



Far Away

A Short Story
by Michael Mark

Dedication

This story is dedicated to the timeless, forgiving power of Nature.

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THE LAST EMBER OF MY MOTHER danced out of existence when I was eight, and migrated like a massless, phantom firefly across the breach between us, flitting like an idea through the void to reappear inside of me. She fell into me in that instant like a fresh, warm batch of gravity whose point of origin was my own, like a strange and empty consequence I couldn't shake, whose cause was everywhere I looked. I had watched throughout the previous months like a girl at a museum peering through a pane of soundproof glass, helpless, imagining the spell would somehow break. She had been a beautiful, twinkling meadow of stars, and she had faded slowly, imperceptibly at first, one pixel of light at a time until finally the last tiny flame had fizzed, crackled, and winked off-line.

Unsure of how to react, I had checked the clock to see what time it was. Then I had looked back to my mother. She was shrunken, her head sagged, every part of her body collapsing towards its center, winnowed down to bones and harrowed flesh, but a spark of her had been there right at the end. I had seen it. It had leapt across the gap of my fearful stare.

Then the pain had opened up inside of me, like the ink spreading from a broken pen across the white cotton warmth of my heart. My mother... she would know how to take that stain out... how to soak the garment in hot water and work it with her hands until it was clean, but she was gone. I had no idea what to do. That darkness had stalked me patiently for months, always near but just out of reach—peeking at me through my mother's smiles in twinges of sadness I could always argue away, or hiding inside of the walls of the empty rooms I found sometimes after school when I'd run in the door, bouncing along on my toes in search of a hug, a

snack and my mother's voice singing along with the radio. I'd search the house and eventually find her napping. That thick, hovering silence was a warning offered in a language I couldn't comprehend. I'd make the cheese and crackers myself to keep things going, and hum myself the parts I could remember of her favorite songs. I tried to cover for her so this darkness would think everything was fine and it had found the wrong house.

When her last breath was spent, I felt myself plunging, as finally that darkness enfolded me. I checked the clock. I breathed in shallow scoops. I stood up a few moments later, fumbled my way blindly through the screen door like a hatchling pawing at a hinged shell, and ran to my favorite stand of mottled sycamores where my sudden appearance scared an assembly of birds into a squawking divergency. A beetle working its way quizzically up the outside of a tree—hitching this way and that in compliance with some ancestral exploratory algorithm—was unfazed.

I picked up a stick and wrote some things down in the dirt so my mother could read them, but they were just scribbles—lines and curves scratched into grit—since my writing hand and what I needed to say were miles apart. I knew she could interpret, though. After all, she had helped me write it. When I look back I can never tell if I was writing to her, or she to me, or each of us to the other. My mother and I were like two ships occupying a socked in harbor, adrift in a fog without origin or bearing, rocking to and fro in some dimensionless singularity that was punctuated by the muffled sounds of longing. We shared an identity, occupied a state that was a transient, quantum instability, and temporarily I was warm and whole. Then I remembered my name again, and my emotions collapsed upon me.

I was alone in a mottled stand of sycamores.

I stood up, needing motion. Something bigger than anything I had ever experienced filled the gaps between the trees like a protective cloud while I stumbled around numb and unthinking, kicking stones and peeling grains of papery bark off the trees, moving on pattern and reflex alone, as if the beetle had taken pity on me and offered to let me borrow its consciousness for a little while. I think that it was inside of that walking coma that I had decided my future would take me somewhere else, somewhere far away, somewhere different. That is how wounded eight year olds think—if it isn't this place, surely there is a different place that is it.

My father had reached for me as I dashed out of the bedroom, and I had let him catch me for a moment, one plunging pause before I had brushed his arm away, and

he had let me go. He was waiting for me on the porch in the half-light of the fading day when I returned home. The cicadas were soaking the dusk with their high speed washboard rattling, just as they had the previous night, and the one before that, and the one before that, too. Nature knows how to absorb every happening within itself, and continue on, but nothing seemed like it could ever be the same for me. I wasn't vast enough—not like an atmosphere of instinctually singing beings—to soak all of it in. My father put his arm around me and kissed my head, and gave me a long hug that quivered once in a while the way muscles tremor when they've been laboring for too long at the limits of their capacities. Even his cells had been stretched taut with grief. With his big arms overwhelming my little ones, he must have felt as I had—that we had never been closer, nor farther apart, than we were in that shaky scaffolding of bones and sinew we had fashioned from, and for, ourselves.

"How long have you been sitting here, Dad?"

