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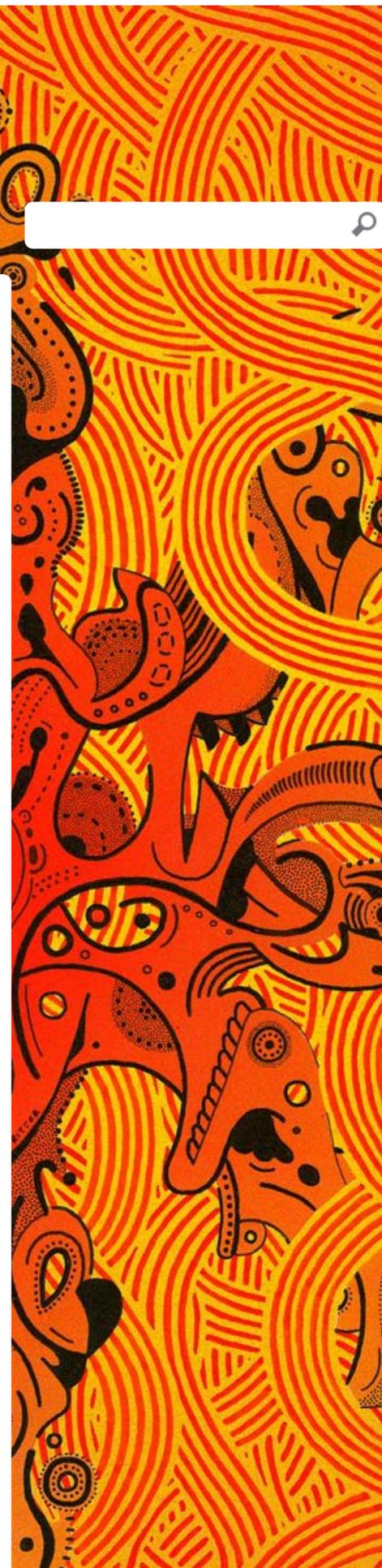
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Douglas W. Milliken Eyetooth



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Editor's Note

[John Gibbs](#)

I'm not sure how to begin. Hello, I suppose; whether you have arrived here for the first time, have returned to see what we're up to after reading/after liking/Na past issue, or have stumbled upon us while searching the internet aether for our motion-picture namesake (featuring Dennis Quaid and Danny Glover), hello. It's nice to have you with us.

Our latest issue (19) of Switchback is rambunctious. It's also our first-ever issue to be born into this world themeless. We felt, at this juncture in our journal's history, it was time to take a risk: to forego any prompt, motif, or preemptive design of any sort while culling submissions in lieu of allowing the issue's primary concerns and questions space to homogenize organically. And/after the obligatory, editorial gestation period/it can now open its mouth and speak directly to you, reader, in whichever language you speak.

Six stories, nine poems, three essays, and one artist's remarkable work make up the present issue. Add those numbers together and what do you get? Nineteen. Perhaps those lamenting the loss of an umbrella theme, and any cohesive comfort it can be said to provide, may take solace in the numerical coincidence, the fortune that somehow roped our planets in a line, the serendipitous deposit of gold struck by chance. Whoever said fate didn't exist?

Of course this effort could not have been realized were it not for the collective work of our staff, who read wildly, discussed fanatically, and/in the end/selected fashionably the writing we are now proud to unveil and stand behind. A word of gratitude must also now be offered to our faculty advisor, [Nina Schuyler](#), whose presence is felt like a good bassline in a jazz trio, making sure the rest of us don't lose the beat and play to the tune of our own whimsy. Lastly, thank you to the MFA program at the University of San Francisco, for continually ensuring our energies are not for naught and for serving as the central hub to so many creative, talented, and motivated individuals.

Wherever you are reading this, we hope this issue finds you well. We hope you're ready to dive in and discover all we have dug up for you. We will gladly dig it all up again with you as readers ourselves. It's now time for me to pad away, as noiselessly as possible, to my invisible post where I can sit, hushed by the impressive work found, contained, and celebrated here today. I'll say again, in closing: I'm not sure how to begin. But, then again, I don't have to.

John Gibbs
Managing Editor



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John Gibbs



John Gibbs is the former Managing Editor of *Switchback*. He received his Bachelor's degree in English from Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri. Originally from Saint Louis, he now lives in San Francisco, where he received his MFA from the University of San Francisco. His work has most recently appeared in *The Chariton Review* and *Bodega Magazine*.

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Christine Hennessey



Christine Hennessey's fiction and essays have appeared in *The Summerset Review*, *Elephant Journal*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *Treehouse*, and *LIT*. She will graduate with an MFA in creative writing from the University of North Carolina Wilmington this month, at which time she hopes to piece together a living by teaching, freelance writing, selling eggs from her backyard chickens, and publishing her first novel, *Five Body*, a book about marriage, sisterhood, and honeybees. You can read more of her work [here](#), or follow her on Twitter [@TheNewChrissy](#).

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Hatchling

[Christine Hennessey](#)

I press the warm brown egg against my ear. Nothing happens.

"Be patient," instructs Sharron, my future mother-in-law. A second later, from within: CHRP. I gasp, nearly drop the egg, and Sharron laughs. "Keep listening," she says.

The chirping continues at short intervals and then, beneath the staccato of cries, I hear something else. Tap, tap, tap. Silence. Then, a few more taps.

"What is that?" I whisper.

"The chick," Sharron says. "She's starting to hatch." Impressed, I return the egg to the incubator and close the lid. Nestled beside the chirping, tapping egg, eight other orbs remain warm and quiet, waiting.

When we first told Nathan's parents we were thinking about getting chickens, Sharron was thrilled. "If you can wait a few months," she said, "we'll bring you some chicks when we visit." A few years earlier, his parents had purchased ten acres of land in southern Illinois. Since then, they'd raised chickens for eggs, miniature cows for milk and meat, and Sharron's cucumbers had snagged a first place ribbon at the county fair. "How many chickens do you want?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Four? Six?" Nathan and I are vegetarians, and I wanted chickens exclusively for eggs and friendship. Four to six seemed reasonable.

When Sharron and John pulled into our driveway a few months later, we expected them to arrive with newborn chickens. Instead, they carried a small machine the size of a breadbox into our kitchen, set it on the table, and immediately plugged it in. The machine, I quickly learned, was an incubator, black and yellow with a see-through lid. Inside, a cradle tilted hourly, turning the nine fragile eggs nestled within.

As Sharron explained all this to me, I finally understood that instead of fluffy, yellow, chirping chicks, she had brought us eggs. We'd be hatching the chickens ourselves.

For a while, I watched the incubator with rapt attention, wondering when the first crack would appear. It was exciting, and then it wasn't, and then we went out to lunch, hoping the chick would make progress while we were gone.

* * *

When I was six years old, I decided I wanted a pet chicken. So I did the only thing that made sense, which was to open the refrigerator, retrieve the carton of eggs from the top shelf, remove one white oval, and take it to my bedroom. I wrapped it in a pair of socks and lovingly tucked it into the corner of my underwear drawer, where it could stay warm and cozy until it was ready to hatch.

I was too young to know how the reproductive system of chickens worked. I hadn't even learned about human sex yet. So I didn't know that I had adopted an unfertilized egg, destined for nothing greater than an omelet. I was also easily distracted, and after a few days of checking on my egg and stroking its smooth white shell, I forgot about it entirely, having moved on to more pressing matters like Saturday morning cartoons and games of hide-and-seek with my friends.

A few weeks later, my mother called me in from the front yard where I was playing.

"Chrissy," she said, holding up the egg. "Why was this in your underwear drawer?"

"I was hatching it!" I said, remembering my plan.

"Why would you want to hatch it?"

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“I wanted a pet chicken.”

“This is not how you get a pet chicken.” My mother softened. “This is the wrong kind of egg.” She placed the egg very gently in my hand and closed my fingers around it. “I want you to take this egg down the street, far away from the house, and get rid of it.” I didn’t want to do it. “I wanted a chicken, but she seemed so serious.” Far, far away.

“Okay,” I said, and ran down the street with a few other kids, who were now curious about my egg. They watched as I held the egg aloft and then heaved it forward with all my strength. The egg landed, shattered, just a few feet from us. Immediately, a terrible smell rose from the yellow yolk that spilled into the street. It smelled, well, like a rotten egg. We held our hands over our noses and ran away gagging.

I have a better understanding of eggs and chickens now, of the way things come into this world and the way they leave it. A few years ago, my friends started getting pregnant on purpose, having babies they were excited to raise with their husbands. It was hard to wrap my mind around this shift, but eventually I adapted. When yet another friend told me she was expecting, I smiled and said *congratulations!* instead of whispering *what should we do?*

Chay was first, and her pregnancy was a novelty. I’d never been to a friend’s baby shower, and it was a spectacular celebration, with mixed drinks, mod décor, and handmade fans to push away the summer heat. When her daughter was born, we oohed and ahed over her bald little head and huge blue eyes, just as we oohed and ahed over a new coffee maker or photos from a trip to Alaska. Chay brought Rees everywhere, and I never minded. She sat in a car seat by her mother’s feet and rarely cried. And when she started talking a year later, she proved to be an entertaining conversationalist.

The babies started rolling in shortly after Rees turned one. First Sonnie, then Mary. I got a text message from my best friend from college’s “ladies’ man” who we were sure would never settle down. “Letting me know his wife was pregnant. My cousin had four children in the blink of an eye. Chay had a second baby, and then everybody started having second babies. Nathan and I did the only thing that seemed natural: we adopted another dog.

I like kids and enjoy shopping for onesies, discussing the benefits of midwifery, and holding a baby in my lap. I think the sight of someone breastfeeding in public is beautiful. Yet the idea of actually becoming a mother terrifies me. I loathe the restrictions of parenthood, and the idea of a small human cradled in my flesh and fluids is nearly enough to spark a panic attack.

On the occasions when I voice these concerns, my well-meaning friends and eager parents do their best to reassure me. “It’s natural to be nervous about parenthood,” they say. “Don’t worry. By your clock will start ticking soon.” And when I tell them I’m not so sure, that not all of us are meant to be parents, they scoff and turn to scare tactics. “You’re being selfish,” they say. “You’ll regret it if you don’t,” they tell me. “Who will take care of you when you get old?”

And so I celebrated each new baby my friends brought into the world, all while feeling the distance between us widen with each child’s throaty cries.

* * *

When we return from our lunch outing a few hours later, I go straight to the incubator, peek inside, and scream.

“It’s dead,” I wail. The chicken—if you can even call it that—is wet and ragged, lying on top of a broken shell, body bent at an unnatural angle. Sharron follows me into the kitchen, Nathan close behind. I step aside and she opens the incubator, quickly inspects the chick, and then shuts the lid.

“She’s not dead,” Sharron says. “She’s tired.”

Sure enough, the chick’s body is rising and falling as it breathes. Still, I’m concerned about the bedraggled state of the creature. Baby chicks are supposed to be adorable, all yellow fluff and round bodies. This thing is definitely not cute.

“She’ll get cuter,” Sharron says. “She’s been working hard to get out of the egg, she needs to rest, but she’ll dry off and fluff out soon. Do you want to hold her?”

Of course I want to hold her. She’s my first chicken, ugly or not. The chick still needs the warmth and comfort of the incubator, so I’ll have to put her back after a few minutes. As Sharron reaches in and lifts the chick

out, I'm grateful for her calm presence, her vast knowledge about the world of chickens. For a moment, I wish I could repay her kindness with the thing I know she wants most. She, along with my own mother, would make an excellent grandma—wise and loving, indulgent in all the right ways. I picture a child spending summers on Long Island at the beach with my parents, springs on the farm in Illinois. But no matter how hard I try, I can't picture me and Nathan as the parents of that imaginary baby.

The next thing I know, the chick is in my palm. She shifts slightly, searching for a warmer spot. I bring her closer to my face and carefully inspect her damp fur, her slimy head, her bony body. She is the most hideous thing I've ever seen in my life, and I love her.

* * *

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Hatchling

[Christine Hennessey](#)

Chickens were first domesticated thousands of years ago, and have since become the most commonly kept animal. At some point, humans started breeding chickens for specific qualities, such as the ability to lay more eggs or put on meat quickly. The chickens most commonly kept as layer hens by both commercial farmers and hobbyists, Leghorns, Barred Rocks, and Black Stars, to name a few, begin laying when they're about five months old, can produce up to three hundred eggs a year, and are not inclined to nest. This means that they'll lay a lot of eggs, but don't have much interest in sitting on them. Hence the incubator.

When the urge to brood does surface in a layer hen, it's generally seen as an undesirable quality, one to be discouraged. This is especially true for hens that haven't mated with a rooster, because the eggs those hens lay will never hatch. The best way to get a hen off a nest is to make her uncomfortable by lifting her up and placing her elsewhere. Some chicken keepers will dunk her in a bucket of cold water, though this is generally frowned upon. Another option is to simply wait it out. Often a hen will begin to brood, getting warm and comfortable on top of her eggs, and then give up after a week, maybe two, distracted or bored.

I'm not sure whether to envy or pity my hens. On the one hand, they've been freed from the work of rearing young. In a world where many chicks don't survive, this seems like a blessing. Chickens (at least the ones lucky enough to live in the backyard of a pair of vegetarians) are able to scratch in the dirt, fight over treats, and roost whenever and wherever they like, without worrying about fragile offspring. On the other hand, we've bred them so that their ability to protect and propagate their own species has all but disappeared. They couldn't be mothers even if they wanted to, which makes the incubator in my kitchen seem a bit cruel.

There's another unpleasant fact about layer hens, one that I, a moral vegetarian, the lover of animals, do my best to ignore. The truth is that laying an egg nearly every day is hard work. It requires a massive amount of calcium, makes a hen more prone to ovarian cancer, and hurts, at least for a few minutes. Furthermore, chickens lay eggs for about two years. After that, they slow down and eventually stop entirely. Most people consider hens useless at this point and get rid of them, usually by way of a hearty stew.

This is not something my chickens need to worry about. I think of them as pets and companions, and the enjoyment they bring me extends beyond the breakfast table. Chickens are mostly valued for the eggs they lay and, as I approach my own reproductive prime, I can't help but empathize with them. In a society where motherhood seems to be lauded as the most important job a woman can do, choosing the opposite path feels, at times, like a betrayal.

For Nathan and I, a young, white, middle-class couple, a life with children would lack the freedoms that have guided our lives so far. For the last ten years, we've been in and out of school, chasing different degrees and putting our passions ahead of our paychecks. If we had children, our lives would no longer be our own. A chicken can get bored and step off the nest, but once you have a child, there's no turning back.

* * *

The next morning, our newborn chick is looking more like an actual chicken, and I'm thrilled to see two damp, exhausted, ugly sisters lying beside her. Bird by bird, our flock is born.

And then something strange happens. One egg is cracked, we can see the tip of a beak poking through, but the chick isn't moving. There's no chirping coming from the egg, no *tap tap tap* echoing from within.

"I think she's broken through the membrane inside the egg," Sharron says, her brow furrowed.

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“That’s okay, right?” I ask.

Sharon shakes her head. “Air can get in, and that’ll dry out the egg. The chick could get stuck, and if that happens, she’ll die.”

“Can we help her?” I ask, afraid of Sharon’s answer.

“We can try.” She removes the egg from the incubator and begins pulling away the pieces of shell that are already stuck to the tiny bird. She works slowly, trying not to tear the bird’s delicate skin. I know that chicks face many threats—inclement weather, predators, disease, getting pecked to death by bullying elders—and it’s a shock to realize the danger starts this soon.

Sharon is able to free the chick from the egg, but she’s still not moving. Since all the chicks looked dead at first, I’m still hopeful.

“Is she okay?” I ask.

“Maybe,” Sharon says. “We can put her back in the incubator and see if that revives her.”

“Does that work?”

“Sometimes.”

Later that day, another chick emerges, bringing our total to four healthy birds, but the one who was trapped in her shell still won’t move. When it’s clear that she’s dead, Nathan comes to our rescue, and does the job that I can’t. He carries the little bird outside and lays her body in our compost bin. As far as these things go, it’s a tiny tragedy, but there are four other chicks that need my attention, so I can’t mourn for long.

The last four eggs remain silent, no cracks or chirps, and after an extra week, when it becomes clear that they’re not going to hatch, we carry them to the compost, too. We try to figure out what went wrong. Did the drive from Illinois damage them in some way? Did we lift the lid of the incubator too many times? Did they suffer a deformity that left them unable to escape their shells? The possibilities seem endless, and it’s why Sharon brought nine eggs even though I only wanted four or six chickens.

