ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	EIGHTY-SEVEN
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EIGHTY-SEVEN is a collection of stories that captures desire through compression and brevity. It draws the curtains on small windows that look into enormous, shifting houses. Characters are caught in moments where they are stuck. EIGHTY-SEVEN is about willfulness and escapes.

EIGHTY-SEVEN

by

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Sabbatical

Oh good, you made it … come under the umbrella. I'll show you the property first, then you can unpack your things and dry your feet. When it rains, it rains … as they say …

This is the front yard … the house is there … through the fog. There are pear trees and plums … black currant vines … in the summer you should trim them, so they don't grow wild.

The front path is over here … it cuts into the neighbor's yard. There he is … Boris … Boris! … He doesn't speak much, but he knows a few English phrases from touring with his metal band … and he has a goat, Bucket … who's standing on the enormous pile of firewood over there … sometimes he gets up onto the ladders … they make him feel tall, like he owns the land. Once I drove into town without noticing that he hopped up onto the roof of the car … all the villagers pointed, dropped their breads, looking like I was sailing a flamed chariot through the hills …

It gets tricky finding the place at night … without lights … but you'll know you're close when you hear Bucket bleating, which he does … all night. It's like his song for the stars. The dark is also good for eating figs from the tree. Then, you can't see the bugs … inside …

Here's the river that carries the trash from town … you should remove the detritus that drifts onto the bank … Across the river is an abandoned auto salvage yard. Lizards live there

now … but it's worth a dig, you never know … maybe you'll find some stray Euros under the seats … a costume … or a love letter …

I was wondering … if you climb around out there and find a knife, with a thin jade handle … could you dispose of it, under the lemon tree? That is where I bury all the things that need burying … you may do the same.

The Blue Woods are all around us … see those tall pines up there? They're good woods for hikes, tricky sometimes. It's best to go when the sun rises so you have the whole day … to find your way back. The carpenter's daughter's shoes were found up there when she went missing … there were footsteps that trailed in circles until they stopped … at a pair of white sneakers … as though she was plucked straight up into the sky …

You mentioned one of your hobbies is mycology? I left you a picture of the non-poisonous mushroom you will find in the woods … I could have left you charts of the fifty-six poisonous ones, but this way is much simpler …

I'm an ornithologist myself … I just received a grant to study cardinals … in Chernobyl … I'm happy you'll be here, watching.

Here's the front door, it doesn't lock.

I've left a slab of plywood, in case you feel threatened.

Sometimes gleaners wander here from the village. Sometimes they confuse our homes for theirs … sometimes they're a bit pushy … sometimes. If you find some fruits and

vegetables on the property I would recommend you leave them on the front porch … as a truce … Perhaps you could also leave a note that says, "He didn't mean it" … I'd appreciate it.

Here is the kitchen. I left you a bottle of cranberry juice to celebrate your housewarming … Being alone in a country like this is a very brave thing to do. I find that when you live somewhere where no one knows you, or your past, you become ultimately free …

I know I didn't really give you any conditions … but I left you a very short list of things I was hoping that … you could keep an eye on during my absence … it's really nothing.

The top of the list is visiting my grandmother … She gets a bit … lonely … since my grandfather died, so I told her about you … and how you've agreed to have … coffee with her on Wednesdays … and Fridays … You can expect to sit by the window of her apartment and silently look out upon the buildings. Sometimes her neighbor is there too … she harvests honey … into wine … I told her you made a bottle or two yourself … so maybe you could read up on that …

Your bedroom is here … you … cut through the living room and … move the couch a little … to the left so … you can access … the staircase. Your room is small and the bed is … missing … but the space opens up to a balcony that looks over the land … like a gift …

Here's a framed picture of my family … you can move it.

Here is my art collection … you don't have to look …

I know I also mentioned that you'd be the only tenant this summer, but I had agreed that my friend's fiancé could stay here in July … Her sister recently died in a fire … she's having a hard time, so I hope you don't mind … finding another place … towards the end of your stay …

I was also wondering if you could give her a tour … just tell her everything I'm telling you now … I'd really appreciate it. Maybe tell her to take notes … in case she needs to do the same …

Flowers for Angelika

My grandfather was twenty-six and poor, staring at his crossword puzzle in line at the fish market. He was staring at the empty squares for 32-Across when she entered through the wooden doors. The locals knew her as the conscientious drunk driver, the widow who drove around the village with her hazards on.

Angelika was rodent-like. Her mouth twitched when she smiled, which she did behind my grandfather in line. It was like a slippery electric shock that passed from one corner of her lips to the other. She held a potted plant, and my grandfather asked her what kind it was. She told him its Latin name, and how it would lean towards someone who spoke quietly to it.

My grandfather bought a smoked trout, and she bought two herrings, and in the weeks that followed he fell in love with her.

Angelika brought up flowers in all their conversations. She talked about opening a flower shop. She talked about using Queen Anne's Lace for birth control, and how she could tell if a sunflower was a girl or a boy by the number of petals it had. My grandfather had little money to spare, but he took her to the botanical gardens in Kosice. Her big mouth twitched uncontrollably at the Birds of Paradise, and her eyes became tearful in the cactus room. He worked in a lumberyard and on some days used his lunch and coffee money to have a single daisy delivered to her.

Then she left for a weekend trip to get some mountain air for her asthma. My grandfather took the bus to her house, and crawled through a basement window, holding a rare

orchid from Hungary. He climbed up the basement steps feeling warm and perverse, having never been in her home, and being there without her knowing.

In the kitchen were clusters of potted plants. They sat on top of the fridge, all along the counter, on the seats of chairs, in the cupboard, inside the shoes. The potted palms, the succulents, the violets, and the carnivorous plants were gray shadows of their previous forms. His daisies strung down the sides of a vase. When he felt them with his fingers, they buckled into brown dust.

The house was still as my grandfather filled bowls with water. He filled pitchers and mugs and said a prayer. He cupped water in his hands. He poured it onto the dried dirt. He poured it over the leaves and the exposed roots. He splashed it on the carpet, and onto the couch. He went into her bedroom and dumped water onto an heirloom quilt. A mouse froze under the sink, and watched him spill water on her telephone. He went outside into the rain and watered each garden flower with the hose, but it still wasn't enough.

Thursdays at Waterhouse

The Waterhouse is all blue marble and fine echoes. Large expensive men bob in the water like corks. The website calls it “exclusive.” A reviewer calls it “neo renaissance.”

On Thursdays, Laszlo Farkas takes the bus to the Waterhouse. He changes into a blue robe, and disappears into the cool, silent chambers.

On other days, he works at The Ministry of Defense.

On other days, he is a lowly clerk with migraines and low-grade depression.

But on Thursdays, he is not.

In March, the end for Laszlo begins.

But first he floats around droney and angelic.

He thinks about biting his wife’s ankles, and the satisfying imprint of a pearl revolver on a velvet cushion. Sometimes he thinks of a big donkey drinking from a street puddle. When the donkey speaks, it sounds a like a slowed down recording of his father.

In the massage room Yuri the masseuse presses his rough hands onto Laszlo’s back, while he tells stories of his many girlfriends with Stockholm syndrome. Afterwards, Laszlo is given a shot of bourbon and a bleeding steak. At the end of the visit, he screams when they dunk a bucket of ice water over his head.

Then it is time for Laszlo to go back to the locker rooms.

He uses his wristband to electronically open locker 444.

He yawns and paws the air within, empty handed.

What is this? He thinks. His locker, like his mouth, is ajar and soundless. Inside are his wallet, glasses, and keys. But who would take his clothes? He sits on the bench feeling prickly and hot, like a burnt light bulb. He couldn't tell the receptionist; what if she thought he was an easy victim for bullying? That he had committed some sort of abstract crime that asked for this abstract punishment? Establishments like these wouldn't take to a childlike scandal like this, he thinks.

Laszlo stuffs his things into the pockets of his robe. It is bright blue and smells like salt. He walks to the bus stop and the raining starts. A large black hound confronts Laszlo around the corner. It snarls at his sleeves, alarmed by the color.

At the stop, Laszlo stands behind a street sign for privacy, where he steps in something warm and orange like mashed sweet potato. His eyes go to the sky as he wishes for any other warm thing, like his bed, or his cheeks after a mug of beer.

The bus arrives and Laszlo slinks to the corner. He hunches over completely. The driver mistakes him for a pile of towels when he glances back.

The next Thursday, Laszlo softly folds his clothes. Earlier, before he left home, his wife threw a scalding pan at him, but missed.

