Personal Essay/1540 words

Amputations

by Erin Jackson

It figures. My left arm's been wanting to go for some time.

Matt draws my last tarot card, the foreseeable future, and places it on the blue Formica countertop. Matt, Elisa, and I are sitting at an L-shaped bar in a hamburger joint called Sammy's. It's early for lunch: the grease is just heating up beyond the pass-through, and the cashier is annoyed at us for taking our seats before she's flipped the OPEN sign around. It's 11:00 a.m. They open at 11:00, and the door was unlocked. Sign or no sign, we have urgent business.

The tarot card on the countertop shows a heart with several swords sticking out of it.

"This means you will have heartbreak and betrayal in your future," Matt says, and Elisa immediately tries to undo the magic that's been set into motion for me.

"But this card is more powerful," she says, tapping the sun card lying at the top of another column, the card that indicates my overwhelming good fortune.

Yes, yes, we all agree, the sun card is more powerful. But I know that there's no undoing the events that are transpiring. I'll be betrayed: I already have been. The culprit is my left forearm, and it's had its own agenda for twelve years.

Twelve years ago, this November, my arm first indicated its growing detachment. I was riding my bicycle, and somehow the cable bike lock that was wrapped around my wrist found its way into a loaded curbside garbage can and broke clean through my radius. The compression equation for breaking bone is stress = elastic modulus x strain, and I've heard that it takes anywhere from six to sixteen hundred pounds to accomplish a break. I don't know how many pounds it took to convince my forearm it was better off on its own. But I have a sneaking

suspicion that it wasn't very many because while the rest of my body traveled forward, my arm stayed anchored to its trashy new friend.

I'd been with it twenty years, always by its side, but all of a sudden it was following a completely different path, without me. The force of the jolt also dislocated my ulna and severed my styloid process. After the accident, what was left of my forearm hung sickle-shaped and numb, dangling by soft tissue. Since then, all indications have shown that my left arm would rather be elsewhere. It only stays because it's been bolted back together. Titanium bridges the gaps inside me.

Unlike this disloyal appendage, Elisa is a good friend. As we wait for our burgers, she prods Matt to collude in a reassuring explanation: "Tarot cards don't necessarily predict anything. They're more of a guide for one's available options, a map of possibilities or alternate ways of interpreting one's world." She doesn't know that I already have my own map. I've had it for seven years, and it's invisible to the naked eye—unless you know how to make it show itself.

For seven years, despite two doctors and three medications, I've had a dry spot on my traitorous left wrist. A serrated-edged continent of raised white skin cells traverses the space between my surgery scars from the bike accident and the soft blue veins of the underside of my left arm. An itching archipelago extends up the flesh into the meat of my palm. This secret map only appears when you scratch it. Otherwise, it stays hidden.

I wouldn't put it past my left arm to try something like a melanoma, but I know the dry spot isn't malignant—or, at least I can pinpoint its inception. I petted a stray dog at the beach on Cozumel during a family vacation, unaware of the hazards of being so thoughtlessly humane. My right arm wasn't infected. But my left, eager to melt away the bones through which several

screws hold it in place, has since been incurable. For all I know, it's cat scratch fever. It's just as likely I'd catch this disease from a spotted dog in paradise as somehow link my moving bike lock to a stationary garbage can.

My left arm's trouble. Truth be told, I'm not altogether sad to see it go. The tarot cards are right. Matt can save his explanations. Its betrayal's been gradual, so it's about time.

Elisa's eyes never fail to shock me. They're startlingly blue and clear, not unlike the ocean off Cozumel. I often tell her that they're bluer each time I see her, usually because she's changed her hair color. Today her hair is bronze; she had it stripped of artificial dyes, and it's closer to her natural color than the burgundy or chocolate or violet she's worn for years. Her bangs sweep to the side of her forehead and don't quite cover a row of bandages stacked above her right eye.

"It's cancer," she and Matt laugh about the way the doctor told her, offhand. He had promised and forgotten to call as soon as a diagnosis was available, to not put it off until her next appointment. He had promised and forgotten to forward her records to the specialist before he transferred her care. His negligence is only laughable because the spot has been excised. Elisa and Matt dip their fries in ketchup and lick the salt off their fingers between smiles.

Years ago, I had another friend whose mother died of skin cancer. She had the kind that progressed to terminal within weeks. "When doctors find that kind of cancer on your foot, they take off your entire leg," someone told me at the time. There was nothing they could do for my friend's mother then—and, it's not as if a doctor could very well cut off Elisa's head now. So she trusts her diagnosis and finds the humor in it. She weighs her options with whatever reassurance

tarot cards and friends and greasy spoon lunch spots, new hair colors, new eye colors, and sea-salted fingers can give her.

I'd give my left arm to make sure she is really ok. It's not much of a sacrifice at this point, I know. But I'm ready to begin the process if the tarot cards are right.

Before I met Matt and Elisa, before my friend's mother died, but only shortly after my left arm had begun to mend from its first escape attempt, I took a semester off from college to interpret for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in a local school district. My first assignment was to accompany a fifteen-year-old freshman to his afternoon health class—in other words, Sex Ed. None of the middle-aged, church-going interpreters for the district wanted the job.

This freshman wasn't only deaf. He was also mentally handicapped and stubbornly unaware that he was any different from his hearing peers. He resented my company but laughed loudly whenever he saw anyone else laughing. Soon enough, this habit became endearing, to the point that it cancelled out most of my own frustrations while working with him.

By the end of that semester, I signed with one bad arm—and mimed when I didn't know the signs—all manner of body functions, eventually alongside a special guest speaker on the half-line of the basketball court in front of the entire freshman student body. I was accompanied by a chorus of what my deaf student couldn't know was his own loud laughter, what with everyone else snickering under their breath or covering their smiles with their hands.

I only mention this because it's the reason I remember so many sexual signs to this day. Twelve years later, I don't remember the sign for "betray" or if it is any different from "adultery." But the picture created by the sign I can remember seems appropriate. In ASL, the sign for "adultery" is made by first placing the hands together, fingers pointing up, palms facing

inward, as if in prayer. One hand turns 90 degrees, fingers pointing forward, palms still together. The fingers fold, leading the palm of the turned hand behind the back of the stationery one.

I make the sign under the blue Formica countertop at Sammy's while Matt and Elisa aren't looking, moving my left hand around my right in one fluid motion.

As of now, my left arm has formally declared its intentions.

Let my left arm find its own fortune. Let it blaze its own trail. Let it walk away, on its own five fingers, poking its way into other people's food, or eyes, or noses—preferably punching rather than poking, in the case of some forgetful doctors. Let my severed left forearm finally go with its elbow held high. Somewhere, who knows? It could meet someone new. They will twiddle thumbs, and hold hands, and clap together. They will leave fingerprints in the sand of some other Mexican island getaway.

Let it betray me.

I'm banking on the sun card to really end up more powerful than this betrayal, like Elisa said. As I scoot my barstool nearer to the tarot cards, I trust my good fortune to shine down on my friends—to be enough for all of us—and hope it's not a bad omen to one who already suffers from skin cancer.