

THE FAILURE AGE



AMANDA MONTEI



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"I am hairless! Thank you drugstore!" She walks with a certain kind of pomp. "It's like, the yacht is calling me!" (A yacht draped with silk and Swarovskis?) "The yacht is a stand-in," she says. "But this is the beginning of a journey. I can feel it." Wondering if she should unravel her coiled braid, she steps into pools of water, no coat to cover, no man to rescue. "I wish there were lily pads all around me," she says. "Lily pads would make the environment delicate. Exotic even." Calves wet, she is walking on an absolute poem of land, her legs effulgent. (There is a chasm beyond the bend and it will remind her.)

**H**er husband is lying on the bearskin rug. He is motioning with his hand. "Come here! Come tickle me!" She is so happy. She is never angry. Occasionally, her husband massages her. Occasionally, they watch television. The woman on TV says that she is "not here to make friends." She is here to be "iconic." She is not here to find a husband. She is here to overcome.

**S**ometimes, the woman and her husband venture out to the park. Watch the dirty ducks. There are always poets reading on a blanket, telling each other what they see. She envies them. The poets point out the homeless. (They only want to *understand* the homeless.) They say, "Gentrification." (And: "The book is dying the novel is dying characters dying only poetry can remain." "Your work is devoid of what they call *purple* but also of what they call *blue*." "Poetry is dead and everyone wants to believe they killed it.") The woman buys a Moleskine. She wants to write, but she has recently quit smoking. Her loins are wasted. She tells her husband, "My loins are wasted!" He says he is an aesthete, he needn't write to prove it! "Your loins are beautiful! Are you fishing?" "I can't get above it," she says. "And also, my head will never be a hat-wearing head." Sigh.

**M**other used to faint after baths. Mother's ex-husband wanted to buy Mother a boob job. Mother told the woman this over Lemon Drops, on a steamboat in the Caribbean. The woman was a girl then. (Mother also told her that boats were cloud factories, that boats were a kind of God.) "Uncoil your hair and let me tell you a story," Mother said, "of the day my EKG was abnormal." Mother's heart was broken but she played "guts ball" with it all her life. She did not have a boob job in the end. The doctors insisted on a pacemaker but Mother did not want to rely on anything but what God gave her. "But what does it feel like to have a broken heart?" (Like galloping?) "Like a void, of course."

"I want to be iconic." The woman tells her husband this while she is slicing into yogurt. "I simply can't get above it!" He is on the bearskin rug. He is smoking. She spreads yogurt on him. "How did you learn to spread so well?" he says. "You cover every part. You never miss one part." (Her hair is in her eyes, what a curse.) "It's intuitive," she says. He tells her that intuiting is nothing to tout. "It's only irrational functioning after all." She is all fiery. "It isn't true! And besides, the strangest thing of all of the things is that time passes." She sighs. "But I suppose that's okay. It passes pretty quietly."

**S**he is dressing in leather, he is cinching her in, when the wings of the apartment cordon off abruptly. He says, "Get in!" She says, "I'm trying!" The binding snaps. Something about breathing is foreign and heavy. Her vision restored. It is always on her mind, whether she is breathing right. She has taken up jogging, carrying pounds of stones inside her pockets. She heard weight makes time more hellish. Hellish is good, they say. ("Exasperation is the new clarity.") Especially if you want to dress in leather. He folds paper furiously on the rug. She joins him and they make cootie catchers with paper, the kind they made as children. She thinks of Mother, how she snatched these fortune tellers from her girl-hands. She tries to pinpoint the failure age, how she might calculate days of rest.

**T**he eaves outside the apartment shudder. She is reading "Timeless Tips." Something about the dumbest thing you can do to your boobs? He says, "It must be to let them shrivel. To let time do a number." And then, "You should eat this pickle. You should eat it slowly." He makes wide eyes at her. She likes pickles because they remind her of aging. When she was a girl, she used to eat the pickle skin before the jellied seeds. "I looooooved seeing inside," she says. "I looooooved seeing what you don't usually get to see." (She sleeps longer deeper when she loves things.) They inspect each other's genitals. "The opera," she says, "now *that's* timeless." (The bust of those singers, like blankets unfolding.)

**H**e is trying to give himself oral on the rug. "It's yogic!" he says. She is working on a Jell-O mold the size of the sun. She is making tomato aspic, the color of the sun. She is burning between her legs, the burning like the sun. She is touching herself and feels like she is elbow deep in sun. The bear head is turning, craning. He is masturbating on the rug, his phone tuned to mobile porn. She can feel her proprioceptors working as she stirs and stirs, dissolving Jell-O crystals. (What if you were always looking down a well, pondering the fall? Couldn't that get to be a little crazy? Wouldn't you think about the kind of light you would meet at the bottom? Wouldn't you think about the jutting stones, which you might chip an elbow on? On the way down? Sure you would.)

