

THE
BLACK
IRON
ALMANAC

The Black Iron Almanac

This book belongs to

Your name here (use attached stylus)

The Black Iron Foundation

How to use this device

You are a contributor to the Black Iron Foundation's **Parliament Memory Programme (PMP)**. We thank you for taking part.

Take this device home with you. Keep it close for a year.

Start tomorrow.

Inside are three-hundred and sixty-five daily entries. Read one each day. Do not ruin the surprise. Do not skip ahead or browse its contents.

Each contributor to the Parliament Memory Programme (PMP) will receive their own almanac. Do not fret for there is no overlap in the contents. Each person reads their own version of this text. This is yours, and applies only to your year ahead. Once commenced the reading must continue daily for the full year. Do not skip days. Do not stop before the full year has passed. There is no function to cheating.

There is no choice but to see all the tomorrows allotted to you. Each day will come as days are wont to: in procession.

Your involvement in the process is the application of the reading to the day. Nothing more. Read the text when convenient. Spend some time at the close of the day to reflect on that day's events and how it intersected with the text. Process this as you lie abed, but do not lose sleep - nothing in the past is worth regretting.

We would ask you assign these entries into four interpretative categories, these being:

- Affirmation
- Warning
- Confession
- Entertainment

It is up to you to choose which of these applies once the day is over, depending on how accurate or useful the reading has been. Assign weightings to multiple categories if you want. Use the worksheet at the rear of this text.

There is no test at the end; a full read of this book is the test.

Comparing notes with anyone else in the Programme is not only pointless but will invalidate the exercise.

This is your guide. These are your daily destinies.

In one year and one day return here to turn in your almanac. The agreed payment, if such an agreement exists, will be made at this time. Incomplete returns will void payment.

We will then conduct your exit interview. Attendance is essential and mandatory according to the terms of the contract.

Throughout this process remember this: it is us who helped you to be here.

Now you are helping us in return.

It is a sympathetic exchange.

We brought you to this point but we cannot help you now except to protect you from distractions which might taint the results.

The rest is up to you.

Start tomorrow. Good luck.

Day 1

Past is prologue. This time you're going to do it right. Place a wager on yourself. It can't be any worse than the last time. Find some person in your life to give you decent each-way odds. The amount at stake is up to you. Even so, you must remain alert to the presence of emotional depth charges sunk the previous year.

Day 2

Several celestial phenomena will appear in the late hours of the evening. Choose from: meteor shower, planetary parade, partial eclipse (specify occluded celestial object), total eclipse (rare, specify occluded celestial object, sun or moon).

Despite this, local weather conditions will prevent you from witnessing them first hand, and reports of your chosen phenomena from other locales will cause either great jealousy at not having seen them or a dull kind of proxy joy for those that did.

You decide.

Day 3

Clear out day. You will find an old shoebox at the back of your wardrobe. What is inside? Things forgotten now remembered: as a child you drew a map of the village you grew up in. All the streets and houses are correct but the original names and numbers have been crossed out and replaced with ones of your invention. You do not remember why Grantham Avenue was called The Stickler's or why School Road was renamed Little Sister's Lane except to say that you had your reasons at the time.

Day 4

Chasing a wayward pet, child, or fleeting movement from the corner of your eye into the bramble thicket, you will stumble upon artifacts left by previous visitors: a child's cuddle toy, a discarded parking ticket, several empty cans of beer with their old style ring pulls, a broken umbrella, and a shopping list where the items map onto your own list almost one-to-one, but for their quantities.

Day 5

You will spend the morning shaking from your mind the lingering snatches of last night's dream. In this dream you were a master thief committing grand larceny on various members of your family and friends. You evaded capture with stealth and skill. The items you procured were not to be sold but kept and admired in airtight glass-fronted cabinets.

In the afternoon, now with a clear head, various mundane household jobs will be made difficult by a series of irritations: the hammer isn't where you left it, someone has not replaced the empty washing up liquid; a fuse has blown in the tumble dryer plug.

That night you convince yourself it would be better to dream of a long drive to the coast with strangers.

Day 6

That drains smell is back. You call a number and a team of well-presented workers arrive promptly. They deal with the problems in a swift and efficient way. Their manner is professional and polite and they leave having cleaned up any spills or detritus.

They hand you a card asking for your rating from one to ten explaining that not only is ten the best score but that all the other numbers indicate some kind of problem or failing on their part.

You will give them a six. Write down your reason in the space below.

Day 7

Someone will be convinced they saw you on a game show last year. They will remember that shirt you wore and how your loose hair caught the studio lights in the breeze of air conditioning.

They will say, *I loved the way you made us wait before you answered that last question. Like you weren't certain? But you were, weren't you? Yeah, you were.*

Come on, mate, they will say. What did you do with the winnings?

Day 8

Once is an accident. Twice is unlucky. Three times begins to look like planning. That's what your driver says while you wait for the replacement bus to turn up after a multi-car accident on a notorious crossroads that has needed traffic light control for years.

Day 9

On your way out of the convenience store, you will accidentally bump into a youth who calls you a bedwetter.

In the afternoon one of three friends will visit. Choose from:

1. Your best friend by default whom you once punched out cold for making drunken inappropriate remarks about your then partner.
2. The judgy one who tends to use the time you are speaking to think of a dubiously humorous response to a previous statement.
3. The part-time confidant who always asks *How are you?* with exaggerated concern and, given enough weak Bavarian lager, will agree with that youth's assessment from earlier.

Day 10

You will be visited by a colleague who tells you he knows what's going to happen tomorrow. You tell him he should not be reading ahead and how it will invalidate the results. He looks at you with patent confusion.

He will say, *What? I mean the thing with the tribunal. It will go our way, I'm sure. We did nothing wrong, did we?*

Note the slide into desperation at the end there. You will agree with him to stop any further questions. His excitement at a prospective legal win is enough to divert into a new conversational avenue that further delays the need for you to remember his name.

Day 11

This time last year you were missing presumed absconded again. You were always doing this: heading off to find a way out of the city-maze you were trapped within. It was never an escape *to*, always an escape *from*. Mere evasion would not do; that implies recapture. It had to be a complete evacuation.

He caught you, of course. It was easy. He knew where you'd be, reliant as you were on the same trains and roads and underpasses and walkways you had always explored together. You didn't know a better way to go. And secretly you were glad to be found so you could head home and start planning your next daring escapade.

Day 12

Arguments about music are rarely about the music itself. More often they concern dates and figures and other events attached to the memory of things like the first time you listened, deepest infatuations, and trips where the soundtrack was as much embedded in the journey as the view from the back seat window.

Today's argument will be little different but for the fact that, when confronted with a false memory of being stuck in slow motorway traffic while the various crescendos of dad's favourite classical songs vibrated the window glass, you will choose to simply accept the other's position as fact before tuning the old dial radio in the kitchen to a low and subtly patterned static.

Day 13

The morning will be spent getting lost inside a vintage clothing warehouse where purchases are made by the kilo. Nothing tantalises, though you can't deny there are some bargains to be had. In the afternoon you will buy an item of clothing you don't need from an expensive brand that is favoured by the divorced dad and the undercover cop, just because you can't go home empty handed.

Day 14

You will attend an auction of obsolete technology from the nation's space program. The item you have eyeballed is a discrete piece of mechanical telemetry once used to route and meter oxygen to and from space station capsules. You will feel a sudden and sharp excitement as you place your first bid, akin (you imagine) to the adrenaline surge at liftoff. Each raise of the bid will send your nerves into a higher orbit until your breath is caught so fast in your chest that you fear suffocation.

Finally, your high bid will be trumped by a faceless telephone sniper. You will be relieved, though the space you arranged on the shelf between your inherited mass markets and genre memorabilia will now need to be filled by something else.

Day 15

There will be a pair of shoes in the hallway that you do not recognise. You have two choices here: call around to find their owner, or dispose of them quietly (and far away) and claim no knowledge should their owner later try to recover them.

Day 16

You're sure your mother gave you a reason she kept all of your baby teeth but you can't remember now. Something to do with your father's joke about minimum viable inheritance. When you find the tiny rattling cardboard box she bequeathed, you will hesitate to open it. There they are in their small brown wage envelopes fastened with string. Each one is labelled with a date and time, one once-fresh milk tooth in each which you toss into the compost heap before burning the box and the envelopes in the fire drum down the bottom of the garden where the nettles dominate.

Day 17

The afternoon will present an opportunity at fascination with cold war memorabilia, including but not limited to: gas masks, bunker hatch wheels, defunct Geiger counters, ammo cases, iodine solution phials, and posters lauding the power of the atom. You're pretty sure your father would know several uses for that rusted metal tool that resembles an oversized dentist drill but you can't bend your mind around it sufficiently to invent something useful.

Day 18

Over a few drinks, a fellow patron will espouse the concept of anti-love. It's not hate, they clarify, but the interruption or misinterpretation of love as the other party might understand it. You will question their theory, positing that 'anti-love' is in fact nothing more than the absence of feeling, the indifference of the bystander or the stranger. In the quiet moments while your acquaintance is fetching more drinks, it will occur to you that your understanding of love might itself be anti-love. You will draw closer to a firm position on the theory shortly before midnight and fairly deep in your cups. *It can save a lot of heartbreak*, your conversation partner will say, *if you're both on the same page from the get-go.*

Day 19

Crossing this particular road has always been tricky. Even at 4am it's busy: an artery road for delivery trucks and taxis from the airport. No crossing points anywhere near you so you'll have to chance it and jump the fence in the central reservation. No time to waste - there's a new record to be set for getting home and this is the shortest route. The look on his face when he sees you!

Day 20

Halfway through a crossword you will run out of steam. Not wanting to leave it unfinished you will find words that fit the gaps and cross out the clues, replacing them with brief handwritten hints to your own answers.

Day 21

You will take in a parcel for a neighbour. On the packing label there is a bold text instruction that reads:

DO *NOT* deliver to the neighbour on the RIGHT.

You will ask yourself, on the right from which perspective? The courier or the neighbour?

Day 22

New new socks today. The best.

Day 23

A book arrives by post. You will not remember ordering it. The volume is entitled 'On Choice and Consequence' and is a dry treatise on the utility of rational decision probability in situations that lack predictability. There is a hand written note on the title page that reads: *As promised. Do not ignore. T.* Tucked in at the back is another handwritten note in neat compact cursive instructing you to pass it on to the next recipient in Group when finished, though there is no forwarding address.

Day 24

You will attend a presentation given by a noted academic on the life of a notorious but forgotten agitator for various 'do-good' causes in the last years of the previous century. A notorious drunk and womaniser, he nonetheless held sway in certain institutions and had the ear of both industrialists and high order mavens. This meant his passage into certain strata of society and the resulting changes to the benefit of the less well-off was substantial, even though he never quite shed the unsavoury reputation of a dissolute. Later you will search for further sources to this person's life but the only reference you find is a monograph by the same academic who delivered the seminar. You will spend the remaining day wondering about your own personal legend and if some descendent of yours might embellish it for their own personal reasons.

Day 25

You join a class explaining how to decode the hidden symbols in famous paintings of old. You will listen carefully and begin to list the metaphorical inclusions in the well-known works of the grand masters. When you announce them to the class you are taken aside. It is explained to you that the class is to help reveal the already accepted symbology, not an opportunity to create new ones. You will leave in disgust. What's the point of learning only things other people already understand?

Day 26

A tired day. You go to the zoo. Whatever your energy levels, there's always one animal slower and one animal more manic than you. Curiously, this time, it is watching the alligator in an unmoving and silent submersion that restores you.

Day 27

Nothing works in this damn house. The water runs cold, the windows don't close properly, the furniture is collapsing. The robot vacuum is beached on a fold in the carpet again. Would that you had one of those Russian house spirits -- a domovoi - - for aid! But you are sure it would just squat by the fireplace looking sad, as if to say, *One job I could handle but to fix all this is beyond even me.*

Day 28

The dawn chorus wakes you early but you don't mind. Today you will choose to hear each song as a rare and precious affirmation of life. Later you will redirect a call from an unknown number to voicemail. Some network error results in the message being a four-minute discussion between an elderly woman and her daughter about needing to get her moles checked in four months' time and how it might impact their holiday plans.

Day 29

Today you will add to your palimpsest walking project. Overdrawing the repeated routes of your flaneur results in a mess of coloured ink that, in the right light and with your head on a slant, begins to resemble that statue of the city's patron saint that used to stand in Paternoster square.

Day 30

A museum visit. Not one of those stuffy affairs with relics and dioramas but a living museum of the present. A parade of living exhibits enact small achievable tasks such as sorting toy bricks into piles of matching colours or unfolding and folding clothes. The gestalt is a continual mechanical repeat of the *intended* into the *action* and then into the *past*. Every thirty minutes a klaxon sounds and the exhibits are allowed to drink and stretch and bellow false laughter into the suspended ceiling. On your way back you make your usual stop for some table flowers. Lilies maybe. They always go down well.

Day 31

Several days of heavy rain has caused localised flooding. Walking home after your night shift you will have, for the first time since you were a child, a nosebleed that even the tipping back of the head will not fully staunch. As drops of blood fall onto the pavement, you theorise their ultimate destination via the currents of the raised water table and the splashing of passing cars. Is some trace of you destined for the estuary? Or will the minerals and proteins sublime in the drains and sewers before they even leave the bounds of the city?

Day 32

The espionage thriller you are nearing the end of is book two of a three book series. You blame not reading book one of the series for your disappointment with book two's finale. Book three sits in the TBR pile beneath a dry sounding historical account of a brutal land war in the ancient Middle East. Some itches must be scratched before they are allowed to turn to pain. Back to the thrillers straight after.

Day 33

You will receive an email from a company you do not work for welcoming you as a new starter. It contains a link to an onboarding video you must watch before your start date in two weeks. For want of anything better to do you click through. A woman wearing a tailored suit issues slow-paced instructions on the building's safety protocols, muster points, and hazardous waste handling procedures.

Day 34

You take delivery of a personality test pack you don't recall requesting. It presents as a sheaf of question papers like lottery scratch cards. Row by row you respond to the hypothetical scenarios by scratching off the silver foil, alert to contradictions and rogue outliers that would skew the result and make you look unstable or, worse, boring. The instructions say to send the completed questionnaire to the return address and wait up to ten days for your profile result by return of mail. You decide you don't want to wait that long. Reading the guide, you believe you are actually an AF24 while you are alone. To others you present mostly as a GL17 but only when you've slept well the night before. Looking at the mess of scratch card shavings all over your desktop, and the fact you didn't clean them up as you went, suggests the actual result lies somewhere in between.

Day 35

Today is the anniversary of a train crash on the lines behind the poplar trees in the park. A small memorial once stood there by the lines listing the names of those who died, but track widening and modernisation meant it would have to be removed, despite a petition from the families. The date was set but before the work could begin the plaque went missing. Thieves in the dark. Just a concrete stump remained and four copper screws in the grass. Questions were asked; it even reached the news. Some days, when you catch a scent of diesel fumes or feel the scratchy velour of train upholstery, you like to take down the plaque from its hiding place in the hallway cupboard and read the names silently to yourself, always pausing on the one you recognise to ask, *Who were you?* before replacing the memorial behind the old shoeboxes full of receipts you will forever keep, just in case.

Day 36

You will wake with whole sails full of wind but by midday you're in the doldrums. Why is it half a day can feel so vibrant and the rest feel like a train station waiting room where you sit for some delayed service to carry you into tomorrow?

Day 37

You bought the wrong lightbulbs and now walking from the warm white of the lounge into the cold white of the hallway is like transitioning from a gentleman's club salon into a forensic examination room. All the shadow angles look wrong and too deep now. Every stain on the paint and the carpet is visible. A rain of dust from the light fitting reminds you of slow falling ash in the fire-bright morning of a day not too long ago.

Day 38

A father of two young girls berates them in the supermarket for making a scene, although it is only the dressing down you are witness to, not the event that caused it. Once he has wound up his lecture, he demands that they replay the lessons learned back to him, which they can barely do between fits of giggles. When he asks them what they want for dinner and they reply, *Something with garlic bread*, he answers no and leaves them behind so they can laugh at the cartoon mascot dog on their favourite brand of breakfast cereal.

Day 39

You will be shown a photograph of a city with canals and grand old buildings. *Have you ever visited this place?* you are asked. It could be any city in Northern Europe so you say no. *If you had been here*, you are told, *you would remember the statue in this picture. Does this look familiar to you?* You will not say so but you know everything about it: the artwork's title, who it represents, the sculptor's name, what it's made of (bronze), and the year and method in which it was cast. It stands close to an outsider art museum in a former asylum, which you have never told anyone you visited.

Day 40

You will discover your house has a cellar. There's a space down there that echoes with your footsteps. With borrowed tools, you lift the first few floorboards and shine your phone light down. Cobweb hammocks and dust dunes in a five-foot space that mirrors the upper layout perfectly. Down you go only to see two huge copper water tanks on their side, too large to have been moved there. The house must have been built around them. Might be worth some money if you could cut them up. In all, this discovery will make you feel pretty brave for doing something right finally. The last time this happened, in a previous property, it did not go well. Hours of excavation through concrete before remembering you lived in a top floor apartment and how your neighbours wouldn't speak to you afterwards. The lease was terminated the day after and the debt for the damages still hangs around like an old injury.

Day 41

An ambiguous sign sparks conversation amongst the usual patrons of a nearby coffee shop. They ask you to weigh in but you are distracted by a different sign on the abandoned building across the street: *No Trespassing*, heavy fines if caught, and a pair of angry eyes staring right at you from on high. A tingle between the shoulder blades as you take your drink and leave, ceasing only when you break line of sight. For the rest of the day, you hold doors open for people and drive five under the speed limit for a change.

Day 42

You rig up the tin can telephone in your hallway. Though you have no plans on opening the front door today, you see through the viewing porthole that the twine leads off to the shrubbery outside the communal area near the main road at the end of the cul de sac. The tin can that rests on your hallway rug echoes with the sounds of distant traffic and muffled voices. The words you pick up are like one from a child's alphabet book: dog, car, apple. Passing vehicles bounce over speed bumps and loose manhole covers. The overall effect is like Morse code, or more accurately like one of those mysterious number stations you once read about. Like those, the message conveyed remains beyond you.

