



HABITAT

m a g a z i n e

Masthead

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Deena ElGenaidi

Wake Up

I didn't mean to kill Casey when I crashed into that wall going ninety-seven, gas in the back seat, cigarettes lit. Or I should say, I didn't mean to kill *just* Casey. I was supposed to die too. We took all the precautions. If the crash didn't kill us the fire should have, and no one else was supposed to be there, not on that street at that time of day. And we had a pact. Casey wasn't supposed to die alone.

I don't remember much after the impact. They said I hit my head. I remember heat. Heat stinging my face, just my face, but in the end my arm had the burns. I felt pain like needles in my eyes, and at that moment I tried to live. I couldn't get any air into my lungs, and I wanted to breathe, but each breath only brought in soot and smoke, and for a moment I thought I had drowned.

Now Casey is dead. Just Casey.

"So we really doing this?" Casey asked.

We were at my house. I think I chose my living room to plan it all out because I secretly hoped my parents would hear us, that this would be the thing to wake them up, because ever since Sam died a year ago they'd been asleep. They didn't speak to me or to each other, except in slow, monotone syllables, never more than a few words at a time. They acted like they weren't parents anymore, like they were the only ones grieving, but I lost a brother.

I should backtrack, though. Tell you how it all started. Casey opened up to me, crying over the phone one night because Ian got her pregnant and accused her of sleeping around, but I knew that wasn't true. Ian is the only boy Casey ever slept with, and it only happened twice. Twice and a half if you count the first time—when she backed out before he went all the way in. So Casey was pregnant. Maybe I should have mentioned that sooner.

"Rose, what do I do?" Casey was sobbing, I could tell. Her voice was nasally, and I heard her sniffing through the phone. "I can't tell my parents. I can't. I'd rather die."

"You want me to beat Ian up?"

"Yeah." I heard a muffled giggle. "But that won't solve anything. Even if he wasn't an asshole, I'm still pregnant, and I can't be pregnant."

"Case, I know how you feel about this, but there are options. I could take you to a clinic."

"No. Absolutely not."

Casey was Catholic. Catholic girls don't get abortions. But then again, Catholic girls don't have premarital sex.

"And even if I wanted to," she continued, "I'd have to tell my parents. I'm under eighteen. There are laws about that, right? And money. I have no money. I can't just be like, 'Put it on my

insurance, but don't tell Mom and Dad."

I could push her down a flight of stairs. Take a baseball bat to her stomach. She'd thank me later. Probably.

"Well, adoption?" I said.

"What don't you understand about my parents can't find out?"

"Jeez, I don't know, Casey. There's no solution here."

"Maybe I should just kill myself."

That's how it started. I should have discouraged her. When I was on the verge of death, I wanted to live, and I don't know if that's just the human instinct in me, clinging to life, fighting to survive, or if I actually wanted to continue with my shitty, miserable life, but it doesn't matter because maybe if Casey were in my position, trying to breathe through the flames, she'd want to live, too. But when Casey said that, *Maybe I should kill myself*, I just went along with it.

"Yeah, for real," I said. "Wouldn't that make things easier? Just not existing anymore? Hitting escape on all this misery?"

It was a joke. I wasn't thinking when I said that. Sure, I'd thought about suicide. How could I not after the year I'd had? But I wasn't serious when I said it to Casey.

"I mean, why not?" Casey said. "Let's just do it."

"What?"

"Kill ourselves," she said. "Let's do it. You're miserable, I've ruined my life. Let's kill ourselves."

I never really understood Casey's Catholicism. Abortion was a solid no, but suicide was okay? I didn't say anything right away. I didn't know what to say. She caught me off guard, and suicide—that was a thing I'd never talked to anyone about. I thought about suicide only in my most desperate moments, in the moments when I'd remember Sam and wish the past year was a nightmare I'd wake up from. Some days, I wasn't even sure what was real, so I'd go to Sam's room, see the soccer trophies lined up on his dresser, see that he wasn't there, and just climb into his bed. Those were the moments I thought about suicide. I pictured it sometimes. Swallowing a bunch of pills. Maybe running the car in the garage and just falling asleep. I'd never planned on sharing that moment with Casey.

"Come on, Rose," Casey said. "You hate your life."

I was a little annoyed. My best friend was encouraging me to kill myself. She was being selfish. Now that she wanted to give up on life, she didn't care about my life anymore.

"Yeah, I'll think about it," I said, not even sure if she was being serious or not.

But I thought about it the rest of that night, lying in bed. I thought about what my note would say if we went through with it. I thought about how we'd do it, and the more I thought about it, the more real it seemed. We could do this. We could kill ourselves.

I wanted something dramatic. Something to make people notice. To make my parents notice. I was being selfish too. I knew that, but I didn't care anymore. I texted Casey later that night: "Let's do it." She replied with a thumbs up emoji and the red dress dancing lady.

When she came over two days later to plan it all out, I told her I wanted it to be big. We couldn't just swallow some pills together and be forgotten. That's when Casey came up with the car crash.

"But that might not kill us," I said.

"We'll take precautions. Create a gas leak or something. I saw something like that on the news once."

We planned it all out in an hour and decided to do it on Sunday. Saturday would be our last day to live, and we figured we'd better do something fun. Casey had asked one of Ian's friends to steal his parents' liquor, and he agreed because Casey said she'd make out with him for ten minutes. I guess you could call that prostitution, but it was our last day on earth, so really, who cares? She came over my house with a bottle of Fireball, and we drank in my room. My parents were home, but like I said, they didn't notice anything anymore. We listened to music and played video games. Then things got serious.

"I wrote my suicide note," she said.

I hadn't written my note yet. Casey pulled the paper out of her pocket and handed it to me. We were lying on my bed, and I had to sit up, prop up my pillow. This was too heavy to take lying down.

Her note was an apology. *I'm sorry, Mom and Dad. I'm sorry, God.* She told them it wasn't their fault. The usual suicide note bullshit. Nothing about the pregnancy. I folded it back up and handed it to her. I didn't know what to say in my note because if I told my parents it wasn't their fault, that would be a lie. Maybe if they hadn't neglected me after Sam died I'd be in a better place now. Maybe I could have gotten through his death in a healthy way.

"Do you regret anything?" Casey said. "In your life, I mean?" I didn't want to talk about this, so I took another swig of Fireball and chased it with a single potato chip. "I just figure now is the time to get it all out there," she said.

"What do *you* regret?" I asked.

"Come on, I think that's pretty obvious." She pointed at her stomach and grabbed the bottle out of my hand.

"Better hope the suicide works so you don't end up with a really fucked up baby," I said as she chugged some more liquor.

"Shut up. But really, what do you regret?"

I regretted a lot, truthfully. Mostly, I regretted not spending more time with Sam before he died. His death wasn't anything super dramatic. Nothing long and drawn out. He wasn't feeling well for a few days, bad headaches. Then, when he started throwing up, my mom took him to the doctor, and the doctor admitted him to the hospital. He had a pretty advanced brain tumor. Died five days later. I regret not being nicer to him, but he was only eleven, and he was so irritating sometimes. I couldn't say any of this to Casey. I couldn't talk about Sam.

"I regret dying a virgin," I said.

Casey laughed.

"Consider yourself lucky," she said. "The sex wasn't even good, and then you wind up pregnant."

"Still, it's one of those things you're supposed to experience."

I didn't care that I was a virgin. It was just something to tell Casey so I wouldn't have to talk about Sam. She kept talking after that, telling me that I wasn't missing anything. I stopped listening to her and stared off in front of me at a red line on the wall. A red line written in

Sharpie. I was so mad at Sam when he did that. He was young, maybe five, and I was ten. It wasn't a big deal, but at the time, I yelled, "I wish you were never born." Maybe that would have been better. If he were never born, I wouldn't be in this pain.

Casey left a few hours later, and I spent the night in Sam's room. I set my alarm for three a.m. because Casey and I had decided to get this done early to ensure no one would be around. Still, I couldn't sleep, so I went through some of Sam's drawers. His clothes still smelled like him. They hadn't been touched in a year. His cleats sat in the corner of the room, still covered in dried mud and brown grass. The room was a mausoleum. I ripped a piece of paper out of a notebook on Sam's desk and started to write my note. I couldn't figure out what to say, so I gave up and curled my body in his bed. I'm not sure when I fell asleep, but I woke up clutching Sam's comforter, my note crumpled in my hand. I opened it and saw the words "Dear Mom and Dad" scribbled across the top with nothing underneath. I knew then what I should write.

Casey and I met at the park down the street, and I took my parents' car. Like I wasn't a shitty enough daughter already, I had to crash their car too. Casey showed up with the bottle of Fireball because she said she needed to be drunk for this. I wanted to stay sober, make sure we didn't miss our mark. We stopped at a gas station, and I poured some gasoline into the backseat of the car. I watched the golden liquid pour onto the leather seats. The smell overwhelmed me and I looked away, as if that would help. The station was empty, so no one saw us. I opened the gas tank. I didn't know if we needed to do that, but it seemed like a good idea. We got out onto the street, the scent of gas filling the car, and I had to open the window, take in a few last breaths. Casey handed me the pack of cigarettes, the matches. We lit the cigarettes, and I hit the gas, floored it. I was aiming for the side of a building, a white brick wall that would smash the car.

They took me to the hospital right after. I didn't know yet that Casey had died. My parents were there. Two police officers, too.

"Can you tell us what happened?" one of them said.

When I opened my mouth to speak, my mom interrupted. "Not without her lawyer," she said.

"What?" I said. I wasn't even thinking about Casey. I guess I assumed since I was alive, she was too, and all I could focus on was the pain in my entire body. The burns were covered, so I couldn't even see the damage.

The cops came back and arrested me three days later. My mom and dad both cried. Casey's parents came to visit me in jail.

"What were you girls thinking?" her father said. I just looked down and shook my head. "You weren't thinking. That was our baby. She's gone."

I wanted them to leave. I didn't know what they wanted from me. Did they want me to cry? To say it was all my fault? It wasn't my job to make them feel better. I don't know that I regretted any of it. Maybe you think I'm a bad person, but I didn't force Casey to do this. She wanted to. It was her idea. I don't feel guilty. I should feel guilty, but I don't. Is that normal?

It's been weeks. My parents visit every day. They hired the best lawyer they could afford, and they got me private visits with a therapist. They woke up. Maybe that's what I wanted—to

wake my parents up, not kill myself. My trial is coming. They won't let me out on bail because I could be charged with first-degree murder. I'm not a murderer.

My lawyer stopped by today. He handed me a photo of a crumpled note. My suicide note. Evidence. I stared down at the blue ink, my own curvy handwriting, the wrinkles in the page.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I went to be with Sam.

Love,

Rose

Florencia Varela

The Mothers

My mother is losing
her mother—

her mind has turned.

Her mothers',
to a far country.
My mother's,
to the nearest coast.

A mind busies.

Her mother turns
child-like and queen
of the new world.

Everlasting.

The dead have returned.
A husband returns.
My mother
Turns, then worse.

My mother turns
to a daughter.
Their bodies busy—
tend to home, hope.

Her mother turns
into daughter.
A husband returns
from the dead.

