

STRANGER SPECIES

by

DEVIN LATHAM

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ABSTRACT

Stranger Species is a collection of interconnected personal and lyrical essays that illustrate and dissect the biological and psychological forces that drive humans to act. While essays in the collection prove the narrator's need to believe that we are animals first and human beings second and that sex and persistence to survive are proof of our animalism, essays simultaneously counter-argue that humans—our emotions, weaknesses, and consciousness—are unique to our species, separating us from the animal world. Throughout the collection, fear resonates that we do not control our desires and ultimately our lives, that biology and our deep seeded psychological inadequacies drive us blindly and often recklessly towards our species' survival never asking for our permission, leaving us to wonder why we do the strange things that we do. The narrator uses research and her experience to explore genetics, reproduction, desire, loneliness, binding societal constructions, control, and loss.

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“to be tough is to be fragile, to be tender is to be truly fierce.”
--Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces*

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LOBLOLLY LOVE

Daddy cruised timber and managed wildlife for a living. He went to work in a thin brown t-shirt, tan Dickies, and knee-high lace-up boots that protected him against snakes and briars. He had a ponytail and a long brown beard. From working outside all day, his brown hair was streaked with blond and his skin was colored brass. Blue paint stained his nails and the lines of his calluses.

When he came home, I put his boots on, and the leather came up my thighs. Inside the boots were still warm and moist. I clomped back and forth on the front porch, tracking dried mud on the wood while he scrubbed at the blue paint and checked himself for ticks.

Most of Daddy's clients owned land in west Alabama—land for hunting, fishing, and timber. On the weekends, he took me to work with him. We drove down Highway 11, turning on dirt roads that led to metal gates. He'd hand me the key, and I'd unlock the silver Master Lock. I'd stand on the bottom rail while he drove in, closing my eyes to the dust he kicked up. These lands were laid out in food plots, ponds, pine stands, hardwoods, and fields.

"Can I drive now?" I asked, and he traded seats with me in his maroon 4x4 Chevy but only on the dirt roads. I passed the "D" with the automatic gearshift, going up and down through the green-lit letters and numbers searching. The steering wheel was smooth and worn from his hands. It smelled like the grease he used to slick back his ponytail. When I drove, I felt like I was going too fast, but he never told me to slow down. I sat with both feet ready to brake; just my heels touched the floor mat.

"Turn by the corner of the pines," he tapped the passenger window with his pointer knuckle.

We passed a fresh dug pond waiting for rain and blue-dotted pine trees marked to cut. He told me to stop by the food plot where a camouflaged ladder-stand was mounted on a thick pine branch and strapped to the trunk. I stood up on the break pedal pressing hard and pulled the gearshift up to “P.” He reached over and turned off the truck.

We walked across the uneven dirt, rowed with green seedlings. We looked for heart-shaped deer tracks and black droppings.

When he drove, I stood on the bumper holding the tailgate. I watched the pines pass in symmetrical rows, listening to the truck’s tires on the dirt, leaving dust trails behind us.

Nature beats nurture. Evolutionary psychologists argue that nurture is mostly unimportant in affecting our development. Even though nurture does not affect our genetic composition, nurture—the wax and wane—means something, has to leave us with some mark, some effect. Nurture might fill holes like dry ponds up to the brim. But the lack of nurture or the presence of and then the taking away of nurture might open up gaps, like the clean burned rows separating pine lines. Lines that have been burned to the dirt, lines you need somebody to walk down and tend to.

Daddy grew hay on his client’s vacant plots. Inside the cab of his John Deere tractor, Daddy planted, cut, and baled sorghum-sundangrass. Sorghum’s flat blades dry gold and crisp, smelling like clean syrup.

Between the tractor’s driver’s seat and the metal cab wall, Daddy fixed me a seat: an upside-down five-gallon bucket padded with folded flannel shirts. I leaned my head against the vibrating metal and fell asleep to the tractor’s hum.

Baling was always hot because hay's cut in late summer, and it was Alabama summer at that. The John Deere pulled a red baler—a squatty loud machine that raked up a row of cut dried grass, packed the hay tight together, and tied the bale up with two pieces of orange twine. It shot the bale out the back end.

As a teenager, I started following the baler, picking up hot twined rectangles. I carried each bale two-handed and propped on my hip like a baby across the field to the wooden flatbed trailer. The twine hung heavy between where my calluses met the base of my fingers. I wore shorts instead of jeans because I didn't like wearing long pants in the heat. When sorghum-sundangrass dries, the edges of the wide blades harden and thin. The dry leaves cut lines into my thighs, the sides of my calves, and the belly of my forearms. At night, the hundreds of tiny cuts burned under the showerhead.

I liked the hay rashes and the soreness in my arms. Daddy was always proud of the way I worked, saying I could outwork two men.

...

It was the cold season in west Alabama, and logs burned in hearths, woodstoves, and camps. Heat blew on my feet while my driver's side window was rolled down, so I could smell the woodsmoke. Smoke hung in the cold air, and the pines butted up to the road.

I was almost there, having driven two hours from Birmingham where I went to college. I turned the radio off, and the chilled airstream whipped my hair against my cheek. It wasn't yet night, but the thick cloud-cover muted the green in the needles of the pines. Every couple miles, I passed stiff heaps of dead dogs and deer. I pulled my hair out of my mouth's corner and turned off the worn county road onto an unlined street.

A doe stood in the road. I stopped. My lights were off. Her black eyes were trained on my car. Her ears twitched, listening. Her dark nose shined wide and wet. Her bark-colored coat was thick for winter. We looked at one another, me inside my car and her in the road. Of course, she was beautiful. I wanted to touch her; I wanted to be her.

I wanted to see what would happen even though I already knew. I put my car in park. I opened the door, and she lengthened her smooth neck. I shifted my weight out of the driver's seat. My feet reached for the asphalt, and I stood. She shifted her body backwards without moving her legs. She was ready to turn and run into the pines bundled by the road. I stepped around the door, and her tail showed white. She scrambled clumsy on the rock surface. She was built for matted leaves and fallen trunks. When she hit the pine needles, she found her cadence and disappeared, bristling limbs and leaves and then nothing. The power pole lights hummed and snapped awake.

I rolled down the passenger window and drove to the end of the road past the few houses. The asphalt turned to gravel then to gray dirt. I turned right through an already open gate between two fenced pastures. This road was uneven with roots and potholes hidden under pine straw. In the twilight, I could still see because I knew this land, these trees. Before I reached the house, I stopped my car again. I got out and walked to edge of the right-hand pasture. A clump of loblollies stood in the upper corner. They'd been there long before the plot was fenced. My father said they were my age, said he could remember ducking to miss the bottom limbs when they were ten feet tall. I was four then. He said they happened naturally. They weren't gapped and lined but sporadic and bunched.

Standing on their browned needles and holding the sagging wire of the fence, I was twenty-one years old. Most of the pines' square bark had flaked and fallen off, leaving their

exposed core soft and paled gray. Their bases were dotted with holes from termites. Their long, needleless branches broke into sharp points. They leaked and foamed their last sap. The loblollies were dying.

I parked next to his truck that used to take me to school, take me everywhere. I walked up the porch and through the front door of my father's house.

A week later, my poetry professor, Adam, wanted his class to meet at a bar in Birmingham, and he insisted we all come. I planned to stay for thirty minutes, but I stayed for eight hours.

Half of his students came, sitting around the table listening to Adam talk about himself. I was the last one to arrive. I bought a beer and sat in the chair next to him. Adam was a solid, boxy man with gray hair and a red goatee. My back sat to a glass wall with a sliding door, leading to a patio that held wobbly tables, wrought-iron chairs, and a wood fire kept inside an old iron washpot. I could feel the winter cold on my back through the glass and my jacket.

At the other end of our table behind a low-hanging light, sat Adam's friend. I knew his name was Jim and that he taught English. He sat with his legs crossed, leaning back in his chair wearing a blue Patagonia vest over a button-up with dark Levis and work boots. His hair was black and thick. His beard trimmed short, starting to gray. His skin colored darker than tan, like cimarron. There was something about his demeanor, like he knew things.

He watched me talk to Adam. I knew he was listening, deciding his opinion of me.

Then they talked across the table to one another. They liked the audience of attentive undergraduates.

"Send it out," Adam told Jim.

“I don’t feel like it’s ready. Meredith agrees.” When Jim talked, he seemed almost shy and simultaneously bold.

“Meredith is a nurse, and this ain’t none of her business. Tell her to stick to what she knows. You listen to me about writing.” Adam was just bold.

Jim nodded in response.

I grew bored, so I walked out to the patio. Under the strung Christmas lights, logs burned inside the washpot, and I stood close, warming my hands. Every now and then, an old man would come along and stoke the fire with a nearby shovel. When I felt that I’d been gone long enough, I went back inside to our table.

Halfway through the night I realized I looked horrible. I hadn’t showered in five days. My hair was slicked back into a bun with my own grease. My father wouldn’t talk to me much, and these were the days I was realizing he was no longer my Daddy—that he was now just a relative. He had his own family, and I didn’t have much of a place in that family anymore. These were the days I needed a Daddy again.

Adam and Jim drank whiskey, so I did too. It was my first time. I didn’t tell anyone that. I could hold my liquor, and I believed in my ability to remain standing throughout the night, which I did until I drove back to my apartment in the short hours of morning, sank onto the wood floor of my living room, and sobbed like a lost child while my cat swished her tail against my face.

But before that, I sat down at our table and watched Jim go outside like we were taking turns. He pulled out a cigarette from inside his vest. With my head half-cocked while Adam recited from memory his latest publication, I watched Jim in my periphery, standing over the fire

sucking his cigarette. I watched him because he kept watching me. The cigarette smoke mingled with his fogged breath, and his skin glowed red over the fire.

“Why is Jim so brown?” I interrupted Adam.

“He’s got Native blood running through his veins,” Adam smiled.

“Like Indian?”

He nodded.

Jim came back in followed by a cold push of air and the smell of cigarettes. He sat down on the other side of Adam. This was the closest I’d been to Jim. His brown eyes were dotted with yellow, and his hair was much prettier than mine. Up close, he seemed sweet like a young boy. He smiled a lot.

“What are y’all two talking about?” His southern accent was strong but smooth without the nasal twang.

“Adam says you’re an Indian,” I said.

“Partly.”

“You’re really tan.”

“Oh, this is my winter coat. You should see me in the summer,” he smiled. I didn’t smile back. He and Adam started up again. I listened for a while, getting antsy. I went back outside. I didn’t dare look at him, but I knew he was watching me. I knew he’d follow me out. I stood over the logs and embers. The glass door slid open.

“I know your mud,” he said as he walked towards the fire.

“My mud?” I liked his statement.

“Where you’re from, that dirt. Sumter County. I know that area well. I went to Livingston University when it was still called Livingston University.”

“It’s the University of West Alabama now.”

“I know, but I’m old.”

“How old is old?”

“Thirty eight.”

“I’m twenty one.”

“I know.”

“Your wife’s name is Meredith.”

“It is.” He didn’t flinch.

“You don’t have any kids?” I guessed.

“No.” He paused. “My wife and I are friends. Good friends.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I stood closer to him. The skin below his jugular looked smooth and warm like something I’d like to smell.

“You’re young,” he said.

“I like you,” I pressed my pointer finger into the down of his vest like it was a threat. The whiskey made me bold, but even still my words surprised me. They surprised me because I never planned to say them, but as soon as I spoke them, I knew they were true, and that they’d always be true.

He didn’t back down. “Devin, I like you too.”

Pines are made of three quarters cellulose and one-quarter lignin, which is the glue that holds the wood together. Cellulose is the fiber used to make paper.

Pines are marked, cut, rolled, chipped, and pulped. Rolling removes the bark, and pulping unglues the cellulose. The wood chips are boiled in chemically treated water to loosen the glue and releases the individual fibers. These fibers are bleached and drained.

The cellulose is run through hot rollers and pressed to bind the fibers back together.

The winter after I met Jim, summer hit hard, and everyone in Birmingham complained about the heat. Temperatures neared the one hundred mark, and breezes were hard to come by. Jim invited me to see his property in Bibb County, Alabama. He loved the land, needed it he said. I said yes, kept saying yes to him. He didn't care about the high temperature, and I decided I didn't either, wanting to prove I was tough.

The L-shaped forty-acre land ran parallel to a pair of train tracks. A sagging house Jim's great-grandparents once lived in and a grayed barn sat in a field. On the long days Jim kept away from his home, he'd made a campsite on the land's highest point. The fire ring made of dumped concrete pieces looked out over the house. The field and his campsite waited within the thick walls of pines and hardwoods.

Jim said he wanted to clear an overgrown patch of privet and sweetgum behind the barn. I told him I wanted to ride along. After he seated himself on his faded red 1968 Massey-Ferguson tractor, he pulled me up with one arm. My tailbone pressed in the metal guard where I sat over the back left wheel.

My Levis baked while the bush hog chewed over sweetgum saplings, privet hedge, and briar thickets. He wore a blue bandanna rolled and tied as a sweatband. I pulled at pieces of his black hair, reminding him I was there. Riding next to him felt like how we'd be if we were

always together. His brown eyes were squinted thin, and sweat dripped off the rounded tip of his nose into his beard.

“It’s not that hot,” I yelled over the tractor and bush hog. The sun sucked at my pores and burned my hairline. “Once you’re out in it, you get sorta used to it.”

“It’s not. People get something in their heads, and then they don’t know anything else,” he told me. He drove close to a thicket of tall briars on my side. I leaned on him away from the thorns that pulled my shirt. I think he found this funny even though he didn’t laugh because more briars kept pulling at me, and he just said, “Be careful, now.”

The tractor bumped the divots in the land, and my tailbone bumped the metal. I kept my boots wrapped behind his left leg away from the five-foot tire. With his right hand, he shook down the stiff gearshift as we neared a clump of young trees—small pines and more sweetgums. The tractor shook as the bush hog’s blade worked over the saplings. It was too loud to talk much. Wanting to touch him, I pulled his hair again.

“Do you want some water,” I screamed.

“I can let you off,” he said while looking ahead.

He braked, and I jump down out of the tractor’s way. The bush hog left a dust cloud, and I breathed through my t-shirt. I watched sweat roll down my stomach and soak into my jeans.

His truck sat by the barn with the cooler in the bed. I fished out one of the water bottles he brought for me. I wiped the cooler water on my face and got him a Gatorade. I walked back through the yellow grass, listening for where the tractor was. The cicadas were on. I headed downhill on the stumped paths left by the bush hog. The cicadas turned off, and the tractor sounded behind me. I turned around, holding up the Gatorade. He let me back on, and we rode until we broke the driveshaft.

His property became our favorite place together. The pines' solitude kept us safe from being seen, and we liked the idea of doing as we pleased. We walked the woods. We tried to plant corn that never turned out. We chopped wood for the next winter.

He hauled a trailer load of wood out to the campsite for us to split. He told me to let down the trailer's ramp, and he walked into the woods like he was testing me. I unpinned the expanded metal ramp and walked it to the ground. I stood on the ramp, looking at the trunk sawed into sections.

He stayed in the woods, peeing and searching through the leaves for deer tracks while I rolled the smaller pieces down the ramp. The wood rattled the metal, and I wondered if he could hear me. I bent down, bear-hugging a cylindrical chunk of wood and slowly stood back up. I shuffled up the embankment towards the woodstack. I dropped the wood away from my feet, too heavy to set down. I worked like he was watching me.

The humidity kept the air stale, and sweat stung the new scratches at my elbows. I liked the work, liked the way it made my body feel.

He walked out the woods, saying, "You're doing good. Those are heavy." I rolled my eyes, but I liked him being proud of me, seeing that I knew how to work, that I'd been taught.

I jogged down the bank, stepping over exposed tree roots, to meet him at the trailer. I stopped behind him. His shirttail was dark with sweat as he leaned over the bed of his truck for his maul and sledgehammer. Sweat collected at his hairline. I caught a drop on my fingertip and put the salt water to my tongue.

I used to watch my father chop wood, and I'd carried the logs to the front porch. Our house was heated with a wood-burning stove, which left my clothes and hair smelling like firewood. But Jim wanted me to chop some of the thick chunks into logs. He said the maul was

only eight pounds, but it felt like thirty when he handed it to me. The handle was slick and hard without grooves or cushion. I set up in the form my father taught me: a wide base and square shoulders. With both arms, I lifted the yellow handled maul above my head. When I brought the maul down onto the trunk, the blade bounced off the wood.

“You’re trying to make love to it,” he grabbed the maul after a few sad tries. “You’re supposed to be splitting it.” His forearms tightened as he gripped the handle, and I stepped back. He lifted the maul above his head, and a streak of yellow ended in the splintering of wood. He split the trunk within three tries and showed me how to use the sledge to hammer the maul deeper into the crack, making the wood whine.

...

When I left home for college, my daughterness collapsed like it was time for my father to focus on his family, and I no longer fit into that family, me being from a different mother than my younger siblings. With me gone, suddenly the family was whole and uncomplicated without steps or halves. It was worse because my father was the person I was the closest to, who I trusted, and who I needed.

My father didn’t call me for a long while, and when he finally did, he said:

“Well, I guess you’re not going to call your father.” He was able to speak like he was right, his voice loud and sure.

“You didn’t call me either.” We were both so stubborn—upset the other hadn’t called. Sometimes, I think he just was mad that we weren’t still close even though it was his doing.

“Well, I’m sure you and Gena are great friends now.” Gena is my biological mother and his ex-wife.

“No, we just spent the weekend together,” I said. He made me tired. Trying to declare my allegiance to him was an old battle.

He began his debate: “She should be glad you even talk to her especially after what she did.”

“Well, we don’t talk much.” I tried to appease him.

“Well, she didn’t do anything wrong if you still talk to her.” His voice wasn’t angry. He was just speaking his facts, his truth.

“She doesn’t talk about that stuff,” I told him, “We’ve never talked about it.” I leaned back in my plastic foldout chair and fingered the grooves of my desk. *Take care of me* I wanted to tell him.

“Gena won’t talk about all that. A long time ago, she told me she’s afraid she’ll go crazy if she opens it up. And she would.” I tried to picture my parents together. They divorced when I was two, and I couldn’t form the mental image. I’d never seen their wedding picture. I didn’t know if it existed anymore.

My father continued, “There’s a lot of crazy in her genes. You know her grandmother; she was a sweet woman, but she got locked up in the loony bin. I’m talking certified crazy. You need to be glad you’ve got me in your genes.”

Our genetic composition is already set when we enter this world. Height is predetermined. Eye color, hair color, personality type, even the way we are likely to react to a situation is predetermined. Appetite, sex drive, alcohol tolerance, mood swings. Scientists say we are born like this, born with attributes we don’t like, things we’d rather not possess: our undeniable, biological truths. Like our bodies steer our gapped hearts as if we don’t even have a say.

My father kept on, “After Gena had the abortion, it was like a boulder rolling downhill. She had an affair and then tried to justify it with her feminist, independent bullshit.”

“After the divorce, did y’all still talk?” When Gena drove to the house to pick me up for our visits, she’d pull up to the porch, I’d walk outside, and I’d get in the backseat because she said the airbag were dangerous. My father stayed inside the house while my stepmother waved from the porch.

He answered, “Well, that’s the thing; Gena and I were good friends, best friends, for a long time. That was the hardest part for her. At the end, she told me, ‘I just wanted you,’ meaning me. We talked for a while, but I had to quit. I couldn’t be friends with her anymore. She wanted to bring him around, and I would have killed him. I told her that.”

I wondered at my father’s face as he said these things I’d never heard. I wondered why he was telling me now when we weren’t even close anymore. Between his eyebrows he may have had his deep thinking crease, or his face may have been smooth and blank like he and I so often wear.

“Isn’t post-partum depression genetic?” I asked him. I know that it is. I know Gena had it. I asked for reassurance, for him to tell me I was going to be okay even though I was not pregnant. I wanted to hear the affirmation from his mouth in his voice.

“She got it bad when you were born. Before she got pregnant with you, she told me she didn’t want children, but I didn’t believe it. I thought every woman wanted babies. That’s where I was young and stupid. She talked about getting rid of it—you—and I told her that wasn’t an option. But after you, she didn’t listen to me anymore and got one the second time.”

I already knew this. I didn't know what to say to him or what it would be like to have somebody like me, somebody on my side, from the same mother. My stepmother saw me as a constant reminder that my father had been married before.

He answered my question: "A lot of women get post-partum depression. If you get it after you have a baby, go to the doctor. Get some Prozac. Don't try to fight it."

"Yeah." I wanted, and still want, a baby to take care of, to take the love I crave and put it into someone else. I like talking about a baby with my father. It seemed right, comforting. My baby, his grandchild, would bring him back to me. Blood is strong like that.

"After Gena had you, I stayed on her hard because she wouldn't treat you right. It wore on her, and it wore on me. She checked out, and I became your mother, too."

Inosculation: Two trees of the same species grow close to one another, touching bark to bark, limb to limb, trunk to trunk. Wind rubs the two separate trees together, wearing away their bark. When the inner layer—the cambium—is bare, the two trees begin to graft and meld, becoming one tree of two separate root systems, confused parts both symbiotic and parasitic.

...

Loblollies are tall with thick, grayish bark topped with rounded crowns of needled branches. The word "loblolly" means "mud puddle" because they'll grow just about anywhere. They're adaptable and quick. Their needles are resinous, meaning you can smell them from far off. They smell like rosemary and mint.

Loblollies are the main commercial timber source in the South. Pine plantations are planted in carefully spaced rows and columns. The understory vegetation is burned and sprayed to maximize timber growth. Stray and weak pines are thinned out, resulting in a uniform formation of solider pines. The strong pines remain; their needles blanket the gaps.

The man with the knee-high, lace-up boots and a shoulder-length ponytail is gone, stolen by age and circumstance and a complete family. He will never come back. He is my daddy. I will always search for, long for that man. He no longer exists. There is no gravestone to visit, memorialize, or mourn for my father is alive. But I will keep my daddy forever in the pines. Each time I run my hand over pine bark, crunch through dried needles, smell their resinous sap I am closer to him. He is between the gapped rows, walking on marking the trunks of the pines ready to cut. He will keep working long days. He will stay with the pines so that I can visit him. As long as the pines are growing, he is there, working and waiting for Gatorade and a sandwich. The pines tell me when I've come home. The pines tell me I am loved, I am a child, I have a daddy. There, he is mine, and I am his.

Winter is breaking, but spring hasn't met up yet. Down with the sun goes the warmth. The trains thunder by, some grinding to a stop to let bigger trains pass—that's what Jim tells me.

I stand in the woods in front of the barn, watching a train through the trees. Jim carries two blankets towards me down the slope of the land. He shakes the first one out which is a cheap imitation-Mexican blanket from a truck stop and lays it smooth over the dead leaves. The second blanket is green.

“This was my Daddy's blanket from the Vietnam era,” he says. There are Daddies all around us.

I sit on the truck stop, army pallet and tilt my face towards the naked canopies of white oaks and dogwoods. I stretch my legs under the dusky overcast and imagine jumping from one treetop to the next.

He shakes out a third blanket. This one patterned with black and grey squares.

“Get warm under this one. It’s good wool.”

The black dirt, the leaves, and the blankets make the forest floor soft. He sits down next to me, fixing the checkered blanket over my legs. His cold, rough hand slides under my shirt and presses into my warm stomach. I kiss him. His beard smells like cigarettes and firewood.

He undresses me under the blanket; the wool rubs my thighs and breasts.

Acorns roll onto the pallet and leave indentions in my back. I pull his jeans down to his knees, and we keep our boots on.

I touch under his eyes, his forehead, his teeth, on his tongue, warming my fingers before I dip my hand under the blanket. I want to taste his oiled skin—the shade of wood on fire.

The pines, forever awake, rock in a cold twilight breeze. Our faces press together—pink and numb.

He re-tucks the blanket under my left side to hold our heat. I outline his eyelids, and his lashes shake, but he doesn’t stop me. His lids are thin, wrinkling and folding under the pressure of my fingertip.

His breath warms my cheek: “I want you to have my babies.” I gather him up beside me and hold this man like my child, like my Daddy, like everything I need.

ANIMALIA

When goats breed, the doe wags her tail to show the buck she is in estrus, in heat. The buck sprays the back of his front legs and his chin, coating himself in his rank smell. When the doe squats and pees, the buck dips his mouth into the stream, lapping at her urine. As her urine drips down his beard, he lifts his proud, horned head to the sky and curls his top lip. The doe wags and wags her tail, rubs against his chest, his barrel, and his face. She smells his penis and curls up her lip, too. They do a circle dance until she stops. He mounts her. When he ejaculates, her back humps up like a scared cat and she walks funny. Then, they do it again.

When I was twelve, my father gave me “the talk” while we watched two Boer goats breeding on our farm. He waved his hand and said that’s essentially how people do it—the does come in heat, and the bucks act crazy to breed her.

A human male ejaculation is, on average, 3.4 ml and contains as much protein as an egg white. In one ejaculation, there are 200-500 million sperm. Hundreds of thousands of sperm are instantly killed by the vagina’s acidity. Semen is alkaline to counter the vagina’s hostility, protecting the DNA inside the sperm from acidic denaturation. Semen also contains prostaglandins, which help suppress the vagina’s aggressive immune cells. For a sperm, it’s a day’s journey to the waiting egg. It’s an invasion, a rescue, and a conquering.

During the winter months, Jim and I crawl up into the old barn’s loft away from the cold and out of sight. We already have an old blanket stored there. A big rat chewed through a thick, hauling rope, making his nest out of the rope’s fibers. We wonder if the rat watches us fuck, what the rat might think. We already know what people think about a young woman and an older married man. Our knees and spines hurt from the boards of rough cut wood. We can smell the

rat's piss, but we don't care. We just want to be together, naked together, inside each other, going back and forth. He wants to get me pregnant, and I want him to. I wonder what the rat thinks about that.

When cats mate, they fight. When dogs mate, they tie knots, swelling and sticking together to keep out other semen. When horses and cows mate—they're just so big that somebody usually notices while driving down a highway or county road, pointing, laughing, and maybe snapping a picture. When we mate, we roll around in the leaves and plant our knees in the dirt. We want to be animals, too. We know that we're taxonomically animals, but we've seem to forgotten our instincts, what's important. Every time we go outside, we try to remember.

When I was a little girl, my family always had puppies because none of our dogs were fixed, and they'd breed in the front yard. Every few months there'd be another litter. I sat behind the house in the leaves under the pines and oaks, playing with the mixed lab-bluetick puppies. The puppies waddled between my legs. Their wet noses tickled and made my stomach jump. I let them crawl in my shorts. It felt good.

My cats don't care about sex. They're both fixed and without modesty. They might lie on the corner of my bed or sit on the floor. Usually they are present for the event, but aren't intrigued or ashamed. One of my cats once licked semen off of Jim's penis. We had just finished, and he was still on his knees. Neither one of us were paying attention to my cat. She just walked by like it was no big deal, stopped, sniffed, and licked. Jim yelled, and then we both sat there wondering what to think. It was a strange moment, but I swear Jim likes that cat more now.

When I was six, I played mommy and daddy in the playhouse during playtime at school. Me and a little boy crawled under a blanket and touched each other's "peepees." We kissed, too. The kisses felt weirder than the private-parts exploration. A few years later, I had a habit of

playing Doctor with my friends during sleepovers, even if it wasn't my idea. Girlfriends lay on my tall twin bed with their panties off and their legs open. I explored with my pink, plastic horsebarn toys that smelled sweet like girls the next day when I played with them. Sometimes, I was the patient, but usually I was the doctor. My friends' Barbies came over to play with my Barbies, and they'd end up naked and fighting with each other. Then, they had sex; they were always having sex with the people they weren't supposed to, but I knew whom I could play Sexy Barbies with and whom I couldn't. One girl I went to school with was very sweet, and she made good grades, and her parents were kind and played music about Jesus while they cooked dinner and read. Our Barbies always kept their clothes on.

For the other mammals, sex is like eating or sleeping—a function necessary for the continuation of life. Maslow ranked sex at the foundation of his hierarchy of needs. It seems we, humans, put our feelings into sex sometimes, and sometimes we don't. Intimacy is a few rungs higher on the hierarchy, but intimacy can't exist without food, shelter, and sex.

Vaginal absorption of semen can act as an antidepressant. Seminal plasma may reduce breast cancer. The absorption of the testosterone in semen can increase a woman's sex drive. Swallowing semen may aid in the safety and health of a woman's pregnancy through the absorption of her partner's antigens.

Around the time I met Jim, I was twenty-one and worked at a craft beer and pizza restaurant. As the hostess, I worked strange hours with the late afternoons off. I went to work at nine in the morning and came home at two and went back to work at five or six in the evening. Jim's wife worked normal hours during the day, and the classes Jim taught were early in the morning. He came over to my apartment on the weekdays after he finished teaching. We lay in my bed having sex for three, four, five hours. We finished and started again as many times as we

could. It was like when we got naked together, we were malnourished, so hungry, like Jim possessed nourishment I always needed. It was the first time we both met someone who didn't make us stop, so we didn't know how to stop until the hour and/or obligation made us, usually running late for both.

When we met, Jim hadn't had sex with his wife in nearly two years. They tried for a few years to have a baby, but that didn't work out. Jim wasn't very attracted to his wife, but he loved her very much. Attraction is mean like that. It's not until we really experience attraction in full force do we know ourselves, know what we're capable of. Jim didn't get married knowing he would cheat on his wife. I don't think Jim ever wanted to be an adulterer. Before I met Jim, I would have said there is no way I would ever fuck or even love a married man. My mother cheated on my father, and I grew up hearing stories of how the affair nearly ruined my dad, how badly it broke his heart and his spirit because he thought they were married for a lifetime. I didn't ever want to be a part of something like that, do that to someone.

After ejaculation, the latter part of the released semen coagulates, forming globules. The initial clotting helps keep semen in the vagina. After 15-30 minutes, an antigen in the semen causes decoagulation. The liquefaction frees the sperm from the semen to swim to the egg.

