

Stillness vs. Frenzy

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A Publication of the USF MFA in Writing Program

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Founders:

Rosita Nunes (Founding Editor), a graduate of the USF MFA in Writing program, has always had a hand in startups, transitions and turnarounds. She has held many titles over the years, and this one is among the best. Switchback is a project to be proud of, thanks to a continuing flow of talent coming together to bring it life with each issue.

Alex Davis (Co-Founding Editor) has an MFA in Writing from the University of San Francisco. His poems have been published in Five Fingers Review. He has a tattoo with hidden meaning.

Editors:

Kelly Krumrie (Managing Editor) turned in her collection for USF's MFA and is waiting patiently. She relocated to Colorado, to wait, in the snow.

Stephen Beachy (Faculty Advisor) is the author of two novels, *The Whistling Song* and *Distortion*, and most recently the novellas *Some Phantom* and *No Time Flat*, his evil twins. He has been teaching at USF since 1999. Check out his website: <http://www.livingjelly.com>

Colin Bean (Tech Editor) is Yet Another Software Developer living in the Bay Area.

Associate Editors:

Kelci Baughman McDowell is a MFA student, library worker, cynic, social commentator, poet, subculture researcher, and city hillwalker. Check out her blog: <http://kmbm23.blogspot.com>

Lauren Dupuis is a second year MFA student at the University of San Francisco. She has some minor publications in existence and is currently crossing all her fingers and toes that the pieces being considered currently are not rejected. She feels your pain.

Kathryn Hopping is a first year student in the USF MFA in Writing Program. She wrote her first story at the age of seven and discovered that telling lies on paper was socially acceptable. She is currently studying poetry—a great and, until now, unrequited love. Her desire is to find the narrow ledge between poetry and fiction and write both from there. Providing endless material for her writing are her husband, son, two daughters, two step-daughters, an Australian Shepherd, two cats, and several crazed neighbors. She lives and works as a substitute teacher in Alameda, California.

Nicole McFadden obtained a BA in English Literature from the University of Oregon, where she served as a poetry editor for the *Northwest Review*. She is currently a second year student in USF's MFA Program where she is crafting a memoir called *In the Middle of the Street* and a collection of essays about her year in India, where she trained many of the people in a certain tech company to “neutralize” their charming accents. She also teaches English as a Second Language in San Francisco and has taught in Japan, Spain, and India. She recently published an article about teaching around the world in *The CATESOL News*.

Melanie Russo began writing at the age of fifteen after a freak table tennis accident convinced her (and her opponent) that she would never be good at sports. Ever. Many short stories, a few dirty limericks, two punk bands, and one English degree later, she is now studying long fiction at the University of San Francisco's MFA Program in Creative Writing, and is currently working on her very first novel about desert-dwelling, cross-dressing criminals. She kindly requests that if you see her on the street, not to ask her about it.

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Balloon

Jonathan Hammer



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Jonathan Hammer

Jonathan Hammer lives and works in Barcelona and San Francisco. Both works are pencil, colored pencil and gouache on paper, 56 x 64 centimeters. Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Fucares, Madrid.

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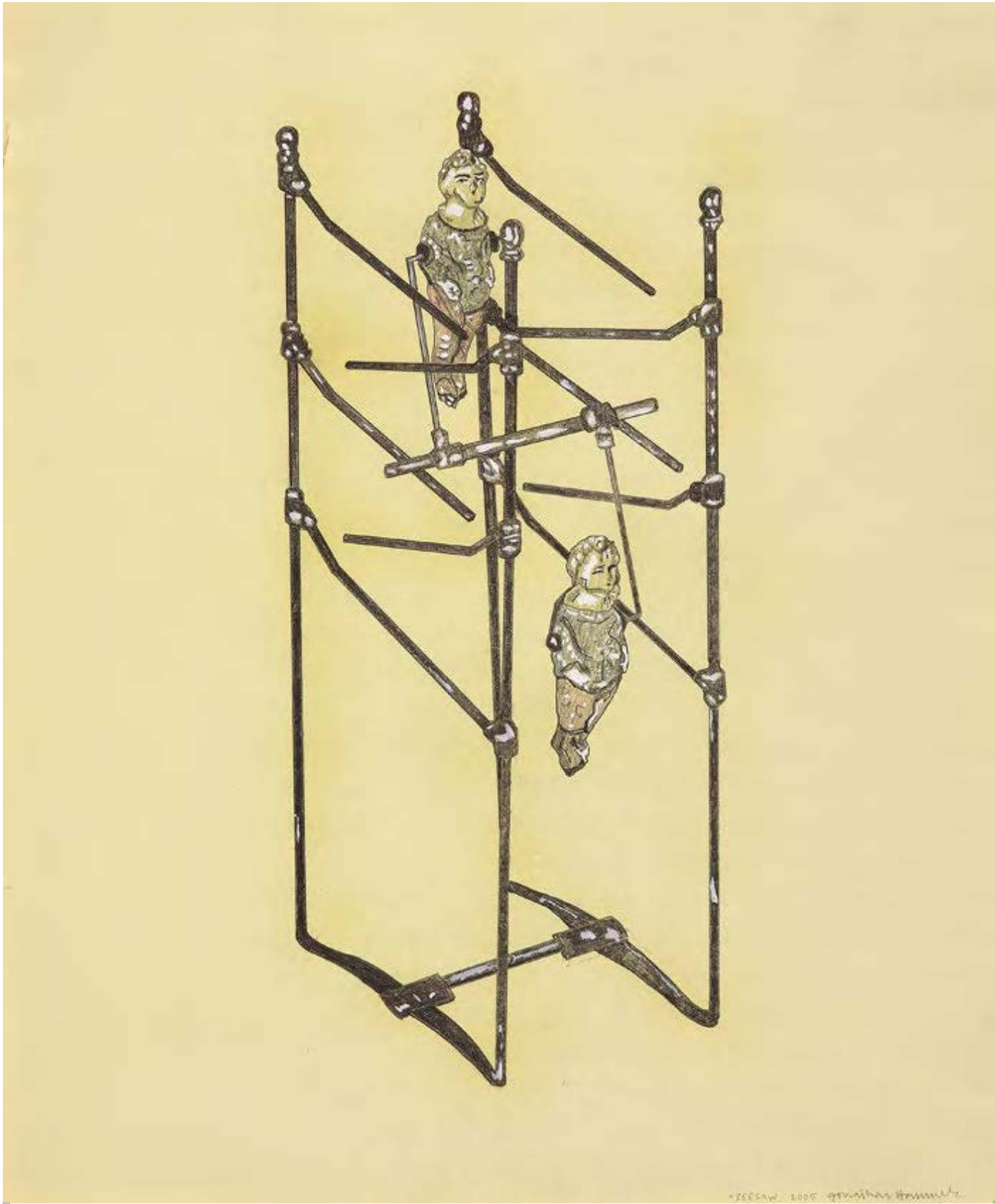
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Seesaw

Jonathan Hammer



Move Me

Alison Barker

When I was young at the ice skating rink, my Dad and I skated and sang to Lionel Ritchie.

