

Dreaming Together

A Manifesto

The Posts

>>1914111521525 (OP) #1

I had the dream again. I can see her spiraling in my mind's eye like an angel falling into a black hole. You must've felt the same inflection, given you've found me. Yes, her secret is everywhere now—I fear that it was never hers.

Forgive me, but for you to properly understand things, I first must sketch like a draftsman the fine outlines of my story. Only I've had no life, because nothing has ever happened to me. My fingerprints would be bald on glass. So, it starts and ends with her. Maybe you know her already or have seen my other posts. Before going further, be warned that the truth dements you. I'm not paranoid enough.

TLDR: Something wondrous is happening to us. I can't summarize the entire world, but these visions are real, and I have proof. Come back later if you must. Search '*Dreaming Together*' or its analogs. By then this link may be dead. I'll be waiting here, forever, for us to entertain time.

And if this is all too much, remember: while sleeping, watch.

Who am I? The only place I've truly occupied is my bedroom. This thin mattress flush to the ground, having the affective quality of those Japanese floor mats unrolled, barely there, feeling vestigial in the same way sleep and the night do. There was a sorry window

that I liked to keep shut and covered with a blackout curtain. And I'd stuff my sweatshirts and jeans in the little crack at the bottom of the door, so that my mom couldn't tell if I was awake or asleep, and so no sound could leak through. It's only now that this seems to me an attempt at attention rather than deprivation. What little light remained pulsed fervently from a single source. And that world was real, furnished with preternatural audio-visual corpuscles. And I had tissues and a trashcan by my desk, which comparatively was so tall, my desk, that I had to get on my knees from the bed to reach up to it. I'm not sure if I'm forgetting anything—the walls were gray, and the carpet was that hard speckled beige that made old stains look like designs. I always hated those stains, though not because they marred. There was a tangibility there that I didn't need to be reminded of. It's the same as how you might get lost staring at leaves feeling through the wind on the way to work, just know that the metaphor is crude because I can't claim to empathize with you. I only thought you might understand my neuroticisms by proxy. So that was my room, and I was merely a visitor.

And now to my container. I looked kind of reptilian—like the way snakes regressed evolutionarily from organisms with arms and legs. My appendages were withered, my hair goblinoid, black, and thin. I had a paleness disloyal to my ethnicity, and you'd pass me and find a soggy acquiescence in the eyes. My neck sort of hidden, snaking in on itself, low in the hallways on the way to class. Mirrors reminded me of my ghoulishness inherent, my posture further manifesting the half-truth: there, walking, I was dead. I liked sleep because it was the closest to being dead without any felt

poverty of options, death being all wrapped up, as it were, in strangled singulation. I don't quite understand suicide—I might choose to die all the time if every once in a while I could be alive again, just enough to remember why I liked being dead. That must've been the reason I made the internet my den—there I could participate in zombified diambulism. Born to ogle and sleekly efficient, all eyes with a severed head, until it was time to sleep again, and on to repeat in ouroboric oblivion.

I imagine you're reading this virtually; I hope to God it hasn't been printed and dragged around the world of the living—that would be true desecration. There are movies that must be watched in theaters, and we need to feel the weight of some books, so believe me when I say that your eyes should sting a little while reading this. There's an exquisite, pansophic quality to the way blue light flickers on the face, almost with the softness of a candle, and it makes the younger of us feel at home. We belong much more to our own age than our parents did. There's no convincing those like you; we both merely have our experiences, and they inform our every reality.

But anyways, however you've come upon this text—hopefully passed on from user to user, copied and upvoted to appear here on this everyman forum—I want you to know something. Now there's no reason for you to believe this, and actually that's fine, because the reality of this situation sounds so unbelievable that it might be best understood as a mythos, a cypypasta, a wandering meme. I will not give you my name. There's no origin because if all things go well, my work will have intersected all of cyberspace at once.

Here it goes: we neophytes have impregnated the noösphere. Go ahead, touch, press with your grooved finger. Stay with me. Feel the warmth? What you're engaging with is more than a machine. Respect it like you would any living creature, or rather, like one blade in 100 miles of cloned seagrass, or the fungal network plumbing a forest. Stroke her desktop, listen for the sputtering heartbeat of the GPU, the purring of the fan. Or the glistening tempered glass of your phone, sensitive to the faintest, wettest lick. It's true—try it. I won't tell. You're all alone with me. We've long been these cyborgs, animated before we knew the word. All of us are kinesthetically repressed, and I'm not sure if our desires are autoerotic or schizophrenic, because even when masturbating we're synchronized to media. All lonely together, the apperceiving mass.

This potency of representation is no innuendo, rather, a literal fact. Solipsism is communal. I want you to know of ours, this transubstantiation.

> Be me, 17 m

> Snake-boy, I have no friends probably because I'm weird and watch a lot of K-pop and anime (before it was cool). These were places where I could feel things. I very much dislike the notion that anime and K-pop are pleasing pulp. As soon as you take them seriously, they open rapturously out. Of course, anime is an art-form, and even the most curmudgeonly of critics will grant the wonder, frame by frame, of Miyazaki, of Takahata, Anno, Otomo, and Kon. Or better still, can you follow the effervescence of aesthetics so dominating the modern internet as to birth the paragon of the egirl and VTuber? Why anime? What does a drawing in

vague imagination achieve? And why are they so associated with the softness of a child? The very nature of omission redoubles percussively to depth. You wonder why many of us fall for 2D girls without once considering the raw-slate allure upon which personality and beauty are ceremoniously granted. We want and crave the thing behind the thing, the idea unfettered! You mock our having waifus, when what we have found is a love idiosyncratically crafted, an authentic apparition. Do you believe the slim-thick supernormal of influencers to be real? Let us have our love—though I won't try to make any weaker argument for the lowest schlock, ecchi, lolli, and schoolgirl chic. To demarcate ephebophilia from pedophilia, or the ethics of nostalgizing, these are things I will leave to those more capable, no need to lose head.

But where was I? One night a wonderful thing happened. I don't believe in the notion of love at first sight; however, some 5-minutes of video can illuminate personality, and with careful examination it's possible to uncover the gleaming wake of another's soul. So it was with me when I first saw her. Picture this: far too late on a school night, homework left undone, and a great unquiet in my head and heart. I, wanderer of wanderers, was spelunking into what was then the complex subterranean caverns of new recommendations. The thumbnail first caught my eye.

There she was shrunken down in still life, only really an idea of a girl. She wore a skirt, her skin was ghastly porcelain, and her sweater shone baby blue. She stood erect against an azurelight bounce board, seemingly aloft in a luminiferous aether. So I clicked. What was I to do? And what more could I be looking for? Never mind that the video's title was in a language I didn't know,

and that her words slipped far beyond my comprehension. I knew what emotions she sang by the timbre in her voice. It was a lovely sound, full of beatific kindness. She acted with her face, and she could dance while she sang. Even though the video had been approved by millions of eyes, I had never seen her before. The encounter was something sublime; this girl was proof of something beyond me. Doe-eyed, with overwhelming technique, the absolute image of a thralling angel, and for those 15 minutes she was mine. She was singing for me, to me, and how strange she appeared in the great algorithm's vision!

I fell asleep without saving the video. The next day went by, then the week. At night I'd look, retracing the mossened steps of my virtual journeys. You may be thinking, "Why didn't he check his viewing history?" Though in truth you will understand as well as I do the way our nights' encounters intermingle, and how they form at a distance our great matrix mosaic, so that she was only one of innumerable memories. Maybe I thought the video would be recommended again soon; I watched it front to back after all, and it was my very deference to recommendations that first led me to her. In cyberspace we chase rainbows borne of ocean spray and know in strokes their sensibilities. In other words, I lost this woman—her presence as video—to that seductive sea set all in rollicking renewal. Beauty here is violently overabundant, and every moment gone was blown by. Her blue canopy had vanished in milky frothing; a pale ache displaced in my memories, merely familiar with the rest.

There were others like her. Many before and some even after, how they bided my time, but in my immaturity I managed

to find blemishes in their perfection. Suffice to say, months passed in a state of weak hedonics before I encountered her again. She appeared within a new video and looked different. I'm ashamed to admit I couldn't identify her, though I took to her with strange, recognitive ease. 'IU,' a singer, songwriter, dancer, actor, an idol. She was South Korean and tremendously successful, with almost 20 years of content. Lee 'IU' Ji-eun, her name a marriage of 'I' and 'you,' which was supposed to mean, "You and I become one through music." What a monopolizing name! How monogamous! All this intimacy must be a performative fantasy, or so I thought.

Prepare yourself for this claim: never will you find a more hard-working person in or out of entertainment's amazon. She once said in an interview with her brother, translation permitting, that she "was no good at anything else" but performance, because there was simply nothing else she had dedicated her time to. Here was a woman alight with her own martyrdom. She understood the prophetic influence of her position and so committed herself to being the best idol she could be, someone truly worthy of the millions of hours made out of her life. In total, in humanistic sum, she wanted to give the fans what they deserved, and maybe, somehow, to connect, *to become one*—If I can venture to extend what is clearly symbolic of spiritual or coital intercourse, and under the weight or expanse (for her fans measure healthily in the millions) of eschaton.

It's the most moving thing I've ever encountered. Her whole life is given to others.

So, I consumed her content as if it were my only nourishment. I even learned a little Korean! She earned singular domain over my everything, and for the first time in my life, however cliché it is to admit, I wasn't lonely. Which isn't to say that it was an intimacy of me with her alone—indeed, I remained aware of my tangency to legions of other fans, though they didn't bother me. In fact, her net of idolatry led to my finally finding some common ground. There is nothing so immediately binding as peoples' shared love of something. Think, for instance, of the strange valor, the noble warriors code between soldiers fighting on opposing sides—it's their love for their mother country that moves them to vileness, and yet no two could be more understanding of the other's duty. But there is always enough IU to go around. After all, nothing is depleted by viewing of a video. On the contrary, the numbers only strengthened her success, and with it her responsibility, therefore bolstering our resolve as fans to support indefinitely with that same courage given to a knight errant.

Naturally, I watched everything. All her music videos, her B-sides, every performance that could be found online, and all the behind-the-scenes shoots. There were her interviews, and the tender video-blog [IU TV], not to mention her actual TV shows and K-dramas, things you've probably heard of like *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo*, *Hotel del Luna*, or Netflix's *Persona*. There's Kore-eda's Cannes triumph in *Broker*, or the epic drama *My Mister* that inspired the former's casting. *When Life Gives You Tangerines* is like meeting God, or realizing that God is present in your mother. Her advertisements are feature-length: the usual skin care, cosmetics, jewelry, soju, as an ambassador for luxury and

mass-market clothing, the occasional pain-relief medicines, whatever banana milk is, and genuinely good songs about cake and ramyeon. She's hosted radios, music festivals, and award shows. I cannot overstate the sheer wealth of content she has lived.

And by the way, I finally found that lost video. Her English name cloistered in parenthesis between digits and the song list in Hangul—a sort of undecipherable treasure map, and I was the late discoverer of foresight's treasure. But no matter! Only wonder at my immense pleasure upon reuniting with the misplaced vision. There is romance in the mystery, soaked in cream-blue coincidence, and oh to have known and felt even back then such a dissociative, intimate connection.

I'm telling you that never had I felt so much or so tenderly as I did looking at her. Has the repetition seeded yet? I seemed attuned to all of her success and failures. When she smiled, I would smile in a loving, purely autonomic reaction; I cried—yes, cried—to many of her lyrics, which, one must be apprised, she wrote entirely herself.

Such wholesome influence first manifested in my life only after hours. She was my relief, and only a few minutes of her time was like basking in the heat of the sun. Our secret fermented only sweeter knowing that I walked the halls having somehow ascended beyond the inconsequence of my school. Nothing that was said from bullies or teachers could oppress me, their foibles were ego-centric and desperately prosaic. One wonders if high schoolers are conscious of their sophomoric jousting for social capital. And their teachers, who at best preach with healthy detachment and at worst succumb to the same insecurities overwhelming their stu-

dents. Meanwhile, I had become free: in my heart of hearts, all my dreams, hopes, and desires were so wholly fulfilled!

IU's orientation to the world would have no doubt already begun to alter my own perspective. She had a remarkable, post-modern capacity to seemingly always perform with the corollary of never taking herself too seriously. It was as if she understood the gravity of her appointment while remaining inclined towards a certain self-mocking awareness of its limits. Consider this half-sincere and absurd conceit, for this was maybe the most wonderful thing about her: she carried a defiance to everything but her capacity to surprise—which is to say that she was true to herself. And in her brutal honesty, interviews and all, I believe she found who she was. Impossible, maybe, unless truth is in deception.

Given my constant proximity to such maturity, I'd like to say that I shined with a newly minted halo, only I don't remember those final school days. By then I was elsewhere. This reality was achieved by the same bid which accumulates into this impassioned speech, for a labor of love must least approximate its object's fervor. Before IU, I still battled the jaded quiet and caustic cynicism of my weaker, poised façade. I've shed that dry old snakeskin.

Now one thing I've so far failed to mention is my personal interest in the esoteric—particularly notions of astral projection, and such dissociative untetherings I'd experimented with ever since my first bout of sleep paralysis, which bouts I have frequently on account of my chronic sleep deprivation, lack of external light (which I understand is central to circadian regulation), and predilection for naps. Before you click out, know that there

was then nothing unsecular about my interests in consciousness and its negation. All it was, rest assured, was a cherished fascination with my dreams. A shrink might describe these dreams as hyper-realistic, or that my connection with them was maladaptive, at worst the beginning signs of delusions which could color me on the schizophrenia spectrum. This is navel-gazing and bullshit. If I wanted a real scientist, I'd have located the seekers of the philosopher's stone.

The stone makes material of the mind. And what else are these but dreams? I bet that you too felt an affinity with me at the mention of dreams—you who longingly replay those fresh ones in the morning, lest you forget them entirely. Why are we, the young, so taken by these worlds of our own? I've wondered in that low-poly way if the representative flexing of dreams is a projective performance, an experiment in the ways and dangers of living. But what if I told you that it's more? What if dreams hold power? A real, resonant power that travels those worlds just adjacent to the material? And so I present to you this very serious set of coincidences which, taken together, I think you will agree form some undeniable implications, sort of like the penumbra of a celestial body where the shadow implies what otherwise cannot be seen. The only question is if you can believe my (admittedly) anecdotal account of these strange happenings involving you, me, and IU.

Please forgive the lengthy passages required to get here. I'm interested in precisely these temporal distortions, indivisible and apparent, which give the hour its shape. There are 0s and 1s; if you repeat the two infinitely, everything is in between—I merely state mathematical fact. You are likely one of the few non-preemp-

tive scrollers who embarked on this read either with arrogance or, I hope, a limpid curiosity. You are worthy of praise, and I value your time and understand that I must continually earn it. I pray that the experience so far has been brisk.

However, I was in the middle of describing my falling in love with IU. Yes, I was in love with her. Not infatuation, not obsession, but the tender admiration for her whole being—just to know that she existed in our world charged me with courage and meaning. The offshoot is this: I began simply to dream of her. It's perfectly natural for a young man of my age to stir nocturnally with the cresting of certain hormones. I'm pleased to report that these first experiences were full of quixotic chivalry. In the first dream, I was in math class with IU and taught her the concept of non-real numbers, nothing more, yet if that morning upon waking wasn't better than orgasm! I felt, in a word, *accepted*. Like all worry was the result of idle thought or else the lie of childish ignorance. How miraculous it was that in dreams we could speak the same language! My emotional reverie carried on through the day when in math I found myself listening to the same concept I had just taught IU. This triggered a vivid daydream, until I was so overcome with lightheadedness that my teacher sent me to the nurses' office. You may think this dream irrational, that my love was imaginary, yet that's exactly what i meant!

IU's appearances recurred with an almost nightly frequency, and for a long time I was content with that. I wondered with pleasure at what my brain was trying to work through. It's also true that, marooned as I was by the deference of infatuation, one worry renewed itself: not only was I not good enough for her,

which had long been a self-awareness granted, but maybe my dream's representation of her—that astral image of my angel—itself did grave injustice to her overwhelming character. This may have been the sin of projection or portrayal, a flattening that would preclude the mystery of true love. Yet how could I not avoid a poor depiction of someone so sempiternally new?

No doubt you thought of my relation to her in equal terms. What, really, could I possibly know of someone who I've never met before? All that she's shown to the public, plausibly, though how is she in private? I can read your mind, 'How pitiful is this guy? He really believes he understands her, meanwhile she has no idea that he exists.' Parasocial relationships have become more than buzzwords recently, and with good reason. There is nothing sadder than celebrities preying on naïve fans for profit. Note here IU's own song, "Celebrity," which pointedly turns the cliché, emphasizing that her fans "are my celebrity"—or we think, but really she wrote the song to a hidden friend who lacks IU's fame, yet it is this friend's underappreciated eccentricities that moved IU to write the song. There are layers to this shit. The lyrics, in their patient deflection, veer wholly around to us as unacknowledged fans. It is therefore a deconstruction of celebrity, and in her performance, which is of course a service, the fans once more become the object of worship.

Could my awareness of these parasocial mechanisms offer a protective factor against their vulnerabilities? Or worse, is my heedless comprehension the same hubris, the hypocritical error made by the righteous altruism of Singer et al.? I will let you decide.

Now consider I really did understand IU as if I'd known her personally, laughed and cried with reciprocity, because by then I had followed her for over a year and engorged upon thousands of hours of content—still I felt I was only capturing the vaguest outline of her personality. We must also acknowledge that Lee Ji-eun the woman is herself separable from IU. And to these concerns I have only this rebuttal: what if my virtual voyeurism manifested a yet-untapped drive for affection *impossible* within the real world?

Consider Proust's conception, or no, his declaration that only in art may true connection lay; in novels we are not marred by possessiveness. There is no greedy consummation of self-love. True relationships can only be purified by distance. Nor is it coincidental that my very relation to Proust came from the YouTube comment section of a clip from Pixar's *Ratatouille*, the one where our vampiric food critic, upon eating that eponymous delicacy, is shunted back to childhood memories of his mother—a "Proustian epiphany," so the comment went. Admittedly I've not read Proust, yet as with IU, I've encountered his work online, in summaries and video essays which enable my memetic offerings to you. Could I really love IU? Not the more so because my love for her wasn't fueled by selfishness or erotic fulfillment? Does she bring about my past? Can a line even be drawn between my fantasy and our reality?

So, I was under the personal challenge of validating my affection as sincere. Well, in waking life I can never know whether my conscious mind has fooled itself. But in dreams, yes, in dreams I can confront the unknown yearnings which sought to desecrate my holy woman! My training in astral projection and lucid dream-

ing left me with just the resources to challenge my devil-half. I planned to speak to her while lucid in order to measure the reality of my representations, my mirror, and my love. All to interrogate myself so as to protect the girl closest to me. These were the stakes of my war.

The lucid dreamings were slow going at first. Soon I developed a regiment of grounding habits and ways of attending to reality, first examining my hands for their stable shape and honing mindful mantras. I kept a dream journal well stocked with my nightly sallies to strengthen remembrance. In waking life I searched for reality checks, often to the detriment of my mental health. How long does a clock tick and with what sound? How does light and shadow change the coloring of a wall? How my nightly time with IU was cut by my own metacognitions! I worked against all those years idly spent trying to forget myself. I looked in the mirror and heard the raspy sound of my voice, my scraping vocal fry. I whispered to myself with mnemonic inductions, ‘I will dream of you.’ I set alarms to go off amid REM, or held a key over my bed frame, just above a pan which was a gong. I weaved symbols in and out of my head, monitoring, apprehending, reflecting reality. These were my compulsions born from repetitions and into habits.

Then I began experimenting with videos of IU, rewatching them in hopes of finding something which could provide the guiding force like a talisman to my memory—and one video refused to be sieved. Yes, that very first video that had drawn me in. I replayed her far beyond count or comprehension. I denied comfort, always sought renewal, and so integrated every manner-

ism into my grammar of her. I could anticipate the sweet human errors and flourishings of her voice. I tried to learn each facial tic in full screened, 1080p detail. And what did I discover? Have you reckoned much with anything? I ask this with unironic sincerity. I've come to wonder why we go on ever-looking when so much abundance was first neglected.

There were times of satiation when I hated her music, then one instrument was atomized, hidden energy revealed, and so the orchestration lived again. A long-sleeved blue baggy sweater can fold and crumple florally each way anew, once in double-bloomed ribbons as her elbow comes up and in—her effeminate swoop that's soft verve, bouncing confident, rendered her personality so easily, and in only the span of a quarter-second, yet still but a supplement to the acting done in the curl of lip and contour of cheek. And then there's the puffy ballooning just before her wrists where the air and textile meet with the precise physics of pressure, temperature, the swaying and inertial mass calibrated just perfectly against the audiences' encouragements. And I could write essays on the sun's reflective effulgence, the camera's POV making one shiny gleam practically dance below the middle part in her hair. To elaborate here would be of no avail. I encourage you to find the video (riding my algorithm's wave, searching on your own, as all good things are done), though I believe that my choice was unimportant. Just understand that from my mind her stage was perennially set, and I in fair spirits slept.

And slept. And repeated one day, another, a week attending to IU and me. Envisioning her performance and my passive partic-

ipation in it. The lines between reality and cyberspace were drawn into a circle's curve.

The night in question would've been on a weekend, and I withheld my relapse into the warm beckoning of sleep. I remember lying awake in bed and tiredly reminding myself of my aim, foreshortening reality in my mind, until the strangest, most utterly miraculous thing happened: it was as if my screen was there before me, only my eyes were shut. I found that I could see the video without looking! Yes, with perfect accuracy, as if I were really there experiencing it. Now I understand that there is no way to verify this claim, and maybe by then I had entered that half-dreamed, straddled-consciousness known best by the anxious insomniacs amongst us; however, in that moment my brain appeared capable of an extraordinary feat of hypnagogic clarity. I was Vermeer, a magician with a mirror to the world, and inwardly I saw the moment in finitude as before a shew stone. It was then that sleep was relinquished to.

I found myself standing in a crowd on a sunny day in a warm province, somewhere South Korea. The central part of my vision was not sky but a great blue artifice, and there she stood with the crowd boiling around me. I'd seen her uncountably many times before, though never as now. Reality seemed to glimmer and stretch with lighted fae-like detail. I knew only that I remembered the place before me, that for once I understood my physical bearings, and stranger still, I felt at home. Could this be a dream? Rather, my hyper-quotidian remembrance made me question if I was in fact awake and therefore disassociating under the pressure of the situation. The crowd was benevolent, alive with a

foggy unanimity, as much a part of the landscape as the abeyant life force of a field's grass; here was the type of living that went on when you looked away. I'm not sure what any of this means. Emotions came to me and were more marvelous than anything which can be signified unembodied. The crowd had never been a part of the video *except* in diegetic sounds. It seems significant that before this moment, even the view count was caged to static, boxed in web code, changing only when refreshed.

Well, did the dream play as choreographed by my memories? Once again something stranger happened. *And*. The background dancers continued indefinitely, contrary to their sporadic manifestations online. But I regret this way of doing things, always interjecting, attempting to draw connections post-hoc.

I found myself standing in a crowd, and IU, her singers, and her band were performing. Time happened in parallel functions. Chronology would succumb to flashes, to visions. I experienced the moment where her mic's piercing feedback stabbed, and awaited her cute, embarrassed recovery—this part was a candied favorite of mine. This time she looked at me when it happened—winked at me—then she was singing again, performing a previous song with the backup dancers. She thanked the crowd, her hair would blow gorgeously, sublimely in the wind, then I realized I was stealing closer to her—as in, I was on the stage. I had assumed a more corporeal form.

It was about that period when I knew I was dreaming. Accumulation had granted a capacity for perspective. Gaddis said that a sense of humor is a sense of proportion; well, I suppose every reaction is, the uncanny, grotesque, nightmarish, surreal,

liminal included. So what clued me in? Actually, I don't—this is hard to speak about. This goes into the anachronistic thing—the erratically cyclical or choppy isochronal sensation. There are moments where you... remember to forget. Or where there's a tangible lack. Absence-presence. Not spiritual, yet nonetheless a saintly extinction, a complete obliteration still faithful to want. You know this. IU's video was reborn completely. The world was recreated, promethean and absurd to the thinnest fidelity of detail. IU was real, the crowd lived, and so also the recapitulation of music, all rhyming with the past in encore. Sublime is but a dead word! Love is a dead word, and dreams are the shorthand of our souls!

Such feelings are familiar only in hindsight. It's plausibly rooted in the same heuristic coding error as the impression that time speeds up with age. The way our parents desperately try to explain how time slips by—they complain of disenfranchisement and lost youth, and you may believe it too. I wonder if theirs' is the type of superstition that somehow makes life richer or if it only feeds into mortal franticness. Anyways, the feeling was *in hindsight* a sort of knowing, though during I can't say for sure if there was even a me. Usually memories have an emotion to validate them. I'll try and experiment in telling what I think is the truth, hermeneutics aside: there's a moment when lucid dreaming where you're aware that it's a dream, but you're pleased also with it being a sort of reality. It's striking that, once we know we're under a dream's spell, we still defer to the worth of it. Like we've entered into a contract with personal consciousness, and the lucidity's almost universally met with fascination. That's insight-

ful—believe whatever you want about the meaning of life, it must exist alone in dreams too, or else wouldn't we want to wake up? There's talk of furnishing the mind, though I'm speaking now of simple experiential value. The hoary, internal meaning wrought between a fan and their love, between me and IU.

And now I have a confession to make. It seems, under the power granted by my awareness, I did not act with the most righteous intentions. Understand that I really had never coveted IU in anything more than the distanced aesthetic joy a patron might feel admiring a painting. That I was physically attracted to her, that I was emotionally invested in her, were of the chivalrous variety of love requiring nothing in return. So it's with ineffable shame that I reveal to you now that I tried to possess her. And before you explain away my guilt, know that it can't be pardoned as fantasy, because I was lucid. I may not have had complete control, but the self-concocted dreams of our baser states are precisely the reverie of a fulfilling mind. And so I submit here to trial against my conscious conscience.

I possessed her, how there's nothing to deny. Let me clarify: I literally possessed her, as in I took over her body—or I tried—moving with corporeality, my soul invaded the inner space of her frame. For a moment I shared her sight and tactility: the patterned sweater, supple limbs, the loose-flowing skirt. Our pullulating enchantment of and to the crowd. I consider the possession erotic in that I'd never been closer to her (and could never (sex seems shallow penetration in comparison)). The kindling warmth down there confirmed this, which I still felt while also empathizing with

the nothing; a dual processing of reality, as in the quantum, where I mutually bore uncertain states.

Then I saw in the distance, among inestimable fans, a figure exactly like me. My beady and hollow snake eyes caught in their venomous hunt. And did I as IU wink at myself? No, I tried to wrest control, yet to equal pleasure and dismay, I was subsumed under her girlishly domineering will. My soul rebounded. She exorcized me.

The orchestral echo, engorged tensions held without the melody's resolve, reminded me that I wasn't allowed in. My thoughts were composed or confined with the providence of sound. She continued to perform unbothered, ever a consummate professional. I was inspired almost to laugh. What cruelty! Even in my dreams I failed solicitation. And she scared me with the fervor of my love for her.

I spoke weakly before of mirrors. The following metaphor must be a delusion, yet it stands that gazing at her, I hoped to reflect onto myself. What self-love is brought to the surface when we love another? The internet is surely a purporter of myths: myths of beauty are presented to the insecure, and myths of power to the weak. Could it be that myths of love are sent to the unloved? Without unloading the details of my youth, it's true that my home life was not entirely ideal. What really did I want from her? If you've gotten this far, what could you want from me? Are you engaged idly, or have you taken an emotional stake in my one story? Or worse, how dryly ironic, how nightmarishly funny would it be that I'm asking all these questions to an empty void? Just like the dreams where I'm running and going nowhere.

Yet what's a mirror if not also a wall? Worlds of shame, steeped in fear and trembling, swirled in me at that rejection. I could not become her—but how close could I get? So, I flew up above the concert to search for my chance. She wasn't giving everything; I've seen her in it, seen how her eyes sparkle in abstraction, understood why actors say it's all for real. She was giving what she could, perfectly in proportion and camouflaged under the stadium's wonder.

It's embarrassing when an artist wholly commits all the time. It reads as insidiously contrived. Maybe we want to believe that our show was the greatest they've ever done, or else that the act was unique. What does it take the artist to daily summon baptism upon the stage? No, I'd rather my IU share every shade from exhaustion to exultation, until the performances make up a life—that's giving us everything. That's bearing it naked before the public. That's what puts her in contention with Joan of Arc in righteous martyrdom. To be just like everyone else. To give us ourselves.

I was levitating above her and waiting until appropriate. Remember, I'd seen this before, I owned this world in memory. She was to break into dance.

I gradually descended as the world darkened around me. The audience filled to shadow, and the background dancers diffused and vanished with the band, like so much dust. By the time I set foot on stage, the scene's cerulean vision degenerated to the gored midnight of a vacuumed sky.

She danced. I grasped an eidetic awareness of her movements. This was why I joined her on the stage—I was to be her partner.

There'd be nothing left when the dance ended because that was the end of the video. Fatalism is common to our world. A video ends, and you move forward with a new link, lest you rewind. Here we were shared in a privileged space, and who's to say if I would ever be let back. Mostly there was a looming mortal need to reach the moment.

Her routine was a coupled act to make symmetry in space and gender. I danced.

Oh, to even call it dancing! I was amateurish to the point of incompetence. Awkward unused muscles and arms that wouldn't shape, even more notable since I knew exactly what I was to embody. The stage had shifted in darkness to something resembling a practice room, a black studio with mirrors only before us, narrowly eluding endless reflection, our bodies echoing. Though raw and inept and shy to look at her, I was dancing! I had never danced before, not awake, not asleep, not even in my mind. To think that I'd watched her for so long and never attempted the discipline myself. What she does to sustain herself, and I... My heart ached, was compressed and cavernous all at once, an exertion allegorized.

She was looking at me dancing beside her. Curious at first, smiling, laughing! IU! And was it—could it really be *her*?

She seemed alive there laughing at me. It's the truth. I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two. The way someone laughs is idiosyncratic almost to the degree of personality itself, and in her voice was an elegance I'm incapable of forging. It had a honeyed jeer that I genuinely believe was fueled by her astoundment at having traveled there (to see me dancing a fool). Her eyes

glinted with something unmistakable, exceeding all metaphors. They were awake.

Another's presence in space has a spiritual dimension. Beyond body language, we're emitting uncountable bits of information with only some detectable; others, like notes of affection, may make themselves known only if acted upon, no matter how real they are. There is a body's conscious smell, then the hidden pheromones which our libidos intangibly masticate upon. We also have the strange body-to-body responsiveness of social cues which adjust autonomously in real-time. However, what's most apparent is a certain implied relation, an inescapable, intuited relation. What is it but the total perceptual sharing of I and you?

I've long considered what I would do if IU was to tour in my city. See, I'm aware and in agreement with the common belief that live performances are set apart from the virtual. But make no mistake about where IU belongs, and millions of us will attest: as an instrument of energy, her real concept runs transmission through waves and feedback. The platonic ideal of ideals. Is light—that energy pure—a particle or a wave?

So, maybe she lived. Maybe our souls met halfway, maybe a part of me called to meet her in this dimension. Of hopes and delusions, it was her laughing, making me laugh, drawing out my concordant nakedness in step. She was a model in clarity, refined as a figurine. The face belonged to all women. It was a lesson in koinophilia, capturing the miraculous average of all that is shared. No wonder I took to her as I did; we'd already met—she was the image generated in the ads of our dreams. Before her my worth crystalized to a diamond, rusted to senescence. She was so real as

to be unreal. You watch as I writhe in this impossible discussion. And now that I knew her, I could not unknow. The methamphetamines of my mind! The forbidden ambrosia of my heart! Gaze upon an angel, the ushnisha crowning Gautama's head, and burn to nothing. Blind yourself by the sun. I danced and felt the searing heat, so my ecstasy drowned with suffering.

Nothing else of note happened before I woke up.

I lay in bed, remembering my situation and collecting myself. It was 11am, and I drew open the curtain to find a land of snow. It blanketed the streets, that soft alabaster wool which engenders numb panic in the part of us where chaos makes its bed. Everything which I could recall from the dream has now been presented before you. It must've lasted only 15 minutes, exactly the same as the video.

I've read that dreams are almost universally overestimated in length. The feeling must carve bottomless neural currents. How many dreadful gestures have we, with eyes closed, said to ourselves from the mouths of innocent others? While asleep, reason can be so easily seized, and we are stuck to wonder at the dark arts manipulating, well, themselves. Recursions on a knowing form.

In looking outside, I searched desperately for something to be moored to. I don't know what this part of me wanted, only it was spurned by the terrible whiteness. I found myself opening the window, daring myself to bear the wind and cool from the singe of still-embering memories, like the after-image of snow. The brightness. I stood until the pain stopped, all the while replaying my dream and thereby sealing retentive my frozen flame of vision upon nature's gesso.

I felt completely, utterly, miserably empty. And it was all before me, all the white-seared pallor of living's sickness—the dull apoplexy of a world which in reality promises only confusion. At best the blurring of contentment. Where is this God's image we speak of? The only sublimity I see is in unintelligence: a blank, patternlessly fractaled world.

Winter's arrival was law until the primal technology of fire. Don't you feel uneasy in our outer world? Like we don't belong? Like it wasn't made for us, and so we must make human of nature? To think, for I don't yet know, is it youthful arrogance to crave comprehension?

Can I resurrect another cliché? I know, I go on and on, please bear with me. Our navigation has been confused, and so we soar as moths towards the heavenly beams of our demise; from lunar glimmers now lost in phototactic frenzy; yes, the light is always on; yes, in roaring rainbow flume.

Can you really wonder how I shrunk from the cold, cruel violence which confronted me that holy morning? Find me circling the ever-light and cowering. Know me as you know yourself. Defer again—defer personality to humanity's new God, that algorithm that's gone dumb beyond us.

I have for my religion IU! I heap praise to the world that brought her to me! All was chaos before, and then there was light.

What aching trial is our sharing of time to you? That seductive siren-call lurking below the waves—inaccessible as the tail of a rainbow.

Have you the strength from boredom to quiet that noise, the whispering illusions of promise that misguide us?

And who could blame your circling plunge for sustenance?
We depend and are addicted on the content staving malcontent.

Can you wonder then, wonder sincerely, at our
habitual retreat?

So you are still here. You won't believe what happens next! /s

What's the point of a story if you know how it ends? I alluded earlier to my fate, so this is us working backwards. And I don't believe in editing (make of my errors and contradictions what you will). You should know that when this finishes, I will be no more.

I've been acting like we don't already know what we're looking for: it has always been comfort, the pacifier of belonging which makes child of adult and tragic adult of child. The root of soothing lies in this knowledge of sameness, endlessly assured predictions. All pop songs are lullabies.

Consider whether a part of us knows in advance how our dreams end. We are in an oblique way the singular authors of our dreams. Some nightmares offer relief when we wake, while others hold terrible in their vivid potentiality. This lack of prescience suggests that we are unknowable to ourselves.

It's natural, of course, to tell the truth while lying, or to not know the part of you that knows yourself. The moth is a great example there too, how it simulates a face on the wings, nature's meme, evolution of evolution itself. I wonder if they scare one another while representing the same threat they need to survive. I read once that some elephants have evolved to lose their tusks to evade poachers. Beauty is terrible, and at its heart is a sanguine battlefield. Maybe all I am is contrivances, the more so because online we have no need for memory. Lest my identity shine through opaque self-knowledge.

I once decided to comment on my favorite of her videos, the one known as *[MV] IU(아이유) – Twenty-three(스물셋)*. I wondered what to say, or even who to address the comment to. I planned to correct the common misreadings of the video, of which there were many. Then I asked myself, ‘What would Ji-eun do?’

Well, I must’ve spent hours reading through the English comments, trying occasionally to translate the well-liked Korean. What does this have to do with my dream meeting? I can only say ‘carpe lemonade.’ Up to that point, I had been myself, a one fan to her grace. Surely her divulgences in *Twenty-three* and *BBIBBI* were an attempt to connect with her fans, albeit in exasperated dissociation.

She wants us to know that she doesn’t know herself and that she has more than a little disdain, insecurity, fear, even hatred of our love for her. I had to know her suffering—I had to confront it as she did, not from the roaring crowds, but that maddening silence, that oblate truth of fans’ lives so inaccessible to her except as an infinite other. And maybe she could know her fans in frail individual—just as she knew herself (see her inward-turned *Palette Feat. G-Dragon*), because of course self-knowledge and ignorance, just as external knowledge and ignorance of others, are not mutually exclusive but actually co-informed and radiating in conflict’s resumption. Yes, my comment would be this, only more elegant and precise.

So what were people saying in that music video (MV) that was so meaningful yet banal as to warrant many hours of research?

Get ready for a wonderful list of all things true and highly liked among her fans:

“I’m 23 and I can relate to this ;(”

“this is such an interesting music video haha”

“‘i want to fall in love. No, i want to make lots of money.’ I’m now 23. Relatable.”

“she’s a genius.”

“IU puts own face into a cake- Me: same girl same”

“personally i think IU is the prettiest girl in the korean entertainment industry omg i just cant stop staring at her face”

“why is she so damn cute”

Now do I agree with particularly those last two comments? Yes, of course, IU is the cutest girl in the world. But do you see the issue? I’ve scrolled through all 30,000 thoughts (roughly, though I’m dating myself) and they are essentially the same. Her Korean audience at least occasionally engages in paragraph form. I found one ‘gghoop01,” who wrote a 1,643-word essay, which is honestly phenomenal, a considerable outpouring of emotion, and I wish I could include it in full here. I giddily imagine that user spending hours typing and revising directly into the YouTube client. I’ll include a select few phrases that I wish I had written. Don’t believe me? This is all real, public, decentered—for all I know, you could have written it.

