

# BROKEN WATERS

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Julieta Vitullo

Glass basins crowded the narrow space. Gentle humming and occasional beeps originated from the few that were occupied. An almost pleasant scent mingled with the harsher smell of disinfectant that filled the hospital, the lamps in the ceiling shedding a softer light than the fluorescent tubes I'd become accustomed to. Small bodies wrapped in white cloth rested in the concave immensity of their transparent wombs. The body inside the basin closest to me had no cloth around it, just a diaper barely visible through the tangle of cables that criss-crossed from the machines like eels nesting in a cave. "Say goodbye to Eliseo before we proceed," the doctor had said minutes before.

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Ten years later, in early 2017, just before my forty-first birthday, I stumble across a piece in a 2011 issue of *The New Yorker* written by Francisco Goldman, a novelist and journalist of Guatemalan and Jewish-American origins. The piece, titled "The Wave," is a memoir about the death of his wife, Mexican writer Aura Estrada. The name rings a bell; I'd come across it before somewhere. I Google 'Aura Estrada' and soon arrive at the website of *Boston Review*, and remember where I'd seen her name: a literary prize established *in memoriam* of this promising Mexican writer. I read the biography provided on the webpage. Her life span is short, so much so that she was born a year after me and has been dead for almost a decade already: Aura Estrada, 1977-2007. Her picture shows a girl smiling to the camera, head slightly tilted, glossy cheeks. I feel a heightened version of the curious sensation I get in my stomach whenever I learn about the death of my contemporaries. The webpage directs me to one of her pieces. A certain disposition in her words reminds me of my younger self. Overcome with the morbid curiosity that possesses us when we learn someone died too soon, I Google her name again.

I discover that Aura was born on April 24th, four days before me; she had begun a PhD in the Spanish department at Columbia, at the same time I started mine at the Spanish department at Rutgers; she had come to the U.S. on a Fulbright, as I did; she used to take the subway at the Borough Hall station in Brooklyn to go to school in Manhattan, the same station I used countless times to get to my job at a farmer's market during my summers off; she was a prolific and precocious writer, as was I until I let academia beat it out of me; she distrusted the cynicism academics felt towards fiction and knew that she wanted to be a writer above all, so she started an MFA at Hunter while she continued her PhD (I never had the courage to do that but some days I wish I had); she had a toaster that branded each piece of bread with a Hello Kitty logo (how cool is that?). I

learn many of these things through the *The New Yorker* piece written by her widower, Francisco Goldman. The piece is an adaptation from Goldman's autobiographical novel/fictionalized memoir *Say Her Name*, which I check out from the library.

Goldman tries to make sense of the tragedy by describing how he and Aura first met: twenty-two years her senior, he fell for her immediately. She moved into his apartment in Brooklyn. Eventually he proposed, and they got married. They wanted to start a family, but one day, while they were vacationing together at a beach in Mexico, Aura was killed by a wave.

Aura was not a surfer, although Goldman mentions the surfing lessons they took in Puerto Escondido the same weekend he proposed. While she and her husband were spending their vacation in Mazunte, on the west coast of Mexico, Aura attempted to body surf the wave that killed her.

I was a surfer for most of my teenage years and part of my early youth. The wave that didn't kill me I had decided *not* to surf while spending my vacation with my then-boyfriend in Pichilemu, on the Chilean coast when I was seventeen. I never wrote about it because it scared me too much to think back on it. But if Goldman could write about Aura's killer wave, how could I not write about my merciful one?

After studying the behavior and size of the waves for several days, I finally felt brave enough to venture in. With my bodyboard under one arm (I wasn't experienced enough with the surfboard), I measured the distance between the shoreline and the white foamy crests adorning the otherwise uniform smoothness of the water: The smell of putrefying seaweed and the frigid temperature of the water pumped more courage into my veins.

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## **Water surged down my throat, salty and cold, as the breaking wave tossed me around like a discarded piece of litter.**

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Waves about ten feet high crashed and curled at the surf zone—a small size for that beach, so going in didn't seem dangerous. But as I approached the sandbar a hundred meters off the coast, the waves revealed their true form: moving mountains, ephemeral and timeless and high above my head. Their gravitational pull made it clear that I could no longer change my mind; I kicked my flippers frantically in a bid to stay ahead of them.

But then a huge wave approached, faster than the others. I let go of my bodyboard, curved my spine like a cobra, and kicked as hard as I could, squinting against the glare of the sun bouncing off the yellow bodyboard into my eyes. I glanced behind: the wave had swollen so high that climbing it had become an impossibility, and it was too late to get away. The wave crashed upon my back with the mighty power of its everlasting waters, pushing me under.

