

Spring 2017

The Transformation of Material Things

Robert M. Crane
Bard College, rc4068@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2017

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Crane, Robert M., "The Transformation of Material Things" (2017). *Senior Projects Spring 2017*. 247.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2017/247

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

The TRANSFORMATION of MATERIAL THINGS

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
Of Bard College
Annandale-On-Hudson, NY
May 2017

ROBERT M. CRANE

For those who make my life

too good to be true—

“Forget the years, forget distinction.

Leap into the boundless and make it your home!”

-Zhuang Zi

Table of Contents

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| A Man and His Butterfly..... | 10 |
| The Pond..... | 22 |
| By the Throat..... | 31 |
| Playing with Fire..... | 33 |
| Little Arrow Pub..... | 39 |
| I Will Come..... | 50 |
| The Smell of Rain..... | 52 |
| The Death of a Dream..... | 62 |
| Afterword..... | 70 |
| Acknowledgments..... | 71 |

Introduction

When my younger sister was born, I had a dream of pulling her body from our family's pond. I struggled to lift her chin above the water, knowing that if I couldn't do something soon, she'd drown. Throughout the dream, there was a man sitting in a lawn chair a few feet from the bank of the pond. He just smiled at me and dumbly waved as I pleaded for him to help me keep her from drowning.

Five years later, my sister learned to swim. We never had any incidents at the pond, and my parents were always careful to keep a life jacket on Lauren when she was near the water, but the dream had left an impression. Regardless of how much fun I was having, I would pause when Lauren walked near the water. Paranoia gripped me as I recalled the heaviness of her body sinking just below the surface of the pond and my desperation in trying to save her. I was thankful in those moments that the two realms remained separate—the dream world was fixed to the dream world and reality was fixed to reality.

*

When I was seventeen, I went backpacking in Guatemala with a group of fourteen students. One night in Quetzaltenango—tucked between the Santa Maria Volcano and Santiaguito lava dome—our group leader invited everyone to a

workshop on lucid dreaming at a café near the central park. We filed through a doorway of hanging beads and into a back room, thick with the smell of sandalwood incense. I recorded in my journal the steps to begin lucid dreaming:

1. *Keep a dream log. Look for repeated themes and any patterns that could be indications that something is out of the ordinary.*
2. *Practice reality tests frequently. Try to fly on your drive to work. By training the mind to question if it's asleep, it will eventually react to dreams with the same skepticism and activate the conscious mind.*
3. *If you ever find that you've become lucid, just relax. Breathe and invite the dream deeper.*

After we all parted ways that night, I walked trying to convince myself that I was already dreaming. I let myself believe that each person I saw was just a manifestation of my subconscious and that, if I tried hard enough, I could teleport across the city into the bedroom of my homestay.

Later that night, I woke up to use the bathroom. The table lamp beside the bed was already on and flooded the room with soft yellow light. I could see the empty twin bed on the other side of the nightstand, the blue comforter tucked beneath the mattress. My backpack was leaning against the wardrobe in the corner and the bedroom door was closed. Everything looked s I had left it. It wasn't.

Although I could turn my head to look around the room, the rest of my body was locked, rigid beneath the covers. I couldn't move my arms to reach the lamp. My legs wouldn't swing out onto the tile floor beneath the bed. Amidst this feeling of paralysis was an even more disorienting notion—I couldn't tell whether I was sleeping or not.

If you ever find that you've become lucid just relax. Breathe and invite the dream deeper.

I stopped fighting the paralysis and let my head sink into the pillow. The next thing I remember was the complete recognition that I was asleep. The bed, the wardrobe, the door—even my own body—it was all taking place in my head. I could feel my heart racing as consciousness fought to take control. The dream began to slip away as my excitement forced me to wake up in earnest. As the wooziness intensified, I turned my head to the left and studied my shadow on the wall. It was watching me. In the last seconds before I woke up, the shadow peeled itself from the wall, rolled over top of me, and scampered out through the doorway.

When I woke the next morning and walked to class, I entertained the possibility that reality was just another form of dreaming. Of course, I *knew* that I

was awake, but I had felt the same way the night before. Everything had appeared real until my shadow peeled from the wall.

I was scared to look at the sidewalk in the afternoon sun. What if this shadow lifted itself from the concrete and began to walk beside me? The boundary I thought existed—the one anchoring the dream world to the dream world and reality to reality—had begun to crumble.

*

Eventually, the busyness of academic life caught up with me and kept my feet on the ground. I still enjoyed dreams—the nightly voyage into the imaginary—but stopped fiddling with my grasp of reality. The question about what distinguishes reality from dreams didn't surface again for about five years. The idea snaked back into my consciousness and intensified this January of this while visiting Los Angeles.

We walked into a museum that my girlfriend, Erin, had written a paper on the previous semester. I didn't know much about the space except what she told me—that it was partially a commentary on the authority of museums. For example, there were signs throughout the museum that said things like "Removed for Cleaning," but there was actually no object. The sign itself was the exhibit.

Beyond this, I had little idea of what to expect when we entered through the front door of what looked like the entrance to a flower shop. Erin and I were

standing in the dimly lit lobby, the first glimpse of Mr. Wilson's *Museum of Jurassic Technology*.

Part of the museum's success is in its manipulation of the viewers' past experiences. It utilizes tropes like the signs and the traditional dark lighting of natural history museums to gain the visitors' faith. The first display that Erin and I stood in front of was a replica of the stink ant, *megolaponera foetens*, with a two-inch white pipe protruding from its head. A receiver next to the display explained—in the anticipated monotonous voice of a museum guide—how a fungus infects the ant's brain and forces it to climb to the top of trees. The fungus then sprouts from the insect's head, as we saw in the model, and rains spores down upon the forest floor on other unsuspecting ants.

The following exhibits displayed mice on toast and duck's breath captured in test tubes. Duck's breath was allegedly once used as a cure for thrush. A wax portrait of a man's face was poised with the bill of a taxidermy duck inserted into his mouth.

The genius of the museum is that it never reveals the truth as it drifts between the scientific and the seemingly absurd. It also never reveals what it's trying to accomplish. In this way, fact and fiction hold equal weight; it's up to the audience to decide for themselves where the line is drawn, if there's one at all, and how much they can actually trust the information being presented.

1. *Look for repeated themes repeated themes and any patterns that could be used as patterns indications that patterns something is out of the ordinary.*

My experience of the museum shifted at one exhibit featuring the work of Geoffrey Sonnabend, a supposed professor at the Northwestern University of Illinois in the 1930's. His work, which was explained through a film, claims that it is forgetting, not remembering, that is "the inevitable outcome of all experiences." Sonnabend imagined memory as an angled plane passing through an upside-down cone. At the beginning of an experience, the memory plane passes through the circular base of the cone, which represents the amount we accurately remember of an event. As we pass further from the moment of the event, however, the plane rises up the cone until it's only in contact with the apex and eventually separates entirely. At this point, we've forgotten everything about the event except that "an event" took place. The mind fabricates the rest of the memory from the imagination.

The conclusion of the video displayed a black and white image of Sonnabend. He was wearing a three-piece wool suit, round wiry spectacles, and a generous walrus mustache. The man, I thought, looked remarkably like Theodore Roosevelt.

I would have normally felt confident in my ability to identify the former president. However, the video had imparted a skepticism about the reliability of my own memory. My only evidence was the fragment of an experience, maybe, I

thought, from early grade school. *Is this Teddy Roosevelt, I wondered, or am I fabricating a memory to attach to this picture of Geoffrey Sonnabend?*

2. *By training the mind to [ask questions], it will eventually*

ASK QUESTIONS

*react to dreams with skepticism and activate the
conscious mind.*

Erin and I ascended a staircase illuminated only by the soft glow of floor lights. There was a subtle shift in the museum's atmosphere as we rose to the second floor. The burgundy carpet was lusher, the walls of the hallway draped in red velvet. A warmer light resonated from ovular light fixtures, like the ones you might find in an antique movie theater. I felt as if we were stepping back in time, or at least deeper into the museum's performance. The commentary was being left behind. We were entering the curator's playground.

As the two of us navigated the small rooms of the second floor, we became excited like two children who had managed to sneak into a toy store.

"Look, you've got to come see this!" we'd whisper.