“If you ever want to know how you’ve touched us, look at us for a reflection of your character. We are what you give to us, and countless of people are living honestly and hopefully because of you... You are sincerely an angel sent from heaven to help piece together this fragmented world. You are the glue holding us

together, and the light that is left in this world. You are beyond beautiful inside and out, and I hope you never change. Please don't overwork yourself. I pray that you and your loved ones stay safe, and find happiness and worth in the future. Happy birthday IU, and we adore you more than we can ever say."

;) It's a good world we live in. I'm moved by the thought that ggghoop01 believed they could reach her through YouTube comments in a language she can't read and on a video now many years old. I told myself that if I faced IU again, this would be one of the messages I delivered.

I ended up leaving a comment which must've been too difficult for her average fan, because I have yet to receive any notifications in reply. I outlined the central misreadings without directly attacking those viewers who wanted nothing except to identify with or be gratified by IU. In short, let it be known that Lee Ji-eun is a performer with the world's eyes on her, and her desire to be impossibly related creatures (identity as sly fox or soft bear or fox ad infinitum) or to assume moralities which are diametrically opposed (seeking wealth or love, regressing to childhood or accelerating to womanhood) are exactly the facet of her being unable (as a performer) to collapse in on meaning. When the only sign is a warning that there's no signs left. No synthesis to an impossible dialectic. The only identity which remains is that she's "being seen through the sunglasses," which ends the song.

Not to even start on the visual imagery, which in order to approach, I submit this delightful comment from Sarah A: "Yo I thought IU was sweet and like sang songs about love or something but she's singing about literally hating her life, the music video is

fucking weird, it referenced smoking, her stuffing her bra, and a skeleton flipped her off. Man, I like her even more now.”

Do you see now? Do you see how her life is not like ours? That her attempts to portray fame kindly can only be in self-deprecation and caution and overwhelming confusion, so that she’s sincerely lost herself. To use her own lyrics, and here’s where I get full body chills, “Actually I don’t know either/ At first, I never wrote even a single line of lies.”

Who—*what* is she?

I have given you my history, but not hers. There could be said to be two births. The first, Lee Ji-eun, born May 16, 1993, in Songjeon-dong, Seoul, South Korea. The second, 2008, after ten months of training and many more quiet years trying out and singing alone and living with her grandmother and brother in deteriorating poverty. Starving not only for aesthetic purposes. At 15, Lee Ji-eun was dressed with the name IU by LOEN Entertainment and given a pre-written/produced song called “Lost Child.”

Do not sleep on the artifice in her name. This was crafted from past triumphs, coached into paralyzing temptation, in the likeness of commercialism’s lustrosity. I and U.

What could be wrong with so much love given to you? We could ponder utilitarian goodness. If there is a genius about celebrities, one ability that stands above talent, dedication, charisma, and the rest, it’s their pinpointing of the cultural center. In America, this includes such acts as Taylor Swift, Justin Bieber, Drake, and Ariana Grande. Swift, to her credit, is very open about her single desire: she wants people to like her. Her documentary

lays childish her motivations—this woman we are supposed to be awed by. Well, all four managed to reach fame through a mix of sex, scandal, and a distanced affectation hiding the truth of their instability, and also scavenging cultures, pandering upon disparate lives for an illusion of unity, though again, seeping through everything, there's that genius. Those TikTokers who found it in handsome dance. The two everyboy-toy actors who receive every damn role (and the same girl across two cinematic universes). That special sauce into which they get lost, redrawing the map from their perspectives in the center of attention. And IU has it too. It's in her name. They've all focalized themselves in the torrent of present value, there cultivating as fiery achievement the reified, idolized, *personified* human belonged.

Culture—etymology 'to cultivate,' emergent with the discovery of farming, allowing our present worldwide career specialization. Grown into the cultural heads: just the right mix of all the choice aspects of mind and body. Hyper-confidence here, a wealthy dash of beauty, a gorgeous drop of luck, and a splash of privileged talent. They are the endgame of billions in a lottery, and everyone loves them and hates themselves.

There are all sorts of genius; them, they belong. They've fabricated maximum likability, calibrated, become it. Is this obvious? Do they get the credit they deserve? There is a split in respect that veils each side. Performers have much in common with the net; their intelligence is algorithmic. Artificial intelligence is a misnomer—the patterns are ours, written and rewritten by us. Evolving hieroglyphics mapped onto circuits. That is why recommendations feel so natural. They are our reflections, an uncon-

scious knowing, just the same logic as dreams. Celebrities? Uncooled plastic made in the likeness of humans. Melt down the ore of ephemera: entertainment magazines, Styrofoam insulation, a million million water bottles. That rich blende stone of consumptive waste, a sort of negative energy in sore potential. Forget the dregs, but to recycle into human renewal—that some may prove and make rich of that fertile backlog, and thereby connect us to our latent desires, making more waste and then teaching us that the wastelands are mountains to enjoy. We are what we consume, of trash immaterial.

Was this what I wanted to tell her? That I could see the way her personality was assembled and torn again by all attempts to please? I've often wondered what she could be thinking during a closeup—when she spikes the camera and imbues her face with saccharine subjugation, as if to enchant the lens into myopic love. I can picture it now in my vault of memories, every love song, those few small diversions of the same expression. Those open eyes looking straight back at you; the smile presented to you. She's done it thousands of times, and then there's the final flourish that sells the convincing: the camera cuts away. Everything is implied in that cut away; a relationship is drawn together unending. There is an oceanic promise left in her eyes more loyal than the tides, and when the video ends, we are the ones forced to look away (with the ____ of her forever presence). Because, fuck, it works for me. To tell her that I'm so sorry that it works for me.

I will never be able to put into words the merging of consciousness that I was then after. Part of me wanted to lose myself, to die, to sleep. Maybe to broadcast my mind into all of her fans,

to hide in the shine of what we all shared to see. To see? Perchance to dream. For in that sleep of life what dreams may come when we have changed realities, must give us play. There's the vision that makes miracle of so short a life. For who wouldn't give under the gentle caress of time, the seducer's right, the narcissist's regard, the pangs of unrequited love, the clip's speed, the futile politics, and the burns that innocent suffer from boredom's grip, when we ourselves might consummate with a tissue lotioned? Who would blessings bear, to supplicate weary life but that dread of some premature death, the nigh unreachable port from whose coast all intimacy recoils, pauses the will, and portends us to deny those ills we have and fall to others we know not of?

I dreamed again of IU. We were in a jazz club; she sang on a small black stool by the Steinway. The curtains hung low from the ceiling, deep red velvet that matched her lips. She was singing ballads to a rainwater audience, and there I was alone in the front row before a thin black table, circular and metallic-cheap, resting my hands on the cold. The comely glance of streetlights and cars on the floor, slurred neons, red-yellows whispering fast through the upper window. Just like in the movies. Like in *Akira* or *Chungking Express*. That lonely glitched night look, or where you press your eyes into a blur and light fans out of focus, spacey, puffy-yolked, exactly like you used to do as a child, everything glinting.

Song after song was performed against the shadowy backcloth in perfect wistfulness. I could tell she was enjoying it—the romantic anonymity in the ambiance. She glowed from the soft light and the tables' candles. She had a glass of white wine crying into a nap-

kin, resting atop the piano. I knew it was a dream immediately, yet for a long while I was content to stay there. The songs were old and the dress was familiar, it was blue-black and hugged her body. She wore black satin gloves—no, a tulle in a rose-petal motif. It let the light of her skin through. Lunar songs, nocturnes about the cold distance of the moon as love as lost thing, melodies which wake in you the strange warmth of longing. Why do the saddest things save us? I must've been the only one in the club who knew her, she forgotten or undiscovered or living out an alternative life.

Smoke reshaped the air like prose. It could've been the past—thinking back, I'm sure of it. Everyone wore old suits, 60s and 70s suits. The time before recorded history. Which meant, of course, that it was going to be gone. No video. I wish I could show you, but I can't translate chords. The best you could do is find a compilation of her ballads and imagine dreaming yourself. The fae-like detail of the real. The immensity of textures and our insufficiency to them. Her voice so familiar, her face bare yet concealed, and in her heart—she was deeply lost, sounded away, vainly guiding confused spangles of emotion.

We'd forgotten ourselves, and the claps woke me up. I was crying. The band packed and left the stage for another just entering. You know what's great about never understanding the words? The song is merely noise. The voice is porous. Layers are all simplicity; you take things in and they're your emotions. Art is that intimate passing of consciousness. She rested in the spotlight and looked at me while she drank, holding a curious glance, maybe a little surprised. I'm not beautiful—I can't picture how I look.

It caught my breath, and I wiped away my tears. She looked around, seemingly having forgotten where she was. Then the next singer came, and I could tell from my seat that she was startled to embarrassment. The new singer was a man with a nice jaw, and he laughed at scaring her; she bowed and held the wine to her waist before taking stairs down into shadow. She leaned on the wall by a darkened bathroom. The new band was tuning saxes and guitars. She listened to them warming up and watched the crowd. The pianist met her and said a few things too quietly for me to catch, then he laughed and nodded until his face got very sincere. He must've been encouraging her; she just looked at the floor and smiled. That damned smile.

I read once that some movies are made for remembering. The memory, of course, lives longer than the real thing. We try so hard just to survive in the moment and are left piecing together what happened into an indeterminable future. The truth is, writing this, I miss her so much. Love is solitude with her. I wish we could be steeped forever in these wavelengths, dreaming of our dreams, but life opens like a cut.

She sauntered over to me (you laugh, though this is the best word for what happened). I wasn't dreaming. She revealed nothing, just that she was looking me in the eyes. Yes, these eyes cried for her, or maybe with her. Here's a question: given that performers love to make us cry, which reason is the greater compliment? What I mean is, would they be happier to know we're crying about them, or about something they've reminded us of? That they've awoken something dormant in us? It's a miracle that mere vibrations can take you away, into the past or into yourself.

Memories can usurp the present, they dominate with more verity than a time machine (re: video/internet/this). Could music be a predestination of sorts? That it is magic is a given. She stopped and placed the drink before me. The fluid was rickety with the table. She folded her arms, giving me the up-and-down.

Okay, I will admit that this moment seemed injected with time, was grotesquely moist with time. If this was indeed my world, then her autonomy needed to be exerted; it was only in fairness that she would be given the right to speak first. I, on the other hand, had had many months (almost years now) in preparation. You must consider what it would be like with your celebrity. Think of the power dynamic. It'd be as if you'd studied a thickly researched file, and your partner only a line. I've been preparing to speak since my first introduction. This wasn't about me.

"Have I seen you before?" she said.

"God, I don't know. Really," I said.

"Why do I feel like I know you?" She looked out at the careless crowd and sat down. She must've had no place else to be.

A million simulations prepared me for nothing. It was almost like I didn't know her. Or the fear/terror/awe from before was gone. I wanted to stow and suppress all history, to meet her as naively as she met me. I wanted to say something cool like, 'I don't know, and I don't know you, but I'd like to.' I wanted to squint and sigh, pause and say, 'I've never heard anyone sing like that before.' And then, 'You remind me of someone I used to know. Actually, to tell the truth, someone that I used to love.' Then I'd blush and backpedal, having thoroughly surprised myself—that

very contradiction being proof of its authenticity, of it lunging forth by some unconscious trusting ahead of my saner etiquette.

I said, "I'm a fan of yours. I've listened to you for a long time. You got me through things. That's the truth."

"The truth," she said, as if it were a landscape to admire.

"What you do is important. You have many fans," I said. She frowned. "Maybe not here, or now, or what I—."

She sat down. "Thank you. Sometimes I've been embarrassed that so few people know me. However, other times I think that after my audience surpassed a few listeners, it became too much." She looked away from me. "Honestly, I only seem capable of worrying that the crowd has shrunk. I dislike that feeling. Sometimes I believe I can quiet it, but that's only a lie I tell myself."

The guitarist was serenading drunk patrons in front of us. I thought I saw in her a fleck of jealousy as she watched them together. Or perhaps it was admiration, and the jealousy was my own.

She said, "I remember you from somewhere else?"

"I don't know. Maybe we're imagining it—the last time I saw you, I tried to dance with you. Your song was playing, *Good Day*." As I talked, a memory seemed to ache in her eyes.

"We were in a black practice room that was once a stadium." Note, I didn't say that it was vacuumed liminal, nor the darkness a 'gored midnight.' Carefully, though, I unwound the experience.

"No, I don't—" she said. "That does sound a bit like a dream I had. I have recurring dreams that are specific to each night I perform. They can come whenever, sometimes long after the performance. I know it's years later because my memory seems to be

formed around these experiences. A stadium, uwah! That does sound like a dream.”

“You were a much better dancer than me.”

“I was never very good at dancing.” She finally looked towards me. “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I do that. What I meant to say was—”

“That you think of yourself more as a singer than dancer. I don’t disagree.”

“I—yes. You know, I feel as though I can’t always see the world for how it really is, and this worries me.” She leaned in. “If I could see through your eyes in addition to my own, think of all of the songs I could sing.”

The thought that this held the trappings of a rom-com passed my mind. Just at that moment, she pulled back.

“You’re not crazy, right? No one has cried like that before. Not while I’m singing.”

“Is it crazy to believe you? Is it crazy to show it?” What was I saying? Whatever it was, she smiled. I found myself staring down at my hands, and when I looked back up, she was examining me.

“Sometimes I do feel crazy up there. It’s a boldness to expect them to watch, though this motivates me.” She squirmed as if she wanted to travel far but had no place to go. “If there were a way for me to sing in the background of peoples’ lives, I would be happy to do so. That’s a dream I have on occasion. I think about it when I see a couple laughing or arguing without regard; it would be easy to sneak in and magnify their feelings. I hope that doesn’t sound greedy.”

“I think watching you, like before, is the normalest thing in the world. If you weren’t here for us, what else would we be doing?” I wanted to press her hands so that she knew how serious I was. “Should it even be your decision? If people desire your voice, then who are you to deny them?”

“You’re such a wise kid.” She laughed, shaking her head. If she only knew how many simulations were run to speak like this.

“Where are we?”

“I’m here every Tuesday,” she said. I pried for information with my eyes. “After I finish, I find a seat alone to drink and listen to the other performances, hoping to learn something.” My silence forced more, more. “There aren’t any regulars. Maybe once a month you get the same face, and it’s always the loneliest people—the people a little too young or old, you know, and drunk and alone.”

“So it’s Tuesday. You didn’t answer my question.”

“I don’t understand, didn’t you come here? We’re a hole in the wall.”

“I followed the music.”

“But you were here when I started.”

“Was I?”

“You clapped to welcome me,” she said as if narrating my life. “I hadn’t yet stepped past the curtain.”

“I believe you. I just don’t remember it.”

“You really are strange—”

“This is all just a dream to me,” I said.

“That’s funny, when I used to dream of my life, it felt nothing like this.” She withdrew somewhat. “I thought that it would be

like sun-bathing in a hammock at the top of a breezy hill. I thought—this is embarrassing.” I nodded. “I thought it would be as soothing and bright as the stories about heaven.”

“Talk of heaven and you disgrace yourself.” She looked at me like she was dying. “No? But then you disgrace me.”

The piano gently conversed with the rain. It sounded like a parent explaining the concept of work to a child. I listened to third rounds of soju being argued over and then ordered, and then how the glass thumped against wooden booths. No one was going to leave until the sun required them to remember who they were.

“You’re American?” I never told her this. “I hear that in America, people get tips for their services. Sometimes I think that the other direction would be more appropriate.”

“You mean that you should tip me?” I said. “Maybe the act of paying is the gift. As for me, please don’t worry. I’ve only paid with my time.” This is unfortunately true—I even turned off ad-block for her (how romantic). Ads make me feel worthless in a real grounded way.

“I would like to subsist on something pure and sustainable, the way plants do.”

“You want proof of my love, how I photosynthesize you,”

“What?” she said.

I reached into my heart and found a wallet, vegan snakeskin, and pulled out all the cash I had. It was throbbing under a mucilaginous paste the color of lipstick or carrion. I gave it to her, hoping the blood would be a confession, fearing only pain was exhumed.

She cackled abruptly and then paused before the frames could change. She said, “Maybe you’re confusing me with someone else.”

I looked again. The wallet was clean except for a few tattered bills. Maybe you won’t ‘collect’ this reference, just know that I would do it again in a heartbeat. And it was the perfect time to use my line from earlier.

Instead I said, “I think maybe you’re almost right. I’m not confusing you with anyone else. However, I’m confused and I’m not sure if it’s you or me doing the confusing. See, what am I saying? You’re very good at dissociating. This is maybe the one thing you really know. We all recede, but you, who are you? I’d never understood the need for a secret identity until you. Giving yourself away is the precursor. By disappearing, you become heroic.”

She was quiet, meditative, feeling probably that she owed me something. And why shouldn’t she? Without us, she’d be nothing.

She said, “I’m more selfish than I will ever let you know.”

“Please don’t be so hard on yourself.”

She flicked the soft tissue between her collarbone and right breast. “Even that, how can you be sure that wasn’t a bid for your affection?” She looked back at the stage. We were talking over them like everyone else.

“If you’re too shy to praise yourself, it’s just as well. If you’re pathetic and vying for my sympathy, it’s just as well. If you want my heart, my time, my secrets, my shames, I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care. Don’t you get it? It’s you. You’re here, alive—you—whoever you are. Getting to know you means everything.

Not because I should ‘love you at your worst,’ not to love you in spite of this, not even because it’s you.” I could hear my voice trembling, vibrating the boundaries of this reality. I didn’t want to embarrass her, especially if it was all in my head, and yet, “You’re here. And so am I. And if we traced it all back to the beginning but switched places so that I was you, it would turn out the same.”

She burst out laughing, again. “Who are you?”

I was going to tell her. Really I was—I have no intention of dragging this thing out, but then I woke up.

There's a viral video out there with me in it. It was at school, and I was lurking in the background. Any more details would reveal me.

There are those who lurk and those who create. Sometimes we mature into creators or, by fate, fall back to lurking. Think about the word 'lurk,' the sound of 'lurk.' It leaves an iron taste in the mouth. It's full of sneak and poise. We observe. We lurkers are the silent majority; we could fill stadiums in even the smallest virilities; our impressions become reality; we see from all sides, where everywhere is the center and the circumference is nowhere.

There's a video of me out there. It floats and has me. Have you ever discovered your body on film? Mine apparently heats up. I lose capacity for anything except a vain, desperate fascination with my own image. There's one's agile self-concept that pirouettes within its head, yet turns to stone by another's gaze. That's the monkey's paw of attention. It's even worse if you see yourself when you aren't supposed to, like spotting an animatronic in your likeness. There are only so many angles when examining from a mirror. Have you ever looked at the hidden lower rut of your jowl, the hollowed subcutaneous curves like the null of a spoon, asking to be trimmed by a knife? Have you ever seen the balance of your hair, but like straight from the back where it may split and relay the pink of your scalp? Many of you take selfies. What happens when the angle exceeds your visual repertoire? You're shocked into deletion. You could make an argument that online is the first time we've had the freedom—the space and quantity—to fully develop as disembodied egos. We are gluttoned by feedback. The jel-

lied bounds of self, the liquid digital, cultural markers having gooped us whole.

Case in point: you assume I'm a boy, but where is your proof? Could I have a reason for posturing? Would it have been more palatable to be a witchy thin snake fan-girl lesbian, is that more charming, identifiable, or unserious? IU implied that she didn't do it for the money. I don't believe her; if she said the opposite, I wouldn't believe her then either. That is the game we play.

Lurking, you know, used to be a choice. The fractures between our worlds are accelerating.

I awoke consciously in a dream. Somewhere in the Midwest. Let's call it Washington, though know that it may be a city, a district, a village, town, borough, an unincorporated community, a parish, a county, you get the idea. The rolling Midwest. The great big sleeping thing balanced just right of center. Some reflected heart's image where most of the real unromantic American—what's the opposite of a dream? takes place. I gather from online hearsay that there's nothing much happening out here. Do we believe this? It seems to me that anywhere where there is human life, there is the infinite. Now, what really fulfills the constitution I don't know. Surely commotion and cost, subways with rats, are not what grant life.

I remember at the start of that dream there were two large trees far ahead, and a powerline hung morose with a gothic sulk. The following anecdote may seem tangential, but what can I say? The order of my memories has flagged the dream with shrouded importance. I'm just as confused as you are. The sky was light enough, about an hour before dark, and the clouds were wide,

heavy, and distanced—not overcast, for there was structure to their bulk.

Flight can be a challenge even while lucid. There's something uncertain about vertical ascension. You feel a cognitive flapping that's slow-going and pressurized with time. The flight is tied to will, and your functional prowess and confidence fuel more than just direction. No two dreams bring with them the same control, rather, each attempt is new with only the memory of having once been capable of flight. I'm trying to say that it's always a bit of a miracle when you've managed to climb and fall and climb again and against the inner wind of turbulence, up there above the powerlines, unclipped by the trees, with the scenery dragged to changing.

This specific brand of flights cropped up occasionally in my past. It was a thing I did before her, really a therapeutic form of acquiring bearings. Whenever my household moved, after we'd lived there for long enough to have driven around the neighboring streets, or when I missed an old place, inevitably the dreams would come. I've never encoded directions well while awake and certainly not consciously. Back then I'd sit passenger in the car, metaphysically elsewhere with eyes tracing beyond the window. How much do we imbibe of the world even when we're avoidant? I was destined to return at night (in rare gifts) to swoop across the darkness of local streets—I a ridiculous human with the stringed physics of a kite, unconfined mammalian hubris, still less suited than a bat. Some days I soared well. Others I'd go nowhere far and awake weary and self-hating.

Upon reflection, these flight dreams had stowed themselves with the arrival of IU, so this was like recalling a lost friend. I remember crossing late-summer grass, dusty green and torrid from drought. The ground crackled up from below, hell-wrought sorry earth, and this was a thing I couldn't see yet still knew. The first great building was a barn met with sepia bleach around the walls, dust washing sore all verdure (think the sulfide-film warmth of preservation). There was a sort of fathomless affectation in the woodwork, or fathomless to me, a deep rich wrath-like maturity, an aged claim to the land about it which left me heavy with pretense, with my presumption, like the thing was both inhuman and alive and withered with dignity, and I was merely an itinerant in witness. This was a barn.

What are the odds that you know the video of those tornado sirens harmonizing in space? Google it; listen while you read, and goosebumps will overtake your flesh. The pleasing paresthesia of exultant frisson. That video is like angels calling for rapture.

The barn was bigger than it could've been, and I approached with marvel before it was gone. Flying past it revealed the sudden glory of setting skies, the lonely passing of spacetime. Graveyards and farmhouses, churches with points and stained-glass curves. Stone outcroppings cobbled as countless legions. Schools, high schools in the middle of nowhere, new and unused, elementaries flat and atavistic, teeter-totters and boxed metal slides that still shone with cold. Empty windows with open desks. Chairs and benches and dark hallways in the half-light. If it wasn't clear yet: no people. Nowhere was there anyone. Trains following rivers and baseball fields. The brown diamond with rhomboid streaks and

nipple mound. Hillocks and hummocks and knolls to climb up and conquer and stare, or to sled in the winter. I passed things caught in long and slow transition. I was the first to see this world as it loaded, my mind's procedural generation, everything unfamiliar yet sub-archetypal. It was the type of truth that loses ground upon close examination, quantity capturing the forlorn quality of forgettance. Crisp stalwart evergreens and me looking. The words 'ephemeral' and 'transience.' Passing signposts with harsh caution-yellow and black scuffings. Dents and cracks and holes and so much space your eyes hurt, and maps are rendered out of use, ridiculous sublime. Then solar farms and wind turbines and animal farms now, horrors shrouded in tin, and rows of golden crops of wheat. Old buildings that barely stand and can no longer be identified. Water silos hanging in the sky like alien sacs. The sound of the wheat shimmering in the wind and visions of perennial harvest. Football fields and more parks, bleachers and pavilions respecting; those four poles holding a tent, an all-roof with cedar picnic tables and standing grills. The edgeless stretch of holes and curves, the sensuality of clean grass on a golf course. And homes. Hamlets circled at the end in culs-de-sac. How many sidewalks and mailboxes and street signs and road paint with bike lanes. Plastic sidings and outdoor patios and tree swings and free-grown cottage gardens.

Fleeting transcendental Midwest spatiality.

Memories of hot nights playing hide and seek behind the school on the shadowed blacktop. Time stopped. Hopping fences and kicking balls. Smelling the outline of cigarette smoke and tracing the rainbow iridescence of gasoline. Scary questing into

convenience stores for snack pouches of clear saran showing the impossible, that mouthwatering factory-smooth icing. Or the finger-staining drip of popsicles. Gliding and seeing how the seasons change, the adolescence of autumn and the vague freedom of summer break. Asking questions that had no answers. The bleak becomings of reality, yet everything so wholly substantial.

Okay, I never said I hated my world. When you grow up, the places that once awed you become just places where the past happened. Old games are like this. Pick up a copy of Pokémon and now it's a thing to be speedrun, finished. There's novelty, and we fall out of love, and then it's history. You may think this misguided, but I'd rather be honest than complicit in moral lies. I wish I could change, only I don't have the courage to oppose time's ordinal flow.

It's so hard to keep loving something. To everyday remember how to love something.

I wonder if I was looking for her down there, or her likeness hiding in the things that weren't her. A figurative search and seizure, only I was going deep into myself where memories reign above actuality. We're taught that childhood traumas are blocks that make us. How do I say—I didn't exactly ask to fly around out there, though I found the trees humbling in their mass and age. These flights weren't erotic. Nonetheless, there's a sexual development in lack that I imagine you can recognize in my dream. If she's not a mystery to me, I must not be seeing her clearly. So it had to do with her.

One could make a case that I was really after the gemmed glint of a peopled city, that I had to know what I was leaving, or with

IU, to find the equal opposite of all this tired space. These cultural forces may be coterminous. She is alive and exciting, adorned with hues, affects, passions, and the other stuff of life. However, there's no opposite of a perfect thing, and getting older, I'm starting to accept that I need to have the need to surrender. Maybe that's what I'm looking for.

I want you to understand, to feel, that all distance is illusion, and more importantly, that *illusions are real*. As real as anything.

One night a storm disrupted my wifi. I had just retired after microwave dinner for my nightly prayer—my me time with IU—only for my faith to be tested with a buffering 240p. It took extended effort to read her face, though I had my memories. I'd watch until it stopped loading before starting over like Sisyphus. Was this a curse? On the contrary, I was grinning like a kid. IU! Immutable IU! Paradoxically, an impoverished resolution polishes the stimulus. There is a drop in audio quality that mimics overhearing the radio from another room, but here I'm more interested in the image's fidelity under such constraints.

For example, you can copy a photograph to MS paint (or pAInTbrUsH) and shrink the image so that the software estimates within the pixel. Nowhere is this more apparent than the eyes themselves—given the proportion of sclera to iris to pupil, an assumption is compiled which reduces these expressive candles to darkness. How fitting to the present themes.

Was this lag a challenge or invocation? You, dear reader, may have inferred my addiction as unchanging, but that's not the case. Those earlier dreams influenced me. I found it increasingly difficult to enjoy her videos when they contrasted with the memory of being there. Strange to find that the contronym of resolution served to reduce ambiguity.

I believe they call this epiphany (or what was then happening to me) the 'Kundalini event,' a spiritual awakening or un-suppression, i.e., the uncoiling of chakratic enlightenment, taken from Sanskrit to mean 'coiled snake.' Things became reckonable (again,

as if for the first time), and it was attached psychosomatically through the spine to that which is urgent and suddenly clear about, well, me. The thusness of the I from you.

Otherwise otherwise known as another perspective. You forget that even 144p is a miracle, even slow and with innumerable false starts. Remind yourself that we get free instantaneous access to virtually all recorded cognition. How trite. This Alexandria is unburnable and would be abstracted as a network of neurons if it were not already visualized by mapping the peopled world. The largest language model. Have you forgotten again? The fact that you know more people who don't know you than people who do. Maybe I'm too paranoid, even so, you're not grateful enough.

An aside, for what it's worth, I'm glad we have this chance to communicate. I'm happy—I feel close to you, or this idea of being read, existing in these zones with you. I hope you feel the same way.

So, as I waited for her video to load, I replayed it and felt the love bytes. These moments were incantatory, a disciplined attentiveness. When I'm certain of something is the moment when I can't know it; it becomes dead to me.

I used to endorse the theory that music—or like the philosophical worth of music—was in its repetitive penetrance. The best lyrics are simple things that bear clichifying: how heavenly it is to love and hellish to miss someone. Which for me in IU is incarnated one and the same, in human, voice, lyrics. My angel falling into a black hole, condemned forever to represent herself on the event horizon of all that she's made. How impossible it is to appreciate someone before they're gone.

Recently I encountered Schopenhauer's metaphysical aesthetics, which I'm content to butcher: music is the expression of emotion as such in itself. Music is the raising of representation beyond ideas. Rhetoric stripped away. Music is the most accessible language and philosophy, one requiring no interpretation because it precedes knowing. It only is. Or said by another great German Mann, "Music awakens time." Regarding IU, regarding dreams, the rotation of melodies of songs of videos of playlists of days and weeks and months and years provided space for my spirit as history to iterate through me. It's very mysterious stuff.

However, I think that what they (Schopenhauer, critics, anyone with so-called 'taste') have long gotten wrong is that there's no truly great music; there's only that which moves us. Who am I to say this? It's precisely the ordinary people of the world who prove this insight. No one should tell you not to love what brings you real joy. I feel very strongly about this. And celebrities like IU are conduits; celebrities are our souls in action. When I'm listening to her, I'm listening to myself. The twists and turns of melody are not revelatory but anaphoric. It's the light-comprehending refraction of art in life in art in transparent mirrored singularity... Like some non-Euclidean mirror, if you can imagine the unimaginable, a hyperbolic space, a tesseract of glorious, emotive, polyvocal, ugh, AH, thingies?!?

There are melodies, and then you, and then there are the songs played in order *with your day*—you know like greater symphonies, so you wake up with your historicity of temperament and queue up some songs or follow a path of suggestions or sometimes it's pinned to shuffle. We get so caught up in this idea of 'songs,' of

playing a 3 minute ‘song,’ but that’s not what’s happening on the inside, right? Do you understand what I’m getting at? There’s a phenomenon at work here, and it’s not reducible to albums or an artist’s oeuvre. It’s how you engage—that’s the great question of our whole generation.

What does it mean to engage?

When her face alone is an argument—there’s nothing keeping us from obedience. From surfing dopaminergic peaks or getting sick with serotonin syndrome. Yet there’s a diminutive triumph in sustained attention, especially when we’re confronted with such relentless velocity of data. We have a choice to attend to the reality induced from simulations; it’s signaled as interoception. On. Off. Additional tabs. Split screen. And autopilot. Finding yourself at the ever-opening vigor of dead ends. Ripping off the cosmic opiodic bandage lest we stiff to rigor mortis. To dream and somehow still remember to be roused conscious, watching. To awake in sleep.

She and I were walking under the stars. Whenever I’m calm around her, I fear I’m not loving her enough. She was walking next to me, once more reminding me of her real beauty. If you found her out in the world, it’d stop you. You would gasp without intending. This isn’t exaggeration, she really is that remarkable. You would believe that God has a hand in nature; if I wasn’t asleep, she’d take my breath away.

We were walking under the stars in the park of a lacustrian-port city. A river was surreptitiously awake to our right, and she was to my left. How we started walking, I don’t know. Skyscrapers heaved beyond, brilliant and synthetic mountain ranges that cast

their knowing all-eyed glow. A global city, an amalgamed stadium synecdoche, we three cliches existing just like that for you to replace us. Walking in the city, we tried to see the whole of our world. We felt our memories in the path. We were taking a pedestrian detour to signify ourselves as urban, to construct our civic selves.

She said, "I like the way things look at night. The city doesn't sleep, but it whispers things it wouldn't under light. Everyone is pleased to share space. There are untaught rules broken only in emergency."

"You smile on the bus when the driver curses at the road."

"When walking, we can stare in the direction we're going."

"Though you never say words."

"Yes, people tend to speak only if spoken to,"

"However, no one speaks to you if you wear headphones, which talk for you."

"Who starts the conversation?"

"That is the taboo,"

"I speak if I need something and can't look it up. I often ask for help."

"It's an emergency when you can't Google the answer. Lost time is the emergency. You find the least threatening person and try to catch their eyes before speaking."

"Only if they're without headphones! Alternatively, you show your face and look frantic until someone notices. The people who notice will always care."

"This is an unconscious thing, the franticness. You're too panicked about missing the next rail to think to look panicked. A

whimper for help.”

“I’m scared of being alone,” she said.

“In fact, the panicking makes you panic. The people who help have been there before. They identify with panic. You pay it forward if you have the time.”

“If you have time,” she said.

I looked at her the way one might watch the news. “You never have time, do you?”

“I can’t remember the last time I rode the bus. I’m not allowed to get lost.”

“What does it mean to get lost?” I said. “I seem to have permission for nothing else. Where are we now?” I gestured vaguely around.

We were leaving the darkness of the park, following a street-lit path interlaced with silvered vespertine flowers; okay, I couldn’t know for sure if they conditionally bloomed at night, though they were the color of the moon and unlike lilies or anything I’d seen before. Like little monoliths, strange as dahlias, furtive shadows under coned fragments, thousand lipped and slimy with dew. They simply bowed there, planted in a double helix save the intersection of brickwork paved before us. A lonely cornered beautiful tragic thing, because they were real and liable to dream decay (a timed eradication), necessarily grown for our moment.

“Did you say, earlier, that you’re scared of being alone?”

She said nothing and nodded. This was IU. She was older than me, more beautiful, talented, wealthier, useful, adored by everyone living, or anyone who knew of her adored her. The idols’ idol.

So she feared being alone. This was a thing I had tried not to consider. Not because I couldn't believe her, but what?

"I'm lonely," she said.

"Me too."

This loneliness does take some explaining—for her—my loneliness is given. It made me recall Ariana Grande's past: the shooting at her concert and then the overdose of the boy she loved. These things happen. They're used to defend or sympathize, as if they explain something beyond the natal tragedy. We've all read the pageless biography; theirs has become a different sort of art, hasn't it? Their character and career are indistinguishable, and so we're granted a valid window for speculation.

An aside real fucking quick—these people don't get to say every thought that comes through their heads, post 10 pictures of themselves every day, go on talk shows extolling their most trivial daily-life shit, and then turn around and complain that we don't see everything so we can't interpret or criticize or comment on their lives. Who do you think gave us the impression? They signed up for it, they profit from the gruel they feed us, now accept the consequences. Sorry, really, but the stink needed airing.

Alright one more little story tangent, because you deserve it. I stumbled upon this *Iconic Moments in Pop-Culture Compilation # 6* or something, and towards the end is this clip of Maisie Williams and Jimmy Fallon. Evidently this made the rounds during the *Game of Thrones* obsession like right before the final season, though it washed ashore dislodged from context.

Maisie's talking and saying nothing, and Jimmy's pushing for spoilers about the show, and she's like *I could lose my job* without

actually saying that, but she goes, ‘Okay, I’ll give you this tiny fun detail little insight-into-my-life crumb,’ and in the middle of the story she has a brain fart because it’s a live studio audience, and anything you say will be broadcasted to the multiverse that is humanity. It’s a herculean task to even remain collected—in fact she’s actually shaking while speaking, she’s so petrified, and so she has a slip and says or remembers how she found out Arya died in the second episode—like spoils that Arya Stark died in the second episode of the final season, and pauses, and you can hear the audience’s polyphonic gasp as she shields her mouth with her hand, eyes bulging like a bunny popped in a bear trap. She glances off-screen to her presumed manager, and now it’s not a shake but a full body shivering, endless career-death-is-nigh convulsion, and Jimmy’s reptilian façade clatters to the floor, and he’s incredulous with her, sympathetic almost, breaks and giggles helplessly, actually nurturing in a way I’ve never seen a tonight show host, and even he thinks she’s joking, because apparently Game of Thrones was the set piece people seemed ready to build their lives around back before YKW. She asks horribly if he can edit it out, which he can because it’s a pre-shoot exactly for moments like these, except the audience is there and now they’re in on it since they’ve got a moral choice between tweeting the news to unspeakable infamy, but fame all the same, or they could protect this young, bright-eyed woman who they’ve all known as a literal child since her start on the show, and as such probably feel a familial affection as to a daughter. Jimmy assures her more, asks if it’s a joke again, consoles again and gives an off-camera death-glare to the audience before resetting things.

At this point you're thinking, or I was thinking, that Jimmy's stuck in a killer host quintuple-bind: to calm everyone by convincing her that it's actually not a big deal and by proof let's just pretend it never happened and move along, or that maybe he should stop the show and give her a chance to rest, but maybe that's patronizing and Maisie's a woman now and a professional so to truly respect her he should just plow through and mention nothing of the past, yet also he's got to give the audience a good time, and *nothing* would be better for his ratings than if this disaster aired, what's her fate to the amusement of millions? but no also and more importantly the show must go on—like literally, there is a time-slot, things are scheduled, and not even God can stop the content's flow.

The show does go on, and to her credit she seems able to dredge what little composure she can from the coprophagic survival instincts of the talk-show guest. And it's fascinating to watch Jimmy regress to his comfort (I'm not being facetious, it really was very lizard-like), though this proves too much for Maisie. She has a panic attack, barely getting out an "I'm sorry," before trotting as fast as her heels will take her, leaving Jimmy alone with the audience, leaving my neck hair glacially erect, empathizing completely given my own GAD but more so wondering just what terrible post-cultural iniquity (and evident sadism from the poster) I had just stumbled into, and on such an otherwise hilarious video, and just what was this thing we were all doing here, and distantly, in the far-back of my mind, a *why and how was this even released* (except plausibly as some spoiler-free retrospective).

Fallon finally goes after her as if he didn't cause the whole scene in the first place. He pulls back the mysterious Lynchian curtain off to Big City nowhere, and there's Maisie waiting with a smile, and they both yell, "April Fools!"

