Switchback

Issue 20

Volume 10

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Editor's Note

John Gibbs

I have news. Today marks a turning point in our journal's relatively brief, yet provocative existenceÑa victory. Today *Switchback* turns one decade old, twenty issues young in other units of arbitrary measurement. In 2004, the Athens summer Olympics had just concluded, America was about to reelect its president, Facebook had not yet been made available to the general public, and somewhere atop the hill of the Lone Mountain campus this journal was spurred into being by the students, alums, and faculty members of the MFA in Writing program at the University of San Francisco.

It is with great pleasure that we get to share with you today the work included within our twentieth issue. An introductory note such as this should not be a summary, but an appetizer, crafted with the intention of tempting readers into sampling (i.e. clicking) the tray of flavorful entrŽes we have prepared for you. Among the tastes and tones presented here are stories that paint surreal landscapes, poems that twist you down a ladder of incomprehensibility only to haul you back up again into a world now slightly altered, and essays that speak of the atrocities and energies of the young. Realms of understanding are prodded at, and emotions are conjured and captured in the works we unveil now.

I admit, speaking in generalities is a consequence of the editor's note. Yet, despite a generality's potential indifferent nature there are truths entombed within it that remain encouraging to us as readers, writers, editors. One truth I've found over the course of shepherding now three issues into publication, is the Herculean effort required to do exactly that. So arduous and unforgiving is the task that it takes not just one or two individuals, but a group of some twenty-odd folks a handful of months to harvest, polish, and realize the thing we've brought before you here. Any hands less, and I'm not typing to you today, unable to mask my childlike enthusiasm for this issue. I thank the tireless staff, who make this journal a possibility.

However, there is one hand on deck that transcends all generalities; Nina Schuyler, our faculty advisor, has gone once again above and beyond herself in working closely with us to improvise, revise, and finalize this lineup of unforgettable voices. Finally, this issue marks my last as reigning Managing Editor, and it is my absolute privilege to be passing off the torch to a longtime and seasoned *Switchback* member, Greg Poulos. I'm excited for what he and his team of new and once-round-the-block staffers will come up with next.

Now this appetizer's finished, the waiter has reset the table, and you're ready for the main course. I don't just have news, I have good, delectable news.

John Gibbs

Managing Editor

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John Gibbs

John Gibbs is the former Managing Editor of *Switchback*. He received his Bachelor's degree in English from Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri. Originally from Saint Louis, he now lives in San Francisco, where he received his MFA from the University of San Francisco. His work has most recently appeared in *The Chariton Review* and *Bodega Magazine*.

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That Half-Light: *A Brighter Word than Bright: Keats at Work* by Dan Beachy-Quick
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Thomas Gillaspy

Thomas Gillaspy is a northern California photographer with an interest in urban minimalism. His work has been featured or is forthcoming in numerous magazines including *Streetlight Magazine*, *DMQ Review*, and *Citron Review*.

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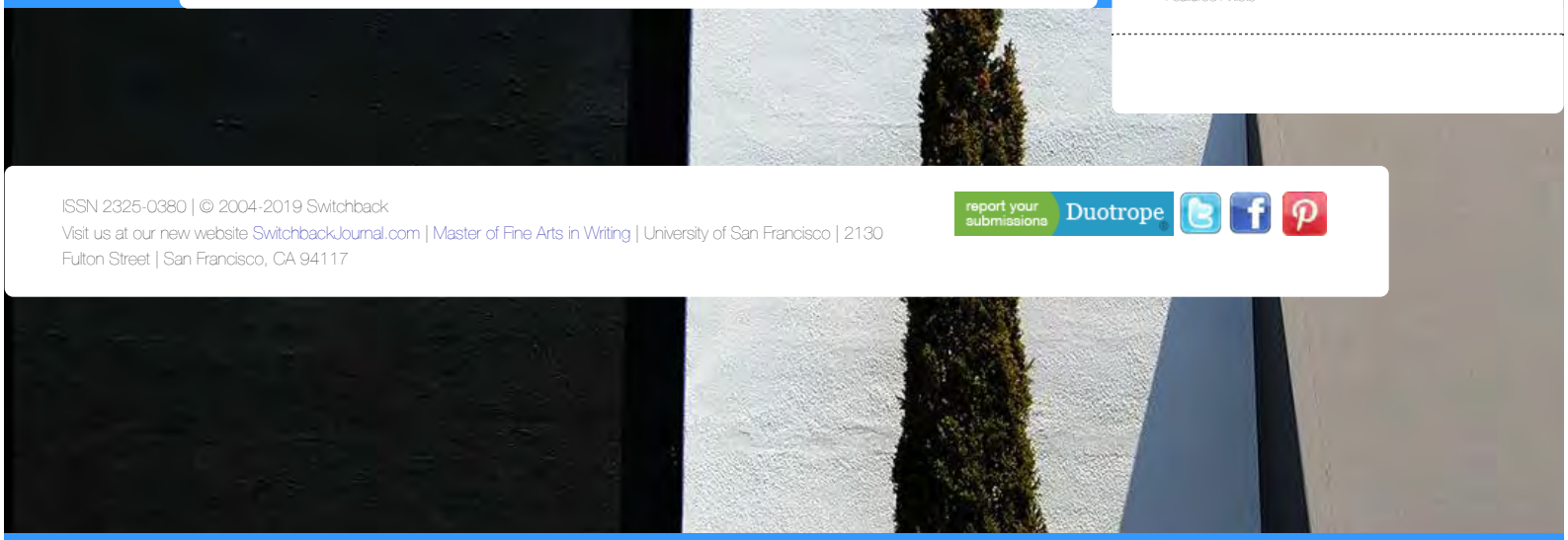

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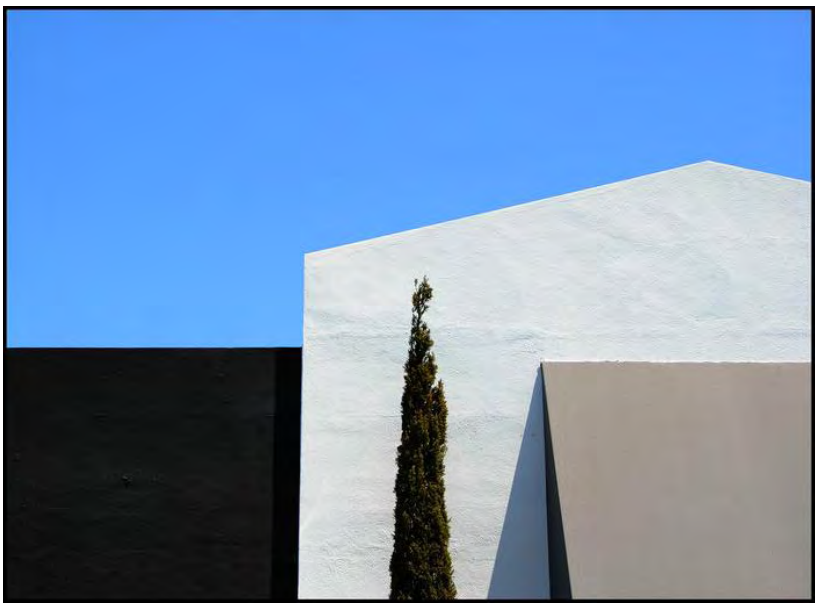
Untitled Portfolio

Thomas Gillaspy



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Jill Kuanfung

Jill Kuanfung is a twenty-five-year-old, mixed-race artist living in Chicago. Her work deals with the recovery of missing artifacts from mixed histories, especially within the context of family and ancestry, as well as with the emptiness left within the self as a result of cultural "erasure" and silence. Her recent work has begun to focus on themes of translation and communication gaps in interracial relationships, and the concept of "belonging" to multiple worlds at once.

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Portraits
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Portraits

Jill Kuanfung

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Jacqueline Doyle

Jacqueline Doyle lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she teaches at California State University, East Bay. Her creative nonfiction is published or forthcoming in *South Dakota Review*, *Frontiers*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Tusculum Review*, *Sweet*, *The Rumpus*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. She was recently nominated for a Pushcart by *South Loop Review*, and has a Notable Essay listed in *Best American Essays 2013*. Find out more about her here.

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The Way I Remember It
Nonfiction

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The Way I Remember It

Jacqueline Doyle

If I had told you this story, say, last month, I would have told it more or less this way.

When my husband and I lived in Fresno almost twenty-five years ago, we used to take our young son on walks after dinner in a small, lightweight stroller. (How young was he? Not yet two, so let's say one and a half.) We lived in a sleepy subdivision tucked away between a canal and a high footpath. The houses had been built in the fifties and all the streets were named after women, the developers' and contractors' wives probably. It was one of the few neighborhoods in Fresno with mature trees. We lived on Beverly Way. That night we were walking on Ramona. Outside it was dark and quiet except for the occasional whoosh of cars passing on Marca Street nearby.

It was a warm night, not as hot as it gets in the dog days of a Fresno summer, sometimes an entire month of temperatures well over a hundred. At least that's what I remember. Unrelenting heat, 110 degrees every day, our small air conditioner turning on and off with a muffled roar as it labored to keep up and failed to do so. But that night was pleasantly warm. The tall trees cast shadows on the street and obscured the occasional dim streetlight. There were no other people outdoors—no walkers or joggers or neighbors watering their lawns. There were no sidewalks in the subdivision, and the two and three-bedroom ranch-style bungalows were set far back from the street. Everyone's curtains were always drawn. Here and there you could see the glow of a TV.

I'd had a glass or two of wine (how many? probably two). I had a game I liked to play with our son, where I'd run ahead of my husband, not very fast, but run, pushing the stroller, and then let the stroller go so it would sail along and my son would chortle happily. I don't remember whether my husband ever objected to that. We were in good spirits that night. I pushed the stroller, and let it go, and my husband said, "Watch out!" as the stroller hit a pothole, and tipped crazily forward, and I reached it just in time to grab the stroller and right it before my son spilled out onto the street.

That's the way I would have told you the story, but I probably wouldn't have anyway, since the story doesn't really have a point, except maybe don't play that game with your child in a stroller. Or maybe, I'm so glad we moved away from Fresno.

Recently the episode came up in conversation, though. "Remember the time the stroller almost tipped over, that night on our walk in Fresno?" I said to my husband.

And my husband said, "The stroller did tip over."

"No it didn't."

"Yes it did."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. The stroller tipped over."

My husband has a far better memory than I do, and I often trust him to fill in details and context when I'm trying to recall something. What movies we've already seen, the names of our neighbor's children, what year I started my job, what happened when or where and with whom. After the first shock of disbelief, I realized he must be right. The stroller did tip over.

He can't remember much more about the incident, except that he was mad at me. "I was really pissed."

Our son wasn't hurt, but probably he was crying, probably I rushed to pick him up, and held him against my shoulder, jouncing him slightly up and down the way you do to comfort a crying baby. Or maybe my husband swept him up and held him while I picked up the stroller with shaking hands and we checked him for cuts and

scrapes, murmuring, *it's okay, it's okay*. And maybe I realized it wasn't okay. That I shouldn't drink wine and play games with our son in the stroller, though the warm night felt so sheltering, and I believed nothing bad could ever happen to the three of us, ever.

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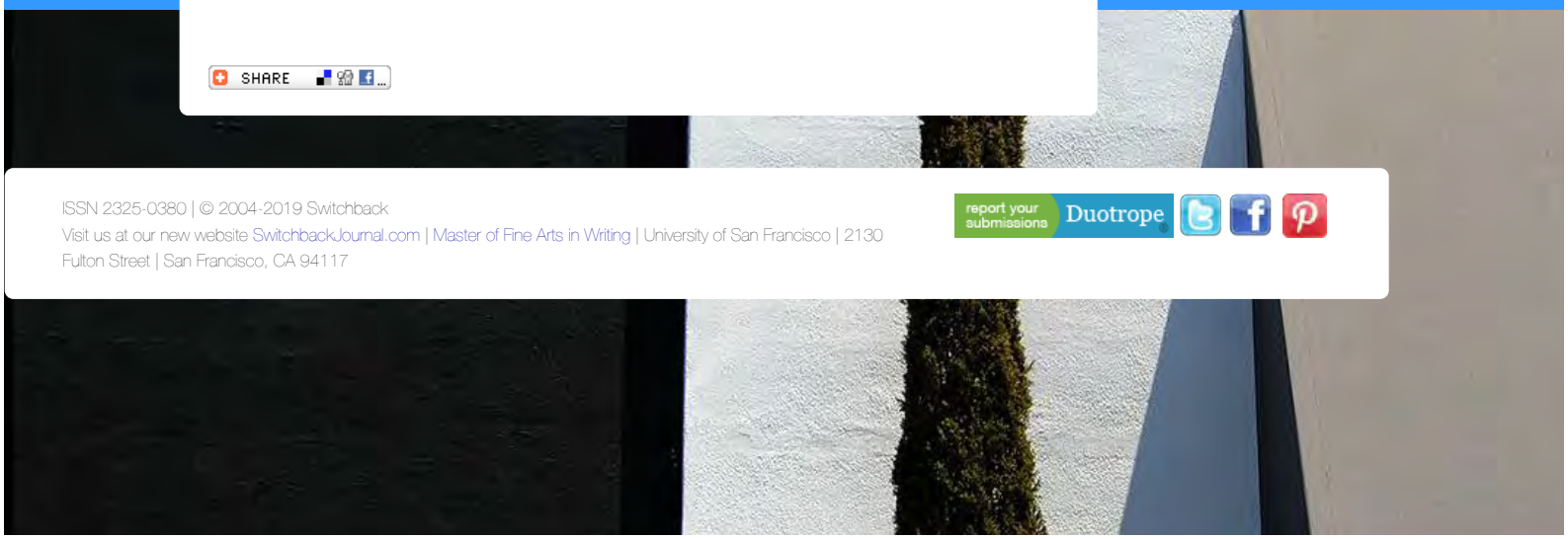

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The Way I Remember It

Jacqueline Doyle

Our son was two and a half when I got sober. I remember that fact specifically, because our son was born on May 26 and I got sober on December 1. Getting sober was the culmination of a lot of things. It was about rediscovering myself, but it was partly about wanting to be present for my husband and child. We celebrated our twenty-sixth anniversary and my twenty-third AA birthday together last year. Though I haven't gone to AA in years, it still seems important to stay vigilant, and to celebrate my continuing sobriety.

There were a lot of buzzwords in AA, a lot of slogans that alienated me at first, sensitive to language and precision as I am, and wanting to believe that we all have individual histories. That was part of the point. You're not as different as you think. You share a problem with all of these other people and you can help each other to stay sober. *One day at a time. KISS: keep it simple stupid*. And, how did that saying go? *Da Nile is not a river in Egypt*. Something dumb that's stuck with me. Addicts and alcoholics are particularly prone to denial, they say. And what else could it be, my wholesale transformation in memory of that warm summer night in Fresno when my son almost, that is, actually fell out of his stroller onto the gravel-strewn macadam street?

Am I too appalled at what could have happened to my son to retain the truth of that night? The experience sank into the murky depths of memory, that vast repository of past events that jostle each other, rise and fall, sometimes ascending to the surface of consciousness where they bob and float, waiting for me to notice them. What other memories have sunk out of sight, perhaps never to be retrieved? Or floated to the surface, waterlogged and misshapen, distorted beyond recognition?

We constitute ourselves through memory. It is only through our remembered histories that we achieve shape and being. But maybe forgetting is as important as remembering, as we decide who we are and how to live with ourselves.

When I was in junior high, the older brother of a girl in my class was killed in an accident. They lived on the Boulevard, the busiest street in our little town, almost a small highway. The houses on the Boulevard were large, mansions really, with very long driveways. Her mother was backing out of the driveway. I picture one of those classic station wagons, a Pontiac maybe, or a Buick, so popular in the sixties with affluent suburban housewives. Her brother was in the back seat when she backed into traffic, another car smashed into the station wagon, and he was instantly killed.

I don't remember whether the girl was in the car, too. (Was she sitting in the front? Was she somewhere else? Was she supposed to be with them?) I wonder how she remembers her brother's death, almost fifty years past. And how does her mother remember? I heard that she was at fault, backing into traffic. I never heard rumors of substance abuse, though there were many mothers popping Valium in that generation of wealthy suburbanites, many secret drinkers, too. But I visited the girl once when I was much younger. We played in her basement rec room. The house was spacious and airy and well ordered, her mother was gracious and hospitableÑeverything my own dysfunctional household and mother were not. I never reciprocated invitations or had friends over to visit, at least the way I remember it.

I picture a simple moment of inattention. Maybe she was thinking about what to buy at the grocery store, or her son distracted her with a question, or something on the radio made her lose focus. The other car seemed to come out of nowhere, appearing in the passenger-side mirror for a millisecond as everything happened at once: the screech of brakes, the loud bang and sounds of wrenching metal and shattering glass, the moment of

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profound silence before the screams.

Does she recall putting her foot on the brake and looking both ways? Does she imagine a car veering out of traffic across her lawn and into the driveway? An accident where someone else was to blame? Does she sometimes think it never happened at all, that her son is grown and living far away?

She must be in her eighties now, his mother. She's still alive, as far as I know. Is she trapped in that memory, or does she remember farther back, remember the sweet boy she read to at night before she gave him a kiss and tucked him into bed? He was warm and smelled like milk. He wore soft flannel pajamas, blue with rocket ships on them. *Winnie the Pooh* was his favorite story. "'Oh, help!' said Pooh, as he dropped ten feet on the branch below him. 'If only I hadn'tÑ' he said, as he bounced twenty feet on to the next branch. 'You see, what I *meant* to do,' he explained." Even though she'd read the words aloud many times before, they laughed and laughed. "It all comes of *liking* honey so much," Pooh explains. "Oh, help!"

I've veered away from the summer night in Fresno, the two glasses of the wine I liked so much (or was it three?), the small accident I once saw through a glass darkly, but now see face to face. St. Paul's vision of Judgment Day rises unbidden from the recesses of my lapsed Catholicism. I needed help. I got help. Still, I closed my eyes and forgot what I found hard to live with. It has come back to me now that I am finally ready to reread that chapter in my life. Maybe memory, like God, can be merciful.

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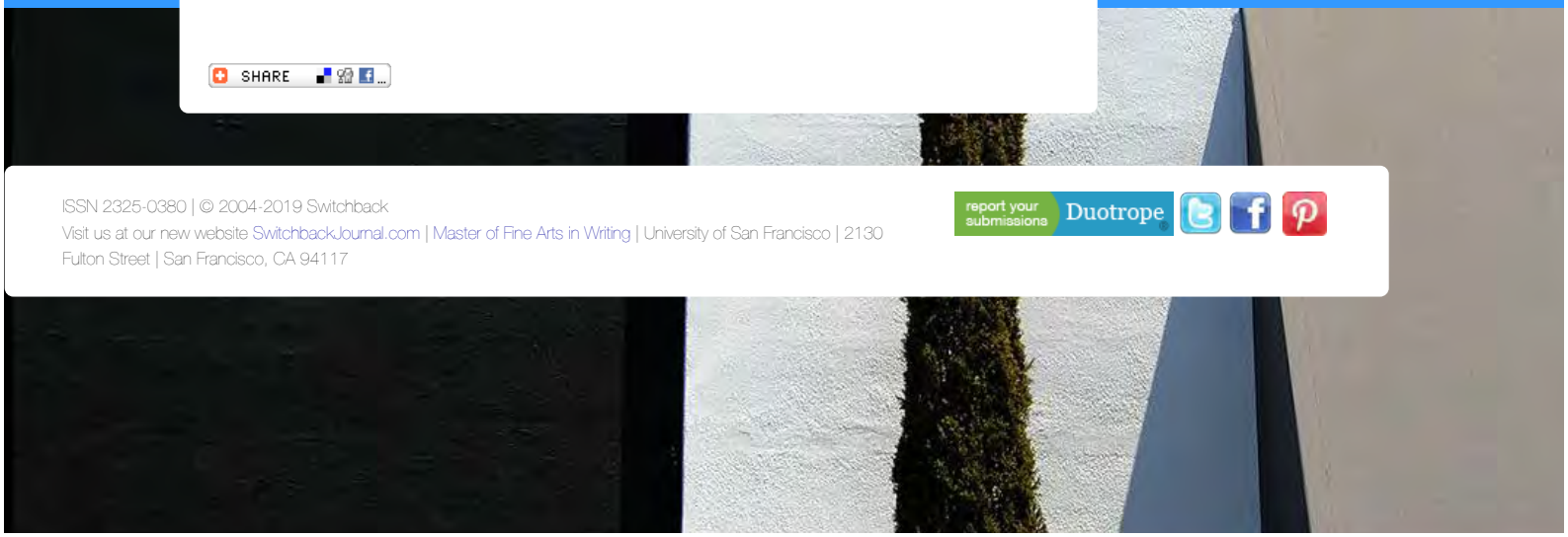

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E. Eastman

E. Eastman graduated with an MFA in writing from the University of San Francisco in 2004; his essays have appeared in *Fourth Genre*, *The Bellingham Review*, *InDance*, and the *Noe Valley Voice*. Because his childhood desires to be both matador and professional flamenco dancer did not materialize, he became a physical therapist, but he could just as well spend the rest of his life on the road satisfying a curiosity for culture, high-end hotel rooms, exotic comestibles, and being the perfect dinner party guest. He currently resides in San Francisco and teaches creative writing to children and senior citizens.

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El Suavecito
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El Suavecito

E. Eastman

I am certain of nothing but
the holiness of the HeartÕs affections
And the truth of the Imagination.
ÑJohn Keats

In seventh grade, galvanized sweat glands christened me with a peculiarly musty smell, my voice dropped the predicted octave, hair sprouted in unexpected places, and pains of unknown origin assaulted me.

ÒDoes it hurt when you touch it?Ó asked my father, Strategic Air Command Officer and adept diagnostician who, triaging our ailments out of a book of common health problems, prevented, if he could, an unnecessary trip to the infirmary.

ÒNo,Ó I said.

ÒYouÕll live,Ó he said. ÒBy the way, are you touching *it*?Ó

ÒIt?Ó I queried.

ÒMister Tally Wacker.Ó

ÒNo,Ó I said, but the truth was, hormones sluicing through my pelvis had set off spontaneous erections I had futilely, but soothingly, learned to control with the glove of self-satisfaction. In addition, the hormonal advance had slimmed my hips and triggered muscles that while dormant in gym class, ached, in that volcanically adolescent world of neuro-synaptic desire, unlike any of the other seventh graders, for Saturday morning to come, when I could pluck from a rack in my closet a pair of hand-made, black, above-the-ankle, soft-as-skin-and-just-as-resilient, half boots that, packed in a powder blue, over-the-shoulder, Lufthansa flight bag, a confiscated cast-off of the parentsÕ odyssey to the Holy Land, I unpacked and donned in the studio of *Enrique El Cojo*, or Crippled Henry as my father called him, to pound a rhythmically intoxicating *zapateado*.

* * *

ÒHell no, Celia,Ó my father had said to my mother, when in sixth grade I began to moon for the shoes.

ÒBut how can he dance without them?Ó she asked.

ÒHeÕs a kid,Ó he cried. ÒFor crisssakes, he can dance without them. Put some wooden heels on his shoes. ThatÕll make a lot of noise.Ó

ÒBut theyÕre brown,Ó I moaned.

ÒAnd whatÕs your point?Ó he said.

ÒFlamenco shoes are not brown.Ó

ÒWhoÕs going to be looking at your feet?Ó

Òl will.Ó

ÒDonÕt look.Ó

ÒOh Ellery,Ó my mother, ambassador of lost causes, sighed.

ÒDonÕt start,Ó he cautioned. Òln six months he will have outgrown both the shoes and the reason for them. What about those art lessons I paid for. Where did that get Mr. Picasso?Ó

In my defense, I said I still drew.

ÒBut he thought your talent minor,Ó he countered. ÒHe told us not to waste the money.Ó

ÒWhy handmade shoes?Ó he asked, eventually.

ÒI donÕt want to look like a hick.Ó

ÒWell said, son.Ó

ÒIf IÕm going to take lessonsÑÓ

ÒWhoa, Mister Flamenco Boy, who said anything about lessons?Ó

But the flamenco bug had bit.

At the age of five, when gypsies materialized at parties in the living rooms of our Spanish hosts, I took to tying the tails of my white shirt above my waist, flinging my arms heavenward, and vanishing into the pulsing cloud of drumming heels, cadenced clapping and ardent singing, seized with what can only now be described as sex, standing up. Mimicking the dancersÕ expectant torsos, their thrusts and turns, I hammered in my two-tone Buster Brown shoes a make-believe but equally passionate rendition of the footwork.

