



The Queer Foundation Scholar

Publication of the Queer Foundation
Seattle, Washington

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Six Students Receive QF Publication Awards

Six students are recipients of 2017-18 Queer Foundation Publication Awards for Young Scholars: **Zoe Bauer**, Pomona College; **Zeus Fondanrosa**, School of Art Institute of Chicago; **James Manley**, Emerson College; **Ari Paden**, Oakland Community College; **Elijah Punzal**, University of California, Irvine; and **Liz Tetu**, Metropolitan State University.

The QF Publication Awards for Young Scholars were established to encourage effective queer writing in any genre among college and university students. Award-winning submissions are published in *The Queer Foundation Scholar*. Students who previously participated in the QF English Essay Contest for High School Students are also eligible to be considered for a scholarship.

I wish to thank the five individuals who volunteered their time to evaluate the submissions. This year's jurors were from Massachusetts, New York, South Dakota, Washington State, and Italy. I also wish to thank those donors who earmark donations to the QF Publication Awards and who this year made it possible for the QF to award two \$1,000 and three \$500 scholarships. I know I speak for the five students: they greatly appreciate the scholarship support.

I hope you enjoy reading this year's student submissions, as well as those of the authors of our Contemporary Queer Writers Series. This year we are featuring a short story, *Dancing with Elinor*, by Catherine Ryan Hyde (in this issue) and an excerpt from *Out and About with Winsor French* (in the spring issue) by James M. Wood.

–The editor

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- Zoe Bauer, Pomona College, "I am man/woman *who*: Gender and identity in language."
- Elijah Punzal, UC, Irvine, "Interview with a poet."

Forthcoming in the spring issue

- Zeus Fondanrosa, The School of Art Institute of Chicago, "The Push."
- Ari Paden, Oakland Community College, "Story of a Sinner."
- Liz Tetu, Metropolitan State University, "Earth-Bound."

From the Desk of the Executive Director

Queer Foundation announces the 2017-18 High School Seniors English Essay Contest. Contest rules are available at <http://queerfoundation.org> or by writing to Queer Foundation, P.O. Box 1206, Ravensdale, WA 98051. Contestants need not be U.S. citizens or residents. Up to three \$1,000 scholarships will be awarded for use in 2018-19 at the U.S. college or university of the student's choice.

Over the years Queer Foundation's annual essay contest has made a difference in the lives of LGBTQ students by valuing their experience and perspective as high school-age members of the queer community, by encouraging their friends to add their voices to the conversation, and by providing scholarships and mentoring to many of these individuals at the accredited U.S. institution of their choice. Queer Foundation Scholarships have helped fund students' queer studies in colleges and universities throughout the nation, including

Bard College
Boston University
Brown University
Colorado State University
Columbia College, Chicago
DePaul University
Emerson College
Fordham University, The Bronx
Front Range Community College
Grinnell College
Institute of American Indian Arts
Lakeland College
Metropolitan State University
New York University
Oberlin College
Oakland Community College
Point Park University
Pomona College
Portland Community College
Rhode Island College
Rider University
San Francisco State University

School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Smith College
St. John's College
Stanford University
Suffolk University
Swarthmore College
Temple University
The Evergreen State College
University of California, Berkeley
University of California, Irvine
University of California, Santa Cruz
University of Chicago
University of Maryland, Baltimore
University of Massachusetts, Boston
University of Michigan
University of Oregon
University of Virginia
University of West Florida
Washington State University
Wesleyan University
Western Washington University

We are proud to have aided so many at so many colleges and universities. Please help us reach the next generation. Your donation, whatever its size, goes directly to help cover the cost of their studies.

Please write me directly to ask how you can make a difference in a student's life: jdial@queerfoundation.org.

With all best wishes,

Joseph Dial

Joseph Dial, Ph.D.
Queer Foundation Executive Director

Rainbow Flag, Unfurled

By **Zoe Bauer**
Pomona College

The three nudists opened Hot Cookie's door and walked in behind me. The tiny Castro District confectionary shop wasn't large enough to comfortably hold all four of us, so I quickly scurried across the ten-foot floor to the opposite wall covered in pictures of previous patrons wearing the shop's underwear merchandise. It wasn't nearly far enough away. Almost dropping my chocolate chip cookie (the least provocative item on the menu), I carefully averted my eyes and waited for the cashier to hand me my change. I focused on the workings of the Castro Street bars and shops, all selling products I couldn't even wrap my head around.

Slowly, gingerly passing around them, I subtly nodded hello without making eye contact. The San Francisco wind was blowing, and I shivered in my fleece. Weren't they freezing? They looked content, though; maybe their confidence kept them warm. When you're all bare, to friends and international tourists alike, your internal furnace has to pick up the slack. The weak dead-of-winter light framed the nudists' pink roundness, and their self-assuredness shone. They looked like piglets, shiny and fresh-skinned. The cashier wasn't surprised to see them approach the counter; it was only remarkable to me with my small-town mindset.

One of them held the door open for me as I left.



Zoe Bauer, a native of Nashville, Tennessee, is a sophomore at Pomona College, majoring in linguistics and French. Ms. Bauer was the recipient of a fully-funded Pomona College Summer Undergraduate Research Project in the linguistics department. For her personal enrichment, she is also a member of the Pomona College Choir. A trip north to San Francisco's Castro (district) provided a non-college learning experience.

