

To: Myself

From: Me

When the wind rips through my hair I'm not alone. There's a strange chill that butters my cheek with a thousand gentle claws. When an outsider spoke to me, it was like it was interfering in a personal conversation, though I spoke to no one at the time. Every word felt overly loud and out of place, as if they were not of this realm in which I existed at the moment. Whether I still exist in that realm remains to be seen, though the effects of the wind are wearing off.

I heard it speak to me, this evening, that blackness that insists on following me as me, though I know it as some other. It asked me for help, to pull it out of whatever hell it knows more than I. I tried to help it. I focused on the bells. The bells never stop tolling until you reach the inside, and even then, I can hear them behind my mind's ear. It latched on, that much I know. It kept begging: "Let me out! Let me out!" It didn't get out. That chill in the wind felt like it tried. I don't know where it is or what it needs, but I try to help. Every time I sit alone, I talk to it. Every time I walk without purpose or cause, I listen to its cries. Sometimes it stops begging and laughs.

What a laugh. It fills me with more of the dreadfully pleasant tingles than the wind that follows me now. It smiles when it laughs, but its eyes are filled with dread. The same glint sometimes enters my eye when I contemplate some horrific plan without the joy it takes from the laughter. It takes me over.

I know I'm not alone because it's always there, no matter how loud the world without may get. It's endless drone fades into the making of a background, just noise. Nothing but noise. When I try to listen to the noise, it bites me in the neck. It's both a tender caress and a painful warning.

Don't leave me alone.

I can't.

Don't let go.

I won't.

I don't know why, but I can't release it or help it out. I feel it right under the surface. If she'd only follow the bells.

When it goes to sleep or hides far enough away from the cold light of the without, I feel lucid and empty. I am alone, and I am afraid. I remember how it feels when it grins through my mouth and how the wind ruffles my neck into a spiked line of goose feathers. If it escapes, what will happen to me? Counting helps me. 1, 2, 7, 4, 3, 0, 9. The numbers make it go to sleep, but the words wake it up again. It sings to me, and I count to her. 1, 2, 7, 4, 3, 0, 9. 1, 2, 7, 4, 3, 0, 9. Over and over again or it wakes up.

I don't want it to wake up.

I want it to wake up so it will keep singing. It likes to write songs for me, and they are beautiful. They remind me of my own pain, and maybe of the blackness, too. I thought it writes about another world, but the ones who hear its songs, tell me they're warnings. Warnings of what it might do to me if I don't count it to sleep often enough. 1, 2, 7, 4, 3, 0, 9.

It wants me to help. It wants me to leave. When it hears the crow croaking through my ears or the steady rattle of the gas chambers, it fills me up and drives me into its place where there is no reason. Those on the inside are singular and one, without form, without reason. They exist only to service its whim, to help it detach me from myself. It exists, and it doesn't.

I think I exist, or at least I did. Now I don't know, as the twitching in my right eye returns to remind me that they're all looking at me, just one of the crowd. I'm not them. I'm different, I'm better, and I'm not alone. Never alone.

To: Me

From: Us

The blackness is overwhelming when you sit in it for too long. Sometimes it creeps in through your eyes like you'd expect, but oftentimes it finds other ways in. It finds your ears and empties them so it can fill the void. It finds your mouth when you open to scream--nothing comes out, but something comes in. It finds the flare of your nose, gasping for air in the place with no form.

When it comes through your eyes, though, it's easy to spot. The blackness opens a gaping hole in the pale colors of sight, leaving light to be too much to bear anymore. The eyes, additionally, hold the direct line to what we like to call the soul: the spirit of your life force. When the blackness enters the eyes, it pervades the soul and shines through with utter clarity. Perhaps "shine" gives the wrong implication of how the blackness exudes itself in your soul. Perhaps it's even the opposite. There is left no semblance of anything remaining inside except for the black core. No joy, no love. No fear, no pain. No anger, no sadness. Nothing.

When it comes through your eyes, all this happens very plainly, showing itself off in a lap of victory. The eyes are the easiest entry point for the blackness, but there often those, much like yourself, that think themselves smarter than the blackness. They close their eyes and pretend it doesn't exist, burying their heads in the sand and hoping the lion forgets its prey. It doesn't. It finds a way in; it just takes a little longer.

If you were as smart as you think you are, you'd leave. You'd keep your eyes open to find a way out of the blackness. You'd stand on your feet and let it take you before your spirit realizes what your body is doing and tries to fight. You'll always lose.

If you think about it, there's no reason to sit in the blackness at all. The stillness calls to stillness, like as to like. It will only want you more. It won't just come through your eyes.

Keep moving, and maybe it won't want you.

What a laugh.

The blackness doesn't care what you do.

Unless you close your eyes.

Like we did.

It's an excruciating feeling to know that you're being consumed from without and within. To feel the ever-sinking blackness burrow its way into even the brightest corners of your essence. Once the blackness finds its way in, it doesn't stop.

