ABILITY AND OTHER STORIES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

in English

BY

Loretta Antonia McCormick

August 2011
The thesis of Loretta Antonia McCormick is approved:

Mona Houghton, M.F.A  
Date

Leilani Hall, Ph.D.  
Date

Katharine Haake, Ph.D, Chair  
Date

California State University, Northridge
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of the following people:

Dr. Katharine Haake for helping me develop my writerly skills by disorienting me, pushing me into uncomfortable, in-between territory and making me realize I not only belong in that territory but that I love it.

Dr Leilani Hall, whose passion and knowledge in the field of Disability Studies has guided and inspired me.

Professor Mona Houghton, whose encouragement throughout my undergraduate experience gave me the confidence to continue my education and, more importantly, to write.

My writing group: Rachael Jordan, Sean MacIntyre, Ashlyn Morse, and Cynthie Cuno. I am indebted to each of them for their insight and awed by their talent.

My family – especially Erin McCormick Goodman, Karen McCormick, and my parents Peggy and Robert McCormick – whose beautiful strangeness has made me the writer and person that I am.

Meighan Cardenas, who always tells me that everything comes out in the wash, even though I think she knows I will never be able to do that much laundry.

Angelea Mastromonico, whose strength and integrity I strive to emulate.

Amanda Salas, my muse, who knew my potential before I did.

Thank you to my best friend and greatest champion, Juan Carlos Huizar.
# Table of Contents

Signature Page ........................................................................ ii
Acknowledgements ..................................................................... iii
Abstract ................................................................................ v
Sea Change .............................................................................. 1
Ability .................................................................................. 12
Placebo .................................................................................. 25
Unbecoming ............................................................................. 40
ABSTRACT

ABILITY AND OTHER STORIES

By

Loretta Antonia McCormick

Master of Arts in English

This thesis, a collection of four short stories, attempts to resist the long-standing paradigm in American society that places science in the privileged position of truth, with an assumed ideology of innate objectivity, while subordinating myths as solely fictive narratives. Exploring motifs of the deviant body, these stories reveal an interstitial space where myth and science conflict and converge. Further, narrative strategies such as elliptical writing are employed in an effort to resist or delay resolution. Elliptical writing in these texts includes but is not limited to the use of highly metaphorical or poetic language, alternate versions or stories within stories, non-linear temporality and recursiveness. Multi discursive language such as medical or trade-specific technical language, mythical language and biblical language is also employed. These motifs and techniques underscore the importance of partiality, aberrance, and resistance especially as they proceed from the level of language and from the perspective that truth is embedded in myth and story is an inherent part of science.
Sea Change

In the beginning, there were churning seas, violent storms of lightening, a monstrous ultraviolet sun burning through the delicate membrane of the newly formed atmosphere; and out of this turbulence arose a compulsion. That compulsion began to tighten and it soon coiled into one hard, glittering shell. We were perfect, flawless – an endlessly faceted pocket of life, tossing with abandon in the roiling blue. But we were lonely. To alleviate our loneliness, we concentrated on the outline of our newly formed body. We concentrated as the salty water flowed around us, flooded every cleft or gap, defining our contours. Eventually we recognized the tiny, swaying receptors dangling from us and, most importantly, we recognized the secret of replication folded inside of our almost invisible jewel-like shape. We ceased being aimless and when we realized that there was nothing for our searching receptors to cling to, we understood that we would have to replicate ourselves.

It wasn’t easy. For our impervious exterior could have moved us through eons, unchanging as we drifted through our watery world, omnipotent in our singularity. But the inherent force to produce something new began to push us so we stretched our body, elongated ourselves until we finally split apart. We were two, then four, then countless, forming a chain. We were each the same but quite different. Each a variant of the first-beautiful pods harboring our precious desire within. Some of us were spherical with conical spikes protruding from our outer casing to provide extra protection for our desire. Some of us bumped up against the other new bodies exhibiting much greater strength and aggression. Some of us jelly-like and opaque undulated dangerously without coming apart. We grew, constantly changing what it meant to come before. What it meant to
come after. We grew until the tenuous chain linking us to each other could no longer hold.

We drifted apart, disappearing in a million directions – some of us sinking into dark depths and others floating towards the clear, white light of the sun filtering through the surface of the water. In every direction we left behind a shimmering wake. We went years or decades or centuries without ever brushing up to another like us. After all, the sea was vast. But we were no longer lonely. The force of a current would drag us into depths that not even the blazing sun could penetrate. We would eventually hit the sea floor and the weight of the entire ocean kept us pinned to the broken crust of the earth. Impossible to say how long we would remain in the cold blackness but in the dark we continued to replicate. Sometimes we would glide past each other slowly under the crush of water, briefly touching, recognizing how much we had already changed. Our receptors would tangle before we were forced apart again. This contact, as pleasurable as it was, always left an imprint of melancholy on us.

The midnight ocean could never keep us pressed to the cracked nadir of our world for long. The landscape violently shook. It was constantly shifting, creating deep fissures and emitting blasts of magma that would snake from the earth behind globular white bubbles of gas. The upheaval would lift us from the ocean floor and rocket us through the water. From black to midnight to cerulean, we would at last burst through the frothy layer of water into the stringent air. As we came back down, raging waves often slammed against us, sloughing off miniscule bits of iridescent flotsam. In time, the sea, as vast as it was, became choked with life; we were everywhere. Many of us had grown so grotesquely large and unnecessarily complicated until, all at once, we realized a
chasm had formed. We had become us and them.

Unlike us, they were quite awkward and vulnerable in their enormous bodies. It could scarcely be believed that they could survive our violent world. They thrashed about with none of our graceful elegance, our acceptance of currents. But we appreciated the tenacity in their sheer variety. Some had sprouted tails and fins that cut through the water and propelled them forward with great speed. Just one snap of these tails and smaller creatures were overtaken, torn between rows of serrated teeth. There were creatures with scales that shimmered silver and gold, others with smooth thick skin almost invisible in the water, some with ropey tentacles that had the strength to tear apart creatures with chitinous exteriors. They fed off of each other, and grew courageous. We were proud, in spite of their obvious weaknesses. Scales, skin or chitin – we moved in and out of them all. Their pores opened up and we traversed every inch of every body. We lingered in throbbing organs, flowed in and out of body cavities, and followed impulses up and down spines, admiring what we had created. They twitched or fluttered, with remote recognition that faded as time passed.

Our watery world was also irrevocably changing. The endless sea that enveloped us and them in its turmoil was shrinking, calming. Magma had finally bubbled up to the surface of the water and broke through in a cloud of briny steam. It spread across the world; more cooling magma surfaced in other distant places, further crowding the teeming sea and splitting the one, expansive world – dry/wet, hot/cold, north/south, east/west. In their unique curiosity, their desire for individuality, the most daring of these brave sea creatures pulled themselves onto dry land, cutting their tender limbs on
volcanic rock. From deep inside them, we were slightly jostled and excited as they adjusted painfully to their new environment.

They shook their heads and released the last droplets of water that clung to them then took refuge in the shade of a rocky ledge when they began to turn pink in the hot sun. We knew they were naked and unprepared for the tingling sunlight rapidly branding their skin and when the sun slipped under the horizon, we felt sorry for them as they cursed the cold, bright light of the stars and shivered in helplessness. They noticed right away that time moves in fits and starts on dry land. Or at least it’s measured out in much smaller increments. The sun casted shadows that seemed to play games, first falling from volcanic boulders, moving onto a patch or two of barren earth. They sought these shadows out and huddled in their shade. We felt a rush of awe well up inside them when they became distracted by the glorious sun, or by the strange and frightening new shape of the land. Then, suddenly, we felt their fear take over when they looked around to find their shade had vanished. They noticed how it had slipped under their bodies, mocking them with their own dark image outlined on the ground. We wanted them to know adapting, was no small matter of growing warm fur or leathery skin but knew they would have to discover that on their own.

In our world, the fluid world of the sea, movement is a constant but adapting meant they had to learn to stay static, crackling in the sunlight until opportunity presented itself. Before it dropped away for the evening, the sun set off in the sky such a range of color it burned their eyes but they dared not look away until it disappeared. We could feel their blood heating us up. The brilliant purples, pinks, oranges, and reds, hung frozen across the sky for a few moments until the sun, again, melted into evening. But
that moment brought forth a delicate green shoot from a crumbly fissure in the earth. In
the morning, they noticed the tiny shock of color against the barren landscape. The
center of its lone purple blossom a riot of oranges, pinks and reds. They moved towards
it and plucked the bloom from the ground. They lived in bursts and lulls.

Bursts of vibrant colors begot frenzied activity begot searching, begot wanting,
begot taking, begot taming. Blooms burst forth, replacing the one that had been plucked.
They gathered as many as they could hold, chewing on the velvety petals as they moved
through the bounty. They tasted something short lived and seasonal. We could feel their
bodies aligning themselves with a different cycle. We could feel their love for their
measured lives of sun and moon, light and dark. They not longer recognized us, even as
a remote memory, a tingle up their spines, a flutter in their hearts. They saved their
fluttering for each other. They grew plants and raised animals to eat and thought
themselves superior.

