Fortunately, it was a cart of clean linen that toppled off the truck when he started to lower the lift before making sure the cart was all the way onto the platform. Even more fortunate was the fact that the cart didn't fall on top of him, only threw him off to the side. Still, he landed on his back and could have easily landed on his neck, or twisted his knee, or broken an arm. But he was twenty-five, lucky and immortal. The driver wasn't even mad at him, probably because he was so relieved that the kid hadn't broken anything which would have been totally on him for not supervising the newbie more closely and besides that, would have messed up his schedule of deliveries for that day. The laundry wasn't even all that disturbed, so they just tilted the cart back up and continued with the day's work.

It was only later that night that the kid felt a small jolt of terror at what could easily have been.

* * * *

A last minute booking and a short flight from Newark brought him to Cleveland where she met him with the cool indifference they practiced with each other whenever they were together in public. He handed her his shoulder bag while he took off his jacket. She shouldered his bag and walked slightly ahead of him past baggage and out to short term parking. It was a ten minute drive to the Red Roof motel where she had reserved a room just two hours earlier. Their conversation was minimal. How was traffic, how was the flight, was it difficult finding a room, nice blouse, red, I like it, thanks. Continuing with their usual routine, she went up to the room first and after about five minutes, he followed and with the extra key opened the door. The room was dark, the curtains closed. She was already under the covers. He methodically undressed as she watched.

They were often quite fast and hard, their afternoon fucks, and this afternoon was no different. The lingering and caressing and conversing would come after, when the urgency had been satisfied, the energy released. She began to talk again about skiing, her favorite pastime. The last great runs she had had, the new maneuvers she had mastered, more complex runs she wanted to try. Plans for upcoming trips to the mountains. He talked about the new paintings he was doing and the commission he was about to start. She talked about the fight she recently had with her mother. He talked about the difficulties in his department. Their conversation continued in this way, individual experiences sideways recalled, never overlapping or meeting in the middle. It suited them both.

In an hour, they would be gone from the motel room—she, back to her house, he, taxied to the airport and a late flight home. Gazing out the window, nursing his airline scotch and soda, he thought again about his unfinished painting and the part he knew was missing.

* * * *

There's a pebble, a stone, a piece of grit, something, in my shoe. I feel it on the pad of my foot and, as I'm walking, I'm trying to wiggle my foot enough so that it will move to the front of my shoe, in front of my toes so I won't feel it so much. At least if I feel it there, at the front of my middle toe, it won't bother me. Not as much. Not as muchly. Not as fuckly. Fuckly fucking little thing. I've been walking for days now, along the side of the road, cars whizzing by. I stop in Walmart or Target or the grocery store to get a drink of water. Sometimes a candy bar. I don't

talk to anyone if I can help it. The men all have beards, they scare me. Like they are telling me something, all that hair on their faces. They look like pictures of mountain men I remember in storybooks. Or prophets from the Old Testament. You can't see their mouths, can't tell if they're smiling or frowning. I think they're frowning. They look mean. Mean men. What are they trying to prove? What are they pretending to be? I think of these things as I leave the store to resume my quest. My journey. Because I had to get out. Out of there. The house had turned dark, like the lights were turned down, nothing would illuminate the way it used to, the corner shadows began to creep up the walls. And the silence became too loud, I had to cover my ears. The silence wanted to go in my ears and enter my veins and travel to my heart. I could feel it happening. My heart was turning to black stone, I had to get out, get out, I had to get out. Shit, this fucking stone is moving back in my shoe, it's making me limp, I'm trying to keep my weight off it. Maybe if I can make it travel to the back, behind my heel. Maybe I should take my shoe off, shake it out, get the damn thing out for good. But I have no place to sit, just the side of the road, people might see me, think I'm hurt. Don't want that. I could maybe take off my shoe standing up, balance on my toes so I don't fall over. But then my bare foot might pick up more grit and then it would be worse than it is now. Better to just keep walking.

* * * *

After leaving the airport parking garage, she stopped at the grocery store to pick up a roasted chicken. This would make her husband happy and, in his greasy dining satisfaction would not think to be suspicious of his wife's afternoon activities. Although he was rarely suspicious of her anyway, which she found both comforting and a little strange. But, given this aspect of his nature, it was easy for her to keep many parts of her life and herself secret. Like her promiscuity. Like her sometime lovers.

