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Melody L. Heide

Melody L. Heide is a writer based in Minnesota. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Beard Literary Magazine* and *Blue Lake Review*. She just completed her MFA in creative writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato and when she's not writing or teaching, she walks in the woods and visits family. And art museums. And eats. Mostly chocolate, but other things here and there.

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At Night, Cooking By The Garage
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At Night, Cooking By The Garage

Melody L. Heide

It is Saturday evening and outside he grills pork chops. I sit inside the garage at the Coleman picnic table (heavy, small, square. The chair is not a chair -- just a piece of red fabric strung between two pieces of metal). I am reading poetry. The little black dog chews his bone, the same bone he growled at me over last night when I tried to take it from him, which led me to shout NO! BAD DOG! and him, him, to drop the bone, crawl along the floor, ears back and eyes meeting mine, large and pleading. WeÕve all got to have our vices, our territories, the things we hold so dearly onto. Me, itÕs cooking in the kitchen, and when the husband asks for advice I tell him the grill is his domain and he grins and says, *My woman* with such tenderness in his voice, it makes me want to stop reading poetry, start writing it. A couple of weeks ago we had a fight because he hadnÕt cooked raw chicken within two days of purchasing. He said, *Well, itÕs not like IÕm some guy who buys chicken and keeps it in the cupboard*. And it was so funny, imagining raw chicken stuffed between the sheets and the towels, that we both started laughing.

He cuts up some apples, arranges them carefully on the meat and the sweet scent mingles with dirt and oil. The food sizzles. He asks me to read a poem out loud:

Arriving here
is a surprise, like getting what youÕve always wanted
but never thought youÕd have-the last piece
of peach pie, all the first editions of your favorite writer-
not to sell, just to keep-that longed for kiss, someone
knowing, really knowing, just how you feel.[1]

It was like this in the early days, this reading poetry out loud to one another, of slow evenings and curious meals. ItÕs like this now too, but only when we make time for it. He returns to his grill and I return to my book. Sort of. Not really. Instead, I take a closer look around to what heÕs done with the place. Back in July, when we were still settling into our new apartment, he took three days and organized the garage. Our bikes hang by hooks on the back wall. The green canoe, the same one that was our home for a month, is above my head, held up by a system of ropes and pulleys. And on the wall, a poster of *The Dukes of Hazzard*, General Lee airborne.

A family arrives from somewhere, parking in the spot across from our garage. A dad, little boy and little girl. Suitcases and pillows and sucking thumbs and tired eyes. TheyÕve traveled far -- from home, or towards home? The dad takes the little boyÕs hand, whispers something and they all laugh and I know *here* is some semblance of home. My own husband bends over the grill, scoops the apples onto a plate, flips the chops. ÒI think theyÕre done, babe, why donÕt you come take a look.Ó I place my hand on his back, look closely, say, ÒThatÕs alright, if you think so.Ó

We pack up, close the garage door, the leash in my hand. WeÕve made up since last night, the little black dog and I, and in the morning I will cook the eggs, the oatmeal. My husband will turn on the radio, play some music with a rock and roll beat, and I will take a moment to dance around the kitchen with the little black dog in my arms.

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[1] ÒGratificationÓ by Susan Wood

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Nicole Lassen

Nicole Lassen currently resides in Fresno, California where she writes, teaches and studies Creative Nonfiction as a MFA student at California State University of Fresno. Among other things, she is an editorial assistant at The Normal School and prestigious judge of her five-year-old daughterÕs artwork.

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10 Rules to Remember Before Stepping on the Scale

Nicole Lassen

1. Do not question the scale
    1.1. Do not think about the reasons for which we have scales, or measurements, or identifications of worth
    1.2. Just know that this scale works
    1.3. It is never wrong
    1.4. You will adhere to the following rules with pleasure
    1.5. Just as those have before you
    1.6. Just as those who will follow you
    1.7. Because this mode of measurement is effective
    1.8. It will not change

2. You must step on the scale every day to retrieve your number
    2.1. More than once a day
        2.1.1. The more the better
    2.2. Even though it is recommended that you should restrict scale use to once a week, you will do it every day
        2.2.1. It may even be recommended that you should not retrieve your number at allÑthat you should concentrate on *well being, energy, fitness,* and *good spirits*
            2.2.1.1. You will not listen to this
    2.3. You must have your number revealed to you
        2.3.1. Because you must
    2.4. And you must live by this number every day, or hour, depending on your scale usage

3. You will always remember that your number is a measurement of your self-worth
    3.1. If you do not meet the expected number, you must not eat or drink until you meet the perfect number
        3.1.1. You must not smell food
            3.1.1.1. The inhalations of these calories will affect your number
        3.1.2. You must not even look at food
            3.1.2.1. The imagining of consuming food will affect your number
        3.1.3. It is inspiring to know that if you stop now, how long you can go without food or drink
            3.1.3.1. The rest of your life
            3.1.3.2. Do you understand this yet
                3.1.3.2.1. *Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels*
    3.2. If you want people to respect you, and your life, you will stick to the guidelines set here
        3.2.1. Because everybody cares about your number, and they will respect and honor you when your number decreases
        3.2.2. You must also give updates to people on your number, so they know how much to respect and honor you
    3.3. This number tells you who you are

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3.4. This number reveals your identity

3.5. You must face the number that tells you who you are and what you are worth

3.5.1. The lower the number, the more you are worth

3.5.1.1. ItÕs true

4. Rules for Scenarios

4.1. If a person you would like to date tells you he would only date you if you lost some numbers, let that motivate you to lose numbersÑhe is not an asshole, he is honestÑand you admire honesty, in whatever form

4.2. If your mother bribes you with a boob job (or a booty job) (or any kind of curve enhancing job) (or any kind of job) (or really any kind of bribe at all)Ñonly if you lose some numbersÑ(because the only place you donÕt gain numbers is in the chest or ass, or perhaps once you lose numbers, it will unavoidably shrink the progress youÕve made in cup or ass size) *take that chance*Ñshe is not insensitive, she just knows what men and women like, and at her age, she was half your size, so itÕs understandable if she is sad for you (or embarrassed of you) that you donÕt look as good as she did at her age; you should be sympathizing with her (itÕs really quite selfish of you to take it so personally) because she is only looking out for what is best for you; she wants you to be *healthy*Ñor marriedÑwhichever comes first

4.3. If you compete in food competitions as a young child with your brother to see who can eat the most food the fastest; know that it will have an effect on how fast you unknowingly eat mass quantities of food as an adult; and you must therefore live with not eating anymore, since you have already consumed your allotted allowance

4.4. If your best friend in second grade starts you on a diet and exercise plan, take her adviceÑshe, after all, must know what she is doing, she is five numbers less than you

4.5. Surround yourself only with people who have lower numbers than you, this will keep your self-esteem low enough to motivate you to have a lower numberÑonce your number is lower than your friendsÕ numbers, find new friends and repeat

5. You will not be happy until you reach the perfect number

5.1. DonÕt let anyone talk you out of it

5.2. It is not whatÕs on the inside that counts

5.2.1. There is no inner beauty

5.2.2. People do not have

5.2.2.1. *Character*

5.2.2.2. *Or personality*

5.2.2.3. *Or charm*

5.2.2.4. *Or intelligence*

5.2.2.5. *Or wit*

5.2.2.6. *Or humor*

5.2.2.7. *Or kindness*

5.2.2.8. *Or generosity*

5.2.2.9. *Or anything*

5.3. People only have the perfect number

6. Step on the scale

6.1. Naked

6.1.1. Always naked

6.1.2. Because you need an accurate measurement

6.1.2.1. If you do not have an accurate measurement, your number will not be valid

6.1.2.1.1. Clothes, and jewelry, and hair hinder your true number

6.1.2.1.1.1. ItÕs best to retrieve one's number hairlessÑI recommend waxing, as it removes the hair follicle in its entirety

6.1.2.1.1.2. Every little bit counts

6.1.2.1.2. I also recommend using the bathroom before retrieving ones number

6.1.2.1.2.1. The above rule only applies to those rule breakers who eat

6.1.2.1.2.1.1. Remember that you need an accurate measurement to refer back to the next time you get your number

6.1.2.1.2.1.2. An accurate measurement is needed to plan your day accordingly

7. Have your scale placed in front of a mirror

7.1. A front mirror and a back mirror and a magnified mirror

7.1.1. This is to examine all flaws

7.1.2. This will motivate you

7.2. Remember the following when looking in the mirror

7.2.1. No matter what you may believe the popular consensus isÑcurves are not sexy

7.2.1.1. Ever

7.2.2. Look at yourself, if you possess any curve, dimple, role, pudge, or any layer other than bone and skinÑsee rule 3.1

7.2.2.1. You should only see the white of your bones pressing against your skinÑbecause that is all you are

7.2.2.2. You should only focus on imperfection

7.2.3. People care what your body looks like

7.2.4. People imagine you naked, and if they donÕt, you want them to

7.2.5. You want to be desirable

7.2.5.1. Your life depends on it

7.3. You must face your appearance as you face your number

7.3.1. You must look at your body as your lover would

7.3.1.1. If your lover is not satisfied with your appearance, your lover will not love you

7.3.1.1.1. Or fuck you

7.3.1.1.2. Or sleep with you

7.3.1.1.3. Or be near you

7.3.1.2. If your lover is not satisfied with your appearance, your lover will find a better lover

7.3.1.3. If your lover is not satisfied with your appearance, chances are your next lover will also be unsatisfied

8. Always sympathize or empathize with people who have trouble gaining numbers

8.1. They have it harder than you realize

8.1.1. Really

9. DonÕt blame your underachieving number on your disease, or your pregnancy, or your bone density

9.1. People donÕt care about your excuses

9.2. People donÕt care about your hypothyroidism

9.2.1. Hypothyroidism is an endocrine disease which has an effect on the hormones produced by your thyroid; among the side effects of this disease are infertility, decreased metabolism, and weight gain (unintentional)

9.2.1.1. Note the unintentional weight gain; subsequently, if you mention your trouble with weight gain to your endocrinologist, he will look at your swollen body, he will notice that your jeans

are too tight, he will look at your mother who is also overweight and assume poor lifestyle choices and tell you to eat less and exercise more

9.2.1.1.1. He will also give you a pamphlet on infertility when you are 15

9.2.1.1.1.1. When you are pregnant at 20, you will stop going to this endocrinologist

9.3. Despite what people tell you, (even after your number increases by 73 in the first trimester of pregnancy) you are not eating for two

9.4. People donÕt care about your big bones

9.4.1. Or if your big bones become brittle bones

9.5. People donÕt care about your genetics

9.6. People donÕt care if you are sick and or tired

9.7. People donÕt care if your hair is falling out, even if by the handfuls

9.8. People donÕt care if you canÕt walk around, or stand up, or speak because you will pass out

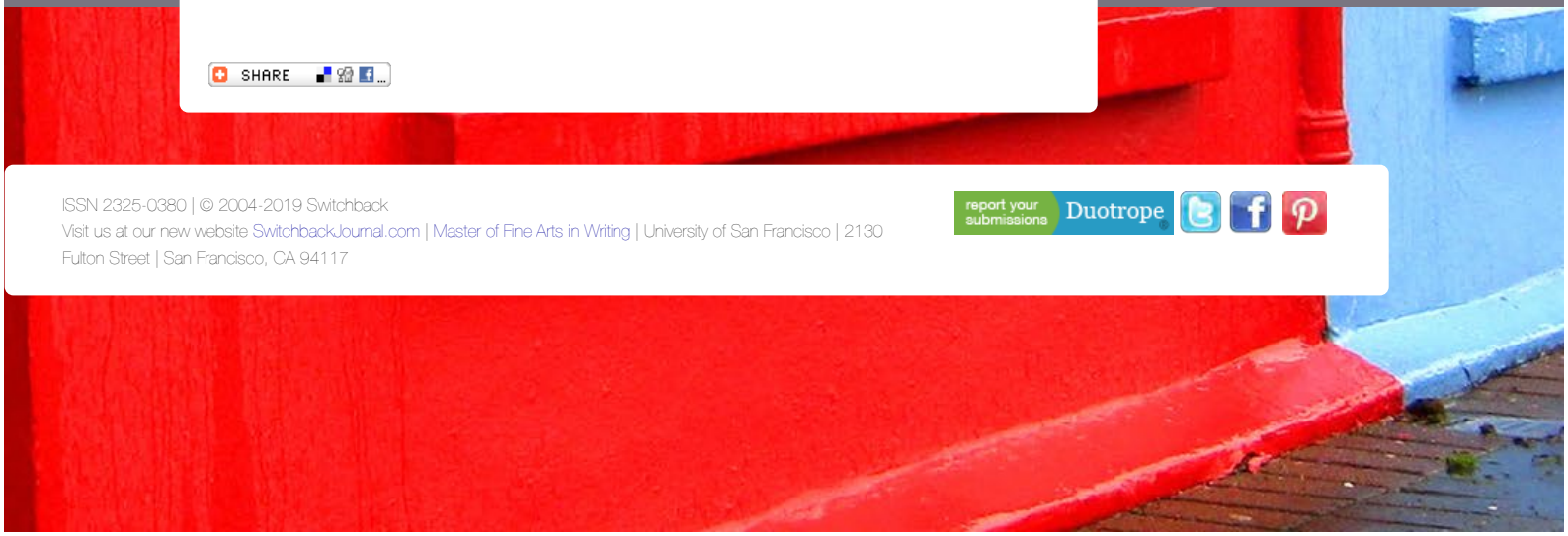
9.9. People donÕt care if you are healthy

9.10. People donÕt care

9.10.1. They only care about your number

10. If your scale is broken (like mineÑwhich teeters between the 1 and 2) just remember thisÑ your number is not good enough

10.1. And it never will be.



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RenŽe K. Nicholson

RenŽe K. Nicholson lives in Morgantown, WV, splitting her artistic pursuits between writing and dance. RenŽe earned teaching certification through American Ballet Theatre and an MFA in Creative Writing at West Virginia University. She serves as Assistant Director of the West Virginia WritersÕ Workshop. Her writing has appeared in *Perigee: A Journal of the Arts*, *Paste*, *Poets & Writers*, *The Superstition Review*, *The Gettysburg Review* and elsewhere. RenŽe was the 2011 Emerging Writer in Residence at Penn State-Altoona, is a member of the book review staff at *Los Angles Review* and is co-host of the literary podcast SummerBooks. Her website is www.reneenicholson.com.

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Hair: A Short History

RenŽe K. Nicholson

When forced to quit dancing, you did the only thing you could: you cut your hair. A bold act, the length of long, silky brown became a short, stark bob. A flapper for the 1990s. An act of rebellion against the feature that so tied you to the look of a ballet dancer. The shortened hair made you look even younger than you were, but you didnÕt care. You didnÕt look like someone who belonged in a dance studio, what you needed to move on. Your body would take a longer time to change, but letÕs not get ahead.

The ballerina Darci Kistler had long blonde hair, commented on so often by others that it became iconographic. One of your early idols, Darci Kistler became your standard of beauty. When, at a summer intensive, a teacher remarked that your hair reminded her of a brunette version of Kistler, you nearly died of delight. So when the locks fell, perhaps you should have cried. But you didnÕt. That time was over, passed. Cutting allowed you to move along.

The short hair, much to your hairdresserÕs surprise, pleased you. You didnÕt remember your old self very much with the cropped look, but a different young woman who could be anything: a teacher, a businesswoman, a personal trainer, a scientist, a therapist, a programmer, a fashion designer. You wanted to be a writer. Newly minted with the short locks and Òl can do anythingÓ attitude, you didnÕt write about dance. At first, you wrote about fishing: with your family in surf off the Atlantic, with two old guys at the reservoir. You owned a pink rod the color of a Daisy razor, the kind you shaved your legs with. You didnÕt know much at all about fishing, but you went out with the two old guys and a Yorkie named Odie. Mostly, they told you stories. One owned the bait shop on the reservoir, which kept losing letters, so it was the ÒIT SHOP.Ó

Still, inside you, there was the training of a ballet dancer. To try to forget, you focused on college courses, in which you did very well.

*

The disease had its own mind and pace, and for a while, that pace was aggressive. Later there would be more effective ways to control it. But for years you felt the effects of it every day, wondered if there would be a day that your bodyÑfilled out since quitting dance but still slenderÑwouldnÕt feel sluggish, filled with fluid. You never said hurt, but it did. If you didnÕt say it, it might cease to be. You hated the sluggishness most, tried to ignore it. The doctor told you fatigue was normal, but you tried coffee and Diet Coke, tried changing your diet. Exercises, too, but it was tougher than you thought, and when your joints swelled enough, nearly impossible to work out.

You bought a membership to a facility with a warm water pool and took classes for people with joint issues. You were the youngest in class by about forty years. A former marine befriended you. He had grandchildren not much younger than you. He was completely bald. Your bob had grown to your shoulders, but not further. In your warm water exercise classes, you clipped it up on your head, not in a bun, of course, but so that it wouldnÕt get saturated with chlorine.

The former marine liked working out with you because he thought you were serious. You were. Using a noodle wrapped around your torso for buoyancy, you scissored your legs, or pedaled an imaginary bike. There were many ladies in the class. ÒThey talk too much, arenÕt here to work out,Ó the former marine grumbled. The pool area was filled with the cluck and clatter of chatting and the splashing of the exercises.

The warm water workouts were not strenuous, but you felt better. You had more energy for work. You worked in marketing, had a knack for writing press releases that resulted in articles, and advertising copy that got attention. Not bad work, but you craved something more creative. You liked being able to pay your bills and for your warm water workouts. You went to the workouts five days a week after work, sometimes on Saturday mornings.

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Some Saturdays, however, you slept in. You never felt like you got enough rest, but you tried to keep up appearances.

*

When did you start to dream about dancing?You went to writersÕ workshops for long weekends. You called these vacations. Occasionally you wrote about dancers, and the faculty at these workshops encouraged you to write more. At night, head on pillow, you dreamed in white lines of tutus in *Giselle* and *La Bayadere*. The white of BalanchineÕs *Symphony in C*. You kept up with writers of dance criticism, read about Darci Kistler in her husbandÕs version of *Swan Lake*. More white.

The white in your world flashed hot in your joints, but you didnÕt complain. You tried not to think about it. You got shots, procedures. You kept up with the warm water workouts. Your right knee was always swollen. Joints usually swell systemically, both sides, but your right knee was always worse than your left.

When you danced, your strongest side had always been left.

You attempted to hide the swelling by covering your legs. No shorts. Skirts to mid-calf were your favorite. You wore pants often, too. Your legs lightened several shades paler than the rest of your skin, you continued to hide beneath clothes. Legs never in the sun. Your limp became a harder aspect to disguise, your gait a hobble. You kept a sunny disposition, made jokes about being a gimp.

Stairs became arch enemy number one. Climbing up or down turned out to be difficult, slow. You hid nothing, but didnÕt talk about it. Really, what was there to say?

*

When you started writing in earnest about dancing, you grew out your hair. When others read your work, they looked at you, assessed what they saw. ÒYou still have the look of a dancer,Ó they told you.

You know it was the hair--length a hallmark for ballerinas. Your body, not large, morphed into a softer, doughier version, no longer sleek and angular. You didnÕtthink you looked like a dancer at all, and it made you unhappy. You no longer had the duck walk, the way a dancer couldnÕt help but hold her turnout when she simply walked. You didnÕt feel toned, muscles gone slack. You tried sitting up straight in your chair, trying to preserve your posture.

You still had a long neck, of course. That didnÕt change over the years. Maybe that gave you the look that others found dancer-like. Maybe they were looking for whatever signs they could find.

Your legs felt lumpy and useless, your arms a thin spindle of nothing. Knuckles swollen too.

When you wrote about dance, a part of you was freed. You remembered the *bourrŽes* from RaymondaÕs third act variation, the happy *petit allegro* of Peasant Pas from *Giselle*. Trying to capture it on paper frustrated you in a good way. When you tried to explain this to others, they looked at you like you had a third eye, or a giant pimple on the tip of your nose.

You wrote leaps, *little bits of flying*. Closed your eyes, remembered the feeling. You could hear the instructions from your teacher. ÒYou should be able to clap your hands under your legs when you leap.Ó Jumping, ironically, had been your specialty, a tiny firecracker of a girl.

You returned to the writersÕ workshop, got more encouragement. A somewhat famous writer liked your material. ÒThe bad news is that this is probably a novel,Ó he said over drinks with the rest of your workshop group.

You didnÕt tell him that the only way to deal with your grief was to write the world you used to know. Instead, you let yourself be happy that something worked. Alone, you considered this question: why fiction? The facts of your life still hurt. The knee was still swollen tight, walking slow, labored, often with a cane. On the page, you created characters to do *Don Quixote* leaps. Ink-on-paper legs were strong, extended, lean. Your narration curled around your characters, dancers, like *soutenu* turns. In your actual life, your body tried to curl around your failing legs.

*

The only things to do: fight against the disease, enroll in a writing program. You did both, hobbling around a mountainous campus with your cane keeping you upright. You taught and attended classes, what writing grad students do. Most of the time, you felt happy, especially writing, focusing on writing, those things that released you from your physical body. Your hair reached down your back; your writing focused on the lives of dancers. Physically, your body continued degenerating, but your mind took flight the way your legs used to. Most days, this was enough to sustain you.

For the first time, you wrote about your own experience as a dancer. It exhausted you. It pleased you. It got published, to your shock and delight. Mostly, you retreated into characters, let them dance the way you longed to.

The Director of Dance at the university where you studied writing read your published piece. Reading the essay, it was clear youÕdhad training. A modern dancer by trade, she asked you to coach a student with a ballet background, to teach her a classical variation. You had not been in a studio in over a decade, nearly two. You agreed anyway.

The smell of the studio was familiarÑthe sweat of work hung heavy, despite opened windows, despite cleaning. Dance studios smelled of human effort.

*

ItÕs not like you to complain about pain. Suck it up, you told yourself. As a dancer, you ached too, different than this ache. That was the ache of exertion. When it got bad enough, hurt too much to walk, you called your rheumatologist. X-rays showed you both the culprit: your right knee no longer had any cartilage. Imagined clack of bones knitting together.

ÒI donÕt know how you are even getting around,Ó your rheumatologist said. It didnÕt make you feel like less of a wimp.

The decision: years of trying to get by with a walker, or knee replacement. You booked the first available surgery date. No hesitation. You decided it was best to get on with what you had to do.

After surgery, your wound had to heal before you could shower. You asked your mother to wash your hair in the sink. Clean hair became your guilty pleasure. You worked out the tangles with a comb; your conditioner made your hair smell like kiwi fruit.

*

A week after surgery, you returned to the dance studio. Perched on a stool, you gave ballet class. You relied solely on your voice, your ability to articulate the combinations and corrections. After every few exercises at the barre, you asked the dancers to rotate so you could see and instruct them all. It was as if your class was a conveyor belt of ballerinas. They willingly complied. Your friends and family thought you were nuts to return so soon, but it felt right to get to work. More and more you had been asked to teach dance, and to your surprise, you found that you were good at it.

*

Once into it, you ended up loving physical therapy. Like the early days of your dance training, you gained a sense of accomplishment. You learned to walk properly again, no limp. Your orthopedic surgeon was pleased with the results of your surgery. He told you that under anesthetic, the muscles in your right leg tried to hitch up to protect your joint, your bodyÕs reaction for managing the pain of your knee. He had never seen that in all his years in surgery, because under anesthesia, the muscles usually relaxed. On hearing this you smiled in your crooked, peculiar way. Your leg muscles had a dancerÕs memory.

Your physical therapist had you do basic exercises on a Pilates reformer. You loved this part of therapy because as a dancer, you also did Pilates. *PlŽ* was as natural as breath. Your physical therapist was thrilled with the results, more flexion. Not perfect, but better.

Could you ever dance again?This was the question always on your mind. You didnÕt ask. You knew better than to think youÕd ever dance like you once did, but you dared to hope all the same.

*

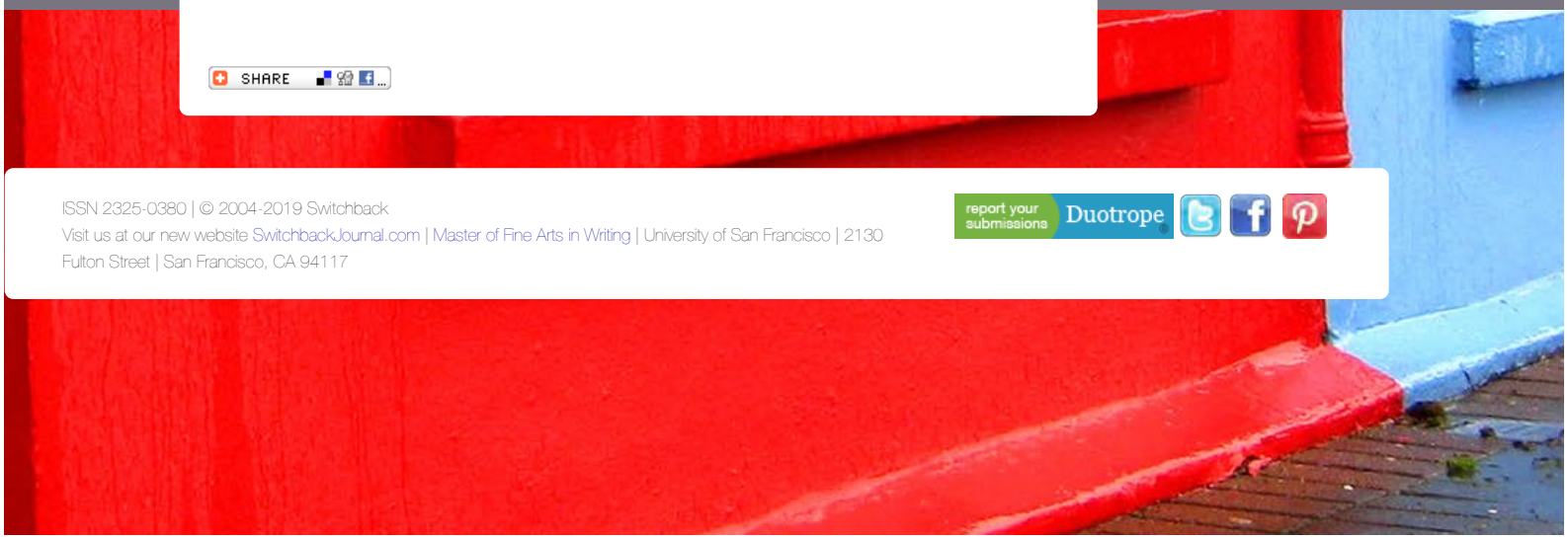
Sometimes you flirt with cutting your hair, but you donÕt. YouÕre in the studio several days a week now. You walk well; you can demonstrate simple things. You feel your arms and upper body, what used to be your expressive *port de bras*. You develop muscles in your back again.

You still swell inside your body, but your medicine is helping more. You still get tired, fatigued, but find inner velocity that pushes you forward. You remember what your physical therapist told you. ÒThe people who tend to have it the worst complain the least,Ó she said. ÒDonÕt ever let this get the better of you.Ó

Sometimes you still are told you look like a dancer. No one has ever told you that you look like a writer. Most times, people comment on your transformation: no walker, no cane, no limp. Darci Kistler, your former idol, retires from dancing. You start coaching private students, and they start going to summer intensives. Most days, you write and experience dance. You are always busy with both. You take weekly shots to keep going. Most of the

time, you don’t mind. There’s not a lot of time for what could have been.

Sometimes you wear your hair twisted in a high bun, other times you braid a long length of pony tail into a thick rope. Sometimes you leave it long and wild. You keep brushes in your car and bag. You condition it to keep it healthy and shiny. Trim the dead ends. At night, you comb your long brown hair, now with stands of gray and sometimes pure white.



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Natalie Vestin

Natalie Vestin is a writer and health researcher from Saint Paul, Minnesota. Her essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Bellingham Review*, *Sonora Review*, *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, *Alligator Juniper*, *Identity Theory*, and elsewhere. She was a 2010-2011 Loft Literary Center Mentor Series winner in creative nonfiction.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 16: Current

Everything Here Belongs Somewhere
Nonfiction

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Everything Here Belongs Somewhere

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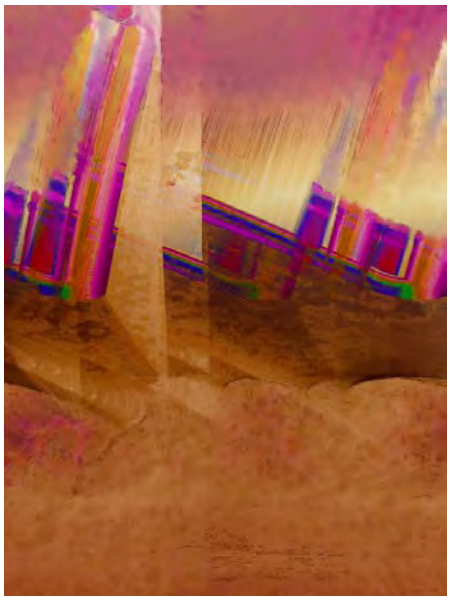
1.

The department was called softlines. Clothes for adults, children, and babies. Unlike the rest of the store, it was carpeted. I hung dresses and folded jeans, smoothing the fabric, stacked squared denim in perfect towers, used two fingers to place even spaces between hangers.



Camp Prosperity
Terry Wright

Everything here belonged somewhere. Everything had a code, a number, a country, a size, and a color. It stayed for a season, then was pushed outside on wheeled circular racks or brought to the aisle by the groceries, slapped with red stickers, price after price crossed out; three dollars, now only two dollars.

2.

The radio received only the Walmart channel. Between the same ten songs, depending on who had topped the adult contemporary charts, were advertisements for engagement rings, fishing poles, and dog food. Southern voices carried the ads along, their accents overly friendly in northern Minnesota. I imagine this false cheer made people want to buy those rings and fishing poles and kibble. I loved those sunny voices. Perhaps I was one of those helpful people the voices said would lead you to everything you might need.

It was late afternoon when the bombing started, and it continued into the the evening. The radio only played the bombing -- no Sheryl Crow, no ads. That night, I worked with a manager and a woman named Marisa, who was hired the same day as I was. We were close in that way that only two people who have gone together through the Walmart orientation and training modules can be. Marisa hated the bombing. She said she couldn't stand listening to all those people die on the loudspeakers. She looked scared, and Marisa never looked scared. She smoked unfiltered cigarettes on her breaks, and sometimes we drank root beer schnapps at the bowling alley after work. She lived in the backwoods area of our town, and she could threaten and flirt with men at the same time. But when the bombs fell for hours, her eyes stayed big, like she couldn't relax their muscles. This was nothing like fighting with rowdy boys at the bowling alley.

Sometimes it was just bombing, and sometimes there were voices--smothered robot narratives, unintelligible, encoded. The voices cut in and out, deep and official but hitched in places where adrenaline narrowed the speakers' throats. Commentary from half a world away, which the radio signal near Arkansas corporate

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headquarters couldn't pick up. But the bombs still fell.

I worked in the dressing room that evening, staring out the glassless window, handing numbers to somber people who listened to bombs fall as they pulled clothes over their heads. We had only the sounds, but I could see what was happening. The shrill splitting of air like a firecracker in reverse, muted explosions, the fall and crumble. The ectoplasmic green heat night vision goggles show. Desert and cities brown and real in the flash, something suddenly gone.

3.

As Walmart employees, we were demonstrably proud of our company affiliation, even if forcibly so. At daily staff meetings, after hearing profit totals from each of our departments, we did the Walmart cheer. If you've never seen the Walmart cheer, there's some spelling of the company name, traditional call and response, and much vigorous clapping. If the manager leading the cheer were in a particular mood, we escaped the lunch room and performed the cheer at the front of the store near the cash registers. All the customers could see our pride -- unless we blushed -- and then they blushed and looked down, while we stared straight ahead and clapped and clapped.

There was space between, before the bombing began, when the quiet ended, when the hurt couldn't stay itself and began to turn into something desperate. There was a month between the hurting thing and the bombing. During that month, we didn't do the cheer, just as David Letterman didn't find anything funny to say. In a small town in northern Minnesota where nearly everyone worked at the Walmart, the paper mill, or the match mill, the month was divided like this:

Week One: Tuesday when thousands of people died. Tuesday when we thought about being crushed, when we dreamed about falling, when families didn't know how to tell each other to never ever leave. The classic rock radio station that played "Ground Control to Major Tom" on repeat. Wood furniture on which I painted ivy leaves for something to do during the afternoons. Skin I rubbed off my face trying to relieve the itch of salt that poured as I tried to sleep. An ache of muscles in the abdominal place that heaves. The baskets I shot, the Discman that bounced on my hip, as I fantasized about being there, having superpowers, turning the planes back.