Ms. Bauer, a semi-finalist in last year's QF English Essay Contest for High School Seniors, is the recipient of a \$1,000 QF Publication Award scholarship. Her essay "I am man/woman: *Who*. Gender and Identity in Language," will appear in the winter issue.

REACHING FOR SOMETHING

[excerpt]

By **James Manley**
Emerson College, Boston

JOHN

[after a long, emotional pause] ...Hi, son.

[CONNOR is standing at the opposite end of the stage. He wears a black hoodie with long sleeves, and he frequently pulls the sleeves over his hands in that self-conscious way young people do. He eyes JOHN slightly reluctantly.]

CONNOR

[pause] ...Hi, Dad.

[JOHN gestures to the empty table and chairs between them.]

JOHN

-Uh, please, have a seat. I'll join you.

[They both walk reluctantly to their respective chairs, pull them out, sit in them, and scoot closer to the table. There is a brief silence. Finally, JOHN musters up the courage to speak.]

JOHN

...Well, it's certainly been a long time, hasn't it?

[CONNOR nods shyly.]

CONNOR

It has.

JOHN

To be completely honest, I didn't even know if you'd accept my invitation or not. I know I'm probably not your 'favorite' person in your life right now.

[CONNOR looks like he's going to speak, but instead closes his lips.]

JOHN

[as his voice begins to break, ever so slightly]

I know it's been a long time. I know a lot of things—several of them bad—have happened since. But I want you to know, I'm here for you. Now. In case you ever felt like I wasn't there for you.

[His voice begins breaking.]

I know it's been tough, especially since we rescued you from that awful situation, with those drug dealers and all? How the paramedics found you, lying in a dark alley, intestines half splayed out onto the cold asphalt, and those marks—those telltale marks—sizing up the vein in your left arm. How she couldn't bear to see you suffering in the hospital. How she kept yelling and crying; "He won't get better! He's not going to get better!" and I promised her that you'd get better, but she refused to believe me. And to add to this boiling pot of emotions, I know her death has been hard on you—it's shaken me to my very core.

[He tries to gather himself yet his voice breaks more and more as he continues.]

I remember when you were young, and I held you in my arms, and you were so precious. How you represented so much hope and joy, especially for me and your mom. And I remember seeing you as you grew up, in little colorful Kittery, and you discovering your identity for the first time. When you realized that you were... "different." That you weren't like everyone else. That your tastes in people were "different." That you liked people of the *same sex*. And, even when you got hooked on smack, I still loved you. I did then and I always will.

[He then stops, now tearing up, and turns his head toward CONNOR. He reaches out and grabs CONNOR's hand.]

And I want you to know that. That I will never stop loving you. I've always loved you. I always have. And, in the future, if you're ever alone, I'll still be here. I will always be here. I know I've done a shitty job at making that clear, but now you know. I will be. Here.

[There is a pause. JOHN stares deep into his son's eyes before he suddenly rises from the table and advances on CONNOR to hug him in a tight embrace.]



James Manley, a native of Cypress, Texas, is a sophomore at Emerson College in Boston, majoring in Film and Media Production, with a Directing concentration. Mr. Manley is a staff photographer for *The Berkeley Beacon*, Emerson College’s student newspaper, and Co-Digital Communications Director for EAGLE (Emerson Alliance for Gays, Lesbians, and Everyone). He is also a budding film director. Of himself, he writes that he’s “just your average 19-year-old liability who loves movies, music, and a good taco. Hopefully by being me and opening up about issues relevant to me, I can help you to be yourself—glittering magical *you*.” Mr. Manley is the recipient of a \$500 QF Publication Award Scholarship.

Wash Cycle

By **Elijah Punzal**

University of California, Irvine

Characters:

TOD: College student. 20 years old. Filipino immigrant. Short and lean.

JUSTIN: College student. 21 years old. Filipino immigrant. Average height and stocky.

Setting:

College laundromat

(TOD enters carrying two baskets filled with laundry that are sorted very immaculately. Maybe he hums a popular song throughout. JUSTIN enters with his rather messy laundry basket, all heaped into one pile)

TOD: Hello.

JUSTIN: Hey.

(Beat)

TOD: How was your day?

JUSTIN: Fine.

TOD: Really?

JUSTIN: I mean, yeah, it was fine. Really fine. Just—

(JUSTIN makes an obscure gesture, yet TOD seemingly understands)

TOD: Same.

JUSTIN: Yeah? I mean, are you...?

TOD: Yes?

JUSTIN: You know...

TOD: Oh that? Yeah, I'm fine. Yeah.

JUSTIN: How did it go?

TOD: Hmm?

JUSTIN: Did you two talk, or...?

TOD: Oh yeah, we talked. Yeah. Uhh, we talked it over and agreed that there was nothing there. *(Shrug)* I mean, *he* said it didn't mean anything—

JUSTIN: Did you say something?

TOD: No, why would I?

JUSTIN: But did it, you know, mean something to you?

TOD: I mean, I guess.

JUSTIN: Then why didn't you tell him?

TOD: That what? I was *into* him? Please.

JUSTIN: You should have told him.

TOD: I've been through this before. It's nothing new.

JUSTIN: (*Beginning to put laundry in the washing machine*) Maybe it's because you're not doing it right.

TOD: And you're one to talk?

JUSTIN: Well yeah.

TOD: Enlighten me.

JUSTIN: You've just got to, you know, follow your "primal instincts." Cause if you don't—

TOD: You're nothing special.

JUSTIN: Exactly.

TOD: You've been saying that a lot lately.

