

Capturing Objective Temporality in Narrative Fiction

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Abstract

In conventional narratives, time is compressed to include only noteworthy events, such that the time spent reading a piece of fiction (“reading time”) is often shorter than the amount of time that passes in the world of the story (“narrative time”). This project has created a new form of narrative that attempts to approximately match reading time and narrative time through applying a calculation similar to that used to measure reading speed and barring certain temporal techniques, such as anachronism. This project has produced five short stories in order to analyze the effects of this new narrative mode and its viability for future works. The results show a massive increase in the time and effort inherent to the writing process, but a promising new perspective when it comes to short-form literature. While this project has laid the groundwork, there is still plenty of unexplored potential utilizing this narrative form.

Introduction

Time is one of the very few concepts that we must grapple with on a constant basis. Thus, it makes sense that time can serve useful in the study of narrative fiction. From disruptions in the traditional chronological order of time (anachronisms) to control of the story's pacing, time plays an important role in the presentation of a narrative. However, despite all the attention paid to the ways in which narrative time deviates from time in reality, there seemed to be no attempt to match the amount of time that passes in the narrative (henceforth referred to as "narrative time") to the amount of time spent reading that narrative ("reading time"). While narrative forms such as the one-day novel may "reveal, attend to, and explore the apparently nonproductive or passive elements of everyday life" (Randall 607), they also delve into details that allow for greater introspection but disregard the constraints of time. In her book on writing, *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*, Jane Alison continues the tradition of examining pacing through the lenses of what she calls "story time" and "text time," but her examination of "real time" with such examples as dialogue and "the transcription of a character's... page of print" (Alison, ch.2) fail to consider the effect of a deliberate, near-exact representation of such time. That representation is what this project set out to examine.

Of course, due to differences in the speeds and methods with which the reader consumes the narrative, there is simply no way to match narrative time and reading time exactly. Such a feat would require not only a specific individual reader in mind, but require that reader to perform the impossible: read at an even, unbroken pace. Still, there is much to discover with the approximate attempt to match narrative and reading time, with the author's intention and the use of distinct language to evoke the mundane feeling of passing time.

Thus, this project has produced and will now analyze five short stories that employ a mode of narrative designed to approximately match narrative and reading time.

Methodology: Word Counts and Reading Time

One method of measuring reading time stands out above all others: word count. Throughout the history of reading speed tests, word count has been the prevailing factor used to measure reading speed. Thus, proper utilization of word count became essential to the construction of this new narrative mode. The work of Marc Brysbaert in “How many words do we read per minute? A review and meta-analysis of reading rate” was integral to this process. Through the analysis of 190 studies, Brysbaert estimates that the average WEIRD adult silent reading rate for fiction is 260wpm, with an average range of 200-320wpm (Brysbaert 1). Of course, measures of reading rate are hard to get exact; in most studies, “the fact that the participants were measuring their reading times arguably had the effect that they kept focused on the task” (Brysbaert 14). This statement, along with many other observations in Brysbaert’s meta-analysis, also apply to this project. Further research on the subject of reading rates would benefit the implementation of this narrative mode.

During the writing process, word count was examined and modified on a sentence-by-sentence basis. The total words of the sentence would be counted and divided by $(x/60)$ with x equaling the WPM for that particular story (240 for “Walk” and “Wedding”, 260 for “Headache” and “Beach”, and 280 for “Drive”). This equation produced how many seconds the sentence would take to read. After a rundown of each sentence, paragraphs and scenes would be tallied to maintain accuracy.

Many events were timed using a stopwatch to ensure accuracy. The most stringent use of this measurement happened in the production of “Drive”, which involved measuring such actions

as driving a car down a street, maneuvering a car down a long road, and turning left or right. The least stringent happened in the production of “Wedding”, which involved only a few measurements.

Introducing calculations into the writing process severely impaired both the speed at which content could be produced and the extent that content could be edited without a complete rewrite. While the WPM chosen for each story hovered around Brysbaert’s average, slight increases and decreases at rates of 20 WPM produced extreme differences both in pacing and in which details could be included.

Effects and Observations

Producing pieces that mimic objective time instantly imbued some limitations. Firstly, the use of present tense was necessitated, as we naturally experience time only as it is happening, only in the present. The recounting of a story—past tense in literature—would logically capture the time it takes to tell that story, not the time it took for that story to happen. In addition, the writer’s toolbox was cut in half, with summary becoming completely unavailable. Each of the five stories is written as one long scene. Finally, words that grounded readers in time were almost completely excluded. There were no instances of “before,” “later,” or other words that may be used to rescind or skip time—in other words, the use of anachronism was not permitted. Only “first,” “then,” and “last” were included, such as in “Beach”: “I wait until the water pulls back, then place my foot where it was” (page 22).

In addition, certain trends emerged during the production of these pieces to compensate for those techniques limited or excluded by the word count. For example, quick actions were often reduced to imperative statements. This is especially prominent in “Walk”: “Glance up,” (page 13), “Never pet the top of the head—I brush the base of his ear. Then move to scratching,”

(page 15). The presence of negative statements is greatly reduced—with so few words to describe what is happening, what isn't happening is largely avoided. Since dialogue is read faster than it would be spoken, as evidenced by the slower out-loud reading rates compared to silent rates in Brysbaert's meta-analysis (Brysbaert 1), dialogue tags and beats are necessary both to clarify tone to the reader and to allow the dialogue to take up as much time as when it is spoken out loud. Since tone cannot be controlled by pacing, I found myself using longer, more connected sentences in calmer moments and shorter, more abrupt sentences in more exciting moments, such as when the speaker is interacting with the dog in "Walk" or panicking in "Headache".

With all of these effects combined, each story takes on a mundane, conversational mood, much like the one produced by the more conventional "stream of consciousness" style of writing. However, the specific subject material, style, and length of each piece produced drastic and varied effects when applied to this narrative style.

Effective/Ineffective Applications

There are a number of different factors that contribute to the viability of a story written in this narrative style.

Firstly, this narrative style is not suited for long-form pieces, or even longer short stories. "Drive", the longest of the pieces at 6027 words (approximately 21 minutes at 280 WPM), suffers from its inability to summarize unimportant scenes. Summary is overwhelmingly necessary in narrative; thus, the length and span of pieces written in this narrative style is overwhelmingly limited. "Headache" and "Beach", 1300 and 763 words respectively (5 and 3 minutes at 260 WPM), benefit the most from this peculiar style, both focusing on a single

moment or action. While a piece longer than “Drive” is certainly possible, its artistic merit would most likely be compromised. Flash fiction seems to be the home for this technique.

In addition, subject matter is also limited. This project did not examine the effects of this narrative style on speculative fiction in order to more closely examine what effects came directly from the mode of narration (as opposed to any of the myriad techniques more readily available in speculative fiction), but still grappled with a variety of realist subjects. As stated, smaller moments or actions tended to work better for the mode of narration, but different kinds of scenes had different effects. Character interaction was impaired by the aforementioned need to equate the time dialogue is read with the time it would be spoken; this is most prominently shown in “Walk” and “Wedding”. However, the inner monologue of the narrator thrived under this narrative form; with such a limit on what could be conveyed, it naturally balanced out with the action of each piece. A retreat into internal monologue often served to signal a section of less action, when the narrator had room to comment on their own reactions instead of the surrounding details, such as the first half of page 30 in “Drive”.

Each piece ended up remarkably detailed due to the constraints surrounding word count. This naturally serves those subjects that thrive on detail; the acute experience of pain in “Headache” and the experience of the natural world in “Beach” both benefited from this narrative mode. However, “Drive” suffered under the bulk of its detail, combined with a sensationless mundanity inherent to its subject that imparts a suffocating feeling. “Wedding”, in its inherent political and social commentary as a story about a live feed of a virtual wedding ceremony in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, also finds itself distracted with detail. Thus, while this narrative mode serves those stories that ask for lots of sensory detail, it inhibits those with other purposes.