He wades into the thermal water and looks up at the painted angels, taking slow breaths. Before long, his ears start to wander in the direction of the locker rooms, trying to pick out suspicious footsteps.

He hears the lighting of a cigar; the sounds of money being counted.

Laszlo imagines a deep voice repeating his name, a collective laugh.

Laszlo goes under.

There all he hears is heavy water and pulse.

When the evening comes to a close, he peers into his locker, finding yet again a missing outfit that seemed to have walked out to take a bath of its own.

On the bus, he sees a man from his office, wearing ratty loafers and a grim sweater. The man waves, *Laszlo!* He yells, with a big grin, but Laszlo is too embarassed by how shabby his colleague looks, so he pretends not to see.

Laszlo continues going to the Waterhouse, though at the end of each evening his locker empties. How could he not? These visits are his only escapes. Not only from work, but from the ugliness of his apartment complex, and the wilted cat that waits for him outside the door.

The Waterhouse is where he feels mistakeless, upper-crust, strong. At the Waterhouse he shares the water with shipping tycoons and the Prime Minister. They nod as they float by. At the Waterhouse, Laszlo feels as though the most powerful men in the country notice him.

That morning, Laszlo's wife totaled their bicycle when she passed out from what she described as "demonic menstrual pains." Laszlo remarked at how very nineteenth century of her that was, to faint about like that, and then escaped her too.

Now April, Laszlo is down to a few shirts and some corduroys with a patch on the knee.

Thursdays begin to grow tense. He lingers in the bathwater like an alligator, surveying the others with a slitted predatory gaze.

Was it Erik? He was always talking about his timeshare, though it sounded like it was in the middle of some wilted and undesirable part of Yugoslavia.

Or Boris, whose wife had a large cigar burn on her neck?

Laszlo moves around underwater, surveying the body sizes of the other men.

He skips his massage and stands gargoylishly in the balconies of the massage rooms to see what Yuri did with his empty time.

Everything stays the same. Everyone basks in the pleasure of the Waterhouse that Laszlo could no longer enjoy. But he is still there. How is this possible? How is it that Laszlo spends his entire Thursday in the locker room, and still at closing time, he finds his last missing pair of everything?

Laszlo writes out "My clothes have been stolen." on a piece of receipt paper, and passes it over the counter to the receptionist. This way no one would overhear. She sits in a dark cavernous booth lit by candles. Her lips are black from eating gooseberry pie and she purses them when she reads his note.

The receptionist makes a sound. Laszlo nods.

"Let's go to where we can discuss this," she says, standing now, suddenly very tall.

They walk down a long hallway with many doors, and through one that opens into a soft grey room, like a pearl, or jail. A lock clicks behind them. She offers a chair for him to sit in. The only other thing in the room is a wooden cuckoo clock.

She asks Laszlo to explain the event, and Laszlo stutters through his recounting. He mentions his various suspects, he describes Yuri and his rough hands, his empty closet and his wife who guards it at home, the black dog from the bus stop, his loneliness, his frustration.

After a silence, the receptionist starts in a low voice, "Let's find a way to move past this problem," she says.

She's unbuttoning her dress now, making a little pile of clothes between them.

Laszlo feels a sudden alarm.

Laszlo feels ashamed, and focuses on his bare feet.

The receptionist lifts his chin with a cold finger. "Are those the clothes that went missing?" she asks, pointing at her pile. She smells of leather and something sweet, and feels crushing and unforgiving when she sits on Laszlo's lap.

On Friday, Laszlo stumbles into the Ministry, red-eyed and sleep deprived.

He greets the desk clerk. She doesn't look up, Laszlo notes this mildly. She unlocks the department's doors and Laszlo lets them close behind him.

She was wearing his yellow polo.

He is certain of this, though she is now on the other sides of the doors.

She was wearing it, and it fit her in a way that was evil and wrong.

The carpet seems cheap and itchy, which irritates him. Laszlo's skin twitches around like a Saint Vitus' dance. He makes his way through the floor, trying to find a colleague to tell this to—but the first person he sees is Stanko the law clerk, wearing *Laszlo*'s slacks, and Erin, wearing his checkered tie as a hair band.

He's been going to the Waterhouse, he hears someone whisper. Laszlo smiles, backing up, tightening the belt around his blue bathrobe.

Once in his office, Laszlo looks at his bulging reflection in the doorknob, and locks it.

Laszlo surveys his dim lit office: desk, portrait of János Áder, refuse bin, lamp. The lofted window above his bookcase lets in smells of dog spit and potatoes.

Laszlo starts ripping his robe into long blue strips, knotting their ends into a rope. He needs to leave the office, find some clothes to put on.

He balances at the top shelf of his bookcase and pries the window open. Outside is a billboard for Mazda convertibles. On it, a young shirtless woman squeezes her large firm breasts, and a Doberman wearing Laszlo's cardigan winks at him.

Laszlo climbs onto the side of the building, and starts his decent down his rope.

The wind slaps the sides of Laszlo's pink body.

Like this--up high, the city, and everyone in it, looks beautiful.

He reaches the sidewalk, he walks quickly.

The pedestrians look away, they pretend not to see.

The Seamstress

On Monday my seamstress decides to give up people.

I'm going to give up people, she says. I nod vaguely, playing mobile sudoku with one hand and passing her my graduation gown to be hemmed with the other, and then leave without asking what she meant because I'm late to see my therapist.

When I go back to pick up my gown she doesn't answer the door. Her house is covered in burly ivy. There are two stained glass windows at either side of the wooden door, and when I look into the glass I see her albino wolfhound Mercy, who seems to tell me to go away.

That evening I get a drink at the village Inn and see my seamstress there, getting escorted to the private room, where her dinner table is set with black peaches and grey liquor and some expensive lamb dish. A celebratory meal for someone who now eats alone.

The town is filled with people who eat alone, who don't want to be eating alone.

A grandfather eating pureed pears and buttermilk in his wheelchair while he watches chickadees from the kitchen window.

A dog eating a band-aid stuck in pig fat from under the stairs of a coffee shop.

A mother signing divorce papers under the broken ceiling fan, soiling the papers as she takes bites of nachos glossed oily, flicking juice from the jar of pickles that she sticks her fingers into.

I imagine the Seamstress first craving and mourning her companions; her mother, her mailman, maybe even me, but then eventually finding solace in the emptiness of her house.

The seamstress leaves the Inn to go back home, to put on her thimbles, to sew a robe for a customer she doesn't have.

Over time the clothes she makes become stranger, more alien. She makes a pantsuit and it turns out harlequin, crotchless, and unfamiliar to how legs move. She makes gloves for a three-fingered hand and other elaborately misshapen garments.

On Valentine's Day she opens a storefront next to a smoking bench and a sculpture garden. In the window is a sweater for a car, top hats affixed to a mannequin's breasts, a belt that she fitted around a teakettle. My graduation gown is used as a curtain.

The door is locked. The seamstress redresses her mannequins, moves them around the store like they are her customers.

A man presses his cheek to the glass beside me and we watch her hide behind a trashcan. He eventually backs away, starts his cigar and slowly disappears into the sculpture garden.

I follow, making my way home before the rain.

The seamstress, who feels a sudden pain, sits down by the window to rest. When she looks out, she sees people walking, but mistakes them for trees.

How to Eat Well

I ask my nephew to bring something nice for dinner, “Something substantial this time,” I say, looking down at a dried out quail wing at breakfast. My nephew catches a 90-pound rabbit in the pine forest that evening. Every night he goes into the woods with a basket for foraging skullcap and mushrooms, valerian root and red currants, but this time he comes home with a black leviathan, this plump dead rabbit slung across his shoulders like a beached whale. He enthusiastically skins it that evening, cuts it into silky flanks and wraps them in butcher paper, filling our entire ice box and our neighbors ice box, and bringing the leftovers to the meat shop down the road. The next seven days we eat and eat rabbit for breakfast and for snacks and for dessert, until we turn plump and dark in the eyes. I eat crimson leg meat that puts me asleep at dinner, and my nephew carries me to my study, slung across his shoulders, where I dream that I live in a castle, where a brotherhood lives behind a door that the tallest pine tree has fallen in front of.

Owls Fall in Nitra

The falconer comes from a winding lineage of loving, mysterious people. Her mother died in an avalanche; her grandmother monitored forests from a tall tower. Once, the family went on vacation to Belarus and the falconer, then just a girl, got away. Her father tried to find her, but made a fatal step. Next he was falling down an empty elevator shaft. The falconer imagined a funnel that led to heaven or a pile of missing things.