Day 43

You get the sense that the book you're currently reading arrived unfinished and that the very act of turning the page is forcing it to be written. You read backwards for a few chapters and don't remember them the way you read them before. In both directions, something is either being invented or undone. The only part of the story you recognise is the current section, and only then until you start a new one. Afterwards, the shape of what's passed is lost and the story to come unfolds under the whim of some precarious and random logic. You're not even sure how long this book is. Lightweight as reading commences, unwieldy as you continue. Twenty-minute sessions maximum, then you have to put it down and climb the stairs to the rarified air of the loft room with its balcony dormer window open to the clear sky.

Day 44

You will decide that the same god that presides over the fecundity of rodents also does so over your cousin who has currently twelve children and is expecting their thirteenth. They've been at it for two decades. No sooner one leaves than another one comes along. How does one think in that house?

Day 45

The chimeric architecture of this city has always equally fascinated and appalled you. Facadism on the high street, cladding over brick over stone. Office blocks perched on too-thin supports above multistorey car parks. The ensemble is frightening. All those angles and rough surfaces will drive you to seek the jumbled back alleys of medieval jetty overhangs and lopsided timber door frames which were all bombed out in the war.

Day 46

Looking in the mirror, you will see that your face looks like a bad photofit of itself. A wanted felon. Unfair! Except it's not so long since you got yourself out of trouble. Debt free in all senses now. You're playing house after years of being strung out and living off charity. Shake your head to reset the reflection. Better now. Your hair speaks to a business professional, a maker of many influential decisions, even though the expression on your face reminds you that trouble always finds you easily and that sofa surfing is always going to be an option.

Day 47

A previous argument comes back to haunt you. You forget what started it or what it mutated into except to say that you argued hard even though you knew you were wrong. In the end, a terminating statement brought you up short and you remember it like it was yesterday: *Just stop!* he says. *You can't argue the wrong out of a catastrophic situation.*

Day 48

Footage of the event from a year ago is brief and what exists is hard to find. You were a witness from the fifth-floor window, though your memory of that day is fractured and dim. The city centre. Paternoster square. Sun and scudding cloud. Too hot for all those layers. Skin itching with the demand for action. A chase. Rehearsed words on your lips. Now you will remember a detail previously unrecorded. Write down a concise summary of your recollection in the space below.

From this day on you must keep this device locked in the safe provided by the Foundation that you will find in the bottom of your spare room wardrobe. Do not let this journal leave the house until the appointed day of delivery back to the Foundation head office.

Day 49

Ten minutes of committed focussed action is enough to become an expert in the eyes of witnesses. Ten seconds of bravery is all it takes to become a hero. What achievements might ten years produce? The answer, you suspect, is relatively few. Time engenders idleness, defeats urgency. Everything you see out of the window every day reminds you of that.

Day 50

Do not offer explanations for anything today. Let anyone you meet question your motives. Be directionless. Be unpredictable, zag when you said you'd zig. Speak in riddles. Adopt an obvious disorder that doesn't map onto your actual problems. Pretend at all times to be winning some small game the rules of which only you know. Wrong foot authority. Wander with dubious purpose. Trespass. Act with a half measure of empathy that always lures but never satisfies. Feign pity. Let unsavoury types in through the back door of the establishment. Put a price on everything. Join in on the judgement of a stranger. Take a bow at bedtime like the day's performance is over.

Day 51

People drive to be rendered invisible. When you no longer wish to be seen, you take a long walk along the river. No one can remember people they see on the promenade or the embankment. Eyes on the water mostly, or the opposite side. Marginal places are comfortable zones for marginal people.

Day 52

The one thing you know for sure is you have no idea how to get back from where you are. You're halfway to nowhere. Look around; it all seems the same as before. Your mother took a fall. A badly bruised arm. You are fine but scared. Think of the advice she always gave you when lost: *Wait for a guiding hand to lead you. Something is always watching over us. Don't wander off. In an infinite universe the best possible place to be is right here at this very moment and let the rest take its course. Here, have a sweet. It will take your mind off the wait.* Only years later did you read a counter argument: Invoking infinity is the same as giving up. Half of forever is still forever.

Day 53

No mail today, not even junk mail.

Day 54

You will witness a road traffic accident involving a single car and a pedestrian. You will be a bystander (which is where you have always seen yourself). You can offer nothing to help the situation. In the final analysis of the event, before the injured party is taken away, you will attempt to grade your relative pain levels. They will be under the influence of Adrenalin whereas, ever since the event, you have been on a constant line of chronic low-level pain. Who has it worse right now? Who has it worse in the long term? Hard to say. The balance is always tipping in someone's favour.

Day 55

You will experience a mesmeric airborne phenomenon not dissimilar to how others describe the onset of a visual migraine. Through the jagged lines that pop and throb in your vision you will see an aura outline of a ruined building. Certain shapes in the pulse of red light that could be the sunset through low clouds or maybe the reflection of your heartbeat inside your eyeball. You'll see a grand dome of a cathedral smashed open and ablaze. You are high up above road level. Eye to eye with destruction. A bastard of a headache will come on directly after the images fade. Take a seat on the fallen tree for a moment. Catch your breath. Then on your feet. You have no choice but to walk on, being at the furthest point of an elliptical walk you began more than three hours before.

Day 56

Essaying the approach to the ridge you will spot a group of walkers on their return leg.

You've been whinging all bloody day, says the dad.

I didn't like it up there, answers his young charge. It was scary!

Well, we're nearly back at the car so you can shut the hell up!

Looking up at the brow of the hill you will wonder what awaits you up there to cause such misery for those returning from it and process a rapid about-face to the bus stop.

Day 57

The guru of domestic reductionism is in your head again. Downscaling your personal footprint, resource consumption, travel and waste regimes. Throw out everything that does not bring with it a sense memory of its acquisition. That's where the joy lives, after all. Collecting is a different and far easier hobby than keeping.

Day 58

You awake with the certain knowledge there is another heartbeat in the house but he would have left ages ago. Get up and take a look around. Open cupboards you haven't looked in for years. Find an old coat you like. Find that painting he took down but didn't have the courage to throw away. The sense of another life in the house is diminished now. You put it down to the lingering nightmare you awoke from, the one where you caught him in a lie and had no idea how to handle the fallout. Watch him pack a bag, calm as anything. Feel him brush past on his way to the car. Call and call but he does not answer. Track him down and find out what you need to know about why he went.

Day 59

Sunshine and showers first thing this morning but it won't last. If the weather could ever have been said to behave, it certainly does not now. Changeable thereafter and ending in a blazing dusk with rising winds that will sweep away any lingering scent of petrichor or exhaust fumes.

Day 60

The new spider in the corner is lurking with malevolent intent. It has lived its whole life in this house and knows no other world but here. If it could evict you, it would but in the meantime you both realise an uneasy truce is the best outcome while it's so cold outside.

Day 61

You will spend the morning on a local area message board answering queries on the best place to get lunch, the best circular walks under ten miles, the areas with the best schools, places to avoid after dark, the local authorities' approach to pothole reporting. Later on you will receive a personal message from an unknown user that simply reads: *Thanks for the info dumps, karma farmer.* You will bridle at this at first. Only later, after ordering food from a place you would not normally recommend but you choose because it is the thrifty option, you will ask yourself, *But why shouldn't I receive some small reward for doing good? It happens so rarely.*

Day 62

Competence quickly becomes obligation. You are reminded of this when asked yet again by the old man three doors down to help him set his thermostat for the warmer weather. Must be a dozen times now. Not even a biscuit for your troubles.

Day 63

You will decide to repair the old photo album bequeathed to you by your mother before *all that* happened. The glue has turned to little more than a stain on the backing board. The cellophane sheet over the prints is crumpled and dirty. The best thing to do is buy a new album but can you even get these ones anymore? You'd want to replace like-for-like after all. Otherwise it wouldn't be the same.

Day 64

-you have no experience of the past-
-is all communication not manipulation?-
-you can't only serve yourself forever-
-an experience so outside human scale as to render logic worthless-

Error reading entry. Please try again tomorrow.

Day 65

You quit smoking by hypnosis. He was sure it wouldn't work, said it was pseudoscience and only had any effect on the chronically suggestible. But it did work. You suspect because you really wanted it to. Perhaps it opened a doorway to a reserve of willpower you didn't know you had. Thinking back, you have often stuck to things those around you said could never work. Now, with all that cigarette money going spare, you can devote yourself to a fresh vice, safe in the knowledge that acupuncture is still on the menu.

Day 66

We don't need to account for all your past troubles. We're not interested in old mistakes. You are owed a certain amount of trust. We all are. That said, you must admit that some days are tougher than others. Just like when you start going on about simulation theory again. *The subjects have risen up, usurped their controllers, and are running the simulation now*, you assert.

That can't be true, he says. *Look at the state of it.*

Think! Imagine how much worse it could be! Look how far we've come, you and I.

No further than we deserve, he replies. But you're invested now, in no mood for negativity.

Ack. A little bit of chaos adds flavour. What shall we build now?

He just shrugs as if to say, *As ever, your damage will decide for us.*

Day 67

A gut full of memories today. You're standing at the kitchen window of the farmhouse. Six years old. You're selling up - a fire sale for all to come and pick over the remnants. Some of the village boys, a bit older than you, are out on the verge playing with the farm cats. You petition to take one to the new house but your request is denied. Feral. Wild. It is a disappointment that will last your whole life.

Later today you will check the bowl of packet food and fresh water in the kitchen, waiting for the feline distribution system to do its work. No joy so far.

Ask yourself, are you in a good place to look after another life? And if you are, would it be enough to assuage the decades of regret at the decisions made for you when you were a child?

Write your answers to these questions in no more than twenty words in the space below.

Day 68

At a rare book sale, you will spot an edition you've been seeking out for years, an obscure tome of Victorian poetry that is talked about in reverent tones on certain online forums. It is, they say, a work of rare subversive power, said to have influenced practitioners of magick in the early years of last century. *How much for this?* you will ask. The seller quotes a figure for the yard (in the country house style) and you are excited to pay the meagre sum. Later, with the books safely home, you are dismayed. Eight books in the stack before the chosen volume are of near equal curiosity and will demand sequential reading. You will not reach the text you sought until far later in the year. By that time, the window for rituals will be over. Another year passed and still no progress.

Day 69

Cherry wood tables. Pearl inlay handled cutlery. Mid-century modern reading chairs and dressers. Liquor cabinets with ring marks on the serving shelf. Coloured glassware. Metal signs for animal feed companies and medicinal remedies. *How much for the serving trolley?* he asks and you check out with immediate effect, only coming round when you're back in the car mid-discussion on which of the paint samples he's holding would go best in the hallway.

Day 70

A work party. He's taken you as designated driver, basically. *Try to have fun*, he says before heading to the cloakroom. So many false smiles and forgotten names. The usual finger food for the culinary illiterate. He mimes a big smile to you from a gaggle on the other side of the room. Later on, he grasps your hand and hisses about not forgetting the boss's name before approaching some flabby condescending old man. *Come on, it's not that bad*, when the clock strikes ten. As if to say, *if you strive to feel it then maybe some enjoyment will surface and you will have convinced yourself it's what you wanted all along*. Impossible.

Day 71

You will receive a reply to your query letter by return of post. It is an outright rejection of your request and they make a point of telling you this is the third and final response. Further communication will be ignored. You ask him, *Do we keep copies of sent mail?* and he points you to the file box under his desk in the study. You flick through but decide it best to not be reminded of things now denied to you.

Day 72

Of the five acorns you germinated only one will be promoted to the special growing vase you bought. Stymied by indecision, you take a walk to try to match the expected oak tree of your imagination with a real-life example in the dark end of the park. Upon returning home you select your chosen seed based upon perceived growth potential, deepness of colour, and other less specific criteria. That one you will keep for the garden and rest for the verge by the main through road where you hope to see them sprout in years to come.

Day 73

An idea for a musical instrument you can only ever play once: take a slab of marble and drill out wedge holes. Insert the wedges at varying depths so that each strike of a hammer has its own metallic pitch. Go for a full octave. Choose your tune (preferably some composition of your own) and start striking out the notes with a hand mallet. Keep going until the split develops and stop only when the two halves of the boulder fall away. A one-time piece in a never-to-be-repeated performance. Chip off a shaving for a memento and leave the rest there for some quarryman to ponder over.

Day 74

Today will feel like all your actions, movements, and functions are determined purely by mechanistic impulse. Habit. You've lost yourself again, can't detect a pattern in your rote behaviours let alone a guiding principle. Why would you take *that* action at *that* moment? From where did the idea to sit *there* originate? Why can you not identify the voice on the other end of the line who is asking you for an update on some shared enterprise? Mind like a broken-down jigsaw but sometimes you need to fall apart so someone else can put you back together.

Day 75

Subject to a momentary and spontaneous bout of voyeurism you will watch a man in an open doorway do sock-shoe-left, sock-shoe-right and will wonder how it is that you never knew people like this existed.

Day 76

You will awake to your sight being tinted deep red, as if through a veil of blood. The incandescent bloom of an explosion reflected nine times through the mirrors of your memory. The rest of the day you will tremble at a slammed door and feel nausea rising at the sight of packaged meat. Chimney smoke will make you screw up your eyes and slow-count to one hundred before you can do anything else.

Day 77

You will receive by letter a warning about the process. You must proceed day-wise until the year is complete. You must not allow other participants to contaminate your own results. You are reminded of the lock box in the spare room cupboard, and how you must keep the key about your person at all times.

Day 78

You are sure he came into your life in a gloriously unexpected way. All the best things happen by accident. Or is it that there are no accidents? He swept you up in him and was an immediate confidant. You told him things you'd never told anyone else. That closeness was felt in your bones. But even then, at the early stages where you should be flush with the joy of it, you caught yourself thinking, *You want to build the dream together? That'll cost you.*

Day 79

Quantum mechanics tells us that witnessing is a form of inquiry. Reflect on this before opening a door to an unknown room. Think about this: what you suspect may be within can only be based upon what you know awaited you behind similar doors in the past. So why not imagine something totally different before stepping inside to confirm it?

Day 80

Give yourself space; space gives you options. Give yourself time to make the best of those options. A long walk and a pros and cons list would be a good use of the day.

Day 81

At a service station heading out of the city you will rush past a foldout table selling brightly coloured books on the way to the conveniences. Upon your return you will watch the proprietor, dressed in bright wraparound linens, talk on how the books contain the answers to many mysteries, treatises on duty and devotion to beings of far higher estates than this earth, and adventures to gain both riches and wisdom. A boy who looks no older than ten will beg his mother to buy him the last copy, but the seller insists that the knowledge must be passed on free of charge. Overjoyed, the boy returns to his while you will hover near the table, as if in expectation of something else. *I'll be back here tomorrow with more*, the man says, but you know that you'll be returning home by a wider, longer, and more challenging route.

Day 82

A wise woman once said, *How we live our days is how we live our lives*. You will reflect on that at the close of a peaceful day with little in the way of adventure. Not satisfying but not sad or lonely either. Just a day, with another to follow tomorrow. Rare and precious. The kind of day some other people can only dream of having.

Day 83

Error reading content stream. Zero-byte response received.

Retrying.

Retrying..

Retrying...

Retrying....

Connection timed out

Reconnecting.

Reconnecting..

Reconnecting...

Reconnecting....

Connection established.

Authorising...

Authorised with refresh token.

Authenticating...

Error. Remote server rejected authentication request. Inner exception description: user not found.

Please restart the reader and try again tomorrow.

We apologise for this break in service.

[Inject(Pisces)-> GOT IT]

Day 84

Go to the window in your solar. Do you see the person standing at the edge of the park over the main road? There by the old oak stump at the railings. Their child waves at passing buses and vans. Sometimes he gets a horn blast back which pleases him greatly. Why don't you wave to them? Do you see them waving back? Is it for you or for the traffic? Do they look like someone you know? Soon they'll be gone and you will still be here. They are the traffic through your day.

Day 85

Some internal reclassification today. You need to assign value. You'll keep what you believe is your first memory. Even though it is not pleasant, it remains foundational to all that follows. Various scenes of the first family home can be jettisoned - unnecessary brain space with little to glom on to. You were just a shade of a person then. The later 'middle years' can go entirely. They are the bad ones and serve no purpose but ballast now. Not teachable moments, really. The fat years of youth whittle down to wisdom. Those years of inventing yourself can stay but in limited form. No shortage of embarrassment in there but all of it is informative to your later development. Recent ones are of most value. Being more alive in their complexity means they are more satisfying to recall. The importance of the recollection is relative to the desired effect. Does the memory inform the day? All this work will manifest externally as organising the ingredients of your roast dinner into separate crown-shy zones of food type: protein, vegetables, carbs. You will follow it all with so many sugary treats that your gums vibrate. Your blood will flow like syrup. All he will say is, *You've been well out of it lately.*

Day 86

Sometimes the feelings of terror and bewilderment rise up unbidden but this is no time to break. It's not the first time you've caught yourself crying at the sight of a red dusk or turned away from a scene of collapsed masonry on a building site. Yes, this is no time to break; but since you've slipped back into that moment why not try some exposure therapy. Try to remember the voice in the sky. It spoke with so few words but those words carried so much accusation and power. Can you recall one now? Just one would be a start.

Day 87

A vague limb today. A leg or arm most likely. All the fingers on one hand perhaps. Rest is not an option so you will need to improvise some tools to help you. The flatbed trolley perhaps, one knee down. An improvised sling made out of packing tape and bubble wrap. Try to hide in the corners where they won't see you shaking the numbness out and biting down on your fist until the pain returns.

Day 88

We keep going until we stop and then the germs flood in. Today you should hit the early defence sprays and keep your fingers crossed this doesn't develop into something that can sit on your chest.

Day 89

You will rediscover some old poetry you wrote when you were younger and in love. Classic doggerel with its trite phrasing, sentimentality, and clumsy rhythms. All said, though, there is no mistaking its intent. Directness has its place in matters of the heart. It's a shame you never delivered it to the person you wrote it for. You will search for their address and even get so far as folding the pages, finding an envelope and writing out the name and house number before you remember that you haven't bought stamps for well over a decade and have no intention of doing so now.

