

snowbird: a brief memoir in essays

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I was ten years old and would not now remember the cracked crab.  
The day's events did not turn on cracked crab. And yet it is  
precisely that fictitious crab that makes me see the afternoon  
all over again, a home movie run all too often,  
the father bearing gifts, the child weeping,  
an exercise in family love and guilt.  
Or that is what it was to me.

(Didion, "On Keeping a Notebook")

on coming home

Let me describe a photograph for you: It is 2008, it is December, and it has just snowed for the first time that winter. The snow is powdered like cake flour, sticking to everything—and, for those who do not know, that is the perfect kind of snow, the kind of snow that packs into plump snowpersons and welcomes footprints in its white skin. There is a child in striped mittens the color of sherbet laying down on their back with their arms spread out beside them like an eagle. A snow angel is forming beneath them.

My family had moved to Pennsylvania earlier that same year. I was nine years old. At that point in my life, I had lived in six different cities, what with my mother's endless march through medical schooling and internships, Navy service and, finally, residency. I was accustomed to it, being the new kid in homeroom. You know the one. The one who shows up holding their patterned lunchbox with long French braids and calf-length socks, the one who has to stand at the front of the class and tell everyone where they came from and what their favorite color is and why they moved to whatever-town-this-is.

We lived in a semi-rural county about an hour-or-so north of Philadelphia, an hour-or-so west of New York City, and a few hours northeast of Amish country, tucked at the base of the Pocono mountains. It was a nice town, perfectly normal, perfectly fine. We had a backyard that sat in front of a cornfield with stalks that grew big and tall and dark green in the summertime. Nettles and dandelions spattered the lawn in spring and the leaves crunched come autumn. We were set to leave after three years, after the residency was complete. Three years passed, then five, then seven, and suddenly I realized that I was stuck in the folds of the mountains. I spent most of my time alone as a teenager dreaming of all the beautiful places in the world that I could be in right at that very moment if only I were not *here*. Anywhere but here.

The first few times I went back home, my first Thanksgiving weekend or my first winter break, my body nestled into the imprint of loathing I created, my spot on the couch that fits me and only me. It was comfortable there, familiar. Everything around me left a sour taste at the back of my tongue, and I liked it. It was easier to criticize with my proximity to my escape still an arm's length away—through hate, I could maintain the idea that my choice to leave was correct and justifiable. It was easier to blame, easier to deflect my changing emotions onto my environment. You know how it is, finding external excuses like a busy schedule or a crumbling relationship to avoid internal work and self-reflection. To admit that I might not have cut my hometown enough slack was too difficult. Everything about me, the very fabric of my being would have to change, and I wasn't ready for that. All I knew was that I was from where I was from and that I hated it there. Who would I be without this part of my past? Comfort is a silent killer.

As these moments and scenes and years of my life have drifted further behind me on the river, they have become foggier, hazier, as memories do. I have found that there is no correct perception of memories, no *real* experience or *real* events. How, say, my father might have perceived a span of time, like the first inklings of my depression rearing its ugly head sophomore year, and how I perceive that exact same span of time are wildly different—to him, it was puberty, and to me, it was so much more. Yet both of these experiences are equally truthful. I recently read Tara Westover's *Educated*, a book that reflects on her time growing up in a survivalist, extremist Mormon family in the hillsides of Idaho, scrapping metal in the summer, canning fruit in the fall, and storing guns and ammunition in an underground bunker all winter long. Her father becomes a central element of her recollection—he is complicated, narcissistic, and many times cruel. There are two specific scenes in her retelling—both involving serious injury of her brothers—that she and members of her family remember differently. It is important to note the “multiple sides” of each event and what implications these interpretations have on the entire character of a human being. If

the way she remembers the events is correct—Tyler stumbling down the hill with his entire leg singed black from a nasty burn, Shawn falling twenty feet through the air and laying in the hot sun for hours before a helicopter was called—then her father is a terrible, heartless person who nearly let her brothers die; if the way her brothers remember the exact same injuries—their father driving Tyler down the hill himself to care for him, an airlift getting Shawn without any waiting—is real, factual, then he is not who Westover thinks he is. Memories waver. That very nature of our memories allows her to create her father as a monster, and as far as she’s concerned, he is. In another eye, he might not be so bad. She might never know.

Separating the self, moving further away from these events forces selective remembrance, in a way. Why do we choose to remember what we do? Our memories shift, I think, based on how salient certain experiences are to us now. Maybe we create memories to serve us. Their purpose is malleable, moldable to be whatever you need to attain from that moment for your current life. There is this back-and-forth, this dichotomy of experience and truth, this struggle between the idealistic and realistic that permeates all recollection. Am I fabricating my memories for some unknown purpose? Is it for comfort, motivation?

Writing these essays asked more of me than I thought they would. I found it difficult, sometimes, to write about other people. It was exceptionally difficult to write about people when I knew those people are probably going to read what I have written about them, and especially, specifically, when I care for those people deeply. I wrote and rewrote the essay that follows this one countless times in a frustrated, sweat-licked rage because I was absolutely terrified of misrepresenting my friends through my own perception. I believed I would warp them into something they are not. I believed the portrait I was painting of them would be false, one-sided, whether that meant elevating them onto a pedestal, a form of hero-worship, or highlighting traits

that might be deemed undesirable to an onlooker. I have the tendency to revere, to deify, or to chastise and loathe, two extremes, two interpretations. My friends and our experiences at the K-Hole were the most important, most life-altering, most impactful part of my time at home (in a similar way that the northeastern climate and my mental illness were the absolute worst), but I know that I am biased. Westover knew she was biased, too, and her bias resulted in the portrait of a monster. I was wary.

Through revising, though, through those countless hours of re-seeing, I found that part of who they are—as well as what the whole of *home* is—is entirely based in my own lens. We are who others perceive us to be. Things are what others make of them. I don't believe we necessarily glorify or belittle memories of home intentionally, really, like making things out to be better or worse than they were to serve some purpose. I believe it is just how we experienced it at that point in our lives; “how it felt to me,” as Didion says. How it felt to me is who they were, is what home was. How it felt to me is why I think the way I do, why I remember what I do, why coming home is so complicated; it is why coming home is so beautiful and strange.

I wanted to explore why writers are drawn to writing personal memoirs and essays to begin with—is it to re-live these experiences that we took for granted, or to create a reality that's better than what we actually experienced? I wish I found an answer, a truth, a brisk and satisfying *yes* or *no*. Of course, there is no real truth, no hard outlines or punctuation to the way things are. This is how I see it: Memories are fluid. I think that is what makes the fabric of home so intricate and volatile. Home becomes what you need it to be in the current moment, wherever you are on the long walk forward. If you need home to motivate you to go, to leave, it will do that for you, it will become that for you. If you need home to open its wide arms and envelop you in the familiar smell of the fabric softener your parents use on all of your towels and sheets, it will. Home migrates like flocks of birds in the wintertime, soaring and relocating around the mind; it sizzles into glowing embers and catches

like a campfire deep into a summer evening. Home buys plane tickets at 8:43 on a Wednesday evening while you stare out your apartment window at the gravel in the parking lot below.

Coming home is hard. It pushes me backwards and makes me reflect, whether I like it or not. I never thought I would come back here without kicking and screaming, and I never, absolutely never, thought I would come here to breathe. But here I am. I am sitting in the swinging wicker chair on the back porch of my parents' house in early August, facing the weed speckled lawn with bright green corn stalks at the edge of the yard, and the breeze is clean and sweet. Grey ridges rise above the distant horizon. I can hear my mother making pesto in the kitchen with the basil she picked herself earlier this morning. The small fountain in the garden is bubbling over.

A finch lands in the geyser and lets the water rinse its feathers clean.

paint something for the trees

Limitless, undying love  
Which shines around me like a million suns  
It calls me on and on across the universe  
(the Beatles)

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I stick my foot out in front of me, my toes floating in the air. Little piggies. I want Sam to press her foot against it like we always used to do.

“Hi.”

“My feet are dirty,” Sam says. The pads of her feet are calloused and worn, and a layer of mud has settled into the cracks. You can see the veins of the earth in her skin; they are mountain feet. She wriggles her toes.

“That’s okay,” I tell her.

The air outside is getting colder. I hold up my hand to block the late day from my eyes. The light is fading, night coming on. I can see the setting sun through my fingertips. Its edges are gooey and soft, like sweet apricot jam.

Sam looks down at her toes and looks around, mischievous. “The one thing my mom yells at me for is *not* wearing shoes inside, because my feet are dirtier than my shoes. She wants me to wear shoes *inside*,” she says, “‘cause, if there’s ever a puddle in the kitchen or like, some water, I just fuck up the kitchen.” Sam’s kitchen biome. Thick, emerald moss coating the wooden baseboards, shelf mushrooms climbing the cabinets, fragrant pine trees leaning over the countertops and brushing against the ceiling. A few birds, a family of white-tailed deer. A placid lake in the center. Francesca starts laughing off to my right.

The firepit sits cold and dark in the center of the five of us. A few bundles of sticks, maybe a log or two, and a scoop of crumbling leaves fill the basin. It is a sun potion. Claire looks up at the

fading daylight and rubs her bare arms. She kneels in front of the pit and gets to work with a kitchen lighter.

“You just have puddles in your kitchen?” asks Julia. “Why are there puddles? It’s a kitchen.”

“No, it’s an ecosystem,” Claire says. The kindling catches. She pauses for a moment to stand triumphant over the pit. Goddess of fire. The logs spark and the flame eats the kindling up like a warm breakfast. It grows and grows and grows until we have pulled the sun back out of the sky at put it right before us.

It is the August right before our final year of college, the last month of the last summer. I have known them for so many years. Countless summertimes have been spent with them, some better than others, some the best months of my life. How did we meet? Truthfully, I couldn’t tell you how I met each of them. We collected each other over time. At one point or another, we all just crashed and stuck, and their presence has filled my life with immeasurable joy. The ways that I think, how I see people, what I value; they taught me everything. Memories of them pervade my vision almost all the time. It is like residue, but I don’t mind. They help me see.

Every now and then, we come together, winter breaks and summer vacation and the like. Whenever an opportunity shows itself, really, though the opportunities grow scarcer each year. Claire travels to Utah to do archeological work, Sam gets a job at a farm, Julia and I work as camp counselors together. Francesca travels with her boyfriend. Claire makes plans to move to Long Island with hers. Julia wants to farm. Sam stays in Plattsburgh, then plans to move to Georgia. I keep returning to Florida, though who knows where to next. We all have jobs, or school, or plans. It’s living and it’s aging. You know how it goes. It just feels so good to be with them, outside in the tall grass with trees looming at the edges of the yard. Savoring it is all that matters. I missed them and their big, white smiles.

Right now, the fire illuminates their faces bronze. From where I am sitting, they look like field of marigolds.

