

You were climbing down a ladder, and then there was no ladder; you were not falling and then you very much were, which as far as loci were concerned was not uncommon, if never fun. You could tell yourself over and over that the drop wasn't going to kill you, that it never killed you, that even when a drop really should've killed you (the cold wind, the dark water) you made it, and over and over your bitch brain would pussy out: YOU'RE FALLING REALLY FAST AT THE GROUND, it would inform you, YOU ARE FALLING REALLY FAST AT THE GROUND AND ARE GOING TO DIE; YOU ARE GOING TO FUCKING DIE YOU ASSHOLE, DO SOMETHING!!! And you were never stronger than the weakest part of you, so usually you flailed around ineffectually for a couple seconds, knowing you looked stupid and it meant nothing, until you crashed and never ever died.

This was only kind of what happened. What happened was way worse, actually. The rational top-level part of you was clicking along fine, dictating reassurances to the utter void, etcetera. But this time— goddamn! You can't even say it, it's so goddamn humiliating. This time you— ugh! This time, instead of the self-preservational screaming, it was dead silent in you. No words at all. Wow, right? You finally grew up? You gained final mastery over your useless screaming lizard brain? No, no, no, no, no. You don't have a lizard brain anymore. Your lizard brain is moldering along with the rest of your old body. You see? You get it? You're so fucking smart. You didn't even think about dying this time, this freefall, because you were too busy attempting to fly.

See? There. It's out. Your murky basal instincts rose and swamped you and you spent between five and ten seconds trying to open your wingcases, which you did not have, and catch the rushing air, which you could not do. And you were confused by this, and struggled for an explanation, and landed on the terrifying concept that you'd been **stuck together**— that something had squashed you into a sodden clumsy wingless mass, and dropped you here to laugh as you fell and crashed and died. (It came back to the dying after all, you liar, you liar.) And this was what consumed you while you were falling, the worst ten or five seconds of your life, until you crashed and didn't die. Then you remembered.

Though maybe 'crashed' is the wrong word. You hit Us's surface and splattered like rotten fruit, is what happened, droplets of Gil scattering fifteen feet in all directions. Your first thought was: fuck. Your second thought was: what the fuck? Lottie fell before you did, and Us had gaped wide and closed around her and she'd vanished just like that. You'd seen it out of the corner of your eye. This was not that. This wasn't painful, or even particularly uncomfortable (you were used to being broken apart), but this was very, very much not that.

If you could pull yourself back together, it would probably be okay. You could not. You may as well have hit a goddamn strip of flypaper. What's more, you were pins and needles all over. Your third thought was: aw, shit. Lottie. What is Lottie going to—?

Then: a ripple. A dampness. A tug at your numb body, which sagged and gave way. A tug at your stunned mind, which sagged and lost thought and gave way too. Blue light. Release. Relief.

Then: nothing.

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It's not accurate to say you died.

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It's not accurate to say you died, any more than it is to say you died the first time, or the second time, which is to say: only if total change is destruction. You had always wondered how your beetles felt, being you. You can't say that out loud. Nobody would get it (except maybe Richard, but you didn't want Richard to get it). But, listen— you're in charge of them, but not in control. Does that make sense? You issue commands from on high, to go left or right or stop or start, and your bodies follow clumsily. Stop issuing commands, and they idle and disperse. They start doing beetle things. They live. Have you mentioned that you think about this a lot? You, greater than the sum of your parts, have never known— can never know— what one Gil-beetle experiences. Is your mind a hated intrusion upon it? A miraculous intervention? Are you a god to these beetles? Are you haunting them? Is there a "you" at all— are you the lame average of what all the beetles want to do? You don't want it to be the last one. The last one freaks you the fuck out.

If you had to say you were anywhere, you would say you were underwater. But that's not quite right. If you had to say you were anything, you would say you were seawater. That's closer. You are not quite awake. Maybe not quite alive. But you are fluid, pooling and mixing, pushed by unseen currents, dragged by unseen tides, incomprehensible things— voices— messages swimming through you. At first in unknown languages, then in senseless fragments, then in—

He is stirring!

Thank the gods.

The gods have nothing to do with this. We do not need more of us.

You would forsake the fellow-dead?

There is no use in bickering. He is with us already.

We did not choose this.

We did not know!

He was kind before. We can be kind in return.

He is listening, you know.

Do you think he is frightened?  
It is a frightening thing. He should be.

(We were frightened.)

Speak for yourself. I was—

Where are you?

With us. Within us.

No place really.

Death. You have died.

We have died.

It wasn't your fault. Or ours.

(It was some of ours.)

I thought we were in that awful place—

Maybe physically. We have made our own place.

You should join us.

He has seen it already, when he lived.

Join us now? Without seeing us?

I agree. He should see us.

He is still muddled. Hold on.

Does he remember his name? He does.

(Why does he remember and we cannot?)

(Shh. He is newly dead.)

Gilbert Wallace?

He likes 'Gil.'

(I have never heard this name before.)

(It has been many years. They have made new names.)

Gil Wallace?

Gil?

Gil?

Open your eyes, Gil.

You don't seem to have any.

Humor us. Pretend.

All we do anymore is pretend.

We would not mislead you. You are one of us.

Try it.

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...You are somewhere. You are Gil Wallace. You are in a crowd of people, and all of them are looking right at you. Something has gone terribly wrong. What? Have you done something? Did you fuck something up? You must've fucked something—

Be at peace.

It is better here than out there.

It is better alive than here.

(Yes, and it is better to be a cloud than a grain of sand. We are being pragmatic.)

Sorry for the ruckus.

He had better get used to the ruckus.

Are you feeling okay?

