

There's nothing here.

Only silence. So complete it finds resonance, so absolute it rings. A continuous wavering note, all empty lines and phrases, all full of potential, all latent. I hear my heart. Its beating, and I'm naked, and I'm sodden and exposed. Arms hang loose at my sides. Erratic drip tracks run their length. Timid and slow. Uniting and gathering pace, at unexpected intervals, matting fine hairs in undular patterns, prickling the skin as they run. Skinless gourds gather at my fingertips, where they hang in anticipation until, unable to bear their own weight, they drop to the floor. There's a syncopated plip, plip-plip, plip; pock- -pock- -pock, as they acne the mud at my feet. I call out. A dry squawk I try to re-swallow. I search for a violence in my voice. The silence smothers everything. I'm nothing here. But I am here.

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My breath finds a hold in the silence. My imagination occupies the nothing with passive imperial dreams. I have arrived. I am here. I am come. It comes heavy measured, the breath. Chest rising repeatedly against my uniform, steady, in, and out, in, and out, in, and out. The exhalations caught in the upturned collar of my greatcoat. Contained there, momentarily, in the certainty of its wool-muffled acoustic. My breath's amplified as I glance at the kitbag that makes a blunt point against my shoulder. Close shorn hairs catch the collar's rough nap as I turn into it. Errant strands have escaped the warp. Translucent when caught alone in the light. Breathe. I ache, dull and uncomplicated, with hard work. A rifle dangles at my other side. It clacks against me as I reach inside the collar and knead the base of my neck. My hands are rough callous hands. Fingers swollen with strength and over-use. Each nail flat and filthy-black. Skin worn tight. Ground dirt stains lines that intersect it. My shirt's cuff brushes my ear, soft and smooth, but starched stiff. I'm in dress uniform, tired from marching, but not in fatigues. I look down at the mirror-shine elevens beneath knife-edge creases. The movement exposes my neck. A breath of nothing seeps in over the collar, sterile and scentless. I shiver, a subtle convulsion, and hunker down tight into the neatness of myself. Then, secure in darts and creases, I turn to face the wind.

A wooden causeway ekes out over shallow water. Unbending, but ever-depleting, it stretches farther back than I can see. The sleepers of a thin-gauge rail scud the beams as it stretches for the horizon. The water it crosses refuses to ripple, even as the wind takes up, reluctant to spoil the silence with its lapping. A small handcar sits squat a few metres from where I stand. It must be how I arrived, but its wheels are rusted thick. It rocks gently, side-to-side on its trucks, as the wind gains strength. Lolling. A motionless gait that throws out faint whines whenever the axles find their bearings. Each gust presses my trousers flat against my shins. Forces me to squint my eyes. I turn my back, hunch my shoulders, and lift my collar up over my ears. The wind is temporarily drowned by the sound of my breath

contained. Increasing its efforts to be heard it tugs violently my clothes, flagging the fronts of my trousers, sharpening their creases and snapping their edges against nothing while the sleepers run under me. They dissect my path as they dash on into the meadow. Their thick black shapes punctuate the field. The measure between them erratic as some are absent from their posts. The smell of them, their thick-sweet-tar, is wed to the wet ground as it tacks up through the thin cold air. Long grass swallows the last of them – the rail peters out. The grass does what the water daren't. Adopting its movement in the wind. Great inverted waves ebb and flow as their stems bow in succession. Each whispering against the next, a thousand whispers, more, many more, producing a muted roar that mimics the water's absent gush.

A memory of the sea. Which sea? Where? And when? The shingle wheeled up the beach with a lulling shush. The waves quietened us. I held your hand. Your hand was soft in mine. My soft hands. I whispered to you. We laughed. The beach was empty, but for us. Or maybe it just seemed that way.

