Pool of Bethesda

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The flies came in on Sunday morning when we had a breakfast party. The door open for much of an hour, people coming and going. Or at least that's when I began to notice them, darting from the pile of unwashed dishes in the sink to hover over the scrambled egg residue in the nonstick pan by the stove. A pair of flies had wandered into my room by Monday morning; I spent the better part of ten minutes tracking one of them down. I swatted it out of midair, unsure of my success until I spotted it twitching on the surface of my desk. I crushed it in a sheet of toilet paper and raised my arms in a triumphant salutation for Caesar after tossing the vanquished into the trash can. "Are you not entertained?!" The plebeians bumble toward the concession stands.

The other found its way into the death trap between the window pane and the blinds, where it buzzed as I typed away at an application essay. In this way we were united by problems—matters of life and death.

Mine: raise the blinds to kill the fly, the fly flies before I can kill it. Leave it there and it will die eventually, but not before it rattles against the glass at intervals of seven seconds, on and on, trapped
in the eternity of a static moment. Soon I am left to wonder at how it, weighing less than an ounce, could possibly bring me to my wit’s end. Undone by a fly, pushed over the edge by buzzing wings. Ultimately, an embarrassment.

His (Hers? Its?): What appeared to be access to the outdoors and all the rotting crabapples and canine waste a housefly could ever want is actually a transparent but unbreakable barrier. A fatal disappointment. Behind it an opaque barrier that explodes with a resounding smack at intervals of fifteen seconds after the guy behind the barrier quits pacing the room and decides to initiate a campaign of terrorism, smacking the blinds against the window with frustrated fanaticism, hoping to keep the fly in an uninterrupted state of flight in order to exhaust the fly and thereby cause its untimely death without having to risk opening an avenue of escape by raising the blinds.

But this is only half of the story. The groundwork for Sunday’s invasion had been laid the Friday previous, when I was again typing away at said application essay and I heard the splat of something fallen. I came out and saw Billy with a towel mopping up the floor under the spot where his trusted talisman had been tacked to the top of the jamb. A plastic bag filled with water, something Billy had picked up while living in Georgia. Supposedly, the light hits the water held in the bag and reflects back in ways that confuse and demoralize flies, gnats, and mosquitoes. “No way I’m going over there,” they say, keeping their distance from the house that emits this eerie glow.

I like to maintain a healthy skepticism toward these Southern customs and voodoo tricks, but for the month that the sandwich
baggie stood guard over the kitchen I can’t recall a single gnat finding its way inside, despite the clouds of blurry dots hovering above the overwatered lawn outside. And now, with our defenses lowered, though the flies from Sunday have either been hunted down or gone on to the great compost pile in the sky without my assistance, I wait for the arrival of flies thick as locusts. Such a fragile balance at play here: some meager plastic and refracted light, and I stand to lose so much.

Even though they aren’t there, I hear them buzzing in the window pane as I lie down for the night. The endless droning continues, low enough that I think it might just be tires against road on University Ave. or power lines murmuring in the dark.

Or, in simpler terms, I can’t sleep tonight.

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I went back to Hungary this summer. The first night found me at the Lowcostel, on the northern edge of the main city park, because my flight got in late enough that I didn’t want to impose on friends. A British kid made conversation with me for a half hour longer than I wanted to be awake; he was friendly and on the last leg of a tour through the main cities of Eastern Europe. He spent his time walking up and down the tourist streets, walking up and down the hills of Buda and across the bridges that span the Duna. I wanted to tell him to go to mindenféleképen try some paprikás csirke, and to stay away from hurka and disznó sajt, and, if he was feeling brave, to go to the kinai piac and watch the crime lords strut
around with stacks of American dollars while the ware hawkers play dice on an upturned cardboard box.

But he was just passing through and could see the city only as a short, shapeless dream. A blur of old brick and steel bridges, fast water moving through and out of the city, down through the heart of Europe and into the depths of the sea. I've seen this river so iced over, that on the banks it didn't move at all—the chunks broken off and floating in the center, they turned like dancers on top of the dark water. With the Chain Bridge lit up at night, and Buda Castle above it glowing soft yellow, the water is like a bottomless pit between the stars. Nobody knows where it leads, but at least it goes somewhere.