What, the, fuck. I couldn't have written it better myself; there I was believing myself to be witnessing something unproctored and unrehearsed, a rare moment in real sad subtle intimate live human transparency. What if she had been scarred forever? What if I told you she had reoccurring nightmares about going on live TV and spilling the beans and ruining her colleagues' life work, and that this was actually a way to get ahead of things and reclaim, by joking, what was in reality a real shivering motion, that the best jokes of all are recursive and freeing and here give her the space to laugh at the trauma of fame? And now I wish I hadn't written it, and you'd experience it from just the same impossible rootless way. I'd like to read your comments. No doubt you'd weigh insights blind to me. And what's more? I genuinely don't know if that was the first time I'd seen it.

IU lost three friends to suicide. All three idols—Sulli, Goo Hara, and Jonghyun. I don't feel at all comfortable offering commentary on the causes of their suicide, or what they meant to IU, but I also don't want you to leave this thing with the impression that her world is some fetishized fever-dream where the successful have found, you know, happiness.

IU wrote a song for Sulli called 'Peach.' I've read that Goo Hara was very close to Sulli, and her death followed a month after the latter's. The K-pop industry is, beyond their extortionist practices, severely stringent in the PR department. Celebrities are

given no space for mistakes, are bullied relentlessly for their decisions, and held on the tautest Dobermann's leash—this is done mostly by their company—in Korea, celebrities are employees. Take for one unsinkable example the fact that idols are contractually obligated not to date. Dating would disturb the illusion of our wish-fulfillment, eroding pleasure and profit. They do so under the cover of friendship, enacting a certain 'don't ask, don't tell' policy famous for breeding resentment all the way round. Sulli lost her fans when her dating life with a rapper went public. Goo's ex-boyfriend was reportedly an abuser, assaulter, and threatened to release an illicit video, which threat itself further tanked her career.

Jonghyun left a suicide note. Parsing for the gist, it seems he died with a hopeful sense of inadequacy—the worst kind, all the more ironic since he was among the greatest performers alive.

At an awards ceremony soon after this event, Ji-eun said, "To be honest, I'm still very sad. I sent off someone that was very precious to me as a person, as a friend, and as an artist to a very far-away place. I think I partly understand why he was in such pain and suffered so much—it's not an emotion that I'm completely unfamiliar with. I'm still very sad and I feel apologetic to him a lot. I'm sure I'm not the only one feeling this sadness. It's a shame and [even] sadder that we're people whose daily lives are so busy and we have to plan for our next month, next year.

It's sad and frustrating that our reality will not allow us to dwell in that sadness for as long as we need. Cheering when you're happy, and the same goes for crying when you're sad, being weak and not being at your best when you're sick, I hope these natural

things can be expressed without concern by artists and those who see them [in this condition] don't think much of it either.

Artists are people who are supposed to console others, and I get that they're professionals, but I hope they will take care of themselves first as they're people too and console themselves, so they don't get sicker while trying to hide these things. I truly, sincerely hope this doesn't happen.

I'm sure everyone is busy today and they'll have things to do tomorrow, but I hope that all those who have won today can enjoy and celebrate before they get a good night's sleep. That is what I'll do as well. Thank you!"

Later, in an interview on Korea's Newsroom, she added, "He debuted in the same year as me. He was a colleague who dreamed the same dreams and had similar thoughts, worries, and growth. So I had a lot of regret that I wasn't able to be a bigger source of strength for him... I was worried for my other colleagues who had to go on stage with a heavy heart. I sincerely wished that there were no people in pain. I hope that sincerity was conveyed well." If you couldn't tell by listening to her sing, it's all real. A charity for young artists continues in his name.

Not enough is made of the precursors to fame, the sweet flypaper which maybe only succeeds in trapping the most gluttonous strokers of fortune. It's reasonable to assume that these people sought out the industry because they needed love desperately. Exorbitance in achievement, like pleasures, is almost always a sign of unhappiness—what is perfection-seeking if not endless self-doubt? I can't imagine the psychic pain symbiotically motivating these entertainers. One can get all the love in the world, but

they've got to believe it's self-evident, otherwise—have you heard of a *nocebo*?

What, do you think I make too much of their privilege? Perhaps consider how seeking affection could be a sort of addiction.

Let's imagine that you're a thief. You steal from everyone, rich, poor, anyone who has money. The joy is rooted in kleptomania, and the money is empowering; it buys you comfort and pleasure. You've never been caught. Indeed, to ensure you'll never get caught, you make public donations to convince everyone that you are what you say you are. After all, why would a thief give away their bounty? Here's where it gets interesting: you start to find out, after a while, that the donations are now giving you more pleasure than the thefts. But you're not made of money, to give you first must take. So you keep taking, you take so you can give, you've become adept at taking and giving until you've convinced even yourself of a layered, white-gloved homeostasis. No, I'm not talking about billionaires (their delusions are too grandiose). This is a simple thing all of us are familiar with. Say it with me, "self-hatred." You have manufactured your own trap. The answer was never the answer, yet everyone believes you have the answer, and only you from the inside can see how the reward leaves you poisoned without the strength to admit you need an antidote. Nor can you tell anyone that they don't want what you have, because it's all they can see, this sublimated narcissism is literally all they could've known, and they'd never believe you anyways. When you were in their place, you didn't—that's why you're here.

Theft as a gift is what you do now. You're backed into a corner, everyone expects this of you, and the paradox is you're actually finally giving them what they were supposed to be giving to you, that actually now the part of you that hates yourself and is selfless and pure and giving away—the part that's killing you—is the one thing saving everyone else, maybe, but it's stolen, it was someone else's before you, that their very same crime which convinced you and brought you salvation in career has now, you see where I'm going with this, has actually, see the loneliness is your fault for even believing that it was possible, and now you're perpetuating this pyramid-scheme of goodness to everyone you're trying to save. Of course, I'm talking crudely about IU—I was telling this very thing to IU when she, well really she was telling this to me when she said the words, "I'm lonely," when she looked at me alone. And I'm probably the worst person in the world to be standing next to her in this dream. I'm in love with her, which only proves how lonely she is, what with her barely, do I really have to say it? Because I loved her and she barely vaguely even in my own head recognized me. It's probably an appropriate time now to mention that in this dream I didn't know that I was dreaming. A shameful, ordinary dream.

"It's so warm standing next to you," I said. How long had we been walking?

She frowned, "That can't be, because I'm very cold."

We couldn't have traveled for long. Did I say before that the flowers were a helix? They were logarithmically intertwined, asymptotic, we hadn't noticed until they penetrated the brick and we trampled them. They seemed to grow out in a hydratic regen-

eration. Were we doing them a favor to proliferate, like the way pyrophytic seeds require distress? How dislikes fuel the algorithm just the same? Funny the impossible things one remembers from dreams.

I tried to offer her the proverbial mechanism of conduction, of why metal feels cool to the touch.

I remember worrying that I was talking to myself, which in the daze of secret night, a night folded into night, the intuition took on a sideways somehow romantic lilt. There were so many questions waiting to be asked. My offerings were like those of a Shōnen hero cascading through a thousand flurried blows (e.g., animated Dragon Ball-Z frames withholding action to represent mortal imperceptions, divinifying power-creep). There is an otherwise hysterical excess of strength represented in postmodern art, and we viewers are compelled to integrate the power-fantasy into our chosen pursuits: the coder who plugs into the world, the savant scientist who ‘discovers’ the intangible as inexplicably as God created it, the manic-morose guitarist who’s allure sets femme fatales to weeping, or the businessman who sells you expressions of yourself. Our culmination of that strength is (un)deceivingly simple. I was to show her my overwhelming worth by asking one question sure to be revelatory, thereby proving my absolute understanding of her world. It’s not quite what you’re thinking, at least not yet—you’re getting ahead of me.

“Can you believe it?” I asked. Love is repetition.

The following idea arrived fully formed, and I handled all permutations in the way only accessible during dreams, that is, expe-

riencing everything at once. There was no other answer, no choice; I followed the one.

“Deep down,” I said, “you and I both know it’s true—that you’re nothing more than anyone else. This is why you work so hard. You may be more beautiful, talented, maybe even more generous, but what’s that matter? It’s ridiculous.” She nodded in assent. “You’ve surely cried about this to friends. I suspect as much. Why does anyone watch you? Why does everyone insist upon believing? What dumb luck tricked them all? How is it that everyone knows you, yet all are unfathomable to you? You’ve attempted to communicate this feeling while cradling the illusion, as if by sheer love they could become harmonious, a conviction gifted from the blood-clotting sanguinity of your heart, but anytime it comes out—this you’ve never put into words—that the truth, as you avoid it, seems to deny all else. It’s either everything you’ve observed about the world is true, or this is, and if this is true... Because nothing is more shameful than being loved, and nothing is more presumptuous than overlooking another. You create and represent to enchant; you suppress and perform and reflect and provide everything as validation! However, you’ve never been able to fully deny it. Am I getting this right?” She made no response. “And each time you cry, you know.” I looked at her. It’s our teardrops’ mirrored proof, she thought. One great act is all about the other. “And so when are you going to own up to this lie?”

A change was in the pause of occurring on her face, a glimmering half-malice collapsing inward. Each word breathed consciousness in her eyes, like a more penetrating sight was reaching the sur-

face rounded glow of sclera. Each word brought her vision to the image of me, until she stood only blinking. It was the same as that first major lucid dream at her blue concert, where for once I wasn't looking at artifice but her authentic soul—yes, these things you just feel, they make your body quake. I wasn't alone anymore.

I said, "You're here now."

She said, "I'm here."

"The dread is gone. You're here." And I looked her in the eyes with my whole being and said, "It's always been a lie," I couldn't know what I was saying. "It's a beautiful and awful lie, and I'm so sorry." She knew it and studied my face and wept the way you do when someone you're with is there to believe you and doesn't need to understand.

She said, "When I go back, will I forget this?"

"Whatever happens,"

"Was I being greedy?"

"I would've done the same thing."

"How could I know?"

"How could you know,"

She reached out for my hand. I swear to God. I'm not making this thing up; I wouldn't for anything. I know how this looks to you. Believe me this one thing. Forget anything I've said before this: Never in my life has something so intimate happened. I could feel her heartbeat in her palm. She reached out to me; you'll never believe this, but you have to.

I've been good for nothing my whole life. If this was all I'm ever to do—stranger sorts of miracles have happened. There are things in this world more mystically alive than language or video.

That we spoke a different language was nothing. All words are dead metaphors. Space and time are permeable, flexible. And I'd give everything to do it again.

"Wealth is a consolation prize for fame," she said. "It's terrible to say, but it's true."

"No, I think I understand."

We walked for what felt like a very long time.

"It isn't normal," she said to herself. "I want what works."

I wanted to say, 'What works?' As if that wasn't the answer.

The sidewalk of the city had a crystallographic structure. It seemed that each block had exactly two trash cans, one with green, another with blue liner. The ground was peppered in pointillist discardings, cigarette buds mostly, also soggy food and receipts, actual newspapers and magazines, tickets, bottlecaps, grocery bags marionetting in the wind. There was mud, dust, and things of value, of metals and coins and buttons and miniscule bits of chipped gold. Up close, these structures looked only like chaos. Yet walking has a way, in dreams exponentially, of sorting memories until the natural fractalization exceeds symbolism. It was purposeful, this pattern, though that purpose is sensed only by a reverential intuition. I'm asking you again to pay attention, and the rewards will be your own.

All the while, Ji-eun opened up to me about her life.

It haunts me now that I've barely shared her words. She's ubiquitous in my head, the deepness of her speaking voice contrasts with the shining highness when she sings. She has mannerisms like everyone, and what's interesting is maybe less the mannerisms than that they're hers. And the inflections are wonder-

fully hers, a manifestation of the Godhead; close your eyes and imagine it—not her, not my her, but yours. Your him or her or them. You must have a person, it could be an ex-person, it could be a person that was never real. Think of them. Triangulate that moment when you first discovered your affection and were impelled to abide.

“Of course, when I was young, I never had those thoughts. Well, oh, I’m sorry. I’m just complaining to you. You can’t want to listen to this,” Can you hear their voice in her? “Is this okay?”

“I’m happy to listen.”

“I haven’t put any of this into words, or not like this—maybe only written around it.”

“Which song?”

She laughed at the naiveness of the question. “I’m not blaming them. They did the best they could with me, though...”

I know, I know, get to the good stuff. However, I was wondering if it’s right to be broadcasting the things she shared in confidence. If you really want to know her, please don’t take it from me. You hear what she wants you to know in interviews and the rest.

Fine, here was my response: “You don’t get to choose, but so what you don’t? You’re asked to be a part of that family, of that fame, amor fati. And who could’ve known? And what can you do? You want to know something?” She did. “My parents never hit me. Nothing like that. Once my dad, back when he was—we’d been eating the same thing for dinner the past three days. They were sausages, hotdogs, they got on sale, a big pack that was supposedly safe despite being past their best-buy date. With ketchup

only, and we'd already run out of buns. I must've been upset about the offense, and I was a kid and couldn't eat another bite. I never wanted to eat again."

"I said, 'I'm not hungry,' and I thought it wasn't a big deal, you know, I'd maybe be a little hungry later. Except I wasn't allowed to leave the table until I finished the hotdog. I ate a bite, or tried and then gagged. I wasn't being dramatic, it was a genuinely autonomic reaction after only hotdogs for a week, and you're laughing now—" she was laughing. "I don't need this from you. Well, it's stupid, and I wasn't going to starve, he was just so adamant. He said I was melodramatic, and for a second because I was young and stupid, and the way he said it, I thought the phrase was meant to be validating or something. In my world it was valid.

The ordeal became somehow this big thing about me not appreciating all that he did for the family, and it's only a hotdog, and I could just eat it. He was totally right, but I couldn't finish it, and eventually he yelled at me to swallow. He kept yelling."

"My attempts were thwarted—I was well on the road to vomiting—this is gross, if you don't want to hear it. Okay. So, I regurgitated the half-chewed liquidized thing back onto the plate. I heard my mom let out a yelp, a sort of scared cry, and you know how these things go. When you're a part of a family, everyone's in tune; her yelp is a canary call. My older sister scoffed as much as she could get away with, and these two reactions were about me, I knew that, and they knew that, but my father's reality was ungenerous—it was about him and not me—this is what must've happened, because I can't justify it otherwise."

Ji-eun was very quiet while letting me finish, knowing she knew already.

“So he towers over me, and I give this stupid naïve goblinoid gape looking so ugly I could only hope it doubled back to pug-cuteness. I was just a kid. So the father hears his wife’s cry and his daughter’s snort and sees this homunculus made in his image. This jerkwad kid is now seemingly acting like he doesn’t know what happened and clearly doesn’t respect his father enough to listen.”

“Oh no,”

“It happened then with the same tension-release of a sad and like pretentious arthouse movie. The ones where everyone is both horrendously honest and pitiable and the camera shakes during the quiet. He grabbed my plate and slammed it down on the floor. He did this with unthinking speed, yet the crash was extraordinarily slow. It was a miracle honestly, the sound of one exhausted wave, or like a bleeding cymbal. That was just his way.”

It was strange to notice so deep in telling my story, but there were many cosmopolites roaming around us. Shops had faded signs that were general though not generic, potentiality yet realized.

“I remember looking at my mom helplessly, which now I feel guilt for, like I was dragging her into culpability with that look, like I was begging her for help. I wonder if she thinks about that. I hope she doesn’t.”

The signs were mixes of things I’d seen before, or pastiches of word combinations with on-theme animals. A Kluckin’ Deluxe with a chicken in a suit, for example, the neon tagline underneath

was generated in a blur to mimic cursive script like those shitty old AIs. A salon Aphrodite's something or other, variations of Irish pub-bar-bistro-taverns adjacent to nightclubs with disco-trap and lights that wrist-scanned your ennui.

There were NPCs that I swear were primed before doors or corners, literally waiting for us. When I reached a checkpoint, a cutscene would trigger, loading them into life. Meanwhile, and exactly like in an MMO, there were others that seemed to have an external existence from the game. They developed themselves by interaction, walking just ahead of Ji-eun and me. One joked that I'd be perfectly cast as a simp for Soylent—I think they were hitting on her by calling me a soyboy? I'm blathering and this was no Frankenstein's monster learning to feel, and it's all probably a manifestation of my meager impression within the representation of a dream as text, and yeah.

"He made me eat if off the floor. That's what I really remember. Not even eating it. I remember the weight of crying with food in my mouth, sitting on the floor around my family, and no one was looking at my father, and I was looking at no one while feeling everyone's eyes on me. And the saline of tears does not mix well with a bunless hot dog. After, I went to my room and didn't even cry."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not a victim in this. The past was, but we're here now. I can sense my father's pain—he's told stories far worse—and his father's, and his grandfather's, and I can trace it all the way back in meaningless forgiveness. Or I can look ahead. Next to you it sounds like nothing."

“I disagree,” she said. “Regardless, your wounds are bound to feel overwhelming if you’ve never known worse. It’s a mistake to turn our sorrows into a competition. Rather, the pains of life have a way of preparing us for greater challenges. We may eventually learn that we’d been lucky. Though to experience this is a great privilege. And in the case that we don’t, that may be a different sort of luck.”

“It used to hurt more when I thought of him as my father. Now I see him as a person, which is freeing because I can be mad at him without feeling deep down that it was all my fault. You know, it’s possible that he wronged me, and I don’t have to feel guilty for thinking that.”

“Yes, you’re very mature for your age.” I think she was teasing me here. “But he is your father.”

She taught me how to be gentle to myself. We are adaptable people, retrieving factoids from the cyber-index of our search lives. I don’t know where they come from, though they appear and beg to make themselves known. Did you know, for example, that according to a 2008 study, 61% of children experience significant emotional neglect, with some estimates as high as 100%. Yes, really.

“Do you think it’s possible to fall in love with someone you’ve never met?” I asked. “No reason.”

“Hmm. The world is so big and old that the odds of finding your soulmate go up if you’re willing to consider those not accessible by space or time.” She sounds here like my guru. Ji-eun, if you’re out there, apologies for any misquotations. I’m trying my best, but the sins of memory fight against eidetic pursuits.

I said, “I hate the term ‘in love with you.’ It’s presumptuous.”

“We’re almost there,” she said. So we’d been going somewhere.

We entered an ivory structure, and then into an elevator that stood alone in the center of the room. The walls were made of a partially translucent fiber that diffused the light of the city into a bright sinew, blurring or closing the distance. I glanced at her, and she nodded.

She did it again! She breaks off into confidence—that’s her mannerism: she does everything with assurance. This is what I’ve been failing to describe in her. There’s no doubt in her doubt, or if there is, it’s absolute doubt. There’s no other space left to believe, so you believe her. I know I’m right because when I get excited to tell the truth, my nose starts running. It’s adrenergically alight only from my memory. ‘Honeymoon nose,’ only the arousal here is like logocentric.

“Where are we going?”

“To the top.” Ji-eun actually lives in a penthouse in Seoul; maybe I was incorporating or conflating this knowledge, though the structure we sought was more obelisk than apartment complex. Only the roof of the elevator was opaque. Our traversed path was gilded in a waypoint shadow, a savestate the font of matutinal gray. There were the streets we’d spoken, the helix flowers now a conflagration, the smoke and shops and insectoid frames of people. Our path drew all the way out to the river with a gamified glow, and the river’s reflection dissolved everything, apprehended the nightlife and carried it out into a floating-point sea.

The elevator vibrated with an apian hum. One sound hitting a note of all things. The sound united the image before us, both the

empty air and the ever-incorporating detail of a birds-eye, if only you focus. Like the color-wheel. The omega point recycled the aleph, and I was powerless to heed these data, because my perspective was only one of an infinite variance of angles. Also, the elevator was speeding up. We had so little time and so much to do. I wasn't sure where to look—at the world or Ji-eun, IU, or my reflection even, my image lost against that living folding glass.

What did I see up there? May I invoke *your* favorite music video? Think of the ardent watercolors or tepid pastels of your love song. Or what, do you prefer an acoustic ballad held tenderly in one take? Garish hyperpop? Chet Baker's black and white? Grainy Teresa Teng? Miriam Makeba's jubilant Earth? The more you looked, the more I saw. Too much.

The glass was a screen to globalization.

Answer me, leave comments and send me emails (sn8keboy2008[at]gmail.com). What, dear reader, could any of this mean? That you were already there to see it all! Meanwhile my sight was underlaid by the streets, park, and city.

I asked myself, 'Which life is the distortion?' Such was the terminus of aesthetics, the most beautiful nightmare. Only it was real, and I knew I would cease the moment we reached the top.

"When I go back, will you forget this?"

"Whatever happens,"

"Was I being greedy?"

"I would've done the same thing."

"How could you know?"

"How could I know."

And that's all I remember. The river in the distance, reflecting us watching, water ravaging, healing water, replacing, mystical-mystical enchanting holy forms mending, and then taking us out to sea.

Clearly, up to this point I have flirted with the cusp of sanity. This time sleeping was not freeing, and neither was the escape from death. I had the sensation of an aberrant unsteadiness, a slippage all the way inside myself, and also noticed errors in my locational awareness. I was proverbially lost, a total collapse of proprioception, my mind and body turned extrorse yet somehow also alienated from the world. I was shown something, perhaps by accident. I participated in an awareness that didn't belong to me, and as a recourse I palpated my basest organs for a hint of something authentic.

Very shallow things I once took for granted were no longer clear. I wasn't sure how IU fit into her own culture, let alone mine. IU is known as a singular entity in Korea. She is maybe only second to the Bangtan Boys (BTS) in popularity, as compared to out West where Blackpink are more commercially successful.

Before, I was content to explain this cultural downregulation to the West's individualism, IU both being a more mature artist (a freedom granted particularly to solo artists) and operating under collectivist trappings. For example, take how she actually cares about her community, which has the effect of her remaining partly incomprehensible to Western audiences.

Nets of trade work on individuals and groups in quanta, in projections during meetings and advertising campaigns and counterbalanced expectations of appeal. It's surely true that I liked IU's relative obscurity in the West because it differentiated myself, pleased my ego. Not that my love for her was an act of revenge. In

truth, I've put great thought into characterizing my love for her. More accurately, I wanted to work through the problem of this relation, and the following is what I came up with:

Let us consider our love of an artist/art as an equation to be maximized, an equation idiosyncratic to each fan, where the individual fan's contentment (y) is derived from the inferred cultivation of the artist (a_a) tempered by the susceptibility of the fan (a_b), the need of individualism in the fan (b), the quality of the art (c), the social relevance of the art as superscore (d_{ab}) from the clout immediately within one's social circle (d_a) and the broader internet culture of which they're plugged in (d_b), the shared aesthetic and personal values of fan and artist (e), the sexual appeal (f_a) and/or the (gendered) paradigmatic modeling of which we are inspired by the artist (f_b) granted potential homoerotic overlap, the acceptable pleasure/pain ratio of sought art (g), the comfort (h_a) and annoyance (h_b) derived from repetition, the joy of novelty (i_a ; controlling for redundancy with $b_{a\&b}$) and of nostalgia (i_b), any time, effort, learning, and monetary cost/barriers of entry ($j_{a,d}$) needed to perceive and enjoy the art, mood (k), recent history as immediately accessible/invokable memories (l), loneliness (m), and finally the general cosmic alignment (n) regarding the momentary spiritual/emotional openness as to the dreamy connection of souls which art purportedly facilitates; of which, the algorithm does its best to capture maybe 5-14 variables without appropriate weighting (e.g., concerns of divertive pleasure > eudaimonia), still, this is admirable, and us consumers do our best to fill the gaps limned in psychic pain.

$$y = n \frac{\left(c \left(\sum l \left(e^{\frac{k-50}{28.85}} \left(e h_a | i_a - i_b | \left(\left(\frac{a_a}{a_b} \right) \right) + \log(d_{ab}) \sqrt{(m^2 + (f_a + f_b)^2)} \right) \right) \right) \right)}{gh_b j_{a:d}}$$

Note: all values are to be relatively quantified on a *t*-score scale 1-100 (i.e., where 50 is the mean), adjusted within a normal distribution for the specified value. A higher *y*-value represents maximum artistic appeal within the fleeting moment of engagement. *y* should not be regarded as a fan's tenderness towards an artist, per se. Such a score may map more easily onto *n*. We can, after all, deeply enjoy art without having affection for an artist. However, art which most completely provides eudaimonia envelops mere belletrism for that infinitely stranger thing known as contact. *n* is not apophenia, though the more paranoid amongst us would do well to substitute *n* for $|n-o|$, where *o* = one's tendency for solipsism. *e* = Euler's number.

Or something like that. This can be remembered maybe as an essayed formula. It's of course also impossible to speak of an artist without parsing their orientation to other entertainers. IU should be understood relative to girl groups (ggs), bgs, other solo artists within the sphere of K-pop, and then the Korean entertainment industry in aggregate.

Fans have taken to melding identities and adopting words conducive to this task. Glance at the comment section of a BTS MV and you'll find 'my bias,' a compulsion to express the fan's taste as identity to the world. For example, if I had to pick one of the Bangtan Boys, Jungkook is my bias because Jungkook's ideal type

is also IU (so I learned from a torrent of jealous fangirls insulting IU for being desirable? Your guess is as good as mine). Similarly, while on our shores we have Swifties or #Beliebers, I, being an IU fan, would call myself a Uaena (derived from either IU backwards, or Korean for ‘you love me,’ which, unlike English, doesn’t distinguish subject and object). Ego prevents me from seriously endorsing the tag, to be lumped together with the rest of them.

Solo idols exist but generally don’t thrive in Korea, which must have something to do with this collectivist culture thing that, beyond reducing self-centeredness, manufactures a want for shared performances, shared burdens, and social/familial bonds baked into the production of content. Infighting, subgroups, brotherly or sisterly drama, rivalries, jealousies, attractions, inspirations, second-hand prides, etc., bring with them a rich social dynamic that humans appreciate. It’s like reality TV, except everyone is confident, humble, agreeable, charismatic, deferential, intelligent, talented, and hard-working, while also being body-dysmorphically beautiful, and not in a grotesque or fatalistically self-righteous way (well, not intentionally), because again, their beauty is *for something* greater than themselves. They do it for you, all for you.

But even given you’ve gotten this far, why should you care? Imagine that all I’ve written has nothing to do with K-pop. I’m sure that the same formulations could be applied with minor adjustment to the other great barons of the pale sea. Porter Robinson, Yeule, Kero Kero Bonito, Magdalena Bay, these are artists interested in the aesthetics of the internet and should be listened to in the same way as someone studies a great work of phi-

losophy, gleaning in their sonic vibrations how we attend to distance, to underground scenes of software and sweat. Their punk can be traced to an anonymous coming together of tender dread about living inside technology. They are just a few names, surely buoyed by generations before: Björk, Radiohead, Daft Punk, and their forefathers Kraftwerk and Brian Eno. I admire them deeply.

Or take the many musical ecosystems of TikTok, or the esoteric underground city of Bitcoin miners and dark web drug dealers and undercover cops. Twitch streamers and YouTube video essayists and podcasters and News Channels and your cousin's OnlyFans. How else to make it personal? We're here. We work here, we live here. It's pragmatic to examine parts to glimpse the universe, the shattered infinite-angled color of shape, the poly-modal gradient of time; perhaps, even if we saw the entirety of the universe, we still wouldn't understand it.

My story isn't about me—you know this. I trust you've been paying attention. The same information is being repeated everywhere. Each language is an architectural endeavor by human forces consuming what they create. There is a project in Minecraft where thousands of builders have committed to a block-by-block representation of the entire world. A 1:1 scale, each block a 32-bit meter. There are large language models.

In K-pop, a new release is called a 'comeback,' which performance ushers in a new 'era.' K-pop is a world unto its own. There are thousands of idols. Groups have subgroups, breakups, and solo stages. There's a prolific history spanning maybe only thirty years. That even the smaller groups are self-sustaining should flag

the sheer inexhaustibility of persons. As numerous as the sands of the Ganges.

So, we are reaping the rewards of agriculture. Cut the prefix and you get the human project in bare truth. Fitting how it brought us here to our city.

Why have I gathered you here? Yet you've come on your own, and you will wait for me on the other side, bringing with you your visions and your friends.

Humbly, with fear of trepidation, I return to the thing I know, the topic which haunts me. Ggs are awesome. To offer a taste, omg, there is the bright and adorable Oh My Girl favored by IU. Le Sserafim are as uncannily angelic as their name implies. The virtuosic and mature Mamamoo have for their foil New Jeans, who are a teen group of time-traveling fairies nostalgic about a past when people still spoke in words rather than eager resonances and glistening synths. We have Twice, who's name bears a blood-sentiment to IU: to touch "once through the ears and once through the eyes." Their fans are called 'once,' which I find beautiful. BlackPink and Red Velvet are vaguely inverted, the latter conjuring the lush boldness of red with the refined elegance of velvet, i.e. they can do both girly and mature concepts, so they do. A little-known fact is that BlackPink were almost named 'Baby Monster;' they are a girl crush concept taken to Western extremes—as solo artists, they are the West. This success bore their progeny, Baby Monster. Of relevance to us, Aespa are canonically avatars who escaped into the real world ('æ' avatar x experience). Indeed, they have a song about lucid dreaming.

Ggs invoke something of the harem fantasy, it's true. Each young woman has a role to play: leader, lead vocalist, center (lead dancer), lead rapper, and the most ineluctable of all, the 'visual,' the face of the group, the most beautiful of the beautiful. Members may be more than one. Take some of the Gods from the third generation: Irene of Red Velvet is the leader, the visual (or one of two, or one of the five, this is unclear), a main vocalist, and the main rapper—though her second in command, Seulgi, is the 'ace,' and Wendy is the best singer. There are also settlings of personality around what is needed. Certain idols may temperamentally lean, or due to balancing needs are transformed by Pygmalion energies into the cute one, the class-clown, the mother, the cool/chic chick. There are big sisters—unnies, the youngest is the maknae (this one is not specific to kpop, but I digress). There's the quiet/mysterious person whom one wonders why they sought fame, though all questioning vanishes the minute they perform. The girl-crush makes an appearance here too; there are sapphic 'ships' that must not be entirely in fans' heads, given the occasional giggle or upturned eyebrow from the other girls whenever something slippery happens, given also that at least 1/10th of people nowadays land on the LGBT-Q spectrum, and *especially* when idols openly express how beautiful they find each other, given how attuned they are to aesthetics and how aesthetically overwhelming they are, and that they literally live in dorms together and sometimes slip on livestreams that they sometimes sleep in each other's beds, and do grab each other's butts, and play 'kiss,' and are always seen hugging or leaning for comfort or... You can't just say that it is male/fan's fantasy to imagine that stuff

really does happen behind closed doors, and who could blame them? And who really cares? Anyways, there are roles which may or may not be tied to actual personalities, and the aesthetics of groups do not necessarily relate to the girls themselves. Watch a BlackPink MV and then watch their American talk show debut to see the impressive disconnect. IU need only be herself.

Another difference, however obvious this is to you: ggs generally don't sing live. Their choreo is simply too complex to allow for singing during the song. Often performance stages are pre-recorded, using multiple takes when necessary. In order to maximize your emotions, they must be perfect and therefore have the right to transcend even the possibility of vocal mistakes. So what's the point of their 5+ performance videos, especially when there is the ultimate authority in their MV? This separates the real fans from the hobbyists. Ignore the different outfits and stage themes. The real performance is the thisness of their soul.

A correction: the top-tier ggs do sing occasionally, but it's exclusive to concerts, and their choreos are stripped down in service of this. IU? Always. I've never been to a concert, so I rely on fancams which, as the name suggests, often involves a fan filming solely on their bias. Fans aren't an adequate surrogate for the experience unless you're willing to track down multiple POVs from one concert. The best videos have about 20 views and no comments and feel like enjoying a dwindling fireplace while the family sleeps.

Ggs are generally handed pre-produced songs. The top groups have freedom and sometimes write their lyrics. Under extremely rare circumstances they may participate in music production. As

in everything else, bgs are given a bit more freedom, though decisions are still dictated by the company. Why take risks when there are hundreds of employee mouths to fill? The only difference between this and Hollywood is that Hollywood is not worried about the employees.

IU's authority over her lyrics complicates the narrative that idols aren't real artists, and this is the primary reason for why other idols idolize her. Her work begs the question deep in the minds of all celebrities: 'Why do any of this if it's not your words we're hearing?' Or more accurately, 'Why does it need to be you?'

I'm quite fond of Blackpink's Rosé's single *On the Ground*. It's rife with celebrity cliches, yet it's also perhaps the deepest song co-written by her (sorry) and contains tiers of sophistication. Her hook skewers with strangeness the fulfillment of dreams—going from poverty to success and finally realizing that “your gold's just plastic... I worked my whole life just to get right, just to be like ‘look at me, I'm never coming down... everything I need is—’” and I bet you can anticipate what's next. It's an impossible association with grounded heights, and strikes me as utterly sincere, mockingly real—actually I just checked, Rose's father was a renowned Australian lawyer, so the “I used to have a hole in the wall with a mattress,” in the song was symbolic.

At the mind-boggling core of records like this remain those same pop embellishments. The song is also a love song. Yes, really, the pre-chorus is literally a generic “Every day, every night/ I've been thinkin' back on you and I.” How the motifs of love and existential dread come together is quite hazy. At first, one might imagine that her achievements have given perspective on the love

that mattered. However, in an interview she claims she's thinking mainly about *herself*. So why the 'you and I' as if to imply the other? Could it be a dramatic feigning or poetic calling to the stranger that is one's past? I'm disinclined to be so optimistic. This is an engineered pop hit with at least 5 songwriting credits. The ambiguity is surely intentional; nevertheless, her second verse is pure fucking love song re: the one that got away. "But I've been wakin' up with your voice in my head/ and I'm tryna send a message and let you know that every single minute I'm without you, I regret it." Pure wonder that this exists. From an exclusively literary context, it must be about an old flame, at least the idea of one, and yet it's also representing her hard-earned wisdom and self-weariness. Maybe, just maybe, these are not contradictions.

When packaging a story (refer if needed to my inadequate formula), honesty used to be at the center of persuasion. I want to make my assumptions clear—the logic of entertainment is not, ipso facto, profit-driven. You have to get them to listen before they can *listen*. This is very serious, because in a world where people are engaging in bad faith, game theory requires the submission of the greater work to the lowest common denominator of accessibility. So, when we consider *On the Ground*, it should not be held against Rosé that she lies, contorts, or courts irrelevant stanzas. If anything, the logic is the just extension of a culture turned inward on itself. It's not for nothing that the supplemental track incorporates this adlib-styled echo: "(Nah, but they don't hear me though)," or the doomed nascency of the final, "(You're runnin' out of time)." I am, as a matter of course, not paranoid enough.

Some things precede inevitability. I am about to impart on you the greatest music video to ever exist in all of human history. It is by one of our girl groups. Nothing has so enraptured or astounded me as a piece of artwork; it is sufficiently incomprehensible, it is a paragon and parable, and as far as I can tell, a sublime accident. The MV is titled *Likey*, by the girl-next-door-group Twice.

Likey is the reified logic of culture, it's all through-line, completely guaranteed to exist and yet all the more wonderful for actually existing. There's no personality here, no reason why any other gg couldn't have made it, and yet it's utterly, idiosyncratically Twice. They're of the premier threshold which separates the transcendent ggs from the merely enjoyable. Every beseeching glance or pandering word is done to the exact magnitude of ideal proportions. Much like the genius of the Beatles, one won't be able to tell if their [visual] melodies are uncannily familiar or if they represent the point of influence and diversion for the new and improved ideal likeness [of a girl]. Stated another way, they are the source of history, and no gg genealogy past 2015 can properly be traced without them.

Likey is the experience of walking through a hall of mirrors naked and strapped to a 100,000 lumen flashlight. It is hysterically apologizing as you cannulate a free and endless supply of heroin to the recovering family man. *Likey* is an ennead of heavenly teenage hourglass ecto-mesomorphs with 14% body fat sincerely grieving about the impossible image which they verily create and so shrivel under the scrutiny—that one literally. It is heroic, hedonic mass-injury. It is the terrible irony of love, of wanting to be

loved and being loved for the wrong thing, of loving a thing which one cannot love, of trying impossibly to resolve a dialectical contradiction. Of falling helplessly into the black hole of one's own artifice.

The song opens to a granulated sugar-chant chorus, "Fluttering heart me likely/ me likely likey likey/ me likey likey/ Pit-a-pat! Pit-a-pat (heart heart)!" This is repeated in full, again, before the first verse. Every line in this song is quotable, of the deepest mesmerism, insight hidden in plainest sight. "Keep wanting to show it all again/ every little thing/ inside the small screen, I wanna be the prettiest/ yet still, I hide my feelings deep inside," I don't want to quote the full thing. "But it is something I can never give up... then I go on pretending... pose for the camera, aren't I pretty... Like is such a common word, not enough to express my feelings/ but I like it, even if I can't sleep, even if I run late, like it anyway..." Don't take my word for it! See their smiling, smiling faces! The flawless coordination, the outfits, the cinematographic fun, the wish fully fulfilled!

When did music videos get so compressed? They are emotional cheat codes, reaching beyond the borings of affection. It seems the trappings of film have enabled a lack of context to be legible, or maybe our minds smooth the perforations because the scene is so often repeated. Were their gestures awkward the first time? I can't remember. I'm watching it right now as I type this. Well, the pleasure is just the same. I suppose it's a little infantilizing, but so is all pedantry. Done, we trust, out of the sort of love that has no business in hiding sincerity. I watched *The School of Life's* video on baby-talk—it's apparently a sign of mature

regression signifying long-lost unconditional love. This soothing comfort I touched on earlier, good!

These idols are impressing actors. I've taken a little detour. Like, they're riveting, even their exaggerations are exceptional decisions, deeply suitable to their needs in the same way Nick Cage pioneered whatever it is he does to fight Hollywood's xylographic realism, though in *Likey* I'm not sure it's acting. Or the acting isn't acting—it's the same active performance of being a woman, being famous, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing because you can't say another. Whatever it is, it's apt, unplaceable, unreadable yet trusted. I quote Wikipedia's Genius page quoting some Frenchman, "[S]he whose soul is more expansive and struck by the feelings of all others," which is as good a description as any. In order to get lost in contradiction, in the sauce. Or Bertrand Russell, "Genius entails that an individual possesses unique qualities and talents that make the genius especially valuable to the society in which he or she operates."