Sitting in her car in the grocery store parking lot, she rolled down her window and lit a cigarette, thinking about her afternoon. The impetuosity of its last minute arrangement, how exciting that was, how eager he was. The power she had to draw him in, to hold him inside. To furiously feel. The incredibly erotic anonymity of it all.

She seemed to always want a lover on the side. Somehow it allowed her to be more steadfast in her more committed relationships which she realized was a crazy contradiction. The sometimes lovers made no demands, no downpayment required, although, she would always almost fall in love with them in the afterglow of her lust. Like it was with her current one. He was a good guy, attentive, funny, nice body, an attentive lover. Sometimes solicitous, sometimes fierce when she wanted it fierce. Like the time they did it in the darkroom at school. Bad and fast. Her idea.

She knew he could easily fall in love with her, but she was also wary of that and made sure she kept herself just enough out of reach. Still young in his love life, she knew that he was a true romantic at heart and, in spite of his willingness to play her game of casual non-commitment, was in fact searching for his one and only. Tempting though he may be, she didn't think she could handle the burden of being his True Love. She would end up hurting him too much.

* * * *

Because the software narratives are so complete and convincing, an operator often will have a hard time determining exactly when his assignment began. It is acknowledged in Training that the vehicle's point of view narrative software doesn't mark the entry point of the operator. A flaw that the Programers are trying to fix for upcoming models. The operator must scan his own real memories very carefully to remember when it was that he realized he was operating a vehicle in the midst of a foreign place of others. It is usually some event that is the first one remembered twice, once by the vehicle's narrative software and once by the operator himself. It is also emphasized in Training that the operator keep these two narrative tracks separate to preserve his own sanity. To know that he is observing the experience of the vehicle but that he himself is separate from it. Again, repeating the mantra helps restore the proper view, remembering realhome.

The ecstatic swelling surge that then occurs is what restores.

* * * *

Again they ran into each other outside the small grocery store in downtown Ithaca on a warm day in June. They knew each other from school, talked occasionally. They had been circling each other, circling for a long time. She was lithe and tall and so was he. Their lanky limbs shone in the sun. In the parking lot she said “I have a novel idea. Let’s do something together, right now you and me.” Yes he said what do you suggest? “A boat. Let’s rent a boat and row it out to the middle of the lake.” A brilliant idea he said and they set down their bags from the store, left them on the sidewalk, and walked two blocks to the small dock on the lakeshore. The rowboat was green. She wore red and yellow. He wore blue. The boat rocked gently as they both got in and taking an oar, he pushed them away from the pier. The water was dark but transparent too, like waving cellophane stretched over a canyon of night. Pulling steadily with the oars, they carved a silky pace. Reaching the middle of the lake, she took off her top and slid off her shorts. She lay back in the bow and stretched her legs wide, resting them on the top of the capping. “I’ve always admired the shape of your mouth” she said. I have always admired your eyes he replied as he took off his clothes, feeling the warm wood on his butt and his balls. And there between her legs he saw the crescent moon, crowned with the shining north star. “Come inside now,” she said, as she guided him to her door and as he crossed the threshold, the north star sang and a great room was revealed, splendid in velvet red and gold. In the middle, there she was, much older now, as was he, and he strode to her with knowing eyes and said my love and she said my love and they kissed an anniversary kiss of tender passion and gratitude for having found each other on a boat on a lake on a warm day in June.

* * * *

I find myself captivated by this vehicle’s programed memories. Many involving sexual exploits, which are amusing to replay. But many of the other memories involve violence or death. I don’t know why this vehicle would have such a programmed preoccupation with death. Maybe the Programers thought it would make this vehicle seem more believable to the other inhabitants. Maybe they thought it would just give me something more interesting to work with. Whatever the reason, the replays do make for compelling viewing. How seeing a dead, eviscerated cat when he was eight years old sent him into weeks of anxiety and depression. Or how seeing particularly gory scenes in movies would make him swoon and send him again into weeks of anxiety. Then there was the story of the shooting, when as a teenager he was almost killed in an incident at a grocery store

involving a heavily armed deranged white supremacist. Sometimes when viewing these pre-programed memories I myself have begun to feel a certain amount of fear and anxiety. But, I just remind myself that none of these things I'm viewing are real, they didn't happen to me. Not really. I just remind myself of the mantra and to think of blessed realhome.