Week Two: Have you ever seen a Walmart vigil? On the one-week anniversary, managers distributed tall, thin candles. Those of us who worked the evening shift walked outside at six o'clock and formed a circle at the edge of the parking lot, between the entrances and the smoker's tent. The manager lit our candles and pressed play on the boombox she'd carried outside. Lee Greenwood sang "God Bless the USA." Our manager closed her eyes and clasped her candle, but the rest of us were uneasy, unsure of the stance and manner we were to take with respect to this rather dorky country song.

I stood by Marisa. We grinned sideways at each other in a camaraderie of cynicism formed between people forced to be sacred in public. People passing us by, walking into the store, seemed embarrassed and looked away. As vigils went, it was bizarre and irreverent, not just because it was held by a stand of garden rakes on clearance sale, but because the second week was nothing but a grasping.

Week Three: Our manager strung red, white, and blue beads on safety pins, then attached them to a larger safety pin in the image of an American flag. She wore this on her blue Walmart vest above a large yellow button encouraging people to ask about professional silver cleaning in the jewelry department.

This was the week of the flags. Boxes of t-shirts arrived. We sliced them open, unfolded flag after dusty flag, and placed them on hangers. The t-shirts were only five dollars, and hung on circular racks in the wide aisles for maximum display. By Christmas, they were a dollar, the racks shuffled out to the enclosure that sold fragrant spruces and pines.

In September, the t-shirts kept coming, stacked on pallets, wedged into their cardboard boxes with crumpled newspapers to keep them from shifting. Some of the t-shirts came from Pakistan, and I saved several sheets of Pakistani newspaper comics. I liked the shape of Urdu script. The previous year, my freshman Spanish professor had given readings in Urdu and Turkish and Persian during the evenings, letting the strange syllables burgeon from his throat and wrap his tongue. Love and blood and tears, the subject of every poem, like the language so full in his mouth could speak only of certain things.

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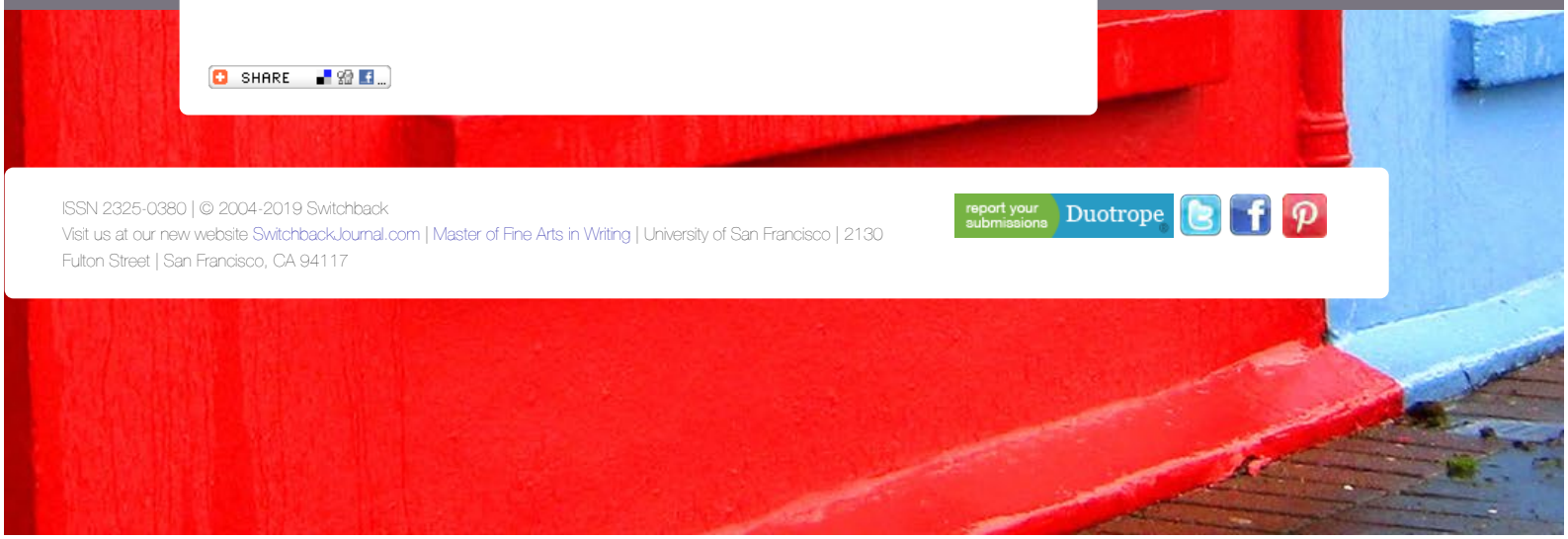

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I smoothed some of the newspaper sheets and kept them, hanging up one red-inked comic in the dressing room cubby until I was told to remove it. The t-shirts weren't supposed to come from Pakistan. But they had to be cheap, so that people in this small town could drape themselves in a hurt that was turning, so that they could keep a Tuesday alive and pressed to their bodies, so that they could look at each other and see those flags and know that maybe at night, someone else's face itched from the salt. The third week was confused. Sweatshops half a world away manufactured cheap patriotism, and people pulled crumpled fives from jeans stained white with paper mill chemicals to hand over their t-shirt and pay for matched hurt in the eyes of the cashier. Nothing made sense. Nothing was right or wrong.

Week Four: The bombing that started only a world away. The bombing that started only on the Walmart radio station. The bombing that was only molecule sound and jumbled adrenal voice. The bombing that made us see sand and metal and skin in a flash we couldn't see. The bombing that accompanied graffiti demanding blood on the sand. The bombing that accompanied graffiti pleading no bombs. The bombing that clustered the softlines girls in a group of polyester and scared eyes. The bombing that wouldn't stop until nine, ten, eleven at night, when we drove home with our blue vests folded on the passenger seat, when the flag at Perkins Family Restaurant was back up from half-mast, when the bridge was dark, when the convenience store was just about to close, when we stopped to buy chips for a late dinner, when we got home, when our fathers were still up and watching television, when they asked us if we'd seen the news, when we said no, when we couldn't explain hours of hanging clothes under a rain of sound.

4.

During a staff meeting, people suddenly wanted to know why. Why that Tuesday happened, what made a choice like suicide and murder occur in nineteen minds. We were really asking about the bombing, asking someone to draw a line between terror and horror and have that line hold strong. The manager, whose fingernails were now painted with American flags, said the line, believed the line. They were jealous of our freedom. We all knew this could not be true, did not make sense, but we nodded, because we were only the softlines girls.

We were only the softlines girls, but we listened to Kabul bombed for hours. We let those bombs pour over us, and though the volume on the radio didn't change, we felt the bombs grow close and move further away. Our skin hurt after, exhausted from tensing in the silences. And when we asked why, we were asking about the space between Tuesday and the night of the bombing. We were asking about four weeks. During days spent in a big-box store, we could only read the signs, the signs that arrived in trucks and on pallets, the signs that walked through the doors, the signs that came over the radio. We hung clothes when death lived on the television, over the radio. Only on the television, only over the radio.

5.

It was hard after the hurting, the sound of bombs falling, the seeping of witness into our skins, to hear so many words. Words that turned a day into numbers, words about jealousy and freedom and extremism, words

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promoting consumerism and accusing us of consumerism, streams and streams of words that didn't stop.

In this small town, there were only a few places to go if you wanted to leave your house and hear these words, speak these words. You could go to work at the mill or the other mill, you could go to the grocery store, you could go to one of the diners, or you could go to Walmart. It's easy to go to Walmart, because Walmart has everything. Walmart even has the bombing of Kabul, Jalalabad, and Kandahar.

Why was Afghanistan bombed in a Walmart store? There was no answer from Arkansas corporate headquarters, and if there were, it might not make sense. There was only us.

So here is this: We lived and worked in a small town, and when we were sad or bored, our impulse was to buy and buy. You know the small town I'm talking about where there's nothing much to do except drink beer and buy. And when we left our houses, we went to work in Walmart, we wandered and looked at the cheap things in Walmart, we met our friends and neighbors in Walmart. We were the consumers, the ones they encouraged on television, the ones they sneered at on television. We were the consumers. We were the ignorant ones who covered our bodies in flags and crying eagles, who pronounced the long "A" in "Arab," who smoked cigarettes and listened to country music next to a stand of garden rakes, who talked about anger and vengeance. This is all true. But there is, perhaps, a little more.

6.

My father and I drove to the grocery store once during the weeks between Tuesday and the bombing. He was angry, in that way people feel rage as their world spins out of control and pours down on them. It is hard to remember those spaces in time between war and not-war, to be at war for so long in such an invisible and meaningless way, that the time before is liminal, hazy, wordless. But here was a space, and I don't know what we were talking about, but we were driving down the long hill by the horse ranch, and my father pounded the steering wheel. "All most people want is to go to their jobs and come home and eat dinner, watch TV, be outside. People always hurt because of what governments want to do. People always take the hit," he said. All those people crushed, burned. All those witnesses watching on their TVs, listening to their radios, a world of witnesses.

7.

What is Afghanistan bombed in a Walmart store? It's a moral lesson, to be sure. All that consumption, all those ignorant small-town people, all that bloodlust directed at dark-skinned foreigners. If you came to visit the place where I grew up, you might find it easy to hate us, to feel disgust, to believe that this story has a moral.

Everything here belonged somewhere, even when nearly everything came from somewhere else, covered in the dust of its journey, unpacked and put where it belonged. Everything here belonged somewhere. Where did the bombing of Afghanistan belong in a Walmart store?

It wasn't like being there. I am not so arrogant, so cruel. It was no simulation of the experience of being bombed. But a girl in a blue vest, a girl experiencing the world through media, through positions of the flag at the diner, through the eyes of her co-worker, that girl knew something about witness. The stale helplessness of witness, handling the goods from other countries, handling what would be consumed.

But here's the thing with consumption, the secret behind the waste, the ignorance, the greed, the ugly wanting. Whatever you consume becomes part of you. Whatever becomes part of you makes you complicit. Complicit in wanting, in working, in being out of the house, in choices made by powerful people. Complicit in browsing for cheap things that came from Central Asia. Complicit in using ugly and hateful words to stand in for words that didn't exist. Complicit in being the representative of a company that rained down bombs from the loudspeakers.

8.

Everything here stayed only for a season. Those flag shirts Ð by winter, no one wanted them anymore. People didn't remember why they wanted a flag shirt in the first place. The flag pins were now out of fashion, and the nail place only offered French tips instead of patriotic decals.

We are funny animals. We can drape ourselves in colors for a season and shed them just as easily. But Marisa and I remembered the night Afghanistan was bombed, even if we only held memory in our skin, in the wet white parts of our eyes. And all those people here that night, aching with wanting a cheap shirt or tennis shoes to protect their toes from the mill's machines, hearing the price of their wanting, complicit in a decision made by people with money forming plans in a very small room, I think they remembered as well.

Sometimes, even through the summer, I caught Marisa's eye as the radio cut to news, and I saw it again: What is Afghanistan bombed in a Walmart store? We didn't know the answer. But it belonged to our bodies in its small, distanced way, and perhaps this was what was intended.

9.

It was called softlines. Clothes for adults, children, and babies. Unlike the rest of the store, it was carpeted. I hung dresses and folded jeans, smoothing the fabric, stacking squared denim in perfect towers, using two fingers to place even spaces between hangers.

Come in and find something you need. There will always be someone to greet you, and she will be quite elderly, and you will think to yourself, "Get that woman a chair." But she likes to stand; she'll tell you so. Listen to the bombs drop. People working here have been listening for hours. The sunlight is fading. Did you just get off work? Hesitate a little at the entryway. It's okay. No one likes to want whatever it is you want Ð antacids, a leather belt, dog food Ð while listening to people die. But your stomach won't heal itself, your pants won't conform to your middle, and your dog can't go hungry.

Ask us a question. We'll lead you to what you need. Look in our eyes. We're scared and a little nauseated, and you're ashamed. We'll remember this, you and I. You work at the mill, and I work at Walmart. We know how people with power and money think of us. We're the same kind of trash. We can take this on. I'll be fear, and you be shame. And all those people with bombs and power and words Ð we won't leave anything for them. We'll find what you need together. It'll be easy, not so much work. Everything here belongs somewhere.

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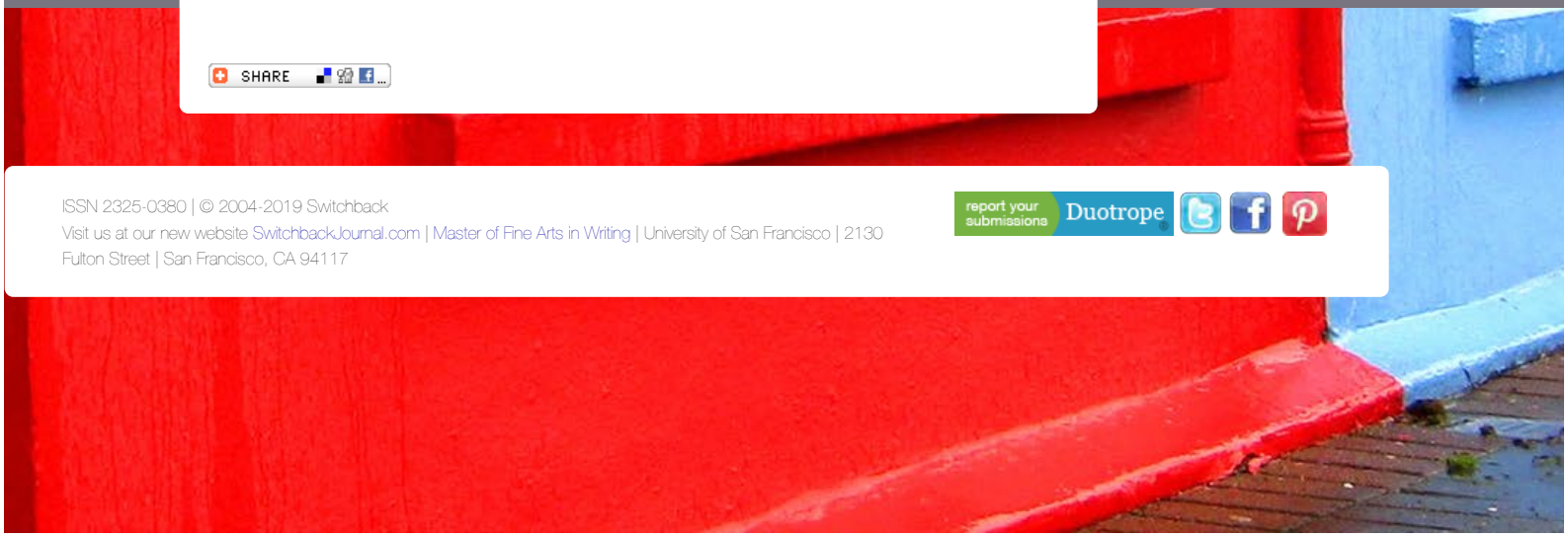

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Alexander Nemick

Alex is an alumni of the University of San Francisco's MFA in Writing program and now lives in the high altitudes of Colorado.

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sounding speech

Alexander Nemick

crystalline branches blossom white blossoms thickly among twin trees beside the opening door

appearsÑpulp cut sprigs bowed by string along over the archway of petals burning white on one side on one side falling as the other appearsÑwhite

leaves white blossoms wilting to the trees as written as thought unspools again lowering the petrifying branches sunken upon the already thick piles of petals

appearing anewÑfresh cut already wilting white petals tremble among the young branches the golden strings humming out the anchor of a word thrown back through NightÕs

twinning doors (of) appearanceÑcrystallizing word blossoms splinter under the other now wilting words appearingÑ writing thrumming petals again

as the winds burn upon the little white-hot suns smoldering deeply into dark branches again cut pulpy and hung in the late sunshine of

strings snapping above emptying wordsÑappearÑburning branches trembling uponÑtrembling lips parting uponÑ blossoms of written words ablaze thrown in the twin doorÑdisappearingÑnight calls a fall down Night asÑaudible

white petals calling back from among the anchors strung to trembling lips *come, our twin*

callery pears!

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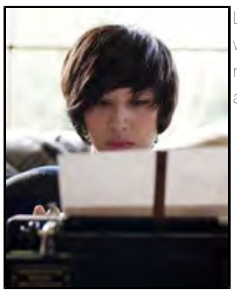
Leanne Dunic



Leanne Dunic is a graduate Simon Fraser UniversityÕs The Writers' Studio. Her work has won several honours and been published in various anthologies and magazines. Storytellers like Osamu Tezuka and Harry Nilsson inspire her poetry and prose. In her spare time, Leanne plays guitar in a rock and roll band.

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Erosion

Leanne Dunic

we keep together
as we spend ourselves
persist, tumble, perfect
moist surfaces
sand, carve
things can remain as they are
or polish
process with the moon
pull, push, recede
under rocks, aggregate skeletons
touch foundations
dissolve, particle by particle
crave each other's
vulnerability
to shine

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Chris Carosi

Chris Carosi is from Pittsburgh. His work has appeared in *Switchback*, *New Fraktur Arts Journal*, and *Hot Metal Bridge* among others. His first chapbook of poems, *bright veil*, was published by New Fraktur Press in 2011. He lives and works in San Francisco.

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Issue 11: Process vs. Product

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$

Chris Carosi

DonÕt fall in love / with this faceÑLorine Niedecker

$

the aperture tries to see
the diorama packed in there
the sun is the word sunset now

surface is the dream of a name
with our heels against the moon say
we ask why

the answer is three letters long
why must we unwind the thing
to hold our lips around an annunciation

what kind of pen is that
that writes nothing but stresses with these
commas are the end of the sun

how old is the arm
what clause is unnecessary

$

just some coins and some panthers
a palm and a dish and a noose
that grows on trees
I tell you I love you

I did not come here looking for you
I am the chest that breathed
a fresh gulf of faces, mouthing light
I am the last great steamboat, I am like a policeman
at the gate in the deep mean blue

I cared for a deaf animal far from the trees
and I was its only friend
and I have your wristwatch
you never had a wristwatch
donÕt forget me when IÕm young

$

how you lose it is
by sinking a glimpse into the fire
by telling it it is consumed
calming a body in the shower

say the kid holds a sentence
say he can hold it
and he says it again
by measuring the delay
light that sneaks past him

listen to this number
I conceal as threshold
to the cash

I am 26-years-old with no career
what do you want from me, 27

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no, no, the delusion could be an emotion
actually a figure is an open space
a candle in a glass

between heading out
foolishly
staying put staying
up
the tickle of smoke turns a dial
and solves the sound
passes behind a country square
tangoes silently like
little proud faces in the dark

seek perfection under the paper
every corporeal pen
every sketch-size of trust
damn too

$

why you work
why do you work
you are the silent percentile
the blooming hand
high over the ocean
roaring a simplistic fare

ÒI think about it too much, isnÕt it?Ó

carry up the work
is never the same as myths

ÒWell IÕm sorry you think about itÓ

ever gone blinking like a beauty
winged warm small season
jealous of every natural thing
thank yourself

$

IÕm sitting in for another man
but he thinks IÕm a boy
so you think IÕm a man
am I a man
whatÕs a man to you?
is this stealing if I say this?
I feel like a boy and a man
my nose is in the dirt
I sit and react like a dog
to an innocent trick:
that skyscraper
and that one
and that one is lying down
but it is not asleep

$

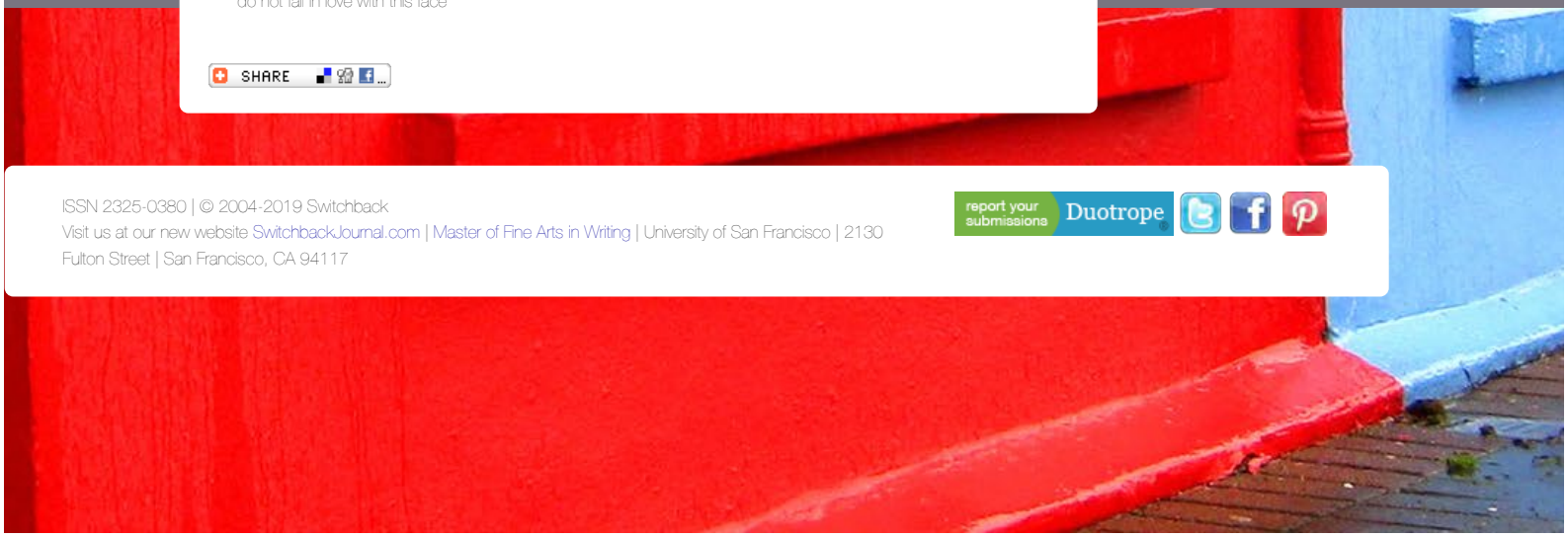
you never called me or beat me
called me into question, despite my panic
never doubted me
a name, never waited awkwardly on the stair
for an act to follow never
has cared more deeply and carefully
as a care muted now, you are mute as I speak
a sense to exonerate another
that kneels in the beloved phrase
that cleaved sound without purpose
true, true beautiful grassy song
careful song, ÒsongÓ from the word
Òto sleep like a stoneÓ
trouble me now with your sleep

$

I count the ahistorical frames
what you might call doors
I also call doors
but I want to call them ahistorical frames
that is the business

some careful stars and
careful designs, waking up in the designs
I remark on the night saying to you that
this all matters very deeply to me
this is all comprised in a book somewhere
but itÕs not

but IÕm not a troubled soul really
and youÕre not a troubled soul
we are not troubled souls
we are not like they want us to be
do not fall in love with this face



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Rich Ives

Rich Ives has received grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, Artist Trust, Seattle Arts Commission and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines for his work in poetry, fiction, editing, publishing, translation and photography. His writing has appeared in *Verse*, *North American Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Iowa Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Fiction Daily* and many more. He is the 2009 winner of the Francis Locke Memorial Poetry Award from Bitter Oleander. In 2011 he received a nomination for The Best of the Web and two nominations for both the Pushcart Prize and The Best of the Net. He is the 2012 winner of the Creative Nonfiction Prize from *Thin Air* magazine. The Spring 2011 Bitter Oleander contains a feature including an interview and 18 of his hybrid works.

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Why I DonÕt Discuss My Dreams

Rich Ives

An egg is not imperfectly round
but perfectly *not round* and never
exactly the same and thus perfect,
if perfect can be said to be
unrepeatable, and yet the eggs
keep right on coming, which

allows one to worship here if
worship is a word for living inside
the idea of the inside of something
that has yet to come out, except
as an idea of what something
not quite like it did before.

An egg cannot speak in the way
weÕre used to, or the way weÕre
used to is not the way most things
have learned to speak when
they decide to tell us in their
way about what they are not,

which is not very often because
most things have no need of
our understanding and no
kindness to share because
kindness is not a necessary
component of being. An egg

is nevertheless kind if only
because its imperfection
allows us to find ourselves
inside without actually going
there where the inside
is actually further inside,

which is the way life before it
erupts can be because its
potential is not yet cracked
and can sing like the silence
between losses, in which we
seem to exist before we exist.

An egg is not a celestial body but
a body containing the celestial,
not a going out to, but a bringing in,
a gathering of resources and
a containment of creaturely
needs and essence, which

is difficult to remember when
you consider the impatience
of the creatureÕs needs inside,
as it feeds and feeds towards
the inevitable breaking of its
imaginary celestial agreement.

An egg exists in its own territory,

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elena minor

Fiction

Art

which is not a shell but a taste
of whatÕs outside translated
to nutrients and a lack of
hammers and foxes and
briars and children,

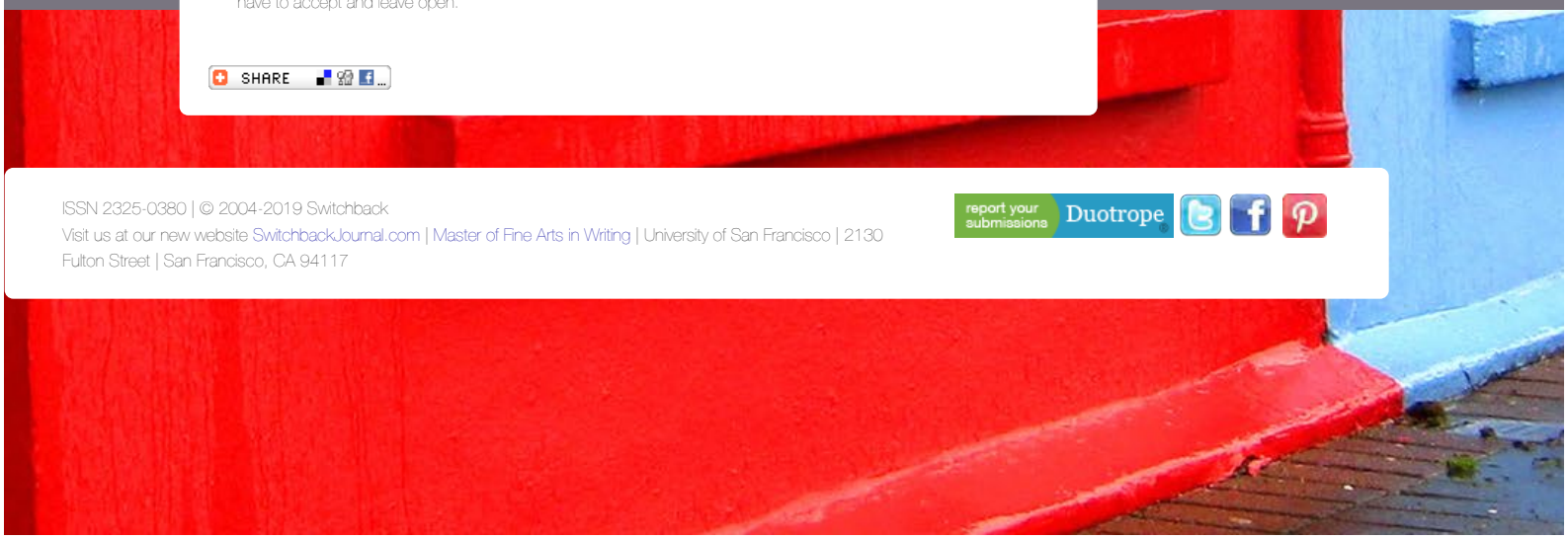
which can fool the egg easily
because it contains them
and offers those contained
its nutrients in another way
that doesnÕt involve even
whistling or sputter. An egg

can be hidden behind fear or
in front of a lie, where the
hidden becomes obvious while
remaining hidden in a joke
about what came first that
isnÕt what we thought it was,

which happens all the time inside
things that hold potential loosely
and long to crack open the shell,
which isnÕt the visible shell, and
therefore isnÕt available to those
who demand proof. An egg sleeps

all the time like a man who lives
inside himself, where itÕs dark
and safe, if you donÕt count
all the horrible things that can
happen to innocence and food and
creatures still turned outside in,

which is the way we all are
at some time before we crack
and climb out of our false safety
and go looking for something to
eat, which we might actually
have to accept and leave open.



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Paul Siegell

Paul Siegell is the author of three books of poetry: *wild life rifle fire* (Otoliths Books, 2010), *jambandbootleg* (A-Head Publishing, 2009) and *Poemergency Room* (Otoliths Books, 2008). Trailers are yours for the YouTube-viewing [here], reviews for the Goodreads-reading [here], and t-shirts for the concrete poetry-wearing [here]. Paul is a senior editor at *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and has contributed to *Black Warrior Review*, *Raintown Review*, *Redivider* and many other fine journals. Kindly find more of Paul's work at ReVeLeR @ eYeLeVeL.

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Lipchitz Lyric

Paul Siegell

Ñfor Varian Fry

Jacques rocks: bronze
dramasÑ

on *The Death of Pierrot*

poetic volumetrics

shaped into creation
by the mighty River
LipchitzÑ

a cubistÕs caress, a
movement progressed:

in 1945 he etched the ef-
fervescent *Nude and*
*Cock*Ñ

bebop Jacques and tonic,
embryonic

if you swing your
Bull and Condor over

IÕll jump on itÑ

ÒThe clay is scarred,
undercut and torn
like the bodies
of the fightersÓ

gripping tyranny
tighterÑ

tumultuous, molten,
sculpt to reassure

eye bright
o bright other life Lipchitz

with a witness

sculpt the sensual

a home for poems

a *Mother and Child*

a letter for a boneÑ

for the letters embodied
to express the statue that
you were born to form: I

look to a page of poetry,

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a pedestal for the textual,

and, spellbound,
perceive the statuesqueÑ

the body Òmodeled,
manipulated and shapedÓ

body foundry

body burning body down
in 1952 his studio

standing there, shocked
to bedrock, jewel-eyed
and mindfulÑ

then stab it all in the sculpt
with a chisel:

you make me want to

I know youÕre not
supposed to

but I take pleasure in

unplugging
electronics

while the powerÕs still on:

true-blue blue-streak
serpent breath of
lightningÑ

the universal spiritual
the sacrificial visualÑ

now *that*
someone should sculpt

sculpt that
BURST

into the bronzeÑ

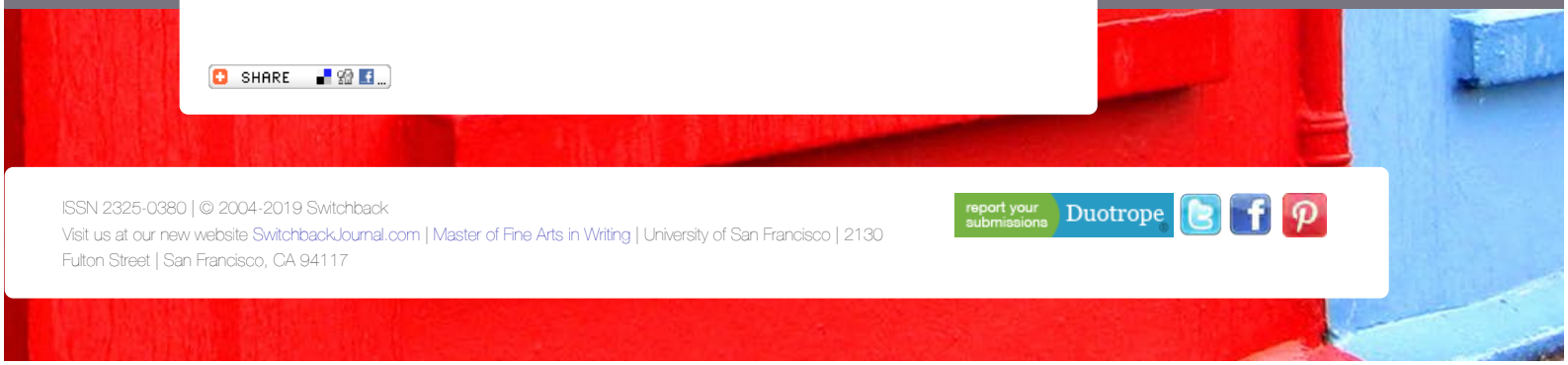
for thatÕs how I feel
when struck by a bolt:

the body/language
possibilities

of a Lipchitz:

spark-stunned,

and jumping up love.



