



THE HOLES IN MARTHA SCHUMACHER

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I'm gazing through layers of acrylic and polycarbonate. And I'm dreaming. Not sleep-dreaming, but daydreaming, the clouds a mirror on my over-stimulated mind. Thirty thousand feet below is Nevada or Arizona.

I sense a pair of eyes, and turn to spot the young black man in 24D smiling at me from across the aisle, not genuinely, but with a squint of hostility, like I'm a smudge on his shirt that draws both his attention and his ire. His upper lip underlines a barely visible mustache, and his deep brown eyes cast off a deceptive twinkle. A moment ago his monologue ignited hysterics in two extremely flirtatious girls behind him, who now rest their chins on the back of his seat, grinning like toddlers, glancing at each other with invisible winks. I turn back toward my window.

The acrylic enfolds hundreds of tiny scratches inside the window, like the hairs of mitochondria. They form faces: my mother and my sister Danielle staring back at me with cracked expressions of love or horror. My brain is up to its old trickery. Since boyhood, I've railed against my natural preference for scientific reductionism by attaching symbolism to the most trivial events. Like when my mother had Penelope killed. The sodium thiopental entering the hound's lungs became

the wind outside my bedroom window; this let me sleep soundly, despite my willful self-deception.

When I blink the scratches shift and settle into new images. Now my mother's lips are parted and she's reciting platitudes of comfort to a friend on the street or an old man in a waiting room. Her hair is freshly dressed, her blush newly applied, and her hands, if I could touch them, would be cold. Danielle's scratch eyes roll back in her head, aghast as always at someone's poor judgment or bad decision that lies outside her petrified point of view. I wipe my palm across the acrylic surface as if I can clear away these scratch-scenes, but they're not merely the temporary ugliness of fingerprints. They're deep, embedded cracks from intolerable pressure.

My glance now pans the aileron, trim tab, and wingtip. I imagine the air molecules flying by, slightly faster over the curvature on top, creating lift. Each molecule is a tiny red dot, forming a wild sandstorm.

I'm flying to the Aerodynamics Systems Accelerator Conference in Anaheim. Rutgers sends me every year, even though my colleagues do the presenting. I enjoy the seminars, but avoid the socializing. I'll partake in an awkward and mutually obligatory drink with my colleagues and then head to my room as early as possible. I wanted to skip the conference this year, but my department chair insisted.

I rise and walk toward the rear of the plane, staring down at worn aisle carpet, blurs of pink and brown and grey faces staring at me from both sides. I'm thankful there's no line for the lavatory and hope no passengers will show up while I do my business. I drop my jeans, sit down on the toilet and rest my elbows on my knees, ready for the painful dance that defecation has become since my surgery. The dissection of my perineum caused a fistula, which, after two unsuccessful attempts, has been deemed irreparable by doctors. If I ever want my new vagina to be functional, it'll require a colostomy bag.

Once I've thoroughly cleaned myself and flushed, I pause to study myself in the mirror. I've avoided mirrors post-surgery, but wonder if plane lavatory lighting can warp my reflection into something bearable. It doesn't. It can't. My face is pale and rough, not the amber complexion most attractive in Caucasians because it indicates a healthy diet of fruits and vegetables. My cheeks are gaunt. The fat around my neck is disproportionate from years of hormone therapy. My shoulder-length hair is dry and grey; I stopped dying it last year. My chin is pointier than I

remember, and it appears to curve slightly toward my left side, breaking the paramount law of beauty: facial asymmetry is associated with genetic mutation and disease.

I try to turn away, but just as a corpse's face can fascinate, my image dares me to linger. This is my physical presence. My fifty-year-old shell. It appears uneven, unhealthy, and infertile. Pathogenic. Biologically speaking, I don't make for an attractive partner. And nobody can mistake me, or any physical part of me, for something resembling that cultural construct we call art. The nicest thing anyone's ever said to me is that I have a beautiful mind.

