

DAY 1. DECEMBER 1, 2020.

You are in a crowded city. It's an American city but you're not certain which one, & this is after the terrible earthquake & most everyone is displaced & most of the buildings have been reduced to rubble. Piles of gruesome chunks of concrete & twists of rusted metal dot the skyline. A river runs through the center of the city but the water is a sludgy neon green. People stand in the green water, pouring buckets of the viscous liquid over their heads, washing Tupperware containers & copper pots in the goo. The people are wearing an outlandish mismatch of outfits, Civil War uniform tops with spacesuit pants, tricorner hats & flowing saffron robes. It is as if the whole populace raided a costume shop & grabbed the first things they could reach. A man in a motorcycle helmet & a doctor's white coat approaches you. He opens a scarred leather suitcase. *You interested?* he says. Inside the suitcase is a long flashlight, a box of chamomile tea, & what looks like a plastic bag of fingernails & toenails. You point at the flashlight. *How much?* you say. *Fifty*, he says. *Seventy with batteries*. You pull your wallet out & hand him seventy dollars. *Not dollars*, he says, *dollars are worthless. Seventy of these*. He reaches a hand into the pocket of his white coat & removes a handful of black beetles as large as his thumb. The beetles crawl around his palm haphazardly, walking over each other, pawing at the air with their front legs.

DAY 2. DECEMBER 2, 2020.

You are waiting in line to enter a plane. But there is a construction crew working on the plane. They have orange cones up & a flag-person to direct traffic. From the vehicles & equipment & by the smell you think that they might be repaving a road inside the plane. The line hasn't moved in minutes & the people are grumbling & looking at each other with rolled eyes & raised eyebrows. A pilot emerges from the plane & looks down the line of people. He blows a sigh out of his mouth. A few people in line call out to him or wave their hands at him, but he ignores them & reenters the plane. Then there is a crack of static & a voice comes over the intercom. *Hello folks, the pilot says. His voice is warm & folksy & you trust him. As you can all see, we are having some delays from the construction. What I'll need you to do in order to speed things up is to turn to the person next to you & pick them up & carry them into the plane. This should halve our boarding time.* You turn to the man beside you & he smiles & nods. *I'm Tommy, he says. Hi Tommy, you say. You don't want to tell him your name, so you say My name is The Experiment in Material.* The two of you shake hands. You hold your arms straight out like a forklift & Tommy climbs onto your hands. Already the line is beginning to move forward. You walk with Tommy in your arms. His body is straight & still like a cadaver. There's a spot on his arm that is plaid. You look more closely. He is covered in pancake makeup, but some of it rubbed off when he climbed onto your arms. The plaid coloring is his real skin color.

DAY 3. DECEMBER 3, 2020.

You have a beautiful backyard garden. You have put a lot of work into it & you are proud of how well it has grown. You like to spend time in it pulling small weeds, setting vines into better spots, pruning dead leaves, ridding plants of bugs. Your herb area is particularly bountiful. You have so many varieties of basil that they could be a whole garden unto themselves, & the rosemary & mint & thyme fill the air with such a heavy perfume that you often stand with your eyes closed inhaling for minutes, & the screwdrivers & wrenches & pliers that you have grown are as strong & ergonomically correct as any that you could buy at Home Depot.

DAY 4. DECEMBER 4, 2020.

You are on the beach at night when a horse approaches you. He is wearing a long robe and a floppy hat with a tall, peaked tip, like a Halloween-costume wizard. *Hi*, the horse says. *You must change your life*. Then the horse just stares at you. The waves crash down in the dark, the moonlight changing the seafoam to cream. And the horse continues staring at you. *Um thanks*, you say, *but could you get more specific? I think I've actually been doing a lot of work on things & that I'm making a lot of progress*. Then the horse is wearing a disco dress. *No*, he says, *change your life. You must*. You sigh. *That's not really helpful*, Horse, you say. *Do you have a name? I feel weird calling you Horse*. The horse is wearing a McDonald's uniform. *You can call me <http://www.changeyourlife.horse>*, he says. *OK*, you say. You look at your wrist, though you're not wearing a watch. *Jeez, I guess I gotta be going*, you say. You walk up the beach. When you look back the horse is wearing the wizard costume again & talking to someone else. You can just hear him over the waves, telling this person that she must change her life too.