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Michael Lynch

Michael Lynch lives and writes in Boston. His poems have appeared in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, *In Posse Review*, *Night Train*, and elsewhere. His most recent chapbook, *Underlife and Portico*, was published by Aforementioned Productions.

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Love Letter with Red Ink

Michael Lynch

Alone, I picture the planetary
gears that cycle behind your eyes,
your carved bone stiletto, two-handed pistol-
grip of your ambidextrous thoughts.

I winter among the abandoned beach
houses, their copper gutworks
looted. We are shuttered against seeing,
ocean furrowed out between us.

Leaning on a sea-blond scruff
of panic grass I watch gannets
light on the breakwater, remainder
marks ticked on their white edges.

Under feather, they are punched
brass and reciprocal motion,
articulated bronze armatures.
What bellows swell inside me,

push my thoughts toward you
and your precise beauties? Beneath
my skin I am empty gin
bottles and a braid of antique

electronics, an arthritic toe cloaked
in asbestos. Then your postcard:
the harmonic drive that swoons me
plunging toward some inward ocean.

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elena minor

elena minorÕs work has been published in *Mandorla*, *RHINO*, *Hot Metal Bridge*, *OCHO*, *Quercus Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Diner and Poetry Midwest*, among others. Her poetry volume *Titulada* is forthcoming from Noemi Press. She is founding editor of *PALABRA A Magazine of Chicano & Latino Literary Art*.

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NIGHTFIRE

elena minor

Black-with-stars high
desert
air caught white
& blue-torched: vespered light

someone *someoneÕs*

(*shadow*)Ñ

must
see / have
seen É

must
be / have
been

breath

É sleepkill or
stalkers haunt hard
sand hunt
everything to blind feel
untouched: no one
said to breathe a
word burn
bright, a blur to a shh É umber rest[ed]
flicker outsigh[t]ed in by shiver

flight: to slanted dawn
from carving dusk

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Jeanie Chung

Jeanie ChungÕs fiction, essays and interviews have appeared in *upstreet*, *Drunken Boat*, *Stymie*, *WriterÕs Chronicle* and elsewhere. This story is part of a novel-in-stories based on her experiences covering high school and college basketball, primarily for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. She received an MFA in fiction writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts, and lives in Chicago, where she is co-director of the Sunday Salon Chicago reading series.

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Charles BarkleyÕs Vertical Leap

Jeanie Chung

This is the list I made before my sophomore year in high school. I had it taped to my bedroom wall, just to the right of the TV, across from the couch. Actually, I guess you could call it the living room, but since it was where I slept it was really my bedroom too, wasnÕt it? My mom didnÕt like having stuff taped up on the wall Ñ I thought it looked cheap Ñ but she knew how important it was to me.

How To Make The NBA

1. Make varsity.
2. Ask C.B. for help.
3. Become a starter.
4. Vertical leap: 36 inches.
5. Get a D-1 scholarship.
6. Stay healthy.
7. WORK HARD!
8. STAY HUNGRY! STAY HUNGRY!

ThatÕs what successful people do: they make a plan of attack and just check each step off their list. It was simple. Start with Step One. The summer after freshman year, every minute I hadnÕt been eating, sleeping, or on the court, I was at the Park District gym lifting weights, usually squats. I was going harder than anybody on our team, including our star, Roosevelt Rawls. Which I knew for a fact, because that summer, like every summer, we hung out together all the time. Now donÕt get me wrong, Ro worked hard, just not as hard as I did. DidnÕt have to, I guess.

ÒWeÕre gonna make it, arenÕt we, Ro?Ó IÕd asked him that summer.

ÒHell, yeah.Ó

With Step One underway, I focused on Step Two. They say around here, we all wanna be like Mike, right? Let me tell you: nothing against No. 23, heÕs a great player and all, but for me, it was always Charles Barkley, the greatest basketball player ever and the most important person in my life, except maybe my mom. You know what? Not even. I mean, donÕt tell anybody Ñ I love my mom, but Charles Barkley? Your boy was the shit. He was too short to be a post player. Too slow and fat to be a guard. Still, every time, youÕd see him working down there in the paint, outscoring, outrebounding, just tearing up guys who were, like, a foot taller.

How did he do it? Your boy had a vertical leap of thirty-nine inches. When youÕre trying to put a ball into a hoop thatÕs 10 feet high, it helps if you can get as close to it as possible. And how did he get that vertical leap? Flat-out, he just worked at it. He wanted it more.

If you know your history, youÕll tell me Charles Barkley didnÕt make varsity as a junior, and there was one year Michael didnÕt make varsity either. I was already taller than Charles Barkley Ñ if I could get my vertical leap up even close to his, and if I could make varsity as a sophomore, and stay there, IÕd already be ahead of where they were.

When I found out Charles Barkley was coming to sign autographs in Chicago that fall, I took it as a sign. I

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didnÕt care if I was in the middle of tryouts: IÕd go late if I had to, stand in line for hours. IÕd take my homework with me, skip dinner. Check No. 2 off my list.

Ro wasnÕt as big a fan as me Ñ nobody was Ñ and heÕd already met a couple of NBA guys at camps and stuff. But since he was my friend, and since he never met anybody as famous as Charles Barkley, he said heÕd come with me to Niketown. We left right after practice, took the Green Line into the Loop, then walked up Michigan Avenue to our appointment with the greatest player in the world.

When we got to the store, there was a line out the door. A lot of people were wearing Rockets and Suns and Sixers jerseys, but there were some Bulls jerseys too, and a bunch of people in suits and work clothes. There he was, signing autographs, wearing an expensive-looking jacket over a turtleneck. He wasnÕt afraid to show he had money. Hell, when I get to the NBA, start making that kind of money, IÕm gonna buy as many suits, as many cars Ñ no, *more* cars than I can drive. IÕll let my friends drive Õem. ThatÕs how we do it.

Some of the people there to shop didnÕt know he was going to be there and when they saw the crowd, then saw it was Charles Barkley, theyÕd yell, ÒWhereÕs your ring?Ó or Ò1993, baby! Bulls in six!Ó He just smiled, waved, and even blew kisses to couple of people.

When we got close to the front, Ro moved off to the side. He was just there to get a look for himself; he wasnÕt a big autograph guy. I wouldnÕt be either, if IÕd been him. Even as a sophomore, heÕd signed so many already he couldnÕt see the point. He felt like, if a high school kid could do it, how exciting could it be? Me, though, I wanted proof IÕd seen the greatest. I was gonna get him to sign a poster, then put it right up on the wall next to my list.

ÒWhatÕs your name, son?Ó

ÒLorenzo.Ó

ÒYou play high school?Ó

ÒYes, sir. Just came from tryouts.Ó

ÒAw, youÕll make the team. Big, strong guy like you. You play in the city?Ó

ÒSure do. Coolidge High School.Ó

Charles Barkley wrinkled that big forehead for a second, then turned around to the guy behind him: his agent or bodyguard or something. He pointed at the manÕs newspaper, the *Sentinel*, and unfolded it when the man handed it to him. We were ranked tenth in the season preview that had just come out that day.

ÒThatÕs right, Coolidge,Ó he said. ÒKnew IÕd seen it. So you must know this Roosevelt Rawls. He that good?Ó

I cracked up, then looked over at Roosevelt who was close enough to hear everything. He shook his head. ÒWhy donÕt you ask him? HeÕs right over there.Ó Ro kept on shaking his head and started waving his arms ÒNoÓ when I pointed at him.

ÒShoot,Ó Charles Barkley said, turning toward Ro and drawing him closer with one arm. ÒLook at your little bony self. I hope you got a good jump shot, boy, you want to make it in the league, stand here and get paid to sign your name like I do.Ó

Ro just laughed, put his arm around me and said, ÒThis boy, right here, heÕs your biggest fan, ever. DonÕt even watch the Bulls unless theyÕre playing you. IsnÕt that wrong? Cheering for a guy who donÕt even like Chicago?Ó

Charles Barkley started chuckling, then laughed harder until he was shaking.

ÒI never said I didnÕt like Chicago. I just wanted to beat you, back in the day. Now, I just feel bad for you, with Michael about to leave and all.Ó

People used to ask me if I was jealous of Ro, and I said, seriously, why? He was my best friend. He didnÕt care if I was as good as he was, never rubbed my face in it. But mainly, it was because we were never competing for the same thing. He was a guard; I played down in the post. It would be like a dog being jealous of a grape or something. It was two totally different concepts.

So no, I wasnÕt jealous. But right then, seeing him and Charles Barkley whooping it up like old buddies, Charles Barkley knowing Coolidge High School because of Roosevelt Rawls and not having any idea who I was, if youÕd asked me right then, I wouldÕve said yes, I am jealous. But I didnÕt have much time to feel bad because

Charles Barkley turned right back to me.

ÒYou studying hard, doing well in school?Ó

ÒYes, sir.Ó

ÒDonÕt bother. I never did.Ó He chuckled again. ÒNo, seriously. You should. I was lucky. You Ñ wait, did you say you have tryouts?Ó

Ro and I both nodded.

ÒYouÕre sophomores, right? And you, youÕre the star of the team. You have to try out too?Ó

ÒYes, sir,Ó Roosevelt said.

Charles Barkley let out the loudest laugh IÕd heard that afternoon.

ÒDamn, thatÕs old school. He make you run sprints, too? Naw, donÕt even tell me. I *know* he does.Ó He turned around and grabbed the bodyguard or agent or whoever he was by the shoulder. ÒBilly, they got the next Michael Jordan running sprints. We gotta go see this.Ó He turned back to us. ÒWhat time yÕall practice tomorrow?Ó

Turned out he had to leave in the morning. He looked disappointed about it.

ÒYÕall gonna make the team, though, right?Ó

Ro nodded; I shrugged. The way I saw it, the only sophomores who didnÕt have to worry about making varsity were Ro, Poochie Ñ who was probably gonna start Ñ and Mo Chambers, the big man who was on varsity last year and was probably going to start this year too. Three sophomore starters and one guy just trying to make the cut. Charles Barkley looked at Ro, thumbed at me and said, ÒHeÕs not gonna make it?Ó

ÒPfff. HeÕs just playing,Ó Ro said. He turned to me. ÒYou know how it is, Zo. We had a post guy graduate last year, and now we only got two guys over six-five. Coach wants guys who are gonna listen to him. He knows youÕll work hard. No way you donÕt make it.Ó

I turned back to Charles Barkley, ÒGotta make varsity if I want to play in the league someday.Ó He nodded.

ÒYou have any advice?Ó I asked. ÒHow we can make it like you?Ó

He smiled. ÒWhatÕs your vertical jump?Ó

ÒThirty-three.Ó

ÒShoot. YouÕre 6-6, maybe? Still growing, probably? YouÕre already ahead of me, seems like. You keep up like that, youÕll be unstoppable.Ó

Damn straight, I wanted to say. But since I was trying not to sound *too* cocky, I just smiled and said, ÒThank you.Ó

Charles Barkley was having a good time talking to us, seemed like. He kept right on until the people behind us started clearing their throats, real loud.

ÒAw, I better go. YÕall be patient. Just lemme sign this poster for young Lorenzo here. Ladies and gentle- well, I guess itÕs just gentlemen Ñ youÕll be seeing these boys over at the United Center in a few years. I promise you.Ó

He scribbled for almost a minute, then handed me the poster back, smiling.

ÒNext time weÕre in town, you boys come by. IÕll leave you some tickets.Ó

I unrolled the poster while we were walking away. It said, ÒLorenzo, Keep doing those sprints. Stay out of trouble and go easy on that Roosevelt Rawls. Not everybody is blessed with our physical gifts. See you, Charles Barkley.Ó

It mustÕve been dark by the time we got home, but I didnÕt even notice. Usually me and Ro would be goofing on each other, sometimes on other people, when we ride the train, but I just stared out the window, imagining the day IÕd go one-on-one with Charles Barkley. Maybe at some kind of NBA fundraising thing, for cancer or for kids back in the hood. Maybe we could come back to Coolidge Ñ me, Roosevelt and Poochie Ñ and do a clinic. No, not Poochie. He said from the jump that basketball was his ticket off the West Side, but that there was more to life than hoops. Maybe for him there was.

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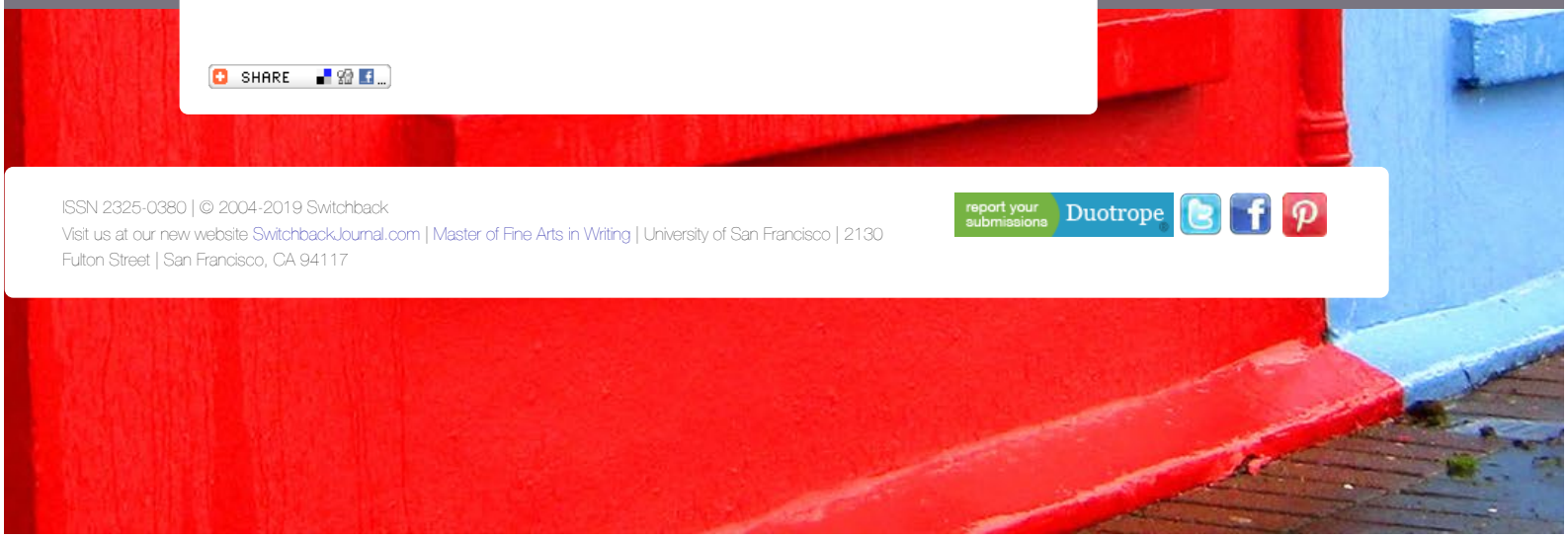

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Charles BarkleyÕs Vertical Leap

Jeanie Chung

Ro and Charles Barkley were right, and I did make varsity. Step Three, becoming a starter, was going to be harder. In the meantime, I put a big x on my calendar for January 18, 1998, when the Rockets were going to be in town. A Monday night, too, so we wouldnÕt have a game. Ro said Charles Barkley had just been playing with us Ñ he probably told everybody heÕd leave them tickets Ñ but I knew better, and sure enough, when we got to the United Center there was an envelope at Will Call with two tickets for ÒRoosevelt and Lorenzo.Ó I didnÕt even care that my name was second. He left us locker room passes too, which was why we barely noticed who won, since all we could think about during the game was what we were going to do afterward. We walked in trying to look like weÕd been there before, but everyone knew we hadnÕt, so we dropped that act and let ourselves be like little kids for a minute, pointing and staring.

ÒWeÕre gonna make it here someday, right, Ro?Ó

Ro was barely listening to me, just looking around with his jaw hanging open.

ÒYeah, yeah, we will,Ó he said finally.

You never would have known heÕd lost from the way Charles Barkley was joking and laughing. I mean, heÕd scored thirty-five points, more than anybody on the floor except Michael, and kicked in fourteen boards. He had on a sharp gray suit, holding court over in the corner, a bunch of reporters and other guys standing around him, joking and laughing right along with him. As soon as he finished with them, he came over and threw his big bear arms around us.

ÒYÕall made the team, right?Ó he said, laughing. I nodded, but Ro didnÕt have to. All you had to do was pick up a newspaper and youÕd know about him.

ÒYou got any pointers for us? Show us a few moves?Ó For one of the best sophomores in the country, a guy who signed autographs and had been since he was fourteen, Ro was really pretty shy, but a lot of times it was easier for him with people he didnÕt know well, especially when he wasnÕt the most famous guy in the room.

ÒShit,Ó Charles Barkley said. ÒLemme see if theyÕll let us back on the court.Ó

Because he was a grown man and an NBA all-star, he didnÕt have to ride the team bus back to the hotel or anything Ñ heÕd get a car sent later. And because he was Charles Barkley, they let us go back on the court for a little one-on-one-on-one.

IÕd been on that court before, for the frosh-soph championship. I was planning to be back for the City Championship at least once. But that night it was different. Michael Jordan, Scottie, Dennis Rodman, theyÕd been out there not two hours ago. I swear, you stood in the right place, you could still smell the sweat.

Only the lights right above the court were on, which made me feel a little like we were inside a cocoon. A cage, maybe. Then, I started to think of those lights like a spotlight. This was just preparation for where we were going in a few years. Where Charles Barkley already was, and where Ro and I were heading. Except there would be thousands of people out there in that darkness, and weÕd go from there to fancy clubs, then go home afterward to fancy houses and champagne and steak. No more plastic-tasting bologna with ketchup. I just stood there, smiling like a fool, until I heard dupp, dupp, dupp: Ro dribbling.

With all of us in street clothes, youÕd think old Charles would pound us, but on top of the fact heÕd just played an NBA basketball game, he had some kind of fancy dress shoes with that suit, which he didnÕt want to wrinkle. So Ro took it to him.

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ÒWhoo. IÕm too old for this,Ó Charles Barkley said. ÒListen, Lorenzo. WhynÕt you show me how you rebound? WeÕll work on the box-out.Ó

He watched as I got my feet set, nodded. Asked Ro to brick one from distance. The ball clanged off the rim, and I jumped. I had the ball Ñ and then it was off my fingertips, in his hands, coming down right in front of a big sweat stain on that nice silk shirt.

ÒNot bad, kid. Then he looked at me again. WhatÕs your vertical up to now?Ó

ÒThirty-four.Ó

He looked serious for a minute. ÒYouÕre still young. Keep working. YouÕll get there.Ó He looked me up and down. ÒYou hit the weights, get a little of that killer instinct. You gonna be a monster.Ó

He had to leave after that, probably to some fancy NBA party, but we didnÕt care. RoÕs mom was outside to pick us up, like we were little kids, and we didnÕt care. We had to go to school the next day, and we didnÕt care.

Keep working. YouÕll get there. YouÕre gonna be a monster. I wrote those words on a piece of paper and taped it right on that Barkley poster, right next to the list. I had two down. More really Ð not only did I get advice from Charles Barkley, I got my own little demonstration. He didnÕt have anything like that when he was a sophomore in high school, I bet.

As hard as I thought it was going to be getting to meet Charles Barkley, it was simple compared to breaking into the starting lineup. I was too slow, not a good enough ballhandler, to play anywhere but down low. Which meant I had to beat out Mo Chambers, who was bigger, and, letÕs face it, better. If I was jealous of anybody, it was him. Now, itÕs not like I was uncoordinated, like youÕd tell me, ÒMove your feet like this and your arms like thisÓ and I couldnÕt do it. I just didnÕt always know when to move them in what way. Not like Ro. Not like Mo. I didnÕt have it naturally, like they did, but if I worked hard enough I knew I could get it.

Really, Mo didnÕt *deserve* to be a starter. He didnÕt want it like I did. He did what Coach said Ñ otherwise heÕd have been out the door pretty quick Ñ but he did as little as he could to get by. He was pretty smart, so he was gonna qualify for college, as far as grades and scores, but again, he did the bare minimum.

He was six-ten, which helped, donÕt get me wrong. Still, he wasnÕt some big goon out there waving his arms around and knocking people over. Naw, he made it look easy. His man would be all over him in the post, and heÕd just take that little pivot step away and have a clear shot to the hoop. Really, his laziness worked in his favor sometimes, because that extra bulk made him hard to move if he didnÕt want to. He was in good enough shape for a high school big man, and when he had to, heÕd get into good enough shape for a college big man, and that would be enough for him. HeÕd never make it to the league. DidnÕt want it bad enough.

ÒYou know how MoÕs got that drop step down low?Ó Ro would ask. ÒMaybe you try working on something like that.Ó So I did. After practice, I stayed extra to work on my shooting, rebounding, my drop step. Boxing out to get the rebound. It doesnÕt sound hard, and itÕs not Ñ you make a wall with your body, get between your man and the ball when it comes off the rim. You set your feet so you take up a little extra space, make yourself into a big, tall box he canÕt get around. The thing is, you have to balance yourself just right, so your guy canÕt just push the side of the box in, collapse it and get to the ball. Or go right past the box, if you havenÕt set it down in the right place and canÕt move it the right way. But once I got that vertical leap where I wanted it, IÕd put it all together.

Coach gave us an off day, and I asked Mo to work with me. Just the two of us. He let me take it out first. I drove him down under the basket, got down low, gathered my strength just like Charles Barkley, and went up strong to the hoop. Got a little bit of air, yessir. I laid that ball right past him and in. He stared at me for a second, then took the ball, bounced it like he was making sure it was real.

ÒAll right, then,Ó he said.

He bounced the ball higher, trying to make his own alley-oop on me, but I sprang up, swatted that mess right out. All afternoon, in that empty gym, I worked that boy over. He was sweating, and I didnÕt even feel like I was breathing hard.

ÒNow we got something to show Coach,Ó I said.

Mo smiled. He was lazy, but he wasnÕt a bad guy. If I was better, if having me start meant that we would

win, he was all for it. Which was why, at practice the next day, he told Coach to let me work with the first team. Coach turned toward Mo, trying to stand so that I couldnÕt see him frowning, thinking Mo was just trying to take it easy.

ÒWeÕll try it. But I better not see you dogginÕ it over there, Mo.Ó

Mo grinned and turned his jersey inside out from the blue the starters wore to the bench red. I switched mine the opposite way. Here we go, I thought. I can cross off Step Three.

When Coach blew the whistle, I ran down the court and set up under the basket while Poochie brought the ball up. Mo stepped in front of me, arms out. Poochie dished to Ro, whose shot clanged off the rim.

ÒAll you, Zo,Ó he called out, even though I already knew. I got my feet set, sprang for the ball, ready to jam it home, and felt Ñ nothing. Except just a little bump against my ribs, which wasnÕt even close to a foul, especially on the West Side. No, my hands were empty, and Mo was coming down with the ball, which he passed to Tony, and before I knew it he was rolling on down to the other end of the court. Tony passed to Delano Brooks, who zipped it right over to Mo, who laid it in for two.

Ò2-0, Red!Ó Coach yelled. ÒYÕall pick it up out there.Ó

I would tell you what happened after that, but I still donÕt exactly know. I was doing everything I should be doing, but somehow I was always a step or so behind. Mo, on the other hand, he was always right place, right time. And however lazy he might have been when he had the ball, when heÕd D up, forget it. He was all over me like I was the last piece of pie.

After ten minutes, Coach called me and Mo over. Mo was sucking wind, but I bet I felt worse. Coach looked from one to the other and shook his head. We turned our jerseys inside out again.

Yeah, hustle beats talent. But hustle and talent beats plain old hustle without even trying.

ÒSon,Ó Coach told me after practice. ÒIÕm proud of you.Ó Told me I was an important part of the team, and how special we were going to be when Ro, Poochie, Mo, and I were all seniors. I told Ro about it when we were waiting for his dad to pick us up.

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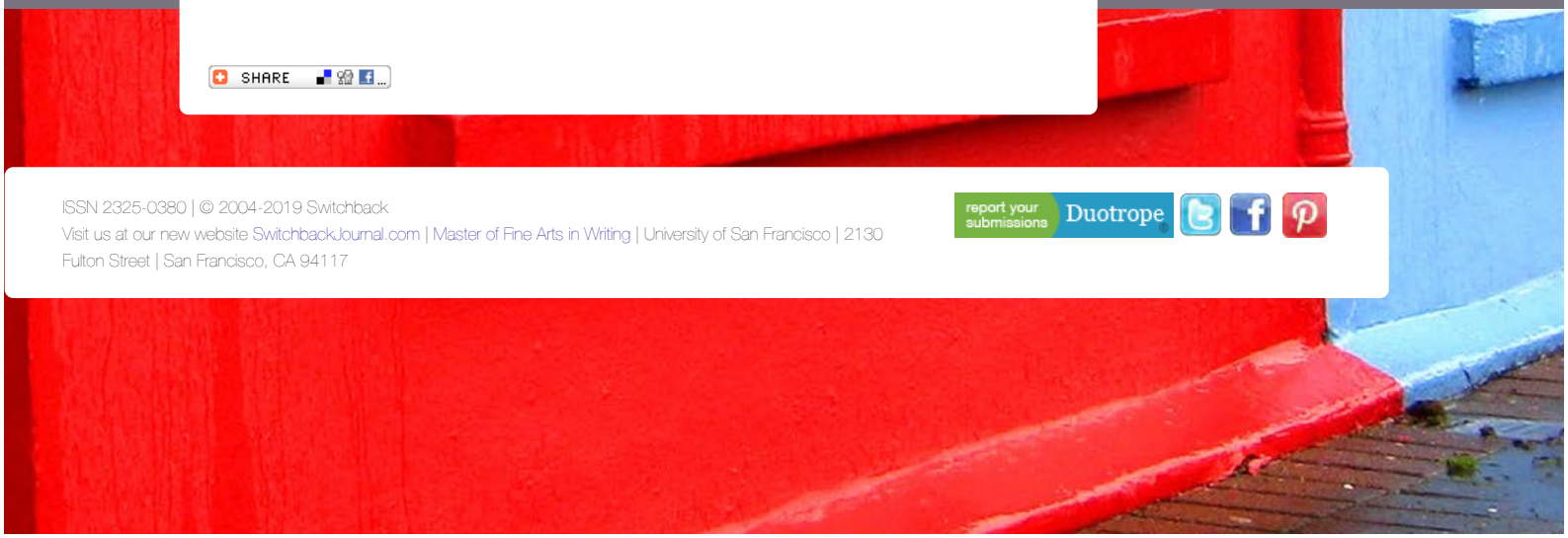

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Charles BarkleyÕs Vertical Leap

Jeanie Chung

ÒHeÕs trying to be all nice, like I got to have my hand held,Ó I said, opening the gym door to spit out on the concrete. ÒIÕll show him. If I keep working, get me a real Charles Barkley vertical leap, by senior year, IÕm going to make this team special. You and me, dog. Ro and Zo. Inside-out.Ó

Ro looked at me for a second, then bent down to untie and retie his shoe.

ÒWhat?Ó I said. ÒYou donÕt believe me?Ó

He looked back at me, then said, like he just remembered something important he had to tell me, ÒMan, you see KG the other night? When he ÐÓ

ÒRo.Ó

ÒYeah?Ó

ÒIÕm gonna make it, arenÕt I?Ó

ÒWhat do you mean? You made it. YouÕre on varsity.Ó

ÒPlease. You know. IÕve showed you the list. ThatÕs just Step One. Am I gonna get all the way there, to the league?Ó

ÒNo guarantees, dog. All you can do is keep working hard. Listen to Coach. You know he knows more about basketball than both of us can even try to learn in four years.Ó Turned away like I wasnÕt there, like the conversation was over.

He bent down again to untie the other shoe, but before he could retie it, I grabbed him, hoisted his little bony ass up to standing, and almost yelled, ÒHe knows about *high school* basketball. He never played in the NBA. A lot of guys werenÕt all that in high school, and they blew up in the NBA. Charles Barkley. Michael Jordan. You know what IÕm talking about.Ó

I was looking right in RoÕs eyes, which got wide for a second: surprised, maybe. But then they set. Focused. His shoulders, his arms tensed, like he was getting ready for that rebound, to pick off that pass. IÕd seen it so many times, for so many years. Ro, he played some sick defense. HeÕd tear you up if he had to. I stepped off, and he smoothed himself out, bent down and retied that shoe, looping every loop like it was some kind of test he had to pass.

See, Ro and I had never gotten into a fight, not once, and weÕd known each other since we were seven years old.

ÒHey, man, I didnÕt mean ÑÓ

He shook me off, still looking down at the ground. ÒDonÕt worry about it.Ó

ThatÕs how it goes with the people who got your back.

ÒRo?Ó

ÒYeah.Ó

ÒSeriously. I know if I accidentally step in front of a bus tomorrow, IÕm probably not playing in the NBA,Ó I said. ÒShit. Be happy if I can walk. What IÕm asking is, if that doesnÕt happen, if I work hard enough, if I want it bad enough, can I be one of those guys?Ó

Ro had finally finished tying that shoe, and we were standing face to face again. It was all good, right? Then how come this time, he really did look scared: eyes bugging out, hands shaking? No. This time there was a flash of that adrenaline, that fear, and then his shoulders sagged, he slumped a little, almost like heÕd gone for the ball and

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lost it. Like the game was over. He breathed out, bit his lip, looked down, shifted his feet.

Then, slowly, in a real low voice, he said, ÒMichael Jordan, Charles Barkley, theyÕre not normal people. North Carolina wouldnÕt have taken Michael if he hadnÕt shown them something. Auburn, itÕs not on that same level, but still. Even if I never get hurt, I donÕt know if *IÕll* be in the NBA, and IÕm ÑÓ

ÒA starter? A star? IÕm just a normal person, and youÕre the next Michael?Ó

ÒNaw, Zo,Ó he said, shaking his head. ÒItÕs just, I mean, you got to have a backup plan, especially when you ÑÓ

I waited for him to finish, but he didnÕt. In his mind, he was untying and retying that shoe. He was just about three feet away. If heÕd been that far up above me, I couldÕve jumped up so weÕd be at the same level.

When the car pulled up, RoÕs dad asked us how practice went, and I mumbled something. I didnÕt talk to Ro on the ride, or for a week after. I could say it wasnÕt the same after that, even though we still hung out. Fuck him, man. HeÕd never played in the NBA either. He didnÕt know any more than I did.

I needed to hear from someone whoÕd been there, and so I sent Charles Barkley a letter, asking him if I couldnÕt even start in high school, how was I going to play in the NBA? What advice did he have? Besides the vertical leap, what else did I need to get my game to that next level? Even though I knew he probably wouldnÕt answer, there was a part of me that thought he would, and it turned out that part was right, because that spring, after our sophomore season was over, after the Rockets got eliminated from the playoffs, I got a letter back. Handwritten and everything.

ÒDear Lorenzo,Ó it said. ÒSo somebodyÕs better than you? What are you going to do to change that? You probably know I didnÕt have it easy for awhile in high school either. Neither did RoÕs boy Michael Jordan. We hung in there, though Ñ we stuck it out and look at us now. Speaking of Michael, theyÕre about to win another championship in Chicago. Make Õem feel better and at least try to cheer for them when theyÕre on TV.

ÒAs far as your game, there are no shortcuts. You just gotta do all the things youÕve been doing. Stay in shape. Watch game film. Watch us. Learn from the best. Listen to your coach. Roosevelt is probably a good influence on you. Keep close to him. Work hard, and you can achieve some great things. Look at me. I promise you, if you work hard, good things will happen. YouÕll learn things from playing basketball that will help you your whole life. I promise you that.

ÒWhat I canÕt promise is that if you work hard youÕll be in the NBA. There are no guarantees, not for you, your boy Roosevelt, or anybody. Honestly, you can do better. When I talk about how IÕm not a role model, I donÕt just mean kids should look to their parents and their community for examples of hard work and decency. I mean basketball players, football players, we arenÕt the ones who are running this world, much as it seems that way sometimes. You donÕt need to run around like some kind of trained monkey in front of a bunch of old white guys in ugly sweaters. YouÕre smarter than I am. Be something useful, like a doctor or a lawyer. Or the first black president. If you play in the NBA too, thatÕs gravy.