Now, the falconer trains raptors for airports. She flies them on the runways to chase off the birds that aren't welcome. The falconer lives alone in a trailer with a Eurasian owl on the banks of the Nitra river. The Eurasian owl no longer hunts, after once having been electrocuted. Instead of flying him, the falconer calls him Squash, and presses her face against his feathers.

One morning, a knock at the door. A very short boy delivers a message. Sometimes it is news from town, but today is a request.

A disagreement between families from two neighboring villages. Tensions have increased, and the families are enlisting the local falconers' help. A sort of traditional gesture. She and another will fly their birds, and whoever's bird emerges victorious, that family will be the one who wins.

So the falconer puts on her cape and packs some frozen mice. Squash, who hates being left behind, unties the falconer's shoes, then retreats to the cupboard under the sink to murmur.

Everyone meets in a meadow between the villages: the falconer and her best bird, and a handler from the opposite village with his. The families gather around them. People from the villages gather around too.

The problems between the two families are endless. Affairs, violence, envy, theft. However, the issue at hand is this: Two brothers, one from each family, had been dear friends. They would hike to castle ruins and collect black trumpet mushrooms together. They would set off sky lanterns, play Bach fugues on their violins, and gamble. One drunken night, they stole a lime Ferrari from a paralyzed man in a bordering town. They intended to return it first thing in the morning, but drowned in the river during their celebratory swim.

Now everyone wants to know: which family gets the Ferrari?

It is parked in the center of the grey meadow like a virus.

A bell is rung, and the birds are released.

Somewhere between the meadow and the moon, the owls lock talons. When owls fight, they play chicken. They latch onto each other and fall, the ground quickly approaching.

One must let go, or they crash.

Whichever one lets go first is the loser.

The families yell and throw rocks into the sky. They curse and shove and pull at each others hair. The men of the families auction their sisters for kisses. The falconer watches them all with a strong sadness.

In the final seconds, an owl lets go and rises, then returns to the falconer.

Now that family must let go of the lime Ferrari too.

At home, the falconer sits by the fire with Squash, telling him about the crooked fir trees from the meadow, and how Squash would have liked to sit in them.

The falconer tells him about the way the birds fell, clutching on to each other. She can't help but think of her father who once tried to find her. Squash moves closer and murmurs. Sometimes falling is a kind of freedom. The falconer tries to hide a tear, but Squash is quick and wipes it with his head. He gives the falconer a wrapped caramel, and brings her to the window, out of which a gentle snow is beginning to fall.

The Rope Barrier

The woman invested in a rope barrier, with a green velvet rope, which she carried around in her backpack like a tripod.

She assembled it when she sat down on the subway. She assembled it at work when she responded to emails. She placed it beside her when she visited the cemetery, and in front of the shower when she washed. Her husband sometimes stood on the other side of the rope, and watched her rest in bed.

When driving in the mountains she assembled it across her lap like a second seat belt. There were lynx and black widow spiders in the forests nearby, so she assembled the rope barrier while she bird watched. She heard somewhere to "never turn your back on mother earth," but it felt okay to do it this way.

Eventually the woman and her family moved into a brick house with a turret and a gargoyle. The woman began to feel an occasional presence, like a heavy judgment, or a fallen angel, so she assembled the rope barrier whenever she felt a chill creep up.

Her friends called it the "meditation median," "despair wall," "uncrossing the line." Her niece called it "the slinky barrier." For birthdays she occasionally received replacement ropes from her family, in novelty colors, like glow-in-the-dark, or snakeskin.

The woman brought the rope barrier to functions. If she was seated next to someone who she didn't like, she put it between their chairs. When she ignored phone calls, she assembled it, as a symbolic gesture.

The woman's sneaky distrust of things grew. Her sister moved to the other side of the country, started practicing mindfulness and seeing a therapist. The sister sent happy letters, and the woman enviously read them in bed while her husband watched.

After a while, the woman still used her rope barrier, but it no longer protected her. Her hands shook when she hooked the rope onto the posts. The rope twisted and frayed. The colors faded.

She placed the rope barrier between her baby son and dessert until his vegetables were eaten. He still didn't listen. A man at the airport tried to steal it when she rummaged through her bag. Members of the mafia moved two houses down. The woman put the rope barrier across the porch steps, but the mailman or the wind would knock it down. Termites infested the walls of her house, and what was she supposed to do about that?

The woman both despised the rope barrier and hissed at those who approached it. She felt singled out and angry at the things that were bigger than her. It felt, now, as if she was forced to put herself on sides of things she encountered, and that she often chose the wrong side.

She wanted a rope barrier for her rope barrier, or a long rope that coiled against her body. No, she didn't want ropes: she wanted curtains, and blockades and stacked tires, and legal representation.

She became irritable and violent. She went into the garden with an axe and started knocking the heads off the sunflowers. She swung it at an ancient oak tree. She tried splitting a rock. She imagined the sound of rustling in the distant hedges and pursued the sound with passion. When she saw the rope barrier she brought the blade down, again and again.

Co-Ed Picnic

She ditches her archery lesson and goes to her older brother's picnic by the fishing pier. Her thighs are white like coconuts and the boys imagine her squashing guavas between them. She bites into a tomato while wearing a white shirt. She licks the relish off her hotdog before eating it. She picks a bony honeysuckle blossom off the bush and sticks the stem under the elastic of her bathing suit bottom. She's fifteen and listens to them talk about fractals, hydroponics and how Canadian geese choose one mate for a lifetime. They take her picture by the boathouse, smoking, with her eyes closed and lips pursed. She's that summer's Darling, the sweetest kiss. She stubs the cigarette on the trunk of an ornamental fig tree to be tough. The boys laugh because the worst forest fires occur in suppressed environments; where layers of dead plant material build up on the ground, ready to make a spark dance. She spikes her cranberry juice and dives off the dock wearing only a sapphire ring. At first they watch her disappear, her blonde hair spreading on the surface like a lily pad. They are satisfied by her display. When she starts to flounder the boys shift around the barbecue, one revs his motorcycle, another crushes a Narragansett can on his forehead. Only when she yells do they rush to the edge. One leaps in and lets her grasp his shoulders. The most experienced swimmer can drown at the hands of someone who cannot swim. A weak swimmer will probably drown at the hands of one who just learned. The one who aggressively knows nothing can have more power over someone who is still in the process of knowing something. She climbs onto the boy and pushes him under the water long enough for him to sink, as she reaches for the edge of the dock.

Winners

The new Fellows are sitting in a sports bar after orientation, drinking.

They are talking about things that interest them: books, words and what they mean, but also things like good sandwich shops in the area, and how someone, a boy from the Buddhist Monastery, had broken into the YMCA to smoke opium in the lifeguard chair.

On the walls behind them are many television screens playing basketball, golf, river football, and soccer. The Fellows compliment each other, how they all seem intelligent and qualified.

Fellow 1 shows someone a picture of her cat, Beckett, sleeping on *The New Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*.

"Wow," says Fellow 2, who goes on to talk about Ezra Pound and all that she has done for the world of modernist poetry.

A waitress in a tiny apron brings them all whiskey shots.

Fellow 1 is confused. Why did Fellow 2 refer to Ezra Pound as a woman, if Ezra Pound was a man? Fellow 1 begins to think that maybe she *did* know Ezra Pound was a woman, but had for some reason forgotten. She tries to remember what Ezra Pound looked like, and imagines her looking similarly to George Eliot, who she had also, at one point, thought was a man.

Fellow 1 starts feeling profoundly embarrassed, thinking of all the times she had referred to Ezra Pound as a man, and vows to never make the mistake again.

It is a slow afternoon at the sports bar, and some of the Fellows go out to smoke cigarettes, where they remark on the view from atop the hill, and laugh a big, booming laugh. They leave behind Fellow 1 and Fellow 6, a confident boy from Nebraska who has taken an interest in a tennis match on one of the many television screens.

Fellow 1 strikes up a conversation with him about how Ezra Pound was rumored to have translated a book of love poems from ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, but it turned out she had made it all up herself.

Fellow 6 nods, taking a long sip from his drink. “I’ve read that,” he says, then pauses. “Ezra Pound also made vibrators by putting bumblebees in glass jars,” he says, “and after orgasming would throw them at pedestrians from her seventh-floor apartment in Paris.” He turns his attention back to the tennis match.