DAY 5. DECEMBER 5, 2020.

You are working in a factory, on an assembly line, making turtles. You are the person who places the top of the turtle shell onto each half-made turtle. The next person on the assembly line adds the back two legs, the next the front two legs, & the last person on the assembly line adds the head & the tail. The turtle then reaches the end of the assembly line, where they are dropped onto a pile of old mattresses. When a turtle reaches the mattresses, they slowly begin to move their legs & head, figuring out how their bodies work. Then they walk off the mattresses & wander around the factory floor. As you stand in your position, adding the tops of the shells to the turtles, the floor fills up with turtles, all aimlessly milling around. Finally, when there are almost too many turtles, so that it is getting dangerous, a whistle rings out. A big door opens & a woman in a turtle costume shouts to the turtles. All the turtles turn their heads toward the woman in the turtle suit & begin to slowly walk toward her, out into the daylight.

DAY 6. DECEMBER 6, 2020.

You are being born. Your mother is there & then you arrive from out of her. The doctor takes you in her hands & clamps the umbilical cord & prepares to cut it. A nurse lines up beside the doctor holding a pistol. The doctor says, OK, one...two...three, go! She cuts the cord & at the same moment the nurse fires the pistol. The bullet shoots out into the room & circles about like a fat fly, sometimes haloing about your head, sometimes zooming out & skimming the walls, sneaking out the door when someone opens it & then sneaking back in a few minutes later. This bullet follows you your entire life, kindergarten, birthday parties, funerals, first kiss, first day of college. You proceed through your life with the bullet following you, never getting so close as to hit you & kill you, but never allowing you to forget its presence for long either, all the while everyone else in your life encircled by their own bullet, eyeing the bullet, distracted by its constant reminder, knowing that it is theirs & theirs alone.

DAY 7. DECEMBER 7, 2020.

You are walking through a park at night. There is a bright, shining orb of light following you. The orb is very shy. When you turn around to look at the orb, it scuttles behind a light post or a tree, hiding from you, though the bright light it casts makes hiding impossible. *Come here*, you say. *I won't hurt you*. But the light stays hidden. *Tss-tss-tss*, you say, as if the light were a cat, but it stays hidden. You continue walking again, & from the light you see bouncing & sweeping beside you, you know that the light is following you. And maybe that's ok, just knowing that the light is there, that the light is with you. Maybe you don't need to be able to hold it in your hands or pet it. Maybe it's better that the light stay wild.

DAY 8. DECEMBER 8, 2020.

You are part of a very large choir, with thousands of members. The choir is preparing to go on a tour, which is quite difficult with so many members. And in addition to the number of members, there are multiple elaborate costume changes within the performance of each song, so you & every other member of the choir must pack dozens of bags. You & the thousands of other singers of the choir wait in a large field for your transportation, all of you surrounded by tall piles of luggage. A bus finally appears in the distance, its chrome front gleaming in the sunlight. As it pulls closer you see that it is a single bus that will house the entire choir, the bus stretching back to the horizon, disappearing into the distance. The bus arrives, its brakes squealing as it slows to a stop. You are at the front of the line to board the bus, your dozens of bags & suitcases in your hands, hugged to your body, strung over your shoulders. The bus doors open & you enter. Inside, the bus is an entire natural world, with many ecosystems & separate towns & cities, each with their own character. You carry your luggage back to the ocean beach area & find a seat on the shore. As the other choir members board the bus & find their seats, you close your eyes & listen to the soft waves wash up on the sand.

DAY 9. DECEMBER 9, 2020.