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There's this creek spot that Sam showed us long ago just off the winding road that leads to the game preserve. Park on the shoulder, lock the cars, head down a small, log-covered incline of moss and weeds. The path is narrow and dark. Hardly noticeable, you could say, but only if you aren't trying to notice. It's an idyllic spot, right along the pebble shore of Jordan Creek with a few huge, smooth rocks on the water that were perfect for us and whatever we wanted to do. We liked to spend time outside together, the five of us. The sun made us all feel good, cured whatever ailments we were suffering from. It didn't matter what we were doing or where we were, at the park or along a trail or in a hammock by the trees. We were just best when we were in the sunshine. That's when the magic happened. The river brings memories of July, of mid-summer. Freckled shoulders and tart, ripe clementines. Sam liked to bring her bongos to the creek. Sometimes, she would bring the most beautiful steel drum. It made these soft, deep ringing sounds, and it must have resonated with the spirits in the trees because I swear it transformed the energy of that river.

She was playing the drum cross-legged, her hair turned auburn from hours of farm labor. It flew behind her ears in thin wisps, creating a gentle halo. You could feel the notes inside your stomach. They were warm and they were full. Her thumbs danced across the steel. The melody carried out over the stream and drifted above our heads, and the river listened.

Francesca and I treaded in the creek, which was the perfect temperature that day. Everyone believes in their own perfection, but I promise, if you slide into the river and the water feels like just the air and your body feels like it weighs nothing at all, then that is the perfect temperature. There is nothing better. We floated on their backs, faces turned up to the sky. Bubbles ran over our shoulders and curled up around our jaws. The suds glistened in sun like a pale rainbow. The way our

fingers and toes looked made them appear translucent, like our bodies were still fresh, virginal, fetal. We floated like that for a while, turned on our backs and letting our arms hang. I could see Francesca's arms underneath the surface. Her long, dark hair clung to the sides of her face, and the way it cascaded down into the water made her look like a siren. A mermaid in a grotto, tanned and cherubic.

Julia and Claire sat laying backwards on a woven blanket against the rocks. They ate strawberries and sliced oranges and spoke to each other in lazy conversation. They were probably talking about toads, or how to make cheese out of cashews. The current reflected white onto their skin like anti-shadows of light. When Francesca left the water to sunbathe, and I paddled over to the other side of the creek to lay in the shallow bank. The stones beneath me were slippery and smooth. I held a few in my hands and rolled them around across my palm. It felt nice. One of them was the perfect size for skipping, big and flat and smooth all the way around. No lumps or craters, a nice weight. I flicked it across the water and watched it skim towards my friends. From the shade, my view of them was perfect, all laughing and lit up by the sunshine.

When I looked at them, I felt the way I feel about the sound of rain or the way a bowl of soup feels in my hands, the way I feel when a room is lit by candles. The smell of banana bread baking. The feeling of cold morning air. It was an episode of harmonious co-existence, *being* in all its messy glory. It was something special, divine, but I did not grasp the weight of it. I could not see the sacrality of it.

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“But yeah, I emailed my landlord because I’ve been having these weird anxiety dreams about, like, getting a roommate,” Francesca says, “like, dreams where my roommate is trying to kill me or something, so—”

“Did you tell her that?” I cut in. She is talking about the apartment she’ll be moving into for fall semester. “Did you tell her you were having ‘anxiety dreams?’”

Sam laughs. “You type: my roommate is trying to kill me, in my mind, in my dreams.”

“Her non-existent roommate—” Julia says. Francesca puts her face in her hands and takes a sip of her Stella.

“My roommate,” she says, “who does not exist, is trying to kill me.” She breathes in. “So, I emailed my landlord at midnight—”

“At midnight!”

“Midnight?” Poking fun at Francesca is easy. She gets flustered and embarrassed and waves her hands around her body. She always wants to explain herself to us, but I don’t think she realizes that we don’t care at all, we just like being around her.

“She was definitely concerned, because instead of emailing me back, she *called* me.”

“Oh my goodness, she called you?” says Julia.

“At midnight?” I say. They laugh, and that feels good, and so does the beer in my stomach. The flame starts to die down. Sam gets up from her chair to grab one armful of sticks, then another. Julia nurses her wine. Claire descends to the grass to work the fire.

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When I moved to Florida, my first roommate had a southern accent and ashen skin. I could see her purple veins along her arms. Her name was Mary. We attended boring fraternity parties together during the first few weeks of school, Sigma Wigma’s “Totally Fucking Wild Orientation Week Banger” and all that. Mary loved parties. I think she liked feeling included, holding a cup in a crowd that wore the same Tory Birch sandals as her. That was thrill to her. I understood it, needing to be part of something. She was alright. Sometimes, we drove to the beach in a rental car.

Mary had chronic gut problems. She didn't really explain it to me. I knew she'd been in the hospital a few times, that it was bad enough that she wanted to stay close to home, but that's all. She kept a blue cart full of medication next to her bedside at all times. I tried to read the names of the prescriptions to figure her out, but there were far too many to decipher. When her pain was overwhelming, she sat in bed, called her mom, and watched the Vampire Diaries. She drank gallons of organic apple juice. It could get boring being with her, but she was all I had. Nobody else on campus went out of their way to speak to me, and some of them seemed like they avoided me outright. I often sat next to her on the bed while she watched her shows. Usually, I read or napped against the wall. I don't know if I felt like I should keep her company, or if I just wanted to be close to someone.

We got along just fine, for the most part. We ate Doritos together and slept in late on weekends. We liked the same things, like the ocean and shag rugs, except she did not like my haircut or my opinions or the way I dressed. She especially did not like these things after she joined her sorority. The façade of it, it all fell apart when I had a panic attack in front of her. I lost something—it was my mother's class ring, the one I wore on my right hand, though that doesn't really matter. I needed someone to tell me it was okay, that was it.

Mary did not come near me. Instead, she stared. She stared for ten minutes while I shook violently. After it passed, I got up out of the bed and stood in front of her to apologize.

"What the *fuck* was that?" she said. My tongue filled up the inside of my entire mouth. I couldn't have talked back to her, even if I wanted to. She started to move towards me, and she kept repeating: "I didn't sign up for this, I didn't sign up for this!"

I wondered what would happen if I screamed. The RA would come running into the room, only to be met with a breakup scene from a late night soap. We were the episode that comes like a left jab to the fans. Ultimate heartbreak at the end of the season. "I can't believe Mary did that,"

they'd say, tsk tsk-ing. "Did you see the way her veins bulged? She looked like my husband's swollen—"

Then she stood square before me, put her hands on my shoulders, and shoved me across the room. I stumbled backwards. It felt as though I could not stop falling.

"You're a fucking *psycho*," she said. Mary moved out of the room the next day.

For weeks, the other bed in my room was empty, stripped clean to the vinyl mattress and metal cot. The walls were bare. It became very quiet. It was so quiet that I could hear the air blowing gently out of the air conditioner when I held my breath. A great deal of my time was spent making art alone. To fill the stillness, I listened to the Beatles. I painted with watercolors and drew on Bristol board with black Micron liners, sitting on the ground in my underwear. The way the pigments dripped and swirled together in pools and puddles on the page was like liquid intangibility. Nebulas of random emotion. I will show these in a gallery years from now, I thought, and I will laugh at how lonely I was. Brooding, melancholic. That streaked part there is sadness. That bit over there is hurt, isn't that funny? That dark part there, in the center, that's me.

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This autumn evening in high school, Francesca and I were sitting in Claire's bedroom. I loved Claire's room. It was covered in plants, pothos and philodendron, succulents like echeveria and houseleek and string of pearls. They lined the windowsill and the walls. They crept along the edges of her vanity. Jars shaped like skulls and vials sealed with black wax sat on her shelves, and she dangled heavy jewelry from nails that jutted out of the painted drywall. She kept dinosaur bone fragments out and told us to lick them. It was a cave. Her room felt full of insight and potential, and I believe it was a reflection of her in the simplest, most absolute way. I felt that she knew everything.

Claire told us she had an idea. She handed Francesca and me lanterns, and she packed a small backpack with a handful of things she grabbed out of a dresser drawer. We put on our shoes

and headed out the front door, through the screen porch and down the front steps. It was the middle of the night. She led us through her sleeping neighborhood. We hit a patch of trees on the right, and Claire turned in at a break in the brush. The bushes were still and quiet, parting only slightly along the deer trail. It was nice that we could walk together in silence. I looked up overhead and saw the clusters of Perseus and Pegasus. It was a nice night, just cold. I pulled my sweatshirt down over my hands and listened to the sound of the dying leaves beneath us as we went along.

After a short while, the bushes opened up and we reached a circular clearing; a Terabithia, it seemed. Claire knelt down and reached into her backpack. She pulled out acrylic paints, broken paintbrushes, old pieces of cardboard.

“Paint something for the trees,” said Claire.

“Okay,” I said.

The wind picked up. It whipped through the branches, tumbling into our small bodies and stinging our faces. The air felt wet and cool. Storm-weather. I hung up my lantern on a tree branch to bring light into the clearing, and as it swung around it cast a beautiful glow against the forest, creating a late afternoon throughout the glade. Sitting down on the dirt and the slate, I smoothed a piece of cardboard against the ground. I could barely see underneath the cloudy light from the lantern, but the strokes felt good and right. Whatever I made would be good and right, nothing wrong could have happened there. The space was protecting us. Francesca and Claire danced around me against the perimeter of the brush. They danced in circles and flowed to the silence, to the wind. I stopped painting to watch them. Their silhouettes merged in and out with the bushes. They were graceful, like shadow-beings. It was like they were made of dust. My body sunk against the ground; I rolled on my back and stared up at the sky. The lantern swung above my head like a bright star. I watched it swing in the breeze.

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The first night Joan moved in, she ate an entire package of Oreos in her sleep, the one I kept in my bottom desk drawer. There were crumbs all over her bedsheets in the morning. She was very embarrassed, but I wasn't upset, just startled. Joan told me she suffered from sleep paralysis, and occasionally, demons visited her in the dark while she was frozen and helpless. I asked if the demons made her eat the Oreos. She said could only move her eyes when it happened. I told her I was sorry. She said it enlightened her. She was a birth number 11.

I watched her do her makeup at her desk each morning. She looked beautiful with her big teeth and small nose. She liked to wear false eyelashes and line above her cupid's bow with red lipstick. Sometimes, I would let her paint her lipstick on me, or rub brown powder onto my eyelids. She liked to dress me up and turn me into something I was not.

We always had nice conversations. Joan was into astrology and numerology, and she was pretty good at it. She told me things about myself that I had never told her before just by reading my house placements. That definitely excited me, being able to explore the metaphysical with someone again. I am ruled by Mercury, according to Joan. After we finished midterms in mid-October, we walked along the river while the sun was setting. We talked about death.

"Do you believe in reincarnation?" she asked me. She was sucking on a blue lollipop.

"I don't know," I said, "but I hope I was a tree once. Or maybe a bird." I looked to the left. The skyline had caught fire, and the river looked as though it was made of gold. Joan's hand found mine as we walked. Her palms were soft like orange blossoms.