We used to drive around at night with the windows down, listening to Jay-Z and feeling great—the city and the flashing lights of traffic and clubs so alive, we thought it the very picture of freedom. But as you wander through Pest in the dark, buzzing from one place to another, you can see the castle on the hill watching motionless through the night, and all the monuments of stone unwilling to join in your festivities. And then you come crashing down, the excitement of the night collapsing in on its own gravity, and every street is the same as you've walked before, and all the people carousing through the city aren't moving in any significant way relative to the vastness of the universe, and you could reduce the journey of ten years across unknown continents to a mere aberration well within the margin of error; an illusion of movement, of progress toward the outer limit of time, a limit you never reach because it is not there, and you think you are straining toward it, but in reality, you are another statue cast in bronze near the Parliament
building, watching the water slip away but never able to take that step over the edge of the bridge, nobody to help you into the water when the time is right. I've heard that the current is so swift that it pulls the bodies under and they don't pop up until a few kilometers downstream.

I lay in bed half asleep, listening to groups of other travelers stumbling in throughout the night, trying at first to place their languages and relationship to each other, then later in the night barely managing to discern their number or gender. I was up before daybreak. I gathered my things, walked out onto the street, and dropped the door key in the mailbox by the gate. I wandered through the park, already sweating beneath the straps of my overladen backpack, trying to step lightly past the drunks slumbering like peaceful, bearded babies covered in dirt on the ground next to bushes and park benches.

I stayed with Hajnalka on my second night in Pest, at her flat on Dohány Street. She'd moved up from Szeged recently with her teenage brother. At just twenty-four, she was playing mother to him, making sure their family of two stayed on their feet in the big city. At night she took me through the center of Pest, past crowds clustered around the restaurant patios where they watched the Spain-Portugal match. We made it to the river, where the city becomes quiet. Across the water, Buda is just a picture to look at, the castle lit up at the top of the hill. She took me to what she said was the oldest tree she knew of in the whole city. Its massive trunk was almost parallel with the ground as it groaned over sideways, propped up at its center by an iron pillar. Hajnalka pointed out that, despite the sorry state of the trunk, the tree still put out new branches and
green leaves. "They used to execute people here when the tree was young," she said, "and people say the blood flowed to the roots and made the tree strong. The blood still keeps it alive today."

She left for work early in the morning, only a few hours after we had marveled at the tree. I woke briefly when she came over to where I slept and draped a blanket over me, touching my shoulder for a moment before she left the room. I kept my eyes closed, unsure whether I was actually awake, almost embarrassed to witness the kindness she meant to do in secret. A few hours later I woke to the noise of cars on the street and the smell of cigarette smoke drifting through the open window. I left a note and a seashell that I had brought from home on the pillow.

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Leinenbach and I decided that the best use of our day in Budapest would be to spend a few hours at the Széchenyi Bathhouse, if only so we could get a few pictures with the old men in Speedos who spend the day playing chess while chest-deep in the mineral-infused waters of the main outdoor pool. We were leaving that night for a month in Romania doing research in the boonies, and it seemed a good idea to wash away the stress of a transatlantic flight before embarking on an all-night bus ride.

From the onset, it was clear that we were out of our element. Hordes of old folks with leathery tans trudged around in every direction without seeming in any way lost, dozens of pools that looked the same but were somehow different, packs of foreigners just as confused as we were making up for their lack of familiarity.
with the place by confidently wandering off through unknown doors. After having lived in Hungary for two years I felt like I knew most of the rules: don’t stare at people on the metro, even if they’re staring at you; know what you want at the bakery before it’s your turn in line, and pay with exact change or be prepared for the death glare from the cashier; don’t ask for water during meals. But the bathhouse had its own set of rules, policed not by the “obviously you’re not from around here” stares from strangers, but by actual whistle-blowing lifeguards who, given the linguistic confusion of a bathhouse packed with Anglos, Russians, Italians, and Germans, delivered their chastisement not with a verbal explanation of the wrongdoing but instead with one outstretched arm, like a sports fan expressing disgust with the officiating crew. “I can’t believe you think that’s a foul,” they seemed to say.

We sat in one of the lukewarm pools and examined the chart on the wall showing the mineral content of the water. Gyogyvít: medicine water, the old folks come here on the doctor’s orders. We leaned back against the edge of the pool, talking about how ridiculous it was to march off to the mineral baths daily in an effort to live forever, as if the water were infused with bits of the true cross. “Just let the gyogyvít heal you, dude,” Leinenbach told me, first half-laughing, then closing his eyes as if in deep contemplation. We stretched out our legs, letting the water work its magic on muscles sore from plodding around Pest on foot, since we were too cheap to buy a metro pass.