Kim was my best friend when I was a girl. We weren't much alike. Her hair was strawberry blond, and mine was dark brown. She had big boobs; I didn't. She had a liberal, creative family. I had a conservative, close-minded one. Her parents had a pool surrounded by tall elephant ears and exotic bright blooms. My family lived in the woods and most definitely did not have a pool. Kim had sleepovers, and we skinny-dipped at night, giggling about pubic hair and hardened nipples. We played a funny game where all the girls lined up single-file in the

shallow end with our legs spread in an upside-down V. The girl at the front of the line swam through the open legs and naked crotches.

We all secretly took turns hanging on the edge of the pool in front of the air vents, while we squirmed under the water. We demanded to be naked. We needed to be free, and it was a good excuse to make sure we weren't the only ones with changing bodies. Later, we ran out of the pool, leaving our towels and played volleyball in the front yard. Kim lived in the country. She didn't have any neighbors, and we felt safe. Sometimes we felt sexy. We were young and timid, but we were proud. We wanted someone to see our breasts, our rounding butts, our newly grown pubic hair even if it was just each other.

When does came in heat on our farm, sometimes they rode each other. One doe would act like the buck, mimicking his behavior by kicking up her front leg and curling her lip. She made the same clipped bays followed by a guttural bellow against the other doe's side.

Recently a friend of Jim's took a picture of one cow mounting another cow in a field. Jim and his friend laughed proudly about the male and female getting it on. I looked at the picture and said it was two girls. The mounting cow had a smooth underbelly absent of a penis. They didn't have much to say about that.

When I visited my mother as young girl, at night I checked her bedroom door to make sure she was still there. I looked for light coming under the door, and opened it, peaked in to see her and her husband in bed reading. In the morning, I tiptoed into their room after her husband went to work. I pulled the cover back and slipped beneath the sheet, glancing at my mother's skin. I liked seeing her bare back, her freckles like mine. She rolled over and pulled the covers tight around her. When we got up, I tried not to stare at her, but she let me see her body in the way my stepmother wouldn't. My stepmother walked around the house in her underwear, a tank

top, and a towel wrapped around her wet hair in the mornings. My mother walked around nude with a towel wrapped around her wet hair. She had round, heavy breasts and thick, dark pubic hair. She started locking the bedroom door at night because one of the nights I checked to make sure she was still there, I opened her bedroom door to find her husband under the covers on top of her. As I stood in the doorway, I saw his bulk jerk upwards under the blanket in surprise. That was the only time I walked in on someone having sex besides walking upstairs to tell my dad goodnight and discovering him naked in bed in the dark awaiting my stepmother.

Speaking of my stepmother, she must have been whore in college because when it came to sex, sex was beyond bad, like just-go-ahead-and-kill-yourself-if-you-have-sex-before-marriage bad. Masturbation was sinful because masturbating made you lust, and lust was a sin. Sex before marriage was the equivalent to bodily ruination and also a sin. When I was thirteen, I asked her if she waited until she was married. She said no and several years later admitted to lying. Well, yeah.

We were Southern Baptists, but my parents didn't go to church. I did all the church-going. I wrote letters to God every night and studied Bible verses. I stopped playing Doctor and Sexy Barbies because sex was evil. Movies with sex scenes weren't to be watched. Low-cut shirts weren't to be worn. My dad said the girls that wore too much eyeliner and mascara looked like "Vodka Queens," and I'm still not sure what that means, but I know it must be bad. I started wearing a "promise ring." I did everything I could to look like I was not, under any circumstances, going to have sex. I didn't want my stepmother to think I was sinful. I didn't want my father to think about me having sex.

But once when I was thirteen, I stood in line at our math teacher's desk. We were taking a test, and a few of us had questions. I was next in line. The boy behind me had his hand propped

on the corner of the desk, leaning against it while he waited. My crotch was near his hand. I screamed in my head over and over again *touch my pussy*. Afterwards, I was mortified even though I was the only one who knew about it. I'd never kissed a boy. I went to church three times a week. I was going to wait until I was married to have sex. I didn't say things like "pussy."

Women's heat occurs during ovulation. During this time, women are more likely to have sex with a stranger. Mid-cycle lust is the instinctual need for fertilization. During estrus, women are more open to feeling sexual pleasure. Women try harder to look nice on fertile days. They wear sexier clothes, fix their hair, put on make-up. Men pick these signals up subconsciously. Ovulating strippers make more money than non-ovulating strippers. When we ovulate, we are driven towards reproduction—our will combating biology. Is that what it feels like to be a man?

After ejaculation and survival, the smart sperm swim to the cervix. During ovulation, a woman's thick cervical mucus loosens and thins to allow sperm to pass. If sperm make it through the gates, the cervical canal is more welcoming than the vagina. Mucus and helpful molecules inside the canal wash the sperm on further towards the uterus and the waiting egg.

My first kiss (besides when I was six) was with Kim's cousin on their grandparent's guest bed. I was fourteen. There was no petting, but there was a lot of tongue. Watching us probably looked like a rescue mission like there was something deep in my throat and Kim's cousin was carefully retrieving that something with the tip of his tongue. I left the room dazed and covered in slobber. He had an ugly girlfriend, and she hated me from then on. I don't blame her. I never really talked to that boy again, but we'd look at each other during football and basketball games. I was a cheerleader, and he played for the opposing team. I swear he still liked me. Lost battles die hard.

The next fall, I sat on the back of a school bus on the way home from a football game with a sweaty football player with blonde hair and a square jaw. He propped one of my legs on his thigh and worked his hand up the inside of my thigh. I had on thick bloomers and panties underneath since I was still in uniform. He rubbed me between my legs, but the fabric layers were so thick I barely felt it. His hair was still wet with sweat from the game. He pulled at the edge of my bloomers, but I shook my head and closed my legs. We repeated the opening and closing cycle six times. I wanted to make-out, but he had a girlfriend, and people might see. He finally asked if I'd touch his "thing." I laughed and said no and he said he didn't think so.

The next morning I lay in my twin bed and wondered what would have happened if I had said yes. What would I be then? What would my parents think? What would Jesus think? I had gotten so close to something sexual. I was shocked that I put myself in that position. I wasn't the girl that did things like that. So I stopped. I stopped wearing makeup. I stopped cheering. I started playing fastpitch softball. I started reading during class when we didn't have any other work and everyone else was talking and flirting. The boys in my class asked me if I had become a lesbian. I said no. I just didn't want to be sinful. I didn't know how to be sexual and still be my parents' daughter. There didn't seem to be any room for my sexuality in our house. The next year I transferred to a bigger high school to get more softball exposure. I wanted to be away from all my friends who were having sex in the backseats of cars and in pastures. I feared I might end up naked in a field under a sweaty boy. I feared I might like it.

Some species of male antelopes will tap their front leg against the flank of females to test the waters, asking if she's ready, seeing if she'll hold still. Other species of antelopes as well as impalas and gazelles will scare females into sticking around to boost their chances of depositing semen. That's all sexual intercourse is: a deposit of genetics. It's selfish, and it's necessary, and

somehow that becomes hot and mandatory for happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction. If the female antelope wanders out of the male's territory, he will snort, stare off into the distance with perked ears at imaginary predators, making her stay out of fear. The males only do this when the females are in estrus. One day a year, a female antelope comes into heat; on that day she will have sexual intercourse with an average of four males at eleven times a piece. That's forty-four times in one day. Male antelopes rely on deception.

I turned off my sexuality because my father and stepmother successfully shamed me about sex as a teenager. I didn't masturbate. I didn't do anything except imagine someone lying next to me at night in my twin bed so I could kiss this person, usually kissing my pillow or the wall next to me. This person never had a face or even a gender. Just a warm, caring body with nice lips.

I'm not sure why, but when I was sixteen I stopped hugging my father. My stepmother didn't hug me so that wasn't a problem. I saw my mother a few times a year and when she hugged me she squeezed me. When she took me home, I pretended like I didn't like to her hug while she stood outside my house where I knew my family was watching us through the blinds. And suddenly I felt uncomfortable hugging my father. It dumbfounded him when I'd slink away from his extended arm. I've never been good at being affectionate especially to someone I love. I think maybe I loved my father too much to hug him; I loved him so much it hurt. Or maybe I was angry at him for marrying my stepmother. My parents wondered if I had been sexually abused. I told them I had not. That'd be something I was aware of, something I remembered.

I never gave their question about sexual abuse any real thought until my great uncle died. My family went to his funeral in north Alabama. I hardly ever saw my great uncle, but there was a man at the funeral I recognized, a man who worked in the same courthouse as my grandfather.

My grandfather was a probation-parole officer. I can't remember the other man's name. I could call and ask my grandmother, but I'd rather not remember. After my elementary school day, I waited in the courthouse for my grandfather to get off work. I walked around the offices when I got bored. The man paid attention to me when I visited his office. He taught me to draw stars on copy paper. He'd make five dots and show me how to crisscross from one dot to the other, making a full star. I traced his stars, and then connected his dots and finally made my own stars. I had pages and pages of wobbly stars. I started erasing the middles because I hated all the lines obstructing the space. I wanted to draw the outline of a star perfectly, but it never turned out as symmetrical as the dotted stars.

I hadn't seen that man in nearly ten years. When he entered the room, I grabbed my father's arm, and said *do not let that man hug me, do not let that man hug me*. My dad looked at me confused, but he saw the fear on my face, a fear that surprised even me. I hadn't thought of this man in years, maybe since the last time I saw him. It wasn't like he haunted my dreams or kept me up with fear and anxiety. I forgot he existed. He and his wife came up to my family to shake hands and offer condolences. My father kept his arm around me, and I didn't slink away. I was struck by how ugly this man was. Children are much more forgiving. He was short and the band of his pleated khakis marked the equator around his swollen middle. His stiffly matted gray hair barely covered the shiny top of his head. He didn't try to hug me or touch me. After he walked away, my dad said he didn't understand why there was a problem, and I just said I didn't like him, that he gave me a weird feeling.

Once, while I was tracing stars, the man bent down and kissed me on the mouth. I looked up quickly and looked back down at my stars. I was six. Then he asked me if that was okay. I nodded and hoped he wouldn't do it again. And as far as I can remember, he didn't. I can't

remember if he ever touched me again. He kissed me, and that was enough for me to nearly have a panic attack when he walked in the funeral home ten years later.

Maybe it was just the kiss, the fact that he asked if it was okay like he knew it wasn't, or maybe it was more. I don't know. How can you be afraid of something that didn't happen, if you can't remember anything happening?

Fertilization is all about timing and choices. After the sperm reaches the uterus, the sperm must pick the right fallopian tube. Only one of the two holds the egg. The egg waits for twenty-four hours. If the sperm swims to the correct fallopian tube too early, the sperm risks starvation before the egg travels from the ovary down the tube. If the sperm arrives too late, the egg will be gone—washed down into the uterus, disintegrated and expelled along with the uterine lining during the next menstruation.

The first time I had sex was with a girl. I was a freshman in college ten hours away from my parents, and I was horny and lonely. Even before her, I thought I might like girls. Girls proved to be a softer step into the world of sex than boys. Something about boys seemed invasive. I started masturbating shortly after my arrival to college and had my first orgasm, which washed behind my eyelids in the color of blue and left my ears ringing. Sex came easily to me once I was out of my parents' house. I no longer needed the rules of sin and purity to keep me sexless without the surveillance of my parents. A few months later, the girl touched me between my legs. I started craving for her to touch me again not because it felt so good or it satisfied me. I just craved for her to be close to me, to concentrate solely on me. That was all I wanted—careful attention. She grew frustrated with me when I couldn't cum. I tried to will my mind into orgasm. She'd try for hours. Sweaty, sore, and frustrated, I faked orgasm. My dad and stepmother and I cut ties for a few years because if sex is bad then gay sex is so bad that it only

has names like abomination, worse than dogs, and brimstone and hellfire. But I think dogs are usually pretty sweet.

The second person I had sex with was also a girl. She was prettier, but I didn't like her as much. I didn't want to be alone after I broke up with the first girl. The new girl had a nice smile and pleasant face. We had sex for about a month and a half, and not nearly enough times according to me. I faked it with her, too.

I was at the college gym when this boy asked if I wanted to study. We had an astronomy class together. I didn't think boys would ask me out, especially a boy as pretty as him. He was tall and sculpted. I was a tomboy, not comfortable with my femininity yet. I said no, and then I said yes. We waited a month to have sex. Even though I'd been with girls before, this was a different. But at the age of twenty, I was ready to get it over with. The first time it was like trying to stuff a pillow into a Ziploc. My muscles contracted and my teeth ground together. I didn't bleed because I'd done that with the first girl on a blanket on my dorm floor while she fingered me. I thought maybe a boy could make me cum, but it never came close to happening. I faked it again. I was getting good, practically an actress. I worried he'd lose interest in me if I didn't cum. But what's funny is that I kept losing interest in the people who couldn't make me cum.

Our sex was like a sport, like exercising. We'd sweat, and do it like athletes. It wasn't warm, but it wasn't cold. It was just the way we did it. We didn't kiss a lot, and I don't think either one of us ever really thought about kissing each other. We rarely hugged too, but we loved to cuddle. We cuddled like puppies. But as soon as we stood up and put our clothes on, people would have thought we were simply friends or siblings. I don't know if we ever held hands. We dated for a year until I met Jim.

The strongest lion wins. Lions who hunt and feed together will fight each other for a lioness in estrus. She will swank past a group of males. Later, the lioness may walk up to loser and scoop dirt in his face, rubbing in his loss and inadequacy. Male wildebeests will clip one another while trying to mount and breed a female wildebeest.

I met Jim at café that turned into a bar at night. We talked for eight hours. My cell phone died at hour three, and I forgot my boyfriend existed. At hour eight, he came to the bar, looking for me. He found me standing by a fire with Jim. They sized each other up in that male way, standing toe-to-toe almost intimately. A week later, I gave my loyalty to Jim.

Even when the sperm reaches the egg, it's not over. Hundreds of sperm surround the egg, trying to break through the hard outer shell to reach the egg's nucleus. As soon, as the first sperm penetrates the egg, the egg immediately reacts, chemically preventing other sperm from entering. Mitosis begins. The egg is fertilized. Zygote. Fetus. Infant. Person.

I still can't cum during intercourse. It's not a physiological or attraction issue. But I've grown to like how Jim and I do it, how he watches me and helps me. Sometimes, I think I don't want someone else to be able to do that to me, to have that kind of control over me—the ability to make something happen in my body. I don't want to lose control like that, to be at the mercy of someone else, to depend on someone else to make me feel good.

Species: sapiens. Genus: Homo. Family: Hominidae. Superfamily: Hominoidea.
Suborder: Anthropoidea. Order: Primates. Infraclass: Eutheria. Subclass: Theria. Class:
Mammalia. Subphylum: Vertebrata. Phylum: Chordata. Kingdom: Animalia.

I'd never felt semen inside of me until Jim—the way it warms and spreads and leaks and stings. We want to be animals, animals with each other. But what animal has a problem with pleasure? What animal loves? I want to be an animal. But we don't make it that simple. I can't

even cum with the man I love. I'm not sure I am the animal I want to be; I'm not sure I'll ever be. I want to be simple and focused. I want to make babies, feed them, watch them grow, and die before them. The simplicity of the animal world draws me in. Fuck, feel good, and reproduce. To survive is to live. To fuck is to reproduce. To hunt is to eat. To sleep is to be safe. To wake up is another day.

“A WET SEED WILD IN THE HOT, BLIND EARTH”

--from *As I Lay Dying*

She’s a cloud full of rain. He’s a cloud full of rain. And one day it will rain. Each cloud too heavy to hold will spill its whole self into the dirt, dissipating and gone to no clouds, no nothing, but reflective sky and wet soil.

Matter breaks down, simplifies. This break down, this decomposition is essential for life. Matter is neither created nor destroyed; it is rearranged. Decomposition recycles our biome’s finite material. The amount of matter we have is the amount of matter we’ve always had. We could be the children of dinosaurs, of mountains, of clouds.

My grandmother is seventy-four years old. My grandfather is seventy-seven. My father is forty-eight, and my mother is fifty. My uncle is forty-four. Jim is thirty-nine. I am twenty-two years old.

My grandparents are like my parents, and my parents are like my aunt and uncle. My uncle is like my brother, and I do have a brother and a sister. My brother is seven years younger than me. My sister is nine years younger than me. My siblings are like my niece and nephew. Jim, my Jim, is like my son and my father.

The heart stills—cardiac arrest. Decomposition starts with pallor mortis, the paleness that follows death. The body grays, and the lips blue as blood drains from capillaries close to the skin’s surface.

“If I could go back to when you were born and be your mother would you like that?” I ask Jim. I imagine myself holding his baby form and giving him the motherly affection he has always needed but afraid to look for.

“Yes,” he answers. “Would you like me to go back and be your father?”

“No, my dad was a good father when I was a child.”

“What about like a babysitter?”

“Oh, I’d love that.” We laugh. Jim talks about my age, but I think about his, not about how he’s too old or I’m too young, but how he’ll probably die long before I do.

My grandmother loves to tell me how old she is, always tacking on an extra year or two. Once someone reaches her seventies, I’m not sure that’s necessary for dramatic effect. She was my real mother. She’s the one who held me, asked if I was brushing my teeth, sliced strawberries for me and sprinkled Equal on top because she didn’t have real sugar, being a diabetic.

When I was two years old, my parents divorced. My mother didn’t want me then, and my father wasn’t fit to take care of me after my mother’s affair. I lived with my grandparents for the next six years. My grandparents loved me a lot.

At some point we grow up, and our adult lives become separate from our child lives. Or maybe that’s what we tell ourselves.

One day my grandmother will stop calling me at 1:30 in the morning, will stop sending me recipe postcards I will never use. No one will give a shit about whether I am flossing or if I got the mole on my back removed. She’ll no longer tell people how my grandfather drove to Daphne to pick me up in a U-Haul, how I hadn’t had any of my shots, how I’d slept in a room with a box of snakes, how my mother put me to bed before the sun was down and locked the door for peace, how after the divorce my father drove hundreds of directionless miles with my

crib in the bed of his truck, how he sobbed to his mother, “Mom, I thought I was married for a lifetime.” I don’t remember these things, and I have a hard time deciding how to feel about things that don’t seem to have made an impression on me or at least one I am aware of, but I think it makes my grandmother feel good to tell people, makes her feel like she saved me. She did.

Gravity causes blood to sink and pool within the body. Livor mortis is this settling of blood. The skin halves with color; the top yellows while the bottom purples and blues.

I had a strange Sex Psychology professor warn the males in the class about their lack of paternal rights. He said, “Once sperm leaves your body, you have no say over what happens to your sperm.” His example was a woman who had sex with a man after he died. I guess if you’re dead it’s no longer rape. The dead man was able to ejaculate, which I still don’t understand. The woman got pregnant and sued his estate for child support, and she won. At the time, the story was awkward because my then-boyfriend, who took the class with me, had gotten his first girlfriend pregnant. The young girl’s parents put the child up for adoption against his will. My boyfriend was sad about the whole thing. A few months later, I met Jim and learned about his trouble with his ex-wife and their inability to conceive a child. I thought about the dead man who had recently fathered one. Matter isn’t concerned with what’s fair.

If Jim died, would I still want to have sex with him? I guess it depends on how long he’d been dead. Blood may drain into the spongy material of the penis. If Jim died while sleeping and I woke up next to him and his engorged penis and started having sex with him and then I realized he was dead, that would be strange.

Algor mortis is the reduction of the body's temperature gradually equaling its surroundings. Dead Jim would stay relatively warm in bed under the covers next to sleeping-horny me.

Within six hours, rigor mortis begins. Muscles contract and remain stiff, unable to release because of the lack of oxygen in the body. Sixty hours later, the pumps responsible for uncontracting muscles are degraded by enzymes. The muscles finally relax.

When I was seven, my dad remarried, and I went to live with him and his new wife in Livingston, AL. A year later, my dad bought our first goat. Goats became his hobby, and before long, we had a full-fledged South African Boer goat farm. We raised, bred, showed, and sold Boer goats. My classmates called me "goat girl," and it wasn't endearing. When I met Jim, he liked that I was from a goat farm.

As anaerobic organisms eat away the insides, gases accumulate in the center of the body, rounding the belly, tightening the marbled skin. Organic liquids froth, and, as gases increase, building pressure, liquids seep from the body's orifices. This putrefaction leads to the next phase: Bloat. This is when the buzzards get hungry. The abdomen colors green, and eventually the skin blackens. Maggots hatch and begin feeding on tissue, which aids in the loss of hair and nails. The build-up of gaseous pressure combined with the degradation of the skin's integrity can cause the round body to rupture.

On our goat farm, we had a doe who died in the corner of the small, plywood barn. Daddy kept forgetting to drag her across the road so the buzzards would eat her and we wouldn't smell her anymore. I was still too young and small to drag her back there myself. He forgot until it was too late, or maybe he didn't care.

Her bloated, black body seesawed in the corner on her swollen center. Her four legs stuck straight out without touching the stale hay beneath her. Her smell made my eyes water.

The dead doe's anus and vagina were swollen and prolapsed with her accumulating pressure. I kept looking at her back there. It was hard not to. Animals die a lot on a farm especially our farm. I'd always wondered if they explode.

She burst from both ends; her weak skin broke and the center of her splashed against the plywood walls. I wish I'd heard it to be able to describe the sound of an exploding dead body, but I didn't. I found her sprayed against the wall behind her and open with a sea of maggots, and that night in bed I imagined the sound—a loud pop or maybe a low, slurped thud.

The next phase is active decay. The internal body temperature rises with energy. Tissues and organs liquefy. Mass is simplified, transferred, rearranged.

The same winter I met Jim, my dad, stepmother, and brother and sister went out of town. They asked me to come home and watch the farm, which consisted of twenty pregnant does, a bunch of inbred dogs, and wild, tailless cats. The reason they asked me to stay was because of a fluffy, white puppy with paws nearly the size of my hands. She was a Great Pyrenees, and we used to have several of them on the farm, but all the Great Pyrenees died or ran away after most of the goats were gone. My stepmother missed having a big white dog to talk to from the front porch. The puppy was living inside because the outside dogs were rough. These dogs were part border collie, part Great Pyrenees, and part pit bull from the housing projects that bordered one of our property lines.

Jim came with me that weekend. We drove from Birmingham to Livingston after I got off work. We drank my parent's liquor like we were high school kids, which was something I never

did in high school. I showed him around the house and land that I'd moved to when I was seven. It was the place I considered my home.

The next morning while Jim was asleep and the puppy was whining, I went out to feed the does. Each pasture used to be full, totaling to over three hundred goats. Now all the pastures were empty except the one closest to the house. The sagging metal fences seemed to know they no longer had much of a job. Daddy bought the cheapest wire because we didn't have much money then. The wire wasn't made to last, and I guess our farm wasn't either.

Dogs barked while the sky, heavily clouded, let down a fine mist. The air was thick and humid even though it was February. The does huddled under the small shed in their pasture away from the moisture, waiting for food. One doe lay in the center of the short grassed pasture while two border collies and an inbred mutt ran in circles, barking and biting at her.

I wore my boots, so I was able to jump the wire and kick each dog in the stomach. Each yelped, and I didn't feel bad. I guess they didn't know better; none of the border collies had been trained. They were just another good idea Daddy never finished. The pregnant doe bled from her long ears, her neck, and her backbone. Her coat was soaked through, and I didn't want to know how long she'd been like this. Maybe since dawn. She shook and refused to stand. Goats go into shock, too. Jim walked out on the front porch, smoking a cigarette, and I called to him to help me.

We found a plastic Radio Flyer wagon under the barn left from when my siblings were toddlers. We picked the doe up by her horns and haunches, swung her into the wagon, and wheeled her under the barn. This huge, metal-sheeted barn stood where the plywood barn used to stand when I was still a child. Under the barn, three 8x8 feet metal pens sat across from the fallen runs where two dead does lay in different stages of decomposition. I wondered what Jim thought

about the decomposed does, if they shocked him. To me, they looked horrific through his eyes: Gross Neglect and Laziness. Used to, the show goats lived in the runs shooting off the front of the barn, and the kids lived in the pens on the clean dirt under the industrial lit roof.

I brought the pregnant doe food and water, but she huddled in the corner of the pen, still shaking and her head hung. I called Daddy for help. I gave her a shot of whatever it was he told me to over the phone. When he got back, he sonogrammed her and said she was doing just fine. She died a week later.

Jim looked around the barn—my home on an irreversible path to never be what it was before. Embarrassed and ashamed of the filth, I still needed Jim to see it: The walls, covered in red dust from the dirt Daddy had dumped and spread for the batting cage that hung where rows of kidding pens used to be, and the wash slab, covered in dried mud, broken equipment, and torn feed bags that were rarely opened except by starving does who broke out, some of them catching themselves in the batting cage's net, hanging themselves in the struggle. Daddy left them in the net, and my sister hit softballs in the cage anyway, aiming for the greasy skeletons to practice placement hitting. Even she'd grown accustomed to smell of raw decay.

Jim wanted to clean up the flush room that had been used for embryo transfers where I got the medicine for the doe. All the lab equipment—microscopes, a Japanese sonogram machine, an autoclave the size of a microwave, semen collection boots—was stacked along the wall covered in sheet of red dust, too. Buckets of neon softballs sat in the center with a metal-framed net and a plastic tee. Crinkled blue and burgundy show ribbons hung from a wire around the ceiling, dating back five and ten years earlier. Daddy and I had won those ribbons. I wanted to tell Jim about each one, how I'd won championships in Perry, Montgomery, West Monroe, but with all the mess and the smell it seemed silly. I begged Jim not to touch anything in the

flush room simply because I didn't know where anything went anymore or if anything even had a place.

Jim said he would clean up the slab outside the flush room. Before shows, I used to wash goats on that slab late into the night while Daddy followed with the blow dryer and trimmer. We worked as a team then.

I walked out to each of the empty, overgrown pastures and carried the low, metal V-troughs up to the barn so they'd quit getting rained on for no reason. Daddy had welded them together and painted them green, but most were a rusted, corroding brown now.

After the troughs were lined neatly under the barn and the hay racks pushed under each pasture shed, I stood out on the grass in front of the barn, looking at the algae covered pond. Even the pond had gone to shit. When I was a child younger than my sister, Daddy would put his aluminum Grumman canoe in the water and we would paddle around. We caught bass and bream and bright colored trash fish. Daddy never worried with restocking. The great blue heron stopped lighting in our pond to eat. All I saw were turtles clustered on a single log surrounded by thick, green slime. On the grass behind me, a white barrel drum sat upright with the top cut out. I walked up to the barrel and looked in.

“Jim,” I said. “Come here.”

He leaned the sweep broom against the wall of the barn.

Jim looked over the edge of the white barrel into a stew of drowned maggots, collected rain, and waterlogged deer carcasses. This was a gut bucket. Two deer lay in their own insides, rotting in the trapped water and the trapped maggots that tried to help them decay. The half-full barrel smelled like preserved death, rotten but not as foul. All the bloated maggots floated to the top.

It took a second to comprehend what was in the barrel. I wanted Jim to tell me what to think, what this was. He shook his head. He didn't know how to understand my father's laziness and complete disregard for an animal's body.

"Those are the deer y'all killed in December," Jim said. "You sent me the pictures."

"That was two months ago."

"I bet those deer don't have their backstraps. You said he cut them out after a few days."

"He'd left them hanging up too long without gutting them. He said the backstraps were the best meat." I remembered the deer hanging from holes in their haunches for days after my sister and brother each killed a deer. Daddy gutted the deer, cut out the backstraps, and let the nearly complete bodies drop into the gut bucket.

Active decay ends with the migration of maggots away from the body. Migrate isn't a word I usually associate with maggots, but I guess it makes sense with maggots becoming flies and all. Whenever the maggots leave, things get pretty unexciting. They ate the good stuff.

The next phase, advanced decay, is marked by the lack of body matter and loss of vegetation surrounding the cadaver decomposition island (where the body is lying). If there is any skin left, it is tough and leather-like. The body consists of only connective tissue and bones.

A month after Jim and my weekend stay in Livingston, the pregnant does kidded. For a moment, Daddy got it in his head that we were going to turn the kid bucks into wethers and show them in the fall. He said the wether business was real big. When I visited home, we burned the buck kids' horns off and my sister who pretends she's as tough as she wants to be cried when they screamed. Then we banded the buck kids. They became wethers, and Daddy bragged about a percentage doe kid who'd make a great show doe. The kids even got their own special pasture,

but he stopped taking care of them, and all the kids died even the ones that were castrated and hornless.

At home, I couldn't stand on the front porch and pretend not to see the does and kids slowly dying in the two pastures below. I recruited my sister, and we wormed as many as we could catch. We stuck a needleless syringe in each mouth, clamped each chin and nose shut, and made each goat swallow the thick, white wormer. It was hard work; the weather was turning hot, but my sister helped me. I tried to teach her how to push the goats in a corner and grab a back leg and just do that over and over again. This was stuff our dad had taught me when I was her age. The wild ones we never caught. We couldn't find the staff, and the chute next to the runs had been broken for years.

I wonder if she even remembers worming those does before they all eventually died, if that meant anything to her or if she already disregards the bodies of animals like our father does. I think I tried to do for her what Jim did for me, but I'm not sure she needed it the way I did, needed a fresh pair of eyes, needed help. She never had the farm that I had.

Each time I went home, another doe was dead. The brown gate I used to get in trouble for swinging on was painted white with buzzard shit. They lived in our trees now. Daddy said a bunch of the does were old, they needed to cull themselves out, and worming them made them weak, but I thought that starving them was what made them weak. I tried not to think about the pasture of bony does and the pasture of dying whethers. But each time I went home I helped them. I fed them twice a day and trimmed over-grown, rotten hooves, but they didn't get fed when I wasn't there so they kept dying. Jim told me I had to quit worrying about what I couldn't control.

Skeletonization is the final stage of decomposition. Leather-skin and cartilage disintegrate, leaving bones—a disarticulated skeleton. Vegetation grows back where the body lay.

The pastures will never again be full of slick-coated does. The barn will never again hold rows of swept silver pens, waiting for new kids. Things change for better or for worse. Maybe both. My sister will get a softball scholarship from practicing in the barn next to bones and skull-less horns the dogs fight over. She'll go into adulthood with a strong foundation of a father who turned his back on one idea for another. One day I will have my own farm with healthy goats and my own family. I'll do it right; I'll do it opposite of him. I'll spend my time undoing my father's wrongs because that's what some children do.

