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This thesis consists of eight short stories submitted as part of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree, the beginnings of a collection that aims to engage what writer Clare Beams calls “the living strangeness” of sensory experience, identity, and desire. In these pages there are churches and synagogues, living rooms and bedrooms, a museum, a theme park, and a station wagon that is also a pirate ship. Though the stories arise from “what if,” they seek to parse “what is”: the wonder and anguish of occupying a body and finding a place for that body in a world of sights, smells, sounds, tastes and textures.

WHAT YOU ASK FOR, WHAT YOU WANT

by

Margaret L. Cooper

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Approved by

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## APPROVAL PAGE

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## MINARETS

In the old days, they could all fly—mosques, synagogues, temples, shrines, chapels, humble churches and stately cathedrals. From Nepal to Florence, they soared above deserts, forests, mountains, cities, and towns. When it stormed, stained glass windows lit up with reflected lightning, and snow gathered on Byzantine domes, covering their painted curves with downy white. Occasionally, fierce winds would carry a shrine into the next valley, and the whole village would be set to work, braiding long ropes together and guiding it back into place among the rhododendrons. Yet for the most part, the temples and the churches knew the way, staying close to the ones who had built them. On days of worship, they settled gently back between the mountains and the forests, and the people came as they always did, as their parents and grandparents had before them.

As the years passed, the synagogues and the churches molted, trading their invisible wings for firm foundations. The trees in the cloister gardens grew deep roots. In time, the people found their own, imperfect reasons: the great cathedrals lacked the agility required for flight, the nature of spiritual discourse was changing, the earth's magnetic force had exerted a new pull. The accounts on old scrolls and tablets were preserved, archived, and catalogued, locked away in ancient libraries and museums, to be read only by the most erudite. Still, for those who knew where to look, there were hints everywhere: the cracks around the base of Ely Cathedral, the feathers carved into the minarets at Al-Haram. You could stand by and hear earnest tour guides repeat the stories

written in the history books: the damages in the wars, the renovations by the Victorians. What they did not tell were tales of synagogues high above the Red Sea and palace chapels that sailed on the spring breeze. The modern temples had never flown before, but even they contained the capacity for flight: a certain quality in that concrete, glass, and steel.

#

It happened in the early 2000s, 1372 years after the last of the ancient temples had landed. The first to fly again was a synagogue in South London, a squarish brick building wedged between a medical care center and a storefront called Streatham Bedding Ltd. When it rose from the ground just before six on a Tuesday morning, the only witness was a nurse coming off the night shift, who third- and fourth-guessed what she was seeing before putting a call in to the city police. A floating synagogue, yes, she was sure. Yes, they had better send someone out to have a look at it.

The nurse—her name was Vanessa—watched from the sidewalk as the synagogue drifted upward slowly, until the door, so recently at ground level, hovered four, five, six feet above her head. She had walked past the synagogue hundreds of times in the year since she had begun working at the clinic, but she was struck now by the details she had never noticed: the perfect symmetry of the three doors and the color of the bricks, a rich clay red in the light of the clear morning. There was, she thought, something beautiful about the synagogue as it floated there next to the dingy storefronts of Prentis Road, and Vanessa glimpsed it in the same way she sometimes glimpsed her mother, who had been dead almost six months now—not head-on, but fleetingly, at odd angles.

By the time an officer arrived, the South London Liberal Synagogue had drifted up to the level of the medical center roof, leaving only a crumbling foundation and a series of signs on the outside fence, promising Thursday night hatha yoga and meals for those in need during Pesach. After several confused phone calls, more police arrived and stood looking up at the synagogue with their hands in their jacket pockets. Vanessa gave her statement, and as the bells of the church down the road struck eight, she began her short walk to the bus stop, passing shops and offices and looking carefully at the place where the buildings met the ground.

As the synagogue drifted higher, a crowd gathered at Prentis Road. The police, on orders from the higher-ups, cordoned off the foundation and stationed three officers to manage the growing mass of people on the sidewalk. At eight-thirty, the building had risen high enough to be seen from the main road, and the television crews arrived, parking their antennae-covered vans in the space in front of the health center reserved for emergencies. Within minutes, they were live on air, and back at the studio, a producer cut between footage of the crowd and the increasingly distant synagogue rising up over the rooftops.

By Tuesday night, footage of South London's flying synagogue was playing all over the world: from the boxy black-and-white television wedged high in the corner of a tiny restaurant outside of Santo Domingo to the millions of palm-sized screens hurtling through subway tunnels in New York and Tokyo. *Flying Synagogue Stumps London Police. Jewish Community Expresses Concern. Special Forces Examine Foundation of Floating Temple.* At home in her small flat, Vanessa watched the news reports as she



made her dinner—scrambled egg with beans on toast—but shut them off before she was finished eating. Her mother, who had believed in such things, would have said that this was a sign of something: good luck, bad luck, the Second Coming. Vanessa did not believe in such things, but the memory of the floating temple lingered as she drifted off to sleep under an old crocheted blanket.

The South London Liberal Synagogue touched back down on Prentis Road at five fifty-two on Wednesday morning, twenty-three hours after it had first risen into the air. Its landing was gentle: the synagogue had eased itself into its old spot between the storefront and the medical center with surprising precision. That night, the rabbi appeared on the news, expressing gratitude for the synagogue's return and humility in the face of God's mystery. Friday evening's shabbat services were the best attended in years—and her sermon, on the flight of the spirit towards enlightenment, was reprinted in *The Jewish Chronicle*.

#

The next to fly was a church: St. Mary's in Stoke Newington. It happened eight days later, on a rainy Thursday, just yards away from a cluster of sixth formers who had stopped to chat under an enormous bubble umbrella. At three-twenty in the afternoon, the church separated from its foundation with a loud crack, and the students, for once distracted from the flow of she-said-to-him and he-said-to-her, watched open-mouthed as the gap grew between the church steps and the pebbled pathway. A boy called Marcus pulled a hood over short dreads, then stepped out from under the umbrella and squinted up into the rain, watching the church spire rise towards the heavy gray clouds. His

muscles, just beginning to ache after another one of Coach's clinics, felt strangely slack under his sweats, and he moved forward almost without meaning to, summoned forward by the rising church. With its heavy stone and tall wooden doors, it looked, he thought, like something out of a movie, or the games he played late at night, with the earphones cranked up loud over the sounds of his parents' fighting.

"Marcus?"

One of the girls called out to him—Angie, his ex-girlfriend—and at the sound of her voice, Marcus realized suddenly just how far he was from the group under the umbrella. He stood now just a few paces from the cracked church foundation, a long rectangle of stone and dirt shielded from the rain by St. Mary's itself, which hovered about a meter above Marcus's head. It was so close, nearly within arm's reach, and automatically, Marcus, dropped his basketball kit and stepped towards it. As though preparing to make a jump shot, he bent his knees and leapt with his arms held high, grabbing onto a stone ledge at the base of the entrance. He had not given the jump much thought before making it, but once he was dangling in the air, he held on, blinking away raindrops as they fell into his eyes. St. Mary's rose evenly, the nave and apse balanced on the empty air, and he rose with it, feeling his weight in the muscles, his feet dangling. His arms hurt, his face was wet, but he could feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins, as he rose farther and farther off the sidewalk. He felt incredible—better than when he'd first kissed Angie, than when he'd made the winning shot in last night's game against Haringey, better than he'd felt in weeks.

"Marcus!"

Angie's voice startled him, and he lost his grip on the ledge, landing clumsily back on the wet pavement. He grabbed his basketball kit from the spot where he'd dropped it and hoisted the bag, damp from the rain, onto his shoulder. A knot of jackets and umbrellas had formed at the edge of the church yard as St. Mary's rose higher and higher, but rather than retreat to the bubble umbrella to stand and watch, Marcus turned away and walked towards the Tube stop.

The police arrived a few minutes later; one of Angie's friends had called them from her mobile. This time, there was a precedent, and before long, the foundation was cordoned off, a team of specialists called in to track the church's movements. Television and newspaper reporters arrived with their smart black umbrellas and air of urgency. The deacon, who had stepped out for a sandwich from the takeaway down the road, returned, and after confirming that he had been the only one in the church that afternoon, took to pacing back and forth futilely. Through it all, St. Mary's rose serenely, all Gothic arches and leaded windows and gray stone parapets against the rain.

#

Later that night in East Ham, two mosques and a Hindu temple broke off from a block of storefronts. The rain had stopped, but the pavement was wet under the streetlights as a band of air opened up beneath Sri Mahalakshmi's pale blue facade and grimy white plasterwork. A pair of shoes fell from the open shelf next to the door with two soft thumps, shoes that must have been left behind by someone who had gone to pray that evening.

Over the next few hours, the three buildings floated higher and higher, leaving toothy gaps between a travel agency, a Halal butcher, and an Indian restaurant, where earlier that evening, two men had sat eating channa curry off of dinged metal plates. It was the older of these men who called the police with the news that the temple and the two mosques were flying. The man's name was Rashid, and he owned a jewelry store one block north of the mosques, just around the corner from Sri Mahalakshmi and its white plasterwork. He lived above the store and had walked past the mosques thousands, if not ten thousand times in the twelve years he had lived in the neighborhood. He knew the row of small domes and the green trim of the Razvi Jamia Islamic Center as well as he knew the layout of the cases in the jewelry store. He knew the more modest brick facade of Anjuman-e-Islamia Mosque even better: he prayed there every morning before opening his store and every evening after closing. To see them both now, rising like smoke from an incense burner, troubled him. At the age of fifty-three, Rashid had become used to certain things: strong, sweet coffee and stacks of invoices beside a red leather ledgerbook, the soft skin of his wife's hands and feet and his daughter's laugh over the phone. Not flying mosques and temples, floating away into the night.

#

All the next morning, the police were busy with calls. At first, they seemed to cluster around the places where the first few had taken flight: the Quaker Meeting House a two-minute walk from St. Mary's, with its bright blue door, and Adath Yisroel synagogue, just next door to Marcus's house on Grazebrook Road. In East Ham, a Sikh temple and Christadelphian ecclesia followed the mosques and the Hindu temple. The

Parish Church of St. Leonard, around the corner from the first synagogue, rose off its corner lot during the morning rush hour, drifting over a double decker on the main road.

During first-block biology, Marcus sat in the back row, scrolling through the headlines on his phone as the teacher projected detailed diagrams of the gastrointestinal system. After he had returned home the night before, he'd shoveled down oven chips and baked chicken, dodging his mother's questions about Angie—he still hadn't told her they'd broken up. He was in his room by the time his dad got home from the hospital and the doors downstairs started slamming.