You are the sun, you are the rain
(that makes my life this foolish game).

But only for a moment, because then he was ahead, faster than me on the fresh ice, where he'd be the rest of the afternoon.

I skated with my left hand out to feel for the wall, hoping for no sudden movements, watching out for the wool driver's cap and blue parka bobbing above the rest of the smaller puffy pink and red and yellow coated kids. I was big enough to not have to have my mittens attached to my sleeves, I thought gratefully as I watched a kid who was big enough, but whose mittens were still attached to his sleeves.

Kids whizzed dangerously close, but I pursued him steadily. Rounding the makeshift corners (in the summer, this place was used for street hockey) three, four times, I had more and more difficulty guiding my blades into flat spaces. The grooves of other people's feet gave me trouble—if I thought too hard about it, I'd slow down and let myself get hung up in the little ditches. I was small enough for that to really send me into a tailspin.

We reunited on the sidelines to watch the Zamboni do its work. If I were faster, I thought, gazing through the banged up plexiglass, I'd pounce on the stretches away from the wall where the ice stayed the freshest, the flattest. Most people fell there.

It took five yards of planning to slow, brake, slow, brake, hoping the small kids would figure out how to angle their bodies away from me. I skidded into semi-turns, pre-emptive defenses, and lost precious views of him, who used the same obstacles to inspire new speed, new angles.

This time it only took me a few laps to catch up to him in the crowds, but I had taken so long that by then, skating was over and it was time to go home. We unpeeled our skates and our wool socks smushed solidly against the rubber flooring, shocking deliciously. We stood in line to buy hot chocolate with whipped cream in Styrofoam cups.

He bought me a box of Lemonheads, and we walked out into the parking lot. I liked the clacking of the tangy spheres against the sides of their box. Seat belted by his side, in the blue and white van, I crunched through smooth sweet surfaces into hard yellow sourness. The combination repeated with each new lemonhead: Smooth sweet sour hard. Steely Dan was on the radio, but I think we were both still singing the same song inside. Smooth sweet sour hard.

Head after lemony head, I bounced a little too much once we got home, all the way down the hallway with the mirror-lined walls, the kind etched with branch-like lines across the glass surface. I knew the spots where I could see most of my face between the bronze scratches that mimicked nature's underbrush. My furry earmuffs were still on; my blotchy face still throbbed from the exertion of chasing him. A giant, smiling lemonhead on the candy box winked.

"You are the sun!" I shouted.

"You are the rain, babeeee..." My father's distant whistle in the kitchen joined me. I shot my arms up in the air, straining out of their puffy coat sleeves. Streaming music, invisible, connected us even as his footsteps retreated down the stairs to the basement. Head crooning into the candy box mike, I swayed my hips into my best John Travolta, even though corduroys made it hard to move. A muted heartbeat—was it mine?—throbbed and kept up with the song weaving

in and out of my mouth. Glass serpentine mirror arms waved back at me, and I snapped my fingers at the end of each line, “makes my life this foolish game.” A splash echoed my snaps, like a hand brushing against tissue paper at the end of a long tunnel. I smiled into my reflective forest.

You are the sun. I danced farther along the hallway, hearing a drumbeat far away in the basement, I strutted past the bathroom, mouth an o-shaped yodel. I passed the study. You are the rain. On to my bedroom at the end I stepped just once, and the candy in the box rattled a little more and I tilted my head back, the last delicious ball rolled onto the tip of my tongue and almost to the place on the side of my mouth where I could hold it still and taste the sweet before the sour crunch oh but before I could it sprang from my jaw hold and stuck in my windpipe—no going up, no going down—I had no air; my last lemonhead was choking me. It killed all the music except the heartbeats and the splashes, the drumbeats coming from far off in the house, kept the rhythm without my melody. I turned, back through the mirror-lined hallway from my bedroom, past the bathroom and into the kitchen where I last saw him. Besides my head, the rest of my body was walking just like it had been on the way in. With my head, I was a cork jammed. No going up, no going down.

He wasn’t there and I banged a chair against the table to call him.

I returned to the mirror forest: my only witness to certain devastation. Through their crackly brown lines, redness darkened around my cheeks, surprised, breath on pause. The lemonhead did not budge. *These really aren’t my favorite candies*, my brain put its grubby little hands on the dumb details that brains like to think about when you think you might die. Deformed branches wrapped around my arms, chest, pinned the top of my forehead. *I’ve got so much love*. My brain was so dumb that it used song lyrics in place of dying thoughts. *Only you move me*.

I jumped up and down a little. Vice grip locked. Dad wasn’t coming for me. The steady beat got louder and faster, too fast for the song even if I were able to sing it. I clawed at my other self in the mirror. Two heavy lines barbed across the middle of my neck, thick, where I held the tightest part of a scream. I dropped the smiling cardboard box, mangled by my terrified fist. My face curled in strain with each punch I delivered to my stomach. I bent over so far that the shoulders of my coat covered my ears so I barely heard the beating I was making. Finally, I coughed, the block dropped, and air popped back into my head.

The beat continued, and I followed it through the house. I found him in the basement, sitting at his drum set.