Water surged down my throat, salty and cold, as the breaking wave tossed me around like a discarded piece of litter. I felt the roughness of the seabed on my face and heels. I wondered if I would make it out alive.

I raised my head out of the water and saw that I was now much closer to the coast. I felt the wave retreating, depositing me in a flatter, less bloated, drier place. “Mamááááá!” I yelled in a primal scream.

Why did that wave forgive me? Why did Aura’s wave not forgive her, instead breaking her spine? Why did my water break when I was six months pregnant with my son Eliseo? Why was life so unforgiving to him?

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Eliseo’s story starts, of course, with his mom. Me. Me who decided to go to spend a week in some remote islands in the South Atlantic following two years studying the Argentine fiction produced in the aftermath of the Malvinas/Falklands War, and wishing to see the islands with my own eyes. I intended to write an epilog in the form of a travel narrative to finish my doctoral dissertation, and requested a grant to go to the islands. Shortly after reaching Port Stanley, a town of 2,000 people on the island of East Falkland, 300 miles off the coast of Argentina, I met Carlos and Dacio, two Argentine ex-combatants who had returned to the archipelago after twenty-five years. I asked if I could follow them around with my DV camcorder and record their journey. We spent the entire week together. Carlos and I got close.

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In *Say Her Name*, Goldman describes the agony of the day and a half or so that followed his wife’s accident until her death. Goldman’s story keeps me in a state of bewilderment. Every few pages I find a piece of anecdotal evidence that makes me believe our lives are inexplicably linked. As these anecdotes mount up, it’s hard to ignore their... should I say calling? How many Latin American women born between 1976 and 1977 came to the New York/New Jersey area on a Fulbright to do a PhD in Spanish, were informed by a Peruvian professor in their admission interview that they were getting a full scholarship for their graduate studies, discovered Oscar Wilde at age thirteen, vacationed at the beach in Tulum, dated older men, enjoyed the sea, bought a Cuisinart ice cream maker, loved *dulce de leche* and hosting dinner parties for friends, went to Cuba in their early to mid-teenage years, listened to Charly García, Soda Stereo, Pixies, The Smiths and Bjork, had hundreds of unfinished stories within the labyrinth of folders in their MacBooks and a childish attachment to an everyday object with a pop culture character in it? (While Aura grew fond of her toaster that branded the bread with a Hello Kitty logo, I became attached to a notebook with pictures of Wonder Woman given to me for my thirtieth birthday).

I’m comforted to learn about the similarities of the grief process of a person I never met and probably never would have, but the more I read, the more bewildered I become; the more I relate to the mourner, the closer I feel to the mourned. Why is life so unfair

and arbitrary? Why are some of us doomed to an early death? What if I *had* crossed paths with Aura? We must have been at the same conferences at the same time, known the same people. I suspect my advisor at Rutgers, who later moved to Columbia, may have also been Aura's. Did Aura and I ever meet?

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Goldman cites entries from Aura's diaries as if trying to figure out parts of her that he didn't know—parts, in fact, that he wouldn't have known if it were not for her death which had led him to open her diaries.

In the almost ten years that I had my Wonder Woman notebook sitting on a shelf by my desk, I peeked at it only a few times, each time closing it right away, either bored by the painstaking detail with which I described life in an obstetric intensive care unit, or dismayed by the optimism and sense of humor I expressed in all the days leading up to Eliseo's short life. I read my notebook again and fail to recognize some of the anecdotes inside. Instead, I see clearly in my mind other stories of those days.

At the hospital in Buenos Aires I stayed in a room with seven other women dealing with complicated pregnancies of various levels of severity. I must have seen at least thirty women come through there during my four-week stay—the longest in the whole unit. I joked that I had become an “obstetrics intensive care unit veteran,” as everything during those months seemed to refer to the topics of my doctoral dissertation: epic narratives, nationalism, war, veterans. The women would leave as soon as their cases ceased to require hospitalization due to their conditions improving or their babies being born or dying. As soon as patients left, new ones would arrive so that all eight beds were occupied constantly.

