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Microwaves

My groceries are embarrassing.

This hand basket is the biography of a life of empty calories in single-serving packets hidden under a camouflage layer of fruits and vegetables that will not be consumed before going past ripe on the counterette of a kitchenette because I don't know where to put my eyes when I eat alone. I turn on the TV, watch part of a ballroom dancing marathon (for the irony), consume yet another hundred-calorie cup of something. I replay what I did not announce to the cashier who works the express lane:

I am not alone.

The cashier has seen this basket before. He knows by heart this never-quite-a-meal assortment of daily tribulations, prepackaged resignations. He can see the future strung out before me in a long, white, waxy receipt that floats past whooshing automatic doors into the dark lot, toward a dark drive home, toward this efficiency apartment, its re-microwaved, week-old, rinsed-off dishes.

There are no provisions I could add to my basket's sad inventory to explain us, our standing Saturday night (don't hold on too long past your bright-and-early Sunday alarm) arrangement. We are ingredients that combine to make nothing.

You don't live together?

They are always surprised.

Hasn't it been six years, their eyes ask, always confused. But, you tell each other's stories and hold hands after dinner.

They use carts with wheels and make recipes from scratch; they pack each other's lunches. They cohabitate in trashy (call it transitional) neighborhoods to save money on rent, and together they choose what deep, warm color to paint the sunroom and what found art will cover the walls. They have a thrift-store hi-fi and a borrowed or inherited hope chest for a coffee table; they have a manner of conversation that assumes by choice of words that they have no plans not to be together. Theirs is a familiar apartment, a reminder.

We are not married. We won't be. I know this, and yet — stay.

If you lived here, you'd be home by now.

Their MySpace profiles taunt me in late night Google searches when my double bed is half empty and actually just a futon built with tiny, disposable wrenches and covered in queen-size sheets, the extra folds twisting to keep me awake. I curl around useless pillows while familiar yearbook faces register for dining room furniture sets in wholesale clubs.

I know guarantees mean shit these days.

And yet. They feel safe now, loved probably, even if they just pretend it's forever, and they don't worry about any of the ridiculous things I do, now that they have been distilled to their basic reproductive elements.

My elitism folds back onto itself like the pillow next to me smothers.

I should pretend to be ages I have already been, in which none of this has crossed my mind and I can continue to nurse doctrines of romantic autonomy over unnecessary beers.

Instead I invent a world in which we could live together, a steady world of conversationed books in bed and microwaved hot water for tea and the nights' routine of smooth blanket-trapped body heat shared. It is not this world. Here we combine to nothing.

Scientists say that if we could see microwaves — if our eyes would absorb them, if our brains would interpret them (they can't, but if they could) — we would be able to see the first bursts of the universe as auras still glowing around us, sparks from forming elements and colliding gasses, our infinitesimalude. The even bigger picture.

I wish for microwave halos whenever this feels too important. Whenever I am microwaving a Lean Cuisine "entree" and aching for some kind of permanence, I try to imagine this momentary furnace of a universe churning in its simultaneous states — matter and energy and spirit, like solid and liquid and gas inside a tiny box of rotating light. I slip under tectonic plates forged inside the impossibility and the inescapability of metaphors, the ingredients of our lives' unnecessary explanations, the labels printed below each item in each aisle.

This kind of understanding is that of never really. Picture a string, a particle, a wave; and then unpicture it. It is not the thing you have called it.

I ding, ding, ding — a sound the whole universe can hear tonight.

Here's a metaphor: We are the time-traveling light of a far-away star that has already flickered out. Picture the night sky, planetarium dome; and then unpicture it.

Here again, now mixed: I am a list, that waxy, white receipt curling inside the mini-fridge. It tucks me in at night into a bumper bowling lane of sleep, a pillow barricade meant to deceive. Believe that I am not alone.

The cashier is wiser. He knows, based on my purchases, that one day the top of my ass will supernova, expanding until it's even larger than its bottom half. He knows that you and I are not synchronized park swings.

I follow a spilling-over drawerful of ticker tape receipts back to a year ago, to a green four-plex, upstairs, hardwood floors and a dishwasher, in the kind of neighborhood that you could take a walk to get a great cup of coffee and the best-ever brunch and if you felt like making a day of it maybe a discount movie ticket. Remember this.

I left the washer/dryer hookups of emotional independence for schleps to the laundromat and that repeated question, the one we push aside casually, as though we have a more modern kind of relationship — even though we don't. And still the Craigslist-scouring hope for green great-coffee four-plexes with hardwood floors with dishwashers with you.

I move closer, get farther away. The serving sizes get smaller; everything doubles. This universe expands and every day we are smaller.

I shop at six different grocery stores. Avoid recognition. I hand over the same plastic basket to another fluorescent face, unfold its clinking metal handles and try to wipe their rust smell from my hands. I push the big green button, accept the charges, fold another trailing receipt into the night. Try again to find the awe in extinguished stars.

From across the galaxy they can tell we are already gone. It's just these microwaves we shed, causing heart problems for pacemakers in convenience stores.

After half-lives there will be nothing left but collapse. There will be a distraction, a brown sweater, doesn't matter his or hers; this holding pattern will break along with a heart unfit for anything else. No chart will explain the percentage each reason applies or where those microwaves go when we have lost them.

Picture a wave, and then unpicture it.