The ball bounces back and forth on the grass court. The players move closer to the net and volley. They sound like little angry creatures, weirdly struggling, until the louder and more attractive player hits the ball into a corner of the court.

He smiles a winning smile and throws his racket into the crowd.

The camera pans to a young boy in the stands, who catches it and keeps it under his bed for years. He later tells his friends that it belonged to Venus Williams herself, and that her breath smelled sweet, like a pear, when they kissed.

Fellow 1 looks into her drink. “Yes, I remember reading that too,” she says.

Grocery Story

It is a Saturday morning and the grocery store is crowded. People yell "excuse me," bumping into him. There are lots of reaching arms, reaching for things they want. He finds himself in an aisle where a woman frantically wiggles her stubby fingers towards a pickle jar on the top shelf. A tall thin man scuttles past with a cart full of canned corn. Fluorescent lights illuminate many different lumps of cheese. A group of people circle their carts around a watermelon display like a death dance, and a small girl stares at him as she crawls out from under a table, clutching a salami. He leaves within one minute without having looked for licorice.

She looks down multiple times at a folded memo, each time whispering "licorice" then slipping it back in her pocket. She can't remember where the natural foods section is; she imagines it's where the dehydrated fruits would be, next to the nuts or the flax. She somehow gets herded into the dairy section, where she nervously compares prices of yogurt. Later she is seen holding two grapefruits, weighing them with either hand, up and down, then putting them back. She smells every hand soap and stares at sudoku covers in the Magazine section. She leaves an hour later without licorice.

Garden Party

He says she looks *wow*, like a flower, like this nondescript blue-petaled thing that he holds up and poses next to her face. Side by side they look nothing alike, because she is Marylane, not a forget-me-not, but he says they're like sisters. Marylane blushes.

They're flirting through a garden. Not a particularly impressionable garden but a garden gardenly enough to set the scene for things to bloom. She proposes a picnic, which allows them to stretch out. They share a ratty quilt that her grandmother patched from her childhood denim jumper. Ladybugs embroidered on it. He looks at them and imagines her wearing the jumper as a child. Cute. She wants him to feel close to her. There's a stain on the left where she spit up as a baby. She wants him to feel that close.

There's only one thermos—they're reaching towards one another. Their hands warm from the thermos like hands warm from hands. Instead of a kiss, they prolong eye contact, smile excessively, nod often, and wait.

In the greenhouse, the crane lilies slip off drips of moisture. The dense air of the tropical garden moves Marylane to slip off her cardigan. He intentionally lets go of his greenhouse map so she can pick it up, and when she does he breathes loud, once, against her neck. She looks at him drive his hand through his hair. She looks at him look at her. One cannot help the way one feels, or doesn't feel. Sometime she needs validation. Sometimes he doesn't want to spend an afternoon alone. As they exchange childhood anecdotes they listen half-impressed. Not every human experience is inherently valuable.

A woman with a twitchy mouth exclaims over a flower, and Marylane rolls her eyes.

They kiss and get in separate cars. Marylane's attention goes to a radio show. He stops to buy some ginger ale feeling distant but content; he watches a pug get tangled in a bush at the stoplight. He would wake up the next morning, and instead of a forget-me-not he could pick a sunflower and to him they'd look the same.

Arranged Marriage

In which Jacob and Lilith get married and go on a hike in The Blue Woods, where they will think about health, opening a pottery studio for children with disabilities, starting a vegetable garden, and God.

Lilith wakes up feeling strange and apathetic. Looking at the numbers on her alarm clock, she remembers—"today I get married," and says it over and over, only to understand the line as a big muttered word that she doesn't know the definition of. *Lilith gets dressed peacefully in front of the window. She watches a bird that has been flying around with long pieces of string for building a nest.* Lilith doesn't get dressed. Squinting and suddenly spun by the reality of agreeing to marry Jacob, she leaves her small San Francisco apartment in a lacy slip, and trades in her iPhone at the convenience store for a bottle of champagne, a vanilla cigarillo, and a lotto ticket.

She ignores directions for the opening scene where *Lilith now walks down to the docks and sees her fiancé, who is taking his last unmarried look at the Bay,* and instead looks up into the sky, says "no," and goes on a sloshy and melancholic brunch date with her sister.

This is fine. Lilith looks exactly like a young girl except bigger, so the neighborhood girl named Susan is contacted, who is in eighth grade and looks exactly like a woman except smaller, to play Lilith's part, the bride.

Susan puts on a white halter-top and linen pants in preparation for the part, and, feeling fluffed up and glamorous from being solicited for a major role, texts her boyfriend. She slips out of the house around lunchtime, to where her boyfriend waits in his banged-up BMW under an elm tree. From there, they drive to a junkyard and park among many other demented vehicles.

While making out, Susan tears her white linen pants and when she returns home, runs into her mother, who grounds her and makes her unavailable to play the part of the bride.

Meanwhile, Jacob drives to all of Lilith's favorite spots, since she's not answering her phone. He drives out to Carmel-by-the-Sea, where Lilith's father lives in a small house with no Wi-Fi. Jacob drives to the yarn store and the ballet studio and the park with all the eucalyptus trees.

Here*, Jacob approaches the Croatian Heritage Hall in a grey suit, carrying white roses, ready to pronounce his love for Lilith in front of his family, his friends, and his therapist.* Jacob is forty-five minutes away from the Croatian Heritage Hall, buys his first pack of cigarettes in three years, and hits his steering wheel with his hand while trying not to cry.

Jacob, unable to reach, or find, Lilith, and aware of time, begins feeling overwhelmingly anxious, and takes a generous amount of Klonopin from the glove compartment. He drives until he sees something, then parks. After staring out the window for a few minutes, he gets out of his car and walks slowly through the cloister gardens of St. Olaf's.

He tries to focus on the lemon trees of the Priest's garden, the stained glass windows, and the encroaching fog that wisps around the tops of the fountain, making the whole scene appear "just like velvet" which he mumbles perversely under his breath.

The bride is still missing, so Lilith's uncle agrees and puts on the wedding dress.

Lilith's grandparents sway contently here as the balalaika orchestra plays heartfelt renditions of Croatian love songs in the reception hall. The balalaika orchestra gets into a bad bus accident, severely injuring the conductor and the soloist's page-turner, unable to make it to the wedding.

Concurrently, Lilith, who is staring into her mimosa, says, "I simply couldn't care less," and texts the caterer to halt the brioche baking, the asparagus steaming, the quail egg pickling and the roasting of the rabbit.

Lilith's uncle, unlike virtually everyone else, has a strong dedication to his role, and tries an exercise he learned in his method acting class, which involves him wandering around the streets in a veil, approaching men in varying shapes and sizes, while trying different emotional facial expressions.

Everything slips away, out of sync, with the tolling of the wedding bells. The understudies trail home. Lilith's uncle protests when the last minute boys' choir go back to playing basketball in the park. The makeshift taco truck and the Father leave. Lilith burst through the doors of the chapel with her dress half zipped, an apology half rehearsed,

Sedentary House

At home, they stay flat against the furniture. The father never speaks, just lays, mumbling into his beard. The mother sits on the ground, thinking a house cleaning spell that goes like: “murky dirty, silky milky” The dog cries dog tears and the children press their cheeks along the carpet and tile, lazy and wet with sleep. Occasionally they catch each other’s eyes, petrified and wondering -- when did they forget how to wiggle and shake, move from their chairs and embrace, instead of letting the drool collect in their open mouths?

The Dance

Judy and Harold have a game they play at dinner. Judy looks at the table and memorizes everything—the silverware, the position of the steak, the saltshaker, and when she closes her eyes Harold moves something, slightly. To the left, to the right, into his lap. Tonight Harold switches their wine. Judy notices a lipstick stain on his glass.

After dinner they flop into the living room. They flop onto opposite ends of the couch, looking at their ventless fireplace, both thinking, separately, about what they will do that evening. Harold had been thinking of going dancing the entire day, ever since he overheard his colleague talking about Salsa classes as a way to overcome anxiety. Harold pictures Judy moving her body around, under a dim light with her eyes slightly closed, smiling softly to some sort of rhythmic music.

They've been together for seven years and have never gone dancing. In college, Harold went out, Judy stayed in. Recently, Harold goes out, Judy stays in. Harold isn't a rabid extrovert or wild pleasure-seeker in any sense, but the idea of going dancing for the sake of it— especially with Judy, seemed exciting, perhaps even reckless, something they could think of next week, in fond remembrance of a night where they let loose.

"Do you want to go dancing?" Harold asks.