Gradually we pieced the rules together: no swimming in the cold pool without a cap, no drinking beer while in any of the pools, and no hoisting girls onto your shoulders while in the pool, Mr. Jones
Ill-advised Tattoos, even if she is your girlfriend. And beyond the whistle-enforced rules there seemed to be a prescribed regimen for bathing, one that denounced our method of going from pool to pool randomly and instead elevated the bathhouse experience to a highly structured art form. Time limits varying with the temperature of the water, stricter time limits for the saunas and steam rooms, silence in the sauna, strange stretching rituals that the old folks perform in the water. I felt like I was in a Kafka novel when a heavy, older man came into the sauna room, faced the wall and started jogging in place. His pace was slow and rhythmic, almost delicate, as if he were trying to tread grapes without splashing the juice on his legs. He jogged at least ten minutes straight, never looking away from the wall that was less than a foot from his face.

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I lie awake wondering how long I’ve been lying awake, calculating what time it could be and how much longer I have until I should be up and about, how much time I could sleep if I were to fall asleep right . . . now. The moment at which the alarm clock will sound is a sort of unbending boundary against which the hours I could be sleeping shrink down to minutes, then seconds. I am too aware of how the grains fall through the hourglass, too busy with my calculations to let go and fall out of myself and into the dreams that collapse time into some strange fable that seems possible but not likely.

It can be so quiet in the house at night that I wonder whether I could be at that moment capable of speech. If I keep still, stare at
the wall instead of typing or fidgeting or flicking the light switch on and off, and if my right eye stops twitching, nothing moves. The house stands guard over the world as we left it until we are ready to pick up where we left off the next morning: the mug left on the coffee table, the backpack against the chair, the books thrown across the couch, the dime left in the middle of the carpet. The tree falling in an unobserved forest could be completely silent as far as I'm concerned; it is of greater importance to know whether time exists in the moments when no trees fall or even sway in the breeze and all the animals lie motionless in their dens and treetop nests.

Were I more coordinated, I would consider taking a walk up to campus and back while standing on my hands. Just to break the world from its trance, to get the whole thing spinning again as it balances on the turtle's back. At two in the morning there isn't anyone to see you trudging down the sidewalk doing a handstand, nobody to tell you that you look silly or that you're upsetting social order by insisting that the world turn itself upside-down for a few minutes. I could look down at my feet as they tiptoe through the stars and imagine falling off the globe, into the darkest nothing, eventually spaghettified as I'm pulled into a black hole. Pulled thin, threadlike as I approach the gravitational singularity, I wonder if I could become ribbon enough to tie a bow around the universe; an infinitely long strand for an infinite mass, I could wrap the whole thing up to be placed under the tree for Christmas.

I have not faith enough to sleep; I don't know enough of its mechanics to trust it. Whenever we experience sleep we are by definition incapable of observation, so in a sense I have never slept, or at least I have never experienced sleep as a self that I recognize. My
sleeping self is a stone statue on the ocean floor, with kelp swaying above it, blocking out all light—no sound, no warmth. Sleep has its conquest one way or another; if I do not present myself as a willing subject while the sun hides and I lay wrapped in blankets, it pulls me under during class or as I read even the most engaging books. The professor paces at the front of the lecture hall, explaining how to calculate the present value of an annuity, and then, suddenly, I'm gone.

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The one time I've ever passed out completely, I was at my cousins' house during summer vacation. I hadn't drunken enough water, had skipped breakfast, and wasn't used to the dry heat. I stood up after sitting on the couch for an hour catching up with the family, and then everything faded. I remember looking at the piano when I came to and trying to match it, like the Rosenbergs' Jell-O box, to something I had known, something that seemed seven lifetimes ago. My mom says I fell backward and hit my head on the piano bench and then lay on the ground, twitching slightly. But I know that I fell down, down into the dark until I was floating there, alone, working on a poem for years (I don't know what it was about), arguing with myself over word choice, reading the lines out loud until I became aware of some swelling chord as if out of a broken church organ, building in an awful crescendo until it pulled my eyes open.