A fifteen-year-old girl in a twenty-week pregnancy with premature rupture of membranes lay in the bed opposite mine. The danger of having an open amniotic sac is that bacteria can come in and create an infection, which may be life-threatening for both the fetus and the mother. With an open sac and the constant loss of amniotic fluid, the fetus is unable to develop. Even if drugs can prevent premature labor and the pregnancy can get close to full term, the baby may not form normally. It's like baking a cake for the right amount of time but at too low a temperature. The acronym for this young woman's condition, which was the same one in which I found myself at twenty-seven weeks, is, in Spanish, RPM: *Ruptura Prematura de Membranas*. I discovered that both she and I were being referred to as the RPMs by the doctors and the residents—no name, no last name, only a synecdoche that explained us. The young woman talked about the baby in the future tense, as if she thought it would be born and continue to live. I felt sorry for her and her deception. I wondered why nobody had told her that with a breakage in the mother's waters at that stage the fetus doesn't stand a chance.

Diagonally across from my bed lay a woman whose two-year-old son was battling brain cancer at a different hospital. When I found out the son's story directly from her I didn't know what to say. What I didn't know either is that soon people would not know what to say to me.

One morning I woke up and felt an emptiness. I looked across my bed to the right and

she wasn't there. The nurse told me the woman's son had just died. They had discharged her so she could attend the funeral.

For a couple weeks, I had the company of a woman in the bed next to mine. She was a hypertensive mother of five and spoke softly, her dark skin and hair glowing. Every day the doctors would tell her, "You need to stop getting pregnant. You and your husband have no money to feed the kids and your pregnancies will always be high risk." She'd turn to me after they were gone and shrug. "I just love having babies," she'd say, "It's the one thing I can choose to do." When she vacated her bed, a younger, loud, jittery woman came to take her place. A diabetic, she insisted on regulating her sugar lows by having Coca Cola and *alfajores* (Argentine chocolate-covered mini cakes filled with *dulce de leche*). The sudden burst of carbon dioxide releasing from the bottle and the crinkling of her wrappers would startle me awake at nap time. The doctors tried to explain that spikes in her sugar levels put the baby in danger, becoming exasperated every time she insisted that some Coca Cola and a bite of *alfajor* were the way to go. Sometimes the exchanges turned to screaming contests.

These poor or lower middle-class women didn't have a prepaid health plan. They would end up in this city hospital in the middle of a fancy neighborhood, a rundown building filled with top-notch doctors and students from the state university medical school. Those prestigious doctors split their time between two worlds: half their week they worked in decrepit facilities like this one, caring for low income patients and training the future generations of doctors; the other half they worked in private hospitals or their own practices. They weren't sure how to treat me because I was light skinned, highly educated and, like them, a middle class *porteña* (the name for the people of Buenos Aires). They'd raise their eyebrows at the mention of my PhD studies back in the U.S., and the rumors of a trip to the Falklands and an ex-combatant baffled them. In contrast, the darker skinned nurses and orderlies lived in some of the same neighborhoods the patients came from. Most of them treated me harshly at first, irritated by the privilege imprinted in my skin, but eventually grew fond of me.

I hold my diary at arm's length and take a peek at random pages:

June 11th, 2007: I must keep a diary while *Big Brother* watches me from the TV. The nurses refuse to turn it down. My life isn't a reality show.

June 12th: The hospital's Doppler isn't working so the scheduled ultrasound has to be postponed.

June 14th: It's the 25th anniversary of the end of the Malvinas War, "Liberation Day" for the islanders. But Eliseo keeps battling! My mom's friend came yesterday and told me that she sees *un aura blanca*, a white aura, around me, and that's supposed to be a good sign.

June 20th: National Day of the Flag. *Sé fuerte, renacuajo*, Be strong, polliwog.

Find this on page four of *Say Her Name*: “Axolotls are a species of salamander that never metamorphose out of the larval state, something like polliwogs that never become frogs.”

In the same section Goldman writes about the time he and Aura went to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris in search of the axolotls. Aura had recently discovered Argentine writer Julio Cortázar’s short story, “Axolotl,” about a man who is obsessed with these strange looking creatures and goes to Paris’ main botanical garden every day to watch them swim until one day he becomes an axolotl. Being an Argentine, I came to know Cortázar’s story earlier in life than Aura, and being reminded of it makes me think about a creature I haven’t thought of in a while: *renacuajo*, polliwog, which is what I had nicknamed Eliseo.

That line in my diary of the weeks at the hospital, “*Be strong, polliwog,*” throws this memory back at me as if to say, “This is what you called Eliseo before he was born: Have you forgotten all these years, too busy getting on with your life? Has becoming stepmother to another child, who is about to turn ten just like Eliseo, made you forget? Does being a mother to another child of your own, one who was also born premature but healthy and without complications, make you forget what you used to call Eliseo?”

