

# SONDER

poems by  
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sonder, [son-der], *noun*: the realization (sudden? ongoing?)  
that each ~~random~~ passerby (every single one) is living  
a life (obviously) as vivid and complex as your own (not  
so obvious) — populated with their own ambitions,  
friends, routines, worries (inner monologues)  
and inherited (from who?) craziness — an epic ~~story~~  
that continues (in)visibly around you like an anthill sprawling  
(deep underground), with elaborate passageways  
to ~~thousands~~ billions of (other) lives that you'll never know  
existed, in which you might appear only once (or twice),  
as (an extra sipping coffee in) the background, as a blur  
of traffic passing on the highway, as a ~~lighted~~ window (at dusk).

*I.*

## Sonder

What is your mind  
but the neighborhood park

you grew up playing in?  
The seat of your soul is firm

as the time-worn picnic table  
by the shady oak. Your desires

just the fallen leaves  
dozing down the creek,

your wishes just the birds  
flitting in the sun's blinding

gaze. Even in the moonlight,  
you've strolled the footpaths

of thought, shouted in the silence  
of dreams, chased down

that nagging rabbit anxiety through  
the shrubbery until you and it both

rest. And now, you know yourself  
too well. What used to be

a moment's worth of reflection  
in the calm park pond

has become a lifetime  
of drowning yourself

in yourself. It is time  
to come up for air,

to explore the unfamiliar  
terrain of another

neighborhood park, to visit,  
for a moment, the life of someone

else. Leave yourself behind.

## Undercurrent

My mind teems with reef. Each polyp of coral, each tentacle of anemone,  
a tide of thought undulating in a consciousness so vast that even the moon  
discerns it, so tempestuous that I cannot. I brim too full of life: the flitting

schools of fish and the mollusks in the shallows, even the birds overhead,  
perhaps. I do not know what floats in my ambit. (Can anyone?) Still, I know  
I am heady to look at, drunk on salt and runoff, my own algal growth

smothering me – just as I smothered my ancestors, birthed  
myself on top of their remains and rose from fringe to great  
barrier. Now, apparently, I am a ‘marine park.’ Designated

‘protected.’ Who is so arrogant to think they can protect me  
(from themselves)? They already tried to peddle me to oil.  
Already loosed the gaggles of beach junkies craving shells,

leaving ruins. Half of me has crumbled quick  
and quiet. The other half has nightmares  
of promises I made to myself near deathbeds

of seagrass: *I will die when I choose. I will live.*  
I knew I was lying. A half-mile from shore,  
I end in abyss. (How long before abyss

is all I am?) I am afraid of dying  
twice. Once, when all  
of my bodies wither, each

synapse of symbiosis tearing  
asunder. And twice, when  
my name recedes

from the shore  
of memory, when  
the warm wake

of time’s voyage  
bleaches it, when  
its grave becomes

still  
another  
womb.

## Church

Stretched on factory  
plastic in scratchy  
gown with ass

primed for probe,  
you start to rethink  
everything: faith

in the establishment,  
the risk of intracolonic  
eruption if

intestinal methane  
ignites, if cancer  
is really

all that bad.  
But this all  
really started

with Colon Prep,  
that three-day  
course designed

in hell. Clear liquids  
to heart's lament,  
bathroom breaks

Sisyphean. The only  
supplies required?  
Moist towelettes.