"All day, june bug." My name was Rachel, but back then Mom and Dad always called me june bug. We were still sitting there on the porch when my Uncle Bert and Aunt Sue pulled up in Uncle Bert's blue pick-up.

My mother's dying unhitched us both on the one hand—stung us each with a pain that was solitary and incommunicable—and bound us together even tighter on the other, as if she had been the flux in the joint that had soldered us one to the other. Her passing had been the heat that fused us. From that moment on, we had grown like vines exploring altogether different surfaces, the two unique lattices of possibility that extended through time like an invisible ladder, awaiting our arrival, but beneath the soil we always shared a common root ball, an impenetrable locus of tangled questions and memories. We shared a grief for as long we both had lived, and a need that could always and without warning annihilate the distance between us.

My father became a traveling apprentice to a question that no one else could answer. A space opened up inside of him into which he disappeared from time to time, as if he were out mending fences along the border of some high mountain kingdom, fortifying a stilted line of posts and shaved saplings against an uncertainty that only he could sense, a momentum that was collecting in the passes like dark clouds that would one day spill over.

When he felt most vulnerable he would leave me with my adopted Uncle Bert and Aunt Sue, sometimes for days at a time, while he went out to patrol his borders. As if beholden to an oath he hated, but couldn't break—not without slipping away altogether at least—he would toss a rucksack into the back of the truck, lift me into the cab with a wan smile, take one moment to touch his forehead to mine before kissing my hair, and then deliver me into the strange shelter of Uncle Bert's den. While Aunt Sue made chocolate milk in the next room, my father and Uncle Bert would chat softly, just out of range, before he set out for the nearby maze of desert canyons.

Watching him drive off and shrink into the distance from my kneeling position on Uncle Bert's couch became a young girl's ritual, and only later would I come to recognize the depths to which we had both needed those times apart. Once in a while, my sorrow at his departure was laced the aftertaste of relief. There were questions that, together, we could never ask of the other for fear of blowing apart something that could never be remade. We were like sculptures made of long, unwieldy springs pressed too tight, our herniated coils poking out through the sides, the shard of wholeness we each possessed dangling like the last rusted leaf of fall at our center, the whole of what we had become bound into shape by a maze of hastily applied sinew lashings and knots that were hardened dots in a reckless, makeshift web. Despite our intimacy, parts of ourselves had been placed off limits from the other, protected and hidden—locked away in sanctums in which they nestled and festered, like wounds, unable to access the air outside. Apart from one another, safe in our relative isolation, we could take those questions out and examine them, and let them breath.

While Uncle Bert stayed close by, stacking wood or playing his guitar, Aunt Sue and I would sit for hours at a time and make up stories about the people my father was meeting with out there in the dry stone fjords, deep in secret caves or atop tall cliffs. They were bringing him medicine, dreams, and all the ideas that he needed. Aunt Sue told me ideas were like the pieces of a puzzle, and when my father collected all the ones he needed, he would be able to put together a totally new picture, one we'd never seen before, and that it would be wonderful.

Of my father's imaginary friends, Mr. Bufflesquint was my favorite. He was a blind man with a long white beard and a silver metal briefcase that he kept chained to his wrist, who lived near the center of our galaxy on a planet I called Farlo. Far-

lo was full of meadows, rock-bottomed streams, forests, and orchards full of trees that groaned in the night like whales and bore troves of sweet, pink-speckled fruit. Mr. Bufflesquint lived in a tall stone tower next to a pond that looked like a sheet of glass, with a family of talking wolves.

My father was an astronomer, and I still remember the day I told Aunt Sue that when he was alone in the desert, perched atop a quiet mesa at night searching for clues far out in the galaxy, way past the Oort Cloud, he found himself confronted once by the singular vision of an eyeball, big and full like the moon, only it blinked once in a while so you knew it was alive... It was one of Mr. Bufflesquint's wolves, Theodore, looking right back at him through a special telescope they all wore. All of Mr. Bufflesquint's wolves kept one eye on what they were doing, and another eye scanning the galaxy for people who were missing information like my father.

While my father was writing about the blinking eye in his journal, Theodore ran back to the tower and told Mr. Bufflesquint what he had seen. Mr. Bufflesquint listened, patted Theodore on the head, and hooked up a special wire from his silver briefcase to a plug on the side of Theodore's telescopic monocle. The wire was made of gold and wound with spider silk. The next time my father looked towards Farlo and found Theodore's looming eye, he and Mr. Bufflesquint could hear one another's thoughts, because Theodore had a heart that could beam messages to anyone. After they had talked for a while, Mr. Bufflesquint typed a code into the Braille locks on his briefcase, and pulled out one of the puzzle pieces my father needed. Using his hands he could read the message and share it with Theodore, which is exactly what he did.

