

## Phantom Limb

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### Poem

There's a place in the brain for everything,  
Even a missing, of all non things,  
though you might wonder where it fits, and how.  
Anyway, mine, when it still lived in the neighborhood,  
was a good limb.  
Brain—hereafter I—couldn't complain,  
wasn't one of those neglected parents  
whose children only call when they need a favor:  
money or to take the baby for the weekend.  
Whenever it felt a pants leg sliding over, it would call.  
When it kneeled to pray or look under a table  
for a fumbled pill or quarter, it would call.  
When it rubbed, luxuriously, against a woman's thigh  
or felt her hand, it would call and call.  
Whatever time it was, often very late at night,  
but I didn't mind.  
He was my limb, after all.  
I wanted him to be happy.  
You could say, his happiness was mine.  
But it wasn't all honey and roses.  
He'd call when he fell and twisted,  
scraped or gashed a knee or ankle.  
Or when someone kicked or something bit him.  
I could have done without those calls.  
I'm empathic, overly identified, as parents are.  
They hurt. But it comes, as they say, with the territory,  
and I accepted.  
And then the night of the explosion,  
when it rang and rang.  
It had never rung so loud or often,  
but however many times I picked it up,  
tried to calm him,

assure him, as parents do, it would be all right,  
even when they know it isn't,  
it kept ringing.  
As if he couldn't hear me.  
Until it stopped.  
I was sick with worry, as you can imagine.  
Tried for a while to call him.  
Knew the number well and called and called.  
Every time of the day and night,  
thinking somehow I'd find him home.  
But I never did.  
Then one day, out of nowhere,  
the phone rang and it was him, with terrible news.  
More and more often. Always with terrible news.  
It made no sense.  
He was gone, nowhere to be found or seen,  
but he was calling.  
Like one of those fugitives,  
hunted by the mob or the police,  
calling from a deserted field or highway in Nebraska  
to tell his wife, worried to distraction,  
he was hurt, in pain, but still alive.  
I was of two minds about these calls, as you can imagine.  
On the one hand, it was reassuring to know  
he was still there somewhere, even if he wasn't.  
On the other, he never had anything good to say.  
Never a kind or pleasant word.  
Only bad news. Pain.  
And overwhelming both, more powerful than either,  
the mystery.  
Being a brain part,  
I find the unexplained fascinating sometimes.  
Enjoy the challenge.  
But this defied all reason,  
stymied every query, theory or surmise.  
Until I read somewhere—now get this—  
the phone wires cheeks and lips and noses use  
to call when they kiss or hurt or tickle,  
had crossed with his.  
Moved in rather, where his, figuring there was no use,  
no point, now that he was gone, moved out.

Nice of them, in a way, I guess.  
They probably thought they were doing us a favor,  
helping us get back in touch after all that time.  
But if all they can tell me is,  
it's like a dagger in the thigh, a long thick needle  
through the calf or ankle,  
I know it's cruel for a parent to speak this way,  
but I'd just as soon not hear.  
It's worst, of course, when the face is touched.  
And as anyone who knows about loss can tell you,  
there's nothing quite so painful as a kiss.