

On My Mind

Carol Anderson Shaw

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2016

Committee:

Sarah Dowling

Jeanne Heuving

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, Bothell

Creative Writing and Poetics

©Copyright 2016

Carol Anderson Shaw

University of Washington

Abstract

On My Mind

Carol Anderson Shaw

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Assistant Professor Sarah Dowling
School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Science

On My Mind engages with complex issues of identity, love's dialogue, and evolution of consciousness through story. The novella is set in an era of post-digital darkness, where transformation abounds as the world emerges into a new age of light, art, and love. In a pseudo-scientific time travel motif with a romantic trope reminiscent of Penelope and Ulysses, the text explores the liminal space between writer and reader, and the workings of narrative voice as bridge. We are in the mind of Isla, waiting at home for Eugene. Isla entertains suitors, while longing for her husband and falling in love with her writing. She is narrator and curator of the novella, which presents her multi-genre thinking, journaling, love letters, and body of artistic work, all to culminate in the premiere showing of her film, *Clarity*.

Tampering with conventions, Isla's form of storytelling conflates fiction with reality and tests the constructs of space and time. As she proclaims, things are not in order. The narrative presents her states of mind as she weighs personal decisions, runs reconnaissance, pursues archetypal quests, and writes. The makers and actors of her film intermingle on shifting planes of creation as the narrative interweaves the fairy tales, legends, novels, and real-life stories they live and tell. *On My Mind* is about creation. It is about love.

On My Mind



On My Mind

is dedicated, with much love, to my family

1. Stream

Bricks aligned one way and steps another. Isla walks along the path, turns, and descends the stairway to the courtyard. Looking back, something strikes Isla as surreal, as though these shapes and planes were constructs of an imaginary film set and she were an animated figure moving through it.

Except that it's raining. Hard. She is hurrying to avoid getting soaked when she notices that beside her, running along the length of the staircase, is an unusual design feature—Isla marvels at its aesthetic and functional ingenuity. An open gully, tiered with miniature steps. Water gushes down the narrow channel as though it were a mountain stream.

Isla is going to meet Eugene, a new romantic interest, a remarkably handsome interest, at half past 12. She has an hour to wait, so she enters the library building. She skips upstairs and wends her way to a quiet alcove in a window box overlooking the courtyard below. She drapes her wet coat and scarf over a couple of chairs. She sits at a desk and looks out the window.

Why is everything always at 90°? She wonders. She's tired of right angles. What if she pulled out the lower left corner of that building across the way, just slightly? That would be glorious on camera, she thinks. She sketches the lines on a page of her notebook, exploring new perspectives from the glass box.

She is in a near vacuum of quiet. Only a pale hum of voices makes it down the long hall to where she sits. Muffled, she writes.

Behind her on the walls are a painting of snowflakes and another of pears and apples. What kind of fruit would there be on other planets? What kind of fruit, what kind of creatures would eat it, and what would the seasons be like? Who would care for the children and the old people? So far, children and old people weren't allowed to go.

The rain dwindles and stops. Isla watches as groups of students flow out of buildings and criss-cross the commons area.

They are vividly beautiful, these people from all over the world. Isla watches as they greet each other and mill about the courtyard. She imagines the lilting tones of their voices in many languages. She admires their faces and physiques, their expressions and movements—a whole range of human loveliness with differences and similarities in striking evidence. Then, on to their next classes. The courtyard empty again.

That's when he appears—Eugene—at the top of the waterfall staircase. He skims down the stairs, step by step, flight after flight, rhythm in his calves and thighs, his footfalls light as an Olympian's running the stadium for training. Just as she thinks this, he turns and jogs back up four flights, smooth and easy, lengthening his stride to take the last two flights at every other step.

Drawn to her feet, Isla stands in the glass watching him.

At the top of the staircase he turns and pauses on the landing, hand on the rail. Evergreens tower behind him, glowing wet and green. He's not breathing hard, just pausing at his leisure.

Sensing her gaze, he looks across and sees her in the library window. A radiant grin lights his face. They stand like that a moment, smiling at each other across the span of air. She raises

her palm to the glass. He raises a hand in answer. He gestures toward himself, then at her. She nods.

She could almost imagine wings on his feet as he flew down the stairs. Long, quick strides took him across the courtyard. He swung open the great doors to the library and stepped inside, out of her sight.

She waited in the alcove, every electron alive and tingling. (Interior, interior. Her film set was now her body.)

He came into view again, walking down the hallway toward her. He stopped close in front of her. They embraced, and Isla was filled with a sensation of warmth.

I didn't know how glad I'd be to see you again, he said.

I'm glad to see you, too, she said.

Then a kiss, soft and expressive, their lips pressing in hope and suggestion.

Isla would think back to this scene for her entire life. Gene running on the stairs. Gene crossing the empty courtyard to reach her. Everything greener and brighter than usual, after the rain. A kiss they would always remember.

They had met the week before, at a conference on disaster preparedness. During the first break, he had followed her down the hall.

Soon after the conference she had a dream that she was levitating. That is how it feels when she is standing in the alcove, and that is how and why and when she remembers the dream. She [quite literally] cannot keep her feet on the ground.

She is waiting for him and he is coming toward her, within sight and then out of sight and then within reach, and who is he but a man she hardly knows and will love forever? She tries to orchestrate it into a story, years later, when really it is less a well-patterned tapestry than a jumble of threads piled from floor to ceiling.

The compulsion of storytelling is a theme for Isla, and she is working on a book and a new film script when she meets Eugene. Isla is in the process of creation, and Eugene picks up on that energy. He tells her so in the alcove.

You're so alive, he marvels. I don't think I've ever met anyone so alive.

Eugene. She has never met anyone like Eugene. The way he moves her. The way he looks at her, to her, into her. The way he would stand by her, so openly admiring. So openly smitten.

Is she taken by the way he takes the stairs?

She is in a state over his entirety.

They go beyond the usual, the possible, in a very short time, as though they had known each other much longer.

Torrential desire. They are standing by a warm tropical sea. They are under a waterfall, kissing. Their wedding trip and their time travels... other memories of moments she holds dear. Isla recreates these scenes and weaves them into her journals and manuscripts, in part to anchor

them somewhere other than in her mind, yet how can such things be anchored in the flow of viewing and reviewing?

Writing is a paradox, she writes in her journal.

Writing is a paradox, she says, reading it later.

It's a lot like life.

2. Note

This story all took place once upon a time. In a way time equals space, or is roughly equivalent. Telling the story also takes time, and recalling it requires space to think about it. I want to say it's everlasting, but the nature of it is also temporary and temporal.

No matter how quickly I write it down or what tense I choose to use, it is immediately set in the past.

Yet stories last, so they can always be told in present tense. Once recorded on the page, they are ever present. Forever and forever, Isla and Eugene meet in the library. He runs down the stairs, the doors part, he crosses the library threshold. The length of the hallway between them shortens, compresses, disappears. They kiss. Perpetually they kiss.

Then they part, they wait, they wonder. They retell the story, in their own minds and to each other and on the pages you've just perused. As Isla notes, it's like literary analysis—what's in the story is contemporaneous with the consciousness of today's reader. And who are you?

For Isla, living the story seemed much longer than the telling and in her case perhaps it was. She now sits in a solid wrought iron chair and remembers another time. Not all of it can be recounted. Recounting is like reviewing all the minutes again, or hours, only instead there are lapses and gaps. The clock hands leap around.

The day he left

She came downstairs and saw Eugene's note.

Let's elaborate: She spotted the note as she descended the stairs. Even from a distance, she didn't like the look of this note. With reluctance, she crossed the room to read it.

The house was strangely quiet. The stairway was open and circular and the note was on the kitchen counter, a slab of black granite imbedded with galactic white swirls. The note was on a page torn from her notebook. He had written the note in her notebook, torn out the page, and pinned it under her favorite coffee mug.

All of this she could readily see or surmise as she circled down and around toward the note.

Written in his hand on her paper, the note says:

I'll be back.

It is, however, more complicated than that. The story line is not only linear it is circular, it is a tangle of lines, a jumble of planes. In this day and age she does not know any more where to begin or how to make time a line or even why she should try. She and Eugene exist in the past, present, and future. They reside in the conditional what if and the declarative here and the imperative you are. Their times are and were and will be all at once simple, progressive, continuous, and perfect.

Over and done, yet ever contemporaneous?

She will have to think about that, he says.

But not too seriously, she says.

Or that's what they would say if they were having this conversation.

Why? Because theirs is a cosmic connection. Blazes of white in black granite. But they are just regular people. Their epic adventures are punctuated by the everyday, and by the rare and beautiful.

Last night had been rare and beautiful. At the moment, here was this note.

She reads the note. What are words, anyway? She makes coffee. She pours coffee into the mug, almost spilling it over the edges onto the note. She adds cream and stirs. She lifts the mug to take a sip and still the note is there, a white sheet of paper on the black countertop. She has not spilled on it. Not a drop. She has not physically touched the note.

She takes her coffee out on the deck. On the way she rescues her notebook from the table, along with the pen that he used. She sits and sips her coffee, thinks about writing. Morning fog veils the view.

Soon she will throw the pen off the balcony and into the garden. Then—after pausing to drink the last swallow of coffee—she will throw the mug after it.

Upon landing on the hard earth, the mug will crack. In a heart-breaking way this will remind her of the golden bowl. These literary references are everywhere and unavoidable, though they will not hang together precisely unless she forces that to happen, because this story like all real stories is in its own quadrant of the sky and forms in some ways a separate constellation beyond her control as writer, actor, and director starring in her own life. Once written, the text is no longer part of her. She lifts up her pen and the words fly away. She tosses the pen and only the words remain, air-born on the page.

She's not trying to make it all fit exactly and she requests that the reader leave well enough alone. The reader gets that now, assuredly, "we" can assume. But it's up to you.

Eugene, are you there? I'm just telling you what happened after you disappeared. I had to go over every detail like this, in order to make sure I wasn't missing anything. It's not unlike the police blotter from a crime scene. There's always something obvious that the sleuth notices, something everyone else overlooks.

Your cavalier note didn't disguise the truth. I knew right away that you'd gone off on a high-stakes time travel expedition. What I didn't know was how, where, why, and when. Especially why.

I know, I know. Only so much can be revealed at a given time or it changes everything.

Back story

A line. An arc. The spaces where things have been left out. Margins, paragraph breaks, page breaks, breathing between words. Spaces that you fill in. You, you, you.

I try to write, writes Isla, but all I can think about is you, Eugene.

You've gone off on a mysterious expedition into the night. Waking in the morning without you is a pain. I open my eyes. Then I remember you're gone. I have to figure this out. It's a compulsion. Where did you go and why?

I knew your work on time travel was attracting government attention. And we were deeply concerned about the impending affects of bionan on the human mind. My own father was slipping away, and there was no antidote.

While we contended with these real-world situations, I was also immersed in theatrical arts—and in the rejuvenation of film. We were emerging from digital darkness. I was writing the first screenplay of the new era of light!

What I also had to wonder that morning—what I also had to wait and see on my own without you there beside me—was whether or not we were expecting a child.

Expectations

Did we have great expectations? Everyone was looking for answers then, as the whole world struggled to reinvent itself in the luminous wake of digital darkness.

Looking for answers is an evolving process, as I see now, coming on this journal years later. A story left to the mind is open to a range of imagination. So much of what I wrote was in second and third person, as though I was separate from myself. And so much of it was intended for your eyes. Letters into the void.

You would have to find a message in a bottle floating in the sea. You would have to break the glass to read it. You would have to be you.

I conjured us up as reader and writer, as close as lovers could be. And later, when we would both be gone, where would the words and letters be? In the air, on a page, lost at sea?

* * * *

A line [cast]

An arc [floodlight]

I say to you []

You to me []

* * * *

What am I thinking?

Don't you know?

Yes, I think

you're thinking of me.

I'm thinking of us.

So am I.

Yes, I know

how you think.

You're on my mind.

3. Let's go!

Ironically, it was while they were eloping in the tropics that digital darkness took hold. So for some time, Isla and Eugene were oblivious to the news that had befallen the rest of the world. No chance to use their disaster preparedness training.

They were staying in a thatch-roofed hut by the sea, with louvered shutters. They walked a path through a tropical jungle to a waterfall. The gardener gave them a tour of the vegetable and herb gardens, and had them taste more than 30 different plants. He told them they used a special blend of fertilizer made from egg, vinegar, citrus and a list of other natural ingredients. Thanks to solar power, the islanders had heated water and iced drinks. So people there were not directly affected by the spread of digital darkness that started on the north of the planet.

Isla and Eugene learned about the rolling blackout when they got to the airstrip on their last day. The pilot told them that they could take off for the mainland, but she was not sure about their landing. Their flight was due to arrive in the daylight, she said. They would go visually and by instrument.

Then she asked them, Are you sure you don't want to stay here?

They looked at each other. They looked back at the pilot.

I'm not sure what you'll be returning to, she said.

They looked at each other again.

I've got to get back, said Eugene.

So do I, said Isla.

Then let's go, said the pilot.

Thinking about it, it's the story that defines all of our lives—yours, mine, theirs, and ours. At the moment I'm telling my own, the way I see it. And yours, Eugene, by extension. During interludes you as reader float into the meld and we relate as one.

(I'm about to go away again.... No, wait—it's you who disappears.)

Pop quiz

Alrighty then, Professor let's-delineate-it-all Eugene. Let's say you're back and you're teaching again and you decide to give your students a pop quiz today. The fragile and the surreal meet the scientifically proven in a state known as reality, where we get to define our own stories. Where we explore the interrelation of existence and consciousness, where we watch neural pathways light up when subjects read lines of poetry. Now let's compare that to brain activity when the subjects are asked to solve math problems. Then the subjects are tasked to conduct mental exercises combining intellectual cognition with metaphorical interpretation. You ask them the following question:

How do you view [your] Story?

- a) Mere photographs of mere moments in cosmic history, strung along like scenes.
- b) The negatives of those photographs imprinted on paper using a collection of ink marks as symbols.
- c) Setting it in stone is impossible because a story is dynamic and no medium can hold it in static representation, although revelation (and revelation through revelation) may mimic the actuality of activity.
- d) The story is only a story in the telling. That is its becoming. Not told, it will fly away.

As though it never happened? He would ask.

Almost, she would say.

I am sorry you went through that, he would say. If he could.

If he could, he would take her into his arms and hold her there a very long time.

She would say, would you please hold me like this forever?

Answer: All or none of the above. There is no answer, she would say. After a long quest in search of answers, she embraces the endless interrogative.

Re: the mug and pen

She will retrieve the coffee mug from the garden, along with the muddy pen (that he used), when it is raining and she cannot bear to leave them out there any longer.

The pen is still operable.

The mug, however, is cracked. She is appalled. Then disquieted. Then relieved to see that, even on close examination, the thin fissure is hardly noticeable.

What's done is done, she decides. No point in lamenting.

Re: the note

She rolls up the note and fits it into her flawed coffee mug. She places the mug next to the sink in their bathroom, where it is always in her peripheral vision while she looks into the mirror and brushes her teeth.

She no longer has to look at the note to see it. It is written—in his hand—on her notebook paper, and there it waits, all rolled up in its repurposed vessel like an obscure artifact, an artwork created from a collision of factoids within a scrap of time, fractals since rendered ambiguous.

A collage of nothingness or the greatest words of all time:

I'll be back.

Re: Now and then

For now it was the first morning of a long spell, a long spell of waiting. A spider web strung from the rail caught the light and glistened in the morning sun. A humming bird dipped and fluttered and then darted close. It hovered in front of Isla, wings blurred in motion, tiny face studying hers.

Wonderment, wonderment. What else could matter? She sat sipping her coffee. That's what could matter. A good cup of coffee.

Waiting.

It was the first spell in a long morning of waiting; her longing for Eugene had only just begun. Despite his promise to return, during the following weeks (lets call them weeks) she passes through all the stages of morning, mourning in recurring waves of denial, sadness, self-pity, and anger. She is by turns awash and adrift, flooded and empty. How can she accept his absence, if she accepts the note?

Is it safe to believe he'll be back?

Does keeping the note beside her make it come true?

Does brushing her teeth constitute a ritual of belief?

She and Eugene had sometimes stood side by side in the mirror, brushing their teeth. They brushed in sync. And then they'd start riffing on the sync, and on the sink, and then on into their silly antics.

You're foaming at the mouth, she said.

That's right, he said, baring his teeth and releasing a big flow of white suds.

She laughed and foam sprayed from her mouth onto the mirror and then they both laughed, and then harder, until they were laughing at their laughter.

It has been a week since she found the note. She bares her teeth at herself in the mirror. She lifts the mug in her hands and says a silent prayer.

She unwraps the pregnancy test from its wrapper.

She pees on it, sets it by the sink, and sits on the edge of the tub and waits.

4. Music—remember music?

It seemed a long wait for her.

Ultimately who would have blamed her for ripping up the note? Gene himself was not one to judge. But for now, at least, the note stayed where it was.

Effectively, Isla continued moving but stopped thinking.

