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# The Fire in the Firefly: The Unspoken (Speaks)

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THE FIRE IN THE FIREFLY: THE UNSPOKEN (SPEAKS)

By

Ania Sonora Payne

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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May 2016

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

The Fire in the Firefly: The Unspoken (Speaks)

This thesis by Ania Sonora Payne is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE FIRE IN THE FIREFLY: THE UNSPOKEN (SPEAKS)

By

Ania Sonora Payne

This collection of nonfiction essays explores life and the way that we, as animals—humans, mammals, insects—engage the world that we all share together, both from a personal perspective and from a distant, 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective. Some of these essays dabble in memoir, wherein I closely examine the intricacies of the relationships between my family members, neighbors, and friends. Other essays are driven by research and my relentless curiosity about the world around me—what goes on in the mind of the earthworm or chigger, the science of fear and the inevitability of death that surrounds us all. This collective narrative seeks to illuminate the interconnectedness of everyone by considering even the narrative of most miniscule organism.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I want to thank my mother, Diane Payne, for introducing me to the illuminating, frustrating, yet rewarding world of creative writing at such a young age and for continuing to help me edit my essays, even when I send them to her on the night that they’re due for workshop submission. I want to thank my father, Roby Rajan, for teaching me to think critically about the world, and to always question everything.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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## Introduction

Everything has a narrative. The radiator in the corner of the living room can tell you about the Pennsylvania factory that it was assembled in, the hands that gathered around to screw its nuts and bolts together, and the lives of the people behind those hands, if you are willing to allow yourself to fall down a research rabbit hole. The potted succulent in the windowsill can inform you about the neighbors who walk down the driveway, day in and day out, and how these neighbors' expressions change depending on what type of afternoon they've had at work—if you're able to spend a day neglecting your human life and sitting with the succulent, experiencing the deliberate stillness of plant life.

As Phillip Vannini, ethnographer, writes,

Objects frequently structure the very way narratives unfold. Objects stimulate narratives, or they afford us access into them...objects acquire cultural meaning and power in the context of stories or narratives that locate, value, and render them invisible and important. Without such narrative storylines—be they accounts spoken by individuals or accounts that hold more general sway within a

population such as discourse—an object is rendered virtually invisible within a culture (60).

After finishing this collection of essays, I hope that my readers develop an appreciation for the narratives of the seemingly voiceless—whether that be the plant in the windowsill, the orange that sits rotting atop the kitchen counter, the firefly or tick that crawls in the backyard, or the often overlooked narratives of underrepresented groups of people.

As a woman who is half Asian-Indian, half White, I use about one-fourth of the essays in this collection as a means to explore my cultural identity. Because my skin is an ambiguous light-tan color, I can pass for almost any racial group. When I am near Mexico, strangers think that I am Latina. In Rome, I am Italian. In Madrid, a Spaniard. In certain areas of the American South, I am part African-American. “Brownish,” “The View From Above,” “Through The Banana Trees,” “Like Kittens In A Grocery Store,” and “The Rapture” all touch on what it means to be a racially “mixed” woman, both at home in the United States, and when I visit my father’s family in South India. “Brownish” explores this theme most extensively—following my experiences as a young child living on the border of Mexico all the way to my adult life in the YMCA sauna of Marquette, Michigan.

It is human nature to be curious and to make assumptions about others. Children are loud about their assumptions and would bluntly ask me

“Are you white or black?” when I was growing up in Southeast Arkansas. Adults in the sauna approach the topic somewhat more subtly, asking the never-ending question of “Where are you from?” “No, I mean *where*, like what country? No, what I’m saying is what’s your ethnic background?” after I respond that I’m from Arkansas. Very rarely are these questions asked out of maliciousness. Most often, these questions are asked because strangers have a genuine curiosity, especially if I am in a rural part of the United States, where seeing people who are not white-or-black is about as rare as sighting a hippopotamus in a Wal-Mart.

I want to give these strangers the benefit of the doubt when I say that I do not think they are aware of how uncomfortable it makes a person when asked, in front of a group of people that he or she does not know, to define his or herself based solely on his or her racial background. If such an isolating experience has not happened to them personally, it may be difficult for the questioner to understand exactly how awkward it is to be placed in such a position. I use one-fourth of the essays in my collection to give voice to myself and others who are unable to articulate the anger or isolation that we feel when called, in front of a group of strangers, to define our identity by explaining our racial cocktail to a group of people who respond by saying things such as “Mixed babies are the prettiest babies” or “Mixed people are always smarter, right?”

My essays not only dabble in the isolation of exclusion, but also aim to show the interconnectedness of everything that lives on this planet—from the smallest tick that crawls beneath the skin and infects the narrator with a lifetime of red-meat allergies, to the ever-present possibility of death that surrounds our everyday lives, whether it be from an illness that we are aware of or from the unpredictability of a falling stone or car crash. In essays such as “Behind Closed Beaks,” “Gateway Bugs,” “On Luminescence,” and “Alpha Gals” where I am giving voice to birds, worms, fireflies, and ticks, I look to authors such as Lydia Davis, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, and Lia Purpura. In the lyric essay “The Soils I Have Eaten,” Nezhukumatathil tells the narratives of all of the states that she’s lived in by characterizing the specific state soils of each area. She writes, “Harney sounds like a friend who will help you in a pinch: silty, loamy, good enough to feed your family, mine too. In Kansas, we sit around the table and break bread with Harney soil. Good guy, that Harney.” Nezhukumatathil was the inspiration for “Behind Closed Beaks,” where I emulate her imaginative style and create a memoir of my experiences in the states that I’ve lived in by researching and allotting very specific characteristic lives to the state birds of Arizona, Michigan, and Arkansas.

The Rose Metal Press *Field Guide to Prose Poetry* greatly influenced many of the essays in this collection. Before taking Jennifer Howard’s course in Flash Nonfiction and becoming introduced to this text, I had only ever

written long form essays. I'd written Flash Fiction before, but had never tried my hand at a prose poem, or a piece of flash creative nonfiction. Immediately, I loved the experimentation with form and depth of language that opened up once I started to draft my own prose poems. As Bob Hicok writes in the *Field Guide to Prose Poetry*,

Once upon a time there was a little bit of plot and a lotta bit of letting go of plot. There was putting some pretty in, some sweet tweet, and 'idn't it swell too when there's fetching kvetching and the weird's plopped in a box to play with trees and wires and bang the conundrum...I've noticed how the long lines run like hair down the back to poetry or as roads to anywhere I'd like to go (1).

The revelation of the prose poem allowed me to reinvent my nonfiction writing, especially in essays like "Porcelain," "Tincture," and "Burnt Petunais," which are especially poetic with their language. These three flash essays required many revisions, as my goal for each of these pieces was to tell the stories primarily through language and emotion-evoking images, rather than through scene and character interactions. I limited myself to one page. I placed constraints on these essays, constraints that I never placed upon myself when writing seven or fifteen page essays. Each very short, specific image had to do more than just illustrate. Each paragraph break was intentional. Any line of dialogue was concise and meaningful. And through the constraints and the various revisions, these three essays achieved my

goal of creating scenes that are told primarily through poetic language—pieces that are more ambiguous than many of my other long form essays, pieces wherein the “meaning” or takeaway is left to be determined by the reader.

I look to Ander Monson when I am considering the form and structure of my essays. As he writes in an interview with *Poets & Writers*,

Part of the pleasure of [structural] performance is trying to figure out what the essay is going to be able to do with its subjects, those suspended balls in mid-arc, whether the essay is going to fall apart, explode, or somehow cohere unexpectedly and be caught—stick the landing...So the essays are maybe witnessing and commenting on their own explosion and reformation. In a couple cases, they don't come back—they just kind of coast out, like in space, unaffected by gravity... That's what I like most about form, when it works, when it has an emotional effect in the piece and not just an intellectual one.

In “On Luminescence,” I explore the family dynamics and relationship between a friend’s mother and father by closely examining the firefly—its mating patterns, how it nests and creates a home, and the chemical makeup of the firefly. I braid these two seemingly unrelated segments together, so that the experience of reading the essay might be slightly jarring—embedding the reader into the life of a firefly in one paragraph, then

immediately switching to the life of my friend's parents in the next, and back and forth throughout the essay so that, hopefully, by the end of the piece the reader associates married parents with fireflies, and therefore uses each separate organism as a means to further illuminate and understand each separate entity. My hope is that readers don't see the braiding of these two narratives as arbitrary, but, as Monson mentions, are able to find both an emotional and intellectual meaning to the intersection of these lives.

I look to Maggie Nelson when I am writing about close, personal relationships. Maggie Nelson's curiosity-driven prose encourages me to always keep questioning my research, to be continuously asking *why* and *is there more that I can be learning about this topic?* Nelson's essay collection, *The Art of Cruelty*, compelled me to consider my tick-bite induced beef allergy from both the viewpoint of the tick and the viewpoint of the human. She drove me to obsess over the specificities of this disease in my essay titled "Alpha Gals," and to not stop researching, even once I understood the science behind the allergy and why it occurs; even once I'd found the Facebook page for the people who have this allergy, and discovered the names of the babies and dates of anniversaries of the people who are members of this Facebook page. Writers like Maggie Nelson inspire me to spend a day in the library, researching everything down to the very minute details of my topics and illuminating these seemingly minute details into something grand on the page.

Aside from life and the complicated ways in which humans and nonhumans interact with each other in our daily lives, the theme of death is also quite present in my collection. In fact, this series of essays opens with an essay titled “After Death,” a piece about the effect that death has on our lives in various forms—ranging from the death of a caterpillar on your kitchen floor to the death of your dog in the backyard to the death of your neighbors and friends. The collection closes with “Lenses,” a flash essay where I watch a neighbor who lived across the street from me as she pushes a stroller with a baby doll on walks every day. Although death is not brought up as explicitly in “Lenses” as it is in “After Death,” it is nearly impossible to read the piece without considering death—the inanimate stillness of this woman’s “baby,” the reasons why she feels compelled to push a stroller of a doll around, her husband’s refusal to enter her dream world and acknowledge the baby doll as a being.

As John Updike writes,

Not only are selves conditional but they die. Each day, we wake slightly altered, and the person we were yesterday is dead. So why, one could say, be afraid of death, when death comes all the time? It is even possible to dislike our old selves, those disposable ancestors of ours.

I examine death in my essays, not necessarily to appeal to morbidity or to romanticize death, but to study death for what it is—as Updike mentions, a

part of our everyday lives. This does not mean that the thought of dying doesn't terrify me. It does. But writing about death and putting these fears down on the page in various formats—reflecting on people who I know who have died, pets I have had who are now dead, and meditating on the ever-present reminder of death in our everyday lives serves as a way for me to try to become more comfortable with death. I can illuminate the more humorous, grotesque aspects of death, as I do in “Things Fall Down.” I can engage death's quirks and the fears that many people have about dying and especially dying alone, and laying in a home where one's body might not be found until days, weeks, or even months later as I do in “After Death.” I can reflect on the sadness of the many deaths caused by Hurricane Katrina, and the way that I saw this experience via the addition of many new students who were displaced from their homes in Louisiana and thrown into my high school in Arkansas, as I do in “Aftermath.” By writing about death from the perspectives of various animals and people—some who I have met and have close relationships with, others who I have met only via research, I can start to think about death more objectively, more reasonably, or perhaps, as reasonably as one can ever hope to think about death and the sometimes comforting promise of circularity.

My hope is that my thesis serves as a place of interconnectedness, a meeting point for the various and perhaps seemingly unrelated subjects of each of my essays—a grandmother, a dying dog, a tick from the Arkansas

woods, a stranger on a Greek ferry, an earthworm. Without sounding like a cliché, the more I sat down to write, the more I not only learned about myself but also about this world that I seemed to have been ignoring, not actually seeing, somehow walking through life without really noticing my personal experiences with ticks, strangers on ferries, funerals, the cacti in my window, the radiator that heats my apartment. I now wake up at night after hearing a sound outside my window or meeting an old pet in a dream and think: I must write about this.

## After Death

The dead ant in the house is not a troubling thing; its removal demands only a swift kick with the heel of a shoe or the breezy sweep of a dollar-store broom. The caterpillar whose flesh is found rotting beneath your fridge has to be scraped off wooden floors, or, if he finds it before you, the dog's tongue might do the trick. When your tabby kills a sparrow and leaves it at the foot of your bed, the body has to be dealt with immediately or else the rotting bird smell will consume the house until it creeps into your cupboards and spoils the taste of your seven-grain crackers. The mangle-necked sparrow can be tossed out with the trash, or it can be buried if you have enough time to stab your rusty shovel into the tough, clay soil of the backyard.

If your dog sinks his teeth into a chipmunk and then forgets its chewed body beneath a rosebush, the easiest way to take care of the corpse is to get out that rusty shovel and toss the chipmunk over the hedges and into your neighbors' yard. Don't feel too bad about it, since the neighbors often let their basset hounds howl their lengthy laments long into the night.

But when your dog dies, the process becomes more complicated. He was young and he dies suddenly. The vet says it's because he ate daisies, which are poisonous to dogs. He also says *don't you know better than to keep daisies in your backyard?* and he gives you a list of seven hundred common

plants that are toxic to pets. The neighbors help you dig through the clay soil the next day, and they shorten the length of their dogs' leashes for a couple of weeks. Your dog's death demands a period of grieving that stains the knees of your favorite jeans brown after a week of kneeling by his grave.

You haven't known many people who've died; you've been lucky that way. Your Grandpa is the only person who's died in your immediate family, and his death followed many years of heavy smoking. Too often, you see articles about lonely bodies that lay forgotten and undiscovered in empty houses for two, four, ten, even forty-one years, and you wonder how easy it is to forget someone; you wonder how many people you've already forgotten. You think about your high school classmates who died in car crashes before graduation. You feel bad for not thinking about these people very often, for forgetting their names when you're discussing their deaths with friends, for feeling creeped out when you realize that you're still Facebook friends with their online ghosts. In their pictures, they still wear their glasses and their casts. In their pictures, their eyesight is still bad, and their arm's still broken.

Your hometown is sprinkled with people who bear Rest In Peace tattoos of teenagers on their arms, backs, and sides. You wonder how often these tattooed people think of the deceased ones who are inked onto their flesh. Do they remember these kids every time they climb into the shower, every time they get dressed or unbutton their shirts to make love? Or, do

these memorial tattoos start to blend into their bodies like a freckle or a mole, becoming normalized like a photo on a computer desktop?

All the dead people you once knew had normal deaths, normal in the sense that their bodies were found immediately. But, still, you've read too many newspaper articles about forgotten people, people who had no idea that next door neighbor Edna lay deceased on her kitchen floor for a month after a tragic fall, or that Tom's body sat crumpled behind an abandoned grocery store for two weeks after a heroin overdose. You decide that you always want to keep a dog around because you once read an article about how dogs will eat their owners' deceased bodies if they're left on the bed, on the pullout couch, on the area rug in the living room. It's a dog's natural instinct, and you'd be fine with that, since you don't know how else you'd feed your dog if you were dead. You hope that the ants can find a way into the house, too, and you're not sure if any caterpillars are omnivores or not, but if they are, you hope they will slither underneath the doors, and the sparrows and the chipmunks will make nests with the strands of your hair.

## When Fire and Family Don't Mix

My cousin, Kara, married Burt, the man whose mother burnt his sister in her sleep. Nine years before the marriage, Burt's mother, Maureen, poured gasoline around her daughter's white-framed bed, then lit a match and ran out of the house. As a child, Kara had been best friends with Burt's murdered sister, Ashley. Just a few weeks before the homicide, Kara, Ashley, and I had sat beneath air conditioning vents in Kara's pink bedroom, playing "Barbie and Ken go to the beach."

The morning after Maureen lit the match, she called Trudy (my aunt and Kara's mother) to go shopping at *Sears*. They bought straight-legged jeans and polyester cardigans and pantyhose that were 15% off. Over a post-shopping dinner at Applebee's, Maureen told Aunt Trudy she knew mothers weren't supposed to say such things, but she *hated* Ashley. As they were driving home from the restaurant, the cops caught up with Maureen and she was sent to prison. Aunt Trudy testified for Maureen's innocence in court, and to this day, she still insists Ashley's death was an accident.

Nine years later, Kara and Burt got married and moved into Kara's old childhood house because my Uncle Tom, Kara's father, always a sharp realtor, had promised the couple he was offering them *the deal of a lifetime*. Their new home sat across the street from Burt's childhood house, which had

undergone various remodeling projects since the fire, but was still recognizable to Burt.

At their wedding, we took sips of champagne and bites of two-year-old Easter, Christmas, and Valentines chocolate that Aunt Trudy had been picking up from Sam's Club ever since she heard about Kara's engagement. Between chocolate-caked teeth, Kara whispered that she and Burt would *adopt a kid, because they both had the crazy genes in their families*. Uncle Tom whispered *that's the smartest thing she's ever said* and three years later, Kara posted ultrasound and protruding stomach photos to Facebook. When the baby was born, they named it Anora, which they still claim has no relation to my name, Ania Sonora. Aunt Trudy sent baby photos to the imprisoned Maureen, but Burt sent nothing.

They couldn't let baby Anora sleep in their bed because Burt still had night terrors about Trudy and would wake up screaming and thrashing. Instead, they put Anora in a cradle next to a window that overlooked Burt's childhood home, which remains empty. My uncle has tried to sell the house numerous times, setting plates of fresh chocolate chip cookies and pitchers of apple cider on the counters, hanging photos of smiling families on the wall and covering any scorch marks with daffodil wallpaper, but he has never been successful.

After Anora was born, Kara and Burt got rid of all of the matches in their house. Burt stopped smoking and threw out his lighters and in the winters, they open their presents next to the glow of a Netflix Fireplace on a flat-screen TV. Anora stays inside on the fourth of July and blows out the electronic candles on her birthday cake, wondering why her wishes never come true.

## Aftermath

People swept into town in a single wave. They left behind their homes, pets too large for sedans, and great-grandmothers' lamps to be swallowed by Katrina the lush, Katrina the thirsty. In my high school, they arrived as cheerleaders, football and baseball players who were ushered onto teams without tryouts. In the hallways, they were invited to morning services at Southern Baptist Churches, potluck dinners at First Pentecostal Churches, and revivals at Missionary Baptist Churches. Families set extra plates at their dinner tables and tried their hands at shrimp gumbo. They silenced their trivial arguments and spousal spats. Motels offered "Katrina Discounts." Some were even half-price.

My peers and I were enthralled by the Cajun accents of our new classmates. At lunchtime we rolled "podna" and "craka" and "spidah" and "fevah" and "tiah" over our Arkansan tongues, thick with the drawl of the Delta swamps. We tested out their inflections timidly, as if tasting a spicier soup. Our new friends tried on our drawl, struggling with "huntin," "fishin," and "trappin."

With new classmates, the romantic possibilities doubled. No longer did we have to settle for Tyler had who put boogers in girls' hair back in the forth grade, or Thomas, who had already hooked up with almost every girl in the school. Romances blossomed with the excitement of new faces. The

Cajun accent was *sexy*. Movie theater and fast-food drive through romances ignited for a few days, weeks, or hours at a time. Letterman jackets were passed from shoulder to shoulder, stretched out for broader arms, hanging limply around smaller limbs, absorbing the scents of Vera Wang and Ralph Lauren and Britney Spears. Love letters were passed down aisles during history and biology classes. Initials in hearts were etched into desktops, then blackened out with a Sharpie, then scrubbed back into recovery.

Teachers, on the other hand, were grumpy that there was a sudden influx of new students in their classrooms, but no increase in pay. There was a shortage of fetal pigs. We had to dissect them in groups of five.

When they left town a couple months later, teenage hearts were broken, families resumed their normal dinners in front of TVs and folded their tablecloths back into cabinets. Church congregations shrunk. After they left, we forgot to tell the lunch ladies that we wanted “hambahgahs” and bread with “buttah” and “tatah tots.” Hide-a-beds were pushed back into walls and families remembered that they disliked each other. Extra custodial staffs were dropped from their motel jobs and “Katrina Discounts” disappeared from the highway-side boards.

But they left behind their discarded pets. The corpses of tabbies and labs lay along the sides of the highways. Neighbors walked the sidewalks with new dogs at the ends of new leashes. In our living room, Katrina

manifested in the form of a rib-jutting, watery-eyed, deaf tabby cat who curled up in our laps as soon as we brought him home. I named him Ivan, because I thought a strong Russian name would be good for him, but the name was three sizes too big and he never grew into it. He ate without pause throughout the day, only to remain thin as bones and hungrier for more food. The vet said he didn't have a tapeworm, and maybe he just wanted a nice hot bowl of gumbo or jambalaya, then he laughed. No amount of printout signs pasted to telephone poles, free ads in the local newspaper, or photos posted to Facebook brought his owners back. He stayed on our couch, curled into a spindly ball, voraciously eating but never growing a layer of fat around his protruding skeleton.

## Crosswalks and Undergrounds

### *Russell Square Station*

The Russell Square tube station welcomes us to London with the smells of mold, tea, body odors, and scones. It's August and hot and the underground air is stagnant. Kellie and I lug two oversized suitcases each onto the trains. Racing to make it through the doors, our cheap luggage wheels roll over many British toes. Behind the train doors, tangles of arms fish into pockets, sometimes the pockets of others. We keep trudging through the station, not really caring about where our luggage lands, just trying to make it through the hallways.

“Ouch! Watch where you're going!” a tall businessman in a grey suit yells as Kellie's Travelpro thumps on his loafered toe. His yell momentarily startles us out of our jetlagged daze and pumps fear into our veins. The businessman races ahead of us and gets lost in the crowd.

The Russell Square tube station is one of the few tube stations in London the renovators neglected. Instead of rows of efficient escalators to carry the masses from underground to the street level, Russell Square provides either one elevator or one hundred and seventy-five winding stairs. On this particular afternoon, the elevator has an “Out of Service” sign taped to its closed doors. One hundred and seventy-five cramped stairs later, we

also smell like mold, tea, body odors, and scones. We are hot, but we are not stagnant, as we step into the rushing air.

\*

Say an underground staff member is just starting his shift. It's 3pm. He goes into the basement storage room to grab his uniform and cleaning supplies. He opens one of the massive containers to pull out some Windex and washrags. Instead, he finds a severely disfigured body that's starting to attract flies and gradually settling into a state of rigor mortis.

Many underground staff members find it deeply distressing to know that a trip to the storage cupboards to retrieve buckets and squeegees could result in the discovery of a dead body. According to *The Telegraph*, many station supervisors refuse to go inside these storage cupboards, leaving the custodial staff to face the underworld of the underground.

The supervisors and station owners don't see a problem with this possible trauma—after all, the staff is offered free counseling support, what more could they need?

### *Leicester Square Station*

Flashing neon lights, 3-D billboards advertising racy musicals, clusters of outdoor metal-sided group urinals, and half-naked street performers tossing flames into ellipses. We plan our first *night out*—American students in

the Leicester Square pubs, American students in *Cirque* nightclub, American students trying to pose next to street performers without actually getting close enough to have to pay for a photograph. We wander from a grand redwood pub to cheaper, cement-walled pubs to one-pound-shots bars. We make friends with other tourists and students from abroad, people wearing camouflage jackets and corduroy pants who have beef jerky in their teeth. We have yet to make any British friends, and we feel shamed by our inability to camouflage our American-ness—we're still unable to stop snapping photos of corner buildings and find the Piccadilly Circus tube station without asking for directions.

~

*Cirque* is a two-floor dance club, designed to accommodate the creepiest of the Saturday nighters. The dance floor is on the ground level, circled by a second-level balcony floor—a floor that seems to have been made specifically to allow middle-aged men to lean over the railing, shirts halfway unbuttoned to show the darkest chest hair I've ever seen crawling from the tops of their chests to their triangular Adam's apples, and ogle the mess of twenty and thirty-somethings entwined in a pulsing rhythmic tangle in the black lights below. A girl lies on the sticky black floor while a series of guys take translucent green shots from her belly button. Two girls seem to be engaged in intense mouth-to-neck-to-chest foreplay with a third human of unidentifiable gender. A piece of hot pink weave gets ripped from a head of

one of the girls in the threesome and flies onto the dance floor. Bartenders race back and forth along the neon counter, pouring drinks, splashing vodka into tumblers, exchanging cash and cards for glasses filled to the brim with liquids that promise energy and hookups and regret.

We order fluorescent drinks and Kellie pulls me onto the dance floor. Within minutes, a pair of lanky, pimply guys in jeans and work boots approach us. Chas and Marley. They ask us to dance. They exchange grins with each other. Chas and Marley have Cockney accents. We say yes. My head only reaches to Marley's shoulders. He's moving his hips to the upbeat while I'm moving to the downbeat and he's stepping on my shoes and trying to make conversation but all I can make out is "...and...where...what?" Marley leans closer.

"What's your name?" Marley screams into my ear. He has a chipped front tooth and smells of Stella Artois and salami.

"Hanna," I yell back at him. It's no use playing the "my name is Ania" game with people I never plan on seeing again, especially in a deafening club. The game always goes the same way—"my name is Ania." "Aahn-yah?" "No, uh-nee-yuh." Then they'll point to their knees, as if they're the first one to think of this incredibly clever homonym. Some men even say it. "Knee." Like "knee." Right.

By the end of the song, Kellie and Chas are sloppily making out, her red lipstick smeared on both of their faces. Marley notices this and I feel five calloused fingers slowly reaching up my stomach, toward my chest. I freeze. He leans around my left shoulder and smiles at me, a toothy, crooked smile. I'm terrified. I need to get out of here. I yank his fingers off of my chest and run to the bathroom.

An old Bangladeshi woman sits on a stool at a brightly lit counter in the bathroom, surrounded by baskets of knock-off perfumes, hand lotions, condoms, lipsticks, and hairsprays. She's wearing a maid-style white dress with a black collar. I'm washing my hands furiously, trying to cleanse myself of Marley's fingerprints. There's an empty stool next to the old Bangladeshi woman, where she motions for me to sit.

"How is your night? You want perfume?" she asks, handing me a bottle of "Jordache version of Bleu Chanel." There's a rhinestone cat brooch pinned to the collar of her skirted uniform. Pointed, studded, strappy high heels poke out from underneath the stalls. Toilets flush repeatedly, followed by a tap-tapping of heels and squeaky stall doors.

"It's been awful. I was dancing with this guy, Marley, and he just tries to put his hands up my shirt!"

The old woman nods and smiles. "You want lotion?" she passes me a bottle. I squirt a purple dollop onto my hands.