This, ultimately, can serve to control the particular tone of a story. During the course of this project, I noticed the similarities between my piece “Walk” and Ray Bradbury’s short story “The Pedestrian”. Both center around an ambiguous narrator who takes a walk in a setting severely implied to be hostile to pedestrians. However, both employ a different tone and serve a different purpose.

“The Pedestrian” is creating a commentary on modern society and its obsession with television: “What’s up tonight on Channel 4, Channel 7, Channel 9? [...] In his ten years of walking by night or day, for thousands of miles, he had never met another person walking, not once in all that time” (Bradbury 601). The narrator is treated with suspicion and is eventually charged with criminal activity for the simple action of taking a walk. In this piece, Bradbury uses an anachronism to skip time until the narrator is picked up by law enforcement: “He was within a block of his destination when the lone car turned a corner quite suddenly and flashed a fierce white cone of light upon him” (Bradbury 601). The mundane details of the walk are skipped over, allowing Bradbury’s social commentary to shine.

However, in “Walk”, I sought to communicate both the pleasantries and the anxieties of the walk itself. The details of the narrator’s perceptions during the walk and the time passed are crucial; the tone of the story is less overt than Bradbury’s, seeking to impart on the reader the individual experiences of the narrator. What commentary there is is kept to a minimum, and to the narrator’s own feelings on the matter (“In truth, the chances of any sort of reparations are slim”) (page 1)). Were “Walk” commenting on greater aspects of society as “The Pedestrian” does, the immense detail would inhibit it, but as it stands as an experiential piece, this mode of narration proves to be beneficial.

Overall, this mode of narration seems to be best for shorter pieces grounded in one moment or action that benefit from sparse character interaction, sensory experience, and immense detail.

Further Considerations

Due to the span of this project and the immense amount of time added to the writing process, there remains many avenues of further exploration. With the groundwork in realist fiction, speculative fiction may yield surprising results; an exploration of a narrator or focal character that utilizes some kind of temporal manipulation may be in order. Other factors that I excluded in order to narrow down factors, such as third person narration and past/future tense, may create wholly different effects when applied to this new narrative mode. I've been particularly interested in frame narratives; as mentioned, I excluded past tense as it would be more reflective of the time it takes to tell the story as opposed to the time passing in the actual story, but the exploration of the time it takes to tell a story in a frame narrative may yield interesting results. Reintroducing anachronism may produce a unique story in sections. Introducing characters who perceive time differently, such as those featured in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, would explore how this narrative mode could be modified to create a unique subjective experience. Overall, I am far from wrapping up my work with this new narrative mode.

Conclusion

While it may not be possible to match narrative time and reading time to the exact amount, the intention to do so brings interesting effects to the narrative it is applied to. These effects benefit shorter stories that depend on heavy uses of detail, inner monologue, and sensory experience. They do not benefit those stories that lend themselves to summary and anachronism,

such as long-form pieces and pieces that aim to have overt commentary. Though this new narrative mode slows down the writing process, it has produced several effective pieces and shows its potential for future use.

Walk

I step out onto the wooden porch. The temperature drops around me. I slip my hands into my jacket pockets. It's sixty degrees, warm enough to want to go for a walk after a long Michigan winter.

My boots clunk on the steps. A blast of wind hits my face, quickly numbing the skin. I look back. My cat's face lingers behind the screen door. A paw scratches at the screen.

I start my walk. My cat gets brutal on the leash. No thanks, not today. Concrete blurs gray beside me. The sidewalks are uneven. I spend too long thinking about how the sidewalks could be repaired. They're a danger as they stand now. I once heard about some kind of self-healing concrete that scientists were working on, but the chances of ever seeing that here are slim. In truth, the chances of any sort of reparations are slim.

My boots are rubbed grooveless on the bottom. I feel them scuff the pavement as I walk until one hits a crack and I almost trip. Recovering from the shock, I plant that foot firmly on the concrete and take a deep breath. The pain slowly fades from my calf and from the tips of my toes.

A ding sounds behind me. Twice. I look over my shoulder. Bike. Stumble sideways. Why do I always have to look when I know it's gonna be a bike? Wind, chains rattling, it sweeps by. I watch the rider soar into the distance, sinking beneath the curve of a hill, headed toward the dirt road. My steps grow uneven.

I'm not the only one that wants to take advantage of the weather. The thought fills me with dread, a tingle in my back. I'll have to watch out for people. Consequences of the modern age.

The sidewalk gets dusty as I approach the dirt road. Pine trees sway beside me. There's a slight ache in my ankles, but it's forgotten as silver shoots along the road. Dust plumes, reaching far above me and slowly sinking down. I long for a world where my road isn't filled with potholes.

I suck in dust and cough. I have to work to keep breathing and still control myself enough to not have a wheezing fit in the middle of the sidewalk. Never know who's watching. My eyes start to water and I blink it away. Have to keep going, can't loiter.

What does loiter even mean? I look ahead. The road doesn't have a sidewalk. My feet scuff on the displaced rocks as I take one, two, three steps to transition onto dirt. Looking left, right, car coming on the opposite side. It trails brown as it zips by. I hold my breath.

Hard to focus. Crooked ankles, stinging eyes. I share the lane with two-thousand ton machines, blind and aimless. I force my eyes open to catch sight of the next street. Pain. Snap shut. Stop.

The dust takes a bit to clear. I'm attempting to blink it out of my eyes. Eventually, I get a red-outlined view of the neighborhood across the street. It's also a dirt road, but cars don't frequent it as much. Glance left, right. There's a distant car, distant enough.

Crossing the road is a challenge; it slopes up in the middle. I almost slip. On the other side, I have to lean back in order to stop myself from running straight into the ditch. Wind blasts my back. The car grows smaller. I take a few hurried steps to the beginning of the neighborhood, hand over my eyes.

The street sign looms over me. As I step out from the dust, I can see brownish lawns. It would be nice to go to the trail, I think. The path: continue this way, right at first intersection. A car rumbles behind me. I make sure I'm out of the way.

The ground is more even. My legs hurt less. Looking up, I see the bare branches of the willow tree on the corner. The lawn opposite contains nothing but grass, yet has three times the space. I tuck my head down and note the colors of the rocks and pebbles under my feet. The tips of my boots kick some out. They bounce and zig-zag away.

Shade patterns the road with flecks of mute gray, the sun shining behind the willow. I step into it. The wind picks up apathetically, then fades again. My cheeks and nose tingle. Step after step brings me closer to the trunk of the willow, which stands a couple feet from the side of the road.

Another sound. Sharp and massive. Brown blur, coming at me. It barks. A dog stops before I can run. It paces at the side of the road. There must be a fence, I figure, an electric fence, as it continues to shatter the air in sound. My quickened heart starts to ache.

Silhouettes pass behind windows. There are people in the house behind the willow. I start walking again. Their dog doesn't shut up, and it follows me along the fence. It's their dog. Not their road. I'm allowed to be here. It follows and trots after me and after it stops its barking still rings out across the neighborhood.

Look back. The dog stares at me. When I turn back, my vision sways, brown specks clouding the road ahead of me. Breathe out. It fades, and I'm at the bottom of the neighborhood's biggest hill. Breathe.

The ground slopes up under my feet. My lungs start to ache. Trees surround both sides of the roads, the owners here not obligated to keep their land clear. The dog's behind me, its bark echoing off the neighborhood. Everyone outside can hear it. I can still hear people talking in that house.

Can't people train dogs to not do that? It doesn't seem so, what with every dog in the neighborhood barking after me and every owner subsequently turning their gaze to will me off their territory.

I'm halfway up the hill and the left house is in my sight, a mansion with a columned porch. The right house remains hidden by sparse-leafed trees, and I only see white chipped paint through the gaps. My breath flutters. There's no single moment of relief at the top of the hill; it simply slopes flat again. The intersection's up ahead.

Something slinks along the length of the left porch. I see pointed ears; it's a cat. It doesn't look at me. I wonder if the person in that house leaves food out. I can't tell if the cat is black or dark tabby.

I have to go right at the intersection, and I'm on the left side. My head swings behind, no cars, forward, no cars. Behind again. No cars. I start to cross. Ears open. Eyes focused in front of me. Don't trip.