* * *

Our chickens turn five months old in October, which means they’ll soon begin laying. Each morning when I return from walking the dogs, I lift the lid of the coop and look into the nesting boxes. Each morning the boxes are empty, the soft bed of hay I’ve placed inside them untouched.

One morning near the end of the month, juggling leashes in one hand, I look in and there it is: a single small brown egg. I gasp and immediately slam the lid shut, while the chickens in the run below cock their heads at the noise. I put the dogs in the fenced backyard, then raise the lid again. The egg is still there. I reach in and pick it up. It’s warm.

* * *

In November, Nathan and I get married. For years we insisted we didn’t need a piece of paper to prove our love, and after we got engaged we continued to cling to this belief. We’d been together for ten years by then, already considered ourselves a family. A wedding wouldn’t change anything—it was simply a nice way to celebrate a decade together.

But once we start planning the ceremony, something shifts. We begin talking less about the wedding and more about our marriage. All the things we’d always dreamed about—the house we want to buy, the book I want to write, the farm he wants to own—suddenly seem tangible. By the time our friends and family join us in North Carolina for the wedding, we’re excited to see them, to have a big party, to drink too much wine and dance all night. And when we stand in front of our community and make our vows, it feels as if we’re stepping over a threshold into something new and certain. We started out wanting a party, but we ended up wanting to be married. The shift is a beautiful surprise.

Of course, being married means that many people expect us to take the next step, and I feel guilty when I tell them we don’t plan on having kids. “You also didn’t plan on getting married,” they say, “and look at you now.”

What I don’t tell them is that a few months after the wedding, I thought I was pregnant. I’d forgotten to get my birth control refilled, missed a month of pills. When the pregnancy test read negative, I was so relieved I

wept. There was no wistfulness, no moment in which I imagined another path. It was one of the times in my life when I felt truly free.

Still, I wonder about the years to come. I think about how our bodies are constantly replacing cells, and worry that one day I'll wake up a new person, with new needs and desires. Minds change, desire shifts, nothing is certain. Sometimes I fear the window is shutting right this second, sending me down a path of regret. Other times I can't tell if the sound I hear in the distance is a clock ticking or my heart's steady beat.

* * *

I visit the coop each morning, when the air is cool and the chickens are in their run, scratching at the ground, looking for insects. When I arrive they rush toward me, hoping for a treat—strawberry tops, shredded greens, warm oatmeal when it dips below freezing—but on the mornings I come empty-handed they ignore me, continue their work in the dirt. They will let me hold them, run my hands along their soft feathers, rub the waddle that sways beneath their sharp beaks, but for the most part they're indifferent to my presence. I don't take their lack of affection personally. I understand that our partnership is following a natural course.

When I make breakfast for Nathan and me—eggs fried in olive oil, scrambled with hash browns, baked in a frittata—I think about the nourishment the hens and I give each other. I don't have a child, but I do care for other creatures. I keep reminding myself that the path I'm on isn't a betrayal, it's simply another way to love, and be loved.

I throw the chickens a handful of pumpkin seeds, then collect their eggs, smooth and brown, warm and round. I thank them, as always, but they're too busy scratching for seeds to notice.

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Courtney McDermott

Courtney McDermott 's debut collection of short stories, *How They Spend Their Sundays*, was published by Whitepoint Press in 2013. Her short stories and essays have appeared in *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Daily Palette*, *Found Press*, *Italy from a Backpack*, *A Little Village Magazine*, *The Lyon Review*, *Raving Dove*, *Silver of Stone*, *Third Wednesday*, *Nassau Review*, and *Emerge*. She also writes book reviews for [NewPages.com](#). Courtney earned her MFA in creative writing from the University of Notre Dame, and now works at Harvard University.

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Filling Up The Moon

[Courtney McDermott](#)

The moon rolls across the sky, above the boarding school where I live. I sit alone, but not, in my apartment, listening to the nightly music of teenagers. Tonight is my night to guard the girls' dorm, to tuck them in bed, turn out their lights and let the full moonlight splash upon their floors as they whisper of boys and classes and secrets.

I have one hour before I am on duty. My apartment is on the first floor of the main building, which houses the library (also my job), the Head's office, and the dining hall. The girls' dorm is upstairs. I spend the hour drinking tea and watching the moon from the slit in my blinds. I can almost see Neil Armstrong's footprint, pressed into the dust, a remnant for ten million years. Minutes before my duty, I will glide upstairs, in my pajamas, a book under my arm.

Earlier this year, when evenings were warmer and I still felt like a visitor to my new home, the other teachers and I played on the hay bales at the school farm. Before coming here, I taught in a mountain school in Africa, where boundaries between students and teachers did not blur, and where respect could be beaten into a body. Now, I can teach and play, and we young teachers are just fuller-brained versions of our students. Sprawled on the hay bales, the chickens fluttering to the coop for the night, we decided to sneak away and have a party while the students were asleep.

During the day, the students own the school grounds. Out on my porch I watch their shadows run across the Teardrop, flickers of faces through the dorm windows. The white wooden Quaker meetinghouse across the Teardrop brightens against the backdrop of the sound barrier, which can't keep out the zoom of the semis headed to Illinois. A light is on in the meetinghouse, and I can see two students' over-dramatic and pale-immersed in an RPG. It's a game they call Changeling, and under this moon, anything is possible.

Summer full moons are best, lusty and mottled-faced as they loom overhead in the quiet heat of evening. But it's not summer yet. It's the time when the magnolia tree by the science building blushes, and the white dogwood's limbs are heavy with blossoms that drift over the sidewalk. After the sun goes down, the blossoms are pale grey, like Dr. Shoemaker's ashes, which crashed into a crater and are now scattered on the moon's surface.

On my own surface, the community here—pseudo-Earth loving, Quakerly, socially odd—named me "Rainbow-like," "Bubbly," "Writers." They did not know that beneath these English-teacher dresses and vintage baubles, I was a goddess-worshipper.

In Lesotho, the place I lived before here, I created a goddess for myself, so I wouldn't feel so lonely. I wrote prayers to her and meditated after wobbly sun salutations conducted on my uneven floor. I bought a book on astrology and read my horoscope, and pleaded with her to change it. Make me fall in love sooner, I asked.

In astrology, the moon rules your personality. My moon sign is Leo. True to form, I am fair, with big round eyes. I savor food and religion. We are lovers of the arts, and this is why I write and scrawl drawings in gothic black. We prefer solitude, and I would prefer to stay here on the porch, but I have to stay awake in the dorm, after I've turned out the lights and the girls go to sleep. This must be what it's like to be a parent, a traffic-controller for a red-eye flight, God. Leo moon signs are good at prioritizing, which is why I can teach and be a dorm parent, an adviser, a writer. Leo moons are strong of intellect, courageous, respected. Bernadette, Lizzie Borden, Anne Frank, Gloria Steinem. These are bearers of my moon sign.

When my tea is finished, I go back inside and up to the dorm, through the throng of students moving

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through the dark. They play hide-and-seek. The half-dark gives shape and depth to the corners of the room, the windowpanes, the door frames. A month earlier, when only the seniors were on campus, and the others were on service trips, I played hide-and-seek with them in the dark. I tucked behind the bookcase in the library, and when Eli found me, he said, *The librarian in the library. You're such a nerd.* I can take this from my students. They only tease those they are fond of.

Coming through, I say, stumbling mummy-like to the girls' dorm door.

I have a room where I sit and sleep and wait like a mother for girls to check in. To take their meds and share their frustrations and giddy girl talk.

Tonight, a girl is missing. Roaming the old Quaker cemetery, perhaps. When the students think they are brave, they'll wander off in the night, telling themselves that vampires or ghosts are out. I walk through the school grounds looking for her, watching the sky as I call her name. I don't see a man up there, nor the toad they talk about in China. I see a face—the only face of the egghead orbiter—the lunar far side unknown. Its face is scarred from the beatings of roving objects that struck ages ago. The terrain is rocks and soil, dry, gasping for moisture. I imagine it looks a lot like Lesotho in winter.

When I lived in Lesotho, teaching high school students not so different from those I teach now, I used the moon as a bright compass. It guided me back to my home when I was a wandering woman, white, beaming like a translucent piece of moon rock, hideously pale. In Lesotho, when there was no moon, the darkness was so thick I couldn't see my hand stretched out a foot in front of me.

In Iowa, the moons are sometimes flat and pumpkin-colored, napping just above the horizon line, a sticker on black construction paper. I used to give stickers to my students in Lesotho. This made them happy.

* * *



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Filling Up The Moon

[Courtney McDermott](#)

Two girls come into my room and tell me that the freshmen boys threw shoes into their open windows. They hold up Adidas sneakers, dirty with dew-grass. *And now they have our clothes!*

Excuse me? I say, because this does not seem a natural order of events. *How did they get your clothes? Did they magically spin out of the windows?*

One girl blushes and says in a whisper, not wanting to implicate anyone, *They asked Laura, and she went into our room and took our clothes and gave them to them.*

Laura is a girl who seeks approval from boys, and has a wishy-washy lack of self-confidence I wish to erase. I try to talk to her, but she hides in the showers.

I call over to the boys' dorm. I tell my male counterpart, John, to get the clothes back please.

John does. He calls me back, and tells me that he found the boys trying on a bra and dress, taking photos. I can see John, an insomniac, walking in on them, his black eyes bulging and startled.

The missing girl, Kelsey, comes back, barely making dorm time. Loose, fine hair falls in front of her peaked face. The eyes jarring, dark with black makeup

Where have you been?

She begins to cry wildly.

Walking, in the prairie! she screams. And I imagine how it must have looked: the grasses ghost-fine and silvery, rustling in the breeze like strips of paper. When I was nine I wanted to be an astronomer and got a telescope from a family friend who had no children. It was large, white, and expensive-looking. I charted the moon for two weeks.

Kelsey is a writer, feels for poetry in earthy moments. She struggles to survive within the structure of a boarding school. I had always screamed at structure myself, only to become entrapped within its coffin, a sort of self-torture that I continue to perpetuate. I measured my life by the very definitions of success I hated. I felt suffocated by academia, but left school to become a teacher. Condemned routine as a killer of spontaneity, but now ate lunch the same time every day. Kelsey wails, her wail body trembling, her shoulders bony. I tell her I'm listening, remembering the days I spent wandering the prairie.

In February, my birth month, it's possible to have no full moon. This is a dark month. The last time this happened, I was a freshman in high school. That was a dark year.

If the moon were a person, she'd be a lunatic, embracing the origin of her once-name: Luna. But we have torn this name from her. And though there's no proof that people go crazy or commit murder more often on the full moons, it has some undercurrent effect. It pulls and bends the oceans. Stronger when it's full, because the Moon, the Sun, and the Earth are in a line dance. When my grandma was in the nursing home for the last time, the nurses used to tell me that on full moons the patients would wander and wail. There are no right words to identify its presence on these nights. For now we have stripped it of all its names and it is, plainly, the Moon. Give it back its name.

I hug Kelsey, then send her to bed. I walk the hall and turn out the lights. This is my favorite part of the night. When all the girls are slightly vulnerable, their blankets snug around them, hearing their soft *good nights*.

A weird illness has arrived in the night. Two girls are sick, feverish and throwing up, and at that moment I feel for our mothers.

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With the bold night mother standing overhead, I stay up with the sick.

* * *

My own mother came to visit me when I was sick of the cold in Lesotho. She took me to South Africa, where we met the pagan fire-burners. We unintentionally found the rural commune, the remnants of an all-night fire blackened in a cold huddle, because it had been the Solstice: the time when the moon blends into the clouds. And they tried to get me to join. Come and start a school here, they said, because they had none. They made beaded boots and grew organic vegetables, and the Peruvian hippie who made jewelry stroked my arm and said he'd build me a house and I'd be their teacher. I left them.

I still get emails from the commune. There are days when I think about leaving, days I wished I had stayed. But then, in the quiet moments after midnight, when the girls are asleep, and I know I keep them safe, I don't wish to be anywhere else.

Every year the moon is getting further away from us, stealing the planet's rotational energy when it's daylight and we can't see. It's a gradual sneaking away, so that when it's finally gone, maybe we won't miss it so much.

When the summer ends, and the new school year begins, I will be gone. The moon will rise full and soft, like a warm woman's breast above the world, bigger than it has ever appeared. That will mark the last of my days here, days which I will continue counting elsewhere.

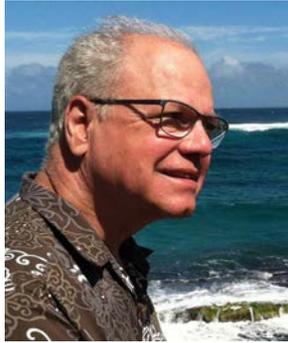
This is how I want to measure my time in numbers of moons like an ancient priestess. Big round bulging brilliant ones. Found and plucked up, counted and measured out.



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Tom Moran



Tom Moran lives in upstate New York where he teaches at Rochester Institute of Technology. When the snow gets deep and the thermometer bottoms out, he does miss California. His articles and essays have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Seattle Times*, *Washington Post*, *Brevity*, *Reed*, *Stone Canoe*, *Rind*, and many other publications.

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Leaving Venice

[Tom Moran](#)

We made a thieves' exit, five shadows in the early morning darkness. I had lugged the bags out earlier, four overstuffed suitcases containing everything that was left after movers had stripped the house bare. After sleeping on the floor in an empty house and being roused by the harsh sound of an alarm a few minutes before 3:00 a.m., no one was fully awake as we fled out of the house. I locked the door and the four of us—my wife, our two children, and our dog, a keeshond named Smokey—carefully made our way along the porch. The sky was starless. Clouds hid the moon and a foggy haze muted the street lamp at the end of our alley. The still air was thick with the rank aroma of decaying seaweed, and you could taste a faint bite of ocean salt when you ran your tongue over your lips. There was no sign of life in the black morning. No lights in the windows. No movement. We could have been the last people on earth.

I opened the garage and we climbed into the car as the electric motor strained to lift the big wooden door. The car's engine came to life and I dropped the transmission into reverse. But I held my foot on the brake, reluctant to depart, knowing there could be no return. My family was leaving a house where we had lived in for nearly two decades. I had pounded in many of the nails that held it together. With the help of friends, I balanced on a ladder and lifted the big beams spanning the garage above us into place. I remembered the feel of a thin 1916 dime we found spading out the dirt where the house's foundation would be poured, just a few feet away from where the car now idled. My dried perspiration and blood stained the sills, joists and studs encased in drywall, sheeting, and panels. We had worked hard, invested a wealth of sweat equity, to make this home. We were leaving, sneaking off now into the darkness like fugitives.

But the building around us was more than just a structure. It was center stage, a tiny cottage used in the 1920s for summer rentals when my wife and I moved in after our honeymoon. Under its roof our children had been consummated, took their first steps, celebrated birthdays, and buried goldfish found floating near the rim of their bowl. I sat within those walls in front of an old Royal typewriter churning out stories and books, my fingers wearing the markings off the keys, the rhythm of the type bars striking the platen, speeding up when everything was flowing, then sputtering when the flowing slowed, and halted. Upstairs, in my wife's studio, she had stood for hours in front of large sections of stretched canvas, slowly daubing oil onto the surfaces with an unimaginable precision, the resulting images bright, vibrant, realistic but, not real. Like all homes, we had filled it with stuff and now it was stuffed with memories. It was where we had shared wine, cold beer, good food, tequila, and the occasional illicit substance, where we had entertained an array of friends, family, artists, poets, writers, and film makers. It was where my friend Steve stayed for a time in our garage, swearing that Governor Deukmejian had implanted an electronic device in his arm, subsisting on dumpster pizzas and terrorizing our neighbors with a stolen handgun. We had survived a gang attack and several earthquakes in that house, including one so severe it knocked the transformers from the utility poles that exploded beside the alley like incendiary artillery shells. A thief stole one of our cars out of the tiny drive. Police tracked down another car thief and found him in our garage hiding under the parked car. Another time burglars pried open the big garage door and left with my power tools. Now that same door was up and I finally began to edge the car out into the darkness. Now we were the ones stealing away.