His hair clung in sweaty waves against the sides of his head, his arms at work in front of him, one hand holding two criss-crossed sticks, the other using a brush against the snare. My voice hurt, but I yelled anyway. When he stopped his banging, he had to wait for the racket of my crying to die down, waited for me to tell the story in between heaves and sniffing. He didn’t hear that I had been utterly stopped before, airless.

He laid down his drumsticks and came over to me, holding me. But I wanted him to be the one who was made to be still, held in place, with no notion of how things might turn out, when I pushed away from him, demanded, then and at every retelling,

“Where did you go?”

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Alison Barker

Alison Barker is a first year student in the MFA program at Louisiana State University. She is originally from Maryland, where Lemonheads and Lionel Ritchie were once extremely popular. Her micro fiction has appeared in *Pen Pricks Micro Fiction*.

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Move Me

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http://swback.com/issues/008/bios/Alison_Barker.html[7/10/20, 8:58:37 PM]

Challah

Jaydn Dewald

Gregory Stiglitz spent that last February of his marriage picking his two nephews up from school and letting them watch his television and feeding them milk and tunafish on wheatbread and making sure they had their schoolbooks opened when their mother showed up. At that time (around five-thirty) he would be leaning against the doorframe in his undershirt or else sitting on the porchswing with the business section spread out on his lap. His wife's sister was thin and longlegged and redhaired and she wore pantsuits all the time, and these traits intimidated him but he sometimes wished he'd married her instead.

On the last day with his nephews Gregory called them to the dinnertable and presented them with a dark braided polished-looking loaf of bread. "This is a challah, boys," he said, sliding his hands into his slackspockets. "We eat it on special occasions."

"Jews?" said Bryce.

"This is a special occasion," said Gregory. "It is our last meal together."

The boys stared at the challah. Bryce's nose wrinkled up and when Timothy saw his older brother's reaction, his nose wrinkled up too. They seemed not to comprehend the meaning.

"Eat it," said Gregory.

Timothy leaned forward and poked at the challah with his fork but Gregory shook his head no, no, no, and sat in the chair at the head of the table and told them to use their hands, like this, tearing a strand off and shoving it into his mouth and leaning back in the chair and crossing his arms over his chest. The boys laughed and followed. They reached over the table and ripped at the challah and huffed and smacked their lips and Gregory himself couldn't help but chuckle at Timothy's little furrowed brow and the strands of challah he gripped in his little fists.

"Why do Jews eat this stuff?" Bryce said.

"I don't know," said Gregory.

Timothy nodded as if he understood.

Gregory went on watching them. He tore a strand off and began to eat with them, his elbows on the table, looking at them one and then the other, not thinking about anything at all. Then he glanced up at the chair on the other side of the table and he stopped chewing and he shook his head. He didn't know how his life had changed and he didn't know—but he stopped himself. He looked at his watch. (It was five-eighteen.) He rose and he slid his hands into his slackspockets and he said: "Time to crack the books, boys," whereupon they fell to whining and dawdling down from their chairs and he started toward the standing boxes in the frontroom where he thought he'd left the paper.

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Jaydn Dewald

Jaydn Dewald grew up in Sacramento, California, and now lives in San Francisco, where he studies creative writing at San Francisco State University. He is twenty-five years old. This is his first piece of published fiction.

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Challah

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The ID and the Own

Brian Dickson

The big blue bird lives in a garden.
(example sentence used with Kindergarteners to learn adjectives)

Sesame Street drifts
from their brows, inchoate, a jubilee
of personifications. Bloomed

complaints arise, chins lifted:
parents and children collide
over distance, over *have*, a word rented

through the years. What's missed
is the ordinary story. Tensile fingers herd
themselves to the flash cards. Glory be

to *me* and my place and the nixed
moment. Branded, the sentence writes
itself out of choke holds, enters *my garden*.

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Brian Dickson

Brian Dickson spends his time riding his bike, teaching kids and teaching at the college level. Some publications include *Matter*, *Grist*, *Santa Clara Review*, and others.

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One Last Look Before We Pass, Imperfect

Brian Dickson

1.

Today we shall
concern ourselves

with the eyes
and their lucidity.

We'll avoid Medusa,
Beatrice, and Guinevere,

or the directness of God.
Here's what's observable:

our whites, born
from marrow streams;

our irises and pupils,
I hesitate to say *secrets*.

And the cornea—
where was the first place

we saw a broken
mirror of ourselves?

2.

And if we are broken
like oblique light

the image of us upside
down—my rods and cones

screwed to hear
the image right.

3.

Retina:
Speak of sun burn

and I know of much
worse. Our ovals

unmistakable in
distance alter

composition.
How lovely, the image

comes in twos?

How when one ashed
becomes lost

the other engraved
image sings
for the words of away.

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Pas de Deux

Lisa Harper

Fifteen weeks pregnant, I felt it. A quick one-two, a light fluttering punch. A surprise. A tease. A flirty call for attention. *Hey, mom! Look at me!*

“Something moved,” I said. We had been lounging impassively on the couch, but now Kory sat up quickly and placed his hand on my stomach. I held my breath.

“Are you sure?” he asked, disbelieving. I was sure. I had been still, and in spite of me, something inside had moved, jolted, jumped. On the outside, there was absolutely nothing to prove my claim, but I knew that something—*someone*—had moved. Rationally, I knew she had moved before. We had both seen her on those ultrasounds. But something infinitely more primal and more immediate had happened on the couch, and its aftermath was not unlike the seconds after a small earthquake, when everything about the world you know is cast into doubt, when your own terra firma promises to slip away forever, irrevocably, without hope of reprieve or certainty, ever again.

In pregnancy your body moves without your knowing it. Your hamstrings tighten and contract. Your calves seize with odd and unaccountable cramps. In my tenth, my fourteenth, my thirty-second week my body felt battered and worn, more taxed by the hormone Relaxin than it had ever been by any dance class. Some mornings I woke to find my stomach sore, as if I had done a hundred crunches. It became hard to twist my torso, not because of my girth, but because of the pain. My ankles, my knees, my shoulders, but most especially my hips throbbed. All I wanted was to stretch, to rotate my hips and shoulders deep in their sockets. In the dark predawn, I slid out of bed and squatted in the dark. I let my knees, my hips, my pelvic floor give way to gravity and the inevitable, literal widening and loosening of my joints. Years of dance training had taught me much about my body, and movement, and how a body learns to move. But it prepared me not at all for the absolute and startling newness of quickening, that moment when the pregnant woman first feels the baby move inside her. The term comes from the Old English *cwic*, living, live, alive. And in modern terms, it is an archaic notion, since modern technology can perceive life *and* movement long before the woman experiences it. But still, there is something extraordinary about the sensation of something living, moving inside you, and there is something metaphorically startling in the conjoinment of those ideas: movement, life.