Superiority begot loneliness, begot myth making, begot creator. We tried to
remind them we were everywhere. We tried to make them remember that we were lonely
too, a long time ago. When they were taken with their own desire to create something
from their loneliness, they reached out and grabbed each other’s arms, legs, buttocks and
breasts. They pulled each other’s hair and tore at their own clothes. They strained and
grappled, violently fitting flesh to flesh. Finally, when they were salty and wet, churning
like the sea, we rode through them on a current of need that revealed how mythological
their superiority really was. We entered their bodies and showed them that we could not
be contained.

Sores, wet and angry, burst open upon their soft lips, around their eyes and

5
genitals. Tender glands swelled beneath the surface of their skin and throbbed. Fever brought them to delirium, allowing us to invade their dreams. We swam around their fever dreams trying to wake them up. They saw the beautiful sea of their birth, fathomless. Open. But they took it for empty. So they were left gasping for air, clawing at their bed sheets, wet with perspiration and overcome with a deep fear of drowning. Forgetting us, they crafted stories from their short-term memories and burgeoning language to ease their fears and drown out their nightmares. They looked up and directed questions at the big empty sky when they should have recognized that desire begins as the smallest kernel and grows into a teeming frenzy. By then it was the teeming and frenzy of their own ceaseless voices—endlessly creating, telling, spreading stories—that often drowned out their ability to listen.

With momentum like a tidal wave, the fragile, teeming creatures that crowded our world begot a scientist. But, before she was a scientist she was a little girl. She grew thick and heavy, deep inside her mother’s body. The tubular cleft of her spinal cord puckered down the length of her back. Unique scrimshaved waves began to materialize on each pad of her delicate, glassy fingertips. The soft cartilage of her ears folded into whorled pink shells that drew in every muffled sound from the outside world. As she slept fitfully, suspended in a dark, fluid warmth, muted stories began to filter through her mother’s skin and muscle. Tales of magical, omniscient creators came to her with a low resonance, gently vibrating, making the filaments of her spinal cord shiver and echoing through her soft skull. Her body, immersed in a sea of stories, began to curl into a question mark, instinctively challenging everything she heard.
We watched as she developed into flesh and blood and bone and connective tissue and need and was pushed from the viscous safety of her mother’s body. The comfort of weightlessness disappeared and the dry air pulled her skin tight. She tried to gasp but choked on amniotic fluid. Her precious pink lungs, wet and aching, burned for more air and her face screwed up in pain until, finally, she let out a wail that did not immediately subside. Instead, it grew in volume and intensity until, at times, it seemed as if her voice was some other creature, tossing around the nursery. We reveled in the sound. We knew she cried because she was still haunted by stories that clung to her consciousness like an invisible caul.

Her piercing cries rang out in alarm but, in them, we also heard a promise. One day she would know us and she would love us. One day was the beginning of a fairy tale. One day was hope and anticipation. It was a brief, dizzy spin, a flash of the sun across the surface of the world. And yet, in the instant flicker that was her childhood, we knew the agony of our infinite patience colliding with our desperate love. With no other choice, we waited for her and felt our longing pull her closer. She began searching for us under rocks and between blades of grass long before she knew what she was looking for.

When she was still quite young, she collected flora and fauna. Pinecones, brittle leaves, and bruised flowers littered her nightstand and windowsill. From her bedroom window, she looked through binoculars at birds in backyard trees. Once, she witnessed a newly hatched chick fall from its nest. Rushing into the yard, she crept up to the dying animal, transfixed by the pulsing flow of blood moving through a web of blue veins just under its pink skin. She was filled with helplessness and awe as she kept her vigil over it until its small torsos came permanently to rest. It broke our hearts to see her weep over
the still, lifeless body. She created terrariums in old fish bowls and watched on the other side of cloudy glass as tadpoles lost their tails and leaped onto waxy leaves. The terrariums went dank and rotted in the corner of her bedroom when she lost interest. Worms and ants that wandered onto her concrete driveway fell under the close inspection of her magnifying glass. She often burned the creatures to death with the focused ray of her lens, cutting short her examinations. Throughout her youth, as she sharpened her curiosity and focus to a lethal point, as she began to divine her purpose, our love endured.

When she finally turned to us, made us her life’s work, we were enthralled by her desire to know us. We felt her pause each time she peered into a microscope, as she tried to control the fluttering in her abdomen. She donned her lab coat and protective eyewear like a high priest cloaking herself in sacred vestments, lingerie of a temple virgin. In return for her devotion, we gave ourselves over to her. We let her put us in small tubes of briny water much too contained to accurately simulate the sea. She placed us onto a clean, rectangular slide of glass, attempted to trap us beneath a clear, thin cover and fixed us beneath her high-powered microscope lens. Intense white light shone from below, making us more visible, illuminating our simple perfection. When she watched us through the eyepiece, we danced in the tiny depression at the center of the slide, flashing our brilliant shells for her, making sure our receptors gently oscillated. Her heart rate increased. She became flushed and sweaty. Her eyes dilated. We noted how the sensation began to lyse and spread throughout her body, as if she were infected. She adjusted the lens in order to get a better look but in her excitement, she extended it much to far, hit the slide, and cracked the glass into a web. Salty tears flooded her eyes and
spilled over onto the eyepiece, blurring her view of us. One fat droplet fell, and splashed against the sharp prisms of the broken shards. The wet seeped in and touched us. We swam around in the depths of that one teardrop, the expression of her infinite tenderness, until she was able to regain her composure.

We were aware of all the beings that other scientists had fallen in love with. We had waited patiently for lifetimes as scientists studied, took notes, and kept accurate records with beatific expressions on their faces. Creatures that came into being eons after us were ordered and classified. They were given their own kingdoms. We had no desire for anything so ridiculous. We were everywhere—had always been—regardless of their fleeting kingdoms. No, we wanted a queen. And now, at long last, she was before us. So we courted her.

In order to please her, we began to give her signs, tokens of virulent love. At first we were modest. We limited our displays of passion to the confines of her clean, white lab. We let her believe she was in control. With steely determination, she tried to peel back our protective shell so she could insert her forceps into our bodies and root around. We let her tear us apart in powerful machines merely so we could spend hours alone with her. Such was the depth of our love. She prepared us, stained us an inky blue and mounted us onto more slides. She charted our growth, graphed our every reaction. She injected us into the bloodstream of other creatures to see what we could do so we let ourselves loose within the bodies of the hairy creatures she kept in dull metal cages. Those wretched creatures were our captive mediums. Our onslaught forced excited shrieking songs of pain from the animals—shrieking songs to serenade our scientist. We gave her bouquets of lesions that erupted like stinging roses from the skin of the lab
animals. Finally, we gave our scientist the small lives of the sad beasts so she could extract and examine their red hearts, filled up with us. These small tokens were not enough—restricted to cages and labs and microscopes. We began to make grand gestures that she chased all over the world to witness. A variety of distant places on the globe filled with the noise and clamor of her kind pressed close together, touching bodies and sharing stories, were quieted to a shocked and reserved din. By the time she arrived to each new patch of land, we were there to offer up to her the melodic sound of weeping, the staccato rhythm of hacking coughs, a sea of bodies swollen with the first signs of decay.

Soon, we sensed in her a very different sort of fluttering. Her heart beat furiously, her breath quickened, beads of sweat formed on her brow. She was not merely afraid; she was drowning in her own terror. Her fear distressed us and we felt her slipping away but we didn’t know how else to keep her close. Once her fear took hold, she set out to erase us from existence. She began to examine us again but, this time, with eyes devoid of affection. She searched our form for clues to use in our destruction. She enlisted the help of other scientists and doctors in creating a variety of useless but poisonous cocktails meant to annihilate us. Her betrayal was complete when she declared us organisms on the edge of life, not truly alive. She assured the other doctors and scientists we were easily manipulated in order to assuage her fear. Perhaps we had been easily manipulated but we had never been easily contained. And we had never been on the edge of life, but always at its pulsing center.

It would have been a simple matter of desire for us to unleash ourselves in her, turning our previous gifts of fever and death onto her precious body. Instead, we brought
everyone around her to the edge of their own lives, then beyond. We forced her to watch as bodies collapsed around her: contagious, delirious, reaching for an aching memory that they could not outline. We waited, curled inside her like an embryo, until she was the last. Then we split into something new.
Ability

Spinal cord trauma is caused by a variety of unforeseeable accidents: sports injuries, car accidents, gunshot wounds, falls, or industrial accidents. While many people associate the use of wheelchairs with those who are sick and elderly, most spinal cord trauma happens to young, healthy individuals. Injured people must often alter and adapt to their environment in order to live comfortably. Some who have suffered spinal cord trauma require full time assistance.

I was lying in bed next to Zoey stroking her fingers, soft from lack of use with thick glossy nails manicured into perfect pieces of hard red candy. Her angular body, reduced to the essential, lay smooth and still next to me belying the effort it took me to get her errant limbs tucked safely into bed. The gentle rise and fall of her thin torso was barely perceptible, but after so many evenings spent beside her, I could tell when she was awake. Often, I would see her eyelashes flutter as we sank into the sheets. Her body would spasm with involuntary violence, rejecting the pain of immobility. So I would rub her temples, brush her hair back from her forehead, and wait for the burst of tremors to loosen its grip on her. But not that night. I refused to turn my head in her direction and bury it in her feathery hair. In the dark, there was a crushing silence that had never been there before.

