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Duality; Or, Metamorphosis: An Essay on Stagnation and Yearning; Defining

A few years ago, I went to a movie with a friend of mine. It was one of those movies you forget as soon as you walk out of the theater—a romantic comedy abundant in stars, but lacking in originality or plot or point. About three-quarters through the movie, movement on the screen stopped—the image froze—and we in the dark theater (a mass of strangers even to the people we came with), held our collective breath and watched as the still image melted from the heat of the projector.

It started in the middle of the screen—the woman's beautiful face contorting and then boiling and then disappearing. The film was burned from the center to the edges like a photograph on a flame—reduced to fluid yellows and tans tinted green.

There was a pause and then the whirling started and the film began again with the scene following the melt down. It lasted only a second before it, too, boiled and contorted and subsequently went black. The overhead lights slowly came on, an announcement was made, and we filed out of the theater and out of the lobby and into the frigid air of late December that met us silently in the parking lot. Wandering to our cars without speaking, we were lost in a metaphor we couldn't quite grasp, the image still burning in our minds.

If I could be anywhere tonight, it wouldn't be here. It wouldn't be here: my apartment—empty but me—a mid-January night, ice and cold and snow weighing on the roof, the windowpanes. I wouldn't be here: drinking coffee, glancing out the window onto the parking lot below—cars poised jaggedly, the faded tan apartments across the cul-de-sac of equally faded black top, hidden under layers of snow, under cars hidden under layers of snow. Streetlights highlighting sidewalks and silhouettes of trees—no one's out tonight. My stereo is on, softly, humming songs of days long since passed and the heater is kick, kick, kicking on, struggling to fight the drafts seeping in through cracks and crevices and seams, but otherwise it's just me, in my envelope of solitude. No. No, I wouldn't be here.

I have two homes: southeastern Michigan and west Michigan.

On the west side, I live with three other girls in a shoddy two bedroom apartment. Shoddy because it's college housing, shoddy because the heater breaks at least twice a winter, shoddy because at least three windows have fallen out during our four years here, shoddy because the floor, the fixtures—the everything—screams 1970...1970 after a rough thirty-five years. But we live here—we live here for a number of unrelated reasons and we live here because it's cheap, and in an odd way, we love this strange little apartment.

At school, I'm the one who fixes things when they break. I have the Craftsman tool box in my bedroom closet with a tape measurer, hammer, screwdriver, wrench, other things. When the door falls off the TV cabinet, when the baseboard gets kicked and clatters on the goldenrod kitchen floor, when the table leg suddenly gives out, I fix it. We all have our roles and somehow this has become mine: Theresa provides food, Regina cares for the plants, Karen keeps us laughing, and I—I fix things.

If I could be anywhere tonight, I would be at a thousand summer nights. I would be in jeans and a sweatshirt thrown hastily over a t-shirt or tank top, bathing suit. I would be barefoot—toes exploring the cooling sand, coating my skin with a transparent layer of dust. Resting my weight on a piece of yet unused firewood, my face flushed from the waves of heat, radiating, emanating. Laughing. I would be laughing, smiling—the muscles in my shoulders, my ligaments, the sinewy masses that hold me together—my entire body—would be relaxed, smooth as the seventy acre lake beyond the short stretch of beach glowing orange from the fire.

I would be every age of my twenty-three years: living each summer of my life consecutively (or perhaps simultaneously) in the span of an evening, feeling the frost of January melt away, the last bits of snow rolling down my back as I warm myself in front of twenty-three summers. I can feel them wash over me, in a seemingly random order only the recesses of my mind can follow or comprehend, its electrical impulses bringing back memories of days long since passed.

Sitting in the library café, I had my back to the humming of vending machines. To my left was a window bright with the noon sun reflecting off patches of stubborn snow and the glinting ice covering sections of a small pond. Around me were others—quiet, reading, silently eating—only the occasional crinkle of a plastic bag, or the turn of a tissue-thin page interrupting the atmosphere. I was sitting at a high counter with a chair too short for the counter's height, leaving me with the sensation of being swallowed whole. In front of me was a book of Emily Dickinson's poetry and I felt too old to be reading her for the first time, yet somehow special—for the space lent itself well to discovery. I felt as though I alone had discovered Dickinson's prose and all its mysterious nuances that had made her famous to others and not yet to me.