Judy shifts her weight on the couch. She is pleased that Harold asks, but feels vulnerable answering. For a few weeks, Harold's late-night office work has been distancing,

and Judy feels like they needed something. But the question is out of the ordinary. Why does he want to go dancing—for her benefit? Does he think she's bored at home? The last thing she wants is to feel pitied, or like he's "taking her out" to be aired. But she does want to go dancing, though.

"Is that what you want?" she asks. "I would if you want to." She sits up, her tone lifts, but she makes sure that her preference isn't clear from her voice alone.

Harold thinks of Judy in the past as a reference point. She's denied going swimming in the river, sliding down banisters, role-playing--specifically his wounded civil war soldier and nurse sexual fantasy--driving without maps, and cigarettes. He thought of her gentle disposition, her attentiveness to safety and to him.

If he says "yes" she might be put in a position to accommodate him. He wants to prevent a compromise. Does he love her? Of course he does, he looks to her to be the most perfect version of himself: to be considerate, safe, and responsible with each decision and its impact. If she wasn't certain about dancing, it was not worth pursuing.

"I would only be doing it if you wanted to," he says.

It is as though the lexis of their feelings is an entirely separate creature within the house. Like a fat cat that holds all their secrets and stolen glances. Howling, obese and grumpy, the keeper of their true feelings, bursting with things that want to be said.

Judy slumps. Harold doesn't really want to go dancing, she thinks, if they go it won't be fun for the both of us. Harold thinks I'm a drip, she thinks. Though dancing would be entirely out of her routine, it was something she had recently wanted to do. In fact, she had been waiting for Harold to suggest it.

If she were to say yes, and persist, as she wants to, she would feel foolish. She knows nothing about dancing, and therefore if Harold isn't enthused at the prospect, who would she be to say otherwise? Like the time they made breakfast smoothies and couldn't impose upon each other different sets of fruits they both enjoy, sticking them in some dumb strawberry-banana limbo.

Judy fills the empty rooms of Harold with a sense of wonderment. He wants to value the things she values. He wants to do the things she wants to do. He wants to buy her a scrap of fabric, a ruby ring, a token of endearment to solder them together.

"No, I think we want to stay home," Judy says sheepishly, watching closely how Harold responds.

"Alright." Harold says. He gets up and takes a deck of cards from the coffee table, gesturing towards it to question if she wants to play a game.

"Yes, sure, let's play blackjack." Judy says.

She doesn't want to play cards. They play blackjack every night.

Judy wonders if eventually, while appearing to be too gracious to one another, they will end up spending weeks, or months, or maybe even many years, inside their house, in separate rooms, looking out from separate windows and desiring a thing, a person, or a place, that is very far away.

Harold is pleased, he did *well*, he thinks, he suggested something that his wife enjoys, and therefore he can too. That's the best he can do. The wind comes in from the open window and gently shivers the deck of cards. The both of them go back to being floppy on the couch.

That night they go to bed silently, feeling some form of contentment. Harold watches Judy sleep, and swoons at the way hair moves when she exhales a dream. A dream in which she is dancing.

Better Homes

When the couple arrived at the open house, the landlord wrapped her arms around them. She smelled like a big warm coconut. In Slovakia, the couple had owned a pub that had burned down. Here, they wanted to start over, in a clean home with a yard for a dog to run circles in.

They followed the landlord, through the overgrown lawn, to the side door. The windows of the upstairs, where the landlord lived, were shattered. The couple smiled at each other softly, before walking down the small flight of stairs into the basement.

The apartment was winding. Tiny rooms multiplied like rabbits in front of them. The kitchen was a brown cave of small wooden shelves. The layout felt strange, but intuitive, to the couple.

The landlord continued through the rooms, becoming wildly excited each time she opened a door. The couple felt enthralled by the landlord, perhaps due to the way she held eye contact. She seemed invested in them, unlike the other Americans they'd met. There was mold in the bathroom, a dead smell in air.

The landlord spoke loudly, and the couple started to match her excitement. They found themselves looking forgivingly over a din of cobwebs and a cramped hallway. There was a broken air purifier and the couple compassionately smiled at it, too.

The landlord opened a trapdoor in the bathroom, and descended a shiny white ladder, which led to what she suggested would be the couple's bedroom. The room had soundproofed

walls, two white cots, and a large poster of a redheaded woman holding a sniper weapon.

It feels very safe here, said the wife.

A corner of our own, said the husband.

I can really see you living here, said the landlord. She touched the couple's shoulders like an angel. It'll be hard to find a better deal for the area. She moved closer to the couple, touching their faces. You know, I feel homesick too.

Before the couple left, the landlord showed them pictures of her parents. She also showed the couple a home video of herself as a young girl. In it, she picked strawberries and smashed them into a sheep's coat. She told the couple about the time she vacationed at a hot springs in Hungary. The hot springs were so hot, she said. Hot hot, she said, smiling. The landlord walked the couple to the car, with an expression that looked both weepy and alive.

The couple drove away letting the shriveled lawns pass. They returned to the motel room and sat together eating pre-made macaroni, looking out the window at an empty lot. They held hands, thinking of their invitation from the very nice landlord, her home, and America.

Imaginary Museums

Annie was encouraged to take a painting class after the divorce. Annie painted scenes of herself in empty, Arctic landscapes, with long, difficult shadows. These paintings became part of a series she called "painting class."

She didn't know why she was still in that small town, where the only people she knew were her ex-husband, his mean, obese mother, and the Hudson River.

One day, Annie's painting instructor recommended that she visit the *Air-Conditioning and Refrigeration Museum* in New York City. "The AC unit is an anthropological lens for community," he said, in his intense, ancient way. "Before air conditioning, whole neighborhoods had to sleep together by the river."

Annie pictured falling asleep with the people in her painting class. She saw herself rolling around in her sleep, bumping softly into their bodies, feeling around in the sand for something she had lost.

"Now we stay inside, shrinking in closed rooms" said the painting instructor. He was looking out the window now, touching it lightly with his hand, like a dog. He had perversely thick hair and a big belt buckle.

"The whole museum feels isolating and distant, like your work." said the instructor.

Annie felt as though she should be turning over a new leaf, rock, or page. Perhaps there she would find a newt, jewel, or her second chance. Instead she had a new cell phone, and her only contact was "Sister," who pickled vegetables, read the Bible, and on the phone sounded very

far away. Annie's therapist also contacted her. He sent automated text messages reminding Annie to "Breathe" every evening at 8pm.

Annie told her sister she was going to the city. "For research," she said into the phone, observing her facemask dry in the mirror. Annie had large pores and spent a lot of money covering them up. Annie also had unspeakable grief, and a Masters in History, but even she didn't know what that meant.

"It's not for me, it's for my paintings," Annie said, finding a profound ring in the phrase.

After the call ended, Annie stayed on the line, listening to the static as though it were the distant ocean in a seashell. She felt so stuck that she believed she might pee herself. But Annie also believed in miracles, and that 222 was the number of angels--that they erased all human memories of them after coming down to earth.

Annie started to mention her plan to visit the Air Conditioning museum. At the fruit stand, in the elevator, to her landlord. To her, the trip represented efforts for a new beginning. She felt feverish from talking about a trip that had not yet happened, about how the Amtrak would go along the Hudson river where the water gets frothy and nice; about how Penn Station would have those light-up keychains with names on them like Ben, John, and Sarah; how she had always felt this push to paint. She fantasized about meeting an attractive metropolitan woman with long dark hair. She imagined they could have fleeting, gleaming kisses in an empty room of the New York Public Library.

To Annie, this museum and the city was the perfect fix that could help her move on. She also knew that she briefly thrived on illusory successes. She enjoyed that feeling of propelling forward, whether or not it was real. She'd always loved even the shimmer of an "out," a trap door from her heart.

Annie's sister emailed her a video of Edna the Elephant painting a bouquet of yellow flowers. Edna made slow, determined strokes with her trunk, and changed paint brushes when she went to work on the leaves. Annie clicked on a website where people could donate money to rehabilitated elephants by buying Edna's prints.

Later she learned that Edna and other elephants are trained to strategically move the paintbrush around, that it detracts from their quality of life to paint the same picture repeatedly. Annie related to the elephant, not only because they were both amateurs, but because they painted their own demise.

Most of her things fit into her small, yellow backpack. She packed her ex-husband's old camera that she never understood--much like everything else about him, in retrospect.