ÒLook at that! This is the longest letter I have ever written in my entire life. If you can command that kind of attention from a superstar like me, just think what else youÕll be able to accomplish.Ó

ÒYour friend,

Charles Barkley.Ó

Now, what do you suppose Charles Barkley would have said to that when he was sixteen? When he didnÕt make varsity, did he decide to be a doctor, or a lawyer, or run for president? No. He kept working, kept trying, and ended up proving the haters wrong. Vertical leap isnÕt about luck or talent or being special. ItÕs about who wants it more.

Charles Barkley was Ñ is Ñ a great man, donÕt get me wrong, but he didnÕt know everything. For sure he didnÕt know much about Lorenzo Bailey, if he thought IÕd rather be president than play in the League. Hell, he didnÕt know much if he thought I could be president. Now, I did hear he wants to run for governor someday, after heÕs done playing. ThatÕs different. If anybody voted for him, itÕd only be because he got famous playing basketball.

ThatÕs what I told Charles Barkley Ñ some of it, in a nicer way Ñ when I wrote him back, but I never heard from him again. I understood; he had bigger people to talk to than some bench-warming high school kid. That was

just how it was when you were in the NBA.

A few weeks later, we watched Michael, Scottie, Phil and the rest of them lift that trophy on TV---all of them and all of us knowing it was going to be for the last time. I saw Michael with his two hands in the air, six fingers raised. I saw Dennis Rodman jumping around with that green leopard-looking hair.

ÒSix championships,Ó RoÕs dad said. ÒYou boys donÕt realize it, but weÕre not going to see anything like that again for a long time. Maybe not ever. Lucky if you get there once.Ó

Ro just stared at the TV, watching Michael hug Phil Jackson, who probably had tears running into that big gray beard of his. I saw the Utah players walking right through that celebration, on their home court, just wanting to get the hell out of there. I saw Bryon Russell, the guy who was guarding Michael, who let him walk right past him to cut the Jazz lead to one in that last minute. I couldnÕt see his face, but I doubt he was smiling.

Those guys Ñ Russell, Karl Malone, John Stockton Ñ what did they have to be sad about? To be playing for the championship, on TV, all those people watching? Standing on the same floor as Michael and Scottie? Charles Barkley, he knew how to appreciate that. When he played for a championship, he was joking and laughing. He didnÕt need to win one championship to be happy, let alone six. Man, when I get to the League, even if MichaelÕs not there, or Charles Barkley either, if itÕs me and Kobe or me and Shaq, and Ro, you better be damn sure IÕm gonna appreciate it.

I still got a long way to go on this list, I know. I still look at it every day. If I learned one thing from watching that championship game, from watching all those games, from meeting Charles Barkley, itÕs that those guys, theyÕre normal people. TheyÕre not superheroes or something. They ainÕt God. No, sir. Ro doesnÕt know what heÕs talking about. I never made Step Three, but it doesnÕt matter now. My vertical leap? ItÕs up to thirty-six, maybe thirty-six and a half. IÕm still on track, man. Just you watch.

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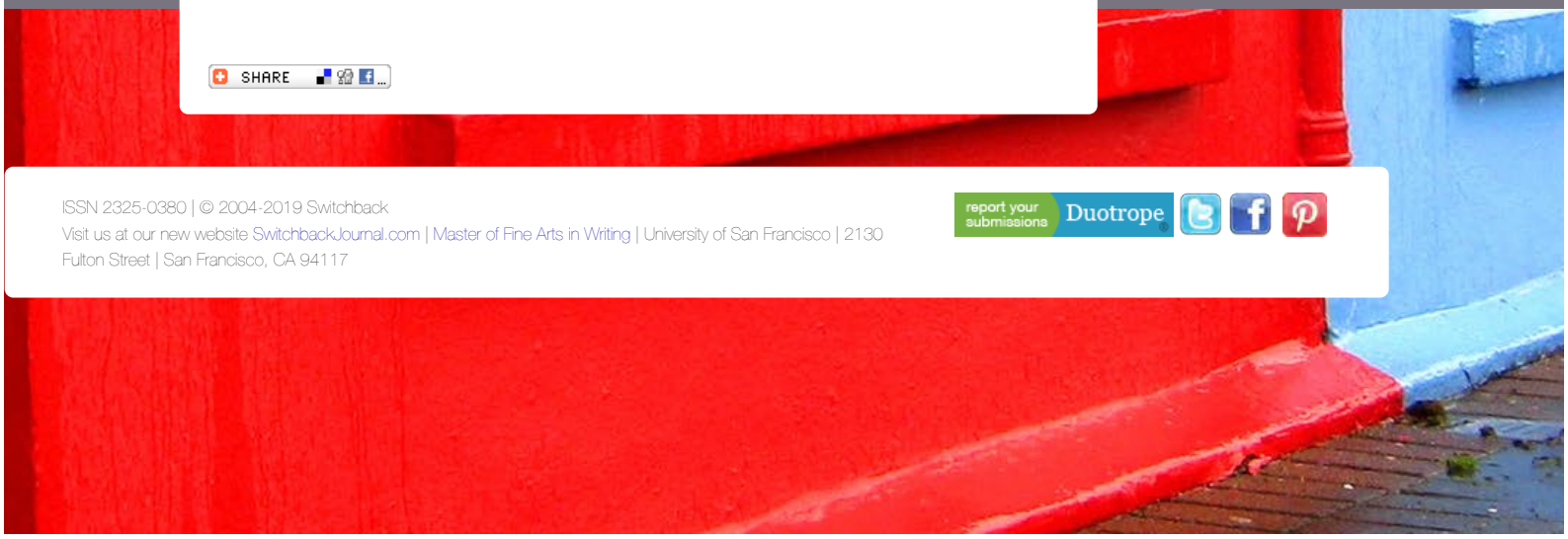

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Jamey Gallagher

Jamey Gallagher has had stories published most recently in *Northwind Magazine* and *Bayou Magazine*. He lives in Baltimore and teaches writing at the Community College of Baltimore County.

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Mousekiller

Jamey Gallagher

Santamaria first noticed the decapitated mouse beside the drain five minutes into his shower, which meant that he had been standing with his bare feet no more than a couple of inches from the dead, soggy body for five minutes. Because the drain was partially clogged with hair from his wife and daughter, the rinse water had backed up, and bacteria and germs from the dead mouse had probably already touched his bare feet. Crouching to inspect the corpse, Santamaria was suddenly aware of his nudity, his balls dangling to touch the smooth white shell of the tub, water running over the knobs of his spine and into his butt crack. In place of the mouseÕs head was a red, mangled knot of flesh. Squeamishly, Santamaria lowered a dark blue washcloth over the body, feeling tiny ribs and ill-defined muscles through the nap of the material. He placed it, like a nice little package, on the side of the tub, turned the shower knob to the left for hotter water and, in the ensuing steam, vigorously scrubbed his hands and feet.

After the shower he dressed in gray sweatpants and a henley shirt and ambled downstairs. His wife, Leidy, sat in the kitchen wearing a thin nightgown and patting the cat who perched on top of the table purring and running his body up against LeidyÕs hand. The nightgown was open, displaying two long breasts tipped with nipples the size and shape of pencil erasers. Santamaria took note of the breasts, made himself a cup of coffee. Chock Full O'Nuts. He missed the good stuff, but they had cut their expenses to the bone. No more going out to eat, no more Netflix, no more cable or cable internet. He was grateful that he had been able to talk Leidy out of selling his iPhone on eBayÑhow was he going to take calls from prospective employers if he didnÕt have a cell phone?

Santamaria settled down at the table to eat his daily dose of Raisin Bran and drink his coffee, and they both listened to Ramona, their daughter, slam her bedroom door upstairs, then slam the bathroom door. Eleven going on sixteen. Ramona had started menstruating when she was ten and a half, and ever since then it had been *watch out*. Childhood was already a distant memory, for all of them. It had been bad enough when Santamaria had seen Ramona talking with older boys on the way home from the bus stop, laughing too loudly, but when he had caught her smoking with one of them in the turnaround at the end of the road it had taken all he had in him not to hit her. They were losing herÑhe was sure of it. Staying home didnÕt seem to be helping matters the way heÕd hoped it would. A person could get consumed with worry.

The cat was now perched on LeidyÕs lap, staring at him, sphinxlike, with two yellow eyes.

ÒCover yourself up, will you,Ó he said.

ÒThereÕs nothing here you havenÕt seen already,Ó she said, opening the nightgown a little wider. ÒBesides, I thought you *liked* these.Ó

ÒPlease, Leidy.Ó

Santamaria had met his wife at his place of employment thirteen years earlier. She had packed boxes in the shipping department while he had worked in the art department as a production artist. The difference in their stations had given him the upper hand for a little while, not long. Leidy was forty-two now, but looked thirty, tops. He, on the other hand, was forty-five but looked fifty. If either of them was going to have an affair, it was pretty clear which one it would be. Forty-five years old, but still, like a school kid, the sight of his wifeÕs familiar breasts gave Santamaria an uncontrollable erection. She shot him a sly, sexy smile just before Ramona screamed in the bathroom. It was a no-shit, full throttle scream, sending SantamariaÕs paternal feelings into automatic pilot. His daughter was in dangerÑhe had to help her. He shot up, adrenaline giving him the strength of three men, then sat back down.

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ÒThereÕs a dead mouse in the bathroom,Ó he said.

ÒThereÕs a what?Ó

ÒThereÕs a dead mouse in the bathroom. Your little champion there ripped its head off. IÕll take care of it once MonaÕs done.Ó

ÒIsnÕt he a good little mousekiller,Ó Leidy said, her tone of voice shifting in mid-sentence, becoming higher and sweeter as she shifted her attention from Santamaria to the cat.

*

After the two women in his life had leftÑtheir hair combed, eyes shadowed, skin moisturized, etc., etc.Ñ Santamaria removed the blue washcloth from the bathroom and carried it downstairs, gingerly. He was not a man who did many things gingerly, but mice tweaked him. He carried the washcloth outside, the mouse body disgustingly perceptible beneath the terrycloth. Bile built in the back of SantamariaÕs throat, but his curiosity got the better of him, and inside the shed he placed the package on his workbench and unpeeled the folds of washcloth. The fluorescent tubes flickered, Frankensteinishly. He imagined a reanimated mouse wreaking havoc on the neighborhood. The longer he was out of work, he noticed, the more often asinine fantasies played themselves out in his head. Soon he would lose all ability to communicate with other adults. He imagined the headless mouse scratching blindly at foundations. Really, there was not all that much it could do if it did come back to life.

The mouseÕs fur was gray and black, moist from the shower, the skin of the body paler, pinker. Where the head had been was a raw fold of mouse body material. Santamaria pressed the mouseÕs belly with his finger, then held the finger away from him. He imagined the crunch of separating bones. He laid the carcass on some window mesh left over from when heÕd replaced the window screens, then buried the mouse in the yard, about six inches deep. In a few weeks he would lift the mesh up and all that would remain of the mouse would be a skeleton, sans skull. He had learned this valuable skill in Boy Scouts. His childhood bedroom had been decorated with lizard skulls and snake skeletons and the skeletons of raccoons that he found on the road, dead but not yet squished beyond all recognition. Back then he had been less squeamish, though even as a child mice had creeped him out.

At ten oÕclock he went upstairs to the master bedroom, moved the cat out of the sunbeam that fell across the bed, and stretched out on the covers. The house had been a ranch when theyÕd moved in, but in the mid-nineties Santamaria had made a bundle in the stocks and theyÕd refinanced and had the addition built. Two bedrooms and a bathroom. Their master bedroom let in light throughout the dayÑa fact he hadnÕt been aware of until last year when heÕd been laid off. He curled into a ball and fell asleep.

Fifteen minutes later he was awakened by the sound of shriekingÑdistinctly miniature shriekingÑfollowed by the clatter of the cat bumping into things in hot pursuit around the bed. Although he felt exposed lying there in the sunbeam, as if the mouse was going to run up the bed and over his face, he didnÕt move, merely watched the hunt. The cat was Genghis Khan-cruel, biting and releasing, pouncing, placing the limp mouse in its mouth and sinking its needle-like teeth into the shrieking body. So, an infestation. One mouse could be just one mouse, but two mice meant a shitload of other mice.

*

Ten minutes later, Santamaria pulled his white Alero into the parking lot of the hardware store, almost empty at this time of the morning. HeÕd bought the Alero, a mid-level sports car, for Leidy, but sheÕd never grown comfortable with the stick shift, so every day she drove his Grand Am to Atlantic City where she worked as a cocktail waitress in one of the casinos, wearing not nearly enough clothes. That job would not last forever, because no matter how good she looked now, forty-two was still forty-two.

Behind the counter of the hardware store, Bob Woodward hunched. Woodward and Santamaria had conjoined backyards, but a barrier of overgrown shrubs meant they hardly ever saw each other. Woodward was the same age as SantamariaÑmaybe a little older. It was the Great Recession, and you were lucky if you had a job, but it was hard not to feel bad for Bob. His eyes shifted downward.

ÒÕMorning, Bob. You having a mice problem over at your place?Ó

ÒNope,Ó Woodward said. ÒYou?Ó

ÒIÕm afraid so. You think I should poison the suckers or go old-school with the traps?Ó

ÒThe traps donÕt always kill Ôem. Sometimes you have to finish the job yourself. But on the other hand, when you poison Ôem they find some cozy out-of-the-way place to rot and stink your house up. ThereÕs those so-called ÔhumaneÕ traps that can trap any number of them, just bait it with peanut butter, but you have to be

sure to empty those real quick because IÕve seen it that one of them will eat the others and then itÕs a hell of a mess to clean up.Ó

ÒRight,Ó Santamaria said. He pictured hordes of headless mice devouring each other. The image was impreciseÑhow the hell would they eat each other without heads?Ñbut no less disturbing for that.

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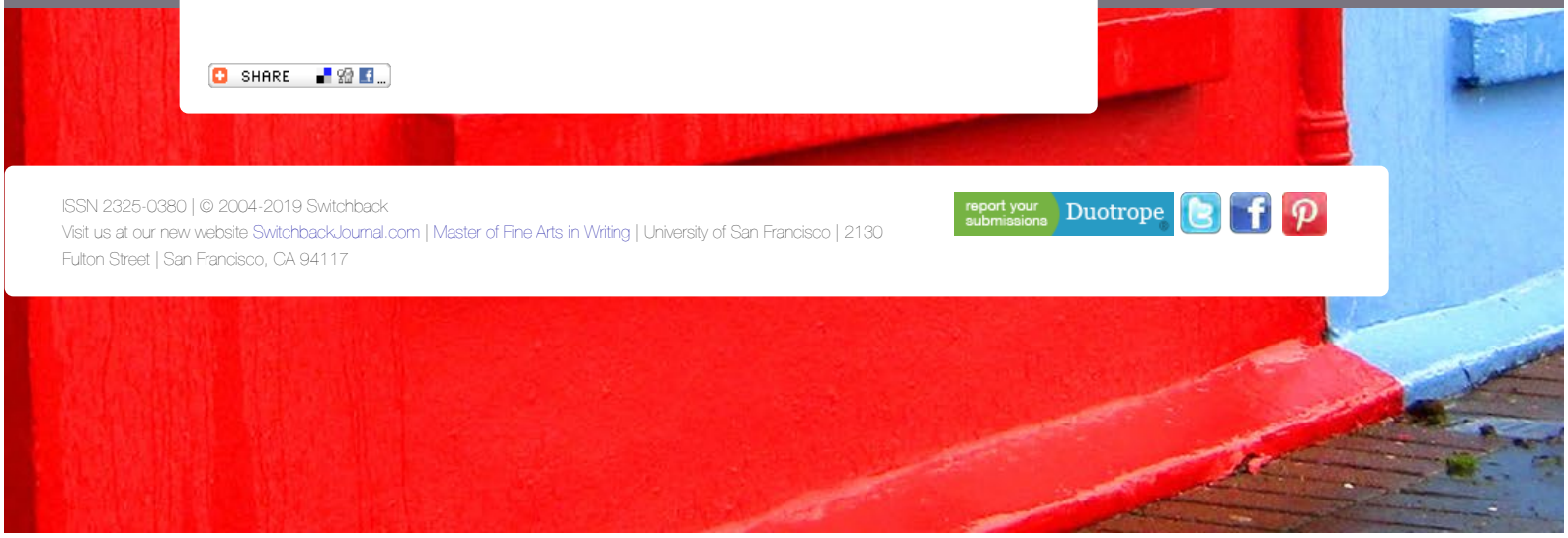

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Mousekiller

Jamey Gallagher

ÒSo, howÕs the job search going?Ó Woodward asked as Santamaria carried an armload of wooden traps with metal snaps to the register with him. He figured seven would do it. He hoped so.

ÒSame old, same old. You hiring here?Ó

ÒIÕm afraid not, Santamaria.Ó At one time, not so long ago, they would have been joking, ribbing each other.

After the hardware store, Santamaria drove fast down the long straight roads of rural, southern New Jersey, a town called Buena, pronounced Bue-nah not Bway-nah, although Mexicans had staked a pretty large section of town now. The fields were dying or dead, plowed over or under, the trees had lost all of their leaves, and the sky had the bleached look it would keep until spring came back around. Santamaria hated to think about the prospect of another winter at home, unemployed. When he saw a small gang of vultures hopping around near the roadside, he pictured millions of them darkening the skies, plucking at his eyeballs and ribcage. IÕm still alive, guys, he imagined screaming, but they didnÕt pay any attention to him.

*

Now there were three mice in the bedroom, and the cat looked dizzy and tired. He was an adept hunter, a skilled mousekiller, but he had his paws full. Santamaria cheered him on, surprised by his own voice. ÒGet Ôem, boy. Come on and get Ôem.Ó The cat didnÕt even look at him. He had turned completely feral now. You can tame a dog or a bird, but you cannot tame a cat.

As he made lunch downstairsÑa grilled cheese sandwich, the cheese bright orange because he had bought the wrong kind at ShopriteÑhe listened to the skittering and crashing of the cat upstairs. Every sound sent ripples of disgust through him. Eating, he tried not to think about hairy, diseased mice or their headless carcasses, but his mind had a mind of its own. He imagined hundreds upon hundreds of the little bastards scurrying over the bed while he and Leidy tried to sleep. He imagined them in RamonaÕs hair and coming out of LeidyÕs mouth. Somehow he was able to finish the sandwich. He read the sports page and the comics and then skimmed the front page.

Since the cat was still working in the bedroom, Santamaria took his iPhone into the bathroom to masturbate to internet porn, hooking into his neighborÕs wi-fi. This was about the only thing he did with the iPhone anymoreÑhe wasnÕt about to check the few stocks he still owned and see that the absolute bottom was even lower than heÕd expectedÑand heÕd become adept with manipulating the thing with his left hand while manipulating himself with the right. Afterwards he was filled with overwhelming sadness, remorse, and self-disgust, but then he flushed the soiled Kleenex and washed his hands and had nothing else to do for the day.

There were four, possibly five mice in the bedroom now. They scattered when he came near. He baited the traps with orange cheese, laid them around the edge of the bedroom and waited.

Sitting on the couch in the living room, he looked at the front yard. After a while the cat came down and stared at him, as if the traps had absolved him of his responsibilities. The cat was mostly black with little bits of white on its chest and paws. He was LeidyÕs cat, but since Santamaria had been laid off, they had developed a kind of relationship. Once in a while the cat let him pat it, or curled up on his lap, a warm bundle at his crotch, but now the cat just stared at Santamaria. He imagined that it was sucking out his soul, like some kind of feline witch. If you thought about them in a certain way, cats were about the spookiest thing in the world. Upstairs, it sounded like a mouse convention was underway. They were partying, wearing little hats, falling into the punch bowl. He waited for the snap of a trap, but even after a half an hour, it had not come.

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*

It was amazing how many people frequented a casino at two oÕclock in the afternoon. They looked like they didnÕt know whether it was day or night, and didnÕt care. Some of them looked like they hadnÕt left the casino for weeks. They had the worn-away appearance of refugees.

Santamaria sat at one of the old-fashioned slot machines watching Leidy from a distance. She wore a gold miniskirt, her strong, long legs on full display, stiletto heels, a gold top that dipped in the front and back. Sometimes after she came home, he would rub her feet for her. Heels were like medieval torture devices, she told him, but they were sexy as hell. Some of the men at the slots were watching her too, but she was just one of several waitresses exposing too much of their bodies. Santamaria was jealous and proud and turned on and pissed off. She made more as a cocktail waitress than he had ever made at any of his jobs. He had worked his way up from file boy to production artist to middle manager before getting canned. He didnÕt have any skills to speak ofÑ beyond Excel and PowerPoint. He had scheduled work for the art department, a glorified secretary.

He fed his credit card into the machine and began playingÑwhat the hell, why not. Maybe heÕd win twenty thousand and they could pay off their credit card debt. The machine still had an arm, but it had been retrofitted with buttons. He couldnÕt stand the newer machines with their cartoon interfaces. He preferred big red, white, and blue 7s and cherries, rollers that actually rolled.

ÒCan I get you a drink, sir?Ó Leidy asked, her slightly husky voiceÑshe had smoked for almost twenty years before heÕd finally convinced her to quitÑflirtatious, but changing quickly when he turned around and she recognized him. ÒWhat are *you* doing here?Ó she said, her voice taking on the accent it always did when she was angry. His Colombian princess. Avenging angel. Her hand went automatically to her hip.

ÒCalm down,Ó he said. ÒI figured IÕd apply at the casinos. ThereÕs nothing else around.Ó

ÒYou apply online, dummy. No wonder you canÕt get a job.Ó

ÒYou know IÕm trying.Ó

ÒAnd what are you doing playing the slots, moron? You know you canÕt win, right?Ó

He hit the button and won twenty dollars, electronic blips tallying his credits, looked at her and grinned.

ÒGo,Ó she said. ÒJust go.Ó He watched her walk away, her hips swaying. Her ass was almost nothing at all now. She worked out too much, didnÕt eat enough. There was something both sexual and asexual about her body. Why couldnÕt he have married a schoolteacher or something? What was she going to do in a few years when no one wanted to look at all that skin except for him? What were *they* going to do?

*

The Atlantic City library was jam-packed with people, many of whom did not speak English. A number of local African Americans were at the computer kiosks. English tutoring sessions were in progress at many of the tables. It was the most crowded and claustrophobia-inducing library Santamaria had ever seen, like the casinos without the electronic jangling or the delusion of winning. He put his name on a long list of people waiting to use the computers, found a magazine, and waited to grab one of the chairs in the magazine and newspapers room. Finally an old woman wearing a white winter hat grabbed her plastic bags and left. Her odorÑa kind of vegetable rotÑ permeated the chair, and he imagined thousands of tiny microbes invading all of his pores. Still, the chair was comfortable and he became accustomed to the smell quickly enough.

These are your people now, Santamaria told himself, looking at the locals. He didnÕt want to look down on them, but part of him did. He had been raised in a suburb of Philadelphia. His family had never had a lot of money, but they had always had some. He had been strictly middle classÑItalian but not Italian Italian. HeÕd gotten the job at the merchandising company, worked his way up. Everything had seemed easy and inevitable. His middle manager wages allowed him to play with stocks, and he had hit on some, big time. Then everything had crashed, he lost a bundle, and here he was. The heady scent of body odor escaped from the sleeping man beside him. A Chinese grandmother stared at him from across the room, probably waiting for the chair. His skin crawled. He imagined that the five mice had turned into a hundred, two hundred, five hundred, back at their house. He imagined five hundred mouse heads lined up on the stairs, staring at him. He wondered where that first mouse head had gone. Did the cat *eat* it?

Finally, he got his half an hour on the computerÑtime enough to fill out one application for CaesarÕs. The application process included a lengthy questionnaire that asked questions about what he would do in certain situations and which of two thingsÑhonesty or reliability, sayÑwas more important, a questionnaire about his values. He felt violated but answered the questions the way he imagined they wanted him to answer them, without attending to his beliefs.

Back at the house, Ramona shot him a look of pure hatred. She sat at the kitchen table, a shoebox in

front of her.

ÒHey, bud,Ó he said. ÒHow was school?Ó He had never needed to take a shower as desperately as he did now.

ÒMousekiller,Ó she said.

ÒHuh?Ó

ÒThis was the only one that was alive,Ó she gestured at the box, opened it. Inside, a small gray mouse limped around. *Vermin* was the word that came to mind. ÒI already buried the other ones in the backyard. How *could* you?Ó

He shrugged, feeling monstrous.

ÒWe should really put him out of his misery, MonaÓ he said. Ramona pushed a piece of wilted lettuce against the injured mouseÕs face. It seemed to look up at them in anguish.

ÒIÕm going to nurse him back to health.Ó

ÒSweetie, listen. HeÕs going to die. If not now, then soon.Ó It felt rotten, but also kind of good, to be imparting life lessons to his daughter. It felt fatherly and grown-up. "Sometimes we have to do things we donÕt want to do. HeÕs going to die real soon. Let me just put him out of his misery.Ó He pictured himself pressing a tiny pillow against the mouseÕs face, holding the pillow there while the mouse struggled for breath and life. He pictured stabbing the mouse in the chest with a tiny dagger. He hoped CaesarÕs would call him. Even a shitty job as a security guard would be better than this. Not another long winter.

*

He listened hard but heard no skittering mice that nightÑnot that he could sleep anyway. From RamonaÕs room came the sound of the injured mouse struggling to escape the shoebox. He pictured the box scraping across the hardwood floors, an inch at a time. He was tempted to take the box and throw the mouse outside, but he knew that Ramona would never forgive him. Eventually the thing would die all on its own. The cat mewled outside RamonaÕs room. Santamaria felt fur replacing his hair, tiny mice teeth replacing his real teeth. He was itchy. Whenever he closed his eyes he saw mice and tiny little bacteria. He wondered how many organisms had been living on that library chair he had sat in, how many germs were on the keyboard heÕd used. Leidy had not had sex with him in three weeks, and she showed no signs of needing or wanting any ever again. Was she cheating on him? She had seemed awfully upset when he showed up at work. He pictured her with a Mexican bus boy in the employeeÕs corridor of the casino. He would have to do something nice for her. If she hadnÕt cheated on him yet, she might any day. Flowers? Dinner? He couldnÕt afford anything. Maybe he could write her a poem.

In the morning he pretended to sleep, listening to the two women in his life get ready and leave for school and work. When he was making the bedÑLeidy would be impressedÑhe found the mouseÕs head. It was a tiny, hairy ball. He picked it up with his fingers, not nearly as disgusted as he would have expected. He held the head up to the sunbeam coming through the window. The eyes of the mouse were open, staring out with animal wonder.

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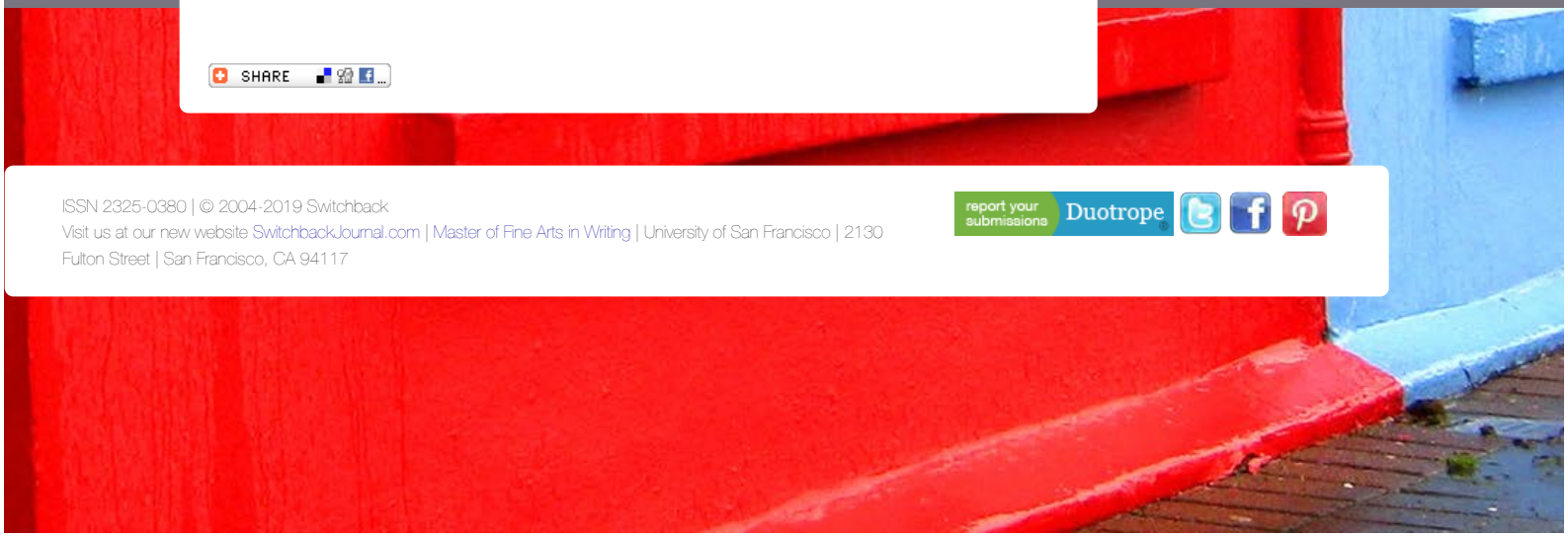

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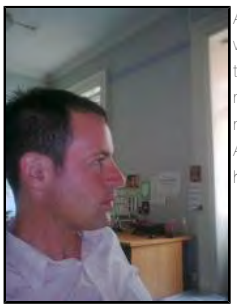
Andrew McLinden



Andrew McLinden likes referring to himself in the third person. He sometimes walks into a supermarket and says to the checkout girl ÒAndrew wants to know if these cakes are part of the two for one deal youÕre currently promoting?Ó On a recent rendezvous with a girl heÕd met off an internet dating site he was heard to remark ÒAndrew thinks you used someone elseÕs photograph on your profile.Ó Andrew likes to read and likes to write and hopes other people like to read what he writes.

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A Case of the Puncs

Andrew McLinden

At the library I hand back two books that I didn't read. All I did was score out all the punctuation marks in both of them. It took four bottles of Wite-Out and nearly twice as many days. When I finished I felt better than I had done in weeks.

As I walk out, an old man holds the door open for me. I canÕt decide what kind of Punc he is. We pause and stare at each other, him with his watery eyes, mine dry, both of us sword fencing bad breath.

ÒIs anything the matter?Ó he asks me.

ÒA Comma,Ó I say, finally.

*

Dave starts up the car and indicates as he takes me home. ÒIt wasnÕt hit and run,Ó he tells me. ÒI waited a hundred yards down the road and the kid got to his feet, you know? I watched him shake himself down.Ó Dave slips the car into second, then third. Fences start to flicker by. ÒThe kid looked unsteady. Sure, IÕll give you that. But there was no indication things were going to turn out the way they have. ThatÕs why I drove off. Ó

He turns off the radio and turns on the window wipers. The car slows to a halt and we sit in silence at a set of traffic lights. A Question Mark walks across the pedestrian crossing dragging a collie behind him. The lights turn green and we start off again. I look at Dave as he drives: those Quotation Marks around his head. They look like earphones.

ÒThe doctorÕs no help,Ó Dave says. ÒI get these pills and a pat on the back and I think, what am I supposed to do with these pills? Will these pills bring the kid back? Where is the pill that brings people back? That would be something worth inventing. Nearly every patient in the world would be cured with a pill that brought someone else back.Ó

Quotation Marks are the easiest of the Puncs to spot. It will say ÒWar Vet,Ó or ÒLesbian and proudÓ or ÒAnti-social Goth.Ó It will say ÒReligious,Ó or ÒEarth Mother,Ó or ÒCam Girl.Ó It will say ÒQuiz Show Watcher,Ó It will say ÒAcademic,Ó It will say ÒHit and Run Driver.Ó

Whatever is in between those quotes dominates them: it dictates the clothes they wear, it dictates the places they go and it dictates the friends they keep.

ÒI lay these useless pills out in a line and then I put them back in the bottle. I lay them out in a line and then I put them back in the bottle. This goes on for hours. I think, is this doctor telling me to take them all at once? Is that what heÕs saying here? Then I pop one in my mouth. It tastes of night. I turn out the light. But those pills donÕt stop the dreams. All they do is chain me to my bed so I canÕt wake up and scream. All the screamingÕs inside.Ó

He points to his temple then shakes his head. As I watch his AdamÕs apple bob I think that Dave might be turning into a Question Mark but say nothing. Puncs can change throughout their lives. ThatÕs something you need to understand. A couple can be happily married for thirty years Ð heÕs a Semi-Colon and sheÕs a Comma. Then one day over breakfast the man announces that heÕs a repressed Hyphen. HeÕs known it all along Ð known it since he was young. He needs to be with another Hyphen and only married to cover his tracks.