Stretched out on his bed, Marcus had read news articles about the flying church that said the same thing over and over again. He had logged into the game he was playing to check on his character, but as soon as one of his teammates opened the chat, he logged off, then closed his laptop. Lying on his bed in the dark, Marcus had remembered the rain on his face and the strain of his muscles as he had hung onto the stone ledge. What would have happened if he had not let go, had hoisted himself up onto one of the church's pillars and clung on as it drifted slowly over London? He had fallen asleep in his clothes and woken up at three in the morning with foul breath, ducking into the bathroom to brush his teeth before tumbling back into his tousled sheets. Now, Marcus scuffed his Air Jordans across the linoleum floor of the classroom, earthbound in school as St. Mary's continued to climb up and up.

#

By lunchtime, the news had already started coming in from other cities: Manchester, Durham, Edinburgh, Cardiff. In York, the Minster had gone up at half past

ten in the morning with a tour group inside, and the visitors had to be evacuated via helicopter at the South Transept. An old Spanish woman, who had been visiting the cathedral with her niece, claimed in an interview that she had seen a pair of angels through the rose window, and a retired American couple who had been visiting York from Cleveland described the event as “an act of Jesus.” The clergy who had gone up in the Minster declined to comment, but privately, they admitted to one another that they were not quite sure what to think.

Why had it begun in London? People wondered over their takeaway lunches. Was it something to do with the currents, the wind? The new coalition government? The magnetic poles? Some argued it was simply a matter of probability: the sheer density of religions packed into the City and its thirty-two boroughs meant that there were churches and temples everywhere. Even as the news came in from the rest of the U.K., more and more of London’s temples and churches were floating upwards, leaving empty foundations in their wake.

By Saturday, there were other things to wonder about, as four time zones to the west, the Catedral Basilica in Salta, Argentina rose from the ground, a glorious confection of pink stucco and blue-tiled domes. As the first church to fly outside of the U.K., the Catedral was broadcast on news stations internationally, but in a matter of hours, it had been joined by dozens, then hundreds of others. After the evening’s prayers, the Sultan of Brunei stood by as his beautiful white-and-gold mosque hovered over the river, and in the mountain town of Carbondale, Colorado, the Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist Church floated up above the red dirt trails leading to Mushroom Rock

Lookout. As the reports came in from New Zealand, Dakar, and Nova Scotia, it became clear that this was far from an isolated phenomenon, that the matter of the flying churches, temples, and mosques was one for the world and all its peoples.

St. Peter's Basilica did not fly until midway through the next week. After a series of emergency meetings, the Vatican had quietly removed some of the more priceless relics, and the Pope had taken up residence in an entirely secular villa overlooking the city, from which he issued regular messages to the faithful. The official position of the Catholic Church was that the flight of the houses of worship was God's will, and that He was gracious in all of his workings. The scientific community searched for more concrete answers, but for all their statistical surveys and complex formulas, there was not much to find. Air currents were measured at normal rates in key areas, and seismic activity showed no significant shifts.

#

As much as possible, Rashid tried to ignore all of it. His mosque had returned to its place next to the travel agency just two days after its first flight, and he began to work in extra trips when he would have normally prayed at home, locking the doors to the jewelry shop at lunchtime and turning the little sign that read "Will Return Shortly." Often, he returned to find his wife's friends arrayed about the front room of the apartment, comparing news reports: the Great Mosque of Sana'a had nearly reached the Saudi border; a man had been found sleeping on the pews in St. Paul's, hoping to be taken up. When she tried to bring it up in the evenings as they sat over plates of red lentils and rice, Rashid changed the subject, the same way he did when his wife asked

about a new sofa, or a trip to visit their daughter in Chicago, their daughter who called one evening to describe the way the University Church had risen over the library early that morning as she made her way to the lab.

“You should have seen it, baba,” she said, her bright eyes over the webcam reminding Rashid of trips to the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, where she had leaned in close to the cases and read every placard aloud. They had guessed even then that she would be a scientist, but what they had not guessed was how far science would take her from them, on planes that flew faster and higher than the churches that appeared, now and then, floating outside the apartment window, dark shapes in the dark sky.

#

One Thursday about a month after the synagogue first left the ground, Vanessa caught an earlier bus than usual and arrived at Prentis Road with time to spare before her shift. The synagogue had flown off and on over the course of the previous weeks, but today it was grounded, and Vanessa turned left at the concrete path and climbed the stairs to the central door. Inside the air was still, the only sound the clack of her sensible shoes across the wood flooring. The doors to the fellowship hall were open, and at the front of the room was a kind of cabinet set back into the wall, with birds and golden branches and within, the heavy scrolls of the torah with their embroidered fabric covers. Vanessa had been in synagogues before—once, for the wedding of a friend from university, and another time, for a service held in honor of a rabbi she was nursing in hospice. Yet there was something different about being there alone, and Vanessa felt a wave of calm



emanating from the plain wood benches and plush carpet. For fifteen minutes, she sat in the fellowship hall, then stood, with a start, at the sound of voices outside. Through the double doors, two women holding yoga mats stood by the staircase.

“Here for the class?” one asked, and when Vanessa shook her head, she handed her a flyer, handwriting photocopied onto bright green paper. “Maybe we’ll see you next week,” the other woman said, and though Vanessa was noncommittal, when the next Thursday came, she found herself packing her bag an hour early, filling an old water bottle, changing into stretch pants that she hadn’t worn since before her mother fell ill and there’d been no more time for exercise.

As the summer continued, Vanessa went every week to the yoga class at the synagogue, letting the calm voice of the teacher guide her through a series of poses that she practiced in the afternoons in the tiny garden at the back of her flat. At first, she caught herself holding her breath as she struggled to keep her arms and legs steady, but then, she learned to breathe deeply, in and out with the teacher’s counting. Sometimes, at the end of class, after the final stretches, she felt something in her bob upward, and remembered the way the synagogue had risen into the dawn.

#

It was then, just as the people became accustomed to the sight of steeples soaring over power lines, or a monastery grazing the tops of the trees, that the landings began, more and more frequent as summer turned to fall, and London’s parks turned from green to yellow-orange. Of course, there was speculation. Had it been a seasonal phenomenon,

an act of God, a portent, a fluke? The only certainty was that the mosques and temples now drifted earthward, settling back into town squares, dense jungles, and city blocks.

As fall became winter and winter became spring, the people thought less and less of minarets and vaulted ceilings, onion domes rising amongst the clouds. The Pope returned to the Vatican, and in London, the churches, mosques, synagogues, and cathedrals were still as black cabs rattled past. New stories were absorbed into the tour guides' repertoires, religious scholars published their latest papers, and the world went about its business much as it had before. Still, there were moments: one afternoon, on the way to meet his new girlfriend after basketball practice, Marcus stepped off an escalator in the Tube and for split second, felt himself continue to drift upward. During a break in the nurse's lounge, Vanessa put on the kettle, then stretched her arms wide, feeling the ache in her new muscles as she looked out the window at the synagogue roof. And on a winter morning after prayers, Rashid pressed a hand against a wall of the mosque, savoring the cool of the stone against his palm as he remembered the look on his wife's face when he had presented the envelope with the airline tickets marked Chicago O'Hare.

What to call it, this phenomenon of flying churches? A temporary departure from the laws of physics, a mass delusion—or something else, something altogether more miraculous. As the years passed, some forgot how the churches had flown, but those who remembered, remembered not just stained glass floating against the London skyline, gray roofs inside gray clouds. Those who remembered, remembered a way of seeing each heavy stone of St. Mary's, each plaster scroll of Sri Mahalakshmi, each fiber of the worn

carpet of the synagogue on Prentis Road. The light catching on a passing cab, strong arms reaching for a basketball, the ripples in a teacup, the pale blue of the evening sky.

## THE CURE

After the photograph “Hydrotherapie, Friedrichsbad, Baden Baden, Germany”  
from Lucinda Devlin’s series *Water Rites*

When we first entered the soaking chamber, we drew back at the sight of those awful hoses, the many knobs. We had imagined a still pond, a shallow pool, something altogether more inviting. What we found was stark tile, a fleet of doctors all in white. Perhaps we should have known; there is something wrong with each of us. The waters are the cure, and cures are not always pleasant.

#

We soak two hours in the morning and two after lunch, gazing up at the cathedral ceiling as our limbs grow heavy, sodden. We are rich and poor, beautiful and homely: lithe Baroness Aurelie, with her jewels and her temper; frail Clothilde, who has come on the nuns’ charity; sweet Frieda from the mountains, in her fine embroidered frock. We are, all of us, of childbearing age, and yet we have failed to bear what is expected. So we soak, and after, we go to the mirrors that hang in our bare rooms, where we study our own faces.

#

Change is slow, but when it comes, we see it. Ears, lips, noses—the parts of ourselves that we once learned to recognize. They erode slowly, washed smooth by the

water, so that we seem to blend together. The doctors mistake our names: Aurelie for Clothilde, Clothilde for Frieda.

#

The water, they tell us, is not for drinking, but we sneak tastes. If this is what it can do to the outsides of us, what will happen when we take it in? At first we recoil at the taste of iron and sulfur, but in time, we long for the bitter weight of metal on our tongues.

#

After dark, we steal back to the tubs and twist the knobs ourselves, watching as our new reflections ripple. We drink long and deep from the taps, and inside, we feel a stirring. Sediments accrue to chalky surfaces, surfaces we can't see, but feel with senses we didn't know we had until we came here. Our bellies swell with something harder, heavier than flesh, and the doctors whisper. They do not know what comes next.

#

The babies are dense and pewter-colored, their features sharp, distinct. They do not cry, but we hold them to our smooth breasts and wait patiently. In the morning, we wail as the doctors uncurl our fingers from the babies' mineral wrists. We lie in our spare white rooms and taste the iron in our tears, until the doctors take us by the hand and lead us back to the tubs again.

#

We have come to take the waters, but in the end, it is they that do the taking. This is the cure: when the doctors turn their backs, we sink low, under the water. We dissolve like powder, like sugar, like salt.

## HOW TO GET TO DREAMLAND

I am in line at the post office when I see the notice on the back of an informational brochure provided by the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority. “Effective March 1, 2016, transfers will include unlimited travel within the system for two hours—transfers are not valid for out-of-state fares, the AirLink to T.F. Green, or the #17 to Dreamland.”

At first, I think it must be something else: a park or day care center with a fanciful name, one of the gentleman’s clubs on the west side of the highway. But when I pull out my phone and Google “dreamland providence,” all that comes up is a barbecue restaurant and an old review of the movie *Dreamgirls*. I try Google Maps. Nothing there either.

On the bus map, it’s a black dot like all the others, tucked into the crease of the pamphlet just south of Bradley Hospital. When I get to the front of the line, I ask the woman behind the counter.

