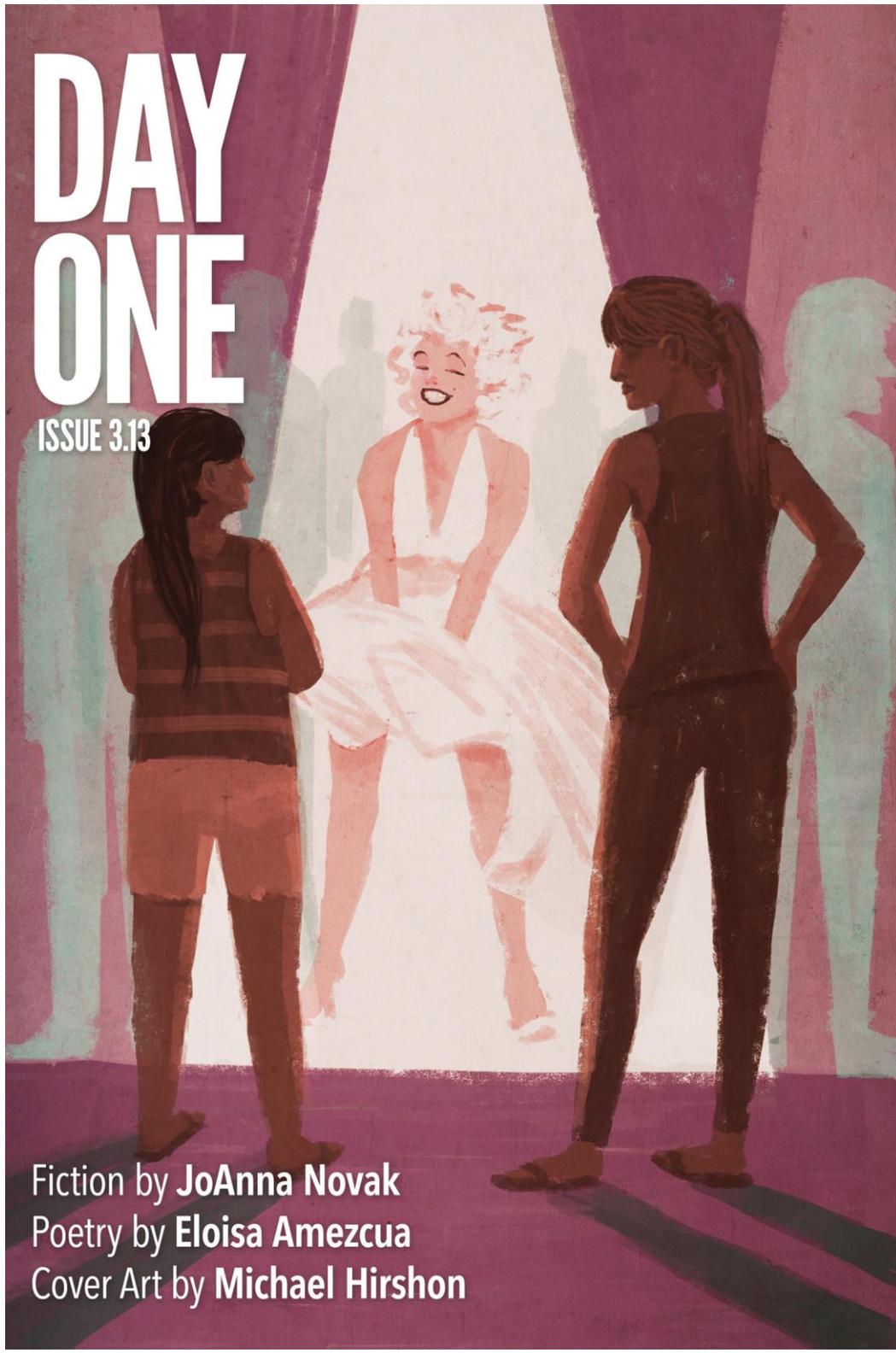


DAY ONE

ISSUE 3.13



Fiction by **JoAnna Novak**
Poetry by **Eloisa Amezcu**
Cover Art by **Michael Hirshon**

In This Issue

Dear Reader,

What I love about this week's story, *Rio Grande, Wisconsin* by JoAnna Novak, is its squirminess. Told in the second person, the story follows the weird, brightly colored world of adolescent Francesca, a world of Hi-C, grass twirling, and Third Eye Blind. Frankie copes with yet another trip to the Wisconsin Dells by ignoring her parents and little brother, fake-sleeping during the car ride, fantasizing about dirty talk with Bill Murray, and disregarding her impending appointment with a psychologist. While her mother wants her to watch her weight, Frankie refuses to police her body. When an unexpected illness forces Frankie and her mom to spend time together, they take a trip to a wax museum that leaves both of them changed.

This week's poem is "E Goes to the Museum" by Eloisa Amezcua. It's full of sparse, tailored lines and sharp descriptions of "white-bellied birds" and "zebra finches." But the poem doesn't only operate on a level of description; it's also littered with moments of profundity, of clarity, creating a gorgeous balance between looking outward and looking inward. Does what we observe in the world, and how closely we do so, inform the way we observe and understand ourselves?

As always, we want to hear from you, and there are several ways to get in touch. You can leave a review on the *Day One* page or on the story's individual page on Amazon. *Day One* stories are available to buy à la carte one week after the issue is released.

E-mail me at dayone-editor@amazon.com with any comments or questions.

Happy reading!
Morgan Parker

Rio Grande, Wisconsin

By JoAnna Novak

The Egg is a prison. The air-conditioning is stuffy and sweet, thick and cold. When you were younger, the windows in the backseat of the station wagon opened in one direction. But in the way back, you're twelve, and the mechanisms have changed. You're getting too old for family. You're not meant for Hi-C, Shark Bites, pretzel rods, snacks. You are a void. You want to swallow everything: cheese spread, plastic straws, chocolate Milk Chugs, the draggy strings off towels.

Menace. You've been called this by your mother and your father, your swim coaches: adults you're stuck with. You have menaced swimmers with grabby hands. You have menaced your house by staying up all night, by flashing Shilpan Patel across the street. You have menaced your mother by being bigger than her. And now you menace the Egg by being yourself, bare feet pressing against the passenger window. You know what you want: you want to push your toe prints onto the glass, shatter the window, and shred your ankles.