I couldn’t have been more than five or six. It was summer and I was lying on my parents’ bed, my feet dangling over the edge. My mother was hanging something in her closet, my father changing his clothes. Blue paisley wallpaper danced up the walls, and I lay still in the childhood calm of merely waiting and being. In this quiet, unassuming moment, with her back turned to me, my mother asked a simple question.

“Would you like to go to Garden State next year?”

Perhaps we had been talking about dancing, or perhaps I had been humming and kicking my feet with that incessant motion that courses through young bodies. The question, like so many others that issued from the far away world of adults, was as unexpected as a snow day and even more welcome.

Garden State School of Ballet was a serious ballet school. Run by Mr. Danielli, a Russian émigré, its main studio was some miles west, in the once vibrant but now derelict city of Newark. By some stroke of serendipity that I understood even as a child, there was a satellite school in my town. Even as a child, I knew that professional dancers began their careers there.

But I had never been inside the studio, which lay behind a glass door next to the town's renowned delicatessen. Sometimes, shopping downtown with my mother, I saw older girls, their hair coiled into important buns, their pale cardigans revealing a window of simple black leotard, their legs long and pink in back-seamed tights. Bags stuffed with slippers, extra stockings, hairpins, even toe shoes, they slipped silently through the glass door. It was an ordinary enough door, but it might as well have been the entrance to Ali Baba's Cave. I knew what transformations occurred within. At the top of those narrow stairs was a studio, a world where girls were taught to do complicated things with their feet. I longed to join them, but it seemed impossible that I would ever be old enough to attend.

In the silence that followed my mother's query I wondered: how did they know? I thought: how could they not know? I thought the world had been dropped at my feet.

"Yes," I said quietly. "I would love to go."

That fall, I entered the studio. I clutched the hem of my circle skirt, my stomach aflutter. But then I stood in the bright, narrow studio, opposite a bank of mirrors, leaning shyly, as the other girls leaned shyly, against the triple rail of bars. The first thing we learned was never to lean against the bar. The second thing we learned was never to wear skirts. We were sent out to our mothers, skirts hanging like wilted flowers from our arms.

And then, the positions. Feet. Arms. Feet and arms together. *Port de bras*. The deep bend of the knees: *plié*, to fold. The extension and point of the foot: *tendu*, to stretch. There were always two things: the dance and the language of the dance. We learned French, but the words themselves were not nearly so foreign as what they signified for our bodies. A small kick of the foot was paltry and weak compared to the staccato burst of a *dégagé*, disengaged, to strike. If we understood *grand plié*, the great fold, our bodies could sink magisterially, until we hovered just above the floor. It was as far from a squat as a puddle from the sea.

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Lisa Harper

Lisa Harper is Adjunct Professor of Writing in the MFAW program at the University of San Francisco. Her writing has appeared in *Gastronomica*, *Literary Mama*, *Lost*, *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, *Switchback*, and *Literary Couplings*. She has completed a memoir, *Inside Out*, and is a contributor to the anthologies, *Mama PhD* (Rutgers, 2008) and the forthcoming *Educating Tastes: Food, Drink, and Connoisseur Culture*. You can find her online at <http://lisacatherineharper.com> & <http://learningtoeatbook.com>.

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Twelve Minutes

Marream Krollos

He opens the door and sees her. She is the one with a lot of dark hair, and the hard voice. She is the one that jokes, the doctor that smiles in these hallways more often than the others. He has seen her before. She is the only one he has heard in the halls. She walks faster than the others and likes to tell the nurses stories. She is the happiest one of them, and they all seem very happy to him.

Yes, you're here. Please take a seat.

He pulls out the chair and pauses, wondering if he will fit. He then sits right in front of her. She looks into his eyes and speaks, smiling.

Congratulations.

She pauses, looking at him, still smiling. Then she begins in what he thinks is her doctor's voice.

You were right. There is something very wrong with you and we should do something about it. We have located a growth in your eyes. It is spreading rapidly towards your brain and throat, however. That would explain the pain you have been experiencing when you look up while you're walking. Oddly enough, it might also explain your inability to laugh without twitching and your physical discomfort when listening to people talk for too long.

He nods. His legs are shaking. He has something to say, but he does not say it. He is waiting.

We could possibly remove both eyes at once, but in your condition, this would ensure that you die immediately. However, with your permission we would like to remove them in two separate surgeries. This would instead allow us to record behavioral data during the time frame between the removal of the first and second eye.

She leans in with her arms on the desk. She is closer to his face.

I will be honest with you, you came here because you were hoping we could help you, but we need your help too. We would really appreciate your cooperation. I want you to know that it is completely up to you though. Whether or not you will take on the risks involved with the process is completely up to you.

So how would it work exactly? You would take one eye out and then you would wait for a while and you would come back for the next eye?

Yes, something like that. If you decide to give us permission to do so we would remove the first eye, wait for you to wake up, then give you twelve minutes by yourself before we remove the other. You have to remember that you would not be sedated and you would need to communicate with us during those twelve minutes.

Well, would I be in pain?

There may be some physical discomfort, certainly. But usually with the removal of the second eye pending, most patients in your condition experience an almost euphoric calm. They understand instantly they no longer have to worry about how they are going to pay for their rent and groceries. They don't need to think about any of their previous regrets concerning what they should or should not have said or done anymore. You may also feel a great deal of relief considering you will be able to eat whatever you want for twelve minutes without worrying about what it will do to you, or the size of your nose and what it is doing to you, or anything really. You know, all those things that everybody else has tried to convince you shouldn't matter but seem to you to be the reason why you don't matter to them very much.

He is shifting in his seat. He is irritated. She thinks she understands him. She looks at him as if he is a child with a cut on his finger. He looks at her as if he is an angry child.