Her mind busies
always on its own.

My mother is losing
her mother.
A matter of mind
can be lost.

She forgets sleep
first, then sleeping.

She forgets dreams,
lives dreaming.

A husband returns.
Her mind has turned,
then worse.

My mother tends
to her mother
like a daughter,

forgets to tend
to home.

My mother walks
the coast.

For years, it is
the end of the world.

My mother returns.
Don't mind me,
she warns,

of her own
inevitable turn.

We won't outlive
this departure.
Now forget.

Don't mind me—
We will neither
forgive nor return.

Jessica Mehta

Namesakes

My mother named me after her
father she hated. Like buying Papo's notice
with a fat grandchild would make up
for anything. My mother
named me after famous cowboys
then went and married an NDN
herself. Meanwhile her own
mother said *No*

darker. My mom named me
the second most popular girls
name in 1981 because firsts
were for good girls without
panic. My middle
name was the same as a boy
in sixth grade with greasy
nails and dirty hair so I
said it was short for Colette.
My mother was a surprise

fifteen years too late. In the hospital,
her father said, *She ain't much
to look at, is she?* and asked
the nurse to name her. The little Mexican
girl chose Rita after her own
child and nobody not nowhere ever
could say a pearl was an ugly thing.
My mother named me

for a man she despised well
after his girth had gone
to skeleton and the coffin flies
went still—but still,

I thought a namesake
should mean something
good and holy like clean
slates, buried shames and starting overs.

Maia Evrona

Greenpoint Sublet

I was awoken early all month by Polish
neighbors outside my window, their breath
a mist in the morning chill of March.

When my grandparents left their poultry farm in Connecticut,
they settled in Meriden, a nearby town of Polish Catholics.
“To recreate their ghetto,” my mother always said.

My grandfather was buried in Meriden, there
in its tiny Hebrew Cemetery before my birth,
my grandmother in the March of my ninth year,

as rain beat down on the warming earth.

Rebecca Street

Uncle Salinas

we are sitting in taco palenque/on the corner of new braunfels and I-410/we are speaking english
because my spanish/is subpar/my finger points/at the crumbs in your beard/here we are safe/
messiness does not equate to/slipping/and other bad things/women stare/i am a deer/in the
headlights/perpetually/misguided/you are brown i am/white/white/white/together we would
make/something lighter/but/i am just/the deer in the/headlights/you drive past on I-410/and
sometimes/you stop but/most/often/you do not/unless it is at/taco palenque/

Margaret Ray

Superstitions of the Mid-Atlantic

No one around anymore
to blame, so, to celebrate,
I set booby traps for myself: a glass of water left in the dark hallway
to kick and spill later, the chair I neglect
to push in, precarious leftovers in the fridge —

All those frozen waffles cleared out
with our daily misunderstandings. An indulgence
to have the place to myself after all this time.

The text didn't send, or *fired*
became *Friday*, an attempt at *airplane*
reduced autoincorrectly
to *apples*, and now here we are thinking about temptation again.
You can come out now, I say to no one.

There were never any good exit strategies anyway.
You've gone missing or I've mis-
placed you like the ritual thank-you letter we received
from your mother after her visit and which I left in the entryway mailbox
to convince the neighbors we weren't home. I still don't know

what you meant when you said *paradise*
out loud when we were eating oranges.
Now when I am in the kitchen eating peaches I say *paradise*.

Dennis Trujillo

Mangroves

Mangroves are nature's scrub brush—
trees propped up on tangles of roots
suck carbon straight from the air like workers
on ladders wiping soot from windows.

Mangroves are breathing membranes of life
clinging between coast and sea—
teeming with fish, birds, mollusks,
and the bright party hats of anemones.

Mosquitoes patrol the mangrove shore
like squadrons of fighters ready to pounce
upon men who come with backhoes and pumps
to drain the wild of its watery tongue.

When morning sun thins the salty mist,
mudskippers and fiddler crabs begin
the primeval dance descended down
from when life began in mangrove brine.

Isaac Lauritsen

Poem

I am in a cafe with an old friend. We sit and drink coffee and she asks, *do you hate the end of autumn that much?* I tell her I am not a communist and she tells me she's ignoring me now. A waiter brings a loaf of bread and slabs of butter and my legs begin to bob. I open the door in my head and a man covered in brain emerges. I feed him bread. He drips goo on my head and I laugh to let him know it's okay. Then I feed him quicker as his hands motion to his mouth without mind that my breaking of bread is not to the speed of his eating. My old friend says, *look at you, stuffing his face like that.* She has said this before in a similar cafe. But this time I see her words and I see her. She does not coddle. *Do better,* she seems to say. Which is when I notice that she has been on fire the entire time that we have sat in this cafe. I really see the fire. And ask about it. Really ask about it. Even as the man pounds my skull to fissures. Her charred skin folds over. She is weighed down in meaning. This is how I learn to love.

Zoe Raines

The Jeff Corwin Experience

Ricky and I are beneath the three layers of covers on my twin-sized mattress that sits atop the paint-stained wooden floor of my first apartment. The third layer is Ricky's own white comforter, softer than cotton candy and chinchillas; it's the comforter that he sometimes lets me steal from his apartment.

Our intertwined bodies sweat against each other underneath all the layers. We have our legs braided together and, when I lift my thigh from the top of the pile to readjust, it makes an audible peeling sound as my flesh unsticks from his flesh.

He winces and says, "Ow, babe!"

I immediately snap my leg back into its place in the braid like a bear trap, like the clamping of alligator jaws.

He tickles my hip bone, the mountainous curve that juts out from the flat plane of my stomach, and this only causes me to kick my legs like a toddler learning to swim, giggling though trying to escape. The three layers of sheets lift and wiggle, a dancing ghost, then float back down onto our naked forms like a parachute.

"Did you ever watch that show on *Animal Planet*, the one with Jeff Corwin?" Ricky asks me.

"You mean the guy who wanted to be Steve Irwin?" I say.

Ricky unsnakes his arm from around my waist, his muscles rippling in the strike of the movement, his red arm hair glistening gold in the sun that streams in from the wall-sized window next to my floor-rooted bed. He props the arm behind his head, his elbow sticking into the air like a perch, eyes wide and incredulous.

"Jeff Corwin was just as good as Steve Irwin was."

"Was not," I say, "Steve Irwin was the crocodile guy. Jeff Corwin just played with snakes and lizards and stirred up dust in the desert a lot."

"No way," Ricky says, "Jeff Corwin taught kids about nature and how to love the environment and their surroundings."

Typical vegetarian. Ricky's a vegetarian, and a humanitarian, and an environmentalist. He tells me not to eat Jif peanut butter or Kit Kat bars because both use palm oil which is a non-sustainable resource and is destroying the homes of orangutans. "Watch the documentary," he tells me. I don't want to watch the documentary. Kit Kats, the XXL king-sized kind, are on sale at Jewel, 4 for \$5, and have been for as long as I can remember. I can't think about orangutans, not right now, not with those kinds of deals.

"No way," I say, "Jeff Corwin was boring. Jeff Corwin talked too much about that stuff. Steve Irwin was the real deal; he like, wrestled alligators."

"Oh yeah," Ricky says, "well if Steve Irwin was so great, then why was he killed by a manta

ray?”

“Stingray,” I say, “Manta rays are peaceful. And so what if he wrangled crocodiles but got taken down by a stingray? He was the crocodile hunter, but everybody makes mistakes. Nobody’s perfect in their field all of the time.”

I’m a writer, so what, I write one bad story and suddenly I don’t deserve to call myself a writer anymore? Sure, my bad story wouldn’t, like, release a barb into my chest, shocking me to death, but the point stands.

I’ve pushed the covers back, and we both sit up in the bed. I cross my legs and cross my arms. Now I am my own braid. Ricky sits cross-legged and facing me. He sits at the head of the bed while I sit at the foot of the bed.

“Steve Irwin knew better, how could a stingray have gotten the best of him?” Ricky says.

And I say, “So what, you think Bush did Steve Irwin in?”

There will be no kissing now. This is a serious matter.

Ricky looks down at his phone, presumably to look something up that will support his point that Jeff Corwin is just as good as Steve Irwin. He’s always doing that, looking things up on his phone. I lean back, and my hands fall on the stairs to the balcony door rather than on the mattress behind me. There is no mattress behind me. I quickly pull my hands off the cold stone-tiled steps and peer suspiciously down at the cracked caulk between the tiles and my wooden floor.

I’m afraid that my bed might have bed bugs, but I don’t know where they’re coming from. I inspect from afar Ricky’s white comforter in the inconspicuous heap it makes on the floor next to my bed now, as if it is a dog curled before a fireplace. Ricky got a notice from his apartment two weeks ago that they were going to do inspections for bed bugs. One of his neighbors had them. I can’t figure out where these mysterious rows of three bites keep coming from, making anthills on my legs between the pores. I scratch the red bumps until they have little red gaping mouths like the opening of a volcano. I read a story about bugs, bugs that bite and devour the body, mosquitos disfiguring teenage boys in swamps until their eyelids are baseballs and their arms are sausage links. And tapeworms and ringworms—I was told a story about someone who had a tapeworm, but didn’t know it, and one day she just puked it up.

I called my mom when I found the first row of three bites and asked her what she thought. I sent her a picture mid-phone call. She chomped potato chips that I knew she probably dipped in ketchup because that’s what she does, and it’s gross, and she screeched as she looked up Google images of bed bug bites.

“That one is disgusting!”

“Mom, stop!”

“Ugh, oh my god. Zoe, I can’t look. You should see this. They’re horrible!”

“Mom!”

“Aaaah!”

Ricky still sits at the head of the bed, legs crossed, face aglow in the blue wash of his phone screen, fingers scrolling, fingers that were touching my waist ten minutes ago.

I think about Steve Irwin, about Australia.

I said I’d never go to Australia when I was a kid because there are big bugs there. I hear they have worms that are six feet long. How does that even count as a worm anymore? I probably still

wouldn't go to Australia now. I don't even fuck with the tiny spiders that might be crawling into my apartment through the cracks in the caulk that mold together the stair tiles and the wooden floor, the tiny spiders that are probably the cause of the rows of bites in three, making me think that I have bed bugs. Sometimes I see house centipedes too. Silverfish, they're called. Those can crawl in from the caulk cracks and from the drains. One time, I found one on the shower curtain. It probably crawled up out of the shower drain, through the tumbleweeds of shampoo-soaked hair. Spiders eat silverfish. Bugs are disgusting, but what's the lesser evil? Which one is better than the other?

Ricky has found nothing to support his Jeff Corwin claim.

The next week, my friend Bailey from elementary school calls me up, and she says, "Zoe, please tell me that you remember Jeff Corwin."

And I say, "No joke, my boyfriend and I were just arguing about whether or not he was as good as Steve Irwin."

Bailey and I were best friends up until fifth grade. She introduced me to terrible microwavable foods that my mom would never let me try—pizza rolls, french bread pizzas, ramen noodles. We would eat trays of pizza rolls while watching *The Jeff Corwin Experience*, or playing *Super Smash Bros*, the GameCube version—making Zelda and Marth kiss by crouching down on that one uneven platform on the Hyrule Temple stage. We haven't talked in years.