You are strapped into the pilot seat of a spaceship, teetering atop a huge rocket. The countdown booms from surrounding speakers: *FIVE... FOUR... THREE... TWO...* You close your eyes & breathe out, willing yourself to relax. *ONE!* The rocket ignites, thundering beneath you, shaking you to the bone. And then, for a mere second, so slowly, you begin to rise, & exponentially more rapidly, hurtling up, gravity swelling. You open your eyes & see only pure unchanging blue sky above, the Earth disappearing below. But the blueness fades, then grows dark. Your ship detaches from the spent rocket & the thundering quaking stops. You hurtle forward into the starlit darkness of outer space. As you adjust to the sudden calm, you turn to your right, to the co-pilot's seat. In the seat, you find a perfect replica of yourself, made out of Legos. The Lego-you is shockingly realistic, beautifully rendered. You reach out a hand to touch Lego-you's face. It is warm & soft, like skin. The Lego-you turns to you & smiles. *Look at us*, Lego-you says. *We are in space!* You smile back. You call in to the command center & let them know that everything is A-OK up here. You look out the window, at the vastness of everything, the closeness of everything.

DAY 10. DECEMBER 10, 2020.

You are at a new bar that has ten thousand flavors of frozen margaritas. The only thing is that you do not get to select a flavor. You are simply randomly given one of the ten thousand. You sit down at your table with your frozen margarita. It is the flavor of the Bon Jovi song “You Give Love a Bad Name,” and every sip you take plays a little bit of the chorus melody. But you want to hear the entire tune, not just little bits, so you keep drinking, slurping up more & more margarita, until you realize quite suddenly that you are terribly drunk.

DAY 11. DECEMBER 11, 2020.

You step to the front of the line at the bank. The bank teller, without looking up, says, *And what is your name? We don't use names any more, you tell them. We use these.* You reach into your pocket & pull out a handful of bright blue coins. Each one is an iteration of your name, which you must cash in every time you employ your name. And so it is imperative to use one's name sparingly.

DAY 12. DECEMBER 12, 2020.

You are dead & your body is lying in state in the Capitol rotunda. Even though you are dead, you feel no discomfort. Being dead feels very much like being alive, except that you're not supposed to move. When the dead move it freaks out the living. The American people pass by you, thanking you for your life's work, some of them crying, some of them saluting. As you lie there in the coffin, you suddenly have a great idea for a short story. You don't want to alarm anyone by moving around & writing down notes for the story with a pen & paper, so you invent a sort of hieroglyphics alphabet & you use your shockingly long & sharp thumbnail to carve the story into the wall of your coffin.

DAY 13. DECEMBER 13, 2020.

You are fighting a monster. You have been fighting this monster your entire life. You try all the weapons: swords, guns, fists, words, motion, magick, joy, despair. Each time you try a new weapon against the monster, that new weapon works. Each time you are so excited. Finally you will defeat the monster. Each time you think, *Oh! It's so easy! All I ever needed was this weapon!* And as you fight the monster with this new weapon, the monster grows so small. And maybe you could even kill the monster, but it feels so wrong to kill them, especially when they are so small. But then somehow, when you are distracted, the monster steals the weapon away from you, & then the monster is holding the sword, aiming your own gun at you, reciting the sentences that had once made you strong. And suddenly the monster is so large again, their teeth so long & sharp. You fight & fight, feeling defeated, feeling ready to be defeated, until you discover a new weapon. And that weapon shrinks the monster down again. And then the monster again steals that weapon from you & uses it against you. After years of this fighting, decades, a life, you suddenly notice a little door in the monster's belly, with a little doorknob. You open the door & step inside & close the door. Inside the monster you find a labyrinth, with tall walls & a single narrow path. The path guides you left & right & forward & back, until you have no idea what a direction even is anymore. And even though you are trapped in the labyrinth, you feel hopeful, because it is the promise of every labyrinth that there must be a way out, that eventually, after all the walking & exhaustion & confusion, there will be a way out. And you think of all the beautiful things that must lie on the other side of this labyrinth, the sunshine & the flowers & the trees that ache up into the sky & the artwork & songs & dancing. You think about them so much that slowly, at first imperceptibly, the paths of the labyrinth fill with tiny flowers, & shimmering crystals, & the walls become sequoias & the sun shines down. And all around you streams gurgle & birds chitter & bits of treefluff float in the wind. You lift your face to the sky & close your eyes & savor the heat of the sunlight on your skin.