She slips my stamps into a translucent envelope and shakes her head.  
“Dreamland? Never heard of it.”

#

The reason I am interested in Dreamland has to do with my girlfriend Jen, who isn’t sleeping well, hasn’t been for months now, since we moved to Providence late last summer, showing up with cardboard boxes and potted plants stuffed in every corner of my old station wagon.

I had found us a place on Summit Ave., the attic of one of those tall clapboard houses with dormer windows and neighbors who grew succulents on their sills. In our relationship, I am the one who finds things: new apartments, car keys, the best possible combination of bus times. It is Jen's job to introduce a level of spontaneity into our lives: surprises; changes of plans; our cat, Noah, who she rescued from behind the dumpster of the parking lot at the Ann Arbor library. I am the plant-waterer; she is the reason we don't eat the same thing for dinner every night.

I cross-checked the list of boxes as the movers hefted the mattress up the narrow staircase, and Jen directed them into the bedroom. We unpacked and cleaned until our shirts stuck with sweat and then lay on the newly mopped kitchen floor, savoring the hard cool of the tiles. This was our third kitchen floor in twice as many years, and in the twilight, I think we both hoped that it would be a good one.

"Hey." Jen rolled over, grinning.

"Hey." I grinned back. The soreness of driving and moving and cleaning had already begun to set in, but I decided not to care. She rolled toward me, and then it was lips on lips and breasts on breasts and sweaty shirts cast aside and part of me wished we had found the box with the sheets, but another part thought that this was better, that this was the right way to start here, on the kitchen floor with a damp mop parked against the refrigerator.

Later, when the bed was made, I fell into a deep, ammonia-scented sleep as the light of the streetlights shone through the dormer windows. When I woke up, I found her

in the living room arranging books on shelves: my math textbooks, her poetry and old copies of *Ms*.

“Up already?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t sleep.”

The first few nights, it seemed normal: new apartment, new sounds, new headlights from cars making their way toward the highway. But then it was two weeks in, three weeks in, and the shadows under her eyes became bags, purple-gray and heavy.

#

The night after my trip to the post office, I find a page on Reddit called QUESTS. Although there are other ways to get to Dreamland—SirLanceofCranston suggests horseback—DreamLord33 advises that the fastest way is by bus. Apparently, we are fortunate in our choice of residence; most major metropolitan areas do not provide public transit to Dreamland, but in the early 2000s the Rhode Island State Committee on Municipal Funding voted to renew the route through 2020.

Jen is making tea when I print out DreamLord’s directions: board the number seventeen, hand the bus driver exact change, bring a sleep mask. I wonder if I should tell her where I’m going, invite her to come along. But when she comes back into the room with a mug, I say nothing. It’s a long shot, that’s what I tell myself. I don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up. As for DreamLord33, he’s vague about what happens after the bus ride. I’ve read other places that there’s not much point in planning your trip—that like dreams, Dreamland has a way of taking you places you aren’t expecting.



The next morning, while she's in the shower, I take Jen's sleep mask and stuff it into my bag. I ride my bike down to the bus depot, past East Side Pockets and over the bridge. I count out my change, then take a seat in the far back, slip on the mask, and let the sound of the engine lull me.

#

We bought our mattress the year that we moved in together—\$776, with tax, what I called “an investment.”

According to the description on the manufacturer's website, the Eden Pillowtop provides moderate support that contours to the body to relieve pressure points. After my old twin bed, a queen was pure luxury, a paradise of bio-based foams. We relished it, nestling in on weekend mornings, my tousled head in the crook of her shoulder, cushioned by natural-content latex. After nights out, we talked until we fell asleep, hands intertwined in the space between our pillows. At first, there was only flatness, but as the nights passed, the pressure of our thighs and hips left dimples in the pillowtop, a topographical map formed eight hours at a time.

The day that it was delivered, Jen had sworn never to work in bed, and I had laughed, thinking of the many nights I had come home from a late class to find her arrayed amidst pillows and books. Yet she was true to her word, sitting instead at her thrift store desk with the brass drawer pulls, elbows propped over stacks of articles. I delivered cups of coffee and bowls of pistachio ice cream, retreated to the couch and then the bed. There were times, leading up to her comps, when she worked until two or three, but even then, I never woke up without finding her, finally, asleep beside me.

The fall after we moved, I grew used to her toss and turn, come and go, used to waking up at four or five to see the light from her desk lamp filtering into the hallway.

#

When the bus sighs to a stop, I wake up and slip off the sleep mask. There are only two other remaining passengers: an old woman with an armful of tattered shopping bags and a little boy who tags along behind her, rubbing sleep from his eyes. I follow them off the bus into a crumbling parking lot, where weeds sprout knee high from cracks in the pavement. There's one car—a dirty-blue VW bus with lacy curtains—and the old woman climbs into the driver's seat. By the time I have stowed my sleep mask in my backpack, they are driving away, and I read the vanity plate: DREAM3R.

#

A few days after we moved in, we found a bakery around the corner from our apartment. It smelled of coffee and cardamom, warm loaves and glossy pastries displayed in baskets and on plates. The woman behind the counter asked if we were new the neighborhood, and I took in her hair, chopped short, the tattoo that peeked out under the edge of her flour-dusted button-down. I nodded, and Jen slipped an arm around my waist as we ordered. The woman took Jen's card, completed the little dance of pen caps and signatures, filled two steaming mugs. For a moment, the counter was full of hands: Jen's, pale and slender; the woman's, strong from kneading bread; and mine, reaching for the pastries we ate in deep, cozy chairs at a spot next to the bakery window.

By the time the semester began, it had become our regular table. We sat and marked papers on Sunday mornings: our church of croissants and rubrics, Jen's favorite

green pens and my grade book, slices of quiche with flaky crust and roasted red peppers.

The sun shone warm through the plate glass windows, a bright spot in days that stretched longer and longer into the dark hours.

By late October, Jen was sleeping less than five hours most nights, and she'd lost weight in spite of the baked goods. She had started drinking more coffee too, iced at first, and then, as fall arrived, hot and steaming in the bakery's wide bowl-mugs. I had always been grateful to be a good sleeper: teaching high school meant early wake-ups, so I rarely had trouble falling asleep, something that now seemed almost disloyal. I knew I shouldn't feel guilty for sleeping, but in our home, rest was becoming a rare thing, and it sometimes seemed like I was hoarding it.

At school, I Googled during my planning periods. Risk factors for insomnia included stress, old age, a history of mental health disorders, working late night shifts, and travel through different time zones. Technically, only the first applied, but apparently that was enough, and I scrolled down to the list of treatments: drugs, therapy, something called "sleep hygiene."

One Sunday, I broached the subject over our usual bakery table. Back in Michigan, Jen had been seeing someone once a week, a PhD. in Psychology who we had called Dr. Ellie, for the collection of elephant art displayed behind her desk.

"Have you thought about looking for someone around here?" I tried to keep my tone light, turning to watch the mother at the next table feed her little boy a bite of cinnamon roll.

Jen sighed, took a sip of coffee. “You know how picky I am,” she said—an old joke, though neither of us smiled. “There’s hardly been time.”

“I know.” I shrugged and tapped my pen to the homework I was correcting: *If  $AB$  and  $CD$  are opposite sides in a parallelogram...*

“I’ll look.” Jen said, and I nodded in acknowledgement. “Here.” She held out her plate, with the last bites of her scone, cranberry pecan with flecks of cornmeal. “You want this?”

#

I know from DreamLord’s directions that the entrance to Dreamland proper is through the greenhouse at the edge of the parking lot, a fogged glass structure that looks like it’s seen better days.

There must be a gardener, but I don’t see anyone, and as I wander farther on, the plants grow wilder, vines snaking out across the floor. From the outside, the building had looked modest, but now the aisle stretches out of sight, plants as far as I can see: thick leathery leaves and pungent flowers, damp moss and orchids standing tall.

Amidst the disorder, I begin to notice signs, handwritten labels: a plaque on the edge of a bed of lilies that reads “first love,” a table of sprouting fiddleheads with a sticker that just says “flying.” There’s “reincarnation”—a pond filled with lily pads—“weddings”—long stems of Queen Anne’s lace. Could it be as simple as this? Pick a bouquet of dreams and bring them back to Jen, put them in a vase on the kitchen table? How would I choose which to include? How many could I carry?

#

Over the Thanksgiving break, we combed through the lists of doctors: sleep specialists and psychologists and M.D.s, looking for someone who could get her in, someone who took her insurance. She settled on a Dr. Pedda, a tall woman with a calming voice, who gave her a book called *Quiet Your Mind and Get to Sleep*, then wrote her a prescription for sleeping pills. On the forms that went to the insurance company, Dr. Pedda wrote “adjustment disorder.” I didn’t say it, but I was wondering how long this adjustment would last.

We had moved across five states for Jen’s new job: tenure track, the holy grail, and I had hoped there would be more time here—for long hikes and going to the movies; maybe, I had thought, for picking out rings, planning the wedding we had begun to talk about back in Ann Arbor. Yet now that time had metamorphosed into something else, the ticking of the clock on the bedside table, the constant tally of slept and unslept hours in Jen’s sleep journal—another assignment from Dr. Pedda and her books.

A whole pill made her groggy, so Jen cut them in half with the biggest knife in the house, the one we used for dicing sweet potatoes. The pieces skittered across the cutting board like mice, and she caught them up, swallowed them. With the pills, Jen slept more, but she didn’t like the side effects: grogginess, a feeling of dependency. Dr. Pedda encouraged her to use them sparingly.

“Coming to bed?” I would ask, slipping books into my bag for the next morning, when I would stand at the front of my classroom, teaching fifteen-year-olds the difference between oblique and acute. Jen would nod absentmindedly from the couch, where she was typing: her latest conference proposal, e-mails, Noah curled at her side.

“Soon.”

“I read that a regular bedtime is—”

She cut me off. “I know. I’m coming.”

I had also read that insomnia caused irritability—no surprise, but still, not the sort of thing that was easy to live with.

It was hard to say whether I preferred the nights when she would lay down next to me, shifting from side to side in her sleeplessness to those when she stayed on the couch until all hours, leaving me to lie back on the Eden Pillowtop as my head swam back to the textbook, the chapter we’d cover the next day. If and only if. QED. By the No Choice Theorem, when two angles of one triangle are congruent to two angles of a second triangle, the third angles must be congruent.

#

As I walk on, the plants grow drabber, with fewer flowers: “taxes,” “train rides,” “unemployment.” A gray-green cactus with a tag that reads “sisyphean tasks.”

