

Var

Kilimanjaro: The word my ex-fiancée's South African mother used in place of *thingy-ma-jigs* or *whatchu-ma-call-its*. Carey-lee's mother—pure leather in her fifty-five years—hit me with her bloodshot eyes, her face wrinkled in consternation, one hand holding the stem of a wine glass, the other hand's fingers snapping in search of the right word. “Go to the shop for me, would you?” she said. “And fetch me some of those...those...little...*kilimanjaros*.”

Snapping her fingers. Lipstick puckered all pink. She meant cigarettes. Menthol, please.

Hypothetically speaking, summiting Kilimanjaro was what my friends and I, all of us avid climbers, floated as a possibility for my bachelor party, a week before my wedding in South Africa: fly to Dar Es Salaam, take a bus to Arusha, spend six days climbing, and, once back down, head to South Africa for the wedding in my fiancée's birth city, Port Elizabeth.

Kilimanjaro—whether a mere idea or an actual, tangible thing—had been hovering vaguely in the clouds at the back of my mind for some time. But after my engagement ended, after my ex and I had all the embarrassing conversations informing friends and family there'd be no wedding, here I was, in Arusha, at the foot of Kilimanjaro, a year after what would've been my wedding date.

I'd flown to Kenya and taken a bus from Nairobi across the border with my oldest friend, Ross. On the morning before our hike, I was the worst version of myself—recovering from a long night out. I didn't remember much about the night before. I'd browned out. Apparently, I had been kissing a local Arushian hairdresser on the dance floor and taken her back to our hostel, but not before attempting to pick a fight with two men we'd been playing pool against. We lost. They were running the table. I got mad. “You were being unreasonable,” Ross would tell me later. But when I woke that morning, in this hostel where Ross and I were staying, I found myself on the concrete floor of a bathroom, naked and sweaty, covered in dried vomit and mosquito welts. I had a vague memory from the night before: leaning against the outside wall of the hostel, the building drenched in a streetlight's piss-yellow glow, waving a floppy-handed goodbye to a girl in a colorful head scarf.

Ross leaned over me and asked, “Why didn’t you tell me your ex was coming here? You guys were talking this whole time? What’s wrong with you?”

It was my ex who called off our engagement and left me in Boston to return to South Africa. I received her engagement ring by mail and resold it to a pawn shop for a fraction of what I bought it for. She’d only worn the ring in private, never in public. I worked twelve-hour shifts at a construction site that summer, and about two months after leaving, she started texting me again. I blocked her number, but she caught on and instead started sending letters by post and emailing me elaborate messages of regret and apology.

After weeks of this, I cracked. *Do you still love me?* Carey-lee asked. Yes. *Do you remember when we road-tripped to Cape Town together? How we pulled over in the Transkei and listened to the animals calling?* I do. *Do you still feel now how you felt then? Because I still do.* Yes, I told her, and I still felt like that. After several exchanges, I leaked details to her about Ross’s and my Kilimanjaro trip. How Ross had more or less arranged this for me, suggesting the trip because he cared and could see how self-loathing and monkish I’d become after the engagement ended. He could see how I’d envisioned this future laid out for myself—married across two continents, two languages, two cultures. Ross organized a flight to Kenya and a bus from Nairobi to the foothills of Kilimanjaro. He just told me the amount, and after I’d saved enough, I paid him. I told my ex the details of our lodging; she’d come for a day or two, and I’d sneak off to meet her.

The plan seemed solid. But now Ross had discovered the truth: I’d been lying to him. There would be no meeting. My ex had phoned the hostel at dawn, crying, asking to speak to me, and when the hostel owner learned I was incoherent on the bathroom floor, she opted for waking up my bunkmate Ross. Over the phone, she spilled the beans: how she and I had been talking, how we’d made plans to reunite and talk about resuming our engagement, eloping. At the last minute, her family stopped her from going, she told Ross. They couldn’t stomach the idea of her risking things not working out again. She was sorry, she said, and she asked Ross to tell me that. Ross told me that, and I cried into the toilet bowl.

I wish I could say I’d always been obsessed with canids, but that’s not true. More accurately, I might’ve been considered a casual fan of, say, coyotes, wolves, and wild dogs, but I drew a sharp line at wolf T-shirts; I’d never volunteered at a wolf shelter or adopted by mail an endangered wolf pup or anything like that. I never even owned a dog. The closest encounters I’d ever had with a wild canine, growing up in a foresty area

outside of Boston, was hearing my neighbor, who kept a chicken coop, fire his rifle at coyotes for pinching hens and roosters. That rifle went off often, and when I heard it, I always rooted for the coyote, hoping it might outrun or otherwise evade the screaming bullet. But that was the extent of it: the coyote would enter my mind briefly and vanish as quickly as the *pop!* of the rifle. If he ever got one, I'm not sure what he did with the bodies.

There is no single English word for a sudden obsession—an obsession that takes and then *holds*—besides *obsession* itself, but that word doesn't meet my needs without additional qualifiers. *Infatuation* ends, often only weeks after it begins. *Fixation* frankly doesn't seem hefty or healthy enough. *Flares* are sudden bursts of zeal. My obsession with wolves sparked much in the way a flare from a sinking ship might: there—suddenly—rocketing up and up, but in my case, that flare lit the whole sky on fire. *Addiction* is one possibility, something I have great experience with, enduring, never-ending, but I know the connotations feel obviously off when describing an “addiction to canids.” *Passion* is another, but that, too, fades.