At the end of the first hallway was a room dedicated to *The Lives of Perfect Creatures*. The square gallery featured paintings of the five dogs from the Soviet's

earliest space program. These animals were the first “Earth-born creatures to leave the earth.” Each dog had their own portrait and a gold tag beneath the frame. I circled the room counter-clockwise reading the names. *Zvezdochka. Ugolyok. Laika. Belka. Strelka.*

When I finished reading the names, Erin took my hand and led me to a doorway. It was covered in black tapestry. She pulled back the curtain. We stepped through and found ourselves standing at the entrance of a small café.

A draft of cool air swept through the room as the curtain slipped from her hand. The candles on top of the three square tables flickered and then steadied. A woman, who was reading in the corner to our right, stood and offered us some tea. I noticed that the dog sleeping at the edge of the woman’s bench was remarkably quiet. He didn’t budge when we entered the room.

The woman smiled and poured each of us a cup of herbal tea. She lifted two lemon wedges from a silver platter and fastened them to the rims. Next to the lemons was a small dish of sugar cubes and two polished tea spoons for us to use.

I could smell the chamomile rising from the cup as Erin and I took our seats beneath two candles mounted in a pair of deer antlers. The sound of a harp echoed from the walls and spilled over the slabs of cold stone floor.

I glanced at the woman who had returned to her corner, and studied the dog’s ribcage rising and collapsing in heavy swells. A couple entered the room from

another doorway and took their seats at a table opposite from us. Whenever we made eye contact they smiled, but in a mischievous way like how someone might smile if they were holding a secret. I tried to hear what they were whispering about, but couldn't make out the words. I wondered if this was all a part of the performance. And then a feeling struck me.

3. If you ever find that you've become lucid, just relax. Breathe and invite the dream deeper.

I glanced around the room again, feeling the heat of my revelation. As my eyes made a full circle, they landed on Erin, sitting across the table from me. The candlelight was reflecting in the dark of her eyes. She smiled. She smiled in the same way that the couple had smiled, and for the briefest moment, I let myself believe that she, as well, was a part of the performance—that she knew something I didn't.

With one last look into her eyes, I smiled, too. I raised the rim of the teacup to my lips and let the warm fluid wash over my tongue.

A Man and His Butterfly

When I was four or five I had my first memory of Chile. I told my mom that I remembered climbing to the ridge of a small hill while the sun was setting. My parents were a few steps ahead of me, laughing with a man and woman that I didn't know. Everyone was barefoot. I stomped over the lush blades of grass after them while my brother dawdled, snapping dandelions at the stem. When we reached the top of the hill, my dad scooped me into his arms so that I could rest my chin on his shoulder. I was too young to retain the words of their conversation, but I've been certain since then about two things. The first, that I was in a place that I had never been before, and second, the couple was my Tia Carmen and Tio Alberto.

My mom, however, insists that my first memory of the place is false, that I hadn't yet visited the country where she grew up.

*

I'm certain, however, that I later remember walking into a restaurant constructed on a cliff somewhere along the central coast of Chile. A breeze carried the smell of ocean through the dining area as our family was herded across the dining room. I unzipped my backpack and yanked out a crumpled sweatshirt while

three or four tables were pushed into a line for us against a floor-to-ceiling window.

If I'm counting correctly, there were fifteen in our party.

I remember fragments of conversations in Spanglish as my dad's side of the family tried to communicate with my mom's. Everyone did their best to speak slowly and gesture as much as they could with their hands to indicate the subject matter of the sentence. *Me. You. Pass the salt.* For the most part, everyone relied on simple conversation topics like the weather and where we'd be traveling for the next few days.

While my family chattered in Spanglish, I scanned the beach below our window. A dozen rowboats were plunked in the sand. The pigment of each had faded and chipped away from the wood. What had originally been a vibrant green like the leaves of a young Norway maple had deteriorated to the pale hue of chewed gum. Likewise, the yellow was zapped of its resemblance to spring daffodils, the blue of its relation to a lover's eyes, and the red of its likeness to the plump seeds of a pomegranate. I watched seagulls teetering above the fishermen as they cleaned their nets in the water. The white, long-winged birds scanned the ground for stray crisps of sea life that might be thrown into the sand.

My most vivid memory, however, is not the smell of sea bass and steamed oysters pulled from the ocean that morning. It isn't the staccato cadence of the Chilean accent nor the fragrance of cigarette smoke and perfume wafting from Tia Carmen. The event scribed into my temporal lobe is of myself sucking my lips into a

glass Yoo-hoo bottle. When the vacuum broke, the bottle fell onto my lap. The last drops of the chocolate drink spittled onto my sweatshirt and ran down the channels of my corduroy pants onto the floor.

*

I'm more convinced than ever that my mom was the one remembering incorrectly. When I went to Chile in September, I found an area that was too similar to my first memory for it not to be accurate.

I stumbled into a restaurant by the side of a road. It was a quiet afternoon in early autumn when the summer dust begins to settle back to the ground. Sunlight was pouring into the main room in narrow strips of amber, fragmented by the curling shadows of grape vines growing outside the windows. Though the air outside was asphyxiating—made heavy by the weight of the setting sun—it was shady and refreshingly temperate inside the building.

The walls were finished with a clay compound instead of paint. I could see pockets of water pooling in the low corners of the walls where the sun had not yet been able to penetrate. I noted that the ceiling was vaulted and I imagined that any heat entering the space would've risen through the room and slipped between the vents of the exposed terra cotta shingles, which interlocked like the scales of a mighty fish. If the building were such a monstrosity, then I was in the stomach of the leviathan, the belly of the beast.

I watched as granules of dust floated through the windows and flickered in the bits of sunlight. Slowly, they colonized on the surfaces of the vacant tabletops and chairs. One by one, they deserted the atmosphere and fell still throughout the restaurant. At last, when the air was motionless and the sun parallel to the west-facing window, I began to move around the room.

Snap.

I was standing at about the center of the dining room when I stopped and leaned my weight on the top rail of one of the mahogany chairs. The smell of sautéed onions drifted from a kitchen somewhere deeper in the building.

Atop each of the mahogany tables was a transparent blue vase with a rim that curled outward and drooped like the arms of a limp starfish. Inside each vase was an arrangement of hyacinth flowers. The clusters of lavender bells were still shut tight, refusing to give me company.

I stepped toward the bar, paying close attention to the amount of weight I was putting on each footstep. I kept my hands in my pockets and crouched forward slightly in an attempt to reduce the size of my presence.

There was a row of photos tacked to the rafter above the bar when I first showed up. I wanted to take a closer look at them, but it seemed I was mistaken. The

heavy wood was bare. The only thing to study were the deep ridges in its complexion.

When I reached the countertop, my eyes slipped from the wooden beam to the rows of bottles lined up behind the bar. Each one had a polished shine to it and threw back the warm glow of the sun outside the windows. There was an absurd amount of liquor, now that I'm reflecting on the collection. The three shelves must've contained twenty bottles a piece, and that's not including the plastic pour-bottles below the countertop for the bartender's ease of access. I was just leaning over the counter to get a better look at the labels when a lobby bell chimed from the room deeper in the restaurant.

It must be coming from a kitchen, I thought. It was the only explanation for the smell of onions, which had faded by then, and the *ping* declaring, 'Order Up!'

I shook my head and stepped away from the bar.

There was still no indication of who or what I was supposed to be waiting for. Maybe there was a signal I was misunderstanding. A letter I hadn't received, a call that went to voicemail. Despite the restaurant's tranquility, it made me uneasy. There was something about the silence that felt staged, as if the restaurant wasn't actually empty but had been curated so that I believed it was. Imagine the beginning of a play. The auditorium is dark. The audience chatters amongst themselves and the collective discussions melt into an indistinguishable patter of ambiguous voices. Then the stage lights come on. The audience fades to a hush. A single character

marches out from behind the lush curtains and she stops at center-stage. She looks about, joins her hands behind her back, and begins rocking her weight between the heels and the points of her toes. Although the audience can only see this one character, there's a whole cast waiting behind the curtains. Maybe some of them drift around backstage because their character isn't introduced for some time. But others, those who are entering soon, have their ears cupped to the velvet drapes, trying to listen to the soloist move through her lines. At any moment, she will give them a cue, a signal to move on stage, and a new personality will join her performance.

Yes, there was a palpable turbulence fluttering through the dining hall. I couldn't see them yet, but the troupe was all around me. They were pretending to be busy in the kitchen, banging dishes and feigning disinterest. They'd remain on the peripherals until I performed the proper signal for them to arrive. But they were listening. Each one knew what I was up to in the dining room. They waited anxiously for their cue.

