

## **SOLVING FOR M**

by Megan Grumbling

Here are some of what once were, seemed, or eventually became the clues:

A bag of needles. A salt doll. Three dozen crows alighting in a tree. The last entry of a journal. A late-night knocking. Spoons in a sink. A goose in a bottle. The disappearance of *M*. Incidents involving maggots. The wings of dead birds.

And here are some of what once were, seemed, or were eventually revealed to be the mystery itself:

A lifeless body. A Zen koan. A ritual in the dark. An opera. A cup, or a scythe, or a story. A rehearsal. A hole in the ground.

But at first, the mystery was obvious, and the clues were at their most literal, most forensic.

The spoons in D's sink. A piece of plastic, possibly a syringe-cap, on his linen tablecloth. That there were 16 needles in a package that, according to the label, had once contained 30. That this package of needles had been placed inside a flowered paper bag, on which had been printed, in black marker, D's name. That below D's name, on the flowered bag, was printed an "H," with an incongruously pretty serif on the end of its crossbar. A bottle of oxycontin in his medicine cabinet, filled six months before. A new journal on the table, written in only on two pages. My name in ink, in his hand, on the second page.

I observed everything in a state of high vigilance. I scrutinized the place of, the day of, the days leading up to the death. Time-stamps, voicemail messages, emails, my own journal entries. I cross-referenced each with each. Over and over, I replayed what I knew and what I was finding as I investigated. There seemed to be something to deduce from all of it, something to solve. I had become a detective.

As the weeks went on, the clues I found myself scrutinizing became more oblique. The certain poems long dog-eared in his Wallace Stevens. His off-hand comment, a week before the death, about dragonflies. Whether a heron I passed in the marsh, as I biked to the beach with his ashes, was hunting or at rest. These were slant-clues. A sutra on form and emptiness. On his shelf, a shell placed on a leaf. A stone on a stone. These clues were less obvious than the earlier ones, the needles and the bottles. These clues were so much less obvious that I wasn't even sure what they were clues *to*.

What a detective solves is a mystery.

But the circumstances of the death were not mysterious. A man, a composer, a former addict, had been rejected by his lover and had gone home, put a needle in his arm, and was killed by its contents. I had seen him that morning, had told him what I told him, and had watched him leave my house. He was found four hours later, with the means of death perfectly visible beside him. What had killed him was in no way concealed or unknown. The cause of death. The motive. The culprit. Everything was exactly how it looked.

And yet my vigilance continued. My observations, my investigation. His blue shirts and his green. Shells on leaves, stones on stones. If these were the clues, what was the mystery? In scrutinizing them so closely, what was it I thought I would solve?

Life and death, we intone, are the great mystery. *Love, the unsolved mystery*, a Kate Chopin narrator calls it. *It's a mystery to me*, we say. A god is said to work *in mysterious ways*. It all seems to mean *I don't understand it*. I might know it, but I don't understand it. Its workings are more complex than I can discern. *It mystifies me* means I am dazzled. Transported. With confusion, with dizziness. With a kind of awe.

Over a year has passed now; the anniversary of the death has come and gone. I am no longer that obsessive, desperate detective grasping at clues. On the other hand, I wonder if I am now simply a different kind of detective, in a different kind of mystery. And I wonder what else *mystery* might mean, what else it might mean to *solve* one.

~

When I was a child, my parents watched the PBS series *Mystery!*, and my favorite part was the animated Edward Gorey intro sequence, with its iconic theme music, its violins riddling against crumbling gravestones – a kind of arch death tango. I remember black-and-white graveyards. Shovels, ravens, men in black. A pale, nearly translucent, nearly glowing woman, moaning and writhing on a crypt, waving a white handkerchief.

The cartoon transfixed me with a vaguely pleasant horror and a vaguely horrific pleasure, with the tiny sound and tickle of something writhing, like the maggots I once glimpsed, as a child, under the head of a dead white goose in the woods when I upturned it with a stick. I quickly let the goose's

head fall again, as if stung. I imagined the white worms still moving on the concealed side of the feathered head. And then I reached my stick out and upturned the maggots again. I imagined them moving even deeper in the eye socket, deeper in the larger vessel of the goose, in the places I couldn't see.