But then Annie looked up the museum and found that it didn't exist. Not in New York, Washington D.C.; not in the Midwest or in some Berlin basement. Instead, there were exhibits like Disco Prints, Dogs of the Soviet Space Program, and Famous Robbery Weapons. Nothing about Air-Conditioning, or Refrigeration.

At the library, the small woman behind the reference desk opened the encyclopedia to "cooling systems." Annie stared at the page that made everything seem simple, feeling that it is difficult thing to understand what another person wants.

Annie was embarrassed, and for a while avoided the people with whom she had shared her travel plans. She thought vindictively of her senile painting instructor, and stopped attending class.

She went to throw away her ex-husband's camera. She walked to the red trash can on the street corner. She disposed of it then pulled it back out. Sitting on a bench she fingered the various knobs and buttons and ding-dongs. She threw it away again, passionately. She observed it, the dumb camera. Her only thing left from her first love, now touching what appeared to be a sandwich. She stared without blinking, until it all turned into a blurred mass of trash.

It was still summer, and Annie retreated to her apartment. She paced in her yellow kitchen; she plugged in rotating fans, and her window units. She pulled out some ice trays and positioned them around the room, under lamps, like a gallery.

Annie went online and collected videos of snowstorm footage, tours of walk-in industrial freezers, windmills, and waterfalls. She turned on the cold water in all the faucets. Sitting still in a leather chair, with her feet in a dish of ice water, she closed her eyes, admiring the cold.

Doorstop

My mother has a two-pound doorstop that she uses in the summer. It's a souvenir copy of the original kilogram. She got it on a tour of the Department of Measurements in Sevres, France, where the original kilogram is kept in a triple-locked vault in the basement.

Three people have the key to the vault, so they can polish it by hand, and compare it to other sister copies, which they do every few years. In 2009, the block was shrinking. In 2013, growing. This, in Sevres, of all places. A village where people are notoriously and comically, according to my mother, unable to adapt to change.

In seventh grade, my best friend moved away to go to a special math high school. I spent the ensuing week despairing, and my mother threatened to send me to that little French village, where the people were so anxious for the kilogram block, she said, that they sat forever in tears, frigid and stupid. Maybe then I'd learn.

I am in my thirties now, living at home again. My brother is dying, and I broke up with my boyfriend. My mother is afraid to answer the phone when it rings, has always been, so I answer. But first, I prop open the door with the doorstop, let the wind in.

Guest Books

After dating for one month the couple rents a cabin. In it, they read entries in the guest book. They read entries by reunited families after the war, couples who had been married for forty-two years, victims of lost youth, jealousy, and broken promises. *Remember, on family trips, when you could pack your shoes into your mother's shoes, because your feet were still so small?* On June 13th, 2008, a woman named Penny, who was about to lose her eyesight, wanted to see all that God created one last time. Now, in July of 2013, the woods look magnificent, but the new couple sits away from the large oval window, eating sausages, flirting, and arguing about the word "gourmet."

Your Shining Trapdoor

Feebee visits her parents in Pennsylvania. They go on hikes each day. Father goes slowly because of his sciatica and Mother brings binoculars. She doesn't have any friends in America, so she gets to know birds instead.

When her parents leave the house, Feebee cleans. There is a program about clowns on the radio. The man has a jagged voice, like quartz or a bitten nail.

There are four types of clowns, the man on the radio explains. Feebee sweeps the dust from under the couch. She thinks of Dumbo and court jesters, how they both feel like members of a divine class.

A more familiar clown type is the Auguste, says the man on the radio. Auguste means foolish. The pranksters who pull jokes that fail. These clowns trip, and fumble. They wear baggy plaid jumpsuits and bow ties.

Feebee thinks of a motivational speaker who came to her middle school. The speaker was 6'7" and ran in place to an 80's classic rock song while everyone sat down. The kids sneered at her. To Feebee she was a queen.

Too, there are the Tramp and Hobo types of clowns. Tramps look sad, poor and plain. They wear mousetraps as tie clasps. Hobos dress similarly, but smile.

Feebee's parents' house is small and dark. It is cluttered with hanging pots of ivy, and smells like dust. Wooden statuettes cover many surfaces. Feebee wipes the cobwebs from them.

There are pieces of once-expensive furniture Father found in the street, mended with duct tape and glue. There are folk quilts covering moldy chairs.

There is a giant red porcelain panther with a light bulb sticking out of its head. It is the biggest thing in the living room. It is too bright for everything around it. Feebee dusts it off to reveal an even brighter shade of red beneath.

Feebee remembers when Father found it. How he had pulled the bright panther lamp up the front steps, slowly, with a struggle. How he threw open the door with his arms up wide, above his head, laughing.

Father's room is filled with strange replacements for things—a golf club for a cane, a desktop computer on a dresser used as a desk, a stethoscope instead of earplugs, and several pairs of one-lensed, one-armed eyeglasses that he stacked together into one working pair. On the floor are books on how to become rich.

Father eats steel cut oats for every meal, fully hunched over his bowl. He has a special wooden spoon he always uses. It is wooden and big like a ladle, and he keeps it in his room. He used one just like it at the refugee camps in Italy; it was the first thing he owned after crawling through tall grass for miles.

Feebee straightens up his desk. She throws away an apple core.

She almost throws away his yogurt container where he keeps his fake teeth. Next to it is a tape recorder. He practices his English into it, saying the "th" sound in words like "therefore," "thought," and "that."

Feebee sleeps in her childhood room, the attic, where she only has nightmares. There is a postcard of the solar system on the door. Under the postcard is where she had written the phone number of the only boy she ever loved.

The lightbulbs in the bathroom are unscrewed. Otherwise, Feebee stands before the mirror and stares, unfocused, unfamiliar.

Feebee plans to leave the next day after dinner. Her mother sets the table with bright red bowls and plates. She found them at a yard sale next to church that morning.

"To balance out the living room," she says, and then, "The plates can be friends with the lamp."

Father smiles down at his oats in the bright red bowl. He'd bought a VHS player and a bow tie, which he wears at dinner.

Feebee eats silently and quickly. She chokes on potatoes and water.

Her mother gives her dried herbs and vitamin B. She wishes Feebee could stay, and Feebee wishes they could leave, could find a place for them that fit.

Father smiles widely and pats her on the back. He looks like a shrunken man in his bow tie. From the car, the panther lamp glows from the window. It looks better that way, when the entire living room is red, like a circus.

The next time Feebee visits, she brings a prybar, door joists, and frames. She waits until her parents leave for the forest and starts with her mother's room. She lifts the rug and makes a 3x3 cut into the wood. She tidies up the space under the floor and puts all her bird watching books

on tall shelves. She installs a large viewing platform with a high-powered telescope that looks out upon rolling mountains. When she climbs back up, Feebee screws hinges onto the door and covers it up with a rug.

In Father's room, Feebee puts a trap door under his rollaway bed. She puts in various corners of his childhood town: the park where he played soccer, the cow field, the Lubovna ruin by the mountains, a trombone. She installs a hot tub with Epson salts. The door is the brightest red.

At the end of the week, Feebee touches the tops of their heads and tells them goodbye. In the mailbox, she leaves individual envelopes, and inside those, are keys.

Girls I No Longer Know

The girl who lost twenty pounds from falling in love and could no longer hear her footsteps. The girl who clapped at the sun set. The girl who tucked a pearl under her tongue while she slept. The girl who never slept and became a spiral. The girl who emptied flower food packets into her lotion. The girl who was a child acrobat, a star, who was struck by a gymnasium light and became a paralyzed millionaire from lawsuits. The twin girls who got into a knife fight in the driveway next door. The girl who tripped me in ballet, which I enjoyed. The girl who watched an agave plant bloom and immediately die. The girl in my mother who disappeared over time, and the girl who tried to find her.

Nearby Places

A girl is pushing an old man down the hallway, and they pass many windows out of which the old man cannot see.

The place she's taking him, she says, is bright and at a perfect temperature and humidity level. There will be towels and a toothbrush and a bowl of candied dates that he especially likes. There are newly added massage chairs and a cabinet filled with hand warmers, markers, and AA batteries, and when he gets there, he can write whatever he likes on his nametag.

A woman approaches them and hands the old man a clipboard with forms to fill out regarding the place. She chimes in, saying that the place "is entirely covered in a blue-ish light," that there are trees to sit under if he wants to be alone, and small animals that will protect him. There is a black porcelain swimming pool filled with many beautiful people who are excited to meet him, and he will be given elegant grey stockings to wear.

Where he is being taken, wires are obsolete, and at night there is a hidden table for him to eat cookies and gaze upon the moon. The man gives the woman back the clipboard, and she blows him a kiss before disappearing behind a door that they pass.

