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Epidermis, Dermis, Subcutis

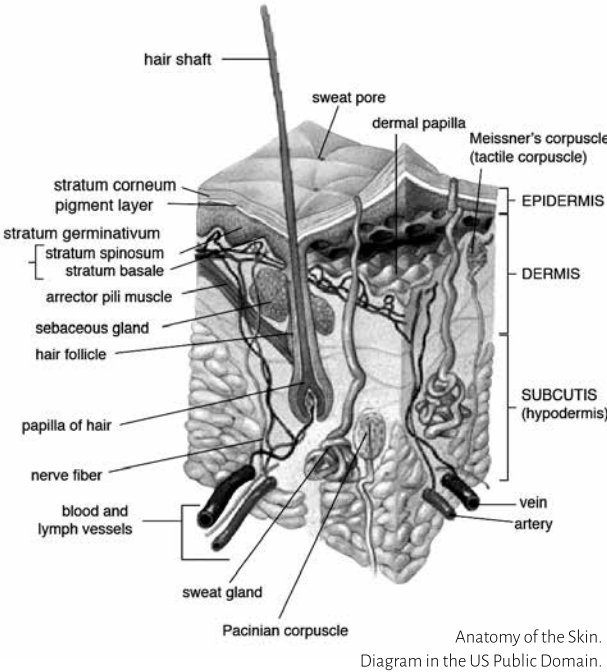
SOME STORIES HAVE LAYERS, like skin. They have an epidermis: the official story that's a hoot, the one your friends get you to tell strangers in bars. Then they have a dermis: the dull logistics of how you got from here to there, the convoluted or depressing long short story you only tell your mother. Then there is the veiny subcutis that is invisible when all the other layers are overlain to form an opaque case: the story you don't tell.

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I WAS IN A MINOR BICYCLE ACCIDENT when I was 24 and it left a little scar, like a single dimple on my right cheek. Single dimples are rare, even glamorous.

On a Thursday night in late winter, I was riding home from my job at a faux-bohemian diner that served ten dollar grilled cheese sandwiches, cantering down a side street around eleven. One minute I was passing picture windows and mumbling to myself about the weather, and the next I was immobile on the road, beneath my bicycle.

My body did a quick inventory of the situation. I was under the bike instead of atop it. My mouth was open instead of closed. And there was a piece of metal in my mouth instead of only teeth. At first I assumed this metal, which curiously enough was my bike brake lever—the lever on the handlebars you squeeze to engage the brakes—had entered my mouth through the standard entry point of my lips. And then I realized it had entered through my cheek.



If it had been up to my mind, I would've shrieked and lain there, impaled on my brake lever, until someone discovered me in the morning. Luckily my body was making the decisions. I removed the bicycle from my face. I got off the road. I went to the hospital.

Here, the strangers at the bar may ask, but how did you get into the accident in the first place? Was it a car? A sudden raccoon? Were you drunk?

The punch line is this: I wasn't alone. I was with someone, and

I fell and gave myself a dimple because we were holding hands on our bicycles.

As we turned onto a side street about ten minutes from home, I let go of my handlebar and took my boyfriend's hand. There were a few moments when the streetlights projected our twin shadows onto the road ahead of us, then our handlebars entangled. I had that split-second people have before accidents, where you are sure you can regain your balance and escape unchanged, and then I was lying in the street. My boyfriend jumped clear. I got clobbered. Which was only fair, considering that I initiated the hand-holding.

It took several hours at the hospital and multiple medical opinions for me to accept that the geyser of blood gushing from my cheek was really a very superficial—though spectacular—injury. So superficial, I was soon back on the bike, undeterred by my brush with disfigurement. Though ten years on, whenever a car passes too close, my left cheek still throbs.

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I WAS IN A MINOR BICYCLE ACCIDENT when I was 24 and it left a little scar, like a single dimple on my right cheek, and it dismantled my knee.