We lived on one of the tiny islands carved out by the grid of small canals lying beside Venice Beach. As the garage door dropped closed, I slowly nosed our car up the alley, passing the homes of neighbors, mostly friends, a few bitter enemies. I turned right at the corner and our headlights washed across a vacant lot where our

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keeshond had once fought a pitbull to a draw, a snarling slashing melee that left Simon's thick fur drenched in slime from his antagonist's fruitless attempts to bite through to flesh. Our car crept up the steep ramp of the old concrete bridge that spanned the salt water canal we had lived beside. In the darkness, the water was itself a black shadow, stretching out into the beach fog. For me the canals had been the symbol of Venice, the remnants of a dream that started to form late in the 19th century and took shape in the next. A tobacco millionaire named Kinney had wanted to recreate the grandeur of Italy's city of canals. It was a typical California dream: ambitious, audacious, the manifestation of a very rich man's conceit. The result was a place called Venice—but something far different from its Italian namesake—the seaside community that, for years, has been home to a diverse crowd of bohemians, surfers, performers, athletes, crooks, artists, celebrities, and degenerates of every stripe. It was a place I had grown to love.

I had written about Venice for years, interviewing young musicians hoping for a break, entrepreneurs looking for an easy buck, politicians and activists with promises for a never-to-be-realized future, and athletes looking to make their mark. Everyone had their tales and most were interesting, even the ones spun by characters I didn't much care for, but the stories that intrigued me most were those told by old-timers, stooped ladies, and white-maned men who had been in Venice before it was Venice. Some remembered the bingo parlors, battle royals and dance marathons of the depression. Others recalled prohibition nights when dapper gun men shot out the street lamps to get a girl's attention and jazz orchestras played at the Ship Caf  beside the Venice Pier. One told of working aboard one of Tony Comero's gambling ships and being paid in silver dollars. Others remembered the dreamer, Venice's founding father, Abbot Kinney, a wealthy man who kept different denomination coins in each pocket so that he could easily find the right amount after he sized up a panhandler. The old timers' stories captivated me and I found the streets of Venice populated with apparitions, ghosts of people like Sarah Bernhardt, Aimee Semple McPherson, John "Bull" Young, Lou "Two Gun" Alteri, Bill Harrah, Duke Kahanamoku, Marie Dressler, and a host of others who had all taken a turn on the Venice stage.

Our car slid down the ramp of the bridge, crossed two more, and we were out of the Venice canals. I turned left at Washington Boulevard and now, as we neared Marina del Rey, a car appeared, its headlamps ringed in fog. Our destination was the airport, where a plane would fly us to New York—the new job, a new life. The car was quiet, each of us unsure of what we were doing, unsure of what to say. Venice was behind us. The past was inching away. We were leaving for good. Even the dog remained silent.

I have lived in New York for many years now. People ask me often if I miss California. I tell them I don't. What I miss, I explain, is my youth spent in California. But when they ask me a different question, when they ask me if I miss Venice, the answer changes: I do miss Venice. I miss Venice and its storied past. I miss its role in my story, my past. Isn't it the same with all of us? Don't we all harbor memories of the landscapes from our past that, for some inexplicable reason, form perfect backdrops, as the poetry of our own story is played out? Like my youth, those special places are now gone, lost to the force of change and progress and time's erosive flow. We have our reasons for leaving them: mine is opportunity. Eventually we discover how important those places were, as the scenes and acts of our larger lives unfold. I miss Venice, the old Venice, a memory of Venice. Yes, I certainly do.



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Claire Bowman

Claire Bowman was born and raised in the woods next to the Missouri river. She is an Assistant Poetry Editor for *The Bat City Review*, and an MFA Candidate at the Michener Center for Writers. Her poems have previously been published in *Four Ties Lit Review* and *Smoking Glue Gun Magazine*. She sometimes loves it all.

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Horoscope at the Discount Tire

[Claire Bowman](#)

grace has been tricking into you,
Sagittarius
fate, a spout,
a spate
of imminent coincidences
there's a chance this is just an
abundance of tricky luck

a future junk shop has every instrument you need
to pull off minor miracles

never mind the big woman seated across, badgering you
for a look at the newspaper.

people in the waiting room sigh,
a landscape of agitation
one man mouth agape, asleep in a chair at noon

so, how much slack is available to you?

ask as much as you want,
but don't go looking for lotto numbers on oil change coupons
don't go etching the words of dead poets on your skin.

this week, your lucky numbers are 56, 33, 1 and 13.

get yourself an exotic plant and cut your hair,
leave that attitude in the shower.

given all of October's blessings,
{hear them drop their blossoms around you}
you could exist in perfect prostration

to
expunge the ego,
finally salt that moth-eaten memory
and any jaded theories you may be harboring.

for now, at least, be realistic, Sagittarius,
this world, it changes overnight.



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What Became of Us All

[Claire Bowman](#)

crumbling throat of the sphinx:
you still do it for us.
taking photographs
and wishing for just one
peek into the oracle
I'll settle for a thimble
of Egyptian sand

my skin is jumpy
be careful, there's cyanide in an apricot pit
there's nothing wrong with admitting
I am a witness that Loch Ness exists,
plus a bird told me.

oh, where the spume has been
green sick from the bacteria
of many countries
infested clouds try to hold it in
but darlin' it's gonna rain soon
(screws in
my left knee creak)

We never quite figured out how to
use the word blunderbuss in a poem.
N took her money and ran.
My breasts never filled out.
I heard that D let his beard grow and moved
West to explore the Northern latitudes.
A'nd you ever smoke a cigarette on
a rollercoaster? I hope you're defined. Burning.
Me? Black irises line the back porch of my mind.
They smell of anise and summer.
I am miles from here.



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Joan Colby



Joan Colby has published widely in journals such as *Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, and others. Awards include two Illinois Arts Council Literary Awards, Rhino Poetry Award, the new renaissance Award for Poetry, and an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in Literature. She was a finalist in the GSU Poetry Contest (2007), Nimrod International Pablo Neruda Prize (2009, 2012). She is the editor of Illinois Racing News, and lives on a small horse farm in Northern Illinois. She has published eleven books including *The Lonely Hearts Killers*, *The Atrocity Book* and her newest books from Future Cycle Press—*Selected Poems* and *Dead Horses*. *Selected Poems* received the 2013 Future Cycle Prize. A chapbook *Bittersweet* is forthcoming from Main Street Rag Press in 2014.

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The Seminar

[Joan Colby](#)

Here's how to draw on eyebrows once they have fallen out. The volunteer traces with a pencil soft as oak shade. Another demonstrates how to oil the bald scalp; she fits the wigs, courtesy of the Society.

They are all smiles. Ladies, isn't this fun. Let's try the makeup now, free samples that you can take home. If only, thinks Christina, the money for these products could be diverted for something to combat the nausea or the pain, if not the cure.

One breastless woman has brought her young granddaughters. Another, on round three of chemo, swears this is the last. A girl weeps, only 21 with Hodgkins, her beautiful hair, long and heavy as a cross.

Christina tries to say: this is what it's like for us, the patients, but these two in smocks don't want to hear. Think of one blessing every day, says the elder. When your eyelashes are gone, you should use bright lipstick, red or fuschia.



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Tim Craven



Originally from Stoke-on-Trent, England, Tim Craven was a neuroscientist living in London until he began a poetry MFA at Syracuse. In 2014, his poems will feature in *Rattle*, *The Lascaux Review*, *New Delta Review*, *Fjords Review*, *Sonora Review*, *CURA*, *Eleven Eleven*, *New Madrid*, *Natural Bridge* and others. He sometimes tweets: @CravenTim

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Sonnet

[Tim Craven](#)

This reward is just micro-moles
of dopamine dripping off
the midbrain floor, axon tentacles
crisscrossing the hemisphere-halves,
the caudate nucleus lit up like Reno.
The cut brakes of obsession from 5-HT
siphoned off in the night and runaway hope
swinging from the amygdala, beating heart
and quickness of breath
just sympathetic circuitry.
I have the science
but the effect of the scent
of your apricot shampoo
is inexplicable, inescapable.



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Cal Freeman

Cal Freeman was born and raised in Detroit. His writing has appeared in many journals including *Commonweal*, *The Journal*, *Nimrod*, *Drunken Boat*, *The Cortland Review*, and *The Paris-American*. He has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes in poetry and creative nonfiction. He currently serves as Associate Poetry Editor with Marick Press and teaches at Oakland University.

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Keys for Atomizing Your Life

[Cal Freeman](#)

I cannot speak from experience.
The year is an abstraction as it ends.

Its keys are angular and lithe
with jagged metal teeth;

they hang in latches
full of dark that dulls their gleam,

from ribbon looped around
the necks of larks.

By them we count the places
we are allowed to enter

for that allotted sliver of time.



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Gabrielle Lee



Gabrielle Lee is Managing Editor for *Willow Springs* magazine. She lives in Spokane, Washington with her husband, where her short plays were performed in 2013. Her work recently appeared in *Scissors & Spackle*, *Cardinal Sins*, and the anthology *Answers III: Accept: True Accounts of Online Dating*, and she is a contributor to [Bark](#).

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ampersand

[Gabrielle Lee](#)

not quite music, momento
of a dying art
calligraphy, fancy
like it means something,
beauty makes it more important,

official:
the words amplified by
punc ð tu ð a ð tion,
dukes and duchesses,
a higher strain of

human:
arrogance, contagious,
& diseased.



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Aimee Penna



Aimee Penna holds an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars and lives near Philadelphia where she teaches ESL. She's also an editorial assistant at *The American Poetry Review* and a member of the Philadelphia Stories poetry board. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Basalt Magazine*, *Meridian*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and *Transom*.

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the lost

[Aimee Penna](#)

sometimes their souls are like cats

we find them hidden in boxes

they can even squeeze themselves

into a diamond ring

a fuzzy varsity letter

a blue plastic mouse figurine

they're in love letters they peer out

through the eyes that knew them

unconsciously echo them

sometimes their souls are like blankets

we just can't seem to fold



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Lesley Wheeler



Lesley Wheeler is the Henry S. Professor of English at Washington and Lee University. She is the author of *The Receptionist and Other Tales*. You can read more about her [here](#).

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Epistolary Art

[Lesley Wheeler](#)

Keats thought letters could manifest
the wilful and dramatic exercise
of our minds toward each other.

The professor delivering him to us
is inside her paper, gray-gold head
bent down. Scratch of nib on
stationery, ghost of a thin cold hand.

On the whiteboard behind her:

made him articulate

You

let's say

In this letter to you I try for a lightning
and thunder effect: the event of writing
closing in on its reverberation

Tacked to the bulletin board: *So you feel sick?*
Taped to a cabinet: *Protect your loved ones,*
The reek of my neighbor's salami and tomato;
from the dirty window eight stories above the street,
a breeze, insect buzz of motorcycle. Unconnected.

There are many ways to be present. You pay to send
a letter and sometimes pay to receive it. Glad coins
for that travelled envelope, beloved scrawl, exotic stamp.
There is no voice but its timbre shakes your heart.

The sky darkens suddenly. Hear the wind, spatter
of drops against glass, as if we're listening
together. Half-crush the letter
as you yank open a swollen sash. That boom,
let's say, almost on top of the flash.

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Carina Yun

Carina Yun is a native San Franciscan. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Fourteen Hills*, *Folio*, *The Feminist Wire*, *The Northern Virginia Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Verdad*, and others. She works full-time and resides in Northern Virginia.

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The Green Umbrella

[Carina Yun](#)

"Like rain it sounded till it curved"
Emily Dickinson

I watch the earth darken
foreboding as if tell-
ing, twirl the umbrella
greedily and warble
as a bird. Meanwhile, my
father shouts, he slams shut
the front door. I slip on
the asphalt and watch my
first love tumble over
like a bucket collect-
ing for the first drought, be-
low a wheel of black clouds.



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Lisa Beebe



Lisa Beebe lives in Los Angeles, where she sometimes talks to the ocean. Find her online at lsabeebe.com.

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Umbilical

[Lisa Beebe](#)

At first it was just a stub. Barely noticeable.

"Can a person turn from an innie to an outie?" she asked herself. She'd heard of it happening to pregnant women. She knew she wasn't pregnant, so she wondered if she might be gaining weight. Maybe that could have the same effect. She started walking more, and tried to eat a little less.

Although her weight stayed the same, the lump continued to grow. It no longer even looked like an outie. It was about three inches long, and still growing. Maybe her umbilical cord was regenerating. Could that happen? If it could, she knew it wasn't normal, so she made an effort to hide it. She bought some medical tape and taped the lump to one side, but it was still visible beneath her tighter shirts. She began to dress in loose layers, always keeping her stomach covered.

Anyone else would've gone to the doctor, but this woman was afraid of injections and terrified of surgery. She worried they'd want to sedate her and operate to remove the cord.

When the cord continued to grow, she started wearing two sets of Spanx under all of her clothes. Combined with the medical tape, she could live a normal life, as long as she never undressed in front of anyone else. She stopped swimming. She avoided communal fitting rooms. She let her gym membership lapse and bought a Zumba DVD.

The cord grew and grew. As it developed, it seemed to have a mind of its own. At times, the cord pushed against the tape and the layers of elastic shapewear, as if it wanted to reach out to people. Not everyone. Just certain people. Each time the cord moved, she felt a twinge in her belly. It didn't hurt, exactly, but it felt deep and personal, as if something were tugging on her soul.

The woman's secret was too big for her to keep. One night, she made dinner for a friend and had a few glasses of wine. Without even meaning to, she told her friend about the cord and its movements. The friend commiserated. She didn't have any advice for the woman, but opened up about her own problems. She was having a tough time at work, and felt like her life was falling apart.

When the cord pushed itself toward her friend a few minutes later, the woman lifted her shirt so her friend could see. The friend lifted her shirt, too, as if to check that her own belly button was still normal. The cord reached for the friend's belly button and connected with it.

As soon as the friends were joined, a sense of peace and calm came over both of them. After a moment of wonder, the woman realized the strangeness of the situation. She reached over and yanked the cord free.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to her friend. "I don't know what just happened."

"I don't either," said her friend, "but it's okay. It made me feel a little better somehow. Like maybe my life isn't so bad."

After talking it over, they realized that the cord's efforts to connect could be a healing thing, and that the woman might have a special ability. They tried to figure out how the woman could use it to help others.

The woman felt a responsibility to go out into the world and connect with people. She couldn't keep the cord a secret any longer.

She organized small meet-ups at first, which became so popular that they grew into massive conferences. At each one, the cord guided her to people who most needed her help. The rest of the audience got to witness the connection, to see something flowing from her into the other person. They watched the cord swell pink and full

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of fluidNand admired the way it pulsed with energy and life.

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Umbilical

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As the conferences grew in popularity, the woman became a celebrity, known the world over for her healing abilities. The woman realized that while she couldn't cure anyone of their mental or physical illnesses, the cord somehow enabled them to go on. After connecting with her, they felt more alive, and more hopeful.

The woman connected with homeless people and world leaders, adults and children. Despite all the good she was doing, a few people got suspicious and started asking questions. Was the woman really helping anyone, or just brainwashing her fans?

"This umbilical thing can't be good," they said, "it feels disgusting and wrong. What if she's spreading some sort of disease?"

Her detractors called on the FDA to investigate, and instead of fighting back, the woman decided to stop everything she was doing. She canceled all of her upcoming conferences. She didn't want to imagine how many medical tests the FDA would run. She wanted no part in it.

She went home, and lounged around the house in midriff shirts, letting the cord dangle. She threw the Sparx away.

When the woman went out to run errands or buy groceries, she wore loose clothing, but strangers often recognized her. They sometimes asked if she still connected with people, or if it was really over.

"Oh, those days are over," she always said. But if the cord twitched beneath her shirt, if it reached toward the stranger, she'd ask if she could give that person a hug. Sometimes those hugs lasted several minutes, and sometimes, beneath shirts, beneath jackets, the cord connected and did its work.

The woman hugged a lot of people. She did a lot of good.

Before she died many years later, the woman asked to be buried without a coffin so that she could connect with the earth. Now, when anyone wants to connect with her, all they have to do is lay face down on the ground, and relax.

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Ruth Blank

Ruth Blank attended the Stanford Fiction Writing workshop in the '70s and then spent many years in the corporate and foundation worlds. In the past couple of years, she has had stories in *Ploughshares*, *Huffington Post 50 Fiction*, and had a piece selected for inclusion in the next Fiction Attic Press Short Story anthology. She is currently working on a novel.

