

# On Fear, Food, and Flight

*Elizabeth Brady*

I'm having trouble eating.

This isn't a new development. I've always struggled against the monotony of eating a dish long enough to fill me up. The heel of a sandwich, one last heap of spaghetti, and milky dregs of soup repel me. But every so often this repulsion envelops me, and I can't force myself to eat much for days, sometimes longer. This time around, my revulsion is reborn with a new face: I cannot stomach sweet things.

Saying I have a sweet tooth is a sad understatement. At any moment, I could happily accept a cookie, donut, or other pastry. And I've always had a high tolerance; when my friends deny themselves a second helping, I'm dishing a fourth.

Lately, however, I'm stuck. I can't eat sweets. Yesterday, I was offered a piece of cake, and instead of taking a large center portion, I took a quarter of a serving out of politeness, coaxing myself through bird-like mouthfuls. Most people would probably see this as a good thing: instead of spreading lima beans around my plate to make it appear as if I've eaten most of the helping, I'm pushing bits of chocolate cake to the corners of a party plate.

I don't feel at all myself.



Crohn's disease is a major culprit in my tempestuous relationships with food. An autoimmune disorder of the digestive system, Crohn's has often come between me and my desires for food—both with these bouts of general nausea and with precise intolerances. After eight years with

the diagnosis and twelve years with symptoms, I am aware of the jealous nature of Crohn's disease. One day I enjoy lavish Italian food; the next week I'll eat marinara sauce and curse the unrelenting acid reflux. I stay away from milk and ice cream, but cheese and Yoplait yogurt are permissible. I really shouldn't eat sugar on an empty stomach, but if I first eat chicken and vegetables, my stomach will tolerate impressive helpings of dessert.

Generally, though, my stomach is relatively stable if I follow my self-taught tricks. But there is one wild card in all of this: stress. My symptoms are highly correlated with my stress levels—which are often hard for me to detect. When I am stressed, I hold it in my body: my shoulders knot, my jaw tenses, and my stomach revolts with its varied arsenal. During the majority of this process, I don't *think* I'm stressed, but my body knows better.

Only this year, I decided to be proactive: I've turned to yoga to help maintain balance and prevent a stress overdose. Over the summer I completed an intensive yoga training course at a local studio. For six weeks, five hours per day, five days each week, I practiced yoga, learned about yoga, talked about yoga. I figured, as a stress-reducing exercise with a focus on connecting mind, body, and spirit, yoga would help keep my stress in check and thus reduce the symptoms of my Crohn's disease, preventing major flare-ups and allowing more flexibility in my life.



From the beginning, James and I were a natural fit. On our first date, we ate Thai food, the conversation easy, pleasing. His smile was shy but frequent, and he laughed like children do: loud, long, and infectious. Joyous and far-reaching, it seeped into my chest, warm and rich as caramel. We stayed at our table in the back until after the restaurant had closed, only then noticing the weary and pointed looks of the last waitress, who had by then cleared all the other tables. This was just before Christmas, the finals week of a particularly hellish semester for me, and I was leaving for home in three days. We walked outside. James helped me with my coat and snow fell quietly, white glitter in our hair and lashes. He handed me the tall box of my leftover pad Thai. Would you maybe have time to see me again before you leave? he asked. Yes, absolutely. Of course.



For two weeks, I have experienced a state of near-constant nausea. Sweets are especially offensive, but most foods are now nearly inedible.

Eating a hearty meal of protein and vegetables normally tamps down the nausea, but I'm too far into the cycle: in order to appease the nausea, I need to eat. But when I do eat, or even feel like eating, the nausea becomes urgent. I don't eat; I'm nauseated. I'm nauseated; I don't eat.



If I were the kind of person who believed in love at first sight, or even the destiny of two people belonging together, I would say that about James and me. After that first date, being together felt like a given. We quickly fell into each other's lives, every night a movie night, every evening together. We talked about everything, sitting side by side at our favorite restaurants, or cooking elaborate meals together. He was better with vegetables; I was better with main dishes. Friends and even acquaintances commented on how we have the same smile, the same eyes. Same glasses and hair. We fit.

Everything sounds so meant to be, so sickeningly cute, so trite, cliché. And it is. But it was new to us. And we were never afraid, didn't think it would ever be any different, not really.