Preoccupied with the hole in my cheek, at first I paid little attention to my knee. But when I got to the hospital, I couldn't get out of the cab, I had to be wheeled into the ER at Toronto East General, where the triage nurses got my shoes off and propped my leg up and had a hearty laugh at my SpongeBob socks, then bustled away.

After we had been waiting for an hour, I asked my boyfriend, Tony, to distract me. I was starting to feel desiccated and caved in, like I might faint or vomit the cheesecake we'd just eaten, secreted out of the back fridge at my work.

Distract me, I said, tell me about your night. Okay, he said, I watched the hockey game with Chris, and it was really good, and I was really excited...and now we're at the hospital and I'm really scared.

This isn't really working, I said, and keeled over in my chair.

When they rolled me into radiology, I asked anxiously, how many X-rays can a person have before it starts to be dangerous? I'd cracked more than a few childhood bones, and I was starting to worry about reaching capacity. Oh you can have a lot, the technician said, as she scurried behind her radiation protection shield. But nothing was broken. By the time we got home the sun had risen. Tony got me up the three flights of our narrow staircase on my banged-up knee and into bed. I lay there miserably on my back trying not to picture what might happen if I rolled onto my cheek. Tony balanced a bag of peas on my knee. It'll be fine in a few days, he said.

My knee was purple and turgid, like I'd swapped out my joint for an eggplant. It felt fine so long as I didn't bend it or put weight on it; if I did, black stars popped in front of my eyes and acid eked into my mouth, and I had to find something, anything, to lean over until the need to vomit passed. But I attacked my new state with grim cheerfulness. The next morning, I set up camp in the living room on the pull-out couch. Without Tony to help me get up and down three flights of our narrow staircase, I sat on my bum, with my injured leg straight out in front of me, and used my arms to propel myself down and down. I got a friend to cover my shifts at work and trained him by distance, relaying by phone where the reserve teaspoons lived and where the Jägermeister was hidden. I even went to a Blue Jays game, bumming my way down fifty steps of the endlessly graduated stadium, while baseball fans watched with mild curiosity.

After two weeks, a physiotherapist told me to just get on my feet. Your muscles only *think* you can't walk, she told me. Muscles don't have thoughts, I wanted to say, except for the fact that she was right. I could walk. I inched along the sidewalks, under the forsythias suddenly in buttery yellow bloom, and enjoyed the excuse not to rush. "I can't believe how upbeat you are about this," Tony's brother Chris goggled at me. I was upbeat because things would eventually set and go back to the way they were, just as it had been with my many childhood broken bones.

But a few months later I was still walking down that narrow staircase sideways, sometimes one foot at a time; any other way and the stairs demanded a deep knee bend I could no longer manage. I stopped running to make the light or the bus, because my knee had developed the tendency to buckle, without warning. Almost a year after the accident, I was sitting in the kitchen with my leg folded underneath me, and when I went to stand, something in my knee caught, like a zipper on the rim of a suitcase. If I tried to straighten my leg, nauseating pain would shoot out of my knee. Tony was on the third floor, and I had to call his name again and again in my reedy voice before he heard me. From the outside, my knee looked like its old self, but under the skin it was an alien planet, its plates shifting tectonically, change as irreversible as continental drift.

But my physiotherapist had said that the X-rays were clear, and the knee would get better with regular cycling. It was a medical mystery, of the mundane variety. A year later, at a new job grant writing for an environmental group, I told my outdoorsy coworkers about my knee, casually describing it as busted for life. But did you get an MRI, they said.

In the Toronto hospital system, the wait for an MRI is months. But the MRI clinic is open twenty-four hours; if you want to get bumped up in line, volunteer to go in the middle of the night. I got called in at three in the morning on a Tuesday. Lost and wandering the hospital corridors with the pale, worried members of other peoples' families, for the first time I considered that something could be really wrong. In the waiting room, an

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elderly couple asked why my husband hadn't come. When it was my turn, the technician gave me headphones and strapped me to the table, and rolled me into the machine up to my chin. The sensor made a shrill, hideous whomping, like a robot's heartbeat. Restrained and in near sensory deprivation, lying there was like falling out of time.

