

Of all the many loves I've lost, you were the superficialist. You with your shock of corn-blond hair and thin square wire-framed glasses. You hovered unreasonably tall in the door frame, offered me tea.

"Play footsies with him," said my cousin. "It works." It worked. We barely said anything to one another. We slept together, refused to send text messages. I did get one e-mail though, asking how Europe was. I sent a postcard in reply. A handful more times in your bed. Never mine. I was furious throughout dinner. Your feet too far to reach. In desperation, after the bill came and went, surrounded by friends and a visitor from out of town, I grabbed you and asked, "Do you want to come see my record collection?"

"You have a record collection?"

"No."

You laughed at that, abrupt and lovely. "Sure then."

I had to move 9,099 kilometers away. I could not sleep without dreaming of you. You took months, a lifetime, half a year to disappear. Maybe I lived a million lives I don't know. I wish I could tell you, but listen I just forgot. Even if I could tell these stories, and trust me I want nothing more, you wouldn't be able to imagine it, so what's the point? You wouldn't believe me either way.

Well ok, fine, so all that stuff happened and then I entered the rainforest, huge and heavy and humid, and slept beneath a giant leaf. I drank water from its cupped hands, and made friends with a talking snake. It whispered in my ear as I dreamed.

In stories like this, nothing ever gets done. The hero shifts from one foot to another. I had a great idea but never-mind. You spoke to me once – maybe only once – when we went to get a coffee before seeing a movie in a city full of rolling hills and deep purple skies. Suns flaming out one by one and ashing into brilliant colors. The entire universe was coming apart.

The tiny spoon looked peaceful and protected in his long hands. He took it up between his fingers, stirred the cream at the top of his espresso around gently, and used it to whittle off a sliver of the brownie bite perching at the edge of his saucer. He let this come to pieces in his mouth.

“I’ve started drinking espressos in the afternoon,” he said softly. I don’t remember anything else he said. He might never have said anything else. He was a very quiet person.

Did he know then the power that he held over me? That I would get an espresso every afternoon for the subsequent six months, like clockwork? Yea, at 2pm every day a great melancholy would settle in around me and the task list I was chewing over at my desk would begin tasting like ashes in my mouth. I would grimace; I knew it would cause wrinkles; still I would pull my face. Tears came to the corners of my eyes. My co-workers’

salutations sounded like animosities. I had to escape. Oxygen tasted poisonous. The bright sun was treason. There was a coffee shop attached to the home goods store, everything overpriced, but it was a shelter. The ceilings were too high. A large communal bench still couldn't fill the ocean of space. We patrons waded to shore, paid for our coffee at the counter. I sat at the table as though at the corner of a great raft alone adrift equipped with an espresso and an oatmeal cookie. I wrote fantastical stories. Coffee in the afternoon kept me up late at night. Melatonin melted under my tongue. He never learned this; we couldn't have spent more than five nights together. What did he do then, to deserve this power? Why should someone else affect us so arbitrarily much?

He humiliated me. But I couldn't believe that he was evil. He was confused, wasn't he? He was trying to figure it out for himself, and was having just as hard a time of it as I was. Well I don't know – he was a little older. Is there ever an excuse for cruel behavior?

We went to see an overly-violent comedy after the coffee. He had quoted the Director once; I remember that as well. When I asked him why he was so interested in building a geometric Haskell IDE he said, "I'm going to say the same thing that the Director said, when an interviewer asked him why he included so much gore in his movies – 'Because it's *fun*, woman!'"

We never went on a date again, although we saw each other a few more times at parties at his place. I couldn't sleep; I went for hikes late at night. I stood on the top of hillsides and watched the telephone lines and street lamps pucker and swallow themselves

up in the night. How could the universe just fold in on itself and collapse like that? I tried it for myself; I died before I was able to record the results of my experiment.

Well we start over. The snake had eyes like cut jewels. Its skin reflected the moonlight and something about its slither was relaxing.

“Sssweetheart,” she whispered, “What do you wish?”