The weightlessness of inversions and the ability to stand without feet earned inversions the term *flight*. One blogger for *Yoga Journal* describes the unique practice this way: "Inversions set yoga apart from other physical disciplines: Psychologically, they allow us to see things from an alternate perspective. Emotionally, they guide the energy of the pelvis (the energy of creation and personal power) toward the heart center, enabling self-exploration and inner growth. Physically, they stimulate the immune and endocrine systems, thereby invigorating and nourishing the brain and the organs. When done correctly, inversions also release tension in the neck and the spine."<sup>1</sup>

In Ashtanga yoga, inversions are performed near the end of every practice. And so I discovered my inability to fly. Every day during practice I got myself in position, focused on applying the correct principles of preparation, and attempted to go upside-down. I kicked a leg up again and again, and wore myself out. Sometimes in desperation I overkicked, propelling the weight of my body too far over my shaking

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1. Aadil Palkhivala, "Do You Have a Royal Fear of Inversions?" *Yoga Journal*, August 28, 2007, <http://www.yogajournal.com/article/beginners/strike-a-royal-pose/>.

arms. I fell often. One arm would give out and I'd fall to the side, or I fell back toward the mat if I didn't kick up hard enough. Day after day I sat back on my heels, red-faced after a handful of failed attempts, and watched the other students balance steadily on their hands or forearms. They looked serene. Long and vulnerable as carrots about to be pulled, as grounded as willows.



Over the same summer that I tried to fly in yoga, James drifted with depression. He told me he had always struggled with the illness; it came and went, and he never took any medicine for it, sure he could work through it on his own. I knew he was going through a particularly rough patch, and it was hard for us both. We felt a new hesitancy, a little bit of distance, and a lot of desperation, fear. We ordered more take-out, and dinners were quieter. We used to interrupt each other in our excitement to talk, his laughter peeling often; now we asked each other, What are you thinking? But the answer was usually nothing. Even in this, I couldn't guess what would come next. An end. A fall. This time, with nothing to catch me.



No one understood why I couldn't stick an inversion. I am naturally strong, relatively, and didn't shy away from trying. It's common for beginners to feel afraid of flying; it's very unnerving to be upside-down, and that makes it feel unsafe or frightening. I mentally surveyed the common points of resistance, wondering if I could find my hang-up. Am I afraid I'm too weak, that my arms aren't strong enough to support my body? No, my arms are uncharacteristically strong for a girl, and my body weighs only 100 pounds. Do I experience any pain? Not when I focus on correct form. Am I afraid I'll fall? Maybe. But that also doesn't seem likely because I am not really afraid of pain—I've always played sports and sustained plenty of injuries, none of which made me afraid to play or afraid to get hurt.

I was stumped. My instructor offered help every way she knew how, including strategies to fall in a safe way. She said, "Most people who are afraid of flight just don't know how to catch themselves if they fall." She taught me how to adjust my hands if I feel my feet falling over my head: simply walk one hand to a 45-degree angle from the other. This will turn the body and allow a foot to swing down safely. I mastered the technique in minutes. Perhaps I wasn't afraid of the fall after all.



I trick myself into eating. I distract myself with reading, eat as I'm walking somewhere, eat only my favorites, try not to eat alone or it likely devolves into attempts more than success. I have conversations with myself about the food I'm trying to eat. Just take one more bite. You're doing well! You need to have something in your stomach. This is the only way you'll feel better. And this is precisely when it hits me I'm eating, and I'm overwhelmed with the foodiness. I can smell nothing but its potency. The taste amplifies and ricochets in the cavern of my mouth until it feels as though the food were there when it is not. I force another bite. Sounds fade until I can only hear eating: my teeth and cheeks struggling to corral the mouthful, but saliva has fled and I cannot adequately moisten it, so the bite lolls around in my mouth like a mound of dough rolling with a hook. My ears ring. Nausea rushes me, and I have to stand or sit very still until I can lie down. I have too many simultaneous needs: get away from the food; don't move; rinse my mouth; don't move; throw up; keep it down or it's all for nothing. My right hand claps my mouth, left hand nestles into the space just below my right clavicle. This is the feeling of comfort to me. I don't hold my stomach. The sensation is too much.



I couldn't believe what James was telling me; it didn't seem real. He left after the break-up conversation, but I didn't really believe that was it. We had always been so sure. Always. I went to his house the next day, but his eyes were empty, and he didn't smile, hardly wanted to talk. I went to see him the next week, but nothing had changed. I rejected the idea of an ending, finality, and my body rejected food.

Most people think the moments or hours before falling asleep, alone, after a break-up are the worst. Not for me. It was the mornings. I'd wake up, after escaping my life for a few hours in sleep, foggy and forgetful, then awareness would rush at me in waves. Morning after morning, memory after memory, waves.



Nausea is typically described as waves. I think of the beach, the crashing waves, the pull of the undertow, the fact that waves never stop. Crash and pull. Crash. Pull. Just as you've regained footing from the last wave, the water pulls back sharply and thrashes your thighs with another. On and on.

That, to me, is the aptness of this metaphor: I can't think of a waveless beach. Even when only a little lapping is present, the waves are there, ready to rear back and pound the shore, with no end in sight. Nausea, however, typically has an end in sight: expulsion. Relief. Progress. In my case, that's rarely true. Instead, I constantly battle nausea with no guarantee of relief. I feel the fear of throwing up without the satisfaction of fulfillment.