The day she found the note, a white shroud of fog rested over the ship canal. The maple tree was brilliant red. The hummingbird's head was a startling green, with more shimmer and sheen than an emerald.

An emerald is nothing but cut stone. A hummingbird is a live jewel. Post-digital darkness, people realigned their values.

They were still in recovery, so Isla didn't wait by the phone. There would be no text, no call from him. It was like being in an old novel. There were birds and ships and there was fog.

She waited by the garden. That is where she would wait.

This is how I imagine Isla on the morning I left.

We had been trying to have a baby. Well, not trying exactly but we had decided to let it happen. We were at it all the time, as though it was the last chance for the two of us to be alone before the baby came. I'd find her and we'd do it standing against the wall. Or I'd lift her onto the desk and lean into her. Practicing, we called it.

What time is practice today? I'd ask.

Do we have to set a time? She'd say.

Are you answering a question with a question?

Do you have to ask?

How long will this go on?

You are stone cold crazy.

That's why we're the same.

Our love is here to stay. I played that song for you the night before I left. I surprised you with it after dinner. I told you to close your eyes and I held your hand and led you into the living room.

I said, Stand right here, Isla, and don't open your eyes. No matter what you hear, don't open your eyes.

You stood there quietly waiting and listening.

I had rigged up an old sound system to run on an energy pack. You did not open your eyes or say a word even after I turned it on and the room filled with music. You stood still as a bird and listened.

Here I come, I said. Keep your eyes closed.

And we danced together and you were radiant in the candlelight and then you opened your eyes and found me looking at you and we kissed.

That's just like me, with my engineering know-how and my thoughtful way of creating romantic moments for us.

Actually, I am the one writing this. I, Isla.

I was just putting it into his words. That was all I could do. He was gone, so I had to do his thinking for him. And his writing.

The concept of conception was floating by, and I daydreamed of our trying. I daydreamed of his arms and hands and thighs and his mouth and his eyes. His eyes looking into mine.

That last night we were together, literally together, and I latched my legs around him and he carried me up the circular stairs though I warned him —this is dangerous— and we fell onto the feather bed and went on from there. I was sure he was remembering it at the same time I was. I willed him to do so, and certainly when he reads this he can edit it and add some touches. But I knew and I know, Eugene, I am on your mind.

Now I imagine him imagining me. It's as though we are on two sides of a mirror, not identical in appearance but reverberating in aspect and seeing each other through each other's eyes, entering back into that silvered room, our bodies in the moonlight. It was a surprise when the room gradually lightened and other objects came into being.

The moon and the sun encircled us.

In the new age of light, I sometimes missed the darkness. It is as they say—we don't know what we have until it's gone.

And now the allotted time was up and I checked to see the results of the pregnancy test....

Darling, I'm sorry to tell you, the test was not positive. We're not expecting.

Perhaps it's for the best for now, since you're away.

But I still feel immensely sad.

Was I losing my mind?

Enough mulling around the house alone. Time to get back out there again.

Not to worry, I told myself, there was a method to my madness in trying to project Gene's thoughts. And it wasn't just for the purposes of sexual fantasy. I had to think the way Gene thought in order to figure out the situation. This was not easy, given that Eugene is an astrophysicist. Who the hell knows what goes on in that brain. He also dabbles in neuroscience and microbiology. Genetics. All related, all relative. Time and energy and structure. He is way more structured than I am.

Perhaps that makes him more suited to the rigors of time travel. I knew he'd been a number of times and wasn't quite ready to take me along. I was adamant: if the technology wasn't safe enough for me yet, then it wasn't safe enough for him. Maybe that was why he hadn't disclosed his plans. But surely he wouldn't pull a departure like this unless he planned to be back within hours... or days....

As I tried to puzzle through Gene's disappearance I followed any number of trails of thought leading to any number of possibilities. It was only recently that he'd begun to tell me details about the time travel program, T2P, and there was only so much I knew.

Partly to protect me, he said.

What did that mean? Protect me from what? Was he in danger?

Oh, no, he said. No immediate danger. But they were proceeding with caution.

Who was they?

I thought back and reviewed every recent conversation, every possible connection. I analyzed what had gone on at office parties and our dinners with his colleagues, and the

conversations I had had with them. What did it all mean and who could I trust and should I go to one of them? I started a list of possibilities:

Maybe this was simply a short test of protocols and he'd be back at any moment. Maybe he had been called to duty. Something to do with the emergent recovery from digital darkness?

Maybe someone had ensnared him in a plot to do him in. A quest for power. A renegade bid to break through the watch-guard at the portal.

Maybe it was political, on the other hand maybe personal.

Why the rush? Why no other communication about it? Just the one note.

Was I to wait idly or was I to take action?

Frustrated by the lack of clarity, I scribbled all over the page. I rose from my chair and chucked the pen into the garden again.

But not the coffee mug this time. I now was drinking my morning coffee from his favorite mug. I sat and finished my coffee in peace. Coffee was not something to take for granted. Not any more.

I decided it was time to put on some real clothes, run a comb through my hair, and do some reconnaissance.

5. Action

Just remember, here I was, and the world in upheaval, and I love this guy like crazy. A day went by after he left the note and then another and another. . . . No one from his office had contacted me. I pinged his department head Carl and, acting as though nothing much was going on, suggested coffee and said, I'm coming by this afternoon anyway to pick something up.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but I brought a large purple shoulder bag. We had auto juice again and Eugene's car was running. Off I went, feeling like wheels were a new invention.

I knew when everyone would be at lunch. Sure enough, the outer office was deserted. I ignored the little sign that said "ring bell for service." I entered the inner sanctum, turned a corner, continued down the corridor, and slipped unseen into Gene's office. I rifled through his desk and hurriedly pocketed a little datebook I found in the back of a drawer. At a quick glance, it held what looked to be some coded notes.

Almost as an idle gesture I touched his sphere and, wonder of wonders—illumination. I clamped my hand across my mouth to stifle a gasp. It was still a visceral rush to see the lights, even though Gene had told me his office was on sphere again, as it was called back then.

I entered several trial passcodes but the system glowed blankly at me in repeated indifference. No easy password to Eugene's work station. Riffing on Pi and birthdates and phone numbers got me nowhere.

I gave up and turned to his credenza. It was burgeoning. The files were lined up in meticulous order, drawer after drawer, alphabetized and dense with information. Swimming through them with two hands, I scanned the tabs, looking for time travel info, bionan, lab results

on Ollie the rat, anything strange and intriguing. Going half by instinct, I extracted several folders and slid them into my shoulder bag.

Then down the hall to the vivarium. I stared at the key code. It was an outdated security system so I thought about trying a hairpin. I rested my hand on the lever and, lo and behold, it louvered down and the door swung open. I slipped in through the doorway, no one up or down the hall to question me.

Once inside, I tiptoed past the rows of cages with little rodents scuttling about. Some of them stood with their paws on the cage wire to squeak at me beseechingly.

Shhhh, I whispered.

I went straight toward a large cage by the window. On the cage was hanging the sign I had penned on a napkin months before: “Ollie’s room with a view.”

I thought back to the sunny summer day I had stopped at the office to pick up Eugene for lunch on Bowler Boulevard. Before we headed out to lunch he had taken me on an office tour.

Would you like to meet my primary research partner? Eugene had asked as we strolled down the hall.

Who’s that? I asked, hoping the answer would not be Dr. Ruth Reznik, who I had met at the office Halloween party. At the time, she was wearing a form-fitting cat-woman costume.

You’ll see, he said.

He took me further down the hall and into the vivarium, where he formally introduced me to Ollie. Not a cat woman, but a lab rat.

Not to disparage Dr. Ruth, as she likes to be called, but I had seen firsthand the way she fawned over Gene. When he introduced us at that Halloween party she gave me little more than an aloof nod and a token handshake before swaying back to the bar in her cat suit, switching her

tail back and forth. Was this supposed to be seductive? Gene was busy talking with someone else at that moment, or I might have asked him his opinion.

I let go of these thoughts as Eugene opened Ollie's cage and lifted out the furry animal. He held Ollie up to nuzzle his cheek, then handed him gently into my cupped hands. Ollie has a unique genetic signature, which is going to help us answer some questions about the effects of bionan, said Eugene.

Are you going to help my Dad get his memory back? I asked Ollie. Ollie looked up at me with curious eyes, then scurried up my arm and perched on my shoulder.

Gene carried him along with us for lunch at Solstice 2, despite my reservations about taking Ollie off premises.

"He'll be fine," said Gene. "It's good for him to get some time out of the cage."

This turned out to be the beginning of a trend. Gene soon set up a lab and a vivarium of his own at home, and Ollie made regular visits.

When we sat down for lunch that day, Ollie peered out at me from Gene's flannel shirt pocket and then settled in cooperatively for a nap. I remarked that Ollie had a cozy room. Gene remarked that Ollie had a beautiful view.

That's when I wrote it on a napkin: "Ollie's room with a view."

It was during that lunch that we finalized our agreement on trying to have a child. We talked softly so as not to disturb Ollie's rest.

"Don't get your heart rate up," I said.

"Not until tonight," he said.

Gene leaned forward to hold my hands and we looked at each other across the table. Smiling and then not smiling, nodding at each other and then smiling again. Maybe little Ollie helped to bring out our parental instincts that day.

Now, months later, I was back in the vivarium, alone in a roomful of rodents. Trying to pull off a sleuthing mission of dubious value. There was the coffee napkin sign where Gene had attached it to the cage, but there was no sign of little Ollie. The little guy would have greeted me if he were there, but just to be sure I slid open the door and lifted his paper towel culvert. No Ollie.

The discovery that little Ollie with his whiskers and pink nose and soft brown lab coat was missing in action caused my eyes to well up. I had not cried since Gene's disappearance, and I had to contain myself. I was pressed for time to wrap up the reconnaissance mission and continue on to meet Carl for lunch. Moreover, I had to meet Carl in a state of complete and alert composure. Carl was a kind man. If I started crying now it might spill over again at the first kind word from him.

I dabbed my eyes dry with the edge of my sleeve and solidified my resolve. As I turned to leave, from down the hall came the sound of footsteps. I froze in place. The footsteps approached and then stopped, right outside the vivarium door. The green entry light blinked and the door handle clicked into engagement.

As the door began to swing open, I stepped silently behind a pillar.

I waited breathlessly as whoever had entered stood there for a moment. All was quiet.

Then the footsteps resumed in my direction, and into my view came Dr. Ruth Reznik. She could not see me yet, but I could see her. Her hair was perfectly coifed in a faux messy way

and her lips were a red not found anywhere in nature. She was heading straight for Oliver's cage, and in her surgically gloved hands was a rat.

It could only be Ollie.

She balanced the creature in her right hand and with her left hand reached forward to open the latch to Ollie's door—

Hello, I chimed cheerily.

Oh, she said, practically leaping into air. Oh!! She cried again as she saw it was me and simultaneously the rat flew from her hands and was indeed in air. As she reached forward to catch the creature she slipped in her high-heeled boots and then went down in a series of juggling and stumbling moves before finally landing on her ass with Ollie safely cradled in her lap.

Nice save, I said, extending a hand to help her up, which she chose to ignore but not before reflexively reaching toward me and losing hold of the rat. The little creature leapt from her thigh and scurried down the aisle, all of its furry friends cheering it on from their cages.

Drat! Ruth cried.

That struck me as a humorous line for the moment. For any moment! Drat? Who says that?

Ruth maneuvered herself back up to standing as I went after the escaped rat.

What are you doing in here? she demanded, following me. No sign of any humor there.

I was looking for Carl, I explained. He wasn't in his office.

I got down on my knees to peer under a counter. There was the little rodent, shivering in a corner, but as Ruth's high heels approached he scurried along the baseboard toward the door.

Oh, he's headed for the door, I said.

While Ruth clattered away in that direction, I stayed where I was under the counter and pulled open my shoulder bag. Inside was a baggie of blue cheese, which I also pulled open. This was Ollie's favorite kind of cheese, the kind that only Gene fed him. The kind that motivated Ollie's best times in the maze.

One wave of the baggie in his direction, and Ollie twitched his nose and turned back toward me. He scurried back along the baseboard, away from the high heels and toward the open purple bag. He ducked inside as though he were going home.

Oh, now he's coming back this way, I said. I stood and stepped toward the door, casually holding the bag.

Ruth ran over and crouched down where I had been, trying to get a look under the counter.

I guess I should leave you to the hunt, I said, reaching the door. I'd better get to my lunch with Carl.

I pushed down the door handle.

Wait!, she called, struggling to back out on her hands and knees from under the counter in her tight skirt. He's not under here!

Oh no! I cried, as I opened the door. He ran out! He's heading down the hall!!

I stepped into the hall. As Ruth scurried over to follow me, I pulled the door closed behind me. It clicked into place just as Ruth reached it with a clatter of heels. She literally pounded a fist on the door, I could hear it. Then she flung the door open and burst into the hallway.

He went that way, I shouted, pointing toward the stairwell.

Drat! She cried. You just let years of research run out the door!

Sorry, I called out after her. Good luck!

I started to leave in the opposite direction but then a splendid alternative occurred to me. Ruth had rounded the corner and I could hear her heels clicketty-clacking on the stairs. I surreptitiously reentered the vivarium. Reaching into the bag, I stroked Ollie's head and gently removed his tag. I plucked an Ollie look-alike from a cage marked "New Arrivals," and gave him Ollie's tag. Moments later I was back in the hall, carrying the imposter rat toward the stairwell, Ollie still safely in the bag. Ruth's footsteps echoed below, so I headed up a flight and then called down to her,

Here he is!

Where? She yelled.

Right here, I called back. I've got him cornered. Hurry!

Dr. Ruth charged up the stairs in time to see me descending from above with the imposter rat in my hands.

Give him to me, she said impatiently. But once he was in her gloved embrace she capitulated. Alright, no harm done, thank goodness.

Thank goodness, I echoed. And now I'm off to lunch with Carl.

Uhhh, Dr. Ruth uttered aloud as a mental calculation visibly crossed her features. No need to mention this to Carl, I suppose. What just happened, I mean.

I suppose not, I said, hardly believing what a gift this seemed to be at the time.

Suddenly Ruth and I were on friendly terms.

I made it to the getaway car without further incident and settled Ollie into his carry box on the floor. This part of the caper had not exactly been planned, but it just so happened that I had blue cheese in my bag and it just so happened that I was driving Eugene's car. Eugene had custom-built this box to transport Ollie back and forth to his home lab, and so off we went. I drove to Bowler Boulevard, parked on a side street in the shade, cracked the windows open, jogged a few blocks, and sauntered into the restaurant.

Carl waved at me from across the room. Among all the tables he might have picked, he was sitting at the very one where Eu and I had shared our lunch with Ollie.

Carl was warm and charming and complimentary, as always. He asked all about the film project, and was ready to offer us complete support from his position at the Academy. This would almost certainly include any filming on campus that we might want to do. In addition, the Academy would donate a range of in-kind equipment and services for the shoot.

Could we sign you on as an extra, Carl? Isla asked. You'd be perfect as the Department head.

Why, thank you, dear. He said. You flatter me.

No, you're the one who flatters me, demurred Isla. It will be so much fun to work on this together!

Now that they've reestablished and deepened their connection, the conversation is open to all kinds of possibility. Yet Isla holds back and she knows Carl holds back, as there is immense trust on some levels, but certain information is strictly classified and certain

intelligence cannot be fully shared. He may also be trying to learn something from her, and she is not sure what that might be.

They speak carefully, but much is revealed. The conversation opens gradually and they circle around a variety of topics, commenting on widespread rumors and reports, mentioning speculations about the investigation underway into the causes of digital darkness.

Is the investigation into causes really that important now? Carl shrugs. It might offer some helpful information, he says, and it might help to re-weight the scales of power.

You mean between government and commerce? She pauses. And where does the Academy fit in?

Carl nods. Not sure yet if it's a crazy conspiracy theory. Who was initially responsible? Unusual solar flares took out a big section of the grid, no doubt. Was the blackout purposefully worsened by terrorists or political zealots or big money with profit schemes? Maybe so.

Well, said Isla, we certainly know who tried to reap economic benefits in the aftermath.

You mean the drones? Asked Carl.

Isla nodded, though that was not what she had meant.

Yes, Carl continued. For a while we all had to rely on flocks of drones to deliver everything, from news to medical supplies.

But then they all disappeared....

Yup. Called into remote fields and obliterated.

By satellite?

Carl shrugged. Again, I'm not sure it matters any more.

Ancient history, I suppose, said Isla. So tell me. What does interest you now?

Carl sat back and grinned at her. Alright, he said. I'll tell you what interests me now, since you ask.

They talked for two hours. Isla immediately went home and jotted down pages of notes, after settling Ollie into his quarters in Gene's lab.

From the PI notebook

Re: Findings at lunch:

- Carl almost certainly does not know where Eugene has gone.
- There is some sparring over time travel between the Academy and the Military.
- Some believe there is an ancient time portal outside the old city of Dorian.
- Key information about Ollie's bionan-altered DNA attributes: the rat may be shooting blanks.

Synaptic fires

Lying in bed at dusk that evening, or at the interval still known as dusk, Isla thinks about a special memory of theirs.

