The Underground House: A Body Memoir

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THE UNDERGROUND HOUSE: 
A BODY MEMOIR

A Thesis 
Presented to 
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Master of Arts 

By 
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The Underground House
a body memoir

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The creative non-fiction genre, in particular memoir and travel writing, is in a state of constant evolution. Furthermore, as we progress further into postmodern times, writing (both fiction and non-fiction, as well as poetry and drama) becomes more and more confessional and fragmented. These two facts make it difficult to classify the following memoir. It is both travel narrative and memoir on the body, but perhaps none of the traditional writers in either of these camps would claim my piece. Nevertheless, I call it a body memoir, and under essay it should be filed.

In three sections (plus an introduction and afterward), “The Underground House: A Body Memoir” follows the preparation for and attempt of a long trip into the Middle East and Africa. The preparation involves the excavation of breast tumors. Post trip, the piece turns to the beginnings of the memoir’s persona, in a rural county south of Louisville, Kentucky. The trip itself is played out in an Arabian airport and the capitol of Egypt.

The piece draws no conclusions as to the forming of identity (including the neurotic, gender, or philosophical identities of a young woman in early twenty-first century United States of America), though these becomings are certainly taken as the primary subject of the piece. Conclusions are far less important than beginnings, which occur again and again as the piece continues to start afresh – in location, in water, and in reflection.
The Underground House

a body memoir
INTRODUCTION

I spent last summer trying to excise and organize, arrange and classify, illuminate and evaluate the trip in order to see how I might have avoided my failure. I felt compelled to begin sorting it out for the sake of proving I was healing and for the sake of writing about it. This piece, originally meant to be a travel narrative from the two and a half month sojourn, was now in need of redefinition. It seemed everything was. I had always hidden behind fiction, and before that adolescent playwriting, and before that childish melodramatic poetry, handing off the hard stuff to the tough hitter that I set up as the not real, or at least the you-can’t-prove-it’s-me, main characters. I hadn’t even thought to write directly about myself because I didn’t think my life was very interesting and definitely not funny enough. I was no epileptic lying kleptomaniac Lauren Slater. I was no suicidal multiple sclerosis Nancy Mairs. But, then again, neither were they; for all of their crafty frankness, the Slater and Mairs of the page still have a non-stick coating that isn’t found on the originals.

A travel narrative might have let me get away with digressing to other people and new strange smells and tastes. A thesis about searching the world for meaning by refracting it through my own lens. But now I was afraid I’d have to write a different sort of treatise. I wondered what our prolific touring companion Barry would have said to me on the matter, considering his chagrin at my being given the option of a creative thesis at
all. I had seen him stop by the hotel bar in the mornings to drop off his empty bottles. He told me he wrote all night on his laptop to record his travels, and this trip had taken him to Wales, Cape Town, and Cairo. He said he’d already written twelve hundred pages.

The first night we’d met him, he’d approached our table where we sipped cool beers and scooped hummus with pita bread. He was a very stout, very tall, very pink man with no hair to speak of, on his head. He had a thundering voice and an enviable Australian accent, and he sat down in a jolly, good-natured way to get to know some fellow travelers. But I quickly became suspicious of his talk of men’s clubs and race relations, and I was especially disconcerted that his knowledge of American politics far exceeded my own. He was a name-dropper, too. With every other sentence he asked me if I’d read so-and-so or so-and-so, and I, of course, felt like a twit when I didn’t even know who half of these luminaries were. But still, it was good to talk to someone new, since we’d been cooped up the last few days, sleeping off jet lag.

Barry, at the least, would agree with me that it’s important to write one’s experiences, but we’d probably part ways there. His writing must have been very utilitarian. His writing must have included detailed descriptions of everything he’d toured, modeled after the laborious journals of so-and-so. He was inquisitive, in fact sucked facts up like he was conducting scientific experiments in his laboratory. The only time I liked him was when he was telling me he’d had to turn back from his descent into the tomb beneath one of the pyramids because he was overheated. He’d had to sit down on the warm dusty steps and scoot up toward the daylight backward, occasionally turning around to check his progress. That part made me smile.
So I was on my own to show how, even though I’d gotten only to my first destination, and even though I’d spent most of my time in the hotel, and even though I hadn’t detached thoughts of my body from anything I’d observed, and even though I felt the weight of sickness and guilt and failure like a yoke around my neck, I had come home from a worthwhile journey all the same. I had traveled from the biopsy table to Dubai and from Dubai to a van next to the pyramids. But I had also traveled to Chad’s Uganda and his Tibet and his Cairo. And that, in turn, had helped me travel the much shorter distance to find the five-year-old me and see if she couldn’t tell me how to calm down. See if she couldn’t answer my questions: Is this how? Is this the way?

In the end, this piece is a body memoir. It travels, yes, and continues to do so, in my head. But *The Underground House* is a narrative on breasts and shit and eggs and sweat. Its pages are hands reaching out; its words are tumors extracted. It will not apologize for itself, and neither will I.
The body is a great intelligence, a multiplicity with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a herdsman.

Your little intelligence is also an instrument of your body, a little instrument and toy of your great intelligence.

You say ‘I’ and you are proud of this word. But greater than this – although you will not believe it – is your body and its great intelligence, which does not say ‘I’ but performs ‘I’.

Friedrich Nietzsche Thus Spoke Zarathustra
All of the skin is smooth on the surface, now. But—underneath—I don’t actually press hard enough to find out. I have stopped checking, in breath-holding sessions, arm resting on the blue pillow above my head. I would like to find someone else who will look for me, feel for me. Because I already know about the inside, especially of the right one; it is now only half-full with what makes up most soft, rounded breasts. The rest is made of knots that refuse to be untied. Internal scarring is a problem because it becomes nearly impossible to tell if it’s the old and familiar knots one feels or new, threatening tumors, cultivated on nights off from kneading one’s breasts.

Many women have others that knead their breasts for them: doctors, friends, lovers. I see now, as if on film, the story of my breasts, filling the screen with creamy peach skin and two large, darker brown focal points, rising and falling. It doesn’t matter that I could not really bare them so. It isn’t about my fears, my empty places; it’s only about my pink surface, and so they are alone, on screen, to be looked at.

And I see hands reaching in. All kinds of hands are touching me. The young, plump hands of the radiologist, to search; the different,
smooth hands of my girlfriends, to learn; the kind, worried hands of my lover; other hands are there that reach in as if to take, but find nothing to take. Those hands, I have learned, have the greatest role in the film because they come for a different purpose, and it is not out of love.

Louisville, Kentucky

A few days before we would leave on the trip, Chad and I went out to dinner at an Ethiopian restaurant in Louisville. At the time, Abyssinia sat on Frankfort Avenue, but since then it has moved from the eclectic yuppie area south to the part of Bardstown Road that is choked with gas stations and low-rent housing. The front room of the restaurant was a shot-gun series of tables that lined the wall across from a bar, and this dim, narrow room led back to a dinner area that used to double as a dance floor when it was still called Utopia Café and when they still had Friday Salsa Nights. Tony, the owner of Utopia, had taught me how to salsa in tiny, hip-tossing toe-steps while my friends drank too much at the chrome-lined bar. But this new tableau, the four of us sitting down to eat, was now dervish enough. The excitement of a new dance at a new bar with a strange man meets all of my limits for reckless abandon. When those limits are exceeded, I can be swallowed up by a sandstorm. And the trip we’d been planning all year was coming to fruition in two days.

I sat next to Chad and across from his best friend, Ken, and Ken’s girlfriend, Dara. The room was lined with mirrors at eye level, which let me watch Chad and Ken talk while Dara and I entertained each other with advanced small talk. The two men are mirror opposites. Chad’s five-foot-eight-inches and fast metabolism leave him
something shorter and narrower than Ken, whose thick, jet-black hair is always styled
with expensive hair products. Chad’s blond, thirty-something hair keeps him forever
conscious of bright lights directly overhead. He and Ken went through the
photojournalism school together at Western years earlier, and now Ken tramps around the
globe doing freelance web design for everybody from Palestinian liberation groups to the
UN. Chad took a job teaching PJ at Western after returning from a year-long photo trip
to Africa. (This is also when I met him in all of his worldly, adventurous, creative
splendor.) But after a few years teaching, he was itching for travel; and so, for a change,
it seemed Ken and Dara (a world traveling independent herself) were the ones envying
spontaneity.

It was hard not to weigh myself against their accomplishments, a lost generation
who had chosen to seek out the wars that change young minds. We met after they’d
finished filling their cups with this quest. Dry summers in the West Bank and dead sick
winters in Georgia after a dip at a bathhouse and a bar fight. Malaria nights on the Ivory
Coast, listening to the mosquito coils snipping at the devil, trying to ignore the man
outside her room whispering, “Let me in, sister. Let me in.” Months and years swatting
flies while making pictures of sick babies and dying aunts in villages ripe with the
“wasting disease” and people who know death in as common a way as they know the
orange dirt stamped under their mango trees. But these three insisted they weren’t
consumers like most Americans are who go to these places — there to take carvings home
to their kids or to take souls home to Jesus. They took photographs, sure, with a
surgeon’s skill, but they didn’t take anything deeper than that. And trying to reckon with
this had made them seem, to me, beyond reproach, at first. I had thought, “She’s a better human than me. She can do what I can’t.”

Dara and I actually look a bit like sisters (she the slightly older one, at thirty). We both have the same short, curvy frame; though hers is a bit curvier. I get the impression her curves would be all the more voluptuous were she not a full-time yoga instructor. She owns her own studio in the Highlands and was proud to be featured recently in a local business magazine as a top-forty entrepreneur. She had her picture taken alongside a five-foot tall cut-out of Strawberry Shortcake. Authentic Dara. She got herself lost on route to the photo-shoot and wandered around downtown Louisville, toting the cut-out, smiling blissfully at on-lookers.

She has this great Greek mane of crazy, big-curl black hair that knots underneath at the nape of her neck in less than two days if not attended to. We frequently discuss hair products, as I am, admittedly, on the same never-ending search to tame curly hair. I quietly ridicule myself, though, for this habit of “talking shop” with fellow wiry-heads. I hate to think that I’m so superficial and self-absorbed that I would waste conversation on my appearance.

Just as Dara’s curves are curvier than mine, her hair is wirier. And her meditations are something significantly more Zen, too. I find her balance so alien, I don’t always trust it. I sometimes imagine that she is deceptively sweet. That she actually loathes me. But, to be fair, I imagine that of everyone, eventually.

“T’m so jealous you guys are going,” Dara said between finger-fulls of lentils stuffed in thins strips of spongy injera bread. Her mouth is shaped just like my mother’s, which is what made me like her initially. “I can’t believe in a couple of days you’ll be in
Egypt.” This, of course, made me think, “I’ll be in Egypt in a couple of days,” and that curled my stomach. She seemed to notice my internal wince.

“How are you feeling? Ken told me you’d had a biopsy, but I don’t know any of the details,” she said. I pushed food around on my side of our huge platter with a piece of my injera. It seemed very important to be brave for her all of a sudden. After all, there I was, going on this great adventure that many, including her, might envy, and I was terrified. It was embarrassing—in this group, devastating even, for my reputation. I couldn’t let on to her how afraid I was, how I’d thought a week before while I awaited the pathology report, “If I have cancer, I won’t have to go.”

“I think I’m ready,” I answered her. “I’ll keep feeling better every day, you know? So I’ll be fine once we’re off and I can quit being nervous about it getting started.”

“That’s good,” she said.

My particular brand of anxiety, if such fears can be so classified, is a member of the agoraphobia family. Though I had never, at that point, been unable to cross the sill of my home, as Nancy Mairs describes her agoraphobia, I had spent weeks indoors, avoiding the little errands of life when I’d first moved to new cities, or even new apartments. I didn’t go out for a month when I first transferred down to Western Kentucky University to try my hand at a photojournalism degree. I spent a lot of time alone that way.

I like to establish a pattern, or “safety in habits,” as my father calls his remedy for his own, similar anxiety. I tend to go to the same restaurants, order the same thing, and
like it every time. I also always need to know where the restrooms are; this is very important to me.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll be fine,” she said. “You should bring some little bit of make-up with you and a sexy dress, something that you feel pretty in. You’ll go so long feeling dirty and disgusting that you’ll need a break one night.” I saw myself for a moment as Kathleen Turner’s character in Romancing the Stone, all dolled up and ridiculous for a night of dancing around a fire with the indigenous peoples somewhere. I finally swallowed the food I’d been chewing for five minutes.

“I hadn’t thought of that.” I smiled. What did she do with all of her hair when she traveled? Mine was cut off the day before, so it wouldn’t slow me down on the trip. It had gone from curling halfway down my back to cropped at just an inch or more. I put my hand up to feel the softest, shortest part just above my neck.

“So, do you mind me asking? What was it you had biopsied?” I was actually relieved to take my mind off the trip, so I told her a short version of the story: the flubbed test at the hospital, the second round of tests, the three and a half hours. I didn’t go into detail, but I felt good talking about it. Not everyone asked and seemed willing to listen.

