

Minimalism

vs

Maximalism

poetry

essays

fiction

nonfiction

art



Jeremiah Stansbury - Eventual Slide



Todd Chilton - Red Arrows

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## Editorial Team

### Managing Editor:

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Todd Chilton - Stripes and Triangles

Jeremiah Stansbury

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## Eventual Slide



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## The Labeled Dream





The Muse



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## **Todd Chilton**

Todd Chilton is an artist who lives and works in Chicago with his wife, Carrie, and new baby, Stella June. He recently graduated with an MFA in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he teaches faculty how not to be confused when using computers. He is now preparing for group and solo shows coming up in the first half of 2006. See this website: <http://www.toddchilton.com>.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

[Issue 3](#) | [\(paintings\)](#)



Todd Chilton

**Blue Radiant**



**Red Arrows**



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**Stripes and Triangles**



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# Switchback

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Issue 3: Minimalism vs. Maximalism

A Publication of the USF MFA in Writing Program

## Welcome

Welcome to Switchback—Issue #3—Minimalism vs. Maximalism. A new addition to this edition is [commentary](#) by fresh voices on the theme.

Subjectivity vs. Objectivity will be [our next theme](#). With the recent controversies over "A Million Little Pieces," and our own Stephen Beachy's exposé on the identity of JT Leroy, the conversation on what is subjective vs. objective, truth vs. fiction is timely. [Add your voice to the conversation](#).

Switchback has been steadily growing in style, quality, readership, and submissions —thanks to a dedicated staff and you, our readers/writers. We thank you for spending time with us.

— [The Switchback Editorial Staff](#)

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## The Ways to Switchback

(All hyperlinks are actual phrases entered into Internet search engines to reach the Switchback site, from its inception until the release of Issue 3.)

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### minimal: faq, advice, personals

frequently asked questions:

[does a chimpanzee dream?](#)

[do real sunflower seeds come from real sunflowers?](#)

[how bad is bacardi 151?](#)

[how to tell if child swallowed a barrette?](#)

[what is a switchback word?](#)

i am looking for information on:

[barbie bicycle helmets](#)

[cigarette ashes on dinner plate](#)

[finkle candy](#)

[linoleum stains mystery](#)

i would like to know how to:

[clean patio chair of black walnut stain](#)

[chipping ice in a freezer](#)

[crawl canter](#)

[cassandra trespass](#)

[greet clients at a hairdressing salon reception desk](#)

[hump your boyfriend](#)

[japanese toilet noise disguise](#)

[draw buck tooth billy](#)

[manhunt soda machines](#)

personals:

*i am...*

[chimpanzee at a typewriter](#)

[addicted to picking ear wax](#)

[deformed freak](#)

[leather belt cinched tight](#)

[alone with others](#)

[master crocheter](#)

[freckles back shirtless](#)

*iso...*

[anger teeth grinding narcissism](#)

[bathing suit fair skin pot belly](#)

[girls licking worms](#)

[jaybird mcqueen](#)

[lips thigh her elastic hard](#)

[well hung men laying on bed in underwear](#)

[windblown spiked hair](#)

[tiny man trapped inside his spandex shorts](#)

Maximal: Word-of-Mouth

2005 switchback : 2006 switchback : a memoir of a bilingual childhood summary : aaron shurin : aaron shurin usf : abeer : abeer hoque : abeer hoque wharton : addicted to picking ear wax : african american skaz : alex davis : alex davis mfa : alex davis san francisco : alika : alika t : alika tanaka : alika usf : all about aria by richard rodriguez : alone with others : amy cock : an analysis of aria by richard rodrigues : analysis of aria a memoir of a bilingual child by richard rodriguez : analysis of aria a memoir of a bilingual childhood by richard rodriguez : analysis rodriguez aria a memoir of a bilingual childhood : and if you throw me a bone with enough meat on it i may even lick your hand : andrei platonov fierce beautiful world : andrei platonov fierce beautiful world switchback : andrei platonov the fierce and beautiful world : anger teeth grinding narcissism :

antique ice boxes refrigerators by progress : **aria a memoir of a bilingual childhood** : art deco typography : as he squirted the white stuff out her tongue hung out and her eyes got crossed : attorney jd mfa : aubrey ganas : aubrey ganas real : aurora leigh and birds : **author insertion narrative** : author mid summer nights dream novel : **bacardi 151** : ballerina music listen : barbie bicycle helmets : **barbie helmet** : barbie helmets : barth funhouse meta-fiction : barth incremental perturbation : bathing suit fair skin pot belly : beg switchback : bicycle barbie : biography of kate sheofsky : boat lake sister bikini tan naked : book perfect solitude : borges triangulation : brett lott fourth genre : brett lott toward definition creative nonfiction : **brother moon** : bukowski fiction true exaggeration : **calluses like hooves** : candy cane fences gingerbread : carla hall : carla hall belmonte : carla hall poetry : casey jake smith art sanfrancisco : casey jex smith : cassandra karaoke : cassandra trespass : catherine brady : catherine brady author : catherine brady curled in love : catherine brady fiction : catherine brady squirrels : cedar sigo : cervantes shakespeare mid summer night s dream : cervelin : charles bukowski literary devices : charles bukowski original voice : chellis ying : chellis ying author : chellis ying kenyon : chellis ying sf state : chimp at typewriter : **chimp shakespeare** : **chimp typewriter** : chimp typewriter write shakespeare : chimp writing shakespeare : chimpanzee at a typewriter : chimpanzee shakespeare : **chimpanzee typewriter** : chimpanzee typewriter and shakespeare : chimpanzee typewriter novel : **chimpanzee typewriter shakespeare** : chimps shakespeare : chimps typewriters shakespeare : chimps writing shakespeare : chipping ice in a freezer : chris brooks usf : chunking ice co. : cigarette ashes on dinner plate : clarence major emergency exit : clarence major one flesh : clarence major one flesh novel : clarence major works cited form : clean patio chair of black walnut stain : colin bean sf : collective memory norma cole : colloquial speech in mark twain s works : comment aria by richard rodriguez : commentary john barth lost in the funhouse : confess omatic : confession of mask : confession of the mask : confession vs. mask : **confessional essay** : **contact or mail or email or phone or fax or tel site www.swback.com** : conventional story arcs : craig perez poetry : crawl canter : critical essay autobiography kurt vonnegut : curtis speck san francisco :

cynthia audet : cynthia audet switchback : **dancing silhouettes** : david booth : david booth fiction : david booth missouri review : david booth switchback : david booth usf : david lodge teenage skaz : david sedaris amputations : david sedaris writing innovations : debbie lichtman : debbie lichtman california : debby lichtman : deborah lichtman : deborah lichtman essay : definition of autobiography : deformed freak : delinquency video : **do real sunflower seeds come from real sunflowers elementary** : dodaro : does a chimpanzee dream? : don finkle : don quixote/menard : donquixote and meta fiction : doppleganger huckleberry finn : doppleganger in literature : double dutch bicycle : doubledutch for children how to jump rope : drank a bottle of bacardi 151 : dressed my husband : **dressen** : el teatro jornalero : elizabeth robinson susan gevirtz : essay aria a memoir of a bilingual childhood : essay aria by richard rodriguez : essay aria by rodriguez : essay life pi yann martel critical : essay of aria by richard rodriguez : essay on aria a memoir of a bilingual childhood : essay on aria memoir of a bilingual child : essay on aria memoir of a bilingual childhood : essayist truth : essays aria a memoir : essays aria richard rodriguez rhetorical analysis : essays by richard rodriguez aria : essays on annie dillard tones : essays on aria : essays on richard rodriguez aria : eugene guillevic : eugÃ¨ne guillevic : f scott fitzgerald lick your hand : f scott fitzgerald s spouse : f scott fitzgerald spouse : **f. scott fitzgerald s spouse** : fancy japanese bidet : fiction call for submissions : fiction categorization labels : fiction traditional methods of characterization : finkle candy : freckles back shirtless : freezer compartment is icing up : frosting icicles : **fruit eyeballs** : ganas : gertrude stein rid nouns : gertrude stein s rejection of conventional plot : girls licking worms : greet clients at a hairdressing salon reception desk : gretchen hammer : guillevic eugene : hard old sister rubbed : hash out origin shakespeare : he will which squirrels : **head tingling** : heather woods : heather woods de : heather woods magazine : heather woods poems : heather woods poetry : helmet switchback : henry miller advice to a young writer : her skirt up : history lesson poem : holden caulfield as an innovative character : **honesty definition essays** : hoque abeer : hoque abeer and wharton : hoque pittsburgh : hoque zyzzyva : **how annie dillard fulfill the writer s duty in an american childhood** : how bad is bacardi 151? : how do squirrels breath : how do squirrels breathe : how do you get walnut stains off of you hands : how to build a trail switchback : how to draw buck tooth billy : how to hump your boyfriend : how to tell if child swallowed a barrette? : http //www.swback.com/ : http //www.swback.com/issues/002/essays/unflinching.shtml : i could smell his pipe breath : i want to kill myself : i will sing while you croak i will dance over your dirty corpse : i woke up and my mom was sucking my cock : ice cream truck paint : ice doors forming

inside freezer : ichimp : ilinca johnston : ilinca zarifopol johnston : illusion and reality henry miller : in aria a memoir of a bilingual childhood : in her mirrored : in the funhouse kurt vonnegut : **incremental perturbation** : incremental perturbation and john barth : incremental perturbation john barth : inez miller voice : irene moosen : j. b. a. university of wisconsin : j.d. salinger teenage skaz : j.d. salinger vulgarian : jane anne staw : jane anne staw .com : japanese toilet noise disguise : jared and lindsay art : jared clark : jared clark art : jared clark utah art : jared clark virginia : jared lindsay clark : jared lindsay clark artist : jared lindsey clark : jared-clark : jason buchholz : jason buchholz signs : jay buchholz : jaybird mcqueen : jd nelson - poet : jd salinger and skaz : jello fingers : jennifercoke : jewett firs style of writing : jippity : joe cervelin : john barth calls triangulation. : john barth incremental perturbation : john barth lost in the funhouse : john barth lost in the funhouse essay : john barth on incremental perturbation : john barth triangulation : john barth- lost in the funhouse : john barth-lost in the funhouse : joseph cervelin : josh mohr : josh mohr - l.a. : josh mohr -surf -joshworld -surfing -longboard -sport -surfboard -longboarding : joshua mohr : joshua mohr story : justin katko : justin katko sound : justin!katko : justin-katko : justin-katko.tk : justinkatko : kate sheofsky : kate sheofsky and about : kate sheofsky portland : kate sheofsky the ice box : kate-sheofsky : katherine lieban : katko : keith tuma : kenyon persimmons : kristina i krause : kristina krause : leather belt cinched tight : let me try it on dressed : lewis buzbee : lewis buzbee bookstore : lewis buzbee fiction : lieban : life of pi characterization techniques : linda peckham : linda peckham editor : link <http://www.caseyjexsmith.com> : linoleum stains mystery : lips thigh her elastic hard : lisa harper : lisa harper fiction : lisa harper switchback : lisa harper uc davis : lisa harper writing uc davis : lisaharper : literary maximalism : literature self-insertion : litquake : lost in the fun house by john barth a commentary : lost in the funhouse : lost in the funhouse john barth plot : lost in the funhouse reflexive fiction : lott nonfiction definition : loxias apollo : m.f.a. san francisco chronicle : madonna hung up ghetto blaster brand name : **makingitnew** : manhunt soda machines : manly hairy play : marie fiala : marie fiala and mfa : marie fiala san francisco : marie l. fiala : marina garcia : marina garcia planet magazine : marina garcia vasquez : marina garcia-vasquez : marina garcia-vasquez planet magazine : marina vasquez garcia : marinagarcia : marisela : marisela orta : marti stephen : mary biggs artist : master crocheter : maximalism : maximalism vs. minimalism san francisco : meaning and aria and richard rodriguez : meaning of memoir of a bilingual childhood : **meaning of switchback** : melicker : memoir bilingual childhood summary : memoir of a bilingual child richard rodriguez : **memoir of a bilingual childhood** : memoir protagonist defining goal : memoir vs autobiography : memoir vs autobiography definition : men worsted : midnightpudding : mildred nilon excellence in : **minamalists** : minimalism and maximalism : **minimalism vs maximalism** : **minimalism vs. maximalism** : missle laser tag : mm switchback : mohr josh : **mom double dutch jump rope** : mom jump rope double dutch : mother tongue by amy tan : my heart aches as though poison i had drunk : my lovely haunting : nathan grover : nathangrover : naughty boy look up mommy s mrs skirt : naughty little girls : non-fiction chimpanzee stories : nonfiction narrator : norma cole : norma cole collective memory : novels written in skaz : ode to a nightingale senses keats : **ode to nightingale** : odetoanightingale : odette salon : odette toenails : of course all life is a process of breaking down : **olive witch** : **olive witch an american dream** : omatic elizabeth robinson : omatic susan gevirtz : on the writing of essays alexander : one flesh clarence major : peckham linda : peeing-holes : **peek up blue skirt** : persona richard rodriguez aria : **personal essayist** : phillip lopate the art of the personal essay : phone slam hurt ears : pint bacardi 151 : pint of bacardi 151 : pittsburgh hoque : platonov fierce and beautiful world : play the double dutch bus : poem about squirrels : poem preview : poem you are dear to me : poetry and its arts : poetry maximalism : poetry submit by email : pointed head : popgoestheweasel : post apollo press thrall : post apollo susan gevirtz : prose vs poem : purpose of aria a memoir of a bilingual childhood : rachael in switchback : rachel usf wild : randy varney : read aria a memoir of a bilingual childhood by richard rodriguez : **rhetorical gaze** : **richard rodriguez a memoir of a bilingual childhood** : richard rodriguez a memoir of a 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childhood : rodriguez aria essay : rodriguez memoir of a bilingual childhood : **rodriguez richard aria** : rodriguez richard aria a memoir : rosita nunes : s-shaped desks : seeking fiction submissions : **self reflexivity slaughterhouse five** : sentences with nebulous : shape switchback : she could see cock accident : show all books and essays written by richard rodriguez : sign poem : sister foreskin : site [www.swback.com](http://www.swback.com) contact : site [www.swback.com](http://www.swback.com) katherine lieban : site [www.swback.com](http://www.swback.com) links : site [www.swback.com](http://www.swback.com) submissions : skaz lodge : skaz russian word : **slashing oneself** : slaughterhouse five vonnegut as a character : slipped finger under elastic : small bottles bacardi 151 : smelling of grandma jokes : songs by switchback : sparkling tags : spiked hair cuts for the mature women : squirrel chew on concrete : stains from green walnuts : stephanie dodaro : stephanie dodaro -ecole -ecoleclassique : stephen beachy : stephen beachy contact : stephen d gutierrez : stephen d. gutierrez : stephen gutierrez : stephen varney : steven d. gutierrez : summary aria a memoir of a bilingual childhood : summary aria richard rodriguez : summary aria rodriguez : summary of a memoir of a bilingual childhood :