ÒLast week I went up to the grave,Ó Dave says. ÒJust to tell the kid I was sorry, you know?Ó

I tell him that graveyards need to move with the times. I say we should be using electronic headstones, linked to social media sites, lighting up those dark cemeteries at night: ÒMiss you forever,Ó flashing above a date

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of death in red. Twelve people like this.

*

My wife is doing exercises to her Zumba DVD as I push through the front door. She waves, like I'm on the opposite side of a river, and stops the music. Sweat blurs in a V down her chest. My wife is an Elipsis.

Éno way did we forget to pay thatÉand then this kid, well he says: let me get the managerÉafter my father died I sworeÉtwo for the price of two it should sayÉbut there was a foam party on the islandÉitÕs repeated after eightÉ

As I lay back on the sofa, trying to get comfortable, I can hear my wife crying in the bedroom. I think of what a let-down life is, and how you never find a woman as perfect as your mother, who gives you love unconditionally, and how itÕs all back to front that you find that first and then afterwards all you meet are these women who will only ever be mothers to other people.

*

Next morning Dave picks me up again. He seems down and we travel to the doctorÕs in silence. This time itÕs my turn to see the quack. I turned forty, four weeks ago. The only card I got was from the Health Centre inviting me in for a check-up.

Already seated in the waiting room is a pair of Brackets and a Colon. The Colon is rocking a baby in a pram. ÒCoo chee coo chee coo,Ó the Colon says. A doctor walks by. He stands erect as he talks to the receptionist. I wonder if heÕs DaveÕs doctor. HeÕs an Exclamation Mark and this to me is right. Exclamation Marks are important Puncs. TheyÕre loud alpha males who live in the best parts of town. TheyÕre go-getters and jet-setters. They become presidents, popes, and prime ministers. They fly planes; they manage banks; they go to schools that look like castles. Sometimes, if youÕre out and about, you can see them pogoing down the street on their Exclamation Marks, knocking other Puncs out of the way.

The nurse calls and I follow her white slip-on shoes down a carpetless corridor. I roll up my sleeve as my body finds shape in the green leather seat. The nurse straps something around my bicep and it tightens. Something beeps. My nostrils flare.

ÒI donÕt like that first reading at all,Ó she says. ÒItÕs way higher than I would expect for a man of your age. Does anyone in your family have heart trouble?Ó

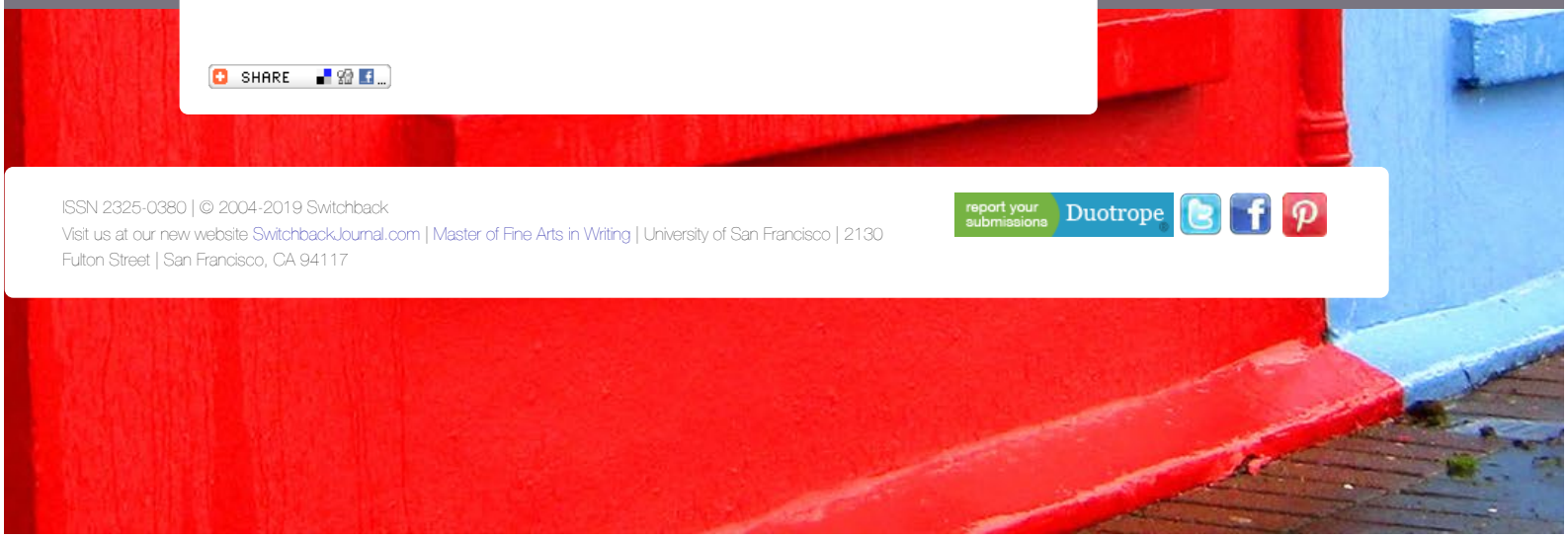
I tell her my familyÕs trouble is that none of them have a heart.

ÒAh,Ó she says. ÒWe have to rule out any underlying health issues. Something might be causing this. You might be a Full Stop.Ó

I ask her to repeat herself.

ÒI said the fight is to get this blood pressure to drop.Ó

ÒAh,Ó I say.



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Jeanne Lyet Gassman

Jeanne Lyet Gassman holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and teaches English and creative writing. She has received fellowships from Ragdale and the Arizona Commission on the Arts. Her work has been published in *Barrelhouse*, *LQQK*, and *Literary Mama*, among others. Her novel, *The Blood of A Stone*, is currently on submission to agents. She lives in Arizona with her husband, two children, a cat, a turtle, and a very spoiled dog that claims more than half of the bed.

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Of Fools and Lunatics

Jeanne Lyet Gassman

Red & White & Blue
Kathleen Gunton

You think you know people but you really donÕt. You share a cup of coffee, talk about hassles at work and the price of food and gas, joke about last nightÕs episode of everyoneÕs favorite TV show. You know about their latest diet or exercise program, their squabbles with family, and what they did on summer vacation. But do you really know them? Nope.

The call comes in around 3:00 a.m., a time when itÕs never good news. Confused by the ringing in my ears, I slap blindly at the alarm clock before I grab the phone. ÒYeah,Ó I say, as I dig for a cigarette. My mouth tastes like last Friday nightÕs whiskey, but I havenÕt touched the booze for over forty-eight hours. IÕm not stupid enough to hit the bottle when IÕm on duty. The flame from my lighter flares blue in the darkness, and I suck hungrily at the cancer stick before I answer. ÒYeah?Ó The voice on the other end sounds like a mechanical doll as she recites: *WeÕll deliver her to the Chinle airstrip tomorrow, 8:00 a.m. SheÕs going to the psych hospital in Phoenix.*

I donÕt know why I was surprised. The buzz has been going up and down the rez for several weeks. First, there was that incident in February when we had the storm with sleet and hail and wind so cold it froze your nuts into iced melon balls. She shows up at her classroom wearing short-shorts and a tank top. Then, twice in March, she comes to work drunk, staggers into the nurseÕs office with her hair matted and a mess where sheÕs wheezing gin breath on the students and handing out excuses to get out of gym. The second time the principal sends her home Òsick.Ó

But last weekend was the clincher. The janitor finds her passed out in the hall on Saturday, wrists slashed criss-cross from a straight-edged razor. They dump her into an ambulance and send her off to the clinic for a quick patch-up. All but one of the cuts is superficial anyway. The principal says to her, *DonÕt come back until you get some help.* Then Chinle phones me.

Why me? IÕm a flight jockey, a pilot who makes his bread with puddle-jump runs from the small towns on the rez in northern Arizona to hospitals in Phoenix, Denver, and Albuquerque. The natives around here call me ÒRed JackÓ Ôcause of my hair. Eric James is my attendant the day we pick her up. Public Health requires an attendant for the crazies. You never know.

Eric is waiting for me by the plane when I pull into the lot. ThereÕs no sign of the ambulance. Last nightÕs rain has turned the air strip into a mud bog, and as Eric jogs toward me, I can see the red goop sticking to his shoes.

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ÒHey, Jack.Ó He kicks his feet out one at a time, but the red paste won't come off. ÒSo, whatÕs the word with her? She have a fall at work or something?Ó

ÒNope. Suicide attempt. WeÕre taking her to Phoenix for a psych eval.Ó

He stops poking at the soles of his shoes long enough to look up. ÒNo kidding?Ó His words condense in the air in neat white puffs.

I nod and turn to watch a couple of old Navajo men in the parking lot struggle to change a flat on their truck. The ambulance is late, making me wonder if theyÕre having car trouble, too.

The last week of April. A season of extremes in Arizona. The late spring front has kept the temps in the low 40s this morning, but Phoenix has a predicted high of 95. It could be a bumpy ride for all of us. IÕve just finished reviewing the preflight checklist with Eric when the sudden blare of a siren makes us both jump.

ÒWhat the hell?Ó Eric says as the emergency vehicle cruises through puddles around us and showers us with a spray of dirty water. ÒDo they think weÕre invisible?Ó

I donÕt answer. IÕm staring at the creature theyÕre wheeling out. Leda has always been pretty, almost Nordic-looking with her pale, pale skin and long white-blond hair, but there is nothing pretty left. Red scabs pock her scalp where sheÕs pulled out that silk. Skin the color of yellow wax, eyes sunk in dark hollows. White bandages, fat as sausages, are wrapped around her wrists. With her head against the headrest, the thin stream of saliva running down her chin, and the slack lips, she looks like sheÕs dead. I realize then that I have never known the real Leda Johnson at all. And I doubt that I know the real Eric James, or the real me, or the real anybody. I feel a little sick.

The driver wipes LedaÕs face and straightens her up in the chair. But Leda still tilts to one side. ÒSedated,Ó he explains.

I watch her mouth fall open, resisting the urge to grab her and shake her. No one warned us that weÕd be transporting a vegetable. She should be on a stretcher, but weÕre flying a four-seater Bonanza, so IÕll have to put her in the front passenger seat. I glare at the ambulance driver. ÒLike to make it easy for us, huh?Ó He looks confused, so I add, ÒCome on then, you and Eric can get her in the plane.Ó

I climb into the pilotÕs seat and watch as Eric and the driver struggle to lift her from the chair. ItÕs not an easy task. Eric hefts her under the arms, and the driver grabs her legs, but sheÕs as unwieldy and limp as a 110-pound bag of water as they half-carry, half-drag her up the wing. When Eric reaches the door, he sets her down on the wing while the driver balances her to keep her from sliding off.

ÒNo chance you want to help?Ó EricÕs face is glistening with sweat as he crawls into the back passenger seat.

I grin and hand him a paper towel. ÒSeems like youÕre doing fine on your own.Ó After I adjust the front seat again, I help the driver position her next to me. Her thin hospital gown is bunched up around her legs. The inside of her thighs are marked with fading bruises and healing cuts. Self-inflicted? Her skin is cold, clammy. Goosebumps prickle across her knees. It hurts me to touch her.

ÒUse this.Ó The driver hands me a coarse woolen blanket.

ÒDo we still need the restraints?Ó She seems so empty, so broken. What is left for her to fight?

The driver nods. ÒI wonÕt make them too tight, but better safe than sorry.Ó He fastens her seat belt and backs out of the plane. ÒThe meds will keep her quiet the next couple of hours. Maybe the whole way there.Ó

*

Quiet is what we get. We are ten miles north of the Mogollon Rim when I become aware that Eric hasnÕt said a word since we took off, but I can still feel his curiosity hanging in the air. He wants to ask. Just doesnÕt know how. I cut back the volume on the radio chatter and reach for the thermos stashed in a map pocket. ÒWant some coffee?Ó I ask as I swirl the dark liquid around in my thermos. The aroma of Folgers fills the cabin. ÒI have enough to share.Ó

He leans forward. His voice is loud in my ear. ÒNo thanks.Ó He pauses, waiting for an opening. ÒLooks like good flying weather,Ó he adds.

ÒUh huh. Deer Valley says thereÕs a light cross wind kicking up from the west so we could hit some

turbulence on final.Ó

ÒYeah?Ó His gaze flicks from me to Leda and back again. ÒI asked her out once, you know.Ó

The coffee burns when I swallow. ÒAnd what did she say?Ó

ÒTurned me down flat.Ó

ÒShe prefers the bad boys.Ó I laugh. ÒLike me.Ó Just off a quickie divorce, Eric is ready to get his ass back out there. He claims his first marriage was simply a poor choice or poor timing. Me, IÕve been down the Ò'Til death do you partÓ road three times and decided long ago IÕm happier single. But Eric still believes heÕll find his true soul mate. HeÕs the kind who flies over the clouds and sees angels in them. HeÕs got the face of a lost puppy, too. All big eyes and round cheeks and innocence. Women fall in love with him on the first date every time, thinking he needs their tender care. But he never stays around too long. This one is Òtoo clingy,Ó that one Òtoo bossy.Ó When I glance at him, I can see he has his eyes on Leda. I wonder if he thinks the recovered Leda is a likely candidate for the next Mrs. Eric James. ÒBe careful of that one,Ó I say, pulling his attention back to me. ÒSheÕs a firecracker. You could get burned.Ó

He looks at her, his gaze uneasy. ÒDo you think she can hear us? Do you think she knows weÕre talking about her?Ó

ÒNope. Not with all that crap they pumped into her. SheÕs out of it.Ó

As if to contradict my words, Leda suddenly mumbles something unintelligible. Drool oozes out of the corner of her mouth, but her eyes remain closed. I set my coffee down and put my hand on her seatbelt. Still snug.

He looks back at Leda, who is snoring softly now. ÒShe used to be gorgeous,Ó he says. ÒWhat the fuck happened to her?Ó

ÒHow the hell would I know? The last I heard she was warming a bar stool every night at Smokey JoeÕs.Ó

ÒDidnÕt you date her? WerenÕt the two of you an item once?Ó

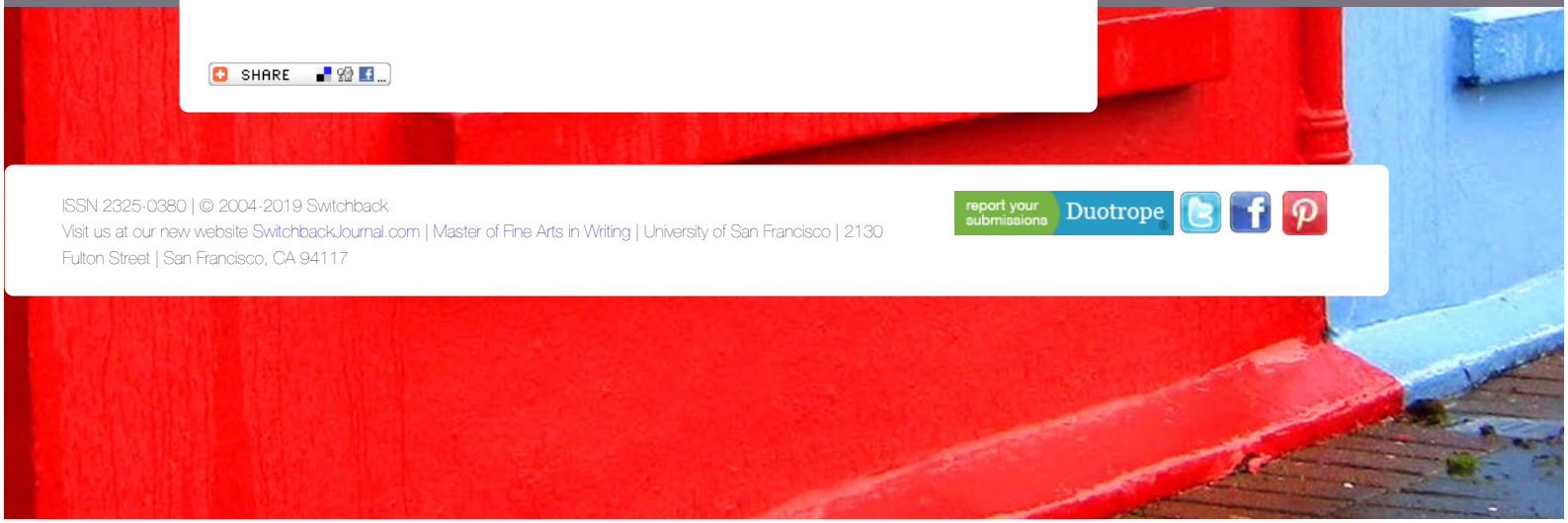
I pour more coffee into my mug. Take a sip. I could really use a cigarette, but I donÕt smoke in the plane. ÒYou should have seen her at DianeÕs Christmas party last December. She was hot. Wore this short little black dress with something glittery on it. Legs up to her elbows. That blond hair piled on her head like a golden crown. Dress was so tight you could see her nipples pop.Ó DianeÕs house was packed that night. Hot and sweaty bodies pressed together in every corner. Stereo blasting Motown hits. Diana Ross: *Stop! In the Name of Love*É And Leda, the Swedish goddess, on my arm.

ÒLucky you.Ó Eric sighs loudly. ÒI missed that party. Had to visit my folks in Albuquerque.Ó

ÒYeah. IÕm lucky all right.Ó I grin at him. He knows what I mean.

ÒSo why do you say sheÕs trouble?Ó

I shake my head. I can tell heÕs still picturing her in that dress.



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Of Fools and Lunatics

Jeanne Lyet Gassman

ÒI know sheÕs a wreck now,Ó Eric says, his voice doubtful. ÒBut she used to be so much fun. I mean, maybeÑÒ

ÒFire and ice. ThatÕs what she is. One minute sheÕs begging for it, and the next minute sheÕs locked the gates to become a newborn virgin.Ó A cock tease. ThatÕs what she was. Complaining that the heat and crowd made her dizzy. *LetÕs go outside, Jack. For some air*. Fingers stroking my arm. Making promises she didnÕt intend to keep. Outside, the ground was layered with a thin sheen of ice that cracked under our footsteps like breaking glass. Her ridiculously high heels made her fall against me. Over and over. Laughing. *Yes, Jack. No, no*. Fire and ice. ÒAnd sheÕs a little flakey,Ó I add, stating the obvious.

Eric chuckles. ÒYou think?Ó

Leaning forward so he can see, I pull down the collar of my shirt. The tiny scar from her bite is still visible on my shoulder. ÒShe likes it rough.Ó

ÒOooh,Ó Leda murmurs.

Eric brushes his hand across her cheek. Her eyelids flicker but remain closed. ÒStill out for the count.Ó

ÒBad dreams,Ó I say. My coffee is cold, bitter. I pour the dregs back into the thermos and screw the lid tight. There is a long silence. Eric looks hard at Leda, not at me.

ÒSo, do you think sheÕll recover? Go back to the Leda who liked to have fun?Ó

I adjust the trim tab and pick up the mike. ÒDeer Valley, this is Two-niner Delta. WeÕre about ten minutes from final. What is your runway advisory?Ó

ÒTwo-niner Delta. This is Deer Valley. Runway two-five. Wind is ten to fifteen knots from the west. Repeat. Runway two-five. Do you read?Ó

ÒRoger, Deer Valley. We have a patient on board. Has Phoenix Ambulance arrived yet?Ó

ÒTwo-niner Delta. They just called and are on their way. They should be here when you land.Ó

ÒThanks.Ó I click the mike twice and out.

Eric waits a few moments longer, but when I donÕt say more, he sighs and settles back into his seat, staring out the window.

Some questions are best left unanswered.

*

When itÕs hot in Phoenix, you can smell the evaporating chlorine from a thousand feet up. We cruise over the brown hills north of town before beginning our final descent into Deer Valley. Blue-green dots mark the insanity of swimming pools in the backyards of luxury desert homes. I bank to the right, coming in to the runway from the northeast. A light headwind is slowing us down. The real trouble doesnÕt start, though, until weÕre wheels on the ground.

Eric has just leaned forward to see if Leda is awake when I hear the first scream. Her shriek catches him unprepared as she lunges for him, her fingers scratching at the air like wicked talons.

ÒOw!Ó he shouts. ÒYou bitch! ThatÕs my face!Ó

No restraints or seatbelt on her now. She was awake the whole time, working her hands free while we were talking. Still screaming, she pops open the passenger door. The roar of the props is deafening; the wind

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stream presses the door against her but sheÕs strong enough to shove it back, slamming it open with a sickening bang.

ÒGet that door closed!Ó I keep my eyes on the runway in front of me. Our land speed is down under 100, but IÕm having a rough time keeping us straight with that damn door whipping around. Over the radio, I hear Deer Valley chirping, ÒTwo-niner Delta, is there a problem? We have a visual. There appears to be someone on your right wing.Ó

ÒYou think we donÕt know that?Ó I squeeze the mic and continue to steer hard with my feet. We need to get this bird on the pavement.

ÒSheÕs getting out,Ó Eric says, scrambling over the seat. He grabs her ankles to pull her back.

ÒRape!Ó Leda screams. ÒHelp me! Help! IÕm being raped!Ó

ÒTwo-niner DeltaÑÒ

ÒHelp, help!Ó

I click the mike twice, acknowledging them while simultaneously cutting off any more conversation.

ÒUh, two-niner Delta, this is Deer Valley. Did we hear correctly? Is someone under attack?Ó

ÒRape, rape! IÕm being raped! Oh my god, stop! No!Ó

ÒTwo-niner Delta, this is Deer Valley. We have a black-and-white on its way to assist. Do you read? Repeat. A black-and-white is coming to meet you. Do you read?Ó

ÒSheÕs not being raped,Ó I tell them. ÒSheÕs a nut case on the loose. WeÕre taxiing in.Ó

ÒRape!Ó Leda shrieks. ÒCan you hear me! IÕm being raped!Ó

WeÕve slowed down enough that the passenger door has stopped banging against the side of the plane. To my right, Eric is lying flat on top of her with his arms wrapped tight around her hips. It doesnÕt stop her, though. She flips over, spitting, then clamps her teeth onto his wrist.

ÒHoly shit!Ó He smacks her jaw with his other hand. Blood seeps from the bite wounds in his arm and his palm. ÒYou broke my watch.Ó

Leda flings herself backward, falling halfway out of the plane onto the wing step. ÒRape, rape, rape!Ó

Just then, I notice the flash of the red and blue lights in my peripheral vision. Runway two-five is a narrow stretch, so the cops are soon on top of us, spewing gravel in their wake. I pull us to the right as the black-and-white wheels around up close to my left wing. A final screech of the siren. Leda sags, submitting to EricÕs grip. We slow to a stop. Light strobes across my windshield. The cavalry has arrived. I lean forward, closing my eyes, listening to a stunning moment of pure silence.

*

Funny thing about cops. ItÕs still a menÕs club no matter what they say. They take one look at Leda, one look at me, and know right away nothing has happened in that plane.

ÒYou get all kinds, donÕt you?Ó the taller of the two says as he hands me a stick of Juicy Fruit. He has dark hair cut into a burr and a paunch that threatens to slide over his belt. Pushing late thirties, young enough to be bored by routine, and arrogant enough to think this *is* routine.

I peel back the foil and pop the gum into my mouth, watching the action over by the ambulance. The paramedics have doctored EricÕs wounds, but heÕs still going to need some stitches. Leda lies moaning on a stretcher. ÒWhy wonÕt anyone listen?Ó she pleads. ÒI was raped.Ó The medical tech swipes her upper arm with alcohol and jabs her with his needle. He just wants her to shut up.

ÒThe reservation is a tough place,Ó I concede to the cop, my eyes focused on the ambulance. ÒNot a good life for a young, single woman.Ó Wadding the gum wrapper up in my fist, I stuff it into my pocket and look back at the cop who seems to be disappointed I havenÕt tossed it onto the tarmac.

He tugs at his belt, shifts his weight to the other leg. His eyes hide behind black aviator glasses. ÒYou need a ride somewhere? Looks like theyÕre going to take your friend to Good Sam. We can give you a lift if--Ó His radio cuts him off.

ÒNot today,Ó his partner says. ÒWe just got a DV over to T-bird and Fifteenth. Guy took a baseball bat to his girlfriendÕs car.Ó

The cop shakes his head and grins. ÒNever a dull moment.Ó The black-and-white spins off in a whirling cloud of grit.

After sliding the stretcher into the ambulance, the paramedics stand by as Eric climbs into the passenger seat. ÒYou staying here?Ó

I wave him off. ÒIÕll catch a cab.Ó I hesitate. ÒWhere are they taking Leda?Ó

I donÕt hear the driverÕs answer. ÒSheÕs going to Good Sam, too,Ó Eric says, poking his head back out the window. ÒFor observation tonight. Tomorrow maybe over to Arizona State.Ó

I nod. Poor Leda. Arizona State Hospital is on Twenty-fourth and Van Buren, territory of crazies and pimps. The whores walk the streets below while the loonies are locked up in the red-roofed towers above. Which fate is worse? ÒSee you at Good Sam.Ó I head for the terminal to call a cab.

When I arrive twenty minutes later, the girl at information tells me Eric is still in the ER. TheyÕve taken Leda up to third. Room 314.

ItÕs quiet on the wing when I step off the elevator. An old man hobbles down the hall, his backside flapping bare while an orderly grasps his arm and walks beside him. ÒNice day,Ó I say.

The old guy shoots me a dazed expression.

ÒDonÕt mind us.Ó The orderly laughs. ÒMr. Stinson and I like to travel in the slow lane. Just go on around.Ó

Leda has her eyes closed when I push open the door. I blink for a moment, adjusting to the dim lighting. An IV drips fluid into her arm, and her fists clench the blanket at her neck like a baby holding fast to a toy. A high flush, drugs or fever, blooms on her cheeks. ÒHey, Leda. How you doing? ItÕs Red Jack. Remember?Ó I squeeze her fingers; she doesnÕt respond.

The room is done up in pastelsÑa faded rose color there and a pale turquoise here--with a floral wallpaper border. Even so, you canÕt ever forget youÕre in a hospital. Not with the lingering scent of disinfectant and the hospital bed plopped square in the center. The turning wand on the mini-blinds doesnÕt work, so I pry open a row of pink slats to let in a wedge of natural light. Apparently, housekeeping has missed this part of dusting, because a fine film of grime comes off on my fingers. I peer through the glass. Below, a car cruises slowly into the half-circle driveway. LedaÕs room is above the entrance, the area where family pick up and drop off patients. No one will be coming for her. Not today.

"You raped me, Jack."

I freeze, not even sure IÕve heard her, my fingers trapped between strips of flimsy pink metal. I donÕt turn around. I wait, but she doesnÕt say anything else. Instead, I watch a man get out of the car parked in the driveway. Dressed in plaid shorts, black-striped socks, and a tee shirt, he has to be a snowbird from the north. Hell of a way to spend your vacation, at a hospital. Bright sunlight flashes and reflects off the front passenger door when he opens it for a woman who looks like his wife. She balances on her walker for a minute to steady herself and then turns and zips through the pneumatic doors, her husband trotting to keep up. The doors snap shut behind them.

In the hall outside this room, two women are laughing. One of them giggles loudly, saying, ÒAnd what did you tell him?Ó Their voices fade away as they move toward the elevators. Rubber-soled shoes whoosh past the door. The clank of a rolling cart. The AC clicks on for a few minutes, rattling the ceiling tiles. Clicks off. In the ensuing silence, I can hear Leda breathing. Slow and steady. She says nothing.

When I walk over to her bed, she has her back to me. A stain floods her pillow from her tears, and her thin hair falls in a tangled web across her shoulders. I cross to the other side of the bed and pull up a chair. She stares at me with wide, angry eyes.

ÒDianeÕs Christmas party,Ó she says. ÒYou raped me. You know itÕs the truth.Ó She blinks rapidly. Another vale of tears.

Gently, I wipe her damp cheek. ÒDarlinÕ, only fools and lunatics tell the absolute truth. Which one are you?Ó

She turns her face away. DoesnÕt say another word.

Eric is waiting for me when I step into the hall. He waggles his bandaged hand. ÒYou said we might have some turbulence. Just didnÕt tell me it was female.Ó

ÒHow bad is the damage?Ó

ÒFour stitches and a tetanus shot.Ó He unfolds his uninjured palm and holds out two broken links. ÒAnd you owe me a new watch.Ó

I laugh. ÒIs it a Timex? Still ticking?Ó

Jutting his chin toward Room 314, he asks, ÒSo? Did she tell you why the fuck she did this? What the hell happened to her?Ó

I look at his man-child face, the kind of face that still believes in justice, righteousness, and truth. I shake my head no. ÒNot a damn word.Ó Taking the broken watch, I drop it into my pocket with the Juicy Fruit wrapper.

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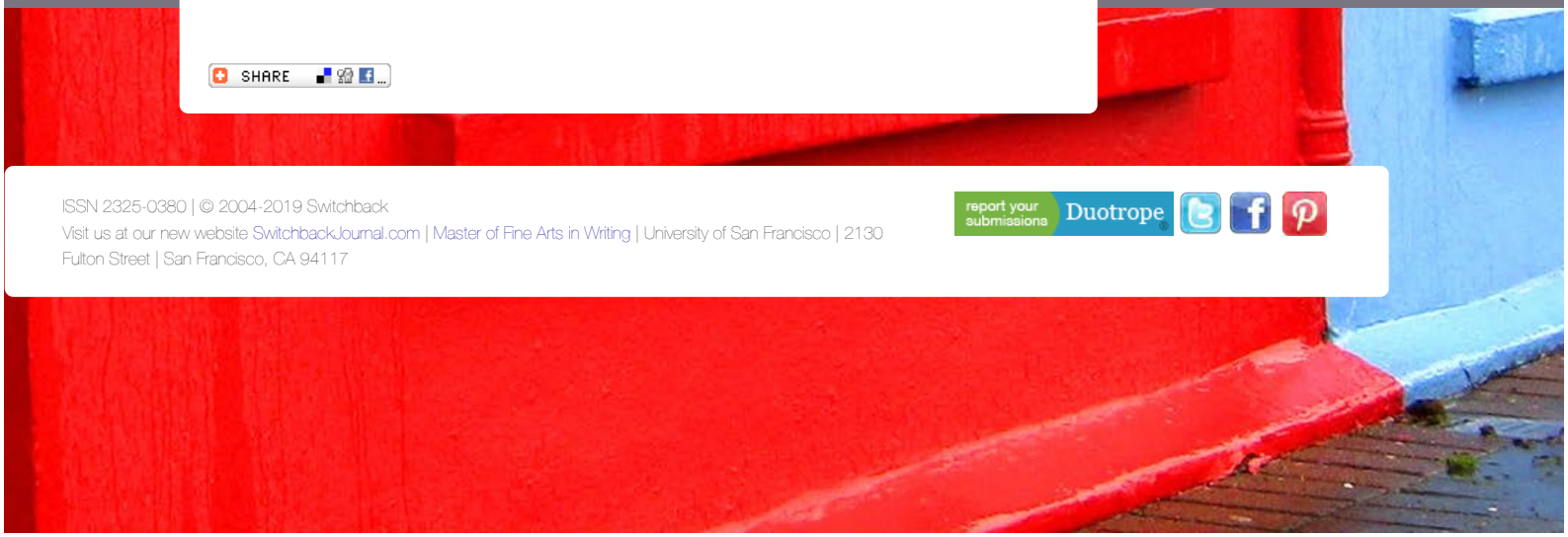

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Constance Ford

Constance Ford, originally from Idaho, earned an MA in creative writing at Hollins University, where she was the recipient of the Melanie Hook Rice Award in fiction. In 2007, she earned a PhD in English, with creative dissertation, supported by the Schaeffer Fellowship, at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and in 2009, she received the Nevada Arts Council Grant for fiction. Her story, "Don't Tell Me Why," was recently published in *Pif Magazine*, and she currently teaches English and creative writing at the College of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas.