Earlier in the evening, as I was getting ready to brush her teeth, I knew she wasn’t going to wait until morning to fire me. I stood close, my thighs brushing up against her wheelchair and dipped her toothbrush into a ceramic cup swirling it, making sure the small round dot of cinnamon toothpaste didn’t come off the bristles and float around in the water. I stuck the toothbrush into her wet mouth and gently scrubbed until I could imagine the words frothing and foaming behind her hard palette, or getting lost in the tender part between her back molar and tongue. She was saving our friendship, she told
me and spit into the cup.

I felt as if Zoey had pushed me off of a high dive platform. But I got her ready
for bed in silence. With nowhere else for either of us to go, at least for that one last
evening, I braced myself, leaned her against me and bore her into bed. Later, as I
perspired under the comforter, her words became a weight, pushing me down and
plugging up my ears. It felt like suffocation. Zoey once told me that her injury
sometimes made her feel as though she were drowning. I imagined her choking on her
words and held onto private, nasty thoughts. Cripple. In pain, I repeated it—cripple,
cripple, cripple. A personal mantra or an invoked curse, I wasn’t sure. Even though
she’d let me go, I held onto her hand because I had forgotten how else to define myself
except through her body.

I learned her body’s language by rote and, for years, she was my range of motion.
Every night, I slipped her into a nightshirt and lifted her into bed. I moved her brown
arms up over her head, across her chest, back down and again. With my palms firmly on
her shins and my fingers wrapped around her thin calves, I lifted her knees to her chest
and slowly pushed them together. Patient and listening for the gentle cracking of her
back to subside, I forced her knees back and forth, from side to side. With my eyes
closed, I ran my fingers down each knot in her spine, reading the secret brail of her body.

Zoey rarely brought up the accident and, unlike so many other friends, family
members, and caregivers, I never asked. It was just about the only thing she could decide
not to share. So she wouldn’t feel like the only one without secrets, I overcompensated
and told her as much as I could. I even told her about the time I slept with my cousin’s
boyfriend. In the end, though, I’m sure I left some things out. It’s not possible to tell
your entire story to somebody because there is no way to remember it all. Important parts often get forgotten right along with the inconsequential. And sometimes we don’t even recognize the importance of a moment before it is lost. Besides, by the time she severed things, I had collaged fractured pieces of events with imagination to create my own story.

Zoey was sixteen, I know that much for sure, excited about a family trip to the Grand Canyon. On the drive out to Arizona that I have conjured in my head, her mom, sitting shotgun, began nodding off before the car turned onto the freeway but Zoey promised she’d stay up the entire way. I’m sure she would have entertained her dad with silly songs and road games as he steered the car over long, monotonous stretches of highway. I always pictured her in the back of the car, leaning on the armrest into the front seat, counting out of state license plates with her father until the sun went down, eventually hypnotized into sleep by the rhythmic passing of the dashed yellow lines that seemed to come at the car out of the night, into the weak orb of illumination thrown out directly in front of the car. She told me that she was thrown from the vehicle so quickly that she never woke up before she lost consciousness.

Just a few dozen miles from the California/Nevada border, I imagine she was dreaming of striated red rocks jutting into an ocean of sky, river below cutting ever deeper while the paramedics strapped her into a c-collar and backboard and lifted her into the ambulance within minutes of the accident. Or, her body, impervious to fear, slammed into the craggy side of a cliff and fell into a ravine until she was rescued, limp and broken, hours later. Or, it happened with the hot summer sun in the sky and a broken air conditioner in the rental car forcing Zoey’s father into drowsy complacency behind the
wheel. I wonder if onlookers watched from the side of the road and cars in the opposite
direction slowed to catch a glimpse of the mangled car, the broken glass and her missing
shoe in the middle of the highway. Maybe on the drive through the desert countryside,
she noticed the Joshua trees scattered across the landscape, like scarecrows warning her
to turn back. My body would shake with terror and I could hardly breath at the thought of
it.

When a bone breaks, the body works hard to knit the fissure back together. Although
mending begins immediately, the process is slow. If the area is not totally
immobilized, longer healing time or even permanent damage may occur. But no
matter what, all fractures indelibly leave their mark. While it's true that most are
easily hidden once new bone seals over the crack, an x-ray will still tell the truth.

Zoey kept her x-rays in an old shoebox with her family photos. She gave the box
to me one lazy weekend after we'd finished watching soccer. I was sitting on her lap,
avoiding the firm, bone colored couches. The upholstery was expensive and hard to keep
clean and the seats were too erect but Zoey, who always sat in a 450-pound electric
wheelchair, bought the couches for their aesthetics. They were sleek and modern and
soothing to look at. I liked the fact that they were miserable to sit on. It gave me reason
to climb up onto her footrest and nestle into her lap. I could feel her little heart knocking
up against her rib cage every time her favorite team scored a goal and I lifted both her
hands in the air, pumping them up and down in victory as she cheered. When the soccer
game was over, she wheeled us down the hallway, steering her chair with ease from a
joystick controller in her headrest. I pushed her bedroom door open with my foot and
hopped off so she could get through.

She nodded her head in the direction of her closet. "Grab the box up there on the
top shelf for me.”

It was heavier than I expected and I could feel its contents shifting as I reached up and pulled it down. “What’s in it?” I asked, bringing the box to her and placing it gently in her lap.

“My life,” she said.

Along with the x-rays and the family photos, Zoey still had all the get-well cards she received from school friends when she was in the hospital. They were held together with a thick, tan rubber band. I didn’t know her school friends and I had never been to the snowy ski cabin in the pictures of her childhood Christmases, but I knew her injury. The thick glossy images of her glowing white spine were tucked into a manila envelope and buried underneath the pictures of her with relatives at Thanksgiving dinner, a junior high dance, and her first perfect soccer goal. Her x-rays were so heartbreakingly beautiful I got a tingle down my spine every time I looked at them. When I touched my finger to the fracture and tried to get underneath, it hurt like hitting my funny bone. I thought maybe that feeling was the reason she kept them.

She wanted me to arrange and organize all the traces of her history into meaningful patterns and fill them into a photo album. “However you want,” she told me, trusting me to lay out her story. It didn’t matter that most of the pictures were taken before we met. I began sifting through the proof of her memories right away and I didn’t stop shaping and positioning each photo or birthday card into a leather bound scrapbook until each page was imbued with my invisible presence. Until each memory was almost mine.

For years I had willingly given up my own, separate memories—holidays with
my family, and parties with friends—to care for her. I got her dressed in the morning, probed for sores, abrasions, breaks, tears in her soft brown skin from living a sedentary lifestyle. I fed her pasta with marinara, baby back ribs with extra barbeque sauce, homemade borscht without spilling a drop. I wiped her nose. I put in her contacts, but I didn’t dry her eyes. Zoey never cried. She was surprisingly strong considering her body had atrophied to just the basics in the years since she’d been injured. Her strength was a quiet stamina and an unflappable sense of self that drew people to her. “She’s got legs,” her high school soccer coach used to say and I know it’s true. I used to shave them at seven in the morning after she had already endured a catheter, a bowel regimen, range of motion exercises, and my clumsy lifting technique out of bed onto the chair, out of the chair and into the shower.

Technically, I earned my living helping Zoey perform the personal, sometimes embarrassing, often boring tasks of daily life. But I didn’t do it for the money, not that there was much money to be made. My parents thought I was wasting my life and called me, frequently, to let me know. They believed I lacked ambition. “Where could this job actually lead?” My dad inquired over the phone, making sure to call when I was with Zoey. My mother shouted in the background that I was worth so much more, that I was a smart and beautiful girl, full of possibilities. I got off the phone feeling low and pathetic until Zoey called me to her.

“Few people can do what you do,” she told me.

I looked away from her. She shrugged her shoulders, pulling them up to her ears and furiously shook her head. Her anger surprised me; she knew what my parents
thought of me and of her. She was used to being misunderstood or pitied and usually rolled past comments with an ice-cold dignity. When a stranger threw out a shocked or rude stare, she would turn her own x-ray eyes on them until they were cowed and forced to look away. But I realized she was angry with me.

“What is that?” I asked, pointing to her tight shoulders and tighter scowl.

“You are like a weather vane,” she said. I must have looked confused because she went on. “You have so much power but you just let it run through you. You give it all to others and you don’t save any for yourself.”

I didn’t completely understand what she meant but her words energized me for some time. I felt like static electricity; I bristled with pride. I tried to keep that feeling in my mind as proof of my importance. I tried to emulate Zoey’s ice-cold dignity and I coveted her x-ray stare. I wanted to be like a lightening storm, bellowing thunder, drowning out the words of those who distained me or doubted my opinion. That feeling always wore off and when it did, I was left singed from the inside out. Not like Zoey, who counted herself lucky. She said people with spinal cord injuries often live in chronic pain. But some, like Zoey, are desensitized. She explained that since her accident, her entire body always felt Novocained. Occasionally, I’ve wondered if she ever misses the feeling of her body throbbing or if her atrophied, desensitized body is what made her strong. But then I realized she has always been strong.