"Flight attendants, sit down." The captain's intercom voice is urgent and unforgiving. In less than a second, the aircraft sinks, and so does my stomach. I hear a body slam against the bathroom door. Something like silverware crashes outside and I hear a deafening mechanical roar. My backside slams against the bathroom ceiling, and then my face eats the sink. I taste hand soap. My body wants to collapse, but the plane tosses me again. The lavatory's extremely tight, so when I finally come to rest, only a few of my limbs can touch the floor. My torso is resting atop the toilet, which flushes for no reason. The sucking force designed to devour shit and piss reminds me of a childhood fantasy, when I longed to float through the cosmos, destined for a supermassive black hole, giddy and only slightly afraid as I crossed the event horizon. The point of no return. Gravity sucked on my head and blood raced to my skull, my limbs stretched and my trunk bisected, until moments later my flesh disintegrated into a stream of subatomic particles flushed into the hole's core, the singularity, the only point at which infinity exists.

When the plane stabilizes, I rise up and step out of the lavatory. I lift my eyes slowly, reluctantly, expecting ravages. I spot an empty seat, then another. I pan my glance to survey the damage. I find water bottles, phones and other relics strewn about the cabin. No human passengers. Their bodies, at least, have vanished. I presume they've been sucked out of a hole in the plane, but there's no hole, just a sudden drop in air temperature. The cabin is cold, peaceful, but not the disaster scene I expected.

I scurry to the rear attendant's station to find it abandoned. Glass coffee pots have shattered into a thin carpet of ice. I feel my legs sturdy on the floor and the engine's vibration humming in my chest, so I'm not dreaming. I clamber to a window seat and feel reassured by the surrounding beds of cumulus fractus clouds, curled like puffed-up snakes, winking at me as if aware of my predicament. I run to the front of the plane and bang on the cockpit door. No response. Just more air through vents. I turn the knob, assuming it's locked. It isn't. Inside, the pilot's and co-pilot's seats are empty. Through the windshield I spot the silver nose of the jet pointing downward.

We're descending, but not furiously. We're in free-fall, but time has slowed down. The distant sun stretches its rays like arms waving welcome, or bon voyage, or good riddance. I slam the door and poke at my skull to wake up.

I stumble back to my assigned row and recline my seat. I glance outside and find a patch of sky through the clouds. The earth below is invisible; we're too high. The air from my vent is frigid now, almost visible like winter breath. My lips quiver uncontrollably, but not from cold. Maybe a sob of some kind? A sudden belch of emotion.

"Where are we?" asks a voice behind me.

I jump to my feet and swing around. She's standing in the aisle about six rows back. Neither a threat nor a savior, she looks familiar.

Long golden-red hair shines as it sweeps her bare shoulders. She's naked and her breasts are perfect globes, her nipples thick. She has a milky white stomach, wide hips, and soft-looking thighs. Her body is lean and curvy at the same time, not an ounce of flesh misplaced. I study her face and its stunning dimensions. Wide green eyes, the same color as mine. Skin like an adolescent's without the slightest crease as she smiles expectantly. Cheekbones cradle her nose and eyes. She tucks her hair behind one ear, the way I often do, and waits for me to answer.

"Do you know what's happening?" she says. "There's nobody steering the plane."

"Who are you?" I ask. She even has my woolly eyebrows, but on her face they're arched, refined. She places a hand on her hip the way I place mine, and twitches her nose. Like me.

"Where did everyone go?"

She steps forward, waiting cheerfully as if an explanation will come to me. I inventory my mind for common causes of hallucination. Extreme dehydration or heatstroke. Lesions or other irritations of the visual association cortices. Extreme cases of organ failure or brain infection like encephalitis. Acute, extreme onset of schizophrenia.

"Don't think so hard," she says.

Does she know that her instruction is impossible? My mind is incapable of skipping past calculations, of setting analysis aside. Asking me to think less is like asking me to hold my breath.

She's a mirage. I'm dying of thirst, and she's a pool to plunge into. I've seen her before, but never up close. Over the years she's breezed into my life on occasion, ghost-like, often hovering in the distance during my desperate moments, but always preoccupied, never caring to glance at me with a look of kindness the way she is now.