The possibility that a car could be coming makes my legs weak. When I make it across, each foot placed carefully on the pebbled road, the anticipation yields to silence. I note the two houses next to me. That dog had been hiding behind the tree; I scrutinize the houses, glowering at each obstruction.

The intersection approaches quickly. The road guides my feet along the right curve. The stretch of street in front of me is not too long, culminating in the overhanging bridge that belongs to the trail.

The street slopes slightly downhill, making my walk easier. There's no trees on either side of the road. I remember how this part of the road shines in blazing brown during the summer and long for the next couple months to pass by quick.

The houses here have objects littered on their lawns, mostly toys, but nothing that could hide a dog. As I approach the bridge, I start to see past the foliage that covers the stairway up to it. It's across the street, but I don't even look before I start to cross. The silence tells me everything.

I quicken my steps. The ground slopes up to the old wooden stairs coated with dead leaves. I lean down to check under the railing for bees' nests and find none. I grip the rail tight and haul myself up.

I climb the steps, always keeping at least one foot on solid ground. The crisp, earthy scent of forest begins to cloud around me. Tree branches brush my arms. The top platform comes into view, and then the benches. I feel myself smile.

A break wouldn't hurt. My legs carry me to one of the benches and I ease myself onto it, pressing my back against the wood. My feet almost touch the ground. I swing my legs, feeling the breeze rushing past them. Glance up. Bare branches frame the clouds.

If I could eliminate the distance between this trail and my home, or extend it to meet my home, I would. Ahead of me sits white gravel, specifically placed to aid walking and biking. Here, the trail is only about a mile long, but it ends on a sidewalk, which leads to where the trail picks up farther on. I take a couple deep breaths, relax my shoulder muscles, and watch the wind move through the trees. The sound of crunching gravel reaches my ears. Benches were made for sitting, I remind myself.

Then, a jingling reaches my ears. Metal clinking against metal. Listening harder, I determine that there's more than one set of footsteps. A dark, tiny shape pops out from behind the foliage.

Claws clack on wood as the little dog trots to me. He jumps, paws brush my calves, but it doesn't hurt. His owner's close behind. "Oh, I'm sorry about that. He usually doesn't do this!"

"It's okay," I say, to my own surprise. I let the dog sniff my hand. His nose is wet. The paws are so delicate, the nose small enough to wrap two fingers around. The dog bears an exact resemblance to a shrunken doberman.

"We're new to the neighborhood," the owner explains, "he's just gotta check everything out. Do you live around here?"

"I'm in the other subdivision." I lift my arm and point, estimating where I started.

"Oh! I didn't know there was something over there." She reaches down and scoops her dog into the crook of her arm. He doesn't mind. He just looks at me with a remarkably soft gaze for a dog. "Yeah, I just moved into one of the houses down that way." She points down the stairs.

"Do you like it so far?" I speak without thinking, without hesitation.

"Yes, it's been nice. My old house burned down, so I was lucky to find something out here."

"Oh, I'm sorry..."

"He really seems to like you," bouncing her dog in her arms, "he's a trained service dog, so he usually doesn't do this to people."

"What breed is he?"

"He's a min pin. Yeah, he's been with me through all this." Silence hangs over us. I watch the dog's ears twitch, watch his eyes glance about.

"He's so gentle."

She smiles. "You can pet him if you like."

My body tenses. I stand and lift my hand slowly and the dog leans forward. His breath tickles the tips of my fingers.

“There you go,” the woman murmurs. A lick. My finger’s wet. The dog lowers his head. Never pet the top of the head—I brush the base of his ear. Then move to scratching. His eyes narrow. He blinks a couple times. I move my hand around to get both of his ears. He angles his head to direct my hand across his smooth fur.

I can think of nothing else to say except “You’re very lucky to have each other.”

“We are.” As I take my hand back, she lifts him up to her face and lets him give her a couple quick licks. My chest tightens at the thought of what they went through. My wet finger brushes against my shirt.

“Yeah, I’m really glad to find a house around here. I’m a lot closer to my kids now. They’re about twenty minutes away.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“I’m separated from my husband, too, so it’s just us. This seems like a nice place.”

I want to tell her that it is. “It is,” I choke out, “You’ve already found the trail. Y’know, it spits you out near downtown if you go that way.” I point.

“Oh, that’s good to know. Are there any other dogs around?”

“Not a lot of little ones. A couple yorkshires, a puggle, a lot of labs...” I didn’t look too close at the dog by the willow tree. Never look an angry dog head on.

“Do you like it here?” she asks.

“I do,” I say because I should. I should be proud of being so close to so much nature. I should be proud of having a house instead of an apartment, of being able to go outside and walk, but I do have to wonder what walking’s like in the city with all those sidewalks.

My wondering's interrupted when I realize she's been talking. "...but I still have a lot of my stuff." I nod slow, solemn, letting the silence and the memory of the fire hang in the air.

"But I'm glad to be out here," she murmurs, "and you seem like a nice young man."

"Thank you." I hope to see this woman and her dog again in the future. "Maybe I'll see you around," is what comes out.

"I hope so. Do you walk often?"

I nod once. "I go as often as I can. Not always here, but around."

"Well, the little guy's gotta get his exercise somehow, so we'll be out here often." She leans down, adjusts him, his legs stretch out as she gently lowers him to the ground. "Have a nice day, now," she says.

"You too." The dog leads her back to the path. I stand near the bench, listening to the clinking of the collar, which fades as they continue on their way, their forms growing harder to see through the trees. I glance down the stairs at the houses all lined up, stewards over bare lawns that anchor trees coated in dark buds.

No one's ever stopped to talk to me on a walk before.

Headache

I'm sitting on the couch. The pain forces its way out of its pinpoint deep in my ear, spreading to the surrounding flesh and bone. My body is sticking to the leather. The air conditioner roars. I'm apologizing for whatever I did to deserve this.

No one's home. My phone's on the counter in the kitchen. I tried to remember if I had it's sound on or not, but got distracted. I decide to remember now. Last time I had it out was this morning. I didn't change the sound then, I think it's still on mute. It was upstairs, on the nightstand next to my bed. Upstairs is far away. Just thinking about the change in barometric pressure puts more pressure on my head.

Water helps a headache sometimes. There's water in the kitchen. Now I remember—there's water and my phone in the kitchen. I left it in there before I sat down. I need to get up. Pain surges. Think nothing, lean the head back to the couch. The ceiling sways above me. Neck cracks, crinkling like a wrapper. Mouth open, breathe. Nothing but the pulse reaches my mind. It stays, hurtling up through my temple, down, slinking around my jaw, I focus on nothing but its totality, the left half of my face shrink-wrapped in pain.

I catch what breath I can. The act of expanding my lungs puts more pressure on my head. I try to avoid it, breathing out, feeling my chest sink down. Quick in. Slow, easy, let it out. I feel the pulsing more in my chest than my head now. A cloud of blackness surrounds my vision. I close my eyes.

When I breathe again, the pain rushes back to my head. I wait for it to subside again, blinded to the sounds around me just by its presence. It's an aching and piercing pain, ricocheting off the inside of my skull and between my back teeth. Of course, it culminates in the invisible

needle puncturing my eardrum. I open my eyes, watching the ceiling swirl above me, all caught up in the colors that lingered from my eyelids. I need water.

As I peel my head off the back of the couch, the sweat on my neck grows cool. The leather must be glistening behind me. My shirt's stuck to my skin. I can't move. My neck wants to go limp. I breathe, deeply, sucking in all the breath I can, holding it just like in those self-care ads, and letting it out as if it were merely leaking from my lungs. It must've been ages, my brain reminds me, since I've been up. Wasted day. No, not all of the day's been wasted, there's some to be salvaged, I have to remind myself consciously. It's just a matter of getting my phone and getting some water too.

I slide my hands up and put them on either side, palms down. Maybe fists would be better. I curl them into fists. Flex my muscles, push as hard as I can, feel the ground under my feet, but it's too early still. My head throbs, feels like it's gonna explode. Imagine water, cool on my tongue, wetting my throat, washing out the inside of my head. I collapse, head knocking against the back of the couch.