When we finished eating, we walked a few doors down Frankfort to Patrick’s and sat out back in the beer garden by ourselves. The only others ever out back were the stoners, but, that night, we had the place to ourselves. And then Dara asked me to explain what I’d meant by the biopsy being a “particular type of procedure.”

Many years earlier, when I was nineteen, I found my first breast tumor while walking my fingers around the surface of my chest, and an electric surge charged through
my body with the instant knowledge that I had come out of sync with my moon. Then I found another. And an ultrasound revealed a third. While waiting the few weeks for surgery to remove and test the tumors, I offered some of my very close girlfriends and my sister the chance to feel them. There was one I couldn’t find at all in my right breast because it was nestled too deep, but the one near the surface of that breast, and the one in my left breast, could be found with a little gentle searching. “It would be good for you to know what they feel like, to know what to look for,” I had told them. But, really, I wanted them to touch me. Feel these places where I was sick and tell me that they felt them too.

Dara said something then like, “Oh, how terrible for you, at nineteen.” And while she talked, I wondered if I would have offered her the same chance to touch. But I couldn’t have offered it now, since thin bandages protected the sites where the tumors had already been removed. Very protective of my recent wounds, I subtly recoiled as I saw her hand coming toward me, fingers first, entering the frame of my imagination, trying to touch my blackened breast, even though she didn’t want to. She would be repulsed, like me, to see it so swollen and blood-bruised from the hematoma. If it had been a discolored leaf or branch on one of my faltering house-plants, I would have by then pronounced it dead and clipped it off, to prevent disfiguration of the whole thing. But we know better than that about our bodies: the sick parts just need time to heal.

The scars from that first surgery, at nineteen, became finely drawn crescents around both of my nipples. The red faded to pink until they became thin white lines separating the two shades of my breasts. The biopsy on those tumors had come back benign, and time very slowly soothed the damage done. When, six years later (last May),
I came to believe that the scar tissue in my right breast was not just the twisted knot shape
I had learned with my searching fingers, but that it had another, rounded feature attached
to it, I went back to the doctors.

I checked in at the registration desk at Greenview hospital, where I’d worked for a
year as a technical writer, learning the jargon and runaround of the world of medicine.

“Do you have night sweats?” The nurse in the little privacy booth asked me.

“No.”

“Have you had coughing, a fever, chills?” How secretive, how useless. Not to tell
me she was digging for symptoms of TB.

“No. But can you tell me how much this will cost?” I hadn’t paid my thousand-
dollar deductible yet. I was living (and still am) on government education loans and the
small stipend they give graduate assistants in the English department at the university. A
thousand dollar ultrasound would be a problem, especially with the joint costs of the trip
quickly mounting to over ten thousand dollars.

“Well, not really. I mean there are different costs, you know?”

“Don’t you have women come in for pregnancy ultrasounds all the time? How
much are those?” I asked, surprised.

“Let’s see,” she began typing on her computer again, “It looks like those cost
around six hundred.” I wondered how much she made a week. Probably as little as I
had.

They finally called me back, and the ultrasonographer turned around so I could
change into a gown. As I lay on the table in the dark, I guided her finger through the KY
Jelly on my breast, shining with the lights from the equipment, to the suspicious addition
to my knot. She began her quick swiping motions. I craned my neck to see the monitor, but she had it rotated away from me. I wanted to ask to see, but didn’t. After a few more minutes, she said she was finished and had found nothing. So, I had imagined it after all. One of those many women who press and rub and tap their scar tissue until it becomes what they fear. I dressed and went home.

Of course, she was wrong. I was not one of those women. As our trip neared, my doctor had urged me to have a mammogram to be sure Greenview hadn’t missed anything. She had not only missed the tumor I’d put her finger on but two others that the technician at Western Kentucky Diagnostic Imaging (WKDI) found in just a minute or two. At WKDI the radiologist snapped the mammogram film onto the light box and pointed at it. It was clearly an image of a flattened breast, though I saw nothing but dark, a dark I couldn’t distinguish from the dark of the other areas he wasn’t pointing to.

“We’d like to do an ultrasound to get a better look at this.” He seemed nice. Again, I let myself think about money. It didn’t matter how much it cost, of course, but it felt good pretending there was a choice to be made, some control to be had.

“Well, I had an ultrasound at Greenview just a few weeks ago—”

“Mm. I think we need to look at this area today.” He was very diplomatic. He should have said, “Mm. I think they were wrong; this is a tumor.” But instead, he said, “Look, if it’s about the money, we can work that out. If we don’t find anything, we won’t charge you.”

Chad had been waiting in the lobby, and he joined me while I waited my turn. We sat in front of a very big screen TV.
“It’ll be fine, baby,” he said into my ear. I didn’t want to cry, so I pulled away from him. I was still wearing the gown they’d given me for the mammogram. It was thin, and I adjusted it to cover my neck. When I was younger this kind of drama in my life would have been interesting to me, but at twenty-five I just wanted them to say, “It’s nothing. Go home.”

“Here’s one,” the ultrasound tech said. The monitor was pointed to face me, and the same egg-shaped tumor from six years before pulsated on the screen. It vanished when she lifted the wand from my skin. She kept swiping and found two more, both in my right breast. The doctor began to talk then, as I focused my eyes on the third egg. He talked about my options for biopsying what we’d found. “Let’s see if it’s cancer,” I thought, “I don’t care how.”

Two weeks later, and after changing from street clothes into a soft-from-washing gown in a closet (to which I had been given a key on a green bracelet), I was told to wait for a nurse to take me to the biopsy room. In the waiting room, my mother and father, Chad, and his mother sat talking about anything, everything—how could I know? The gown smelled good. Like clothes washed by my parents, it had a better, cleaner smell than average laundry.

I stood shivering in my loose linen pants and my open-in-the-front gown. This a diagnostic imaging center where most radiological procedures could be performed outside of the bounds of the hectic doctor-mall that is a hospital. Here, the hallways were not bustling; everyone moved at a calm, reasonable pace. There is no need to panic, my pants whispered to me as I followed the nurse. I could hear them swishing as I walked; so, in that kind of quiet, there was no need to be afraid. Sh. Sh. Sh. Sh. They said.
For all of its calm, this place could not do one important thing for me—slip me into the sleep of the surgical patient, the sleep of counting backward from a hundred, the one that ends eerily with a coming to, as someone watches me from far away and gets closer and louder, when the hard thing is already over and I can sleep the lazy, in-and-out sleep of post-anesthesia and pain pills to ward off soreness. This place was not equipped to monitor the human body during that kind of sleep. So, instead of a white wrist band with all of my vital information typed neatly, I had a rubber, spiral bracelet that held a little key to my changing closet. Instead of the sleep, I was led to a high padded table in a cold room surrounded by machines and the kinds of medical paraphernalia that make some people queasy, and here I would stare over my left shoulder for the entirety of the three and a half hour procedure.

A Valium had been prescribed for my anxiety, and I’d never had one before, or I would have requested something two or three thousand times stronger. Because, as I made my way onto the table, I knew that I was in the worst shape possible – completely sober. If a new bar equals a double Maker’s on the rocks as soon as I get there, then this anxiety equaled the whole distillery. Sober, I knew nothing more than to carefully hold the front of my faded gown closed with my clammy fingers. This wasn’t out of modesty; it was only my freezing fingers seceding from my ridiculous brain, making a final run at protecting my warm, whole breast from these people.

I lay back on the table. Just as I had during all of those monthly self-exams in my own bed, and I put my right arm up and over my head, my bicep at my ear, my hand somewhere over my crown, my fingers curled into a fist, which I was told to relax. I surrendered immediately. And my breast was bared.
The first step was to numb it with a local anesthetic administered by multiple long-needled syringes. While he did this, the radiologist performing the procedure laid out the game plan for me.

I’ve always felt obliged to humor doctors during awkward procedures. Take the Pap smear. You’re on your back, naked except for a thin hospital gown, scooted to the edge of a table so that your doctor can insert a sort of salad tong with a cranking device into your vagina. Just as she has it properly cranked and is sticking in a q-tip the size of a drinking straw to scrape the lining of your uterus, she begins to ask you how your family is these days and how school is going. You both know the banter doesn’t help. She knows because her own doctor tries the same trick. But I could be assuming too much. Maybe she isn’t trying to distract you. Maybe she’s just trying to fill the silence of one human’s body in the hands of another, when there is no emotional contract to protect either one.

“There are three tumors. One here on top, this one near your armpit, and this last one underneath.” He pressed his fingers into my flesh as he spoke.

“We hope to get to all three with one small incision, here, on top. We will enter from there and come at each one from that angle. This one here,” he pressed my armpit, which I barely felt, “is very deep, near your chest wall.” My research said that could be dangerous. If they’d had the capability to monitor my body and put me under, they would have been able to hear my heart rate speed to a titter at the mention of my chest wall, which, if punctured, would deflate my right lung and require that I be rushed to a hospital. The muscles of my body pulsed, warming my bones, if only for a moment.
“So we hope to get as much of it as possible, but we may not be able to get all of it.”

A vacuum-assisted needle biopsy requires that a single long needle (having already been fitted to a gun-like contraption, which is attached to a hose that leads to a vacuum machine) be inserted into my breast and to the center of the tumor. An ultrasonographer is imaging the whole time to allow the radiologist to see what he is doing. The gun is fired, snatching a thin, stringy sample of the tumor. The needle is removed from my breast, the sample extracted from the gun, and then it goes back in again. This extraction by tiny increments is repeated over and over and over again, until most, if not all, of the tumor is gone. The process is repeated for each of the three tumors.

My body was stretched out on the table, but all of my anxiety over deflated lungs, and bleeding tumors, and long needles, and passing out, and having cancer, and leaving for Africa, and getting malaria, and going crazy, and being alone, all of these curled up around my defenseless breast and my surrendered arm, as one might press like a spoon against a lover who cried in bed over a disturbing dream.

They turned on the vacuum.

What’s that smell? I needed to know. It’s the rubber getting hot on the machine behind your head. We’re making the first incision on top. Don’t tell me. Clinched teeth. The light in the room was dim so that the radiologist could see the monitor that showed the inside of my breast. I think the ceiling was tiled. The hose from the vacuum machine moved on my body somewhere. The gun fired. The smell was hot
rubber from the machine behind my head. Get that blood. The nurse to
my left was rudely in sight, tapping my body into tiny containers of fluid
(is it water?) that flushed pink every time. A half hour, an hour. Firing,
tapping, pink water. One down, two to go. This one bled. We need to
stop the bleeding. A pause. I think I might pass out. I think I might be
sick. A fan. A Sprite. No, we can’t give you a sedative. If I were to
suddenly be whole and closed, standing next to a woman just like me
whom they’d just said that to, I would hit someone. I would kill
someone. Are you ready to go on? Yes. That’s the wall there, doctor.
Yes, I see. Fire, tap, fire, tap. I felt the needle deep in my breast every
time. It did not hurt, but there was a pressure that I cannot compare to
anything, but only say that it made me want to lash out my arms and
defend my invaded body because it moved inside me. With the effort to
keep still, tears pooled at my ears and made them cold. We will have to
make a second incision. We cannot work through the nerves to your
nipple. Yes, make another. You’re okay with two incisions? Yes. There
it is. How much longer? We’ve just begun on the third tumor. We
weren’t able to get all of the deep one. It moved too closely to the wall
of your chest. What if we stop? Is what you have enough to tell about

I rested in the dim room, the machines off, finally. A nurse whose shift was over
sat with me, and I could tell she wanted to go home. I didn’t want her to leave because
she looked familiar now, but I didn’t say so. The ceiling looked so bored with me. I felt like I couldn’t exhale. I wanted to see my mother, Chad. Where had they been? Another woman took my nurse’s place and asked me to sit up. I tried, but black rushed up to my eyes, and I had to lie back down. After several attempts, I sat upright on the table. The doctor came back.

“You’ll need to have a mammogram now so that I can record the placement of the clips we inserted to mark where I removed tissue.” Was he serious? Had he no idea what a mammogram was?

“I can’t. I mean... I can’t. I’ll pass out.”

“Well, I guess you could come back in a few days.” But I knew I wouldn’t.

In the mammogram room a new woman arrived. She was very motherly and looked like she could hug well. She offered me a cold cloth and a glass of water. We pulled my chair up to the machine so that all I had to do was stand long enough for her to position my abused breast between the two clear plates, crank those plates down as far as it would be pressed, and run to the machine to take the picture. I held my breath like she told me to; but, when she came out from her booth, she looked mad.

“Look up,” she said firmly, which surprised me, and so I did. She came to me and very gently helped me sit down. “I’ll get a towel.” I didn’t understand. I looked down. My blood was splattered over the base of the machine and speckled the off-white ceramic tiles at my feet. My light blue pants looked as if I’d gone out in mud made from red clay. I looked at my chest and she caught me before I fell over. “Look up!”

Once they helped me from the wheelchair to the passenger seat of my car, and Chad had shut the door on his side, I clutched at a new white t-shirt with the center’s
name screen-printed on the front, and the thighs of my pants, and I sobbed deep, uncontrolled sobs made entirely of relief.

