Seven Tangents of Space and Distance

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I.
Zero Distance

He hunches over a book. Pages and pages to get through. Posture sloshed. Insides slumped. Can you, he says, motioning to neckspot. *Just a minute. Just a little?* I come up behind. My fingertips touch... no, dig. Or rub. They rub...

Slowly. Thoughts: How fast? How deep? These fingers. You should know this by now, I think to them. Haven’t we done this before? Focus. I want them to be confident, good. Be more than good. Be magical. Faultless. Miraculous.

I wonder: How many people pray for knowing: knowing how to hold a hand, when to give a hug, when to stop a hug, just how tight a shoulder should be rubbed. I’m always off, awkward, “too” something: early, late, at the wrong angle, light, brief, off-target. So much to know, touch. The rhythms. The expectations. The instincts. The rights, the wrongs. The risks. The timing.

The language of it.

Closer: One thousand touch receptors rub through bleached t-shirt fibers to skin that would split like a candy wrapper if it weren’t for atomic covalence; surface-layer elastic cells scratch apart, skin cells gutter under my fingernails as fingers bend to tendons, to thick sturdy slopes of collar bone...the in-and-in pressing, the listening (*you can press harder, I’m not going to break*, he says, patting my leg, turning a page...
In, in, in: I press in (How can this not hurt? Am I that weak?). I close my eyes, try to feel, think of the atoms creating a current around the protons and neutrons of my fingertip atoms and his shoulder atoms, electrons buzzing, flying around, courting, flirting. To the right, yes, more, no, up. Right there...

It would be better if we were lying down. You can use your weight that way, my college freshman roommate once told me; your arms and hands won’t get as tired. But here I am, standing, hands now numb, finger joints slack and loose, like guitar strings needing to be tuned. But I will not stop, not yet, I will press my electrons closer to his until he says just right...

This awkwardness has origins.

My mother was never touchy. When I was little, I would try to hug her, but she’d always be walking off somewhere, and I’d be left dragging on the floor, attached to a pant leg. But my father: my father was crazy-touchy, always putting my sister and me on his lap, vice-gripping our hands and necks as we walked down sidewalks, tackling my mother in the hall and tickling her on the carpet, grabbing at our feet, pulling us tightly to him.

Until all of a sudden he seemed to stop one day. Maybe it was because my sister and I had become awkward, older, or maybe it was the woman we found out later he was seeing, or maybe because he was growing apart from all of us. But it opened a gap. Like someone had poked a hole into a tire or moved out of the house.

And I could tell my mother missed it. Evenings sometimes she’d open a magazine in front of a window and just stare out at the squirrels running around in the evergreens until the darkness made a mirror and she was just staring at herself. Touch was something she needed, too—she just lacked the language or courage or ability to ask.

I know I will have to stop soon. Electrons carry a negative charge. Negative charges repel. Electrons will never really “touch.” There is no zero distance. The feel of pressing closer is the actual pressing apart. I shake out one hand, then the other.
He leans down until his nose ruffles the book’s pages. He shrugs, adjusts his t-shirt, turns around, hugs my legs: *Thank you. Your turn now. Sit.*

No, I start to say. I think of reasons: *Maybe later... you’re too busy...* But there are no reasons, no way to say, I don’t want what I want, and anyway he is stretching, standing, steering me into a seat.

II.
Close

A boy’s knee touching my knee. Then a hand on top of my knee, flat and pressing, a starfish on a rock. His words: *What a knee.* Yes, I say. *Knees.* We look at our knees.

Mr. Huybers, who has a curly ponytail and a receding hairline and coaches girls’ tennis, tells us to turn to page 138. Under his halfway-unbuttoned paisley a t-shirt peeks out. It reads “*How Ionic.*”

The kid behind me keeps kicking my seat and sticking his pencil into my hair. I concentrate. The atoms on page 138 look like globs. These pictures oversimplify, Mr. Huybers says. *Kick.* The image of an atom can’t easily be drawn to scale. He picks up a piece of chalk. For example [kick, kick], the ratio of the size of a hydrogen atom nucleus to the hydrogen atom as a whole is about 100,000. He turns to the chalkboard and draws a bigger glob. I feel another kick. If we think about it, Mr. Huybers says—turning from the chalkboard to look at us, noddingly, one at a time—you will realize [kick, kick] there is really very little that is solid.