The girl and the old man stop in a small restaurant and split a strawberry pie. "We're almost there," she says, and the waitress tells the old man that he will be able to see the whole place at once, and in the distance, he will see a house from which his mother looks out at him fondly.

After they finish eating, the girl pushes faster down the hallways, turning left and right, so the windows pass quickly when the old man stretches his neck towards them. She tells him that he deserves to live in this place, and that this is the place just for him.

The hallways slowly start to dim, from the days-worth of travel. The trip to where the old man is being taken is a bit long, so the girl pauses to use the restroom, leaving him behind. Many people are walking down the hallway, in a hurry to get to their homes, and must move around the old man, causing them to occasionally bump into each other.

One person drops her coffee and file folder. As she picks up her things, the old man tells her where he is going, to which she says “I know a few people there, and they are all very happy.” She has a dog with her, who makes a cheerful sound when hearing about the place. The old man wants to pet the dog’s head, but the person is in a hurry and leaves.

A couple, who the old man does not recognize, moves the old man to the side of the hallway, puts him in an elevator, then wheels him into a small room. When he tries to tell them where he is going, they furrow their brows and tell the old man that the place does not exist. They turn off the light and close the door, so the people no longer have to walk around him.

The room is empty and clean. There is a crack from under the door, which is how the light gets in.

He waits there, and folds his hands in his lap.

He waits there, imagining the things that the girl told him, about the tropical trees.

He thinks about the many seagulls to count as he goes to sleep. Almost a hundred seagulls, she’d said.

Field Notes

Erica will walk for a maximum of thirty-five minutes, so that she has time to get coffee and return emails before lunch. Then the other things: reducing leisure time on the phone or computer, saying what she means, maintaining good posture and hydration at her desk, and reducing despair, will become more manageable.

Erica exits her car and walks into a blue sign. “Nature Study Area.” Lists wildlife information. Butterflies. Groundhogs. Trail map, jackets advised: daytime temperatures average 50-60°.

Erica swings her arms and moves along, finds another sign a few steps further.

> *This land was first home to the Ottawa tribe, who abruptly left sometime in the 1780’s; then Moravian missionaries, who wrote to their congregation that there was “darkness on the land”; then the New England Settlers, who drowned and hanged themselves. It is now a place to observe songbirds, pick blackberries, and sit beside the various ponds.*

She tries to “clear her mind” but her brain feels itchy. She wants to find an empty clearing to “become one with,” or a patch of quicksand in which to briefly suspend.

Erica takes deep breaths but still feels the her in her.

The air smells dim and shapeless, like burlap, or fear.

The words of a perfumer: “Perfume is too often an ethereal corset trapping everyone in the same unnatural shape.” Erica looks at everything in front of her at once and detects a million little movements.

Her mother lives in the flatlands now. “You always know when people are coming” she whispered once over the phone. But it’s quiet there. Erica stood in a crowded room last night; a hush fell over everyone at twenty minutes past the hour. According to a website about divine synchronicity, this means an angel passed by.

Erica feels for the shape of her phone in her pants and remembers that she intentionally left it in the car.

> *This wetland patch is populated solely by decades-old skunk cabbages. Maroon in color, skunk cabbages make their appearance in early winter, when other plants are still sleeping. The smell, similar to rotting flesh, both attracts flies to pollinate them and deters other wildlife from eating them.*

Erica looks past the sign and sees pieces of trash stuck in the mud.

There are old oak trees around a pond that make opening door sounds—like visitors, when the wind blows. Erica tries to listen to the river sounds but get distracted by the rhythm of her breath.

> *Do you see beavers building their dams nearby? It is a little known fact that beavers dislike the sound of rushing water. It drives them to do anything to block it out, to make dams.*

Erica's personal dam has been breaking down recently; she forgets that it takes work to keep those ugly sounds out.

Erica imagines scrolling through unread emails and endless feeds in the car.

Erica reminds herself that she is here to take in the scenery, to observe things rustling. Wood, vapor, where the light falls, or doesn't. She is not here to frantically anticipate, or think of her failures and behaviors.

She walks down a tree-lined path that opens up into a small meadow. Three squirrels watch her from nearby trees.

> *This meadow is dedicated to the local schoolmaster who would start fall semesters only when the goldenrods bloomed. Here the goldenrods are bent*

with heavy yellow pollen. Goldenrod leaves can be made into rubber. Young leaves are edible.

Erica's mother has goldenrod salve above the sink, next to a vial of perfume called *Dark* that smells like leather suitcases and olives. Erica used to put it on every day.

The trail feels deserted and Erica imagines encountering possible forgotten things on the path:

1. a half-finished picnic,
2. a pair of hiking shoes, mid-step,
3. a cell phone still on the line. When she picks it up and says hello, the voice knows exactly who she is.

In an article that Erica recently read online, a group of archaeologists from the Great Basin National Park found a forgotten rifle that had been leaning against a juniper tree since 1887. Perfectly intact. A Winchester—"The Gun That Won the West." This particular rifle had been shot only once, perhaps as an attempt to communicate something to someone far away, before it was left behind.

Erica currently has 9 open tabs on her browser:

1. A Google Flights price graph for a trip she'll probably never take.
2. A Youtube playlist of "stimulating classical music."

3. A spreadsheet of due dates for jobs located in places she's never been to, like Connecticut and the Netherlands
4. A Google search of "How many wonders are in the modern world now?"
5. A Google search of her name.
6. A Google search of her nemesis's name.
7. A Google search of the local librarian's name, who has a level of serenity that she wishes she could have.

Please do not stray from the marked path.

She's more used to seeing the world online, second hand. Erica wishes she could come across something for the first time, anything, with her very eyes and hands and ears.

Perhaps then she could be happier.

Perhaps if she could obtain a large powerful mallet and pound each individual tree neatly into the ground.

Once, Erica bought a grey skirt from a second hand store. It was the perfect length and made her feel like the school girl with levity she'd once been. Before she put it in the wash, she noticed some markings—the times table, fibonacci sequence, civil war timeline, and two phone numbers labeled "Kevin" and "Cocaine" written in permanent marker under the front flap.

Erica tried wearing the skirt three separate times after washing, but felt distracted and weighed down by the left over noise that it carried.

Climbing over rocks of various sizes, Erica follows the path uphill.

Erica had initially thought of getting an office plant. Some study Erica's colleague shared online explained that people who experienced hardship were much calmer, focused, and confident when they spent time in rooms that overlooked natural environments, or were decorated with indoor plants. But after a frantic azalea purchase, Erica was still so overcome by the demands of herself that she forgot to water it, which only depressed her further.

Erica reaches a bluff, reminiscent of the rocks that lure people to die in *Picnic at Hanging Rock.* Erica remembers the part where Miranda, in her white dress, takes off her stockings and starts to climb, defying the restrictions of boarding school and the grasps of the other girls who call her to come back to the world. But Miranda wants timelessness, because that means to want shapelessness, so she disappears into the rocks to get rid of the body and its restrictions on knowledge.

The Internet makes it easy to be seen and vanish completely at the same time. "An ethereal corset that traps everyone in the same unnatural shape."

There are forty-five species of butterflies here.
How many did you see, Erica?

Erica wishes she could be the scientist who discovered that butterflies drink the tears of turtles. How he must have felt when he saw one rest over the turtle's crying eyes for the first time. Maybe it brought tears to his own. How different it would feel to see it, first hand, rather than to read about it on her phone during morning traffic.

By the end of the walk, a bluebird had seen Erica thirty times, but Erica never saw it.

Rest in Pieces

I am calmly organizing the things on the desk, grouping them in similar weights and sizes. Among them are three objects identical in shape:

an orange punctured with cloves,

a paperweight,

and a pink tennis ball,

which I switch around in front of me on days when I feel anxious. There's something about the power of threes-- that my massage therapist, Effie, told me about, that makes the tactile exercise emotionally satisfying. Effie wears the same white calculator watch on both wrists. Whenever she feels the knots in my shoulders, she lets out a low whistle.

This morning at the Water and Power Supply Company, I am early for work and sitting between vacant desks. Morning light makes the tenth floor look dusty and discarded. The copy machine is white and muscular like a cargo horse.

A man in a waxed raincoat appears from the corner office, makes a "cheers" gesture at me with his coffee mug. His eyes are puffed from a yawn, and he walks the length of the office in a slow two-step. I goose-neck for a moment, holding my pink tennis ball, until he disappears behind *Exit* door.

