In the realm of silence, where neither light or darkness binds,
A world where neither sight or sound unwinds.
From feeling, taste, and touch, it's free,
A universe unborn, a budding tree.

A cradle of potential, it neither starts or ends,
Where opposite are yet without their twins.
Bathed in warmth, unseeing night,
A journey starts, absent of light.

No touch of breeze, no taste of rain,
No scents to cause delight or pain.
Yet in the quiet, all unfolds,
A narrative that is never accurately told.

A symphony silent, a painting unseen,
A story unspoken, what might have been.
In this vast silence, a rhythm thrums,
A happening echoed, as all becomes.

Bound in the soft embrace of peace,
Where the hustle of existence cease.
Happening begins in this gentle hush,
A canvas blank, waiting for the brush.

Growing, thriving, all unseen,
In the quiet where neither life or death has ever been.
A mystery unfolds in silent grace,
A new reality begins its wondrous race.

No senses yet, but still a part,
Of the endless rhythm, life's own art.
For even in silence and presently unseen,
Neither life or death has always been.

PROLOGUE

Before

The last thing I smelled was a candle that had just gone out. The next thing I made was a universe.

Both of those are true. I have had a great deal of time to look at the distance between them, and I still can't tell you how it was crossed.

So I'll start where anyone would start. With the man at the table.

I'll call him Theo. It was his name. And I need to call him something that isn't *me*.

*

The cake had seventy candles on it because Wes had bought seventy candles, and Wes did not believe in doing a thing halfway, only in doing it loudly.

"Structurally unsound," Theo said, looking down at it. He meant it. He had never in his life been able to look at a thing without estimating what it would take to bring it down. The candles stood in a spiral his brother had pressed into the icing with a thumb, and the middle of the spiral was already sagging, and the whole arrangement was about four candles from a soft, sugary collapse.

"It's a cake, Theo."

"It's a cantilever."

Ruth said, from the sink, without turning around, "Let him do the maths, Wesley. It's how he says he loves you."

She was seventy that day. She had a small white scar through her left eyebrow from a bicycle she'd been told not to ride in 1962, and she still touched it when she was pleased and trying not to show it, and she touched it then. Theo watched her do it and did not memorize her face. Nobody does. You assume the face will keep being there, the way you assume the floor will.

The kitchen was too small for five people and had been too small for thirty years. The refrigerator carried a note of B-flat that he had once identified on a whim and could never afterward stop hearing. Somewhere above them, out in the hallway, the smoke detector chirped its low battery.

It had been chirping since March. He had timed it once, out of irritation, standing under it with his phone: not forty seconds, as he'd assumed, but forty-one. It was not the sound that bothered him. It was the regularity: a thing with almost no energy left, spending it in identical increments, not one of them different from the last.

"I'll get the battery," he said.

"You said that in March," said Ruth.

Ada was seven and kneeling on a chair with her chin nearly in the icing, counting. She counted everything: stairs, blue cars, the seconds between lightning and thunder.

"Sixty-eight, sixty-nine, seventy," she announced, having skipped roughly fifteen.

"You skipped," said Wes.

"I estimated," said Ada, and looked at her father to see whether that had landed, and it had.

Wes had done the icing himself and the icing was the colour it was.

"That's pink," Ada said.

"It's red."

"It's pink."

"It's red. It's just got a lot of white in it."

She looked at it with her whole face. "How do you know it looks the same in your eyes as it does in mine?"

He started the answer, because he had one ready; he had one ready for everything. Something about light of a particular length, the same length going into her as into him, which is why four strangers in a shop can agree about a tin of paint.

He got about five words in before he heard what he was doing, which was answering a different question.

She had not asked why they agreed. She had asked what it was like in there.

"I don't know," he said.

"You don't know?"

"No. And I don't think anybody does. I don't think there's a way to find out."

Ada said, "That's weird," and went back to counting.

He stood in his mother's kitchen holding a knife for slightly longer than he needed to.

June was leaning in the doorway with her coat already on because her shift started at eleven, and she was listening with her head turned slightly, the way she always did (the left ear was the good one, a childhood infection had taken most of the right), so that she seemed

always to be receiving you a little sideways, with more attention than you had earned. Eleven years of hospice had made her patient in a way Theo found unbearable and could not live without.

Wes lit the candles with a grill lighter in three long passes, and the kitchen changed.