DAY 14. DECEMBER 14, 2020.

You have moved into a new house in which everything in the house is a typewriter key. When you sit on one cushion of the couch the house types a certain letter, when you open the cabinet in which the glasses are stored the house types a different letter, when you flush the toilet a different letter, so that all the things you do around the house type out letters, words, sentences. At the end of every day, as you lie in bed, you read over the text of what you wrote. Often there are repeating passages, from the things that you do each day in the same way, & yet every day there are surprising passages, telling you stories that you could never have known you were able to write.

DAY 15. DECEMBER 15, 2020.

Your new job is in an office deep down on the bottom of the ocean. To make your commute less grueling—the other employees take a daily shuttle-submarine every morning & evening—you buy a houseboat & anchor it above the deep-sea office. You wake up, have some coffee & a bit of breakfast, then dive off the side of your houseboat, swimming down through schools of shimmering silver fish, past lurking hammerhead sharks, down into the darker depths of the ocean, where long, amorphous jellyfish float by, down into the lightless zones in which strangely shaped glowing things flit by & enormous leviathans create currents as they pass, until you see the little lights of your office. You swim into the entryway & into dry air, where the dull chatter of people on phones & printers chugging fills the air with a kindly boredom. You walk over to your cubicle, pick up the phone & call the next number on your list. A man answers the phone. *Congratulations!* you say. *You may already be a winner! You may have already won a new car! And a horse! And a box of pretty greeting cards!*

DAY 16. DECEMBER 16, 2020.

The whole world is on fire, burning here in quiet embers, & there in towers of conflagration, & in some places in ways that don't even look like flames. Animals run through the streets & plants quiver from the heat. You open your doors & windows to let the deer run in & the slugs slide in & the beetles scuttle in & the birds fly in to perch atop the tall cabinets. You rush about, digging up the plants & repotting them in old hats & containers you would have normally just thrown out, bringing them indoors, more & more of them, until every surface is covered with plants & animals, panting & staring out the door at the encircling flames. You close the windows & cover them with boards & nail the boards in. You lock the door. In the darkness inside your house, you light a candle, which burns steadily, glinting in the wide eyes of all the gathered animals. Outside the hot winds rattle & the fires thunder & roar. But inside the house it is peaceful. And finally, after so much time that you have lost track of time & you now forget what day it is, what month, what a year is, the fires stop. You open the door & clean air slips in. Behind you, the animals file out into the blackened world that sits below the pure blue sky. And though the whole world is burnt, transformed into slag & ash, you see already little sprouts of green tendrils growing up through the ash. And over here, the thin growths of baby houses begin to bud forth. And over there, where the playground used to be, a vine pokes out of the ash with tiny paintings growing on the tips of its thin branches.

DAY 17. DECEMBER 17, 2020.

You are in a tennis tournament. All the tennis-players in the tournament are versions of you from other multiverses. In the first match, you play a version of yourself that is a little less attractive than you are. It's a tough match—he has a strong serve—but you beat him. In the next match you play a version of yourself that is even a little less attractive than you are. You beat him too. In the next match, your opponent is a version of you who is even less hot. You again win. In each match of the tournament, you play progressively less & less attractive versions of yourself, until finally you play a version of yourself who is so unattractive that you don't even recognize him as being a version of yourself. All through the match you keep staring at his unattractive face, trying to figure out how a version of you could have gotten this unattractive. All this staring & figuring takes your mind off of the match & this unattractive version of you beats you in straight sets.

DAY 18. DECEMBER 18, 2020.