JUSTIN: That's because it's true.

TOD: Hmm.

JUSTIN: Why do you think it happened, then?

TOD: *Hindi ko alam*, why are you suddenly so interested in my life?

JUSTIN: Well—

TOD: And don't tell me it's because you feel bad.

JUSTIN: Well, I mean...

TOD: Do you *actually* feel bad? For me?

JUSTIN: No, I just—I want you to be, you know, happy.

TOD: Interesting.

JUSTIN: *Ano ba yan*, you're the only other Filipino I know here. We have to, you know, look out for one another.

TOD: I thought you were too busy making fun of the way I spoke Tagalog.

JUSTIN: Well, maybe if you didn't speak it in such an exaggerated accent, you might actually pass as Filipino.

TOD: Might actually pass? Thanks, I'll really take that into consideration.

JUSTIN: Okay, fine. Whatever. Just do your laundry. (*Facing away from TOD*) *Tinatakbuhan ang problema mo.*

TOD: What?

JUSTIN: Nothing.

TOD: What did you say?

JUSTIN: Maybe if you'd actually try to learn Tagalog, you'd—

TOD: Why are you criticizing me? I've already told you how I'm trying—

JUSTIN: Then try harder.

TOD: Yeah, well I totally want to be speaking the language of the people who shunned me and practically disowned me and would—

JUSTIN: *Ano*, you think we're all traditionalist, conservative assholes?

TOD: Gee, I sure do.

JUSTIN: Well we're not!

TOD: I know! Just—I'm sorry, okay. I'll throw in my laundry and get out of your way, okay?

(A period of silence as JUSTIN watches TOD throw his laundry into the washing machine)

JUSTIN: I'm sorry.

TOD: Why are you apologizing?

JUSTIN: I shouldn't have said those things. I'm sorry.

TOD: You wouldn't have said those things if you knew better.

JUSTIN: I...okay. I'm sorry.

(JUSTIN and TOD are silent as they continue to do their laundry)

TOD: *(Suddenly)* You're right. I do need to work on my Tagalog.

JUSTIN: You don't need to—

TOD: No, you're right. I need to. For myself. Maybe it'll be the first thing in my entire life that my parents will actually appreciate.

JUSTIN: Then screw them.

TOD: I wish it were that easy.

JUSTIN: Do you really have to go back with them for the winter?

TOD: I have no where else to go. At least if I don't talk about, you know, my "gayness," they shouldn't bother me.

JUSTIN: Is that why you're always trying to find a boyfriend?

TOD: I mean, if I have a boyfriend that would let me live with him, it'd be killing like a whole nest of birds with one stone.

JUSTIN: A whole nest?

TOD: Anything is better than staying with my parents.

JUSTIN: I see.

TOD: It's just—I'm tired of all these games that everyone's playing. I thought college would be different but honestly, it's just like before. My parents still don't "understand" my life and the dating pool has really only expanded to include kinkier men. Kinkier, older men. Well, maybe not too old, just older, but I digress.

JUSTIN: Yeah.

TOD: Sorry if talking about this makes you uncomfortable.

JUSTIN: No, go on.

TOD: Don't tell me you're into kinky old men too?

JUSTIN: I'm not—wait, *too*?

TOD: I digress.

JUSTIN: Interesting.

TOD: Hey, that's what I say.

JUSTIN: I know.

TOD: Anyways, yeah, dating is hard. It's funny, but I'd never thought I would encounter those "No Asians, no Blacks" or "Masc4Masc" men. I guess it was just wishful thinking. Oh, and don't get me started on fetishes. You wouldn't believe the kind of messages I've received.

JUSTIN: Like?

TOD: I'll spare you some of the weirder things. Oh, one literally just said, "Asssiaannnnnn." Just like that. Not even a "Wow, you look hot" or "DTF?" or even "Hey." Just, "Asssiaannnnnn."

JUSTIN: Yikes.

TOD: I know right? The world's a hot mess.

JUSTIN: It seems like you lead a very interesting life though.

TOD: That's one way to put it.

JUSTIN: I didn't know these kinds of things happened.

TOD: It's definitely not like this all the time. Sometimes it's nice, you know? And sweet, even.

JUSTIN: That's good, that's good.

(Beat. TOD and JUSTIN resume their laundry, though TOD seems to be distracted)

TOD: *(Suddenly)* It was kind of that way with the last guy.

JUSTIN: Was he, you know, attractive?

TOD: *(Thinking for a bit)* Meh, around a seven. But he was nice. Kind, and he had great eyes too.

JUSTIN: Where did you meet him?

(TOD taps his phone, and JUSTIN nods understandingly)

JUSTIN: Well, do you think you two could have had something?

TOD: I don't know. I mean, when we hooked up, it was pretty hot.

(JUSTIN looks at TOD, stunned. TOD laughs)

TOD: Oh my god, I'm just kidding! *(Beat)* You can tell me to stop, you know.

JUSTIN: *(Recomposing himself)* No, it's okay. Continue.

TOD: Okay, so yeah, it was't really a hook up, but sort of? I don't really know what to call it. Anyways, so we were in my room, right, and we're just cuddling and all that good stuff. You know, staring at the ceiling doing absolutely nothing but rambling on about what we want to do with our lives. Then I turn to him, stupidly infatuated with his face, and ask if he wants to, you know, *do things*. He doesn't really respond, but I can tell he wants something. And then my roommate comes in and—

JUSTIN: He walked in on you?