I know the nightmares as soon as I see them: wide, pungent blooms; protuberant growths; dark leaves with strange origami shapes; something that looks like a Venus Flytrap. There are labels here too: “broken bones,” “break-ups,” “nuclear war,” “death by drowning.” I walk more quickly now, afraid to brush against the leaves. After several minutes, the foliage begins to thin, receding back into orderly tables of seedlings, past which I can see a heavy wooden desk with brass drawer-pulls, a sign that reads: VISITORS—SIGN IN HERE.

Behind the desk sits a curly-horned ram in a blue striped necktie, wire-rimmed glasses glinting over his close-set black eyes. He's sifting through a stack of papers, but as I approach, he looks up, and utters a kind of throat-clearing bleat, nudges the glasses higher with one cloven hoof.

"Welcome to Dreamland," the ram says. "What is the purpose of your trip?"

I haven't been expecting this question, but I find that I have an answer prepared, somewhere in the back of my mind, an answer that I've been preparing since I found the pamphlet in the post office.

"I need to get my girlfriend's dreams back."

#

Over the holidays things got better. At her parents' house in New Hampshire, Jen slept more than twelve hours on two consecutive nights, even in spite of rambunctious nieces and nephews clamoring to bring Aunt Jennie a plate of pancakes. When we returned to our apartment a few days after Christmas, her sleep stayed fairly consistent: seven, eight, and even nine hours without waking, more than she'd gotten in weeks.

Jen's mom had sent us home with a Tupperware full of cookies and a jigsaw puzzle of the constellations, one of Jen's old favorites. We spread it out on the kitchen table, and she fit pieces together as I separated the edges from the middles. Jen was less irritable, more relaxed, and I drank it in, wondering if maybe it had just been a stressful semester, if things were looking up.

As Jen napped on the afternoon of New Year's Day, I searched my email for an old message she had sent me: a picture of a ring she had found almost a year ago, no text

except for a smiley face in the subject line. I logged into my bank account, checked my balance, subtracted the cost of the ring. Two years before, I had paid off the last of my student loans, and since then, I'd been saving for the ring, the wedding, maybe a house or a kid someday.

"Babe?" Jen's voice called from the bedroom, and I clicked out of my inbox quickly. I could tell from the tone of her voice what she was thinking, and I made my way into the bedroom, slipped off my shoes, and slid in next to her, reaching.

#

Before I can leave the greenhouse, the ram makes me fill out Form 22-31 B: QUESTS and sign a waiver which states that the Queen of Dreamland and her associates are not responsible for any loss or damages.

I scan the fine print and sign my name. "Who's the Queen of Dreamland?"

The ram issues a loud baa of a laugh. "I should think that will become obvious." With a hoof, he takes my clipboard and adds it to a large pile that teeters dangerously on the corner of the desk.

"Go on," he says, nodding to a door that I've only just noticed. I step through.

#

Barely two weeks into the new semester, Jen's insomnia was back. More and more, I woke to signs of her nocturnal movements: books arrayed across the couch, glasses of water dotting the side tables. By the week of Valentine's Day, we were back where we had left off before Christmas: me making dinner while she sat in a stupor,



staring at a single page of a book; pausing in the middle of television show so she could cry, and I could sit, rubbing her back in circles.

One night, we were doing dishes when Jen dropped a glass. It shattered and she swore, sank to her knees, her hands dangerously close to the shards spilling across the tile.

I darted for the dustpan and brush. “I’ve got it, babe. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t touch that.” She stood, jerking the dustpan from my hand, bending again to sweep up the shards of glass that had scattered everywhere. “I fuck something up, and I’m going to fix it.”

I took a breath and leaned into the sink where a strand of spaghetti, a chunk of tomato, and a few wisps of kale sat waterlogged in the drain. Jen didn’t get angry over things like this, not before. Back in Michigan, when a kid threw a baseball through our apartment window, she had laughed for ten minutes.

“Just stand there and watch me clean up. Perfect.”

I knew she was baiting me. “You just told me that you didn’t want help.”

“Help, help, help.” Her voice went high and whining. “I’m the only one who ever needs help around here. You, you’re just taking care of poor Jen. Jen, who’s so unstable.”

“I’m don’t think you’re unstable,” I said, and she laughed bitterly, tossing the remains of the glass into the trashcan.

“Babe, c’mon.”

“Stop it.”

“What?”

She stomped to the bathroom while I finished the dishes, running hot water until my hands turned red. We were no good at fighting—not enough practice, even after seven years.

#

When I was in my early teens, I went through a fantasy phase, so I know enough about quests to predict that things will only get weirder. Sure enough, when I pass through the door, I am outside again, at the top of a gently sloping valley, white with what I think, at first, must be snow. Since I entered the greenhouse, a fog has rolled in, and I take a few experimental steps before I realize that this valley is not a valley. It's a mattress that stretches at least a mile out, and the white is a fitted sheet, impossibly seamless.

I bounce slightly with each step. It's slow going. There are enough hills between home and school that my biking has kept me in good shape, but even so, my calves are aching before a half an hour is up, and I stop to catch my breath, take a drink from the bottle of water in my backpack. At the base of the valley, I lie down, and I'm tempted to just stay here, catch up on all the sleep I have missed in Jen's tossings and turnings.

#

One day in early March, I arrived home late after a faculty meeting. It had been days since either of us had gone grocery shopping, and when I asked about dinner, she looked at me blankly. She was sitting on the couch in the dark, watching the news, muted. On the screen, a man in a red tie was gesturing officiously. I knew she hadn't slept the night before, or the night before that, not really—but in that moment, I didn't

care how she felt. I was tired, suddenly, of thinking about how many sleeping pills she'd taken and how many hours she'd slept, and I wanted to scream, but I didn't. Instead, I put my coat back on and walked out the door and drove across the city to a diner, where I turned off my cellphone and ordered a corned beef reuben with crinkle-cut fries.

That night when I got home, Jen was lying in bed with the lights off.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No, I'm sorry."

And I was, and I knew she was, but that didn't help because this was what we both feared: that after twenty-nine years, sleep was a trick that her body had forgotten how to do, that someone, somewhere, had flipped a switch that could never be switched back. Our whole lives had become that bed: what happened here, what didn't. I lay down next to her on the Eden Pillowtop and nestled in, skimming a hand inside the edge of her pajamas.

She let me kiss her and I leaned in close, but then, I heard her exhale, and she sunk back into the pillow.

"I'm so tired," she whispered, and I rolled away, across our queen-sized expanse of bio-based foam, a headache starting in my temples.

#

When I finally climb the edge of the mattress-valley, I'm looking out across another parking lot. On one side, what looks like a bar promises BEST QUALITY BEER AND NIGHTMARES. On the other sprawls an old-school motel, with an enormous neon sign that reads THE QUEEN and a smaller addition: VACANCY.

I'm thirsty from my trek across the mattress, so I try the bar first and find the clientele is composed entirely of sheep, sleeping, with numbers pinned to their fleece like marathon runners. There's no sign of the nightmares, but the beer seems plentiful: half-empty glasses and bottles sit beside hooves.

There's an electric jukebox in the corner and lullabies play on rotation: rock-a-bye baby, don't say a word. The bartender, also ovine, doses on the counter, so I take matters into my own hands, filling a glass from one of the taps. When I am finished, I go back outside. It's time to meet this queen I've been hearing so much about.

#

The less Jen slept, the more I seemed to drift off, in my classroom during planning periods, on the bus on the days when it was too wet for bike riding. I started to wish that sleep were like a joint bank account, where my deposits could cover Jen's withdrawals. I would sign over my assets in the blink of eye, liquidate my savings to pay off her debts. I would be the primary sleepwinner, and when I negotiated my next raise, I would ask for more hours. I could be sleeping for two.

Jen stopped coming to the bakery, even on Sundays, so I went alone, skulking at a table in the back, avoiding eye contact with the lady baker. There were other coffee shops in Providence, sure, but this one was just around the corner, this one had the best quiche, excuses, excuses.

One weekend, I waited until she ducked into the back room to order my slice of lemon tea bread, but she was back by the time I hit the register.

“Your girlfriend doesn’t come in much anymore,” she fished. I only shrugged, handed her a five, stuffed the extra dollar in the tip jar.

“She’s really busy.” I reached for the cake, turned away from our old sunlit table. As I ate, I watched the baker chat with an older couple, a dad and his daughter, a college kid. She reached for a loaf at the top of the display and her sleeve shifted, offering me a glimpse of her tattoo: a sheaf of wheat on her bicep. I took another bite of cake, moist and tart, and thought about how the tattoo would look against clean sheets, how it would feel to run my hands over it. She seemed like the type of person who would have other tattoos too, out-of-sight ones that she kept to herself, that you could only see if you got close enough. She seemed like the type of person who would sleep soundly, exhausted from a long day of kneading and slicing and chitchat over the register, whose eyes would drift closed like ships out to sea.

#

Across the parking lot, at the motel, the office is locked, darkened. I wonder if Dreamland has always been neglected, or if, in our modern life of stimulants and blue-light screens, we have begun to sap its reserves, allowed it to fall into disrepair with no regard for the consequences. The Queen of Dreamland’s palace looks like a dingy Motel 6 with turrets.

When I try a door at random, it swings open, and though I had expected drab, motel furnishings, what I find is a familiar polka dot duvet and a smell like my mother’s macaroni. On the bed lies Lizzy the Elephant, and my seventh grade self-portrait hangs on the wall of what I see must be my childhood bedroom, transported from the outskirts

of Colorado Springs, the house my parents sold five years ago. I pick up a frame on the dresser, finger the row of softball trophies, then sit on the bed, hear the creak of the slats. After the hike and the beer, I could fall asleep here, but I heft myself up. I know there's more, the long motel hallway filled with doors, and I need to see what's behind them.

The answer? Beds—from the crib my parents bought at the yard sale down the street to the twin extra long in my freshman-year dorm room. They're arranged chronologically from the time of first sleeping: the hospital where I was born makes an appearance, bright white and antiseptic, all the way to the left, next to the motel office.

Before, I would never have considered the vast number of places I have slept: the tents, the couches in friends' apartments, the hostels in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile the winter I studied abroad. As I move from one to the next, the motel hallway seems to stretch, longer and longer: my first girlfriend's bedroom, which smells like chai lattes and Pantene; the bedroom of the girl who I left her for—charcoal pencils and fabric softener. And then, the Jen rooms: the first bed that we shared, a precarious twin, in the old house she shared with three other girls at the edge of campus. Our first apartment, with hideous wood paneling and a hand-me-down bed from Jen's aunt Suse. Our studio in Ann Arbor, with its snow-covered skylight, the Eden Pillowtop, still new. A hotel room that I recognize from our trip to Montreal; our berth on the train we took from Berlin to Munich; the bed and breakfast where we stayed in Colorado the summer that I broke my arm.