"It was horrible. It was horrible."

He looked stabbed, but didn’t speak, only put his warm hands over mine. I couldn’t have said what I needed from him then. I still can’t think what could have been expected from a man whose lover was coming home in pieces, with pieces, even, left behind in little containers.

By the time I finished telling Dara about the biopsy, it had gotten a little cold out and I felt good. Like I was released because someone else had been willing to take it on for me. And I was too exhausted by the labor of it to even switch to worrying about the trip. For a good change, I felt very much in the present, and I liked it. Chad and Ken were still talking about their motorcycles, and my mostly untouched bourbon was watery from melted ice. I made a trail through the heavy condensation on the glass with my knuckle. Dara got up to go inside and I breathed deeply, not letting the trip or the unhealed incisions worry me. Not letting the cool night air be anything but pleasant. But she came back from the bathroom, looking unhappy and like she’d splashed water on her face.

"I don’t feel very good, you guys." And then she passed out, face-first, onto the picnic table. She made weird, snoring sounds in the back of her throat. She’d broken out into a cold sweat that quickly dampened her red tank-top. We sat her up, and her eyes rolled into the back of her head as spit ran down her chin. She twitched against me while
I held her upright. Ken seemed torn between holding her up and running away, but once he had her, I ducked past him to run inside and call an ambulance.

I swerved past the pool tables and curious barflies. I was yelling at the bartender before I got to him to call the hospital. Another man emerged from the back looking worried in the kind of way you look worried when some girl passes out in your bar.

“Can you give me a bag of ice?” I asked him.

“A what?”

“Give me a bag of ice!” I demanded. And then I ran back out to Dara, who was the same – slumped forward, mumbling and drooling. Touching her face and neck first, to feel her heat, I put the bag of ice against her skin.

“Mmm. Thank you,” she said but couldn’t seem to get her eyes open. We kept her that way until the paramedics arrived and began asking her questions. I knew that I was behaving well, that I had the situation under control, and I felt calm and sure of myself. I was leaned over the railing she sat next to, to keep the ice on the hot skin of her upper body, and she whispered to me, “Bad medical stories make me pass out.” I repeated this to the paramedic and everyone else dying to hear what she’d said, and added sheepishly, “I’d just finished telling her about my biopsy.” I felt betrayed. Why couldn’t she handle this? She’d tried to take some knowledge from other places and from their wars, so that she could understand herself better. And perhaps she’d wanted to take the same from me by asking about mine, but I began to suspect then that this was the first time she’d learned anything. Why had this, of all things, made her afraid, my sister? Didn’t she understand yet what our bodies are capable of?
And I felt guilty. Maybe my dark anxiety had been enough to overwhelm her. But, no. If anyone is going to believe that, it’s not me. Let her believe it was my sick aura, or my bad feng-shui. I know now that the twelve hours she spent in that emergency room bed, delirious and undergoing a multitude of tests, was thanks to a severe bladder infection and low blood pressure. I know it was that she hadn’t eaten enough salt with dinner. She had offered as much, later in the summer, when I was down and out. “I just need to be careful to eat more salt on my food,” she’d said smiling. And, to demonstrate, she’d shaken a little out onto her falafel. But I didn’t really believe her. Still don’t. Even now, a year later, I suspect she blames me for her temporary imbalance and ensuing medical bill fiasco. But I kind of understand; I wish I had somebody to blame for mine.
There are important things to know about Egypt. The man with a six-foot board stacked with bread loaves on his head. The bright red and green lawn chairs outside of your ancient hotel where old men sit and smoke their tall, slender hookahs. The cats. A woman with a watermelon on her head as she walks, hands at her sides, her flowing garments moving in rhythm enough, like the rest of her, to maintain a symmetry with the earth’s rotation, so that she could even pause and greet a friend without the melon falling and splitting open on the street. The things people can carry on their heads in other parts of the world make you suspect we Americans are some of the least poised. The pyramids look like mountains through the Cairo skyline as you weave toward them, but then you find there is a KFC/Pizza Hut at their main entrance.

In ancient Egyptian history, at the beginning of civilization, it was believed that when you died, your heart was weighed against a feather, while a judge questioned you about your life, to determine if you were good or evil. If your heart was evil, if it weighed more than the feather, then a dog gobbled it up and you were damned. While your
heart was weighed, another judge with the head of an alligator, a lion,
and a hippo listened to see if you were lying so that he might tip the
scales.

Dubai International Airport, United Arab Emirates

By the time we arrived in Dubai we had been traveling for about thirty hours. Sleep deprivation between time zones can create a sense of oppressed euphoria in a place like the Dubai airport. Daylight streamed in from the massive skylights of the domed roof and the long walls of windows on the sides of the building. So much glass and bright sunlight. Pink and orange neon lights wrapped around live palm trees that pushed up to the third floor of the center atrium. I felt like I was in heaven. They glowed in a silly way as we wandered the second level of the pill-shaped airport, looking for a place to rest.

The first floor was filled with duty-free shops that carried everything from the Sony earbuds Chad needed for his iPod to gold and diamonds and fine silk scarves. I had been told people flew in from surrounding countries just to shop for the day in the airport. There was a full-size grocery market where I saw women selecting chocolates and wines in a hurried way, as though someone were about to beat them to it. Early in our layover, many people milled about the shops and restaurants, and most of them appeared to be from the region.

We finally stopped circling after finding an open area with simple reclined leather chairs where we could sit down to take stock of ourselves. Nearby was a pair of
bathrooms, so we took turns guarding the carry-ons and camera equipment, while the
other went to freshen up.

It was in the bathrooms, looking in the mirror at my newly cropped hair, that I
became aware no one was speaking my language, or any language I’d heard before. I
stared at my oval face, which was pale and tired looking. When Chad and I had begun
planning the three-month trip, I had imagined the coast of southern Spain or Ireland’s
green hills. But Chad loves Africa, loves the Middle East. He’d had a dream, he told me,
that he was drinking tea in Tibet. And so we were three days into our around-the-world-
style plane ticket that cost nearly four thousand dollars each. First Cairo, then Mt. Sinai,
then the Red Sea, then Nepal, then Tibet, then Uganda, where we would stay for two
weeks teaching photo courses for a cultural project to benefit children with AIDS. I want
to be here, I told my eyes in the mirror. I can do this. The treble of female Arabic was
ringing in my ears, as I sought a stall where I could change my bandages.

Locked in, finally, I went about getting out my little kit, a sandwich baggie filled
with the necessary sterile supplies: large band-aid pads with the sticky part cut off, body
tape to hold them on, a little travel bottle of hydrogen peroxide, and a pair of tiny sewing-
kit scissors. The incisions themselves hardly needed all of this attention. Unlike the two-
inch openings for my surgery at nineteen, these were only a quarter to a half of an inch
wide. But the constant in and out of the needle gun and the pivoting and angling to get at
multiple tumors from one place, had created nickel-sized areas of skin so damaged they
resembled raw meat. They were each very soft and delicate. I thought of them as little
plots of land where I was trying to grow skin. I found that the band-aids were great for
their pads, but their sticky arms began to create new sores after a couple of days. So I
switched to cutting the pads off the band-aids, careful to keep the center of the pad sterile, and taping them on with body tape, which was very gentle on my already irritated skin.

By now, the hematoma, which had initially covered almost the whole lower half of my right breast, had faded down to the size of a business card and its center was brown and a lighter purple—the edges the happy green of a fading bruise. The nickels were almost dimes, and it appeared the incisions were precariously closed, finally. But it was hard to say, and I wasn’t doing any poking or prodding to find out. I’d had my chin tucked to my chest, looking down at my tedious work for so long, that I became light-headed and had to lean against the wall.

The first time I ever passed out was from a similarly delicate process. Waiting for surgery to remove the tumors my freshman year, I decided to get my first and only tattoo. I spent days researching for images that said something important to me. Only, at nineteen, I wasn’t sure what was important to me, so I tried to find something open to interpretation—something with legs for the years to come. This was just before the Chinese character tattoo craze. I couldn’t have known how unoriginal it might eventually seem once every mid-drift clad socialite began to sport the black ink script I had so romanticized. But even now, it doesn’t matter. I never regretted having that feeling of control I so very much needed when I walked into Acme Ink for my two-hour appointment.

Jay Fish, the well-tattooed guy who laid it on me, was great. He worked for an hour and a half straight. I had expected to lie down, but instead he had me lean over the table to stretch out the skin on my back enough for him to work behind me. When he
finished, he slathered on some ointment and put a few layers of plastic wrap over it, and taped it down with body tape. I was giddy with what I’d done.

Under strict instructions not to remove the plastic until eight the next morning, I waited until just then to see my new skin, my new mark. I worked very carefully at the shower mirror in my dorm, peering over my shoulder to see what I was doing. I dabbed at the area until it was clean and saw, for the first time, my body as my own.

But just then the noises from the showers became underwater surging against my hot ears. I sat down hard on the cold blue tiles and gratefully spread my arms and face onto them, the cold ceramic keeping me conscious. As I lay there, in an almost sitting, almost lying posture of supplication, girls walked by me and climbed into the showers to start another waterfall and then another. I couldn’t bear the noise, so I crawled into the hallway and toward my room. I made it just outside my door before I passed out. When I came to, I crawled into my room and passed out again on my little bed.

The tattoo itself is pretty simple. An impressionist butterfly with Japanese cherry blossoms in her wings sits on my spine at the center of my back. Below her is a Japanese character that means “to fly” and above her is one that means “to dream.” And, indeed, as I had predicted, they held a different meaning for me then than they do now. Back then, I needed them to mean that I had a long life ahead of me. Now, I need them to mean that I deserve that. I often forget they’re even there, but they never disappoint me when I catch them in the mirror. It may be the only major decision in my life I’ve never questioned. Perhaps because it affected only me.

I finished up in the stall and packed up my little kit. From the sink, this looked like any airport bathroom one might find in the U.S., though much cleaner, as someone
was constantly cleaning. My intimate knowledge of bathrooms made this view of Arabia, at least, familiar.

Bathrooms. Preparing for the trip, my main concern had been how in god’s name I was going to poop in a hole in the ground when we got to Uganda. I was worried about shitting in general. I tried to ease my mind by learning to stand and squat on the toilet seat in my Bowling Green apartment to do my business – a kind of dress rehearsal for the real thing. But I only did this once because it sounded like I was pooping down a well, and I was afraid the neighbors would hear.

There would be no pooping in the ground in Dubai, unless that was what I wanted to do. The United Arab Emirates is easily one of the richest places in the world, and Dubai was the hub stop for all of our Emirates Airline flights. In the airport, there were plenty of bathrooms with stalls where one could squat over a hole, if one wanted to; in fact, most of them were like that. They looked like huge steel hospital potty pans with foot grips, and hanging on the wall next to each one was a hose with a sprayer on it. No directions. No toilet paper. But on the other side of the bathroom, one could find a long row of pristine Western-style stalls with toilets and paper. If I’d been feeling better, I would have had to experiment with the former of these offerings.

This wasn’t the first time I’d obsessed over my excretory system. That most taboo and mysterious part of our bodies, that most vile and omnipotent ruler of my throne – it can be ignored by many. But for those of us secretly stalking the myriad bathrooms of the world, so many of us women wishing we could have been ladies, it simply must become a conversation piece. By telling our friends (of course, our families by then know) and our lovers (up front is best, as a joke, an ice-breaker) we are giving them a
warning. Sort of, “In case of fire, break glass,” but instead something more fitting: “In case of panic, drive fast.” We often have an excellent sense of humor, joking that we could save money by riding public transportation instead of maintaining a car only if the cost of diapers doesn’t exceed the cost of oil changes and gasoline.

The thing about my Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is that it generally flares up at times of extreme anxiety; it is actually the fear of incontinency that makes me incontinent. And the fear that most aggravates my spastic colon is that there might be no bathroom facilities available should I need them. Thanks to this fear, I tend to avoid new locations. However, in the spirit of self-improvement, I often push myself out of my comfort zone in the hopes that I will, someday, be spontaneously cured of it all at once: the IBS, the incontinency, the anxiety, and maybe even other things that could use curing.

So when Chad and I started talking about and planning our around-the-world trip and where we might like to go, I began hesitantly to imagine Uganda (according to him, extremely deficient in my idea of a bathroom) as our final destination. When I’d met Chad two years earlier, he’d only just returned from a year in Uganda where he’d been photographing for Save the Children. I realize now that one of the things that made him seem so spectacular to me at the time (besides his beautifully sensitive photographs of African children with AIDS) was that he’d been brave enough to shit in a hole in the ground, sometimes even in public. When he suggested we switch out our initial last stop from Kauai, Hawaii, to sub-Saharan Uganda, I made myself forget what the country lacked and tried to focus on what it contained.