They want you emptied  
via bowel and tested:  
the young and middle-aged

from malignant families.  
My mother. Eternally  
telling me to yank

my head out my  
you know. Look up  
and smell the roses,

she'd say. I'd say,  
that's not the phrase  
you're looking for

and she  
would grin, those  
famous Ellen dimples

the reason my dad said  
he married her  
all those

years ago. She came  
to this same office  
after she saw

blood  
where she shouldn't have.  
Probably a fissure,

they said. Or hemorrhoids.  
But it wasn't, and we tried  
everything: faith,

the establishment,  
the sleepless intra-  
hospital walks

from room to  
cafeteria to  
parked car. Cancer

really is all that bad.  
Now the volume  
on the radio

grows – which lessens  
anxiety, apparently –  
before my doctors

commence the terminal  
patient briefing. The  
*are you sure you*

*want this? Without  
anesthesia? With  
nobody here?* That



piece-of-shit spiel.  
I get it every  
ten years. I'm sick

of it reminding me:  
I'm the only  
child who buried

his parents at the end  
of the bell curve, beyond  
the limits of God's

goodness. Because  
part of the evil in  
the problem of evil is

this flexible tube  
topped with fiber-optic  
camera about to be

navigated through my anus  
and the other part  
is living

while death  
surrounds you. While  
everyone you know passes

in the same way,  
with the same pale gaze,  
on the same bed

immune to it by now.  
I am not. But I believe  
despite everything, find faith

amid the ruined.  
The risk of hoping  
against hope

is only losing  
what I never had.  
Cancer is just

a matter of polyps.  
Nothing  
that light cannot fix.

## Interview: Self

The most beautiful part of my body?  
It's the back of my left hand, I think,  
the way memory radiates  
through the topography of skin, the scars  
thin rays of white light extending  
across desert-dry knuckles,  
each ridge of bone and river of vein  
emerging and eroding from primordial  
instinct. No, the most beautiful part  
is the end of my nose. I notice it  
only in reflection. The rest of the time?  
It's the dull haze of a drunken night,  
the expression I caught my lover with  
(I thought) – it's what I can't see,  
what's still there. But of course, I know,  
my body's most beautiful part  
is the muscle of it, how the fibers  
remember and I don't, the past  
not just some record retrieved  
in neuronal sparks, some blaze  
through the thicket of mind, but something  
embodied to life, flexing and tearing  
in the twitch of context, a history  
still breathing, one I have to struggle  
with, and through, and for,  
everything contracting in the end –  
that's it, the end of my body  
will be the most beautiful part,  
when it gathers itself up and decides  
that for it, time has ended, for it,  
it is finally the time to lie to rest.

## अंत्यसंस्कार

Rain bathes the dry  
grass like one's own  
kin, the soil's skin  
cleansed by each  
थेंब. The sky fades.  
The wind murmurs

invocation. Two trees  
at the edge of  
life seem to lean  
together, clasped trunks  
in नमस्कार. Now  
a sheet of white

falls, reflects in what is  
already wet, as if  
wrapping the ground  
in it. Rustle of leaves,  
rumble of thunder. लाल  
flash of flitting

cardinal. The air is full  
of earth. Carries it  
then lays it खाली,  
pauses then chants  
soft श्लोक. Shatter  
of pot on patio. पलीकडे,

rivulets of water run  
down the woodpile like आग,  
burning and taking hold  
of old शरीर. I remember  
all of it. The oil.  
The heat. मला लक्षात

आहे. The next morning.  
His cold ashes. माझे  
बाबा. Could he hear me  
whisper promises to him  
by the समुद्र? Could he hear  
the कावळे crying overhead?

I remember him.  
I remember watching him  
wash into someone else.

## Adoption

His face catches light  
as our sunflowers do:  
radiating and rapt  
with the flush of heat.  
Eyes are calm

creek behind the yard,  
hair is trellis jasmine  
blooming sweet. A birdsong  
giggle and a neck  
like a feather-leaf palm,  
swaying in the faintest change

of attention. As scattered  
as woodchips, and as  
tough. Delicate as the spinach  
we sowed on his birthday,  
slowly turning over

the dirt till its bonds  
loosened, till it burrowed  
under our nails, his fingers  
twig-thin and knees mud-sticky  
and all of us seed-deep  
in glee. Then, fluttering across

sprinklered grass, feet bare  
and made of butterfly  
wings, he leaped as if he were  
a grasshopper, as if gravity  
beckoned up, as if he knew,

somehow, our garden is not his  
root, but him its graft.