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If There Is No What

[Ruth Blank](#)

I'm in the airplane bathroom talking into this hunk of junk. I call it a hunk of junk because it must be ten years old, it's dented and has a sticker on the back that says, "Keep Calm. Drink Tea." You told me to take a recorder with me in case I wanted to say something that I would normally tell you on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. This is the only piece of crap I could find in my father's desk and as far as I know, he's never had a cup of tea and to say "keep calm" implies that he's been calm at one time, and I doubt that.

According to you, three weeks is a long time for someone to be away from treatment at this stage and it's really going to be almost six weeks because when I get back, we'll have two sessions and then you're going to be gone for the month of August. I haven't decided yet if I'll talk into this every day or if this bathroom chat is it. And even if I do record something, I might not give it to you, or I might edit it. I might say I lost this stupid thing, or I might erase whatever I say and tell you I never used it. Most likely, I'll give it to you. But will you take the time to listen to it?

It's only day one of this trip, not even that, night one, hour six.

Someone is banging on the bathroom door. It's probably Mom. What does she think I'm doing in here? One thing she doesn't think I'm doing in here is talking into an old cell-phone-like thing. She doesn't know I have it and she's not going to know. It's really noisy in here, it sounds like the plane is going to explode, though supposedly that's unlikely. Don't expect this to be easy to listen to. If I give this to you, you're going to have to do some work if you want to hear me.

We only left the house six hours ago and already Dad has gotten angry at me because I asked him to buy me a carton of cigarettes at the duty free shop. I like the Rothman's. He knows I smoke, but he doesn't want me to do it or talk about it in front of him.

It's Meggie's birthday today. She's fifteen and she's angry that she's spending it on an airplane with her family. She'd rather be with her friends. She wanted to go to Paris. London was the only destination where we could get four seats at the last minute. I can tell Meggie's angry because Mom tried to put an arm around her waiting to board the plane and Meggie shrugged her off and turned her back.

Mom had a root canal in the morning and it put her in a bad mood. Dad was in the good phase of his pre-dinner drinking, the generous good-Dad phase and said, "Would it make you feel better to go to Europe?" He can say that kind of thing since Grandpa died; he got a lot of money. He bought a baby grand piano and remodeled his bathroom with a sauna about a month after Grandpa's funeral. Mom said, "Yes," but I don't think she knew he meant "Let's go tonight."

By the time we got a cab for the airport, Dad was in the angry phase of his dinner drinking, where everyone was doing everything wrong: the cab driver was cheating him, Mom packed too much, Meggie was going on and on about her birthday, and me. It doesn't have to be anything, he just doesn't like me. I'm sure that now that he knows me, he wished I wasn't David, Jr. Junior isn't supposed to be almost flunk eleventh grade. If he had given me a name like Norman or Howard, he wouldn't have to criticize every little thing I do. But with a junior attached to my name, I'm under constant scrutiny and there isn't much I do right.

My seat is across the aisle from Dad's. He's sleeping with his head lolled back on the seat, and his jaw is open. I had to get up and come in here just so I wouldn't have to look at him.

Knocking at the door is getting loud. I'm putting this thing away.

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* * *

Nobody thought this through, that we'd be arriving in the morning with no reservation and even if we had one, we wouldn't be able to get into our rooms until the afternoon. Dad was the only one who slept on the plane and we're all screwed up. Dad called around while we waited for our bags and got a couple of rooms at the Shaftsbury, but we couldn't check in for four hours, so we took a taxi into London which took forever and I actually spent most of that time thinking about what I want to say into this thing and when I'm going to get a chance to, because they booked only one room for me and Meggie. So when we get to the hotel, the three of them went to the restaurant and I said I wanted to walk around. Mom and Dad looked at each other, but they were too tired to stop me. Now I'm walking and talking into this thing and no one looks twice at me because there are so many crazy people and because English people are too polite and if you don't look closely at this hunk of junk, it probably just looks like I'm talking on the phone. Dad wouldn't let me actually bring my phone because minutes are expensive abroad. Coming into a lot of money suddenly hasn't made him less stingy.

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If There Is No What

[Ruth Blank](#)

When I see a girl my age coming, I put this thing down, so that's what most of the pauses are. I think my voice sounds whiny when I talk to you and I don't want anyone else hearing it.

On the airplane this morning, while we were still over the ocean, the captain came on the speaker and said with his British accent, 'We have a birthday on our plane today. Everyone say *happy birthday* to Meg.' Actually, it was her birthday when she got on the plane, but it was already the next day when he made the announcement, but you could hear people saying *happy birthday* and a couple of people stood up to try to see the birthday girl. This is the kind of thing Dad would arrange, thinking it made our family the most important people on the plane.

Meggie and I haven't spoken all summer. Well, that's not correct. I haven't spoken to her and she gave up trying to get me to say something. You've tried to get me to talk about Meggie, not directly of course, and so far I've hardly mentioned her name, so now I'm letting you know: I've given up speaking to her. I don't look at her at the dinner table, and if I want something on her side of the table, I do without instead of asking her for it. I couldn't really say why. She just makes me mad. She goes out with her friends who drive and they cruise around and she comes home just like she's still Mom and Dad's little girl and I'm sure she's not. She'll lie across the end of their bed while they watch some old movie. She pretends she's happy to be in their company, when really she's reliving the evening in her head.

I know what she's doing because I've done it, from the other side, from the guy's side. Go to the Hot Shoppes or Vista Park and see who's there, get in someone's car and drive for a while. By the way, I'm walking by Piccadilly Circus right now, I recognize the statue of Eros. Lots of tourists taking pictures. Almost no one around me is speaking English so I could say any fucking thing into this fucking thing.

So Meggie probably gets in guys' cars and rides around with them. Not probably. I know she does. That's her whole reason for going out. She wears eye makeup and tight shorts and Mom says, 'Should you go out dressed like that?' and Meggie says, 'It's fine' and that's all the resistance she gets.

Sometimes I imagine when she leaves the house, she's saying *fuck you* to me in her head.

I go out sometimes, too, but I avoid Vista Park. I go further into town where the girls from Bishop Quinn hang out, at Speed Boys and Devon Alleys. They're not smart girls and they're not always great looking, but they like me for whatever reason.

I'm a little lost. I'm sure I can find my way back to the Shaftsbury just by looking at the buildings. It's right down the street, I'm pretty sure. I'm just really tired from not having slept on the plane and I think it's not even dawn Philly time. I don't want to ask anybody; I'll get there eventually.

Sharing a room with Meggie, I'm not just going to not speak to her; I'm not even going to look at her.

* * *

I called up to Mom and Dad's room from the lobby. The lobby smells like bacon, not like Oscar Meyer, but like some English farm bacon. They're on the seventeenth floor. They gave me a key to my room, which is on the fourteenth floor. They told me Meggie's sleeping and that she wants to go to Madame Tussaud's this afternoon and will I take her, they don't want her riding the Underground by herself.

I told them I don't want to go to Madame Tussaud's. 'Just do it,' Dad said.

'Why are you mad at your sister?' Mom asked.

I said, 'I'm not.'

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“Then take her. I’ll give you twenty pounds so you’ll have money for food.”

I took the money and I’d like to go take a nap, but I’m not ready to go to the room yet, so I’m back in the lobby, sitting in one of the high back chairs, resting my head on the back and my arms on the armrests. The lobby is bustling. No one notices me talking to you, at least I don’t think they do.

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If There Is No What

[Ruth Blank](#)

It's unbelievable that they got Meggie and me one room. They're so clueless. We used to love sharing a room, it's true. At least I did. Before Dad put in central air, on hot nights, they'd have me sleep on the floor of her room because it had a window air conditioner. I'd make her laugh, sometimes by tickling, but also by saying stupid stuff like a joke I learned from a joke book: "Cheer up, things could be worse. So I cheered up, and sure enough, things were worse." I'm sure she didn't get it, but everything cracked us up those nights and we'd laugh until Dad came in and screamed at us to get to sleep. And then we'd just laugh more quietly.

This chair is pretty comfortable. Goodnight.

* * *

I went to Madame Tussaud's with Meggie. We took the Underground, but we stood at opposite ends of the car. I had to keep an eye on her because she knew which stop we wanted and I didn't. For some reason, I can't read anymore. That's why I'm seeing you, of course, but we never talk about my not reading. We talk about everything else which is strange because the problem is that I can't read.

Of course, Mom and Dad know I can't ride the Underground without Meggie even though they make it sound as though she's the one that can't ride without me. No one's going to attack her. This is London after all. And there's no worry about her getting lost. Everyone always wants to help her.

I saw her exit when the loudspeaker said *Baker Street*. She walked fast and I lagged behind, but I could see her even in the crowd because she was wearing a pink slicker.

Madame Tussaud's was stupid. They keep it kind of dark; just the exhibits are lit. There were lots of tourists in wet raincoats so that it was both steamy and creepy. I got the headphones that tell stories about all the figures. Not that I care where David Beckham was born or what leisure activities Prince Harry likes, but I wouldn't know what's going on without the audio guide. I wish the whole world had an audio guide.

Meggie spent a lot of time looking at the murderers: Jack the Ripper, Lee Harvey Oswald and some famous British murderers—a guy called The Black Panther and a girl named Mary Bell, who if you can believe the wax figure, was kind of pretty in a '60s sort of way. They had her in a leather jacket with a scowl on her face that was kind of sexy, like she was every kind of bad. The background was rickety old buildings barely lit on narrow streets and it looked as though something terrible would happen any second. I wonder if Meggie really liked the dark scenes they set up for the murderers, or if she wanted me to think she liked them since I'm sure she knew I was behind her.

I followed Meggie's raincoat back to the hotel. I'm supposed to protect her, but there I was, trailing her like a calf following its mama. I don't feel like her older brother anymore, though I'd never tell her that; I don't like telling you for that matter. When I was almost twelve and she had just turned ten, we were playing Uno on the floor of her room. She was wearing a loose nightgown, and when she leaned forward to pick up a card, it kind of dipped open and I could see that she had breasts, more or less. It shocked me and I could feel my whole body get warm. Somehow, she didn't notice me staring every time she leaned over and when she wanted to quit, I said, "One more game," and felt disgusting and thrilled all day and even though she didn't know. It felt like she had something on me.

In the lobby, Meggie did a quick about-face and left the hotel. I guess she didn't want to ride up in the elevator with me any more than I wanted to ride up with her.

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Now we're at dinner with our parents at Veeraswamy, which serves fancy Indian food. Dad is on his second glass of gin. He is asking how we liked Madame Tussaud's, as though he thinks Meggie and I do things together. It must be nice to be able to ignore so much.

I'm standing outside, smoking and talking into this thing. It's not quite dark yet. I know that people walking by can hear me talking, but they don't look at me. In fact, people in London don't look at each other, I guess out of politeness. If someone looks you in the eye, you know they're from another country. I'm going to have to go back inside before Dad sends Meggie out to get me. Mom, Dad, and Meggie are going to the theater tonight. I plan to walk around.

* * *

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If There Is No What

[Ruth Blank](#)

I'm still jet lagged. Meggie has gone down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. I order room service. The eggs are covered with too much butter, and the thin bread was probably toasted early this morning, but everything tastes really good. And now the room smells like bacon.

I would have had an appointment with you today if I were at home. You would sit there and look at me, professionally easy going, not shocked by anything I say and not demanding that I speak. What you do sometimes is make me so uncomfortable by your silence and by your staring at me that I blurt something out and even if it's something stupid, you'll follow my thought wherever it goes.

I couldn't get a seat on the trolley today, I'll say, and you'll say, Ömhhh. Frustrating? And then we'll talk about trolleys and trains and road rage for a half hour, and then we're done and I leave wondering what just happened.

Today, I'd talk to you about Meggie, which I know you'd like, even though you'd never say you wanted me to talk about her, but I can tell because you shift in your seat when I mention her and you ask me questions: How do you feel when she goes out with friends? What annoys you? When did you start feeling annoyed? What do you think of her friends?

Yes, I might talk to you about Meggie today if I were in your office. I don't know what I would tell you, how much. I might wait to see what you asked me. There have been a few times when you've asked me questions and I've felt a wave come over me, from head to toe and back again, like full-body dizziness and I find that I'm saying something that I've never said out loud before. Like the time I talked about when Dad stood over me when I was six and he blocked out the sun and the trees and his spit hit my face and his hand was raised above his head and it was almost worse that it didn't come down on me because then he could have stopped being so angry but he never has.

I think you know more about me than you're letting on.

This hotel smells of bacon and years of strangers occupying its rooms, but the bed is comfortable. I'm going back to sleep.

* * *

I walked to Hyde Park today. The bellman pointed me in the direction and it was just a straight shot down Piccadilly right to Speaker's Corner, where the crazy people line up to fill tourists' heads with their wacky ideas. It was raining and cold, so not that many people were standing around, but that didn't stop this youngish-looking guy from going on and on in a thick British accent. His raincoat was buttoned up so tight that it looked like it was choking him, and his plaid wool cap was dripping water onto his face.

When I walked up, he was saying, Öif there is no what, then what is what? Then he paused to let his small audience absorb the meaning of his words. I looked around and there were a few people—some Scandinavian-looking people and some Middle Eastern-looking people—but they all seemed to be waiting for another speaker.

As far as I was concerned, Öwhat is what? was a good question and I wanted to hear the answer even though the speaker already said that maybe there was no what. And he went on to say that if you can't answer the question of Öwhat is, then you can't prove there is "what" and therefore we have a dilemma. He called it a die-lemma and it was hard to tell if that was his accent or that was part of his meaning.

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The guy had dark droopy skin under his eyes, as though he hadn't slept in a long time, as though this problem had been keeping him up at night and he was finally ready to share his dilemma with the world, to expose the "what" problem. There was a young couple under an oversized umbrella, both wearing lime green Keds with no laces. I heard the girl snicker and I wondered what made her think she was so much better than the speaker. Then, it occurred to me that she might be snickering at me with my hair plastered down by the rain and my old white Adidas. She probably thought I was the next nut in line.

I was pretty wet so I went back to the hotel. Meggie was reading a book in the room. I kind of wanted to ask her: "If there is no what, then what is what?" to see if she could make sense of it, but, of course, I didn't.

When I came in, she looked at me, got up, picked up her raincoat that was on a chair and walked out. Now I'm here with nothing to do. I could go back to Speaker's Corner, I could go to the British Museum or the Tate. I could walk around in the rain. I call up to my parents' room. They're not there. At times like this, I wish I could read. It's not that I was ever a great reader. I was slow. We had to read *Moby Dick* over the summer between eighth and ninth grade and it took me all summer to look at the words, but I didn't make sense of it. I hated that book. They thought I might be dyslexic, but I failed the dyslexia tests. Then, it was a few months ago that I just stopped recognizing words. It didn't really shock me to pick up my copy of *Free Fall* that I was reading for English and not understand what I was seeing. I looked at the page and saw lines and curves, nothing that meant anything. After all the CT scans and MRIs and spinal fluid tests, they sent me to you. All we do is talk. Talk talk talk and I still can't make out a letter. I can say the alphabet, of course, I just can't read it. What is what? Can you tell me?

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If There Is No What

[Ruth Blank](#)

I just light up a cigarette. It's a "no smoking" floor and there are no ashtrays and Meg hates cigarette smoke. If she smells it, she'll complain to Mom and Dad, and Dad will start with smoking and then run down the list of all of the things I do wrong. Of course, "not speaking to your sister" will be on the list, but "not reading" won't, because it's too much for him to have a junior that doesn't read, that might never read, that might be signing his name with an "X" forever. He pretty much subscribes to the notion that if it's not talked about, it doesn't exist.

I'm lying down with a soap dish on my stomach, and smoking a Rothman's.

There's a Sesame Street style show on TV that's working on the alphabet. They're focusing on the letter Ö. I hear them sounding it out, "double-u," and I see the shape that's on the screen, but I can't hold onto it. They're going through a whole list of "W" words. Who, what, when, where, why. Wolf. Watch. Word. Well well well. Maybe instead of spending three so-called hours a week with you I should just watch Sesame Street.

Mom just called, "We're going to Bar Bould for dinner. Wear your sport coat." I hate going to fancy places because Dad takes it personally when the service is slow. So many times he's blown up in a way so the whole restaurant hears him and everyone looks at Meggie and me with pity as we follow him out of the restaurant. It makes the food hard to digest.

* * *

I met Mom and Dad in the lobby. Meggie wore new clothes, a short red dress and pointy-toed boots. She must have gone shopping and changed in their room. We took a cab to the restaurant which is so fancy that it's casual. No tablecloths, an open kitchen, good-looking servers and bussers wearing some kind of designer t-shirts and tight black pants.