Halfway into Goldman’s book I learn about the novel that Aura was writing during the last year of her life, tentatively called *Memoirs of a Grad Student*. Her protagonist, a young Mexican woman pursuing her PhD in Literature in New York, is named Alicia. I recognize the gesture of the writer who chooses an alter ego whose first initial is her own: Aura/Alicia. It’s not an unusual device for writers to choose but I’ve always found it to be somewhat amateur. I did the same in the novel I finished writing recently. The main narrator of my story is called Jimena and she shares some things in common with me; for example, that she studied literature and lives in a town in the Puget Sound that resembles the town where I live. Jimena receives a letter from an old acquaintance, Blanca, and tries to trace back the story of her life. To some extent, Jimena is to me what Blanca is to Jimena: a double, a shadow, a subject of our imaginations. On the next page of *Say Her Name*, I discover that in Aura’s novel, Alicia’s mother, who would presumably be based on Aura’s mother Juanita, is called Julieta.

I happen to be reading this on April 24th, which turns out to be Aura’s birthday. She’d be turning forty. Happy birthday, Aura. You’ve been dead for almost ten years. Next July, when I go to the beach and send paper boats out to the sea in my yearly ritual in memory of Eliseo, I will send some out for you too.

Aura	Aura
Alicia	Blanca
Julieta	Aura blanca
Jimena	

Some other place in the book, I read about the time when, after Aura's accident, Goldman, walking in his Brooklyn neighborhood, saw an old lady standing at a corner waiting for the light to change. He realized that Aura would never get to grow old and look back on her life. This image is like "a silent bomb," Goldman writes.

After I left the hospital, I couldn't stand the sight of a baby. Only a few weeks before Eliseo's death I would walk next to store windows and check out the reflection of my belly, a very modest profile, as the bump never got to be too prominent. After his death I would cross to the opposite sidewalk whenever I saw moms and babies approaching, and would avoid parks and certain areas of the neighborhood where the baby density is high—minefields of silent bombs. Thoughts of the injustice inflicted upon Eliseo and me crowded my mind.

As the days and weeks went by, the older babies were the ones I was most bothered by. I felt no tenderness towards them. Mostly I felt rage. I would never get to hold him, or nurse him, or dress him in the cute orange, green, yellow, blue trendy clothes given to me at my baby shower (a group of my mom's friends who worship all things American threw an early baby shower for me a few days before I ended up in the hospital, not long before I was scheduled to return to the U.S.). I would never teach him how to peel an orange (I had become particularly interested in the notion that a kid needs to know how to peel his own orange, and this image turned into an obsession). I would never get to push his swing or read him a story at night. I would never teach him how to catch a wave or he would never get to teach me. I would never pick him up from school like those moms who stood at the school gates as I walked by, waiting for their kids to get out while they waved their cigarettes in the air and bitched about their stressful lives.

What hits me the hardest when I first read "The Wave," and then again, as I devour *Say Her Name*, is when Goldman writes about the optimism he felt while they were flying Aura out of Oaxaca to a hospital in Mexico City, her vital signs seeming to improve. He goes on to describe how the optimism vanished right after they landed and Aura's vital signs started to decline. "Now I can't say whether I am grateful for those last moments of hope and relief, or whether I feel that we were cruelly deceived," he writes. Although I know from the start that the story ends on a tragic note, I can't help but feel hopeful when it seems that Aura's condition could improve. It's easy to forget that I'm reading a memoir. But am I really? The book cover doesn't say it's a memoir, but neither does it say it's a work of fiction. The jacket explains that the things Goldman narrates happened to the writer Francisco Goldman. Yet the more we get into the story, the more the borders between fiction and reality start to blur. To me, Aura and Goldman are at times literary characters floating over a dubious fog of reality, and other times real people drifting through a magical and unsettling fictional realm. Therein lies the profound truth of their story.

I am crushed when I learn that Aura had two heart attacks the night at the hospital in Mexico City, and that she entered a coma and died on July 25th, 2007.