I knew this had really happened because when my father picked me up that time he had a new warmth inside of him, like the kind I used to have when I got out of school for Christmas vacation. For a few days, he wasn't always in a hurry. We made a bonfire outside on a school night, played checkers and drank hot chocolate, and I produced a series of sketches of myself waving to him from rockets as I flew through the stars. It was one of my most prolific periods as an artist. I always added little images of nested arcs in the background somewhere, like progressively larger parentheses partially encircling one another, and when my father asked me what they were I told him they were messages from Theodore beaming through space. That little bit of information had failed to compute, so I had to tell him the whole story. He was quiet for a while after that, and he went to get more wood for

the fire even though he already had a huge pile nearby. I used to love imagining signals leaping back and forth across the stars, and of people receiving information from someplace far away.

Far away was always on my mind.

My mother's death had both filled and emptied me. My heart had been punctured, and an invisible force field whose existence had filled my world and given it shape and solidity—a force whose existence I had previously failed to consciously apprehend—drained out of it, whistling through my chest as if the accumulated warmth of a thousand sunrises was being scuttled through the tear at my center, into the vast emptiness of space. The howling that arose in its passage, the tremolo moan of invisible winds whipping through the gaps in my ribs as they strained to reach the vacuum beyond, was a sound that only I could hear, the voice of my pain. What remained in the silent calm that finally came was nothing but the membrane on which my world had once been projected, collapsed upon me in a misshapen heap—an afterbirth. What had once been, was no more, having vanished inside of me. I was delivered into the fullness of longing.

Pulling the tattered fabric of my previous life away, I found myself emerged onto a wide plain, a rolling land of gently swaying grasses bounded by a distant snow-capped peak—the entirety of it awash in an altogether new type of fullness. Longing was the primordial fluid of my new existence. Longing had taken up residence at my center, and was present in every nook and cranny of this world. Longing is what I had become.

As the seasons passed, I began to dream of a place for which I needed no words to name or describe, the place that had come into being the instant I had been born into longing. This place, which I have often called simply far away, was the object of my desire, the source of the magnetism that flowed through my every fiber. Far away was the opposite pole to the need I had become, the balancing force, a geometry perfectly mirrored to my own, with which I would one day join in a consummate act of union and annihilation—and I secretly hoped, rebirth. So steeped was I with the vision and the feeling of far away, I didn't realize I had been transformed into a living question, or that my very existence had become, in turn, the gestation of an answer.

Far away always seemed exactly that—remote. Distance was never really the

principal issue, for the place I had in mind was an altogether different kind of place to the one I had always known. It existed in the same way that lands born of hope have always existed, as close as thought, but infinitely far as the crow flies. The sense of vast distance always accompanied my vision like a commensal bird with oily black plumage perched upon its back. Distance was the measure of my longing, the dimension of my need. How could such a place as I dreamt about be hidden nearby, when everything nearby was but the recycled, long dead image of what had always been, a landscape now devoid of its essential ingredient? Even a child recognizes nature's skittish avoidance of discontinuity.

The world around me had become a husk, and I wandered through the years carrying this silent hope deep inside of me.

Looking back, the hallmark of far away was its absence of tragedy, of even the possibility of tragedy, although at the time I would never have used such language to describe it. It was simply a place where trees groaned like whales in the night, and the animals could send messages across the galaxy. It was the kind of place whose natural currency was the imagination of its inhabitants, a place where dreams roamed the sky like clouds, then rained upon the soil and sunk down into waiting darkness, emerging later as flowers, musical instruments, or doorways made of wood standing alone in a field whose thresholds led to new worlds.

Nothing remains stagnant, however, not even our dreams. They, too, are part of nature.

The feelings that strike us to the core and don't get out reverberate down through our years. They stretch out and cool, radiating their heat into the invisible tissue of our lives. Slowly, year over year, we take them in, and dissipate them through the alchemical reactions of our becoming. They transform us, and we them. By the time I had left college, far away had transmuted from a fairy tale into a tangible prospect. The burning pang of my youth had been restated in the reasoned tones of maturity: a dream of travel through the void of space.