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Julia and I used to chase sunsets in my car. Late summer afternoons spent driving forty-five minutes from our town to look for ‘spots.’ I liked spending time with her and listening to her talk as she drove. Julia was a quiet person. I always wanted her to share what she was thinking with me, but it took a bit of prompting, a bit of prodding to get her to talk about her life. For whatever reason, though, she could not shut up in the car. She rambled about her sister or her parents’ failing marriage, or about school and freelancing, of course. I loved it. While she chatted, I kept my eyes peeled for those spots. Scenic spots, hidden spots, pockets of magic behind a bundle of pines or an abandoned barn. We found one once, a good one, off the side of some farm road in Bumfuck. The shoulder overlooked a ripe cornfield and a depthless lake. The best part was that it faced West, like it was made for us. It was waiting for Julia and me to find it. I parked the Chevy and crawled onto the hood, pulling myself up onto the roof. Julia followed. We sat on top of my car together with our feet dangling, bare, and waited for the sun to drop out of the sky. The air was pleasant, like down feathers.

“I just want to talk about the stars,” Julia said. “Why do we dream, you know? Why do we love?” She looked out across the lake. “Why doesn’t anyone ever want to talk about the universe with me?” The loose curls at the ends of her brown hair were lit in bright, hot orange. In the sun, her tawny eyes turned the color of basil, a deep green just below the surface. I think I fell in love with her then, really. She was a light.

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Joan started bringing boys into our room. First, it was once in a while, then more, and more. I didn’t mind at first. If boys had wanted to come back to my room with me, I probably would have let them too. The last time it happened, I came home from class to Joan texting someone on the bed. Her feet rocked back and forth in the air.

“Hey...” she said, “do you think you could be somewhere else for like, an hour later tonight? At six, maybe?”

“Sure,” I said. It nice enough to do work outside. Joan thanked me and hugged me. She kissed me on the cheek. I had to wipe the lipstick off in the bathroom mirror.

I came back to the room after an hour and a half, after the sun had set and the night air became sticky and humid. It was generous of you, all things considered. Dusk had woken the mosquitos, and they were ruthless. Bug bites ran up and down my legs, and a strange rash bloomed near my heel. A shower would feel so nice. Turning the handle downwards, I tried to open the door.

“Wait wait wait *wait!*” said Joan from inside the room. “Give us, um, five minutes!” I could hear hushed voices. It did not surprise me. The door slipped back into the frame, and I sat up against the hallway wall. Joan had been arguing with me recently. We had grown apart, her finding new people to be around and me finding nobody new at all. She was growing and changing, like people do, and I hoped I was, too; but I didn’t understand any of it. I just knew I was angry. I was only temporary to her, I thought, and I was not sure what she was to me.

I stood up and walked into the dorm. A boy jumped into the air and stared at me with very round, blue eyes, looking like a deer. His chest was smooth and shiny and his nipples were hard from the air conditioning. He had blonde hair. I think his boxers were pickle-patterned, but they might have been cucumbers or they might have been neither of those things at all. Joan was lounging on her bed.

“Aw, Beck, come on!” The boy ran out of the room, bright red. I did not look at her. Joan didn’t talk to me for the rest of that night.

I moved out of that room at the beginning of spring semester because Joan and three of her friends cornered me after class on a Tuesday and, for two hours, told me I was a terrible, terrible

person and who did not deserve happiness. Change is good. But what she did to me that afternoon hurt me in the softest, saddest parts, like watching a butterfly tremble with a broken wing. It still hurts me very much. I felt so lost. After gathering my things in a few trash bags, I slept on an old friend's couch for two weeks. The friend was only an acquaintance, really, but she had a kind heart. She said hello to me every morning and wished me nice dreams before bed. There was a flamingo nightlight in her living room that lit up the walls in magenta and rose, casting color against the bare walls. My feet were always cold because the blanket was too small for my legs. I listened to recorded tracks of rain every night before bed. I dreamt very little.

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The night my high school boyfriend broke up with me, I drove to Julia's house. I had nowhere else to go. We sat in her basement, sitting as close to each other as we could. I cried until my eyelids were sore. She sat there and listened. A cast iron heater that was supposed to look like a fireplace sputtered on in the corner. It hummed as the heat seeped into the room. The lights were dim and yellow, and the walls of her basement were painted a pale green. I kept scratching my nails against my legs. It was sobering to me, the sensation. I was focusing on that sensation, the way that my skin pulled back underneath my fingers, when I heard Julia start crying.

"Are you okay?" I asked. She rubbed her face.

"I just," she said. "It felt like you broke up with *me*, before, when you started hanging out with Alex so much. Where did you go? Like, I still loved you, but you weren't there. When you have a partner or whatever, you can't just leave me hanging. You know?" The fake firelight flickered in a mechanical way. She put her head against my shoulder. We breathed in rhythm. How much time had I taken from her? From the others? I wasted it, the days that we had together. Now, there is no time at all. What I wouldn't do to go back.

"I missed you," she said to me.

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I have a flight to catch at dawn. I say goodbye to them, blowing kisses across the dead embers. Francesca stands in front of me. I look into the warm brown pools of her eyes.

“Bye,” she says. I reach out and grab her hands.

“When we go,” I say, “we always find a way back.” She nods.

Drawing it out makes it harder, I have learned. It is hard to look at them for too long. There will be a next time, though. There always is. I put my head down and walk away from the fire circle and into the darkness. The night is cold on my skin, but I leave the windows rolled down in the Chevy anyways. Familiarity settles in the passenger seat. Tomorrow, I will fly away from them. We will talk every day, sending photos of sweet potato gnocchi to each other, but it will not be the same. We all know that. When I get home, I open my front door quietly, the way I have always done to not wake my family. I smell like smoke and campfire. I close myself into my bathroom, sealing the door behind me. The faucet turns on with a quick hiss. I wait for the water to heat, standing naked and cold underneath the fluorescents.

## k-hole

They called their band the Wildlings.<sup>1</sup> The party was at their townhouse in Kutztown on a hot Saturday night in September. I was seventeen, and I'd never been to a real party before. Parties were Nintendo games and the chips my parents bought for us in bowls on the floor; they were game nights playing Settlers of Catan and Mafia around coffee tables; they were getting drunk with friends in half-finished basements after junior prom. We drank Vladimir vodka for \$7.79 a liter and called it a night at 3. The plastic jug was as big as my head. When it was empty, I looked through the neck like a telescope.

Francesca and I pulled up to the address Ross sent us. A torn, brown couch was outside on the lawn, and five people sprawled across it, laughing loudly and holding wet beer cans. I stood by my car and stared. I could see the whites of their eyes in the moonlight. Others were off in the side lawn, puffing American Spirits. If I had to start smoking cigarettes<sup>2</sup> too, I would smoke American Spirits, I thought. The cardboard packs that poked out of their waistbands and lapel pockets were matte and blue as a robin's egg. Everyone's marble eyes followed us. It wasn't surprising—we were two children, wide-eyed and soft, and we were new to them, strangers in their house. Still, I was unnerved. I never thought I could be that scared of people. Their fingernails were so sharp, and their black pants were so tight, and my stomach felt sick from the smell of the dying front lawn that

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<sup>1</sup> Fronted by Isaac, the Wildlings were a sort of surf-rock jam band, like the Growler's old albums but with worse recording equipment and a low production budget. They had been playing together since high school, making music in garages until they found space and an audience in college. They were really, really good. They broke up a few years after I met them, though I suppose it was more like a dissolving, a slow decay. Like a sickness. I don't know much about it and only heard secondhand from Francesca. From what I understand, the bandmates didn't agree on where they wanted the Wildlings to go—Isaac wanted them to practice, play well, and possibly get some real, paid gigs. Ross, on the other hand, seemed to stop caring about the Wildlings, or didn't take them seriously. He didn't want to practice, didn't want to try. Eventually, he fucked up the paperwork at a paid gig that lost them their pay—something like, "I've got it covered," and he never did. I think that was the last straw.

<sup>2</sup> My mom hated cigarettes. Mamaw had smoked like a damn chimney, and mom grew up around it. She hated the smell, always complained about the smell, especially when we were somewhere in public like a beach or walking along the sidewalk. Secretly, I liked the smell. I especially liked when the tobacco smelled sweet, like the way the slots smell in casinos in Las Vegas, or the way old hotel lobbies with plush carpets smelled. Like dark red cherries and wine.

was the color of barley. When I dreamed, I imagined myself with people like them in places just like this. I wanted to be them so badly. We walked along the concrete steppingstones that led to the front door and climbed the stoop. You ready? Francesca said.

It was dark and lit with colored incandescent, forest green and cobalt. One of the living room couches was shoved up against the left wall; the other was the threadbare outlaw we'd seen outside. Where a dining table might be was a stage, if that's what you want to call it. It had an old amp, a microphone, and a drum set, crude flood lights hitting it from the linoleum floor. A band was setting up. The house was packed with people, lots of ringer tees and cuffed pants. Pyramids of Natural Ice<sup>3</sup> beer hovered in the corners. It smelled of piss, though I didn't see anyone pissing anywhere—not at the moment, at least. I glanced down at my feet. Lifting one shoe off the pilling carpet, I looked, then set it down and picked up the other. No piss. If Francesca was nervous, she didn't seem so. She pulled me inside and burrowed through shoulders, arms, and ribs. Everyone's eyelashes looked beautiful covered with sweat. I could only hear my pulse.

Right before we entered the kitchen, we passed through a wide archway. Above it hung a huge wooden sign, hand painted with the appellation: The K-Hole. I tapped Francesca on the shoulder. Do you think they do ketamine?<sup>4</sup> I asked. She said she was not sure.

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I met them a month or so before that party, after the first football game of the season. My ex-boyfriend<sup>5</sup> played middle linebacker. Admittedly, he still looked good in his uniform, so I'd

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<sup>3</sup> Natty Ice. Horse urine in a can. They sold it at parties for \$1. It was all I thought beer was for a while.

<sup>4</sup> A painkiller and a sedative which can sometimes cause hallucinogenic or psychedelic effects. The “k-hole” is that out-of-body experience, the dissociation and the visuals that you might experience on ketamine. You might feel like you are watching yourself, that time is not real, that you are not touching the ground. You might see fractal visuals. Think, acid on acid. I only knew all of this because I'd heard about k-holes in a Grouplove song.

<sup>5</sup> We broke up in May of that year, two weeks before my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. We spoke very little over summer break, except for a few passing thoughts here and there. This song is cool, how are you? I missed the way he smelled—like shampoo and Burberry cologne—and the way his big arms wrapped around me on the leather couch in his stone basement when we watched cartoons. In the fall, we started meeting up in a dark parking lot outside the church a few minutes from my house to drive into the forest, pull off of the gravel road, and have tired sex.

dragged Francesca with me to show support, or whatever. Late August tormented us in this dying orange overhead; the air boiled around us and strangled our lungs. I felt like thick soup was pouring out of me, seeping into my shirt, covering me in ripe French-onion. I was not having a nice time, smelling like a bad date at The Cheesecake Factory, looking like a wet rat. It was brutal. I was covered in leek broth. An hour longer and I would have looked like a sad seedless grape forgotten at the bottom of the bag, the wrinkled ones that nobody likes, or like the sweet dried prunes I eat when I can't shit. Like a lemon peel left on the porch in the sun.