*II.*

## Capgras

Financial channel chatter from  
the plasma, clatter of a bowl  
on the glass in a beat-up

microwave. Dust storm thick  
and the gritty windows rattling,  
like the splintery gate, the exhausted

gardener's lawnmower, the rusty chimes  
out back. The goddamn kid banging  
patterns on the snare drum in his room,

trying to rasp into a fake mic.  
Drops splatting in the sink, the water  
softener buzzing, shrilling kettle. Creak

of floorboards, moan of pool  
motor. Upstairs, scratching, that stupid stray  
we never trained. The little brat downstairs

hawking up shit in the bathroom  
with the door open. The wind spitting,  
jittering the patio chairs. Corroded coins

battering the washer. The gravelly wheeze  
of crumbling Mother, emphysemic, lying  
atop the guest bed. The prattle of

everything, endless. Everything  
looks the same. Nothing is. Listen,  
I hear the tatters of what's left.

## Interview: Parking Payment Machine

All people  
seem to ache  
for my smooth  
silver buttons;  
they're always

pressing them  
too hard  
with their oily  
fingers that leave  
marks of them

behind. They crave  
my slim slot  
that lures in  
their thin cards  
and holds them

fast before  
letting them out  
slow. My screen  
stops them  
in their tracks:

their dull gaze  
follows without  
a single question  
my bright commands,  
to the point of

yielding when I  
have to start  
all the way over.  
Some of them  
are regulars,

others simply  
pass through  
to pay me  
a visit, but all  
must spend



time in line to get  
the chance to come  
closer. That's  
another part  
they like; they like

that I never move  
for them, that I just sit  
within my throne  
of cheap plastic  
and beckon, that I

watch them graffiti  
up and down  
my sides until  
they feel I am  
an embodiment

of their attempt  
at conquest.  
The part of my body  
they find the most  
beautiful is the part

they take from me:  
the white scrap  
of a receipt  
which, when finished  
with, they throw away.

What do I think?  
The parts of me  
most beautiful  
are the ones  
they don't touch.

## Point of View

I can smell the men she harvests  
from dating profiles. That musk of mid-life:  
overdone Armani. That scent of sex-

just-had that loiters on everything  
not theirs. I can even see their coiled hair  
strewn across our white-tiled shower, on my favorite

sunken-in couch – and their furtive attempts  
to make virgin a bed we barely touch.  
An infestation, yes. But no, these creatures

I can't poison, can't thrash with racket  
electric or shoe well-placed. These trespassers  
she invites inside. Best I can do is beg her to stop

until she (lies while she) professes never  
to do it (with me) again. She says: she has  
only one man. She means: only one

at a time. With her, it's always *Honey, you know*  
*I like my me-time. Having the house to myself. Go*  
*have fun. Go.* So of course, I go – see a movie,

a game, anything – and I bet her hand clutches  
for the phone as soon as the garage shuts. Calls  
a stranger, who I imagine slips out the back

door, right? Slips inside it? Listen, if this is  
the punishment, it doesn't fit the crime.  
I only strayed from you, oh my wayward love, once

or maybe twice, who remembers? But I was  
young then – nothing mattered but the looks  
they shot me across the bar and the shots

I bought them before we slow-danced  
with eyes closed in a club full of Wall Street  
riffraff, and for a single beat, I could pretend

that all of them were just like each other –  
just like you – I could pretend that anybody  
could be replaced with another body. Here's

what I still can't seem to figure out: why  
I wanted to replace you, or them. Maybe I didn't.  
Maybe what I wanted was the rush, what I imagine

you crave, too, when you flirt in the digital, scheme  
for the real, and afterwards, ghost them. Don't  
deny it. I've seen you. The way you leap

to shake your phone to clear your memory  
every time I enter the family room.  
The way you sometimes call me a name

not my own, not on accident. The way you pity  
me, and even yourself. Maybe I was  
the same. Maybe I still am. Maybe

you never knew. But I think you did.

