

Do you remember when you were important?

Space

You lie on the rooftop, gazing up at the sky. The shingles are bumpy beneath your back, but not in an unpleasant way. Clasp your hands together, you rest them behind your head. The warmth from the blanket that covers your legs is a defense against the chill that the darkness has brought. A cricket chirps somewhere nearby. It's easy to feel as though this is the only moment that matters, that you are the only one.

You close your eyes, and in your mind, you play a game. Zoom out, just a little. There are other people in the house beneath you, and they are all immersed in their own journeys. To them, you are at most a main character in the narratives of their lives. How easy it would be to fade out, from secondary character to extra to nothing?

And how many houses on this street are just the same? In twenty homes there might be a hundred important stories. Is their importance diminished by their nature as one of many? You don't know most of their names, those hundred; instead you label them based on the roles they play in *your* life. You see the cars parked in driveways, silent, and as you watch, some of the homes on the street turn off their lights and fade into the darkness. If all these lives are of such trivial importance to you, you receive the same treatment in their minds. You're already losing substance, starting to vanish.

Now, your city. The houses that seemed large are tiny now, the lives inside them only visible in the lights that shine through windows. You can see the lights, sparkling and dancing like so many stars out of the darkness, but could you pick yourself out of this sea of light? Your home? Probably not. You remember how darkness consumed the houses on your street. The lights in the house under you are out, so you're left to find yourself in the dark spaces between. All the little lives are tangled together, who could tell one from another? What is it that made you think they were distinct?

The state. It doesn't really matter which one, pick the biggest, or maybe the smallest, or any of them in between. You're almost nothing now anyways, so just choose one. The individual lights of each life no longer tangle—they are one. You might be in a light patch, but

you could just as easily be in the dark. There's much more of it than the light. Evidence of most people has disappeared. It takes many together to shine through.

Out to the country now. It's not as far as the journey from city to state. A million people become invisible easily, but you never even knew they were there at all. It's as though they never existed. You lost them a long time ago. A hundred million stories reduced to a single wisp of smoke in the mind, dissipating into nothing.

You watch the Earth from the surface of the moon. The globe is before you, adrift in a deep, black space. You are amazed that it hasn't been swallowed up, with the weight of unrelenting darkness that presses in from all directions. But your planet is all bright greens and blues, brilliant in their life. The sun peeks out from behind, dousing it with light, illuminating the clouds that swirl across the surface in mesmerizing patterns. The stars are still only small lights in the darkness.

But the Earth is one of eight, spaced so far apart that you have to retreat light years away to see them all. Yet they are close enough to be drawn in by the sun. You can see your home planet, a small dot even compared to its neighbors Jupiter and Saturn a few doors down. Who could tell that there are humans down there? All those people, feeling as though they matter, living, fighting, dying. From here it all looks the same.

When you zoom out again, even looking for the sun becomes a joke. In the massive galaxy that spirals out into the blackness, you think your home might be near the edge of one of the trailing arms. You should be thankful for that. For most of history, humans placed themselves in the center. But at the heart of the Milky Way lurks a black hole, which draws everything around it into oblivion. It is not evil, just indifferent. Your planet will get there one day, or it will if it still exists then. At any rate, the dust that was once the Earth will perish. That dust is every human who was ever born and ever died.

But our galaxy, complete with its dark center, is only one of 50 others like it in our Local Group. They all look so small from here, and so elegant. But their light is the light of a hundred thousand million stars. One of those is the sun, and around it your little planet. No use looking for it now; it's nothing.

Did you think the Local Cluster was the end of it? You were wrong. You zoom out yet again, and there are 200 billion more of those galaxies. If you want to know how many stars, try putting 29 zeros after a one. Dazzling light, a myriad of colors, but so much emptiness. For every light, an unfathomable amount of dark. And the dark spaces only widen, as the galaxies rush away from each other.

Can you imagine a universe without stars? Supposing you could survive long enough, your sky will be empty of them; they will have moved too far away too fast. A cosmic loneliness made reality by distances too far to ever breach. An unthinkable, deadly divide composed of nothing.

It's not only that—someday, the sun will die, and it will expand and eat the Earth. Hydrogen is not known for its empathy or compassion. But that's assuming you make it that far. You're only here today through a series of accidents. Every second is a lucky one.

Who are you now? One life on one tiny planet in a universe that makes our solar system invisible with sheer size. The smallest point in a galaxy that is a smaller point among more galaxies.

That's only the observable universe though. How much more is there to see? It will likely never be known.

Imagine a massive, churning river. The waves are frothy and rough, they plunge up and down as they race along the banks. Picture all the tiny droplets of water that make up the river. What if each drop of water is a universe, just like yours? Just like yours, but without you in it. That's the multiverse.

You look at the river brimming with universes, and your chest tightens. Your heart begins to beat faster, the tips of your fingers tingle. There is a frozen moment of tension as you hang suspended above it all.

And

then

you

fall.

Sucked into the whirlpool of the multiverse, you dive desperately into your own diminutive drop. You fall faster, losing control as you leave the unknown and enter the observable universe. The lights of an unimaginable number of stars flutter and flash around you as you tumble into the Local Group. You think you can make out the Milky Way every so often as you flail. Then you know you see the Milky Way, because you're plunging towards it, moving towards that familiar looking arm of stars.

The solar system is there. You see your sun, so bright, but so small. You're moving at such a speed now that you can barely focus on your beautiful planet, but then the blue surface is rushing towards you, you're crashing through the atmosphere, watching your country come nearer. The shape of your state comes into view, then your city. Some of the lights on your street are still on, bringing it life. Your home is close, too close—

The impact drives the breath from your lungs. You sit up on the roof of your house, and the shingles dig into your legs as you gasp for air.