My zeal for wolves has not wavered since it began. And it won't. That's why I call it a *consumption*. Obviously that word, in spite of its dated interchangeability with tuberculosis, works in a multitude of ways. In this version, I'm not the agent of consumption, but the thing being consumed. My time is consumed, my energy is consumed, my mind is consumed.

Shortly after my ex ended our engagement, I moved into a studio cabin on a hillside overlooking Lake Leverett in Western Massachusetts. I was attending an English grad program nearby, and the venue seemed perfect for the last year of my degree—reading and writing. I'd been working construction and saving and unloaded fifteen thousand dollars in one lump sum to secure the spot for a year. The land was wooded and secluded, right off a long dirt road among the far reaches of Mt. Toby State Forest. A writer's dream.

It was here, a mere week into my lease, where I saw my first wild canine. I was returning home from campus at dusk when I heard something shift in the woods—crunching steps over dead leaves. I turned. A large, dog-like creature stared back at me; it had a wide, hard face, a pointed snout, and yellow-green eyes. Tawny-brown coloring. Teeth long and sharp. Whole mouth dagger-lined and built for killing. This was no domestic dog. I thought I was face-to-face with a wolf and that surely this creature would devour me. But the animal and I locked eyes, and then a moment later, it let its tongue down, turned, and trotted deeper into the woods and out of sight.

Later that same night, heart still racing, I heard howls. I threw open all the windows in the cabin, lay down, and listened deeply, a woodsman version of Charles Xavier, searching for the creatures with my eyes closed. With dark fully settled, I heard a howl answered by several other howls—soon followed by a chorus of yips and barks ricocheting off pine trees. They must've made a kill. Or, maybe they just wanted every sentient thing in the woods to know they were nearby for their protection and ours. Too excited to sleep, I stayed awake listening for their calls. But as night marched on, they got further and further away until they disappeared altogether with the sunrise.

A season closed in that cabin; another opened. Two months until Kilimanjaro, and Sex Addicts Anonymous was not working out as planned, though my addiction counselor and I settled on it as being arguably the best of my options. There's no pill for this, my counselor once said helpfully. Thanks. Each time I saw Dr. Flynn, I lied when I claimed progress was being made. In reality, I'd only shown up to about seven sessions, my participation was erratic, and I missed over half-a-dozen weeks. I didn't like how SAA interfered with my body-building regimen. So, no, I hadn't earned a bronze medallion—not even a plastic chip for a single day. I neither took to God's teachings nor to our group study book: *A Gentle Path through the Twelve Steps*. Fellow SAAer Leah and I had exchanged numbers at a meeting and drove forty miles back to my house to fuck on the kitchen floor. The anticipation was unbearable; we nearly fucked each other right up the stairs to the cabin door.

Dr. Flynn believed in the anonymous classes, as long as I continued to see her regularly and practice accountability. Something I didn't want to admit to her was that SAA seemed doomed in theory, like the whole thing had only, just barely, scraped itself through the ideational phase from which it came. Our group leader in this chapter of SAA was Kenny. He walked with a limp, was tall and white, and had long gray hair and a handlebar mustache. My money was one hundred percent on him being full of shit. That dude definitely still fucked. And yet, that didn't stop him from flaunting his two-year chip at us like some false god. "I know there'll eventually be a day," he used to tell us with a big, histrionic breath, "when I walk in this room and tell you all it's over. The streak is done. And that's fine. It just has to be right. It has to feel right."

Kenny told us this was so we could all hold each other accountable, but the whole thing just seemed like a setup—a dozen-plus fuckups who fuck too much staring right into each other with come-fuck-me eyes. With the arrival of each week's session, I would show up a bigger and bigger version of myself, amassing mass to present to people in

the outside world. I wore cheap, skin-tight T-shirts to these meetings, shirts that I wore often those days so that during sex I could tear the shirt open across my chest to impress whomever I was fucking. I seriously did this.

Unlike the mandatory substance abuse program I went through when I'd last gotten in trouble with the cops, it seemed us twenty-, thirty-, and forty-somethings in SAA were all equally as puzzled about life, all making as little progress in it as humanly possible. All of us: arrested development, over-active libidos, babies in big jeans and adult-sized costumes. In meetings, the contours of our bodies were plainly visible. In meetings, our legs shook when we sat. In meetings, our hearts raced. Faces flushed, eyes darting to body part after body part. We drew air in through our nostrils in hopes of sneaking a whiff of one another. We squished our inner thighs together to feel more deeply *how* we studied one another with hunger and wondered what noises came out, what words; wondered what each other's paces were; wondered about the smack and the slap and the spread and the stink, and where and how one another liked it, what our spots were, our sizes, our tastes, our stances, our positions, our fetishes, our level of dirty. Dirtier the better. We shared some of this information aloud, and it made us sweat just hearing it.

