

AS AN EXCHANGE STUDENT IN TOKYO, I joined the university judo team and spent my first week at the dojo flinging myself to the mat, learning how to fall without getting hurt.

The sound of a fall is important. A well-executed one sounds like a hundred-pound bag of sand hitting wet pavement: a single, heavy smack. That means that all important body parts have hit at once, absorbing the shock equally. But a fall that starts with a thud, immediately echoed by limbs hitting the floor, means someone is in pain.

After I'd gotten good at falling, I learned how to flip men twice my size. I couldn't wait to get to the dojo each day, and I practiced until my arms and legs trembled with exhaustion.

I became involved with the team captain, who didn't speak English. Our relationship was against team rules, so we kept

it a secret. We ignored each other at practice, then rode the subway home together, purposely choosing crowded cars so we could press up against one another.

One night I snuck into his room in the dormitory, and we lost our virginity to each other.

As the end of the school year approached, I prepared to return to the United States. The team captain and I had never discussed our future. Though I loved him, I knew I couldn't stay in Japan. The day I left, I gave him a blue aerogramme already addressed to me and asked him to write.

A month later, the blue aerogramme arrived in my mailbox. I opened it with trembling hands. In carefully penned English, he had written, "Please forget me."

I never have.

*Laura K.
Brooklyn, New York*

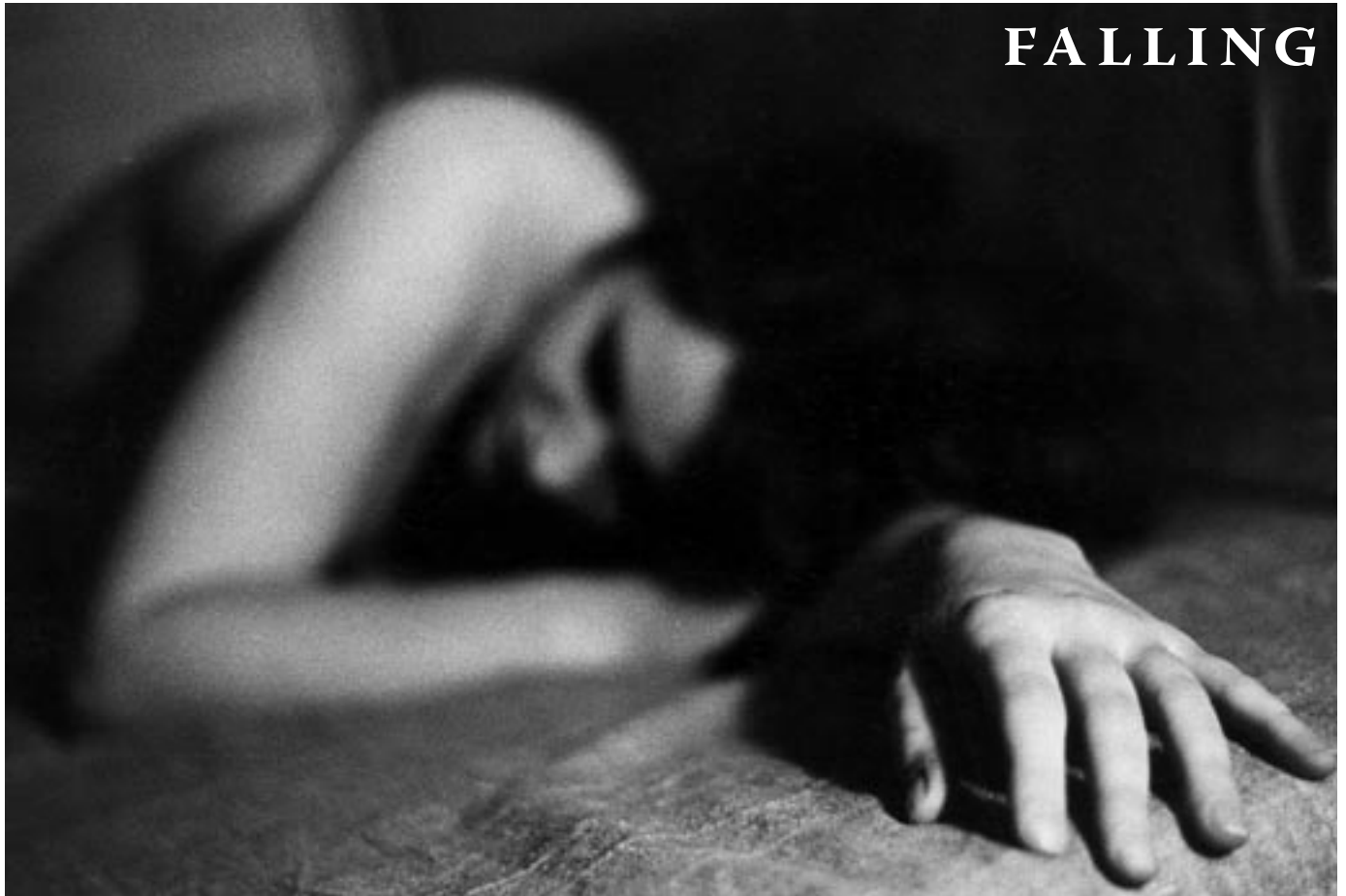
MY SISTER CAREENED BACKWARD, and her head smashed into the wall, leaving a softball-size dent. Shaking it off like a cartoon character, she insisted she had only a little headache, then drove off to her son's soccer game.