Eugene messaged Isla one day: Meet me at the Docks. I've got something to show you.

This was when he showed her his new theory. He was studying brain waves and neural energy lines as they related (as it turned out they related, per his subsequent article in *The New Bailiwick of Biotec*) to universal energy fields. They were sitting in Sal's, a restaurant that hadn't changed in 40 years, with red booths and black and white photographs of people on fishing boats. But how much longer would the menu offer fish?

Outside on the dock was a statue—the fishers’ memorial. In the late-day sun, a toddler girl in an oversized blue jacket was chasing seabirds.

The last daylight glowed on Eugene’s face and hands as he drew a diagram on a napkin. A cell, then a synapse. A network of cells and synapses.

What does that look like, he asked Isla, pushing it toward her. He threw down his pen and took a sip of his drink.

Neural pathways to nirvana, she said, kissing his ear.

You’re not listening, he said.

I was listening! she said. That’s the answer.

Look at it again, he said.

I give up. What is it?

He picked up the pen and traced the lines between the hubs.

The galaxies, he said.

He drew circles in the hubs and said, here are black holes. And the galaxies line up along these pathways, he added, drawing circles on top of circles, a tangle of dark ink circles on the curvature in space.

He was stirring his drink, contemplating. Here’s a spacecraft, he said, sketching a triangle in the ether.

What gives them that energy? She asked.

What energy?

This energy, she said, tapping the page. What’s the force of attraction pulling these galaxies onto this line?

Dark matter.

Another non-answer, she said. I'm using this, she added, picking up the napkin.

It's for you, he said. But I want credit. And the film rights.

I know what you want, she said.

6. A sea of letters

While he is gone, Isla writes and falls in love with her writing and writes journals and poems and love letters to Eugene that she sets out to sea in bottles, metaphorically.

Like his work on the brain, this project, too, could have practical applications. What was the ultimate quest? She believed in the everlasting interrogative. The journey. Art.

Mind expansion and elevation and exotic entertainment and time travel—they could experience it all. Where was Nirvana? A pile of leaves rusting by the tree, a half-eaten apple, a core of suffering at the heart of humanity. These served to bring dreams of heaven into sharper relief.

They needed shelter, food, and water to survive. They needed love, wisdom, and creativity to thrive.

Dear Eu,

It is I, Isla. Call me I, as you do. Or Is or la, as you will, it is still I, though there are many of me. I look a bit like the portrait of Dara Mar, a collage of eyes and noses and breasts assembled askew. Different every time you see me, yet still the essential I.

The identity property. That is what you would use as a metaphor for this phenom. They teach that now in first grade math, you know.

How was your first grade math? Did you wow them, Eugene, or were you a flunky early on, like Einstein?

I confront the monstrous white of the blank page. What numbers and letters and symbols will I spill onto it? Nothing happens. I seem incapable of continuing with the film script. It's as though I am stopped in time.

So instead I am writing to you.

Love,

Isla

Dearest Gene,

Thank God you are coming back, and soon, I hope. I could use some help around here.

Exciting news: your friend Ollie has come home. He is set up nicely in the basement with your other friends. Seems happy enough but I worry he may get a bit lonely, so today I put him in the maze with the others. You were right, he and Molly seem to have a special interest in each other. They were twitching noses and whiskering each other.

I am considering giving them some alone time. What do you think? Would that be helpful for the Gene research??

Hello? Hellooo??? Let me know asap.

Yours eternally,

I [I, Isla]

Hey Eu,

This morning when I looked out into the garden there was a pool of red around the base of the trunk of the maple. All the branches were bare. During the night, every single leaf had been loosed at once, as though in answer to a signal.

Are you out there?

Every single leaf, all at once. I got chills when I saw it.

Darling, I don't know why I am writing this when I have no sure way to send it. Yet I have decided to write to you every day. I will place the letters into glass bottles and set them out to sea. Marooned on your tropical island, you will see them rolling in on the waves. So keep an eye out.

I know you're there.

All my best,

I

Cher Eu,

I'm frozen in time, like one of those scorpions in acrylic we saw in that airport gift shop. But I do not wish to liken myself to a scorpion.

Think of me instead as a sleeping princess, deep in the wood, surrounded by an overgrown thicket of branches.

I am dreaming of your kiss, but what if someone else comes to wake me?

I am struggling with this moral dilemma, and feel at times that I really could be metamorphosed into a monstrous bug.

It is all in how we see ourselves, non, Monsieur?

Think of the frog turned Prince. The beast and the belle. The past and pending transformations of the mermaid in the Mermaid's Tale.

I can't wait to tell you about the "new" legend I have heard. I wonder if you've heard it, too? It's about the Wingéd River Nymph of the portal of ancient Dorian.

Yours regardless, never irregardless, since that is not even a word,

I

7. In the interim

Here's what I do not talk about and have not yet written.

The time I stood in the living room and looked out through the glass at a downpour and I wailed into the empty air of the room. I wailed your name, called it out in a rage of sorrow from a well I did not know.

Then I heard a strange sound in the house and stopped to listen. It took me a moment to realize what it was.

It was the poor little lab rats, calling out in terror at the sound of my wailing.

How remarkable it was to hear the otherworldly sound of their cries. I hurried downstairs to soothe them.

Let the lightning strike and thunder rail. From now on I would be a sea of calm.

I wrote letters and poems. I wrote scenes for the screenplay.

I considered my lot.

Never before had I felt such emptiness. Having Eu gone added immeasurably to the feeling that I was becoming alone in the world.

Dad was getting worse. He was still his sweet self, with his warm personality, but his memory was looping. He could no longer operate the car.

You'll have to come to terms with us dying, said my mother. You and your brother both will.

Never mind, she quickly added. I shouldn't have said that.

Never before had I felt a desire to have children. Now that I feared it might not happen, I felt the longing like a knot in my belly.

I was approached by many men. By a number of men, anyway. That is not a passive statement due to lack of agency-- on the contrary. It is meant to show me as I was, standing firmly behind my narrative distance. I considered them carefully and calibrated their standings through a number of coefficients, as would any good scientist. Not as affairs of the heart, but as potential candidates for mating. Fond as I was of them, I kept myself apart.

But what exactly does that mean?

What exactly does any of it mean?

No answering a question with a question.

Who's making the rules here?

Aristotle's incline? Aristotle's virtue ethics?

The categorical imperative?

It's not that easy.

No one said it was.

Who was lashed to the mast?

Who had to be?

* * * *

Whose hills these are

She surveys the view from the saddle of the hill.
Enthroned, seat of longing, sedate, presiding.
Grounded, landed, land and ground,
the country seat, abide, abode,
residing—hillside, trails, cathedral, sky.

She is said to be possessed, possessing.
She waits for one for whom she waits
—faces, facing, edges, vertex, corners of
[tetrahedron, theorem, synizesis, scansion]
absence, dreams of mansions, arrival, inhabitation—

to press tight.
Beneath the willows, her horse drinks from the pond.
Wishful summerset, to long too long.
Sidled and addled and asked.
Marked, remarked, astride

she rides—
sees, seizes, seas, siege, succession—
saddled, roped, untethered,
ferried
home, home.

8. Life goes on

Isla takes her coffee outside one morning to discover a pile of red leaves under her showpiece tree. It was as if, overnight, all the branches had decided to drop their leaves simultaneously.

They decided? laughs Max.

That's what it looks like, she says. Somebody got up a plan—let's all let go, all at once.

Who is Max? He is Isla's film guy. The cinematographer. Together with their producer Victor they have resurrected the film, after Victor filed for bankruptcy. This has been achieved thanks to the lawyers, who were among the first to resurface in the era of post-digital darkness.

Hey-- if the lawyers are bringing back commerce and if commerce revives art, who are we to complain? says Max.

Far be it from me to complain, says Isla. I've always liked lawyers.

What about cinematographers, says Max. Do you like cinematographers?

Isla smiles. Cinematographers can be highly likeable, she says.

Isla has been researching the legends of the river people and has arranged for a shoot in the old territory of Dorian, where she is on a quest to find an ancient time portal rumored to be more than legend. She is considering attempting a search mission for her missing husband, Eugene.

And she is considering Max.

So much to consider.

And at that thought you may feel as though you are at risk of slipping into a new form. Into a river of rivers. Into a sea of foam. I, you, she, he, we, they—all these merged identities. A narrative of multiple narratives, and when these are told and retold we are jumbled into our own versions and cannot quite delineate and cannot easily hold a sense of sense.

As though the subconscious plunges deep into the sea, as though we all live in a yellow submarine. How the philosophers have attempted to explain this phenomenology to no avail. Yet if we were to have a lucid dream, we would understand and remember and revere the essence of it all as brilliantly clear in its clarity. We would wake in a reverie, reclaim our voices, and sing like a choir of nightingales. Rhapsody in a hot shower of ions.

Isla gets a call from her editor Maria. Maria has read the book manuscript and is, as always, supremely supportive and encouraging. After the compliments comes the critique and this is what Isla is waiting to hear, though admittedly she exults in the praise. It's not directly like a boon to the ego, but more like someone saying something nice about your child. (Or so she imagines.)

Maria wants to talk about narrative voice. What a gift it is for Isla to have this insightful woman in her world. Maria wants to bat about the pros and cons of first person versus second versus third, and suggests that Isla make a decision and stick with it. Or perhaps delineate chapters or sections into alternate points of view.... Finally they decide perhaps not to worry about it, not yet.

Keep writing for now, Maria says. Later we will read it again and decide.

Maria is a Hoxgarth scholar and finds it interesting that Isla often writes about herself in the third person. Privately, Maria may harbor concerns for Isla's sanity. Not really, but this is the

sort of thing Isla tosses off. Perhaps creating more narrative space and innuendo? They're all skirting insanity, truth be told. Truth! As if it could be told.

They joke and laugh but also talk about serious matters. Real truths.

Isla confides in her that Eugene is gone and out of touch. Incommunicado.

Oh, you must be so worried, she says, sympathetically.

She and Maria have worked together for years and Maria has recently become a grandmother. That has become the main essence of who she is. Her core radiant.

They talk about how rare children have become.

This is regarding the book, their conversation, although the projects do overlap. The nice thing about the film script, thinks Isla, is that there is no narrator.

Unless she herself goes into the film....

Isla throws some summer clothes into a small suitcase. Isla stands in the mirror and looks over her shoulder to check out her backside in a black bikini. She ends up packing four bathing suits, because they will be filming on the water for several days and she loves to swim. Not because she tries them all on and can't decide. Not because it matters what she looks like, front or back. She is not even sure whether Max will see her in a bathing suit. She is not even thinking about Max, as she reminds herself.

She also packs sunglasses, sun hat, sunscreen, long sleeve blouses and short shorts. She girds herself for the battle against the sun, which burns doubly on their planet now. Her inner heat is another matter. That requires another shield. In the end, every true story involves moral dilemma.

Isla nonchalantly boards the plane, stows her luggage, and takes her seat, though it has been a long while since she has flown.

It is Victor's new private plane and it smells like new leather. The leather is cream colored and soft as butter to the touch. Bankruptcy is treating him well.

The pilot is standing near the wing. Victor arrives, climbs on board, and takes the seat beside her.

"This is beautiful," she tells Victor. "I hope I won't spill my coffee."

"Don't even joke about such a thing," says Victor. "That does it. Only water for you."

Isla likes to tease him but he isn't really that way at all, persnickety. Or is he? Anyway, he enjoys not being that way with Isla, putting out the act as an act.

Victor has high stakes in the film and big plans for the release. He can afford to be magnanimous. New film releases are no longer a drachma a dozen, and Victor stands to shovel in some blockcoin on this project. So he hopes. In comparison, what's a little spilled coffee? Or even a broken mug?

As the plane rumbles and purrs above the clouds, Isla begins waxing nostalgic, saying something to the effect that this projection would be like reopening the curtains on a giant screen and illuminating an old theater, defunct but not forgotten.

Victor looks at her askance. "That does it," he says. "You will not be allowed on the set."

What was nostalgia, anyway? Isla's Dad always said, never look back, keep looking forward. For Isla at this juncture, winging across the air was a flight into both the past and the future. She was intent on finding the portal described in legends of the ancient river people, if it existed, because she was intent on finding Eugene, if he existed, though this was a question she refused to entertain.

Gene was as present to her as the present, living as he did in her thoughts. That seemed irrevocable, though she could already sense the wearings of time, lapping like waves on stone, a sound that blended with the engine noise and soon lulled her off to sleep.

She dreamt she was standing by the Fishers' memorial at the Docks, on a bright sunny day. She was wearing her black bikini under short shorts and a filmy white long-sleeved shirt. Suddenly Gene appeared on the bow of a ship. He leapt onto the dock and walked toward her, a vision in the dazzling sunlight. He grinned and took her hands.

Where have you been? She asked.

He began to tell her, but stopped speaking and waited while she reached out to pull gently at something caught in his hair.

It was a red maple leaf. She held it up to show him and he grinned and then took her into a full embrace. But the leaf fell from her hand and she reached to catch it, following as it drifted in a soft sea breeze, alternately skipping and stopping and leading her farther away each time she leaned over to pick it up. Then it was the little toddler girl in the oversized blue jacket who was chasing after the leaf.

Isla looked back at the spot where Gene had been, but he was no longer there. She called for him, and was calling his name aloud when

she woke abruptly, as full of his absence as she had ever been. Yet also more certain of his presence. His aliveness.

She somehow hovered in this impossible space for the time being.

Look at me, Eu, she thought, not only simultaneously holding two opposing notions as true, but seeing them with a third eye, as well.

Look at you, she could hear him reply.

The plane's engines droned on. Isla gazed out over the water and hills and mountains beyond. From this vantage point, the Earth appeared little changed.

She wished she could dream forever.

Waking without him was a recurring nightmare. She had to live it over and over again, that moment soon after she opened her eyes when it came to her and she remembered—he's gone.

9. Don't look back

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

—William Stafford, “A Ritual to Read to Each Other”

Her dream was generative and when she woke fully, Isla gained a semblance of clarity and resolve. She put aside her spring fever, summer heat, and distracting contemplations of Max. No time and not the time for any of that. She focused on her script.

The digital darkness had fallen on them seemingly randomly but what was random? Chaos could be planned. It coincided, it was coincident, shall we say, with an unusually grand series of solar flares and, not exactly the fulfillment of Mayan prophecy—I wouldn't say that—but the setting in of a new era in human existence, which could be described as raised consciousness. Altered consciousness, in any case, which itself was correlated with a random if not planned infusion of bionan.

So she summarized. So she drew on excerpts from Gene's notes to write and revise the scientist's speech for the film. The scientist was pacing across a raised stage, with images projected behind him, speaking at a symposium on bionan:

Introduced initially via injections to a control group of patients under IFA testing of an experimental treatment for depression, bionan spread like firing synapses through the human

race. It created a realignment of the energy field centered in the [] part of the brain. [AQ: ask Eugene again for the neurology on this. Or Ruth...?] Its effects varied and had yet to be fully understood, but it had been shown in initial studies to stimulate processing capacity and to elevate calm.

In the most pronounced cases it seemed to affect the wall between conscious and subconscious, rendering the veil between dreaming and waking hours thinner and more transparent. For those subjects, dreams and memories often mingled indistinguishably. As some saw it, dream life took on conscious meaning more proportionate to its actual relevance in human mental experience.

Scientists had also come to understand much more about the power and presence of collective consciousness, and the individual mind as a receiver and transmitter.

The fucking net, thought Isla.

I mean that in the nicest of ways.

But it does seem de-personalizing at times. Not as nice as our personal net, Mister Gene.

Looking back

Looking back on it, it was impossible to distinguish how much transformation was brought on by bionan, and how much was environmental. New light; new gravity; new energy fields.

The sun was brighter and a second star rose one night to challenge the moon. It emerged from a vapor of anomalous dark matter that had previously been overlooked as unremarkable.

That could not happen, said Gene, the way you describe it. Also, there would be dire consequences, with changing tides and weather.

And yet it did happen. Remarkably, the event counteracted the calamitous environmental changes brought on previously by humans, and had a calming affect overall, as though the dual system had all been designed and planned in advance and successfully implemented in concert with the bionan injection for world peace and harmony.

Gifts from the Gods, cheese for the lab rats, or a virtual depiction of a new reality, depending on your perspective.

Gene spoke on these phenomena at the first international conference of Science in the Age of Light. The forum was called once the stardust had settled and basic services had been restored in key regions or at least systems established for people to obtain food and water.

The period of absolute digital darkness was surprisingly short, thanks to human ingenuity, and the consequences far less dire than they might have been. People looked out for the young, for the elderly, for their friends and neighbors. Strangers reached out to strangers. Heroism was displayed in many small acts of kindness.

The world went quiet for a moment, bracing for a frenzy of activities directed at self-preservation, but then warmth spread across the populace with the shared realization that things were different, and they found themselves all together in this.

Perhaps this related to a quelling of fear. Perhaps this quelling of fear related to bionan. Perhaps it was more the actualization of human potential, catalyzed by the sudden equalizing of the human condition. To some extent, digital darkness laid flat the gap between haves and have nots, by highlighting the only thing anyone really had. More accurately, perhaps, by joining them

all together against the not having. They bonded against a common crisis and the situation called for new survival skills. Values were realigned like moving constellations on a chessboard sky.