You are at a customer service counter for Walmart. The counter is far outside the store, in a bedraggled, empty lot with weeds & dirt & some Snickers bar wrappers & rusted wire. You are really angry, because the inflatable kiddie pool you bought has holes in the bottom of the pool—not even rips, but holes that were intentionally built into it—so it holds no water. The Walmart employee, clearly exhausted, clearly emotionally on your side but required to adhere to corporate expectations, will not refund your purchase. Just as you're about to lose your cool & start yelling at the employee, a strange whistling sound comes from the sky. Both you & the employee look up. Something is falling out of the sky, a meteorite, leaving a trail of smoke in its wake. And then the meteorite splits into two, & the two pieces fall down to you & the Walmart employee, fall down right into both of your outstretched hands. The half meteorite is surprisingly cool in your hand, formed of some kind of metal, but with tunnels running through it, as if worms had eaten through the solid metal.

DAY 19. DECEMBER 19, 2020.

You are in a superhero movie directed by Wes Anderson. You wear a baggy costume that you have to pull up, tucking the excess cloth into the band of the briefs underwear you have on beneath it. You have to fight villains with names like The Loosener & The Human Goo. After you defeat The Loosener, the two of you have a cup of Earl Grey tea together, sitting on the edge of an old concrete foundation for a long-gone house. The Loosener tells you about the birdhouse he built last summer, how perfectly he planned & crafted the little house, crafted to look like an exact miniature of his own house, how proud of the birdhouse he was, & how then no birds used the birdhouse, how it stood empty all summer & fall, until finally, he knocked the birdhouse down & threw it away.

DAY 20. DECEMBER 20, 2020.

You are a bounty hunter, working for a bail bondsman. One of the bail bondsman's client's has skipped bail & you have to go find them. The only clue to where they might be is a grocery list that reads

Popcorn

Podcasts

Polecat

Pylon

You start your search for the bail-skipper at the grocery store near their house. You search all through the popcorn aisle & the podcasts aisle & the cages full of polecats & the pylons stacked up out front, until you find a footprint that matches the bail-skipper's shoes. That footprint leads out behind the grocery store & into the desert. You follow the tracks for days, sometimes feeling like you're catching up on the bail-skipper, sometimes feeling like these tracks might be centuries old. As you follow the tracks a fox trots beside you, diligently pursuing the bail-skipper with you. You & the fox follow the tracks for so long that you nearly forget about the bail, about the transgression of skipping the bail; you have come to love the daily act of following these tracks through the desert, watching the sun arc through the sky, the daily explosions of sunrise & sunset, the soft patter of the fox's feet. Until finally one morning the tracks lead to a small house. You walk up to the front door & knock. The fox sniffs at the door. The door opens & the bail-skipper stands there. They let you in without a word. The table is set for two. You sit down. The movie music soundtrack swells, emotional & reminiscent of some treasured but barely recalled memory.

DAY 21. DECEMBER 21, 2020.

You live in a house built entirely out of precious metals & jewels. You sleep on a silver bed beneath blankets of amethysts & rubies. You cook your breakfast on a diamond stove that has pearl dials & burners made of solid gold. The house's pipes & walls & even the towels are all precious metals & priceless jewels. It is all quite annoying, the bed uncomfortable, the golden burners melting & warping with each use, the pipes cracking & leaking gross stuff, the drinking water filled with sparkling powders. The clocks, all of them made out of heavy precious metals & clunky gems, are all stopped, each at a different time. Finally this is all too much for you & you pack the few things you own that are not made of gold & silver & diamonds & emeralds & leave the house. You do not even close the door when you leave. Just before you leave, though, just in case, you fill a sack with diamonds. Outside the precious house you find the most fascinating things, cobwebs on broken wheelbarrow handles, a bedraggled pigeon with missing toes, a page ripped from a paperback book & pasted by dirt to a brick wall. In the distance, you see the sunlight twinkling on the ground. The flashing lights draw you in, until you find a mound of broken bottles. You sway side to side, watching how the light flickers & flashes through the shards. You take out your sack of diamonds & pour the diamonds out into the dirt, then carefully, you fill the sack up with the most jagged & beautiful chunks of broken bottles.

DAY 22. DECEMBER 22, 2020.