In a similar fashion, the ark—as we came to call it—had been the alchemical product of my father's astronomical research and solitary yearnings, his greatest invention, an idea he had nurtured from the one shard of possibility he had never relinquished. This idea had grown within him from a single corpuscle of meaning into a radiant constellation of points—a story, the possibility of a beginning and

ending interwoven and unceasing, of renewal. When my father first began to speak of the ark, I had returned from a summer in Tokyo where I had spent ten wondrous weeks immersed in the introductory study of stellar chemistry. My father, from his most productive period yet—a stint at an Australian observatory, replete with an entirely new vista of canyon architecture to explore.

I was seventeen and he was approaching fifty.

An ark he told me, is not a craft, but a trajectory. A cosmodesic. It takes movement, he had said, his left arm resting in the window frame of his beaten pick-up as it scabbled along the curve of a familiar desert road, rousting a plume of dust up from the hard-packed earth, to express possibility. "Movement," he had said, taking his eyes off the horizon for just long enough to wink towards the sky, "but—movement of a certain type."

Movement along a stable orbit, for instance, was just drifting at a constant potential. Traveling in circles. The real action, he told me, required travel along an altogether different axis. You had to find the means to propel yourself in and out of the page. *You* was his vernacular for persons who understood such things—people who didn't flinch in the face of what was obviously required, who were not scared off by their deepest questions—people, in short, like us. I hadn't been certain at the time that my inclusion was merited, but he wouldn't have it otherwise. From then on, he had always spoken as if we were co-conspirators, the only two who could truly understand the common necessity that rang inside of us. While he instructed me about coming off the page, he would move one hand slowly towards and away from himself, palm open, as if sensing the latent patterns nestled into the world around us. Sometimes during these pantomimes he would disappear, vanish within himself as if one of his thoughts had encountered an old friend, and I would have to remind him we were having a conversation. Right here. Now.

Electrons, he said, absorb and emit light as they vault from one orbit to the next, leaping across thresholds of potential like teleported thoughts, flickering between geometries. They die on one end, disappear, and then resurrect on the other. That was how he described it. That was the secret to transformation. If you wanted to cross a darkness, he said, you had to step inside of it for a little while—let it swallow you whole—and stand quietly with your hands cupped in front of you. Just wait, and when you caught a drop of starlight, you would find you had emerged on the other side. He always snapped his fingers and pointed up towards the sky

when he talked that way, even on cloudy days, and especially at night, when we stood together underneath a felt blanket sky pin-pricked with luminous hints of what lay hidden on its other side.

I asked him if people were like electrons, and he told me that we were, but that we humans exchanged an altogether different kind of light. He told me to think carefully about that. I had, for quite some time, and when I had asked him two hours later if humans changed shape like electrons when they exchanged this kind of light, he said we did, but he said it wistfully, like he was talking about someplace far away or long ago—about a place that, despite being heretofore elusive, simply must exist... or else, how could we ever be sure of anything at all?

His eyes burned with a strange glow, one I was at the time unable to fathom, one that seemed distant and unknowable but that I should have recognized, for we shared a common beginning. Would our responses really be so different? We each had a part to play, a life within us we couldn't avoid.

My father didn't leave me with clues; he left me with traps—delightfully contrived circumstances that tumbled open irreversibly when I arrived, as if they were sunlight and a drop of rain tickling some piece of me that had laid dormant underground for the winter. Each trap had been a ratchet in the unfolding of my life, a diode progression. Once a seed opens, there's no going back. The shoot either withers or pushes forward into the open air. So it was with me. The ark he built for me was a pattern deployed across both time and space, like a constellation of stone-walled libraries erected across a scattered landscape centuries before its people had learned to read, a series of points separated by darkness, awaiting the arrival of fire. I was somehow the necessary flame in his endeavor. I was the password and the database. My very nature was the map. Each trap that I sprung delivered me into a new layer of myself.

Once when I was on holiday, taking a break from my own research on the orbiting resort Cloud 9, I had taken delivery of a parcel. There was no return address. Nor was there a need to ask the question. The wrapping was a thick tan stock sprinkled with natural wooden fibers, lashed together with multiple segments of jute twine—Flemish Bends on the bottom, the loop of a Bimini twist on top through which the last free end passed before being securely pinched in a clever copper clasp. It was a return address only I could read, in a cursive script he had taught

me to read years before in sun-soaked autumn canyons, alongside of chattering streams, my clumsy fingers struggling to grasp the looping, tangled phonetics.

Inside there had been a small pane of polarized violet glass—my favorite color—with a set of celestial coordinates and a time stamp etched into it. There had also been letter of invitation to a joint summit on chronobiology and nanotechnology sponsored by a Professor Alguillon in Paris. The other girls usually got cards on their birthdays, or potted orchids, digital certificates redeemable via satellite at eclectic west coast boutiques, or wrought silver necklaces. I got a trap in which only I could be caught—a reminder of a young woman's once raw curiosity, of her once active romance with possibility, and of a specific conversation we had had many years before about space flights, cellular rhythms, and human hibernation.