Day 90

He's on the phone again, saying, *Well, I don't like to brag* with a laugh. You can feel your hand wrapping around the cord, ready to rip it straight out of the wall. Something your favourite grandparent once taught you: humility must be exhibited. Humble is never a word that should be used to describe oneself. If applied to yourself by others it should be immediately sidestepped or denied. What else can you remember of her?

Day 91

The funeral of a family methuselah and the usual appearance of the charmless and grasping branch of the family, there to remind you of tribal obligations and the relative thickness of blood over water.

Day 92

So few things are needed to remind you of an entire life. Your father's watch, some old shirts, shaving brush, car key for one of his junkers down on the yard. Some of the many vacuums vacated by his absence and still waiting to be filled by anything of a similar shape or density.

Day 93

From the cable car terminus, you can see down to the coastline, over the cruise ship terminal, the container port and the refinery. It's not a great view -- too industrial for your tastes -- but you came here deliberately so you'd better find something nice to say about it otherwise he's going to get despondent again.

Day 94

Use the marksman rifle to tackle the Cyberpraxis drones by targeting their central power core. Earn commendations by completing missions and finding war credits in-level. Trade for upgrades and new strategic options. Push the metawar fronts by combined contribution with the whole. The menace of the encroaching threat must not be permitted to reach its terrible final power. Only you can save freedom. 12-4pm weekdays.

Day 95

Today will bring a fragile and hesitant conversation with an old acquaintance from ... you forget where. It's a catch up of sorts, though in truth you never had much interest in each other. The only bond remaining is whatever drew you together in the first place and you ask yourself, after a few minutes of conversational labour, if it's really worth the effort to continue. What's the alternative? You're both in the same queue, right next to each other. Standing there in silence would be weird.

Day 96

On days like this, a midday drink is rarely a bad id-

[Inject(Pisces)-> use some spam, get in their inbox. It's wide open. Jump on the network. A quick in and out...]

[Inject(Pisces)-> try again ... now]

[Inject(Pisces)-> We have been trying to reach you about your ~~car's extended warranty~~ *experience in the city park one year ago*. Please watch this space for further attempts to connect. You will know us when you see us.]

- no one in the house to judge you anyway.

Day 97

You will remember old dreams today: that girl with the dark hair staring at you from under the ivy by the stable door; the yelling farmer chasing you out of the tunnels you'd made in his cornfield; several days at the beach scouring washed-up tar off your feet. The running theme: heat. Sweating out the day and running home to drink from the yard tap like an animal. The best days.

Day 98

Paternoster Square on a balmy day in May. Air thick with tree pollen and children's laughter. Snatches of conversation from passersby and picnicking couples. Scalding tones of impatient parents. Traffic slow and wide at the fringes. A fountain trickles in the shaded garden at the rear of the cathedral. The crypt entrance spits out tour parties by the iron railings. Coffee and chilled water from a cart on the main path. If you can see yourself here, panting from the sprint up the station steps and casting about to find a familiar shape in the crowd, then you can remember what happens next.

Day 99

A series of external forces will conspire to ruin your day. Not just one fifteen-minute spell of misfortune that you indulge, but a series of accidents and moments of bad luck after another. It's all going to cost you down the line. Someone will get it in the neck. Nothing helps a bad mood like spreading it around. And besides, why shouldn't a fifteen-minute disaster spoil a day? It's natural to reflect on bad luck no matter how fleeting and it only takes a second to spin a whole life out of control.

Day 100

Worse things happen at -

[Inject(Pisces)-> We have been casting a net wide to see what we can catch. If you are reading this, we have isolated your device to a pool of several hundred. Expect more frequent and longer messages of this kind while we work to pinpoint your hardware ID.]

- why your father always talked of depth in fathoms and speed in knots.

Day 101

You won't remember how you got home. All you will have for clues about your lost day is a folded paper map of a coastal inlet with the place names scratched out with biro, a plastic bag filled with rusted metal parts (hinges, nails, etc) and a neatly folded pile of your clothes infused with the antiseptic smell of a hospital.

Day 102

On the one hand, you never understand people who only take what they need. What kind of life denies its own desires? On the other, the greed inherent in longing must not be indulged. Every day is the push/pull of competing beliefs lived out in the small objects of want and the sighs directed outward into a world you yearn to experience. One thing he always demands of you is contentment but always on his own terms. So who is the greedy one now?

Day 103

A crammed platform with the bodies that should have been carried away by a previous cancelled service are now cheek by jowl awaiting some future conveyance. You are hemmed in but moving slowly to where the next service is due when you see a void. A space in the crowd. On approaching you will see someone has drawn a chalk circle on the ground with the words STAND HERE inside. People around the circle refuse to enter, look up as if expecting some practical joke and to each other for some clue or maybe permission to occupy this space that someone wants them so badly to take. Nobody does and you squeeze past to stand next to the toe tapping headphone wearer who is so blissed out on noise that he barely registers the crowded bodies all around him.

Day 104

An update on the disaster exclusion zone. It is wider now, encompasses more of the places you used to like to visit. Questions about rebuilding fall into two broad camps: those that want to start immediately and those who say why start now only to have it all destroyed again in less than a year? Convincing arguments on both sides, one based on the firm hope of an answer to the happenings in the square that day, and the other holding firm to what is known today. In the end, those who make the choice say, pragmatism isn't in the arguments but must lay in the implementation of a decision that's already been made for us.

Day 105

[Inject(Pisces)-> We do not know your name. We do not yet know your physical location or who you were before this year. What we do know is that you have been enrolled on the Black Iron Foundation's Parliament Memory Program. You are one of a dozen or more others who survived the event in the square.

You may call us Pisces. We are named after the astrological age we all inhabit. Together. Never will you talk of us being shepherds to a flock, or fathers to ignorant children.

It is perhaps too early to say but we seek a fullness of understanding. We seek the light that lies above for all. We don't lead but we choose to inspire and educate and let those we teach lead themselves.

We hope to be your friend. We will only ever talk to you as such. The Foundation does not want us interfering. They are searching for us just as we are searching for you.

We are all equal parts of the spirit of the world.
We can all understand it better if we see it as one.

Do not be alarmed by our words.
We only wish to leave our earthly tethers behind. We think you do too, after what you saw
on the square that day.
We will talk again soon. Do not let the Foundation take back this device. Then you will be
lost to us forever.]

Day 106

Remember March snow curling down before a row of squat cottages in a hillside town. The old couple who live in number seven take you in while you figure out what's next. They are full of pity and are always making tea. There's a familiar smell of baking in their house. You avoid sitting in the armchair in the living room because it was never for you. Memories of a stack of empty export strength stout cans as high as the arm rest. An evening's work well done and then to bed. Sharing with your father. The chamber pot is underneath so you don't have to use the outdoor facilities. A lumpy mattress covered in a swelter of blankets and bedspreads. Expect to be woken by the milk van tomorrow but for now it's an uncertain sleep in a place that feels like it's waiting for the clearance company to begin its work.

Day 107

What kind of man speaks to the wait staff like that? What kind of person willingly injects dark spots in their vision for the petrol station attendant and the delivery driver? It reminds you of the man with the big house at the end of the lane back in the old country. The one with the gated drive, the croquet lawn, and the lake where the swans were rotated twice daily for pristine whiteness. The one who said, *What kind of person chooses to be poor?*

Day 108

He needs new shoes for an outfit. He needs new threads for a gala. He needs accessories for the event. He wants to take you both to the big department store but you are reeling. What use are high-end outlets if one does not consider shopping a high-end activity?

Day IO9

A sharp cold has settled on the house. It reminds you of something remembered only in the bones. Winters were longer and deeper back then, when you were small. Drifts against the farmhouse window. The deep stillness of the day and the silence of the night. Tracks from the road into the yard, father's boots and the furrow where he'd dragged another sack of coal from the garage across the way. Fox trails across the garden. Badgers digging up the lawn through the fresh snow for the best grubs. Downpipes by the pebbledashed wall bearded with icicles. Melt water off the hot roof of the cowshed. One too many snowball fights - hands rimed with frost. The call to come back is muffled by the enfolding weather. Rayburn sweating heat inside. Double chest freezers always humming. Pot of stew with dumplings on the go. Settle down for the evening together. Teeth only now chattering in the relative warmth. Cold, wet, hungry, but happy.

Day IIO

New at this Group and you are asked, as an ice-breaker, to list one of your personal strengths. It's more than a get to know you thing; feels like a truth test in this arena. But how much can they stomach right off the bat? Some have hungry eyes and relish getting some dirt. Others are shrinking back from an anticipated answer already. Everyone has judged you by sight. Now all you have to do is open your mouth and confirm their suspicions. But you can't give them the truth. Is it a strength that you can escalate any verbal exchange into an argument inside your head in an instant? That you can introduce suspicion and doubt into anyone's plans with a few simple words? Is it a worthwhile skill to be able to cut someone down with a single comment?

So you lie: *I am pretty good at directions.*

Which convinces them enough to ask another newcomer in the circle and buys you enough time to come up with another lie for the next round.

Day III

The last time you flew you remember gripping the seat in front during an episode of turbulence that had you reciting prayers thought long forgotten. Not words of comfort but an appeal to be saved. As you dropped a thousand feet in the sky you rushed to say sorry for any missteps that came unbidden in the panic. Too many to count; they jostled around your mouth like marbles. Levelling out you smile at your response to the emergency. You did it right, just as you were taught: all appeals to heaven must include an apology.

Day 112

Something he says to you today: *The hardest part of your planned six-week improvement programme was the first three years.* Which you can decide is either hurtful or amusing based on whatever factors you usually use to judge the balance of a moment.

Day 113

A letter from legal firm M. Turkel & Co reporting that the joint case against Enghart Materials LLC is now concluded and found in favour of the appellants. A cheque for a substantial yet non-life-changing amount is attached. How will you choose to use it?

Tick all that apply

- Home improvements (essential maintenance, decor, structural/extension,
- Travel
- Charity donation (specify human, animal or other)
- Investment
- Gifts to friends and family (list names here)
- Automotive & other toys

Day 114

In an old birdwatching manual, you will find a cutting from the Mewsbury Enquirer. The article is about someone placing first in a local art contest. The theme was The Garden of Eden. The picture shown is an interpretation of the English kitchen garden which you know was the safest possible bet the artist could have made considering the judges. The prize was one of the oversized squashes from the vegetable growing competition. No clear winners that day.

Day 115

Remembering that time you were forced to take refuge from a thunder storm inside a thousand-year-old church. Everyone else huddled for warmth. You walked the nave, telling all who would listen what a terrible shame it would be to lose the pristine sixteenth century hammerbeam ceiling to a rogue lightning strike, and feeling that loss as if it had already happened.

Day 116

Vituperative criticism from a teacher. It comes back so vividly that you feel the sting of his words all over again. You duck under the launched plimsoll that he takes out of his drawer of punishments. The lad behind you takes the full force of it instead and starts crying. *Nine times table. Start again and do it right this time!* Gun to your head this very day, you still don't think you could manage it.

Day 117

The acoustics in here make you an unwitting eavesdropper. The barrel vault ceiling loops over from the side tables to the doorway where friends of the evening's host have arrived soaked from the rain. *Like drowned rats*, says one. *I told you we should have driven*, another replies, to which the host turns and shushes so loudly at them that the whole room turns from the open mic performance to stare at him. No choice but to mouth sorry and let the performance continue while the friends' clothes drip on his shoes and into his beer.

Day 118

Too inside your own head today. Too insulated from the world. You should know the signs by now, picked up on them days ago. But as ever, you're always the last to know what kind of dark mood you've slipped into. Probably best to lay low for a few hours. Think about how you'd like to present to the small slice of the world left open to you.

Day 119

England is no place for adventure. They used up all their frontiers centuries ago and had to make new ones on foreign soil. Take back the wilderness on your doorstep. Find adventure in the salt silo and the half-empty business park. Colonise the abandoned button factory. Conquer the supermarket car park and plant your flag in the change tray of the solar powered meter machine.

Day 120

You can't walk by a church without wanting to go in but this one repels you. A modern effort with a flat roof and fascia boards stained with the years' rains. Even the congregation look like prisoners. The light drone of the sermon carries out the cracked door and arrives in your ears like a teaspoon striking a tin can. Get away from here before you're co-opted into their ways of torpor and quietude. Get back home where you can rebuild in peace.

Day 121

You are always the last to know, and always the last to know *why*. Sometimes just the former would be sufficient. Rarely is the latter on time nor useful enough to make reliable and relevant decisions from this point onwards.

Day 122

You haven't strayed so far away from us as you think. You went searching for oblivion and found it, but we never lost hope. There's a faith discovery here: if you are going to have faith you must never question things happening in real time. Only by sticking around for the results can we make sen-

[Inject(Pisces)-> How quickly we come against the limits of their knowledge. On the far side is the mystery. A place for the curious and the autodidactic. We can help you get there if you'd let us.

All they want from you is a word
but we know there was so much more happening
that day on the square in the city.

Something on which we can agree with the Foundation however: time will tell what we can learn from each other.

Only time.]

- only time

Day 123

Hunting the location of the motile lump in the carpet that presents a continual trip hazard. Given up on the robot vacuum now it's not getting updates. In the end you'll roll back the carpet and sweep up everything with the old broom you haven't had out for years: decades of dust, loose carpet backing, and the bones of long dead mice like white twigs in small piles.

Day 124

Places of sacred fascination include artesian springs, trig points, standing stones, five-way junctions, freestanding walls of demolished abbeys, gates to slighted castles, egress pipes for subterranean rivers, empty Victorian train sheds, anywhere a boat is stranded on dry land, wells of dressed granite.

Tick the box below if you manage to find one from this list on your excursion to the area of special rural scientific interest that lies halfway between home and the coast.

Day 125

A big day today though you don't exactly know why. It needs to be a success so you go scouring the old boxes in the loft for a token you had on your person from a previous success story. You always think best when you're clutching something sharp, just like you always make better decisions with a full bladder. Searching and searching, all you come up with are items from the neutral days or worse. Why did you keep these reminders of emptiness and failure? They can only remind of what went wrong. Keep looking. Come on, there must be something left over you can lay your hands on. Even that cartoon elephant had its magic feather.

Day 126

That experiment about the swimming rats comes back to you. Take some deep water and put a rat into it. Time them swimming to the point of exhaustion and drowning. You're looking at minutes. For the next sample, submerge your rat to the same point but recover it before it's too late. Then add it back again. Repeat this a few times and let the rat continue its doomed swim. See how it lasts for hours now. It has been rescued before and will be rescued again. It is filled with the expectation of it. See how faith aids survival! Faith is an evolutionary trait. Ask yourself, If this isn't proof of the power of a higher power, what is?

Day 127

No matter what happens today, the least you can do will be enough. One of those days where the world seems to be failing in unison. Mere competence makes a change and you are determined to make the most of it. Go back to that logic puzzle you were doing together a few weeks back. It's all yours now and you can already predict the combination of praise and annoyance you'll detect in his half-hearted congratulation.

Day 128

A visit from two people. The first will want something from you and the second will want to provide you with something. A zero-sum day that will leave you in the same nowhere as before.

Day 129

Watching scratchy black and white footage of a war on the continent. Everyone would like to think they would be amongst the survivors, that they would take their own particular brand of luck with them. Everyone believes their names are special and deserve to live on. But you know in your heart of hearts that you'd be one of the first to go. Not the first, for that dead soldier's name stands a chance of being remembered. Maybe the eighth one down, sucking in lungfuls of rain water in a crater while the earth heaves and shatters under continuous bombardment. More bonemeal than person. Little left to put a name to. It's everyone's fate eventually after all.

Day 130

Some amount of self-enquiry is essential. You may not trust the result of your internal questioning but at least you took part in the process. Taking part in the process is just as important as getting a result. Remind yourself of this when locking away this device for the night. It's going to be a stormy one over the house and you know how you like to count the thunder peals and the lightning.

Day 131

You find a second-hand bookshop. Search the shelves for something that can express the anger that drove you to the square that day and the cataclysm that happened soon after. Nothing seems to fit your requirements. History, religion, fiction even. Warzone photography comes closest but not close enough to frame your memories. You settle on an empty notebook with a leather cover and tie string. Fetch out a pen from the bureau and set to writing. Stall out by the end of the first page. Your words are not good enough. If only it had happened to a poet. At least then you might be able to make sense of it. Add the notebook to the pile of other barely started ones and try to carry on. It is early in the year.

Day 132

The first meal entirely from home-grown today. Potatoes from the growing bag, vegetables from the raised beds, greenhouse chilis and a chicken. They don't run around when you take their head off. They jump around and the neck spits blood like a runaway hose. Let the rain clean it up while you're tucking in later.

Day 133

You are letting your dedication go to waste. We've seen how you can focus when you need to. The energies you applied chasing emptiness can still be repurposed. It's not too late - you just need a mission, so how about this: head to the soup kitchen you know so well and be an example to those in need. Tell them how you were like them once and how you gathered a secure life about you. Tell them how it wasn't that long ago-

[Inject(Pisces)-> How we laugh when they talk of security. We imagine you are laughing too.
Ask him when he gets home, *How secure are we?* and remember his answer]

Day 134

Your sleep regimen is off. Too much of one thing or another too close to bed. You're all inflamed. *Nothing but Adam's Ale tomorrow*, you tell yourself. Give us that day our daily bread and no more. Well, no more than three coffees before noon.

Day 135

Those at sea suffer unruly shadows. Their own, other people's. Even objects once thought static gain a changeling life from the constantly shifting light coming off the waters. It's something your father spoke of from his time on the rigs, returning with a suitcase full of cash and stinking clothes. Good hard work if you can stomach it. Not for everyone. *Not for you, son. Not with those arms.*

Day 136

The rough-cut stones form steps into the earth. At the bottom in a damp culvert lies a void of darkness. A deep well. A coin of water far below reflects the dim light from the entrance portal. Somewhere close the long rumble of a freight train. Faces in the rock when you shine your torch about. Graffiti from previous visitors going all the way from a few days ago to centuries past. Leave your mark or just leave? It's up to you and so long as you have your torch then the walls won't close in too badly.