**T**hey fill the apartment with organics, nestling into a carpet of peaches. "You are bruising them," she says. "Be gentle. They don't have preservatives to protect them." Skins fade, go brown and soft. She has heard that in New York you can rent walls. She has heard that good people drink green tea. She has heard so many things about wrinkles. (What to believe?) He is deep under now, sleeping on his rug, peach juice all around him. Her feet soften. She sees a man just outside their window. He is carrying a water bottle in a crochet pouch. (Water in baby socks.) Flesh and fur in her toes.

"I want to be fondled by academia *and* religion," she says. "One shouldn't have to choose." He says this does not make sense, like saying *fuck* when something feels good and also when you stub your toe. She must make up her mind. It's only rational. At the park, a white-bearded man mutters in Spanish every day. The man hands out letterpress broadsides, folded in half. (Messages from God, she can tell.) The man never approaches her, never harangues her, and this sad pattern has been with her for days. "I mean, is God having a closeout sale? Or is he just into gift economies?" (She wants to ruffle the dirt out of the man's snowy chin.) "Where do you think he sleeps?" she says. "Who do you think he loves? Hasn't God a message for me?"

**S**he can't stop thinking about the poem she read. About the girl who gets bleach water thrown on her feet. (They're cleaning the street?) The poem never addressed what happened to the girl-feet afterwards. Whether they singed right off, or whether they turned all white. He has taken up the violin, and plays it now on the rug. Says the sound of the strings is what he imagines the inside of letting go feels like, though he wouldn't know. (Aging is hard for him, too.) "What would it be like to walk around with absent feet?" she says. "Would it feel like floating?" He offers nonchalance like an hors d'oeuvre. On a platter. "I've always wanted to touch myself in front of you," she says, and feels something like relief.

**S**he sits balled up, walled in with couch cushions all around her, in an acetaminophen high. She has been taking Tylenol for days. She is trying to feel her body that deeply. He is busy learning a concerto. He is weeping. She bargains a dance. "You know," she says, "a saint relenting doesn't ever wear a bra, have you noticed? Though once I think I made out a sheen on some ethereal stained glass lips." "I think I have carpal tunnel," he says. "I'm having real trouble holding this bow." He has lived too long. His body is rejecting the violin, the wallowing sound. "Why is it that people think they understand their bodies?" she says. "Like, how can you know that your insides yearn for a green smoothie?" She dreams of mail order roses, and of mail order fruit shaped like roses. He eats the violin bit by bit. He yearns for music. "Like the man that ate the airplane! I will eat the music if I cannot play it!"

"Is there something inside you?" She says she hopes so, but he means he can feel something. "One of those rings? A tampon maybe?" She pushes him off, gazes at the clouds. (He once told her that a cloud is just a tuft of snowflakes. What a cold place!) He gets bigger day by day on that rug. "We can split some SpaghettiOs now," she says. He gesticulates an aria about a woman he saw touching herself. He speaks of Meg Ryan and how she is not beautiful. "Yet our sad trust in that plastic face is fraternity, isn't it?" She buries her head in Tylenol. His familiar fingering like a tremor. "Come quell this latent infancy," she says. "Come share with me a nondinner."

**H**e is indolent on the bearskin rug. "You must have received a malediction," she says. "Perhaps what you need is soup, beautiful soup, the kind of soup you could float edible flowers in. The kind of soup that has beef from far far away, all red and raw and marbled with fat! If you give me some time, I can make a soup that will smell like boyhood, like your days on that green-lit porch swing, when you used to watch your legs dangle. When you used to watch your feet stretch towards the floor, knowing your toes couldn't touch ground, but aching for contact just the same? I shall make you a soup delicious enough to win all the cooking competitions!"

**S**he asks an old woman in the park what she loves. The old woman shakes her head. "Why, nothing." The old woman goes on feeding filthy ducks, and then the old woman changes her mind. "It's Queen Anne's lace," the old woman says. With resolve. Her face sobering. "And I once thought I might be able to love another woman." The young woman doesn't know that Queen Anne's lace is a flower, but she pretends she knows something about it, and decides to Google it later. (A doily-type thing the old woman might wear on her bony shoulders, an old delicate shawl that would break apart in her hands?) "I am sick of my heavy breath," the young woman tells the old woman. In the apartment, he puts his fingers deep inside her, hooks them. "I am not an excavation site!" she says.