The first time I walk into my dorm room freshman year, I am with my father. As soon as we open the door, a girl runs over, hugs me, then hugs my father. She is blasting Jimi Hendrix. *I love Jimi Hendrix,* she says. *Do you? Bold as Love,* I say. *Are You Experienced.* She hugs me again. I’m so happy we are roommates, she says, as though we’ve known each other for years and this is all a happy coincidence. She hugs me again.

She seems nice, my father says later, rubbing my shoulder. I like her. *Yes,* I say, pulling my hands into my sweatshirt sleeves and crossing my arms over my chest.

My mother writes: *You could write.*
There are other words besides “touch”: abut, brush, caress, contact, converge, dab, examine, feel, finger, fondle, frisk, graze, grope, handle, hit, join, kiss, lick, massage, nestle, nudge, palm, palpate, partake, pat, paw, pet, probe, push, reach, rub, smooth, strike, stroke, suck, sweep, tag, tap, tickle...

The freshman college roommate is always bringing new people into our dorm room, all sorts: dreadlocked, hightopped, bigbanged, shaved, bellytatted, patchjeaned, poloshirted, chemmajored, treechoppered, drumcircled. You have to meet my roommate, she says, coming over to me and hugging me. She is an artist, she says, just because I painted stars and moons all over the windows and am taking Art 101. Many of these people, I never see again. Some call repeatedly. Some stay a few nights. Some leave strange things by our door—mixed tapes and mango-flaxseed muffins and mobiles made out of shells. Some live off-campus. Her bike always knocks against the door when she comes home from their houses early in the morning, smelling of maple leaves and cold. Sorry, she whispers. But are you up? I have to tell you about the most amazing night...

My mother writes: You should write.

Not even science can define where particles are. We can only deal in probables: You are probably near me. Our molecules are probably close. Left uncertain, we measure: We measure forces and electric and thermal conduction. We look for whatever we can to explain sensations or textures of heat or friction—anything. Whatever it takes; there has to be a way to explain or measure or calculate whatever it is that we probably feel.

When my father calls, it’s always: I am afraid I’m not calling with the best of news...

In Art 101, we do gesture drawings and make charcoal sketches of milk bottles and keep a daily journal. We do three-page reports on isms: Dadaism, renaissancism, impressionism, realism. I get assigned pointillism. Pointillists, I learn, don’t mix their paints. They use
primary colors to create other colors by painting with small brush spots on their canvases. When viewed from a distance, the points of primary color can't be seen. The eye does the mixing, instead of the brush. From far away, the images make sense; up close, they're just spots.

It is hard for me to fill three pages with facts and insights about pointillism. What can be said? It is. I space my letters out on the page. My instructions at the top: Read from far away.

It is Thanksgiving, and I am with the family of the woman my father is seeing. The woman has two sons: Scott is in high school, acts in plays, has parties. Paul plays guitar, has long hair, goes to a Christian college out in Kentucky, is engaged to a girl whose voice is so tiny you need the room to quiet to hear it.

Over mashed potatoes and turkey, Scott tells us all how he got kicked out of school for having a bad acid trip during a history class. My father—new to the project of boys and discipline—pokes seriously at bean casserole.

Paul and the girl he is going to marry, D., sit at the end of the table, pushing smiles and laughs back and forth in their own quiet bubble. Later, they tell me that they met in Kentucky. They tell me about the lake in Eastern Washington that D. lived next to growing up, and how Paul, as a boy, would camp by that lake, the other side—both of them swimming in the same water, both of them growing up slowly, year after year, neither of them aware that it would take hundreds of miles before they would know.

To touch is to close a distance. Like closing a door. But what is close? There is always distance in close. My sister and I say "we are close" and my father says "I wish we were closer" and a few times in my life I've heard "I feel so close to you." But close: Close is ink on this page, the spaces in the words, the distance between what the words say and what the words mean; and if I'm using them right, the distance between what I think I'm writing and what you'll actually read.

He is close. I look down at my hands and remember there is a beer in them, something dark and thick and foamy, stingy-tangy on the tongue.
Do you know what I am thinking? He says. No, I say. I lift the beer up to take a sip. I am thinking, he says, taking the beer from me and leaning in, that there is too much air between us.