“And my friend is out there dancing with his friend, so if I go back, Marley will probably still be there waiting. I just want to leave.”

“Yes, yes, fun dancing! Here, have some powder.” She pats tan powder all over my face.

“Thanks...I guess I’ll go back out there now,” I say.

“Have fun with friend! Tell friend about lipstick in bathroom.”

I get up to leave and she extends her palm.

“Five pounds please.”

I reach into my pocket and pull out the last five pounds that I have. As I leave the bathroom, I catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror—smeared mascara, wild hair, and tightly powdered face.

\*

I find Kellie and tell her I’m ready to go.

“Why? Aren’t you having fun?” she asks, her hands underneath Chas’ shirt. I shake my head no and head to the door. Kellie runs after me and Chas follows behind her.

We’re out on the street and Chas is still with us. “You’re not taking him back to our flat, are you?” I hiss in Kellie’s ear. She giggles.

“Yeah, he’s coming with us! He’s cute.”

He's fallen a bit behind us and is standing around a metal fixture with a group of other men. I keep staring, trying to decide exactly what I'm looking at.

"That's right, I'm pissing! Want to come over and get a better look?" a man yells, noticing me staring.

He and Chas stand around an open-walled metal structure with three other men, peeing into an elongated basin. Casino fronts pulse with flashing lights, women stand in front of sex shops, handing out coupon flyers, and crowds of drunken friends stagger through the street. I keep looking behind us, worried Marley will reappear, or that one of the guys peeing at the urinal will approach us, figuring that he already has his penis out and might as well keep on using it. There're empty lipstick cartons and discarded cigarette packets and condom wrappers in the gutters. I don't trust these men of Leicester Square—what's to stop them from approaching us and throwing our bodies into these gutters?

"No way, Kellie, *please* don't bring him home," I beg. Has she forgotten we share a room? Our beds are four feet apart. She doesn't seem to notice that her dance partner has stopped at the urinal, so I keep her walking in the direction of the Leicester Square tube station. Kellie's going on about what a great dancer and kisser this guy is and doesn't realize we've lost him until we've rounded two corners and reached the station.

“Where’s Chas?” She seems puzzled.

“Guess he got lost.” I am the worst wing-girl of all time. I steer her through the tube station doors, she swipes her Oyster card on the scanner, and finally we’re riding the escalators into the underground, catching the last train of the night back to Russell Square.

\*

We stand on the platform, minding the gap. Kellie keeps looking around, as if she expects Chas to show up. I walk closer to the tracks and stand at the edge. A torn-in-half pound note, plastic water bottle, candy wrappers, and a photograph of Queen Elizabeth lie scattered on the tracks below. There’s about a six-foot drop from the platform where I stand to the train tracks. The train pulls into the station swiftly, silently.

On average, one person commits suicide in the London underground every week. To the person committing suicide, this method may seem like a clean and simple way to go. Most people who are hit by subway trains do die on impact. It’s a quick end, but their bodies don’t disappear on impact. There are also other, non-suicide deaths that happen on the tracks. One article in *The Telegraph* describes a reportedly schizophrenic man pushing a 22-year-old woman onto the tracks at the Leicester Square tube station. Another article by the London Evening Standard displays a 23-year-old woman who got pushed onto the tube tracks over a hat dispute. When anyone, suicidal or

not, dies on the tube tracks, their mangled bodies remain on the rails, next to the water bottles, the discarded pictures, the torn bills, and the candy wrappers.

### *St. Paul's Station*

The Occupy movement storms into London in October, swarming the streets with posters about economic equality and affordable housing and the ninety-nine percent. I visit St. Paul's Cathedral with a friend, Jim, to experience Occupy the London Stock Exchange. Masses of periwinkle tents, green tents, cow-patterned tents, and tie-dye tents surround the enormous grey dome and spirals of the cathedral. A group of women in long red wool dresses stand on the steps of the cathedral, between Renaissance-style columns that seem to minimize their figures, and speak about uniting workers, social injustice, and corporate greed. Heavy black cameras record their words and movements. Policemen stand scattered around the perimeters with their hands in their pockets, prepared to take action.

The women on the cathedral steps start a chant: "Global democracy now!" Their passion and energy is infectious. It spreads through the two-hundred person crowd like a crashing wave. Jim is extremely political. He's in his element, and I wonder if he might get a tent of his own and join the camp. He starts to chant. Swept up in the energy, I join the chants as well.

A reporter shoves a camera in our faces and we tell the camera we're going to "eat the rich!" and that "capitalism is crisis!" and "root out usury!"

A group of protesters march through the streets—maybe one hundred people; they take up the entire street. Cops follow along. No cars would have a chance of passing through. Everyone marching has a sign and an occupy shirt and they're chanting in unison. We're still buzzing with endorphins from the cathedral demonstration. We have neither sign nor shirt, but we figure we can join in on the chants.

"Capitalism means war!" we shout. "Shut down the one percent!"

We march with them for half a block, shouting slogans and pumping fists. Our feet stomp on discarded Occupy London flyers and bits of pieces of political posters that blew apart in the wind. We march through streets lined with tall, off-white, eighteenth century gothic buildings that now house banks, offices, and flats. People line the windows of these offices and flats, staring at us from one hundred feet above.

The chanting duo next to us starts to whisper to each other. "Where's your shirt?" asks the woman next to Jim.

"Where's your sign?" asks the man next to her.

We shrug. "Don't have one." We keep chanting.

The woman waves her sign in Jim's face. "You can't march with us."

“Excuse me?”

“You *can't* march with us. You're *not* a part of our group.” She shoos us with her “Rich beware, your days are numbered” cardboard sign. Other marchers start to stare and whisper. We keep chanting, trying to ignore the hostile looks. But we don't feel like we're a part of the demonstration community anymore. We've been rejected, like a bad organ transplant.

We leave the protest and head back to the tube station. A “Keep Calm and Occupy London” sign lies forgotten on the side of the road. Jim bends down to grab the sign, brushing off footprints and pieces of hardened chewing gum from the cardboard. We carry it with us to the station. A man selling newspapers outside of St. Paul's station notices our sign and gives us a high five and shouts “right on!” before we disappear into the underground. The *London Evening Standard* headline reads “Petrol Bomb Thugs Attack Police.”

\*

To take a second to stand immobile on Oxford Circus, overwhelmed by the double-decker busses and cheap plastic souvenirs and glossy-windowed designer stores, one would likely to be shoved, stepped on, frowned at. To stand still in the middle of the station would indicate weakness, ignorance--tourist.

When someone falls onto the underground tracks, the underground staff must take care of the body. Staff members who work at the help desk

don't have to worry about carrying out this task, train drivers never have to go near the dead bodies, but the janitorial staff must arrive at work every day and hope nobody dies on the tracks. There's no time to wait for an ambulance or a police officer—imagine the delays this would create in train schedules all over the city. London ambulance services have limited resources and won't give rides to dead bodies. The people of London have places to go and things to do. They must cash checks to pay au pairs and finish financial reports by five pm and pick up poodles from the groomers. The janitorial staff cleans the scene on the tracks and places the bodies in massive industrial bins that get put in basement storage cupboards, along with mops, extra trashcans, and toilet paper. Only hours earlier, these bins carried mops, sponges, and Lysol.

The bodies can stay in these bins for up to three or four hours, waiting for the undertakers.

### *Russell Square Station*

I'm walking home alone from the Russell Square station and it's a pleasant day for London in November—a grey sky and light rain and a bit of wind, but not enough to turn my umbrella inside out. I'm already on my third umbrella this month.

I'll be flying back home soon. I stop by a souvenir store and buy a few London-themed shot glasses, a couple of “Stay Calm and Drink Tea” mugs, a few hoodies, and what I thought was a flag of England, but turned out to be

the flag design printed onto a placemat. As I'm leaving the store, I'm approached by a man who looks like he's in his sixties. He's unshaven, wearing a blue striped button down.

"Can you give me some money?" he asks. He's not threatening. He looks like he could be someone's father. His black hair is peppered with silver streaks, his green eyes are clear, not cloudy, and his open palm is steady, not shaking like a man going through withdrawal. I don't feel pressured to give him money, nor can I point out any specific feature that would make me think he should need this extra money.

I tell him no.

He rolls his shirtsleeve up from his wrist his elbow. A vertical gash runs from the bottom of his thumb up his arm. The gash is wet with dark blood. The gash is about an inch wide. The blood along the side of the gash has clotted and hardened.

I want to throw up or run away or scream. Of all the people on the sidewalk, why did he have to approach me? I turn my head away, but he doesn't roll his shirtsleeve back down.

"I need money to call an ambulance," he says, calm. "Please."

"I'm sorry, I don't have any cash," I say as I start to walk away. He follows me.

“Look at all of this blood! Please,” he says, shoving the gash close to my face. I clench my teeth.

“I’m sorry, really,” I say, and run across the street as the crosswalk light blinks on and off counting down 3, 2, 1.

\*

I replay the scene in my head as I lay in bed that night. On the ceiling, what look like amoebic coffee stains seem to shift, arrange and rearrange themselves before my unfocused eyes. Perhaps this man really did need my help. Maybe he picked me out from the crowd as the most charitable, and what did I do? I ran from him at a crosswalk. I think back to a time when my mom stopped our car to help a bleeding man on the side of the road. What if this man bleeds to death overnight? Or he followed me and I wake up to his body on the stoop outside of the flat tomorrow morning? I get no sleep that night. Instead, I worry. I worry about men with bloody arms, men who grope women on the dance floor, men who use the outdoor urinals, and dead bodies on the underground tracks. I wonder how many of those deaths are suicidal, how many of those deaths resulted from someone getting pushed onto the tracks after a night of close dancing or refusing to give someone money.

In class the next day, I’m unable to concentrate. I tell my Shakespeare professor about the man and his gash.

“He said he wanted money to call an ambulance? Definitely a scam. It’s free to call an ambulance in the UK.” She starts to laugh. “Not a bad scam, though, if you’re able to tell who’s from here and who’s a tourist.” Then she cracks her knuckles and begins her lecture on *Much Ado About Nothing*.

## Hameen's Wallet

The wallet's leather folds gleam beneath the shuffle of feet on Tottenham Court Road. Tired feet, anxious feet, melancholy feet, sweaty feet tromp around the wallet, step on it, oblivious. An airplane flying westward to South Africa casts shadows onto the wallet, a three-legged ant hobbles across the wallet's surface, and Lewis is the one who bends down to pick it up. In the middle of the sidewalk, Lewis pauses amidst the pedestrian traffic to flip the wallet open. It's filled with cash. He quickly shoves the wallet into his coat pocket. In the middle of a line of paused traffic, a carload of black-suited businessmen stare blankly out of the immaculately clean windows of a black sedan. A poodle on the sidewalk yelps as a leather boot accidentally trips of his paw. Seconds later, a tall, bald white man approaches us, asking *Did you just find a wallet? I lost mine.* There is a rectangular bulge in his shirt pocket. We shake our heads no and run back home.

Lewis and I lock ourselves in my shared bedroom in the five-girl flat I live in and lay out the wallet's contents on the floor. My roommate is out (her purse and studded motorcycle boots are gone), but I do not know when she will return so Lewis and I have to act quickly. I am only slightly relieved to see the man in the photo of the ID in the wallet is a stocky Middle Eastern man, not bald and white. The ID tells us Hameen is from Saudi Arabia, and that is all we are able to comprehend. Hameen has brown eyes. Hameen has a beard. Hameen has a nose that curves slightly to the left. Hameen has a

dimple in his left cheek. Hameen may or may not be an organ donor. Hameen doesn't carry photos of children, spouses, or membership cards. There is just an ID and cash. I say, *We should bring this to the police, right?* and Lewis says, *We could...but we don't have to.* We count the money inside. Two hundred British pounds.

Lewis says, *Hameen is probably a drug dealer. Why else would he only carry cash and an ID?*

*He could be new to the country, I say, or a minimalist.*

*If we give the wallet to the police, they'll probably just keep the money,* Lewis says.

I let myself believe this, even though I know that Lewis' conclusions are flimsy and dripping with stereotypes. We decide not to tell any of our classmates who are also in London studying abroad with us about the wallet. We don't tell our program director, our professors, and we don't mention the wallet when we make our weekly Skype calls to our parents.

I don't want to keep the wallet in my room. It feels alive, although I cannot explain why. I don't want it watching me undress, watching me sleep, do homework, and listening in on my conversations with my roommate, so Lewis takes the wallet back to his flat. In his twenty-one years, Lewis has bought drugs, sold drugs, skipped class, driven drunk, publicly urinated, and assisted in feeding a teachers' lounge a pan of marijuana brownies. I have

jaywalked and rolled through a couple of stop signs. Lewis is reckless with the kind of freedom that his privilege allows him—son to a family that owns multiple luxury shopping centers and malls around the country, parents who not only live next door to Dick Cheney but have had him over for tea, and his hometown located within the wealthiest zip code of Texas. I am quiet and careful in my Arkansas middle-classness. I pay my overdue library fines immediately, attend every class unless I am rendered absolutely useless and bedridden, and do not even urinate with the bathroom door open.

The next day, Lewis and I meet up in Bedford Square Garden. The pigeons that sit on the edge of the fountain are silent today. Since Lewis is the one who actually bent down to pick up the wallet, this justifies letting him plan the events of the day. A pair of policemen sip coffees on a bench next to us and argue about whether or not the roast is too dark or if the beans were burnt, and even though Lewis has ditched Hameen's wallet and ID somewhere and stuffed the cash into his own plaid, monogrammed wallet, I feel my palms start to sweat.

*Shhh, talk quietly,* I whisper at Lewis.

I tell myself I am less guilty than Lewis is in enjoying the wallet's contents if I am not carrying the cash, if I am a mere follower and not actively planning a day of fun on Hameen's dime. I follow Lewis to a lunch at Spaghetti House, through clam and oyster appetizers, plates of pasta alla

norma and pasta primavera and a carafe of cabernet, not the house stuff. I can't help but wonder if Hameen likes his spaghetti with cream sauce or red sauce, if he drinks wine or is sober, if he slurps clams between a small gap in his front teeth like I do, or if he chews them slowly. I am seated facing the street, watching as a mother and her young daughter pick up dropped change from the cracks in the sidewalk, and Lewis is across from me. I am only halfway engaged in our conversation, one eye fixated on the lamb ragù that speckles the corner of L's polo collar, the other eye scanning the street for a bearded man with a left-cheek dimple.

I am not sure what I would do if I did see Hameen pass by, though. Invite him to eat with us? Sheepishly offer him our leftovers? Toss the rest of the cash at him quickly and then run away? Nothing at all? Our extravagant lunch purchases alert our waitress that we are generous customers and she flirts with Lewis, touching his arm and laughing at his overwrought oyster jokes. Drunk and ego-boasted by way of money and a little flirtation, Lewis leaves her a generous tip.

At the tube station, we wait for the yellow line. A man stands too close to the tracks, and a porter guides him away by pulling gently at the elbow of his frayed army coat. I cannot see the man's face, but his hair is dark. He is bent over homelessly, as Lewis says, in the way that the outcasts of society become folded and compressed: noses pointing to the ground, backs bent, eyes rarely making contact with others. The problem is the way sunlight slips

through cracks in the walls in the late afternoon air, the sound it makes as it lights up the man's face, like a dying dog gasping for its last breath. Lewis is texting, and a part of me wants to say, *Let's just give the rest of the money to the homeless we pass on the streets*, but the louder part of me remains silent, and I wonder what is wrong with me.

Lewis has never been homeless, but I have been, or so I am told. After my parents split up when I was three, mother left my father and took me on the road with her, although we had nowhere to stay. We spent two weeks alternating between sleeping in the back of her covered truck bed, on the couches of some of her friends, in the spare bedrooms of others, on the floors of relatives' kitchens. I have no recollection of these times, and as a three-year-old, I probably didn't notice the difference between a weeklong vacation and couple weeks of being homeless. Although I don't remember these two weeks, I do vaguely remember living in mice-infested Arizona rent houses with grasses sprouting up through cracks in the floor, and roaches crawling across our countertops in the summertime. Lewis remembers having his socks ironed and folded by a maid, and waking up to a clean uniform waiting for him at the end of the bed for the beginning of each school day.

The porter walks along the perimeters of the tube station, using his baton to nudge to life each sleeping pile of rags and blankets and plastic sacks, shooing them through the tall tiled archways toward the parking lot, toward the alleys off Regent Street, the Camden Town underpass, to the East

End or the underside of Tower Bridge. We climb into the train and watch as the piles blur into each other, into the walls of the station, into concrete floor and dust speckle and greyness as we speed away to Trafalgar Square.

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To find a penny on the ground is normal, a nuisance even. The penny might even symbolize a day's worth of good luck if it's facing heads-up, or it might follow you home by clinging desperately to a piece of chewing gum flattened to the bottom of your boot. Many people toss pennies into the trash to avoid dealing with them, to take weight off of their purses and wallets. To catch a one-dollar bill blowing in the wind is happenstance. To find a twenty-dollar bill on the edge of a gutter is lucky, and to pick it up and pocket is only natural, sane. To find an envelope with a bit of cash in a parking lot and no possible way to identify the owner is fortunate, and to keep the money is legal. To find a wallet, filled to the brim with cash and an accompanying ID and to *keep* the wallet is, according to British law, to commit theft, since the owner's identification is attached to his or her missing contents.

Lewis and I spend the rest of the afternoon watching *Jurassic Park*, one of Lewis' favorite movies, in an IMAX theater. Since it is a Wednesday afternoon matinee, we have the entire theater to ourselves, with the exception of a weary-eyed mother toting three sticky children. She reclines her overstuffed chair, leans her head back and sleeps through the roars and

clangs of the surround sound system blasts that penetrate our ears. Lewis and I eat popcorn out of an 85-ounce carton. We slurp down white and brown and yellow sodas on Hameen's money. I decide that, like me, Hameen is probably not a *Jurassic Park* fan, but more of a *Titanic* fan. It has something to do with the way the ends of his hair flip upward, or his slightly crooked smile, or the way the flash of the camera reflects off of his hazel eyes when the photographer says *smile*. At this moment, he is probably watching Leonardo and Kate through his 80's era tube television in his rent-controlled flat in Camden Town. He's new to London and doesn't have much furniture yet, so he's watching them from beneath a pile of blankets in his futon bed. Maybe, if Lewis is right, there's a pile of heroin on the table. And a few packets of high-quality cocaine. Perhaps Hameen has had an extremely busy day, with strung-out customers knocking on his door nonstop. Hameen is just starting to settle in to the mattress, allowing himself to get lost in the familiarity of Leo and Kate's drama when he adjusts his position and notices a flatness around his ass, an absence of mass and square and weight in his back pocket.

~

Lewis roars with laughter at the witty banter between Dr. Alan Grant and Dr. Ellie Sattler and I sit back in my chair, gorging myself with sugar and butter and salt and oblivion, thinking about dinosaurs and their extinction, how they once ruled this earth on two and four and six feet, but

after 230 million years their existence has been reduced to grainy fossils illuminated beneath fluorescent lights for greasy fingers to tap at from behind museums windows and animated purple and green characters who sing the alphabet for children's television shows. Dinosaurs are immortalized into a pattern on a button-up shirt that a hipster might wear tucked into a pair of high-waisted denim shorts. I wonder if Hameen owns a dinosaur-print shirt, then decide no, of course he doesn't. He's more practical, a flannel type of man. Maybe, when he's feeling dressy, he throws on a denim jacket.

By the time we leave the theater, Lewis' collar now wears a collage of the stolen meals that we've stuffed ourselves with—thick red spots, yellow grease, brown liquid. My stomach bulges into my waistband, painfully not pleasantly. Lewis smiles and a popcorn kernel protrudes through his teeth.

We walk to the Tate museum and spend more of Hameen's cash on a twenty-pound entrance fee. We do not even ask for the student discount. Lewis and I stroll through the white hallways observing the pieces of artwork, Lewis lingering longer than I do at each exhibit. But when we stop to take in a piece, it is not just Lewis and I looking at the art, Hameen is there too. As we stand in front of a sculpture of a horse constructed from splitting 2x4's, slabs of rusty metal, and tires, Lewis says, *Damn*, I say, *Powerful*, and Hameen says, *Painful*. In front of an exhibit of a naked man sculpted into existence by thousands of Mike & Ikes glued onto the plaster body of a man hailing a taxicab, Lewis makes a Marxist critique of the piece,

and I comment on the unusual arm placement--surely this is some feminist commentary. Hameen says, *The repetitive placement of the red candies next to the green ones on the sculpture's chest signifies an ache from within, an illness or possibly a sadness.* In front of a water jug creation that just barely illustrates two people making love, Hameen says *That's not how to do it; no, her arm should be bent and his face should be closer; his legs should be pointed to the ceiling and her fingers should be behind him, that's it, that's the right way.*

I tell Lewis I'm thirsty and need to take a short break from the art. Inside a brightly lit downstairs café, to the chorus of screaming babies and clanging cash registers, I slam a beer down my throat, hoping the alcohol might erase Hameen from my mind, but he is right there with me saying *No, choose the Stella Artois instead of that Blue Moon; do not drink so quickly, look, there is beer all over your chin now; no, never lift the bottle with your left hand!* Lewis, always eager for an alcoholic afternoon beverage, is thrilled about my unusual decision to continue day drinking. He slams his PBR and belches afterward, proudly stating his victory at beating me in a race that I did not know we were having.

We keep strolling through the museum, and once the alcohol starts to pump its way through my bloodstream and up to my head, Hameen disappears for a while. Perhaps he leaves to take a nap, or to make some lunch. I do not know if Hameen is religious or not, but maybe he has just

disappeared to a quiet corner to locate the direction of the Kabba for his afternoon prayer.

An hour later, Hameen reappears. When he reappears, he does not tell me where he went. I drag Lewis inside a Crabtree & Evelyn because I want to look at bubble baths and shower gels. He disappears to the back of the store, and I don't follow him. I stay in the front, smelling bubble baths of "Caribbean Island Wild Flowers," "Classic Rosewater" and "Jojoba" when I hear Hameen say, *My wife uses a shower gel that smells like patchouli, it's very nice. When we give the twins their nightly baths, we wash them with a hibiscus-smelling soap. Why don't you try one of those?*

Wife? Kids?

Hameen is no longer Lewis' drug dealer, no; he is now a family man, a father to twins, a husband.

I grab a hibiscus-smelling bubble bath and Hameen is behind me at the checkout counter, saying *Good choice, that will smell nicely on you. The scent will cling faintly to your woolen sweater.*

Hameen is close behind as Lewis and I walk to the London Eye. My walk turns into a slow run, and Lewis is panting behind me, grasping his own full stomach, telling me to stop walking so quickly. I am trying to ditch Hameen; maybe, if I walk quickly enough he will not be able to keep up, but no, past a telephone booth and there he still is, past a street light on the

corner of Beldevere and York Hameen is asking for the time, as we run through a tunnel on Waterloo Hameen is admiring a graffiti of a Joshua tree.

At the line for the Eye, Hameen is standing next to us, saying, *Thirty pounds a ticket? Outrageous. I could pay for two week's of Kalil's piano lessons with thirty pounds. I could buy Duman that new pair of khakis he needs for the start of Primary 4. Thirty pounds?*

I turn to Lewis and say, *Let's use our student discounts this time, okay?*

He looks at me, slightly annoyed, and I realize I have interrupted his story about the time he attended a Phil Collins concert or a time that he beat his best friend in a game of "Civilization V" or guitar lessons.

*Even with a student discount, you're still paying twenty-five pounds apiece. Fifty pounds total. You're Americans, right? Isn't that equate-able to one hundred American dollars? Isn't that ridiculous? My wife needs a new winter coat. It's almost December, and she is still wearing her fall rain parka.*

Finally, we climb into the capsule, Hameen, Lewis, and I. Within seconds, Lewis has his iPhone out and snaps panoramic views of London, angling his camera to capture the setting sun, the boats passing down the Thames river, the light reflecting off of my hair. He waves his phone around until he is able to catch a WiFi connection, instantly throwing his pictures

onto Instagram with hashtags about #birdseyeview and #LondonInTheEvening and #StudyAbroad.

We share the capsule with a group of Japanese tourists and a short Norwegian family. It's a tight fit, and the capsule rocks back and forth as people pace from one side to the other side, trying to capture the most artistic photographs, trying to project their most happy and carefree faces, the good sides of their noses, their most wholesome family poses with arms circling waists and teeth protruding from lippy grins. A group of people from all over the world share recycled air, standing encapsulated together dangling five-hundred feet above the city, dressed in similar variations of denim and polyester, contorting our lips and eyes into similar shapes, touching each other in exactly the same curves and indentations before the flash of the camera.

Lewis and I stand by the window and take in the city. We point to the neighborhoods we recognize, point out other neighborhoods we want to explore. Beneath us Big Ben chimes, double-decker busses fly across hundred-year old bridges, and barges honk their horns as they sail through the thick, brown Thames. We capture photos of the city until our phones blink "Memory Full" at us, and then, finally, we can put our devices away and just stare.

As we are descending, Lewis checks the time.

*Shit, he says. I forgot I was supposed to meet Carl in front of our stoop an hour ago. He said he has some of the best green in the city. Might as well buy that while we have all of this cash to burn.*

I hear Hameen make a disapproving *tick* with his tongue.

The massive amount of junk food Lewis and I have consumed throughout the day, combined with the endless back-and-forth swaying of the glass capsule has my stomach on the verge of tossing all of its contents onto our scenic, family-friendly ride.

Loopy from the lack of fresh air and the height of the Eye, Lewis and I stumble out of our capsule as it pauses near the ground. But I can still hear Hameen, his thoughts, his observations, and his sadness, so I tell Lewis I want to stop in a pub on the way home, and then one bar, and then a club, until the night is dizzy and Hameen's voice is static-y and broken; the fragments of words and sentences that are audible are hollow and dim. They are easy to block out when my ears are clogged with the sounds of a jukebox or the deafening noises of a dance club.

By the end of the night, Lewis tells me we have just about spent all the money.

*Wasn't that fun?* he says. *Aren't you glad that we didn't try to give the wallet to the police?*

The streets are blurring around me, lights from cars and buildings and cell phones seem to be glaring ferociously, the city is spinning and suddenly the taxis and busses are driving on the sky.