"You're here to show me what I might have been," I proclaim.

She laughs, not in a mocking way. Her teeth shine in a determined ray of sun that's flashing through the cabin.

"You were my fantasy," I say.

"That's nice," she says, absurdly. "Thank you."

"Until I learned that fantasy is a waste of the brain's resources. It leads you nowhere."

"Did you really learn that?" she asks.

I can't discern mockery in her voice, but I sense her question is rhetorical.

"Yes. Reluctantly, I admit."

"Oh," she says, sounding concerned. She bows her head and her hair tickles her breasts. I notice that her pubic hair is strawberry blond, shaped like tiny waves. Aside from these waves, and the mane on her head, her body sprouts no other hairs. Her flesh is white and smooth, without a single unwelcome follicle.

"So, you don't want to be me?" she asks.

"I did." I've offended her. "But I had to give you up. It was inevitable. The more time we spend on earth, one by one, we let our dreams go."

She frowns, half infant, half vixen.

“That’s sad,” she says.

“It doesn’t have to be,” I say, comforting myself. “It’s healthy to let go of your ideals.”

She stares so that I’ll continue. I can tell she wants examples.

“Like my dreams of a Nobel prize, discovering a new galaxy,” I continue. She’s shaking her head, so I change course. “Expecting to feel content every day of your life. To feel like you’re exactly the right person in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. These are just dreams that fade away over time.”

She remains silent. Air screeches into the cabin, as if all the invisible passengers have opened their vents at the same time. I scan the rows around me. The black man’s wallet sits on his seat cushion, abandoned. I concentrate in the direction of 24D, attempting to hallucinate, to bring him back. To bring anyone back. But my mind can’t stay focused with her eyes on me. She doesn’t want them back. She likes being the only two on board.

“If you’re done with dreams, then what is this?” she asks, glancing at our surroundings. She bows like a humble geisha, so I stare at the top of her head, the white line of her scalp parting an ocean of hair. She’s so tender and clean, like a baby, as if nothing *out there* has ever touched her.

“I risked my life for you,” I say. Is my tone accusatory? “They drugged me and brought me close to death so they could stab me and rearrange my insides. I got infections. I got deformities. All to find you, but you never came.”

Of course I never expected to be transformed into this perfection standing a few feet away. I merely hoped for some version of her to gradually replace my most repulsive parts: the knees and thighs, the lips, the hips, maybe the hair.

I collapse back into my seat, and she folds her body next to mine. Her head hangs low, and I think I see a tear in her eye, but it might be my imagination.

“I’m sorry,” she says, almost as a whisper.

I'm apologizing to myself.

I gaze out the window and feel more disoriented. We're descending at a sharp angle, but slowly, methodically. Earth is still nowhere in sight.

"Where are we?" she asks again.

"We're crashing."

"What will happen to us?" she asks, with the expression of an abandoned dog. She too is a victim. I'm the ghost in her ghost story, just as she's the ghost in mine.

We sit calmly side by side. The overhead lights dim, then surge, then dim again, and then black out. We both turn toward the movie screen at the front of the cabin. Pixels flicker, then video streams in. It's a close-up of my five-year-old face.

When the camera pulls back, I recognize the tapestry in the background. My mother bought it in Mexico, but decided she didn't like it, so hung it in my bedroom. I'd pointed out the image of Jesus offering fish to the poor, but my mother said it was just a fisherman with a beard. I'm standing alone, my voice inventing gibberish lyrics to my own spontaneous melody. My little lips are bright pink and my smile is coquettish. I'm a pretty little girl, even though I'm still a little boy. Blue footed pajamas encase my body like a strait jacket. I'm standing on one leg, on the tips of my toes as long as I can. I try to spin, but nearly crash into the full-length mirror. I spin again and this time I stay on point. I giggle at my reflection in the glass. From down the hall my mother's voice calls – "Martin!" – and commands me to stop "prancing around." My smile flees and the room darkens, as if someone has drawn the blinds. I pop my thumb in my mouth and suck it. The image dissolves until the screen goes dark.