Something's at the top of my vision. I focus on it. It's dark red. Kind of a triangle. It leans to the left, just like the pain. Great—my eye's so swollen it's distorting my vision. Next it'll pop. The thought sends my heart skittering, quickening the pulsing in my head. I have to get my phone.

I lean forward, try to put the weight on my feet. The pain turns to a murky heat. My skin tingles. The whole of my head is heavy. I have to stop.

When I lean back, the pain grows a sour taste in my mouth, an acrid scent in my nose. The red is still there. It's all too much. I focus on my sight. Bands of yellow light streak across

the opposite wall. I'll watch them change as the sun sets, trapped here on the couch. There's no more hours left in the day, there's nothing left for me.

Breathing doesn't do anything to calm me down. The heart needs more oxygen to fuel its panic, so I can do nothing but provide. The room tilts and wavers. I don't know how long it's been, I don't know how long I'll be here, all I know is that if I try to count the seconds, it won't be accurate, and it won't get me anywhere. When someone will get home doesn't matter if I don't know the time now, and the time is on my phone, and my phone is on the counter in the kitchen.

A rapid, flowering brownish-blackness grows over the edges of my vision. Deep breath. It lingers, rippling like static. Breathe out. It subsides, retreating to the corners of my eyes. Keeping the breathing rhythm is the only thing keeping me conscious. One time, I fainted and hit the bathroom door. Since then I've known exactly what it looks like before it happens. I keep breathing. My throat is dry.

My vision's almost clear now. I see the wall in front of me, the sunlight streaked across it. I see the doorway to the kitchen. I see the white carpet. I see the coffee table. It's all so hazy in the golden sunlight. The air is hot. I'm sweltering.

Water would feel good right about now. I could text somebody to get me some, but my phone's in the kitchen. And nobody's home. I could text somebody to come home. But my phone's in the kitchen. What I need is my phone first. I need to get up. But I almost just fainted. I need help. I need to get up to get help.

First, I need air. I focus on breathing, the way the air cools the back of my throat as it rushes in, the feeling on my lips as the air brushes them on the way out. In for seven seconds, filling up my lungs from the bottom up and tightening until no more air can fit in, oxygen pulled

into my bloodstream through my alveoli. Hold for five seconds, letting my lungs suck the air dry of its oxygen, just until the ache gets truly unbearable. Out for seven seconds, releasing the carbon dioxide slowly, returning it to the houseplants, the ache of my lungs heightening in its longing for oxygen, for breathing in again. I can never maintain the pattern for long.

Still, I'm breathing more steadily. I can see more clearly, and the low humming of the refrigerator comes to me gradually. The air is humid, but rich. The thought of trying to get up again makes my heart jump, so I focus on just the room I'm in. What was that exercise—five things you can see. No, hear. No, it's four things you can hear. Or is it four things you can touch? Time for a different strategy.

I note all the things in the room that are white. White carpet, white ceiling. Glance around the room. White lampshade. White blinds clustered near the tops of the windows, white curtains framing. We used to own a white couch, but this couch is brown leather. The coffee table has a whitish gleam on its glass. My phone case is black. The lightbulb holders—whatever they're called—on the chandelier in the kitchen, they're white too. I can't remember if the counter's white or yellow.

I stand, my body heavy, head pounding, in pain but not dizzy. Blackness crowds around my vision, but my breathing is steady, and I take a step.

Beach

My shoes sink the sand. Lift a foot, let it sink down. It's amazing with so many trampling feet how the sand stays so loose. The wind from the lake must keep dislodging it.

Lake Michigan sprawls out in front of me like a carpet over the Earth. From here, under the light of the afternoon sun, it looks still, though I know the wind is pushing its surface, rolling it over itself. Water sloshes over sand. My foot hits a rock. I stumble, throw the other foot in front, rebalance. My skin itches under the sunlight.

It's too hard to balance in shoes, so I reach down and pinch the back of one to slip it off. Drop it on the sand, wrench the sock off, sock in shoe. My bare foot plunges into the sand. I do the same with my other shoe, pinch the back, pull it off, drop it on the sand, sock off, sock in. I slip my finger through the loops on the backs of my shoes and pick them up.

Sand scrapes between my toes. The shadow of a seagull passes over. My bare feet can grip the loose ground much better. I walk, moving with the shifting sand, my body cleaving the wind. My species was made for walking. It's a comforting thought.

The lake grows closer. Tiny waves wash over flattened brown sand. The ground solidifies as I approach, brown and tan mixing in clumps. I step on a big clump and watch it crumble. My other foot hits the wet sand, a firm mass, smooth as marble with the give of foam. I lean down and place my shoes on the sand.

The sunlight dances on the water, thousands of tiny mirrors forming and shining and dying. The water close to shore bumbles up onto it before drawing back into itself. I place my other foot on the wet sand and pick up the one that had sunk in, glancing at my footprint. The sand evens out. When I leave it will be as if I was never here.

I look at the water. I came here to touch it, but there's a certain hesitation. In the abstract, the water is Lake Michigan, one of the biggest freshwater bodies in the world. But right now it's just water, and touching it won't feel any different than touching any other lake or stream.

I wait until the water pulls back, then place my foot where it was. It rushes over the top of my foot, then slinks away. I put my other foot forward. The returning water swirls around my ankles. I must look like a human bird perched at the edge of the water, staring down into it.

The water brings a clump of seaweed and leaves it on the beach. I consider touching it, but the water picks it up again before I can reach forward, vanishing it within itself. I look out again, watching the gleaming surface. It doesn't even look blue, it looks like a whirling pattern of black and white, like rhinestones tilted back and forth.

I feel like a statue. I have to force myself to pick my feet up and walk along the shoreline. I maneuver my way down the line slowly, waiting for the water to recede before I put each foot down. Something gray sticks out of the sand. I reach down and pluck it out.

As sand and water drip off the rock I get a better look at it. It's curved like a ramp and more of a grayish-brown than plain gray. I slip the rock into my pocket, press against the fabric with my fingers to feel its outline. The spot where it was has been filled in.

If everybody took a rock from here—maybe that's how the beach got so smooth. I turn and head back the way I came. Trying to imagine the scale of everybody who visits this beach every year makes my head woozy. Looking back, there's dozens of people just in my range of vision. The parking lots aren't full, but they're getting there. This is only one beach, too.

I see my shoes and socks. The lake sprays against my legs as it comes in. I close my eyes and feel the water trickling around my feet. I have to go. When the water's at its lowest, I step

back onto the dry sand, feeling it cling to my wet skin. I bend down to pick up my shoes, making sure my socks don't fall out.

Drive

I take a right turn, turning parallel to the caution tape shielding downed power lines, the car thudding as the tires grip the dirt road. A black pickup races by. Lush forest surrounds the dusty road, its deep green stark against a blank white sky. The car trembles on uneven ground, growing more jostled as I press my foot lower on the gas pedal.

The remaining power lines lazily slope past me. They said the power would be back on by ten last night, and while I appreciate the estimate, I'd prefer a more accurate one instead of moving the goalposts all the time. When you throw out estimate after estimate, the whole bureaucratic system gets tangled.

Shadows flit over me as I pass by the paved subdivision on my right. It's about ten in the morning, so if the clouds weren't there, I'd be blinded by the sun. I ease on the gas as the car passes over the rows of potholes that form naturally on dirt road intersections. Driveways line the road ahead, bringing with them more bumps, each sharpened by last night's rain. Perhaps they had expected the rain to stop by ten, but that still doesn't explain the four hours they've been here already.

I keep a careful eye approaching the pedestrian crossing. Bikers like to zip across it without pressing the button that turns on the warning lights. The yellow sign swoops past me. The road lights up slowly as the clouds shift. As I pass under more trees, the sun flashes between each cluster of leaves like a strobe light. It lights up the streak marks on my windshield. I probably should've sprayed and wiped the windshield before driving, but I don't bother now.