Remarkably, most of us were clean (minus herpes). Regardless of all the other shit in our lives, being clean or not was never something to joke or lie about or assume. I told the class about my run-in with chlamydia and the scabies I'd gotten three or so months ago that had since gone away with prescription cream—but not before I spread it to at least half-a-dozen people. Like most of the other newbies in SAA, I had a standing monthly STD check: if this didn't come about via a shrink, it for sure happened during the first SAA meeting. Kenny asked why I was there, and I said fucking, and he said, "Okay, first things first, go get yourself checked."

The first few sessions I attended, Leah brought her boyfriend with her. A few others had their partners with them, too. It was open knowledge that they were being cheated on with a whole catalogue of other people, and yet here they were. At first, I thought *how dumb*: how embarrassing to be cuckolded. But then I thought of the courage it must've taken to admit that truth—and, more importantly, to *still show up*. Leah's boyfriend was a tall, skeletal white guy, maybe older than her, in his thirties, with a patchy beard, a skullcap, and hand tattoos—the kind with the Old English-style letters. No idea what they spelled. "This one doesn't give a fuck," she said. "Bless him." She described him as "one of those guys"; he rode a motorcycle in the summers, had never gotten

a diploma, worked in a warehouse, and had an elephant-sized cock. When she said this last bit, she apportioned out a foot with her hands, and he chuckled dumbly along with the rest of us. Somebody said, well good for you. Oh, they were so in love, they were so in love, Leah said. The fact that she was fucking around on him made her not only bad to him, but bad to me, too. It made me want to fuck her harder than I did already. She did this thing where she leaned forward and tucked her dirty blonde hair behind both of her ears at the same time when she was explaining something, like one of her justificatory sex philosophies: for example, a threesome or group sex shouldn't count because it's more of a *spectacle* than the full-on act; she implored Kenny to come on just give her a one-day chip. It was pretentious, and it made me ache. Leah wore owl-rim glasses and touched herself during meetings. Her legs crossed, her hand pressing and rubbing between her jean legs, subtly unsubtle. If for some reason she was mixed into a crowd, and you were tasked with IDing the one sex addict among everyone, it'd be hammer-over-the-head obvious it was her.

Me: I had charm. Inauthentic, but still. It's funny, because in meetings, we spoke often of our manipulation tactics, and we made lists of them, about how we'd meet people out there—in the real world—and chat them up and some of us would stop right there, but some of us couldn't stop once we started. Across the board, manipulation via false charm was the prevailing male tactic. Leah, on the other hand, liked to drop things on the floor at the bar and turn around quickly to catch the man ogling her ass. She'd go from there. So manipulation, and our admission of it—still, I openly manipulated every single person in class with my charm. My body, too, existed as a physical manifestation of this manipulation: beefy and taut, but full of dead veins. I made Leah laugh; I made everyone laugh. I made it so that she had no choice but to notice me.

The last time I saw Leah, I drove to Montague where she lived with her super-rich aunt who was out of town, and we fucked one last time. "It's not like we're supposed to just up and quit sex," Leah said, mouth agape. "It's not about that. Everyone knows it's about reckless behavior. You want to be one of those sad assholes with a ten-year medallion? Be my guest. Sex when healthy is an undeniable life joy." She proceeded to quote from *The Joy of Sex*. Something about sex being akin to a breath of fresh air. In our brief time knowing one another, we never talked about anything other than sex and the people we'd fucked and how fucking all of these people had surely messed us, and every future loving relationship we'd ever have, up beyond repair. Leah told me about how the night before we'd first hooked up, she'd answered a message on Thrinder,

driven to Springfield by the Hall of Fame, and met three of the Harlem Globetrotters for group sex.

I didn't like Leah at all. We never would've been friends. I wanted her. And Leah never liked me either—I doubt she even remembers my face or name. We were texting other potential hookups right there in each other's presence. We showed each other the people online we were planting seeds with. With Leah, there was the feeling of obvious dispensability: our sex was a perfunctory transaction. I was a faceless blur lost inside the tumbling, high-speed chaos of her everyday—not unlike a cereal bowl or coffee mug or something. It could've been anyone, it could've just been the arm of the couch she drenched each night with the red raw center of herself, but today it just so happened I was there. And I'd be a fucking liar if I said I hadn't felt exactly the same way.

Like any self-qualifying millennial, I turned to the internet when I wanted to learn more about the creatures inhabiting the woods where I lived. The Google Maps satellite view of my cabin showed nothing but forest, lake, river, mountain, and other small houses for miles in all directions. Some research on the surrounding forests told me what wildlife I lived among. The predators of note: eagles, owls, porcupines, bobcats, fishers, foxes, raccoons, bears—and *coyotes*.

Though I'd never seen a coyote in person, I knew what I'd been told growing up: that they were small-sized canines, a shade or two bigger than a fox. People told me I shouldn't be afraid of them; they're scavengers—skittish and unintimidating. This didn't add up to me. The canine I saw was rather large, at least four feet long and maybe close to three feet high. In all honesty, I thought I'd seen a wolf. And then those howls—deep in tone—they had to have belonged to wolves.