She leans in and whispers to me: "You named that dance the Blue Angel. Remember?"

A new scene emerges on screen. I'm standing in front of a white board, "Dr. Martin Schumacher" in bright blue Magic Erase. I'm still a man, but my students have noted my transition. It's the only class I'll ever teach (I asked to be replaced the next morning). Sweat forms soup around my eyes; I regret dyeing my eyebrows the day before. I'm discussing torque. Five minutes into the lecture, I know I can never stand in front of a classroom again. My hand shakes as I draw on the white board, taking my time so I can keep my back turned longer. The

camera pans away from me, revealing one, two, and then six rows of seated undergraduates. They look perplexed and maybe disgusted, not by torque, but by me. They aren't listening to my words, but stare at my hips, the way I'm standing, and my liquefied eyebrows. Several look perturbed, as if my physical appearance is ruining their concentration. A blonde girl in the back row – Jennifer Feeney, I will never forget – strokes her lower lip with her pen. She scrunches up her nose and squints – like the black man in 24D – as if she's detected a foul stench. She shakes her head, undeniably appalled by what she'll be forced to look at for the next four and a half months. Just in time, her face begins to fade, desperately, to black.

In the next scene, I'm recovering in my hospital bed. The handsome surgeon is explaining why they need to keep me longer than expected. I have tears in my eyes, not from emotional pain, but from physical discomfort and a bit of exhaustion. I've been consuming a steady stream of medications and hormone injections, and feel bloated below the waist, like I could tear off my legs for relief. I can think of nothing besides the hole, the second one, which the surgeon unapologetically described as a rare and extreme form of recto-vaginal fistula formed during the dissection process. A hole in the wall between my rectum and my newly-created vagina, through which intestinal fluids, gases and feces can intrude and terrorize. It's become infected, so they'll need to monitor my recovery more closely. I didn't want to admit it at the time, but my new vagina was filled with shit.

Fadeout, and now I'm visiting my mother for the first time post-surgery. Danielle is there too. They didn't visit me in the hospital; I'd asked them not to, which brought them noticeable relief. My mother stands in her foyer, six feet away from me, asking questions about the healing process; my sister just stares, closed-mouthed, almost leaning against my mother for support. I don't know exactly what I expected – or wanted – from them, but it was more than this. Miles Davis purrs in the background. I try to smile hard, to prove that this is a happy occasion, and my mother says something about the hospital's excellent reputation. I catch my sister staring at my mid-section, curiosity at war with repulsion. I finally have to do it. I step forward and lean in to my mother. I need her to touch me, not just look at me. I embrace her, resting my hands on her lower waist, and tuck my face into the peach-scented cradle of her neck. She doesn't speak, but doesn't pull away. The hug lasts at least fifteen seconds; I linger to feel her hands against my back, but they never come. On the screen, I can see it clearly. Her arms hang limp at her sides, without purpose, with no impulse to rest against my flesh. Her hands prefer nothing to something.

The lights come on. I stand up, ostensibly to stretch my legs and inhale the whooshing oxygen.

“I’m sorry,” she says from her seat. Again.

“It wasn’t that bad,” I respond.

I walk the aisle. I need signs of life, some evidence of the human beings who have left me behind. Several suitcases have exploded out of the overhead bins, and a brassiere dangles from a bin handle. On a child’s seat sits a teddy bear, its head too fat to sit up straight. It holds a magic marker in its paw, prepared to draw, but without its human playmate to guide its hand. What happens to a soul ripped from the sky so young? Next to the bear is a book. It’s bound in leather with a floral engraving. I open it. It’s a journal – not a youthful diary with a lock, but a serious canvas for reflection, from the mundane (*I should exercise*) to the profound (*When will it be my time?*). The human mind is selfish and fragile and miraculous.