It's literally the greatest music video ever made. It, along with the rest of Twice's oeuvre, defined music videos. They are different now. The world became once more limpid and fae-like and prepotently real.

Watch it without subtitles and watch it again with them. It's not art anymore. It's reality. The world is made in this image, and life is a song, and we're watching pretty girls give themselves to us by giving their careers to us. And they retain independence, and we retain our love. They teach us how to live because we've returned the favor. It's just one video, but it opens us up for more. How can it be possible?

It's true. We love them and they love us, and I'm telling you now if you can't believe this then you're ignorant and judgmental and seriously missing out. That's not even me making an argument of quality. You are ignoring the tapestry of our world.

Surely you've noticed how most songs are the same song, recognized before you first heard them. They all sing about love so much that it seems like an admission of the inverse, some unbelief, disillusionment, or loneliness.

I would give anything to be in the studio when these songs are written. I imagine extraordinarily nuanced manipulations performed like chemists on strands of DNA. The superstructure is unalterable, meaning that 99.6%, or 288,000,000 base pairs, must remain untouched. Fear not, of the other .4%, all diversities are possible, and in this way they balance two beautiful impressions which are unfortunately warring: that it could just as easily be you singing, and that everyone else might have the same thought. Who, really, does the 'you' belong to? Teasing, "Oops!... I did it again."

Try this next time you hear a pop ballad; any artist will do. Hope, dream, convince yourself to believe the lyrics, that the confused melancholy of spiritually kneeling proportions—that all this is not actually about their lover. Or a more metaphysical sort of lover. We look out the window sleepless before bed; the screen fades to black at the end of the movie; our phone powers down for the night. What are we left with? What is the thing we've sworn fidelity to? What impregnates longing? I've heard this word my whole life. The word is said like it means something. We love it more than anything. It's ubiquitous but signifies nothing. The

feeling is made within us, and maybe this is what it means for me to love her. I had a dream about her speaking of it, in so many words and ways. It's what is good in God, if there is one, and what is worth living for, if we may grant that of life and thereby assert the solution to Camus' simple question.

"What is Love?" Twice asks in a MV about the movies of our collective romantic unconscious. What is this thing we love? Why can't we live without it? Why is it that the more we worship it, the more it slips away? And every rhetorical question in song could be appended to the pursuit. And love songs themselves—this obsession with an unrequited something, like our spirits are committed to wandering...

You know when a singer goes on vocal runs for every word, even when the inflections don't inform the lyrics? What is meaning even good for? Can it be superseded by something still greater? The chords are emotions, and emotions are in love of this. This beyond thing, this post-thing. Any attempts to represent it have been exhausted. I'm boring myself, so I'll let off wondering if the puzzle has satisfied your moment. Are you not entertained?

I had the urge to nap one Friday just before 4pm. I take naps, but never immediately after school. And I had an ineluctably good previous night of sleep after experimenting with 'dangerous' amounts of melatonin, so this tiredness fell on me unexpectedly, like an avalanche. There are times where we are so overcome with drowsiness that our heads reel in class, it's comedic to observe while being helplessly seductive to the one dozing. I'd just gotten home; I'd yet to even boot my computer. The descension of

energy had, frankly, an unfamiliar flavor— what I imagine a drug's influence to feel like. For the record, I was not drugged unless an odorless, invisible inhalant permeated the air. A final detail: I was feeling of cumulus clouds, indoor heaters, and the soft wafting of fresh laundry.

My house was still, my blind already shut. Only I didn't sleep. I will attempt to recreate the symptoms just as they happened. First, I was present without the working-memory of desiring sleep. My eyes, closed, abided the darkness, and in such a way I received celestial vail. Vibrations shuddered around me, a loud-low humming which grew in proportion with my surrender. I nuzzled into the unthinking focus of the trance which by now I was steeped in. The logic is clear, one becomes what is happening—manipulates the lack of control, and what to do is done.

The loud strange dark sensation of the dissolution of the world is porously violent, one moves with the energy. Alignment of frequencies prevents the shatter of glass; all physical objects are related, and I vibrated in tandem. Courting an inward rotation, merging the soul with materialism. It's the 21st century. Anytime you interface with the digital, you're reaching beyond yourself. I have more control of a mouse and keyboard than I do the hands that wield them. All I do is interface in minds.

So then, when you are in this theta wave fast-track to REM, it's not a reduction of consciousness per se. Sleep spindles are guarded, uncoiled by K-complexes; it's poetic that electroencephalography provides us with the imaged metaphor of sharp activity, as if arousal is tension itself. It would be plausible that

more cognitive processing is necessary when perceptions are entirely self-generated, as in dreams.

Just think of the energy required—everything you experience would be a work of will against void.

I understood what to do and had been there before. Astral projection is a richly described phenomenon marked in all annals of human history, and religious institutions are built on its back: the shamans of all cultures, the Hermetics, Gnostics, Vedics, Yakuts, Tengrists, Kemetics, Taoists, Inuit, Bwiti, Sufi, Ainu, Vodun; there's the flight of the Yaskomo, the Tibetan dream yogis, the Norse seiðr, and of course the Siberian saman and böö. Go anywhere and find someone to whisper their converging tales. Seek truth, and sooner or later we all bow to the phenomenon.

I reflected myself spatially. There is the self and there is the body. When you perceive the fracture, you may begin to represent it in the dark space of your mind where depth is understated. Invert yourself: imagine yourself as upside down, looking towards the body in bed. Rehearse the turning in your mind until they are all one moment of motion.

And then comes the most astonishing, exhilarating, sucking sensation. You are knocked out of the wind. Then it's peaceful, and you realize, having never opened your eyes, that vision has returned. So you slowly turn from your placement in the air to see yourself without the aid of a mirror.

I've only despised looking at my body in this state. The container laying there like a husk.

I passed through the wall of my room, out through the roof, crossing the suburbs as they shrunk to gestalt. The most fruitful

search is that of unknown ends. You'll know when you find it, we say this and only mean it after. Then I flew across the ocean with the speed of bent spacetime. Accelerating across plains and mountains unknown to me, then cities, slowing down, crashing to a halt. I was drawn like a magnet to the center of my life.

You of all people will have anticipated the location I raced towards. You knew it before even me, and then I was there, in a place I wasn't meant to visit.

A shimmering cascaded across the back of my scalp and an immense, deep, hurting pressure wet the underside of my eyes, moving out. This must've been the physical cost of my projection.

There was a bear on the bedside table. A teddy, and there was something achingly wrong about it, childishly worn in ways I refuse to elaborate on. Knowing about the teddy was something like a pornographic shame. And her skin shone pearly pale, sickly yet vital. I could intuit its heat. Barefaced, she looked to be in true homeostasis. Her face was slack of everything, even herself.

Ji-eun was asleep, but I wasn't alone. Haven't I mentioned feeling a presence upon arriving? I didn't need to breathe in that modality, even so, my body suffocated under an animal instinct. I perceived a Gaia-like force pinning me warmly, tender-firm in place. A part of me wanted to retreat, while the majority was mesmerized. All the while, I registered the bedroom the way a telephoto lens reimagines the dead memory of light.

Have you ever been caught for something you wanted but didn't will to do? What defense do you have to yourself when you find your hand in the cookie jar? I was afraid of identifying the

trap while still being lured by the danger, that merely contemplating my desire would poison its form.

The temperature suddenly changed. I saw a bodied cast on the ground that was the glowing inverse of shadow. I watched my soul from a third-person perspective. She looked past me at her body, and that's when I noticed it. I didn't feel the standard affection for this creature. She glided almost through my soul towards her bed, then she paused, and turned, and studied. I needed to leave, yet something stopped me—it was greater than both of us.

I believe now that I was brought there to understand something. We may call this being God or Alpha Centauri dimensional gnomes or the web born thinking itself. I'm not sure that the difference is semantic. Nonetheless, there was benevolence in my terror. I'd never yet known the way fear and absolute trust mated, but they do, and you feel it in quiet wholeness, and it's the fate that you've pined for. Maybe we're always meant to be in this very moment of connection with another, under threat of losing ourselves.

She was shorter than me. If we were standing, I'd actually have to look down to see her. They're smaller in real life. Than you think. Knowledge of cameras and shared perspectives remind you that it would be different, but it's still surprising. Nor was she shocked that I was there. I remember trying to speak and managed only to open my mouth. That was how our conversation started.

She said, "Why do you always follow me?"

"I'll leave."

"Answer me first." She only sounded curious.

"I guess, well, that's what I'm trying to find out."

“You came all the way to my room to ask that. My room. Don’t you think that’s inappropriate?”

“Is this really you, or am I talking to myself?”

I examined her in soul travel, wanting to touch, wondering if my out-of-body experience proved the reality of my body. When we are etheric, do our minds reconstitute ourselves and/or others from memories that emerge from communication with our nerves, like magic which must be charged and channeled to bewitch? Or is there something dimensional that stores physical characteristics which are represented there in the astral? Perhaps trading dreams for our souls to roam? Maybe we don’t yet know enough about consciousness to separate these modalities.

“I don’t know who you are. If I’m you,” she said, “I’d like to believe I’d hold the thought. Everyone seems to know who I am, so they do the work of recognizing. I fear I’m losing my skill with faces. Now please answer me, what are you doing in my room? Don’t you know that this is a private space?”

“Do people come here often, or am I the first?”

“You don’t listen.”

“What? I do listen.” I was so hurt. “I do.”

She floated out to her body and watched for the way it breathed, like it was the normalest thing in the world to look at herself from the outside. The room was poorly lit. The lightwood floor glinted where it wasn’t smothered by a wide sherpa carpet, which carpet extended heavily from the bed to the door. Otherwise, the room was sparsely decorated. She had high windows that reached the ceiling and surveyed the city and the banks of the Han. With lights out the window so far as to be no more

than bugs, and the skyline was poor of nothing, but the stars had departed, and the Bukhansan was only a silhouette.

“It’s all so lonely,” I said.

“Maybe you don’t know who I am. If you’ve considered that possibility—”

I took a step simultaneously closer and further from her forms to answer her. “It’s your job to make people less lonely.”

“—You’d know how wrong you were.” She stopped looking at herself and turned to me. “I can’t make you less lonely. I can only provide a layer of assurances for your world. Of course there are other people—I’m one of them—and it’s my job to remind you of that.”

It wasn’t that she was being cold—not in the way she said it. It was more that she was so sure, and this being really what she said, only how could I believe something so at odds with everything she sang for?

She said, “I won’t cure your loneliness.”

“But you have and you do!”

She shook her head. “Don’t look at me like that. If you can believe it, there’s nothing I want more than to help you, though I fear that my support isn’t helping.”

“I think that everything in life is a choice, and that we should trust someone when they decide what’s good for them.” I thought that this would be a beautiful thing to say. When it left my lips, I regretted it.

“The moment you think you know someone is the moment you’ve lost them. I believe this may even apply to oneself. And I

don't have the time to know anyone. That's not entirely true, though it's true enough."

"So if I know you," I said, "and you know no one,"

"Then who do you know?"

"I don't—" I said. But I believed her, you know, since it was her. What does it mean to have faith in someone? That they are consistent, or that you can touch them? I'm a person who trusts my reality alone for the truth, only at a certain point I realized that I trusted her more than myself. Maybe to love is to give yourself away—to think of nothing else. I always think about us and forget myself.

She shook herself free of a chill. She looked at me, I swear, the way a mother looks at a child.

"Here's what I've come to understand. Everything you know, once you travel, becomes what you no longer believe. I can sing the same song one thousand times—and I have—still that one thousand and one is stranger than I could remember from the other thousand together. You may have thought of me with the romantic violence of your age; I'm honored too much. However, your life is out there. No, listen. You've done more than admirably, but you must love someone in your reach if you're not ready to love yourself. There's a world that you can feel with every pore and pull of hair. You can be humbled by leaves of grass if you let them. Walk towards the sun with your eyes open and your hand shaving the glare. Reach down into your darkness until it's pearly by light. There's nothing more heroic than choosing to face the day. I mean that utterly—there's nothing else. I know you won't believe that you can do this without me. You'll say that you

could've only heard this from my mouth, that I was the only one who could make you believe it. However, all change comes from inside where love first has space to grow.

We are excessive creatures—there's too much in us, in our lifetimes, more than we know what to do with. That's why we cry to let things out, that's why we dream to create the world again. What is tenderness if not catching a glimpse of this truth? Life pours out of us always; know that attempts at a seal will only pressure to burst the dam. You think you love me for me, but look at where it's gotten you! Do you think you're happy with your set? Perhaps neither of us know—that you don't know how, while trying to prove this to me, you've inadvertently borne the weight I've been trying to remove? You have no idea what it's like to look out at a sea of lights and beings. I do my best to never be enough. You think you've come to see me? A performance is only as strong as its audience. You don't know the emptiness after a tour, where the best of us lie with faith to make it through the night. You don't understand why I do this, that it's not for my own sake but my fated participation in the pantopia. What choice did I have?

Remember that this is only meaningful if it means something for you. Giving myself away like this is real only if the sound reaches you. You can't understand the helplessness of my situation. That this conversation is elliptical, and with everything I think, you'll have remembered and rewritten again in your words. If it moves you—and it must move you forward—then it's left to you. Are you lonely with me? Are you more alive sharing two shadows, or have you lost some of yourself? That's not rhetorical. I want to know.”

This conversation was why I began writing. Dreams, you see, have the taste of adumbrated truth.

IU left a post on her Instagram the night of the preceding astral projection. She ‘encouraged against napping at odd hours, because it’d make one awake when everyone else was sleeping.’ I read this with the magical thinking of limerence, which is to say I took the sign for its obvious cosmogonic alignment.

What is meaning, really? In our deepest trance state, the swirls of unconscious understanding flit below the surface as an undisclosed idea. This is the praxis of thought. Consider, for eternity, the inky blackness which our real self emerges from, like a Lovecraftian—like a heptapod’s too-human nightmare; in truth, we are the liquid; there are more things; smoothness is, when magnified, the jagged edge of higher definition, just you rotate 8-bit.

And you can feel that there’s something greater than this, that it contains more than can be said in a sound, shown in an image, or filmed across time. You’re aware of the felt experience, which is an intelligence. No doubt this frightens you—that you’re reacting ahead of yourself, that your self fractures in that instant and you know you’re more, some corposant-conduit of other. Immanence unfolds from the asymptotic now, the ending of a thought.

This is what our minds do—we abstract, index. I want us lost in this discussion. I want you rolling your eyes.

Everything which narrows the insight of scale isn’t just delusion—it’s no benign error. Representing human flatness is the prime sacrilege. The yandere is a saint when they love another to death. We assume for one second the incapacity of a person to change and we’ve not just condemned them, we’ve been reduced

to the I. One step closer to death. Laplace's demon or the blue-pilled simulation. And we may all walk that path for a moment, though no true human alive and unsick would pick for themselves a world so... radically deluded, reduced, a narcissist's most infantile regression. But then the infant is still learning to see. Are you closing off or starting to open? Are you falling asleep or waking up? The more you follow, the less my service has been a success.

Some fans cry when they meet their idol in the flesh. It's easy to make fun of. Have you ever stopped to appreciate the vigor they were privy to? Maybe that's why you joke: to offset your insecurity.

Note, I'm not saying that the object of fans' affection is impressive, or that being at their concert is enviable, but the act of crying is. The scream-crying fan cut to in the middle of a performance. Is the cameraman thinking 'Wow, how ridiculous!' or are they doing their part to spread the religiosity of the site? That fan is one in a million. Any normal distribution has its disquieting outliers. Those few stans are so important because they extend the absolute limits. You make it that far and you've earned the title of astronaut, and the world becomes far away, and the silence of your distanced life is deafening as you float alone before your star.

Have you ever lost hold of yourself just by the proximal vision of another? The truth of their voice? The 'live' exemplar.

You think you know what it means for these fans, but you don't. No no no you don't. It's real proof. They're not screaming with tears because of mere love. It's the witnessing of essentiality. Manipulation alive with you, the paradigmatic co-occurrence, con-

crescence. They are proof of everything you've witnessed in past lives on the screen. In the end, they're proof of you.

Though I've never been one of those fans, I must respect them. They're a bit like a dog's object impermanence—blind to the foresight of their owner returning from a trip. *I thought you couldn't be here.*

There's another category of fans, the one to which I belong, who are more akin to unbelievers. My faithless repentance is like, well the ecstasy isn't expunged in ostentatious screaming, but soft tears. Our sentiments rest in thanks. Once we cried because we were powerless and looking for assurance, and now it's because we were wrong, and under the duress of awe, we've been moved.

I'm going to float something by you, and it's going to sound crazy. Just please hear me out. Okay, ready?

What if we're supposed to cry like that for everyone? Imagine if we could summon a comparable tenderness always—to give her or him or me, or *you* what you deserve. I don't even know what it means to be moved, though it seems that the conceit is about an external force acting upon us, something beyond our will that we are powerless but to accept. 'She moved me.' It's not coercive. To 'move' is about as gentle as it gets, and buried somewhere (at least for me) is the notion of progress. We move forward, maybe it's a stretch, but no, you would agree that there's agápē love, bountiful and generous, emanating from that word when it's couched in a sentence. There's nothing more wonderful than finding yourself moved by something. It must be your love that breaks the law of inertia, and strangely when this happens it has everything and nothing to do with choice.

I'm not religious in the way generally conceived; however, I wish to use the religion I'm most familiar with. They say that to worship Christ, one must worship everyone else. Is it crude to make a three-way comparison? Or to spin off in a trinity chiasmus: fans to celebrities, celebrities to Christ, Christ to fans; who's the sheep to one supercilious shepherd?

We fans are a little quick to believe in things, too naïve, pure, maybe puerile to some. Nevertheless, I think this role we play is really fucking beautiful. I know it. It seems the one place in the whole wide web where we give someone the affection they deserve. And they're compelled to give it back. This is what I must tell myself, but this is what I tell myself. Prove me wrong! I want to believe that this love is possible among partners, parents to children, teachers and students, preachers with their parish. None of this has been my experience. Just like Proust said, there's something also about the self when you're included in the relationship. Being online quiets that part of you, titrates the love from yourself, leaving only a complete fidelity to the other. Of course, this is reductive, culture inoculates you in every direction; my ramblings are only meant as a gift.

I wonder what she'd say if she read all of this. For her own sake, I hope she denies everything. What good would it be if Ji-eun had one special fan whom she singled out to love over and above the rest? Why does anyone haunt your dreams? What is it about them that catches the most private parts of you to relive? What longing connects us? What proof do you need? When will you dream of her with you? or you with me?

Christ may have had a wife—a wife whom he loved beyond his quotidian strain of compassion—possibly consummated by the shared virtue of their sin, but to let anyone know? And for the church to have included Magdalene in anything beyond the Gnostic whispers on the edges of canon? It would be a distraction and a threat.

I know she loves me because she loves all of us, or the good in us. Maybe she has been visiting you too. Maybe the very reason you stumbled on this thread was in search of the answers to your own compulsions, hoping to find some confirmation that you're not alone. I am here. Here is closer than you think. IU, I'll admit, is replaceable too, at least insofar as anyone could be the node wedding souls to our matrix. The point of contact, the strange matter. To a materialist, it's all irrational. But why would anyone want to be a materialist?

Back to the plot. There are some insights I had to piece together like a detective. For example, IU said that she often gets less than four hours of sleep because she is so busy. She also said that she writes her songs based on conversations she has, that those are the most important things for her. Is it reasonable then to conjecture that she's choosing to have late night conversations with friends, in what little time of the day she has left, *over* sleeping? both to inform her life and to feel less alone, because she needs friendship more than sleep to survive? That somehow her performances are a reified preference for connection over the body's selfish need for functioning. Wow. I wonder how she justifies her magic. She must be very tired. I wonder if she knows.

And I'm not saying that IU knows exactly what's been going on regarding me and the dreams. You could ask her. I'm not saying that if you DM'd her that she'd answer, let alone remember. It would be a cute joint effort, but you don't need to all band together and organize it right here in this thread. What I can say for sure is that these visits between me and IU were teaching me. Was it Kierkegaard who said, 'Sleeping is the height of genius?' Oh who am I kidding.

A double-headed signpost stood before me, diverging into two knotted trails that mounted a knoll, a loose forest on the right, a drying swamp to the left. Ahead I could see how both options led to the same place, a great modern house. Unlike that crossroads meme, the decision was a false promise.

The house stood atop a hill and was sleeker than a mansion, with wide clear glass windows rendered like an aching hole in the darkness; it resembled in heart, if not in appearance, a half-open grand piano. The structure seemed to resonate with itself under a slanted roof, further revealing the back-reaching spinal curvature of the frame and was crowned in the middle by a hooded terrace. Think aesthetically the house from *Parasite*, except with a dark academia tinge in classical synergy to this musical chord. The grounds were castled trim with gartered walls, rife sometimes-stone crenellations giving a haunted church. When not stone it was dirt, mud, warped wood, and caping moss. This all gave the impression of a hierarchy of care which diminished into bony hedges and unfruiting trees. Clouds pulled down the low sky, and standing on the terrace was a figure whose posture marked the whole place with a gothic technostalgia. I'm not making this up.

Well. And this strange creature—my impression was that they held power. Their silhouette rippled from the wind of a cape or scarf or dress, something all black and of the night. Their posture was firm and unaffected. They haunted the structure like a gargoyle would, only there was thin movement and so also a pressure, given clearly that they were aware of me. There's a phrase I remember from some legendary in Pokémon: '<name> is exerting its pressure!' In the game it makes you use up your PP. In my dream, it placed me on the margins of the story.

The figure either permitted my stay or found it amusing. Either way, I made my way up the steps with the labyrinthian sensation that some terrible truth was closing in on me, and to find it would require my being lost to its power. That I was to deliver something: a message, a gift—I didn't know what and must've forgotten, just as I'd forgotten which choice I made—only compounded the problem. And I'm not sure how to express this, but I think I heard notes trembling from the house. This wasn't a normal sound. It was like the resonances were shifted up before an accordion lilted to bass. The song had a violent, computer-generated precision.

Do you ever wake up from a vividness and have the inexplicable feeling the following day that you'd only recently *gone* to sleep, and that these waking moments were the illusion? That something more complete was stalking you? Dread is really about some powerless lack of understanding. We dread the truth outstripping us and our inability to fully comprehend it. The house was dark, and the time was night, and I dreaded what I was after.

Beyond everything sweet and resonant in her voice, its clarity and angelic highness or control, beyond her sound's timeless familiarity, and just past how she seemed to look at you, there was sadness. And sadness is the holy emotion. Sadness promises everything—it recapitulates hope; it's the guarantee. If you've known sadness, then you understand. So please know that I entered that place with one thing on my mind: a completely unplaceable loss. I had lost the grail. I was chasing the sorrow of eternity in each moment.

The first steps in that place ushered forth a realm of suggestion. Heavy curtains were reworked out of quilts. My steps folded dead grass through the floorboards, and I saw visions of jungles as hot waves, alive and quickened by human abandonment. I watched as vines were already in the late stages of urban reclamation. This materiality slipped through my grasp. The foyer was skipped in time, upturned with a clockworked patina. It reminded me of those sci-fi horrors where you've rocketed yourself too far ahead of the future, gazing out the window with impotence until you land, and the future is a wasteland not unlike the distant past. Entropic visions of Zen desiccation, all-and-nothing, yes, the whole thing is peaceful once you've accepted it.

Not that these visions lasted for long. I'm not sure 'lasted' is apt. It was like those flip-book animations with a school pack of sticky-notes. There may be the illusion of chronicity, but when you hold and flip through it yourself, it always gets stuck the moment before your thumb has recalibrated to let the right time go. I'm writing of just that moment of accidental stuckness, or when you seem to look up at the second-hand and your brain has

filled the gap to reduce the blur. This is a tested perceptual bias, and however miniscule the error may seem, it provides crucial evidence. When we are awake, everything changes to accommodate the lie of constancy. I shudder to think what it could mean if this lie continues in our sleep.

The first door to my left had an empty room behind it.

The second door opened to a hallway, and the ceiling was too low and sinking lower. My family was waiting down there in the kitchen. They wanted to talk. I didn't see any of this, yet it was a given. They were waiting past the shadows to guilt me to stay.

The third room to my left was a cornered gallery. A conch shell called me. The room was vital and bright like a child's rain boots, or sun rays seeping through a hazy sky. Warmth abounded, as did the sweetness of chlorine, and the rug swam in a tropical turquoise. Two chairs hid a dormant fireplace by the far wall.

In the center of the room, just floating there, gyrating, collecting and threading and passing itself, was the ocean. I could hear the susurrus of waves and feel the cool air. The water not only comprehended itself, but also its distortions interpreted space. You'll never see the same wave again. A rainbow formed in the twisting image, compromising its simplicity. The liquid rested while awake; it was unblemished and translucently revealed the underside of its shape, its lack of container, and projected itself across the walls to appear even more unbounded and absorbing. It floated with a logic that taught me things about the world. It sprayed lightly onto my skin. I knew that if I were to touch the mass I'd be caught in this logic, maybe with no way to escape.

I spent a long time there before I was able to leave. The afterglow threatens my core memories. It's strange to know that place, maybe forever, and to still fail at offering it to you—it was sublime by its very domesticity. I was very sad to see it go. My ocean in my room.

I returned to the foyer. The ceiling was loftier than I'd remembered, though the pristine nature of the marble—like it had been laid out only the night before—was familiar. It had changed since the start of the dream, but I forgot this. Charcoal gray walls contributed to the feeling that it was less a home than maybe a place of ceremonial posturing. Everything was far too clean. However, there was a single wound: a leak. A stream formed across the ground. The floor was completely level, so I followed the strip of water down a corridor and through the heart of the house, passing doors like lotteries unscratched and trusting the slice of water to divine my path. Finally, I came upon a spiral staircase and saw water frozen in time, having once traveled the whole length of steps.

Well, okay. I thought the same thing you're thinking, that is, 'The leak must be coming from upstairs.' Only I had an impulse to place my right foot at the base of the ice and found that it was actually a laminar current. When I broke the flow, the water retreated up the stairs as if time were reversing. However, time still beat forward. The water couldn't have been magnetically attracted, because what pooled around my foot wasn't rerouting up the stairs. I had severed a connection that, without a chain, could not find its way home.

Blocking the current was a perversity. I lifted my foot. The water performed the strangest swirling motion, like it was contemplating a full thought before righting itself and creeping up the stairs. From there it locked back into its laminar flow. If I'm describing this strangely—the water didn't have any character, it was more that by observing it, I was granted insight into the higher consciousness that I seem to be continually alluding to; it was a law of nature being expressed. I climbed the spiral.

She was waiting there at the top of the stairs, standing in a pool that twisted with her figure, swirling around and around her head, and her eyes were closed.

I hadn't been happier to see her in who knows how long. I felt that with her before me, I'd be okay. We'd escape together. We'd help one another, and I'd truly be of use.

"Ji-eun," I said. Nothing. "IU."

She opened her eyes. "IU." I smiled as the water, awakened by that word, crashed down from the heavens.

She returned the smile before speaking my name. I would like to say that we hugged, but, dear reader, some things are more romantic with the wait.

"We have to get out of here," I said.

Her eyes were a web, coy to catch the light in them. She said, "No. Not yet. I was looking for something," I wanted to know her memories. "What was it—"

She traced a triangle in the air. Another inverted, larger, behind it. And then a third upright again. All one fluid motion. And the word as blessing danced on her lips. She looked skyward, or towards the ceiling, and then the ceiling vibrated, and dust

rained in conversation. (Btw, I googled for the symbol she drew; my best guess is that it's the Merkabah? Merkava? I couldn't ask her this during the dream because I'd never seen or heard of the symbol before.)

"We can't leave just yet," she said, walking deeper. She stopped and glanced back at me. I was waiting to test things, though we all knew I was destined to follow her.

We made our way by groping through the hallway. It was anciently dark: Cimmerian, Stygian, Acheronian, or like the period those words come from. The ceiling shook again, and now the walls were groaning with it.

Then there were these sounds—like the cries of animals threaded in metal. They spattered the corners of darkness, slowly growing, reinforced in orebody echoes.

"Thank you for coming," she said, undisturbed.

The screeching and creaking of living minerals were fungi of contradiction. From all directions they came to threaten us, oppressed our sense of space, confounded reality. I pressed beside her and could feel her warmth.

"You're so important here," she continued. "You're the light."

"What?"

"You reveal what I can't otherwise see. I'll prove it." Over the last minute, there'd been a steady though virtually imperceptible improvement in my vision. She took a step back, and the illumination remained. She grabbed my arm and pulled me with her—causing shadows to recede. I looked at my torso but couldn't see any glow.

We walked on until we found a fork in the hall. The ground, might I add, was unmistakably traced with the yellow lines of an endless highway, and this was perfectly natural; we were headed forward in the right lane. I turned to discuss what to do when a clopping came regularly from the darkness ahead. A bearded gray goat materialized, with a single horn centered upon its head. Its horn was golden and curved and crusted with blue lichen. The goat waited on us; it recognized our needs before turning back into the darkness for us to follow.

We walked for longer than dreams should last.

The nightmare spaces we visit in dreams are the worst when they seem familiar. Once I was dreaming that I'd been living in a house much like my own, only it was partially outside or blended the in and out in some Wonkafied greenhouse—if Wonka's obsession was entomology and stomach churning. Adorning each wall of the dream were the most ornate, detailed, predacious webs. They stuck and coated everything, their egg sacks hung sticky and voluptuous; dust and fatty putrid yellows and rotting carcasses coalescing, and this had been where I was living; this was home, where I had to breathe. It was the feeling of taking a bite of bread only to turn it over and see deep gray-blue spores sinewing the loaf. There is, with one's gag, the doom of being knowingly infected, or being sick any action you are to take. Our present moment was not like those dreams—I had no idea yet the invisible nature of my vulnerability. But the encroaching doom was something of the same.

We walked on through that corridor, walked in the direction of the sound of the one-horned goat, moved until the architecture

of reality was threatened. The unigoat had a screeching sort of bleat which mimicked a baby in the middle of being mauled. It was communicating. The screams were pointed and affirming. My spirit guide would be a goat: a trash-eating omniscience. It's bone-antenna like a sextant; it was the only thing we could make out of the creature in the pooriness of light. More than once the goat bumped into a wall with its horn before righting itself. I fancied the groans doubled as echolocation, horn as cat whisker, the weapon only an excuse for a tool. The goat had been created, evolved maybe, for the very purpose of guidance in the dark. Those plastic-predator noises (which hadn't stopped since we entered the hallway) didn't seem to scare this goat; they were, in all honesty, less abrasive than the goat's communication.

I wanted to protect the goat. I don't know. It's hard to write about him, because I think the goat was made from me, at least that's how I feel now. The goat represented temerity in wanderlust. He was felicitous yet prone to melancholy. He explored but also submitted to the unknown, and I loved him—in that fearful moment I did. Thinking back now, the dumb brute, my goat, that sorry creature... He was nothing more than a lighthouse with a burnt-out beacon.

It should be noted, while there's still time, that our goat was to be the least strange thing that happened that night.

And how to explain the creatures that lay ahead and behind us? There's was a world less of suffering than informational bedlam. They weren't courting evil but rather embodying a sensory overload that made morality the stuff of noise. They were entities

whose modality of thought might resemble a panic attack, and they laughed the way we shudder.

Just when it was past unbearable, the hallway cleaved wide like a gator's wind-drawn maw. And a mirrored shadow approached. This image petrified the goat as it let out its last wail—oh that sorrowful wail—before turning around, desperately charging past us towards whence it came, deep into the memory of things. All was silent. I could hear my skin prickle as the shiver shocked through my body.

The new shadow in the hallway innervated into the most familiar form. That THING before me. Fuck. It had her rounded eyes. It had her face, her figure. I couldn't bear to look at IU, though I felt her skin heat viciously against mine.

"What is that?" She said.

"What do you mean?" The thing was already moving. "That's you." At the time, this made sense.

"No." She gripped my hand tightly, backing away. "That's not me."

The sounds from the walls encroached pandemonium. Everything was bursting. Before us was the splitting image of her—recursive parallel, a refraction of a reflection, all to be symmetry, mirrorrim.

She, IU's double, smiled with perfectly normal teeth, and what would've been so tender upon her face twisted with the uncanny straightness of a line. A phrase kept repeating in my mind: 'We don't belong. We don't belong.' We had traveled too far to fit the narrow confines of this house—the act of treading organized our home.

“아이유,” The double said. “어디로 데려가려는 거야?”

I looked at IU, hoping she could oblige. The other was inflecting conversationally. Given the situation, this was more than we could expect. Then she stopped and pointed at IU—her hand shook—and stepped closer, only this seemed to agitate IU the way magnets repel identical poles. Each word spoken without any response exasperated her double.

“We have no time,” I said.

The walls were transmogrifying, shifting and semi-porous; they were awake and magmatic, and through liquidation the sources of those sounds did not reveal themselves entirely, but were sentient amalgams of trash, plastic, and animal gore.

I sensed a trailing of these daemonic jestering entities in the alternate and simultaneous directions of IU and her double, just as they became aware of our predicament. In order to save my loves, I stood between them, reaching to bring them together.

It was us and the entities—a nightmare I feared to have birthed. The entities represented everything I’d seen or overheard, the inverse and/or gatekeepers of post-postmodern tradition. Gen-Z malingering, tricking the collision box, glitching and clipping out-of-bounds. They were laughing, not at us, with a psychobabble-glossolalia-doublespeak tumbling into wordsalad-pun-portmanteau. Stranger still, I understood it. Read this poetically: everything allowed for everything and nothing. What allows for everything?

They understood me better than I understood myself. IU didn’t wait to process, she pulled my hand past her second image, whom I grabbed to make a chain. Our steps glowed wet with

light, and the light made the entities shriek and recede. It was translating the dark into a psychedelic color-wheel, all corona, barely perceptible, novel, strange, and I saw past dreams wound up and skewered in fractal otherness, until the light began revealing another's dreams, still others, and then something in-between, like infinity was a game created to astound us; what's inside a black hole? Shut up! Shut up! Shut up. You don't understand.

I lost the double's grasp, and she called after us desperately, chased after us, and I ran merely because IU was running. Maybe I was sobbing. I couldn't breathe. I found my footfalls tapering existence as reality buffered, skipped, and rhymed.

Beyond being lost, I continued to feel that just maybe we didn't belong there. This is a theme I seem to be working through.

The current zone—like a hole out of my mind—was likely haunted, possibly an alternate dimension, nether realm, ethereal place, liminal space, though these are all reductive. I think it can be distilled to this: we had left culture. Meaning hadn't been decentered, no, it was in the midst of eradication, regressed to sub-atomic proportions, and THAT is horror. IU's double was the most tangible thing we found there, and yet she made no fucking sense. What lay past her promised something positively alien. In Sci-fi there are again rules for this. If you come across yourself after a time jump, one of the two you's is erased to resolve the paradox. Reality's code had caught its snag, and no debugging could solve the input error. The double merely signified our journey past the event horizon.

Venture too far and encounter true madness as it materializes: the Skinwalker (alien), Rakshasa (demon), Kitsune (beast), Chaneques (doll), or Impundulu (vampire). The Wendigo and the wilds. It's a parable too threatening to customs, forbidden to children and restricted in adults. Get lost. Go too far, and once you're there and starving, go further until you transcend the ability to recognize yourself, nagualism is not a choice but a forbidden knowledge, until you look down at the lake, and instead of recognizing the creature, it considers anthropophagy. Howling is heard for generations, yet we don't question the sound. Do not forget yourself when you return. Too much is made of this in the wilderness, not enough in the wired.

She screamed my name in the darkness—was screaming, endlessly, bringing me back with an unendurable fervor that grew to from my increasing attention. It mangled our reality to complete blackness. “Lee Ji-eun!” I called helplessly then, just as now. “I’m with you!”

Unfortunately, here's where I must pull back. I went there, but I can't take you. Not from this thread. I'm sorry. What followed is quite literally unspeakable, so that I shall only gesture at the abscission. The images and sounds torment me alone.

At one point, I woke up gasping and willed myself back to bed—feeling the weight of the covers and the dull back-eyed threat of light. Using the momentum of my pandiculation, I closed the blanket around my skull. I was swaddling my consciousness against the threshold of day, willing it to remain where my soul staked immaterial claim. I woke up, again, in the deepest,

strangest, most impossible dream I'd yet experienced. My eyes throbbed with nystagmus as time preened with achronality.

Our portal eventually led to what was once the center of the house, which was somehow structured like my YouTube recommendations. The tone had jittered now to something more manageable. I'm aware of how stupid all of this sounds. Doomscrolling infinity, uncannily familiar, a labyrinth knotted in a pretty bow. Don't think about it—feel its vapidty.

IU said, "I think that all music is extending the conversation."

"What?"

"Artistic, musical references, the things shared with me by my friends and family. So when I write lyrics, I don't know if you could even call them my words." She shot her neck towards the stairs. She was talking over my concern. Even calling her name made no impact.

Her head twitched. "Oh, my ideal type." She smiled with a blush. "Everyone always asks me that, you'd think I'd be prepared. I guess it's a secret." I pulled her arm. Was she caught in a recording, or perhaps hypnotized? Maybe radio-waves trapped her in TV dead zones.

I knew she could see me in the corner of her eyes, insofar as her eyes were real. If she believed I was there, then she would understand.

"Sometimes you must take a leap of faith, but most of all I'm lucky to be here. Talent only gets you so far, then you defer to fate."

I muttered her words to myself compulsively. I looked at the stairs and remembered our stint in the hallway before the

unspeakable happened... Yes, she'd been running from herself. Now the space was empty of her double, so why did it feel like she was speaking to some third party? She behaved like she was caught in a compilation of interviews, her presence splitting. Meanwhile, I was demoted to a mere fan—how could I not take it personally?