You have a small rubber ball you keep bouncing off of everything. You bounce the ball off walls & off furniture & off trees & off coyotes & off cruise liners docked in the bay & frozen waterfalls & off the one remaining window in a ghost town city hall & off the lips of a gigantic statue in the middle of the desert that is all broken & worn down & armless now, though it once stood at the gates of the capital of a vast empire & off the refrigerator. You bounce the ball in tricky ways that make it bounce hundreds of times, off hundreds of surfaces, before it bounces back to you. You bounce it so high, you wait days for it to return down out of the stratosphere & into your hand. You bounce the rubber ball in innumerable concoctions, each one more complicated & bewildering than the last. Then suddenly you do not enjoy bouncing the little rubber ball off of things anymore. You're not sure what happened. One moment you can't get enough of traveling around the world bouncing this thing off of things & now, when you drop the ball & it springs back up, you feel no joy, none of the simple fascination you had for all this time. You see a kid who looks bored & you shout out to them. They turn to you & you toss the rubber ball out, making it bounce with geometric implausibility against the surrounding walls & cars & passing trucks & even a small tortoise, until it lands right in the kid's hand. He looks up at you with a goofy smile, holding the ball out. *Go ahead, you say. It's yours now.* The kid begins bouncing the rubber ball, at first simple bounces, but growing quickly into more daring, more expressive bounces. You stand still for a moment, feeling how strange it feels for your hand to be empty, to not feel the rhythmic thump. Then you walk to the musical instrument store & pick up the first viola you see, & buy it.

DAY 23. DECEMBER 23, 2020.

On a cold foggy morning you give birth to a river. The river, being brand new & not having developed her motor skills & rational thinking yet, immediately floods the local city. You rush through the city, helping people clean up their flooded houses, retrieving washed-away wheelbarrows & tipping tipped-over cars back onto their wheels. *I'm so sorry*, you tell a couple as you help them mop the mud from their hardwood floors. *It's OK*, the dentist says. *I was once a river too, I flooded so many cities in my youth. I look back on it now & I cry & I laugh.* And then the dentist actually laughs, real laughter so hard that she bends over & holds her palms on her knees to catch her breath from so much laughing. The architect squeezes her mop head into a blue bucket. *I was born*, the architect says, *as an entire family of jackals, at least a dozen of me, but now I am an architect. Each of us can only be what we are when we are that.* Later, after the floods have all receded, you find your daughter, the river, asleep in a canyon, looking more like a lake than a river. You stand on her shore, watching her water levels rise & fall, loving the way her water levels rise & fall. You love your river. And if tomorrow she is a lake or a horse or a Burger King, you will love your lake or your horse or your Burger King. A small white bird flies up to the shore & steps their thin, wrinkled feet into the water, & twitches down & takes a drink.

DAY 24. DECEMBER 24, 2020.

You are using a heavy construction machine to dig a well. The drill attached to the front of the machine pushes deeper & deeper into the earth. Waves of mirage-heat waver over the cracked & baked land. You grind the drill deeper & deeper, deeper than anyone has ever drilled before. Suddenly, you feel the tip of the drill, so deep in the earth, break through some layer of rock into an empty space. Then a sound begins to churn from the well-hole, growing louder. It's coming! You've hit it! The sound increases into a roaring, whistle sound that fills your ears, until a fountain erupts out of the hole in the earth, spraying everywhere. You hold your hand out & pull in some of what is raining down: it's words. In your palm you find the words *all others from all things draw all that's good*. All around, words are falling down into the dry soil, turning it richer & healthier. On your shoes you find the words *rides the sloughs and sluices of my mind*. The whole landscape is filling with words, making the whole land into a poem.

DAY 25. DECEMBER 25, 2020.

You are in a new rock band. While the other people in the band play the drums & guitar & bass & there's a singer, you play a feral cat. You've hooked the cat up to a series of effects pedals for various forms of distortion & delay & reverb. The drummer clicks off a tempo & the guitarist & bassist start the song. The singer begins to sing in a sweet, shy voice. You crouch down to the feral cat & scratch the cat behind her ears, causing the cat to purr. The purring bounces & grinds through the effects pedals, coming through the amp as a howling, haunting melody. The deeper you scratch the cat, the stronger she purrs.

