



perpetual autumn
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It was the end of language at first, not because he forgot all of it, but simply because his language was no longer enough to describe what he felt and saw.

It only seemed like a few moments to her before she joined him, reeling as into wordlessness, just as it had been for him, but he felt those moments draw out into endlessness – after the transition time was meaningless, as meaningless as his old language. So while we waited for her, he waited alone and without form.

Later, millennia later, he realized why.

He was watching the death of the planet, passively as everything was. The sun slowly expanded and consumed the planet and there were just no words as the fire consumed everything until the world was gone.

Centuries later he began to spin words again, creating language from the most base concepts – beginning with a singular distinction between nothing and everything, just as he had begun the process billions of years before while still physical and young. From that single distinction, more distinctions came until everything was labeled and categorized and separate again – he'd taken the whole and spilt it into a billion pieces and those pieces were words.

All this he did while waiting for her – in the three seconds before she followed him he learned everything and was ready for her by the time she came through, but those three seconds allowed him access to all of time – time enough to acclimate, time enough to learn how to teach her and make it easier for her, so by the time she transitioned, he was ready.

What had taken him billions of years, he was able to teach her instantly – all those lonely years spent watching stars explode and grasping at the most simple concepts with his starcast, feeble mind – that mindless and black loneliness – these things she would never know because he was already there waiting for her.

So slow was his transition and so fast was hers – they were no longer the pair they'd been before – her concerns were still for corporeal things – things he'd long abandoned. He'd taken the longest journey. As for her – she blinked and was there, her experience cleaved during that short darkness.

She wanted to know the future – that was the one thing he didn't teach her – it wasn't that it was a scary thing – it was, he'd never known terror as a physical being, not the terror of the long entropic dark – and his being was such that concepts like protection were foreign to him – such were the long, long years – but he knew about despair and he

knew it would end her if he revealed it to her too soon. It was a pragmatic choice, as well as self-preservation – he knew how easy it would be for her to cross the black threshold he'd spent untold millions of years trying to skirt at the edge of his consciousness – madness was a very real thing. Very early he'd named the despair.

So he coddled her at first, since he'd been ready for her – he wrapped her in a warm light and created an illusion, a sense of physicality that made it easy for her – he wrapped her in his light and gave her form and place. He did his best to give himself form, also, but the full transition was impossible for him – so much time had passed. He had to relearn what was instant for her.

She went to sleep on the white lab table and woke up in a field full of soft yellow roses. The roses and grass under her form were velvet under her fingertips – these awoke first as the gas of her crept into this new form he'd created. She didn't recognize the sky as her eyes fluttered open – it was a deep purple unlike anything she'd ever seen or known.

When she sat up, the first thing she did was glance about for him, a smile on her face. They'd talked about it before the transition – he would go first and prepare things for her and she knew that waking up like this, in a place like this, meant that it had worked – he'd made it and made things ready for her.

She stood and found she was wearing a blue summer dress – it was warm here in this place he'd created, warm and surrounded by yellow roses under a deep purple sky. She didn't see him anywhere, but she could feel him – she was more now than she used to be – so she could feel him there but he was everywhere and everything.

She smiled and looked at the far off trees surrounding the field – high, twisted branches, filled with orange and brown leaves, as though autumn was coming, though there was no chill in the air. She smiled again and called his name, implored him to show himself.

A warm breeze answered and lilted over her bare shoulders and through her skirt, swishing it about her legs. She felt strong and whole and eager for him.

He'd built a small wood and stone cottage for her at the edge of the clearing – a twisted brook bubbled happily by a large garden full of fruit trees, flowers, and vegetables. He'd done his best to recreate the flavors from memory, but the look on her face when she bit into a bright red strawberry told him he hadn't gotten it quite right. It was sour instead of sweet, more like a lemon, if lemons were red.

She laughed and called to him again. He knew, even after this second call, that she would need him to physically be with her – there was no way around it – despair would cover her if she was unable to hold him – that sense of wellbeing he'd infused into her would not be enough.

Physical as she was, it was easy to stretch out her time into and around all of his, so in a mere instant – she dropped the half-eaten lemon berry to the thick grass and turned toward the cabin – he roamed the galaxy and universe and collected all the pieces he needed and formed them and learned again how to be in one place and one time and one thing.