TOD: No, we weren't doing anything. But I mean, he came in and literally passed out on his bed, poor thing. So I turned on my lamp and turn off the lights. Now it's like mood lighting and stuff, so I kind of ease myself into this boy, you know, like nuzzle my nose into the crook of his neck and other romantic stuff like that. And then he finally comes around, probably horny and the like, and he's like, "Do you want to make out?" And in my mind I'm like, "Fuck yeah I do." So we do. And it's like...here. Turn around.

(TOD put his hand on the square of JUSTIN'S back, pushing him slightly and firmly but not enough to move him)

TOD: *(Gradually getting more and more poetic)* I like to explain it as if our bodies were gravitating towards one another as if the space between us was too infinite—our bodies needed to become one. Hands finding spots to linger, fingertips brushing together, making small circles wherever they land. First foreheads touch, then noses, then lips...

(TOD moves almost instinctually closer and closer to JUSTIN, then JUSTIN turns around)

JUSTIN: Okay, maybe this is the point where I stay stop.

(Beat)

TOD: Oh yeah, shit, sorry.

(TOD and JUSTIN step apart)

JUSTIN: You must have really liked this boy, huh.

TOD: Unfortunately so.

JUSTIN: There's nothing wrong with being a softie.

TOD: That's debatable.

JUSTIN: Your love life seems so interesting.

TOD: Is it now?

JUSTIN: I've never had to experience things like that.

TOD: No offense, but you kinda sound voyeuristic right now.

(JUSTIN looks at TOD as if stunned again, and TOD just laughs)

TOD: I'm kidding! You're fine. *(Beat)* You're not the first person to tell me that anyways.

JUSTIN: *(He sighs, smiling)* You are...quite the character, Tod.

TOD: *(As if suddenly 'in-character')* Am I now?

JUSTIN: *(He chuckles)* The most interesting one I know.

TOD: Aww shucks.

JUSTIN: I mean it.

TOD: *Sige*, flattery will get you everywhere.

JUSTIN: Okay, okay. You're the *blandest* person I know.

TOD: The word of the Lord, amen.

JUSTIN: Yeah?

TOD: Yeah.

(They both return to their laundry. JUSTIN finishes first though he seems puzzled)

TOD: What happened?

JUSTIN: Why is it always not working?

TOD: What do you mean?

JUSTIN: Every time I try to use this damn thing, it never works

TOD: Did you press start?

JUSTIN: What?

TOD: Here.

(He takes JUSTIN'S hand and presses multiple buttons)

JUSTIN: Ah, thanks.

TOD: Anytime.

(TOD begins to wrap up his laundry)

JUSTIN: You're hands are soft.

TOD: Eww, don't say that.

JUSTIN: Sorry, sorry.

TOD: Again, you're not the first person to tell me that.

(TOD winks)

JUSTIN: I do not need that image in my head, thank you very much.

TOD: Hey, you're the one who took it in the wrong direction.

(The two of them laugh)

JUSTIN: Thanks for talking with me.

TOD: Of course. Maybe next time we'll discuss your love life.

JUSTIN: Perhaps.

TOD: I'll look forward to it. And remember, if you ever want that dastardly thing to work, just holler for me. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to press start.

JUSTIN: Alright. Thanks again.

(TOD flashes him a peace sign as he exits with his baskets in hand)

End of scene



Elijah Punzal was born in the Philippines and immigrated to the U.S. with his mother when he was four months old, settling with other family members in Redwood City, California. A sophomore at the University of California, Irvine, Mr. Punzal is majoring in Drama and Education. A semi-finalist in last year's QF English Essay Contest for High School Seniors, Mr. Punzal has become a town and gown queer activist, serving as a Professional Volunteer for the UCI LGBT Resource Center, a Board member of the Irvine Queers, and a Queers & Asian Group Leader. A storyteller and LGBTQ+-based community organizer, he is also a member of UCI's Soulstice League (a SNL-esque comedy group) and a QuestBridge Tech Intern. His "Interview with a Poet," an introspective journey into both his life as a proud, queer person of color from the Philippines and the life of a transgender poet on the UCI campus, projected against the increasing violence committed against transgender women, will appear in our winter issue. Mr. Punzal is the recipient of a \$1,000 QF Publication Award scholarship.

DANCING WITH ELINOR

A Short Story¹

By
Catherine Ryan Hyde

1. MADAM PRESIDENT

The things I like to do are the things I do well. Consequently, I hate to fly.

I was standing at departure gate A23. In front of a TV tuned to CNN. Enjoying watching Elinor. A satellite shot of Elinor swirling over the Atlantic. Headed obliquely for D.C., my destination. She might only be a tropical storm by then. But now she was 111 miles per hour, moving at nearly 15. Now she was 350 miles across, with gale-force winds 200 miles out from her eye. She was one gorgeous motherfucker of a storm. And I was stuck at a connecting airport, outside my real life. And I enjoy that. A lot.

I also liked this girl at my left. We stood nearly shoulder to shoulder. Taking the image in. Together. The way strangers can be together. Only at a time like this, though. After a minute she lifted her cell phone and made her first call. To the person who would meet her. If and when we ever reached our destination. Her significant other.

How did I know that? It wasn't hard. Because she didn't say hello. She didn't say who was calling.

She just said, "Hey." Hey, as in, it's me.

Then she said, "This could take a while."

And, "I have no idea. I'm playing leapfrog with a category four hurricane here."