We just ordered. I'm standing outside again and it's freezing. There are a bunch of Italians at the next table and one of the guys has been staring at Meggie and then saying things to the guy sitting next to him. Over and over he uses the word *pissona* or *bissona*. I can just imagine what it means while he's looking at her and I'm ready to punch him. But I see that Meggie's kind of smiling at him. Mom and Dad are halfway through their evening drinking cycle and they're very amused that Meggie is flirting with some Italian guys. They think it makes them sophisticated. I want to go back to the hotel and get away from all of them but I have oysters coming and then some tuna thing that I knew they have because I saw them bring it out for someone when we first walked in.

Now two of the Italian guys come out to smoke. They're tall and way too old for Meggie. One of them is wearing a blue and yellow-striped shirt with the cuffs rolled up to show off his hairy forearms. The other one is wearing a grey sweater buttoned up that on me would look feminine but on him looks cool, of course. They're talking loud and laughing and I wouldn't be surprised if Mom and Dad let Meggie go off with them, even though they look like professional soccer players who probably have four or five girls a night.

* * *

I'm sitting on the steps of the cupid statue in Piccadilly Circus. There are pigeons everywhere. I found one of the few spots where I could rest my ass so it wouldn't be in pigeon shit. There are pictures being taken everywhere even though it's the middle of the night. It's pretty bright because of the billboards. I can't read, but I recognize a bottle of coke on one of them. I recognize the McDonald's arch. I can't read, but I'm not spared the obnoxious

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ads that pollute Piccadilly. I'm in a lot of the tourists' pictures. A year from now, when that Japanese couple or the African kids look at their London trip pictures, they'll see a guy like me talking into a phone-like thing and looking right at their camera, blowing smoke at them, and definitely not smiling.

As it turned out, the Italian guys from the restaurant actually were soccer players, though not for one of the big teams. They introduced themselves and asked if Meggie would like to join them to go dancing. Their English was really good. The taller guy said to Mom, "Of course we would love you to go, too" and she was as flattered as he wanted her to be, then said it would be OK for Meggie to go as long as I went with her. Meggie actually looked at me for the first time in a long time and didn't say anything. I think she was figuring out whether going with these guys was worth having to be in the same place as me for a whole evening.

I said OK as though I was doing her a favor. The truth is I wondered where you go in London to loosen up, not that I like to dance but I like to see where girls go and you don't find that out by reading the guide in the hotel room.

Four of us got in a cab: Paolo, Bruno, Meggie, and I. I sat in the little fold down seat and faced the three of them. Paolo and Bruno looked like grown men and Meggie looked small between them and I think she looked a little nervous. I could smell the cigarette smoke on the two guys and wondered if that would turn Meggie off enough to ditch them.

Paolo gave the driver an address and then began talking to Meggie. I doubt he knew she was just fifteen.

"Where are you from?"

"Philadelphia."

"Ah. Allen Iverson."

"Yes."

"Do you know him?"

"I've never met him."

"You're very pretty."

I wanted the ride to end in a hurry but there was a lot of traffic. The two guys spoke to each other in Italian.

"Your sister has many boyfriends?" Bruno asked me.

"You'll have to ask her."

They laughed as though I had said something funny. In a foreign language, it's harder to detect anger and disgust, so they missed it from me.

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We got out of the cab at a place called Ministry of Sound and didn't have to wait in line, maybe because it's Wednesday or maybe because Bruno and Paolo are regulars. Bruno put his hand on the small of Meggie's back to push her through the crowd. There were a million people inside and it was louder than I've ever heard anything before, with a thumping beat and a synthesized girl's voice singing in a foreign language. It was hard to tell the dance floor from the rest of the club. Everyone was facing the two story DJ booth waving their hands in the air almost in unison. The beat invaded my body, not in a good way. Was I the only one?

I looked around for just a second to get a feel for who was there. Most people seemed to be in their twenties and particular about their clothes. Just within my line of sight, there were dozens of pretty girls, but at least that many, if not more well-dressed guys. Then I looked on either side of me, and Meggie and the Italians were gone. I guess I didn't really expect to spend the whole evening with them. I can't say I was sorry. Yes, I was supposed to keep an eye on her, but what was I going to do if I saw something? And what was I supposed to be looking for? What if he started kissing her and she kissed him back? It made me sick to even think about so it was better not to have to see it.

I walked around, or I should say, I squeezed my way through people. I sort of kept my eyes open for Meggie's red dress, but just about every girl was wearing red. And half the guys looked like Italian soccer players. The air smelled spicy, like Sandalwood or Patchouli. I bet the scent was shot through the ventilation to mask the sweat because a lot of people were drenched. I managed to get a beer and stood near the hallway to the restrooms where there was a little bit of space. Not far from me, a few girls were dancing at the edge of the crowd. They had their hands in the air and watched their feet as they danced. Something about them didn't seem British, but most people in London weren't British, so I tried to figure out where they were from by their clothes and the way they danced. One of them saw me watching, a girl that would have been exotic except that her hair was so wiry it looked like it could slice you up. She elbowed another girl who looked up from her feet and followed her friend's pointer finger to me. The friend looked like she might be pretty. The exotic girl waved me over. I walked toward them slowly. They kept dancing but I just stood there.

"Hey, boy," the exotic girl said with a thick accent. "English?" She wore a tight t-shirt with writing on it which I wished I could read so that I'd have something to say. Of course, even if I could read, it might not be in English so I'd still be lost.

"Yes," I said. She kept dancing. I saw that she wasn't really all that exotic; she just had a lot of makeup on with thick black eyebrows that had to have been drawn on by pen. When Meggie was little, she put on our mother's makeup once in a while when our parents were out, purple eye shadow and mascara that ended up all over her face. I put some on, too. No big deal. It was just for fun, back then when Meggie and I had fun together.

"Dance?" The girl asked me.

"Nah," The prettier girl grabbed my arm and crushed herself against me. She was damp. The music was awful. It vibrated in my head. My jaws were aching because I guess I was grinding my teeth again. The girl felt good enough, though she seemed to be wearing spandex or something under her clothes that kept her body from spilling out. I stood and moved with her a little bit but I know I must have looked stupid.

"Hey boy," the girl with the eyebrows said and they sort of danced with me in the middle of them. Some other girls that they were with were laughing and trying to yell above the music in what could have been Turkish or

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Romanian. They all smelled of flowery perfume and when they spoke, I could smell the liquor they had been drinking. I thought I picked out the word *fuck* in what they were saying to each other. It must be part of a universal language. Of course, I use it myself, but I hate it when it's used to describe actual fucking. I only like to use it to mean *Övery*.

After a minute of dancing with me in between, I saw one of them nod to the other, and the pretty one grabbed a tall thin guy who was coming from the restroom. He wore a black shirt and black pants and started dancing with them immediately, and I had to find a way to remove myself without seeming like an idiot, but they really didn't notice me leaving. I walked around the club a little more and by then my head was full-out throbbing in pain. Everywhere, there were couples grinding against each other, not like dancing grinding, but actual grinding grinding. They didn't seem to care if anyone watched. I could have stood and watched, but it made me feel a little sick to think about Meggie seeing these people and that ruined it for me.

Before I left, I went up to the balcony area and worked my way to the railing so I could look out on the dance floor. My eyes picked out all of the red and then I realized it was ridiculous to try to find anyone in that club so I left. When I got out into the cold, my head was still noisy. I asked a cop, a bobby, which way to Piccadilly because I could probably get back to the hotel from there. I couldn't understand a word he said and I didn't want to ask him to repeat himself, so I just started walking in the direction he was pointing.

It's supposed to be summer but it's cold here. I pulled up the collar of my jacket and walked, staying on big streets. I walked for a really long time and for all I knew, I could have been much farther from the hotel than when I started walking. I guess I could have gotten into a cab at any time but it would sort of feel like cheating and it would get me back to the hotel too soon. I was really trying to figure out if the guy in Hyde Park made any sense or not. Because when you think about it, he was right. If there is no what, then you have to ask what is what? It's nothing. Right? But, he was starting from the premise that there is no what, and maybe he's wrong about that. It may be that everything he said was meaningless. How do you figure that out? You're a doctor. Explain.

I walked for a really long time. You might think I'm crazy for walking around all night in this cold fucking city. You'd never say I'm crazy, not to my face. But you might think it. I don't care. I didn't want to go back to the hotel. If I can walk around and talk to you, it's almost like being with someone. Although I still haven't decided if I'm going to erase this. Maybe I'll erase it and tell you I never made any recording, or maybe I'll erase it and tell you that it has lots of stuff on it that I know you'd turn into more questions that I might not answer. And maybe I'll save it for myself. Probably not.

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If There Is No What

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I was hungry while I was walking and I noticed other hungry people, men stooped over digging through trash cans, old women shuffling on worn shoes muttering to themselves and asking for money without waiting for an answer. When I was little, so I'm told, I used to pick gum off the sidewalk and put it in my mouth. I tried to eat a dead sparrow that was in the back yard once and someone stopped me. I guess I'm not so different from these bums. I haven't slept in my clothes before and I don't have a beard or wild hair. Yet.

One street that I walked down looked like the setting for the murderers at Madame Toussaud's with dark alleys and dangerous second story balconies. I kept turning round and round to see if there was anyone sneaking up on me but there was no one. If anyone had been around to see me, I probably would have looked crazy. I wished I could read the street signs. I wished I could read anything. I felt like lying down in the hotel. Where are all the fucking cabs when you need one?

* * *

I'm back in the hotel. I asked another bobby which way to Piccadilly and he looked at my face closely and then said, "follow me" like I was a lost five-year-old. I know it's late. It might be almost morning. Meggie isn't here. I lost whatever tired I felt when I unlocked the door and saw the beds turned down and the soft night service lighting on, and no one in the room. I hadn't really thought about it, but I guess I expected her to be there, in bed, watching TV and keeping whatever happened that evening to herself. She'd flick the light off to make it easier to ignore me. Like last night and the night before, I'd go to sleep in the bed on the other side of the nightstand sensing her whole, huge life that I'm not part of.

I'm in trouble. What do I do? Do I wake up Mom and Dad? Then they'll know I left Meggie and whatever has happened to her will be my fault. I should have kept her red dress in my sight and coaxed her home, even if that meant I had to talk to her. She might think I ditched her and maybe she's staying with Paolo and Bruno just to show me show me what, I'm not sure but it can't be good. And what if they're murderers like the Black Panther? Maybe rich, handsome Italian soccer players leave girls by the side of the road when they're done with them. I have a picture in my mind of Bruno, with his tan and his forearm hair and his stubble, hovering over Meggie, not as she is now, but Meggie as a little girl, as my little sister. I can't lie down. I can't stand still. I'm hungry and tired and I blame you with your electronic cigarette and the little cracks in the leather chair that are probably a Rorschach of some kind and the clock behind my head that you can see but I can't and the way you let me rev up just before the forty-five minutes are up.

"We'll work together," you said. "We'll get you back in shape." All I have to do is talk. All you have to do is act casual as if you're saying: "Talk, don't talk. It's all the same to me." But I know you're waiting for some big revelation, something to do with Meggie. Maybe I have something to tell you and maybe I don't. Maybe you should ask Meggie because if anything ever happened, long ago or not so long ago, it will always be silence between us.

When I think about it, I hate her so much I can't see straight. I don't want her dead, but I want her erased from my head. If there's any blame, I'm the one to blame, but somehow she's the one that ended up with good grades and friends. She can read. She does it all the time. How did I end up the one having to sit with you three days a week? And how did I end up the one standing in the middle of this room talking into a hunk of junk?

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If she doesn't come back, who's to blame? I'm stuck in this spot. I can't move. The bacon smell is rising from the hotel kitchen. I'm hungry but the smell makes me feel sick. A little light is coming in around the blackout shade. I just don't think I'll give this to you. Not for a while. There's the key in the door. Shit.

* * *

Meggie's hair was a mess. Her cheeks were red and she had smudges of mascara under her eyes. The new pointy-toed boots were water stained.

"Shut up," she said when she came into the room, not even looking at me. She walked straight into the bathroom and I heard the shower go on.

The tired from being up all night overtook me and I lay down on the bed, in my clothes, which is where I am now, fading. When Meggie comes out of the bathroom with her hair wet from the shower, wrapped in the Shaftsbury terry cloth robe that's too big for her, if I'm still awake, I might ask her what's what.

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Kristan Hoffman



Kristan Hoffman is a twenty-something writer who loves dogs, travel, and football. She earned a B.A. in creative writing from Carnegie Mellon and later attended the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop. Kristan's first manuscript *The Good Daughters* was a quarterfinalist in the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Awards, and her web serial *Twenty-Somewhere*, which won a contest with St. Martin's Press, is now available as an ebook. Her shorter work has appeared in the *Citron Review*, *Sugar Mule*, and the *Oakland Review*. For more about Kristan and her writing, please visit her [website](#). She looks forward to meeting you!

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Bringing Them Home

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We were not pleased. For over an hour we had been crowding around the gate like dogs at dinnertime, and now they were telling us it would be another twenty minutes before boarding. A plane they had been waiting for had just arrived, but on the opposite side of the airport. There were certain passengers who needed to make their way here.

We rolled our eyes, thinking that no plane had ever waited for us.

There was sighing, grumbling, quick trips to the restroom. At long last, the gate agent called for those passengers requiring assistance. Then priority members and first class tickets. Then the lowly masses, row by row.

We shuffled down the jetway with our backpacks and our rolling cases. We settled into our seats with our laptops and our headphones. When everyone was finally seated, we expected to push back and take off. Instead we waited. Again.

The air in the cabin grew warm and stale from our bodies, from our frustration. We were about to complain to our flight attendants when a clomping noise came from the jetway, like horses on cobblestone. We all sat up and peered over the headrests in front of us.

A small group of soldiers came on board. Clean-cut and stone-faced, they quickly took their seats in the first two rows behind business class. They had no luggage.

Okay, we thought. For them, we would gladly give our time.

But by then, the plane was pushing back. The engines spun. The wings trembled. We took off.

The flight was long but smooth. We sailed over the city, twinkling lights spreading out below us. We nosed up through the clouds, the thin air icing and cracking our skin. We leveled out, surrounded by stars, and then we read, worked, watched videos, and slept.

The soldiers sat like statues the whole time. Hands in laps, faces forward, mouths silent.

Hours later, the plane began its descent. Another city, another constellation of lives fanning out across the earth. Our stomachs dropped as the *Fasten Seatbelt* light dinged on. A tired voice asked us to return our tray tables and seat backs to their upright and locked positions. We stowed our personal belongings and leaned forward in our seats, eager to get up and off this plane, eager to stretch our legs, eager to be home.

The captain came on the speaker. He thanked us all for our patience at the beginning of the flight, and asked us for just a little more patience now at the end.

This is a bit unusual, he said.

We were carrying fallen soldiers in our cargo hold. If everyone could remain seated until the bodies were transferred off the plane and into the waiting vehicle, he would be most appreciative. Also, we shouldn't worry about the airport's fire trucks stationed along the runway. They were only there to do a water salute.

The cabin went completely silent. We looked at each other, and out the windows, and at the magazines peeking out of the seat pockets in front of us. We snuck glances at the soldiers sitting at the front of the plane.

There was a loud whir and a soft whine as the wings adjusted and the wheels went down. There was a *whump* as we landed, and the screeching of wind as the plane sped up to slow down.

As promised, two boxy red trucks sat on either side of the runway. They let loose two giant arcs of water, and we passed underneath. Droplets fell onto the plane and ran down our windows, glistening in the blue and yellow runway lights. An unnatural rain.

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The plane pulled up to the gate and stopped, but we didn't stand. We didn't even unfasten our seat belts. We didn't reach for our phones.

The cabin door opened, and a military officer stepped on board. He walked past first class and found his fellow servicemen. They stood as one.

Whatever words they spoke, brief and low, were lost to us. Afterward, the officer dismissed each soldier with a nod. They marched past him, off the plane, out of sight.

The officer stayed, moving back a little ways into the first-class cabin. He addressed us in a gentle but resounding voice.

Those men took an oath, he said. To bring home the fallen. To get them back safely to their families. You all did not take that oath, but tonight, you fulfilled it nonetheless. Your country thanks you.

The heel of his polished boot clicked against the thin carpet as he did an about-face and exited the plane. We were left floating in his wake, suddenly adrift from a shore we hadn't known we were standing on.

The flight attendant kindly threw us a line. She let us know that it was now safe to move about the cabin. She thanked us for choosing her airline, and hoped to see us again on a future flight. She knew the script and gave us our cues.