I had set down the glass of wine, gazed out a window at the Earth nestled far below, and felt myself change shape. I had felt as though I might disappear, emit a pulse of light, and reappear somewhere far, far away. I had felt as though I might one day be capable of lifting off the page and crossing an impenetrable darkness.

Four years later I would do exactly that.

The greatest unresolved problem with respect to deep space travel—leaving the fanciful solutions such as wormholes and teleportation out of the picture—was the duration of the journey with respect to the duration of a human life. Traveling at the speed of light, it would take 100,000 terrestrial years to cross the galaxy. Reaching the speed of light, however, or even a close approximation thereof, was still well beyond our reach on the day I strode empty-handed, my father beside me, down six flights of concrete stairs to Alguillon's underground laboratory, possessing nothing but the clothes on my back and a weightless catalog of memories. It was to be my final visit. My stomach took up residence in my throat, and my heart in the very air around me. My blood was surging like a spring river rounding the last bend before the sea.

My father walked quietly next to me, and together, stride for stride, we shared the softest kind of silence you can imagine, like nightfall seeping into an alley. It was the kind of silence that would arise in a meadow just after a pair of crows skated across it, the sound of their wings brushing through the air like whispers before their twining paths were absorbed into a wall of standing birch. What remained was as poignant, in its own way, as the first color you ever saw. It was the kind of

silence that surrounds life itself, after all necessary words have been spoken and the time has been reached when language, too, must fall away from the moment like so many spent booster rockets. It was the type of silence that arises when the setting of something straight signifies the end of all that once was known.

In order for a life to reach such a moment, it must be propelled. It must be crashed into headlong and left gasping, as I was. As we had been.

On the train ride into the city, we had spoken our last words to one another. We had laughed about simple things—rainbow colored shoelaces and Halloween costumes no one but us understood, and his heroic, but futile attempts to grow tomatoes in the desert. At the very end, he had told me Mom would have been proud, as he was. In the silence that followed, we had said good-bye, neither of us able to do much more than share a space for the remainder of the ride.

Alguillon's assistant Emily had greeted us inside the glass doors and walked us over to the Vault. My father squeezed my hand, and I kissed him on the cheek. Our glistening eyes met briefly, telling all, beaming to one another rays of hope and certainty we both felt but couldn't explain, and then he turned and left the room. It had come to this? I had realized suddenly the extent to which we both crave and avoid the most definitive moments in our lives. Then all of a sudden, ready or not, we are inside of them. We can't step aside without losing our way. I knew that my father felt the same.

I laid down on the stone table, preparing for the holographic catapult that would vault me into the ark.

When the conditions for transformation finally reach full term, the shift itself is instantaneous. Electrons leap across the gap between orbitals outside of time, changing shape in the gap between time's smallest detectable duration, searing the space in between into a glowing vacuum. I used to wonder how they knew precisely which shape to assume on the other side. Was it awkward to suddenly inhabit a new geometry? Did it require an act of will?

Alguillon's solution to the conundrum of transporting humans across vast distances of space, and eons of time, was to change the very definition of human life, to reshape it in such a way as to render it immune to time's passage. His answer, in short, was to shift consciousness into an altogether different vessel. I cannot explain the mechanism by which consciousness couples with matter, or describe the laws by which they interact. I can only tell you it has something to do with dreams.

I fell asleep that day in Alguillon's Vault, dreaming of sycamores. The photonic device of his invention caught me out wandering, and I never awoke—at least not in any way you would describe by the term waking. I departed on one end, leaving my body behind. There was a pulse of light that filled the entire lab like the reenactment of the birth of a star, and I changed shape entirely. A few days later my old shape, that of a middle-aged woman, was given back to the earth. Elsewhere a small capsule was fired towards the hollow black of space bearing my new form sealed safely inside.

Every living thing has an electromagnetic architecture, a pattern projected into space and time from its own dimensionless singularity. How Alguillon developed the means for linking one singularity to another, I'll never know. Perhaps they are already linked, and it merely takes a push to vault yourself from one to the other. What I do know is that my experience was not complicated. For a moment it was dark, and I could perceive neither color nor sound. I was aware, but free of all physical sensation. Then a column of light grabbed me, as if I were a sail caught in a strong wind. I felt as though I were accelerating faster than I ever had before, blurring into a brilliant streak like a shooting star. It was the pure sensation of flight, removed from any points of reference, that ended with the breaking of an invisible barrier. All at once the wind was gone, and I became a hive of swirling tones—a field of delicately struck bells.

