
Senior Projects Spring 2023

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2023

The Strangeness of Being Alive

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Bard College

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Recommended Citation

Orbach, Marxe Altman, "The Strangeness of Being Alive" (2023). *Senior Projects Spring 2023*. 175.
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The Strangeness of Being Alive

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

Dedication

I dedicate this to myself at 16 years old, and to all the other children, teenagers, and adults who write to survive. We're making it, you guys.

Acknowledgments

I do not know how to write an acknowledgment. The people I ought to acknowledge are endless, and they deserve so much more than words on a page, however powerful words on a page may be.

I would like to thank Mary Caponegro, who sat me down and gave me her time, laughter, and guidance. Some weeks, I sat with Mary for multiple hours, chatting about senior project, and everything else. We spoke about Maryland, eels, and the difference between chewing up grit and being covered in oil. Without Mary, I would have been lost and hopeless.

I want to thank my family. Evie for being my mom and so much more. Not least for ensuring the financial burden of higher education would never be an obstacle in my path. Mo for our weekly yarn and tea evenings. Satch for making me laugh no matter what.

I need to extend appreciation to all the people who told me I couldn't, or shouldn't, do this. I was told not to major in written arts for so many reasons; it wasn't practical, I didn't need it, my ideas weren't the right ones. You ignited a fighting spirit I did not know I had.

Thank you to my friends, my suitemates, my soulmates, the friends I've been a little bit in love with, and the casual acquaintances who spared me a smile every now and then. You give the world texture and beauty.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Spider.....	5
Heat.....	8
Pre-Apocalypse.....	9
Worship.....	12
Cult.....	13
Tarantula Care.....	15
Heartbeat.....	18
Space.....	19
Beginning.....	21
Us.....	23
Party.....	24
Weather.....	26
Eels.....	27
The Woods.....	30
Snake Show.....	33
Post-Apocalypse.....	38
The Place of Lost Things.....	40
Chiropterology.....	43
Mayfly.....	47
The problem.....	50
Meaning.....	53

Introduction

Originally, I called this story *An Anthology of Dreams* because it is in dreams that the imagination lives.

The definition of dreaming can be contentious. Obviously, dreams happen when we are asleep. There is an activation of certain chemicals in the brain, a blocking of external stimuli (though this is limited: in the range of 20%-92%), and a loss of conscious self control. Daydreaming, then, does not count. Sleep paralysis does not count. The executive functioning network turns off and the imagination is allowed to roam freely without the interference of logical thought. The part of the brain that decodes metaphors goes inactive and every experience is exactly what it seems to be.

Dreams are notoriously difficult to study objectively. They are reports of memories of subjective experiences. They are often misinterpreted, or forgotten before there is even a chance to begin grasping them. Dreams do not solve problems. They're not adaptive and nobody understands why they evolved. Reflecting on dreams, though, can help a dreamer discover unexpected solutions or oversights. Symbols in dreams might mean something (Freud believed that a symbol in a dream meant the same thing no matter the context, and that it usually represented something sexual) but they might mean nothing.

Dreams are stories. They often focus only on specific personal concerns and anxieties and make little to no sense. They reflect the chaos of our brains without the stabilization of the outside world. Children with ADHD dream of misfortune, threats, and social aggression more than their neurotypical counterparts do. All humans, however, tend to dream about similar things.

I rarely remember having good dreams as a child. There were interesting settings and people, there were fun pieces, but there were never happy endings. I dreamed of a Polly Pocket™ pool party once, when I was in third grade, but it ended when I was picked up by a giant pigeon and fed to her babies. I was, of course, Polly Pocket-sized. When I was awoken in a state of panic, unable to face the danger of my bed, I wrote down my dreams and reflected on them. Through the words I wrote, the irreality revealed itself. Yes, the terrible had happened, but it had happened to a different version of me in a universe that mirrored, but was not the same as, my own. This version of me was the size of a human child. The danger passed.

As my collection of written dreams continued to grow, I grew as well. I graduated third grade. I became more interested in science and psychology. I fell in love with biology; with weird animals like bats and lizards, spiders and snakes. I tried to control my dreams, but rarely had success in that. Still, I practiced the methods that are supposed to lead to lucid dreamings – things like counting the fingers on my hand, or reading words on a sign to remind myself I was awake. And, while these things did not allow me to keep the nightmares at bay, they did teach me to recognize waking moments of surreality. It turned out that the waking world was frequently unreal.

According to the founders of dreamresearch.net, the dream coding system is described by a set of universal features.

In dreams, as in reality, there are settings: indoor, outdoor, familiar, distorted, and unfamiliar. I found myself often dreaming of things in unfamiliar places like haunted houses or outdoor garden parties. I wrote these dreams down.

There are characters, defined by gender, identity, and age. I dreamed often of my friends, my dog, of my family. Often, in the worst of my dreams, there were blank-faced strangers. These strangers

were often benign, but they took up space and I had to look at them without understanding what they wanted or meant.

There are animals, objects, activities. There are successes and failures and good or bad fortune. There is emotion, often, though it is not all encompassing. There is social interaction, always either friendly, sexual, or aggressive.

The dreams I wrote down made little sense. They were long stories of being chased by something that turned into something else that wanted me for some unknown reason. They filled up pages upon pages, as long as I needed to write before I felt calm again. Often, the words were more or less meaningless. All that stuck with me would be a single image, setting, or feeling, and I would let that turn over and over in my mind.

I retold these stories, both internally and externally, time and time again, until they became myths. They were tales of heroes facing challenges, weird and absurd. Sometimes, there was fear, and sometimes there was dissatisfaction. The search for meaning, as is the case with dreams, often ended fruitlessly. I focused on the beauty in that.

The images in my dreams morphed into settings and stories. I dug into the pieces that stuck with me, the love, the discomfort, the absurdity. I searched for symbols and themes. I read about dream psychology. I listened to podcasts. I created characters that are omnipresent in many of our dreams and gave them names; there was the man, the sophomore, the stranger, and a narrator who held them all to reality. There was an animal, Lasi, who maneuvered between forms and sensibilities. All came from dreams, and all came from me. None were me.

I explored situations like running away (sometimes quickly and intentionally, sometimes unconsciously and nearly imperceptibly), or being trapped and lashing out. I took the emotions I felt in

my dreams, which often centered around escape, and the emotions I felt in real life, which were often unsettling, intense, and confusing. There were new discoveries in dreams, new ways of experiencing life at different scales.

I explored daydreams too. There were moments when I wondered what would have happened if my arm had randomly dislocated, or if everything that had not been alive before were suddenly animated. I toned it down, and I added it in.

Through writing this, I dreamed about my life and the lives of my friends. I experienced moments that did not feel fully real. My grandfather died. My friend from high school died. I started catching eels for a Department of Environmental Conservation survey. One of my best friends made it clear that she did not value our relationship. I learned about mayflies. I applied for jobs. Winter began and the bats went into hibernation. Winter ended and leaves grew back on the trees. There were thunderstorms. Flowers bloomed. I learned terrible and exciting things every day. Everything was unexpected and nothing went according to plan.

I put as much of it as I could into this collection of stories. I hope some of the beauty and absurdity of the world makes it to you. I hope your moments of sadness drive moments of connection, and that the pain feels like part of the beauty.

The Spider

The itzy bitsy spider went up the water spout.

But, the spider never did see herself as very small. Some called her a creepy crawly spider, but she didn't see herself like that either. She had eight legs, sure, but she was an arachnid, and that was the perfect number. It was exactly what she needed.

She knew, going up that drain pipe, that the downpour would flush her out eventually. It always did. And yet, she continued to climb up, to search for greater heights.

The viewpoint was the best up there, from the gutters. There were always bugs hiding in the dams of wet leaf and stick. There were panes of glass in the roof through which synthetic bulbs shone at night. If she built her web there, she could catch innumerable moths, each juicy and delicious. Their bodies filled her stomach and their scaled wings floated down to feed other smaller creatures.

Maybe, though she would not admit this, she was waiting for the rain to come and carry her away.

The spider wove webs. They were shiny and beautiful. They connected to her brain. Not only did they serve as sensors to the outside world, but as an extension of her cognitive system. With her silk, she could connect the dots between the bent nail in one shingle and the rough texture of another. She could trick her prey, catch them, and wrap them up. She could shelter her young if she ever had any. She could store her thoughts.