Whatever the causes, the effects were delightful, kindness spurring more kindness and delight rising with delight. Defying all prior predictions of what would happen under widespread power outages, there was not mass destruction, not terrible violence, not a decimation of the human population. Disaster proved to be character building on an individual and a group level. People rose to the occasion.

Being off the grid wasn't so bad. Now, gradually gaining momentum, they were getting back on to a new form of grid. Of course there were black markets and barter thrived as a form of exchange, but those who gamed the situation also seemed to value social enterprise in this new era. The rewards of gathering a village or a township and turning on the spigot and watching children dance in fountains of water far surpassed the value of blockcoin in the new economy.

And yet. They were quickly being propelled forward.

Max was standing on the tarmac at the airfield, ready to greet them with a bottle of champagne. In the making and shooting and screening of their upcoming film, Victor and Max and Isla were conscious of this opportunity to do things differently. Human impact had been put on hold and the planet shimmered in new light. The disabling of old infrastructure allowed new technology quicker access to market, and affordable new energy inventions that had long been waiting on the shelf were taken up and handed out like candy. It was an entrepreneur's dream and a sage's sweetest meditation come true. Much bigger than any of them individually.

When they reach the house, it overlooks the river. After tea on the terrace, Isla goes up to her room in a turret with a door to a stone balcony, where she watches the river and writes.

Gene's scene

About a year after their elopement, Isla helped Gene to prepare a speech on “The Mind in the Aftermath of Digital Darkness and the Spread of Bionan.” As a result, it was more accessible to a general audience than it would otherwise have been. More accessible, period, as she told him with a grin.

Of course, when Gene gets up on stage at the Academy and scribbles data and equations on a board, he is met with ooohs and ahhs and stunned silences interspersed with episodes of applause from the academic and scientific community. But the general transcript, which circulated much in the old fashioned way, told a story all could understand.

Now she was envisioning the scene for the film. Our scientist hero Harold strolls on stage looking tall and tan and strong after a spate of manual labor in the garden. On film, he is waving his hands and inspiring us all with his enthusiasm. Part way through his talk, he does that endearing thing where he gets ink on his white raven Time-shirt. He stops talking and tries to wipe it off. He takes his pen from his pocket to see what's going on. As he examines it, the pen leaks ink all over his hands. Soon enough, he ends up with ink all over his face and hair.

Isla laughs to herself. Then she looks down and notices her own pen is leaking. Unbelievable, she thinks.

All right, Eugene, I can hear you now, complaining about this portrayal of our hero. Maybe the ink mess wasn't quite that bad.

Nothing to fear

I am frightened of doing nothing, but even more frightened of doing the wrong thing. Looking back and losing you forever.

Like Orpheus and Eurydice.

Even if I found you, would the scene be real? According to Phaedrus, the infernal Gods of the underworld showed Orpheus an apparition of Eurydice.

If I saw you again, my musical man, would you sing to me as before?

Dearly Beloved,

Would you still be you?

Remember how you used to wander by and lean over my shoulder and read my writing? That was so maddening! Now I am going to put this letter out to sea—like a message in a bottle, bobbing among the clear blue waves—and pray that you’ll read it someday. I know you may be tied to a mast. I know you may be shipwrecked and marooned somewhere on an island.

But remember what you always say—no one is an island.

Another thing you like to say: the bell tolls for thee. I like the ways you turn it from a death knell to a wake-up call, or use it to herald some pending delight. As when the bell rings on our coffee maker to signal our coffee is made.

As though we’re not standing over it already, waiting, favorite mugs in hand. (By the way, my mug has been repurposed and I’m using yours these days.)

Darling, I could also use your help on this screenplay. How does one write about love in the era of post-digital darkness?

Transformation is all-encompassing. I am a river. Time travel has you in it. Here goes this bottle, swept along with the other flotsam and jetsam.

XOX,

I

X. Absence

Eugene is gone. Isla feels his absence like an ache, a cavern. A tsunami has crashed in, receded, and swept everything from shore. In the end, there is no metaphor. Words will not name themselves.

She sits in a wrought iron chair at the wrought iron table in the garden. Everything is wrought.

She is writing. Writing is her refuge. Writing is her love. Writing is a well source and she writes not to get to the base of it, but to show the impossibility.

Depths can't be plumbed. This she learned early on. In her favorite fairy tale, all the cables and steeples of humankind laid end to end can never reach the merpeople's coral castle on the ocean floor. It is unfathomable. Ever shifting. Mysterious. Inconceivable. Sands and waves cannot be tethered and undersea worlds are discovered and lost in a glimmer of the page. Over and over again and again.

Waves come at her like joy and grief and wonder.

* * * *

The maple is red and the rest of the garden is neon green, fresh from rain. Isla's deadline is looming and she writes to Maria, asking for time. She goes inside to get a cup of coffee.

The clock in the kitchen is ticking audibly. Time is interminable with Eugene away. Yet for him this moment might seem like an hour. A day. In a way she would like to throw the clock into the garden, but she is done throwing things. Remember? She takes the clock down, removes the battery, and hangs the clock back up again.

Her father always said, don't look back. That was one of his favorite life philosophies. Now it has become impossible for him to look back.

Sitting next to her on a plane once he said, Isla, I have no idea where we've been and where we're going.

He paused and looked at her, adding wryly, So what else is new, right?

There should be balance, she thinks. The ability to look in all directions. Text and context. A window into the opaque pane of the page.

They are flying above a sea of clouds.

As her mother says at every tragic turn, Everything will come up roses.

Her mother also tells her, Don't think so much.

Yet she herself is thinking all the time.

Where do you suppose Isla picked up her narrative irony?

11. The Penelope syndrome

Things are out of order. When Isla comes home from her lunch with Carl, the entire lawn is green—free from leaves. After she settles Ollie into his home digs, she rushes to the backyard—no more pile of red under the maple tree. She sinks into her wrought iron chair. What can have happened?

Turns out that this is not some inexplicable phenomenon like crop circles or a new orb appearing in the sky. Turns out Brad from next door has raked her entire lawn for her. Next he knocks on her door and invites her over for dinner.

Brad's dinner of roasted rabbit (he keeps not only rabbits but chickens, goats, and bees) and fresh herbs and vegetables from his garden and home-baked bread, tastes (in that moment, I assure you) like the most delicious meal she has ever eaten.

Isla talks with Brad across the candlelight. They are seated at his kitchen table. The table is a thick slab of solid knotty pine, from a tree he felled on his property. She asks him about his land. She asks about his goats, his chickens, rabbits, and bees. She feels as though she's in a scene— far from the madd[en]ing crowd.

He clears their plates and brings steaming cups of hot tea to the table. He brings three jars of honey. One is lavender, one clover. One sage.

He slices her a thick piece of buttery pound cake. He then cuts that slice into three, on a small china plate. On each piece, he drizzles honey.

Isla asks, Are you trying to cast a spell over me?

He says little. But enough. He says to let him know if she ever needs anything. He is always there, nearby, and will be there whenever she calls.

He walks her home, across the expanse of his lawn and then along the path toward her front door. The silver light draws shadows beside each tree, lining the path with double sentries.

Isla. He says at the door. You don't have to wait forever.

She calls her parents the next day.

How long can I be expected to wait? She says.

It's entirely up to you, asserts her mother.

I'm still writing him letters.

Maybe you're writing those for yourself.

Isla knows that her mother, too, is waiting, with little hope that her father will return.

Dearest Gene,

Fleeting as our time is (I must write quickly to make deadline, although it's always 2:10 in the kitchen), we were in the process of creation while this story was in the process of creation. I have been immersed in writing and in thinking of writing and it seems as though you and I have been transformed into text. Our bodies are bodies of text, our minds represented in letters and words.

Everything is surreal. Subject and object, lover and beloved, writer and reader. Those were fragments, pairs, incomplete phrases, and thus we set off. We set off as joined and separate from all else, simply by being beloved, we set off splendidly into the exploratory, the observatory, the adventure land of future love. Into immersion as nouns, pronouns, verbs,

verbally. Rather fragmented and happy. Subjective and subjunctive. Present and absolute. Unto death, perhaps.

But then we were apart. As though in parallel dimensions. As though in a sea of loss.

Now the story brings us alive, as though the symbols on the page turn around and create us again.

Yet for me to write of love feels fraught. Will there ever be a homecoming? Where will the story climax and what significance lies in the consummation of romantic love? Can we be objective while subjective? Looking for meaning beyond where language explicitly goes while trying to express the ultimate in language is the paradox. Even as I peruse our landscape and explore avenues of ethics and character and truth as we go our separate ways, the greater meaning is in what I do not write. I love the spaces between the lines. This is the space where you and I meet. The space where you followed me down the hall. The space where you kissed me in the alcove.

Do you remember the 13-line sonnet I wrote for you? "The Line Left Out." It is about lovers in touch without sound, about the silent spaces around words, about dreams beyond language. I will dig it out of the archives and send it to you in my next letter.

Will you ever see these silent missives I send?

Whenever I was watching you, whether you were engrossed at your desk, working in the yard, or talking with someone else across a crowded room, you would turn your head to look at me.

Always,

Your Isla

Dearest love,

So you see, Eu, I am fine. I may go to the brink and look over the edge into the abyss, but I have not been silenced.

If love is language, words can heal my broken heart. So writing is going to see me through. Yes, that is another gift that has come from this.

Thanks a bunch. :)

Love, Is

Music, encore

Another song of ours:

Ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough, to keep me from you.

Not to be languishing in memories of sweet moments, but I summon them up in part to keep us alive.

After kayaking we came home to a time-zinging session in the language of love. I was still lounging on our bed while Eugene got up to take a shower. I heard the water running. I heard him step in. Then he broke into that song, his voice rich and deep in the watery enclosure.

While he was singing, I tiptoed into the bathroom and wrote with my finger into the steam on the mirror, Nothing can keep me from Eu. It was there almost indelibly for a week until one morning he called me in and, pointing at the words on the mirror he lamented, How am I supposed to shave?

He had a towel wrapped around his waist. I whisked it off of him and reached to swipe it across the mirror, but he stopped my hand.

Now who's being sentimental? I said accusingly.

We kissed in the steam.

All right, I said, moving closer to him. I'll shave you, I said.

I held a hot cloth over his face and then lathered his skin. I stroked the razor along his jaw line, one side and then the other. I stroked it over his chin, and above his upper lip, slowly and smoothly and deliberately. As close as though he were looking into the mirror. Afterward he said it was rather a strange feeling, an unusual interlude.

Did you like it? I asked.

He nodded.

How I missed hot showers during the digital darkness. Think of all the pleasures of life we often take for granted.

When shaving became something of a luxury and a hardship, Eugene grew a beard. He had a beard the last time I saw him. Sometimes when I'm in town, I catch sight of a man with a beard the same shape and color. I feel a sudden sharp soaring recognition, and then I realize, no. No, it is not Eu.

12. Heimus & the bionan meter

Isla is quite sure she can trust Heimus, and moreover she is quite sure she can trust herself around him. Good looking as he is, thin and dark-skinned and bespectacled, he is also something of an automaton. Isla even wondered-- was he some kind of AI bot?

Leave him to Dr. Ruth. She was an unusual creature in her own right.

But Isla needed his expertise and his access to a bionan meter. She had reached a place in her home lab experiments that required some input from the Academy, and she had decided that Heimus was the guy.

She had considered Carl, but ruled him out as too entwined with Academy politics and Armory maneuvers and Blockcoin Exchange decisions for her to fully ascertain, amid the complexity and nuances, his ultimate position relative to her plight and Eugene's disappearance. No doubt Carl genuinely cared about her—and Eugene—but what all was he really up to in the grander scheme of things?

Isla considered a couple of grad students, as well, a faculty friend from another department, and even considered going to Dr. Ruth for assistance, perhaps holding the Ollie incident over her head in some sort of extortion play.

But Isla was not about extortion. Except in dire circumstances. And not when there was a better alternative. And there was: Heimus.

She invited him over for coffee and pie.

Apple pie? He said.

All right, she said. Apple pie.

All right, he said.

But you can't say anything to anyone about this, she said. Nothing about us getting together. Not even that we've spoken. Not to Ruth, not to Carl, not to anyone, she specified.

She instructed him to bring along the bionan meter and promised him an intriguing evening.

She hung up the phone feeling half guilty and half triumphant.

She turned on the oven. Full of trepidation, she rolled out the crust, laid it in the pan, and fluted the edge. She skinned, cored, and sliced the apples. She arrayed the slices in layers, and sprinkled them with cinnamon and sugar.

13. In my hand

I pulled a book from a shelf, and from its pages fell your letter.

The morning after Heimus's fateful visit, Isla sees a cloud formation shaped like a hand.

A person's hands are distinctive; you can recognize someone by their hands. She can picture Gene's hands.

Thinking about it, Isla imagines a whole page full of print and script, no white space at all. A meaningless jumble. It is the spaces in her story that matter, she realizes. Someone else can arrange the pieces. They do not need to fit together or even touch.

Isla wrote and when she looked up again, the hand was gone. The dark clouds had closed over it.

Isla wrote and wrote and fell in love with her writing. The suitors wrote and called and knocked and she ignored them. She had entered the page.

She had almost forgotten that it was a love story.

Living in the space of recounting, I evoke in myself again the overriding absence. It is something of a refuge from loneliness, but there is no work more solitary than writing. Yet with every word on some level I think of Eu.

My dear Eugene:

Come home now, Eugene.

The moon is up and my ovaries just laid a beautiful egg. I can feel it inside of me, all aglow. I'm like a clucking hen waiting for you to bring me that big cock of yours. If you don't hurry I might have to resort to the man next door. This is farm life, after all, and we're all just animals. It's simply the nature of reproduction. Maybe I'll have him plant a seed and nothing more. What would you think of that?

You see where I've gotten, when I write to you this way. The thoughts that cross my mind!

I ran the bionan test with Heimus and it confirmed that Ollie is shooting blanks. Mollie had a litter with another rat, and though this is not ideal, they all seem happy enough. So the species continues.

Heimus has been a huge help and I realize I had underestimated that man. I showed him our wedding poem and he said something lovely that will always stay with me. He said that in his country, men believe love friendship is the most important things.

Come back, Eugene.

I'm quite upset with you if you have risked your life for this. For anything.

~Is

Dear where are Eu,

Where are you? I know I said I would write every day and I'm sorry I got distracted and diverted. The film is progressing well and I can't help but be excited. But clouds are streaming

past and leaves have fallen for season after season and at this moment my mind and body are aching with desire.

My heart and soul have known sadness enough and if you cannot come back soon I don't know what I will do. I am no closer to deciding than I have ever been, though I have never wavered in loving you. I do not know how to go on and yet life goes on, so every day I find a way forward. Moral decisions and artistic decisions and decisions about what to have for dinner and how best to mate a pair of rats.

I do not mean to belittle them. But they are little!

Maybe that is what I miss most, our conversation. Laughing with you while toothpaste runs down our chins. I miss trying. I miss your hands. I miss sleeping next to you at night, just sleeping. Our dreams interweaving.

I had a dream I was trying to find you
and saw you
but the stairway was blocked.

I miss all of our times. I miss you.

--Isla

Dear Isla,
I'll be back.
xo Eugene

I hold you to your promise.

14. I Could Not Fall

I could not fall asleep. I had easily avoided Brad's spell, had confirmed a complete lack of chemistry with Heimus, and had decided to write off all suitors. Now I was lying awake thinking about Max: We are about to be together again, filming together in Dorian, and I am not sure where that will lead but I feel inclined to rush in despite my trepidations. Whatever we decide will be all right. Right? I know that because I keep elevating. Elevating my hopes and desires. I will not settle either way.

But I was having trouble convincing myself of this.

I was at my parents' house. We were dealing with the brain on bionan. It was about 1am. I heard Dad talking in his sleep in the next room. His voice became louder and more animated and he was speaking very clearly as though on an important phone call. He was speaking in his old way as a leader or a parent or a coach, moving and direct and articulate.

It was not a phone call, I realized. It was a speech. He was making a goodbye speech.

You're a great group of people, Dad said. And this is the hardest thing I've ever done. But it has gotten to the point where I just can't handle it. Things are beyond me.

He went on like that, dream-talking and delusional but lucid and eloquent, and it was such a real goodbye speech that I started to fear for his life. Could he be aware on some level that this is it? Is he looking at an exit door or a vortex into bright light?

I heard my Mom jump out of bed at the same time I did, and heard her enter his room, so I held back. Dad saw her in the doorway and his voice was overcome with deep delight. Oh!, he said. Here is the person who has been my number one support. This is my wife, Beth. We've had a great run together. For those of you who don't know her, she's a hell of a girl.

He and Mom spoke back and forth for a moment and I could hear the cadence of their voices, the words lost in a murmur. He then realized that “everyone else had gone,” but he still thought he was elsewhere.

He said to her, let’s pack up and go home.