sunflowerseeds press : surreal chimpanzee : susan gevirtz : susan gevirtz 2005 : susan gevirtz elizabeth robinson : susan gevirtz greece : susan gevirtz omatic : susan gevirtz poetry : susan gevirtz thrall : susan gevirtz tiff dressen : susanne dyckman : susanne dyckman poem : susanne dyckman poetry : swallowed gum take care : swallowed toothpick : swarm intelligence katko : swarm intelligence tuma : [swbach](#) : [swback](#) : [swback.com](#) : switch a boy in to boobs : switch back on-line

journal mfa usf : [switchback](#) : switchback - sf literary : switchback - usf magazine : switchback - usf san francisco : switchback alika : switchback at san francisco literary : [switchback beer](#) : switchback casey jex smith : switchback christmas : switchback creative writing : switchback experiment : switchback feedback : [switchback film](#) : switchback food shelves : switchback forum : switchback game : [switchback grass](#) : switchback grazing period : switchback helmet : switchback hoax : switchback jared : [switchback journal](#) : switchback journal usf : [switchback literary](#) : [switchback literary journal](#) : switchback literary journal san francisco : [switchback literary magazine](#) : [switchback literary magazine usf](#) : switchback literary usf : switchback magazine usf mfa program : switchback manuscript : switchback maximalism : [switchback meaning](#) : switchback mfa : switchback nebulous : switchback norma cole : switchback online : switchback online literary magazine : [switchback poetry](#) : [switchback poetry usf](#) : switchback publication : switchback race way : switchback san francisco : switchback shelves : switchback sign : switchback slang : switchback story : switchback submissions : switchback susan gevirtz : switchback tabs : switchback tanaka : switchback tiff : switchback tiff dressen : [switchback tv show](#) : [switchback university of san francisco](#) : switchback university san francisco :

[switchback usf](#) : switchback usf journal : switchback usf literary magazine : [switchback usf mfa](#) : switchback wanted : [switchback words](#) : ta wake and hear a cock out of the distance crying : teacher jump rope double dutch : [teatro jornalero](#) : teatro jornalero sf : [teenage skaz](#) : teenage skaz and jazz : teenage skaz salinger : teenage skaz writing style : [teenage vernacular](#) : the author as character : the best american essays of the century : the bullet with the poison danny kay : the characterization of a mid summer night dream : the country of the pointed firs essays : the crack-up by f. scott fitzgerald : the intrusive borges : the meaning of pierre menard author of quixote : the memoir of a bilingual childhood : the relationship between content and form in memoir : the review of aria written by richard rodriguez : the symbiosis between the writer and his writing : the world is a beautiful place by lawrence ferlinghetti s : thoughts on innovation : throw me a bone bartleby : tiff dressen : tiff dressen - poetry : tight patent leather belt : tingling head : [tingling in head](#) : tingling of head : tingling on head : tiny man trapped inside his spandex shorts : todd melicker : todd tiff usf mfa : tone of the aria a memoir of a bilingual childhood : topaz voyeur : tradition is the illusion of permanance : tremble switch : tropic of cancer ; henry miller; style; mode : tropic of cancer postmodernist : twain skaz : typewriter chimpanzee writing : university of san francisco aaron shurin : university of san francisco master of fine arts in writing alumni : usf literary journal switch : [usf mfa](#) : usf mfa magazine : [usf mfa program](#) : [usf mfa writing](#) : usf nathan grover : usf poetry : [usf switchback](#) : usf-mfa : views on richard rodriguez aria : virgin mobile switchback : voluminously in a sentence : vonnegut as a character in slaughterhouse-five : vonnegut lost in the funhouse : vonnegut plymouth duster : w.i.t.c.h : well hung men laying on bed in underwear : what is a switchback word? : what is richard rodriguez purpose for writing aria : when was aria a memoir of a bilingual childhood written : whitman - literary devices : who are minamalists : windblown spiked hair : window licker : wiser than evening : woodward reservoir pics : woodward reservoir skiing : wool switchback vests : works cited best american essays of the century : [worsted wool](#) : write it as it is don t try to make it like this or that. you can t do it in anybody else s way - you will have to make a way of your own. if the way happens to be new don t let that frighten you. don t try to write the kind of short story that this or t : writer alyce miller : [www.aria](#) [richard rodriguez].com : [www.joshmohr.com](#) : [www.swback.com](#) : [www.swback.com/](#) : yann martels motives behind the life of pi : zora hurston linguistic devices : zyzzyva abeer :  $\frac{1}{4}^{\frac{1}{4}} \frac{1}{4}^{\frac{3}{4}} \frac{1}{4}^{\frac{1}{4}} \frac{1}{4}^{\frac{1}{4}}$



## Forum: Minimalism vs. Maximalism

Marianne Villanueva

Many times, I don't know what I'm interested in writing until I actually sit at the computer and begin writing. Writing for me is very much a process of discovery—even when I'm writing memoir or non-fiction. Sometimes I will get a ripple, a flash of emotion, and I'll be in the kitchen and have to run to the computer. Mostly, I try to arrange my life—when I'm not teaching—so that I'm not very far from my computer.

What does all this have to do with minimalism/maximalism? Well, the biggest tool in my writer's arsenal is the element of surprise. Whether I surprise myself, or surprise others. I don't like to have a pre-arranged plan, I don't even believe in having a firm structure. My writing is best when it's loose and unstructured. Of course, the flip side to this is that I can't sustain a longer piece. I don't have the stamina, I don't have the energy, and most of all I can't sustain the interest—and if I can't sustain the interest for myself, how can I expect any reader to be interested in what I have to say?

So I like to keep things short.

Occasionally, I'll have an extra-long period of amazement and turn out a 20-25 page story. I've had these moments perhaps once a year. I treasure them precisely because of their rarity. Two of my stories that are longer have appeared in my new collection, *Mayor of the Roses*. The stories are "Infected", set in New York City; and "Selena", set in our very own Silicon Valley.

I also this year finished another long story, 22 pages, also set in Silicon Valley. I'm trying to write a novel but I'm doing it in short bursts, so that the structure that is emerging is more of a mosaic...

I wonder if this style of writing will change as I get older. So far, nothing beats the thrill of sitting at the computer and having the words come out in a rush. It's such an adrenaline high, I almost can't live without it. That's why I always keep myself busy—to lessen the time I have for writing, which paradoxically makes me want to write more, which then increases the intensity of emotion when I actually do have something to say, so that the writing comes out very charged, very short, and very intense. Strange process, I know.

Cedar Sigo

When a poem becomes too long or crowded I begin to see I added its staircase and panels to the hallway (making it longer) out of pure desperation and wanting to sell. I have one of them removed in favor of a two-way mirror. When a poet reads a poem considered long & fat with self love it bores us. It ignores sadness, intensity and horror. If these aspects do not make you physically ill or forgotten I am forced to have the writer put down, horribly uneven parts, mirth, brilliance and luxury, not a single line added that is out of step with the band. When I have embarked on collaborations with other writers I find the cutting of the work is harsh and kept quick. What little is left on the page blinds both of us. It hated being buried even a second.

Alvin Orloff

Minimalism was a marker of good taste among the suburban intelligentsia I grew up around. The acceptable color palate for clothing and houses alike consisted of various shades of beige, gray, and a horrific mixture of the two, greige. The political slogan of the era was "Less is more," and the literary corollary was that prose should be spare and realistic. Fanciful plot lines, improbable characters, and excessive editorial comment were strictly verboten. I still recall sitting on my parents' oatmeal colored sofa reading New Yorker stories that all seemed to be about the same lady in Connecticut to whom nothing particularly ever happened, often quite slowly. Oh, what joy I felt on first discovering that not everyone had disencumbered their works of alliteration, rants, fantasy, absurdity, and way too many adjectives. Books could snarl and bite! Books could dance and sing! Books could grab you by the

brain and sodomize your thought process! There are doubtless a few writers for whom minimalism doesn't lead to drabness, but I suspect it's easier for the mind meld between author and reader that makes literature interesting to happen in less constrained formats. My motto is, "Maximalize, maximalize, maximalize, you have nothing to lose but your good taste."

## Cherry Muhanji

I will never forgive myself for having never read Toni Cade Bambara's, *The Salt Eaters* till now (of which I refuse to read the last 20 pages that have lingered for well over 4 months in my, "things not to do list." Clearly a postmodern text it comes with everything thrown in; takes the reader on journeys to places and spaces that end abruptly—appear to start nowhere in particular; embraces the ancestral, "mud mothers," begins with madness, struggles with healings, on to friendships, love affairs, rapes, the courtly acceptance of men in the Civil Rights Movement to women struggling to find a clean bathroom to change their tampons. It digresses big time, makes references in the black idiom, and is elaborate in detail. In short, this text demands: get in or get out. It is an intricate weave for some, but for others at the time (1980) an impenetrable soup. Gloria Hull, literary critic, *What It Is I Think She Doing Anyhow*, writes, "*Salt* is long, intricately written, trickily structured, full of learning, heavy with wisdom-is, altogether, what critics mean by a 'large' book." She compares it to what Richard Wright's *Native Son* in the 40's, to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the 50's, to Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* in the 70's. "It fixes," Hull continues, "our present, and challenges the way to the future." Well, the future is here, and one, I'd argue, that *Salt* in part never dreamed of.

A close reading demands the reader supply meaning. Does that make it a minimalist text? In that the uninitiated reader will experience breaks and digressions as something other than what they are (i.e. sloppy writing) and elaboration as meaningless meanderings. For them. Perhaps they see this work as a minimal effort lacking in form or substance---making sounds that signify little. Woe! To those who have no political consciousness of the 60's. And, to those who laud those times, "remember how sweet it was?", or do you, really?" I argue that Bambara's targeted audience is black and female. It is full of black aphorisms which brought a great big smile to my lips, and feminist which is another---- dare I say it in these times--- very important "othered" message for me as a black and female and lesbian.

I think of my own writing over time. I began as a poet interpreting my world as scantily as possible... demanding--- as it were ---the same kinds of things I see in *Salt*. Either you're in as a reader or out. I published. Now, after years in the academy, I haven't written much, I second guess everything, and I try to throw everything in including the kitchen sink...And publish little.

I long for Toni Cade Bambara, of whom I met briefly, who is now deceased.

I will, I promise, finish *The Salt Eaters*. I can't promise I'll get all of it, but I thank you for this, angry, happy, funny, sad, outrageous book, and the utter delight you have (notice the present tense) in Blackness American style.

## Alvin Lu

The goal is maximum compression with maximum complexity. In a word, economy. It's a modernist aesthetic, really, but impossible to do in a modern language without distortion. The classical Chinese texts are as serene, and real, as the landscape paintings. Compression, complexity—and clarity. I want a literature that is not so overwhelmed by verbosity, voices, voices, voices, but is the simple sound of thought, an ocean through which the heavens and all life's details can move without disturbing the surface.

## Lisa Jarnot

It had not occurred to me to think about minimalism or maximalism in poetry until I received a call from the editors of Switchback to write about this topic. When I search on the internet for minimalism in writing I find out that Samuel Beckett is considered a minimalist writer and I like Samuel Beckett's writing very much. Then I think that James Joyce must be a maximalist writer of sorts, though I'm still not sure what the definition of maximalism might be. Then I go on the internet and search for "maximalism in poetry" and I find out that someone named Alan Williamson is a maximalist poet, but when I look at his work I don't think much of it and I wonder if maximalism is related to obsessiveness since his work seems long and drawn out and somewhat obsessive in returning to certain topics, but not necessarily in an interesting way. Then if that is the definition of maximalism I think that my favorite maximalist writers are James Joyce and Bernadette Mayer and Jack Kerouac who are obsessive but also interesting. Then I think that in a perfect world the legislative branches of the government

would be filled with minimalist and maximalist poets instead of democrats and republicans. In this perfect world I would like to be represented by minimalist poet Aram Saroyan and maximalist poet Juliana Spahr.

## Tsering Wangmo Dhompa

Words have created a sense of place. Life is long. Water sits still on the shelves. To accept that meaning is, could mean an acceptance of the mortality of our words. So we write meaning is stationary and decipherable. It is there and it is waiting. There is the story that is aware of other stories. Words we are yet to reach or words we put aside to arrive here. We may walk through many doors and reach the apple. To define my toe, I have called on the doctor. He says, it's a good toe. It's hearty. Some say I never get to the point. Too many byways. Too much of the supernatural. We are carrying personal and national histories inside us. Where do we hang them while we wait for assimilation?

## Joshua Clover

Isn't this forum just a hammering of nails into the coffin of some decade I can barely remember because of distance and the lithium haze that surround it, some art movement and its quasi-oppositional double that turned out to be retorts to the threat of mechanical reproduction, one autistic and one hysterical, which by answering the wrong question nonetheless managed to ramify into realms of taste and economy and aesthetic pleasure, which is probably how the history of art is written, so we should forgive them for fighting skirmishes in wars that have already been settled by music? As a thought experiment, I am trying to imagine what it would feel like to care about this question. I mean, to have a real stake in it, to feel oppressed by Don Judd or thrilled by Hong Hao or whatever the affect might be. Nope, nothing. We float in a moment of superinformation; the relationship of consciousness to the intractably, thrillingly, unmanageably vast forest of signs that dominate the daily life of every urban and quasi-urban space takes on an irreducible substance. The impulse to have a response to superinformation – to manage it, to display the mechanisms of management, to give a sense of what it feels like to be vagrant within it, to be its reluctant or blithe or exhausted subject – these seem interesting to me. Thrilling, maybe, or oppressive. Minimalism started to think this and proceeded by abstracting symbol management from social space, which is probably unforgivable and certainly insufficient. One more try if you want to be contemporaries.