As with the goose, each time I watched the *Mystery!* animation, I was fascinated by both what I could and couldn't see – both by the men with the shovels and the moaning lady, and by what I didn't know of their intentions and secrets and insanities. In the woods, when I crept up on the dead goose and saw the maggots eating the eye from its socket, one part of my fascination was with the existential conditions that might lead any creature to the state of death: Woods fraught with predators; insidious men in black. The other part of my fascination was with what we can expect to happen *next*, after death: Pale maggots, a translucent yet impenetrable madness writhing on a crypt.

~

What do I know about mysteries? There is a death. A victim. An investigator and suspects. Clues and red herrings. Evidence hiding in plain sight. A motive. An accusation and a culprit. A solution.

The classic murder mysteries, like those of Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle, tend to follow a limited range of forms and devices. “As a matter of fact,” writes mystery maven Dorothy Sayers, “it is doubtful whether there are more than half a dozen deceptions in the mystery-monger's bag of tricks.” She anatomizes what is widely considered the first modern murder mystery, Edgar Allen Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*. In it, Poe tells the story of ingenious August Dupin, who, accompanied by his rather less ingenious companion, looks in on the scene of a double-murder and handily solves it. Sayers says this one story “constitutes in itself almost a complete manual of

detective theory and practice.” The formulae it demonstrates include: The hermetically sealed room. The wrongly suspected man. The unexpected solution. And a detective’s obsessiveness, which allows for deductions that the bumbling, limited police have missed.

The room I investigated was not hermetically sealed. It had already been disturbed – by the person who found D, by EMTs – before I went to his apartment building the next day and made my way down the dim hall. I stood outside his door for some time, long enough for the motion-sensor lights to flicker off completely, before I tried the key. The key failed once, twice, three times. And then it beeped, released the latch. I opened the door a crack. I pushed it open. I stepped inside.

*No overt signs of death.*

This, from my notes on the scene.

*His bed was always an unmade disaster. But the comforter is on the far side of the room, by the drawing table; his pocket coins and tobacco are in a pile near the foot of the mattress. A huge rip in the sheet. Zen books. Empty wine magnums under the sink, a half empty glass on the sill.*

I knew the means of death had been taken away by the EMTs. None of the spoons in the sink were the means of death. These spoons were innocent, had only been used in his cereal, or his soup, or his tea. I studied them anyway, their wet sheen in the sink. I studied the little pile of coins and tobacco, the things that had been in his pockets. The books by the bed, AA books, books about Zen and music theory. I studied the waver in his handwriting in the journal. The golden ginkgo leaf on the bookshelf. The soft cotton of the blue shirt I’d seen him wearing a few hours before his death. The fabric’s scent, tobacco and sweat and lavender. Still, the more time I spent in his room, the less of a crime scene it was becoming: minute by minute, my very presence altered the evidence, diffused the scents. I had only so much time to solve what needed to be solved, whatever that was.

~

All of this mystery was giving me déjà-vu. And that made sense, because mysteries had been a veritable gravity between D and me long before this new, more final mystery had presented itself. The very word “mystery” had been often in our mouths when we were together, and we had, together, put the word “mystery” into the mouths of other people.

Our mystery was our final opera. Staged just two months before his death, with D’s music and my words, ours was an opera about a particular kind of mystery. The opera presented a sequel to the myth of Persephone, set in the age of climate change. In its near-future world – the “Late Anthropocene” – Persephone no longer spends three solid months in the underworld, as the Queen of Death, and the rest aboveground, as the Goddess of Spring. Now, Persephone comes and goes erratically, takes a human lover, drinks too much. Meanwhile, ice caps rot; storms surge; ticks, green crabs, and dead zones multiply.

In the original myth, while Persephone is underground in the world of death, her mother Demeter searches and grieves. Then, disguised as an old woman, Demeter receives solace from a mortal family, and it’s then that she reveals herself and gives to humans her “mysteries.” Despite loving Persephone when I was a child, it was not until the opera that I learned about these mysteries. In my somewhat cursory research, I learned that the mysteries Demeter gave to humans are a kind of ritual, and that the ancient Greeks practiced them – practiced many different ritualized mysteries – for thousands of years. The particular mystery of Demeter and Persephone was practiced in Eleusis, near Thebes, and thus these mysteries are referred to as the Eleusinian Mysteries. They recreate, in three stages, the main action of the Persephone myth: Descent, when Persephone goes underground; Search, when Demeter seeks and grieves; and Ascent, when Persephone, having struck her deal

with death, returns. At some point in the ritual, a hallucinatory grog is drunk. Near the end, someone speaks the words *Rain and Conceive!* The phases of this ancient mystery – Descent, Search, and Ascent – became the basis for the three movements of our opera.