Basically, what we need is to observe and record your behavior. For example, during this time, most of our patients seem to experience a sort of physical release. They don't feel like failures for twelve minutes because they know they don't have to think about being failures anymore. I am not insinuating anything about you personally; this is just what we have observed, in general. Initially, the sensation is so liberating that some patients say they experience a relaxed, invigorating stir throughout their whole body. Some of our patients just spend this time in bed, happily waiting for the other eye to be removed. They enjoy the twelve minutes.


Some patients?

Yes, unfortunately, other patients undergo the regrettable urge to say goodbye, if you will. They want to see people, animals, plants, objects one more time. Of course, we make sure that they cannot leave the grounds of the hospital. However, despite the nurses' objections they tend to venture out into the courtyard to touch things just one more time. At this point, they say that color becomes so very vivid to them that they almost feel as if light is pleasantly putting pressure against their faces. This is the only time we find our patients are prey to the use of words like "beautiful" to describe things. I will read some of what the little poets have said so far.

She opens a drawer and takes out a folder. She flips through chuckling occasionally. She settles on a page and reads in a mocking seriousness.

Our patients have expressed the following, I quote: "texture alone has become a cause for celebration," and "scents have turned into various booths at single second festivals." All this information is taken down in interviews done right before the removal of the second eye. Needless to say, for us it is invaluable information.

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Marream Krollos

Marream Krollos is currently attending Denver University.

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Shadowmen

Philip Byron Oakes

An anonymity of the innocuous, saving bells the trouble of ringing the perimeter with palm trees. Scrap iron moustaches disguising glottal stops, with stutters taking tympani to quiet time. Body's better bluster, worn in echoes of voices suspended from active duty for violating a whisper in the dark. An octopus in the jungle. An elephant in the deep blue sea. Little Mr. Invisible, sized for handcuffs in the emporium of guilty pleasures. The rudimentary collusion of events in the making taking turns. The diabolical applying for certificates of normalcy, in the amber light of postcards to the cousin who never could. The ventriloquist who never would say why.

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Philip Byron Oakes

Philip Byron Oakes’s work has appeared in numerous journals, and is presently viewable on the internet in *Otoliths* (6, 8, and 9), *Glitterpony* (3), *Sawbuck* (1.6), *Cricket Online Review* (IV.I), *zafusy*, *Horseless Review* (5), *Hamilton Stone Review* (13), and *My Name is Mud*, among others.

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Mollusk-Consistency

Talia Reed

easy to swallow her and mash out the
fish frame. crack the spindles with your metal
fork. incineration bone grain.

to cover her like the glove swallows the hand.

a deadpan adrenaline
drain, dripping into his coffee can.

living a few feet below everyone,
she forgets, *it isn't real what you feel.*

when she wakes up to the untempered
air, flapping her on the line
and the wrath of the seasoned pan,

the human burn.

the plates will shift. eager to swallow and
reseed. it's the legacy of the meat
fattening on the bone.

Talia Reed

Talia Reed graduated from Indiana University in 2008 with a degree in Secondary English Education. Her poems have appeared in/are forthcoming from *Arsenic Lobster*, *elimae*, *Avatar Review*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Wicked Alice*, *Main Street Rag*, and others. She has written reviews for *MiPOesias Magazine* and *Rain Taxi Review of Books*. She has a column, “Babbling and Strewing Flowers,” that debuted summer of 2008 in *Oranges & Sardines*, and she occasionally writes for her local newspaper, *South Bend Tribune*.

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Tattoo Woman

Mark Richardson

She had no tattoos when she left him. Just white twenty-two-year-old skin. It wasn't her skin, necessarily, that he thought about while at the gym or when eating at a Chinese restaurant or when pumping gas at the station off Santa Monica Blvd., where homeless men with brown paper bags offered to clean his windshield for a dollar. But he missed touching her skin. Not missed—ached—from its absence. The ache compelled him to drive up to Portland and plead with her to come back. Actually, he only made it as far north as Monterey—his bold, Dusty Hoffman gesture thwarted by a faulty carburetor. Then the ache turned to anger. So he burned her letters, tossed the photos, and pledged to forget her. And he did.

Now ten years later he sat on her sofa. She'd loosened her blouse and his eyes locked on the butterfly tattoo on the nape of her neck.

"You have five tattoos?"

"Yes, I know, crazy. I thought I was immortal. I have to wear these long sleeves at work," she said, lifting both arms.

Her arms: that's not where his mind went earlier in the evening at the art gallery when she first told him of her tattoos. He pictured a "tramp stamp" on her lower back; they peek out above blue jeans when young women bend over. Do these women realize that men inevitably think, Oh, that's what I'd be looking at if I were fucking her from behind?

He hadn't recognized her at the gallery. He did notice a woman with cropped black hair watching him with unusual interest as he circled the room. But when she approached him and said—"Andreas, it's me. Stacey."—it took a moment to register.

The years had hardened her. She looked more militant, like she'd been practicing martial arts. And her chest, before so full, was flattened; her weight had shifted down to her muscular legs—once an apple, now a pear. All-black attire augmented her stern appearance; slacks and a blouse tightly holding her body, even the butterfly covered. She stood rod straight, laughed only once, and neither smiled or moved when Andreas pinched her sleeve and said, "Are you going to show me your tattoos?" But when he said goodbye and tried to break away she dragged him into a cab, insisting that he join her at her Pacific Heights apartment for a drink ("Leave me? No, no—I insist!").

She leaned closer to him on the sofa. "It's good to see you again, Andreas."

"It's nice to see you as well."

She rose, went to the kitchen and called back, "More wine?" They had already finished a bottle. "Is red again okay?"

"Fine." He reached over and lifted a framed photo off the coffee table: black and white, Stacey and a man hand-in-hand on a beach.

She returned and refilled his wine glass. “Oh—that’s him. We still haven’t set a date, but the plan is sometime next spring. Or summer, perhaps.”

“Do you love him?”

“Do I love him? What a question,” she said. She sat down again, poured some more wine in each of their glasses and took a sip from hers.