But the webs were small.

The large pink beasts that walked on two legs called her glass illusion a skylight. Through it, if she hung just the right way, she could watch it work its own clumsy web. It did not produce its own silk like she did. It stole its thread from others, though she did not know who, and used a stick to

unspool it very, very slowly. The web the human spun was larger than the spider's, but it was not as beautiful. It was not sticky. It could not have caught anything, or connected anything, or protected anything.

The spider watched the human work for hours, stitch by stitch and layer by layer. She thought that, maybe, when the human was done, in days or weeks, it would have a cocoon to rest in. The web was rather small in comparison to the beast's body. The human lifted the web, braided and colorful, to its eye. Then it paused. The spider was ballooning a mosquito when she saw this, blanketing it over and over with silk from her major ampullate gland. She, too, stopped and held her breath for a moment, the slits on her two pairs of book lungs narrowed and stilled. The spiracle opening the trachea on her abdomen to the passive movement of oxygen could not close, but it was secondary.

Then, the big clumsy pink thing that shook the ground with every step, found a string and pulled. The web it had spun was delicate. In a few seconds, hours of work splayed over the floor expanded and undone. A pulled thread led to nothing. The spider was disappointed. It was an unsatisfactory story.

The spider drank the blood the mosquito had taken from the human. This made her feel a little better.

She waited for the rain to come.

The thing about rain is this: it can carry you for miles. Being flushed out is like being reset. The spider would find a dry spot somewhere, though it never knew how far it had gone. She would climb up the rainspout because that was where the best spots were. She would build a new web and try to find different stories, better ones.

Being flushed out was like falling into a river. The stream connected one point to another, though the spider never knew where she was heading and just barely understood where she had come from. It was bigger than a web, and bigger than a thread. It ran dry sometimes, though there was always a wave coming from ahead. Sometimes, when the spider wasn't caught up in the rapids, she could see, with brief clarity, something beautiful or something terrifying. Then, she continued on her way whether she chose to or not. It was much more satisfying than pulling on a string and learning there was nothing left.

The spider was deposited wherever the current saw fit. She found a waterspout there and always climbed up. Then, she tricked and ate and watched. She constructed an intricate web of beautiful lies and waited for some poor creature to show attraction. Always, there was boredom. There were unsatisfying endings to intriguing beginnings. So, always, she waited for a flowing river to come and take her away, to show her another good story before the cycle started anew. Then, she watched.

Heat

The man no longer believes that pure cleanliness exists. This is because he collects dirt like a wet sponge. This is because he spews mud and shit like putting too much oil in a shallow pan. Like Laboulbeniales fungus growing on the shells and nails and hair of insects and spreading to whoever it touches. He moves sometimes, and we shrink back. He loses his temper in ways we don't expect, and can't defend against. So, at the end of the day, if spotlessness exists it is not for people like him.

Still, he cannot keep himself from the scalding hot shower. Is it hot enough to kill the bacteria on his skin? He doesn't know. He used to scrub his arms and chest with a scouring sponge until he was raw and red and bleeding, but that was futile. It just opened pathways for the dirt to get inside. Since then, he has moved to a loofah. He uses a salicylic acid body wash. This is the way things are.

He washes his hair twice with shampoo and conditioner. The faucet releases softened water, so it never feels like he's rinsed all the conditioner out. This means he needs a second round of shampoo. This means he has to keep going, holding his head under hot water for as long as he can stand to, taking a break, and going back again. More conditioner. He washes it out for so long, this time, that his hair starts to feel dry. He can't do it again. The tile walls are covered in clumps of hair he's pulled off of his scalp. Dry is better than oily anyways.

His face, he used to bathe in benzoyl peroxide and salicylic acid, and then let the chemicals sit and sink into his skin. They thinned the skin, killed the bacteria, loosened the pores, and broke off the dry bits. In the morning, flakes would peel off and drift into the sink like snow. It would wind up on his pillow and show on his clothes. In the end, it was only more dirt. You can never clean a person off of themselves. It's too much work. This is why he's switched to a water rinse. Never clean, but better.

The issue is, he still tries to scrub and lather. He makes sure the heat reaches his chin, his brow, the insides of his nostrils. It comes when he gets to his eyes. He scrubs in little circles, and they dip and roll along with his palm. They're smooth, marble-like but not completely circular. He can feel the iris, the pupil imperfecting the spheres. They tell him that they perceive light, but his eyes are closed. They have to be.

The problem is, once he gets started on his eyes he can't ever stop. They roll and they squish and they show him lights that aren't there circling like he's about to be abducted and taken away. They start to burn. His hands are stronger than his lids, and he pries them open, then shut again. He can't stop.

He's on his knees in the shower. His body is hot. The water leaves red lines on his back and his chest and his thighs. He's sweating, and he knows this only because the various little scrapes along his body start to sting with the salt. Still, he can't stop rubbing his eyes. He could be here forever. He's not thinking about how dirty his body is, or how dirty the world is. All he can think about is how his eyes itch and burn and feel so good under the press of his palms.

When the water starts to feel cold, he gives himself an ultimatum. He will count down from five, and then it will be over. If it's not, he will be here until he dies. He counts down. He stops. He always seems to. Opening his eyes hurts. Blinking hurts. He's surrounded by dirt again.

He wants to sleep.

Pre-Apocalypse

A list of creatures that will survive the apocalypse:

1. Cockroaches. This is obvious and well-told. A cockroach is round and flat, and therefore notoriously difficult to squish.
2. Crows. Not only do they exist everywhere, but they do it well. They thrive in trash, in woodlands, in deserts, in abandoned buildings. A crow is one member of a swarming family that stretches around the world.
3. Mushrooms and fungi. Because it exists deep enough below the earth that humans cannot kill it.
4. Ferns. Plants that existed long before the dinosaurs and have already survived a half dozen other apocalypses. This one will be a walk in the park for them. If they could walk.
5. Jellyfish. I refuse to elaborate. They may, however, give rise to an alternate version of corals.
6. Crabs. Horseshoe crabs, specifically, will exist forever. Their designs have not changed since the dawn of time. Other crabs too. Not in the form that we know them now, but everything does turn into a crab eventually. They've evolved at least five separate times. Convergent evolution.
7. Cats. Opportunistic and sly. Not dogs. Dogs will be lost with humans.
8. Me. I will live forever. I have a plan to keep myself from dying.

They say the apocalypse will not come in a hail of fire or an outbreak of zombie contagion. It will arrive slowly, and gradually and we will all see it but always think there is more time. Before the

end, the store shelves will be full, the water will be poisoned, and the earth will be unplatable. Things we never see will die before we know they exist. Humanity will be wiped out by zoonotic diseases, by extreme weather events, by starvation, and contamination. Nothing can be done about that.

Worship

Their friend said “set an intention,” so the sophomore said “I want to stop caring what people think of me” and their friend laughed.

It hit at 1:47 pm, on a walk down the suburban street in the Spring. The flowers had just started blooming the week before. The sophomore didn’t say anything about it, but they did mention every cherry blossom and dandelion, every insect floating in the air. Their friend knew. Where had the insects been in winter?

They stopped at the flowing river and looked down. The rippling sunlight could have been small fish or frogs or water striders but it was not. The sophomore decided not to think so much about jumping off the bridge. The acid allowed them to slow down, to register each thought and understand from where it had come and why.

Later, the sophomore and their friend sat in the grass in front of the blue house and stained their pants green. They’d picked up a leaf somewhere along the way and the sophomore had tucked it into the laces of their shoe to keep it safe. Vibrant orange, green, red, and brown, perfect veins flowing like aqueducts. They sat in a circle around it and stared.

Later again, when they were bundled in soft blankets on a ripped leather couch, just beginning to come down, the sophomore asked, “Why did you want to be friends with me?”

To which their friend replied, “Because you looked nice. I noticed you were short and you had a cute dog.”

The sophomore felt disappointed and relieved. They had learned friends would find them no matter what and often for no reason at all.

Cult

Joining a cult should have been easy. The sophomore was relatively well-to-do, young, and, most importantly, directionless. All these things made them a prime target for exploitation. When a Scientology video arrived in the mail, addressed to their name at their home address, they borrowed a DVD player and watched it. When calls came in from the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, they kept an amicable tone and didn't hang up.