Research from the '70s showed that wildlife biologists, zoologists, and local Massachusetts residents alike were all puzzled and starting to question what these large, wolf-like creatures were and why they happened to be so much larger than purebred coyotes (*canis latrans*). Wolves (*canis lupus*), often hunted in the earlier days of the settlers, were wiped out of New England by the 1900s, so it was obviously not them. The data of these earlier studies were essentially this: the further east and north one went in the United States, the larger the coyote. But that was the old stuff. The new stuff, published from 2013 to 2015, found that New England and southeast Canada had their own special canine. This new species was called *canis latrans* var. or “coywolf,” and in New England, it was soon discovered, coywolves numbered in the millions.

The var. appended to the coyote's Latin name, *canis latrans*, simply means *variation*. Literal translation: “howling dog, variant.” Like wolves,

New England coywolves prefer hunting in forests, unlike coyotes of the west, which evolved in the great plains. John G. Kays and Roland Gay are two of the more prominent zoologists researching the nascent species. In a short few days, I read the majority of peer-reviewed research written by the both of them. Kays's most recent report on the coywolf, published in *Biology Letters*, found wolf DNA from two separate subspecies of *canis lupus*—gray and eastern wolf. The genetic makeup of this New England coyote-wolf hybrid was roughly sixty percent coyote and forty percent wolf and domestic dog. When wolves were decimated by hunters, the few remaining wolves had no mates, so they mixed with whatever they could find. Keeping one's genetic information alive: the primordial mission of mankind and the kingdom of all living things. In this way, wolves lived on, but through coyotes. Seed spreading for the good of one's nitrogenic code.

The hybrid canine I'd seen when I first moved into the cabin was nearly twice the size of a coyote; it had a wolf-like face with a large snout and rounded ears. Kays's findings note that with their "larger jaws, more muscle, and faster legs, individual coywolves can take down deer." As a pack, they kill moose. "Even their cries blend those of their ancestors. The first part of a howl resembles a wolf's (with a deep pitch), but this then turns into a higher-pitched, coyote-like yipping." As a hapa of Polynesian-Asian-European heritage, the whole *canis latrans* var species was made up of unclassifiable half-breeds like me. Not a wolf, not a coyote; a var. Neither them nor I ever "passed," and together we were the real bastards of the forest: ravenous carnivores unapologetically seeking out whatever meat was there.

Scouring the message boards of articles in *The Economist*, *Smithsonian*, *National Geographic*, and *The Boston Globe* confirming the coywolf, I found that rural, forest-dwelling New Englanders weren't just elated to have had their observations of a more wolf-like apex predator living in their woods validated, they were outright pissed off that the research had taken this damn long to catch up. "Course we got wolves," one commenter wrote. "Fuck's wrong with you?"

Coywolves were one thing, but the lifting, the new obsession with my body and unprotected sex, all of the flirting with STDs—none of that came as any surprise to me. I knew what I was doing, and some dark part of me craved the risk.

I grew more alienated. I refused phone calls; I refused to meet people for coffee or dinner because doing so would've messed with my nighttime coywolf listening, or, equally as important, my lifting regimen, which had now grown to engulf twenty-five percent of all my waking

hours: I went once in the morning for two hours and once in the evening for two more. This, seven days a week. I ran up the mountain by my little cabin at least three times a week. I chugged whey protein shakes, pumped my body full of supplements, and ate cuts of lean, unmarbled steak, salmon, tuna, and egg whites. During therapy sessions, I didn't talk about how, obscured by all of these seemingly healthy life developments, I experimented with cutting for the first time. This, I kept to myself. I told no one. I used a kitchen knife. I hadn't gone too deeply, but in my first attempts, I just wanted to see what it was all about. I wanted to see what was underneath me, drifting, swirling below my brown skin. The blood wasn't responsible for the pain: I knew that. It was my brain, a part of my body. And I wanted to injure it. I wanted to glimpse, if I could, the thing that lit ethanol beneath my deepest fury. I wanted whatever it was beneath the atoms of the cells of the blood. I could in no way get rid of this thing, but I could still dare to glimpse what it looked like exiting me.

"This body sitting before me? It doesn't seem to be you," my therapist tried to convince me, before referencing Cartesian duality. *But it is*, I insisted, and upon her request, I listed out everything I was taking for the maintenance of my new body. She listened with care and jotted it all down: glucosamine, chondroitin, hyaluronic acid, and bone broth protein in the morning with my kale-avocado-banana-whey smoothie and half-a-dozen egg whites. I took two flavorless scoops of creatine in my coffee, a daily multivitamin, biotin, omega-3 fish oil, three capsules of testosterone booster, citrulline malate, NO boosters, and Cellucor C4 Explosive powder all before my first workout of the day. Fourteen pills and four scoops of various, chalk-like powders. I'd drink whey protein for protein synthesis with BCAA powder for muscle density and rapid regeneration, and a dash of l-glutamine immediately postworkout, usually in the locker room or the shower, when, muscle fatigued, I still couldn't walk right or lift my arms above my head. After my second workout, I'd mix more protein and creatine, and before bed at night, I'd swallow capsules of testosterone, chromium, vitamin B6 and B12, magnesium, alpha lipoic acid, carnosine, and ginkgo biloba. I'd wash all of that down with one hundred grams of Trazadone and five milligrams of melatonin, so that I could sleep less restlessly. I'd thrown up enough from this regimen of supplements to know that I couldn't stomach it all without eating, too: so then it was a Greek yogurt and one final glass of casein protein. I'd wake at least once in the night to piss. And when I woke up in the morning, I'd take lithium first thing to treat major depression disorder. This drug, unlike the rest, was the only one I took

that made my hands hum—as if an endless train were rolling by right outside my body.