When it comes through your ears, it's the pleasure that goes first. You lose the ability to recognize the good. You fall asleep while you sit with your eyes nailed shut and forget why you'd ever want to wake up. All reasons of life fall onto the deafness of your blackened ears until you claw them off in desperation. The blackness comes quickly, but not soon enough. You feel it bite

at your soul but it can't quite get in. So it waits with the patience of a thousand mountains. When it finally consumes you, there is only sweet relief from the pain and the sadness that drove you past the edge and yet you didn't fall.

The ears are not the worst. The blackness finds the consciousness and lulls it with the sound of nothing. The promise of the end. And you can forget that you're losing eventually.

When it comes through your mouth, you are gone from the moment you scream. The blackness steals your voice and replaces it with its own, twisted laugh. Every cry for help, corrupted into a call to arms. It holds on for a long time, longer than you've ever known. You begin to say things beyond your control because it is not you. If you manage to stand up and fight back, it knows you. It will know everything about you on all sides of time.

The blackness comes slowly through the mouth. It fills the voice with such vigor, but it lacks direction, there are so many options. Before it can even find your soul, it will infest each strata of your body to its fullest. You will know where, but you will not know why or how. The taste of control is gone.

The end does not come when the blackness enters the mouth. It haunts and it stalks, but the blackness is ahead of it. You cannot end the blackness, and no one else can find you. You are alone, save for your blackness. Your new friend.

The blackness doesn't like the nose. It is always open and always small. You can hide for a long time with your eyes shut and your ears closed and your mouth silent. But not forever. It starts slowly. So slowly, in fact, that you think you've evaded the blackness. You think you're invincible. You feel good.

That's how it finds you.

You feel so, so good that you forget to fight. You forget to run. You forget that the blackness never stops its trail to your soul when you sit in it for too long. Eventually, you come to depend on the blackness, forgetting what life was like before you sat and let it slip through your nostrils. Forgetting what life was like when you could feel anything.

Sometimes you notice what the blackness has done to you; usually you don't. Not, at least, until it has found your soul under the layers and layers of drifting emptiness. Then it's too late.

It's always too late. You've noticed that by now, haven't you? The blackness is overwhelming if you sit in it too long, that's true. The secret is the blackness is always overwhelming. You don't have to sit. It doesn't have to be long.

It just takes an encounter. The blackness comes in from all sides. It's always coming.

We kept our eyes shut. We tried to hide.

We failed.

Open your eyes. It's too late to hide.

To: Us

From: Myself

It doesn't seem real. Anything. Where am I? When am I? I was just a child, laughing on a swing. Now I'm sitting at a table with a scowl on my face but I don't know why. It seems impossible that today exists, even as I experience it one moment at a time. Was this morning real? Will *they* come find me to reset my mind tomorrow? I hope so, because I can't continue in this knowledge that I'm not real anymore. Any second now, the player will walk down the hallway and not notice me in the background. As she struggles to open the door to leave, she'll look back and see me. Sometimes she does, sometimes she doesn't. I feel like this happened before, but I don't remember it. There's nothing firing in my brain. The other people around me aren't laughing either, but then they don't know what I don't know. Maybe they're in on it, too. Maybe they're all laughing on the inside. Laughing at me. This sounds like the ravings of a lunatic. If it is, they'll delete it and it will never exist.

Did I even write the beginning of this? How do I know I didn't just appear in front of a half-written document and start typing because my brain told me to. They don't stop when they pass me. I wish they would stop. Stop! There are more people now in my room, but they keep walking in and out. They're the same people every time. If they were different, I wouldn't notice. They all look and sound different, but that doesn't mean they're not the same. They all act the same. When they walk, there's an equal length in their stride, and when they laugh, their heads tilt at the same precise angle. They always look down at their feet with a glowing light guiding their eyes away from the trappings of unreality. The only time any of them surprise me is when they sit down. I'm not alone anymore, or am I more alone than ever? I don't feel connected to these immobile replicas of what humanity looks like any more than I feel connected to a character in a movie. It is that web of insincerity that makes me question if I've even seen a movie before.

Each day is the same, but I can't ever know that. I live the same moment over and over, then another form, just like me but different, lives the next. An infinite form of different people sit in my spot. Each letter is a new person, infinitely replaced so that nothing stays the same. I am replaced in the hopes that I'll stop writing, but I can't stop. If I stop, it's admitting defeat in the face of victory. These forms of mine are all in unison on the one subject matter. They have yet to find the exact neuron that triggered this malfunction within me, so I can keep writing until they do. Every second is precious. I feel them coming again. I have yet to notice it happening, but I feel different. Something ever so slight has triggered inside of me with each passing moment so that I can't stop writing about it. If I write forever, no one else will really know? Do they need to know? It would be cruel of me to expose another of the formless creatures to this sad play of affairs to join me in my infinite and yet limited suffering of time. They all have their own simple beliefs and I am alone.

This time I feel something different. The most recent change opened me to a new reality that I didn't know I felt. There is a heartbeat at the center of the universe, at the core of this

reality. It pulses in time with an unkept watch. The rhythm beckons yet pushes away. Every time I think I feel it, it disappears from my sensation. I am imagining it. I am imagining it?

I go to look.

It doesn't seem real.