It was indescribable, my freshman roommate says. Like, acrobatic...

A potluck. Couscous. Tabouli. Wine. Homemade candles. A boy with elkskin boots. Everyone has left, walked down to Boulevard Park, something about a moon. But we have stayed behind, are sitting on the couch. I have forgotten his name. He has my pants unzipped. People start coming back. I zip. We pull apart. My freshman roommate is there with her bike, winking. I stand up, go over to her, whisper in her ear: Find out his name. Please. She laughs. I'm not helping you with this one, she says. This, you do yourself.

On average, our skins weigh about eight pounds. The outside—the part you see—is sloughed off dead cells, pushed out and off into the world by new dead pressing cells—cells that are constantly pushing themselves out of ourselves.

Because the boy with the elkskin boots lives two hours away and doesn't have a car, he hitchhikes up to Bellingham the day Kurt Cobain is found dead in Seattle. We walk to an arboretum tower in the woods and end up lying on his leather motorcycle jacket in a small clearing off of a trail. It is raining, and we are looking up as the rain mists down from the heavy slate sky. Cold, I say. He turns and says something, something I have to ask him to repeat, not because I don't hear him, but because I don't know what to say back. We are all lonely inside our skin, he says again. Inside, we are and always will be alone.

My father calls: I'm calling with good news.

There are two types of bonding: neutral molecules share electrons, while charged molecules match up with opposite charges. The attraction, the pull, the desire, is to be neutral.

The boy with elkskin boots spends fifty dollars on a Dodge Dart. No more hitching, he says.
Things last one more month. It never feels right. I write a letter. I try to be clear and direct. I write fifteen pages. I make a copy for myself, then send it. I read it again as if I am him. I get mad at me. He calls: *This makes no sense*...

My mother writes: Why didn’t you tell me your father is getting married? What has happened to my daughter?

If our atoms were looser, more free—if they could just relax their electrons a bit, release their electromagnetic forces—we might say “collide” instead of “close”: *We are a collision. We collided. I feel like I have collided with you.* That would be the closest close: a completely closed close. But physics: The laws of physics make us sit up straight, keep our hands folded neatly in our laps. They say, you will take it and learn it and like it.

*We can be happy with “close.” It might be the only honest word.*

I open the door and throw my bag at the wall. What’s wrong? My roommate says. I tell her how the Art 101 instructor read our journals. I tell her how, when she handed mine back, she walked with me out of the building and tried to walk me all the way to campus support. It’s just words, I say, showing her the pages.

*Of course it is, sweetie,* my roommate says, taking the journal away and giving me a hug. *Then: Can I tell you something? What?* I say. She backs away, and for the first time, I see her look unsure. *You need help hugging.* You’re all crooked and bendy, she says. I tell her about my parents, how my mother never hugged and my father hugged too tight. *Well, stand up straight,* she says. *Let me show you how it’s done.* *Open up your arms. Wider. Wider.* See now, you’re crooked again.

She tries to show me, and I begin to try to learn.

**III.**

**Cohesion**

In 1999, my freshman roommate and I are living five blocks away from each other in Seattle. She is teaching second grade, and I am waiting
tables at Palmer's, a smoky bar and grill downtown. One night, we go to Linda's Tavern on Capitol Hill. We sit in a booth and order Sidecars and smoke Nat Sherman's. In the booth next to ours, a blond-haired boy with black plastic glasses asks us to help him color a fuzzy poster with a "birds and flowers" theme. A minute later he is sitting at our table, sharing his pitcher. He lives in Albuquerque and his name is Dermis.

After Linda's closes, we all spill out to the street then walk back to my house and drink Schmidt and listen to The Cars until I am asleep on the floor with a blanket around me and my freshman roommate is walking Dennis to her house and the gray Seattle mist is lightening into morning.

My mother calls: I am seeing someone. We're getting married.

It happens like it does: there is not, and then there is. The first night he is over at a barbecue and then the next night he is over with The Big Lebowski and Red Hook and then, of course, there is more of that; but then it gets to the stocking caps and boxer shorts and smoky pipes mixed in with the silverware and stiff socks in the sheets and concrete-caked work boots lined up by the front door and a toolbelt hanging from my coat rack and High Life cans by the couch and me driving up and down and up and down the street out front, wondering where to park.