And, "As long as it takes, I guess."

I was immediately reminded of the one about dancing with the eight-hundred-pound gorilla. I wanted to say, "We're not done dancing until Elinor says we are." But I didn't want to frighten her. Don't spook the locals. Though truthfully she might not have fallen into that category.

Despite my thinking of her as a girl, she was probably mid-thirties. And yes, that does depress me. How women that age look like girls to me. But we were not the same animal, she and I. She was close to six feet, with a looseness to her limbs. She was all denim with hair all down her back. Not curly, not straight. Just disorganized. But a disorganized that worked. I hate to admit there is such a thing, but there you are. She was not tight, or neat, or compact. Or in control of everything. So if I'm a woman, she has to be something else. So I called her The Girl.

Just before she hung up the phone, she said, "Susan. Wait. Don't hang up yet."

And she looked over at me. Saw I was listening. Met my eyes with defiance. Dared me to make something of it. Dared me to disapprove. When I just stared back, she took the phone to a more private location.

¹. "Dancing with Elinor" was originally published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. It is reprinted here with permission of the author.

I pulled out my cell phone. Turned it off. Wanting to be even farther from my real life.

The interesting thing is that I knew she had a problem on the other end of that phone line. But she didn't know. Not yet.

There were other calls over the next seven hours. Though I only heard her side.

"What do you mean you haven't told him yet? I'm halfway there for Christ's sake. How can this not be the right time? This is the time we agreed on."

"Well, I hope so. Because I'm on my way and all. All my stuff is in storage. Hell of a time to get cold feet, you know?"

"There was a time to consider all this, but it's over."

"Yeah, but she's a grown woman."

"Yeah, I know you're her mother. But she's not a child."

"That's what I'm saying. She's a grown woman. She'll deal with it."

"Because people deal with things."

"Well, I hope so. All my stuff is in storage. I'm halfway there."

"Okay. Good."

"No. No, Susan. No way. If you can't bring yourself to tell him by then, just don't come. No, that won't work. I'm not going to a hotel. And I'm sure as hell not staying there. This is the deadline we agreed to. What makes you think it's going to get easier later on?"

"No. I don't. I think it's just a goddamn hurricane. I don't believe in omens anyway."

"Don't even use the storm as an excuse. You're not looking at that direct a hit. You're not out boarding up your windows. Don't even try to sell me that."

"Well, while the two of you are flood-proofing the basement is a great time to have that talk."

"I mean it, Susan. Don't come to the airport if you haven't told him. I'm serious."

"Well, I sure hope so."

Then, upon flipping the phone closed, she'd again look defiantly into my eyes. Daring me to disapprove. Why she thought I'd disapprove, I don't know. Force of habit on her part, maybe.

She was squirming on that awful bank of airport seats. Trying to get comfortable. She had those endless legs propped up. But not for long. She took them down. Stretched out her lower back. Took off her denim jacket. Under it she wore only a narrow tank. A heather gray ribbed tank. I ran my eyes over the slimness of her shoulders and upper arms. She must do yoga. Could be she worked out, but that tends to make you tighter. More bound up. This was a long look. Lots of freedom of movement. But strength, too. I'm an admirer of necks, shoulders. Upper arms. Collar bones.

She met my eyes for the hundredth time. At first she offered up the usual defensiveness. The practiced challenge. Then you could see it dawn on her. Finally. She caught on. And it had been right there all along, too. It was easy. But it took her so long to see what was right in front of her.

I could almost look into her eyes and see the word form in her head.

Oh.

It's like that. Oh.

I could tell she'd been happier the other way. She was easy with defending. Now she clearly felt uneasy. She chose to handle it by talking.

She said, "My feet are swelling up. And I can't keep them up much longer, because it's killing my back. I'm almost desperate enough to lie down on the floor. But not quite. I mean . . ."

She looked down at the floor.

I couldn't see her feet or her ankles, but I took her word.

She wore jeans. Boots. I wore nylons, a skirt. Open shoes. But I also use diuretics when I travel. I know all about bloating. It's one thing to fly when I fly poorly. It's another thing to look puffy doing so.

I continued to consider her upper body.

I could feel her wanting to put the jacket back on. I could feel her pulling away. Much the way she might if I ran a hand along those shoulders. Not just eyes.

I said maybe I could get them to break out some cots. They have them. All airports have them. She said she hadn't known that.

"Well, they're not cots in the best sense," I said. "Just slings. But they *are* horizontal."

I went off to pressure some hapless airline employee. I believed I would get cots. But the best I could get was an offer to break them out if we hadn't boarded by 9:00 pm.

When I got back she'd put her jacket back on.

"It's going to be a while," I said. "You look like you could use a drink."

"I'm fine."

But not really, she wasn't. She had been changing seats. To avoid inane conversations. I could tell. I hate them, too. I could see them eat into her brain. Wear her down.

"I was just thinking. It's quiet in the Admiral's Club lounge." That's what I said.

"You can't get me in there."

"Why can't I?"

"Not for free."

"So?"

I watched her work that over. Maybe I'd go through this whole thing—pay her way in, buy her lunch and drinks—and maybe she'd go sit by herself. No one to say she couldn't.

In my head I silently repeated the word. Quiet. Bait cast into clear water.

"What the hell," she said. "I got time. Huh?"

Yeah. That was probably the key factor. She was willing to sell a piece of her time for thirty-five bucks plus drinks.

Probably not because that was so much money for her.

Probably because she had so much time.