Ross texted me, Francesca said. The steam from the hot dog vendor was covering my view of the field. Who's Ross? I asked. He's an old friend, she said, and pursed her lips. Sometimes, I think he's just trying to hit on me.<sup>6</sup> Anything is better than this, I said, motioning to the student section to our left and the sun overhead and the filmy, burning weenie steam. We invited Julia and ditched the game—a shot in the dark. Francesca hadn't seen Ross for a while, and we had no idea what to expect. I felt like this was my chance to do something brave, stop being such a baby all the time and try to meet someone new. If I was good at making friends, I probably would have had other plans that Friday night besides watching my ex play football.<sup>7</sup>

Even though the car ride was cold, my hands slid down the steering wheel every time I banked a turn. It felt like wet flesh, sweat soaking the pleather and the nylon stitching. Maybe we were biting off more than we could chew. I wondered if I should suggest it, bailing out. I couldn't be the only one who felt like I was suffocating, like the air in the car was turning into seawater and filling my nose with spume. I think it's there, on the right, said Francesca. She peered through the

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<sup>6</sup> These are the worst kinds of old acquaintances, unfortunately, never genuine about much and always asking you to stay later than you'd like to. I have dealt with a few of these before, friends who were cool until they became not-so-cool, asking you questions that made your skin crawl, touching your elbow, touching your knee. Touching your thigh. Those friends made me feel as if I were not really a person but a limp ragdoll, eyes that see everything and a smiling, quiet mouth.

<sup>7</sup> If we'd had other plans that Friday, though, we probably wouldn't have had this night, and I cannot fathom existing without this part of me.

windows and pointed. I tipped my head forward to see—a worn farmhouse sat at the base of a large plot of land, nestled in the corner of the road. There were buildings all over the property and they all looked like barns. I imagined the buildings filled with goats and chickens and mud and hay and troughs of viscous slop. It would be funny if we ended up hanging out with livestock all night, fat pigs oinking around us while we sat smack in the middle of a barn just to talk with some boys. It was a nice evening; the gravel was loud, and the night was bracing. It was still in the forest around me, in the bushes and dense shrubs. Someone<sup>8</sup> emerged from behind a wall, coming into focus against the streetlight. He gave Francesca a hug.

Hi, I'm Becca.<sup>9</sup> My voice shook. I tried to hide it. I'm Ross, he said, nice to meet you.

He led us into the barn he'd come from. The interior was made of stone and concrete; power tools, hammers, chisels, large plastic tubs, and ceramic tiles were scattered everywhere.<sup>10</sup> It smelled like cement. Mosaics covered the walls and tables and surfaces. A heap of spackling and grouting knives was piled to the right of the door. In the center of the room, there were a few metal folding chairs propped up in a circle, and a boy in a paperboy cap sat in one. This is Isaac, Ross said. Isaac<sup>11</sup> waved. Ross led us to the chairs, and we all sat down, facing one another. The chair was hard and uncomfortable. I shivered, though I was not cold.

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<sup>8</sup> Ross was average height, a little soft at the stomach, and wore a floral button up shirt, very Dad-like. He had this air about him that seemed to me like he was above appearances, like he really didn't care what anybody thought of him, like he did only what he wanted to do. No second guessing, no fear. He was himself, truly, and enjoyed being himself. I envied it.

<sup>9</sup> I wore denim jackets and black jeans with rips at the knee, knitted sweaters from the Goodwill that were too large, and chunky black boots. They jingled when I walked, like cowboy spurs. My hair was silver, and I let it cover my face often. I hunched because I didn't like to stand out, but I stuck my chin out so that people would be scared of me. I was very, very loud, and hated myself for it. I wanted to be cool.

<sup>10</sup> Isaac's father owned a ceramic business, and Isaac was his apprentice. They tiled floors and backsplashes and created beautiful mosaic centerpieces on walls and in bathrooms. The pictures I've seen of their work is incredible, black cosmic sundials next to tubs. The barn we were in was their workshop. It was always covered in a thin layer of dust.

<sup>11</sup> He was on the short side. His cap It masked his hair, which was unkempt and a little greasy. His eyes were kind and he raised his voice up at the end of his sentences. He seemed unsure of a lot of things around him, but I don't want to say that he was because I don't think he was at all. He just seemed that way, shy and nervous.

Isaac lit a joint. He passed it to Ross, who passed it to Julia, who passed it to me. I took a drag. I passed it to Fran. We spent the evening like that, passing and dragging. Eventually, we started talking; but when they talked, you had to lean in, push yourself gently towards them and listen. Their voices drawled out and made words long and languid. When they talked, they sounded at ease, secure. It seemed effortless. I'd always wanted to captivate people like that. I had no problem getting attention from my peers, though it was usually unfavorable, at least in my eyes.<sup>12</sup> Ross and Isaac spoke loosely to the air—mostly to each other, but if we happened to have something to say, we would interject with a faint voice. My head hummed from the weed. I tried make jokes and make them laugh. As far as I remember, it didn't work. The way I kept crossing and un-crossing my legs looked stupid, and my head felt so heavy that I imagined it snapping off my neck in an instant and tipping down over my shoulder, rolling into the middle of our feet with my eyes squeezed shut. They were probably going to tell all of their friends how this loser teenager walked into that circle of folding chairs, how I acted like a fool, how I acted like I belonged there.<sup>13</sup>

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According to Orion looming overhead, it was January, though uncharacteristically temperate—65 degrees, no headwind, a clear sky. After the music ended, after the bands threw their equipment back into their cars, everybody stood in a circle in the kitchen. Our bodies were strong and steady, our energies were equals. We were Stonehenge. Nobody's socks matched.

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<sup>12</sup> My mom used to give me advice whenever I felt lonely. It has been something that's stayed with me to this day. She'd tell me, "There is a choice in life: change yourself to please others, but be miserable inside, or be yourself, find yourself never quite fitting in, but be happy. You have made the difficult decision to be yourself."

<sup>13</sup> Throughout my time with the boys, I regularly experienced a very intense imposter syndrome. It was euphoric when I was with them, but at the end of the day, I would drive back to my parents' house and sleep in the same bedroom I'd slept in since I was nine, go to high school the next day with a heavy backpack, and do worksheets and read Pearson textbooks. I always thought they were talked about me after I left, that they thought I was pathetic. I felt like a child all the time, clammy and shy, a false projection of who I'd known myself to be.

Funkytown<sup>14</sup> came on over the speakers, and everyone danced with a madness; we were connected by a deep understanding that sometimes, life is okay. I was a drunk and warm. The room around me slowed down and everyone looked like they were moving through maple syrup. A vast, amber sea. They were all strange, with wild eyes and knotted hair. The music was loud and vibrated through my bones, it shook the hanging light and shook beers on the table and shook the front door right in its frame. I didn't care about how I looked, just like the way I practiced in my bedroom mirror with the door closed and the lights dim, the routine I saved for the person I saw in my mirror.<sup>15</sup> It felt raw and pure. My skin was new and fresh to the touch.

The others were there with me twisting on the linoleum floor. Their presence was all I needed to feel safe. I heard my friends laughing beside me, their faces lit up by bright purple disco lights that flooded the kitchen. Their mouths were open, wide and smiling, and their hair stuck out from their heads, bobbing in the humid air on their own. Everyone looked so beautiful. I did not understand why these people who I had only just met welcomed me and my friends into their arms with love. I surrendered to myself.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Songs as a period of time: "Dancing Queen" by ABBA, "Free Weed" by Free Weed, "Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games" by of Montreal, "Beautiful Girls" by Sean Kingston, "Abandoned Mansion" by Dr. Dog, "Thank You" by Florist. All worth a listen.

<sup>15</sup> Usually, I would shuffle into a pocket in the pit with a beer in my hand and bounce, gently. Just bounce. Bobbing up and down, maybe nodding my head here and there when the music got really good, but usually, just a little wiggle. Think: dashboard hula girl. I danced for the entirety of my youth and yet this was all I could muster.

<sup>16</sup> When I was in seventh grade, the orthodontist put a palette expander in my mouth. It pried my teeth so far apart that I could fit my entire thumb in between my front incisors. Nobody shared their glitter gel pens with me that year. Nobody braided my hair for me in between class periods. Nobody walked around the track with me during gym class. To be honest, this was probably because I never smiled—what kind of a smile was mine, anyway?—and I hardly ever talked if I could help it. It wasn't that I was terrified of public speaking, or that I was shy; I was terrified of simply being perceived at all. Every part of me wanted to talk, to make friends or share my thoughts with the class, but I didn't. Fear of opinions and judgment and that damn perception always held me back. If I had only succumbed to my own wants, just for a minute, I might not have been so lonely for so long.

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I had a secret at school on Mondays. In class, after everyone had come back from the holidays, my teachers had everyone in the class to go around the room and share what they did with their free time over the break.<sup>17</sup>

A week or so before, Casey had brought a jumbo Ziplock bag full of sushi from the university cafeteria to a house show. He gave it out to half the party by the handful, sliding his hands into the bag to grab fistful after fistful of raw salmon and white rice—handfuls. Everyone smelled like stale rice vinegar and the seafood section of the farmer's market, and the stench clung to Casey's hands and cotton shirt until he smelled worst of all.<sup>18</sup>

Just that past Saturday, Julia and I had gone to visit the K-Hole. As soon as the two of us walked into the entryway, someone skateboarded right through the bathroom door. Right through. The door broke into dozens of jagged wooden pieces that flew across the kitchen and slid underneath the toilet. We gathered the scraps into a pile so everyone could have a turn dancing on the pieces like a ceremonial sacrifice. I laughed so hard that my ribs ached.

Nobody deserved those memories but me. The other kids at my never included me in their fun, never asked me to be in their group or sit with them at lunch. They outcast me, I thought, and they liked it. Joshua Larsen liked it when I blushed in history after his nasty joke about my testosterone levels. Joshua Larsen sat next to me in American government. I had been deprived of

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<sup>17</sup> Which was stupid, by the way, because I knew that my teacher knew that my class did not care what our classmates did over the break. Having to go through another round of "get to know me" bullshit like it was the first day again made all of us want to fling ourselves out of the nearest window and splat like pancake batter onto the frozen pavement outside. Imagine all of us flinging in the air like flapjacks.

<sup>18</sup> I was briefly in love with him, but then again, I felt like I was always briefly in love with one of them. He was 21, and I was 17. We saw each other casually for a few months; I drove to his box apartment every couple of weekends when we both felt like it. We didn't talk much about whatever was going on, not to each other or to anyone else. He showed me good music, made me appreciate the bass. He had freckles all over his shoulders and caramel eyes. I liked his tattoos. It was simple.

that community for so long by those fucking cadavers that there was no way I was going to let Joshua Larsen hear about my incredible new life.

It was my turn to share to the class. Nothing, I said.

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When I went to college, I found free-spirits and *artistes* whom I believed understood my ways of thinking. I was in the middle of a picnic on the hill at Schenley Park when I wondered if it was just high school that was bad and weird, not me.