The Uganda of Chad’s photographs, like the Nepal and the Tibet and the Sinai Peninsula of the Lonely Planet’s travel book photographs, was lovely. Uganda seemed
all at once crisp and bright and full of blue skies, orange clay dirt, and green mango trees. At the same time, it was white window light illuminating just the eyes of someone sitting in the darkness of a home. There was little to no electricity where he shot, so the colors were pure and brilliant, untainted by the green hue of florescent lighting or the yellow glow of incandescent bulbs. One photograph – a serious schoolgirl in a blue robe, standing in front of a blackboard that is covered in thick, white-chalked English words and letters, her rich, deep skin color against the royal blue of the cloth, the creamy white on the black of the backdrop – it is more beautiful than the coral reef photographs of Hawaii that we’d admired in Lonely Planet. I forgot to worry about bathrooms. I saw only the colors, deep and true, and the eyes in the light.

From his photographs, I learned these things of Uganda. The trees I drew as a child with one brown and one green crayon were the mango trees of Africa. The trunk is stout and brown, and the green bush of branches and leaves form a perfect treetop. This one sits alone under a blue sky. Its shade looks cool and inviting. This one sits behind the schoolhouse, and the children are gathered beneath it. The cows, with their long, wayward horns, are nearby. The teacher wears a brown suit near the chalkboard, under the tree. This is Kybuye, in Nakasongola. In other places, the children are crying. In many pictures, the children have large, deep eyes, and they are crying.

Rita, Balikudembe, Bula, Moses, Immanuel, Isaac, Maria, Julius. The orphan children of AIDchild in portrait are looking for me. They look into the wide eye of Chad’s camera, searching for his, searching, it
seems, for mine. Rita is smiling; Balikudembe is serious; Bula is laughing; Moses has white teeth; Immanuel is crying; Maria is sick; Isaac’s ears stick out; Julius is a boy. These are the school pictures from your fourth grade year, from mine, from Chad’s. Self-conscious.

I hear them singing “Oh, Uganda” (“Oh, Uganda, the land of freedom...”) on his audio files. And they sing at night before bed in young, high voices the song that puts them to sleep. “Ku lugyegere, kweyansumulula. Mu bizibu ebingi ebyo, yansomulula.” (From the chains that bound me, I have been set free. From a life of troubles, I have been set free.)

About ten hours into our thirteen-hour Dubai layover, I began to feel funny. Within an hour I was fighting to stay conscious by rubbing Chad’s cold Sprite on my face. This was day three. No sleep longer than an hour. No food not forced down during a bumpy plane ride. No sense of welcome in the United Arab Emirates. Only me, suddenly the most insignificant person in the world, plucked from a Kentucky cabbage patch and dropped into a place so foreign, the only thing I could do was duck my head and walk behind my boyfriend. And that is what I did from then on. It was a very strange thing. I wish now that I’d been alone so there would have been no one to cower behind. I wish now that I’d had some self-respect. But there was only fear. Cold, white, American fear. How little it turns out I’d deflected; how much I’d absorbed.

There, I was a pale woman uncovered, vulnerable. I wanted one of their burkahs to crawl under, to protect me. I wanted to be five again, body and head under my
blankets to stay safe from the shadows in my room at night. But I hadn’t been able to breathe. The little bit of air beneath the layers of bedding slowly seemed stripped of oxygen, and, eventually, I’d throw off my blankets and breathe deep the cool, night air of my blue room in our underground house. Back then, I had consciously chosen to expose myself to my demons so that I could survive. By choosing them, I wasn’t afraid to face them.

But in Dubai, I began to suspect that I’d been a much stronger woman when I was five.

Cairo, Egypt

Sitting in waiting rooms. For various kinds of illnesses we sit in waiting rooms and stare at the wallpaper. As though this is a sufficient distraction. We look around and see tiny orange fish in fish tanks. We see other people hushing their children. We see anger over long waits and co-pays and illnesses that make us angry, too. We see toys. We see carpet with a pattern that we trace with our eyes. We see stacks of magazines for ourselves and our children. Magazines for everyone.

How many of these common household things can you find in the jungle? One of them asks me, when I am ten. How many can you see? It wants to know. I circle a hairbrush in a tree trunk, a hat with a feather in the monkey’s belly and tail, a bottle in an exotic flower. I was good at that game.
Waiting is like living. I went to the beach and stood on the wet, packed sand and waited for the water to come to my feet. And when it finally did, I waited for it to come to my ankles. And when it finally did, I waited for it to touch my calves. And when it finally did, I went home. And there, I waited until I was grown and out of my parent’s house. And when I was, I waited to make a family. And when I did, I waited until my children were grown and out of my house. And when they were, they waited to make a family. And then we will retire. To the porch. For iced tea.

By the time we arrived in Cairo, I was a mess. Thankfully, the air pouring into the van kept me awake as we barreled through heavy traffic and clouds of exhaust toward the Windsor Hotel. We passed a building with a huge painting on it of the President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, which the driver pointed out to us proudly. The man in the painting seemed too young to me, much younger than I had imagined Mubarak to be. The driver was grinning at me in his rear view mirror and waiting for my response. “He looks like . . . a very good leader,” I said lamely. But the driver seemed pleased and redirected his attention to the vehicles careening around us. It didn’t appear that they used the lanes, as our van squeezed in and out of slowing clusters of traffic by straddling the dotted line.

At the hotel, a cool breeze revived us momentarily as we climbed down from the van. We checked in to our room and fell asleep for days, or at least for what I had hoped would be days. But I never felt as though I went to sleep, sitting up every hour or so to
check the clock and Chad and see how much longer I had. The five a.m. call to prayer made my thoughts turn to men in long robes and women with hidden faces. After several such nights, I still could not shake the dizzy hotness that had crept over me in that Dubai airport stall, swaying as I was careful to cover and tape my wounds.

“How are you feeling?” Chad sat down on the bed next to me where I’d been reading Lauren Slater’s *Lying* for the last couple of days while he explored the hotel and then the city, restless to get out. I had been underlining passages like: *You feel terrible but that doesn’t mean you are terrible. You feel empty, but that doesn’t mean you are empty.*

“I feel best when I lay really still,” I said, tucking a plane ticket stub into the book to mark my place. At first I’d tried reading the Lonely Planet travel guide books we’d brought along, but they only made me feel worse. “I’m really hungry, but the thought of food makes me almost throw up.”

We had this conversation frequently and each time I felt more lightheaded, hungrier, and more nauseous. I was only getting a bite or two down at every meal before I had to stop. It made my stomach curl and my head hot. It wasn’t the food itself, but the idea of putting anything into my body that I couldn’t trust. We didn’t even brush our teeth with the tap water there. How was I supposed to eat the food if the water was so dangerous? The hummus and falafel and beer were safe enough, and I knew it. And they tasted good, at first. But my mind must have wandered out of range and worried my stomach into being afraid, so that the food turned it as fast as I could begin to eat.

I was scared I would have to go to a hospital if I did not eat and they would put an I.V. in my arm to feed me. I knew even then that it was ridiculous to fear contracting the
disease we hoped to help fight in Uganda, but I couldn’t shake the thought of getting H.I.V. from shoddy infectious disease practices in an Egyptian hospital. With every five a.m. call to prayer, every blast of smelly heat in the hallways, and every failed attempt at a salty meal, I was very much in a foreign land, and being sick in a foreign land is a big deal. Especially when I didn’t know what was wrong with me.

Chad found some packaged cookies and crackers down the street from our hotel, and to both of our surprise I ate them all immediately. I knew then, and Chad must have too, that my head was more to blame than my stomach for that week’s fasting. If I was doing this to myself, it had to stop. I wasn’t going to ruin this trip. I had to start pushing myself out of the cold little room and into the hot alleyways and towering monuments that lay beyond them.

“It’s as if all the years of experimenting with drugs and therapy to get to where I was has been stripped away. It’s as if this is where I’d be if I’d never done all of those things to fight it. Completely out of control,” I’d said, over a beer in the hotel bar, one night. He just looked at me. What could he possibly do to help me get back ten years of psychotherapy?

“I just wish,” I said earnestly “that I could get a hold of myself.”

“Me too,” he said. And that was fair.

Soon it was clear a half of a week had passed, and I’d been putting off the pyramids. I was still sickened by the heat and the smells outside of Room 11. I had the air conditioner running non-stop, so the room was an oasis, and I hesitated at the doorway. When I stepped out into the hall, into a dark corridor, I was pummeled by a thick gush of sticky warmth and meat smells coming from the hotel restaurant a few
floors below us. A few times I turned around and went back in, unable to go out. The corridor was dark to conserve electricity, so I felt badly about the air conditioner running all the time. At every hint of our venturing out, Aryan, the all-business Egyptian who managed the place, would send someone up to shut it off.

But I hadn’t gone out any farther than the few streets surrounding our hotel before the day we went to the pyramids. I had been downstairs with Chad to talk to Samir, the hotel’s official tour guide, a few days after we arrived.

“I will take you by van to the City of the Dead.” He pointed on a map that I only glanced at. A familiar burning sensation was creeping up my neck. I looked around the tiny lobby of the old British colonial hotel, built before the city (and much of the hotel) was torched by its citizens to liberate themselves from the British. They had gone out into the night and set fire to their own businesses and homes. No one would have Egypt if the Egyptians could not. And it had worked. The English removed the last bit of their troops in answer to the blaze and gave the Egyptians back what belonged to them. In the hotel restaurant, three floors up, there was a large painting, charred beyond recognition, which hung on the wall next to the tables. It had a tag that hung underneath it to explain how they had won their city in the blaze of 1952.

I continued to look around the lobby. I was looking for something to soothe me – something comforting. On the wall, beside the front desk, hung a clunky, old-fashioned switchboard. Nailed to the wall behind the desk were the keys for the hotel rooms, each hanging from a heavy bronze pendant, shaped like a diamond. *The Windsor Room 11* was etched onto our key’s diamond, which I fingered the corners of, secretly, in my pants pocket.
“You do not want to buy papyrus on the streets,” Samir was saying, “It will be very inexpensive, but it will not be good.” I looked toward the open front door, only twelve feet or so away from the desk. A nice breeze was coming through to my damp cheeks, and I tried to focus on how good it felt. A few feet inside the door was an armed guard. He had on a very nice, clean suit, the white of which gleamed next to the black strap of his semi-automatic rifle. He held his weapon with one hand, casually. To touch him, I would have had to walk through the metal detector that stood between us. I did not.

Samir was talking to me.

“I’m sorry. What?” I asked.

“How do you wish to go?” He waited and then smiled.

“How do you wish to go to the pyramids?” He asked me.

“Won’t we be taking the van?”

He laughed. “No, at the pyramids, I mean. You will have to get out of the van—”

My neck flooded with red. My cheeks burned and ears tingled. I put my hand against the desk, in case I couldn’t feel the floor under my feet, in case that was next.

“You may take a camel,” here he turned to Chad and made a disgusted face, “but they are dirty animals. Or a horse.”

“I don’t like camels,” Chad offered. He had the same look on his face as Samir – sort of disgusted, but excited to be planning the trip.

“I don’t know,” I said. My hand was slipping around on the desk with sweat. I did not want to go. I was in Cairo, and I did not want to go to the pyramids. I hoped, I
think, that this feeling would go away—that this was temporary—and that it was only thanks to the just closed incisions on my breast and the three days without sleep to get there that I wanted so badly to go back up to the room right then and sit on the bed. To dry my hands and breathe very deeply without smelling anything. I hoped very much that I would feel the floor, hard under my feet again, not a trampoline, punching up and down against me. They were looking at me, patiently. “Um... do I have to decide now?”

Samir looked at Chad and smiled, knowingly. “Whatever the queen wants, the queen gets.” I was insulted, momentarily, which was a nice distraction from the trampoline. But then he continued. “My wife is my queen, and I do anything to make her smile. My daughter is my princess.” He looked at me and said, “No, queen, you do not have to decide now, only please to tell Aryan as soon as you know. I would take the horse, if I were you. They are very fast.” I felt better, not having to choose.

I was still undecided when we left the next morning in Samir’s van with Barry, the Australian, and two Japanese men who fell asleep and began snoring as soon as they sat down. Perhaps that was my mistake. Perhaps, if I had imagined myself on the horse (not the dirty camel, of course) I would have made it. I had decided to go on Friday, which seemed disrespectful somehow, as it is the Islamic holy day, or “your Sunday,” Samir had said. But it was a convenient day for Samir (a Christian descended from ancient Egyptians) and the rest of us (non-worshippers in general) because much of the city shuts down to allow for prayer. In other words, the traffic isn’t as bad.

When I stepped out of the hotel for the first time in days, I ran into Samir.
“Queen! You are feeling better?” They all knew I felt like shit. Everybody I came in contact with seemed to have been informed.

“I’m okay,” I said.

“Are you sure you are ready, queen?”

Of course I wasn’t, but this is how you get past your fears. Right? You run headfirst into them.

“I hope,” he said quietly, “That I did not talk you into going on the wrong day.”

He stood so close to me; and, in America, this would have made me very uncomfortable. But there, I was so relieved to not be ignored, to have a foreign man in front of me who would look me in the eyes as we spoke. “You do not have to go today,” he said, “I will take you tomorrow. Or any day.”