Just me again, alone with time.

I think of everything I need to do, and the thinking feels like good hard work. I write down a list of abstract tasks on a sticky note to appear intentional to myself. Around me are lists of phone numbers and calendars, reminders and follow up appointment cards.

I make a concrete stride into the morning by taking my coffee into the stairwell, and looking out the large window. I stretch my wrists and clear my throat. I read the *Tenth Floor Exit* sign in the deep voice of my lover. I don't have time to be down. I only have time to be productive.

The Water and Power Supply is divided between two warehouse buildings on the Shoreway.

There's the Power building where the Power people work, and the Water building where I work with the Water people. Through the window is the brick face of the Power building, where everyone types quickly, and ties large helium balloons to the clamps of their clipboards while they soundlessly install "on-off" switches throughout the city. The Water people, by comparison, are washed out and ugly like eggs.

One wall of the stairwell is all windows. My colleague in the waxed raincoat is further down the descending clip of steps, footsteps in rhythm to the tennis ball I'm bouncing.

Suddenly the *thwum-thwum* of the ball pauses, as it bounces slightly too far from my hand. The ball now *dwomps* down the iron spiral staircase, blinking around corners and gaining on my colleague. I peer over the railing vacantly, before deciding to trudge downward to retrieve what I have lost.

The layers of the rainforest are: Emergent,

Canopy,

Understory,

and the Forest Floor.

This city has its layers too, sliced in horizontal stratas and stacked one upon the other. From the tenth floor window I can see the city's emergent layer of smokestack tips, antennae and roof accessories, the plump and greasy seagulls bobbing in the early air, squawking *hee-hee* into the face of the ground.

From my view high up in the building, I can see the flat palm of the lake and its forty-five miles of water to Canada. In 1969 the Cuyahoga River caught fire on itself--it was a black hole of trash--and slowly emptied into the lake. I envision a horizon of fire, while the tennis ball continues to strum down the steps.

I see a kite propelled by a boat. Both glide along surfaces, impossibly weightless. Somewhere else, I'm sure, a huge barge squeezes through a river, carrying heavy looking boulders.

Following the ball, I now enter the canopy of the city. Around the sixth floor of the Water Supply, I start to see the closer neighboring buildings, the old chipping signs on the empty warehouses and distant steelyards. A Spirit aircraft flies overhead from the airport. My aunt and uncle used to fly separately when their daughter was young, in case one of them crashed.

Now it's the part of the morning when the middle-cut arrive to work, as indicated by the sudden influx of pale and garbled men and women who pull up the stairs, stepping around the tennis ball as it bounds down.

At the third floor now, the Understory. The windows look out to bridges, train tracks and a Methadone clinic billboard. Apartments above an adult video store. Bloom and rust. Groups of attractive people laughing heartily and groups of less attractive people laughing nervously.

The man in the waxed raincoat disappears out the front door while I'm still a floor above him. A bicyclist circles around the block with a bag of Plain Dealers. I watch as the ball rolls through the open door, and comes up to trip the bicycle, causing the man-and-bike and my colleague to collide.

A pink tennis ball,

a bicycle bell and

an apple from the pocket of the man's raincoat

roll into the street. When I get outside I pick them up and swap them back into their proper places, killing time before the next thing comes undone

Pets I No Longer Have

A duckling that was straggling behind her skein; I pocketed her into my small rain jacket. A rabbit from PetCo; I pretended to find him shivering in the garage. My secret kitten who slept in the attic. Seven parakeets, let go, over time, when my father opened windows. A turtle from Florida, forgotten on the rooftop of my parent's car. Some people dedicate their lives to reptile shows. Some people say "both me and my cat liked it" in reference to movies they had seen. Frogs can recognize their owners, none recognize me. There are albino peacocks kept in the garden at church. They hide their babies on the roof. Occasionally the mother bird is lured back with dog biscuits when she escapes onto the street. One day she didn't come back. In a dream, I stuff her in my backpack. The peacock's periscope neck peeks out.

The Squinter's Watch

I walk past the park holding some groceries when I see some junk kids gathering around the trunk of a juniper tree. There's a girl in a hot pink skirt looking up with her mouth open at a dragon tangled in the branches. It's struggling to breathe through the leaves. Its silver scales are dented from the grasp of a branch. The boys throw cans at it and the girl says *damn we should probably do something about this*, and takes out a 40-volt lithium ion chainsaw and starts cutting. And the dragon regards her with intense feelings of loneliness, and the girl feels powerful to be conquering this armored beast surrounded by juniper berries the color of vodka and sea salt. The wood splinters and the dragon heaves majestically, parting the branches like a curtain and spreading its wings like dragons are depicted to do in folklore, and blows out a curl of fire that engulfs the girl and her hot pink skirt, as I stand there thinking about how someone probably loved that juniper tree.

Love Language

Biba scoots in the airplane seat, feeling for her headphones. The upholstery itches and the cool air nozzle is unavoidable. She feels a melancholy for everywhere she is leaving, as though she would never return, forever.

The passenger next to Biba wears big yellow beads and prays. She prays for a safe landing, but also for death to her husband, and the whorish violinist who took him. During a quieter part of the flight, she turns to her little airplane window and whispers down to everyone below that soon their sweet soul pain will come.

The flight attendant is plump and comfortable like a babysitter, or a sausage, and she tottles down the aisle to make an announcement. The turbulence on the small aircraft gives Biba a bellyache. She wants an Ambien, or a kiss.

Over the speakers, the flight attendant whispers, "We are lost." Various facial expressions pass through the plane. The flight attendant goes on to say that the pilot has "never seen this place before," how according to the navigation system, we should be passing over "somewhere that is no longer there."

Biba stretches to take a look. It's hard to tell… outside are bursts of clouds and brown patches. Biba shrugs at the woman with the big yellow beads.

"Looks the same," she says.

Other, less comforting flight attendants in starched uniforms start to file through the plane, reminding everyone about how to deploy their air masks, urging everyone not to look out their windows.

The clouds and hills are simple and familiar, but start to feel confusing and alarming.

The pilot starts to speak over the intercom. He tries telling jokes, and proposes questions for the passengers to discuss, like "what is your favorite dinner dish?" and "where was your favorite vacation destination?" Biba answers all his questions in her head. They calm her down. She feels like she could die peacefully to this. The woman with the yellow beads hisses at a family in front of them, then starts to hyperventilate.

Outside, the sky gradually shifts to a vibrant magenta. Outside, the clouds become spherical and silver. The plane appears to be going slowly, as though moving through something thick. A strange feeling spreads through the cabin, like a body ache, or a ghost.

After an hour, the flight attendants' voices become shrill, and their brows furrow fearfully as they start assembling at the back of the plane, where they take bottles of slivovitz from behind a black curtain. A man in tears joins them. The woman with the yellow beads joins them. They take swigs while looking out, pointing at the abstract and hellish landscape, inciting panic in one another, their mouths gumming down. They drink so suddenly that they drop empty bottles and cover the floor in shattered glass. Outside, the sky is black, flames engulf the clouds. There is an evil sound that brushes up against the side of the plane.

Eventually one passenger opens the small exit hatch, as a joke, but then climbs through it anyway, and the other passengers follow, one by one.

After some time the plane is empty, except for the pilot, Biba, and a long hurry of wind.

"What kind of music do you enjoy?" the pilot asks. Biba's body feels hot. The pilot plays a Strauss piece over the speakers.

"Where do you wish you were sitting right now?" He asks.

"If you could run into anyone at the library, who would it be?" He asks.

Biba hums. Biba wants to ask the pilot questions too.

"Can you hear me?" The pilot asks.

Biba wishes she could walk up and sit beside the pilot. She cannot bring herself to move, he feels like something that appears to be walking closer, but is permanently far away.

Can he can feel that she is somewhere in the plane with him? That she stuck around? She wonders if he thinks about family, God, or someone he loves when he flies. She wonders if he owns pets who greet him in uncontainable joy, and if he holds the door open for people who are far away.

"What will it look like when we land?" He asks.

I'll hold your hand as we exit the plane. Biba thinks. *The terminal is an empty room, it smells like a rubber glove. A baggage boy sleeps in a red chair. We get into your car and drive in the rain. We sit side by side. We don't say a word. We don't look at eachother. You park alongside the shore. It's the most comforting thing in the world*. She leans deeply into her seat.

After a long time, she hears his voice again. It is quiet, and she listens for footsteps.

Outside, a grove of lemon trees.