We sat at a table in the bar area. On soft, padded armchairs.

I think she knew I'd buy her a drink and a sandwich. She didn't say so. But I offered. And she hardly seemed surprised.

She ordered a tequila. By now it was late afternoon. But I expect she'd have had one for breakfast if necessary. The look on her face said so. There were no rules at this juncture.

No wonder I love this so much.

I thought she might just sit there for hours and not say a word. But it was only minutes. Then she looked at my face before speaking. And looked away again.

"I don't understand why people live in something that's not the truth. Or anything different from how they want to live. I don't get that. Why they don't just say what's true."

I said I'd like to second the motion, but couldn't. I understood.

"Explain it to me then."

But there's a mile gap between what you understand and what you can explain. And I said so.

She nodded. Like she'd anticipated no more satisfaction from the day. Or from me. "I don't know what you're expecting from me."

"Nothing," I said.

"Good. Just so we're clear."

And after that we somehow took everything back off the table. Went back, magically, to the land where nothing had ever been said out loud.

We talked about the storm-chaser sides of ourselves. All we can find to love in a hurricane. Nothing about who we are. She had the walls up on that score.

A lot of the time we didn't talk. She put her feet up, sipped her drink. Closed her eyes.

After all, I had promised her quiet.

Later, I found her in the ladies' room. She stood at the sink, washing her face. Looked at me in the mirror. As though she'd never expected to look up and see anyone else. As if she were adjusted to the intrusion of me now. A necessary evil.

She did not look at my eyes, though. Instead, she scanned me up and down. A distant assessment.

I told her we had cots.

"Ah," she said. "Good."

I could tell she was in no mood for camaraderie.

I took the cot right next to hers. Sat on the edge of it. Behind her. They'd set them up in an unused gate. At the far end of the concourse. No real direct light. I felt her gear up to speak. Knew whatever words she mustered would push me back a step.

"You again. Life is full of coincidences."

It was a cut. I should've let it be. Let it alone. But I didn't.

I said, "We make judgments. Who we want to be close to."

Then, I kicked myself right away. I stepped too far just as I told myself not to move.

She spoke over her shoulder at me.

"She might still come. You know that, right? She could still be there."

So, that put everything back out on the table. That I'd been listening to all her conversations. And she knew it.

That I was treating her like she was up for grabs.

That she wanted me to stop now.

I took a big step back. "Of course. I'm sorry."

I might've just moved away. Permanently. Or I guess I mean somebody else might have.

Instead, I admired our ability to communicate. And negotiate. It was worth the price of admission, just to watch us work.

It was after eleven. I lay on one of the cots. Looking at her back. I could hear someone snoring. I could hear her make one more call.

"Susan."

"We're still hoping sometime tonight."

"Well, I can't. I don't dare. Believe me, I'd love nothing better than an airport hotel. But they might board in two hours. Or they might push it back another two."

"I know. Me, too. But you still haven't told him, right?"

"Yeah, well, that's true either way. Somebody'll get hurt either way."

"Yeah, I really mean it. Don't come to the airport if you haven't told him."

"I'll just go home."

"Well I hope so."

Then she clicked off. But I didn't know it for a time. She never said goodbye.

Many minutes went by, maybe an hour. I thought she was asleep. She turned over to face me. But with her eyes closed.

She looked too vulnerable. Wrapped in her jacket, tightly, like she was cold. Or just exposed. I sat up and draped my coat over her. Lay back down.

A while later she opened her eyes. Spoke to me in the dim.

I didn't wonder why. And when it showed itself to be something more trusting, I wasn't surprised. Because she was in between. And, unlike me, not enjoying it. She'd packed up her old life. And the new one was disintegrating underneath her feet. So what did she have with her, in this in-between?

Only me.

“Even my blue lines are gone.”

My gut held still. Tight. Waiting. Knowing she was telling me something that mattered. I didn't ask what she meant.

She would say.

“You know how a sheet of paper always has blue lines. Even if there's nothing written on it. It's like the formatting on a computer disk. But even the blue lines are gone.”

I told her I enjoy that, though.

“Not me.”

Then they called our flight. Announced we were finally boarding for D.C. I couldn't imagine worse news. People applauded. What the hell were they thinking? What's wrong with people, anyway? The things they find amusing, I'll never understand.

Since it was all over now anyway, I turned on my phone. Just long enough to learn that seven new voicemail messages had accrued. At least five would be Martin.

I turned off the phone again. I would tell him the battery died. Whether he'd believe that or not, I didn't know. Or care.

2. THE GIRL

I made a lot of mistakes that day, but mostly on the inside, where nobody needs to know but me. Like, for example, I let myself believe that when we finally got on that goddamn plane, the nightmare would be over, and I could stop holding my breath. Instead, I got an aisle seat next to one of those idiot men who sits with his legs splayed apart, using up half my leg room. I know, it doesn't sound like much, but try to cross-reference it with the exhaustion and the other obvious emotional pressures. Sometimes you can take it and sometimes you can't. It's a resistance issue.

One of two things happens to you on a day like that. Either you develop a sense of altruistic community, or it makes you combative. I planted my feet, literally. I refused to move my leg, even though he was leaning on it. Two minutes in, my left leg was already trembling, and it was a four-hour-plus flight to D.C. You get the picture. Hopefully you do.

I was thinking what an idiot I was to get on this plane. To fly all the way back east to see what Susan decided. Why didn't I call her one last time, tell her to save me the trouble if I was coming for nothing? But I froze in the desperate thought that a little extra time could make all the difference.