I went outside into their back yard. It was a rare night of darkness and tree frogs and cicadas were making their rhythmic racket, their sing-song of yes, no. It made me think of all the on-off energies that had been immersing us. Not just us, Eu & I, but all of us—society in the digital age.

Bionan was not in this realm of nature, exactly, yet the night air seemed to echo with it.

Eugene, I wish you were here. I need you more than ever. I do not want to get old and most of all do not want to get old alone. I want you by me, beside me, full of devotion. I want us always enjoying each other until the last.

I looked up. Demonstrating stillness in the midst of light-years of motion, turbulence and explosions, the pinpricks of starlight were beautiful and ambivalent. The night was dark but I could see forever in the stars.

15. So

In some ways it was not really there. It was a figment of the filaments. Just as we children used to chase fireflies in the fields. We chased them and caught them and put them in a bell jar. Just as we used to take our lamps and appliances and devices for granted. So many little lights ready to go out. To be extinguished.

Young imaginations leap among the clouds and waves as fish glide through water and those are their elements just as air sweeps over and lifts up the wings of birds. We adults do not know enough to remark on it properly, and we have only words to do so.

So.

It was as though I was under a fairy tale spell, and I sewed. And when I sewed, I sewed my silk nightgown under the lamplight to bring it on the trip to Dorian and to feel a man's hands running down the soft shimmer skimming over my skin. I folded the fabric, the silk, into an accordion and pushed the needle through to make eight stitches at once. A fold in time, a trick to keep it all in a line, telescoping under my needle, in a circle of lamplight.

I thought of Max, the poet. The poet of fleeting recitations.

Time was unaware that it held such sway.

How could we be cognizant of nothing and everything all at once, barely holding onto residuals? While one writer I knew wrote of flashlights and another of another writing of

flashlights, and we joked about shining them into tunnels, I write of a writer who noted a mark on the wall.

The mark became many things in her imagination although not to my knowledge did she ever consider that it was a black-hole portal or a needle's eye or an enlisted creature of the night, a time traveler. In its own mind, where was the snail proceeding in its shell, as it traversed the writer's wall? At home in its home in the home of the writer and appearing also as a black mark on the page, here again.

She wrote of drowning and grasping onto a plank at sea.

The needle slips in and out of the fabric, pulling thread along behind it. Just as a snail leaves a trail, only more to the point—a pun, a fabrication, a holding together with a seamless look.

I could sew forever and then never have to see Max tomorrow and make this fateful decision that has my every nerve ending singing and alive. I could prick my finger right now and fall into a deep and untroubled sleep until the right man, the true Prince, finds me and wakes me with a kiss.

I set down my sewing and picked up my pen and wrote, Where are you now?

That may be all I can say on the matter with little black marks and yet I cannot even tell the story to you as I almost did, Eugene. Sometimes temptation bears resistance. And other times not, which is why back then I let you all the way into me with your flashlight. Your hero's sword. Sorry to jest, sorry to joust, but you're starting to seem like a myth.

I texted Maria who waited on a distant shore with her concern. There I might be intact again, she said, as I had been when I left. Before I was overcome by your stories and your tongue and mouth.

Remember that time you were lurking out in the garden with your silly flashlight, pretending to be a snail in the dark or a giant firefly or an alien being from another earth?

Ooo, scary, I said, speaking through the night ruckus of crickets.

You gave no answer, as though still undiscovered.

Earlier we sat on the deck together, and while sitting there on the deck we heard a tree fall in the woods.

That answers that, you said.

Can't you come, make a comeback and show your full self? I suppose not, or you would have by now. Perhaps forces of time travel and physics beyond our nature would not allow it.

Therefore, I wondered, should I be entertaining suitors again? Most likely. It seemed the only path to love, if one existed. The woods were mysterious and dangerous, trees like sentries along the path yet really providing no guidance at all, just obscuring the rest of the forest.

Lightning rods of energy flow through me as I walk, thinking that I might be walking toward you. Is that a light ahead in the woods? But then we pass without seeing each other, though we may have been close enough to hear each other's breath and brush up against our lips and be everywhere else within reach.

Depending on how time travel works. Depending on how dimensions coincide.

Tomorrow the red maple? Where is home and how do we get back there?

I have had enough and yet will not make any goodbye speeches, the hardest thing I have ever not done.

Well, that really is not true. I did say goodbye in the end and was glad I had come on my journey into the filmscript. I took what I needed and I left with less than nothing. A talisman of who I was and still was and would be, a maiden nymph still yearning for the river into the sea. Wandering blindly in the woods. A silk nightgown torn by thorns, leaving fabric scraps and threads dangling from branches to mark her way.

16. Clarity

Clarity became the code name of the film. That's right, I said to the cast. Although it would layer a few stories, the scene we were shooting at Dorian would be fairly conventional. At least we thought so, going in.

Not that Charlotte, the star of our story, was conventional. She was daring and an adventuress, as they might have said in her day. She wore a gauzy dress and a man's straw hat. She traipsed across the lawn carrying a long paddle, twirling it as though it were a dance partner, and stepped off the dock into Harold's canoe. He reached in alarm to steady the boat, dismayed at her aplomb, but the boat barely rocked and she settled effortlessly into the prow, as though weightless, and tilted her chin up at him with an innocent smile.

They paddled into the river where nothing had changed for millennia except the particular identities of the trees and birds and dragonflies, the smoothness of the rock, the many layered striations visible in the colossal formations along the canyon walls and, now and then in gradually subtle or violent storm-washed ways, the course of the river. Lush greenery lined the flowing water. The river was an indescribable shade of pale or dark brownish green with rushing waves and strong currents in some sections, and eddies of near stillness behind the rocks that jutted up mid-river, creating alcoves where Charlotte and Harold would intermittently seek shelter. Their canoe would cross the rapids one by one as they made their way upriver in a process known as attainment.

Is that not straightforward story-telling so far? Isla asked Max.

They waited in the stillness of a boulder's shadow while the canyon walls and tall trees loomed all around them. Above them the blue sky looked like a dome painted with white clouds. Osprey, eagles, and hawks circled and dove and perched.

Harold, who is a time traveler, tells Charlotte that decades later a chopper would hover over paddlers at that very same place. Now there was nothing to disturb the silence except the sounds of rushing water and bird song and wind.

What, pray tell, asks Charlotte, is a chopper? It sounds barbaric.

In his tales of time travel, Harold often describes the unimaginable.

It is a flying vehicle on a rescue search.

Who needs rescuing?

A young girl is seen diving from a tall rock into the river. Hikers nearby watch in awe as she launches herself into the air from a ledge a hundred feet up. She sets her arms in outstretched position, rising in the shape of a cross. Her body then folds like a jackknife midair and as she hovers there—poised in the sky above the rock ledge—everything is held still in the balance, as happens in rare moments. Then she reaches with long straight arms into the pull of gravity and her body unhinges at the waist, until she is straight as a birch arrow from finger tips to toes. She plunges like a fisher bird in free-fall toward the river.

Water sprays upward as her hands part the river and her head and body glide in afterward and the river closes over her toes. Ripples spread briefly from the circle of her entry and then are gone.

The people watching hold their breaths.

Moments later they see her surface briefly, downstream. She seems to shake her head, her long tresses flowing in the water behind her.

Tresses? Asked Max.

That is what we used to call them.

But not anymore.

Not anymore.

Go on with the story, said Max. What was she wearing, by the way?

You, said Isla, are incorrigible.

Did she have on nothing on at all?

Maybe a silk nightgown.

Or a white deerskin skirt, he said, predictably.

This was part of their own story, nothing shallow, nothing running too deep, an exploration of the waters before bridges are built.

Thus, we have not really interrupted the narrative. We have floated briefly behind a rock and now will reenter the surge.

First tell me, did they find her?

The people saw the current sweep over her head and then lost sight of her in the rush of water. But the man she was with knew this was a reenactment of a similar scene, a scene from ancient times when a river nymph dove from that very same rock.

It was back in the time of oral tradition but the story had carried down through generations as one of the legends of the River People.

And this young girl was reenacting the legend?

Yes. Apparently so.

What was the legend?

While they were waiting for rest of the crew to launch the camera boat, Isla told Max the legend.

17. Story within story

The Legend of the Vortex

The River People tell many stories. This story is about the middle daughter of Uhm and Three Bears, the first leaders of the River People. The daughter was not the youngest and not the oldest, for those two had their own stories. This girl was unfettered by the expectations placed on the youngest and oldest, and she chose to run free. Her name was Tilla. Tree of the water.

Tilla was taller than her sisters and grew straight as a tree reaching for sun. She ran through the woods and over the rocks as fleetly as any woodland creature. She also dove like a bird and swam like a fish.

She was both curious and courageous. One day, when a vortex appeared in the dappled light of the forest, Tilla stepped boldly into it. When she stepped back, only moments later, she brought to the river people a gift from the other side. They did not understand it; it was unlike any object they had ever seen. But she showed them how to use it.

What was it?

It was a needle.

A sewing needle?

Yes, a sewing needle.

Well that doesn't seem like much.

This was a sewing needle threaded with a long strand from a spool of silk that seemed never to end.

The river people sewed clothing and headdresses and night covers and even pennants for ceremonial occasions, and later made marks and images on sycamore bark and bound them into

books and then built looms to make cloth. The silk thread was strong and sturdy and the needle never broke or grew dull.

But the middle daughter of Uhm and Three Bears grew restless with sewing. She went back many days to the place where the vortex had opened, and found nothing there except the sound of the wind and the river. The birds sang, but they could not reawaken her carefree spirit. No longer did she run through the woods and sing back to them in their own distinct calls. Often she sat on the rock ledge and gazed down into the canyon as the river ran its course.

One day Tilla found a fallen bird in the clearing at the mouth of the vortex, as though the bird had come looking for her when she was away. She had missed its arrival, and the bird had died.

The daughter carried the bird's body home and though she was sad she knew to honor it in death. Her family marveled at this bounty, as it was a large bird like none they had ever seen. After Tilla had plucked all of the lovely feathers, the bird made a bountiful meal for the whole village.

At the next moon, Tilla went back into the forest. This time she found a strange white deer fallen in front of the vortex. She used the strong thread to bind together branches from a tree and she built a raft to pull the deer's body home. Again her family and all the village feasted well and they danced into the moonlit night.

Tilla was still not the happy self of her girlhood, but her initiative seemed to return. As she danced that night, her brown legs twirled and her arms wove skyward like flames from the fire and her eyes shone in the light of the moon. Like the moon, their light was lustrous but distant.

The next day Tilla set to work. She cleaned and stretched and dried the deer hide. It made a delicate fabric, soft to the touch. With the pelt she sewed a skirt for herself, short panels front and back that were held by a belt at her hips, and a vest that hugged her breasts, in the style of the river people. The needle seemed to glide of its own accord. When the fabric was sewn, she decorated the belt and the vest with the many-colored feathers of the otherworldly bird, and when she had finished it all she put it on and she was striking to behold.

It was early enough in the springtime that the river was running high, the currents swift and strong. The young girl slipped through the forest like an unknown, and the birds grew quiet at her approach. When she reached the clearing of the vortex, even the river lessened its decibels. The girl stood still as a heron, listening into the silence.

At first there seemed nothing but woods. No indication of the vortex. No wavering of the light. But then.

Then?

Then, well, it is difficult to describe if you have never seen it with your own eyes. But I will try to find the words.

Because you love me?

Because you love my stories.

Because I am willing to listen to them?

Because you are compelled to listen.

Because I love you.

Isla gazes at Max, absorbing this unexpected declaration.

There is a moment of uncertainty. The sound of rushing water. Something in her dies or comes alive.

The camera crew shouts at them over a bullhorn.

Legend, part 2

What happened next was never completely understood.

As legend would have it, the girl in her silk thread and deerskin and feathers stepped into the vortex but then came through it or seemed at any case to reappear simultaneously, one hundred lengths clear of the woods, stepping out onto a high rock ledge above the water.

And she dove—

She dove.

Did she survive?

They saw her surface, then watched the current sweep her under and away. They searched the shore downriver for many days, and found no sign of her.

After many moons and quite a few seasons had passed and they had long since given up any hope of her return, Tilla appeared by the shore. She emerged from the river, tall and strong, rivulets of water streaming from her body. In her hands she carried a silver fish. It was another fine feast in the village that night and there were many stories for her to tell of her time away.

Do you know those stories?

I know some of those.

Will you tell them to me?

Sure, she smiled.

Charlotte and Harold paddled into the current, ferrying across the rapids. They reached a beach made of gazillions of tiny shells and pulled the boat onto land and found a flat rock to sit on in the shade, where they could eat their picnic.

And your girl with the chopper; was she rescued?

The girl was having a picnic with a man who loved her but could not have her.

Is that why she dove?

Maybe. Maybe that was part of it.

But it was not an intentional quest for demise, if that's what you're wondering.

It was an inevitability that she dove.

Everything had brought her to that point. And it was a beautiful dive, without knowing or thinking anything ahead of the unknown consequences or results or next event, wonderment at the beauty of her surroundings and the beauty of being in her own body as the dive unfolded. She had the feeling of becoming a bird, and experienced a sheer state of exhilaration while giving in to her full nature.

He leapt to his feet and watched her in stunned admiration as she dove from the precipice. When he saw her engulfed and carried off by the river he without hesitation took a running start and threw himself off the ledge, feet first, yelling into the canyon all the way down as his body hurtled and hurtled after hers.

Did he save her?

He found her eventually, but nearly lost his own life along the way.

In a swirl of water he bumped over and along the rough rocks, collecting cuts and bruises but never getting knocked out, because he knew to go feet first and to let the river carry him and not to struggle against it.

He had read about what it would be like to experience this. A shelf of books at home and in one of them was a passage about time travel, and the hero was a Prince from an ancient tale who had fallen overboard and this is how he had survived it. Giving in was the only way not to give in. This is sometimes the hardest lesson for the intrepid adventurer to learn.

Oh, is there a moral to the story?

No. No, there is not.

It is purely and simply a story.

I am not trying to convince you of one thing or another.

Not sending any messages, veiled or otherwise.

Nothing suggestive.

He passed her the wine.

Isla and Max lounged a while in the sun, and she watched a dragonfly; she examined a dragonfly that had landed on her hand.

In the legend, the girl is transformed into a dragonfly.

Isla had given Max no answer. Would they grow old together? That was a monumental question and hard to fathom, and it was all still undecided.

She focused instead on the delicate filigree of the dragonfly's folded wings. The bright turquoise of its body. It stared back at her intently, from a circular black spot suspended inside a globule of cloudy jell, and when she turned her hand in the sunlight the creature was always

looking at her, from the front and side and back of this remarkable eyeball. The pupil didn't move, it just saw in all directions from all sides. The dragonfly had spherical views of the world from both eyes and who knew what kind of sentience in between?

What next? Asked Charlotte.

He found her floating, dazed but conscious, in one of those quiet alcoves behind a river rock, where her beautiful clothing had been snagged by a tree branch growing out from the rock. The branch held her there, face up, currents rocking her in a gentle to and fro.

He swam with her to safety, right here on this beach.

He laid her on the sand.

Warm and spent, she slept, and when she came to after a while, the sun was higher in the sky. He was climbing upward, through the leaves, stepping on the terraced array of rocks leading up the face of the canyon. To gain a vantage point. To wave away the rescue team in the chopper. It was loud and he could not hear her voice when she called after him.

The helicopter, Harold told Charlotte, looks a little like this dragonfly. He held onto her hand and turned it in the light, and they studied the lines together. A snub-nosed big-eyed window in front, a long tail behind. It is built to hover. It dips and dives and darts.

The dragonfly launched from her hand as though to demonstrate.

I want to see it, she said. Will you take me?

The answer is yes....

But...

Yes, but... it is always time dependent, he said. Her expression fell and he quickly embraced her and as he held her sun-warmed body he promised, yes, you'll go.

In fact, he said. You'll go before me. I've seen how it happens.

You've seen it already?

Now don't ask me too much or everything will become a jumbled mess.

You mean you'll lose the thread of the narrative?

18. Murky waters

Complete clarity seemed to evade Isla, but maybe she wasn't seeking it whole-heartedly enough. It was hard to concentrate. The chopper was loud and obnoxious and she didn't even want to put it on screen, filling the theater with that thing. Could the dragonfly alone be used? Could people imagine a helicopter roar amid that overriding silence, and would they be stunned by the stupidity of their own machines?

Why did Harold say the girl from the future had to be rescued, though she was the beautiful diver?

On their last day, after the film crew had left on break, she and Max had gone canoeing. After ferrying and attaining and riding some rapids and talking story line in the alcoves along the way, they had turned back.

Stop paddling! He had said. Close your eyes.

She did.

Now see if you can tell which way your boat is oriented as the river carries and turns it.

The tide had turned and they closed their eyes as they floated and let the current convey them along the last stretch toward shore.

Nothing but the gentle eddy of the water and river noises surrounding them, the feel of warm sun and cooling wind.

Everything was relative.

Time was carrying her home and she was all alone in the world.

No you're not, he said.

She looked at him but showed no emotion.

They had finished filming in a rush to allow Susan, the director, to go home for her father's funeral. Isla herself had arranged it. A needle hole in the folded fabric.