Another day my sister fell in the shower, catching her wedding ring on the door handle and slicing her finger down to the bone. At the emergency room, when she changed into a hospital gown, her body was a patchwork of bruises: purple, green, yellow. The nurses suspected her husband, but the real villain is Parkinson's disease.

At only fifty-three, my sister is being robbed of her balance and control. Now dementia is creeping in. A host of medications around the clock, in conjunction with a surgical brain implant, slow progression of the disease, but there is no cure.

Readers Write

FALLING



ANNA KAUFMAN MOON

Though she now uses a wheelchair, my sister vows to “beat this damn disease.” The minute we turn our backs, she gets up to go to the china cabinet or the stove. It’s as if the disease doesn’t exist in her mind. She just keeps getting up, and keeps falling.

Name Withheld

AT THE AGE OF ELEVEN I FELL IN LOVE. My crush wasn’t on one of the neighborhood boys, though. I fell for Lauren, the new girl in my fifth-grade class. I wanted to walk her home from school, but instead she took me to a stairwell where only the janitor was supposed to go. There, Lauren taught me to kiss, *Beach Blanket Bingo* style: leaning forward with our hands behind our backs and our lips puckered. It was both thrilling and terrifying. What if someone saw us? What if it got around school? Two girls kissing!

Lauren told me not to worry: if anyone saw us, we’d say we were practicing for the real thing. “It’s not like we’re queer,” she whispered.

When I heard that, I felt as if I were plummeting into a deep hole. I gazed at Lauren’s lips and realized that falling in love with another girl was something I’d have to keep secret — especially from her.

*Merry Song
Eugene, Oregon*

I USED TO DEFINE MYSELF BY MY speed, efficiency, and competence. Then, four years ago, I was diagnosed with lupus, a progressive autoimmune disease. It is like a slow fall. Eventually it will crush my body. For now, though, my symptoms are limited to periodic flare-ups during which my shoulders and knees burn like a bad sunburn, my mouth and nose sprout sores, my chest hurts, and I feel exhausted.

Sometimes I can’t sleep because of the pain. One night I sat up watching CNN and saw falls galore — politicians, marriages, CEOs, buildings, and even countries. It was as if the world itself had been diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. I found this strangely reassuring. I was connected with others by this invisible cord of illness, by this falling.

