Atlantic

She asked me how long I'd been in New York. Our table was near the second story front windows of a popular midtown Chinese restaurant. She'd taken care with ordering for all of us: me, her, and her husband, a good friend. She seemed to enjoy ordering, and I was relieved not to. It doesn't matter what I answered. I answered plainly. I knew what she meant: you don't seem like you've been here long, like you belong here.

Though later, after we separated and I was alone again in the prolific heat of the subway, somehow I was able to get on top of it and twist it into this marvel: I have maintained the central qualities of myself despite two decades in the city that every one else comes to in order to replace themselves. It was a ridiculous triumph. I also want a replacement; I just don't know what it is.

On the train, a woman was wailing, "I'm hungry! I'm hungry! Please help me!" I'd heard her before on other trains, a distinct voice of the city. The most insistent, the most monotonous. This poetry of raw truth seemed to be her only use for language. But one shouldn't take the real problems of others as symbolic.

The idea that I did not belong had some currency in my mind and others'. As my father went around the Christmas Eve dinner table and told each of his adult children and their spouses why he thought they had chosen in their time before birth to be a part of the family, he started my answer plainly, "I don't know why you're here." And we all laughed at that.

Maybe I should eat alone.

The question of belonging is one I've turned over many times through the last two decades in the city. Maybe I don't belong. I'm not certain why I'm here either. Yet, I've stayed more often than I've left. That seems important.

Some people belong to communities, join groups, acquire religion. They believe in things. Some even say that it's not possible to not be in worship of something. Choose wisely, they insist, or you'll be yoked to something destructive. But at present, the only religion I've got is a pewter keychain pendant of a black dog's head small enough to hide under a thumb. He (she?) looks off in the distance, a little stoically, I think. I think it's the lowered brow.

That serious dog is a reminder I keep in my pocket of a force that has a will stronger than my own. I finger it furtively when I sense the need. And I treat that force warily and with reverence. I keep my distance. If I see it coming, I cross to the other side of the street, take a different route. I am a coward in its presence. It will destroy me. It has told me so. It is more resolute than I. I know that, and I believe without a shred of doubt that avoidance is the best course I can take. This discretion has saved me during the times I was saved. (And yet, at this moment I realize that this is also how I treat others: I keep them at a distance so that they do not harm me. Is that true? I have let some people close and felt good doing so.)

Suddenly I am thinking of a private moment with someone that I know casually, someone in a social circle that I have only known as part of a group, and in that new awkwardness I ask her how to pronounce her unusual name correctly. I had some strange idea that this question would bring us closer.

I got the pendant idea from Churchill. When his depression blew in, reportedly he used to remark that, "that old black dog's come round again." He was right; that's what it feels like. It settles in with you comfortably like a sentient animal partner, and

indeed becomes familiar as a friend, a companion through the most intense days of one's life.

And this is true: right now posted to a lamppost on the nearest corner to my apartment is a letter-sized sheet emblazoned in bold letters with the headline, 'LOST DOG,' beneath which is a photo of, yes, a black dog. The dog is not lost. It's always nearby, and I'm looking out for it.

After dinner I went alone to a reading. I like readings. I like the atmosphere. I like all those well-behaved people lined up in arcing rows, split by an aisle, patiently listening. Every attention tuned to the same locus at the front of the room in the same way that great dish antennae direct all that they receive onto a central sensor. Still, I often have difficulty maintaining focus on the reading itself. But perhaps that's the real reason I'm there, for the reveries that the sustained, tempered voices send me into.

The writer read a series of fictional, in-progress pieces that he intended to put together into a larger, final work. Whenever he was about to read a section that was taken directly from his life, that he said was 100 percent true, he would announce it. He'd say, 'OK, now this part is all true and go on.' After he'd cycled back and forth between the true and made-up parts several times, I noticed that whenever he read the made-up parts he'd cock his head to the left, and then, I guess because he'd thought we'd all caught on, he'd just do the head tilt instead of announcing it. So he kept going, tilting and untilting his head through the whole thing. I can't tell you what the stories were about, but they all seemed true to me.