Each time, the crowd roared, Ò*Ole!*Ó

In a black-and-white photograph taken at the *Fer'a* that year, I am that eager-eyed boy slouched against a rope slung across the entrance of the *Caseta Americana*, in a suit, ruffled shirt, fringed sash, and broad-brimmed native hat. Gypsy women from the floor show poised around me, a clutch of aromatic bodies wrapped in wet shawls pressing into me, arms reaching, in a rustle of ruffled sleeves, clicking bracelets and clucking un-clasped castanets, to fasten fallen flowers to hair combs, hips curved to the camera, hems hissing in the dirt then, still.

Inside, my father socialized, surrounded by other officers and merchants doing business with the United States Government and a passel of wives, the sparkling zest of this party; later, in a boozy pantomime, he brokers an invitation to a more lavish *caseta* with more smartly-dressed patrons where, under a bobbing sky of strung paper lanterns, the dance floor trembling with the weight of a hundred synchronized dancers, a *puissantly profundo frisson*Ñas my father, having exhausted English alternatives would have saidÑregistered in the seat of my spine.

He, mad for flamenco, for its nomadic and sensual lifestyle that, save his familial responsibilities, mirrored his own, slaked his thirst for it in nightclubs and late-night parties, *juergas*, on the back patios of roadside restaurants on the dusty road to *Jerez*, where overcome by the dancing, the last stinging sip of whiskey on his tongue, he would foot the bar bill with a wad of prodigious bills that tutored me in the mathematics of a gracious tip; then, hoisting my drowsy form over his shoulder, the fabric of his jacket saturated with the aroma of pleasure, he carried me to the car, laid me down on the cool leather of the backseat where, chassis thrumming, glittering stars seeping through the lace of window frost, I surrendered to sleep.

But, the end of first grade brought the curtain down on our Spanish occupation; unfortunate, because I had just convinced my father that the maid, on her afternoon off, could accompany me to the flamenco shows downtown.

ÒStateside,Ó my father called it when we boarded the flight.

ÒDo they dance in their living rooms?Ó I asked of the new natives.

The answerÑthat residents of the western MassachusettsÕ suburban town of Chicopee, at least in 1959, did not dance flamenco in their living roomsÑdid not, however, extinguish hope. In the basement, using pillars as partners, I executed my *Sevillanas* or, in a *muy magn'fico*, pint-sized, matadorial outfit, fought a festively decorated faux bull-on-wheels.

Three years later destiny reassigned us to the Iberian Peninsula.

Sailing from New York, we disembarked seven days later in the land of Roman amphitheaters, Moorish palaces, *conquistadores*, and a cultural geography my heart knew, instinctively, to navigate.

My father now commanded squads of vehicles assigned to three motor pools at three bases and we took an apartment with maidsÕ quarters in Seville, in the *Prado de San Sebastian*, a complex of brick buildings and tree-lined streets abutting the vacant lots of my beloved *Fer'a*, that two-week flamenco party where the morning streets surged with a parade of flower-decked, horse-drawn carriages driven by whip-snapping, liveried drivers, the equine confluence led by men on Arabian steeds in *trajero*Ñshort-waisted jackets, ruffled shirts, riding pants, Cordoban hatsÑwith women in bold-colored, tight-bodiced dresses positioned sideways on the pillion, an arm

about the manÕs waist, the scalloped skirt draped across the animalÕs flanks like oversized hothouse blooms.

I was home again.

* * *

ÒMr. Eastman,Ó said my seventh-grade music teacher, Mr. Graves who, for the better part of an hourÑin a classroom on the second floor of the two-story stucco San Pablo High School, a twenty-minute ride on one of the buses in my fatherÕs motor poolÑhad been instructing, with snapping fingers, the divination of the ÒunderliningÓ beat of the 1964 recording of ÒThis Diamond Ring,Ó by Gerry and the Pacemakers, bruited, he said, to be popular on the American continent.

ÒYes, Mr. Graves,Ó I answered.

ÒYouÕre not snapping.Ó

ÒOh, IÕm sorry.Ó

ÒYou do realize that American taxpayers have no responsibility to foot the bill for a student who daydreams at eleven forty-five on a Tuesday morning,Ó he said. ÒAre we boring his highness?Ó

ÒYes, sir. I mean no, sir. Again, sir, IÕm sorry, sir.Ó

ÒApology accepted,Ó he said, pointing at me, then lifted the phonograph needle to the recordÕs burnished spinning lip. ÒFrom the top, please.Ó

Sporting, in a rotation of five colors, DickiesÑthose sleeveless, torso-less simulated turtlenecks worn under shirts and sweaters, purchased by overseas boat mail from the Sears and Roebuck CatalogueÑI impersonated in clothing, hairstyle and slang, the masculine version of a military brat, feigning interest in the incipient and imported American teen life, but fantasizing myself *Martino*, whose father breeds bulls on their *finca*, whose motherÕs bloodlines descend from kings. Not Martin, the middle name they call me at school, or worse, Marty, who cannot recite the rules of games played with balls but who would have gladly been, if it had been a choice for boys in 1964, a cheerleader.

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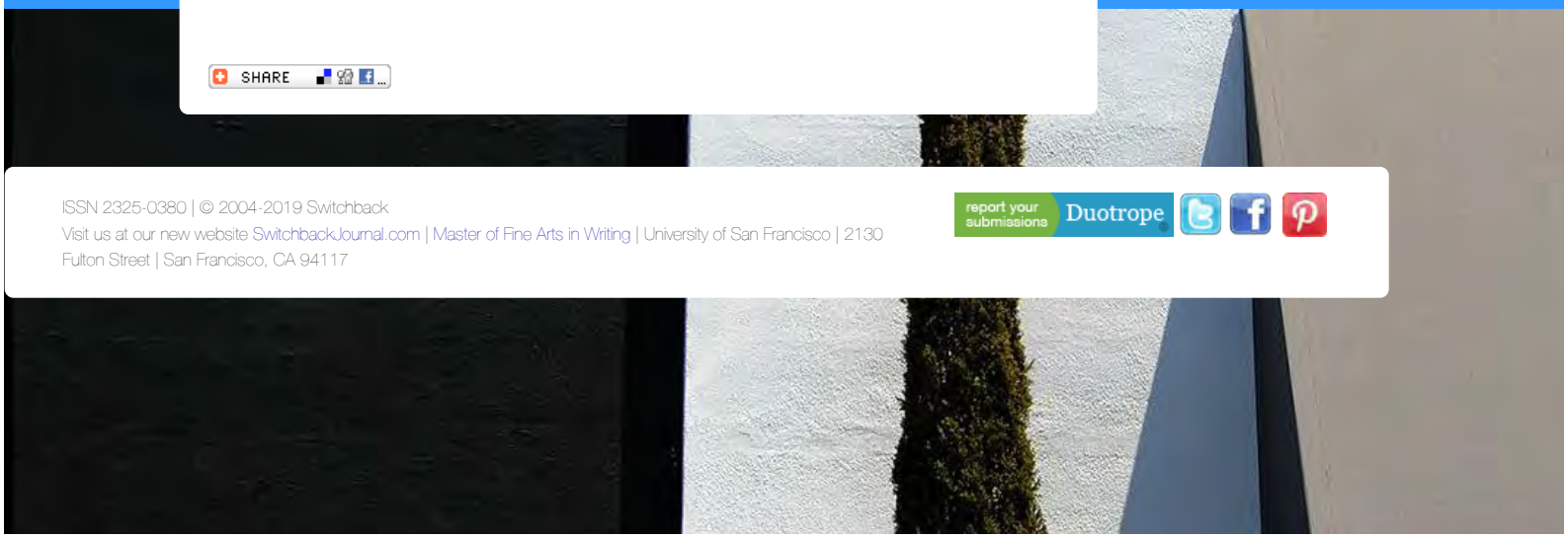

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El Suavecito

E. Eastman

ÒAbout those lessons,Ó I had persisted in the middle of sixth grade.

ÒNo,Ó he said. ÒWe canÕt afford to indulge your oneiricÑdreamyÑinterestsÑdonÕt bother looking it up. There are five of us dining from the same trough, so to speak.Ó

ÒBut Ellery,Ó my mother said, Òwe could economize; a bullfight, a night out.Ó

I offered a bake sale.

ÒA bake sale?Ó he said, flabbergasted.

* * *

The imprecise history of the gypsy of the Iberian Peninsula lies in the invasions of Greeks, Romans, and Phoenicians who bequeathed to flamenco its postures, bronze castanets and rhythmic clapping, adopted by the descendants of the Indian Punjabi tribe, the untouchablesÑanimal trainers and traders, acrobats, dancers, musicians, palmists and metalworkersÑwho in 800 AD migrated across continents to the ports of Africa, sailed to *El-Andaluz*, the land of vandals, and assimilated into the outpost of the Islamic Empire that became the cultural center of the western world. Writings of this period tell of singers that under the influence of *tarab*Ñthe Arab equivalent of flamencoÕs *duende*, a state of ecstasy brought on by the singingÑaffected listeners so profoundly that they ripped off their clothing, broke jars on their heads, then fell to the ground, spinning.

In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella captured the last Muslim stronghold of Granada, and seven years later, under the influence of the Catholic Church, they breached the treaty that had granted religious tolerance to Muslims, Jews, and gypsies. With the InquisitionÕs required baptisms came uprisings, leading to either African deportation or a brutal and systematic elimination. Some of the gypsies and Christian dissidents who could not tolerate the Inquisition, escaped to the mountain caves above the city, where the disparate cultures found themselves united against a common enemy.

In this forced exile, flamenco thrived and with the Leniency Edict of 1782, Charles III restored some freedoms to the gypsies who had been herded into *gitanerias*ÑghettoesÑwhere family groups had safeguarded the purity of the art.

Flamenco, possibly named for the Flemish soldiers of the Spanish-Belgian Territories known for their confidence, style and ostentatious pride, qualities reflected in the character of the gypsy, became a national art form.

But within the family circles of the gypsies, a more private kind of music existed, songs whose verses possessed an almost sacred quality, expressing the pain of prison, of hunger, of a love worth dying for; songs sung *a lo gitano*, in the gypsy manner, *con aficion*, with love, with a raw fierceness that turns emotion inside out, making it visible and palpable, sung with startling and surprising movesÑan intensity of expression, a pause, a breath, a sobÑthat deepen the singerÕs vocal prowess and virtuosity, shatters the audience and transforms the performance into a cathartic event. It is in the *jaleo*, the call and response, where, singing from pure spirit, from *duende*, the artist draws inspiration, improvising lyrics on the broad canvas of Andalusian life.

* * *

I advanced a relentless campaign for the lessons, but only when my mother vowed to donate her bowling league money to the cause did Mr. Paterfamilias relent.

ÒEnough,Ó he said. ÒBut no fussy outfits.Ó

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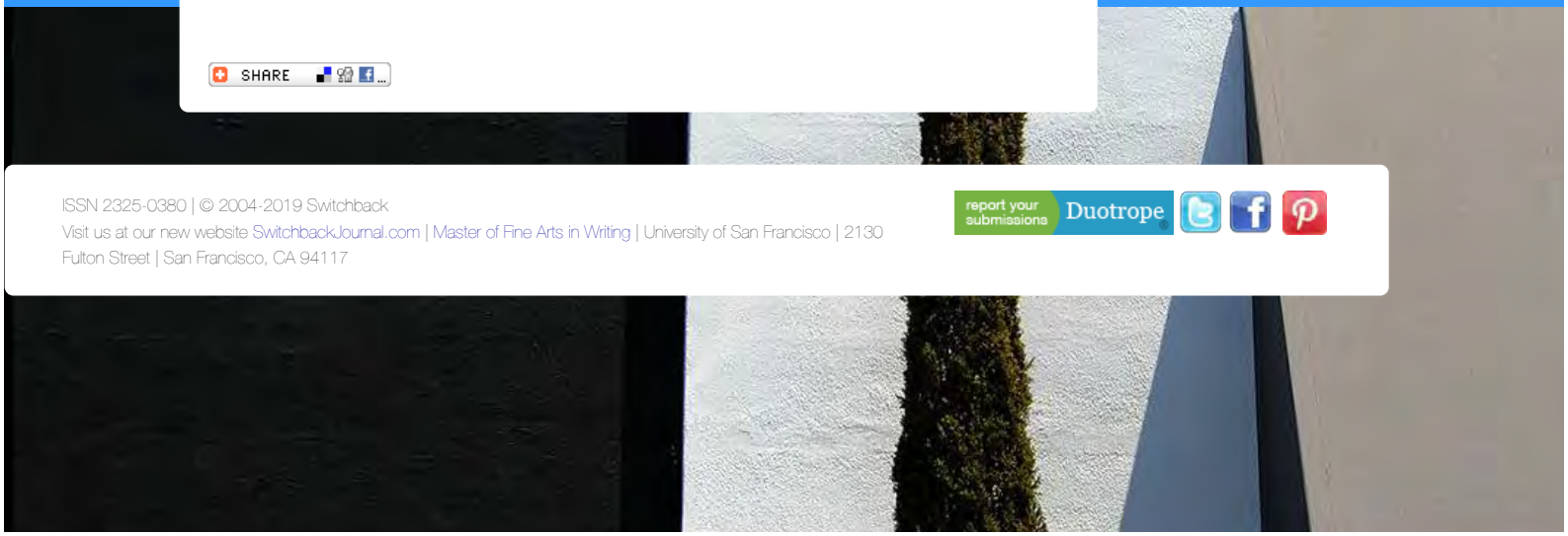

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El Suavecito

E. Eastman

Enrique el Cojo, my fatherÕs connections in the Spanish community assured him, was *el mejor*, the best.

ÒItÕs just an audition,Ó my mother warned before drawing back the thick burgundy velvet drape across the door of his studio on *Calle Espiritu Santo*. ÒThereÕs no guarantee heÕll accept you,Ó she continued. ÒBy the way, I heard he taught the Duchess of Alba to dance.Ó

Corpulent, his unhandsome features shadowed in dappled, dust-laden light cast by iron-grilled windows, *El Cojo* sat at the end of the dance floor in a straight-and-high-backed wicker chair facing a battered, bantam table, his legs dangling, the feet inert, cast at a crooked and eerily lifeless angle.

In the session before mine, a well-known dancer had been finishing a passionate *buleria*, a masculine explosion of heels and arduous footwork propelling him across the floor; and when, with an open palm, he smacked his flank, the slapÕs fervor shivering the muscled bellies of his thigh, I prayed to the Baby Jesus, the rest of the Holy Family, and a slate of saints that one day, my turn would come, and thusly would I perform. In a flamenco troop conquering capitals.

Ò*Exquisito*,Ó my mother whispered.

The music stopped.

Ò*El coreografia exige mas emocion*,Ó *El Cojo* said with a scant lispÑthe choreography demands more emotion and then he unpried his crossed arms to demonstrate.

Ò*¡Alle!*Ó the crowd clamored.

Ò*Sentarse il culo con passion*,Ó he said. Anchor the haunches with passion.

Ò*Mas coqueto*,Ó More flirtatious.

Ò*¡Que bonito, hijo, que bonito!*Ó The crowd clapped ecstatically.

He stood, the effort of heaving himself from the chair rippled through his crippled legs, his judicious steps seductively pulsing his hips in place and with his arms arched, wrists cocked, fingers fanning minuscule, measured beats, quivering, fluttering like leaves floating on a tender breath of air, grasping at grace, his partially paralyzed body, released of corporeal restraints by some miraculous, magical rerouting of nerves and tissue, dispensed of its disability, fleshing it with a complex and arresting physical elegance; a beauty born of suffering, brandishing in me a rampant and rapturous shiver of recognition.

ÒToo bad your father decided not to come,Ó my mother said.

I had wanted him to; had imagined him boasting when the teacher finished tutoring my innate, yet untrained talent.

With a glance, it was my turn.

* * *

ÒWhy do girls get to sit sidesaddle,Ó I had asked my father, earlier that year, as we rode in the *Paseo de Caballos* in a hired carriage, my sister ahead on the back of Colonel AdamÕs horse, my brother behind, on Colonel WellÕs, my mother chatting up the other wives back at the *caseta*, the question shouted above the din of clacking wheels and clopping hooves, the question sparked when Jacqueline Kennedy, the wife of the American President and the Duchess of Alba passed us, both smartly attired in traditional equestrian garb and, seated aside.

One afternoon at the stables, with the help of a groomsman, I had mounted a side-saddled ebony Arabian. Slipping my left thigh over the bi-furcated pommel where it lay suspended, the toe of my right boot nestled in the stirrup, the posture effectively rotated my pelvis, enshrining my *baby boys*, as my father referenced testicles, protecting them from the hornÕs brutal thrusts, a posture hinting of a strong and sexy vulnerability. As sexy as I imagined uncoiling, with a sweep of my calf, the flounced train of a magenta polka-dotted flamenco dress I had *mis ojos* on at the *Gallerias Preciado*; or the tug of a turquoise, thick-strapped, chunky-heeled flamenco shoe, on my instep; the playful slap against my neck of pink looped earrings; or, the voluptuary lingering tickle of lace undergarments against bare skin.

My father, seated across from me on his own broad black leather seat, flinched at the question, his spine reassembling itself with a shudder. His brow glistening, he pulled a white handkerchief from his suit coat. Just the week before we had had a lengthy discussion about masculinity when he discovered the extent of, in the top drawer of my bureau, camouflaged beneath a layer of underwear and scented soaps pilfered from my motherÕs caboodle, a fan collection.

ÒWhy canÕt you collect miniature cars like your brother?Ó he had asked.

Having recently completed a school report on the Cultural Evolution of the Fan in Other Cultures, I argued that Spanish men not only bussed cheeks in greeting and held hands in public, but carried the utilitarian tools against the heat.

Ò*Mucho affectado*, buddy,Ó he injected. ÒExsiccate it.Ó

He had been similarly rigid about allowing me to wear my piecemeal flamenco outfit for the school picture.

ÒAnd none of those poses,Ó he added as I headed out the door to catch the bus, referring to the arabesque stance I had developed a fondness for when being photographed.

As my tutor in the masculine arts my father adhered to a strict, predetermined code of conduct derived from his military training, designed to improve my vacillating virility, lessons he imparted in non-private, extemporaneous lectures or, if the situation demanded silenceÑin church or while someone was speakingÑhe resorted to disapproving stares, dramatic, phlegmatic clearings of his throat, or a painfully ceaseless tapping of my nearest body part. Then, imitating the offensive behaviorÑan angle of the wrist deemed too limp; legs crossed thigh-to-thighÑhe slashed a finger across his neck.

That morning in the carriage, the unanswered question of the side-saddle floated, like a toxic cloud, between us.

Wiping his brow, he answered, finally, with a brusque belligerence. ÒProtects their *business*.Ó

ÒWhat business?Ó

Ò*Pelvic*.Ó

ÒBut why canÕt men ride that way?Ó

ÒPelvic business.Ó

ÒBut it seems to meÑÓ

ÒSeems to me, someone needs to sit in a saddle the same way other men sit in the saddle.Ó

The rideÕs remainder passed in silence ending, at last, when he called for the driver to halt in front of the *Caseta Americana*. Handing over a sheaf of bills, he disembarked, swinging open the small door with a soft, sedulous sigh of its hinges, the carriage swaying with the descending burden. When he turned, his face reflected an implied, tentative and unnamed part of me, its innocence deemed undesirable, worthy of derision, demanding to be hidden, cloaked in a cautious privacy, a secret feverishly and reluctantly lodged in my psyche, never abandoned, smarting, still, with shame.

Later that afternoon at the bullring, he would again pull that handkerchief from his breast pocket and wave it furiously, along with the crowd, calling for the *indultado*Ñthe pardoning of the animalÕs life when it had not succumbed to the swordÕs ineffectual thrustsÑand I thought of him and me, father and son, as such, he the matador and I, the wounded-yet-spared bull, gasping with incredulity at the sudden promise of unclaimed days.

El Suavecito

E. Eastman

ÒWhat would you like to dance?Ó *El Cojo* asked. Ò*ÀUn fandango? Una buleria?*Ó

Ò*ÁQuale?*Ó Which.

ÒWhichever you want.Ó

ÒI know the *Sevillanas*.Ó

ÒBegin there,Ó he said and when he pointed, up came the familiar guitar chords.

Ò*ÀSolo?*Ó I asked, of a dance I had only done partnered.

ÒBut of course.Ó

ÒI canÕt do it alone.Ó

ÒAh,Ó he said.

ÒAh,Ó my mother repeated.

Terrified, I wondered if she had been, in representing my skills at the onset of the audition, a bit *ambiciosa*.

I smelled my fear.

Nervously fingering the thick sheaf of bills against my thighÑthe fee and a munificent tipÑlodged in my pocket that morning with a quick shove by my father, I wondered how long he had labored for the sum.

I began to shape the apology that I, the impostor, would, for having wasted the maestroÕs time, proffer the fee, then counted the steps to the door through which my dreams and my disgrace would flee.

Ò*Noviciado*,Ó someone clucked.

Ò*Pobrecito*,Ó someone added.

ÒWell,Ó I anticipated my father saying when my mother recounted the failed audition, Òafter all that fuss.Ó

An eternity passed.

Then, the clamantly imperative rap of knuckles against the table top, insistently rapping the danceÕs beat, roused my inept feet which, faltering at first, the insubstantial strikes against the floor ill-defined and muffled, but slowly, incrementally, when I saw his half-looped, bemused smile, substantially more audible and authoritative and precise.

Ò*ÁAnda chiquillo!*Ó the crowd yelped and with a swift shimmy, I shed my sport coat, unhitched my bow tie, flung both to the floor, shoved unbuttoned shirt cuffs above my elbows, lashed my untucked shirttails mid-torso, then trucked across the floor, *con brio*, hips swiveling, fingers snapping, arms pulsing with eminently more and more artful and enticing poses.

Ò*ÁQue toma, que toma!*Ó the crowd screamed.

Unfortunately, my provocatively fiery head tosses unleashed no backcombed locks burnished with Brilliantine because my fatherÕs leniency at the barbershop allowed a paltry cockscomb of waxed unwavering hair.

On my face, the expression endlessly rehearsed in the mirror, equal parts rogue and rapist.

But when I slapped my right buttock with a crack echoing across the room, *El Cojo* came out of his chair.

Ò*ÁAlle!*Ó he roared, thumping the table and, if my translation skills were accurate, telling me that the stage was mine.

Like the keys of a typewriterÑsomeone yelled about the dizzying speed with which my heels now struck the floor. When I finished, panting, lips a little frothy and parched, my clothes more than damp, tingling with the thrill of having danced, finally, for the master, the room stilled.

Plunked in the hush, the blossoming doubt that he would deem me worthy of refinement, and as I prepared to recompose myself, gather up my lobbed garments, shake his hand, thank him for his time, hand over the cash and disappear, I ascertained, in a rush of words, inscrutable at first and directed mostly at my mother, the price, steeper than expected, of his tutelage, that I must never be tardy, that I must practice every day, that it would be better if I attended alone and, as soon as *la se–ora* could arrange for *el ni–o* to obtain suitable *zapatos*, he said, scribbling the address of his cobbler on a piece of paper retrieved from a pocket, the lessons could commence.

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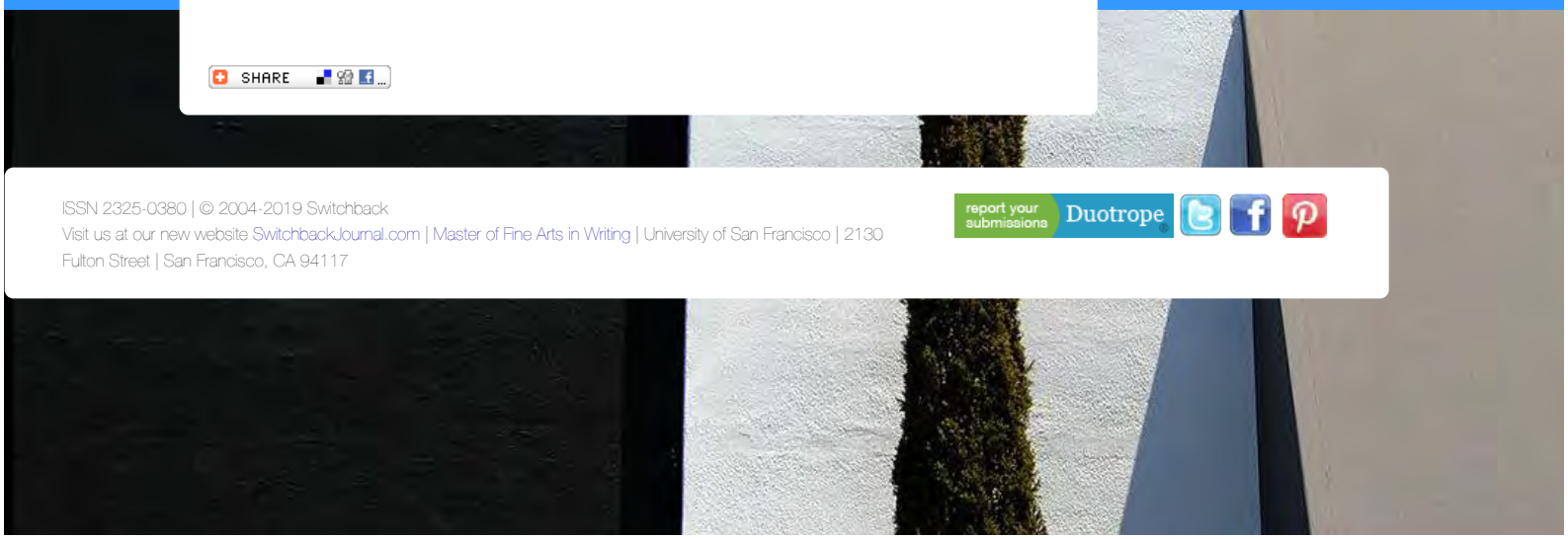

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El Suavecito

E. Eastman

ÒThose shoes will come out of his allowance for the next thirty-six months,Ó my stolid father said, in way of congratulation, of my accomplishment at the audition.