It was not the flames. It was what seventy flames *did* to a room. How everyone's face was suddenly lit from underneath and went strange and gentle and about a hundred years old. How the heat arrived as a thin, physical shape above the cake that you could put your palm into, and how the light was not steady but leaned: all of it leaning together toward the door, because the hallway was cooler and the air was going that way and the flames were only doing what the air told them.

They sang. Three keys, no agreement on the tempo, and Wes an octave down for effect. Ada sang the loudest and did not know the middle part.

Ruth closed her eyes.

"What'd you wish?" Wes said.

"Then it won't come true."

"That's a scam invented by people who didn't get what they wished for."

"Wesley."

She blew. It took three breaths: the outer arm of the spiral, then most of the middle, and then Ada leaned in and finished it with a spitty, enthusiastic gust that took the last four and some of the icing.

And then the smoke.

Seventy wicks let go at once. The grey came up in threads, and the threads braided, and for a second there was a whole small weather system standing over the cake, turning, going soft at the edges.

The smell reached him a half second after the light left: sharp, faintly sweet from the wax, with something mineral underneath it. Not the smell of burning. The smell of having burned. The smell of a light going out.

Above them in the hallway the detector caught it.

It did not do what it should have done. It did not shriek. The smoke must have reached it thin, because instead of the alarm it gave one long unbroken tone (a held note, steady, without any shape to it, going on for perhaps two seconds), and then stopped, and then, forty-one seconds later, chirped again exactly as before.

Everyone laughed. Wes waved a tea towel at the ceiling. Ruth said *see*, and he said *I'll get the battery*, and only he was still looking up at the hallway, because it had not sounded like an alarm.

Alarms rise and fall. They are built to. That one had not.

He thought: *that's what nothing sounds like.*

Then Ada tugged his sleeve, and he forgot about it.

"Where does the smoke go?"

He crouched. This was, of the many things he was, the thing he was best at.

"Nowhere," he said. "That's the trick. It doesn't go anywhere. It spreads."

"Out the window?"

"Sure, some. But mostly it just; gets further apart. Right now it's thick, so you can see it. In a minute it'll be all through the kitchen, and you won't see it, but it'll be here. Tomorrow it'll be all through the house. There's no place that's *away*. There's only more spread out."

Ada considered this with her whole face.

"So it's still here."

"It's still here."

"Forever?"

"Pretty much. Just too thin to tell it from the room."

She thought about that, and then she said, "That's sad," and he said, "Why?", genuinely wanting to know, and she said, "Because you can't smell it anymore," and then she was gone, over the back of the chair, after her uncle, because Wes had the first slice and no plate.

Theo stayed crouched a second longer in the emptying kitchen with the smell still on him.

*

They kept Ada overnight; the rules had been set by the seven-year-old and ratified by the seventy-year-old and the parents had not been consulted. June left first for her shift. At the car she put her hand flat on his chest, which was a thing she did instead of several sentences.

"You smell like a church," she said.

"I smell like a fire hazard."

"Same building." She got in. Then, through the window, in the tone she used for things she'd learned at work and never quite put down: "They go quiet before they go. Everybody thinks it means they've stopped. It doesn't. They're listening. All the way down, they're listening."

"Who is?"

"Anybody. Goodnight."

Ruth hugged him at the door and held on two seconds past the hug's natural life, the way she had started doing sometime in the last few years. Ada was already asleep on the couch with icing on her wrist. He stood over her long enough to do the small arithmetic he

always did (she had been alive for two thousand five hundred and ninety-one days), and then he went out into the rain.

*

The road home was the two-lane, nine minutes, no lights past the quarry.

The rain was the fine kind that doesn't fall so much as hang, and the wipers were making their off-tempo double knock, and the heater was pushing the smell of the candles up out of his jacket and around the inside of the car, so that he was driving in it, in the smell of seventy small lights going out at once, and finding it, unexpectedly, the best part of the whole evening.

He was thinking about the battery. Nine-volt; there were three in the drawer by the sink. He would swing by in the morning and do it himself rather than say again that he would do it, and the sound would stop, and his mother would notice the silence for about a day and then stop noticing it, which is what happens to every sound that never changes.

He was thinking: *forty-one seconds.*

And the light came across the road from the left, and it was too big and too low and arriving at a speed that some part of him was already, helplessly, professionally calculating, and he had time to turn his head and no time at all to

PART I

The Dark

CHAPTER 1

Nothing

He did not wake.