I pulled the cocoa leaf closer to me as if its touch meant anything. Water beaded up along its curve and rolled gently on to me. The air was moist with memories. The night sky blossoming with stars, sweet smell of mud and moonlight all intermingled. Insects buzz in the area around, and a night bird is still singing, no less beautiful for the invisibility of its plumage. I'm in love, and I don't care, even if no one is able to receive this feeling. I could turn into the jungle, snakes everywhere burrowing into my spine's curve. I could be the entire world, and everyone would walk all over me. I hated it then, all of humanity, I detested its remoteness and its lack of empathy, its callousness, its thoughtlessness and misery,

but I couldn't stay alone in the jungle. Somewhere out there, a drum was beating, and people were dancing around it and around a big crazy fire. I wanted to meet them, I wanted to dance with them too. Soon the sun would rise, and would push in front of it a quiet chilly dawn. Well in those moments it's nice to just stare out at the world, take in the silence and the splendor, and it's so much richer then with someone sitting by your side.

I watched the sun come up alone. The fire had died down and everyone jumped inside before the night was over. I was left kicking the ashes, turning them over to find clues about who had been there before.

My hunt for other people was slow and methodical. I had all the time in the world and my wits were still bright then. I spent time getting bit by insects, making traps by the river, and obsessing over tracks on the ground for any information they may have had. I listened carefully to the birds, learned to decode their communications, so desperate for understanding that a raven's cocked head looked like loving curiosity to me, and my eyes would shine with emotion staring back. Everything was given this disproportionate importance and meaning by my attention: a flower opening up to greet the dawn was a sign that I was on the right path. An insect with a crushed wing dying by the side of the path was a tragedy and a bad omen. As the days happened one after another the bad omens seemed more frequent, I began sleeping in so I would miss the sunrises, my search became sadder and my state more distressed, but through it all I kept my goal in mind, kept making and remaking plans to find another conscious being.

It was not this measured industry that brought me to the tiger cubs in the end, but rather magic. The tiger cubs were a legend in the jungle. The birds sang about them to each other in the trees, whether words of warning or admiration I still could not tell. It takes time to appreciate the subtlety of language. The snake had known of them. In my dreams I saw them, before I found them, and even their imagined presence felt intentional. I became

convinced that they were the ones I was looking for, and that they knew of me, or at least of my dreams. I began thinking of them more often during the day, determined to enter their dreams in the same fashion they had entered mine. I sat with my eyes closed by a stream, pictured them so perfectly that I may have accidentally altered them in the act, and demanded to be seen in return.

I was tackled by a tiger. I cried out with laughter, and he did too. He was a big one and he grabbed my face between his two paws. I shook my head back and forth, too overcome with joy to even speak, clasped my hands around his paws. He was drowning me in the stream a little but I didn't even mind. Gasping for air between laughter and mouthfuls of water I wriggled free, which impressed him. Tiger cubs love to be impressed.

"Come home with me," He begged. "I want you to meet my family."

Tiger cubs also love novelty. His family all crowded around me, shoving in to get a better look at my pink flesh and my short teeth. They got in spats when they shoved in to each other too hard, would roll away to tear angrily into each other's ears and backs. We played every day, and doing so became my life's work. But eventually they tried to eat me. I guess it should have been obvious that that was their plan all along.

In every world I found myself I was always naïve. "I find myself," you murmured in a tone that managed to be both apologetic and self-congratulatory in that same delicate muted breath, "In a" every "committed" word "monogamous" a "relationship" barb.

My world turned on its side. It was hard for me to tell, I was drunk. One foot was planted on the floor, the other lifted and stuck to one hallway wall, leg bent at the hip, pushing my back against the wall across. In this new coordinate system maybe the hallway wall that my foot was on was actually the ceiling and my back was pushing against a floor. Either way I was blocking you from getting to the door of your room.

“Sorry,” you added.

I tried to make sense of what was happening. Maybe I was actually in a high runner’s lunge, with my back pushing against a ceiling. I didn’t remove any of my limbs from any of the surfaces they were pushing against, scared I might misjudge which way gravity was pulling and collapse. You shoved my leg a little, sheepishly.

At this, the walls or floors or ceilings or whatever they were began folding in on themselves and I was grateful to allow them to flatten me into a cut-out shape and then a line and then a point and then

The tiger cubs lunged to sink their teeth into me. The universe froze and then violently decomposed, patchwork and frantic, falling apart like a wall being demolished, particles scrambling, static fuzzy, dead TV channel, glitchy 8-bit noises from the early 90s, beast paws kneading brutal claws into me as their torsos bristled and began drifting apart and their eyes in disbelief, horror, and regret, blurred and lost their focus, as sharp blood beaded up and bubbled down my arms. I was filled with pain and betrayal. I tried to reach out and grasp the first tiger cub, the one who took me home when this whole stupid life had begun. I screwed my eyes up with an effort of willpower and begged the universe to stay still and stop this entropic nonsense, to give me just one more slice of time and space to share with him, to press up against his warm belly and feel the weight of his limbs, but the universe only took my request as an offense and imploded in an instant the second I formulated my prayer, and his body disappeared like that, leaving my arms outstretched around nothing.

