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Joel Hans

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# Once There was an Upside-Down Girl

## **Abstract**

You arrive and say you walk at night on the milky rivers between stars, at day on the basin of blue, and we don't believe you; we see your feet in the same dirt as our own. You are oriented no differently than we. We don't believe you, but you insist the stars are at your feet and you carry our world atop your head.

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## Once There was an Upside-Down Girl

Fiction by Joel Hans

**Y**ou arrive and say you walk at night on the milky rivers between stars, at day on the basin of blue, and we don't believe you; we see your feet in the same dirt as our own. You are oriented no differently than we. We don't believe you, but you insist the stars are at your feet and you carry our world atop your head. When you ask us to test you, we imagine your falling to be different than ours; how surprised we are to find that when tossed into the air, you fall just as we do. You are full of falling. You fall like you are filled with the opposite of hummingbirds. We love how you fall, how you bleed: down as do our wounds. You walk on the stars, but your organs sag earthward. There is no escaping the below, living or dying. We love how you read the world so wrong, but when you ask us to test you again, we have only one more idea: We hold our scriptures upside-down, the ones handwritten in inks churned out of cacti florets, and you read from them without hesitation. We sit in the dirt, and we listen as though we have never heard our own stories before. We begin to believe we have been wrong all along: our walking, our words, our gravity. When our stories end, you offer a promise: that if we love you and have faith in you we may come to know your beautiful world.

We make adjustments, open eyes askew, live anew. Nevertheless we are filled with worry that it is only a matter of time before you fall into the blue without us. We lose the meaning of life before you, and so we build you a home with a ceiling strong enough that you might never fall through. We restructure our bodies for you, walking

on our hands so that we might know of the soil above and the sky below. Our muscles bloom for you. You: star-skipper. You: laborer of a whole world. We will carry that burden for you. We will carry that burden away from your shoulders. We will carry it on our hands and in the tension of our new muscles, and we will join you in the stars below. We feel such a strangeness when we put our feet back in the soil and walk upon it. We feel lost.

You give us new words, an altered language. We rebuild our nouns for you: our rare downpours become upfloods. Our wide red canyons sutured by washes become soilcomas, the streams themselves belly-filled in the springtime our comets, hurls of water rushing always higher. The flat plains on which we live, where the soilcomas meet and saturate the sand, become soilmaria, like the dark swatches of the moon. New morning colors become skyalluvia, the daytime blue becomes not bedrock but bluerock, the night's black, blackrock. Monsoon clouds become skyrapids. The sun is a magmatic core unsheathed. We do it all because you turn our stars into steppingstars: how we can travel such distances by the echo of your voice against the backdrop of dark. Constellations into walking paths. We say *we're feeling down*, and we smile and we laugh at what used to be.

There are nights you move like the bodies of comets: your smile, the wonder-hue of all eclipses. You say the time is soon, soon, when you will step onto the swinging-by moon and we will follow, your tribe. We do not feel ready—our feet are easily magmaburned, and our heads are eddy with blood. We beg you not to leave us behind when it is time for your going. We are saying: Do not leave us behind. We are on our elbows begging. We have this one solution: You drink our sweet liquors, and with the blackrock beneath us we bind your left ankle with our strongest metal to the floor of the home we built for you. For this, we are sorry, but you have promised us a new life, and we are sorry but this is necessary to ease our worry. We cannot let you leave without us; our shoulders cramp, and our tongues work in spirals. When you cry we tell you *not to feel so up*, and we don't laugh at what used to be because what is now feels heavier. When you cry you make skyriders that learn how to float, and it is all so beautiful. You are so beautiful. You make everything we never had.

But now we have woken to falling, to the moon nearer our feet. We are begging: Why did you not warn us so that we could unshackle you, so that you could fall with us? Explain to us the meaning of all this, how you seem as surprised at our falling, as though you never expected it, and why our voices seem to turn into meteorites and hurtle down toward the blackrock, and how you seem to hear none of them. We are asking: Why do you praise the arrival of our enemies, who are amused by our absence, and why do you ask them to unshackle you? Say anything. Speak speak speak. We are demanding: why you are speaking to them, pointing down to us fallen

into the blackrock; why you let them pull you down onto their shoulders; why you ask them to walk on their hands. Why do you become their queen, as you were to us? Tell us please why they now occupy our homes. We are begging: Feed us another million nouns—perhaps they will float us back to you; perhaps we will consume them like hummingbirds and learn to flutter. We should never have shackled you, yes, and for that we are still sorry. If this is our punishment for not believing you completely, we are willing to take the rise, but we see now that you are no more than a broken-girl trickster with flipped-around vision—your optics read like mirages or mirrors.

The sky is so deep: The faith of you will be forgiven if you only fall. We are learning that we are not a together out here: There is no room between steppingstars for villages, for communities, for lovers. There is falling and the becoming of everything unfamiliar. There is the loss of what it means to be a village, a together. The spaces between one and another grow. There is fear. There is soilmaria far above and always fading. Old worlds rise away to the blue-brown zenith, and old words percolate into every soilcoma: every emptiness a place where blood has trailed up and pooled into comets. There are magmaburned feet and the inability to escape a sensation of falling. Mistakes sound like wind when it has nothing to whistle past. There is no love here, only a body full of falling, vacuums in the shape of hummingbirds, their mouths emptying of pronouns for what used to be: us and we and you, burning up or down in the mesosphere.

Joel Hans is an MFA candidate in fiction at the University of Arizona in Tucson, and the prose editor for *Fairy Tale Review*. His fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *West Branch*, *Redivider*, *Nashville Review*, *Necessary Fiction*, and others. He is also an editor with *Cartridge Lit*, an online literary magazine devoted to literature inspired by video games.