DAY 26. DECEMBER 26, 2020.

You are a limousine driver in Manhattan & you pull up to the airport to pick up your rider. You step out of the limo & stand at the doors, holding up a sign that reads MUMMY. Travelers exit the doors, rolling their suitcases & looking at the sign above your head in faint confusion before walking either to the right or the left. You stand there as the stream of arrivals from your rider's plane fades to a trickle & then stops. No one exits the doors. Around you birds flit from tree to tree. Just when you are starting to wonder if maybe there is something wrong, the glass doors slide open & a shambling, lock-limbed figure emerges from the airport, the mummy. Ancient strips of fabric flap from the mummy's limbs. A bit of the cloth has come away from his chest, revealing blacked rib bones & an empty expanse of darkness within him. The mummy sees your sign & stumbles toward you, pulling his black roller-suitcase behind him. *Good morning*, you say. *Arrrrghhrrr*, the mummy snarls. *What is our destination today?* you say to the mummy, but he just snarls again. *Why don't we take in the sights?* you say & the mummy growls & nods. You drive away from the airport, sneaking looks at the mummy in the rear view mirror. The mummy scratches absently at a spot where his skull & some desiccated flesh emerge from the wrappings. He stares out the window, watching the trees & hills & rivers pass into warehouses & row houses & then downtown skyscrapers & cathedrals & monuments & museums. He looks content back there in the back seat, looking out at the modern world's versions of the pyramids of his day. He looks at home here, in the downtown with signs & images covering every surface, pedestrians passing with diligent speed. As you're driving the mummy suddenly calls out *Aaaaarrrr!!* You stop the limo & the mummy opens the door, leveraging his stiff body out of the car & toward a little park with metal benches. In the center of the park sits a piano. Someone has set the piano on fire. The mummy stumbles toward the burning piano. You're not sure what to do, how to react to this. You just watch. The mummy gets to the piano bench & tries to sit on it, but his stiff legs won't bend. Finally, with two hard chops, he cracks his legs at the knees & sits. He pulls the bench up to the burning piano & begins to play. A beautiful melody washes out of the piano, like Debussy or like song birds gathered in the thousands. The flames leap from the piano to his old, dry cloth, lighting the

mummy as he plays the most beautiful music you have ever heard. The flames engulf the mummy but he continues playing, continues into greater & greater explorations of melody, ecstatic & glorious music, like angels, like the voices of the clouds. & sunlight itself. The mummy plays until he is only a single flame, until finally, his old body collapses into ash. And the piano, unharmed, undamaged, continues burning in the center of the park.

DAY 27. DECEMBER 27, 2020.

You & a friend are driving in her car through a tunnel. Your friend is driving, telling you all about her new job as a hostess at a fancy restaurant. You're shocked that she would be working at a restaurant as a hostess—it feels like a considerable step back from her current work at a big corporation doing bigshot things—but she seems happy & so you are happy for her. Suddenly in the middle of the tunnel, your lane narrows to only a sliver of road & beside you there is a fifteen-foot drop to the oncoming lane. Your friend does some excellent driving to keep the car on the road, even though only two tires hit the asphalt, but finally, she can't keep it going & the car teeters & falls off the drop. The car lands on its side, standing upright like that. Luckily, no cars are in the oncoming lane. You are unhurt. You check your friend to see if she is OK & she seems entirely uninjured, except that she now is wearing a little Greek fisherman's hat like a young Bob Dylan & her hair is cut into a wispy mullet & she wears big silver hoop earrings, three in each earlobe.

DAY 28. DECEMBER 28, 2020.