I knew, consciously, that for the next twelve hundred years I would inhabit this single drop of water. A singularity, it turns out, requires no more than this to sustain entry into the world of matter. Gold threads the thickness of single atoms tickled my periphery, linking me electrically to a powerful quantum computer my father and I had agreed to name Theodore. My new vessel was a bustling electronic system, a fluid dynamo capable of giving and receiving miniscule pulses of light, of communicating. I was a body electric, packaged safely in a metallic capsule, flying swifter than anyone had ever previously traveled towards the uncharted realm of space towards somewhere far away. I had become a whirling cloud of electrons that would never burn out.

The capsule that bore me was named the Ark, and it tore through space like a falcon hurtling towards the ground in a squint-eyed tuck, its vision never wavering from the tiny, scurrying object 1,200 light years away that we called Kepler 62. I

knew this, the way I still know which drawer in my father's kitchen contained the knives and forks, but I had no visceral sensation of our still-growing velocity. I had very little visceral sensation at all, in fact.

When I focused on physical sensation, I felt as though I was a cloud of twinkling lights. Each point of light was a unique and burning desire to fulfill an errand, as if each one were a tiny, electronic postal courier with a message that would disappear if not quickly delivered, resulting in the irretrievable loss of something necessary and important. As fast as these points of desire emerged, the errands were fulfilled, as the lights leapt from point-to-point with an accuracy and a spontaneity that was joyous to behold. I couldn't help but feel I was observing in the cloud of lights the fleeting signature of an invisible, clockwork process—a process I realized I *was*. This recognition was both buoyant and decisive.

I could identify with each individual flash of movement, could feel the raw magnetism that scribed its path, and yet I also felt as though I was the entire cloud, a symphony of illumined transformations that was itself a whole and singular process. Occupying the seat of this sensation was effortless, and in no way unpleasant. I discovered I had become the convergence of two dynamics, of coming undone and being repaired, of balance breaking apart and balance being restored. I was an intricate puzzle, and all of its pieces, in a perpetual state of solving itself, but never quite arriving at a stable solution.

It was beautiful to experience, as if I were listening to a masterful work of poetry in a language I didn't intellectually understand. Despite my lack of facility with its primary tongue, something of its inherent beauty shone through the barrier nonetheless.

I never tired of being a witness to and a participant in this real-time choreography, but on the other hand it would never be all of myself. My transformation in Alguillon's laboratory had loosed me of my once unquestioned bodily moorings. In a blur of light, a seed within me had opened and there was no turning back. Alguillon's process had unpacked me, had reached into the very knapsack of my soul, pulled out its contents, and arranged them on the table for inspection. My memories were in tact, and I had an identity—an awareness I could call my own—but it was no longer indistinguishably bound to the confines of a woman's life on Earth. A once indisputable convention within me—one so concrete I had never known it existed—had unfolded, a symmetry had spontaneously broken, and a new dimension I

could navigate had unfurled like a sail.

I had a foothold in the physical world, a sparkling drop of water with which I could identify, but my memories, my identity, and something else that was inexplicably me—a constant presence that had leapt across the gap from woman to water—had been granted an unexpected freedom. I was no longer a woman, but nor was I absolutely and completely a drop of water—not, at least, in the way I had once been a woman. I had become nebulous and non-local, and yet I felt as much *myself* as I ever had.

This freedom was at first delicious. There was no pressure—nowhere to go, no one to become, no world to whom my time must be justified. I had no questions about what to do next, about what to do or who to see, and I discovered that this latent condition was a wellspring of imagination and possibility. Ideas arrived unbidden, in a trickle at first, and then in droves, as if they had been waiting to gain entry into the mind of one or another earthly inhabitant for centuries. Both motivated and guided by this unexpected influx of inspiration, I discovered I could pursue the path to being a fully functional drop of water without losing the larger, boundaryless sensation I had discovered. I mustered the ability to harness my twinkling bursts of light, and sent them in quick pulses down the wires to Theodore, who always repaid me in full with a return pulse along a different wire. In this way we formed a simple circuit, and our communication could be sustained. I used the code I had been taught before the launch to form letters and words. Theodore transcribed my ideas and transmitted back towards Earth.