Of course, those were not the types of cults the sophomore really wanted to join. They were too normal. Large, universal, and not yet world-encompassing, but a start. You could be a Mormon, or a Scientologist and remain a relatively normal person in society. That is, unless you were really good at it.

The sophomore was tired of normalcy. Also, they were tired of spending their energy on things that took them nowhere palpable: video games, love, climbing the social ladder. At least, in a cult, they might be promised wealth and paradise.

So they stole from their mother. They sought bad grades in their classes. They never called their friends. If they had known just the right person or if they had been less of a homebody, maybe they would have received their invitation to live at a spiritual ranch in the middle of Kansas. There was no invitation. They were growing used to the disappointment.

An old adage: If you want something done, you have to do it yourself.

Another: Be the change you wish to see in the world.

So the sophomore went to their hottest, richest friend, and apologized for their usual lack of communication. Their friend said he did not mind, and the sophomore asked him if he'd want to become a religious icon, a figurehead. That part was easy. Their friend, as it turned out, had his own

alternative philosophies about the oneness of all things, and a relatively strong yet unfulfilled need for positive attention.

Then, the sophomore, who had promised to take care of management and planning, had to find a place where it would be easy for the two of them to separate themselves from the rest of the world. Somewhere rural, beautiful, and cheap, where Verizon did not care to extend its wireless tendrils.

Southern Idaho already belonged to people who did not want to be found. It was an ideal place to go into hiding. They found Midnight on a map, but it was not a town or a village. It was not even a settlement. It was a 'populated place'. There was no better phrase to describe the rotting farmstead and half-landslide-buried shack between the lake and the mountains.

The sophomore and their friend found ten acres for sale just up the river from Midnight. The mud that slopped off that land down into the valley, rich in magnesium and potassium, was worth more than they paid in full.

For recruitment: TikTok. The sophomore filmed the green mountains, the flowing river, the foundations of new homes being built, and their friend emerging from the water naked and beautiful. His smile. His words of welcome.

They built the foundations together, sowed the seeds of tomato plants and corn and lettuce, and applied for religious tax exemption.

Nobody came, and that was okay.

Tarantula Care

When I was a junior in high school, I drove for an hour to the biggest reptile convention in Maryland. It was called Baltimore Repticon. A few years earlier, when I'd fashioned myself a hobby lizard breeder, I'd come with 4 baskets, each full of 2-dozen lizards. Bearded dragons. This time, I was empty-handed.

My price of entry was ink. A moist stamp like a snog on the back of my hand. I could hide it, but never scrub it off. That purple chameleon stared at me, daring me to burn it off with hydrochloric acid once the soap didn't work in the convention bathroom. When it lasted until Monday, it nearly made me cry. A much heavier price than the \$5 entry fee.

I hate having anything on my skin. Images that are not part of me that I cannot make go away. *Under my skin* is a different story, but one for another time.

This story is not about skin.

This story is not about scales either, though I do love the scaly and the slimy.

This story is about plastic.

It begins here, at Baltimore Repticon, in the stall with the black tablecloths and the bins of arachnids. With Lasi the Brazilian salmon pink bird-eating tarantula.

To be fair, she was a baby Brazilian salmon pink bird-eating tarantula. Still in training. I couldn't even buy her the normal-sized crickets yet -- they were too large for her to easily kill, and I was scared they might bully her if she couldn't get them fast enough. Still, she ate more pinhead crickets with every feeding, impaling them on her fangs and bundling their squishy bodies together with her silk rope. She'd gone through three molts already, growing larger with each one.

She was outgrowing her home.

The back of my hand itched and I scratched it. I checked my fingernails for ink and found them clean. I let my shoulder relax and my sleeve hang loose so that it covered my palms and the first two joints of my fingers. My clothes were always too large anyways.

The table was blocked in with black curtains, with neon images of venomous deathstalkers and soft rose-haired tarantulas. They swayed gently. The man behind the table with tattoos matching his tapestry spoke with another customer. I wondered if the ink underneath his skin stared at him the way my chameleon curse stared at me. The deathstalker came alive when somebody tripped over the curtain. I couldn't look away, but I did. I always do seem to.

There were plenty of other arachnids there, ones that really were alive. Skeleton tarantulas, Mexican redleg tarantulas, and curly-haired tarantulas. Emperor scorpions and jumping spiders. I was looking for the clear plastic boxes in the corner. Stacks of them, in different sizes, different shapes.

Imagine a dog cage, metal bars and plastic sheeting for easy cleanup. Maybe there's a bowl of water or a blanket on the floor. A tarantula cage is not like a dog cage and still would not be if the tarantula were the size of a dog. Some do become that large.

Tarantulas need humidity, and they're smart enough to open a clasp to escape. At least, Lasi is. Lasi's old home was the size of a tissue box, clear plastic, with small holes on the sides that she sometimes stuck her feet through. I kept it closed with four plastic screws and latches, one on each side. A process to open or close. An eyesore.

My tarantula had tiny feet, velvety skin, an abdomen covered in ginger fuzz, and a spinneret that she used to prepare her food, build her house, spin her egg sack. *Lasiadora parahybana*. Lasi was an old-world spider. Her fangs could grow up to an inch long, but she would never use them to bite. If she were threatened, she would have kicked hair at me instead, and the fuzz would have caused my skin

to itch and swell immediately and for the next two weeks. But I never threatened her and she was gentle with me. She didn't deserve to live in between four jutting screws.

I wanted to buy this house. This one with four walls and a roof. Two levels she could climb up onto and a ramp. A front opening door with its very own doorknob and circulation abound. I wanted to live there too.

Coconut fiber soil, dehydrated bedding. I could have buried myself there and slept like a tortoise put into its shallow grave for the winter. I wondered if those tortoises waited to be dug back up or if they died a small death like going under anesthesia.

A tarantula house in an old-growth forest. Water would flow in from the sides to feed the multitudes of moss, like little forests along its walls. Beds of leaves would litter its coconut floor. Outside, dragonflies and frogs, deer, and, if I'm lucky, even a bear. It would be the size of a van, or I would be the size of a spider.

If I fell asleep in a tarantula cage in the woods, I would not want to wake up.

Heartbeat

The man sat at his desk. Everything hurt and he didn't know why. His feet tingled and his head pounded. He felt his knees pulsing. If he looked closely, he could see the muscles jumping in time with his heartbeat.

He imagined that the muscle cells there had grown tired of listening to his brain's commands, those constant chemical-electrical impulses. They had quit their jobs and gone on to find more fulfilling work. They had specialized, turned themselves into cardiac cells and now they generated their own action potential, sent out their own electrical spikes. He imagined little hearts in his body, where hearts were not meant to be. Hearts in his knees, his toes, between the plates of his spine.

It was silly, to have so many hearts. It was inefficient, they couldn't keep up with each other. There were no messages being sent, and fewer being received. But all the bundles of nerves and muscles were tired and demoralized and this was their fulfillment. They watched their neighbors change and they became inspired. He pictured more and more of himself turning to smooth cardiac muscle: his lungs, his blood, his eyes. Nothing left.

Each cell became a tiny heart. There was no more contraction of muscle, no more smoothness of skin. Tiny hearts circulated through his veins, pumped through bigger ones that could no longer keep pace with each other, oxygenated by lungs that no longer received oxygen.

He wondered if this was an anxiety attack or a dream. How fast were all his tiny hearts beating?

Space

The man makes me uncomfortable. He is somebody's brother, but he is nobody's son.

No, I have to correct myself. He has a mother. He just isn't sure what he is to her. He loves her but he doesn't want to be anything for anybody. It is too much responsibility. It's crushing.

Yesterday, I wanted to hold him. I wanted to reach out and wrap my arms around his stomach. He's so raw, so distant always. My hands hover and I feel his warmth, but I can never quite reach him. I think that if I could touch his skin, he might shatter into a dozen plastic pieces. I don't want him to shatter. I don't want to tell his mother that I reached too far and went right through him.

Also; what if he doesn't hold me back? Or if reaches forward while his mind recoils.

The man is applying for work. He was submitting applications on Christmas. Now it is mid-January and there's been no reply to his email. He has just pinged it. Sent an additional email because they hadn't replied to his first. This happens sometimes when people send work emails on Christmas and it makes sense to him that his message has gone unnoticed. But now he's pinged it.