There is a part of me that is relieved to open the door on our current bedroom, that's been counting the doors, wondering how much farther it would take to get here. I

thought there might be something special in this room, a clue of what has brought me to Dreamland in the first place, but all I notice is the way the light from the dormer windows falls across the pillows. It looks nice, like a place you would never have trouble sleeping.

Back in the hallway, the rest of the doors are locked: the future. I think for a split second of the lady baker, and I wonder if her bed is here somewhere, if the rooms are already furnished, set out before me like squares in a graph paper notebook. I am struck by a desire to knock down the doors, looking for signs of Jen or not-Jen, some hint of what I should do now, when a door at the end of the hallway opens, and someone comes out.

#

By the time the school year was over, I was even more exhausted than usual, strung out in the final days of grading and graduation prep on sugar and stale coffee from the teacher's lounge. Jen's semester ended a few weeks earlier, but her sleep hadn't improved much, and Dr. Pedda was talking about experimenting with more intensive treatments.

Between the usual end-of-year events and my clandestine visits to the bakery, I was barely home, and when I looked ahead to the long expanse of summer vacation, my usual excitement was tempered. When we had moved, a year before, we had talked about a big trip—the west coast, maybe even Europe or Australia; I had imagined proposing at the top of a bluff overlooking the ocean, somewhere warm. Now, when I thought about traveling, all I pictured was the line in the Wikipedia article about the effect of time zone changes on insomnia. I started looking at solo hikes: a section of the Appalachian trail,

maybe, something to keep me busy with training and packing, something involving a single sleeping bag, a lightweight tent. On the day I found the brochure in the post office, I was planning to float the idea with Jen, see what she might say to me taking off for a few weeks without her.

But then I decided, first things first, one quest at a time, and I ended up here, at the Palace of the Queen of Dreamland.

#

The figure approaches from the end of the hall, and I see that it's Jen, Jen in a crown and cape, the Queen herself. Has she been here all along? I wonder. If she has, does that mean my quest has been for nothing?

"You found me," she says.

"I guess I did."

There's a long pause as I study Jen's face, which is different somehow, and then, I realize that this is how she looks well rested, the way that I haven't seen her now for months.

"What now?" I ask.

Jen laughs and gestures to the locked doors, the long hallway. "It's up to you."

Her face shifts and twists into someone else: the lady baker, who reaches out and takes my elbow, pulls me towards a locked room. I shake her off, and the Queen transforms again—this time, she's Dr. Pedda, in a white lab coat, offering me a bottle of sleeping pills. Then, Jen again, and I reach for her hand to keep her here.

"I came here for you," I say. "To get your dreams back."



“Thank you,” she says. “But that’s not how it works. I should think that would have become obvious.”

“That’s what the ram said.”

She laughed. “He knew what he was talking about.”

“I’ll see you at home?” she asks, and there’s a pause, long and silent. She disappears like a person in a dream, leaving her crown and her cape behind her.

#

I return to my childhood bedroom. I’m exhausted now, and I think that I’ll just nap here for a little while before I make my way back across the mattress, through the greenhouse, to the bus stop. But when I open the door, there’s a velvet rope, like in a theater or a museum, and a sign that reads FOR DISPLAY ONLY.

So I begin the trek back, which is shorter than I expected, so that before I know it, I’m coming through the back door of the greenhouse, nodding at the ram, whose is organizing his clipboards.

“How did it go?” he asks.

I shrug, and he laughs—his quick, loud baaa. There are more forms to sign, and as I hand him back the pen and clipboard, he clears his throat in another short bleat.

“The bus leaves at 4:08,” he says, gesturing to a clock on the wall, long hand approaching the 12. “If you hurry, you should be able to catch it.”

As I turn back through the greenhouse, I think of pausing, picking some choice blooms. Then, I remember the Queen of Dreamland’s words. “That’s not how it works.” How does it work, then?

Back on the bus, I pull the mask over my eyes and sleep soundly, waking up to the familiar sight of the bus stop outside the bakery, scrambling off as I rub sleep from my eyes. The sun is out again, warming the sidewalk as I walk the last blocks to the apartment: Hope to 4th to Bayard, up the steps to find Jen napping on the couch, Noah curled at her ankles.

She stirs when I come through the door. “You’re back.”

I kneel by the side of the couch and lean in for a kiss, sun-warmed, sweet with sleep.

My backpack drifts to the floor, and that’s when I remember. “I brought you something.” I take it out: the Queen of Dreamland’s crown. We watch as it fades from between my fingers.

## FAST FOOD ROMANCE

I've never liked the drive-through—trying to pull close enough to the window, counting out change, one hand on the wheel shouting into the speaker. Better to get out of the car and have a better chance of getting what you ask for, what you want.

But then, there are those times when what you ask for isn't what you want. Or what you wanted when you ordered isn't the same as what you really want when the lady with the vest and the nametag hands you the paper bag, already soaking through with grease. And those times, wouldn't you have been better off with the drive-through, with fate selecting you a fish-a-ma-jig, a double chalupa, and a large curly fry, extra spicy?

Or a gentleman caller with a side of aristocratic mannerisms—who would have thought they even had that sort of thing on the menu?—a bad boy with motorcycle, cigarettes, and special sauce; Cajun-style fisherman in a boat on the bayou. Have you tried the nerdy guy with glasses and a widow's peak, who comes with matchstick fries and a leather harness?

Did you see that sign on the downtown bus, with the picture of oozing cheese, oozing sex, just the right amount of stubble? That's how they get you to stop on the way home, to swipe right, to grab something hot and salty instead of just waiting until you get back to your refrigerator, the leafy greens in the crisper drawer, your husband making brown rice and watching the History Channel.

Your friend Devan says it's unethical, disgusting, so corporate. Haven't you seen that documentary? The heterosexual gastronomical economy, she says, makes her sick, and you nod sagely, agreeing. In the back of your mind, you're thinking about a one-night taco stand, chicken nuggets with honey mustard dirty talk, a side of onion rings that won't call you the next day.

## WHAT TO MAKE WITH PINE CONES

On Thursday, you lost your baby—not in the “and found” sense, but in the sense that she is gone, and there will be no finding. It is now Tuesday morning, and your mother is on the phone again, offering to fly in from California, dispensing family histories. “Your aunt Gloria miscarried three times before she had Howard,” she says. Say “mmhmm” into the phone as your husband washes the breakfast dishes.

Outside the library, there is a sign that reads “USED BOOK SALE.” Your mother keeps telling you to get back on your feet, get out of the house, find something to distract you. It will help, she says. You doubt it, but you have agreed to accompany your husband to the dry cleaners, where you will pick up the suit he was wearing when he arrived at the hospital, which will be clean and pressed.

The library is across the street from the dry cleaners. Since he is the sort of person who likes books, and you are trying, in spite of everything, to be the sort of person who likes him, agree to go in, “just for a few minutes.” Remind yourself, for the eight hundredth time: he is the one who painted the baby’s room Yellow Lotus. You are the one who assembled her in your body, cell by cell.

In the library conference room, watch him browse the boxes of biographies as you sidle past Self-Help, Women’s Studies, Parenting. In the Hobbies section, pick up a book at random: *What To Make With Pine Cones*, by Genevieve Ploquin. Flip through the pages of retro photographs, diagrams in orange and green: Berry Wall Hanging; The

Shepherd, His Dog, and His Sheep; A Small Garden. Put the book down, but before you leave, pick it up again. Buy the book for one dollar and fifty cents, the coins warm from your husband's pocket.

#

To make things with pine cones, you will need: scissors, ruler, pencil, wood glue, paints, wire, wire cutters or heavy shears

Also: an easily accessible conifer forest, a large paint brush for cleaning the cones, patience

#

In the woods behind your house, find pine cones by the dozens. Some are squat with hard points and wide bases, others are longer, greener, sticky with sap. *Don't limit yourself only to the most beautiful cones.* This is what the book tells you. *Use large, medium, and even some very tiny ones,* so you do, slowly filling a green plastic bucket.

In the doctor's office, there is a chart with pictures of each stage in the growth of an embryo. For the first few weeks, it is a cluster of cells. By four weeks, it becomes a fetus. At twelve weeks, the fetus is eight centimeters long. At eighteen weeks, they tell you. You're having a girl.

Make lists of names. Start buying baby clothes. Sleep on your left side. Count the weeks by twos: twenty-two, twenty-four, twenty-six, twenty-eight. Stop counting.

Instead, count pine cones while your husband works from home, hunched over his laptop in the breakfast nook. He's supposed to be keeping an eye on you, but you insist

that there's nothing for him to keep an eye on except the pine cones. Thirty-three in the green bucket: large, medium, and even some very tiny ones, as the book instructs.

#

Page 3: Before You Begin.

In books like this, it never says that if you're looking for lists, rules, books, directions, then it is already too late for you. Instead it says, "Before you begin...", unlike in life, when there is only "as you're beginning" or, more likely, "after you've begun," after you've already unintentionally skipped two or three crucial preparatory steps, accidentally glued the shepherd's hat to the sheep, forgotten to cast the charms, arrange the amulets that will protect you from misfortune.

Run the numbers: your boss has offered two weeks paid leave, and if you add your earned sick time as well as your remaining vacation hours, you'll never have to see Jill, who is due the same week you were. On the day after it happened, she dropped off an Edible Arrangement at the house. "Karmic insurance," you told your husband, who ate the woody pineapple over the kitchen sink. The chocolate-covered strawberries he saved for you on a plate in the fridge, where you let them bleed out, leaving juicy stains.

Although in the past, you and Jill discussed cribs and high chair options over the photocopier, now you fantasize about jabbing her with a melon-covered skewer, watching her flinch.

#

Look it up online, late one night after your husband falls asleep over the brief he is writing. Learn that the causes of stillbirth are often unknown, that only 1 in 200 women

miscarries after week twenty. Jill's baby's chances are good, with or without the Edible Arrangement.

New tab: there are both female and male pine cones. When we imagine a pine cone, what we are imagining is the female, with a tough woody body and geometrically cone-like shape. The male pine cone is typically smaller and more herbaceous; it produces pollen, while the female produces seeds, and together, the two types of cones constitute the reproductive structures of the conifer.

#

In the afternoon, drifting off on the couch, wonder who in the world writes a book about what to make with pine cones? The answer, of course, is on the cover: Genevieve Ploquin, author of *Painting on Stones* and *Cork Toys to Make*. Genevieve Ploquin, who is, no doubt, a brisk walker, an able craftswoman, and a person of great intellectual and emotional fortitude, who issues her instructions from a cottage on the edge of an easily accessible conifer forest somewhere *en France*.