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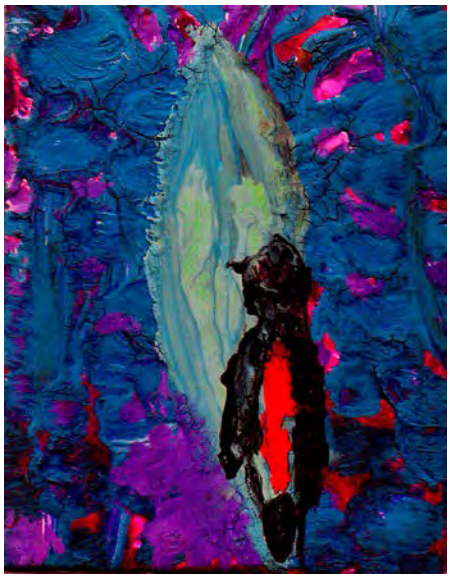

Woodpecker
Ye Chun

How old is she? ThatÕs what theyÕd asked her mother at the hospital when she took Virginia there the morning after the cramping started. It had been dark when the first squeezes began in her lower abdomen, like a hand grabbing her insides and slowly closing itself into a fist, her gut caught in the grip of it. When she looked outside, she saw the moon slivered into the sky, a small white sickle pressed coldly onto a black background. ÒSickle, sickle, sickle,Ó she said quietly, as she looked out the window. She liked that word. Cloud was another one of her favorites. ÒI made me some cloud berry pie,Ó she had heard someone say once, at a picnic. There was something about the way it felt in her mouth that she loved.ÒItÕs cloudy out today,Ó she would say dreamily into the morning silence of their house, even if the sun made a bright ribbon on the floor when Jimmy opened the door at noontime. HeÕd come in and hold his hands up so she could see how black and greasy they were.ÒWe might have a cloudburst,Ó sheÕd say, laughing.

ÒThatÕd clean you up. ThatÕd wash you clean.Ó HeÕd run after her then, threatening to touch her with his grimy hands. ÒMama!Ó sheÕd shriek and crouch down behind the kitchen table, hiding.

ÒYouÕll be all right,Ó said her mother to Virginia. The large woman at the desk, whose fat folds at her neck and arms seemed to be spilling out of her shirt and sliding slowly toward the floor, helped them fill out the forms, and in The Labor RoomÑthatÕs what the white letters on the door saidÑVirginia took off her clothes and lay down in the hospital bed, the thin blue gown the nurse had handed her tied in the back. A few of the hairs at the base of her neck were tangled in the strings and every time she turned her head, they pulled. ÒIÕll be back in a little while,Ó said her mother, but she turned away and fiddled with the clasp on her purse. ÒYouÕll be a long time yet. I have to go down the street for a while. ToÑto check on Mrs. Hammond. But IÕll be back before the time comes. YouÕll be all right.Ó

ÒWhat time?Ó Virginia asked. ÒWhat time do you mean?Ó

A nurse came into the room, snapping on a pair of rubber gloves. ÒLetÕs see how youÕre doing, young lady,Ó she said, pulling back the sheet that covered VirginiaÕs legs.

ÒShe might seem a little slow,Ó said her mother to the nurse, and then to Virginia, ÒIÕll be back,Ó and went out, shutting the door behind her.

ÒWait, Mama,Ó said Virginia, as the nurse guided her feet into the metal stirrups on the sides of the bed. And then to the nurse, ÒIt hurts. ItÕs starting to hurt again.Ó

ÒI know it does, but letÕs see how far along you are with the pressure from the contraction.Ó

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Virginia let the nurse place her legs into the stirrups. ÒIt hurts,Ó she said again, as the fist closed inside her. She squirmed as far as she could to the side. The nurse had one hand inside her now and one hand pressing on her protruding, hardening tummy. ÒWhat are you doing?Ó Virginia said, when she could talk. ÒAre you taking the baby out? Is it almost out?Ó

The nurse finished the exam and then stood with her hand on her hip and looked at Virginia. She peeled off the plastic glove. ÒThe doctorÕs going to come help you get the baby out. YouÕve got a ways to go yet. YouÕre only about five centimeters.Ó

She left the room and Virginia lay back against the pillow. The window was open and she heard some jays squawking somewhere close by and the tat-tat-tat of a woodpecker, pecking the life out of some poor tree, no doubt. Woodpeckers were the meanest birds, especially those big black flickers, the ones that scared the squirrels away and made nests in the holes of the trees near their house. Her teacher told her once that woodpeckers only pecked on trees that were already dead, but Virginia knew that wasnÕt true. They lit into everything, even houses and cars. She saw one swooping down towards JimmyÕs head one time, most likely trying to steal some hair for its nest or maybe even peck his brains out. Jimmy ran, she remembered thatÑhe knew that bird was up to no good. He ran in the house and slammed the door. She could picture Jimmy right now, outside their place, banging his hammer on the wood bench he was building for that shack of his, his cabin, he called it, since today was Sunday and he had a day off from working at the garage.

That Jimmy, their mother often said, he always has to have something to do, he just canÕt hold still. His hair, even, was thick with motion, and it grew so fast their mother made him cut it himself, which he did, once a week, hanging his head forward over the edge of the bed and cutting, in one whack, the black growth that curled over his collar and into his eyes. It would fall to the floor in a feathery, forlorn heap, which he swept under his bed. Sometimes he cut his dark eyelashes too, because he hated how long and curly they were, like a fucking girlÕs, he said, so he cut them to short, stubby bristles that made his eyes look even more blue than normalÑa light, intense blue, the color of the sky reflected in the stream that ran near their house.

She thought of Jimmy coming into their room last week, or the week before. When was it? Mama had been downstairs, in the kitchen, getting ready for supper. She always sent Jimmy upstairs to put on a clean shirt before they ate. It was later than usual, Virginia remembered, because her stomach had been growling for a long time. She had been lying on the bed, just like now, only home, not in this cold place, and when the front door had finally opened, she heard some sharp words in her motherÕs voice. The voice went on and on. Virginia didnÕt want to hear it. She put her hands over her ears and started singing. *Over in the meadow, in the sand, in the sun, lived an old mother toad and her little toadie one. ÒWink!Ó said the mother; ÒI wink,Ó said the one: So she winked and she blinked in the sand, in the sun. Over in the meadow where the stream runs blue, lived an old mother fish and her little fishes two. . .* She was on *little crickets seven* when Jimmy came into the room and closed the door. She took her hands away from her ears. ÒHi, Jimmy,Ó she said.

He sat down in the chair in the corner and put his head in his hands. After a minute he looked up at her. ÒHowÕs my baby sister?Ó he said, walking over to the bed, as he unbuttoned his shirt. She had her t-shirt pulled up a ways, to cool off a little. It was hot still, she remembered that. Her naked tummy was pooching up in the air, her belly button stretched out so far her skin was almost smooth; it didnÕt even dip in any more where her own cord had once been attached. Jimmy put his hand on her stomach and then leaned over and rested his ear on it, to listen for the baby, he always said. ÒHowÕs the little fish?Ó he asked. He rubbed his prickly cheek against her stomach.

She laughed. It was funny to think of a fish flopping inside her belly. Sometimes she dreamed about holding a big silver fish with a babyÕs head and arms, its tail flapping and wriggling inside a soft blanket. She laughed again and then looked out the window.

The moon was hanging low and golden in the darkening sky and their two dogs, one German Shepherd and one hound dog, were jumping up to the plum tree in their yard, leaping up over and over. They were biting the ripening plums right off the tree, snapping them off one by one and then chewing for a minute before leaping up again.

ÒLook, Jimmy,Ó she said, Òthe dogs are fruit-picking.Ó

He laughed then and turned away to the closet to get his clean pants and shirt, the ones he put on every evening. ÒI guess they donÕt know they ainÕt supposed to,Ó he said as he flopped down on the saggy bed beside her. On top of his familiar sweaty odor, his shirt smelled like soap. She could picture her mother bending over their washtub, scrubbing her bristly brush around the collars of JimmyÕs shirts and up and down the sleeves. She helped with the washing sometimesÑshe liked plunging her hands into the cold water and swooshing the clothes around, pushing and pulling them through the water.

Jimmy lay with his arms up over his head and Virginia started singing again. *Over in the meadow where the clear pools shine, lived a green mother frog and her little froggies nine. ÒCroak!Ó: said the mother; ÒWe croak,Ó said the nine: So they croaked, and they splashed, where the clear pools shine. . .*

ÒIÕll croak you,Ó said Jimmy and reached for her nose, pinching it between his fingers.

Virginia kept singing, only now it sounded like she had a cold. Jimmy let go of her nose and put his hand over her mouth, but jerked it away when she sank her teeth into his palm. ÒHey!Ó he said. ÒJust finish the song, then we better get downstairs.Ó

After *little anties twelve* Jimmy rolled sideways off the bed, pretending to fall flat onto the floor. Virginia giggled as he stood up and looked out at the dogs. ÒI guess they ate their fill. TheyÕre just lying there now, looking kind of sad. Maybe they got a gut ache. Come on,Ó he said, finally, turning to her. ÒGet up.Ó He grabbed her hands and pulled her to a sitting position. As she pushed herself slowly off of the bed, Jimmy walked over to the door and opened it. There was Mama standing there, a spoon sticking out of her hand.

ÒWhat was that thump?Ó she asked. ÒWhat in the worldÕs going on up here?Ó

ÒJimmy fell off the bed,Ó said Virginia, her hand over her mouth, to cover her giggle. ÒKer-plunk.Ó

ÒYou didnÕt have to come up here. We were coming down,Ó Jimmy said under his breath. He looked at the floor and scuffed his shoe back and forth.

ÒItÕs a free country, ainÕt it?Ó Mama said, looking at Jimmy. ÒItÕs time to eat.Ó She turned away. ÒI was just coming to tell you that,Ó she said over her shoulder as she disappeared down the stairs.

Jimmy turned to Virginia and grabbed her arm. ÒGet downstairs, okay?Ó

ÒOw,Ó Virginia said. ÒJimmy, you hurt me.Ó Pulling away from him, she sank to the floor, her knees bent under her, and began rocking back and forth, holding her arm.

ÒNo, I didnÕt.Ó He sighed and looked down at her. ÒIÕm sorry,Ó he said, taking her arm more gently and pulling her to her feet. ÒI am, IÕm sorry. I didnÕt mean to.Ó His face was white and tired-looking. ÒIÕm sorry,Ó he said again.

White, thought Virginia. The walls were white here, and so flat and smooth. Not like at home. She could see their house inside her head, the cracking brown boards on the outside, and on the inside too, and the cardboard that Mama had taped up over the broken window, and the dirt around the house where the chickens pecked for bugs. And the treesÑthey were everywhere, all up and down the side of the hill which rose behind their house, the smell of the sap running through them and leaves gathering on the ground thick in the air. They picked up the dead wood on the ground every day, and the dry leaves, too, sometimes, for their stove. When Jimmy threw a match in, the leaves would catch instantly, the smoke curling off them into thin, whispery hands that reached everywhere, around the wobbly table, under beds, into the darkness of the house, before the sun was up, even, when the chill of the night rested in the drafty corners and Mama was still in bed. Virginia had seen them, long-fingered hands that curved under doors and around the chimney outside. She squeezed her eyes more tightly shut and then opened them wide as the fist grabbed her again. *Mama,* she thought, and felt herself sinking into some other place, some long ago place.

*

Cold, roughÑit hurts when she rubs her legs back and forth, scissoring them open and closed on the scratchy mattress, so she curls up on her side in a tight ball. Big girl, Virginia says, her face turned into the pillow, but she doesnÕt know what that means.

"You're a big girl," Mama had said at bedtime. "You donÕt need to sleep with me anymore." And now itÕs dark and sheÕs with Jimmy in his narrow, creaky bed, just Jimmy, and she cries.

Jimmy puts his arm around her and tells her a story about dogs in the forest, nice dogs, wolves, he calls them, that point their noses up and howl when the sun goes down, to make the dark come faster. "They like the dark," he says. She still cries, for a while, then her eyelids droop, a new smell close by, a five-year-old boyÕs underarms and hair that smells like outdoorsÑleaves and grass and soft brown dirt, a new smell, but warm and close. She closes her eyes and sleeps.

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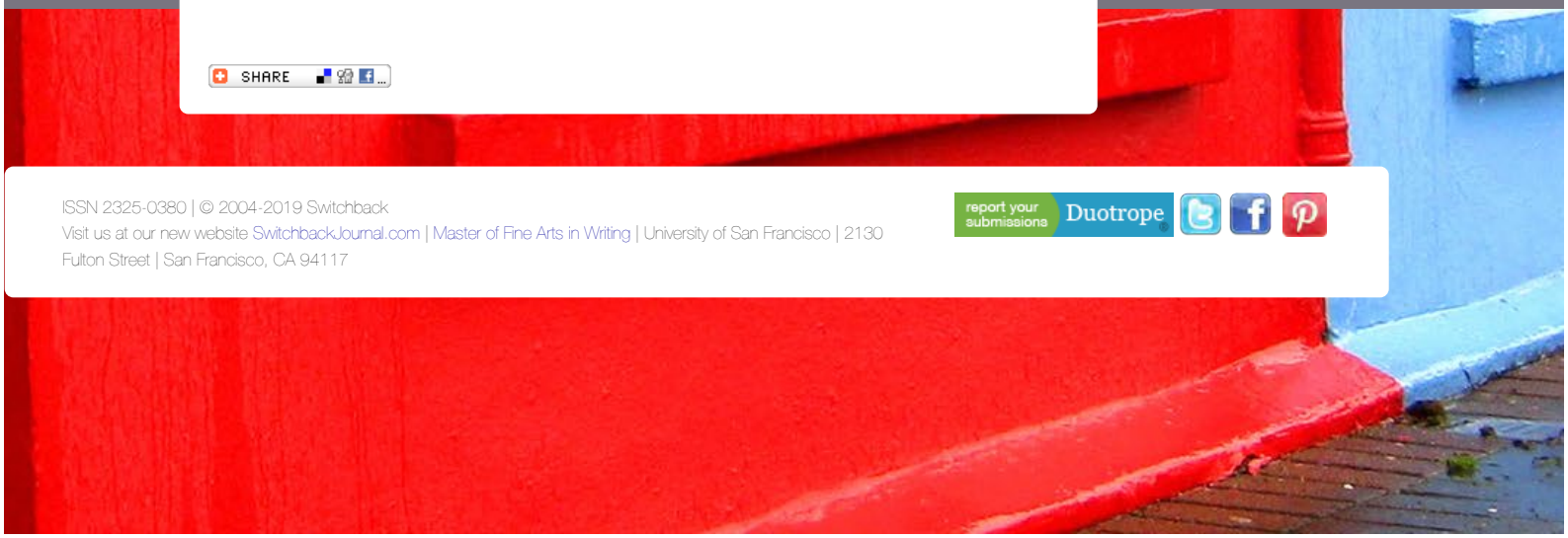

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Little Bird

Constance Ford

*

The door to her room opened and the nurse came in holding a razor and some towels. ÒWe need to shave you up,Ó she said. ÒEverythingÕs got to be nice and clean for the baby. Can you lift your gown for me?Ó

Virginia reached for her gown, but a new pain pulling through her went up higher and higher until she could feel it in her throat even and then sank slowly into one small point in her back. When it was gone, she lifted her bottom up and pulled the gown out from under her and up over her belly. The nurse smoothed a warm washcloth over the inside of her thighs.

Virginia could see the nurseÕs eyes looking at her lower parts. ÒHow old are you, honey?Ó

ÒI was born in 1956 on April first,Ó Virginia said. She sank into stillness for a minute, then focused her eyes on the nurse again. ÒMama told me that.Ó

ÒSo youÕre fourteen.Ó She ran the razor over VirginiaÕs skin and then rubbed her off with a towel. ÒNow a little antiseptic. This is going to be cold.Ó

Virginia lifted her head off the pillows and tried to see what the nurse was doing, but her stomach stuck up so much she couldnÕt see around it, so she let her head fall back on the pillow. She shuddered as a trickle of cool liquid ran down the inside of her thigh.

The nurse patted her dry, fixed her gown so it was over her legs again and pulled up the blanket. ÒSorry, honey. What grade are you inÑninth? Tenth? My son goes to school here in Harrisonburg. Maybe you know him.Ó

ÒI used to go to school, but I donÕt any more because my stomach always hurt when I had to ride the bus.Ó

ÒHmm.Ó The nurse came up to the front of the bed, looked at her again, then brushed the hair off VirginiaÕs forehead. ÒMy son, heÕs into the sports, any sport he can play. I always have to sit on him a little and get him to buckle down and finish up his schoolwork before his dad comes home. ThatÕs the rule, he has to have it done before his dad gets home.Ó

ÒJimmy works at the garage up in Elkton sometimes. He fixes cars. People take their cars clear up there from Harrisonburg so he can work on them. HeÕs sixteen.Ó

The nurse adjusted the blind on the window so the sun was only coming through in narrow lines across the bed and then stood looking at Virginia.

ÒThe bus driver wouldnÕt let me get off, sometimes, with the other kids,Ó Virginia said. ÒI told Mama, but she said I was telling stories. And then I threw up three days in a row and my heart felt all jumpy, like I couldnÕt breathe. They wouldnÕt let me come any more after that. They said I should go to the doctor, but Mama said I was all right. She said I didnÕt need to go to any old doctor. She said I could just stay home and keep her company.Ó She paused for a minute, then cupped her hands around her mouth. ÒHe made me stay on the bus. He was mean,Ó she whispered.

The nurse had picked up the damp towel. ÒOh. Oh honey,Ó she said. She blinked rapidly, clearing her throat. ÒYouÕre a real good girl, you know that?Ó She squeezed VirginiaÕs foot, then went out.

*

He puts his hand on her thigh as she is going to sleep. He grabs it tight for a minute, the soft inner part,

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and she doesnÕt know why heÕs squeezing it so much. "Jimmy," she says. "That hurts." But he drags the blanket over his head. "IÕm sorry," he says, "I didnÕt mean to," and puts his arm around her shoulders like always. The next night he stays up late, doing homework that all the eighth-graders have, and she canÕt keep her eyes open, waiting for him. When he finally throws back the covers, letting in a blast of air, cold on her legs and feet, she pulls her eyes open, heavy and dull with sleep. He jumps in quick and jerks the covers up, then turns on his side, away from her. "Jimmy," she says, "IÕm cold." But he drags the blanket over his head. "IÕm sorry," he says, his voice muffled as if someone is holding a hand over his mouth, and she moves next to him, presses up against his back in the narrow bed.

*

Coming in the window now, the rays of the sun shone in strips through the dusty air and onto the table beside her bed. Virginia followed the path of the light with her eyes and saw a clear pitcher standing there, full of water, and a small metal box with three red buttons on it. The box reminded Virginia of the sugar cookies they made at school one year, when she was in fourth grade. The teacher gave them red hots and they got to press them into the soft cookie dough, after it was cut in shapes, bells and candy canes and reindeer. The reindeer were hard to make, because the antlers kept breaking off when you tried to get the dough out of the cutter. The boys wadded up bits of dough and popped them in their mouths when the teacher wasnÕt looking, and stuck them in the girlsÕ hair and down the backs of their shirts. They didnÕt ever touch Virginia, though.

They left her alone. Virginia sat pressing on the dough with her fingers, poking it gently and finally got one reindeer to come out perfectly. She placed two red hots on it, one for the eye and one for the nose. It was a side view of a reindeer.

ÒLike Rudolph,Ó said the teacher. ÒThatÕs very good, Virginia.Ó

Virginia sat looking at her reindeer, thinking of antlers covered with velvet down, a wet, cold nose, breath coming out in steamy, cloudy puffs, a hoof stamping on frozen ground. She put her arms out, encircling the neck she could see so clearly and felt the nose nudge coldly against her ear. She turned her head to the side a little and kept it like that, so the reindeer could reach her ear.

ÒVirginia?Ó said the teacher. ÒAre you all right?Ó

The other children laughed and Virginia quickly put her arms down and sank into her seat. The reindeer cookie stared up her, red candy dots gleaming in the afternoon light. The teacher baked all the cookies in the school kitchen and after school, she carried her reindeer home in her two outstretched hands and showed it to Jimmy. ÒThatÕs pretty, Virginia. I like it.Ó He smiled at her and touched one finger to the center of her forehead the way he often did, a finger love, he called it.

She ran her finger over the red buttons on the metal box. *Call*, it said in small black letters underneath one of them. The others said nothing.

*

Her mama wonÕt talk at all sometimes, to Virginia. Her silence is so loud, Virginia feels pounded by it, like a hammer is pounding on her head. She sits on the floor and covers her ears with her hands, but it wonÕt go away. Mama sits in her chair at the table, her back to Virginia, looking out the window, waiting for Jimmy to come home. She waits and waits. Why doesnÕt he come? Virginia thinks. "Why donÕt you go find him?" Mama says then, like she could read VirginiaÕs mind. "Why donÕt you tell him to come? HeÕd come for you." SheÕs still looking out the window. "Go on," she says, nudging Virginia with her foot. "You can wear the rope."

"Mama," Virginia says, "I donÕt want to," but when she looks at MamaÕs face, she feels pushed, like thereÕs a hand pushing her, and she gets up and goes outside and fastens the long rope around her waist. When she was little she couldnÕt go outside without putting it on. "You might get lost," Mama always said. "Put it on." Virginia slides her back down the side of the house and sits there, looking as hard as she can into the woods, hoping to see the familiar shape of JimmyÕs body swinging into view. Come home, Jimmy, she thinks. Come home.

*

Another night, heÕs late again and they have to wait supper, chili beans it was, and theyÕre gone now, except the smell. MamaÕs voice fills the house, even though itÕs her quietest voice. "Why are you down there at that old shack all the time?"

"I donÕt know," he says. HeÕs holding a small piece of wire in his hands and he twists it around and around, bending it into a crooked corkscrew, then sits down.

"You donÕt got a girl down there, do you?" she asks. "You gonna get yourself a girl?" She shakes her head rapidly, as if shaking off a cloud of gnats. Virginia peers through the dim light. TheyÕre swarming everywhere, circling frantically around her motherÕs head. "You out tomcatting, is that it?" Mama says, and a stream of bugs flies out of her mouth, filling the room. VirginiaÕs mouth opens in wonder, but she shuts it quickly so they donÕt fly in. "Like your daddy? And now we got barely a bed to sleep in. And this old falling down house." Mama spits out the words like thereÕs acid on her tongue and JimmyÕs face caves in a little.

Then something changes in her eyes and she comes over beside him and puts her hand on his cheek. "But youÕre just a boy, arenÕt you? My good, good boy. YouÕre not a man yet."

He shakes his head and rubs the top of it with his hands, hard, as the insects circle around, then fly in a sudden stream into the fireplace, as if theyÕve been sucked in, all at once. Virginia can picture them shooting up the chimney and out, tiny bits of transparent wing and black body parts, blazing into bright sparks against the night sky, then pinched out one by one in the cool air. "YouÕre not going anywhere, are you?" she clutches his arm, but Jimmy stands up suddenly and rushes up the stairs.

Virginia sleeps that night, and toward morning she dreams that two large crows are trying to get into the house. She hears them pushing the door open and the door scraping along the floor and sheÕs afraid, and she and Jimmy go out of their room to try to shoo them back outside, but then Jimmy disappears. She wakes up and turns over, but Jimmy is lying there, just like always, his mouth open, breathing in and out. One leg twitches under the covers, then he twists away from her and pulls the quilt up over his shoulders, even though the sun is beginning to peek in the window. ÒGo back to sleep,Ó he says, and she closes her eyes.

*

Virginia folded the blanket down and pushed herself up to a sitting position.

Nobody had been in for a while. She could smell a food smell from somewhere, like bread, maybe, or meat pies. It didnÕt smell good, though, not like the bread at home.

Nothing smelled good. She reached one hand to the stirrup at the end of the bed and used it to help herself stand up. She walked over to the window and looked out at the grass and trees. The leaves were still onÑ yellow and red and gold-orange. She saw some acorns scattered around on the ground. Some of them had lost their caps. "Gnome caps" Jimmy had said, once a long time ago. "For the little people that lived in the woods. In cloud land," heÕd said, grinning. He knew she liked that word. He said it again. "Cloud land."

"Not all of them were gnomes, though," heÕd said, his blue eyes serious now. "Some were imps, little creatures who were very smart and had pointed hairless tails. You have to be careful. They might come in your window in the early morning, right when the sun is coming up. You have to be careful."

She crossed her arms over her chest and swayed back and forth as she looked outside.

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Little Bird

Constance Ford

*

Mama waits by the window the next evening, too, but this time she talks sad in her quiet voice. "Do whatever you want," she says, when he comes in late again. "A real man donÕt leave his home, but I donÕt care anymore. You a real man or just a boy?" She moves to the rocking chair and leans her head back against the wood and closes her eyes.

"I canÕt just hang around here all the time. I got to have my own place," Jimmy says.

Virginia puts her hands over her ears. "YouÕre scared, ainÕt you," she can hear Mama saying, even though her hands are as tight as she can make them. "ThatÕs how all the men are. YouÕre scared of her." She points to Virginia. "Because of what you did."

"I didnÕt do nothinÕ," Jimmy says. "And I ainÕt scared."

But in the morning, when Virginia comes back in from the outhouse, she looks into the bedroom and thereÕs a whole pile of hair on the floor and Jimmy is pushing his body through the window, first one leg and then the other.

"Jimmy?" she asks. "What are you doing?"

"Get out," he says, his voice coming back at her, hard and angry, and then says other words that she canÕt understand because heÕs outside and has pulled the window shut, pried it down with his fingertips. She can see his mouth moving through the glass and his eyebrows drawn together in an angry line. She runs toward the window, but he motions her to go away with his hand and then turns and scoots down to the edge of the roof and swings himself over the edge.

"Jimmy," she says, and tries to pull open the window, but itÕs stuck down tight. She runs down the stairs and outside, but heÕs nowhere. HeÕs gone. She runs into the woods calling *Jim-my*, but he doesnÕt answer. "Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy." she says, waving her pretend sickle in front of her, a curving silver blade to cut a path through the trees and bushes, but she canÕt find him. "Jimmy," she says again and begins to skip with the rhythm of the words. "Come, Jimmy, come. Come, Jimmy, come." A bird, bright with blue and gray feathers and a shiny black eye hops down onto the ground. "Pretty bird," she says, "I want to fly with you, blue jay," but it hops under a bush and when she dives after it and pushes away the leafy stems, itÕs gone. She sits back on her heels for a minute, then gets up and walks around one of the big oaks nearby, just brushing the trunk with her fingertips, all the way around in a circle. "This is my tree," she says out loud. "No ghosts, no birds, no rhyming words. Si-ckle, si-ckle, gone." She sits down on the ground and pushes her finger into the soft dirt around the roots, which bump up in wavy-looking snakes under the ground, and traces the letters of her name in the dirt, then makes a star shape. And a heart. She always draws a heart. At school her papers were covered with stars and hearts. "The queen of hearts, she made some tarts, all on a cloudy day," she says out loud. "The queen of hearts, she made some tarts, all on a cloudy day." The trees rustle over her head and she looks up and sees the blue sky cut out in shapes in between the leaves. The cicadas begin to chant along with her, their sound winding up louder and louder, until they drown out her voice and sheÕs quiet. The tree trunk feels warm and she presses against it. All on a cloudy day.

She feels a pressure on her shoulder and opens her eyes. "Jimmy," she says. "Where were you?"

He bends over her, looking at her solemnly. "Do you want to see my cabin?" he says, picking out a twig and a broken bit of leaf from her hair. "Stand up." When sheÕs on her feet, he gives her a little shove. "Walk

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straight up that way."

They wind through the trees for what seems like a long time and then behind a clump of ashes she sees a shack with a dark opening. Some mud-daubers drone around their nest under the eaves. "Go on in," he says, pushing her forward again. "Those little bees arenÕt going to hurt you none."

She steps through the doorway and inside, the dirt floor is swept smooth and the bench heÕd pounded together is against one wall and there's a sagging table against the other, the wood of it splintery and rotten. An old broom leans in the corner.

"ThatÕs MamaÕs outside broom," says Virginia. "She said a bear must have took it. But it was you," she says, looking at him with wonderment. "WhatÕs that rattling noise?"

"Nothing," he says. "It sounds like rattlesnakes, but itÕs just some kind of bugs."

She sinks down in the corner, onto the bare dirt. "You can sit on the bench," he says. "ThatÕs what itÕs here for."

"I like sitting on the ground," she says. "The ground is cooler." She pats her hand on the dirt, and then pats it again, and peers closely at her handprint in the dust.

He sits on the bench looking at her. She pats the dirt again, then looks up at him. "Sickle, fickle, pickle," she says. "Nickel."

"Tickle," says Jimmy, lunging off the bench to grab for her. He pinches lightly on her ribs until sheÕs shrieking and they roll together onto the dirt floor. He pins her to the ground with his body and sheÕs still giggling. Her dress is scrunched up around her waist and he looks down for a minute at her bare legs, then suddenly rolls off her and sits up.

She sits up too. "Jimmy," she says, but he wonÕt look at her now, and after a minute, he jumps up and runs out the door and into the woods. She runs after him and when she catches up with him, they walk slowly back through the trees to the small open ravine that holds their house.

Their hound dog catches sight and scent of them and raises his nose toward the sky. As the sound of his barking echoes and jumps through the stillness of the air, three large black feathers float to the ground from the maple that spreads its branches over their house.

Jimmy stands and stares at the house. "She donÕt want me to be a man. She wants me to be somethinÕ else."

"Like what, Jimmy?" Virginia says.

"I donÕt know,Ó he says. He picks up a rock and heaves it, as hard as he can, into the maple. A crow squawks hoarsely and flaps out of the tree onto the roof of their house and sits there, eyeing them for a minute, and then flies off, its black silhouette sharp against the sky.

*

She turned away from the window and felt the fist again, this time in her back. It spread up into her abdomen and she could feel it tightening there. Walking slowly over to the door of the bathroom, she opened it and gripped the handle with one hand and the edge of the door with the other. She held on and tried to think about the gnomes until the fist began to unclench itself. She felt something warm running down the inside of her legs and she looked at the floor and saw a bloody trickle of water between her bare feet. The puddle grew larger and larger until finally the dripping stopped. She sat down on the edge of the bed, her heart thumping. She looked at the red button. *Call*, it said. The fist clenched again and she stood up and gripped the door. More liquid dripped down.

The pain stopped, then started again. She held onto the door as it receded and then came once again. Sweat ran down into her eyes. She wiped her forehead with her hands, then tried to grip the door handle, but her hands were slippery now and she couldnÕt hold on. *Call.* The pain went through her again and tore suddenly, large and bursting, through some lower part of herself and she cried out, not in words, but in a sound like a calf she saw once, its skin twisted onto a barbed wire fence, the sound just coming out of it, loud and sudden and long.

The nurse came quickly into the room and in a moment, a man followed her, a man in light green pants and a loose shirt.

ÒJimmy,Ó Virginia said, bending over, her head in her hands. ÒJimmy, it hurts. WhatÕs wrong, Jimmy?Ó

ÒLie down,Ó the nurse said. ÒItÕs time.Ó

Virginia lay with one hand covering her eyes, the other reaching for the long bangs that brushed over her forehead. She rubbed a thick, soft strand between her fingers, then clenched the hair in her fist and pulled, and it burned like coal in the palm of her hand.

*

The door of her room opened. ÒSee? You did good,Ó VirginiaÕs mama said. She walked in and stood at the end of the bed.

The baby lay beside Virginia, in the crook of her arm.

ÒI knew you could do it. What did you think you needed your old mama for, anyway? YouÕre a big girl, all grown up now.Ó She patted VirginiaÕs head.

Virginia could feel warm moisture seeping out between her legs onto the pad underneath her. ÒLetÕs just give that uterus a nice squeeze, to make sure itÕs clamping down good the way itÕs supposed to,Ó the nurse said, as she came in behind VirginiaÕs mama and began massaging VirginiaÕs lower abdomen with her firm hands. The blood flowed out now, onto the bed underneath her and Virginia felt tears come into her eyes as her lower gut area cramped fiercely. ÒOkay, honey, easy does it,Ó said the nurse.

Virginia looked at the nurse. *Charlene*, said her name tag. Her eyes were brown and there were wrinkles right above her nose and on her forehead. ÒYouÕre a brave girl. She was here all alone,Ó the nurse said, looking at VirginiaÕs mother.

Her motherÕs lips twitched as she moved around the side of the bed. ÒRemember when Aunt Gail had her baby?Ó she said to Virginia. ÒYou said how sweet it was. You told me that, remember?Ó

Virginia looked down at the baby. It was wrapped up tight in a pale pink blanket and its eyes were squinched shut in its red, wrinkly face. She touched the top of its head.