I didn’t say “okay, good idea.” I said, “No, I’m ready.” And we went.

About sixteen million people live in Cairo, a city currently incapable of housing properly more than two-thirds that number. Consequently, some five million people do not have what Americans might consider proper housing. But the denizens of this overcrowded metropolis are very resourceful. When Samir put his finger down on the part of the cartoonish tourist map labeled City of the Dead, I had imagined a ghost town, of sorts. But Cairo does not have empty spaces. And so the City of the Dead, originally a maze of tombs, an above ground cemetery with each tomb walled off from the next, has made room for the living. The road leading into the City was elevated enough to see a dusty maze filled by these bizarrely deserted streets and tiny apartments. The buildings seemed to lean inward toward us on both sides. Only the skinny dogs came out to see about us as our little van labored over the bumpy dirt lane. Over a million Cairenes live
among the dead there, though I only saw the man who led us through the mosque. And he would not look at me.

We stepped inside the mosque, into the cool air that I was hoping would be trapped between the large stone walls of the dark interior. But, after taking a few turns, we walked back outside into a sunny courtyard where ahead and to the right was an area of prayer with many large Persian rugs covering the floor.

Samir told us that the men kneeled on the rugs to pray and any women who attended would kneel behind them, on the concrete where we stood. He pointed behind us to the minaret we would soon climb, and described its architectural qualities compared to that of a Turkish minaret. “You should remember,” he said, “that the main difference between a Turkish minaret and an Arabic minaret is the pencil. I will show you the pencil on our way to Giza. But for now, you know that this minaret is not so much like a pencil. Now come with me, but do not step on the carpet.” He led us back into the cool shadow of the building to the right, where light came in from one tiny arched window near the vaulted ceiling. It shone down in a straight line to the floor, and I tried to take its picture. But Chad moved into the light to make a picture from inside the beam itself. I felt very heavy, in this circular room, which Samir explained was a sacred tomb, as I watched Chad move so that the light obscured his outline into a very quiet explosion of white and shadow. I lay my camera against my chest, and let the strap pull taut on the back of my neck. I would not take any more photographs that day. Samir grew impatient in the courtyard, and we hurriedly tiptoed along the edge of the inscribed floor to rejoin him.
The hot sun felt like a blanket on my head. My white cotton hat was only a layer of cellophane between my scalp and the fiery heat. As Samir led us to the minaret, he pulled out his wallet and showed Chad and me a school picture of his princess, his four-year-old daughter. She looked sweet, her hair and face like that of any other four-year-old caught between second and third period, or lunch and recess; her white blouse buttoned with those little, fake pearly buttons my mom had used to make my shirts when I was her age, and a burgundy sweater, reminiscent of a school uniform – simple, almost plain. Samir grinned while I studied it. I learned from my last boss, a middle-aged nurse at a hospital in Bowling Green, to put on a very emphatic show when I was shown a photograph of someone’s child. “Oh, she is so pretty, Samir! Look at her! Adorable! What is her name?” This seems false, I know, but in all actuality, as I had witnessed of Trish, it is a vital social ritual. (And, apparently, a global one.) Samir was delighted by my delight. We were both, for a moment, delighted. And then I had to climb the minaret.

All of the men stepped aside to let me go first, but I insisted I be last. The minaret may not have been Turkish, but it was very near a pencil, nonetheless. I was afraid I would fall backward, so I knew I’d be going very slowly. So we climbed, and I pulled up the rear. I had experienced stairs like these only once before, in the American Cathedral in Paris. I’d made friends with the Canadian girl living in the top apartment of the spire. The stairs of both places are made of large heavy stone, which I grasped all the way to the winding top. This one was about four stories of moving in a constant circle, each step as high as my knee. The sun on my head again, as we climbed out of the stairwell and
onto the roof of the building, was an angry fist. I sat down and put my head in my hands. My camera was a brick around my neck.

Finally, I stood, wary of the need to sit down immediately, and looked out at what Samir claimed was the best view of the City of the Dead. I saw below me an endless expanse of the same streets we’d driven in on. But now I was high enough to see the tombs. In every tiny walled off lot, no bigger than my living room at home, was a very large monument or tomb marking the resting place of the dead. In some cases, the tombs could not be seen, and, I was told, they were inside the small dwellings, often in the center of the living room – the size of a casket. I sat down again.

The minaret itself was used for the call to prayer. Back before public announcement systems, muezzins would climb the thousands of minarets in the city and call the people to prayer, five times a day. They still do, but now fewer people are needed for the various regions of the city, thanks to the aid of bullhorns and speaker systems. We heard them, every day, from our hotel room, the streets of the bizarre, the bank: it was a beautiful chorus of fluctuating male voices, calling the children of Allah to worship. Allah was the only word I could pick out, though understanding was somehow unimportant because the voices hummed just perfectly against the back of my throat. I would wake to it every morning and feel very small, and very strange.

Samir was smoking a cigarette in the shade of the minaret’s stairwell, leaning one elbow against the top step and exhaling into the light. I watched him for a few minutes this way, my head still propped in my hands, and he looked like he probably looked when he was not touring Americans around Cairo. His near-constant smile had faded into a worn grimace. His body, against the large stones of the stairwell, looked tired.
To my left the two Japanese men were laughing and taking each other’s photos with small digital cameras and a camcorder. They repositioned themselves several times and posed, smiling, with something carefully selected behind them. When they had exhausted their photo opportunities, they were ready to leave. I thought how terrible it would be of me to write of them, awake only at the major monuments on our day trip because they’d just gotten off their plane from Japan, taking pictures and being an otherwise unimpressive presence as none of us could communicate with them properly. They nodded at Samir’s tour lecture but appeared to do so out of courtesy, not understanding.

Back in the van, Samir told us we would stop next at the papyrus shop. It was certified, he told us. But, when we arrived, the dozens of shops selling papyrus and other souvenirs surrounding the entrances to the pyramids appeared equally as certifiable. I suspected Samir got a nice commission off of the hundreds of dollars our group spent at the shop. The two Japanese men did the most damage, and we were forced to wait an hour for their money “to come through.” I wasn’t sure what they meant by that, though I pictured cables and telegrams being rattled off all across the Eastern Hemisphere as the money made it’s way through Morse code to our little paper store. Chad and I told Samir, as the group had unloaded in front of the shop, that I could not go on to the pyramids, which was a funny thing to say since they loomed right next to us.

As I stood there in the sun next to the van, outside of the shop, my legs quivered and I couldn’t explain precisely why. Samir said he was sorry. “It was the wrong day,” he said to me. “I will take you back to the hotel? Or, you could use the van to drive around the pyramids. But you could not tell the others.” I wanted desperately to go back
to the cold room at the Windsor, but I saw a little hope in Chad’s face that he might be able to touch the pyramids with me, and it appeared Samir was offering us a special deal. So I decided to try the van, and we joined the others inside.

Fortunately, the shop smelled incredible—minty, like eucalyptus—thanks to the demonstration table where papyrus stalks soaked in shallow trays of water, waiting to be woven for curious customers. And there was a bathroom, thank god, since I had had at least two liters of water already that day. Part of me wonders if it wasn’t the water that caused all of the problems.

In my parents’ living room, a week before, my sister and Chad had told me horrible stories of dehydration and sickness. I came firmly to believe that one could shrivel up at a moment’s notice as the dry desert air was forever pulling moisture out of my plump, pink skin. In all reality, I realize now, the week in Cairo was hardly different than the weeks spent on tacky beach vacations with my parents as a child, in terms of sensible water consumption. But at the time, I may as well have been on Mars, and I believed what I had been told about dehydration.

So it’s a fortunate thing about the bathroom, which I made good and frequent use of while we were there. And after having had to purchase squares of toilet paper off the lady hanging out by the women’s bathroom at the Cairo airport, I had learned quickly to carry toilet paper with me at all times. Good thing for that too, as toilet paper was hidden here, and every other place I went in Cairo, from Westerners. At the hotel, Aryan explained to us this was because their plumbing systems were not accustomed to the large quantities of toilet paper we Americans like to use. We were frequently reminded to throw used toilet paper away in the garbage cans near the commode.
Two older men sat outside the bathroom smoking, but did not pay any attention to me as I came and went. I assumed they did not like me very much. The bathroom was clean enough, but the only soap to wash my hands with was a thin sliver of soiled bar soap. I passed it up and used my waterless hand sanitizer instead.

When we’d purchased all the papyrus we could that day, we piled back into the van to drive to the gates of the pyramid where the Sphinx looked down at us with only half a face. Samir was very strict for a moment and said two hours was all we had. All we had? My god, how was I going to make it two hours? After Barry and the Japanese men got out of the car, Mohammed, the driver, drove us to the pyramids. He had a scuffle with some armed men over the entrance fee, and then we were soon parked fifty yards away from the pyramids of Giza.

I didn’t get out of the van for two reasons: 1. I was so hot I couldn’t even sit up straight as the van heated up and my bandana dried again and again. And 2. I was afraid if I stood up I’d pass out and I would be taken somewhere where someone would stick needles in me. Okay, three reasons. 3. I knew that if I stood up I would piss myself. The peeing I had done at the papyrus shop was nothing compared to what I needed to do right then.

Mohammed waited for us to get out, but we could not communicate with him that I was a complete jackass. So eventually he got the hint and began driving us around the three pyramids. And that is how I saw them. That is as close as I came. Chad, practically squirming, never complained, only took picture after picture through the windows of the van.
When we finally got to the last pyramid, Mohammed again waited for us to get out. Take a picture. Dance around. Anything. I imagine he thought I was a terrible person. He made me feel, with his cutting looks and shaking head, like a terrible person. But by then, there was no way I could have gotten out of the van without a toilet at least two feet away. I had scanned the desert as we wobbled through the windy road – anything would do. I didn’t want to be picky. But every hundred yards or so was an armed soldier on a horse looking very much like he would not be pleased with me pissing at the foot of his great pyramids. So we asked Mohammed to take us to Samir. He knew that word, and he shook his head and drove toward the KFC at the paws of the Sphinx. Right past that was a set of buildings and dusty allies where Samir was found eating his lunch – a KFC value meal. As soon as he got in the van, I asked for a bathroom.

“How much would this chicken cost you in America?” He asked us, offering his fries to me.

“A meal?” I asked. I used all of my adult bladder control to maintain my composure. “Um, a two piece meal would probably cost about five or six dollars.” I really didn’t know. I hate Kentucky Fried Chicken.

“How much does it cost here?” Chad asked.

“About twenty-eight Egyptian pounds,” he said, putting a gob of fries in his mouth. At the hotel, Chad and I had spent little more than that for two dinners and a couple of beers. When we pulled up at the papyrus shop again, Samir and I jumped out and I hurried for the bathroom. We decided to hang out there until Barry and the two Japanese men were finished touring the pyramids.
I had forgotten until then about Friday, the holy day of prayer. When we arrived at the shop, the owner and all of the pushy salesmen were leaving to pray. The place was quiet and dark. It gradually grew warmer as the hours wore on. I sipped a warm Sprite a young boy had brought me, and Chad had tea with Samir. Soon, the owner of the shop arrived and sat down with us. Samir explained to him in Arabic about me and the bathroom; and, when the owner attempted to sell us papyrus, Samir cut him off, again in Arabic, and seemed to be telling him we’d already purchased a fair amount.

The owner turned to me and smiled. He looked at me for a moment and then turned to Chad. “I will buy her from you,” he said. “I will give you ten thousand camels.” Chad smiled and we both laughed.

“Oh, I think I might keep her,” Chad said.

“I will give you fifteen thousand camels,” the owner said with a grin and nodded to me. “I am very rich. I will take you to the doctor and then I will take you home,” he offered. I didn’t know what was meant to happen at the doctor and didn’t want to.

“Fifteen thousand?” Chad asked. I laughed and looked at them both warily.

“It is true,” Samir offered, “he is very rich. This building alone cost six million of your dollars.”

“Twenty thousand camels. Yes?”

“Sorry.” I said, becoming slightly uncomfortable with the conversation, “I’m not for sale.”

The owner looked at Chad, smiling broadly, “Everything has a price for it. I will give you all of my camels. I have forty thousand camels!”

“No,” Chad said, “I would not sell her.”
“Okay! Okay! I did not mean to offend.”

I breathed deeply as we rose to go to the van and pick up the other members of our group. I was so grateful to be going back to our room, finally, that I felt a little bit sturdier, a little less hot. I stopped Samir before we left the shop. “Thank you for letting me rest here.”

“You are welcome, queen. Would you like to repay me?” I looked at him questioningly.

“You can repay me by playing your lottery. You can play any numbers you like, but always pick nine for my son. My oldest son, Adam, is nine years old and the day of his birth is the ninth day. If you win, you keep, say, eighty percent, and give me only twenty. I will send him to college with it someday. Yes?” Of course, I promised I would play the lottery for a month and bring him twenty percent if I won.

On the way back to the hotel, Barry, the Australian world traveler who had chatted us up the night before in the hotel bar, talked incessantly. He asked questions constantly of Samir, who was often confused by what was being asked of him because Barry made everything more complicated than it had to be.