ÒAnd about those fussy outfits,Ó he persisted, his eyes locking on mine like a fighter pilotÕs on his target. Òl meant what I said.Ó

For the record, there was no allowance, and I never asked for the much-pined-for fussy outfits or the hand-carved castanets, knowing that these accoutrements tumbled into that dangerous territory my father, that morning in the carriage, had warned about; indulgences violating masculine conventions, and while I had considered having his tailor stitch a pair of pants so taut against my fleshÑ*mucho mas cenido*, tighter, *por favor*Ñ potentially injurious to the baby boys, I did not, not wanting to risk the indignity of, during a closet raid in search of imagined contraband, randomly hung clothes, or, god forbid, un-shined shoes, have him find a flamboyant and unauthorized costume.

On lesson Saturdays, I rose early, extending an already extensive toilette, showering with a scented soap saved for special occasions then returning it, after it had dried, to its decorative box in the medicine cabinet. From cheek to jowl I spread a spume of shaving foam, then stripped it away with a bladeless razor, practice for the day, which, given the other witnessed physiological changes of my body, would, my father predicted, arrive in a twinkling. Liberally, in a distribution pattern marrying my fatherÕs bracing face slaps and my motherÕs dainty pulse-point dabs, I doused myself with my favorite cologne, then, slipping into clothes chosen the night before and placed in donning order on the hastily-made bed, I repeatedly rehearsed the choreography of the previous week, already practiced tirelessly in a back room of the basement on a piece of plywood supplied by *Francisco*, the *Portrero*, until bubbled toe blisters threatened to burst.

Though my mother had escorted me to the audition, I was now trusted to make the walk myself, traversing palm-lined, imperial boulevards, past the *Hotel Alphonse XIII*, where I learned to use a fingerbowl, and the *Hotel Reina Christina*, where, quarantined with chicken pox, waiters in white gloves rolled my tablecloth-covered carts to the door and *no further*Ñrepeat, *no further*. Slipping into the lush gardens of the *Alcazar*, I crisscrossed the paths and terraces and pavilions in the stippled shade of exotic trees to emerge into the *Plaza del Triunfo*, and then to the cathedral, entering the *Puerta del Perdon*Ñthe door of pardonÑpausing in the *Patio de los Naranjos*, where in Moorish times worshippers, before praying, washed their hands and feet in the fountain beneath the orange trees; a dash to the sacristy for a genuflection at the high altar of the patron saint, then the final sprint to his studio in the barrio *Santa Cruz*.

If my lesson were the first of the day and I arrived early enough, I might spy *El Cojo*, his heavy and rounded body swaying with his weakened gait, flocked by children screaming his name, following him inside, then scampering out moments later, his shooing arms the only visible part of him beyond the curtain; if the lessons had started, the children, grasping the bars of the iron-grilled windows, jockeyed for a peep; and if the student were well known, adults towered over the children.

Once inside, I stood by the door or sat on the bench along the wall, waiting to be called.

After greeting me, he asked for the shoes and plunged his thick hand into their hollow forms, ascertaining, in the arches, in the baldness of the toes, or the exhausted edges of the heels, the extent of my effort. He was always pleased.

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Obscene Chapel
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Bikini Blues
Lily Iona MacKenzie

Poetry

Fiction

El Cojo taught the *tacaneo*, the footwork, with a vocabulary of hand gesturesÑthe heel of his hand the heel of the boot, a clutch of fingers the toeÑa litany, a tattoo of taps and knocks, smacks and clonks keeping tempo, the cuff of a cupped palm, faint as a whispered prayer, or as fierce as thunder. If my feet could not duplicate this manual pantomime, he would, with an indulgent, slightly exaggerated smile, protractedly and tediously repeat the sequence of hand sounds. If that failed, after several attempts, exasperated, sighing heavily, thwacking his thigh, spitting expletives, he hoisted himself up with a grunt, breathing hard, and lay bare the choreography. Luckily, it did not happen often, for it mortified me. *El Cojo* had a biting sense of humor and was quick to criticize dancers whom he felt were not meeting his standards, ridiculing them, imitating them with wild gestures, contorted and unflattering facial expressions, calling them unkind names.

The dance he had been building for me began with a pose evocative of a bullfighterÕs formal stance: one turned-out leg slightly in front of the other, chest erect, head, with a downward gaze, rotated to the left, hands clasped, cradling the right hip. When he signaled for the *musica*Ñmy musicÑto start, there would be a few introductory chords and when it was time, he clapped once, softly and said, *anda*. Throbbing, my fingers uncoiled, trembling to life, *lentatmente*, slowly, *como una mariposa saliendo el capullo*, like a butterfly freeing its cocoon, my arms ascending ardently, wrists articulating languidly, my heels drumming a muted, deliberate beat, cultivating complexity and volume as I embarked across the floor. As I danced, he danced, his arms and facial expressions illustrating the refinements he wished me to make. At the end of the section he would have me repeat it, without the guitar, just to the beat of his handclapping, but this time, with *mas emocion*, and then, again, because ultimately his emphasis was the emotional aspect of flamenco rather than the technique that enhanced it: the arch of the brow, the hunch of the shoulders, the pitch of the pelvis, conveying delight, doubt or despair, and when he performedÑwhich was rareÑhe put so much of his personal feeling into each movement that it was difficult not to assimilate the emotional content into my own dancing. In time, with a legion of Saturdays behind me, I danced with an abandonment I never knew myself capable, and with each session I did not stop dancingÑI had not succeeded Ñuntil his face loosened with the full weight of his satisfaction.

At the end of the session, he would introduce me to the ensuing student and assembled guests as *Suavecito*, the smooth one, serving both as title and term of endearment. Standing next to his chair as he planned our next appointment, his arm heavy about my waistÑa thick, inquisitive hand tenderly clasping the rim of my hipÑI sensed, beneath the crush of fingers and flesh, an instinctual muscular response hinting of an intimacy beyond the platonic constraints of this tutelage.

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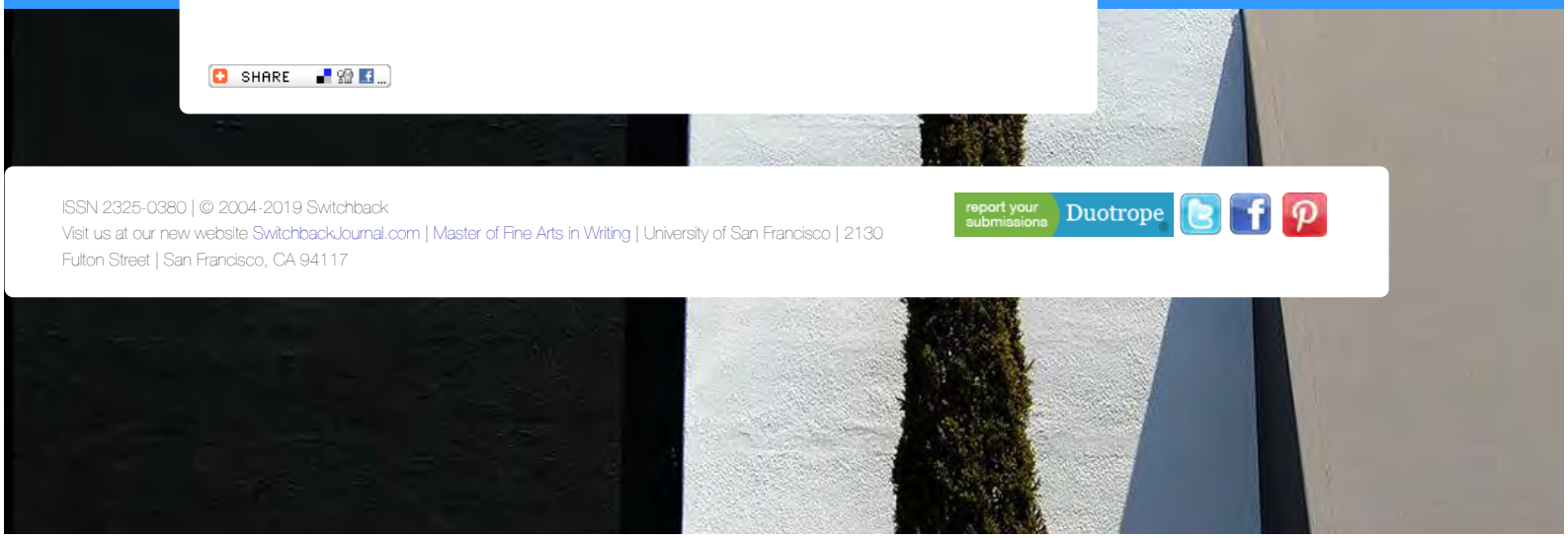

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El Suavecito

E. Eastman

My posture changed.

Standing as though I had just entered a bullring, or as my father suggested, had been impaled by a broomstick, the pell-mell steps that once constituted my gait gave way to a studied stroll that, coupled with a calculated sacral sway, fell just short of a prance.

ÒModulate that wiggle,Ó my father ordered when he caught me.

But I persisted, especially during the daily summer migration weÑmy mother, siblings, and IÑmade to the *lujoso*, ritzy, *Club Nautico*, a private swim club, where, in the vibrantly-striped canvas cabanas with full-length mirrors and doors-that-could-be-locked, in between swims in the lusciously landscaped, lagoon-like pools and lunch on the flagstone patio, I rehearsed, unsupervised and unencumbered, my art.

At a party that summer, when the gypsies came, I danced with an unbound bliss, that though my father clapped, along with the crowd, it was not with the same enthusiasm, his countenance muddled with apprehension and, a speck of panic.

* * *

My father made Major and with ballooning responsibilities at *Mor—n*, the Strategic Air Command base forty miles away, circumscribed with barbed wire and housing B-52 bomber planes nestled in hangars, we were allocated to base housing, and one morning in July men in blue overalls packed up the contents of our apartment and unpacked them that same afternoon in the low-slung, white-stucco, red-tiled-roof structure with a contiguous carport, abruptly bringing the cold war to my backyard.

It was as though I had landed on the moon, or at least, an internment camp with maids and gardeners. The blocs of lodging consisted of two paved-over swaths of the valley floor. On one side, commissioned officers in single-family units with lush flowerbeds and manicured lawns. On the other, separated by a sizable fallow field, noncommissioned officers in multiple-family units with lesser, more communal landscaping. A two-lane road with vast drainage ditches circled through them and back to the main post: the Post Exchange, the Post Office, Commissary, movie theater, barbershop, beauty shop, bowling alley, pool hall, pool, barracks, OfficersÕ Club, Enlisted MenÕs recreational hall, elementary school, stables, airfield, and the motor pool from which my father could now, happily, be home in minutes. Boot camp, I called it, where men in fatigues and a range of oddly configured hats attended to chores driving jeeps and jitneys, the thrum of the tires on the asphalt constant, and from the airstrip came colossal roars of engines that, given the command, lifted jets into the sky within fifteen minutes.

ÒGet the hell out of the way,Ó my father had warned of the red alert siren.

At the movie theater, we stood, instantly, to let the men pass.

On the roadÑand all roads led to the heavily guarded, fenced-in air-stripÑwe flung bikes and bodies into the drainage ditch, lest the rushing stream of vehicles dismembered us.

Our social life ceased to extend beyond the base, my parents content with bowling leagues, dinner-dances at the OfficersÕ Club, barbecues or an impromptu lawn-chair-in-the-carport cocktail party.

I spent most of the rest of that summer at the pool, behind a lofty chain link fence, lying on aprons of unshaded, un-landscaped, cabana-less concrete, where access required brandishing not only a laminated

identification card but also, the embroidered badge sewn to the front left bottom of oneÕs swimsuit indicating permitted access, with tadpoles relegated to the pediatric pond, dolphins to the shallows of the adult pool, a whale the deep end, and a shark, entrŽe to three diving platforms of dizzying heights, the fifteen-minute-on-the-hour adult swim, and the privilege of running a tab at the snack bar, and while I had qualified for whale-dom, my father insisted I strive for shark-dom, even signing my name on the clipboard for the required lessons. But, I refused.

ÒIf you drown,Ó he said, ÒitÕll be your own damn fault.Ó

Far more vexing however, navigating a locker room of men in various states of undress saluting one another, and the politesse of showering, naked, en masse.

ÒWhatÕs to hide?Ó my father asked when I grumbled about the lack of privacy. ÒWeÕre all men.Ó

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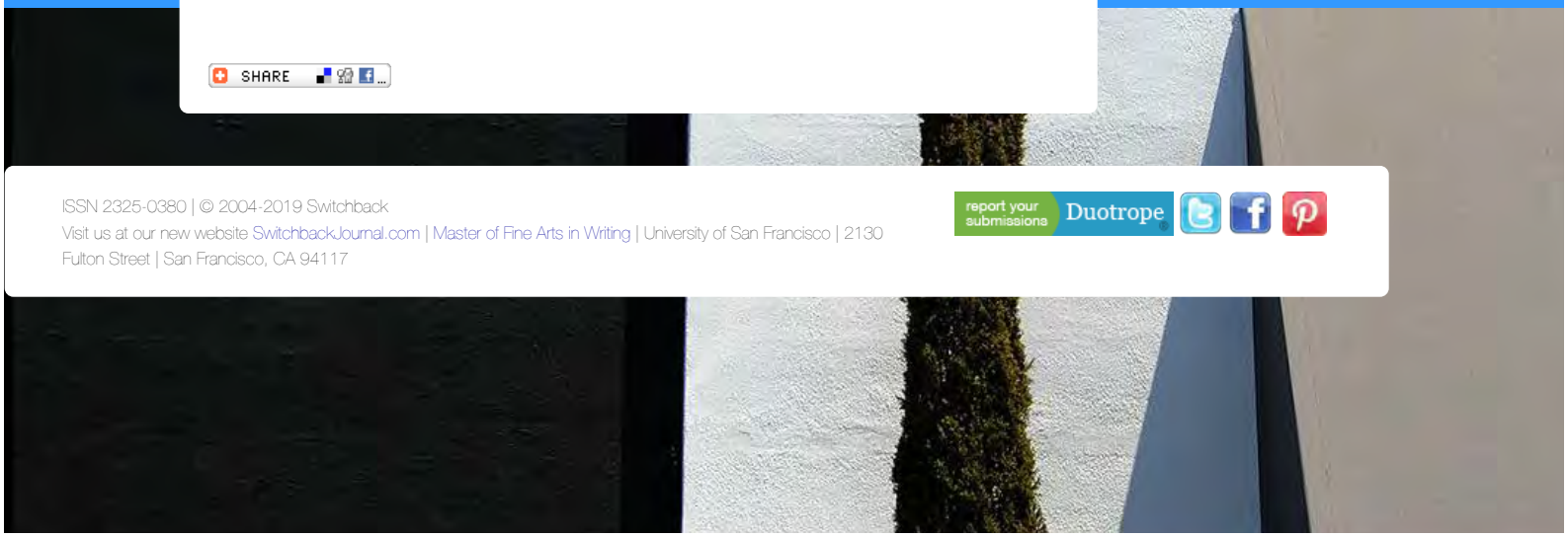

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El Suavecito

E. Eastman

ÒBut you could drive me,Ó I insisted to my mother when, citing the distance into town, the flamenco lessons had been cancelled.

ÒYour father needs the car on base,Ó she argued.

ÒBut I can take the bus,Ó I persisted, when my father came home.

ÒNo,Ó he said. ÒFor *crissakes*, youÕre eleven years old.Ó

It was as though a limb had been severed.

I threatened to run, assured of artistic asylum at the American Embassy, where, prostrating myself in the lobby, refusing to budge until I had the AmbassadorÕs ear, I could beg for employmentÑtyping, translating, babysittingÑand a sympathetic residence.

ÒBetter write your dead grandfather and see if he left you in the will,Ó my father said when I shared the strategy with him.

I pleaded.

ÒItÕs otiose,Ó my father said, Òfutile. I will not succumb to arrant cupidity this time, buddy boy. Flamenco dancer is *not* a career choice in this family.Ó

I turned twelve and lost myself in the business of seventh grade, bustling with books and notebooks tucked under one arm along an orderly route of halls, home rooms, lockers, the asphalt quad for recess, the cafeteriaÑif the teasing by letter-jacketed, hot-dog ingesting giants was not untenable and required that I flee to the relative safety of the libraryÑand the dreaded, detested gymnasium where my ignominious physical ineptitude, in a variety of tasks involving ropes, nets and balls, had become acutely apparent.

While my peers avidly disclosed highlights of their livesÑscout troup camping, capturing baseball trophies, or commanding a new badge at the poolÑI could not recount the triumph of snagging dance lessons with the foremost teacher in Seville, a secret slid into the same sachet of confidences accommodating the fan collection, the desire to sit sidesaddle, and the urge to dress from both sides of the *Gallerida Preciado*Õs noted flamenco aisles.

But, my closeted shoes begged for outings.

The plywood board, trucked out at my insistence with our belongings, stored upright behind the wall of the carport, behind lofty stacks of wooden cases of sodas and drink mixes, would be pulled out at night for a clandestine practice, wearing sneakers so as not to alert or alarm the neighbors. But occasionally, indiscretion prevailed and I practiced in the boots, inciting the racket that, if he were home, brought my father bounding out of the house calling for an immediate cessation to the *goddamn* pounding.

By October, I had befriended, because they worked for my father and came by the house after work for cocktails, the men who drove the buses to school and into the city and enlisted them in the debate over riding the bus to resume my lessons, promising tickets to my performances when I became famous.

It wore my father down.

ÒTake the damn bus,Ó he finally said. ÒBut if you miss it back, donÕt be calling here.Ó

Suavecito was back in business.

With the lessons resumed, I rose even earlier to perform the exacting toilette, rode my bicycle, trailing a cloud of cologne, to the bus stop, leaned it against the rack and boarded, showing my identification card at the

checkpoint to the gunslinging guard who, nodding, verified the face against the photo, saluted and officiously wrote down my name, ID number, time of departure and expected time of arrival back on the base.

ÒBusiness?Ó he asked, tapping the pen with an impatient beat against the frayed edge of the metal clipboard.

ÒBusiness?Ó I repeated.

ÒWhat type of business will you be conducting in the downtown Seville area?Ó

ÒPleasure.Ó

ÒCould you be more specific?Ó

ÒLessons.Ó

ÒType?Ó

ÒIs that necessary?Ó I said.

ÒProtocol,Ó he said.

ÒDance,Ó I said.

ÒOh,Ó he said. ÒWhat kind?Ó

ÒNative,Ó I said.

ÒOh,Ó he said, handing me back my card, which I slid back into the framed plastic window of my two-toned-green, hand-stitched, fake-alligator wallet holding the wad of *pesetas* for *El Cojo*, and, written in my fatherÕs precise hand, a list of emergency numbers.

As the bus pulled away from the curb, I shed my military skin.

The studio smelled the same, a confusion of swelter and must. *El Cojo* welcomed me with *mucho gusto*, bussing my cheeks, bellowing about the increased height of my silhouette, and busying himself, as though there had been no lapse, with rekindling my choreography.

As the lessons resumed, I discerned a broader, more treacherous disparity between my persona on the dance floor and the one appropriated for military life, the latter rife with mannerisms masking the sensibilities I so liberally exposed and expressed in the former. In the locker room at school, as I changed into the required gym class uniform, names began to hover about me, derogatory, deprecating, disparaging names about boys who did not align with the strict compass of a martial masculinity, timid, cowardly, effeminate boys, never buttoned as captain of the compulsory teams, boys to be vilified and shunned, or battered behind closed doors.

I brought the attendant bruises, indignities, and disgrace to the only outlet I had, my flamenco lessons. Knowing nothing of my misfortunes outside the studio, *El Cojo* thought my dancing *cargado de emotividad*, loaded with emotion.

Ò*ÁApasionante!*Ó

Ò*ÁExcepcional!*Ó

Ò*ÁFabuloso!*Ó

After each lesson, before catching the last bus, I let city life once again engross me as I wandered the labyrinth of venerable streets tapering to narrow passages of balcony-flanked walls, iron-grilled windows and the waxy smell of pink geraniums. While I often returned to the old neighborhoods, occasionally, ignoring my fatherÕs warningsÑ*stabbed, robbed, and left for dead*ÑI ventured across the river to *Triana*, the gypsy quarter, with its isolation from the city center, its mystique, its citizens famous in flamenco and the bullring, known for its *miradores*, those glass-fronted, wrought-iron balconies above the streets where women sat as sentinels of the local life, swathed in black lace veils draped from teetering tortoise-shell combs.

Headed for, at the end of *Calle Rodrigo de Triana*, the *Iglesia de Santa Ana*, where children of the faithful dipped fingers in the baptisteryÕs fontÑthe Gypsy FontÑbelieving it would impart the gift of flamenco song, where I lit a myriad of votive candles at the foot of the most revered Virgin, patron saint of bullfighters and flamenco, *Nuestra Se–ora de La Esperanza*, Our Lady of Hope, with her diamond tears, praying forÑon my knees, hands clasped, eyes rolled back into the part of the brain I believed to be the source of all wishesÑnot only protection at school but that just like in the dream, I might be abducted by gypsies.

Talk at the dinner table turned to the escalating conflict in Vietnam, where the military had begun to muster men like my father who specialized in the mobilization of material goods to a war zone; his next assignment when

he ended this tour of duty in the spring, would be there, obliging the rest of us to return to the states. My father, after much deliberation, put in his application to retire and when it was accepted, in December, citing the holidays and my increased responsibilities as an altar boy at Church and the impending move, he again cancelled the flamenco lessons.

ÒStart packing,Ó he suggested whenever I pined for them, ÒweÕre out of here in three months.Ó

ÒBut my careerÑÓ

ÒSorry, little man, but your career is over.Ó

My shoes took yet another hiatus in the closet, while every act assumed an air of finality.

ÒHeading home,Ó my mother said, sighing, when queried about our next assignment.

But trading in a favor, my father arranged for one last trip to *Granada*, just after New YearÕs, where we would be guests of the governor.

Granada, home of the Moors, of the Sultans who ruled the province of *Andalusia* for a thousand years, of the *Alhambra*, one of the worldÕs ten wonders, a fortified castle of sumptuous palaces at the foot of a fertile agricultural plain, nestled in the steep mountains of the *Sierra Nevada* whose melting snows replenish the lush, intricate maze of pools and fountains in the gardens designed to resemble those of the Koran, of heaven on earth.

Granada, home of the gypsies, of *Lola Medina*, *el Pitlin*, *Manolo Amaya*, *la Golondrina*, *la Faraona*, *Maria la Canastera*, artists whose dwellings in the *cuevas del Sacromonte*, the caves of the Holy Mountain, named for the Martyrs of the Inquisition, had become shrines of flamenco; the dwellings carved from the rockÕs pebble mixture, claiming crude amenities, the walls adorned with copper plates and goblets, the floors covered in wood, the narrow rooms lined with caned, shawl-covered chairs for the tourists who flocked to the internationally-famed, late-night shows, and in the audience, famous politicians, Hollywood movie stars, Nobel prize winners, and royalty.

ÒMight I bring my shoes?Ó I had asked as we packed.

ÒOf course,Ó my father had said, Òwere you planning to go barefoot?Ó

ÒNo, sir, *the* shoes.Ó

ÒNo.Ó

ÒBut the gypsies in the caves,Ó I said, recalling my fatherÕs vivid description of his first time there.

ÒLook, gypsy boy, I canÕt guarantee the governor will put it on the agenda.Ó

ÒCanÕt you ask?Ó I said, thinking these favors amongst VIPÕs as easily cashed as a check at the PX.