Eventually I looked up from my book, over the short wooden partition on

the opposite side of the counter, and out the large window a few yards beyond where I was sitting. A tangle of bare trees was reaching toward the sky, growing from one of the ravines that carved the earth around the library. The most prominent tree was the closest to the sidewalk—with a robust, solid trunk and branches—it was the largest and tallest one out of the small forest. The branches of the tree angled off of the trunk, forming perfect seats for anyone brave enough to climb up to them.

I gazed over the partition and out the window for a while and the walls around me faded from my peripheral view. I felt the rough bark digging into my pale skin, leaving imprints and patterns along my legs and back as I reclined on a branch, leaning back against the trunk. I imagined that I was the brave one, the one who decided to climb and risk the height and the one who got to see it all from her spot high up in that perfect tree, and I imagined that it was summer and that I was content.

Synapse occurs between a neuron and another entity—either a neighboring neuron or any component of the body that contains neurons—muscles, bones, skin, and eyes all house and are run by these microscopic beings. Mere nanometers in size, they are small worlds within themselves, an outer membrane protecting innards colored brightly in textbooks—mitochondrion, smooth ER, ribosome, and microtubules—each with their own task and purpose and shape, packed into the spherical soma of the neuron. The nucleus, located in the center of the soma, is mammoth in comparison to its counterparts, and is the brain of the neuron, sending out orders that, ultimately, keep the body functioning.

If I could, I would be with my friend Jill—the summer we were eighteen—our crisp high school diplomas recently received. College awaiting us at the end of August, us sitting on logs in front of a campfire at my family's cottage, not knowing what to expect or how our lives would change in the coming years—and at that moment—not really caring. Talking about godknowswhat, trying to choke down a can of Miller Lite from my dad's stash in the fridge. Us wrinkling our noses at its watery malt and barley taste, the can mostly staying wedged in the sand. Cigarettes. A pack of Marlboro Reds purchased at the only gas station in town, fifteen minutes away. Bought only because we could, just to try, just this once. Us lighting them with matches from the kitchen cupboard, sitting in front of the fire, watching the moon cast silver on the lake while we try to blow smoke rings. Me finally inhaling and feeling the hot smoke burn my trachea, bronchi, alveoli. Me rolling off the log, coughing, hacking, tears. Jill laughing, laughing, tears. We never finished the Miller or the Marlboros that night.

During a recent break, while home from college, I saw my first ex-boyfriend. My family and I went to Christmas Eve mass and then got seafood on N. Dixie

Hwy. While eating piles of fried food—shrimp, cod, scallops, clam strips, and samples of crab and lobster from my sister's plate—I looked up during mid-bite and saw him. He was waiting the table next to us and hadn't seen me.

I hadn't seen him since we graduated from high school and I was amazed at how five years had changed him. His gawky six-foot frame had filled out, ridiculously spiked hair tamed into a long crew-cut, wire-rimmed glasses replaced with contacts. He looked good. He could've done without the rhinestone earrings, but he still looked good in his black pants, white collared shirt, tray filled with salads soaking in various dressings—ranch, French, and something I couldn't distinguish without staring.

The two women and the man at the table he was waiting were probably in their fifties, although their frumpy clothes and lined, hard faces suggested older. He was friendly and attentive despite their lack of personality. "Okay, I'll put those orders in and be right back with your drinks," I heard him say. I couldn't imagine him saying something like that in high school.

This is me: sitting in front of my laptop in the wee hours of the morning, resisting the heaviness weighing on my eyes lids, in a quest to articulate a need I can't yet define. I sit here longing—but for what I do not know.

The most glorious sound in the summer starts with a familiar heavy silence and the darkening of evening skies—blue turning gray tinted tan and yellow and green, darkening to a cobalt blue, darkening to a deeper midnight blue, like silk and velvet, touching the horizon and lowering the dome above. The earth hushes just before its arrival—the leaves are still and the air is still and the birds have long since disappeared. Activities outside end abruptly and windows are rolled in, doors shut.