Could I have been wrong about illness

all these years? Could it be a bridge between us all, a comfort in a lonely world? Perhaps suffering, once it becomes inevitable, should be accepted and embraced. I wish someone had told me this twenty-five years ago when I received my diploma from medical school.

Name Withheld

THE SIGHT OF THE SUN, AFTER MONTHS of darkness, signaled the end of the long arctic winter and made me want to sing, dance, and begin spring-cleaning. I boxed up the books that my neighbors had given me — to help me endure my first winter in Kotzebue, Alaska — and set out to carry them to the clinic. Rather than tote the heavy box around the frozen lagoon, I decided to take a shortcut across its icy surface.

Inuit children played in the snow nearby. When they waved to me, I made comic faces and grunting sounds like a gorilla. The kids laughed and cheered. Then I pretended to walk a tightrope, carefully sliding one boot in front of the other,

balancing the box of books. The children smiled, waiting for my next trick. I hoisted the box atop my head, balancing it with both hands, the way an African woman carries a basket.

Suddenly I felt a rumbling. There was a loud snap that reminded me of ice cubes cracking in a glass, and my footing gave way. Books skidded everywhere like hockey pucks as my body plunged into the frigid lagoon.

Freezing water rapidly soaked my heavy clothing. Barely able to move my arms, I sank, terror-stricken. Yet when my feet hit bottom, I became curious and opened my eyes to see what was down there — no debris, sea grass, or fish, as in California’s warm lagoons. The glacial water stung my eyeballs, and my arms were frozen in place. Then I blacked out.

I awoke bundled in blankets in a small, sparsely furnished room. An old man rubbed my feet, and an Inuit woman toweled my hair fiercely while others rubbed my back and massaged and shook my

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they’re the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn’t as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we’re unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don’t want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. Feel free to submit your work under “Name Withheld” if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author’s name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don’t question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you’ve already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We’re sorry, but we can’t respond to or return your work, so don’t send your only copy unless you don’t want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you’ll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Praying	November 1	April 2007
Too Close For Comfort	December 1	May 2007
The Bedroom	January 1	June 2007
Guns	February 1	July 2007
Change Of Heart	March 1	August 2007
Rivals	April 1	September 2007

arms and fingers. I didn't recognize any faces.

"How'd I get here?" I asked.

They didn't answer, but talked among themselves in their native dialect. Shocked, embarrassed, and grateful, I whispered, "Thank you."

The elderly Inuit man cupped my bare feet in his hands and pressed their icy soles to his naked chest. Through skin and bones I felt his heart beating, its life-giving warmth.

*Shinan Barclay
Coos Bay, Oregon*

I WAS BARELY GETTING BY WRITING

freelance articles, shelving books in the town library, and selling vegetables from my garden. I didn't have enough money for health insurance or new clothes. When friends asked me out for lunch, I would check the change slots at the local car wash before confirming.

Then my car developed mysterious problems that ended up costing me all I had saved, plus months of future income. And it still didn't run reliably.

At the library, my athletic shoes didn't conform to the new employee dress code, so I was fired. My car broke down again. Without it, I couldn't pick up groceries at the food pantry. When I asked a friend if she was driving in that direction, she told me, in an exasperated tone, that I really should get AAA.

The middle-class people I used to work with have no understanding of my struggles. I have more in common with the homeless, who don't have the luxury of judging others by such superficial standards.

*Su Clauson
Blacksburg, Virginia*

WHEN I WENT TO BED THAT OCTOBER

night, I knew the wet snow falling outside might be too heavy for the diseased elm in my front yard, and that the long limb that hung above my old car could break under the weight. For some reason, I ignored the impulse to move my car.

The limb snapped off overnight. My car was totaled. Until I saved enough to buy another car, my eighty-two-year-old mother agreed to loan me hers in exchange for driving her to the grocery

store and doctors' appointments. Afterward we'd go out to lunch. Our conversations were superficial at first, but we spoke more deeply as the weeks passed. We finally apologized for the ways we'd each hurt the other over the years.