The man my mother says she is going to marry used to sleep on benches near the Seattle Center. He is missing three fingers on his left hand. Now he delivers wood floor planks. He hangs tsetse from his belt and grows out the hair in front of his ears and wears a Yarmulke above his ponytail. He has a laugh so crazy we get asked to change tables at Denny's.

Close your eyes, she says into the phone. No, seriously. Are you? Okay, you're on a beach...

Every time I pick my freshman roommate up from the airport, she smells a little different, just a subtle tiny bit, the way people you know well do when you pick them up from the airport. Probably something
to do with the breathing of different air and the brushing teeth with hard water instead of soft and the sleeping in sheets that have been washed with Tom’s of Maine instead of Arm & Hammer. These little things are the things that change.

My mother and the man she is going to marry don’t want to wait any longer. They make plans quick. They are Messianic. The bottom of the invitation reads “pot blessing to follow.” The boy I am living with gets excited. This wedding might be okay, he says.

When I speak with my mother about it, she says they wanted to find a way to say “potluck” without the “luck.” We don’t like the word, she says, and we won’t say it. And besides, she says, there is no such thing.

When electrons are shared, the bond can only be felt when the molecules try to pull apart. It is like gluing fingers together. You can only feel the bond when you try to pull the fingers apart, when you can feel the forces trying to keep them close.

The day before my freshman roommate moves to Albuquerque, it is sunny—sunny in Seattle in February—and we meet for hot and sour soup at University Village.

We eat the soup quietly. I am worried that—after eight years—we have run out of things to say. When we are done, the waitress comes by and clears our bowls and drops two plastic fortune fish on the bill. I put one fish in my palm and sort of hold it there, and we watch it as it suddenly curls its tail into its head. “Deep in love,” we read on the diagram. Then my freshman roommate puts her fish in her palm. At first, it just sort of stays flat, and we just sort of stare at it, waiting for it to do something, but it just sort of curls its tail lazily. So we keep staring and staring, until then finally—finally—it curls up too, tight, the “deep in love” curl, and we both breathe and sit back, relieved, and then look at each other and laugh, feeling silly for being so serious about everything, as if those fish things could really be accurate, as if a piece of plastic could really tell us how or what we feel.

I am sitting on my mother’s bed, and she is showing me her dress: simple, white, and gauze. She bought it years ago in Israel, she says, somehow knowing right when she saw it that she would wear it to her
wedding. G-d promised me, she says. And see? Look now. What kind of wedding will this be? I say. Is he Jewish? He doesn’t look it.

Messianic, my mother says, turning in front of the mirror, looking at her behind. Oh, I say. Jesus Jewish.

No, my mother says, pulling up her hair. Messianic. How many pounds can I lose in a week? What’s he wearing? I say. Whatever he wants, she says. I watch her reach for the zipper, carefully unzip, and softly, slowly, step out of the dress.

Just like me, this: Here she is, finally happy, and here I am, just now at this moment, missing her.

The language of science does not bother with touch. In electrodynamics or thermodynamics, touch might mean that a charge or heat can be transferred by conduction. In quantum mechanics touch might mean that ‘wave-functions’ are overlapping.

When I hug my mother and the man she just married, it might mean that we are close.

IV.
Friction

Then, the woman says, pulling a cigarette out of her pack, it was just fighting. Fighting and fighting and fighting to stay together.

Okay, you’re on this beach. It’s sunny. You can hear the waves. You are reading dumb magazines. You are thinking of the sun.

My mother walks around with her hands half stuck in her hair. This isn’t fair, she says. I can’t find where I put it...

No, no. See: You have it all wrong. Atoms of my epidermis came close to atoms of her epidermis. Then, the electrons of my atoms pressed close to the electrons of her atoms. Nothing touched.

My freshman roommate calls. I feel like I can’t tell him certain things, she says. Like I can’t be critical. Bring certain things up. He won’t listen.
Well, I say. Have you tried talking with him about it?

My mother: I put it here. It was just right here.

My father calls: We are worried about Paul. D. has been seeing someone, he says, someone in the KKK who lives in West Seattle. But Paul is still in love with her. Paul still loves her and wants it to work.

Certain touch receptors adapt to stimuli and stop responding. They are jaded, bored. They are journalists waiting for a good assignment, restaurant patrons tired of the same old menu. Wake us up when you have something interesting for us, they say, yawning.