Waking has a shape to it. The slow surfacing. Light pressing orange through the lids. The room assembling itself out of habit before the eyes are even open: dresser there, window there, the weight of the blanket across the shins, the particular cold of the floor waiting on the left-hand side. None of that happened.

At some point he was simply there. Already going. Like a film that has been running a while before anyone sits down.

He went looking for the edge of it afterward, many times, the way the tongue goes back to a broken tooth. There was no first moment. There was no threshold he had crossed. There was only the fact of being underway, and no information at all about how long that had been true.

*

His first thought was that his eyes were closed.

It was a reasonable thought. It was, in fact, the only reasonable thought available, and he was a man who liked those. So he opened them.

Nothing is the wrong word for what followed, because nothing implies a result. He gave the instruction and there was no result, and

there was also no absence of result. No strain. No flutter. No dry catch of a lid unsticking. The order went out and the world declined to comment.

He tried again, harder, in the way you press a button that has already failed.

Then he stopped, because he had noticed something worse than failure. He could not tell whether he had tried.

He knew about this. It was the kind of thing he knew about, in the shallow confident way an engineer knows a piece of biology, from a talk at a conference or a book read on a plane. When you move, two things happen. The muscle gets the order, and the brain keeps a copy of the order for itself, so that it knows what to expect back. That copy is how you can turn your head and have the room stay still. It is how you know, without looking, that the hand you just closed is closed.

Take away everything that comes back, and an order and a thought about an order become the same event.

He had opened his eyes. Or he had thought about opening his eyes. There was no test that could tell him which, because every test he could imagine required something to come back.

*

He decided to speak.

He was aware, even as he decided it, that this was not a plan so much as a flinch. But he had a word ready and the word was *June*, and he sent it out.

He did not hear it. That was expected; he had already stopped expecting to hear. What he had not braced for was the rest of it; the fact that speaking is not only a sound. It is a throat tightening, a jaw

dropping, a tongue arriving at the back of the teeth, a small pressure behind the sternum, the faint scrape of breath being spent. He had said his wife's name perhaps forty thousand times and every single one of those had been a physical event in a body.

This one was a thought that had been given a shape and pushed out of a window into a night with no ground under it.

He said it again. *June.*

He said it several more times, and then he stopped, because repeating it was making it into a word instead of a person.

*

He went looking for his hands.

Not to move them. He had given up on moving. He wanted only to locate them: to establish, as a surveyor establishes a benchmark, one fixed point that he could measure from.

This is not a thing most people have tried. You do not usually look for your hands, because your hands are always quietly reporting in: the temperature of the air on the backs of them, the small weight of them, the particular angle the wrists happen to be resting at. You are never told where your hands are. You simply have never once not known.

He reached for that knowledge and it was not there. Not blank; blank is a surface. It was more that the question had nowhere to go. *Where is my left hand* dissolved before it could finish forming, like a sentence in a language that turns out to have no word for the thing you were about to name.

He tried his feet. His chest. His face. He tried the whole idea of a body, all at once, the way you might slap a wall to find a stud.

He found that he still had a shape in his head. He could picture himself lying down. He could picture the ceiling he was presumably lying under. But he understood, with a clarity that arrived all at once and never afterward left him, that he was picturing it. It was a drawing. It was the drawing a man makes of a building he has not been allowed inside.

*

Then he thought to check for his heart.

It is always there. It is the one thing that never once, in a whole life, stops filing its report. You do not listen to it; it simply underlies everything, the way a room has a temperature.

He listened.

He listened the way you listen for a car in a driveway. He listened with everything he had, and put everything he had into narrowing down toward the one place in the middle of the chest where the thing lives.

There was no thud. There was no rush and settle. There was no chest.

Breathing, then. Breathing you can find. Breathing is enormous: the whole trunk moving, the cool at the nostrils, the small clicking work at the top of the throat.

No.

No is still too generous. He was not finding an absence of breath, the way you find a room empty. He was reaching for the place where the answer was kept and there was no place.

And now the thought that had been standing politely outside the door for some time came in and sat down.

You might be dead.

He was, he would admit later, almost relieved to have a proposition he could examine. He had spent his adult life examining propositions. *If I am dead, then this is what death is, and it is not what anyone said, and I will have to get used to it.* It had the shape of a conclusion. It was nearly restful.

Then a second thought arrived behind the first and put its hand on his shoulder.

Or you might not be.

*

And that was when it came.