**T**he woman's favorite thing is cats that bat at your hand but really they're just batting at the air. "It's sweet the way it seems they're always grabbing at something they can't quite touch." His favorite thing is the bearskin rug, natch, which he dusts with a feather duster daily. His second favorite thing is unexpected eye contact. "It's glorious when you realize you have sexual tension with everyone you meet," he says. She agrees. "My least favorite thing is gin," she says. "Too piney. My second least favorite is wrinkles. Duh." (She feels like an empty space, like a space bar pressed down for days.)

**T**ime passes like an old ship. (Slow and loud.)  
Mother always said that people all look the same inside when you remove their skin and genitals. Mother always told her to look for the good in everyone. Mother never told her that her girl-hands and girl-feet would disappear. Mother never told her that her feet would feel like absent feet, that life would feel like a tenuous suspension. Mother never told her that they wouldn't be drinking Lemon Drops for years, on a steamboat in the Caribbean.

**S**o what if the floor is riddled with condom wrappers? Mother would be pleased. At least the floor is being used for something. (Mother was “an experienced multitasker.”) They ignore daily ablutions. She has “let herself go.” Sometimes they sit on the rug together and talk of ways to “make a difference.” How many self-deprecating jokes are allowed? Is there really an ethical medium for poetry anymore? What really leads to subjugation? How can one actually be sex-positive? He writes the answers on her, a tender cunnilingus. “Life is sad like a twangy Bollywood soundtrack,” she says. “You almost feel like you’re falling into something every day.” He is on the rug playing a sitar. (The violin has been digested.) She knows this is problematic exoticism. “It’s so true,” he says. “You feel like you’re falling down a well, but you can’t place the feeling. It’s hard to understand when you’ve reached the failure age.” She bucks and twirls. She says, “No one should have to exoticize alone!” She wants to be a string on that sitar.

**S**omeday, she will write a poem about a woman who feels like an object, even in the eyes of other women. (Incapable of seeing herself as a person, as a friend, as anything other than sexual, she constantly tries to titillate others, even those she finds repulsive. It's neoconfessional.) Or she will write a simple story about a woman who is looking for the perfect moon, who travels the world trying to find it. (The plight of everyone really, defining themselves in terms of the elusive big-O Other!) When the woman in the story finally finds the moon in Biarritz, she will be blinded by it. Undoubtedly. The glow will be too specular, too iridescent, too much like teenage glitter.

**T**he flower, there on the screen, reaches out, stems like lonely fingers stretching from a long night curled. She thinks that Queen Anne's lace also looks as if it's grabbing at something it can't quite touch. The moon is condom-round. The sky is painted pastel, tumescent with blue-gray mold-fuzz, like the peaches that are dying on the floor. Tantalizing even in their slow death. "Isn't it upsetting that the moon is always out there but you can't always see it?" she says. She is spreading yogurt on his every part. "That sometimes it's covered up, but it's still right there?"

**H**e is on the rug with toy cars. She makes love to him on a bed of rug and tiny vehicles. She knows her body undulates imperfectly, knows her eyelids are winking unintentionally, her nostrils flaring ever so slightly. She misses scheduling cigarettes. (Eight water glasses used to offset the dehydration caused by four cigarettes. It never felt like an even trade.) "I just forgot who you were!" she says, as his hands slip around her butt cheeks. "For a moment, I couldn't make sense of anything!"

**H**is hand is down his pants. With his other hand he speaks to the ground with flamboyant arm movements, pointing like he has a Power Point setup or a big pie chart. "I am practicing for academia!" He scratches around down there, pulls out his hand, smells his fingertips. "We don't have to practice contradiction though, it just comes so naturally. It's like hiccuping, too. Hard to get rid of!" He makes himself giggle. "It would be nice to explain things to no one, instead of to myself," she says. (She is sincere.) "Just lick down and around," she says. "Down and around the nubbin. I just need you to lick right there, right now. Please?"

**T**he mail brings surveys about shopping experiences. They fill out these questionnaires elaborately, just to make their mark. "You've got to seem irate!" he says. "Be injured! So we will accrue coupons! We can live on paper!" *I lost all my teeth when I bit into that bone! A very old man should never have to bite bone!* They attach mawkish missives, addressed to the customer service representatives. *You work the type of job that keeps the world afloat. You are a true altruist.* "I get off on this!" she says. All that envelope licking really desiccates his tongue. "I've got it!" she says. "It's feeling dry! That's how you know! I think how you know it's upon you is your whole body feels dry, like your tongue seems to feel right now!" (There are things that make you fall apart so fast.)

