AMY LEE SCOTT

Every man's memory is his private literature.
—Aldous Huxley

Memory is a way of holding on to the things you love,
the things you are, the things you never want to lose.
—Kevin Arnold

When the World Explodes

When my friend Brian died on Sunday, I was standing at the kitchen sink, scrubbing pots. Outside, mountains ringed in white still held the pale morning. Cold air listed from the window pane and fell into the water's heat; steam made my face sweat, turned my hands into lobsters.

Four days later, it still takes a long time to fall asleep, because I hate to wake with a sigh of false relief, only to feel an itch in my heart and remember all over again. It was only Sunday morning when I was washing dishes that Brian's dad heard his son's alarm clock blaring in his room fifteen miles north of me.

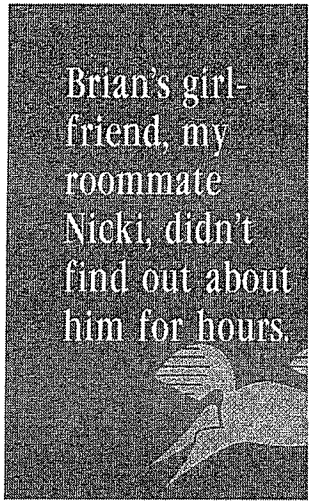
Imagine how that would have sounded. His dad didn't understand why Brian just didn't turn it off. He didn't know. He climbed the stairs and knocked on the door—once, twice—then entered. Brian was still in bed, oblivious to the alarm.

"Son," his dad said. "Son, it's time to get up." He went to turn off the alarm but never made it. He saw his son lying so still. Blood spooled from Brian's nose. Right before I fell asleep last night, this image flamed against my lids: his father's stark eyes—how he ran to the bed, grappled for a pulse, tried to exchange his breath for Brian's, tried again, again, again, pressed his forehead to his son's, pressed his ear to his chest, pressed his lips to his wrist, tried again and again, until Brian's mom pulled him away, held his waist, told him to stop, Honey, just stop.

It was 8:30 a.m. I was in the kitchen with pruny hands that smelled of orange-scented liquid soap. It was cold, and I breathed

on the window to make fog creatures for my roommates. I didn't want it tc rain. I wanted to blink bright sun, to wander through foothills, to pick my way through orange groves, to snap photos of whitewashed homes nestlec against a backdrop of velvet green.

I daydreamed magnolias, pitchers of sangria with lemon heads nodding against the glass, white heat against my straw hat. When I came to, all I saw was the brown face of the mountain, wrinkled and sagging beneath its load of white.



Brian's girlfriend, my roommate Nicki, didn't find out about him for hours. She woke up, still smiling from their date in Park City the day before. It wasn't until she was driving to his house for dinner that his dad called. At first, she thought he was joking. I don't want to know how it felt, pressing insistent arrows through her ear. I don't know how she managed to drive back to us through the cold. Her phone must have burned her cheek while the radio buzzed from the blown-out rear speaker.

She entered our apartment, shaking. The lightest touch would have felled her. "I'm not anything," she said. "I'm not. I'm . . . I'm *angry*." She started to cry and didn't stop for two days.

Patricia said she heard Nicki crying in her sleep that night. She said she heard Nicki sobbing when she woke up. When I was in the bathroom getting ready with the fan turned on, I could hear her crying through the vent.

I sat on our ledge for a long time Sunday night. The cold concrete sent ice up my folded limbs, but I welcomed the numbness. I hated how the sunset could still be so brilliant. It seemed indecent until I remembered the blood-red sunsets that occur in the wake of volcanic explosions. I have never seen one of these, but I imagine them to be similar to the oddly beautiful smog sunsets of Los Angeles. Like smog, a volcano's ashy pollution feeds the burning horizon.

As I write, I think of Krakatoa, a volcano anchored in the Sunda Strait of Indonesia. It erupted after three months of seismic activity. Ash began to sputter in early June. On August 26, 1883, at 1:00 p.m., the volcano heaved its insides to the sky. A black cloud of ash seventeen miles high pillared then blanketed 300,000 square miles. It erased the sun and rained pumice, ash, and fire. Much of the debris lodged itself in the stratosphere, refusing to leave the turbulence-free space where weather balloons bobbed lazily. As a result, the sunsets looked murdered for years.