I lean into a gutter and throw up, feeling nothing but relief as clam and oyster, pasta primavera and 85-ounce popcorn and soda, soda, soda, beer, wine, vodka, leave my stomach. The contents of the day empty into London's sewer system—what was once a nice meal, an afternoon drink, a white-tablecloth appetizer is now trickling through the metal grates and falling heavily into the four-hundred and fifty miles of sewers beneath the city that carry waste from Buckingham Palace, from Spaghetti House restrooms and port-a-potties and the asses of the homeless who have no choice but to squat directly over these grates. Below our feet, below these streets, families of rats swim through the sewers, picking grain and piece of fruit and vegetable and nut from human waste and garbage disposal mush. These rats scurry to catch what my body is expelling, to benefit from the labors of Hameen, a man who neither the rat nor I have ever met, as I am sick with the very things that should sustain me. The night ends late and we are tired but trying not to say so, just sitting next to the sewer grates, letting the early morning emptiness of London wash over us, wondering if it's time to give up and go home.

## The View From Above

On top of the Sears Tower, middle-class fingers pushed buttons on middle-class cameras, capturing the gleams of our middle-class teeth. For those able to look down their noses and through the lenses of pay-by-the-minute microscopes, Chicago was no longer an amalgamation of poverty and wealth, abandoned buildings and mansions, equality and inequality. 1,500 feet of separation blurred existence into non-existence, turned roads into slivers, lakes into puddles, buildings into Lego pieces; a distorted view of the city that we *oohed* and *aahed* at behind our camera lenses.

A group in matching tie-dye *45<sup>th</sup> Annual Knobloch family reunion!* shirts stood by the glassy ledge, a windowed box that jutted out of the Skydeck, allowing tourists to feel as if they were floating above the city. The kids tore Skydeck brochures into pieces of confetti while the adults snapped photos of each other. They took turns posing as if they were pinching the skyscrapers below between their thumbs and index fingers. Their poses said *I've got the whole world between my fingers.*

I fumbled around, trying to find the perfect position for my own photograph – I wanted to look carefree and natural, not posed, and especially not *touristy*. Hands on my waist felt formal and stiff, hands straight down my side looked like a mug shot, and my father told me that hands folded across my chest looked pouty. I ended up copying the Knoblochs, air-pinching the

top of a skyscraper between my fingers, and my father captured my moment of fabricated power and illusion of enormity with a click and a flash.

A few posters informed deck-dwellers that small everyday items like pens and pencils dropped from the top of the tower could pick up enormous amounts of speed and easily kill some unfortunate person standing below. As a ten-year-old, I didn't know much about physics. What I gathered from the posters was that all it took to make the seemingly insignificant a thing of significance was height.

On the street Chicago was loud, smoggy, and overwhelming, but standing on top of the tower there was no denying the beauty of the city's skyline—the dimming horizon, the twinkles of lights, and the joy of capturing the entire scene between the perimeters of a perfect rectangular flash, even if the photograph was slightly distorted by the fingerprints and breath marks of everyone else who had visited the glass ledge that day. So many human cells were smeared onto that glass. My cells met and mixed with strangers' cells, strangers' cells clung onto my hands and shirt and hair. Our cameras captured the tiny buildings below into small rectangles, but our photos were oblivious to all the tiny heartbreaks in the tiny apartments, the tiny tragedies of loss and missing gloves, the tiny joys of love and successfully roasted chickens.

~

According to Duke professor Adrian Bejan, our eyes can scan an image fastest when the shape of the image is a rectangle – the shape speeds up our ability to perceive the world, and without realizing it, we utilize this technique whenever we can. Bejan defines the golden rectangle as a “shape that emerge[d] as part of an evolutionary phenomenon that facilitates the flow of information from the plane to the brain” (Hosey 84). Subtract a square from a golden rectangle and what remains is another golden rectangle; subtract another square from the equation and you get another golden rectangle, and so on. We crave the predictability of this equation, and if we look, we can find this shape everywhere – the face of the Mona Lisa, the bust of Nefertiti, the façade of the Notre-Dame Cathedral, the original iPod, credit cards, the average shape of books, television sets, and so forth (Hosey 84). This utterly plain geometric shape speeds up our ability to perceive the world. Standing on top of tall buildings and skyscrapers, looking down at the world from above and viewing it as a collection of shapes, then capturing that image within the confines of a golden rectangular photograph makes what lies below seem so much more manageable, so wonderfully compartmentalized.

~

The busses in Trivandrum moved slowly, and sometimes they didn't move at all. The busses were low to the ground. Gazing out the window while the bus was paused at stoplights could lead to periods of awkward eye contact

with passersby on the street. The driver's seat was elevated and the perimeter of his windshield was adorned with beads, flower garlands and drawings of Krishna – the driver sat in a shrine while we, the passengers in the back, sat on torn plastic seats, our arms packed tightly into the crevices of strangers' moist backs, our sandaled feet hovering at awkward angles to avoid stepping on chickens whose heads poked out from underneath the seats.

The woman across the aisle from me wore a sari that hugged the curves of her thighs, forcing beads of sweat to sprout through her thin emerald fabric; the man next to her wore an off-white mundu that wrapped around his waist and clutched on to the contours of his crotch, as if hanging on for dear life. Every thud of the tires sinking into a pothole reverberated the bus and pushed the edge of his mundu further up his skinny thigh like a slow, deliberate revealing. Careful not to spill, my father and I unwrapped our lunch of rice and fish dal that Ammamma had meticulously folded into a moist banana leaf, our makeshift lunchbox. My father kept leaning over to pull the bones from my slab of curried fish, then flicking them out the open window.

Mosquitos trapped on the bus didn't fly freely, but seemed to hang stagnant in the thick monsoon air. We passed by rows of pastel-colored houses – sea foam green, baby pink, faded aqua – houses with massive iron gates guarding the front yard sat next to houses made up of only a few sheets of tin held together with rusty nails which sat next to six-story apartment

complexes. Chickens sprinted down the road, dodging car tires and feet. Stray dogs with rib cages protruding from their sides lumbered lethargically, licking food scraps from cartons of microwavable noodles and Styrofoam boxes that had held take-out idlis and idiyappums. Auto rickshaw drivers napped and lounged beneath Kanikkonna trees. The drivers drank Kingfisher beers and waved potential customers away when they inquired about rides across town.

The air on the bus smelled of feces, of pots of hot curries that bounced up and down on women's laps, of sweat and sweet perfume and coconut hair oil and hibiscus. I smelled of perspiration and Teen Spirit deodorant.

My father looked out of the bus window and saw endless beauty. He saw home, and a rich culture, and familiarity, and the origin of all things. As I admired a button on my shirt, he would say *Buttons, did you know they were first invented in India? That globe in your bedroom – know who invented it? Indians! And that Snakes and Ladders game you like so much? And shampoo, too!*

I was twelve and when I looked out the window, I found it hard not to think *how easy it would be to just pick that trash up, right? How much better the streets would smell without those rotting jackfruits everywhere! How much prettier that building could be if someone just scrubbed that mold off!* I kept these thoughts to myself though, because I knew that if I voiced my

concerns to my father, I would get a lecture – a lecture that might last an hour over beachside lunch tables while we sipped sweet drinks straight from coconuts, or a whole day of lectures slipped between visits to endless relatives' houses or a lecture quietly whispered while scanning grocery store shelves for Ammamma's prune juice.

On the bus, I squinted my eyes, placing my hand in front of my face and obscuring my view. I thought maybe, if I could just block out the heaps of candy wrappers and burlap sacks, gnarled straw brooms and coconut shells and the cows that sometimes ate from the piles then left their own patties of steamy, furry dung on the streets, then I, too, could see Kerala as my father did. But even with my palm to my face there were gaps of space and air and room for vision where the edges of my fingers didn't quite touch.

Noticing my face pressed against the bus window, my father said *Kerala is one of the cleanest and wealthiest states in India, but you probably can't tell through your Western gaze.* He said "Western gaze" with distaste, and I realized a Western gaze was a hindrance, a cultural plague that marked the gazer as judgmental, a colonial prick. My father saw the large picture – why was I so stuck on the details, the smaller picture? I worried – *could others tell that I have a Western gaze?* I put on sunglasses and hats when we left the house, but schoolchildren at recess still yelled out *vella penkutty, vella pankutty, white girl, white girl*, when they saw me walking down the street.

In the mornings, my aunt parted my bangs and placed a jeweled bindi in the middle of my forehead, my Ammamma spun me around until I was covered head-to-toe in a floral sari or a pleated salwar kameez – how did the children still see me as a “white girl?” Putting the outfits on felt like “dressing up,” not just “getting dressed,” but I loved the intricate patterns and soft airy fabrics. With each sari purchase, I knew my father would spend half an hour bargaining the price down in 1,000-rupee increments—a 30-minute routine he never practiced back home in Wisconsin, but which came to be expected with each fish, vegetable, or clothing purchase here in Trivandrum. Stepping into these heavily bargained outfits felt like the first step to moving beyond the label of “tourist” and becoming someone who belonged with the second half of her family. I refused to wear my jeans and t-shirts until I was back in the USA.

My father and I took the bus to the Trivandrum beach almost every day that July. I’d dash into the ocean while wearing my ankle-length sari, only to get as deep as my knees before my father would come running behind and pull me out, not trusting the current of the Indian Ocean to play gently. He swore that the Indian Ocean had more ferocious currents than the Atlantic or Pacific, which were tame, submissive kittens in comparison. His warnings didn’t stop me from insisting that we make frequent visits to the beach – I loved the black sand of the Trivandrum beach, the red tint to the

water, the high levels of salt, and the peddlers who sold touristy trinkets along the shore.

But what did it matter that I loved the beach, that I was delighted by the banana trees, the beach-front shops where I picked up coconut-husk trinkets for my friends at home, the painted elephants that paraded down the street, and the people who stopped to let me pet their painted elephants? So what if I began to look forward to bananas and fish with every meal, fell into a trance when I heard the musicality of the language I wished I understood, the adhan that sang through my open window each morning, and grew close with the relatives who would talk to me in English? Before embarking on this trip, my father had encouraged me to find beauty in the *culture*, not just the flora, to really appreciate the apparent ease at which so many religious communities coexisted peacefully in one city, not simply the golds and teals and maroons of the temple walls, mosque ceilings, and cathedral entrances, but he had yet to tell me exactly *how*. A practice that came so easily to him furrowed my brow into wrinkles with each bus ride.

~

I once took a British art and architecture class wherein the professor brought us to various museums and historical buildings in London. She taught us how to read paintings – to start by standing close to a painting, almost pressing our noses to it and observing the brushstrokes, the lines of

vision, the foreground and background, then stepping back five feet, ten feet and observing the painting at different distances and angles. I remember pecan halo swirls over angels' heads, textured Picasso whirls of tangerine, Seurat's miniscule cherry dots that peppered the canvas. *Notice how the colors speak to each other when you're looking at them closely, now notice how they come together when you step back and view the painting as a whole.*

At the time we joked about it, saying how pretentious we looked as we put our noses to the paintings then stepped back ten feet, repeating up-close noses and far steps throughout the museum, all the while scribbling notes in our Moleskines. But this class taught us to appreciate every cog in the machine, to interrogate how each of Seurat's dots might seem insignificant on its own, but yet are so integral to creating the entire image of the Eiffel tower, or A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, how one absent dot might leave a hole in a man's mustache or black toothless gap in a white smile.

~

At 400-feet, the Mascot Square shopping center still stands as the tallest building in Trivandrum. On top of the shopping center, I could still hear horns and shouts; I still saw cars and vendors and a portion of the 800,000 people who populated the city. In Trivandrum, there was no Sears

Tower, no Eiffel Tower, no Space Needle, or a mountain to climb—and I wondered, if I could have just observed the city from afar, from a taller point where I wasn't reminded of how sharply my light skin stuck out, somewhere that provided me with distance from language barriers and confusion of cultural norms, somewhere elevated that turned the city into lines and colors and shapes and abstraction, somewhere that turned all of the tiny parts into a whole, could I find what I needed to fully appreciate this place, my second home?

~

Instinctively, we crave a sense of familiarity, especially when we find ourselves in unfamiliar places. The familiar calms and appeases, even though we may not always want it to. Physicists have found that people consistently prefer to look at a certain mathematical density of fractals – a natural phenomenon that exhibits a repeating pattern that displays at every scale. We prefer a density that is not too thick, not too sparse. Apparently, this particular pattern echoes the shapes of trees from the African savanna, the place supposedly stored in our genetic memory from the beginning of the human race. We respond so dramatically to this fractal pattern that simply *seeing* a painting or object with this fractal pattern can reduce our stress levels by as much as 60 percent (Hosey).

In the 1940's, *LIFE* named Jackson Pollock “the greatest living painter in the United States” when he was creating canvases that are now recognized as paintings that conform to our optimal fractal density (Hosey). Apparently, he just got lucky and painted these patterns intuitively, complicating and improving his fractal technique over the years. But luck or not, the precision of the density of the fractals between his strokes continues to capture us in a way that we can't quite explain; he toys with an instinct so far embedded into us that many people are not even aware it exists. The familiar patterns in his paintings please us *because* they are familiar, though we can't exactly say what makes them familiar – what can an entire species possibly remember about the savanna?

~

I imagine myself standing atop a 1,000-foot mountain in Trivandrum, capturing a photo of the city's twisting streets, ocean shoreline, maze-like produce and meat markets, the zoo, the capital, and the constant protesters stopping the swarm of city busses all within the neat perimeters of my camera, then gluing that photograph inside a rectangular wooden picture frame. I'd place that photograph on top of my dresser, beneath my tall, rectangular window and look at it from my rectangular bed, my head resting on a rectangular pillow. Although the photo might not have Pollock's eye-pleasing fractal pattern, seeing this bustling, mystifying space so neatly compartmentalized, so manageable, surrounded by so many golden

rectangles, might provide me with the space to take a breath and study each section of the photograph piece-by-piece, letting me prepare to move beyond cursory observations like colors, smells, and tastes for my next visit to Kerala. Perhaps I can find this image on some postcard with an aerial view of the city.

## Terminal 1

Here's a romantic story: my parents met during a layover at the Delhi airport. They were both sitting on stiff, plastic chairs in Gate 7—my mother probably wearing some combination of Gortex cargo pants and tie-dye, her hair bound together in dirty braids. My mother swears that my father was wearing a suit with monogrammed cuff links. My father swears that he wasn't. Both of my parents agree that my father had a full head of hair back then.

My mother was flying back home to Michigan. My father, back home to Kerala. My father asked my mother to have a cup of chai at the airport teashop. Back in 1989, there were two teashops in the entire Delhi airport. Today, the Delhi airport has three Starbucks and Costa Coffes all in Terminal 1.

When my mother met my father, she was just finishing up a hiking trip in the Himalayas where she had walked alone with nothing but a tent, cooking stove, and a few clothes in her backpack for two weeks. She tells me stories about the people she met on the trails and her close encounters with fever and tiger and near-death. My father was on a business trip. He had a briefcase full of papers for a presentation about economics, or some data about stocks. My mother says *things were different back then* when I tell her that maybe I don't want to continue with more grad school or get a full-time

job right away. She shakes her head when I say that I could envision myself embarking on a solo-hiking trip in Nepal or Thailand or India.

I don't know what draws two strangers together in an airport. Perhaps, it's something about the way one stranger is sitting—her mosquito-bitten arms crossed loosely over her chest, Gortex-layered legs tapping rhythmically to the beat of some song that only she hears in her head. Maybe my father was drawn to my mother because of the stories and experiences that her unwashed hair promised—where did you get that tangle from? That bug? That woven flower? Perhaps my mother saw something safe in my father, and maybe, after two weeks of meeting strings of strangers wearing ripped parkas in tents, nothing seemed more reassuring than a man in a cleanly-pressed suit, washed hair, and monogrammed cufflinks.

Whatever drew my parents together in that Delhi airport now repels them. They speak on the phone infrequently, only to talk about insurance plans or to make arrangements for my graduations.

They have both tried to convince me that I was not conceived in the Delhi airport bathroom. I remain skeptical.

## Brownish

On the flight from O'Hare to San Francisco, an elderly Indian couple next to me takes selfies on an iPad. Passengers walking down the aisle to find their seats appear to think that we're a family, traveling together, perhaps even straight out of India since the woman is wearing a traditional sari and the couple is speaking Hindi and I am not speaking; we keep getting smiles and cocked heads of approval. These boarding passengers look at us as if saying *How lovely, a nice Indian family is traveling together, and I smiled at them, I do not think they are terrorists; I am not a racist.* The Indian couple is traveling to San Francisco for a wedding – I know this not because they told me, but because I observe the woman from behind the pages of novel I am pretending to read. She accepts and declines various invitations on a very full and high-tech e-calendar, and with the flick of a red-varnished fingernail, attached to a finger weighted by stacked gold rings, she accepts an e-vite to a beachfront wedding that was to take place that weekend. I know the couple has a daughter my age, in her twenties—not because they told me; we didn't speak once, because this couple was not my parents and I try to avoid engaging in conversations with strangers on planes—but because of the family photo that served as the iPad's background.

~

To be a young, brown child living on Arizona's southernmost border means that to teachers, cashiers at grocery stores, and school bus drivers, you are Hispanic. Mothers would approach me on the sidewalk and ask me questions or try to introduce me to their Spanish-speaking children, but all I could do was respond with the few phrases I remembered from my Teddy Berlitz Jr. books. *Mi casa es tu casa!* and *Mi hermano se llama Pedro!* I'd say, as vendors pushed carts of cold paletas michoacanas down the Nogales sidewalk. Frustrated, these mothers would glare at my mother and hiss *Why haven't you taught her Spanish?* *Por qué no has enseñado Español?* But before I could ask my mother for a popsicle, or she could open her mouth to explain that I wasn't Hispanic, the mothers and the vendors would be gone.

*Are you black or are you white?* my fourth-grade Southeast Arkansas peers would ask me, while swinging on monkey bars, while standing in line at the cafeteria waiting for mashed potatoes and fried chicken, from between stalls when we were in the restroom. *Neither,* I'd reply, *My mom is white and my dad is from India. Yeah, but are you black or are you white?* they'd respond. We had, maybe, two Hispanic kids in our fourth-grade class, but their identity was never questioned, perhaps because their parents owned the only Mexican restaurant in town and my classmates equated them with burritos and cheese dip and mariachi bands that played songs for you on your birthday. There was one other Indian girl in my class; her last name was Patel and her parents ran the Days Inn, but she was 100% Indian and there

was nothing ambiguous about her ethnicity. She had grown up with these classmates since preschool, so she was never questioned.

My peers' confusion wasn't alleviated by the fact that Melvin, my African American bus driver, would always call me "daughter," on the bus, would bring me birthday presents and give me hugs in the hallways. He was very friendly to all the kids on the bus, but for some reason took a particular interest in me—perhaps because I was being raised by a single mother, perhaps because I was very quiet and sat at the front of the bus, perhaps because I was brownish and maybe he, too, thought that I was black. Every day when I would get off the bus, Melvin would pat my back or touch my hand; or if he ran into me in the hallways at school or at Wal Mart where he worked a second job, he would give me a hug so warm and comforting that the lines between father and bus driver would start to blur.

Without asking me, everyone at school accepted the fact that Melvin was my father, and that even though I kept saying I had a father from India, I was wrong; Melvin was my father and therefore I was black. During class, Rashada who sat behind me would play with my hair. She'd braid it, brush it, and say *How'd you get this soft white-person hair?* while our teacher stood at the front of the classroom, trying to get us interested in isosceles triangles and The Constitution of the United States.

*We've never heard of India*, kids would hiss at me as we were waiting for the bus. *Where's that? You mean Indiana?* My father lived in Wisconsin, a place they had heard of, but because they had never met him, my peers questioned his existence. At recess, we'd gather in a circle beneath the slides, roll up our shirtsleeves, and compare skin tones. *You're almost as dark as Rashada!* Sarah would say about my summertime tan. *You must be black* *Look how much darker you are than me!* Before moving to Arkansas, I had never participated in so many wrist-skin-tone-checks--a recess activity that seemed eerily like something that young Nazi children would take joy in during their own recesses. The constant racial scrutinizing eventually made me start wonder if I was black. Clearly, my wrist was at least ten shades darker than Sarah's, but only two shades lighter than Rashada's. Maybe this whole India story *was* a lie, maybe my father really was black, or maybe he wasn't my father, maybe my real father really was Melvin—my fourth-grade self easily equated love to gifts, and if Melvin wasn't my father, why would he buy me so many stuffed animals, EasyBake ovens, and gift certificates?

~

Around Thanksgiving break, my father flew down and spoke with my fourth-grade teacher. They arranged a day that he could come talk to the class and convince my peers of India's existence. I was a very soft-spoken, shy child and I hated being in the spotlight. My teacher asked me to introduce my dad to the class, so I stood in front of my classmates, mumbled, *This is my*

*dad...uh, yeah* and then sat back down in my desk. Even though I hated the constant questioning and pestering about my race, I was even wearier of a whole class session devoted to discussing me and my ethnicity. During the class, my father passed around photos of India. He held up a few of my glimmering baby outfits, and I shrunk down in my seat while my friends giggled. They asked about the food, with a genuine curiosity, and my father told them about tame dals, spicy curries, coconut chutneys, sambar, chutneys, biryani, papadums and idiyappams while my peers kept glancing at me, imagining me eating these foods with my fingers and I slunk down farther in my seat and wished myself out of the room, out of the state; out of the country and into my Ammamma's kitchen in Kerala, eating idiyappams and curries at her dining room table, away from the scrutiny and quizzical glances. But by the end of the session, I was eye-level with my desktop, and my peers were finally convinced of India's existence.

They stopped asking me about my race afterwards, and I became just another student. It wasn't until middle school, when people started dating, that my race was brought up again. One day when I was in seventh grade my class was lined up outside, waiting to enter the portable trailer-shack that served as our "reading classroom." The trailer shack was always hot, the metal siding burned our fingers if we accidentally touched the building anytime between the months of May and October, and the inside smelled of must because of a hole in the ceiling where water dripped through into a

plastic bucket when it rained. Ten beanbags that were supposed to accommodate the twenty-four students lined the perimeter of the room. Anyone who didn't race to a beanbag had to sit on the hard linoleum floor. Nothing about the atmosphere of the reading room made us want to take any interest in reading.

As we waited to enter, we chatted about the upcoming Winter dance and who we wanted to go with. One of my friends, Chelsea, said *You're so lucky, Ania, because you can go with a black guy or a white guy! I have to go with a white guy, or my dad would be furious.* After that, I started to wonder *why* I didn't have a date, when I was supposedly so versatile, while many of my friends already had dates. Many of the students at Monticello Middle School viewed their peers who were "mixed" as if we were from some untouchable caste, some sinful she-thing. Black guys wouldn't date half-white girls, white guys wouldn't touch half-black girls; their hate bred a constant circularity of isolation and loneliness. If Chelsea's father would be furious about her bringing a black guy home, why would any of my classmates' parents want them to bring a half-Indian girl home?

If an outsider were to walk into our middle school cafeteria, they'd think we had just recently gone through de-segregation. A table of black jocks and cheerleaders sat in one corner, a table of white jocks and cheerleaders in another; a table of white guys who were on their way to becoming the "redneck" clique in high school sat at one table, a table of black

guys who would soon become the “gangster” clique sat at another. By that time, I was sitting at a predominately white-girl table—friends made during band practices, or friends made via my mom introducing me to her colleagues’ daughters. In classes, everyone would chat and joke with everyone else, but in the cafeteria, where the students were given freedom and the choice to choose where to sit, they segregated instantly. No longer did the white basketball player flirt with the black cheerleader. They might text each other from phones hidden beneath the cafeteria tables, but they remained on opposite sides of the room. Their romance became a thing for privacy, for secret after-school meetings or stolen kisses shared between shadows cast over a dark movie theater.

By freshman year of high school, my Indian friend, the Patel girl, had left our clique and started befriending the “hot black girl” clique instead. None of the white guys had showed any interest in dating her, but once she moved to the hot-black clique, she had dates every week. I remember my father once asking me about her on the phone, and when I told her that she wasn’t hanging out with us anymore, she was hanging out with the black kids, he said, *Her parents must be disappointed*. I don’t know if her parents were disappointed or not, but I do know that I’m not allowed to bring a man to visit my family in India until I’m married; I do know that my father’s side of the family was not happy when he went off to America and had a child with a white woman who he never married, but I’m not sure how this

situation would be different if he had run off to America to have a child with a black woman who he never married.

Which cliques we hung out with, where we ate our lunch in the cafeteria, which seat we chose on the bus or which corner of the parking lot we parked our cars in established who we would talk to, who we would date, what types of activities we would be willing to engage in on the weekends—our lives were determined by a series of subtle cues, lunch tray and vehicle placements. I'm assuming that up until a certain point, many of these indicators that we chose—right corner of the cafeteria, back of the bus—might have been heavily influenced by our parents' expectations. By our senior year of high school, many more couples were dating interracially—but that was only after twelve years of growing up together.

In college, when I went on family vacations to Italy, Belize, or Greece, I had little trouble passing as a local, assuming that I was not dressed like a tourist. Once, when my mother and I were purchasing a baguette at a bakery in Rome, the baker ignored my mother, turned to me and started addressing me in Italian. A woman on a ferry in Greece once handed me her baby and gave me instructions to care for it in Greek. My college friends would often tell me how lucky I am that I can pass for so many different races, but to me, it still feels like a hindrance, a lie, even—what good is it to *look* Italian, but not be able to speak one word of Italian? To look ambiguously brown but being capable of only speaking English sets me up for a lifetime of

disappointing strangers. The pressure is enough to make me want to learn twelve different languages—*yes, see, I can fit in with your culture, I do belong here, in Greece, you were right to look at me and assume so!*

Once, during grad school, I sat in a YMCA sauna at Marquette, Michigan. A man in his 60s, whom I had never met before, looked at me for a few seconds, then asked *Are you Brazilian?* I responded, *No*, to which he responded *Well, are you Portuguese? Italian? Mexican?* To which I responded *No, no, no*. Another man in the sauna actually got off of his bench, walked over, leaned in and squinted his eyes at me, peering as if I were an animal at a zoo. *I'd bet you're Venezuelan*, he said, *But I could tell better if I had my glasses on*. It was like they were playing some version of racial *Jeopardy!*, where the contestants are stuck together in a 10 foot by 7 foot wooden box, vulnerable and wearing minimal clothing, streams of sweat pouring from their pores as they try to guess my race, the \$100,000 stinger in the final round.