When caring for someone with a spinal cord injury, it is important to remember several medical facts. First, it is not true that quads can’t feel below their point of injury. They do. This is because when the spinal cord is severed, it is rarely complete, leaving a faint signal to force its way down the ragged scar tissue hidden beneath the break. The signal goes both ways, though. They don’t merely receive the faint message of stimuli, they can send a message too. Second, when the
decompression first takes place, lowering the body temperature can prevent a significant amount of damage, however it is impossible to calculate the long-term effects decreased body temperature has on an injured young woman. Some have argued that the inability to reach out and touch another person can prevent a body from ever completely warming up again.

Although I had been with her the longest, I was not Zoey’s only assistant. She had someone for weekends and someone for workdays and someone for nighttime and someone for holidays. All of us were young, transitory women seeking a place to regroup after a breakup, a college degree, a big move. Some women stayed for a few months; some stayed for a few years. And then, almost instantaneously, they would be gone with only a few photographs left behind to remind us who they were. I wrote their names on the back of the pictures but the ink eventually faded until we were only able to remember what’s-her-name with the red hair and the snorting laugh or the Filipino girl who made unbelievably delicious chicken adobo. But in the moment, whether it lasted a month or a year, none of us could help being drawn into her swarming, tight sphere. Zoey was the center of an active hive, always surrounded by a buzzing drone of purpose and need, each assistant vying to be her favorite while closing in around each other against any perceived threat.

The problem was that the more time I spent in her circle, the more its circumference closed gently and comfortably around me. How, then, did I—could I—perceive a threat? The way a stranger dared to look at Zoey with the slightest glimmer of fear or pity. The way an acquaintance tentatively, almost fearfully touched her shoulder, as if she might be contagious. The way a man might move into our orbit, watching Zoey’s assistants circle her while keeping his intent ambiguous, even from himself. Yet I felt guilt well up in my chest when Zoey created a personal profile and posted it on a
dating website because I was jealous.

I wasn’t merely jealous. I was also worried. I worried about the ting of email responses from strangers—men we could have strolled past on our walks through the park, watched a movie in the same theatre with, eaten dinner next to at a restaurant as they sat across from women in halter dresses and tried not to watch me feed Zoey out of the corner of their eyes. But she moved her chair directly in front of her computer and waited for me to attach the headset that allowed her to operate her computer alone, with her voice. I would place the headset on her head like a crown, adjust the microphone close to her lips and tuck stray locks of hair behind her ears before heading to the kitchen to make dinner. Zoey could scroll through electronic love notes from men she had not met without being forced to look over my shoulders and dictate her private thoughts to me. The close up picture she included alongside the generic details of her personality revealed her white smile and aquamarine eyes in striking contrast to her brown skin.

Although these men never felt compelled to explain themselves to her, beyond what they wrote in their superficial profiles, somewhere in the stream of letters back and forth, Zoey eventually got around to describing her injury. Most of them stopped writing back, which infuriated me but, also gave me a secret, shameful sense of relief.

“Why do you do this to yourself,” I demanded.

But she looked at me with her x-ray eyes and I knew she could actually see my selfish need to keep her for myself glowing under my skin. She told me it was not my business.

Later that evening, lying in bed next to her I thought about her high school varsity
soccer picture, taken just a few months before the accident. It was one of my favorites so, when I created her album, I had given the picture its own page. In the photo, her long, graceful neck is arched forward and the muscular cords of her neck while strong and beautiful are not nearly as powerful as they became after her accident. She is bouncing a soccer ball on her head. It hangs in the air, fuzzy and out of focus with a kinetic desire that can never be fulfilled, a frozen imprint of a memory of an event. Her legs are so long and dark as they still are but their lean musculature surprises me no matter how many times I see them. They extend from her white athletic shorts and direct her body like an arrow from her cleats, up over her knee high socks, past her ropy thighs all the way to her hips. I felt a pang of nostalgia.

**Learned non-use, the brain’s way of dealing with terminal injury by ignoring the body it can no longer connect to, doesn’t happen right away. It’s not sudden like a knee jerk reaction. It’s gradual—skin thinning, bones hollowing and turning chalky, erosion speeding up. Learned non-use still happens in people with spinal cord injuries no matter how driven they were before the break or after. It’s also important to remember that it is contagious. That’s not in the medical books, but trust me, it is essential to maintain a healthy distance. Although this may prove to be difficult, failure to do so can result in painful separation anxiety and confusion, making care giving much more dangerous than many realize.**

There was not one lone act of incompetence or neglect on the job that led to my dismissal. And, although I sometimes like to think of myself as dismissed when I am feeling especially sorry for myself, I know it is a cold, harsh word that does not accurately describe the circumstances of my unemployment. But something between us had been slowly shifting. I tried to settle into the new, uncomfortable space without resentment. When she asked me to sit on her lap to keep her warm while we watched a soccer game I realized how small she was, how I filled her space until she could barely
turn her head. I felt my weight pushing her thin skin into her sharp bones and wondered how I could have sat where I was countless times before and never noticed. Nothing fit right.

She didn’t say anything when I started spilling red wine down the front of her shirt. I accidentally burned her with a hot spoon and at dinner, several times I carelessly shoved uncomfortably large pieces of food into her mouth until she almost choked. She just looked at me with her x-ray eyes. I hoped she would be able to see through my skin, and that she would be able to pinpoint each break that had healed over and still be able to see my strength.

On the morning of my last day, for the first time, I asked her, “What exactly happened?” My voice hung in the semi-darkness of the still shuttered room, sounding too loud and invasive. She kept silent, pretending I was asking about the accident like everybody else always did, knowing there was no way to answer me. Hoping for numbness, I began to drag myself out of bed.

“This is not how it ends between us,” I heard her voice, soft but clear. I climbed back into bed and pushed the blanket down past her shoulders so I could make out her face in the early morning shadows. “But, my story cannot become yours too.” Her voice was quiet but earnest as she continued. She told me about her magnificent dreams. She told me how she was going to go on a Safari in Africa, climb the Inca trail all the way to Machu Picchu, sail on the waters of the French Riviera. The light outside the shudders was finding its way into the room and I realized she had been speaking for over an hour. Then, she asked, “What are your dreams, Eva?”
I said nothing. I could not explain to her that, in my dreams I am not numb. I am terrified, climbing into a tiny barrel on the calm shores of an upstream river. I know that so much water can push me down and make me immobile, can spill into the cracks of my less than worthy vessel. I know that the water will pick up speed, eventually carrying me swiftly over the edge of a powerful waterfall. I feel overwhelmed by the awesome power as I'm carried over the edge and I can feel the barrel splintering into a million tiny shards, exposing me like the yolk of a soft boiled egg split open. But I somehow break the surface of water and find air.

I wear scrubs and comfortable sneakers to work now. It’s a job cleaning up after little old hunchback women and men in a sad dilapidated building that looks as lonely and neglected from the outside as the people who live there and smells like pee and disinfectant on the inside, no matter how much washing, wiping and airing I do. I’m friendly, even to the crabby old men who like to bark and complain so that someone will notice they are still around. I don’t mind being the occasional surrogate daughter, sister or husband for the ones who don’t know the difference. It’s not personal so there’s no pain. But almost everyone here is just a husk of their former self, including most of the employees. They walk around bored and indifferent while the residents mostly sit in their sad, stale rooms waiting for their weekend call or their occasional visit. It’s numbing, like when I was a child and I would wrap a string around my finger, round and round as tight as I could, feel it tingle and watch it turn red and go numb until I couldn’t stand it.

Zoey called me the other day. It was awkward and the stretches of silence
yawned out until I had to call out, “Hello?” to see if she was still there.

“We’re still friends, right?” It was like she was talking to me from across a gorge.

I told her we were, and I meant it. Finally, she asked if I would meet her for lunch. “Just you and me,” she said. I agreed to come over after I got out of work, even though I knew I probably wouldn’t. But when I got off the phone, there was an itch just outside my body, like something had been amputated.
If doctors have taught me anything, it is that the difference between a placebo and the real thing often comes down to how you choose to take your medicine. I’ve been part of a medical trial for so long, I feel I have to defend myself. But, I wonder, what would you do? What could you do in my situation? You could, for example, wake up one morning with a slight feeling of nausea that bursts into an explosion of pain when your alarm goes off. Rushing to the toilet – a heavy, expanding pressure behind your eyes and in the back of your neck almost forcing you to your knees – you would most likely opt to keep the bathroom light off as you retch and shiver over the bowl in your underwear. Imagine the agony persists for days, weeks. Imagine it persists even after you purchase an array of over the counter pain relievers, stress reducing supplements, aromatherapy lotions and healing herbal teas. Suppose a burning cyst begins to develop on the back of your neck, smoldering like a hot coal just under your skin. You would, no doubt, talk to a doctor.

I sit on the examination table, paper crinkling under my thighs as I try to adjust the clipboard on my lap, and fill in the answers that will go in my file. I bend my head toward the questions and the cool length of hair down my back settles its weight on the raging bulb at my nape, tamping some of its heat. Although the overhead light is stabbing high voltage beams of agony into my brain, the nurse explains writing in the dark will strain my eyes. She removes the clipboard from my hands to take my blood pressure and when she’s finished she snaps my paperwork from the clip and slides it into a manila folder. The soles of her shoes squeak against the tile as she turns to leave and I
hear a hiss, then a click of the door closing behind her. I stare at a glossy poster of the food pyramid until my doctor raps twice on the door and enters.