He lighted a cigarette. ÒItÕs not the way itÕs done,Ó he said, blowing a slew of faultless smoke rings. Òln diplomacy, one does not demand; suggest, maybe, verbally strong-arm, or lightly threaten, perhaps, but not demand.Ó

ÒMight I call him?Ó

ÒThat would be another absolutely not,Ó he said, the sentence punctuated in a scud of cigarette clouds.

When we arrived at the hotel, white-gloved staff settled us into a suite with balconies overlooking the *Alhambra* and the *Albaicin*Ñthe old Arabic quarter of whitewashed houses and cobble-stoned streetsÑand beyond, like a mirage, the *Sacromonte*. The governorÕs aides had seen to a bouquet of white roses for my mother, whiskey for my father and a food basket for the children. In a thick cream envelope, a handwritten note of welcome and the typewritten list of the intended itinerary for the four-day stay but glaringly absent from the activities, the caves.

With each of the aides chaperoning us to architectural marvels, I surreptitiously broached the subject of the gypsies, some of whom, I said, I had met in the studio of my instructor, *El Cojo*.

Ò*ÁEl Cojo!* The best. But you must go to the gypsies, and yes, of course, I will make the plan with the governor,Ó each said but at night, the car headed not up the *Camino del Sacromonte*, but to the hotel and the balcony, where in the cold, I could see, like beckoning beacons, the glowing caves.

At dinner on the last night, the governor arrived in a flurry of livery and had been seated, inconveniently, between my parents so I was impotent in diverting his attention until just after dessert when he excused himself from the table and headed for the restroom.

So did I.

ÒDo not,Ó my father had warned back at the hotel, Òspeak to him unless he speaks to you, and you,Ó

he said, poking a lone, leaden finger into my sternum, ÒAre not to beg him about those frigging gypsies.Ó

When the governor exited the stall, I followed him to the sink, stood mutely at his side while he washed his hands, dried them, combed his hair, straightened his tie, and splashed cologne on his cheeks. Then, pressing my right hand into his still damp oneÑ*sin vergÜenza*, without shame, as my father would later sayÑI pumped it, thanking him, *muchisimamente, profusamente*, telling him how much I had enjoyedÑ*inmensamente, enormemente*Ñthe festivades, but wondered if anyone on his staff had mentioned my work in Sevilla.

Ò*ÁTu, hijo?*Ó You, he asked.

Ò*Sí*,Ó I said and it must have been the plaintive look on my face because he winked, snapped his fingers, called for the cars, whispering *Sacromonte* to the driver, but with a stop at the hotel for the bundle the footman would hand me through the open window of the limousine: the shoes, spirited amongst schoolbooks in the Lufthansa bag, and disclosed only to my new benefactor, the governor.

ÒWhat the hellÑÓ my father said, turning to me, glaring.

In the pocket of my sport coat, I fingered the fringe of my red silk sash.

We arrived in the fanfare generated by the governor and his police escortÑsnapping flags and barked commandsÑshortly after midnight, taking our table, already brimming with bottles, the cave buzzing with anticipation, my sleepy siblings collapsing on a line of chairs set up with folded suit coats as pillows.

The flamenco troop assembled itself on the small stage of wooden planks.

By one, the crowd was on its feet, cheering.

ÒGo, already,Ó my father said.

ÒNo,Ó I said, Ònot yet,Ó unable to adequately explain the hierarchical performance protocol, how one must wait for the proper invitation.

ÒBetter make it soon, buster, the rest of us have a date with the Sandman.Ó

At two, the walls perspiring, the candles flickering, the castanets quavering, a nod from the guitar player and I pressed into the welter of wet fabric, my heels pelting the floor, the accolade of the crowd a noisy tide as I dislodged the alchemy, the crux of chromosomes and physiology impelling me to *flamenco*; my *braceo*Ñmy arm workÑbanishing the anguish of my unnamed inclinations, the unpardonable slights, the vicious insults, the unbearable loneliness of who I had become, stabbing the collective heart of the room.

ÒA little swishy,Ó my father said when I arrived back at the table. ÒBut the governorÕs wife went wild.Ó

* * *

Recently, I came across a framed collage of photos my sister had compiled, childhood images cleaved and pasted higgledy-piggledy one on top of the other, and between one where we children frolic in an inflatable pool in the courtyard of a villa, and another where we make snowmen in a suburban American backyard, there is oneÑa rarityÑof my father and me, fifty years ago, standing, in our broad-brimmed native Cordoban hats, in front of a row of *casetas*.

He holds my hand.

As beautiful as a diamond, I think of that little gypsy boy, fresh from the frantic floorshow inside, about to be whisked to his next appearance, his father not yet aware of the differences that will engulf them in an agonizing abyss.

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Danny Long

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Obscene Chapel
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Obscene Chapel

Danny Long

ÒWhy do you spend so much time over there?Ó Mom asked over the phone as I prepared to leave for EricÕs. ÒYouÕre there every day. Tell me the truth, Danny. What can you do there that you canÕt do at our house?Ó It was a Friday morning in the early summer of 1998. I, nearly fourteen at the time, was standing in the kitchen, damp with sweat. Our house, a ranch-style in a quiet middle-class neighborhood, was apparently allergic to air-conditioning, like many houses in Fort Collins, Colorado, where the cool, dry summer evenings strengthened homeownersÕ resolve against the intense daytime sun.

ÒNothing,Ó I lied. ÒI just like it over there. We watch movies and play video games and stuff.Ó

She sighed. I imagined her shoulders drooping, as if she saw no point in following her motherly instincts and pressing me further. Or perhaps she thought that ignorance was, well, not bliss, but as close to it as she could get. ÒJust do me a favor, all right? Mow the lawn this afternoon.Ó

ÒPromise.Ó

The guilt from this admittedly mild lieÑ"Nothing"Ñis still with me, deep down in my stomach, a bezoar of regret. Lying has always done this to me, which is too bad, since IÕm pretty good at it. But I had no choice. I couldnÕt tell Mom the truth. Ours was a lovely home, a wonderful place to grow up, although a bit like a Chuck E. CheeseÕs after my stepdad, Ty, and his three kids moved in, turning a family of threeÑmy mom, my sister, and meÑinto a family of seven. Yet in the way of mischief it offered little. Not like EricÕs. His house, the house of the Kings, where he lived with his father, Art (King, Arthur), was that magical place where teenage boys could give the scenarios cooked up in their imaginations, no matter how reckless, a pulse.

The contrast between the two households was stark. At my house, Mom confiscated the only throwing knife I ever owned, a Black Widow a friend gave me for my eleventh birthday. At EricÕs, we flung freshly sharpened blades at a wooden plank wedged between two windows in his basement bedroom. Eric once sent a knife clean through one of those windows, which went unrepaired for months, unless you count the duct tape and Saran Wrap. At my house, Mom and Ty forbade BB guns, after a BB I had shot ricocheted off the concrete slab in our backyard and chipped the neighborsÕ bedroom window. At EricÕs, we fired BB after BB at strips of plastic foam, glass jars, tin cans, and, eventually, each other. The way I saw it, I belonged at EricÕs house because caution didnÕt. We never planned things out in advance, never reasoned through our decisions, never considered the consequences of our actions. If we had an idea, we pursued itÑsimple as that.

We even had the freedom to invent, our most memorable invention being a cannon we cobbled together by soldering the ignition apparatus of a toy rocket launcher to a PVC pipe the length and width of a cigar. WeÕd stuff the pipe like a musket, with gunpowder (which Eric had made by grinding down model-rocket engines) and a marble, point it at cantaloupes, watermelons, milk jugsÑbasically anything full of liquid and vulnerable to high-velocity balls of glassÑand press the red button, which in this case was yellow. This would release a surge of sparks into the gunpowder, triggering a blast that would send the marble flying. As with the throwing knives, our aim was only theoretical, and EricÕs backyard plant life suffered as a result. Trees were permanently scarred, bushes torn asunder, flowers blown apart, bursting like fireworks, showering the grass in pinks and reds and purples. Our clever engineering transformed the KingsÕ backyard, a lush Eden when Eric and Art moved in, into *that* yard, the one neighbors look at and say, ÒWhat the hell goes on over there?Ó

Our friend Pat, a gangly kid with blond hair who, like me, spent most of his early teens at EricÕs, once

crammed so much powder into the pipe that the marbleÑreaching a speed theretofore unknown to marble-kindÑ snapped a wooden slat in a fence clean in half. The explosion echoed for what seemed like minutes, swallowing all other neighborhood soundsÑbirds, cars, bicycles, opening and closing garage doors, giggling children. All was quiet but the rippling reverberations and the ringing in our ears. The whole city must have heard our cannon go off, we thought, and this thought scared us so much that we hid the smoldering object in the crawl space, locked the front and back doors, drew the curtains, ignored the potent scent of gunpowder lingering on our clothes, and sat motionless for an hour, glancing at each other every few seconds with large, wet eyes.

Looking back on these exploits, IÕm astonished, and more than a little embarrassed, to notice how many of them involved some crude form of weaponry. IÕm astonished because we werenÕt violent kids. Quite the opposite, in fact. Nor were we troublemakers. Nor were we keen on looking or feeling strong or powerful or clever. We simply loved to bring our ideas to lifeÑto imagine a cannon and then actually create it and hold it in our hands, even use it. The creative process and its challenges inspired us. So we concocted scheme after scheme to test our limits, to see how far we could go until our dreams pushed back. Sometimes these schemes were disappointing, like the time we dismantled and reassembled ArtÕs bike and found that, once weÕd finished, we had a handful of forgotten nuts and bolts. ÒWhere does that one go?Ó ÒYou mean you donÕt know?Ó Other times they were successful to the point of hyperbole, something to which the broken slat would have borne testimony, had the rogue marble only maimed it instead of finishing it off entirely.

The slat belonged to a fence that separated the KingsÕ backyard from the backyard of a family IÕll call the Spotlesses, a family who shared little to nothing with Eric and his father. Indeed, one of the most bewildering details of the period immediately following the cannonÕs roar was the silence of the Spotlesses, who, with the exception of one member, generally preferred a solid over a dotted line between them and the neÕer-do-wells next door. Any passerby could glean as much from a quick curbside glance. Eric and Art lived in a dark-gray split-level home topped with black shingles. It had three large, yawning windows on its facade, two upstairs and one down, their blinds nearly always three-quarters of the way closed, like sleepy eyelids. Wild juniper bushes full of spiders and bees and probably garter snakes framed the narrow, crack-veined driveway, their unbridled limbs reaching out and obstructing the jagged, undulating concrete path to the front door, clutching at comers and goers. The Spotlesses, on the other hand, lived in a white bungalow with green trim and shutters, its front lawn and bushes neatly manicured, its driveway smooth and unblemished. Even the family members themselves were nuclear almost to the point of fakery, if not nausea: a mom and dad I never met; a daughter, Lauren, who was in my grade; and a little boy named Spencer.

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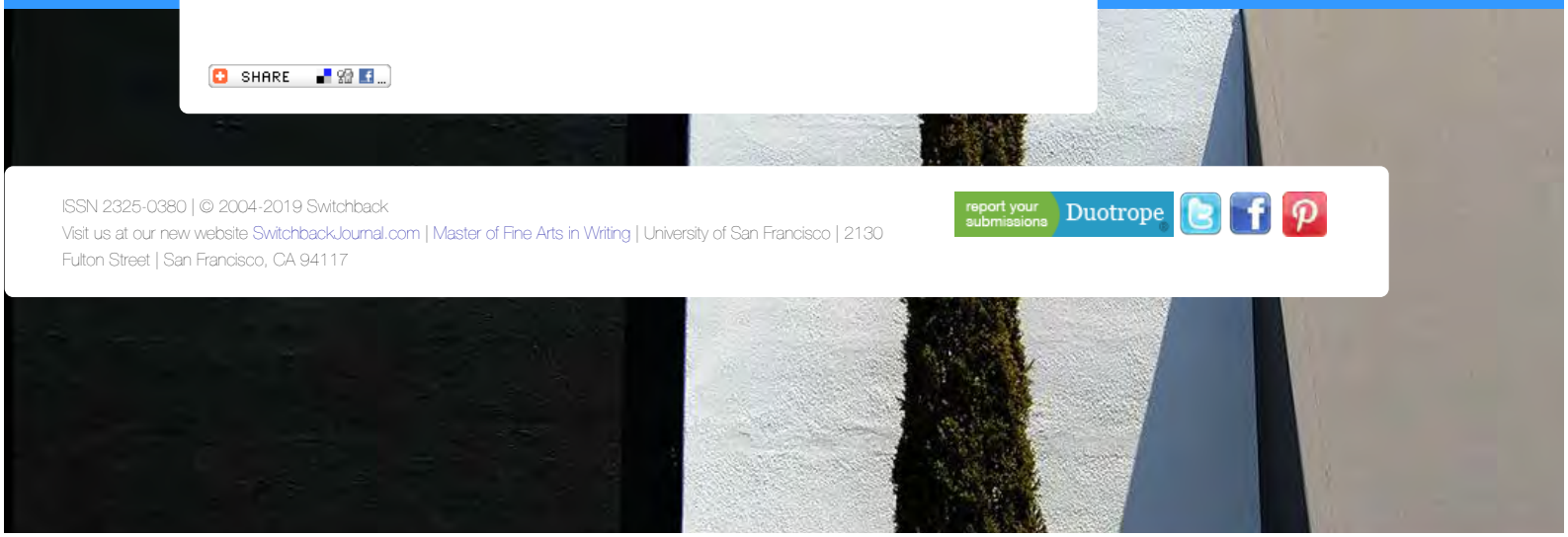

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Obscene Chapel

Danny Long

Spencer was about eight years old, short for his age, with brown eyes and what I think was blond hair, though I canÕt be sure, because he never took off his bike helmet, a bulbous white affair that created an especially odd effect at the end of his Popsicle-stick neck. Inextricable, Spencer and his bike helmet. Nearly every day, regardless of the weather, Spencer would climb into his helmet and pedal his bike up and down the street, up and down, up and down, as if heÕd blown a fuse and gotten stuck on repeat. And when he wore himself out and saw Eric, Pat, and me outside, he would stop by to nose about.

He did so that Friday in early summer.

The three of us were in the garage, working on a fort we had assembled by laying large sheets of plywood across the exposed ceiling joists, and pillows and blue nylon sleeping bags across the plywood. It was like a tree house, our fort, with the risk of asphyxiation.

Spencer rolled into the garage on his miniature bicycle. ÒWhat are you doing?Ó he asked. Perhaps it was the balloonishness of his helmet, but Spencer always sounded to me as though he were romantically involved with a helium tank, thus adding a touch of pleasant irony to his usual manner of italicized disapproval. Three feet tall with a two-foot voice and a seven-foot sense of moral and intellectual superiority: that was Spencer.

We peered over the edge of the plywood. His head was tilted upward, as if he was trying to see what we were doing, but his eyes were hidden behind the lip of his helmet. ÒWeÕre working on our fort,Ó Eric told him, grabbing a stack of loose papers and hiding it under one of the sleeping bags. ÒDonÕt come up here, Spence. DonÕt even look up here.Ó

ÒWhy? What do you have up there?Ó

ÒJust...decorations.Ó

ÒWhat kind of decorations?Ó

ÒDecorations, Spence. DonÕt worry about it.Ó

ÒIÕm not worrying about it. Why would I worry about it? I just want to know.Ó

ÒBut you donÕt need to know,Ó said Eric.

ÒThatÕs why I said I *want* to know. Wants and needs are different, Eric. HasnÕt your father taught you anything?Ó

ÒI know theyÕre...You know what? I donÕt want you to know. HowÕs that?Ó

ÒYouÕre hiding something. What is it?Ó

This was too much for Pat. ÒGoddammit!Ó he yelled, bypassing courtesy and getting straight to the nub, one of his talents. ÒGet the hell outta here!Ó

Spencer shook his head and, still straddling his bike, walked backward out of the garage. Òldiots.Ó

ÒI swear,Ó said Pat when Spencer was out of earshot, Òone day IÕm going to strangle that little bastard, and when I do, IÕm going to rip off his helmet and see what heÕs hiding underneath.Ó

ÒWell, just keep your eyes open for now,Ó I said. ÒHe always comes back.Ó

In a way, Eric had told Spencer the truth. We were decorating. But not G-ratedly. I donÕt remember which of our brains churned up the idea. The night before, we were lying on the sleeping bags in our fort, chatting and joking, inhaling the greasy vapors emanating from ArtÕs light-blue Cadillac, when it dawned on us that, wonderful as it was, our fort lacked character. It needed something. Artwork. It needed artwork. ÒAnd nothing says artwork,Ó

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we must have thought, Òlike a collage of naked women.Ó

Now, most fourteen- and fifteen-year-old boys at the timeÑand still, for that matterÑwould have dismissed this idea as mere fantasy the second it passed their lips. First off, the Internet then wasnÕt quite what it is today: one couldn't access encyclopedias of pornography with the swipe of a thumb. Second, even if they could have acquired the pictures, and managed to keep them secret, their parents would never have allowed them to stick said pictures to the ceiling of their garage.

But we were not most fourteen- and fifteen-year-old boys. Or at least Eric wasnÕt, thanks to his parents. Rather than forbidding such things as garage-based tributes to the female form, they facilitated them. If it isnÕt clear already, Art, a well-meaning, well-educated man with a monotone voice, thick glasses, and nipple rings, was the exemplary anti-disciplinarian: unless one of us was seriously injuredÑand why this wasnÕt more often, I cannot fathomÑhe rarely glanced up from the Fort Collins *Coloradoan* to investigate our high jinks. Whether he knew what was going on and didnÕt care or cared so much he didnÕt want to know is a question IÕll leave for the serious historian. In either case, ÒKing, ArtÓ posed no threat to our ÒProject, Art.Ó On the flip side, EricÕs mother, Mary, who lived with her new husband, Larry, in Chicago, was EricÕs supplier. When Eric turned thirteen, she decided it was time he learned about sex, so she got into the habit of buying him several dirty magazines whenever he visited her in the Windy City. Many of my friendsÕ bookshelves were stacked with classicsÑ*CharlotteÕs Web*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Wizard of Oz*. Those were the books we were supposed to own, the ones we were supposed to read. By contrast, EricÕs shelvesÑread Òdresser drawersÓÑwere stacked with forbidden fruits: *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Hustler*, and a few VHS tapes Eric had made himself by recording CinemaxÕs late-night lineupÑsome of them also classics, I suppose, though of a different strain. In any case, from a very early age, Eric, Pat, and I could read and watch all the illicit material we wanted, without fear of punishment. It was an odd suspension of reality. I mean, this wasnÕt right. It made no sense. It was evil, wasnÕt it? It had to be, yes. Why else would I tell Mom I went to EricÕs to "play video games and stuff"?

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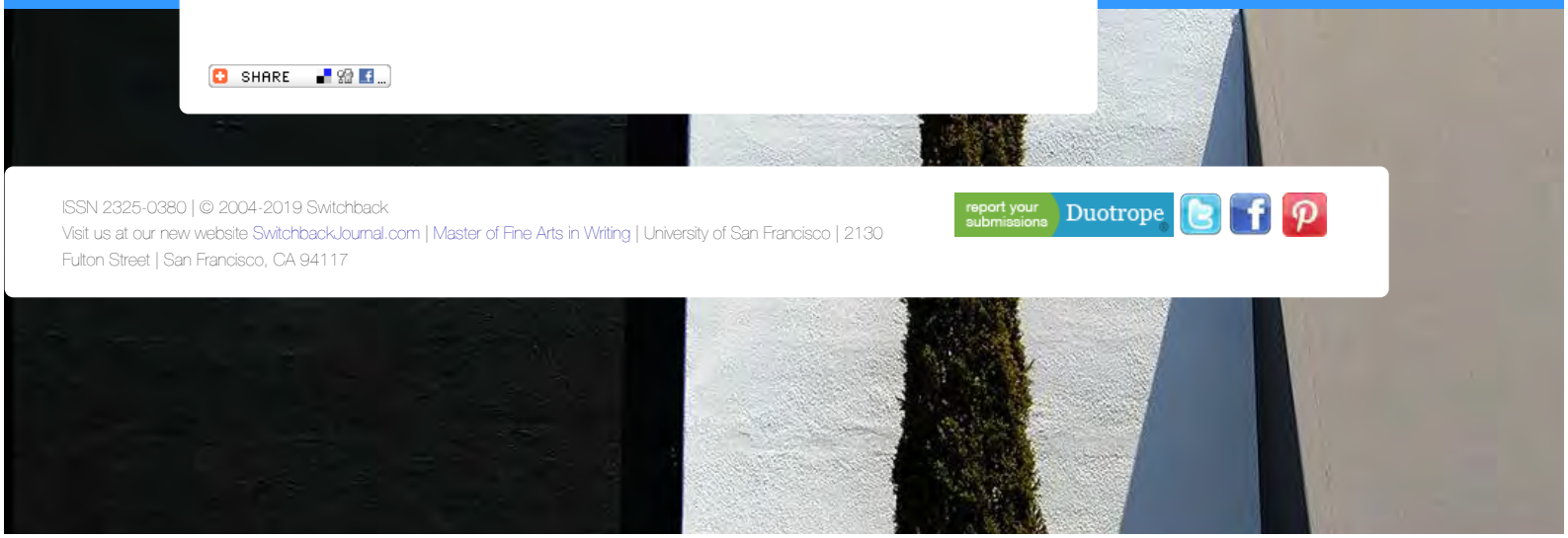

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Obscene Chapel

Danny Long

For several hours before Spencer wheeled into the garage, Eric, Pat, and I had been sitting on EricÕs bedroom floor rifling through his stash, ripping picture after picture out of the magazines, and setting each one onto a tidy pile between us. We must have torn out a hundred of them, and it was these one hundred pictures that Eric had shoved under the sleeping bag to keep from SpencerÕs view. When Spencer had left, then, Eric retrieved the stack and placed it, next to the cordless phone and Scotch tape, on the garage door, which was open and, as such, a convenient catchall. ÒBack to work,Ó Eric said, always the leader.

We taped for an hour, cramming as many pictures as we could between the rafters, sweating as we went, the nylon sleeping bags sticking to our legs, the floating dust gathering on our arms and faces, clogging our nostrils. It was dirty work.

In that hour we completed half the ceiling and so decided to take a break to enjoy the fruits of our labor, which Pat had shrewdly likened to the Sistine Chapel. Climbing down the ladder and looking up, we expected to feel proud, creative, resourceful, to marvel at our genius, maybe shed a few tears. ÒLook at what weÕve done! Look at what weÕve given the world!Ó But we didnÕt feel any of these things, and we were too overwhelmed to produce any tears, of either joy or pain. There was nothing exciting about the collage, nothing attractive, nothing thrilling. We didnÕt chuckle in satisfied amusement or high-five each other on a job well done. We simply gaped in silence at a mess of body parts, all more or less the same fake-tan orange. Our magnum opus was grotesque, a token of arrant shame, a terrifying failure. Somehow, in the short time it took us to climb down the rickety steel latter, the Sistine Chapel had become the Gate of Hell.

The phone rang, scaring us out of our disappointed stupor. Eric answered and handed it to me. ÒDanny,Ó my mother said through the receiver, speaking slowly, overenunciating every word, as mothers will when wronged: ÒGet. Your. Butt. Home.Ó

ÒDammit!Ó I said, after I hung up. ÒI forgot to mow the lawn!Ó My tone of voice belied my eagerness to leave. The collage unnerved me. I welcomed the chance to separate myself from it for a while. And yet, I also forced a desire to complete it, not because I wanted to see it finishedÑhow couldn't it get worse?Ñbut because I hated to see it unfinished. ÒIÕll be back later,Ó I told Eric, Òwith more tape.Ó Pat, also deflated, decided to leave too. We hopped on our bikes and rode off.

A few hours later, lawn mowed, I rounded onto EricÕs street, one hand steering my bike, the other holding two or three fresh rolls of the sticky stuff. The sun had begun to set, the edge of heat to dull. Shadows overlay the houses to my left, while to my right the pre-twilight color of burnt orange flickered through cottonwood and birch leaves and beamed off rooftops. EricÕs house was nearer the far end of the street, on the left. As I closed in on it, SpencerÕs white helmet emerged from behind the bushes, tilted downward. He was looking at something. EricÕs garage door was closed.

After Pat and I had left, Eric chose not to continue taping on his own and went inside to enjoy a cup of green tea and lose himself in the soundtrack of *The Phantom of the Opera*, responsibly shutting the garage door behind him but irresponsibly forgetting to remove the stack of pictures from on top of it. The result was staggering. It looked as though an adults-only newsstand had exploded above EricÕs house. Dozens of airbrushed blondes, brunettes, and redheads lay strewn across the driveway. Several were tangled up in the bushes, and several more, having been picked up by the wind, had relocated to the street, where they danced for passing cars and families

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out for a stroll.