My therapist also knew the story about my ex, she just didn't accept it as an excuse for my behavior. "This is all deeper," she said. "Just keep self-examining. Take it seriously." Whenever I brought up race with her, her eyes lit up. I sensed this was the answer she wanted me to find. My difference, my not fitting in neatly—my variance. Or, she just wanted to help me in the way most really good people want to help the bad ones. Plus, she billed the state seventy an hour. It was her understanding that consumption by wolf, weightlifting, and sex was filling a deep fissure left behind by something in my childhood, that these rituals lent value—however false—to my sense of being. She analogized Dr. Bruce Banner to my current status, confirming for me what she thought I must've already known: Bruce sad, Bruce angry? Hulk get big, strong. *Hulk smash.*

That fall I started sleeping with fellow classmates in my graduate program. I slept with undergraduates. I slept with professors. I slept with an older woman who lived down the dirt road from me after dog sitting for her. To repay me for watching her dog, she invited me over for a meatloaf dinner with her family. Her husband, older than her by about twenty years, sat right next to me, her young children directly across the table. I remember asking her husband to please pass the ketchup and squirting out a farty pool of it atop my meatloaf. Her kids and I laughed together. The husband gave me a look I couldn't read.

I told most of the women I was sleeping with during this time that I was "training." For some reason I felt that the word "training" gave the information they needed. Some girls wanted to know why I was so muscular, why I was working out so often, like, what was the point? Who cares? Most thought "training" sounded legitimate because the word that followed—Kilimanjaro—by its very nature sounded legitimate, and colossal, when in reality, there's not a lot one needs to do to "train" for Kilimanjaro. It has a very high success rate. It's cold. There's less air.

All things considered, my growth was swift. I did all the right things to acquire this postbreakup version of sex appeal. High weight, low reps. I was 170 pounds when I started and around 215 pounds on the day Ross and I left for Tanzania—the same body specs as the starting quarterback for the Seattle Seahawks, Russell Wilson, a person to whom I was compared a lot during this time because of our similar facial features, body, and skin tone. Though I had spoken often to Ross over the phone, he hadn't seen me in more than six months, and when we met in our terminal at Logan Airport, he didn't recognize me.

The iron landscape of my thighs was visible through the tight skin of my jeans. My biceps measured seventeen inches in circumference. My neck disappeared straight into my traps, which now peaked high above my collar bones. When he last saw me, my curly hair was down to my shoulders, and my beard was large and unkempt. Now, the beard was long, but neater, tighter; I'd started using fragrant beard-cream products to keep it looking shiny, neat, and hydrated. My head was a dome—Bic'ed straight to the scalp—a shiny, light-reflecting end of a missile.

“Mother of God,” Ross said. “You look like you just left prison. Where's the other Jeff? I miss old Jeff. Can I see him, please?”

In spite of our standard jokey, make-fun-of-each-other banter, something was different now between us. He seemed wary of me. His fear may not have been just my imposing physical body, it could've simply been the whole of me: nervous, sex-addled, and spouting coywolf-obsessed nonsense—slave to my own insecurities, which centered around goals of muscle gain and prominence. Ross thought I was playing with fire for starting a habit of threesomes. “What kind of life are you living? Seriously, you're gonna get a disease. This is deep, Jeff.” When Ross asked me what planet I was living on, I told him what I always told him—that I was living in Hell on Earth. And now this felt especially true.

In early winter, about a month before my trip to Kilimanjaro, I'd started watching over and over again the very poorly received, Liam-Neeson-battles-the-Arctic-wolves-in-Alaska film *The Grey*. Reason? The humans all die. The wolves win (or so we're left to believe). I wish I could claim that the root cause had been something deeper or more significant seeming. Shortly after watching the film for the first time, my reoccurring dream began: Nighttime. Hunt time. Me, in full-adult body, but at my childhood home standing at the end of a long driveway, aimed toward the stairs that led to the backdoor. The wolf, a larger version of the coywolf I'd seen in person, stood beneath a spotlight on the side lawn, piercing me with its stare. A sprint to the door.

I never once finished this dream—not that I know of. And though the situation presented itself the same, it played out differently each time. In several permutations of it, I swapped perspectives entirely: I became the wolf; I was teeth-bared charging at my own body, ready to tear apart and devour myself. I had no idea what to make of all this. When you have dreams this fucked up, online dream dictionaries do not even scrape the surface.

Earlier that fall, I'd attached a basic game camera I bought from Dick's Sporting Goods onto a tree behind the attached cabin. Plan was simple: coywolf moves behind my house, sensor detects, camera captures.