“So, Samir,” Barry began another lengthy interrogation, “How would you say women in Cairo are treated?” Treated by whom, Barry? I wanted to ask. Which women? Me? Or that woman over there, the one wearing a headscarf, carrying a load of melons on her head, all of them perfectly balanced on a thin board that does not bow? I wanted to ask his intentions. Do you want this information to hold against them? Why do you want to know? So you can record it in your laptop tonight? Alone in your room again, with two beers?
But I didn’t ask Barry anything because he had already asked me how in the world I was going to defend a creative thesis. How in the world would it be evaluated? How on earth could one pass a master’s program focusing on creative writing? When he had asked this, I clammed up. I didn’t say that I was one of few in my program who were even attempting a thesis because I could already imagine how appalled Barry would be by that, too. Instead, I listened to him badger Samir and watched out the window as the camels’ heads bobbed up and down, up and down, while they walked next to our van, led by men in long robes or in slacks and a button-down shirt.

Once we began to move more quickly, Chad leaned over and whispered, “Do you know what that is?” He motioned to the thin channel of water running next to the road. “It’s the Nile,” he whispered. “Can you believe that?” I couldn’t. It was so small. Apparently, it narrows drastically in places to pass through the city. I watched the brown water as we sped by. I saw an overturned tree. I saw children splashing. And about a couple of hundred yards past the children, I saw a dead horse, on its side, in the water. I looked at Chad, looking at the horse, the both of us bouncing around with every crack in the road.

As we unloaded in front of the Windsor, I shook Samir’s hand with a twenty-dollar bill in my palm and thanked him again. Chad had said it was way too much, but I disagreed. We headed up to the room to cool off. I took off the hot layers of clothes, t-shirt and long-sleeve shirt, pants and boots, that I wore out of modesty even in the hundred-degree heat and fell onto the bed in my bra and underwear. I’d had nightmares in Kentucky of pious Egyptian officials bursting into our room and chasing us out onto
the streets in our underwear when they found out we were unmarried and sinning. But so far they hadn’t.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Chad. “I’m sorry I’m ruining everything. That’s what I was most afraid of.” He sat down next to me on the thin mattress. I was crying again. I was tired of crying. I was tired of feeling out of control. I was just tired.

“You’re not ruining anything,” he said. He put his hand on my leg.

“I am too. I’m ruining your trip.”

“It’s not my trip. It’s our trip.”

But it wasn’t. It wasn’t “our trip.” I had never claimed it for myself, and even if I had, my body was breaking down, forcing me to give it back.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked. If only there was anything he could do.

“Nothing. There isn’t even anything I can do. I’ve tried all my usual tricks. I’ve tried telling myself I can stop; it’s all over; we’re going home. But it doesn’t work. I still feel awful. I still feel terrible. And I hate myself for it.”

“I want to help you. I wish there was something I could do to help you.” He was so sincere. I can still see the look on his face. He was in earnest. And I wanted to let him help me. I can’t remember seeing that look since then. I looked at him and at the orange curtains. I listened to the whir of the air conditioner and looked at the little twelve-inch T.V. that got nothing but snow. I looked at his hands and couldn’t help but grab at them. I felt a surge of anticipation rise in my throat because I knew I was going to say it out loud. But I felt like I was giving him up, like I’d been unfaithful. I was so sorry. I couldn’t do anything then but say it.

“I want to go home,” I gushed and let myself lean back against the old paisley
wallpaper and cry. “I want us to go home, but I can’t ask that of you. Chad, I have to go home. I’m sick.”

I’d finally said it. And I immediately wanted to take it back. I wanted him to tell me that it wasn’t an option. I wanted it not to be an option. But for those of us properly disposed, everything is an option. What he said would decide everything.

“I would understand,” he said. And that was enough. He didn’t rail against me and tell me to “snap out of it already!” and tell me to think about the opportunity I was throwing away. I thought then that I wanted him to say those things. Whip me into shape. Tell me I could do it. But I know now that it wouldn’t have helped; I still would have had to come home. Until I could whip myself into shape, I will always have to come home.

In the bar after dinner, Chad and I sat squeezing the shells off of the yellow beans. I had forgotten what the waiter called them when we’d asked how to say it in Arabic. I never even remembered because I couldn’t distinguish the individual syllables when he pronounced them. Or see the word out to the side of the bowl of beans as he set them on our table. I remembered his name — Wa-el — because he sketched it on our tablecloth, dragging a thick track through the breadcrumbs, grinning broadly.

We salted the yellow beans and bit at the rounded opening of the skin until it was torn properly, and then we pushed it through the little canal and into our mouths. Occasionally, one landed nearby on the floor. And we laughed.

But this was all a farce because we both knew at that point that I could not go on, that in less than a week we’d be getting on two separate planes to fly away from each other. Even worse, my carefully laid plans – the planes and cars and hotels, the mountain
we’d planned to climb, the warm clothes for a trip into Tibet, and even the reflective silver sticker in our passports that would let us in – the plans were all gone. But that all had been a farce, too. It would have been rain and mud up to my eyeballs in Nepal. It was the fucking monsoon season for Christ’s sake. It would have been dust in Uganda, but I’d blocked it out. Before we left, I bought a rain jacket that cost two hundred dollars. I bought a little fan at Wal-Mart that had a tiny bottle of water attached so it could mist cold air into my face, which had not worked at all in the van at the pyramids. But I couldn’t buy this success. One can’t pay one’s way into certain clubs. I had to learn to be satisfied with my own. To make use of myself within the context of my own limitations.

And the hotel bar where we sat was a beautiful reminder of that. We had spent all of our free time there because I couldn’t go out. Even though it was all right there through the windows – the man in the green plastic yard chair with his cup of tea and his hookah. But I was in this bar, this beautiful, colonial hotel bar in the middle of downtown Cairo, away from all of the other Americans, just like we’d wanted. There I was, squeezing those beans through their skin and eating them, not even caring anymore if they might make me sick, and letting the warm light coming through the twelve-foot arch windows drop softly on Chad as he stood between layers of gauzy curtains and looked out at Egypt.

We both knew then that I was sick in a way that couldn’t be extracted. It couldn’t be pulled out in one big chunk like a bad place on a banana or in pieces like the three tumors, in needle-size strings, had been a week before we’d left for Cairo. And it had turned out, I wasn’t sick like that. This couldn’t be got at like that. I was sick with
something undelivered. Something festering. Something rotten, for sure, but something completely mine and made within me. I wondered if I didn’t even love it.

I’ve come to realize that digging down toward the root of my fear only makes it spread. Like when some women’s cancerous tumors are removed and the tiny little vicious tumors that no one had spotted explode in a fury of growth that kills the women in just months. Left alone, at least it grows more slowly. It was just too deep to reach.

This would all be enough to send me home. Back in the Dubai airport, we would get on two planes and mine would fly me to our little apartment where everything reminded me that I was in the wrong place. Or at least that I was in my place and he was in his. It was almost enough to make we want to give him up altogether, for both of our sakes.

Almost enough. Instead, in Room 11, I would make love to him.

For days. Once I knew I was going home, I would try to save up. But not in a sweet way. I was afraid all the way through that I would never see him again, whether by chance or by design. So I would study him, in secret, to remember forever, in case I had to. I would touch him and feel the blonde hair on his skin and the tight muscle of his thigh beneath. I would feel his warmth under my hand and try to believe it was still mine.

I would breathe him in. Draw him in. Keep him in.

I would touch him. I would smell him. I would taste him. I would remember.
Those beans tasted like salt and vinegar. Wael, with a nod, flipped the TV channel to BBC World and walked out of the bar. We sat nursing our sweaty beers and began to play another hand of rummy with our ancient Egyptian rulers card set that Chad had found at a bizarre.

The man in the corner had his chin tucked against his chest, his cigarette burning between thick fingers, his end-of-day beer dripping on the table in front of him. He wore a long, white thobe that touched the ground when he walked. He seemed to be snoring.
Margarine tubs, the kind that hold almost a quart of it, hold almost a quart of better things. Dog food pellets – snuck behind the house and gobbled shamefully in the shade of the humming AC unit. Driveway gravel – pierced with diamonds, buried in the safety deposit box of the back yard for a harder year. Or those tiny yellow flowers, whose stems taste like lemons – gathered all day by a tireless and painfully fasting devotee, who is disappointed to find that they wilt and grow soggy under a day’s heat and a warm hose. But who eats them anyway. And then aches in the stomach.

In defense of imagination.

Learning to lie next to a woodpile and mew at hidden farm kittens for three hours to touch scratchy tongues. Learning to punish frogs by banishing them to little bulges under pulled-high knee socks – “their room.” Learning to love pressure by rolling slowly out of a stiff-sided waterbed. Learning to ignite volcanoes, in private, guiltily.
My parents built my childhood home at the end of their young twenty-year deep
breath following the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis and at the start of
Reagan’s presidential campaign against both Carter and the “evil” Soviet Union. It had
been a breathing period for my father anyway, who had spent his own formative years
hiding under his desk, and, I imagine, smirking with the knowledge even a child would
have had that a desk and one’s arms could not protect one’s head from a nuclear wind.
But when he heard Ronald Reagan railing at the Red power to the east, my father began
to fear his children would be doing the same sort of ridiculous distractive exercises under
their own desks. So he took decisive action. He got out a map of Kentucky and a
protractor to triangulate the point farthest away from Fort Knox, Louisville, and the
Charlestown Ammunition Plant in southern Indiana, in case of a nuclear attack on any
one of those. Then he’d built a house into the side of a hill on the property he and my
mother bought right after I was born.

I have always blamed my smirking father for my incapacitating fears. In therapy
and in bars, either way, I hunched over and blamed him for my fear of death, my fear of
life, and all of the fears in between. It is natural, I assumed, to see him, with his paternal
version of my anxiety, my stomach, my crackpot brain, and my fear of going out into the
world, as also being the progenitor of all of these things in me. I thought that was what
he had wanted – to incapacitate me with a strong dose of what he’d had.

I wish I could remember now what he must have said to me when I was very
young to make me afraid. I do remember our underground house, our little berm, way
out past the city limits, crouching in a hill and whispering softly in my ears at night. It
spoke of cricket legs creaking and frog noises that only country people know frogs make.
It spoke of the darkness in the forest and wild animals approaching. Visions danced across the floor of my imagination, backlit by the moonlight from a window in the ceiling. I trusted what it told me. I never suspected, like the little boy under his desk had, that it could perhaps not protect me after all from a nuclear wind. But at least it never settled like aboveground homes do. It never tried to scare me. The house itself was quiet, and I was quiet within it.

My parents say that when I was three years old I would sit and stare for hours in the house. They tell me they spent those years trying to coax me out of my head and into the safe world they had created for me in the country.

I still have no idea what they’re talking about. I don’t remember sitting and staring at walls; I remember playing in my head. It’s what I think eventually became my late-night adult obsession-hours, staring at the ceilings of my bedrooms through the years, when I’ve needed desperately to be sleeping.

But it is also the internal dialogue that I can’t hush, the subliminal voice that builds in a fury and tells me when to panic. It connects my fluttering brain to my fluttering stomach. These two are like butterflies mating – the one, undulating feverishly, expectantly, while the other considers the best approach for producing their offspring. The one, excited most when the other flutters faster. The both of them still connected, mating in flight, even when distracted. For years, I have tried to curb my thoughts, change their flight pattern, so that the two organs never meet in a flurry of copulatory panic. But I learned too early to let my mind go wherever it would. So I lose control sometimes, in a very literal display of a bond between lovers that will not be broken.
When I was three, though, I was only thinking about playing, instead of actually doing it. I had conversations with people, built things, and fell in love. Or was that last one years later? I remember as an adolescent, sitting in a recliner in my parent’s living room while everyone was watching Sunday golf, completely zoned out and fantasizing about whomever I’d recently developed a crush on, but would never tell. To play out my fantasies was of no interest to me because the performance couldn’t go, then, the way it had in my head. And because I was safer where I was. However, I eventually did begin to wander outdoors. I would sit in the forest on a log bench my father had made from fallen trees, swinging my legs and singing songs about Jesus and my mother, whom I sometimes might have mistaken for Jesus.

We had six acres in an area so undeveloped our street name was Videtto Road until we moved when I was nine, and the people who lived in a trailer on the land across the drive from ours demanded that it be changed to Kelling Drive. We didn’t care. I just wish we’d thought to go get the street sign when it came down.

Videtto Road was a hilly mile-long gravel driveway that stretched back past a few acres of trees (which I called “the forest”) to our honest little home, peeking out from the Earth. We have since called it “the underground house” in honor of its portion actually underground. The front looked like any other small subdivision home, but our land sloped right up to the sides and back, so that one could step up onto the roof on three sides. The back rooms, one of which was my bedroom, were provided skylights, to let in natural light, which I liked because it warmed the top of my head more the way the sun really does.
The house faced south. I always figured this was the direction opposite the one my father suspected would bring nuclear fall-out. But he corrected me recently; it was facing south for the most winter sun, to warm the bricks and earth that held them up. It was on this land that I grew, sheltered in the back of the house, cool in the summer thanks to ground temperature, and warm in the winter thanks to a wood burning stove and the sun.