I was moving toward the exit when a gritty voice interrupted me from behind the bar. His tone was calm. The question rumbled through the room with the steadiness of a distant roll of thunder.

"Puedo ayudarle, Señor?"

Ping.

The kitchen bell struck again.

Soft music played from another room, but I could barely hear the notes. It was more like I felt the music than actually heard it. Now that I'm thinking about it, the melody was murmuring through the walls. It played from the glass bottles behind the bar, from the flower buds on the tables. The grape vines outside the window swayed with the tempo. Then everything stopped.

I braced myself against one of the tables closest to the bar. The corners of my vision darkened for a half-second like a vignette around an old photograph. Had I been drinking? My head felt like it was swelling and contracting. I had to turn my head at strange angles to make out the objects around the room.

I blinked and squinted toward the bartender. His black hair was wet with gel and was combed back neatly, his face shaved clean. Everything about him looked polished. The black tie slipping from beneath his chin was pinned to his dress shirt. The white shirt was crisp and clasped at the wrists with brass cufflinks. He spoke up again.

"Is everything alright, señor?"

"Yes," I stammered. "I'm...I think I'm just waiting for my Papi's birthday." It was the first excuse that came to mind.

My palm had risen to my forehead and I was standing up again.

The vignette was clearing from the perimeters of my vision when I noticed another man sitting on a stool at the right side of the bar. He was slouched over the counter, his hands folded and fingers interlocked in a delicate embrace.

Wisps of white hair, that's truly the most accurate way to describe them, were combed over the top of his otherwise balding head. He was wearing a short-sleeved white polo with horizontal blue stripes. I hadn't seen him wearing short-sleeves in years, not since the Razadyne began to thin his blood. Although I was only seeing his profile, I knew who this man was. This was my grandfather, Papi.

He nodded his head and blinked hard, scrunching his face into a collection of deep wrinkles.

"Yep," he said, lengthening out the sound of the "y".

I swallowed and looked back to the bartender. All of the Spanish I had learned in my childhood was gone and there was a tightness in my throat. I wasn't sure what to say. I moved closer to the bartender. I asked for a drink, almost in a whisper, not wanting yet to draw the attention of my grandfather.

Without a word, the bartender reached below the counter for his metal shaker. He dropped a scoop of ice into the cup and lifted a bottle off the shelf containing a clear liquid. He tilted the bottle upside down, maintaining eye contact with me, and poured for one one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand. Stop. He placed the bottle back onto the shelf. Then he reached below the counter

again, this time removing a red jar with a black lid. The contents looked like pink salt crystals or maybe bath salts. He took a pinch with three fingers and sprinkled the ingredient into the metal cup.

He replaced the lid on the shaker, raised the stainless steel container to his right ear, and began to shake the contents vigorously. The ice cubes rattled. Frost developed around the outside of the metal cup.

When he stopped, he brought the shaker tight to his chest. He leaned over the counter. Intuitively, I leaned over as well.

“Would you like,” he whispered, raising his eyebrows, “to know the reason for why you’re here?”

I didn’t say a word. I looked dumbly into his eyes and nodded.

“Look outside the windows,” he said.

I did as he said. I turned, looking over my grandfather’s left shoulder, and out the window facing west. The sun had sunk below the bottom sill, so that I could see straight through the window and across the landscape. I could see in the distance the same hill that I had climbed with my family when I was four. It was the hilltop from my memory.

I was about to turn to the bartender when a single scrap of paper fluttered through the window. The paper danced in the orange plumes of sunlight and then gracefully landed upon one of the flowers in a vase on a table closest to the wall. As the wings of the scrap of paper flittered, I noticed that it was not a piece of paper at

all, but a butterfly. Its wings and thorax were white; its legs as black as olives. The insect danced across the hyacinth flowers, opening the petals one flower at a time.

While that butterfly worked at one cluster of flowers, another drifted through the window, followed by another, and then dozens were coming through the windows at once. Scores of butterflies were fluttering through until the air was alive with the rapid patter of delicate little wings humming around the restaurant. They landed on the flowers, the tables, the tops of chairs, behind the bar, on top of the bar, on each nozzle of every bottle on the shelves, and even around my grandfather and the bartender.

Without disturbing a single butterfly, the bartender cleared his throat. He tapped the rim of the shaker against the counter. The vacuum between the lid and the cup broke.

“This is why you’re here.”

I leaned over the bar as much as I could. My feet lifted off the ground. I peered into the shadows of the metal container.

I peered into the shadows of the metal container.

I peered into the
shadows of the metal

container.

June 10, 2014. Slow and peaceful morning.

I walked with Ray to the pond; the grass was still wet with dew and snappy. Ray pulled the canoe to the water's edge and we both climbed in. For the next twenty minutes the only sounds heard were the click and swoosh of us casting our lines. Occasionally a cat bird would chatter from the reeds of cattail. The day came alive.

The Pond

A coyote yipped from the corn field just beyond the pond. The colors evaporated from the air in front of me and the night returned to its sharp contrast. There was again only the permeated landscape of black and the hollow cords of white light descending from the sky to illuminate the edges of the highest branches and the crown of my dad's head and his shoulders. I froze mid-step as another coyote joined the first, which was immediately followed by three or four more voices and another until the pack was at least a dozen strong.

If I was shut away in the safety of my home, the yipping might have sounded lyrical, like a pagan celebration unfolding in the forgotten woods. My family will often open the windows looking over the back porch and west toward the pond to listen to the hysterical cackles of the dogs, young and old, romping in the night. Safe at home, I may have listened for a few minutes, then turned away from the window and gone back to bed. Outside, however—blind and unprotected—I was a guest amongst their celebrations. There was no way of telling how suddenly my dad and I could stumble into their merriment, finding that the coyotes were indeed yipping their invitation for us.

“They’re more scared of us,” my dad said. Though he later confessed he wasn’t so certain at the time. “If we hesitate, they’ll know. Just be confident, and they’ll respect your distance.”

We continued our pilgrimage to the pond.

*

There’s a theory I once learned from a yogi in Guatemala about the nature of quantum mechanics. We were sitting next to each other on a public bus from Santiago Atitlán to Cobán. The man’s hair fell in thick coils about his shoulders while his fingers licked a few precious notes from his guitar.

He explained to me that when particles of light are focused through two slits and recorded on a screen, each particle creates what’s called an interference pattern. When enough particles pass through the slits, the arbitrary pattern begins to resemble a wave. Our idea of a physical world, he explained, is not as certain as we let ourselves believe. Those particles exist only as possibilities—every single possibility—until they collide with the light-sensitive screen and must be recorded.

“So,” he said, passing me a mason jar of spirulina mixed into warm water, “we must celebrate that the two of us have ended up in this seat together on this bus at this moment. Our molecules may become waves again at any moment.”

I didn’t know what to make of his words, but I took a mouthful of the green drink and forced myself to swallow. It tasted like swamp water. For the rest of the trip, I pondered the implications of what he had told me, trying to make sense of

why the world looked solid if what he told me was indeed true. I began to wonder about the definitions I had applied to objects. Did the world exist the way I saw it?

*

When we reached the pond, my dad and I stood in different places. He paused a few yards before the dock where the grass still cushioned his feet. I stepped over the divide of water separating the lawn from the dock and landed on the reassuring sturdiness of treated wood. When I looked over my shoulder, the leaves of the Norway maple behind my father began to stir. His face was turned to the sky and I traced his line of sight over the pond to the southwest where the three stars of Orion's belt were shimmering.

The tomato vines and stalks of corn on the opposite bank had disappeared into the silhouette of the forest further behind them. The Catskill Mountains teetered along the western skyline, illuminated by the light pollution radiating from the cities of Kingston and Saugerties nestled in the valley where the terrain slips into the Hudson River.

Then I looked up to the stars, as well. Of all the possible trajectories and destinations, after millions of miles of travel, those particles of light were arriving to be recorded by our retinas. By standing there and looking up, my dad and I had collapsed the infinite possible trajectories into a distinguishable point of light. *A star.* I gazed up at the vastness, at the thousands of stars covering the sky like spilled sugar, wondering what it meant for my father and me to be a part of that cosmic

narrative. My consciousness swelled and contracted, not yet sure what to make of the moment. I was simultaneously humbled and unbound.

*

I saw the yogi again on the Island of Ometepe in Nicaragua. He walked in bare feet as we meandered down a dirt road leading out of the village. This time he challenged me to think about a tree, robust and sturdy. Yet every tree is made of millions of cells, which can be broken down further into fundamental elements—carbon, nitrogen, oxygen. At what point does the object we call ‘tree’ stop being that object and become the individual particles that produce it?