They would resume filming elsewhere, the river scenes were done.

He did not know why but the day before, Isla had written off Max completely. She was coming up the trail from the beach and heard voices in front of her. She was about to call out to make herself known, but then she saw through a gap in the trees that it was Max and Charlotte. Bennie, that is, the actor who played Charlotte. It was obviously an intimate moment. They were standing close and he had his hands on her shoulders.

Isla stopped cold, silent.

Just one kiss, she heard Max say.

Just one? said Bennie.

Isla turned back to the waterfront, the sight of them burned into the back of her retinas.

She waited at the beach a while, then walked up a different path when a suitable amount of time had passed, this time with Susan.

Max seemed baffled by her change in attitude toward him. Max, she said. We're friends forever. That's it.

Leaning back into the buttery leather of Victor's upholstery and allowing the wings of aviation to transport her across space and time, Isla sighed a deep sigh. She felt an intense relief, as though she'd been blind and had her sight restored. As though she'd dodged bullets fired from a military chopper.

Yet her own role in this was far from clear, wasn't it? She had to admit that.

19. Home again

Isla crossed the threshold into her own home. She poured herself a glass of wine and went directly out to the garden. A hummingbird came by. It swooped and dove a while, then hovered in front of her, then perched on a nearby branch.

The Japanese maple was a dull green. The lawn yellow. The day long.

Did she need a break?

No, she was just beginning.

That evening she laughed over the card table with her neighborhood friends. Their brightness flowed over and around the table and the chandelier and candles made the mahogany gleam and the city lights came on and on as twilight attempted to reclaim its jurisdiction beyond the glass. How strange it was to have power again.

Dear Eugene,

Is there anything worse than duplicity? When I think of “Love’s Forgery,” it’s easy to see why love has its detractors.

Indeed, I had dinner the other night with a man who said, “Love is just another one of our four letter words.”

He asked, “When love occurs, what four-letter words follow?”

We immediately came up with a list.

Eugene, thank the lord you don't have a shred of cynicism in you. People are jaded and many say the notion of "happily ever after" is a fairy tale. But let's admit it, if there were guaranteed outcomes, wouldn't nearly anyone and everyone love to fall in love!?

Yet what to do now about the word love. What else will you call it, if not love? What if we call it love but declare it anew and give it fresh meaning and open our arms to it and embrace it fully? Hard to do, if love has been damaged beyond repair. But love is resilient! Love will find a way. Language can renew itself and love is without end.

I adore you, Gene. When the word love doesn't seem big enough, keep that in mind.

Xox

Drly Blvd,

I knew immediately that you were a man of your word.

Remember the first night we met? Here's what you said about that night, in your toast at our wedding party when we came back from our island elopement. I found this yesterday, on a piece of Academy stationary folded up in the back of your sock drawer:

"There is a consciousness of consciousness that I love about her and I fell in love, have fallen in love, with Isla for her mind. Kind of a head trip. Something about her aura.

That's what I saw, really, the first time I spotted you across the room and followed you out the door and down the hall.

We were at a disaster preparedness convention. It was a cosmic connection."

Remember how sweet you were, Eugene?

Hi, I said.

Hi, you said. I'm Gene.

Hi Eugene, I said, reading your nametag. We were shaking hands at that moment.

Yours is upside down, you said, not taking your eyes from mine.

Oh is it? I asked, not taking my eyes from yours. You did not let go of my hand, either.

We were smiling at each other as though we had known each other for years.

You'll have to tell me your name, you said.

Isla. I said.

Here, you said. Let me be sure.

You very carefully and respectfully turned my nametag right side up on my collar.

Isla, you read. It's nice to meet you, Isla.

It's nice to meet you, Eugene. Or Gene. Do you go by Gene?

Either one, you said.

That's very genial of you, I said.

You laughed and then asked where I was from, and I asked where you were from, and then it was time to go back.

Now, in that whole conference room full of people, only the two of us were there, circling around and then finding each other again and again over the next two days.

At the evening reception, I was standing by a table of food and you came up next to me. I was eating shrimp.

What is it, you said.

Butterflied shrimp, I said.

Mmm, you said, popping one in.

How about Eu? I asked. Does any one call you Eu?

You're the first.

Really?

Really. Do people call you I?

Yes, they call me I.

Really?

No not really, silly.

How about I. May I call you I?

Only if I can call you Eu.

This could get very confusing.

My head is already spinning.

I'm glad I have that effect on you. How about butterflies? Are you feeling any butterflies?

You held up one of the shrimp.

Along with these frivolous name games, we spoke in more serious terms and got quickly to the matters of digital darkness, the recovery, and matters of life and death. You were very kind when I told you about my father's worrisome condition.

At the end of the conference we stood under the cherry trees, blossoms falling like snow. For a few moments our hands met, our fingers interlocking. We agreed to meet a week later, have lunch in the Academy café, and walk through the Phasian Gardens.

That's when I would spy you on the stairs and you would spy me in the glass alcove, bricks and blocks and clocks and paintings and the results of rain all about.

That's when you would find me and kiss me.

Now I sit by this tree in our garden and wish with all my might to invoke you back here.
Can you feel my heartbeat? Can you hear me telling you stories you know?

Love

your love

20. Tide

After returning home from the river shoot, Isla felt as though she had dodged disaster. She had evaded something far more disruptive and devastating than assault by a deadly helicopter.

She was ready to delve back into her work and forget about any potential forays into a fatherhood quest, consigning herself again to the fates of waiting. The film was underway, and this was more than enough fulfillment. How nice it was to simplify her own concerns. She dumped everything from her suitcase into the laundry bin, and sat on the deck with her notebook and a glass of wine. She realized she did not want children, after all.

Isla got up on a Tuesday and went to their CFO's office to meet with the other producers and discuss the film budget. Victor's bankruptcy filing, which at first had seemed disastrous, in the end had given them crucial financial flexibility.

Was there no end to complications in life? Yes, there was! Worries proved pointless and were dispelled and she showed up for the meeting feeling newly empowered. Everything would come up roses.

She'd met their CFO Clark before, but hadn't given him much notice. This time was different. Clark came striding into the cavernous lobby to collect her, smiling and shaking her hand convivially. The man was fresh-shaven. He was wearing a button-down shirt. He smelled like laundry soap and shaving cream.

The meeting went swimmingly.

He walked her out to the car and they stood chatting in the bright light.

You, she said to Clark, are brilliant.

They were set to start filming again in the majestic city of Myrth, in two weeks.

Isla sat in the garden that August afternoon with her tea, not really thinking about Clark. She thought again about her good friend Susan, who had lost her father. Isla felt a wave of sadness at the thought of her own father, slipping away.

Before dying, Susan's father had found a way to live life entirely in the present. He was lost in time, Susan had said. Or maybe he had come unstuck in time, as Vonnegut would say.

That's what I've said about my Dad, too, replied Isla.

More and more people were coming down with this at a younger age, as the potential effects of bionan spread.

Isla suddenly sat upright. What if Eugene had contracted this thing and was off on another Earth without any idea of who she was any more? If he had stumbled forward into that confusion, he'd be so totally lost he would be incapacitated.

Oh, drat, she nearly cursed. Do I have to go after him?

Eu had expressly forbidden that at one point. Presumably he knew what he was doing, yet she couldn't help but wonder. What if he needed rescuing and she was blithely cooling her heels here, drinking tea and waiting for leaves to change color?

She didn't want her life to be a stupid tragedy.

She didn't want to waste time thinking about it, either. Revisiting decisions she had already made. Ok, so she would keep waiting to some extent. But also looking. She was done not looking. Max was a cad, but there were other men. She needed human companionship and why

shouldn't she enjoy some repartee with a handsome man occasionally? She didn't need to cross any lines. Isla felt completely confident in her ability to keep the lines clear and stay on the safe side of them.

Piece of cake.

High tea.

Rituals of old civilizations.

So much for simplification.

21. Myrth

She arrived at her hotel and decided to buzz Clark. No. She would ITM him. Whatever the mode was then. Hard to recall, exactly. The important point was that she would intimate some things. She contemplated intimating something intimate. Would that be intimidating, she wondered? No, he was not to be intimidated. Any warnings about Eu would only embolden Clark. The man was not shy. That thought made her smile. How terrible was she?

Hi, she messaged. I'm here.

Clark answered immediately. Dinner?

So she met him for dinner. She put on a white leather skirt and a silk top. She walked silently into the bar, feeling the cool stone under her sandaled feet.

He stood up when he saw her and held out a chair for her and then sat down again, pulling his own chair closer. She caught a fresh waft of spring air—his shaving cream and laundry soap. A particular scent she had almost forgotten.

Clark and Isla both ordered steak frites. She couldn't remember the last time she had tasted a steak... or frites.... She took another sip of her Cabernet. No wonder she was thinking about having children with this man.

What kind of laundry detergent do you use, she asked, pulling Clark toward her by the collar and burrowing her nose into his shoulder.

Tide, he said.

Mmmm, she said.

Would you like me to do your laundry?

I'm not sure it needs doing, she said.

I think it does, he said.

There was a pause while he looked at her, waiting.

That's not much of a come-on, she said, and they broke into laughter.

Under the post-digital-darkness circumstances this was very funny and so they both laughed again. Then they laughed even harder, laughing at their own laughing.

Isla found herself laughing all evening and having a great time with Clark, despite any reservations she might have brought to the table initially. Besides, what harm was there in enjoying good conversation and didn't they all need to keep a sense of humor and didn't she deserve to laugh?

The steak came and was cooked to perfection and the salted French fries were the perfect compliment and she had ordered a béarnaise sauce, as well. Clark poured her another glass of Cabernet. With the excitement of the filming, Isla had not eaten much for the past week. And with the shortages and shutdowns and rationing, she had not eaten anything like this for a very long time. The flavors and textures were a marvel and every bite tasted exquisite.

Where did this come from? She asked Clark.

He shrugged and smiled. We have our sources, he said.

A steak dinner seemed harmless enough.

Over time, however, she could see how the process resembled attainment. Crossing the river or working upstream always did entail some risk, and Clark was very seductive, let's go ahead and acknowledge it. His words and his body enveloped her like electricity, and the city of

Myrth loomed with its high spires and marble arches and bright lights all around them. Still, she was in control of her own craft. This was her story and she could write it at will.

That night, solitary in her nunnish bed in a small Myrthian Inn, she thought about how unfair the world had become. She thought of all the other people who would relish a dinner of steak-frites. Much as she believed the arts were essential to humanity, humanity also needed to be fed. Something to be done about it, she thought. She thought again of Tilla, of how Tilla returned home from her time travels with feasts for the whole community.

Threads of endless story.

Her thoughts were drifting toward a candlelit table and she was dreaming of her Eugene at home again, and the two of them presiding over their someday, would-be family.

She flew like a bird, giddy over the starlit streets of the city of light, several new moons reflected in the pools surrounding the castle.

She dove and floated downstream, feet first and trailing a comet of tresses. She felt a sensation of calm radiance because she knew that ahead was an oasis behind a rock where a tree grew and its branches would snag her and hold her and she would wake to make love on a shore of sand and shells and she would live to tell the story.

22. A person of letters

Dear Eugene,

The film is going wonderfully, in case you were wondering. I wish you were here to discuss some of these underlying themes I'm struggling with, to wit:

The complex issues of identity, love's dialogue, creation and/or loss of self in relation to another, to the relationship and to its creation, or in relation to the state of being in love. Transformations abounding. I've got art infused in nature, as well, and mix-ups among the makers of the film and the actors in the film and the legends and stories they live and tell.

Don't worry! Maria will straighten it all out on the editing room floor. Susan will direct it masterfully. The actors will invoke Harold and Charlotte with true love.

I have been working hard, too, in the lab. That is your work, Eugene, and there is only so much I can do.

But don't worry, when I travel, Heimus and Dr. Ruth keep an eye on Ollie and Mollie and crew. Yes, love friendship is the most important things, and beautiful love friendship is between Ruth and Heimus. She has bloomed and you should see him! Enthralled.

In perhaps the most exciting news of all, it would appear that Ruth and Heimus are close to a breakthrough on the bionan dream-brain syndrome. It may be too late for my father, but I can't think about that now.

xoxox

Dear Eu,

I know my letters are like the weather, but here is my mood today. I am tired of pain and sorrow.

So many love stories are about pain and sorrow. Why must there be so much tragedy, people led astray while passion overrules judgment? In plays where “all’s well that ends well,” love does come happily—after the story is over and we’ve all left the theater. The play itself is entirely a comedy of errors and obstacles to be overcome on that pathway to love. Similarly, old fairy tales that end in “happily ever after” do not expound on that ending.

How can I know anything of our ending when we’ve lost the thread of the story for so long? I love you madly but I do not wish to go mad with waiting and I do not want to devote my life to absence and sorrow and longing.

I’m sorry, but I might have met someone, and you should know.

—*Your petulant Penelope*

Dearly beloved,

Love transcends time and death.

Although I have been writing you forever and it has all been said before, here we are again. I can’t stop mulling it over. Compulsive rumination. This is what happens when we need an answer and cannot find one.

I know you (likely) will not answer this. You've been gone for years now, off on your time travel expedition. All I can say is that this better be some kind of epic journey, Mister. I am a little foggy on where we left off, and when I write down our stories some of it begins to feel surreal.

Yet in your absence I still love you. I still conjure you up in my mind, I still address this love letter to you on the page. Not to be morbid or anything, because I do not believe you have died! But still, if time prevented us from ever seeing each other again, we would still and always have that love we once shared.

Only love and writing can transcend time and distance. I cannot be with you but I will keep writing to you, whoever you are now and wherever you may be.

On the other hand, without openness in language, we cannot really know each other. Without knowing each other, we cannot really love each other. This is why I'm worried about us, Gene.

I have to say what I'm thinking, Gene. Forgive me.

Yours, as always, for the moment known as now,

Moi

Dearly Beloved:

I adore you. Enchantment and ecstasy are words that make me think of you. How you looked into my eyes and held me, saying the perfect few words or no words at all before you kissed me.

There is a specificity in you,

a certain particular set of ...

Yet there is also something universal and shared in our story that is like all other love stories that resonate over time.

Why not say the word love out loud and evoke and invoke all those other great loves? Why not shout the word love from the mountaintop? Tristan and Isolde? No, not such pain and tragedy. Dante's Pilgrim and Beatrice? No, not so precious and heavenly that we're untouchable.

It seems that James Joyce tried to bring us back to earth from the notion of epic, mythic artworks to the rendering of the everyday, though ironically in epic form. Here is Leopold Bloom, just the everyman, going from hour to hour. Here is Steven Dedalus, still a bit wracked by high-mindedness. Both a bit lost and unsatisfied in their exiled wanderings. In the end it is Molly Bloom, the long-suffering wife and female who brings regenerative power to language and the story and in the end affirms life and love and the pleasures of sex in her long long run-on-sentence, a monologue that ends the novel with: ...yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I said yes I will Yes.

Who knew you'd be off on some lengthy cosmic mission? I really don't care to draw these literary parallels any more and would request that you simply come home. Just come home and be yourself, Eugene. I don't want to think of you as existing only on the page, like some novelist's construction. I am also tired of thinking of you as a potential reader of my letters.

Who knows why, given how she idolized you, but your mother did not name you Ulysses.

And who am I, Isla, to be waiting and wishing for love while you are away?

I might have used the name “Penelope” in the film, but when I mentioned it to my friend-for-life Max he said, Penelope? I don’t think so.

I have no right to bring her up here, either, in our letters. I am not a scholar, Eugene, like you. I’m just wandering around in the pages I’ve read, an avatar in my own life, hoping you’ll soon show up and make a woman of me again.

Perhaps on the kitchen counter....

I’ve got that ache of Spring in me. You know how I get this time of year.

There is another poem by another poet where we see a field of white flowers at our feet and then we see it is a field of stars, sparkling in the cosmos all around us. Do you remember it, Ulysses Eugene? We used to have it on our refrigerator, and I can’t find it now. Wherein we become one with the cosmos through death. This is not unlike becoming one with universal life through love.

Do not let those stars bury you, Gene. I still watch for your one shining light. Last night I noticed that things were glimmering around Orion’s belt.

Woe is me. Deprived of your love, am I sometimes in despair? Are you, too, Gene? Please don’t despair. I hate to think of you as unhappy. I will be fine and well, well and fine, no matter what, and we both must stay strong, no matter what. But sometimes it seems like too much to bear. All your absence, Gene, and

all my longing,

yours

Dear Eu,

People laugh at my obsession with love. I say, how can they concern themselves with anything else?

Romantic love can be a religion. Dante's pilgrim seeks his transcendent love Beatrice and finally catches up with her in the cloudy heavens, yet still can't and never can touch her.

Oh, dear man. I hope that will not be us. You traipsing around the cosmos, I meandering around in literature and theory. Never to meet again.

I really don't want to transfer my love and I don't want to idolize it from afar, either.

Helloooo? Anybody out there? I am sitting at the table looking out on the wintery day, everything dusted in frost.

Did I mention it was Spring? It's a late frost, Gene. Late.