As I approach a tight bend, vision impaired by the shrubbery, a white car swings around the turn. It darts to the left to pass me and I shift my steering wheel to the right. I pay it no mind as I prepare myself for the turn, sticking to the right as far as I can. A pickup zips by. The right

side of this turn is always filled with potholes, and the first one hits before I can even move my foot to the brake. The road straightens. I manage to brace for the next row of them and hit them gently. The road curves up ahead as well, blocking visibility, leaving me no option to avoid the potholes.

As I ease onto the second curve, I note a car in front of me going slower thanks to the potholes. Or it could just be that they were turning out of their driveway. I slow too, glancing to see fifteen on the odometer. Then, the car begins to turn into a driveway. They stop halfway in. I slow almost to a stop. As if noticing my intrusion, the car turns back onto the road, driving over a bit of grass. Then, it stops again. I have the suspicion that it's attempting a Y-turn, but I can't get inside the driver's head, so I just stop as well.

They continue forward, brakes lights flashing on and off. Another pickup passes us. The car in front of me begins to turn into the next driveway. There's my chance to get by; my car lurches forward as I touch the gas. The headlights of another car cross my vision as I hurtle past the second driveway. Letting my breath go, I switch to breaking again as the road steepens downhill. That guy must've been attempting a Y-turn and just got startled. Or maybe he had turned into the wrong address. It's hard to find your way around these roads even for some locals.

The sun shines ahead of me as the trees arching over lighten up. It feels like going through a tunnel on a highway. The blinding brightness is such a contrast to the darkness of last night, the clouds covering the stars, the pitch black of a hallway usually lit up by a nightlight. The road curves back east, but I reassure myself through the light hitting my eyes: beyond the intersection up ahead the road turns north.

I can almost see the intersection, so I slow down in preparation for the inevitable crossroad potholes. To the left is the bridge, a decades-old dirt structure that looks like it could collapse any minute thanks to the erosion. A couple cars turn off from there and lazily move past me. They're distant enough from each other to handle the tight curves if anything goes wrong. The one behind's going a lot slower, too. My chest swells with pride and satisfaction seeing two people safe on the dirt road.

I don't have to stop or slow or anything from my position in the intersection, but I do check to see if anyone else is coming over the bridge as I'm moving. A brown pickup dismounts the bridge and merges in front of me, picking up speed and vanishing behind the bends ahead. The curve ahead brings an involuntary feeling of relief; these back roads don't have as much activity past this point.

The trees close up ahead, the road leading into what looks like a black pit. The bountiful green comforts me. The road slopes up and I let myself instinctually tap the gas. It's hard to remember when I had to consciously decide whether gas or break was the right choice. I remember asking my parents, friends, and driving instructor how to make it so that you just keep going the same speed and none of them knew. Eventually I figured it out on my own: hold the gas pedal in place and adjust for slopes. Eventually driving became peaceful.

Right now it's distracting me from the power outage. I never thought driving would calm me down, or that a simple power outage would freak me out so much. At least this outage isn't in the middle of a blizzard, and at least it won't last a solid week, I hope.

A dark shape moves on the left side of the road. Not a squirrel, stubby legs—a turtle! I pass it. I could see the long tail; it was a snapping turtle. There had been patches of bright green on its shell, most likely algae from one of the ponds on the side of the road. A bright spot passes

over me. The turtle wasn't headed toward the middle of the road, so I'm not worried about it. My mom once saved a snapping turtle by grabbing its tail and pulling it out of the way of an oncoming car. I hadn't been there to see it, but she told me about it when I came home from school. It's funny how seeing a snapping turtle reminds me of every other time I saw a snapping turtle—one time I found the same baby turtle two days in a row.

I hit a couple potholes too fast. A dull pain wedges into my lower back. The edges of the road slope up into small cliffs for the trees to perch upon. I'm going uphill as well, so there's barely room to avoid the next potholes. I pass by a divet in the cliffs where people park their cars. There's some debris from the storm scattered on the road, bits of muddied branches and strips of bark. There's some puddles too, but none of them are too deep.

The pain fades fast. I have to wonder if I'm ever gonna throw my back out on one of these roads. It's hard to miss potholes on this road, but easy enough to slow down for them. Besides, the main roads have the same cracks and dips. They're just more predictable. I vaguely remember a hole near the side of this part of the road—no, that wasn't here, that was past the next road, which I won't be seeing for a little while yet. It was literally a hole that went under the road. Thankfully, it was at the edge and easy to avoid.

The curve ahead is the hardest. I stick to the very right, branches hitting my windshield. It's a tight "S" downhill that leads into a straightway that people like to barrel through and they don't slow down at the curve. I brake and grip the wheel tight. The curve comes into view, jerking first to the right. I lean back on my seat. The car tips forward and accelerates. The bulk of my focus settles on keeping control of the wheel, keeping the car to the right. If I mess up, I could slam into the cliffside right in front of me. The sight and the thought tighten my stomach.

I force the wheel to the left, lining my car alongside the cliff. No cars yet. I ease into the middle as the road grows wider. Second turn, fighting with the wheel to get the car to the right, and the straightway grows in front of me. There—done that curve every school day and I can do it again. The trees thin and light seeps between the leaves. I've always loved this part of the road just for its sheer visibility. No surprises, no need to hug the right, nothing.

A huge branch sweeps over the car before I drive into the sunlight. The storm must've broken a piece off. I'm glad I'm not returning this way home again; it could fall and block the road anytime. The sun's on my left, shining a hazy red glare on the side of my eyeball. I pull the visor down and, ducking my head, muscle it into position. Check, no cars. The dirt on this part of the road is freshly laid and it makes me strangely satisfied knowing that my tires are helping to push it in place.

Cattails and reeds rush by me on my left, the occasional young tree on the right. It's odd that I've never seen an animal on this part of the road before, only on the hills and curves. I shake my head to clear it as the car approaches the next hill, soon to end its carefree romp on the wide, grainy straightway. The trees lean above me again, first filtering the light green, then blocking it out entirely. Gaps of blue occasionally peek through the canopy.

There's another residential spot past the intersection where I'll be turning. I wonder what it's like to live on that end of the dirt road. I always seem to find worse road conditions over there, and I've seen a couple "don't speed" signs, so that gives a big chunk of the answer. Just ahead is where I had my first accident. It was winter and the road was icy white like the inside of a freezer. I couldn't stop and almost crashed into the back of a mail truck, but remembered my training and swerved right to hit the soft snowbank instead of the hard truck.

No damage to me, no damage to my car, no collisions with anyone else. The mailwoman and a passerby helped me get out of the bank and I picked my way home along this road at a good five miles per hour. The trees thin as I approach the entrance to the shooting range, the place where the mail truck had been trying to get to. I brake for the intersection potholes and swiftly pass the entrance and the fence behind it. The city logo emblazons the sign by the fence.

A barren tree arcs above me. It might be dead, seeing how it's the middle of summer and it's surrounded only by shining leaves and evergreen needles. Oh well, a new home for the bats, and at least it's not near any power lines. If I'm lucky, they'll be picking up those downed lines by the time I finish my drive. Shadows scatter across the road like stripes on a shirt. Cement poles pick up next to me, shielding me from careening down the steep slopes beside the road. I hit a couple potholes since there's no edge of the road to go to.

The edges quickly flatten out as I approach the next road, its teal-green sign positioned on the corner. I slow down; this goes to the main road, which I can use to get home. My hands slide over the wheel and heave it to the right, gradually turning to match the loose corner. When I see that no one's coming I take the turn wider. My car's not so good at tight turns. The potholes are barely noticeable at my meandering speed. I straighten the wheel with a couple tugs and continue straight.

I don't have as much experience with this road. My right hand slips from the steering wheel as my eyes fixate on the road ahead of me. By muscle memory my index finger finds the "Navigation" option on the car's touchscreen. The map shines white in the corner of my eye. A glance; no streets near. Eventually, one will lead to a neighborhood that'll let me off on a back road that connects to the main road that crosses with the dirt road where I started.

