

51.86370° N, 8.33256° W

Mark Kelleher

The first week of that summer, I boarded up the house with all three of us inside.

The strain of the hammering brought bruises to my arms and made my brain feel stretched beyond the limits of my skull. My fingers blistered. The pounding sounded louder than it should have. Afterwards, I passed out on the floor and had a dream that replicated what I had just been doing.

When I awoke, I found my parents where they had been all along, sitting bolt upright next to one another on the couch, oblivious to what was happening around them.

My mother's face was concealed by a Soviet-era gas mask she had outbid a stranger for on the Internet. She bought it because it seemed to her to be the kind of thing you needed to keep around the house. It stayed in its box until she appeared wearing it at the top of the stairs one morning. She hadn't taken it off since. The fit was two sizes too small and hugged her face so tightly it gave the impression that her head had shrunk to the size of a child's. On the rare occasions when she spoke, her voice sounded like a cartoon character. I couldn't make out any of her words. She didn't seem to notice this.

The hose from the mask wasn't connected to anything. She kept the loose end in the pocket of her cardigan. She kept a small, laminated picture of Padre Pio and a stone from the garden in the other.

My father, meanwhile, was slowly rewinding into the past. All his wrinkles flattened out. There was a new shine to his eyes. His expressions were boyishly unpredictable. Even his hair appeared to be returning to its original black. Looking at him felt like coming across a slightly altered version of myself in a dream.

In between little whispered prayers he kept asking where his own father was, as if he had gone out earlier in the day and was now late. He had never known him. He had fallen off an oil rig and drowned when my father was three weeks old. They only found his shoes. I reminded my father of this just once before understanding that he didn't recognise me anymore. Even when I explained that I was his son, it was clear I was a stranger to him.

I imagined he thought I was insane.

We only interacted through touch now. He let me hold him as he cried, which was often. In those moments, he would take my hand, place it over his heart and ask me to confirm that it was still beating. I sometimes fantasised about placing my hand so firmly on his chest that it would pass through it and exit out his back. Most of the time I couldn't feel a thing. That didn't stop me from cherishing what passed between us. It felt wrong to admit it, but I preferred this reduced version of him. He wept beautifully, silent and slow. I removed his tears with my sleeves and told him he was a good man. It didn't matter that it didn't register with him. I was saying it for myself.

My sister, Mia, had been gone for about a year at this point. Her disappearance wasn't without forewarning. She was a student of conceptual art whose end of first year project was a repurposing of missing persons narratives, to be presented at an exhibition at the local community college at the end of the semester. On opening night, there

was no sign of it or her. The whole thing was a stunt. She let me in on the secret the day before. She would go missing for a week and then return. Her own vanishing would be the real project. She was more than happy to risk pissing people off. People needed that, she figured. To be shocked and angered into an awareness of the world's greater pain. I was the only one she told.

I don't know where she is. Nobody was surprised when she didn't show up. It was true to form for her. Three days went by before my mother finally contacted the police. They looked in all the usual places. They dragged the canal. They searched every disused building in town. They examined flight and hospital records. They questioned her friends. None of it ever came to anything.

Sometimes the phone would ring late at night. It was always an older woman saying the same thing every time: "I'll be right back." There were traces of Mia in the voice and now and then I considered the idea that she was somehow calling us from the distant future.

The calls ended after the media stopped reporting on the story. Soon after that, my parents and I gave up talking about her, too. I think the three of us silently agreed that the only way we would ever get through this was to convince ourselves that it had never happened in the first place.

I wouldn't have been able to do that if I hadn't been going through a series of separate crises of my own at the time. I was adrift in a cosmic sadness too mystifying to put into words. There were no great dramas at play in my life right then. No deep love interest to set off the inward spiral, no health concerns I could trick myself into thinking were terminal, no unlocked ambitions to usher in rupture and ruin. I just felt deeply and inexplicably off-kilter, as if some internal wheel inside me had ground to a sudden halt.

Most days it felt like my entire skeletal system was hollowed out. My ability to verbalise even the most basic of sentences became

compromised. I went days without speaking. It wasn't that I didn't know what words to use or how to use them. Language simply didn't work for me anymore. I dragged the husk of myself from bed to work and back to bed again. It was only in the total darkness of my room that I felt anything close to being alive.

My parents were still functional at this point. They didn't need to say it, but it was implied that the psychological hole I had fallen into was a direct consequence of Mia's disappearance. I let them believe that it was. You have to be kind to the people who are pained spectators to your suffering. Even the very worst answer is better than none.

In truth, Mia's absence was an extension of some deeper void at play around me. I could pin my pain on her, but she wasn't its root cause. At first, I felt the only way to resolve my issues was to take an existential leap out of who I was. I spent days reimagining the reality of my material self and what else I could be. Surreal new ways of being flashed before me with little effort on my part. I don't know why this was. Something deep in me craved total transformation. A sort of suicide of the fundamental self. It all felt euphoric and unreal.