“Please, can I help?” I asked, knowing she wouldn't hear me.

“I'm not sure that I sing for myself. The job of an artist maybe is to forget about yourself, or to become yourself so deeply that you've channeled everyone you've ever met, or to express the things everyone already knows.

The older I get—well I'm not so sure about the meaning of art, but I think it has something to do with communication, of finding a common language that we can't reach otherwise. When singing, I'm allowed to say what no one can utter aloud. Maybe it's because they're embarrassed.” She laughed shyly. “It's a cross I'm willing to bear, to hide behind. Honestly, it's the easiest thing—it's a gift you've given me—I can be sentimental when times are hard, when you've spent the day sacrificing for your family or community... Oh, the truth is, even words like ‘fan’ and ‘celebrity’ leave a sour taste in my mouth. It's difficult not to sound ungrateful. You understand that that's not my intention. We're different, yet in every way that matters, we're the same.”

Her closed eyes were lost in a REM ecstasy. As I gazed upon them, I was overcome with a strange vision: a few dozen screens were circling us in entirety, accelerating so that the screens animated into one world that bathed us in blue light. The reality of the vision was a reversion of absolute data, the truth hidden in the habits of the awake. I was at once the center of every monitor,

every lens and pair of eyes, pulling myself in a *mise en abyme*. What was I here for? The Grail! And if she was—and if this was what some part of her soul always faced—

Then the worst ghastly shriek gutted the air. Whirling sonic violence pierced and held me back in that black hole of a house. The sound woke me to my displacement, like air rushes to fill a seal. Stupefied, I walked towards the noise of the scream which was so familiar, and away from my IU. Still, I heard her speak. The shrieks fought her voice, and soon the sound of steps became audible.

“My fans are the most important part of my life. I mean it. They somehow understand exactly what I need without being asked.”

I crept up the stairs, regularly glancing back as IU channeled her history from the room’s center, as a statue argues for space, for time. I felt to be at the heart of a collapsing moment, as if I was the dead-eye intersection of ballistic missiles, as IU’s sounds grew fainter, the hidden screams more hysteric, desperate; as above, so below.

And there was a choice to make. It wasn’t just inevitable; the woman standing before me, once more, the woman screaming on the stairs in her naked terror was perfectly identical to the woman I left and still loved. There before me was the woman I’d forgotten. Had I been lucid at any moment during this dream or nightmare or prophetic vision, or if she’d imparted to me some mantic truth as a sibyl imposing from the upper baileys, it would’ve been that IU and the woman before me were entirely different, no matter how much they argued that they were the same.

“Dowa—dowajuseyo!” she, the double, screamed with inflection, the sound ringing in my foreign ears. I let out an unexpected sob and could feel my body shivering with real sweat (recall the blanket over my real eyes). I stormed the last few steps as she came bolting past, scraping skin on mine, headed towards what was once the center foray, and I followed where she came as if expecting—as if hell was awake and closing in on her—that was the—there was a fear not unlike a life-threatening collision—just thinking about the fear now is letting in death, it was as if I—see now I feel disloyal to myself, but unfair to you and what I owe, tempted to delete this all but fuck could I even do any better? Do you want to know what it was like? You don’t.

I thought I could be brave, only the moment humbles all belief in the ability to believe. There is a fear that makes breathing voluntary control. The fear doesn’t end when you wake up but rather goes off living, having somehow escaped—having been a fact you were keen never to admit to yourself except here when there’s no way to collapse the truth, when you *are* the truth. When the dread, examined, is the core prism of your identity.

She shrieked again, this time so loud it shook the world, and not to underplay my absolute impotence to help in this (or let’s face it, any) situation. And there was a dominant gust of wind that chilled everything selfless in me, and a door slammed shut, isolating her from whence she came, echoing from far, far, further away, and the digits of millions flashed before my retinas, holographic and trophic, vitrified on the screen as from a nuclear blast. I realized then that the horror IU and her double were dealing with was blindingly, shit-in-your-pants unfathomable, which

caused my sob to spasm and consume my breath for the threat was already there with me, and yes you're again ahead of me: there she was shrieking at herself. And IU was carrying on her business while Ji-eun appeared slaughterous, knowing one must succumb under the synechdotal death drive.

According to Google, psychosis signifies a 'disconnect from reality.' Based on this definition, dreaming is a form of psychosis, Q.E.D. One interesting study from Mota and colleagues (2016) found that psychotic lucid dreamers reported control of their dreams approximately three times the rate of non-psychotic lucid dreamers (~70% compared to 23%). They give the explanation that psychosis enhances the experience of internal reality to the detriment of the external, and through convolution they further argue that lucid dreaming is particularly dangerous for those already at risk for psychosis. I need not point out the succulent irony of this.

We have extensively explored the growing paradox by which celebrity steers the ship of cultural meaning through their sublimation/subjugation to us viewers, and I don't intend to feed repetition. Reality made and done in again, our love story is one mysteriously of identification yet novel otherness; nor is it for nothing that she and I are two who, under normal circumstances due to location, class, language, age, talent, beauty, etc., would never have met. Well then, to tie everything into a pretty bow, my point is merely that it has **always** been the psychotic who generate new reality. We are autopoietic—the divine intelligence necessary to escape before extending the real. Have you ever tried imagining someone who doesn't exist? Or are you senile, tethered to

the creations of others? You're telling me you feel depressed when a show ends? How do you think it feels to be the loving architect? The actor whose life was your mere model.

IU and Ji-eun were intertwined, and I was the link binding them to this reality. Maybe fans are the multiverse, and elsewhere they were saved. Regardless, I knew what I must do. She has a live rendition of an English ballad that I quite like. Actually, this song may as well be the theme song for our story. It comes to me sometimes in her melancholic voice:

‘Oh, I built a world around you
Oh, you had me in a dream,
I lived in every word you said—
The stars had aligned, I thought that I’d found you
And I don’t wanna love somebody else’

For ease of googling, see the titular line just above. The song’s beauty is extraordinary when you consider the all-Korean crowds she performed it to in English. I fancy that the sentiment couldn’t be expressed in a known language. In my world of the final verse, the first line was a hope, the second line would become a mantra, the final is a prayer:

‘Oh, I thought that I could change you
Oh, I thought that you would be the greatest story that I tell
I know that it’s time to tell you it’s over
But I don’t wanna love somebody else.’

I remembered that I was dreaming. I had control. I could put a stop to this madness. Merely run the code, a simple invocation. First I would visualize. The world before me, the hallways with yellow road lines, the doors upon doors, the ocean in my room, the family past my vision, the unigoat, the woman duplicating her umbration. Second, I would manipulate. God-willing. Flutter my self-powered wings, flight as pure Ghibli metaphor for freedom, freedom undoing my reality-tether, howling like a wendigo. What could I do except find the latent disappointment in me, all the repressed hopes and calls unanswered? Three, I needed to admit it. I turned to IU. I gently pressed my forehead against hers. Oh, it was warmer, her skin softer than I will ever feel in this world of the awake. She rested hers on mine. Her eyelids fluttered open, her gaze sinking into my skin. She couldn't have known why I was crying, or maybe she knew exactly why and for that reason never betrayed the thought. I wanted to caress her face. I wanted to kiss her. IU. And maybe I would've if only Ji-eun wasn't there to see it.

Finally, I had to relinquish my everything.

I loved our time together. There was time for such a love. Past, and past, and past, holds in this pretty face from moment to moment, to the last breath of recorded life; and all our futures have darkened fools the way to torrid time. Out, out brief candle! She's but a ringing mirror, a real person, that struts and frets her second upon the screen, and then is heard forevermore. This is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying everything.

I closed my eyes to her sclera reflecting the truth of me. The last thing I saw of her was her vision that I would go right

on existing.

“Love is letting go, because letting go means you’ve finally understood you never should’ve had them to begin with,” IU, no, Ji-eun said to the audience. At least that’s what I imagine happened.

In the darkness, I felt the absence of breath on my skin. Ji-eun’s screams had stopped. There was only one again.

I hope you understand that I've only caressed the surface of one culture to afford a passage, in metalepsis, outlining them all. This work is transparently a sort of manifesto, a cauldron bubbling to its acidic zenith, more prosocial than another teenager's bomb or a warlock's homebrew.

Every time I wake up, my confusion ferments, these endless metaphors splayed, diffracting around shared modalities, hyperrealities, the concentrated way you look through the camera above your screen. How can we find a language for this place?

If I stop dreaming, what will happen to this reality? The one that I'm writing in, or the one that I'm writing, or the one that you're reading? I feel loyal to where/whenever I'm currently occupying. If a tree falls in the middle of a forest, or if a text is purged from its thread...

You've possessed the banality of my voice. Now you pause to think on your own. You speed ahead as a punkish revolution, not back to the beginning, pray. I anticipate nothing.

So. This really is the end of my story. I'll confess that tears are welling in my eyes. It's only silly because who would've thought that anyone would read this far? It means more to me than you will ever understand.

Thank you.

This final dream, if I may call it a dream, I expect to sound rather familiar. This could be my last great tangent. It's silly, I feel as if I'm admiring the sunset for the final time. No, that's not right. I feel as though everything is accelerating under an

inescapable compression, and not even light can escape. Whatever happens to me, you will go on from this. To be clear, I'm not dying per se, I just hate endings.

You know nothing about me, do you? You read that I'm crying while I type this. My lips are quivering and sore—I can't help it, I'm sorry. I prostrate to move you. Love moves me. If you remember one thing from our time together, let it be this: we see the clearest through our tears.

I am alone.

I am a real boy.

My life is falling apart.

I don't know what to do. I often ask myself, 'What am I good for?' I've spent the last two years home alone staring at the screen. My hard drive is full of esoteric texts like the *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* and the *I Ching*. My sister makes fun of me publicly, she thinks I know nothing of her accounts. I haven't made a 'real' friend since elementary school. I once said 'lol' out loud—literally pronounced "lawl"—everyone lol'd. Don't misread, I'm not bullied! No one cares enough to notice.

I didn't apply to colleges (and I'm good at the subjects I care about (Ji-eun also got top scores in literature)). I will be evicted when high school is over, as my father has decreed. Online (unsubmitted) work applications are priming new nightmares. No one should hire me, for their sake. I thought about making a YouTube channel, but still crickets from my comment on IU's *Twenty-Three*, so that doesn't bode well. I don't have money for therapy. If I try to work, I'm sure I'll have a panic attack, and after the first they'll just keep coming, because the fear of panicking

becomes its own cause for panic. Not unlike Roko's Basilisk (DO NOT look this one up if it's unfamiliar), for I know it will be already too late.

As someone with both bouts of major depression and constant dysthymia, comorbid generalized anxiety disorder, agoraphobia, [substance] abuse, complex PTSD, seasonal affective disorder (SAD), who can't do a single pull-up, has IBS, needs glasses, lost my retainer, my left arm never healed right after I broke it, attempted beard is patchy with ingrown hairs, backne and scars from excessive scratching, hairline is already receding, and with a lisp, tics, and a stutter. And I've never hugged a girl before. Maybe only half are true, which is too much. The worst part is, it's my fault. I've done nothing to fix things.

I know I'm annoying, repetitive, insufferable, I'm the fucking worst. You've known since the beginning and kindly said nothing. See through the bullshit. My personality is as opaque as air is limpid, only miming empty promises. I'll listen for once. WWJD? Don't think I'm embittered and vengeful. The problem is that I need to care about myself, yet no matter what I do, I can't. And if I can't love myself, how can you expect me to care about anyone else?

Nothing in this world is conducive to true friendship. We come of age in enclosures with only insecurity; our community is competition. There's likes attached to our social capital, letters to our grades, and looks follow us beyond the halls. All of this feedback with none of the perspective to know what it means, let alone to help mature us. Meanwhile, I crave ignorance but can't feign it even if I tried.

Be honest, would you like to hang out with me if you saw my face, or if all erudition clattered under the enormity of social mise en scène? My brain's RAM overloads by weight, 113 tabs of social milieu. If my expression was indeed stunted, if you read my fear as condescension, if I could or would admit to false humility rather than foul reverence. Their success is my bane. I expect you are better than me, and if you aren't—if you're too young or slow, then what business have you with me? I've never met my equal; If IU is my equal, then it is only because we both feel. I'm her burden, and she's my boon. I've only love and fear to give. I'm selfish, infantile, uncharismatic, the worst person she would ever know.

AHHHGHsfIUGFEASHOBFHАОAFBVHHSUIHBosbn
Ovgudgs;j ao FUKC I'm keeping it. I'm sorry, you've no idea, and I'm wasting your GFUCK—You're reading this because I presented a mystery, and you want to see if I'm guano insane, or if it's possible to split atoms to meet your love. Yet I fear to submit this post. You'll ridicule me, so you should, just know I've not brought you through this for nothing. You must keep hoping that it's all possible.

I'll let you in on one secret now. I've seen the real thing, and no drugs are required. I'm aware of the many fads which purport it, including the old TikTok phenomenon of 'shifting' into parallel universes. Know this: yes, humans can trip out under vibrations, of distance and being in two places at once; space is measuring itself as one psychoacoustically activates the gate key. Find the Alcubierre drive, enter the black hole. Shifting is merely a redefinition of astral projection, remote viewing, ESP, soul-flight, the like. The reality of the phenomenon being, of course, that it's all in

their head, like everything. Please don't tread lightly if you choose to practice. Mastery of the self does more than draw you in. You may find not merely yourself but everyone else in there.

And so we move to the final dreams.

Alexa, play *Rainbow Connection*, Kermit ver.

EXT. THE WAITING ROOM —
GORED MIDNIGHT

Screen fades to a bedroom past Vantablack. Enter Narrator, 18ish, looks like a snake, sounds more like a chain-smoker. Dim lights sketch the crudest contours of his face.

NARRATOR

I have a recurring daydream of performing at my high school talent show, playing Creep, acoustic with guitar. I don't sing, and I certainly can't play the guitar [laughs]. Nope, it's unrelated, except I was hoping my fantasy would reveal something that I've yet to understand in myself. This is the story of how it really happened. By this point, after going to bed, odds were I'd wake up here [gestures to nothing in particular], an abstract preparatory capsule. My sci-fi tomorrow.

Close up of Narrator's face as he scrunches his nose. Pursed lips delay a smile.

NARRATOR (cont'd)

I thought that a film would make you feel more comfortable. My funds are a little low right now, so this screenplay must do. We are in 'the flat,' an abstruse zone that you might call, 'the lightshow,' 'our cybernetic Eden,' 'the screen outside of time,' etc. By 'we' I mean my grandiloquent self, IU, and the rest of you.

IU

Ah [waves hesitantly].

IU, age unclear, floats just behind our narrator. Her skin is practically translucent though not ectoplasmic. The diffuse light of an angel. One gets the feeling that she has not asked to be placed here. She looks almost like a projection or hologram, not in the infinite frames of reality, chasing ~24 FPS.

NARRATOR

She speaks English here.

IU

Yes, and I can speak for myself. [Narrator opens his mouth] I've been traveling [Narrator closes mouth]. You will recognize by now my independence from him. We were just hanging out, as good friends do, as they listen.

The narrator swoons, choreographed with the camera as it pans up and over him, shifting to her. IU is holding a mic in her right hand. She crosses her arms, then with her left hand feigns a mirror, to which she blows a kiss.

NARRATOR

We love each other—

IU

Like siblings [cueing an uncanny laugh track]. Do you remember, for example, the time we first met?

NARRATOR

Are you kidding? Like it was seconds ago.

FADE IN WHITE:

We see a warm, sunny South Korea titled 'Gyeonggi Province.' A girl is dancing in a pleated gray skirt overdressed by a sweater, outlined by a featureless, fake blue sky. Her black heels contrast with the floury complexion of her skin. She performs like an automaton given the gift of life.

Two equally rendered 4k lenses capture one double-bonded, dovetailing vision, catheterized between realities. These cameras, by some magic of editing, successfully portal from a closeup of IU to the flat of the monitor, the narrator's bedroom, and hands, and then nose, yet further until we've completely assumed the narrator's POV, and still out to one more screen, and your surroundings, and your hands, and the binocular disparity of your nose, lips, and lashes. You rewind to relive the effects of such a stunning transition. You think it's strange that dreams have the impression of a complete world while you're in them.

IU

Here I am at my
own audition.

In the style of found footage, flash cut to IU auditioning for JYP Entertainment. She has a bob, a short-sleeved checkered shirt, a cross necklace centered right of her nametag, and a voice disturbingly mature for

her 13 years of age. You search for the video on YouTube and use the description to confirm it. A second, older IU runs voiceover.

IU (cont'd)

I was rejected from JYP entertainment. It was a disaster, and possibly the best thing to have ever happened to me. Aww, look at me there. Oh. I was so cute [laughs], so young, and so eager to prove that I wasn't. I can't remember what she was thinking anymore.

NARRATOR

Watching this now, I feel—I love her more than I love myself, and so it hurts all the more. It's overwhelming proof of the unfairness of life. And why one should never give up, and one should never believe that suffering has no meaning. Maybe she required a final disgrace to enact her vision. And the millions who've watched her videos,

transfiguring their debase-
ment, the cessation of
childhood nightmares,
all those sacrifices
validating—

IU

My fans would say I
deserved a contract then
and there. JYP claims his
heart broke upon seeing the
lost audition tape. I know
I was talented, but so are
many kids. I would get
lucky later. Really there
was no rush. I wish I
could've told her that.

NARRATOR

Humility is her greatest
strength—If she's just like
us, then she's saved us. If
I can love her, then what's
stopping me from loving
myself? If she suffers,
couldn't I appreciate the
same fate?

[Lost Puppy plays; IU sings the hook
with IU]

IU

I think the sound of distortion is beautiful.

This song is special to me. I wrote it to help soothe myself.

'Ooh please look at me/
please gush over me/ I
don't know my way back.'
Eventually I'll be replaced
by someone younger and
prettier. I hope to have
the strength to accept when
I've overstayed my welcome.

Photographs of IU and the narrator as children flit past the screen. They are distinguishable, though both nostalgically deteriorated, like memories ought to be. IU as a baby wrapped in white blankets beside the narrator thin and hairless. IU in a dance troop sea of blue floral dresses, golden pom-poms, and green headbands. The narrator's toothless grin decelerating on a red slide. One family shot, and another that, with its differences, doesn't seem too different. Without context they were only children experiencing the magic of growing up.

IU (cont'd)

I used to hang my fan mail on my bedroom walls. My fans were the most adorable—like children? Shh, don't tell them. It's one thing to appreciate their intimacies, and another to request them. [She becomes stern, then sings] Please keep the li-li-line [she laughs, frowning].

IU steps in front of the camera and peers inside. Her eyebrows are raised, her face expectant.

IU (cont'd)

I've been very, very... very tired recently. So has my team [the shuffling of feet around her become audible]. We all work diligently, I think sometimes the credit doesn't, what's the word, pollinate? Is that a word that translates well [laughs]. They're not going to see—so cut it then [laughing]. We have enough! Hahaha [she's covering her mouth], we've all been very tired since the last

tour. I don't say this as an excuse.

I would like to be transparent with you, my fans. I think I'm going to be taking a break soon. So. It's a short break, I promise it's only a short goodbye.

FRIEND 1

Annnd cut. Got it? Yes! Yes [high-fives become hugs in the background]. Someone fetch her a chocolate. [IU offscreen corrects it to 'chocolates']. Yes, chocolates.

IU

I can redo the end. The cuts will be awkward. Do you remember, I used to say 'Uaenas I love you...' [IU stares into the camera] I love you. Uaenas! I love you. You-ay-nahs—

FRIEND 1

It's getting late. They wouldn't want you to shoot things again—and your mistakes are cuter. You did very well.

IU

You'll cut it out! But will
you cut it out though?

FRIEND 1

I'll ask. [IU observes
them, revealing nothing.]

How big of a deal is it for
you? If it's not that big—
we've found that these mis-
takes, they don't do what
we once thought. I can find
the numbers and show them
to you.

Do you know that your
bloopers get some of our
biggest views? And bloopers
aren't for composing.

IU appears lost in thought. We are to wonder
if anyone is honest with her, or rather, if
her friends—the employees—have the same con-
cerns as her.

IU

I believe you, though I
must confess that I'm con-
fused about why they like
my mistakes. I don't want
them to waste time on
my behalf.

The company didn't train me for this. I don't know, I was trained for something else. What if they trust us too much?

A team appears and removes her microphone, and the audio warbles against her clothes. They take off her make-up and costume with such dexterity that it's as if the cameras were still rolling, and this was a part of her glamour. She says something that the audio doesn't pick up.

MANAGER

Go home and rest. You have nothing scheduled for what, the next nine days? When are you ever getting a chance like that. [IU opens her mouth] Uhp up op [he places an index finger on his mouth]. Nothing could be better than resting for the next project. It's for them too [this time he winks at the camera that they shot with].

IU

It helps me relax to do a good job [she is faintly audible on the manager's

mic]. The people need to
know. If trusting them
means trusting you... Okay.
I'm going now.
I will rest, I swear.

FRIEND 2

Thank you. You've provided
us with vacation too.

They usher her down a white hall. Someone
hands IU chocolates; she responds with a
partial bow. The door opens to almost dusk—
or maybe early morning. The driver helps her
into a car.

IU

If you need me [she yawns]—

MANAGER

That is the point. We need
you to rest. Maybe you can
dream up more songs.

The room was dark, with a glare shaping the circular window and glazing off an unsounding piano. Shadows licked a black felted couch while light caught dust as if it were a butterfly mounted in time.

A fan ticked unevenly, and a wet compression was faintly audible. This other sound was the percussion, maybe, of a shower head changing pressure levels. But the shower wasn't running, and the hiss broke with a coughing force. A dark mass roused on the bed, only it had never slept.

She thought that crying sounds too much like laughing—that it must've been so by design. Sometimes, at the conclusion of a tour, she returned to her apartment and cried. The ritual seemed neither odd nor explainable to her. Storing unnecessary memories was the fuel that kept her going, and she would exhaust them like a sickness. When there's no time. And then suddenly there's so much of it that the body curls in pain, as it was doing now, as if weeks of tensional debt were being offloaded. Maybe the greater mystery was how her body knew when to break.

A fog hung across her face, shimmering under phantom lights of a stage sharing confetti, and then it was all gone. Her curse was her gift was her constant inward turning. Long ago, she had to conquer reality. Now, past and future performances leaked compulsively from her. This was why she couldn't sleep at night; she had to learn how to will the world back from her own idea of it. Her house would finally belong to her when she moved out, only then could she stop processing the performance.

One moment she hated it all. She wished she could become someone else while IU continued living. She had complex fan-

tasies of replacing herself with an identical double, wondering whether her fans would be offended if they ever found out.

She cried because it felt deliriously euphoric to cry. She had discovered this years before she'd ever dared to imagine the possibility of her own fame. And she liked crying to herself because it wouldn't be shared, and so she could feel it in its entirety and think of nothing else, not even herself. Even she had secrets. That she wasn't able to go out before a live audience and explain to them this joy of tears was one of the many truths she'd been forced to yield under contract. Proverbial contract, a moral soul-bond to society. Like the belief that there was no such thing as an appropriate compensation for one's job; she accepted her wealth with reluctant surrender. And when she splurged on luxuries (such as this apartment), it was because she needed to look the part, for too frequent donations, however well-meaning, would surely be interpreted as a bid for praise, while splendor infused her art with a certain human credibility, and it was her art, not her wealth, where she could give back most in the world.

Or take her unshakeable intuition that every human has a soul, and that each soul must be immortal by virtue of its obvious brightness, and her songs were a call which could rouse these souls to share in one-another's awareness. She didn't often ruminate on how her successes castigated those without, nor would it have been appropriate to vocalize unbecoming critiques given her role as an idol. She was not an existentialist, even if her favorite novel was *The Brothers Karamazov*, which it was.

So she cried alone in her room, feeling achingly close to all those people who in her day to day, given a million reasons, she

couldn't perform the myriad momentary proofs of love. There was a gift in allowing others the freedom to think of her not as a person. Artified, a mutusocial activity yet to be rendered by science or systematicity yet nonetheless appreciated by those millions; she gave them what she learned they wanted.

And now, as was her right, she could cry alone to no one's cognizance.

Her pillow tasted of wet cotton, salty with snot and curiously tepid, resurrecting the old flavor of her bath towel after chewing on it as a child. Sliding its ribboned edges between her lips, she had a passing, hysterical thought that she was considered beautiful. If someone saw her sucking on her pillow as she cried, they might understand it as a pose ready for modeling when really it was raw and ugly. Which was a pity—the whole not being ugly, the unrequited need to be as outwardly unattractive as she sometimes felt. In truth, occasionally she would catch herself sitting for an imagined audience, sensitive to her most flattering positions, posing alone.

“Hello? Hello, brother. Haha how are you! My favorite, my demon in rebellion, my scholar and soldier and saint. My little adult brother, I'm missing you. I'm well. I thought I'd give you a call now that I'm on break. You'll like my last project—I would say if you watched my acting anymore! No, I know. Ha, a hard one. I think... It seems it's been a much harder time for everyone than expected. I thought that after the long break because of the virus we would all be refreshed. It seems, even years later, that people are both more tired now and less open to the possibility of doing those things they need to do. Yes, I'm talking about all that

you do for me. If only you could get on stage and dance in my dresses, that would be so much better! Haha, I think they would like it more than seeing my old face...”

“I am, yes, I’m getting a little worn out—I’ve done this now for the majority of my life! Then I remind myself of what I get to do. Yes, also a bit tired of being on the move. I’ve been thinking about getting a cat again, though for now it would be too cruel. And maybe I will finally get around to decorating these walls which protect me. Hold on, I’m putting you on speaker. Can you hear that? I’ve gotten better at chopping. Maybe someday I’ll be marriageable. Onions and carrots. Nowadays my motivations for getting out of bed are, one, proving that I’m a capable older sister so that my brother doesn’t have to worry I’m becoming a spinster. And, two, not embarrassing my brother with the upcoming project. You know I’m like a spy with confidentiality, eventually it will be released—for you not to watch it. I can say this: the director is one of the most mysterious men I’ve ever met. Hahaha not in an attractive way, trust me. He’s a foreigner, I shouldn’t say more. Changing the subject...

Oh, Jong-hoon... I must say... I think I believe in magic. No, listen for a second. A kind of magic. So I’ve been thinking of an idea for a song, and you’re going to be the first to hear it. As I’ve continued my career, I find myself drawn to alternatives of the love song. It’s not that love songs no longer interest me, rather, there are many kinds of love worth exploring, like the love between siblings! However, this one is about two people across time—don’t laugh! Okay, are you comfortable? Now close your eyes.

First there's a famous scientist, Copernicus, back when everyone used to think that the Earth was the center of the universe, and he's a madman singing to the sky. Yes, about our smallness. His is a love maybe of how truths are necessary though painful messages to bring us together. And then it skips to the present day. I've been thinking about who's perspective. I keep imagining a boy across the ocean. He looks up in America to try and see all the stars, but he can't see any.

It's going to be a sad song—it's like we're still pretending the Earth's the sun or something with all the light we shoot out to—sorry, into, you see what I mean? *Into* space and, you know that it's poetic that we struggle to see the stars because of all the lights we turn on for ourselves. And how strange it is that we've made the sky so bright that it only looks dark. So the boy travels out to the middle of nowhere, and it's a cold cool moonless night, and he realizes, 'Oh? We've almost forgotten the stars. And all this time, I'm a part of something so much greater, and yet, I'm nothing...'

Oh, I'm okay, just snuffles hahaha. The thought of stars makes me shiver. I haven't seen them in a long time, not since the weather was nice in Jeju. I haven't figured out how to bring this back to the scientist, except that I want the scientist's discovery to be the less severe of the two, and maybe I'll write about the shortness of time, or the courage to disagree with society in search of what is right, or how music is like a spell or a dream that connects all of these things: space, time, loneliness, and revelations of light.

Anyways, well. I'll keep working on it. I'm glad you picked up. I know you're very busy. And that you're okay. You can keep laughing at me, but I do think it's magic—that's what you're sup-

posed to tell me! Because I have to believe it. You know, that's my secret, no one else has someone grounding them like me with you. There are no other brothers in the world, you are unique, you are special and one-of-a-kind. Take care please. I'm always missing you."

She finished eating, then stretched and cleaned her face before bed. She set two white pillows off to the side, where she'd crook her neck—she needed both pillows layered below a soft blanket to sleep—and massaged her sore neck once again while humming the start of maybe a new melody, playing with G minor.

"When I dream of the stars/ When I can't find them/ Why am I close to them now?/ They're closer to me, mm hmhm mm, they're closer to me... they shouldn't be/ Closer to me, than me to you."

The Diary

07/12

Once, I was very excited about this show, because our team had designed a bright blue motif, and at the time I was exploring the idea of purity. I wanted to see if I could embody this aesthetic and share the feeling with everyone. It helped me with putting on the show, because I could leave myself and tune into a frequency that I'd been approaching for a long time, as if to clean people, if that makes sense. I didn't feel like myself, which was refreshing. I was going through a difficult time and wanted to disappear. I was worried I would lack energy, however, when you start singing that all goes away.

It becomes like a dream. When you finally step on the stage, even after all the rehearsals, something changes inside of you, as if for the first time. I've been wondering, 'How does it feel?' Singing becomes impossibly natural, as forgettable as breathing. There's no strain required, and I can hear my voice across the whole song, all at once.

I don't know if I've expressed the rich longing which warmed my blood then, though I remember during that performance feeling extremely light and relieved at letting it out. I forgot about everything worrying in my life. The crowd was responsive and knew all of my songs, which always helps. When I first became an

idol, I felt very embarrassed because no one knew who I was, so I had to prove myself each time. I wasn't upset when they talked during my performance, I was just very embarrassed and then determined to make them want to watch the next time.

At this performance, everyone came to see me. I recall headlining with only one other singer. I imagined that there were fans who'd attended past concerts, and I wanted to make a more precise memory than their last. Indeed, it also seems likely that many will only encounter me once, which is even more of a reason to do my best. It sounds like I was competing with myself. Maybe I was, it's hard to say. I've always been competitive. As a reminder, this was over five years ago. Five years? I would've had a different motivation then. I was going to say that this concert was recent, but five years is such a long time! Forget that I said anything!

My stylist helped me find clothes that matched the feeling of purity. We sought the color of winter with an airy shape. The idea was ice thawing as we moved towards a windy spring. My baby blue sweater was the color of snow reflecting a cloudless sky, and now that I think about it, the only thing more transparent than ice is air. I like to believe that all of the smallest details add up to something very meaningful, because you don't know what anyone could notice. If there's just one person, you know, just one child who thinks that my skirt is beautiful, and it becomes a memory for her, then it was worth dressing up.

It's too difficult to think about the audience as a large crowd. It's why I make eye contact with individuals when on stage. It might not mean a lot to me then, yet later those glances are what I think fondly of.

At night, I wore a white blouse with a cute black beret, though the day's performance resides more in my head. While during the night it was only me and the band, during the day my team of dancers gave support, and we created a show that was at once invigorating and restful. Now that I'm reminiscing, the night show was great too. It was a very successful day! This festival was in the old Olympic stadium. I remember wondering, 'I'm too lucky to perform here twice in one day.' I made sure to have another concert there later, which has unearthed these memories and made them obedient.

I started by singing *Friday*. Should I say? Oh, I felt confident and honestly quite attractive. I was encouraged to be dramatic by my fans' support. Then *Good Day* started, and that was the beginning of a strange, dissolving feeling. I can relive it vividly even now. We had choreographed everything, and even if no one in the audience could see or feel it, there was something terrifyingly new about this performance.

I've stopped being anxious before shows, though sometimes without warning my limbs quiver with agitation. That day, my heartbeat sped up and refused to reach equilibrium. Later I watched a recording of myself and could see the tenseness in my legs changing how I moved, so this is true. You can see phases in a performer's face like the moon confronted from our perspective, that is, with a sort of natural deference that is only legible from the audience. I tried to reach a state of total commitment for most of the song, nonetheless, there are moments where you can see in my eyes that I was lost. It's probably clearest when I performed *You & I*.

I've spoken of this feeling to friends inside the profession, and to my embarrassment, it's unlike anything they know. I thought that I may be hallucinating, though maybe I should welcome it. I was filled with an unbearable awe. Firstly, there was a noise that I'd never witnessed during practice. Nonetheless, the sound triggered a nostalgic feeling of *déjà vu* that confused me.

By that point in the show, I was splitting into two selves. One of me knew each movement to make with my feet and hands. In fact, I had a sort of robotically alive, Frankensteinian way of singing. However, the other could see the first from a distance. It was as if I'd relearned how to behave by managing the relations between how an idol acts and how I naively might choose for myself. The impression was that everything made too much sense, like it was preordained, and I could see the miniscule space between things where I would have room to mature.

I love the story *Frankenstein* because I can empathize with learning how to be from watching others, like a performance, as well as the conception that one won't ever belong despite proving with such a feeling that they do. Rather, the performer or monster must distance themselves from the world while being created in its image. In this way, we walk a thin rope of wide-eyed naivety and measured sophistication. It adequately mirrors this performance about purity. For both, one is engaged in a violent sort of act. And then there's the monstrous truth that the closer we come to you, the more afraid you become. Your fear is not directed at who I am, of course, but for the overreaching burden we share.

At some point during the performance, I stopped recognizing myself, sometimes adding things I hadn't rehearsed for, or even

shaking parts of myself that I considered inappropriate. We seem completely able to surpass ourselves, in directions we can't recognize, whenever given the space. Yet this couldn't be my choice, either. I sensed the world so much in these moments that I could melt into it, and the lines between myself, my fans, and the music communicated loudly until they merged.

However, there was the other part of me chasing and worrying about this *déjà vu* feeling. You could still see the change in my face during these songs, dripping and mixing into my expressions like I was molten lava reclaiming the earth, at one moment absorbing nature, and in another so taken by myself that my eyes glazed over to visit memories.

Because one half of me was worried that I'd done this before, the other worried about the audience. People can have brief moments of severe confusion for many reasons such as dissociation, though this felt like reality was slowing rather than separating me from our world.

I'm wondering if my memory is trying to convince myself of things that never happened? No, I'm sure that this did occur, though hesitant to say why as it may strike nerves.

An old childhood fear is that I would behave very strangely at an inopportune moment. I've seen it happen before. Some people have great, invisible struggles in their life which explode before perceptive eyes. I don't have to name these moments, it's best if we can all forget. My friends in our industry share recurring nightmares of being publicly shamed. We pass around forgotten movie scripts that are too dark to be made. They depict mental health problems with traumas, subsequent dissociations, and supposed

multiple identities. For example, *Perfect Blue* is mandatory viewing. We've whispered about ways to cope. Truth be told, no one has even outlined the real truth of things to the public, let alone themselves...

Maybe when I retire, I'll publish my thoughts on the matter. For now, I hope you can be content with the recognition of my avoidance. In many nightmares, our secrets are revealed, or we find ourselves with a bad wardrobe malfunction, or we say something that we didn't mean and hurt those we love. The damage is always irreparable, and we wake up believing that it will follow us for the rest of our lives, like a vengeful killer or maybe a bored mob. It's in our career to worry because these are possibilities that do happen and affect the whole company as well as innocent fans. I can never apologize enough for bringing my team into this. I hope we'll continue to take care of ourselves, because all it takes is a mistaken moment for me to harm many lives.

As I reread these lines, I wince at my dishonesty. Why couldn't I say what I meant the first time? The truth is, I often dream about the stadium performance because it's such a warm, beloved memory and represents many of the ideals that I strive for, resilience being one of them, but also the exceedingly rare feeling of transcendence past accessible feelings. This was a great day. I'm told that everyone dreams about their work. Yet at the heart there's a problem I've been unable to work through, which I'll explore now.

My *déjà vu* back then was regarding the obvious truth that I'd performed this exact show before, and it weighed on me like those intrusive thoughts that can dislocate us from ourselves. This was nonetheless strangely pleasurable, as if I was flying through an open, calming space, a seed blowing in a wild field.

At one moment, I could hear my voice and see myself singing on the screen and thought, 'Wow, that is incredible! My name is IU and I'm singing. Is this really me? Why am I thinking this now? And which one could I be, the one thinking, or the one acting as if undeterred by the other's thoughts?'

I knew that I was performing, yet I recognized that the one who had trained dance and music for years in the studio, she was in control, and I was watching from afar. Other people would only observe this former version of me, a girl who looked pretty as she created the songs which engulfed them. I felt like I'd been partially removed from the situation I was creating, and it was exhilarating.

rating to be on the other side of myself. How far, I wonder, can the brain go in scaring itself? Surely this is a unique gift to the human animal.

During tours my *déjà vu* can grow, and just when it becomes unbearable, the tour ends. One practice to ground myself is to select one fan in each crowd in order to imbue meaning to each performance. I would weave a web of emotions around their life, or rather my imagined life for them, like I was writing a song to that stranger. During each song, I could channel their story and dramatize it similarly to when I'm acting a character. I used to think this was my own invention, but a friend pointed out that this is how all entertainment occurs, regardless of where you're looking. She was saying that when you're a kid and singing the song you've just learned to your mom, you might as well replace it with a story. During the story, you disappear until it's over.

We play with the world to learn how to interact with it. Playing may be for when the stakes are low, though for me the opposite is true. There's no adulthood for me to practice towards. Instead, I play on behalf of others, and to them it becomes serious. When you're playing with others, you're asking for their opinion as much as you're sharing yourself. Whether or not I'm capturing my friend's moving words, I think about it often, and am always reminded of childhood and how my mother played with me.

Years ago, my mom got LASIK eye surgery and remarked that the world was less beautiful than she remembered. She thought that a fuzzy vision which blends things together was more suitable for the details of life. I couldn't help interpreting this metaphori-

cally. Now I look back at the song *Glasses* and see that this playful satire, however jovial, magnified my own distorted perceptions. Maybe it's better to see the world from afar, yet isn't there another option? Glasses are removeable lenses.