SKIN AND CAGES

“When your children’s children think themselves alone in a field or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. At night, when the streets of your cities are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone.”

--Chief Seattle

I’ve heard wild animals can’t be tamed. Big cats maul their keepers—the people who feed them, house them, even love them. Wild animals may or may not understand love, but they understand food and shelter. Wild animals understand boundaries—pens and cages. To be wild is to be uncertain.

Dogs, domesticated and docile, can reverse centuries of breeding, turning back to wolves. In Joy Williams’s essay “Hawk,” her black German Shepherd, Hawk, mauled her after nine years together. He slept at the foot of her bed, received kisses on the nose, took long walks with her every morning. After nine years, Hawk unexpectedly attacked Williams, biting into her breast and mangle both her hands, nearly tearing her right hand from her wrist. Nine years together, and the dog turned mean, rabid, and wild. Maybe Hawk “snapped” like people do, becoming suddenly frightened, relying on instincts to survive. Other animals may inherently know what we are capable of, what we’ve done. Maybe Hawk was a wild animal all along. Maybe we all are.

In 1830, Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act. Over 100,000 southeastern American Indians were pushed west of the Mississippi. Men and women who lived in pine forests and along the banks of creeks were moved to Oklahoma territory. 60,000 Indians died during the migration, also known as the Trail of Tears. All this is common knowledge that we’d

rather not think about. What can we really do two hundred years later after nearly wiping out a race of people?

...

My cat ran away. And I locked her out. Her name is Harlem, she is black, and she is strictly an inside cat. She is three years old and has only been outside in the tight grip of my arms as she clawed into my shoulder. I wanted to show her the snow.

She's never expressed an interest for the outdoors. At least not the *real* outdoors. She loves to window-look like a cat does, but when I'm unloading groceries and the front door is wide open, she peeks her head out and sniffs, taking a few wary steps onto the welcome mat. When I go to close the door, she runs back in and plays in an empty grocery bag.

My Orlando apartment has a very small balcony that juts out from my bedroom on the second floor. The balcony overlooks the parking lot and an overgrown lot across the street. Harlem became braver on the balcony. Every day, she walked out with me to feel the temperature, smelling the outside smells. She poked her head through the metal rails and looked down at the stray cats, roaming to and from a vacant lot to a dumpster. Then we went back inside.

The night she ran away/got locked out there was dog barking. At three in the morning, I walked out on the dark balcony to see if I could spot this dog in the neighborhood across the street. I just wanted to look at the dog and telepathically send it bad feelings and silence. I could see the fenced-in backyard where the dog mostly likely lived, but I couldn't see a dog. I walked back inside, closed the door, and lay back down.

I woke up the next morning, and my other cat, Spore, (I only have two) seemed worried. Harlem usually sleeps by my feet, but she wasn't there. By lunch I still hadn't seen Harlem and

wondered if I vacuumed earlier. When I vacuum, Harlem hides. By the evening, the litter box hadn't been touched and my other cat sniffed at the closets and under counters, trying to find Harlem. I checked each hiding place two and three times. Retracing my steps, I realized I locked Harlem out the night before. She jumped down from the balcony and ran out into the world.

I walked around outside, looking for her. I checked behind the dumpster. I walked through the tall grass of the vacant lot across the street, calling her name. I asked two neighbors walking by if they'd seen a black cat among all the other stray cats. I told them my cat is an inside cat so she looks different: healthier and cleaner. They said they hadn't seen her and they were sorry. They continued walking their pit bull.

My apartment is on a busy street in Orlando. I expected to find Harlem's black body smashed in the road. I'd never thought about seeing her guts before. My other cat was sad; I was sad. I knew Harlem was probably gone and would soon be dead, and I might or might not find out.

When it got completely dark, I put on a jacket. I needed a flashlight. I knocked on my neighbor's door, and as I was waiting for him to answer, I saw a small figure dart across the parking lot under cars. Harlem, I called. She must have heard my voice, smelled me, and was running home under the cover of dark. My neighbor opened his door, and I told him to close it. I called Harlem's name and bent down. She ran to me, and I picked her up and squeezed her. I told my neighbor he could open his door again. I explained to him why I knocked, thanked him for his good luck, and took my cat back into my apartment.

Harlem ran to the food bowl with Spore trailing behind, smelling her. Harlem is a cat, but she is also my baby. I take good care of her. Life is better for Harlem in my apartment than it is

out there. I feed her, hold her, clean her litter box, and play with her. I take pictures of her, pet her, and love her. I am good to her, and she is mine.

In Broken Arrow, Oklahoma in 2008 a tiger maimed a man to death while he was feeding the cat a deer carcass. Forty preschoolers were lead away from the educational demonstration. In 2007, an elephant went wild during a festival in India, injuring over twenty spectators and killing a trainer. In Lowgap, North Carolina in 2004 a fourteen year old girl was killed by a tiger kept in a cage behind the family's trailer. In 2003, bear lover Timothy Treadwell and his girlfriend were killed and eaten by bears. For thirteen seasons prior, he lived with bears in Alaska.

The Predator Control Program began around 1895, preventing the destruction of “useful” species. Prevention meant gunning, aerial shooting, trapping, poisoning, and den-hunting un-useful predators like the fox, coyote, wolf, bobcat, and mountain lion. When the Indians were removed, the buffalo were killed. Hungry wolves started eating farmer's cattle—a useful species. In the 1920s, the rabbit population rose exponentially in the west due to the lack of predators. Rabbits dug tunnels and ate vegetables, destroying fields crops. The government began poisoning the rabbits, too.

Wolves retreated to the north across the border into Canada where Predator Control didn't have jurisdiction. Animals understand boundaries.

Indians were forced to leave their homes. Indians were killed. Indians were pushed to reservations. The same government, just a different program, attempted to wipe out a race of people—wild people like the wolf, like the mountain lion, like the buffalo.

...

One night during the wild summer of 2012, Jim and I went out to his property in Bibb County, Alabama. Jim had a handle of Jack, and I had Jim for the night. The weather was

warming from a cold winter, and we were itching to get out. The moon was nearly full, lighting the nightscape—garlic blooms, privet, and backdrop pines. Maybe the moon really does make us do wild things, or maybe we want to do wild things and the moon looks like a good excuse.

We drank thermoses of whiskey with a splash of coke. Jim had a cooler in the back of his truck where he kept the ice and coke cans. He kept the whiskey in the back floorboard. We climbed a fence made of telephone-pole pieces. Meth addicts would drive on the property, looking for scrap metal, so Jim built the telephone fence to keep the meth addicts from carrying off the tractor and the turn plow. We pulled ourselves up onto the platform of a half-built shooting house that didn't have ladder. Jim told me to be careful. Then he said I climbed like a monkey.

We sat on the edge with our feet dangling and looked out over the lit field that used to be an orchard. His great-grandparents house stood in the center under the moon. They were long gone, and no one's lived in the house for decades, but it's holding up. The roof hasn't caved in and most of the porch still stands. Jim said they don't make houses like they used to—just like they don't make men or women like they used to.

I lay back on the wood, looking at the stars, swimming with whiskey. I pushed up his shirttail and put my palm against Jim's back, feeling his heat. He gave me his shirt, and I tried to make a prayer pad for my knees. The boards of pinewood were hard and unforgiving. I felt every angled surface and joint in my knees. He kneeled behind me on his rolled down jeans. His knees must have hurt, too. I think we liked the hurt. The pain reminded us just how bad we wanted to be there, to be with each other.

On the climb down, I lost my grip and slid against the creosote-oiled telephone pole, my shirt pulled up by wood splinters. My skin burned, and I knew there'd be a scrape in the morning.

We walked in the woods. I rubbed pine trees' bark and smelled my hands sticky with sex and sap. The moon leaked light down through canopies. We stepped around the stumps we could see, running into the ones we couldn't but too drunk to feel the difference. We ignored the pull of briars and ignored the hour.

Early into the morning, Jim dropped me off. And even though we'd spent half the day and most of the night together, I still felt disappointed to see him leave. No matter how drunk I got, it always hurt to watch him go home.

I woke up the next afternoon and saw that I was covered in dirt, blood, and bruises. Briars and branches had scratched my legs. Dirt dried in swathes down my whole body. My knees, thighs, and hips wore blue and purple. I felt like I'd done something. I felt full—almost like Jim was still with me.

...

When I was fourteen, my grandparents took me to Cherokee, North Carolina. We visited the Oconaluftee Indian Village. There's a long wooden bridge from the parking lot to the village, which doesn't look much like a village. There's a stone welcome center and a gift shop where you can buy plastic tomahawks and dyed artificial feathers attached to tan headbands. The "real" Indians were stereotypes over-dressed in fake skins and stripes of face paint with a braid down each side of their brown faces. They reenacted the old ways so white tourists could see how they had lived in moss covered cottages before white people made them leave the cottages. At night, the Indians who lived on the reservation dressed up and mocked the wars with white actors, wars

the Indians didn't win. At the time, I didn't much care about a real Indian culture experience; I just wanted to see real Indians—red men. Indian skin always fascinated me—the brown-red color. I'm so pale in comparison. I wanted skin like that.

In the Indian Village, my grandmother told me to raise my hand for the children's activity, which consisted of white kids dancing in a circle around a fire like Indian children. I was too old for it, but my grandmother didn't care about things like that.

I was embarrassed because I was fourteen, and all fourteen year olds are embarrassed. An Indian boy older than me reached his hand out. I looked at his brown fingers with pink nail beds. His fingers were thick and strong. I held out my hand too, and he grabbed it in his. My hand looked stupid, so puny and white, not even a freckle as browned as he. He led me around the circle with the children. He smiled at me, and I'd never held another boy's hand before. His black hair was let down nearly as long as mine, his skin—a mixture of brown and burgundy. Afterwards, my grandmother talked about how the Indian boy looked me and how handsome he was. I told her to be quiet while we got in the car. I lay down in the backseat, closed my eyes, and imagined kissing the Indian boy, touching his black hair and bare back, asking him who he was, who he could ever be now?

Wild animals have been tamed to cattle, wild plants to golden corn, and people to offices, bathrooms, doormats. Some people call it evolving, but I call it suppressing.

To domesticate a crop is to harness the idealized genetics in a seed and replicate it over and over, controlling the environment in which it grows to achieve maximum production. For an animal to be domesticated, it's like corn: bred, fed, and controlled to achieve maximum production. Cows and chickens are bred past the point of function, purely for purpose. That's not an animal. A chicken too heavy breasted to stand is not an animal. A buck too heavy-antlered to

raise his head is not an animal. A person too blind to see past a bottom line is not animal.

Animals run, fight, hunt, fuck, shit, survive on the land, follow the cycles of the moon, plan according to the sun, move with the tides, live by the seasons.

Getting rid of the Indians was the real beginning of the Predator Control Program which should have been named Exterminate Wild Life. David Quammen says wildness is defined by its uncertainty. Tigers and bears don't make certain pets. Not even dogs make certain pets. What is a pet anyway?

Why can't wildness be left alone to be wild? Why would a man put a tiger in a cage and be surprised when it kills him five years later? I'd kill him, too.

Jim is dark brown, darker than tan and without the gold. His skin hints at red, the cimarron inside cedar. His thick hair is straight black. His beard is half gray and half black like a skunk. His eyes are brown with brass that's easy to miss but hard to ignore once you've found it. Jim is part Indian. Nobody knows how much, or what kind, but he claims Creek. The mystery makes it better; it's more fitting. One of Jim's prized possessions is his green Penobscot canoe. He likes to fish, he likes to walk around in the woods, he sleeps naked, he likes to drink, and he can get mean.

Jim loves to drive. He loves to walk. He can cover a lot of ground. He drives from Hueytown to Bibb County to Birmingham. He drives hours at a time; going a long distance is no big thing to him. He walks through the woods, searching the leaves for something left, anything. The Indians had a lot of territory once, traveled long ways through the woods, built fires and sat by those fires, fucked women on pine needle beds under tree tops.

The Indian in Jim comes from his dad's side down in south Georgia. Jim's grandfather looked like a white man and so did his brothers. It was like the Indian blood saved itself up and waited to put everything it had into one descendant. The blood chose Jim.

Everyone thinks of Jim as an Indian, but he's legally classified as a Caucasian male. Most of the Indians are dead because of the Caucasian males, but I think Indian might not be a race anymore. By 2100, nine out of ten Indians will be mixed. To me, Indian is place, a mindset, a spirit, a way, a heart.

What if God was an Indian in the southeastern woods? He was a wild man who stalked buffalo, ate hearts still warm with blood, wore cured pelts in winter, worshipped the Sun and the Moon. What if God marveled at the beauty of starlit pine tops on a flat, clear night?

Not only did the government take the Indian's land and their lives, they took their God. Red Jacket tried to tell the white man they shared the Great Spirit, but the white man didn't want to share God so he killed him, ran him out, made his own God and then wondered why things look so gray now, so empty and disconnected.

My great-great grandmother was an Indian. Her name was Ellis Whisanent, and she was full-blooded Cherokee. My grandfather was born in her house in north Alabama. He says even when she was old, she could put both her palms flat on the ground with her legs straight as a board. My grandfather is tall with thick skin that still hasn't wrinkled on his hands and arms. It's easy to see the Indian blood in him, but I'm as pale and freckly as they come. I get sun burnt with sunscreen on. My hair is brown but favors towards red. My eyes are green, and there's nothing about me that looks Indian except maybe my bone structure, but that might be wishful thinking. I like to think I've got the heart of an Indian though, and if I don't, I want to.

I want to have a baby with Jim, a brown Indian baby. I think maybe if I pray, if I run around in the woods of north Alabama, build a fire, sing, get naked, then my grandmother will hear me, will fire in my blood and put everything she's got left into my belly. I want a brown baby with black hair. I want the woods to be filled with men and women working to live, believing in Nature again, hunting with God again. If I could bring something wild back into this world maybe we'd all be a little better. I'd be better.

I dream I walk in the woods and find a swan in the shape of a woman. Her fingers are slight and graceful like the wing bones of a songbird. She is hardly dressed with gray fitted cloths. She is a woman, a beautiful woman, but she is also a swan. She seems hurt; she seems to need me. I rescue her. I take her home. When I put her down on pale marble, she shits a long milky path just like a bird. She sits down cross-legged, folding long, white limbs. She looks me in the eye—her eyes black. She cups up handfuls of the white and yellow cream, paints her belly, her arms, her forehead. She fingers circular patterns onto her skin. On her forehead, someone had drawn clocks—faded and each at a different time. Her face is an old math problem still not answered. I want her to love me, be my pet, be happy I brought her home. But she is angry and defeated like a captured bird.

The night before the dream, I walked along a lake in Orlando. Swan boats were tied to a small dock. Lights illuminated each black and gold painted head. A real swan floated close by, only one. The bird cleaned its feathers, staying near the dock. I wondered if the swan thought the paddleboats were gods? Did other swans light in the water while people paddled the boats around the lake? Did the people in the boats feel ridiculous next to the real swans, or did they find it all beautiful—artificial, superior, and safe?

Sometimes, we see something so pretty, so good that we must have it, must experience it. Maybe white men saw the Indians and wanted to keep them as pets and called it assimilation. Once, I saw a spotted fawn and wanted to make it my pet, wanted it to be mine. I love a man who I want to make mine. But I know I can't own him; I can't try to possess him because as soon as a wild animal is possessed it loses its wildness. Wildness can't be captured. Once captured, the wildless thing will never love us back. We've got to step back, stay out, and treasure wild from a distance, trust uncertainty. We've got to sit on a water oak stump, and see a fawn wobble out of a tree line towards us, we've got to sit still as he sniffs the air, inches forward, extends his graceful neck to smell our fingertips. Then we'll feel God again.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GET WHAT YOU CAN'T HAVE

Jim thinks Spore might be dumb, but I think she might be smart. “She’s just not all there,” he says. Spore is black and white, no bigger than a rabbit, tailless, and tall eared. “Maybe she just thinks a lot,” I tell him.

Spore’s favorite room is the bathroom. I think she likes the cool, tile floor against her belly. She does not like to be held or pet on the head, but she does like to pee in front of the litter box and dip the tip of her mouth in the water bowl without drinking. Spore does not play with cat toys, but she does watch movies. She stares at people for long periods of time and out of the windows she can easily reach. She isn’t very coordinated, so heights aren’t her thing. When Spore stares at Jim, he talks to her.

“What do you want Spore?” he asks.

She does not blink or tilt her head. She stares.

My father gave me Spore despite my initial hesitation. He assumed I’d love to have Spore since she is the daughter of Fungus, my outside cat from our farm back home. There’s a big difference between an inside cat and a barn cat: domestication, resulting in poor hygienic habits and bad manners. But she turned out to be helpful.

Before I had Spore, I had roaches. My Birmingham apartment is old, and during summer nights, the roaches made themselves at home. They lounged behind trashcans and flitted under the light of the television. Roaches know how to ruin a movie. I had to press “pause,” turn on a lamp, find the thing, and scream. It’s not something I’m proud of, being from a farm and a self-proclaimed “nature person.” After slapping the roach with my flip-flop, I dry-heaved while

wiping off the crunched goo from the sole. The few times Jim witnessed me around a live one, he shook his head with both mock and real disappointment.

Spore's way better than a roach motel. Instead of finding a sick roach crouched behind the kitchen faucet, I find dead ones in the corners. I've never actually seen Spore kill a roach. Their still, papery bodies just appear. I make my rounds to each room, checking corners, collecting roaches with a paper towel-covered hand. It's easier knowing the thing is dead. There's certainty and assurance there, no wiggling antennas or kicking barbed legs. Just trash, hardly a thing at all.

While I towel off, I notice Spore (we have an open door policy) playing. She kicks something, and it slides across the wood floor. She chases after it like it ran away on its own. She dances around it and hops over it. Spore throws it up in the air. When it hits the wood like a ball of crumpled paper, I know it's a roach—a dead one. Spore animates the roach for hours. Spore likes the dead roach better than the stuffed mouse that squeaks or the flying squirrel with a crinkly cape.

I brush my hair, and Spore tosses the roach in the bathroom. It lands at my feet, and I kick it away and wonder how long it takes to kill a dead thing. I'm not sure what makes this roach more special than the past dead roaches. Maybe this roach gave a good chase, was harder to kill than the others. Or maybe it's Spore's boredom or loneliness or the tricky combination of both. I call Jim about Spore's new pet, and he says it would be a shame if I threw it away.

Exactly three days after Spore adopted the roach, she paws at the floor like she does in the litter box. Armed with Windex and a roll of paper towels, I tell Spore to step back. She purrs, walks away, and there is her pet roach—belly-up with bent antennas and a few absent legs. I

guess after a while, dead roaches aren't much fun. I felt bad for the roach. Spore commanded the little, shelled body, but she wasn't after unwavering control and obedience. She wanted the roach to run so she could run. I throw it away because what else do you do with something used up and over-explored.

Jim spends the night, and I wake up wanting tomato-cheese toast. Spore stretches and stays in bed with him. I shower and dress for work. In the kitchen, I cut into a chunk of cheddar and lay the rectangles of cheese across a slice of bread. I put the bread on the oven's metal rack, and turn the oven on "broil." I try not to think about later, when he'll be at his home. I check my toast, but the cheese hasn't changed. I wonder what I'll do tonight after work. Jim's wife will be back in town. Maybe my Netflix will be in. I slice the over-ripe tomato, spilling yellow, seedy juice on the plastic-wood counter. I lay the watery slices on top of the melted cheese.

I sit on my bed with my toast next to a sleeping Jim, hoping he might wake up and talk to me before I go to work. His breathing doesn't even change. I cough a few times, but he's asleep. I eat. I look at him. Spore looks at him, too. Having Jim in the morning is so rare that I try to make it mean something, something I can keep. Instead all I can think is that he sleeps like a teenager, lying across the bed on his stomach, hugging my pillows, hiding under the comforter.

Spore hops around the bed excited about morning time and company. Toast crumbs fall on my lap. I tell her to stop. I try to pop her on the head, but I miss and crumbs get in the sheets. Spore stares at me before crouching behind a hump in the comforter. I roll my eyes. Spore wiggles her back legs like she is going to attack something. She's not as cute as she thinks she is. Spore clears the comforter hump and lands on Jim's back. She's playing with him. He stays asleep. I brush off my lap, pet them both, and go to work.

Jim will wake up, and I imagine Spore's triangle face with her surprised ears and white whiskers outlined by her black cheeks. Jim will try to pet Spore on the head, and she'll squat away from his hand to sniff it. He'll check his phone; he'll scratch himself. She'll sit in the hallway, watching him pee, dress, and leave. Then, she'll wait, wait for someone because we just keep coming back.

LET ME BE BORN ONE MORE TIME

I was two days away from turning thirteen. It was summer in Panama City Beach where my family spent our annual beach trip away from the farm. Kim, my best friend, came with me. Daddy called her Kimbo.

My great uncle owned the old beach house. It was within walking distance of the water, and we stayed each summer for almost-free. The outer cinderblock walls were whitewashed and speckled with sand-grit. When Melissa, my stepmother, told me to sweep the kitchen, the brown, thin tile chipped up in pieces, weighing down the dustpan. She assigned Kim and me the downstairs bathroom, which had a strange section of moist carpet, cushioning a water heater, hiding a roach family who played every night. The shower was the same size as the refrigerator. We had measured with our arms.

That morning, Kim and I put on our bathing suits in our assigned bathroom. The door was closed and probably locked because Kim was still shy about her growing boobs. She whispered to me as I tied my bathing suit top. I didn't have any boobs.

“What?” I asked her. “I can't hear you.”

“I need a,” she whispered even though we were in the bathroom with the door closed.

“Kim, I can't hear you,” I said, raising my eyebrows and wrinkling my forehead. “What the heck are you saying?” This was when I didn't curse. Melissa didn't allow me to say “oh my god” or “butt”; it was “hiney” instead. My parents didn't go to church much, but somehow they were—what I would later learn to name—fundamentalist. Sex was bad. R-rated movies were bad. Low-cut shirts were bad. Most everything was bad.

Kim started out strong, “I need a tampon,” but still whispered the last word.

“Okay, I’ll ask Momma.” Kim nodded. This was when I still called my stepmother, Momma. I never called her Melissa to her face. She had raised me since I was six for better or worse, but after I left home, I realized that she really was my stepmother just like I really was her step-daughter. But, I will always call her “Momma” in front of her because it’s polite and just easier, and as much as I hate to admit it, I don’t want to hurt her feelings. I didn’t see my actual-mother very often, and I was pretty sure she wasn’t too excited about motherhood anyway, so I’d take a Momma where I could get one.

I stepped out of the bathroom in my bathing suit, and Melissa and my brother and sister sat on the plastic, floral couch, watching the wooden-paneled, console TV.

I wondered if they heard us whispering. I tiptoed over to Melissa and crouched down with my hands on my knees, if only I could get smaller—invisible would be nice.

“Momma, Kim needs a tampon,” I whispered and colored red from saying the word aloud. My brother at four and sister at two were much too young to even know what a tampon was—not to mention puberty. Daddy gave me “the talk” once; it was while we were watching two goats bred on our farm.

“What? Why are you whispering?” She responded with frustration between her eyebrows and lining her forehead.

Barely louder, I said, “Kim needs a tampon. She doesn’t have any more, and she *needs* one.” I hadn’t started my period, but I was completely fascinated by the whole, bloody thing. Kim sneaked behind me, trying that invisible thing too.

“Well, there’s a box of tampons in Daddy’s truck in the glove box.” She said tampons so loud that I couldn’t help but shrug my shoulders and look around. Apparently, Melissa was on her period, too. Kim hunched by the front door under the window unit.

“The glove box is the one in front of the seat, right?”

“Yes, the one in the middle is called the console.” Her tone was condescending, but, then again her tone was always condescending. She was a Special-Ed elementary teacher, and she kept teaching when she was off work.

Kim followed me out the screen door. We didn’t wear shoes, and the cement drive was hot and rough on our soles. We looked around, trying to find Daddy. He wasn’t sitting in one of the wooden chairs along the front of the house. He wasn’t in the side yard or down the driveway. We sweated from the heat and our nerves. I opened the passenger door.

“Your Dad is outside,” Kim tapped me on the back. Daddy was around the side of house where the spigot was. We hunched inside the door.

After opening the glove box, searching through old insurance cards, and a roll of toilet paper, I found a small box of Regular tampons. “I got it,” I whispered I held the box against my chest and ran for the screen door. Kim closed the truck door and ran behind me into the house and up the stairs. Of course, we giggled. Daddy probably never saw us. I threw the tampon box on the pushed-together twin beds we slept on at the top of the stairs. Kim grabbed them back up and put them under a T-shirt in her suitcase.

Kim told me how much blood there was, how it doesn’t stop, how it just keeps coming. She told me sometimes it’s different colors: pink, brown, scary-movie red.

When we got to the beach, we played in the waves and invented a secret phrase for when she had a period-related problem. We decided “Code Red” was too obvious and people would know so we chose “Code Pink.” We went to dinner at a dive bar that sold all-you-can-eat oysters which was a highlight for Daddy. Kim and I ate off the kid’s menu because Melissa made us.

Kim didn't care, but I did. I was almost thirteen, and the kid's meal had a twelve-year age limit. Throughout dinner, we whispered "Code Pink" to each other, laughing and feeling mature.

The next day we walked down the Panama City Beach pier. In the noon sun, we watched brown, thick-wrinkled men with frizzy, white ponytails cast baitfish into the air, hoping to catch big fish. The air was thick with salt, and the wind made our faces greasy. We stopped at the bathrooms with no air-conditioning or fans. The stalls were hot with a stale-urine smell and trapped salty air. As I peed, sweat rolled down my neck and the bottoms of my thighs stuck to the plastic seat. I looked down, grabbing the inner lining of my panties. There were three red spots. I ran my thumb over the dry spots. I wiped, and there were more red spots on the toilet paper, a brighter red. I folded a square of tissue paper and stuck it inside my panties. My breath got quick. I pulled my pants back up and ran outside the bathroom.

Kim stood by the door, trying to tame her fly-aways. I grabbed her forearm, and stared in her eyes, which were green like mine. "Code Pink," I whispered, "I just started my period."

"What?" Her eyes grew big; she grabbed my forearm. I was ready to show proof, but she believed me. Kim had used all the tampons because she was bleeding like she was dying.

"We need more tampons," I said like a grown-up even though I had no idea how to use a tampon.

When I got up the nerve along with the itchy reminder of folded toilet paper in my panties, I walked up beside my stepmother. I made myself open my mouth, and I mumbled, looking straight ahead to the ocean's horizon at the pier's end. "I think I started." She didn't say anything so I said, offering evidence, "There was blood in my underwear when I went to the bathroom."

When I was eleven she let me shave my legs, but I wasn't allowed to shave up my thighs or my armpits, but she couldn't decide when I should start my period. I was glad for something bigger than her, something to make her out of control.

"Oh. Really?" She stopped walking and turned to me, mildly surprised. I'm not sure if I expected her to gasp or cry or what because I hadn't ever seen her do much of anything except look mean and give orders.

"And there was blood when I wiped."

"Okay, well that's alright." I think this was our moment, her welcoming me through the monumental doors of womanhood.

"Kim used all the tampons," I informed her. I was still embarrassed but excited for grown-upness.

"Okay, we're gonna stop at the Carousel for beer anyway, so we'll get some there. Is it a lot of blood?"

"No, it's not very much."

"I'll get the small ones, then."

And that settled it. Daddy walked far ahead the whole time with my brother, and my sister walked next to my stepmother oblivious to the world of tampons.

I think Kim was relieved she wasn't the only one with a bleeding problem. She had recruited me.

At the Carousel, I followed Melissa trying to remind her with my presence that she needed to purchase the box. I wanted it to be a secret. There was no reason Daddy needed to know.

Finally, she picked out a box of cardboard Junior Lites, which in itself is just a degrading category. I knew I would one day work up to Regular or maybe even Super; however, I never aspired to Jumbo and definitely not Super Jumbo because I couldn't even comprehend those. She continued shopping with the box just sitting there in the buggy. I tried to cover it up with blueberry Poptarts and Cheerios.

As Melissa checked out, Kim and I waited by the store's automatic doors. The hot air blew against our backs each time the doors slid open. We always felt so out-in-the-open like we couldn't find a corner, a sheet, something to get us out of the way of scrutiny. Daddy was in the conjoined liquor store. I wasn't sure if he knew what was going on. I just hoped he didn't.

Back at the beach house, Kim and I went upstairs and snuck in the clean, upstairs bathroom with the miniature tampons. I looked at the pictures of lined vaginal canals and squiggly pubic hair. I read some of the directions, trying to figure out where to hold and what to push. It was slow going, but with Kim's experience and my perseverance we figured it out. We'd showered together and shaved each others' legs before. Neither one of us felt weird.

The next day on the beach, Kim and I were plugged and ready to go. We whispered to each other across our towels, me burning and her tanning. Later, we tossed a big, bouncy ball between us. Daddy walked past me as we laughed, and he turned back, looking me straight in the face and said, "Are you happy about being gross?"

"No," I said, turning red and hot. He didn't say anything else, turned around, and kept walking. I think he was nervous. Kim asked me what he said, and I told her. We both stood there on the sand unsure. That meant she was gross, too. The ball was no longer fun; the sand was too flat and open. We ran for the water without excitement. We ran to submerge ourselves, our bodies, our everyday growing proof that we were going to be women no matter what.

...

At home, we helped Daddy on the farm. We raised South African Boer goats that we showed, bred, and sold. Daddy bought our first goat when I was ten, and by the time I was twelve, we had a headcount of almost three hundred. During the fall and summer, we were gone most weekends, showing or breeding, and Kim usually traveled with us.

I was hard on Kim because Daddy was hard on me, and I wanted to be the boss of someone. Before shows, Kim helped me wash the show goats, which usually took most of the night, and then we'd wake up early the next morning to leave for the show. We always slept in the truck on the ride while Daddy drove.