He lifted his hand after finishing this thought and spread his fingers wide at arm’s length. We kept walking as he stared at the gaps, curling his knuckles and picking at his cuticles.

“The same can be argued for ourselves,” he said. “At what point is the body separate from the hand, the hand from its digits, and downward to the molecules. Most things are not as concrete as we see them.”

*

My family spent numerous summer evenings barbecuing at the side of the water when I was young. My dad was always the first one to hurdle off the dock as the sun was setting, his chin tucked into his torso and arms pointed in front of him. Hesitantly, I’d follow him over the edge with my brother and my sister in her life jacket. The three of us would challenge ourselves to see who could swim out the

furthest into the center of the pond. I'd begin confidently, churning my arms through the water and suppressing the visions that my imagination conjured. But it was always thirty feet or so from the dock that I'd glance over my shoulder, half expecting to see a fin rising from the water or the jaws of a crocodile simmering below the surface. There was no way then for me to restrain the images in my mind. The stalks of water weeds raking against my ankles became claws and I was certain—certain—that I'd be dragged to the depths of the pond before my hands wrapped around the boards of the dock again.

While I had been staring up at the stars thinking of this memory, fog swept across the lawn. It spilled from the marsh like cream, flooded the grass up to my dad's ankles, and dribbled over the bank of the pond.

I looked over the right-side of the dock and tried to see through the vapor. I remembered the pond floor on summer days, populated with water snails and minnows swimming through the wisps of algae. The bottom had vanished, however. Even when I strained the muscles around the corner of my eyes, I could only see the fog twisting above the surface. I pretended for a moment that the milky vapor had replaced all the water and that if I dropped over the edge, I'd fall straight through. The pond became a purgatory of descent. I'd drop for hours that would turn into days, not understanding what had happened to the mud that I used to scrape from the pond floor.

The longer I peered through the vapor, the stronger I believed that the water had been replaced with a cauldron of smoke. I wanted to kneel at the side of the dock just to affirm that there was a pond to touch, but I worried what would happen if I reached over and pulled back a dry hand. There was again no way to stop the fantasy once I submitted myself to the imagination.

When I looked up, my eyes fell on the branches of the black willow tree quivering in the breeze and the north bend of the pond far off to my right. There was a hollow rumble of metal behind me and I knew that my dad had left his spot on the lawn and pulled the canoe from where it was leaning against two cedar trees.

He dragged the vessel back across the lawn, the metal sounding like knives sharpening as it scraped over the grass. He heaved the front end of the canoe into the pond, displacing the fog and revealing the water once again. He held the vessel steady for me while I climbed into the front seat, and then joined me. Once settled, he pushed off from shore with the tip of the paddle. The pond quivered beneath our weight as we drifted away from the dock. The fog closed around the shoreline.

*

The last time I met the yogi was along the western shores of Costa Rica. He was meditating on the beach when I joined him beneath the stars. Bioluminescent plankton were crashing in the surf, spilling over the sand like millions of independent solar systems.

“Time, first of all, is not absolute,” he declared, “but can be warped and manipulated depending on the state of the observer. A star does not experience the period of a day in the same way as a human, nor does a prisoner understand a year the way a free man does.”

He explained that we’re all misunderstood in thinking that time only moves linearly, that each increment is the same as the last and must move forward to be replaced by a new moment.

“There is also the possibility of considering time like a dimension through which you can move to any moment of your life. If this were possible, you could revisit any single point of time for as long as you wished. You would effectively not die, but always be dying. You would not be born, but be in a constant state of being born.”

*

There is a small meadow on the bank furthest from the dock, where the pond is deepest and bound by a tangle of grapevine and red dogwood. Here the ground arcs higher than the rest of the area and slopes downward to the water line. A Norway spruce and gray birch tree stand sentry at the crest of the arc, guarding the burial site of our cats and dogs.

I could see the top branches of the spruce tree from the canoe. I remembered the day I stepped off the bus in grade school and saw our cat, Misty, lying beneath

the forsythia bushes outside of my home. The yellow leaves danced like lances and in the afternoon light of spring.

It was the first time I encountered death, but I don't remember much of what happened. It took me a few seconds to even realize she had been hit by a car—I thought she was resting in the shade—and another few seconds to process that she was dead. I ran inside with my backpack tossing from my shoulders. I cried even as my dad carried the cat into the bucket of our tractor and drove the animal to be buried at the pond. We've also had cats disappear into the woods and never come home. It's usually on one of these nights that we'll hear the coyotes racing through the forest. The cat will turn up, but as a puff of fur or in traces of scat in the cedar woods.

I caught glimpses of the shoreline as we rounded the bend of the pond, circling back to the dock. The fog cleared enough for me to see the safety rope looped around a low branch of the black willow tree. The white cord looked like a noose dangling in the wind beneath the starlight.

There was a soothing meter to the oars dipping in and out of the water. My dad and I had remained silent for the entire voyage, choosing to not disturb the atmosphere of the night. I dragged my hand alongside the canoe as we approached the dock, trying to peek through the fog. I was so used to being able to see the shoreline that I was deceived about how far away we were from land. My dad had

made another three or four strokes with the oar and I still couldn't see the dock. I wondered how long it had been since he dropped the boat into the water. The metronome of the oar seemed to stutter and reset, until my dad lifted the paddle and let the boat coast through the last stretch of water. Everything around the pond fell silent.

Then the pale outline of the dock began to break through the fog. The boards looked like the skeleton of some beast who had gotten stuck in the clay, its flesh sagging and then sloughing into the water. The boat glided over the last stretch of pond before colliding into the dock with a satisfying thud that echoed into the night.

By the Throat

Red landscapes dipped in the black ink of my pen—

Swollen and destitute, these words will not
come forth.

Not with ease and not for days

Grab them by the throat

My best of friends

Kiss them for coming back to me.

Let's start over then and fill the pages with
whispers and criminal disposition. Love affairs.

Dreams—hopeless and inevitable, coming to exist by

Fake confidence

&

Perseverance

Do not listen to my words not today. They're

flimsy and clumsy like a tower of
plastic straws.

Run and come back tomorrow. Bring me tales to tell or

get lost.

Playing with Fire

They know that I'm getting closer. Every time I try to record these patterns that I'm seeing, they short-circuit my thoughts. Whenever I find another link they keep me from verbalizing what it is that I'm uncovering. They hate that I'm writing about them, that I could expose their secret. We are not the ones in control.

Their primary tactic is called lethologica, which many describe as the tip-of-tongue experience. This description, however, is based on the conviction that we are fighting our own minds, trying to recall a specific word or idea. In reality, what we've done is stumble on a phenomenon that's dangerously close to subordinate. The Others are so entrenched in our consciousness that they can shut down the memory recall with a short electric shock to the temporal lobe. The jolt of this shock typically presents itself as a feeling of frustration while the image flutters in and out of our memory before disappearing. We, of course, recognize that a memory is being stripped from us, but cannot place our finger exactly on which one is being taken.

They scramble my thoughts in this way so that I can't focus on a subject for more than a few seconds. I can't grasp a thing. The conclusion, the 'so what', flees from my thoughts without being captured.

Here.

Here.

Here.

So how will I ever tell you my story? How will I ever show you the connections I've begun to make in a way that will be useful? I can't give you the conclusions, but I can provide you fragments. I can tell you the things that I experienced and hope that you notice the same sequences that I'm finding, that you see the evidence drawn in the sand. That's as much I can do for you because they're keeping me from accomplishing the rest. Hopefully they don't interfere with this attempt and leave me with my sanity. Maybe they'll convince you that I'm crazy, truly unhinged this time around.

I'm still trying. Despite the aggravation and obstructions, I'll continue to dig my way deeper until I've reached the heart of their intentions. I'll sink into their realm until they can't help but acknowledge my presence. They're far more intelligent than we think.

These are our creators.

They live in our heads.

*

I was in seminar one morning and had forgotten what the professor was lecturing about. As her voice became a hum, I stared around the room.

One student raised her hand. The entire class turned their heads to her in almost-perfect unison. I don't remember what she said, but when she finished speaking the professor called on another student. The class looked away. I kept watching the first student. While everyone else's gaze was averted, I saw the girl's face scrunch into an expression of frustration, as if she had just been delivered an electric shock. Her lips puckered and her nose compressed into a look of anguish. No one else was looking, not even the professor as the student held this face for several seconds. She then shook her head and smiled, although her eyes began to water. I thought she was going to cry.