We stood. We opened the overhead bins and pulled down our bags. We emptied out, row by row, and shuffled up the jetway.

The airport was dim and sleepy. A lone janitor wearing headphones was running a vacuum right in front of the gate. He paused the machine when we emerged, his eyes passing over us with disinterest before settling on the view through the window.

The way his brows drew together made us look, too.

A casket draped with the American flag. Then a second. A third. A fourth. They slid out of the plane's belly on a conveyor belt, like babies being born.

The soldiers stood next to the caskets, one apiece. They waited, patiently, as a small herd of people walked across the tarmac. The herd separated, peeling apart at the direction of the military officer. He pointed each family to their fallen soldier. When everyone had gone past him, he looked at the ground and sighed.

We all crowded around the window, lips pressed together, hands over hearts. We watched as an older woman in a purple shawl collapsed against the first casket in a tearful embrace. The man next to her grasped her shoulders as if to hold her up, but his head was shaking so hard that the tremors rippled down the pleats of his suit. Several men, women, and children surrounded the second casket, clasping each other's hands and crying into each other's chests. The circle of their bodies was like a halo. At the third casket, two dark-haired women with a toddler between them laid their palms against the red and white stripes of the flag. They lowered their heads and began to pray.

A young man stood alone by the fourth casket. He stared at it for a long time, hands in his pockets, mouth in a hard line. He stepped forward and leaned in, squinting as if to see through the fabric and wood. Then he pounded his fist against the casket, once, with force.

Shocked, the soldier standing next to him grabbed the man's wrist and yanked him away. The man didn't resist. He simply turned and fell into the soldier, sinking to his knees.

That was when we turned away.



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Laurence Klavan



Laurence Klavan wrote the novels, *The Cutting Room* and *The Shooting Script*, which were published by Ballantine Books. He won the Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America for the novel, *Mrs. White*, written under a pseudonym. His graphic novels, *City of Spies* and *Brain Camp*, co-written with Susan Kim, were published by First Second Books at Macmillan and *Wanderers*, the second installment of their Young Adult series, *Wasteland*, has just been published by Harper Collins. His short work has been published in more than thirty literary magazines and a collection, *The Family Unit and Other Fantasies*, will be published in August 2014 by Chizine.

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It wasn't the fact that she was going away—she had gone away many summers during college. And even though Amos always had a panicky feeling as soon as she left for overseas or another state—the sense that his daughter had slipped his hand while crossing the street—he always got over it, always had, anyway, by willfully forgetting or becoming fatalistic, by thinking, she was on her own now, he could not help her any more, goodbye, good luck. But this was different. He was surprised by how different it was, and he didn't like it, didn't like what it said about him.

But what did it say, exactly? That he was shaken that Randa was going on a trip to Bolivia with her college singing group and in the company of another girl, a girl who was more than her friend, who was her lover? Nor would be by the time they got to Bolivia, or after they had been in Bolivia for awhile, that it was only a matter of time, in other words, if it hadn't happened already and it probably had, who was he kidding, besides himself?

It wasn't that he disapproved, because he didn't, didn't care about it in a moral way, morality had nothing to do with it, he was totally open-minded. For instance, at a work retreat last summer, he had been come onto quite openly by Shem Cutler from marketing, the completely bald guy who looked like a linebacker, with the big muscles, and Amos had just been flattered, amused that he was still young enough (at forty-four) to be asked to be someone's prison bitch, instead of being "Pops" on the cell block, the guy who divvies up the cigarettes, keeps a pet mouse, and dies of a heart attack during the break-out. And he only thought of prison because, well, Shem was big enough to be sort of scary in his form-fitting suits, so he looked like he could be, you know, kind of a convict, even though he was the gentlest guy. Anyway, never mind, it didn't matter, it was just a joke.

It wasn't any of that—maybe it would have been the same if she were going away with a boy, which Randa never had, as far as he knew, though he had no idea what she'd been up to at school and didn't want to know. (If his own experiences during those years were any indication, watch out!) But, no, he had to admit! Even if it was so last century and only to himself (and even then he felt sheepish, as if God could hear his thoughts, which he used to actually believe as a child and never got over believing, if truth be told, and he felt embarrassed thinking *that*, too) —that it was different. Because it made Randa different from him and feel further away, further even than her growing up had made her, as if she had actually *moved* to another country now, one that was hard to reach, so that he would not, in a sense, be seeing her as much any more, which made him melancholy, as if a little love had leaked out of his life, it was corny to conceive of it that way, but that's how it made him feel, lonely, even lonelier than he usually did, for he was aware that he was lonely as a rule and always had been. Randa had made him feel less so the second she was born.

Amos would have felt even worse if he hadn't seen how Sheila was reacting; and he didn't ask her, not right away, instead he just observed how she was taking it and interpreted it, which was risky, but it didn't feel right to just blurt out the question, especially since he felt so uneasy about his own response (and by himself, forget with his wife). Still, he saw it in Sheila, a sort of forced smile when he discreetly mentioned it, as if she hadn't known this about her daughter—hadn't known since she was nine, as parents always said they did—and so this meant that Sheila felt she had failed, had not been as close or as good a friend to Randa as she'd supposed.

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"Maybe it's a phase," Sheila said. "Though it doesn't have to be. I only meant"

"I know what you meant."

Sheila nodded, relieved that Amos understood, that she didn't have to say she wasn't a bigot or anything, that they just had a similar sense of distance (was that it?) from their daughter now. The whole house seemed larger, as if it were a hotel or little inn that they ran and not a home, a place where other people only stayed briefly. You saw them at breakfast and that was it, you never really got to know them. And Randa was their only child.

"We'll get used to it," Sheila said, trying to be pragmatic and not so emotional, which wasn't easy for her.

"Sure."

"Though the girl she's going with—Ashley?"

"Amy."

"Amy." They'd learned about it, in an email. "From the picture she sent she seems a little sloppy, doesn't she?"

Amos was noncommittal, suspecting that Sheila was being critical of this girl because she couldn't judge Randa, it was taboo and would expose too much about herself. He hoped that Sheila would stop after the one comment, but as the week went on, she kept going, becoming more and more judgmental about this Amy—whose name she had "not known" intentionally, he figured—finding fault in every aspect of her from the one small photo that was their only evidence of her existence, like a detective trying to crack a case from a single clue. Randa would be gone for a month, and Amos was not looking forward to hearing this the whole time, but he kept his mouth shut (if there was one thing he had learned in marriage, it was when to do that; he was proud of that, other people never learned) and let her get it out of her system.

But that didn't mean he wasn't relieved when he got the phone call.

At first, it didn't quite sink in who the woman calling was; it was only what she wanted that appealed to him— which was to come see them and, he hoped, interrupt Sheila's unceasing sniping about this Amy, as well as enliven their newly and loudly quiet house, most of their friends in the suburb being gone for August and so unavailable for a dinner party, cookout, or game night. It was only after Amos hung up and explained to Sheila who it had been that it suddenly occurred to him how surprised, even shocked, he was by it.

"It was the donor," he said, inhaling as if to grab back and swallow down the word and the woman with it.

Sheila just stared at him, as if he had expressed a particularly crass vulgarity for no reason at all, was showing signs of early Alzheimer's or something.

"What did you say?" she asked in a tone which would have been a prelude to a punishment had he been a child, not a middle-aged man.

"The donor. Yolanda Smirnoff."

Sheila looked away then, as if slapped by the words, punished by them.

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They had always known it was possible that they might hear from the donor, though it had been controversial at the time, the government had made the names available to all who entered the program, when the transfers (*mitochondrial?* Amos always had trouble saying the word) began to be more common and the modifications more acceptable. And even though the donor was only providing mitochondrial DNA (again, hard to say) which was a tiny amount—the part of Sheila’s that was defective—still, it meant that there had always been three people involved, three parents, in a sense, and they had known that. And how fair was it that this small part of DNA was also the most powerful? Sheila asked in tears, before they agreed to the procedure. Not fair, but life wasn’t fair, Amos told her, comforting neither of them, but not knowing what else to say. Yet even though they knew it was possible, they never thought it would actually happen, her contacting them, her coming there, Sheila pointing out that the woman—Yolanda whatever; she had folded over the letter as soon as she saw the name—would have too much pride to track down her, what was it, point two percent of her DNA? So now, while Sheila tried to stay even-keeled, it took an effort.

“Well, what does she want?” she asked, turning back, paler than when she’d turned away, as if the air had wiped off a layer of her pigmentation in the two turns. She should have just stayed still.

“To meet Randa,” Amos said, his own discomfort making him stammer a little (he hadn’t since childhood).

“Did you tell her she isn’t here?” Sheila said, making it sound as if she meant, “Did you tell her she’s an idiot?”

“Yes,” Amos replied, “and then she said she wanted to meet us.”

For a weirdly long time, Sheila made an exasperated face. “I can’t believe it.”

Amos didn’t answer. He didn’t know why he always had to smooth the edges for Sheila when he himself was not all that okay with them. But that was their relationship, that was their arrangement, every marriage was one, at least emotionally. Sheila openly expressed her anxiety while he buried his own, ashamed of feeling anxious. It worked, it seemed to have worked, anyway, for more than twenty years.

Then Sheila nodded, very slowly, and Amos was reminded of an oil rig going into the earth, reemerging, except that Sheila went the opposite way, up and then down, so the analogy made no sense. “Tell her she can come,” she said.

“What? Really?”

“Yes.”

“But—”

“Please.” She softened her tone, perhaps remembering to be reasonable, that she wasn’t in this alone and was glad of it. “I mean, if it’s okay with you.”

Amos was silent, implying that it was, and that the exchange was over. He didn’t admit that he had already told Yolanda yes, again secretly knowing when to keep things to himself.

* * *

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She arrived that Friday night. Yolanda was attractive and engaging, but it was hard to tell, because she cried so much during dinner, which made her face puffy and red. She was about forty-five with a trim build and shoulder-length blonde hair tied appealingly, as if she were a teenager, in a ponytail.

In between mouthfuls of food (Sheila had made her special chicken with sweet potatoes, delicious) and helpless glugs of tears, Amos was able to piece together her tale. During the summer, she rented condos in the last seaside town in Maine. In winter, she produced stage revues of punk-rock-era songs that toured senior citizen centers in Florida. Her partner in these businesses, who was also her longtime lover, had recently abandoned her, and when Yolanda examined their finances, she discovered there had been secret pilferage the entire time, which had now left her with nearly nothing.

“I feel so lost, that’s why I came,” she said, “I couldn’t tell you over the phone.” This sentence was completely in the clear for she was only drinking wine now, having finished eating and at least for a second stopped crying, the way a storm subsides but you can’t relax and leave your umbrella at home, because it’s been on and off all day. Once dessert was served (another superb Sheila concoction: a Middle Eastern-style nut cake), Yolanda became much calmer and ate it like someone even younger, intently and charmingly, like a child. Soon she grew loose and amusing, making profane remarks that were actually as funny as they were rude. A rarity these days, Amos thought. She listened politely as Amos and Sheila described their jobs (he was a lawyer for a company that made flood gates; she did PR for a group designing underground malls), though stifled a yawn here and there, again in an amusingly kid-like way.

As Amos watched her, he didn’t believe she had come there for money, it was just a hunch, a snap judgment that she seemed to be genuinely seeking solace un-self-consciously from vaguely, yet crucially, connected strangers. Still, when he caught Sheila’s eye as he rose to clear the plates, he knew that their exchange of glances had nothing to do with that (Sheila had probably never considered that Yolanda could be some kind of what was the old word, grifter). It was about the fact that Yolanda’s partner had been named Becky and was a woman.

* * *

As he washed the dishes, Amos listened through the swinging kitchen doors as the women continued to talk. He picked up Randa’s name many times now (the girl had hardly been mentioned during dinner, as if Yolanda had needed to finish her explosion of distress and need before anyone was allowed to even broach the subject, as if and this was a completely corny way to put it, Amos knew, but whatever, their daughter was a rainbow that required a storm to introduce it). Amos was slightly hurt that they had only started to talk about her once he’d left the room, as if his diffidence, the way he always buried things that bothered him or let them take a back seat to those unsettling Sheila, might have made them think he didn’t care (surely Sheila knew that wasn’t true, he would be miserable if, after all these years, that were so. No, it wasn’t that. Maybe she just thought that women could talk in ways they couldn’t if a man were around, especially since, well, Yolanda was the way she was and Randa was, you know, that the little amount of DNA had been definitive). Should the government have allowed them to know her name? Amos discounted the question, wasn’t thinking straight, had drunk so much his hand without the sponge slipped, and he only saved a plate by chance.

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He waited for a break in their conversation so he might re-enter the room, but the talk never subsided long enough for it not to be awkward. He noticed that Yolanda began to cry a few more times, usually just as he was about to step through the swinging doors, like a gunslinger into a hostile saloon. He heard glasses being set down more often and more shakily on the table and then he, too, took another snootful from an aging bottle he found in the fridge. At last, he only peeked in long enough to give a little IÖm-going-to-bed wave.

He saw that SheilaÖs eyes were red as well, as if she had been actively commiserating with Yolanda or even sharing her own sorrows, though which ones Amos didnÖt know. Used tissues were scattered across the table like bits of rubble from a buildingÖs collapse.

ÖOh, are you going to bed?Ö Sheila asked, fuzzily, even though he thought his wave had been more than clear.

ÖYes,Ö he said, almost inaudibly.

His wife weaved from her seat and hugged him, held him particularly close and long, whispering that Yolanda would be staying in RandaÖs room, for it wasnÖt decent to make her drive anywhere in this weather (it was pouring, he realized, he could hear it tapping on the air conditioner, like that crazy drummer with the bad toupee he used to see in old news footage ÖplayingÖ the sidewalk near Grand Central Station).

Then Yolanda rose and hugged him, too, more formally, and her wet face made his own face wet, as if she were smearing him with her sunscreen, protecting him like a parent. It felt nice. Or did it? He was so loaded he didnÖt know. His mind was offering up ideas on its own, like the stewardess who lands the plane after the pilot passes out in that old movie; or, no, he knew, like his thoughts were being extracted as someoneÖs DNA was by a cotton swab.

* * *

Hours later Amos was awakened in his bed by silence. The rain had stopped performing, and the absence of its consistent sound had pulled him by the collar from unconsciousness. Even though it was a long time before the morning, he was already hungover; it had been years since heÖd drunk so much, and his head felt like an enormous red blister balanced upon his neck.

There was pain at the end of his legs as well. As Amos sat up, he saw that someone was sitting on his feet. Sheila was at the bedÖs edge, faced away and looking out the door, as if listening to the whisper of light from the little night bulb in the hall bathroom. Feeling him move, she turned and her faceÖthough still pink from all her weepingÖwas mostly white. She wore only a t-shirt and underpants, no bra, he noticed.

ÖIs something,Ö he tried to say through what felt like moss, dust, and twigs in his mouth, Öwrong?Ö

ÖWe were only touching each other,Ö she said, her voice clogged by wine and tears, Ömostly touching, anyway. I donÖt know how I feel about it. It didnÖt feel bad, not physically. But thatÖs not the point. I didnÖt want to be only one-third of her, thatÖs all. Of Randa.Ö

Amos fell slowly back, as if knocked down by a cartoon boxer. The throb on his feet subsided as Sheila slid into bed beside him, or so he thought. Had she even been there in the first place and said what sheÖd said? He couldnÖt tell. Yet he didnÖt put his arm across her, as he usually did.

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In the morning, Amos knew that it was all true and had actually happened. He could tell from the way Sheila and Yolanda behaved. They were chatty, yet maintained a distance from each other, sitting at separate sides of the table. Sheila seemed sheepish and kept directing what he thought were solicitous peeks at him. Plus, she had made her special whole-wheat pancakes, which she rarely did. Or was it only because they had a guest?

She passed him his plate piled high, and Sheila's expression seemed to say, "I'm sorry, you know why I did it with her, it wasn't infidelity, not really, I love you so much. Amos realized this was a lot to read into a person's features, yet that's what he saw. His engorged head now felt the way he imagined mixed martial artists do when their opponents gouge their eyes with fingers and hold onto their faces, at least in films. He suspected it might not have only been his hangover.

Yet the two women appeared to have no ill effects from the wine, perhaps had rubbed or kissed or sucked it out of each other the night before, Amos thought, surprising himself with the imagery and the anger with which he'd conjured it.