"I just had dinner with him [Jeff Corwin]," Bailey says, "and he was a dick."

"No shit!"

She goes to Northwestern University now, up in Evanston, while I go to art school down in the Loop. Probably why she's having dinner with Jeff Corwin while I'm just writing about it. Her environmental conservation group at Northwestern raised funds to hire a lecturer, so they hired Jeff Corwin to come and speak with them, and they all went out to dinner at a fancy restaurant. Only a couple of people from the environmental conservation group actually showed up for their reservation at the restaurant, so it was mostly just Bailey asking Jeff Corwin questions and everyone else sitting there uncomfortably, increasingly so as Jeff Corwin talked only about his workout routine and how he runs all the time.

"And of course, his nipples were showing," Bailey says.

Of course his nipples were showing. Of course his nipples were hard and showing.

There was Jeff Corwin, at the dinner table of a dimly lit restaurant, where the scant mood lighting came from a crystal chandelier with multiple tiers ending in Swarovski teardrops that glittered like the drops of rain falling outside, and the chandelier was centered above a ten-person, round tabletop with a long, cascading white tablecloth—the thick plush kind, not the cheap two-ply kind that you rent for parties, but the real kind that you have to wash in its own load with diamond quality detergent—and atop the long, cascading white tablecloth in the center of the ten-person, round tabletop would be a crystal vase with a bouquet of red roses, the deep shade of crimson red, not that cheap licorice red nonsense. Jeff Corwin was reclining in his high-backed velvet chair, the kind with arms that curl at the ends and fold over at the top in a cheeky wave. Jeff Corwin's recline was not the kind of someone at ease, but the recline of someone with blatant disrespect for his bourgeois surroundings, the kind of recline that you see a middle

schooler attempting in their blue plastic chairs, leaning on the two back legs, pressing their knees up against the edge of the desk for balance. Jeff Corwin's severely reclined posture only further accentuated his taut form beneath one of those thin-fabric athletic muscle tanks, the ones made by Under Armour, color blocked in hideous shades of steel gray and neon green, and his stupid, pointy nipples were poking through because his stupid muscle tank was making him cold in the expensive, air-conditioned restaurant. A place can't be dimly lit and warm, or else it would feel like a cave. If it's dark and cold, however, it might have the more breezy feel of a sea cave, the kind where you might eat grape leaves and olives off of oiled muscles. Oiled muscles and pointy nipples. Jeff Corwin was not touching the free bread in the woven basket in the center of the table, nestled in a crimson red napkin to match the crimson red rose. Jeff Corwin did not want the extra carbs, not even if they were dipped in olive oil.

I used to think that Jeff Corwin was the kind of guy who always wore khaki shorts with short-sleeved button-up shirts, but how easily I changed my internal animus of him into a man in an Under Armour tank top and too-short basketball shorts. He seemed to me, back when I was young and naive, the type of guy to eat a Clif Bar, but then to also eat an Almond Joy. Sweet, but slightly exotic.

Jeff Corwin was propping his ugly, fat sneakers up on the ten-person, round tabletop with the cascading white tablecloth, the dirt from their thick, rubbery soles leaving footprints like he'd just kicked a ghost in the face. What a douchebag. At least they were clearly the expensive kind of sneakers, even though they were bulky like footballs and looked like the type of shoes my grandma would choose to play tennis in.

"What a fucking douchebag. Does he even like, do conservation? I thought he just manhandled small snakes," I say to Bailey, as if I do conservation.

My roommates and I talked about maybe getting a composter. We didn't want one with worms though, so that really limited our options. I didn't want worms in my apartment. Especially not the six-foot long kind. Or the kind that you puke out of your stomach.

"How do you think environmental policy concerning the EPA will fare alongside other conservation efforts, now that Trump is president?" Bailey asked Jeff Corwin. "He already banned the National Parks Service from tweeting."

"Well, we're all basically fucked," Jeff Corwin said, and then he talked more about his workout routines: "I hate hotel gyms. I belong to the YMCA because I like the huge weight rooms and their cool treadmills. Excuse me, waiter, can I get a lightweight meal that won't make me feel heavy?"

"Just like that," Bailey says to me, "he asked the waiter if they had any lean proteins. Like, could he be any more of a douchebag?"

"Damn," I say, "you get one experience show on *Animal Planet* and suddenly you're an overgrown frat boy."

What an ape.

I imagine the waiter handling the words *lean protein* like a wriggling garden snake, wrangling the tiny beast while casting a dirty glance down at Jeff Corwin's dirty sneakers on the cascading white tablecloth.

What a douchebag.

Hannah Humphrey

The Choice

In the dark, on the way to see
the veterinarian, we passed into
alternativity. A dead deer, a burn pile
two stories high, and I can see
the shadow of the dark side of the moon.
Empty fields of sharply cut stalks
slide by as we drive. My companion
lifts her head, half a moon reflected
in her eyes. We could keep driving,
she and I. Perhaps to the shore...
where the water meets the sand.

Nathan Taylor

CO(R)PSE

First, I say, you must love your own self.
How could they not, the body like a vessel, like
a temple, veins like vines on trees, heart dripping
with gold, a beehive, throat humming morning
warmth. I do love, how warm the body!
Sweet slab of tendon twine, salt-water oven! O
eyes, roll like cold stones down a slope. Body like
a body like a tomb. Tomb like a soul. The “steel-
trap mind.” The mind a catacombs. The catacombs
no surface exit. No sunlight. The synthetic glow of
hospitals. Cells. A shriveled wasp hive under water.
Sigh. The body mostly water. Body mostly wreck-
age. The body remains. The body’s coiling, a circle
that repeats. Rings on rings. A fallacy of trees.
The trees have no cover. The trees barely touch
other trees. They don’t know there are other trees
so they don’t know they want to be other trees.
Never dreamt a life of furniture or paneling. Grain
of a box. Car with the heart of a horse. Hearse
in a parade. A pause, a hole. A pyre of miniature
flagpoles. Deep ditch. The pits. A funeral procession
into the ocean. Love song, elegy gargled over and over
the sink. Fog on the mirror. The glossy surface of
others. Bodies and other bodies but not mine. Mine’s
getting used. Exhale, exchange.

E'mon Lauren

Ode to Thick Eyebrows

balance beam of my forehead.
douglas park bench waiting
for a kiss. angel wings hot glued
together. train tracking the city
of my crown. the boar bristle
brush of my face. crashing waves above
my eyes. could pull the moon into two
crawling crescents. filtered
charcoal when wax wants to
burn. the candlesticks in the bushes.
annually trimmed by thread.
my father's misplaced mustache. meringue
on my crusted brim. blowing black
blades on a sandy valley.

Rayan Mustafa

Morning Song

I want you to stay & connect the small dots
scattered along my neck with your eyes. The
sun streaks into the room through a crack
in the blinds, but we don't live by laws of light.

Wake me up at noon or later, your teeth
against my collarbones & I can't keep
any more secrets. If you stay you can
smoke me with your coffee & press
outstretched fingers into my jaw. Lay

down next to me & I'll wait for evening.
I'll wait for church bells & springtime, longer
days so you can turn stained glass mosaics into
words & paint self-portraits on my wrists.
Only we can decide when this day will begin.

Denise Massingill

Repent

The first time I dragged my daughter out into the night while I was slightly drunk, I was 29, she was almost 6. Age doesn't matter. I was telling myself she needed this— us, running like children together, like magic, away from the darkness into candlelight, into stories she'll remember later. The first time my mother dragged me out into the night while slightly drunk, I was 8, she was 35. She pulled me toward the old cemetery (*Freidhof*) in the village. It was winter in Austria, but still no snow. (I prayed for snow, over and over. Ignored.) In the center of the *Freidhof*, my mother stood before the giant wooden crucifix. I was God-crotch-level, but knew enough to pretend this wasn't true. Look above to his closed eyes. Look above to his heavy head hanging. The pain. The suffering. Bow your own head, child, don't lift your eyes. My mother made me sign the cross onto my body. Forehead, chest, left and right. My skin against my skin, and our sins floated up with exhaled air into the cold darkness. *Vater, Sohn und Heiliger Geist*. I'm sorry, God-crotch, I'm sorry.

Daughter, I've lost what I was supposed to show you. Maybe it's that you don't need a man to save you, that I will show you the spirit caged behind your own bones. Run with me. Daughter, run from me always. Just fucking run, because I'm sorry I'm still running too.

Consent

I wake cold, still. Blackness
peels away from me. There is blueness,
always blue, from a window in every memory of this.

No, this is not a memory. *Re-live it truly*, the doctor says.

Don't separate again.

Where are you now?

The blue room with blackness peeling. Come here, he says/said/is saying. His body holds the same repulsiveness as an animated corpse. I'd rather lie next to something dead, undemanding. Holds/ held/ is holding. He is holding on to me. He is tightening his palms around my wrists, nails pressing into me. A blade. He is saying *Don't make a sound.*

No.

Let me separate.

This isn't now.

I am untouched in this room with this desk and this chair.

I am here with this chair with the missing wheel, slightly tilted.

A doctor's office.

This is now. I can be a million people before I am ever
that girl held down again by some ugly, scared boy.

Find a different patient to feed you stories.

Keep your money, and fuck right off, kind sir,
can you hear me?

I said no.

Hannah Kidder

Wolverine Frogs

I stare through the dim lighting at my desk across the room. One of Mom's old nature encyclopedias sits, open, as usual, to the article on Wolverine frogs. The edges are curled in, faded, over-used: *When threatened, a Wolverine frog has the ability to break the bones in its own toes and force them through its skin to create claws.*

"Do you need me to stay with you?" Mom asks. She's sitting against my leg, her hand on my forehead. The shadows on her face are harsh. She's aged quickly in the last few months.

"No." I rub my hands over my arms. They are textured with goosebumps and my numbed hands do nothing to warm me. "I'll be fine."

She squeezes my hand and closes the door when she leaves. The room is dark again. I lie back and stare at the glow-in-the-dark star stickers on my ceiling.

My pale blue dress rises mid-thigh and drops off my left shoulder. I bend over my desk and hold the macro mirror close to my face while I swipe at the smudged eyeliner on my cheek. A light gray line remains. I drop the mirror onto the encyclopedia, grab my purse, and walk downstairs.

Evan's car pulls up as I reach the end of the driveway. I get in and yank the door closed.

"Hey." Evan pauses with his hand on the door handle, then sits back and re-buckles his seatbelt. "You look great."

"Thanks."

"Ready to go?"

"Yep."

He smiles and pulls away from the curb.

An hour later, we're in the concert venue handicap bathroom stall, his face buried between my thighs. The bass drum pulses through the wall, vibrating my teeth if I tilt my head back. Someone rattles the door knob and knocks. The mirror across from me is covered in lipstick and Sharpie—*Margo sucks cheap* with a phone number scrawled beneath is the most legible note. My eyes are swollen red. My hair is greasy by the roots. I look at the ceiling. He looks up at me and pulls a condom out of his pocket, then motions as if he were going to help me lie on the floor.

I laugh. "No." I hop onto the sink and brace my hands against the ceramic, its cold biting through my dress.