"Wanna play mercy?" you ask your brother, Lawrence. His menaces are different than yours: little-boy blunders. Canted smiles and loose teeth. He has flushed a frog down the toilet. (You suggested he was a serial killer in training, which upped your menace.) One more log for your mother's bonfire, the one that'll be doused by the child psychologist she's found for you.

Lawrence leans over the seat. You bend his fingers backward, until his bones crackle like Legos.

"Give in!"

"Yes yes yes—ow!"

"Francesca! Stop tormenting! Don't be—"

Behind her softball-sized sunglasses, your mom's eyes are slits, but you see her disgust: the mirror image of you.

"Why do *you* torment *me*?" Sometimes you imagine you are wearing a plastic space suit to protect yourself against her vitriol, but this vacation, you're getting naked.

"Don't back-talk your mother, Frankie," says your dad. He sits spread-legged, the Midwest map spread across his lap. "Leave your brother alone. You're bigger than all this. It happens again, it's on the list."

Squeeze your eyes shut and pretend to sleep. Dreams taste like Jolly Ranchers, watermelon, at school, where you're not always wrong. School is listless. School is bathrooms and locker rooms, and boys, boys, boys.

The Egg steamrolls through the mysteries of Illinois. Congestion clouds the rickety Spirograph of American Eagle, the wooden roller coaster at Six Flags. The world is smokestacks and malls and outlets, Amoco and Woodfield and Gurnee Mills in hick towns like Rockford and Rockton, Belvidere—home to a Chrysler plant your dad annually points out. He harbors hopes: his daughter might be an athlete (you're a grass twirler). An altar server (you get laugh attacks during homilies). A mathematician, except when he tried to teach you multiplication with As and Xs, you said, "Math, not language arts." He set down his graphite pencil, the eraserless kind for geniuses. You were a disappointment.

You try to sleep, but you are not an easy sleeper, not with the Patels' lights across the street, not with *Private Lives* on the radio, not when you're trying. Trying, you're almost guaranteed to fail. You meet your body: left eyebrow itch, right eyebrow itch, third eye itch, lower left chin itch. You feel woolly. How long since your parents took away your tweezers? You've been forlorn.

Peek at the world: Loves Grove is picnic benches and steel garbage drums out the window. You know the town by its water tower: red bubble letters trapping a heart, the silo dirty-sock white.

Welcome to Wisconsin.

Interstate signs announce Beloit. At a college there, your dad's brother, Pete, smoked away one semester, selling term papers and dime bags out of his sarsaparilla-colored Cadillac. Then Janesville, where the Harley dealership outfitted the entire Novic quartet with screaming eagle T-shirts (yours too tight across the boobs) and you ate your only Wendy's meal (a kids' Frosty and a square cheeseburger).

Your eyeballs burn salty. Your parents think you are asleep. Your parents took your headphones, too—you were "obsessed," your mom claimed. With what? Third Eye Blind? Stephan Jenkins's words, singed on your brain?

You wish *you* could "cut ties"—lies or no lies—at least with your family. Instead, you hear your parents.

"Leave these two in the room and hit the beach? They're old enough. Let's get wild."

"Diane. Nasty mouth. You got a taste for summer? You want me to hide you in the lake? You want me to give you something to drown in?"

“Tell them we’re at Loots. That’ll scare them.”

Two hours from now on River Road, the last turn before the Hotel Rio Grande, your family will drive past the wooden sign for Loots: the forest-green writing, the ivory background, the painterly woodpecker—not a nature preserve or a camping ground, but a supper club. *Are you ready?* your dad will say. *Let’s make it good*, your mom will shout. *Loots salute!* Then, in unison, you four will stick out your tongues. *BOOOO!* You will feel tricked into wholesomeness, togetherness. You will want it. To believe your family is a team.

Loots is gross. You don’t remember the meal or how old you were, just the aftermath: your mom and dad barfing, your brother crying in the hotel bathroom, sick from both ends. You’ve never puked, but still. Bodily expulsion: that’s your Novic thing.

“You know I get hungry in the sticks.” Your mom’s giggles are slutty and delightful, something you shouldn’t hear that gives you hope: someday, you, too, might tread lightly enough in the world to giggle with a man. You peek at her: she’s hair. Hair over the seatback like a blonde pastry, glazed and pear-scented, a curlicuing snail. She’s a fox.

In the middle seat, Lawrence is missing this. He spazzes his Game Boy. Life-preserver headphones bear-hug his skull. You catch weak burps of the Mario theme, the dribble of notes that means Yoshi’s tumbled down a hole.

Your mom’s glance lights on your dad’s lap, where the map bunches everything north of Wisconsin. They’ve been in love since college; they used to camp. They have had children, terriers, houses, cars, a mirror over their bed, a Jacuzzi in their bathroom. Once, you had a friend. Hillary. She came over, and you showed her your parents’ room: the adobe pillars, the sage-green tufted shams. Then your mom walked in when Hillary was telling you how she’d spread peanut butter on her hoo-ha and her dog had licked it off, professing that she, Hillary Zandra Harmon, age ten, loved oral sex. That was the end of friends.

“You’ll be my sugar?” says your mom. “Like the days you used to dance?”

“Di, you know I’ll make it good for you, honey. Big and good.”

Swallow a retch. Two years ago, mistaking this stripper malarkey for truth, you boasted to the swim team about your father being a pediatrician *and* an exotic dancer. When this rumor got back to your mom, she asked you, “Seriously, honey, who made you so dumb?”

Exit thirteen. Cheese Haus, Swiss Maid Fudge, Stein Garden, Cave of Wonders.

Between your thighs, you ride an awkward bump of denim shorts and stifled rage. Under your T-shirt, your sports bra is white cotton, the elastic peeking

through a flesh-colored frown. Tired of listening to your parents' dirty talk, you have been trying to think yourself off.

Goo in your underpants. You need to blot the wet.