But none of that made me afraid. It’s true that I was chased by beasts that terrified me, but these were created by me alone. I was chased by packs of coyotes and my evil sister, who only had to touch me to kill me, in dreams that drove me into my parents’ bed for comfort. I was afraid of the ghost of the murdered girl I’d heard screaming at the abandoned high school on the hill above my grade school. One night I’d even clung to the cheap gold metal headboard of my parents’ bed until they came home early from their rare night out.

“She says there was blood on the floor,” said my grandmother. She spoke into the yellow wall-phone of our underground house to my dad. My grandmother was giddy with excitement, always having been the type to hurry her own children, including my five-year-old mother, into the family car so they could follow the speeding fire engines. My mother and her two rough brothers tumbled around in the back seat to see out the windows and find the fire as my grandmother careened through neighborhood streets in search of excitement.

“The police went over to make sure there weren’t any kids there, but they didn’t find anything,” my grandmother said excitedly into the phone. She listened. Hearing her say “police” made me worry that I would get in trouble, be taken away.
“Well, David, I don’t think you need to come home.” And I had run away, then, from where I’d peered around a corner into the kitchen to hear my grandmother talking to my father, back to my parents’ bedroom to wrap my arms within the curls of the metal headboard. And scream.

“I saw her!” I screamed so that my grandmother could hear, and hopefully my father, too. Loud enough to scare myself.

“We saw her and the blood on the floor!” My heart raced, and I heard Hee-Haw in the background.

My redheaded grandmother came pounding back into the bedroom, ready to rip me off the headboard, but she was suddenly struck by some rare maternal instinct, and so she sat down stunned on the bed next to my bony legs. Maybe I looked familiar to her. There’s no telling what I had looked like. Probably like a crazy girl, ready to be locked up. I see the girl’s red face. But I remember that there were no tears to make it wet. Her face was red with trying to cry, but she wasn’t crying. Because she wasn’t really afraid. I only just now see that I was making it up, that I knew perfectly well there was no dead girl or blood in the high school. I don’t think I was making up the fear. Yet what I was afraid of wasn’t so simple as ghosts. I wonder now if that isn’t how it goes for some crazy people. Maybe they managed to get themselves locked up in straight jackets when all they ever wanted was for their parents to come home and not leave again.

But I got the DNA from somebody, and I suspect it wasn’t too disappointing to find that his daughter was afraid to go out into the very world that he feared. Fear can keep you safe. Be afraid of the unknown; it can hurt you. And it was always men that were his villains of the unknown. He’d taught me that.
He used to ask my sister and me, when they had friends over for a bonfire party in the gully next to our Earth home, “Girls, what are men?”

And like we were decked out with red and blue sequins for a talent show, we’d looked at each other to coordinate our timing and say, in dual little girl, sing-song voices, “Men are jerks!”

It’s little wonder that we wasted our first few chances at love on men that were, in fact, jerks. After all, if that’s all you have to choose from, you may as well dive right in.

“All men are jerks,” he’d say.

My dad wore Big Mac overalls. Had black wavy hair and the only mustache that’s ever made sense. Carried us around in five-gallon buckets. Let us ride the mower with him. Built us a chicken coop. Sang me to sleep every night with “Golden Slumbers” and “When You Wish Upon a Star.” Worked every day in a hot shitty factory job. Listened to me cry over the nightmares I’d had and the ones I’d made up. Even went out one night after my last genuine coyotes-chasing-me dream and fired his .357 magnum into the warm night air.

“I got them all,” he’d said. And, oh, how I’d slept that night.

Ten years later, as I readied my backpack to head to a girlfriend’s house across town for a movie, he said, “Well, I guess your mother and I can stay up all night worrying that you’ll be out driving all over the state. Don’t go downtown. You take one wrong turn down there and we’ll find you in a dumpster somewhere. And stay off the expressways. You drive off the road into a ditch on I-65 and we’ll end up finding your body parts all over Tennessee after some lunatic rapes you and then chops you up into
pieces.” For many years I have taken my father’s word as I would the Bible if I were still a Christian – as being true, but in need of interpretation. There are so many different translations for this speech, but my favorite one is: “Your mother and I love you. Don’t go. I love you. I’m afraid for you. I can’t protect you out there. I love you. I love you.” But back then, my favorite was: “I want to make your life miserable. I’m selfish. I’m sick. Making you feel bad is a tool I use, even though I know it doesn’t work.”

He still works at his hot shitty factory job, putting together dishwashers for General Electric, and while he works he now listens to books on tape about philosophy and Western civilization. He is proud of his new knowledge, even though many of his sisters have begun to ignore him when he tries to enlighten them. They roll their heavy, complacent eyes. We know enough, the roll says; enough is always the measure of our limitations. But I listen. Because I keep hearing something that hasn’t sunk in yet, like the Arabic name of the beans in Egypt that our waiter had pronounced for us, but I couldn’t ever remember.

He tells me about existentialism. He tells me about it, and it sounds like Hemingway’s existentialism. Reminding me how I’d bought into it for the duration, to make the duration endure a little longer. (To that end, the irony of my choice has not escaped my. Suicides and depressives will buy into almost anything. Will buy anything. I am no exception.)

*My father is talking, his black mustache moving, and when he smiles, his front teeth bite into his lower lip. I hear again how it works.*

*I have to make up my mind what I’m here to do and then do it. Fuck all*
the rest of what people are doing and believing. Just decide and then
be, and then decide again every day because it’s hard.

It’s like deciding which direction to walk from the Hotel d’ Ville
in mid-December Paris. It’s the cold and the people and the streets
interlocking. It isn’t the decision to go that way. It’s the going, and
then what I see. I saw a bird market. Turned a corner away from the
Seine, and amidst rows of apartment buildings and otherwise non-
market fixtures, there were stacked cages of birds and there were
swirling feathers like dead leaves. Feathers landed on my black wool
shoulder while I stared at the chickens. Those chickens, fancy-footed
and twitching. Those parrots, green and grinning. Those birds. Those
feathers.

So, why am I currently mired in Seymour Krim’s dilemma of the deciding? Why
am I still in my head, making up my mind about what standards to live by because I’ve
not settled on a career? When it doesn’t matter what I decide, so long as I do? When I
first read “To My Brothers and Sisters in the Failure Business,” I was strangled by the joy
of finding someone telling tell my story while he told his own. But a couple of whiskey
sours later, still flipping the pages of his essay, I realized Krim was a miserable old man,
warning me off his snared non-path because he’s still on it and knows he always will be.

What I realize now about my father is that he is not responsible for nearly as
much of my fear as I thought he was. As I am. I’d been looking all those years for the
root of it so that I could kill it there. But it isn’t the root I needed. It was the seed. I’m
the seed. And I grew into myself. Just like he did and his mother did and her father did before her. It’s my nature. It is not the nature of my brother and sister who grew up in the same berm. I know because they are not afraid. She a big city attorney; he an ex-sailor, new dad. But what a paradox – the seed trying to control the grown tree. I can’t pretend to know how to do that yet, I only imagine that there is a way. And I suspect it begins every morning.

Another thing I realize about my father is that he’s a liar. He lied about the coyotes. He lied about being a jerk. And he lied about what happens when you drive off of into a ditch on I-65 (it turns out, you call AAA and they come fix your tire). But I think, finally, I understand his intentions. He was only living by the rules he’d set for himself. One or two of them, perhaps, budding as he crouched under his school desk, but the rest made years later, after he’d become a man.

Louisville, Kentucky

My mother picked me up from the Standiford Field Airport two and a half weeks after she’d dropped me there with Chad. We loaded my luggage into her car and drove home on Louisville’s web of expressways to my parents’ small house where she gave me a glass of wine and a bed and I slept for days. I finally slept. Without dreams or men’s voices chanting, without waking to find I’d have to go out into the hot streets of Cairo, without the absolute dread of impending further travel, without worrying where my water and food would come from the next day, without a whirring air-conditioner, without pale paisley wallpaper, without needles punching holes in me, without anything at all, without Chad. I slept with the comfort of knowing I never had to wake up, if I didn’t want to.
But I did wake up, a day and a half later. It was early, so everyone was asleep in
the quiet house that smelled like the lavender my mom grows. I climbed out of bed,
walked ten feet down the hall, and stepped into the little white tub in the sunny bathroom.
I slid the frosted glass door closed and sat down inside the white bowl to adjust the water
temperature. When it was just scalding enough to bear, I laid back and let the steaming
water slowly fill up around me. The curve of the tub forced my chin down, so that when
I opened my eyes, I was looking at my breasts, gradually submerging in the warm water
like volcanoes enveloped over time by the rising of the sea level.

It had been nearly a month since the biopsy, and the deep bruise from the
hematoma had faded out to green and yellow. With the lights off, and the morning sun
seeping in, it hardly appeared anything was wrong. In the bath water, they appeared
smooth and whole again. They did not seem as vulnerable to me anymore, so that the
protective moves I’d been making with my hands and arms when people seemed near to
brushing against them would become pretended movements, no longer to protect my
wounds, but instead to try and keep the small amount of extra space I’d won during the
ordeal. I put my left hand carefully over my right breast, covering up everything. I slid
down to the bottom of the tub until my ears were under the water, and I closed my eyes
and breathed in my mother’s lavender.

My mother. She had stayed at home in the underground house to raise her three
children. I believe my mom was so good at her job because she knew where to find the
five-year-old girl wherever it was she hid, still tizzied from the fire-engine chase, to rock
her to sleep, to let her inside when she needed to go the bathroom, to protect her from
predators, to ask her Is this the way? Is this how? I guess the little girl told her what she needed to know.

She planted a garden on the hill overlooking the gully. She put old button-down shirts on us backwards, fastened them up, and let us splash color in the kitchen. She pretended not to look when I ate the play dough I’d shaped into a pizza. She taught us how to pray next to our beds every night for our grandparents and our rooster, Max. She made some of our clothes and all of our food. She cut the two percent milk with powdered milk when we had a hard winter. Though she says now that she didn’t. She was never sick, claiming that mothers don’t get sick, which I, of course, believed.

A few years ago, we sat together on her back porch, talking about nothing on a hot summer afternoon. Her flowers were growing wildly onto the porch, occasionally startling me by tapping me on the head or poking me in the ears. I noticed then that her posture was strange, as though she was a statue of herself, awkwardly still, perpetually uncomfortable. The warm summer air was lightly clinging to my face and neck, but she was drenched in perspiration, as she pressed a cold drink to her forehead. Her short reddish-brown hair was limp from the heat and going unwashed. Her mouth was turned down in a concentrated way.

“How are you feeling?” I asked her stupidly.

“Oh, well, today isn’t a good day, really,” she said.

“Is there anything I can get you?”

“No. I’m fine.”

When we’d moved into the city limits from the underground house, she’d taken a few different jobs, finally settling in as a third-shift assembler at the Toyota plant in
Georgetown, Kentucky. She drove the two hours each way, six days a week for seven years. And, very gradually, she became ill.

First it was her digestive tract. Then her wrists. Then her shoulder. Then that final, creeping fibromyalgia. For a very long time doctors diagnosed fibromyalgia as psychosomatic, a female illness of the greatest proportion. We women had apparently been in such a habit of being sick in the head when we would swear we were sick in the body that doctors finally did the only thing they could do – call us crazy. But fibromyalgia was in our bodies, they eventually concluded, just a few years before my mother was diagnosed. The incapacitating muscle knots and crippling fatigue, the body aches, the joint pain, they decided, were actually real. How generous of them, to let my mother be only sick, and not both sick and crazy.

I’d worked with her one summer at Toyota before the fibromyalgia, as part of a program to encourage employees’ children to go on to college. (A very successful program, I imagine.) I worked in the Stamping Department where huge rolls of metal sheeting were cut and molded into car parts. I hated the job, but I was treated well and paid well. One of my duties had been to go to the Shop (a waiting area for parts molded by Stamping and collected by Body Weld for assembly) to pick up the little plastic tags that Body Weld removed from the part bins and hung on a hook for me. I would then redistribute the tags to the areas that stamped those parts – Sienna doors, side panels, etc. – so that they knew they needed to make another batch. Very meaningful work.

Our long drives there and back were marked by the same few rituals every day. On the way there, we always stopped and got gas just outside of the factory. And, to my surprise on my first day of work, my mom also bought a lottery ticket. She who had cut
milk, threw dollars away on chance? But I quickly learned that it was not making trash
out of a dollar to buy a lottery ticket; it was like putting quarters into a jukebox. I began
to buy them too, feeding the dollar directly into my brain so that I could listen all night to
the possibilities my head would come up with for spending 250 million dollars. I played
the lottery all summer that way.

On the way back, we stopped at Kroger and bought a disposable ice pack for my
overused knee and sugary coffee for the quiet night drive. And I drove us home, as
careful a driver as I’ve ever been. My exhausted mother sleeping in the seat next to me.
The lines on the road senselessly straight.