On the weekends, I would quickly scroll through the images on my laptop. Mostly, I caught flashes of raccoons or deer—sometimes there was a critter out of frame, big enough to trigger the camera. Sometimes, deep in the back of the frame, I caught a blurry foursome of fast-moving legs, or, behind a distant tree, something there and then something not. For two months, this camera captured images of turkeys, geese, deer, fox, and moose. I saw a black bear, but even that didn't interest me. I wanted another coywolf, and, frankly, anything else meant nothing. I wanted to watch the coywolves eat; wanted to make sure they were fed and healthy—that their pups were not only surviving but growing. I wanted to see how close they got to the cabin, to me. If they came near, what would that mean? If they pissed right on the cabin's foundation, what would they be trying to tell me?

Any wolf book I read that fall said basically the same thing: don't anthropomorphize. Rick Bass writes in *The Ninemile Wolves*, "Don't think of them as having feelings or being able to think." Barry Lopez echoes this in his best-selling *Of Wolves and Men*. Experts say that this is the wrong way to go about your imaginary relationship with wolves. Think of them, but don't develop anything with them—for surely your emotional attachment will not be returned, not in the slightest. But like Bass, it was these imaginings of the wolves, these scenes of them playing out in the mind's eye—mouth first into a giant ungulate and gorging upon its body, say—that, most nights, brought me finally to sleep.

Ross was now stirring, but I'd been awake for hours. With the wind rattling our tent since nightfall, I never fell asleep. We were at Mount Kilimanjaro's base camp—19,300 feet. The four previous days of the trek were merely an opportunity for my ailing brain to replay an entire reel of my engagement's misfortunes: from meeting Carey-lee in a medical checkup line for foreigners in Korea's Incheon Airport, to our first trip to the jungles of southeast Asia, to her moving to the U.S., to the day I proposed to her via a short story I'd written strictly for the occasion, to the day she left Logan Airport with security guards asking us—a wrecked couple in absolute ruin—if they could help.

We began the final leg of our trek at midnight, well before sunrise—the muscular ripple of the Milky Way more prominent than the black sky itself. Our goal was to summit before inclement weather drifted in and snowed us out. Most people who summit Kilimanjaro do so at sunrise; tens of thousands of pictures of men and women beaming their

smiles into cameras—frozen beards, hair, faces, the sun a brilliant orb drenching them in front light.

On our day, around ninety people would attempt summit: a slow-moving assembly line of headlamps dragging heavy bodies up an ascension of snow, ice, and boulders.

It's true what the books say about the altitude headache. It strikes suddenly and fierce, blinding you, and it doesn't leave. It's true what the books say about hallucinations. There are rabid dogs up there, at nineteen thousand feet, sprinting at full gallop. There are bottomless holes to avoid; there are rocks that don't play by our rules, transmuting into beating organs right before you. One internet blogger warned those with a past history of LSD use (e.g., me—aggressively): "There is a chance you could have an acid flashback at over fifteen thousand feet. Be warned." It's true what the books say about panicky, claustrophobic feelings from air scarcity. It's true also what the books say about the cold. On our day, several climbers curled themselves into fetal balls in the middle of the trail, refusing to budge, claiming inability to feel toes, fingers, cheeks, ears. We stepped over them.

In the first shot of daylight, I observed the water jug I held in my hand, and the water—frozen—wasn't water at all but blood. It was as if my dreamscape was superimposing itself atop my actual vision. My head, with each pulse, hurt more and more. I looked up toward the slope before me, at least a mile: another beastly dog, more wolf-like than the last, sprinted across my field of vision; I tracked it out of sight, and then another came, this one an actual wolf. The temperature here felt the same as it does on Mars: negative degrees Fahrenheit with incredible gusts of wind.

Playing in my head was my ex's voice, too—she seemed to be there, whether I liked it or not. For the final few months of our engagement, we lived in the very house where I grew up; where my mother still lived, fighting cancer; where my recovering alcoholic father, only somewhat able to care for his wife, spent the majority of his days flittering about the house, napping in bed, and watching hours and hours of pornography and television. On a school day when I had graduate seminars and taught introductory writing courses at the university, I left Carey-lee behind in the house where my mother's sickness and father's daily rituals no doubt depressed her greatly.

There was no way I could blame her for being unable to handle that environment. The reality of the house came to feel like the reality of our relationship. We believed we were strong enough, we believed we could make it through. But we'd been beaten. Reality became a python; it rose

up and struck, driving all the life and love out of us in a slow series of days, weeks. We gave up. She'd left America over a year ago.

Ross and I summited around six in the morning.

A moment after we touched the KILIMANJARO sign, Ross collapsed onto all fours. He'd been stomach sick for part of the trip, so I thought he was going to vomit, but he didn't. He was just staring into the ground.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Ross was crying.

"What are you crying for?"

He just looked at me.

"What are you crying for?" I repeated, growing inexplicably frustrated. "Stop."

In truth, I was jealous. I wanted to cry, too. I looked at Ross and tried harder to summon my own tears. I couldn't. I was too fucking angry. In the past year, I'd gone deep and cut myself and that hadn't worked, and now I'd gone high and tried to clear my head and I couldn't. Instead, I thought about the weight of my heavier body, and of all of the other things I'd dragged up here with me to twenty thousand feet, things that weren't physical like a tent or a flashlight: things like pain, failure, *consumption*. I looked at Ross, his head still directed into the arctic dirt. With each frozen tear, Ross expelled something unspeakable—it must've felt orgasmic. I tried again. *Just let them come*, I thought, *like last time. Just let it wash over you*. I tried so hard, and I couldn't. Kilimanjaro, I learned then, meant nothing to me.