**S**he begins receiving text messages from someone she doesn't know. They say "pray for better days LOL"! She can't seem to tell this good-humored apocalyptic guy to leave her alone. She figures it is always a good thing to be reminded to pray for better. Every night she prays alone on the bearskin rug, while he sleeps soundlessly beside her. She remembers her days as a girl with Mother, each of them in their own glowing blue-green tanning bed. They pretended to be *unda the sea*, singing to each other in that Jamaican crab voice while they shifted around their tiny goggles. (Her chest flesh burnt just like Mother's.) She prays, and she remembers the smell. One day she'll be a little mermaid, singing on a rock.

**H**e takes up peripatetic dialogues on the rug. She misses the violin, the sitar. "Let me spread something on you," she says. She begs. "I have to remain active!" she says. "I have to use this body or it gets so loud!" She imagines she will attend yoga by moonlight one day, high on a skyscraper. In a spinal twist, the moon pressing patterns into her eyes, she will decide that meditative movement is the ultimate postmodern act, and will not be sure if she likes this revelation. She will not be sure about such groundlessness. "We're here to shed our stories," the teacher will say, a calm palm on her back. "We're here to shed ideas." (The night will creak like bad stairs. Nonplussed.) She will shed the idea that as a child she cried at the sight of ponytails. She will shed the idea that she was once a poor casual lover. She will shed the idea that she will ever understand what clouds are made of, and she will shed the idea that her head will never grow into itself, the way people say your feet do. She will shed the idea that the failure age is upon them, and then all the ideas will come rushing back.

**S**he loads up her bag and fills a water bottle. "But you can move right where you are!" he says. He is on the rug, doing somersaults for exercise. Toe touches. Plank pose. She layers. Too much heat or a chill will induce regret. She won't be able to wrestle down regret. On the walk to the park she sweats, she cries. She walks past the park. She walks to a dried-up wash because it's the closest thing to a field around and fields, they say, inspire solace. She puts her bag down, but finds herself heavy with something else. (Empty sky?) She is in dust and concrete. She is disappointed. "There is nothing out here!" she says. "Nothing open in a field or in a wash treated as field! We do not live in fields!" she says. "We live in stone-cold houses! Rotten peach-filled apartments!" She can hear a blade of dry grass yelling something at her. Blade-friends huddled around the yelling blade. Are they whispering divine secrets? She crouches. (No one is whispering divine secrets. No one is whispering at all.) There are only muddy car tracks, carved out like craters. She sits. She cry-sweats.

**S**he wants to eat honeysuckle with her legs open. (The possibility of a bee sting.) She wants an instruction manual for speaking. (She would choke on every page.) Yearning is so involved, she thinks. (And newness is not real life!) The sky is cloth now, ripping soundlessly above her. "Boy bands understood male sensitivity," she says. "Boy bands knew how to trace tears down their cheeks with the pad of a finger." She thinks about cooking a quesadilla and eating it in bed alone. Then masturbating. Not even washing her hands in between. (Hugging herself that way.) She thinks of grease between her thighs. What would that feel like? Like newness? Words settle below her, run underneath her. Her soggy shoes keep her from eulogizing the woman in the park, the God-man in the park, the poets on the blanket in the park. Squish-squish sounds slow her pace to a halt. She thinks, new things are real life.

**H**e paints a picture of her. In it she reclines on the bearskin rug. It is a poor representation, but she can see that he has been careful. The canvas is a quiet lace. Her face loves things. The moon is a peach, and she stands under it alone. A boat in the sky puffs out icy clouds. She holds a Martini glass. She has a tan, but her skin is unwrinkled. "I can't get above it," she says. "I'm trying so hard." Hiccup. He braids her hair. Recoils it. He hums a concerto. He weeps. "You will go on a long journey," he says. "You will write a book-length poem about it. I just know you will." She stuffs her mouth with blue cheese olives.

**T**hey plant a lemon tree in the sink. They sprinkle seeds into the drain and pack soil down into the piping. When it grows, the lemons are suns, not moons, hanging over the bearskin rug. He plucks them with his feet just to test the impossible. They tear apart each lemon with their mouths: one set of lips and teeth on each end, they chew through the rind until their lips meet. They time themselves, to see how quickly they can destroy a thing. "Mother used to set the timer to encourage me to do chores quickly," she says between lemons. "What do you think she was trying to teach me?" His mouth is puckered and bleeding from their game. So is hers. They kiss, the tinny taste of blood between them.

In the park, she picks a flower. There is no Queen Anne's lace, only daisies, the flowers she picked as a girl. She counts one . . . two . . . three . . . fourteen petals on the daisy. (She has done this before. She knows how to play the game now. She must start with what she doesn't want, so she may get what she does want in the end.) He loves me. This is where she starts.



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