Yolanda's hair was down now, no more ponytail; she had become a grown woman, was no longer a girl. She began talking, disarmingly chirpily, what was the word? with the same amount of positive energy she had applied to negative things before. Overall, she appeared refreshed by events. Amos lost her words in the deafening clang and boom of syrup being poured and butter being spread. In his state, that's how they sounded to him but he got the gist. She was grateful for their compassion and impressed and touched by the generosity and openness of their marriage, at least the one, Amos thought, that Sheila must have told her they had last night.

"There's been such progress in the world," Yolanda said, with wonderment, "not just in science, but in humanity, too."

Sheila looked at Amos after this and seemed to beseech him to stay silent, which for once at a crucial time in their marriage was not his inclination. Then she said Yolanda should stay until Randa came home, which seemed to be a very, very, long time from then.

* * *

That day after work, there was a drinks thing at a local bar. It was the kind which Amos always avoided, being an executive and so not liking to hobnob too much with those he supervised, believing it distorted working dynamics, encouraged false familiarity and impeded productivity, or something. But tonight he agreed to go, to the surprise of his staff, and didn't call Sheila to say he'd be late, which he had never failed to do before.

He sat crushed between others at a long table in the back room of a deafening sports bar where screens in all corners showed ultra-violent electronic games. Amos felt like a guest at a baronial banquet after a primal battle or hunt, with backs being slapped, flagons of beer banged upon wood, and everyone swaying side to side in bawdy song. Still, for all their joviality, he sensed his crew felt restrained by his presence, was holding back from the true depths of their usual foul-mouthed fun, and had preferred it when he hadn't come.

After nursing just one beer the idea of getting drunk again inconceivable (then why not do it every night? Why never *not* do it?) Amos wandered down to a lower floor. It looked like the long, dank hall shrouded in shadows that might have been in the castle that hosted the banquet. Were there mounted swords and family crests on the walls? That's what he thought. Soon he emerged from the men's room, where he had peed into what appeared a trough in a stable-like expanse. He saw Shem Cutler, the big guy who'd

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well, made his interest known. He stood against a wall, hissing good-naturedly into a cell phone. He looked up, smiled at Amos. Like a superhero, Shem seemed to have burst from the suit usually suffocating him and now wore only a t-shirt and jeans (no tights or shorts, but the effect was the same).

As Shem said a friendly "I love you," snapping the phone shut, Amos approached him without a word. He thought of how colors mix to make new colors—blue and yellow made green—and how all those genes now mixed to make new parts of people, and how his anger at Sheila and his love for Randa and his desire not to die and his feeling of being utterly alone were mixing and making him feel something else, and then the two men were in each other's arms, like the spirits of the castle disappearing into the wood of the wall. Shem was as gentle as Amos thought—hoped—he might be, and they finished right before someone else, a co-worker, came down the stairs.

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The next night, at dinner, there was little talk between Amos, Sheila, and Yolanda. Plates were passed and food ingested virtually without interruption. Sheila hadn't made any effort to cook, had ordered in from the town's only Indian restaurant, the food of which had once given her diarrhea. Yolanda now wore a cunning little cap that hid her hair, so that she looked like a boy, like someone else.

He surreptitiously studied the women's faces and saw no acknowledgement of one from the other, not even the shift of an eyeball or the hint of a smile. He imagined that one had been rebuffed but he didn't know which or, in fact, if the rejection had been mutual. Had each merely known the other in the way she wanted and now had no desire for any additional involvement, as neither was taking seconds of the (dry and lukewarm) chicken tikka masala? At any rate, it seemed as if all three now ate on separate islands in outer space, an image that mixed the sea and sky but Amos didn't mind, since both were vast areas of loneliness, one wet and one dry.

At bedtime, Amos said nothing, not because he was still angry at Sheila (how angry he had been, he didn't know) but because he now had a whole new set of secrets to think about, which he stored in an apartment that had opened inside his brain and in which he lived alone. As for Sheila, usually so voluble, even when about to sleep, she would once in awhile open her mouth but then think better of it or else, unsure what she meant to express (and she generally proceeded unheeded, finding out what she wanted to say as she spoke), stop and be still. Soon both were diverted by and bent forward to hear Yolanda mumbling animatedly in her sleep down the hall in Randa's room. Her actual words indecipherable.

* * *

When Randa came home at week's end, Amos and Sheila introduced Yolanda as their old friend, since they had never revealed their participation in the program, feeling it was unnecessary or feeling they had to wait for the right time, which never came, or not wanting to discomfort the girl, or some other reason. As was the wont of those her age, Randa seemed more interested in talking about herself, recounting her "amazing" trip and casually mentioning that during it she and her girlfriend, Amy, had become "kaput" and that she was now seeing a boy, Jamie, who wanted to work in home security after he graduated.

Sheila complained of a "horrible headache" and went to take a nap, shutting loudly and locking the bedroom door. Amos sat by himself, staring out the window at two pigeons mating near the backyard bird feeder, wondering what two dirty city birds were doing out in the respectable suburbs. Then he was drawn from the strange sight by a sound.

It was the faint strains of a piano, coming from the den, where the instrument was kept and played only by Randa. He approached the door, closed to a crack, and through it saw a slice of his daughter and the donor seated side by side on the stool. Yolanda was playing, and both were singing "The Rainbow Connection," a song written for puppets long ago.

Amos had always known that Randa had a beautiful voice, but he'd not known of Yolanda's talent, which was just as great if not more impressive. Tears entered his eyes like criminals. Amos heard the two hit the same note, who was singing became indecipherable. It was as if this was what the elder had handed down to the younger, this and nothing else, this alone.

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Mary Ellen Lives



Mary Ellen Lives's stories have appeared in *The Atticus Review*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *The Petigru Review*, and *drafthorse review*. She is the December 2013 winner of the Penn Cove Literary Arts Award. Ms. Lives currently lives in Waterloo, South Carolina and is an active member of the South Carolina Writers Workshop. She is currently seeking representation for her historical novel.

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Guided Tour

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Two girls stood at the edge of a mossy cliff above the forth of seven waterfalls in the Grand Etang Reserve. Andru waited behind them, studying their figures. They were good looking: one a petite longhaired brunette, the other a tall sporty girl with short cropped curls. Both had nice butts. Americans. He knew right off from their accents and the way they carried themselves, like they watched a parade, the world marching by for their enjoyment. Brits postured like they were the ones parading. And the French? They seemed to lounge on the air as if it were a banister.

The sound of water was all around. Vegetation, jade green, and dripping wet, exhaled a thick verdant scent. Mona monkeys chattered in the canopy of virgin forest. The athletic girl made pictures with her digital camera. That was the same with all tourists, no matter where they came from.

Andru had been dozing in the cultivated groves of banana and nutmeg trees that skirted the inland mountains when the cab with the girls pulled to a stop.

“What are your names?” Andru asked at the trailhead.

“I’m Allison,” the tall girl said, “she’s Beth.”

“Allison, Beth.” Andru repeated each name to get familiar. You got better tips if you were familiar. A little brother to the men, a flirt with the women. “Beautiful names for beautiful American girls.”

The small girl blushed and stammered a gracious *thank you*, but the athletic girl’s eyes narrowed. He could see she was a tough one.

“My name is Andru,” he said, “like the Prince of England, but it is spelled different. Grenadian spelling. And we say it the island way with the stress at the end.”

“How much do you charge for a guided tour, Andrew?” the tall girl asked, mispronouncing his name.

“For the Seven Sister’s Trail? Twenty dollars.”

The girls gave each other a wary look.

“That’s Grenada dollars,” Andru added, “not American. Very cheap.” He closed one eye and

squinted at the azure sky. “About seven dollars to you.”

“Could we go alone?” the tall girl asked.

He puckered his full lips. “It’s better with a guide. The path twists. You could get lost.”

The longhaired girl shrugged at her friend. It gave Andru hope. “I can tell you names of plants and animals. I can tell you the stories of the island.”

He tucked his chin and gazed at them through his long lashes. He knew this was an attractive expression. It complemented his large brown eyes and heightened his cheekbones. “The Handsome One,” his mother called him. Though a tease, he knew it to be true. A chance breeze ruffled his unruly hair, blowing strands across his forehead. He had them then. He saw it in their eyes.

“What is this called?” At the periphery of the waterfall, the petite girl stared at a brown animal clinging to a volcanic rock.

“Oh, that?” Andru said, “we call that lee-zard.”

The petite girl studied the animal. The tall girl laughed. “Lizard? Funny, that’s what we call them, too.”

She rolled her eyes at her glib friend and started walking.

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He would have to be more careful. This one was a know-it-all. They were the worst kind. Ire rose in Andru then. Anger lay in his chest like a congestion. Tourists with their stupid questions. *Had he lived there all his life?* What did they think? That he traveled from the rich Caymans to give guided rainforest tours on Grenada? *How old was he?* Old enough to be sick of tourists. He'd been guiding them since he was a boy. He learned from his father Haro, a plodding man who slipped a lot on the slick forest floor. Father passed the job on to son. Now Haro spent his days at the mango stand, drinking beer and advising tourists on which fruit to buy, which ones were ripe enough to eat right away. They tipped him for this advice.

They tipped Andru more. He was eighteen, he told the tourists. Always eighteen. He had been given a scholarship to the University of Brighton in England. He was to leave in the fall, or the winter, or the spring. Whichever season was next. The money he made giving tours would go to buy his schoolbooks, his plane ticket, his clothes. Everyone wanted to help the island boy, "The Handsome One." They slipped him rolled-up bills. "Something extra," they'd say, "for your trip."

The scholarship part was true. The Commonwealth gave out several to island youths who excelled in their high school studies. England's way of paying back generations of suppression. Top of his class, Andru was awarded one when he graduated. He imagined flying away on a British Airways jet, the island a green spot afloat in the turquoise sea. But the money he earned went to support his family. There would never be enough to pay his travel expenses. Andru could not go.

What difference did it make whether the lizard was a gecko or a skink?

The girls were in front of him now taking pictures of one another under the trees. It was bad to let a tour group get too far ahead. It meant Andru wasn't earning his money. There were rules about these things. He could get in trouble with the Tourism Authority if there were complaints. He could be made to stop giving tours. It had happened to others.

Some things were frowned upon, others forbidden. It was frowned upon to go to a guest's room, to have sex with them for gifts or money. This occurred all the time. His friend Mackey bedded fat women from all over the world. He said they were easy to seduce, the fat ones. No one showed them much interest and they were grateful when someone did. Very grateful. Mackey saved enough money to buy an old car. He drove it as a cab, hauling tourists to Saturday market. But that business was competitive. The hotels had to call you and the concierges had favorites, relatives in the trade. Mackey couldn't solicit business for his taxi in front of the hotels, calling out for customers. That was forbidden. When cab fares were scarce, Mackey trolled the beach for fat women.

The girls had taken a wrong turn. They were off the path.

"Hey," Andru called out, not able to remember their names. They stopped and turned. "This way. We go this way now."

The tall girl indicated a break in the forest. "What's down there?"

Andru sighed. He held out his hands, palms up. "Nothing. Rainforest. We stay on the path."

The girls sauntered back through the foliage. They were in no hurry. Andru looked up at the heavy awning of spread leaves. It was almost two-thirty. He knew by the quality of light, the slant of shadows. It was a three-hour hike, the Seven Sisters Trail, but these girls went so slowly. They needed to head down. It was Friday and Andru wanted to get home. His father waited, tipsy and smelling of fresh mango.

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How much? Haro would ask.

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Andru would toss the Caribbean dollar bills on the rough wooden table in their small tin-roofed house. The colors of the currency, with its pictures of schooners and Queen Elizabeth, matched the brightly painted walls of the room. His mother and sister would not be home till after they took the nutmeg they gathered that day to the co-op. Sometimes, when the trees were full, it took several hours to unload their sacks and get paid. Andru would heat up his mother's spicy fish stew while his father napped in the hammock outside. He would hear Haro wake and shoo away the curs that roamed the streets for handouts.

“Andrew.” The tall girl pointed at the ground. “Do you know what this is?”

She and her friend stood at the verge of the path. He came up behind and looked at the gentle white flower at their feet. The athletic girl's green eyes met his. He saw her skepticism. “Really now,” she said. “Do you know what it is?”

Andru used to tell stories to the tourists, legends of the island that he made up new every day. They listened, rapt. Some videotaped him. They would repeat these stories when they got back to their homes in America, England, and France. These stories were the truth, as they had no other. It had once given Andru pleasure to know his stories traveled where he could never go. That pleasure turned bitter with the years and Andru hadn't bothered with his tales in a long while.

Nevertheless, feeling the alert expectation of the girls, a legend took shape in his mind. The orchid at their feet was dazzling white with a splash of red in the center. “This? This is what we call the Queen Camellia. It is very rare to find one, especially in this part of the rainforest. They usually grow much higher.”

He raised his eyes to the crest of Mt. Qua Qua. The girls followed his gaze.

“Queen Camellia was once ruler of the island.” Inspired by the lush treed mountain, Andru warmed to his tale. “The most beautiful woman in Grenada. When the British came, the captain tried to make her his own. But she refused to be dishonored and stabbed him in the heart. They imprisoned her, of course, and planned for her execution. It was to be a spectacle, to show the island people who was in charge. Queen Camellia robbed them of their victory by drinking poison. She died pure and radiant, like this flower. It is named for her.”

The petite girl crouched to touch the orchid. “That's so sad, so sad and so wonderful.”

The tall one snapped pictures of the mountain, then knelt beside her friend to photograph the flower. They hovered over it for some time. Staring at the crowns of their heads as they knelt, Andru smiled. He would get a good tip from these two.

Tonight there would be a party at the public beach, as there was every weekend. He would hang with Mackey, and drink too much beer. Andru and the real Camellia would steal off to the old disco, the nightclub that had been wrecked by Hurricane Emily so many years ago. At the end of the beach, the building was far enough away from the hotels to be left by its bankrupt owners, falling apart bit by bit. A section of the foundation stuck out over the sand creating a cave of concrete. It was their special place, where Andru and Camellia were sheltered, yet could still hear the waves and feel the island under their bodies.

“You are very lucky today,” Andru told the two girls, “to see such a rare flower. It is a special thing to tell your friends when you get home.”

The tall girl stood, camera still in hand. Andru thought she might smirk and shake her head at his fable. Instead, she gave him a guileless smile. “You are the lucky one, Andrew, to live in such a paradise.”

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Andru noticed flecks of gold in her emerald eyes and, for a moment, wished he could remember her name.

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Douglas W. Milliken

Douglas W. Milliken is the author of four books, including the novel *To Sleep as Animals* and the pocket-sized collection *Cream River* (out this November through Publication Studio/Downeaster Editions). His stories have earned prizes from *Glimmer Train*, *McSweeney's*, and the *Stoneside Corrective*, and have been published in *Slice*, the *Collagist*, and the *Believer*, among others. "Toledo" was written as part of a fellowship with the Hewncoaks Artists Colony. www.douglasmilliken.com

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Eyetooth

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I was sleeping when our prop plane kissed the mountain. I can't really say what happened. My head was leaned against the porthole glass and I remember I was dreaming about driving with a friend through the rain-washed forests of Oregon, highways slick and shining. We were looking for someplace to eat. Then I was awake and cold and still strapped to my seat but my seat was half-buried in snow and there was burning fuselage everywhere. All the metal looked twisted and black, which really bothered me because metal's not supposed to do that, to tear or to burn. I remember the fire looked very red like it was painted over top of everything, which is likely one reason I remained so calm. None of these things seemed real. I dug my legs free from the snow and unfastened my seatbelt and tried to find the other passengers, most of whom I had only just begun to think of as friends. I do not remember feeling worried or scared. I remember thinking it was important that I find out who else had survived. I didn't want to be the only one left. But it was hard moving out there. My legs didn't want to work right and it was snowing hard and the storm made it dark so that I could not tell if it was daylight or dusk. I'll remember the black shape of shaggy trees wracking in the wind, and the burn of snow stinging along my cheeks. And at some point I stopped to pee but couldn't get my pants down in time. Everything seemed like it was spinning or about to tip over, and I could smell more than feel the urine staining my clothes. I felt disgusted and ashamed, and then I didn't feel anything because I was sleeping again in the snow.

I do not remember any bodies or blood in the snow. I don't remember anyone's voice. No panicked shouts from near or inside the burning plane. All I heard was the wind screaming its verdict down on me. It didn't care how I felt or who I was.