After a long, one-day show in Georgia, Daddy decided to drive back that night. When the sun was completely down, and we were still a long ways from home, Daddy stopped and folded down the whole back seat of his truck. Kim, and I lay side by side on the hard bed, facing the fabric ceiling while he drove. Inside the truck was cold because Daddy kept the air-conditioning fan on high, but we had a blanket over us.

He listened to the radio, and the sound covered our voices. She said she wanted to show me something. Kim slid her hand under the blanket down towards her stomach.

"You just rub there," she told me.

"Just rub?"

"Yeah, but not too hard."

The passing light from power poles flashed through the windows. Lit, chopped patterns played out on her forehead.

The back of Daddy's neck was above my head. The fine, brown hairs thinned down the length of tan skin into the neckline of his T-shirt.

I turned my head and focused on the ceiling, finding shapes in the tiny holes and tears in the tan fabric. My thigh shook next to her thigh. The folded seat was hard against my spine, and we started to sweat. We smelled like goats and cedar shavings.

My feet pushed against her left foot, my right elbow pressed into her side. I wanted her to do it for me.

“Do you feel it?” she asked me.

“Yes. Wouldn’t it feel better if someone else did it?”

She didn’t answer. I watched her hand rise and fall beneath the blanket.

I didn’t want him to see us. I wanted her to touch me.

The blanket got hot, and I worried she was breathing too loud over the radio.

“Can you feel it?” she whispered between the gasps of light.

I felt it. And I wondered if I felt more than her. She was my best friend, but I wanted her to touch me then. Once I slapped her butt and she turned to me laughing, and said, “Don’t do that in public.” Kim was funny, but it turned me on when she said that. I didn’t understand why. I didn’t know I needed to be close to a woman, a girl, an anything-female.

...

My showmanship doe’s name was Majoni. Her full, registered name was LRB Majoni. The farm we bought her from had the registered initials, LRB. Ours were LAZYL. The farm initials were tattooed in the right ear. In the left ear went the year letter and the assigned herd number. Majoni’s left ear read N37, which meant she was born in 2001 and was the 37th kid that year. The letters were green, and the inside of her ears were spotted brown and white. When the judge would check her tattoos, I’d lick my finger and rub my spit over the numbers so he could see through the dead skin and dust. She was my goat.

The summer I started my period, I won the IBGA, International Boer Goat Association, 11-14 year old showmanship class with Majoni. Neither one of us were full-grown. We won a pleated, blue ribbon and a monogrammed hat. Majoni and I worked well together. Neither one of us were particularly friendly, but we liked each other.

...

Daddy usually didn't let show does carry their own babies, but when Majoni was a few years old and I was fifteen, she was accidentally bred by a decent show buck. Daddy decided not to give her a shot of Lutalyse, which would make her abort and come into heat. Majoni grew to be a big doe, and she carried fat in her barrel. She was almost weak on her pasterns, and when she gained her baby weight, her dewclaws touched the earth.

Majoni stayed home from the shows because she was too pregnant to travel. I didn't do showmanship anymore because I felt too old, and it didn't feel right with a different goat. I showed in the regular classes where the goat was judged not the person. Kim competed in showmanship and started winning. I was proud of her because I'd taught her to keep the doe's head up, to always walk alongside the doe instead of in front, and to never spend too much time setting up the feet.

The next morning after we got back from the show, I walked down to the barn to check on Majoni. She looked like she was carrying a drooping basketball on each side of her stomach. Her pink bag hung tight with milk. She moved like she was miserable, and I wished she'd just go ahead and have her baby. She wasn't cut out for pregnancy.

One hundred and fifty days after Majoni was accidentally bred, I came home from school, and no one else was home. I slipped on my rubber boots and ran down to the barn. Majoni had been moved to a pen because we knew she was going to kid soon.

I slowed down under the barn, and my rubber boots clapped against the concrete slab where I had washed Majoni before shows. I saw her pen and a new kid lying beside her. Its body white and head a pale red colored just like hers. They lacked pigment like me.

I stood in front of the pen and stared at the pair sleeping. It was a he. The buck's tiny ribs hummed with breathing. His long, floppy ears folded in the dirt I had swept for them.

But Majoni's eyes weren't completely closed, and then, something felt weird. I grabbed the top bar of the metal pen and swung myself over the gate. As my feet landed on the dirt, she didn't move. I knew she was dead.

Daddy hadn't told me. He knew. I knew he knew because he was home all day, and he had to leave before I got home to pick up my brother and sister. Why wouldn't he warn me? He could have called, left a note even though Daddy didn't leave notes, warned me somehow. But, he didn't.

I touched her cool head, down the length of her long, stiffening ears. The kid-buck awoke and stood up, stretching and curling his top lip.

He stumbled—new to walking—to his mother's still-warm bag. He dropped his neck and began to nurse, wagging his white tail. He pushed into her teat, suckling with pleasure while she lay un-moving with squinted eyes.

I jumped out of the pen and walked to the house.

I dialed Daddy's cell phone number, but he didn't answer. As I stood over the phone, someone knocked on the door. It was my neighbor. We were in class together. I think he liked me, like that. I told him I was busy and couldn't ride four-wheelers today. I told him to go away.

The next day at school, he told Kim that he saw me in a tank-top and he thought I was crying.

Daddy never said much about Majoni, so I didn't say much either. He left them in that pen. She bloated, and her kid continued to nurse on cooling milk. I should have moved her myself, but I waited on him. He finally dumped her across the road, and I covered the kid-buck in another doe's afterbirth as she kidded so that doe would take him as her own. Expand sentence. I never looked for buzzards across the road, and Majoni's kid grew up and was eventually sold.

...

A year later, Daddy's favorite died. I walked down to the barn because that's what I did every night.

The rows of silver painted pens ran down to the end of the barn, and Daddy sat in a green fold-out chair pushing one foot against a paint-chipped gate. It was summer, but the dark made the air still and decent. The frogs hummed around the pond echoing over the dam to the barn.

"Good ole Reebo," Daddy said in quiet, tender voice I didn't like. He sniffed and palmed at his eyes.

The barn lights buzzed and bugs fell, paralyzed around us. A beetle flew into my cheek, and I jumped, slapping it away. I wished he weren't this way.

"Jerry was a good buck. He knew his name," Daddy talked in a voice all wrong, and I couldn't help but be ashamed of him, then. I'm not sure when Daddy started calling him

“Reebo.” Daddy would wake up in the morning and walk out on the front porch and yell “Reebo” while he was peeing, and the buck would bay back to him.

In the swept dirt was a trail of small, mud circles where he’d filled up Jerry’s water bucket. The humidity made my skin thick with oil. I carried the hose around to the other pens, topping off water buckets. The sharp intakes of Daddy’s breath made my fingers ache around the slick hose. His chair teetered on its two back legs as he pushed his feet against Jerry’s pen.

“Pneumonia?” I asked with my back to him.

“Some kind of respiratory infection.” I wondered if it was worse because he didn’t completely know. Once a show doe had died and he didn’t know why so we took it out to the grass lane in front of the barn facing the pond and cut the doe’s belly open, looking through her cavity and her stomach for some kind of answer. Melissa said it was wrong what we were doing. We never found anything.

In front of Jerry’s pen, Daddy’s thick fingers rubbed his wrinkled forehead as he looked at the large, dead buck. Jerry was sitting up, resting against the back of the pen, and I wondered if Daddy had moved Jerry that way after he died. This was the man who’d taught me to be tough, to be indifferent. I was ashamed of him—his open grief.

I didn’t help Daddy take Jerry across the road. I wondered how he lifted the buck’s massive weight, but Daddy was strong and he’s always been good at finding a way.

...

A few months after Jerry died, Daddy needed my help. It was late at night and fall-time, and I wore a sweatshirt with sweat pants tucked into my black rubber boots as we rode on the four-wheeler. This was when the goat farm got so big it felt out of control, when strange things happened.

Daddy said Diamond looked like she was going into labor. He said he saw the amniotic plug hanging out of her. He needed my help because my hands were long and thin, and I'd done this plenty of times before. The babies inside of Diamond were not hers and they were worth a lot of money. We knew she had twins from when we sonogrammed her a few months before. He parked the four-wheeler in front of Diamond. Daddy cut off the four-wheeler but left the lights on—straight, slim beams.

Diamond lay on the gravel-ground, pushed, curled her lip, stood up, pushed, and paced. She had a large barrel, and she always had big flush kids—show kids that were put inside of her. She was a good momma.

Daddy held her chin against him.

I found her white tail, which was lined with her fluid. I touched the soft, warm skin at her tail-base. I slipped my right hand inside of her, pushing through the plug and the cervix. My cupped hand slinked further inside her to warm hair, skin, and bone. I traced my fingertips over the skeleton, trying to decide if I was touching a leg, a head.

I couldn't find the soft bottom of the kid-hoof. I couldn't find the knobby-knee joint. I felt upwards across the hair surface, moving my fingers centimeters at a time. I looked for nostrils, mouth, eye sockets, ears. Diamond got impatient and lurched forward, but Daddy steadied her against him, and I pulled my out hand, stretching my fingers, and slid back inside her. She was warm and slick and her muscles stayed tight around my cupped hand.

“What is it?” he asked me as he propped his knee in front of her chest.

“I'm not sure, yet.” I found the hair and bone again, feeling harder this time. I felt a divot, like an eye socket or a nostril. I moved my fingertips to the right and felt another divot. They were too far apart to be a nose. They could be eyes, but then the head would have been too

round. I could barely see anything beyond the four-wheeler's light. I moved my fingers even more to the right and there was another divot. I cupped my hand over the round mass with three divots and pushed further. Diamond grunted and tried to push with my hand inside her. Her muscles contracted and squeezed around my wrist and hand. I found an ear.

"I found the head." I said. But it felt big, bigger and rounder than usual. I couldn't find the other ear. It was just a wet, warm mass. I felt back to the divots. Nothing was spaced right. Where was the mouth, the nose, the eyes?

"Daddy, it's not right," my voice wavered while I was inside her.

"What do you mean?" he asked me in the dark.

"It just doesn't feel right, and I can't see anything. I'm telling you, it does not feel right," I tried to look at him, but he was out of the thin light, and all I could see was his silhouette and the shapes of trees behind him. I felt odd, uncomfortable. I didn't understand what was inside of her, but I knew it had to come out.

"Okay, let's put her on the four-wheeler."

We picked her up by her legs, mostly Daddy did because she was heavy and fighting with labor, and we swung her onto the four-wheeler's back rack. We laid her on the rack like the deer we shot. I sat behind Daddy with my right arm over Diamond's shoulder, keeping her in place, petting her neck. Daddy drove slow past the show-kid pasture and the buck pasture to the end of the barn. He pulled in under the heavy industrial lights. Fifty pens were lined up in rows waiting for the pregnant recipient does to drop.

Diamond stayed on the back of the four-wheeler, and I told Daddy, "You try. I don't know." I had done this plenty of times. I even liked doing it, but I didn't feel right.

Diamond looked tired in the light. Her breathing was heavy but slow.

Daddy pushed his hand inside of her, and she lifted her hanging head and bayed. I patted her shoulder. She still didn't struggle propped up on the metal rack.

He didn't talk much, and his face held deep concentration. I didn't ask any questions. I just waited.

Daddy started to breathe harder, and I could see the muscles work in his right forearm. Then Diamond started baying loud and louder and she wouldn't stop, and he told me to hold on to her. So, I grabbed her head and he said, "No grab her horns." I stood on one side of the four-wheeler, holding her slick horns, looking at her spotted gums every time she screamed, and he stood at the other end of the four-wheeler, sweating, breathing, and pulling on something inside her. Between my thighs began to ache for her. Nothing seemed right. Then, he started pulling with his left hand too. I saw he found the two front legs. The kid was big—really big—but he had found the legs and now we could get the first kid out.

Diamond screamed louder and thrashed against the metal rack. I dug my boots against the back tire, trying to hold on to her. He pulled and sweated. He shouldn't have to pull this hard I kept thinking. I knew what this was doing to the inside of her, and I squeezed my knees together as I held her horns. She wasn't made to push out whatever he was pulling out. Blood ran out her, pooling in the dirt at his feet. Diamond stopped baying as often. Daddy took a step back, and it was like Diamond gave way and white legs appeared and another leg and blood and an ear and two backbones. The kid fell out, thumping hard against the ground with its own heavy weight. I walked to the other side of the four-wheeler and looked at the ground.

It was two babies, two bucks with white bodies and one massive, red head. They shared one head. The divots I felt were supposed to be eyes that hadn't finished forming and the

nostrils—all four—were spaced out unevenly. Each white body was huge. Diamond always made big kids, but this time she made them too big and they grew in a way that was impossible.

“I’ve never seen that before,” Daddy said. Blood dripped onto the white, wet bodies as Diamond lay across the four-wheeler. Her breathing was shallow. It didn’t seem there was a need to shoot her. She was already dying—quick. I wondered what the inside of her looked like.

The two-bodied kid on the ground was dead. We don’t know when it died. Maybe that morning and that’s why she went into labor, or maybe the two-body kid suffocated in the birth canal when she went into labor.

Diamond was a good doe. We knew this was our fault. We did this; we’d put show-doe’s embryos inside her because she was a recipient. It was called flushing and we did it twice every year. Daddy laid Diamond down in the dirt, and I petted her neck. Then, we checked on the show goats in the runs seeing if anyone needed extra feed or hay or water. We had a show coming up.

The next morning the Great Pyrenees had drug off the two-bodied baby, knowing it was wrong, and Diamond was stiff and dead. Diamond went across the road.

...

Strange babies were born more and more often, like a bad science experiment. The farm slowly decreased in size, and I started playing fastpitch softball. We stopped showing, and I played on travel teams in the summer and fall until I left for college.

When I was eighteen, I had reconstructive surgery on my right shoulder. I played softball for a small college and was injured.

The morning of the surgery as I stood naked under my paper dress, I told the nurse, “I’m on my period. Is that a problem?” It just seemed like something I needed to address. Daddy and

Melissa were in the room, and at this point, I didn't care. I was basically naked, and Daddy had grown accustomed to my womanly grossness.

"Are you wearing a tampon?" the nurse asked. I've always thought the phrase "wearing a tampon" was strange.

"Yes ma'am." I nodded.

"Let me go ask Dr. Andrews if you need to take it out. He might want you to." She left the room squishing down the hall in her Crocs.

I turned to the other nurse in the room, "If I have to take my tampon out, what are they gonna do?" I pictured my limp body sprawled out on a metal table, pooling old blood from my crotch.

"They'll role up gauze and put it between your legs." She said this like it was normal. I looked at my parents, and they both did a motionless shrug.

The Croc-nurse came back in the room. "Dr. Andrews says you can leave your tampon in."

"Good." I wasn't sure what my tampon had to do with my shoulder anyway.

Later, several scrub-wearers came in with various needles and syringes. They took a small needle and gave me a shot in the right side of my neck to numb the area. It didn't really hurt, but the cool, clean metal of the needle stung. Then, they took out a needle that looked like a cartoon drawing of a needle. It was really long. This was the nerve block. As the needle penetrated my neck, a woman's covered mouth got close to mine. I could still feel her breath against my cheek. I wondered how she felt about getting so close to people all day, what it was like when she was this close to someone she wanted to be close to. At this point, I'd never been in a relationship, and never had sex before, or had a drink, or been to a party, or much of

anything. But, I could feel needs encroaching. I felt hornier (a word I didn't say then), lonelier—restless.

They told me to lie down, and they leveled my bed. And, then, I noticed my neck and arm were numb. My arm no longer felt like a part of my body. I thought my arm was laid across the bed, but it was resting on my stomach. I told my fingers to move, but they remained still, and when I held my right hand in my left hand it was like holding a stranger's hand. My parents stood in the corner of the room attempting to stay out of the way but be supportive at the same time. They didn't talk much.

I joked with Melissa, laughing, "What if I die?"

She became suddenly serious. "That's not funny, Devin." I withheld the eye-roll, but couldn't help but fantasize about how bad she'd feel for being such a bitch all these years if I did die. I never thought about how it would affect my actual-mother. I seemed to lump her shortcomings in with Melissa's so basically they both sucked and that was Melissa's fault.

They knocked me out in the room, but I woke up again when I was in the surgery room on the metal table, and all these masked faces looked at me like on television. Then, they knocked me out again.

When I woke up the second time, my surgery was complete, and I immediately started dry heaving. They gave me a shot of Phenergan. My parents took me home and bought me soup I didn't eat.

That night I took my tampon out with my left hand because my right arm was bound to my body and I still couldn't feel it. I had stopped bleeding. I guess the surgery stopped my body's cycle.

That night as I was asleep the nerve block wore off and I woke up to what felt like movement in my shoulder. It was like I could re-feel every adjustment the doctors had made earlier that day, like my shoulder was replaying the surgery for me since I couldn't feel it earlier.

I took another pain killer and walked through the house in the dark waiting for the re-surgery to stop.

Three days later, I was allowed to take a shower. Melissa let me use her bathroom since it was nicer. Everything of hers was nicer. I wasn't allowed or able to move my arm so she came in the bathroom and took off my three-day-old shirt and sports bra and then my shorts for me. She'd never seen me like that before with my breasts so naked. In that moment I wondered if she thought they looked okay. I hadn't seen a lot of breasts, and I wanted to know if mine were normal. I believed they were, but I wanted a knowledgeable opinion. I didn't ask. I'd seen hers once when she was breastfeeding my brother, her son. They were full and her nipples were red and round.

Melissa took my right arm out of the padded bind that held my arm to my body. I had a shower sling I could get wet. She carefully held my bent arm in her hand and put the white, mesh sling over my head. As she worked, I could smell her perfume, Calvin Klein *Eternity*. It was the only kind she'd wear. When I was a little girl, I would sneak in her closet while she was upstairs, and I would wrap myself in the hanging pants legs and sleeves, inhaling her perfume. She pulled the strap tight to keep my arm up and asked if I needed anything else. She never looked at my breasts. She never looked at my face. She left and closed the door. I turned on the shower and didn't bother to lock the door. I stood under the water and left-handed the shampoo bottle, squeezing the shampoo straight onto my head.

I started physical therapy the next day by pushing into a wall with my right hand and squeezing stress balls. The therapists cleaned my incisions. I was on the rigorous path of healing so that I would be fully recovered by the next season.

...

Back at school, my arm was still bound to my stomach, and I had a dent behind my shoulder where muscles atrophied. My teammates helped me with things I couldn't do alone like putting my hair in a pony-tail and undressing for more showers. Missy, our short-stop, and I became friends. Then, we became best friends. With all the help I needed, I started to trust her and she felt needed.

We found ourselves lying on the reclining bank of a small pond in the park. Geese and ducks walked in wide circles around us, trying to figure out if we had food. She was on the damp grass next to me, and we wore our sunglasses so we could look at the bright sky. It was the beginning of spring and there was a chill in the breeze, but the sun was bright; we barely stayed warm.

She had a serious girlfriend, and I was supposed to be straight. Well, I still hadn't been with anyone so technically I wasn't anything, but the world most definitely including my parents assumed I was straight. Missy's strawberry hair was cropped short like a boy's. Her lips were thick and round. I thought she was beautiful. I wanted to crawl in her body and live inside Missy.

Her finger slid across the short grass to hold my little finger. We lay like this, wondering why we liked to be around each other so much, wondering why we couldn't like other people this much, if we were doing something wrong, how could something so sweet be wrong. I laid my cheek in the grass and looked at her under my sunglasses. Her skin held a rose tint, and the gold in her hair glinted in the sun. She was the first person I fell in love with.

...

After my parents disowned me and I lost my scholarship because my surgery was unsuccessful, Missy and I moved to San Diego. We lived in a single-wide trailer with her recovering alcoholic uncle. He had a gray almost-mullet, and he slept on the couch in the living room while we slept in his bedroom which consisted of his bed and his decades of clothes.

Missy worked nights, and I couldn't sleep when she was gone because I'd think of Daddy and Melissa, wondering what they were doing, writing angry emails to them and not sending most of them.

Missy got back around 6 a.m., and we'd sleep as the sun rose straight up, heating the aluminum trailer. We'd sprawl out on the full-size mattress sweating into the thin, worn sheets. We slept until I had class. She had the only car, and she'd drop me off and pick me up before she had to go back to work that evening.

I was still so new to sex that I wanted to touch her all the time. I wanted her to touch me. I wanted to touch for hours. We were both so unhappy. I wanted us to feel better, and she just wanted to be left alone. She didn't like California either, but she didn't have anywhere else to go. Neither of us did.

Sometimes, she'd let me touch her long enough to keep touching her. She'd lie on her belly turned away from me, and I'd slide my hand under her. She'd tell me no, but she didn't move away so I'd touch her as best I could. The insides of her thighs would sweat against the sides of my arm. I'd watch the muscles in her back and butt tighten. Then, she'd clench her hands to fists, bury her head a pillow, and yelp into the mattress because it was evening and her uncle hadn't left for the casino, yet.

She'd lie there catching her breath, and I'd kiss her back, smiling, thinking orgasms could make us happier, make us better. She'd shower, and go to work, and I'd wait for her to come back, needing a woman to love me, being inside a woman who wants me there.

SWAILING

The poets tell me I'm in fire season. I build fires in the night, at daybreak, at noon. I like to sweat. I'd sweat out every ounce of liquid in my body given the chance. I've got fire in my thighs, in my mouth, in my belly. I lie on my back, on my knees, on my face and burn until I'm put out. I'd burn myself up if I could.

...

Fifty acres of woods and an overgrown farm sat in Bibb County, Alabama with no company but the drone of a train and a great-grandson who piddled the land for answers. Jim called the land the Old Place.

The brush pile sat at the edge of a clearing beside the old house Jim's great-grandparents had lived in. The house leaned forward like it'd been waiting for someone to come home too long. The front door rested swung open against the outside wood wall. Most of the windowpanes were broken, but the porch still stood and wrapped around the old house.

I wanted to burn the brush pile. Adding to it, I drug saplings from under the surrounding woods while Jim shouldered the fallen trunks of sweetgums and pines. We made the pile twenty-feet tall and forty-feet around. There was an old mattress halfway down buried beneath branches—the floral fabric peaked through. Someone had dumped it by the gate. I wanted to burn it, too.

Jim poured diesel around the edges to make it all catch. He threw in a lit chunk of kindling, and the dry wood caught with a quick roar, burning tall and toxic.

Between the wall of summer and the wall of the fire, sweat rolled down both sides of my body. I watched sweat run down his red-brown face off the tip of his nose into his black beard

down the length of his neck to soak into his shirt. I wanted to taste his sweat, to run my tongue down his salty stomach.

That night, we watched from his campsite as the brush pile smoldered to scattered ash, smoking under a clear-night half moon.

...

Fire is a chemical process dependent on oxygen and energy. When heat cannot release faster than it is created, fire catches. This is combustion.

Fire's burning is called oxidation. The oxygen atoms combine with hydrogen and carbon atoms in the atmosphere, exhaling water vapor, carbon dioxide, and fuel particles. This is smoke.

Wood burns fast; therefore, energy is released fast. This is heat.

...

Jim taught me how to find kindling, the heartwood of resinous pines—graying chunks of knotted wood hidden under leaves and rotted stumps. Daddy broke the jagged wood in half, showing me the orange, oily center. Jim taught me how to snap the kindling, how to smell the sweet pine middle, how to place the lit pine within the deep, dry branches to start a fire.

...

Matter is neither created nor destroyed but rearranged.

...

Growing up in our half-finished log cabin, we never had central heat and air. During the Alabama summers, our air conditioning was provided by window units scattered throughout the house. I had one in my bedroom above where I slept. Mine was old so it repeatedly froze up and thawed out, dripping water on my head. Momma put peach filters in the great room unit and

vanilla filters in the one in the kitchen. Daddy said he liked window units better so I decided I did, too.

During the winter, our heat was a wood-burning stove that sat in the back of the kitchen. The gray, metal rectangle connected to a wall with a thick, black pipe where the smoke was exhausted. Daddy said to never touch the pipe. But once, I accidentally brushed my thigh against the pipe and jerked back, watching the skin redden and pucker to a blister.

Daddy yanked the stove door open to shove oak logs inside. Four or five logs could fit at once. The house usually fogged over, smoke clouds clinging to the ceiling. The alarms took turns going off, and one of us kids would grab a kitchen table chair and a potholder. The alarm stopped and started again until Momma opened the back door. Daddy opened the kitchen and living room windows, letting the smoke seep out of the house. Momma said this defeated the purpose and this was why normal people had central heat and air.

We all smelled like smoke—our clothes, our hair, our beds.

...

At 111 degrees, our skin feels pain. At 118 degrees, we receive a first-degree burn. At 131, second, and at 140, the skin becomes numb. At 162 degrees, skin is instantly destroyed.

...

The following Christmas after I met Jim, five of us sat around Jim's campfire at varying distances, depending on how thick our layers were. The train track ran parallel to the property line of his campsite. When we were quiet, we could hear cars drive by on the road out past the gate.

Jim invited a few friends he went to graduate school with to go camping at the Old Place. One of Jim's friends was much closer to my age. His name was Michael, and he was tall with sweet eyes.

It fell below freezing after sundown, and the men built a massive fire in the pit. They piled up oak logs, then oak stumps, building the fire until it was too hot to sit close to. We all scooted our chairs back, trying not to spill our coffee mugs of whiskey. The stump's burning roar muddled the passing train's stumble to a metal clink. Train lights threw shadows through the woods towards us.

Jim wouldn't come near me that night. He wanted it to seem like he was sad about his divorce like we were just friends. Tired of following him around the big fire, I sat back down in a plastic lawn chair as close to the fire as I could stand. I wanted to feel the heat in my bones; I wanted to be hot.

I watched his friend, Michael, across the pit. He sat on a concrete bench that happened to be in the shape of Alabama, watching the fire he helped build. He resembled a bear with wavy hair, a thick beard, and broad, round shoulders. I wondered what it would be like to be with someone young like me.

Late into the night with the chill coating my back and the whiskey in my head, I stared into the fire's heart—the embers glowed orange under the flames—imagining what it would be to touch the pulsing center, to step into the heart of the fire, to feel that necessary energy.

“What would happen if I walked into the middle of that fire?” I interrupted them. They all agreed I would die. I knew I would die. I wanted to know how fast.

...

During the summers, Daddy built bonfires down by the pond. Momma and Daddy made me drag up limbs from behind the house that were knocked down by the year's storms. My brother and sister were too young to work, so they played in the grass. Daddy stacked all the limbs and branches into a burnable pile.

He poured gasoline over the top of the brush pile. Daddy told us all to step back, and I ran straight to the pond, waiting by the water. He lit a paper match and Momma told him to be careful. We all watched him throw the match into the gasoline soaked wood.

As soon as the lit match hit the wood, the gasoline combusted with a loud, strong exhale. The heat was instant. I made my way up the hill, approaching the fire's heat.

Daddy got fold out chairs to sit in and beers for him and Momma. I was too young to know how good a beer was once the sky got dark and sleep was hard to find. They had each other, but they rarely slept in the same bed.

My baby sister sat in my lap, and I propped my cheek on her head. Our faces reflected the red glow as we memorized the flames.

Dark sank over our heads, and the branches and limbs crackled to ash. These were the special nights Momma and Daddy got along and lightening bugs joined us by the fire.

...

A week before the Christmas camping trip, Jim and I went to the Old Place to straighten up the campsite. Jim wanted to use his blower to blow the leaves in front of the wood stack.

"It's outside. There's supposed to be leaves on the ground. Are you gonna sweep the dirt, too?" I thought everything he wanted to do that day was stupid. I felt an anger towards him that I couldn't get rid of.

“No, I just want to clear this area cause we’re gonna chop wood over here, and I want it to look nice.”

We cleared Quikrete bags off the industrial tables so we’d be able to set out our food, whiskey, and coffee. We straightened up the lumber. Over the summer, he started building a cabin. The four corners stood with boards around the base. All summer we’d come out here to build, bushhog, and fuck because we couldn’t be seen in town. But he stopped working on it after his wife filed for divorce and I moved away for graduate school.

“I want to move these over to the firewood.” He pointed to the segments of an oak tree we had stacked the summer before and then pointed to the firewood across the camp where he had just blown.

“Why?” I looked at him like he was stupid.

“Because I want them over there. If we decide to split them for the fire, it’ll be a lot easier to move them now than in the dark when we’re all out here.” He was frustrated with me. I wanted him to get angry. I was angry. I’d been angry at him for so long, and it was like he was oblivious, like there wasn’t enough space for me to feel things while he had so many things to feel.

“If you don’t want to work, if you think everything I’m doing is stupid, then why don’t you leave, why don’t you go back to your uncle’s house or go to Starbucks and write on your laptop so I can actually get some work done.” And like that he combusted, all the stress from his divorce, from not having any money, from me being ten hours away ignited. I was holding the handles of the wheelbarrow, and he swung his right hand back and hit the wheelbarrow out of my hands. It clanked against a root at my feet. He yelled while stomping around the camp

throwing what he could, knocking down pieces of a shed propped up against a pine. He screamed and he paced and he kept screaming.

I picked up the wheelbarrow and started doing my own work. He tried to knock the wheelbarrow over again and told me to leave, but I ignored him and kept working. We didn't talk for about an hour.

Later, I apologized for acting like a "shithead," and he apologized for getting mad. Actually, I don't remember if he apologized for getting mad, but it sounds nice. Rather, I think he talked about my young age and bad attitude and about all his stress that I knew so well. I felt like I was getting a divorce, too.

I told him to burn the pieces to the shed that used to sit behind his old house before the divorce. They were already lying on the ground from when he knocked them over. He didn't want to before the yelling, but afterwards, after we made up inside the frame of the cabin, he let me throw the shed walls on the fire. We left before dark, and I know he watched the wood burn in his rearview mirror.

...

Pyromania: the chronic need to start fires.

Pyrophobia: the hatred and irrational fear of fire.

Pyrophilia: the strong sexual desire to watch fires.

...

I sat on a broken chunk of aggregate concrete somebody had dumped in a heap at the Old Place. Jim and a friend had carried each chunk up to his camp and stacked the fire pit.

It was summer, I hadn't left for school yet, and Jim was still married. The cicadas were on for the night. The train rushed by every hour—two long, lights slipping between pines and hardwoods. I wondered how many fires the train saw like ours along the tracks of Alabama.

