

Spring 2012

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### Recommended Citation

Lineberry, Amanda; Baumann, Mary; Rahman, Nabila; Dannelly, Ryann; B., E.; Crowley, Lean; Figueroa, Lourdes; Lewis-Lockhart, Tiffani; and Branca, Katie (2012) "AN EARTHQUAKE a collection of dissimilar moments," *The Messenger*: Vol. 2012: Iss. 1, Article 55.

Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger/vol2012/iss1/55>

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## AN EARTHQUAKE a collection of dissimilar moments

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# AN EARTHQUAKE

## a collection of dissimilar moments

Not only was it our first class together, but it was also our first class after the earthquake. As our first assignment for our Creative Writing class with visiting professor and distinguished writer, Honor Moore, we had to write, in fifteen minutes, our experience of this event. It was still very fresh in our minds. Even though we had all been on the same shaky ground about forty-seven minutes before, the differences in our stories surprised us as much as the earthquake itself.

When I think of an earthquake, I think action. Ground-shaking, building-crumbling, earth-splitting action. Really though, the climax of my earthquake was the opposite. It was the waiting. Maybe this is because nothing actually happened in my earthquake. Nothing crumbled, no one died. The earth below my feet is all in one piece. The waiting for all of these horrible things to start happening (that never actually happened) was the worst part. I had finished eating some delicious 302-calorie mozzarella sticks in D-Hall with ketchup (because I am just not classy enough for marinara sauce). Leah and I were sitting at a circular table in the center of the middle room. All our other friends had left, the conversation was waning, and I knew we would be leaving any second. Then, I felt it. I stood completely still, a defense mechanism I normally find silly when employed by scared rabbits in my front yard. Nonetheless, I froze. I looked at Leah to see some sort of reaction in her face that she felt it too, that I wasn't crazy. When her eyes met mine, we exchanged a glance of mutual confusion, and then both looked up. Why one would look up when it is the ground below you that is threatening, I do not know, but I froze even more so when I saw the large chandeliers quivering above me. My eyes stayed fixed on them as I listened to my classmates shout in excitement and panic around me. I thought of my mom and my brothers and how I really should move away, far, far away from these quivering chandeliers. And, yet, I waited. I must have waited for at least a minute, but thoughts rushed through me at

an impatient, panicked pace. Part of me wanted to grab my frozen self by the shoulders and shake me. Why am I still waiting?

I never thought I would experience an earthquake, and even now I don't fully grasp the idea. It was on the first day of classes on a beautiful day in August, with no wind, or rain, or warning. The professor had stopped explaining the syllabus turn off the air conditioner because people were complaining of the cold. No more than a minute later and the building was shaking as if a class had just been let out and they were stampeding down the stairs and through the halls. We sat for a minute, unable to understand the fact that this might actually be an earthquake. None of us even knew how to handle this particular natural disaster. The professor asked if maybe we should go outside, so we stood up and left, some of us laughing and some of us sprinting. When we finally escaped the building, the mass of people on the lawns and clustered on the sidewalks essentially verified the earthquake theory and the phone calls from terrified parents began pouring in. Though it was a tried and true earthquake, the gentle shaking of the tables in the room reminded me more of a massage chair at the nail salon and less of a deadly disaster capable of killing millions. Though I am grateful this particular quake has not, to my knowledge, injured anyone, I am most grateful that the professor was too scared to return to the building and we held the remainder of the class outside in the beautiful August sunshine.



I was eating my brie and ham “mini” sandwich, extra mango chutney because what they had was not enough. Outside, because the weather was beautiful. Inside, because we were enclosed in the courtyard. The ground started rumbling, and I thought nothing of it. Construction, we thought, it is believed. Then confusion, because the ground, the walls, the arches, all were shaking. Beautiful, prone, architecture about to fall. Take what’s yours and run away. Laughter because we are glad to be alive. Small earthquake, big feelings. See friends of long away. Laughing, laughing gossip. Wait it out, because he says so. Aftershock, maybe. Wait it out, and see what happens. Long gone, time slips through and we are back again. Back to normal life.

I had been sitting wedged in the middle of the same navy blue plush sofa for thirty minutes. The University of Richmond women’s basketball head coach had been talking to the entire team about the coming season for at least thirty minutes. As usual, I was nervous listening to the head coach. My nervousness was the cause of my statue-like position. Sure, my butt and legs had fallen asleep ten minutes ago, but I did not dare to move.

My coach had been discussing expectations for the season when it all began.

A rumble in the locker room walls started off gently, almost like the distant vibrations of a construction site. I still tried to focus on the voice of our coach, but I could not help seeing out of the corner of my eye something that I knew was not normal.

A picture frame on the wall was shaking. My initial thought was that it looked as if the picture frame was shaking in fear. The comical thought that the picture felt the same as I felt at that moment made me smile slightly.

That was when I started to feel my frozen figure vibrate and the couch rumble, as if I were on one of those expensive massage chairs you see in the mall, but that no one actually dishes out hundreds of dollars to buy.

Just as I was really starting to enjoy my massage, it stopped.

I looked across my body and saw another basketball player gripping her chair with such force that you would have thought its entire wooden frame would shatter at any moment.

At the beginning of my full body massage, our coach had momentarily stopped his speech. But once the shaking ended and he figured out what had happened, he chuckled to himself as someone in the room yelled, “Earthquake!”