The precise nature of a mystery can itself be mysterious, and Demeter, in our opera, is constantly trying to help us understand. In the first movement, she tells us about how she gave mysteries to humans, and about what mysteries were and are, weren't and aren't. *Mysteries?* she says, as if someone in the audience has asked her to explain.

*Let's say they were a story. Or a cup. Let's say they were some part mirror, some part scythe.*

But now, in the late Anthropocene, Demeter laments, people have lost the practice, have developed *a taste for more than mysteries*. They have also lost the very sense of the ancient word: *Mysteries?* she says.

*Mysteries are misunderstood now. A mystery isn't an unknown. You are growing one right now in your throat.*

What is a mystery? According to the opera, our opera, a mystery is both a tale and a vessel. Part reflection and part blade. Not an unknown. Something growing, in my own body, at this very moment. Something alive.

That was me who wrote all that, those gnostic answers to the question. What do they actually mean? I don't think I was sure even as I wrote it. In fact, *mirror*, *cup*, and *scythe*, as answers, actually deepened what I *didn't* understand about mysteries. I have now, since the death, re-read our

opera many times. What is a mystery? *Part mirror, part scythe*. Yes, I think now, not understanding, but knowing. *A cup*. Yes. Of course.

~

A friend's husband who is a classics scholar tells me that the word "mystery" comes from the verb *muo*, "I close," referring often to the eyes, but sometimes to wounds. Later, *muo* evolved into *mueo*, or "to be initiated into the *musteria*," later the *mysteria* – the mysteries – as practiced by the order of Eleusis and others.

The person who walks through the ancient Greek mysteries is called not a detective, but a *mystes*, an initiate. In the ritual, the *mystes* is cleansed, then blind-folded. He goes into the dark, or perhaps an underground room. And then he sees a vision.

What actually happened when the *mystes* went into the dark? These Eleusinian rites were not recorded, and in fact were kept secret, but we can speculate. My scholar friend imagines that the *mystes* experienced "some raw and physical moment, a flash from a box, a boom from a drum, I don't think anyone knows." He says, of the crucial moment of the ritual, "The mystery at that moment was unveiled – light and dark were one." As my friend sees it, this ritual was devoted to "unmasking the 'mystery' of the eternal continuity between life and its umbilically rooted association with darkness."

*Umbilically rooted*. "I think of the mysteries as underground," my friend continues. "Deep and rich in a meaning that is below the surface, not abstract like an archetype, dark until the door or box opens with a flash of insight." So the mysteries are not abstract, just hidden, dim, capable of being



opened, unmasked, lit. They are tangible, graspable in hand – *mirror, cup, scythe* – just unlit, underground. Perhaps right under our feet. To enact a mystery is to intentionally go into the dark, to perform there a certain sequence of acts, and to then re-emerge literally enlightened, somehow changed.

~

What happens between the beginning and the end of a mystery? The action of a murder mystery, according to literary critic Carl Malmgren, is a quest not only forward but backward in time, in order to right and redeem what a protagonist cannot undo. The focus is on *before* rather than *after*, Malmgren says, relative to two key points on the timeline: he calls the moment of the murder the *terminus ab quo*, or “zero-time”; the moment at which the solution is deduced is called the *terminus ad quem*. “It is finally the past, the time before zero-time, that matters,” says Malmgren. “Return to zero-time marks the restoration of the equilibrium that the originary crime had so drastically disrupted.” The mystery’s plotline begins after the *terminus ab quo*, and though the action proceeds forward, that action is “moving forward in order to move back,” in the formulation of critic Dennis Porter. Parallel with the investigation’s plotline toward the *terminus ad quem* is the plotline of events that led up to zero-time, the revelation of which comprises the solution. Or, as Malmgren puts it, the solution “rehearses the series of events which culminated in the crime which occurred at zero-time.”

*Rehearses.* As if the solving is like the practice for a performance, for a play. For an opera.