And then he was again, sitting on the wooden porch swing, waiting for her to complete her spin, waiting to catch her eye.

When she spotted him she laughed and ran, her blue dress flowing out behind her in a shimmering wave of color against the yellow roses and green grass under the purple sky. He stood to greet her and she slammed into him, reminding him about bodies and their mass. Quickly he collected more so as to make himself more solid and not topple over. For her part, she didn't notice this – he was so much quicker than her now, since he'd come before and had all that time. She could do these things too, but didn't know it yet

Her arms encircled his neck. He felt her breath on his cheek and her curly brown hair against his skin – he'd built her like he remembered her – there was little surprise in the details, but already she was learning and her scent surprised him. He hadn't added that and she had. She smelled of lilac and green tea skin cream and vanilla shampoo. She was learning already, though she didn't know it.

She spoke to him again, over his shoulder – her words went behind him and if he was the being he used to be he would have given greater import to that idea – but he wasn't who he used to be any longer, so he only recognized it and discarded it as an old idea.

"There's so much I want to know," she whispered. "I want to know everything. I want to know what happened to our children and our grandchildren. I want to know where we are and what this place is. Please, tell me everything."

For the first time in untold billions of years his mind reeled to find language – he'd created a better one, his own that he'd used to create all this, to build this world and rescue and protect himself from the black despair, but now he struggled to grasp her words and translate so she could understand him. He remembered them, remembered their meanings, but they were still so foreign to him.

"We are on a place I made," he said. "From my memory – I created this place for you so it would be easier for you. And our children and grandchildren are the same as they always were – at a time and place and those things are far away from here but we can visit them when you are ready. I need to teach you first."

Such was her trust for him she blindly accepted this – the purple sky and yellow flowers whispered that there was time – there was so much time now and there was no need to worry. They made slow, quiet love on the porch swing – there were no more words for a

long while, only gentle moans and afterwards they lay on the grass and stared up at the sky.

There was no sun or stars or moon, only a gentle purple glow.

"I've waited for you for a very long time," he said. "I've watched and waited and you have to understand that even though you followed me very quickly that everything exists in just a moment here. Less than a moment, even."

"I want to see everything," she said. "Please show me."

"I will," he said. "But before I do I need to show you something."

"It's hard to wait."

"Don't worry. We have all the time that exists."

He took her hand then and pulled her up after him – they rose from the soft grass and walked, naked, across the field of yellow roses, away from the cabin. At the edge of the field they went into the woods, under the autumn trees for a long distance. The actual amount didn't matter – he could change into inches or miles, but the timing was important, so he stretched it to the right distance until he felt her and she was ready.

Finally, the forest thinned and he stood with her at the edge of the precipice. He'd created it, of course, just as he'd created everything else, as a way to show her what the despair was. Down the rocky face, deep down into the black, wet fog rolled, colored like coal, swirling and crackling with flashes of light like lightning inside a thundercloud.

When she saw it she shrunk back and into his shoulder. He pulled her tight against him and sent her feeling – words were cheap and useless to describe the despair – she had to see it and feel it like he did.

"I waited for you and didn't venture there," he said. "This is alone and now you are here, but we must stay together. There are many things that are happy and sad, but they do not matter anymore. We have everything, but we must not go there. There is no return from that place."

She nodded into his shoulder, but he felt her curiosity, even overshadowed by her fear. He knew then that his protection, the creation of this place, was a mistake – that she was different from him and that they must eventually go there because he would have to follow her inside. But she didn't know it yet – she wasn't as old as him in this place because he'd been there to catch her and slow her.

"There are so many things to see," he said. "Come."

She held tight to his arm as they turned away from the cliff and moved back into the woods.

Back at the cabin he taught her, slowly, how to think things real. She helped him with small things first – she worked on the strawberries in the garden until they tasted as she remembered – their sour citrus faded into bright sugar, red and juicy and forever ripe. When she tired he made the bright purple sky darken and she would sleep under the sky, amidst the roses. She didn't like to sleep indoors.