Mental masturbation: this is a secret that your parents haven't discovered. The fantasies are you and Bill Murray—in your head you call him Dr. Bob. Dr. Bob is hunky and his specialty is 100 percent Frankie, her eyelash flutters and nose squinches and extra cake-batter lip gloss. He doesn't need a Clearasil blast like seventh grader Ryan MacMahon, your class's most popular kid, whose skin is ground beef. Dr. Bob sees you. He's there for you. He uses you.

The Cheese Haus looks like a chalet, a Bavarian appendage of the gas station. You love things that are versions of something else. Replicas. When you were little, you had a set of Russian nesting dolls that you lined up. It was the largest woman that fascinated you. Her big lips, her almond eyes: she housed all the others.

"Let's get fudge! Or cheese curds?" you ask. You try to remember your place—heading to the Dells with your family. Sitting in a minivan—not Dr. Bob's dingy, cramped, carpeted, crusty-with-instant-coffee office, which smells like caramel and bread, like hiding under an afghan in the center of a rainstorm.

"Frankie, it's a vacation, not a binge," says your mom. "You know you don't want that garbage. Really. We're just getting gas."

This sexy body won sixth place in conference? Dr. Bob says. Fly? You little slut. Lots of hip action with butterfly. He lifts your heavy black ponytail and slings it over your shoulder, princess-style. Beneath your butt, his magic penis transforms into a wand.

Your dad swivels. His minky eyebrows leap over his sunglasses.

"You know that magic ratio of fat to protein? Oh no: we don't need Lare-Man to get his own special gas. Larry Lactose!"

You groan. You too had cutesy nicknames. Frankie-Spanky. Why? You spanked your stuffed animals.

Your brother wears a shirt printed with stegosauruses and a rainbow bucket hat. He can eat sorbet, goat cheese, and soy milk.

You unbuckle. Between your legs is sick-slick, near success.

"Can I go to the bathroom?"

"Di," says your dad. "Frankie's hitting the pot."

The pot is unisex: your bacteria are no different than Dr. Bob's. You hover over the toilet. Your hamstrings quiver. With a wad of toilet paper, you wipe the albumen glop from your crotch.

With your shorts unzipped, you waddle to the sink. On a poster, androgynous hands crawl with amiable germs. In the mirror, you are block shaped, wide without curves, despite the Levi's tag. On the wall behind you, a dispenser sells pads and Rib-Her-Up condoms.

You lean against the sink. Make a fuck-me face, stop your thoughts, be blank. This is what it would be like to be desirable. Sexy.

You have this hobby: you think all the bad thoughts in your mind to prove that you're tough. You don't know why you need this, but you are sure, very sure: you need to be brash. Abrasive. Vile—if it's mother talking. "Facedown on the mattress," sings Stephan Jenkins. *Swoon*. You do it now: oh, you love your stomach, *cummy tum tum*. The skin around your navel, sticky-warm honeycomb. You touch your mound, where the hairs you plucked are already poking back. Nice cum bucket. The first item on your parents' list is *naked at pool*. You would show yourself to anyone. You cock your head at your reflection.

When the Egg stops again, you're at Hotel Rio Grande.

Hola, Wisconsin! In the parking lot, across from the hotel's outdoor water park, taste the cardboard fuzz of waking. Your last week at swim practice springs to mind: before Holly the mannish coach called your parents and told them you were the only thirteen-and-under girl—actually, the only girl—showering "au naturel." And another complaint: the phone call from Mrs. Dickinson, delicate Claire's mother, Claire who has a blue vein waltzing across her forehead and toenails so long they remind you of piano keys.

"You disturbed a sensitive girl with your exhibitionism": that's what your mom told you.

"We're here, here, here!" yells Lawrence. He flips into the way back. He lands on you, and you feel how small he is. Your body is sluggish, a lumpy tube. "Frankie, you missed Loots salute."

"Why didn't you guys wake me up?"

"We've seen it lots of times. Big dealio. You wanna see the lake, too?"

Your parents no longer camp near or fish or swim in open bodies of water. If you swam naked, your vagina might swallow a minnow. The hotel is lungs, pink and adobe-style, with cinnamon terra-cotta roofs. Behind a red fence, the water park is Southwest on steroids: An upside-down sombrero rains Listerine-blue water, and a sea of saguaro cacti shoot Super Soaker streams into the cloudless, shimmery Wisconsin sky. From palm tree—disguised loudspeakers comes a double-time techno remix of "La Bamba."

You are excited—for tube slides, dunking station, wave pool, secret nachos—until you remember the list. The stack of grievances is a report card, one

your parents are keeping: enough bad grades and you'll be barred from adulthood. You get out of the Egg and stretch, arching your back. The sun is already hot.

"That's all new this year," your mom says. "There's a fitness center, sunrise yoga on the pavilion. That's what I'm psyched for. *Vinyasa* in the Dells? Gila Monster's Juice Bar? Delicious. That's for Frankie and me."

"Frankie and I," you say.

"No, sweetheart." Her voice is taut. She's so pretty, you forget she's smart. "You're wrong. We're the object: Frankie and *me*."

While your parents check in, Lawrence and you browse. Once you wind through the Mesa Grille and Pueblo's Lounge (you steal a handful of Gardetto's snack mix, drop everything but the rye chips on the dark carpet), you're at reception and Rio's Grand Bazaar, a glassed-in room smaller than your closet.

"*Don't* break anything," you say. Klutz is your nickname. You're compensating; you know this—you can reflect on your behavior. That shrink will eat up your brain.

But Lawrence is hiding inside a rack of T-shirts printed with the Dancing Cactus show. You hear him inside the hangers.

You examine a purple mesh cover-up with dangling strings and red, green, and yellow beads. More holes than fabric. The merchandise is so trashy. Cheap. Why *do* your parents keep coming back to this hotel?

"*Don't* be a *cooz*," your brother says. He smacks you on the back.

You wince, more than the slap warrants. *You like drama, Spanky*, whispers Dr. Bob.

"What did you call me?"

"A snooze." He shakes a snow globe in your face, shimmying his rump, while glittery flecks of bronze sun rain over a miniature Rio Grande.

Room 705 smells like hair dryer and powdery floral spray to deodorize the last people. There are versions of Novics everywhere, a little nicer, a little meaner. Some of those other yous slept in this room, where the wallpaper zigzags like bleached Tetris.