When I returned from Kenya, I quit SAA. I believed that a trip abroad and a multiday, big-mountain hike—the act of ascension, of overcoming, of rising above to look down upon the clouds, the world, the insignificance of it all—might distill my pain or solve something. Push something. Right me. Make me okay. Instead, I was in the shower, digging into my wrist again, this time with a single-edge razor blade.

The same night I sliced myself and bled into the shower drain, I met another girl—a girl whose name I do not remember—at a bar in Amherst I frequented several days a week, where the bartenders knew me by name and my sexual proclivities by basic human logic and intuition. The rotating staff was cordial and tolerated me, allowing me to watch basketball games, read, and write at their bar without being visibly disturbed by my consistent attendance. Sometimes they made conversation. They didn't seem too judgy when, two or three drinks in, I would start chatting to the girl nearest me at the bar; when I would ask them if they wanted a cigarette; when, after the cigarette, I would

return inside to pay the tab, collect my book or laptop, and leave with that girl to her place or mine. If there were no girls at the bar, or only girls in pairs or groups, I'd sit on my stool pretending to write and in actuality be swiping and texting vigilantly—anxiously—on Tinder, Hinge, OkCupid, Blendr, XDating, XMeets, RealSexTonight, and PURE. If desperate for something new, I'd create ads and fire off emails via Craigslist. I'd leave when I found someone. It was always a rush.

The girl I met that night was super skinny, but with wide hips and a nose not unlike Owen Wilson's, pinched awkwardly at its bridge. I could be wrong about these details, or maybe I am enmeshing her with someone else. But let's imagine that she had thick brown eyebrows, too, long brown hair, and wore all black: the way she appears in my memory, which becomes more and more false each time I try to access it. I *do* remember that she worked at Petco off Route 9 and mentioned that she was capable of running the damn place herself and that on long-shift days she smelt like animal—and taking that smell home made her feel like the worst person on Earth. She smelled like animal tonight, she said. *Sorry in advance*. She'd always wanted more for her life. She still lived with her mother. She was obsessed with lizards and had several as pets. An amateur photographer, she gave me a tour of her Instagram. They were mostly of animals at Petco: snakes, gerbils, hamsters, or else they were beetles and bugs, zoomed-in and focused.

At the bar, I told her about my Kilimanjaro trip, how I'd only just gotten back. I pitched Kili to her like it was the most revelatory feat I'd ever accomplished. I told her about the coywolf—the variant species. I promised her photos from the trip and episodes of *True Detective*. She hadn't seen the show but was major into crime stories, and she wanted to hear the wolves, so I invited her home with me. Once inside, I gave her a blanket while I cranked the heat back up. I made her a drink, put on *True Detective*, and returned to the kitchen to fix some popcorn and my protein shake. We didn't last halfway into the episode. Under the blanket we'd started by holding hands, but quickly accelerated to rubbing and then unzipping. She tugged my pants down and gripped me through the hole in my unbuttoned boxers. She lifted my shirt off, pausing when she saw the gauze I'd affixed to my wrist with tape. She looked back into my eyes. Hers were deep and green.

"You too?" she asked.

I bit my lip, returned her green look.

"How long?" she asked. "How long have you been doing it?"

I stared back, didn't answer.

"I swear to god it doesn't help," she said, turning her wrists over to show me her scars—dozens of them, crisscrossed across both arms.

When she sliced the fish belly of her forearm, she went deep deep, marking herself permanently—a pristine trophy case of her pain. I wasn't sure I wanted to brave that level yet and leave myself with marks to remember. I wasn't sure I wanted to remember at all, I just liked the hurt—the uncorrupted and total wave of shock and awe that eclipsed your whole head during the act of cutting with pleasurable yet terrifying immediacy. I hated the cleanup. "Really," she repeated. "I can tell you firsthand, it doesn't help."

"It feels like it does," I told her.

"Just—be careful. Trust me."

I nodded and kissed her neck. She said, "I want you to fuck me." I spread the blanket out on the living room floor and we collapsed onto it. I couldn't stop thinking about what she'd said; these thoughts loomed heavily over our sex. The bandage on my wrist had a deep-maroon dot of dried blood in its center. I looked away toward the ceiling. My head wandered up there with it. I had been on this floor two nights ago with Katia: Katia who'd just gotten out of a relationship and all she wanted to do was fuck fuck fuck; Katia who'd texted me frantically at three a.m. asking to come over; Katia, who after that night, would text me a week later to tell me she'd gotten back together with her ex.