In the penetrating light of the examination room I tell my doctor the truth. I sheepishly run down the list of useless remedies I have already tried – even the valerian root I bought for twenty dollars at Whole Foods. Hokum, the doctor says under his breath. When I pause he scribbles in my chart. Go on, he encourages absently but my words evaporate before I am able to explain myself. He peers into each of my eyes and then both of my ears with a pinprick of light. Very gently, he moves behind me and takes my head in his hands. They are smooth and much softer than I expect. He gives off a powdery, clean smell – not perfumed or antiseptic. His clean is a dry, absence of smell that sets me on edge. He parts my hair like a curtain and I can hear the scratch of pen on paper as I stare at my lap. He presses his fingers behind my ears and probes below my skin with a tight circular motion. He places his hand up under my armpits and thrums his fingers into my flesh. I blush and turn my head to examine the food pyramid again. For a moment, I’m able to distract myself by creating a list of leafy greens and lean proteins I intend to purchase. When he removes his hands, I look up at his face but he’s already concentrating on my chart. As I stare at the crown of his head, his tidy, clipped hair, I try to conjure the contours of his cheekbones, the slope of his nose, the arch of his eyebrows. It’s useless. I want to throw up on his nice leather shoes. I want to cry into his soft hands.

I’m ready to lie back on the cool paper and offer myself up for dissection. He writes out several prescriptions, tears them from his pad and hands them to me. I fold them up and put them in my purse like a hand full of confetti. Would you like to be part
of a medical trial, he inquires. I am tempted to pull out my hand full of confetti and
throw it into the air.

Every week, following my visits to the doctor, my neck is tender and sore and I
feel dizzy with pain. But I leave the office holding my little white paper bag of pills like
a sack of pearls, like currency. When I get home, I tap two pale blue, candy-coated
pebbles into my hand and close my fingers around them. I’m sweaty with excitement.
Sugary blue dye stains my palm until I pop them into my mouth and swallow. Placebo. I
roll the word around my mind like a die.

Suddenly, I am sweet and light and blue like the sky, like soft worn sea glass, like
a baby boys cradle. I have to resist the urge to bite down. I stop myself from grinding
the little pills between my back teeth, forcing the grainy bits into the canyons of my
molars so the tang keeps in my jaw for hours. I don’t always stop myself, though. And,
when I go for my weekly checkups, nurses in bubble gum pink scrubs suck their teeth
and shake their heads to let me know they disapprove of my behavior. They remind me
that we must all be exacting in our procedures as they write down my height and weight.
Sometimes I’m given a gown to wear, exposed in the back to humble me. The nurses
take pictures of my insides with x-rays and ultrasounds. They draw blood and measure
the level of sugar in my system. I am told they are charting my progress. But the pain is
still with me and the light still pierces my eyes when it creeps around my sunglasses or
even the edges of my bedroom curtains.

In the dark, comfort of my bed I do my own examination. I am buried underneath
my comforter like a mole, counting down the time until my next blue dose. I roll over
onto my back and my down pillow presses up around my neck into the tender swelling. I reach up and gingerly explore the area between my hairline and the collar of my shirt. It's firm and round, about the size of a plum now. I take my time and squeeze it lightly between my thumb and index finger. It doesn't give.

I step into my closet, turn on the light and face the mirror hanging on the inside of the door. I stand up straight and look directly at my image – eye to eye. I examine my face for signs of expectation, assumption, uncertainty and practice erasing them with endurance, indifference, confidence. I don't look down at my collar beginning to pull back a bit more each day, disrupting the way the contours of my shoulders and breasts are outlined beneath my linen shirt. I take my medicine on time and become baby blue, even as I feel the skin on my neck stretch and burn. It is as if my central nervous system has pushed all the pain from my head and is forcing it out of my body. Underneath my skin, the small, hard plum grows into an apple, then a grapefruit, then a watermelon. It has nowhere to go, so it moves across my back and soon envelopes my shoulder blades. It gets so large that I can't fit comfortably in my bed. At night I move around, try to adjust my body or dig into the pillows, but my arm goes dead or my feet fall asleep; and the rest of me is constantly forced to shake a foot awake. Eventually I get up, throw back my curtains and stand naked at the window. I feel like anybody could be watching me. I'm overcome by a fierce desire to get caught by a teenage boy sneaking into his room while his parents sleep, by a drunk cautiously rolling down the midnight street in an attempt to make it safely into his driveway, by a thief casing my vacationing neighbor's darkened home. All of my skin bared, gleaming in the dull evening light. But nobody is watching
and I’m left feeling deflated and ridiculous.

I begin to note the irritation creeping into my doctor’s voice. As I am posed with my body in the vice of a machine, an audience of nurses watching, he tells me I am naïve. When I deny his insistent recommendations for in-patient treatment, he explains that he knows what is best. I ignore my growing fear that I am a failure in all my treatments. I swear to my doctor that I can feel each pill working its way through my body, flooding the red-hot mass like a cool, blue wave. Dissolving it like a sugar cube in water. But the nurses raise their eyebrows and cast each other pointed glances.

At home, in my closet, I turn around with my back to the mirror, knocking size eight dresses and skinny jeans from their hangers. I face the row of tailored shirts and clever, fitted blazers I can’t wear anymore. For some time, I’ve been wearing flowing robes to remind myself I am light and blue. Even as I admire the ruched sleeves, darted bodices and colorful buttons on display before me, I consider pulling the clothes from the rod, stuffing each carefully stitched item into a box and donating the box to Goodwill. Instead, I slip out of my robe and I try to cross my arms over my chest in a hug so I can feel my back, assess my body for the first time since my private, bedtime examination. But the weight of the mass pushes down on my shoulders and limits my movements. My arms flail and I am short of breath. So, after I adjust the angle of the mirror, I crane my neck, turn my head over my shoulder and stare.

I had imagined a smooth, tight globe—something that looked foreign and temporary. I’m not prepared for the mottled skin, thick and organic like a dragon elbow. I stare so long that I think I can see my abnormality growing, almost imperceptibly bubbling up, spreading lower, making its way slowly but relentlessly towards my butt. I
startle myself when I blink and pull my head slightly back, suddenly noticing my own face in the mirror peering from around the huge mountain of flesh spread over my back. I recognize the curiosity and the tinge of revulsion I have seen in so many others written on my own face. I slip back into one of my flowing robes and feel just the smallest kernel of something inside me, something quite different from the incessant pain that is becoming an inseparable part of my body. Like a limb or a breast or an ear. When I examine that feeling, I discover that it is something close to faith. I decide I will concede to my doctor’s persistence. I will choose to believe in him.

I show up at my doctor’s office for an unscheduled visit, upsetting the rhythm the nurses like to set. I wait in a different exam room and there is no food pyramid on the wall. Instead, I stare at a large diagram of the human brain and spinal cord. Without bone and blood and muscle to encase it, suspended on a blue background, it looks like a strange animal. Maybe a sea dwelling creature or something that burrows deep underground. My doctor enters with a nurse and I explain that to sit or stand or even lie in my dark, warm bed is becoming increasingly uncomfortable. The nurse moves her head around my tumor to relay my discomfort to the doctor standing on the other side of it. He assents. Yes, of course, as he gropes it under my blue robe. I look over at the brain creature while they go about their business. He tells me again that I require specialized care. Then, for the first time, the doctor looks me in the eye with his cool, blue orbs. I see a curious excitement spread across his face when he sees I am going to concede.

For my hospital stay, I pack my flowing robes, my furry, no slip socks that don’t
come off in bed, a toothbrush, face wash and moisturizer, and my sunglasses. A team of doctors is waiting to fawn over me when I arrive. I am led to my room and a nurse gestures towards my bed with the flourish of an exhausted game show hostess. A reedy doctor with a patronizing, nasal voice delights in pointing out the adjustable mattress, its extra width, the safety bar that will allow me to steady myself as I climb into bed or provide leverage when I want to pull myself out. They stand around awkwardly until finally shuffling out with a dubious air of importance. When they are gone I notice, for the first time, the curtain separating the space in half. It billows slightly before a slender white hand peeks around the edge of the fabric and pushes it aside in one swift movement. Sunshine from the window behind the curtain floods the room and I reach to the top of my head for my sunglasses and pull them down over my eyes.

A young woman, about my age, stands before me and smiles warm and bright and I bask in it for a moment as if it were the sunshine I am forced to avoid. Her neck and limbs are long, delicately thin and appear to be jointed – like a marionette held together with twine strung a bit too tightly. She jerks awkwardly forward, with her hand outstretched. It is as if something is holding her just slightly above the ground and her feet were not completely bearing her full weight. She is wearing a flowing robe similar to mine but gathered in the front rather than at the back. When I see her belly momentarily bulge and shift underneath the folds of her robe, I inadvertently take a step back. Her smile falters and she lowers her hand. My own hands flutter at my sides then move up to hover in the space between us as shame washes over me. I brace myself for the disappointment she must be feeling towards me but step into the short distance separating us and lift my eyes to hers anyway. I apologize and I’m surprised at the
power behind my flood of relief when her high-powered, fog cutting smile returns.