*Every opera is a rehearsal for grief.*

That’s something I wrote very shortly after zero-time. I had been revisiting our own opera, which is itself about grief – grief over climate change, over environmental catastrophe. Re-reading the last

pieces of the libretto, I was stunned to read poems of such solace that they might have been written expressly for my new mourning self. As if I had been rehearsing for myself, in advance, both the grief and the solace. *What happens*, Demeter concedes, *is grief shrinks the stomach*. Then: *But*, she continues,

*finally grief  
is just one more hole*

*in the ground.  
And what do you do*

*with the hole?*

~

Not all of the world's mysteries involve looking down into the ground and the dirt and the dark. In an anthology called *The Mysteries*, edited by Joseph Campbell, scholar C. Kerényi contrasts the ancient Greek mysteries with those of Christianity and our more modern sense of "mysticism": These later mysteries, he says, were concerned with, in the words of post-ancient mystic Plotinus, "the flight of the one to the one." Or, in Kerényi's words, the later mysteries enabled "man's exit from the world in which he as an individual is 'alone,' to achieve union of his whole being with the universal 'One.'" Kerényi's point of contrast is that in this post-ancient formulation, what is divine and sought is "*outside* the diversity of our natural existence"; that is, it is "supernatural," and thus an attempt to free man from natural bounds. The ancient mysteries, in contrast, like those of Eleusis, were about humans in and as nature, going into its darks as if going into themselves.

Exactly what transpired in those darks is unknown. Yet despite the common understanding that these rites were forcibly kept under wraps, Kerényi warns that "'secret' must not necessarily be taken to mean 'mystery.'" He prefers the sense of the word proposed by scholar Romano Guardini,

“who defined a genuine mystery as one that is experienced, venerated, lived – in other words, is not kept especially secret – and yet remains forever a mystery.” That is, the experience itself of the unveiling, of going into the dark or the underground in order to see a revelation, might be more of the point than the guarding of a secret. For the Greeks, Kerényi says, this secrecy was incidental, not intentional; the nature of the ritual was “a sacred open secret.” It was surely known by many, he says, but nevertheless remained “unutterable.” In that unutterableness, Kerényi says, the mystery had the quality of the *arreton*, the inexpressible, or the “ineffable: a true mystery.”

~

As a child growing up in the woods of in southern Maine, one true mystery that occupied me was a hole in the backyard. It had been there for a long time, but it wasn't a “natural” hole, I was sure. It had clearly been dug for a purpose. The hole was not particularly big, perhaps five feet in diameter, three feet deep. But to my child's mind, it was a hole of proportional significance. A young pagan, I tripped through the woods imagining that the hole had once been a place of ancient rites, worship, sacrifice. By whom? I was vague on that point. Maybe Druids. What precisely might have transpired there I couldn't know, and the unknowability inspired that same horrified pleasure and pleasurable horror, attraction and repulsion. I remember looking at the hole from the safety of some feet, circling the perimeter of the lip. I remember venturing a first foot over the edge, planting it warily on layers of disintegrating leaf-fall the color of old pennies. And I remember finally standing at the bottom of it, feeling myself at its depth, inside this remnant of something greater and stranger than what I could see. Standing in the place where something greater and strange had happened, I felt awe, curiosity, and horror. And I felt that by standing there, I was somehow standing in many moments at once across time, including moments in which the Druids moved, performing their rites. These out-of-time moments seemed to exist as if behind a screen, but close by; it seemed that they

might be visible if I only turned my head quickly enough. I sensed muffled, blurry motion and sound, voices, bodies in motion, some strong miasma of feeling or awe. I both did and didn't want to know more, but for a short time, standing in the center of the hole, I was nevertheless part of whatever it was I did not know. I was part of their mystery. I *was* the mystery.

Twenty years later, I learned the actual culprit of the backyard mystery hole: our old codger of a neighbor Booker, a woodsman, tree warden, and general iconoclast. It turned out Booker had a love of fine trees, and a habit of digging them up from one place to give as gifts, to friends and neighbors, somewhere else. It was birches, particularly, that he chose for this ritual – white birches, the straightest ones.