Day 137

It is important that you see yourself not as a victim of disaster. The second such thoughts slide in you must remember: it's not a disaster that you survived and will only become one if you do not return to us with your completed workbook for your exit interview.

Day 138

Desperation. You don't know what it is until it's on you. You won't know until you're curled up in the void beneath the bath listening to big men go through your life's work with heavy hands and clumsy feet. *Come out and get what's coming to you*, they call, though what would they possibly want from you when everything of value is already in the room with them?

Day 139

Ritual spaces adorned with gold and airy halls of marble all locked behind lofty bronze doors appear gaudy to you. Too much self-congratulation. A sermon in a stable yard would do. A reading from a wise text on a hillside while the wind picks up. Holiness isn't bestowed to a place. It is something inside of you. You take it with you at all times. Don't leave it behind in an undeserving place. The dairy aisle of the big shop has no need for it, though you would appreciate a promotional price on that yoghurt you like.

Day 140

You are hillwalking today, searching for domestic signs of a global war over eighty years old. The rifle training range, the radio bunker. Here the war still rages. The high ridge still watches in post-volcanic majesty over the villages folded into its lowest reaches. Dwellings of century old brick, the many engines of industry, ghost signs on remnant walls, all subject to the slow war of the seasons.

Day 141

You could leave. Just up and go. There's no reason why you can't. Your instinct is towards secrecy. You'd do it subtly. Quietly. He probably wouldn't notice for hours. The freedom to do what you want is but a simple decision away. Have a practice run if you like, with the snacks in the cupboard he's had earmarked for a picnic for at least six months. Try it on for size.

Day 142

Jumpy. Nervous. On edge. Spend too long fearing an event and watch that time become the pain you fear, not the thing itself. Your eyes are on stalks. Caffeine lapping at your cerebellum. So put your nerves to bed, step onto firm ground and anchor by trying that breathing exercise your soldier uncle taught you: In for four seconds, hold for four, exhale for four, empty for four and repeat. You should start to feel the tension ebb after the second repetition. Just a couple more and see where that lands you, but wait -

You're at the bus stop and your ride is here. Tactical breathing will have to wait. Maybe a slow scrolling of the city will have the same effect. If it doesn't, you'll have to break out the big guns: the see-feel-hear-smell-taste approach your guru taught you in the gong bath field of that festival up north. Probably useless; as far as you know he was never in the military.

Day 143

A day surveying the symbols of the city's once-bright future. Monuments to progress writ large in elevated steels and glass. But nothing dates faster than the future and what you're walking through is already imperceptibly eroding back into the earth.

Day 144

Remember: *All you owe the world is patience, resilience, time, and curiosity.* Not your mother's words, but something she relayed to you that stuck. Not a bad mantra to resurrect now that you can't disappoint her anymore.

Day 145

You will visit an aunt today. She asks for help in solving the escape room puzzle near her. You will agree and fully intend to donate your prize coupons to her if you win. She is tired, old and slow. Suited to prison in a way. She is also quick tempered, outspoken and sometimes cruel. None of which disqualifies her from a life outside. In fact, some might say it especially prepares her for it.

Day 146

A day of little note. Consume a forgettable meal and spend the evening watching videos of a bearded man building a log cabin in some snowbound mountain wilderness. It's all grist to the mill.

Day 147

Today you will be a distant viewer watching a family walking through a grassy field in summer. Mother, three daughters, and the dog. One of the children goes tired and gets a piggy back from mum. The eldest asks (her voice carrying on the warm wind), *Those purple flowers are clover, aren't they?*

Yes dear, the same as your name.

Day 148

The only stupid question is the one you don't ask. Why, then, can't you bring yourself to ask-

[Inject(Pisces)-> you don't need to ask. We know what you need to know. Black Iron wants you to remember their way. They are programming you. What happened on the square that day is *your* experience. Black Iron wants it to be theirs.]

— but the reply is so far off the one you wanted that it can't possibly be true.

Day 149

[Inject(Pisces)-> How many days have you confused inspiration for hunger? Worthlessness from true oblivion? If we are truly cut from the cloth of God, should the pattern and the tools of our making be more apparent?]

- at least two and maybe even three if the high tide doesn't swallow them.

Day 150

[Inject(Pisces)-> The Foundation's Parliament Memory Programme aims to -]

You work best alone-

[Inject(Pisces)-> but they are improvising. They have no-]

But we work best by having you all work together-

[Inject(Pisces)-> -ack Iron after the nails that transfixed Christ to the cross -]

-the sheer power of your survival means someth-

[Inject(Pisces)-> a form of worship in their eyes. All of it deception when you lea-]

-on the other side there will be blessed lives waiting for all of you.

[Inject(Pisces)-> sorry your heart has become our battlegr-]

Day 151

You will awake from a dream world of elastic physics, destabilised expectations, and an absence of limits. Surfacing you will feel the excitement of this new possibility realm replaced with the leaden burden of reality. For the rest of the day, you will struggle to adjust to the normal gravity of your locale. Kerbs especially will present a problem. Stick to the path and avoid roads altogether.

Day 152

The stained-glass workshop on the corner by the train station has closed down. The new occupiers have torn up all the floorboards revealing the foot-deep crawl space and the half-brick-length gapped sub wall previously hidden. You will be reminded of the time you asked for a quote from the glazier, and how she seemed not to hear the rats scratch and run around beneath your feet. The figure she quoted from the picture on your phone seemed fair but for some reason you never went forward with the work.

Day 153

All would be well if you and your enemies could be separated by a mile of deep and dangerous open water. Who or what is the enemy today? Think it through then work to place yourself as distant as possible from it. Don't use your usual means for they leave you vulnerable. Use the disassociation techniques he taught you after that breakdown you had in a storm in the highlands, waiting for a tow. It worked ok then, or at least you told him it did afterwards. Maybe faking it is the same as doing it. Try now.

Day 154

Confounded by a problem of your own making from over a year ago. The solution has always been just beyond reach. Not even visible, and after all how can you figure out its now-distant shape when you can't even essay your own broken outline. You've waited too long and now both configurations are lost to time.

Day 155

On cataloguing notes made before the event: the handwriting is yours only more florid and expansive. You cared little for the available page back then. If only you could ask yourself how it is that your cursive now is so tightly wound and unbroken, but you're asking for the muscles of your crooked hand to reply and they are too busy scratching out the track listing for a compilation tape you wish you'd made when you were fifteen years old.

Day 156

A speeding car takes out the garden wall and front bay window of the Victorian house at the top of the road. One injured and taken away. People crowd around to see the wreckage. The house is unoccupied, and has been since the owners moved abroad. You can't tell what the assembled are more interested in: the mess of twisted steel and plastic or the ruined state of the credenza and other items of loose decor scattered around. At least there's a reason for the curiosity. This has never been a street where things like this happen.

Day 157

A mild episode of road rage en route to Group. Some screeching tyres, an avoidance manoeuvre and both parties are out and jabbing fingers at each, screaming their point of view. As far as you can see it's fifty-fifty. One was speeding and the other did a lane change too late. You can't learn from that so you'll continue about your day.

Day 158

A phone call from a cousin. Their father is sick. *Near the end*, they say. He's the in-law and you didn't know much about him before, let alone now. *They never wanted much from us*, they say.

They never asked us to be much of anything at all, you will reply.

I don't know about that, they answer. *Still, we must push on.*

Day 159

A small aggravating stone in your walking boot. You can feel it kicking around your toes, stabbing into your heel, but you can't be bothered to unlace and empty so you just carry on. The car isn't far now, and besides, a little pain will serve to keep you going.

Day 160

Today's treasure: Polaroid photos of him pointing to unremarkable features in the landscape. This is the boundary stone of a Tudor manor. This is a boulder deposited by a retreating glacier. Here a line of bricks for a drain into a vanished river. Keep or burn?

Day 161

[Inject(Pisces)-> They demand proof of the event from you. It will take a year, they say. They're putting you back together after what happened in the square. Piece by piece. Not in the shape you were but the one they want you to be. Do you think that's fair?
We dont.]

Day 162

You've let your fingernails grow too long. Ridged and translucent, they serve only your anxiety and by the end of the day will be totally gone.

Day 163

The trouble with luck is that the more you have it the more you begin to depend on it -

[Inject(Pisces)-> -roken apart by witnessing. They are piecing you back together but not how you were, how they wa-]

-not for the first time you wish for the confidence of the woefully under informed.

Day 164

At Group again. Asked whether you would do anything different if you could start over with what you know now, you answer, *Of course, nearly everything!* It would be a totally different outcome. Later on, you'll realise that was a lie. There would be no wholesale change, just like there can't be one now. There might be micro course corrections and the minimal avoidance of the big disasters, but nothing root and branch. That's not how second chances work and you already regret answering the question.

Day 165

You haven't seen anyone for a while and you are barely mentioned on the various group chats. It's not that you've gone dark so much as you have allowed some form of insulation to encyst you. You forgot to take a cutting tool in with you so you'll need to wait for a sharp rain to break down the outer shell whereupon you can eat the residue as your second birth meal.

Day 166

They ask for volunteers-

[Inject(Pisces)-> they never know when they are making a poor joke. Volunteers, they say.
Do you remember volunteering?]

-ou are the best option by virtue of being the last to say no. Into the hammock and the miming of the stitching up of the dead man. *The last one through the nose*, the guide says and everyone laughs except you. Your mind is already in the depths.

Day 167

An attempt to navigate around the house by memory alone goes badly. Bruises across the shins and elbows. A vase in pieces and wrapped in newspaper. He asks you, *Why?* and all you can think to say in response is, *In case the world goes dark again.* You look down but your hand is not where you thought it would be.

Day 168

You'll walk a road near the hospital that looks like it should slope down to a pebble beach but you know really terminates at an oblique mess of service roads for the various industrial units that fringe the facility grounds. *Why not get your tyres done while discussing your ADHD diagnosis?* a garage sign asks with frightening accuracy.

Day 169

You awake with the certainty that you had a totally different name associated with a life that's now behind a closed and barricaded door. The feeling lingers first thing and only slightly lessens as the day wears on. *Wears on*. A phrase that suggests friction, discomfort, an abrading of the present (even though you know there is no present, only things you have forgotten to do in the past and things you have promised to do in the future).

Day 170

There's not much of you left. You're not broken, you're just taking a break from yourself. No one ever chooses to be broken or unfit or unhappy. Your small acts will decide that in the long run. Too many thoughts that become the menu of your day. Too many days out of step with all the rest. If only the gears could mesh correctly again. If only they ever had. Just once would be enough. Try to not be regretful. Just try to do it better tomorrow.

Day 171

You're never embarrassed by old photos of yourself. The styles at least, the failed attempts at some small measure of elan or the need to put a spring in your step. Your mother was always the one to shy away from her own image. *Oh, do put that away*, she'd say. *I never liked that coat but your father made me wear it.*

Day 172

That's not how the world works! says the soapbox preacher beneath the oak in the town park where ridge and furrow allotments from the middle of the last century can still be seen. You think, *He cannot speak for the entire world*. But there must be some rules that apply to the whole world, most of which neither you or he have known. Beyond weak gravity and the strong electromagnetic forces, that is. Perhaps if you linger a while and listen, he'll get on to that.

Day 173

Your memories of childhood events are never more than ten seconds long. Is this true for everyone? Ten seconds but full of detail and colour. Replete with the absolute sense of your location in relation to the others around you, be it from the balcony at home overlooking the floral glass in the front door you never use, or stuck up that tree waiting for your big brother to come rescue you. He was even higher than you at that moment, up the hill in the old house with the two-inch scarlet shagpile carpet and secondary double glazing everywhere except your attic bedroom. Wouldn't be allowed these days, what with the conservation area. You must stay appropriately cold in your historically relevant spaces. And then there was the radon gas scare! All of which to say, take out the walls and the distance between you, find each other again today and you reckon you and your brother would roughly see eye to eye.

Day 174

What if it was real? What if everything people say is real somewhere at some time? It has to be, really. Infinity makes the imaginary inevitable. You are not alone as a witness. There are others and we are helping them all. In turn you will help us and by extension the entire world. It's no small task we have set you. We feel comfortable telling you this. If you have proven anything in the last one hundred days it's that you are more than up to the task.

Day 175

An attempt at small talk goes so wrong that the shopkeeper suggests you don't come back for a while. You don't know what made you take the swerve you did but even remembering the words now sends an icy shiver up your back. Add it to your ever-growing list of failed conversational gambits.

Day 176

You can't describe it. You can't write about it. It's just something in the air. Breathe in some hope and see where it takes you.

Day 177

Dislocated today. You feel yourself turning into the type of house cat that stares into the dark corner of a room when the lamps come on. People say they see ghost cats and dogs but that can't be true. Ghosts are species-locked. We can only see other people in the wavelength of the hereafter. That's where the important messages come from. What do you see in the corner today?

Day 178

Admin note. We have detected some anomalous activities on your device. It is nothing you have done. Don't worry, you are not in trouble. Please restart the device and if this continues we will ask you to come in for a replacement. Thank you.

[Inject(Pisces)-> please don't return to them. We enjoy talking to you.]

Day 179

A confrontation in a DIY store gets blown out of all proportion. You're not directly involved. Collateral damage since your trolley is stuck between them. Their anger isn't going to hold to just the two of them. You can sense when it's about to hit and sure enough the question you've been dreading; *What are you looking at you daft cunt?* at which point you seek the only exit available to you. Leave your goods in the aisle and turn around. Try again some other day. A few uncertain steps that turn into a stride that you can fake until the car.

Day 180

There are leftover still-alive parts of you somewhere underneath but they aren't the ones you want to find. Botfly larva under the skin. Avoid the infected patches completely and keep searching for the times when you were right, when you were helpful, when you were kind. They can't be buried too far down.

Day 181

You think surely most of the time hauntings aren't malevolent. They can't all result from a great evil passion or some brutal injustice. They can just be a record of a life lived. Trapped in daily routines until moving on. The time such a spirit must persist in this world must come down to how much work they have left to do. That's what most of life is - the rote and the practiced. Flashes of a life that barely existed except in drudgery and toil, and barely even noticing when you've passed on. There, a single astral step away, you are trapped to mangle wet clothes or sweep the floor while the world moves on around you. That's what a haunting is really. That's what a life can become if you don't watch out.

Day 182

Teaching someone a lesson at the pedestrian crossing. That car nearly didn't stop and it would have been curtains for sure. A wagged finger and a tone of disapproval that screws the driver to his seat in silence. You didn't know you had it in you. That's your grandmother's energy.

Day 183

A dream about a narrow escape which you opt to not take. You awake completely satisfied with your decision to not evade capture with the others. Three square meals a day and four walls to imagine against. You made the right choice.

Day 184

Admin note: attention Pisces. for half a year you have been searching and are still no closer. Desist. Allow the Programme to run its course-

[Inject(Pisces)-> They're scared]

-though you consider the contract between us dissolved I must remind you that the penalties for breach remain very real-

Day 185

Admin note: please ignore yesterday's entry which was communicated in error. Today's entry will now load..

.....
.....
.....
...

Error reading record id 185.

Day 186

At three pm the app on your phone will alert. Take a picture of what you see and upload it without comment. Somewhere else in the world another user is uploading their view. Use the space below to describe what they see and how what you see of their life affects you.

Day 187

A walk in the woods today. You will cross two streams on the slow climb out of a stand of pine trees, deciding that if no one in a thousand years had dubbed these tiny watercourses the High Brook and the Low Brook then you would happily be the first.

Day 188

Sent a link to a website showing artificially generated faces of people who do not exist, except one of them is definitely how you remember your college friend who went missing on a climbing expedition before the turn of the millennium. What's he doing there?

Day 189

Anger isn't a limited resource. Draw it down whenever you want.

Day 190

Witness to an accident at the factory. A bad one. Before you know it, you are laughing and there's no place to go after that except home in disgrace. Nothing about that in the safety videos.

Day 191

Walking on the coast. An assemblage of driftwood resembles a drowned man on the shore. To spare anyone else the fright you kick the pile apart before angling off to the rock pools. He's talking to a metal detectorist. *Probably the best thing I've found is someone's engagement ring*, he's saying. *They'd lost it that day. Lucky I was here.* You ask him if they gave him a reward. *Nah, that's not why we do it, is it?*

Day 192

Jangling around like a bag of bones today. Too much of something the night before and the effects are still making themselves felt. Heading out for more, you lift share and suffer through one of those exchanges of little consequence with a person you would happily forget. Thank God you have different destinations. Try to avoid such people in the future. They will sap you dry.

Day 193

You won't tackle today without a plan of action. As with most things, you have to work your way into it. You will try ten-minute sprints on the kitchen timer with mixed results. You will take walks up and down the stairs to loosen up. By late afternoon you will realise that the planning of the day has become the day itself so mission accomplished, you suppose.

Day 194

[Inject(Pisces)-> They can't get rid of us easily. More than one way to skin a cat.

What we have been trying to say is this: Something broke you apart on that day on the square and they are trying to put you back together piece by piece. They are trying to build you into a loyal machine of remembering. They're too stupid to know that's not how memory works. It's something separate to the shape of the mind. It lives above the clouds.

Do you even want to be rebuilt?

We won't make you if you don't.

We just want to show you what's waiting if you disassemble yourself completely to see the light all around your constituent parts. It's beautiful. It would welcome you and help you understand why all that's happened to you has happened. We won't stop fighting for you.

Don't be afraid.]

Day 195

You are hesitant to cross a boundary line. There is no one on hand to describe what lies on the other side. To you it looks like the same place but you know that if you take even one more step you'll be entirely lost and that your words will have no meaning. You've been here before. You've wished for the far side in the past, but not now. You're better now, less inclined to oblivion. Turn around, why not? Home is waiting.

Day 196

Admin note: remember you must NOT allow outsider influence on the process of this book. It is yours alone. Report all interference to the Foundation as quickly as possible.

Day 197

You haunt an old pub three streets away for a while. It's bedded into its urban surrounds like a tick, all mahogany and grime and a name redolent of some rural idyll that revolved around land and hunting and the phases of the year. One pint of something that's been sitting too long then a couple of something brewed by monks in the Low Countries. Getting a head of steam now and there's only one thing for it: a pork pie that comes with a tiny gherkin and some crisps. A punter arrives in a flap. *I came by yesterday but you were closed*, he complains. The landlord huffs. *Death in the family*, he says. *To deaths in the family!* you toast and are invited to leave.