While she slept he sat beside her, watching her dream. While she was dreaming he helped her, prodding her unsophisticated visions toward greater complexity, leading her to help her exert more control over her mind. This process was completely different for him than it would be for her – he learned control before physical form. With his help, she was able to master physicality fairly quickly – indeed, he was holding her very atoms together as she slept. Without him, she would disperse into trillions of particles. Holding physicality was a fairly trivial matter, but the level of control it required was beyond her, only a few days old, comparatively.

They moved like that for months, until she became restless. He saw it coming in her much sooner than she did, but once it was out in the open he knew he would be forced to confront it. It happened on the edge of the stream as she created small flowers – she learned to speed their development to create petals and seeds in a matter of seconds, going through many generations in only a few hours. She preferred to do things this way, quickly moving through each iteration, rather than considering what she wanted and allowing it to spring forth, finished and whole. It allowed her to experience surprise, which meant that part of her mind was still hidden from her – that part that he was aware of from the beginning, but he was shielding it from her.

For his part, he didn't know if she knew he was holding her back.

When she asked again about the children and the grandchildren, the foreboding he felt was palpable, so much so that the bright purple of the sky darkened to a midnight blue.

"I'm not sure if you're ready to see them," he told her. But she insisted and so, against his better judgment, he asked her when she'd like to see them.

"Now," she said. "Right this very second."

He did his best to explain that they didn't exist in the when they were – that the children and the grandchildren hadn't existed for billions of years – they were something else now – atoms scattered across the stars, building life in other places, as part of what their old race was

now. He did his best to break this to her gently – he thought she would understand and recognize it not for the tragedy it seemed, but instead, the miracle it was, but his shielding of her had been too much and she had trouble.

Finally, he ceased trying to explain it and brought her to the beginning, to the hospital for the birth of their first grandchild.

Their daughter lay in a hospital birthing bed, grunting with effort. Her husband, a man neither of them had even met, clung to her side, clutching her hand and breathing in time with her.

They did nothing at first, simply watched and waited – it played in real time – it seemed extraordinarily fast and slow to him at the same time. He asked her if she noticed any difference, but she said nothing, so enraptured as she was watching her granddaughter come into the world.

The birth happened exactly how he remembered it, indeed, there was no way for it to happen any differently – the same landscape is always there – it was simply a matter of how one transverses it –and now he was walking over the seconds and minutes with her at his side, but she paid almost no attention to him.

When the baby finally emerged from their daughter, she came wailing into the cold world, covered with blood and birthwater. Her cubby face was pressed flat from the crushing tightness of the birth canal, the way that all babies are and he'd seen this moment a billion times while waiting for her so there were no surprises for him. But for her – this was the first time.

When their daughter stopped moving and the machines began to wail in time with the wailing of his granddaughter, he was ready for it. But he saw from the fear plastered over her face that told him she didn't understand, and now his error in bringing her to this moment, from protecting her from herself the way he did – that mistake was fully revealed to him.

Slowly, the moment dawned on her and he allowed her to open up slightly, to see the timeline of this moment, backwards and forwards, all the buildup to it and the aftermath. He guided her senses inside their daughter, showed her the blood clot and how it traveled inside her veins to her heart, let her feel the organ gasping for oxygen and failing, let her see it slow and finally stop, exhausted with nothing left to keep it beating.

And then she surprised him – she tried to change it – he felt her send herself out to cup tender organ, kneading it with her thoughts, encouraging it much the way she encouraged the flowers to grow quickly and bloom into beautiful yellow and red blossoms.

Of course, he knew this would do nothing – he'd tried himself, once upon a time – and it wasn't that they couldn't change things – it was that by time he learned that he could, he'd also learned why he shouldn't. Slowly he felt her mind, seeking for those realizations, and he

knew two things: she didn't know how to change things like this, but also, she didn't know why she shouldn't change things, and so, instead of explaining all this to her, taking millions of years and allowing her to come to the same realizations he had, he made his second mistake – he let her try even though he knew she would fail.

He released his hold on her and she tried, fruitlessly to bring the failed organ back to life. But she wasn't able to do it. Their daughter was dead in that moment, though she would always be alive a few moments before.

She fell to the floor. He saw the look on her face and instantly they were on the edge of the precipice, looking down into the black fog of the despair. She'd moved them there – he'd done nothing.