Realhome. A place of pure color and light. A place of no fear. A place of no want or wanting. A place of no anger. A place of perfect.

* * * * *

After that day on the lake, their lives would be forever changed. For having now found how each of them fit into the other, physically, soulfully, perfectly, there was simply no stopping them. He knew her desire, she felt his lust. They were awash in endless erogeny, shameless and fearless in their long awaited longed-for love.

So vivid still are his memories of their honeymoon in the tropics. The sun-filled room overlooking the turquoise sea, the open doors to the balcony, the native bird that came into the room to watch them make love. The air was wet and silken, bathing them in its seduction. And as she rode him, her eyes were shining emeralds and he saw her and she saw him and they made it last and last in the bathing warmth, the silken air. And in his memory, this moment never ends. He knows there was a before and he knows he has lived long after, but that moment persists in him to this very day as an eternal moment. Perfect.

* * * *

Mother was in the last stages of her life, I could tell. Although after a month here in hospice, her condition had seemed like it would go on like this indefinitely. My sister and I would alternate with each other in the vigil beside her bed, listening to her breathing, moistening her lips with wet sponges on a stick. Always waiting for her eyes to open, for her to come back into the world, to maybe say some words. Mostly she slept.

On the last day, I held her dough-soft dough-kneading hands. Then she opened her eyes and saw her husband in me and smiled a relieved, embracing smile, a

coming- home smile and she closed her eyes again, her smile lingering on her fading lips.

Her breathing began to slow. Shallow but long. The time between breaths

lengthening. One last breath. Silence. Then one last breath. A longer silence.

One more last breath. An ending silence, an eternal silence. Until one more final

last breath. Followed by a stillness beyond still. A quiet that enfolds all into its

depths. Until

one last

breath.

One

Last

Breath

I watched her then in stillness turn to wood
Petrified prow of an ancient Viking ship
Then I watched her turn to stone
Old face carved and shaped by wind and wave
Then I watched her turn to ash
Drifting to the horizon
Out to sea
To vanish
In blue.

Everything moves now somber and slow. The finality of the last parent gone. The remnants of her life sorted and dispersed. Memories encased in fading photos.

The meaning of this empty space will not hit home ‘til later.

* * * *

Mommy and Daddy’s house is next to the beach and I go there everyday to visit my friends, the giants. They are these humongous towers of solid rock, sitting on the beach. Each one of them has a different shape. Some are rounded, some are pointy. Some sit up like our dog when he barks for more treats. Some are like big train cars. Some are as big as Daddy’s store. They all have different personalities and talk in different ways. Their faces are all knubbly and broken, with big slashes and wrinkles and scars and scrapes. Their bottom parts down by the sand are covered by gazillions of mussels and barnacles and there are huge starfish stuck on them, orange starfish and yellow starfish, Daddy says they are slowly eating the mussels which I think is really gross but it also looks pretty cool. All these things get attached to the giants as they wade through the ocean when the water is high. You might think these giants don’t move ‘cause they sit very, very still, but I know that they have moved about in the night, ‘cause they are all always in a slightly different place than the day before. And they are also all boys. I’ve tried looking for a girl giant, someone like me I could talk to, but they all act like my brothers so I know they are boys. Boys who have turned to stone. I wish sometimes my

brothers would turn to stone, but I wouldn't like it if they were giants like these guys. That would be too scary.

* * * *

The pregnancy was nine months of indulgence. For both of them. Nine months of dreaming. Nine months of planning. Nine months of body heaviness, of discomforts tended with sweet attention and constant care. Nine months of frustrating waiting. Nine months of wonder at the unstoppable force of Life, growing, distorting, body-warping Life. And then the final ride, the final crazy crappy hell hurting screaming ride that ends in a baby boy. A dark-haired angry-faced howling baby boy that was more beautiful than sunrise.