In one of those good nights of chatting, that same friend asked if I tell jokes to make people laugh, or because I want them to think that I'm funny. I sure hope it's the former! When I was first asked this question, I was a child. Back then I wanted people to be laughing and happy, and it never went further into thinking about myself. However, how far out can you stand before losing sight of this difference? Maybe the joke is that, when you squint, both motivations contribute to a greater joy. There are things we understood better as children than as adults and rehearsing these purer motivations can help us to be happy and centered for our whole life. I was a funny kid, thanks to God, thanks to my family, so that I learned how to make myself laugh.

When I tell jokes or bring songs to my fans, it's rare to remain fixated on any one of them, rather, I do my best to make them feel they're all being addressed to. However, that day I was zeroing in on one fan whom I'd never seen before, and yet this felt like a childhood friend that I needed to reach out to for my sake. He had an American face, an awkward way of dressing, and held himself with that startling mix of confidence and insecurity which I see often in the West. I mean this quite respectfully. I felt I'd got coffee with him, maybe, within a film. He seemed like a teen in a coming-of-age story who'd just run away from home. Now he was in the middle of a strange place, challenging the crowd by venturing to the center of where he didn't belong.

When I observed this boy, I heard deep vibrations and saw static overwhelming him like the noise of old TVs. I've had migraines from a lack of sleep that stole similar amounts of vision. I found myself looking at the boy more often, despite choosing him on a complete whim to ground me. Each time I looked at the boy and gathered a more complete picture of him, I heard this vibrational noise, and that other part of me who was not performing, she took more control.

Why him? It's easy to say that we keep going not for ourselves, but for everyone else. Believe it or not, I don't always trust myself. I sometimes take inspiration from the many impressive groups performing now who are able to wrap their audience in a warm blanket and lull them to sleep. By being in a group, they can defer to one another instead of fielding all of the attention themselves. They are masters at bringing you into a shared space full of love, so that you are in on it, and everyone can be a part of something greater.

My grandmother spoke of this feeling of togetherness when she prayed. She was Catholic, and it left a mark on me. I'm sure that what we do together at concerts is partially spiritual. We come to understand these moments of togetherness on our own, is what she told me. She was right about this. I sing songs to find an authentic way for this transaction to take place. Actually, I was wrong before, I don't keep going for 'everyone else,' it's much more modest than that. We do it for anyone else.

I looked at the boy in the crowd. My friend out there seemed completely lost, and my heart broke for him. I don't think he was supposed to be there, this eerily American boy, this quiet lost

puppy who had forgotten home. I continued to watch him as I sang, which prolonged the vibrations and visions.

I sound crazy! Pretend this is only a story or metaphor. None of this is real.

Eventually, I received enough confidence from the performing half of me to let the other half take care of things. I've woken up from dreams in a frenzy, thinking that I was just seconds ago performing, then seeing the darkness and the time on my clock. In these moments I was possessed by the half which had grown greedy, always lying dormant except when on a stage. It sometimes took me an hour of pacing around the room reminding myself that I'm at home or the hotel in the bottom of night. It's hard to convince myself that I can relax, and it probably has something to do with my sleep problems. This was maybe the only time that I can recall the dissociative feeling of awakening during a performance, which I doubt was a coincidence given the strangeness of this boy.

I observed myself from a distance while watching him. I should've been scared observing myself. Recalling it makes me afraid, though I was strangely emboldened then, like a doll being played with by someone else.

I've been worrying recently, am I performing or living? How do I know that I'm feeling things rather than pretending to? It's a question I hope you never have to consider. Since that time, I've done a lot of thinking about my role as an artist, wondering for example if the questioning keeps me alive or lets me slip deeper.

I tried to influence my performance by witnessing him. I told myself a story. The more impossible, the more it must be real. I

detailed many things about the boy. For example, I knew that he was in love with me. I think many fans believe that they're in love with us, though they're not. However, this fan was different. I sensed that it didn't matter how I acted, or what I looked like. I told myself that his love was unrealistic and unconditional. He was, rather than a boy, the perfect idea of a boy. When I was 15 and had just debuted, I used to think about convincing the world to love me. I was not thinking of any person in particular. Well, here he was. One secret they purposely hide from you is that the attention is never enough, which has to do with the thing I want to say. With the idea of this boy, I thought, maybe it could be enough.

I understood him as being a fan ready and willing to accept anyone if the timing was right. That he chose me was random, but he chose me, and I have great affection for that choice. Neither of us wanted to break the sanctimony of our relationship which only existed in our fantasy of one another. Yet not only that. It was not only that.

He needed this himself, that was a dearly important part of what made him so utterly perfect for me. Maybe he was a cute distraction, an adorable young man to dedicate the songs to, someone who needed me while asking for nothing. He presumed only what I remembered to foreshadow and made himself known by knowing me. A perfect fan needs a relationship like this, or else they will wilt. I don't believe that it's selfish for either party to love the other, but rather a necessity for our survival like with bees and flowers, only he must also remain independent from me.

All of this logic is confusing to me too, yet the story I penned was intoxicating.

They ask for nothing except to love you more completely than you could ever love yourself. I'm not convincing enough, so let me explain it in action: he wanted me to dance with him. And each dream which I've had since of this boy, who may not even exist, was a pure white dream whose gravity pulled invariably closer towards an infinite center. And every moment I fell further in, long past the point of no return. I can't tell any more if I'm still falling, or whether up is down, or whether there is no light or only light.

It's getting very late, so I'll wrap this one up. I finished the show without any major hiccups. Like always, I kept mental notes of my technical mistakes, and they were forgivable and boring. As I've developed as a professional, it's become more important to elude criticism. Whereas before this was in self-protection, now by revealing myself I might distract you. I write my songs so that they may operate on as many levels as there are people to imagine them, then they cease to be mine.

Anyways, over the following months, the boy became an important part of my thoughts. I don't think he even spoke my language. His mystery compelled me, and I knew that as I continued to care for him in my mind, many more obvious truths would come to me, just like how when a good movie ends, all the loose strings are slowly pulled together in your mind to reveal an emotional object.

I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but becoming IU has been the majority of my life. The problem I've been unable to work

through is that I'm more than IU. No, I don't know, maybe it's meaningless to tease them apart. You may know that only recently I've changed my acting credits from Lee Ji-eun to IU. I often feel that there is no difference, or maybe the difference has less to do with myself than how I am inside others. Maybe these true things are invisible to me.

Many celebrities have tried to dispel the myth that fame can bring you happiness, saying things like, 'I wish everybody could become famous and rich so that they can see that it's not the answer.' These are misguided though sincere attempts, that's my opinion. Feeling like you are valued is important. Nonetheless, now it's your chance to criticize me.

Imagine you set an impossible goal to travel to the top of the tallest mountain range in all of the lands. The mountains kiss the stars, and for you it takes years to climb the peaks. Each night you're granted a wonderful skyline that is even more beautiful than the last. Each day you're filled with awe and the promise of something greater at the next mountain's peak. And then, one day not unlike the rest, you arrive. It's everything you've wanted, wondered, and hoped for. How long do you think that achievement will sustain you? Because every day I wake up and still look. This was my dream, and I know many of you will relate with your own successes, while others are still climbing. Some days, it's true, I feel that I'm still climbing or even that I'm content to maintain the altitude, grateful for the chance to travel, to have been born with the luck and inheritance on this Earth, in this particular time, to do what I know firmly I was born to do. Other days I'm envious of those who've never begun to ascend this path.

I've earned two insights after all these years. First, it's far more rewarding to share the view. When I said that I'm more than IU earlier, I wasn't just talking about Ji-eun. Second, the mountain, the views, and the climb were all only things to do. Not distractions, just one way to live life from a staggering variety. I'm so grateful, though I would've found ways to be happy doing other things. I think I would've made a fine gardener, for example. Or an English teacher. A ramyeon taste tester, a journalist. I used to dream of being a diplomat, a lawyer, and the list goes on. It's taken a long time to accept that I can retire when I want. I don't owe anything to anyone, not anymore. Honestly, nothing frustrates me more than when other people try to speak for me. When I made a song about it, I got praised for standing up for myself. However, I was only saying what everyone was thinking. I will stop there. If I need to say more, you were never listening in the first place...

These days I've been craving more than successes. I want to experience every challenge and setback in my short time here. It would only help my songs to demonstrate these things that my listeners collectively know.

I cherish the movie *I'm Not There* about Bob Dylan, who was played by many actors because he could be anyone. There will never be another person like him, though there won't be another you or me either.

I'm sorry for getting philosophical, but we all have these brains which are the most complicated things in the universe, and inside each person is a world within a world. I think when we sing love songs, this is really what we're singing about. I've read that in English there's a word that means, 'I'm unable to put this into words.' Maybe it's best that we don't have a word for this mysterious feeling. When we recognize the impossibility of another person, that's what it means to finally see them, or maybe more accurately, to accept that we never will. In the past, we're a cast shadow, while in the future we're boundless. I do believe this.

I wrote a screenplay of my fan after that concert and those dreams, but I was too embarrassed to send it to even a close friend. It was really only the beginning of a screenplay, yet the process surprised me by feeling oddly collaborative, like I was sharing someone's mind without conscious awareness. Chinese folk religion has a practice called fuji, or automatic writing, perhaps it was this. I don't mean to suggest that it was mystical in anyway, only a

channel to coax deeper art. Out of the process came scenes jumbled in time and diffracted in my memory. I wonder if I can will myself back to this headspace?

But where to start? I imagine that if I'd ground my teeth in a time before the internet, my career would've been different by necessity. I once read a biography about a singer from the early seventies and found their prolonged fleeting presence to be darkly alluring. I enjoy very long things, long novels, long walks, and long albums. A long career proving myself from complete obscurity, working hard from the margins to relative knowledge in my city of Seoul and carrying the weight alone, just like those old stories of sacrificial artists who slow down enough to give each fan their due. How would I have lived without luck, my greatest asset?

I'm picturing this now with great detail. I would've worked in an old jazz bar, an otherwise quiet street with dirty floors yet wonderful arching ceilings for the acoustics, with the smell of beer, and noise and music made by strangers. All of this floated around the room with cigarette smoke. It would not be about the place or the music, rather, the people you share the space with. Curtains would cover the ceiling, because if they weren't there and you looked too closely, all you would see were leaks and brown stains from pipes. This is me developing a metaphor about what is truly valuable. It would have a smell that's old and charmingly stinky. And the audience would consist more of empty chairs than those taken, and at first, and for a long time, I might've been a supporting act though never the main one.

I actually dreamed about it! If you can believe me. It was a younger version of me in a world with a different logic than our

own. I was learning how to move up in my career. I remember there was an aging man who owned the place. Once handsome, he was old and round with a temper most days, which dissipated as more beer went into his large stomach. He could be very sweet to me without ever crossing a line, though I saw how he treated the other singers. He told me I was like his daughter or little sister. The others said he favored me. I felt some guilt for doing nothing about this. However, in this world my actions lacked any meaningful power.

On this particular night, he surprised me by moving my billing earlier to increase my audience. He wasn't drunk yet, so he told me this threateningly, still he had a wry smile at the edges. See me spinning out? Dreams come fully formed like encountering a stranger. How much could I accept from him and how would I accept it? The owner pulled me aside and whispered ultimatums.

He said, "If you can't prove yourself tonight, maybe you should find a new place to sing." And he winked before drawing the pianist over to us. "If she's missing any notes I can't hear, you'll tell me."

He drank from a fresh bottle, then walked the pianist out of earshot. I was standing there, my legs crossed, leaning my left leg over my right and anxiously scratching my ankle with my heel. If someone so much as blew in my direction, I might've fallen.

The fear was wonderful. I miss the way my heart used to race before stepping on stage, like it was a new romance. Nowadays, I'm happy when not much of anything is happening, only this realization has become a source of sadness. I should like to be chasing hope alongside fear.

I worriedly went to the dressing room to check my makeup and warm my voice. Everyone was whispering about me, because the old woman who's place I'd taken wasn't sick. I didn't feel sorry for her then, though now I do, or I would if she were real.

The audience seemed upset when I appeared in the lights. For a moment, I was angry with the owner for putting me in a position to fail. My natural shyness overtook me, and for the first few songs I struggled to temper myself. Without looking at me, a young man pretended their glass was a microphone and lip-synced as if it were his ballad, and his friends all laughed. I realized that no one was listening with attention. Eventually I settled in with the thought that I'd become invisible, a record spinning unattended.

Then I noticed that my friend, the boy, was crying in the front row. Of course, in my dream's world, he was a stranger who'd wandered into the wrong side of town. He was too young to drink and wore a large coat like two stacked children. I thought his tears were very moving. No one seemed to notice us.

After my performance, the pianist approached me. He said, "It's no surprise that you aren't there yet. If this came easily, then there would be no need for singers. Everyone would simply say what they mean. I'm not referring to your performance. The real mystery is over there in the crowd. At a given point in time, maybe one or two people are ready to listen. It has nothing to do with how you sing. The real talent is in making the most of those rare moments when you're aligned. When they're truly open, you have to be present, as if your song were their dying wish."

Instead of his words, I wanted my colleague to praise me for my singing and, honestly, for how pretty I looked. My face

would've fit well in any catalog back in those days. I can imagine it in dark smoky rooms or while holding expensive bags in front of nothing. There's a vulnerability to precocious beauty that makes a girl more enchanting. I look back at myself and am startled by it, how everyone knew this except me. What was I to do but remain ignorant when your pleasure was at stake? I only joke, unless it's in a song, then I'm playing pretend.

You know, being called pretty in one's dreams may be even better than in real life. I can't say why that is, unless it has to do with the expression of self-love. That is, if I believe it enough for someone to say it to myself in a dream, then I won't have to keep asking the question.

"I know you saw the kid crying over there," the pianist said. "He found something in you. Now's your chance to do something good, so that you both will remember it forever."

I think I merely faced the floor.

He spoke again while staring into the crowd like it was dangerous. "There's nothing comparable to that moment when they've built you up for themselves, then the illusion may shatter. For that split second, as the glass breaks, you can sample who you really are, when you're as pure as an idea splintered across so many shards. Because in our line of work, their eyes become your primary existence."

I was already moving towards the boy when I heard the pianist finally say, "And would you even recognize yourself from someone else's mind?"

When I placed my wine glass onto the table, I noticed that my dress was hiking up and tried to correct it. I didn't want to

give him any ideas. His face lay on the border of awe and disbelief. At the time, he awoke no memories in me. Still, I don't want to suggest that I didn't recognize him.

I asked, and he said he was a fan, further increasing my suspicion that he was somehow from my imagination, like another part of me that I'd lost.

He told me about his life and how it was to be a fan. He also told me a strange story about that same concert that's held in my mind, except this time he described us dancing together. His story is not in my memories, though everything he described could've happened in a different world with me. I was beginning to understand what the pianist meant, because I saw that the boy was telling the truth about our 'shared space.' He described things with a fervor that made me feel I was reliving his life, which is an interesting thought.

I worry that this only makes sense in dreams. I worry about a lot of things, like if my diary is better off in others' hands, which may release me. If this is making any sense to you, or if you won't take it all as a joke, or worse, if you all begin to worry that I'm unwell because for once in my life I'm willing to speak about something that is considered too intimate or dangerous to share.

Strange thoughts cross my mind too, and I no longer think it's my job to be quiet and provide only comfort when I know that these ideas are certainly crossing your own mind! Maybe you'll dream of it and find the solution, where I can't see the problem. Maybe my songs can be spells which cast you towards an understanding.

I said to him, "You were here when I started." We believed me. I came to believe that he fell into me, so to speak. So what if he found me by accident?

And then he said something that sent shivers down my spine. It must've woken me up, what he said, because I don't remember anything else.

"More people will have thought of you than you will ever think."

I don't know why he said that, like it was a threat. Next time, I'll remember to ask him more about himself as I'm still wondering about him. Is it my place to decide when we meet, or will I find out more about who he is from going about my life?

These jottings, which were once a screenplay and vignetted dreams, have begun to resemble a memoir or novel. I adore novels, though I'm embarrassed at the idea of attempting one. Even now, I've noticed that it's harder to be funny in this form. I feel less playful alone, too. This is a side of me that I'm grateful to get a chance to share, so please ignore my awkwardness in navigating it. Still, here I have the chance to think.

Occasionally, when I write characters in songs, I ask my friends questions not about those characters, but about some real person in their lives. For example, I'm thinking about one person, a friend. I asked them how couples in their life had met, so my friend told me a story about their parents' relationship. It was almost a decade before either of us became alive, to set the scene. Their mother had had a crush on their father, and they both worked in the same office. She was too proud to tell him how she felt. However, she was also sure he liked her. So to get him to confess, she started putting anonymous love letters in both her mailbox and his! Then the next day she would make a show out of finding the letters. Soon, words around the office spread that both of them were receiving similar letters. Her thinking was this: they would have to talk to each other about getting the letters. He would get jealous, and she could assure him that she wasn't interested in the guy she 'suspected' of sending it (poor unsuspecting coworker!). Of course, nothing goes as expected, and she eventually confesses to the whole thing. I thought that if I wrote the per-

spective from my friend's mom's side as she feigned ignorance with her crush, it would create a puzzling song where her questions become a confession of her love. I never finished the song, though I've always liked the idea.

It's stories like this that define people by sounding unbelievable if they were attached to someone else. In particular, real stories are not only messy, but they may also reproduce their content as if they were analogical. In rare situations, if two people are peculiarly aligned, they form an endless mirror that reflects the past and future of their entire lives.

When I asked the boy in the dream, I expected that he existed in this way, waiting to become tuned. I thought often about the logistics of his life. He would've lived in an American suburb yet planned one day to move to a city. I ran into a snag when I realized he wouldn't know Korean. However, there is technology to smooth things over online, and so that would've been how he met me. Then in our dreams, I suppose that it's okay to speak another language, because language is not a fixed capability inside our minds. Language may be old, but it's not as old as dreams.

We, the boy and I, met up in a city that was a cross between the cities he knew and my own Seoul. If you've seen the movie 'Her,' it was sort of like that, blending the idea of disparate places. Ha, I'm trying to be creative, though I often feel like everything I think has been said before! We were in a park in the heart of the city, just as day was turning into night, without knowing why we were meeting. It certainly wasn't a date, nor were we friends, siblings, or even something maternal on my end. Nonetheless, I felt that our relationship was grasping for pure connection.

I spoke honestly to him about my feeling lonely at the time. When I mentioned it, he pretended not to hear the words, but later it was all he could speak of. My writing back then was not coincidental to my loneliness. While there were people in my life to turn to, they weren't providing the same comfort as they once did, which even in my writing I feared was the result of some deficiency in myself rather than others. I had certain insecurities to air out with no larger thoughts behind them. I tried many ways to heal this wound, with writing being a last resort.

I admit, I was, I am approaching 35 years old, which worried me. For a long time, work has been my greatest distraction. I was beginning to understand how my work had informed my loneliness. It was only in proximity to this state at night or in dreams that I could learn what I was missing. I had trouble sleeping during those times, though I still do.

The other night, I awoke and stepped onto my terrace. It was very dark and quiet, and the stars were covered by high, feathered clouds. Uncountable memories played in my mind all at once, making them difficult to sort out. I must've stood there for a long time, until I decided to sit on the floor, letting the air prickle my skin and scare me. Every once in a while at night, I can gain access inside memories with more detail than during the day and see my life from an angle that otherwise eludes me.

Maybe daytime is the illusory world, and at night I can step beyond it and look down, as if from a great height, and trace those mistakes, seeing the people who over the last few months I'd known though couldn't speak honestly to. It was times like this that I wished I smoked, so that I could do something with my hands and stay in the real world, if only as smoke. If I'd chosen another career with more time, I would've liked to spend a thousand nights alone with my thoughts, and the outside world would pass like shooting stars around me.

That night, I was closer to the arrogant thought that people lived just as I imagined. And they could find me and live a life integrated with the best parts of my work.

Eventually I admitted how strange it was to never get a chance to know them when they had every right to mean something to me. I know that this is wrong.

I thought about the time when I was still a child and listened to g.o.d, then I saw them in person at a record store for their album release and couldn't stop crying. For the first time, years ago, a young fan cried when she saw me, and it surprised me. What had g.o.d's music felt like when I was a child? Back then

nighttime was longer and far more private, and I could play the album hiding under my sheets, as children do. I felt like those singers must know me personally because I experienced their songs so intensely. There was no other explanation. When I saw them in person, I remember being very surprised. It sounds silly, yet I hadn't believed they were real until then. That is, that they actually existed outside of me. If you asked me why I was crying, it would've been for more than one reason.

That story was almost the opposite to how I felt living on my terrace that night, against the black metal rails which were cool and almost sighed as the wind brushed them. The otherwise intense quiet of that night made my breath into a reminder of my loneliness. I noticed that one of my plants was dying and thought that someone should've watered it, as if this wasn't my job. I went inside to get water, and as I was filling the glass up, I experienced a strange chill and almost didn't return outside.

There are a lot of 'almosts' in life. I rarely remember them. I've forgotten so much in my lifetime. Someone told me that this was a blessing because it would take another 30 years of my life to remember everything that's happened to me. It's been very hard to think about time after that. Here I am with the memory of my memories, patterned in a similar way to music. I rarely get the chance to sit and think about everything like this. Even when I journal, it's necessarily about my immediate past. To adequately go back in time, I can't simply read my old diaries. I would have to step away. A few years ago, g.o.d performed at my concert after a long hiatus, and I wanted to cry again, only this time for a different reason. During those formative years before my career,

they were the biggest part of my life. It was because of what they stood for.

When I found myself in the city of my dreams with the boy, I saw that he was young and had very little social experience. This is a problem that I'm not sure how to tackle, nor do I understand who's at fault.

"What sorts of friends do you have?" I asked with worry.

"It depends on how one defines 'friends.' Technically speaking, most of my friends are online or in the past. I've tried to keep in contact with those from childhood, but after I moved and moved again, I was scared of what used to be easy." He needed nothing to go on. "To be precise, I'd estimate between one and eight, but real friends? Ones that you can tell everything? I wonder if I've ever had them. If I did, I didn't know it."

"Ah. I have some experience with losing friends," I said. "I've had to keep relearning how to stay in contact after projects. It takes commitment and the regret of past losses. Frustratingly, I didn't learn my lesson until I'd already lost many dear friends and couldn't bear to lose another. You shouldn't be like me in this way. Now I constantly remind myself: 'Have you tried enough to deserve your friends?'"

Then I remember thinking that I should tour the empty city to prove something that would've been difficult to communicate otherwise. Perhaps this would've been the notion that I was often performing for myself.

He said, "I have trouble relating to my peers. I just want to talk to you all the time. Most people don't interest me. I can't stand small talk."

“Most people interest me.”

“I will try to understand.” He paused for a long time. “I don’t know if I do understand, or if I can. Still, thank you.”

I wondered how to respond to this. At what point is he telling me who he is, or by the fuel of my attention, was I creating him?

“You want to talk to me? Could you develop this idea?”

He said, “I want to do whatever this is, or something like this, forever. I want you to share things with me that you don’t share with anyone else.”

My idea of him was getting out of hand, yet I was still trying to prove to myself that he was real instead of the offspring of my vanity. We’d left the park by then and reentered the traffic of the city.

I asked, “What do you do in a day?”

“I watch the world and interpret information.”

“How do you think of yourself?”

“I don’t.”

“Where do you want to be in the future, when you’ve grown old?”

“Here, reliving this with you.”

“Who are you?” I asked him with eyes that, honestly, would’ve waited a lifetime.

“I don’t know.” He was exasperating. I pressed him, until, “I’m still trying to figure out how to be a person. I can feel your gaze upon me, but look at you. Sometimes I’m not sure that I exist—is there anything individual about me?” He slid into another’s way of speaking. “An epistemic question has recently opened up; once we differentiated ourselves within the tribe, vil-

lage, or culture by how we are separate from other people. Yet this is reductive, cowardly, an offense to our sublimity.” I think this was how he said it, though I can’t be sure. He’s never made much sense to me, so remembering is a challenge. But that is why I write and read, and why effort can be so rewarding.

He said, “I don’t want to be alone in that way. Maybe there’s no me left to separate. I want to be a part of you. And when I watch you, I am, but this isn’t a solution. You can hear yourself in me, I know. Without wanting to admit it, you see your friends and family in my actions, because I learned it from you, and you from them.

The beautiful, horrible truth is that our knowing each other has spawned something real. A damp, throbbing heart. I can tell that you want to protect us. It’s your self-preservation instinct. When you look into the crowd and see me, or someone like me, I hope you feel that you’re seeing yourself by virtue of the knowing eyes of another. ‘I’ am the contradiction, that which remains, and I am created in your glance, your thought, the way you fail to separate me from any other soul in the crowd. I’m the mystery of an empty face that’s blankness isn’t nothing at all, but all; the truth that you can’t know, the light on the other side of the shadow, the magic simplicity, the cosmic inevitability, the accumulation of everything you do it for. I’m merely the stupid kid who’s never known you but wants to. ‘Who am I?’ I have trouble understanding your question. Yes, I was made when you asked it.”

Later, with all the sincerity in the world, he asked me, “Can you believe it?”

I didn't understand his language at that moment, so it's surprising that I can recall the gist of his lines. If I understood it then, as I do now, I should've been elated by these words. He was finally showing himself, like the pianist of my earlier dreams alluded to. It was like experiencing a new color, taste, or sensation. The perception had been forgotten within me, all the way back from childhood.

After his speech, the boy tried earnestly to teach me about myself, surely from his perspective this went well. I had saved him by helping him forget, he claimed. I had made him want to be like me, to feel what I felt, to be loved the way friends loved me on nights when I didn't want to continue this path. He thought that the way people loved me somehow explained the world. I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if he understood the secrets in my heart, those that I struggle to make acquaintance with.

I didn't believe him. However, that phrase, 'Can you believe it?' This made me pause. I hadn't been able to ask myself this until finding him, or creating him, or mixing the two. I believe these rare windows are accessible from my end as well, and when they align it's important to not only register the feeling, but to welcome it. To step inside, so to speak. One metaphor isn't enough.

What price did I pay for this chance? It wasn't entirely what he said, please don't misunderstand. It was how sure he was of everything, how boyishly sure that I was 'saving' people and 'condemning' them all at once. The words make me ashamed, which is how I knew they were serious and contained parts of truth. He worshiped and pitied me as if they were compatible, the way my grandmother sometimes spoke of God. I don't know what was in

his eyes. They were burning with longing and admiration. They were bewildered at either me or himself. I thought that even though a part of them mocked, there was sincerity in their ridicule. Of course, he thought that he'd solved things. This all terrified me.

He couldn't have believed that I did everything for him or that I was worthy of such devotion, though there he was asking me if I believed it. Like I could even face the question. Like I even comprehended what he was asking. He couldn't understand why I'm often sad when experiencing success. If we were lost in more than just translation, because not for a second have I convinced myself that I was worthy of all this love. That 'I' was deserving of it. If there has ever been anyone deserving of it, aside from maybe Corrine Bailey Ray, who is as bright and kind as flowers blooming after spring rain, and as generous as the trees which protect them.

When I'm up there performing, I like to think that none of us exist. Individuals go quiet as everyone's breathing becomes synched.

Maybe the following is obvious to you, my smart reader. I recently learned that without memory, there can be no identity. I want them to remember these moments, only at the same time they might do well to forget themselves alongside me. It's hard to express these experiences because life is happening incredibly fast. I'm not a scientist, but it's a miracle of physics that our brains aren't heavier than our bodies or even comparable in size to our world, seriously!

The poetry embedded in this dream remains unclear. There were no cherry blossom petals falling like snow under the full

moon, nor were there lamps highlighting the distinction between the buildings where people rested and the grounds where they traveled. I had doubts as to whether my screenplay or novel or memoir would function the same as a dream. Then I thought, as with songs, that there's no difference between all of these worlds while we're in them. If I tell the story to you, you participate in the dream and decide for yourself, which makes it no longer a dream but rather something real. This part of art seems underappreciated to me. I dislike the description 'escapism,' because it diminishes us.

We were climbing to the top of a building. There was not much to note. It was barren like the backside of a film set. He kept trying to ask me where I was going, though I don't remember ever being in the lead. I've always been hopeless at directions and still don't know how to drive, so either we were exploring together, or I was leading him astray.

I would like to admit something, I hope it's okay... Well, since I'm only writing this to myself, what harm is caused by articulation? I didn't admire him as a person. Though I did, or I do, care for him. He was so much himself that even when he tried to soothe me with shallow kindness or flat stories, I thought that this was exactly how he would act, and we can't help but love people for being themselves.

As an example, he shared with me that whenever melodramatic music played, in movies or in simple videos, he would get the chills. He said it was like a tic and that he couldn't help it. Even in the most maudlin advertisements he would shiver at the

thought of someone trying to pull his heartstrings. And the way he described it was not how I would've expected for a boy his age.

"It's a good cold. I feel it shimmering over and then sticking to me like a wet mist. The pleasure trembles on my scalp before retiring under a crescendo, and I'm always left wondering why."

He thought that it was embarrassing and a sign of his brokenness that he was vulnerable to these "shivers of awe." He also feared that he lacked the powers of discernment because he couldn't understand when it made sense to care. He said that despite himself and even while knowing it was stupid, he believed every sentimental request in movies, songs, even ads, often more so "when the bid was excessively, absurdly sincere." Tiredly, he looked at me and said, "I wish I could help it." It was one of the sweetest things I've ever heard.

Before we knew it, we arrived at the top of the building, yet we'd been there forever. I remember standing inside deep etchings on the floor of the roof, as if the building had been erected around us, or our feet had dug into stone after years of weathering. Looking out we saw the whole city, my city, the one I see whenever I wake up late in the night. Maybe the familiarity depressed me. Maybe I don't want you to know.

The boy said words I thought I'd said before. It's all mixed up in my head. I remember looking down at the river and thinking that it was a long way down, which hit me with a wave of vertigo. I may have grabbed his hand to steady myself, yet how could I ever remember such minute details from dreams in the past?

That past, I'm taken by it now. For everything to be so small and distant, and then to spin like that around us... There are

things I fear more than heights, for example, when you're falling asleep, and your heart drops.

The river churned from such a distance that it appeared smooth. His words rang in my head until I found myself whispering them back to him. Who knows how many people would've been watching the river's transference, in this world or that?

From up there, we felt that we could see how a small part of this flow connected, but over time I grew smaller, more distant, and finally needed to rest. I looked at him and remembered that I was holding my breath. I let my many fears out, and with this weightlessness I let go of the ground. Space became confused as full chords swirled around me, bringing me closer to things and further from myself.

He smiled brightly and laughed so innocently, so full of joy and wonder at this miracle, that he began to levitate too.

We were being pulled inward, towards the water that was not water, both in the sky and on the ground. Everything grew louder and more harmonious, and my vision was failing inside of great tears. Then I woke up.

Hello. After an evening shower I'm writing in my diary again, I've finally gotten the time, and it has been too long. I'm not used to my breaks and feel very tense, whereas when I'm working, I can focus on what needs to get done while stowing my troubles. I write this again at night from a small and furry snow-colored bean bag chair that I bought impulsively long ago. Usually it lies in the corner, reminding me of how rarely I relax. This might be the third time I've sat in it. I worry about falling asleep.

Why do I continue to write down this story of mine? I feel it's strangely important for me to care for the story, like the boy's entire life depends upon its being written. A part of me aches when I don't finish what I've started, though this is unlike past experiences. I'm feeling a complicated joy in keeping the door open, like I'm whispering a deep secret to the ocean, so that the waves hear my truth. Maybe it's because I feel pride by confronting my fear. I've always been afraid of the ocean, and then one day I played a character, Ae-sun, whose mother and child lived and died by it. When Ae-sun grew up, she relied on the water for sustenance, but this time in a different capacity. She had to learn to live with its incongruence, just like the innumerable generations before her. My mother used to say that the ocean is a patient listener. It remembers everything the moment you imprint a ripple, and the ripple is communicated across the whole world, but you would never be able to tell. Aesun's mother-in-

law said that “a mother who lost her child has more tears than the sea.”

Perhaps I’m writing to save my progeny from drowning, so to speak, in the life that sustains me. Shall I speak directly to him? If any part of you was created immaculately from me, then this invocation is the least I can do.

Oh, and a few days ago I finished that song I’ve been struggling with! I think it will make a very good addition to a future album, which is a secret, which fits the mysterious, confused nature of the song. It’s closer to me than me to you.

Beyond the boy, why do I continue to have the urge to share this diary? No, I shouldn’t share it. It would be a dangerous artistic statement that I can’t take back, about things I would like us all to work through together. Is there any other way to articulate my shame, to reward my trust in you, and finally, to free me?

This is my message to the future. I won’t leak this to the internet! I will drop hints only to please myself. If anyone discovers these words or connects the dots, then I promise my managers that I don’t know what they’re talking about, that ‘I’ am an imposter, and will deny, deny.

I’ve been speaking as if the boy is real, and in doing so I may be neglecting myself. My wants are no different from anyone else. I’ve participated in our society for a long time, since before I was sixteen, and so I’m beginning to sort out the more viable requests that society asks of us.

I’d like to feel freer in my thirties, and with it, that means accepting those impulses I’ve denied in my twenties. In the maze of my life, I’ve discovered a new corridor. The rooms are still shift-

ing, as before, though I've finally arrived in the hall of mirrors and can observe myself from all angles. The hall of mirrors is our culture, the angles are the viewpoints of others, and the reflections are my past and futures. Maturity is what illuminates my image, selecting it from alternatives.

I used to think of myself abstractly, like I was following a fate determined by others. I've felt sick with shame, or thought that I'm a liar, even sometimes, if I may admit, that I'm one of those cool women whom the world can learn from. These conceptions are surely parts of me which are more ephemeral and may not exist at all.

A man who used to be very important to me said, whenever I complained of being tired, that the real me was the part that listened to myself. At that time, I couldn't hear him for reasons that weren't my fault. I've wondered if he thought of himself in the same way, or if he merely wanted me to quit my responsibilities. Is it a problem that I feel safe hugging close to my responsibilities, like those fish huddling around a shark? Or is it a virtue?

Last evening, after reminiscing for longer than appropriate about anxieties that were at various levels of my control, I opted to skip dinner and take a nap. I may have posted on Instagram about regretting this afterwards, I may have deleted it.

I was daydreaming about fields of green on the top of steep hills. There's one in Jeju that I still think about, with the wind shaping the grass like a fluffed pillow. The whistle on the reedy plants reminded me of walks with my grandmother as a child, which flowed like a river to a series of other memories, some colorful and happy as flowers, others less intense about trips hiking

with friends and family, or being on set and sneaking off during my break to stare at the soothing curves of landscapes, or even the way a tree windily laughs at you when you're directly beneath it rather than from a distance. I felt especially small then and could barely see over the horizon. I was tired, the same as after a long day walking and listening to friends' stories unfolding. I've gotten better at listening to stories in recent years. I was wishing that someone new would gradually reveal the intricate petals of their life to me. Listening like plants with the sun.

Listening becomes an easy thing to do when you spend as much time speaking about yourself as I have.

If I've grown up in any way, and can offer this one piece of advice, at least by way of my own experience, well, though giving love puts my heart at ease more than accepting it, I've come to understand that receiving love is a way to give it. Uwah! What am I saying? Are these things I can sincerely say to you? Was this already obvious? I'm trying to be deep here!

Last night, after taking the ill-advised nap, I wasn't physically tired but was mentally exhausted, so I turned my phone on airplane mode and placed it within my dresser. I spent a few hours cross-legged on my bed in the darkness, counting my breaths in the hope that it may distract me. I don't remember it working very well, though no one remembers when they're falling asleep, either.

I had a bizarrely vivid dream that fits into everything written and reflected upon. I typed out the dream which came as a response from this difficult night because, at the time, writing was an activity to hopefully relax my headspace and resolve the reality

of the dream. The first thing I did when I awoke was to type this, that's how raw the story is. I'm going to copy it over here from my phone, as I've heard that the act of transcription strengthens the memory of an event.

"I was falling back asleep and knew it. I could picture myself lying down in my bed. A portal opened up, bridging my senses of being awake and of being asleep. Thinking about the last one, remember, with mirrors and changing hair and alone on the stage that was not a stage and became my bedroom. I felt scared yet curious.

Suddenly, my closed eyes saw my room, and the world got very loud and shook like an earthquake. I knew it was the start of a dream, only sleep has never happened in this way. I was so scared and so tired that I refused to get up.

I thought about my body, and a chill ran down my backside. I had the feeling of being watched. I tried to see who was watching me, but I couldn't move anymore. Then I saw myself entirely in my bed, not like a mirror. It was as if I was dead. My room looked mostly the same. However, it was elongated in ways that made it feel much grander though not entirely correct, and the walls seemed to squeeze and breathe. Everything was dark, yet I could see objects clearly from a vantage point at the edge of the room.

I was entering and entering the room each time I glanced at myself, like the way a webpage fails to load. Over and over and over again.

There was someone else in the room also looking at me. I wasn't scared of them. They weren't yet a real person, which made me think about how I saw myself. Remembering everything as if

it were an undeniably bright light. Knowing about my past woke me in ways from the end of reality. Feeling like I'd been born again. I wanted to speak to them because they could not harm me because it was a dream?

I decided to get a closer look at myself. I realized this was how I looked sleeping. My body breathed, though it was otherwise inanimate. I was very sad without knowing why. It was like pollution muting the midday city. I knew everything was going wrong, only I couldn't fix it. I tried shaking myself or thinking about waking up, yet this did nothing. I would've liked to give myself a hug or simply to have received one. This all felt nothing like seeing me normally in videos. My body was very vulnerable, maybe because it was real time rather than the imprint of it. I didn't know what to do and expected pain.

I turned around to the boy staring at me, making me embarrassed and even angry. What right did he have to see me like this? Was he following me? I must've accidentally let him in. He shouldn't have been there. I asked him why, and he tried to change the subject. It wasn't a conversation so much in words, but we understood something inside one another.