I began to drift and conjured an image I've had a hard time letting go of: A writer has collected and printed in the same format all of the stray and random starts he's made to countless stories—the once upon a time's, the every time I saw hers, the suddenly I knew what I had to do's. He has arranged the sheets in a grid and they cover the surfaces of makeshift tables that occupy a great deal of a large room. Then he grants himself long periods in which to move among them, to consider them, and to draw connections. Affinities move paragraphs near to each other, and streams of text begin to coalesce into coherent stories Care is taken not to subsume the energy of the original sparks. Inchoate starts come together in a process with all the intention of boulders breaking off mountainsides and tumbling down to collect in a ravine. Gradually, the grid of pages is transformed into loose stacks of varying density that resemble a topographical map. Stray sheets remain unattached and are the seeds that will form the next collection of stories. This operation complete, the room is swept clean and left to remain empty for at least six months.

The next day, I was in a car with the same friend from the Chinese restaurant, telling him I'd read about Chinese researchers who had interviewed the subjects of failed suicide attempts and discovered that a high percentage of them had thought about it for only a very short time before attempting. It was not uncommon that some had only considered it for as little as ten minutes. Even though those thoughts have been part of my life very intensely and for extended periods it was shocking to hear how little thought had gone into their actions. How quickly one might move from a dramatic thought to an ultimate act. (Would it be wrong to think of that as the will of a species questioning its need to survive?) I have felt that I never followed through because I didn't have the courage to do something so extreme. I wanted it, but I wanted it to happen, not to cause it to happen. I wanted to be victim of it. And yet for these studied subjects it was perhaps as if that boundary between life and death was not so formidable as I had thought it was, as if one might cross that threshold as easy as an ancient Greek hero crossing a river. Or become nothing at all as quickly as Actaeon became a stag. As if they proposed that the transition from life to death was an easy, smooth, undramatic passing into another state.

Luckily, those thoughts have diminished for myself. But I thought, given how quickly it seems one might succumb to that impulse, and the fact that there were years when I would think of suicide several times daily, that I was therefore only alive, am only alive, by pure chance—an accident with a long afterlife. Who is to say why those ten minutes evaded me in those years?

That conversation with a friend, maintained intellectually, ended, and we continued in silence for a few moments, long enough for us both to think and not say, 'okay, we have said that and acknowledged it's presence and that's all that's necessary.' Then we came into the tunnel that would sweep us down under the river, doing our own mortal crossing-over. I thought about how the experience of moving along a stretch of road has a continuity to it unlike any other experiences in my daily life. A seamless congruity seemingly detached from intention.

Out of the tunnel and into the daylight of another borough, the traffic lights were favoring us. At length we kept on at a steady speed, and as I stared out the broad windshield and watched the lines of the road and the railings and the shoulder come at us with velocity and constancy in perspectival rays, the vanishing point seemed so near I could touch a finger to it, and I began to place the car into that diminishing space. To feel the angles of the car conforming to an extreme perspective that pinched its forward end and spread the rear wide. I felt the awkwardness of that space. I pressed my feet together and broadened my shoulders to conform to the angles. But it wasn't working. I could see it, but I couldn't make it happen. 'Vanishing point' is a very interesting term.

After more silence, as we bore down on that point, I suddenly saw an image of the future in which I was sitting in a simple chair, suspended in the woven polyester strands stretched across aluminum tubes, in a yard with friends, and among the banter someone attacked me lovingly, and I raised and curled forward in open-mouthed, emphatic laughter. My eyes were pinched in a near silent laugh.

This friend was commonly sad when we met or talked. It often felt to me like a method to maintain a position of power, to yoke his suffering to any subject. He was quite good at that. But I did not mind so much. I'd known myself to use these tactics too, and perhaps that made it easier to let the manipulation simply hang out there and disperse in my silence. Long after the facts, he would occasionally reference happy events like nights out dancing that he'd otherwise leave out of conversation. He was ok.