The fire burned in the pit, but the dark sat around us like walls. I could barely make out Jim's face as he leaned back in the lawn chair propped on a platform that used to be a ramp to a shed behind his house back before he cheated on his wife, back when they still had a good marriage when they were still trying, back before he drank Jack Daniels every night, before the tornado came through Birmingham and tore the shed down.

In the field below the campsite, the tin roof of the old house held the white stain of the moon. The moon rose up above the tree line, tracking across the night sky. The farther the moon traveled the sooner we had to leave.

I looked back at the house, thinking of the time I had lain on the dusty front porch with my head on my arms, gazing down the length of the sagging pinewood. I had imagined babies—brown, happy babies—our babies—stumble around the corner of the porch towards me.

“I want to live out here forever,” I told Jim across the fire.

I stood up from the cement circle and went to him. I knelt before him on the old shed ramp and put my head in his lap, smelling his jeans, rubbing my face against the worn denim.

“Don't say it unless you mean it,” he told me as he rubbed the back of my neck.

He smelled like sweat and cigarettes. I pulled his jeans down to the tops of his boots. He pulled down my jeans and turned me around, facing the fire, bringing me onto his thighs. He took off my shirt, and the orange glow reflected off my white skin. His hands looked nearly black against my breast. A lightless train rumbled by, covering the sound of our breathing.

We moved to the leaves of the forest floor. On our knees, my elbows and hands sank into the cool dirt, and I felt real and necessary.

...

fire breathers, fire eaters, ring of fire, lake of fire, fiery pits of Hell, fire and brimstone, getting fired, Hellfire!, Shitfire!, spitfire, fired up, fire power, firearms, gunfire, firing squad, fireworks, fire hazard, cease fire, fireball, Chicago fire, death by fire, baptism by fire, fire pit, fireplace, firebrand, light a fire under my ass, fireman, fire truck, fire alarm, firestorm, lightning fire, brush fire, wild fire, forest fire, coal fire, wood fire, Frost's fire, bonfire, camp fire, fire one up, fireflies, friendly fire, fire watcher, fire sex, fire cleanse, candle fire, London's fire, fire bellied road, fire bird, fire clan, firewalkers, fire totem, fire in the sky, fire in my thighs, fire nights, fire mornings, fire smoke, fire swell, fire squelch, fire scream, fire please, fire oh my god, fire fall

...

Later that Christmas camping night, Jim and I crawled into his small tent. I was glad to be close to him, and he held me against him, and then, he kissed me. But this was some kind of affirmation that I wasn't sure about, that I had needed earlier. I never wanted to be Jim's secret. I thought about Michael in the tent next to ours and wondered if he heard us and what he thought about us together, me being so much younger than Jim and Jim being so recently divorced.

The next morning at 5:00 am, I was colder than I've ever been. It was well below freezing, and my face ached. I couldn't sleep anymore because I had to pee.

Jim lay next to me, but he was zipped away asleep in his sleeping bag. I found my boots and pulled them on, wishing I'd never taken them off.

Outside, it was black. It might as well have been night. This wasn't morning. I walked into the very edge of the woods because no one else was awake, and it's true everything looks

different in the dark. I pulled my pants down and sat back gripping the small pine's trunk through my gloves.

Our fire from the night before was only dark embers and ash. I found the hoe we had used as a rake and poker, stoking the embers awake. I pushed and pushed at the ashes until a small flame popped up. I ran to the woodpile and gathered up a few logs. I stacked the wood over the flame, waiting for fire to catch. The logs started to crackle. I carried more wood. When Jim woke up, I knew he would be proud of me; I just wanted him to be proud of me.

...

When a human spontaneously combusts into flames, the torso and head char beyond recognition while the legs and arms remain unharmed. The body burns like an inside out candle, the skin being the wick and the insides being the wax.

To combust a body needs two things: a lot of heat and a flammable substance. Normally, the human body contains neither.

One theory to human combustion is that methane builds up in the intestines and is ignited by enzymes. Another theory is the build-up of static inside the body, and another is that combustion occurs from an external geomagnetic force exerted on the body.

Most scientists don't believe in human combustion. I guess I can believe in human combustion since I'm not a scientist, but I'm having a hard time of believing in things these days.

...

When I was sixteen, I read a question-and-answer book a man had with God. Throughout the book, the author asked God questions, and God answered in a different font.

One question the man asked was how to find God when it felt like God was unreachable and silent. God said to meditate and one way to do that was by staring at a candle flame. So I sat on a thin rug on my bedroom floor and stared at a Yankee vanilla flame. My bedroom was dark except my Christmas lights strung around the ceiling. It wasn't Christmas; I just liked the light's red glow. I stared for as long as I could without feeling stupid, waiting and watching the flame shake with each of my breaths. But God never spoke, and I wore the flame's imprint on the back of my eyelids for the rest of the night.

...

When a candle is lit, the wax travels to the top of the wick, and it vaporizes. The heated vapor oxidizes which creates more oxidizing vapor, making the fire hotter, building and sustaining the fire upon itself.

...

When Jim and I met, he was married, but not happily, of course; however, still dutifully in the most practical and social ways. When his wife got home, he needed to be home or at least be on his way home, which gave us an hour gap between when I got off work to when she got off work.

Jim would meet me at my apartment. I'd walk in; dump my purse, lunch Tupperware, and books on the kitchen counter, and walk to my bedroom where I knew he was. And after about an hour, he'd get dressed.

He'd walk away from the bed across the wood floor to the front door, turn the loose knob, remember to unlock the deadbolt, turn the knob again, and open the door. Then he might walk back across the living room to kiss me as I sat on the corner of my bed where I could see through the living room to the door. Part of me wanted to push him out the door to get the

leaving part over with, tell him that walking back and forth didn't make it any better. And another part of me wanted to plaster my body to his to prevent him from ever leaving again. I knew the leaving was hard for him too, but it was hard to feel bad for him because he was the one doing all the leaving.

Then, he might say something like 'he was doing the best he could', and I never did say anything in response to that except something stupid like 'I love you.' Once the door shut behind him, he might open it back again to say 'I love you' one more time, but that was usually it. At first, the leaving was easy, but then something happened, or maybe it was that the leaving kept happening. Suddenly, it all looked hopeless, that I would live my life in that one hour.

I sat on my bed raw and sticky, listening to his steps down the carpeted stairs to the first floor, to the slam of the wrought iron door that led outside. This was when I knew he was gone, but I'd still wait to hear the roar of his truck pass below my window to the street. My apartment and I would sit for a strange and silent moment not quite sure what to think or how to feel. At first, I felt nothing—neither happy nor sad, but then the sun would go down. I'd get up and go to the bathroom and pour a glass of wine.

I'd light candles around the living room and drink more wine. I told myself the candles made things better, made my apartment better after he left. After finishing the bottle, I'd study the wave and ebb of each flame like I was waiting on God to say something.

...

Once fire burns down to the nerves, the feeling—the pain—subsides and vanishes. When skin is severely burned, the body directs all fluid to the afflicted area. The damaged skin and vessels are unable to retain the fluid; therefore, the body's fluid leaks out, leading to shock, and then, to death.

Your palm is 1% of your body. If 25% or more of your body is severely burned, this fluid shift will begin.

...

I became sort-of friends with Anna, a woman Jim had slept with many years before. That fact didn't seem to hinder our friendship, being more like something we had in common.

Over Christmas break, Anna and I decided to meet at a favorite bar in Birmingham. She drank white wine, and I drank Long Islands because I've always been amazed at how they can make all that alcohol taste so good and how drunk all that alcohol can make me so fast. Across from one another at a small round table, we both texted Jim, begging him to join us. He was busy packing for the Christmas camping trip the next day. I invited her to camp too, knowing that she wouldn't.

Later, Jim showed up and drank Jack and Coke while I got drunker than I realized and continued to drink more. Anna and I sat moved to one side of the table while Jim sat on the other. She held my hand, and I sat close to her, practically in her lap. I wasn't attracted to her, but we had an intimacy that we automatically shared through Jim. We both knew what he felt like in our mouths. We both knew how he smelled. We both loved him, and in that way, we shared a love that bled over onto one another whether we wanted it to or not. She held my hand hard and insistent, rubbing the back of it, daring me to forget she was there. This was under the table and not for Jim's entertainment like the rest of it seemed to be. I felt comforted by her slender, cold hands and her floral smell.

An hour later at her house, my stomach started to hurt. I walked outside quietly and puked under a tree. Jim didn't want to have sex with her. I didn't want to have sex with her. But

here we were, her leading him around her house making God knows what kind of innuendos while I sat under her tree next to my vomit that I was too drunk to even smell.

Jim came out and told me to get in his truck. I remember flashes of sitting in Jim's passenger seat huddled over, vomiting into my own jeaned thigh, dry-heaving as he drove me to my uncle's house where I was staying.

Crying and mumbling, I crashed through my uncle's house, who spends most of his time past four o'clock drunk.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?" he asked me. I held my stomach, and he bathed me and washed my blue jeans. He's a kind man, and I believe he was glad to finally not be the one who needed cleaning up.

The next morning, Jim told me I acted like a child and one of these days I'd learn and I guzzled it down like water and he had a lot of work to do in preparation for the camping trip and he shouldn't have come out last night and there was puke in his truck and this wasn't the first time I'd done that. I thought back and counted. It was the third time I'd puke in his truck. The other times were near the end of summer when I'd drink the leaving away sometimes overdoing it and puking before he was even gone.

I wanted to tell him it was his fault that he made me drink like that, but he didn't make me drink anymore than he made me do anything else. That Christmas, he asked me to lie down in the backseat of his truck every time when we drove by his old house and his ex-wife was home, he asked me to hide in his closet when someone knocked on the door. And I hid. I needed self-respect and was waiting on him to find it for me like a Daddy would.

...

More than 100,000 wildfires clear 4 to 5 million U.S. acres a year. Wildfires can travel at 14 miles per hour, consuming trees, animals, homes, towns, people.

Wildfires are difficult to control; therefore, we suppress them and prevent them. But wildfires are necessary to restore nutrients to soil for seedlings, to thin crowded forests and overgrowth. Wildfires remove diseased plants and harmful insects. Wildfires cleanse the land.

...

Daddy was a forester and it was his job to manage his clients' land. He started, controlled, and put out pine plantation burns. These burns were supposed to mimic the natural fires that would push through forests. I could always tell when he'd burned all day because he came home, his skin covered in a layer of soot, and his boots stained black. Daddy said the wind had to be just right or the fire wouldn't travel enough or worse, the fire would travel too fast.

When we drove past the plantations because it was always me and Daddy together, I could smell the burnt resinous pinewood before I saw the blackened trunks and ashed, clean gaps.

When I was young and I didn't know, I asked Daddy, "Does the fire kill the trees?" He answered that pines needed fire, that the strong pines would survive, that they needed room to grow.

...

After everyone else left the Christmas camping trip, I sat on the dirt below Jim and held his thighs, saying, "I want to be a better woman for you."

He said he wanted to believe me, but people say a lot of things they don't mean or things they want to mean. I swore I meant it.

But what I really meant was that I just wanted to be better. I didn't want to be angry and drunk all the time. Sometimes, I hated him for leaving me, for being so sad about his divorce, for being his secret. I hated myself for letting him.

I picked up a stick and sifted through the ashes, trying to define what I was to Jim, what he was to me. There were two broken glass bottles. I looked for the beer cans, plastic forks, and foil we'd all thrown in the fire, but the pieces of melted glass were the only thing that hadn't burnt down to ash, the only thing left to identify.

...

The feed-sack-burn pile sat right off the gravel drive by the barn. Daddy and I burned the paper sacks every evening after feeding time year round, but when I think of the gray ash circle surrounded by yellow grass, I think of summer. We stacked feed sacks that smelled like molasses and alfalfa inside the circle.

Daddy placed a match under the sacks, and he and I watched the paper burn. Paper sacks burn tall and quick.

The goats picked over their food with happy, full bellies while the fat sun dropped behind the trees. The bats came out in dark circles above the barn, followed by the lightening bugs. When the sunsets were exceptional and the sacks were ashes, Daddy and I walked up to the back porch to watch the last sun slip through the pines. He always asked Momma to come look, but she wouldn't. I'm not sure if he asked to be nice or because he really did want her to stand by him, stand in my spot like she should have. She wasn't my biological mother. Daddy married her when I was six, and they spent most of their time not getting along. Pink and orange stretched and spilled behind the backyard pines. I got used to standing next to Daddy, but many years later I'd leave home and wouldn't have a place anymore like it was time for Daddy to focus on the

two children they had together, making a clean, whole family. It hurt like a breakup. Jim filled some of the space Daddy left in me, and Jim and I both knew it, but it came like a package. It wasn't something I could extract. It was all melted together, pooled like cooled wax. The air held smoke while the sun set like it does every evening, like the way we can't help but keep on.

CRACK AN EGG ON MY BELLY

and bury the shell. Put pomegranate seeds under my pillow. Unite the salmon and the spider. I'll wear the cuckooflower. I'll dance under a full moon, chant spells, run through the woods, sing to Mother Earth, sacrifice a lamb, cook a kid in his mother's milk. I'll offer a bouquet of blooms, drink ruby water. I'll pray. Anything to make a baby inside me. It's how women rub their stretched, sacred belly skin. How I wish to touch myself, touch someone else. It's how I need to love to be a good person. To feel holy. How I need to be pregnant. It's how my chest hurts when old men cross streets in that scared, hurried way. How my grandfather fell in the street by Subway on Lookout Mountain, searching for my grandmother. He tried to wear her cushioned clogs to protect his week-old stitches. How he'd just had surgery amputating the last segment of his last big toe. How the neuropathy won't let the gaped sore heal. How he keeps getting an infection that spreads to his thinking. How this time the police found him in a ditch bloodied from the fall. How he didn't know where he was two miles from his home while my grandmother slept in their bed. I need a baby, a fresh, new thing. Something to look forward to. Jim and I live four hundred miles apart. When we see each other, I strip down and chase him, singing *let's have sex. Let's have sex*. The more we do it, the better our chances. Afterwards, I hold Jim like he is mine, like he came from me. He falls asleep. I pretend to sleep, too. I smell his skin, lift my legs in the air to slide the semen to my cervix. I hold my stomach, hold his stomach, and pray for a baby. I study calendars, calculating if we timed it right. I study the moon's cycle, the tides, the seasons, Beltane, Harvest, Christmas. My body: breasts swelling, uterus contractions, gas, nausea, pain, moodiness, food cravings. Finally, I'm pregnant. My hopes get bigger, more certain. Until I bleed. Jim and his ex-wife couldn't make a baby. Jim

wants a baby bad. I've wanted a baby since I learned how to want. My grandmother taught me to line my dolls up in a row and tuck them in, how to cradle them and kiss their foreheads. We called them *my babies*. She feared I'd turn out like my mother, not wanting children. But it's all I want. A fresh, new thing. Something to look forward to. Because Scott Harris died. The same day my grandfather fell in the street. I cried more than I should for a man I do not know. Scott Harris was a friend of a friend of Jim's, and he's been dying for years. He had a brain tumor I think. I don't even know him well enough to know for sure. It's easier to be sad about a man I do not know rather than my tall grandfather lying in a hospital bed with his body rotting from the bottom up. Jim and I keep trying to make a baby, but the timing is always off. His sperm swim and swim and starve. My egg waits and waits and disintegrates. I pray and hope and think of all the good people who can't have children. Jim is seventeen years older than me, and I wonder what I'll have when Jim is dead. What will we have left? I need a baby. No one wants to die alone. I believe I'd be a good mother, really the best. I just want to love the little thing. Is that too selfish? I don't care, to tell the truth. Please please please. Artemis, Venus, Isis, Xochiquetzal, Theotokos, Thesan, Rauni, Saint Giles, Mama Ocllo, Freyr, Ioa, Gaia, make a baby in my belly. Make me like soil, and grow something inside me. Mary got pregnant, and she didn't even have sex. I have sex as much as I can. The odds are in my favor. If you accept Jesus into your heart, you can be saved and you'll go to heaven. I accept this baby in my body, and I'll go to heaven. Make me holy and loved. We need this baby, the both of us. Jim needs it because his father died, and Jim is the last one left, and he needs a reason to live. I need the baby because I need to be the mother my mother wasn't. If I have a baby and I love it, I'll love myself. I'll be full and whole, and every bad thing can go fuck itself because I will have a beautiful baby that is mine. I won't be alone after everyone else has died. I need a baby. But I worry we'll never have a baby. In a

long distance relationship, we've spent more days hundreds of miles apart than together. We've slept more nights alone. Faith keeps us going. I believe in him. He believes in me. We have fallen, but we've forgiven. I was blind, but now I see. Amen. If God would just bless us with a baby, I'd never ask for anything ever again. I'll break the bread, pour the wine. I'll eat the body and drink the blood. I'll do anything You want. Just give me that fucking baby. I add it up: Jim is nearly twice my age, he smokes, and his family has a history of cancer. We have a good twenty years of health and happiness. But not even those twenty years are guaranteed. Scott Harris had two young daughters. They say he was a good man with a good family. Then a tumor overtook his brain. He was a healthy man. He was a Godly man. But God doesn't give a shit about what's fair and right. Daddy got sick before. He was thirty-nine. It rained. Daddy's flatbed truck smelled like piss because mice lived in the engine and chewed nests into the ceiling. My stepmother yelled at Daddy over the phone. He struggled to see as we drove west towards Meridian, Mississippi where she taught school. The piss, the rain, and the yelling made his face turn red. We stopped at Waffle House. I sat in a greasy booth while Daddy walked back outside rubbing his face. He needed fresh air. I waited patiently like I was waiting for my father to die. I was fourteen. Then I heard the sirens. Then I saw my stepmother. I never ordered. I didn't know what a stroke looked like, only that old people had them. I told God that if He'd make my Daddy okay then I'd give up the boy I loved. I'd kissed the boy in his grandmother's guest bedroom. I prayed he'd love me back. I told God to throw away all my prayers for the boy and this was my one prayer: *let Daddy be okay, please*. When I saw Daddy at the hospital, I didn't speak. He sat slumped in a wheelchair. He said I didn't care, but he didn't understand that I cared so much. That if I even parted my lips, I might explode. Daddy's friend said maybe now my stepmother would start being nicer to Daddy, quit yelling so much. Daddy's friend died five years later from

a heart attack. He was in his fifties. His wife lives alone, looking out at the fence he never finished. They weren't able to have babies. I don't know what I have to sacrifice, what God wants, but I know it's more than a boy's affection. God, what is the price of a baby? And do I possess that currency? You already have my soul, what more could you want? Just take it. Anything. I want to be swollen. I want to stretch. Push. Scream. Wail. Cry. Please.

NITS, MONO, & MARRIAGE

I signed up for a Spinning certification workshop the fall of 2012 after I moved to Orlando for graduate school. I hadn't taken an indoor cycle class in almost a year, but I remembered being decent. The one-day certification workshop consisted of two rides and long lectures about hand positions, saddle heights, and music—whether or not any of us got hired, the organization had their three hundred dollars per person. A few weeks later, LA Fitness hired me for fifteen dollars a class. I'm not sure why I accepted; I'm not even sure why I did the workshop. I didn't have anything else better to do. I'm not a cycle fanatic. I don't enjoy motivating people to burn calories.

Each LA Fitness cycle studio provides one headset and transmitter for communal use among the instructors. The hands-free microphone often smells like sweat and/or bad breath. The cord connecting to the transmitter is two (2) feet too long, and I've yet to see any obese cycle instructors, but the managers get mad if we wrap the extra cord around the back of the metal headset. I still do it. The headsets never last long anyway. And I don't use the gym's trademark cycle CD of rip-off pop songs that were bad in the first place before someone ghost-covered them. I spend hours on iTunes and digging through old CDs finding the right electronic song with the right beat. Again, I don't have anything better to do.

We have to bring our own batteries, 9-volt C cells, for the transmitter. It clips into our shorts. I disinfect the headset and transmitter with the tepid water they call sanitizer with the tissue thin cardboard they call paper towels. The headset also has a thick, fabric strip attached to the metal bar that is supposed to cushion our heads, but it just twists up and collects sweat. Sometimes it's still wet.

Two months after I started teaching, I was still pretty bad. There are only so many things you can tell people to do on a stationary bike. I didn't like hearing myself say the same things over and over, but it never seemed to bother my class. What bothered them was when I didn't talk enough. They'd look at me expectant and frustrated, and I'd say, "don't stop pedaling." In cycle classes, I started to attempt small talk like "good morning" around the time I noticed I had dandruff. I wondered if I wasn't washing my hair often enough. I have that tendency; I just don't like showering.

A few days later, my scalp started to itch. Then, during my poetry class at school my head felt like one massive mosquito bite. I had to sit on my hands, gritting my teeth because I was afraid if I scratched my head dandruff would fall on my shirt. Nobody wants to be that girl. My face turned red as I strained against the need to scrap my scalp with a knife.

That night at home, I sat at my desk not paying attention to my hands until my scalp burned because I was scratching two-handed as hard as I could. God, it felt good. I got up to use the bathroom—I was about three wine glasses into enjoying my after-class, every-night buzz. After I peed, I caught my reflection in the mirror. There was something in my hair, right at the top of my bangs. It was white and square-ish, thicker than dandruff and shiny. I picked it out of my hair. It was smooth and almost slimy. I held it up on my fingertip and examined it under my kitchen light where I could see the distinct outline of a head, antennae, and two front legs. I had lice.

I threw the louse in the trashcan and planted my hands on my knees, trying not to dry heave. Nothing like a louse to ruin a good buzz. Louse rhymes with mouse so it doesn't sound quite as bad as the plural variation, just a small, understandable pest problem, but lice sounds horrible. Lice means you're dirty and your parents are poor and probably without some of their

teeth. The itching persisted, but I didn't dare touch my infested head. My skin tingled, and I wanted to shake my body like a wet dog. I drove to CVS and walked up to the first person in a red polo and said, "Where's the lice shampoo?"

At home, I took my shirt off, wet my hair in the kitchen sink, and put the medicated shampoo in my hair. Then I read the directions and found out I wasn't supposed to wet my hair.

While I waited for the shampoo to exterminate my scalp, I read Internet literature about lice infestations—horror stories of families who had lice for years, women who had to shave their heads, animals coated with white thick mats of layered lice. I looked at my cats, thinking about my razor, but then I read that cats don't carry the same kind of lice as humans. Human head lice (different from pubic lice) need human blood to live. I begged my cats to take my lice and starve each tiny one.

The CVS box came with a fine toothcomb. The directions told me to comb through my hair in sections and pick out the nits, which are tiny, white louse eggs glued to the hair base.

Try combing the back of your louse-infested head and picking out microscopic nits. At two in the morning, I walked from room to room of my apartment, trying to find a mirror with a better angle. While I stood in front of my bedroom mirror in a twisted half-backbend breathing heavy and squinting for nits, I had an epiphany: This is why people get married.

I used to hate the concept of marriage. I thought it was unnatural and people were stupid for doing it because they just go and get divorced. A professor once told me my obsession with the failure of marriage had to do with my parent's divorce, which I thought was silly because they've been divorced since I can remember. I think it was my Dad's next marriage. They fought and screamed, and I swore to myself to never treat anyone like they did each other. Not getting

married was a sure-fire way. And then I got lonely—really, really lonely—and I started rethinking the whole stupid thing.

Before I moved to Orlando for graduate school, I lived by myself in Birmingham, Alabama. My uncles lived a few doors down, and the rest of my family was an hour or two away. When I was bored, I'd walk to my uncles' house, and we'd drink, smoke pot, and look at their garden. I was proud I lived by myself.

When I missed Jim or he had plans with his wife on the weekends, I'd stay with my grandparents or visit my brother and sister at home.

When I moved to Orlando, I learned what alone really meant, what it meant to not have anybody around or even within five hundred miles. Jim got a divorce when I moved to Florida so I guess he learned what it meant, too. I used to think people were weak for being afraid to live alone or to be single. I didn't know what I was talking about.

When I met Jim, I was writing two essays for my portfolio to get into graduate school. One was about the farm I grew up on, and the other was about my parent's divorce and my dad's second marriage. In that second essay, I argued for the failure of marriage by presenting statistics and following each fact with my own experience. Jim was in the tail-end of a failed marriage. He was my case study, my real-life proof. I just didn't understand that he wasn't my proof for the failure of marriage, but for the extent we'll go to avoid loneliness.

The spring after I got lice, I got mono. I dated this guy, we'll call him "Gary," for two months while I was taking a hiatus from Jim and his divorce and my loneliness. It was all a bad idea and not just because of the mono. Gary's roommate whom I was friends with for one month got mono from some guy she tried to date. Gary had mono years earlier, but it can become

active—contagious—at any point. My theory is that Gary’s mono became active when his roommate/my ex-one month friend got mono from that guy who wouldn’t hang out with her.

I contracted mono right before I called Jim to tell him I loved him in early March. It takes four to six weeks to show symptoms. I don’t remember exactly how our conversation went but it lasted for five hours. I quit seeing Gary, and starting talking to Jim every day. During Jim’s visit in April, I was already symptomatic, but I didn’t know it then. I assumed God hated me because my brain felt like it was floating in a fishbowl. Stairs were whiplash and bending over was instant vertigo. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen between Jim and me, but I knew I still loved him. I did not suspect mono would happen. I deserved it.

A few days after Jim’s five-day visit, my eyes swelled along with a lymph node at the base of my neck. I wanted to lie in bed all day, but I thought I was being lazy and sad because Jim had left. Sometimes, I felt fine except the headache and swelling, and sometimes, I felt half-dead. I called my grandmother, and she suspected mono. I told her she was crazy.

I went to the health clinic on campus, and the nurse asked me about various symptoms. When she was done, she said, “So, all you’ve got is a headache?” I’m not sure if it was a question.

“Yeah.” Apparently, my swollen eyes and lymph node didn’t count for much. I guess the nurse wanted me to bleed from my ears or something.

The doctor sent me to the lab.

It was like as soon as my body heard its diagnosis it decided to really get its money’s worth. My temperature rose to triple digits, and walking to the bathroom became a challenge. I cancelled my spin classes for three weeks and watched every episode of *Mad Men* on Netflix,

which led to a crisis questioning the intention of men (thank you Don Draper) and the existence of love at all. I had a high fever.

It's when you're too weak to fix a grilled cheese or warm up canned soup that you have that same epiphany: this is why people get married or even: this is why people have friends. Winn Dixie shoppers stared at me like I was homeless. I wanted to tell each rubberneck if they didn't find something else to look at, I'd cough on them, but talking hurt my head.

There was nothing to do. I couldn't see well enough to read. I couldn't sit up long enough to write. I just wanted someone to talk to me. I drove Jim nearly crazy calling him every hour saying nothing. We were trying to figure this getting-back-together thing out, and we didn't trust each other yet.

What's worse than getting mono is getting over it. That shit lingers. Three weeks into it, I was ready to kill myself, but was too tired to go through with it, having to nap every few hours.

During week three of my mono, my grandparents drove from north Alabama to Orlando, Florida to visit me. It's about a nine-hour drive. It took them two days. They're slow, and not just because they're old.

They're in their mid to late seventies. They both have diabetes, and they both stay up all night, literally all night. They're oblivious to the general schedule the world lives by.

My grandmother was born with the name Jefferson Gertrude Burns, and she met my grandfather, Whitt Lee Latham, when she was thirteen, which she likes to brag about as well as the fact that they are third cousins which doesn't help Alabama stereotypes. When they got married she changed her name to Jeffie Burns Latham. She told me to call her Jeffie when I was

a baby because she thought “granny” or “mawmaw” sounded old. She was fifty-three then. I couldn’t get Jeffie quite right and said “Jeggie” instead.

I moved in with my grandparents when I was two and stayed with them until I was almost seven. My dad, their son, and my mom got a divorce. My dad lost his mind for a little while, and my mom who had an affair thought it would be better if my dad took care of me. They both lost their minds a little.

Jim was glad my grandparents were coming to Orlando to take care of me. I knew better. First, this trip had been planned for months. Second, their specialty isn’t nursing. They mean well, and I guess that’s what matters, but when you’re lying on a broken futon with a fishbowl headache and a fever, lacking the ability to open your eyes completely, it’s difficult to be understanding. Once they arrived, I thought maybe if I closed my eyes they’d disappear or at least become mute. It didn’t work.

I tried to sleep on the blow-up mattress they brought, and it just didn’t work. The next night Poppy got air mattress duty, and Jeffie and I slept in my bed.

Jeffie decided she didn’t feel good either. She lay next to me in the bed she bought for me three years earlier.

“Oh, I’m so tired,” she said. “I don’t think living down here by yourself has been good for you.”

“I’ve lived by myself for the past three years.”

“It makes you too self-sufficient. You don’t need anybody.”

“I thought that was a good thing.” I knew she was right, but I’d moved here for graduate school—what else was I going to do?

Poppy had television withdrawals because I didn't have cable. After the first quiet night, he went to Target and found an antenna that picked up channels while Jeffie complained how they were locked away at midnight like prisoners.

"I thought we were gonna have fun," she said between sips of Diet Coke.

When I broke up with Jim I was angry with him, tired of dealing with his marriage. When he got divorced, I thought that would make everything better, but it actually got worse. His ex-wife became the memorial of his failure, and I became his psychologist. I had moved so far away and was tired of being alone.

In my most grown-up voice, I told him over FaceTime: "I don't want to need anyone. I can't depend on anyone but myself."

Jim looked like he would cry, and he said, "Devin, it breaks my heart that you think like that. I don't want you to live this way. Trust me, I know. You can't live like that." I wondered when he had ever lived like that, when he had lived alone, but maybe that's what unhappiness is.

"I can't disappoint myself." God, I thought I was clever, but I learned that, yes, I can most definitely disappoint myself.

I sat at my plastic, foldout computer chair, looking at my grandparents. They sat across the room on my futon. They took their medicine, which was held in cloudy, gallon freezer bags. There were so many bottles. I'm not sure how they keep up with them all. They sounded like ancient babies shaking rattle bags. I sat there trying to muster up something like goodness or at least tolerance. It was difficult with my waterbed head and swollen eyes.

They talked at each other.