Sophomore year, I visited home for a weekend in November to see the girls. The leaves were the colors of carrot cake and terra cotta. I ended up swinging by the K-Hole<sup>19</sup> with Francesca and Julia to visit Isaac.<sup>20</sup> When I walked in, a wall of sweat and musk hit my nose, hard. The house was a mess, empty bottles and cans and glasses everywhere. Some were full of foggy liquid—who knows how long they’d been sitting there, small science projects, fermenting and brewing. The boys were sitting on the couch, the same one from before. It was shocking that it had held up over so many years.

They were boring, so much more boring than I remember; in fact, I had never remembered it to be boring before. They didn’t talk about much, mostly politics. They had all gotten into Marx, encouraging the push of democratic socialism and arming the proletariat. We nodded, dismissive. The room was lifeless, a bad scene from a teen flick. I wanted to get out of there. What happened to this place? It was the same, in a way. The couch with the rips, the chaos all around, the boys and their unhurried voices and apathy. But where was the spark from so long ago? Sitting there under

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<sup>19</sup> It had moved to a townhouse across the street. It was identical the unit across the street—same walls, same door, same stoop. It was exactly the same.

<sup>20</sup> Now, Francesca’s boyfriend. He’d made goo-goo eyes at her from the beanbag chair in the corner for months. Secretly, she had goo-goo eyes for him, too. After she finally broke up with her shitty boyfriend, she went for it. They’re going on almost 5 years now; can you believe it? Jesus. I think they look strikingly like John and Yoko.

the lemony lights and surrounded by dust and disillusionment, I sunk into the cushions and pretended to be a bug. Bzz bzz.<sup>21</sup>

New Year's happened after I went back down to Tampa. All I know was that Francesca slapped J.P. for trying to hook up with Gina, her little sister.<sup>22</sup> When she called me, I listened with half an ear, laying on my bed next to the window and the rain. I almost didn't care about it. What a train wreck, I thought. I haven't heard much about the K-Hole since.

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When I look through photos of the K-Hole—I have a couple of gems—I feel this steady peace course through me. Sometimes, when I tell stories about the boys and the sushi and the couch on the lawn, I hear myself talk, gush and ooze, bend the truth here and there. Sometimes, I even throw in embellishments to make those nights sound even cooler, even better. But who are those embellishments for? If I could rewind, re-watch, re-see, what might I find? The girls and I talk about the K-Hole often, our senior year, the “golden age” in a way. Our seventeen-year-old prime, the once-in-a-lifetime year that came, and then went. I can't get it back, for more reasons than I ever knew.

Maybe they had always been bums. Maybe they always smelled. Maybe they never really liked me. Maybe they hardly knew who I was. What do they think of me? Do they think of me at all? It could have been illusion, a dream. I had been drunk off admiration, off worship.

Reverence. That doesn't mean I don't miss it.

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<sup>21</sup> It would have been nice to be a bug in that moment. I wondered how everyone might look with my big bug eyes. Maybe they would have big heads and tiny necks, like bobbleheads. I would rather see them as complete strangers than as familiar-but-worse, unnerving and fetid.

<sup>22</sup> From what I could gather, it was a bad scene all around. Word got around that Gina and J.P. were hooking up in the bathroom, and Francesca didn't like that too much. You can imagine what happened—girl walks in on her baby sister straddling the neighborhood creep, and it all goes to shit. Naturally, there was controversy on both ends. On one hand, Gina is an adult, and she is allowed to straddle whomever she wants to, of course; but on the other hand, J.P. is in his mid-twenties and has been preying on girls at those parties for ages. He tried it with me three years before, when I was seventeen. Gina was nineteen. It didn't help that nearly half that party was a stranger to us, onlookers into our drama and private lives. It just wasn't the same.

snowbird

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Sophomore year. My face is foreign in the mirror to me, grown sharper and wider at the corners of my jaw. I obsess over the strip of pudge that's developed below my navel—it's genetic, unfortunately, according to my mother. In the shower, I stare at the soft, brown hairs on my shins. I am conflicted. They feel so nice when I run my hands across them, but they look so ugly. None of the others have hairs, so I can't either. I rest my feet on the edge of the tub and coat my legs in raspberry foam from a pink can that I found in my mother's bathroom cabinet. I nick my ankles. The blood slithers and dances down the bones of my feet in bright red strokes, and every pass with the razor adds a new red worm. There. Smooth, perfect. I wear dangling earrings and swirl blush on the round parts of my cheeks. This is the year that I cut off all of my hair into a side-swept pixie. In a moment of confidence, I dye it lavender, which eventually fades to a pale mint green.

One of my favorite things to do, especially on Sunday afternoons, is sit by my bedroom window in my big, round chair and sunbathe in the afternoon autumn rays. Each tree outside is vibrant like shades of a bonfire, rustling against the eastern winds. They fill my bedroom with diffused colors of honey that are exceptionally beautiful to me. I surround myself with blankets and pillows and thick books about wallflowers and girls that run away to Maine.

I keep the window cracked just slightly, sort of because I like the way the air nips at my cheekbones, but mostly to listen to the birds. Goldfinches, cardinals, blue jays, orioles, robins. Woodpeckers. Sparrows, bluebirds. They live in the big tree in the front yard, in the birdhouses that my mother dangles from the branches by chains or nestled among the leaves and twigs. Each of their songs is different. One adds a chirp where another adds a trill, one sings where the other screams. I'm able to recognize them well after listening for so many years. I am early an amateur

ornithologist. Here in the sun, I feel a bit like a bird myself in this cozy chair. My cozy nest, tucked away in the corner of my cozy bedroom.

I do not like school. I thought I would like school this year because I am so different now. much better than I was before. I bought the right shoes. I wear black clothing to look skinny. The football team takes unflattering photos of me at junior varsity games while I walk around the track with my friends. They tell me I look like a man and call me a dyke behind my back. A big, ugly thing. I become unable to leave my house without mascara. In class, they snicker to each other every time I open my mouth to speak. Hot pain rushes into my ears. My face burns. I would do anything to feel comfortable in my own skin. I thought everyone would think I was so cool, notice that I am so different. What do I need to change? I am different this year, don't they realize?

My face and body become foreign, numb. I am deeply out of tune with myself. I spend more time in my bedroom alone. The door shuts it out. I sit naked on the floor in front of the mirror, my tired legs unravelling on the carpet. My fingertip traces my outline along the cool surface of the mirror, each bump newer than the last. Uglier. Have I always been this ugly? It feels like there are hundreds of green aphids all over my body. The small hairs on the back of my neck curl. I slide my hands across my stomach. My eyes stare back at me, my pupils large and scared of everything. I have never hated myself more than I do right now at this very moment. I wrap my arms around my waist. If I squeeze hard enough, I will cut myself clean in half and my guts will spill onto the carpeting and bile will sink into the fibers and my blood will leave a dark stain that will never come out, not with soap or bleach or tears. I feel like I am molting out of myself, crawling out of my mouth head-first. Damp, shivering, nothing to protect me. God, I am so vulnerable, all the time. You could kill me with a single word. You could break me in half just by looking at me the wrong way. You never

know what a sidelong glance might do to someone, you know. Behind me, my window is just barely open. Only a couple of birdsongs drift inside. It is getting colder. I forgot the birds left in the winter.

I am angry at the boys at school for hurting me. I am angry at my town, its small mind and shitty streets. I am angry at myself for being the way that I am. I did this to myself. This is my fault. I crawl on my knees over to the foot of my bed, my back pressing against the wooden bedframe. Hot tears rip down my face. A chill from the window touches my bare skin. The carpet underneath me surrounds the weight of my legs, lifting me in places where I cannot lift myself.

I like to lay on the carpet on Sunday nights after everyone is in bed and stretch my spine out long and stare up at my flickering yellow overhead light and imagine it is the sun, imagine it could wrap my body in warmth and carry me away from whatever this is. I would die if I had to.

Sometime in mid-winter, my mother takes me dress shopping for the semi-formal school dance. We drive to the mall in the frost, and my breath puffs white in front of me inside the car. I rub my hands together back and forth and check the heater. It is as high as it can go, but it will not warm me up. We talk about school, maybe getting lunch after we shop. When arrive at the mall, my mom parks as close to the entrance as she can. Department stores scare me. The women who stand at the makeup counters have sharp eyes and thin mouths. It smells like mothballs and old cardboard. My mom guides me to the formal section by holding the base of my neck. I am sure this is meant to comfort me, but I feel like a feral animal.

“Why don’t you go pick some out, kittenfish?” she says.

“I don’t like them.”

“I’ll pick some out, too. How’s that?” Her face is kind.

I wander around the silver racks of party dresses as if I am in forest. The dresses loom over me with their polyester tendrils, lifeless forms taunting me with sequins and lace and smooth satin sleeves. I can hear them laughing at me, the mannequins. The invisible people. They know that I do not deserve these. Not with my square shoulders and bent legs and fat, jiggling hips. I choose a couple of dresses that do not snarl at me. I find my mom. She has picked a few dresses too, but hers look menacing.

We lock ourselves in a small dressing room. There are plastic hangers on the floor and clumps of dust in the corners. The mirror Mom sits on the vinyl stool in the corner and I stand bare in front of myself. I reject every dress, leaving them on only for a moment before ripping them off. Too tight. The sleeves are too puffy. This one is too short.

I look at my eyes; my reflection sees what I see. It knows one of the pretty girls will choose the same dress I do, and we will wear them at the same time at the dance but she will look so much better than me in her size 2 with her cinched waist and I will look like a troll, a purple-haired, disgusting troll. Everyone will talk about it for weeks and months about how embarrassing it must have been for me, being a troll. I sit on the floor.

“My acne,” I say. I run my hands across my chest. Pustules bubble under the skin—a side effect of being fifteen. “Look at me.”

“I know, sweetie.”

“It’s so ugly, mom,” I say to her.

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I start drinking with my friends at our sleepovers. I sneak shots of tequila in their kitchens after their parents go to bed and chase it with vanilla ice cream in small plastic bowls. The spoon is chilly, and it feels nice. I let my tongue linger on the underside. Tequila makes me feel warmth unlike

any I have felt for some time. I like how the room drags along my vision like frames on a film reel when I shake my head back and forth. I like that my arms and legs feel like I've been sitting on them wrong. We play video games and chase each other around the living room, bare feet on soft carpet. There is pine and cedar in the air—my friend's Christmas tree still stands tall. It casts a wash of blue on our faces. We lay on our backs and stare at the tall ceilings and pretend that we are looking up at the sky and all of the beautiful stars. The tingling goodness of tipsy laughter that fills my nights is a welcome friend after months of feeling dried up all the time.

This habit goes on. I look forward to weekends with my boyfriend at our friend's house, to the dim lights and excited whispers and Arctic Monkeys on repeat in the background. In school, I stare at the icicles that hug the windowpanes and daydream about those nights. They have become one of the only things I still enjoy. I feel guilty, but not because I am not supposed to drink. Part of what makes it so fun is that it is forbidden, a secret. But I have grown so used to feeling bad and tired and angry all the time that I sometimes think I am exiled from happiness, trapped in my cold bedroom with cold feet and cold toes. I yearn for warmth.

I begin to drink with new friends, except these friends are different. These friends drink to get drunk. I have never gotten drunk before because I only take a few small shots at a time. Victoria asks me to come over for a party.

"It'll be great," she says. "My mom will be home, but we'll be in the basement, so, she won't know."