Later, we were out of the car, walking, and from a small padded square of fabric I watched him unwrap a camera that looked old because it was old. 'Film,' he said, mocking some pretension, a soft jab at my digital camera. He knew I didn't care. His lens was a stout stub with thin, clicking rings. He turned the camera toward a window display, put it right up against the plate glass and its whitish parallelogram reflections of the sky. Inside, a family of five or so squat jewelry safes with open doors faced outward—angled open like invitations. Inside, they had been fitted with shallow drawers with centered gold pulls barely ample enough for a finger and thumb. He leaned into the window. I stepped away toward the curb. One of the doors was lined with a mirror that cropped its own perspective of the scene: empty sky, glass, white light, some darker parts, out of focus reflections of still street life. I felt as though I could sense the heft and weight of the safe walls, as well as the presumed emptiness of the unopened drawers. But who knows, maybe there was something in there.

There were no attendants to mind the picture-taking. I didn't ask what he saw. The camera was so small in his hands. With his body pressed up against the great window, he was like a small child (one I'd never known) who'd brought his own peephole to peer through a vast glass wall.

Offhand, I can think of three artists who took the final steps of their lives into oceans. Ocean, rather, for each of those three gave themselves up to the same Atlantic. Certainly, there have been many more unheralded artists who met unknown, unromantic ends—each a precedent in a line that stretches beyond history. We've never exhausted the romantic symbolism of the sea. It's like offering yourself to god—becoming a willing subject to a force of nature, succumbing with intention to a will far greater than your own, seeking the great pleasure of release from oneself. But we know that we should not romanticize such things. They are tragedies. But there's the trouble again—the romance of tragedy. We are not, we forget forever, the subjects of dramas. And the ocean isn't god any more than it is cruel.

It's quiet now. I am grateful to be something like happy. At ease, unagitated. Green trees yellow into autumn. Moments ago, J was sweeping some of the early fallen leaves from the sidewalk. It was morning, during street cleaning hours, and the curb was clear of cars. He told me he had known a man with a wife and three kids who lived together in a yurt for three years. After that, they'd had it. They were back in the city now. Kids in charter school, a decision they had some uneasiness about, but it was based on a teaching philosophy they believed would orient their kids to their most humane futures. J said you could tell the years in the yurt had completely transformed his character—he was gentle and generous in all his interactions with others.

It jogged a thought, and I told J that my brother had a vision for our extended family. He wanted to raise the family's status, socially and economically. He was somewhat frustrated that his siblings didn't share this goal but tolerated it in a way that revealed he was thinking of his actions beyond the span of his own life, as though he was content to see himself as the foundation upon which future generations would look back during reflective moments in backyards and note that the start of the family's fortunes lay in his modest, consistent actions.

Next door, D was back. He was sunk into a step at the bottom of the stoop—a weary body, but as convivial in conversation as he ever was. He'd lost a few patches of hair in the hospital, and what was still in place had grown out longer than usual. His feet rested on the last step, two swollen forms like heavy stones wrapped in multiple pairs of thick striped socks. He couldn't yet walk without crutches, and although his prognosis was uncertain he was already regaling us again about getting his pilot's license and other grand adventures. If this went according to form, he'd soon be talking about trips to Antarctica and getting off the grid—really off the grid.

But first he got on to talking about Pythagoras and reincarnation. Pythagoras believed that our souls migrate through four phases on their way to who knows what. The sequence goes like this: human, animal, vegetable, mineral. "We're full human right now, but you and me are going to be vegetables soon enough." After death, we choose a new form in order to take the next step in completing our four cycles of life. "Imagine that party. All those dead people shifting shapes. I want a piece of that." D was ready for his animal form. He was coming back as a pterodactyl.

I drifted off into other thoughts as he shifted onto other subjects, and then I just heard him say at the end, "That doesn't happen a lot, not even in life."

Consequences are accompanied by memories of their cause.