* * * *

You can't bullshit those giants, those ageless sentinels hewn from the earth's stony crust.

* * * *

Jolts of terror. Mental jolts. Jolts that not only turn the world upside down, but take it apart, rearrange the pieces, distort the space. Could he recall them? When did they start? What were the triggers?

What is worse, the terror of the violent event or the terror of the inevitable end? Because the break happened not when he was recalling the shooting. Or the fall. Or the dead eviscerated cat. The break happened months after the funeral. Out of the blue. And in his mind he saw the door, the door of his death, the door that would come. Inevitably. Like any door he had ever gone through, you see it ahead of you, then you are there, and you enter, and like any door you have ever come to, you will come to death's door, just like that. And you see it and you break. The world breaks around you and through you. A black film covers your eyes. A black stone forms around your heart. In anguish you cry, in anguish, tears fall down your cheeks. You are broken.

And then you start walking.

* * * *

There was always a secret part of my True Love that I could never find, a small pocket I knew was in there somewhere that I wanted to locate, to turn inside out, to discover its hidden contents. He always maintained there was nothing there to find, that he was keeping nothing from me, (honest!) And maybe that's all I would find if I searched hard enough: nothing. Nothing would become a theme of his. In his work and in his aspirational identity.

I would say our marriage was one of the good ones. An incredibly erotic first act followed by growing romance and heart-felt commitment. Honesty, trust, partnership. We believed in each other and supported each other. Raised a good kid together. Created a secure and solid home together. We were a great team. Then the doldrums of the middle years. Little career disappointments, small irritants at work. The routine of home life. He began searching. An old death obsession from his youth started to return. He began reading Eastern philosophy, New Age philosophy, Esoteric Science. He wanted to become a Buddhist, or a Taoist, or a Shaman. Or maybe just a full-time drunk.

Then his mother got sick. Then his mother went to hospice. Then his mother died. And on the one year anniversary of her death, he walked out of the house and was gone.

Five weeks later he was found in Kingman, Arizona. At the edge of the Mohave desert. Where I went to retrieve him and bring him home. To try to put him back together.

* * * *

These mesas or hills or cliffs or whatever they are; they rise up from the earth like they've been squeezed by some ancient force, a force that folded the earth, broke it open, carved it, flattened the tops with a giant's baking knife. Funny that they aren't level, they tilt away from the setting sun, the setting sun that burns their rocky sides red. The setting sun that burns my eyes red. Stare long enough and all you see is nothing. Nothing for nothing, nothing good. That's the fucking truth. But I keep staring out this bus window, watching the rocky red and green polka-dotted landscape roll by, taking its time, time that I have nothing but of, time.

But, somehow, I got on somewhere, after walking for days, for weeks, walking away ‘cause I had to get out, get away from there, the there that used to be home. Homes shouldn’t turn on you that way. Get dark in that way. Then I got on this bus, this greyhounddog bus, I had money in my pocket or something in my wallet I can’t exactly remember but somehow I just got on and went to the back and found this seat and now I’ve been here for hours, days, weeks. Maybe a year. This landscape takes years. I don’t know if I want to know. Time doesn’t seem to move here, those mesas or cliffs or whatever the fuck they are look like they are moving but so slowly as to not be moving at all. Like in their moving they make time stand still. That’s it. That’s why I keep staring, they stop time.

* * * *

She had decided to take the long route home from the Oregon coast after her annual pilgrimage to see her old family home and the giant rocks on the beach below. Her old childhood friends. It had been a rough year. Her parents falling ill, the selling of the house, the battles with her brothers. And the inevitable and expected breakup of her marriage. A longer road trip was called for, a trip through the desert.