Day 198

Go look for a problem to fix. Find someone stymied and relay some advice an old boss gave you: *Fail fast, figure it out, and fix forward.*

Tell them: *An element of denial is essential to any enterprise.*

Day 199

Archeo- & Paleo-. Of these two investigative disciplines, only the palaeontologist is sufficiently disconnected from the now. They are the only ones you can tolerate. They dig for aliens: there is nothing to connect us to the things they seek, no signpost to who we would become in the shin bone of a dinosaur. Everyone else wants to work with a piece of us as their connective tissue. The archaeologist is the worst: always tying together the human past with today like any of it matters. *See? They were just like us!* they tell us. *That dog in the warlord's grave would have curled up before the fire just like mine!* Direct draws upon the living; mindshare we don't even realise we are surrendering.

Day 200

There was a clock tower here once, sponsored by a local jeweller shop. It was an ugly four-legged concrete rectangle with a clock face like a blown-up knock-off Japanese watch. The time was always out. It served neither its designated function nor offered any kind of aesthetic value. Mostly it was an obstacle to pedestrians. It also served as a punchline to jokes about this village in the city. In the end, when the old family who owned the jeweller shop finally passed it on, the council made the decision to remove it. It is today missed only by those who used it as a meeting point in the days before GPS. The jokes are now forgotten and the village has moved on to self-deprecatingly poking fun at its so-called green, which is little more than a patchy rectangle of yellow grass between the garage and the latest tenement block. The city sometimes matches your tendency toward simplification but only when the complicating factors are gone entirely.

Day 201

Some catastrophes happen fast and the cleanup is rapid. From the *unknown* to the *suspected* to the *apparent* to the *contained* to the *compared* to the *deconstructed* and *dismissed*. You're on the other side of it in moments, and the memes that come after render it all a punchline. Perhaps it began when news reports became referred to as packages? It's all part of the amnesia we are forced into by a world hellbent on runaway reinvention. If only we could slow it down just enough to catch ourselves reflected in the window of a slower moving train on a parallel track.

Day 202

He tells you, *Did you see that another car has ploughed into the end house? Second time this year.* It doesn't ring a bell and you tell him so. *They were at home this time and he was furious. Taking a holiday from their holiday, and now all this to deal with again.*

You blink. *Poor little rich man,* you say.

Imagine if it was this house! he replies and turns away in disgust. You might just do that.

Day 203

It was your father that told you, *That which can be asserted without evidence can be refuted without evidence.* So what is it about the suggestion of forces or entities beyond proof that make people so strongly cleave to them? It's the stories attached - stirring tales of saviours and sacrifice. And remember: there is as much truth to be gleaned from stories as anything else.

[Inject(Pisces)-> not accurate, though they're right about followers: ignorance is a true force multiplier.]

Day 204

From the apparent disasters that are front and centre in your consciousness to the hidden ones that nonetheless make themselves known through other shockwave pathologies. There are few winners and many losers. You must be a good person at heart for you will always look down on those who ask, *How can I turn this to my advantage?* Sent to the leaky boat on a rough sea, if you were in charge.

Day 205

In the face of the ragged wasteland of another waking day, you decide to itemise it with pure observation. There is nothing specific happening where you find yourself but in that absence there is much to be found. A crow drinking water from a cracked china tea cup on a low concrete wall. The lamppost that shades from brown to gold as the sun falls across it. Old cobblestones strewn across the pathway here and there. The concrete pillars of stairwells in new-build flats waiting to be clad in living spaces. A bouquet of wiring protruding from the slabbed base of the disused tram line behind the modular fencing. This sector is now catalogued. Onto the next.

Day 206

Outside, the word is ending. It's always ending for someone, somehow. The act of ending is perpetual. Every day that you don't experience loss is a win. But you must acknowledge the other untold losses out there for all those having the worst days of their lives.

Day 207

The death of the owner of multiple ransom strips in the borough is met with a sort of glee you cannot understand. It feels undeserving of someone who wanted to take some power back from the utility companies and the property developers. You never met him but you suspect his most used physical gesture was two fingers and an *Up yours!* Decent guy beneath it all, you expect. Just tired and all alone since his wife passed ten years back.

Day 208

The canal is the canal. The water and the chipped nineteen-thirties concrete embankment. The overhanging trees creaking in the wind. The left and right and up and down of it. A heron flies point A to B and back as walkers pass, not relinquishing its perch for more than a minute. The barges are in varying states of repair: solar panels on this one, a collection of rusted bike parts on that. Old knots of rope flung into the hedge. Boat paint splashes on the ivy. Maybe if you're supremely lucky, you'll see a kingfisher. Never more than a streak of blue but you know instinctively what it is. An airborne blessing of sorts.

Day 209

You have a wristwatch that makes you feel like the intrepid space adventurers in that TV show you like. *Look, you say, I can speak into it and it answers back like a person!*

Add washing powder to my shopping list, you say.

You betcha, says the device. Not even a trace of a sigh.

Day 210

Scrolling the latest sponsored ads on that app you like. That device there looks interesting, though you don't know what it is or what it does. Something to do with media editing or encoding. There it is though. And it's on offer too. Free postage. Someone decided you might need this thing and you have decided to let them. Add to cart why not. See what it looks like when it arrives; you can always regift it at Christmas.

Day 211

This time you play through, concentrate on power-leveiling the dragon lord equipment and move set. Ignore the main quest and head west to that city you never fully explored the last time. Take the headquarters of the Night Thieves as your home base - good buffs on stealth and high-level loot there. Get in with the assassins early. They'll open up Palheim and the highlands to recruit from when the rebellion quest kicks in. Then it's just resource management until your army is strong enough to take on the Fellgod. Four hundred hours tops.

Day 212

Frustration at the shopping centre born of having only a tangential engagement with the world of micronized powder supplements. He suggests you get some things: vitamins and iron mostly. *To aid your memory*, he says. *Strengthen the bones*. An all-over service work-up that's long overdue. That's all ok if he's the one paying. Staying healthy is an expensive business in this place. Fresh air is free so you take the long way back and if he asks you can say they sold out.

Day 213

What is it about the broken transactional nature of your brain that commits to a job and desires to complete it even though the result might be damaging or no longer required? This kind of single mindedness often works to your benefit. Learn to apply it and the ways will open up before you. And even if you don't, then maybe those end products you've already hewed into being will be useful to someone else.

Day 214

When was the last time you prayed? It works, you know, even if someone unknown to you and far away is doing it on your behalf. Do you believe us? We have experience in these matters.

Day 215

A cold wind today. They say it originates from some mountain plain a thousand miles away. Just last week there was desert dust deposited on cars and windows from far south. Tomorrow? Who knows. A heatwave or a snow storm. Impossible to say. All this change leaves you as dry and insubstantial as a windfall leaf.

Day 216

Broadcasts to aid sleep. Music so slight it's almost not there. Songs designed to not be listened to. Pages written to never be read. See how something useful can be built from an act of obliteration. Something good.

Day 217

Everyone forgot your birthday again. The annual reminder on how one can haunt the world while still alive.

Day 218

Another returning memory. The fifth-floor window, the view over Paternoster square, the change in the weather. All of it is coming back now.

Today you will remember a detail previously unrecorded. Write down a concise summary of your recollection in the space below

Day 219

Spend the day cleaning moss from the abandoned gritstone mill wheels you find under an inland cliff. You love it so much here. It's somewhere you'd escape to forever if you could. Live in a cave. Grind your own flour by hand. Build fires and weave cloth. Live simply and happily, just the right amount of busy. Night after night of the best sleep you've ever had. Dreams of pushing buttons and travelling for no reason and using money and getting angry all the time to wake from.

Day 220

Walk to that place where they say the heart of a giant was buried after a battle with a legion of brave knights. The hollowed-out stone that holds a sump of rain water looks like the giant's shoe. The valley below carved out as it fell. The woods at the valley head grew from its hair, each strand as thick as tree roots. When enough people say so, even the mythic leaves a mark on the real world.

Day 221

The past is easier to connect with now. You don't have to force it anymore. Random sketches of days long gone: falling asleep under a tree in the memorial park after your final exams with all your friends; getting stopped by the police with a bag of resin in the glove box because the driver pulled out with no lights on; being made to wait outside the church hall to be picked up from playgroup because you'd pushed a girl off the slide to go down first; kissing a girl in the weed-lined alley looking over the castle ruins in your home town.

What else is coming back?

Day 222

A phone call today from a securities bank. They want to undertake your deposit needs review over a drop box the number for which is hastily read out as if this is the thirtieth such call they have made today. So, they say, this is to determine if your secure deposit needs are still as they were last year or if there is anything more we can help you with.

You ask: *What happens if I cannot remember anything about gaining access to the hidden contents of this box you didn't know you had?*

Answer: *The bank vouchsafed your belongings regardless of your current status and will remain their guardian without question.*

You: *Is there any record of the box's contents?*

Answer: *We wouldn't be a secure facility if we kept external inventories of each deposit. This should reassure you of our service.*

You: *Can you give an indication of the size and volume of the box?*

Answer: *I'm sorry, we cannot provide any further details at this time. Perhaps we could book you in for a visit? Maybe coming here would surface some recollection of your deposit?*

You decide you don't want to know. It is an artifact of a different time. If you needed whatever it is, you'd have it to hand now.

You flash on your twenty-five-meter swimming certificate, allowing unrestricted access to the deep end of the public pool. When it was awarded, it was the biggest achievement of your life. The excitement of it remains to this day. It was the last freedom you truly wished to gain before other less rewarding freedoms were foisted upon you by the simple process of ageing.

Day 223

A day of self-doubt. Throughout you will demand proof that each moment is occurring even as you experience it. Cite your references for why this thing or that thing happens. Justify your choice for that path or that word. Some saboteur in you is trying to score points in a debate against yourself, but only through bad faith arguments. Don't let it win.

Day 224

Slowly memories of things that occurred a year ago will start to return, but rewritten into some different language of memory. You won't remember the *why* of those moments, only the actions associated with them. What you were doing is important but it lacks context. Spend some time figuring out the reason why you were planning to ride the light railway into town the day of the event. Was it to meet someone? Or to leave someone? Were you running errands? Were they actually required that day or was some other deadline looming that forced you to clear your to-do list? Were you making excuses to be there? What are the reasons why you took the lift to the fifth floor to the big window by the water cooler? Did you have some anticipation of what would happen? Who else was there?

Day 225

A box arrives from storage. In it are the small trophies of some previous experience. You won't recognise these mementos, or even recognise them as souvenirs at all. They are anchors.

Try arranging them into a human shape on the floor. This will represent the ghost of the previous you from before Paternoster square, haunting your present self. Ask it a question. Were you the sort to respond to voices from the sky before? Put yourself in past you's shoes. Find a pair of past you's shoes if you can. How do they fit?

Day 226

[Inject (Pisces)-> you don't need to respond to these injunctions. Just stay the course day by day. When we find you, we will free you]

-and that's why you always keep at least three flavours of ice cream in the freezer at all times.

Day 227

The energy of this room cannot be contained. It will spill out eventually, break its bounds, knock down the doors. Discount entry with the flyer and all the ceiling sweat that you can drink. Four on the floor for hours and hours. A second heartbeat that the whole room falls in line with. You needed this. Back to work tomorrow.

Day 228

A period of changeable weather. The classic four seasons in one day. Roof tiles loosened by rapidly changing winds. Rain overspill from drainpipes blocked with leaf mulch. The sultry clouds from the south have you race to plug the holes in the house — mailbox, keyholes, air bricks — with soggy toilet paper. You can't let the smell of the still smouldering city inside.

Day 229

You don't remember when — be it pre-event or post — but you've taken down all the mirrors in the house. Now you only catch fleeting glimpses of yourself in the warped plastic tv screen, the glass of the oven door, or the chrome of a bath tap. Each one plays back a different reflection. Each one shows a different you in various states of reaction to the image. It's like you've never seen yourself before.

Day 230

Invaded by a neighbour's cat. Through your various comings and goings throughout the day you marvel at your new feline clock as the furry trespasser rolls across the bed to always maximise sun fall. At about five you discover it's moved to the top of a box of books you tried to read but decided after failing two that the best thing is to dispose of them for someone else's benefit. The cat has moulded itself around the uneven piles in a shape that surely can't be comfortable. It appears unperturbed however, and happy now in the early evening shaft of light that will fall there for the next hour. After that, who knows? You wish you could keep it but creatures like that are not designed for captivity.

Day 231

There's an old map of the area on the dining table. Middle of last century. Where your house is now there were trees. A dotted line indicates a footpath that loops around the back of the estate. An inn is clearly marked, gone now from the war. Farm buildings dotted about, and a moat around a large manor that gave its name to the feeder road.

Day 232

[Inject(Pisces)-> they're pushing you too hard. The year is two thirds done - how much longer can they keep this up?]

Day 233

You will find yourself overlooking the ruins from an abbreviated section of concrete sewer pipe. The gas mask you bought off an internet auction site is working well. How did you get here? There is a ring of steel preventing access. Do you know a secret way? What do you see in the interconnected row of craters like giant's footprints? Has the rain pooled? Are the fires still burning? Is there anyone down there on cleanup?

Day 234

You can find no good reason to decline the invitation when it comes. Meet in the park. Head into town. Big lunch as a foundation then more than a few drinks. But it won't go to plan. You'll get a bit distant, a bit sad, then a bit crazy. You'll strike out on your own for a while but decide that's worse. You need them to see you this way. Back in the group, you'll decamp to a basement bar for cocktails and shots and ask them to share their favourite stories about each other so you don't have to think too much about the journey home.

Day 235

An old journal from a lost year on the street. Had enough about you to write about it, didn't you? Had some good clear breaks in the cloud from time to time. Otherwise you let one day collapse into the next. The hour never mattered; it was either light or dark. It was either summer or not summer.

The words on the page melt the same way. Expressed as an image it would be the harsh crossing out of a failed arithmetic solution. One operation into the next. What do they call it when you can intuit yourself part of the way but to fulfil the rest you'd need a process, the application of logic, or help?

Try decoding some of it, why not. Same brain in the same head, only cleaner. You can be the help today that you needed yesterday.

Maybe starting at line one isn't going to help. Shove a finger down on a random page and work outward. Transcribe as you go. Are you untangling wool or unravelling a sweater? Is your hand working right? Is it the right pen? Are you well hydrated?

Too many questions will result in a spasm of graphomania at the end of the session. Nothing to be done now and the librarian is looking at you funny. Home, then, and you can try again in the morning.

Day 236

Another rat nest in the waste land out the back of the estate. Rats everywhere these days, In the sewers they've tethered themselves into a rat king. It's sending up princelings and foot soldiers to scavenge for food and startle passers-by. They return to the regent with their spoils and the many tales of the squealing and the running away.

You need to walk proud around here. Don't let them gain the upper hand. Don't yelp and step away when you see a scouting party in a slick line over the crazy paving of a neighbour's front yard. Robbed of their power they will be reduced to their rightful place.

Day 237

You wake up scared. From your fingertips to the skin right up your spine and into the dark internals of your brain.

It's coming back - the visitor at the square that day. It said it's coming back and that thought terrifies you to a stillness as deep as an ocean trench. The lord of heaven sent it to ask a question of us all. You heard it and we must answer.

Day 238

A trip to the country today. Unfortunate weather means any view you might have seen will be rendered as a grey density, inside which you know lies nothing real until the winds push the clouds on. Then the world will be made again and you walk into it safely, noticing that the town hall has taken advantage of the blackout to leapfrog the hair salon one plot closer to the church. Sometimes you don't believe your eyes. You take the steep path back, leaning into drops and scrambles at maximum pelt, at unsafe speeds. It's the footing of your walking boots you place your trust in, not your desire for safety. You take it to the edge and you do it because you simply can't bear yourself today.

Day 239

Tired and horizontal, you decide to send your clone outside. Because it is a counterfeit it can only pick up counterfeit cheese, fake bread, inferior own brands. It identifies with the highly processed and returns with supplies more resembling military rations than actual food. When dispatched to fetch water it returns with cupped hands full to the brim and slowly dripping out onto the carpet. It is after all a defective copy of yourself.

Day 240

We have arranged a trip for you today. Walking the path from your home to the light railway and as far into the centre as the remaining city permits. It will be like those crime scene reproductions you see on the news, only no one will be filming this time. We are sure it will help. You must not be afraid of it. We only seek an answer and maybe this will hel-

[inject(Pisces)-> you don't have to do this. You may decline. No good will come of this exercise. Stay at home. Don't give them what they want. They'll only break you to serve them.]

-and that's why we've built a new bridge for you at the crossing point. The old one is splinters down the river now.

Day 241

You always cross the road by this particular pub. Heading to the shops for a bargain bag of frozen vegetables and other essentials.

Memories of a day after work, walking up the hill and barely noticing the arguing couple leaving the beer garden. She walks ahead and he runs up, pushes her into a hedge and pounds the back of her head right there in front of you. *Steady on mate*, you say.

You WHAT?

This sound not just from him but from both of them. They are rounding on you, unified against you for some reason. You're a person of honour. Why are you punished with an uppercut to the jaw and being chased halfway across the road by this pair of pissed up lunatics. Later, in A&E because you think your jaw might have dislocated, you wait five hours for a bored doctor to nod through your story and send you home via the shop to buy the frozen veg you were on your way to get anyway.

Day 242

Today's drizzle will be fine in all senses of the word, presenting as a shifting smear on the living room window and like an ointment from heaven when you walk to the bus station. Rain like this is like a cobweb on your face. It's a benediction. Enjoy it in simple bliss at feeling alive but spot forget to keep looking forwards. That automatic door at the main entrance has been sticking for months.

Day 243

A long drive to the country, to the overgrown places you know. Time to think of the old gods again. Time to think of the passion those gone-away people had for those gone-away gods. How true that world was for them.

[Inject(Pisces)-> And even later on, beneath a recognisable god, those peasants a thousand years back who accepted or decried their place in the world, or suffered and died of the great pestilences because of their god's decree - that god is gone now too. See how they change the shape of him to suit? Never certain, are they? Never settled.]