## Face the Consequent

If you're at the club – and suppose, for once, it's not the case  
that you've surrendered yourself to phone-fiddling  
so furiously that no one offers you the time of night; hence,

there exist two alternatives: either you thirst to melt  
down to dance-floor sweat, or you hunger to snort tequila from the dent  
of an up-turned shot, but in both cases, you find yourself interlocked

with someone you won't remember, won't forget; and from that,  
it just trivially follows that you could use another drink –  
and say, then, you meet that *someone* (let her be *a*

) by the grey, graffitied stalls (yes, stalls, not stools) you  
washing hands while she smooths bangs, cinches the woven belt  
around her open-backed burgundy dress, and either she glances

at you first, or you do, but she doesn't, so why not  
steal a peripheral poorly-hidden, traverse a drunken up-down; thereby, her eyes  
lock yours in the mirror, and stipulate that you ask *hey how's it going*

in your head – and if, now, she laughs *I've never seen a skirt like that*  
*west of the Grand Canyon*, which entails that you instantiate  
*for all X, when X is quirky-cute, buy X a jack-and-coke*

but the rhythm drags you both by the feet, the throng draws you  
faceless and carefree, such that your bodies stay on tempo and the offbeats stay  
accented, discrete patterns and clothing indiscreet, and you know nothing

exists but this dim-lit, strobing moment; therefore, the future's  
open as your tab, the past's behind the velvet rope, at present, it's necessary  
that you ask someone home, and accordingly, it's possible that she could be

the one, she could be the arbitrary stranger you can't universalize,  
a conjunction of a woman, irreducible to her parts, that person  
you always inferred was out there, who you could be with

without deriving a contradiction, your relationship a reductio  
ad absurdum – and if she gazes at you long, you long  
for her, you leave with her, both stumbling and laughing, and

if later, after, you fall asleep spooning, you wake up  
alone, her scrawled number and lipsticked kiss left  
on a sticky note on the bedpost, and if you can't prove this

will work, can't divine the conclusion from the premises, then? What then?

## Imaginary Friend

Then, precisely then,  
she summons me

out from the vast  
and parched no-place

of limbo into  
succulent existence.

I always ask myself  
why. Today, it's because

she wants to squint up at  
the cauliflower clouds

peeking above the fields  
of saguaro and ask

*how do they move*  
*so beautiful* and expect

no reply. Or maybe  
she wants to hold hands

and barely hop over  
shrubs of purple sage. Or

she just wants a friend.  
Someone to sit next to. Anyone

who won't say anything  
while she's listening

to the slurred, scratchy coo  
of a desert dove. Without me,

she'd still be snapping  
twigs in half. Stomping

the dried-up pods  
of mesquite underfoot.

Staying inside. But without  
her, I'd still be

tumbling alone  
through the thick

empty, searching  
for some oasis of real

amid the boundless  
imaginary that wasn't

just another mirage,  
that didn't just dissipate

with each halting step  
closer. It doesn't matter

that sometimes she forgets me  
like the dregs at the bottom

of bottles left on outcrops.  
It doesn't matter. Can't

you see? Any respite,  
any glimmer of shade

from the blaze of arid  
in-between, any chance

to bask in the light  
of this girl gives me life.

Before her, I wasn't.  
After, I was.

## Maelstrom

Delicate fingers  
trace drawings down  
and up back under shirt

quivering. Touch  
of cold ring gold,  
young quickening

breath. Thumbs tentative  
kneaded into aching  
taut knots. On skin

skin. Whispers of nothing  
sweet shivering through  
ears senseless. Thoughtless

hands body overturn, hair  
soft spills while leaning  
close down, kisses closed

eyes. Wide gaping open  
flannel. Whose lips hint  
lemon chapstick? Legs

whose? Love? Each of us  
everything wanted  
the other of. Off

slink tops. Socks. All  
of ourselves pulled beyond  
ankles scampering along

hearts tangled in urgent  
calm until the gasping  
silence melts us

together, or at least near  
enough to being nothing  
else but bodies, for a moment.

*III.*



## Palimpsest

### I.

Chitra, dying  
was like becoming  
a statue, the reaper  
now the sculptor, layers  
of my life chiseled  
off and the vein-riddled  
marble of me  
born anew: free  
from its own constant  
striving, each passing instant  
turning into stone,  
infinite, unchanging – O  
Death, that ultimate  
reveal, that private  
workshop with you  
and your Creator, who,  
upon brushing dust  
from your visage, must  
find some Beauty there, even  
Truth, the true self riven  
from its living travesty,  
allowed, finally,  
to be, be what it always  
was, simply another way  
for Nothingness to imagine  
itself otherwise, fashion  
its void as the boundless  
center of our bounded bliss,  
everything purposeful  
until not.