It was at a gas station/convenience store in Tucumcari, New Mexico where she stopped to get a pack of cigarettes when she saw him. A Greyhound bus had stopped for a pit stop and passengers were out stretching their legs. Except for this one guy who remained in the bus, sitting by a window, staring blankly out at the parking lot. One of her old lovers, she was sure of it. Even though he was older and his hair was long and he had a scraggly beard, she knew it was him. She could never forget the shape of his head or the shape of his eyes. As she looked at him, asking herself if it was really him, he abruptly turned his head to face her and caught her gaze. There was no doubt that it was him and this realization opened a well of upswelling memories from those old days, the delicious secrecy of their erotic recklessness, the heady freedom of their casual, indulgent affair. Her growing fondness for him and the almost bitter disappointment when he broke it off. But, while there seemed to be recognition in those familiar eyes, his face remained hollow and impassive, drawn and grey. Without breaking his eyes from hers, he got up from his seat and went to the front of the bus and down the steps to the pavement. He was walking towards her and she began to feel some panic at what she would say or what he might say or who would say something, anything,

first. He kept walking in a slow limping way towards her and she realized how thin he now was, how ragged his clothes, how his limbs seemed barely held together as if by gossamer threads that would invite a desert wind to blow him apart and scattered him away—he walked to her and past her, brushing her shoulder and then stopped and stared at the great red butte just across from the highway. She thought she would go to him then, touch his arm, say his name, but the unnatural stillness of his pose stopped her. And a chilling thought came: he was no longer of this world. Something had happened to him. He had become a blankness, an empty hole where a person used to be. The material, sensual being she had known and shared pleasures with so carelessly was now no more. Her onetime favorite sometime lover was now nothing but a ghost.

She turned then to her left and walked back to her car. Quickly, without looking up, she started her car and lit a cigarette. She drove through the parking lot, past the store out to the road. Then, at the stop sign, she looked back towards the parking lot where the bus was starting to pull out. He was nowhere to be seen. As she prepared to turn left onto the freeway, she saw in her mirror the bus enter the onramp going the other way. Heading west.

* * * *

Then the landscape stops and a parking lot has appeared and people are moving but I keep still in my seat as the world moves and I sit and stare as a visage appears, a specter that I know have known was known in my long past before I was me and a forgotten memory that zaps my head and forgets me again and I find myself walking towards it, this ghost, and I walk towards her and as my shoulder touches her I see her turn and float away across the road into the red mountain and I see the red fill the sky and the red fill the road and the red fill my brain and I am frozen in red until I find myself again in my seat and the world begins to move again. The world moves again in that way that will stop time. Stopping time is what I want. Stopping time so I won't go through that door, so that the door never comes, so that the door, the door, no, I have to stop I can't go there in my head, my head, my brain. That's why I had to get out, that's why I had to stop time. That's why that's

* * * *

He was sitting on the floor in the corner of a police station room, rocking back and forth, rubbing his legs then picking at his arms in endless agitation. He was filthy, bedraggled, incredibly thin. Scraggly long hair. A beard. I had never seen him in a beard. My beloved. A complete, psychotic mess, locked in a delusional prison of some kind that I couldn't understand. I got down on the floor, took his head in my hands and put my face close until his darting eyes found mine. And I spoke to my darling, I spoke with a tone I knew that somewhere inside him only he would know and recognize.

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They are standing above me, policemen, I think they're policemen, cops, I remember them they helped me before back then I like them they helped me up, hugged me told me I was safe and here they are again, helping me up saying my name saying they would take care of me and put me in the back of a car and I see street lights red and I see distant mountains red and I see the moon red in a green-black sky and I close my eyes and the thrum frumming humming car rocks me to sleep.

They bring me in through these glass doors, the handle is a long chrome tube, it's beautiful I think and the policeman who is walking with me, holding my elbow is beautiful and I see that the policeman is a woman and she is quite young and kind but strong. Steel behind those kind blue eyes I can see but her voice is gentle and she says that I just have to relax in this room, this room with broken linoleum and green walls and a heavy steel door, the same steel that is behind her kind eyes I can see and I don't know why, why the walls are green or the linoleum is cracked and broken, broken, broken like me I think broken like me and now I wonder how did I get here? Was there a time before my walking, my riding past the time-stopped landscape? And can they get me something? They ask me can they get me something and I say how should I know? I mean really, how can anyone know such a thing, is there anything that anyone can get anyone? There is a chair and a table but I look for the most comfortable corner, the one that is warmest and safe looking and sit on the floor there and I see that my shoe is dirty, my pants are dirty, my hands are dirty and I feel that the dirt must be coming from somewhere inside me, just below the skin maybe, and if I scratch hard enough, I can get it all out, let it all out on the floor, then I can tell the beautiful policewoman with steel blue eyes I can see she can get me a broom and a dust pan and I can clean up the dirt coming out of me. Sounds like a plan to me. Yup.