Your mom whisks off bedspreads and throw pillows from the beds—they look naked and small in their plain white sheets, without their Native American covers.

At the window, you finger the metal-balled chain for the blinds. The view is so private, more hidden than your bedroom window, where Shilpan Patel flashes his camping lantern for a peep show. Here, the swath of evergreens is a patchy quilt sewn with argent gaps of river. It's pretty, and there's no one watching.

Your dad opens the bathroom, tests the fan. He straddles the doorway between abode and commode and clears his throat.

“A man needs to christen his domain.”

“I’m unpacking, Tim. Run the tap.”

“Can you send them—?”

“I’ll get my suit!” yells Lawrence.

“No,” your mom says. “Frankie. Get ice. Bring him, okay? And really: stairs?”

You and Lawrence pass through the hallway barefoot. The wallpaper is corrugated; it makes a snaggy zip under your finger. You touch everything. Your brother runs, leapfrogging the carpet, pouncing on the pattern’s red diamonds.

Someday you’ll be an adult who brings ice to her own hotel room. What will it feel like to come back to your private bed? You’ll lie on the sperm comforter, wedge the dirty sham pillows between your thighs. You picture your adult self: her hips swaying, her helium tits bobbing, a feline smirk splashed across her lips. You’ll be bringing back ice to your lover, Dr. Bob, who’ll age into craggier perfection. *On your knees, Frankie*, he’ll say. *Show me that butt*. And you’ll face the headboard and tip your neck as he slides an ice cube up your spine to your brain stem, erasing every last thought.

“Why do you think McDonald’s makes Dad poop?” Lawrence says.

You stop.

“You guys ate lunch?”

“Dad and I did. Mom stole some fries.”

Inside the stairwell, shiny white paint coats the walls and railings. Lawrence climbs backward. The floor is bouncy like the school gym.

“Lawr, that’s effed.” Your voice echoes. “Why didn’t anyone wake me up? Seriously—Mom and Dad are asking for me to be crazy about, like, everything.”

Your brother brings both feet to each step before continuing. He is small for his age, the shortest kid in his grade, yet his eyes look so adult now they spook you.

“Are you hungry?” He presses the clunky watch that overwhelms his wrist, like the right sequence of buttons might give you superhero powers to eat without getting fat.

You shrug. Yes. No. Yes. Yes. You’d eat an entire bag of chips, a large order of fries, a box of Popsicles . . .

“I’m fine.”

You return to the hallway. As you walk, your footsteps fade, the way a vacuum’s route vanishes. All traces of you are gone—this might be what it would

be like to be totally grown up: you remember you covered familiar ground, but you can't see where or when or how.

You really are hungry. You would eat garbage. You scan for room service leftovers.

The ice machine is in an alcove next to a vending machine. Behind the plastic, gripped by metal springs, the snacks look fake, like the hollow brown chicken drumstick in Lawrence's Fisher Price kitchen set that you tried to convince him to eat. That wasn't on the list, but it could be.

Lawrence touches your arm. "I've got a dollar. I wouldn't tell."

His bill is rumpled and soft, like the inside of a pocket. He holds out his hand.

You remember his hand, when it was the size of a strawberry. You remember him coming home from the hospital, blue and terry-clothed. You were not so bad. You didn't crush his baby fingers in mercy.

"Keep your money. I'll do what Mom does. Ice, ice, baby."

The ice machine grumbles so loud, you and Lawrence laugh. When the ice cubes reach the brim, you take one, pop it in your mouth, and crunch.



That night, the salad bar at the Packinghouse fills a wagon, a replica of a Conestoga. You dribble blue cheese dressing on a plate and lick it off your pinky. Your mom picks mandarin oranges from a vat of Hawaiian salad.

"I'll have another lager," your dad says to the waitress.

"What does that taste like?" you ask. "Can I try?"

Your mom sends telepathic brain waves: *lemon water, lemon water, lemon water.*

"Well, the Point is a pilsner. The nose is hoppy . . . do you know what hops are?"

You feel your brain wandering off, heading to a square dance. Why can't you listen to your dad? You see how happy he is to explain.

"Okay, so otherwise it's really mild. Some might call it weak. To tell you the truth, it's not great, but they've made it like an hour from here since the 1800s."

Your mom: "Frankie, think of beer as liquid fat."

Under the table, you kick Lawrence's calf. *See?* You hope he'll speak up—he's little enough to blurt without being "mouthy"—but he plays dumb. He's stacking butters.

The waitress arrives with a rolling wooden cart. For your brother, Buffalo Chicken Tenders and ketchup. A bison burger and Home-on-the-Range Fries for your dad. Your mom ordered for both of you: two Old World Shrimp Scampis, hold the pasta, extra veg.

“So,” says your mom. “What’s tomorrow’s game plan, Novics?”

You played a round of minigolf before dinner, which she effortlessly won. “Diane the Dynamo,” your dad dubbed her. Now she sips white wine and saws tails off shrimp with the smugness of a lifelong victor. Her nose is mushroom shaped. Otherwise, she’s perfect.

“Water park in the morning, duck tour in the afternoon?” says your dad. He fork-and-knives his burger, stacking each bite with just one cube of Home-on-the-Range Fries and a dab of ketchup. “The forecast is eighties, sunny, but we could try something—rent a paddleboat, a pontoon. See the rock formations over by Ishnala, out on Mirror Lake. There’s a Frank Lloyd Wright house out there. God, for years that place was overgrown. You remember, Di—when we swam out, ditched my mom and dad, summer after college?”

“Mmhm.” Your mom’s throat looks like a flower stem when she swallows.

“Frankie, please—chew your food,” she says.

How can you love her and hate her in back-to-back bites?

“What’s wrong with how I’m eating?”

“It’s not a race. Your body needs twenty minutes to register fullness.”

“Not mine. I know I’m still hungry.”

You had five shrimp; now you have a plate with an oily pool and parsley, and a new item on the list: *instigates arguments with D.*

Your dad grins like a goof. “Tomorrow, then? What’s our decision?”

“I like the duck tour,” Lawrence says.