The MRI report revealed that, after I let go my handlebar and took Tony's hand, and just before I landed on the road under a bicycle, I had planted my left foot and pivoted as I fell, like Paul Gascoigne or Tiger Woods, and effected a complete tear of my anterior cruciate ligament, a partial tear of my medial cruciate ligament, and the removal of a quarter-sized chunk of my meniscus. In physiotherapy circles they call this the unhappy triad. In layperson's terms, it's a blown knee.

My surgeon looked like Dick Tracy. He was going to extract a piece of my hamstring, and make from it a new ligament. As for the other members of the triad, he said so long after an accident, there's only a fifty/fifty chance of recovery. After surgery I spent six weeks in a full-length, *RoboCop* knee brace, and thousands on months of physiotherapy.

My knee doesn't buckle or catch anymore, but its shifting pieces grumble and ache; it's not what it once was. When the body is hurt it outsources the pain to other body parts to protect the injured places. So the cogs of my hips fit funny and they grind against each other. The tendon running along my inside right foot feels like it's been replaced with a twig, liable to give at any moment with a snap.

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I WAS IN A MINOR BICYCLE ACCIDENT when I was 24 and it left a little scar, like a single dimple on my right cheek, and then it dismantled my knee, all because of hand holding. Love hurts.

That Thursday night in late winter, it was our anniversary. To surprise me, Tony biked forty minutes across town, through snowmelt and damp. When I saw his face through the restaurant's locked door, after the cooks had left for the night, I was so delighted. All of the pint glasses had been washed and put to bed, so he drank beer out of a child's plastic tumbler while I rolled cutlery, and before I closed up we shared a slice of cheesecake, stolen out of the back fridge.

We usually biked straight over the Gerrard Street bridge in a single file, but this night, maybe taken with a romantic impulse, he took a right I hadn't noticed before, forking off the bridge, into a warren of leafy streets. Scenic route, he said, as I pulled up alongside him. Then I reached for his hand, and we crashed.

By the time we got home from the hospital, the sun had risen. I lay in bed miserably, listening to the morning traffic thickening on Dundas Street. Then suddenly, Tony gripped me to him. He said, that was so scary, I don't know what I would do if something ever happened to you.

Tony was a great caregiver in the beginning. He got his friends to show him how to make a calendula salve from beeswax and the flowers he had grown in the back garden, and he lovingly mixed it with Polysporin and applied it to the gash in my face before bed. He bought hippie medications from the health food store, like Traumeel ointment, even though he couldn't afford them. But it was hard for him to understand that what I wanted the most was just some company.

We lived thirty minutes in the wrong direction from all of my friends, and besides, everybody worked. Maybe they would have visited if I'd said how much I wanted them to. My parents lived out of town, no one had a car, and the closest form of transportation was the streetcar, which had three steps, each a foot high, impossible to breach so long as I could not bear weight on my left leg or bend my left knee. I couldn't afford taxis. I was trapped.

Then, after the first few days, Tony didn't want to be around me. I wanted so desperately to be around him, it was claustrophobic. He sheepishly tried to find substitutes for his company, but when I asked him to rent *Bring It On* for me, he accidentally rented *Bring It On 2*. By the third day on the living room pull-out couch, I had nothing but a TV with three channels and a foul-tempered cat for companionship. The calendula salve friends also lent me the TV show *Carnivàle* on DVD, but its bleak creepiness only made me feel worse. I googled "waiting" to see if neuroscientists had discovered an evil protein that tsunamis all over your wrinkly brain the moment you reach your threshold for patience, until you hallucinate that the moment of waiting will never end and the rest of your life will always be receding ahead of you, out of reach. But my search brought up nothing; it seemed it was just me.

A month later, I was sitting in the kitchen with my leg folded underneath me, and when I went to stand, my knee caught, like a zipper on the rim of a suitcase.

