



Conserve

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November 9, 2022

Suggested Citation: Smith, C. (November 9, 2022). "Conserve". *Heliotrope*.
<https://www.heliotropejournal.net/helio/Conserve>

My stepfather is an evolutionary biologist. Former zookeeper, elephant keeper. He tells me about the time he punched an elephant out of fear, frustration. His hand broke in three places and the elephant didn't blink.

In Water's Lake, Florida he finds employment at a research facility called Lube Bat Conservancy. Minimum wage, four dollars an hour, mucking shit, slicing food. Nick works with fruit bats. He takes me to work. I watch him prepare wheelbarrows full of cubed fruits. He wraps blue booties around his shoes. Weaves in metal cage doors, dishing out fragrant melon spliced with medications, vitamins.

I eat box mac and cheese.

Lube is a compound that digs into forests, swamps, primitive roads punctuated by rocks, roots.

My family is homeless again. Instead of living in a tent, we move to the conservation compound.

We take company quads down roads, back to the mansion where a rich man used to live with his family.

There's an indoor pool full of scorpions that seem to live for a time on bottom ledges submerged in chlorine and light blue. My little sister steps on a deck, the redbrown scorpion is hidden in dark paint. Stinger digs into flesh and she yelps in pain.

Blackest moss crumples on Florida Pines, weeded and worn, the ancient thatch of a banana spider's web waves between branches.

My mom washes our clothes in industrial machines meant for zoos, hospitals, factories. She brings home laundry in black garbage bags. Plastic melts with heat from the industrial dryer. I like to swirl myself into hot folds of laundry on the floor of our trailer house away from the compound.

A yellow jacket waits in a white sweater. I feel legs crawling before sting. The bug drives itself into my skin. Again and again.

Elbows swell with venom, ankles swell with humidity, heat.

My older brother scoops his hand towards steps in the pool. We smell concrete, rotting wood, scorpion corpses pickled in chlorine. In the night, moon fowl crow from their cages near flying foxes, endangered Miss Waldron's Red Colobus.

Betsy's another keeper, she handles monkeys. We sneak into abandoned cages and swing from ropes where chimps used to play. Betsy catches us and shoos us from behind metal slats and sliding gates.

It's dangerous, you can catch viruses from animals. Never play in their enclosures.

Nick wrote his thesis about declining white tail deer populations in Alberta. He watched them from perches in tall trees, tall prairie grasses. Nick says, *I'll tell you what I found, there was a natural rebound in the population that declined from the 1970s onward. You can't be married to your own ideas, they're often wrong, emotional investment interferes with facts.*

The steward family members of Lubee Bat Conservancy are Jehovah's Witnesses. They don't celebrate Halloween. Birthdays. Play face cards, use masks. We attend a meeting and learn only 144,000 people will make it in the end.

I try to count bumps in the popcorn ceiling of the old mansion when I can't sleep. The night seeps from stone-cast walls.

Here's something else Nick says, *Being a biologist means cleaning up a lot of animal shit.*

Silver-green slime grows in springs, creeks, wet driveways. We slip with bare feet. At Lubee we bathe, sliding a white curtain to and fro, while scorpions walk water, unaware, drowned.

Cristalle Smith is published in Arc Poetry Magazine, Room Magazine, QWERTY Magazine, The Maynard, and elsewhere. Cristalle won subTerrain Magazine's Lush Triumphant Literary Awards for Creative Nonfiction in 2020. She has a chapbook with Frog Hollow Press and is a PhD student at the University of Calgary in Creative Writing.

SEO Excerpt