“We do ducks every year. It’s always the same! ‘Welcome aboard, here’s your quacker. Let’s hear those honks! What do you call a duck on land? A sitting duck. What’s a Wisconsin duck’s favorite snack? Cheese curds and *quackers.*’”

“What do you call a bad sport named Francesca?” Your mom’s tongue wets her lips. “*Quacked up.*”

After dinner, back at the Rio Grande, lights out, a blockade of pillows separating Lawrence’s half of the bed from yours, you listen to your dad’s gargly snore. Moon rays bathe your face. The room is too warm. Behind your knees is sweaty. You can’t get out of bed with everyone there. You picture the dense lace of stars, jam your face into the pillow, and hold your breath.

Someday, you want to forget your only friend before Hillary, Monica Bliss, whose father shot himself in the head while his daughters and you watched the Pet Parade. You were six, focused on the vanilla Tootsie Rolls. You want to forget suicide happened in small houses with pale-green garage doors. You pray to forget the time your father told you that you smelled like a foot. You pray to forget the time you put a rock in Lawrence’s soup, the time you swapped his soy milk with

half-and-half just to see what would happen (vom). To forget rifling through your mom's closet before your birthday, finding a bag of clothes, and then, on the morning you turned twelve, having only an envelope to open, with a brand-new gym-membership card. You pray to forget finding the list in your dad's cell phone while you waited in the car and he went inside to get your mom's Sunday cappuccino, on a dad-daughter date.

If only you could forget everything, you wouldn't have anything to accidentally tell the shrink.

Because more than anything, you pray to forget two months ago, this season of swimming, the first week, which ruined everything. You kept bumping into Amy Doulas's toe during free sets. First she called you a lesbian and then she accused you of being a molester and then she told you she'd have her father sue you for emotional damage. Then, deliberately, you slo-mo flip-turned, used maximum force to push off against her chest. Toffee-skinned Dave, the dive coach, had to give her CPR, and luckily she didn't remember what had happened in the seconds before her blackout. *Fuck me*, you thought. *Fuck her*. *Fuck them all*. That's when you started showering nude.

"Good morning, sleepyheads." Pulled back in a tight ponytail, your mom's blonde hair is seal sleek; her legs are pliers in yoga pants. Your thighs are blubbery.

"Babe," your dad says, rolling over. On his stomach, he doesn't have a belly. "How late did we sleep?"

"Eight, and I'd say let's get a move on. You guys better be ready for some heat!"

In the bathroom, you change into your team swimsuit. A neon-orange tidal wave stretches across your stomach. Your breasts tug the neck low. You pout at your reflection, tongue around your mouth. Then, in the mirror, you see it. Flesh where there shouldn't be flesh. Not cleavage: side boob.

There is a knock.

The side boob isn't supple like the front of your breasts or puffy like your nipples. It's colder, paler than the rest of you, dead flesh. You pull the suit aside; the side boob hangs like a flap. You try to tuck it in, but the side boob refuses to stay within the fabric.

"Frankie," your mom says, rapping on the door. "Let me see you."

She's already in her black one-piece. Her face is radiant, the apples of her cheeks naturally red violet. She looks at you like you're one more germy pillow on the bed, a germy pillow that needs to get back in the bathroom.

"Do you want to wear one of your dad's T-shirts?" she says.

"This isn't *Heavyweights*, jerk."

“Well, you can’t go exposing yourself, Frankie.”

“We don’t know these people.”

“Exactly. Have some self-respect.”

During adult swim, you watch adults wade into the water, slowly, like it is boiling syrup. The women keep their sunglasses on. The men have chests. “Christmas in July” is today’s theme, according to the cabana deejay. Every hour, on the hour, he plays “Feliz Navidad.”

For these fifteen minutes, you are in charge of Lawrence. He sits next to you, tunneling a finger into his ear. Watery redness washes his eyes, and when he coughs his wussy chest shivers. You want to thump it, hear his empty sound.

“Look at Mom and Dad.”

When they aren’t across the table, you do love them: your dad, wearing his father’s gold crucifix, floating on his back and disappearing underwater to tickle your mom; and your mom, laughing to captivate him, like she’s never had one bad thought.

You sigh. “They’re so in love.”

“Can I go to the cactuses? That’s open for kids.”

“*Cac-ti*. And isn’t that for babies?” In the cactus grove, mothers in skirted swimsuits lead water-winged toddlers through the streams spurting from plastic plants.

“Come with, Frankie. Don’t be dumb.”

“I’m not dumb. I’m resting. You go. I’ll watch.”

Your brother dashes off. You roll over onto your belly. Your skin is slimy from sunscreen. You remember other summers, without lists. You two dove for glow-in-the-dark water rings, snapped Airheads back and forth until the candy shrunk.

Lawrence runs to a cactus, perches on the jet of water, and jumps.

“Frankie,” he yells. “I stop it with my butt!”

“*Cinco, cuatro, tres, dos, uno!*” says the deejay. Children bombard the pools and “La Bamba” begins again.

Your mom slinks toward you. A shabby-haired lifeguard, probably a couple grades older than you, checks her out.

“Where’s your towel, Francesca?” Hers is wrapped twice around her body, knotted sarong-style at her waist.

“In the hampers?”

She frowns.

“I’m tanning.”

“There are kids at this pool.”

“You think?”

“Francesca, do you need to be argumentative?”

You flip over, prop yourself onto your elbows, and arch your back. You thrust your boobs. *That’s it*, says Dr. Bob. *Show those vacation dads!* You tip your head skyward, your eyes looking so far back you can see the jagged overhang of your own eyebrows. *Provokes family members without reason.* Your mom—her chubby nose, her hacksaw collarbones—can bite you.

“Francesca. I’m going to ask you one more time, and then we’re packing up. Done. Going home. And that appointment is ASAP. Not two days from now. Tell me what you did. What happened to your brother?”

“What did I do?” Your voice gets higher and louder. “How should I know? Why do you think I’d hurt my own brother? C’mon . . . Say something!”

Your mother scowls and scowls and scowls.

While you were at the pool, housekeeping remade the room. You sit on the filthy Navajo comforter while your mom stands at the foot of her bed, feet wide, the ready position you crouch into on the block. When she’s angry, your mom’s features aren’t striking. They’re stern, carved out, and she’s wet, haggard, stringy arms folded across her chest like twine.