Not gradually. He had been calm (it is astonishing, what a mind will hold still for while it is busy measuring), and then the measuring ran out of things to measure and the calm went out from under him like a floor.

He was in a small place with no air and no walls and no way to know how big it was.

He screamed.

He did the thing that a scream is. He put the whole of himself behind it, all of it, everything, the way you do exactly once in a life if you are lucky and never at all if you are luckier.

There was no throat. No tearing. No ringing afterward. No echo off a ceiling. No one turned.

He did it again.

He did it until the doing of it was the only thing in the universe, a pure white unbroken wanting-out with nothing on either side of it.

And there was no evidence.

None. Not a trace. Not the smallest returning signal to say that anything had happened at all. He had emptied himself into the dark and the dark had not so much as taken note.

He could not even know whether he was screaming now or had finished.

*

Afterward (and there is no way to say how long afterward) he came back to himself and began, because it was what he was, to survey.

Structural assessment. You do not look at the whole building. You look for members, and you look for load paths, and you look for the places where the load is going that it should not be going. You do it in order. You do it slowly. You write down what you find even when what you find is nothing, because a nothing that has been written down is data and a nothing that has not is only fear.

Sight. No.

Sound. No.

Touch. No.

Taste. No.

Smell, and here he stopped, because he had reached the bottom of the list and the list was the entire world.

Five. It had never before struck him as a small number. Five is a decent number of anything. Five bolts will hold a plate. But he laid them out and looked at them and understood that this was the whole intake of a human life, the complete set of doors, and that a man was a house with five windows in it, and that was all, and every one of them had been bricked.

He had been a person who measured things. That was not a hobby; that was the load-bearing fact of him. He had made a living

standing in unfinished buildings with an instrument in his hand, and the instrument told him the truth whether or not he wanted it, and there was a great and underrated peace in that.

He had no instrument.

He would never have another one. The last instrument had been his body and it had been repossessed, and every question he might want to ask from here to the end of whatever this was would have to be answered by the only thing left in the room, which was the thing asking.

You cannot measure a beam by wanting to, he thought.

He had said that out loud once, to a junior engineer, on a job in the rain, and the man had laughed.

*

A phrase came up out of somewhere.

Without form, and void. And darkness upon the face of the deep.

He had no idea where he had it from. Not from church; he had gone four times in his life and three of those were funerals. From a poem, maybe. From a film. From his mother, possibly, who had believed something, though she had never been clear about what and he had never been rude enough to press her.

He did not believe it. He was not, lying there, being comforted by scripture. It was only that the words had the right size. Everything else he knew was too small (he had the whole vocabulary of an engineer and every word in it assumed a world with edges), and this one old sentence out of nowhere was the only thing he had that was the right size for the room.

Upon the face of the deep.

The deep he could do. He had poured foundations. He knew about water under a thing.

*

And then, because he had run out of every other direction to go, he went looking for the last thing.

The smell of the candles.

It was there, in his jacket, the whole way home. It had been the best part of the evening. Seventy small lights going out at once and the wax going soft and the wicks giving up their thread, and the warm dead sweetness of it filling up the car while the wipers knocked out of time.

He reached for it.

And something came.

Not the smell. He knew the difference; he would always know the difference, and knowing it was going to cost him more than anything else he owned. But something came: a shape where the smell had been, faint and entirely his own, assembled out of him rather than arriving from anywhere.

He held onto it. It was the only thing in the world that had answered.

He did not ask where it had come from. There was nothing else in the room to compare it with, and he was not, at that point, a man who could afford a second question.

*

He waited for the chirp.

It was an absurd thing to wait for. But the mind goes where it goes, and his had gone back to a hallway in his mother's house, and some part of him was still standing under the smoke detector with

his phone out, timing it. Forty-one seconds. He had been meaning to change it since March.

He waited, and there was no chirp, and no forty-one seconds either, because there was nothing to count them against.

He had been wrong in that kitchen. A held note was not what nothing sounded like. A held note was enormous. A held note was a thing with a beginning and a body and an end, a pressure on a membrane, a gift.

This had no note in it at all.

*

Ada counted everything.

Stairs. Blue cars. The gap between the lightning and the thunder, out loud, hand up, waiting to be corrected on the arithmetic.

It came to him that he could count. That counting was free. That it required no instrument and no world and no returning signal, and that if he counted, then something would be happening, and something happening is the difference between a place and no place.

He gathered what he had.

One, he thought.

And then he waited to find out whether there would ever be a two.