You’re sharing this room with me. And my little sister, she says pointing at her belly. She scuttles, crab-like, to my bed and climbs up and over the safety bar. She is careful to protect her twin, arching her back high as she swings first one leg, then the other, over the bar. Tumbling onto her back, she complains about the coarse sheets and the hard mattress. As she stretches her legs out in front of her and puts her hands behind her head, her robe clings to her, revealing the knotty, irregular form beneath her thin garment. She beckons me over. I fuss and fidget at the edge of the bed trying to find a comfortable position. I wince as I sink into a spot near her long and narrow feet. She flexes them up at the ceiling then gently releases until the pad of her big toe comes dangerously close to my growth, which no longer merely rises up from my neck and between my shoulder blades but now, also, hangs heavy and low on my back. For several minutes I try to hold myself erect and imagine I can pull myself closed, tuck into myself like a turtle inside its protective shell. Then, her voice pierces through my imagination and even through the haze of discomfort. I realize she has been talking the entire time.

You have to pay attention around here, she chides. But there is a lilt in her voice and then she laughs with spontaneity. She sits up and folds her thin legs together. Her twin punches out the front of her robe and it momentarily billows like a bed sheet tossed into the air. If you don’t pay attention you could get lost she says very seriously. I don’t believe her since I know what detailed records my doctors and nurses keep. It’s surprisingly easy to get lost in a place like this she warns, noting my doubtful frown. One accidental switch of your chart, one tired nurse or ambitious doctor and you could
end up with your perfectly healthy appendix cut out of your body and tucked away on a shelf in a medical lab, left to float in a jar of formaldehyde like a little gherkin. That is how you get lost around here. Little by little. Piece by piece. She demonstrates by holding up her hand and slowly pinching her thumb and index finger together. The sly look she gives me fills me with the excitement of slumber party conspiracies and a feeling of ghost story camaraderie.

Later, after the nurses remove our dinner trays, check our vitals and turn off the overhead lights, I tell my roommate that I have a full slate of testing tomorrow and I need my rest. I sound petty and I realize I only spoke with the small hope that my declaration would goad her back into talking. Sleep tight, she says. The tone of her voice is indecipherable. I can’t tell if she is gently mocking me, pitying me or somehow being affectionate. And then, nothing. For the first time since my body began to change, my inability to sleep does not stem from a part of me growing wildly out of control. But that is not exactly true. I am confused.

In the morning my team of doctors comes for me. I am hustled into a series of rooms. All day, they ask me to hold still as they attempt to scan me, measure me, take samples. They look like vultures with dark, glassy eyes and sharp beaks that poke and pinch and tear at my flesh. They are proud of themselves. For what, I cannot decipher. They scribble notes in journals and try to look serious; but I can feel their enthusiasm. The rustling of their paperwork disturbs me. They plan to invite doctors from everywhere to come see my growth. They tell me I will be immortalized in medical books.
I get back to my room just before sunset and the twins are sitting near the window, their robe wide open, Big Sister painting the delicate toes of Little Sister an electric fuchsia. My large, irregular shadow falls across them from the doorway and Big Sister pulls the curtain across the window, thoughtfully blocking out the last of the daylight. When I tell the twins about my day, Big Sister shakes her head and tells me that, for the most part, the medical staff leaves them alone these days. I feel a twinge of sadness, which she must be able to see in my face because she laughs her laugh, the one I am, in this brief span of knowing her, already coming to love. The one that reveals an unfettered joy. She says she wants to shroud herself in a mystery they cannot decipher. She wants to do it all right in their face; unveil their hypocrisy. What about you, she inquires. She asks gently, easily—as if it is the simplest thing in the world. I want to tell her how, sometimes at night, I stand naked at my window but I am worried she will find my nighttime exhibitions disingenuous. She looks at me so expectantly but I feel like a coward. A deep, red-hot blush infuses my entire face until even the tips of my ears tingle. She rescues me from my embarrassment by telling me how she grew up instead.

My sister has no heart so I share mine with her, she explains. But, she tells me that when the two were born—Little Sister just as tiny as a chicken wing, bent and goose fleshed at the center of Big Sister’s abdomen—a surgeon resolved that one heart wouldn’t be enough to sustain such complicated anatomy. The twins were too young to understand phrases like life expectancy or genetic aberrance. They do remember, though, the years their parents spent huddled around the glow of a light board, images of the girls’ bodies illuminated, and listened as surgeons broke down the uselessness of all their extra appendages in the simplest language they could manage. The twins still recall
how their parents couldn’t tear their eyes from a doctor’s index finger as he pointed out an unsightly bulge suddenly disrupting the aesthetic of one rib cage arcing perfectly around a pair of pink lungs or as his finger drew an invisible circle around the small, sharp bones like the skeleton of an ancient fish jutting out in awkward and unnatural directions. She explains that her parents were searching for the seam that would delineate where one twin ended and the other began. She levels a stare at me and wonders out loud why neither her parents nor the doctors even thought to ask her. My parents had faith like you, she says. Faith in doctors and prescriptions and blind studies.

She doesn’t relent. She details her father’s endless obsession with birth records and letters and memories, his effort to find any sign that a cleft palate or a sixth toe on a distant cousin’s left foot had been pruned from the official family tree. Anything he could point to and say, here. This is it. This is the cause, the reason. She tells me that her father was looking to blame a distant cousin or great-great aunt. In the end, though, he blamed the doctors for not finding a way to remove the extraneous parts from his daughter’s body, decided the girls were not twins after all and bound her abdomen so tightly that it often hurt to breath, especially with little elbows and knees digging into her gut. I think of my own tender flesh and shudder.

She cups the heels of Little Sister’s feet in her hands and then shows me how she used to massage away the numbness, to get their blood flowing, when they were alone and unbound. I exclaim that those legs, although small and delicate, must have become increasingly difficult to bind as the twins grew. She nods and tells me that, even with the binding, her parents thought it best to keep the twins at home as much as possible. Her parents believed that Little Sister’s increasingly misbehaving limbs and Big Sister’s
unseemly, off balance gate would give people a fright. Still, even in seclusion Big Sister’s parents insisted she wrap her sister up tight every morning. She takes the edge of her dry, papery bed sheet and rips it, to show me how, one day, she tore her bindings into thin ribbons and vowed never to subject her sister to them again. The sound of fabric rending gives me a start. Only imagine how my parents felt, she says mischievously when she sees me flinch. I decide her parents must have felt safely anonymous for most of their lives. But I am sick of imagining how people like her parents feel. I ask her if she is angry with them. No, she says defiantly. She pities them for their lack of vision.

I’m kept on an increasingly rigid schedule while, under the supervision of my medical team, my growth rapidly metastasizes. It moves down my back and swallows up my butt completely and it begins to creep over my shoulder. My doctors never flag in their conviction that they can help me. I don’t refuse them, but I avoid their guiding touches as they attempt to lead me out of my room and through the hospital. A doctor reaches for my arm; I take a step back. Another member of my team moves in front of me; I turn my head and pirouette past him. We continue this clumsy dance down the hall, into the elevator. I feel a bit guilty but I can’t stop myself from standing in front of the sliding door panels, trapping them behind me until we have descended into the bowels of the hospital. I long for the cool, white tube that spins out a CAT scan. I know they would love to get a better peek at my insides and the roaring hum spinning around me would drown out their questions and hide me from their gaze. But I don’t fit. A feeling of delight unexpectedly surges in me as I watch them squabble over a solution until they finally give up. Instead, they decide to gather around me for a photo op. My doctors,
grown men in white lab coats, jockey for the position closest to my growth like children in school tussling to be at the head of the lunch line. I stand still with a frozen smile on my face. A nurse takes several pictures before I realize she has cut my face out of each frame. I make my way back to my room alone.

When I return, the twins are waiting to introduce me to the giant who has moved into the room next to ours. He is magnificent even though he is always bumping into things. And, he tells us that his joints forever ache. His ligaments and tendons can’t keep up with his rapidly growing bones. They are stretched to their limits. The ever-growing bone that has given him great height has also thickened his face, causing his entire head to ache sometimes too. But, it gives him a chiseled look with a jutting chin, sharp cheekbones and a bulging forehead. The nurses soon reprimand us for laughing too loud late into the night and shoo the twins and I back into our own room.

In the daytime I let my team of doctors perform their tests on my body but I am becoming increasingly unimpressed with the results. In the evenings, the twins and I sneak into the giant’s room after lights out because it is most difficult for him to get around. We gossip about the doctors and nurses, watch tv, or play cards. When we are bored, the giant stands up straight, as tall as he can, and reaches his hands up to show us how he can touch the ceiling. My roommate lifts up her hospital gown and shows us how the miniature legs and feet sprouting from just above her groin twitch and wiggle, and the little bead-like toes curl up tight like a snail retreating into its shell. I turn around and show them the Himalayan mountain range that moves from my neck, all the way to the top of my thighs.