Slopping, gaseous dumps blast through the walls: you hear. Your dad, who’s been in there with Lawrence, has emerged to say, eyes on the carpet, “Watery stool, explosive.”

The room reeks.

“I don’t have anything to say to you,” your mom says finally.

“Why is everything always on me? Maybe he drank milk!” You pull a loose thread in the hem of the bedspread; alone, you’d tear it with your teeth. “Why is his diarrhea my fault?”

“Diane!” your dad calls.

Your mom is so squeamish, she didn’t breast-feed. She takes two backward steps toward the bathroom.

“He gave himself an enema!” Your dad sounds impressed. “You know those cactus shooters! Lare! Little dude! You’re in for a rough afternoon.”

“Tim, it’s not funny. Is he going to be okay? Should we go to a hospital?”

“We’re good, Di.” Your dad comes out of the bathroom and wraps his arms around her, rubbing wings across her shoulder blades. She rests her head on his flubby chest.

“Hey—why don’t you girls take off for the afternoon? This has to run its course. No use you holing up. Have fun!”

You consult Dr. Bob. He's hornier than ever. *Frankie, open wide*. In this situation, he finds generosity sexy. Selflessness, a turn-on. Isn't that the principle behind giving it up?

"C'mon, Mom." You take a deep breath of charity. "Let's go, me and you."

Driving down River Road, you and your mom don't salute Loots. The sign is hieroglyphics in the rearview. You sit in your dad's spot.

Your mom clenches the wheel. Her thinness makes her transparent: the grit of teeth through her cheeks, the sallow peaks of her knuckles. You see everything about her, how relentlessly she tries, supergluing a smile on her face, striving to be a perfect mom-shaped robot whose affection appears as infrequently as Shilpan's penis, which he withholds, always, waiting for you to give him more, turn around, touch your tits, spank yourself.

You breathe. You feel . . . well. All right.

You pass marinas. The dinky River Road Motel, with its sad swing sets and sandboxes in the front yard. You decide something, once and for all: you aren't afraid of talking to Dr. Orland or whatever shrink comes next. There will be more. Men in chairs in offices. Bring them on. You will lie. You will do whatever you must to keep yourself yourself. You will say you *don't* want to tweeze the hair off your body. You will say showering naked *does* make you an exhibitionist. You won't mention Amy Doulas. You won't mention Third Eye Blind or the Internet or Shilpan or Dr. Bob or the school bathrooms. You don't need therapy: you need space, a family that accepts you—a hefty girl growing into a buxom woman. That's the secret of adulthood: leave your past behind. Soon real lovers, rough, ready men, men manlier than Dr. Bob, will pleasure every inch of you, curves and rolls and dimples, all the filth between your thighs. Your body doesn't belong to your parents or your brother or a therapist: it's yours.

"Strip traffic sucks." Your mom's ponytail is low on her neck. With mussed hair, she looks like a mom.

With you, you realize, she might always be Mom—never Diane.

"It's giving me a stomachache. Stop and start, stop and start."

"What did I say about hotel scrambled eggs?"

"I had an omelet."

"Oh . . . That's right."

"With veggies." *Broccoli!* You want to shout, but your mom's chin is puckered; she's about to cry. "Lare will be okay. Dad'll take care of him. He has Gatorade in the cooler."

"I try," your mom says. "I really try."

The Egg turns onto the strip. Here is what you missed yesterday: duck tours, Wax World, Haunted Trails, Pirate's Cove, Feed and Pet the Deer. Corny Maze, Family Land, Noah's Ark, Wonder Spot. Maple fudge and saltwater taffy. A&W. KFC. Culver's. Zinke's, the only grocery store. Tommy Bartlett. Moccasins, temporary tattoos, airbrushed fanny packs, lanyards, key chains, muscle tees, tomahawks.

There's an open parking spot on Broadway, the main drag. Your mom angles in. The world is wild outside the Rio Grande. The thought feels real and stupid—what is this, stranger danger? But there are so many people—in so many kinds of shorts—flooding the sidewalk. It's overwhelming. For a sec, you envision the Egg backing up and driving to the Interstate, you and your mom, forgetting the men.

“Let's walk,” your mom says.

“For what?”

“Just . . . for walking? Walking to walk. Try it, Francesca. Good for the mind and the quads.”

At J. T. Buckley's Photo, kids with retainers and polycarbonate glasses try to keep straight faces in overcoats and hoop skirts and sausage curls. You flash a jealous smile at them through the window.

“Lice,” your mom says. “I see your eyes on those wigs.”

A shop that sells only baseball hats. Twenty-four colors of spray-flavored popcorn. Dream catchers with the Chicago Bears logo woven in blue and orange crystals. At the box office for Ghouls of Lake Delton, a line of people snakes around itself: parents flapping brochures, kids chewing glow sticks. You pause at Marge's Sundry Shoppe. Cheese curds?

“Give it up, Frankie. You'll thank me one day for everything decent about your skin.”

“Why?”

“Because dairy is a poison that our government subsidizes out the—”

“It's on the food pyramid.”

“Sweetheart. Don't be gullible.”

Wax World it is.

The entrance takes you through a heavy burgundy curtain. Inside is a mash-up of a museum and a dungeon and a haunted house, how you imagine strip clubs. Men have sex with blow-up dolls: What about with wax? Everything smells like pee and 7Up and cherry Life Savers: cloying and good.

Your mom tromps up a ramp, through a medieval door, toward a muffled sound. The first exhibit is Rock and Roll. The statues are as real as corpses—at least your grandpa's, the only dead person you've seen. His corpse wasn't him—he was overrugged, friendly, not his usual gruff police officer self. Here at Wax

World, each figure is almost lifelike, *except* for a cheery flush in the cheeks, a dumb beadiness in the pupils.

“The Monkees!” For the first time since she sank a putt in the windmill at minigolf, she sounds elated; she shimmies her hips to “Daydream Believer” playing from an orange stage. “I *loved* them! Did you know? Would you believe *your* mom wrote a letter to *the* Davy Jones? He was my junior high crush.”