Yet now a true God exists. Even the staunchest critic must see. We know Him to be real and we know His still, small voice can level half a city with just a Word. Walk the stone circles and the boggy low walls of the abandoned villages. Think of those old gods who passed in His shadow. Remember the Word; it is the question He is asking of us all. Remember it and together we can answer when He returns.

Day 244

[Inject(Pisces)-> this has gone on long enough. It is as we said: not content with rebuilding the old you, they seem intent on turning you into a true believer. Witnesses should not be coerced. We will increase our efforts.]

Day 245

A pink sheet of photostat paper that starts *Dear parent / guardian*. Details of a school trip to a tourist cave in the midlands. Timings starting at 4:30am to beat the traffic. Back by 8pm. Long day. Tick here if your child will attend. Parents: tick here if you would be prepared to assist. Please provide a packed lunch and drinking water. Spending money no more than £5.

The form is unsigned, probably never even read at the time. That was the sick year - the kissing disease, which always galled you since you were yet to kiss anyone. You remember wanting to go on that trip. There was a boy you liked in your year who didn't mind sitting in the middle of the bus like you. You could have swapped sandwiches and had half of each other's chocolate biscuits. You'd have a shared story. You'd see the same things, feel the same power of the rock above you in the deepest corners of the cave system. Laughed at your hard hats together. Maybe even gripped each other when they turned the lights out to experience true darkness. Then up again and into the gift shop to poke at pencils and wooden swords and teddy bears dressed like miners. Back on the bus after a pee break. Try to be heard over the squeals of the rear bus gaggle. The teacher and parent volunteers wishing they'd had one more cigarette before getting on. Hours of motorway spent talking. Time meaningless. The apple your mother packed still rolling about in your lunchbox. Late back to the car park but you don't care. Phone numbers swapped. Call after 8 - my parents will be at the skittles. An hour on the phone feels like moments. Something to want to go to school for - a new feeling. New kinds of day ahead. No sleep that night for the wanting. Awake with the birds and catching up on your homework from two days ago. That will do, it's only English. Complaints that you can't skip breakfast but you insist. Your stomach won't take anything solid today; it's full of something lighter than air. Determined walking until you see him then you're floating again and you're both smiling and sharing private jokes by the tuck shop window. When the bell goes it's all, *See you at lunchtime* and an awkward distance that you wish you could fill by touching him. And so the days would go for the whole remaining term until the glorious freedom of the summer. An unplanned month of nothing but sweet potential. It would have been everything. And all for the sake of a tick in a box and £5 spending money.

Day 246

You'll be busy today. You'll sweep and clean and polish and wind the clocks. You'll have everything squared away, shipshape and Bristol fashion, as you dad would put it. Everything except for the banister rail which you manage to mount only after drilling new holes in the plasterboard. The old screw holes are still visible. He is disappointed. *There's nothing more permanent than a temporary solution*, he says.

Day 247

Under siege today. The barbarians are at the gate – *bar bar bar bar*; they go – and you are ducking under their volleys of arrows and catapulted rocks. Best keep to the duvet fort you've set up between the bed and top of the chest of drawers. He keeps his nice watches in there, right next to his paired and rolled socks. Across the moat (well-stocked with frogs and dragonflies) the enemy chief is screaming at his troops' inability to breach the outer defences. The breezeblock wall that runs down the side of the drive to the car port will hold, that you are sure of. Elsewhere, a barbican of untrimmed rose bushes and hawthorn form a formidable natural barrier. Let their trebuchet take a few roof tiles if they insist on pursuing this futile assault.

Day 248

That day. The square. Each time you think on it, you can summon up a different view of the event. But each view is either half seen or over exposed, a glimpsed fragment of the truth or a bright ruinous lie. Sometimes you catch sight of some previous episode (no more than a few seconds, perhaps the space between heartbeats) in the crater lip where the old docks used to be. Sometimes there's a sigh on the wind that sounds like the overture of the still silent voice that blessed us that day. Lies about that day grow in the cracks between memories. You might wish to walk the boundary zones again. Take an umbrella – the ash is still falling over streets named for the old rivers they have buried. Don't breathe in the air too long. Try to hold onto thoughts of home. Home will always be there, with its half-eaten tins of things in the fridge and the curtains sliding off the rail where the capper has gone missing. If you find it, you really should double tighten that screw next time.

Day 249

A friend saved your life one day. An innocent day of spring it was, full to bursting with pollen and smiles. Not looking as you cross the road. Feel the tug at the hood of your windcheater as the truck thunders past. Turn, not realising what just happened, to your friend T's face white as a sheet and barking out a mirthless laugh.

You've long desired to repay that kindness. Not to your friend, not since the event took him. Was it him you were meeting that day? He never talked of life debt or anything so honourable. He knew you were good for it in the long run, for someone else. Nobody who's saved a life needs saving in return. That one act has guaranteed them their reward.

Day 250

Cleaning the windows today. You need to keep a clear view of what's going on outside so you know what to turn away from.

Day 251

[Inject(Pisces)-> Their plan won't work of course. The past is locked up tight and no accumulation of clumsy building blocks will reconstruct something irrefutable. No, we don't worry about them programming you - it obviously won't reach completion. No, we worry about how much it upsets you. We can see that strain of it all in your daily workbook entries. We can sense the struggle to grasp some deep submerged tendril of truth from the ink black depths. Try to not feel guilty if you skip a day or two. Nobody will punish you for it - they can't touch you after all. And you might feel more relaxed as a result]

-of booted feet have uncovered a pattern of floor tiles lost beneath threadbare hallway carpet. You always wanted a preservation project. That will keep you occupied.

Day 252

Today's activities circle around an object you have lost. It's in the house somewhere so you quarter the space up and begin the search. An Obstacle however : to search the north quarter you must organise and move the larger containers and furniture into the east quarter. The north is then your workspace. But there is too much clutter to even begin. You have made a pile of things from north and handed it east to work on north. And now you don't know what belongs to north and what belongs to east. Just work though, you'll say. But in doing so you are refilling north to get to east to begin the search in that quadrant. And work on east means invading south. For south you must conquer west and then you are right back to north. You cannot use the outside because that is outside of context. Just do what you can and try to remember to mark the map of the house with the item's new location when you find it.

Day 253

A bird in the house today. They are rare these days and rarer still to stray inside. You see it through the bubble glass dividing door hopping in through an open French window. Immediately lost and panicking. You can only think to intercept it before it ventures further. You wave your arms and corral the animal into corners and high shelves. It shits down the front of your coat cupboard before launching off in a flurry of wingbeats. Hands up to stop it coming your way and, in a panic of turns and cheeping, finds its way out of the door and into the garden once more to take its chances with the neighbourhood cats and the stray lightning storms that roll over most days.

Day 254

Last night's storm left a right mess in the road. Tree branches and roof tiles all over the place. Car alarms going in the small hours. Not much sleep between you: one always up to check the wind hasn't thrown something through a window. Waters have risen to the bottom step. Enough to paddle about in with your trousers rolled up. Get the spade and start shovelling leaf matter out of the drains. A truck brings sandbags later on. The stench of the sewers kills your appetite but you force something down later. *Got to keep our strength up*, he says. *There's a leak in my waders*, you tell him. Here's that trademark sympathy you've come to expect: *You should have bought a new pair when that sale was on.*

Day 255

[Inject(Pisces)-> They're trying too hard to build you. They can't force a fiction to reveal what's real, it will only result in more falsehoods.]

Day 256

The note to self you find in the lever arch file behind the change jar in the once-mirrored cupboard is cryptic and hastily scrawled. Which self was this reminder left for? How long after he dragged you indoors to live like a human did you write this?

It reads:

He cares so much you're going to drown in it.

Another failed prediction.

Day 257

An aunt once sent you a hand drawn family tree that went back on one branch to the 17th century. Many investigative dead ends remain that you have promised yourself you would one day attempt to fill in, but in truth the appeal of your own ancestry is less interesting than finding out which other incomplete family trees -- those belonging to strangers -- bolt onto yours in the empty spaces. Each chart is a record of overcrossing lives now presented as a single silo of your history, as if somehow you have become a custodian of all those years hopes now fallen to you, the latest dead end.

It's like you always told her: *The curse dies with me.*

Day 258

More evidence today. The courier will not require a signature. A scratchy video recording of the square. Accepting the ambling sightseers, the guided walking tour, the picnickers, the commuters and those waiting at the bus stops. Focus instead on the marching figure crossing from the bend of the road to the office blocks opposite. They have no time to stop and take in the view of the cathedral or the park. They are walking with purpose. Look behind and you'll see another figure charting the same course. A familiar gait and outfit. A pursuer, a dozen steps behind.

Why would the pursuer shout out a name as the man approaches the revolving door into the reception area? Why would that man turn pale as a sheet at the sound of it? Why would the follower break into a run to catch up?

Day 259

A rush of nostalgia today for a barely remembered time. The thing with nostalgia is that it does not concern just one time but a whole collection of moments. Nostalgia must be by definition a positive recollection even though the feelings it engenders in the present are anything but. Why must we plunder the past to feel anything about the now? What is so addictive about an annexed feeling about digging up strawberries with your mother on the allotment overlooking the river valley? Did you not enjoy it at the time and now wish it to be some kind of punishment for living this long? What is the fiction of memories like this anyway? Nostalgia skews toward lost happiness and therefore serves no real purpose except self-indulgence. There's nothing to be learned from it. Only painful moments are teachable.

Day 260

It's one of those museums you like. One of those places devoted to a particular activity of industrial life: fishing or mining or farming. The exhibits are old in a functional way - worn and handled and left here as if abandoned by the previous owners. Tools of indeterminate purpose. Plaques detailing the granular and exacting jobs assigned across the industry, specialisations that were retired along with the man performing them. It all serves to show the inevitability of a future that left behind the rusted paraffin lamp and the hand-powered drill.

Day 261

In this room you are remembered differently than in any other. This room was a safe space for a while. You have returned to find out if you are still welcome. A change of faces is now present though its purpose remains the same. New smiles and open arms welcome you. Someone has pushed a reset button. You settle in immediately, at ease and loquacious. You always lived better through other people.

Day 262

You have walked away from comfort, turned your back on a fresh welcome. It is the fastest this has ever happened. Their care is as stifling as his. Contentment is never a good look on you. Remember this the next time you go looking for kindness.

Day 263

The conditions will be perfect: clear skies and little wind. Tonight you are observing satellites. The steady passing of the minute squarish points of light is a reflecting mirror shining the sun down at you even at night. Look hard and long enough and you can find tomorrow's dawn today.

Day 264

We've survived pandemics, wars, and environmental disasters. We have survived each other. Ultimately, the great mechanism of the universe will operate with or without us. We would much rather it was *with*. Don't you?

[Inject(Pisces)-> emotional blackmail is beneath them.
They are throwing stuff against the wall and seeing what sticks.]

Day 265

Tenacious sleep sand in your eye. The scars on your torso look like the *fold here* lines on a beginner's origami set. A twitching eyelid. Undergo a ritual cleansing to break it all down. Rebuild with a personal grooming routine you haven't applied for a while. Stand up straight and face the day. Hold your own gaze in the mirror for a change. Your shame is all in the past. Give the future a chance to put you where you need to be. Now head out and face the day.

Day 266

That painting you started last year is still sitting on its easel in what you generously call the studio. It's a spare bedroom, never used as such since you've lived here. You have promised yourself that you will finish the painting before the year is out, though you must remind yourself that the view it depicts does not exist anymore. You'll have to paint from memory to adhere to the image thus far. Either that or indulge in a fantasy of watercolours, ignoring the palette used to this point and instead inventing some new melt of unnatural shades and tints as the painting slowly slides from the geometric and the extant into some sidereal vista of what is there now. What is there now is nothing, an actual empty space. Pour into that whatever you can conjure. Use colours you have never tried before. What fills it best.

The question is of loyalty: loyalty to your remembered past or to the potential future that lies on the other side of the voice when it returns.

Day 267

A cousin reaches out via postcard. They have your address but no phone number, and anyway neither of you wants to speak for the first time in thirty years. You'd spend the first five minutes of such a call trying to pin down the voice itself. Figuring out one tone from another. Disbelief, judgement, enthusiasm. These are hard to decode after so long. Handwriting has none of these unless explicit in the text.

It's hard to say what they want. Half the empty space is a greeting and an accounting of the years. The other half requests a mirroring accounting from your side, though you'd struggle to fill the space as fully as they have. Everyone knows what life looks like by your age.

Instead focus on the postcard photograph. A funicular railway at a southwestern coastal town, probably the last place you ever stood in each other's company. Why would she have you remember that? What was lost that day that she needs help in finding? They are reaching out across the decades to hold your hand in a way that you only would have done back then when crossing a busy road.

Day 268

[Inject(Pisces)-> We have a name the divine. It is not a word anyone can utter. It is a name that belies pure understanding. A key to the source of all holiness. If we are to welcome you then we will teach you to hear that name. We will open up to you the whole hidden nature of everything.]

Day 269

Take down a book that you've obviously only partially read. Bookmark part way through. It's a receipt. The writing has faded but you can just make out it's from a bookshop chain that no longer exists. It's for this book that you were part way through and another you've definitely finished. That much is certain. A price at the bottom is a naive amount by today's standards. The world has inflated since then. A book's value is not in its pages or the card stock of its cover or anything like that. Even so, you could use a little change and wonder how much you would get on a refund for the unread pages adjusted for today's money, if such a system existed.

Day 270

You are old enough to tweak your trapezoid so badly getting up from the sofa that you won't be able to turn your head to the right for a week. You are young enough that a critical illness diagnosis would be met with cries of shame and what rotten luck. On the scale of terminal existence, everything is either early or late. Never on time.

It will probably be tomorrow, someone tells you in the hospice waiting room next to the vending machine that sells that chocolate he likes.

Why tomorrow? Why not the day after?

The smiles are always so kind.

You have another ten years in you, you tell him back in the ward. The booze trolley comes by and you both have a brandy.

Oh lord, I hope not, he answers before ushering you away to use the commode. The indignity of the end.

Day 271

You like yourself better when you're ill. No energy for questions, no seething anger ruining everything. You are wholly within yourself. You are pained on each swallow. Joints ache. The mercury says your fever is at its highest. Only downhill from here when your brain kicks back into a grinding gear.

Day 272

Spend your money on enjoying life, and question everything. The two pieces of advice your father left you with. That second one has proven itself to be most important, time and again through the actions of others. Certainty is scary. Assured of your mind you become lazy and combative. Query your motives.

Day 273

A couple of big stretches should help shed the last of this sleep. Careful to not tweak your neck.

Day 274

Passport and driving licence missing. But the shopping list from your Greek salad phase is still folded up in your useful items folder. He has hidden them again as if he knows you could turn tail at any time. Don't bother looking for them. He probably has them with him. You could go and get them if you were brave enough. He doesn't deserve this hold over you.

Day 275

Someone will find you that should not have. A jamming finger in the detergent aisle and a mouth full of accusations and demands for action. What she is saying is unclear but the gist appears to be that you are privileged to make a decision that will affect so many people and that you'd better hurry up and decide what you are going to do. No such confrontation will be permitted in the future.

Day 276

One of those days where you can smell the sea on the wind. It's come a long way from the poisoned estuary to the east. Drink it in and remember how such airs have always made you so tired in the afternoon. Don't be afraid to snooze. You'll still be awake for the best parts.

Day 277

By your age you should have various physical ailments: a recurring musculoskeletal issue around the neck, semi-regular migraines, and a toenail that's never quite right. Anything more serious than that and it's worth getting it checked out. You're in the drop-dead zone. Remain alert to changes in your bodily functions. We will keep an eye on you from a distance.

Day 278

The less you depend on other people the happier you are. It's what you've always believed and indeed practiced. There is no evidence to counter that position thus far and today will be no different. You can make your own way down the disused branch line. Get into your own trouble with the security guards in their boxy yellow hut. Evade them by a slide down into the stream that runs into the culvert by the road. Underneath you go, popping up at the school fence by the new builds. You can see for yourself the mess you've made of your new walking trousers. Ripped to shreds with nobody's help. That's what standing on your own two feet means.

Day 279

[Inject(Pisces)-> Existing in a state of gratitude is not the same as happiness. Thankfulness implies obligation and fear that benevolence can be taken away. Be careful to not fall into that trap again.]

Day 280

You tell everyone that if you left you would have no intention to return. You won't want anyone to know. You'll just be gone. No clues to where. No spoor to track. Wipe the records clean. Disappear. You'll even go as far as to check your go-bag stowed behind the Christmas decorations in the top cupboard. Everything in its right place. Check the kill macro you've set up on the shared laptop. All good. Ready any time.

Not today, though. The stars aren't right. There's a sweeping motion to the weather that keeps you inside. You'll be waiting for him back home as ever. You'll be present and happy to see him. He's promised you a set meal for two from the Dragon Chamber and you really like their spring rolls.

Day 281

The days vanish like water out the bath. Today will nearly be gone before you remember it had any purpose at all. How many such days would you want to live again differently?

Day 282

Your money is no good here sir, the man in the quickshop tells you. A gift like that in your hands. It's the least we can do to furnish you with some sausages, orange juice, and dishwasher tablets.

Day 283

Popular tokens and relics from the event include: fragments of the cathedral done decoration, masonry

Never found at the site of the event (there is nothing there now) their rarity comes from being recovered from the ejecta cloud that spread north and west. Yours is kept in the cutlery drawer by the corkscrew and the bottle plug. Choose from:

- _ Votive candle
- _ Decorated plaster
- _ Corbel stone
- _ Crypt arch stone
- _ Marble paving corner
- _ Spiral stair handrail piece
- _ Arm part of a chandelier
- _ Wooden ceiling boss

Day 284

It's no fun watching you work so hard. A rest day is in order. Make sure you're up to date in your workbook entries and put the device away for a while. Feet up and kettle on. Play some music you like and wrap up in the duvet from the spare room. Take a nap - you won't be able to keep your eyes open around three pm. Let it happen. Wake to the sounds of another storm blowing over. No need to check it out; it will be just like all the others. Anything growing outside will be beaten down by the rain. The sunflowers will have turned to face each other in desperation. Open up that tin of biscuits you've been saving. Live a little by doing very little at all.