He does not know the face of the woman on the other end of the coded strings of words. He knows her title, the address of her office, but still cannot imagine her expression reading his email. He started this email, as he does many, with the line "I hope you are well." And now, he imagines a featureless face scrunched up. The colorless eyes cannot roll in their sockets but the muscles ripple and shift. Does she believe this line is bullshit? It must be what everyone says. He doesn't know her and he doesn't really care that much about her well-being. If she told him in her reply that she'd fought with her partner, or her kids were getting ready to move out and it scared her, or she was alone in a new city with few friends, he doesn't think he would quite know what to do.

He doesn't really think that this is why she hasn't responded. But he still worries that he's annoyed her somehow. By pinging the email. By applying in the first place. He's not the most qualified applicant in the pool, he's pretty sure, and now he's taking up more space than he was ever due by sending a second email four weeks later. Would it have been better to email sooner, he wonders? Two weeks after hearing no response, instead of four. As little as he knows her, she knows him less. All she has to go on are a short letter and a resume and she can not possibly remember him from that, especially now that it's been almost a month.

He exists in the world now, maybe, to someone who had never considered his existence before and this is terrifying. He does not deserve space in her mind. He does not deserve a spot in her inbox, and yet he has taken it. He wishes he could go back in time. It never really mattered that much.

Beginning

Like many of the altogether ill-conceived things we did at the time, running away was the sophomore's idea. They had tried before when they started their failed cult. Although it hadn't worked out and they had grown bored of Midnight, Idaho, they never really gave up.

The sophomore knew that we all wanted to escape from something different. They'd been reading a lot of books about manipulation tactics recently, for research. We all knew this. One by one, they pointed out to us our own issues and gave us a path forward.

They talked to the man first, because men are gullible and easy to control if they think they're the ones in charge. They asked him about his job search and his social life. They listened and nodded, and even offered words of encouragement or advice, depending on which seemed more appropriate at the given moment. They treated him like a friend, and he believed all of it. The sophomore told him that he was not damaged or insane. It was this impossible world that was really at fault. No sane person could have ever grown well-adjusted and successful here. If anything, the sophomore said, it is the rest of the world that is crazy. It was not very original. Still, he ate that up.

The sophomore said to the man, "I'm going on a trip, and I want you to come. We can do something fun. Nobody will expect anything from you that you don't already have and can't already give."

The man even broke a smile. He did not care where they would go, he just wanted to be gone. He did not want to stay here.

The sophomore came to me next, because they did not need to ask the spider, and they definitely did not need to ask their real friend.

I would like to think that I am smarter than the man. I would like to think that I am more astute, and less prone to being drawn into another person's plan. The sophomore knows me better than that.

"Do you want to see a really big snake?" The sophomore asked me. Of course, I did. Who wouldn't? Maybe I wasn't as smart as I thought.

The sophomore said "Lark Parker is having a live show in Cincinnati. She's going to present the biggest snake in the world."

Lark Parker was like a modern-day Steve Irwin. Except, Lark did not have the adoration of the masses, the ownership of a zoo, any particular catchphrase, or a regular spot on TV. She was a YouTube star who began as a zoo employee and continued on to film wildlife encounters. I didn't have a catchphrase either. So, on the spectrum of normal person to international icon, she was really a little bit closer to me.

A difference: I hate Ohio.

"I've got tickets and gas money," The sophomore said, "Can you drive?"

How could I have said no?

Us

We sit in the van together. I am driving. Behind me are the man, the sophomore, their friend, the stranger, and Lasi the tarantula. The passenger seat holds only my backpack.

The man stares at his hands and shakes. He does not belong in this body and he is afraid, sometimes, of the things it does. He is afraid, too, of the future, of the work he must complete, of the decisions he must make.

The sophomore stares at their hands as well. They are comfortable in their body, it is theirs as much as any form could be. The thing is, they're in love with their friend and he doesn't love them back. This is the third time it has happened.

From behind, the stranger looks like it is looking out the window, straight ahead. From any other angle, it does not have a face.

Lasi the tarantula is buckled into her seat next to the sophomore's friend. Sometimes, she becomes a dog. Sometimes she becomes a woman. The seatbelt keeps her from becoming too large. The friend stares out the window and makes a point of meeting nobody's eyes. Lasi has too many eyes to avoid.

We are looking for something, but now there is only road ahead of us, and the sun is setting.

Party

A collection of images

The marble bridge in upstate New York.

On one side: noise, lights, people in evening gowns with jewel-topped canes. A home the size of a city -- made of gray stones and crawling ivy and stained glass windows.

On the other: Trees. Taller than they should be, darker. Blotting out the stars and absorbing the moon. Cicadas, maybe, except that cicadas aren't supposed to sing at night.

Below: flowing water, a staircase, a landing. The water's surface rippling with red and white and blue on one side, reflecting colored lanterns strung from ropes. On the other, sinking into inky blackness. From behind, a trickling stream. Ahead, vastness.

On the bridge: the man.

He has come from the party. He would have stayed, but the people there were strange and faceless. They laughed at jokes he didn't understand. They smiled with no eyes and far too many teeth. The place he rests now is safe, but he cannot stay here. The night is growing cold, and somebody might look for him. He won't know their intentions if they do come looking. They might eat him. They have so, so many teeth. Every time they speak, they present their teeth like tiny white show dogs standing in rows.

The man cannot imagine how many teeth it would add up to if the dogs all growled at once.

He can't go back to the party, this much is clear. But the stairs shine slippery and the woods suck in everything and he can't stay here. The noise is growing closer. He can't stay here and he can't go the one way, so he goes the other. The woods have never hurt him, not really, not like the water has.

The water is vast and inky and, if the man tried the stairs, he could slip and hit his head and drown. His father drowned years ago. It would have been unfair of him to do the same.

The man is still afraid of death. He turns towards the woods. Tall pine and fir, only slivers of stars between. He'd thought there were cicadas, but now there is silence. This is strange. The woods are never silent at night. He is still too close to the mansion. The animals share his fear.

He goes further and hears nothing. He does not hear the party. He hears the fall of his step on soft brown needles. He hears his heart, his breathing. The sound has no meaning.

Weather

It was raining in the freezer. The fat droplets soaked through the cardboard and puddled over the ice tray. We had to break up the giant cubes with hammers and pickaxes, or we would drink our water warm. We couldn't read the microwave instructions on any of the frozen meals. The ink was blurry.

It can still rain when the ground temperature is freezing. Thunderstorm, too. The reason metal cannot be kept in the freezer is not the loss of structural integrity but rather the environmental safety in the event of a freezer-based thunderstorm. Metal attracts electricity. Electricity travels through wires.

We opened the freezer door because we were hungry, but the weather was too nasty to stay in. We ordered Chinese takeout and had a picnic in the midday sun. The man lined the kitchen floor with towels before we left. He said the door might leak and then there might be water damage. Another day, the clouds would clear up and dry the ink until it was legible once more.

In the meantime, we all must do our best to not stick our clenched fists into the storm. We always open them up to find we'd been holding forks.

Eels

The Sargasso sea is strange. It is not bordered by land, but by currents, and this means that its waters are eerily calm and deep. There is little dissolved oxygen, and light does not reach past the surface. This makes the sea a terrible home for plankton. For fish and whales, a sea without plankton is like a city without rice, or bread, or any carbohydrate whatsoever. It is a food desert. The water is deep. Five miles. This is the home of the Bermuda Triangle, the Devil's Sea.

This is where the eels go, so deep that we cannot find them. The surface is blocked by carpets of brown floating *Sargassum* seaweed. It is a landmass without land. Here, crabs pick and forage. Birds nest. Turtles swim. An eel is hardwired to swim down, always, to find the tightest darkest rock crannies or rotted shipwrecks where, maybe, there will exist some safety.

An eel that has reached the Sargasso Sea will never be heard from again. This is, also, where an eel begins. In between, something is missing.

Eggs in the billions wash out, slowly, slowly. They have no control over their movement. Many of them float to the seaweed and are eaten by crabs. Many of them sink into the depths and die in the impenetrable darkness. Some reach the edge of the still sea and are picked up by the faster, stronger currents of the ocean. The Sargasso Sea is bordered by four major currents, and the eggs are thrown to all corners of the Atlantic Ocean. They hatch into larvae, leptocephalic and disc-like. Flat, impossible to squish. They can swim now, all by themselves, without being taught, without having fins. They follow the tide, always to land.