—Tis I, again, as always

Dear Love,

Where are you?? Forget about my fears of heaven in the last letter. I've thought of something even more daunting. What if I caught up with you in hell but failed to follow the proper procedure to bring you back? With time travel, this really is a fucking risk. And all those earlier directives from the underworld: don't look back! Much as I jealously hope you are not having too much fun without me, I also hope and pray you are not stuck in some hellish place.

Aside from hope and prayer, what is my mission? No looking back, my Dad always used to say. Yet nostalgia calls and I have these images of my parents that will stay with me always.

Once when we were on a family vacation at the beach I went grocery shopping with Dad. For a few minutes we got separated in the grocery aisles. I was an adult but I felt like a kid again, lost in the store without my parent.

Then he came around the corner, pushing his cart.

There you are! he exclaimed.

As though he felt the same way.

I can still picture him, finding me in that grocery aisle.

I can still feel the relief and gladness we both felt.

And my Mom, I picture her at a distance, walking toward me on a country road, sunlight aglow on her snow-white hair.

I went to see them again. This is why I'm thinking of this pre-language phase of consciousness, where love begins even before language makes meaning of it. This is difficult to think about now, to imagine our own state as minds new to the world.

Where language begins to form identity, and/or vice versa. Eugene. Don't you love the sound of your name? I do.

Eugene, if I may invoke your name now and you might perceive it in my mental voice, Eugene, language is all we have. And I mean this more than literally. If that can be said. We are ethereal, we are clouds made up of stories.

In any case, so much love to you from my parents. It will make you sad to hear about my recent visit, but here is the story of the pants. We can also laugh about it, too, hopefully. Either way, I wish that you were here to hold me right now.

23. The pants

Isla went to see her parents. It would have been nice to have Eugene with her, but he was not and that was ok. She was up for this. They were all doing what they had to do.

Isla's Dad was still his charming self, delighted to see her and asking repeatedly how everything was going. But at times he grew petulant. He'd forget what his hearing aids were for.

She'd hand him a hearing aid and he'd say, what am I supposed to do with this?

He'd lost so much weight that his pants were baggy, and he had trouble figuring out how to work a belt. He dressed himself, and looked like he wasn't quite put together.

Isla took him to the store one day. It was raining, granted, and they had already run five other errands. But it was her last day in town and she really wanted to find him some pants that fit. She coaxed him into pushing the cart and he looked through the racks for a few minutes with her, but then he said, I'm done with this. He didn't want any part of trying on pants. They had three pairs of pants in the cart, two of them exactly the same, just in case they were miraculously a good fit.

I'm done looking, he said. No more.

OK, Dad, she said, just push the cart this way.

Where are we going? He said loudly. I'm done here. Let's go.

Her Dad complained to the woman at the dressing room, I'm not doing this! Look at these! he added, pointing to the baggy pants he was wearing.

The salesgirl tried to cajole him by telling a joke. She led them to a large private room on the side that said "Men's."

Isla said, Look Dad, it's a big private room. Just try on one pair. It will only take a minute.

They went in and he sat on the bench. "You mean I have to take off my shoes?"

He took off his shoes and Isla helped him to try on the pants, which of course were too tight and too short.

He was peeved but then had a flash of contrition and apologized, I'm sorry. I just can't do this.

So Isla coaxed him into trying one more pair, which did fit, but they were sweatpants, which he refused to wear. By then he did not want to put on his own pants, either, the ones he had worn into the store.

Those won't work!, he said. But they got him dressed again and the nice saleswoman said goodbye, and sorry those didn't work out for you.

I'll say they didn't work, Dad declared loudly.

The gal said, well I hope it all works out eventually. I thanked her as I hustled Dad toward the door.

Thank you, Dad called to her over his shoulder. Thanks for your help.

You're welcome, she beamed.

Isla bought the sweatpants anyway, as he stood glowering at the counter, ready to go home.

She was hurrying through her payment and trying to avoid a big outburst, and the young man behind the counter was very pleasant.

Look at these! Dad said, grabbing at the pants he was wearing. These are terrible.

Well, good thing you have the new ones, said the salesman.

Good thing? Yeah right. I won't wear those! Would you?

I took Dad's elbow and we turned for the doors.

Well, come back soon and I hope you find some good ones next time, said the young man. He was not to be dissuaded.

In fact, he followed us along, walking on his side of the counter toward the door as we walked in that direction. Apparently, even when Dad grumbled, there was something engaging about him that made people want to interact.

Happy New Year! Called the salesman.

Happy New Year! Isla replied, mustering a sweet smile for him though she felt more like crying.

Then Dad chimed in. You too, he said. Happy whatever it is.

That was exactly what the young man wanted to hear. He stopped and waved goodbye to us. Thanks! He said, with all sincerity.

They stepped into the rain. It was getting dark. Isla's Dad immediately turned to her and apologized.

I'm sorry, he said. That was all I could do. I know you're trying to help and I just couldn't do it today.

It's ok, Dad. She said, giving him a big hug in the rainy parking lot.

They got into the car and he said again, I'm sorry. I had just had enough. Things just aren't working well for me right now.

That's ok, Dad. I don't blame you for being frustrated. I'd be frustrated, too.

She thought about everything he was going through and some tears came into her eyes. He was still her sweet Dad and at some point in every day lately the words came to her from someplace in her childhood, from somewhere deep in the well, and she said to herself, Daddy. My Daddy.

And so they drove for home.

It was a family affair. This whole process. Yet how strange it seemed, when her childhood voice spoke up. It was something from inside herself that she never would have anticipated.

That night, Isla was reading in the kitchen. Her parents had gone to bed earlier.

At about midnight, her Dad wandered in.

Good morning! he said.

So Isla made them a midnight snack. In the silvery light of the sun room, they had a talk that was deep and meaningful, though much of it was in a different language.

We'll get through this, said her Dad at one point. It was in metaphor form, his "this," not fully clear in antecedent yet understood.

They conversed in something like dream language, where the words had altered meanings. Phrases floated like clouds full of implication and shone with profound truths, or the simple giving in and letting of rain and sunshine, for after all, what else could you do?

Life is mysterious and challenging at times, but all will be well enough.

We're so lucky to have our family and friends, they agreed.

They looked at each other and smiled in complete understanding.

She flew home the next day and her brother and sister-in-law called.

"We're on the way to the store," they said. "What size pants does Dad need?"

It was a family affair. This whole process. The whole shebang.

24. Fragments of our former selves

Love generated in the mind is doubtless more intelligent than true love, but it has only flashes of enthusiasm; far from scattering the thoughts it is constructed by the power of thoughts alone....

--Stendahl

Dear Gene,

As one great writer might see us, you and I are locked in the classic caress of author and reader.

In reality, I have waited long enough.

Eugene, I would wait forever if that weren't such a long time. Every day in the mirror is like another reminder.

For one thing, I look at the calendar and count out nine months and think, how much longer can I wait? Will I be distraught or disappointed if time runs on and you are still gone and I haven't had children?

Now the pressing nature of time is not only about my own biological clock (don't worry, you will find me young as ever) but the whole human race, given what we've reconfirmed through Ollie.

But should I even be bringing children into this world? It seems on the positive side to be trending toward peace and harmony as a new light of wisdom dawns on us, yet who the hell knows where we're heading with humankind?

I am not God. You are not God. Though I do find you Godlike, yes.

I am dying here. I do not want to waste my precious life ruminating endlessly on moral dilemma and if I am going to venture forward with one of these suitors, what does that look like? Could I keep a distance and a reserve and simply seed an Earthling? That seems alien to me, Eugene. And it would seem like just an excuse offered as moral justification. Like letting go of faithfulness on a technicality.

Would you please just send me a sign and let me know whether and when you'll be back?

Am I really this pathetic? A pair of ovaries with a calling. Or am I more than that—let's say a bundle of nerves and a desire for romance.

Love,

Isla

Dearest Gene,

I know this letter is rather crazy, given that “you” are “gone” and “nowhere” to be found. But “here” am “I,” writing anyway. Or here I was, at some moment, and there you are now, reading this. Possibly. The way thoughts can be transcribed and words can leap across pages of time.

The way I can write about the moment you turned to me beside the ships in dock and said, “I love you,” with the sky all eggshell blue behind you, and near the base of the memorial statue a little toddler girl in a blue jacket was chasing seabirds.

That scene is in the film that is about to be released, marking five years since you left. It has been five years since you disappeared, Eugene, and still I wait. Although I must tell you, I have resolved to see suitors. No more sitting home alone. Even Penelope did not sit home alone.

Who is Penelope, you ask? Look her up, Eugene. You should totally look her up.

There is this guy named Clark I also need to tell you about.

Much love,

moi

You wait on the other side of time.
Your sail wavers in the luff.
You stand straight as the mast,
then your image shimmers.
The water flashes bright, blinding as your shield.

Do not cross over, not yet!
Not until we've known the oceans.
Just as Aristotle's incline
requires careful timing,
you must abide your time.

You hear the appeal of my siren's song,
sweet peals of silvery bells,
the choir of every voice in the firmament,
but do not listen.
Lash yourself to the mast if you must.

Oh Dear,

torrential

Spring again

Don't make me
wake
wait

Clock
Brick
Alcove
Rainglass
Riverwave

Pain Pane Page
Rage Rain Rein
Vane in vain vein
Leaf leave leaves
This is I,
Insane in sane
Same same

Fragments fractals
Body by body
flow

deep as you go
time travel
on my mind

Whoooosh
Who...
Shhhh

Eu n I
4
love
is

The Divine Feminine

Anatomy, antonym

Agony, Antigone

Gone, but not

Swept streaming

immortal

Ophelia

Tilla of the cliffs

dove

rivers

to the sea

her mersisters

spirits

silken tresses

shorn, sewn,

Penelope

Seen on scene,

Scheherazade,

unsettled, set

This page
left intentionally

25. There is time

She rips up the note and sticks the scraps of it onto the barren tips of the branches of the maple tree. [Of thee, of thee, she thinks.] She sits on the deck, drinking coffee from her cracked mug, admiring her work. A spider web glimmers in the morning light and a pair of humming birds dips and dives and hovers. She is wearing Gene's flannel shirt and Ollie is buttoned into her pocket. She has not washed the shirt and it still smells faintly of Eugene.

A shimmer appears by the maple. In the shimmer the shape of man appears.

Eugene! You are not.

Not what?

Home for my film premiere!

Am I in it?

You'll see.

First come with me, says Eu, extending a hand.

Where? Why?

You'll see.

But the premiere is tonight! There's no time.

Don't worry. There's time.

Their fingers interlock. They step into the sheer waver of their garden vortex and step out onto a tropical island beach. The sand is dazzling white and the sea is a palette of tropical blues. They

lie in the sun, they swim. He is up against her and they make love. Curtains of light sway through palm leaves, warm breezes carry the scent of tropical flowers, cooling their damp skin.

The new sun rises.

It's time, he says.

All too soon.

They are back at the maple.

Ollie, too, has made the trip, and will never be the same.

It's the night of the film premiere. She puts on her blacklit dress full of lights, thinking of Nuvoletta, yet determined to survive the evening. He wears a tux with his "go anywhere" Time-shirt, no ink to be seen.

At the premiere, a colorful crowd mills about in the lobby. Gene happily greets all of their friends, including Isla's suitors. She is greatly relieved and quickly lets go of any earlier concerns on that account. Gene is feeling magnanimous in the new age of light. Their excursion to the beach has also likely made him less inclined to destroy her admirers. No need!

They toast to each other with glasses of champagne. Isla makes a brief speech, thanking Victor, Clark, Susan, Max, Harold, Charlotte, Maria, Carl, Ruth, Heimus, Brad, Ollie, Mollie, her parents, brother, sister-in-law, and Gene.

They find their seats in a box above the stage. The lights go down. Gene has his arm around her and she takes his other hand and holds it in her lap, pressing his palm against her belly.

Are we expecting, she says?

Shhhh, he smiles, nodding at the screen.

The curtain rises. A unified murmur that is not language but a deeper impulse of expression fills the auditorium as the projector lights the screen and the first letters appear.

P.S.: Love

Dearly beloved,

We are gathered here today to bring love back into this world! To say the word and spread its meaning from mountaintop to shore! Let us rejoice as we consider language and its relation to the nature and meaning of love.

I do not mean math, chemistry, engineering or technology. Well, yes, chemistry. I am talking about words and emotions, touch and sex, love and the art of conversing about love. The essence of what is best about being human!

Eugene, I had almost forgotten how eloquent you are.

How you speak the language of love.

Your kisses woke me from a long sleep in a strange land.

I'm beside you now, giving a long sigh.

Your touch is like silence.

Your I

Dearest,

A knock came at the door yesterday. I invited you to cross the threshold and stand at the hearth. You had in your hand one of my letters!

How amazing. You had been thinking of a glass bottle with a love letter in it on the very day that this bottle floated ashore. You woke up thinking of it and half dreaming of it. You pulled yourself up from your bed and walked down to the shore. Amid the waves, a flash of light caught your eye, and you waded in and picked up the note.

In your other hand was the reply you had brought home.

It's about time.

Love

* * * *

Conveyance

Are you there? I'm behind this book
of words, a glass screen, an invisible wall,
looking for a key or a latch to a hidden door
into your garden.

This way, she waves,
spearing scraps of paper on tips of branches.
Is this any way to read or write?
Convey, convey, convene, convey,
conjecture, conjure, converge,
conjoin,

Convey as sails catching the wind.
Reflect in the window, silver feathers flying.
The story takes.

26. Happily after forever

So that's where Gene has been, off on a quest for his manhood. He went forward to concoct a remedy, and arranged a rendezvous for the two of them to travel in time and evade the onset of bionan and his own infertility. Or something along those lines.... Maybe we'll never know where exactly they've gone, forward or back, to reach the beach. The point is, they are temporarily not subject to time. Out of time and not out of time.

In the process of pursuing his quest Eugene almost loses Isla, and then the whole venture would have been for naught, except to rescue humankind. Fortunately she waits for him, just long enough. Is it worth it? What is this biological quest versus the artistic quest and the scientific quest, versus one-on-one true love versus universal love versus the fate of the earth and its people?

Finally he is back. A man who loves her for her mind! A man who cares for her artist's soul. A man who is her dearest friend.

In the mirror, they brush their teeth.

A little girl chases birds at the wharf. She is wearing a blue jacket too big for her. Isla cannot tell anymore and cannot be sure if she has been in this scene before, whether she watched the girl in her memory or she saw this ahead of time in a dream, whether it was a scene she had imagined in her longing and then it came true. Whether it came true in actuality or whether it came true in an imaginary script that bloomed on an imaginary silver screen.

The wind whirs like the sound of an old projector. The little girl raises her arms to the birds in the sky and then clasps her hands in delight.

Theirs was a love story like none other. It was a love story like all others.

All stories are love stories.

When he came back, Gene was himself and not himself. He was transformed into a being more himself. That was it.

Isla clung to him like a leaf. She clung like a mermaid, like a river nymph, like a time traveler for whom all time had come home. Like an all-seeing dragonfly, or a snail on the wall.

Yet I did not cling at all.

I was also more myself and would always be.

Now that I have been filled with absence and have cried aloud in woe. My interior life was forever a space my own, yet it opened into yours. This is what the ancients tell us in the tales of the river people. This is the true nature of time travel, that it takes us to many places and we go. We become the travel, it is us, and it is we who define it.

It is also we who define our love. I name U. I cannot even begin to declare in words or lines or letters or poems the true love of our true love. Looking deep into your eyes I see it, in the harbor of your arms I feel it. At night I watch you sleep and know you dream of me and of home.

I step free of the shower and put on my blacklit dress. As I comb my hair, I smile at myself in the multi-faceted mirror, both lover and beloved, both artist and art.

Tonight is the night not of I, but of the film.

I smile a pure smile of recognition and waltz away from my own self-image and into the night, giddy with joy and anticipation, carrying my own history and striding into the theater on the arm of Eugene to find all these people I love waiting to indulge together in the first showing of the film.

It's the new world and I carry no regrets. Those were left behind, strewn like dark ribbons on the editing room floor or melted like candle wax into the ether. The near misses and the other directions the story might have taken—any of those chapters might have reached climax and culmination—yet as it turns out everything turns out for the best.

Much as mother says.

A rose is a rose is a rose. It's true. I remind myself of that, Eugene, since you've left again. You're off on another excursion into the unknown, and here I sit, recreating your absence and writing the next story, letter after letter.

Dear Gene,

You are always with me. Are you out there? Please do stop by. I will have you recite me that poem of Sappho's you sent me after the first day we met at the disaster preparedness class, and you took me out for coffee and learned that I was a writer and without knowing anything about it you found that poem to send me, the oldest known love poetry of our time.

What you are doing is very brave. Per usual. Go ahead with your heroics! I will be fine.

Everlasting love and sweet memories of your kisses,

I of the Land of Hours

Hey Eu,

Occasionally old friends stop by and they ask about you. They have their own stories, too, of course. Heimus says:

What you didn't know is I've spent the last 10 years developing an immunity to bionan.

Inconceivable!