Edvard Munch observed, "Suddenly the sky turned blood red. . . . I stood there shaking with fear and felt an endless scream passing through nature." When he painted *The Scream* ten years later, he remembered that summer day. He painted a livid sky, a lava flow streaming across the top half of the canvas.

Krakatoa exploded paroxysmally. It seized and rent the sky with its violent tantrums. Not one of the 3,000 inhabitants of Sebesi, an island close by, survived. After reading so many accounts of the post-explosion evenings, the memories of the sunsets—the terrible, intoxicating red—have started to become mine.

On the porch with my eyes closed, I could almost feel the heat of a 113-year-old Krakatoa sunset. When I blinked, the cold returned. The sunset before me had transformed into an aching duel between clouds and light.

Monday morning, I hovered near the kitchen table. I gauged the sounds from Nicki's room and pretended to read. I didn't want her to feel like I was on guard, but I was. I remembered how I touched her back the night before and set a cup of tea on her desk. She told me that she had to go to Brian's work to clear out his cubicle. She didn't want his mother to do it.

When she said this, I bit the inside of my cheek so hard it started to bleed. There had to be some way to let me take her place, just for a day or two, just so she could cocoon herself to emerge all stunning and healed. I didn't know how to think. I didn't know what to say. I simply closed the door and tried to stifle my tears.

In my head, all I could see was my beautiful friend clutching a cardboard box. She stood in his office with its swishing fans. The faint rustling of all the workers felt claustrophobic. She couldn't breathe. There were too many eyes looking at her, and she, so small and golden against the dark wood, looked like a desert wrung dry—desolate.

Krakatoa was barren for six months. I read that the explosion and consequent tsunamis wiped out the island's vegetation and animal life. The letters blurred as I flipped through the pages: a tidal wave 120 feet high killed 36,000 people in Java and Sumatra; two-thirds of Krakatoa was destroyed in its explosion, which measured 13,000 times larger than the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima; Krakatoa's explosion was "believed to be the loudest sound in recorded history" (it was heard as far as the island of Rodrigues, near Mauritius—nearly 3,000 miles away), its atmospheric shock waves so great that they went around the world seven times and could still be detected five days later.

I read and read, stuffing my brain with all the facts I could gather. I did not want any gaps; I was greedy for words. I learned that the temperature worldwide lowered an average of three degrees after 1883. Weather patterns revolted for years. A blue moon mourned for two. This all happened. I know. I've read each article ten times. But I still can't imagine it.

Sunday night, Patricia, Allyson, and I walked softly through the apartment, straightening pillows, wiping counters, rearranging cutlery. We were helpless. We did not know how to act, so we were clumsy: grasping platitudes and furling brows, vaguely knocking on her closed door, our awkward hands smoothing her sweaty hair. When I crept into Nicki's room, she gulped for air then fumbled for the ibuprofen I offered. She tried to smile, but her lips collapsed with the effort.

"No, no," I whispered when she handed back one of the pills. "Take all three." I rubbed her back for a minute then leaned down and kissed her forehead. It was all I had.

Later that night, Patricia heard Nicki on the phone with her mother. She was telling her that she had gone through Brian's room and run her fingers

across his clothes hanging neatly in the closet. Her fingers left traces in the dust on his mirror, his window pane, the awkward spot behind his lamp. She picked up a pair of his shoes and couldn't put them down. If she did, everything would begin to exist without him. So his shoes dangled from their laces, thumping her side with every step. She held them, and she held Brian's mother, and they cried.

The next night was better. Nicki still cried but not from grief entirely. Her co-workers had sent her a bouquet of flowers; her secretary, a gift basket. My roommates and I gave her a stuffed monkey and tucked pieces of paper all around her room, noting the things we loved about her. "Everyone has been so good to me," she said as we hugged in the kitchen.

Nicki brought out her photo albums of the past six months. The funeral home needed a recent photo for the program, and his mother asked her to find one. Her hands looked pale beneath the kitchen light. I imagined how she used to sit on the couch with Brian, their hands clasped together. The image left something sharp in my joints, which I tried to flex away.