One night, when my knees were screaming from walking miles on the concrete
floor in steel-toe shoes, and I couldn’t come up with anything good to daydream about
because Shania Twain was grating her way through my earplugs and making me sing
along with her, I consciously left my Kevlar arm protectors on top of my lunch box. I
had decided to accidentally let my forearm slide along the edge of one of the stray sheets
of metal in the Shop, so that my mom and I could go home. I knew people sliced
themselves open on that metal all the time because it was as sharp as a knife. But, on my
few brave attempts when no one happened to be around, I didn’t get the right swipe. So I
gave up and retrieved my sleeves. I worked the rest of the night, the same as any other
night, thinking about getting out of there.

When my mom couldn’t make it through the grocery store one Sunday without a
motorized cart, it was clear she’d have to quit Toyota. And she hasn’t worked since.
Neither does her television minister Kenneth Copeland grace her Sunday mornings, since
she sleeps in on her and my father’s third shift schedule. On good days, she tends her
flowers. On really good days, she helps with my little brother’s baby. On bad days, she looks awkward — surprised her body won’t let her go outside to the garden where she knows she can feel better.

Sitting in their living room before I left for a trip to places I couldn’t get to in my head, it was only my mother who said nothing. She sat back quietly against her white couch, and over her shoulder I could see the tall waving lavender and buddleia (a butterfly bush) of her flower garden through the large front window. My father, on the other hand, continued to lecture me on the importance of water. I was told how the water could make me sick. And don’t forget that not enough water would make me really sick. My perpetually anxious father was very worried about everything. But my mother reclined in pose, not so much calm as still, like a movable body part in a doctor’s office used to demonstrate how an illness works. I suspect, in her mind, she was somewhere in Arabia, combing the sands of the Sahara, looking for seashells to add to her collection. I tried to pay little attention to either of them, but my anxiety grew exponentially as we sat.

The bathwater was almost cool, so I stood up and slid the frosted door back to let the bright morning in. I drained the tub and looked in the foggy bathroom mirror while the water gulped its way down the pipes. I was disappointed that I didn’t look rejuvenated from my rest and my bath. It made me think my body was a little sick after all, and it hadn’t just been my head that needed to be healed all that time. My dark short hair was already a little longer, even curling at the tips on my pale forehead. My skin looked ashy, and the blue circles under my eyes gave away how tired I was. As I dried off, I was careful to pat gently on my breast, which was definitely still somewhat discolored.
I wanted to be beautiful. But I knew I wasn’t. I determined to be beautiful by the time Chad came home. I thought about calling my old therapist. And I think now about the girl in the Cairo airport. I can even see the desert behind the glass doors we’d entered through.

“Excuse me,” she’d said. And I acted surprised even though I’d been watching her and her friends suspiciously for some time. Chad and I were sitting on a bench waiting for our flight out to Dubai. A group of fidgety men and women in their mid-twenties were sitting nearby. The men wore white button-down shirts and khakis, and the women wore long black scarves that covered their heads, met under their chins and draped the rest of their bodies, down to their feet. Framed in black, the women’s faces were stark and out of context with their bodies. I knew they were looking at me, and I tried to ignore them. Then they laughed. I was sure they were making fun of me, with my stupid short hair and my flip-flops and my neck showing between my collar and my chin.

“Excuse me.” I looked up at her bright oval face. Not really surprised but worried.

“Yes?” I made every effort to have no tone of voice at all.

“I’m sorry. Do you speak English?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I’m sorry. But my friends and I—” here, she pointed out her group of friends, and I looked toward them and nodded my head. They were all smiling at me. One giggled. I felt Chad’s presence next to me. “We think. I’m sorry. My English is not very good.”
“No, no.” I said to reassure her, eager for the punch line now. “You speak my language very well. I can speak only English, so you do better than me.” I stopped myself from going on to criticize our public school system or saying that most Americans are too lazy to learn anything but our own language.

“Thank you,” she said and continued. “My friends and I... I think that you are very beautiful. Will you come meet my aunts?” I stood up then, politely, and looked her in her green eyes.

“That is a very nice thing to say.” I tried hard to take a compliment well for once.

“Will you come meet my aunts?” She reached her hand out toward me, and I took it, like a child.

“Of course.” She led me over to her group of friends, which, I then noticed, included two older women who must have been her aunts. She led me to the women, holding my hand all the way, and I swear I nearly dropped to the floor at their feet; I was so honored to meet them. I did bend very low, almost bowed.

“It is very nice to meet you,” I said. And they nodded and smiled. The young people were speaking behind me.

“Can I have your photograph?” My new friend asked me as she produced a small camera phone. “Could we take a picture? You and me?” And then I thought maybe “beautiful” meant “strange” or “different,” but I didn’t care.

“Oh, okay, sure,” I said, clumsy and overly flattered. We squeezed together and one of the men pointed the camera phone at us and took a picture. I can only imagine what it looked like. Probably like a young white boy with short, dark hair in a white button-down shirt and brown pants with his arm around the shrouded figure of an Arab
woman who had naturally red lips. And I can feel her warm cheek against mine as I think of it. We must have pressed much closer together than necessary. And then she thanked me and told me again that I was beautiful, and it made me embarrassed. "You are beautiful, too," I said awkwardly. We hugged before I went to sit down next to Chad again, very ashamed for my initial distrust. He looked at me sideways. Had I told him I'd been suspicious? He knew, at any rate. I smiled at him and looked away, realizing just then how silly it all was. And I wanted to take her hand again and see Cairo and Nepal and Tibet and Uganda. I loved her. She was beautiful. And I was beautiful. The same way the color of an eggplant is beautiful.

But over the Atlantic, on my last long flight alone, my thoughts churned and I was ugly again. When proposing this trip to the English department, I'd been intrigued by the spontaneous bullshit I'd put down on the forms to legitimize the Eastern adventure. I'd said I was in search of spirituality, something constant and elevated above the fallible human body. But spirituality isn't something, as it turns out, one can search for; I know because I've worn myself out looking. It can be grown, cultivated like a garden, but it can't be got. Instead of "finding spirituality" on the trip, as one might find a missing set of keys, I found myself staring at the mirror. I've come to believe in nothing, and everything. Still, I pray when I've lost hope – the last remnant of a childhood religion. I watched the sky outside my window darken from white to gray and the occasional bouncing turned into a constant jostle. I was afraid I wouldn't make it off that particular flight, especially since the reason I was on it to begin with was that I'd deserted Chad in Africa to come home and nurse some unnamed illness. It seemed like fate. It seemed
like a rash punishment, but I didn’t have any deity to plead my case to, so I prayed to Chad instead, to forgive me and save me.

When the captain asked the wobbling flight attendants to all sit down and buckle up, we were halfway through the flight, which allowed me to estimate we were over the middle of the ocean. I tried to squash my stomach and my brain into one big lump somewhere in my watery spine, connecting them further than they already were, to keep them under control. But the weeks of threadbare nerves and trying to rewrite my thoughts pushed harder in the other direction. The plane jumped up and sent my stomach into my throat. And I finally lost control of myself and let my mind shit all of its visuals into my consciousness: 1. The plane screaming from the sky into a body of water so desolate we’d be luckiest if we died on impact. 2. Me blindly trying to count seats, like those two grotesque and beautiful Delta flight attendants sitting at an adjacent table in a Paris cafe had said to do, years earlier, if I should ever be involved in a plane crash:

“Those little lights in the aisles won’t work.” This one had blond hair pulled into a severe bun and a shrill, excited voice.

“Oh, she’s right, none of it will work. Or else you won’t be able to see through the smoke.” This one had bright red lipstick.

“No, you have to remember to count the seats when you get on the plane. Find the closest emergency exit and count the seats.” The bun seemed to pull at the edges of her face.

“And don’t just look at them and count them. Touch them.” Her red lips were very thin.
"Yes, touch them because it will be so black from smoke you will have to feel your way out." They were reaching crescendo.

"And don’t ever ride in coach; the air’s re-circulated." I supposed it made no difference to them that I’d never ridden in anything but coach.

"That’s why everybody gets sick. It’s worth the money to fly first class. That’s where we work, and we get to stay places like this. In Henry the Fifth’s Hotel. It would cost somebody like eight hundred dollars to stay where we’re staying tonight!" Quiet glances from a table nearby told us we’d been found out. Americans. 3. Water rushing up to my mouth and my nose and my eyes, water in my lungs, holding my arms, stripping me down. 4. Chad’s body pushed against mine in an old Cairo hotel room.

_Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven._ Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever amen. Wherever you are at this moment. Feel my lips on your lips. Feel my cheek against your face. Feel my warm breasts under your hands. Feel me. Feel me. Forever and ever amen. I would do anything for you. Except this. No, even this. I do this for you. I will do anything. Please love me. Please keep me. Forever and ever amen. I will get better. I will get stronger than I’ve ever been. I will be the strongest and the bravest, and I will not fail you again. And I will not say that I can’t go on. I will always go on. Feel my hand on your thigh. Feel my mouth on your hot skin. I will
quench your thirst, your hunger, your hot your cold, your light your
dark. Foreverandeveramen.

I caught something moving out of the corner of my eye. Next to me, on that Delta flight, which of course didn’t crash, was an early-twenties-student type who’d thought ahead (unlike me) and had ordered Delta’s version of a vegetarian meal. She had it spread out in front of her. She was content—her sugary juice splashing out occasionally onto her banana, her chin pointed toward the ceiling as she focused on the feel-good teen soccer movie playing. I was like a space anomaly swimming next to her, only millimeters away from her elbow, a black swirling mess of anti-gravity and particle distortion. She slowly peeled her banana and took big bites of it, never taking her eyes off of the TV. I looked out from my breakdown, suddenly hungry, at her still-sealed vegetable sandwich that she would not hide away in her backpack for another thirty minutes. And I thought: Can I be hungry and sure I’m going to die at the same time?
As for Chad and me, he came home; we made love like strangers; I apologized; we prepared for the fall semester of teaching and learning; we continue to grow together. This very minute he is asleep in our bed upstairs, gone there early with a sour stomach and a headache. His reddish-blond beard poking into soft blue sheets. Our black and golden dog snoring in duet with him. It is a good sign in American literature when the relationship details are interesting only to the lovers; otherwise something is probably wrong.

I decided to use my damaged breast as a pass for this particular debacle, and I hoped he’d let me. Surely people couldn’t judge me for this one. He knew the truth, but he’s very discreet. I was a little worried, though, that he would have too much time alone in Uganda to drink his Nile Specials and think about how crazy I am. So I used my flight voucher for the teaching gig in Uganda, the one I’d thought briefly about using to get myself back to him, to fly Ken over.
On the phone, during one of four live conversations with him the whole summer (late one night for me, early in the morning for him, at the Blue Mango Hotel):

"I didn’t mean to cause such a commotion. I thought you’d have a phone in your room."

"Yeah. There’s just the one at the front desk," said the same sleepy voice I knew from Sunday mornings, lazy in bed.

"I hope they’re not mad," I said. It was always so fucking hard not to cry when I heard his voice. It kept my sentences short for a while.

"Oh, it’s fine. It’s nice to wake up to your voice again. I miss you."

"I miss you, too," I measured out.

"Is everything okay? Are you back home in Bowling Green now?" The line cut out for a few seconds. "Hello? Are you there?"

"I want to come back."

"I know."

"I mean it."

"I know. But we’ll do it again. We’ll come again. I’ll bring you back when you’re ready."

"But I could come now. I found a plane ticket through Emirates—"

"Now’s not the time," he said.

I sucked in my breath. "You don’t want me to come?"

"I want you to get well," he said. And though he rarely intends to imply multiple meanings with his words, I knew this time he did.

"Oh."
"I love you. And we’ll do it again. I promise. But only when you’re ready. You should spend this summer resting. Go to the park. Plant your flowers.” And I knew he was right. But I cried anyway, and he asked what the matter was.

“I feel like I’ve fucked everything up. Like all I wanted was to show you I could do it, but then I couldn’t. But, Chad, I can do it."

“I know you can. You had a lot working against you. Most people wouldn’t have even tried to go.” But that didn’t help. I was trying to be one of the few people that would go.

“I’m just afraid this will make you hate me. You have to promise me you’ll give me a second chance. To show you that I can do it.”

“I already know you can do it. And we’ll go again, when you’re ready,” he said. And even though I knew he didn’t hate me or think I was crazy or plan to leave me when he got home, I sent him an email that worried over just those things. To make sure.

And then one day it was time for him to come home.

The Louisville airport was under construction when I went back. Sparks from welding were shooting like stars from the high ceiling where two men worked behind sheets of plastic. I watched the sparks, entranced, to see if they would dissipate before they reached anyone walking below. So I didn’t see him at first, when he emerged from behind security barriers. I went to him like I was meeting a stranger. I wore a red camisole and torn jeans. He wore a thick beard and his backpack. I measured every step to get to him because each seemed too valuable to disregard. At the hotel, we showered, and then we went night-swimming in the pool. And we were both beautiful, all night together. But by morning we were ourselves again.