Twenty days before that, on July 5th, Eliseo was born and I was finally allowed to walk and roam around the facilities I had only glanced at briefly when I was admitted on a cold and moonless night a month before. With my freedom regained, the first noises of the morning echoing in the long, gloomy hallways of the hospital were a pleasant reminder that life existed beyond the walls of the intensive care unit where I had stayed. Despite that fact that I was pregnant and not ill, all I had been allowed to eat was an insipid rotation of low-fat chicken broth with overcooked vegetables and, on the lucky days, gooey mashed potatoes with a shoe-sole-type of steak—a real affront in the land of beef. My mom would bring me salads and other dishes loaded with nutrients, but the nutritionist on staff had gotten it in her head that raw vegetables were bad for me. I craved junk food and caffeine, so that morning I told my sister to head down to the cafeteria with me. I glanced at the menu and picked a ham and cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee, feeling bold and mischievous. Two dry, thick, semisweet pieces of bread enclosing a single bit of cheese and a suspiciously greenish slice of ham stuck to my palate but I was in Heaven. I chugged down the coffee, set the plates aside and took a nail file out of my pocket. “I’ve been wanting to do this for days,” I told my sister while I filed my nails on the Formica tabletop. I had written in my red Wonder Woman notebook: “I must file my nails so I won’t scratch Eliseo when I hold him.”

I never held him.

When I returned upstairs to the intensive care neonatology unit, the echoes of my incursion into the real world still resonating in my ears, a doctor approached me. I didn’t like the look on her face. “Things aren’t going well,” she said. “Eliseo can’t breathe on his own. He has developed a hyaline membrane disease, common in premature infants, and is in respiratory distress. We’ll keep working on him for a little longer. But at this point you need to know that, even if he makes it, he could turn out blind or severely disabled.” My heart sank.

How long was a little longer? Who cares if he turns out to be disabled? I just wanted him to live.

I know now that I had been holding on to an unfounded optimism despite the discouraging statistics that doctors had repeatedly cited throughout those weeks. But who thinks about life in terms of statistics?

When I first started having complications early in the second trimester of my pregnancy, my mom had told me that everything would be fine: we’d already had the death of a baby in the family when my sister Carola died at the age of eighteen months. “Fate has more mercy than that. It’s happened once to us already and it won’t happen again,” she said.

She was wrong.

How could I dare think of having coffee and filing my nails as if my son weren’t dying just a few flights up the stairs?



During that week in the Falklands in December of 2006, I shot ten hours of raw footage: interviews and casual conversations with the two ex-combatants, Carlos and Dacio; a long walk from the town to the old airport where they had been sent on April 2nd of 1982, twenty-five years earlier; a visit to Mount Two Sisters, where they spent most of their time waiting for the enemy to attack and watching other eighteen-year-old conscripts like themselves succumb to British artillery; the candid moments of drinking beer at the end of a long day, or dancing with a couple of drunken British soldiers in their barracks.

Despite the lack of proper mics, the wind howling almost relentlessly, and my often-shaky hand, there was real magic in this footage, so much in fact that it ended up playing a big part in the documentary *La forma exacta de las islas* (*The Exact Shape of the Islands*), which I made with my friends Edgardo and Daniel five years later, in 2012. The film was first thought of as the story of the two ex-combatants in the aftermath of the Falklands War, but it quickly changed into the story of me as a single mother-to-be, a researcher and a PhD student in the aftermath of my trip. Eventually we had to discard all the materials in which I spoke, pregnant and happy, about the exciting new situation I had found myself in after my trip. We rethought the movie completely. That required a second trip to the islands, in 2010, with an entire film crew. This time around, it was *my* return to the islands. In the end, *The Exact Shape of the Islands* is the story of those islands fought over by different powers, the grief and trauma of the ex-combatants, and my own grief and trauma.

There's only one scene in the entire footage where I film myself. I'm dancing in front of a mirror, Carlos behind me. This moment arrives shortly after Carlos shares with my camera the experience of one of the soldiers in his platoon dying in his arms. His name was Ramón Orlando Palavecino. He was from the northern Argentine province of Chaco and was eighteen like Carlos. The mirror scene is how the film, in its temperance and restraint, shows that Carlos and I became involved. The audience is given enough clues to figure out that Carlos is Eliseo's father. The film communicates nothing else about our involvement, nothing explicitly intimate or sexual, because everyone knows how babies are made, sometimes deliberately, sometimes fortuitously. Sometimes they are made out of love and the desire to build a family, sometimes because two people counter Thanatos—the death drive, the drive of destruction and annihilation, the drive that century after century has made it possible for adults to send their kids to die in wars—with Eros, the sex drive, the life-producing drive, the survival drive, a drive able to duplicate the world as a mirror does.

I never talked to Carlos after Eliseo's death. I don't know how he experienced all of this: re-signifying a place of loss by conceiving a life in it, only to later lose that new life. I know that he was ecstatic when, back in New Jersey a month after my trip ended, I told him on the phone that my immediate worries had been confirmed and I was pregnant. Around

that time, we still talked on and off. But I had begun to cut ties and change the tone of our relationship because on the very last day of the trip, just as we were about to embark on our return flight, Carlos' friend Dacio had told me something: Not only was Carlos not single, as he had led me to believe during that whole week, but he had six children and a wife waiting for him back home.