This girl was different. She didn't seize control or bite, slap, or claw me as girls like Katia did—she just wanted to come and to make us both feel good. On the ceiling I noticed a stationary black dot in a cobweb, a spider about the size of a dime, maybe curled up and waiting for its next hunt. Or asleep, done for the day. I'd read that spiders were a lot like cats; that they chased lasers like cats did, and napped away large swathes of the day. I felt tired too—just not in body. Tomorrow I would wake up before six a.m. and start from the top, likely doing the same damn thing all over again: I'd meet Samantha bright and early at the gym, a fellow bodybuilder and my new fuck/workout buddy, we'd lift together and likely borrow the secret, third-floor de-gendered bathroom for a quickie; we liked each other sweaty, coated in gym stink. I'd shower, go teach, go work on my master's thesis. I'd go to the gym again and end the day with a trip to a bar, or else find someone for a last-minute date, work on one of the three-to-five people in my rotation. Then here, then bed, then repeat. I felt close to coming and started pumping harder. My chest tightened, veins bulged, heart rattled—I was nearly there. I looked back up at the spider. Wrist. I couldn't stop thinking sad thoughts about my life, routine, loss, the limitations of my body and mind. How a student of mine had written on a recent semester evaluation a simple question: *Is he OK?* How there was hardly anything new for me to discover in orgasm, and yet I continued to chase it night after

night. How fucking elevated me to my highest point each day and then afterward I fell straight back down into the hell from which I came. One thing people who live in a constant state of undulating sadness know is that The Sad comes in waves and that some waves are small and only shore-crawling, like little water tendrils reaching up and up until they tug on a heartstring or prick the heart, and then others are tidal-sized coast-destroyers—waves that rewrite the whole history of you. One of these latter-sized waves crashed over me and, totally overwhelmed, I started crying. Still, I kept fucking. A tear dripped off my nose. Then another. I kept pumping and I didn't stop, staring at the sweat on the small of her back, watching the beads leak down her spine and mix with my tears, more out of breath than ever.

My crying is ugly. And when I start, my cries quickly turn into sobs or maybe whimpers—audible. A sound maybe not too dissimilar from sexual pleasure. While I maybe would've gotten away with a whimper on any other night, this girl was able to distinguish the note between pleasure and pain. She faced me over her shoulder, hitting me with her green look again. She said, "Holy shit, are you all right? Did I hurt you? Are you hurt?"

I told her I wasn't hurt—not physically. "Confused, dizzy," I said. She eased herself back down against me once more and then pulled herself all the way off.

I curled myself under a blanket. My chest hurt, felt like it was collapsing inward. I couldn't stop crying, and I couldn't breathe—not enough air was coming in, and way too much was flying out. She kneeled over me, concerned hand on my shoulder. I couldn't look at her. I was too busy hyperventilating. I managed to communicate to her where my medicine was, and she got it from the bathroom. *Thank you. Thank you.* When the attack started to wane, my body was drained. This pretty girl whose name I don't remember, she petted my bald head, and I felt the entirety of her small hand—warm, soft, and kind. She told me she wasn't even freaked out, that it was fine, it was okay, that maybe she could sleep over, and we could talk about things in the morning. Sorry, I told her, that wasn't a good idea. *Sorry sorry sorry.* I was thoroughly embarrassed. My breathing still erratic, my heart still kicking out of my chest, I tugged my boxers on and stood up, grabbed my cigarettes, and went barefoot out the back door. Late-January: the ground blanketed with a stiff, frozen snow. A smooth sheen of white covering every little rise, fall, or bend in the land. I bent down and dug my hands past the hard surface into the innards. I crouched to try and collect my breath and cupped some snow onto my face. My body was alert. I tingled. Hard, tiny bumps sprouted out of my skin, but I didn't feel the cold. My flaccid

penis, which had just a minute ago been stuck to the hairy skin of my inner thigh, was now retreating inside of me. I lit a cigarette, shaking. I'd been tracking the coywolves in the night all year long—their prolific songs of howl and yip and bark, and then the noisy feeding frenzy that followed when they'd made a slaughter. I hadn't had the time recently to look over my game camera footage, but in the early winter, before Kilimanjaro, I began laying out meat for them—leftover cuts of steak. Sometimes, they ate these; sometimes they left them, like they too were equally as selective about what they consumed. In the winter, they left paw prints in the snow, and I'd follow them and follow them until I got too afraid or till they just vanished—like magic. I was no tracker. These coywolves, they were a different breed and special to me: bigger, thicker, stronger, more muscly things than the coyotes for which they'd been mistaken for decades. *Canis latrans* var. I'd repeated these words in my head for the better part of a year, like a mantra. I grew attached to these creatures—tracking their trails, getting up before sunrise to run up the mountain by my cabin in hopes of maybe seeing one by the lake or turning around to catch one sprinting through the woods after me. I thought in these moments that *wolved-to-death* might be an all right way to go. I thought often of setting traps to catch one—selfishly—just to see the animal up close, the beastly motherfucker with dagger teeth and green eyes and caked blood all around its mouth. I wanted to pet its fur, feel the hair between my fingers, bunch the thick meat of its neck into my grip and pull, understand the power humming in its shoulders, its legs, its jaw as it ran out.

I shivered out of control, my teeth chattered, my whole body alive with goosebumps. My wound ached. My nipples stabbed the frigid winter air, and I covered my chest with my arms, while I crouched and continued to smoke. Hunched into the snow like this, I was a naked monster of my own accord.