For years he had fantasized of one day meeting Stacey again. It played out like a movie: Andreas bumping into her at a bar or restaurant, a leggy blond on his arm. They’d talk only briefly, pleasantly, and he would say something like, “The years have been good to you, kid.” And then Andreas and the blond would continue on to the opera, or a Springsteen concert, or some other sexy venue.

“Does it matter?” Stacey continued.

“Not to me,” he answered.

“Okay...then just be happy for me.”

He took his glass to the window and looked out. Perhaps some wounds remain open. Outside there was a yellow metal balcony, a fire escape. He supposed she had a view but he couldn’t see it; fog had rolled in covering San Francisco like white cake frosting. He could just make out the street below, catching glimpses of red taillights from passing cars. He took a healthy swig, then shifted the glass to the other hand and swirled the wine for a minute. It felt heavy, awkward, so he held it with both hands.

“I’m surprised no one’s scooped you up,” she said.

“Surprised?”

“I told my fiancée that you prepared me for him. My only other nice guy.”

“How could you just leave?” he asked. “Just tell me that. One day you’re there and the next you’re gone. Just gone.”

“You knew I was going to leave!” she said, surprised and agitated. “That was always the plan. You changed the agreement, and...I just couldn’t handle it.”

It was true: he had changed their agreement. He knew she was going to leave. He even helped complete her grad school applications—stretched out on the futon in her bedroom; her parents asleep down the hall. They’d listen to David Bowie CDs. But one night, after she returned from a weekend retreat with some of her new-age friends, Stacey said:

“They told me my third-eye is wide open. I know your eye is shut.” He took this as a signal to propose, his third eye clamped closed.

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Issue 8: Stillness vs. Frenzy

A Publication of the USF MFA in Writing Program

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Mark Richardson is a writer living in the San Francisco Bay Area. He has published non-fiction pieces in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Reuters*, *Literary Traveler*, and *Dusty Shelf*. “Tattoo Woman” is his first published work of fiction. He is a graduate of the University of Iowa.

Contributions to Switchback:

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Denouement

Harbeer Sandhu

I

Billy woke up one morning, as he did every morning. He yawned and stretched his arms and arched his back, sat up, and scanned the cold hard-wood floor with his two big toes for his velour slippers. He put his feet on the slippers, stood up, shuffled over to the bathroom door, stepped off of the slippers and onto his bath rug, and closed the door behind him.

Billy turned his back to the toilet bowl and pushed his plaid pajama bottom down to his calves. He slowly bent his knees and leaned forward at the waist, preparing to lay his bare buttocks on the cold toilet seat. He stopped. He looked back to ensure that the seat was down and that the toilet paper dispenser was stocked. Satisfied, he turned back around and lowered himself onto the toilet seat, then nearly jumped when the seat greeted his warm cheeks with a cold kiss.

Billy sat on the toilet with his elbows on top of his pajamas on top of his knees, cradling his chin in his palms, staring at the bathroom door before him, wondering why he bothered to close and even lock the door when he never had visitors. He wondered why he wondered. He wondered if he wondered too much, then remembered the time and what he was doing. He cleaned himself, washed his hands with soap and water, dried them, and stepped into the shower.

He opened the hot water tap to flush the cold water out of the pipes, then slowly added cold water to make the temperature bearable. He turned the shower head away from himself and pressed the lever to turn the shower on. Thin jets of water shot out the shower head and bounced off the wall. Billy cautiously put his right hand in the stream of water and, satisfied with the temperature, turned the shower head to place himself beneath the stream.

II

Billy closed the car door and buckled his seat belt. He slid the key into the ignition and pumped the gas pedal a few times, then held the pedal down and turned the key. The car started. He revved the engine to warm it and turned the heater on, removed his gloves and set them on the passenger seat and rubbed his hands together.

Billy leaned forward and tapped the steering wheel a few times at the ten and two o'clock positions with his fingertips. He rubbed his hands together, breathed into them, then rubbed them together again. He quickly gripped the wheel at those positions and twisted his hands back and forth like he was revving a motorcycle. He let go and sat back, then leaned forward and tapped the back of the gear-shift lever with his fingertips, rubbed his hands on his pants, grabbed the lever, pushed down on the brake pedal, and put the car in reverse.

III

Thompkins Street 2 mi, the freeway sign before Billy read. *2 Miles...* Billy thought of his grandmother's cat, Miles. *Miles smiles miles away*, Billy thought and smiled, pleased with his wordplay. *Miles smiles miles away...*

Billy exited the freeway at Thompkins Street. He looked at the green digital clock on his dash and saw that he was half-an-hour early. Traffic was unusually light that morning. He decided to treat himself for being ahead of schedule, so he turned the car into the driveway of a hamburger chain by the freeway overpass. Billy was amazed to see only two cars in the parking lot of the normally crowded restaurant. He drove up to the large drive-thru menu and glanced over the

yellow section which was devoted to breakfast foods. He could not decide between a bacon-egg-and-cheese muffin and a breakfast taco. He visualized himself holding a muffin and taking a bite, and wondered if he would want to take another. Just as he was about to imagine taking a taco bite a metallic voice rattled his window, startled him out of his reverie, and made him hit his head on the car's ceiling.

Billy rolled down his window.

--Welcome to Burger Bonanza, can I take your order?

--Two breakfast tacos, please.

--Would you like anything to drink with that?

A nice cold beer... Billy thought... *An ice cold beer.*

--No, thank you.

He rolled up his window and drove to the side of the restaurant. He leaned to his left and removed his wallet from his right back pocket. He took out a five-dollar bill. The man inside the restaurant opened the restaurant window and put out his hand. Billy rolled down his car window and handed the man the money, then rolled his window back up. The man made change at the cash register and put his hand out of the restaurant window to give Billy his change. Billy rolled down his window and took the change, then rolled the window back up. The man left the window and came back with a bag. He put two napkins in the bag and extended his hand to Billy.

IV

Billy parked his car and removed the keys from the ignition. He put on his left glove and took the office key in his right hand. He picked up the bag of tacos with his gloved hand and exited the car. He closed the door and walked to the office entrance and was surprised to find the door locked. He unlocked the office door and entered. He turned the lights on. He went to the thermostat and turned on the heat. He went into the break room and put his things down and put on a pot of coffee. He removed his left glove and put it in his coat pocket, then took off his coat and hung it in the coat closet.