## Jennifer Blowdryer

I am maximum size and live on minimum income. Maybe if I wasn't so fucking poor I wouldn't've gotten in the box of spaghetti boiled and laden with store brand butter, salt, and pepper type of habit. If you call it pasta it sounds a little more wealthy, actually.

I like maximum guys, big guys, as well as being big but sometimes they want me to dominate them. "Sit on my face!" a young man requested just the other day. Well, if there's one thing you don't want to do when you're 235 pounds, it's sit on somebody's face. It's not too erotic, the opposite of letting go, tensing my bulky body to avoid pulverizing a, well, yes, ONE NIGHT date.

Rich people and poor people with excellent taste have minimal decorations, white walls, the floor that pebble color I equate with wealth. I am not choking in piles of crap like my bag ladyish grandmother, but there's a lot I can see just sitting here – a painting of a haggard being with flowers, flowers, a feminine shaped crotch, and floating skull that a borderline drag queen manic depressive biker type from Bay Ridge painted while on a manic 8 hour high, a huge Venturer brand dual cassette player with a broken 5 cd changer and large robot like speakers, topped with an Emerson brand cd player with a broken cassette player, and I will stop right there because I can tell you're tired already and lists are a bit lazy. But honestly, Venturer and Emerson? Who even buys these brands, who plays cassette tapes, who isn't using an iPod yet? Moi. All this off brand equipment take up 3 square feet, at least, and is the slightly updated version of broken cars in the yard, piles of busted tvs.

The minimum income gets me maximum help from Uncle Sam, who Bush would like to reduce to everybody's father's second wife and her one son, the ones who get it all while wondering why you don't just get a job. I love it. Health care, medicine, nominal income, Sweet poverty deals, and \$138 of groceries a month.

*The Spirit*, a Berkeley paper sold by the homeless, says Social Security Disability is called "Homeless Money", because you can get a hotel for about 10 days a month on it. One of the cruelest and weirdest things they did in San Francisco is take away people's shopping carts full of stuff, bring them to a warehouse that was hard to find and reach, and then obliterate all the blankets, collectables, mementos, and possible retail items hoarded by the very

poor. Once a homeless and pretty mental guy left a box of his things at my place in New York, and, homeless mental style, would not come and get that box. If the box had somewhere to be, maybe part of him did, I don't know, but I looked in that box and there was a copy of Donald Trump's *Art of The Deal*. I knew this man was a goner, but that was really pretty bad. Still, I remembered it, and my brain is cram packed!

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## Forum: Minimalism vs. Maximalism - Contributors

[Marianne Villanueva](#)

[Cedar Sigo](#)

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## Geomancy

Aaron Shurin

On the way to the airport alone in the very stretch limo, which had turned out to be the hotel's version of a door-to-door shuttle, I scan the houses, loping roads, long slow horizon, the open bowl of the all-visible sky, and say the name "Chicago" with a shiver of pleasure, as if the actual city lay *there* in its announcement — which is true insofar as before this week I'd never been to Chicago, had only this verbal gesture, an echo of the architecture of a song I can't remember the words to, though I try to sing it a little to myself in the car, and can't exactly remember the melody either: it segues into "San Francisco" as if Judy Garland were doing a medley, while the Pakistani limo driver quizzes me about my impressions of the city, seeming particularly interested in delivering his own contradictory responses.

The downtown is handsome, carefully made, with a buoyant spaciousness unlike any other city I've seen, I tell him, and he agrees, but there's a mournfulness in his voice as his running description passes beyond the city limits, and a near-hysteria I detect in the torque of his ache as he complains, "It's all flat, ugly, so flat. You go for miles — ugly flat country, flat, flat. To find the beautiful place" — he shakes his head — "you have to drive six hours! All flat, flat."

I look at the far views from each side of the limo to register the flatness he moans of, and it's true you can see as far as you can see in every direction: from the slight lift of the highway the sleek horizon is unpimpled by structures or trees; the sky is voluminous, noisy with clouds, an undiminished hemisphere. Gazing, I mouth to myself the other captured word that Kate used yesterday: 'prairie.' 'The Prairie.' I visualize miles of whispering grasses, acres of pure direction.

"What's the difference between The Great Plains and The Prairie?" I'd asked; neither of us was really sure. I told Kate about my one trip to Kansas City a few years back, when Richard had taken me to a scenic bluff overlooking the Missouri river. Behind the cliff top was an undulant Kansas City, MO, neighborhood, and just back of that pleasant, rolling, tree-filled districts Richard had driven me through; in front of us, westward, was a sheer drop to the river, and then a stretching, perfectly flat plateau, and then Kansas City, KS, just in the distance, a hat on a rug. I'd thought to myself, "Now begins the Great Plains. I'm literally standing with my back to the Midwest and East Coast, but from my feet on out it's the Great Plains right to the Rockies!"

I slept through geography so I can't vouch for the accuracy of my coordinates, but I do know the Great Plains lived in my speaking as if my mind had been suddenly unfettered, loosed from an unknown band, and I flooded west spreading till I couldn't see a way to stop, as far as my flying eyes could lift me, balanced as I was on the literal pitch of the vast continent's inner lip.

I take with me back to San Francisco this new matching set, two palpable phrases ready to burst — The Great Plains, The Prairie — with a feeling I can shut and open these magic boxes at will, and scoot myself out of my apartment walls in lonely emergency, to breathe-in the curative powers of space and scale. "O flots abracadabrantescues," Rimbaud addresses the sea he's conjured, "Prenez mon coeur, qu'il soit lavé!" "O abracadabric waves, take my heart and cleanse it."

The sea unfolds.

## Aaron Shurin

Aaron Shurin's most recent book of poetry is *Involuntary Lyrics*, from Omnidawn publishing. He's finishing a new collection of nonfiction prose called *King of Shadows*. Shurin co-directs and teaches in USF's MFA in Writing Program.

### Contributions to Switchback

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Rusty Morrison

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## Black striated gull feather

on salt-white sand. So vivid, the line  
between opacities.  
Persnickety wind slips in. Thin as the skin of sky.  
I get no closer than interruption.  
Lips chap.  
Red cypresses molt and crack.  
Each presentiment, the same  
paralysis.  
The beach is cold. I breathe too hard. Extending fog,  
its plausible form of nothing  
apparently moving. But the chill  
nearly crackling  
the near into branch.

---

## Fact defilement

*make our habitual evidences vibrate until they disjoin*  
—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

No camouflage, though we crouch  
speechless in dry-throated grass.  
Our water-hours sealed in the dew of mornings past.  
How we shiver, chilled in the underthought.  
Yet we might ripple between resemblances.  
Slip in through monotone,  
washed clean of measure, of the haste  
that wastes its mayhems.

---

## Before generosity is possible, generosity must be abandoned

There's no starlight to obscure  
the inflammation of pure sky tonight.  
I keep my fingernails cut close enough to follow change



with my fingertips.  
Fog knows best how to test  
our approximating line of intimacy.  
The shiver that could be my start at life.  
Find me.  
In even this thick alpaca scarf.  
Only later, construed your distance-filled glance  
as lambent.  
Because of the way I've arranged my selves  
around it.  
When I close my eyes, I see there's no pattern for what  
pattern interrupts.

---

## **Reconnoitering, which isn't avoiding, generosity**

I've never heard an abstraction and not  
taken it personally.  
I can widen what a misunderstanding might be called.  
Is that a distancing strategy?  
The desire for chocolate instead of conversation.  
Havoc in the compromise.  
Have I forgotten how to leach its sweetness?  
Can I milk the room's secrets with each blink of my eyes?  
This too is desire.  
We needn't be wily. The actual's urgency,  
erased  
by moving too fast.  
The reflex  
of biting my lip when I nod.  
Which might make a stacking sound, if memory  
kept the right thing.

---

## **Generosity, the sketchpad**

How to see clouds out the window, not cotton. How to draw a line  
that won't domesticate the quietness of rain.  
That is tempted to suggest dimension. Doesn't.  
I have a few ordinary habits, like sucking air in through my teeth.  
As if the taste of simply waiting wasn't worth something.  
A darkness tonight, close beside us, impossible to sharpen to a point.

## **Rusty Morrison**

Rusty Morrison's collection, *Whethering*, won the 2004 Colorado Prize for Poetry. Her poems &/or essays are published or forthcoming in *Boston Review*, *Chicago Review*, *Conjunctions*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Fence*, *New American Writing*, and *ZYZZYVA*. She is co-winner of Poetry Society of America's 2003 Robert H. Winner Memorial Award, and the *Five Fingers Review* Poetry Prize. She is co-publisher of Omnidawn, one of five editors of *26*, and a contributing editor for *Poetry Flash*. This past semester, she taught the poetry workshop in the University of San Francisco's MFA program.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

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## I Ka-Ching

Paul A. Toth

Nothing in the Crystal Bookshop cost much, and James barely nickeled a profit in Southeast D.C. Still, liquor stores sandwiched the shop, and his accounts were bolstered by drunks who, moon-eyed and wobbling, spent their dollars on get rich candles. The kids liked voodoo stuff, casting hexes on parents. Women favored love sign statistics, Virgo versus Taurus, Sagittarius meets Scorpio, like Japanese movie monster showdowns. The men preferred protective jewelry, bullet-proof wristbands and rings to ward off stabbings, Dungeons and Dragons for the street.

James wrote another epigram. The words came to him like smells from the fish store down the street, saturated fat molecules in the air, snatchable.

*The Universe rebel*  
*works new systems*  
*of time*  
*through imagination vessels,*  
*infinity in off-keys,*  
*Thelonious chords.*  
*Later,*  
*euphoria destroyed,*  
*comes mythologica paranoid.*  
*Authority moves inside,*  
*becomes respiratory,*  
*a deputized dweller*  
*in the cracked,*  
*smoked*  
*body.*

He was almost done, number sixty-three of sixty-four. The Ghetto I-Ching. "You throw three dimes or pennies, whatever you got," he'd explain after publication, "and then you check this chart. It shows which one to read depending on how many heads or tails you get. That'll tell you something, possibly something you desperately need to know."

He closed up shop, hustling out the non-buying drunks who giggled at the sparkling crystals hanging from the ceiling by string, making a happy pattern when the men had enough alcohol in the blood and a nerve center disaster when they didn't. They shuffled out, muttering, elbowing each other about the blonde new age models on the cover of the books.

He walked fast to the station, took the train back to Dupont Circle, then hurried to his upstairs P Street flat. Along the

way, his mind worked on the last epigram, but it probably wouldn't come to him until morning, in rough form, first draft from the subconscious, ready for editing.

Gay men strolled past, eyeing him. Like the flashlight stares ghetto boys shined him on his way to and from the store, he no longer registered B&Es into his psyche. He was a superhero, shielded, and he carried in his pocket the solution to the underclass crisis.

His epigrams would seem relevant when deciphered and applied with the same desire for coherence which customers brought to astrology and tarot decks. "Tell me," their expressions signaled, "something, anything." The way they slumped, their drop-down trousers, as if the world was sliding off their bodies, suggested they forever verged on nakedness. When he scouted new age shops in wealthier parts of town, especially shopping centers, he saw the same wandering search for treasure maps and secret keys and above all protection from naked vulnerability. Liposuction hadn't solved anything, but yoga might: "Gimme a 'G' for guru."

He watched Cops. He ate a sandwich. He counted his take for the day. The store wouldn't last much longer. Then what?

His room was free of the spiritual, barren of all but the television and kitchen appliances. Home of the brave. He stared it down, this glacier, so lonely. Yasmine. Yasmine waz mine, he thought, in the way she might have put it. She was a Capricorn, he a Virgo. The love sign books claimed they had an excellent chance at lasting love.

Corny bullshit. Would they buy his? Ghetto I-Ching: stupid. Of course they wouldn't.

Outside, snowflakes. Somewhere, a crackhead licked the flakes, thinking the sky was snowing coke, until his tongue stuck to a steel fence post as other junkies walked by and laughed. But they were staring at the flakes, too. He had seen this happen.

"I am the guru," he told himself. "Whitey with a third eye. Cracker Confucius."

He hated the boredom of loneliness but knew relationships inflicted their own monotony; no woman wanted to sit around his empty joint, least of all Yasmine. He once had to attend family barbecues where her relatives claimed no problem with the racial difference yet jibed and jabbed with intricate jokes about his ancestry and all that it had done to the world. Or he and Yasmine visited her friends who liked to snort a line, then pass the mirror. After inhaling, Yasmine talked and talked until the feeling wore off, and then she wanted more. He couldn't afford more. He needed a woman who enjoyed sitting around and biding time, with high-frequency sex and low-frequency conversation. There was no such woman.

But the alternative was this other boredom. After working all day at the bookstore, reading tired him. The window provided watch on a neighborhood of college kids, attorneys and the kind of people who attended neighborhood zoning commission meetings. He did possess a CD player, but not since Yasmine left had he listened to jazz.

"Fuck it," he said, scribbling the last epigram:

*Vulnerable, deserted, in a corner.*

*Stop.*

*Defensive strategy:*

*Scream.*

*Dominate.*

*NO!*

*The confident offend fear.*

*Work your way*

*to the subway.*

He took the stack of sixty-four epigrams to Kinkos, typed them into a word processing program and printed them out. He had fifty copies made.

The next day, he set the stapled copies on the counter. Some of the customers stopped to take a look at this mangled publication which lacked the gloss of his other products.

"What the hell's this?"

"It's straight from Tibet," he said, "smuggled out. It's an urban fortunetelling device, meant for streets like these. They got the same problems over there that we do here, but they're wiser. I can't say how I got my hands on it. I don't need the cops coming here. Just keep it quiet, okay? Keep it low, don't say anything. The feds might show up."

"I won't say nothing."

The rumor had started.