Perhaps in the moment of death we lose our grip on the here and now and drift into the dream of another life. We are born so
completely into the new world that we forfeit all awareness of our dying moments in the world we left behind. And as months of time are compacted into the short seconds that I lay twitching on the floor next to the piano, we live an entire lifetime within what is a second or two in the life that contains our truest death. But we never reach that first death, drifting into another existence as we lie dying at the conclusion of the second life. If the y-axis were “real” time, the time that ticks away in the base reality, the one we left when in the process of dying for the first time, and the x-axis were time as we experience it regardless of what layer we occupy, we could experience infinity within the final seconds before our death. We could follow x-values ad infinitum and never reach the y-value we aim for, the moment of death. The last breath, multiplied into endless lives and worlds, like light split into a full spectrum, expanding, filling an entire range of values from one end of endlessness to the other.

I’ve heard that our souls were never born and can never die, which leaves us stuck in the middle of infinity, stationary, hamsters turning wheels forever.

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After venturing inside to discover the indoor pools, we found the steam room. The steam was thick enough that when I first stepped in I thought it was empty: silence and a curtain of mist. But with a few steps toward center, figures materialized like foreboding apparitions; what appeared an empty room was in fact packed with patrons. They lined the walls, the mist obscuring their faces, a herd
of unidentified limbs and torsos. The hot air burned in my lungs, sharp with the scent of eucalyptus. My head, like a bottle uncorked, all the tension out.

If I could run fast enough that everyone else on the soccer field seemed to be walking, then oozing from one place to another, then not even moving at all, my tendons might dry up and burn away; my muscles might boil into vapor, gone into space. It seems to be a question of will, of mental energy. My legs would move when I told them to, as fast as I told them to, until they reached a speed at which the legs protested and the mind started to take the protests seriously. It would consider easing up when instead it should push harder, to the true limit of how fast a leg could move. Because we'll never escape if we quit once the pain starts, once we see we're approaching the outer limits of normal. We need to get past it, we need to be a blur; I know it's frightening to think of what lies beyond, outside of material existence, but it couldn't match the thought of the stillness of night unbroken by a ticking clock; noiselessness between the stars; heavy coins in a coat pocket; houses buried to the roof in post-flood mud, wire pulled thin thin thin never snapping, buckets never hitting the bottom of the well. I think that if I could run fast enough, I could burn up into nothing.

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Leinenbach and I rushed out of the steam room and into the coldest pool, empty, the water icy still. It was a sort of joke. Run in, run out, a quick dip like the Finns do when they break through ice in the stream outside the sauna. Like manly Finns. But we stayed
in the pool, legs pulled to the chest, up to our necks in the water. It was almost a pleasant thought, almost something to smile at. My heartbeat slowed slightly, calmed as if by divine command, and I thought it might stop altogether, it might just stop and I'd drift away. I know it's quite funny; I can be quite funny sometimes.

We chatted in short statements, drawing breath like inverted coughs. Our English brought a stranger to the pool; he wanted to know if we were Americans. He was from Maryland, probably the same age as us, and seemed to be there alone. I wondered what he was doing near the cold pool of the Széchenyi Bathhouse alone, and why he was talking to us. I had never met someone from Maryland before.

I thought about the ship scuttled at the end of the pier at Seacliff State Beach, south of Santa Cruz. I saw it when I was a child, the ship at the end of the pier, filled with concrete, low in the water. The waves rolled in but the ship didn't move; it never moves. Inside the exposed hull strange currents swirl, dark water topped with foam. There was something terrible about that ship; I wanted not to run away, but to have never seen it, to have never thought of the possibility that it could exist, anchored down just below the surface of the water. What mountain of a wave could move that ship? What wall of water, of skyscraper height, could break the will of stone and iron sunk in water?

For a moment I dip below the surface, fully immersed. The buzz of conversation gone, the bathhouse now cleansed of all its foreign chatter, of the Americans and Spaniards and Poles and Turks. It must have been my chance at a moment of healing, beneath the
Inscape

silence of cold, my pulse whispering through the water in a timeless language.

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I drove through the night to get back to school after a weekend at home in California. The illuminated dots dividing the road moved along faster and faster until they blurred into a solid line, but the dark outline of mountains on the horizon seems stationary, as if the road rolling beneath me was just the belt of a treadmill. After hours of driving, I can’t tell what’s been done with the last ten minutes, and whole cities slide past me unnoticed; I grip the steering wheel thinking that it is the external manifestation of my fatigue and if I can choke it dead, outside of me there’s no danger of slipping off the road and crashing into the side of a hill. When I can’t hear the engine I know I’ve faded too far; I grip the wheel more tightly and look for some sign of light on the road in front of me that can prove my eyes are open. Moths illuminated by the headlights dart toward me, halted when they splat against the windshield. Help me through the night.