Jeffie feels like she's about to faint and Poppy is so hot. His back is killing him and Jeffie doesn't think she's ever felt so weak in her life. Poppy felt exactly that way on the drive down here. There's no place to rest or sit and everything hurts. They shook their pill bags, hoping the right label would roll to the top. They each emptied the colored capsules into their palms and piled them onto their tongues followed by a swallow of room temperature Diet Coke.

Then, Poppy asked me, "Why do you like it down here; don't you get lonesome?"

Jeffie said, "There's nowhere to sit."

I answered, "I'm down here for graduate school."

"I sure wish you had another bed." Jeffie said to me.

"No one would ever use it, and it would just take up room."

"You barely have any furniture."

"I don't like clutter, and I don't have company over."

"We're your company," my grandfather interrupted. He seemed so eager to please me.

He thought I was mad at him, but I wasn't. I just didn't talk much. I wasn't used to talking much. And I had mono. I tried to smile whenever he looked at me. He was worried about me.

He's always trying to take me back home with him like I'm still that fat toddler who said "Jeggie."

Jeffie wanted to go to the Rainforest Café. That Sunday was Mother's Day so it seemed like a good time. After dinner, we walked through Downtown Disney. Their slow walking helped balance my head as the fever tried to make an evening appearance.

My grandparents have been married fifty-four years. The sun was nearly down, and the wind blew off the dirty water. It was a nice night except for all the people. We took the water

taxi, and I rode on the seat behind my grandparents looking out at the thick, dark water, feeling the empty seat beside me.

A LACK OF HUMIDITY

Humidity was another layer I put on when I stepped outside, growing up in west Alabama near the Mississippi line. I didn't feel the humidity until I moved to San Diego, California. During winter in Alabama, humidity coated me from the cold. I never realized that until I spent a winter in San Diego where the air was light and the ground was hard. On the early mornings when I was too cold to sleep, I wrapped myself in over washed sheets and huddled against Missy's back who slept next to me but wasn't anywhere close by. I wished for that southeastern humidity to wrap me up and hold me close, keep me warm.

California was not a place I'd ever wanted to visit. I definitely didn't not want to move there. It was a last minute decision spurred by desperation. I don't know if running to California for nine months did me any good. I like to think it did, that somehow the hardship made me a better person rather than harder to get along with.

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Livingston, AL, Average Morning Relative Humidity: 88%

My senior year of high school I received a softball scholarship from Rollins College in Orlando, Florida. Being from a town of three thousand people on the Mississippi line, my parents were proud of me and terrified. Orlando was ten hours from home, and I'd never been to a big city before. I'd never dated anyone. I'd never been to a party. But I was ready to leave and ten hours sounded pretty nice to me.

I was ready to be gone, ready to be out of that house where my parents didn't get along and my stepmother, Melissa, may have loved me, but she certainly didn't like me very much. She was rarely happy. She spent most of her time hid away in her bedroom upstairs where my

dad didn't sleep. He slept on the couch in the living room downstairs. When she wasn't upstairs watching television, she was downstairs saying the house was dirty, and when she got really worked up about once or twice a month she'd scream as loud as she could and throw the television changer and/or cordless house phone, and they'd break. Daddy found the duct tape and wrapped the changer back together, circling over old tape from the outburst before. One thing I could never figure out was why she was so mad all the time. Our house sat half-finished in the middle of nowhere. Our floors were painted plywood, and we had the type of dishwasher you rolled across the cheap linoleum covering cement over to the sink and hook it up. I know all this because I was in charge of cleaning.

My dad married Melissa when I was six. They were both previously married to spouses that cheated on them. They had trust issues in common. No matter how miserable my parents were for so many years. One thing was guaranteed: they would never cheat on each other. That trust must have been so important that everything else didn't matter.

When I first met Melissa, she was tall, skinny, and sweet. She had long brown hair and pretty eyes. While living with my grandparents for six years, I told my grandmother I wanted a "young mama, brothers and sisters, and an upstairs." I got what I wanted, which is funny because children shouldn't be able to make wishes that come true. Soon after I moved in with my parents, Melissa became strict and moody like I was always in the way. Her breath stunk. She'd get close to my face, telling me what to do and I'd crinkle up my nose, hating her. Nobody in my family liked her. She just wasn't very pleasant. She didn't like my dad's brother, Bobby, because he was gay and drank a lot. Melissa started voicing her opinion of Bobby more and more over the years until they couldn't be in the same room.

When I got my scholarship to Rollins, my dad told me not to say too much about it in front of her because it might make her mad. Melissa was jealous of me doing good. My dad and I were close, which drove the knife in their own distance. Also, I was my father's daughter from another woman, his first wife. Melissa hated that my dad was married to someone else before. I was a good reminder of that fact. I didn't see my actual mother much, but more on her later. When I was seven, Melissa had Seth, my brother. Two years later, she had Abbey who nearly died when she was born. Because of that, Abbey was the special child. Even to me, she was special. It was like she had an angel, and I don't even believe in that kind of stuff anymore. When she was coming out of the birth canal, the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck three times, cutting off her oxygen. Her heartbeat stopped, and the doctor performed an emergency C-section before Melissa could even feel the anesthesia. The doctor pulled out a blue, unmoving baby. Daddy fell to his knees, nearing unconsciousness. The nurses began to cry. The doctor pumped on the baby's chest over and over again. Abbey came back to life. She was born with a hole in her heart, the prolonged lack of oxygen would most likely result in some level of retardation, and there were other side effects from her birth that could arise. Abbey's heart grew up, and she was didn't seem to have any side effects except a wet cough that she still has.

Everybody tells her to cough it up. I think of them as my full brother and sister, but I'm not sure my stepmother ever saw me as her full daughter. Growing up, I called her "Mama" along with Abbey and Seth because she told me to. There was nothing that would freak Melissa out more than to discuss the fact that she wasn't my biological mother. She didn't tell people she was my stepmother. Everyone thought we were related.

Once my senior year of high school, a classmate said, "Devin, you're adopted right?"

“Uh, no. No, I’m not adopted.” The thought caught me off guard. Where’d people come up with that?

“Mrs. Latham is her stepmother.” Another classmate I played softball with added a few seats back.

“Okay. Dang, I thought you were adopted, but that makes sense.” I just nodded, wondering how that made sense. Melissa worked at the high school because she was an special education teacher. My dad used to say she got all the good parts of her used up at work and didn’t have any goodness left by the time she got home. Melissa heard that I talked to classmates about her being my stepmother. She screamed that my mother was not my mother, that she was my mother, and that she was the one who took care of me. I just couldn’t figure out why the same woman who was so adamant about being my mother was the same woman who acted like she didn’t want me in her house, like I was always doing something wrong. We both stayed hidden in our bedrooms as much as we could on opposite sides of the house from each other.

Being so much older than my brother and sister, I was more like an aunt to them and a maid to Melissa. I did most of the housework because they were too young to help. My stepmom was a clean freak, but she rarely cleaned. I had to clean the kitchen every morning before school, unload the dishwasher after school before she got home, and reload the dishwasher and clean the kitchen again every evening after dinner. I washed the laundry. I folded all the towels. I mopped the floors.

On weekends, Melissa liked to drive the hour to Meridian, Mississippi to grocery shop at Sam’s and run by the mall to spend money we didn’t have. When she left for the day, she left me a piece of copy paper on the kitchen table with a two column list of chores to do such as “dust the whole house” and “sweep, mop, AND sweep the living room floor.” She underlined and

capitalized for emphasis. I hated her handwriting—her ugly cursive. It was the kind of list that took the day to finish.

I didn't have many friends because I was a weirdo and Melissa was strict about having people over and especially about me going other places. If I wanted a friend to come over, I got a cleaning list first. Sometimes she still said no after I'd done all that cleaning.

"I just don't feel well. It's not a good night."

"Please," I'd beg desperate to be around someone else, to have a friend to play with.

"No. Don't ask me again." She'd walk up the stairs to her bed. She often didn't feel good. She had endometriosis and spent days in bed with a heating pad and pain pills. I'd spend the night watching a movie with my dad—the only friend I had.

Orlando, FL, Average Morning Relative Humidity: 90%

In August, my parents and I drove down to Orlando to start my freshman year at Rollins College. My dorm roommate was a rich girl from Pennsylvania. Most of the students at the school came from wealthy families in the north. The campus was made up of brick walkways and stucco buildings surrounded by palm trees. My parents pulled into the back parking lot of my dorm. We unloaded all my bags and boxes. My stepmom made my bed and set up my lamp and unpacked my clothes. I wanted to fix my things, but I knew she'd be gone soon so I didn't say anything. It would have hurt her feelings. My dad put batteries in something.

That evening, Melissa and my dad took me shopping for clothes. Melissa kept trying to buy me things, and instead of being excited for new clothes, it just made me sad. For years, she bought new clothes for my younger brother and sister, which were her biological children. But she didn't like to buy things for me. She'd always said I already had enough. I knew my parents

didn't have a lot of money, and the trip down to Orlando was expensive. I wanted to tell her to stop, stop buying me things you can't afford. In Gap, I saw her try to make up for being mean to me, for not liking me when I didn't deserve it. She eagerly handed me more tops and shorts to try on. There, I knew I did not ever want to punish her. I didn't have the heart for it.

I knew my parents would miss me. Melissa was scared of the guilt that would surely come in my absence. That evening my parents, whom I'd spent the last ten years living with, drove the ten hours back home. I stood out in the parking lot after their black Tahoe they couldn't afford disappeared. I did not feel simply lonely or scared. I felt so many things: relief, excitement, terror, sorrow, peace, that I felt nothing. I spent most of my time before school started going to orientation, the gym, and my dorm room.

Soon after my parents left, my dad called to tell me that I needed to call Melissa every two days. He said, "She's not doing well. She's started crunching on Sonic ice every evening while she sat in front of the computer playing games. She buys it by the bag, stuffs it into a big cup, and crunches for hours." I called her mostly every two days, counting it up in my head and staying on the schedule and dreading it. We had odd conversations. I was supposed to call her, and I was mean if I didn't, but she acted like she didn't want to talk to me, like I was bothering not saying anything unless I asked her a question and seeming like she was in a hurry. She couldn't help herself. It was like if I called her and loved her, then she really wasn't that bad and her guilt would lessen. Daddy called me three times a day. We were like best friends. He was excited for me to play softball. He wanted updates about practices. He wanted every detail. I loved talking to him even though I complained to my softball teammates about how much he called.

I don't talk to either one of my parents much now. But the other day, Melissa called and told me about my younger sister going on a date. Then she said this time they'd do better—meaning she and my dad would do better for my sister than they did for me.

“Y'all did fine.” I didn't want to hurt her feelings. Or I didn't have the balls to stick up for myself. Who decides these things? I just don't see the point making her “pay for her sins” or having some kind of “justice.” I made it out alive. I'm fine now. What's the point of all that? In a strange way, I've always been protective of my stepmom. Even though she could shake the walls with her screaming and her temper could stay lit for months at a time, she was fragile. She needed protection. In our house, she was a monster, a giant. Outside, she was vulnerable, and you could see it on her face.

A few months after school started, my coach sent me to a sports medicine doctor for a CAT scan on my right shoulder. My coach was disappointed I couldn't throw nearly as hard as she remembered when she recruited me. The CAT scan showed I tore my labrum and my bicep tendon during a play at the plate a year earlier. I needed reconstructive shoulder surgery. Instead of already taking me to the doctor, my dad thought I was being lazy all that time. The summer before Rollins, we'd go out to the complex and throw in the outfield until it got too dark to see. My dad thought my form was off, that I wasn't trying hard enough. I knew I was in pain, but neither one of us realized how bad it actually was. I was red-shirted my freshman year. The surgery required a nine-month recovery of rehab. My dad must have felt bad after we found out about my shoulder. Instead of playing my freshman year, I sat the bench. He didn't come to games because what was the point, and I ended up not seeing my family near as much as planned. They were messed up in a lot of ways, but they were my family. They were all I had.

I never knew it then, but the surgery made me depressed. I was used to running and lifting weights every day. I was used to being strong and healthy. After the surgery, I couldn't even undress myself. Once, I had to ask my rich roommate to help me take off my shirt. She knew most of the girls on the softball team were lesbians. I could tell she didn't want to take my shirt off. She just kept her head down while she peeled off the cotton.

After surgery, I tried drinking. I drank a sixpack of Smirnoff Ice while playing beer pong with my teammates. My parents drank every day, and I'd been fixing drinks for them since I was a child. I called Melissa the next day to tell her, thinking I was doing the right thing. I shouldn't have told her. I was stupid to expect her to be understanding or accepting—two things she'd never been. She screamed immediately as the words came out of my mouth. She nearly cried. All I could be was confused. She grounded me from my car, making me mail her the keys. She sent me email links to the health effects of alcohol. She told me my father was very upset, and apparently he was because he didn't answer my phone calls for over two weeks until I flew home for a check-up with my surgeon. When I landed, he acted like everything was fine, like he hadn't missed a single phone call. That was my first hint. My father was very capable of not speaking to me.

My parents knew change was coming, but instead of making it better they made it worse. They threatened to pull me out of school if they found out I drank again. They didn't mail my keys back because a teammate posted a picture on Facebook of me standing in the background at a party. I tried to delete my Facebook, but Melissa told me I wasn't allowed. She wanted to keep tabs. Sometimes in the evening, my parents would call me, both on the line, and accuse me of drinking. They'd lecture and threaten. The phone calls were exhausting, and if anything, I deserved a drink after enduring them. In reality, I never did anything too wild. I didn't drink and

drive. I drank a few beers here and there. I didn't party hard or go out to bars. My parents were scared. They knew something was wrong, but it wasn't the drinking.

Only three of us on the Rollins softball team were not lesbians. I'd had some thoughts about girls before, but not many, not enough to make me worry. I wasn't sure what I was, but I found girls attractive and boys scared me. I'd find myself looking at boys, but I didn't find them looking at me. I hadn't spent much time worrying about how I looked, and I rarely bathed or wore make-up. My hair hung down to my waist, and I ate whatever I felt like, but I wasn't fat because I went to the gym whenever I was bored which was usually twice a day. I wasn't tan or thin or giggly. But I got lonely.

Missy, one of the girls on the team, had short strawberry blond hair, blue eyes, and looked like a boy. Even if her hair was long and she wore make-up and a dress, she'd still look boyish. I think she had more testosterone in her body than an average girl just like maybe some men have more estrogen and progesterone. Missy dated our pitcher. They were both tall and big. A few months after school started, they got engaged, which they announced on Facebook. Later that month, I had shoulder surgery and they texted me to check on me. A few days later, I took the flight back to Orlando. I had an aisle seat, and I cringed every time someone walked by afraid they'd bump my arm. On the plane, people helped me take my bag down from the overhead bins. I took an eighty-dollar taxi ride from the airport to the school because most of the team was still out of town for fall break. My parents gave me a hundred dollars for spending money. I watched the dollar amount tick up towards 100, and I was prepared to tell the driver to just let me out and walk. At my dorm, I walked up the stairs with my roll bag, into my dorm room, and lay on my bed. I couldn't move my arm, and it felt heavy bound to my stomach. The tendons and muscles pounded with my heartbeat. I didn't take many of the painkillers because they made my skin

itchy and me horribly constipated. They scared me, too. Not that I had an addiction problem, I just didn't want one. I slept for the rest of the day.

I don't know how it happened. I wasn't attracted to Missy. We became friends, and she talked to me about my parents and how crazy they were. She helped me see it wasn't normal. One day Missy came to my dorm. My roommate was never there. We were headed to the mall to do some Christmas shopping. Missy lay in my bed while I sat in my desk chair with my feet propped up. Later, she patted the spot beside her, and I stared at the fitted sheet holding the outline of her hand. I lay down beside her and turned away from her. Then, she touched me. I hadn't ever been touched like that. I felt like I had a fever as she traced up and down my arm and my back and my shoulder. It was hard to breathe. At that moment, I realized all I wanted was someone to touch me.

She put her hand under my shirt and asked me if I was okay. I whispered yes. She rubbed my back and my side, and she rubbed my stomach and I didn't move, barely breathing.

Later, she rolled me over and kissed the side of my mouth. I didn't kiss her back. She had round lips, and I could feel the soft blond hairs above her lip.

"I don't want to be like my mother," I said. I knew it wasn't exactly the same thing. Missy had just gotten engaged. Why we were doing this?

"You're not. You'll never be," she said. She didn't know what she was talking about. She just wanted to say the right thing so I would kiss her.

She kissed me again, and I lay still. After a few more times, I kissed her back. I felt numb. I couldn't get over the shock of being touched, kissing a girl, and kissing someone who I was friends with her fiancé.

All we did was kiss. We wouldn't go any further until a few months later. Over Christmas break I went home to Alabama, and she went home to California. We talked every night until the sun came up. We learned everything about each other. She told me what sex was like. We were falling in love. Right before we'd talk though, she'd call her fiancé and they'd talk for about an hour. It didn't bother me then.

After Christmas break, we met in her dorm room. Her fiancé was at a movie with a friend. We lay on their bed and kissed. She said she was going to make me feel good. She took off my pants and then my panties. I had no idea what it was going to feel like. It had only been a few months since I learned how to masturbate and feel an orgasm. Once I was away from home, I felt comfortable enough to touch myself, but I still felt guilty after I came each time, felt like I did something wrong, felt a little sick to my stomach. Melissa told me masturbating was wrong—especially when you thought of someone else because that was called lust.

It feels strange when you're licked for the first time. While lying on my back and looking at the ceiling, all I could think was that's really wet. After a while, she stopped and asked me how it was. I said it was nice, and she said I'd get used to it and be able to come soon.

And then, I was in love. It must have been the sex since it was my first time. I loved her even though I didn't really like her. Missy was still with her fiancé. I still wasn't able to orgasm, and she became frustrated. I was afraid if I didn't come, she'd leave me. One day I just faked it, which became a nasty habit. Then, she let me touch her. I found doing it more enjoyable because then I didn't have to pretend, and I was in charge but also not. It's like needed-service. You're serving the other person, but she needs you.

A few months later her fiancé broke up with her. Missy freaked out and threatened to kill herself. At the end of the spring semester, we made it to Regionals. We traveled up to Hunstville,

Alabama. I was trying to find ways not to go home over the summer. I asked my dad if I could stay in Orlando and play for a travel ball team since I'd just missed a year from being hurt, but he said no and that he'd find a team for me to play on at home.

While we were in Huntsville, my dad and sister drove through to say hello, and he gave me gas money to drive home. I took it and felt bad. Missy's ex-fiancé found out about me, which she already sort of knew, but then she knew for sure. She wanted to beat me up. She and Missy got in an actual fight. This is point I always go back to. This was the turning the point, when I was given an out. I should have given up. I don't know if I should have gone home, but I should have given up on Missy. That was one of those pivotal moments you hear about. But I didn't leave Missy. Once the team got back to Orlando, I called my dad. I told him I wasn't coming home. I broke his heart. He screamed. Then, he didn't say anything. I cried. I could hear sorrow in his voice. The real kind. He didn't cry. I told him I was going to live with my mother, the woman who broke his heart, who cheated on him and divorced him. He called out to my stepmother, told her what I said. She got the other house phone, and they took turns telling me I had to come home. He made her hang up. I told him I was a lesbian. We, my mother and I, both broke his heart. I know we have that much in common. I also know it's not that simple. He did a lot of things too. He put me in an odd position where I had to make big decisions at eighteen, but I did break his heart and for that I don't know if he'll ever forgive me, if he'll ever trust me.

Fairhope, AL, Average Morning Relative Humidity: 90%

When Missy and I moved in with my mom, my mom was so happy to have me that I guess she would have accepted just about anything. After a few weeks, she hated Missy (most people did). She wanted us to find jobs, but it was 2009 and the economy was horrible and no

one in Fairhope, Alabama wanted to hire two lesbians. Missy missed her ex-girlfriend, and I missed my family. I realized that going back to Rollins became less and less of a reality because my dad refused to fill out my financial aid forms and my mother made too much money, but not enough to afford private school tuition. My softball scholarship was based on financial aid.

Going back to Rollins was all I really wanted, was what I had spent my high school career working towards. I never believed I wouldn't be able to go back, that I'd never play softball again. My father took me off his health insurance, took away my cell phone, and took my car. I started seeing a psychologist because my mother said when she was young that was one of the only good things her mother ever did for her.

In July, my parents called me and said they had talked to my softball coach, and they would fill out my financial aid papers. I could go back to Rollins if I came home and broke up with Missy, promising to never talk to my mom or Missy again. It was a three-way call. They said this was the only offer. I had to give my answer right then. I didn't want to say yes or no. I wanted to go back to Rollins, but I didn't want to stop talking to my mom or Missy. Maybe if they'd have let me move back home and let me continue talking to Missy and my mother, I wouldn't have felt so cornered. I would have been able to go through with it. I said yes because I was desperate. Missy left that morning to drive to her mom's in North Carolina. My stepmom drove to my mom's house with my younger brother and sister in the car. I told my Mom, and she rushed home from work. She didn't want me to leave.

My mom's husband helped me load my bags into my stepmom's car, while my mother stayed inside afraid of what she'd do. I drove back with Melissa with the cell phone my mother gave me turned off, hidden in my bat bag in the back of the car. Melissa said I wasn't allowed to use the computer, the telephone, or any cars. I felt like a convict who never really did anything

that bad. My brother and sister sat in the backseat, and I was happy to see their sweet faces, but I knew they were as confused as I was.

My room at home had been painted and transformed into my brother's room about a month after I'd gone off to college. I put my bags and boxes from my dorm room next to his cheap air hockey table. My sister got a stomachache, and I asked if I could go for a run. My dad was out of town for business. I sprinted down the lineless asphalt. I sprinted under the street lights while dogs barked from windows and the edges of yards.

When I got back to the house, Melissa told me to call my dad. We talked for an hour while I stood outside and walked under the power pole light hearing beetles crash into the light and fall to the gravel. My dad promised to get me a better laptop, a better car, so many better things. I didn't want things. I just wanted to be happy. I didn't know what would make me happy, but I knew it wasn't the cage I had grown up in. I needed freedom and that freedom looked like Missy.

I had made a mistake. I walked back in the house, checked on my sister, and I lay in my brother's bed. I felt like I would suffocate, like my heart was claustrophobic within my own ribcage. I held up my hands in the dark as if they were scales, and I asked myself what if I went back to Rollins and was still unhappy because even though it was ten hours away my parents would still control me. I wanted freedom and softball and school, but Rollins came with a price and lying in that bed, I decided going back to school wasn't worth it. That was the hardest decision I ever had to make. It was selfish and it still hurts today and I believe it always will, but I would not undo that decision. It was a lose/lose situation.

Missy sucked, but I should have been able to figure that out and move on. My parents should have accepted me for being young and dumb and trusted me to grow-up, but they didn't

trust me. They tried to tie me up again, and I'd already been tied up for so long that once I had gotten away I couldn't go back.

I left a note on a napkin on my brother's bed saying to forget about me and that I made a mistake and goodbye. I dug my phone out of my bag and called my mother. I carried all my bags and boxes one by one down the long dirt road driveway and waited, praying the barking dogs wouldn't wake up Melissa. My mom drove the three hours and picked me up at three in the morning. My brother and sister found the note the next morning when they came to wake me up. Melissa called my dad who then called me. I didn't answer. My softball coach called and told me I was making the biggest mistake of my life. A teammate called and told me to go back home. They thought it was all about Missy, and, at that time, I probably thought it was also about Missy, but it was about more than Missy. Later, I answered one of my dad's phone calls and told him my mind was made up. He said I was calm on the phone the night before because I had already made up my mind to leave. I said yes. That was the second time I broke his heart.

That night he texted me saying the softball World Series was playing on ESPN, and I said thank you. I didn't hear from him again for another year and a half. I should have known my parents would not accept me as a lesbian. They thought homosexuality was literally an abomination. Only two Christmases before our extended family fell apart because my dad and his brother got into a fight after his brother invited my dad to the his wedding in California where gay marriage had just been voted legal. My dad stopped talking to his brother and his parents for years. Cutting people off was his specialty and mine as well.

I left my family, but for the next few years it always felt like they left me.

Once I was back at my mom's, she said Missy couldn't come back. I didn't sleep for days. I paced the house back and forth, trying to think of something, come up with some kind of

answer. Missy said she was going to California to visit her dad, and I decided I would move with her there. I would enroll in a community college and live with her. I had lost so much already that I needed something constant even if that constant thing wasn't the right thing. My mother didn't want me to go, but she knew she couldn't stop me. I was tired of being stopped. I wondered if she felt bad for making Missy leave—that maybe if she wouldn't have, I would have stayed. Now I see that despite everything, I'm the one who made these decisions. I have to take responsibility for them. I chose, and now this was my life.

San Diego, CA, Average Morning Relative Humidity: 74%

Missy's dad bought me a ticket with the promise I would pay him back. Two weeks later I flew to San Diego, California. We moved in with her uncle who was a recovering alcoholic living in an old single wide with two big dogs. When we pulled up to his trailer lot, I thought it was where homeless people had put up shacks, and I wasn't from anywhere fancy. Each trailer sagged in the center and leaned one way or the other. The dogs shit and pissed on the thin, brown carpet in the living room where her uncle slept eighteen hours a day, sometimes twenty-four. He was depressed. His wife divorced him before he swore off alcohol, and he lost his job.

I started my sophomore year at a community college, and Missy got a job at a group home. She took me to school in the morning after she got off work. She worked nights and never got enough sleep because she had to pick me up later that afternoon. The trailer lot was in a bad part of town, so it wasn't safe to go outside by myself. While Missy slept, I sat on the greasy carpet of the tiny bedroom reading and feeling a whole new kind of lonely. Missy still talked to her ex-fiancé, telling her she missed her, but she'd never fess up, never tell me the truth. One night, in her dad's truck he was letting her borrow, I asked her if she thought we'd always be

together. She said she didn't know because she'd been in a relationship before where she thought she knew and it ended. I didn't know if she meant that was my fault or not. A few times, she hit me and she said a lot of nasty things, but the worse thing she did was not have sex with me. I was nineteen years old, and she was the first person I'd ever had sex with. I was so horny. I just wanted her to touch me, and I just wanted to touch her, but she rarely let me once we were in California. I'd masturbate when she went to work, trying to ignore her uncle's snoring down the hall.

Nine months passed like this. It only took two months there until I was ready to go back home, but I still wasn't ready to give up Missy so I stayed in California and enrolled in another semester, and it was then that I decided that I would go back to Alabama in the summer. I applied to the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Missy wasn't sure if she would move back with me at first, and I knew if she didn't leave when I left that she never would. But in May, she quit her job and moved with me.

Birmingham, AL, Average Morning Relative Humidity: 83%

We drove from California to Alabama in two days. My grandmother found me an old apartment in Birmingham near the school. We moved into the apartment with a mattress, a dresser from Goodwill, and a table with four chairs.

I found a restaurant job and then I found a job for an office position with an insurance company. Missy couldn't find a job, so I worked as much as I could to pay our bills including her school loan and cell phone bill her mom asked money for to keep their phones in service. My uncle thought Missy was a moocher. I'd already lost too many important people. I wasn't ready to lose another one.

Missy stayed in that old, empty apartment by herself while I worked and went to school, rarely home. I became so busy trying to make money and taking classes. I didn't feel sorry for her then even though she moved across the country for me.

I hadn't talked to my dad or Melissa or brother and sister in over a year. I missed them more than I ever thought I would. I couldn't believe my dad hadn't called me, wouldn't return my calls or angry emails. I honestly couldn't believe that part. I guess I never expected that, I never thought it would be truly over.

After Missy found a job at Academy Sporting Goods, she became friends with one of her co-workers, a girl named Kelly. Kelly had a pleasant face and seemed sweet. I wasn't looking for someone else, but when I met Kelly I realized that I wanted better than Missy, and I could find it. I wasn't in love with the other girl. She just made me realize that I could do better. When I was finally strong and stable and back home near the rest of my family, I broke up with Missy. Now, I see how selfish that was, how I should have broken up with her when I left California. It was my first relationship, and I had no desire to date around. I just wanted to love one person and have another person love me back.

Missy threatened to kill herself, again. That seemed to be her standard breakup reaction. Three days later she drove back to California.

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Occasionally, I think about the weightless, dry air of California, and think of the trailer where we lay side by side where I wished she'd love me the way I wanted to be loved.

Even after my dad and I started talking again, I realized that I've always wondered what he thinks about me, how he feels about me. I haven't lived at home in five years now. Maybe I'm

supposed to have answers by now, I'm supposed to have insight, wisdom, but I'm still looking for some myself.

Maybe I'm selfish. Maybe I'm a bad person. What do you do when you think you might be a bad person? I can't tell if I'm a victim or a villain, if I put up with too much or not enough. I don't know if I'm right or wrong, but I know I want to be good. That's got to count for something. I know I can count on the Alabama humidity to hold me close, keep me warm when no one else will. I know when I'm in Alabama, I'll be okay.

WILD THINGS IN SAFE PLACES

Part II: Orlando, FL 2013

Peacocks—actually peafowl—live in my neighborhood. But I don't really consider it my neighborhood. Jim and I found the peacocks and peahens during his visit in April. I hadn't seen Jim in four months because I decided I didn't want to be with him, but then, I decided I did.

During an evening of his visit, Jim and I walked through the neighborhood. We didn't hold hands or anything, but the whole walking thing felt very couple-ly and grown-up like everything was going to be okay between us. I hadn't yet taken a walk here even though I love walks, even though I've lived here for nine months. I'm used to walking on dirt roads and across tall pastures not smooth suburban streets. Jim and I walked the dead-end Restful Street turning left onto the dead-end Wilde Avenue. Peacocks swaggered down the road, perched in the yards and the empty, overgrown lots. We couldn't help but overlook the peahens' plain mousy feathers while the peacocks fanned out their emerald eyed tails and shivered with vanity.

I sloshed cool Chardonnay against my thigh as we passed peacocks and peahens roosted on a man's roof and in the bed of his truck. The young, short-tailed males stay away from the older, long-tailed males. A small patch of woods—except it's not really woods but sub-tropic undergrowth—stands in the very center of the neighborhood separating some of the peacocks who call to one another throughout the day and the night. They sound like screaming cats, and with all the vacant lots and feral cats roaming around, I used to think the peacocks' calls were the cats in an endless heat.