It doesn't work, this constant rearranging of the parts, this inexplicable reordering of events, this charitable reinterpretation of our fellow beings. I collapsed to my knees and let blood run down my long marred arms and between the webbing of my fingers to pool on the ground in hot puddles. The ground was all frozen and covered in snow and I watched my blood settle in and stain it – maybe the jungle was still underneath there somewhere, far down (I couldn't tell how deep this snow was), an insect trapped perfectly in ice at the bottom, suspended in the act of carrying an object of food home or rubbing its abdomen. My hands turned purple and swimming in little pools of blood in the white



expanse I thought my fat swollen fingers looked like borscht bits in red broth in a porcelain bowl. I couldn't even cry, I just kept having stupid thoughts like this.

The static had gently resolved itself into hyper-active snowflakes, I'm not sure when, and I breathed them in and out as I worked on steadying my breath. It was over: even my blood was freezing on my arms, my little arm hairs completely rigid at the end of my goose-bumped skin. I was still dressed for the warmth of the jungle, but that didn't mean I was unprepared. I had grown used to the universe reconfiguring itself at this point; it didn't make it any less unpleasant of an experience, but did allow me to think with a clearer head during the process. There wasn't really any reason to be cold, and so I lifted myself up, shook myself out, and turned to look out at this new world with clear eyes.

The sky was a thick white blanket, the air a blurry fog of snow. There were no trees and no vegetation, and the terrain was remarkably flat. I made my way forward, keeping on a straight course, determined to make the best distance possible with my time, which I could recognize was limited. My goosebumps receded into my skin and my arm hairs acquiesced, settled down docilely again on my arms. In the distance there was an ocean, eventually, which I saw when I had reached the limits of my exhaustion – still far off on the horizon, appearing occasionally and then obscured again by fitful clouds of snow.

The ocean from where I first caught sight of it looked perfectly flat and smooth, its great turbulent waves still hidden by the omissions of distance, its surface a shiny marbled gray that caught the ambient light and spread it over itself like moisturizing lotion,

glistened and flushed with sudden streaks of teal or aquamarine. The luster and iridescence made me think of a perfectly polished gemstone and I desired it the way people desire anything beautiful. I was heartsick; my stomach hurt.

I folded into the ground. I lay on my side in the snow, let its icy fingertips grip onto my bare skin. It melted at my heat, transformed into a slick coat. I thought I was sweating. I rolled up onto my hands and knees and continued moving forward. I had to get to the ocean. The wind flared up in occasional fits of aggression and shoved me forward or back or to the side. I didn't mind. It felt nice to be touched. I liked being moved. "Hey, I'm sorry for acting like a fool last night," I typed out in the nauseous gray dawn after the party, with trouble focusing my sleepless eyes on the little letters. "I drank too much and was caught off guard. I'm normally very respectful of relationships. It won't happen again."

"Thanks," you wrote back. "No harm done."

And half-dead ahead I saw a cliff overlooking the ocean, which now was a real tumultuous entity crashing and roaring and sending up great walls of frothing water. Nothing other is ever still is it? I pulled myself to the cliff's edge to look over into it with endless wonder and adoration, the ocean which was only some other person's confusion, indifferent forces colliding and pushing and pulling and causing this gigantic momentum that swallowed everything up into it. It smashed against rock faces, pulled them down under.

Context is weird like that. Your whole life can drop away. Things you thought were so fixed can slide into themselves when you're not looking; if you get distracted; if you forget; if you close your eyes for too long; if you let go; maybe they'll get carried away. I don't know how it happens – things disappearing – sometimes I don't even notice they're gone. That's the scariest bit. Thinking I may only remember a small fraction of all the things I've lost.

We never talked again. I sat for a long time by the ocean, object of my desire, Coastal Northeast cold and content and empty as a pre-verbal patient post-electric shock therapy, until my world eroded and I crumbled down quiet into it.