The wind blows the memory clear. Urging me on. Pushing me forward. Lifting the kitbag from my shoulder. Leaving me unbalanced. Head down, shoulders hunched, I move. Measured steps toward the outpost. The ground holds fast where roots are strong. Small clear pools well up around my shoes. They brim at the edge of the sole, as the saturated earth takes my weight. Pendulous, the kitbag swings at my side, thumping against me with each alternate step. Its exhausting heft a comfort on the root sprung grass. Sparse clouds shift rapid across the low-hung sky. Puddles bounce the clouds back as they graze above me. I march on. The grass has lost numbers further in the field. Its networks of roots are weakened. There, the ground gives but doesn't give back. Shallow mud generously welcomes each step, but then refuses to release my shoe. Slaked vacuums that make each new step harder than the last. The grass churns about me. Fresh meadow riptides. Hiding a

ground that wants to swallow me whole. I march on. Kitbag thumping alternate step. Rifle keeping time on the other shoulder. I march on. Currents of wind run toward the outpost. The bunker door gulps it in as it sits waiting for me. Drinking and drowning. I march on. Toward the door. I march on. Two small round windows, the outpost's myopic eyes, squint back at me across the field. They blink as they catch the light. My breath is caught in my collar. I feel its moisture between my cheek and the wool. I march on. The kitbag's canvas rasps along my side. Its mass thuds through me. With me, against me, with every other step. Everything clear and muffled and contained. My chest rises and falls, rises and falls, rises, and falls, rises, and falls; working to move the weight I carry.

The wind frequently changes, pace, direction, strength; briefly, uncertain, but stubborn, and always moving. The door of the outpost sucks it in. Gross-rusted, it gulps it in screeching and clangs shut. Gulps it in screeching and clangs shut. Gulps it in screeching and clangs shut. Huge noises made small in the expanse of the air. I raise my head to judge the distance, leaving my feet unattended. The breath escapes my collar. I see it rise before me, great clouds of it dispersing, like drops of white ink in water. Between clangs the wind drops. The door creaks ajar again. A lower sound. Slow and apologetic. Mournful. A dirge of sticky hinges. Hinges that quickly screech cruelly again. The door caught creeping open. The wind interrupting with another violent clang. Creak-screech-clang. Creak-screech-clang. Creak-screech-clang. The mechanics of a strange laugh. I march on. The outpost laughing. At me or with me. I march on. To the gulping laughing door. To the threshold. I march on. To the cause that brought me here. To my post. To an order. I think. After. This is it.

I don't remember arriving at the cause, or what brought me to it. It must have been early in winter though, because the leaves had all fallen but weren't rotten under foot. The bareness

of the trees revealed their wounds. I remember the splintered bark where the poc-poc-poc...poc-poc-poc-poc of machine guns had scarred them. I remember the defiance evident in every gnarled branch. A stubborn deciduous honesty. I don't remember who sent me here. Only the order itself. And the wider order; the general order.

The outpost is well sheltered. The cause the only way in, or out. The billet is a bunker. A simple thing, gaping and laughing and blinking its myopic eyes. One room, two parts. The front a low-rise concrete pill-box, the back dug-out of the cliff that rises up, sheer and menacing, behind it. I took stock on arrival. Stood still, on the threshold. Holding the door mid-cackle. The bunker smelled of memories. It smelled of an irretrievable past. It smelled of the twentieth century; of mould and dust and engine grease; stale beer and sour wine; leather, metal, tobacco; of seasoned wood, sweat-varnished through use; and damp concrete and shit and vomit and blood, that unmistakable iron-copper-tang. The room itself was largely empty. A small Formica topped table, with one leg shorter than the others, stood uncertainly to the left of the door. It would groan pleadingly as it rocked when in use. A vinyl cushioned chair sat next to it, but didn't match, and always looked lonely. The table was comfortable despite its handicap. Even tables with one short leg are used to standing on their own. Chairs need company.

Two reinforced porthole windows cast pillars of sun down into the room. Disturbed dust froths, made to dance by their downcast beams. I learned to watch two plates of sun as they slowly phased across the room. I'd wait for definite circles to form and fade. Perfectly round at noon. Ellipsed by the uncertainty of the afternoon. I appreciated the theatre of their synchronous dance. There was a time each day when the spotlight fell upon the chair. It emphasised its loneliness and, occasionally, reminded me of mine. But, I would think, it's only dust and light and furniture, and I would think no more

of it, until I thought of it again. Thinking is no cure for loneliness, but it's reliable company in solitude.