I saw her eyes then looking at me. My wife's eyes, And I saw her hair and I saw her mouth and I saw her hands. How she got here I don't know, I didn't hear her come in. Her face was very close I smelled her soap I smelled her skin I smelled her smile and she said Sweetie you need a shave, let's get you home. It's safe there now, I got rid of the dark, I got rid of the stone. Come, darling now, I will take care of you. And I got in the car next to her and put my head against the window and with one last look at the chrome handled glass door, one last look at that landscape without time, I fell asleep again, this time for good.

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It was a long drive home. Mostly, he slept. Said very little. I tried my best to be calmly upbeat, to talk about home, the garden, our son. Talked about the news, gossip about our friends. Just wanted to keep it as normal as I could for my now not normal, unknown husband.

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My wife's voice is bringing me back, I can tell, back from that no-place place of no-time, back into my remembered world. Her voice waltzes with the humming of the tires on the road and I don't really want to look outside anymore so I mostly close my eyes and listen to her lovely voice, her lovely voice that sings like the warm ocean air, her lovely voice that takes me to rooms inside my head, gold and red velvet rooms where a perpetual entwinement of our love replays the stories of our life together, our lived life, our living life.

But the balm of her singing voice can only soothe so much because it occurs to me that she is bringing me home, to that house where I was attacked, where the dark scraped the inside of my skull and ground my insides and I am afraid. The door.

But her voice sings my life, is my life. I will wrap myself inside that voice and trust it will protect me. I sleep and dream a warm wind and stars and sea.

* * * *

In bed, his wife tried to get his full attention. She tried kissing him, rubbing him. Fondling him. His cock was limp, his face was limp, his eyes were vacant. He looked at her with his pleading vacancy and she started to cry, softly, silently. Where are you she said, are you still there? And he said I'm trying but there is this wall of cotton between me and you, between me and the bed, between me and

the room, between me and myself. He wanted to cry, but there was a wall between himself and his tears.

* * * *

I got him in to see our doctor as soon as we were home. Pills were prescribed and a therapist referred. He moved about the house like a zombie, numb to the world. He wouldn't talk to me much about what was going on. He would talk about a black stone, a dark veil. Whenever I held him, he would start to cry, saying he didn't understand what had happened to him, saying over and over that he was sorry.

It was very hard for me, to see my vibrant, strong, always full-of-himself confident man reduced to shadow. I began to feel unmoored.

* * * *

For the last several weeks, I've been taking these pills, clonazepam, lorizillpram, lollapaloozapam, some kind of pam, and they are anti-anxiety pills that are supposed to help with the kind of depression, break-down, crack-up I had. They slow me down. They put cotton between me and the world and they do make me less anxious although I'm still suspicious of the walls at home. And the shelves. And the vases. Like the dark is just waiting inside them, waiting to come out, sneakily, stealthily. Biding its motherfucking timeily. But I'm not as nervous, not as stomach churning heart pumping terrified, so that's a good thing. My doctor, my shrink, thinks that is a good thing. I see him twice a week. He wants me to talk about what happened, what started it.

He wants me to talk about death. I really don't want to.

He wants me to look at a candle flame, to focus on the flame, on the flame that burns, on the flame that burns out and I tell him that really, really doesn't help. Because it's the burning out that's the problem, the inevitable ending of that beautiful flame and what's the point of its beauty, it's glowing happy yellow beauty if it's just going to die? It might as well not be there at all and now the anxiety starts to return and where did you go to school, Doc? Where did you get your training? Ok, he says, let's try something else. Let's try a different kind of

focusing, something that will keep me in the moment, he says, in the moment. So he begins to talk about meditation and having something to say in your head as you sit quietly still, something you repeat over and over like what? I say and he says it could be anything, like meatball? I say and he says if it feels right and so I try meatball, meatball, meatball, meatball, meatball over and over and nothing seems to be happening and I switch to another food, artichoke, but the choke doesn't feel right and he says I just need to stick with it and practice at home and time is up, next time we'll assess…

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After a month of therapy and constant tinkering with meds, he hit upon something that started to work: daily meditation. He had messed about with some new-age crap before, but only in an intellectual, bull-shitting after dinner sort of way. But this time, he was determined to really take it seriously. He even drove to the city to get his own personal mantra from the Transcendental Meditation Center. I was very careful to keep my sarcastic incredulity to myself. I was willing to support him trying anything that might ease his inner torment. And, as it turned out, the daily meditation started to help. His anxiety lessened. He began to smile more, even laugh. Our lovemaking resumed.