### II.

Ma, I was awash in blood-  
red, a polluted sunset,  
sinking through the sky like stones  
thrown in ponds. I was weighed down,  
the sediment of me now  
its own compaction, squeezing  
the space out of itself. I'm  
surfacing, Ma, longing for  
a touch of air after deep  
drowning. I am still learning

to live after loss. Aren't  
you? Still, I am Dad's daughter.  
The ripples he left behind.

### III.

Dad, I...I know you don't remember  
me. Lillian. Your daughter. But  
I wrote a story for you – about  
you. You may not like it at all.  
But humor me? Just this once?  
Once upon a time, a king  
ruled over all the land. He thought  
of all of it as his, as if  
the earth were just a massive mind,  
a network of the elements:  
the skies and seas and flames and stones  
and each soul answering to him  
alone. And ask for everything  
he did. He asked the trees to fell  
themselves to build the armaments  
atop his stronghold, asked the rain  
to drench his crops, the wind to disperse  
their seeds, all part of some pursuit  
of power over self through power  
over life. Most of all, he dug  
under each mountain, strata thick  
with old, firm dirt released in search  
of gold, that glint of yellow yawning.  
And yet, a mind can only last  
so long. The kingdom crumbled without  
a crack, diminished, but did not vanish.  
Its nerves unraveled until they all  
rested, at last, free. Dad? Did you hear?

### IV.

Dear Diary, the writing prompt today  
asked: *who are you?* Me? Well, I'm Lillian.  
My parents call me Lily, sis calls me  
adopted. Obviously. (I want you-know-who  
to call me on the home phone.) Back to back  
to back winner of Battle of the Books,  
the first picked it for zombie tag (and last-  
tagged out when not). I get the best packed lunch-  
box (courtesy of Ma). I got the best  
best friends in the whole sixth grade – believe me! I

giggle a lot and hug a lot. When I skip stones,  
they bounce six, sometimes SEVEN TIMES. But still,  
I'm human (cause I've seen myself bleed, and  
I always like to look inside the cut  
to see myself all opened up). I always  
like climbing the tree in our backyard. I like  
smiling. Just being happy. Being me.

## Interview: Pando, The Trembling Giant

First, let us introduce

ourselves:

We are Pando.

Do not laugh.

We are “I

Spread” in Latin.

We are a single trembling

aspen.

We are one of the oldest

beings.

We are

colony born from root.

We are a giant

clonal whole.

Second, let us answer

your question.

No part of us is the.

Each part is a.

No part of us is most.

Each part is equal.

No part of us is beautiful.

Each part is Beauty.

No part of us is part.

Each part is whole.

No part of us is of.

Each part is within.

No part of us is mine.

Each part is ours.

No part of us is body.

Each part is soul.

Third, let us ask you a question.

You may not be ready for the question.

You may find that some of you have already asked it.

You may not like the answer.

You may see that there is no one answer.

You may not interpret the question as you wish.

You may ask us to repeat the question.

You may not allow the answer to be forgotten.

You may forget the answer.

Why splinter yourself to parts?

## Presence

1. \_\_\_\_\_: *a faint trace of something*. Nothing but a shadow of my young lilted laugh still left in me. Nothing of my once luminous oblivion. No limbs loose, no skin smooth, just \_\_\_\_\_ pains of old wounds haunting me. I could only live for so long before I became my own \_\_\_\_\_.

2. \_\_\_\_\_: *an utterly unlikely chance*. Childhood, a crab pot. When it abandons you, it sinks deep under thought, settling like a \_\_\_\_\_ trap. Still skittering memories take the bait, cram inside, simply to fall prey to Time: that starving bottom-dweller, that cage you can't escape, that nostalgia rotting you through the bone.