A few rows back, both lenses are cracked in a pair of Calvin Klein sunglasses. Next is a set of keys on a brass ring, its inscription, “Melinda,” degraded by contact with flesh and sweat. (Inscriptions give us the illusion of permanence.) In the next row, a *People* magazine with happy heroes and celebrities calling out from the cover, their names in large block letters, their tales promising distraction, sublimation, the filling in of blanks. In the very last row, a baby bottle, half full of milk or formula, is tucked between two seat cushions. Its nipple is big and round, coated with the shiny saliva of a baby who won’t have to know the pain of identity.

My eyes catch a flicker of light across the second aisle. It strikes the ceiling, blinking like a beacon from a hidden civilization. I hope for a clue and walk to the source. It’s a woman’s compact, opened to expose a mirror and a spongy, scarlet square with a miniature brush. I pick it up and stare into the reflective glass. I can make out my face through gobs of powder residue. It’s only an image, not my actual flesh. No human has ever seen their own face. We can see reflections or refractions or photographs, but can never directly observe our eyes, ears, smiles, necks. We’re such an advanced and enterprising species, yet true self-observation is still impossible.

The lights fall again. I take a seat as the movie screen displays my image kneeling in a pew. It’s a small Catholic church in a small New Jersey town. I’d driven past it many times but never visited. It’s a Friday morning, and I hadn’t slept the night before, so I called in sick to work. I’d been driving, wandering, seeking, and felt relieved to find the church doors open and the pews empty. I’m startled to hear my own sobbing on the screen, pleading with the symbol of Jesus on

the cross. I'm asking him to end my life. I can't bear it. Every emotion I have is like madness. I only feel more lost since the surgery. I've mutilated my body. And my mind. I've fallen into a hole, so I want to die here. *Please end this*. He's supposed to be infallible. *How could you make such a mistake in me?*

The screen goes black. I stare at the tray table. *Fasten Seat Belt While Seated*. All is quiet. I can feel her eyes on me, and I'm getting used to it.

"I remember everything about that day," she says, having appeared in the next seat.

"You do?" I suppose I should have known. "I remember feeling calm afterwards. It felt like forgiveness. What right did I have to be so angry at God for giving me the wrong body?"

She takes my hand and gazes happily into my eyes. "Martha," she says. My legal name for eight months now.

"I'm not the only mistake He's ever made," I continue. "Birds have *hollow* bones to reduce their weight so they can fly. But He gave bats solid bones. So, birds soar across the heavens while bats flap in the dark."

She's quiet, almost amused by my comparison. She gives a slight nod, as if agreeing that I'm like a bat, and then uses one hand to cover her eyes.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"If you're a mistake," she says softly, "then so am I."

I glance at her cheek, nose, and eye lashes curving outward like stamens. I study her creamy breasts and listen for the life, the pumping and breathing of the precious organ between her legs. And I wonder if she could be.

The lights haven't come back on. The movie screen is dark, and so is the entire cabin. I remain seated, still holding the compact, staring at the tray table. *Life Vest Under Seat*. I feel her head on my shoulder. She rests that way for a few minutes, and then she snakes her arm behind me and pulls me to face her. She smiles through tears. I lean in and hug her with all the arms I have. I begin to speak but she shushes me, and I can feel her smile against my cheek. It's the only togetherness I've ever felt.

Alarms ring and I hear the intercom voice of the flight attendant. She's frantic and faint, miles away. An oxygen mask drops out of the lavatory ceiling, baiting me to lift my body from the toilet and grab it. I hear the screams and babies' cries in the main cabin. We're not far from the ground now. It's coming fast. I consider bolting from the bathroom, but human chaos rules the other side of the door. So, I wait. I close my eyes and strain to feel the stretching of my molecules, up and away, crumbling and dispersing, funneling into the beauty of the singularity, the spring of infinity, where they'll assume a new, fascinating form.

Leon Marks writes fiction that explores crime, identity and the extremes of human nature. His work has appeared in The New Haven Review, The Westchester Review, ThugLit, Typehouse Magazine, Union Station Magazine, and others. He holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Fairfield University and teaches writing and communications at City University of New York. Check him out at www.leonmarks.com.