I saw one peacock here before Jim's visit, but I thought he was someone's loose pet. He walked around my apartment pecking at cigarette butts, dropping them back to the ground. I shooed him away from the busy street and wondered where in the world he came from.

A couple walking their small, shaggy dog, Tiger, told Jim they once counted forty two peafowl in the neighborhood. They said they lived down the street, but didn't specify where, not the way people back home point which way they live, describing the house and car parked in the driveway.

Jim sat by Restful Street on a segment of sidewalk. It's three squares. It doesn't go anywhere. Who's going to get off the road so they can walk on a sidewalk for three steps and then walk back on the road? Of course, Jim liked this spot. No one uses it. I sat with him on the tiny sidewalk under a young live oak, listening to the peacocks caw as Jim called to a dove above us on the power line. I watched for the dove to shit, but it never did, and I got tired of turning my neck. Getting shit on by a bird is supposed to be good luck. I wanted some of that.

A male peacock strutted up to a chain-linked fence with a gate with a "No Trespassing" sign. He tried to push the gate open, but it was locked.

"Don't you wish he could open it?" Jim asked me as the peacock pushed his tiny, crested head against the chain-linked gate. The peacock stepped back and looked up. The massive bird jumped and flapped his heavy wings up to the gate's top. His elaborate tail sagged nearly to the ground.

"Or he could just go over it," I said.

"He doesn't give a shit." We laughed. The peacock jumped down into the yard, landed heavy under his weight, and searched the tall grass for bugs. The grass nearly covered the

peacock, rustling with his movements. “Wouldn’t it be something if someone came out of that house and just blew that peacock away?”

“That would be horrible.” I said, and I wondered why he had thought of that, if that’s what happens to wild animals in the city, if Jim expects bad things to happen, if bad things usually do happen.

Later that night, I drank too much wine and Jim drank too much Jack Daniels. And I got sad. I told him that sometimes I don’t want to be here, here mostly meaning Orlando. Jim accidentally knocked over his glass onto the sidewalk outside my front door, and it broke into pieces. I helped him clean it up—not wanting to see him struggle. I’ve always wanted to help him. An owl called from the trees across the street. I told Jim to call back. He stood up and called like he’s done for me before at home, but here the owl flew away. I picked up the glass pieces. I didn’t know there were owls in the city. I’d never stayed outside at night because I was usually by myself, but everything was better when Jim was around. The world was bigger and safer, and I could see more.

We went to bed early that night. I held him and promised him I would never leave him again.

A few days later after Jim flew back to Alabama, I tried to keep up the evening walks, but it wasn’t right. Everything got empty and small like he took all the good things back with him.

I’m not sure how the peacocks got to my neighborhood, but they fit right in. No one complains about the peacocks, how loud they are or how they block the road. Some people even feed them. But I don’t want to adapt or fit in; I just want to go home.

I'd already been to Rock Springs Run State Reserve on my own where I saw three snakes, one tortoise, fresh bear scat, and a lot of birds and lizards. Jim wanted to see this animal infested place so we went the day after he flew into Orlando. The temperature stayed in the low eighties. A breeze blew and an occasional cloud muted the sun. We kept telling each other, "Wow, it sure is nice out here," and "Isn't this the perfect day for hiking?" and "It could have been a lot hotter." We didn't see many animals except for tiny frogs and a great heron and ticks—lots of ticks. We emerged from a thicket of palmettos and Spanish moss and stopped to drink water.

"Shit," Jim said.

"What is it?" He bent over picking at his shins, getting out his lighter. He had a tick and then more ticks, and then it was like they were coming out of both our shoes: big ticks, seed ticks, deer ticks. We picked off the crawling ticks and walked fast for a minute, then stopped and watched more ticks emerge from our socks. We picked at ourselves and at each other. He gave up burning each one, and I squashed them between my thumbnail beds until he said "hey, do this one," and he opened his fingertips and it was a tick as big as my thumbnail.

"Ugh, that's huge," I slapped it away. We kept walking and stopping until we didn't find any more.

"Let's take the pond trail where I saw the bear scat last time." We walked along the wide, sandy road of the pond trail which was a three mile circle I still haven't figured out. The pond trail circle crosses the path of the trail leading to the pond trail.

When we reached the pond, a thick bed of dried pine needles lay in its place.

"Well, there used to be a pond here. Looks like Florida is in a drought," I said behind him. Until then, I hadn't known Florida was in a drought. I didn't have a garden or a yard, and I

rarely left my apartment except to go to class and the beach by myself and there's plenty of water there.

We walked around the dry bed of the pond like it was full. We sat under slash pines. Jim noticed they'd been burned, fingering the char between the bark. Sitting in the shade, we checked our legs for more ticks, but there weren't any.

We talked about his failed marriage like we always eventually do. The whole thing fascinates me, how people will torture themselves, thinking they're doing the right thing. Adults assign themselves roles to play, and when they can't play those roles or they don't want to anymore, it's very hard for them. But, it's never that simple; I know that much. It can't be so simple.

Jim couldn't play the role of husband to his wife because she wasn't "his woman." She was his wife and his best friend. I think that means they didn't fuck well. Apparently he needed that, and she didn't. Adults are interesting. I don't consider myself an adult because I don't have many responsibilities other than my two cats and a desert plant. I haven't thought up a role for myself, yet. I think of adults as this category of humans bound and grounded by obligation. I'm not an adult. No one is counting on me.

"I just couldn't fake it anymore," Jim said.

"What exactly is *it* that you couldn't fake?" I want to understand how these things work. Maybe if I understand, I won't make the same mistakes.

"I'm not even sure; maybe the chemistry. We just never had much of that."

I nodded like I knew exactly what he meant. Hypothetically, I did, but what the hell did I know about actually being married. I love to spout off all my negative witticisms about the

fatality of marriage and how they're all doing it so wrong, but I don't have a fucking clue. It sounds good, but I'm all theory and no practice.

Jim started looking at me, and I looked at him. He didn't say anything. His body didn't do anything, but I could tell he was feeling sexy. Jim doesn't really give himself away. He doesn't rub all over me or say sexual things. He just looks at me. You'd never think it was a sexual look, but somehow it is. I rubbed his salty leg in response.

"You wanna go behind those pine trees back there?" He asked.

"What if someone sees us?" The sand road was in front of the dry pond. We hadn't seen anyone out there all day, but I'd feel a little funny if someone walked up on us half naked on top of each other. Not because I'm modest, I just wouldn't want to get in trouble inside the reserve. I like the place. I'm sure they have some kind of rule against public indecency or maybe it would depend on if we were considered wildlife.

"We'll go back there, come on," he reached his hand out and helped me up. He picked up my backpack, carrying our water and wallets. From behind the pine trunks, I could still see the road but not well. I wondered how many animals had fucked here before us.

"Take your shorts off and lay on top of them so you don't get scratched up." He took my shorts out of my hand and smoothed them down for me. I sat on them. I've never loved someone this much.

No one walked by us then or later, but we did get lost. We got off our trail, thinking we were headed back the way we came, but instead we were on a horse trail and then there were passing houses and people talking in sheds and broken things strewn in massive yards bordered with rusted barbed-wire.

"This is a good start to a horror movie," Jim said.

“Yeah, but I have service.” No one ever has a signal in a scary movie so it seemed logical.

We walked along what we realized was the property line of the reserve and then ducked under the barbed-wire onto a long, sand driveway. We walked passed mobile homes and a show horse pen.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to live facing this reserve?” I asked him, and he nodded.

We came out at the highway. We turned right and walked towards the reserve’s entrance.

“Is this what it’s like to hitchhike, walking with all these loud cars and the hot asphalt?” I asked.

“Holy shit!”

“What is it?” I hoped for a snake.

“That’s twenty dollars,” he said, holding up a folded bill. We looked around but didn’t find anymore. I called it the magic twenty dollar bill, and after we walked all the way back to the gate, into the reserve, and back to my car, we left with the magic money, looking for lunch. Jim saw a black man on the side of the road selling barbeque. “I bet that’s real shit,” he said. “We should stop there.”

His name was Brother Mack, a cook and a pastor. We bought ribs, chicken, pulled pork and Brother Mack threw in one of his special chicken wings for free.

“We walked around in the woods. We gathered goods and traded for meat like Indians,” I said to Jim as we drove back to my apartment, salivating over the smell of smoked meat.

I used to have a garden before I moved to Orlando for graduate school. My new apartment doesn't have ground space for a garden and even if I could find a spot they wouldn't allow me. They stick to the rules here.

I wonder what my garden back home looks like. Each time I go home, I visit my old garden and am amazed at how the peppers are still producing. But, I know it won't last, not without care. I just wonder if the weeds will grow up the cement wall and take back the dirt or if someone will care enough to pull the garden up. I'm not sure which would be better, if I care either way. I'd rather things didn't have to change, things like moving and gardens.

The front door of my new apartment has a small "porch" which is an elevated slab of concrete with enough room for one plant, but the space doesn't get much sun. After living here for a few lonely months, I bought a miniature tree plant with big, magenta flowers, a Desert Rose. I learned that the sap is poisonous and the bulb swells as it stores water. I thought it was going die over winter, but during the spring the leaves and buds grew back. The blooms opened the morning after Jim flew back home. I sent him a picture and told him about the sap. He said I should make darts and hunt the peacocks for my dinner like a wild, white Indian.

Part I: Birmingham, AL 2012

"There's a fox that was just run over in front of the Whole Foods. Want me to get it and bring it to you? We can skin it or just look at it?" Jim asked me over the phone. He was on his way to see me.

"Yeah, get it." That's the thing about Jim. He'll do it. When he says he'll do something crazy, he's about to do it.

He pulled up to my apartment in Birmingham with a dead, fluffy fox in the back of his truck. I ran outside to a cold, overcast afternoon. He parked so his truck couldn't be seen from the road. The parking lot was private except for the Mexican man who sat in a rocking chair outside his apartment door overlooking my parking lot. He watched us. Jim waved at him sometimes. I wonder what the Mexican man thought about Jim and me, if he could tell Jim was married by how much we liked each other, how Jim never stayed for very long, how we looked guilty. Actually, I'm not sure if we looked guilty. I'm not even sure either one of us felt all that guilty. We wanted each other too much to feel bad about it.

The fox lay on his side in the back of Jim's truck, nearly full grown with thick and bronze fur.

"Did you see him get run over?" I hugged myself for warmth. Winter was leaving, but spring hadn't caught up yet.

"No, but I know it just happened." He lit a cigarette, and I wondered if that made him warmer.

"How?"

"Because his tail is still fluffy. See, he's not stiff." He jerked at the fox's back leg, jiggling the body, and the stomach waved like a waterbed. "Wanna skin it?"

"Yeah." I'd skinned animals with my dad before. I liked the way it smells like meat and blood and the wet woods.

"Hold the front legs," he told me. The fox's face was crushed on one side from the car that hit him. I wondered what his day had been like before he died. I wondered why he was trying to cross such a busy highway. Jim held a clean, paint-chipper blade between his fingertips. He used the blade to cut down the middle of the fox's belly. The white fur separated under his

blade, showing pink meat and white fat. The tiny blue veins webbed through the connecting tissues. He was careful not to puncture the stomach. We both knew that was something we didn't want to smell.

Jim shaved away the cobwebbed tissues, and it sounded like a man shaving. He scrapped the tissues away holding the pelt further and further away from the stomach. The pelt loosened from the underside of the belly.

Jim gave me the blade, but I wasn't very good at it. It took me much longer to free the fur from the white tissues, and I was afraid to cut too deep.

I gave the blade back to Jim, and I watched him work. He was beautiful to me, his red-brown skin and his thick black hair under his gray toboggan. This was his winter wear. His beard was long, and he wore about three shirts and Levis with long-johns underneath. He wore wool socks and brown, leather work boots. He smoked more Marlboro Lights and worked at the fox. He held a crease between his black eyebrows. I wanted to tell him to cut me open, to take my skin, to look at me like that with dead-still concentration, to not see anything else.

He cut around each small, bony leg, freeing the skin. We didn't know how to skin the crushed head so he stopped at the neck and cut round-ways like he did on the legs. The wind picked up, and I ran inside for a sweater. Jim wore old, wool gloves that had the finger tips cut out. Back outside, I shivered under my sweater as I sat on the plastic lining of his tail gate, always watching him.

We weren't sure how to approach the fox's genitals. It felt rude, but we had to do something with them. Jim skinned the penis and cut the pelt up the legs where the skin met the scrotum. He cut off the sack and threw the balls in the woods by the parking lot. The pelt peeled

off sticky-like. Then Jim sawed off the tail. He carried the skinless fox to the woods, a carcass of red meat and muscle with furred feet and a furred head.

“I wanna see what that thing looks like in a few days,” Jim said, walking back and rubbing his gloved palm down the front of his jeans.

“Jim, that’s gonna smell in a few days. It’s not gonna stay cold. What if I get in trouble?” My landlord, Raymond, wasn’t the nicest guy you’ve ever met. He seemed to enjoy getting onto me like I was a little girl.

“Devin, this thing isn’t gonna be here in a few days or at least most of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a lot of shit that lives out there in that.” He pointed to the thick undergrowth of privet and wisteria that grew under oaks behind the backyards of each house and the side of my parking lot.

I went back inside while Jim laid out the fox’s skin and scrotum out in the back of his truck. I stood at the kitchen sink with my hands tingling under the hot water. My cats smelt at my shoes and my jeans, looking for something wild.

A few days later Jim walked into my apartment and dropped a puff of fur on the floor. It was the fox’s scrotum. He dried it and gave it to my cats. They both ran to it and sniffed it and rubbed their heads against it. It’s still their favorite toy.

In Orlando, it travels up to my bedroom in my apartment and back down to the living room. For some reason, it’s always where I am. The fox’s dried scrotum lies by my feet on the bed while I sleep or by the futon as I watch TV or under my desk as I work. Sometimes, my cats fight with it, pawing at it with their back feet.

In Birmingham the spring before I moved, I told Jim I wanted a garden.

“You can have a garden here.” He replied.

“I don’t think I’m allowed.” I was more hesitant to act than he was. A few months earlier when Jim and I first started seeing each other in my apartment in my bedroom and before he needed to be more “respectful” of his marriage, I texted him that I wished he was with me and we were naked. He came over that night without telling me he was coming. He said he wanted to see if I was just talking. I didn’t know what to do. He sat on my couch and held me like a baby and said it was okay. I didn’t understand. I wanted him to hold me like that forever, but I felt like he was testing something inside of me.

“Fuck them, let me show you something,” he said about the garden and my landlord.

I followed him outside, but I didn’t see the point. I just wanted to sit down and stare at him, touch him, have as much of him as I could get before he had to go home. I don’t know if I was trying to store him up or if I was in denial. I loved him, and I thought that ought to be enough. I didn’t understand why he kept leaving; why when he got home he wouldn’t answer his phone until late at night. I’d never been married. I didn’t have the distraction of someone else.

Most of the 1950 built apartment units were empty, and each one stood in front old, small gardens, lined with bricks around eroded, moldy dirt. A green clothesline leaned back towards the earth. Jim walked me past rocks someone had stacked decades ago up towards the parking lot.

All of Birmingham is on a hill. Everything there is either up or down, not flat like Florida. The back parking lot ascended parallel to the ceiling of the first floor of the two-story apartment building.

Around the lower right corner of the parking lot between the retaining wall and the lot, sat an elevated bed of rock, dirt, and red clay and a lot of buried trash. I wasn't sure why the parking lot was built like this, why the cement wall didn't just immediately line the parking lot. Instead there was this bed of elevated dirt. The rest of the parking lot angled uphill so the walls on the backside stood above the lot instead of below it.

“This?” I looked at him like he was kidding.

“Yeah, you could dig this up and around there, clean out the dirt, and plant a garden.” He pointed around the side of the parking lot where the dirt-bed wrapped around.

That weekend, I bought two huge bags of potting soil and a jalapeño plant, day lily bulbs, daisy seeds, a hand shovel, and two plastic, water pitchers to carry water from my bathtub to the garden.

Jim gave me a pickaxe, and I used the pickaxe and my hands to dig out rocks, bottles, trash, and chunks of red clay. I spent hours digging out a flowerbed with the Mexican man watching me. We were both off work—we were all off work even Jim's wife which was why Jim wasn't with me, helping me with his idea. I put glass bottles and coke tops I found in the dirt in a garbage bag. I pulled plastic bags out of the ground trying not to fall off the cement ledge. I filled the garbage bag up and cut my ankle on a shard of glass as I carried the bag to the road. Proud of the blood running down my dirty ankle, I texted Jim a picture.

A few days later, Jim looked at my flowerbed full of potting soil, and I could tell he wasn't impressed. He had bigger plans.

“What about around this edge? What about some more vegetables?” He pointed and asked. “You can take off a layer of dirt or build it up and edge it with some of those bricks behind the building.” He pointed behind the apartment building and seemed to know what he

was talking about. I was slightly agitated he didn't like my "flower bed" and upset that I didn't do better, but I wanted a real garden so I listened to him.

While I was at work, he came over and worked on my garden. When I got home, it was raining and he kept working. He'd turned the dirt and edged it with solid cinderblocks giving the roots more room. He found kids' toys in the dirt and old glass containers. He used found stones to make small drainage channels.

I bought tomatoes, and he staked them. I found green bell peppers, squash and cucumbers. After the squash got infested and the cucumbers started taking over, I ripped them both up, and Jim found a man selling every kind of pepper and got five different kinds: chili peppers, habanera peppers, and I should find out the other kinds next I'm home.

My uncle who lived a few houses down from me called it the Love Garden, and I guess it was something like our love child.

Sometimes when I came home from work or visiting my grandmother on the weekends, there'd be a surprise in my garden. Once Jim painted two wooden stakes orange and in white letters wrote: Devin's Garden. Another time while I was at work, he sprayed the weeds on the ground below that tried to grow up the wall into the peppers. After a weekend at my grandmother's, I found two arrows stuck in the dark standing straight up side by side. It rained that night, and Jim was safe at home, trying to be two places at once.

TIDAL BREAKING

The moon is a satellite—Earth’s satellite—bigger than Pluto. Some scientists consider our moon a planet.

I like to be sad. But if the sadness goes on too long becomes too deep that I lose my grip, then I worry, get scared I’m lost for good this time. It’s like playing with drugs, knowing when enough is enough, telling myself I am still in control that I can quit at any moment. When I get too close to hopelessness, I try to remember how to step back out of it, afraid I’ve forgotten. To be hopeless is truly terrifying. But sadness is my drug, the drainage of expectation. I expect nothing; I am nothing. That is relief.

When the Earth was young, a large asteroid collided with Earth and broke off 10% of the planet. The broken-off 10% became our moon, always present but out of reach and here to remind us every sundown what we’re missing, what we used to be.

It wasn’t until I was older, moved out, disowned, and an ex-lesbian that my stepmother told me she always knew I had a tendency for depression. That was her ego’s way of apologizing. I know that we all get sad.

The moon synchronously rotates with the Earth, meaning the moon always shows Earth the same face. How much of that face depends on the moon’s position in relation to the Sun. During a full moon, the Earth is directly between the moon and the Sun. The Sun’s light illuminates the moon’s full face.

When I moved in with my Daddy and stepmother, I was seven and tried calling her Mommy. She told me she didn’t like that, that it sounded babyish. So we decided on Momma. As I got older, she insisted I always call her Momma, which I still do today, but only to her face.

The moon formed 4.6 billion years ago. We live by the clock of the moon. Long ago, we believed the moon was a bowl of fire. We believed the moon was a mirror of the Earth.

My stepmother was sexually abused by her grandfather. I've only heard the backbones of this story. My stepmother never talked much about the abuse. I wonder if she'll tell my sister, her real daughter, about the abuse. If they'll bond over her past in a way she never bonded or shared with me. I always wanted my stepmother to tell me. I always wanted to know at what age he started. I know he made her look at his penis, her grandfather, her mother's father. But did he touch her? How much did he touch her? I know it happened for years, but for how many years? Three, five, eight? I don't know. My stepmother's father, Pepper, died when she was twenty-two. He fell off a ladder at home and hit his head on the concrete drive below. His brain exploded inside his skull, and he died the next day. My stepmother loved to talk about her Daddy. He was a pharmacist. He was a good, Christian man. In pictures, he is bald with a genuine smile and a sweater. He resembles Mr. Rogers. After her father died, she married a man from a wealthy family, but he managed an O'Charley's restaurant. He also beat her, and then, he cheated on her. He was ugly with pink skin and round glasses. She showed me a picture once. My stepmother is beautiful. She's tall and slender, usually tan with long, brown hair and bright eyes. She loves Shania Twain. She also has chronic bad breath. She only wears Calvin Kline's *Eternity* perfume, and as a child, I wanted her to love me so badly that I'd sneak into her closet when she was gone and wrap myself in her clothes, inhaling her scent. I touched her make-up, her shoes, her hairbrush.

Gravity on our moon is weak. No sound can be heard on the moon, and the sky always appears black. Moonquakes shake the satellite, caused by the gravitational pull of Earth.

After my stepmother and Daddy were newly married, she wanted more alone time with Daddy. She didn't have any kids yet, and I reminded her that my father had been married before to a woman who hurt him, a woman he will always love in a tiny, put-away-part of his heart even if it looks like hate. My stepmother seemed to always be agitated with me, like I never folded the towels right and didn't sweep the kitchen well enough. I wasted too much milk and walked around the house without pants on. I spent a lot of time grounded from the telephone because I forgot to take messages, from the television because I played too long at a friend's house. If I walked in the room while Daddy watched a movie, she watched me to make sure I walked by quickly and didn't linger to look at the television. Once I was grounded from my tennis shoes for a month because I wore them in the goat pasture. Years later, I was grounded from any shirt that had a V-neck because I tried to wear a low-cut shirt without a tank-top underneath to school, and she caught me as I walked out the front door. I think she may have meant well, but she just couldn't be nice to me because I was my mother's daughter. As a baby, my mother didn't want me, and then, my stepmother didn't like me. At the age of eight, I decided there was something wrong with me. I wasn't sure what it was, but women didn't like me.

Because my stepmother was angry and oppressive, I was a sad girl and often lonely. I made room in my bed at night for Jesus to sleep next to me. I pretended I was my own Mommy while I dusted the great room, pretending the displayed plates were mine, and I was fancy and pretty and free.

The moon has a small core—420 miles wide—mostly made of iron. The rocky mantle of the moon is 825 miles thick of dense iron and magnesium rock: a result of a billion years of volcanic eruptions. The moon's top crust is 42 miles deep.

When I was thirteen and visiting my birth mother, I lay in bed while she rubbed my back in a tender way no one had ever touched me. She traced her fingers over the shoulder skin of my freckled back, “Your skin is so smooth,” she said.

“It is?” I asked. With all the freckles and white sun scars, I’d never accused myself of having nice skin.

“When I was your age, I had acne all over my back and chest.” Being close to a mother became intoxicating like being a baby again and doing it right.

The rocky surface of the moon, pockmarked with craters, was formed from asteroid impacts. Because the moon is without weather, the craters haven’t eroded. The moon has a very thin atmosphere where a footprint can remain for centuries.

I’m sure I have moments, but I’m not certifiably, a-harm-to-anyone, crazy. I just get sad. I get sad about things. Old men make my chest actually ache. Shy people make me sad. Grief makes me sad, like when animals mourn. On our farm, we had a recipient mother give birth to a big, pretty show doe. She was the type of kid that hit the ground looking like a winner. With most kids you can’t tell until three to six months, but not this kid. She had a large, square frame, long floppy ears the color of walnut trees, and the sweet eyes that only baby goats can have. The show kids were born in 8x8 metal pens under the barn, and stayed in the pen with their recipient mothers for a month until the kids were strong enough to live in pastures. But after a few weeks in the pen, the doe kid hung herself in the metal hayrack that hung from the top bar of the pen. The bars of the hay rack narrowed and the doe kid was the perfect size to lose her footing on the lower pen bar and slip into the slats and pen herself, front feet dangling, slowly suffocating as her neck swelled, cutting off oxygen. We found the hung kid with blood dripping from the tips of her ears from where her recipient mother tried to pull her out of the hayrack. Daddy said it was a

damn shame because she was going to be one of the nicest show does we ever had. We removed the stiff, swollen necked kid and let the mother out into the pasture. She walked down to a clump of loblollies that later died and lay down. She never got back up. I know elephants are notorious for mourning their dead and dogs are loyal as hell. But seeing a mother goat mourn a baby that technically was not her own, mourn herself to death, well, that was sad. I brought the mother food and water, but she didn't care. I couldn't make her live. She died because she wanted to. She died because she helplessly watched her baby strangle to death. She died with a full bag of undrunk milk, making me feel something so deep in the pit of myself that I felt awake, alive. I think I like to be sad because that's when I feel the most human, when I feel the most at all—fear and futility. Isn't that living?

Feeling sad is easier. It's quicker. It's more comfortable. I like sad movies. Sad songs are the best. I like sad paintings, sad books, sad endings. I read a very sad essay the other day with a happy ending. I told my Jim I didn't like the ending because it was happy. He said that was typical. Jim says happiness is hard work. He's right. He still believes in happiness, which is funny because bad things, really bad things (death and divorce) have happened in his life. And he still believes in happiness and still trusts people. Jim doesn't like to be sad

The moon is 4.6 billion years old. I am twenty-three years old. Humans are 200,000 years old. The moon puts things in perspective, takes some of the pressure off.

I'm not so sure about the whole you can't be loved until you love yourself. But I do think you have to let people love you. You have to believe it. You can easily not believe it, question it, and diminish it with logic and circumstance. Happiness is work. Relationships are work. Marriage is work and anyone who says otherwise is delusional and dumb. That's a little harsh. Good relationships take work. If you want to call it something else because you think work

doesn't coincide with soul-mates and fate, then call it something else, but if you have a good relationship that means you put in effort, good old, fashioned w-o-r-k.

I like the moon better than the sun. I like the sun. I just like the moon better. I like nighttime better. The night scares me, makes me afraid to go to sleep, afraid someone might leave me even though I live alone. I sleep better during the day. It's safer then, which makes the night more special. Haven't we always loved what we fear?

I'm good at being sad by myself, but I don't know how to be sad in front of someone else, how to cry in front of someone else. In my family, crying was like sex: don't do it.

There are a few things that I don't usually think about, like the time my stepmother and I got in a fight in the goat barn. I was fifteen, and my brother and sister, eight and six, were watching. I needed to catch a goat and put the goat in a pen before cheerleading practice. While I tried to pen the doe in a corner, my stepmother prematurely reached for the small doe, driving the goat out into the open pasture. My stepmother mostly stayed inside the house, so her goat herding skills were lacking.

"You messed me up," I said in reaction. This was the outside world, much different than the inside world of clean floors and sloshing machines. My stepmother pushed hard into my shoulder, I think, out of embarrassment. I said, "don't push me," and she pushed me again. I don't know where it came from. I'd never been in a fight before. I tackled her. I shouldered into her middle and knocked her to the ground so hard that I knocked out my own breath. Then I went limp. I stopped because I could hear my brother and sister's nervous laughing. We were covered in dirt and hay. Clumps of my hair fell out. I remember being a little disappointed at how she fought: pulling hair. She stood up and yelled that I was going to have to live with my mother.

I did not have to live with my mother, but I did get spanked by Daddy while my stepmother yelled in my face with her bad breath when I said she pushed me first. She didn't talk to me that summer. I apologized because Daddy said I had to. I cried with eventual sincerity and shame. She said she didn't know if she'd be able to forgive me and she'd definitely never forget. I talked to God a lot that summer. I covered my walls in Bible verses. I looked like a religious fanatic, but really, I just wanted a friend, an ally.

During eclipses, the moon, the earth, and the sun are in a straight line. A lunar eclipse is when Earth gets between the Sun and the moon. Earth's shadow falls on the moon's face. This can only happen during a full moon. A solar eclipse is when the moon gets between the Sun and the Earth and the moon's shadow falls on us. Solar eclipse can only happen during a new moon.

I always loved my father more, but needed my mother more. Then I needed my father and was angry at the sun and the moon. My mother might now be a moon without a sun, a satellite above Earth. She prefers to float on her own without a north star. She is her own north star, her own Earth, Sun, Moon.

I am fair skinned and burn easily in the sun. I like the sun in theory and the moon in practice. I like the idea of sunny walks, but I can't withstand the UV rays. I put on sunscreen before I go to the grocery store. I'm better at moon bathing. I've tried to pick the right side since I was a child and knew how to pick sides. For many years I chose the day, and then I sided with the night with an eagerness to switch sides again and again due to what suited me at the moment. The tiny moment between dusk and twilight, when it's not day or night, both and neither, is my space to love both the moon and the sun together and to love neither of them, the short time my mother and my father loved each other, the time that made me relevant.

When Daddy tans, he turns red and then he fades into brass. His tan holds a tint of red. His hair use to hang to his shoulders, naturally highlighted from spending most day hours outside. He worked in the woods, marking timber and controlling burns. He wore his long hair in a ponytail with the underneath shaved like the nineties. I thought my father was beautiful in the way young girls love their fathers.

My mother doesn't tan like I don't tan. She is covered in light freckles. She works in the sun too, working in wetlands and fields. Her skin wears wrinkles from the lack of melatonin. I love the way my mother smells, like spearmint gum and sunscreen.

When my parents met, they were both bodybuilders going to Auburn University. They were both on steroids, both into the wilderness. They became best friends. They loved each other once.

My first memory comes from my first year. I had recently learned to walk, and I walked down the hall to find my parents making out on a couch with a bed on the other side. The room was large. My mother laid on top of my father, and I felt funny. I turned around and ran. Years later, I described the room to Daddy, a room I'd never seen in a picture and a house we moved from before I was two.

My second memory comes from my second year. My mother left me at home, a different home. I was a toddler, and I remember her saying she needed to use a payphone. I don't know if I could even understand that at the time or if that detail has slipped into my memory over the years. She left me at the door, and I was terrified. Later, I would realize that she was most likely leaving me to see the man she was having an affair with.