And in that pathetic moment of my indecision, they closed the cabin doors.

Then I looked up, and there was that woman, standing over me.

In my head I'd taken to calling her Madam President. Because I'll be damned if I was going to ask her name, and you have to call somebody something. In your head I mean.

It was because she looked like a politico. The first time I saw her, I pictured her taking the stage at a Democratic convention, staring down the crowd and telling them she was twice the man her opponents would ever be. Daring them to look her in the eye and say it wasn't so. I pictured her as the first viable woman presidential candidate. I believed she could make me vote for her. I did not believe she would end up borderline stalking me. That didn't go with the image.

“Nobody likes the middle seat,” she told the guy with the big wide legs, and he looked at her with aggressiveness, probably wondering why she would torture him by pointing that out. “How about if I trade you?” She handed him the stub of her boarding pass, and he eyed it like a used car he was too smart to be tricked into buying.

“This is in business class,” he said.

“Your lucky day.”

“Are you nuts?”

No one had yet asked my opinion about any of this.

“I want to sit with my friend,” she said.

And Leg Man made himself scarce.

This was a moment of big-time ambivalence for me. On the one hand Madam President was the only familiar thing in my world. I mean, in the bizarro world of this disaster. I mean . . . what do I mean? I mean if it's true that all we have is the here and now, then Madam President was all I had.

On the other hand the hypervigilance was making me tired. I wasn't sure that—at a purely emotional level—I had four hours of it left.

At first we didn't talk. She thumbed through the Sky Mall catalog. Ripped out a page or two and stuffed it in her overly expensive looking attaché. Crossed her nyloned legs and let one drift way too close to mine. But she didn't say a word, at first.

We didn't talk until nearly an hour in. By this time the cabin lights had been dimmed to allow people to sleep. The guy on her left was snoring, his face smashed against the window. Just when I thought I could let down and not hear another challenging word from her, she hit me again.

I should've seen it coming. An aisle seat in business class doesn't come cheap.

“So, do you think she'll be there?”

I was so surprised by the question that I actually looked her in the eye. “Now how would I know that?”

“You know,” she said.

“I don't. Of course I don't know. I don't know what you're talking about. How the hell would I know?”

“In here,” she said and almost touched me.

She extended one hand toward my solar plexus, the source of most of my discomfort. But she didn't touch me. Not quite. But I tightened the muscles there, guarded myself against her touch. Reacted to the touch of her energy, which jumped the two-inch gap. She spoke quietly, because just about everyone on that plane was either asleep or trying to sleep.

“In here people know things. Where you stand with everybody. What they mean by what they say to you. And the part of you that says you don't know? That's just your brain overriding what you know. Because you don't trust it. Or because it's not the answer you want.”

I took a deep breath and sank into depression. Just like that. Just as fast as I would sink in water if I didn't try to save myself. Only it didn't feel like I was sinking into it, it felt like it was rising up around me. I breathed again, drew it into my mouth and nose, my lungs. I didn't fight it anymore. I felt how hard I'd been clinging to believing I couldn't know yet, not until I got there. How important it was not to know. For a little bit longer. Just to live in Maybe Land for four more hours. It almost felt good to let it go.

“I don't really feel like talking,” I said.

I sat breathing in my doom for five or ten minutes. I guess it was that long. Then I made the only outward mistake of the day. Only maybe it wasn't a mistake, I don't know. I want the moment to do over, but maybe not everything you wish you could take back is a mistake.

I was just sitting there, looking down at my own legs. Looking at my left hand, drooped over the end of the armrest. And beyond that was her crossed leg, the inside of her left leg, bare except for her nylons. It was just an inch or two from the outside of my fingers. So I moved my fingers over an inch or two, and I touched her calf. Right almost at the back of her knee. Then down, following the curve of it with the outside of my fingers. I didn't look at her face, not at all. Not once. I just focused on the calf. Like it existed unowned, or at the very least would never rat me out. For those couple of seconds, it was all about that one curve of calf. I think she might've stopped breathing. Then I ran out of reach, and I took my hand away.

I know why I did it, but I don't know if I can explain. I did it to change the way I felt, the same

way I might walk by an ashtray and pick up somebody else's cigarette and steal one hit, even though I don't smoke anymore. But right at that moment, you need something to change the way you feel, and you'll take anything.

And it worked, too. It filled me with this nondepressed static electricity. Not a sexual electricity; it was more about fear. It was more about the danger, the audacity, the complete and utter outrageousness of touching a total stranger. It was better than what it replaced.

And then, when I was done, I set it right back down in the ashtray, because it was a cigarette I had never intended to smoke. I just wanted that one spectacularly ill-advised hit.

I sat back and closed my eyes and kept them shut, tightly shut. I refused to look into the eyes associated with that calf.

Call it cowardly, call it what you will, but I wasn't going to do it.

After a minute I felt her lean closer, felt her breath close to my ear.

"I'm going to the restroom," she said. And she climbed over my legs, briefly bracing a hand on one as if for balance.

As if.

I sat with my eyes squeezed shut, full flight-or-fight raging in my belly, and let the ambiguity of her simple statement terrify me. Did she mean, I'm going to the restroom, and I'll be right back? Or did she mean, That's where I'll be, come meet me there? Could so easily have been either one. I let confusion rattle me for as long as I'm guessing it would take her to walk ten steps toward the rear of the cabin.