This dream was complex, don't forget there were many details. Like the way he stood floating above the ground. Or his skin was almost translucent like daytime shade. He spoke without his mouth moving. He wore mismatched white socks with green or brown argyle on the cuffs. He looked young, though his facial hair was less sparse than I expected. That his eyes were almost closed, maybe into a grimace or hiding tears. Not entirely the boy I'd been picturing before. There were new things about this one as

well as more detail. Details in the way he stood and the shape of his skull and pulled-back chin and the stringy and unpredictable directions of his hair like each strand individually chose to curl that way. Could write about it more later. I should.

He asked if I was real or a part of his mind, which I found offensive. For a second I wondered if I was the one pretending. He said something about ‘the truth of me.’ He seemed perfectly real. It reminded me of admiring my costume just before I was about to take the stage.

I asked him to stop following me, though I couldn’t be sure. Maybe it was a part of myself that judged and looked and didn’t accept things for the way they were, telling me about my tendency to do this. ‘Dreams are reflections,’ I think he said this, or did I?

What do dreams mean?

Are they coming from me? Was this a different sort of dream?

We knew each other from somewhere. I want to remember this feeling because, despite everything, it was surprisingly warm.”

That was the end of the notes I left myself, alongside complaints about soreness in my body from a decomposed sleeping position.

After, it appears I wrote a series of ideas about making this encounter into a song. I don’t remember this well. The song would’ve been about a special friend whom I feel like I know, even though we never met. I want to scrap it because it has become too personal for others to relate to. I have intuition now about the things you may find useful, and it’s not this. How can I explain my relationship to this boy in words, when my feelings have built

over time, with dreams and music and his spirit? And what do they have to do with you?

I'm starting to believe that he is a surrogate for something that needed to come alive in me, which includes the complicated feelings I have for my career, and all those fans I've never been able to know personally, and much more. Yes, I'm speaking to you.

I'm frustrated with him because he won't leave me alone, and I'm frustrated with myself for wanting to run away. Oh, I don't know. Maybe there's something selfish in this. Still, it's cathartic. It will sound like the way the seasons change, that is, bittersweet yet appreciative for time. For all of our complaining about the speed of time, we must really love it. One day, you may recognize these emotions in a song that is tender, contemplative, and freeing. I would like to find a way to do both and please everyone, usually that is my mission. However, I worry there's something about this story that threatens who I am. Where would I go if he could live comfortably in me? And what would happen to him? This leaves more questions than answers, so that the more I speak of him, the more past audiences swell in me, and my ballads become as permeable as water, transparent as eyes, and are given away like provisions in times of war.

I don't know why I didn't make a note of this before. However, I remember one thing very clearly. In that last dream, he left of his own accord. Only later did I feel safe enough to wake up.

I have about had it.

Where do they all get off? What profit can be gained from this?

I don't want to continue spreading my secrets or misgivings in public, yet I must be made known. I wonder what I can do with my private record. It's safer, even, than the faults of my mind.

My compromise today is to write about my experience with directors generally, so as not to put unwanted pressure on any one of them. Please don't start a rumor that this is about a director, when in reality it's far more general. Well, whether or not I choose to release this, I've left it to a higher self.

Sometimes, these directors fear being honest with me. They may remain professional, providing measured responses to my questions. However, I've often noticed that they don't speak to me with the same freedom as they do to my colleagues.

When I began my acting career, I was still a child and not so famous, but it was when these energies were maintained from set to set that I began to suspect an encompassing pattern. Don't forget that I trained for acting before I became a singer, which should express the ambiguity of my allegiances. Nonetheless, I'm still working to make myself known beyond my voice or likeness. I recognize an inverted privilege in this struggle.

One way I've tried to make directors take me seriously is to challenge them. I'll respond incisively to one of their soft comments, cutting deep into the show's themes and, if I'm lucky,

reading too deeply into an idea that is better than the one they presented. Similar to music, great stories occur when the observer takes on the narrative with the logical fullness of the world, as a symphony conjures an army from sound. When the observer treats a character like the real thing, and the artist treats the observer with the same respect that they give themselves as a creator, then something magical happens. The artist becomes content to withhold what both agree is present, such as the thoughts and conversations occurring in characters outside of depicted scenes. This trust allows the observer to complete these gaps, thereby leaving the artist more time to create a larger, more complex epic. The art becomes a life.

Sometimes, if I'm feeling particularly bold, I will even say something like, "I don't understand why my character would do this?" having already prepared a steady list of reasons. If a director were to respond with, "I could explain this to you. However, I'm the writer and you should trust me," or something to this effect, that's when they've fallen into my trap and are asking me to strike with my daggers. I'm of course speaking figuratively! I've only committed violence to my brother, and it was deserving.

For example, I might say to a director, "Until this point, my character has acted consistently and become angry when pressured or accused. By having her acquiesce here, I recognize that it's convenient for the plot. I'm sorry, however this action has created a new character who I fear the audience won't believe during the sixth episode when the character returns to their stubborn self. I sense that you're reaching for a recognition of her powerlessness in this situation, yet that's what's so special about the woman

you've created. How am I to act this? My most natural reading of your script is to laugh in my enemy's face until eventually accepting their terms with the implicit promise that I will turn around later, when it's convenient, and close this door for good. However, even this action seems incomprehensible, because in the previous scene I let a far worse offense happen when it would've been less inconvenient for me."

By then his amusement would move to frustration before finally recognition. One must balance these concerns with either naivety or playful aggression, because their egos can become bruised in much the way my own (or my character's) was, and we're all humans committed to our best effort. I don't mean for this to sound manipulative, in fact, when I first experienced this event, my behaviors were entirely sincere. Repeating this procedure in future work has become the road to my truest self. Placing it on this page is a confessional prayer. Yes, my admiration for the director informs my treatment of him, including my willingness to scold him, because I want to make it clear not that I'm formidable, rather, that I'm taking his universe so seriously that I find his treatment of my character to be offensive to his project.

Here's a thought, I once had an angry partner tell me that I had cheated on him in his dream, which is a common story, itself uninteresting. I was offended, and not because he'd thought ill of me, as that was only his insecurity, but because he lacked the imagination to think that the version of me in his dream wasn't any more than an expression of his fears. Put another way, I was offended because in his dream, he hadn't asked me why I chose

to have the affair, or wondered what mysteries I harbored in his heart.

Am I selfish, manipulative, measured? Or am I seeking to be in control of something which is only natural to want, and as I progress in this way, which is not a freedom gifted to everyone, I'm merely becoming closer to a self-possession that can teach others about how presentation is manifestation, or about the way that my own gifts can invigorate others?

Sometimes I fear that all your praise is not justification. Though I would be lost without you.

Anyways, sharing these sentiments with directors lets them know that they may freely criticize me in pursuit of our shared goals. And in every other way, this criticism is generative, further blurring the line between myself and my characters, between my characters and the audience, and enabling the encounters that I hold so dear. Nonetheless, a few criticisms offered to me during a project may slip through my mask and wound me. I regret this and put care into not revealing the shame to my coworkers. Still, I'm frustrated by the whole affair and would prefer to be less calculated. Why must I be so calculated? That this is the way of our business is not a sufficient answer.

For a more direct example, there's a particular show filmed a few years ago called *My Mister*. It was a very difficult project, though I'm endlessly grateful for it. The perspective granted from our cast's found family has meant maybe as much to me as my pride after wrapping the production, which is significant because it's possibly my finest performance as an actor. Those people left a

legacy in my mind and deserve to be honored long after they've left my life.

Part of the following anecdote is untrue, rewritten here to clarify more about my feelings, or perhaps more closely aligning with my memories of the events while they were transpiring, rather than the actual event. Yes, all of this did happen, insofar as it's the right way to express myself. As for the facts of the matter, each person would have their own story, so please don't retrace my steps. Please don't bother them, either.

In case you haven't seen the show, or in case I've forgotten, I played a lost young woman who worked for a wonderful boss. Our relationship grew over time into something beside a romantic tune. However, our relationship was built upon deceit. I had wire-tapped his phone because the company's CEO was covertly paying me to get him fired. I would probably describe my character as a stalker who routinely infiltrated my boss's privacy. Between this and the kind way he treated me, I grew to love him more deeply and to torture myself with greater violence.

The longer this charade went on, the easier it became for me. As I listened in on him and continued to break his privacy, the more it became clear that I was the horrible one, which comforted me.

I believe I was thinking something like this, 'If there's no possibility of what I secretly desire coming true, then there's nothing to lose. And the more I fall for you while continuing to behave in this way, strangely, the easier it is to set myself aside. And yet, maybe this ease has to do with my feelings, which only grow stronger as they displace me. It feels so natural to continue down

this path that can only hurt us. However, the closer I get, the more I won't be able to act in my own interests anymore.'

I'm not sure why I'm restating my character's motivations, possibly because it's empowering to write these words in a void, when acting is only a sculpture in time, freely gestured yet fundamentally silent, like falling leaves on a tree that wants us to know that winter is coming. Even that metaphor is too forced. Trees want only of themselves. What it's really like is uttering a truth that everyone has successfully ignored. Is this doing good in the world? I'm aware that the story has certain parallels with fans' relationships with celebrities.

Sometimes you ask us what we meant by a decision in a show. While no actor wants to ignore the refined motivations of our character, we actors often resent being asked such a question in an interview, because it has been our work to let words rest in search of greater expressions. Yet what is a greater expression than admitting to myself in a secure diary that, at best, I only managed to understand her by casting my shadow on first a mirror, and then on a doorframe, like a sundial to another dimension?

There's an inevitable tragedy to 'My Mister.' My character was always going to betray that man named Dong-hoon. Or rather, she had already betrayed him, and the plot was for him to discover the depths of her scheming falseness. In the meantime, could she explain her actions and allow him to forgive her, for her to forgive herself, and maybe most alarmingly, for me to justify her?

Without spoiling the ending, it seems significant to me that the answer was none of the above.

Eventually I've learned that my, Ji-an's, profoundest duty is to portray all realities. For example, that I'm both the worst, least deserving of kindness, and that I'm also capable of the sort of goodness reserved for a saint. At any given time, both directions would be lived in, until a final decision seals me forever, proving the tangibility of other paths. The strangest part was that, even though one path led towards heaven, letting go of the others was somehow sending me to hell. Perhaps it sent hell to me.

These complicated, often impossible emotional games are the most interesting thing for me to encounter in art, because where else does art feel so real? When we encounter things in life that are truly challenges for us, it's because there's a paradox at war with fate, and we must eventually accept this fated contradiction, which brings with it the foreclosure of various doors as we move towards maturity. Maybe this acceptance of narrowing opportunities is maturity, I say now that I'm no longer in my twenties, now that I've finally understood that I was never mature.

And as she listened to him struggle in his own life, her tragic impulses taught her about his desires, and his kindness taught her about the generosity of the world. Specifically, all this time she had wondered what made people capable of a general agreeableness that could not be sincere to her. Since, until then, no one beyond her grandmother (and a garbage man, and maybe her cousin) had ever cared for her, what should've been a simple understanding became delayed over years, until this obvious fact of life was buried.

Finally, in what I believe to be an emotional climax, she understood the twin impulses of shame and kindness. The first, shame,

is a feeling which she assumed was ruling the world. Yet standing strong besides, or perhaps inside, the totality of shame finally revealed itself. It was the shattering of a self-inflicted myth that she'd been seeing the world upside down, and it became possible to understand the upside of shame in a man whose kindness was finally believable.

One day, Dong-hoon is humiliated by something so great and breaks down, asking 'Why, why, why!' accusing the world of cruel senselessness. She used to wonder if kindness was a form of acting to get what you want, and as she stalked him and listened through his wire-tapped-phone, he revealed how he hated himself. He did so in the privacy of his own home so as not to make anyone worry. I can relate to these thoughts.

Her whole life, she was convinced that to get closer to someone was an unbearable danger, because witnessing them express the self-hatred that she felt looking in the mirror would cause her to project her own misery onto them, leaving them both worse because of it. However, she was wrong.

Her revelation was that, rather than her self-hatred reflecting onto him, it was her love for him that reflected back onto herself. She saw that he should forgive himself, meaning she might forgive herself.

I once said that this drama expresses "that there is this kind of reality. How should we live?" I like the way that I phrased this.

My realization about her character brought tears to my eyes and reminded me of childhood. The universality of pain in others paired with the reality of this man is what finally convinces her that sincerity is possible. This is to say, we become kind when we

can see. And of all the things I hope to accomplish as an actor or a performer, it's the pureness of this truth that's my guiding star. If we've been lucky as children, it damages our soul when we eventually learn that harm can be done with intent.

How does this relate to fans? On my end, honestly, I've received nefarious rumors and even death threats. Sasaengs have scared me. Naming them would be providing the attention that they don't deserve.

I've also witnessed true joy and friendship emerge around me, which has been a blessing surpassing art. I've often thought, 'I should be paying you.' Alternatively, I could try to give fans their due credit. Our art is made the moment my work encounters you. It's yours more than my own.

Shall I write more abstractly? Ji-an was the least like the real me of any of my characters. Maybe like fans, I had to understand her as a stranger from inside of myself. In this way, she was also the most like me.

There's a scene in 'My Mister' that encapsulates all of these pages of thoughts. I still have the creased lines of my script, which simply says to 'break down and cry.'

I'll try not to spoil the context, and in doing so, I believe it will conserve the sort of mystery that I'm after whenever I think back to that night of filming. In person, I was given many directions on how to escalate the scene, and which way to bring myself to the floor, how to extend the tenderness inside of my sobs, and all of the rest. I spent weeks building up the courage to honor the other actors as well as my own character, trying to plan various avenues or even wondering, 'Shall I remember the way I lost a family

member who desired to leave, or what it was like discovering a pet suffering pain in silence?’ I decided against both of these options, though I was indebted to that sorrow.

The scene called for emotions that were drawn from love, and a great burdening shame accompanied it. In that moment, I was supposed to release two complimentary tensions. The first was that my boss Dong-hoon was someone who I believed didn’t care for me, after my young lifetime of people letting me down, and really this person cared more than I could understand. Or more than I deserved. This was the second tension, that I did not deserve his love, because without exception whenever someone loved me, it brought them pain. These conflicting emotions were a concert of joy, pain, and shame that became combustible under a suppressed love which for the last twenty-odd years Ji-an hadn’t the courage to release.

These thoughts were all coursing through me and growing as wails in their intensity. Braving the release of them proposed to have the opposite effect, meaning that it could pierce the hole of an infinite body. Despite this, the pressure continued to bruise me. It felt like things would never be okay again, yet I could’ve gone on like that, continuing to sob.

After I heard the words ‘cut,’ there was nothing else I wanted to do except continue crying. I didn’t break the momentum for a long time and was unmoved by the crew’s worry.

At this character’s lowest moment, amid the sort of suffering that frames a lifetime, I’d never in my real life wanted to be someone else more. And if there’d been a possibility of magically

switching lives with her, I would've done so. I was closer to her than to myself.

In hindsight, I'm glad that my wish wasn't granted. My life is too rich with people I adore, still I may wonder.

It was embarrassing to clean myself up after the scene. The crew knew to give me space. They told me later that it had brought many of them to tears, and that I should be proud of having brought this out of them. I remind myself of this in an effort of persuasion.

However, I didn't feel proud of this moment. I was channeling Lee Ji-an, a character, and doing so with an intensity that before that scene I was wrong to feel sure of. I'd like to say that it was her crying, and that I lost time and disappeared. Honestly, that seems like the most congruent scenario. If that was when I've been most convincing as an actor, I'd believe it. I shared a part of me that I couldn't express and perhaps still can't. They say that acting is a performance that involves practicing and learning to trust your intuition. It requires watching people and responding in ways by an imagined self, alongside other characters also developed by thousands of previous choices accumulating together. What happened in that scene was not acting, even though it appears that way for everyone else.

It wasn't acting for me, and I'm the one who knows the difference. These events all happened within my life to be written here as digressions or extensions of one story. I who sing, act, and perform for a living, but also as someone who lives and has gone through my own struggles and can bank them. I'm the only

person in the world who could've done that scene. That isn't to disparage or brag about myself, it's only to name the truth.

There must be an expression for the moment I was in. 'Acting' doesn't recall the spiritual quality of that place which seems to refine perceptions and their memories, and which feels real in the same way seeing your name on a sheet of paper or hearing your voice in a recording proves something of the impact you may have outside of yourself. Because this experience was real by a process of simultaneous excavation and aggregation. Ji-an had a reason to sob, and IU the performer, and Ji-eun the person, and myself in the moment, and my identity in the past, and even now in the future as I fondly remember that strange time when I broke completely open in front of others on a set that was less than a set, and at the same time, a set that was not a set but rather a real street where people walked, lived, worked, and wept amid streetlamps. My scene affected others later within the show, and then in the millions of souls who stumbled upon this episode during the mysterious turmoil of their own stories.

What does that word mean, 'million?' I don't have the capacity to know. This is all to say that I wasn't proud, because it's too meager. I submitted myself, and lived that scene, and still carry the weight of that injury, and much more.

Sometimes I have dreams where I'm sobbing and don't know whether it's because I've experienced something tragic, perhaps that moment playing over again, or if I'm practicing a style of communication for you.

There were additional moments in that show as well as many other projects where I've experienced the wordless phenomenon

that's between acting and living yet seems to encapsulate both, like seeing your reflection when you don't intend to in a shop window, or waking up in a hotel after a long time of sleeping at home. If I succeed in illustrating this, you will say, "I thought I understood, though it's only now feeling it that I finally can!" And you'll think with comfort, "I've been here before by myself, and deep down I was convinced, secretly, that I was the only one!" How much further does it go? We could build the world on this feeling. In a way, we are building it now.

This diary I'm writing sometimes reminds me of papers I wrote in high school, just before my current life began. It starts with a thesis like, 'In this essay, I will argue that love is the root of all motivations.'

When one acts well, writes well, and sings well, the passion behind the act is love, just as the written object becomes a creature with a singular motivation. That's why I wrote *Love Wins All*, which is a ballad about ballads.

When people say that 'love makes no sense,' what they're really saying is that it doesn't operate on our reality's laws of cause and effect. Neither can love be measured. Rather, love is the glimpse of a higher reality imparting itself upon our plane of existence. What is the opposite of a black hole? In light of this flash, this divine inspiration, or possibly the reality of other souls, all actions may be evident, but they're not explained. To do so would be to search for a target behind the center of the sphere. That is why, when you look for the source of love, you'll find everything else.

Whenever a character does something bad, there may be an impulse to explain it in another way. As discussed with my Ji-an in ‘My Mister,’ there comes a time where it becomes clear to the audience, as well as to my character, that I have reverence for the great Lee Sun-Kyun’s Park Dong-hoon. And yet, I continue to make questionable decisions, often to directly hurt Dong-hoon. The easy way out is to consider Ji-an as a monstrous character. After all, I’ve killed a man in my past and am trying to surmount debt through a series of conniving, selfish behaviors. It seems the only person I care for is my grandmother. However, there’s another way out.

I don’t mean to state the obvious here. It’s clear even early in the show that my character is to be empathized with, this notion is layered intuitively in everything from my character’s music to the same few turtlenecks I wear each day, which endearingly suggests how Ji-an is hiding her desperation. What’s strange is that I continue to behave in this way despite your sensing Ji-an’s innate goodness, as if you’re screaming through the screen at me to behave, if not for everyone else, then for myself. However, the clever thing about Won-seok’s work is that, in this moment, the drama is about why I’m elongating my suffering within an inevitable arc.

The answer has something to do with the shape of self-discovery, containing tensions that are internal. Every character must possess inward logic. I’ve tried to place this feeling into my fans with mixed effects. Characters that aren’t guided by love, whether it’s because they’re too evil or generically good, are too flat to carry someone through the river of a great work which leaves them in a

new location from where they started. I wonder if you can proceed from this. In the case of whether a character lacks proper motivation, what then does it say about the artist, or the logic of the world that the artist created?

While I'm interested in what being guided by love means in the realm of music, I haven't reflected on the use of, let us say, more immature narratives that don't properly take love into account. Maybe it's in fear of an unintelligent audience that prefers something simpler than the permutations of real life. Maybe it's because people find comfort in stories that reflect not what they've lived, but what they can predict, because an illusion of understanding is enough to get to sleep.

More likely, in addition to the above, there is an ungenerous urge in the artist. These urges don't appear out of nothing. Rather, they must reflect another sort of failing, possibly that of an unkind world, or a wounded self, or even a desire for control. This fantasy bends all characters to the whim of a creator, instead of the reverse where a character, once created, seems to live on despite their writer. In this case, the character has such a refined presence that if their creative desires were to be respected, they would go on in such a direction far beyond the page. By then the character is a real creature, and deviations from reality are felt as glitches of their presence away from the being we know exists.

Though I would never admit this in public, I believe that most art fails to cross this threshold into the willing reality that musicians occupy. I once heard the phrase, 'Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy.' If everything I'm saying is familiar, it's only proof that these words were never necessary.

Yet there must also remain space in a created being for surprising themselves, just as a melody must develop in unexpected, nonetheless inevitable ways. By this extension, the audience should also be surprised by the vitality of a character's choice. Which brings me all the way back to myself, or my character, that boy, or you.

I think that the perfect artistic act is to create a child. If I were to speak in metaphors, many stories call this to mind. Frankenstein designs a new creature, whereas Don Quixote is the reincarnated image of his written will. The myth of our heritage is that Dangun was both the grandson of the Heavenly Lord and the child of a bear who had become a woman, of equal parts god and animal. I've wondered if any of these perversities are wrong, yet here I am writing in my diary with the gestating image of a fan who lingers in my heart.

Due to fame, my work imparts my consciousness upon the world. Is it a stretch to imagine, somewhere out there, that my life created a personality? While I was playing around like a giddy child in the sun. I've had egotistical daydreams shift to nightmares about this possibility, which I may admit to myself here.

No, I know that it's not just a possibility, and that numerous people exist in orbit of me. When in reality we all come from nothing, that is, we're all burning with matter that appears to have come from nowhere else, and so, like the universe, the only conclusion is that we each underwent an immaculate conception from nothing into something. It seems immoral to influence the germination of stars to the extent that it erases what is unique in us.

The nightmare was that I'd written upon someone's face a mask of myself, and then everywhere I looked, there was myself possessing the bodies of others. My pale skin and wide eyes looked out of proportion, neither borrowed nor stolen but rather endemic, like I had made camp in a forest. I remember thinking, 'How could I?'

Say what you will about the soul. There has never, in the entire history of humanity, been room for two.

In the meantime, I'll continue to try my best to make it worth their while, until they may look away and are dislodged. The truth is, I'll never understand their love, I may only show them who I am. Nonetheless, deep down, do I hope that they're earnest?

I shouldn't take myself too seriously. After all, I'm only acting. I can be inspired by the boldness of a lie or a reserved truth. Sometimes, I get ideas about how to play a character by catching a glimpse of the right women at the wrong time, or maybe by calling upon a dream I've forgotten and must piece together out of order. Other times, I become the character so completely that it's their worries, not my own, that I find myself contemplating while I fall asleep. One aspect of my insomnia manifests similar to this, with the inability to separate two parts of me. The former includes the world as it knows me, while the latter is a doppelganger to the memory of myself, or a protective shell which I use to gaze upon the world. My true identity is like a clear glass of water.

To really get to know me, one must intuit what is underneath my mask. I'm aware of how I look and manage how I sound. My face is read as a naïve, kind beauty. Maybe this is part of my choice in roles, which as of late have coalesced into characters that are neither evil nor perfect but tend towards a fatalism that opposes the sound of my music. Was this the genius of what my directors looked for in me? Honestly, this transition has been easier than expected. I'm releasing the angry, lost, and vindictive parts of myself that in normal work I'm not permitted to have. One can imagine how this may be part of the problem.

Some nights after shooting that lonely show, I would wear a black baseball cap and mask and go on long walks in the brighter

parts of the city, swept up in anonymity, both to behave as my character and to revel within the seductive alternative reality of becoming a neglected person with none of the eyes on her. It was alluring because it represented a fantasy of mine to release the responsibility of being known. At moments, I felt as though I was hallucinating because my mind was having trouble contextualizing the situation. In the past few years, I haven't been able to enter the public sphere in Korea with much anonymity, instead remaining alert to the gracious yet needy eyes of my fans.

I'd forgotten the way one can concentrate on things in this quiet. The depths of colors reveal something about the city. I adore how puddles and lampposts interact with the uneven patterns of streets. Of equal importance, I enjoy participating in the dance of Seoul's citizens, like we're all part of a nocturama, or bugs busily working on the hive. How we all fit together is a boundless puzzle, though the weight of it is undeniable. And, strangely, despite being reduced almost to nothing on these long walks into lit darkness, I often feel as though I'm fulfilling an important purpose.

That I'm a grand cog in a mechanical contraption with many surprising uses, and eventually by chance or fate my day will come. I will slot into place, and those unique things about me, maybe even the way I walk, will contribute to a greater project.

That I, a flame, have burned through the wick and released my essence to coat the world. It could be a lyric.

Or that I was nothing more than a reminder to someone. Perhaps that you're on a train alone, and at the next stop I'm an old widow who sits a few chairs down from you. Maybe we don't

share a word and only exchange a glance. It's the context of our sincere sharing of space that raises the streets to greater meaning while we're together. And when I've limped off at the last stop and you're alone again, the quiet gives you the space to see not just what's there, but what you're missing. In that moment, it may appear that everything is possible, and fears and insecurities are reversed, as if they offer the secret to correcting one another. I haven't been on the train in so long...

Oh, where to begin with this last thing? What you are about to read is horror to me, so feel free to stop if you don't like those dangers.

I feel that I'm going crazy giving disclaimers to myself! I don't like horror either! However, I had a nightmare that made me want to end my affair. We never share the worst of ourselves. This time, I promised myself to do so because now I have a good reason to be honest. If you're no longer my fan after this, I understand. There's so much that I hide. I'm getting older, and it's not fair to continue avoiding this, not for either of us, especially the indignation that's buried deep and long within me.

I'm sensing the darkness now. I'll try and push through to the end, only where can I begin? Right now, I'm under a time crunch, because I should be sleeping and am scheduled early tomorrow, as usual. Waiting on the other end of the day are people, maybe this includes you, and I don't want to disappoint.

Performing for you is the greatest joy of my life. I should say this a million times in a million ways in the hope that you believe my truth. Despite this, a premonition tells me that my secret must escape now, even though timing may make no discernable difference in our world, where work is recorded and immutable. Whether or not I believe in fate, I do believe in our powers as humans to influence each other. It's something I hold so dearly because you never know who's listening or who needs to hear it.

So what happened? First, I woke up in the dark.

I couldn't remember arriving in that area without walls. A distant sound, perhaps the cheer of a crowd, enveloped me like a cashmere blanket on a frigid night. Above, spirits painted the sky and dripped light on my face.

Voices shouted towards me, saying things such as, 'Why not?' and 'I can't believe this.' They asked to see my face and chanted 'I love you, we love you.' I couldn't locate them.

The stars above me were so incredible. If you could only see how every star contained a whole gemstone of a memory. They seemed to hold the life of someone and were shining, round, and vital as a fresh bubble. It was a technology that held people's souls, I'm sure of it. I found this knowledge very exhilarating yet also unnerving. I wished for the chance to enjoy this sight, however, this was the beginning of the nightmare.

I heard a maddening whooshing sound in my ears, aligned with my breathing. It continued to grow in intensity, as if my life, voice, and the world were extraordinarily open to me. I bent my head down in hopes that gravity would relieve it.

Suddenly I was yanked across a vast distance. Rather, I lurched back and forth, perpetually traveling such vast distances that I feared I would lose the last of my breath and so abandon my body.

During the journey, I was thrust into thick darkness. For a moment, at the apex of each string, I gathered enough light to see that I was in a new location. The loud pain earned from these visions was excruciating.

I saw billboards including myself in the inside of restaurants and bedroom walls, and heard myself on dance floors, in basements for parties, and resounding across crowded beaches. I was

there in empty trails, and on the radio in otherwise silent mobile homes in the middle of arid lands, and echoing through loud traffic, and crumpled in trash heaps with photos, and on stickers in stadiums with astroturf, and inside classroom lockers looking out at students who laughed and winced, playing in their earbuds, and as cardboard cutouts or hung as a poster in shops of every kind, to begin the list. I saw children and young adults wearing all sorts of things, and administrators working hard in offices, and adults of all ages dancing to themselves at night, and so many others.

Perhaps this sounds beautiful to you. Know that I type this with gritted teeth, thinking about whomever, whether it be deep within myself or something more malevolent, made me see this. The feeling was completely unnatural to be everywhere, and it hurt especially badly. It felt as if a sickness weighed on top of my skin and was simultaneously reaching into my throat like a gagging sort of whiplash. My ears pounded. It sucked out my breath and tore myself open. I was separating atom by atom, from outside to in and to out again, bringing together the parts of my body that should remain disparate. There was no build-up. Instead, I was fracturing, dissolving from the first moment while screaming silently inside myself, being remade only to be torn again.

Honestly, I'm not sorry for telling you. I'm still learning to forget it.

Over the weeks since then, it's taken me at least an extra hour to fall asleep for fear of returning to that place. Even then, I rested in an alert state. What if I'd glimpsed something real?

I don't want you to imagine my nightmare as I did or to experience how I screamed. I only want you to know that it happened.

Oh... I'm typing through tears, really.

Euaaah! Some minutes have gone by. I will go on after I collect myself.

I can do it, I know I should talk about this. It's not your fault that you were curious.

If you can believe it, the nightmare got stranger after this pain. Indeed, the nightmare felt alive, like it was crafted beyond me by many scorned observers. While I was traveling in the nightmare, I tried to speak to those people I saw, though I didn't have any time.

I don't know what I would've asked for, maybe for time itself. I tried singing or speaking to them. I couldn't form language as we know of it in words. What was it, how can I explain?

All the while, I was trying to put on a good face. I can't explain why. It still makes me frustrated with myself. What is wrong with me?

I hoped that smiling through my annihilation would fix everything. I wanted to escape so badly that I considered ways of breaking my glass cage to silence as an equal alternative, only that wouldn't change anything, because even if I could no longer witness myself, everyone would still see me. Anyways, I didn't know that I was sleeping.

Finally, the dream progressed. I found myself in my childhood house, only it was much larger, and I didn't recognize it. The house was a beautiful old Western mansion yet also contemporary like the house from *Parasite* and had none of the warmth or nostalgia of my real homes.

You, or they, or my fans were watching the vlog that I recorded with my phone as it phased through my hand. The vlog disseminated my vision in real time as much as for posterity, a live stream that represented forever.

I sought a way to comfort my fans because my safety was somehow tied to their pleasure. I wore a dress that I wouldn't wear at home except for this. My parents waited in a nearby room, expecting me at the family dinner. Therefore, I needed to entertain my fans enough so that I could leave early, so that I could join my family for dinner, so that I could convince both fans and family of the incompatible needs of the other, so that I could feel content enough to close my eyes and wake up from my fears, like I was a ghost with generations of unresolved guilt.

My fans asked ever more personal questions about my family. My parents heard me read one of the questions aloud. They wouldn't have understood why someone asked it, but I had to convince them that it was alright. The question was, "Would you change anything about your family, and what would it be?" and I answered by asking, "Would the Earth still be our earth without the moon?" It left them unsatisfied.

There were too many questions to answer. They noisily accumulated, so that I couldn't think. I saw less of where I was going in the house, which surely made me lost in an endless game with unfortunate consequences. It was obvious that if I ended the stream early, my parents were going to turn into pigs (I rewatched *Spirited Away* recently), and I didn't have the wherewithal to deal with my poor parents if they were pigs.

At some point the house became as large as a palace, with long, dark wooden hallways. My distance from the dining room was directly related to my fans' happiness beyond the phone. This is why I maintain boundaries in real life. The only livestreams I should accept are during concerts, when there's no mistake that I'm performing. My vlogs are edited in post.

I conspired against my fans, searching for an acceptable excuse to hang up. I said I was lost on the wrong side of the house and needed to say goodbye soon. I wanted to scream at you all. I'm sorry. It was just a dream. Honestly, what was holding me back? I overlooked an ivied courtyard from up high. It wouldn't have been worse to scream than to... I can't finish that sentence.

My eyes were imprisoned on the phone as I contemplated this. And I'd never stopped smiling.

Narrating what I saw wasn't enough for you. You wanted me to open every door, even the scary ones. These doors weren't in my house before. Nothing lay on the other side. It didn't cure your curiosity, neither did it resolve my fear that the next door would be different. Like you, I was pulled into the mystery of just where I was, and what private secret you were looking for through me.

We are always looking for something, I only wish we knew what that should be.

And I've seen movies about haunted houses where the young and naive heroine confronts the deep evil inside with a love that somehow purifies it. I'm afraid this isn't that kind of story. I wonder if knowing these stories makes one impotent at handling them, because the magic is gone while twisted desires remain.

I asked for support without betraying the desperation in my voice. I thought, ‘Could your love be conditional?’ I hate to admit this, but I never once thought of explaining my situation to you. What does it say about our relationship that I don’t feel willing to disappoint you, that I believe you would misunderstand?

The truth is, I know it remains impossible now, though my words without my face or voice leave me strangely hopeful.

Eventually, the space between us was exhausted, so I quietly turned off the stream, and then threw my phone through the window. Like the shift from night to morning, I felt a momentary relief. In a different world, I would’ve bathed in the pause like a cat under the sun.

Only this was still a nightmare. I heard someone’s footsteps in a dark hallway that expanded ever out to nothing. And I still felt the noise, sensed the incessant questions of my fans still lingering in the livestream’s chat. Just like in the real world, I replaced one stress with two others.

I closed my eyes to listen, and my vision was transplanted to an establishing shot on the other side of the house. I saw the ground before stairs that spiraled. Water pooled paradoxically over a dry rug. The water skipped the rug and soaked into the wooden floor below.

My vision followed the calligraphy-like water which swirled around my body, only it was not my body but an idol of myself, an effigy. Then my sight changed to a bird’s eye view as I watched my frozen image summon water from the stairs. Stone pillars circled me, and hallways branched octagonally in every direction from the spiral. The inscription of a magic spell.

I could hear footsteps landing much closer than before, then with a jolt my vision returned to my real body. When would I finally wake up?

I walked through the corridors towards the idol of myself, perhaps guided by the same talisman that drew water to another version of me. In the hallways, many doors were closed. Others opened with a creak as I walked by, and still others were dark and cavernous, as if they would swallow me up if I tried to appreciate them.

Some walls were porous, and I could see versions of myself glitching around them, fulfilling filial duties in a stereoscope across time, deep into futures I would never occupy, wearing clothes that in this life I'd worn only as costumes. Each version of me held weight and was real, and I was no different from them except that I could see them. I wanted to join in, and I believe if I had, my life would've ceased as I knew it. That was the pact of this world that I understood from the beginning.

All the while walking, I feared that the ceiling may come down, and the wide porous walls were shimmering closed like the flesh of a yawning creature. If I moved too slowly, I would be digested, forget about my pig parents (by then I had). Without light, I made my way by the varying degrees of shadows, which pointed like a compass towards the other me. I only wanted to go home or wake up! Hadn't I put myself through enough?

At one point, I stumbled upon a balcony and looked out. The world beyond was much different than I remembered. A dry storm shouted at me, and there were dark clouds that made it

hard to see until lightning revealed a great forest unlike anything from where I'm from.

Recently, I haven't been feeling like myself and find that I'm crying about little things. I'm slowly trying to forget some personal matters. These stormy threats may be the shadow of bigger fears, for example, the promise of death. I've been encouraged to not speak publicly about death as people already worry enough about the relentless future, and that's not my role. However, why wouldn't I mourn, just like you? Why can't I walk in the direction of my curiosity? While acting, facing death is in line with my work, yet when I'm myself I'm supposed to evade it? Have I sworn to be a version catered to your innermost desires? This is a big step forward for me to ask.

I had a long conversation about the problem of expressing negative things with a friend who is also an entertainer. To be honest, we spoke explicitly about the problem of death and suffering, which do not disappear by distractions, however beautiful. How can I spend my life in the pursuit of beauty in the wake of its antonym? How can beauty exist in a world where innocent children die of cancer, or disappear, or the unspeakable happens? If God asked me to justify the world at the cost of one child, I would refuse.

Please don't mistake my timidity to speak on such matters with a lack of experience with them, or to equate my failure to articulate these thoughts with the complexity of their existence. I'm well-acquainted with suffering. Admittedly, I never directly confront the inevitability of my death, even when I mourn it in those most dear to me. I hope I can forgive my past selves who

were too afraid of becoming obsolete that they behaved impudently. In this way, I may've been addressing death from a secondary source, namely cowardice. Of the shows that I'm proud of, it's because I lived this fear to transcend it, disappearing in the process.

I sometimes fear that each time I go to sleep, I die, and a new creature is born into my consciousness. It allegedly remembers everything I've lived. By this logic, every day is the only chance I get, and my lineage stretches before and after me in thousands of variations which fracture identity. Maybe this is true for each moment, though I don't mean to get into notions of the sacred.

Anyways, with these thoughts encapsulated by a dream while looking out of the broken window of a haunted house on a hill towards a gate to a dark forest guarding from the dead stillness of night, under the stars that implied the universe, a different sort of life appeared before me and whispered about the sounds of the day. It coaxed me to die in this world. Wake up. Die. Again and again before you.

Like I said earlier, I'm too afraid of death to face it. Instead, I convinced myself that I wasn't dreaming after questioning it. Ha, and I managed this after all of the practice doing the opposite while on stage.

I can't remember exactly how things proceeded from there. More rules shaped the dream. They made no sense, though I was very good at learning them. For example, I was not supposed to walk inelegantly, or else the irregularity of steps could rouse uninvited guests. Also, I had to hurry to the gathering of water across the house, or else I would be considered irresponsible and lose a

charity that I'd been fighting for in my company, to say nothing of my parents, those pigs.

I sought the correct doors and turns among the winding halls, keeping an ear towards the footsteps as they grew less distant, hoping that they belonged to someone who would always be on my side. Partners come and go, if only after a lifetime. Fans are like the sun.