When I finally told them the cocktail of my genealogy, the are-you-Brazilian man responded, *Mixed babies always have it better. They're usually better looking and smarter*. I wondered if he'd spent two seconds asking his half-Brazilian children about life in Marquette, Michigan; the whitest and least racially-diverse area of the country that I've ever lived in. Here, I walk into a room and I am instantly the darkest-skinned person. I am almost entirely sure that a high school cafeteria here would look nothing like

the one at my high school—instead, it would be made up of students who bear various shades of blondeness, brunetteness, redness—the students haven't even had a chance to chose whether to segregate or not.

When people ask me what race I am—and this happens very frequently in the YMCA sauna—it's difficult not to snap at them, even though I know that most of the time, they are simply asking out of curiosity. I don't ask them where all their hair went, or why the pinky on their right hand is so crooked, why they have seven moles on their neck, or whether they are Russian or Polish or Icelandic, or maybe even Greek. Perhaps it is because I've lived my whole life being asked this question, but I would never say to a perfect stranger, *Hi, my name's Ania, what's yours, have you seen that new Tom Hanks movie, oh, and what race are you?* I might wonder to myself, quietly, and try to gather any clues that I could without directly asking the person, via techniques like peering onto the screen of the iPad of the Indian couple who sat next to me on the plane (I was merely curious about their lives), but halfway through the flight, they darkened the brightness of the screen and turned away from me, so that I couldn't see the iPad anymore and I had nothing to do but listen to my own music and read my own novel, every so often looking out the window and seeing the dark ponds and rows of boxy houses below.

## Through The Banana Trees

The first time I met my Ammamma, I was nine years old and I leapt into her arms without hesitation. I was thrilled that Ammamma's house was green, that the front yard was sprinkled with fallen bananas, coconuts, and mangos, and that we had to watch out for thieving monkeys when the windows were open.

At the time, my six-year-old cousin Nidhi only knew one phrase of English, "Come, let us play," which she repeated every time she saw me. In the middle of dinner she would turn to me and say, "Come let us play." While we were out grocery shopping smile at me between rows of rice and say, "Come, let us play." And we played continuously, from dusk to dawn. Nidhi and I huddled over boards of Chutes and Ladders and Candyland and Chinese Checkers and hid and sought behind jackfruit trees and bushes of Kerala flowers, our conversations translated by aunts, uncles, or my father.

At dinners, my tame dals and plain rice and cool coconut chutneys and deboned fish had to be cooked separately and set aside from everyone else's. I drank water that had been boiled and then cooled and warmed milk and I listened to the intonations of the conversation around me as I stabbed my rice with the only fork on the table.

By the end of my first week there, I was sick of my GAP t-shirts and tie-dye dresses, so my aunt took me shopping for Salwar Kameez and bindis. While we were out, Nidhi insisted on buying her first pair of blue jeans, which had little gems sprinkled around the pockets. My denim and polyester American clothes got pushed to the bottom of my suitcase and my new, light cotton Salwar Kameez were frequently worn, washed, and folded on top. To buy the Salwar Kameez, we went to a five-story department store, the tallest building in the city of Trivandrum. From the fifth floor patio, I took a photo of the congested streets below. When I returned to America, I glued the photo into my scrapbook, titling it, "Downtown India."

The next time I visited Trivandrum I was thirteen. I sauntered off the plane in cargo pants and ear buds in, the sounds of the Backstreet Boys and Nsync blasting through my Walkman. Nidhi and her family had moved to Singapore, and we only visited them briefly on our way to and from India. This time, Nidhi spoke perfect English.

When my father and I arrived at my Ammamma's new flat, none of my relatives rushed to hug me. Instead, they stood and smiled and asked about my travels. I hooked my thumbs behind my back, unsure of what to do with my arms that itched for familial hugs and recognition. My father and his mother didn't embrace, and I found this odd. The photographs in

Ammamma's flat showed my family members standing next to each other, not touching and solemn-faced, the opposite of the photographs in my American relatives' homes, which showed siblings hugging and grandchildren laying casually across grandparents' laps.

This time, the streets weren't all coconut trees and fallen jackfruits, but piles of rancid trash and stagnant, mosquito-infested mud. I said to my father, *Why can't people pick up after themselves?* and I turned my nose. I knocked my heels together, Dorothy style, and wished I was back on paved, clean American streets. My father tried to tell me about the difference between first and third world countries and the everlasting effects of colonization and the dominance of the Western world, but I was defensive. I didn't wear any Salwar Kameez on this visit.

I was twenty-one on my third visit. My Amamma had grown much older and she had a *helper* who came to cook and clean for her during the day. The *helper*, Gomati, had her own bathroom in the flat, directly off of the kitchen, conveniently out of sight. I didn't notice the bathroom until a few weeks into my stay, and when I asked to see it, I was met with concerned faces. My father said, *No, you don't want to go in there*, which made me want to go inside even more.

This time, my father and I traveled around Kerala by train and bus, but only the second-class busses and trains because my father was going to show me the *real* India, the India through dusty, cracked windows, the India where one had to be alert during public transportation adventures so as to avoid stepping on chickens and goats sprawled on the bus floors; not the India that could be viewed comfortably from clean, air-conditioned seats and freshly wiped windows. Through the grimy windows, billboards blurred by, advertising saris and Salwar Kameez and gold jewelry and TATA vehicles and fairness creams. The models on these billboards were all light-skinned, northern Indians, even some bleach blonde-haired Indians, even though Kerala is in the southern tip of India, where the people have dark skin and even darker hair.

I wore my Salwar Kameez to visit relatives, to travel, to the temple, and to the fish market, where the fisherwomen sat on the dusty sidewalk, piles of fish laid out on sheets of paper in front of them. Yelling over the blares of car horns, the fisherwomen asked my father when I plan to get married and if I'd found a husband yet. They said that they had sons and grandsons and nephews who were available, and my father laughed and said something that in Malayalam I wasn't able to understand. We walked away with heaps of fish piled in our tote bags, and as we left, I wondered when I would return to India again, if I would be married the next time I returned, or if my father

would still be accompanying me and translating my interactions, guiding me safely through the unfamiliar and the unknown.

## Like Kittens In A Grocery Store

Ellen and I shuffle through Piggly Wiggly's "Reading and Literature" aisle, stopping to flip through bibles, some novels in the *Left Behind* series and gossip rags. We are each wearing a chest-strapped pouch with a kitten inside; Ellen has Midnight and I have Oreo.

Ellen holds out a copy of *Left Behind: Soul Harvest*, saying, "I know you and your mom don't want to go to church, but this book is really good. And you can learn about the rapture." Whenever Ellen's mother comes to pick her up from a play date at my house, she always finds a way to casually invite my mother and I to the next event at her church, to which my mother always responds, "Thanks, but no thanks."

I toss *Soul Harvest* in my basket, but make a mental note to discreetly "lose" it somewhere before getting to checkout.

Ellen and I skim the literature shelves until we find the latest issues of *Teen Bop*, which has pullout posters of shirtless Aaron Carter and Nick Lachey, the perfect decorations for our twelve-year-old bedrooms. I bend down to pick up the magazines from the bottom shelf, pressing Oreo close to my chest so that she doesn't tumble out of the carrier. She protests with a low "mew." A middle-aged woman in a "Rapture: Now You See Me, Now You Don't" shirt stands next to me, peering curiously at the kitten but saying nothing.

Midnight, who rides in Ellen's pouch, lets out a soft "meow" and Ellen quickly shoves his head back into her pouch. "Oh my God, someone from school is going to see us. Let's buy these and leave," she says, grabbing the magazines and pulling me to the front of the store.

The cashier is an older woman with wild grey hair and a "Jesus Knows You're Looking" pin on her massive bosom. "Oh, that's a great read. I just finished it last week," the cashier says, noticing the *Soul Harvest* that's still in my basket. "What church do you go to?"

"First Methodist Church," I lie, avoiding Ellen's glare. She knows that I use the Methodist Church as a cover for my "heathenism," a term I learned only after moving to Arkansas. I *do* go to the Methodist Church, but only for the occasional Girl Scout meeting, never for the Sunday Service. Our Girl Scout Leader, Mark, is also a Southern Methodist preacher, so I tell myself that this is only a small lie. Ellen thinks all lies are lies, therefore sins.

"Oh, yeah, on Main? Heard y'all got a new preacher, how you liking him?" the cashier asks me.

"Um, yeah, he's fine," I mumble, turning away to adjust Midnight, who's started crying loudly on my chest.

Ellen smirks. "*I* go to First Presbyterian," she says, proudly pointing at the logo on her T-shirt.

The cashier smiles, then leans across the checkout lane and whispers, “You know, you can’t bring cats into grocery stores. It violates health codes. I’ve seen you and your mom comin’ in here with those cats,” she says, pointing a finger at my chest. “But when the manager sees you, he’s gonna scream. Now I’d get out quick if I were you.”

“I told you this was weird!” Ellen hisses as we grab our bags and dash out of the store. We press Midnight and Oreo close to our chests so that they don’t tumble out as we race out of the Piggly Wiggly.

One we’re out of the parking lot, we slow down and catch our breath. Ellen grabs *Teen Bop* out of her bag starts reading aloud a few stories about Britney Spears’ latest breakup, how to get your crush to notice you, and lip gloss that changes color with your mood. We gush over the articles as we walk home, past my dentist’s office, where I try to memorize the lyrics to the Christian rock songs that blast continuously while I’m getting teeth pulled, past Al’s country music club that illegally serves alcohol even though Monticello is in a dry county, and into my mother’s brick house, where the kittens, panting with excitement, scamper away from us, burying themselves in dust bunnies underneath chairs far from our grasps.

## Behind Closed Beaks

The state bird of Arizona, the cactus wren, is an eight-inch, tobacco spitting, whiskey- drinking, foot-tapping con artist. He builds a slew of decoy nests between the prickly thorns of desert cacti. He is the largest North American wren, and he knows this. Each morning, he flips over dried leaves with his beak, searching for braised pork loin with balsamic reduction. He's learned that he can rely on nature only for practical things like insects and twigs, so he perches outside of Carrabba's Italian Grill, where the Sous-chef feeds him bites of leftover lasagna and sips of wine from a mason jar lid. When he flies back to the nest, he has nothing to share with his mate and hatchlings, who wait with open mouths, mouths that only ever receive dry grasshoppers and beetles that get stuck in throats that crackle with a desert-wind dryness.

~

Arkansas' mockingbird was named by the early Quapaw, who called her *Cencontlatolly*, a word meaning *four hundred tongues*. Men are excited by this name, so she keeps her beak closed when they are near. As she flies, businessmen, garbage men, and fireman walk on the street below her, following her shadow as if attached by a string. Male birds stalk her at night, following her from rooftop to tree to pole. They primp and preen when she is around. Some bring her twigs and worms, hoping to swoon her; others try to force themselves on her delicate body. Once a month she feels lustful and

chooses only the most well endowed male to accompany her in the nest. Afterwards, cencentlatolly warbles loudly, impersonating the croaking frog below, or the neighbor's dog who cries during birth, or the squeaks of bedsprings that leak out of open windows late into the night. Her trills say: I am not a plagiarist, but a thirsty diva—will someone please refill my glass of chardonnay? Only two of the puppies live.

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Michigan's American robin demands a more unique name for herself. She is patriotic with her red breast, but is vocal about her support for Spain's football team. The robin is the first to sing at dawn, but she sings blindly, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dark. She is known to fly into fingerprint-stained dining room windows while groggy-eyed families bend over their bowls of oatmeal. When her neck cracks on impact, the inhabitants of the home gather her frail body and feed her a sugar water mixture with a medicine spoon. They say to each other, "We can fix this bird," but with 2ml, 6ml, 9ml of sugar water lodged in her throat, she chokes and suffocates, so they toss her limp body out to rot with the bananas.

## Gateway Bugs

The gossamer-winged butterfly's a myrmecophile--some say ant-addict but he prefers *ant enthusiast*. Last month he was thrown in jail for publicly abusing trophallaxis – he sucked the shit out of a teenage ant's ass until its limbs quivered, it fell and never woke up.

Every morning, he trembles until he produces a sweet secretion. *Come, I have the purest candy*, he calls. Ignoring the shrieks of their queen, ants flock to his body for the sweetness. But after one lick, they are submissive, obedient creatures who bend and exert when they are told.

As a young pupa, the ants protected the gossamer and a few other pupas from predators. When the other pupas were weaned, they left the colony, but the gossamer never learned to feed without ants. He ate their vomit, shit, and larvae when the adults were out, then wiped his mouth and spat lies when they returned.

Relatives thought a mate might help, so they set him up with a sweet blue-wing, soft-tipped butterfly. She led him to passionflower, showed him how to suck and bite. The couple only lasted for two days, until the butterfly awoke to the gossamer's quivering body rocking their leaf, his fat abdomen covered with spent ant carcasses, mouth parted into a gluttonous gasp, one thin leg dangling out of the corner. The gossamer's father still refuses to speak to him.

The mezcal worm lives with the maguey worm and about 100 other edible worms in a bucket underneath Nachomama's tex-mex kitchen sink. The mezcal worm's a sexy, long-bodied seductress who swears she's been to the bottom of five tequila shots, been swallowed down throats and seen the darkness of stomachs, but always slithers away unharmed. Said she gets drunk every time and she likes it.

The maguey worm refuses to believe the mezcal's left the bin, says *the only time you disappear is when you fall to the bottom of the bucket, you punta*. Everyone knows the maguey's *highly nutritious*. Last week, her larvae were scooped onto a wooden spoon and tossed on a skillet where she heard them sizzle. The maguey'll be masticated, maybe eaten alive in a *650-calorie Weight-Watcher's dish* or deep-fried and seasoned with salt, lime, and served in a tortilla, if she's lucky.

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The goliath worm is also known as the tobacco worm but he doesn't know who Goliath is and he's never tasted tobacco. His friends in the laboratory tell him about past days of munching on fresh tobacco and tomato leaves, but the Goliath only eats the wheat germ based diet that's squirted onto his dish. All his food tastes of bleach. His meals lack the xanthophyll he needs, leaving him mostly blind to the gloves that probe needles into his soft body. His skin's a bleak blue when it's supposed to be green.

Students say they love him for his easily accessible nervous system and isolatable organs, but the goliath still isn't sure he knows what love is. He sees boys threatening to drop worms into girls' hair, sees chemicals being squirted onto bare hands – maybe being pricked and pulled equals love?

At night, the goliath curls into a ball, but he doesn't sleep. He's been injected with a disease so painful his insides itch. In the morning, students pull at his body, shove him into trays and peer at him through hot, blinding microscopes. They say *inflammation, digestive tract, manduca sexta*, but they don't say *feel better, I'm sorry*, and nobody ever tells him who Goliath is.

## Things Fall Down

You're sleeping next to your wife in your metal-roofed Brazilian home. Your cat snores on a chair in the corner, a few crooked family photographs hang by loose nails on the dusty bedroom walls, and every night, the same three mice skitter in and out of a small hole in the closet. The metal roof, although somewhat flimsy, has protected you and your wife from countless thunderstorms, falling branches, and bird droppings. You roll onto your side and wrap your arms around your wife, maybe using her stomach folds to warm your cold hands, maybe slipping your long, calloused feet between her slender, smooth heels. "I'm content," you think to yourself, when suddenly your peaceful night is interrupted by four sharp hooves crashing into your esophagus, your thigh, your elbow, your groin. A brown, thin-haired stomach weighing approximately one ton now crushes your chest and a wide-nostriled, pointy-eared, bulging-eyed face is the last image you see before passing out.

"I didn't bring my son up to be killed by a falling cow," Maria de Souza told SuperCanal TV. "He nearly died when he was two and got meningitis, but I worked hard to buy medicines for him and he survived. And now he's lying in his bed and gets crushed to death by a cow. There's no justice in the world."

No justice, indeed. Joao Maria de Souza and his wife, Leni, were asleep in their bed when the 3,000-pound cow crashed through their metal roof this summer. The cow, in need of his nightly constitutional, supposedly escaped

from a nearby farm and walked up a flowery hillside only to accidentally find himself standing on the slanted roof of Joao's house, which the cow mistook for a metal extension of the hill. Unable to support the cow's 3,000 pounds, the roof caved in and the midnight walker took an eight-foot plunge directly onto Joao's side of the bed. Leni and the cow walked away from the incident unharmed, but Joao didn't survive. The Caratinga police continue to search for the owner of the cow and hope to eventually charge the cow's owner with manslaughter.

According to [nationmaster.com](http://nationmaster.com), the United States takes first place in the "Morality Statistics –struck by thrown, projected or falling objects" category. In 2004, we had 712 of these deaths, Brazil took second place with 351 deaths, and the Cayman Islands came in last, with only 1 falling-object related death. You can take some precautions to protect yourself from the dangers of car accidents, the flu, and drowning, but how do you defend yourself from objects that seemingly fall from the sky? Even the most durable helmet won't save you from a cow crash. Should we try to avoid any type of roof or awning that doesn't allow for a precise view of the sky above at all times?

Aeschylus was a Greek tragedian frequently described as the "father of tragedy." His own life came to a tragic end during his trip to Sicily, when an eagle dropped a tortoise on his head, mistaking Aeschylus' baldness for a rock that would be suitable for shattering the tortoise's shell. According to old

legends, eagles picked up tortoises and attempted to crack them open and get to their meat by dropping the tortoises on rocks. Apparently Aeschylus had a prophecy that a falling object would end his life, so he had been trying to remain indoors at all times, but fate works in funny ways.

This August, a pregnant Yingli Li sat on a Queens park bench, massaging her swollen ankles. Nearby, families picnicked at wooden tables, sheepish owners let their golden retrievers defecate into freshly planted flower beds, and ice-cream vendors sweated in the sun, trying to get kids to buy chocolate ice cream, trying to get adults to buy the marijuana and coke hidden underneath the tubs of chocolate ice cream. Same Kim was walking her golden just feet away when the tree fell.

“I heard a loud crash and a boom. When we got there we saw a young Asian girl laying face down and there was blood coming out of her head. She was just enjoying a beautiful day in the park, just a tragic thing to happen,” said Kim.

During the same deadly August, a small plane crashed into a Connecticut neighborhood near an airport, killing six people in their homes. Between 2000 and 2011, a whopping 215 people were killed by their wall-mounted televisions that unexpectedly crashed onto their shag carpets. Is there anywhere that we can go to protect ourselves from these cows, trees, televisions, and planes that might suddenly descend upon us? When strolling

through parks, should one always keep a team of arborists in tow to map out which benches sit under the most dangerous, bloodthirsty maples of the area?

According to the Economist, Americans have a 1/54,538 chance of dying while walking –getting hit by a car, falling through an uncovered manhole, walking beneath a sick tree. This statistic may make walking seem like a fairly safe activity, but it’s actually one of the top five most deadly activities listed on the Economist’s chart. You’re more likely to die from “walking” than choking, a fire, firearms discharge, or the forces of nature. Perhaps the common cartoon death-by-falling-grand-piano isn’t as implausible as one might think. Cows, televisions, trees, airplanes, asteroids, space shrapnel –who can predict what gravity might send towards us next?

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It’s New Years Eve of 2011. You and your friends prepare to partake in endless shenanigans in the booming metropolis of Beebe, Arkansas, population 7,000. Perhaps you’re just driving back from Little Rock, the car packed with bottles of alcohol that are forbidden in Beebe’s dry county, and maybe you and your friends are playing the most dangerous game of all –40 on 40, where the goal is to finish an entire 40 ounce of Malt liquor while driving the half hour back home on interstate 40. The more you keep drinking, the easier it becomes to chug the malty drink. By the time you reach Beebe’s city limits, everyone feels quite tipsy. The driver begins to

swerve across the yellow line. Whenever you have a brief moment of clarity, you grab onto the “oh shit” handles, but your grip isn’t very strong. Liquor splashes over the seats and floorboards of your friend’s pick-up truck, but the slightly sweet, sticky substance soaking through the seats is starting to smell good to you.

You’re cruising down Beebe’s Main Street when you hear a “thump” on the roof of the truck. And then another thump. And another and another and you look out of your window and see dead blackbirds pouring down from the sky. You know you’re drunk, but you don’t think you’re already at the point of seeing-dead-birds-falling-from-the-sky drunk. But then you roll your window down and hear the *crunch crunch crunch* as the pick-up’s tires roll over piles of blackbirds.

“Thought the mayor was messing with me when he called me. He got me up at four o’clock in the morning and told me we had birds falling out of the sky,” a gruff, middle-aged Milton McCullar, town street supervisor of Beebe, tells ABC news.

“Well, there was just birds falling down on the street and people dodging and missing them,” said a Beebe police officer. “We got called out by the chief and we all [came] out trying to pick them off the street.”

“One of [the birds] almost hit my friend in the head,” said Christy Stephens, who had been standing outside with the smoking crew at a New Years party. “We went inside after that.”

The Aflockalypse came to Beebe on New Years Eve of 2011 and 2012. Nobody was prepared for the 2011 flock (about 5,000 dead birds), but the animal control and police were ready the next year. From my own dry hometown two hours away from Beebe, we turned the local news on around midnight in 2012, eager to see what might drop first, the Times Square ball or the mysterious Beebe blackbirds.

Conspiracy theorists racked their brains for answers. It must have been a UFO. The government. A government-controlled UFO. Lightning. Terrorists. Terrorist-controlled UFOs. Perhaps some almighty creatures engaged in a game of “Angry Birds.” Scientists, on the other hand, declared that fireworks startled these otherwise healthy birds from their roosts, making them lose their minds and fly into trees, buildings, telephone poles, cars, and each other. The birds’ poor night vision probably didn’t help their circumstances either.

According to ABC news, not even one Beebe resident was hit or grazed by a dead blackbird falling out of the sky. This seems like a hard fact to believe, though –of the 5,000 birds that fell in the city of 7,421 people, not one person was hit? How is it that on a seemingly normal day, one Greek

tragedian dies from a falling tortoise and one lady in a park gets crushed by a diseased tree, but on a New Years night when the sky is filled with nearly as many plunging dead blackbirds as people who inhabit the city, not one person gets pelted with a falling fowl? Perhaps the almighty creatures just sucked at their game of “Angry Birds.” The statistics of the universe remain a mystery to me.

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Following the Feng Shui rules for bedroom furniture placement, I’ve aligned my bed “further from the door/ diagonally from the door but not in line with the door.” You want to be able to *see* the door from your bed, but you don’t want to be *aligned* with the door. Our 1940’s style duplex, with its high ceilings, rounded entrance arches, and heavily scratched wooden floors, although rather pleasing in appearance does not make for the most Feng Shui-appropriate furniture positions.

My bed, awkwardly large for the small dimensions of my room, sits under a shelf that’s attached to one of my bedroom walls, a shelf that has probably been nailed or screwed to this wall for many years and might stay attached to this wall for many more years (or, then again, it might not). The shelf is a heavy, white, wooden thing with three separate layers to put candles, jewelry, picture frames, and the likes. My pillows lie directly beneath this shelf. Every night before bed, I give the shelf a good shake to

test its sturdiness. It could be my paranoia, or the fact that I keep shaking this shelf every night, but the shelf seems to be getting slightly looser.

I've tried moving the bed against other walls, but there's just nowhere else for it to go. Other walls don't have enough outlets to plug in all the devices on my bedside table, I can't have the bed pushed against the windows because of draftiness, and anywhere else would be breaking the rules of Feng Shui. So my pillows remain beneath this 5x5 wall shelf, daunting me with its heaviness, its increasing looseness, its ability to end my life.

"If you do fall," I tell my shelf, "can you do so a swift chop through my carotid artery? I'd prefer a quick death to a slow, drawn out one where I'm trapped under the shelf, unable to move it off of my trapped neck."

My fear of falling objects is fairly new, and I blame it on a coconut tree. This summer I flew to Thiruvananthapuram, a city in Kerala, India to visit family. On my second day there, my dad and I walked from my grandmother's flat to a fish and vegetable market nearby. We cut through some side alleys to avoid the head-achingly busy, dusty streets. The alleys were nice, quiet, lined with homes and coconut trees. While walking, I paid close attention to the roads. If you're not careful, you could easily step into a pile of garbage, a piece of sidewalk that's not as stable as it might look, or onto a sleeping rabid dog. As I fixated on the ground and my deliberate steps, a coconut fell directly into the one-foot space between my dad and I.

This coconut wasn't from any short, baby tree, but a full-grown, 70-90 footer. Had the heavy, water-filled fruit cannon landed on my head, it could have killed me, possibly paralyzed me, or at least given me a concussion.

“If we hadn't stopped to talk to those women in the driveway, one of us would have been demolished by that coconut,” my dad said multiple times that day.

One of the eight deaths mentioned on the “death by coconut” Wikipedia page is a one-and-a-half-month-old girl who died by a falling coconut in, where else, but Thiruvananthapuram. Maybe it was the Feng Shui-appropriate placement of my furniture that barely saved me from the coconut, or maybe it was our brief chat with the women in the driveway that did it, who's to know? There's virtually nothing that we can do to protect ourselves from the dangers of falling objects. In regards to things that drop from above, all we can do is hope that the cows will remain on their hills, the coconuts stay on their trees, the pilots land their planes on the runways, the eagles don't mistake our heads for rocks, and the arborists frequently peruse the diseased trees in the parks. In the meantime, all we can do is lie in our beds and hope that the Feng Shui positioning of our bedroom furniture is enough to keep the heavy wooden guillotine of a shelf nailed to our walls.

## Signs of Drowning

She cannonballs off the diving board, casually, and I don't react. On top of the lifeguard stand, I pick at my cuticles, check my hair for split ends, and adjust the ties on my swimsuit top. She doesn't show the usual signs of someone who doesn't can't swim – eyes darting back and forth, pacing up and down the diving board indecisively, heavy breaths. Instead, she walks the plank coolly, doesn't even blink before curling her body into a tight ball and bouncing into the deep end.

I'd seen it with kids before, six or seven year olds whose parents never taught them how to swim, or that water can be dangerous. They'd walk up to the board and spring right off into the twelve-foot water, slowly sinking to the bottom of the pool as if they were somehow naturally buoyant, and expected to spring right back up like everyone else they'd watched that day. Lower and lower the kids would sink, until they were on the bottom. Suddenly, their eyes would pop open, always the eyes first; then their mouths would gasp; and I'd realize that they were not, in fact, playing the "pencil" game, or the "tea party at the bottom" game, but stuck, panicking silently, screams silenced by the chlorinated water. Frozen on the bottom of the sparkling pool, the children looked eerily reminiscent of an insect embedded in resin plastic – those creepy souvenirs that you can purchase in Arizona and New Mexico, scorpions or wasps or grasshoppers permanently trapped in a glittery teal plastic mound that a lawyer might use as a paperweight, or a grandmother

might receive in a Christmas stocking. This observation was not one that I shared with the children's parents.

