

Finalist

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1970s conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader is twenty-seven when he dedicates himself to falling. His project is not metaphorical. He films himself—falling from a tree, a rooftop. From standing at rest. At twenty-seven I am dedicating myself to holding on. I have a one-year-old. In eight months his father will leave, causing an equal and opposite reaction in myself. “I will never let you go,” I whisper in my toddler’s ear. A promise.

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What fascinates Ader is not the fall itself, but the tenth of a second that precedes it. The moment you decide to commit, throw yourself into freefall. I wonder what goes through my husband’s mind the moment he lets go and the idea of leaving crosses from idea to plan. The instant he removes the first hanger from the closet, places the first object inside a suitcase. Is it a comb? A toothbrush? When is he certain he’ll go through with it? When he closes the door behind him? Or the moment before, when he glances around a half-empty apartment and realizes he no longer lives there?

I remember the exact moment I decide to hold on. It isn’t during pregnancy. The baby is still the idea of a baby. Nothing personal. Neither is it the moment I first see him. He is all throat raging in the center of a red, puffy face. “That’s an ugly baby,” I tell the doctor. But it happens. There is a moment, not soon after, when I realize: This baby needs me. I am the one person who will never leave.

I'm standing before a classroom of U.S. History students when I find out my husband has left. There's a knock at the door; a student he has intercepted outside the school hands me a letter: *As you read this I will be on my way out of your life.* I search for a signature. Who would send such a letter?

I wonder if my husband imagines, when he writes it, that he will deliver it. Does he imagine, too, that I will read it? Does he picture how my knees will buckle, how the weight of those words will drag me to the floor even as another part of me steps out of that body, continues moving, this new body's voice excusing me from the classroom, its hand turning the doorknob, legs carrying me to the principal's office and out into the rain?

Only later will I remember the cacophony of car horns and traffic, the assault of rainwater sloshing over the curb, soaking my shoes. Only later will I think how I might have called a cab. It will be years before I learn about Ader—how, for his final fall, he attempts to cross the Atlantic in a thirteen-foot sailboat and falls off the edge of the earth. At the time, all I know is that I cannot fall. My baby and I live north. I start walking.

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