They stood on the edge for what felt like hours – he held back, the despair scared him even more because he knew someday they would be forced into it and he didn't want to go there but understood that if he held her back anymore she would force him to follow her in at that very moment. Instead he slowly stopped shielding her mind and let her see everything for what it was.

As soon as he moved back from her, her body exploded into trillions of atoms – without him she was unable to support corporality any longer. Her mind flew out as well, expanding in all directions just as his had done billions of years before, when he'd first transitioned. He watched it happen but did nothing, indeed, he didn't know what to do – he knew every moment that was, but didn't know this one – time streams extended in all directions – the ribbon he walked was separate from everything else. He knew now he shouldn't have protected her – he should have just waited and let her find, as he had himself found.

Instead, he returned to the cabin and waited.

Old stars exploded and new stars formed as he waited for her in the cabin. He passed the time slowly, trying to revel in simple pleasures – morning tea, afternoon walks, late night contemplation – repeated in an endless cycle with every minuscule particle, temporal and physical, examined and given name. After millennia he began to find pieces of her inside the plants and air as she grouped back together, renaming things in the way he had done, learning words and form once again. This time he took note but did nothing to help her – he understood now that there was nothing he could do except wait for her. There was still so much to learn that he was content to wait.

Ghosts of her began to appear on his periphery – a shadow in a sheer blue dress, her brown curls bouncing in a slight breeze, leaving messages for him inside the structures of the plants. He tended to them and encouraged them to grow, all the plants except for her flowers – he left those untouched. He felt her in them and knew they were a focus for her – she was using the flowers to regain herself, much as he had done with the stardust that he'd used to first form this home for the two of them. She was as much the flowers as he was the earth and trees and sky.

Once in a rare night of sleep – he only chose to sleep once every few months – he awoke to find her curled next to him, lying in the crook of his arm. Tenderly he began to touch her, to coax her toward him and with him, until they were together, wholly physical again, moving together up and down in a locked embrace. Afterwards he slept and when he awoke she was gone, the scent of her still on his body and bedclothes.

When he was lonely for her, he returned to the moments before he'd released her and watched himself with her, lying in the yellow roses and green grass, laughing and holding each other. He returned also, over and over, to the moment of his daughter's death, not to watch his daughter die, for he understood that she was alive a moment before and would always be alive a moment before, but to watch her, as she stood, aghast and writhing with effort to beg their daughter's heart to beat again. This was but a memory – the timeline long passed, but still, he yearned for her and needed every moment he had of her that was.

Of course, he also returned to the two of them, back before they'd transitioned, and watched. He saw all his favorite moments – their wedding, the birth of their daughter and son, the smile on her face just before he went before her to prepare the way as she held her hand and whispered to him. His favorite moment he rarely visited except in

particularly dark times, when the wait became too much, when he stood at the precipice and stared down into the despair – in those moments he fled and relived with the best of her.

They'd been camping all weekend in a state park, making love by the side of the fire and hiking through the gentle forested hills all day. It'd been three days since they'd come to the park, and it was only one day until they had to leave and it was that moment when he'd first had the idea, first learned how it might be possible to transition and become what he was now.

They were hopping over stones across a stream, one to the next, while the water rushed around them, throwing up white bubbles and spray. Their feet were bare and they could feel the rough stones under their pink toes. She wore a lavender summer dress – the hem soaked through and stuck to her legs.

It was that wet hem that had given him the idea and for long years he worked and researched in the basement until everything was ready. The way the hem clung to her legs – it made him understand – the circle of the thing, the way the fabric rose up and down but never came disconnected.

It took him much longer to convince her. But it won't matter, he'd told her. We can still be everything.

He knew, of course, that it wouldn't be true, but so selfish and excited was he that he'd told her anyway, and he knew that as she rebuilt and rediscovered she would find that out – she would find out that he always knew it would be like this but he made her come anyway because he didn't want to be alone or without her.

So he'd sold her dreams of eternal heaven.