I imagine Booker alighting on a straight white tree in what was to become my backyard, how the light caught its white, and how he went to his truck and came back with a shovel. I imagine his blade going into the ground, deepening a ring around the straight white tree, severing the roots, the cuts in the earth finally meeting underground, till he could lift the tree on the spade, wrap it in burlap, and take it away in the bed of his truck. And I imagine him lifting it again, bringing it to a neighbor's front porch, and ringing the bell, waiting for the door to open and for the face to see the tree. Waiting for the sudden lights of surprise – birch, laughter – to catch and open that face. The birch would be watching too, with the soft, charcoaled eyes along its trunk, where the boughs it lost had left slightly parted lids, where the wounds had healed dark against the white, had left behind eyes. And then, as I imagine it, his spade would again slip into the ground, clear a new hollow place in the neighbor's yard for the root ball and the straight white trunk that grew from it.

Now, when I see that hole behind my parents' house, I think of the birch that once stood there. And so the mystery of the hole has changed. You could say that the mystery has been solved, that I now have the answer to the questions of who made the hole, and why, and how. But the case doesn't feel so open-and-shut. In a way, in fact, I feel as if the mystery has grown. Because now Booker's digging has joined, not supplanted, my blurry sense of the motion and feeling in the hole's secret history, in my sense of a rite performed there. Because it turns out that when, as a kid, I imagined strong feeling and motion, imagined a sacred ritual, I was right.

The mystery of the birch seems to mean a certain kind of love and social grace. What is it exactly that was given, exchanged, felt, enacted? It is certainly more than a birch. I could try to identify it as praise, love, appreciation, but it is more than those things. Booker's solitary eye caught by the white, his careful spade ringing the roots and lifting the life away intact. The exchange, the light caught, the new hole dug in new ground. There is more in it than spade, birch, and hole. It is difficult to express. It is ineffable.

~

Through the days and then the weeks after zero-time, a certain page kept falling off my fridge. All the windows in my apartment were open, and it was like a storm sometimes in the kitchen, a warm chaos of gusts that felt like some wild creature's will. Again and again, in the warm July winds, this page was swept from its magnet. Again and again I picked it up, read it once more, and stuck it back up. And so it became a clue. The page was a lesson from a Buddhist class that D had taken on something called "The Heart Sutra: The Womb of the Buddha." D had given this page to me one day as I served us tea.

The lesson is titled “I 7: “Emptiness Is Not Separate From Form, Form Is Not Separate From Emptiness.” Or, as someone named Hakuin phrased it: “Form is Emptiness, Emptiness is Form.” Or, as someone or something abbreviated as GTZ put it: “Form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself form.” The lesson proceeds to list six elaborations on the concept.

Number 1 reads: “There are no conditions under which form is different from emptiness or emptiness is different from form.”

*Really?* is what I remember thinking when D gave it to me. *So this teacup isn't a form? If I throw it on the floor, a form doesn't get broken into shards?*

I'm sometimes a little too fond of the tangible, maybe, the cold stolen plums in the hand and all that, and a part of me often resisted what I considered the lofty vagueness of some of D's Buddha stuff. Still, I tried to read the page and its paradoxes, its huts and mirrors and skinbags, tried to listen to D explain how form is emptiness and emptiness form, without raising an eyebrow – because, as with many other things, trying to understand form and emptiness was also trying to understand him, a person I loved. Finally, I filed the page on the fridge for some future time when I would sit down and really try to understand it.

Later, after zero-time, with my windows open to the warm, windy late July and then the hot, blustery August, once form-and-emptiness had become a clue, I found myself reading the lesson harder each time it flew across the kitchen and skimmed the floorboards. The stakes of understanding the lesson had soared, especially because its significance as a clue now seemed to have become less forensic than oracular – it seemed an insight not into what had happened to D and

how, but into the fact that it *had been going* to happen. And, even more importantly, it seemed a clue into what was to be done now that it had. The page on form and emptiness now seemed to have been placed in my hands specifically for this aftermath of zero-time. Like a seed or a breadcrumb. Like a clue in advance.

In number 2, Shitou says: “Thousands of words, myriad interpretations are only to free you from obstructions. If you want to know the undying person in the hut, don’t separate from this skin bag here and now.” That seems to mean, stay in the body. Don’t get caught up in abstractions or explanations. Embrace mortality. Clear enough. In number 3, Te-ch’ing says: “The statement ‘form is not emptiness’ destroys the ordinary person’s view of permanence. This is because ordinary people think that only their material body is real.” And sure – I do, lately, consider my views of permanence more or less destroyed.