I slowly make my way past a building on my left, something having to do with the national park nearby. That park's probably the only reason why this road is still so beautiful. There's a small patch of forest between my house and a strip mall that they were planning on tearing down to build condos, but those plans fell through. I've heard that the guy developing the land has been working on a different project in Florida. His sign still stands here, propping up vines like the new-grown trees around it. A car climbs up from beneath a hill and passes by me, white sunlight reflecting off the black chassis. My car slopes downhill.

Another glance. The map shows no roads ahead. This route is longer than I remember. I had used this a couple times to get to my high school, and I would've used it more if it hadn't been pitch black in the morning. The other intersection was easier to navigate with all the lights, but there were always at least five accidents per school year. Another glance. There's a road up ahead that'll lead to a dead end.

With the short amount of time that has passed since I got in the car, the hope of people starting on the power lines by the time I get home diminishes. At least there's the assurance that I *can* drive, I can go to the library to get a charge on my phone, go to a friend's house, go out to eat, anything I need. Wasn't like that back during the outage that gave me my fear.

The road I need to go through shows on the map. The road in front of me curves slightly, the kind of turn that would freak me out as a student but that I can now perform automatically. The sunlight shining through the leaves makes them look gold instead of green. I keep glancing at the map like I haven't been going the same speed. A dark red convertible leans to the left to get around me. I almost mistake a patch of light for the first road up ahead, the one that'll lead to a dead end. That distraction almost makes me hit the gigantic puddle on the right side of the road; I kick the brake and slowly turn the wheel to inch my way around it.

The road's messy here and I find myself picking left and right to avoid the dips and bumps scattered across the road, swerving to catch a branch between my front tires, squinting to tell holes from shadows. A dark branch hangs above me like a warning. I know I'm getting close to the suburbs because the forest beside me thins out, leaving only a small line of young trees attempting to conceal acres of meticulously-kept lawn. My car bumps and shakes as I forget to monitor the potholes in favor of staring at the houses in the distance.

As the forest thickens again, I turn my eyes to the road, scanning the right side beneath the leaning trees for those entrances. Another slight curve brings nothing, though a glance at the map shows I'm remarkably closer than before, about halfway there since they first appeared on the map. The possibility of missing it is all I can think of, which really isn't too big a deal, I know how to get back on route or even find a different one. I've missed turns when I've been too scared to change lanes.

I try to distract myself—that snapping turtle was beautiful. I haven't seen one in years, only the painted turtles in the pond in the other neighborhood. I wonder if there's a pond on the other side of the road for it. That place is surrounded by swamps, I'm sure it won't have any trouble finding somewhere to cool off. Especially with the storm and what it's left behind. Must've been nice to relax underwater while the storm poured gallons upon gallons of clean water into the lakes and swamps, formed puddles in the earth, mixed soil into mud. The plants must be enjoying it now that the sun's begun to heat the air.

I hit a pothole and hear the blanket in the backseat thump against the back of my seat. I don't really bother to take it out in the summer because I'll forget to put it back in the winter. Maybe I should throw it in the wash, though.

The trees thin up ahead—must be the first road. I slow down as I approach, my foot delicately pressing the brake pedal. The sun shines on packed dirt, just another one of those impromptu parking spaces again. There's nothing around here! The nearest building that would require parking was a couple miles ago. I switch my foot to the gas and build up the speed I lost.

I forgot what I had been thinking about. Another slight curve brings me into a shadier part of the forest, but as I squint ahead, I can just barely make out pavement. I take my foot off the gas and let the slight elevation damper my speed. Yep, it is the first one, and as I pass by the signpost and the bleach-white pavement I keep my eye out for the second one, the one closer to my exit. The road between these two streets gets bumpy. I slow further and work the machine over and around them.

There's the second street. I hike to the right side and slow, move out just far enough to make the turn, then glide my hands over the wheel, guiding the tires along the edge. The differing houses, the speed limit sign (it's always twenty-five in residential places, but I guess some people need reminders), the trees spreading out like tips of paintbrushes grazing the sky above me, it all slinks into view. I'm barely out of the woods when I encounter the first intersection, the one that leads back to the first entrance. I push on the gas pedal a bit, aligning myself in a good twenty miles per hour. Mailboxes brush past me.

The road steepens. As I push the car a bit further, I notice a green leaf plastered near the top of my windshield. I give the windshield wiper lever a flick and watch as the wipers themselves rise and graze the stem of the leaf, just barely not reaching. Ah, well, this car could use a wash anyway. It's hard to get in and out without getting a scuff of dirt on my pants.

The neighborhood continues to sprawl in front of me, the occasional shadow from a tree slipping over my car. The roads are empty. I run my hands over the steering wheel. They're

starting to get a bit sweaty. There's a stop sign up ahead. My foot switches to brake and the car slows. I press my hands against the wheel in a mock push against the force drawing me forward. The car settles to a full stop.

Looking at the map, seems I need to take this turn. Look left, right, left again. Most of the road on the left is concealed by a hill. My foot lifts, my hands turn the wheel, little touch on the gas to get the turn over quicker. Then, it's over. The road is straight and I'm heading up the hill, back at twenty miles an hour. You never know when someone's gonna come rushing over a hill.

Reaching the top of the hill, I can look out over the sprawling neighborhood and its square streets, each cluster of houses set into a box. A car perpendicular to me passes a few intersections ahead. The next intersection has no stop sign, so with a quick glance side to side I maneuver through it. Another stop sign looms over the next intersection and I slow at that one, glancing down at my screen to see if I need to take this one. The whole neighborhood is just a web of asphalt.

It'd probably be best to take this turn. Going right this time, I take a glance to see if anyone else is coming, then squeeze around the corner. Up ahead the turns get a bit weird and I find myself balancing attention between the road and the map. All of my focus turns to the Y-shaped intersection ahead, all three spokes of it curved to make it the vague shape of a shuriken. There's a yield sign ahead, so at least it's somewhere to catch my breath. The map shows the left turn spiraling into the mesh of neighborhood ahead and the right turn looping around to the main road.

My car creeps up on the yield sign as I check for other vehicles. My ears pick up a strange rumbling sound that I put out of my mind as my hands lean the wheel into the right turn.

The road over here looks older, the houses a bit bigger. I flick my windshield wipers in one more futile attempt to get that leaf unstuck.

As I round the bend I see a massive pile of dirt taking up the left side of the road. It's got cones and workers surrounding it. They're doing something in someone's front yard. I swerve right to miss the cones, barely squeezing through. There's more up ahead. I stop the car as a massive vehicle with a roller attached to the front swings back and forth over the road. He's on the right side—maybe I can get by on the left. I ease the car between a couple more cones and angle it on the left, hoping to get the driver's attention. He stops on the right, waves me through, and I touch the gas to hurry on by. As my car swoops past his, I wave my thanks.

The road ahead is a different, darker shade of gray. I note this newer look as my car drifts back to the right. There's puddles in the new road, and some cones left standing at the ends of people's driveways, but it feels so much smoother. As I pass another Y-shaped intersection, a company truck pulls up to its stop sign signaling to turn. I pass and duck left to avoid a few cars parked in the road (three feet of space for opening doors, my training reminds me) and take another tentative look at the map.

There's a couple downed trash cans, but luckily none in the streets. There's cones everywhere, but none of them are blocking cars from the driveways they're bordering or people from the sidewalks. The driveways and sidewalks do look newly-laid. Another machine sits quietly on the right side, a tiny bulldozer. I watch to see if it'll move, but it doesn't; there's no one in it. Both the bulldozer and a line of parked cars force me to the left side of the road. Another roller comes into view. There's just enough room for him to shelter on the right side of the road and let me go by. I slow and he does just that. A wave to thank him and I'm past.

My heart's beating pretty hard—I'm not quite used to driving through construction, but at least I'm not frozen in terror like I was in training. A lot of things in drivers' training are just expected to be known, like how to navigate construction when each instance of it varies. I guess you come to know with experience, but the point of training should be to give experience in a safe environment.

I'm driving on the left side more than the right. Now there's a dump truck on my right. At least the construction won't extend to the main road, hopefully. I wonder if these people have power. Must suck to be trapped in construction if they don't. The map says I'm coming up close to the main road, just one more intersection to pass and I go by it as I'm checking the map. There it is, the T-shaped intersection that'll bring me to the main road. I slow for the stop sign. Look left down where I need to go, right toward the high school. The road's empty enough to turn left.