When the front door closed on my last roommate to leave the house for the day, high-pitched panic began to buzz in my ears. The hatefully beige walls of the living room were closing in, the walls of my throat were squeezing together, and I was suffocating. Absurd things, like the puddle of cat litter grit in the corner of the room that I could not bend to clean, brought me to tears. I could

not remember or think of anything good. I knew that in a few weeks I would get to be with the rest of the world again; meanwhile every consecutive moment my blood wailed *this is all there ever is forever*. If I ran out of distractions for even a second, panic flooded my cheeks, fingertips, and intestines, like water filling lungs.

And then Tony would come home and go upstairs where I couldn't follow.

The day we went to the Blue Jays game was an overcast Tuesday in almost-spring.

Extravagantly, Chris took Tony and me in a cab, and this kindness brought me close to tears. We got stuck in a rush hour jam,

and hip to shoulder in the backseat, watching the clog of humanity inching up the street, I was nearly hysterical with relief. Over the taxi radio, Trooper sang: *we're here for a good time/not a long time/so have a good time/the sun can't shine everyday*. It seemed so profound and true, like someone was playing the song just for me. Everything was funny and new: the way the attendant pushed me so fast through the crowds in the complimentary wheelchair that I lost Tony and Chris, the row of ten-year-old stats crunchers with clipboards and neon neoprene neck straps on their sunglasses, the price of nachos, what it felt like sitting there high above the stadium, hemmed in by the red-faced happiness of fandom, all of us together, doing the wave. It was the furthest I could be from our living room. All the agony had just been some kind of crazy, foolish blip, and from now on I'd be fine. Then we went home and the next day the silence started all over again.

I was terrified that if I tried to put my acute suffering to words, it would just sound like whining. I didn't tell Tony, because I was afraid he would say I was just looking at things wrong. I stood on my one working knee and stared out the window at the world without me.

When Tony and I fell in love, it was a horrible shock: we had both carefully imagined and charted-out our futures, and they were fatally unsynchronized. But when he came home from work I would start to dance as soon as I heard his feet on the stoop, a ridiculous elfin jig. I could not help doing this, even when he came home angry, laden with plastic bags and low-wage angst. I would dance until he was forced to unhand his mood and stomp around with me, the two of us weaving and toppling with too much love. We thought we'd be together forever.

Eight months after the bicycle crash, in December, Tony sat me down in our over-stuffed bedroom and told me he'd been accepted to an organic farming school in British Columbia and he was going to go. He'd made the decision without me because he was afraid I would say he was just looking at things wrong. A month later, I was sitting in the kitchen with my leg folded underneath me, and when I went to stand, my knee caught, like a zipper on the rim of a suitcase. It was January and Tony was leaving in a week. We had yellow curtains in our kitchen in a weak attempt to make the winter less grey. It took ages for Tony to hear me calling, and when he got to me, there was nothing he could do. After trying to straighten my leg for the umpteenth time and failing, I buried my face in his stomach and cried. If you go, I said, who's going to take care of me? He said, this must be so frustrating for you.

Five months later, in June of that year, I went to visit Tony. I had to take a propeller plane to the Campbell River ferry dock where I could get a boat to the tiny island where he was learning to farm. On the flight we had to sit in order from heaviest to lightest, and the woman across the aisle from me wept the whole way because she was afraid of flying and wanted to sit with her husband. Tony met me in Campbell River, and we fell asleep together in a motel room in the afternoon.

There is a lot of unnecessary suffering in the world, but all necessary suffering stems from the fact that love is not enough. We loved each other

much more than we ever thought we would when we first met. But even that Herculean love was not enough; not enough to cheat the laws of bicycle balance, not enough to regenerate ligaments, not enough to bind us together, even when we knew how excruciating it was going to be when we came apart.

The last day of my visit, we walked miles through a forest with trees older than our greatest grandmothers. We sat by the edge of the Pacific and looked out onto the end of the world. We lay in the bed Tony had made out of couch cushions and imagined what our wedding day would have been like. And he told me that day in the Campbell River motel, after I fell asleep, he had stayed awake and watched me and said to himself, remember how this feels. Don't forget how much you never want to lose how this feels.