But in reality there were challenges. And there was still despair. But the wet lavender hem, the way it stuck to her thigh – that was still his favorite because he hoped that it would be like he told her it would be, even though he knew that no one would ever follow them – he'd made sure everything would be destroyed after they transitioned – that sealed it – he knew no one else came – he'd watched the rest all the way to the end – what people were now would never understand how to do what he did all the way to the end. Nothing would ever follow them – it was only the two of them for all time and she was spread out and finding words and he was afraid she would never rebuild as he did and never come back to him and that was the despair, or part of it.

While he waited for her he replayed it all, over and over – the moments spent convincing her were not his favorite moments – they'd

been exciting and powerful when he was still physical, but later, when he was able to see moments for what they really were – the deception there reminded him too much of the despair. But they still contained her, so he replayed them over and over anyway, just not as much as other moments.

They'd talked about everything, about meeting all the important historical figures and learning everything there was to learn, going back to see all the great masters and watch them, and forward into the future to watch their children and grandchildren forever and ever. They'd even talked about learning the solutions to all the great mysteries of the past – all that human mysticism that caused so much conflict – they wanted to go back and learn the truth of it.

But the hard fact was all those things weren't nearly as interesting when he understood more, after he renamed it all and seen it all a million times and learned what great men were really about – they were men, nothing more, reinterpreted over and over by the hard line of time, and that was a line he understood better than anyone else. Even better than her.

Still, he wondered as he waited and tended to the plants, relived his memories and grew the world, about something more. Maybe there was something more, something buried deep past where he was and where she was, but if there was, it was only a renewed level of baseless mysticism, because nothing had ever given him an indication that the old ideas about a higher power could be true. He'd looked everywhere except the despair and there was nothing in there. He knew it.

While he waited, he did follow the growth of his old species with relative, if simple curiosity, just to see the big moments, but he felt nothing for any of it. It didn't affect him when they left their planet for the stars, spread to distant planets and forgot where they came from, only to fight each other millions of years later when they were all something else. He tracked his line, just for idle curiosity, but so different where those things now from anything he recognized that he felt it was pointless. His joy was still in simple things and the dull ache of waiting for her – he felt it like savoring the hunger before a meal.

But he watched the races spread and fight and die as the their suns burned themselves out and the entropy of the universe sank all matter and energy together until there was nothing but black and his world and him, still waiting for her. Her ghosts were long distant and it had been billions of billions of years still he'd seen her last.

When she finally reappeared it was late in the evening as he'd created it, late in the endless cycle of days he'd spawned because he preferred days instead of the endless bright purple twilight. He was sitting on the porch swing, gently swaying in the breeze.

And then, there she was, sitting next to him, her arm around his neck, her head bent down to rest on his shoulder. He said nothing at first – there would be time for talking – he just wanted to enjoy her for a moment.

"I've waited for you," he finally said, pulling back her face with his hands to look into her eyes.

He saw her struggle with words, the way he once did when they'd first met after transistioning, and when she spoke he was surprised at what she said.

"I've been everywhere and seen everything," she said. "I've looked in every thing and every moment. And I don't know what to do now."

"Stay with me," he implored. "We can do every thing together." He put his hands in her hair and felt the soft breath of strands as they flowed over his fingertips like water.

"Why did we do this?" she asked. "I didn't know it would be like this." She pulled away to look at him. "But you did, didn't you? You knew it would be like this."

"We can do anything," he said. "We're limitless here. And we have all the time that is."

"I know why you tried to protect me in the beginning," she said. "I know everything now. But there's nothing else to do except go into the black. Soon all the last suns will die and it will come find us. I'd rather face it now. I'm not afraid."

He pulled her close then. He'd known this moment would come from the very moment he'd first shown her the despair, but he wasn't ready to leave – not yet.

They walked together through the field of roses, now every color imaginable, not just yellow. Hands clasped, they made it slowly through the forest, under the autumn trees until they stood at the edge of the despair.

"I missed you," he said, whispering, barely audible over the roar of the twisting black nexus below. Lighting and thunder crashed in response. "But I can't come with you. I'm afraid to go there. It will end us."

She turned to him with sad eyes, but said nothing, just slowly backed away from him, staring into his eyes all the while. On the edge, her bare feet stepped off the rock and she fell over the edge, a splash of blue cloth, and then she was gone. When he looked down there was no trace, only the same twisting black fog that had always been.

And then he was alone.

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