But land is so far away. Those that managed to hatch are dead after a year of swimming, mostly. They are eaten by the smallest of fish, which are eaten by less small fish, which are consumed by bigger fish. Some of the big fish are punched to death by octopuses, which then eat the crabs that scavenge

their remains. The seal that dives to find and eat the octopus is trapped by an orca whale, chased, tortured, and is itself consumed. On and on it goes.

Some larvae survive, and those that do find the salt of the water growing scarce. This is a cue. They drop their teeth. They grow long and round and become glass, like rice noodles with large dark eyes. The spine is visible as a dark line down the center of its long body, its eyes are bright and unlidged. Under its eyes, two pink circles like blush on its cheeks. This is where the oxygen diffuses into its blood, where it digests the small insects it has eaten for lunch, not that it divides its daily consumption into meals. They swim, always, against the current.

This means, the glass eel, barely now over two inches, pulls itself over waterfalls, vertical dams, any obstacles it may meet. It can survive the dryness of walls and beaver blockages. It can use the surface tension of the water on its skin to grip and aid in its journey. It can survive falling, bending, being hit, being bitten. It cannot survive more salt. This is the one thing it tries to escape from.

And, eventually, once the eel has found a spot far enough inland, there is fresh water. Now, its body can produce more pigmentation, its skin can become a thick, dark green. It is no longer so vulnerable, though more visible to those that want the meat on its bones. It hides in leaves and rocks at the bottoms of streams. It eats, finally, worms and snails and the glass eels that do not trigger any memory of what it had once been. Still, it swims against the current.

It pulls its body over wet grass, dirt. It slithers like a snake through sand, as far as it can go until there is no longer any sign that the ocean had ever existed. Home is this marsh, or that well. The eels colonize the continent, each searching for the place it can turn golden and eat and rest. It will spend fifteen years here, or one hundred, and then something will call it back

Does the signal arrive from outside or inside? The stomach dissolves. There is no more food, and the eel must hope it has eaten enough at home. There are no snacks to be packed and still 4000 miles to go. Its skin goes gray and shiny. Its eyes grow large enough to see through the darkest parts of the ocean. The silver eel turns around and goes back to where it had started, in that quiet place of floating brown algae and unimaginable depth.

Maybe, it will survive. Often, it will not. There are people waiting with nets to catch and eat it. Eagles, herons, raccoons, waiting to pluck it out of the water. The journey takes half of a year, at least, if the eel swims the entire way at full speed with no obstacles. Then, the Sargasso Sea is reached and the mystery begins.

Sigmund Freud, before he became a psychologist, was hired to perform dissections on silver eels as a lab assistant. He cut open hundreds of them, searching always for their genitalia, as was the Freudian way. He never found even a hint of how an eel reproduces. For Freud, the invisibility of eel sex was torture. Freud was the first person to discover an eel penis, the obsession running so deep that eel phalluses made their way into his dreams.

In treating patients later, he often referred to items that appeared in their dreams as symbols of phallic or vaginal imagery. In truth, he was still hung up on the eels.

The Woods

The party was louder inside.

Inside was where the sophomore stood, blending into the carpet. Their friend had a hand in planning the event, and they followed him around like a puppy weaned too early from its mother. Their friend greeted the guests, conversed with them about things the sophomore didn't really care about, and moved on. The sophomore took every drink offered to them, and even some that weren't. They had never drunk to the point of vomiting before, but they had drunk to the point of slurred words and forgotten grammar rules. A place where they knew they were making a fool of themselves but did not care to stop it. This was, they thought, where they preferred to be.

It was fine, as long as they had an arm to lean on or a face to smile at. An ear to listen with, and a mouth to be listened to. But they were with their friend, and their friend moved through the crowds like fluid. Now hugging a guest, now on the dance floor, now sneaking off into the bathroom with one or two people the sophomore had never met. And then, there was nobody the sophomore really knew. Nobody came to speak to them, nobody cared what they had to say.

They realized, after some time sitting alone waiting for their friend to return with people whose names the sophomore did not remember, that it was hubris to think they had something in their mind worth knowing. This was the reason people spoke to each other but never turned to them; because to know another person was to sacrifice time and energy, and nothing the sophomore had given the impression that they were that valuable.

Still, they sat there, in that empty living room lobby turned ballroom, on a couch pushed to the walls, windows thrown open to let the heat out. Music played from speakers the size of small vans

and the dancers filtered out with some tacit awareness that it was time to smoke. And the sophomore thought anybody might want to hear them speak. They sat on a couch alone. Hubris.

Not, they reflected, that they were particularly good at speaking. Even in the conversations they did join, everybody spoke about things they did not know, and could not add to. They could sit in silence and nod sometimes, or they could ask short questions at others. When they found themselves totally and completely lost, they stood up and danced, but the language of their body did not line up with that of anybody else's either.

So, they left. They stood outside the door and did not see the groups of smokers they had expected to. There were wood planks above, guarding them against the rain, but not well. Who would want to smoke in the rain? The drops splattered and stained their clothes and flattened their hair. They walked in the middle of the street because there were no cars, and they told themselves they wouldn't really care if there were. Still, when they heard tires on a wet road some hundred yards behind, they did step out of the way.

This night was no better for dying than any other. Lasi was waiting at home.

Something about the rain made them feel alive and invisible. Something about the alcohol made them feel like this was all important. This was all there was. They needed to stomp through the mud. They wanted to catch a frog. They wondered if this was wrong of them since the frogs would not want to be caught.

A cafe down the street, but it was closed. They stood outside for a minute anyways, two, three, just to hear the rain bounce off the top of their canvas hood. There was a reflective marker posted beside the street. It bordered a path. They took the long way home through the woods, even though

they needed to use the bathroom and, if they'd just taken the sidewalk, their hotel would have been less than five minutes away.

They squatted in the middle of the path instead. It was too dark to see the rain wash their urine away. They didn't want to go home. They wanted to stay and sit on a log but they didn't have a bottle opener and they also wanted to have another drink. In their bag, there was one beer left. They knew a trick for opening bottles with a lighter, but they didn't have a lighter either.

They tried using the log they sat on as a church key, but the bark was rotting and the bottle cap scratched it off more like pulp than woodchips. Otters are some of the only non-human animals to use tools, but most of their tools are rocks, not bottle openers or lighters. The sophomore left the path and walked into the woods. They tried to imitate an otter. They rubbed the bottle cap against a moss-covered rock up the hill but could not get the right angle. Eventually, they aimed for the neck and hit it. Hard. The bottle broke easily. The innards spilled out because of course they did. The sophomore drank from the broken glass anyways and hoped they did not cut themselves.

There were four sips left. They counted. With each, they felt grit and dirt on their bottom lip. Still, they crouched there by the moss carpet and worried that they'd poisoned the soil. They left the empty bottle there and poisoned it further.

They left their bag in the woods as evidence and came home late. Lasi was not as excited to see them as they'd hoped. She did not wag her tail or run to the door. Their friend did not get back until the early morning. By then, they'd already become sick with wondering. Did anybody else actually know about that place between party and home? If they had fallen asleep there, would they have been left in peace?

Snake Show

The snake show was a disaster, and not for any of the normal reasons either.

The most common causes of incidence at live animal presentations are as follows: animals that are improperly socialized and become afraid, loud children and careless adults, electrical blackouts, and animals pooping on the zookeeper's arms.

Lark Parker knew how to deal with all of that. She was an expert. She was 43 years old. For 22 of those years, she had trained in the husbandry, care, and handling of exotic animals. She was smaller in person than on the computer screen, but still, she had no problem holding a crocodile and wrapping a boa around her shoulders. Not at the same time, usually.

In the past, the longest recorded snake in the world was the reticulated python at nearly 33 feet. Lark smiled when she said this. Her hand rested on the softly rippling fabric hiding the creature behind her. The heaviest snake in the world was the green anaconda, which could weigh 550 pounds even before a meal. The green anaconda could take down a big cat if it wanted to.

“Imagine something with no legs that could kill a jaguar.”

I have seen a Burmese python fight an alligator and win. They wrapped around each other and clawed and thrashed but once a python has squeezed you so tight that you can't move your arms or legs, or even whip your tail, it's better to just give up. You close your eyes and wish the end would hurry up and take you.