My third memory comes from the same year and starts with the aftermath of my mother telling Daddy she was seeing someone else and wanted a divorce. Daddy threw their framed

wedding pictures against the wall, and my mother cleaned up the pieces with a black garbage bag. I cried because two-year-olds know when something is wrong and he said “look what you’ve done.” Daddy took me to the neighbor’s house across the street. I colored and played with a blue stone rose on a silver chain the neighbor’s wife gave me. I don’t know why she gave a toddler a necklace. My father talked to Morgan, her husband. I try to imagine how my father felt that night when his family was broken apart, when he learned that the woman he loved didn’t want him anymore, or their daughter.

No matter what my father does, or how much truth I learn behind their marriage, how irresponsible and neglectful towards my mother he was, I will always hurt for my father in that moment, when he had nowhere to go except across the street. I wonder if he slept that night. I wonder if he went back across the street to plead with my mother. I wonder how mean she was to him. I’m happy to exist, but I think my parents didn’t do much more than hurt each other, leaving each other with scars and heaviness.

The moon has no seasons. Some areas are always lit and some areas are always draped in shadow. My mother is one shade; she is business. Business is what she is best at, and I commend her for that. The temperature on the sunny side of the moon can reach 273 degrees Fahrenheit while the dark side of the moon can reach -243 degrees Fahrenheit.

My mother didn’t want children. Growing up with my father, I was taught if you don’t want children, you’re not really a woman. You’re mean and heartless. As a child, I hated going to visit my mother, but my stepmother wanted me to (because as she’d later admit) she wanted alone time with her husband and new son. My stepmother sat at the kitchen table with the calendar taken down showing me all the days I would be gone. I’d weep when she’d plan long, nearly two-week trips for me to stay with my mother. I’d try to bargain for less time, but she said

I had to visit that long so my mother would keep sending money. Eventually my mother stopped sending the money, which was translated to me that my mother didn't care about me. I later learned that my mother knew I wasn't benefitting from any of the money. Daddy, obviously bitter, and my stepmother talked horribly about my mother all through my childhood, and my first memories of her didn't help. A few times when I was visiting my mother, I got so homesick, I collapsed in the grocery store ready to die. My mother had to call home and ask what to do with me. I missed Daddy and I missed my goats and I was so terrified my mother would leave while I was asleep that I only slept in the daylight while she drove around town running errands. Then, I'd have the same dream of my mother leaving me while at a gas station and driving off in a truck with my Daddy down a steep hilled highway. Daddy told me to call my mother "Wrinkles," and I did. She called me "Sleepy." After every visit, my parents would ask me how the visit went, and I always said horrible like I was supposed to.

The average distance from the moon to Earth is 238,855 miles. The moon's gravity pulls at the Earth. High and low tides form our seas, lakes, the atmosphere, and the land. High tides come from the side of Earth closest to the moon as well as the side farthest due to inertia.

My grandmother, who with my grandfather raised me after my parent's divorce from age three to seven, accuses me of being bi-polar. She says, "You're getting into one of your moods," which, of course, is a low mood. I can go from exhilarated to depressed, from the Sun to the moon. I'm too hot and cold. I'm too eager to pick sides. But I just want to make a decision and stick to it. I most definitely have highs and lows and I enjoy them both.

The pull of the moon slows Earth's rotation, called tidal braking, increasing the length of a day by 2.3 milliseconds per century. The energy Earth loses is picked up by the moon,

increasing the moon's distance from Earth by 3.8 centimeters each year. The moon moves a little further away, and the days get a little bit longer.

The visits became less horrible, but my relationship with my mother became more confusing. Sometimes I liked my mother even loved her, needing a mother who wanted me again, but that wasn't allowed so I tried not to. When I became a lesbian, my mother took me in when my parents wouldn't, understanding because she too had been a lesbian at the same age. As a child, I never thought I'd be close to my mother. In those ways, growing up and being an adult is truly wonderful. I'm not a child anymore. I don't have to live with an angry woman who dislikes me. I can love my mother, and question my father. I can be my own parent.

STRANGER SPECIES

“the idea that one person’s mind is accessible to another’s is just a conversational illusion, just a figure of speech, an assumption that makes some kind of exchange between basically alien creatures seem plausible, and that really the relationship of one person to another is ultimately unknowable.”

--from Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

Other Woman

I sat in same booth at the Jim’n’Nicks in Five Points Birmingham, eating the same chili and drinking a ‘Truckstop Honey’ beer I used to love. It was the winter of 2012—two months since Jim’s divorce, a year since I met Jim, two years since my dad and stepmother started talking to me again, and two years since I started being “straight.” Used to, this chili, this beer, and this booth were perfect. But it wasn’t what it used to be, like so many other things. The first time I came here was also the first time Jim called me. I didn’t have his number saved. We hadn’t planned the call, but as I drove down the red hills of Birmingham and my phone rang flashing an unknown number, I knew it was Jim. I answered with a smile. He asked do you know who it was, and I said I did. We sat on the phone silent, simply happy. I wanted him to join me at the restaurant, but I didn’t dare ask, and he didn’t dare accompany because he was married and someone could have seen us. After his call, I ate there still full with the possibility of him. But that fullness wallered out a hole inside me that followed with a deep, echoless gulf. You think things—habits and emotions—can be preserved or at least replicated, but it’s never the same. Ignorance truly is bliss.

I sat in the Jim’n’Nicks’ booth, trying not to call Jim, turning over my phone with the screen facedown. I was home for Christmas break, finally back in Birmingham where he was,

but I still missed him. I wasn't seeing him as much as I had hoped and needed. Jim lived in the house he and his mother bought several years earlier when she got sick. The house sat behind the house Jim lived in for years with his then-wife. His ex-wife still lived in their house, waiting for it to be sold, and Jim lived behind her watching her go out on dates in a red Jeep.

A year earlier when I was working at a pizza restaurant and living in a bad neighborhood a few houses down from my uncles, I'd sat in the same booth. I had a garden and my family close by. I'd just met Jim and one of my cats hadn't started peeing on the floor yet. I was applying to MFA programs, but I was convinced I wasn't going to get in anywhere and simultaneously in shock that I wasn't going to get in anywhere.

Now my car was in the shop; I barely made it to Birmingham from Orlando in the thing. I was driving my grandparent's old Buick La Sabre and listening to CDs from Lilith Fair that had once belonged to Jim's ex-wife, her name "Meredith" written in permanent marker on the front. He let me borrow the CD, saying I had to give it back. I just wanted to burn it to my computer, which I did, making a CD for Jim including all the songs I listened to that winter after we fought, when he was too conflicted to see me, when I was lonely and bitter and more than anything tired.

And now in the same booth, a lot was different and the chili didn't taste near as good as I remembered. The brisket was fatty and stiff. The beer made me full. My eyes felt perpetually heavy from spending too much time alone. Walking out amongst people was shocking and made me aware that I looked sleepy and confused.

Jim had finally gotten the divorce I had once hoped so fervently for, but if anything, it made things worse. He was more distant, afraid to upset his ex-wife, unsure of his future, and I was unsure of mine, living in Orlando, one of the few schools that did accept me, and I could have refused, I could have stayed in Birmingham, but that didn't feel like an option. I moved to

Orlando because I had to, and I hated every step of it. I left my garden, my uncles, my nasty apartment, and I left Jim, a man who was married, seventeen years older than me, a man I loved more than I could hardly handle. I feared he'd move on, we'd grow apart. But we never did grow apart or move on, and in that booth I wondered if that were for better or for worse.

It was cold, and the draft seeped through the windowsill next to me. I spooned nasty chili and guzzled the rest of my beer, wishing I could afford another one. A party of women left their table in front of my booth. The four women walked towards the front doors. The woman in the back walked with a limp unable to keep up with the pace of the group. As I watched the brown haired woman, I realized she had some sort of impairment, maybe a mental retardation. She didn't see the step down as she eyed her group ahead. She fell as her foot expectantly dropped down the step, and she splayed out on the greasy wood floor surprised and crying. She continued to lie there. There weren't many people in the restaurant, and for a few moments I believe I was the only person who saw her there on the floor.

I watched as she cried patiently, waiting for someone to help her. By the time one of the group members came back to check on her, a waiter turned the corner and within seconds a crowd had gathered of wait staff, managers, and friends to see to the woman. One of her friends looked up while kneeling near her on the floor. She made eye contact with me. It wasn't accusing, but it wasn't friendly. It was questioning. Whatever the woman's condition, her friends seemed to know that she was shaken and not badly hurt, but the managers wanted to make sure, taking every precaution to avoid a lawsuit. She was brought a chair, a glass of water, asked how she felt. The woman was seemingly fine, and she eventually left with her party, dragging her left leg a bit just as she'd done before she'd fallen.

It wasn't until after she left that I realized I had not only not moved to help her, but I hadn't even thought about moving to help her when she fell. I watched her lie there and wail like a hoarse child. I'd like to think I inherently knew she wasn't hurt, that someone would find her. I think her friend looked at me wondering why I sat there and didn't help her. I didn't want to know what that said about me.

Tire Boy

I often see people stranded on highways, and I never stop. I want to be the person that helps strangers out, and I tell myself if only I had someone with me in the car like Jim, I'd stop. On a long drive to visit Jim, I saw a guy carrying a flat tire to an exit. I drove thirty more seconds to find his car. I told myself, if Jim were in the car, we'd help him, but I'm usually by myself and I never help people more afraid of what could potentially happen to myself.

Friends

I've never met Jim's ex-wife, but I feel like I know her. I've heard her voice play on his voicemail. I've seen a hundred pictures spanning over fifteen years. I know where she went to high school, her birthday, her favorite foods, her hobbies. I know she likes to eat plain butter and she likes spaghetti. She drinks white wine. She shops on weekends with her mother. She loves animals. She's a nurse. In college, she was in a sorority. I know this woman. I almost love her. But she is a stranger to me, a stranger who has impacted so much of my life, a stranger I wonder about, I care for, a stranger I will never be friends with.

Through the Door

Over the summer of 2013 while showering in my apartment in Orlando, someone knocked on my front door. After I dried off, I walked to the door to peak through the peephole. There was a young, black man, shirtless and wet, standing in front of my door. I had never seen him before.

I left Jim after I returned home from Christmas break. Then, we resumed our relationship a couple months later, going into the summer. Things got worse before they got better, but we just can't seem to grow apart. I dated a boy during the interval that I couldn't have given a shit less about, and I don't know how he didn't know that. He knew nothing about me. It's funny how much people won't ask, how much they don't want to know.

I tiptoed back to my bedroom and dressed, taking my time brushing my hair and lotioning my legs. I felt safe because the door was locked, and I figured the stranger would be gone by the time I was done. He wasn't. He waited in front of my door. I stared at him through the peephole. I wondered if he knew I was a few feet away. I looked closer and saw a dark, growing puddle beneath him. It sprinkled outside. The stoop in front of my door was covered in seeping red. The man was bleeding. I heard my pulse in my ears. My armpits got hot and sticky. I walked to the back of my apartment out of earshot and called 911, which I'd never done before; I'd never needed to. It felt like crossing a barrier. The illusion of safety is finally over. I explained the situation to the operator, wondering in the back of my mind if I was overreacting. She told me do not answer the door. She asked his race, and I felt ashamed when I said he was black. Why'd he have to be black? Being a young, white woman from Alabama, it just didn't look good.

While I waited for the ambulance for the black man at my door, I called Jim—frantically and immediately. He was driving with his brother, moving from Birmingham to Georgia to start

an MFA program. It didn't cross my mind to call anyone else, not my parents, my grandparents, no friends. Just Jim.

In less than sixty seconds, sirens wailed. I hung up with Jim, and I watched through the peephole as the shirtless man got in a blue Mustang that was already facing out ready to leave. The fire truck pulled up, and I opened the door barefoot and unthinking. I stepped into a puddle of the man's blood. His blood was splashed against my door, on the handle. His red blotted white shirt sat in a heap on the sidewalk. Blood ran down the sidewalk into the parking lot. I stepped back sick to my stomach, what if he had a disease I thought. My hand touched blood on the door. I couldn't get away from it like it misted from the sky with the rain. The medic jumped out of the truck and asked, "Where's the baby?"

"Baby?" I asked confused, scraping the sole of my foot against clean concrete.

"All this blood. Where's the baby?" For a split second, I pictured what this man may have seen: A young woman with wet dark hair, wearing gray cotton shorts and a white t-shirt like the one on the sidewalk and without a bra. She'd had a baby in the rain on the sidewalk suddenly. There was a dumpster right next to her apartment that smelled like old garbage rot. Where was the baby?

"There was a man here, bleeding. He drove off when he heard the sirens." I tried to speak loud over the engine of the truck. I watched a worm inch through a puddle of blood. The apartment dumpster twenty feet away stunk. My throat constricted, and my stomach hurt. I held myself like a woman missing a baby.

A police officer drove up and said they caught the man over at the next apartment complex.

“Come on guys. He’s over there. Just throw some bleach on all this.” The officer pointed at the ground while looking at me.

“What’d he do?” I had to know what this hurt man did who stood between me and a door while I watched him bleed.

“He stabbed someone. Alright let’s go.” They drove off. I stood away from the blood puddles. I scraped my left foot some more. I walked inside and washed it in the sink. I called Jim back. He and his brother listened as they drove. Over speakerphone, I told them there was a black man, that was fucking bleeding everywhere. I called 911. He stabbed someone. They caught him. I said I don’t know what’s wrong with these fucking people. It’s like no one knows what’s going on. Jim was glad I was safe and agreed Orlando was fucked up. I paced back and forth through my front door, wondering what to do with all the blood and the man’s t-shirt.

“Hey there’s an ambulance driving by. Let me ask him about this blood. I’ll call you back.”

“Be safe.”

I flagged the ambulance down. He asked where the fire truck was. It seemed no one knew what was going on. I asked what I should do about the blood. And what about the man’s soiled t-shirt that still sat on the sidewalk.

He called the fire truck back, and they peroxidized the sidewalk and my door. Even my plants were sprinkled with blood. A tiny frog hopped through a trail of blood and into a foaming river of peroxide. The frog was doused and then washed clean. He hopped away, but I wondered if he lived after his chemical bath.

The blue Mustang pulled back into the same parking spot. The black man got out with the guy that lives above my apartment. I nearly vomited with fear. Why was this man here? What

was wrong with the world? It was like the police stopped working. The man's forearm was heavily bandaged. He looked heavy eyed. I stood as close to the dumpster as I could. My neck snapped back when he spoke. I looked crazy—wet headed, wide eyed, and barefoot.

My neighbor led the drowsy man up the stairs.

“Why is he here?” I asked the closest paramedic.

“He cut his arm on a window and was looking for his friend. He must have gotten the apartments mixed up.”

“But he drove off when he heard sirens.” I mumbled to myself. Everyone seemed to shrug.

Each story was different. After the sidewalk was clean and the paramedics left, I went to Starbucks and sat at a communal table around as many people as I could find. I didn't want to go back to my apartment. When the Starbucks closed, I went back home and listened to his footsteps walk around above me.

Other Woman II

After the bad Christmas and after Jim and I got back together, Jim was accepted into an MFA program in Georgia. He told his ex-wife he was going back to school, and she asked if I had helped him—anyone who knows Jim knows paperwork and technology are not his strong suit. The fall before, I filled out eleven applications to schools in the east, some as far as Ohio and Iowa. He had talked about running off there, how he wanted to get accepted as far away as possible, how badly he needed to leave Birmingham. I understood the desire to get away from it all, but I barely saw Jim as it was. How was I supposed to see him, thirteen hours even further

north? Neither one of us had any money. Plane tickets weren't an option. He talked to me like we had no future.

As that bad winter continued, I drank heavily, went camping with Jim, hid in his backseat as we drove by his old house where his ex-wife was home. He was afraid she might look out the window and see me in the truck with her ex-husband. She knew about me. She knew we were probably "involved." The summer before, I had a going away party at my uncles. Jim came. She found out. Jim and I never found out how she knew he came to my party. We wouldn't have been that hard to figure out. She would have just wanted to look. I think she eventually did, needing a boldface reason to spark the divorce that had been inevitable for years. But who am I to talk about another woman's marriage? To judge the quality of her marriage and the inevitability of the divorce? Maybe the divorce was inevitable because of my guiltlessness.

Over Christmas break, I hid in Jim's mother's basement once. He asked me to hide under the bed in case his mother came over. I hid in the closet once when his ex-wife let their dog out and walked up to Jim's house to put the dog back in. I was so close to her through walls and windows.

After break, I left Birmingham as my unfixed car smoked on the way to my mom's in south Alabama. The car threatened to overheat, and I arrived with oil and every other liquid dripping from the old car. My mom bought me a newer car, which was one of the biggest and nicest things anyone has ever done for me. With the new car and the burden lifted off my shoulders, I was ready to have all burdens lifted. I missed Jim. I spent all my time missing him. Even when I lived in Birmingham, I missed him at nights when he was home with his wife and I was in my old apartment alone. Then I missed Jim in Orlando so many hours away from him, sometimes the distance became so great and vast I felt like I might suffocate. Dread sat in the pit

of my stomach, and I lost my appetite. Sometimes I couldn't sleep. I sat on my bedroom carpet, leaning against my metal bed frame rocking with a cradled pillow. Sometimes I slept the day away, wishing more days would pass on and on because something good had to happen eventually; there had to be something to look forward to.

My logic was I already miss Jim now and we're "together." What's the difference if we're together or not? He wants to move three states north. He wants to kill himself. He has nothing to live for. I felt useless, something to be ashamed of, something to hide. I felt like I didn't count. Back in Orlando, I partied as hard as I ever had. I called him over FaceTime and told him I wasn't sure about us anymore. I hardly remember the conversation, just that he screamed like my father did when I told him I was a lesbian and I was going to live with my mother instead of him. It's strange how people will get so angry when you leave them. The sadness and desperation comes later.

I made out with a boy with dirty teeth who smoked too many cheap cigarettes and drank whatever alcohol he could find having no preference. I didn't like this boy, but I needed someone to distract me, someone to party with, someone to keep me from the loneliness. A few weeks later, Jim drove through the night to my apartment showing up unannounced with a gun wedged in the back of his pants. No one else was in my apartment. He was so angry. He yelled and pushed me. Then he was sad and he cried. He tried to have sex with me. He cradled me while we sat on the floor surrounded by stacks of his DVDs and books he was taking back that he'd given me. He took his grandmother's gun that I kept in my closet, a gun I very badly wished I had on hand the time the bleeding man stood outside my door, a gun he later gave back to me, saying I'd earned it.

Dirty Man

Coming from rural, farm life, I've now lived in the city for the past five years from San Diego to Birmingham to Orlando. None of them are the biggest, but they are big enough for me. I've earned my street smarts.

I sat in my car at a red light, after dropping off my recyclables. I was on the phone with Jim when a heavily bearded man with a dirty face and ratty clothes came up to my window, motioning for me to roll it down. I was alone in the car, and there weren't any cars behind me. I looked at the man and shook my head. My doors were locked. He motioned down again. I turned my head away from him to the red light ahead. A few cars drove up and stopped behind me. He stepped away from my door and crossed the street without stopping at any of the other cars. I couldn't help but wonder what he would have done if I rolled down my window—why he didn't stop at any of the other cars.

The whole time I talked to Jim about other subjects never pausing, never skipping a beat in our conversation to acknowledge the man outside my driver window.

The problem is we don't know what people are thinking. Someone could be hurt, or someone could be vicious. The news and horror movies and our parents tell us not to talk to strangers. What happens one day when I'm a stranger and I need help? How are we ever going to be able to help each other?

That's the problem with relationships too; we don't know what the other person is thinking, what their intentions are, if they mean us harm or care. Being with someone is like memorizing his schedule and his likes and dislikes. I know what Jim is likely to do and say and like, but I don't know what he thinks. Sometimes he surprises me. The other day he went for a run. Jim doesn't even like running. Why'd he do that?

Sometimes, I think of horrible things. I think of Jim cheating on me in front of me. I think of him suddenly not giving a shit about me. Jim is not likely to do that, but I'm not Jim so I can't know that he'd never do that. I just have to trust that he is not likely to do that. My father doesn't love me like he used to. It wasn't likely that he'd do that at least from my perspective as a child, but he did. I never saw myself as the stepchild, the other child, in our family until after I moved away and went to college, and then, I did become the other child that my father only calls when he is traveling for work, when he is hundreds of miles from home. That's when he misses me; that's when his voice is friendly. If I call him while he is home, sometimes he answers and even if everyone is in school, my stepmother and brother and sister, he is still distant and hurried. I've learned to not need my father or at least function without a father. I don't know what he thinks. I don't know why he does what he does, and I never saw it coming. I knew he didn't want me to be a lesbian, but I'm with a man, now. Why does he still not love me like he did? In this way, my father is a stranger. I do not understand him; I do not know him. I do not trust him. I don't know the next time he is going to call. I hardly feel welcome in the house I grew up in. I am treated like an aunt or a cousin instead of a daughter. I believe he loves me, but it must be that abstract kind of love that works better in theory rather than in practice. He might be proud of me. I don't know what he wants from me. I don't know that he wants me.

I'd Miss Me

I have these dreams about Jim. I know they are more about me than him. It's more about my problem than anything he's done. Jim has sex with someone else in front me. He acts like it's no big deal. In the dream, I always wonder when Jim changed. I always think how I never saw

this coming. In reality, Jim cheated on his wife, but I do not believe Jim is a cheater. I believe he was in a bad situation.

Jim cheated on his wife for more years of their marriage than years he didn't cheat on his wife. How could she not know? Not suspect something? I wonder if she was that blind to him, to his needs and wants like she was tuned into parts of Jim, but not others like radio channels she couldn't pick up. I like to think I'd know if someone was cheating on me, if it was someone I lived with, saw, talked to everyday. I like to think I'd know if someone was capable of changing or leaving me or not loving me. I like to think I know what to expect from the people I love more than what I expect from a stranger. But I'm not so sure there's a difference. Sometimes, I even surprise myself. Sometimes, I feel I hardly know myself. Sometimes, I feel we hardly know anyone at all, and we couldn't be more alone.

We work hard to get away from ourselves through distractions. Technology, daydreaming, tuning out. Whenever I'm alone in the car sometimes I want to call someone, turn on the radio get away from my head and my thoughts, but why? What's wrong with me? Why do I need all these distractions? No wonder I don't like myself, I'm rarely around myself. It must be like love: we can't know anyone until we know ourselves, until we love ourselves. I know that my brain is the only brain I have access to, and I should stop running away from myself, from other people. I should start calling my father more instead of being upset he doesn't call me. I should expect the rejection and the distance in his voice for I am okay because I have myself. This isn't some kind of moral lesson because real life doesn't work in moral lessons. Or maybe it is. This is a lesson to pay attention to yourself, to tune in. Instead of feeling lonely, feel whole. We've got ourselves. That's got to be worth something. If I died, I'd miss me.

Broken Bicycle

Driving home from spin class, I saw a man standing in the dark between the shadowed gap of two light posts. He stood on the sidewalk by the road, wearing a bike helmet. His legs stood together and his shoulders slumped as he hung his head low between his shoulders, looking at his bike lying on the pavement. His bike lay between the yellow line marking the road and the edge of the sidewalk. The man simply stood there not looking up or around. Within in the five seconds I was able to see him as I passed and in my rearview mirror, he never moved. Was his bike broken? Was he sad? Hurt? Lost? Sick? Waiting for someone to help him? Trying to draw attention to himself? Had he finally had enough? His day could have been anything, and for a moment his life intersected with my life. He did not see me pass, but I saw him and now I wonder why he looked so defeated. I see someone on the side of the road and instantly think he's probably crazy. I'm sure there are moments when I look crazy. Once I went to Publix in sweat pants and a baggy t-shirt and a woman pulled her small child behind her like I was a disease. I understand we all have bad days.

The Sign People

They used to be young, black men that could dance to songs in their heads while holding a ratty Little Caesar's sign, but now I see old men who look homeless waving signs for antique stores, electronics sales, and furniture close outs. There's a man that wears a gold suit and a gold mask for a pawnshop. He waves a gold, gloved hand as people drive by, sometimes tipping his gold hat. I've stopped looking at him because I know he'll wave and tip his hat at me. It makes me feel weird. The Little Caesar sign guys could throw their signs in the air and catch them like a baton. They'd stand out there near the asphalt in the midday heat of summer. Their clothes were

soaked through with sweat from dancing. I marveled at how good of shape they had to be in. I wondered if any of them lost weight from the gig. What is it was like to stand on the side of the road and wave to people who were probably busy texting? But who knows maybe it was an important text message like the people who go by in ambulances. There are so fucking many of us.

Milk Boy

On a small, black bicycle, a boy of ten years old sat in the road's median, waiting for an opening in traffic to cross the remaining lanes while he propped a jug of milk on his handlebars, looking more grown-up than I do. He waited patiently. His young face looked cute wearing such a mature expression. His mother must have sent him to the store.

Airplane Thoughts

There's those people you meet on airplanes, in long lines, in classes that you briefly know. I've forgotten so many of those people, and I am sure so many of those people have forgotten me. We're so individualistic, self-centered and "special," we forget we are a species, a common animal. If everyone died and you were the last human on the planet, would you want to live? Would there be a point? I wouldn't. Most of the time we suck, but we're also so interesting. I love humans. A stranger is someone I don't know, but I know the animal. I know the species. How we interact with one another and how we know how to interpret one another. We study our own behavior through psychology, sociology, and biology. We are fascinated by our species. Is everyone a stranger? Is no one a stranger? Is there something comforting about a stranger? It's comforting to be around animals that look like you.

Marriage Talk

I've heard all these details. I know the facts, the emotions. I can tell the story. It's become my story, part of my experience. And I became conditioned for something strange to happen. When Jim talks about his ex-wife, I get horny. It's a weird cause and effect. He brings her up, and I feel the familiar blood rush to my center. I feel the surge of moisture. I feel strange for having such a reaction. Maybe it's like Stockholm syndrome. I believe it comes from our beginning, how he was married and how I wanted him to stay. We'd have sex and he'd have to leave to be home by a certain time. The sex and the pain became so closely intertwined. He'd leave for her. I wanted him, and I thought of her. He'd speak her name, and I'd feel the warmth spread over my body. Maybe the sexual desire tried to cover the pain, the hole her name created. Maybe both. I'm more welcoming of the both these days. I spent a lot of time looking for black or white, yes or no, good or bad answers until I realized they were only a construction and there was no such thing. Jim's ex-wife, the boy on the bicycle's mother, the dirty man, the sign people, the sad woman that watched the crippled woman fall, the man who rarely talks to his oldest daughter, the man who cheated on his wife, none of us are bad people. We may not be good either. We're just animals who do good and bad things. We just try to figure it out as we go along the best we can. We're all strangers, and none of us are strangers. We know nothing, and we know everything. We are weak. We couldn't be more powerful.

PINE DADDY

The back of his neck is finely wrinkled with burgundy-tanned skin. His hair thins down his neck to the smooth of his broad shoulders. Freckles and moles spot the reddish brown that is my favorite color. His brown hair is streaked with gold from the sun. I love him most when he wears a ponytail to his shoulders, his hair greased back smooth with the sides and underneath sheered short. Around the side of his neck on the right side, he has a dark birth mark that his mother says is the same birth mark on the back of my right thigh.

He says shit eating bastard, you lie like a rug, shitfiredamnhell.

He keeps his nails short and his hands rough with work. He works outside, in the woods. He marks timber and manages land for hunting and fishing. He plants food plots. He walks through pine plantations. He knows snakes and grasses. He rides horses. He plays football. He cooks chicken and dumplings. He makes homemade biscuits.

He calls me boney maroney for when I am growing, vermin and fruit fly for when he loves me, and squirrely for when I am crazy.

He treats me not like a daughter and not like a son, more like his little friend. He teaches me to work hard. He teaches me to hunt and to fish. He teaches me how to survive. He chops wood, and I carry the pieces onto the front porch and stack them in the iron ring. I sit behind him in the four-wheeler, spotlighting beaver.

We watch movies. We sing Sarah McLaughlin in his truck. He lectures to me on genetics. We are best friends.

If I want to make myself cry, I think of him dying. I never imagine we will stop being best friends. I assume we will last forever, no matter what.

He is born in Japan in 1965. His father is in the air force. He lives in Nebraska and then Texas. He likes Texas best. He dates a Mexican girl whose father is half-black.

He starts on the high school football team. The players call him Longhorn. He is a linebacker. He is recruited by colleges. He gets hurt. He becomes a bodybuilder. He goes to Auburn University. He takes steroids. He meets my mother. They workout and shoot up together. They get married. I am born. He graduates with a degree in Wildlife Biology and Forestry. She cheats on him. They divorce. He takes me with him.

He stays in the pines, works the land. This is when I love him best. When I am ten, he moves to goats and hay. This is when I love him second best, but I see his laziness, his rashness. Then he moves to softball. All the goats die. He goes to the woods when he wants to make money on a timber cruise. He is a coach. He will get my sister a scholarship. He is a man of phases. I do not know what his next phase will be, but I hope it is less expensive than a bailer, a 100 x 40 foot barn, top shelf softball bats, a flatbed truck and trailer, three hundred goats. I wonder if I am the product of a phase; the wildlife-workout-shoot-up phase.

He just wants to be a good father. He has three children from two different women. It's easier to be a better father to the younger two who are from the woman he is married to. And he is a good father to them, especially my sister. I am thankful for that. They need him. I've learned not to, or maybe how to function without him. I am okay. I will always miss my daddy in the pines. I will always search for, long for that man. He no longer exists. There is no gravestone to visit, memorialize, or mourn. The man with the knee-high, lace-up boots and a shoulder-length ponytail is gone, stolen by age and circumstance. He will never come back. He is my daddy. I will keep him forever in the pines. Each time I run my hand over pine bark, crunch through dried needles, smell their resinous sap I am closer to him. He is between the gapped rows, walking on

marking the trunks of the pines that are ready to cut. He will keep working long days. He will stay with the pines so that I can visit him. As long as the pines are growing, he is there, working and waiting for Gatorade and a sandwich. The pines tell me when I've come home. The pines tell me I am loved, I am a child, I have a father. There, he is mine, and I am his.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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