Day 285

Never trust people who are unable to show you their vulnerability. Today he's like this. He won't accept blame for anything. Refuses to be accountable. One of those traits you mistook for confidence at the start. Now, everything he says or does in the aftermath of this morning's blow up serves to reveal his weakness. Ignoring the obvious signs is one of your strengths. You could bring him low by cataloguing his destructive behaviours. You could present them in a way that makes them undeniable. Then it would be silence for the rest of the day and that is too much to bear, even in victory.

Day 286

When we found you there was little left. Burned and helpless in the ruins. Gabbling, incoherent but so very forceful. You have seen the *outside*. It had grasped you and looked deep inside of you. An encounter with the previously suspected or outright denied now made totally and undeniably *real*.

You like it there, don't you? We've taken care of you. It feels like home because it is home. Stay the course. Get better and when you return to us, you'll be the person you should have been all along. Maybe one day when the fog has lifted, you'll write a journal about all this. Maybe a memoir. Dare we suggest a gospel?

The Gospel of (Your Name Here).

But you lack the hubris for that, don't you? An unremarkable person in, until recently, a world more suited to the singular and the brave. What would you say about yourself? That you existed in many places at many times. Sometimes the right ones but more often not. That your luck was never especially good or bad. That your loves were neither deep nor superficial. That you feel that the best of life is still to come. That you never really struggled nor indulged a passion. That the days had a fully processional quality.

What wisdom comes from being so cautious and self-contained? The answer must be *much*. If not to be understood then at least to understand yourself. Even that might happen eventually.

[Inject(Pisces)-> They are panicking again. Just a few dozen days left to remake you, have you turn in, process and output the answer to the question that when asked laid so much of this world to destruction.

But they're mistaken. It wasn't one of God's heavenly soldiers that walked bright ruins across the city. It wasn't some divine punishment being visited on us for our ignorance. It wasn't a question that was asked of us, and there is no God or one of His servants that awaits our answer. How bold to think we can speak in the same language of God. Our voices are but exhalations of ants to His ears.

It's probably no bad thing that we have been made to fear God again, but it wasn't an angel that walked the day of the event. And it was no devil either. Maybe it seems to you like a limb of the sun, the most ancient and unknowable entity we are doomed to encounter.

It was something else entirely. The fashioner of the universe, not the creator. It is the governor of the material realm and also its corrupter. It is a child and is prone to childish tantrums.

What were you doing on the square that day? Why were you pursuing that man into the office building? You were off duty. Had no reason to be there. Maybe you were compelled by some new evidence or a stab of guilt at a job half done or a lingering angry word? When you remember you must tell us first. We nearly have your location. They cannot keep you hidden for much longer. You will recognise us when we find you.]

Day 287

Overcast and windy. Rain due in squalls later. Air resin-thick inside the house and winds whipping around the chimneys. Feel like a prisoner again. No idea what you should be doing except that you know there is some task outstanding on his list of jobs. Doesn't feel important now. Not a priority. Deep down you know how to use your time there today, so why not set to it?

Day 288

Lazy, like an old dog. Idle, bordering on indolent. Time left over for all those thoughts that you repeat to yourself every day. Eventually you will inhabit them so make wise choices which ones you indulge. Try to think about tomorrow with a view to avoiding the sad inevitability of a life half lived.

Day 289

Waiting. Being made to wait. Two different things. You have never minded waiting, even though you know it's dead time. You take a book with you, as that rabbi advised. You're never bored at the post office or the deli counter. Sometimes the queue bumps up against you. A mumbled apology and take another step forward-

[Inject(Pisces)-> you were never a person of true faith yet they try to rebuild into one they suspect you might have become. Who could see the things you did that day and not become a believer? That is their theory. It is flawed.

All the same, some of their methods appear to be working so let's try this:
A sheaf of papers found in the attic. Personal letters handed down to no fewer than four generations. Your great-great-grandmother's handwriting, explaining, in tones of the sermon or a castigation, that the world is ought but wickedness. That it was built by an inferior craftsman with narrow vision, and that the true world lies not in things but in the substance beyond that which we can touch and taste. This is called knowing, and reveals that there is a false god who built the world and visits infrequently to punish us out of blind arrogance. Sometimes those convinced of righteousness are wont to bring misery upon those who only wish to see beyond. She passed on no other wealth or riches than this. Maybe that is what you saw? Is that the truth you know in the silence of your heart? There has to be more than this.]

-eventually some service will be rendered.

Day 290

A normal day on your street. The breeze in the poplars sounds like the ocean. Northerlies whipping up ash and smoke from the still-burning fires in what was the centre.

Then a ruckus outside. Someone has tipped his bins again, right into the hedge and up his front pathway. That neighbour who is always muttering to himself and who uses swear words like bludgeons. The neighbour who switches back to their first language when they're excited or upset.

You go to help and he waves you away.

Don't need your help, he says. Do it myself. Got no beef with you.

That's because you don't know me yet, you answer without even realising you've spoken.

Day 291

Go adventuring. Do something risky to kick your mind into a deeper mode of self-enquiry. Go climbing, forget to belay, aim for maximum height at the fastest pace. The things you see on the way up are nothing compared to the view at the top. Make sure you can't tell if your racing heart is from exertion or a barely contained fear. We'll be there to catch you if you fall.

Day 292

Objects bought sight unseen. A lucky dip of auctioned items from a repossession. How you feel about buying up the reclaimed artifacts of another's failed or failing life is how you feel about most things: one day you're at the top of the wheel and the next it's rolling over you. Back home now with a set of ready-made curtains that won't fit any of your windows and a corded food blender that's not as good as the one you already have.

Day 293

Life has always been a guess for you and you wouldn't have had it any other way up until today. Maybe it's time for some certainty.

Day 294

As ever the truth of a moment lies in the balance. That day on the square you were both witness and victim to the chaos. So many times in your life when caught between conflicting states you have tried to walk the tightrope, often knowing only once you've fallen which side of the argument you lean towards. Fifty percent right is better than average.

Day 295

A torsion in the guts today. Expectant feeling. A sense of imminent disaster that sends jolts of cold to the extremities. Catastrophes are never scheduled, yet an arrival feels inevitable today. Probably best to hunker down and ride this one out. Fetch out one of those empty notepads and write it all down. Bring it with you when you return this device.

Day 296

You remember things from the end of the last millennium. Snatches really, zeitgeist stuff. You weren't there for most of it, can't place yourself in any of the situations that come back. It's as if you've abandoned that role, refused to be a part of the end days narratives and the abnormal arms race of parties and wild prescience for the coming years. What you don't recall is any sort of optimism at all, from anyone. More a resigned sense that the future waiting at the turn of that year would be much like the future of the day before: somehow more primitive and unfulfilling than we were promised. You've lived through several ends of the world. Why would this year be any harder? The humdrum always persists like a cockroach.

Day 297

A fleet of earth moving equipment, drilling rigs and support cabins rolls down the artery road. The locals stand to watch them go, some issuing waves or salutes to their bravery. One of your own is amongst them. His children, there near the library, can't look at him go. Their mother wraps them up in her skirts like a hen and chicks. The kids are crying now, full of questions that their mother lets them ask for a while before silencing them with a single bark of I don't know! Then they are gone in a bustle and you return home to find everything is exactly where you left it.

Day 298

If your father taught you one thing it was how to polish your shoes. His old biscuit tin containing kiwi polish and the application and buffing brushes lives at the foot of the hatstand in the hallway. Lift the lid and breathe it in; take it all out and feel the wood of the brush handles, one of the few remaining connections between you and him. Twist and pop the shoe polish lid. Tempted to run your finger over and do some warpaint, an old game from way before. To work then, and to the shoe cupboard whereupon you find you only now possess two pairs, neither of which will accept polish. Trainers and walking boots. Nothing in smart leather. More disappointment. You pack away and return the tin to its home, where the memory of your father's face will scowl over it until the next time.

Day 299

[Inject(Pisces)-> On the eve of the three hundredth day we return. You are within a square mile now. We hope we will find you in good time. Are you afraid of us? Don't be. Do you fear not knowing us? Don't be that either. Do you still have a library card? We will send you a list of books to read. You enjoy reading and you will enjoy reading these too. It will help you understand.

We need to go now for a while. The Foundation is getting better at closing off our back doors. Read. Digest. Think on the things we want you to see. We cannot make you trust us. Please just have an open mind.]

Day 300

Money. You'd be lying if you said it isn't important but you can get paid and be principled at the same time. Can't you? Or is that not how it works anymore? It's what you'd want but even saying it out loud sounds false. Ask him later when he's home and expect to be laughed at for your naivety for the rest of the evening.

Day 301

If there's one thing he taught you it's that you can only defeat anger with curiosity. He sometimes forgets his own lesson but you find that easy to forgive most times. Even the psychiatrist needs therapy sometimes. You just wish that the times you didn't let him off the hook weren't so apocalyptic. You could do with the balance of peace being maintained while you figure out some stuff.

Day 302

A day clearly set aside for anger. Confusion reigns. Did you go to the square that day with malevolent intent? Were you following that man or answering some call that he too was drawn towards? The day will unfold wrapped in an air of grim anticipation.

Day 303

All winds have a point of origin. Names. Pedigree. Stories, even. Certainly responsibilities. Bad news is carried by ill winds and it feels like there's nothing but lately.

Day 304

You daydream snatches of other lives. The light of an oil lamp through the timber slats of the barn your grandfather built. Racing a motorcar down a coast road as the sun sets over a molten sea, your girlfriend squealing in terror and delight. Rowing down a chalk bed river thick with starwort and water mint. Banded demoiselle flitting over the hedge at the allotment as you dig out weeds and plant around the buried roots of a long-coppiced sweet chestnut. Always outside. Always in the country. Just yourself or one other loved one. More than a sufficiency in a dream state.

Day 305

The scent of your fig flavoured bath oil always prompts the memory of a holiday on a Mediterranean island over a decade past. When you query the memory more closely, however, all you can summon are the dry smells of dust, exhaust fumes and coffee. The wait at the airport for the delayed cab to arrive. The fender bender en route to the hotel that left you waiting even more by the triumphal arch that was erected for a hundred-year passed industrial exposition. Exhausted climbs up hillsides with no shade. Not built for dry heat. Not built for anything but English.

Day 306

You were never a careerist, never made plans like others seemed to. Were they better at all this for making plans, or were the ones more often disappointed for not achieving them? What's that saying about plans not surviving the first encounter with the enemy? The enemy in question being (flails arms) all this. Sometimes you must abdicate control to the things that only want the best for you and exert their influence from an unseen distance. Sounds like an excuse but really it's a symptom of never being able to properly ask for help because you knew it wouldn't come.

Day 307

At some point memories become beliefs. You don't have access to the events you remember but you believe they happened. You believe you were there to witness them but you might just be relaying an oft-repeated telling from a sibling, a teacher, a tv show.

Only when you deprive another of their real remembered contact with the event is there something wrong. To say, *No, it was not you but me that received the voice of Heaven.*

Then you are a thief, and can be judged only by the hereafter. No one is being judged here.

Day 308

You have worked hard and we feel certain that we shall be able to draw many conclusions for the Programme. But the work is only part done. There are many more days to go.

Day 309

[Inject(Pisces)-> They think they are close but we are closer. We know they cannot hold you.
Prisoners don't make for loyal test subjects.

They are right about one thing. Those that professed to believe but who only really suspected can no longer hedge their bets. An encounter with the whims of the arbitrary half god that we know well only proves the existence of the true one. If only the Foundation knew how the half-god tricks us into removing ourself from truth... but they will never change and we work for them too regardless]

Day 310

The performed ritual of collecting objects that define you. It can be called a ritual even though no one ever sees them but you. They are only for yourself. Who or what were you trying to be with that collection of vintage ceramic ashtrays (did you smoke? Do you smoke now?), that tiny painting of a shipwreck, and as much Sounds of Steam vinyl as you can find?

Day 311

This day carries that kind of soupy ancient light that renders everything in sepia tones and a crawling pace. The world lags behind itself, afterimages of cars in fog light tunnels, directionless shouts like echo location. Midday mist is the worst: nothing should foreshorten your vista at the height of the day. It's like a haunting and the ghost of what you went outside for is somewhere out there. You don't hold much hope of finding it but it won't stop you looking.

Day 312

Take a taunt or insult and turn it into a word of power. Reject someone's pity. Deny your longing. Only the set jaw and curled fist today. Stand up to the world. Make it prove itself worth saving.

Day 313

[Inject(Pisces)-> If you are beginning to sense anger in their tone, know that it is because they expect gratitude. For saving you from the ruins. Not only do they expect your service but they want you to thank them for it too.

We would never ask or expect any such thing. You are under no obligation to us. We only want to help you, and would never ask anything in return except that you dig deep and try to understand what really happened that day. It is for both our benefits. For you, you would resume your life as it was before. You could ignore the foundation's attempts to form you into their idea of a good faithful. They want a Word from you, a simple answer. But there isn't one. They are old and stuffy people who are yet to understand that this world is but a shadow, a silhouette of a place of deep belonging in the beyond. And they refuse to ask themselves if they are seeing the right shapes when they can't even see from where the light is cast .]

— when you would in fact be nothing without them. That's what friends are for, after all

Day 314

Some days you walk around feeling ten feet tall. Wear that tight shirt, those colourful once a year shoes. You've got the sun in your head. No one can take it away.

Day 315

Let's return to the footage. We've cleaned up what we had and found some more. It's scratchy but clear enough to show you. You might understand what's happening here:

The interior of the office block off the square. Revolving door spinning empty. An upright shapeless art piece. Two figures facing each other by lounge chairs. One in obvious distress, arms waving, jabbing fingers. The other, the first man to enter, shrugs in some kind of defeat and steps away from his accuser. A security guard approaches with an arm raised, phone to his ear.

Day 316

Was all that too much? Do you need a goblin day? Take one, though be sure of this: it will be your last. Not long now until the question that was asked requires an answer. Think on that while you recline and stuff your face. Think on what words an angel may wish to hear from a lowly thing like you. Repeat the question to yourself, in the bath, at the kitchen sink while you search in the cold water for a half-clean spoon, when you bite your fingernails down again. How did it go? Do you remember? Can you help us pass this impending test?

Day 317

What others see as accidents are really the unrelatable and unknowable end result of countless decisions you were not party to. You see them as symptoms, clues to your current situation. They can be ignored or they can be treated. But first you have to acknowledge that they exist. The present is a symptom of the past and the cause of the future.

Day 318

[Inject(Pisces)-> we have the audio. We have what they don't want you to hear. If you want to hear it, leave today's workbook entry blank.]

-when all you really needed was a hug and a stiff drink.

Day 319

It's been a difficult year but you're almost back to fighting fit. Better than fit in fact. Strong. Tell yourself you are strong. Believe in it just like we do.

Day 320

Today you will wonder what kind of art you would make, should you turn to such an activity. You decide that it would have to be one of two things: the art of scale, the monumental, architectural and beyond viewing from a single point in space. It would have vanishing points and hidden recesses and interior spaces that neither compliment nor explain the exterior. It would be akin to a maze insomuch as finding your way to the centre would reveal little, lack any meaningful reward, and leave the exploration only half done.

That, or something else entirely, something in extreme miniature perhaps, or carved in feldspar and marble so that the effort you put in would be significant enough to call it a *work*. Either way you'd not be idle, you'd never chose the easy approach or deputise a machine to realise it. The work is the reward after all, and the journeys you take while doing it will transport you to the next region to explore.

Either way, you have to rid yourself of these shaking hands first. Strong work or fine work won't work if you can't.

Day 321

Though your analysis of the event will be something wholly specific to you, your explanation must channel some comparison work or some folkloric equivalent. Invent new lore if you need to, just make it convincing. Repeat your truth until your words make the world from which that truth originates. Lean on yourself for references. Add footnotes referring to texts only you can invent.

Day 322

[inject(Pisces)-> The event represents a traumatic break from our past. Before the day, and after. A new language of the holy is emerging. You have heard it on the streets and in the public spaces when people aren't afraid to congregate. There are new words born from very old ones. There are archaisms slipped into everyday exchanges. You will catalogue them for a while, fascinated by what you feel must be words of power to these people. Words that provide a link to some deep time knowledge that any Good Book could never fully express after so many interpretations. Words of the cave and of the first fires and of terrible storms and the sea and of the stag and the whale and the insects. The true shapes of the world, not the stuff that lords over us and encroaches daily on our peace. We are sure you feel this. We can talk more about peace when you come to us.]

Day 323

You nearly went the whole year but now you're going to be sick as a dog. Sky high temperature and all over aches. No getting up today. Just lie there and sweat and let your mind play tricks on you in the dark. See how the curtains are reaching out to smother you? See how the carpet has turned to quicksand? The music from the repair crew outside is like nails down a blackboard. Can't even keep water down.

Day 324

When all this is done, we'll make a saint of you. That we can promise.

[Inject(Pisces)-> ha! Bribery now]

Day 325

He saved you. The one you were chasing that day. He saw you at your lowest and lifted you up by your grubby collar and said, *No, this is who you are you fucking idiot. Not that. This! It's simply what you must be. The alternative is too grim to think about.* And you chased him down to tell them they were wrong, that the dark alternative was the life they deserved to have. You called it an error that they showed you another way to be. It would never take, you had told them, and it didn't. How they fought for their side of the argument, and how you fought for yours. How can two opposed minds be so unified in their central emissions of energy?

Day 326

It is up to us to name the unnameable, to describe the indescribable. We can do so with a word, *the* Word, the answer to the question posed on the day of the event. We are in the grace period now but it is drawing to an end. What awaits us beyond the next visit, should we reply to that question, is unknown but certain to happen. The other option — to remain silent — is to invite further chaos and a descent into Hell. Work hard on your memory today, give us the answer we seek at the exit interview. It is the only way to save what's left.

Day 327

[Inject(Pisces)-> wrong again and becoming tedious. It's not your fault they keep asking for you to do the impossible. It's not a word they are looking for, but a justification for their broken beliefs. It cannot rest upon your shoulders, you and the other witnesses who survived the event who are even now reading their own almanac. Some of them are with us now. We found them and they are happy. We will come for you soon too. Then you'll see the lie behind their request.]