Then, in number 4, Te-ch’ing says:

*....The true emptiness of prajna is like a huge round mirror, and every illusory form is like an image in the mirror. Once you know that images don’t exist apart from the mirror, you know that ‘emptiness is not separate from form.’*

And here is where I start to lose my grip on the concept. Because in this analogy, what is casting the reflection? Aren’t there actual forms out there creating reflections in this mirror? My hand would slide right off a stone or a cup or a person’s hand if I tried to hold it in the mirror, but if I turn around, isn’t there a form casting that reflection that I *could* hold?

There are surely all manner of things this lesson could help me solve – about D, about desire, about how any living person can be there, alive and complicated and potent, and then not be there. But I

can't figure the goddamn thing out. It still makes my head hurt, every time I take it down, read the words, and strain my brain to understand.

I'm not a Buddhist scholar. I really don't understand how form is emptiness. But now I better understand at least the stakes; I better understand both the relief and the terror of the proposition. Still, when I wrap my hand around a cup or a stone, when I imagine throwing the cup to the floor or the stone through a pane of glass, or when I take my own wrist in my hand and feel its pulse, I feel a form there, a form laden with consequence, with the latent capacity to be broken by or to break another form. I know I'm not supposed to care about the form that is broken, or the form that breaks another form, because any form is an illusion, or is ephemeral, or something – because that form is actually emptiness. But I *do* care. I *do* feel pleasure in the cool weight of the stone, the smooth curve of the cup, the soft blue beat under my skin, so solid yet vulnerable in my hand. I do feel love for the particular form that is one small stone laid by D on a longer, bed-with-pillow-shaped stone, which he gave to me and to which he gave the name *woman sleeping*.

Even this page I hold in my hand, the page on form and emptiness, this thing that can be blown away and picked back up so many times, this thing D held in his own hands and then gave to me, isn't it a form, even as thin and wrinkled as it is?

It is, at any rate, a clue. Possibly even evidence. So I inspect it closely, once again. On its blank reverse side, the paper is riddled with barely noticeable marks. Tiny, dark little colonies of dots, like an inverse Milky Way. That's just some sort of mold, from long hanging against the moisture of my fridge. But amid the dots is also a faint, stray curve of brown. This mark could have been made by him, perhaps by the lid of his omnipresent Ball jar of lukewarm coffee. By a hastily scarfed piece of



chocolate. By a scuff of the sole of his loafer. How easily, even now, I slip back into detection. I actually put my nose to the mark and smell it. Nothing, of course. I put the page back on the fridge.

~

Over my years of knowing D, I accumulated a small miscellany of Buddhist ephemera he shared with me, stray residuals of his practice, all of which became clues. Form-and-emptiness. Sutras, koans. Something about a salt doll walking into the ocean. About a goose in a bottle. *A woman grows a goose in a bottle*, is how that last one begins. *How can she get the goose out of the bottle, without breaking the bottle or the goose?* I remember him posing it to me in my kitchen one night as I cooked pork chops. I knew just enough about koans to know that the answer wouldn't involve something clever, wouldn't involve glass cutters or the sublimation of a living solid to a gas. I knew just enough to know that the rules of the koan operate outside both the physical rules of our world and our understanding of what an answer actually *is* – of an answer's function, of what it fulfills.

Despite knowing that much and that much only about koans, and despite the fact that D never told me the “answer” to the goose-in-the-bottle koan, I liked it so much that I appropriated it for the libretto of our opera. I turned it into a Farmer's Almanac riddle. And I changed *goose* to *gourd*. So:

*Grow a gourd inside a glass bottle.*

went the riddle.

*A gourd that is bigger than the bottle's neck.*

*Now, how do you get the gourd out of the bottle, without breaking the bottle or the gourd?*

By *gourd*, I was trying to imply *over-evolved human brain*, i.e., what had gotten everybody into so much trouble in the first place, which was actually probably similar to what the Buddhists were implying by *goose*. I don't have a solution to the gourd koan. My thinking at the time was along the lines of, *The solution is, there is no solution*.