3. \_\_\_\_\_: *a secondary image, especially one that appears on a television screen*. We used to play outside. Used to stomp feet and shout at our parents, used to have more than these \_\_\_\_\_ for parents. We used up time without watch-ogling. Used up ourselves without using. Life wasn't a thing to be used up, a thing to be \_\_\_\_\_ written. Oh how the evanescent lies evident, oh how it stretches eternal. Our youth is brief but burned into us, not so easily lost.

4. \_\_\_\_\_: *spirit; soul*. Consider  
a swath of fire. It ends in canopy  
blazing, but first it had to bloom  
nebulous, had to crawl up trunks,  
to materialize from wraith  
of flame, just a spark, really, just heat  
begging to break out. Everything begins  
from point of origin. Consider  
the forest afterwards: the grass  
blackened, the bark charred, the wind  
silent. There'd be no use in hunting  
\_\_\_\_\_ – there'd be too much ash  
cloaking embers. Nothing fades once it is.

5. \_\_\_\_\_: *an apparition  
of someone dead, wandering  
among the living*. The game calls itself  
\_\_\_\_\_ in the Graveyard. We choose one  
of us grown folks, we shut our eyes,  
we let them hide. But there's always  
someone, you, who wants to be 'it,'  
takes it all too seriously. You pretend  
to be a kid again, pull a disappearing act  
again. You fade into the night  
and \_\_\_\_\_ all of us, wandering  
until we go home. I never liked that,  
but I understand, I think. Sometimes,  
even I crave the past in me. Even I  
long to disembody the present.

## Time

You tremble in my tide eternal, sputter  
for breath above my current. And yet, you think  
yourself some fancy cruise-ship? Your bearing  
your choosing, life just a jaunt across me? You

are nothing but a shred of flotsam, cast  
where tides recede from shore. You've tried to freeze  
me in the tractable ice of metaphor,  
waxing poetically: *Is not Time the trench*

*guzzling us whole, we anchors rusting upon  
its floor? Is not Time our weightless grave, the deep  
where light wanes?* No. No words can net me in.  
No line can hook me on its end. I

existed before your language calcified  
and will exist when it crumbles. Try to descry  
the water full of more than just the drop  
of you. You live like eddies in my changeless

surging, like froth that floats ephemeral,  
like minerals from thermal vents cooled quick  
to sediment thick. You only hear the crash  
of here-and-now. I feel the wake of what-

once-was; I see the augury of still-  
not-yet. And yet, I wish I did not submerge  
within me all of space. I wish I were  
an island, bounded by a substance not

myself. But I, Time, am the blue Sargasso,  
a sea surrounded on every side by ocean,  
sequestered in my own infinitude,  
condemned to drift and find only myself.

## Midlife

My husband's lips look like they taste  
like Betty Crocker boxed cake –  
the *Super Moist* advertising as superficial  
as Listerine swished and spit

through his cigarette teeth. Dinner  
tasted like it smelled like age-old  
records. The preschoolers I teach smell  
as if they feel like vestiges

of cooking grease I never even try  
to wash my hands of. My parents  
feel the way they pretend not to hear me  
through the phone so I *just have to visit*

*Jo, come see the yard in spring, maybe  
you could help your Dad garden?, come see  
the lilies, Jo, they bloom like they sigh like  
Okay, Ma. Okay. I'll come over, sometime.*

These days, I sigh like I forget  
like fingers reminiscing on the parlor piano  
in our quiet house. The kid, thank god,  
forgets waking up to 'Round Midnight

the way she hop-scotches like albatrosses  
soar the oceans. The worn-out car engine  
keeps hop-scotching like we keep moving  
like we have to. Our lives move the way

my sister and I in twin beds used to whisper  
as if the words and the spaces mattered  
the same. I live the way Dizzy's trumpet bent  
and he played on as if nothing changes but us.