Are you feeling okay? The only thing you know is that something has gone wrong. Something inside you is wrong. Are you in a locus? You have hands. Five fingers. Your name is Gil Wallace. The crowd isn't real. The people look convincing at a first glance, but stare any harder and their faces go all off: sheeny, melted.

He is judgmental.

He is keen.

We are sorry. We can't help it.

It's better when we're dreaming.

It's better than nothing at all. We are dead.

You are dead too. We told you. Do you know it?

Dead? No, no. You're not...

You must be. Or you would not have joined us.

(He did not join us before. He must have died between then and now.)

We are sorry for your loss.

I'm not sorry. It is what it is.

Play nice!

You're not dead. (Except something is really wrong.) Fuck! When did you die? What happened before this? Something about... flying? Falling? Did you fall and fucking die? Is this what happens after you die, you wake up in a crowd of freaky-faced not-people— god! You're such a fuck-up! Is Lottie here? Did she kick it too? Or— you are going to fuck her up so bad, if she's not dead. You are going to fuck her up so goddamn bad, you piece of—

Charlotte Fawkins is within us again.

She is not one of us.

Speak plainly! She is alive.

Unfortunately.

I do not think it is unfortunate. It was not her fault.

We do not know why she has come, but she is alive.

Perhaps to bring his body to us?

It could be. We might ask her.

No! No. No. No. Please, no.

No?

He is ashamed.

I think he would like to spare her feelings.

Surely she will discover it herself.

She may already know, if she brought him here.

He does not seem to think so.

Does he know under what circumstances he came?

I don't think he remembers who we are.

You're right. Was it that long?

No. He only needs reminded. Who does he know?

One of us. He was fast friends.

I think it was Theodore. I will bring him.

The crowd shifts, gurgles, presses apart. In their midst springs a— a— Teddy. Teddy is slightly misshapen, but he is there. Here. He has come right up to you, close enough to see his eyes through his thick glasses.

You try to say 'hi', but your mouth isn't working right. Teddy inclines his head.

Hi, cousin.

Cousin? You can't respond. Shit. Does he know where you are? Does he know if you're dead? Does he know if Lottie—

You are responding. You always have been. And I think it's cousin... give or take a couple hundred years, if I have it from you right.

I also think you know what's happened. You have to. You just don't have your head on straight.

You never have your head on straight. You're always fucking yourself up about one thing or another.

We'll get you sorted. Buck up.

You haven't even really joined the party. I think you'd feel better if you did.

You don't know what that means.

Do you trust me?

Teddy's a cool guy. So you guess so. He's the only person you know here, wherever here is.

Glad to hear it. Shake on it.

He extends a gloppy hand. After a moment of hesitation, you grab and shake and— and come together, in terrible familiar fashion. Like being the join of two rivers, or two sides of a zipper, or paint mixing, or stars colliding, or fingers lacing, yours and Teddy's, and when you look you see yourself looking, and see that your face is misshapen too. Teddy's mind sparks and courses against yours, within yours, and you scan the jumbled fragments of his history before withdrawing guiltily. You would like to take your hand away, but can't. It is fused cleanly with his, and glowing blue at the join.

Teddy's thoughts form in your head before he can think them: Sorry, cousin. This is what we are. Can I introduce you to the rest?

You don't know your response, because it forms in his head instead. Whatever it was, Teddy tugs your arm forward, bringing your chests together, and wraps his other arm around your upper back, and you receive the impression that he means to pound it, in the method of a manly-man hug. The kind your brothers always did with their buddies. But he can't, because his body is melded half with yours now, and the crowd is crowding closer, and in Teddy's mind you sense them buzzing. You are joined to him, and him to them, and them to each other, out and out forever. From a particular angle it's terrifying. Dehumanizing. Like a mass grave. But you *are* dead, in a particular sense, and more than that you're not human. Your murky basal instincts are saying: there is safety in numbers. They are saying: there is comfort in following

directives. In stopping and starting and veering on command. They are saying: there is an itch inside you to join a swarm.

After you'd satisfied yourself that your human mind wasn't going anywhere, you had discovered it soothing to let the beetles do what they wanted. Mostly they bumbled around, avoiding bright light, seeking plants to sit in or gnaw on. Whatever. Beetles aren't complicated. What they did didn't matter. What mattered was you: rocked and stretched by their random movement, you could slip into a light dreamlike state. Your mind could wander, free of usual concerns— maybe you left those inside the beetles. Also whatever. You could stay like that for a long time, not asleep or awake, not beetle or human, not in control but not out of it— you could reassert yourself whenever you wanted. You just didn't want to. You liked being nothing at all.

Us was a little like that: you letting slip of your body, and self, which were each really already gone. You already were them; it was only a matter of being Them. (You were already beetles; it was only a matter of being them.) You sank into Teddy and a little ways into the ground and the crowd sank into you in turn, not replacing you, but bundling alongside you. You were yourself but not only yourself. Not even mostly only yourself. You could exist in a light dreamlike state, letting currents and signals flow through you, contributing your own on occasion, and above you could form something greater than the sum of its parts. Something wiser and older than you could ever be yourself.

And below, Teddy, no longer misshapen, could separate and slap your back and point out to you a place you could go. You would remember your name in this place. You would have a good and steady life in this place, a place where you cannot die, where the world cannot end. It will never end. The waters will never rise. You can exist there and be happy, and if you ever tire of it, your thousand-thousand lifetimes can mix and make another one.

You were Them already, and half-asleep, but you guttered out a minor protest: But Lottie?

And you responded: **WELL, SHE IS THERE ALREADY.**

This was good enough, so Teddy showed you the way, and you went.

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