It was this mess of pictures that had caught SpencerÕs attention, and caught it so thoroughly that he didnÕt seem to notice my arrival. He fixed his gaze to the pandemonium before him, his eyes popping out of his eight-year-old face, now a little less angelic. Speechless, I tiptoed past him, still clinging to the hope that he hadnÕt noticed anything. I then punched in the code to the garage door, which opened with the speed of an arthritic geriatric.

ArtÕs Cadillac was gone. He hadnÕt yet returned home from work. Inside, Eric was half asleep in his favorite big blue recliner, his two gray bichon frises, Bluebell and Violet, curled up on his lap, sleeping, the music of *The Phantom* haunting its way through the house.

ÒEric…the pictures…fucking everywhere!Ó

Eric knitted his brow. Then, ÒOh, shit!Ó He levitated from the recliner, dumping Bluebell and Violet onto the carpet, and in a second was outside with Spencer, frantically gathering the pictures into a loose pile against his chest. I watched it all from the living room window. I realize now I should have helped.

SpencerÕs lips moved, but I couldnÕt make out the words. When Eric came back inside, panting, the pictures swaying in his arms, I asked him, ÒWhat did Spencer say?Ó

ÒHe asked if IÕm some kind of pervert.Ó

ÒAnd what did you say?Ó

"Yes.Ó

This was not an answer. It was, to be sure, a confession. SpencerÕs discovery of the unmoored nudies did something that no one or nothing had ever done before: it laid bare, before our very own eyes, our guilt; it peeled away our outwardly young, virtuous flesh to reveal the lechery within. We had found our limits, found the indistinct line we dared not cross. Somehow we understood that finishing the collage meant passing into some new, some lewd country, a country that still frightened us. We were not ready, not yet, not ever. No, despite all the work we had put into it, all the hours, all the tape, all the tearing, the collage had to go.

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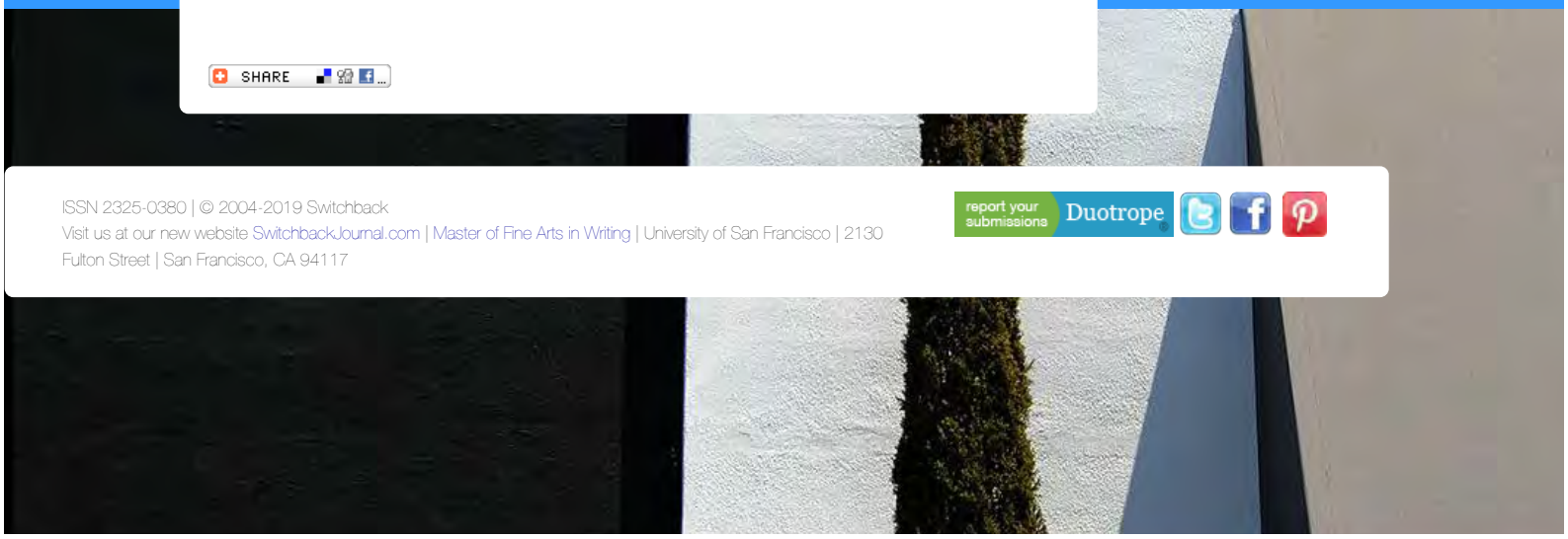

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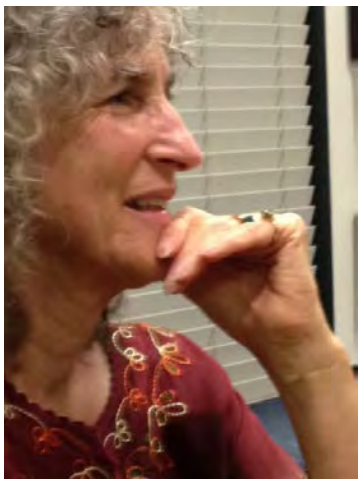
Lily Iona MacKenzie



Lily Iona MacKenzie teaches writing at the University of San Francisco. Her essays, poetry, book reviews, interviews, and short fiction have found a home in numerous publications. *All This*, a poetry collection, was published in October 2011. A recent issue of *Notes Magazine* featured her as the spotlight author, showcasing her poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. All of the arts inspire her, and she dabbles in painting and assemblage when she isnÕt writing. *Fling*, one of her novels, will be published in 2015. You can read more about her on her blog.

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Bikini Blues
Nonfiction

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Bikini Blues

Lily Iona MacKenzie

At fifty I took the vow. Not of celibacy. Not for the nunnery. I vowed I would never wear a bikini again. An ardent bikini wearer for thirty-five years, I didnÕt find the habit easy to break. I had worshipped the sun and its intimacy with my belly. I loved naval-gazing, my stomach the same shade of light copper as my arms. Now itÕs as pale as the moon. Of course, the sun is something else IÕve given up, except in small doses. Melanoma and the fear of resembling a lizard have tempered my exposure to it.

Fourteen years later, IÕm rethinking my earlier pledge, triggered by a trip to Turkey with my husband, Michael. How can I let my younger self speak for me now? Why did I assume I should hide my body once I hit that magic age of fifty? How do I differ from Muslim women who cover up, though they do it, supposedly, for religious reasons? IsnÕt there something faintly devotional about my choice? Doesn't it imply there must be something inherently immoral about wearing a bikini after a certain age?

In Turkey, I expected my modest, black one-piece suitÑproper for a matroniÑwould be totally appropriate. I even worried it might expose too much. But as we cruised down the Aegean, and later the Mediterranean coasts, I reconsidered. At every beach and swimming pool, bikini-clad gals older than IÑand carrying a lot more weight on their framesÑstrutted past, broadcasting their aged bodies, some even topless. Of course, most werenÕt Turkish. Europeans flock to the Turkish coast (French, Spanish, Italian, German, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian), as do the British. And they donÕt have the hang-ups many Americans have about their bodies. They werenÕt concerned about having the perfect mannequin shape. Nor did it bother them to be overweight or physically unattractive in other ways.

I couldnÕt say the same for myself. Occasionally, we lounged on beach chairs, under big umbrellas, either poolside or seaside, when we werenÕt haunting archeological digs. But I was distracted by the parade of flesh, male and female, most wearingÑyes, you guessed it. And the skimpiest ones at that. The menÕs big (and I mean BIG) stomachÕs bulged over itty-bitty scraps of cloth: virulent red; potent green; glowing yellow. Then there were the buxom types, big-hipped mamas, and generally overweight women all flaunting the fact.

I watched this human parade reveal its sagging flesh, gravity not a particularly uplifting friend. Yet the bathers seemed so easy with their appearance, apparently unconcerned about what others might think of them, while IÑin my one-pieceÑcowered inwardly. I hated for anyone to see the ugly six-inch scar on my right thigh that makes a dent, the result of a compound fracture to my femur when I was a girl. Or to witness my floundering tissues. Yet all around me were the scourges of aging in full view: sagging breasts, slack stomach muscles, drooping haunches. And not an ounce of shame or timidity over displaying themselves in this way.

From behind my wrap-around sunglasses, I watched, smug in my black you-know-what. Michael would frequently nudge me: ÒYouÕve got a better body than she doesIÓ Instead of reassuring me or making me feel better, his comments highlighted my cowardice and made me feel out of place. I wanted to bury myself in the sand, or at least under a huge beach towel. But Michael urged me to renounce my pledge and live a little. He thought I was nuts not to go for it.

Rationalization works well when weÕre faced with the awful truth. It sure worked for me. I said, Lily, youÕre not interested in sunbathing or showing off your body any more. After all, thatÕs the main reason to wear a bikini. Face it: you gave up those telltale white patterns on your skin long agoÑthe bathing suit marks. YouÕre too mature now to let it all hang out.

So what is this thing called maturity? Does it mean relinquishing the things of youth? Or is it more connected to dignity? Just how dignified did I want to be? And why is a covered body more dignified than a naked one? ÒNaked came I into this world and naked I shall leave.Ó I donÕt know who said this originallyÑmaybe JobÑ but it was a favorite line of RodinÕs. In his sculptures, he explored the naked flesh in all its variations from taut and young, to old and frail. I wouldnÕt call his creations undignified. IsnÕt dignity our attitude towards something, rather than a particular way of dressing or being in the world?

This shame some of us feel about our bodiesÑAmerican women especiallyÑmust have a source. And while IÕm sure there are many causes, I blame ironing for some of our ideas about wrinkles. The thought that a garment is more attractive if it has no folds or creases has more weight than we might realize. I was aware of that notion on our trip when I frantically sought out irons at various stops, hoping to eliminate the evidence of our travels from the clothes we were wearing. ItÕs an old hang up. I remember learning how to iron on the farm in Langdon, Alberta, when we had to heat irons on the wood-burning stove. The habit burns deep, and IÕm sure it carries over to the flesh.

But I also blame our isolation from Europe and the prudishness that still informs America. Our neighbors influence us, and Europeans have been rubbing shoulders with each other for a long time. Their more accepting and mature approaches to the body and aging is infectious. They donÕt worship youth as we do in America. So whose mores do we embrace? Not those of Scandinavia. Not ItalyÕs. Not RussiaÕs.

Or maybe this fear of others seeing me in the rawÑespecially as I enter my golden yearsÑis just my problem. I donÕt think so. Though I no longer spend much time on California beaches or at swimming pools, when I do take the plunge, I donÕt see many older women in bikinis. I tell myself that one-piece suits are less distracting and easier to swim in, but, again, for me thatÕs a rationalization. And while I may not have many opportunities here to flaunt myself in a two-piece suitÑI really only swim or sun when IÕm vacationingÑitÕs the psychological element that bothers me. IÕm no longer concerned about being a sun goddess. But I am troubled by the outdated perceptions women have of themselves and how they should look at whatever age.

IÕd like to say I discarded my one-piece suit for good in Turkey, but, okay, I admit it: I refused to buy a new swimsuit while I was there. Determined not to give in to whatever pressures I was feeling from Michael and the beach culture, I continued with my one-woman crusade and my one-piecer; it was okay to be different. I didnÕt have to show all.

Lest you think that Michael is a bully, heÕs not. He likes my body and hates to see me disparage it. He wants me to feel free to wear whatever I want, but not out of fear or from my own inner pressures to follow some Òrule.Ó

But I have to admit, I did have some rules for aging:

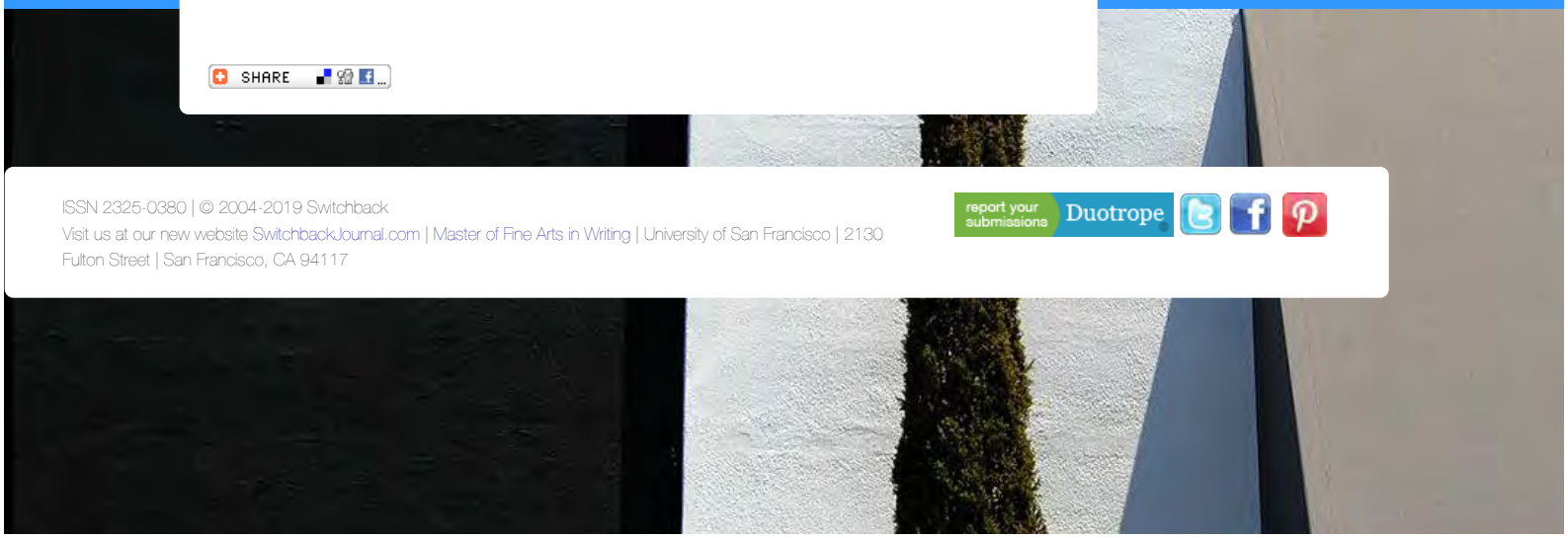
* DonÕt stand out
* Cover any wrinkles with clothing (unwrinkled) or makeup
* Go out gracefully
* Be modest
* Seek the dimmest lights possible
* Eliminate eliminate eliminate (especially bikinis)
* Remember the adage that old people should be heard, not seen

My revised rules of aging:

* Make a lot of noise
* Call attention to yourself
* Unveil
* Advertise the beauty (and ugliness) of old age
* ÒDo not go gently into that good nightÓ (not original, Dylan Thomas said it better)
* Wear whatever makes you feel good

* Break all the rules, including these!

So instead of singing the bikini blues, I'll buy a bikini and, if nothing else, hang it on a wall in our bedroom, under my dreamcatcher, so I can see it each day. Not black, thatÕs for sure. Perhaps something more fluorescent. Or floral. Whatever I choose, it will stand as a reminder of the many ways I oftentimes oppress myself and disparage my own aging body. I hope that the suit will make a different statement: be bold, and donÕt worry about regressing. And if you do regress, enjoy the voyage along the way.



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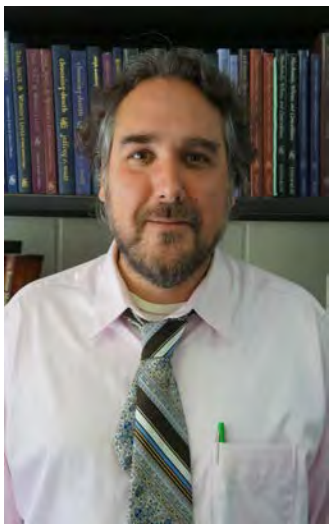
James D'Agostino



James D'Agostino is the author of *Nude With Anything* (New Issues Press) and *Slur Oeuvre* (Diagram/New Michigan).

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Necrostellar Holdings and Loan
Poetry

Torchable Moment
Poetry

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Necrostellar Holdings and Loan

James D'Agostino

In the grand scream of things
it must take a lot of instability
for the sky to make that face.
Me, I got nothing to say, just
lots of explaining to do. Up
and up, I fucked. I'd fall
for anything, but I'm already
down. I've forgotten how
to see any of this. Took down
a couple of clouds and called
it a day, a nursery of eternity.
In five billion years the sun
will swallow us all, but wait
until you see where it spits us
out. Here in our pale green
early, yellow really late,
another in trouble but love it
bubble bursts. Pear trees sop
the lot light, a foam of bloom,
flower, froth brought forth.
Right about now's when
forsythia means foresight
but hadn't even hinted it'd
been one big blonde all along.
Say I maybe name me some
more sorbets staring at a sunset.
Not just which shit looks how,
but how it makes you feel,
therefore, look more, or out
at something else. The ants
are coming. Turn off the TV.
No. First watch with me
Peruvian Mint Green Opal.
Milky cloud break shadow
sharpens. Nighttime windows
ice with buyable light and yeah
as a child I hid and sought.
If I told you I used to hear
frontier as from tear and still
wanted to go, would you
believe me or take me or both,
whatever, we've just really got
to leave. Now. I might not
catch much, but I've always
been good at misunderstanding.
For years I thought it was Fred
of Stair. There might be a clarity
scarcity but what's worse what
little sense gets made gets busted
up often all of a sudden and just
as it rolls off the line. It's still
spring. The leaves begin trees.
Dirt and sky, David Bowie's
eyes. We're all dead star.
A dying gaseous cluster makes
such May of this moment.
A mothy month there's so much in

I can't even can't. The clouds do
a thing. The sudden jelly
of a monarch on the windshield.
How some songs seem a skin.
You crash two darknesses together
you know you get light, right?

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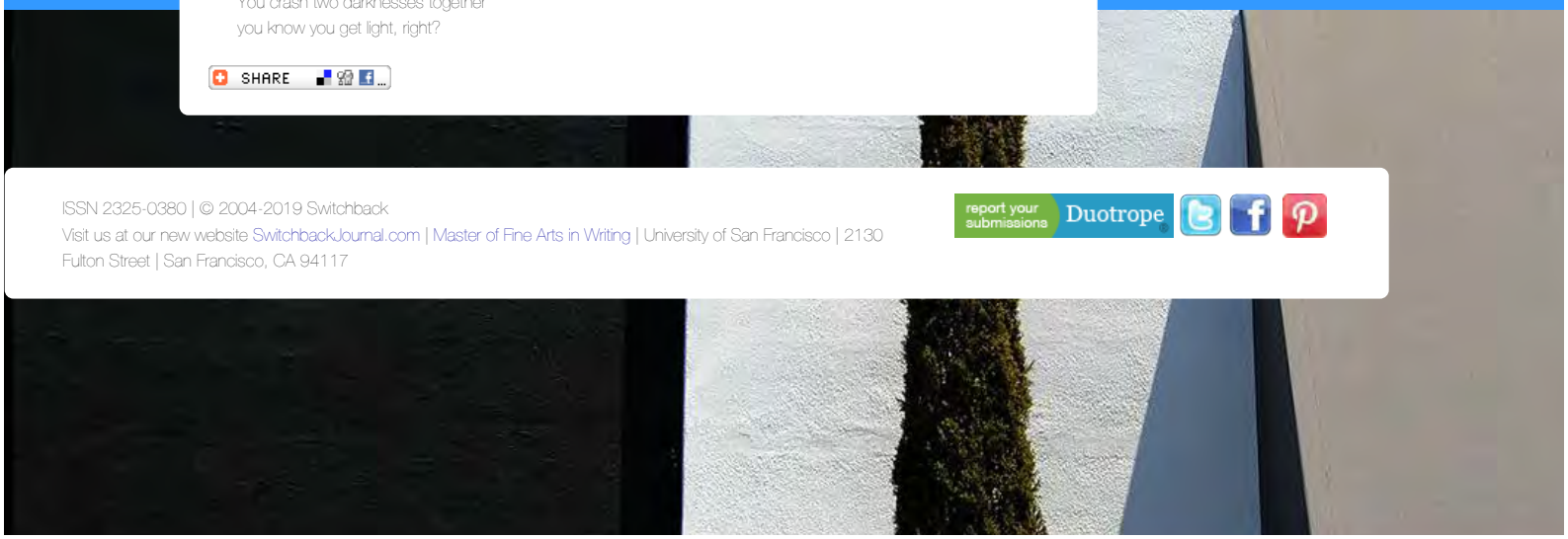

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report your submissions Duotrope

Torchable Moment

James D'Agostino

YouÕve got to loose a bunch
of black ants to eat the sweet
adhesive keeps the bloom balled

up in its bud. YouÕve got to
eat through the body in your head
is one difference between me

and Jack Gilbert, whoÕd end line
five in bed instead, whoÕs dead
and thatÕs for now another.

We gotta get out of the amygdala
more and hopefully up into
the hippocampus. A lot of itÕs

just where to lay down light
and a lot where not to. A lot
of birds into dense wet leaves

sound out shook out laundry
snap, a lot of trees italicized
by wind. A lotÕs not on the test

letÕs try not to take. Learn Lear
ears, weÕve got the year. I mean
weÕve got to get more out of

the amygdala, which means
almond tonsil, and not just
its limbic climb up fear

toward pleasure. Which?
Watch me lecture on really late
summer light or just shut up

and shadow? Choices in the multiple
choice test are called distractors.
Trees rerelease this remnant

rain. The brain doesnÕt even
have a brain. We donÕt care
how you write it. How does

it read? What should we name
our disease? Wind in the trees
or trees in the wind? Quick

which? There are only two
ways to make poems easier
and harder.

Andrew Kindiger

Andrew is an MFA candidate at the University of New Orleans concentrating in poetry. He is nearing the end of a brief stint in the field of technical writing after previously completing a degree in English at Truman State University. He has also published in *The Chariton Review* and is currently working on a book-length manuscript.

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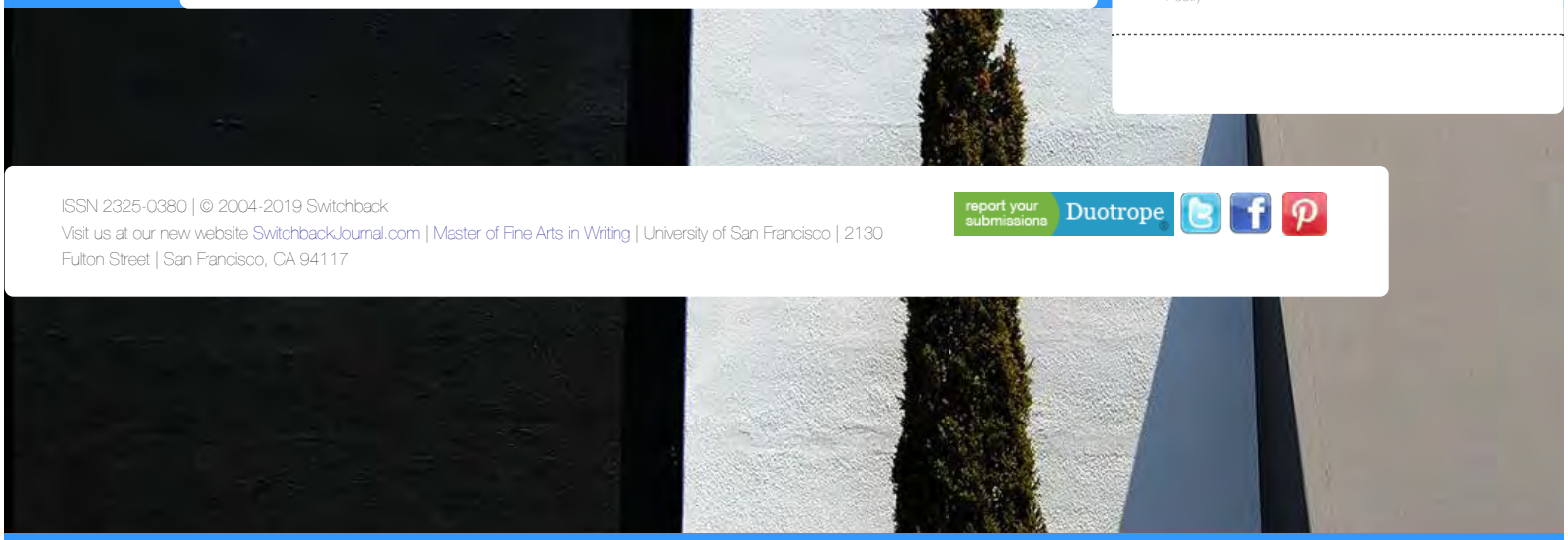
The Splendid Hotel
Poetry



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The Splendid Hotel

Andrew Kindiger

Another afternoon caked in
Light and Dreaming

Of apricot dresses pressed on apricot skies
Caring less about how mad
We seem

Finding comfort in ordinary genius
Pretending we live in an old French film
Flickering on a black and white reel

Capturing loss in an aperture
Adjusted for regal landscapes, cast in
A Still, Napoleonic purity

Outside hotels: Slinging bottles Spanish style, alone
Except for stars hovering over the turquoise lake
Draped with mountains

Tutors gather,
Before retreating to their attic window apartments
Professing that the world is made of energy, as well as

Pockets of dark, zero forces,
Obliterating the duality between all and nothing
A surging presence of chaotic emptiness
Existing amongst all else

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Jon Riccio

Jon Riccio studied viola performance at Oberlin College and the Cleveland Institute of Music. An MFA candidate at the University of Arizona, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *CutBank's All Accounts and Mixture*, *Four Chambers*, *Paper Nautilus*, *Waxwing*, *Plenitude*, *Bird's Thumb*, *Blast Furnace*, *Your Impossible Voice* and elsewhere. He coordinates the Tucson-based WIP Reading Series.