Koans seemed to be riddles to the *n*th power, meta-riddles. Enigmas. Little mysteries with a strange sense of humor. They couldn't be solved in the same way as garden-variety riddles, certainly not in the same way as detective stories. It was only by some process other than deduction that you could arrive at a koan's solution. Koans were meant to do something different to your brain. They were meant, perhaps, to get it out of its bottle.

~

"Post-Romantic," is how D identified the stylistic aesthetic of his music. Now that the music is here and he's not, I want to make a joke about that. "*Post-romantic*" is right. It's not a very good joke.

To my undereducated ear, the fundamental qualities of D's compositions are dissonance and his use of counterpoint or polyphony – of several lines or voices operating simultaneously, but each in seeming independence of the others. Seeming chaos. The experience of listening to his compositions was sometimes disarming, perplexing. His music was not always easy to listen to, not always accessible. He scoffed at writing "for" an audience. He scoffed at the idea of writing "songs." He wrote compositions that, though carefully wrought, nevertheless rarely provided easy fulfillment of the musical patterns we come to expect. On first listen, D's work often sounds opaque, tangled, chaotic. You can't easily tap your foot to it.

There were exceptions, though, and sometimes he wrote a piece of disarming simplicity and clarity.

One of these was a love song that disappeared many months before zero-time. Not a love *song*. A love composition.

He'd written and shared it with me on the cloud during our headiest first months as creative partners-turned-lovers. The music was exquisite, all high-octave piano, so slow and minimalist that listening to it changed the way I breathed. I wrote to him: "It makes me somehow feel that I'm breathless and, at the same time, that I am breathing deeply." The oblique melody line resolved its subtle shifts and changes, finally, on a single note, which ended the piece. This resolution was so quiet, so unadorned and uncolored, that it was as if that final note was meant to be almost missed, or to be missed by all except those who knew just how to listen for it. I had to lean in, hold my breath, strain, and wait to hear what would lift the whole piece beyond itself. The composition seemed to confer such respect and trust, even tenderness, that the listener would hear and understand the note that was the key to the whole piece and that yet was the softest. I did not predict it, exactly, and yet, in a sense, that resolving note was there all along, an inevitability, a resolution that anyone who knew anything about musical progression might have predicted. The composition ended simply and yet was somehow all-encompassing, as if by limiting the resolution to one note, he had paid homage to them all.

After its sequence of slow shifts, its quiet dissonance and entwinement, how simple, after all, the solution was. Euphoria was what I felt, hearing its last note, a rush of both surprise and "Of course." The day he sent me the piece, I listened over and over, and each time, I held my breath for that last note, for the warm, scintillating wash of dopamine that suffused me, each time, like light.

That piece, which was in a file titled only “M,” disappeared from its link on the cloud many months before he died. I know because I looked for it often, during and in between our tumultuous, endless rapprochements and repulsions. And after zero time, when I found it easy to guess D’s passwords to his online storage accounts, when I searched for M among his files, it wasn’t there either. I scoured my computer, my iTunes, my downloads, my trash. It was nowhere to be found.

~

A mystery is solved by finding its *solution*. Which seems to mean *the answer*. The explanation. The murderer identified. The secret revealed.

And what else? In school, the solution meant the last un-eliminated box in a penciled chart; meant the  $x$  all alone, finally, on one side of the equation. And it meant something else, something in a test tube: crystals of salt, or of something bright blue, dissolved into water. Into solution.

*Into solution*. My pulse throbs in my ears.

From what I remember of junior high school chemistry, the solution occurs when everything has been dissolved. All the shards of blue – of copper-sulfite – or all the shards of salt. The substance of those crystals isn’t gone. Their formerly solid matter is now latent, synthesized, held molecularly within the water. And having absorbed it, the water is now tangibly changed. It now holds some of the qualities that the crystals held when they were still solid matter. The water is now bright blue. Or the water, now, tastes of salt.

I remember that water is a natural solvent. It *wants* to synthesize, to absorb into itself whatever soluble solids, whatever sharp, hard-edged little crystals, are thrown into it. In that, perhaps water is like us. Or perhaps it is we, who *are* water, that are like water. Yearning for the relief of all the sharpest shards finally released from their hard solid state. Practicing the strange grace of undoing, even as we continue to hold, the substance of those shards.

*The solution is when everything has been dissolved*, I write on a scrap of paper in my kitchen. *Yes*, I think. Suddenly I am seeing through salt. *Of course*.

###