I was in my room trying to read before a meeting and the bottle on the bookshelf started to shake. The whole room was shaking, really, and that old Jerry Lee Lewis song – A Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On – came to mind. This room shakes too much. I should go smoke. Wait, rooms aren’t supposed to shake. Maybe I should let my boss know – if those bottles on the bookshelf break he’ll think there was a party in here. But there’s no party without music, we ain’t fakin’. Anyway, it’s not even 2pm. The sun is still out. Is it laundry? Christ, that’s a lot of laundry. Oh shit, it’s an earthquake, isn’t it? I just trained for this. If the bottles would stop shaking I could focus. In the blue binder by my bed there’s a piece of paper, cut in half, that says “In the event of an earthquake something something something.” Call a number? Go to the basement? No, that’s dumb – in an earthquake buildings fall from the bottom somehow. I’ll just leave. I’ll just stay away from trees and maybe never come back. I have to come back for class, okay, but I’ll still leave and if anyone asks I’ll say I was at D-Hall. I just go around the back and walk back to the hall – there are people outside that will have seen me coming back but not leaving. That’s perfect. It’ll be like I was gone the whole time.

I was lost again, looking for Ryland. Of course I was late because I had spent too long chatting in the dining hall, and of course I was lost because Richmond is confusing with all the buildings and courtyards that look the same. Eventually I did find my class, and I made sure to make good use of my voice to say “sorry”, so they would know I was international and think that my lateness was ok.

Around two we had a bit of an interruption. There was a really loud



noise that was shaking the building a little. "What the bloody hell is that?" I said to myself, thinking those people upstairs were a bit rude and couldn't drag those tables a bit quieter. Then it got a little louder, and when I say a little, I mean a lot. I was sitting there a bit confused, wondering why they dancing for upstairs. Bit strange, I didn't know they had a place for that in this building. Everyone else was chatting, and someone told me that this building was old and it was the air conditioning. Oh that explains it, but it didn't really because then, why was everything shaking, and now that noise was getting louder, and it was a noise I'd never heard before, and now my chair was having a bit of a rattle too. I still didn't think anything was really wrong. But my professor looked at me and said that we do get earthquakes here in Virginia. Earthquakes? No, not really, this couldn't be an earthquake. Where's the split in the floor that you fall into? But then I stopped questioning it and I got a little scared. The professor said we should go outside.

Outside it wasn't shaking anymore, and I think the earthquake had stopped. This is where the funniest thing I observed happened. We grouped for a second and then everyone was on their iPhones. First of all, how did everyone have iPhones. And secondly, they weren't on the iPhones to confirm the earthquake, but to facebook and text. So outside everyone was texting, and facebooking, and I was just having a look around because I had nothing else to do. There were files of people coming out of the buildings, and teachers from others classes came over to tell us that indeed it had been an earthquake. A real earthquake. I had been in a real earthquake in America. Now this was something really different to write home about.

The earthquake was the silliest thing that happened all day. I was in my Art History class, Art of Japan, thinking that I wanted the professor to be my grandfather, even though I already have a grandfather. And then my desk started moving. My first thought was that there was some construction going on in the room right below. But the motion did not stop, it kept going. I could feel myself smiling as I

saw the three girls sitting in front of me holding each other's hands and about to cry. Their eyes glassy and the tears wanting to fall. But they didn't. The window shutters were drawn and they moved along with the vibrations of the building, allowing the light from outside to come into the room in fast-paced intervals.

The professor was still talking, explaining how earthquakes were very common in Japan. His voice remained serene. Secretly, I think he was enjoying it as much as I was. His calm voice was preventing anyone from running out of the classroom. The window shutters were flapping against the windows and the loose nails in the desks were hitting against the iron. But my professor kept on talking about Japan as I thought, this earthquake is not as bad as the one we had back home that afternoon I was with my grandfather.

When the earthquake happened, part of me, a larger part than I'd like to admit, thought it was a really well timed special effect. When I have one of my many daydreams I imagine my life as a movie or book or TV show with all the artifice and plot contrivances that go with it. It was just too perfect. I hadn't missed much despite being late for my philosophy class. I had only skimmed the reading the professor had sent so I was glad we were staring with an exercise that had nothing to do with it: "Write one philosophical question and one scientific question." After we'd finished, we were told to explain why we assigned the question as such. We only got to one girl. There was the beginning of a lively discussion that I had no intention in taking part of. She said something about her scientific question being scientific because it dealt with facts. Just the sort of mistake the professor was waiting for. Like a cop or a lawyer on a cornered criminal, the professor's words seemed to dance and entrap until finally she ended with, "Are you trying to say there are no FACTS in philosophy?" The roomed rumbled. I thought it was thunder. My God, I thought. It's like she did that with her mind. Though as it continued, it became less dramatic and more bizarre. Thunder doesn't last that long, or cause the ground to shake. We were more confused than scared. "Guys, this is an earthquake," someone finally said.

“It’s like we pissed off the gods of philosophy.” Which I decided was much cooler than my thought. We did nothing until someone told everyone to get out of the building. And suddenly life was disappointing again. No cool dramatic timing or the beginning of a grand adventure. Just a thing that happened that lead to awkward small talk outside. And we didn’t even get out of class.

I was pushing the cubes of honeydew melon around my plate thinking of something I could say. Dear Michael, what a guy, had brought two friends to our lunch date and I was having trouble adapting to the manliness of the conversation. They were saying something about alcohol. I popped a cube into my mouth, and just as soon, had to spit it out. “Jesus, D-Hall,” I said, poking at the rest of the melon in the bowl. The fruit was rock hard.

Then, our drinks were shaking, and all of us were at a loss for words. Wide-eyed, we whipped around to scan the room and found that everyone else was doing the same. Forks clanged onto tables and trays as we watched, waiting for a hint at what to do. Then, a distressed staffer, bucket and rag raised overhead, shrieked for her supervisor. “Help! Quick!” We ran.

Another staffer: “Whose got a smart phone?”

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