The panicked expression would be my cue to dive off the lifeguard tower and retrieve the child from the bottom. Sometimes, worried mothers would rush over to thank me, or try to slip me a \$20 bill, as if giving me monetary compensation would relieve them from the guilt of almost having a child drown within twenty feet of their engrossing romance novel. Too often, parents would continue to sunbathe by the pool, crunching ice from a cherry slushie, headphones on, oblivious.

Saving children from the deep end was easy. They were small, light, and usually stopped struggling once they were in my grasp. The adults remained in a state of terror, continuing to struggle even after I'd started hauling them up to the surface. I could understand why they'd be skeptical of the abilities of my scrawny, sixteen-year-old self. But they'd try to climb me, hands pushing my head down into the water, and it was all I could do to not break free and just swim to the side, saving myself.

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Out of the seven billion people in this world, scientists have identified 400 who are completely unable to feel fear. These people suffer, or, some might say, are gifted with, Urbach-Wiethe disease. Urbach-Wiethe disease causes calcium deposits to grow in the brain, which cause parts of the brain

to calcify and harden, leading to possible epilepsy or other abnormalities. In some severe cases of Urbach-Wiethe, the host's amygdalae, the almond-like structures found deep in the brain that are crucial to the human fear response, will completely harden and waste away. When the amygdalae is healthy, it sends fear-inducing signals to the body if someone is in a dangerous situation – signals like a racing heart, sweaty palms, shortness of breath. But when this part of the brain calcifies, the person is unable to experience these symptoms, or recognize when he or she is in a dangerous situation.

Researchers at the University of Iowa recently interviewed SM, an anonymous woman who suffers from Urbach-Wiethe. Her real name, age, and location were kept anonymous, because if her identity leaked, people could easily take advantage of her. SM says when her sons were young, she was walking to a store when a man on a park bench called her over. She says the man “grabbed me by the shirt, and he held a knife to my throat and told me he was going to cut me. I told him – I said: ‘go ahead and cut me.’” Instead of trying to run away, SM said, “I’ll be coming back, and I’ll hunt your ass.” The man let her go, and she went home, but SM didn’t call the police after this event, since she didn’t see any danger.

If something traumatic happens in SM’s life, the event isn’t registered as threatening or scary. She’s been held at knifepoint at least twice and held at gunpoint twice. To SM, fear is a completely incomprehensible phenomenon. She can’t even recognize a fearful expression on someone else’s

face, even her own sons'. But her doctors say that this is an isolated defect: SM has normal intelligence and feels other emotions such as joy, sadness, jealousy, and anger in the same way as others.

In the interview, SM talks about how her previous husband almost beat her to death. She recognized the abuse, that she was being mistreated and not in a healthy marriage, but the actual beating left no emotional footprint on her, no scarring. She felt no need for therapy, a recovery period crucial to most people who suffer through such a relationship. Professor Antonio Damasio, the neuroscientist at the University of Iowa who has been studying SM, says, if she looks at her autobiography, her autobiography does not have written in big letters as 'this was a bad thing' because it was not a bad thing in terms of her experience. It's not that she is masking it. It's that she didn't have it to begin with."

~

Although most of the patrons who couldn't swim remained in the shallow end, there were always a handful of people who couldn't swim but would fling themselves off the diving board, care-free. The small children would usually warn the lifeguards of their swimming inabilities first, so we'd jump in with the rescue tube and wait to catch them after they dove in. But the number of adults who didn't know how to swim, yet would jump into the pool freely and without warning us, was always surprising.

According to Professor Antonio Damasio, “If you have no fear, more terrible things will happen to you, but you don’t personally experience them as terrible. If you have a lot of fear, fewer bad things are likely to happen, but it’s very probable that your life is more painful to you. So is it better to be fearful or fearless?”

Our recreational culture makes us believe that swimming and water sports are a normal part of life. Similar to the inability to read or write, adults don’t like the stigma that goes with not being able to swim. If people pretend that they don’t have this fear, that they can swim, even though they’ve never learned how to do a breast stroke or tread water, and they jump confidently into the deep end, appearing to their audience as if they have been swimming for their whole lives, is this the best way to overcome a fear of swimming? Often, people will advise someone who is scared to “Just do it!” – a father pushing his shy son to go play with a group of children making sand castles on the beach; or a wife, encouraging her husband to try sushi at a Japanese restaurant; or my own mother, telling me to put my foot on the gas pedal and shift from 1<sup>st</sup> gear to 2<sup>nd</sup> as she taught me how to drive a stick-shift. Unfortunately, with life-or-death sports, a confident performance without any actual skills can only do so much to alleviate fear.

During my three summers spent as lifeguard, I watched many of my fellow lifeguards have to rescue struggling adults from the deep end—adults who showed no hesitation or worry before jumping. By the time I’d reached

my third summer, which I'd already decided would be my last, I'd considered myself lucky I'd only ever had to rescue small children. Until that hot day in late July when the woman in the orange striped bikini, probably in her early 30s, leaped off of the diving board, her seven-year-old son watching from the side of the pool. She smiled at him, then jumped in, and I thought nothing about it until she didn't return to the surface, and her flailing arms started to make ripples on the surface.

I dove in with the rescue tube, my own heart frantic. She was almost to the floor of the pool, so I hovered a couple of feet above her and extended my hand, but she wouldn't reach for it. I dove further and scooped her up and she resisted the entire time, a natural reaction for someone who thinks they are drowning. Eventually, we got to the top, me, out of breath, her, choking for water and gasping for air.

She was clearly traumatized, and did not have Urbach-Wiethe. Her son ran over, crying, as we wrapped his mother in a warm blanket. I didn't ask her *why* she jumped in if she didn't know how to swim, or if perhaps she did know how to swim but just panicked after the jump.

The ability to feel fear can save us from many avoidable life-threatening scenarios, but can also prevent us from living life, or taking chances. Fear stops me from talking to strange men on the sidewalk, men who could be completely harmless; but also stops me from drunkenly jumping

off of a boat in the middle of Lake Superior. Having been raised by helicopter parents, I'd say that I'm on the far end of the fear scale, always questioning motives and dimly lit corners. I'm unable to turn off my feelings of fear.

Perhaps these diving-board jumpers were able to ignore their feelings of fear because they knew that if they started to struggle, a lifeguard would come save them. They trusted our abilities, sometimes more than we did. For those who do not have Urbach-Wiethe, the ability to ignore a sense of fear might stem from an ability to trust in humanity, to believe that people are predominantly good, and will do what they can to help others. Maybe there is something to be said about standing up to fear, taking the initial dive, and saying *no, you won't* to the man who tries to hold a knife to your throat.

## Promises Made by the Superfast Ferry Website

*Romantic, under the stars nautical camping experience. Top deck camping – fun for the whole family!*

They sleep under blankets woven with constellations, woven with whales, or curl up around last week's newspapers. "DEAD WOMAN FOUND IN 88<sup>TH</sup> ST. DUMPSTER," reads one headline. Their heads rest on garbage-bag luggage. Silent babies with wind-chapped noses snooze in the crooks of their arms. Quiet and peaceful, they bother nobody. Their teeth are just coming in.

A woman trips over the sleeping families, stabbing their legs unapologetically with her red heels. She turns to the man carrying her luggage and says, "Book me a couples massage at 3 with Agapitos, only Agapitos." She marches downstairs to her private cabin.

A man drinking a glass of ouzo at the ship's open-deck bar spits tobacco into a cloth napkin and tells my mother that the campers are *tricky gypsies, those Romani* before asking us to join him in the private hot tub in his cabin. We exchange a look of disgust and leave him to down his ouzo. We'd rather be in our cheap dormitory cabin with our six other bunkmates than with this creep. A woman on the top bunk snores heavily, whistling through the holes in her retainer.

*Moments of relaxation under the Greek sun, fun by the swimming pool, from morning until sunset.*

In June, the pool on the top deck is closed for some unknown reason, so my mother and I sunbathe next to the “Warning—Do Not Cross” tape and piles of dead flies. We let the sun bring our skin to a boil and munch on stale Cheetos.

A woman with a baby on her hip sits across from us, saying nothing. She is Romani, a top-deck camper. She points to our Cheetos, then back to her baby, then to our Cheetos again. We pass the Cheetos to her and watch as the toothless baby sucks the dry Cheetos soggy. When the child is done, she hands the baby to us and walks away. A uniformed man sweeping the deck scowls and shakes his finger at us as we run after her to return the child.

*Dance the night away to the biggest Greek and international hits!*

Middle-aged, pot-bellied truck drivers stand at cocktail tables around the empty dance floor, six levels above their semis that are parked in the ship’s bowels. They recognize us from the baby incident earlier and say, “Watch out for the gypsies, they’ll rob you and take your money.” They ask us to dance, my mom and I both, unconcerned about our thirty-three year age difference. They just want warm bodies pressed into their empty arms. We decline, again. The men twirl the ends of their black moustaches with olive

sticks and massage their legs through blue jean pockets as they wait for the young, agile dancers promised in the photos on the Superfast Ferry website.

*Swimming pools, discos, bars, casinos—we have everything available to guarantee that everyone has a great time the moment you step on board.*

Deck dwellers, dorm dwellers, and private cabin dwellers feel the bumps of the waves and the pull of the tide together. At midnight, the dismayed truck drivers abandon their dance-floor perch and return to their rooms alone; the top-deck dwellers attempt a rainy, wind-blown sleep interrupted by flashlights scanning for illegal migrants, and we lie in our dormitory bunk beds, grumbling about the overpriced cafeteria food and the way the toilet water spills onto the dorm floor when the ship hits the roughest of waves.

## Thirst

### Chilies

In the house behind the chili factory, the living room hung heavy with aromas of poblano, manzano, serrano, and guajillo. A deep breath tickled lungs, nostrils. The house's adobe-bricked floor cracked and parted, making way for desert grasses. I tried to plant wildflower seeds between the cracks of my bedroom floor, but the flowers never got enough light to bloom.

No amount of sweeping ever removed all of the dirt that blew in through open windows and piled beneath straw-braided rockers. I pirouetted across the cool floor, shedding the dirt from the tips of my toes to the melodies of Brahms and Tchaikovsky, practicing for my after-school dance classes. My mother followed the trails of my twirls with a broom and dustpan.

At night, I lay in bed and stared up at my ceiling, which was lined with a string of Christmas lights, each bulb covered with a decorative rubber chili that was purchased one at a time, in five-cent increments, from the chili factory. As I fell asleep, I counted chilies. For the springtime program at school, my classmates and I had to memorize a song, in Spanish, about the different types of chilies. *Chilaca, Pasilla, Chiltepin* we'd sing down the hallways. For the performance, I dressed as a habanero and stood on the stage next to a chilaca who got so nervous that he wet his pants, staining a

section of his cardboard chili costume a darker shade of green. The urine dripped from the crooked tip of the chili and pooled between his lime-green roller-skating Sketcher shoes. If I'd been him, I would have popped the wheels out and rolled right off the stage.

After school, I often walked down our driveway to the chili factory, perched on a wooden stool in front of the check-out counter, and chatted about my day amidst floor-to-ceiling shelves stocked full of chili pastes and powders, chili t-shirts, plastic chilies that danced when a string was pulled, chili-patterned shoe strings – the types of gifts that always filled my grandparents' stockings when they came for Christmas visits.

I used my allowance to buy sweet lollipops with ants, crickets, and grasshoppers embalmed inside, licking away their sugary coffins until the tip of my tongue reached the cusped head of the insect, whose body I bit off in deliberate segments, head-thorax-abdomen-wings. Willy, the chili factory owner, put the University of Arizona basketball game on mute and listened as I proudly announced each freshly-bitten limb, the terms gleaned from my second-grade science class. I'd slurp on picante mango suckers and squeeze the gooey threads of pelon pelo rico tamarind through the top of the plastic tube until my teeth were heavy with orange coating, the foreboding shadows of future cavities. Willy never counted the pile of change I flung on top of the counter. He'd pull at the strings on his U of A hoody, then scoop up the pile and drop the coins into the cash register. Willy always sent me home with

free chili pastes and sauces for my mother, calling them “extras” or “leftovers.”

Our front yard was a chili factory and our backyard was the purple Tumacacori Mountains, which were carved with roads and river tunnels. At night, the river tunnels came to life as people fleeing from Mexico crawled through to our Arizonan backyard on hands and knees, carrying children in backpacks to The Land of Opportunity. Sometimes when we were lying in bed at night, we’d hear a child’s shriek through our open windows, or a father’s yell, or a mother singing calming Spanish lullabies about twinkling stars, pretty horses, and amazing Grace. In the morning, we picked up discarded diapers, torn shirts or stained underwear from the yard.

During the day, I waded into the river tunnels with our dogs, wearing my favorite “The Chupacabra is Real!” shirt in an adult size that draped around my ankles. My mother sent me with sacks packed full of tortillas, chilies, beans, chips, blankets, and water bottles to hide in the tunnels and behind Saguaros and beneath desert willows, tasks that left me covered with layers of unforgiving dirt.

When the policemen inevitably pulled into our driveway, faces red, eyes squinting, drooping mustaches, and ponds of sweat stagnant in the folds of their backs, my mother sent me out the backdoor to run into the mountains. I ran barefoot on my callused, desert-girl feet. My shirt snagged

as I dashed through bushes, eyes squinting as I tried to make my way through the dimming evening light. I crawled into the mouth of the river tunnel, its concrete walls reverberating with the thuds of the cars passing above, spiders to my left and Gila monsters to my right. I grabbed leftover cans, tied them up in blankets, and shoved them into our rickety metal shed. Unable to find what they were looking for, the policemen left, spitting *I know you're helping the illegals. And you're going to regret it.*

But we never regretted it, and I ran the supplies right back to their spots the next day. In the evenings, my mother and I ate our dinners on the front porch, yelling at our dogs to stop chasing the javelinas, listening to the crunching twigs and padding footsteps of immigrants walking through our backyard, watching the chimneys of the chili factory spew their acrid smoke into the sky as Willy toasted tomorrow's batches.

## Piles

Ella's grandparents napped an awful lot. When we were playing fairyland or doggaland in her grandparents' yard, dodging through beds of cilantro, heirloom tomatoes, wildflowers, and cacti, I'd try to peek into her grandparents' windows and see past their thick, dark curtains, because after two years of Wisconsin Summertime friendship, I had never been invited into her house. I fantasized about her grandparents living with closets full of dead bodies, Frankensteinian experiments, or stolen children who came out only at

night to plant and tend to their massive garden. I never shared these fantasies with Ella, who was easily angered and enjoyed killing off my dog fairies or magical kittens with sudden sinkholes or accidental falls whenever we were in play world.

One day we were sitting in my dad's front yard, beneath a tall oak tree that kept dropping leaves into our drinks, as we argued about who the best Disney dog was. As we debated, her grandma leaned out of the front door and yelled, *Ella! Come inside and talk to your mom on the phone!* When she saw Ella motion *I'll be right back, just stay here*, to me, her grandma yelled again, *You can come inside too, sweetie! We'll get you something cool to drink.*

I remember resisting the urge to race to the front door. I tried to walk calmly through their front yard, making sure not to stomp on any flower or vegetable beds, worrying that an accidental step on a stem or leaf could get my golden invitation revoked. Outside, the sun was bright, melting the ice in our drinks and dripping strawberry LipSmacker chap stick down the corners of our mouths in a joker-esque fashion. As soon as Ella's grandma shut the heavy oak door behind us, everything went cool and black. I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the lack of light. The outline of her grandma's cherry-patterned dress, which hugged her curvy hips, disappeared into the dimness. *Come into the kitchen and I'll pour you some lemonade* her grandma's voice echoed from the other end of the house.

No matter which way I turned, I was surrounded by piles of newspapers dating back to 1944, loose photographs, books about gardening stacked on top of books about vehicles stacked on top of books about World War II, balls of yarn, expired coupons, new coupons, used coupons, fishing hooks, and more. Some stacks reached the ceiling. Something smelled, or, perhaps everything smelled. The air absorbed the smells of these items, and the air conditioner circulated the air through the vents, over and over again, as if deliberately adding to this cycle, as if the house was clinging on to these belongings just as much as its inhabitants were.

To make my way through the house, I had to follow a thin, cleared trail, like something the boy scouts would have whacked through overgrown weedy woods. I ran my fingers along the stacks as I walked, feeling the soft hair of the Asian dolls, knocking a few loose family photographs to the floor, scraping the dust from cassette tapes and old fans between my fingernails, feeling the textures of maps, empty rolls of tape, and wine bottles that appeared as if they'd started to be crafted into something new and potentially usable. I wondered if all of these items were meaningful in some way, like this was a museum of their lives; or if Ella's grandparents just feared loss – of people, objects, trash, anything -- or if these items were arbitrary, simply gathering into piles because her grandparents were too lazy to throw all the junk out. As I turned a corner and entered the dining room, I slipped the

plastic tulip ring off of my pointer finger and set it on top of a stack of cracked handheld mirrors.

In the kitchen, Ella's grandma chatted with me like normal. When she yelled for Ella to come down and sit with us, we heard an upstairs door slam. Her grandma and I sat on bar stools, surrounded by heaps of cookbooks, cooking magazines, phonebooks, babies' dresses, junk mail advertising discount boats and blenders and dentures. She didn't say *excuse our messy house* or *sorry about the junk, we just haven't had time to clean in a while*. Instead, she said *would you like some sugar with your lemonade? What about a cookie?* Both of which I accepted eagerly, because I was always a very hungry child, and I remember the cookie tasting like sweet chocolate and oats, with just a hint of old newspaper, stains on dead babies dresses, and book dust; the lemonade electric on my tongue, with trickles of sweat, stale perfume, and maybe urine, was that urine?

### Choir

The high school choir director wore pastel suits that stayed crisp, even in the wet heat of the Arkansas summertime. He was unmarried and drove a white Cadillac that always gleamed as if it was fresh out of the car wash, never a smashed bug on the windshield. Friends who took his choir class said they loved Mr. Winns, said he spoke in the most calming voice. He

waved soft hands and well-maintained fingernails in the air, keeping the students' crackling pubescent voices in time with beats of three, four, six, eight, and twelve. He sang the National Anthem at Friday football games.

Mr. Winns preached at the Revival Center Church of God, an African-American church that was known for its expansive Sunday potlucks of ham casseroles, potato salads, French fries, Cajun fries, sweet potato fries, fried chicken, spinach dips, roast beef, guacamole. At church, he spread messages of the Lord, of love and kindness and humanity and the importance of keeping romantic relationships within the range of Adam and Eve.

Bent over lunch hour meals of instant mashed potatoes, thawed broccoli, and rubber ham that bounced onto plastic trays, students often whispered *Do you think Mr. Winns is gay?* To which, some very devoted Baptist choir member always spat back *No! Of course not, he's just different. Geeze, do you want to go to Hell?*

Mr. Winns didn't drive a muddy pickup or wear tennis shoes with his khakis like Mr. Defir, the history teacher; Mr. Winns didn't wear athletic shorts to school like the coaches or teach class with stained button-ups like Mr. Gramm, the biology teacher. Somehow, the sloppiness of these teachers made them *manly, masculine, real Southern men*. They ate messy, saucy meats in the teachers' lounge, tossed their dishes into the sink without washing them, and talked about *that game last night* and *that deer we shot*.

We had a friend, Travon, who became the school's first male cheerleader, who loved shopping and wearing tight Abercrombie & Fitch shirts and Hollister pants, who said he wanted to be a model when he graduated. He kept his afro short, combed, and fluffy. Travon dated girls from nearby schools one week at a time, changing his Facebook profile picture with each new girlfriend. Whenever we'd ask him why his relationships all ended after a week, he'd say *I'm just not that into her*, or *I don't know, she texts me too much and wants to go out all the time. Like, I need some space, you know? And, no, ew, I am not gay. You know, I just love that pussy*, he'd say, then cringe.

Travon didn't fit in with the guys who'd show up to class covered in flecks of mud from last night's mud ride, whose pickups still had freshly dead deer in the truck bed when they rolled into the high school parking lot, who talked about new shotguns and *fucking bitches* and called each other *gay* when they were trying to be funny and insulting. He didn't fit in with his cousins' clique, who wore baggy blue jeans that pooled at their ankles and flat-brimmed hats with the price tags still on, who smoked Newports, blared the hottest hip-hop songs out of their vehicles. Travon sang Taylor Swift lyrics with my girlfriends and I. He went to our matinee chick flicks, because all Monticello offered for entertainment was a movie theater and a bowling alley. Travon helped us shop for sundresses at Wal Mart and It's Fashion and Stage. When we got our licenses, he drove with us go shopping 100 miles

away in Little Rock, all the while slurping down Skittles and hot Cheetos, chasing them with gulps of pink lemonade. Travon taught us the great sin of pairing brown tops with black bottoms.

The year after we graduated from high school, Mr. Winns died alone in a jail cell. Mr. Winns had been a secret epileptic, suppressing his disease with prescription pills and sedatives for many years. We had no idea.

We also had no idea that he had been inviting male students back to his house after choir practice, luring them to his bachelor pad, a two-bedroom brick house at the end of a cul-de-sac, his own little House of God, with the promise of a heavenly oxycodone, hydrocodone, or propoxyphene high. The boys lied on Mr. Winns' living room couch, beneath wooden "God Bless This Home" signs, crosses nailed to the walls, and prayers that had been printed and framed. In this house of Glory and God, Mr. Winns handed the boys each a painkiller that they popped onto outstretched tongues and slid past their braces, down their throats.

Once the boys were high, Mr. Winns slithered closer to them. He'd crawl a hand up their legs, then a tongue, ever so slowly, and take his Eucharist from the boys' bodies. I don't know if he loved them and fed them a sobering meal of steamy chicken noodle soups with warm bread afterward, but I do know he invited them over in the evening, close to dinnertime. I don't know if there were mutual kisses or stolen kisses (the boys said they

were stolen, but why did they keep coming back?) or if he lusted after them only temporarily, then sent them, disoriented, to walk back to their trucks with unzipped flies and crookedly buttoned shirts, swerving across the yellow lines back to their homes.

The boys kept this secret for many months. When they finally told their parents and friends, Mr. Winns was arrested and thrown into a jail cell where his cell mates, murderers and thieves who suddenly became holier-than-thou when a “child” molester was added to the cell, may have reached for Mr. Winns in a similar fashion, but took their hands to his body in a way that was not-so-holy, not-so-soft. Teachers who had been friends with Mr. Winns, members of his congregation, and parents of students who had loved Mr. Winns were horrified and they hated, they *fag-ged*, they spat, and they prayed for his eternal burning in Hell.

At the time this story broke, I was taking a creative writing course at college. The professor, a married man in his 30s, was known for wandering hands. Sometimes, in the middle of student readings at “Word Garden,” he rested his palm on one of his female student’s knees and left it there for thirty seconds or so. Students sitting nearby fidgeted awkwardly in their chairs when he did this, some pretending not to notice, others exchanging disapproving glances with each other. He never crawled his fingers up their legs any farther, and many of the girls were okay with this because they said *he’s not harassing us! He only does this because he thinks we’re really good*

*writers. It's his way of showing affection and friendship.* The girls bragged about it at lunchtime or while they were studying in the quad, as if his hand had welcomed them into some secret sexy writer clique. The professor never put his hand on a male student's knee, or mine. He still works at the college.

When Mr. Winns told the jail wardens that he was epileptic, that he really needed his medications and painkillers, the wardens refused to give them to him. Mr. Winns died mid-seizure in a pool of urine and sweat in the jail cell, his head slamming against the concrete floor until he reached eternal peace, or eternal misery, or eternal silence and nothingness.

That same year after we graduated, Travon, who had moved out of our small town and to the capital city for college, group-messaged us saying that he had recently realized he was gay, and that he was having an affair with a 50-year-old married male doctor, who paid for his silence in Rolexes.

## Porcelain

When the G# key on the piano gets stuck to the G key, it might be because of the teal polish that falls between the porcelain crevice when she paints her nails above the keyboard. Once, she thought the practice room would be a safe place to hide a stray kitten in the winter. When the custodians found the animal strangled in the wire strings beneath the soundboard the next morning, the G# and G keys were fine. Sometimes, the keyboard becomes a bench where she and her boyfriend kiss after she finishes playing a piece by Chopin or Beethoven or Mozart, and that lodges the C and D, E and F keys together temporarily, and they always release afterwards.

She blacks out when she's performing on the stage. If her scholarship didn't require performances, she would play only in closed rooms, behind locked doors. When she's performing, her fingers and feet move as if they have been programmed by her teacher and her head is nothing but white space, until the end, when the crowd wakes her with their cheers.

At the end of her last performance, she looked down at the keyboard and noticed the specks of blood. It dripped between the G and G#, gluing the keys together so when the boy performing after her sat on the piano bench, his chords were ruined. But the tips of his quick fingers dusted her blood off of the keyboard as he continued to play, returning the keys to a clean ivory by

the end of the performance. She watched this from the stage-wings, watched him clean all remnants of her as the crowd sat silently bathed in ninety-degree light shadows, watching the overhead ropes swing to and fro with the reverberations of the chords.

## Tincture

The doctor shined a flashlight down her throat and said her tonsils were red, no, *scarlet*. He handed her a bill with the cost circled in a red marker at the bottom. Red, like the crisp leaf that tangled itself into her hair as she stood on 34<sup>th</sup> street, debating whether to slip the hundred-pound bill she found on the bus into the Styrofoam cup of the man begging beneath golden arches. If she could paint her emotions, they'd be blurry dashes of vermilion on a piece of torn cardboard lifted from the trash, because she hated the way her fingernails dug grooves into her palms and refused to hand the bill over to the man, and she especially hated the way her fingers so willingly released the bill into the pink palms of the cashier at Topshop.

Once, her flatmate came home with arms trellised in mulberry bruises that turned crimson beneath pressed fingertips. The flatmate's eyes filled up, glossy and red, as she told the story of the bruises. While she spoke, the flatmate picked at her pink cuticles until blood poured from the sides of her nail beds and dripped onto her comforter. The flatmate talked about her abusive boyfriend, how she was blamed for his anger, for his bites and the shattered glass. The next day, the boyfriend sent a bouquet of red roses with a card reading *I'm so sorry*. The flatmate kept her roses to herself, sitting atop the dresser in her bedroom.