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The Id Raft
Poetry

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The Id Raft

Jon Riccio

Carving my name by way of wax
fruit, the stems closer to gray
now that I go by Neel.

Calligraphy, not identity.
The charade of flourish given
a replacement set of rules,

smudges in my voice
finagling a moneygram
or Fourth Avenue tea.

In the drill of becoming
you furl the bow,

stave the glyph.

Neel, roll your wrist
till it etches the brew-potÕs scald,

for lack of an id
thereÕd be no raft
but the fruition of conceit,

the defect in your name
like graphite on mute.

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Christina Rothenbeck

Christina Rothenbeck is a PhD candidate in poetry at The University of Southern MississippiÕs Center for Writers in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Bone Bouquet*, *Sugar House Review*, and *Reunion: The Dallas Review*. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Girls in Art* (2012) and *Erasing Innocence* (forthcoming 2014), both from dancing girl press.

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Solitary
Poetry

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Solitary

Christina Rothenbeck

I know the volume of a teaspoon in the mouth,
scrape of sugar against the tongue. It sinks
into the body as if it were made from it, as if it could
transubstantiate: flesh made sticky as syrup, crystals
dusting the skin like sand, tangling eyelashes.
The body a grainy column, melting in the rain.
I roll through the apple of my lit apartment
like a seed, all bitterness and potential, a little bit
of poison at the core. Days pass in spoonfuls
denied, in the bedÕs single dent. All through
the long winter, the body hoards its sweetness,
stops sap at the root, immures itself in cloisters
of wax and abnegation, walls dripping with honey.

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Switchback

Annie Rovzar

Annie Rovzar lives in Berkeley, CA. She is a WritersCorps Teaching Artist in Residence. She also teaches poetry at San Quentin Prison.

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gather. I remember
Poetry

leaves
Poetry

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gather. I remember

Annie Rovzar

gather. I remember

against the bare paper.

sometimes to see herÑ

reader, what I had said

to myself before falling

asleep: because the known

and the unknown touch,

we live in the narrows

of time and difference

which converge in

a center of light,

visions of others

beneath our skin.

we wake

at the threshold

of meaning

which dissolves

our incredible need of it.

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leaves

Annie Rovzar

leaves,

and turns into an opening
of broken glass. the stone

there, in silver light. a chair,
beginning with the color

blue. a room occurs
in the question, ÔwhoÕs outside?Õ

he brings you a glass of water

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Andrew Ruzkowski

Andrew Ruzkowski lives and writes in Chicago. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Columbia Poetry Review*, *The Bakery*, *[PANK]*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *The Seattle Review*, *Willows Wept Review*, *The Camel Saloon*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics*, and *Parable Press*, among others. He has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes, a Best of the Net award, and was a finalist for the 2012 Atlantis Award and the 2012 Kay Murphy Prize for Poetry. His chapbook, *A Shape & Sound*, is available from ELJ Publications. His first full-length collection, *Things that Keep Us from Drifting*, is forthcoming from Another New Calligraphy. He also serves as the reviews editor for PoetsÕ Quarterly and as an assistant editor for Black Tongue Review.

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Away and Gone
Poetry

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Away and Gone

Andrew Ruzkowski

I want to square the ridgeline

What jagged blue exists in the south

Much like the white pines
their soft wood and pollen

Birds I do not know call
ghosts and meridians

A wonder of smoke

Will travel for
Will become or will do nothing at all

It is quite perfect to be away from home

What different lines gather
and of course desire drives

A host of sounds
What ever makes them

I wonder as fluids turn monsters

An unmaking occurs each time
I look for some particular thing

Red seedling

Yellow flower

Watching the dawn is not hard

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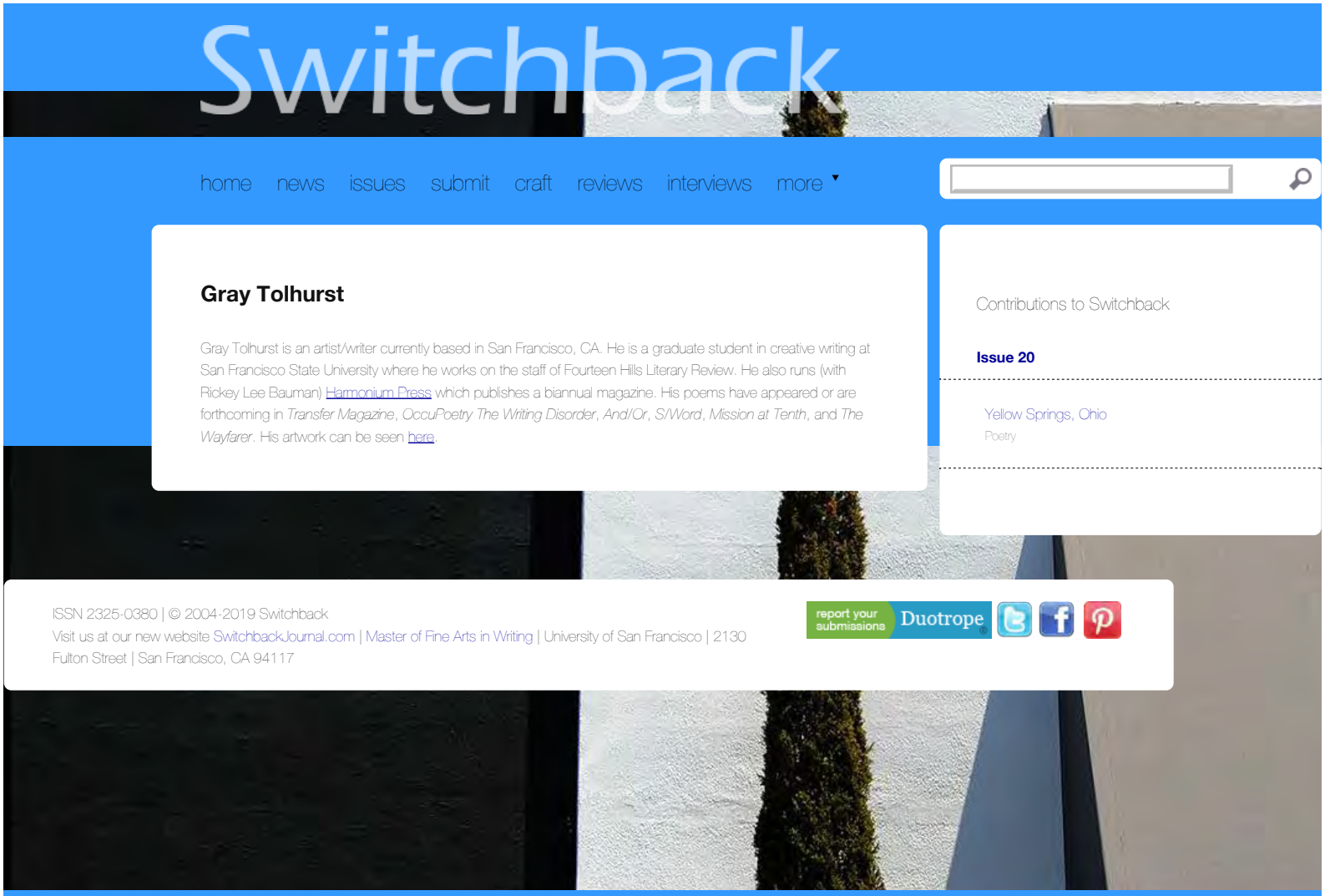

Gray Tolhurst

Gray Tolhurst is an artist/writer currently based in San Francisco, CA. He is a graduate student in creative writing at San Francisco State University where he works on the staff of Fourteen Hills Literary Review. He also runs (with Rickey Lee Bauman) Harmonium Press which publishes a biannual magazine. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Transfer Magazine*, *OccuPoetry The Writing Disorder*, *And/Or*, *S/Word*, *Mission at Tenth*, and *The Wayfarer*. His artwork can be seen here.

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Yellow Springs, Ohio
Poetry

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Yellow Springs, Ohio

Gray Tolhurst

language is the
structure

no no this is the structure
the feeling of it
(deep, deep)

not to discount
fear

of the curtains closed
the red eyes of morning

a symbol of what you want
to be sad, you want to be sad
she said

white, white
you get what you want
what you ask for

with the language of your hands and eyes

pushing myself in from behind
clothed, pulsing

star between my ribs
her uneven ribs, hard bone of want

I've returned to find her asleep in her jeans

to see only myself in mirrors

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Sarah Ann Winn

Sarah Ann Winn lives in Fairfax, Virginia. Her poems have appeared or will appear in *Bayou Magazine*, *[d]ecember*, *RHINO*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Quarterly West*, and many others. Her chapbook, *Portage*, is forthcoming from Sundress Publications in Winter 2015. Visit her at http://bluebirdwords.com or follow her @blueaisling on Twitter.

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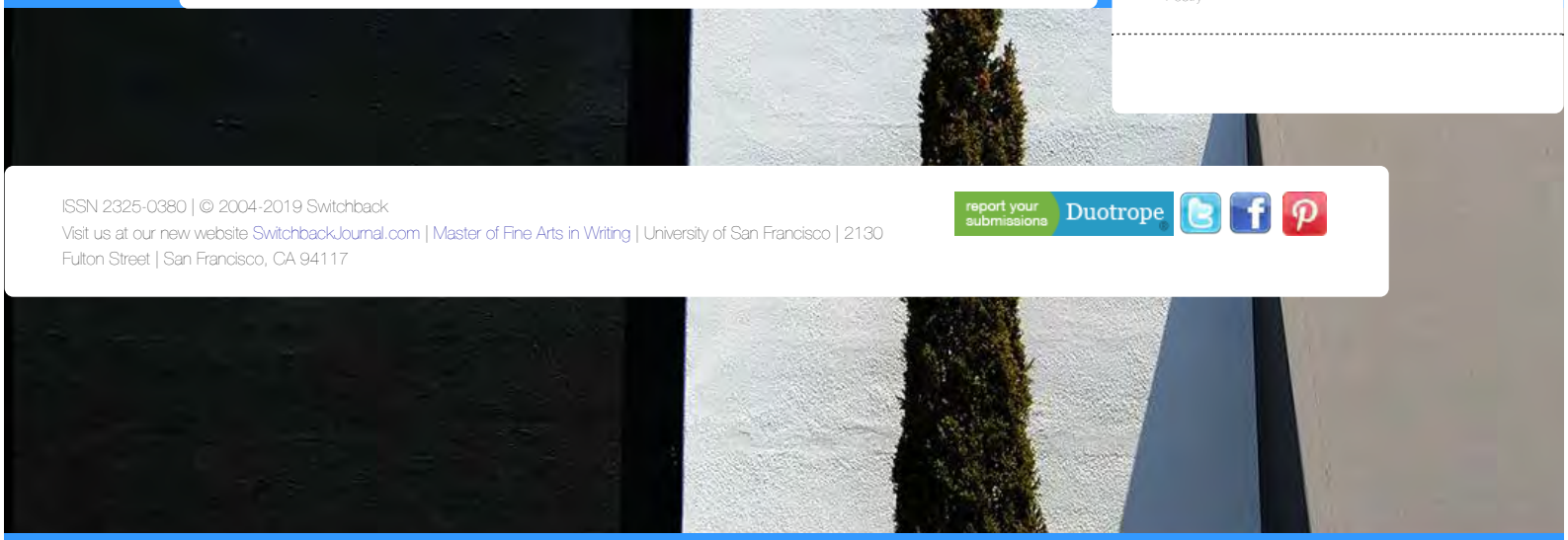
Appendix N
Poetry



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Appendix N

Sarah Ann Winn

Fig. 1: A life size x-ray of a woman's lungs, shadowy places, and cavities. Age browned letters *tb* are scrawled on the label at the bottom of the x-ray. His mother was told to hold her breath.

Fig. 2: A halved woman's heart. Signs of weakness caught too late are still invisible to doctors.

Fig. 3: Color 4x4 snapshot, *Easter, 19*. Two girls hand in hand pose on sidewalk, in ruffles. The older squints at the photographer. On its head beside them his shadow stands. The younger laughs, waves her basket. Tulips open. Their mother has faded. The girls will go to church with their grandparents.

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Miles Doyle

Miles Doyle is a writer and editor based in San Francisco, where he currently works as a developmental editor at HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins. His writing has appeared in *Time Out New York*, *Fordham Magazine*, and *The Jersey Journal*, among other print and online publications.

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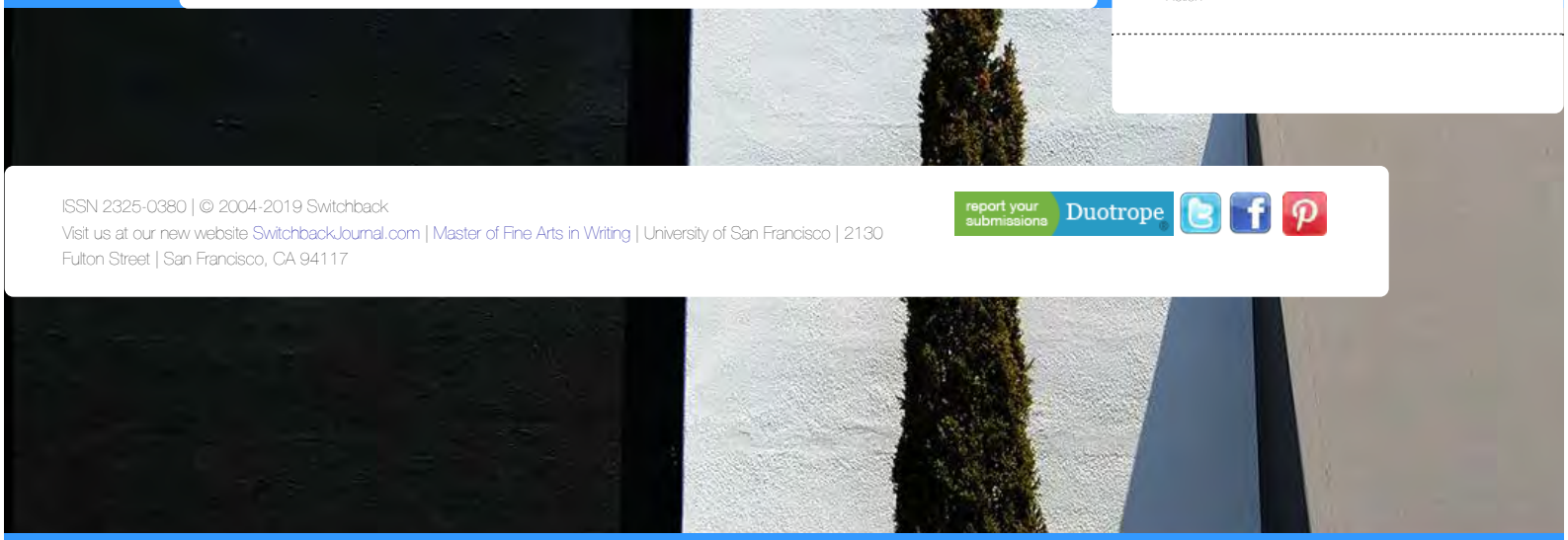
You Can't Stay Here
Fiction



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You Can't Stay Here

Miles Doyle

We were half-drunk and ready for a fight. This time, about the holidays. After our third or fourth round at the bar, Nancy brought up Christmas. She wanted to spend it out west with her sister, Karen. I was against the idea. A few years back, right before Nancy and I started up together, Karen ran into some trouble in Sacramento. What kind of trouble, Nancy never told me exactly. ÒBad enough,Ó was all she said. It must have been, because before long Karen left for Santa Cruz, where she paired up with some guy named Terrance, an evangelical type with good hair and tanned forearms. He managed an artichoke cooperative a few miles outside of Pescadero, and Karen helped him with his books. They shared a rented one-bedroom Craftsman three blocks from the ocean. Nancy said Karen was in a better place now, that she was finally happy.

ÒWe can dip our toes in the Pacific,Ó Nancy said, Òand then open our presents on Christmas morning. DoesnÕt that sound lovely?Ó

I told Nancy I wanted to stay in New York, just me and her, an idea she dismissed with a flick of her wrist. She got like that sometimes, imperious and stately, like a pampered housecat. It was one of the things I hated about her.

ÒIt will be good for us,Ó she said, Òand it will be good for Karen.Ó

I told her what I thought about her sister.

She smacked the edge of the table, spilling our drinks and putting an end to our evening. The bar had emptied around us. It was last call.

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You Can't Stay Here

Miles Doyle

IÕd met Nancy at a bar downtown, a different bar from the one where we fought about Christmas. I was still employed then as a security guard for a law firm, which, as far as I could tell, had no such need for round-the-clock protection. But they paid me under the table, and I gladly cashed in my earnings on mid-shelf liquor and steam-table buffets at a bar around the corner. When I stopped in at the end of my shift one evening, I spotted Nancy in a booth near the back, sipping on a tumbler of rye. Her hair, a pelt of dry auburn, fell below her shoulders, which were small and sagged slightly, as if sheÕd been on the wrong end of a long-drawn-out battle. I introduced myself, and she invited me to sit down. She wore a chevron-patterned sweater dress and a crop circle of bracelets and charms that jangled on the bar while we spoke. She worked as a secretary, was a shade past thirty. I was nine years her senior. We both drank with the same seriousness. Between us, there was no humor to be wagered; humor, IÕd recently come to discover, was a luxury for the young or the fortunate few still in possession of promise. Nancy and I were well past that point.

We traded stories about our pasts. She told me about her sister and her father, a black tie conservative who christened Nancy and Karen with their old-fashioned names and who, after their mother died, shipped them across the country to live with his batty older sister Jeanne in Sacramento. Once there, Karen found a kind of currency in the tumescent fantasies of teenage boys, but eventually tired of their clumsy hands and the smell of cheap soap and tissues they all seemed to wear. She drifted in and out of house parties up and down the Sacramento Valley before stumbling upon the allure of married men and the itchy turn-on of after-hour assignations in dentist offices, car dealerships, and once, according to Nancy, the industrial walk-in of a local Cheesecake Factory. Nancy, on the other hand, spent most of her time looking after her aunt, whose already feeble mind spun looser by the month. Left on her own one Saturday evening, Jeanne set fire to the kitchen, and Nancy had to drop out of school to care for her full time. When Jeanne finally passed away at the age of eighty-two, two years shy of NancyÕs thirtieth birthday, Nancy fled Sacramento, leaving behind the house and a sizable inheritance for Karen to do with as she pleased.

I told Nancy about my time overseas and a dog I used to own as a child, a mean old German shepherd named Sergeant. Sergeant used to entertain himself by jumping our backyard fence whenever he was left unattended. My father would make me go fetch him. During one such pursuit, I managed to corner Sergeant in an alley on the other side of town. When I tried to fasten a leash to his collar, he tore loose a piece of flesh on my forearm, from my bicep to my wrist. I still sport a crooked patchwork of tissue there that glows red at unexpected times, as if I were lit from within.

When I met Nancy, I had just rented a one-bedroom railroad apartment in a neighborhood two or three years ahead of gentrification. The broker who showed me the place told me the narrow corridor extending six blocks north from the apartment was called NoProCro, an abbreviation that to me meant nothing. The place suited me. On my days off, I read the paper in a tiny pocket park in the heart of the neighborhood, where flightless pigeons and scabrous old men in undershirts and pleated slacks gathered around me.

A few months into our courtship, I invited Nancy to move in with me. She accepted and brought with her a large radio, which I humped up six flights of stairs, and a banana plant, which attracted in no short time a phalanx of cockroaches. I flooded the apartment with boric acid and waited for the fuckers to die.

Her first week there, Nancy spent most of her time feverishly checking the doors and windows. I made a

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game of her patrols and, when she wasnÕt looking, switched back the latches. Eventually she caught on or simply tired of my antics and stopped caring.

We enjoyed a year of peace together, Nancy and I. Then I strayed with a girl from the law firm. She had long blonde hair and an ass like a tomato. In bed, she pulled tufts of hair from my scalp and told me not to look at her. The next morning she cooked breakfast and let me do shameful things to her again in her kitchen before I returned home and told Nancy all IÕd done. She called me a bastard and finished off a handle of gin. Then she chucked a sleeve of Saltines at me and started whaling on my chest. I didnÕt try to stop her, which was the right move, because she tired herself out before she could do any real damage. After she gave up, she slumped down in the kitchen, and she and I wept together like newlyweds. I stroked her hair, told her everything was going to be okay.

The next morning she moved out, but she returned a few days later. She wasnÕt ready to call it quits, she told me. To my surprise, her affection for me continued. When we were alone at home, we were pleasant, patient, and gentle even to one another. Outside, though, was a different story. Our arguments played best in front of an audience. The company of others seemed to jimmy loose her feelings for me and inspired in us both performances worthy of a Russian play. It got so we could hardly leave our place. Which was why I said what I did about her sister, I suppose. KarenÕs sudden reemergence, coupled with her new life in Santa Cruz, frightened me, and it was all I could do to keep Nancy from visiting.

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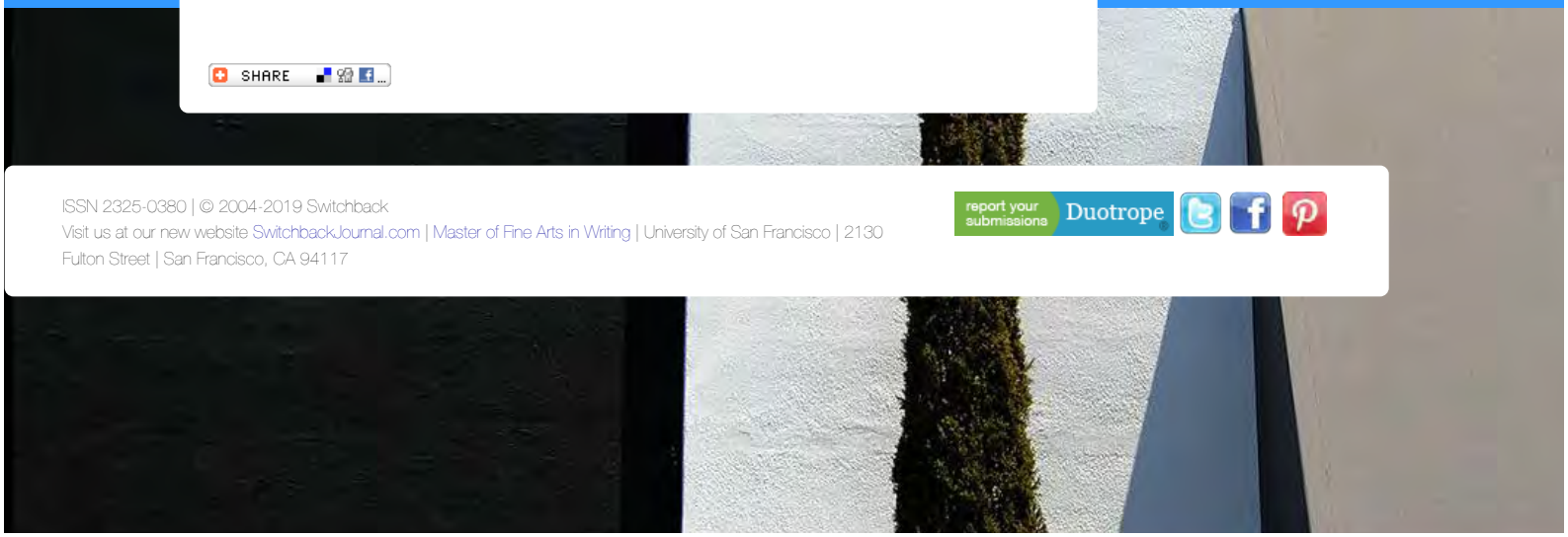

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You Can't Stay Here

Miles Doyle

Outside the bar, snow melted in our hair. Nancy walked a few steps ahead of me. WeÕd tucked our heads to our chests, chastened by the December wind. The streets were still and soft-lit by the noiseless lamps over our heads. I pulled Nancy close to me, a gentle act of contrition.