Thirty-two vertebrate humming with anticipation as the first streak of light follows a thrilling rumble. The earth grumbles and rumbles and slowly the wind begins to circle and circle and the leaves start their seductive dance, and without warning it'll come—a crisp roll of thunder that crackles just before it really lands with a deafening thud, echoing in the distance. Flashes of light illuminate the clouds and reflect on the windows newly pattered pattered with droplets running down the smooth glass, a preview of what will soon be a deafening soundtrack pounding against the walls, the windows, the roof. It will come in sheets and in drops, in movements directed by the wind and showcased by webs of white light spread across the night sky and the thunder that never seems to cease.

And folded in these arms of chaos, this is the best way to sleep on a mid-summer night as humidity meets with air cooled by rain and jet streams and currents from far, far away. This is the best way to sleep.

Neurons are in control of every movement—no matter how minute—every

thought or memory that seems to float to the surface of the mind, every sensation the body experiences—pain or pleasure, warmth, every itch or twitch, or shiver down the length of one's spine—has a network of neurons in charge of it, their connections creating a system of nerves. Tendrils called dendrites spider off of the neuron body, reaching out for other entities to link with, forming an axon, like a path, from one neuron to another. A mass of nerves looks like a city road map, its streets and alleys and highways all interlaced and interconnected—a web of passageways, a web of possibilities.

If I could, I would be eight again: after a day of splashing in the shallow water by the shore, a day of fishing with Dad in the paddle boat or the four of us riding in the motor boat, my mom's hair a red chaos in the wind. After a day of making sand castles with Elise, finding perfect rocks that we kept in a plastic bag under our bed, our tender feet immune to the burning sand of our small beach—I would be eight, six, seven, five, nine, ten...sitting around the campfire roasting marshmallows, eating them with sticky fingers, sticky lips, bits of charred sugar and gelatin caught in the fine hairs of my arms, collecting granules of sand. My mom would be cooking two marshmallows until they were black on the outside, practically liquid on the inside, and a smile of satisfaction would be crossing her face—if I were there right now—she would be saying this is the *only* way to eat 'em.

I would be there.

Funny how fire is: the hypnotic quality about it and the way it crackles and the way it dances and the beauty with which it curls a paper placed in it.

... Sometimes I wish I smoked—not because it's healthy, not because I like the smell, not because I necessarily *want* to, not because I can afford it or want to stand huddled in the cold, not because I want to be dependent, addicted, but because it would give my hands something to do. When my brain is still humming and I'm in between moments and my body is left floundering, at least I could hold onto a cigarette, smoke, do something—at least I would have a purpose.

We dated for eight days in ninth grade. My first boyfriend. My first ex-boyfriend. He liked Tool. Let me borrow their Aenima CD for a weekend once, but I only listened to one song over and over because the rest of the album was too hard for me—I never told him that, though.

As dinner continued, my dad was cracking jokes and my mom was rolling her eyes at him. My sister was annihilating another crab leg as I pushed a few of the clam strips around on my plate. The amount of golden brown fried food in front of me was making my stomach turn. I thought of all that grease mixed with the water I was drinking. I imagined it churning and separating in my stomach—the yellowish oil rising to the top and the water with its heavy

hydrogen molecules resting at the bottom as rivers of stomach acid worked to digest it all. I wanted to go home.

If I could, I would be twelve, watching Emily's dad shoot off fireworks from their beach, two doors down. And if I would've known at that time what I was soon to know, I would've stayed out with her later, sitting in the sand, my shoulder length hair still damp from an evening swim, wavy, tied in a ponytail, and smelling of lake and sun. I would have talked with her all night about whatever was important to talk about when I was twelve and she was thirteen and we were friends. It occurs to me now that her heart might have been failing then, that maybe she knew it just a little and was too young to understand what it was. No one knew that we had eighteen days left with her. But I would be there now, on that beach with her, explosions of red and blue and yellow and white overhead reflecting on our still fresh faces, and I would sit with her—the gunpowder smoke drifting, sharp in our nostrils, warding off mosquitoes. I would see her laugh, her eyes squinting, and her head bobbing just a little, as it used to when something caught her humor. I would laugh with her tonight.

My home in southeastern Michigan is a two story brick house, is a sprawling city that has never left its small town identity, is my parents, my sister, a few friends remaining in the area, and a handful of relatives. My home in southeastern Michigan is a series of memories and events that will always be my home, my childhood, my beginning. The pulse of that corner of the state is always felt faintly across the miles.