Their living room mantle was decorated with a vase of artificial dahlias, but each day the felt petals faded, a bleaching so subtle it went unnoticed until the petals were light coral and no longer matched the plaid curtains. A troupe of fire ants broke into their flat one night and stole crumbs of cakes and breads and crackers. When the roommates woke up the next morning to a parade of ants by the kitchen door, they stomped on them one by one, leaving behind a bloody streak that they could never completely erase from their wooden floors.

## Burnt Petunias

I stood next to the patch of petunias with my mother's red lipstick smeared around my mouth. The pool of sugar water beneath my tongue trickled down my throat as I tilted my head upward to the amaranthine desert sun. With my lips puckered and ready, I waited to be recognized by the hummingbirds.

The javelinas scurried by in a snorting pack as they scavenged for prickly pears, their short legs tripping over budding yuccas.

Desert-stained men and women, families and children, ran through our front yard, stopping only to pick up the snacks and water my mother left on the front porch of our adobe house. The men and women carried packs full of water and tamales and chilies, and they hoped this was enough food to sustain their journey across the border, but they usually stopped at our house. Sometimes they left a plucked and stemmed Mexican Hat on our front doormat as a thank you.

When the white, boxy, cars peeled into our driveway, my mother told me to keep my red lips sealed and hide the containers of food before the officers approached our door.

Instead of the hummingbirds, I met strangers on the Nogales  
sidewalks who would ask me *Cómo estás?* and then yell at my mother for  
never having taught me Spanish, fooled by the ambiguous bronze of my skin.

But the hummingbirds, aware my young, brown limbs could not bloom  
a petunia or an iris or a lily, never showed.

## In the Sauna

The sweat from my thighs meets the thigh sweat of the woman sitting next to me. Our married sweat trickles between cracks in the cedar and rolls down the back of the woman perched on the bench beneath us. We pant and inhale and exhale together, a mass of heaving breasts and flexing legs and perspiration.

Shirtless students sauna with shirtless professors and shirtless bakers and shirtless bus drivers and shirtless businesswomen. With our uniforms, suits, and other socio-economic markers shed, we are nothing but bones, skin, and perspiration. We sit in silence, breathing in eucalyptus oils and evaporated sweat.

During public transport, you don't want to be the passenger who invades someone's personal space or gets too close for comfort. But in the public sauna, these standards of etiquette seem to evaporate on the hot rocks. Perhaps this is because the sauna is the opposite of transportation, in fact, it's more like public idling, and maybe because there's no movement involved, the rules of interacting with strangers in public settings are reversed.

In the sauna, the women are often topless or naked, a phenomenon that, before sauna-ing, I was pretty pretty unfamiliar with since I've never been on a sports team and have chosen to avoid locker rooms for most of my life. The sauna is like bizarro world, where touching is welcomed and sweat is

flung from an arm onto and onto a leg and it's not considered rude to sit nakedly or publicly doze off. The first time I saunaed, I brought my iPhone inside with me, unsure of what I was supposed to do with my hands or how else I would know when the fifteen-minute mark was up. It took me a few sauna sessions to realize the difference between the sauna and the restaurant, the sauna and the bus, the sauna and the coffee shop.

There's something about the intense heat and the dizziness that makes it okay to sit with perspiring bare legs pressed against strangers' perspiring bare backs, something about the lightheadedness that encourages people be still and enjoy a moment of silence in a world so focused on movement and talk, and to be okay with naked people who drip their sweat onto your back. Time stops in the sauna, and I judge how long I've been inside by how many bottles of water I've consumed, not by how many minutes have ticked by on a plastic clock. When someone pours more water on the hot rocks, the steam burns my nostrils with each inhale, but clears my head and my sinuses with each exhale. Cold showers in between fifteen-minute sessions energize me like a refresh button, and I'm ready to go back in the steam again.

The sauna welcomes introverts like myself. It's perfectly acceptable to arrive alone, to not want to converse. The sauna isn't a place to read the news or yell about slow traffic or salads that didn't come with fat free ranch dressing *on the side*. It's a place to say, "Shall I pour more steam?" and close your eyes until your head starts to forget that it's attached to a body.

## Used

“I have over 1,300 pope hats (replicas) that I really need to get rid of. The pope hats came from China and are a little too small for most adult heads and are also irritating to the skin, so you would need to have long hair or wear a smaller hat underneath (just like the real pope). Dogs do not like to wear these pope hats, but maybe a large cat would wear one. My dogs refuse but they are not very nice and always hate being dressed up like for Halloween. When we tried to dress them up like batman, they became very agitated and bit a neighbor’s kid. I will lock the dogs up when you come get all of these pope hats. My wife is a devout Catholic and she finds the presence of these pope hats all over the house to be blasphemous. She has started lighting candles all over the house for my soul but these pope hats are extremely flammable so it’s a problem in my house (there are pope hats everywhere)” ~anonymous craigslist user circa 2010

I had just moved to Marquette from Arkansas, Sofie, my roommate came from Minnesota. We were about to begin graduate studies and had found a great apartment on Craigslist. Little by little, we would run off to thrift shops and bring new items into the house, slowly adding forks to the kitchen drawers and books to the shelves.

But then we had to buy larger items –a pullout couch, a living room chair, a dining room table set. My mother was still visiting during this, and she looked miserable when Sofie and I arrived with the huge pullout sofa

that's the color of burnt orange rind, smells of stale yarn, and has to be at least fifty years old.

We spent hours getting the couch into the living room. It was like trying to push a Toyota pickup through our skinny doorframe. Two front doors had to be removed and every couch leg had to be unscrewed. After an hour of struggling, a biker passed our house and saw us staring at him with pleading eyes as he pedaled by. His conscience kicked in and he turned around and offered to help. We had maneuvered the couch from the truck and miraculously dragged it across the lawn to the front steps. But that was it. We could do no more.

He was in skinny biking shorts and a chest-hugging shirt, almost home from his leisurely ride, and we looked at him as if he was the Pope himself coming to our rescue. As he heaved the couch arms with his sixty-year-old shoulders, he said, "I bet you wish there was a younger guy helping you."

"Oh no, not at all," my mother embarrassed us all, especially him, by remarking so quickly.

He then mentioned that his wedding ring was wedged between the doorframe and the couch, and my mother looked deflated.

Whenever we have guests over, Sofie invites them to spend the night on the couch.

“It’s a pullout!” she says every weekend, pointing to the couch. “And it’s comfortable, too.” Guests will shake their heads politely, saying that they’re fine to drive home. “We have pillows!” She’ll start opening the couch bed. If someone, anyone, will sleep on the couch, this will be enough to justify the removal of the legs, the recruitment of the stranger, the dismantled door.

“I got crabs from sleeping on a pullout couch once,” a friend said when Sofie started pulling the bed out. Sofie looked at the couch in horror, while the other guests looked at Sofie in horror.

Much to Sofie’s disappointment, the only one who sleeps on the couch is the cat, who is slowly tearing through the upholstery in the back. One tear looks like the Leo constellation, another is eerily representative of a swastika. It’s a used couch, rescued from the Salvation Army. The cushions sag in the spots that conformed to other people’s lingerie-clad, slack-clad, overall-clad, and bare asses. Stains that we could identify but deliberately choose not to cling to the rust-colored arms.

Sofie and I are proud of her living room furniture investments. In an oddly satisfying yet remotely pathetic way, our newly purchased possessions defined us. We were two strangers politely making a house together. One of us would haul something in, the other would smile and say, “Great find.”

For my bedroom furniture, I visited a yard sale at a place that looked like a historic old mansion, but turned out to be a halfway house. The basement was frightening, the residents were nerve-wracking, the owner was insistent that the dresser wasn't made of cheap veneer, but was actually wood, a solid, beautiful piece of furniture. He claimed that he'd had this dresser since he was a boy, and he was old now. Yet, the dresser lacked the beauty of old and seemed more institutional, and I couldn't help but wonder if the dresser had been left in the basement for so long that he only assumed it was a beautiful antique from his childhood, imagining that his childhood was less impoverished than it really might have been.

Something strange happens when you walk into a thrift shop. There's almost always some orange-dot sale going on, prodding you to start calculating percentages, reductions. Something about the way that the ceramic cat cookie dish looks just right next to that stained coffee table. Something about the way the dried up mud still clings to those untied combat boots pushed into the corner, underneath the "Miller High Life" sign, next to the bedazzled Easter basket. And perhaps, for someone, there was something about the way that these 1,300 pope hats sat piled on a futon couch, filled 2 wooden chests, or came with a "buy 1,300 pope hats, get one free keyboard!" deal that he just couldn't resist.

About a month after buying the couch, Sofie and I returned to the Salvation Army. We planned to buy cute, quirky paintings for our maroon walls, decorations that would accentuate our marble fireplace. Framed photographs drenched in bright colors. Maybe a tapestry or two. We left the Salvation Army with a framed photograph of 41 dead fish hanging from layered rods, an amateur, zoomed-in shot of a squirrel sitting on a branch, glaring at the camera, and a heavy wooden sign stating “No Deliveries Accepted Between 11:00am to 2:00pm & After 5:00 pm.” The squirrel hangs above Sofie’s reclining chair, glaring at her as she watches “Trailer Park Boys,” the “No Deliveries Accepted,” sign made of heavy wood and weighing about ten pounds and permanently threatening to fall hangs above the short, stiff-backed “guest chair” that doesn’t face the TV, and the fish peer at me as I spread out on the pullout couch. Sofie and I are like two traditional fathers, claiming the pieces of furniture that we each think provide the most comfort. Our guests notice that we leave them by the drafty window on the most uncomfortable chair, underneath the heaviest wall decoration. Neither of us are great sharers. Though, we’d love to share the sofa.

One day, Sofie and I will be packing up and relocating once again. She’ll go one way, I’ll go another. And the furniture will be hauled out to the front lawn for a yard sale. Except for one item, which will require an ad on Craigslist.

“I have a great vintage sofa couch that I really need to get rid of. The couch comes from a clean and respectable woman. I have a sensitive back so I have never slept on the couch. Well, I have fallen asleep on it plenty of times. And my drunken friends have fallen asleep on it also, but never with me, or even on the mattress, which makes the bed part of the couch almost brand new. I’ve heard the rumors about getting crabs from used sofa beds, but that won’t happen here. My cat sleeps on the couch all the time and he eats all insects, and I’m sure he’s not that fussy, and he’d eat crabs with the same gusto he eats grasshoppers. Parents don’t like sofa couches, so don’t worry about them staying at your house. When you lead them to the sofa, they’ll split for a hotel. My boyfriend wouldn’t try sleeping on the couch with me. Even when drunk. I thought it’d be fun pulling out the couch and watching a movie together, the way people always watch TV in bed in movies. But, he was at my house when I had that party when that one friend told us he got crabs from a sofa bed. My boyfriend has a fetish about cleanliness. I’ll miss the couch because it’s served me well, the same way it’ll loyally serve you.”

## How To Become An Insomniac

Lie in bed for one hour, tossing restlessly from side to side, stomach to back, waiting for that perfect position. Replay the events of the day—the whole wheat pizza dough that did not rise, the robin who crashed into your living room window and left a splattering of red feathers on the freshly cleaned glass, the daddy longlegs whose web you destroyed in order to get into the drivers' seat of your car--and realize that you forgot to buy your mom a birthday present. If you had remembered, you would've bought her a bouquet of flowers and a souvenir sweatshirt with an outline of Michigan's Upper Peninsula printed on the front. Pick at a lumpy mass on your shoulder and make a mental note to call a doctor about the lump. You think it might be growing. You think it might be turning a little more orange.

Your boyfriend sleeps soundly next to you, which makes you angry. He's cute, but so peaceful. His chest rises and falls, little snores escaping from between his lips. With each snore, you hear the waves of Hurricane Katrina and the burning of forests on the California coast and the cries of the world's loneliest whale who cried for companionship but was shunned by the blue whale community. Your tosses become more violent and you pull the covers off of your boyfriend. You want him to be awake, suffering with you, slowly plucking out eyebrow hairs one-by-one. You are full of misery and would love some company. He doesn't stir, just rolls away from you and hugs

your fish-sequin decorative pillow. You watch the clock turn from twelve-thirty to one.

You go into the living room and start reading this month's copy of the *Good Housekeeping*, which you steal from your neighbor's mailbox, monthly. You think the magazine is shit, but that doesn't stop you from stealing it. You're not entirely sure why you do it -- something about the perfectly decorated houses, something about knowing the neighbors aren't going to learn about this year's trendiest Fall wreath, something about watching your roommate's cat greedily shred the perfect smiling faces and their perfectly polished cars into pieces on your un-vacuumed living room rug, their incisors and irises, fenders and tires scattered among the iridescence of the Cheez-It crumbs.

Dr. Andrew Weil, who runs a website called "Living Weil" recommends the insomniac to get out of bed and read something dull. You flip to an article about "The Red Lipstick That Looks Incredible on Everyone." Apparently, a shade called Ruby Woo is a "striking true blue red that works beautifully on all complexions and lip shades, delivering the perfect long-lasting red every time." Still awake. "31 Reasons Prince Harry is the Best Royal," "3-Step Nail Art Ideas You Can Totally Do Yourself," "7 Ways You're Unknowingly Making Your Period Worse," still awake.

Put the magazine down and tip toe into your roommate's room. The cat's litter box is her makeshift nightstand. There's a decorative ceramic lamp on top of the litter box, but the cord dangles freely, nowhere near an outlet. She keeps a bottle of Canadian Hunter whiskey on the nightstand, her remedy for sadness, loneliness, sleeplessness, joblessness. You unscrew the cap and take a swig. The whiskey burns your throat, but warms your stomach and starts to calm your head. She doesn't stir, so you take another swig, then one more for good luck. You wonder about these sleeping people, your boyfriend and your roommate, what it is that they're doing right and what you're doing wrong. Perhaps it is because you didn't compost your apple core after lunch. Or because you started to play Moonlight Sonata that evening, but never finished; never ended in that final, ear-pleasing V7 chord whose absence from a piece of music apparently drove Mozart crazy. You put the bottle back down on her nightstand, then notice a pregnancy test sticking out from underneath her bed. It bears a grey plus sign, a positive greyness that promises late nights of breast feeding, of used diapers and giggles and gummy toothlessness.

You crawl back into bed and wait for sleep. If you pass out this second, you can still get in five hours of sleep. You stare at the ceiling. Count sheep, count sheep dogs, count shepherds, count shepherds' wives, count shepherds pies. Count the 373 calories in the shepherds pies, the 5490909648 seconds in the 174 years since the death of Nicolas Clement—the chemist who in 1824

first defined the calorie as a unit of heat. You wonder if you can count heat itself. You wonder if your mind is slipping, anyhow, if so, Clement would measure and define its descent.

You grab your phone off of the nightstand, the #1 thing that thedoctorwillseeyounow.com says *not* to do, and text your mom, “Can’t sleep again.” You text the same thing to your friend who has a whole pharmacy in his medicine cabinet. He texts back immediately, offering you Xanax, Klonopin, Risperdal, Haloperidol, Ambien, Sonata, Lunesta. You make a song out of these prescriptions to the tune of “Mary Had A Little Lamb,” which gets stuck in your head, and fills you with horror, a terrible, indelible jingle keeping you awake now. You’ve always tried to stay away from pharmaceuticals, but you’re feeling desperate. Quotes from a WebMD article titled “10 Things To HATE About Sleep Loss” taunt you. Sleeplessness causes car accidents, heart disease, heart attack, heart failure, stroke, diabetes, depresses you, ages you, dumbs you, makes you fat, kills your sex drive, kills your relationships, eventually kills you. Your heartbeat quickens, palms sweat, your right eye starts to twitch. You pick your phone back up, re-read your friend’s list of drugs and pick a few at random. He says he’ll bring them tomorrow. You envision a row of blank headstones with crows perched on the top and a circle of fake, plastic flowers lying below.

The cat comes into your room and leaps on your stomach. You grab him, jump out of bed and toss him outside. It’s ten degrees, maybe colder,

and he lands in a snow pile. The cat stares at you, surprised, confused. You look up at the sky and notice a constellation that looks like Beethoven, sharp nose, deep eyebrows, thin mouth. Slam the sliding door shut and leave him outside.

You return to bed. Your boyfriend is sleeping on his back now. His mouth is shut and little chickadee-like whistles are escaping through his nose. You try to sleep, but can't stop thinking about the cat, out in the snow pile, icy-toed, probably hungry, shivering, probably getting chased by a raptor, probably dead. He's not dead, though, because you can hear his meows, faintly, creeping into your bedroom. Maybe, you think for a brief moment, these are the mewls of the dead, a mewling ghost, the collective cries into the face of all the world's famine, or the satisfied mewls of the upstairs neighbors as they make love, or the confused mewls of the cluster of cells that are forming in your roommate's uterus.

Three-thirty a.m. You throw the covers off and let the cat back in. All of the neighbors' homes are dark. Even the next-door woman who wears a see-through robe as she hangs up laundry in the backyard, watches reruns of *The Bachelor* on repeat, and has never had a visitor to her house is satisfied with her life, soundly sleeping, yet, somehow, you are not. Everyone in the neighborhood is asleep except for you. Everyone in the state of Michigan is probably asleep except for you. If they all snored as your boyfriend did, the snores would sound like a chorus of beluga whales swimming through

shallow water, with a family of seagulls perched on top of their backs. You have a roommate across the hall, and a boyfriend in your bed, but you have never felt so alone.

Return to bed and stare at your boyfriend as he sleeps. Count the 15 freckles on his back, the 5 moles, the 33 dark hairs. You wonder if this is a code for something, some numerical distinction that's ingrained in our bodies during our prenatal development. You wonder what sorts of foods would bear the number of calories that would equal the number of your boyfriend's freckles, moles, and dark hairs – apples, maybe? Or, perhaps people with 15 freckles, 5 moles, and 33 dark back hairs are destined to sleep well, while others with 2 freckles, 0 moles, and 57 dark hairs have no choice but to be insomniacs. By four-thirty, the sun is starting to shine through your blinds. You can hear your upstairs neighbors walking around, making coffee, and you smell them frying eggs. You wonder how many hours of sleep they got. You wonder if they know that you steal their *Good Housekeeping*, you wonder if they know why you do it. You wonder if they will report you for mail fraud, you wonder what it's like to sleep in jail, you wonder if your boyfriend would visit you in jail, or your roommate, or if she'll bring her baby, or if her baby will be a boy or a girl or if her baby will ever know your name.

## Extensions on “Fire”

My cousin, Kara, married Burt, the man whose mother burnt his sister in her sleep. Nine years before their marriage, Burt’s mother, Maureen, poured gasoline around her daughter Ashley’s white-framed bed, then lit a match and ran out of the house. Just a few weeks before the homicide, Kara, Ashley, and I had sat beneath heater vents in Kara’s pink bedroom, playing “Barbie and Ken go to the beach.”

Maureen told the police that fourteen-year-old Ashley poured the gasoline around her bed and lit the flame herself because she was committing suicide. Maureen told the prosecutors that she had taken a Prozac and Valium that night, and does not recall what she might or might not have done. Maureen told the police that she “could have” started the fire. Maureen told her best friend that she “hated” Ashley. Maureen’s neighbor, Eunice, told the reporters, “Maureen did not do it. Man alive, I am sure of that.” The State of Michigan sentenced Maureen to life in jail on account of homicide.

The right-winged, heavily Dutch Protestant town with a population of 5,605 buzzed with the news. *Guilty*, a neighbor would shout at her husband between bites of quick oats at breakfast. *Innocent*, a grandfather would hiss to his son in between the Sunday morning hymns.

Fear breeds rumor. The more anxious a group is, the more likely people are to open up the rumor mill. According to rumor expert Nicholas

DiFonzo, our initial intention for starting rumors is a noble one. Rumors are our attempt to decipher scary, uncertain situations in our lives. Exchanging information, even if it's ludicrously false, relieves our unease by giving us a sense that we know what's happening. We feel better spreading lies than spreading nothing at all, because at least spreading lies makes it seem as if we are in the know. Of course Richard Gere must checked himself into the hospital complaining of intestinal pain and rectal bleeding, only to reveal his pet gerbil, Tibet, shaved, declawed, and dead, lodged in his anus—the result of a satisfying night of “gerbilling,” a sex act popular with gay men. *We must* sleep with our mouths shut, otherwise spiders will crawl between our lips and journey down our throats, settling comfortably into our large intestines. These are facts.

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Immediately after the match was lit, Maureen called Trudy (my aunt and Kara's mother) to go shopping at *Sears*. They bought straight-legged jeans and polyester cardigans and pantyhose that were 15% off. Over a post-shopping lunch at Applebee's, Maureen told Aunt Trudy that she knew mothers weren't supposed to say such things, but she *hated* Ashley. Aunt Trudy might have cried, or insisted that Maureen didn't know what she was saying, or simply taken a bite of her mashed potatoes and nodded.

As they were driving home from Applebees, a cop car trailed Aunt Trudy's mauve minivan and insisted that Maureen get out of the vehicle. Maureen was handcuffed and tossed in the back of the cop car. Her leopard-print purse lay forgotten on the carpeted floor of the Aunt Trudy's minivan.

In court, Maureen told witnesses that Ashley was sleeping soundly when she left the house at 8:55 am to go shopping with Aunt Trudy. Maureen said that she entered Ashley's room before she left, but only to kiss her and say goodbye before leaving the house, like any normal mother would do, and what was so wrong with giving one's daughter a loving kiss before embarking on a shopping trip? The holidays were approaching, after all.

The prosecutors did not find Maureen's kiss so loving, this kiss of death. At 9:00 am, five minutes after Maureen left the house, a passerby who was taking her dachshund out for his morning stroll noticed that Maureen's house was on fire. Like a good neighbor, she called 911.

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Very few of the rumors that humans pass are positive, complimentary tales about others. Naturally, we are more inclined to share negative information. According to psychology professor Helen Harton, it makes more evolutionary sense to pass on negative information than positive information. This stems back to our beginning, when passing information about a tiger

approaching would be more beneficial sharing the location of the nearest bed of lavender flowers.

At the trial, Aunt Trudy testified as a witness on Maureen's behalf. Maureen was innocent; sure, she might have mentioned hating her daughter at lunch that afternoon, but who doesn't get mad at their kids every now and then? Sure, Maureen might have been a little eccentric, but how could her best friend do something as horrible as set her daughter's bed aflame immediately before meeting Aunt Trudy for a shopping spree? Sure, detectives might have found traces of gasoline on a chair in the master bedroom that only Maureen slept in, and sure, more evidence might have proved that that same gasoline was poured around Ashley's bedroom, but that didn't tie Maureen to the fire, perhaps she was lighting the grill for a fun, family barbeque and simply didn't wash her clothes properly before returning inside to relax in her chair.

The State of Michigan finds it essential to state that the interviewers did not deprive Maureen of food, sleep, or medical attention. The State of Michigan specifically states that the interviewers never physically abused or threatened to abuse Maureen. The State of Michigan Court of Appeals finds it necessary to mention that Maureen, at forty-eight years old, held only a high school degree

Rumors are more prone to stick if they are somewhat surprising, but still fit within our existing biases about the person whom the rumor is being told. Even if we are not usually gullible, these types of rumors get in under our radar because they click in with what we already believe about a person, or what we want to believe is true about a person. Yet, even when we are presented with evidence that refutes a rumor, we often stick to our biases. According to a University of Maryland study performed in 2007, only 3 percent of Pakistanis believe that Al Qaeda was responsible for 9/11.

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Apparently, one week after Ashley's funeral, Maureen joked to a close friend that she would soon be in jail. *Ha ha ha*, she might have said, *the next time that we meet for tea and crumpets, I'll be behind bars wearing an orange jumpsuit! Hilarious!*

Iowa State University investigators have discovered that stress plays a large part in one's perception of a crime. Being wrongly accused of a crime increases one's level of stress, sometimes to the point where the accused admits to a crime that he or she did not commit. If questioned for a long period of time, the accused starts to feel beaten down, and even if the accused is innocent, they are more likely to lose their energy and motivation to continue defending themselves, ultimately leading them to give up and confess.

The spreading of rumors operates in a similar way. With each consecutive retelling of a rumor, we start to believe that it must have originated from a credible source. Hearing the same rumor retold from several different sources strengthens the rumor's validity, even if the sources themselves are not reliable. We are also more prone to believe rumors that are very detailed and concrete. *Maureen killed her daughter. Maureen lit Ashley on fire while she slept. Maureen woke up on that Tuesday morning, made herself a bowl of Cheerios, put on her tall, black leather boots, crept into Ashley's bedroom and sprinkled gasoline around her bed before striking a match and dropping it on the carpet, next to a stuffed Winnie The Pooh that lay belly-up.*

According to Chip Heath, a Stanford business professor who studies idea spread, our brains are wired to remember concrete, sensory details and facts better than abstractly told stories. Therefore, rumors and urban legends are able to survive only if they conjure up very visual or tactile images. And the rumors that do last are very difficult to disprove. When the majority of a criminal case relies on one person's word verses another person's word, with a few clues here or there, rumors and speculations can define accused's fate.

To this day, Aunt Trudy claims that Maureen is innocent. Maureen continues to claim innocence.

Nine years after Marueen was arrested, my cousin, Kara, and Burt, Maureen's son, got married and moved into Kara's old childhood house because my Uncle Tom, Kara's father, always a sharp realtor, had promised the couple that he was offering them *the deal of a lifetime*. Their new home sits across the street from Burt's childhood house, which had undergone various remodeling projects since the fire, but was still recognizable to Burt.

At their wedding, we took sips of champagne and bites of two-year-old Easter, Christmas, and Valentines chocolate that Aunt Trudy had been picking up from Sam's Club ever since she heard about Kara's engagement. Between chocolate-caked teeth, Kara whispered that she and Burt would *adopt a kid, because they both had the crazy genes in their families*. Uncle Tom whispered *that's the smartest thing she's ever said* and three years later, Kara posted ultrasound and protruding stomach photos to Facebook. When the baby was born, they named it Anora, which they still claim has no relation to my name, Ania Sonora. Aunt Trudy sent baby photos to the imprisoned Maureen, but Burt sent nothing. To this day, Kara and Burt refuse to visit Maureen in prison. Maureen has never met Anora.

Kara and Burt couldn't let baby Anora sleep in their bed because Burt still has night terrors about Trudy and wakes up screaming and thrashing. Instead, they put Anora in a cradle next to a window that overlooked Burt's childhood home, which remains empty. My uncle has tried to sell the house numerous times, setting plates of fresh chocolate chip cookies and pitchers of

apple cider on the counters, hanging photos of smiling families on the wall and covering any scorch marks with daffodil wallpaper, but he has never been successful.