I descend the stairs to the basement at Victoria's house. The carpeting brushes the heavy callouses on my heels. I emerge in a plainly decorated living room space. There are a few other people scattered around, lounging on the couches, sprawling on the floor, and loud music is playing

in the corner from a portable speaker. I shuffle along the walls of the room with my shoulders hunched until, finally, Victoria sees me. Thank God. She grins at me and motions for me to come over.

Her manicured hands are clutching one plastic water bottle each, one with its *Crystal Springs* label ripped off, one with it intact. She holds up the naked bottle—vodka—and then the dressed one—tequila—and asks me which I would “prefer.” The lights are on in the basement. I feel watched. I grab the labeled bottle, and a hush falls over the room. At least, I feel like one does. My ears flush. Why are the lights on in the basement? I probably look so stupid, staring at the bottle. They are all going to start talking about me unless I do something. I wriggle my toes on the carpet and slosh the clear, inviting liquid around.

I unscrew the cap and toss back the tequila and taste the familiarity of it, the comfort, the warmth, the promise of feeling better than before. It spreads through me. The weight of my body has become so much, all the time. Fatigue has dragged my limbs down to the earth. Every drink lifts me, each sip a little more. I can feel yesterday leaving me, the morning leaving me, the moment slipping away from me in slow-motion. I lift and lift and lift until I am practically touching the ceiling with the tip of nose and the fluttery ends of my eyelashes.

My spine feels hollow, my neck like marshmallows. Tiny dots of fuzzy blackness begin to crowd my vision, a swarm of small gnats in the heat. Everything is slow. Everything is calm. Everything is dark. So, so dark.

I open my eyes. I am on my knees in the back room of the basement. Someone is in front of me. They are touching my hair. It smells like sweat. I hear a ringing in my ears, and I blink. I am on

all fours throwing up Doritos all over the carpet. Victoria's mom is walking down the basement stairs.

I am in my dad's car, in the pleather backseat, the smell of vomit woven into my shirt. I cannot remember what is going on or why I am in his car or why I still feel bad. I was supposed to feel good tonight.

"She just ate too much pizza and chips," Victoria says to him outside the car. The door slams. I can hear tires rolling on pavement.

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I wake up to my mother at the foot of my bed, rage steaming off of her skin. My skull feels too tight for my brain. All I wanted was another night of peace and escape, to lift up to the sky and exist outside of my own mind for a few hours. Just a few hours. It is the only way I know how, the only way I can feel much of anything anymore, but I should not have done it. I should not have tried.

My mom nurses my hangover and grounds me accordingly. I spend the next week or so floating through school, void of life. A hole where a person used to be. I have nowhere else to turn. The hallways fill with bright white sunlight reflecting off of the snow, and I squint as bob through the crowd of students. It is so bright, so blinding. Unavoidable. My teeth chatter at the bus stop. My nose turns pink. At night, I crawl into my chair by the window and fold myself into a ball and bury my face into the cushion and cry. My bedroom is quiet now, the window closed tight. My books collect dust on my shelf.

Soon, though, my mom finds out what Victoria's brother did to me at the party. I crumble. I tell her everything, the months of drinking, the numbness in my feet. I see tears slip down her face for the first time in ages. I do not remember the last time I saw my mother cry. I wish I could evaporate and become blankness, leave my house and my school and my town and these hard winter months. She lays down with me on the bed; the room smells like the color blue. My toes are nearly frozen.

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Mom comes into my room one morning holding a white plastic bottle. "This will help with the blues," she assures me, passing me the bottle. "Take one in the morning and one at night." She closes the door behind her.

I pass the bottle back and forth between my hands. There is a picture of a pretty green plant on the front with small yellow flowers that remind me of the mustard weed in the forest behind our house. St. John's Wort, it reads. I twist open the bottle. The capsules smell like dirt and look like little rodent droppings. They are light in my palm. I hold one of the pills in between my thumb and index finger—I have never had to take medicine before. Is this even considered medicine? I wander downstairs to my dad's office in the back room.

"Hey sweetie," he says.

"Hey Dad." I sit down at the desktop computer, and press down on the keys.

Extract of St. John's Wort, *Hypericum perforatum*, has become increasingly popular as a remedy for depression.

The only person I know who is depressed is best friend's sister older sister.

A survey revealed several themes in the decision to use St. John's Wort. These included personal health care values favoring use of alternative treatments, definite depressive symptoms, self-perception of the depression as mild.

She just flunked Freshman year of college and sleeps in until 2 P.M. every day and only eats eggs and toast in her socks and pajamas standing up at the kitchen island. I get good grades, I make lists, I eat at least two meals a day, usually. I have interests, like art, and theatre, or like reading. She does not. We are not the same. The bottle stares at me from the desk. Just sad. I open it again and place one of the capsules on my tongue.

The snow thaws and the school year ends and I begin to feel my chest open up, and slowly the pressure releases. I stop taking the herb. Did it work? That does not matter now, I suppose; I feel good now, really good. Leaving school and dances and boys and bad friends behind is what does it for me, I am sure of it. I dye my mint hair brown. I wake up in the mornings to chirping birdsongs and spend my days off laying outside on the patio in the yellow sunlight with a new book, eating bowls of red seedless grapes.

There is a hawk that likes to visit me in the backyard during the summer. Sometimes, we spend hours together. He perches atop the tallest telephone pole in the cornfield behind me and shouts into the hillsides, singing for me. As I listen to him, the droplets of sweat that form on my skin feel as if I am shedding and becoming something else. Becoming something new. The hawk's feathers ripple in the afternoon daylight. He screeches and flies off into the clouds.

My family vacations to Hilton Head, South Carolina. My little brother and I make sandcastles by the lifeguard's stand; we ride bikes along wide streets and down the boardwalk. Hammocks swing underneath giant Banyan Ficus trees draped with a course blanket of Spanish

moss. The Ficus are my favorite because they are not afraid to take up space. We return north, and soon school begins; soon I am walking the corridors in a knit sweater while the grass freezes outside the large hall windows and the sun carves its path lower and lower through the sky.

There is a day where I wake up and I feel the cold lingering inside my bedroom, lurking in the dark, empty corner.

2.

Depression is soft duvets in the wintertime, heavy knitted blankets, jars of thick amber molasses. It is missed deadlines and unopened mail; it is sitting on the floor of the tub during hot showers until your knees turn bright pink. It is cold dinners. It is never enough sleep.

November rounds the corner and I fall back into my sadness rhythmically. After school, I close my door and turn the deadbolt, pull on my thickest socks, and perch in my nest, swathed by pilling blankets. The routine. The cold pounds on my window every day and inches its way into my bedroom to slide in-between my sheets and seep under my skin, spreading numbness and sharp pains. My mom notices a pattern. She thinks I might have seasonal affective disorder. SAD, fitting.

“Maybe,” she says. Maybe my insides turn to mush as soon as the weather gets cold and the sun stays low. If that is the case, there is nothing I can do. This is where I am, trapped in the backroads of the mountains, the threat of unseen herds of deer lurking in the shadows as you drive and very, very few streetlights. There is always winter here. I look out my bedroom window. A layer of frosting coats the sky and everything below it in the shade of gutter water. It comes every year of course, worse than the last, more ruthless. I do not want this to keep happening to me.

I try light therapy. A big flat screen about a foot-long and a foot-wide sits on top of my desk. It is made of colorless plastic, “Happy Light” emblazoned on the side. I press the switch on the power cord. Dazzling white fills my entire bedroom, washing out my buttery overhead light and evicting every shadow, even ones I did not know were there. It is obnoxious. My mom recommends that I try to do my homework in front of it, maybe read or draw, anything to get me to absorb my daily dose of artificial sunlight so I might not feel like I am dying all the time.

I do try, clicking it on, off, on. Sometimes I lay in bed with it resting on my stomach. Sometimes, I put it in the corner and let it just pour into my room. I want it to work so badly. I

close my eyes and imagine I am far away from here in a place with oozing sunbeams dripping off of the trees and a flock of pelicans crossing overhead. The air smells clean and good, and my body no longer hurts anymore.

When the light goes away, tucked under my desk with its cord wrapped tightly around its smooth, plastic base, the sad returns. It ebbs through me again, no longer distracted by the false daylight. That is what it is, really. A distraction. When I sit there for an hour or so a day with the sun in my eyes, I force myself to forget about what lurks. I can travel. I can shed this thick coat that weighs me down and spring up into the air as high as I am able. I can become something else, become something new, go somewhere that is not here. The light offers me brief moments of reprise. But, they are only moments. The rest of my days and my nights wait for me, in the mirror when I brush my teeth in the morning or in the car while I drive in silence or at my locker in between classes or when I come home and lock myself my bedroom again.

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The wheel of the year shudders to life, shaking the powdery snow off of its shoulders as it spins me into spring. I spend the summer like the last. I feel good, but only sort of. I think it is because I know that it is waiting for me, black pencil scribble thoughts in my big, dumb brain. I feel like I am living in fear of something. Like I am being threatened, or stalked. The wheel never stops turning; it will always come.

I go to therapy, my Happy Light replaced by a fleshy human being. My mom drives me down roads bordered by muddy snow on Tuesdays before school. The building is a small townhome made from brick, unassuming. We park in a parking lot off the road. My mom sits in the waiting room next to an end table of magazines. She smiles at me with her mouth closed. I am led down a narrow hallway to my therapist's office.

The room is like a hug from a stranger, an attempt at warmth but hardly comforting, to say the least. There are strange puzzles and children's games on a shelf in the corner and books about anorexia nervosa and borderline personality disorder and childhood trauma. My therapist sits in a colorless chair with pressed slacks and a papery button up. She asks me to sit on the couch across from her. It is too firm, and it makes a crunching sound when I sit on it. My palms are sweaty. She asks about my mom, my dad.

"How's your brother? Are you doing well in school?"

Anything fun with friends? Anything nice on the weekends? We chat back and forth like this for a few minutes, good, good, good, yes, sometimes, sometimes. My brain is on autopilot. It is her job. And just like that, a shift. We talk about my sadness, how it feels, when it is the worst, what makes it better. We talk about my anger, my anger at my town, at myself for being the way that I am. We talk about hopelessness, feeling trapped, feeling the constant weight of the winters year after year. I cry to her. It is exhausting. I sob and shake and shudder until I cannot breathe through my nose. She passes me tissues and nods her head with a look of mild concern written across her brows. She asks me to keep a journal. I tell her I will.

My hour is up; she leads me out the door, back down the hallway, and passes me off to my mother. I do not like coming to the therapist, but I go for six whole months. I do not know why. The last day of high school comes and goes, a fever dream of chanting and laughing. We count down the seconds on the clock and run through the parking lot to our cars, singing, screaming. I put on a red satin gown and a square hat and walk across the stage at graduation. Relief pools around my ankles. I am free to go. I have been waiting for this for years.

The escape, in theory. I meet beautiful people who like to wear tinted glasses and pearled hair clips. They teach me to love being different. We hold hands and eat strawberries, sitting on a knitted blanket on the hill at Schenley Park while the sun sets over downtown across from us. The sky looks like shave ice and the strawberries leave pink streaks down our chins. We take day trips to Phipps Conservatory to visit the flowers and plants and butterflies inside glass greenhouses. My friend can name every plant.