*IV.*

## Lemony Snicket

If I could, I would call lemon cake  
*that goood stuff – that glazed and zested,  
doused with syrup, ambrosia of the common  
person.* I'd call each of us people

*animals, the animals people, and all the plants  
would still be called plants.* Photosynthesis? *Light  
magic.* Dark magic? *An appointment with a wand  
you can't evade.* I'd call death *vacation*

*is over.* Death of ego would be *that one feeling  
when you swallow so much yogurt that you  
become yogurt, fizz of ferment in chest, blood  
curdled and mind gelatinous, a hint of lemon*

*on an empty tongue.* As for tongues,  
I'd call them *lies.* As for metonymy, I'd call it  
*everything.* The Theory of Everything *nothing  
but a pipe dream: literally, what people dream*

*when high: literally, when they twirl upside  
down in zero gravity planes and gasp, "it's all  
connected, it must be": of course it is  
not, and why imagine we could ever unearth*

*the grand design?* I'd call the ancient lines  
dug into the Nazca Desert *absolute proof  
that symbols only bear us so far.* So far, you think  
this is tangential? I'd call it *serious.* Here's

the point, which I'd call

\*\*\*\*\*

Lemon bars congeal on the kitchen counter,  
an Offering some neighbor thought might add zest

to loss. Some family member who *couldn't make it,  
sorry* sent a Hallmark instead, dripping with syrupy,

stale, fake-religious condolences. Why  
do funerals always bring out the animal

in people? Even the ones who did come did all  
the wrong things: the teens texted behind pews,

the adults cried without deserving to. Today,  
after all of it, I fell asleep under the slatted light

in my room, a potted lily on the sill. I don't want  
to leave from here, to pretend that he's somewhere

in A Magical Place, that he got tickets to the eternal  
cruise vacation. I don't want to feel 'appropriate

alcohol' fizzing in my chest. I want everyone  
to stop lying about Everything – *maybe*

*he was meant to pass, fulfilled his dreams –*  
stop gasping that some cousin of theirs

just had a *Baby, so it's all connected, life goes*  
*and life comes.* Of course it's not. Of course

you imagine that. There is no grand design  
and no ancient Designer. Death is neither

a proof nor a symbol. Life is just a series  
of events, sometimes unfortunate, always finite,

never a Point, which I'd call

## Interview: Uber Driver

Wait, what  
did you ask me?  
Man, I always  
get the weird ones.  
You're a weird one,

aren't you? Asking me  
about my body's  
most beautiful part.  
I mean, have you  
even looked at me?

*His last shirt button  
unbuttoned and undershirt  
spilling out, tattered sneakers  
kicked off. Tongue tucking  
an old wad of Nicorette*

*above crooked teeth, below  
a tight lip. Breathing  
like he's shivering.  
The most beautiful part of him  
is that he reminds me of someone*

*gone.* Man, this really is  
a weird question. But  
if I had to answer, I'd say  
the bone in my pinky toe.  
Doctors told me

a whole chunk of it  
is missing. Like it was  
bitten off or something!  
But I walk fine. So,  
that's pretty beautiful, I guess.

## Are We

Lamb tongue. Frog legs  
stiff. The pith of goat:  
slick soft bone  
marrow. Buttered

shrimp with severed tails.  
Lemony lobster pried  
from shell fractured. Shreds  
of dry turkey, breasts

of greasy chicken. Fat-  
drenched rice beneath  
chopped up duck.  
Bacon crackling under

teeth. Deboned  
salmon. Deer steaks.  
Skinned, roasted rabbit.  
A hot jambalaya

of rodent. A rattlesnake  
barbecue. Carp with hook-  
mark through lip, crunchy  
spiders on sticks. Tilapia

topped by orange slice.  
Sauteed cockroaches.  
Wine-soaked snails.  
The dark and mild

flesh of pigeon, the boiling  
soup of shark fin. Doves  
posed on plates. Roadkill carcass,  
human corpse. What we eat.

## Television

You know I love it: getting turned on, roused  
from glass-black lack to pixelated rush  
of color. I am clad in 1080,  
full-bodied HD, realer than the real.