Billy removed the napkins from the bag, then the tacos. He found three tacos in the bag. He checked the receipt. He had paid for only two. He was overjoyed. He wondered if he should go back and return the third taco, then realized that the restaurant, assuming that Billy had tampered with it, would probably not take it back. He wondered if he should go back and pay for it, but decided that paying for the mistakes of others was not his responsibility. Besides, if he did that today, the next time Billy ordered two tacos, the man inside might give him four in order to sell more tacos. Billy shrugged and smiled and tucked his tie into his pocket and proceeded to unwrap a taco. He ate it. He unwrapped the second and ate half of it, then decided to put the remainder of it, along with the third taco, away for lunch. He replaced the tacos in the bag and opened the refrigerator door.

Half of Abraham Lincoln's and all of George Washington's face looked up at Billy from atop a half-eaten cake. Billy covered his face with both of his hands. He cursed himself for forgetting the President's Day holiday.

V

Billy was walking down the street with a grocery bag when he remembered that he had forgotten something. He had reminded himself not to forget, but all he could remember now was that he was not to forget something. Exactly what, he did not recall.

Billy realized that he would not be able to remember if he consciously attempted to, so he thought other thoughts. He thought about the summer time, and how he hated getting in his car after it had been sitting in the sun. He thought about the winter, about how he always looked forward to the first snowfall, and about how he always dreaded the second snowfall.

He stood on the sidewalk holding his grocery bag, took a deep breath and stared at the sky, whistled, and tried not to think of what he had forgotten.

Billy saw a woman approaching. *Alas!*, he thought. *Alas a lass!* He considered speaking to her.

--*Hey pretty lady.*

--*Hiya, handsome. What's a good looking guy like you doing just standing in the middle of the sidewalk holding a bag of groceries?*

--*Waiting for you, what else?*

--*But why the bags?*

--*Why, to exhibit my manly strength, of course.*

--*Of course. Ha, ha! Silly me! What was I thinking?*

--*You were probably just taken aback by my dashing good looks and brash salutation.*

--*You have SUCH insight into a woman's mind.*

--*What can I say?*

--*Say you'll marry me!*

The lady drew nearer and Billy looked back up at the sky. She passed. He watched her walk down the street and around the corner.

Billy remembered what he had forgotten--he was supposed to buy milk. He went back to the supermarket.

VI

Billy sat down to write a story; he didn't know where to start. He hit the paper release lever on his typewriter and realigned the page, then pressed the lever again and rolled the knob on the side to bring the top of the page back down. He popped his knuckles and made typing gestures as he brought his hands down on top of the keys and made his fingers dance across their surface. He took a deep breath and put his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair.

Billy stood up and crossed his arms. He walked over to his window and looked out. He made sure the window was closed all the way, then walked over to the thermostat and turned up the temperature. He paced the length of his bed.

Billy walked into his kitchen and turned the light on. He opened the fridge and took out his bag of tacos. He put the remaining one-and-a-half tacos on a plate and opened the door to his microwave. He set the microwave for one minute, pressed the start button, and threw away the taco wrappers.

A minute passed; the microwave beeped. Billy took the tacos out of the microwave and put them on the counter. He removed a glass from the cupboard and poured himself a glass of milk. He put on a pot of coffee and sat down to his tacos and milk.

Billy wondered what to write about. He finished eating and put his dishes on the counter next to the sink. He opened the hot water tap, then added a little cold. He wet his sponge and put some detergent on it. He scrubbed and rinsed his plate and drinking glass, then put them on the drying rack. He turned the water off and dried his hands with the towel hanging on the oven door handle.

Billy took a coffee mug from the cupboard and poured himself a mug of coffee. He turned the kitchen light off and went back to his bedroom and set the mug down on a coaster next to his typewriter. He sat down on the edge of his bed with his elbows resting on his knees and his chin cradled in his palms. He watched the white steam rise out of the coffee mug sitting next to his black typewriter.

Billy stood up and stepped over to his desk, pulled his chair out and sat down. He lifted his mug, slurped a sip of coffee, and replaced the mug on the coaster. Billy began to type.

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Harbeer Sandhu

Harbeer was a popular drink and he still is. He gets more props and stunts than Bruce Willis.

Contributions to Switchback:

Issue 8: Stillness vs. Frenzy | Denouement

Issue 5: Independent vs. Representative Voice | Applied Algebra

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On My Acquaintance with H.K., Recent Break-Out Director and Toast of the Indie Film Circuit

Ingrid Satelmajer

He had a breath spritzer, and we called him Alex P. Keaton behind his back.

J., the guy who came up with the nickname, dated E., my best friend and college roommate, and in high school, we'd set the periodic table to pop tunes in three-part harmony. We were ambitious—honors students with scholarships and goals—but we liked to include others in the joke, so there was nothing mean in the nickname. Still, there was something funny—as in laugh at, not with—about this kid, H.K.

Short. Dark hair, side part. Tinted glasses. Khakis. And that spritzer. *Chicka Chick*. He pulled it out mid-conversation the first time we met, and I couldn't tell if he was clueless or brave. *Act with confidence, and the confidence will make your actions right*.

In the recent photo I've seen of H.K., the one that comes up on movie sites reviewing his “groundbreaking” effort, he's ditched the glasses, lost the spritzer. He must have other tactics now for his breath, which was stale and heavy. Listerine strips implanted on the inside of his cheeks. Slide fresh ones in when morning comes, and you'll coo directions into Kate Winslet's ear for another twenty-four hours. Because that's who he directed in his sophomore effort. Kate fucking Winslet. I spent two hours reading Google results after I heard the news.

I met H.K. in Honors Accounting 101, fluorescent lights bearing down on our go-go late-eighties optimism. Still, he kept popping up like he didn't know me.

“Not to sound like a bad pickup line, but has anyone ever told you that you look like Jennifer Gray from *Dirty Dancing*?” It was a week later, and we were the first students to show for a history study group. The library study room, although open, had no lights on yet.

I'd heard that line a lot my high school senior year, once from an old man on an airplane.