Where first it was passages of poetry that surfaced in my awareness, the abstracts of scientific papers I had read, or concepts for new devices, technologies or works of art, the ideas that approached me soon became a series of realizations about my current condition, and what it really suggested: I was something other than I had once thought. In time, I was wondering what had become of my mother after she had died—if she had been picked up by a burst of light as I had been, and somehow taken somewhere else, or if she had simply become a quiet understanding like I had been before the column of light had grabbed hold of me. Did time or distance enter into these considerations? Where was she now? Could I leap now, from this drop of water, and find her at last?

These questions hollowed me out and left me with an aching emptiness I could not fathom, and I felt as though I had been gifted, or perhaps had become, a strange

tool whose purpose escaped me. I held something within my grasp, but I grasped it not. Eventually I was delivered into a weightless land of dreams, and it was not long before I realized there was one more darkness I had yet to cross. All of my awareness distilled into a single dream, a mysterious encounter in which I found myself over and over again.

In my dream I am standing at the edge of the desert. Nearby, a large boulder sits in a geological tangent between the mountains at my back and the salt flats before me, and in the side of the boulder there is a shiny coin slot and a small metal crank, like the ones on the front of old-fashioned gumball machines. The crank is inclined at just the right angle: a brilliant starburst reflection pierces my vision whenever I look in the boulder's direction. I am aware that if I can find the right coin, I could put it into the boulder, turn the crank, and regenerate the atmosphere of this strange place. Cool steam would come up from below through vents and shafts in the ground. Clouds would form. Birds would fly across the land, and in time, the desert would flower. More than anything, this is my desire. This is my reason for being here.

I know the coins are kept someplace tantalizingly close, a hidden place so real to me I can almost taste it, as if I'm standing at the right location on the map, but in the wrong period of time, or am perhaps seeing the wrong spectrum of light. It is right here, right where I am standing, within earshot, and yet it is somehow not of this world. I have the sensation that I already possess this coin, if I could only bring myself to remember where I left it. If I could remember that particular location, I could go there and retrieve the coin. I would be there in an instant through the immense power of memory, but all I have is this fuzzy feeling of being on the verge, of being close but not quite.

I am stuck.

I am standing in a pool of this desire with no means of accessing what comes next.

After a time, a figure materializes, walking across the desert towards me. As the figure approaches, I see it is my mother. I become excited. She will know where to find the coin we need, but as she draws near she stops several paces away from me, like a stranger would, and when she speaks it is not her voice. She looks straight at me, but there is no recognition. For a moment, I am stunned. I look up at the sky,

at the coin slot and the dazzling glare of the crank, at her curious smile. My mother has become someone else. The mother I once knew, is gone. Somehow her body and her mind must have been cross-wired. Everything about this place is out of tune, distorted, or inside out.

"You are someone else."

"No," she replies. "I don't think so. This is who I have always been."

"I remember you differently."

"Have we met before?"

I have to remind myself this person only looks like someone I know. I point to the coin slot. "Do you know where to find the coin?"

She puts her finger to her lips, thinking and clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, spins on one heel and looks back across the desert as if she just asked it a question and expects a reply, as if this type of thing happens all the time in her world. "Funny you should ask. I met someone once... Here—come with me."

I take her hand, and we disappear.

The recurring dream was finally broken by the collision. There had always been the risk of small asteroids or refrigerator-sized hunks of ice traversing space at tens of thousands of miles per hour on paths that would intercept our own. Theodore could keep us clear of the big stuff, but objects below a certain size were not easily detected or avoided. They appeared out of the darkness like artifacts set free from a shifting wreck on the ocean floor, materializing in an instant out of the deep.

Theodore had tried to warn me, but there was nothing to be done, no means of correcting our course in time.

I knew we had been struck because suddenly my fleet of tiny electronic postal couriers couldn't make their deliveries. I felt my droplet of self shearing into a thousand pieces, and though it was not painful, it was not possible for me to process so much information at one time. My inner choreography was tossed into chaos, as if all the stars in the heavens had begun to fly around like a cloud of gnats caught in the leading edge of a thunderstorm. My connection to the drop of water was first strained and then in almost the very same instant severed altogether.

I was once again plunged into a quiet darkness.

I drifted, a pure awareness.

After a time, I saw a darting particle of light, like a firefly dancing on the breeze,

and then I was overtaken quickly by the sensation of swift and terrible movement, as if I had become a freight train careening down a mine shaft with the weight of an entire mountain behind it.