I remember stories I made up to entertain you. Not lies, not really, things that could have happened, but didn't. The lamppost I walked into. The inappropriate outfit I wore to an important event. The rude shop keeper I put back in place. The cubicle lock that broke in my hand. The gum I sat in. The wedding I'd stumbled into. Or was it a wake? The slapstick of everyday. Little gems of it I'd polished just for you, just enough to see you smile, to bring out the frill of your laugh and that little shake of your head. Inventions that were more real than ever to me now. Remembering each tale as if it had happened. Each memory, which is what they'd become, jostled for position as if competing to be the one that pretended to have happened that day. But, in their immediacy, they were all further out of reach. Further removed from a truth that I still understood. More unbelievable, more farfetched, more implausible. That everyday was gone.

A small loose-jointed dresser stands drunk against the far left wall. Its shelves run away to the back of the room as you look at them. They're empty. But for a leather framed photograph of a young private in uniform. The angle of the shelf inclines his head, making him inquisitive. He peers into the room questioningly. His clean young face persistently asking you why you're here. Throwing accusations that deflect your own queries. He offers no explanations for his presence. In front of the picture is a gold wedding band. It winks through the dust, asking to be picked up. It wants to be held. In time I came to believe they were offerings, the photo and the ring, that they'd been left there to appease some ill-tempered spirit, to break a curse, or bind a spell. Perhaps they'd been given to the cause so that the private could simply slip away. When I thought of his departure his gaze became unbearable. The barb of a patronising glint developed. It pierces you and holds you fast. It

hooks and draws you in. Still, I never touch the private or his gold. He stays in his place. I stay in mine.

Facing the dresser is a cot bed. It sits tight to the opposite wall. Metal frame, heather-stuffed calico mattress, low-slung across canvas webbing straps. The anonymous private's glare falls directly on it. I feel him watching me as I try to sleep. Wondering how long I will last. The bed's soft, it welcomes a body warmly, but I can find no comfort in it. The sheets never feel clean, no matter how I wash them. They smell of other people's comfort, of warm skin and complacency, of slovenliness. Salt-sour with sweat and empty hours of not sleeping as he watches. The bed groans in protest as I try to find my place, then tries to spit me out before it swallows me whole. I wonder if you still sleep at home, in our bed, in the bed I made for us. I don't sleep. I force myself between the course blankets and shiver. Perpetual shivers that never escape the spine. A wave of unease that never breaks. Like a pecked kiss on the forehead of a corpse. Someone you'd loved. Shivers that don't end. Even through summer, caught up in the cloying grip of its cloth and steamed in my own sweat, I shiver as I evaporate. This bed makes nothing of me. This hateful bed. Sat squat before the dug-out. A giant upholstered roach at the mouth of a cave. Waiting.

The dug-out is carved directly into the cliff. Always dark, safe and solid. It's permanent, it's like it's always been here. A single bare bulb protrudes from the rock and offers some ailing light. Condensation gathers on the chain of its pull-switch, collecting at the end and dripping, intermittently, onto the wooden workbench below. The bulb was dead when I arrived. Its filament tinked inside the blown glass as I loosed the bayonet. Small mineral islands flake the bench below the chain, interrupting its sheer patina. A residual archipelago. An imposing radio speaker stands over them. It looks old. It feels like it's from another time, like it's always been from before. It crackles to life at regular intervals. There's no way of measuring the time between. No need. Seconds, minutes,

hours, they have no meaning here. Days are arbitrary at the cause. There are light times and there are dark times and there are the times that fall between. But I know that the voice comes regularly. I know that. I know the voice comes regularly. You can rely on the voice. I know the voice.

They say the voice is the first to go. From memory. That the voice is the first thing you forget. That when someone is lost it's their voice that follows first. I think about this carefully, speaking to myself as I do, so I don't forget my own. I remember you well, I think, because I remember your voice. I remember you singing quietly, always quietly, to yourself, like all the songs were just for you. I would listen, straining to hear them, for the pleasure of hearing you, you being you. The pleasure of being there at a moment when you were only yourself. I remember the way your voice would crack slightly as you reached for a chorus. And the idiosyncratic sounds you made when a lyric escaped you. When the words became not-words. But do I really remember your voice? Remember its tone? Its timbre? I remember the way you would say things, and I remember the things that you would say. But I can't hear you anymore.