“I like that fern,” I say. It is a maidenhair.

“That’s one of my favorites,” she tells me.

“And that one?”

“That’s a snake plant. My grandma used to keep snake plants in her kitchen window.”

We go to drama parties; they are always themed. We run away from the police every weekend—down the fire escape, through the alleyways, singing and teetering in the streets of Shadyside wearing faux fur and fishnets, dressed as the sin of lust, dressed in our patterned pajamas.

I have a new room now. My roommates sing indie songs and play the ukulele to me at night before we go to bed. My bunk is the top bunk. When I lay down, my nose almost touches the ceiling, and their fluttering voices float up towards me. I like my new bed. I sleep well on this mattress simply because it is not my old one. The sheet feels good when I run my hands underneath it. This is so nice. The breeze is coming in our window from the courtyard and the string lights we hung paint our arms and legs. I let my body sink into the bedframe. I have never felt more accepted in my life.

My friends tell me how wonderful I am, how needed, how important it is that I be myself in their lives. They tell me they love how artistic I am, how graceful I can be at times. I feel affirmed by

them. They empower me to do the things I want to do, and to care about my wants and my needs. I take my drawing pad around campus to draw the colossal buildings, sliding my charcoal over the paper with long strokes, rubbing my fingers into the corners to add depth and texture. My favorite building to draw is the art building because it reminds me of a castle. On Saturdays I grab a book and take the bus to Squirrel Hill. It is a nice walk to Dobra Tea, and I jingle the front door and I make my way inside. Sometimes there is a solitary floor cushion, and I get lucky. I drink pot after pot of fragrant green tea that makes my skin smell like jasmine for the rest of the day.

If I have time after class, I go to the bagel shop a few blocks away and watch people. The bus stop is perfectly visible from the big bay window, and there is a crosswalk that stays busy. The people have places to be, some of them swishing their pant legs with headphones in their ears, others sitting at the bus stop with a dog on a leash. The possibilities of a city excite me. There is life here, buzzing through the air and lighting up the streetlamps at night. I have never experienced this before, not in my town. Here, I can do things. I can really go out and do things, find happiness and love and all the wonderful things I have wanted for so long.

I am sitting on the the lawn of the Cut eating lunch with a friend. We are discussing the complex role of the narrator in plays for our dramaturgy class. My shoes are off, and I am laying backwards on my elbows. Crumbs from my sandwich fall into my lap. I stare at them as I talk. In a pause, my friend tells me she thinks my spirit animal is a bird, maybe a hawk.

“Why?” I ask.

“You just look like you were meant to fly away.”

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The program is conservatory-style, day-in and day-out. It is grueling, and time for leisure becomes a luxury. My typical schedule, every weekday, is as follows.

My alarm goes off at 7:00 am. I take care not to smack my head on the ceiling and I crawl down the ladder to the floor. I am the first one up, so I take a quick shower while I can and do various bathroom things, brushing my teeth and putting on deodorant. I get dressed, walk a block or two to campus, grab a muffin, and head to the drama building. At 8:30, drafting class begins. I learn about architecture and how to draw perspective drafts of a stage with two rulers and metal pencils on smooth, white rolls of paper. If there is a smudge, you start over. If a line is not straight, you start over. Next, I have stage management, where my professor lectures about organization, scheduling, annotating scripts with cues. It is boring, all calendars and charts, and I begin to fade. I think my professor can tell. After, I walk across the Cut to the Humanities building where I take the university-required 100-level academic writing course. I enjoy this class most days. It is a breath of fresh air at a keyboard, away from .02 graphite and electrical equipment. Lunch happens at around noon. The suspension of activity allows exhaustion to settle into my eyes. I lay in the grass and stare at the clouds drifting overhead; they remind me of a gauche painting. My chest rises and falls with labored breath. I try to focus. This will all be worth it, all of it. I remember why I am here, why I am melting into the lawn every weekday only to pull myself up and keep going.

I'm thrown back into the drama building headfirst. In design, I paint color wheels and interlocking patterns and make abstract representations of shoes that cannot look like shoes. I draw naked bodies in figure drawing, then drag my feet to technical rotation—this week, I learn how to tie knots, the bowline and the hitch and the half-hitch and the figure-8. My arms ache. My neck cramps when I turn it too far to the left. At 4:30, we are dismissed for dinner and are given two hours of

leisure. I savor each minute. These are the moments that make it okay, my friends twirling their arms in the frost on the hill and their feet on the grass and our laughter healing wounds from the day. I am doing okay. A not-okay person would not laugh with their friends; they would not appreciate the color of early winter behind the trees on the edge of campus. A not-okay person would not drink tea on the weekends.

We are torn from our bliss at 6:30 P.M., not a minute later. Stage crew calls. There are curtains to be hung, platforms to be built, a deck to be painted, lights to be focused, speakers to be programmed, floors to be swept, work to be done. Always more work to be done. The labor is taxing; after four hours, we are released. We to trickle up the plush red staircase and start our schoolwork at 11 P.M. or so. My body is put through a wringer and every drop of youth is squeezed from me in mere months. I feel like I am aging rapidly. I hunch over my drafting desk for hours and develop backaches that shoot up my spine. I am always thirsty. Acne explodes all over my face, clustering above my brows and temples until I look like I have the skin of a frog. They hurt, the blisters, they throb with the pulse of my migraines. I trudge home underneath flurries at 3:00 am. One rung at a time, I pull myself up into the bed; it wraps around me entirely. I sink into the folds of my quilt.

I spend most of my free time sleeping now. In times of encompassing sadness, rest is a drug that the body can never have enough of. Sometimes, it feels as if you are resting for every moment you've ever felt tired, every late evening or pre-dawn morning you've had since the day you first breathed life. That's a lot of catching up to do. I slowly disappear from nights out and Sunday brunches. I set reminders on my phone to tell me when to do almost everything during the day—when to shower, when to eat, don't forget. I keep a toothbrush in my bag so I can brush in the bathrooms at the beginning of class. When I do leave my dorm room, I take the bus by myself to

the far reaches of town in the early December chill. My headphones dangle down my chest and into my pocket. I thumb the white cables. The bus is nice, because I feel like I am going somewhere without going anywhere at all. I can say, “I did something today. I rode the bus.” I take it all the way to the last stop, only to catch the next one back home.

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On the second Thursday of my second semester, I walk into my academic advisor’s office. She asks why I am there. I am doing fine in my classes. I am putting out good work.

“Is everything okay?” she asks. I never thought I could be so terrified and so relieved by a single, simple question.

Ten minutes later, I walk out and dial my parents on the phone. As it rings, I walk down the empty corridor, running my hands along the lockers. My fingers leave prints against the cool metal. I stop in front of one and make a flower with my thumb. A draft bleeds through the floorboards, dry and tired. My dad picks up.

“Hey sweetie, what’s up?”

“I’m withdrawing,” I say, and suddenly I cry and I cry so hard that my throat fills with thick grief and my parents voices sound distant and quiet.

My advisor says I have three days to vacate if I want my tuition money back. I grip onto the floor of my room. A few months earlier, I’d found an old Polaroid Spectra at a thrift store. Despite its flaws—sticky button, a shutter that always jams—I love it, but the film is expensive. I save it for special moments, times when I need to immortalize and concretize my vision in palpable color. The camera is in my desk drawer. I dig it out and take a photo of my roommates on their bed (I keep that photo pinned to my wall for the rest of undergrad). We hold hands. I promise them I will write

letters and visit them so, so soon. While I pack up my belongings into worn brown boxes, they play the ukulele for me.

My mom drives over on Saturday and we load my things into my car, shame blistering on my cheeks as her reassuring voice simply echoes around inside my head. Everything is far away. I strap myself into the passenger seat and her tires roll away on the salted asphalt, crunching and sliding along the wet roads until we reach the eastbound highway. I do not look behind me. My breath becomes a cloud inside the car.

I am curled into a ball in my chair by the window, a failure, a coward. I had done it, felt beautiful, wonderful things and laughed until I had no more sounds to give. Now I am back. These walls close in fast and hard, crushing my ribs. I turn my neck to look out the window, down below. Slush spills over from my neighbors' lawns into the street, freezing the thick lines of tar from last winter's repairs. My bedroom has become a stagnant ripple in time, stuck in sophomore year. The elementary school kids throw loose snowballs at each other in puffy outfits and thick mittens, their teeth shimmering against their flushed cheeks. I can hear their laughter drifting up to my window, knocking gently on the pane, begging to be let in.

As my mom unloads groceries in the kitchen, I see a documentary come on TV: Blue Planet. The vibrancy of the coast and the mangroves project across the screen while the narrator describes the erosive capabilities of rising sea levels on coastal beaches and how the mangrove trees act as anchors, securing the coastline. He says the mangroves even filter the water for the aquatic inhabitants of the wet forest, what magical things. It is so breathtaking. The landscape, saturated and hot, and the rays of sunlight painting every frond and sea oat that hugs the ocean foam is everything that I have been looking for—warmth, all year, never-ending.

I decide in that moment that I will do whatever I have to do to get away. I will leave everything behind, I will get on a giant metal plane and run away to the Gulf if it means I do not have to feel like I am dying again and again and again and again. I hate it here. I hate this room, I hate the dirty piles of snow on every street corner and parking lot. This place has caused me so much pain; I miss myself, the sound of summer birds singing to me as I sunbathe with a worn paperback. I miss watching the wind blow through blades of grass.

I am standing in at my gate in a jagged line waiting to board a plane to Tampa. After rushed applications, I decided on sunny Florida, on rivers and towering, historic minarets. It felt right. “We used to live there,” my dad says. I feel like I am going to meet myself for the first time in years; who will I be when I’m not defined by what’s inside my head? My life is multitudinous. What might I become when I am not here?

Each year, when the snow puts the laurels and dogwood trees to sleep for a long season, tens of thousands of folks pack up their things and leave their northern homes behind. They fill the highways and skies with a gentle hum, following the pull of the sun to the southern reaches of Florida. They nestle in quiet neighborhoods and fill gated communities on the marina with shiny, white boats named *Pearl of the Sea* or the *S.S. Arlene*. Their RV's swarm together to create "white cities," a temporary haven of motorhomes and plastic flamingos. Their skin turns the color of their wicker chairs and drink orange juice in tall glasses on their back porch, barefoot in the middle of February. Some locals call them "winter visitors," others call them snowbirds. I became one.

It has been two years since I got on that first plane to Florida. I have found friendship and cruelty here, found passion and achievement. I have found love. I have not, however, found what I came here to find, because I am still depressed. It lurks behind my curtains in the morning or in my lingering reflection in the mirror; though, I am trying to learn to mold myself around the melancholy, to find ways to breathe alongside that nagging darkness in my periphery. I read furiously, the smell of rough paper like a blanket to me. I find tranquility in the sound of the ocean. I like the way my fat orange cat snuggles up against the backs of my knees while I'm lying in bed. I did meet myself here, a new person who I had never met before, a person who can *be*, despite the shit of it all. A strong person. Leaving didn't cure me of anything, really, and I attribute that to the fact that this is simply part of who I am. You can't just leave your shadow behind you.