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Several people came by the hospital to visit me that July 5th. At the beginning, I received happy faces—eyes and smiles celebrating the arrival of a new life into the world. But as the situation rapidly switched, those features became tense—eyes and smiles attending a funeral.

I can never remember for sure who visited and who didn't. A friend from high school, Sebastián, visited a few days before the birth, and yet my memory places him there by my bed in the haze of the hours *after* Eliseo's birth. We weren't close as teenagers, though we had a lot in common. He showed up in the hospital as a surprise after finding out through a mutual friend that I'd be stuck there for an uncertain amount of time. He brought me a clip light that I used to read after the 10 o'clock curfew. I saw Sebastián once more and for the last time at a concert in a small neighborhood venue after I came out of the hospital. He gave me a CD of the band that played that night, *Pequeña orquesta de reincidentes*, which he knew well and I was seeing for the first time. I still have the CD but I can't listen to it because it hurts; less than two years later, he hit his head on a rock while surfing in Brazil and died. His wife had been expecting a baby.

I know for certain that one of my mom's girlfriends, the same one who said she saw my *aura blanca*, was there on the 5th. She told us she had a psychic friend who was able to predict outcomes by working with a pendulum. The friend provided my mom's friend with some over-the-phone advice and said that, according to the pendulum, everything was going to be alright. He didn't think the name Eliseo was a good idea though: "Too heavy! That baby needs something lighter." Her friend, of course, had no idea what my reasons were for picking that name. I had thought of it because of a poetry book the author of which, Mario Montalbetti, had given me months before while I was touring university campuses interviewing for jobs, secretly pregnant. The book is titled *Llantos Elíseos*, which literally means "Elysean Cries" but also resembles the words Campos Elíseos/Champs Elysées. Montalbetti had dedicated the book to his son Eliseo, who was a baby when Montalbetti started writing it. Several of my own friends had opposed the choice on grounds that the name, which is pretty unusual, reminded them of a corny and uncool movie director of my parents' generation. But the more people resisted the name, the more I defended it.

My pregnancy had become an open forum for friends from North to South America and either side of the Atlantic. Facebook wasn't quite a thing yet so this was all happening by phone, email and live conversations. Eliseo had been claimed as *El bebé del pueblo*, the

People's Baby and, given that I had no partner with whom to share the joy, I was okay with over-sharing the main events of my life with the masses.

Desperate to cling to hope as Eliseo's condition became more unstable, I followed my mom's friend-of-a-friend's advice and wrote the name "Valentín"—"strong and brave," yet light enough—next to "Eliseo" in a sign I placed next to the cables and paraphernalia around his basin. Was he covered in plastic wrap, like a dish ready to be taken to a potluck? Or is my memory playing tricks? Am I mixing up his image with the descriptions of other premature babies whose stories I learned later? I know for sure that he was hooked to countless cables and monitors. I wasn't able to hold him but they let me touch his arms and feet. At some point they said that I should stop coming to the room because every time I did his heartbeat quickened. I hadn't been able to hold him right after the delivery either, because they took him away immediately despite his first cries being vigorous and the initial vital signs all positive. To this day, I wonder if that quick separation was necessary. Did he, in his budding newborn consciousness, feel abandoned? Did the environment where he spent his last month before coming into the world feel hostile? Was there enough fluid in those broken waters? Would he have screamed, had he been able to, "Mamááááá," as I did fifteen years earlier when the water of my wave retreated?

The last time I saw Eliseo alive he had a hole in his trachea and a tube inside it. A few remnants of the doctors' last working session surrounded his body, inadvertently left behind: a bit of gauze, a syringe without the needle, a small section of a plastic pipe.

After they stopped trying to keep him breathing, they asked me if I wanted to see him the way he was or if I had any clothes I wanted them to dress him with. An impossible decision.

I slowly walked into the room full of basins and saw him lying in his, all the traces of the fruitless work gone, his lips parted, the tip of his tongue sticking out.

When my dad embarked on a series of bureaucratic procedures at the hospital, the civil registry, the morgue and the crematorium, dealing with simultaneous birth and death certificates and inexplicably difficult paperwork, he wrote my son's name as "Eliseo Vitullo." I'm glad that he did. Eliseo's short-lived middle name had been a doomed last-ditch effort and, had it stuck in any official way, it would have been an unnecessary reminder that in moments of desperation we latch on to things we don't believe: friends of friends, trickeries, and pendulums.