After Anora was born, Kara and Burt got rid of all of the matches in their house. Burt stopped smoking and threw out his lighters and in the winters, they open their presents next to the glow of a Netflix Fireplace on a flat-screen TV. Anora stays inside on the fourth of July and blows out the electronic candles on her birthday cake, wondering why her wishes never come true.

## The Rapture

On Thursday the weatherman announces the possibility of an ice storm over the 6 o'clock news. Within the hour, all Southeast Arkansas schools are cancelled. The town buzzes with the excitement of change -in a county where the most newsworthy events include the paving of a new road or the construction of a new church, the ice storm brings us something to look forward to. We long for the storm to blow through the town and redecorate our storefronts with icicles, paint a layer of white over the broken-down Chevy that's been stuck in the neighbor's front yard since the '80s, zap withering azaleas into icy submission. We ask the storm to take care of our ample feral cat population, to stop the midnight yowls from waking us in our sleep. Kill the ticks and chiggers that prowl our backyards, waiting to sink their greedy feelers into our warm flesh when all we are trying to do is sunbathe our stretch marks and surgery scars away or toss a tennis ball for our arthritic dogs.

With the news of the ice storm, the Wal-Mart parking lot fills with minivans and sedans. Some people even park at the Taco Bell. Shoppers balance babies onto hip bones and toss cans of soup and refried beans and packets of spaghetti and crackers and jugs of milk into shopping carts in sets of three. The mice in aisle five are left hungry.

There is no ice on Sunday, yet, but it is cold. When the car ignition starts, there is a *yowl* and a horrible burning smell that wafts up as smoke

steaming from underneath the hood. A mother cat searching for warmth drops out through the engine with burns on her stomach. Her kittens do not make it out alive. We are late to church because we must throw a multi-kitten funeral. It is difficult to dig metal shovels into frozen ground and it is difficult to wash the smell of burnt kitten off of our Sunday best.

The church parking lots fill at the possibility that the power might go out and lives might be lost without one last chance to worship Him underneath fluorescent lights, one last chance to demonstrate worthiness of a spot in Heaven. Short-sleeved T-Shirts reading “Rapture Ready” are thrown on top of long sleeved T-shirts bearing the names of non-Christian rock bands, the stuff that kids can only listen to through ear buds when they’re lying in bed, underneath covers, supposed to be asleep on a Wednesday night.

Inside the nave we squish our asses tightly into the packed pews, breathe in the collective armpit sweat of bus driver and family doctor and stay-at-home mother. We inhale and exhale faux leather and off-brand perfume as we sing to the daily hymnal. After church we are reminded of the importance of being neighborly and doing unto others, so we stop to say *hello* to neighbors whose names we can never remember, *Hello, George? Mary? James?*, neighbors whose birthdays we do not notice but whose funerals we will feel obligated to attend after their front doors are decorated with massive bouquets of white daisies and lilies and orchids.

On Monday we go to school because the sun is out and the roads are not yet icy. Students are restless in desks, still hopeful that the weather might change while we are locked away in windowless classrooms. We keep our ears attuned for the *buzz* of the PA system to crackle over our history lessons and bark at us to get in a single-file line to wait for our early busses. In front of the classrooms, teachers point at photos of dead presidents, reluctantly. In the hallways, janitors bend over brooms and dustpans, sweeping away our chewed up pencils and misspelled love letters. The school librarian decides that she might as well finish reading the copy *Gone With The Wind* that she checked out over a month ago, since the left side of her bed remains empty and she is still making gourmet French dinners for one.

With the threat of icy roads and poor driving conditions seeming spineless and distant, teenagers hop behind the wheels of their 2-door Ford pickups and press their pedals to the metal, feeling exhilarated as they race down dirt roads on the outskirts of town. How exciting Country Lane 338 looks when it is seen through the lens of an 80-mile per hour blur—suddenly, these drivers are no teenagers forced into taking over their fathers' insurance agencies in Monticello, Arkansas; population 5,384, home to the University's Cotton Boll Weevil mascot. Without even having to buy a plane ticket and face their fears of leaving the town, these teenagers can transform their everyday scenery into the stuff of impressionist paintings—blur, color, uncertainty, unpredictability. With a bit of gas in the tank, a pack of Budweiser and a

truck, Monticellonians leave their farms and desks and cash registers and enter Monet paintings, speeding through time, allowing this movement to morph their perception until they are met with the force of impact. This escape is rarely temporary, and perhaps some of these drivers are intentionally entering an escape route from which they cannot return, although the local paper would never acknowledge such a thing, as that would deem the driver to an afterlife of sin and Hell. Again, a bouquet of white flowers gets hung on a neighbor's door.

The twin towers crash down and still the ice storm has not arrived, but the school has one less student, one more desk that sits dusty and empty, haunting the English class as they try to memorize vocabulary words about attenuating and opprobrium and gainsay. The PA system crackles on and the secretary delivers some coded messages that only teachers understand, because front-row students are hastily assigned to take the names of misbehaving classmates on the white board as the teachers run out of the room, loafer heels clapping behind them.

Through the thin windows around the doorframe, we see teachers congregate in the hallways to cry; thick loud sobs, and we are not sure why. School is released early, but somehow students know better than to whoop and holler down the halls. There is a thick sadness about our early release, and although we don't know what it is, we feel it as we walk solemnly in our single-file lines. We take busses home to tearful parents, comforting parents,

parents who mark our arms with the palette of reds and yellows and blues, parents who are on their third martinis and parents who are on their fourth sets of prayers. The third jug of milk in the refrigerator has soured and is starting to sprout mold.

When October arrives and there is still no ice storm, we dust off our last can of chicken noodle soup. Osama Bin Laden ruins Halloween costumes for brown children in the south forever. A homemade Davy Crockett outfit thrown together with a coon-tail hat, furry vest, and brown corduroys is mistaken for Osama. A pair of purple tights, flowy top, and magic carpet in tow is regarded as Osama. A brown child dressed as Bigfoot or Paul Bunyan or even a fluffy, innocent squirrel with acorns drawn on the side of its cheeks is accepted as neither giant nor scavenging mammal, but founder of Al-Qaeda, coordinator of September 11 attacks. This September tragedy gives the citizens of the town the chance to act out their most racist instincts, something that they have secretly all been waiting for, and they take out their anger on olive-skinned children who are simply trying to ask for some candy. The Osama child receives handfuls of Bit-O-Honeys and circus peanuts and boxes of raisins next to pale children who get tossed whole Snickers bars and unwrapped candy necklaces. The Osama child must let her mother check her candy carefully when she returns home, scanning for any knifed apples or re-packaged candy bars. The white child scarfs down her King-Sized Hershey's without hesitation.

Spring is approaching when hear that the KKK will be holding a rally in our town. Still, there is no ice storm. The local newspaper encourages residents to *take no action in response to the event, but just be aware that it is taking place, with your knowledge and awareness.* The local newspaper refuses to refer to the organization as the “KKK,” but instead calls it a “nationally recognized organization,” so that people searching Google for KKK cannot easily find news of the event and come to town in an attempt to thwart it, although the paper does not state this explicitly. The local cops tell members of the town to recognize that the event is taking place, but please do nothing. The local press silently protects the event. Had there been an ice storm, the winds, the gusts, and the cold could have scared the Klan members away. Instead, we are told to hold no protests, no attacks against the Klan members and no anti-Klan rallies of our own. We are reminded to be good God-fearing citizens who obey the laws of the sheriff.

The local newspaper shares another post about the rally from the KKK’s website, which reads: *No weapons, attitudes or media are allowed. Cross lighting at dusk, food is provided but bring your own chairs. Motels are located 6 miles from the rally site. If you plan on attending any events notify the Imperial Wizard at [impwizard1996@gmail.com](mailto:impwizard1996@gmail.com).* The editor-in-chief ends the article with an anecdote of his own: *No guns? Haven’t the knights heard of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment?* The town of Monticello silences its citizens, warning that Imperial Wizard is to be left alone, we are not to send threats to his

Gmail, we are not to bombard his inbox with hateful words of our own. We cannot even send inquiries about whether the Wizard will be serving pound cake or lasagna or tacos. In a town that is ruled by a network of cops who are all so closely related that it borders on incest, we have no choice but to conform and keep hoping for the ice storm.

Instead of an ice storm, we get a series of springtime tornadoes. The tornadoes trample over families sleeping in their homes, sweep up rows of minivans waiting to cross the intersection on Highway 425, toss the broken-down Chevys into the air and throw them back down with a force that disfigures them even further, rearranging rust and metal and muffler into a nasty exhibit on our front lawns. The tornado redecorates our towns, but not in the way that we were hoping the ice storm would; no, it does not generously dab us with a sparking white paintbrush and temporarily freeze and beautify our flaws.

Instead, we are served ruthless twisters that embellish our many imperfections, toss trailers into the air like a cat batting a mouse, pull the roofs off of homes with the ease of a child twisting an Oreo into two halves. The tornado gobbles up mother and grandfather and newborn but does not digesting them, just spits them right back out, as if deeming them sour-tasting, deformed, bitter, even though they have been baptized, have kneeled and prayed and have prepared their souls for the rapture. Instead, the ice storm forgot about us, skipped right over the town and followed the air flow

to the East Coast, like everyone else who has left this town, leaving Monticellonians to continue waiting for the rapture while we sit saturated with our swamps and our tragedies, our dead teenagers, the remnants of 9/11, the Tupperware containers left behind by the KKK, our outdated milk and our yowling feral cats.

## On Luminescence

As children, we were rewarded when we captured beauty and bottled it. Fireflies, flowers, butterflies, blue frogs and caterpillars sat imprisoned in a mason jar with a few holes punched at the top from our fathers' orange-handled screwdrivers. Maybe our parents were relieved that their children could recognize beauty and were not bringing home bottles of ants and slugs and cockroaches. Maybe they secretly hoped that we would one day find beauty in these supposed abominations, too. That we were able to identify butterfly from roach as a creature that we should capture and display in our bedrooms signified something *normal* about our adolescent growth. Surely, this indicated that we would find prom dates in high school, would not be forced to attend this rite of passage dateless; would get elected to be on the homecoming court, would receive awards for athletic and musical achievements. We would attend college—we would *want* to attend college—would major in a degree that would provide us with a lucrative career, maybe an applied science or math.

These insects and plants made us happy for a little while, about as long as childhood happinesses tend to last--sitting atop our dressers for a couple of hours or days or even a week, until they would inevitably wrinkle up and die, devoid of water or food or light or freedom. Fireflies were swept onto the sidewalk in front of the house. Butterflies dumped onto the rosebush

in the neighbor's yard. Frogs returned to the stream in the backyard.

Caterpillars, given to the cats.

Liz and I spent all of our childhood summers outside. We ran through creek beds and sewers, got lost in the woods between our houses, and cleaned muck and tick and chigger from our bodies by diving into a steaming neighborhood pool. We were usually accompanied by my mother, who would read novels and issues of *Harpers*, *Hip Mama*, or *Mother Jones* and glance up occasionally to make sure that we weren't getting hit by cars; or Liz's mother, who would keep one eye glued to us at all times, the other eye wandering lazily through a copy of *Readers Digest* or *TV Guide*. While Liz's mother, Theresa, would watch us, her father, Daniel, the high school track coach, would sit inside, staring at an episode of *All in the Family* or *Everybody Loves Raymond* or silently watching the live coverage of an ESPN track meet in the den. Sometime Daniel would watch us, but never at the same time as Theresa.

Liz's parents had separate living rooms—Daniel, the den, and Theresa, the playroom, where she lived among hairless dolls, plastic frying pans and spoons and fake spaghetti, and stuffed animals named Baxter; each room equipped with a reclining chair, a couch, and a cable television. At night, Daniel would sleep in the queen-sized bed in their supposed marital bedroom, and Theresa would either share a twin-sized mattress with Liz's youngest sister or crash on the playroom couch, where she dreamt amid the shadows of

the mini-trampoline, the Barbie playhouse, the electric keyboard. This was not a house where Aretha Franklin sang through a living room stereo while the family gathered around a board of LIFE and everyone communicated via winks and squinted eyes to secretly let the youngest daughter win. This was not a house that required full-family Sunday dinners around a winged, wooden table—no, this family embraced the frozen TV dinners of fried chicken, mac and cheese, or slabs of turkey on their separate TV dinner stands in their separate living rooms as they laughed to the jokes of sitcoms, at different times, on different stations. Fits of rage or passionate shouts never echoed down the shag-carpet hallway, just eternal silence between mother and father, as if they realized they made a poor decision in choosing a mate and had no choice but to settle into that decision.

On one mosquito-thick summer night, Liz and I were swinging in her backyard. Theresa pointed to a swarm of fireflies and said, *When my siblings and I were children, we used to capture fireflies and squeeze them until they burst, then rub their glow on our fingernails and shirts.* Even though Liz and I had just brought a container of fireflies into her bedroom hours ago, the thought of squeezing their insides to make our nails and shirts glow was too much. We liked to look at the bugs, sure; didn't mind watching the bugs drive themselves mad as they rammed into the walls of the mason jar, struggled to breathe in the glass container that we let sit in front of the sunny window during the hottest hours of the afternoon because we were under the illusion

that, like our glow-in-the-dark play doh, these insects needed hours of intense sunlight in order to glow at night, but we didn't want to physically murder them. Liz and I were both raised under the doctrine of *Do unto others*, and even though this saying didn't apply explicitly to fireflies, we obeyed. Silently horrified about Theresa's story, we didn't respond, just continued pumping our legs up and down, on the swing, waiting for the hound to stop howling the blues in the backyard of the neighborhood old maid's house, which it never did.

~

Fireflies thrive in the hot, humid air of Arkansas. They run on moisture and sweat, making homes by lakes and marshes and even backyard swimming pools—areas that are abundant with the snail and slug and worm that their larvae need to eat in order to survive.

The adult firefly lives for about the length of one year—only long enough to mate and, if a female, lay eggs. The firefly is a type of beetle who bears many physical similarities to the common bedbug during the daytime: hard, brown shell, dark beady eyes, six spindly legs, and a thorax. Because they are almost completely helpless during the day, fireflies are nocturnal. I wish I could have told Liz about how fireflies lack the magic necessary to survive without their “fire”—a daytime firefly crawling across the surface of a countertop would almost certainly end up squashed and wiped away with a

Clorox-soaked sponge, mistaken for a young roach. I wish I knew that back then, when we were stepping on the “ugly” bugs on the sidewalk, separating brown shell from purple wing and talking about what was going to happen between Salem and Harvey in the next episode of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*.

When sunlight renders the firefly incapable of flashing a warning of its internal poison, unable to indicate that within his body exists a color so fluorescent and out of touch with the common tones of the natural world that it must be toxic, other insects remain unaware that he may be deathly to consume. But at night, these insects produce light and bioluminescence in their rear ends at night simply by transferring oxygen from the air into interior cells via a complex series of successively smaller tubes, the tracheoles. I wish that Thresea, the seventh-grade science teacher, had told us that once fireflies absorb oxygen, the oxygen mingles with calcium, adenosine triphosphate, and the chemiluciferin, transforming these creatures into things of radiance at night, highlighting their mystique and the intestinal alert that they might be poisonous appetizers—I wish that she had nudged us to appreciate the complex interworking of the firefly instead of encouraging us to smush, to kill, to glow.

The life of a male firefly is almost entirely devoted to eating and finding a mate. At night, the male will fly through a backyard garden, flashing his yellow light as he glides between tree branches, past sunflower blossoms and over piles of dog shit. Each species of firefly has its own

flirtation routine. Like humans, fireflies want a mate with whom they will have something in common with. A shared interest in Meticalla. A particular fondness for the edges of a swamp. A waffle with syrup and hot sauce poured on top. In order to identify this suitable mate, a male will flash his light in a specific pattern, indicating his species, and a female will blink back in the same pattern if she happens to be of the same species.

Some species simply flash their lights once. These are the careful and cautious males--conservative with their light, only radiating when they see a spectacular female. Others emit a series of "flash trains" of up to nine carefully timed pulses. They are the perfectionists, the OCD subgroup of firefly. They must do nine perfect pulses, then seven careful circles around the tip of a pine needle, then five jumps on a bed of fallen leaves, three quick rolls, one blink. These OCD flashers believe they have the perfect mate-finding formula, and repeat their routines each and every summer night until the ideal female is found. I wonder how successful they are in finding a fitting mate—how much better human relationships might be if we could mimic the mating patterns of the firefly. Would Theresa still be sleeping alone on a couch in the playroom? Would Daniel still be cold and alone as he rolls from pillow to pillow in their king-sized bed? Other lightning bugs fly in decorative aerial patterns, showing off their aerobatics and forming a "J" of light. They are the artists, the middle-school dropouts who shine with their bodies where their minds cannot. Some fireflies shake their abdomens from side to side

and make their bellies twinkle--the most sensual of the beetles,  
straightforward in expressing exactly what they want and how they want it.

~

Theresa and Daniel met in a high school down the road from the house that they still share today. Liz and I would later attend that same high school, where Liz would end up meeting the first man who she would marry immediately after graduation, spend three years living in a trailer park with him in a double-wide with a caving ceiling and four Pomeranians, only to divorce him before she turned twenty-four.

Theresa and Daniel had a history class together, and then one football stand kiss led to a prom date and a marriage. To marry young in Southeast Arkansas is considered a victory, *Congratulations son and daughter, you have made it, can't wait until you have a baby!* Perhaps Theresa and Daniel were once a happy couple, because their house has a few dusty photos of their young, twenty-year-old selves smiling and dimpled at their wedding. In the hallway, the evolution of their happiness can be traced from beaming wedding photos to first-born child, second, and third; but with each successive Wal-Mart studio family portrait set against tropical backgrounds, a purple mountain range, a dense forest, and finally a series of desert backgrounds with one lone cactus posed and prickly behind them, the parents' smiles become more flat, more forced, more bloated and weary.

Theresa and Daniel kept the shades drawn in their house. Even when the sun was shining outside, it was dusk inside their den. It was easier to see the TV that way, and the comically dysfunctional yet smiling families that shined through it. With the shades drawn, they couldn't see the molding reclining chair that sat in their driveway for three years, the plastic children's toys that covered the front lawn, the dead azaleas that needed water and fertilizer a year ago, let alone the phosphorescing insects that found shelter in their deadness. With the shades drawn, it was more difficult to see how the walls were lined with stacks of clothes that needed to be folded, forms and papers that needed to be filled out and filed away, family-sized packs of Sams Club Coke and Sprite that were waiting to be put into the pantry. When Theresa and Daniel interacted, it was to remind each other about an honor roll assembly at a kid's school that week, or an upcoming family reunion or the curiously iridescent pile of throw up that the cat had just barfed into the corner.

On afternoons when Theresa took Liz and I along to the grocery store or a stop at the church for a quick, pre-scheduled prayer, she curled the ends of her un-dyed, greying hair up into small flips. Even though she was only dragging her daughter and her daughter's friend around town to buy a packet of paper towels at the Piggly Wiggly and cross herself before a ceramic man bleeding ceramic blood, her hair gave her the appearance of a woman who had a much busier day planned. *Maybe I'll stop by Jane's for a mid-afternoon*

*cocktail before heading over to George's Gatsby-themed party, her hair hinted, rather than leaving it down, unwashed and sloppily combed, which would have revealed a message along the lines of *I haven't shared a bed with my husband in years and there is a pile of cat shit underneath the coffee table that we have both been trying to ignore for a month.**

On the outside, Theresa and Daniel's house matched every other 1960s style brick home in their subdivision. It was one-story, had wooden shutters on every street-facing window, a small garden plot in the front yard (albeit all of the plants were brown and drooping), a driveway, and a garage that had been remodeled into a playroom once the third child was born. A sprawl of plastic children's toys, several unfinished construction projects of dog houses, doll houses, and bike stands, and the moldy living furniture in their driveway set their otherwise *normal* house apart from the rest of their neighbors. Their blonde and red-haired children ran barefoot and giddy through the neighborhood with the rest of the white children of the block. But Theresa never took walks with the other mothers, never had anyone to gossip about newest girlfriend of the neighborhood bachelor with, was never invited to the book clubs or the ladies wine nights. Perhaps it was because of this exclusion that Theresa wanted to make sure that Liz grew up *normal*, enrolled her in dance classes, cheerleading tryouts, various athletics, every Summertime Vacation Bible School, made her sell Girl Scout cookies on burning black pavements in hundred-degree heat. My mother, on the other hand,

encouraged me to listen to Michelle Schocked and Fiona Apple when all of my peers were shaking their blond-highlighted hair to Miley Cyrus and Ke\$ha. She immediately marked us as the black sheep of the neighborhood when the cars in everyone else's driveways would disappear for a few hours on Sunday mornings and ours would remain parked defiantly in our driveway, when she'd open the door with a beer in her hand as neighborhood mothers would ring our doorbell and invite us to join their churches, or attend their fundraisers, or at least, for the love of God, just try their church's free potluck dinner. Liz wore polka-dot dresses of the latest styles and cuts, and I wore tie-die skirts and t-shirts three sizes too big promoting anarchy and questioning and microbreweries in Wyoming.

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As larvae, most young fireflies feed on other larvae, preferably terrestrial snail and slug larvae. Young fireflies like the taste of other juvenile insects, their mollusky bodies still so warm, so fresh. They kill their prey by injecting their victims with a paralyzing chemical that shoots through their mandibles. As fireflies grow older, their taste buds mature and many species of fireflies become vegetarian, so they search out pollen and nectar for dinner. Some adult fireflies completely lose their appetites and never eat again after they mature; but, like children who are fed red meat at a young age and can never forget its tender taste, certain fireflies remain predatory forever.

Non-virginal female fireflies who have already mated will lie waiting in the dark, hidden underneath rose petal or shrub leaf, until they spot and identify the flash code of a male of a different species. As if she were at a masquerade ball, the firefly will flash a false code back at the male, sending him the message that she is also a *Licliola*, a sweet species of firefly who the Japanese consider to represent the souls of the dead, when she is really a *Photinus*, the most vicious species of cannibalistic female firefly who has no interest in representing dead souls, just devouring them. She is ravenous, but not in the sense that the male was hoping. The hungry female will then shoot up into the air before closing in on the unsuspecting male, sever his neck with the force of her body, and consume him whole. Within seconds, the male will disappear, only to return to the Earth in the form of excrement. Because of this characteristic, the female *Photnius*' are often referred to as "femme fatale" fireflies.

If scientists are correct in speculating that female fireflies partake in this behavior because male fireflies greatly outnumber female fireflies and these females are simply fighting for equality in a male-dominated world, - perhaps Theresa's faint smile into her tea cup was not so out of place as she watched a news clip about a woman who had recently murdered her husband by tying him to the bed and lighting him on fire. One school night, Theresa brought Liz and her younger sister to my mother's house. It was nine or ten pm, and I was in pajamas. Liz, her sister, and I were told to *go play*

somewhere in the other side of the house, but I remember overhearing Theresa say *he was so angry* and *I just didn't know what he would do* and *I was scared, didn't know where to go, came here, don't tell Daniel* through the walls. Theresa and my mom weren't close friends by any means, they never 'hung out' when Liz and I weren't playing together, but my mother served her a cup of tea and told Theresa that she could stay at our house that night, if she wanted. On the television, a reporter emotionlessly recalled how a woman lured her husband into the bedroom with the promise of a kinky hot oil massage, only to band his wrists to the bedposts with twine, douse his body with gasoline, light a match, and leave. The couple's downstairs neighbors told the reporters that they were worried about getting that *smell* out of their ottoman while my mother and Theresa sipped their Moroccan Mint tea. Meanwhile, Liz and I stared blankly at the latest issue of *YM* and attempted to take a quiz about whether we would be more suitable girlfriends for Aaron or Nick Carter. We rubbed perfume samples on Liz's younger sister's arm. We drew hearts around the faces of the boys who we had crushes on in the yearbook, Thomas and Arthur and Lance, and colored in the eyes of the teachers we disliked with a red sharpie, demonizing them. In the corner, a kitten snored on a pile of dirty clothes. Theresa and Liz were gone by midnight and Liz and I never spoke of their visit again.

Later that week, Liz and I were in her backyard chasing down fireflies with mason jars, as Theresa sat on a lawn chair in the corner. Liz captured a

firefly, it might have been a male firefly or a female firefly, I'm not sure, but instead of leaving it in the jar she picked it out, smeared it between her fingers and rubbed it across the logo of her *Monticello Elementary School* T-shirt. I remember the iridescent smear rubbed across the face of the school's mascot, the Billie Goat, as if the goat had just consumed a bowl of electric oatmeal. I caught one of my own and rubbed it on my fingernails. We smeared fireflies on our foreheads, our arms and bare legs, until we were covered in streaks of fluorescent yellow that would soon fade away. In the corner, Theresa smiled as we killed the insects, turning bug and mate and partner and future egg-carrier into streaks across our bodies; transforming life into accessory, impermanent beauty, the illusion of lightning, and guts on cotton.

## Alpha Gals

Deep in the bayous of the delta, nestled between thick pine trees and crawfish-laden creek beds, the ticks and chiggers reign. Among mammals, they are the least popular of the arachnids. Even the whales shun them, but they are the royalty of the delta woods. Sure, a hiker can spray her exposed limbs with a ten-dollar bottle of permethrin tick repellent, but as soon as she starts sweating in the ninety-degree air punctuated with ninety-percent humidity, the repellent will trickle right off of her skin, leaving her limbs naked and exposed, savory. A hunter can deck himself out in hundreds of dollars of “tick-repellent clothing,” but as soon as a branch snags his pant leg and his ankle flashes pasty skin, the stealthy tick will find the hunter’s flesh with a thirsty embrace. No gun can protect him. Here, smallness is a cloak against the oafish.

Ticks in Southeast Arkansas live idle lives, equipped with endless free time to breed and feast, lives of luxury. If they were born humans and not insects, these creatures would be featured on the cover of *Forbes*, reclining in chaise lounges, sipping lemon drop martinis through golden straws while servants file the points of their toenails into curved perfection. The winters here are mild enough for both snowbirds and ticks to survive year-round. Southeast Arkansas air hangs heavy with a sweltering humidity that pulls the ends of your hair into wild curls, sprouts mold in every crevice of the bathroom and kitchen no matter how often your grandmother gets on her

hands and knees to scrub with vinegar, and breeds moisture-needy insects like ticks, who require damp air for their hydration and survival. They need not flee or migrate, as the damp, warm weather welcomes them continuously. Your grandmother, meanwhile, throws her back out and misses a week of work at the diner.