Driving west on M-50, a Sunday afternoon: my car, passing through, and I, its only passenger.

On either side of me were fields and farms and plots of land vast and open with the dead of winter. Solitary figures with branches almost black stood against the mist of trees like ghosts in the distance—their faint presence a whisper—and beyond them the dull gray of a February sky.

Thick snarls of bare brush and twigs in rows perpendicular to the road—the length of each separating neighboring fields. Patches of snow and dark frozen earth contrasting with the remaining stubble of last year's harvest—strips of snow and strips of earth and rows of pale yellow and tan and golden brown stalks, broken and standing in jagged array.

Winding in and out of view on the left was the River Raisin, its waters dark and forbidding from the icy air. Small clusters of buildings silently claiming the land as their own: dilapidated stilts of faded barns and ones still strong and deep red—all in various sizes, for various purposes, housing their own stories and forgotten pasts. White farm houses with wide porches and each, a solid oak tree in front—now leafless and still, but in the summer, almost fluid

with sways of green.

Barren.

Disturbing the landscape, the stillness, waking the dead, I passed through quickly, barely breathing, so as to not stir what wasn't mine to claim.

It was eight o'clock on a Saturday—the sun slowly, slowly sinking past the trees on the other side of the lake, leaving spills of deep orange across the sky, and the air becoming still as it does when night approaches the lake in the summer. We had been running—down the road from her family's cottage to mine. The slap of flip flops on pavement, the feel of air rushing through hair and clothes and across tan skin.

(God, the smell of summer—so wondrous, so delicious—and the thrill of running and of youth and purity, without realizing at the time what it was. I imagine the crickets were just beginning to chirp in the seclusion of tall grasses filling the field across the road, and I imagine the lightning bugs were getting ready for their nighttime dance.)

Down the driveway and through the door, through the kitchen and into the family room—I thought she was behind me.

Laying on the kitchen floor, in the breezeway—her black hair like rays of sun framing her face.

Emily.

There were sirens and lights—blue and red and blue and red—and voices and prayers and confusion, and there she was.

The sun set and the blackness of night followed.

Hours later, the slow crunch of tires on the driveway, small pebbles popping under the rubber, and the sudden silence after the hum of the engine was cut.

The pained look on Dad's face when I met him at the door: I knew.

I feel myself pulled in two directions: towards a nostalgia for the past and also a yearning for the future. I roll my tired eyes at my habit of over-analyzing, over-searching, over-defining, but I can't seem to help myself, as it has been a need growing in me for as long as I can remember.

I'm left in the middle—in the present—in a moment following the past, a moment before the future. Moments sliding and fading, moments washing up on shore and receding just as quickly—the hypnotic movement of waves, their pull at the sand along the smooth shore. What do I have to say for myself—to prove myself and my existence—and what is that I crave? These questions run over me like water and encircle me like smoke from so many fires.

I still search.

If I could—another Fourth of July—I would be there, too: with Kendra and Carolyn and Elise and our three families sitting near a fire on the beach. The

four of us sit off to the side, away from the adults who are having adult conversations uninteresting to us. The four of us with our heads tipped up to the sky, pointing out constellations in the display of stars above. We invent our own constellation—see it right there? no, not there, see where I'm pointing?—we watch for satellites trailing across the vast dome and feel small, lucky—blades of grass tickling our ankles, our necks, as we lean back into the lawn and lay there—safe, peaceful, happy.

And there are more, many, many more. And if I could, I would be there. I think I would be there tonight.

Maybe he wouldn't've even recognized me anymore. My shoulder length medium brown hair is now a little over an inch long, is darker from the styling wax I put in it, and has blonde highlights. My eyes aren't as brown as they once were—green and shades of teal have flooded them and they were outlined in mascara and eye shadow, things I never touched in high school.

I drank more water and my stomach began to feel heavy, bloated.

He brought them their meals.

Maybe I'll say something to him as I'm leaving, I thought, or maybe as I'm sitting here. What would we have talked about though? I'm sorry I dated you for eight days, barely spoke to you, then told you after school one day that "this just isn't working" before you got on the bus to go home? I could've asked him what he's been up to—I was a little curious—but I didn't.