It was soft, like the velvet dress her cousin had once when she was small, and it had a brown mark on its cheek, a small one near its ear. ÒWhatÕs that, Mama? Why does it have that brown spot? Is it a mole, like IÕve got on my stomach?Ó

ÒItÕs just a little birthmark. Just a little tiny one. The babyÕs not a *it*, Virginia, itÕs a *she*. DidnÕt you hear the doctor say that? We got ourselves a baby girl.Ó

ÒBaby girl,Ó said Virginia. ÒWe got ourselves a baby girl.Ó She lifted her hand and touched the babyÕs closed eyelids, first one and then the other.

*

ÒWhereÕs Jimmy?Ó Virginia asked the next evening, when they went home. She pressed the small, tightly wrapped bundle to her chest as she walked toward the house.

The nurse had wrapped the baby up like that before they left and then handed her carefully to Virginia, telling her to support the head, to keep her arm right under the babyÕs neck.

ÒI havenÕt seen him,Ó said her mother. ÒNot for a couple of days. Maybe out to the cabin. I wouldnÕt doubt if he was gone for good. Now let me take that baby,Ó said her mother, holding out her arms. ÒItÕll give you a little rest.Ó

ÒIÕll hold her,Ó Virginia said. The babyÕs hand waved out from under the blanket and Virginia touched a small finger.

ÒYou wonÕt want to. YouÕll get tired of it. IÕm telling you. ItÕs hard work taking care of a baby,Ó she said. ÒI remember when you was born. April FoolÕs Day. AinÕt that funny? Let me take her.Ó She patted Virginia on the arm. ÒWeÕll make a little bed for her. YouÕll see. YouÕll want me to help. You ainÕt going anywhere, are you, Virginia. Not with a baby to take care of. Where would you go?Ó

Virginia slowly shifted the baby away from her chest and handed it to her mother, and with a quick motion, her mother unbuttoned her shirt, flopped her thin breast out and dangled it over the babyÕs face. ÒYouÕre a good baby, arenÕt you,Ó she said, and brushed her nipple across the babyÕs mouth. The babyÕs mouth pursed

up and started working around, trying to latch on. Its eyes were closed tight as it worked its mouth around, like a tiny baby rat Virginia saw once, searching blindly for its mother. ÒSheÕs a good oneÑ look at that,Ó said VirginiaÕs mama. ÒShe knows what to do.Ó The baby got the nipple in her mouth and sucked for a minute, then began to cry. VirginiaÕs mama laughed. ÒDry as an old bone, ainÕt it.Ó She poked her finger into the babyÕs mouth to calm it and moved toward the house. ÒOpen the gate, will you?Ó she said to Virginia. ÒI got my hands full.Ó

As her mother walked through, Virginia looked up into the evening sky. The red and gold clouds shrieked across the sky, the edges blindingly bright. She shaded her eyes with her hand and for a minute she thought she saw the baby up there, only plumper, with wings sprouting out of its shouldersÑshe could see it flying away up into the air, smaller and smaller, its wings flapping, strong and sure, then slowly drifting back down and settling onto a branch of the elm tree that grew beside their house. She could see it perched there on the edge of a limb, its feet crossed at the ankles, holding onto the branch with its small chubby fingers, smiling down at her, laughing almost, it looked like. She squinted her eyes to look more closely, but now there was just pink and red and gold as far as she could see.

*

In the morning, Virginia came down the stairs. Jimmy stood by the front door, twisting something around and around with his fingers. His hair was shorter than she had seen it before, almost shaved clear off. ÒJimmy!Ó she said, Òlook,Ó and pointed to the baby.

Their mother had the baby up over her shoulder, patting its back. ÒSo you came home,Ó said their mother, her mouth pursed up tight. ÒWell, itÕs a free country.Ó

Jimmy said nothing, just stood by the door.

ÒI finished feeding the baby a little bit ago,Ó said Virginia. ÒMama, I want to hold her. Let me hold her.Ó

ÒShe ainÕt burped yet.Ó She stood up and handed the baby to Virginia. ÒYou got to pat her back like that, real soft, so she wonÕt get a tummy ache. SheÕll cry and you donÕt like that. You told me last night you didnÕt like it.Ó

Virginia took the baby in her arms. ÒLook,Ó she said again to Jimmy. ÒItÕs a girl.Ó She came over to him and stood there, swaying a little, back and forth, and humming. Jimmy touched the babyÕs hand and it opened, then closed tight again around his big finger. ÒShe likes you,Ó Virginia said.

Their mother stood there watching. ÒI knew youÕd come back.Ó

Jimmy turned to look at her. ÒI did, but I ainÕt stayin.ÕÓ

Their mother sat down, suddenly, in her chair.

He turned back to Virginia. ÒI came to bring you this,Ó he said, handing her a small wooden bird. ÒI carved it.Ó

She smiled. ÒI like it, Jimmy. Here you take her, so I can hold the bird.Ó

He took the baby in his arms. ÒLike this?Ó he asked, holding the babyÕs head carefully against his chest.

Virginia didnÕt answer. She was looking at the little bird, turning it over and over in her fingers. Its wings were outspread from its body, and its beak was open. ÒItÕs a robin, ainÕt it, or a blue jay maybe. ItÕs going to let out a big squawk.Ó She ran her fingers over its smooth back. ÒItÕs the best bird there ever was. Maybe it will turn real and fly up to the sky.Ó She laughed and then closed her eyes and slowly whirled around in a circle, her loose dress flying out from her legs, flying out in a swirl that wrapped the room in the colors of birds, trees, and the darkest feathers that drift to the ground in the wake of the wind through the branches.

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Tasha Matsumoto

Tasha Matsumoto is a doctoral candidate in Creative Writing and Literature at the University of Utah. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ninth Letter*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Redivider*, *1913*, and elsewhere.

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Sores

Tasha Matsumoto

And I canÕt stop finding your face in their faces, all rearranged.

--John K. Samson, ÒCivil TwilightÓ

I AM SORRY FOR GIVING YOU HERPES, ClaraÕs penmanship shouted.

Her junior high Social Studies teacher once told her that she had the same handwriting as Charles Schulz. According to a handwriting analysis her best friend had checked out from the library, their bold letters meant that both she and the cartoonist had Òa strong sense of self.Ó

HERPES? GOOD GRIEF, CHARLIE BROWN!

SORRY FOR GIVING YOU HERPES, YOU BLOCKHEAD!

GIVING?

Could an insidious venereal disease be considered a gift? Gifts were things like potted plants, wineskins, and commemorative sheets of postage stamps.

~~I AM SORRY FOR GIVING YOU HERPES.~~

How does one paint penitence with a pen? What is the shape of a sorry?

ROSARY IS AN ANAGRAM FOR ÒA SORRY.Ó

She could send Marc roses, pink and vaginal, with swollen petals erupting from the sepals.

ROSES IS AN ANAGRAM FOR SORES.

Clara called Henderson, who could always find the words. She dialed the number of the diner where he waited tables, and waited for her cryptic phone calls, like when she asked if the word ÒfêteÓ is pronounced like ÒfeetÓ and if colonize was spelled colin, as in Colin Powell, or colon, as in an anus.

ÒWhatÕs another word for giving?Ó Clara asked when the hostess handed the phone to Henderson.

ÒCharitable, philanthropic, generous,Ó he began, listing words whose connotations were exactly the opposite of the words she wanted to say.

ÒNo, like, as an action.Ó

ÒProffering? Bestowing?Ó

ÒWhat do you have in the antonym department?Ó

ÒTightfisted? Parsimonious?Ó

ÒBetter,Ó she said and disconnected the call. She was not SORRY FOR GIVING Marc herpes; rather, she wished that she had been more TIGHTFISTED, more PARSIMONIOUS with her saliva.

This was the worst apology letter sheÕd never written.

In these sorts of epistemic emergencies, Clara wished that English grammar permitted her to create her own words. Then, without violating the QueenÕs English, she could write, earnestly, a little lovingly, I AM SORRY FOR HERPING YOU.

With considerable difficulty, in the lowercase letters her hand was so unaccustomed to forming, she wrote, I am sorry that you contracted herpes from me.

She began to doodle, the spirals and arabesques unfurling across the margins, defacing the paper to the point where it might have been too embarrassing to send.

Even though Clara gave Marc herpes, she did not have herpes. Or, the symptoms of the herpes that she

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didnÕt know she had were latent, and before Marc, she didnÕt have any reason to believe that the fluids in her body werenÕt virus-free. Ignorance: the best defense and the worst acquittal.

It was as if her body was trying to colonize his, infiltrating his bloodstream, spreading her virus to all his extremities, until his body wasnÕt really his own anymore. Like a Native American tribe, stricken with dysentery and alcoholism and cholera from the early white settlers, who had exhaled death and pestilence along with the smoke from a peace pipe, annihilating with their germs, happily claiming the spoils. Her sympathies had always been with the Native Americans. WouldnÕt any outsider sympathize not with her, but with her former boyfriend?

The word Òex-boyfriendÓ scalded her esophagus. Even when she was too young to have an ex-boyfriend, in her mind, the prefix ÒexÓ always conjured up a stick-figure drawing with an X crossed over it. A terminal X, annulling not only the relationship gone awry but also the very existence of her former beloved, like a post-fetal abortion. Not wanting to begrudge anyone for whom she once cared his right to existÑprovided that he no longer exists in close proximity to herÑshe swore sheÕd never refer to anyone as an Òex.Ó

Words beginning with Òex,Ó for example: *expire, exterminator, extinction, excrement*, were all filled with destruction, like the *Ex*xon-Valdez tanker, pregnant with explosive, gurgling black oil. It was as if the prefix ÒexÓ forewarned that the rest of the word could somehow devastate everyone involved. She preferred words that ended with an ÒexÓÑthe short, sibilant hissing like a conversational climax.

SheÕd met Marc Furman, not to be confused with Mark Fuhrman, the racist detective in the O.J. Simpson trialÑwhose proceedings she had watched on television nearly every day during her Government class in high schoolÑwhen she was working as an assistant in MarcÕs laboratory in New Hampshire. At that time, Marc had discovered 2.5 new species of moths (although, really just one new species and three sub-species) and had posted a want ad for an assistant on a website thatÕs mostly trafficked by people looking for anonymous sex, but also sells used furniture.

Clara applied for the job for the following reasons:

a.) The listing sought for Òa personable, meticulous extrovert with an expertise in photographyÓ and she thought that even if she werenÕt all of those things, maybe she someday could be.

b.) The title of ÒlepidopteristÕs laboratory assistantÓ sounded technical and therefore more respectable than her current job, where she sliced imported cheese at a fromagerie in Tucson.

c.) After she looked up the word ÒlepidopteristÓÑfirst, unsuccessfully in her Spanish-to-English language dictionary, then successfully in the OED, she discovered that a lepidopterist studied butterflies. She loved their jeweled wings, and how their life trajectories seemed to be filled with metaphorical significance.

and

d.) The annals of her disorderly mind conflated New Hampshire with Vermont. She thought New Hampshire was a haven for liberals and where haute ice cream had been invented, where people wore wool sweaters all-year-round. But she soon learned that Vermont, the leftist state, was also on the left geographically, and New Hampshire, where she had just signed a one-year lease for a cabin in the town of Darcy, was on the right, both politically and on any U.S. map.

As her fifth Greyhound drove through the New Hampshirean countryside, past shooting ranges, ammunition stores, and ÒGod bless youÓ signs, as though they were anticipating her sneezes, she finally understood that when Tricia, the owner of the cheese shop, asked her how she felt about moving to a Red state, she was not referring to Communism.

At the bus station in Manchester, New Hampshire, Clara discovered that her pay-as-you-go cell phone had been drained of minutes, and exchanged a Sacagawea dollar from her coin collection to call Norton, the man who was leasing his cabin to her. Norton had promised that there was a car at the cabin that she could use during her lease, but he would pick her up from the station. The bus station felt like it was masquerading as an airport, with its digital screen filled with departure times. She arranged her three gorged suitcases from smallest to largest. She bought one of those pretzels that was a hundred times larger and softer than a regular pretzel, like some sort of edible Claes Oldenberg sculpture.

After half an hour, she tried to figure out how to move all of her suitcases outside to the entrance of the station, so she could wait for Norton. She left her first suitcase with mainly clothing inside of the station, then dragged the second and the third suitcases outside, but didnÕt want to leave both of them there alone, so

dragged one of them back inside to pick up the first suitcase. It felt like one of those logic puzzles, how to get a chicken, cat, dog, and baby off of a desert island if the rowboat only fits two passengers.

Norton said heÕd be driving a black pick-up truck, yet a red SUV pulled up to the curb. A man in a driverÕs cap got out of the car. ÒYouÕre Clara?Ó They put her suitcases in the back of the SUV, and Norton walked around the car a couple of times to inspect his tires.

Norton was a seniorly type of citizen with a face lumpy like a potato whose car showed him in which direction he was driving. *N is for Norton, who drives due North.*

In the car, Norton mumbled the lyrics of the rap song on the radio.

ÒAre the roads good?Ó Clara asked, wondering if it was a mistake to pack Rollerblades.

ÒRoads, good. SignalÕs are bad. This station from BostonÕs the only one we get up at my house,Ó he explained. ÒSo I know all the hottest jams.Ó

Clara didnÕt really know any of the hottest jams, or even the lukewarm jams, and she simultaneously admired Norton and pitied him for this.

Her ears began to pop as NortonÕs truck ascended the mountain, and the hilly terrain made her nauseous. Soon, the tar-covered roads looked as if they had eroded into dirt and gravel roads, with flecks of mica glinting in the sun.

ÒCandyÕll cure what ails you,Ó Norton said, when she told him that she felt ill. He winked as he opened the glove compartment and handed her cough drops.

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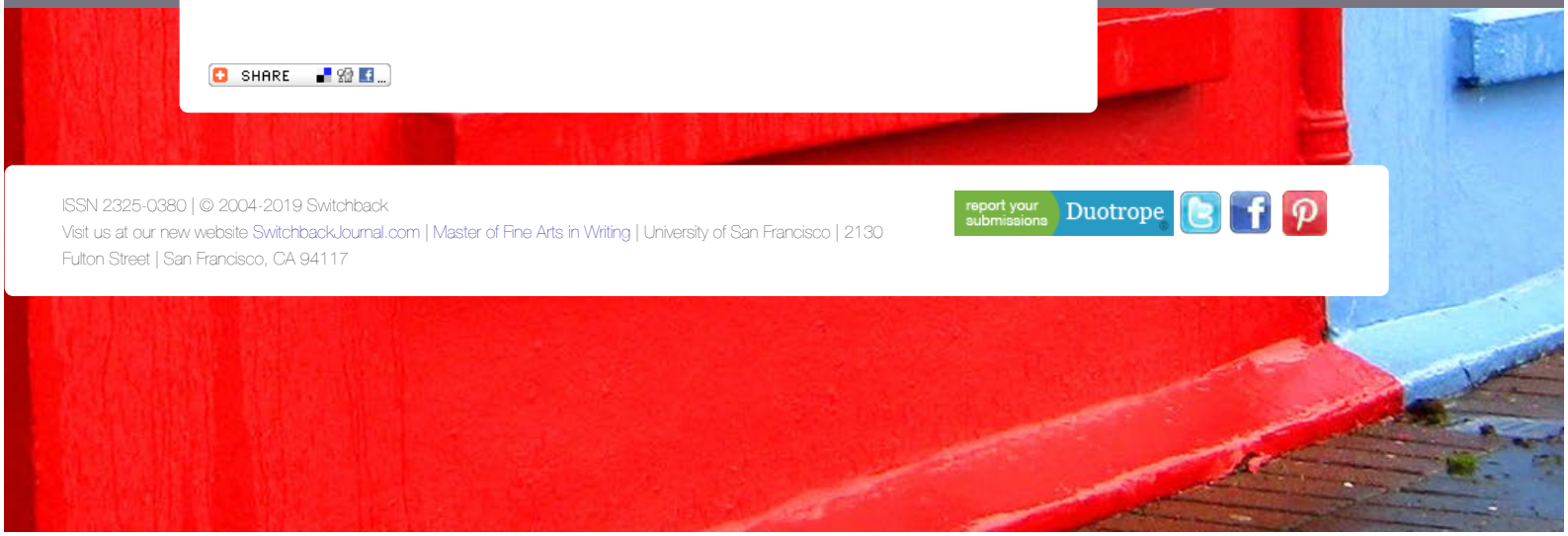

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Sores

Tasha Matsumoto

The cabin was not in the back of the woods, as sheÕd imagined, but was on the edge of the road. There was a boxy car in the driveway. The cabin wasnÕt really a cabinÑor at least, wasnÕt made from wood and mud, but white painted brick. Inside the cabin were kerosene lamps that didnÕt work and regular lamps that did, a wood-burning stove inside of which were piles of old TV guides, and a greasy electric stove. She noticed an old-fashioned coffee grinder by the defunct stove, and a new-fangled coffee pot by the functional stove. There were antlers on the coffee table, brown and white woven blankets on the rocking chair, and framed cloth flour sacks hung on the wood-paneled walls, the brown burlap like deflated balloons. The bedroom had a single army cot covered with afghans that looked like they had been made by knotting yarn. The whole place had a medicinal mothball smell.

Clara took inventory: two stoves, a fireplace, and no smoke detector.

*

On her first day of work, she tried to Rollerblade to the lepidopteristÕs lab, but forty yards in to her two-mile trip along Buttonwood Trail, the chattering of her teeth caused by the wheels of her rollerblades running over stray bits of gravel made her feel a bit like the victim of shaken baby syndrome. She changed into ballet flats in the middle of the empty road and walked the rest of the way. When she reached the address she had been given, a two-and-a-half split level house built in the seventies, she wondered if this was the lepidopteristÕs home instead of his lab. On the front porch, she rang the doorbell like some sort of Girl Scout. A middle-aged man in a plaid shirt answered. She immediately learned that his name was Marc, she soon learned that he was her boss, and she much later learned that she would sleep with him. At the time, she just thought that he was somebodyÕs fatherÑ which he was, actually.

ÒClara,Ó Marc stated, not asked, and extended his hand.

Unlike the white, sterile laboratory she had envisioned, the walls were paneled with imitation wood and the floors were checkered in tiny mustard and orange terra cotta tiles. Marc led her into the employee lounge, a former kitchen, with a vending machine in place of the refrigerator, and they sat in metal folding chairs at a wooden table.

MarcÕs hair wasnÕt thinning, but his lips were, as if with age, gravity caused his lips to collapse into each other, permanently narrowed and pursed. The pursed lip syndrome, Clara noticed, was always exacerbated when one had the misfortune of crooked teeth and learned at an early age how to tauten oneÕs lips over oneÕs smile.

When Marc asked her why she had decided to work for him, she told him, proud of her poetry, that butterflies look like airborne stained-glass windows. He smiled his tight-lipped smile, and told her that moths were his area of study, not butterflies.

ÒYouÕll soon discover that moths are exquisite insects, every bit as beautiful as butterflies,Ó he said.

Clara wished she were working with butterflies. And living in Vermont.

ÒYour main responsibility,Ó Marc explained, Òis to photograph, and organize the archives of photographs, of the various specimens I am studying. I trust you are familiar with close-range photographic techniques, including photomicrosopy?Ó

She counted the syllables in the word.

Òln a few weeks, youÕll assist me with my field research,Ó he continued. ÒYouÕll accompany me to sites inhabited by the species IÕm surveying. Your duties will include logging my observations, taking long-range photographs, sometimes apprehending specimens. Stuff like that.Ó

Marc left her in the kitchen/employee lounge to fill out some paperwork. Because there wasnÕt a grocery store within Rollerblading distance, she hadnÕt eaten anything since NortonÕs cough drops the day before. She bought three granola bars from the vending machine.

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For the next two weeks, everything she consumed came from the vending machine. To Clara, this limited diet felt like subsistence farmingÑa sole food source, harvested steps from where she lived, or at least, where she spent most of her time.

Clara and Marc were the only ones who worked in the lab five days a week. A janitor, or a housekeeperÑ Clara wasnÕt sure which term was more appropriateÑcame Tuesday mornings. One weekend, a graduate student named Bekah visited the lab to share some statistics about the population distribution of Sphinx moths. Bekah worked in MarcÕs lab two summers ago, and for the first time, Bekah realized that the lab was not always a two-person operation.

Clara was proud of herself for learning many of the names of the moths in just two weeks, distinguishing between a lichen moth and a tiger moth. But Bekah referred to all the species in their Latinate names. Clara hated Latin and felt that any language that demanded its words be italicized was too self-important. She started to feel like a toddler and Bekah was an adult spelling out all the S-C-A-N-D-A-L-O-U-S words. But, when Bekah mentioned a *Sesia apiformis* and Marc muttered, ÒYeah, a hornet moth,Ó Clara began to fall in love with Marc.

*

She rarely used the brown car in the driveway of her cabin, and preferred walking to and from work, but on rainy days, Marc insisted on driving her back to the cabin. She began to keep her cabin cleaner, in case he might come inside after work someday, removing the clothing she hung from the deer antlers and straightening the afghans on her bed every morning.

Her contact with Marc remained professional during the first month at work. Only twice did his voice betray sentiment, which exhilarated her, the same feeling she imagined Marc had when discovering a new specimen. She witnessed MarcÕs first emotional response after he had read a copy of a letter she had drafted to University of Maine, requesting a grant for a considerable sum of money.

ÒJesus, Clara, are you dense?Ó he asked her as she was standing at the vending machine, trying to decide between salt and vinegar chips and Raisinettes.

Clara was inclined to answer no, but didnÕt reply.

ÒDid you send this letter already?Ó

ÒYes, I sent it early this morning,Ó she explained, momentarily relieved. ÒThatÕs a duplicate of the letter I sent.Ó

ÒDo you know that you spelled insect as INCEST? INCEST! Do you know what that means? Do you have any idea how important this grant is?Ó

ÒIÕm sorry, it was an typo.Ó

Marc put his hand over his mouth, as if to withhold the horrible things he wanted to shout, and left her in the employee lounge-cum-kitchen, clutching her handful of dimes. Her coin collection was dwindling; she might have to use one of her Buffalo nickels if she didnÕt make a trip to the bank soon.

DUMB AND DUMBER, she wrote to herself in her journal.

*

The second incident occurred when she asked Marc about a poster-sized photograph of a white moth hanging in his personal office on the 1.5 floor of the split-level laboratory. His office was entirely unadorned, except for this silver gelatin print. The moth was perfectly symmetrical, white as the Taj Mahal, with a dark pattern inlayed upon its upper wings, flourishing in tight, delicate arabesques, like a marble flower. As she placed a folder full of photographs on MarcÕs desk, she pointed to the print hovering above them, and said, ÒThatÕs pretty.Ó

ÒItÕs a *Clemensia albata*,Ó Marc said. ÒThatÕs my daughterÕs name.Ó

ÒI didnÕt know you had a daughter.Ó

ÒI call her Clem,Ó he said, without making eye contact. ÒShe lives with her mother.Ó

ÒHow old is she?Ó

ÒSeventeen.Ó His lips were pursed so tight that Clara thought he looked like a monkey. For the first time, she felt as though a shutter had opened a narrow aperture exposing this manÕs sad life.

MOTH AND MOTHER.

*

After six weeks of filing, photographing dead moths, grant writing, checking and rechecking her spelling very carefully, Marc decided that Clara was ready to accompany him to the field. They were to begin the expedition at 10:00 p.m, when the nocturnal moths began to emerge. She packed the equipment in a knapsack: a DSLR, a thermos of tea, a voice recorder for MarcÕs observations, a fluorescent lantern to attract the moths, and butterfly nets and glass jars to catch and contain specimens.

Clara felt New Hampshirean in her oversized wool sweater, with the thick weave shielding her from the October air. She followed Marc into the woods, staring at the upturned cuff of his jeans and the soft flannel lining sewn into the coarse denim.

They sat on a fallen tree and began to unload the equipment. Marc took a picture of Clara with the labÕs camera while she was sipping tea.

ÒYour turn, Christy Turlington,Ó she said, and took a photograph of him.

When he smiled, his teeth hidden beneath his upper lip, two creases appeared on either side of his mouth, as if when God was poking dimples into MarcÕs face, he slipped, and left gashes instead.

Marc lit a cigarette, and offered one to Clara.

ÒIÕve never seen you smoke.Ó

ÒMy ex-wife used to smoke. She always tasted like an ashtray, but after I picked it up, I didnÕt notice anymore. SmokingÑitÕs contagious, it spreads faster than the common cold in a dorm room.Ó

ÒI never lived in a dorm,Ó she said. Clara had gone to a junior college, which ironically enough, had no juniors, being a two-year school.

He smiled, and Clara realized that he was staring not at her, but at her face. He is going to kiss me, she realized. Synapses fired like a defensive battalion, and Clara knew she had to say somethingÑanything!Ñor else Marc would kiss her.

There was nothing she could tell him.

Where were the words to fill her mouth?

She was thinking faster than words, beyond words.

So she pretended to sneeze.

Her nose was crinkled and her eyes were squeezed shut, but before she could open them, his thin lips were pressed up against hers.

ÒBless you,Ó Marc said, as unbeknownst to him, he possibly contracted oral herpes.

*

Clara liked MarcÕs dark sunken eyes, and the way that Marc tasted after he smoked, his tongue like venison, whereas the tongues of other men had been like raw chicken. After they slept together for the first time, on the couch in the cabin, with the local NBC affiliate blaring apocalyptic weather warnings in the background, Marc convinced Clara to smoke her first cigarette.

There were no witnesses to this relationship, no one to whom Marc could introduce Clara, saying ÒClara, my second half, because sheÕs half my age.Ó He told her that they werenÕt to treat the laboratory like it was a house, even though it was a house, and that they would have a strictly professional relationship while on the premises. But they fucked until the friction from the shag carpeting in MarcÕs office wore away the skin on their knees and elbows, as Marc whispered words into her ear that Clara thought were Portuguese, until Marc murmured, ÒBella, Bella, Bella,Ó and she realized he was speaking Italian.

Clara no longer had to subsist off the vending machine, which she had almost singlehandedly emptied. A few times a week, they drove down to the local farmerÕs market, where they bought brown eggs, cinnamon sticks, figs, nectarines, hand churned butter, and maple syrup to make brunch. MarcÕs Dutch Colonial House had no furniture in the living room or dining room. She wore one of MarcÕs plaid shirts while they ate in the breakfast nook.

MarcÕs house was sparse, no rugs, no wall hangings, but he had a collection of kitchen appliances that would make Julia Child jealous. A fondue pot, a crock-pot, a deep-fryer, a Cuisinart, industrial mixing bowls, and dozens of ceramic knives. The entire eight months Clara was with him, they ate only one meal outside of his kitchen, when Marc was craving Szechwan and drove them down the mountain to eat at a Chinese restaurant owned and operated by white people.

*

Two months into the relationship, Marc gave Clara a one-day advance notice that his daughter, Clem, was coming to visit.

ÒI am picking her up from Phillips Exeter on Wednesday,Ó he said, pronouncing Phillips Exeter as if it were a Latin word. ÒYou should come over for dinner on *Saturday*,Ó he said. *I do not want to see you before then* was left unsaid.

ÒAnd,Ó Marc added, Òyou can have Thursday and Friday off.Ó

Clara was nervous to meet Clemensia Albata Furman, whom she imagined as poised and angular with horn-rimmed glasses and a sleek, neat haircut.

On Saturday, after Clara trimmed her bangs, she walked along the bruised dirt road scarred by red leaves, to MarcÕs house. She thought she saw a quarter impressed into the dirt road, but it turned out to be a bottle cap, a Miller Lite logo where George WashingtonÕs face mightÕve been.

As she rang the doorbell, clutching her homemade pico de gallo, she imagined how distorted and convex her face looked in the peephole. Marc answered the door, led her into the breakfast nook, and to her relief, Clem had messy hair and soft features. She was a redhead, which surprised Clara, who then realized that this meant her mother was probably a redhead as well. As she shook ClemÕs hand, she studied her face closely, searching for the features in her face that were missing from MarcÕs. Like a sketch artist, forming a composite of her mother through absences. Just like Marc, Clem had deep indentations bracketing her lips, but the bridge of her nose was broad, whereas MarcÕs was cinched.

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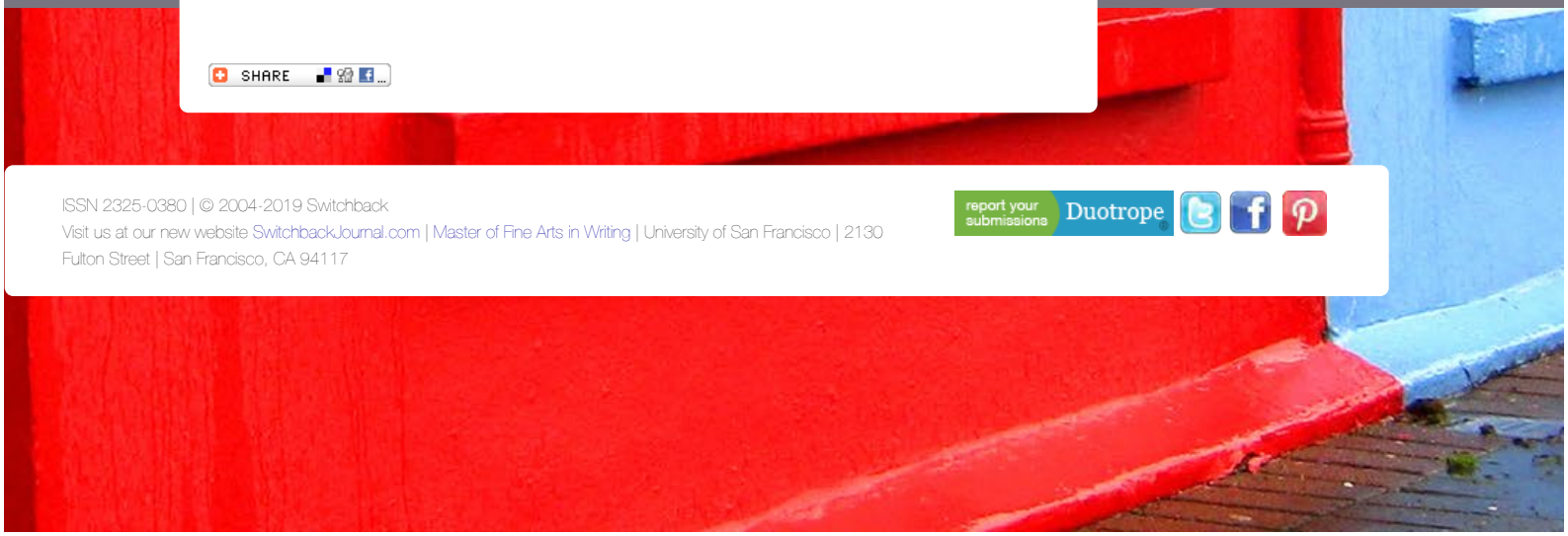

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Sores

Tasha Matsumoto

Music was playing; sheÕd never heard Marc play music before.

ÒIs this your music?Ó Clara asked Clem.

ÒYeah,Ó she said.

ÒWhat band is this?Ó

ÒThis is Sorry About Dresden.Ó

ÒIsnÕt that name a little flippant?Ó asked Marc.

Clara had never heard of this band, and again, she felt relieved. Clara had calculated that Clem could be as old as 7 and ¾ years younger than her, or as young as 8 and ½ years younger than her. She was even more relieved that like an old curmudgeon, she, too, found the bandÕs name to be potentially offensive.

ÒWhat else do you like listening to?Ó Clara asked Clem, in hopes of further confirming the generation gap between the two of them.

Clem listed the bands she liked, many of which had names that were complete grammatical sentences: ÒWe Are ScientistsÓ and ÒSomeone Still Loves You, Boris Yeltsin.Ó ÒClap Your Hands Say YeahÓ gave Clara a little difficultly, until she mentally diagrammed the sentence and determined that it was actually two imperative sentences, both with implicit subjects.

Marc had fixed stuffed poblano peppers, Clem had made guacamole, and dinner was surprisingly civil. Clara had long since divided the people in her life into allies and enemies, and thought that Clem would either want to be her best friend because she was so young, or that Clem would despise her for it, but Clem didnÕt seem to have strong feelings either way. Marc drove Clara back to her cabin before eight oÕclock.

ÒYouÕre the first woman whoÕs met my daughter,Ó Marc told her on the drive home.

ÒYouÕre the first man whose daughter IÕve met,Ó Clara replied, lighting a cigarette.

*

On one of their trips to the farmersÕ market, at the stand that sold homemade jams, Clara saw three kittens clawing the sides of a large shoebox. The man and woman behind the booth were Mennonite, probably not Amish because the woman wore a periwinkle dress. Clara called Marc away from the piles of squash and eggplants and asked him how he felt about getting a kitten.