It begins the same each time. A low hum emanates from the base of the transmitter, just audible. It bleeds into the room, becoming louder, gradually, gently vibrating the bench, gathering speed and violence until the whole cave hums. A harmony that wavers on the edge of hearing. The front of the box begins to glow as its inactivity thaws. A milky light, diffused by the pane of the transmitter's blind screen. Casting shadows harsh enough to reveal the pocked imperfections of the leather panels that encase it. The light gathers strength, like a spontaneous fire on a dry lawn, where the flames are hidden by the sun that started them, almost imperceptible until they're too strong to extinguish. The heat of the voice is hidden in this ambient warmth. It begins cold against the glow, a thin anonymous stream, but no less full and familiar for it. Its tinny tone

remains somehow rich. Its remoteness is relatable. Obscure, but comforting. It describes the dangers we face and makes them real. It makes us ready. ... - *an unseen enemy is the most dangerous enemy of all* - ... It comforts. It reminds us of home, and of before. It reminds us that we are a 'we'. Binds multitudes of 'I's' together. *It binds us*. It reminds us that we are necessary. ... - *We require your strength, unity and cooperation to achieve our victory* - ... It explains our past so we understand it. Explains our past so we see our present as the path to our future. It makes it all make sense. Makes it sensible. The voice makes sense.

I began to think of the voice as his voice. It became the voice of the anonymous private. It called for vigilance and I obliged: patrolling diligently. It called for pride and I obliged: presenting arms to the injured trees. It called for strength and I obliged: I focus solely on myself. I am individually tuned, and never satisfied, and always becoming. I became what the anonymous private called for. I am.

Most of the food supply had been used, or taken, before I arrived. The same was true of medicine, first aid supplies, ammunition, and general hardware. There were a few tinned vegetables but they didn't last long and the experiments I made, planting beans from tins, all failed. I implemented a regime of foraging. A system of finding and learning. The water the causeway cut through was still and lifeless, it offered nothing, except the idea that I had arrived from somewhere else. The idea that there was somewhere other than here. Sometimes that was the nourishment I needed.

To the right of the bunker was a pine forest. Uniform and airy, where the trees all presented in neat rows. It was a welcoming place, fresh, with a sharp light, even on dull days. A dry, sanitary and palatable place. Each tree swayed in time with the wind, always reaching toward one another but never touching. The pines offered little except resinous wood that I learned not to burn and hours of walking to nowhere. Their dropped needles were soft underfoot, comfortable and yielding, but always a bed of needles. Countless tiny

deaths, singly sharp and hostile, combined in the illusion of compassion. But I enter the pines regularly, still seduced by the luxury they seem to offer. On warm days I close my eyes and turn my face skyward. The clouds scud above me and darken my eyelids like shoals of fish flitting between the spears of the trees. Sometimes, when I open my eyes, still blind in the sun, I think I see you, a red-green negative of you, or someone like you. Your outline. Before me.

To the left of the bunker was a mixed deciduous wood. Where no two trees were alike. The wood is fertile, but unforgiving. The trees simultaneously supporting and strangling each other. A persistent static violence in which the dead hold up the living. The wood quickly became impenetrable. The few trails I found, or hacked out for myself, were always too dark to follow for long. Knotted boundaries would always bar the way eventually. There, the limbs of the fallen and the living were so tightly enmeshed that it was impossible to tell one tree from another. Lichens competed along their boughs. Delicate fractals of bleached green and bistered orange, the living verdigris and rust of wood. The trees like the twisted remnants of some great shattered machine. It was around this point, the point that was impossible to pass, that foraging was best. I went there often, to the warmth of the place, to its generosity. It was there that I found sustenance. Blossoms, berries, leaves and bark, roots, nuts, and mushrooms. Mushrooms whose buff nipped caps teetered delicately on creamy stilts that ripened from the fetid earth. It's scent was warm and ostentatious, sweet in the nostrils but bitter in the throat.