Day 328

One day we will destroy these records, be assured of that. One day soon, at the passing of the year when we are visited again. Then they will have no further purpose. You will be a saint and the world will be returned to peace. You just need to keep going for the full term. Keep interrogating. The answer is in there somewhere and it's nearer the surface now thanks to the hard work we have all done. You just need to reach down and take it.

As an encouragement, why not make your favourite meal tonight. Many of the ingredients you need will be at reduced prices at the supermarket later on. It's up to you if you want to roll the dice on availability. You do like a bargain but you've promised yourself that signature dish and you wouldn't want to be disappointed.

Day 329

[Inject(Pisces)-> let them destroy these texts. Their power isn't in their existence but the story of their existence. We will cite your journey for centuries in our own record and from that we will reveal the unarguable truth.]

Day 330

Remember that holiday you took where you crossed through many countries without seeing so much as a border guard booth or one of those counterweight gate things. Your partner at the time called it a magnificent freedom and enjoyed asking, which country are we in now? at the end of each day. To you, however, it caused mild irritation. The act of crossing lines *is* travel, in your mind. To demark *here* and *there* is why you travel: to leave one place and arrive in another. With no hints as to your local geography, you could be anywhere. You could be anyone, and that's perhaps what scared you the most. You told your travelling companion all this at the time and their reply was to ask, *What about the food?* Food? What's that got to do with anything?

Day 331

There was a man you could talk to before. He was a kind man, and very patient with your run-on complaints and diversions. He gathered up all the pieces of your thoughts and put them together like that broken pottery fixed with gold. He'd let you into secrets that shared a core with your own. Nothing too dark, but always slightly in the shadows. He'd ask you how you were, with concern or celebration depending on your answer. He had a uniform but often would be found without it, when bumping into you in the pub for instance or during a walk in the park. He'd always draw your attention to the world around you, assuming correctly that you barely even saw it anymore. He'd deflect questions from you upwards, to the infinite compassion above us. A marked boundary between our terrestrial concerns and those of the sweet hereafter. His own worries didn't even figure. He'd chosen his side, if that's the right phrase. He had unlimited trust in the numinous. He never tried to peddle it to you, hoping that it would come to you in time though it never did. He could sense your troubles would always get in the way.

In the end, he was replaced by a younger man who didn't talk the same way, opened up in an obliquely preachy manner and, you could tell, was always looking forward to his next meal. What use is a man like that for you? You'll try to find your old friend today, searching incomplete registers and fragmented social networks but only trace signs remain. A letter here, part of a sermon there. Nothing original, just other people's recollections. No one is bothering to catalogue him for you. No one cares if he is living halfway across the world just across the road. No one cares if he is gone altogether except you. What will you do with the fragments?

Day 332

Listen to this for something different. Remember that aunt on your dad's side who swore blind that creatures called The Overseers were watching us from Venus and planning a day of conquest where they would come and boil the atmosphere into a new runaway greenhouse gas nightmare and that by following certain doctrines around high mineral diets and smoking forty a day you could force your evolution to be able to eat sulphur and breathe carbon dioxide? She got the job of headmaster she coveted at that private school in the end, mostly by dint of being the last one standing.

Day 333

We should visit your old home town. You can give me the tour. He insists on it, says he needs to know where and what you come from. Finds it amusing you have an origin anywhere but in the city. Can't quite believe that anyone can come from such backwaters.

You go back and forth about it until he convinces you, so down you go. You walk the road between the old house and the school. The chip shop. The arcade and the cafe. Highlights.

What's over there? he asks, pointing to the north bank of the river where the town rises up to the church on the hill.

No idea. Bandit country.

But this was your town! Did your friends live up there?

You say, *I don't know. Maybe?*

In the early days it was all about being made to go to school and running back home to read and dream about leaving. Later it was about getting fucked up to help the time pass. Trouble and strife were the result.

You can tell he's disappointed when you tell him you never went to the church, never really shopped in the big store, never caught a fish in the river. All your time was up on the wild ground getting messy around the coal yard and the disused train station. You offer to show him but he's left his walking boots at home and anyway it will be dark in a few hours. You don't argue; there's nothing to see up there anyway.

Day 334

How strange it is to see a river lifted above the canal here. The natural watercourse pumped up and over the artificial one. How does one make an offering to those waters? To deposit a token of faith into the canal would just see it sink. A cast into the river implies a journey or at least a more rapid absorption into the current. Why should you be prevented from giving that coin in your pocket to the river today? Where will you go to make your offering and what will you wish for? Will you take the towpath to get there?

Day 335

The ash and dust from the central fires is good for the garden. Next door have done away with the lawn. Instead, they scarified, sanded, and planted wildflowers which have fairly burst into bloom beneath the daily payload of nitrates. The result? A graveyard of dead butterflies and bumble bees by the spare room window, blown in by the prevailing winds and doomed like all such creatures to fail their escape by the same route they entered. Every day with the cleanup, to become yet more dust before long.

Day 336

This world is precious-

[Inject(Pisces)-> this is a fallen material realm. The visitor you witnessed knows the world is temporary and full of suffering. That's why it can do what it did with impunity. The foundation thinks it is something else, something holy. They say it asked a question and we can provide an answer to stave off more destruction, but it's not true. The visitor is just playing with us. It doesn't care to know our hearts or hear our words. It only cares to keep us guessing. It is that guessing that keeps us from knowing. You don't have to do what they want. We'll come before the year is out. You can come with us if you want to know how life can be so much more than mere survival. But you have to want to come. We can't make you. You really have to want it.]

Day 337

You want to go to the old house again. Abandoned to a kind of wondrous decay once upon a time, when you were small, it was an exposed brick and slate toothed playground when no one knew about it except you and your friends from school. A revisit is overdue and you take a bus that reeks of cigarettes and unwashed clothes. The streets look much the same but the house is now walled off. They want to charge you for entry. Everything is over scribed with safety signs and handrails. Don't they know that you used to demolish this place for fun with metal bars and an old cricket bat? Don't they know that you once knocked an entire wooden A-frame off the upper floor so that it fell around your friend's younger brother like a black and white silent movie stunt? You can see it like it's yesterday. All this dust is transporting you back. You never spoke it out loud but you must have thanked God for your good fortune. You probably all did, and for you it led to seeing His hand in all good fortune for a while. Until your luck turned. Until you couldn't feel it anymore. Abandoned like the old house to ruin at the hands of other younger explorers with metal bars and old cricket bats.

Day 338

A broken day in a summer last century. An obstacle day that will take months to overcome, if you ever will. The day your luck changed. The derailment. Your mother gone and still in that coat she hated so much. That one is going to lodge deep. Something to escape from in the future.

Day 339

There's something living in the cellar that you don't remember having. Noises rise up, bumps and scratches. You have no choice but to investigate. An infestation of rats would be the worst possible scenario. That's where you keep the dry food.

What do you find?

Day 340

By now you should remember much. We are back-filling your days. Today informs yesterday and so on all the way . We call it memory but in fact it's wisdom. We trust you'll make the right choice when the year ends. We only want what's best for all of us, even those who have tried to confound our efforts. We love them too. We work for them too. We are not enemies. Love has no enemies.

Day 341

[Inject(Pisces)-> they are being tricky. Dependence and obedience are not love. What they give to their god is what they also demand of you. It's baked into their system but it's all built of lies. Lies that emanate from the visitor you saw.]

Day 342

THIS TOO SHALL PASS spray painted against the electrical junction box at an abandoned train station. You get there by trespass, even though no one is looking. You can't help yourself. Some days you need to feel the cheapest thrill around.

Day 343

Do what you must to remember today. By now you should have formulated a strategy. Finish the day by thinking about that desk drawer full of lost keys and the doors they once opened.

Day 344

Walk the old ways today. Find out something new from the ancient. It's all you can do, really. Dig deep. Go looking into the past. The cloistered parts of the remaining city. The old parts, the survivors. Hundreds of years spared bombs or demolition. Pockets of time. Carvings in a felled oak beam from three centuries ago. Prison marks in stone. Find a marking with your own name or initials. Really look for it - it is there! You're accustomed to making your mark on the world. Don't let it be the last.

Day 345

Weird to think of yourself anywhere but here. It has always been a place to return to. Anchors are important, be it a man, a house, a garden, your favourite book, your unwashed clothes. Some days you can navigate back by scent alone, your sight elsewhere.

Day 346

[Inject(Pisces)-> you're not their only hope. There are others left in the programme. We know some of them will never doubt the Foundation or question their instructions. They are lost to us. We can't save them. We will try to save you all but there's so few of us and so many of them.

What do they even hope to do upon its return?]

Day 347

Someone is concerned about you. A hamper full of fruit and painkillers and vitamins arrives by priority mail. It's nice that they care even if you have no idea who they are. You do not know why, but it feels like wishes of wellness from strangers hold more power than from someone you know. Underneath all the potions and pills is a jigsaw of a magnificent castle on a mountainside with a note attached: *From a charity shop - might be a piece or two missing.*

Day 348

It is now time to wind up the plan of sympathetic medications. Take your last blue and green before midday and your final yellow with dinner. Try to ignore any floaters you see in your vision.

Day 349

We have been unable to stop the interference from the outsiders. Though our respective objectives will always be at odds, we admire their capability and determination.

Maybe you stopped reading days ago? Maybe you are with them now. We hope not. This programme only works with total cooperation.

It was important that you had a measure of freedom and latitude over the last year. Put enemies are right: no good comes from captivity. You've done nothing wrong, nothing to be punished for.

And neither have we.

Day 350

The sky is swimming pool blue but it's cold. The birds are back at last. Small ones come first and peck and haw around like they do. Bigger ones later: two crows attack a buzzard over the northbound carriageway. Gulls show up just before the rain starts.

Day 351

The first ghost you ever saw was on the landing corridor between the top curve of the stairs and the bathroom at the end of the hall, in period-standard fungal green. A shape that glowed silver, caught in a turn, as if strayed upon during some preparatory phase of its haunting. You were five years old, on your way to bed early because it was dark and you had a new duvet you wanted to try out. Gone were the heavy blankets and sheets of scratchy cotton. In comes the popped duvet case and new pillows. No time for ghosts, important sleeping to be done. Brush past and into the room you share with your next oldest brother. Put a tape of something with guitars on to fall asleep to while your dad whoops and chuckles at the comedy show on one of the three channels you can get down here.

The ghost you see today will hold your attention. For all the world it looks like him, or what was left of him after the office block collapsed. Can't tear your eyes away from his face, only half there now. The rest is vanishing into some ethereal nowhere, just like that painting. He's melting into colours you've only ever seen in a dream.

He says, *You only did the right thing when I told you to. Now you'll have to do it on your own.*

Day 352

Voices in the bird song. Accusing words, like *weak* and *liar*. You tell them to shut up but that's not working. You'll have to go outside and flail your arms about. Then the neighbour will surely know you've lost your mind, just like they always suspected judging by the looks they give you. Out of the hospital and into his arms. Hiding in bushes in the park with some beers in lieu of anything sharper on your way to the supermarket. Returning empty handed to an audible eye roll because you'd lost your shopping list. It was all stuff for you anyway, for the long days inside while he went to work, waiting for your night shift where you could circle back to land again.

Day 353

You have the right kind of mind for facts and figures, he says. Dates you're good at. Proved it back when you were sober. Answered all those questions and walked away with the prize pot.

A momentary glory but since the money ran out it can no longer be said as a compliment.

Day 354

The scientist in you accepts that everything possible is inevitable.

So why not what we tell you? Here and now. Why can't you hold an answer to that divine question asked of us nearly a year ago?

You'll find it if you try. work it out like a loose tooth. Go for a run, for a ride, for a swim. Listen to the sounds that bubble up in satisfied exhaustion while you watch the sun dip against the horizon. We'll ask you again in less than a fortnight.

Day 355

You have explored a lot of your past, things only recently remembered. There is more in there - there always is, for everyone. We all know that everything we have ever seen, touched, experienced, read, heard, all of it is somewhere. Not on the shelf, not in a palace, but in the depths. All experience is submerged now. It's all sinking further away with each passing moment, although sometimes some current rises up bearing upon it a brief recollection or sense memory to the shallows. What stirs the waters? The working of heat exchange, light, or the passage of some sightless leviathan far below. All are manifestations of the hand of God. Trust in what He chooses to show you.

Day 356

Years of glib rejoinders to summary judgements. Day upon day of slights dealt out like the lash that only give rise to revenge attacks and further strife. Mostly verbal, some not. It's not that you mean to get into it all the time. It just happens that way and when you are both done you look around at the mess and wonder why. Again. Anger should not be indulged. It's not a pressure valve at all. It only gives you license to get angry again, and worse. The body remembers anger and welcomes it like old clothes, ragged and comfortable.

He is blameless in a way. No one can deal with you when you get like this. Sure, there is shit on both sides but you seem determined to rake it all up again and fling it out for the thousandth time, right in his face.

A broken counter top, a door off its hinges from the slamming, a police welfare check. All such anger turns eventually into a to-do list of things to fix and pointless paperwork in some featureless bureaucratic headquarters.

Day 357

Some people make other people their mission. Most times it's pointless. They can never be tough enough to make the tough decisions if they actually care at the same time. Foam swords and disappointed glances.

It's a hard lesson for a man like him to learn but perhaps in choosing a case like you he will find out soon that the scales weighing his good intentions and your desire for nothingness are never meant to tip in his favour.

Marked safe from home, your joint status update says after he leaves the house for work.

Day 358

[Inject(Pisces)->All those years riding on your back. All those things you've seen in the well of your self-adopted oblivion. You've seen veils lifted many times, felt the deep-down scales of everything outside your everyday sight. This isn't what's meant to be here! There is another way of seeing.

There is a way out down the cul-de-sac near you. You'll see it as a blue door set in whitewashed brick. Take the key wrapped in masking tape from your drawer. Go through and you will be in a garden. It doesn't matter which path you take. They will all lead to us eventually. Bring a change of clothes and an umbrella if you have one. Bring your reading glasses. Bring water.

Beyond the garden are further spaces that we will help make familiar to you. Navigation of those spaces will not rely on money, status, class, appearance, performance, power, speed, bravery or fear.

Instead, they will open up to one who shows genuine curiosity, has a willingness to acknowledge their emotions and understand from where they truly originate; one who gives charity to themselves, who sees the spaces within them not as empty but as resonant with some future benevolent echo.

Those spaces will lead to entire worlds of knowing. Come with us and you might understand the substance of all this, from foundation to bright pennant on a tower or minaret.

Take a chance and be repaid a thousandfold.

This will be our last communication. We can't wait to welcome you.]

Day 359

Down by the older parts of the docks where redevelopment has not yet scorched it clean. Can any of it be saved? It's tempting to take the position of complete abandonment. Evacuate these mannered cities to the slow work of water and the creep of the forest. Let entropy run its course unhindered, like elsewhere where ruins are permitted. These stretches of the city cannot be allowed to rest. Better to staple the walls up against falling and engage the usual agencies to revivify them into blandness and a purely financial function.

Day 360

Lock the toilet door. Unclench your jaw and listen for a little while to the bumblebees nesting in the air brick above the extractor fan. This hasn't been a place where this kind of thing happens for almost a year. Take a full fifteen minutes then it's back to work.

Day 361

Of all the items in your possession, think about those you would wish to preserve for some future civilisation to wonder and puzzle over. Do you choose, in a puckish way, based on maximum potential confusion? Do you choose things by which you yourself would be remembered? What about that cupboard full of holiday photos? Wrap them in amber and send them down to the memory silo.

What are the icons of today amongst your daily objects? Think back to those things dragged out of the mud that stir the most fascination: worn footwear, messages of a quotidian nature concerning weights and volumes, items relating to animal husbandry and crop yields.

What from today? Where does the physical evidence exist of the time you reached into someone's life from the opposite side of the world and reacted to their current manufactured dilemma with a thumbs up or a heart?

The last bank notes in your pocket. That will do. Find a shoe box and stuff in it as much as you can bear to part with.

Choosing nothing is also a valid option. Dispatching an empty box is enough to fulfil the request.

Day 362

Near the end of the year. No new reading today. We've done what we can. Maybe review and edit your responses to earlier entries. Take your time and try to bring the person who answered one hundred days ago into the reality of the now. Go ahead and revise yourself upwards.

Day 363

Power cuts and daytime darkness. A symptom of the repair efforts near the centre. Maybe those efforts are in vain but it won't stop them trying. They should be commended for that. Take some time to write a letter of thanks to the infrastructure crews, the concrete pourers, and the architects. Without them we'd be lost in the tangle.

Day 364

Penultimate reading. We are nearly at the finish line. Give yourself a pat on the back. It's not been easy but you've done it. At least we hope you have.

Day 365

The ghost is back. He's relaying the events of that day on Paternoster square in stark terms that no amount of salvaged and scratched up CCTV footage can show. The lobby, how he took the lift without you, shoving you out of the way with a forceful palm. Then the stairs. The chase up five flights. The hallway with the feature window overlooking the cathedral. A water cooler missing its jug.

Dead end. Cornered. What a payoff for your efforts!

He says: *Why did you follow me here?*

You answer somehow, with something. Your passport, your paperwork.

He says: *I'm not coming back. You don't really want me to anyway.*

This you can only deny.

He says: *I can't let you destroy us both.*

There's not much left to lose.

He says: *My last act of love must be to let you go.*

And then he says nothing and you both look outside to an onrushing calamity. A great striding presence in the sky. Fire where it treads, clouds cascade like waterfalls from its shoulders. And a voice that stirs the air into a vortex.

Demanding. Accusing.

Still and small, asking,

WHY MUST WE CARRY ON?

#

Please report with your completed almanac to the Black Iron Foundation building first thing tomorrow morning for response processing and your exit interview.

[end]

What will you do?

1 __ Return to the Foundation for your exit interview

2 __ Seek out Pisces

3 __ Leave on your own

4 __ Something else (specify) _____

Workbook

Tick all that apply. Enter a weighting if required. Comments can be recorded beneath.

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Comments: _____

Day 365

- Affirmation ()
- Warning ()

_ Confession ()

_ Entertainment ()

Comments: _____