Yet, I couldn't say he was his old self because there was still a distance to him, like he was separated from the world, observing from behind a screen.

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At least my eyelids can stay closed now without trembling. I think now of how it was when I started, closing my eyes, repeating the mantra, the mantra over over over but my eyelids jiggled and trembled and wouldn't relax but I just kept repeating the mantramantramantra, concentrating on the sound of it in my head, not even words so much as sounds, like a bell, like a bell ringing, ringing in my hears I hear and I find when my mind goes there, to my eyes, they are now closed, closed in repose, reposed in my closed eyes and heart and legs and mind now calm and I hear the sound fade and fade and fade and I am here again now back on my cushion back in my crossed legs back in my quiet room. The world resumes. And the world seems scrubbed, brightened, the things greeting me in my house seem to have just come in the door with an optimist's forecast. And I think back I

do I think back but not too hard or dwellingly I think back to when there was a soot sheen covering everything but I don't want to go there, not so much yet. There is a glow, a little glow now, good now enough.

I go to the kitchen and there is my wife, my True Love, standing at the stove, stirring her eggs. We greet we kiss we ask each other how our nights were and so we begin our day, her to her work, me to mine. Mutually rubbing the barnacles off our hulls as we pass.

I drift. I drift as I sit staring at my work. Decisions still come to me, little solutions following each other, arriving at their required professional imprimatur. My thinking, thank God, my thinking still works. But in that thinking, hiding in corners, peeking at me, are half remembered memories, of places or people or events I can't tell because they are just out of reach. I feel like I want to reach for a lever, toggle a switch somewhere to make them play for me, to bring them back.

I feel sometimes like I am just going along for a ride.

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On a blacker than black night, no streetlights or car lights or house lights to be seen-- on this blacker than black night with no stars in the sky, no moon, no satellites or airplanes or starships-- on this deeper than deep black night the only smidgen twinkle of light to be seen was from a diner way down the road, a road only felt because it was too deeper than deep black dark out to see.

As he walked toward the diner, the windows grew yellow and he could see that the "D" was missing, leaving only "iner" to glow green in its neon flicker. Entering through the moaning door, he saw him sitting in one of the middle booths. Just him. All of the other booths were empty. And he noticed that no one was behind the counter, no waiter or barman or cook. In fact, the kitchen was dark. So, it was just the two of them.

He slid into the booth, opposite this other who was himself.

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It has been over a year now. A year of pills, a year of therapy, a year of fucking Transcendental Meditation. He used to talk about his experiences in meditation all the time and I, in my silent, listening way, tried to be encouraging. But, one day, he stopped talking about it. Maybe he knew what I thought about it, maybe he just found that he could keep all of it to himself. But one big change: he began to listen to me more, to be more interested in how I was doing. We started conversing again about our plans, dreams of our future. And he began to work again with something like his old enthusiastic vigor. Best thing though: he is calmer, more patient. I haven't seen those glimpses of terror as he gazes out the window for a long time now.

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Every morning I sit crossed legged on my pillow on my floor on my grounding earth and the top of my head reaches up to heaven and I close my eyes and make my thoughts go quietly silent and still and imageless until there is only an empty emptiness and then I feel my feeling of this empty and I find that I am ok I am alright so hover now hover and stay here calm and watch what thoughts will now arise, shadows on a screen, projections on a cake, burning edges of a film of myself sitting across from me and I see my mouth open and sounds the size of blue marbles come floating out to wrap around my head to wrap around my mind to wrap around my heart and I say to myself let it go let it go let it go. And it goes, goes quiet, quiet again and still. Until, other thoughts come, distant thoughts, dreams of memories that I catch like moths in a faded glass. And I see my life now as a dreamscape of rolling images and I row my car down this river waiting for a road to appear that will take me to my real home.