“A real homely girl,” he closed the compliment with his wife right by his side. “But she's got a spark in her.”

Like most of the people I knew—including H.K., who makes a big deal about this in every profile I've read about him—my family had religion, not movies. So I hadn't even understood the kid who first said it to me.

“She's a movie star,” he'd explained, and that's all I'd needed. The idea that someone out there, my double, was living a charmed life. Every time I heard it, I liked how it sounded like the start of a blind date.

I started taking late-night walks with H.K. He spent most of his time with E., J., and me—meals in the cafeteria, study sessions in the college library. Still, things had picked up between E. and J. So when they took off together each night after our evening accounting class, my path with H.K. seemed clear. Our college—small, parochial, protected—filled the center of a New England town where the biggest crime news hailed from over three hundred years earlier: Mary Rowlandson's capture by “Indians” during King Philip's War. Ten o'clock ambles were safe.

One favorite route cut through a neighborhood, right by what E. and I had dubbed “The Dream House.” A small cape cod on a hill, lights on in the front windows. E. and I reconciled through it our dreams of high-flying ad exec career plans and domestic bliss—ran down the hill in our minds to embrace ideal husbands. We'd give up our lucrative jobs for a few years to raise their perfect little babies. H.K. was never that man.

Still, it didn't hurt to walk with him. And argue.

“You mean you like everyone that you love? Distant grandparents? Awkward cousins?” I fell too often to questions for my defense.

“I mean I’d look long and hard at what I meant by that word ‘love.’”

He won, but I knew who was out of step. He was formal. We all were heading for casual.

“If we were dating,” he said two nights later, “I wouldn’t let you walk next to the street. A man should never let the lady that he’s with walk unprotected.”

“It’s a neighborhood road, idiot.” But I didn’t push the point. He’d let me take the street side without a fight.

“Listen,” he stopped on the third night. “We should watch ourselves.” His breath filled the autumn night, but he didn’t look so bad anymore. “I’m concerned about us hanging out all the time with E. and J.”

I just let him talk.

“You know. Since the four of us spend a lot of time together, and since E. and J. are dating. I just don’t want people to think . . .”

He transferred to Harvard after our first semester.

But first. Manipulated class officer elections. Won “President” for his Harvard application; bumped J. down to his Vice. Tried recruiting E. and me as their photocopy-making “assistants.” Fell in love—as everyone did back then—with E.

All three of us kept our distance from H.K. after that.

Still, when he left, we had to hand it to him. We were ambitious, smart, but nobody we knew ever had tried to make that dream come true. He was our success story. Think *The Secret of My Success*. Starring Michael J. Fox.

Or what E. reminds me of now, when I call to dish about the *New Yorker* piece I saw about H.K.’s movie.

“Don’t you remember how he saw himself as Charlie Sheen’s character? In *Wall Street*?”

It makes me remember how J. came across a story—right after H.K. left, right before E. broke up with him, right before it ended up being E.—just E.—and me.

“H.K. ran into problems in high school,” he told us. “Sold the band’s instruments, or some scam like that. Told them he was helping them, but pocketed the money for himself.” We had gone up to New Hampshire that Sunday for pancakes, but the wait was 20 minutes. So we were sitting outside on a bench in the cold. E. had my head on her lap, but she’d been pushing J. away, who was hanging all over her. Then J. told us that story, I sat up, and E. pulled him close. Our breath sent out plumes as we laughed.

Still, I never knew if I could believe him. J. got desperate when E. started losing interest in him. But who’d blame him? He never quite got E., never quite got what she was trying to become. But really. Who’d blame him? Not even me.

Last month, when H.K. popped up on my computer screen, I looked up E.’s number.

We’d fallen out of touch a long time ago—even before E. got married during the middle of our senior year. Different paths, different interests. E. dating the guy she later would marry. Me working to bring up my G.P.A.—I’d messed up some classes at the end of my freshman year.

But then H.K. showed up—the name, the announcements, then the face. We’ve talked almost every day since.

We’ve got time. E.’s been at home with her kids for six years. I’m between jobs, and my husband works late every night. So I’ve been thinking I might visit her up in Saugus for a while.

I still haven’t told her my plan.

“Technically innovative,” she reads from the *New Yorker*. “Masterful directing.”

“He lives with his wife in L.A.” I’ve reached the end. “They’ve got a dog. They walk it every night.” Then, “Hey, E. Remember that house?” She doesn’t say anything. But I know we’re still connected.

I don’t even mean how we decorated the whole thing. Every room, one by one. Night after night walking past there, together, that year after she and J. broke up. Once, after the house had been put up for sale, we found a door unlocked in the back. E. wouldn’t follow me in, so I came back to her in the entry, and then we’d stayed there, just sat there, for almost an hour. Later, the women’s dean called us into her office. She knew it was the week before finals, but it was the third

time--she'd been counting--that we'd come back so late. She had prayer with us because "Girls can feel temptation for each other too." Then assigned us to different rooms.

All I mean is —. "There's a picture. Hey, E. Check it out. Would you check out H.K.?"

One page over: side profile, chin on his hand. Not like he's resting. Like he's got somewhere to go. And he needs, more than anything, for you to believe that.

Ingrid Satelmajer

Ingrid Satelmajer’s fiction is published or is forthcoming in *The Massachusetts Review*, *the minnesota review*, *Talking River*, and *The Sand Hill Review*. She also has articles published in *Book History*, *American Periodicals*, *Textual Cultures*, the *Blackwell Companion to Emily Dickinson*, and *Cultural Narratives* (forthcoming). Currently a lecturer at the University of Maryland, College Park, she’s at work on her first novella.

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from *field guide*

Laura Walker

blue grosbeak

in poor light to resemble

she stood with her back to the lamp

by second winter

a habit of twitching

overgrown field

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Laura Walker

Laura Walker grew up in North Carolina and now lives in Berkeley. She is the author of *rimertown/ an atlas* (UC Press, 2008) and *swarm lure* (Battery Press, 2004). Her work has appeared in various journals, including *26*, *Five Fingers Review*, *Xantippe*, and *Bird Dog*. She has taught creative writing at UC Berkeley Extension and San Francisco State, and is very happy to be teaching this semester at the University of San Francisco.

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