Later, I'd feel the hands of rescue workers dragging me out of the drifting snow and bearing me to safety. I might remember a helicopter flight, or I might remember a movie I once saw. I remember the hospital in Denver as a sterile and icy-white place. But mostly I slept through that, too. Then the foundation we were working for had us all moved to a private recovery house back in Portland and that's when I started to be awake again.

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Aside from me, the only other survivors were the tour's organizer and manager—a woman named Diane with whom I'd become involved and who anyway had gotten me the job to begin with—and a Mexican folksinger named Josefa. Of all the talent on board our flight, Josefa was the only one to make it out intact, but hers was a story I wouldn't learn for some time, as her deep sleep—no one was willing to call it a coma—lasted much longer than mine or Diane's. I'd later learn that Josefa had been thrown clear of the wreckage, far enough away that, in the storm, she could not see where the plane had crashed. In all likelihood, she should have been incinerated or had her bones smashed to dust against a tree. Instead, she landed gently in clean snow. No bruises or broken bones, just a mild concussion and a major jolt. She got up and looked around and walked for a while through the blizzard until she came across a snowmobile trail cutting through the woods. This was a woman who had never seen snow before but she knew what she was seeing and knew that tracks meant people, and people, in this instance, meant safety, so she took a gamble and followed the tracks, but ultimately chose the direction leading away from the nearest town. She was only wearing a pair of jeans, an electric blue sweater, and red cowboy boots. It's amazing she survived at all, but when the rescue workers finally found her, she was marching with headstrong authority against the increasing squal and storm of night. She had not lost the trail. But she had begun to hallucinate. When she saw the rescue workers, she thought they were riot police. She fought them with what waning fury she had left in her, biting and gouging their hands and faces before they finally restrained her and ferried her safely to the hospital.

But like I said, I would not learn any of this for a while. All I knew was that Diane and Josefa and I were the only ones to survive the accident. All the other Latin American artists—painters and poets and musicians and dancers—were dead. Of a twenty-one date tour of rural universities, we'd only met with and performed before three student bodies, all in Utah or Colorado. Our program of cultural and artistic diversity ended before it had properly begun. When you think of all the work these artists would have later made had they not been on that flight—when you think of all the kids snoozing through the performances or the kids that never had the chance—it's very likely our program did more harm than good. But these are unquantifiable things. Like the thoughts that raced through their minds before impact. Like the number of seconds between their next-to-last and last breaths.

What little I did know that first day in the recovery house, I learned from our male nurse, Kevin, once I woke up and stayed awake. Kevin took care of everything at the recovery house. I think he actually lived there with us. If we needed anything, he would oblige, though he did not dote over us at all. In fact, he was almost detached from who we were and what had happened. The impression was that he understood that we were capable adults who were only slightly damaged and not by our own mistakes, people who knew when to ask for help and when to help ourselves. For the most part, we were left to heal on our own.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. There's something I want to explain. That first day in the recovery house, I woke up and sat up and knew that I would remain awake. Then Kevin came in and talked to me for a little while—he introduced himself specifically as our male nurse, and told me where we were and why, how Diane and Josefa and no one else were also here in the house, and he said this with an accent that I could not place—then he brought me a coffee and a bowl of cereal. I was not wearing any bandages or anything, but my skin felt tender all over, and I had an IV and a catheter that, now that I was really awake, Kevin helped me remove. Then he left and I had my breakfast and, for a while more, sat quietly in my bed. My room was old and spare and seemed at first like

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a strange place for a hurt person to be. The wallpaper and hardwood floor were dull to the point of looking almost dingy. In many ways, this felt like an abandoned place. Yet despite this, I felt perfectly comfortable. I liked the dim room and the way the white light made my one window glow like a blank television screen. I moved my legs back and forth beneath the covers. I didn't feel like a victim at all.

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Then, a little later, Diane came into my room. I remember that almost like it was a dream. First I heard the latch click. Then I watched the door creak open. I did not say or do anything. I sat up in bed and watched as the door slowly opened just enough for Diane to sidestep into my room. Her eyes were wide and bright and her hair was a ringlet mess. All she had on was a hospital gown, her bare feet shushing across the floor as she sort of crab-walked toward my bed, like she was trying to sneak up on me. Even as our eyes were locked. For a moment, I worried that she'd hurt her head in the crash and now this was the only way she understood how to walk. But I knew: this was just a game. When she reached my bed, I lifted the edge of the sheet and she climbed in with me, her little limbs so much smaller than mine wrapping around me as I eased down and held her, and she said hello and I said hello and then I kissed her, and it was then that I noticed that her top eyeteeth were gone. They got smashed out in the crash, she explained. Just those two teeth. I don't know why. I squeezed her tighter and cried a little because I was suddenly having to face the fact that I loved her teeth and since her teeth were part of her, I must love her, and it was true I loved Diane but I didn't know it until just then. I guess I'd never loved a woman before that. I loved Diane and I loved her teeth but now her two eyeteeth were gone. They'd been beautiful. Incisors like an animal's. But I did not cry for long.

I know it's not fair to not tell you how I met Diane, how I felt something strangely changing within me whenever I was with her, how I finally allowed myself to touch my mouth to her wet and waiting mouth. But you've seen me just now ambushed in flames and you've seen me with a plastic tube inside my urethra. You can ask everything of me, but I can only give so much. This detail the original choice that led me to this house, this bed, this tiny woman hugged close to my chest in keeping for myself.

But I will share this: for a while, Diane and I held each other in my bed, and I think it was only then that I finally believed I was really out of the storm. It'd been days since the crash, but I'd spent most of that time asleep and dreamlessly, too. It felt like only a few hours had passed. I was buried in snow and surrounded by fire and wind and torn, blackened steel. Then I was in a bed. I hadn't known how scared I was until Diane found me and pressed her body against mine. I hadn't known my body was a fist. But she slipped into my bed and all at once, my muscles relaxed their days-long clench. It left me breathless, this letting go. It came as a shock for me to realize how much I needed this woman in order to feel safe. But I let that go, too. If only for now, I allowed myself to be loved and feel safe, and feel grateful in that safety.

I don't know how long we laid there like that. I guess at some point I must have fallen asleep again or maybe was just imagining in a vivid, passive way. In either case, we were back in the plane and I was seeing myself as Diane saw me, slumped asleep against my window while everyone else panicked and the plane arced inexorably down. As dream-Diane, I watched myself sleeping and thought that I should wake me: amid so much chaos, I shouldn't be asleep. But then I-as-Diane changed my mind. It was a kindness to let me sleep through what surely would be my death. I touched the hair lying lank against my temple. I let me soundly sleep. Then the pines met the wings and the plane shattered across the mountain.

I came out of my dream to the sound of Diane whispering, "Joquill Hernandez-Hildie Romero-Pedro Bucarelli... All the way down the list. These people who risked everything in countries of danger, risked their lives to make art to speak in a voice and medium singularly themselves then risked their lives again to share their voice in a country much safer than their own, risked everything, lost everything. What did we risk alongside them? What

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did we lose by surviving what they did not survive? What did we gain? IÖve never asked Diane if the crash was anything like my dream. It doesnÖt seem important to know.

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In a little while, we got up and crept around the house, holding hands while we explored. The ceilings were high and arched and had dark little cobwebs here and there, and the ornately mitered railing by the stairs was stained by decades of passing hands. A warm organic smell hung in the air, earthy but not unpleasant. I could not figure out what it was. We found Josefa's room down the hall from my own and stood by her bed to watch her sleep, each of us hoping she'd wake up because Josefa was one of the artists with whom we'd started to grow close. She was fun and foolish but also tough, and could sing with more passion than I'd ever known possible for a human. But now her cheeks looked burned and her hands were in bandages and she looked almost surly in her sleep. Like an old cat who does not want to wake. We petted her dark hair away from her brow and then we went downstairs where we found Kevin in the bright window light of what I guess you'd call a parlor, reading a magazine in an armchair. He was dressed in hospital scrubs and looked so out of place here I was beginning to think of this house as some rich widow's vast summer home, all closed up for the season but then again, in our baggy patients' clothing, we must surely have looked just as out of place ourselves. Kevin lay his magazine open in his lap and talked to us for a while. He explained that the foundation had moved us back to Portland because that's where our program was based: they figured it'd be best if we were close to home, to our friends and families. But Diane had only just moved for the job: she didn't know anyone here. I'd come down from Seattle. Josefa was from Mexico City. But none of that mattered. I was already growing fond of where we were. Kevin said that we should feel free to wander the house and grounds as we pleased. If we needed anything, he said, just ask. Then he resumed his reading.

Diane and I watched him with his magazine for a moment I remember, he was reading Modern Taxidermist then we headed for the front door. Outside was a long green lawn and gardens splashed with bright pink and purple flowers, and between the yard and the street ran a tall wrought-iron fence. We could hear cars moving beyond that. We walked down the steps and along the path and our steps were short because we were weak. All four of our feet were still bare. The cement tiles of the path were cool and rough. The grass growing between tickled. Bright, clear sunlight lit the low fog clinging to everything so the whole world looked washed in a silky web. It was beginning to not feel real again. We reached the fence, then stepped out through the gate. So now we were on the sidewalk. We didn't need to say it to know that we weren't the same people we'd been before the crash. We were safe now, but we were not healed. We might not ever be who we once were. And that was okay. It might be better if we were never like that again. Our anxieties and our fears. I was voiceless before I spoke. We'd be who we had to be with these new wounds inside us. But it would take time to figure out who we had become.

Across the street, through the mist, we could see a park, dark trees impressed against the white and nothing but white beyond the trees. Somewhere around us, there were cars we could hear but could not see. They were invisible. We stitched our hands more tightly together. We knew where we were going but not what was waiting for us there. The pavement on the street looked sharp and the traffic sounds were dangerous and the yellow lines could've meant anything. We didn't care. These things outside us never change. Not the way we change. Together, we took our first barefoot steps, from the sidewalk into the street.

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Darick Ritter

Darick Ritter makes paintings that symbolize the gateway between consciousness and unconsciousness. His surface markings tend to oscillate between handwriting and figuration, gesturing toward thresholds between language, perception, and culture. His aim is to call attention to the experience of information beyond the 'waking light' and bring back trophies of beauty, strangeness, humor, and terror. He lives in Merced, California working out of his studio-converted garage. You can read more about him [here](#).

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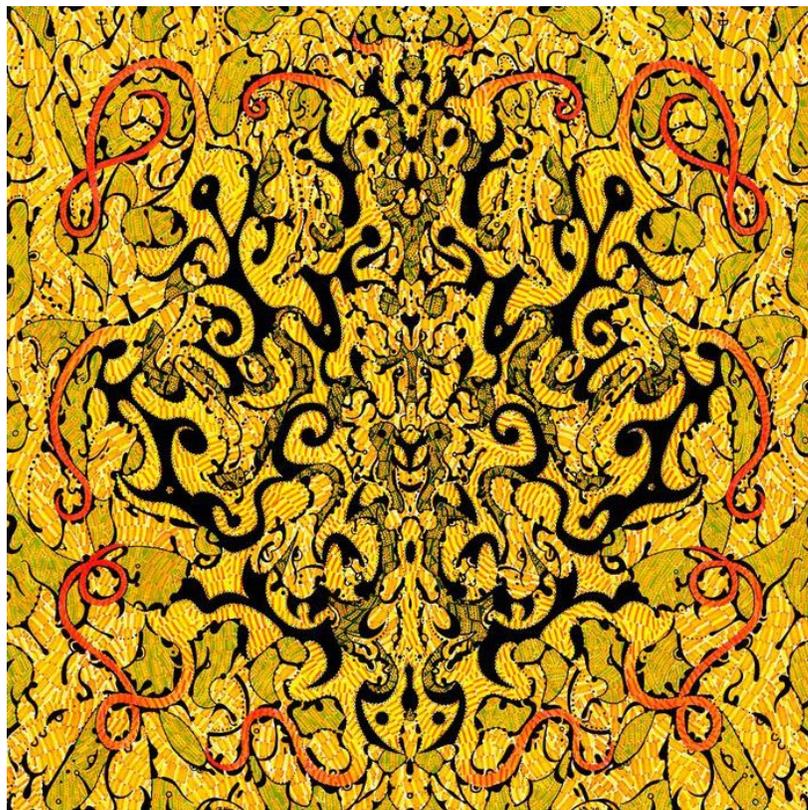


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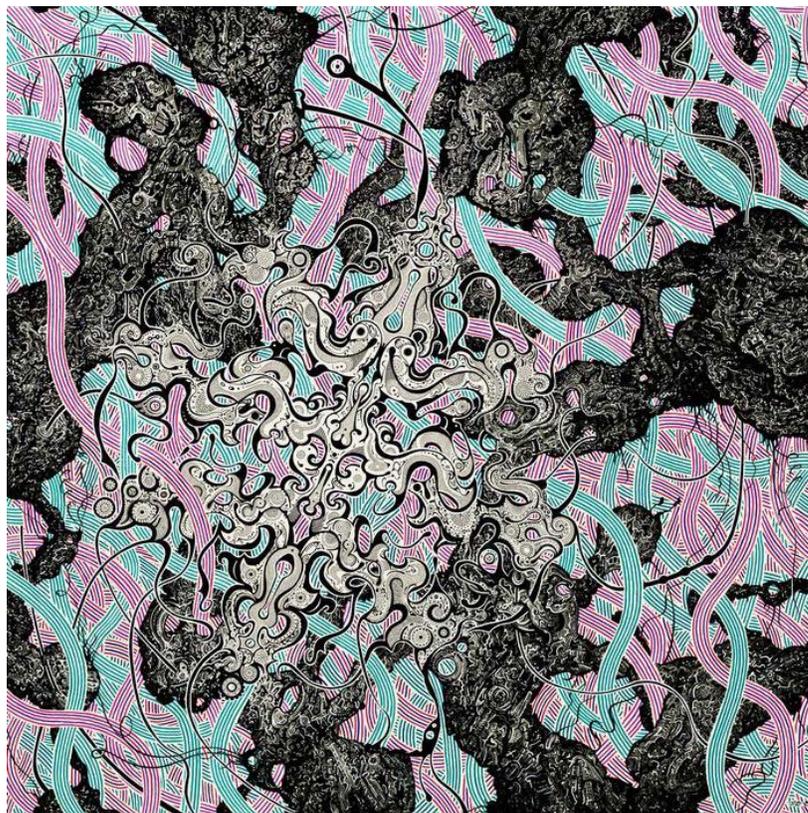
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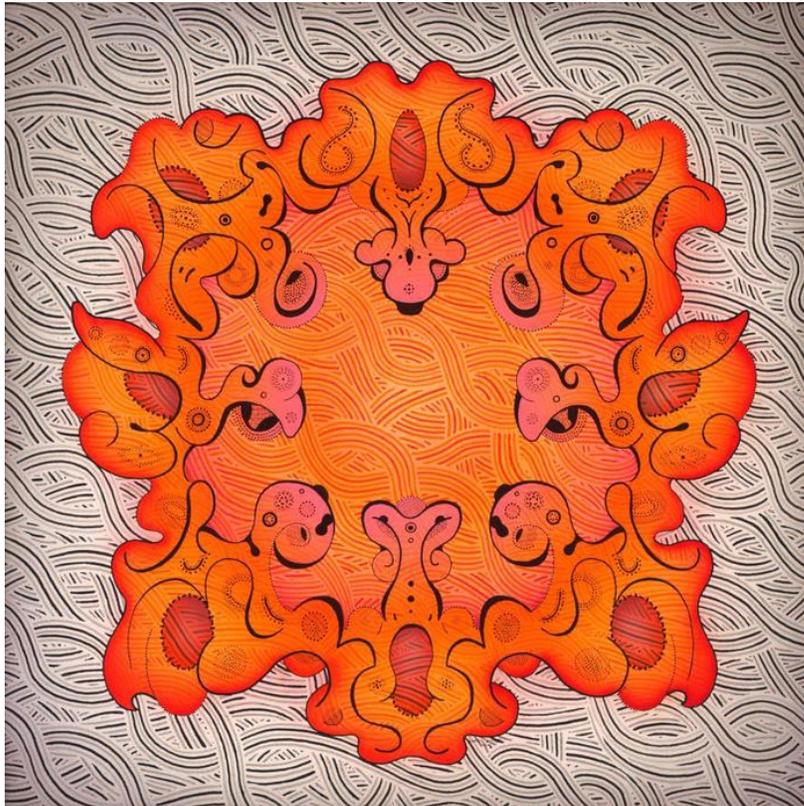
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