I've tried every trick to get myself upside-down. And when I'm not physically practicing, I search for answers in words. While searching *Yoga Journal* for something I'd maybe missed, I found Linda Sparrowe's article on conquering the fear of flight. She says, "Handstand, like all balancing poses, requires that you feel comfortable with instability. When faced with instability of any kind—physical or mental—most of us tend to recoil immediately and try to regain control by locking things tightly in place. Ironically, this reaction only serves to make us more rigid and less able to make minute and sensitive adjustments to bring ourselves back into balance."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps here, finally, I've found my problem: the thought of my body inverted, standing upside-down in a wide room, reminds me of pill bugs I found in my garden as a girl. I coaxed them into my palm, their translucent legs tickling across my skin. And then I flipped them over. For a split second I could see their soft gray underbelly, legs flailing, trying to regain control: vulnerable and bare. In a blink, they rolled together, the hard armor of their back protecting their weakness, recoiling against instability. They took too long to unfurl their bodies in my hands, and I lost interest; they didn't trust me.



James and I had planned on getting married. We had picked a ring. It had seemed so sure.

Now that future is flying.



*Flight* typically has a positive connotation. Freedom unfettered. Lightness, weightlessness, soaring to the heavens. Angels.

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2. Linda Sparrowe, "Standing on Your Own Two Hands," *Yoga Journal* (May/June 2003): 110.

I can see the appeal of these notions. I would also love to feel those heights of jubilation, exultation. But when I think of that kind of freedom, my first thought is water—not flying, but floating. I am fascinated with swimming things; otters over eagles. When I want to feel weightless, I take a bath.

Maybe this started in my dreams. I have a recurring dream of flight. Always, I am back in my hometown, on the small country lane in Idaho where I spent most of my childhood. As I walk down the lane, I find a broomstick, and I know it can make me fly. So I straddle it, and take off. I soar high, feel the catch in my chest as I lift. And I'm very good at flying: I barrel-roll, I dive, I speed through trees. But always, a storm kicks up. The sky darkens, and I realize I'm alone, in trouble. I have to get to the ground, but the wind whips and whistles and rain stings my cheeks. I'm no longer in control of the broom—the storm has taken over. I roll through the skies with the gray clouds in utter terror. Eventually, I fall, grounded again. I abandon the broom and run home. When the storm breaks, I look outside for the broom, but I never find it, and I know I'll never fly again.



James had broken the relationship, but to me it felt more suspended. It seemed so clear to me that he wasn't free to think clearly; depression had been slowly stealing his rational thinking, his personality. Over those summer months his mood and motivations dampened, gradually growing heavy, weighted. He believed he would never make me happy; he believed he had to leave.

I didn't think so. And I didn't think leaving him on his own while he was struggling was a good option either. I asked him to try an antidepressant. I thought it would help him float back to the surface, feel more himself, feel free.



When most people think about a fear of flying, they might think of planes, mechanics. My fear of flight is personal. It resides in my body, the way Crohn's does; a disease. And I wonder if perhaps James isn't experiencing these same sensations: With Crohn's, my stomach pitches with nausea, and I reject food; with depression, James's thoughts roil with doubts, serotonin flees, and he rejects people, love. I tried to make it through a meal one mouthful at a time, and James tried to walk toward the future one day at a time. Only when we stepped back to look at our actions

from a new height could we see a gaping endlessness, an overwhelming repetition of requirements just to get through a small portion. If I have to fight so hard to take this many bites just to finish one meal, how can I ever sustain this? And how can James keep walking toward a future if he can't even get out of bed today? Each of us felt the vertigo of fear.

Fear not just of flight, but of the unknown.



At the end of each practice, we lie in Savasana. I lie on my mat, only small points of my body in contact with the ground: heels, calves, pelvis, shoulders, head, arms. I close my eyes and the other students disappear, my mat cradling my body. Sounds fade until I can hear only the soft rush of my heartbeats in my ears. I drift deeper into the pose, surrendering to the mat, sinking. My mind floats away from my body. It feels unfettered, delicious. It feels like flying.



Maybe two weeks after we broke up, James came to my house. He had just started an antidepressant, was feeling hopeful. And was feeling glad I hadn't fled when flight would have been easy. His shy smile garnished his bare, grateful expression. I rested my head on his shoulder, and he reached out a hand, rested it on my clavicle. I immediately felt secure, warm, protected. This feels safe, I told him. I felt his arm relax, he leaned into me a little deeper. It felt like grounding.

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This essay by Elizabeth Brady received an honorable mention in the *BYU Studies* 2015 personal essay contest.