The wood is unnerving. No false welcome like the pines. All still and quiet. Nothing moves. No animals. No insects. No birds. Nothing. Even the wind holds its breath in the wood. The silence hangs thick in the air. A ballad to death. It tastes of gin, the silence, of juniper and bitter almonds. The bullet holes look on, blind and unblinking, offended by my presence. My movements insult a memory. Open old injuries. Awaken an

atrocities that had insisted that time stand still. I return repeatedly. Dusk is the worst time. Dark sets so fast. The dusk just a fleeting glance from the day as it runs from the night. A stolen look over a fleeing shoulder. A look that says I'm sorry. I'm sorry I can't stay. I'm sorry to leave you. I'm sorry that you'll face the night alone. So I retreat as soon as the sun's resolve weakens. Back to the bunker. Back to the lonely chair and the crippled table. Back to the anonymous private. Back to the voice. To the static. To the waiting. To the waiting to begin again. This is my time. These are my days. A monotony of ritual. Rituals which fragment as they form routines. Collections of rituals. I am a soldier. I wait. I keep watch. I make repairs. I clean. I forage. I patrol. And I parade. I parade weekly. Infantry Private First Class, marching weekly for no one.

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I woke up. The first fronds of sunlight were reaching in through the windows. Searchlights cutting through the room, illuminating the particles of dust which always floated aimlessly at that hour. A fly effervesced at the window. Its fat little body gives a plump-fingertip tap at the pane as it launches itself against the glass. Again, again, again-again, again, again. Rest. Again, again-again. Rest. A high tissue-comb-threnody of wings punctuates the tap-tap-tap and marks each take-off as it fizzes. Delicate compound eyes don't see the glazing that keeps them from freedom. I watch it. Rise and fall, rise and fall, rise and fall. The arc of its repetition reminds me of bubbles. Breaching the surface of a sparkling drink. And I'm submerged in memory, a cold lemonade, a flute of champagne. Returned, momentarily, to another life. A flute of champagne. A life before this one. A flute. There was music before. I hear it in the incessant confused buzz of those tiny confined wings. The music of before.

It was only much later that I realised. On a morning when the sun struggled to heat the land. The dew hung thick, clinging to its mother mist. A young doe ventured warily into the clearing. And I realised. The fly had been the first living creature I'd seen since my arrival at the outpost. The awkward grace of that young deer, each step so light, so carefully placed, and yet so precarious, made it all apparent. I watched and I realised. I'd danced in my bed with the fly. Held in early-light moments, an uneasy sleep still tugging at me, I'd waltzed through the melody of my nostalgias. I watched. Perfectly. Still. Awed by the stumbling elegance of her gait as it all became apparent. Birdsong, the whirr of insects, the dry distant crack of a twig. Like a rifle's echoed report. The ruffle of wings that accompanied it. The cause awakened around me. And when I moved, the grass fizzed at my feet. Crickets leaping clear. Effervescent.

After that I began to find strange freshwater oysters along the shoreline. And I remembered. I thought I remembered more. More clearly. I remembered the start of it all. The creeping rise. The unexpected victories. The belief. The net-curtain ghosts that enforced the early changes. Neighbour watching neighbour watching neighbour watching neighbour. Choosing sides. The shifts. The shift to us and them. I remembered the parades; the ordnance boom of the bass drum, heavy boots through streets, over them; the report of the snare above it. The loud speakers. Ejaculating ideas into crevices. Nestling safe between underdeveloped thought. And the flames, great tongues from sacred leaves. Language rising as smoke. Debate died. Truth went into hiding. Both replaced by impostors. Born of repeated lies. Life became singular. Monastic. Monolithic. Disagreement became dissidence. Then even the ghosts began to die. Dragged out from behind their hangings and forced to stand alone. The walls were stripped then spattered. The ropes laden heavy with the burdens of the state. History was passed down upon us. A sentence of fate. A sentence that we all stammered through. I couldn't remember the

side I'd chosen. I couldn't remember the principles I'd defended. I couldn't remember the people I'd fought beside. I couldn't see their faces. Or hear their voices. I couldn't remember. I cannot remember. I just cannot remember. But the voice reminds me. Regularly. Repeating. ... - *an unseen enemy is the most dangerous enemy of all* - ... - *We require your strength, unity and cooperation to achieve our victory* - ... There was music before. We danced. My lips brushed yours, not quite a kiss. I buried my face in your shoulder. We laughed. I used to laugh.