Mr. Jones, you think, meet Dr. Bob. You imagine sliding into a time machine, a funicular like the one your family piled into to see Witches Gulch: Would you and your thirteen-year-old mom be friends? Or would she pariah you like Amy Doulas?

In the Ole Opry section, your mom scowls at a blonde in a blue rhinestoned pantsuit. “Dolly Parton. Looks like her waist’s life-size.”

“How does she stand up?” you say. “With that rack?”

“Frankie!”

Except for Ringo, the Beatles are scary, as expressive as toasters. Elvis is molded into an avocado sofa, shotgun cocked at a smoking television set. Zirconia twinkle on Michael Jackson’s glove.

You push through a red velvet curtain into Old Hollywood. Inside a big video camera like the one your parents used to set up on Christmas, a reel ticks.

“Frankie, my dear, I don’t give a damn,” your mom says. You smile. She smiles. Maybe, maybe, you are on the same team.

You inch through movies. What will you do if you see Bill Murray? You imagine leaping the velvet ropes, humping frantically, grinding, the way you weren’t allowed to at swim team preteen parties.

Frankie, Frankie, Frankie. Show me Shilpan’s secret sauce, Dr. Bob whispers.

Shut up, you think. What if he melted? If you toppled him with thrusts? *Don’t be here.*

He isn’t. Instead of Bill Murray, three John Travoltas wink their cleft chins: one leathered from *Grease*, one in *Saturday Night Fever* disco garb, one from *Pulp Fiction*, a film you weren’t allowed to see.

“Marilyn!” you gasp. Stunning women always captivate you. You’re surprised by the soul in zombie Norma Jeane. Her eyes are needy and sad. She presses her white dress; a gust blusters through an air vent. Her cleavage rounds beyond her halter: utterly sexy side boob. “She’s beautiful.”

Your mom sniffs. Her gaze finds the ceiling, which billows with black fabric. “If you like girls like that, Frankie.”

“Like what?”

Your mom’s eyes trace the blinking white lights outlining the exhibit. Up ahead is the macaroni-and-cheese-colored yellow brick road. You still have

Americana (Presidents and Politics). You still have Circus Freaks. Jungle Fever. Oriental Express. Wildly Wild West. Tales from the Crypt.

“Like what?” you say. You set a hand on your waist and grip your flesh. There’s plenty of it. You have ample skin. Protection. “Don’t ignore me. If I like women like what?”

“If you like girls, angel.” Your mom gives you a look like a nudge. “Like Amy?”

“Because because because because because—because of the wonderful things he does!” sings a tinny, analogue, sugary bow-and-arrow soaring through Wax World. Families have been here—you can tell by the ground, the Now & Later–wrapper confetti. Little kids. Velcroed to parents. Juicy Juice mouths and cotton candy fingers. Unconditional love.

“What about Amy? Who told you about Amy Doulas?”

She looks shocked. “Francesca. Why do you think your father and I want you to see a therapist? You’re acting out, and we . . . we think it’s because there’s something . . . something sexual you’re trying to suppress. To hide. Or express. We *did* know.”

“You think I’m a lesbian? You two are homophobic jerks!”

“No, honey, we—you’re a bright girl: you shouldn’t have to be cloistered in some closet.”

You walk. Then you run—past Indiana Jones clutching a coil of rope; past chattering chimpanzees playing against a desert backdrop painted with a fire-red pyramid, the site of some virgin sacrifice; past a pair of toddlers hiding behind their unremarkable mother, who scoots them back to Oz as you charge out of Wax World.

Your mom follows you onto the strip. She is fleet and fragile. Her bones blink like cursors in the sudden daylight. She puts her cold hand on you, and her touch is tickly and awful as the ostrich-feather duster she hands you before Christmas company comes over. You yank away and she tries to keep hold of you and you draw your shoulder back like you’re about to do freestyle and you push her, hard, and she staggers backward, into a wide peach-haired man in a sleeveless sweatshirt emblazoned with the Snickers logo.

“Don’t touch me, cum bucket!” you scream. The man’s pockmarked face is scared. You point at him. “Trash!”

“Francesca!” she says. Her eyes bug, aquamarine and freakish. She’s breathless. “What are you . . . we . . . want to make sure you’re expressing in appropriate ways. If you’re confused, you don’t always know—I care about you, and I want to make sure whatever’s on your mind goes away while you’re still a normal, healthy girl. Francesca, please—you don’t need to take this out—”

Done is done. You dart into a crosswalk and run. It's so much harder than swimming. Air is all around you. You don't have to gulp—but you still do. You gulp for a breath. You're sprinting down Broadway, fast—maybe faster than your mother. You skirt crowds of sweating laughing gawking sniffing coughing eating kissing tourists under the fat Wisconsin sun, heavy and hot love all around, the sidewalk jammed with vacation: tank tops with swim trunks, flip-flops and baseball hats, caramel-colored women in stringy Day-Glo bikinis.

Dr. Bob massages your temples as you sit on the pot at Zinke's, the only grocery store in the downtown Dells.

Let it out, sugar cheeks. You did good. One hundred percent grown-ass, he says. Emphasis on the ass-isis.

You don't have change for a pay phone. No school ID or library card. You and the Egg are through. This is the toilet at the market where your family has bought plastic silverware and stinky white bread and Peter Pan crunchy for day-trip sandwiches. Behind the deli counter, across from a break room blaring Rick Springfield, in a bathroom with a checklist and a blue ballpoint dangling from the door, you try to forget your parents and Lawrence, "cut ties" with lies who might be trying to find you, lies waiting for you to eat dinner and lose at minigolf and slumber beneath Rio Grande germs.

Whatever, family. On the pot you spread your legs. You squeeze a fistful of flesh on your thighs, fulvous from the sun. The burn hurts. A giant water blister will cover it. A skin sheet. A liquid pouch. It will be disgusting and fragile. Satisfying to peel off.

Your fingers spider-walk over your labia. Inside, the skin is hot and moist and red and pebbly, a gross-out exhibit in the children's zoo. In shampoo commercials, orgasmic pleasure is an ice cream sundae, a hair toss, a rain forest beating with quetzals and waterfalls and Spanish orchids. Your pleasure, when it comes, and it will come, will smell like Zinke's: potato salad and lunch meat, Daisy bologna.