In all the hours of baby name browsing, you never considered the name Genevieve, but there's a certain elegance to it, and although neither you nor your husband is French, you have been to France on your honeymoon, when you drank wine in outdoor cafes and strolled through museum galleries holding hands, transparently newlyweds. There is a picture of the two of you, his arms around your waist as you hold two ice creams: one chocolate, one a bright pink *framboise* just beginning to drip in the August heat. Ice cream cones, pine cones, rods and cones, the cone that they put around a dog's neck to keep him from licking his wounds.



Wake up to the sound of the clock in the hall striking three and nestle deeper into the couch, where you won't see, through the front window, the arrival of the school bus, the mothers waiting in their cars. Close your eyes instead, and see Genevieve, emerging from the forest with a smart feathered hat, a basket filled with acorns, pine cones, needles.

"It takes some time to get the hang of it," she says generously, and you both look down at your empty basket, a hospital blanket folded over the wicker ribs.

#

The next morning, choose your first project. *Beginners may want to start with this classic wreath, perfect for the Christmas season!*

Sigh. It's April, but it can't hurt to get ahead of schedule. Before, you weren't much of a crafter—more of a TV-watcher, a red-wine-drinker, never so handy as to own a gluestick that hadn't dried into a fossilized nub. But now, every show seems to involve a giggling pink newborn, and you can't drink wine at ten o'clock in the morning—your husband is worried enough.

Get in the car and drive to Michael's, a place you haven't been since tenth grade, when you made a diorama of Ophelia's death for Mrs. Enzo's English class, fake flowers arrayed around a shiny paper river, a clothespin with embroidery floss for hair.

It's about how you remember, the tile still that dull white-gray and above, the rainbow rows of fabric paint and the red "sale" signs. Consult your list. Ask the clerk to help you find the wire, the wood glue. In the \$1 bins by the checkout, fall victim to a set of rubber alphabet stamps, each one the size of your pinky nail. You never used to be the

type of woman who frequented strip malls in the middle of the day, but here you are, handing over your credit card, thanking the clerk when she offers to scan her coupon: 20% off.

Later, at the kitchen table, follow Genevieve's instructions carefully. Arrange, rearrange, attach the cones with wire. Leave the half-finished wreath out and make toast, spread thick with almond butter. Drop the knife on the floor. Wipe it up with a paper towel.

When your husband comes home, the wreath is lopsided but finished. Ask him what he thinks and wait as he squints at the wreath from behind his glasses. "I like it, honey. It looks good." He is a kind man, with the patience to make many things out of pine cones. You hate him as much as you hate Jill's Edible Arrangement, almost as much as you hate yourself.

#

On Ebay, there are 954 results for "pine cones." The first, which promises free shipping, includes 200 real SPRUCE PINE CONES 1-2 inches. Seven people are watching this item.

Genevieve, of course, encourages you to collect your own pine cones, but Genevieve, you think, does not know the pleasure of clicking a button and bringing a box to your door. It's 2015, for God's sake, and for U.S. \$9.75, those pine cones could be yours, traveling from Osage, Iowa to your carefully chosen, family-friendly neighborhood. They will tumble from the box, chattering, and you will offer them a drink: water, pine sap, warm milk. You will fill your arms and rock them against your

breast gently. You will escort them to a nursery filled with fragrant, needle-stuffed mattresses.

You click to buy, but “200 real SPRUCE PINE CONES 1-2 inches” has been claimed by another, more eager, shopper. Fuck that. You will gather your own pine cones, and Genevieve will be proud.

#

The more facts you learn about pine cones, the more silences you can fill. As your husband stirs the soup, report: the white pine cone and tassel is the state flower of Maine. The Pope’s staff is decorated with a pine cone, which was also a symbol of the Egyptian god Osiris. When he asks you when you’re coming to bed, tell him that in the Vatican, there is an enormous bronze pine cone fountain flanked by two Roman peacocks. Some say that the pine cone represents the “third eye,” a mystical concept referring to an invisible eye, which provides perception beyond ordinary sight. You don’t have to be a mystic to know that he is growing tired of pine cones, but you can’t stop, not when he looks at you with those eyes like a sad dog and asks how you are feeling.

#

Open the book to a new page. *It’s really easy to make owls from pine cones of all sizes! Why not make a collection?*

Ask yourself: why not? An owl for the windowsill next to your husband’s desk to start, another, smaller one to keep it company. Then an owl for the table in the hall, a big one, and two more, to balance it on each side. An owl for the breakfast nook after that, one or two or five for the bookshelves. Wrap one in tissue paper and send it to your

mother, priority mail with tracking. Make an owl for the bathroom counter next to the toothbrushes, an owl for the kitchen by the forks, an owl for the piano, an owl next to your pillow, looking out with construction paper eyes. *Follow drawing 7 to cut out 2 yellow eyes and 2 black pupils from construction paper. Use a few drops of glue to place the eyes on the edge of the scales.*

Owls everywhere, with their hard pine cone feathers and yellow irises, watching you while you lie on the couch with your eyes closed for whole afternoons, stare blankly at the shadows shifting on the ceiling. At night, as you lie in bed, not sleeping, you can hear them ruffling their feathers and hooting in the dark.

When you finally drift off, dream of waltzing with Genevieve, swirling across the packed ground of a needle-covered glen. Her arms are strong around your middle, and her steps are clear, decisive. There's no music, just the sound of hooting in the distance, and you wonder how to keep time. Genevieve must be counting steps, twenty-two, twenty-four, twenty-six, twenty-eight, because after a while she stops, panting, to turn the page of the forest. You look down and find that scales are growing over your calves, your forearms. They feel stiff and strong. Wake up and they are gone, your flesh soft and pink as ever.

#

When your house is so full of cones that they brim from bowls in the kitchen and baskets on the coffee table, when they roll underfoot as you brew your morning cup of tea, try eating one. Brush it carefully, as Genevieve recommends, and break off a single scale. Place it on your tongue like a lozenge and let it sit there. It doesn't melt, but it

releases an earthy, bitter taste that appeals to you. Hold it in your mouth for as long as you can bear and think of your husband.

At the offices of Beaton & Stites, he opens his briefcase and discovers three large female pine cones. For the rest of the morning, he keeps his door closed, makes no phone calls.

#

It's Thursday again, three weeks after that first Thursday, when you called your husband from the car as you drove yourself to the hospital. Decide that, today, you will lie in bed, contrary to the recommendations of your doctor, your mother, and your psychiatrist, who is very supportive of your pine cone crafts. A cockeyed owl watches as you reach for a pinecone on the bedside table and test its scales against the soft skin of your stomach. Press it harder, so that it leaves a mark.

Imagine Genevieve brushing you all over with a paintbrush, murmuring to you gently: *microsporophylls, microsporangia, megastrobilus*. The parts of a pinecone.

Remember how the night before, in the dark, your husband had whispered something about trying again, when you were ready, whenever you were ready, not until you were ready. Shift the pine cone lower. It hurts more than you thought it would.

Recite: A cone is an organ on plants in the division *Pinophyta*.

#

That afternoon, go to the bus stop and wait as the mothers and children disperse. Your daughter is the last one down the three steep steps to the pavement, and you smile to see her run her hand through her hair, just like her father.

When she hands you her lunchbox, take her hand. “How was your day, sweetie?”

Look closely. Notice her fingernails, ten pine cone scales pressed onto the ends of those perfect fingers. When you get home, kneel down to help her with her jacket and see two construction paper eyes, a black circle on a blue circle on a white circle and eyelashes like sprays of tiny pine needles.

Remember that you never had a daughter anyway, that this was the whole reason you started collecting pine cones, crawling on hands and knees. Remember the way that nurse in the hospital lay a hand on your shoulder, the way the mothers at the bus stop looked as you walked by. Remember the way you stood with your husband in front of the rows of paint chips, the hours you spent researching OB-GYNs, the date for the baby shower circled on the calendar.

Cry until you’re hoarse, until your husband gets home and sits with you on the living room floor, until he cries too and one of you has to get up to find a new box of tissues.

#

On the fourth Thursday, drink three glasses of red wine and decide that you’ve had enough of the goddamn pine cones. Carry the bowls and baskets into the backyard, sweep more pine cones into the dustpan and add them to the pile. Gather them up and feel the scales digging into your arms, catching against your faded t-shirt.

Hesitate over the book, but leave it inside, on the bookshelf next to the *Mayo Clinic Guide* and *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. Find the matches, an old newspaper.

It takes a long time to get a fire going, but once a few of the pine cones catch, the flames spread from one to the next: the large, medium, and even some very tiny ones. Breathe in oxygen, pine sap and char. Listen as they crackle. Step closer and feel the heat on your face, the smoke burning down your throat. Watch the embers growing. Scream into the night and wake the neighbors' children, with their warm, pink fingers and toes.

In the house, your husband gets up, bleary-eyed, and fills the green bucket with water from the tap, sloshing across the floor of the kitchen.

#

In the morning, go out to the backyard and see what remains, a burnt-up pine cone pyre. You're hungover and it feels like morning sickness, and your husband takes the day off from work, making you oatmeal that makes you feel even sicker, that makes you cry. Tell him you're sorry.

There's ash on your face and your fingers. Wash it away, making a stream of tears, a lake, a lagoon, an estuary. Snap at him when he tries to rub your back, then listen as he retreats into the living room and turns on the TV, the local news report, Moulton tops third quarter fundraising, Meteorologist visits 3rd grade in Rockland.

You've read online that forest fires provide a prime opportunity for new pine growth: cones open when it is warm and dry in order to release their seeds during the most favorable conditions for germination.

After a while, the TV shuts off. Emerge. Sit, gingerly, on the couch next to your husband.

#

One night, three weeks later, find a pine cone under the couch. Admire its thick, wide-spread scales. Take down the book and flip through, past the pages with the wreaths, the placecard holders, the owls, the picture frames. Then, close the book. Genevieve Ploquin might need a lampshade or a tiny cottage thatched with brown needles, but you don't. You don't need the shepherd, his sheep, or his dog. You need the pine cone itself, its spine and scales, *microsporophylls*, *microsporangia*, *megastrobilus*.

You need to go back to the paint store and try again: a new color, light green like new pine growth.



## THE THEME PARK OF WOMEN'S BODIES

Welcome to the Theme Park of Women's Bodies! I'm Tina, and I'll be your tour guide today as we explore the park, making stops at the Palace of Female Empowerment, the Kingdom of Sex and Sexuality, and one of our newest features, the Crossroads of Intersectional Identities. Before we begin, management requires me to cover a few ground rules: no running, no outside food and drink, and no unauthorized videorecording. Finally, we ask you to please remember that the park is a no-smoking facility and weapons of any kind are not permitted. I'll also take this opportunity to introduce my assistant, Andie. She's been at the park for just a few months now, but I can assure you, she's already an expert in women's bodies. Isn't that right, Andie?