There's nothing unusual about catching someone off guard, but as I looked around the room, something felt off. I began to notice other peculiarities. A student two chairs to my left was staring at her notebook with her pen poised as if she were trying to write. The pen never moved. She just sat locked in the position as if paralyzed. When we made eye contact (she only looked at me from under her eyebrows), she adjusted her posture and her pen began to move across the notebook. Was this all coincidence?

Just as this thought passed through my head, the lights in the hallway flickered—*just* the lights in the hallway. Again, I was the only in the room who

seemed to notice and I felt relatively confident then that I was picking up on something. There was some pattern that I hadn't noticed before, but was tapping into. I waited for some occasion to confirm what I was thinking—for the walls to turn to pixels and slowly crumble into the sky.

I meditated on the trees sprouting new buds outside the window and on the grass that had begun to photosynthesize. The student closest to the window turned his head toward me until his chin was resting on his left shoulder. His eyes flickered as if he too were being electrocuted. Then he turned back to the classroom. This was my final cue.

A car will pass by the window, I thought, in three, two, one...

*

I was bored, so I struck a match, holding the stick right-side up so that the smoke rose toward the kitchen ceiling. I repeated in my head, "You won't burn my fingers." My neck muscles tightened as I leaned forward resting my elbows on the countertop.

I was convinced, while the flame was still licking at the phosphorous, that its color seemed to be fading. If the flame was already giving up, there was no chance it could burn the length of the matchstick to where my fingers held it steady. Perhaps my thoughts would be enough to keep the fire at bay.

My confidence wobbled about the time the flame reached halfway down the match. For half a second, I thought I was losing. It was enough to motivate the flame back to life.

Though I doubted I could recover from my stumble of faith, I redoubled my mantra. "You won't burn me. You *won't* burn me." My tongue clicked against the roof of my mouth.

Say it harder! I thought.

"You won't burn me," I whispered through clenched teeth.

By then the top of the match had charred and doubled-over. Though the head had turned grey, I could see that an orange ember was still burning at its core. I could feel the heat on my thumb and forefinger, but the fame was shriveling. I persisted, knowing that the flame would either extinguish or scorch the tips of my fingers.

In the last moment before I blew out the flame, the head of the match snapped from its stem and fell into the palm of my hand. The ashes fell away, leaving the ember bare against my skin. I shook the match while biting back curse words.

I had succeeded, I thought, while dabbing a wet paper towel to my burned palm. The flame hadn't burned my fingers.

Still the wind was increasing fearfully; and whenever we rose from a plunge forward, the sea behind fell combing over our counter, and deluged us with water. I was so utterly benumbed, too, in every limb, as to be nearly unconscious of sensation.

-Narrative of A. Gordyn Pym, Edgar Allen Poe

Little Arrow Pub

For a moment, I savored the night air, not knowing how long it'd been since I allowed myself the chance to enjoy a good breeze. I closed my eyes. I inhaled sharply, noticing how much cooler the air was on the intake. I let my lungs swell until every capillary was filled with the ocean ether, until the salt water coagulated in the back of my throat and dripped like warm taffy into my stomach.

I hadn't noticed then that the night had descended like a veil. I couldn't recall the slow setting of the sun, nor the overtures of twilight when the clouds darken into swaths of bruises. The stars above me flickered from their pock marks in the sky. Thin clouds had formed on the horizon above the ocean and the boat beneath me continued to chuck along with the tide.

As I relaxed in the stern trying to recall how I had ended up in the boat, I noticed a barrier of sharp cliffs running in shadow about fifty meters off the port side of the rowboat. The rock might have provided a pleasant radiation of heat in the sunlight, but now the sandstone was dormant. The purple visage scowled high above the water—lifeless and echoing the sounds of the ocean back upon itself.

Will these cliffs ever end? I wondered.

Despite my disorientation, there was no reason to panic yet. The nearest shelter could've been within shouting distance and I'd still have no way of reaching it. I had to relish the carelessness of the open sea. The ocean was calm, the boat was dry, and the thin fabric hanging around my shoulders fell in delicate folds. All other concerns slipped from my mind and spilled into the ocean where they sank to infinity.

Time slipped onward. I rubbed my fingers along the wrinkles of the wood's grain, feeling every crook and splinter of its topography. The sturdiness of the wood reminded me of my grandmother's hands. They would somehow retain a tenderness in the springtime even when her fingernails filled with soil and her palms became cracked and dusty. I could feel her warmth beneath the calloused epidermis as she laid another tulip bulb into my waiting palms. The muscles down my back loosened as I shifted my weight and relaxed deeper into the wood's embrace. I welcomed the heaviness I was feeling. I accepted it, reclining all the way down until I could only see the stars above my head.

There were, however, several peculiarities that I might have taken notice of had I not been so naïve. First, the water was leading me on a definite course. Despite the rowdiness of the ocean, the boat persisted on a perfect line, almost as if a rope were attached to the bow, pulling it along.

Secondly, the stars had shifted considerably since I stopped to take in a breath of night air. Some constellations had traversed the sky. Some had reconfigured themselves into new shapes, and others had disappeared from the sky entirely.

While I pondered away in solitary at the boat's stern, the cliffs receded into the distance. The environment beyond the boat became a cavern of shades of purple and black in all directions. From above, I must've looked like a terrestrial speck rising and falling on the ocean.

As the boat voyaged further into the open sea, a shadow began to swell at the thwart. A set of cogs, which had until then been motionless, began to rotate. It wasn't until the oars creaked in their locks that I turned my attention back to the boat and, properly, what was inside of it. I saw, then, a great pair of wings unfold from the boat against the backdrop of ocean and starlight. They hovered above the water as I counted my heart beat three times. Then, a crack like thunder shattered through the night as the wings plunged into the sea, breaking the barrier between water and air.

My body stiffened. I felt the bottom of the boat soften like clay and I could do nothing as I began to slip through the hull and into the ocean. The water rose over my chin and flooded my insides, leaving a taste like copper on my tongue. The world became muffled as if my ears and soul were stuffed with gauze. I couldn't see the boat from below the surface, but I felt the currents of displaced water flutter past

my eyelashes. In my weightlessness, I imagined the oars lifting from the water and whirlpools churning in the boat's wake. I thought I had known darkness above, but it was nothing compared to the way it was below. The moonlight was fractured and cold, and fluttered like gnats caught in a spider's web. My mind spiraled deeper into the abyss with each rotation of the paddles; still I could not move my body. I was prepared to resign myself to this place of isolation when a hand tightened around my collar. My gaze turned downward as I was hoisted through the water. I followed a channel of moonlight to where it concluded on the ocean floor, and for the first time I saw what was below, what it was that I had been sinking into. I witnessed, in the last moments before I was pulled from the ocean, a graveyard of my own corpse. Each of the faces was swollen; the pale irises stared up at me as eels nipped at the disintegrating flesh. This was the last thing I saw before I was lifted from the water and dropped onto the boat.

My abdomen contracted and I heaved a stomach full of water into the vessel. Mucus dangled from my nostrils as I sucked in a lungful of air. The vessel lurched forward with another swing of the oars, knocking me back into its clench. I kept track of time by listening to the waves lapping against the side of the boat and the rotation of the oars pulling in and out of the water.

Shluck-uh-womp, two, three, I counted. Shluck-uh-womp, four, five...

In the time I'd been on the boat, I hadn't considered I might be in someone's company. I strained to see the man's face through the darkness. As the speed of the boat began to slow, I noticed a tenderness to his methodical labor.

Each time the oars revolved, his torso and arms mirrored the motion. He tugged as if it were the only option he had as if the oars were fused to his hands and his existence contingent on their locomotion. He was a machine. Better yet: a puppet, with the oars springing from his hands and disappearing beneath the waterline. He depended on the boat's progress as much as it depended on him.

I felt his eyes through the silence concentrating on the center of my forehead. I shifted in my seat, not knowing what to say to absolve the tension. I attempted to swallow the discomfort back into my stomach where it belonged.

"Do you know what we're doing out here?" I asked.

He said nothing. The oars' cycle continued without interruption, but the boat trembled while I spoke as if someone in the front had shifted their weight.

"Sorry," I said, not knowing if he'd heard me. "But do you know what we're doing out here?"

This time, a commotion erupted from the bow. A lanky shadow separated itself from the oarsman and began to wrestle its way across the boat's midsection. Grunting noises escaped from the shadow as it collapsed onto the floor. Each thump against the floorboards was a bit closer.