I take my foot off the brake, but keep it off the gas, getting another look-around since this seems the type of road where people wouldn't notice the side roads. I could take the easy way and turn right to get to a turn-around, but that'd be a lot slower. One last glance and I touch the gas enough to bring me into the turn. I make the turn as quick as I can, my car shaking and bumbling over filled-in potholes from years past. I fit myself between the double yellow and single white lines, take a breath, and match the speed limit of forty-five.

This road's near a lot of schools, so it isn't as busy in summertime. I can see the intersection ahead, the first I've come across with lights in this little trip. It's difficult to keep my car in the lane with the lines painted so tight together. I wonder if cars have gotten bigger while roads haven't just as people have gotten bigger while airplane seats haven't. A silver car zips by. Power lines dip and rise beside me.

There's a row of neatly-placed pines hiding the clusters of homes I just came from. We, too, have forests blocking us in, but we wouldn't if that guy hadn't found his project in Florida. I note a white truck peeking from a sideroad, but too close to cut in front of me. Nope, it's a company truck. I pass by. My family has a stereotype that white truck drivers are rude and reckless drivers, and I guess there's a bit of truth to that in the fact that if they're rich enough to buy a white truck, they're rich enough to not really care about accidents.

The road widens, adding in a white line for the right turn lane. I glance in my mirror, my blind spot, signal, then shuffle the car over. I brake as slowly as I can as cars pass perpendicular to me, coming to a stop just before the thick white line. The red light hangs above. A sign on the right reads "STOP here to activate SIGNAL". Curious, I pull up farther, next to the sign. I've never seen a sign like that in my life. My gaze shifts to the approaching cars, anticipating their slowing as the signal activates the light on their side, but they just keep coming.

The company truck pulls up next to me. watch cars and trucks zip left and right, planning out the lane I'll be getting into when I turn. The truck next to me inches forward, a bit more, a bit more, like a kid in a lunchline. I've pulled past the white line. I wonder if the signal's like those pedestrian buttons in the next city over that really don't do anything, but it would be dangerous to have cars pulling up farther and farther trying to get the signal on. A massive semi with two open-topped cars sweeps across the intersection. I can see a small line of cars waiting on the opposite side. I wonder if they have a signal sign too.

Now this is getting ridiculous. I've sat here longer than a normal cycle on any other light. I adjust my foot on the brake to get a better grip. My hands grow slack on the wheel. As the traffic thins, I watch a car in the opposite right lane creep forward and jerk around the corner. I'm always a bit nervous to attempt that; my friend failed her driver's test by turning on red when

there was a “no turn on red” sign and I hadn’t checked to see what the policy was on this intersection before I pulled up.

The traffic’s sparse. I glance in the mirror and see a radiator grille behind me. They haven’t beeped yet, so I figure I’ll just wait it out, but it’s so much worse with someone behind me. The few cars that are on the road move in such a way that leaves me unable to tell how far apart they are, or maybe it’s the angle of the road. A Ford Transit approaches and moves through the intersection. I only know the name of that particular car because I’ve always wanted one.

One more semi tears through the intersection, then the light turns green. My foot instinctively lifts from the brake and I shift my gaze around, checking for stragglers. Then I find the gas and push. The car jerks forward and I swing the wheel. The turn is tight to get into the very right lane. There’s a stretch of time where I feel completely divorced from even the concept of knowing how to drive, then I’m aligned in the right lane, pressing down on the gas pedal to reach fifty-five miles per hour.

The odometer hovers at fifty. It’s hard to get myself up to speed on faster roads since it’s been etched into me that faster speeds end up in worse accidents. I pass under another green light and force my foot to press down just enough to get to fifty-five. The intersection ahead switches to yellow and I jerk my foot on the brake pedal. Kinda frustrating, but it’s the way this road works. At least the person behind me seems patient.

My car slows to a stop, rocking forward at the white line. There’s nobody at this intersection, no cars, no pedestrians, nothing. And I had to wait minutes for the light to change after I supposedly activated the signal. I let go of the steering wheel and shake my hands in the air at some attempt to get them to be less sweaty. The light turns green and my hands fly to the wheel.

This time, I press the gas hard until I can't help myself but look at the odometer. The lever grazes above sixty, then sinks as I let the car slow to fifty-five. The road in front of me is almost empty, but the southbound lane to my left is cluttered with cars. As the road straightens out, I see a car in front of me with something attached behind it. I let the car slow a bit more to keep my distance.

To my right the road opens up to reveal rows of unsold cars behind rows of American flags tied to lampposts. The sky's gotten cloudier since my time under the canopy. It doesn't look like it's gonna rain soon, but if that fog continues to bunch up, we might have another night like the one before. Another right lane opens up beside me, allowing access to that car dealership and the other stores clustered on the side of the road. A blue car meanders ahead of me in the left lane. I'm wary that he's passing, but I can't remember if you're supposed to pass on the left or right, just that people do whatever they want.

We continue at the same speed. There's a couple lights ahead, and I'll be turning in the second one, so I straighten up to keep myself from slipping into daydream. My surroundings filter out as I focus on the road ahead. The gray expanse is wider now with another lane on the left to accommodate Michigan left turns. There's the strip mall by my house. The first light is green; the car ahead of me zooms under it. I always get scared about green lights 'cause I never know what to do if it switches to yellow. Poor distance judging again.

The trio of stop lights grows bigger and brighter as I draw near before a burst of speed lifts them over the top edge of my windshield. I need to get into the right lane now; I send a couple glances to my rearview mirror, the side mirror, the blindspot. I make sure to pass the entrance to the strip mall before leaning right. It's a tough choice when to start breaking, so I try

to start just as my car's completely in the lane, but I end up almost slamming the brakes anyway. I take the turn a bit too fast but manage to keep the car under control and close to the curb.

The people fixing the power lines are still here. The resurfaced memory of having no power forces me to face that dread again. I make sure to approach them slowly in case I need to wait for them to move out of my way. It looks like they're letting cars pass easily; a couple make their way past me on the left. There's machines on both sides of the road even though there's power lines on only one. There's people in the middle of the road, so I slow almost to a stop. When they dart off to the left, I maneuver the car around a truck edging into my lane, making my way toward the entrance to my street.

It doesn't look like they've made any progress whatsoever. Not any visible progress, anyway, but it's difficult to keep myself believing that they're trying to fix it knowing how it feels to have them leave assuming their job is finished when it's not. I make the turn onto my street, checking for other cars and pedestrians. There's another car taking up the right side, so I stick to the left to complete my turn. They've added at least two cars since I left, so that's a good sign.

I don't bother with the gas or brake on this dead-end street. I'm safely under twenty-five and there's no other cars, so I'm free to meander home. The plush summer trees welcome me back. The point of the drive had been to distract me, but my efforts were dampened by their presence at the end of the street.

There's the mailbox, black in front of a deep blue driveway. My car has slowed enough on its own to turn. I pull the wheel to the right, giving the gas pedal a touch to work the car up the hill of my driveway. Using the trees and lawn as landmarks, I maneuver my car into position. My hand moves from the wheel to the stick and forces it to "P". I lean back. Branches sway

above the windshield. Generators roar outside, the sound muffled by the car windows. I feel myself in my own body again, the sweat on my back, the pressure of the car floor on the bottoms of my feet.

Wedding

The newest item on the list of pandemic changes: I'm at a wedding in my pajamas. I'm sitting next to my mother on the couch with her laptop propped up on a table in front of us. There's their cleared dining room framed in white, a Christmas tree in the corner, the chat on the right lazily sliding messages by. Neither bride nor groom have made an appearance yet. On the top left of the screen: "Kylie and Tim's Wedding! – Facebook Live".

It was supposed to be for September. They were already living together for, like, two years. I don't know them too well, just like I don't know a lot of my older cousins. I had to ask my mom if we were related to the bride or groom.

I'm too far away to read the messages. There are about thirty viewers and going up. Not everyone in the family's on Facebook, but I know some families are doing watch parties together.