The distance between then and now grows. Time is more ubiquitous. Less comprehensible. It can't mean what it used to. I want it to, I suppose. Only nothing stays the same. I wasn't always a soldier. I know that. But the memories of before are emptying out. They've become flat pictures. Pictures of places that no longer exist, or never existed at all. We took bikes into the village, through the small square by the harbour wall, the salt in the air stung our faces in the sun, the smell of fish frying and the patter of the locals, their dialect ricocheting about us, banking off the church walls, the bells peeling away the hours, chilled wine and cards, hot dice into the evening. But they are not there, and you are not there, and I am not there, and there is not there. It all empties out. All the joy and anticipation, all the anxiety and fear; until the only pain left is regret. The distance between then and now continues to grow. Only nothing stays the same. I am a soldier. I stand in my uniform. Dressed in ideals. In insignias that baffle me. Their meaning contingent to something I've lost. They represent an absence that has no meaning of its own. Still, I rarely stand naked. I am a soldier. With orders. But no army. I am alone. I don't remember what I am fighting. I don't remember who I am fighting. I don't remember why I am fighting. I am no longer fighting.

I was eating oysters when the jet flew over. Prizing them open with the tip of my combat knife, which I still sharpened daily. Severing the muscle that held their shells

together. Swallowing them alive. They tasted of ozone and batteries. They tasted pure. They tasted of another life. I heard the plane before I saw it. A high nasal drone, constant and unapologetic. Its trail scarred the sky. An imprint. A two dimensional thing. Too high to have real form. Too far away to be the thing it was. But I understood it, and what it might mean. Anticipation coiled in me, my limbs were sprung, loosened by the tightness it invited. I thought of the pilot. Of another person. Another human being. I wonder if he hears the voice too. If it is the same voice. If we have that in common. The anonymous private. The plane passes. It's gone. The pilot never saw me. Never thought of me. Or, if he did, he never thought to return. I waited for him to circle. I watched the sky. Swifts moved above in greater numbers everyday now. Their warm liquid shrill elongated the dusk. The pilot never thought of me. The plane never returned. Then the symptoms began.

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Confusion first. Questioning myself. Repeatedly. Unsure. Unsound. Always uncertain. Without recognition. I was in the dark. I sat in the dark. In the evening of my days. During the dark times. Has the bulb blown or have I forgotten to turn on the light? Inertia accompanied it. I would have tried the bulb. Now I sit; sat, sitting. Waiting for nothing. I can move, I think, but I don't. I have no will. I will not move. I wait for nothing. It feels better, easier, to wait. It's torture. I am content. I move. To gorge myself. Moved by a hunger, gnawing low in my pit. An emptiness that can't be filled. I consume mounds in shifts. I go through months of supplies in single sittings. Sharp berries that jar and bitter roots. Bowls of barely cooked mushrooms. Piles of them. Reconstituted, wet and resistant. Their purple-black gills greedily holding an oily sheen. I feel my gut taut. I am not satisfied. I am never satisfied. I drink pints. Gallons. Water, pickling brine, preserves. I gorge. I

