

elseship

: an unrequited
affair



tree abraham

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*an unrequited
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For M [REDACTED]

SAMPLE



In that first year after my admission of love, there were starts and stops transitioning from being housemates and friends into an undefined elshship. A few days after my birthday, I was lying on the couch dripping heartache inchoate of my soon-to-be unrequited love, you were sitting next to me stroking my hair. This was the last time it would be simple, you illimitably unfiltered, us a weightless relation. I couldn't have known it then, how we would be redefined in a moment like nothing had come before and tomorrow would never arrive. All at once our loose grains of sand hardened into a glassy mass, and that year, and all of our years in relation to one another thereafter, would forever remain a conundrum of flash and rock.

We had hard talks every few months after that. About how we struggled to trust each other, the ways it made us writhe. Thrumming, spasming, the question that nagged in us: Were we allowed to exist?

One such talk happened on New Year's Eve, almost a year after the admission. You said, Maybe this talk was what we needed to reset. As the clock approached and passed midnight, I lay on the couch and you sat next to me stroking my hair for the first time since that last time. Then you laid your head on me, and I stroked your hair for the first time, and you fell asleep and so did I. In a way, this end to that year felt like a reset, but in truth, we were somewhere entirely new. This is an account of our in-between, because that is where we live, that is where our love was found.

The story of you and me starts where most end: unrequited love confronting friendship.

Here is written many things about us. So many specific things that it might appear to include everything. It does not. It does not include your side. Everything written here is what psychologists term *myside bias*.

It leaves out things I love and dislove about you that are too personal. It leaves out moments that tasted so sweet but melted too fast. It excludes some of the worst acts that transpired between us that need not be recapitulated. And only includes your words when possible to directly transcribe. Written here are nonchronological snapshots compressing and shuffling time and void.

To pin this book to dates would imply that love remains loyal to days both in arrangement and duration. But love, and memory, are unconcerned with locating themselves. They are forces. Though I tried to keep this book in that first year, some realities and insights slip in from beyond it—to the equally challenging years that followed where we stayed living together, then when we didn't—but mostly, while we kept going, my revelations and observations of our dynamic hold true to what took place in year one, even if I've had to relearn them again and again in non-linear order.

This book cannot contain everything because it is a book, not a life. Or so I told myself. I must not live in this book. Once recorded, I should abandon what is not written and move beyond it, back into an unwritten future. But we are storytellers, constantly gathering fragmented happenings into a recognizable shape, making choices about how to interpret hardships and windfalls. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are and how we came to be forge our identities. My gut is a jumble of fear-filled hysterias. I fear that love and happy and all good things might be

like fisting a handful of sand, with grains trickling out every second until the palm is dusted with grit but mostly left gripping itself.

To endure our complexity, I had to actively solder **facets** of us into a meaningful narrative.

That year I needed this story, I still do.

Each time I've tried to sequence the story, it has resisted arborescence, I am not the tree I was when I began telling it. I kept changing and so did everything between us. Deleuze and Guattari write about how the romantic structure of a book is dialectical to nature, hierarchical, and with a binary logic that betrays the intricacy of life. They propose a counterstructure, with *rhizomes* and *lines of flight*: no subject or object, only undifferentiated space and ruptures in predetermined thoughtways. When a paradigm breaks, lines of flight offer entrances toward new intensities, identities, and connections. When a rhizome splinters along old or new nodes, it fractalizes but remains whole.

You see, we started as housemates, soon became friends . . . then I fell in love and you didn't and we kept going, being housemates, being friends, becoming something else. What we'll end as—there isn't a word for that.

In a way, our persistence gave rise to rhizomes. But our unrequited affair also marooned me. What I have done here is tweezed out shards—of definitions, metaphors, memories, moments, feelings—and welded them together along lines of flight, removing and replacing and fusing new and old remnants into a -ship of some sort that I could hold in book form.

facet: one of many definable aspects of something (a situation, subject, object, person's character, etc.); the small sides cut into gemstones to increase light reflection