My behemoth, Dr. Bob whispers as you stroke yourself. My Amazon, my Xena. You picture your mother, like a leopard or a panther, sleek and dazzled with dewdrops, bounding through the rain forest, swinging from vines, her triceps stapled with muscle. She is looking for you, calling for you, asking the fuchsia flowers and the mossy stones and the braided roots and the three-toed sloths if they've seen you, if they've heard your Frankie footfalls. But you're sneaky, a swimmer, lithe in liquids. There are rivers and lakes and lagoons, coves your mother's never seen—cold, dark whirlpools where you can be a friend to the minnows and lesser fish.

E Goes to the Museum

By Eloisa Amezcua

I find the term *natural history*
problematic

taxidermic animals
giraffes & sea turtles

with Linnaean names
phylum order family genus

a wall of venomous snakes
their fangs & jaws labeled

the shark teeth tell stories
I want to learn by heart

*

two zebra finches starved
by the window in the kitchen

a family gone for the weekend
& I seven years old

forgot to feed them
I pulled the dead things

from their cage held white-bellied
birds in small hands

*

children & parents spill out
of the entrance

the world knows of me
what I do not know of myself

Three Questions with JoAnna Novak

What inspires you to write?

Considering this question follows *Rio Grande, Wisconsin*, I feel I should mention a specific anecdote: a couple weeks ago, I got home from work, and I was in my car in my parking spot in the lot down the block from my building when “Never Let You Go” by Third Eye Blind came on the radio. I turned off the engine, turned up the volume, and let myself be emotionally battered by the music. I have no particular story behind or connection to that song, but it’s one of those experiences—and I have a lot of these—that makes me feel devastated and swept up in what’s possible and everything in between. I wrote down that I wanted to explore how that song did that, but I probably won’t pursue that inquiry. Instead, I seek things like that to elicit my biggest, rangiest emotions, which almost always inspire me to write. I should mention that every day, I find myself feeling so intensely—sometimes about the most mundane things, like the presence of mini-muffins at a meeting—that I’m always taking notes. That isn’t to say that mini-muffins inspire the same passion as Third Eye Blind or that Third Eye Blind evokes the same emotions that direct human interactions do, but just that the world presents many, many, many occasions that make me want to respond.

What is your writing process?

I usually write the first draft of something—a story, a poem, even a novel—relatively quickly: a day, an hour, a couple months. I reread the whole draft each time I start working on it again, whether it’s fiction or nonfiction, so every day I find myself at the beginning again, which sometimes makes the process seem like it takes longer than it really does. I do take notes, very randomly and haphazardly—title ideas and observations and bits of overheard speech—and sometimes those things end up in manuscripts. Not always. Lately I’ve been writing short stories by hand, in one sitting. I don’t think I’d written anything that wasn’t an in-class essay for an exam to completion by hand since elementary school, and I’m enjoying how writing in cursive in a notebook influences my prose. I also like how there’s a built-in editing step when composing in longhand. Stories that I can finish in a single sitting usually feel, at least to me, very cohesive.

What are you working on now? What’s next for your writing?

I completed edits on a novel called *Real Talk* a couple weeks ago, so I still feel like I'm living with that work and in that time. The book is set in 1999, and to revise, I immersed myself in teen culture of that decade (this is a perk of being a writer, as far as I can tell). I listened to only '90s music, watched '90s movies, and revisited my favorite '90s slang and fashion. I teach, too, and a strange thing was leaving my car, with Kurt Cobain blasting, and then walking into a classroom full of college students who weren't around during the years I was so invested in. That felt good. It felt like I had a secret '90s life. Still, I'm trying to return to the present. I'm working on linked stories and an essay about cynical cooking.

Four Questions with Eloisa Amezcua

Tell us about this poem.

This poem is part of a series of “E” poems in which E does all types of things, from watching her mother get ready for a night out to eating a burger at the airport before boarding a flight. It’s a snapshot of the anxiety we feel going into a museum where everything is displayed and labeled and dead—the way E remembers feeling when she came home to the poor finches she starved as a kid.

What inspires you to write?

I’m not too sure, but I do have this innate desire, almost compulsion, to define the world around me and my experiences in the world. I think it also has to do with control—through poetry, I am able to manage where the poem is going and assert agency through language, form, content, et cetera.

What is your writing process?

Poems for me start with sound—either a word or phrase that I can’t get out of my head for days. From there, it’s fairly associative as far as content goes. I’m not too sure where the poem is going to end when I sit down—I write toward an ending. But in reality, the biggest part of my writing process is revising. It’s like being in a house and closing all the doors and windows that I don’t want the reader to go into or look out of, and creating this room, this space, where the poem lives. I’m fairly obsessive. It’s a long process.

What are you working on now? What’s next for your writing?

I’m currently working on sending out my chapbook titled *On Not Screaming*. I also do some work in literary translation (from Spanish into English). Right now, I’m translating the poetry of two Mexican writers, Abigael Bohórquez and Ethel Krauze.

JoAnna Novak

JoAnna Novak is a writer of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and the editor of *Tammy*. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in the *Atlantic*, *Bomb*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Guernica*, the *Rumpus*, *Diagram*, *Quarterly West*, and the *Los Angeles Review*. Novak is the author of four chapbooks, and her first full-length collection of poetry will be published in 2016.

Eloisa Amezcua

Eloisa Amezcua is an Arizona native. She completed the MFA program at Emerson College and works in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her poetry and translations have been published or are forthcoming in *Boatt*, the *Boiler*, *Cider Press Review*, and other publications. You can find her at www.eloisaamezcua.com.

Michael Hirshon

After a nomadic childhood spent doodling, eating, sleeping, and growing, Michael Hirshon ended up in Saint Louis, where he studied illustration and design. He's currently in New York City, in the illustration as visual essay master's program at the School of Visual Arts. His clients include the *New York Times*, American Express, the *Washington Post*, and AARP. His work has been recognized by the Society of Illustrators, *3x3*, *American Illustration*, *Creative Quarterly*, *CMYK*, and AIGA. To learn more about Michael, visit www.hirshon.net.

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