

There's a heart here, beneath the muscle and sinew, beneath water that pools like blood and concrete sheets of skin, somewhere, there's a heart, and she wonders, she would like to know, whether it beats.

How long she's wandered here she doesn't remember, where there are no signs of the seconds passing, no sun in the sky, nor clocks on the walls, no tick-tock of stoplights on the empty roads; there are no sounds at all that she's noticed, except for the man, and not even her footsteps make an impression on the still air. There's only the maze of facades, of tunnels and corridors, of Euclidean spires and geometric shapes made solid, made rough and weathered; it's a dream of some mad draftsman now falling into ruin, a mystery she's not sure she'll ever be able to unravel. The soil is cool under her hands, and the floors pleasantly warm, when she presses her body against them and feels for a pulse, and there's a familiarity to it that she finds a little comforting, but there's an absence too that forebodes. She sits at the overgrown border of the world, under yew and reaching hemlock, and watches the purple-orange sky stand still.

Every so often she thinks of her wife. She thinks of their dogs, and their house. She remembers scrubbing dishes under the faucet that sometimes squealed and sprayed water everywhere. She remembers the way the stairs creaked under her feet and the smell from the toaster and the glow that morning light gave to messy hair. She remembers many things and forgets more. The pins she puts into months and years, to hold the pattern of her life in a shape that has order and distance, those pins are falling out, and it makes her so, so guilty to forget these things, to stare at the trees and the river and think of nothing at all, until with a jolt she remembers that's why she's looking for a way out. Until she remembers that she's looking for a way out. What does it mean to live in a world at right angles to everything you've ever known? No – what meaning does that have, when your whole life has already shrunk to a single point? In linear algebra, you can split any vector into the component that's parallel to an axis, and the component that's perpendicular to it. The world she used to inhabit, she thinks, has separated in this way, and she's fallen into the wrong part.

Perhaps then, as she's drifted here and there without a sound, as she's trailed fingers across doorways and banisters, great walls and pillars, just trying to keep herself grounded in this body she pilots, perhaps she's finally come to a theory about this place. She indulges herself in imagining what it ought to look like, what it might have been designed for, a place for learning, a place for gathering; she imagines thousands crowding these halls, filling them with energy, with life, if only for a moment, if only for a weekend. These are the kinds of buildings we build, she thinks, because we mean them to be used, the places where we intend the business of living to be carried out. When we cease to do so, they don't wither like flesh, but they become something other, haunted perhaps, or haunting.

Real life, for her, used to have its components. It had its vector pieces that could be separated from each other, the part that happened at work and the part that happened at home. It had places she could retreat to, things she could block off, and not think about until the next day. But her life, which once seemed so solid, has long since contracted, collapsing into a single space, and that makes her wonder: what happened to the rest of it? The other piece, the other component, it's still out there, surely, it has its own kind of existence, somewhere out there that she can't see because her life has diverged too far, and couldn't this be it? What happened to the spaces we made for us to do our work in, when we stopped doing our work in them? What

did she lose when the vector of her life was projected down onto one axis, and then further, until some days it seemed like there was nothing beyond her room?

Once, she studied theoretical physics, and she considered herself lucky for that. Her work wasn't tied to a machine in a lab, a tokamak or a collider. She didn't spend her days in tunnels delved deep into alpine rock, or in high cold towers asking questions of the stars. Maybe it would have been better if she did. Maybe if she'd been crew at a radio telescope high in the Andes, or a neutrino detector under the South Pole, then her life wouldn't have split in half in this way. But she wasn't. They had a little house in the suburbs. She took the train in to work, until one day she didn't. She went to meetings in pajama pants and pretended nothing had changed. She invested in a ring light and a backdrop for her work desk; she tried to convince the dogs they weren't toys. She bought a new microphone and it took four months to ship. She missed the whiteboards, and the bad coffee. She thought that was good enough.

For a while, maybe, it was. She thinks about orthogonal dimensions, about time and space. Here, she's found some of the space that had gone missing, the sprawling of life into different places, the ability to separate and distinguish by *where*. It still exists, just as she left it, just as if no time has passed at all, because here it doesn't, because here nothing changes, nothing moves except her and the man and the wide, slow river, and all the dreams she has of filling this place with life drift away like mist when she lifts her head and looks out the window. This world is fallen from Athena to weary Hecate, whose domain is the crossroads, a place for passing through, not for inhabiting, not for living, and when the places and the buildings we built parted ways from the people whose stories used to call them home, she thinks maybe, maybe here's where they landed. She stands at the crossroads and she thinks of her wife, she wants to hold her, speak to her, but she doesn't know the way.

Early on she was too busy to notice. She had been shunted onto the other road, the one that went off in a different direction. It went off at right angles and it led home. The lens of her existence zoomed farther and farther in, to a desk in a room in a house in a neighborhood. The space she used to take for granted was off limits, but life moved on. It moved on heedless of how she felt about it, or how much she wanted it to stop. It moved on no matter how much she wanted it to pause, for just a second, so she could breathe and take stock. Outside the walls of their house it barreled onward, and it carried both of them with it. She found that the different parts of her collapsed onto each other, until she couldn't distinguish them anymore. When good things happened, they didn't feel special. When bad things happened, she had nowhere to hide.

She sees the man sometimes, at the corner of a hallway, or an upper window, a mezzanine railing. He asks her why she's come. He tells her about this place, or what he knows of it. He doesn't say, there is nothing for you here. She says nothing.