I was reminded of the time I was walking through Union Square and beheld a naked man on the street corner. He was shouting proverbs from a torn copy of the Bible, gnashing his teeth while he spoke. Passersby did their best to avoid eye contact. They checked their phones or pretended to have forgotten where they were walking, suddenly looking in another direction, squinting and changing course.

Curiosity carried me to within ten feet of his pulpit. As I approached this man, however, I saw that there was a deeper level to his apparent insanity. At his feet was a severed boar's head with a dinner fork shoved into one eye-socket. Some of the skin had been peeled away from the hog's forehead; dark ink was stamped into the cheek. As I crossed to the other side of the street, I looked backed into the pig's one good eye.

"They will see his face," shouted the man, "and his name will be on their foreheads! There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever."

I turned and continued down Sixth Avenue.

This man—the man in the boat—rose onto his knees and thrust his face to within inches of my own. He sucked wind through his teeth, converting the oxygen into a wad of pollution, and discharged the humid waste from his mouth. It wreaked of clam juice and rotten beer.

A flashlight clicked on beneath his chin, revealing an angular jaw covered in gray stubble. The yellow light disappeared into the hollows of his cheeks and reflected off of his protruding forehead. His skin was glossy, as if it had been stretched too tightly around his skull. Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead. His eyes, though—his eyes were the empty color of canned tuna. They heaved from their sockets each time he exhaled, widening as his tongue flicked over his cracked lips and retracted back inside his mouth.

“We’re running from that large ship behind you,” he said, the words whistling through the empty spaces in his gums.

A large silhouette filled most of my view when I looked over my shoulder, maybe fifty yards off the stern. Silver waves were curling from beneath the front of the outline like cheese passing through the holes of a grater. As the ship rose on the surf, it caught the half-moon’s light, turning the wood to ivory. Enormous sails stretched across the deck and ascended what must have been three stories high. Before the ship plunged into the trough, I noticed the bowsprit stabbing into the night sky like the brass fist at the end of a knight’s javelin. For a span of moments, I was immobile—dazed by the sight of this monstrous watercraft.

The men were assembling a small sail in the center of the boat when I turned back. They unraveled the linen and fastened it to a mast without saying a word. With a few clicks and the tightening of knots, the sail rose. The heavier man adjusted the boom and then straightened the fiddler cap on his head. The sail snapped into a

pocket with an audible *whack*. Our boat lurched forward with more confidence than ever before, intent on carrying me deeper into the night.

I began to wonder if I'd ever feel land again. I was exhausted by the night's events and just wanted to feel in control. I wanted to be somewhere stable.

Tears begin to squeeze from the corner of my eyes as the boat picked up speed. I caught, through blurred vision, the glimmer of lanterns on the horizon. I held tight as the oarsman collapsed the sail and the momentum escorted us to the coastline.

Each of us stepped ashore and stood on the pavement facing the village. Directly across the street from us was a street lamp, seizing us in an island of light.

Behind the lamp stood a row of buildings suspended maybe eight feet off the ground. Each structure faced the water and had a staircase ascending on the right side, crisscrossing from the street to a doorway hidden from sight. Between me and these buildings, clogging the streets, were hundreds of white plastic tables arranged edge-to-edge as far as I could see in either direction. To the left, the road gradually rose and disappeared over the lip of a small hill. To the right, it continued for a quarter mile on a gentle downward slope before stopping and turning left at ninety degrees where it disappeared behind the final house in the row. As far as I could tell, the street continued to hug the coastline in that direction, filled from sidewalk-to-sidewalk with flimsy picnic tables.

A bump on the other side of the street caught my attention. I turned just in time to see both men leap from the final tabletop and alight on the staircase of the building across from me. They began to dash up the stairs, only touching down on every third step.

I scrambled on top of the first table in front me. It wobbled, but held my weight until I crossed to the second tabletop, then the third, and so on. Bounding across the plastic surfaces, I reached the other side of the street and began to climb the staircase nestled between the two exterior walls. I stumbled over loose boards half a dozen times and bumped into the handrail. At the top of the landing and to my left, was a thick door made of cherry wood. Warm light passing through a portal window unveiled a sign hung above the entryway. An epigraph of a dog wearing a space helmet was scorched into the slab of oak. The sign read, "Little Arrow Pub."

I threw open the door, letting the air inside escape into the night. My nostrils filled with the humid scent of cigarettes and burning wood.

I became intoxicated by the fragrance and stumbled across the threshold into a large room. The wall to the right was filled with various liquor bottles backed by panels of mirrored glass. A fire rumbled in the corner, blanketing the room in an orange glow. Toward the center of the room, covering the wood floors worn from heavy traffic, was an oriental rug, at the middle of which I glimpsed a pair of burgundy leather chairs.

Stars flickered in front of my eyes as I turned to the far wall. Darkness encroached on the perimeter of my vision and I felt as if I were back on the rowboat, still bobbing in the ocean. I collapsed into the stool closest to the fireplace. Despite my efforts to blink it away, the vignette swelled until everything was choked from sight except for a pair of windows framed by thick velvet curtains. The fabric was the color of red wine and poured in folds to the floor along either side the vista.

I rested my elbows on the counter and buried my forehead into my hands. My skull felt as if it'd been stuffed with gauze.

The logs shifted in the fireplace pressing a current of heat through the room. Every cavity of knotted wood swelled with warmth and temporarily lifted the unlit spaces from their shadows.

But there was something unnatural about the curtains that I couldn't take my mind off of. They seem sentient. Of course, this was absurd. Yet I couldn't help looking over my shoulder to see if they'd moved, half expecting a hand to emerge from the folds and beckon me away from the bar. And that music... *Pachelbel's Canon*. Was that playing when I walked in? I couldn't remember, but the muffled lullaby emanated from every direction of the room as if the speakers were hidden within the walls.

"Been a rough night?" asked a voice in a thick Scottish accent. I struggled to lift my head. The man behind the bar was middle-aged and balding. He wore a white collared shirt and a red tie, his sleeves rolled up to the elbow. He wiped the

countertop with a towel in wide circles, then tossed the cloth over his shoulder and smiled.

I opened my mouth to speak, but had already forgotten what he'd asked. The man reached over the bar and placed his hand on the crown of my head. His fingers began to tighten.

"Without trying," he said, now staring at the spot between my eyes.

"Without thinking. Drift away. Drift farther and farther away." The letter 'r' rolled off his tongue and folded into the melody filling the room. Gently, my neck loosened its command and I knew finally that there was no coming back.

Somewhere in the distance, the tide slurped against the wooden rowboat. I tried to count the waves as my head sank onto the varnished wood countertop.

Shluck-uh-womp, two, three, I counted. Shluck-uh-womp, four, five...

I will come

The snow is deflated and brown

In patches amongst the muddy landscape. And my heart

My heart is still shut and cloisters itself

In the security of introversion.

Our eyes can meet but don't hold the gaze

Who'll stop it, though?

For this wayward and lonesome heart.

An individual...

Wait. Hold steady. Breath. Strike now. speak and fall.

Today, dear, I am with you.

Like the muddy clumps of snow clinging to the blocks of concrete.

I couldn't responsibly apologize for fathoms of suicides lie between

You and I in a distance that

Is not time, not length. Not spirit.

But maybe I can apologize for ...you waiting

And I deceive myself, I don't believe in

Forgiveness, for acts of passion but, Jesus, your further away again.

Give me time to forgive myself. Let waves of salt water fall on my body

And carry me onward to your feet

Stay and I will come.

The Smell of Rain

I was struggling to write the other day, so I walked upstairs to my room and pulled a letter you had written to me out of the drawer for inspiration. You had inscribed the date in the top right corner.

July 8, 2016.

When I unfolded the pages, I remembered where I had first found the note folded into thirds on the nightstand beside my bed. You had just pulled out of the driveway on your way to Maine. I remember the room feeling still without your presence like the way a movie set must feel when it's not being used. The envelope was glowing in the morning light when I lifted it from the table, turned it over in my hands, and broke the seal where you had dabbed a wet finger to activate the adhesive.

For you, who I've left by now, who I will always come back for:

You confessed in the letter that you had read something of mine that I left on the table about how rain smells differently everywhere I go. You said that there was probably some biological reason for that, but also because the way we feel, you believed, isn't just inside of us,

that somehow it's also in the world, and it changes things, and it matters.