I used to watch my pet ball python grab a mouse and wrap around it until blood spurted from its nose and its eyes popped out from their sockets. The big cat would die that same way. So would the alligator. It was all very terrible and thrilling. A python has no need for claws or speed or venom. It is the shape of a wrapped sausage, a tube of muscle and meat. It has a soft small face and little round eyes.

When I was in grade school, one of my teachers told me that a full-sized Burmese python could eat 400 hamburgers in one bite. She even showed me a drawing.

“It is important not to villainize snakes,” Lark said, “Everything must eat to survive. Remember, each person eats almost 2000 pounds of food a year. That’s an entire cow or 350 chickens.” The difference, of course, was that we shoved the animals we ate into small cages and processed them in cold factories with harsh chemicals.

The man was a vegetarian. None of us looked at him. We already knew the smug judgment that would meet us. Not that all vegetarians are like that, of course, but the man was.

The fabric behind Lark was a burnt shade of orange. It reflected in waves off the marble walls and floor.

“This animal was discovered in Costa Rica, near the River Tempisque. He’s the biggest snake ever discovered, five times as big as a reticulated python. Do you guys want to see him?”

There was no hesitance in the audience’s cheer. It was loud, echoing, resounding. I thought snakes didn’t like loud noises.

Lark’s hand on the fabric morphed into a fist, and her fist tugged sharply. A mechanical whirl followed. There were hooks in the shroud, connected to cables on the ceiling. The elevation of the bottom corners sent a strong shudder through the textile. An unfelt breeze from the air sucked out of a room that held its breath.

Like a ball python removed from a pillowcase, the snake lifted its head with the cloth gone. It tested the air. It looked around. Its head alone was the size of a small pig. Lark rested her hand on its side. Each scale looked like a rusted quarter.

“We call this big guy Brandon. We don’t have a species name for him yet. Like I said, Brandon’s from Costa Rica. Like other large snakes, he swims in rivers. He was accidentally caught by some local fishermen a couple of months ago, and they couldn’t get him out of the net without injury.” She pointed at large blackened scars where scales no longer locked into the rest of the skin. Some scars were jagged, some round as if from knives and spears both. They explained he was here for rehabilitation.

Lasi watched with the rest of us. She crawled onto my shoulder and became smooth and round and cool to the touch. She stayed small. She nuzzled my cheek with her nose and tickled it briefly with her ribbon tongue, testing the air.

Brandon. The entire animal could not fit into the frame of a camera. The thickness of its body must have been a yard in diameter, lined with gold and green, and spotted with burnt umber like it was designed with large pixels from an old video game. Why did Lasi, dipping her nose into the collar of my shirt, not grow into something like this? This was power beyond belief. This was a dragon. I could not wrap my head around the disrespect of calling it Brandon.

In all the reptile shows I had been to, the audience was full of ecstatic children, bored teens, and tired adults. This should have been reserved for professionals of the trade; herpetologists, evolutionary biologists, and paleontologists. How had the sophomore gotten tickets for this? Who had allowed it to be exhibited like a common baby alligator?

“Now,” Lark said, “A few safety notes: Don’t open any doors while Brandon is here. He’s the only one of his kind and we don’t want to have to catch him again. Snakes are very sensitive to vibration and noise, so silence your cell phones completely. You’re free to take photographs on your phone, just turn off the flash. I’m gonna let you all take turns petting Brandon here, but you need to

move slowly and calmly. Also, please don't shout. Snakes have sensitive ears and nobody wants to hear it."

Lark answered questions that had not been asked. Are snakes slimy? No, she talked about the scales, how they would feel smooth and a little cold. Why did snakes not have skin like us? Well, can you imagine a swimming snake getting all pruney in the water? I once heard that our finger pads get wrinkles like that so that we can grip onto things, even if our hands are wet.

As she spoke, the audience stood up from their folding chairs, and one by one laid their hands on Brandon. They rubbed up, down. Took selfies that did not show the snake's face or capture its size, and then they moved on. Brandon draped over the metal scaffolding and acted like he did not notice. They were the size of mice to him.

What does Brandon eat? Only meat. Something big, because snakes only eat once a week so they need a lot of food in every meal. Usually, fresh pork. Sometimes, veal or even fully grown cows. Here's a math question: If a Burmese python could eat 400 hamburgers in one bite, how many could a dragon fit into its mouth at a time?

"Do you want to see Brandon eat?" The crowd snapped, because yelling, and thus cheering, was not allowed. The phones came out. The cameras turned on. We thought they would bring out a pig. Alive, probably. Maybe on a cart or a leash. The man turned away and covered his ears before they did it, but the pig never came out so the man saw nothing more.

The rest of us watched Lark Parker whistle a tune, step forward into the audience, and spread out her arms.

"Brandon is very well trained."

Her last words were immortal before they were even spoken. The snake did not need to suffocate her to kill her. It didn't need to suffocate anyone.

The live streams did not turn off.

Post-Apocalypse

The sayers were wrong. The world actually came to a halt during a strange storm that knocked out all electronics. Or, maybe, it was a zombie plague. Was it a swarm of flesh-eating birds? I can't remember anymore. It doesn't matter. The planet still exists. I took five minutes to wish the old world goodbye and then I forgot.

The phones went out, I think, and then the group of friends I gathered would have been a ragtag team of whoever happened to be nearby by necessity. I had planned for the apocalypse before. I'd even kept a carefully curated list of people whose combined skills allowed everyone to pull their own weight and safeguard each other's weaknesses. I don't think the list mattered in the end. Best laid plans, and all that. Otherwise, why did I invite the sophomore and the man? They were never on my list.

The sophomore knew how to hotwire cars. I don't know where they learned it. I can't figure out if it's technically stealing when the owners are dead. They were parked on the side of the road in affluent suburbs. We looked for the newest ones, those that were most likely to last without issue. One was large, a flatbed truck. We used it to plow through road blockages on our way to pick up the second, which was small but practical. It had a rechargeable battery and it went fast. It was fun to drive. We packed all of our things in the truck. Gas expires after three months.

Everyone went to the shopping centers and the man was driving, so he followed them. In the truck, there was a garland of colorful fabric balls hanging off the rearview mirror. Other people, those less smart than we are, swarmed the Walmart and the supermarket. We thought they might. We turned left where they turned right and found our new home in PetSmart.

This idea belonged to me. Still now, there are rows and rows of well-preserved protein, dog and cat food in the thousands of pounds. Enough to feed ourselves, at least. There were medical supplies,

but those are gone or expired. We had the equipment to set up water treatment systems when we ran out of purification tablets. When we got tired of caring for the reptiles and the larger fish, we gave them to Lasi, or the sophomore took them by the tail and slapped them against the ground until their spines broke. Fresh meat.

The power went out because of course it did. There is no workforce to keep the power plants running after the apocalypse. We didn't kill the hamsters. We made sure they stayed healthy and we put them on their wheels to generate electricity. The sophomore's friend did not know how to do that, but he kept trying to configure the wires until the lightbulbs turned back on.

Another important item: bird seed. We weren't able to plant immediately, it wasn't safe to go outside. But then, we had access to heat lamps and ultraviolet and soil and large tubs. We sowed the seeds from the large plastic bags and waited to see what would grow. Now we have sunflowers and corn and millet to bake bread. We can survive here forever. We make up stories and write and paint and grow food. We treat each other's illnesses, sometimes well and sometimes not. We record the dying days of our civilization and pretend that the new one is even better.

There is nothing to stop us from befriending the crows and the cockroaches and harvesting the mushrooms but we haven't gotten around to it yet. We cared for the cats and the hermit crabs in the beginning, but they have stories of their own.

The Place of Lost Things

The inn we stop at for the night has only one room left. The sophomore smiles and implies that this is lucky. All the other hotels are booked. I don't want to share a bedroom with these people. For an entire day, I've listened to their silence. The night should be mine alone.

As tired as I am of the man and the sophomore and the friend, I can't sit behind a wheel on a two-lane highway for another moment. Lasi hides in my sleeve and goes unnoticed by the concierge. I consent to the room. Split between the five of us, it is inexpensive. We take it.