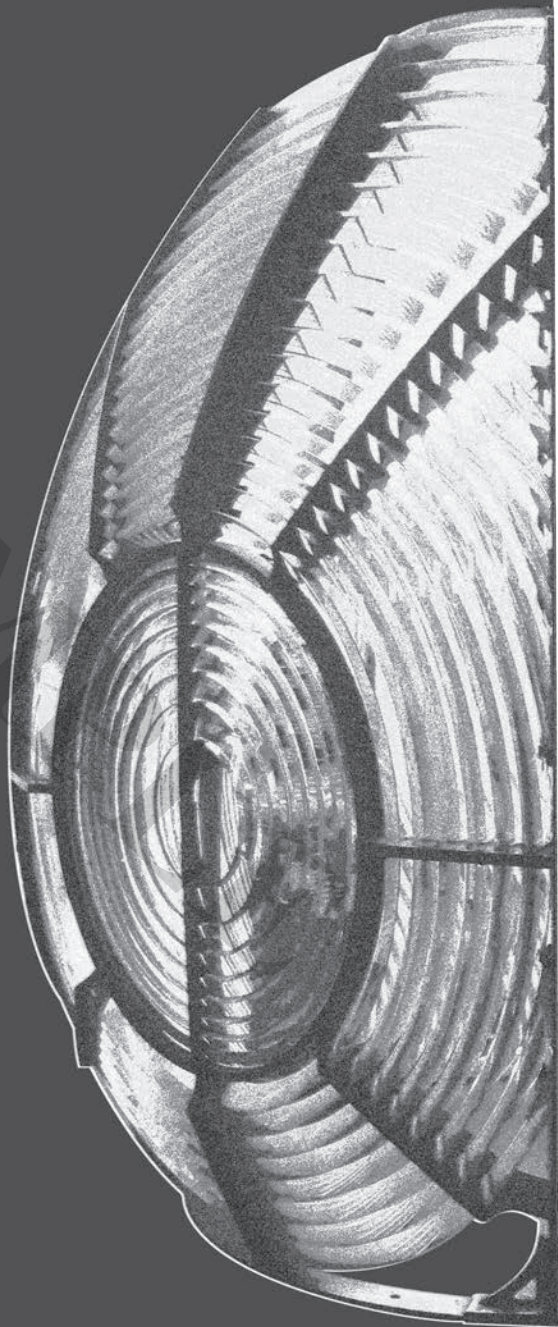
I am a pilgrim peregrinating for words. Those with obscure, exacting definitions that confirm through their existence that a seemingly particular phenomenon also belongs to the universal. You know this. I love how sometimes you say, *There should be a word for that*, and I will try to find one, and you are elated if I do.

Believing synonyms did not exist, Gustave Flaubert was in constant search for the most precise “right word” (*le mot juste*) for every occasion. Homer called it a *winged word*. What does a winged word provoke? Perhaps I believe that fashioning a word in the shape of a phenomenon can liberate me from ever again needing language for it, and the new species of word, once spelled out, can immediately fly away.

Some definitions of new and old words encountered this year became glass lenses in a **lighthouse**, straightening the beam seen through the fog of what our -ship meant.

lighthouse: When lighthouses began to use gigantic lenses to strengthen their beams, the glass was solid, heavy, and expensive, with a thickness that weakened the penetrating light. In 1822, physicist and civil engineer Augustin Fresnel invented a new lightweight design of glass lenses that wrap around a lamp to refract scattering light into concentrated parallel beams. The *Fresnel lens* stairsteps hundreds of cut-glass panels into concentric rings, which can radiate an infinite combination of constant or flashing light patterns across great distances.

SAM



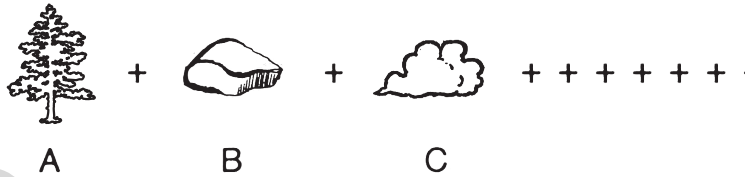
Words shape stories. We perceive the physical world through language acquired to describe it. We perceive our inner worlds similarly. The more new and specialized words we learn to classify our variegated emotional states, the deeper we are able to delve into ourselves. Language favours the physically observable. The absence of words describing the intangible can limit our ability to define our experiences.

I lap up web listicles of foreign words with no English equivalent, revealing the sensibilities of different cultures. Tagalog's *kilig* is a noun that describes tingling or fluttering felt when overcome with romance. The Mandarin word *yuánfēn* reflects an entire belief system in the fated affinity two people have for one another. *Cafuné* in Portuguese is the verb for running your fingers through a loved one's hair.

I remember the first time you stroked my hair because it was the first time anyone had. You came and sat on my bed one morning while we were talking logistics about our day's field trip. You had overslept. I was fully dressed and wilted over one side of the bed atop freshly laundered sheets, as I waited sleepily for your wake. You perched across from me, apologetic for the delay. Without announcement, your hand reached over to tickle the hair around my ear, as if you had done it a thousand times before. Only a split second of surprise delayed what became an addiction to the sensation. Your small pointy fingers moved like they were playing a string instrument on my scalp. I would have cancelled all our plans to stay on the bed like that with your fingers' cradlesong. I couldn't need a word for that feeling before meeting the act that made it. Now I need the winged word because I need the act.

The thing about the word *love* is that it encapsulates a universal feeling but, in every way, feels entirely particular. Never have I felt more common yet, in a moment, unrepeatable. Love heightens everything. It is little things and big things, unusual and plain things, all of it marbled together.

Carson McCullers wrote a short story about a man trying to teach a boy the ability to love. The man says he made the mistake of starting with the climax of loving a woman, when really he should have started with “A tree. A rock. A cloud.”



Better to start by loving the small details found in one’s surroundings, to find love in every particle that makes up the universe, from which we are inseparable.

Love is granular, also mountainous, enormous—unyielding—a big thing, but it yields, so slow with time, it becomes something else—a Sisyphian boulder, a rolling stone, a rocky road, gravel, sand—little things.

All your things sprinkling over everything like celebratory glitter as I too hover between earth and air. Loving you is *ammil*-like. *Ammil*, the Devon term for the thin film of ice that glazes a landscape after a freeze, every blade of grass to budding twig glimmering in the sunlight.

This icy layer draws me near over and over as you thaw with each re-approach. The slow way in which you reveal yourself compels me to listen intently, to look closer, to really take note and deconstruct the contours and fillings of your person.