The small, red light on the ceiling smoke detector blinks rhythmically. Then it's on the floor, in front of my face, and it's the charging port for a vacuum sweeper. The vacuum isn't there, but the light blinks anyway, still useful and functioning. The blinking becomes less in-time, more erratic, until it blinks so rapidly that it's a steady glow of blurred red.

"That was great." Evan is finished.

I drop back onto the floor and find my underwear.

"Yeah. See you later."

I leave.

We are a mile and a half from my house, so I walk home. My feet slap against the pavement.

"Did you have fun, sweetie?" Mom calls when she hears the front door close.

"What?" I ask, even though I heard.

"Did you have fun, sweetie?" she repeats with the exact same inflection.

"Yeah."

Mom walks into the foyer, sleeves rolled up, drying a plate with her rooster dishcloth.

"What was his name? Evan?" Water drips onto the floor between her feet. "Are you going to go out with him again?"

"Probably not."

"Not too many second dates these days, huh?" she asks in the quiet, too-sweet voice I've heard her use on her third graders.

"Yeah," I pause on the stairs. "Not too many."

The Wolverine frog is sometimes called the "hairy frog" because of its thick, hair-like papillae that extend from the male's thighs and back.

Andre collapses on top of me and sighs. "It's not working."

I roll my eyes and push him off. "Well, good try. Maybe next time."

I skipped homeroom for this. The mattress creaks as I stand up.

"You're leaving?"

I grab my clothes from the floor and look for my backpack. "Yeah."

"Just let me try again! I had a heavy lunch."

I dress in his parents' living room and hurry to the door. The warm sun and humidity hit my face like opening a dryer mid-cycle. I step onto the sidewalk and start down the street.

The Bakossi people of Cameroon believed that if barren couples were to ingest the Wolverine frog it would grant them fertility. They believed the only way to harness some certain power for themselves was to usurp and absorb the power of another.

"Emma, wait up!" Andre has regained his nerve. He's buttoning his shirt and running toward me barefoot. "Hang on."

I turn and keep walking. "I have to get back before next period."

"Wait." He grabs my arm, fingers pinning me to him. "Emma, just look at me."

I was pinned to the ground in the dim room, fingernails digging into the wooden floor boards, red light blinking in front of my face.

"Just look at me," the man said through gritted teeth.

I closed my eyes tight.

"Look at me!"

I was on my stomach and he was on top of me, pounding into my backside. I couldn't look at him if I tried. My fingers were white, gripping at the cracks in the floor.

I pressed my hands into the floor and pushed up as hard as I can. He falls off and I face him. I

lunge and dig into his skin with talons I didn't know I had, tearing at his eyes.

"Emma, stop!" Andre cries.

I'm outside, in the sun. A bird is singing somewhere.

Andre's hands are grasping his face and blood seeps between his fingers.

"What the fuck, Emma!"

He staggers back to his house, clipping his hip on a fence post and nearly falling.

I run home. My feet slap against the pavement.

I rub at the caked blood on my hands and it comes off in flakes. Dark outlines remain under my cuticles. I rake my nails over them until I bleed too.

"Emma!" The screen door slams downstairs. "Emma, are you here?"

"I'm upstairs, Mom," I say, too quietly for her to hear.

"Emma!" Mom is running up the stairs. She throws my door open and sees me sitting against the foot of my bed. "Oh, thank goodness! Are you hurt? Andre's dad called." She grabs and examines my face, neck, arms, hands. She stops at my hands. Her eyebrows pinch and her teeth click together. "This is his blood, right?"

I nod.

She relaxes and pushes my bangs from my face. "What did he do?"

"He didn't do anything."

"Emma—"

"I don't know what happened." I stare at the rusted brown and bright red mixing on my fingertips.

I walk to the checkout counter with my box of macaroni.

The girl behind the register eyes me. We went to junior high together, I think.

I grab a Snickers bar and keep my head down. People either think I'm a psycho that tears out boys' eyes for fun, or they assume Andre deserved it.

The cashier nods at me. "Ain't you the chick that stabbed that guy in the face?"

In small towns gossip hangs around like wet laundry.

I toss the Snickers onto the belt.

"Props, girl." She drops my food into a bag and hands it to me. "What he did you, though?"

Wolverine frogs are born as tadpoles already equipped with several rows of horned teeth. They are carnivorous and ready to fight their own kind if their wellbeing is compromised.

I hand her a ten and hurry out without my change.

I jog a few blocks away, then stop and lean against a fence, counting my breaths. Seven seconds in, hold for six, seven seconds out.

The grocery bag rustles as I fish the macaroni box out and overturn it, listening to the hard noodles settle like an hourglass.

The skin around my nails is still raw. I keep scrubbing them, even though his blood is long gone and replaced by my own, many times over. I wish I could grow claws.

Aya Elizabeth

Emergency

I want to start the New Year's party early, or late,
or however long it takes to forget all the minor regrets in me:
bottle rockets left un-popped, not asking for my turn
with the handsaw, following the good advice
over what my stars told me in stranger languages.

But this year, I want a year where people only speak in silence
or like its their last sentence. Where they don't wish for stronger doors
or looser heartstrings and worry that the bad seed in them just can't be spit out.

Where they don't go rushing everywhere only to feel lost,
or compare themselves to knots but become undone by crooked smiles,
break furniture in their own homes to teach the world a lesson
and wait for their names to be called long after the roll call ends.

But these days I'm feeling like New Year's resolutions
are just glorified prescription refills with a prolonged aftertaste.
It's the kind of medicine that you hide from your boyfriends
and are ashamed to tell your doctor about. But this year,

I think I'll treat old love letters like post-it notes that have already
been checked off the list. This year, when I'm on the train
and a mother points out the emergency button to her son and says
but there's no emergency so you don't need to press it,
I think I'll believe her.

When I was little I had fantasies about filling a bathtub with mouthwash
so I could walk around smelling like peppermint all day.
Now I have fantasies of filling a bathtub with mouthwash
so I can come out a clean tongue that's lost all memory of mouths
both wrong and wronged.

I want to discover that the black market is a real place,
maybe at the bottom of a well or in my boss's supply closet.
But if I discover anything in either of those places,

I'd want it to be your ribs, hipbones, eyelashes. I am handsy
and full of ennui.

But this year, I don't want to refuse my hands or those
who seek them out. I want to be a giant, and let salt from the ocean
rub off on me so that I can become a tidal force myself.

This year, I want to praise what is good, always, period. Because it is.

For the first time I feel like to save us from our irredeemable,
irreparable ways is no emergency.

Steph Jurusz

Where I'm Going to Have Been

It begins with some variation of wanderlust. I always dreamt of great, faraway places: the coastlines of California, the castles of Europe, the mountains of Japan, and Argentina, where my childhood best friend was from and visited during Ohio summers while I waded in icy creeks and chased lightning bugs in the town where we both lived. In my mind these places were magical, but my only conceptions of them arrived through pictures in *National Geographic*, history programs, and nature specials on television. I imagined going to these places and having great adventures but always had the goal of returning, of coming back to a place called home.

Living in Chicago as an adult, I watch each summer as Midwesterners flock to Lake Michigan. The Lakes certainly are Great, but as a child of Ohio, I know what it is like to stand next to a giant body of water and wonder if it is anything like an ocean because so many years passed before I saw the sea with my own eyes. Because you can't see across, because the hot sand is as gritty and burning as you imagine the tropics, the illusion is nearly complete.

In Ohio most of the year is grey and rusty, except for the summer when the world blooms into a green so lush that it is nearly blue. In fifth grade Mrs. Church taught our class that water lies inside each cell of the body, and inside the cells of leaves there is water, too. I did not know how many leaves there were in the forest behind my house, but I imagined thousands, maybe a million. They were all filled with water, a great solid sea hanging from the treetops.

Under that canopy, I remember the feeling of the entire history of the earth beneath me, fossils whispering against callouses on the bottoms of my eight-year-old feet as I grasped the sandstone with my toes. Glaciers carved those rocks tens of thousands of years ago, pushing north across the continent until they melted into the Great Lakes, exposing the imprints of small creatures, shells, and plants for the first time in millions of years. In wonder, I traced their outlines with my fingers.

I would climb deeper into the dark, imagining swimming through prehistoric seas, but I struggled to imagine this land without trees. They are infants compared to the land beneath, the rocks surrounding them, but they are big enough that I cannot encircle them with my arms in memory or in reality, if they are still standing. I know how to count the rings of tree trunks, but that requires death. I want to believe they are infinite—tiny aquatic sprouts that, as the seas drained away, evolved into the giants that towered over my house as guardians, that still tower in my mind.

More than far away places, I imagined going to far away times. I often dreamt that if I walked through the right caverns, into the right parts of the forest, that maybe I'd go back to another era and be able to see the world as it once was and have a better understanding of how the current reality came to be.

Forests have been cleared, fields turned over into housing subdivisions, roads paved and

re-paved, but Twinsburg was and still is a place where people live for generations. A girl in my classes from third through ninth grade was a direct descendent of a prominent early figure in our town, the preacher and educator, Samuel Bissell. We attended an elementary school that bore her last name and her family was still known and loved, if not for who they were, for what their forebearer meant to our collective history. In my mind this meant somehow that she owned it. In some ways she did, the ancestral families who have lived in town for generations all knew one another and held some sort of social capital. They were the ones who knew the details of everyone's lives and still remained prominent due to the happenstance of genetics and last names. Their forbearers planted roots long ago and fruit was still coming off the vine.

My parents were among the few outsiders who chose to make Twinsburg home. They arrived in a way that makes me think of settling homesteaders, coming from the East. My mother had never lived any further inland than Niagara Falls. My father was a nomadic man of Boston origins, having moved across the country multiple times growing up; but if I asked him where he was *from* I don't know what he'd say. In the early '80s they set up their first apartment behind the Catholic church where both my brother and I were baptized. Occasionally, my mother offers snippets of life in that time, such as how when they first arrived in '83 there were no paramedics and residents couldn't just call 911 in an emergency.

For many people, there existed an expectation that if you were born in Twinsburg, there's a good chance you wouldn't venture too far from home. The outsiders were a toss up, but many, seeking assimilation and dreaming of roots for their children that they themselves lacked, did everything to remain tied to the town, buying and building houses, switching jobs as the market shifted. We were a town in flux, and in some ways I grew with it.

Each summer Twins Days brought more people to our town than residents. This is something that was proudly declared each August in the *Twinsburg Bulletin*. Since I was born, it seemed that the town had always been growing, despite its small and quiet origins. In the '70s Twinsburg began attracting outsiders' attention with the tradition of Twins Days, an annual festival in which thousands of twins would flood the town for a weekend of doppelgängers, fried food, competitions ("most talented twins" karaoke contest, "most alike twins," "most creative twins," and so on and so forth), carnival rides, and fireworks. I never thought any of this to be unusual until I was uprooted as a teenager and moved across the country, out of the Midwest, to a place that was bright and hot and seeming to lack any meaningful history or legacy.