Ticks perch on a blade of Bermuda grass or the leaf of an oak tree, holding on to the leaves by their third and fourth pairs of legs while their first pair of legs remains outstretched, patiently waiting and reaching for the hair of a deer or dog, or the fat calf of a human; perched so still and meditatively that their stance might as well become a yoga pose—the “questing tick.” Ticks are incapable of flying or jumping, so all they can do is wait for their host to stroll by; wait with arms extended in a position called “questing,” a term that stemmed from the Latin *quaerere* which means “to ask” or “seek.” The ticks do not ask before they take, but they are feverish seekers.

The tick situates itself intentionally, picking a blade of grass that lines the path of a frequently visited hiking trail or deer path. The tick waits until it senses an animal’s breath, body odor, body heat, moisture, or vibration. The Deer Tick can even recognize an animal’s shadow.

Once a host brushes by a tick’s questing site, the tick quickly climbs onto the host’s body. Some ticks, the greedy, blood-thirsty ones will attach

quickly to whatever piece of skin they are offered and begin to feed from there. They are not choosy, they are just thirsty. Other, more patient ticks will wander around the host's limbs, exploring the suburbs of the body as they look for a thinner piece of skin like the cul-de-sac of your outer ear, or the tender subdivision between the thigh and groin, or the warm, pungent ghetto of the armpit.

When the tick has found a satisfying piece of flesh, *Armpit Du Jour* or *Groin Wellington*, it prepares for the initial bite by gently coursing its chelicerae over the skin of its host. Each chelicerae ends in a tooth that's tapered to an especially sharp point, which scrapes and punctures the host's skin with an almost unnoticeable force. The tick contracts both of its chelicerae while flexing both tips, as if performing a nightmarish version of a breaststroke. With each stroke, the tick buries itself further, until it is submerged completely—and only like this, fully buried into another body, protected from the wind and the sharp beaks of the hungry chickens and wild turkey, can it begin to feed.

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It is September, and you have just recently moved from Arkansas to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan for graduate school. Your roommate accompanies you on a drive to the airport to pick up a long-distance boyfriend who is visiting for your birthday. Your romantic relationship is not sustaining

the long-distance and it is obvious that you are both losing interest. There is something missing in this relationship—the “spark” or whatever it is that makes people fall crazy in love. The two of you go weeks at a time without talking on the phone. Each state that stands between the two of you—Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Tennessee—only pulls the two of you farther apart. Your love was simple, a love that existed when both of you were conveniently in the same town, only dorms apart on the same college campus where you could have scheduled breakfast, lunch, and dinner dates in the cafeteria. It wasn't until you moved away that you realized how much of your relationship was built around the convenience of proximity and the necessity of touch. Now, you want to be *just friends* with him, but you don't know how to tell him this when he offers to buy a plane ticket to come see you for your birthday. He flies from Little Rock to Marquette, and because your roommate insists on showering five minutes before you had planned on leaving to the airport, you are twenty minutes late picking him up. When the two of you arrive at the airport, he is sitting on his suitcase in the parking lot. The red one. You feel bad and he looks disappointed, surely he was expecting a more welcoming pick-up. You blame your roommate.

On the way home, you all stop at Crossroads, a bar and grill named after its proximity to the intersection of County Road 480 and State Highway M553. Its menu consists of typical bar fare, fried this or grilled that. A collection of furry, marble-eyed heads of deer and bears and plastic, scaly

replicas of lake trout line the wood-paneled walls. It is a strange sort of rural Midwest kaleidoscope that you've fallen into—a restaurant where you can eat your venison while being watched by a glassy-eyed deer that hangs only feet away from your plate and stares at you, judgmentally, as you poke into your meat clumsily with a fork.

Your boyfriend and roommate both order a hamburger. You are not a vegetarian, but you eat very little red meat in your day-to-day diet, mostly because you grew up in a household that never cooked red meat. This was both for health reasons—high cholesterol and cancer rates in the family, impromptu heart attacks and obesity linked to family members on your mom's side who ate a lot of red meat—and religious ones. Your father's side of the family consists of practicing Hindus who only cook chicken and fish at home. When you grow up without ever eating a certain dish, it's very easy to continue not eating that dish.

However, when your roommate and boyfriend both order their hamburgers, you decide to order one as well. Perhaps this burger-order began to bubble up on a Freudian level, a part of you feeling rebellious as you order beef even though your parents have raised you to so carefully avoid it. Perhaps you just smelled the burgers grilling in the kitchen and thought they smelled tasty—you're not sure, the memory of *why* you chose to order a burger is not nearly as vivid as the memory of what happened four hours *after* you ordered the burger.

You are all hanging out in the living room, listening to records. Your roommate has already grabbed your arm and yanked you into the kitchen for a “sidecar” where she whispers *if you and your long distance boyfriend don't have sex immediately after first seeing each other something in this relationship is terribly wrong*. She doesn't know how carefully you have been working to orchestrate this situation.

While you're sitting on the couch, your right arm starts to break out in a rash. It's the mild, pink type of rash, with softly-curved bumps, the kind of rash that babies get on their bottoms or middle-aged joggers notice after running in the sun while wearing tight spandex. You figure that you must have gotten bitten by something—it is still warm enough in Michigan that the bugs are out, and the cat brings plenty of bugs inside. He'll carry fleas and small worms in on the top of his back, and the squirming bodies of cockroaches struggling for their life from between his feline teeth.

Five minutes later, you see a spread of bumps emerging on your leg. The bumps are popping up more ferociously this time, boiling through your skin like air bubbles crackling in a pancake mix splayed on a high-heat cast-iron skillet. You start to feel nauseas as your body breaks out in what you're now deciphering are hives. You wonder if there is something living in the couch, or a whole family of bugs living beneath the thrift-store cushions. Bugs infect couches, even the one you sit on as your relationship with your boyfriend dwindles, as your arm swells with bites, as he walks you to your

bedroom where the dust mites are surely plans beneath the mattress that you bought from one of those mattress outlet warehouses that seem to be existing in a perpetual state of “Store closing! Everything must go!” sales, so surely your warehouse mattress hosts families of *climex lectularius*’ who nest in the network of foam and rubber that you sleep on every night, sometimes shirtless.

You lie on the bed and your boyfriend pulls your shirt off, but it is not sexy or romantic; probably not how he imagined this would go—you, entirely covered in hives, sweaty and dizzy, burning in a rash. He walks to the grocery store around the corner to purchase some Benadryl and hydrocortisone cream. While he’s gone, you lock yourself in the bathroom and hug the toilet. You can feel the eyes of all of the house spiders watching you from their perches on top of the windowsill and the side of the claw foot tub as you empty your stomach. Your roommate has locked herself in her bedroom and does not step into the hallway to check on you, even though she can surely hear your misery from between the thin walls. You are alone with the remains of your lunch, your welts, your sweat, the spiders, the toilet. By the time your boyfriend returns with the Benadryl you’re lying in bed, naked and empty-stomached. He pops a Benadryl into your mouth and rubs the cream on your welty back and you think to myself how you do not deserve his kindness.

The Benadryl acts quickly, spreading throughout your system, zapping the reaction into submission, dehydrating you. Your boyfriend sits on the end of the bed and restrains you from scratching the red welts off of your skin. When you finally stop sweating, the ends of your hair plaster themselves to the sides of your face. Your mascara has dripped down to your chin. After thirty minutes, you start to feel like yourself again. The welts have almost completely dried up and disappeared and your stomach has nothing left to protest. You and your boyfriend decide that this must have just been a freak accident; the cook probably didn't grill the burger properly or maybe you just got a bad burger. Your roommate and boyfriend are both fine and we all had the same meal, so surely you just got stuck with a bad burger. You wonder if this is karma—you ate the *beef*, you are not appreciative of my boyfriend and you were late picking him up from the airport, so the Hindu gods have punished you with a rotten burger. *Look at how her stomach rumbles and boils with pain now! And look how her skin burns and itches with that hideous rash!* You imagine Shiva laughing to Vishnu, the two gods patting each other on the back and high-fiving for a job well done.

Later that evening, you take your boyfriend to meet your new grad school friends and get drunk at a local dive bar. Even though the lights are dim and the walls are dark, you can't help but wonder about the bugs crawling beneath the padded seats of the bar stools. You find yourself touching the cracks in the cushioning, sticking your finger into the foam,

using the tip of your finger to feel for heads, thoraxes, abdomens, wings and antennas and legs and legs and legs. By your third beer, you forget to keep checking the cushions for insects.

Since your karmic punishment has been paid and your body is whole and healthy again, you drink yourself into another dimension where the streetlights sway and “Gangsta’s Paradise” and “Say You’ll Be There” blare from a jukebox so we forget that we are living in 2013 and at the end of the night when your boyfriend says goodbye to one of your male friends by whispering *I’d like to have anal sex with you* in his ear, you laugh it off, *funny boyfriend* and scratch my arm predictively, as no itch is there.

~

The Lone Star tick thrives in the Southeastern United States. It is a small arachnid named both for the single, white spot on the back of the female, and for the state that used to be its main habitat: Texas. Currently, because of a series of changes in the environment and climate, the tick can be found in most states east of the Rockies. The Lone Star tick’s growth is categorized in relation to various letters of the alphabet—nymphs are the size of a lower cased “o” in newspaper print and expand to the size of a 0 when fully engorged. Adults are the size of a capital “C,” but when engorged, can swell as large as a raisin.

Lone Star ticks bite humans by injecting their needle-like mouthparts into the skin, while their backward-facing teeth act as hooks, securing their needly mouths in places. Once they are secure, the ticks secrete a cement-like substance that helps them stay attached to the skin.

Every time that you go back home and into the Arkansas woods in the summertime, you leave the woods covered in ticks. Arms, legs, scalp, neck, the ticks are everywhere. And when you think that you are finally done pulling ticks off of your own body, the dog jumps onto your lap and you see ticks crawling on his head, underneath his stomach, on his paws. The ticks will jump off of the dogs and inhabit the furniture, waiting for a cat, dog, or human to walk by or sit down to watch the *Family Feud* marathon, or read *The Sun* or sip a glass of hot spiced rum or eat a meal of roasted carrots and beets or nap, dreaming of tug boats and ferries.

The Lone Star tick thrives in Arkansas. It produces a sugar from its gut called galactose-alpha-1, 3-galactose, or “Alpha-Gal,” the slang term it’s referred to within the allergy community. When certain people are bitten by this tick, their immune systems develop an allergic response to that sugar. Because Alpha-Gal is also found in red meat, a bite by the Lone Star tick could mean that the host develops an allergic reaction to anything that is considered “red meat”—from beef hamburgers to bacon. Unlike many other allergies, the Alpha-Gal allergy reaction is a delayed response and can occur anywhere from 4-8 hours after finishing the meal. Repeated tick bites can

potentially cause the antibody level of Alpha-Gal to rise, which means that the allergic reaction will worsen with each consecutive strip of bacon, bite of cheeseburger, or flank of steak.

There is an “Alpha-Gal Allergy Awareness” group on Facebook. It has 2,828 members and the administrators frequently post about ways to avoid interactions with ticks, what to do when a tick does bite you, and occasionally congratulates members who have out-lived their Alpha-Gal allergy after five, ten, twenty years. Members post on the wall, sharing experiences and embarrassing post-red meat consumption stories about themselves, family members, and friends. Members are encouraged to *Spread awareness of Alpha-Gal allergies!* They are designing a support ribbon, the color still undecided. They are still designing the image for the T-Shirt.

You decide to join the group and scroll through some of the members’ profiles. Bryan Huff, photographer and owner of a studio called “Huffoto”, posts that his allergy has disappeared after eighteen months of avoiding ticks and red meat. Bryan Huff rotates his Facebook cover photo between various albums from Metallica, The Beastie Boys, and Guns and Roses. He photographs scenes of lighting from as seen through the rearview windows of a grey sedan and captures these images with phrases like, “Warning: Objects in mirror are more dangerous than they appear.” Linda Morris paints canvases of flamingos and rows of townhomes and tennis rackets and sunflowers. People leave comments on her paintings like “So cheerful!” “A

happy village!” and “Memories are little treasures that we are blessed to have!” Kirstina Hoffman is pregnant with her first child. She prays that her baby will not be born with an Alpha-Gal Allergy.

~

You are at your father’s house with a new boyfriend. Your old boyfriend has, surprisingly, just married a woman. You were not invited to the wedding.

You, your stepmother, father, and new boyfriend are eating on the outside patio of O’Malley’s Irish Pub, an overpriced burger joint overlooks Lake Michigan. It is a warm summer day, the sun is just about to set, you are all sipping Martinis and Mojitos and Sour Apple Cocktails and you have not yet discovered that you have a beef allergy. When the waitress comes to take your order, you ask for the mushroom pasta.

*At an Irish pub you’re going to order pasta? your dad says. Why don’t you order a potpie, or at least something more Irish?*

Easily influenced and always searching for ways to appease your father, you change your order to a potpie. The potpie was supposed to be lamb, but the waitress says that the kitchen has run out of lamb and can only fill the potpies with beef. *Sure*, you say, *I’ll take the beef*. You eat half of the pie before you’re full.

That night, you wake at 3am to a rash crawling up your arm. The bumps start small, then spread to you back and chest, exploring and conquering your body, claiming each new territory with a perfectly round, red hive. The hives are followed by waves of sweat, then your stomach starts to rumble, and you recognize these symptoms as the same symptoms you had two years ago after the Crossroads burger. You know that you have to get yourself to the bathroom, immediately. You pull yourself out of bed and try to sprint to the bathroom, when you faint and collapse on your bedroom floor. When you come to, about five minutes later, you're seeing stars. Breathing becomes more difficult—each inhale feels like a struggle, and it feels as if your body is resisting every breath. You crawl across the hallway to the bathroom and try to pull yourself on to the toilet, only to faint and fall onto the floor with a loud *thud* seconds later. The tiles feel cool against your sweating face, so you lie there for a while, knowing that these are the last minutes that you'll be able to sit and lay immobile, dreading what you know is about to happen next.

Your dad hears the thud and starts knocking on the bathroom door, asking if everything is ok. You try to speak, but your throat has swollen to the point where speaking is almost impossible. You eventually crawl out of the bathroom and your dad helps you back in bed. For the next hour, he tells you that he's going to call 911, bring you to the emergency room, call an

ambulance. You tell him no, no, no over and over while his fingers hover over the 9 on his keypad.

*I've had these symptoms before, just give me a Benadryl, wait another half hour and they'll pass,* you whisper.

You hope that you're right. Thankfully, your boyfriend is asleep in the basement and is unaware of the entire incident.

Your dad has gone to the doctor for a slight leg pain, for getting *sniffed* by a dog in India, for getting a bee sting. When you talk on the phone to your dad he notices that you have a slight rasp in your voice, he starts listing doctors and specialists that you should see. At this moment, nothing sounds worse to you than being whisked away in an ambulance, examined underneath fluorescent lights, poked and prodded at, and being on display in front of strangers while you're unable to control what is happening at either end of your body. You push your dad's cell phone on the floor and pull the sheets over your head until eventually, the Benadryl kicks in and the symptoms fade. You fall back to sleep, your father watching nervously the whole time.

Outside, a swarm of bees constructs a hive by the window. Two male bees fight to the death, in order to get a few seconds to couple and copulate with the queen bee. The worker bees wait silently for the sun to come out in

the morning and tell the flowers to open, to call bee bodies to pollen and petal.

The next morning, you are served a glass of orange juice, no coffee, and a handful of articles about beef allergies. Your symptoms match up with the vivid descriptions in the articles. Many of the articles link the allergy back to a Lone Star tick bite.

*You wanted to order the mushroom pasta—I should've let you order that! Why did I tell you to get a potpie?* Your father paces the kitchen, blaming himself. He runs his hand across the top of his bald head, repeatedly. He stares silently at the light fixture above the kitchen table as he picks at the skin around his fingernails. He keeps walking over to you, inspecting your arms for hives and peering into your eyes as if to check for sanity. He insists that you see a doctor as soon as you return to Marquette, and hands you a list of doctors that he has printed off from Google.

~

Once you're back in Marquette, you call multiple doctors, trying to get an appointment within the week. Most doctors are unavailable until the next month. Eventually, you find a doctor who says he can see you as early as that afternoon. You should take this as a warning sign, but you don't.

When the doctor comes in to meet you, he introduces himself and you make small talk about Marquette and grad school for a couple of minutes.

The doctor wears alligator-patterned socks that peek out from the top of his loafers. The doctor is not married, or if he is married, he does not wear a wedding ring. The doctor has a mole on his left cheek, which sprouts one brown hair. The doctor is wearing a cologne that smells of cedar. The doctor has a sweat ring underneath his left arm. When the doctor finally asks you what you're visiting the office for, you tell him that you are 90% certain that you have a beef allergy.

*Beef allergy?* he asks.

*Yes, a beef allergy.* You tell him about your past two interactions with beef.

*Hmmm, I don't know about that. I've never heard of a beef allergy,* he says. He asks his nurse if she's ever heard of this "beef allergy," and she shakes her head no. He turns to his computer and types "beef allergy" into Google. He opens the first page that pops up, an article on WebMD. He scans the article, then opens a few more articles before saying, *Well, I guess this is a real thing. What do you want me to do? Why don't you just avoid beef?*

*I obviously plan on doing that,* you say.

In the corner, a potted bonsai wilts.

As the doctor is Googling "beef allergy," your fingers find themselves tracing the edges of the exam table, searching for rips and tears in the plastic

covering, feeling once again for antenna and thorax and leg. Even though the doctor's office is probably the most sterile setting that you will find yourself in that day, you can't help but fear the insects that can adapt and survive in this sterile environment. Perhaps, like the antibiotic, the doctor's office insect has learned to adapt and has grown into a super insect with each dose of bleach. Perhaps, there is a family of super fleas scurrying beneath the cushion right now, angry that the weight and imprint of my ass has caused their ceiling to cave. Even a doctor's office has walls, and behind them, wood and insulation and pipes, and the ants and wasps and mites and meal moths and roaches that thrive in the wool and metal and coolness of those environments.

He quotes a few lines from articles that you, your parents, and boyfriend, have already read numerous times.

You ask him about seeing an allergy doctor, maybe you have other unknown allergies, maybe you can do something to cure this. He says no, no allergy doctor required. Instead, he just prescribes you an EpiPen and tells you the instructions will be in the packet.

You ask him to look at a mysterious lump of tissue on your shoulder. He pokes at it, his finger probably leaving traces of staphylococcus epidermidis and corynebacterium and acinetobacter johnsonii on your

shoulder, before removing his hand to return to the computer and Google “lump on shoulder.” He tells you it’s probably nothing to worry about.

Today, food allergies and intolerances are a thing of chicness. People pronounce their nut allergies proudly, dramatically leaping out of the room when someone unwraps a Snickers bar within ten feet of them. One-half of your coworkers claim to have intolerances for gluten or lactose. According to an article on the *Daily Mail*, nearly one in three Britons now claim to suffer from an allergy or food intolerance, but a recent investigation has proven that only around 1.9 percent of the UK population is really intolerant to certain foods. Someone can drop a couple hundred dollars to get a food intolerance test while waiting for their nails to dry at a salon, or after finishing a workout at the gym, or while in line for their freshly-pressed juice at the locally-owned, organic and vegan juice bar. Even these vegans who proudly avoid animal products perhaps digest the unintentional bug who lives and thrives on the skins of such pesticide-free fruits and vegetables. These well-meaning vegans may, perhaps be eating the meat that these bugs have eaten, perhaps the meat of a bug of a different species or the meat of a sister or brother bug, however semi-digested that meat is, because these vegans are also inadvertently eating insect shit.

You used to get an irrational feeling of pride when you could sit in a doctor’s office or a massage parlor and check “Allergies? None” on the new

patient form. Now, even more irrationally, you get a sick feeling of joy from telling people that you have a beef allergy.

You have friends who have gone on gluten-free, dairy-free, wheat-free diets and take any opportunity to bring it up in a conversation.

*Do you want to go see the new Ghostbusters movie this evening?*

*Sure, but keep the popcorn away from me, you know I'm gluten intolerant!*

Now, when you go out to eat at restaurants, you have an unreasonable urge to ask waitresses if the egg-drop soup is made with beef stock, if the chicken will be sautéed with the same spatula that's used to cook the beef, and *is that beef that I'm smelling in the air? I'm feeling faint; please, give us the corner table by that open window.*

More than you hate the symptoms of what physically happens to your body when you eat beef, you hate what having a beef allergy has done to your mental health. The uncontrollable urge to slip this fact into any conversation, the itch to top off someone else's allergy story with your own traumatic allergy events, the need to claim your food-victim status and lecture whoever will listen about what happens when you get bit by the wrong tick.

You imagine a family of ticks, perched ever so pensively in their "questing" pose, arms outstretched, legs clinging on to the edge of a blade of

grass. They are strong, they could wait like this all day. You walk by, and one by one, father, mother, son, daughter, the tick family clings onto your leg hairs. Their suitcases are packed; they plan on staying here for a while. Together, they venture down into the inner crook of your knee, where sweat pools, pores open, and the skin is soft.

They build a stucco house there, equipped with a swimming pool, three-car-garage, mowed front lawn. In the evenings, they sit together to feast as a family, white bibs wrapped around their necks to catch any fallen drips of blood. Between heavy gulps they share stories about their days and tell each other about flunked math tests, raises at work, and the misbehaving dog. They develop allergies of their own. They lament (though they don't know they're lamenting) their inability to access and conceive of Google. These ticks pump their bodies with blood, all the while depleting yours, turning alpha-gal into your enemy, transforming you unwillingly into a food-victim, but their touch is so soft that you don't realize they are there until it is too late. You lack their specialized senses; all you notice is the sweet sugary smell of the summertime pine needles, the soft mud between my toes, the thick humid air, and the sparrows, their feathers likely housing the next generation of mite, chirping in the trees as if this is really a happy and safe place.

## Circularity

he sits across from me in a stiff chair there's a potted fern with brown tips  
on the edge of his desk in a ceramic pot with a maroon elephant and yellow  
stars

I sit on an overstuffed couch

he tells me that I can lie down but I don't my body remains at a 90 degree  
angle

I think this makes him uncomfortable so I sit like this for the entire hour  
he asks me what I want to talk about today I shrug I say  
nothing

he digs around in the bottom drawer of his desk a deep wooden  
drawer

fingers hands elbows disappear and return with a yellow legal pad

it's my second visit here but I'm a skeptic we'll see if he's as  
good

as his bronze-rimmed diplomas advertise washington university  
vanderbilt PhD. honors written in gold cursive because black print  
wouldn't reflect

off of the 2pm sunbeams that shine through the picture window

I can stare all day

he smiles & I smile and he leans forward in his chair

he asks me why I find it difficult to say no

his pen is ready

I tell him that when I was 9 I took a wire brush to my dog Barto's back

I brushed him for 46 minutes while watching *Wishbone*

but on minute 46 I looked down and his black fur was soaked with blood

my fingers were sticky

but Barto was still sitting in front of me letting me rake cheap wires  
through his skin he would have still been sitting there even if my tv show  
was 217 minutes long he was my first dog & I was his only owner

he's scribbling on the legal pad or maybe he's drawing stick-figure boobs

how did this make you feel he asks

I say that I washed my hands rubbed a wet towel through Barto's fur

& I threw the brush away

did throwing the brush away solve your problem? he's pulling at his cuticles

if he starts biting at his cuticles I will leave

no it didn't solve the problem I say because the next week my mom  
said

what happened to the wire brush and she came home with an identical  
brush

I tried to brush Barto again gentle I tried to be gentle but I  
got distracted and made comparisons like sriracha sauce bleeding

from the insides of a bean burrito

the pen in his hand glides vertically across on the paper

movements that can't possibly be forming words

up down up down he asks me about growing up

as an only child

I say I would smear red lipstick on my lips sit next to a patch of petunias

with my lips puckered and wait for hours to be recognized and kissed by  
the hummingbird

he pushes a bowl of hersheys kisses towards me I take 6

I want you to think about distance he says I stretch out on the couch





## Lenses

Mary from next-door keeps her hair grey and wears it loose. Every spring she starts a tomato garden in her front yard, but by June the garden will be forgotten, the vines bald and barren, the tomatoes hanging heavy with the weight of decay, and maggots.

Her husband, Jack, drinks Budweiser in a bathrobe on the porch. When Jack is out of beer, he comes to our house and asks to buy the beer straight out of our refrigerator. Reluctantly, my mother hands him a beer, never takes his money, then says to me, "You and your binoculars! You saw him coming. Why didn't you warn me?"

Mary and Jack stand on their front porch, underneath a hanging azalea. Mary rocks her baby in her arms, cooing as she swings the baby. From our living room window, I zoom in on my binoculars, until the large cross on Mary's neck appears to dissect her breasts as she leans down to put the baby back in its stroller.

Every morning, Mary pushes the baby stroller around the neighborhood. Neighbors always stop and talk to Mary, they tell her how cute the baby is and they adjust the pink bows on the baby's head. Jack never walks with Mary and the baby. The baby never cries.

I adjust the binocular strap and zoom in on the mud on Jack's cowboy boots. The stub of his cigarette dangles in the corner of his mouth, hovering dangerously over the baby stroller. On their porch, Mary and Jack's mouths form O and E and P and Z shapes at each other.

Two Weimaraners pull two women down the street. They're new to the neighborhood. Jack sits on the porch in a rocking chair, smoking and drinking a beer. The ladies introduce themselves, and he shakes their hands. The dogs nudge their noses into the stroller and Mary pushes them away. The two women lean over and peer into the stroller, then pull back, startled. The corners of their eyes crinkle as they exchange worried glances at each other before leaving the porch. Mary stands up proudly and yells something at the women, but her lips move too quickly to decipher her words through the lenses.

Jack stands up and flicks his spent cigarette and drained beer can into the stroller. Mary slaps him across the face, hard. His cheek reddens. His beer spills over the top of the can and splatters the baby's translucent blonde hair. The baby's facial expression doesn't change. Through the binocular lenses, it's clear that one of her blue eyes is open but the other eye is shut, a defect in her plastic body. Her plastic hands are frozen with palms up, forever reaching. The stub of her father's cigarette burns a slow hole into her polyester frock, and my stomach growls as I watch Mary cry while holding her baby, and our pot roast isn't even close to ready.

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