A month after the tree limb fell, my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. We added trips for radiation and chemotherapy to our itinerary.

Only three weeks later, my mother suffered a major stroke and lost most of her ability to speak. She did manage to say that she wanted me to keep her car and that she wanted to die. She passed away six days after entering the hospice.

On the morning of her funeral, driving the car that now was mine, I had a revelation: if I'd moved my car that October night, I would never have healed those wounds with my mother. Tears of gratitude joined my tears of grief.

*Judah Freed
Denver, Colorado*

THE FIRST TOWER FELL AT 9:59 A.M.

on September 11, 2001. The next thirty minutes were filled with dread and fear as I waited to hear if my brother-in-law, a New York City police officer, was OK: he'd seen the first plane hit while walking to work and had called my sister to tell her that he was rushing to the scene.

At 10:30 I found out that he'd been standing at the base of the second tower when the first one fell. He ran for his life and called my sister from a pay phone to tell her he was alive.

Planes falling out of the sky; buildings falling to the ground; people falling to their death. To this day, he won't talk about it.

*Nanci Goldberg
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

I WAS BORN WITH A CONDITION THAT

causes my bones to break under the slightest pressure, and I learned to use a wheelchair instead of learning to walk.

By the time I was eight, my legs had fractured numerous times. Nevertheless, doctors decided that, with braces and crutches, I might be able to walk. I was sent to a children's rehabilitation center, where a physical therapist tried to get me to stand. I refused to do it, because

I knew that my legs would break. After pleading with me to try, the therapist put her hands under my arms and stood me up. We took a few faltering steps together before both my legs snapped and I fell to the floor, screaming in pain and fear.

After my fractures had healed and the casts were off, I was again sent to children's rehab. When I saw the same physical therapist waiting for me, I began to shake. Seeing how frightened I was, she said gently, "OK, Phoebe, let's give it another try." Once again, she stood me up. Once again, both legs broke. That was the end of my attempts to walk for many years.

*Phoebe Bubendorfer
Des Moines, Iowa*

MY HUSBAND AND I WERE RENOVATING

an old camp building on a lake in eastern Maine. The dream of a cozy, rustic retreat kept us going, but remodeling the tired and poorly built place was a challenge — for our marriage as well as our carpentry skills. Richard wanted to get the job done expediently. I wanted everything to look and feel exactly right.

One raw November day, I was working inside while Richard and his brother were putting on a new roof made of heavy sheets of corrugated steel. I came outside to see they had laid out the roof without consulting me on the overhangs, which I felt were too wide, and I said so. I wasn't happy, but with only a few pieces remaining to be installed, I had to let it go. We were all tired, cold, and hungry for lunch.

The last piece of roofing to be put on was the one that needed a cutout for the stovepipe. It was critical to locate the hole just right, so Richard made a point of sending me up the temporary ladder to the sleeping loft to approve the stovepipe location before he cut the sheet of steel.

I'd confirmed the location and was starting down the ladder to heat up some soup for our long-overdue lunch when my foot somehow missed the first rung. I felt myself falling slowly backward, headfirst, toward the cast-iron stove at the foot of the ladder.

By miracle or luck, Richard was in exactly the right place, and I fell into his waiting arms. If I'd landed on the stove, I'd surely have cracked my skull — or

worse — and we were miles from any doctor, on a Sunday. Rather than dwell on what might have happened, we marveled at the romance of my rescue. Any arguments about overhangs and such were forgotten.

*Jane Crosen Washburn
Penobscot, Maine*

I WAS A LATE CHILD, BORN WHEN MY siblings were already in their teens, so I got the sort of attention usually reserved for only children. Mom and I had a special bond and shared a love of music and the arts. But my mother was also a diagnosed schizophrenic. She had mad, sparkling eyes and looked like a movie star. I often manipulated her into letting me stay home from school. She would play songs on the piano while I sipped my chicken soup and sometimes sang along.