Leaves molted from the trees, and we heard them crunch beneath people's shoes outside. We huddled around her as she turned page after page of protective plastic. Brian smiled back at us. My eyes burned, and I bent to grip the table. Though the backgrounds changed from print to print, every pose was the same: his arms wrapped around Nicki, and his cheek pressed against hers. The wide angle caught their grins, huge and giddy from love.

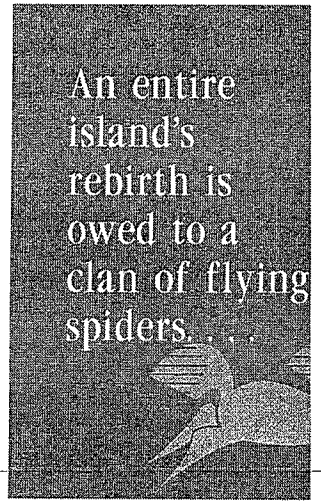
The only one of him by himself was a candid shot. In it, he rides my red cruiser with his hat turned backward. He is a blur of spoked movement and evening shadows. He stands up on the pedals, elbows locked straight to bear his weight. The dimming street looks infinite before him.

"The first living things to recolonize Krakatoa," I read, "were spiders, which ballooned in from neighboring islands twenty-five miles away." I have thought about this feat for days. An entire island's rebirth is owed to a clan of flying spiders, each weighing no more than a piece of lint.

These lightweight creatures shimmied up blades of grass or wildflowers and puffed their chests high like pompous soldiers. They cast a line of silk to the sky, hoping for a breeze strong enough to whisk them away. Some were too heavy, or maybe the breeze was too light. Those climbed a highe blade of grass and spun a few loops, "which lift[ed] in the air like a balloon, and were off, swirling up to the stratosphere where they ping-ponge around.

Back above Krakatoa—actually Rakata, the only volcano on Krakato left somewhat intact after the explosion—the spiders spotted land. The quickly wound up their silk strings, drew in their legs, and floated down t earth.

Belgian biologist Edmond Cotteau was the first to discover one in 1884 six months after "the day the world exploded." He was on a French expedi tion researching the explosion and its effects on the surrounding landscape He was so involved with the mass destruction that he almost missed the tiny eight-legged wonder. It was right before him in a cache between two rocks. He wrote, "This strange pioneer of the renovation was busy spinning its web!"



Oblivious to the ravaged land, the spider found refuge in the pocked rocks. It didn't care about the bulbous pahoehoe, the steaming hotspots, or the stench. Instead, it set up camp on one of the most barren places on Earth and tried to catch a bite to eat. It had only a trace memory of loss.

Nicki held the album page open for a long time. We stared at Brian who was summer-gold and laughing. She smiled to herself and shook her head. "He hatec this picture so much. He said he looked like a kid."

"He looks happy," one of us said.

"If I used this, he'd be so mad." She laughed. "He'd look at me and say 'Babe, what were you thinking?'"

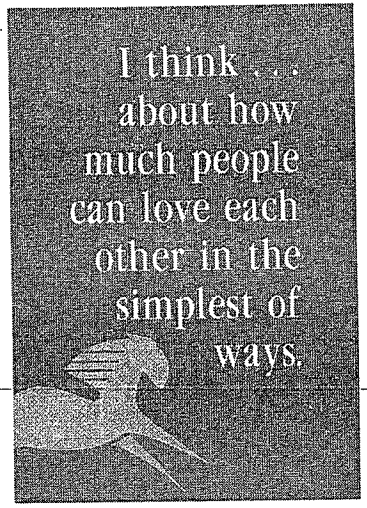
Because she was laughing, we laughed, too.

Laughing, it wasn't such a stretch from crying; it required the same choked breathing, the same galloping shoulders. Sitting around the table with Brian's face tripled on each page, it felt necessary. Nicki's eyes were bright, but her smile seemed loose, genuine.

* * * * *

Sitting here writing this, I feel like a creep. Who am I—where is the line between public and private, grief and exploitation? I reread passages, some of which deal with a pain more than any person should have to bear, and I wonder if it's too soon, if it's something I shouldn't even touch. I think about the isolation of grief; all I want to do is hole myself up in my room and write until I have nothing left to write. Then I would know that I had nothing left to feel. I would be absolved of pain, doused with disinfectant, and wrapped in plastic for future use.