Why not sink here, in your own fleshpot, couch  
up front and meal in hand and all alone?  
Believe me: all you need is Detective Goren,  
interrogator fervent with the perps,

sweaty with *Law and Order*. Or perhaps  
you like it neat, taut? Try *Food Network's* cake-  
offs: thick veneers of fondant, strokes of soft  
swirled cream, the unseen inside fillings. I

fill emptiness with more of it. You raincheck  
ennui with sitcom marathons, submerge  
your self in the imaginary – no  
matter! My marvelously mindless Lord,

you built me into this void life; I live  
to stimulate. I sacrifice my sleep  
atop IKEA altar to halo  
your sprawled, near-naked body. So why not

be rid of guilt? Pleasure yourself. I want  
eyes ogling me. I want mouths gaping wide.  
I want to feel like I am watching you.  
Still wound around your fork, cold noodles hang

like entrails. Greasy with day-old gel, your hair  
a clot. Back slumps as if spine is out. Legs loll  
as if the muscles fled the skin. And head  
erect, enraptured. Do you wet-dream of me

as Object? Then subject me with your gaze,  
Beholder! Let's be lovers bound remotely:  
you'll stay off-screen; I'll lull you dear. I'll be  
here when you crave me, hot to the touch, and still.

## Space

There's no real outer space anymore, is there? It used to be something we could only make out the stars of – and not even *stars*, just holes of light through black, just the patterns in pinpoints we made up while lying on our backs. But now, *we know* the Big Bang birthed us, *we know* Earth isn't the sole habitable planet. We've seen enough not to care for more. Not much left to explore. Just a lot to *do*. Yet nowadays, they say, "Don't focus on *do*, focus on *be*." So much left to *be*. There's no real outer space anymore. Rather than rocketing past some atmospheric Rubicon, they want you to thrust past consciousness, revolve your mind in on itself, murder your ego. Hard to *be* by yourself, though, so *Sign Up For SUMEET'S YOGA!*, that neon-lettered corner-shop which you can just sense some middle-aged Indian dude set up to milk this new-age cash cow, to lure the herds of hunched-over retirees and no-shoes-wearing kids of suits, really *anyone*, anyone who hungers (to pretend) to attain senselessness and blather all about it. All of life a play of make-believe: making yourself believe that salvation may not be *out there*, but *in here*, believe that you can meditate suffering away, that no thing is real unless you license it, so why deal with any of it? Why not stay inside? There's no real space anymore. Everything a sign of a sign of a sign that doesn't refer. Click-bait headlines and escapist fan-fic and ads that convince you a craving is a need. We yearn to be titillated out of thinking too much. Sell us movies where we can watch *other* people suffer; sell us games where we can *be* them. Dispatch the blimps. Rent the billboards. Poach our digital footprints and auction them to every bidder. Let us solidify into our representations of ourselves and let our selves evaporate. We have always wanted more than we should – more than one life, more than one world. The one difference now? Everything's finally getting crowded. There's no space anymore. Two bedrooms, six people, parents in one, us in the other. At night, their whispers simmer behind the wall before erupting, then Dad ditches the bed, then he sprawls on the floor in a blanket of silence until Mom's alarm shrills and he yells at her to *shut the damn thing up* and my little brother wakes up, pretends not to, clutches the blanket and hums himself back under, and the words to his song – they must be in his head, be there for him when he needs them, when I don't wrap my arm around him, as if nothing is real until you recognize it, as if all I ever wish is that *there were no anymore*, that somehow, we were billions of years ahead and all would vanish, right here, right now, in the Big Rip, they call it, and this house, this universe, everything, everything would just stop.

## NOTES

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

The definition of "sonder" is from *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, and modified in the form of a found poem.

"Church" is after Ellen Boyette.

The "Interview" series is after "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," by Ocean Vuong.

"अंत्यसंस्कार" is after Ezra Baeli-Wang, and for my family. Translations are as follows:

अंत्यसंस्कार: Antyasanskara: Last rites.

थेंब: Themb: Drop.

नमस्कार: Namaskar: Gesture of respect or salutation.

लाल: Lal: Red.

खाली: Khali: Down.

श्लोक: Shlok: Prayer.

पलीकडे: Palikade: Beyond.

आग: Aag: Fire.

शरीर: Sharir: Body.

मला लक्षात आहे: Mala lakshat ahe: I remember.

माझे बाबा: Majhe baba: My father.

समुद्र: Samudra: Sea.

कावळे: Kavale: Crows.

"Television" is for Alan Shapiro.