First, the basics: the tour will take approximately one hour. We'll end right in front of the entrance to the Miracle of Life, one of our most popular rides, which allows guests to follow an ovum from the moment of conception through the various stages of development and finally, experience the birthing process through a state-of-the-art twenty-five-foot model of a woman's vagina!

Before we get going, I'd like to invite anyone who is visiting the park for the first time to raise their hands. We are always particularly excited to welcome new visitors, and today, Andie will be coming around with a very special souvenir for those of you who are new to the park. That's right! Andie is passing out a few of this month's limited-edition super-collectible top-of-the-line menstrual cups. In addition to being more

environmentally friendly than a sanitary pad or tampon each of these little guys—or should I say gals?—is painted with the face of a famous woman from history. Ooh, yes! Looks like you’ve got Georgia O’Keefe! Enjoy, folks, and remember, the full line of cups is available in our gift shop!

Any questions before we get started? Yes, okay! A gentleman near the front here was just asking how I became a tour guide here at the park. Well, I was a Women and Gender Studies major, and after graduating from college, I wanted to find a meaningful job where I could continue pursuing my interests. I applied to a few jobs in New York City, but then I saw a posting for this position, and I got lucky! It’s a real privilege to spend my time in such a place steeped in women’s history. No, sir, I am not a lesbian. I identify as bisexual, which you can learn more about over on the Ferris Wheel of Sexual Orientations. It’s a great ride for the whole family—there’s something about that rainbow bunting that makes people open up!

Let’s get this show on the road. Our first stop on the tour is the historic park entrance, constructed in 1977. Our founders, who envisioned the park as a monument to the feminist movement, commissioned an all-female team of architects to design this twenty-three-story breast. The nipple at the top was sculpted from one-hundred-percent Italian marble, and the areola, made of glass, is illuminated every night. As we pass through, make sure to take a look at the photos of our founders on display. These are the women we have to thank for this important landmark, although you may note that fashions have changed somewhat in the last forty or so years. Get a load of those haircuts!

Just inside the entrance here, you'll find some of the historic features of the park, including the famous Tower of Flaming Corsets and the Burning Bra, two of our most pyrotechnic features. Around the corner, you can just see the top of the Second Wave, one of the park's only water features—perfect for cooling off after a long day of sightseeing. I'm not supposed to tell you this, but skinny dipping in the Second Wave is a bit of a staff tradition! The first time I saw Andie, she was lounging nude next to the statue of Betty Friedan. Who could resist that combo, right?

Now, if you'll all gather around the Womanly Welcome Center, you can view a complete topiary model of the park as it appears from above. While we're here, I always like to do a few trivia questions. First, can anyone tell me the original name of the theme park? No, I'm afraid "Tittyville" is not the correct answer, sir. Any other guesses? Yes, you there, in the sunglasses. That's right! Until 1988, the Theme Park of Women's Bodies was officially called WomynWorld. Andie, let's get this woman a commemorative 40th anniversary zine! She knows her history!

Next question: where did Andie and I have our first kiss? Andie? C'mon, I know you remember. I guess I'll be the one to tell it, then: the park had just closed for the night and we were making our way past the Fountain of Lactation when she pulled me into one of the mammary glands and pinned me up against the wall. Wow-eee! Talk about a Theme Park of Women's Bodies! Yes, ma'am, this is the child-friendly tour. Of course, if you're not comfortable with the park content, you're free to go at any time.

Ah, well. There's a few prudes in every bunch, but it's nice to have a smaller group. More intimate.

Continuing on, you'll see to your right the entrance to one of our most beloved attractions, the Fun House of Positive Body Image. Check out your features in each of the distortion mirrors while practicing affirming mantras. Then, take some time to reflect in the Inner Beauty Yurt. We're passing over the River of Menses now, so make sure to admire the flow of blood and cellular debris that threads through this area of the park. For those of you in the mood for something a little different, I absolutely have to recommend a sunset gondola ride with one of our all-female team of gondoliers, several of whom were recruited from Venice. Andie can vouch for the fact that it's one of the most romantic areas of the park—can't you, Andie? That's where we had our fourth and final date, which ended when I came back from a trip to the ladies' room to find Andie hooking up with our oarswoman. Oh, that's right. You thought this might be some kind of happy-ever-after story? You're not at Disneyland, folks, although I am delighted to tell you that in the most recent survey by the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, we were ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the category of Independently Owned American Theme Parks! Truly an honor.

Everyone stand to the right for a moment, please. It looks like Officer Patty's making her way down toward the Pay Gap, so make sure to give her a wave! She's our Chief of In-Park Security and works tirelessly to make sure that each and every visitor leaves safe and happy. Oh, and it looks like she's coming over here! Hi, Patty! There's been a complaint? I was afraid of that. You know, some people just can't handle an honest dialogue about sex and gender. I know, it's a real shame. There's something else?

Great, okay. I'll plan to stop by the director's office as soon as I finish my tour. Sure thing. Thanks, Patty.

Sorry for that interruption! We'll start up again right here with the Glass Ceiling. This attraction, which was installed in the early 80's, offers a test of strength to any woman who wants to take a crack at it! Believe it or not, no one has ever managed to shatter the highest ceiling, but who knows? Maybe this will be the day! Before we move on, do you have any questions for me? Now, ma'am, don't you think that's a little personal? Well, if you insist, sure. Since that night on the gondola, Andie has slept with no fewer than five park employees. It hurts, sure, but at least I'll always have the memory of her performing cunnilingus as we rode the Hormonal Roller Coaster of Puberty. Oops! Looks like we lost a few more there! Oh well.

People often ask why there's no Theme Park of Men's Bodies, and while I can't answer that question for you, I can tell you that, in the U.S., women are almost five times more likely than men to be victims of sexual assault. What a number, right? You can learn more about that at our annual Haunted House, which includes the Dungeon of Date Rape, the Chamber of Genital Mutilation, and a whole host of other terrors! It's not easy to be a woman in this world, especially when you're betrayed by your co-tour-guide after a whirlwind summer romance.

No, that's fine. I'm not crying! It must be the mist that rises off the Cascades of Gender Fluidity—just water, nothing to worry about. I'm so thrilled to have you folks here today that I can almost forget the fact that this morning, I heard that Andie and Shelley from the snack bar are moving in together at the end of the summer! God! I'm

just so happy for them, aren't you? It really just fills me with empowerment to think about two such strong women living in the same house. The opportunities for menstrual synchrony are staggering!

No, Andie. I don't think it would be best if you finished the tour. I've got everything perfectly under control here. I may have been—What was it that you said? Clingy and pathetic? However, I am also the number-one-rated new tour guide according to customer service's surveying metrics, and you, it seems, can't even sleep your way past the assistant rank. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think we have a tour to complete.

Okay, folks! I want to make sure to get you to the Miracle of Life ride early, so let's get moving! On busy days, the lines here are so long, you'd think they were giving out signed first editions of *The Second Sex*. Now if you'll just follow Andie towards the entrance to the womb, she'll hand you your wristband and a special souvenir pin. Just make sure she doesn't stab you in the back with it!

The ride itself lasts about twenty minutes, and if you are triggered by blood, pain, or birth-related trauma, it's probably best if you meet your party at the end of this attraction. As for me? I'm off to the director's office, where I'll be losing my job and preparing for my own big move—back to my parents' basement, where I plan to study for the LSAT and drunk text Andie from the bar down the street. It'll be a blast!

If I've learned anything in the Theme Park of Women's Bodies, it's the importance of maintaining a healthy perspective. This time tomorrow, I may be sitting in my apartment eating Chunky Monkey, but thanks to the hard work and dedication of our foremothers, I'll still have property rights, birth control, and suffrage. And you—I hope

you'll all have memories of an entertaining and empowering day at America's 3rd Favorite Independently Owned Theme Park. Come back and visit again soon, and don't forget to vote for us in this year's IAAPA survey. Maybe next year, we'll be ranked #2!

## THE PIRATE GIRL

The pirate girl has no eye patch, but she ties a bandana at her neck and wears flowing white shirts with faded cut-offs. Her hair is short, blunt, somewhere around the cheekbones, and her eyes are the color of the briny deep. She's a buccaneer in an old station wagon, swashbuckling her way from port to port on back roads and highways. The pirate girl is not seeking safe harbor—just a place to stop over before letting her sails catch the wind. In an old trunk, the pirate girl keeps a pair of sleek leather boots for special occasions. She's left the polish at her last port of call; the toes are scuffed from rollicksome maritime ventures.

She's the only pirate you've ever met, but you know with certainty she's the real deal. She swaggers and swears and plunders the bulk bins at the natural foods store, spiriting away with pocketfuls of chocolate-covered raisins and honey-roasted cashews, a few wasabi peas. She buys a peach so the lady at the register won't be suspicious. Something about stone fruits and the hard labor of the seafaring existence.

You have known the pirate girl since high school, when she was not a pirate, just a girl, who talked her way out of geometry tests and drank energy drinks from electric yellow cans. When you went to college, the pirate girl went to California, where she acquired the trappings of her piracy: the wind in her sails, the unassailable sense of self. The pirate girl's name was Angela, but you know that she never liked being called that. Instead, she made up pseudonyms, nicknames, alter egos feared for their skill with a



blade. You have never kissed the pirate girl, but in the past, you have given it some consideration.

When you get out of school, you see the pirate girl tacking across the parking lot on her way towards the post office, and you tug your bag, heavy with pop quizzes, a little higher onto your shoulder. You know how to teach math, not how to tie knots—but she does: clove hitches and halyards in the length of rope she keeps in the backseat for when her hands get fidgety, knots in your stomach when she runs aground in your little mountain town, a brief shore leave, counting the days until she sets sail again. She sweeps through Main Street like she drew the treasure map: smooth, quick lines and paper splashed with saltwater, X marking the spot where she will briefly lower her anchor,.

That night, you ignore the pop quizzes and step out into the dark summer air. She buys you a drink—rum, of course—and regales you with tall tales: sea monsters, scurvy, an ex-girlfriend with a hook for a hand. The bar is hot and loud and the vee of your black t-shirt has sunk down in the humid air. The pirate girl invites you back to the captain's cabin, and in a slim berth perched atop an old house on the edge of town, she has her pirate way with you, licking salty sweat from your sternum and diving downward, coming up for air.