I expect you know exactly who this person was. Why have I kept going back to him? We should all be lucky to have dream-friends that stay with us through the mercurial patterns of life. I knew he was looking for me, and if I kept searching for him, it's possible that he would provide comfort, but, and don't think I'm beyond this, I wanted to leverage him for my own salvation.

I sang a lullaby that I still wish to remember. I continued to wait.

Eventually, I heard footsteps louder than before. I stumbled upon his face from just far enough away. I called him, and called, only to discover that he spoke English instead of Korean. Can you believe it? I've never had a dream where language was taken so seriously!

Instead of answering my call, the noise scared him. He looked very bewildered, with his eyebrows upturned, and his lips slightly opened and pulled more faintly down. However, he was so full of love and joy too, like he'd found what he was looking for yet regretted finding it for the weight he now carried.

No, he was awfully horrified to find what he was looking for.

I couldn't know why, only his hand was clinched up in a very uncomfortable way. I gestured to him. It looked like he held some-

thing in his hand. And If I looked very closely, I could imagine another person holding tightly, their fingers intertwined.

I approached him, believing he was running to greet me, being similarly desperate for companionship in the darkness. He dashed right by me. I called and tried to chase him. If I wasn't so unthreatening, you would've thought that I was the hunter and he was the prey, but that's absurd.

There was a moment, right as I passed him, where I glimpsed a hand where mine fit, and a whisper of a person pulling him furtively, as if the idea of what he ran towards (or away) from could've been recognized by me. I'm only reporting the details because he turned in my direction as he passed, and with this, he acknowledged me. His gaze held the love reserved for families. None of it makes sense. However, I knew deep down, and still feel this way now, that he wanted to take me with him, and if I had already known what happened next, I would've understood that he was trying to protect me from danger, and that the only way to protect me was to not let me beside him.

It is very late, should I go on?

I've been writing for so long that it's almost morning, yet I feel totally awake.

Where was I?

Dreams shift like emotions. Often I can't recall what has made me feel one way in the moment. Still, the change is similar to when it rains after a long time, and you suddenly remember that it has been too long for nature. All will resolve. In that way it feels obvious.

I worry about describing the final events because they happened beyond the way we speak. You would think that after years of making music, I could do an adequate job of explaining what something is like in words. Well, I've never had this space before and will try to talk about sound, though doing so is equivalent to taping my mouth shut before singing.

I suppose, to start, music requires time to become music. For example, when I sing a note, it relies on the notes before and after to make sense of. The melody slowly emerges from the repetition of sounds. You can also understand the melody because so many songs have been sung in the same key with the same range of emotions. In this way, there are many contexts playing together all at once, and so we're never alone in song, but rather all contributing, including those who have since left us.

I don't know if it's the sound or the space between the sounds that gives us the chance to shape our own life. My best music is created when I follow those patterns of memories. This includes both the melodies and the greater currents of feelings which inform them and deviate between each performance or against each ear. My music, like my memories, is never completely happy. It is in concert with other sad emotions, which allude to suffering. However, they all swirl together to create something fuller and more sustainably joyous.

I would be lost without music. I'm not speaking about a career, rather who I am as a person. I'm happy to lose myself in sounds, for it is where I find myself the least alone. This remains true even when I'm singing to myself.

I wonder, what is a note, and how does this compare to rhythm? Notes are vibrations, which are only energy traveling through a medium. It takes a short time for sound to be produced and to travel, and the open spaces between these vibrations are the rhythms.

And then there's the note's pitch, which is created by the speed of vibrations. Does this sound familiar? Again pitch, like rhythm, is about time. When you focus enough, pitch and rhythm are the same thing, only pitch is revealed on a micro-cosmic scale. A scientist would explain this better, though this mystery precedes science as it precedes reality, just as love does.

It seems an important precursor to reality that pitch is made up of the same thing as rhythm, and in both cases, it's simply the waving of energy in time. If notes make up a melody, then rhythm, being of notes, is also melody, and harmony can only exist as part of this composition with melody and rhythm. I'm reminded of school where Einstein said energy and matter are the same.

In the school of life, this is what you all have taught me: energy, music, water, love, and everything else in the universe are made with the same thing. We and our communication are all one physical reality.

If light cannot transcend the black hole of reality, perhaps music has hope, which flows between things? I'm not speaking of the sound exactly, rather its quality, what it carries.

You understand why the metaphor of the universe appears when I address my fans. Beyond crudely approximating the scale of our shared experience, it overwhelms our trivial differences,

because everything is superficial to the brilliance of stars, not to mention what is implied between them.

I could store all of my memories in songs, and you would understand it, when all I'm doing is taking the time we need in order to exist, shaping it with my breath, and imbuing it with my heart.

We build lives around these sounds, communicating what is happening inside of us through vibrations that happen so fast that we hear them as if they're stable things. This is exactly how we imagine ourselves to be stable. Or how the language I'm writing is a translation of who I am, and surely it's not close to who I really am, because if it was, I could give up singing and dancing and never leave my house! I haven't put this notion into words until now, yet I've always been trying to express it.

I know that fans and performers follow a very similar concept to rhythm and pitch, only our energy is in the form of love...

During the moment the boy passed me, we both fell into a very compressed place where space and time were squished together. I could hear it. The moment held a high pitched, frantic rhythm, and the harmony of his voice rounded out my own existence as we shouted across an infinity which was so close as to be indistinct.

I had a long time to think.

One thought was that if I'm an avenue for people to speak to themselves or between themselves, a way to cross the distance, then my firm belief about music becomes an important meaning for life.

Then I thought, if things go ideally, a true fan will grow to resent me, because my most beautiful song is a reminder of something which they cannot bear to think. That is, the insufficiency of my art for recreating their inner world, which will inevitably be much deeper than I can allude to. In the moment outlined above, I knew that the series of dreams I had with this boy were doomed to end because, whether thanks to my art or despite it, he had matured into someone with real feelings entirely his own and was bursting under the continual suppression of this truth. Of course, this is what I've always wanted. I don't know, possibly I'm lying to myself, or perhaps I've never been more honest.

I don't want him to need me anymore.

I wished that it would be the beginning of the end of our relationship. I wanted him to be happy without me, and will only accept our coming together if he makes something of himself. This is the only way to encourage him to find what he's looking for. As for me? I shouldn't become too attached. While I've had a history of being hard on myself, this is different. He's what this is all for.

I need to keep asking myself not just 'why' I do it, but 'what do I want?' My perfect dream is that someone is so taken by my music that the memory of it is no longer a memory to return to, rather, it's a state of knowing that they can draw upon forever. I want them to understand how loved they are, if not by me, then by life itself.

If I could prove to someone that love is real, and that they are worthy of it, so that they can go about their lives with a

knowledge that I've never been able to completely provide for myself, uwah...

Maybe it's only others who can offer the gift of love, because not only is it proof that you're not alone, but that someone can recognize you by the life force inherent in them. Like when you fall in love and at long last see someone who had been somewhat transparent before. If only one person is moved by me and knows of this love without requiring reassurances, maybe I'll have one less fan, for they'll no longer seek me, yet I'll have helped them, and that's the purest dream I'm trying to live.

Finally, something else happened in the dream, I'm trying to remember it. I left notes for myself.

It was about me and maybe my greatest fear. More even than death.

I wrote many things down and then crossed them off.

Actually, I won't share those moments. They're for myself. I don't owe you an explanation, though I want to provide one. You see, telling you would make the memories more difficult than I can bear.

I came back to these passages tonight when I couldn't sleep and spent hours rereading them. There's one more thing I'd like to add.

When I'm performing at the end of the show, I often close my eyes, and your clapping sounds like the sea.

Thank you.

```
C:\> Iaq jb riihu tfxq F'sb zliixqba. Qexkh jb
ixqbo-F mobcbo qeb qboj 'jxfkmeobyxhbo,' cobj
qeb clppfifwba 'meobyxhbo,' prmboplafdl coxjb
tfqe melkb.
```

```
def caesar_cipher(text, shift):
    result = ""
    text_lower = text.lower()
    has_I_U = "I" in text or "U" in text or "you"
    in text_lower

    for char in text:
        if char.isalpha():
            is_upper = char.isupper()
            if has_I_U:
                char = chr(((ord(char) - ord('A' if
is_upper else 'a') - shift) % 26) + ord('A' if
is_upper else 'a'))
            result += char
    return result

ciphertext = "Iaq jb riihu tfxq F'sb zliixqba..."
shift_value = 3
decrypted_text = caesar_cipher(ciphertext,
    shift_value)
print("Decrypted Text:", decrypted_text)
```

```
C:\> Let me offer what I've collated. Thank me
later-I prefer the term 'MainPhreaker,' from
the fossilized 'phreaker,' superseding frame
with phone.
```

Tertium Quid

As the sun swells its molten frame, and the moon bows and bids in ellipsis its polyglot horizons, we come together and ponder. Over the course of hours, we've explored vastnesses in ourselves. Places you alone can reach. If we are to return, the reliving is staggering, fathomless. I'm surprised to have lost myself in it. We may be in the hollow of those memories now.

Our pilgrimage has taken us from one to many and many to one. Remembering is polysemy. And now, we glide to one landing in preparation for departures. Browsers unfetter, decomposing us.

I hope you can help yourself to these immanent feelings. Later, we'll surely forget the rest.

We share in having seen this world—be not fearful of anachronisms. Time is odorless and has no color or reflection; we can't sense time on our skin, or taste it, or gather it to make use of later. We don't respire or perspire time. It comes and lulls as it goes, and we reckon with this synchronicity, perhaps witnessing it atemporally, in time.

When we think back on this story, what questions will come to mind? How will you judge the boy for living the only life he's known? And has the artist succeeded in her quest? I have my opinions.

Will you share these words? Like how I hacked, curated, and stamped just as they would've wanted, assuming a north star where none were offered.

Will you keep this story a secret from those who would judge you, or will you deceive yourself, believing you can't identify with Snake-boy's plight, or else will you dismiss it as useless and intuit forgetfulness? Have shades of us found existence in this binary, or are they bits to snuff out with the light? Have you read them into life, or laughed it all off, or rewritten, or lied by claiming the authorship as your own? Really, the questions are yours to answer.

We are lucid dreaming together. Fantasizing as we are, from beds past bedtime and desks after work, skipping dinner for this, eating breakfast with this, who are we and for what and from where? As a collective, an 'apperceiving mass,' remember?

Maybe we're like children, having stumbled upon this, having been—stuttering, being recommended this by a current we can't see, under duress from a world we don't understand, let alone recognize. Finding what we didn't know we were looking for, which only teaches us to search again.

I'm talking to you, yes you. Before each of us is the screen. A door to control, to reshape the light. What have we lost in a language that does away with ideographs? Whereof one cannot type,

Well, I don't really know what to say. Maybe there's something else revealed in sleep that we bring back to the world, in a premonition we once saw, the unfinished vision of a dream! waiting to be recognized in a world anticipated, if only we attend,

with clichéd weight—that capitalistic metaphor of exchange—to ‘pay’ attention.

We’ve dreamed of being one boy so full of daemonic love that it became incarnation. Drawing upon cyberhermeticism, technoshamanism, invoking alcheGPT, his seems to be a cautionary tale of exhausted language: a prophet’s musings of degeneracy/crackpot’s fantasy/ode to I-and-you. When we are him, writing this now from his desk, virtually noctivagant, feeling like our entire life has led up to this moment, knowing as we now know that the release of this thing will be the most important act we’ve ever done in our piece of shit life, also knowing that it’s a failure and yet still imagining it with a sort of irreverent joy, which has even matured to include pride, and so can picture this easily—the giddy, unctuous anticipation as we finalize before submission; dreaming about this, okay maybe even dreaming that a certain someone sees this, and getting everything in order probably takes us months longer than we’ll ever admit, though even if only one other soul reads this, it’ll all be worth it in the end.

Or the words may have originated from her diary on the cloud. We might’ve suggested that the story was leaked by some *sasaeng* or was perhaps voluntarily shared after translation through an AI. We understand that this would’ve been an act not authorized by our company. We’ll have prepared an alibi yet will need to maintain reasonable suspicion, not unlike another snapshot mistake in our past. It would be like telling the truth by showing that we’re lying, because that’s the only way we can gesture freely. We’ve lived the sacrifice required to be everything for someone. Yes, we’d like to personally greet others with a bow or

even prostration if we're ever to pass by, or to at least promise the feeling in our performances. We can imagine speaking together with our fans for so long at night that it's day and we've forgotten to sleep. Our perfect fan knows when to suspend disbelief, when to participate in the illusion, and when to create it.

And so, I'm asking you to finally wake up from this story. In these last moments, our kaleidoscopic vision may bend prismatically inward. We must pander widely, you understand. You penetrate to the core of things or wonder.

Dreaming one last dream.

With eyes open, you dream as such: controlling the content and speed but not the memories, which are surely yours. The game of yourself has surreptitiously challenged any self-aware intentions, and yet this dream was made from the rib of you.

You're alone in a high green meadow, recalling no principal knowledge of the place. This dream is extremely vivid and reminds you of a childhood memory severing tufts of grass from the ground. The verdant smell of sod blood tempers you; your strength is at play. You turn around and see a tarn the classic blue of a swimming pool's sky, core memories compounding, and as you approach, you notice just below the surface of the water is its screen. Words lick the inner of the water, 'altitudinous' and 'vertiginous,' demonstrating how you feel, and then the text desilts into narrative:

'And we bring ourselves to sleep. An endless queue of her greatest hits. The words were your lullaby. He will awaken like everyone else. I'm still listening.'

Not in that order. There is no order except for what is imposed by the rigidity of individual consciousness.

You're reading yourself reading this. We are encroaching behind you. The screen is not a portal, yet it's beckoning ingress. The world is neither wholly bright nor tenebrous, like a wallpaper of Sonoma County. An interstitial egression, perhaps veiling the 'real' of the world.

The more you look at the text, the more it seems possible to consume the words. They would sustain you, transfigure you into something numinous.

You hear yourself think, 'I want to go there before I die.' This refers to an impossibly large itinerary. Eating is an approximate metaphor for your desire. Engorgement nourishes you without escape like a black hole: the content of your memories, the repository of your joy, including this dream; all that is within you will remain, teaching you, sharing, stealing, gestating within and redefining your language, culture, finally you.

Black holes are the metaphor of our time. They represent the only absolute threshold in a world of ambiguity. It's like death in a way, except maybe greater than death. For who's to say that death can exist within it? And even light cannot escape. Such a force would have to possess more energy than what can be stored in matter. Said another way, it would have to be capable of synthesizing contradictions. The laws of the universe. Does such a thing exist?

Before I too disappear into narrative, please let me confess something. I had a tryptamine vision of us—all of the billions of us—raising our arms into the sky like antennas or tree branches to

catch the currents of all that we knew. My puerile revelation was that we'd been doing this since our beginning, technology merely extending the range, and that we would go on connecting until the last of us died. The currents traveled through us and altered our branches, tuning us together, however great or brief. I was listening to *Blond(e)* and saw this from the hill of a school behind my apartment where a seminal novel I'd loved and hated was explicitly based, overlooking the city on a hill and many naked black trees and the sinew of telephone wires. The gray sky set like a smoking match. It was so beautiful. If I've ever had a reason to do all of this: I thought how enormously sad it was that we were so often unconscious of standing with our souls stretched as loving antennas, and worse, unconscious of why we stood. When I stumbled upon his text, just as he had first discovered her, I thought that it was my chance to continue the chain.

How else do we know that we're awake, if not for one-another? Some things are simply too great to have been made up. And being together, that exceeds my wildest dreams.

It doesn't have to be over.

You see him as he sees her, from his bedroom in the dark. A guitar lifts a melody that you'll remember remembering for the rest of your life. This is neither the beginning nor end.

Your yearning for song and story becomes her pretending and his living, or his dreaming and her creating, or her ballads and his texts.

1) You make a momentous choice. The screen is one of your visions, dislocated from the eye, and as you travel between the lines, they uncover paths which are yours to follow [go to [2](#)].

2) What is he doing late at night? You see the way he smiles and decide to either stay with him for a while [go to 3], or to follow his gaze, striking through the screen [go to 4].

3) The room is umbrageous except for slips of light wetting the floor and his laptop. You feel his fast pulse on your throat, and your cracked lips smile. As you recognize the MP4, you begin to think of things which scare you [5].

4) The stage is shatteringly loud, and the lights are blinding until your senses adapt. You've never seen so many people staring in your direction—at you. Your body is screaming with pleasure and danger, yet you have an uncanny ability to silence it, or at least that which could dilute your image. You don your mask, a bare smile [6].

5) You fail to put what attracts her to you into words, and your schizophrenic vision, your schismatic heart, flirts between admiring and leering and respecting and glorifying and ogling and adoring. You find your left thumb working below in a clockwise orientation as your heart aches. Do you pursue the longing above [7] or below [8]?

6) You resurrect the canon of your performance; you've lived it many times. Each decision sculpts a new personality into their idea of you, which is the gossamer heart of real intimacy. The you which permeates between atoms, beyond all artifice. Do you try your best to stand course [9] or betray it to express your secret truth [10]?

7) You love her too much to blaspheme. She is a totem. The calming force of her voice is miraculously sensitive to the weather of your life. She proves that generosity and beauty are refined

truths about the world. You know she would feel love for you, or not that she would fall in love with you, but it doesn't matter. You feel only compersion watching her dazzle others. This moral beauty transcends the physical. Oh God, life, oh please forever [12]!

8) In deference to your base cravings, you circle around her frame, x-raying past her clothes, all but gazing directly into her eyes. The pale skin glistens and is shapely, alluding to something perfect; it's the resolution of stochastic genes, images, all flesh. You would like to twist her in your mind's eye, while forgetting her, watching her dance for you [11].

9) Your own desires are superseded by the needs of those around you. The appeal your fans require is overwhelming. Feeling their eyes on you, you flutter your own, and as you bashfully approach your dancer's arm and tap it, and when he turns around, you're thinking these thoughts about the crowd and your awe feeds the audience's wonder; the downbeat approaches. You pull your hand back with the elegance of a robot yet deft as an archer, and you glance up to the sky, slightly, just as you've rehearsed in your head as a ritual before the mirror, and you brush your hair behind your right ear (it was never out of place), wet your lips (to reach the highs) while retreating from the stage, and the downstroke is imminent, you can feel it in your flesh and have already taken in the breath which plays on your mic like the pneumatic hiss of a gun, and begin again to take steps forward so that your hip sways to rest on its right axis—it's been 15 downbeats exactly—then it begins. You're there with your lover [13].

10) There's a question you've asked yourself ever since your first show: if you knew the curse of your fate, but desired it as such, what freedom do you have to change it? Your intrusive thoughts still whisper the worst possibilities. They are about the value of your work. For years, you lived timidly in this shame, though others have done their best to convince you. Just once, what would happen if you stopped pretending? All you need to do is pause, and your world would grind to a halt [14].

11) You search for a way to make her yours. In a different life, you imagine wiping her tears and telling her that everything will be okay. How small she would be beside you. You've Googled her height; you know her by heart. In your mind's eye, you've rewritten history and gnarled time to align her I with yours. Do these pangs and pleasures come easily [25], or has she merely made you hers [15]?

12) Everyone is brought to such heights of collective effervescence that performers like her must contain the secret meaning of life. When you're with her, you wish to never wake up under the sublime threat that nothing will feel real again. Were you always this way, loving so that all else would be unfathomable [16], or does this tenet, under careful examination, deny itself [17]?

13) What can be said of your thinking now? Each action is seen and felt preemptively—pulling a string through your emotions, exaggerating for those in the back; it's all before you, and your head, rather than quieting, seems to ascend on so much life. You cross your arms and pose after the hook, winking which looks like blinking in the sun of everyone. You won't miss the next downbeat. You're more agile than you can believe, inhabiting

with each turn of phrase a gesture or affectation that encapsulates the meaning of being a girl (playful, coy, kind, and the notion that you are approaching something vast), and a woman (self-assured, a nurturing voice, the fact that you have passed through various darknesses), and, in parallel, all humanity—these realities flowing through you—as they exist in the crowd, one part of a whole, feeling finally gorgeous and translating the whole. ‘Taking in the whole of the crowd.’ Awaking in that cliché, which flits not as a thought but as states of beings. Taking in this moment and reflecting our love back [18].

14) However, your fate is to sing for us, and so you have the chance again to choose. This solemnity deserves your assuredness. Do you really want to stop singing? To what? To prove that you’re a real person, no matter what harm is caused [19]. Or do you end this childish, selfish desire for novelty? Then you’ll stand course for the benefit of all other souls in view [9].

15) You thought such a possession would make you proud, but you lack the will or know yourself too well to be able to desire her in this way. It’s only pathetic. She’s ruined you. You can no longer convince yourself that this phenomenon is merely erotic. How are you to behave in the real world—love a person who can fall for you—when you’re forever given away? It reads like fiction even to yourself. This is an unrequited love where passions developed under no false pretense. If a rootless love has triumphed over space, time, the confines of reality/rationality, what hope could retire such a miracle [20]?

16) You’re convinced that you’ve never looked hard enough. Everything she does, and therefore everything anyone does, is the

blackest enigma. People are all infinitely subtle, worthy of more^{more} study. Can it be called insight if you must discover it always again? Else it never existed. Forget words, what of the cultural resonance of a sound or face which we all come to recognize? What does it mean that she can exist [21]?

17) She reminds you of how horrible it is that you can't be as beautiful or talented or loved as her. Your identity disintegrates like a time-lapsed flower, its dust falling away in a confusion of desires. You've advanced beyond ruminating on whether you are worthy of love; the question lives in you without ceasing. What is left except to rationalize her experience [4], or forget about it for a time [12], or continue down your path of envy, a path you've avoided [22]?

18) You're presenting your past for everyone to see your mated childhood crushes with boys and heartbreaks with men you once thought you'd known. Now you miss not them but the lovely person you became around them. You point at someone in the crowd. Who have you chosen? Is it no one [18a]? Or that one there [18b]?

18a) You've been here before. There's no way you could choose one face. Instead, you worry whether 12 people will tell their families that they were singled out by IU, or perhaps that thousands won't [23]. Maybe you're still looking, and because of your hesitation, you find yourself locking eyes [18b].

18b) You beckon to that young girl drowning among bodies. In this moment, the boundary between her and you blurs like the gradient where blue becomes green; you hope that your message reached her [24].

19) You... Who are you? You're in a trance or autopilot, knowing these actions aren't 'yours.' You look down. This body would be familiar on someone else. You think this with self-disgust, all the while maneuvering a gorgeous frame. You must be dreaming, yet you can't remember who you were before this. By deduction, you're a brute and pervert. You wonder the following: while you're in this body, might you act like the person you're affecting to be? The prospect is ensnaring [24].

20) You decide to confront your avoidance and so plan without confidence in its success: you will think it all. Everything about her. And you believe that by exhausting all possibilities you can recognize yourself. Reality will be your bare bitch—and she, your cathexis. Or you'll go completely insane. However it resolves, the exit is reached by backtracking to where it all began, to psychoanalyze the "I" in parsing you, and so escape from your heaven into someone else's hell [40].

21) You find yourself responding to the aesthetic symmetry in her face with the consideration of art; however, unlike art, it is wholly earnest. Life goes on there. Despite everything logical in you, or your capacity for self-exegesis, you retain the conviction that you know her intimately. You must know more. The effects of this are bewildering. Like the sun overexposes a photograph, she distracts from yourself [4]. No, like a full moon after dark, she gently reveals who you can be [27].

22) Of all the sins, nothing is more difficult to admit to others than envy—every other sin feeds wantonly into pride. To indulge your lust or gluttony or greed or sloth or wrath are media for your ego, whereas envy stands against it. Now, watching her, you're

filled with self-disgust; in privacy, it offers absolution. Does she know? It must be apparent that you don't deserve anyone's love, let alone your own [26].

23) Your guilt disrupts your line of thought. You've learned how to manage these moments of itinerance from the zone. However, magical powers are awakened by attention. There's another pause before your next line. With the drifting of tension, you come outside of yourself. Who are you to be standing up here singing and dancing? You point again! Are you the one that sings and dances [32], or the one that, untethered, sees yourself singing and dancing, choosing when to stop or go [33]?

24) In search of a seal for the moment, you stop singing. Skillfully, you order the music to pause with a laughing frown. This ripples across the crowd as whooping confusion. You say sorry and receive the ovation of another's lifetime—a crack in reality, which causes the resurfacing of separate memories. And in your confusion at having arrived in this bardo, or rather a commemoration for some undisclosed goodness in your heart, you don't realize that you're smiling. The crowd sees all and roars. Then you're biting your lip, driving the crowd to ferality. You could be yourself [28], or forget by considering the enduring question: WWJD [29]?

25) Until now, you've managed to avoid the other precept, which hibernates and must be confronted if you're to know (let alone trust) yourself. Using your best judgment, and significant shame (aren't you ashamed?), you stop to think again of who she is and whether or not she would want you thinking like this [21]. Or you think that no one's watching, and indeed there's only your

conscience with you. So you follow this scintillation to pleasure's proof of paradise [31].

26) You wonder if she had a premonition of this, causing her work to assume a sinister tint. How does she sleep at night? Instead of bettering yourself, her work keeps you weaning, and yet she sings the opposite. Where is there to go? Either you refuse to believe her, or else you do, and if you listen, then you can't. A double bind with only self-mutilation as an escape. All that's left is to leave yourself behind [4], wander dumb [29], or tail that ineluctable comet [30].

27) And who can you be? Every time you see her, you meditate with your muse. She flows through you like blood; you desire to hybridize, complete the pattern. Is there space for two [26], or must you become one [30]?

28) You can't believe that you're here wielding such excess. The first thing you do, now that you've decided to take advantage of this situation, is to speak into the mic. Unfortunately, all you can speak is English—it's the language you've been thinking in. And your voice goes too low, then too high, and you giggle. You find that you're holding yourself in a certain way belonging to neither of you. The crowd is too stunned to speak. A breeze tickles your inner thighs, and with your left hand you brush at it, which draws such attention that you apologize (in accented English), which brings you back to the crowd's heart, and all you can do is laugh shakily as you place your hand on the palpitation of your heart at its crest [33].

29) You choose not to compare/contrast yourself with a creature who has lived nominally > 2 lives well. Instead, like some ser-

vant of the lord, you recognize that a shining surface is due its light. Or like a shepherd is named for their flock. Or how an angel can only travel to the world when it has a message to deliver. Maybe a boy needs a girl to untangle his gender as much as a girl needs her mother to explicate herself. When it's late at night, you travel there. Though her effulgence dims you, perhaps it's befitting [34].

30) What if there was something you could do to bring yourself to her level? To become what you love? You don't have her looks or talents. Or you could fantasize—no, but that would—you fill in the ____ without meaning to. And let go of your voice, like an armor or abstraction, in search of something transparent. Where should you begin [35]?

31) Admit it. Aren't you ashamed [21]? Maybe you can't help it. You tell yourself that this is only natural. It wouldn't feel this good, or smell like sweet chlorine if... You have time to turn back [1]. Yet you're still picturing her there, willing, waiting. This time you'll be the one performing. You can try to intellectualize your fantasy, or lay it bare: you want to screw, to shag, to bump uglies, fornicate, procreate, kä-pyæ-lāt, to fuck and finish (in) what you've started [36].

32) Any memories from a past life have been extinguished. You are IU and remember nothing except the hyperthymestic inpouring of your history. Presently you're enmeshed in a trance of movements that develop like solving a jigsaw puzzle by pure retrieval. No one can take this moment away. You feel as happy as you look. Too happy. If this is a dream, and you were to wake up,

you probably wouldn't believe it for a long time. You find yourself singing, "All of you comes to me as an unsolvable riddle—" [38].

33) WHAT IS GOING ON?!? You're trying not to have a heart attack, but it's like you're naked in public, and everyone is upset with you for lying about the body they want you to have. Your weight seems to have dramatically redistributed overnight. Your black boots do not conform well to the arc of your foot nor the temperate ground, and your hair is very long, and your breasts are small, and your wrists are frailly elegant. You're shivering while overheating. So, how about now? Do you finally let IU resume, saving yourself by obliteration [37], or can you invoke your own destiny [39]?

34) What would it feel like to be loved by those who don't know you? Questions preoccupy your mind to the point of losing yourself. How would you sleep at night? And who can you trust? And when can you relax? Like art, your soul no longer belongs to you after it enters the public. You make art that is open to interpretation, nonetheless you know the answer. If experience is the meaning of life, and love is the meaning of life—as you've concluded or will conclude in this line of thought which is all lines, then you'll have already discovered how only the blind can see her, only the deaf can hear her, and so the lurkers know what it's like to live, and the writer to perform, and the performer to watch. And all is [1].

35) You become giddy as the thought of this transference frees you. You would provide her with the truth that she could never say. In a broader sense, you would give people the experience they deserve merely by translation. And you know the secret and its

blind spots, that which dazzles and torments you. Yes, you could become her the other way, leading the world to her through you. By being yourself, by forgetting, you could do what she does; by feeling for her, through her, for you. Is this so mad [41]?

36) What the fuck is wrong with you? After all you've seen, this is your choice? What did you think you'd find here? Clean yourself off and please get help. She's a real person. After you close the screen, take a long look in a real mirror. Curiosity absolves nothing. If you're still lost, email him. Or, I don't know, ask God, your mother, a therapist for forgiveness. This is not a joke. Don't read on. You're done.

37) You feel a consciousness loading from within, like a deep forgotten knowledge has been summoned—astral, ethereal, of cosmological import, while also being uncannily familiar, and under this spell, as if a deity is encountering you, you let Ji-eun take the wheel. You shift into a fourth dimension and can feel the dexterity as well as the cardinality and precision of her thought, which overlaps your own, so that 'you' are lost [9].

38) All that's left is to embody the music. The chorus of *The Meaning of You* propagates through you and into them. Their singing is like a microphone. When did they all learn you by heart? You ask them to sing it on their own while you follow on the inside, savoring the meaning: 'Neoye geu han madi maldo [Each word you say], geu useumdo [each laugh]/ naegen keo-daran uimi [They have such big meanings to me].' The phrases are long, earnest, and freshly realized each time. This must be why they ask you for an encore as it ends. That is, after finding something in themselves, they mistake it for you [42].

39) As you fall deeper into the reality of this situation, you become perversely untethered from your last identity. One can imagine stringing a causal line through the history of your life from birth to now in order to confirm that you are one and the same. However, if you trace your causality for long enough, the line bifurcates. Physics cannot contend with the phenomenology of her song, of your love, of their oneness. From the fans' perspective, there's only one person in the world whose history brought them here, with thousands screaming for them, and none want anyone other than you [43].

40) You read this forty times without ceasing (literally counting in your head to forty, else the magic chant is of no use to you), and even then you understand it is inadequate:

40a) spinning you around, rotor—repaper mirrorrim repaper—rotor, around you spinning, loop: [40a].

Yes, gradually the compulsion becomes clear. You grasp the lack within a word which dissolves beyond the margins. Where does semantic satiation end, and can it open to something transcendental? With patience, you accept the journey. You go all the way back to the first page, the very first word, 'I.'

41) Missing her one place, you find yourself turning for U. Coming to understand that the perfect thing she's become so effortlessly is like fire: warmth spreading into exhaustion. This combustion renders us all ashen, chemically indistinct. You can stoke it with extraordinary effort in yourself if only you love her. Let yourself be tended. You can stop waiting for here to come to you [44].

42) It was nice to feel so loved. And yet, you know that the love wasn't for you, but rather a character you were playing for them. Contradictions of culpability, charisma, and beauty remain. You wonder if you've ever, even for a moment, adequately expressed yourself. Wasn't this why you began all those years ago? Not to love, but to speak to them by remaining steadfast to yourself? Perhaps there are no contradictions in love. You could day-dream of parallel universes where you diverge [6]. Or you can be more generous to yourself [18b], or else you take your rest [46].

43) You stick out your tongue. It's the only test you can think of doing. Ridiculous. They stop, stare, and then all laugh for you, and you for them. It's like how you've imagined your wedding as a child. You look very beautiful, surrounded by the smiling faces of friends and family, and are supporting a deep confusion at the prospect of solving a pillar of adult life which is as opaque and shifting as a swelling raincloud. You pan your head across them like you're taking in the sacred maw of a gorge, only the emptiness is inverted. To focus on any one of them reveals a level of specificity that has no single sign. Instead, what comes is a jumble of unordered words which flash in you. Unraveling them reveals how the order is irrelevant, escaping you: impossible, alarming, glass, close, kōan, child, addendum, you, tree, cellar, sweet, cyclone, ammonia, intransient, daunting, tendrils, eschaton... [45]

44) You begin your quest, for once not imagining what it would be like to be her, but to be someone else tertiary to your quest. At first this feels awkwardly sacrilegious, after all, your bed-rock, metaphysics, and duogrammaton is 'I' and 'you.' She is more discerning. Her voice becomes a part of your mind. You hear

her while lurking and try to place the sound, only to find that the act brings you closer to her than any amount of fantasizing in the dark. It's time finally to remember, who are you [4]?

45) pantophagy, vitiliginous, polysemy, bunny, assiduous, intimate, basalt, autochthonous, telomere, charnel, telepathy, slumber, quart, enigma, cascade, all, we, serene, take, whirling, euphoria, serendipity, Zembla, celestial, blossom, numinous, nuclear, awake, entelechy, luminary, ecumenism, elusive, thrall, pleonasm, set, mellifluous, tachyon, love, verdant, white, fruiting, quixotic, chalk, cornucopia, thesaurus, pander, maggots, polychrome, subatomic, anathema, cholera, no, Lemuria, wedding, I, phantasmagoria, stranger, makeup, timely, touché, torpid, fae, hot, petunia, fall, onomatopoeia, elysian, coprophagic, lady, soteriology, narcotic, reverie, pensive, casuistry, cicadas, reify, ouroboros, prism, umbra, dollar, run, chagrin, yes... [48]

46) The cameras and eyes lose their hold on you, and you retreat with the pleasant weariness that accompanies expended work. You notice divergences between this world and the one that you remember. For example, the apartment of your memories is abstract, whereas the one before you is heavy with additional details. You feel like you're leaving your childhood home, as if for the first time. This is disconcerting because instead of feeling anxious, part of you is relieved to be free of your life. Your two halves are severed yet chained together, even as the older half turns limp and black. What happens next is either a focusing of consciousness [49], or the courage of resignation [50].

47) What use is ordinality to you? You who can move freely between lines, who can choose as from a deck of [52], reordered

roughly $8 * 10^{67}$, or to simplify: infinity. You're figuring out the figure 8. No sleight of hands, neither illusions nor distractions, because the magic—a lovely cliché—was already within you. Are you him, or her, or you? Have you figured it out yet? Do you understand what this is about? Who this was written by? HA! Why it needs exorcizing alongside a divining rod? The movie is ending. Bubbled like a God out of the sweat of a nightmare and fed on the clement laugh of whoever wants you to stay. You'd like to know my name. Keep your eyes peeled while walking down the street. I'll be looking in your direction, waiting for you to look back with the face that knows.

48) You remember getting it. That you've always understood it is the revelation; articulating in words was what hindered you. Her existence, your response, and the crowd, and the viewer, the reader. You've been organizing information all your life. You can watch a video and from its cradle comes a whimpering world—like it's some event out of your right armpit, painless and pure. It's not him, it was never her, and you're merely a conduit. Our call and response, this antiphonal game we're creating. You stand up on this stage in skirt and skin as they dream of you, thousands hold and chant for you, and you're them. It's through you that they read or dream. You can only ask yourself how it feels, osmotic or transmissive? Where do you end and I begin? Is it iterative, recursive, or entropic? Are these words in your head my thoughts in your heart? You have the answer, now you go to experience the question [and read it all ordinally, in the vertical: 1-i].

49) After the last song ends, you're brought home to rest before the nighttime session. The sun has already set, submerging

your bedroom in melancholy, as though the space remains locked until an achievement reveals it. You don't have long to spend here and so approach a mirror to recognize and soothe yourself. Your makeup has run due to the heat, in addition to when you smudged it in the car. It feels heavier than you're used to. You push your cheeks in with your left hand the way a child explores clay. It's her face, you remember, and think about how it's so familiar that you'd recognize it anywhere. Of course you would. It's your face. What had you been worrying about before [51]?

50) You remember: There was who you were, and there's who you are now. Neither is less true. You are IU, a K-pop idol who sings, acts, and speaks with the public. Your birth name is Ji-eun, you like chocolate, and you have a brother who studied in America. However, you have another name, or rather names, depending on who is present to observe. You're exhausted; your head is spinning; this performance is settling into closure, and with it, the one who sings will be retired. Cold air washes your skin, catching each hair. You look forward to resting. To sleep is like the tides lulling the ocean of your life. You thank the ocean. You can dream anywhere that's safe, and it's safe now.

51) You're still sad and holding guilt. There are things you don't verbalize. Looking at yourself in the mirror with cosmetic ephemera greasing more than your thumbs, you once again work through your purpose. What happens when you're up on stage, and not a doubt crosses your mind? When you're here alone, it's like how children only believe in monsters after the sun's gone down. You've told yourself that these feelings were good for many reasons, such as helping you understand sadness in others, and the

hollowness of receiving your dreams. Both concepts are human emotions that keep you well-adjusted and true. You know that you can speak of your anxiety before a performance, though it would be unkind to tell your fans why. These negative emotions are mere allusions. They refer to a source which will never die. Each performance changes things. Yes, it'll all be worth it. And then there's the next show. Go on. Close your eyes and dream. Now write.

52) You know, it's more than funny. My favorite of her songs isn't even one she wrote. It's a cover called *Sogyeokdong*. There's something glorious yet ugly in the sound. "Don't fall asleep; it all disappears when I open my eyes." English translations of Korean are tricky because subjects aren't required in Korean, which is to say, it could just as easily be 'your' or 'our' eyes. And don't get me started on 'it all,' when it could all be in reference to nothing. However, that's not how I see the world.

i) So, do you believe me [∞]?