Along the axons, synaptic vessels are shot from one neuron to another, riding on electrical signals—nerve impulses—that increase in speed depending on the thickness of the axon. Each impulse sends loads of these synaptic vesicles, which are bits of membrane, housing fragments of sensations or movements or memories, to the presynaptic axon terminal, which rests on the receiving dendrite. Between the axon terminal and the synaptic cleft of the dendrite is a fine, fine space where these vesicles, these bits of our beings, must pass and be absorbed. This transaction is called synapse.

If I could drive myself there tonight, I would: I would take 96 East, 127 South, and M-50 East, I would take those back roads with their quirky names, ones that change with the beginning of a new county line. I would go there tonight, pull in the driveway, the key to the front door burning in my hand, and feel the breezeway take me in. I would go back to the summers of my youth and wrap myself in them and belong to them and they to me.

I am fighting sleep. Fighting, almost literally, fighting. I consider sleeping in the desk chair I'm sitting in, knowing it would be horribly uncomfortable, knowing my neck would complain all day tomorrow, knowing I might fall out during the night...knowing it would be less lonely than my bed with its infinite space

and unfulfilled promises and its cold, cold sheets waiting for me.

Growing up, my mom taught my sister and me to be independent. She told us to never depend on a man; that you can't depend on anyone but yourself. She told us to never let a man control us. She taught us to be strong and capable and self-sufficient.

I am more than grateful to her.

I am lonely. Slow to trust, I tell myself. Cautious, selective, smart.

Hopeless, I whisper.

Emily is buried in a small cemetery along US-12—less than five minutes from the cottage—and I go there once, sometimes twice a summer.

She is several rows away from the cobblestone church and one of the furthest spots from the highway. Her headstone is black—black like her hair—and when I go, I sit to the left of the marker, in the grass slightly damp from the warmth of the sun, and talk to her in a hushed voice. I imagine she is far, far away from this patch of land along US-12, far, far away from the shores of our lake even, but I still tell her what I'm doing and about my family and her family and that I miss her. I imagine that wherever she is, she might be able to hear some of my words or feel the vibrations of my voice across the miles or light years or whatever unit of measurement is necessary to describe the distance between us.

Sitting there, I am in a chasm of sound—the rush of cars along the highway fills the spaces in between the headstones and small trees and cement angels, and circles around me—but on the other side of the cemetery is a silent, steep cliff with a set of green metal stairs that lead down to a lake.

At the bottom there's only a foot or two of sand before the lake begins, which remains just over ankle deep for a couple yards out. The water is clear and the sand is soft, offset only by pebbles and colored rocks, most of which are smooth from the lapping of waves.

Trees and vines thrive along the shore—and there is one tree in particular that's receptive to climbers, allowing me to leave my sandals in the damp soil at the base and shimmy up the trunk. It houses a certain low, sturdy branch where I sit and lean back, breathing in the foliage and watching the reflections of white clouds and blue sky on the surface of the water. It seems far, far away from the cemetery and from everything else and sometimes that's all I want.

Cottages have a quality difficult to describe—the threat of cliché lingering close. Ethereal, magical...I struggle to find the perfect description, that one adjective that will light your face in complete understanding. And yet I can only say this: that often I long to be there when I want to belong to something, someone, anything. When I'm drowning in solitude or losing myself in the overwhelming monotony that inhabits much of my life, I hear the lap, lap, lap of small waves against the docks built with my dad's hands, the splash of fish

surfacing for water gnats or mosquitoes—perch, sunfish, blue gill, bass—and the smell—I smell the damp, fresh yet mossy smell of the lake. When I ache for reassurance, for comfort, for acceptance: I know the waters of my lake will provide this—the granules of sand along its shore, the water lilies and lily pads coiling and spreading with the arc of the sun, the smoke curling from the snapping fire on the beach out front—they will take me in and own me and love me. Perhaps I carry it all with me: some lake water still deep in my ear canals, sand in the folds of my eye lids, the smell of smoke and lake and sun in my hair, though I haven't been there for months. Perhaps after all these years and most of my childhood spent there, it's become my other half, my better self. Perhaps the life I lead elsewhere—my life in this anonymous apartment 138 miles away, for instance—isn't real, only stretches of time in between visits to who I really am.