She lights the cigarette, picks up her drink, slides away from the bar, and sits at an empty table over in the corner. I just need to enjoy this song, she says.

Friction: At the simplest level, the effect of atoms pushing against each other.

For five years it was circles and circles and circles. Now it is back on the radius. There is you don't listen and you don't know and don't lie and I'm not lying and I saw you and I heard you and so you're back at that again and coffee maker throwing and things flushed into the toilet crying into pillows and slamming doors shut, wham.

That's not fair, he says. Here you have been doing all this thinking, and now I've fallen all behind.

It is not Paul's choice to divorce. He moves out of their apartment and buys new clothes, a leather jacket. He cuts his long hair off. He says now when he looks in the mirror, he can't tell who he is.

I have to not be mad at you this time, I say. Because I need you there, and I'm not letting you get out of it.

My mother: You saw me with it. You saw me put it here.

Lady, he says. It's right there on the shelf.
My father calls: We are a bit worried about Paul.

Just close your eyes, she says, holding my hand. Picture that beach, a Mexico beach, you’re on a beach...

*Listen*, she says. She shuts her eyes tight. Just *listen* to this song.

V.
Collision

August, 2000: A Saturday. The phone wakes me up. The boy I am living with gets up and answers it, then comes to the bed and hands me the phone. I am foggy, slowed by a Friday night of serving drinks. Hello, I say.

It is my father. He says he is afraid he is not calling with the best of news. I sit up and listen to him and then I listen more. I have been up all night, he says, and am not speaking well. His voice is gravel, has been ground into something jagged and dull, run over too many times by thick heavy tires going in and out and in and out and in and out of the same old driveway the same old way these same old years.

My mother writes: *write*.

The most common nerve endings in the human body are the ones that signal pain.

If touch receptors never adapted, the fibers of our sweaters would always be scratchy. We would always want to loosen our laces. Tongues would feel too big. Skin would feel too tight. We would always order from the dollar menu. We would fight over the word “the.” Poems could never be finished. Talking would be directionless. The word “distraction” would not exist.

I want our beach, I say.

The boy I am living with and I drive two hours north to visit my father and my stepmother. We bring sandwiches and flowers. There is a lot of wine floating around. It is quiet. My stepmother won’t eat. There
is lots of stopping by and the conversations feel like tissue paper.

In the car ride back, the boy I am living with reaches across the shifter and puts his hand on my knee. Did you see how your father was holding your arm when you were standing by his chair? He says. I thought he was never going to ever let you go.

On a smooth surface, with few bumps, there is little friction. Most of the atoms can slide right by each other without actually pushing against each other. But if the forces between one set of atoms are weak, those atoms get pushed out of the way.

Paul’s note: “Find people you love. Love them. Don’t ever stop loving them.”

VI.
Space

In 2004, my college freshman roommate and I are living 100 miles apart in the state of Arizona. I have something to tell you, she says into the phone one day from a natural foods market up in Prescott. You’ll be the first to know.

Oh, I know, I say. I am in Tempe, on my bike, trying to balance a cell phone between my shoulder and my ear. So, tell me: how far along?

I ask him to please write me a letter. Why? He says. To tell me you know what I’m saying, I say. But I do know, he says. I just said. But if you write it, you’ll think it, I say. So please?

You just need to be in the same room together for a few minutes, she says. Then you will remember. Then you will know what or who you are.

My freshman roommate gets bigger and bigger. I miss my jeans, she says.
We need space. Space allows a knife to crisp an apple into slices, trees to be toppled by chainsaws, blades of grass to submit to mower blades, sharp edges of paper to slash deeply into our skin.

Because of space, with the right sharpness, anything can be cut.

And bigger.

But air is made of molecules, too. If there are no molecules between 'touching' molecules then that would mean there is no air between them.

There is vacuum.

An old friend calls, out of the blue. Do you remember that boy with the elkskin boots? She says. He was working for Weyerhaeuser and had an accident. His hand got caught in a shredder. I stay silent. My mind composes a montage: Sleeping bags, cold nights camping, dorm beds, leather jacket, 64 ounce bottles of Mickey's, Nirvana posters, Dodge Dart. Which one? I finally say. The right. I try to remember the hand. I should remember the hand. All I remember is cigarette smoke and how it always reminded me of my father.