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Our life has been solid. The troubles of the past keep fading. Our careers seem to be flourishing, and our marriage seems stronger than it ever was. Time and history and overcoming trauma together will do that. He still meditates every morning. Now it's zazen, less mumbo jumbo, just silent sitting which he says clears his head of cobwebs. And I say whatever works.

New challenges starting to occur are mainly physical and medical. Benefits of living long. My degrading spine, his twitchy heart. I sometimes wonder if his heart's irregularity has anything to do with the anxiety caused by his breakdown

and I always look deep into his eyes for signs of terror of which so far I've seen none. So, we carry on. Go to our doctor, take our daily pills. Sometimes to the hospital for a procedure to put his heart back in rhythm. All in all, our life is good.

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There is always some trepidation when facing another one of these procedures, back again at the hospital. You get up early, no coffee, no breakfast. You wake with the worry, just a little one but it's still there: what if this time I don't wake up? My wife reassures me, my lovely wife, she will be with me the whole time, at least until they roll me in to the cold operating room. They are here now, I have a needle in my arm, I kiss my wife goodbye I'll see you soon, see you on the other side, the other side. The other side of what? I'm looking at the ceiling as I'm being rolled down the hall, looking at the lights, fluorescent tubes behind a gridded covering. Gridded rectangles of light, passing one after the other. Bumping through the swinging doors, swinging in opposite directions, why do they do that? Much much colder here, the nurse rolling me asks if I'm too cold, no I say I'm fine, we keep moving then the bed is swung around and more nurses are here, they are shaving my chest, attaching sticky electrode leads to my skin. A bald headed man with a nice smile comes to my side I'm Doctor Doctor the anesthesiologist and we're just about ready to start, here we'll put this oxygen mask on you just breath and relax and breath it will all be over soon and the lights above me start to move, back and forth and I don't want to stop seeing them, keep looking at them they are moving, shifting, they are joining hands on the ceiling they are dancing, twirling, my eyes close no look up, look up, I'm not here, I'm back, I'm back, next to my wife, it's all done she says, everything was fine she says, how can that be? Where was I then? How do I know? Everything went well, your heart is back to normal now, it's all good. And I think to myself, how can this be? To dematerialize so? I feel like there is something I've forgotten, something there in that missing piece of my existence. But I can't quite, I can't quite I ca

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Because this vehicle was designed to be almost indistinguishable from the inhabitants' own bodies, at least to them, we were instructed as part of our training to allow inhabitant physicians to use methods from their world to try to maintain and repair these vehicles of ours. Sometimes their methods work reasonably well, sometimes not. But since the first imperative is to not let them know our real identities, we go along with the care they want to give us.

Lately, as my own vehicle has fallen into decline, I have had several procedures done in one of their massive buildings for complex care. They call them “hospitals.” Today, I had another such procedure. This vehicle’s inner pump of oxygenated fluid has been wearing down, increasingly showing signs of misfunction so today I had what the inhabitant physicians call a “cardioversion.” The procedure involved calming the vehicle’s electrical circuitry to the point of seeming unconsciousness (of course I was aware all the time), then inserting a scope down the vehicle’s mouth to observe the pump then apply jolts of electricity to reset the pump’s operational cycle. My inhabitant partner was beside me the entire time, hiding her worry beneath a calmly stoic and reassuring demeanor.

The ecstatic swelling surge that then occurs is what restores.

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She was sitting by the window in a motel room in Kingman, Arizona, looking at the train stopped on the tracks across the street. Behind them were the jagged rock heaps of mountains that characterized this hostile landscape. It was already 104 degrees outside and the sky was yellow in the summer sun. Inside, she sat smoking her third cigarette of the morning and was contemplating lighting a fourth. She was waiting for her sometime lover to show up with the money, but she suspected that she had been ghosted by the son of a bitch once again. Still, she would wait. She really had nothing better to do, and for some reason, she liked the view. The unmoving train seemed to have made time stop and the graffitied cars were calming and filled her with hope.