Then I remembered what she said. About knowing.

I leaned out into the aisle and craned around to look. She was standing at the restroom door with her hand on the latch, and we looked at each other. Except the cabin lights were off, and we were a long way apart by then. She actually stood in a spill of light from the flight attendants' area at the very rear of the plane, but that only lit her from behind and threw her features into shadow. And yet we froze for a time and watched each other. So what were we watching?

Silhouettes frozen, I guess. The body language of frozen.

I shook my head.

I thought it might be too subtle a gesture for the subtle lighting, but I was wrong; she got it all right. She dropped her head and opened the door and went inside and that was that.

I sat back again and squeezed my eyes back to shut. She was gone a long time. I thought she might never come back to her seat.

When she did she climbed over my legs, but without touching me. Turned off her overhead reading light.

"I just . . ." I said, but I didn't know the end of the sentence, so I clammed up again. What did I just? I didn't even know. A few seconds later I said, "I guess I just don't get what the point would be. Total stranger, someone you'll never see again." Of course I was whispering.

"I would think it would go without saying. Something outside your real life like that. Something that's just so . . . outside your real life."

I laughed, but it came out as more of a snort. I leaned in close and looked into her face in the dark and realized I wasn't afraid of her anymore. And realized I'd been afraid of her before, all in the same moment. Afraid because she could play that card at any time, but now she had, so she had no power over me. Now I might even get to lead.

"Here's a news flash," I whispered. "This is your real life. That smokescreen you're making sure I never touch, that's the fake. This is the real deal. Right here."

I expected her to counter with something clever, but she never did. That was the last we spoke on the plane.

Amazingly, I slept. But I was startled awake by a bang of something hitting the bottom of the plane. Based solely on feel, a mountain range.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Madam President said on an outrush of breath. I had a feeling she’d have said something smoother, given more time to prepare.

Then the plane righted itself and bumped a few more times, and I swallowed my stomach back down and adjusted to not being dead, or even dying. I don’t understand how turbulence can create that sound and feel. How it can hit the belly of a plane with that force. It’s just air. I know it can, but only intellectually. Really, I don’t get it.

The pilot came on and apologized for “the wake-up call” and said a few other things, but in a southern accent so thick I only caught every third word. But he said to buckle our seat belts. And that it was rough.

Thanks for clearing that up.

We dipped again, suddenly enough that I lost my stomach, like on a roller coaster or a mountain road, and I heard a few people gasp a lungful of breath, and Madam President was one of them. I sat back and rode it out. I have a perverse enjoyment of stuff like that.

I looked left and saw her squeezing the life out of both armrests, and I could tell it was no game for her. That’s when it hit me that she’s not a good flyer like I am. And I had a strange thought. Maybe she hadn’t sat next to me to play games. Maybe her little obsessive pursuit had nothing to do with it. Or not everything to do with it, anyway. Maybe she needed to be with somebody. Maybe, just for that moment, I was all she had.

I checked with my gut, but I never got a clear read on the answer. But I reached over and put my hand on top of hers.

At first she just kept her death grip on that armrest. But I edged my fingers under her palm, and in time she turned her hand partway over, opened it up a little bit, and allowed it to be held.

3. MADAM PRESIDENT

Not that I think of myself as the easily affected type. God knows I’m not. But it broke my heart to see her standing in that no-man’s-land of airport where people get met. Among the black-suited mercenaries holding up signs. Just standing there, taking in the nothing.

I went to the baggage carousel. Not because I didn’t want to help. Because I knew she didn’t want me to.

After a while she came over and watched the bags go round and round.

A few minutes of that and I moved closer to where she was standing. Shoulder to shoulder, like at the start. Only this time it was just baggage. Swirling.

Outside, rain splattered off the roof of the covered walkway. Onto travelers running for cabs and town cars.

Now would come the messy part. The cleaning up.

“I was hoping she’d be here,” I said.

First she didn’t answer. I was giving up thinking she would. Then she said, “Thanks.” That’s all. Thanks.

I asked her where she’d go.

Another short answer. “Home.”

I wanted to tell her she wasn’t entirely right in what she’d said on the plane. A little bit right, maybe. But not as right as she might think. Tell a lie long enough and you own it. Lie or no lie, it’s mine. And that makes it my real life. But she’d throw that back in my face, I think. Because she’s one of those who takes things more head on.

Besides, it was too late. She spotted her bag. It was big. It rolled. She hauled it off the belt. Pulled out the retractable handle. Towed it away from the outside doors. Away from ground

transportation. Back to the departing-flight desks.

I watched her to see if she'd look back. She did. I waved, but she didn't even raise her hand to wave back. Just nodded once. That was okay, though. That was akin to just saying "Hey" when you call someone on the phone.

I think I liked that even better.

Catherine Ryan Hyde is an American novelist and short story writer with more than 30 published books, including several recent titles now available in various e-formats. The recipient of a number of literary awards, Ms. Hyde has enjoyed considerable popularity in the English-speaking world and increasingly among German-speaking readers as well.

Pay It Forward, perhaps her best known novel, has been translated into over 20 languages. According to the author, the story was inspired by the assistance she received from two strangers when her car broke down in a "bad neighborhood" (her own) and who left before she could thank them.

We greatly appreciate Ms. Hyde's willingness to allow QF to reprint "Dancing with Elinor," a story which first appeared in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. You can find more information about her most recent publications on her website: <http://www.catherineryanhyde.com/>