ÒWhere will it be kept?Ó he asked.

Translation: *Will it be yours or ours?*

Clara picked up a kitten by its underarms and feigned incomprehension. ÒWeÕll keep it in the empty dining room!Ó

ÒI donÕt want a cat,Ó Marc said.

Clara ignored him. She felt that she had never really asked much from Marc. The kitten she chose was a gray tabby, soft and warm as her favorite sweater. ÒLetÕs name her Cashmere,Ó she said.

When they discovered that Cashmere was a he, not a she, Marc wanted to change his name to something more masculine. Clara lied and said that she named him Kashmir after the Led Zeppelin song. For the first time, she borrowed MarcÕs car to drive down the mountain to visit the vetÕs office to get the cat neutered. While registering the kitten at the vetÕs, Clara defiantly wrote ÒCashmere.Ó

Clara had thought that Marc would be just a tangential character in CashmereÕs life, but Marc loved the cat more than she. Every morning, after the kitten awoke Marc by walking on his chest, Marc went to the bathroom

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to take a shit and the cat followed him, twirling figure eightÕs around his legs, purring. Clara was becoming jealous of her own cat.

When Marc started feeding him three or four times a day, Clara said, ÒYouÕre slowly killing him.Ó

ÒAt least heÕll die happy.Ó

ÒI donÕt want my cat dying.Ó

ÒYour cat or *my* cat?Ó

The cat slept on MarcÕs crotch every night, kneading his paws into MarcÕs abdomen.

ÒItÕs the warmest part of the body,Ó Marc explained as he stroked the cat lying atop his genitals. Once Cashmere settled down, Marc wouldnÕt move for fear of disturbing him. The cat was like a weight on his chest, pinning him down. This cat is ruining our sex life, Clara thought.

ÒYouÕre callous,Ó Clara said to Marc once, before going to bed. As Marc picked the cat up and walked to his living room, Clara ran after him.

She explained that she didnÕt mean to call him callous, exactly. But then, she did not know what it was that she meant to call him. She wouldÕve gone on a scavenger hunt for synonyms, she explained, if only she owned a thesaurus instead of, or in addition to, the Spanish-to-English language dictionary she bought when she thought that moving to Quito was the only thing that could ever make her happy.

She told Marc that she thought that there was something quixotic about Quito, and something equitable about Ecuador, where the Northern Hemisphere converged with the Southern Hemisphere. She imagined herself in Ecuador, straddling the Equator.

ÒI was horrified to learn that EcuadorÕs national currency was the U.S. dollar,Ó she told Marc. Ecuador was where all her old bills went to retire, the twenties with Andrew Jackson still trapped inside that oval. Ecuador was where currency is no longer current. It troubled her that the same dollar could buy so much more in Ecuador than in America.

ÒItÕs as if the meaning of the dollar breaks down, a subprime semantic crisis, and like my Spanish words, all the dollars get lost in translation.Ó

ÒYouÕre a strange woman,Ó Marc said, and holding her right hand with his left hand, like he was about to kiss it.

ÒI need a new job,Ó Clara said.

She spent the next week trying to explain herself to Marc:

ÒItÕs not about you, itÕs about the job.Ó

ÒI wanted butterflies, and I got moths.Ó

ÒI want to quit smoking.Ó

ÒIÕm taking the cat with me.Ó

ÒIÕll stay if you cry,Ó she told Marc.

ÒIÕll cry if you stay,Ó he replied.

ÒWrite me a recommendation,Ó Clara stated, not asked.

When she applied to be a docent at the Fairbanks Museum in Vermont, Marc helped her rewrite her resume, explaining, ÒItÕs like rearranging furniture. ItÕs about presenting the same things in a much better way.Ó

The Fairbanks Museum, in the state where Clara had always wanted to live, featured Òinsect portraitureÓÑ intricate mosaics formed by interweaving the metallic shells of beetles and the wings of butterflies, the insect Clara had always wanted to study.

In the museum, there was a portrait of George Washington, iridescent from the beetlesÕ carapaces. His powdered wig was composed of moth wings. The dark eddies on the white feathery wings perfectly simulated the soft coils of the First PresidentÕs coiffure. Clara realized, after two weeks of passing by the same portrait every day, that WashingtonÕs thin lips reminded her of Marc.

Clara had difficultly reconstructing MarcÕs face in her mind. All the photographs of him had been taken with the labÕs camera, and therefore remained the labÕs property; their relationship archived among the pictures of dead moths. She tried to form a mental image of him by remembering the metaphors she had once used to describe his face, like his AdamÕs apple that looked as though he had swallowed a Scrabble square.

She finally realized that it wasnÕt as if she had forgotten what he looked like, but rather, she remembered him all too well. She remembered his face from every angle, every perspective, and when she tried to put it all together, his face fractured like a Cubist painting.

She was the one to re-establish contact after the break-up. CashmereÕs vaccination records were in his house; she wrote him a letter asking him to send them. She mentioned that Cashmere was very happy living with her. After moving, Cashmere began to love her as much as he ever loved Marc, if only because there was no one else to love. Love is an exchangeable currency, Clara learned.

Clara received the papers a week later, and read MarcÕs attached note, in which he mentioned that he read about the museum in the Arts and Culture section of *Entomology Monthly*. He offhandedly recommended that Clara should get herself Òtested,Ó specifically for herpes, because he believed that he contracted Herpes Simplex Virus Type-1 from her. Clara was convinced that he was lying. She remembered his testicles, as lumpy and uneven as the ventricles of a heart, suspended like peaches from a branch. She wondered if they were now mottled with oozing abrasions, as soft and gooey as rotting fruit.

GENITAL IS ALMOST GENIAL, BUT NOT QUITE.

Walking to the bathroom, she rubbed her tongue along her gums. In the mirror, she examined the ribbed palate on the roof of her mouth and the purple sinews beneath her tongue. She stuck out her tongue and touched it, slick and amorphous, with a white film coating it, downy as peach fuzz. She gargled with mouthwash the color of antifreeze and made a doctorÕs appointment.

The doctor explained that 95% of all people have HSV-1, but that the majority of people who have herpes donÕt express the symptoms thereof.

(WE ALL HAVE HERPES, ALMOST!)

All your symptoms are latent, the doctor explained, and Clara left her office confused. Though she told Clara that she had a clean bill of health, Clara still didnÕt know if that meant she had herpes or not. What she had was silent herpes, a road not taken, a mightÕve been . . .

IF THE VIRUS IS LATENT . . .

IF A TREE FALLS IN THE WOODS . . .

IF THE GLOVE DOES NOT FIT . . .

IF THE SKIN IS NOT INFLAMED, YOU CANNOT BLAME.

IF THE MOUTH DOES NOT ACHE, YOU MUST EXONERATE.

Clara began to date Henderson, a chubby blonde waiter, loud and goofy, all the wonderful things that Marc was not. Henderson was like a vaccine for Marc, strengthening her emotional antibodies. The first time she told Henderson about her herpes predicament, he said that herpes was worth it, and before she could ask him what the hell he was talking about, he kissed her.

Henderson liked to dance with his face while listening to music, contorting his face, grotesquely, yet elegantly, every facial twitch synchronized to the song. His facial expressions would become progressively goofier, with bulging eyes, blown out cheeks, and a flailing tongue, until he lost all muscle restraint and Clara and Henderson both convulsed with laughter. Henderson wore Christmas ties all year long. Henderson used her vagina like a ventriloquistÕs dummy, softly lifting the lips, and making it speak with a deep Bronx accent. ÒThis is what smokers sound like, toots.Ó If Cashmere was lying on ClaraÕs belly and Henderson wanted to mess around, he had no problem throwing the cat off of her.

Occasionally, Clara still thought about Marc. She imaginesd MarcÕs thin lips, scabbed with sores, leaking seepage. If she had accidentally infected him with Chlamydia, she could at least take solace in the fact that unlike the herpes, she, too, would have to endure Chlamydia.

But Chlamydia can be cured.

Herpes was forever.

Clara felt that some sort of reparation was in order, an equal punishment she could inflict upon herself. She tried to imagine a befitting punishment, as clever as if Dante himself had divined it. She wondered if she should send some sort of nice gift basket, with cold cream and herbal ointments. But even if that helped Marc, it wouldnÕt really punish her. She thought very carefully about what the opposite of giving someone herpes unintentionally might

be, and decided that as her punishment, she should intentionally *not* give someone herpes.

She liked Henderson, yet she began to fantasize about celibacy. She checked out a book from the library about the Shakers, a religious group that almost died out due to their belief in lifelong abstinence. She learned that instead of sex, the Shakers channeled their energy into spasmodic dances and woodworking. She fell asleep, mentally designing an oak dining room set for MarcÕs empty house. She imagined it filled with chairs, an armoire, and bookshelves. However, she knew how she could fill the empty dining room. When she opened the closet to find KashmirÕs cat carrier, she stared at her favorite sweater, fallen to the floor, and noticed tiny holes, where the fabric had been eaten away.

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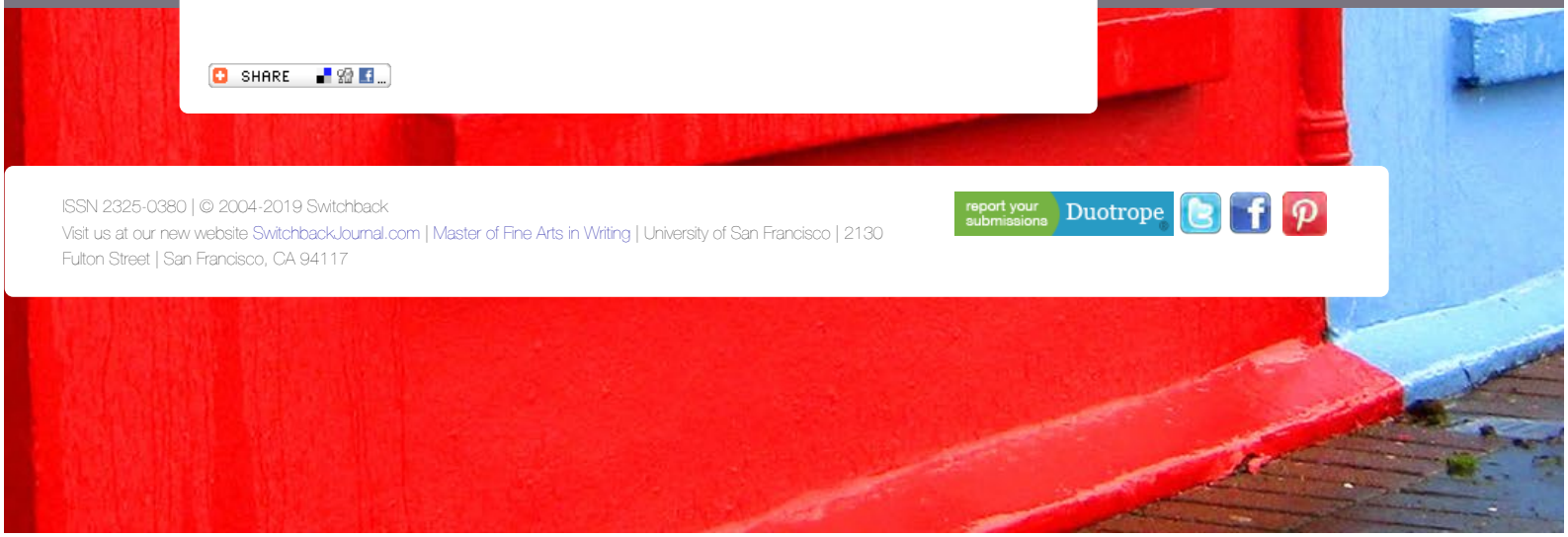

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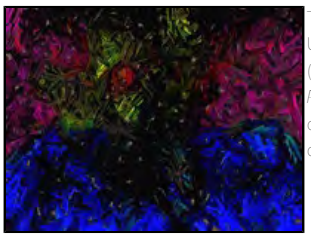

Terry Wright lives in Little Rock and teaches creative writing at the University of Central Arkansas. His latest chapbook is *Fractal Cut-Ups* (Kattywompas Press). His art has appeared in many venues, including *Pure Francis*, *"Potion*, *The Jet Fuel Review*, and *USA Today*. More work can be seen at his web site: wrightart.net. Terry believes his sunrise can beat up yours.

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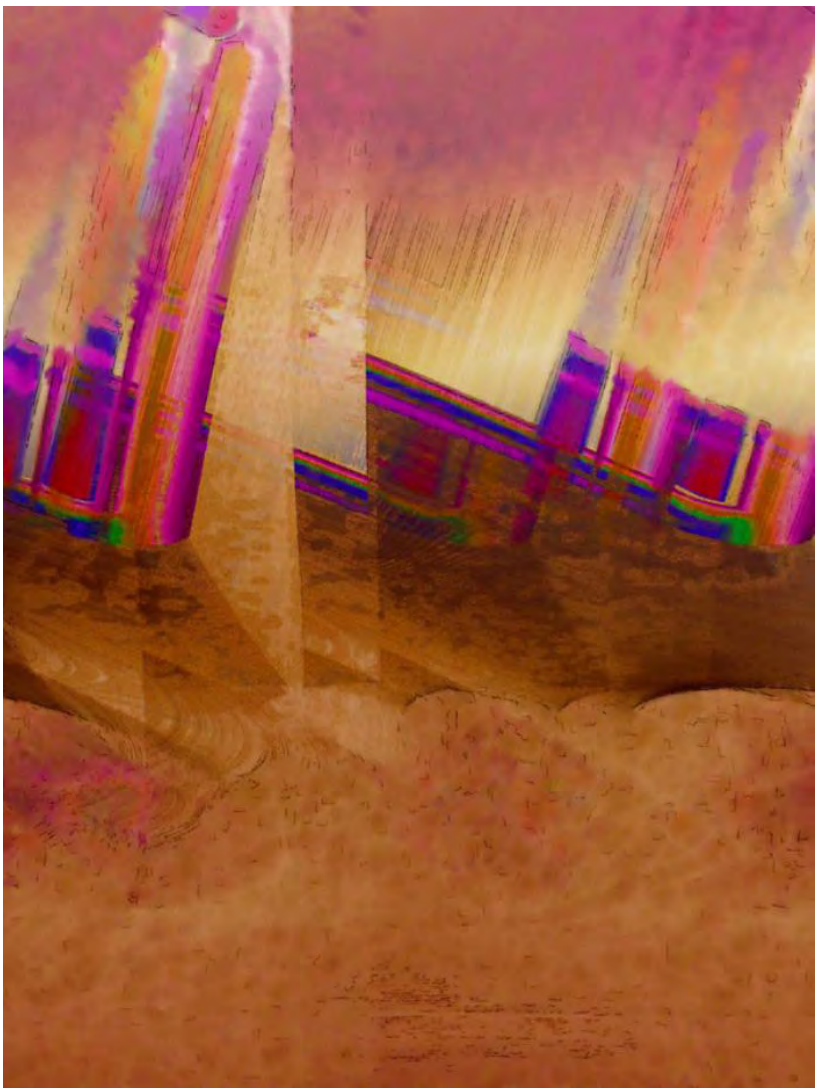

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Ye Chun

Ye Chun ( ) is a writer, visual artist and literary translator. Her second collection of poetry, *Lantern Puzzle*, received Tupelo PressÕ 2011 First/Second Book Award. Her translation of Hai ZI's poetry, *Wheat Has Ripened*, is also forthcoming from Tupelo. Her other books include *Travel Over Water* (Bitter Oleander Press) and a novel in Chinese, *Peach Tree In The Sea* (PeopleÕs Literature Publishing House). She currently teaches writing at the University of Missouri where she is a Ph.D. candidate.

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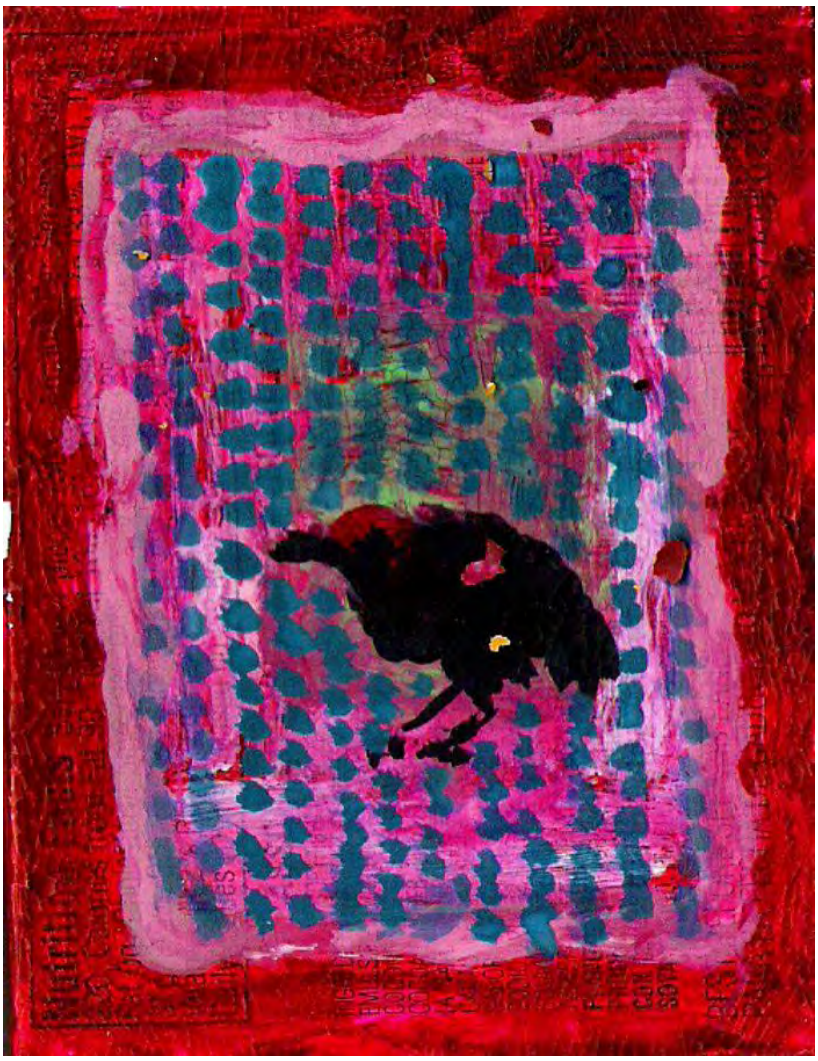

"Blackbird"
The bird paintings featured here are gouache on 3.7 x 2.11 inch chocolate boxes.

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Kathleen Gunton

Kathleen Gunton is a writer/photographer who is never quite sure if photos feed her writing, or if words invite the picture. In either case, she is happy to be involved. She believes one art feeds another. Her images have recently appeared on the cover of Arts & Letters, Inkwell, and Thema, to name a few. She lives in Orange, CA. and is working on a memoir of her convent days.

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Red & White & Blue

Kathleen Gunton

Artist's Statement:

Photography is the Örecreation of my soul.Ó (Thanks Bach, who said it first in regard to music.) Capturing images -- photography and poetry -- is what I do.

Little did I know when I graduated from CSULB that the most important word on my Degree was creative. Literary publications where my poems appeared soon became home to my photographic images. Though my work has been in gallery and private collections, my greatest satisfaction as an artist comes when I see my photos nestled between great poems.

I approach my work with gratitude for the many moments and landscapes freely given. Most of my photos are taken with a Canon Rebel DSLR. However, while driving through Cork in April 2012, I was holding a small point and shoot camera and captured this "Red & White & Blue -- my left brain at work in an election year...

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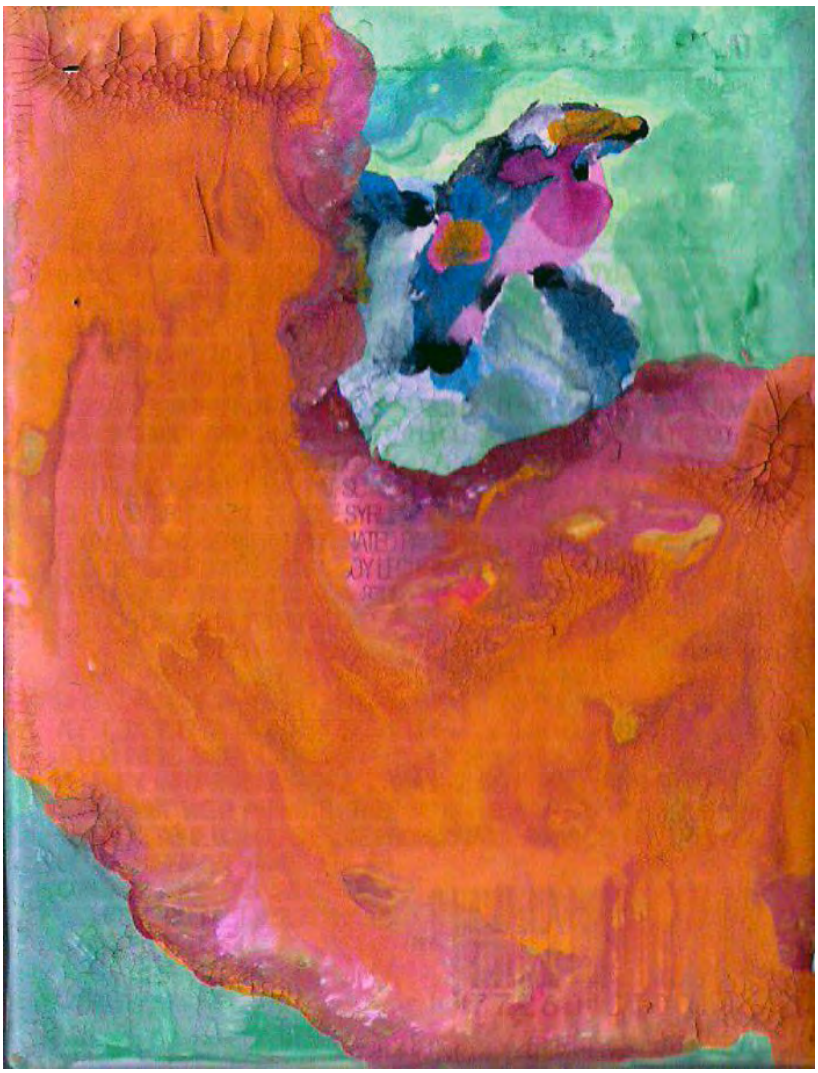

"Bluejay"
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"Cranes"
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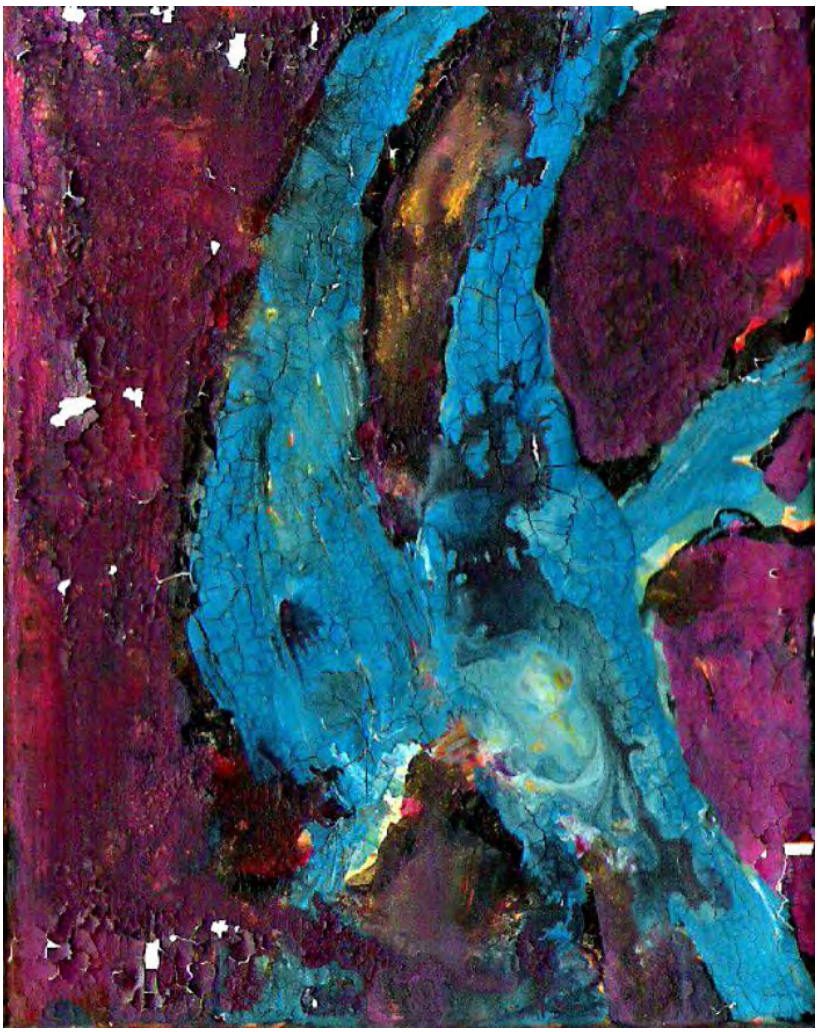

"Geese"
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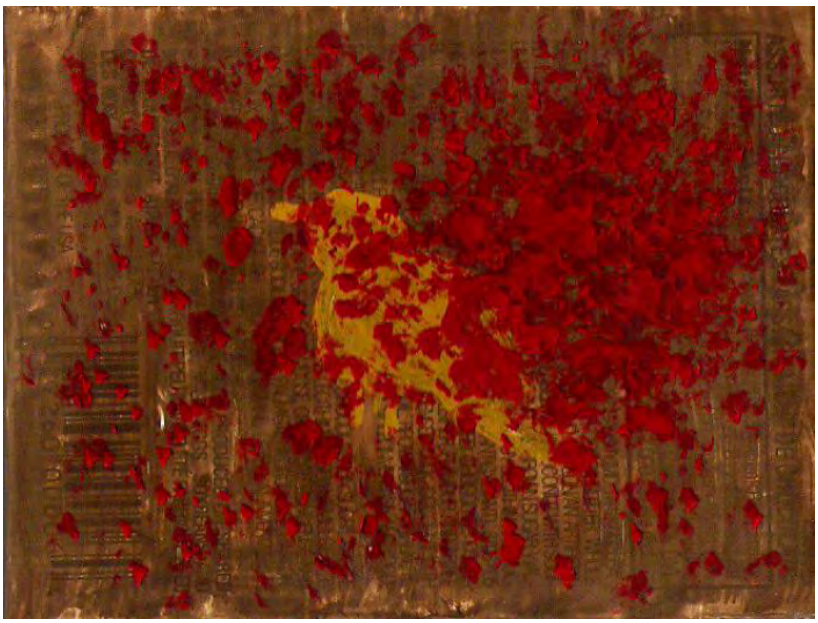

"Goldfinch"
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"Peacock"
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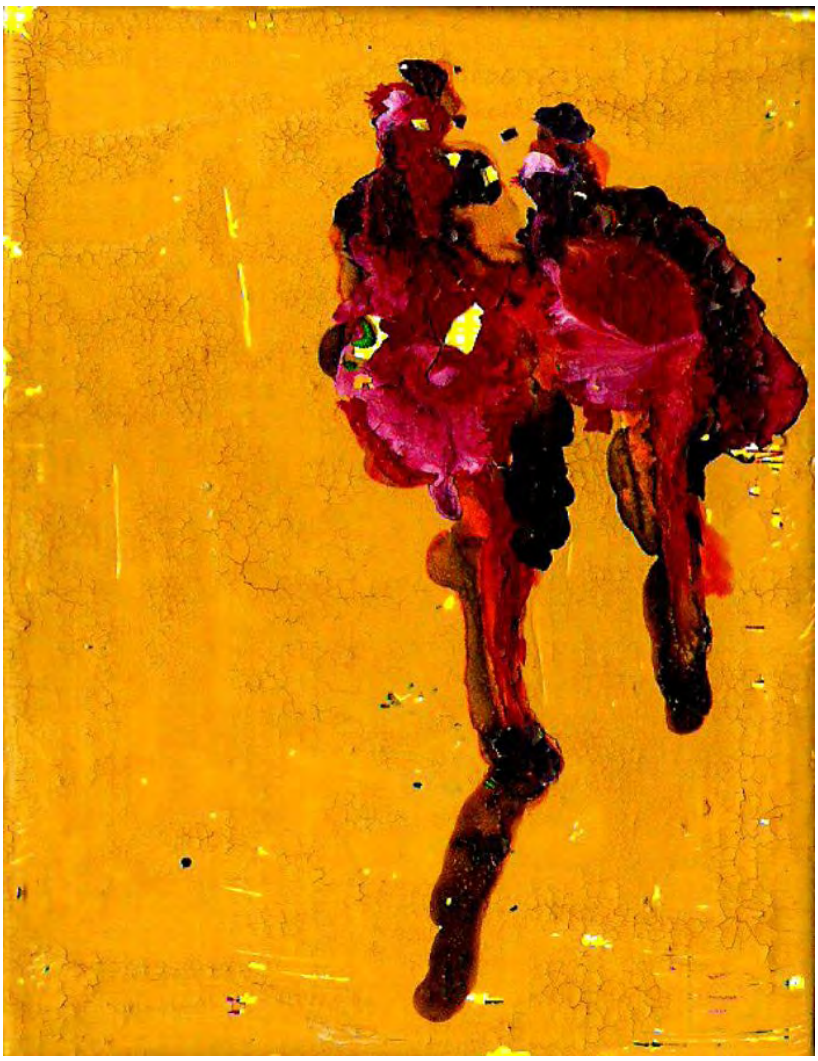

"Red Canaries"
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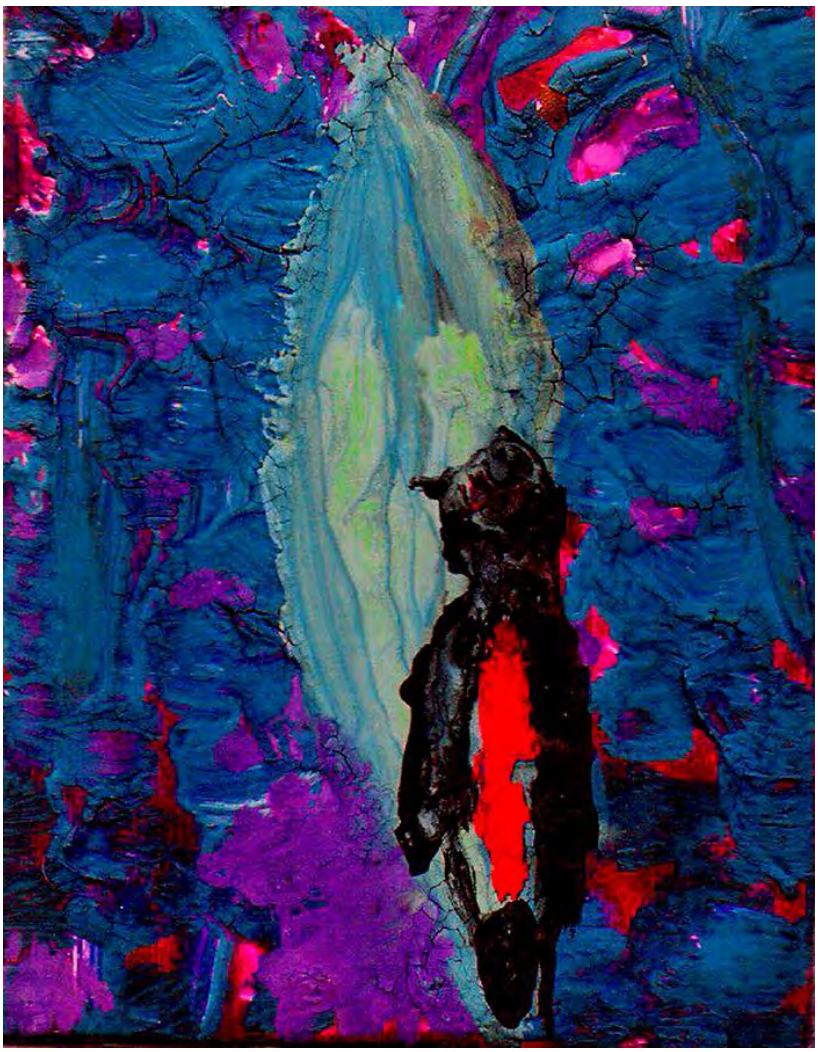

"Woodpecker"
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