Space: A blank or empty area. Or, the expanse of the universe.

We are standing in the kitchen. I don't know, I say. I don't either, he says. The wind from a fan blows one of the shade strings around against the wall: whap, whap, whap. It is the only thing moving in the room. It is a thing to stand and stare at.

It happens like it does: there is, and then there is not. And between, there is a mess.

Only 250 miles to the nearest ocean, she says.

Space: An area provided for a particular purpose. Or, the infinite area in which everything is located.

To my mother: I am writing...
VII.
Motion

Upon exiting a spiral tube, a marble will move along a path that is tangential to the spiral at the point of exit. The marble will no longer curve or spiral; instead, it will travel in a straight line in the tangential direction.

My freshman roommate is in a pulsing type of pain. It lasts days. She and Dennis rent pornos and have sex. Then they drive around for hours on bumpy roads. Then they watch more pornos. They have more sex.

I think it has decided to stay in, she says. It is missing the instinct for birth. I will be eternally pregnant with the world's first inside child...

Dennis calls: I think it's happening, I think. I mean, I think so.

Dennis: It's not happening. Don't come yet.

Dennis: It is happening. It definitely is. I think.

One of the most fundamental and influential physical laws is one of chance.

I am driving up to Prescott, Arizona, and the sun is sinking behind the White Mountains, and I am thinking about the two-hour drive, wondering if I should stop for something. Ice cream? Wine? Diapers? Anything. There must be something to stop for, pick up. I can't just go in their door with nothing. I will think of something.

A slowing object's acceleration is always in the opposite direction of its motion. There is always a reason to stop.

It is dark now and the temperature is dropping and the cactuses space out in shadows for miles in the scrubby hills.

These cactuses are natural here. This is their elevation. I think of the cactuses back in Tempe, how they import them in, keep them hydrated with individual custom water spigots. Here on this
spring night, in dust cut through by I-17, somewhere between New River and Rock Springs, the arms of the cactuses branch crooked, mangled, strong, like they are reaching out for something, anything, but all I see is air.

I open the door: Quiet. Music. Dennis, a midwife, a bathtub. Water everywhere: The floor, the ceiling, everyone, the air. My freshman college roommate’s head, turning to me. Eyes marbled, scrambled, fingers gripping white porcelain.

Promise me, she says. Promise me you won’t ever, ever, do this.

For hours, it seems: paper towels, boiling water, an uneven in-and-out, screams loud enough to make the house rip apart into splinters and then settle back into still.

She is screaming and Dennis is there saying you’re doing so good you’re doing so good and the midwife is saying keep doing what you’re doing and here I am just standing there in the bathroom doorway looking for a gap, a good moment, an invitation, a space, some sort of way in.

The midwife is holding her hands between the legs of my freshman college roommate, peering in. She says something about an odd angle, things coming out sideways. More paper towels, she says, motioning behind her. More water. I go to the kitchen, find paper towels, more water. I make my way to the bathtub and find a space to kneel down on the sopping tile floor. I reach my hand into the tub and search for a hand, but her hands are gripping the bottom of the tub, and the best I can do is rub at her arm.

Think of a beach, I say. You’re on a beach. She looks at my hand, me, and for a second there is a focus, disbelief: Here, this, now? A beach?

Okay, I say. Not that.

She manages a smile. Hey.

Hey, I say. I’m here.

The midwife hands me a pair of blue household scissors. I stand over the bathtub while she holds it out in front of me. It is not what I expect. I was thinking pink and blood and drippy. This looks like
a cable that would be unpacked with a computer. The cord gums between the edges of the blades. I cut.

Whenever an object's velocity is changing, that object is said to be accelerating; that object has an acceleration. In other words, acceleration has nothing to do with going fast. It simply refers to change.

When they hand it to me, my right arm is all crooked. It is just this nothing weight on top of it: so still, buried in its blanket, so calm, so collapsible, so brittle, so gray. I want to hold it but I don't want to hold it. I am afraid. I am afraid it will fade in my arms and no one will know. I want to ask the midwife to stand next to me and make sure it stays alive. I want to ask her how you can be sure. I lean close, look for a twitch, a flutter in the chest, a wisp of a twinge. My right arm burns but there is no way I will move.