Ten sold that day, at a profit of one dollar per copy. Ten customers returned the next day. "This shit works," one told him. "I landed on the same damn thing three times, and it was dead right."

The following day, twenty copies sold. The next day, thirty. On Sunday, when his store was closed, he returned to Kinkos. The clerk told him, "I'm not supposed to say this, but if you're gonna keep copying these, it'd be cheaper at a print shop. They could put it together like a real book."

"No," he said, "the cheap look's part of the sell."

Every customer claimed satisfaction. One woman insisted number sixty-four saved her life. "I was backed in a corner, just like it said, so I screamed, and that little punk ran right the fuck out of there."

Sales spread beyond his usual customers. Strangers arrived.

Then one Monday, as if someone had tipped her off that he finally had extra money -- and he knew someone had -- Yasmine appeared. She walked through the door looking almost as pretty as he had remembered her.

"I hear you're selling out some book," she said.

"I can't sell out. I print them myself. Smuggled the original out of --"

"Your apartment. Mind if I come over tonight?"

"I've got money now, right? You know when I get home."

That night, after the reunion sex, they dressed, went into the living room and turned on TV. Even after half an hour, Yasmine had yet to complain of boredom. After another half hour, she found her coat and dug into the pocket. She removed a baggie and a pipe, then smoked a rock.

"What're you looking at?"

"Moved up to the big leagues now, Yasmine?"

"NBA: National Base Association." She put the pipe down. "Show me how that book works."

"You got any change?"

She gave him three nickels. They sat on the couch, and he opened the book on his lap.

"Just throw the coins on the floor."

"You do it. My hands are shaking."

He tossed the nickels. He ran his fingers across the words as Yasmine read.

"Shit," she said, "you ain't no rebel. And who the hell's Thelonious?"

Thelonious Monk, he wanted to explain, was a man who altered time with piano keys. But she wouldn't care; she always made him turn off jazz. She couldn't stand it.

"You got any money?" she said.



"If I can have some."

"You? If I can witness that, I swear to God I'll listen to that shit you play on your stereo."

They returned two hours later with a hundred dollar baggie. They smoked, listened to Thelonious Monk and had sex three times. She hardly talked.

"How come you're so quiet?"

"You get past that in the NBA. You quit talking when the high turns off and sometimes even when it's on."

"How long's that take?"

"Not long."

In the weeks that followed, he converted. He believed in all of it, love signs, tarot cards, everything. Boredom was smoked out in minutes, the world fascinating and very bright. Down came the crystals, the store darkening, which only drew more customers. The book kept selling. He believed in what he sold, as if he were a minister chumping Bibles.

On good days, he worked new systems of time through imagination vessels, infinity in off-keys, Thelonious chords. On bad days, he saw authorities moving in, deputized officers of the D.C. Police, Drug Enforcement Agency, Secret Service and CIA. They moved in, but he smoked them out. At night, he and Yasmine lay naked and quiet in the fog of a collective unconscious as high in the sky as their minds.

## Paul A. Toth

Paul A. Toth lives in Michigan. His first novel, *Fizz*, and its successor, *Fishnet*, are available from Bleak House Books. His short fiction has been nominated for the *Pushcart Prize* and *Best American Mystery Stories*. He received honorable mention in the *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror 17th Annual Collection*, ed. Ellen Datlow. See [www.netpt.tv](http://www.netpt.tv) for more information.

## Contributions to Switchback

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## War Poem

Erika Figel Roliz

Crowd spitting in the wind, fur framed  
faces, gold noosed. Reflective  
teeth, glint in the eyes, speak the

*what is*, serious thing with it,  
the problem of ignorance, no hands  
choke what we hate, hear

the mic echo. Lips in the cloud, forced out,  
snake stunner bites the wondrous  
steeple, Middle Eastern dance, love it.

Consistent beat of chaos,  
no time for breath,  
filled with tanned white

faces, belt wrapped around  
the arm(cash drug), antennae  
rusted and fan twisted in-

to bonsai, paper shredded  
with tattered edges of words,  
cliché of *spit it*, cliché

of *spit this*, spit bones, stomach  
empty save for the taste of,  
hunger, you like? Between fire

and damp concrete smothered in  
the blood of hopelessness,  
hopeful money spills. Pieces of

what we call "weightiness"  
bear on stories innovated  
by temptation, a wasted youth

wishes they had time to  
have faith. System rotates, rots,  
street-breeds shame, plants the rhythm

of a love song with the rhetoric  
of sin, blood drip, ours. Picture  
tainted and sprayed with street talk,

walled in, pieced apart until  
together at opposite  
ends, superstar syndrome, risen

then fallen by the popular  
vote, American dance, love it.  
Global tricks exported from the Unified State

of Americanization. We made it, war  
not over yet, war on the wall, spray-  
painted continuous stream of anger,

perfume torture, poetic scheme  
illustrates the black, tongues  
of white toothed politicians. Rain

sweeps from roofs to gutters, and people  
live here, people live there. Love  
in vain, the paper chase, hustling

seven days for the original,  
dream, the name making fortune  
and fame, unripe wisdom criss-

crossed over scripture and rock  
and roll, hip hop and psalms, the game  
infinite. Red blood taken

tentacle to tooth, spit it,  
spit it now, take it from  
and about, we go.

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## Erika Figel Roliz

Born in Bogotá, Colombia and raised in Connecticut, Erika Figel Roliz lived in New York City while attending Leonard N. Stern School of Business at New York University and Hofstra Law School. She is currently an MFA Candidate at California College of the Arts for Creative Writing. Erika interviews and writes poetry, fiction, and screenplays. She has been published in *Watchword* and *Eleven Eleven {1111}* and is the co-editor of *Transmission*, the online literary journal of CCA. Erika is happily married and resides in San Francisco while completing her first book of poetry, *Spoken For*.

### Contributions to Switchback

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## The Contract

Jennifer Coke

**COMES NOW** Kenneth, the Party of the First Part (herein referred to as he/his/him), and says:

—I don't love her. I stopped loving her, a long time ago. I dunno? I just sort of fell, you know, out of love with her, I guess. If I ever loved her, I mean.

### AND HE SAYS FURTHER:

—Stop asking me questions. He says, kiss me. He says, do that again. Just like that, he says.

Xandra (herein referred to as "The Party of the Second Part") plays with the spread eagle of gray hair on his bony chest.

The Party of the Second Part says something. Her young voice sounds to him like tissue paper rustled.

—What? says he. I didn't hear you. Come again? He doesn't want to cup his ear, his new habit.

—Who was driving the car? When it happened. Who was ...? Xandra almost whispers.

He blows the air out of his concave chest. He stills her tracing hand on his nipples. Her fingernails feel to him like a spider, crawling. He stops the young hand of the Party of the Second Part tighter than he means to.

§ § §

Affiant, Kenneth, swears this is his true testimony:

### *First Cause of Action:*

We were driving up to Montreal  
It was late  
I was tired  
Had three beers  
I guess I was driving fast  
No faster than everyone else  
No faster  
Skidded on a patch of ice  
Black ice  
Didn't see it  
Car spun around once  
Before you know it  
Hit the oncoming car.

### *Second Cause of Action:*

Not a scratch on me  
She was in a coma for 3 months  
They didn't think she'd make it  
Woke up, she was a quadriplegic.

§ § §

The Party of the Second Part clears her throat. She kisses the shoulder of the Affiant, Kenneth. She lays her young breast cool on him. She says:

—That why she, like, lives with you?

He nods his bobble head.

—How old is she, anyway?

—Twenty-eight.

—Five years older than me, the Party of the Second Part needlessly points out.

— If anyone is counting, he says.

§ § §

He picks up his heavy gold watch from the nightstand; he squints at the time. Two giddy children chase each other in the apartment overhead. Someone tells them to wash up for dinner. One child jumps. The other child jumps.

The Party of the Second Part turns over her damp pillow. Her voice is colored sweet. She says:

—Ever maybe thought of some kind of rehab center, some, like, nursing home or something? Put her in?

§ § §

Affiant pulls the blanket up over both their nakedness. He shifts his middle-aged buttocks.

Affiant pleads:

1. I dated the woman on and off for a whole year
2. And I was about to break it off
3. But she wanted to go to this B&B
4. Thought Canada would be romantic, snow and all
5. She has no insurance
6. She has no family.

I owe her this, I owe her this, I owe her this, I owe her this. I owe her this, I owe her this, I owe her. I hate her eyes on me. I hate her smell. I hate the fucking bitch.

The Party of the Second Part crosses her arms extravagantly. She does not look at Affiant.

—Well, so, like, what about me? Her voice is very loud, like a young woman hailing a taxi.

§ § §

**WHEREFORE**, the Affiant begs for relief and prays as follows:

If there's a God in Heaven, I hope she goes soon. That sounds cold and callous, I know. God forgive me, this is a horrible thing to wish on another human being. But I hope she dies, you hear me? I pray every day. Every day I pray. I want her just to give up. Just fucking let go. Jesus God Al-fucking-mighty, it's been three years. I want it over already. Do you think I'm proud to feel this way, Xandra? No, I don't. Do I wish it were different? Goddamn straight. But, what can I do? You tell me; what the hell can I do?

**FURTHER AFFIANT SAITH NAUGHT.**

## Jennifer Coke

Jennifer Coke was born in Black River, Jamaica. She has been published in *The Henfield Prize Stories* and has been awarded first prize for poetry by the Academy of American Poets. She is currently working on a novel, *Grace Notes*. Her website is [jennifercoke.com](http://jennifercoke.com).

## Contributions to Switchback

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## Teddy's Girl

Bill Teitelbaum

Selfish, selfish — at first she could have killed him herself.

How like him, Claire Klein thought.

And yet, not careless. On reflection the will had not surprised her. Though selfish he was neat. He hadn't wanted the children to hate him. Stacks of fat brown envelopes, cash, notes, sheaves of bonds.

Look at this, exemplary for her of time's collapse, a souvenir check for \$28.08, void now for almost two generations, their share of the settlement in a class-action against the phone company when it was still known as Pacific Bell.

It was as if her own life, too, had vanished. The honey-bunny, the radiant bride. Who cared about that now except for her? What you got was what you saw, what you held in your hands.

She stood in the mirror and struck a pose. Hubba hubba?

There should be hag cotillions for broads like us, she thought. Low-light revels. The drug companies could sponsor them.

\*

Naturally people humored her, she would have to get used to that. At the chapel they'd assumed she was struggling to be businesslike. Something in suede for the lady? An open toe? Had she been beside herself doubtless they would have accommodated that, too. It didn't matter. The real funeral hadn't come until later, when she couldn't find anything of his in the laundry hamper. No socks? No T-shirts? What was the bastard walking around in? No briefs?

Well, let me be pleasant, Claire Klein smiled. I'll be comfortably retired, languishing, but with interests to absorb me. Manageable ailments. Children who visit. She just needed to develop that assessing look, that sweep of eye like a reaper's knife. Where's the manager, who's in charge here!

She looked at the small, jeweled travel clock on her makeup table and thought she might have tea. Also she needed to organize the refrigerator. Picking through the shelves, clearly things were getting out of hand.

Did we need anything? What did we need?

We, no less. Maybe it would be better if We stayed in today. We could even have popcorn for dinner. Who would know?

\*

It reminds her, she could use some new friends. Strangers. People who knew how to mind their own business.

Did they think she was crazy? It made you wonder what mattered in the end.

For suddenly there were men in her life— to protect her, they said, to care for her. As if all had studied the same mating manual. This worked, it assured them, like changing shampoos. Women wanted to be held, to be treasured. "I want to watch you sleep," one of them had told her, and on the spot her insomnia had gone to another level. "Thank you, I can look out for myself," she had told him.

And why would they care for her? It seemed so arbitrary. It wasn't their fault, but it was as if each comprised his own revelation of loss for Claire Klein. What did it accomplish? How many times could a man die? When she laughed brokenly at their attempts to amuse they assumed it was because her sense of humor was uncertain. Its nervousness touched them. She was still uneasy with pleasure, they thought. She didn't feel comfortable enjoying herself yet.

But she wasn't ambivalent. She wanted to go home. Being pleasant to these men seemed an exercise in hypocrisy.

Or adultery?

That was at dinner one night with another developer, when she realized, listening as he went on about himself, that these were all the things she had never needed to talk about with Teddy—his practice, his golf game, his partners, his charities. Instead there had been the common ground— the kids of course, the house, the cabin, the investments, the trips, the parties, the quarrels, the families, the plans; inevitably the changes in the plans. “What do you do for relaxation,” the man had asked, and since she had no interest in seeing him again, she told him the truth. “I mourn. It comforts me,” she said.

\*

In time though she learned to embroider those awkward moments with a more maidenly diffidence. I’m not ready, she would say. I want to be fair with you. I’ve decided to get some counseling first.

They liked that, she discovered. It made a flattering picture.

“You may be selling yourself short,” one of them said.

“Well, you may be right. I just need some time. Can I call you?”

Still, most simply wanted to know how she slept by herself, like the Hun who had had the audacity to advise her that they weren’t children, so could dispense with the formalities.

But it was the formalities she wanted, she told him — manners and napery, candlelight, opened doors to a flagged terrace.

“I like a good sport,” he had told her.

Yes, well, she would have to be, wouldn’t she, Claire Klein thought.

That had been the one who owned a fleet of limousines. “I’m not a complicated man,” he shrugged. “There are things I like and there are things I don’t.”

Also a believer in love at first sight if she could believe her ears. Age seemed their permission to dispense with gesture, with courtesy in effect, in favor of something they called common sense, in effect barbarism, laziness, tantrum tactics. God knew she was not self-important, but God knew she had not lived this long to be treated indifferently.

He shrugged at this, then waited irritably while she let herself out of the car.

“Why do you wanna give me such a hard time? What does it get you?”

“What would I get for putting up with you?”

He had to laugh. “Well, I can see this is going noplac. Probably I ate too much anyway. Listen,” he said, feathering the gas pedal, “Call me — we’ll go someplace.”

They suggested being friends to her, but they took their illusions too seriously for friendship. They weren’t even lonely in a recognizable way. What did they need her for, some pretense of vitality? Were they more alive for themselves this way? What did they see when they looked at her, her dead husband’s money? Someone to keep their prescriptions straight?