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THE ACCIDENT AND EVERYTHING AFTER was a small thing in the grand scheme, no major organs, no deaths. But sometimes, when I plummet to the yoga mat because my soles are screaming while other bodies balance blithely on the baby toe of the left foot, I allow myself a little cry. Sweat masks my damp sadness that some things do change forever, sometimes it is too late.

From time to time, I get phantom throbs in my cheek. Or my knee aches for its first ligament. Or I stumble across an old email with inside jokes I no longer understand. And then it's hard not to be overwhelmed by the minor tragedies of life, if only for a moment. We carry them in our skin.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHEA LASKY

The Sort of Bliss I Strive For

BY KATIE CONDON

THE SPEAKERS represented across Dorothea Lasky's four poetry collections are at once banal and almighty: they delight in people's sweaters and then regard the sweater-wearer's journey through the mortal world with a wisdom that seems omniscient. In part these all-knowing declarations are unexpected because they are delivered by speakers who earnestly profess their love for "weird ass hippies" or open a poem with a discussion of *The Shining*. In this way, Lasky cultivates a kind of artlessness that has made her poetic voice absolutely unique over the past decade. Like the shepherd Caedmon, who was illiterate until an angel gifted him with song, the wisdoms that Lasky's poems arrive at are often so abrupt that they seem like gifts transmitted from a god. Unlike Caedmon, however, Lasky's speakers are their own gods. Their divine wisdom is not received; it is summoned from within a speaker who is part "graceful lady" and "part museum / Of the voices of the universe everyone else forgets." Lasky's poetry calls on us to delight in oddities as much as it asks us to consider our place in her cruel and beautiful world.

Lasky's buoyant and confident voice extends from her poetry to her lectures and essays on poetics (which we hear she's compiling into a book!). In her critical writing, she often pushes back against popular notions of poetic composition, investigates color in poetry and examines the usefulness of poetic personae. Not only is her intellect fierce, Lasky also brings a refreshing informality and wit to her criticism. I can't help but describe her approach as indiscriminating. Much like her poetry, her prose is generous and ecstatic—as much as it wants you to take knowledge from it, it wants you too to take joy.

PHIL HEARN lives in Baltimore and received his MA in writing from Johns Hopkins University. His fiction has appeared in *Post Road Magazine* and *Potomac Review*, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

BOB HICOCK's ninth book, *Hold*, will be published by Copper Canyon in 2018.

ERIN HOOVER's debut collection of poetry, *Barnburner*, was selected by Kathryn Nuernberger for the Antivenom Award and will be published by Elixir Press in 2018. Her poems have appeared in the 2016 edition of *The Best American Poetry* and in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Awl*, *Bennington Review*, *Narrative*, and elsewhere. Originally from Pennsylvania, Erin currently lives in Tallahassee, Florida. Her website is erinhooverpoet.com.

NICK LANTZ is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *You, Beast*. He teaches in the MFA program at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, where he is also editor of the *Texas Review*.

DOROTHEA LASKY is the author of five books of poems, including the forthcoming *Milk* (Wave Books) and *ROME* (Liveright/W.W. Norton). She is an Assistant Professor of Poetry at Columbia University's School of the Arts and currently lives in New York City.

TIMOTHY LAURENCE is the author of the essay collection, *How to Make White People Happy*, forthcoming this winter from Alternative Book Press. Recent work includes nonfiction for *The New Welsh Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Catapult* and *Fourth River*. He holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Aberystwyth University Wales, and currently serves as a research assistant at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College.

DANA LEVIN's fourth book is *Banana Palace* (Copper Canyon Press, 2016). Previous collections include *In the Surgical Theatre*, *Wedding Day*, and *Sky Burial*, which The New Yorker called "utterly her own and utterly riveting." A grateful recipient of many honors, including those from the Rona Jaffe, Whiting, and Guggenheim Foundations, Levin serves as Distinguished Writer in Residence at Maryville University in St. Louis.