My last summer in Twinsburg was the first time I did not attend the festival with my brother and father to gawk at the multiples, drink watery lemonade, and watch fireworks bursting over the high school football field to signal the end of the festivities until the next year. That last year, months passed between the times I saw my father, who had already begun a new job in Florida. As a precursor to mine and my mother's departure, around the same time my brother had moved out of the family home to rent an apartment in the same complex where he lived with my parents as a baby. He was old enough to choose, and he made the choice I would have made at that time, had I been given it.

I do not know the exact date of our departure, though I can tell you that we were on the road when Hurricane Charley made landfall. That might not make any difference to people in other parts of the country, but if you are or were in the Southeast, that matters a lot. Even ten years

later, people are talking about what they did during Hurricane Charley. Many of my current friends were having “hurricane parties.” I was lying on the floor of my mother’s car, my black and white cat clinging to my chest, as torrents of rain surrounded us, cursing my father for the fear, for forcing us into such a perilous unknown. I remember the red taillights of my brother’s car being nearly washed away in southern Georgia on the second day of our drive. I remember wondering if we would be able to make it there intact when we’d finally reunite with my father in Florida.

On my last night in Ohio I had slept not in my bedroom, but in the living room. My possessions and bed had all been removed and packed into the back of the moving van and it was clear that my room was no longer mine. I hovered outside the door, trying to conjure up my belongings, my memories of having lived and slept between those walls, but I could only see what was still there: blank walls and carpet. Any sense of “mine-ness” had been painted over, erased when my parents changed my walls from the red that had covered them to plain matte white. They said it was easier to get a buyer that way.

That night, I found a space on the living room floor and wrapped myself in the cream- and brown-striped comforter that had been in our family since before I was born. Its torn fabric had been repaired with mismatching patches from pants that had once been my brother’s and then mine. On the carpet, I curled up and laid in the same place where the television stand once rested for so many years, the impression of the base still carved into the floor, despite multiple passes of the vacuum and carpet cleaner. It was a smooth, unstained island of cream. I laid my head on the floor, the bed pillows having foolishly been sealed away in cardboard boxes. I do not remember where my mother slept. I do not remember her sleeping at all.

My cheek against the carpet, I tried to focus on the naked white wall. I did not want to turn and face the hallway that led to the empty room that while I could still walk into it, was no longer mine. After the sun went down, the only light was a single ceiling bulb in the dining room, regulated by the dimmer switch. I wrapped myself tighter and tighter into the blanket, trying to make some semblance of a pillow out of the soft, worn fabric.

When I woke, we packed ourselves and our pets into the car, strapping birdcages to the seat, setting down beds for the cats behind the backseat in the trunk. Before packing myself, I had neatly folded the comforter into a clean rectangle, marking the space where I had slept. My mother, claiming we did not have enough room in the car, forced me to leave the blanket behind, and we pulled away into the ink of pre-dawn.

When doing something unfamiliar, it is easy to believe that one is merely in a state of dreaming. Flashes of light crossing and uncrossing on the highway enhance this illusion on the floor of the backseat in the hours before the sun rises. Roads turn from red and blue lines on the map into dark asphalt expanses stretching south.

I had seen some of the places we passed through on this journey before, but for the most part they only existed in seventy-five mile-per-hour flashes. The South only existed when it was convenient for our purposes, though mostly a blur between Cleveland and Ashville, that path traced and retraced, roads becoming and un-becoming during summer road trips to and from my

grandfather's and aunt and uncle's homes. When I was not there, the South existed in photos, voices on the telephone, words and stories like the ones my mother read to me each night before bed that only came into existence for the moments that the pages were opened. Once the book was shut, the stories remained trapped neatly within the covers and even if I thought about all the places I'd go, I wouldn't get there unless I pulled the book from under my bed and flicked through the pages.

Jack Peterson

Wire

Remember the thickness, blackness,
live wire seduction in the street

of a hive lulled summer block, the dream
where you achingly levitate

your useless legs and sense if the ceiling
were lifted your head wouldn't bump.

The red-tailed hawk, or kestrel at slip
of talons, lifted on a wing

from insulated line could swoop.
No thing pretends this is normal.

The raptor returns to breathe and view
what flashes, while blood

completes its circuit and late children
shriek and give a wide berth.

Donia G. Mounsef

Drone Punctuation

From the eye in the sky, an ellipsis,
 aerial re-vision of the realms of reality,
 relinquished by commas of life,
 a question mark where
 a shepherd paused,
 with partial flock in tow,
 a shoemaker held his hammer mid-air,
 a school teacher drew half an ampersand,
 a cormorant flew half way,
 into wrecked dunes,
 shorebirds like bullets
 stir dust at the feet of time,
 we borrowed from our weary ancestors.
 When we looked up we used to see heavens,
 rumpled jagged edges in the shape
 of cirrus clouds,
 creased to the rhythm of hope,
 chiseled days with the ambition
 of ripened fruit in the sun.

Yesterday in the shade,
 death waits for us to move,
 land our unmanned terror
 on the tarmac of human flesh,
 sprouting up from the ardent earth,
 in the sluggish July heat,
 leaves mumbling erratic quilts,
 back alleys filled with crumbs
 the pigeons left because
 our bread tastes like shit.
 Eyes loitering behind luminous
 sun-streaked blinds.

The target invented the drone,
 we invented its punctuation.

Carol Ellis

a refugee moment

you sit in your boat long enough but forget drowning it is where I am
made of moon and wind and water to shore sandy beach and magical appearance
where rocks melt and it rains until every boat out there is an ark an invitation.

you are what swimming is as necessary travel but what country loves you
instead to let you walk into your life carrying your story closely as wind
the constant unexpected dream that makes for two of you coming aboard.

Michelle Xu

Inside the United States of America

And then she was inside
the United States of America without shoes, sisters,
God. Inside the United States of America like canned tuna pre-cooked,
cooled, boned, hermetically sealed to prevent contamination.
As if she beyond the bone was

anything at all. Haven't you heart?
Floppy fish, lay. What use is standing
without shoes—shoes, sisters, God, sterilized
against. There was no preservation. Instead the terminal took
back its glow and of course neither carpet nor shadow

minded the color. What's become
of this foot? This foot, this fish, this glow,
this bone. Turbulence in her pink palm.
And then she was inside
the United States of America, mind and still.

Steak

Sometimes I think of murder as a hook
on the edge of my desk. Sometimes I raise
my hand to raise you. All day long I think
of your big brain, how it must be heavy
like a grand piano, how I must bend
my knees to lift you. If I feed you your
favorite meal three days in a row, will
you still take it rare? If I take away
the plate, will you still eat it in the ground?
Sometimes I slip my ring on the hook on
the edge of my desk and hear it tinkle.
Sometimes I joke. When you laugh, I
hear your big brain rattle in the clean earth.

John Duncan

What the chief's daughter wants to know

I am taken aback when I open the door and he is standing there, holding the two bottles like a fifteen year old boy who has raided his parents' liquor cabinet. He holds them up like trophies and shakes them with a grin. I am renting the apartment from him, so I let him inside and apologize for being a slob. I think he has already been drinking because his face is rosy. He has never come down to my apartment before, unless he was telling me to separate my beer bottles from the rest of the garbage, or to not flush anything other than shit or piss down the toilet, or to quit feeding his dogs grilled cheese when I come home at night, drunk and lonely and unconnected.

He stands on the tile inside the door, next to a pile of dirty shoes and flip-flops and broken umbrellas, absorbing the universal loneliness of a single, middle-aged man's dwelling. The television roars with the laughter of a South Korean variety show. I'm pretty sure it is *Infinite Challenge*. There are clothes and papers and bottles and ashes all over what little furniture I have. I work quickly to shovel as much of it as I can onto the sheetless, sweat-stained mattress of my bed. I pile up the clothes and grab the chair before looking around as if I own another.

"No, no. We sit," he motions toward the floor, shaking his house shoes off.

He points at a small table and I drag it to the center of the room. I don't have any lamps and the overhead lighting makes me feel like we are both staying at a bar that is trying to close up.

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry about the mess, ajoshi."

He really laughs at this and then asks if I speak Hangul well. I tell him I do not and apologize again. He looks concerned. I get some short glasses from the cupboard and set them on the table before lowering myself down to the ground.

"Beer? Mak-chu? Crisp?"

He is smiling when he asks. It is not a question. I grab two big bottles of Hite from the fridge and a bag of half-eaten, orange chips before sitting down across the table from him. Heat radiates up from the floors. There are no pictures hanging on my walls; no photos of my family adorned by frames. He sits cross-legged, his foggy eyes drinking in his surroundings from behind the dirty, smudged lenses of his bifocals.

When I moved into this house my boss, Jon, had told me that he would move here after he won the lottery. I was unfamiliar with any Korean lottery and could not tell if he was fucking with me or not. Most South Koreans, especially the older ones, in my experience, do not care for sarcasm. My boss had spent some years in the United States though. I don't trust him too much. A man obsessed with his own physical fitness, he likes to remind me that my apartment is across the street from a gym, his register for sarcasm shared with thinly veiled insults. I get stuck teaching his son twice a week and the kid is a budding creep. He glares up at me from his phone, on which he watches women exercising, while I ask him questions about grammar homework that

he never does. It's painful. The kid doesn't have a chance. His father makes the same jokes some white men make in the South, usually the ones told only after first looking around. He shames his employees—mostly women—when they don't drink at company dinners. He has a fake katana on an elaborate stand next to his desk and hundreds of dollars worth of unopened bourbon bottles.

I hope my boss never wins the lottery and I hope he never moves in next to my landlord and his sweet, ancient wife. Since I've lived below them a few months now, she occasionally meets me in the driveway after school. I know she waits on me, looking out the window. On more than one occasion she has given me kimchi and other food, speaking to me as if I understand her language. She is tiny, with a curved back and, though she smiles, she never looks me in the eyes.

"Do you like this?" the landlord asks, motioning towards the television.

"Oh no. I don't know what they're talking about. I don't know what's going on."

"Are you ill? Sick?" He points at a box of pills sitting on my desk next to the television.

"Oh no. Sleeping pills. The roosters wake me up."

I hold my hands together up to my cheeks and cock my head to the side. I wonder if he saw me and my coworker Sean in our attempt to assassinate what we thought was one very loud rooster. We crossed the rickety metal bridge into the neighbor's garden late one night, armed with a frying pan and a blanket. Down the hill from my home, over the rooftops of other houses and across the road, barges pass down the broad Han River, cutting choppy wakes in their passage. A few miles closer to Gwangnaru station, Walker Hill Casino twinkles from its perch overlooking the river. The outskirts of Guri Si are quiet late at night. I fed the old man's dogs some grilled cheese and peanut butter sandwiches to keep them from barking. Sean took practice swings at invisible fowls with the frying pan like he was hitting home runs while I made the sandwiches. We breached the hill leading up to the neighbor's yard, beyond the garden, crawling on our stomachs like two army men crawling through blasted out earth in an old movie. Neither one of us said much of anything when we saw them all strutting around, their oily, black feathers slick in the moonlight.