Maybe one day she would simply stop eating, Claire Klein thought. It would be neat that way. It wouldn’t have to involve anyone.

As his wife these were the lives her Teddy had spared her, she realized.

\*

She was getting a reputation, Claire Klein was informed. At last, a reputation.

But men considered her a ballbuster, the women complained. It wasn’t funny anymore.

No, that was true. Claire Klein agreed. It had never been funny.

But she enjoyed that crestfallen way the men looked her over. The slow realization that she didn’t need them was satisfying for Claire Klein. Their belligerence was hollow with nothing desirable to offer, foolishly argumentative, as if they had spent years in violent confrontation with themselves. Finally certain decisions had been reached, they knew



what they wanted now, what all men seemed to want as far as she could see, the papa's praise, the mama's breast, or, failing these, unconditional acceptance. They had paid their dues, now they wanted some service, "an orderly home," as one of them put it, mama's boy code for a one-guest hotel. Claire Klein, a woman not given to excuses, who had always prided herself on showing up, now suffered nauseating headaches and lancing muscle spasms in her lower back.

"It's not you, it's just people. I don't like strangers touching me."

This was true enough. Even in dressing rooms she was squeamish.

Nevertheless they would want to come over. To talk, to have coffee. What am I, a cafeteria? It was not her pleasure to be unkind, but what did she need this for? What do *I* get, she asked. It seemed a reasonable question. What do *I* get?

One man continued to bother her as though her distaste for him had only gilded her desirability, one of those charmers who described himself in personal ads as 70 going on 50 yet seemed not to know his own neck size. He showed up one afternoon fairly strangling in his collar, with the wormy veins writhing in his head.

"Why do you keep calling me? You know I don't like you."

But she had class, he said. "What are you going to do, sit home?"

Those were her choices presumably, nothing or less than nothing. Was she supposed to be grateful for these attentions? How could you be touched by men like these? The fool had kept calling for almost a year before he got the message. Hoping to get lucky? Hoping she would make things easy for him? She had never imagined such woefulness sustainable. Probably he too was dead now, Claire Klein thought.

She saw then that it must have taken a certain bitter courage for Teddy to live as selfishly as he had done. Rat that he was, it would have pleased him to know that she remembered his weight.

She had understood him, that was the travesty, she had truly known him, while for him it was always as if she were too complicated to engage. Why bother, that's what it came to in the end. "Look," he would sigh, "just tell me what you want," and as a result she had lacked for nothing except possibly the knowledge that she might have been worth a bit of trouble.

But that too was manly in its wretched way. Ultimately even marriage was a zero sum, a negotiation, a cut to the chase, while for her a choice between love and reliability. Respect when it came, came from other women.

She tried to think with his mind now, with that tough, funny brain, carelessly, rapidly. It had been an artist's brain. He should have been an architect, she would tell him.

"You can hire architects," he would tell her.

That was him, that contempt for the ephemeral, the abstract notion. In that way he would dismiss such people, yet whose ephemera were being contested? Facts killed you, he would complain to her. You asked for answers and instead people gave you cooling loads, the cost of light.

It summoned his obduracy, his inability to consider alternative viewpoints, yet memories like these seemed moonlit compared to the tedious men her girlfriends sent over. Is this what her Teddy would have lived to become? But there was no correspondence between her husband and these querulous, quirky guys. It had been her parents who socialized with men like these. Lodge brothers, gin rummy players. This was the dull greed her Teddy had saved her from. A hundred years separated her from these spoiled, belligerent men. They were courteous and attentive for a while, but then they would tire and begin asking questions about his bankers, his sources — assuming they could sustain the conversation this way? Perhaps get to her?

"Where's that waiter," one had demanded, as though it might be her responsibility to see that his supper was put on the table.

"Maybe you should go see," she had told him.

That was another thing about Teddy, he respected himself, she could listen to him.

\*

She understood boredom perfectly then. Or was it depression, this knowing what came next? She had never been a bouncy type but nothing seemed urgent to her now. Had she become intolerant in her old age or merely indifferent?

Yet there were small things now which suddenly and absolutely she could not endure— inanity, gossip, rudeness, glibness, dirt, vulgarity, noise, carelessness. When had it become such a labor to be cheerful? She resented the way people who should have known better seemed to take her patience for granted. Men expected her to chatter, to engage them, and when she didn't they would complain that she was difficult to know. So they were not her husband, whose fault was that? Why go out if she was going to act this way? You were never alone with a woman like this. How did you vie with the flawless dead? Now even his infamies were lovable, a tribute to his virility.

Yes, they had heard of him, they could understand why she missed him. They, too, missed their dead. But did she imagine that time had stopped for her as well? Who did she think she was?

And finally they didn't like her. They didn't like the way she looked at them. Examining them, counting their guns? Screw her, they decided. Women like this were welcome to their privacy.

Well, she thought, let them know about it. Let them know how it felt. She only hoped Teddy knew what she was suffering for him.

"I miss you very much, Teddy. I'm glad you can't hear me say it."

But she was babbling now. She didn't know what she wanted. It was as if she might be developing a speech disorder. She could feel it in her mouth.

## Bill Teitelbaum

Bill Teitelbaum's stories have been published by literary journals such as *Bayou*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Riversedge* and *Crab Creek Review*, and two of his plays will be out this winter, one in the debut issue of the *Oregon Literary Review* and the other in the *New Issues Press* anthology, *The Art of The One-Act*. His short story, "Teddy's Girl," in this issue of *Switchback*, is part of a collection in progress with the working title, *God's Orphans*. Bill lives in Lincolnwood, Illinois, a small Midwestern village surrounded by the larger Midwestern village of Chicago.

### Contributions to Switchback

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## Dream Lightness

Cynthia Audet

People will want to know your reasons. They will wait patiently, eating their cheese puffs and chicken kabobs. They will linger next to you, making jokes about the weather and the cruise to Alaska they just took and the weight they now need to lose. And then, they will lean in closer and ask “why both?” For the men, quote statistics and studies. They will nod if you talk numbers. They will nod like you are stronger than they thought you were. For the women, talk about your support group, how you spent those warm afternoons talking about sweating and cannabis cards and burns. Tell them about the fingers, how all those pale piano-playing fingers drove you crazy, how they never stopped fluttering, drumming knees and twirling scarves and scratching skin. The women will shake their heads. They will shake their heads and sigh as you tell them these reasons and sometimes, when they call you brave, you can shake your head too.

Never tell them the real reasons. That you were lazy. That you were tired of all those small circles; in the shower, in the bed, in the car. How you felt like a child who had lost her marble in the sandbox, knowing someday your fingers would find that pea-solid lump. How you grew tired of marking your calendar with a large black X and of appointments and machines that pressed you flat. Never tell them you just wanted to sleep like a child again. How you just wanted to sleep with molasses dreams and wake up feeling hazy and small and free.

People don’t want to hear that you like hospitals. That you liked watching your blood drip through those straw-like tubes into that clear plastic bag at your side. And that when you closed your eyes, that bag became a baby — your baby — nuzzled warm and quiet against your side. And at night you pulled that bag in close and relaxed against its warmth until two days later when they took out the tubes and sent you home without your baby and without your breasts.

When you get home you will look at yourself naked. At the scarred flesh. And you will ask, Am I really disfigured? You will touch the scars, the soft, thick skin, and they will remind you of the sticky wooden groves on your mother’s casket only they are not cold. They are hot. And you will put the back of your hand against them to feel their heat and in the mirror, you will look like a young boy pledging allegiance with his hand turned the wrong way.

You will look thinner and in a strange way you will feel light. Not just in weight but in your thoughts and in your mind. You will miss the heavy lead jacket you had to wear during treatments. One day you will consider making an appointment with a dentist just so you wear that jacket again. But you don’t floss. And you don’t want to hear that you should.

At night, you will dream lightness. That you jump out of a plane but cannot fall. And you can only watch as everyone else spins and drifts back down to earth while your body remains tangled up above in some invisible net. You scream “stone...stone,” but the silence is heavy and smooth, enveloping you like a wave and you know no one can hear you. You can’t even hear yourself.

On Tuesday you start smoking again, you will call in sick and spend the morning burning holes in the arm of your father’s old vinyl lounge chair, the one he gave you when he moved to North Dakota. The smell will remind you of the ants you used to burn on the sidewalk as a child. When you smoke all the cigarettes, you will pull out a burnt thread of stuffing and rub the wiry fiber between your fingers. You will think it is rough and proud. You will think it is like a pubic hair. And then you will pull out more of these threads until you have a tennis-size ball in your hand and when you squint it will look like you have a hand full of dirty mashed potatoes.

You will expect to feel different, more alive or something, but you won’t. You will feel numb and lost in your own life. The circles will be gone. But now your mind will go in circles, around and around, trying to see everything from every angle. Does it really matter if you get wheat or white? But your brain will keep circling until you have spent fifteen minutes in the bakery and you are tired and want to go home. You will want to take off your bra. You will want to talk to your sister but you no longer feel related to her. You will buy croissants instead of bread, and a hot water bottle. And you will sleep with it at night and think it feels like a rubbery turtle until it loses its warmth and then it will feel like a life preserver — sticky and cold — and you’ll throw it from your bed. And for a moment, you’ll remember what control feels like, and then in the next moment, the feeling will be gone.





## Cynthia Audet

Cynthia Audet has the heart of an east coaster, the soul of a west coaster, and a nice assortment of wrinkles due to her long lived distrust of SPFs. She is currently very pale and living in Oakland with her husband, son, and two small dogs (who think they are big). Her writing has appeared in *The Sun*, *Utne*, Dermanities.com, and *Monday Night*. She is currently writing the last sentence of a brief bio statement.

### Contributions to Switchback

[Issue 3](#) | [Dream Lightness](#)

## Vehicular Needs

Ray Sikorski

She was the kind of woman I could always put my arms around, but I could never have her. She had needs, needs a simple farm boy could only attempt to satisfy. Vehicular needs.

Women like motorcycles, and Kelly was no exception. She had an affair with a guy who rode a motorcycle, and she was disappointed, of course. “He was nothing,” she said. “He was all bike. Nothing else. Not like you,” she said.

She moved on – a four-wheeler, a snowmobile, a Winnebago, a boat. “It was a bass-fishing boat,” she said. “We had sex in the boat. It was cold and wet. It was terrible,” she said. “It was depressing,” she said.

“Why do you leave me,” I asked, “if you know you’ll be disappointed?”

“I don’t know,” she apologized. “But I always come back.”

For a while she hung out at the airport, until finally she got a ride in a plane. She got airsick, then he got airsick. So she came back to me.

I took her out in the hay field one day, and we sat behind the haystack, among the stubble. “Kelly,” I said. “I’m not flashy and I can’t say I’m romantic. But my family has a cattle/grain truck and a pickup, two tractors and a combine and a swather, and we have many attachments for the tractor, including a baler and a disc and a harrow and a duckfoot, and we also have a chain saw and a post-hole digger.”

“I know,” she smiled. “I love harvest season, riding with you in the combine late into the night, feeling the dry barley chaff on my cheeks. That’s why I always come back to you.” And we sat there, behind the haystack, and kissed for a long time.

We kissed until it came. We heard it first, before we saw it. It sounded like, well... it sounded like a UFO. Then we saw a glint of light against the sky, and the first thing I thought was, Oh shit. And I looked at Kelly, and I looked at her eyes, just staring at it, and I thought, Oh shit.

It was round and shiny and it looked just like a UFO, and it landed right there in the stubble, right in front of us. Her eyes were all lit up even before he, or it, put the top down – it was a convertible. And a two-seater, so I knew there was no chance of me coming along. I was in trouble.

The man, if it could be called a man, didn’t impress me. But that’s not what mattered to Kelly. He was green with three eyes coming out of his head, and I suppose he was your typical alien – but not that good-looking. He was a third-rate alien in a first-rate UFO.

“Kelly,” I said, but she was lost. “Kelly, please,” I said. I didn’t want to raise my voice, I knew it wouldn’t help. She walked over to it, and he held out a tentacle for her. “Kelly,” I said, but no, it was too late. She got in and she was gone, and this time, I knew, she wasn’t coming back.

## Ray Sikorski

Ray Sikorski, a reporter for the Sonoma Valley Sun, recently moved to the Bay Area from Bozeman, Montana. Sikorski has published his own collection of stories called *Driftwood Dan and Other Adventures*, was Artist in Residence in Everglades National Park in April 2005, won second place in the Sonoma County library system's 2005 poetry slam, and a short story of his will soon appear in an anthology called *Sleeping With Snakes: Notes from the Los Angeles Underbelly*, published by Orange Recordings. A first-year student in USF's MFA program, Sikorski can be heard reading his work every fourth Sunday of the month at 10 p.m. on Sonoma's KSVY, 91.3 FM (or streamed at [www.ksvy.org](http://www.ksvy.org)).

Links:

[www.orangerecordings.com/snakes.html](http://www.orangerecordings.com/snakes.html)

[www.authorsden.com/raysikorski](http://www.authorsden.com/raysikorski)

[www.sonomasun.com](http://www.sonomasun.com)

[www.ksvy.org/shows/Pacific\\_Poetry\\_Jam.htm](http://www.ksvy.org/shows/Pacific_Poetry_Jam.htm)

## Contributions to Switchback

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## **Jeremiah Stansbury**

Jeremiah Stansbury is a painter who is primarily concerned with what he calls the "autobiographical" image, this is defined as the ability to take the images that reflect his own way of perceiving the world and express them in his paintings. His world view is in turn nurtured by the affirmative power of his personal expressions. He is devoted to tracing the line of sense or reason that leads him from the creation of one image to those images that follow the initial image and subsequent paintings. The similarity between two or more paintings from a single artist is often said to be his or her individual "style".