The appointed hour hits and still nothing happens, despite the surge in messages and likes. My patience is wearing thin.

I'm only in my pajamas because I would usually be in bed by now. I didn't want to have to spend time changing after the wedding, I just wanted to be able to go to sleep right away. My mom leans forward to type. The way her fingers pick around on the keyboard, you'd never know she took typing classes back when they first became a thing. Her message ascends across the screen with all the others, a reverse waterfall.

Something white flits at the edge of the screen. My mom gasps, tenses. "Did you see that? Is she coming?" Her words are spoken in only the slightest of murmurs, as if we were at the actual venue. I shrug. I can feel my mom's body relax as her excitement diminishes. She's known the bride since she was a little baby, and now she's getting married. Must be surreal. And,

of course, as the only Facebook user in the house, my mom is intimately knowledgeable about their struggles to get married during a pandemic.

I'm sure sometime my mom will pull out one of our old family albums and show me the bride as a toddler at a Fourth of July party. One day, I'll be the one showing photos to my kids, if I ever get around to sorting through the mountains of phone photos and printing them. At least I've backed them up digitally. I'd like to build a photo album myself, but there's so many things in the way, ranging from a lack of printer paper to the fact that neither of my parents like having their pictures taken, meaning I'll have to scrounge around for those rare images.

I lean forward. In the chat someone is saying that the bride and groom are having their cats be the maid of honor and best man, but I've also heard that they'll have a proper wedding party later down the line, when they can have the reception. We really don't know if they'll ever be able to have the reception they want, but at least they're getting some shadow of the ceremony they wanted. They could just have two ceremonies. Still, it's cute that they're including their cats, who would undoubtedly get in frame anyways just to see what their humans are doing.

The officiant steps into frame, a friend of theirs who got his ordination online. His tan suit nearly blends with the hardwood floor. He bids a meek hello. Hearts and thumbs-ups drift across the screen. He steps into position at the right side of the frame, hands fiddling with a set of index cards.

"Uh, thank you for showing up, everybody. Welcome to Ky and Tim's wedding. I'm sure they'll be out in a moment..." His eyes dart toward the edge of the frame. He shifts his weight to the other foot. My mom's hand clasps my shoulder and I jump at the unexpected warmth.

Chat messages are flying faster than either of us can read. It's strange to think that they can't know what we're saying right now, but they'll probably sit down and read it all afterwards.

My mom's hand slips off me as she leans forward to type something again. The officiant looks away as if he's being addressed.

Then, his gaze follows the groom as he steps into frame, gray contrasting against the earth-toned background. A burst of digital hearts obscures the two. They smile at each other, the groom unable to mask his joy. There is no "all rise." Instead, the officiant leans down to a barely distinguishable Bluetooth speaker on the floor, fiddles with it, and gets it to produce "Here Comes the Bride." In her white-clad glory my cousin steps into frame, her hair done up, a small bouquet of white flowers positioned at her middle.

They seem to be waiting for the barrage of images pasted over the frame to end. The bride hands her bouquet to the officiant, who sets it confusedly under the Christmas tree and turns the speaker off. The bride and groom join hands. The officiant straightens, clears his throat, glances down at the cards.

"Thank you all for coming today. We are here to..." a glance up. "*Finally* unite Ky and Tim in holy matrimony. It's been a long time coming, and I'm sure the bride and groom are grateful to have their family and friends with them on this important day." The bride and groom only have eyes for each other. I can imagine the tiny webcam sitting on a stool or something across the room, their only assurance that someone else is watching.

"I'd like to say a couple words about how Ky and Tim met. When Ky first moved to Colorado for college, she didn't have a lot of local friends..." I glance at my mom. Her eyes are welling with tears.

"And though they were in the same program together, it was actually at this coffee shop that they met, both regular attendees for the live music nights..."

Her thumb rubs over the back of his hand. He can't stop smiling. I watch their body language more than I listen to the story. Weddings have always seemed fake to me. The only way I can tell what's really going on with a relationship is by seeing how the bride and groom act toward each other. At the last wedding I attended, they didn't touch except when necessary for the ring exchange, and the whole time the bride looked like she was in pain. I would cringe whenever the groom or officiant joked about the ol' ball and chain. A long time ago, I made the vow to myself to never accept being treated as a burden by the one I'll be spending the rest of my life with. Ky and Tim's gentle attention to their officiant doesn't waver and their hands remain firmly clasped.

"...and now that they're both so close to finishing their doctorates, it's time to start a new life together. As you can tell, they just couldn't wait any longer!" The bride smiles widely, her cheeks tinging red, and the groom squeezes her hands.

"Now, Ky and Tim have prepared some vows. As you all probably know, we're considering this the "official" ceremony, and we'll be having a vow renewal and a reception later on. So make these count, guys."

A small titter from the bride and groom. Tim lets go of Ky only to pull out his vows, all scrawled on one sheet of loose-leaf paper. The microphone picks up each crinkle as he unfolds it.

"Ky," he murmurs, voice quiet and reverent, "I love you. I never knew that day I met you that one day, I would be standing here asking you to be my wife..." His voice falters. "I can't describe how much I've enjoyed spending these last couple years with you, waking up every morning beside you, carpooling to class..."

My mom's shadow flits beside my vision. My gaze is torn away. When I look back, they're in a box on a screen and the floating icons streaking across the right side of the box are so distracting. I don't really know these people and I'm watching them like a voyeur.

I fight down the sudden revulsion and try to get a grasp on Tim's vows again. He's talking about the time they spent together in class and he can barely contain his laughter. His voice filtered through the microphone is flattened, delivered at just the precise volume, despite his frequent falters. I can't focus on what he's saying anymore—they all seem the same incoherent digital mumbles. I take my hand and put it on my mother's arm to feel the warmth.

I remember talking with a friend about how if we had all just stayed inside for two weeks this would all be over. Never mind the resources needed for two weeks, the hospital services, whether or not corpses are still contagious, the fact that two weeks without work would cripple the world economy—it's a lot more complex than two weeks inside, but it didn't need to be *this* complex. Ky and Tim could only wait a couple months past the initial date of their wedding. I wonder how long I'll have to wait; if my parents will have to see me handed my diploma through a camera, watch me exchange vows with that digital crinkle over my voice, meet their grandchild through a video conference.

If there's one saving grace it's that Ky and Tim will have a permanent record of what everyone was saying during their wedding ceremony. Then again, in-person weddings are often recorded, and the second those fragile Facebook servers collapse, it's gone. Not if they take screenshots, but they need to keep transferring those screenshots from hardware to hardware as the technological world deteriorates. They could always print them. I imagine them pulling out printed Facebook screenshots to show their children their wedding.

Tim takes out a handkerchief and wipes his eyes. Ky has a sympathetic look on her face and her smile hasn't faltered. She murmurs something to him as he stops to take a shaky breath. I don't think I've ever seen two people more overtly happy to be getting married to each other. His voice picks up. The chat and the hearts have slowed.

As I glance away, the afterimage of the screen glows pink over the darkness. I watch it fade. There's a bright light outside the window from the light of our neighbors' porch across the street. When I was younger, I used to mistake it for the moon

A bout of silence draws my eyes back to the screen. Tim's folding up his paper and Ky is getting hers out. There's a flood of messages in the transition time. Then, Ky begins to speak. Her voice is so much more level than her soon-to-be husband's. She's keeping the tears in, but I don't think she could stop smiling if she wanted to.

I notice the heaviness of my eyelids. My body and all its sensations are becoming divorced from the screen, cozying up into the couch, my hand still on my mom's shoulder. I take it off, wrap my other hand around it. The warmth is quickly sucked away by my ice-cold fingers, then by the chilled air. I watch her lips move. It's a lot harder to tell what she's saying with the static crinkle. Between the masks and the digital sound quality, this past year has been a nightmare for my hearing.

"I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you." It's the first time her voice falters, and the two share a silent reverence before she moves onto the next section of her vows. I imagine them sometime in the future, curled up on the couch together at my wedding, the screen lit in front of them, fighting to keep awake.

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