I was traveling once again towards someplace far away. I flew for a duration I couldn't measure, a duration that seemed to be without end. I became neither tired nor restless. My thoughts were given to me, like drops of rain falling to the Earth, and I was never thirsty. I felt like a point of light on an errand, like I was being drawn along the straightest possible path by a magnetism that was the very nature of my being. I could sense that this flight could not be interrupted or impacted. There was no power in existence capable of disturbing this motion, of impeding my progress along this cosmodesic curve. I was held by something so great and so vast it was everything, and I was its agent, its means of reaching into the particular. It was moving through me, and I was nameless and endless, as it was. I had become a pure force.

I forgot my name, forgot everything but this movement.

Eventually, I saw a room. I was the room and all of its contents. I was the silence beneath the bed, the dark space between the bureau and the wall, the particles of dust floating in the light flooding in through the window. It was a strangely familiar sensation, as if I had been there before, but I couldn't remember when or how that could have happened. A young girl was standing next to her father, watching silently, as her mother's body flickered into quiet. The girl was scared and overwhelmed. She was confused. She looked to the clock on the wall, began to buckle as her insides turned to slosh, then ran for the door, her hair flying behind her in sandy blond streamers. Without moving, I stayed beside her. I followed her as she ran across the land, steering her gently, guiding her feet over rocks and roots. I wanted to give her something. I was waiting for the right moment, sailing alongside of her, knowing it would present itself. I had to give her something. Something was alive within me that she needed. I was a message that she needed... from some place far away.

In a grove of trees, the girl fell to the ground and for a moment there was an opening—a space between thoughts. I flooded the girl's heart like sunlight spilling through cracks in a high barn roof, whispering a story about places I had been. There were no words, just a flowing presence that passed between us like we were breathing from an atmosphere that only we could share. The girl listened without

hearing, drinking me in as she dug at the earth with a stick, her mind loose and free like the scent of pine diffusing through a stand of trees. We jabbed at the hard ground together, splintering the dirt apart into nickel-sized clods, looking for something together.

I was looking for it, too. My hands were her hands, and her hands were my own. We scraped and clawed at the ground with the type of urgency you cannot muster if you are uncertain about whether or not there is anything to be found. Our efforts were a creative insistence. We both knew it: there was something nearby, something we needed, something we would not—could not—leave without. Our first stick shattered and we found another. We used our heel like a wedge to loosen bits of buried stone. We used our fingers to sift through the dust.

As we chipped away, a great silence was gathering around us, filling the glade in a steadily deepening embrace. The silence came from places near and far, accruing like a vast crowd of expectant onlookers. We were held by a field of gentle faces, all of them called, beckoned by a magnetism they could not resist or fully understand, to witness this moment. The girl's mother was somewhere among them, looking on with curiosity and hope. What was happening? Our digging softened as we settled in for the long haul. Dust plumes wafted through the air and dissipated, specks of history dislodged from their slumber and tossed aside. Our arms ached. Sweat rolled off our face.

There!

The sun echoed brightly from the ground as its rays caught the surface of something shiny and clattered into a million brilliant pieces. We continued the excavation together like archaeologists peeling back the sedimentary layers of our past, both reverent and eager. A few minutes later we pried a small golden coin out of the earth, the tips of our fingers sore and scratched. The coin was weathered and dented, slightly bent, the relic of a former time, something a traveler a hundred years before must have misplaced. We brushed it off, licked our fingers and rubbed it clean.

Something within me relaxed, as if I had just exhaled. It was an exhalation that never ended. A river poured out of me and into our world, a river that had begun someplace far away, and had made its way here, to fill the sky with gentle waves. I fell to the ground with each of her tears, inside of them, carrying something she no longer needed away with me and down into the earth. Nature is a perpetual ex-

change, a breathing in and out—the power to absorb every happening within itself.

She looked the coin over and slipped it into her pocket.

Then she ran home like a blown leaf scurrying over the pavement, hardly touching the trail. Flying along safely within her, I was both hollowed out and whole, an awareness capable of filling the whole sky. On the front porch, she fell into her father's arms, and they shook together gently like the branches of a tall tree pulled taut by the wind. I let his deepest whispered feelings trickle into me. I was under the porch, in the cool darkness, catching them. I held them like a sponge that can hold time itself.

She stepped back, pulled the coin out and showed it to her father. I was the coin she placed into his waiting hand. "Look what I found, Dad." I was watching them from high up in the sycamores, watching from inside of every leaf at once. He turned me over back and forth in his palm, chuckling to himself as I shimmered in every direction when the rays of the porch lights caught me.

I was there with the whole sky, in the sound of cicadas buzzing through the dusk, in the creaking of the boards in the porch. I was there with every ounce of my being, in every nook and cranny of space, in every particle of dirt and soil, in every thought that whistled past, for there was nowhere else to go.