The roosters were giant and many. Killing machines. Not so distant relatives of dinosaurs. Their prehistoric talons would have rended the flesh from our bones; their beaks would have pecked holes through our soft, thin skin. We retreated to my apartment and crushed up some of my sleeping pills and listened to bootlegs of Elliot Smith until the roosters started up with their screeching and screaming. It was too late to do anything else but drink. We toasted our bloodless defeat. Is the landlord here to talk about that? Had the old man's wife spied us feeding her dogs sandwiches and then watched us prostrated, gazing at the neighbor's roosters? I imagine her ancient, bent body obscured in the curtains, her face severe.

"Roosters wake you up?"

His eyebrows arch like bows ready to shoot arrows into the ceiling. He laughs hard at this as I open the Soju and pour us both a drink in the glasses. I pop open the beer and with both hands pour some on top of the Soju.

I try to explain how I am not used to roosters at three in the morning. He listens carefully and then slaps the table, laughing. I force laughter of my own. He asks me where I am from, lifting his glasses as he rubs the bridge of his nose.

"Kentucky."

"Kentucky Fried Chicken?"

"Kentucky Fried Chicken," I repeat back to him.

"I am from Seoul. My daughter is at Philadelphia. College." He carefully mispronounces *Philadelphia*. "Is Philadelphia good?"

I offer him a cigarette and he shakes his head. I have never been to Philadelphia before.

"Philadelphia is great. Big city. Very nice."

"Seoul is a big city."

"Oh yeah. Much bigger," I say. I get up and grab my *National Geographic* atlas off the bed. I set it out on our table and open it up to a map of the United States. We both look silently at Pennsylvania. He puts his finger on it and says his daughter's name. I point at Kentucky, at Lexington.

"Very small," he says gravely.

"Very."

"Do you have any fruit?"

I tell him that I don't as we hear the other tenant's car pull up. The old man says something under his breath, staring at the light permeating the frosted windows that wrap around my flat. I am not sure if he is angry about fruit at first, but then he begins pointing at the wall I share with the man next door.

"Drunk. Too much drink," the old man says, shaking his head.

He is utterly disgusted. I don't say anything about meeting the other tenant. I just nod my head and pour some more beer into our glasses.

The neighbor had come and knocked on my door a few weeks ago. He was drunk and chatty. His English was fair. He insisted I come back to his side for a party. I grabbed a few beers and headed over. There were a bunch of Korean men eating fruit and drinking vodka. They were watching baseball and smoking incessantly. I sat on the couch in between two beefy guys and began drinking quickly. They all took their shirts off and looked at me. Sujin, my neighbor, motioned for me to take my shirt off. Reluctantly I peeled it off over my head and sat there, hairy and flabby. They looked at me and nodded before they went on drinking and talking about baseball in Hangul. A delivery man showed up with a bunch of chicken. He did not seem to think our partial nudity was strange. I drank as much vodka as the chicken would allow.

"Do you like it ... here?" There are so many wrinkles on his face. Gray hairs protrude from his nostrils and ears.

"Oh yes. It is very nice. Thank you for letting me live here. What is the fence for at the edge of the neighborhood?"

"Why did you come to Seoul?" The old man asks.

I realize he doesn't understand what I have asked. I am speaking too fast or mumbling. He pulls a cordless phone out of the pocket of his house coat and sets it on the table. I don't know what to say. Is there a correct answer for this question?

"To teach," I say. "I'm a teacher."

He nods and then asks how I like teaching. I want to tell him the truth—that I came here because I didn't want to kill myself in front of my mother, that she couldn't take that loss after her husband had killed himself only two years before. That he taught me how to be a man and he

left me a note that simply read, “Thanks for the laughs.” I want to tell the landlord that when I dream of Tom he is always walking past doorways, only looking in as he passes, and that he never speaks. Does anyone ever really speak in dreams? I want the old man to hear how my mother cried that night after her husband shot himself in that park. I want him to remember, like I do, what it sounded like in that seedy Nashville hotel room as she wept because she was a widow and she was going to have to tell my little sister the next day—and I just sat there drinking in the dark and listening to her sobbing.

I want to say that I can’t use drugs anymore, because when I did I would just break down. That people had gotten sick of my shit back home. That my girlfriend had left me because she couldn’t deal with it anymore. That I had put on weight. That I was blacking out regularly and having a harder time remembering things when—on the infrequent occasion—I was sober. I would tell him that when I was in Oregon, before I left for Korea, I was drinking a twelve pack every night, and that was after the bar. In those days I sat up late and Googled disaster scenes and listened to the pieces of my heart rattle and jingle from inside my chest, like a box of light bulbs would sound after having been dropped off a roof. I get up and turn the television off. I don’t want to get upset in front of this stranger in my flat.

“The children work very hard,” I say.

He picks up the phone and carefully dials a number. I sit quietly, confused. He nods and smiles, holding the phone up to his ear. He begins speaking into the phone in Hangul before thrusting it toward me. I take it and say hello.

The sleepy voice on the other line says hello back. “I’m Mr. Choi’s daughter. In Philadelphia. He wants to know why you came all this way to teach Korean children when you could have just taught children in the States.”

Her English is impeccable. She sounds annoyed and tired.

“Wow. What time is it there?”

“Bedtime.”

“I don’t know. I just came here. I wanted to travel, I guess. Hey, look, I’m sorry he woke you up.”

“Has he been drinking?”

“Well, a little. He’s not drunk or anything.”

“He used to be the police chief, you know.”

“No kidding?”

“Yeah. He retired a while back. Now he just gardens.”

“Why are you in Philly?”

“Oh, I’m going to Temple now, but I’m getting ready to drop out. I’m going to become a nun.”

“Oh. Wow. Your dad must be very proud.” Is proud the right word?

Her voice changes. Becomes abrupt. “He doesn’t know yet. Will you give him the phone back?”

I hand the old man the cordless phone. He speaks quickly before handing me back the phone.

“He wants to know if you like Seoul better than your home. I know this is a stupid question.” She sounds annoyed.

I give her the safe answer she expects and hand him back the phone. He nods and laughs before handing me back the phone.

“Do you like the food there?”

I wonder what she looks like—if she’s sitting up in bed, or if she’s waking up on the couch. I imagine her shoulders in the green luminescent gloss of the bedside clock. I don’t hear anyone else so I imagine she is alone like me. I imagine she sleeps naked in a small bed underneath a crucifix. The room is Spartan in its décor but not like mine. The landlord’s daughter has pictures of her family and a picture of Christ—one of the kind where he has honey-colored, silky hair and soft blue eyes and he’s wearing clean robes. Her phone sits on top of a bible on her bedside table.

“The food is fantastic. I love it.”

She doesn’t say anything for a moment. “He asks that you keep your beer bottles separate from the rest of your garbage.”

“Oh, totally. No problem.”

“So why *did* you move there?”

I want to tell her the truth, but I don’t want to be so angry anymore. Or maybe I don’t want to hold it all in under this thin, thin skin.

“Maybe the same reason you want to be a nun,” I tell her.

Eva Rodrigues

records

in the records, we will be noticed
for our peculiar occupations:
you, a songwriter-ecologist and me,
a poet-ethologist. they will observe
our strange almost-sameness,
these records kept only in numbers &
checkmarks, every data point slightly off.
in anthropology classes, they will
laugh when they find my research,
funny how anyone thought they knew anything
back then. i will be introduced like
jean-baptiste lamarck, which is to say
briefly and only to prove i am wrong.
in writing courses—mandatory
for every biology student—
they will liken you to rachel carson.
they will wonder why they didn't listen
to either of you sooner.
as an anecdote, the teachers
who have done extra research will point out
that we knew each other briefly.
we have both left enough writing
that they might be able to say that we
influenced each other, even,
studied at the same small college
when i was sixteen and you were eighteen
but in the records, we will be noticed

Paula Persoleo

Apricots

It was the first sip of tea
that took me back thirty years
to that double-wide by the ocean,
to my grandmother before she died
but after the stroke that made her fall
up the stairs, to unceasing card games
because we cheated or didn't understand
the rules, to stolen jars of apricot baby food
even though there were no babies then.
A forgotten summer without sadness.

Indulgent apricot tea, tasted after
the bills were barely paid
and cold air slipped
through the windowsills.
I put down my pen, picked up
a crayon, and doodled, colored, drew.

Matthew Woodman

Still Life

after Rufino Tamayo's *Naturaleza muerta*, 1954

A body can survive
on exclusive a diet
of watermelons for
six weeks won't you
have a seat we have
as well wine and
polyangular rotund
peaches and twelve
slices of watermelon
one for hour each
month a toast to blue
nights and days red
I'll drink under the
you table rind and
then emerge smiling
my teeth a semicircle
subsequently f(r)ugal a
cross section craving
for what a sweet end

Three Women

after Rufino Tamayo's *Tres mujeres*, 1966

My heart laps
 red pools
that swell in the spring
and contract in late summer

depositing calcium rings
along the granite bedrock
swimming holes

into terminal sink basins

my eyes fly
 a black sky
that closes the blinds
just before dawn
to collect and process
storms
 it cannot roll
but must stare straight
to weather mostly calm

my hands bear a brood
of chimerical bastards

tagging
 nothing's
enough

antelope horns nailed
to a jackrabbit's head

beaver pelt stapled
to a dried trout's back

Children Playing with Fire

after Rufino Tamayo's *Niños jugando*, 1947

At ten I would stuff dried grass
down gopher holes and set them
alight to watch the ground exhale
the field

at nineteen I worked
the district to plug burrows
with smoke bombs
to preserve lawns

I had spent
the morning painting steel awnings
and hadn't cleaned sufficiently
the oil from my hands

when I lit
the fuse I also aflame set fingers
sudden summer torches

some
would call this karma

I haven't seen a gopher in years
all at forty-two are ants I drown
in water boiled from the tap

John Belk

October Pick-up

We watched Tim take
a line-shot to the temple
and crumple—just a sick crack
and collapse like empty
burlap.

Some wanted to stay—
say:

“Tim. *Tim.*”

But we didn’t.

The taut air
blew us everywhere,
drying our shooter-sized eyes
so we couldn’t cry—
it was November when Tim
finally died.

I go back sometimes
and hit baseballs into the
tall-grass—
they waterlog and bloat
until picked up or rolled aside.

Joni Renee

In Blue Velvet, Consumed

On some level, everyone hopes they'll live their whole life without finding a dead body. On some level, we'd like to be on motorcycles in June, riding to the wedding of our favorite childhood friend. Am I not the will of the executor? Ask instead why I've been out to the storage unit to put my hands on what we own.

I'm sure I see you on ships: a little book in the hand, a box with a locket, tiny vials inside, sweet oils to dress my curls. To be sure of a thing, you have to believe in the entirety of It (the moment you stop trusting math, all numbers lose their brilliance). Perhaps you've seen the Gorge or the American Dream burning. Our valley fields are covered with antiques, scattered copper pans and window adornments where cows should walk but no longer do. If I swipe over you, will I stop believing in It?