THEA LIM's novel *An Ocean of Minutes* is forthcoming from Touchstone/Simon & Schuster in Summer 2018, and her writing has been published by *The Southampton Review*, *The Guardian*, *Salon*, *The Millions*, and others. She has an MFA from the University of Houston, and she lives in Toronto.

Raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, **ANTONIO LOPEZ** is the winner of the 2017 Santa Barbara Writer's Conference Poetry Award, as well as the recipient of the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley's Lucille Clifton Memorial Scholarship. His nonfiction has been featured in *TeenInk*, *PEN/America* and his poetry is present or forthcoming in *Gramma Press*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *storySouth*, *Grist*, *La Bloga*, *Acentos Review*, *Sinking City*, *By&By*, *Permafrost*, *Track//Four*, the *American Journal of Poetry*, and others. He is currently pursuing a Master in Fine Arts (poetry) at Rutgers University-Newark.

ANN STEWART MCBEE was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She graduated with a PhD in creative writing at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, where she taught undergraduate composition, creative writing and literature and served as an editor for *cream city review*. She has published fiction and poetry in *Ellipsis*, *Untamed Ink*, *The Pinch*, *Citron Review*, *Blue Earth Review*, *Palaver* and *At Length* among others. She now teaches English at Des Moines Area Community College, and lives outside Des Moines, Iowa with her husband and a smelly terrier. Her novel *Veiled Men* is looking for a home.

SCOTT NADELSON is the author of three story collections, a memoir, and most recently the novel *Between You and Me*. Winner of the Reform Judaism Fiction Prize, the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award, and an Oregon Book Award, he teaches at WillametteUniversity and in the Rainier Writing Workshop MFA Program at Pacific Lutheran University. His new story collection, *The Fourth Corner of the World* will be published by Engine Books in 2018.

NAWAL NADER-FRENCH is an MFA candidate in her final semester at Regis University in Denver. Her poems appear in *By&By Poetry*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Progenitor Art and Literary Journal*, *Rogue Agent*, *AMP: Hofstra University's Digilit Magazine*, and *The Elephants*. Her poem "That I remember" is nominated for Sundress Publications' 2017 Best of the Net. In the past Nawal taught secondary English, authored high school curriculum, graduate level professional development courses, and was a coordinator for a Colorado school district. Nawal holds a BA in English and Secondary Education, and an MA in Curriculum and Instruction.

EMILIA PHILLIPS is the author of two poetry collections from the University of Akron Press, *Signal-etics* (2013) and *Groundspeed* (2016), and three chapbooks, most recently *Beneath the Ice Fish Like Souls Look Alike* (Bull City Press, 2015). Her poems and lyric essays appear widely in literary publications including *Agni*, *Boston Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. She's an assistant professor in the MFA Writing Program and the Department of English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her third book, *Empty Clip*, will be published by the University of Akron Press Spring 2018.

JEREMY RADIN is a poet, actor, and teacher. His poems have appeared (or are forthcoming) in *Gulf Coast*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Nailed*, *Sidekick Lit*, *Sundog Lit*, *Union Station*, *Winter Tangerine*, and elsewhere. He is the author of two collections of poetry, *Slow Dance with Sasquatch* (Write Bloody Publishing, 2012) and *Dear Sal* (not a cult press, 2017). He lives in Los Angeles where he teaches acting at the Beverly Hills Playhouse and sighs loudly while eating pastrami sandwiches at Wexler's Deli. Follow him @germyradin.

PHILIP SCHAEFER's debut collection of poems *Bad Summon* (University of Utah Press, 2017) won the Agha Shahid Ali Poetry Prize, and he's the author of three chapbooks, two co-written with friend and poet Jeff Whitney. He won the 2016 *Meridian* Editor's Prize in poetry and has work out or due out in *Kenyon Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Thrush Poetry Journal*, *Guernica*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Salt Hill*, *Bat City Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Baltimore Review*, *diode*, and *Passages North* among others. He tends bar in Missoula, MT.

SIMON SHIEH is a poet, Writer in Residence at the International School of Beijing, Editor in Chief of the *Spittoon Literary Magazine*, and the Director of InkBeat Arts, an organization that empowers