I would agree with that statement and argue, as I'm guessing you were, that it does not just apply to the smell of rain.

The day before you wrote that letter, you found me with tears trailing down my face. You took the book from my hands, read the inscription on the inside cover, and slid the book back onto the shelf. Without a word, you sat next to me on the bed and turned toward the door.

It was the first time I knew my remembering had hurt you. I understand now why it would. Remembering was more than paying respect; it was falling backward. I had left the present to relive the past. In a way, I had left you.

You weren't angry, though. Your blue eyes were shimmering with tears when you turned toward me, but you refused to let them fall—not then. You blinked and wiped a hand across your eyes. I've never had such an urge to hug someone.

You confessed that you were confused about your place in my healing process. Did I want you to leave early?

I shook my head.

“No,” I whispered.

The tears were quivering in your eyes, threatening to fall down your cheeks.

“Then what do you want me to do?”

I stared down at the bedroom floor. There’d be parts I’d have to navigate on my own. I was aware of my tendency to make an island of myself, to build barriers between those I cared about most. More than anything, though—far more than anything—I knew that I wanted to stay there with you.

“Do you want to go for a drive?” I asked.

*

We first met in that dorm room on a Saturday night toward the end of the spring semester. April 22, 2016 to be exact.

You walked into the room and everyone’s heads turned toward the door. I wrote down in my notebook later that the first thing you said was, “I need a drink,” and that it made me smile because I admired the honesty.

Though we’d never been introduced, I knew who you were. You worked late nights as a lab monitor in the photo studios. I used to stare at you through the hoses and boxes of darkroom chemicals as I developed rolls of film.

The evening slowly pushed us together as you learned that I had taken classes in the photography department and I pretended to be surprised when you told me you were a writer.

We talked about our feelings about Susan Sontag and Walker Evans

How we needed to leave and come back *that somehow*

We need to change things for

them to matter in the world *again*

We ended up at that party on the north end of campus with the strobe lights and spilled beer on the carpet. The large space smelled like body odor and cheap cigarettes. Our friends disappeared amongst the shadowed bodies and it was just you and I standing in the corner by the doors leading out to a balcony.

I thought about asking you to dance because that's what I was supposed to do. We were looking at each other, sort of dropping our shoulders in half-commitment to the music. Then you placed your hand on my shoulder and leaned over to my ear.

"Do you feel like smoking?" you asked.

I nodded immediately. We walked out through the double doors onto the porch facing west toward the Hudson River. I remember the night being quiet, but I suppose we would've still heard the music from this side of the building. A few students were outside smoking in the night air. I remember smelling the moisture of dew rising off the grass as we ambled down the steps and across the lawn.

It was dark, but in a natural way. Dark from the stars and dark from the moon that was hiding behind a line of trees to the south. We sat down on the

opposite side of the art installation jabbing out of the small hill behind the dormitory. The structure, called Stargon, looks like a pair of metallic rabbit ears sprouting from the earth or the antenna of a buried Transformer. Stargon separated us from the party, a barrier for a world of our own.

You pulled the joint from your clutch and I helped you with the lighter. We talked long after the smoke was gone and our muscles were stiff from shivering. The music had subsided when we finally walked back up the hill. The dining hall was dark and we were the only ones outside.

Ours was the only car on the road as we passed Mr. Kellerhouse's farm and turned left onto Kidd Lane; we were alone as we passed the mansion where Saul Bellow and Ralph Ellison lived; and we were the only ones awake when we pulled into your driveway. We sat in the car and talked until the sunrise.

*

You agreed that we should go for a drive, that we should leave the house—go somewhere, anywhere to clear the heaviness from our minds. So we descended the staircase together. We left the house hand-in-hand, got into the car and backed down the driveway.

I turned left onto Stony Brook Road; right onto NY-9G South for seven miles, past Tivoli where we had sat in the car until sunrise and past Bard College where we had shivered and slowly gotten high against the metallic embrace of Stargon. We crossed the Kingston-Rhinecliff bridge for what I later described in my journal as a

“comfort food pilgrimage.” Our grocery bags contained a pint of local blueberries, a spicy tuna roll cut into eight pieces, a container of macaroni and cheese, a container of sesame chicken, and a package of gluten-free mocha doughnut holes wrapped in red ribbon. A mist of rain hung in the air as we crossed the parking lot back to our car, as if the precipitation had chosen to pause in the atmosphere rather than fall onto the pavement and complete its journey from the sky.

I could try to recall the details of our drive back across the river, maybe fabricate a metaphor about the bridge and how it represented a transition in my healing process. The honest answer is that I don’t remember a thing between the parking lot of the grocery store and the boat launch behind the Rhinecliff train station.

We must, because we had to, have driven east across the bridge and turned south on River Road. We would’ve driven through Ferncliff Forest for three miles, past the private driveways meandering west through meadows of alfalfa and wild grass. We would’ve merged onto Rhinecliff Road, down toward the waterfront, and turned right at the first street after the cramped parking lot of the Amtrak station. We would’ve descended the ramp to the boat launch. But I don’t remember any of this.

I remember sitting in the car with you, staring through the windshield at the Hudson River. Fog rolled across the landscape and buried the Catskill Mountains in grey oblivion. Even the bridge we had driven across seven minutes before had

disappeared, only its ghostly silhouette was visible through the vapors of sunken clouds. When I stepped out of the car, I knew that I'd have trouble describing the river when I turned to my journal.

The surface was dark and raw like the feathers of a grey kestrel. The tide was rising. The river seemed to bulge in certain areas, as if there were diaphragms heaving beneath the surface—as if the river were breathing, inflating and deflating against the laws of physics. There was no bottom. If I chose to jump into the liquid, my hands would search endlessly to for solid ground. The current would usher me away from land and guide me slowly away through the fog. I would drift forever into infinity.

Thicker raindrops began to patter against the black top while I beat back my primal urge to join the river. I felt that there was no difference between ourselves—you and I—and the sky, or between the sky and the rain drops falling, or the rain drops falling and the river. The entire scene was interconnected. It was an existential orchestration of harmony, of bliss, and the rain fell as the drum beat to keep everything in tempo. I was glad to share that moment with you.

The two of us turned away from the river and crossed the asphalt to the walkway over the train tracks. One rail was for the service running south to Penn Station, the other north toward Hudson and then Albany. I counted forty-seven steps as we ascended the staircase.

At the top of the bridge we looked down at the river, then to the opposite end of the walkway where an identical staircase descended to a gravel parking lot. I could see the soft glow of lights from the Rhinecliff Inn breaking through the mist.

Staring at the landscape from above induced a feeling that we had been transported to another land. Our view seemed more fitting for the Scottish Highlands than the Hudson Valley in late July. *How could this all be so unfamiliar*, I thought to myself.

You took my hand. The rings around your fingers were cold, but I could feel the warmth of blood rushing through your veins. You guided my fingers around the bars of the security fence, the black metal was cold and wet with fallen rain. You stepped away and another strand of champagne hair fell across your face.

“Scream,” you said. “It’ll make you feel better. We’re not leaving here until you scream.”

I dropped my head and smiled. When I looked back up, I tightened my grip around the black bars. I felt an energy rumbling in my stomach. It swelled like steam from a tea kettle and rose through my abdomen into my chest. My throat tightened. I swallowed hard. A storm raged somewhere deep inside of me. I raised my eyes to the heavens and stared at the wisps of thin clouds passing in the sky. Then I looked west to the mountains and south as far as I could see down river. I opened my mouth. I inhaled. I inhaled as much air as my lungs could hold. Then the words from a distant book fluttered through my thoughts one last time.

- 3. If you ever find that you've become lucid, just relax. Breathe and invite the dream deeper.*

I screamed. I screamed and let everything go.

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)...

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

-E.E. Cummings

The Death of a Dream

I once dreamt that I was standing in the driveway of a white cottage with green shutters. I hopped across the stepping stones in the front yard, intending to knock on the door, but when I lifted my hand to tap on the screen, I literally passed through the house and into the entryway.

The walls inside were painted white and a small window draped with lace curtain looked out into the front yard from where I had just entered. Not a sound stirred from the depths of the house. I turned right down a long hallway, quickly discovering that the house was a labyrinth of interconnecting passageways and trick doors. I'd turn a corner to find that I had ascended to the second floor without noticing. Other times, I'd be looking down a banister with no staircase at the foyer where I had begun.