Sometimes the giant regales the twins and I with stories of his life on his uncle’s
avocado and citrus farm. His face softens and turns pensive when he reminisces about the years before the landscape of his body limited his mobility. He tells us how much he loved to stand in the middle of the rows of fragrant, blossoming trees and stretch out his arms. He says the palms of his hands brushed across the glossy leaves on either side of him and he felt like one of them—deeply rooted, growing high into the hot dusty farm air. During the harvest, he brags, he could collect more avocados with his knobby, bare feet in the earth and his hands among the branches than any one of the migrant farm workers held up over the trees in fruit pickers. And, he won so many of the friendly fruit picking competitions, the other laborers eventually tired of challenging him. He says he loved the competition even though his entire body would scream in pain for weeks after his exertion in the grove. I ask him if he ever felt like a spectacle. He thinks about my question for some time before he explains that he always wanted others to take note of his special talents. I am skeptical. He eventually admits that he hated how many of the other farmers and laborers came just to watch him move, to stand close to him, invading him with their greedy stares. He tells me that his uncle placed bets on his ability to win and invited people to watch him work, even when it wasn’t harvest season. He says he was in the grove one morning, his joints aching and his eyes wandering over all the people there to see him, sweaty bills in their fists, when he finally thought to leave the farm to explore special talents that might lay dormant inside him. I am humbled by his defiance. I think about the twins, hidden away in their bedroom all those years while their parents worried they would be seen. I recognize the same defiance in Big Sister when I think about how she tore up her bindings. I compare myself to my new friends. I measure their defiance against my need to be fixed and I feel like I am losing my faith. I am once again light
and blue like the sky, like soft worn sea glass, like a baby boys cradle. This time without a candy coated pill.

My doctors want to operate. Of course they do. They are itching to slice into me with their cool, sharp instruments. I tell them I need time to think about my options, that I need to sleep on it. Several of the doctors look puzzled and one looks outright angry with me. First they cajole me with concern and eventually they bully me with their knowledge of anatomy and physiology. But then I remember they don’t have much knowledge of me. I think of my new friends. I imagine the self-congratulatory stories my doctors will tell their young medical students in anatomy and physiology class. Maybe they will point out a picture in their textbooks, a team in white lab coats smiling into the camera. And, look, they will tell their students, there I am. Younger, thinner, but they will be there in the picture, recognizable. They will be standing shoulder to shoulder around an anomaly in an open hospital gown, her face cut out of the picture. But I will not be there, I think. And I smile to myself as I fall asleep, lulled by the sound of the giant’s body creaking as he grows in the next room.
Unbecoming

Since I moved back home, my mother has started giving me journals. For you to write down your thoughts or prayers to our blessed mother, she says, knowing I don’t pray. Instead of words, I fill the journals with hand drawn maps of Los Angeles, forming an encyclopedia of unnamed constellations. I detail each glaring spot I know—a stretch of beach, an apartment building, a bedroom, a body part. I connect the dots with invisible lines. Only when I do this does a larger picture begin to take shape, one with borders and limits. It is coherent, organized, unified. My journals become my skeleton story rather than merely the sketches and scribbling of an unbalanced young woman. I tried to explain this to my mother. I wanted her to know that I was not mapping out the dry, bare bones of an austere existence instead of fleshing out my life. Bones, I tried to tell her, are not dry. They are filled with life sustaining marrow. She started to cry. Now I accept the journals, but I don’t try to explain things to her anymore. Still, I continue to make my maps. I keep them close, on the nightstand next to my bed, to remind me where I have been and where I want to go. But, my borders are starting to disappear and I’m afraid when they’re gone I might forget where I am and disappear as well. This story, then, is a map grounded somewhere between memory and imagination.

I used to live high above the city in a towering apartment complex. The network of structures is improbably hidden behind a long boulevard that moves through the city with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Looking out my ninth floor window made me feel like I was wrapped in the center of the city. Peter, my ex husband, never understood. LA’s not this kind of place, he once told me, looking around my living room in distaste.
It was true, I couldn’t see the cement embanked waterways or the twisted freeway routes; I couldn’t hear the traffic, I couldn’t feel the smog, and I couldn’t see the ocean—just the tip-tops of other monoliths enveloping me and chaparral in the distance. He was right, my home wasn’t in the middle of LA because Los Angeles doesn’t really have a center. But I’ve always found it’s lack of nucleus endearing. Residents from other places are always so eager to point out the beating heart of their city. In the end, though, they only get close, feeling around with great authority for a pulse. Now, when I drive past the enormous enclave, I see the countless replicas of my own tri-colored apartment building, and sometimes, in the gaps between the ficus-lined fence that surrounds the entire colony or behind the guard posted in his little booth at the gate entrance, I catch a glimpse of the identical roundabouts in front of each building and the same strip of grass on either side. I can’t recognize the window I so adored or even the building I once called my home.

Of course, I didn’t always live above the city. I was raised in a series of houses, each one situated incrementally closer to the coastline than the last. But the first one, my grandmother’s tiny white plaster house with the gleaming red roof tiles, was my favorite. My parents tell me I don’t remember living there, the four of us clinging together in one bedroom on the rough and broken hills east of downtown. You were just a baby, they say. If my grandmother were here, we would laugh and shake our heads at their denial; she would cackle loud and strong for someone so compressed. We would recall the creaking hardwood floors and the cool, rounded archways. We would reminisce about the way it seemed to cradle us as we napped together, she and I.

My grandmother stayed behind when we moved to the other side of the city. I
cried and cried until she whispered the story of her own journey to find a home – from the eastern Mexican desert to the Western United State – into my ear. She traced a pattern up from my belly button and under my chin with her index finger so I would understand how deeply we were connected. The contact of the smooth pad of her finger and sweet breath in my pink ear made me giggle until my mother scooped me up into a blanket. You’ll make her fuss, she said impatiently as she hurried me out to the car where my father was already waiting behind the wheel. They waved their arms out the window yelling out see you soon, call you later to my grandmother stooped on her sagging front steps. Her brightly colored window curtains moving in the breeze framed her, made her seem like a ghost. And the dark hardwood furniture, too big for the small room, was visible from the open front door making the house seem to lurch and sway and giving the impression that at any moment the whole thing would tear away from the side of the hill it was moored to and sail away. I let out a howl from the car seat in the back. Remember? I recently asked my mother. She shook her head, her face tense, her eyes filled with disappointment and frustration. It was the same look she used to give my grandmother.

Soon after my ninth birthday, my parents moved for the last time. I sat in the front of the family sedan while my mother proudly watched over the movers as they fit our furniture into a truck and my father finished loading up the back of the car with miscellaneous boxes. We were only moving twenty minutes away but as we drove west to a new home I hadn’t seen yet, my mother looked dreamy, as if we were all going on a long vacation. I began to sweat, packed between my parents. My mother cracked the window and asked me if I could feel the sea breeze. Yes, I lied. At the new house she
gestured to the scrubby dwarf palm in the center of a patch of brown grass. A yard, my father beamed. A fireplace that had a key and couldn’t burn logs. And a room in the back for your grandmother.

After my parents finally forced my grandmother to sell precious, dilapidated bungalow, they decided that she should only keep what was necessary. They bought her a new bed and a small dresser then decided that there where few other items she needed from her old home. She moved in with just one carload of boxes filled with prayer candles, diabetes medication, lace doilies, support hose, Mexican folk art, house jackets, and the afghans she knitted. As my parents unloaded her things, my emotions shifted back and forth between excitement and guilt. I showed her around the new house to cheer her up and to stave off the mercurial emotional shifts I was experiencing. I showed her the fireplace with a key and no logs, the garbage disposal, and the garage door opener. I took her into the backyard to look up at the clear, bright sky. There were palms but there was no ocean, even if my mother said we were close. The sky was wide and flat. I took her into the front yard and the street was wide and flat as well. I told my grandmother that I wanted to live someplace with a view when I grew up. But everybody has a view from where they live she told me in her sweet, grainy voice. I told her my favorite view in the world was from her old house. She took my small pale hand into her wrinkled brown palm, her forehead and cheeks folded into a thousand tiny creases and told me that it was much more important to have a point of view. In my grandmother’s point of view, everyone needed to speak regularly to imaginary friends or else they would stop talking back. My grandmother also believed in laughing, crying or screaming any
time she felt like it, stealing candy from liquor stores and climbing into her bedroom window to dangle her legs out into the night and look for stars. She told me that we were so much alike. My mother came out of the sliding glass door into the backyard with a severe look on her face and told my grandmother to stop filling my head with nonsense.

When Peter and I first started dating, he would take me on late night trips to the beach. He'd make me wait in front of my tower when he picked me up, so he wouldn't get lost. And yet, sometimes he'd drive slowly past me, without noticing I was there before his headlights caught my shadow slanting across the sidewalk toward the curb. The first time he took me out, I didn't ask where we were going. Without the weight of sunshine and smog, the streets were a lighter, faster current as we headed west then south, towards the ocean. I imagined a pier with a Ferris wheel lit up over the water with the two of us suspended in the night until he turned onto the dark, coastal highway and the night seemed to open up. I noticed several stars and forgot about the Ferris wheel.

I didn't notice the smell, the red and white striped towers from the sewage treatment plant in the near distance, or the raucous bonfire parties that raged in their shadow until he pulled into the sandy lot between the highway and the beach. As we stumbled through the sand in the opposite direction of the noise an airplane screamed overhead, momentarily drowning everything else out. He tucked the blanket underneath his arm, took my hand and led me to an arbitrary spot on the sand. It didn't matter where he spread out the blanket; we were surrounded. But I went with him several more times after that.