She said, ÒI hate small men.Ó

She laid her head on my shoulder and wrapped her arms around my belly. ÒDonÕt be small, Joe,Ó she said, turning her open face up at meÑone of the things I loved about her. She kissed me and I felt right again. We wanted to spend Christmas together, I thought. At least we still had that.

When we reached home, we ran into our neighbor Bobby, a short, good-looking man with a dark ponytail, who smelled faintly of tar. He stood on the front steps with a young Hispanic kid IÕd seen once or twice leaving his apartment. Our presence put an end to their conversation. Bobby nodded and moved to let Nancy and me pass. The kid cut in front of us and then bounced back on his toes, like a boxer wary of contact. He repeated the steps a few times, and we all three watched his sad little dance, confused. He buzzed BobbyÕs apartment, stabbing his index finger repeatedly against the silver button. His fingernails, I noticed, were long and manicured. On every other one was painted a tiny black skull and cross bones. When no one answered, he buzzed all of the apartments at once.

ÒI know heÕs in there,Ó he said to Bobby. ÒYou canÕt hide him.Ó

He wore a turtleneck, tailored black slacks, saddle shoes with brown leather patches across each vamp, and a shearling jacket with wide lapels. He looked like a Spanish don, one recently departed from his last doubloon. His eyes were puffy and fraught with a heavy brown sadness, the source of which I was only now starting to comprehend. He and Bobby were intimate, and the kid was in over his head.

Embarrassed, Bobby smacked away the kidÕs hand, which was still working its way down the row of buzzers. ÒManny, please.Ó Bobby then turned to Nancy and me, as if we could do something to help rid him of this kid and put an end to his misery. ÒIÕm sorry,Ó he said, his voice quiet and guarded. ÒWhy donÕt you guys go on ahead?Ó

I took the opening. I unlocked the door and let Nancy enter. Manny pushed past me to follow Nancy inside. Bobby gave chase, shouting and slapping at the kid in the vestibule, and all the way up the stairwell.

A part of me wanted to see Manny dole out whatever justice Bobby had coming to him. But then, if Bobby caught a beating from a kid IÕd let into the building, I knew it would make for a long evening with the police, whoÕd find a way to hold me responsible somehow. Another part of me wanted to show Nancy that I was still capable of good and decent things, that I could rise to certain occasions.

I told her to stay put and ran up the stairs toward BobbyÕs apartment, where I heard through the door their two voices, now joined by an unknown third. I banged on the door. A small white man opened it. He had a fresh welt below his right eye, MannyÕs quick work. The welt flashed across his hairless cheek like a current of electricity over a white field. ÒHelp us,Ó the man screamed. ÒHeÕs crazy. You have to stop him.Ó His tiny hands shook in front of his chest. In this pose, he reminded me of an old lady afraid for her pearls.

I pushed past. Inside, Manny was in the process of banging the back of BobbyÕs head on the floor. From the ground, Bobby clawed at MannyÕs forearms as if he could wrest from beneath the skin whatever demon had taken possession of him. His legs pumped at the floor, pedaling for some kind of traction to break MannyÕs hold.

Then Manny stood up and dragged Bobby toward the bedroom. Dragged Bobby right by his collar with a brutal efficiency that startled me. ÒIs this where you did it? In here, with him?Ó I watched as Manny threw Bobby on the bed and punched him repeatedly in the back of the head.

ÒEnough,Ó I heard myself say. ÒLet him go.Ó I wrapped Manny in a bear hug and carried him back through the hallway past the third man, who shielded his face behind splayed fingers. He kicked at us blindly as we exited the apartment. By now, Nancy and a few other neighbors had gathered on the landing. I dropped Manny to the floor, where he continued to flail around.

When I bent to calm him, he caught me with a right hook, right near my temple. IÕll give the kid this much Ñhe knew how to throw a punch. It stunned me, and, for a good second, I thought I would black out. I could feel a knot already start to form there.

I turned to Nancy, thinking maybe she and I could come up with some kind of plan to get him out of the building, but she just stood there, running her fingers up and down the side of her face, right about the same spot where Manny decked me. Her mouth was open, and I thought she was going to say something, maybe call out to me, tell me to be careful, but she just stood there with her hand at her face, watching me struggle.

I took Manny by the wrist, bent it around his back and pressed him into the wall, just as they taught me the first day on the job.

The woman in 4E asked if she should call the police. ÒNo,Ó I answered. ÒHeÕs leaving.Ó

Manny started to cry then, quiet sobs at first, followed by a series of childlike wails. It was an awful clatter. I didnÕt know which was worse, the depth of his keening or the airless silence that followed and somehow made his humiliation more complete.

ÒWhy,Ó he asked in fractured syllables. ÒWhy?Ó

I let him go. When he turned around, I put my hand on his shoulder and told him, ÒYou canÕt stay here.Ó He nodded and made for the stairs.

ÒThatÕs right, you little shit, get out of here.Ó It was Bobby. HeÕd left his apartment in search of more.

ÒLet it go, Bobby,Ó I said. ÒItÕs done.Ó

ÒFuck him and his brown dick.Ó

Even a yard away, I could feel Manny stiffen. He arched his back and turned quickly. I tried to stop him, but he slammed into me and brought us both to the ground, damn near taking all the air from my lungs. Before I could catch my breath, Bobby dove into us, fist-first. We tumbled around on the dirty tiles until I managed to dig myself out from under Manny and drag Bobby back through the open door of his apartment. He seemed relieved. Pawing at his tears, Manny shouted at Bobby in an ugly mix of Spanish and English. Bobby started to react, but threw up his hands in disgust and retreated deeper into his apartment, where he claimed a moral victory of sorts, the kind of face-saving move we used to employ as kids, back when we used to throw rocks.

With Bobby out of the way, I asked Manny again to come with me outside. I swear, the kid looked at me as if he wanted to take my hand, which made me wonder, for the second time that evening, about his age. I realized that I was probably old enough to be his father. We were half-way down the landing when Nancy started down the stairs with us. I turned and pressed my hand to her stomach.

ÒWeÕre fine,Ó I told her. ÒYou stay here and get everyone back in their apartments.Ó

She nodded and eyed me with concern, and I felt a tenderness for her that I hadnÕt felt in some time.

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You Can't Stay Here

Miles Doyle

It was colder now on the street. Snow continued to fall. Down the block someone was shoveling, scraping the plastic instrument against the asphalt. Manny stalked back and forth on the sidewalk. His nostrils flared, and his features glowed in an iridescent righteousness. I realized I was sweating.

ÒHow could he do this to me? How could he do that to me with him, that pinche palomo.Ó

He eyed me with an irritating intensity. I didnÕt want to answer him, lest I piss him off. I figured in his current state he could bounce me into one of the trash bins lined up in front of the apartment.

ÒThis ainÕt the first time, either,Ó he said. His voice was angrier now. ÒThat asshole told me they were done. Why would he do this to me? Tell me that.Ó

The muscles around his jaw tensed and then relaxed.

ÒIf it wasnÕt you,Ó I said, ÒitÕd be someone else.Ó

The scrapping continued down the street. Across the way I saw through a second-story window a woman cooking, the room behind her warmed by orange light. A quiver of envy knuckled my spine. I shivered and tried to shake the feeling from my limbs.

ÒCan I ask you a question, Manny?Ó

He fixed the lapels on his coat and stuffed his hands into his pockets. ÒFive months.Ó

ÒFive months, what?Ó

ÒWeÕve been together for five months. Or were. Whatever.Ó

I shook my head. ÒI wanted to know how old you are.Ó

ÒIÕll be nineteen next week,Ó he said. ÒHappy birthday to me."

Nineteen was impossible to imagine. I spent my twentieth year hauling hazard chemicals out of Albany and making weekend runs to Toronto, my fists choked with amphetamines. That was a long time ago, and picturing it again felt like trying to remember the plot of some old movie I never cared for in the first place.

I looked across the street. The woman in the window was gone. I rubbed my temple and thought about Nancy, all the wrong IÕd done to her. I suddenly felt within me a great capacity for love, which undid me. My face slackened, and tears threatened to spill out of my eyes. It was too much, caring for another person. Exhausting. And I knew I would continue to hurt Nancy. I felt queasy with regret.

ÒYou got a place to go?Ó I asked.

ÒI got a place. Shit. I ainÕt homeless.Ó

ÒWill you be all right?Ó

ÒI will after I hurt him some more. IÕll catch him someplace else. You watch. IÕll sneak up behind him and Ñ*bugarron*!Ñrun a razor across his face.Ó

He started bouncing on the balls of his feet and threw a wild combination at the air.

I said, ÒthereÕs nothing for you here.Ó

Manny stopped. ÒBut I still love him.Ó

I spit on the concrete, which was wet with snow.

ÒYouÕd be better off with the razor,Ó I said.

And then I watched as he walked to the corner, turned, and took off running.

Nancy was waiting for me upstairs. She was spread out across the bed with her coat on. I treaded toward

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her, expecting her to welcome me. But when I lay my hand on her arm, she bristled at the touch.

ÒI heard what you said to him.Ó

Between the drinks and the cold and knock to the head, I couldnÕt remember what I had said. ÒI donÕt know, Nancy. I said a lot of things. I had to get him out of here.Ó

ÒI could be anyone too,Ó she said.

She stood then and yanked off her coat. She moved to the middle of the room. The two yards between us might as well have been two miles. She turned and stretched out her arms as if to pull down the walls around us.

ÒI used to be pretty, Joe. I really did.Ó

I readied myself for whatever came next.

ÒIÕm going to visit my sister. Come if you want. Or donÕt. I donÕt care.Ó

ÒLetÕs talk about it in the morning. IÕm beat.Ó

ÒFine,Ó she said.

But I knew it wasnÕt. WeÕd sleep without touching, and then wake and pretend weÕd take a trip together out west. I knew we were nearing the end, and there was nothing I could do to stop its approach.

ÒIn the morning, Nancy,Ó I said, but she had already switched off the light.

I walked to the front door. I cinched the latch and put my ear to the door and listened. I could hear, through the metal and honeycomb bits, Bobby a few flights below, tucked into bed with that third man. I could hear, too, Manny kicking around the city, a blade in search of its victim. Farther out, I could hear Karen and sea swells crashing into rocks. The noise built toward a slow dark rumble I could feel all the way in my belly.

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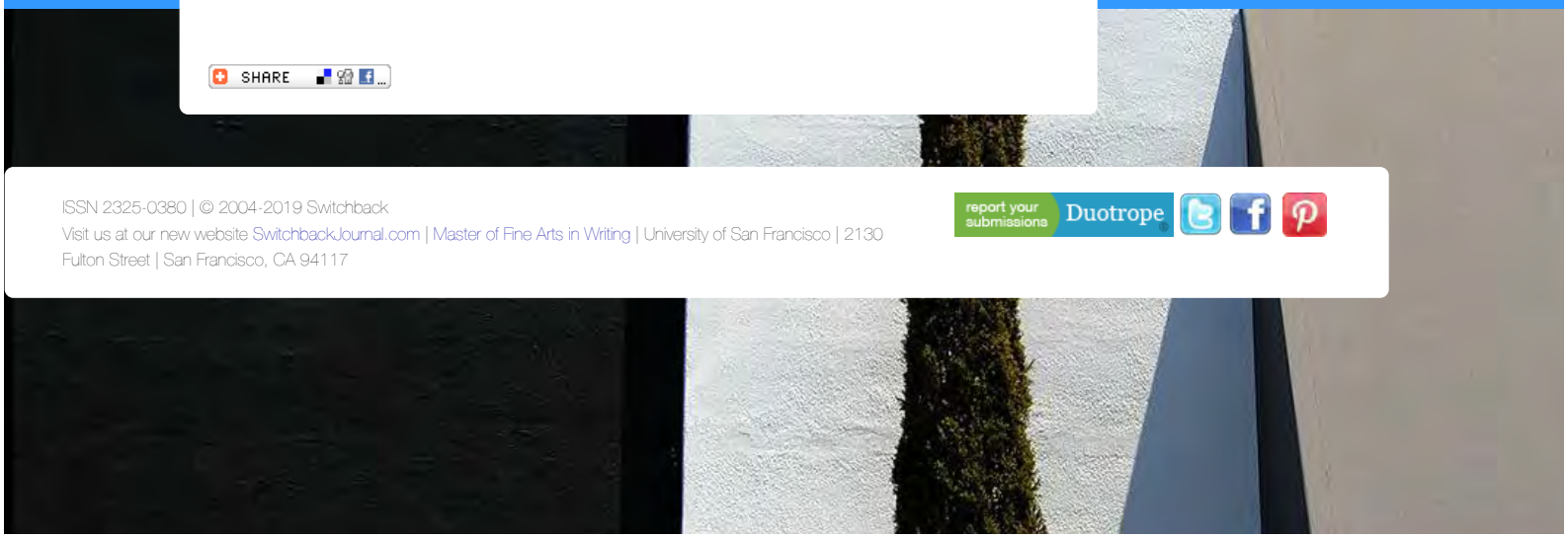

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Timur Jonathan Karaca

Timur Jonathan KaracaÕs stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Baltimore Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Narrative*, and *Willow Review*. He is a practicing anesthesiologist, and a student at the Writers Studio, San Francisco. He lives in Oakland.

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Tooth

Timur Jonathan Karaca

The hospital staff are all friendly, and before long IÕm reclining on a gurney, in a gown that exposes my backsides, and theyÕve hooked me up to this inflatable blanket attached to a blower thatÕs keeping me warm. The ache in my gut comes and goes again, and I imagine that hours from now itÕll be gone for good, or different at least. And IÕm anxious, sureÑabout how it will feel afterward, and what the news will be. My hunch already is that it wonÕt be too good. You pick up a certain vibe when the doctors talk to you, when theyÕre going over the scans, pointing out the gray knot behind your stomach that looks like a smear of television static, or just looking through your files for the first time. You can feel them get a bit tense, put a layer of friendliness on top of everything, like theyÕre sorry for you, but wonÕt come out and say so. Which, for a fraction of a second, makes me angry. Level with me, I want to say, let me have it, even though I know that theyÕve already told me everything. And then I try to imagine myself in their shoes, with ten old guys like me coming in here each day, having to tell each one that his numberÕs up, and having to carry all of that with them when they pack up for the night, with no one outside to explain it to (whoÕd understand anyway), nowhere to put it, and I want to put my arm around each one of them then and say, donÕt worry, itÕs all right, itÕs no oneÕs fault, a thing like this. Because I imagine thatÑin their shoesÑIÕd do just about the same.

The anesthesiologist looks like he could be nineteen, though I suspect heÕs in his thirtiesÑmy sonÕs age. HeÕs a bit quiet, but seems confident. ItÕs easy to imagine him studying in the library, hunched over his books late into the night. When did you last eat or drink, he asks. Any loose teeth? HeÕs clicking away at things on his computer. Can I give you something to help you relax? he asks me, like a margarita, but through the IV, he says. And I tell him, hell yes, though Jim Beam would be better if they have it, and he laughs and tells me, sure thing.

And then the medicine is doing its work, and it is like a stiff drink or two, which is welcome, and weÕre wheeling down the hallway and he says, IÕll give you plenty of pain medicine before you wake up, but if you need more in recovery, just ask, and I thank him. Let me tell you about pain, I say, and I suspect that maybe IÕm talking too much now, with the drugs, but it doesnÕt matter. You spend much time in the mountains? I ask him, and he says, sure. He skis, he tells me. HeÕs camped up there before. We used to go twice every year, I tell him, a group of friends, and I tell him about the time that Mike LeFiebre, Will Stevens, Bud Cooley, and I backpacked through the Desolation Wilderness years ago: four days in, four out. Dawn, I tell him, our first morning, climbing up over the first steep ridge, and Mike starts rubbing at his jaw. We were twenty-five or thereabouts, all of us recently married or engaged, no kids yet except for Mike, whose wife was expecting their first. And weÕre joking with himÑabout the lack of dental hygiene where he was raised, or that heÕs gone and bitten off more than he can chew with his wife, MariaÑand heÕs walking out front and laughing good-naturedly with us as we climb. But come late afternoon, he doesnÕt look so good, wincing when he takes a rough step, and poking a finger in at one of his molars. Just a cavity, he says when he catches us watching. No sweat, he says and smiles, and we keep going. Near sunset we unhitch our packs by this tree-sheltered bed of flat lava rock next to a stream to make camp, and now Mike is breaking into sweats and starting to shiver.

The anesthesiologist makes a sound and clicks his tongue like he can guess whatÕs coming, like he knows full well how bad those cases can get. WeÕre turning the corner into a white corridor that must lead to the operating rooms. The air is cooler down here. I can feel it on my bare arms and my face, but itÕs not unpleasant. Yeah, I say, and now Will, always the practical one of us, says to Mike that maybe we should head back, drive into

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town and get him checked out. And Mike says, nah, heÕs OK. Then he makes this sort of gesture up toward the hills, as if to say, look at that. The sun is still bright on top of the mountains where it hits the last pockets of snow. The air is dry and bright. ItÕs September. WeÕve been looking forward to this trip all year. Mike, Will says, as if to talk some sense into him, and Mike frowns like heÕs angry, which is not like him, and he snaps that we ainÕt leaving. The rest of us look at each other, then we back off to set up tents and gather firewood. And then IÕm workingÑworried about Mike, but happy to be in nature, in the quiet, happy to be breathing that air as the sun goes red on the mountains, then purple, and sinks down into the trees.

WeÕre rolling into the operating room now, where there are a few others waiting: a nurse and another young man to assist with the surgeryÑall in blue caps and masks. I slide over onto another table, and someone puts a blood pressure cuff around my arm and stickers on my chest. The anesthesiologist is standing in front of me again, looking at me over his mask. Waiting.

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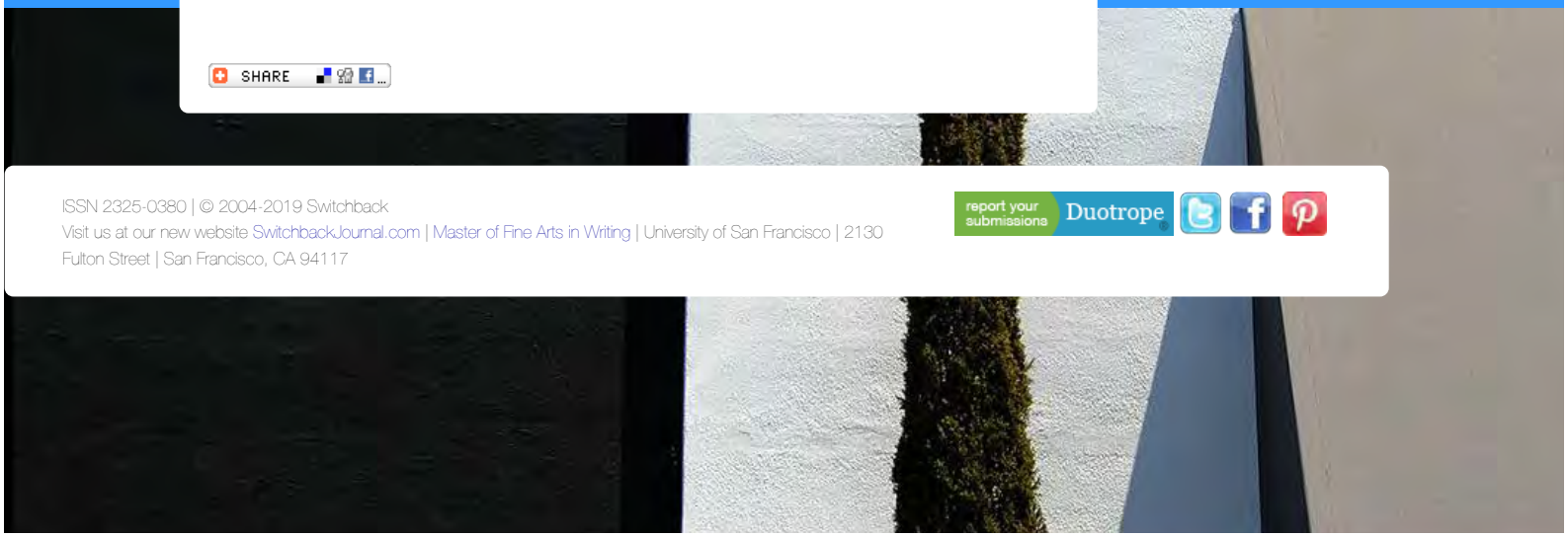

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Tooth

Timur Jonathan Karaca

So we build our fire, I tell him, cook dinner. Bud passes around a bottle of whiskey. By dark, Mike looks worseÑ canÕt stop shivering, though weÕve got him up close to the fire. He wonÕt eat. His cheekÕs swelled up like a beehive now, and his arms make these funny jerks here and there, like convulsions. All right, Will says, standing, thatÕs itÑweÕre walking you out of here right now, he says. No way, Mike says, and Will looks over at Bud and me for help. That toothÕs got to come out, Will says. And thereÕs a minute or two of quiet then, with the sounds of the creek running and the fire coughing up sparks. I suspect that we all know WillÕs right. Then you all will have to pull it, Mike says, and none of us answerÑlike we didnÕt hear or itÕs too crazy even to think about; heÕs not in his right mind. Will waves me over, and I can see that he means for us to pull Mike up and to carry him out of there on our shoulders if we have to. I ainÕt going, Mike says, and he hurls a stick at us to keep us back. One end of it pokes me in the shin and draws blood. Then he digs in his bag and comes out with something in his fist that I canÕt make out at first in the dark. And when I get a better look, it seems like it takes forever for my mind to accept that itÕs a pistol heÕs gotÑa Colt .45, cocked. HeÕs not aiming it at any of us, but itÕs shaking in his hand, pointed straight out into the dark, the sight of which beats the blood up into my head and my hands. All right, Mike, Will says, all right.

In the operating room, the staff are all gathered along the sides of my bed, listening.

Mike uncocks his gun then and sets it down in the dirt, I tell them. And Will, Bud, and I are just standing there awhile, all of us looking at that gun, and after a time Mike nods over at his bag, like he wants us to go through it for him. Will looks over at Bud and me, then he kneels and eases it open and puts his hand inside, slowly, the way youÕd reach in for a stick of dynamite or a trapped snake. He looks up at us again and starts pulling things outÑan old brass compass, a jacket, hunting knife, a pair of flathead pliers. Will opens and closes those pliers a few times, gives them a good squeeze, and turns them over in his hand once or twice by the fire. Then he and Bud are looking right at me, and I can feel the weight of their stares in the dark. I can hear their arguments before anyone even opens his mouth: that they should be the ones to hold Mike down; that IÕve got the steadiest hands; that IÕm the one who volunteered six months in school in the emergency roomÑwhere, truth be told, I mostly folded up sheets and carried specimens to the labÑand IÕm holding my hands up already and clearing my throat to tell them thereÕs no way. But then IÕm looking at Will and BudÑwatching me, waitingÑand over at MikeÑhead down, hunched by the fireÑand I imagine that if I were one of them, IÕd want me to do it, too. And I suppose that one way to look at it is that theyÕve managed to duck this thingÑWill and BudÑthat theyÕve pushed the worst of it off onto me. But the other is that they didnÕt decide anything at all, that they just knew, like I knowÑsure as that fire, and that river, and those mountainsÑthat this is the way it has to be.

We pass the whiskey around a few times, Mike drinking double, then Will hands me those pliers. TheyÕre cold and heavy in my hand, and they catch a little, but they close true. Will gestures for me to hold them out. Then he splashes them with whatÕs left of the booze. We have four flashlights and two lanterns between us, and we set them all up around Mike where weÕve got him propped up against a boulder, and Will and Bud kneel down close and lean into him. Will holds one of the flashlights for me, and Mike lets his mouth open. The smell pulls the bile up into my throat, but I swallow it down. I tip MikeÕs head back a bit, and right there I can see whatÕs wrong: a molar, second from the back on the right, up top, is gray and rotted through to the root. The gums all around it are red and tight, like they aim to burst. I fit the pliers in over MikeÕs lip, and his tongue is big and wet and pushed up

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against the edge of my hand. I ease the handles open and turn them a bit to get the right angle. Then I clamp down, and when the tips touch that tooth, Mike lets out a whimper and tries to stand up, but Will and Bud hold him. IÕve got what I think is a good grip, and I pull. But that tooth wonÕt give. I pull harder, and this time the tips scrape and slip off with a snap, and I fall back a few steps into the dark and damn near put my hands in the fire. Mike howls and curses, and Will and Bud look pale. I show them the empty pliers, and they gather themselves and lean in close to MikeÕs ear and tell him, easy now, itÕs all right, youÕre all right, almost done. Then we set ourselves up to try again. I get the pliers in, and now IÕm worried that that tooth will break, that IÕll have to squeeze so hard it will crumble and weÕll leave behind the bad part, that itÕll be buried and thereÕll be nothing left to grab onto. I prod the edges for a place that feels right, where I can get a good pull without squeezing too hard, and when I find it, I clamp down and hold, afraid I might lose it. And then I look up for a second and I catch MikeÕs eye, open wide and white, looking down at me over his nose. I can feel his body shaking against that rock. I can feel his breath on my hand. My arms feel weak, like IÕm about to lose my nerve, and I put my other hand on his chest for leverage. And then something happens with my hand there, and he stops shaking. I can feel his body ease up and his breath get deep and slow, like heÕs giving in, like heÕs giving himself over to us, with our hands on him like that, whatever might happen.