I wandered the house for what felt like hours, emptying the soil from potted houseplants in search of hidden keys; I opened dozens of doors only to find myself in yet another hallway. No matter which way I turned, I was always within sight of a window draped in a lace curtain that looked back at the front yard.

Then, I heard someone cough.

I followed the noise down a corridor and into a small sitting area. There was another window built into the wall, which, I intuited, would look into the backyard. The light streaming through the glass was so bright, however, that I needed to squint to even see that there were also two rocking chairs on either side of the window. There were also two white doors in the alcove identical to the ones I had been opening all afternoon. One of them, however, had a doorknob made of polished black marble. I opened this door and entered a room cloaked in shadows.

An empty bed was pushed against the wall to furthest from me and beside it was yet another window, this time concealed by a plush maroon curtain. The air was thick with the smell of frankincense. At the foot of the bed was a dresser, on top of which was an old television with the antenna sticking up at obtuse angles. A soft crackling sound emitted from the screen.

I walked to the side of the bed and leaned on the covers so that I could make out the image on the television. It was then that I noticed that it was a monitor displaying a feed of the room from a high-angle, and in black and white. I saw the door that I had entered through, the curtains covering the window, and I saw myself staring at the monitor. The bed, however, looked stiff, almost as if the sheets were carved from marble. I squinted at the screen, realizing that indeed the bed on screen had been replaced with a marble dais like the ones that bodies are rested on during funeral services.

When I turned away from the screen, I saw that my own body was lying motionless on the bed. A fly buzzed around the room. Perhaps it landed on the corpse, but I've since forgotten.

When I woke up, I realized three things about the dream:

1. **Despite the absurdity of the dream, I remained calm, seemingly unaware that something extraordinary was taking place.** There was strangely a feeling of stability as I reflected back because there was no decision making required of me in the dream. My conscious mind was shut down—I was reliant on the guidance of the subconscious.
2. **My lack of agency restricted me to a single perspective.** I couldn't deviate from the narrative that was being constructed for me and say, look through the windows at the houses across the street. I was a passive character who remained unaware of any peripheral information, existing only in the loop of his program.
3. **Upon waking, there was nothing I could do to affect the dream.** I could see, of course, all the potential options that would divert me from arriving in that room, but my knowledge meant nothing in retrospect. The dream was over—there was no way for me to jump back into the story to try adjusting my perspective.

*

For twenty-three years, I've lived in the same village, one hundred and three miles north of New York City. My family's home has always been a farm on the northern outskirts of Tivoli, since long before my own life, actually.

As a kid, I rode the school bus through the streets of Tivoli with headphones in my ears, staring out the window with indifference. One morning, I wondered what would happen if I ran off the bus the next time the doors opened, racing for the train tracks down by the river. In the end, however, I remained compliant. I sat quietly in my seat as the vehicle navigated the same route it had taken every other morning.

I drove the roads so frequently that they simply became pathways to a destination. There was substance beyond the windows of my car, but since I was on my way somewhere—to school, the post office next to the fire house, the ATM behind the laundromat—there was no reason to deviate. Stay west on Broadway to get to the Hudson River, go south on Montgomery to reach the county road, and drive northwest on Stony Brook Road to return home. The routine was so consistent that I began to drive through the center of the village without looking away from the windshield. I only focused straight ahead at what was coming next, ignoring all of the peripheral narratives happening around the car. I was still a member of the community, but my perspective did not drift from the track I was on. My

consciousness stirred elsewhere while I drove through the center of the village on autopilot.

This changed one day when a professor informed me that the authors Ralph Ellison and Saul Bellow had shared a house in the 1970's just outside the center of Tivoli. Their home was a renovated white mansion that could be seen from Montgomery Street on the way into the village and, although I had never considered the house much, I knew exactly where it was. The revelation was remarkable to me not only because of the esteem of the two writers, but because I had never heard, or never listened to, this story in the two decades of living in Tivoli. How could it be that I was not aware of this?

When I drove home that afternoon, the sun was breaking through the trees. I slowed down at the Bellow residence and gazed up at the white mansion on the hill. I imagined Ellison crouched over his typewriter in the front parlor while Bellow tended to his herb garden in the backyard. As I drove to the center of Tivoli, an image of the two authors emerged beside me in Ellison's sleek Chrysler. I gazed out the side windows at all of these homes that they too would have driven past. I discovered a new appreciation for the basketball hoops attached to garage doors and for the dandelions blooming in people's front yards. Bellow tipped his fedora at me when we reached the one intersection in the village, and Ellison steered the car west onto Broadway.

As I continued onto North Road, the image of the authors faded, but the world outside of my car retained its potency. I rolled down the windows at the waterfall on Stony Brook Road, listening to the water burbling as it was washed downstream toward the Hudson River. The smell of freshly cut clover drifted through the windows as I continued northwest past the open meadows of my family's farm, flooding me with memories of climbing empty hay wagons with my brother in July. I pulled the air freshener off my rear-view mirror and tossed in the back seat.

I drove over the crest of the final hill as the peepers began their evening chorus. The sun was setting behind the Catskill Mountains, the cows were grazing in the pastures, and I could see a light on in the kitchen window of my home.

*

I was recently shown two black and white photographs of this very home—or at least of the original house that stood where mine now exists. It was shocking to see the photographs because in some way the scenery looked familiar—I understood that the photographer was facing north and believed that the general structure of the home was similar—but in another way there was something false. The house in the photograph, for example, was constructed of field stones while mine is sided with yellow vinyl.

Photographs only have the ability to capture a specific moment and, although they cannot lie, they also don't provide the viewer with any information except for

what fits inside of the frame. My experience of this home in the photograph was limited then to an idea. No matter how much I tried to transpose my experiences into the image, it was impossible because I was beyond reach of the image. This home was no longer real—it existed in the past and could not be affected by my attempts to adjust the photograph's perspective.

In a sense, the house in the photograph was as real and as relevant to me as the house in my dream had been after I'd woken up. There was a distance between myself and the photograph, just as there had been between the self that was awake and the memory of the dream. It was meaningful and impactful, but separated by a distance of time, if not space. The photograph was dead in the same way that the memory of a dream is dead.

By contrast, one can become active in the present as I had done on the night that I returned home.

When waking from a dream, you must leave the space in which it takes place, and are left only with fragments, memories of the events that occurred. But on that drive home, I did not leave. I was not waking up this time as one does from a dream because I had not gone anywhere. Instead, I was taking command of my consciousness and fracturing the consistency of a routine.

When I parked my car down by the barn, I wandered up my driveway toward the house. I appreciated the gravel crumbling beneath my sneakers and the

smell of lilac and apple blossoms wafting through the air. I was not leaving the moment– not entering some dream or entertaining stories of the past– but was “awakening,” in the philosophical sense of the word, to the world around me.

I was, in effect, becoming lucid.

Afterword

The Chinese philosopher, Zhuangzi, once had a dream that he was a butterfly. He had grown a pair of paper-thin wings and, from what he could remember, spent his time fluttering hither and thither. He recalled being able to taste the sweetness of nectar as it was drawn through his proboscis. He could feel the upward draft as his wings propelled him through the air. While he was in this state, Zhuangzi was conscious of his happiness as a butterfly and that he, himself, was still Zhuangzi.

When Zhuangzi woke up, however, he found himself in the same bed that he had fallen asleep in. His wings were replaced with arms and his proboscis with a human face. The dream had been so tangible, though. "Now I do not know," he wrote, "whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man."

To his mind, the dream was no less real than the condition of being in a human body. It was not until he had woken up that the dream was described as such and who was to say, then, that he would not wake again to realize that this world was all a great dream.

There must be a distinction, he thought, between the two.

He called this transition The Transformation of Material Things.

Acknowledgments

The contents of my work would not be possible without the guidance of the following individuals:

Susan Rogers
Benjamin Hale
Elizabeth Frank
Joseph O'Neill
Erin O'Leary
Michael Wood

Thank you for taking the time to read my work and believing that there's something of value here. I have never been so aware of the amount I have to learn.

To my parents, Sonia and James Crane. Thank you for everything.

To my grandparents and especially my grandmother, Sue Crane. I hope I've made you proud in preserving the legacy of your work as a Bardian. There are few people in my life who have shown me the value of hard work like you have. Thank you for taking the first steps, Grammy, so that I may end up where I am.

Don't be fooled. Although I may dream, I also know the worth of the ground I stand on, of the air I breath, and of the love that fills my heart. The mind wanders not to escape, but because it is perplexed that the conditions of this life could be anything but the substance of some dream.