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Issue 3: Minimalism vs. Maximalism

A Publication of the USF MFA in Writing Program

Marina Garcia-Vasquez

OVER

WATER

stone  
dawn

over    water  
watch    the sea  
the one

water

covered  
by   starlight

here    I  
wait

how I

thought  
ember  
would    turn

one  
back

to me

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## **Marina Garcia-Vasquez**

Marina Garcia-Vasquez lives in New York but dreams of Mexico City. She works in magazines and finds poetry in the white space between typed words and photographs. She is obsessed with pyramids, flowers, and seashells.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

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## Grandpa Tells a Story

Maury Zeff

An old man in khaki trousers, a white shirt, and blue suspenders sat in an aging wicker chair on the porch of a plantation style house, his feet resting on the porch, and thumbed through a well-worn copy of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Suddenly two young boys burst out of the house. They were followed by their golden retriever, Shemp. The older boy carried two old-fashioned fishing rods and a bucket of worms.

The boys ran past the old man, shouting, “Bye, Grandpa!”

The old man put down his book, leaned forward, and laughed, “Whoa, whoa, boys. Where’s the fire?”

Jimmy, the older one, said, “We’re going down to the fishing hole. Johnny Smith said he saw a big mouth bass in there the other day.”

Little Tommy said, “Yeah, we’re going to catch a real big fish!”

Grandpa chuckled. “Why don’t you boys set a spell? Grandma’s baking up one of her apple pies. I’m sure she’d put some vanilla ice cream on it if you asked her real nice.”

Jimmy and Tommy looked at each other.

Jimmy said, “Well, I guess it couldn’t hurt to stay for a bit. But Grandpa could you tell us the story about The Kid again?”

“Well, I don’t know, boys. You’ve heard that story so many times. I’m sure you don’t want to hear it again.”

“Please, Grandpa, please, please!”

“Please, please!”

“All right, boys, get some chairs and gather round.”

The two boys grabbed a small wooden bench and pulled it up close to Grandpa’s wicker chair.

“Ah yup, it must’ve been the summer of aught-eight or aught-nine. It’s been a long time, hard to remember after all these years. America was going through a terrible war in the Philippines. They had said that our boys would be home from Manila by the end of the year. We’d gone in there looking for the Gatling guns President McKinley had sworn were there. *WMD* they called them.”

“WMD?” Jimmy asked.

“Yep, weapons of moderate destruction. Craziest reason to have a war, if you ask me. They never found those durned guns either,” he said as he packed tobacco into his pipe.

“Meanwhile, America needed something to take its mind off its troubles. It started out as a small statewide championship, nothing special, but it grew. Telegraph lines were jammed that entire summer with news of the event. And by the time it was over, there wasn’t a person in the US that hadn’t heard about The Kid, Emily van Houten, those crazy brothers, and that quiet little girl in the crinoline dress.

“It was exactly what this country needed. They held it in Aloevera County, smack-dab in the middle of the state,” Grandpa said, poking his thick index finger into the palm of his weathered right hand.

Jimmy stared wide-eyed at Grandpa. “Were you there?”

“You bet I was. I remember the first day of competition. I was up early that morning.” He chuckled. “I guess I was a little too used to farm life. I saw *him* there too, staring out over the school yard, past the kickball diamond, beyond the jungle

gym, to the east where the sun rose, bright as a fire in the sky. You could see the glimmer in his eyes. He was there to win. He barely noticed the chalk lines of the court. I don't think he was even worried about that dang court."

Tommy shifted in his chair. "Who was he?"

Grandpa smiled and reflected a faraway look in his eyes. "Nobody really knows. They just called him The Kid.

"The Kid had just arrived in Tuckerville that morning. He rode all night on top of a boxcar. The only thing he carried with him was an old leather bag. In that bag were his pennies. He would only play with his own coins, which he polished every night. Back in those days, you didn't have to play with regulation pennies. When he played, those pennies shined like rubies."

Grandma came out on the porch with thick slices of apple pie and ice cream on top for everyone. The three of them began eating.

"I tell you, you've never seen anyone play the way he played. He was born for the game. Legs and arms that hopped and scooped effortlessly," Grandpa said, through mouthfuls of pie, as he stretched out his long legs. "Ah yup, he was tall as an oak and lean as a cedar. Must've been seven feet if he was an inch. And red hair like a fire engine, he had.

"Anyhow, there they all were, probably fifty players in all, ready for competition. You'd never seen a finer assemblage of athletes in the world and have never since. Players had come from as far away as Taggart City, which was a great distance in those days.

"I've never been prouder to be an American than when they played the national anthem that morning with the country's finest young men and women gathered to engage in good sport and all 44 stars waving over the field." Grandpa lowered his voice to a hush, "Then the master of ceremonies raised the loudspeaker to his lips and said..." Now Grandpa spoke in a voice rich with bravado, "Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the first ever state hopscotch championship. On these courts, over the next three days, these worthy competitors will do battle with coins, shiny pieces of glass, yes, even jacks to see who will carry the title and the unheard of sum of \$45." Grandpa put his bowl and spoon on the floor of the porch.

"The first two days were a whirl of competition. Scores of books have been written about those matches. But nothing can describe what it was like to really be there. Greatness battled greatness, hopping their way into glory or ignominy. Gods were created every time a coin hit a number and giants brought down when someone hopped off a square. They played a blind round-robin with double elimination in a lottery pick-up rotation. Are you boys following me?"

Jimmy and Tommy nodded in unison.

Grandpa gave a chuckle, which turned into a full laugh, causing him to hack up a glob. He spat it on the back of Shemp's neck and then rubbed it into his fur with his right hand. Jimmy and Tommy looked at him quizzically.

"Oh that. It's very good for his coat. That's an old home remedy I got from my grandmother. She was a horse whisperer, you know.

"But that's not important for our story. You see, they had just introduced American rules hopscotch back then. Some of the country folk were used to English rules, which had been the way ever since Lord Cavendish, the British ambassador, had played a seventeen-hour hopscotch match with Andrew Jackson on the front lawn of the White House back in the thirties. Old Hickory also played jacks and patty-cake for days at a time. He was a vigorous man, but some say he didn't lose too good." Grandpa shook his head. "After one three-day long session of Simon Says, he made the decision to attack and subjugate the Cherokee nation. Anyhow, a lot of the great nineteenth century hopscotchers dropped out after their first round because they weren't used to these newfangled rules, y'hear?

"I reckon that The Kid had never played American rules before, but for him it didn't matter. It all came so naturally. To watch him play was wonderful. He made grown men cry the way he threw those coins and hopped from square to square, scooping over to pick up the coins as he spun in the air. Ah, I used to count along with him, one, two, three, four...It was magic, like watching a bird that did these things instinctively."

Grandpa examined his silver, wire frame glasses and ceremoniously put each lens in his mouth, huffing cleansing air on them. He then wiped them off on his cotton shirt. Replacing the glasses he continued, "I do believe that this tournament changed hopscotch forever. Many pioneers of the game realized that a new era had begun after this contest.

"By the third day, it was down to just four competitors including the Kid. There was Emily van Houten. Now that girl had a scary lisp, absolutely terrifying. It was as if the Devil himself had risen from Hades with a speech impediment and pigtailed. Her father was an important man in the Bull Moose Party. Some say he had used his contacts to get her into the semi-finals.

“Then there were those two brothers. There was something strange about them. What was it? I can’t seem to recall,” Grandpa said, rubbing the side of his head. “Oh, yes, they were joined at the hip. I think they went by the name of Siam-I-Am. A lot of folks thought they shouldn’t be able to play. But they had two arms and two legs between them, just like the rest of us,” he said, extending his arms and legs to make his point. “And there was nothing in the rules that barred competitors with two heads or two torsos.” Grandpa paused to empty out his pipe again and refill it.

“And then there was a quiet little girl with hair as black as coal. She wore the prettiest crinoline dress.” He paused. “I can’t recall her name.

“For the finals, they played a sudden death, blind selection, rotating singles style tournament, old Gaelic rules. So The Kid was matched against Emily. He outplayed her and outclassed her every throw of the coins. He hit every square perfectly, hopping on each one right in the center. It was a hot day, hotter than a steam engine locomotive trying to get to Wilsonberg over the mountain pass. The Kid barely perspired as he kicked up the dust off the court. Except for sucking on a single piece of eggplant, The Kid took no refreshment the whole time.

“Then it was Emily’s turn. She hit one squarely, barely made two, and then overthrew the third square. They were playing no do-overs. So she lost that round. The next round and the one after it were the same. In the final round, after The Kid had thrown and hopped his fifth consecutive perfect match, Emily lost it on square one. She was disqualified. Now people in Aloevera County weren’t mean-spirited, but you could tell they were happy for The Kid. There was just something about that Van Houten girl that wasn’t quite right.

“Nobody knows why she did what she did next and they never will. Emily walked up to The Kid to shake his hand. Instead, she leaned in and kneed him—hard.” Grandpa grimaced, as if he could feel the pain himself. “Now that wasn’t cricket, but you can’t entirely blame her. She was just playing the way she had been taught by those big money folks back east. Ruined her childhood, if you ask me. The endless training, the weeks on the hopscotch circuit, the relentless pressure. She had been sent to the best hopscotch academies in Switzerland. And look where it got her.”

Jimmy and Tommy both leaned forward, chins in cupped palms, oblivious to everyone except their grandfather. “Then what happened, Grandpa?” Tommy begged.

“Well, you could see The Kid was not too well off after that kick from Emily. Meanwhile, Siam-I-Am had beaten the little girl in the crinoline dress. She played proudly, but those brothers were just no match. They had the energy of two men. And their two heads and torsos actually gave them better balance as they hopped down the court. Plus, they said that the one on the right was right-handed and the one on the left, left-handed. So if one got tired, the other took over the throwing. Of course that poor little girl was devastated. She wept like a Democrat. But everyone understood.

“So now it came down to The Kid versus the brothers. You should’ve seen it, boys. There was never such glorious hopscotch as we saw that day. The first four rounds were even. Both had played perfectly, not a square missed or over-hopped, and that was with The Kid’s injury. Then on the final round, those brothers seemed to have some kind distraction. I don’t know if it was the heat or just brothers being brothers, and I think you know what I mean, but they just lost their focus. And as they hopped to pick up their coins on square 8, one looked one way and the other looked the other way, and they fell, flat on their faces. There was a hush. And then one of those boys started yelling at the other, calling him clumsy. But it was too late. They knew they had come in second. And then The Kid completed his ten squares and that’s all there was to it.”

Jimmy could hardly contain himself. “So, Grandpa, what happened to The Kid?”

Grandpa looked long and hard out toward the woods before he answered. “Nobody knows. No one ever saw him again. I do know this: he never played hopscotch again.”

“Why’d he do it, Grandpa?”

“I can’t tell you. Some say he did it for the love of a woman. Others say it was for the money. I don’t think so. Heck, he left town without even collecting his prize. Those Si-ah-mese boys picked it up instead. I heard they paid for an operation with the money. Said they had their noses fixed and collagen put in their lips. Dangedest thing.

“You know what I think?” Grandpa asked without waiting for an answer. “I think he did it for himself. Just for the pure love of the game.”

“Wow, Grandpa! I wish I could’ve seen The Kid.”

Grandpa just smiled.

Then a dark look crossed his face. “Of course, all of this happened before the game was ruined. First with that Hitler fella introducing it at the Munich Olympics, training teams of Aryan supermen hopscotchers. Then later came the big money and the multi-million dollar endorsements. And now the East Coast hopscotchers are feuding with the West Coast hopscotchers. People die on hopscotch courts everyday. It’s sad. Times change.”

Grandpa noticed the concern on the boys’ faces. “Well, never you mind that. Why don’t you run along and go catch that fish now? And when you boys get back, I’ll tell you about my time in the Hopscotch Corps during the Great War. Ah, yup, it was a hellish war, but we tried to make the best of it.”

Jimmy looked back at him. “Boy, Grandpa, you sure were the greatest generation.”

“Now get out of here before I put gravy on you and serve you up with some biscuits.”

“Gee, thanks, Grandpa!” And with that, the boys and Shemp ran off the porch and down the dirt road, a trail of dust following them.

As Grandpa looked far off into the distance, he recalled the crinoline dress he’d worn that summer day so many years before.

## **Maury Zeff**

Maury Zeff grew up on the east coast, but has lived most of his adult life in California and Asia, where he spent his time working in the consumer software industry and seeking the perfect mango. (He found it in southern India.) He comes from a family in which Scrabble is a blood sport. He is currently an MFA student at the University of San Francisco.

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## Glimpsing Venus

Colleen Lookingbill

Through sandstone archway outside where daughters' baffling composition blushes from persistent dawn of cultural unraveling, arranging intoxicated testimony round and round earth resonance combine act of sexual diffidence back home fairy-tale matrix, vortex of self-importance, shape of which ... need emerges solving real and symbolic wooed by an audience with certain disposition READING unquenchable books behind closed door, bring up sale of human beings, unintended irony, a practice no one questions imbues ardor recorded passionate, ominous, playing to the inner ear reflex isolation like polemical talent moves ... give us time to recover eye-to-eye, as a sex our legacy from scratch an ambiguous loyalty we pledge equally clear observations of affection, manners or morals remain in place, reality oppression leads to psychic intelligibility heavenly rain of tears, someone has to weep, has to contrive tenuous power regardless of appearances possessed or chosen our responses connect perfectly ... intimacy tangled in grass flowers, design boundaries rustle, writing embraces itself in this increasingly minimal space, exteriority attempts conversion female subjectivity introduces a shift in the allegorical, our body approaches VOID and INTENSITY unconscious recognition merely truthful readers disentangle a story different than the one told ... figures mirror an early splitting, dismantle culture, this "other scene" translates historical way of looking, sparks of opulence amid extreme scarcity vagabond story evocative order, gender disparity, race, language, money mean nothing, I know my own predicament beyond impetus unwitting oracle no one questions, speak objects of conflict, watermark haunting presence apprehensive opposition like a silent movie where fragile readers defer dreamy charm, provide terrain anyone can possess ... waiting to see feminine volition grow all toned down by social inscriptions, an accident solidifies fragment of submerged emotions shape collage based forgetting how singular reappears ever changing amalgam of perspective postpones ABANDON, language follows many rhythms elaborating entropic masquerade structures echo the original triangle of narrative strategy's obsessive text of lies "I have a reaction" implies verbal erotics happen separate from experience, we lose sight piece by piece moment by moment ... deafening effect "treaty of silence" boundary inseparable from tender wiles overcome nostalgia for city of lost honeymoons fitting body around every nook and cranny preserves for how long the nature of good, a flood of semen submits to considerable editorial revision whose influences shape freedom's fantasy, emerging transformation etched in lines of my face, without seeming eccentric, deficient or failure, solitude resists anonymity and indifference more than personality insists upon recognition ... concern whether feminine would serve a guide beyond writer's production of texts psyche enacts poetic aspirations locates elusive yearning, we look for we hope for exotic terrain squeezed from openings sensitive to any fluctuation, evidence synonymous artifact of gratitude, preparing always preparing ... my vulnerability, dynamism of its own awareness making inventions fluid under a spell of love, irrigated with streams out of the continuum an existential turning point requires fate paying tribute to surrogate enchantment, sexual emancipation lack of SYMMETRY eradicate finer differences our erotic potentiality awakens allowed to express collective sexual revolution, spontaneous adroitness seeks palpable illusion only tells lies by coincidence ... same city re-captures a present oppressive, inviolate, ecclesiastical, temporary stay in a vast landscape thousands of miles because the narrator finds it impossible to say the story is over, urban character requires complex



tension everyone loses everything by simple assertion "I feel" we admit self-confidence seen as devotion half way, desire older than doubt anchored by inkling, contoured arrogance plenty of errors finding why that was and with whom concentrating on giving support in all the wrong places ... resemblance eclipses curious way loose repetition based on social code, logical diversion requires watching to evade heritage complicit with this impossible gap, when marginal becomes excessive competence or painful participation we're ripe for an antidote, a private celebration borrowing our nakedness, a simpler world unwinds thick in bed beneath the last romantics insist on radically changing that moment of vexation, hurled illuminated into the web.