Brendan Walsh

*poem about puddles while standing outside in
a tropical storm*

about gray-water puddles
widening w/ each rain
about puddles as ocean spittle,
sea-phlegm, tide-piss
filling the toilet of our city

poem of how I'm stranded beneath
untrimmed canopies
off some street by Las Olas

poem because
this will not be here forever
if forever is my lifetime

poem that the dogs were once wolves
and the dogs will be wolves again
when great storms rust all the civilized chains

the lawns, seagrass again
the dirt, sand again
the puddle, oh-oh-ocean again

poem to the landlord:
our flooded bathroom is metaphor
for your bad investment—what's built on water
becomes water and so too the porous bones of city
and bank account

poem a puddle of my own watery body,
all that daily falls out of me

poem:
the liquid of us
continues past
what holds it

Glen Armstrong

Without Interruption

He continues without interruption.
Through empty streets and parallel.
Investigations.
Someone being interviewed.
On the radio says *we are a nation*.
Of law and he laughs.
So hard that he almost swerves.
Into what would be oncoming.
Traffic if the streets.
Were not empty.

I spoke to him at length.
Twice.
And I suppose each conversation.
Was a type of interruption.
A big parade of Canada.
Geese crossed the street.
In front of my car.
I started daydreaming.
About movie stars who died.
Young and unhappy.

Matt Hawkins

Eight Seconds

The oxygen masks eject. Everyone starts screaming. I put my headphones in. The plane starts pitching up and down in the air. I am in the middle seat of the middle aisle, in the back of the plane. The woman to my left puts my mask on for me. She does it like the all the instructional videos tell you to. She removes her mask and the suctioned edges stick to her Botoxed lips for a millisecond.

“We just have to ride this out,” she says, before sealing the mask back around her mouth.

Before take-off the same woman wouldn’t stop talking to me. Her hair was bleached and long, so it kept hitting me every time she turned. She used this as an excuse to apologize and start a conversation. She told me her name was Tanya, or Tammy, or something like that. I told her that my name was Grace even though it’s not. I didn’t want her to know. I like to role-play on planes. I like to become everyone that I could never be on the ground. She told me that I looked like a Grace. She told me that she liked how thin I was. She said that she used to be thin like me. She picked up a strand of my brunette hair and said:

“You know, life’s better as a blonde,” as she combed her fingers through it.

She was covered in green and brown camo. I was not about to take fashion advice from someone wearing camo. She told me she had just gotten back to the States from an exotic hunting trip in rural South Africa. She showed me a picture on her iPhone of her mounting a hippopotamus carcass. Its tongue was sticking out of its mouth and blood pooled around its stomach. The woman was smiling while she held her small face next to its massive face for the photo.

I thought about my dog that died when I was in the first grade. It fell through the cover on the pool in my backyard in winter. We thought it had run away but we found its body, still and pruned against the tile on the bottom the next May. My mom never let me get another one.

I thought about the cat I dissected in AP Anatomy my senior year of high school. We had to skin its face. I told my teacher that I didn’t want to skin its face. He told me it was imperative that I learn how to skin an animal. He said that you never know what situations you could get into. He said the skill might come in handy. I have yet to skin another animal.

“It was thirty-three thousand pounds,” the woman next to me said. “It was pregnant with a little baby hippo. It cost me eight thousand dollars to have them fly it back. Its carcass is in the bottom of the plane. I’m going to get it stuffed when I get back to the U.P.”

The woman took out a white container of Chick-fil-A chicken nuggets from her Louis Vuitton purse. There were blotted grease stains around the whole box. She held up the bag

displaying a black and white cow holding up the sign saying “Eat Mor Chicken.”

“This is why I love the Atlanta Airport—so many Chick-fil-A’s.”

She put each nugget in her mouth one by one and shredded each fiber with her back molars. I could hear the chicken dropping down her throat. I thought about every Thanksgiving dinner I ever had. I thought about the first time I did a cannonball into the city pool. I told the woman that I was a vegetarian, just to spite her. I’m not a vegetarian. She asked me why I’m flying and I told her that I was heading home, back to Detroit, for spring break.

“What do you study?” she asked.

“I’m in veterinary school,” I said.

I’m an English major, but I don’t like to tell people this. People always judge me for it. They ask me what I’m going to do with my life. They say this in a demeaning tone, like they are better than me, like they are talking to a child, like they know why I fly economy. I always tell them that I don’t know what I’m going to do with the rest of my life. I’m not interested in the remainder of my life. I guess I’m just interested in the right now.

“My ex-husband works on Wall Street,” she blurted, like she had been waiting for the opportunity to say it. “I didn’t like that lifestyle.” She adjusted the woven safari hat on her head.

“Right after we got married in the ’90s I bought a dog. A small one. A Yorkie named Rudy.” She showed me a picture of a polaroid and the dog looked exactly like Chewbacca.

The man to my right turned up the volume on his iPhone to overpower the woman’s voice. He was listening to Kanye. Yeezus. I have a theory that people only listen to Kanye to pretend that they are Kanye. I saw him text his mom that he loved her before takeoff and that he’d call her before we landed. I saw him swallow three Ativan after the flight attendants demonstrated how to properly buckle the seatbelt. I thought about every pill that I have ever taken. I thought about asking to buy one off of him, but I didn’t have any cash on me. His arms still shook.

The plane warmed up. The wings twitched. I suspect that the pilots took a shot, said a prayer, messaged their Tinder matches one last time—just in case. The wheels started turning and we launched into the air. We passed through the layer of clouds, a portal into a different dimension. All the babies were summoned by the movement and started crying in unison. The seatbelt sign turned off. The man next to me kept squeezing a stress ball intensely like he was experiencing labor pains. The flight attendant came by and gave him a plastic cup of red wine. I wanted to tell him that you’re not supposed to drink wine while on opioids, but I think he was well aware of what he was doing.

The woman kept talking.

“My husband liked Rudy more than me. I liked Rudy more than me.”

She washed down the strips of chicken meat left in her mouth with her own plastic cup of wine. She opened her mouth wide whenever she spoke. The red stained her teeth like blood.

“One day I took Rudy to Central Park and just took his collar off. He ran away from me. I didn’t chase him. No one chased him. I don’t know what happened to him.”

The flight attendant came by with a trash bag, but the woman just asked for more wine. Another attendant came over and filled her cup. The man tried to turn up his music but it wouldn’t go any higher.

“I know I should feel bad about Rudy,” the woman said before she took a gulp. “But I don’t.

I just don't." She chugged the rest of the cup. "Honey, when you get to a certain age you just stop caring. It doesn't matter if you're in New York or Africa—it all sucks. All your good and bad deeds, your degrees, your husbands—they don't mean anything."

I believe that everything means something, that every move, every word, every action—is supremely important.

"You know when I shot that hippopotamus I pretended it was my ex. I pretended it was all my exes. I pretended it was everyone. I pretended it was me."

I smiled, because that is what you do when a crazy person talks.

"This place," she pointed a French tip past the aisles out toward the window, "would be better without us. All we do is cause pain."

The seatbelt sign dinged on. The flight attendants returned to their seats. The plane mimicked the hand of the man next me, unsteadily shifting up and down in the turbulence.

I look over at the woman now. The plane is spinning. Her eyes roll into the back of her head. Her mouth falls open, teeth still stained red. Everything is moving around so much that the green and brown of her camo meshes together. Her blonde hair wildly flaps in all of the chaos like an exotic bird.

The guy to my left starts screaming. Unconscious bodies of flight attendants roll around the aisles, like tumbleweeds in the wild west. All of the complimentary drinks from the cart are spritzing around the plane, like wax in a car wash. Something red splatters across my mouth. At first, I think it's blood, but then I taste it and it's just lukewarm tomato juice used for Bloody Marys in first class. The guy grabs my hand and impulsively tells me that he loves me. His hands are big and soft. I imagine that they do important things. He has a silver Rolex watch fastened to his wrist. I can hear it clanking against the arm rest as he strengthens his grip on my hand. I bet he majored in economics. I tell him that I love him too. We start kissing. The plane flips and he throws up in my mouth. I gag and spit it out, then turn back to face him. I think that if there is a right way to die, this would be it.

I remember the first party that I went to in college. I took a million shots of tequila. I didn't know any better. I went back to this boy's dorm room and we started making out. He had a Pink Floyd poster behind the headboard on his bed. The frame squeaked whenever I moved around. And we were moving around a lot, so I started to get sick. He held my hair while I ejected my stomach into his wastebasket. He held me all night. I was so drunk that I told him that I loved him. I basically died in his bed. In the morning we both pretended like I didn't say I love you, and that I didn't throw up.

The plane nose dives toward the earth and starts spiraling. The man grabs my hand tighter. I squeeze back.

I remember the first time I had sex. It was the weekend before senior prom. My parents were at the casino. Mark Masters, captain of the high school rugby team, gave me rug burn on my back. He gave me hickeys all over my neck. We did it on my parent's bed. I bled everywhere and he finished in, like, eight seconds. I had to use so much foundation and concealer to cover my

neck. He stood me up the next weekend.

I look into the eyes of the guy holding my hand. They are light brown, like the hamster I had when I was young, before it got lost forever. His pupils are dilated. He is so scared. He screams. I scream because he screamed. I ask him to bite my neck. He bites my neck, viciously, just like Mark Masters did. The rest of the passengers are gradually losing consciousness from all of the spinning. I feel like he and I are the only two people on the plane. I feel like we are the only two people in the world. I tell the man that I love him again. He doesn't say anything back. I look over to his eyes and they've rolled back into his head. They just look like white little balls, like the hard-boiled eggs my grandma used to eat, before she died. I wonder what the man is seeing inside his head. I wonder if he sees his hamster or his grandma? I wonder if he thought about his virginity? I look over to the woman. Her mouth is agape and her limbs are flailing while the plane continues to spin. I wonder if she's thinking about her ex-husband? I think about the hippopotamus's body in the bottom of the plane. I wonder what it thought about before it died. I wonder what hippopotamuses think about when they're alive.

When I was eight, my third-grade classroom watched planes hit the Twin Towers. I screamed as we watched people jump from the windows. I asked my teacher, Ms. Hector, if it was painful when they died. She told me that there is no good way to die. She told me that everything was painful. I asked her if they had families and people who loved them. She said everyone has people who love them. She said that's why death is so painful.

I can imagine my mom waiting in the airport parking lot. She pays way too much in order to park in the long-term parking lot, just because it's the closest to the baggage claim area. I can see her just waiting, and getting anxious, and looking at her watch, and looking at her phone. I forgot to text her before we took off because that lady next to me wouldn't stop talking. I forgot to tell her that I love her.

I look to the guy next to me, and I tell him that I love him, again. The plane breaks into a million pieces. Everything's on fire. All of the metal is screaming. I feel like I'm in slow motion, everything is heavy. It's like I'm on a rollercoaster, waiting for the drop. It's like I'm underwater, sinking to the bottom. First class, business, and economy spill out into the atmosphere equally, like salt crystals into a bowl of soup. The man lets go of my hand, the wind rips him in another direction. The woman goes in a different direction too. I close my eyes and I try to think about anything else than what's actually happening. I think about nothing. I think about everything. I remember everything—everything that matters, I guess. If you don't think about it before you die then I guess it didn't really matter. I don't want to die in a panic, so I remain calm. I count to eight until it's over.

Andy Mee

Landing

Forgotten prosthetics and clipboard-scribbled notes sat on scuff-mahoganyed floors and the ables and the non-ables sat as equals. Nurses, doctors and patients watched the Eagle.