I saw myself as a decommissioned water tower just visible off a highway in an Eastern European city in winter. I saw myself as a fading political slogan spraypainted on a suspension bridge. I saw myself as a wire through which untraceable communications were firing in impenetrable code. I saw myself as Bruce Conner's *BOMBHEAD*. I saw myself as volatile weather events. I saw myself as a bird in its first and final flight. I saw myself as a pool of sunlight rapturously alive on the ceiling above me. I saw myself as trade winds and white heat. I saw myself as pink smoke. I saw myself as 1,159.9 miles of road and sea.

Seeing myself through the distant lenses of all these images worked briefly until they no longer did. No sooner had a fresh image stirred me than it dissolved into a grainy nothingness again. I kept coming back to the who and what of myself. My imagination and my options burnt

through, I finally did what I had been avoiding all along: I accepted who I was and attempted to properly fix myself the way other people did.

I engaged in a strict jogging regimen. I dug into the depths of myself with a Bulgarian psychoanalyst who had trouble understanding the complex theories I had already built up around myself. I took Melatonex, I took Citalopram, I took Zoloft. I touched my pulse and reflected on the wonder of it. I read six books that championed the virtues of Taoism. I wrote my thoughts down in rushed bursts every day for three months. I resuscitated my inner child. I contorted my body to the point of breaking. I sent anonymous letters of praise to strangers. I gave up coffee. I gave up alcohol. I gave up screens. I gave up my ego. I observed the fire inside me from a safe distance. I practised kindness. I lit incense sticks. I attempted to appreciate nature. I viewed everything through the lens of an impossible beauty. I removed the thought of romance from the idea of suicide. I chanted “I love you unconditionally” to myself when I knew no one was around. I ran even faster and harder and further still.

None of it worked. My blood continued to scream “NO.”

I don’t know what would have happened if things had continued the way they were. It was only when I resigned myself to the fact that nothing would change that everything started going weird.

The serendipity of it all still astonishes me.

It started with a week of solid daylight. Soon after came the shortage in the water supply. The electricity grid started experiencing problems a week later. The power kept coming and going. We were told to stay close to home and go about our normal lives in any limited way we could. People didn’t panic until they were advised to stay calm by the President in a televised address. His speech was stilted and contained no poetry. The grainy footage provoked speculation about the true nature of what was really unfolding. The consensus was that he was

already dead.

It was the arrival of the drones in their thousands that drove people to permanently stay inside. The collective sound they made was nearly as intolerable as the sight of them filling up the sky. It felt like living on a film set.

It wasn't possible to theorise. Our imaginations were blunted into disbelief. We stumbled mid-thought when trying to formulate ideas about what this meant for the future. We weren't scared. It wasn't real enough to be terrifying. People forgot what day it was. Time was stripped of its old texture. The past seemed more distant than it had ever been. Everything slipped into confusion.

It wasn't until my father started regularly crying that I decided it was time to lock ourselves away. He appeared at the foot of my bed one morning, smiling with tears coming down his face. They moved at a speed I had never seen before.

In the raw moment I thought he was about to announce Mia's return and the world with her. Instead, he lightly touched my foot and in a low voice told me that one day all of this would make sense. I loved him more then than at any other time in my life.

If the world wasn't going to return to us, I was going to make us a new one. No one would ever get in. I was convinced of that. We would figure it out. I had the capacity for hope then.

I asked him where the hammer was. He seemed to understand.

Even with all natural light extinguished, the outside found its way in. The overhead buzz of the drones crept through day and night. It wasn't unusual to hear gunfire. At times, all that could be heard was a low insistent hum, as if some benign force was trying to make itself known.

To drown it all out, I spoke relentlessly and loudly for hours on end—to my parents and, when they didn't seem to be listening, to myself. I frequently sang to them. I lost my voice every day. When my mother reached for the radio, I grabbed it and turned it off. Nothing good

was going to come from it now. She shouted through the mask when I did this. My father would do nothing but laugh and look at us like we were two wild animals playing behind a pane of glass. His response always saddened me. I wanted to get into his mind and witness the scene as it played out inside him.

Even now I don't know if that desire was driven by a want to be closer to him or to simply free myself from my own experience of what my life had become.

They both vanished on the same morning.

Even before I passed through the rooms looking for them, I knew they were gone and would never be back. Their absence was communicated by the house itself. A home is a living thing with its own way of speaking. The atmosphere of each empty room held an unspecifiable poignancy. The air was heavy with it. I couldn't stop running my fingers along the walls. I had seen them only a few hours before, but now I couldn't even begin to visualise their presence there anymore. Beyond their few possessions, all of which they had left behind, the only trace of them was the imprints their bodies had made in their bed and on the couch.

I didn't even need to check the windows and doors. I knew they would still be boarded up.

I am still here. I sit. I try to work my memory. I stopped thinking ahead. I spend no time second guessing. I pace the floors for exercise. I ran out of food and water months ago. I look at old photographs and then I burn them in the kitchen sink. I never hear voices from outside. I sleep dreamlessly. I am trying very hard to unlearn certain words. I disassemble anything that can be taken apart and then I put it back together again. I no longer reimagine myself as anything else. I do not expect to hear a knock on the door. I have destroyed everything that can reflect an image back to me. I am not waiting. I still sing the same songs I sang to them.

POETRY