consume. I am consumed. I move only to get more. More. Mores. I waste. Excrete. Expel. I am waste. Dejecta. I am shit. I make no effort to move. I have no will. I will not. I shit and wallow in the earthy tang. Recline and float. Drift in a perfume of rejection. It floods my head. Headaches cast off from my sinuses, dull and heavy, an awkward small-talk of pain. They slosh and rattle about. Company for the confusion. Vicious memories that manifest, all rusted and barbed, in a porcelain skull that thins as they grow. They are agile and acute and incisive. They select points to attack then settle behind an eye, or both, with a pressure that makes me whimper before the blindness sets in. My skin tightens with fever. Shrinks around me as I crawl to my cot. The canvas webbing creaks as I dump my weight onto it. Its warp groans into the mattress as it reaches its limit. I feel my hair growing. Each follicle fighting to distance itself from my rancid scalp. I feel my nails getting longer. My teeth loosening as my gums recede. I screw my eyes back into my head. It's all I can do to hold my shape. And a nausea rises from the effort. A potent inevitability. The spit floods my mouth, overflows, great glooping strings of it, all stagnant and salinated. The heather mattress invites it on, its enticing urgency, tempered with moments of delay, of repression, of holding it all in place. Of fighting it. Beating it down. Repressing the relief. Until. The first jerking spasm, the unavoidable purge, the contorted jets, streams of bile blasting through my head. Jets, jet, jet, again, again, again, again, again, again, again. Relief. Still. No calm. But still. Slight tremor in hand, silently conducting spent groans. I drip over the edge of the cot. I am sweat. I am tears. I am snot. I spit. Strings of bile stick to my chin. Acid. Taste it. Sour and ignorant. Drip; drip; drip. Caustic mucus in my throat. I need water. I need to wash out my head. I need. I have need. I have needs. I cannot. I am. No longer able to move. No longer will. I cannot move. I lie there. Unmoved. I lie. My eyelids twitch. Tic, tic, tic. Visions return. I cannot move. They are heavy. The lids. I'm trapped beneath them. It's dark. I lie.

I am still here. But I'm slipping. Slipping between here and there. Where it is. Whatever it was. I laugh. I dance there, still, sometimes. I am still here. The lids lift. It's light. The spotlights shift slowly across the room. Perfectly in time. They sweep the boards. Make feature stars of effluence. I am unmoved. I hear nothing. Ringing in my ears. Silent feedback. Post explosion. I smell nothing. My nose still full of my shame. The light in the room tinged green. I eye the windows. A lichen has grown between the panes of the portholes. The sun passes through it. Infuses the room with oxidised air. How long have I been here? I think. Knowledge of death becomes belief. Absolutely. The sound of it fills me. Lying there. At my lowest. Buoyant low-timbre of empty-full-drum. Thudding through me. It fills me at my lowest. When my lungs are completely empty. It brims, anxious and endless, and always starting over, always beginning again. And it begins again. The voice. More regular than before. Repeating. Repeating. Repeating. Filling everything with words. The anonymous private. Speaking directly to me. Words. The tin-tone of the familiar. Whenever I am awake he is speaking. He is speaking. He is speaking. He is speaking. He is speaking to me. Everything that is is in his words. Everything he says is all that can be. His words are everything. The only words are the words of the voice. The voice is the only voice. The only voice is all voices. There are no other words. And even if there were, I could not hear them, or speak them, or write them. The voice goes on. I understand. I am moved. I know what I must do. The voice. I understand. The voice is my voice.

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Words lose meaning. Relationships shattered. Their communion broken. I can no longer understand.

This must be a lie.

I lie here.

I'm lying here.

I tell the story. Retell the story. This must be a lie. The war is lost. This must be a lie. I am lost. This must be a lie. Lost to history. This must be a lie. I've lost sight of the end. This must be a lie. I've lost it.

Pulse bangs time in ear. March. Six eight time. We are outside. We find ourselves there. The sun is up. But the world isn't yet warmed. Our breath hangs before us. Grass whips bare legs. Trees bluster. Cold mud between toes. We pace through it. Gurgling. Consumptive. This isn't what you expected. The outpost has gone. The bunker is obliterated. We are naked. I'm only wearing my lips. You aren't here yet. We are naked and dry and cold and mobile. We are moved. We realise. Words realise. The words matter. The words are matter. The words are all that matter. We gambol toward the causeway. The clearing slips away behind us. Each step is dissolved. I sit by the shore. In the mud. In the sludge. I lie. Sink into it. Drawing warmth from around me. I look for the outpost. I face the past. The bullet holes in the trees have healed. Wet earth fills my mouth. Sapid clay. Mineral batter. I do not gag. I taste iron. I taste copper. Metallics replace shame. I'm breathing mud. Drinking and drowning. Accepting. Grit between teeth. Sands. Stones. Sediments. Seeds. Pits. My head is a shell. My tongue is an oyster. Grit becomes pearl. Pearl becomes word.

Everything changes.

Nothing stays the same.

There is nothing here.

It is beautiful.