The man is given the key. He carries it up the stairs and down the hallway. He stops outside the door with our room number printed in little blocks, and he does not open it. He does nothing for so long that the sophomore takes the key out of his hand and does it herself. What meets us, when the door opens, is not really a room. It's small, but there's a bed, a table, and a comfortable chair. It's where you go when your room isn't actually ready yet. More like a storage closet. There are shelves covered in things that do not belong to us. No windows. There's fish-patterned wallpaper peeling near the floor.

The sophomore is the first to enter. They take the bed before anybody else has a chance to argue. The rest of us lay three cots side by side like we're camping with the military. Lasi shouldn't need her own cot, but she's shifted again. Her legs have shrunk into her body, her ears have grown long, and she has a tail that never rests. She refuses to sleep on a pillow and we are nothing if not accommodating. The man says that she will not change in her sleep but I do not believe him. The friend gets to share the real mattress with the sophomore because the sophomore cannot pass up an opportunity to hold him all night.

Their stifled giggling doesn't fully fade from the large bed. It bounces off of the watercolor fish-patterned walls and blends into the heater's buzz. I can't sleep. Nobody will notice if I stand and walk around what little space we have.

I pursue the shelves. This is the first thing I see: An old wallet on unfinished wood. It sits just below chest level. Easy to pick up. Familiar to hold. I purchased one just like this in middle school. It's printed in black, white, and red with the image of two lovers kissing each other. Killing each other. It slipped out of my pocket on a bus in Washington DC. It slipped out of my pocket and now I see it here. There are no alarm bells or flashing lights when I look inside. There are metro cards. Debit cards. A driver's permit with my picture.

I want to say something, but the sophomore is snoring. Their friend scrolls through Instagram, lighting the room in a dark glow. It seems sacrilegious to interrupt. The white light bounces off plastic eyes; dozens of stuffed animals. Are they the same ones I sold when I turned fifteen? It had felt like abandonment but I'd thought myself too old. Their time was over. Whoever bought them had put them here to collect dust.

Where there should have been windows, there are posters of muses and inspirations. I hold a phone up to them, the white screen up and the flashlight off. The letters of their names shift in the dimness. I can't make out their faces.

There is silence. I don't remember the heater clicking off. Something in my chest feels like the antithesis of choking. This makes sense. I've always known I'd wind up here. This is a place of forgotten memories, and that is what I was always bound to become. It happens to us all eventually. I always thought I'd be here alone.

Am I lost? Could I be here if I weren't? True, I don't know the name of the road I've been driving on, but that's why I have a GPS. I don't know my destination either. I can't remember where I picked up the sophomore, or their friend, or the man. I remember Lasi. Lasi has always been here.

I look towards her. Her paws kick from the ankles, pink toes flexing. I kneel by her side and do not reach out. She is asleep and I am not. I hold my breath and she huffs gently. Her breath catches and her ears twitch. She releases, and I do as well.

Tomorrow, we will all wake up. We will eat a complimentary breakfast. I will get behind the wheel and fill my gas tank and we will drive away from the rising sun. That, I know.

I don't know what we are all looking for. I want to find out.

Tonight I am surrounded by lost things. I am in their ranks. Tomorrow will come, and I will leave. I will search until I find something, anything. Even if it's not what I was looking for before.

Chiropterology

The man does not use hiking poles because they take up too much space and he does not need them. Some of his colleagues use them but he never understood why. Not when there were tree limbs and rock formations with which they could have hoisted themselves up. He is much more practical and self-sufficient than everybody else.

The hiking poles could not have fit in his pack, not with the ultrasonic detectors and the large extendable steel poles for mounting nets or the nets themselves. In nowhere Pennsylvania, the physical accommodations he barely even needed did not fit into his goal to be a well-oiled machine highly deserving of both a raise and a promotion.

His colleagues could do whatever they wanted, but he would climb the ranks faster and better. He would work harder. His results would be finer. And, despite the lack of any supervisor presence in the field, they would notice his passion. Lasi bounds along behind him. Sometimes, ahead of him. Hiking with a dog is never a bad idea, although it is an extra consideration in regard to water breaks.

Exceptions: interactions with bears or hunters, accidental consumption of toxic animals, plants, or fungi, falling into crevices or other natural traps, poison ivy and poison oak, and tick bites. Fortunately, Lasi is smart enough to avoid eating things she shouldn't. If she wanted to, she could fight anything and win. Then, the question becomes whether she has the drive. She does. She can survive anything. Nobody has tested this theory.

The man sprayed himself and the dog with a natural insect and tick repellent before leaving. It is mostly effective and rarely causes cancer. He was more afraid of Lyme than cancer anyways. Everything is a carcinogen after all.

Task 1: The man finds a clearing between a cave entrance and still water. This is the ideal place to set up. He drives the large metal poles into the ground six meters apart from each other and hitches the net to them. Five loops means five knots and five pockets that the bats can become stuck within. He spreads the hitch knots on both sides so that the net is taut and then he secures the poles' placements. Lasi is trained to avoid running into the net.

Task 2: Nearby, the man finds a large tree. He opens the case that houses his ultrasonic detector and powers the device on. He waits for the GPS signal to lock before he closes the case and checks that the error light is off. It's the size and shape of a tissue box patterned with camouflage. He uses bungee cords to secure it to the tree trunk, as high as he can reach. The microphone points toward the sky at a 45° angle.

Task 3: It is important, in setting up camp, to remain close enough that he will manage to find his way back in the dark, but far enough that any light he may use will not disturb the bats' foraging behavior. He finds a flat grassy clearing of decent size and lays down his tarp, builds up his tent. He prefers the camp stove to an open fire. It's better for cooking and he doesn't need the fire's heat this late in summer. It's easy to set up and it saves him time. He lays the camp stove out with the propane, blows up his sleeping pad by mouth, lays out his sleeping bag and Lasi's, and fluffs the collapsed down-feather pillow. He has two steaks marinating in plastic bags. He cooks and eats them before sunset, and is careful to secure the dishes in airtight, bearproof containers with his toothpaste, mouthwash, and tomorrow's breakfast.

Task 4: The cave mouth is small. Too small for Lasi to squeeze through in her current condition, and definitely too small for the man. It's about a foot in diameter. He writes this down in a waterproof notebook. There are plans to raze this area of the forest, flatten this small mountain, and

build a power processing plant. His employers have been hired to ensure there are no endangered species here so that the utility company can alter the landscape legally. The man listens to the chirping of insects and frogs displacing the songs of birds as the sun sets. He hopes he will find a *Myotis sodalis*, Indiana bat colony in this cave. There are so few beautiful places left and now he feels like he knows this one and like this one knows him. He feels safe here. He wants to return the favor.

The sun sets and he watches and he waits. He will set up a camera tomorrow night if he sees anything, but for now it is better not to waste data and time. It takes so long to count all the bats in a video. The golden rays shift into dark and the dark shifts into moonlight. He sits and waits and tries to identify cricket and cicada and grasshopper by ear. He gets them all wrong, but he believes he is correct and his imagination is all that actually matters. He's not here for insect surveys. He rubs the ears of the sleeping dog beside him and looks towards the sky, the stars just beginning to peak over the day's curtain. He can't see stars like this at home. He doesn't look.

He wishes it were a flutter of wings that brought his attention back to the cave mouth, but it's not. Bats are near silent flyers. It's Lasi, ears perking up nose twitching, that alerts him. One bat flying in a direction opposite the mist net but that's fine because a few heartbeats later there are more. They go looking for the food that rubs its wings together and sings for them. They chirp at a frequency he can not hear. When he analyzes the sound recordings later, he will play them back in slow motion and they will make him smile. They always do.

But, he brought a dog hiking. And, while a dog is fine, Lasi's attention has given way to intrigue like his. She is dialed in and smaller and softer and faster than she had been before. She is all sharp claws and teeth and large eyes with contracted pupils. She swipes them out of the air, rips holes in the skin of their wings, tosses them around and plays with them. She is a cat. It is not her fault. The

man tries to pick her up and remove her, but she latches onto him and breaks his skin and now he's bleeding and he can hold on for a second longer but then he's bleeding more and it hurts and he lets her go. He wants to kick her. He wants to hurt her. She kills one and there's nothing he can do when she goes after another. This is why he hates outdoor cats. Because when she is this, with her brain sharp and predatory and focused, it's not even her fault.