Five years later, when Eliseo's brother Martín was three, I had to explain to him why a certain teddy bear named Tomás had to be treated gently. "Please, *bebote*, don't spin Tomás by the leg or you're gonna break it again." Martín had started to ask questions about his brother and, despite my efforts to play it cool and not let the death of this baby become a burden in Martín's life, Eliseo had developed quite a stature in his imagination. I've always been afraid that I would transfer my grief to him in the same way my mom transferred to me her pain over the death of my sister Carola. Not too long ago, though, I realized that to some extent Martín has turned Eliseo into a character of his own making. It took me a while to realize that, in Martín's mind, his baby older brother's name wasn't

Eliseo but Iseo. He's always heard me talk about El-iseo and, capable as he is in Spanish, he decided the noun had to be separated from its article, as if he were tracking back the remnants of an Arab name that entered Spain during the Reconquista.

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**B**efore my world was rocked by those early broken waters, I had accepted a job offer at Oregon State University. I traveled to Buenos Aires so I could spend the second trimester of my pregnancy in my hometown close to my family while I finished my dissertation. April 2nd was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of the Malvinas War and I wanted to be there to witness the commemorations. I planned to return to New Jersey two months later, defend my dissertation at the end of the summer, give birth in early September, and move with the baby to the two-bedroom apartment I had secured in Corvallis, Oregon.

But nothing went as expected, and life became unbearable.

I screamed a lot during those days, and also spoke profusely about my shitty luck. One time, my friend Edgardo said, "When I had cancer at age nineteen, I didn't just think I had bad luck. I thought I had been peed on by the dinosaurs. But look, I'm still alive."

Then something magical happened: On July 9th, three days after I left the hospital, while the country celebrated Independence Day, *porteños* saw their city covered by snow. It was the third recorded time for such an event in the history of the city and the first snow on that day in eighty-nine years. People gathered at the plazas, laughing, kissing and holding hands, utterly inexperienced in such meteorological matters and not quite sure what to do with the thin white blanket forming on every piece of concrete and patch of grass. I heard the laughter and squeals of joy coming from the mouths of adults and children. The light bouncing off the white streets, a color I'd never before seen on this ever-gray asphalt, dazzled me. Tiny white sculptures formed on the edges of parked cars, on the grilles of sidewalk drains, on top of store awnings and sunshades. The cold smell of fresh snow starting the world anew filled my lungs.

This was the lovely part of the dream from which I would awake only to be reminded of the fucking nightmare my life had become.

Would it have been easier if I'd had a partner to share the pain with? I recently wrote a short play in which a married couple reenacts the death of their baby year after year as a way to deal with their grief and guilt. But they each carry a baggage that seems to be very much their own. I don't think that sharing the pain with your loved one necessarily decreases the grief. But if two people stay together through the loss of their offspring, like the characters in my play do, then their love for each other must surely enter a new dimension.

Without the advancements of modern medicine, not only would I likely not have survived my first pregnancy, but neither would I have been able to bring my next one to an impressive thirty-five-week term and become a mother to a healthy child. When Martín announced himself early in December of 2009, I was relatively calm. It surprises me even now how confident I felt that everything was going to be alright.

I was in Buenos Aires again, and this time I purchased a health insurance policy. When after the initial skin-to-skin contact, a doctor took Martín away from me to do all the things they do to newborns, I panicked. I don't remember saying anything, but the doctor who came to take him must have seen my face. She came close and said, "Julieta, don't worry, Martín is not Eliseo. He's a different baby." I was baffled. How did this person know Eliseo or me? Her hair was covered and she wore a facemask so I couldn't make out her features. I asked how she knew and she told me she had been there at that other hospital. This was the nice private facility that the good doctors got to go to after they did their time at the crappy hospital. I immediately remembered: she was the neonatologist who came to tell me the news about Eliseo's unstable condition that morning when I returned from filing my nails at the cafeteria.

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**I dove in and something tingled my body: a colorless and odorless element, neither dry nor wet, neither cool nor warm, and neither soft nor hard.**

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In a time before modern medicine, women suffered these kinds of losses at a much higher rate. Being pregnant and giving birth entailed a considerable risk of death for the mother. Miscarriages and premature deaths of infants were probably looked at differently than they are today. But I doubt that this means women didn't suffer the pain of such losses or that they grieved them less. Some women may have cried in silence while others may have been declared crazy when, in fact, they were just mourning the death of their children.