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## Colleen Lookingbill

Colleen Lookingbill lives in the Haight-Ashbury, S.F., with her husband Jordon. She co-edits the Etherdome Press chapbook series with Elizabeth Robinson. Her book of published poetry is *Incognita* from Sink Press. Recent poems have appeared in *26* and *New American Writing*. New poems will be published in the forthcoming edition of *Traverse*.

### Contributions to Switchback

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## Teddy's Letters to Ray

an excerpt from *You Can Say You Knew Me When*

K.M. Soehnlein

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

*You Can Say You Knew Me When* opens with the funeral of Teddy Garner, then follows his estranged, gay son, Jamie, as Jamie determines to uncover information about the period Teddy spent in San Francisco forty years before. As a San Franciscan himself, Jamie is fascinated to learn that his conservative, homophobic father once dabbled in the life of the city's counterculture--that he moved to the city under the spell of Jack Kerouac, and even aspired to turn himself into a writer in the mold of the Beat Generation.

Jamie's search leads him to Ray (Rachel) Gladwell, a painter who was once Teddy's lover. In 1960, Ray was living in the suburbs in an abusive marriage. During her frequent visits to the city, she first took up painting, had multiple affairs, and steadfastly reinvented herself away from the watchful eye of her husband.

Ray gives Jamie a cache of Teddy's letters, written to her during their brief affair. Jamie reads them with fascination: this is the first window that's opened into his father's secret past. Over the course of the narrative, it won't be the last.

Although most of the novel is told in Jamie's first person voice, Teddy's letters, diaries and other writing are presented as "found" documents; the "errors" are the character's, if you will, and not the author's.

October 24, 1960

Dear Ray,

I woke up this morning and the first thought of the day was lonely because without you. Our hours yesterday came back like a fresh vision for me. Oh how I wish I could have woken up and seen your hair on my pillow. Forgive me for starting with heart on sleeve, but I tell you only because you'll appreciate how this moment passed very quick, and I took your sagely advice of "do not stay sad long because life is short." Because my eyes (my "painter's eyes," as you told me to cultivate) spied something very nice at the edge of my new orange window curtains, which was the brilliant blue of the sky. It's a Pacific blue purer than the hazy factorysmoke blue over the Hudson.

When Don brought me those orange curtains I told him he'd make my bedroom look like a whore's room. Mrs. Casey would look up from her backyard sweeping and wonder what kind of a tenant brings such a color to a respectable Irish house. And would I tell her what Don told me that day? "Bring some contrast into your life, that way you'll see everything different." I understand that I never saw the blue sky quite the same until it was up against the orange.

I think Ray maybe you put a spell on me and now the sights are all changed. Come back soon, if you can stand me gushing.

Teddy

October 26, 1960

Dear Ray,

All my thoughts are about you this fine day, hotter in October than it was in the foggy summer. But before you think, Here he goes again, Teddy Garner the Sadsack, you'll be happy to know that I'm not sitting still, longfaced with empty pockets. I'm doing something important.

Yesterday morning, first thing I heard was Mrs. Casey in the alley with her infernal broom, yelling about overdue rent and wanting to know who was it I had coming down the stairs after midnight? How could I tell her it's been a week since the tool and die job and if it wasn't for your groceries I'd be hungry and miserable instead of just miserable?

I walked toward the ocean hoping for an inspiring idea though I never made it to the dunes, because there's Don outside the Hideaway but Don with some big news--"I fired The Cyclops." Remember him? The big Neanderthal with eyes too close together, who flipped burgers like was playing scales on the piano but also siphoned off beer from the tap. Don finally had enough of his drunktempered antics. So I'm the Hideaway's new shortorder cook! I work ten through two, then four-thirty until close. I can kiss factory work goodbye.

With my new job and my new curtains and my new you, I'm full of inspiration. I woke up today and guess what, I started painting. I set up for the first time the easel which we purchased together, got a shirt cardboard and painted a landscape of the curtains, the window frame, the sky behind them, and rooftops. A whole hour passed right by before I took any notice, just like you said happens. It's probably no good, and the blue's not right, but it's a good first try I think.

Ray, you have blown in like an angel and kept me from harm during a time of aimless worry. Please write and say you're coming back up here soon, my magic girl! Even a postcard is great.

Teddy

November 10, 1960

Dear Ray,

High spirits at the Hideaway these days. We had a crowd on election night sitting around a television set which Don brought in for the occasion, all of us cheering on Kennedy. The lunch regulars are friendly and like to pick on me for my New York accent, but it's all oldtimers so I can handle them. At nights the beat crowd spills out onto the sidewalk, one hamburger split for every two of them, and always the jugwine in a juice glass. I get the feeling they think I'm deaf or speak only a foreign tongue and can't understand their intellectualism. Excuse me Mr. Bearded Artist while I wipe up your spill but I happen to be a painter too and for your information I have so read "The Stranger" by Albert Camus. One of them left behind a copy of "Tristessa" which I'm reading but it's full of junktalk and nowhere as good as "Subterraneans." The word from Don is that Kerouac is a drunkard and past his prime and the writing of this book might prove it.

I am sad your visit was delayed again, I guess it never sinks in for me the life you're leading down there in the mysterious wilds. Here's the phone number of the Hideaway where you can leave me a message, please: Judah 5-1124.

With you on my mind -- Teddy

November 15, 1960

Ray,

Today I am lonesome remembering the shouts between us at the end of the night and worst of all the shove I gave you. I may be a meantempered jealous Irish fool but you know I'm crazy about you, so forgive me for that reason, which I swear is true.

After you left Don said to raise my spirits he'd take me out to a "mixed bar" which I figured meant white and Negro but when I got there it was full of fairies and Don knew them all. The name of the bar was "The Who Cares?" with a sign that says "Leave your Cares at the Door." Don introduced me to the fruits, each of them giving me eyes up and down like cops with flashlights. One even had the nerve to call me handsome, so I said "Watch it!", then Don said, "He gave you a compliment, say thank-you." That'll be the day!

My mind was full of confusing thoughts such as the \$64,000 Question, "Is Don one, too?" And should I be his friend knowing now what I think I know? Do you pick your friends because they are the familiar type, someone regular like you? Or on the otherhand when something is new and different do you take a chance because that's what makes life a kick? By which I'm trying to say, I figured I'd stick around instead of heading out the door. For the kicks. Plus where did I have to go anyway?

No secret I am shy with strangers (boy, were these strangers!) but Don bought got me soused enough to stop feeling so funny among a crowd of that kind. It was very peculiar knowing that some fellow regular enough in conversation is actually an invert who might be looking at you with unholy thoughts. In particular a brawny one a few barstools away staring at me with severe a look in his eye. He's got his own flock of queens surrounding him because he's the matinee idol of the bunch, a ringer for Rock Hudson, with possibly the largest chest muscles outside of Jack LaLane, I kid you not. On the way out, I passed directly alongside this big guy and I hear him call me "trade" which was explained to me by Don and is unsavory. I was furious and demanded of Don, What's the big idea bringing me there? and him saying, It's a fun place you never know what type of crowd you'll find, and me saying, It was a fag crowd, and him saying, The beer's the same as any other place. He had a furiating answer for everything.

I didn't want to even take the ride back from him, but we were in a fringe neighborhood full of spades, somewhere on Haight Street. And in the car I asked him "Are you one of them?" and he just dragged on his Camel and kept his eyes on the road and said very sagely "I supposed I've just learned to live my life." To which I asked, Dont you worry about a black mark on your soul? (him being from the seminary and so forth) and he said, "I worry about the cops arresting me. I worry about the newspaper printing my name the next day. I worry about the drunken sailor out looking for a fistfight because he didn't find a whore who might relieve him of his suppressed tension" and so forth with concerns that are not about God but about Man. When he finished I said, "Well, Don I guess you're all right by me." Though I wonder if I can look at him the same.

That's why to sort all this out I have come to the typewriter to you Ray because you are the one person who has been very straight with me and also you knew Don before I did. Even though I was a foulmouthed roughneck with you, I know you have a way of never holding a bad opinion about anyone. Sorry for the lengthy and lurid atmosphere of this letter, I hope it didn't upset you.

From Frisco, Soaked in Ale, Teddy

[This next note was on a postcard with an image of the Sutro Baths. It was undated but seems to fall into sequence here.]

Your probably still laughing at that last letter of mine. Boy I sure do run at the mouth after a couple too many. Just forget about all that. Don and me are pals, and we have an understanding, he's that way and I'm not, so what's the worry? Today he drove me up the Highway past Playland to show me Sutro Museum. What a nuthouse! More wild junk than you've ever seen before, including every stitch of clothes ever worn by Tom Thumb the famous circus freak. Plus actual mummies and other curiosities. Ray, phone me up I miss your voice. Maybe you've tried but I don't always get the message. T.

November 28

Dear Ray,

It's been so long since I've heard from you, you must still be mad. Well I know your busy with family kids & the mean ogre husband but gosh Ray just a phone call is all I'm asking.

I thought of you on Thanksgiving, which Don used as a chance to close the Hideaway and cook a turkey for me and some other "orphans" as he called us, all a fine bunch. (Except for one clownish queen name of Benjamin but known to all as Betty. The worst of That Kind. A fineseeming fellow until he opens his mouth and then just a showering of womanly fussing and flirtation.) Best of the lot was Don's old pal Chick, who like Don fled from the seminary, and talks now of Buddha. (He says, "Read Dharma Bums. It's all in there, man.") Chick's lady is Mary, they're a couple of beat poets moving out of the city for a cabin in the mountains to the south. Mary seems sad and remote but she lights up after some wine with a face that's

almost beautiful--don't get jealous Ray she's nothing compared to you! Chick and Mary told grand stories of San Francisco before Urban Renewal and they got a kick out of me listening to every word. Mary was at The Six Gallery the night of Ginsberg reading "Howl," and she claims to have conversed with Kerouac, Cassady, McClure, everyone! Mary and Chick say the best of San Francisco is past, but I think of you and how you see everything as hopeful.

Mr. and Mrs. Casey are leaving to visit "the relations" so I will have place to myself two days, maybe you can sneak up to visit and I'll show you my "masterpiece" which needs your advice as I've gotten stuck. Honestly Ray I can't bear too many more nights with nothing but booze for company. Please call!

Teddy

December 25, 1960, 3 o'clock in the morning

Dear Ray,

You stopping by was the best Christmas present anyone gave me, I'd given up hope I'd ever hold you tight and kiss you like that. I'm glad you still think of me and want me to write out the full flood of my thoughts.

Don cooked up a Christmas dinner of lamb stew tonight for the two of us plus Chick and his dark lady Mary, after which he made a presentation to me of a proper raincoat for this watery Frisco winter, and then surprised me by saying he's going to midnight mass and why don't I come along? He took me up Nob Hill to Grace Cathedral which is unfinished but an eyeful just the same. These Protestants build them tall just to make you feel small. You look up into those pointy arches and then you think about your own puny life down here, and you just got to hope there's someone up there keeping watch. I sat next to Don and prayed, "Dear God, I'm not in very good standing with you these days so I won't ask you for anything, just please watch over these people," mentioning you first and foremost, and then my family and my friend Danny, wherever he is these days hope he's OK and hasn't forgot about me. And thanks for Don taking good care of me and for Chick and Mary who gave me a bottle of Irish Whiskey for Christmas. Amen.

Don had his head bowed, on a prayer streak of his own. I wondered if he was asking God to put him normal. And it made me wonder truly why should Don, who is a decent fellow, be sitting here with his eyes squeezed tight enough to give himself a headache, asking God for anything? How about if God said to Don instead, "Sorry for making you a queer, Don, giving you all kinds of torment and then making it impossible for you to change." The whole thing got me thinking and afterwards I sat on the steps outside and had a smoke and felt the big bafflement of it all..

So I'm here now dipping into my bottle of Christmas Cheer typing my fingers so hard they're sore. Will I see you in the New Year? I don't know what I'd do in Frisco if it wasn't for you showing up now and then.

Yours, Teddy

[end]

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## **K.M. Soehnlein**

K.M. Soehnlein is the author of two novels, *You Can Say You Knew Me When* (2005) and *The World of Normal Boys*, winner of the 2000 Lambda Award, as well as the essay “Putting Gay Fiction Back Together,” which appeared in the anthology *Bookmark Now: Writing in Unreaderly Times* (2005). He teaches creative writing at University of San Francisco. He resides in the city with his partner, the actor Kevin Clarke.