My hometown took the blame for these feelings for years. I deflected myself onto it for everything, the nights crumpled on the carpet and the weight on the crests of my shoulders—and sometimes, I still do. I tend to tell people where I'm from with disdain, grateful that I "got out of there," that I flew away in one piece, theoretically. It can be a dark pit in my memory, a pool that I

tend to avoid. Oftentimes, the simple act of remembering breaks me down again. It did that to me, I think. But did it?

I will never know if my relationship with my hometown would be different if I was not sad, and that is okay. I could wonder if I “escaped” for nothing. I could wonder if I made it out to be a malicious town with an agenda, despite it simply being a place. It meant to hurt me, I could say. What if I grew up somewhere else? What if I had been luckier? That is not productive, though. Whether my home did damage to me or not, it is past. Whether depression warped my perceptions or not, I will never know, because it is past. The beautiful thing about the past is it is no longer happening to us—time brings relief, retrospection. Since I have been able to realize that my sadness is not curable by simply running away, I have confronted it directly and sought ways to treat myself, and as of right now, I am doing okay. I never thought I could be doing okay and love where I came from at the exact same moment. All I can do now is move forward.

## blue mountain loop

The acceptance letter comes in a little before lunchtime; you feel immortal, like your blood is made of silver. It takes a second read-through, (“Congratulations! We are pleased to offer you...”) a second look before it feels real, like something you can touch. You can finally leave.

The Valley has trapped you for years, these never-ending mountains. Dreams of leaving have been all you can think about, and oftentimes your nights are spent crying before you fall asleep, thinking about this semi-rural, semi-town, about this freezing cold state. You tried once before, and failed; there was no way out, it seemed. This piece of paper is a second chance. The snow outside hardens all of your favorite flowers, the ones that Momma plants out front—the hyacinths and their fragrant perfume, the yellow daylilies. It kills the hydrangea and sends the honeybees away. It drives the family of groundhogs that live in the backyard down into the heat Hell. The ground is so cold against your boot soles. The asphalt feels like it will break under you, like thin ice on a lake, and you’ll fall into a pit of frozen tar and slush and stay there until you’re fifty-two and you realize you never left.

The black Sharpie you use to draw X’s on your dad’s calendar in the kitchen grows dull. Every day flattens the felt nib a little more, and the X’s grow fat like ripening fruit. You pack Momma’s high school class ring. It has a round, polished amethyst set in its center—it’s going to look so pretty, so fresh and different in this new place. Rubbing the stone makes it shine. It feels warm and safe in your palm. When the eve of the day finally comes, you go see your friends at the park. You kiss them goodbye, hug them with this feeling of sureness, this feeling of closure. It is the end of a chapter, in a way. They tell you not to cry, but you do.

The airport is crowded with hundreds of going-away-ers like you. They are wearing thick sweatshirts emblazoned with university crests made out of felt. You want to touch all of the embroidery with your fingertips. Usually, you hate airports; no trip or vacation can mask an airport’s

chaos and musty, congested air. This time, though, you enjoy it a little, relish in the going-away-ness of it all. You hug your parents for a long time. Dad's polo shirt smells like detergent, and he kisses your forehead with the force and melancholy. Momma's is gentler, slower, like taffy. She could have hugged you forever. They look sad to see you leave, but also proud, sort of. When you look at them, they look old. You never noticed how old they were until this very moment, standing in front of the American Airlines ticketing counter in late August of your nineteenth year alive.

The plane takes off and your stomach floats in the center of your midsection. You press your nose to the strange, double paned plastic porthole next to your pleather seat with too few armrests and see squares of crop fields sewn together by strips of trees and brush. You've always loved the window seat. The corn has already started to wither and brown, preparing the weight of winter on their thick stalks in a few months. It's overcast. Large, dark shadows engulf the mountainside. The ground looks grey and lifeless, tired, utterly exhausted. It's the worst watercolor you've ever seen. The plane takes you up higher into the clouds; you can't see anything anymore. You lean your forehead against the window and it feels like everything is spilling onto the floor of the cabin.

The plane lands, as you hoped it would. The man next to you has been drooling on his sleeve. Sleep crusts along your eyelids, only to be wiped away by your clammy fingertips. Get out of here, sleep. To sleep now would be grave, something you'd regret for the rest of your life. It's time for seeing and living and awake-ness. The thick, humid air wraps itself around you as you deplane. Florida wants to tuck itself into every crevice of your limbs, sweat hardening into a mucus almost instantly. It's a little invasive, you think, but maybe you're just not used to it—and stuffing your sweater in your backpack is so liberating that you don't care. Sweat collects on your upper lip in beautiful, round beads. They are embellishments that make your face twinkle as you sit outside the

terminal with your bags and wait for your ride to come and carry you off to a life you have been waiting for these past weeks, months, maybe even years, maybe even for your entire existence.

The first time you go to the beach is the second Saturday of the semester, the first week of September. It is warmer than you thought it would be. The heat seeps in-between the cracks of the wide window in your room and melts the dead palm fronds in the parking lot to the hot asphalt. The drive to the beach is otherworldly. There is a long, flat bridge that floats atop the bay itself, right on the water. The flatness is striking. You roll down the windows of the car you and your roommate rented and smell the brine licking at the concrete pillars beneath you. You stick your forearm out the window and let it flap against the wind and watch the waves rolling beyond your fingertips. They wriggle against the sky. It is a dream. You are driving to the beach in a little black swimsuit with a bottle of tanning oil on your lap. There is fluff the color of eggshell floating above your head and the vast teal ocean is all around you; you came from there, and now you're here. Why would anyone be anywhere but here? Here has been hiding from you for too long.

The sunshine is a drug. In between classes, you recline by the pool or swing in your hammock strung between two palm trees by the river. Going to the river in the early afternoon is your favorite thing to do. You like to watch people boat and kayak along the waves while the breeze ruffles the hair on top of your head. Sometimes you play music and sometimes you draw or write in a small, red journal. Sometimes, you do nothing at all. Today is one of those days, those nothing days, the ones that feel like the way pulling clean, cool sheets over your skin feels after a shower when your hair is still wet. Momma's ring warms your knuckle. You spin it around and around on your finger. The soft purple facets glimmer underneath its transparent surface, the gold band flashing a hint of sunlight into your eyes with every rotation. There are clusters of freckles blooming along your forearms, kisses from the sky, or maybe from God. Freckles are a good look on you. The

hammock swings in rhythm with what is around you, and your toes brush long grass below your bare feet. Humming to nothing in particular, watching people bike and skate and laugh across the river, hearing their voices echoing along the surface of the water is bliss. Pure, absolute bliss.

It is October. Midterms come and go, a flurry of papers and exams. There is a throng of students walking to the computer lab in the student center every hour to print essay after essay after essay. You have been spending your weekends laying in the grass, watching the clouds skate along invisible lines in the dome above you. The river smells salty. Pink skin drips down the length of your arms from the tops of your shoulders. Decomposing on the lawn can be drudging. It's still hot—it always is—but it's cool enough to wear pants, or your favorite boots. There's a probably still a bit of mud caked into the scuffs of the toes from the game preserve back home. Usually, the trail with the wildflowers was hard and rocky, but after a long rain it always got a little muddy where it curved into the trees; but the mud was nice, squishy. The texture of ice cream. Remembering those boots tucked away in the back of your closet makes you antsy. It's been too hot to hike, thin mirages in your vision everywhere you look. You haven't even thought about it, really. But the air is sweet enough to at least let you try.

The first five searches bring few results. There's not much. A few hits about an hour or so away, but you don't have a car here, and the trails are more like walks than anything, flat pathways through marsh and swampland filled with mosquitos. You try a different search. The cursor becomes a spinning circle again and loops for two, three seconds before the screen fills with Yelp reviews of small, developed parks. When you'd come down here, you didn't even realize that you'd miss trails. Come to think of it, you didn't even consider what you'd miss; it was all escape and never looking back, new chapters and new beginnings. The mattress is hard. The laptop sits in front of you, a patient servant, but you close it gently, gingerly, with a bit of a grimace. Your eyes drifts to the

window, the bright window that fills your dorm with tangerine sunshine every evening after class. There's an edgeless oasis outside that looks like a masterfully rendered oil painting. You lean your head against the window. It radiates warmth and it reminds you of where you are.

Nausea, sharp and unnerving, sets in. Your stomach folds itself into a square the size of a quarter, only to sit right underneath your ribs with the weight of a heavy stone, a boulder even. It's hot in your room, like it always is. Dad had warned you it would get that way. He and Momma grew up down here, after all, their youths spent in your dream. You thought avoiding Miami and Boca and Ft. Lauderdale would at least prevent your thighs from sticking to each other like glue in October. It did not. The closet across the room is slightly ajar, dark and cool. There are piles of sweat-licked jean shorts in your hamper that you've been meaning to wash for a few days. They smell like vinegar. Out the window is the vastness, the green, the foliage cascading around buildings and dying against the ground. Sunlight glints off Momma's ring, shooting lavender fragments of light out onto the ceiling above you like those fake, glow-in-the-dark stars that people stick onto their ceilings. It's too bright in the city for stars, even out by the ocean. The last time you were at John's Pass, you stayed on the sandy blanket until sundown just to get a glimpse of the galaxy. When the ocean turned pitch, you waited for almost two hours, but the sky stayed murky with light. You would do anything to see stars again—it's too bright here, all the time, too electric.

Dad texted you earlier today. "We miss you," he wrote.

For someone who usually hates airports, you've been finding yourself in them a lot. Surrounded by people wearing tropical shirts and flip flops without really completely understanding why you're there to begin with, you clutch your suitcase in one hand and a long, floppy boarding pass in the other. It is November. The last time you were in an airport was only a few short months ago, when you left, when you went away. You didn't think it would be that way, not when you were

going away—it would be eons, ages before you went home. It took so long to leave, really, so why would you ever go back? There is nothing there for you. Just to see family, you think, family and friends. When you're hunched down in the airplane, crawling over legs to get past first class, you look down at your boarding pass. It is smooth against your thumb. It looks like you have the window seat.

The aircraft comes down as fast as it shot up. The announcement, the one you have been secretly, privately waiting for these past weeks, maybe even months, crackles over the intercom. "Prepare for the cabin for landing," it says. As the plane breaks through the clouds, your window reveals beautiful hillsides of fire and mahogany and sweet, sweet honey. Fall is in full efflorescence in clusters along the quilted fields. It is gorgeous. The plane descends further, lower and lower and lower until you see them along the horizon, their curvature bulging and snaking across the pale yellow sky: the mountains. The enormous, incredible mountains. Their slopes are dotted in a thick layer of mustard oil paint, flecks of ochre and Merlot appearing along the ridges. They rise and fall into the clouds like waves, currents. An ebb and a flow. The come, the go.

You bring your hand to the windowpane and trace your fingertip along their bones from your seat in the sky. Salt brine trickles over your cheek. You cry and you cry until the mountains before you dissolve into a grateful fog.

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