Our neighbor Brad lingers on—that old hunk of metal, tool in the shed, piece of hardware, as you called him in turns. He's still out there raking his lawn. I know you won't mind hearing that he trundles over now and again, bringing a rabbit stew. And if you do mind, well then, maybe it will rile you up again to hurry home.

Come on home, Eu, and we'll rip apart our bedroom and transform time. I know you want to. I hope you're not stuck in a tree somewhere.

True love always,

I again

Epistolary Epitaph

I can't help slipping
into this envelope
a desire to be enveloped.

* * * *

You and I

You and I are bound together
in pages of a book.

Nothing and everything
between us.

U & I

Everything in twos

lips pursed
around sound

an echo,
your wide ears

a second sun,
your tie, a bow

a vessel holds
your silent note inside

We said we'd never leave.

In no time
we're on the other side
of morning.
Water rushes, water falls
rippling pools below.

My closest friend,
Our love
will never end.

Stay near.
Sit beside me again
and tell me your story.
I love to hear your voice.

We Eloped!

We lived in a hut
with a thatched straw roof,

We lived in a storybook
romance,

We listened to birdsong
dusk and dawn,

We spoke our vows
by the sea.

We spoke our vows
by the roll of the surf
by the rumble of waves
by the sea.

You unto me,
and I unto you

You and I
happily to be

OXOXOX...

Who is stringing us along?
This summer seemingly has no end,
steamily
leading up to infinity

If so, we have circled
Full circle
Ad infinitum ahead and

Come look for me in the aftermath!
I mean, in the afternoon!

I will choose a sky-blue sea,
a snowy white winter, green gold spring.

I will wear a silk jacket
sewn by hummingbirds,
and pearls polished in the shell.

I will carry this book
or—if am sailing
or sewing
or mending nets—
will have it near at hand.

You will know me right away
with so much love abounding.

Curtains: The end

All in all, I was still up and about, just quick to tire. My bed was a sea of eider down where I could still slip into the white deerskin skirt or my premiere blacklit dress or the naked skin of my youth. Eugene was there at times, and other men who I knew or did not know, and my many friends, my brother, and my parents. Maria brought me sheaves of manuscripts and Max came with canoes full of film scripts and we worked late into the night. I dove from the precipice and rose from nightmares of drowning to gulp at a glassful of water on my nightstand. More often, I flew away from danger and wheeled like a bird of peace across the night sky, while below me spread far and wide rivers and forests of trees and now and again cities of light.

In the last dream I recall, you are with me in the library alcove. A glass vestibule. A window box at the theater. A garden in the sea. We embrace inside a clear bubble of tropical blue as a wave breaks over us. The surge lifts us and we are dashed about in its currents and thrown into a river of time. We ride it feet first with the flow, laughing at our whims of consciousness as we go.

I am standing alone then, smiling at the upcoming sensation of our first kiss, and you are across the courtyard, on your way toward me. As though we knew ahead of time before we had ever met, and were preparing for this moment all along. How can this possibly be?

Then I am dancing up and down that staircase myself. Remembering how the waterfall of rain beside the staircase had surprised me and how its design had intrigued me, I glance over to see it. What I see is again unexpected: the channel is full and frothy, and the water flows upward, swift and sure.

I turn to look and you're there, at the top of the stairs, wreathed in leaves of sunlight.

Our stories happen over again and I forget what I've said, what I've left out. Our love abounds. The last word is love.

Addendum 1.

Artist's Statement

About this book:

Here I, Ilsa Sandcastle, will place some of my more intimate thoughts and deeper contextual revelations. He was great would have summarized it all except for his absence and my doubts, lingering and recurring. And he was alone more than he had to be but some of us are alone more than we want to be, and wouldn't that be worse. Everyone needs caring. So, we choose our words. Helloooo!! Yoohoo!!! I'm talking to you. *

I wrote this artist's statement as an addendum to something earlier. A poem I wrote in the middle of the night, to be precise. A port in the storm. A two-sided folio. A port of folly. (You'll read it further along.) My mind was revving on sleep deprivation and caffeine, a not uncommon syndrome. There is some interesting syntax in this paragraph and some ambidextrous dangles if you look at it closely, as I do when I reread and revise repeatedly. This is the comingling of our identities right here as the reader and writer, but already I am disappearing. I can hardly see my own hands on the keyboard.

Go ahead and edit. Go ahead and interpret!

Oh, so now the voices are going to begin. Yes, yes. All in little mathematical bleeps. Folded into time. Please will you give me a moment while I finish disassembling and assembling this and then you can send me these messages.

Uhhhhmmmm. Where was I?

Do not think I do not hear you, Ulysses Eugene. Do not think I do not love you. But you cannot show up after so long of saying nothing and be this insistent.

Lost, no sails. No sails, nor a fertile island.
But, O my heart, hear the song of sailors. (My Mallarmé.)

Disconnected and writing to non-existent people, are you? Imagining things?

Well, Max would find it funny, anyway.
Maybe. But he's not in your jurisdiction.
He's a fable of his own fabrication.

Whose space is whose and what skin am I in?

I am about so much more than the cover I am in.
With kindness and respect and admiration.
Acts of love and devotion will bear fruit. Close reading. All of those things.

Flower, I want to flower, I want a flower. A rose. Not just any rose. A fragrant rose. A flagrant rose. A fragrant, thick- and soft-petaled rose. Thick soft petals overlaid in a lovely display, a bouquet of roses. I will put my nose smack into it as would a bee, and I will create a buzz, a sensation with my wings. Will you be along?

You, transfixed by starry nights and mental lights.
I, the eyes of dragonflies, our oldest stories.

We've sewn our folds in time to bind our love.
Flights of fireflies and flights of fancy.

It's all about story. Foreseen, foretold, untold mysteries unfold.
Repetitive? Don't think I don't know it! It's all been said before.

Some of this was reassurance or erasure as you will. In my case, a total tribute. No big claims here except this: What a lovely opportunity, really. Out of so many others, I get to be here. I am so glad to be here in this moment and

Was struck just last week by opposing moments. Thank you to the Academy and thank you to the film producers and thank you to my family but what has happened to our strange world? I had parked my car and was headed into the grocery store for apples and of four people coming out then, four in four were heads bent into their devices

when we could walk quiet as deer along the river path

Then as I am here, in the era of post-digital darkness. What do I do when you come home? You want to know. In the interim, many men cook me dinners and woo me with words and here:

My poetics are to write something engaging with a lot at stake in a big maybe the biggest love story of all time wherein people

are transformed.

This transpires in the realm of language, and I like to play with language. (Recently inspired by the fabulous Harryette Mullens.) Here's one fun thing I wanted to be sure you noticed, my darlings:

This is a book, did I mention. *On my mind*. An ok use of yours, is what I was hoping. And mine.

(O, look how foreboding is the erasure poem composed from the first lines ever spoken between Romeo and Juliet. So like the sun and the moon. They meet and their hands meet and they share their first kiss, all while co-writing a brilliant and flirtatious sonnet. Yet their words already hint at their tragedy to come. See it online.)

Regarding *Clarity*, see my notes in the program from the film festival.

Please please also see my 13-line sonnet: "The line left out." It's in a bottle I set out to sea.

It's really the best thing, no matter how it's spelled. Yet I was compelled. Its its and it's other its and its like it is, it's like it is. Is is, it's. I, Is, Isla. C'est la. C'est ci. C'est moi.

I'll tell you where I got my wordplay.

You wanna hear it?

If not, I don't blame you and here's what I might say:

I don't know how I STRAYED INTO THIS WHOLE ARRAY of things and then I noticed I had inadvertently hit the caps lock key, but wouldn't we all like to ride fortune and have everything go our way? Let's shout our love to the moon!

Give those acts of love every, every day. "Every act of love or devotion bears fruit."

Ya, some sundry Sunday, some summery, summary, shim shim shimmery, cheri, good luck will rub off if you shake hands with me.... Golden light will break dawn if you take up with me!

Oh, gorgeous bodies of text.

Do you see how those words became our own bodies and how every body is a gorgeous vessel for a precious soul, a person. Every word a passion for living.

I am not sure how we needed to see that to understand it. Nothing should seem to need to be this complicated. It's history and science and storytelling that at times seem to

be the culprits, the perps. I will rep them and resent them or better yet I will not represent them at all. So forget I said that.

Now goodnight. They are bringing me dinner. Since you are not here. How fortunate am I! How I send you all the best of good luck and warm wishes. Since you are not here, my dearly beloved reader from afar, and I must sleep with the dictionary.

It was my friend Donna who gave me the title Port Folio, and this story will make all clear on the author's intent if that is what you really need to read read read:

The sense of where we are now. We have rigor at the Academy and then can go boundless on the Anywhere.

Here's what I think, it's better when *you* read it and comment on it. The wild boat has sailed. I wrote my artist's statement and then erased it. This is all that remains. Post post. A glassy blue surface. This is the real me. Just for a moment. Where are you?

*You who are reading this: helloooo—

But wait, the story behind the title of the poem is that my friend Donna goes to visit her 90-year-old mother in Florida. Whenever they are in the grocery store or out on a stroll, Donna's mother will call out to people: "Yoo hoo!" She will approach these people and ask, "Do I know you?" She introduces herself and usually these people are lovely and Donna's mother will have a nice conversation with them.

Donna herself is a lovely person. She is an Italian professor with a bent for Dante. She has always liked the work of Billy Collins and thinks she'd like to meet the poet. She sends me "GOLD," her favorite poem of his. It describes a bedroom in Florida suffused with gold from sunrise on the lake, Aphrodite's fire, and Dante's rings of light.

"Should I write and tell him how much I love his poem?" Donna wonders. "I keep thinking I'm going to look him up—'Yoo hoo.... Mr. Collins!'"

P.S. But then I changed the title. Portfoliyouhoo seemed too silly.

Footnote:

1.
What do you read, my lord?
Words, words, words.
(Hamlet, Act II, scene 2)

2. *Hello, you.

Glossary:

Verbeau: Truth and lyricism and precision combined, as in the well chosen word.
When you find the perfect word, that word is verbeau. Exactly so. [Ironically, there was no perfect word for such truth and beauty in language, so we had to make one up.] Plural = verbeaux, when you've found more than one of such precision. A rose is a rose is a rose is/are verbeaux. Well said. Allow me to point out all the possible permutations and connotations and layers and tones—no, wait!
No more overflowing prose. Send me one word on a blank page: verbeau.

Dearest reader,
Two more poems to go, below.

Port Folio

This is all that matters.
The art of real life.
She looked at me across the table.
There were knives and forks,
wine glasses. Nearly empty
plates and the candles had
Burned down, like Rome,
Not in a fit of pique
but more like a slow
Melt, subsiding into the
Afterglow as I listened to
her confide Her restlessness
with the everyday.
She had new energy, she said, renewed
Engagement, an awakening
of thought and passion
for literary realms.

Her artist's statement
had to do with new discourse
Over emerging trends
in post-post-modernism
and how in this transition
the second person
was gaining traction
among some who previously
had no voice
yet still were willing
to speak for us all
and as she talked
her hands lifted and
the blue water deepened
while the moon rose
in a haloed glow
and she said
she didn't really know
Anything
but loved learning
and
loved
writing.

What can I say?

You haven't been around and
yet you are as real as right here
with my eyes closed seeing you
holding out your arms in the blue

water and air, a stroke of white
outlines light along your shaded arm—
it is your hands that reach out,
they are your hands I see by

length of fingers, curve of thumbs,
softness of palm I can only recall
and the first time we held
hands most of all

I read you by your telling look
at something I slyly said
invoking an inside joke
from an open book between us

apropos of nothing, I know
nothing very well and everything
about nothing and the way it once was
or should be now

yet knowing you, you will likely say
I am gone overboard
into blue and should start
swimming back toward you

—Ilsa Sandcastle, à fin

Addendum 2.

Poetics Statement

Carol Anderson Shaw

Thoughts on *On My Mind*

This work engages with complex issues of identity, love's dialogue, creation and/or evolution of self in relation to another, to the relationship and to its creation, or in relation to the state of being in love and to the state of being in artistic creation. *On My Mind* frames a multiplex thesis on human consciousness, with influences from internal genetics and biochemistry, external universal energy flows, and a long history of storytelling. As narrator, Isla examines the writing and reading and integration of story into who we are and who we become, while the whole world shifts in consciousness from an era of digital darkness to a new age of light, art, and love. Transformations abound.

In a time travel motif with a romantic trope reminiscent of Penelope and Ulysses, the text explores the liminal space between writer and reader, and narrative voice as bridge. We are in the mind of Isla, waiting at home for Eugene. Isla entertains suitors, while missing her absent husband and falling in love with her writing. She is narrator and curator of the novella, which presents her multi-genre thinking, journaling, and body of artistic work, all to culminate in the premiere showing of her film, *Clarity*.

Which we shall never see. Although we do see the filming of it and the telling of it as art infused into nature, fiction blurred with reality, and with mix-ups among the makers and actors of the film and the legends and stories they live and tell. Conflations abound. Yet the hope is that these characters will feel real and their situations compelling, even as the narrator herself draws some attention to the boundaries of the book as a land of make-believe. This is terrain in between

art highlighted as art, with brushstrokes and conceptual guideposts showing, and art as transparency, the clear pane of a window offering a view into something beyond.

A sea of letters

Among conventions I tamper with in this novella of sorts, narrative lenses shift as the text conducts an exploration and exposé of relationships between reader, writer, narrator, text, and story. Voice alternates among first person, second, and third, displaying multiple facets of consciousness and interrelations in storytelling. Narratologists have had a field day of late with this sort of thing, and my interest was in part inspired by Claudia Rankin's *Citizen*. Along with subtextual innuendos, the narrative in *On My Mind* plays openly with the characters' names, with "I" and "U" as stand-ins for those who find themselves in relation with the text.

While he is gone, Isla writes notes and poems and love letters to Eugene that she sets out to sea in bottles, metaphorically. The reader may be alone with the narrator's thoughts, take the place of lover as recipient of the writer's intimate letters and poems, or be part of a larger audience as the narrative recounts memories and events from Isla's life, fictional scenes from her film, and a legend of the river people rediscovered through oral traditions of the past. The intent is in part to break up the expectational stance of the reader, allowing consciousness to flow more freely than conventional straight-line narrative would have it. Structurally, I wonder how much our long training in Aristotle's incline predisposes our minds to certain ways of viewing the world and organizing our own life histories into storylines that are actually not entirely natural and organic. This isn't necessarily the way the mind works when left to its own wild trajectories and meandering neural pathways.

Isla as narrator, protagonist, actor, and director in her own life is presented as the willful conveyor of this non-traditional form. She examines rivers and flows of consciousness in light of living and writing in an expansive mode, unbounded by linear thinking and constraints of time. Writing and reading are forms of time travel, so unlike Eugene, she does not have to go far. She stops time in her own kitchen. Story is foundational in creation of self, and she is deeply driven as an artist in the act of creation, and as a woman in the throes of love, loss, and moral dilemma. Although she is human and thereby flawed, subject to temptation and rumination, Isla is a heroic figure, pursuing archetypal quests.

One quest is to solve the mystery of her missing husband, and to bring the iconic hero home safely from his far-reaching time travel mission. In this effort, she also takes on the mantle of Eugene's quests during his absence. This leads Isla into interdisciplinary advances of art and science, all the more challenging in the context of a new world environment where everything is in flux and transition. For the writing world this setting suggests changes in literary modalities, supporting Isla's ventures beyond convention, while the novella also harkens back, paying tribute to fairy tales and legends.

The notion of the quest is deeply embedded in our desire for meaningful existence. Ultimately, the quests identified as central to this character are communication, artistic creation, and love. Isla and Eugene want to have children and create a home. Yet their reach goes beyond home to neighbors, community, civilization. Like Eugene's scientific work on the brain—his quest to rescue humankind from the adverse effects of bioan—Isla's artistic endeavors have broader applications for the evolution of human consciousness. These issues also raise deeply personal questions for thinking people with limited time to allocate. What is the ultimate quest? What is our desired state of being, in our most elevated theories of self-actualization?

According to Isla, there's much we cannot know. She believes in the everlasting interrogative. The journey. Art as an open window. Words deeper than the sea. A new way of [not] formulating story. This narrative is about her mind and what's on her mind. The marvel of realms of consciousness and intellect and imagination as integral to human experience. She embraces the shimmering unknown, thereby achieving the impossible and the sublime. Absence darkens her threshold, yet in the end her home is full of art, light, friendship, and love.

It was sheer pleasure to immerse myself in writing this manuscript and I'm deeply grateful for the opportunity to pursue graduate work in Creative Writing and Poetics with the talented faculty at UWB and my wonderful cohort. I'm sad the program is ending! For supporting my process in creating *On My Mind*, special thanks to my thesis advisor Sarah Dowling, my second reader and our program founder and director Jeanne Heuving, and to Amaranth Borsuk for her generative class on poetry and bookmaking this Spring. Thanks to my parents for their ongoing never-ending encouragement. Thanks to my dear friends and family members who've always urged me to write. Thanks to my amazing children Katie, Laura, Maddy, and Joey, who collaborate with me on editing and creation throughout.

To be continued...!