The next day, after school is out, you find her lollygagging by the garage, supervising a tune-up to the trusty vessel, looking on as brakes are tested and fluids refilled. You ask her how long she's been a pirate. She says should really couldn't say, and she's got no parrot to answer for her, just a peg leg piece of mannequin she calls

Polly and a glove compartment full of cracker crumbs from snacks eaten asea. The mechanic lowers the station wagon to the ground as she tells you she's looking to take on a first mate, someone to swab the decks and keep the ship on course as she steers toward the horizon. The school year is nearly over, and you say you'll consider it. Is this, you wonder, how it always works—not so much a pirate kidnapping as an aiding and abetting, a girl with short, blunt hair offering a means of transportation to an otherwise willing runaway? In your landlubber's bed that night, you loot and pillage each other, hands running from sterns to bows.

As you blow out of town the next morning, the pirate girl cranks the radio all the way up. You look back and watch the mountain town fade against the skyline, think of your students and their worksheets: if a ship travels at ten knots per hour, how long will it take to sail from New York Harbor to the Bay of Biscay?

You remember, suddenly, a time before the pirate girl, when Angela passed you a note in science class that said to meet her during eighth period on the bleachers. You skipped out on study hall, your heart beating an eager tattoo as you thought of her eyes: blue flecked like whitecaps on the water. Outside, you walked the planks of the green wooden benches, checking your watch: five minutes, ten, twenty, thirty. She never came.

It's the typical story: betrayal on the high seas, and you ask if she remembers—the note, the afternoon—but she shakes her head as though she's never even heard of Roaring Fork Regional High School. You prompt her—Mr. Elnore's science class? The peeling paint on the bleachers? The gel-tip pen, the scrap of lined paper? Nothing. A pirate has no regard for details like these, cast away like empty bottles.

When she stops for gas at the Exxon in the Springs, you climb down from the crow's nest and disembark, off the gangplank into the empty parking lot. It's not a mutiny or an ambush, just a goodbye, strangely ordinary. Your last kiss is like waves lapping against the hull of a ship, and you mumble something about sealegs, not having them. You say goodbye to Polly and watch as the pirate girl adjusts her bandanna, then departs, tank full of gas, sails full of wind. As her mast disappears over the horizon, you cross your arms over your chest and feel the knots pull tight.

Here you are: marooned at a gas station on the west side of the highway. What is there to do but buy a pack of gum, chew away the smell of seawater, catch the next bus back to town?

## THE SMELL MUSEUM

The museum is located forty-five minutes outside of Phoenix, a steel and glass building with two wings jutting out from a central pyramid. Inside the lobby, a scentscape plays across cascading streams of perfumed liquid. Each pool offers a smell: jacarandas, espresso, petrichor and new galoshes. The odors mingle below enormous skylights.

Further on, the galleries are sparser: white walls and minimal text directing visitors to a series of precisely engineered scent diffusers. Motion sensors allow the smells to dispense automatically. In one room wafts the amber odor of pine sap, a bear's thick musk; in another, the acrid smell of blood melds with the saccharine scent of orange Jell-O. Specialists believe that, of all the senses, smell is the most visceral, linked, as it is, with survival, nourishment, attraction, and memory. In the galleries of the museum, eyes drift close, and the nose takes over.

#

Mrs. Shin approaches from the east, her blue Kia cutting through the sun-baked desert in a journey that she makes three times a week: Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. The museum opens at ten o'clock, and often, she is the first visitor, arriving just as the guard unlocks the high glass doors in front of the ticket desk.

She nods, and he nods, though they rarely exchange words. She is grateful for this: their routine, the faint smell of fried potatoes she traces, one morning, to the MacDonald's by the exit, where she sees his truck emerging from the drive-through.

There used to be another guard, an older man who liked to joke, but Mrs. Shin prefers this one, his silence.

Inside the museum doors, Mrs. Shin breathes in the smells of the perfumed pools, shows her membership card, reaches out her hand for the stamp. Ablutions: the long mirrors just beyond the ticketing desk with their considerately worded signs, asking visitors to wash their hands, swab their necks with the provided alcohol wipes to remove unwanted odors. On her museum days, Mrs. Shin forgoes the bottle of Pantene Pro V her sister keeps in the glass-doored shower, but its fruity scent clings to her, and she swipes it away carefully, studying her face in the mirror. Before Hye-won died, seven years ago, people said they looked like twins: mother and daughter with their smooth black hair, big eyes, round faces.

#

There are 280,000 smells in the museum collection; it would take years to smell them all, and although there are completists—fanatics, who draw up schedules and make lists—most visitors return again and again for another whiff of an old favorite. A fisherman, landlocked in Tempe, seeks out the scent of bait and brine; a pair of Scottsdale fitness gurus gravitate toward the yeasty aroma of freshly baked bread, rich butter.

At any given moment, about 5% of the collection is on display. Another 40% of the museum archives is accessible at one of three state-of-the-art digital scent pods. Located on the third floor balcony, the pods look unexceptional: white, oblong, with the dimensions of a mid-sized sedan. Instructions are posted inside: close the door and secure the airlock; when the touchscreen blinks on, select the appropriate keywords. Program the

potency of the smell and set the duration of the diffusion; alternatively, assemble a composite scent: odors layered one on top of another—cumin seed, hair oil, and old books; fresh dirt, wet dog, and Drummond clematis.

According to museum records, the most-requested scents include cheese pizza, freshly cut grass, dollar bills, and baby powder.

#

In the leftmost pod, Mrs. Shin scrolls through keywords in a rhythm that has become second nature. She calls up the scent of yuzu tea and breathes the tangy sweet: Hye-won's breath in the tiny apartment kitchen, the sticky spoon in her fingers, her grin. Graphite: the drawings she made of pop stars and princesses; detergent: her school uniform, its bouquet of pleats. On certain days, Mrs. Shin calls up other smells: burnt rubber and antiseptic, hospital corridors, orchids. In the quiet of the pod, the diffusers whir softly.

Before she came to Arizona, Mrs. Shin had already forgotten her daughter's face, the photographs on her sister's mantel populated by little girls whose cheeks are plump, but somehow unrecognizable; a taller girl, still round-faced, on her first day of high school, smiling and holding two fingers up. Her daughter's scent is something different: well worth the museum membership fee, the money she saved to buy the little blue Kia, the hours Mrs. Shin spent studying for the Arizona State Driver's License Exam, learning the English words for accelerate, merge, and yield.

#

In an upstairs hallway, photographs depict an array of noses: cartilage, nostrils, and septa posed in stark studio light. Research indicates that, except in rare cases, the outward appearance of the nose has little impact on its olfactory efficacy. Nevertheless, the shapes captivate: the pert and upturned, the long and slicing, the romanesque, the chiseled, the bulbous, the flared. For the most part, the museum forgoes visual art, but this is the exception—twenty-four proboscides drawn from models of all ages and races culminating with the aquiline beak of the photographer—a self-portrait.

#

Mrs. Shin's nose is dainty and slightly flattened. She cannot know for sure whether her sense of smell is particularly acute, but once, in her childhood, she gagged to find the rotting carcass of a cat buried in her neighbor's garden, and later, working as a secretary at a bank in Seoul, she fell in love with the whiff of a man's cologne and married him. Now, she smells her sister's condo, plaster and kimchi; the chemical-tinged florals of the nail salon where she works afternoons and evenings; the ferment of hops on her sister's American husband's breath when he comes home on Friday evenings.

Hye-won had her father's nose, broad and slightly flattened, and though Mrs. Shin would never say that this was the reason she left Seoul, it was a relief to no longer see it on his face when he got up in the mornings. He is a good man, but it's been six and half years now since she left him at the Incheon airport. Her oldest sister, the one who stayed in Korea, says there's another woman now, with a nose like a girl in a TV drama, pinched out and up.

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During the school year, the museum hosts field trips. Lines of children jumble out of buses and swarm the lobby, chattering, placing bets and pulling ponytails. In the galleries, their little noses twitch like rabbits' as they race from one smell to the next, their teachers speaking in voices that are one part patience, one part exasperation. At noon, there is lunch in the scent garden. 95% of smell is taste, the docent tells the children, and they hold their noses closed as they chew individually wrapped cheese sticks, turkey sandwiches that smell like vinegar and plastic wrap. Their last stop in the pods, where they take turns, each pair selecting their scent and clearing it with the teacher: no to farts, blood, and dead bodies; yes to dinosaurs, chocolate milk, and moon rocks.

When she can, Mrs. Shin avoids them: the skinny knees and elbows, the sweet savor of breakfast cereal and shampoo. Even seven years ago, Hye-won had been too old for field trips, for these soft pre-pubescent smells. Still, as they pass, Mrs. Shin scans the group for dark heads and hair ribbons.

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Because the human olfactory system is easily exhausted, recovery spaces are scattered throughout the museum area. Inside these rooms, visitors breath clean air, and benches run from wall to wall, inviting visitors to rest their legs as well as their noses.

Of course, wherever there is matter, there are smells, but here they are muted by circulatory air vents and odor-balancing formulae. The senses reset, the nasal cavity clears, and when visitors step back out into the museum, many are surprised by their renewed ability to appreciate the nuances of the smells before them.



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On some days, Mrs. Shin bypasses the scent pods to sit a full hour on one of the smooth wooden benches of the third floor recovery space. It is quiet in this corner of the museum, and Mrs. Shin breathes more easily than usual, free of odors, each one of which is or is not Hye-won.

Mrs. Shin wonders, sometimes, what her daughter smells like now—not the ash, not the urn—but something else, something that might or might not exist, that might or might not smell like anything. As she sits on the long, smooth bench, Mrs. Shin catches a whiff of warm, human scent, skin and hair: her own smell, wafting.

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The museum exit lies through the gift shop, a tasteful assortment of smell-related paraphernalia whose purchase funds regular operations and maintenance. Rows of essential oils line the shelves, and a rack of scented postcards spins slowly next to the register, the usual souvenir keychains and pens. On the far wall are the books: scientific studies of the olfactory system, general interest titles on historically significant perfumes and colognes, picture books with titles like *The Man in the Moon's Nose* and *Smell You Later, Paco*.

Normally, Mrs. Shin passes through quickly, her small, deliberate steps carrying her by the collectible perfume bottles and stuffed noses without a second glance, but today, she stops before the postcard rack. Once, the man who was Mrs. Shin's husband was highly susceptible to collectible merchandise: the result, she used to think, of an

unarticulated belief that having the right sorts of things would save them from misfortune.

Mrs. Shin has no illusions on this point, but she buys a postcard that smells of cedarwood and slips it into her purse, nods to the security guard as she passes through the front doors into the parking lot. If she doesn't think better of it, she will send the card to Hye-won's father on the anniversary next month. He will smell it with the broad, flat nose of their daughter.

Mrs. Shin turns the key in the ignition of the little blue Kia. She turns left, then right, and the museum disappears from the rearview mirror as she rolls the windows down. When Mrs. Shin breathes in, she smells the desert: emptiness and cactus blossoms and sand.