<http://kmssoehnlein.com>

### **Contributions to Switchback**

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Issue 3: Minimalism vs. Maximalism

A Publication of the USF MFA in Writing Program

to thing to thing from thing

Anne Blonstein

prepositions fell off verbs  
and now fly around this language  
like post-gnostic angels

a marxist-red paperclip  
reassures the unpaid bills

she in a laced metaphor  
his endings tailored off at unexposed borders  
the divorce between up and on  
made out a twentieth century

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## Anne Blonstein

Anne Blonstein lives in Basel, Switzerland. She has published two full-length collections: *the blue pearl* (Salt, 2003) and *worked on screen* (Poetry Salzburg, 2005), and two chapbooks: *sand.soda.lime* (Broken Boulder Press, 2002) and *that those lips had language* (Plan B Press, 2005). A new chapbook, *from eternity to personal pronoun*, is forthcoming from Heliotrope Press.

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## My Introduction to Linguistics

### A Personal Reminiscence

Lowell A. Cohn

Where I came from everyone referred to condoms as scumbags. It's not only where I came from. It's also when I came from. I grew up in Brooklyn in the late 1950s and early 1960s and everyone I knew called condoms scumbags because the word was so descriptive and accurate and vivid. As time went on, the word scumbag has taken on a more metaphorical meaning, as in "Irving's a complete scumbag," implying the Irving in question is morally shaky or has a personality which makes him unfit for basic human intercourse. Some of my younger friends who currently use the word scumbag, always in reference to a person, have no idea of its linguistic origins. The loss of the original meaning is another example of the decline of the English Language, don't get me started.

I bring all this up because recently I was thinking about something that happened when I was fifteen. It was a Friday night and I was standing in front of my apartment house on Avenue L with my friend Stuie. Neither of us had anything to do, which was not unusual. We never had anything to do. The sun had gone down and a chill swept along the avenue and we couldn't decide whether to walk left or right when along came an older guy. He might have been sixteen or seventeen and his name was Kessler. He knew our names and we were flattered because no one knew us. For no apparent reason he said, "You guys want to see me buy scumbags?"

Stuie said yes sure definitely. And I nodded because I'd never actually witnessed anyone buying the items in question, least of all me who'd never laid eyes on the things and would have no need to see or buy that particular consumer aid for years to come. So we walked along East 19th Street toward the drugstore on Avenue M, and Stuie asked why Kessler needed scumbags and Kessler, his chest puffed out, said, "Why do you think I need them?"

Stuie didn't say anything but I was impressed. I had no idea why Kessler invited us along and in my innocence was flattered by his hospitality. Then Kessler said he had learned a new word studying for the college boards.

"Do you want to know the word?" he said.

"Yeah," Stuie said. "What is it?"

"The word is xenophobia."

"What does it mean?" I said.

"It means fear of farmers."

"Fear of farmers?"

"Yeah, fear of farmers."

"Why would anyone be afraid of farmers?" I asked.

"Beats me," Kessler said.

Just then we entered the drugstore called Musso and Michaelson's and as we walked inside I was assaulted by the unique odor of drugstores, the cloying combination of perfume and oil of wintergreen and Juicy Fruit chewing gum and arthritis medication and plastic and rubber and God knows what else, so many smells mixed together they merged into a haze of smells.

"Watch me," Kessler announced as he walked toward the counter. We were alone, just Kessler and Stuie and me, and Michaelson the druggist who had red round cheeks and always smiled like everyone's favorite uncle. Stuie and I stood behind Kessler, and Kessler stared at Michaelson and suddenly he hesitated before the enormity of his request. Michaelson waited. He was a patient man. Finally Kessler, his voice a little hoarse, said, "I'd like to buy prophylactics." I

couldn't help noticing he had used the formal terminology.

Michaelson didn't react. He stared at Kessler. I thought Kessler was in trouble. Maybe there was a law against the under-aged buying prophylactics. Maybe Michaelson at that very moment was pushing a hidden button under the counter to summon the police like a bank teller who'd just received a note: Your money or your life. But that wasn't it at all. Suddenly the warmest smile spread across Michaelson's kindly face and he said to Kessler, "Do you want them monogrammed?"

Kessler didn't get the joke, but Stuie and I, who always were in the smart classes, did. Along with Michaelson we laughed our asses off at Kessler and we walked out of the drugstore laughing, and to tell you the truth I don't know if I ever saw Kessler again, and I don't know if he ever got to use his prophylactics that night.

But years later I was in a Kessler situation, God was I. I had moved away from Brooklyn and was a graduate student in the English Department at Stanford and in 1969 had won a fellowship to study Joseph Conrad for a year at the British Museum in London. London had more cachet than Avenue L and Palo Alto and I felt like a big deal. At least I did at first. Although I was twenty-three, I was, unfortunately, still the kindergarten baby and was not prepared to be left on my own in a foreign city. The fellowship was called the Leverhulme Fellowship, and a real Lord administered it – Lord Murray to be exact. It wasn't until I actually arrived in London that I learned the Leverhulme Fellowship, which suggested to my youthful imagination sherry before lunch and cucumber sandwiches and castles with sprawling green lawns covered with croquet wickets, was endowed by Lever Brothers Soap. So I was a soap fellow.

I had taken a room in a part of town called Kilburn because it was cheap. I lived right near the Bakerloo Line at the Kilburn High Road in a neighborhood which looked surprisingly like Brooklyn except older. And it occurred to me I had traveled all this way only to return to the beginning. Kilburn had small two-story run-down attached homes and everything was foggy and wet and to be in London in those days was to look at the world through a dirty window. I later learned lots of Irish Republican Army terrorists lived in Kilburn but no one ever tried to blow me up.

I shared a kitchen and a bathroom, which had a bathtub but no shower and it felt creepy sliding into a bathtub, naked skin to dirty porcelain, that perfect strangers used, and it made me feel I'd gone back to the 1940s. My room was large with a high ceiling that needed paint and to heat the room I had to drop shillings into a meter, each shilling giving me an hour of juice in a small electric heater in front of the bricked-over fireplace. The heater had one bar which gave off enough wattage to melt an ice cube. The meter didn't take enough shillings to keep the heat burning all night, so I'd wake up at three in the morning to find a low pressure system pushing in through the water-stained wall. I could see my breath in the air and I'd taken to wearing a hat in bed to keep my brains from congealing.

I didn't actually know anyone in London. I was supposed to meet Lord Murray for lunch so he could praise me for being a Leverhulme fellow and discuss my research, something about first person dramatized narrators and moral uncertainty in the fiction of Joseph Conrad. I wanted to tell Murray – I assumed we'd drop the lord business and be a couple of pals – well, I planned to explain to good old Murray that I'd made a breakthrough in the history of knowledge and then I'd lay my Lord Jim spiel on him. But I never got around to that. I never actually got around to the British Museum, either.

I didn't feel what you'd call normal in London. Although the English were annoyingly polite they never actually wanted to be friends like, say, New Yorkers who would tell you go fuck yourself and then invite you home to dinner. I wandered the streets of London like a ghost never talking to anyone or doing anything worthwhile or thinking the least bit about Joseph Conrad or his dramatized narrators or, God forbid, his struggle with moral uncertainty. That was his problem. My problem was terminal loneliness and an irresistible urge to admit defeat and slink back to California and sunshine and people who knew me. Because I had no one to talk to, I had begun talking to myself, long monologues involving hand gestures and laughs and snorts. I would talk anywhere, my sense of social decorum having vanished.

And then one day I noticed on a bulletin board outside Queen Mary College, where I was theoretically enrolled, a notice that said concerned Jews were marching on the Soviet embassy to protest the treatment of Soviet Jewry. This was a subject I hadn't given much thought. Soviet Jews had their issues and I had mine. But this was an opportunity. Not just to meet a friend. It was a chance to meet a woman, the right woman from my heritage, someone sympathetic, someone wise and beautiful who would understand the depth of my solitude and restore me to life. Forget that I hadn't stepped into a synagogue in more than a decade, not even for the cheese and wine spread after a bar mitzvah. The next day I walked into a drugstore in Kilburn for the proper accouterments because I was sure whoever she was would fall in love with me on the spot and I wanted to be prepared. I was surprised how much this place looked like Musso and Michaelson's. I almost expected Stuie and Kessler to come strolling through the door. I wanted to ask the man behind the counter for what I needed but I was having trouble with terminology, with how not to give offense, with how to make myself clear without actually saying prophylactics or rubbers or, heaven help us, scumbags. Several older women were hanging out near the counter buying hairspray and stuff like that and that didn't help either. I waited for them to leave while I hid behind the sunglasses rack, but they didn't leave. For all I knew this was the social hub of Kilburn and they'd be there for hours. So I

took a deep breath and walked over to the counter. The druggist, the chemist, whatever they call them, looked my way. His face had a helpful, inquiring expression. At the last minute, I received an inspiration and was glad of it. I said to him, "I need something for birth control." I noticed I had whispered the words as if I was trying to slip them past the posse of women clinging to the counter.

The druggist stared at me, and for the longest while he didn't say a word. Then in a loud, clear voice he said, "Breath control?"

Breath control? Was this guy hard of hearing? A bolt of panic shot through my chest, although a part of me appreciated the concept. Breath control, people all over the world squirting anti-bacterial drops into their mouths for clean-smelling breath, a whole world free of halitosis. I tried again. I leaned over the counter, looked the druggist squarely in the eye and repeated, "I need something for birth control." This time he stared at the women who also had leaned toward me when I'd spoken. "Breath control," he announced to them. They all huddled up like the San Francisco 49ers gathering around Joe Montana. I heard the words breath control repeated several times. I saw heads shaking. Even though all of us were speaking English we were speaking a different language. One of the women said to me in a tone of accusation, "Are you Australian?"

I tried again. Slowly I said, "Birth control. I need something for birth control."

A light bulb of recognition beamed bright above the druggist's head. "Oh," he said, "You've got it all wrong, sonny. Birth control isn't for men. It's for women."

He turned to the women who were clucking their tongues and suppressing giggles. This was becoming a nightmare. I made one last desperate attempt to clarify. "Not for women," I said. "For me."

One of the women walked over to me and slid her meaty arm around my shoulder. "You mean condoms, dear," she said matter-of-factly. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

I wanted to explain I was having linguistic difficulties, but I was sure she couldn't understand. I walked out of there with a jumbo pack. I went home and took a greasy bath and washed my hair and combed it, although I never really felt clean in that city. It was as if centuries of old coal dust had settled on my skin and turned it gray.

I met the Jews near a synagogue and a monitor walked over and politely handed me a lit candle. I said thank you. We began walking toward the Soviet embassy, a whole procession of outraged Jews and me. It was dark and the procession stretched for blocks and the candles flickered and glowed. It felt good to be part of a group. I noticed a young woman walking next to me, dark hair, dark eyes, long dark eyelashes. I was sure her name was Rachel or Ruth or Sarah, some fine Old Testament name. I knew she could understand me. She had ripe peaches for breasts, let me climb among the fruit. I smiled at her. Rachel or Ruth or Sarah smiled back. Her teeth were as white as liquid White Out. I leaned toward her searching for just the right thing to say. "Sure is a nice march," I intoned, breaking the ice. She smiled back. She didn't say anything. I got straight to the point. "What are you doing later?" I asked.

The monitor hurried over to me with a stern look on his face.

"What's up?" I asked.

And then the monitor told me, "This is a silent march."

"A silent march?"

"Yes, a silent march."

"You mean no talking?"

"Shush," he said.

I looked at Rachel or Ruth or Sarah for support. "Shush," she said.

I wanted to say to them, "To hell with your silent march. I need someone to talk to." Now more people were shushing me. A confederacy of shushers.

At the next corner I dropped out of the protest. I figured the Jews could get along just fine without me. On my way to the Bakerloo line I dumped my candle into a garbage can. A half hour later, I slumped into my cold dank room and sat on the bed and saw the water drops near the ceiling and took a deep breath. And from some place down the corridor of years, I'm not sure why, I retrieved the memory of Kessler and I apologized to him because I had laughed at him, which made me

feel like – well there's no better way to put it – I felt like a real scumbag.

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## Lowell A. Cohn

Lowell Cohn is a sports columnist at the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*. Before that he was a columnist at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He has a PhD in English from Stanford. He grew up in Brooklyn and currently lives in Oakland with his family.

### Contributions to Switchback

[Issue 3](#) | [My Introduction to Linguistics](#)



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vs

Maximalism

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Jeremiah Stansbury - Eventual Slide



Todd Chilton - Red Arrows

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Translating Thought to Action



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JUL  
08

### Thacher Art Hour: Still Life Part 2

**WEDNESDAY, JUL 8** 11 a.m. – 12 p.m.

Online - online

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JUL  
08

### Sport Management Information Webinar

**WEDNESDAY, JUL 8** 12 – 1 p.m.

Off-Campus Event - Off-Campus Event - Remote

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### Thacher Art Hour: Origami

**WEDNESDAY, JUL 15** 11 a.m. – 12 p.m.

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Issue 3: Minimalism vs. Maximalism

A Publication of the **USF MFA in Writing Program**

## Ciphers and Constellations

Maria Cielo Ludwig

yellow & green, black-lashed and aren't I spread from margin to margin a  
connect-the-dots of word, water, earth, blood a thumbprint in the upper corner  
identified by this whorl as that woman who isn't a doppelganger but sheaves of  
self while I reflect craters, aspects of moon-flecks in her eye as stars circle and  
close in on a head a body a lack of that scattering which radio-signals tell you is  
the soul, spirit, ghost—an ink line with two speckles, ends standing in for the  
curve of kosmos, the flat of horizon, the break of cloud above my up-stretched  
hand and no star on my eyebrow it's been pulled into the black of temple, that  
which whirls at the apex biting the indecision, the center of that who I know I am  
not and plunder continuously in search of this splinter

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## **Maria Cielo Ludwig**

Maria Cielo Ludwig is a poet and artist currently living in Berkeley, but whose home is somewhere far snowier. Those in the know pronounce 'Maria' like mariah, with a long 'i'; or like the song says, 'they call the wind'.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

[Issue 3](#) | [Ciphers and Constellations](#)