I felt like I was living in another place and era when, after giving birth to Eliseo, I returned to my bed and a strange apparition materialized at my bedside. I'd been napping that morning of July 5th after an excruciatingly painful oxytocin-prompted labor. When I opened my eyes, I saw a nun standing next to me. She wore all white, a big wooden crucifix hanging from her neck. She held a book, probably the Bible. She gazed at me intently and said a prayer. I was startled, yet comforted: the short, silent interaction felt familiar even though I don't believe in God and have never been to mass. For a while I wondered if this had been real or a dream.

I now think that it was real and that the nun was there to give the last rites to that part of me that was going to die twenty-four hours later.

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Right after my return to New Jersey from the Falklands, my friend Macarena and I flew to the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico. We had ten days before school started again and we wanted to get some sun and relax on the white beaches and in the turquoise waters of Tulum, overseen by the remains of the only city the Mayans had built on the coast. I suspected I might be pregnant. I'd been worried about it since day one but had made the decision not to take the morning-after pill and simply let things happen. I had taken a couple of store-bought tests that had come back negative, so I was pretty convinced that I was not pregnant. It wasn't until I returned from that trip that a blood test came back positive.

One day, Macarena and I went to see one of the many cenotes of the Riviera Maya. Cenotes are sinkholes produced after limestone bedrock collapses and exposes the groundwater underneath. The Mayans regarded them as sacred and today tourists flock to them. This being my first time in Mexico, I had never heard of cenotes. I stood on a high rock and watched the round body of water underneath, absorbing the mystifying sounds of the jungle. I dove in and something tingled my body: a colorless and odorless element, neither dry nor wet, neither cool nor warm, and neither soft nor hard. I had no reference points to describe the attributes of those waters but it didn't matter: I floated and let the womb-like shape of this substance cuddle me, my thoughts whirling back to a time before thought. I finished my swim and sat on a lower rock, letting its familiar warmth absorb the water on my skin. I observed the subtle and hypnotic undulating ripples created by ancient movements from within those subterranean rivers.

Then I saw it: Me, walking on a rocky beach on a rainy chilly day holding the hand of a child. I couldn't see the child's face or mine but I knew that it was me and the child was mine. The child had a green scarf that stood out in the grey and blue background of the immense rocks and the Pacific Ocean. The vision was brief, but vivid. Soon I came out of whatever trance the surface of the cenote had put me under, and although I had never been to Oregon, the rock formations reminded me of pictures I had seen. I didn't know where I would be the following year, but I had applied for a job at Oregon State and had received a call for an initial Skype interview, which I would be doing when I returned to New Jersey.

Eventually I received a job offer from Oregon State and moved there, alone. I don't normally believe in supernatural phenomena and tend to be skeptical of anything that seems fantastical in a "New Agey" kind of way. However, for all the months I was pregnant I had been convinced that I had experienced a vision into my future: the child in the green scarf had been Eliseo and we'd been strolling on a beach on the Oregon coast.

If I had to find any explanation for this event now, other than that the water might have

had overly stimulating properties that excited my imagination, or that the pot our friends gave us was extraordinary, I prefer that of a parallel universe.

I write down this idea the day before I get to the part in *Say Her Name* where Goldman mentions the idea of cenotes as portals. Yes, he and Aura also went to see the cenotes when they vacationed in Tulum. By now I've gotten accustomed to feeling, experiencing, thinking, and writing things that Goldman's book later throws back at me, so I feel I shouldn't make too much of this. But I do want to believe that perhaps cenotes are portals into other universes.

Universes in which I am, in fact, living in Oregon with Eliseo.

Universes in which Aura and Francisco live in their apartment in Brooklyn with their kids.

Universes in which Aura's mom, Juanita, doesn't lose her only daughter to the fury of a wave.

Universes in which my mom doesn't see my baby older sister Carola die.

Universes in which Carlos' friend Ramón Palavecino doesn't get sent to die in a war so far away from home.

Universes in which I get to meet Aura.

And she meets Eliseo. ❀

**Julieta Vitullo** is a bilingual writer, playwright and dramaturg born and raised in Argentina. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in *Into The Void*, *The Fabulist*, and other journals and books from England, Argentina, Brazil and Spain. She's the author of the book *Islas imaginadas. La guerra de Malvinas en la literatura y el cine argentinos (Imaginary Islands. The Malvinas/Falklands War in Argentine Literature and Film)*, and the protagonist and co-script writer of the 2012 award winning documentary film *La forma exacta de las islas (The Exact Shape of the Islands)*. One of her most recent plays, *Two Big Black Bags*, will be produced in Seattle in 2021. [www.julietavitullo.com](http://www.julietavitullo.com)