She doesn't tell him how tired she is of men questioning her presence, explaining what she can already see, how exhausted she's become watching others debate her right to exist in the same spaces as them, the lengths they go to in order to preserve their ideas of right and wrong. She doesn't tell him how it dragged her down to think of these things every time she walked past her work desk. She doesn't tell him this because she doesn't think he has anything to do with this, because in the end she does think he's being sincere, because she can't blame him for seeking out another soul, for trying to help her, for trying to warn her, for regretting mistakes and wishing things were better. She doesn't tell him because after so many months she wants to have finally rediscovered the place where she can hide, the space she craves, to

put her worries aside until the next day, or pretend to, a place she can step back to and sit and look at things with perspective. She doesn't tell him, because she's afraid that if she brings such things here then this world too will splinter and decompose and leave her with less than nothing.

On the whole, she had it pretty good. She doesn't mean to pity herself. Her marriage didn't strain, but grew stronger. Her colleagues supported each other. Her work was the work of the mind, and it didn't especially seem to matter where she was. But weeks turned into months and then into years. Postponements turned into cancellations, and acceptance into resignation. The mechanics of life didn't bother her, but when she looked into the future, she couldn't see what was ahead. She longed for the someday that had always been there, and she found she longed for the somewhere as well. She wanted to hold a steering wheel and drive forever. She wanted to clutch her wife in one arm and a subway pole in the other. She wanted to pull open the door of the Dunkin' off the interstate without worrying how many people were inside. She didn't know how to describe it, to herself or anyone else. Something deep inside her was fatigued, and she wanted to let it relax, to stretch the other parts of her. She wondered how life had felt so easy, so effortless, before everything had started happening all at once. But, she supposes, it never was. If her life had separated then so too had her memories. In bad times, she thought only of the good that was gone, but there had always been more.

Remembering is hard now, as the leaves on the vines brush her cheek, as the long, slow waters lap at her feet, and she knows part of her wants this, wants to just let go, wants to rest here forever and drift away and never change. She knows she loses perspective, when she stays too long in one world or the other; she loses touch with the rest of herself, and forgets that there are other axes along which she exists – but there are. She knows she is solid and real. She knows her life is not just a single point, and it never really has been. She knows it's not bound to this space, that it's always had many components, that it points outward and upward. She wants to believe that's who she *is*, that's what her life is, what her world is, and maybe, she thinks, when it seems like our world is coming apart, that's when it's up to us to build it back up around us. She tries to find a basis for her own survival, and to remember all the parts that make her her, and remembering is hard, but she forces herself not to forget.

In the end, she supposes, it was her own fault. She did something ill-advised. She wanted to really do something, to finish something. She wanted to do it on her own, so she didn't tell anyone, not even her wife. She wanted to do it with her hands, not just her mind, and maybe she hoped that would show her what she was missing. Whatever connection she was looking for, she didn't find it, and in the end everything went wrong. Everything went sideways, and that was when she met the man. She regrets what she didn't say to him. She regrets what she didn't say to her, the stuff of years and mere moments. There are things she doesn't admit, not even to herself. There are things that would burn like a newborn star when she lay awake at night, and when she stared into them all else faded to black. But life moved on. Despite everything, after all of this, her life moves on.

She still doesn't know what this place is, not for sure, she has no idea, and maybe she never will. If she lives to be a hundred, maybe she'll still be thinking about it, or maybe she'll never find her way out at all, maybe this will be all she'll ever know until she passes on. Even now she feels the pull to stay, to fall back into herself and do the simple thing, but maybe that choice is already made, maybe that fork is already taken; maybe to take the chance, to throw the dice, is the only thing she can do, the only thing in the end that she can do and still be the

person she wants to be. That's how decisions happen for her, how these thoughts crystallize beneath the surface, running over each other again and again until they're solid enough to take her weight. She's scared and she's been hurt, but she'll find the man and she'll make things right, and they'll find the way out, or they'll give it their best shot. It sounds so simple when she thinks of it like that, and she knows it's not, she knows there's only the two of them and they're so lost and everything is wrong, and even if he won't say it they both know it's true: there's nothing for her here.

Yet she has to believe, to believe and to build. She has to put a vector back together from spare parts, the one that pointed this way and the one that pointed that. She has to believe things will get better, to honor the ones who didn't make it and build for the ones who are still here. If she's at a crossroads, then it's up to her to choose a path, and to bridge any river in her way. She has to believe that even after our world is turned upside down, we can still plant seeds for the future, and prolong that which is good. We can work together, and help each other, and learn new things, and find the things that were thrown away, no matter how small. And just maybe, we can open doors that were once closed, and restore what was dead to life. She dreams again of these halls filled with people, with their own joys and their own sorrows, even just two or three at the start, but one day, we'll be able to put things back together, and they'll be better, even if they're a different shape than before. That's the life we wanted for the world we built, not this flat half-existence, and that's what *she* wants. She wants it so badly that she cries, there on the riverbank, and she laughs, looking up to the sky, and she isn't ashamed.

Over the years she's made many mistakes. This one might be the mistake of a lifetime. She doesn't know. There are things in her life that she doesn't regret, but even then there are little things wrapped up in them. She remembers the warmth of a friend and the cold in her belly when she pushed him away. She remembers the office that still has her name on it, the papers of a promising student and the creak of her chair, the smothering knowledge that she didn't do enough for her. She remembers the hot rush of falling for someone in a summer that felt like a movie, the nights of figuring out who she was, and at the end, everything unraveling just as effortlessly as it began. She remembers the feel of these things. She knows she doesn't learn enough from experience. She's made mistakes, and she's afraid, she is, that this time she'll finally, irretrievably fuck everything up. Because this is the way she gets sometimes. If this is a mistake, then, maybe, so be it. This isn't some noble thing she's doing. She's doing it because of that something, deep down, beneath her muscle and sinew and blood and skin.

Under the yew and hemlock, she thinks of her wife, and she wills her own heart to beat.