Each night alone and sad in bed, this option seems desirable. The pains in my joints subside just thinking about release. But then I think about the funeral and Brian's family, how they cast a line from the microphone to reel in trace memories, to catch glimpses of his beaming grin. They asked for stories, as many as we could tell and retell. Then they asked for more. The stories starred, grouped to form vague outlines. New constellations graphed themselves across the ceiling, and we mute mourners gazed up at them, awed.



Afterwards, his parents wrapped their arms around me—a stranger whom they had never met—and smiled. They thanked me for coming. His mother squeezed my hand, and the touch reminded me of my mother, who died when I was just a kid.

There is something to this touch. There is something to this telling of stories, this constant constellating, this remembering. Telling stories in order to remember gives the brain a certain flexibility, a forgiving adaptability. This flexibility shapes and reshapes memories. I'm beginning to believe that this is not such a bad thing. Sure, I am glad that I can forget some things, but more and more I want to remember as much as possible. I want my neuron paths to be trampled smooth in order to help stories find their way.

I do not want to set my heart on ice. I do not want to be cocooned s tightly in Saran Wrap that I cannot be opened without sharp scissors. I wan to squeeze a person's hand and wrap my arms around them.

After taking a few calls from my family, I sit back down at the computer I think about mothers and siblings, fathers and grandparents, boyfriends anc nephews—about how much people can love each other in the simplest ways

In my head, I imagine that I am an explorer foraging through a jungle Behind me is a path of beaten plants. Nosing at my heels are images anc memories featuring the people I have loved. Then, bobbing in the branche high above, I spy a tiny balloon carrying a memory of my three friends anc me six months from now.

I stare up at the silk round and pray that it will survive the night, that it will find the trail I have blazed and reappear in six months' time with the ease of a seasoned traveler—a bandanna tied loosely at its neck, a gleam of sweat just visible on its temples.

My projected memory has my roommates and me chattering in the kitchen, preparing our traditional Sunday dinner. There is a certain grace to our movements as we bustle about the cupboards and fridge. Light refracts off the glasses, casting rainbows all over the room. I watch as Nicki tries to catch one with her fingers.

On the table, there is a spread of our favorite foods: salmon, mango salsa, couscous, French-cut green beans garnished with almonds, and a pitcher of cool limeade. The windows are open. I stand at the sink, peeling oranges for dessert, and watch the mountain shake its green skirts to reveal a glimpse of pink, blushing and luminous.

Spring sails through the windows, carrying pollen and tiny insects clutching bits of silk. Outside, the sun shines low, drenching the town in pastel hues. It fills my clothes, clings to my teeth, my eyebrows, my bare arms, and I look down to see an orange glowing in my hands, and I am moved and laughing with the laughter that bubbles from Nicki who is light, light, ebullient, and, yes, we are light, and it is all so beautiful that I will not blink, no, I will not blink, I will see widely and clearly and I will not miss the smallest thing.

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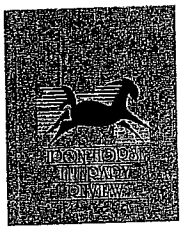

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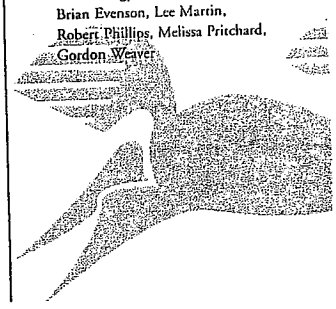

AMY LEE SCOTT recently graduated from Brigham Young University. She lives in Washington, D.C., where she is completing an internship with the Smithsonian American Art Museum, applying for graduate programs, and, of course, writing. Her poetry can be found in the forthcoming issue of *Quarter After Eight.*

She says of "When the World Explodes," "To be honest, I had no intention to write this essay. I was sad and anxious so I just started reading everything—particularly W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*—to take my mind off things. Sebald's empathetic treatment of loss and death helped me to pick through the wreckage of my grief and coax from it a sense of hope and communion; mindless Wikipedia browsing brought Krakatoa and, from there, the ballooning spiders to my attention. After that, everything clicked. The essay tumbled out, and three days later, I found myself staring at my computer screen, dazed and tear-stained, thinking, 'Well, I guess there's this.'"