He no longer hopes these are Indiana bats. He hopes they are anything but. There are so few left. He's miscalculated. He didn't pack a leash.

Mayfly

It opens its eyes to the muck. This is the first thing it has seen in its life. Dirt, mud, detritus. Decomposing leaves and old sticks. A million little creatures, each identical to itself. Its siblings have six strong legs, three spiny tails, and fringe-like gills over their abdomens. They look like minuscule lobsters or especially small shrimp.

It is just like them because they are all crawling and digging and all it knows is a desire to do the same. Its long body burrows into the silt. This is what it was made for, all strong femur and sharp claw. Buried under the first layer are dead algae, bodies of other sunken insects that have grown soft and water-logged, and pieces of a decomposing squirrel.

Once, all it knew was *dig*. Now, it has already forgotten that. It has found a goldmine. It does not think in words, but if it did, the only word in its mind would be *hungry*. And so it eats. It feels ripples in the water above and does not know that an equally hungry trout is swimming by. It does know, somehow, to wiggle its long body further into the warm, welcoming mud.

It knows that it has grown larger because more food can fit into its mouth in a single bite. It sheds its shell a couple of times. When this happens, it finds a protected spot and curls up, feeling soft and vulnerable. It lashes out at its sibling's hard feet and soft gills scuttling above. It does not want them there. When its body hardens again, it feels powerful, and it digs its way back up.

Last time it molted, something happened. A weight on its back, which it had never even noticed was there before, lifted. Despite its soft body, it was too light, with that weight gone, to live as it had before. It watches its brothers and sisters flick their way up. It watches the trout's tail beat into a frenzy. Its old exoskeleton still hangs off of its tail and, despite the danger, despite the impracticality of it all, it too flicks its way to the surface and sits just below.

A bird swoops down from above and, mere inches away, grabs a brother in its sharp beak. The water ripples. A trout from below bites a sister and drags her down. The mayfly bobs and survives. It no longer knows *hungry*. With its last molt, it had lost its mouth. Now, it flicks in the water, tries to remove the excess exoskeleton. It succeeds and rises above the surface, millimeter by millimeter. It watches all its siblings do the same.

One manages. The first mayfly of the season rises into the air and flutters there as though no more difficult than swimming through the water. Then there are two. Then one hundred, and one thousand, and five thousand. This little individual joins the cloud. It flutters about, narrowly avoiding collision. The cloud of bodies is massive and dense. Angels with white wings and sparrow-like tails. None of them understand quite what they are looking for.

When the mayfly lands on a sapling branch, under the shade of a young maple leaf, it knows it has found something good. So it stays, and it allows its siblings to join. They are vulnerable together there. They remove their hard shells and do not cower from the tenderness. They rise again, together, and this time embrace the collision.

In the swarm, the mayfly searches for collision. It finds its partner and is held, tightly, until they fall and land in a patch of lake grass. They stay together for only a few moments. There are others nearby, but they turn away and continue to search for their own counterparts. The mayfly's partner does not leave, but it flies away and it struggles, and it falls in the dirt. Its wings flutter in an invisible wind.

The mayfly falls too. And it cannot fly again. It had never spent so much energy in a single day. It is starving, but it is not hungry. That is the thing about having no mouth. It spasms on the surface of

the lake, its wings flickering. All it knows now is *push* and it does. It releases thousands of eggs and watches them sink into the muck. They might be eaten by snails. They might not. The fly's job is over.

The mayfly does not have eyes that could close. Even if it did, it would have died there with its eyes open, a day after first experiencing the fresh air and the thrill of life. It makes a good snack for the trout. Its shell is full of protein.

The scientific name for the insect order Mayfly is Ephemeroptera. This is because they come, and they go. Like us, they live only for a moment and that is all they need.

The problem

Rule one of a haunted house: don't move anything.

Generally, spirits and ghosts have no reason to hurt you. They exist, they see each other, they do what they can to make it through another day in the world. It's unfortunate that they have to do so. They don't even know what time is anymore.

Something that may be surprising: ghosts have a very strong sense of property. As any casual antiquer can tell you, spirits tie themselves to objects. This is how they are carried through the world. This is why a porcelain doll's eyes follow its owner, why your grandmother's pearl necklace makes you feel ethereal, why drinking from fine china confounds the flavor of the tea. Objects are far more durable homes than bodies. Ghosts have already been evicted from their old homes. They are fiercely protective of the new ones.

Should you ever visit a truly haunted house, one where all the objects hold history and all the eyes in the mirrors don't belong to you, you should not be afraid. Sleep in the bed, if you can handle the mothballs, and you'll rest better than ever before. You can use the stove to make breakfast in the morning, sit in the chairs at the table, even vacuum the rug should you so desire. Houses are meant to be lived in, and spirits love to be lived with. Eternity is boring.

Just don't rip up the carpet in the hallway. Don't paint over the scratches on the wall. Don't move the dining room chair into the study. If I were a ghost, and you moved my home without consent, I would haunt you. I might kill you. It's good that I'm still more than a spirit.

Here's the problem: We don't talk to each other.

I am not a haunted house. My spirit lives in my body. It resides in my brain, and is kept there by fluids and webs: the pia mater, the arachnoid mater, the dura mater, all tied together by thick bone and stretchy skin, made pretty by dark, curly hair. My spirit controls my body. I can go wherever I want, whenever I want. My legs listen most of the time.

My spirit has been furnished with experiences and deeply ingrained thought patterns, mossy carpets, and framed photographs of people I love and people I hate. There's history attached to everything. I guess I am a haunted house. Nothing moves.

The sophomore brought in a new soap dispenser yesterday. It was pink and shaped like a sheep. They keep bringing in new objects like that, jammed with spirits that cannot escape. The man wouldn't let me throw it away. He keeps putting it back.

This is valid. The objects are not trash. I'm just tired of tiptoeing around curses. The man won't let me salt and burn anything either. He won't tell me why he wants to hold onto everything so badly, just like the sophomore won't tell me why they collect hauntings like state quarters. If I could understand, maybe I wouldn't mind so much.

I don't know how to approach the subject.

The problem is this: They're ghosts too.

I carry them with me because I killed them. They haunt me because I haunt them. I can't stop either. I don't know why.

If they ask me why I killed them, I won't know what to say. I will think *because I couldn't bear to look at you* and *it was you or me*. It wasn't an active choice, it just happened. I wanted them gone and I can no longer move them.

In the room of lost things, there is a shelf of etched vials. They are engraved with fine portraits and names. It hurts when I look at them. All those bottles are full of specters. I can cork them, I can hide them in a box, but the room will always be on a nameless road. I will always visit it because it is a room in my house, and they will always be there because that is their home now too.

I will live forever. We all will.

Meaning

We will be home by tonight. We would have been home already, but I was hungry. I requested we stop, and then suddenly everyone else's stomachs were grumbling as well.

There's a sign on the highway for a restaurant called Bella Oscurità. I choose it for the Italian name. It's not too fancy – it's a restaurant off the highway – but everybody can eat something there; spaghetti, pizza, salad, wine.

We sit at a round table with a shiny spill-proof checkered tablecloth that nearly matches the floor tiles but stays discordant enough that the man complains of a headache. Only one other table is occupied. We're handed menus and served lukewarm water.

There are Greek salads, dolmas, souvlaki, and gyros. Nothing Italian at all.

“What's the special?” Asks the sophomore, hands folded in front of them like they're in a sophisticated gastropub.

“Umm,” says the waiter. She is not usually asked questions like this, “The Athenian burger is good, I think. And we've got a great new york cheesecake.”

She leaves for more water and we're left to scour the decidedly Greek menus for anything palatable. The man might have to eat salad all night. He taps his foot against the ground and the table shakes. It's louder than it should be. There's a television mounted on the wall showing Veggie Tales cartoons. It's playing the theme song quietly, so full of static that there's no hint of musicality left.

The sound means nothing.

The future is empty.

The email nobody replied to, nobody cared about.

The mayfly's life is over in a blink.

We won't remember this meal.

But for now, it feels real. I can let my companions look into my eyes. We speak with each other and it's not smooth. It's textured with misunderstandings and hesitancy and confusion and even anger, sometimes.

I'm surrounded by beautiful people at all times. I don't care if they're really here. I could reach forward and touch them if I wanted to. If I weren't so afraid of them all.