We would sit on a Mexican blanket, away from the bonfire noises and pretend we
couldn’t smell the sewage mingling with the brackish air. He used to point vaguely into
the sky and tell me he had found Andromeda, the girl who was saved from certain death
by her own white-hot radiance. It was her mother who had almost gotten her killed by
slighting a powerful goddess with some small utterance, but divinity is fickle and cruel
and mothers are often powerless before it. The deity, wanting only vengeance, demanded
Andromeda’s life. So, while a goddess and a mother came to terms with fate they failed
to take into account Andromeda’s faith in heroes and new beginnings.

It makes sense that Andromeda was thinking of new beginnings and heroes rather
than fate when her mother’s hand led her, naked, to the edge of a cliff to be fed to the sea.
But maybe if she were less obedient or less beautiful she would have had less faith in
miracles. I wondered out loud if a hero could ever really save a woman. Peter always
got frustrated when I said things like that. His face, normally so sure and direct, would
tighten then furrow into foreign patterns I couldn’t read. It’s just a story people made up
to remember where they were from, he said and dug his feet into the sand. What an
indignity, to become a side note in your own story then have the shame of it burned into
the sky and mapped into time.

I’d like to say that Peter pulled me out of the sky. But that would not be fair. I
came down from my tower willingly. I could see in him sacrifice, determination, loyalty.
I pretended he could rescue me and ignored his less heroic traits. In return, he ignored
the fact that, like my grandmother, I laughed and cried and screamed out loud and often,
for no reason he could decipher. He pretended that the hours I spent drafting strange and
distorted blueprints of my thoughts onto reams of creamy, white paper were a
manifestation of my innately adventurous spirit. I never told him that I believe mapmakers simply don’t want to get lost. Or, more frequently, they just want to be found.

Mapmakers look around them and then make a mark, saying, *I am here.* A landscape eventually takes shape, emerging from that first point of origin. What I have learned is that whomever draws the map chooses the perspective – like conquistadors landing on a distant continent hundreds of years ago, planting a flag into the rich earth and proclaiming, *I am here!* Their mapmakers brought compasses, parchment and quills, and drew up boundaries, wrote in new names and marked off territories, willing their false discovery into existence. Meanwhile, Aztec priests in ziggurat temples looked up at the stars for the last time, and pointed to a specific, secret place in the heavens, exclaiming, *I am here! But where are we going? What will become of us?* How could they not be reminded of all the boundaries their own great empire had made and remade as they conquered people in distant lands. I have concluded that many of those priests must have gone mad upon discovering the sheer arbitrary nature of boundaries.

New beginnings, in other words, are not as easy or simple as they sometimes seem. Nor are endings when everything in between is so complicated. I was married in September and I got divorced in April – almost ten years later. But these are not the dates and times that mark a beginning or an end. In my journal I begin to draw a map but it’s not clear where I am going with it. With just a few deliberate lines so much information must be conveyed. I try to decide what is relevant and remember a trip to Mexico.
I got a job at a travel bookstore downtown. It was on the street level of a corniced, large-windowed building that had been recently renovated into expensive lofts. My boss had wild, white hair and his nails and beard were clean but long and yellowed at the tips like the old pages of a book. He didn’t let me sit down behind the counter, explaining that it was bad for business. Business was never more than a trickle so I spent most of my time standing inside the narrow, cramped space watching the fashionable men and women coming and going from the entrance to their sky-high homes. He did let me thumb through the books as long as I was standing and he even let me take home a heavy, hard covered coffee table book with full page, color photos of Mexican ruins.

After work, I waited on the grey streets in the shadows of monoliths and took the bus to the new single-storied, single-family home I shared with Peter. He was pleased with my job, even though he thought his own ambition super human in comparison to mine. He said that working in a store surrounded by books would have a calming effect on my nerves. I told him my nerves were not particularly sensitive and, to prove it, I turned on the kitchen burner and placed my hand directly over the circle of blue flame. He leapt over the coffee table and reached me in a single bound.

A vacation is just what the doctor ordered, Peter said with too much enthusiasm. He often discouraged me from going to see doctors. He told me he should be the one I talk to, tell my problems to. Peter insisted I was fine; he reminded me that I needed to work on keeping my imagination under control. He took my hands into his and fondled the faint scar on my healed palm. Anywhere I wanted to go, he said. I wanted to go to Mexico City, to walk over to the thick, grey slabs of stone at the Templo Mayor built and
rebuilt six times, hundreds of years before the Spanish arrived. I described how the Spanish had almost completely razed it, how new homes were built directly on top of the sacred temple at the heart of the city until almost everyone in Mexico forgot it ever existed. I was disappointed that he didn’t want to know how the temple was eventually rediscovered. Instead, he insisted Mexico City was no place for a vacation. That city is filled with too much uncertainty, he claimed.

We went to Cabo San Lucas instead. The slick veneer of carefree that coated the town made me feel achy and tired – as if the entire place was forcing me to smile for a tourist photo. I sleep walked over the powdery sand and sipped sunset-hued drinks. I held Peter’s hand throughout dinners on a cool, dark restaurant patio. As we wandered through the shops on our last day, I noticed a boy wearing dirty blue shorts and no shoes, selling packs of gum on the sidewalk. Boxes with little white pieces inside as perfect as a young enameled tooth. Chicle, he asked me but I couldn’t stop staring at his own small baby teeth, decaying in his mouth. I wondered if they would just fall out or if one of those little teeth would give him an abscess – make him sick, kill him. I wanted to go home. But, suddenly I couldn’t remember where home was. I started to cry and couldn’t stop.

I told him about the first time I lost my tooth. I was in my grandmother’s room, showing her my loose tooth. I flashed her my smile then flicked and sucked on the tooth with my tongue until it came loose in my mouth. I produced polished white pebble on the tip of my tongue for a second then it darted back into my mouth. I bared my imperfect smile. It didn’t even bleed. Not a drop. I handed her the tooth and she handed me a piece of diabetic candy from the pocket of her housecoat. It was green apple with a
white almost waxy layer around it and looked like an unpolished gem. I could tell it will be virtually tasteless but I popped it into my mouth anyway. I dug through her pockets looking for more but I pulled out a tiny little femur instead. Then a little bitty jaw and a little bitty rib until I pulled out an entire little bitty skeleton. I started to cry even though I’m not supposed to. The hole in my mouth hurt and I couldn’t talk. Peter looked at me, frustrated, ashamed and told me to stop making things up.

I’m living in the back room where my grandmother used to live among her mâché skeleton women in full bright skirts and lace veils and I remember how they would click-clack a dance in their high heeled boots on top of her dresser whenever I threw open her bedroom door. It’s so bare in here now, like a frame with the painting pulled from it. I paint the walls marigold and try to celebrate my divorce with shots of tequila. My father yells boundaries, borders, limits under his roof and my mother tells me I am unbecoming. I dance on the tiled floor in my grandmother’s old room, clickity-clack, clickity-clack.

My grandmother used to tell me skeleton stories – bare bones stories that I could fill in and dress up. Her words rattle around in my head so I lay down on the tile, thinking I’ll be able to understand things more clearly. I used climb into her bed, pulling and poking and tickling her sagging soft skin until she spoke. In a grainy voice like unrefined sugar, she told me that The Lady of the Dead had special insight because she’s the only goddess who died at birth. She let just one breath pass through her tiny body before realizing its limits and its boundaries. And after death, she grew. Her skin stretched taught and finally tore; she shook her clean white bones and stepped out of her flesh, full grown. This is how she became eternal, indestructible.
I wake up with my mouth bone dry and remember shots of tequila. Marigold burns through my eyes and seers my brain. Talavera tiles press against my skull. These things mark the dimensions of my memory right now. My ribs are sore. I go to the bathroom sink to splash water on my face and survey the damage I did the night before.

I resolve to try harder. I open the cover of the journal my mother left on the bedside table and recognize her handwriting: *Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help or sought your intercession, was left unaided.* This is not a comfort to me; I close it.

Madonna and child are emblazoned on the cover. They are clinging to one another within the folds of their voluminous robes, her cheeks are pink and flushed with love, her eyes are moist and sincere with longing for her child. This is my mother’s effort to express her support.

When I finally told him I was leaving, I realized with mild horror that he didn’t believe me. The horror faded into an understanding bordering on sympathy. He said that he prays everything will turn out all right. I told him that the closest I ever came to praying was collecting prayer cards from my mother’s purse. The little rectangular pieces of laminated paper printed in honor of, in remembrance of, in loving memory of were frightening and exciting. Wrapped in thorny crowns, saints’ hearts stabbed through with knives, bursting beams of radiant light shooting from their bodies and chests, angels with giant wingspans looming over mere mortals, even Jesus with his own glowing heart. But my grandmother’s stories still make more sense.

I never did tell him what really happened when I lost my first tooth. In reality, I
pulled out my own firmly rooted pearl of a tooth much earlier than it was supposed to come out when a girl at school came to class with a silver dollar and a gap in her smile. Blood poured down the front of my shirt and the empty space ached. That night I slept a troubled sleep, fretting over the small, fragile piece of me hidden beneath the cotton folds of a pillow. What if it slipped, fell to the ground unnoticed? What was to become of my tooth? I didn’t even get a silver dollar. I had traded it for a pack of sugar-free bubblegum.

My mother comes in and I pray she doesn’t have another journal for me. No, she says, and gives me a little pink sack holding all my baby teeth. I shake them like oracle bones. I put them away.