Our family endured my mother's bouts of illogical and embarrassing behavior, but as her illness progressed, she became increasingly forgetful, angry, and incoherent. There were times when I couldn't help feeling mad at her.

After I grew up and moved out, I stayed close to home for years. When I finally decided to leave the area, I spent my last few days in town visiting my parents. Mom and I fought constantly up until we arrived at the airport and said our tearful goodbyes. It had dawned on us that things would never be the same.

Months later my niece told me that Mom was crying all the time and kept falling down. She'd broken her collarbone and was becoming a danger to my father, who was now feeble himself.

I flew home to find my beautiful mother looking like a street person. Her once-sparkling eyes now gave only flat, blank stares. One day I saw her start to fall. I caught her limp body and carefully let her down to the floor. Then I lay next to her and put my head on her chest.

Crying softly, she whispered, "I don't know what's happening. I'm lost. I keep falling down."

"I'll catch you," I whispered.

*L.Z.
Los Angeles, California*

ON THE OUTSIDE, MY LIFE LOOKED great. I had my MFA, was engaged, and had

just landed a new job. But I had trouble making the transition from being an artist and listening only to my muse to working for someone else. Overwhelmed by the needs and demands of other people, I felt depressed — and then guilty for being depressed when all was going so well.

For some time my fiancé and I had been planning a sky-diving excursion. He'd done it once before, and I wanted to experience the thrill of falling thousands of feet through the air. I signed the disclaimer form acknowledging that what I was about to do could kill me. With life on the ground seeming so flat and heavy, I wasn't as scared as perhaps I should have been.

I'd imagined wind howling in my ears, but as soon as I jumped from the plane, there was complete silence. Falling at hundreds of feet per second feels like floating. Everything is suspended: space, time, thought. Only when the parachute opened did I become aware of myself again, and of the land rushing up to meet me. But during free fall, all my worries had drifted away.

Now that I'm a wife, and mother to a little boy, I assess risk differently. I will never again make such a jump. But when the buzz of the world grows too loud, the memory of that perfect silence helps me to cope. Sky diving did not make my depression disappear, but it changed me. I will always be someone who fell through the sky.

*Allison Parker
New York, New York*

IN THE SUMMER OF 2004, DURING THE second intifada, I took a trip to Israel and toured the settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. I was there partly out of curiosity and partly because I was doing research for a novel set in that troubled part of the world.

Though I was not religious, a group of Orthodox Jews kindly let me join their tour. We went to Jaffa, the six-thousand-year-old port city where an ancient stone stairway leads down to the sea. On the way there, our guide explained that the staircase was a popular site for wedding photographs, and every day many brides surrounded by photographers would descend the steps.

Sure enough, there were brides everywhere, and I tried to keep out of their way. As I climbed past a beautiful woman in an impossibly white gown, I lost my footing on the narrow step and began to fall. I might have tumbled all the way down to the sea if the bride hadn't reached out and grabbed me.

I corrected my balance and thanked her profusely. She'd taken a risk without thinking, for a total stranger, and in her wedding outfit, no less. She never said a word — it was unclear whether she'd understood my English and mumbled Hebrew — but she let me take her picture, and she smiled, so beautiful in her bridal dress against a backdrop of ancient stone.

Back in the tour bus, my rescue by the bride provoked a debate among my Orthodox companions: had the bride been an Arab or a Jew? A woman behind me said that, with so many Jews coming to Israel from Ethiopia and India, it was getting harder to tell the difference. A man in front of me said she couldn't have been an Arab: "If her husband saw her dressed like that, he would cut off her head."

Their debate was beside the point. When we stand close enough to each other, we can see each other's humanity. Then, if someone is falling, it is only natural to reach out a hand to help.

*Anita N. Feng
Issaquah, Washington*

(end of excerpt)