You are in a small, dark dive bar. It is daytime & the bar is nearly empty. You are sitting beside a person you love & who loves you but whom you should not love & who should not love you. The two of you have untouched cocktails before you. Both of you look forward, not daring to look at the other. This is the last time you will ever see them. You know in the moment that you are wasting this moment, that the impossibility of this situation is ossifying these last minutes together. And then a song comes over the speaker, an old soul song you've sung along to a hundred times. The person you love but whom you should not love stands up & takes your hand & guides you to the narrow aisles between booths. They hold you close & sway their body into a slow dance. You close your eyes. You lean your head down onto their shoulder. The song fills you, moves through you, becomes you. You feel every part of you inhabited by the old soul song, feel it moving your limbs, feel it pushing the tears from your eyes, feel it pumping your heart. The person you love whom you should not love whispers the lyrics of the song into your ear. And then, too soon, the song is done.

DAY 29. DECEMBER 29, 2020.

You are bouncing up & down on a trampoline. You are very young, a baby, you have just been born. On the opposite side of the trampoline, bouncing opposite of you, so that every time you hit the trampoline you bounce them up & every time they hit the trampoline they bounce you up, is a little tree. The tree is young as well. But as the two of you bounce each other up & down, a perpetual bouncing machine, the two of you grow taller & older. And as the two of you grow taller & older, the tree grows faster & taller than you. As the tree grows taller & larger & heavier than you, each time the tree hits the trampoline the tree bounces you higher & higher, launching you way up into the sky, past the tops of the trees, past the tops of the mountains, into the clouds, through the clouds, until you can look down & see the whole round fullness of the entire Earth below you. The Earth looks so simple down there, so calm, as if it is taking a lovely afternoon nap.

DAY 30. DECEMBER 30, 2020.

You stand at the edge of a wide volcano. Below you, molten rock roils & bubbles, hissing & roaring, emitting a sulfurous heat-wind that rises up like a flaming storm. A young woman stands beside you, looking down into the volcano, her hair blown up over her head by the rising heat. The young woman turns to you. *Do you know*, she screams, *what that is bubbling down below?* You shake your head. She closes her eyes & leans over the edge of the volcano. *It is love*, the young woman says, *the unattainable transformation.* Then she leans even more forward, until gravity takes over & her body slips off the edge, tumbling down toward the molten lava, the heat billowing her hair & clothing around her like a halo. Her body gives off smoke, then ignites into flames, burning in a bright blue flame, burning entirely up before she hits the surface of the lava. All around the edge of the volcano, people walk up & drop themselves in, falling down, bursting into flame, burning into nothing before they touch the lava. And you get it then, the power of love, the tectonic, wild, furious power of it, how one wants to dive into it, be engulfed by it, & yet one can never reach it. As people continue walking up to the edge of the volcano & leaping in, you turn your back on them & pick your way down the steep slope of the volcano.

DAY 31. DECEMBER 31, 2020.

You are walking along a dry streambed lined with rocks when you notice a particularly interesting rock. You crouch down & pull the rock up. Beneath the rock you discover the secret. The big secret. The secret everyone has been searching for all this time, the one that most people said didn't exist, couldn't exist. The one that the authorities said that only the elite could access. The one you never thought you would know or be able to know. And here you found it, under a rock, a rock you turned over just to see what might lie beneath it. You look around the landscape, the smoke & smog of the distant city of cars & factories, the strip-mined sides of the hills, the piled husks of a rusted century. You look back down to the dirt beneath the rock, where small things, pale blobs as fat as drops of moonlight, squirm, all of them so close to the secret, living right beside the secret, burrowed around & nestled into the secret, yet not caring about the secret, not knowing what it might be to not know the secret. You set the rock back down atop the secret. One day another person will turn this rock over & find the secret. And maybe that person will take the secret out from under the rock & bring it to the city & build a fortified castle around it & sell action figures & archival-quality prints of the secret, but not today. You keep walking along the dry streambed. You see another interesting rock & you turn it over. Beneath the rock a small black insect looks up at you. The insect raises their front two legs at you in a show of aggression, in an act of defense.

MATHIAS SVALINA

Mathias Svalina is the author of seven books, most recently *The Depression*, a collaboration with the photographer Jon Pack (Civil Coping Mechanisms), & *America at Play* (Trident Books). He is a founding editor of Octopus Books, & since 2014 has run a dream delivery service:

<http://www.dreamdeliverservice.com>