Two men in white were to set down on the dusty surface. An Eagle, almost landed.

Chap-bitten lips of St. Bart pessimists mouthed forgotten words, words their sugarlipped carers had been trying to feed them on plastic spoons for months. Abandoned words were suddenly brim-filled by adventures in space. *Maybe miracle-doubters need Eagles and Apollos to jump-start personal moonflights?* Matron Lombardy considered, turning her shining eyes to the fluttering ward television.

Eldrick Yeomans sat the way he always had as a trend-setting teenager: chair turned the “other” way around, arms folded across a wasted back support. He was hugging the life out of it, his chapped fingernails burying themselves in the red plastic, garden spades in winter soil. He watched these men. The “uncouthness” of spun-chair sitting had always annoyed his mother. Breaking briefly from the live feed on the ward’s small portable, Eldrick looked down and briefly saw his fourteen-year-old sneakered feet on the floor below him. He blinked. The shoes had run off as quickly as they’d appeared. Only stark-ugly stumps remained. Stumps. And raw, purple sores. Blisters.

The feed buzzed with activity again, serious radioed tones, and Eldrick was drawn from stumps back to the popular television. Eldrick waited for men in white to set working feet on what knowing voices were calling, “the lunar surface.” He waited. He watched. An airlocked white door would soon open, they said. He watched its blankness in nervous anticipation, as he had the slapdash-glossed ceilings in the ward. That blank canvas had always repainted old horrors.

The white feed slowly painted itself a bottle-green. It refused to abate when he closed his eyes. He wondered how much of himself he’d left there, in the jungle he still couldn’t escape.

There was once a time when he had thought, like them, that anything was possible, but he knew the dangers that mindset brought. Two men behind a white door might open a door to seas of tranquility. He thought that he could drown in seas like that.

TV suits, live in Houston, began preparing for “the descent.” The word had been part of army lexicon. He’d known those terms, verbatim, in that life before. He had once made his own “descent.” Kennedy’s “...not because it is easy...” played on repeat, entwined with Fats Domino melodies as a background score. That optimism had soon been pickpocketed by five-fingered elephant grass, and those hidden behind it.

Two resting plastic legs waited obediently by his side as Eldrick came back to the men in the Eagle. Mission Control’s crackling transmission, the same kind of bursting radio-voice he’d become so familiar with in that jungle, talked of “touch-down protocols,” whatever that was. The

radio crackle suddenly brought flashes of orange flame from the past, muffled explosions and closing-night applause of another jutting fusillade.

Two men behind the door, and impatient waiting, sent Eldrick to wander once more in his jungle. Eldrick found himself walking through that impossible maze of bowing elephant grass. The rain had come down in torrents, kamikaze drops the size of marbles exploding on waxy leaves. Hunchbacked grass bowed lower, a sarcastic mock-greeting. *You shouldn't have come.* Eldrick prayed the door would bring a way out, an escape route. A path through the grass he'd never escaped.

A murmur amongst the other amputees briefly hosed away orange flames and brought black and white reality back. They'd "landed long," apparently. They'd landed far west of their target. Maybe that's why they were waiting.

Eldrick knew all about being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Diane Vickery watched. Unexpected alarms caused her heart to flutter. Live-feed concerns tugged wide eyes wider still—unknowing eyes questioned unknowing eyes, as Diane turned to Eldrick—before the newscaster set minds and eyes at rest. The alarms were protocol alarms. Good alarms.

Like Eldrick, Diane Vickery was used to alarms. Not good ones. She never knew such things existed. Her time in the high-dependency ward had come with all tones of ringing bells. None had been good. She had cause to fear alarms. They had always been accompanied by lines of the world blurring and empty lungs. But these were pioneers of new-science, heroes. They wouldn't panic like she had.

An arithmetic-faced NASA engineer told the TV reporter that it was "safe to continue the descent." Panic over. She wasn't sure she could take failure. This felt like her last chance.

Diane would have lifted her arms to cover her bulging eyes, if her arms had still been there. Instead, she sat and watched through half-scrunched eyes, re-widening momentarily with relief as the alarms ceased. Relief usually came in a syringe. This was different. Her eyes dropped from the Eagle, and that door, to the coffee table. A rest from the drama.

Well-thumbed magazines lay on the heavy-buffed varnished oak. Such timeless collections waited in wards across the country. Long-term patients. In some kind of mirthful spite, the pouting, able-bodied cover models seemed to scoff at her. Diane eyed them mistrustfully. They were a reminder of real-world failures. She felt scorn in their photoshoot eyes and turned away from their stares. The locked secrets inside each magazine made her fresh-bite her already chewed bottom lip. Like so many other things, dexterity had gone for good. Page turning had gone forever. At first, she'd considered asking them to get rid of the magazines and the bitchy cover girls, but she'd learned to accept that she couldn't just rid the world of ugly stares.

She still remembered the first article her sister had read to her. It had replaced the awkward it'll-be-okay chatter and the uncomfortable fishing for anything else. It was an obituary piece. Boris Karloff had died that February and Beryl had read her the memorandum article. She hadn't taken much notice at the time—she'd had other problems—but now, as she watched adventures in space, Karloff came back into her mind. Perhaps there was something about the scientific equipment in Mission Control and the Eagle that made her think of Karloff's monster. He'd been breaking scientific boundaries too she supposed, that Dr. Frankenstein.

These days she had more sympathy for the dead.

She remembered, vividly now, Karloff's waking monster. She thought how closely she must have resembled him after the trampling. Scars and stitches. Stitches and scars. They had much in common.

As she watched the Eagle and waited for the spacemen, she remembered again the final moments of her old life. She felt fingers, which were no longer there, curl.

The old world soon leaked into St. Bart's as all those old faces, full of anger and dissent, were reawoken into life like Shelley's monster. Space's televised blackboard soon became less black. And yet, more black. Like the grainy feed on the television, black and white had never seemed so far apart. White faces and black faces from that life-changing afternoon reprised their roles once more, gritting teeth in mindless, volatile anger. Black and white. That had been her problem.

Like the others, Diane had seen taking possession of the Allen Building as symbolic. She'd been determined to lend her voice to the principles of nonviolent protest. She was a pacifist and she was as American as they were.

Perhaps their peaceful protest would, finally, spark action regarding the ridiculous limit on enrollment numbers? Finally. Perhaps it would highlight the meagre financial support? Perhaps it would make a difference? She had once had so much hope.

She'd got in because of her grades. They couldn't say no, she supposed. But she'd been flat broke. Maybe she'd lived in a fairytale world back then. Maybe she'd read too many happy-ever-after tales. But idealism wasn't about right and wrong. She knew that now. Sometimes good people lost.

She could still see the sharp-nosed university dean, sent out to be the voice of reason. He'd politely asked them to leave. Diane remembered thinking their point had been made. It was time to pack up and go. But others had convinced her to stay awhile.

Maybe that's what had caused it? Diane wondered. Didn't violence always follow reason? Maybe one was hid behind the other.

Their exit had finally come—as she hoped Armstrong's and Aldrin's soon would—with a buzz of hope. Hope for progress. Hope for equality. They had also come out of a white door. Like the Eagle's million-eyed door, there had been many eyes on that door, waiting for their exit. But these had been angry eyes, not the eyes of wonder that watched this Eagle.

Then things took a bad turn.

Diane remembered the police lines trying to usher her away to safety in the seconds before the rolling white-wave stampede came. In turning, she had twisted her ankle and fallen, just as the first of the scuffles had broken between clashing crowds. Ying versus yang.

She couldn't remember the trampling.

She'd finally reawoken to the white-plaster ceiling in St. Bart's. She remembered the pain in her broken shoulders where the morphine tap had blocked. It was like raw oven-burns. Perhaps that was what had woken her up from the coma.

The dull throbbing in her head when she'd woken had been like death drums from an operatic danse-macabre. Then things got worse. The birth of complete horror came when she tried to raise her hands to cradle her drumming head. And her hands weren't there to lift.

Diane now had her toes crossed—a logical substitute—that the exit from the Eagle would

find only hope, in the way she had hoped her own exit would. She watched and prayed. This time they were all on the same team, she hoped.

The lone abstainer on the other side of the room heard the ripple of excited hum as the amputees waited for two men in white to move closer toward the impossible. Hope was too much for Paulie.

Everyone else in St. Bart's watched the Eagle. They waited for that single foot to plant in moondust. Paulie couldn't sit with the group. Instead, he gripped the parallel bars in front of him that he'd grown to hate, ignoring the buzz of murmur.

The crash had shattered both his legs below the knee. He hadn't seen the damn truck coming. How the hell had that happened? The error cost Paulie his legs.

Like the other amputees, now glued to the live feed, he too had once waited anxiously for a door to open. But the door on his crumpled white sedan had been jarred shut. They'd had to cut it off. They cut it off and then cut him out. Most of him. Some had to be left behind in twisted metal.

Sweat tributaries rolling down both cheeks, and with Edvard Munch's famed *Scream* replicated in his muted agony, Paulie gripped the wooden parallel bars in front of him. He dug his chewed nails and blistered fingers into the hard yew and began again.

The sickening artificial legs were still unwilling to obey his gritted-toothed commands, like disobedient, grinning children. His raw thigh-sores burned, sending spasms of electric agony coursing through what was left of his upper legs. The shuddering, part plastic, part steel new lower legs, the only ones in St. Bart's not temporarily discarded, held his weight. Just. He could feel the blistering on his tied skin scream, *Let go! Let go! Let go!* But he refused to get back into that damned wooden wheelchair. He hated the sight of it.

He tried for the thousandth time to shift his weight onto one leg and take his first unsupported step since stepping into that damned car. The well-meaning hands of the nurses were otherwise engaged. He was glad of that. It was just him and the bars, him and the mat, him and the damned prosthetic legs.

Holding his weight on one trembling leg had led to endless crumpled and failed attempts. He gritted his teeth. Murmurs somewhere in another universe suggested a door had opened. They were on their way, he guessed.

Arms spasming uncontrollably as they helped hold his weight on one thigh, sweat dripping onto the old blue mats below, a heavy groan escaped from his tight, grimaced mouth. Coos of wonder from the other side of the ward were buried beneath the swell of a ringing that suddenly pulsed through his ears.

Paulie let the burning and ringing rise to full war-dance fury but he still pulled. He ground his teeth together, below saliva-dripping broken lips, and they scraped, like fingernails on a chalkboard, against each other.

Holding his balance on the teetering left prosthetic, he stared downwards to the sea of blurred blue mats through bulging, kaleidoscopic tears. Paulie couldn't suppress the groaned cry of white-hot agony that one final push demanded. His vision was starved of oxygen and peripheries as the world became thin and dark blue.

Exhausted, but with applause and cheers from far away bringing the world swimming back,

Paulie saw his new foot planted on the plastic mat in front of him. Sweat and tears rolled down his pounding face and puddled on the mat.

On the other side of the room, Neil Armstrong had finally set his own foot down on the dusty surface of the Moon to cries of disbelief and wonder.

“One small step...a giant leap...” he heard them say.

Paulie let the tears come.

Bios

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