I look down and pull again, angling in toward him this time and twisting a little, and this time something gives Ñnot much, but itÕs something. I pull out the other way, and then I rock back and forth some as IÕm pulling. My wrist aches, but I can feel that tooth start to loosen. I give one more hard pull, straight down. And then it goes. ThereÕs a pop I feel through those pliers, in my hands and shoulders, that feels like it comes from somewhere deep down inside Mike, like the bottom of his spine or somewhere even deeper. And I go straight back again into the dark and down on my backsides in the dirt. Mike howls and curses again, but itÕs different now, like thereÕs a bit of relief or release in it, too. And when I hold the pliers up, thereÕs that tooth: stuck in the tips with three big prongs reaching up, and I can feel my heart going. I turn it around a few times to be sure itÕs all in one piece, and so far as I can tell, it is. Will sees it and lets out a laugh, and Bud just stares, wide-eyed. Mike rests his head back against the rock, like heÕs set to lie down, and I gather myself and we help him over to his bag and tip some water into his mouth. Will takes the tooth and holds it between two fingers in the firelight. He rolls it in his hand and it shines a little, like a wet pearl. Mike is sitting up, watching, like he means to say something, but heÕs too tired or his face hurts too much. Then he picks up that gun thatÕs still sitting there beside him in the dirt. Will, Bud, and I freeze. He cocks it. Then he points it straight up at the sky and fires once. The shot rings off the mountains and down the river. Then Mike sets the gun back down in the dirt where he got it from, and falls straight back onto his bagÑpassed out.

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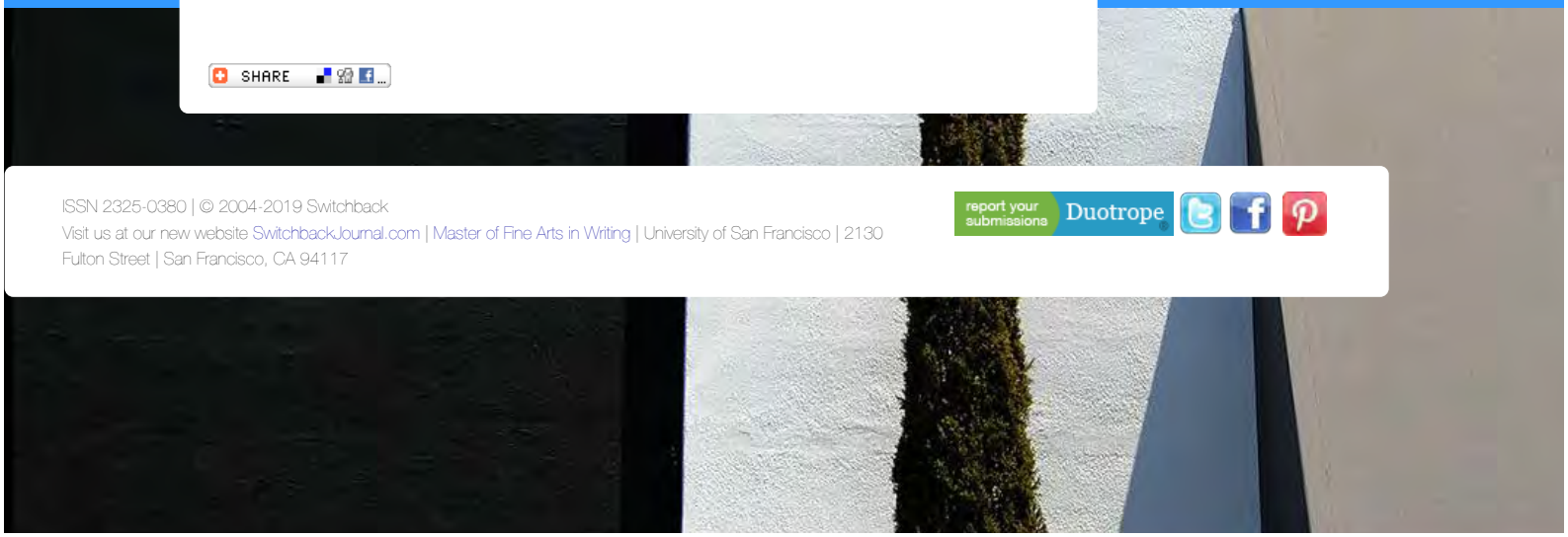

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Tooth

Timur Jonathan Karaca

ItÕs quiet in the operating room, like you can still hear that shot ringing in the air or off of those white walls, and the staff are all staring at me and nodding or shaking their heads over their masks. What happened to him, the anesthesiologist asks. He did all right, I tell him. We wake up the next morning and already he looks betterÑa little slow, but the shakingÕs stopped and he says it doesnÕt hurt so bad. He wants to keep hiking. So we pack up and go, take it easy at first, but we climb higher. Come late afternoon, Mike is about like his old selfÑlaughing and naming all of the trees and rock formations, though his voice is a little rough. HeÕs walking up ahead, and not long after, he leads us through this valley and down to an unmapped but pretty good-sized lake. We drop our packs and clothes and jump in, and the water sucks the wind right out of you itÕs so cold, but clean, like fresh-melted snow. You can see clear down to the bottom. And itÕs like being wrapped up in warmth to come out again and feel that mountain air on your skin.

The anesthesiologist is looking down at me, listening, and it occurs to me that IÕve talked too long now. Anyway, I tell him, thank you. And he tells me, anytime; that if I ever want to start up a combo wilderness-tour/dental-surgery clinic, he has some outdoor-enthusiast dentist colleagues who might be interested, and we laugh.

And then IÕm breathing through this plastic mask. The air feels dry and cool in my chest, and IÕm thinking about the last time that I saw Mike, years ago now, when his daughterÕd just had his first grandchild. WeÕre sharing a bottle on his front porch to celebrate. ItÕs sunset. HeÕd be killedÑMikeÑa few months later by a big rig, blindsided a mile up the road from where we were sitting. But, of course, we didnÕt know that then, and MikeÕs joking about that trip up to the mountains and his tooth. Thought I might die, he says, and he thanks me. I tell him, no sweat. HeÕs never said it before. Just donÕt you pull that gun on me again, I say, and he laughs. He was a bit of a hothead in those days, he tells me. The sky is going hazy, with the sun almost gone and the liquor in our blood. IÕm glad it was you, he says. You wonÕt remember it, but before you pulled it, you put a hand on me, he says, like this, he says, and he demonstrates with his hand on my collarbone. And it kept me calm, Mike says. It was like it all hurt lessÑI know that wonÕt make any sense. I knew you didnÕt have a clue what you were doing, but I could feel that you knew it would be all right, he says. I donÕt tell him that I remember it, too, that I didnÕt mean anything by itÑmy hand on him like that, that it was an accident, or that I didnÕt know it would be all right at all, that I was afraid. In the end, I suppose, none of that mattered. I like his version of it. We pass the bottle and it gets dark.

And now the anesthesiologist tells me that IÕll be going off to sleep in a minute, and that the next medication can sometimes sting a little in the IV. Take two deep breaths if it does, he says, and itÕll go away. I want to thank them all again, but I donÕt think theyÕll hear me through the mask. And then I feel itÑa pinch in my hand where the IVÕs taped. It grows into a burning that spreads past my wrist and my forearm, then up into my elbow and my shoulder. ItÕs not a bad pain, if that makes any sense. There Õs a kindness about it, like itÕs there for a purpose. But it gets hotter, like a fire in my blood, and it occurs to me that IÕm still awake, that maybe somethingÕs wrong, and I want to sit up and pull the mask off. And then thereÕs a hand on my arm, above the IV in the place where that pain starts. It draws the heat from that fire, and then IÕm beginning to feel cold, like sinking down deep into water. You pull me back up now, I want to tell him, but the words wonÕt come out, and I can feel by his hand, wrapped tight on my arm, that he will.

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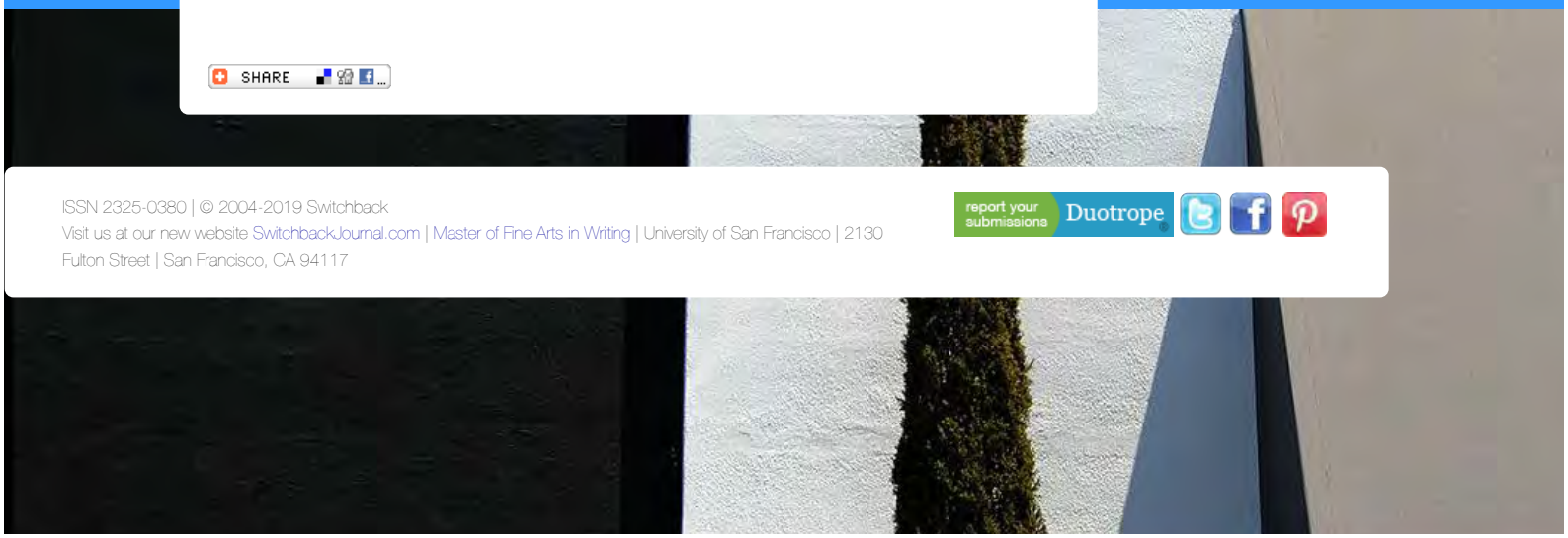

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Diane Payne

Diane Payne is the author of *Burning Tulips* (Red Hen Press) and *FreedomÕs Just Another Word* (Sweatshoppe Press). Most recently, she has work published (or forthcoming) in: *Lascaux Review*, *Flyover*, *Crabfat*, *Literary Orphans*, and *Rathalla Review*. Diane is the MFA Director at University of Arkansas-Monticello where she teaches creative writing.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 20

Breaking Bread
Fiction

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Breaking Bread

Diane Payne

We had just finished our run, the neighbor ladies and myself. Two nights a week, several of us meet for a jog through the neighborhood. After running about five loops, we walk the final bend and get caught up on things that are hard to discuss while running.

A few of the neighbors had already left for their homes while the rest of us were still heading home, when we noticed Jessie pushing the stroller. Jolted into silence, we moved aside a bit to make room for her to pass, and we mumbled feeble greetings about how it looked like rain, then more nonsense about needing rain. She deliberately bent over the stroller to adjust the blanket, cooed something about feeling a bit chilly, then continued walking while we stood there sharing a weird form of generic dŽj vu: HemingwayÕs six word story about baby shoes and the psycho movies with women pushing dolls in baby carriages. Beneath the baby blanket a loaf of bread emitted a hearty fragrance. Not just any loaf of bread, but a loaf specially selected from our local bakery, a multi-grain Vollkornbrot.

Instead of weeping, as we somewhat expected, Karen rolled her eyes. Four months ago, she endured another miscarriage. Maybe miscarriages hardened Karen the way childbirth softens mothers. KarenÕs pregnancies never lasted long enough to warrant a baby shower. We went all out for JessieÕs shower. Maybe JessieÕs shower was too soon after KarenÕs miscarriage. All of us probably thought we were the only ones who knew she was pregnant again, and also the only ones who knew when the pregnancy was over.

Then there was Jessie, pregnant with her first child. We hadnÕt gathered for any kind of celebration in a long whileÑonly met for our runs, which felt more laborious during the winter when the skies darkened by five. And then it was April, flowers emerging everywhere, and we gathered at my yard for an outside shower. Everyone but Jessie drank mimosas. We hired a masseuse to give Jessie a massage. Lying there on the table, Jessie oohed and ahhed, while we poured ourselves another drink and stuffed ourselves with desserts, olives, and cheese.

Maybe sheÕs got another baby in the oven, Karen said. We were silent. *Get it? A bun in the oven?* she said.

Foolishly, we nodded our heads this way and that, did our stretches, and returned to our homes.

That night, we dreamed of cats meowing, then the meowing turning into cries, the cats transforming into babies. We woke to the smell of freshly baked bread, the aroma so strong we could detect every seed kneaded into the dough. We felt the same deep hunger pangs as when we later woke in the middle of the night to cats fighting outside, shamed by our inability to grieve.

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Rob McClure Smith

Rob McClure Smith's fiction has appeared in many United States and European literary magazines. A former winner of the Scotsman Orange Short Story Award, his collection *The Violence* is forthcoming from Queen's Ferry Press in 2015.

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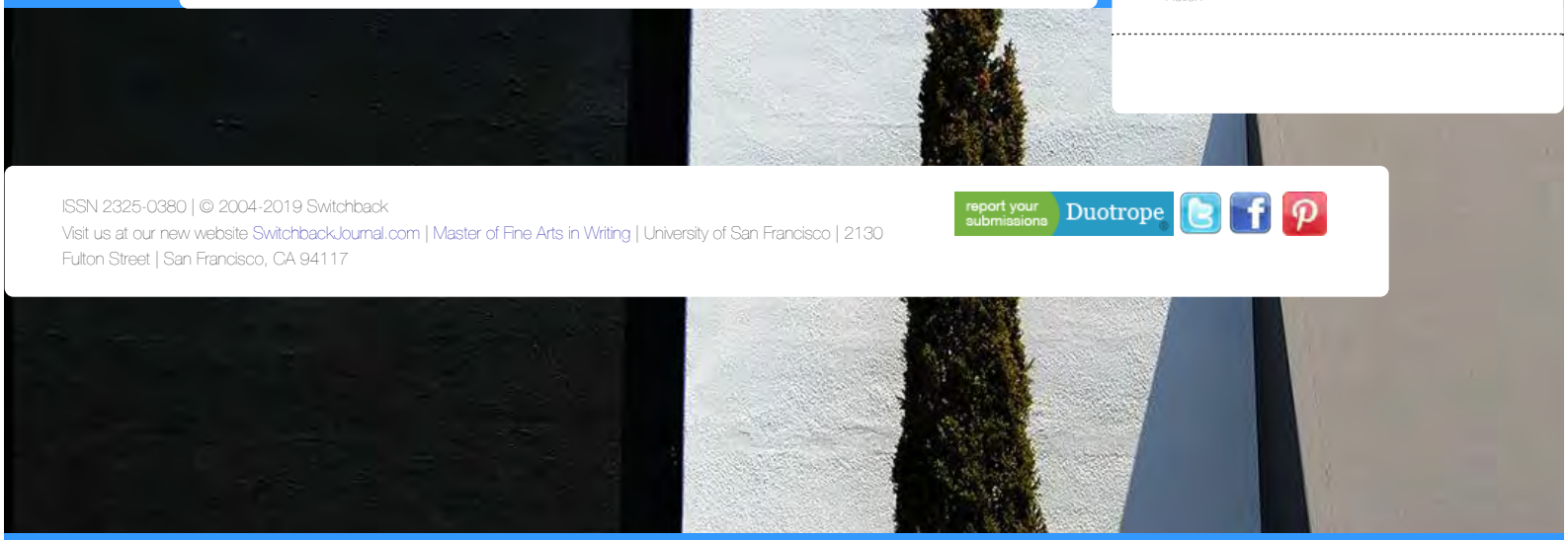
Night Shooting
Fiction



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Night Shooting

Rob McClure Smith

1.30 a.m. and the Spanish soldiers, muskets and rapiers discarded and left tagged and labeled on a tarp, queued up by the commissary in fresh-laundered blue and yellow uniforms, looking sleepy and not remotely of Mediterranean provenance. Under the sapadilloes, half-naked Kuna, daubed jet-black for war, forked empanadas from paper plates. The Scots knocked back seco con lecho under a bank of arc lights illuminating the imperial blue and gold on top of the stockade. The salsa of R—mulo Castro rattled from a radio, and a toucan shrieked accompaniment while a long green insect with white-tipped antennae ambled across the dial. The attackers still hadnÕt attacked and it was spitting rain. PAÕs jabbered into microphone headsets: coffee out, soldiers plastered, director incommunicado.

The Toubacanti stockade was originally built on the southern descent of a hill near the river Acla. It was star-shaped, with redoubts and bastions. But undermanned, the defenders were unprepared for a surprise attack. The battle of Toubacanti was brief. The Scottish axe-men slashed through the palisade, their Indian allies broke through on the flanks. The Spanish fled across the Isthmus.

The rebuilt stockade faced the jungle. It was damp among the biting sand flies, and the best boy already had a concussion from a coconut thrown by an irate monkey.

* * *

Jasper Lillee lay flat on his belly midway between the trees and the stockade, examining the tracks. The grips laid a new set, stepping over him. The old tracks were embedded in the mud. The DP looked up at Rich from his recumbent pose. He had smears of dirt down his cheeks and looked badgerish.

ÒWhy are you lying in the mud, Jasper?Ó

ÒUsing these bastards is a fucking nightmare in the jungle, mate. They either sink in the muck or stand out like a greyhoundÕs balls.Ó

* * *

A small crowd had gathered by the commissary to watch Sir Terence Duffy berate a girl from costume. The controversy involved him not fitting into his uniform. Duffy waggled his fist near the girlÕs face.

ÒWell, all IÕm saying to *you*, lassie, is it fit me perfectly in Los Angeles and now it does not. This costume has been somehow altered in weeks succeeding.Ó

Duffy indicated an open row of brass buttons upon his famously hirsute chest. On his bare right arm a tattoo: ÔScots WhaÕhae.Õ

ÒBut it hasnÕt been altered,Ó the girl said. She fingered a button, ventured upon the unspeakable. Òls it possible youÕve put on weight, sir?Ó

ÒNo, it is not remotely possible,Ó Duffy roared. Òl perform martial arts routines twice a day. Kyokushin karate. I hold an honorary shodan. As you no doubt see, I have the torso of a man a third my age.Ó

Duffy pummeled the torso of a man a third his age.

ÒBut the buttons wonÕt snap…Ó

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ÒListen here, woman, try to pay attention, will you? What has happened is the extreme tropical heat has shrunken the fabric in some unaccountable way.Ó Duffy pinched the material to demonstrate shrinkage, inhaling deeply as the girl wrestled with the buttons. ÒSuch an occurrence would not be unusual,Ó he added, breathlessly.

Duffy turned salmon-pink as the girl tugged and hauled at him.

ÒYes it would,Ó she said, giving up.

The other actors studiously avoided eye contact.

ÒAll the rest are the same,Ó said the girl. ÒThis is the only one thatÕs shrunk...Ó

ÒAnd where,Ó Duffy bellowed, changing the subject,Ò is the leader of this enterprise? Are we awaiting white smoke to rise from yonder tent like the Vatican?Ó

Rich supposed Duffy had been at the secho con lecho during the break.

ÒThere is a widening gap today between those who know about films and those who greenlight films,Ó Duffy declaimed. ÒThe one thing you canÕt say now is ÔI donÕt know.Õ Hitch would say ÔI donÕt knowÕ all the time. ÔWhat do you see in this Tippie woman,Õ IÕd say. ÔI donÕt know,Õ says Hitch, Ôbut have you seen the tits on her, Terence?Õ" Duffy nodded. ÒBut today the person on set you think is the tea-boy is the director.Ó

It took the crew four hours to light the jungle around the stockade. Getting the rig up in the trees proved difficult. The gaffer was trying to shoot a microphone-supporting rope through the overhang of branches using a bow and arrow.

ÒWhy donÕt they let the Indians do that?Ó Duffy queried. ÒThey are the experts with that apparatus.Ó

ÒWrong kind of Indians,Ó Rich contributed. ÒYouÕre thinking of the Native Americans of...Ó

ÒDonÕt tell me what IÕm thinking of, suit,Ó Duffy snorted. ÒYou can have not the slightest conception of what IÕm thinking of.Ó

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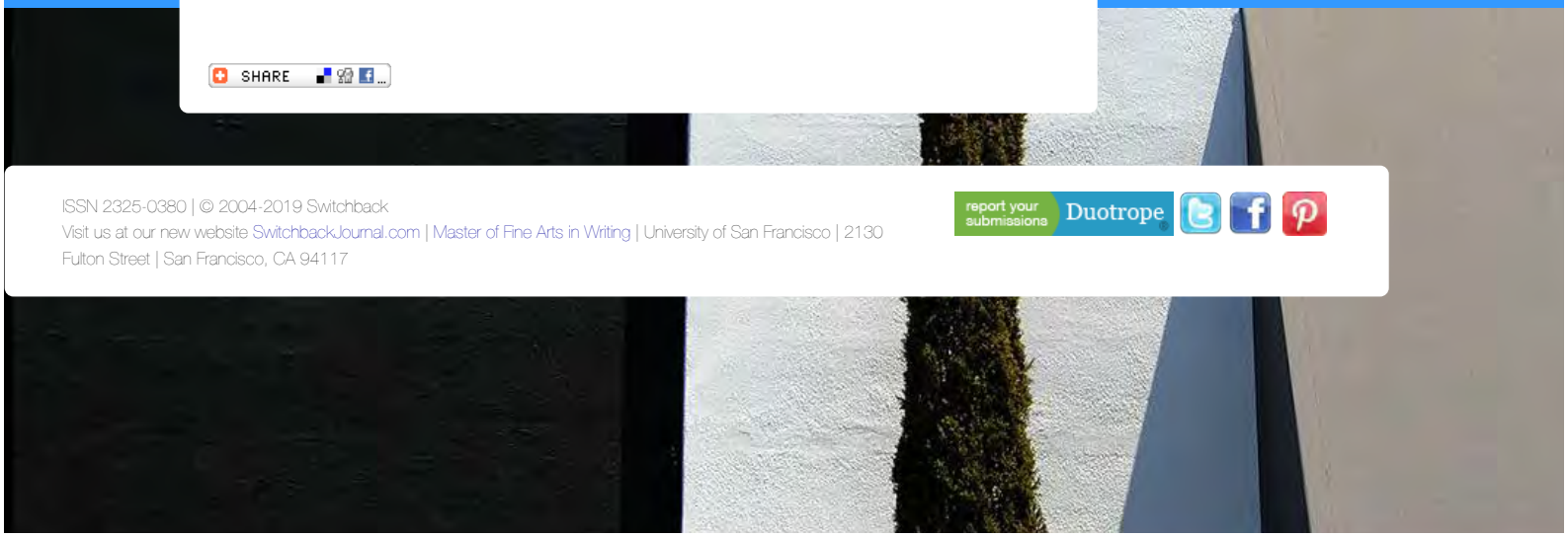

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Night Shooting

Rob McClure Smith

The director emerged at last from the editing tent. MacPherson was using a crutch and sported a red bandanna. A scarlet macaw perched on his shoulder.

ÒAh,Ó said Duffy. ÒCaptain Kidd has seen fit to grace us with his presence.Ó

MacPherson and his DP looked over the shot list. Lillee consulted a computer, agitated over a blocking issue. More whisky arrived, different shots.

ÒExcuse me,Ó interrupted Duffy. ÒWe have been assembled here for three hours amid mosquitoes and incompetence.Ó

MacPherson looked exhaustedÑwith the questions, with the shoot, with Duffy.

ÒHowÕs aboot you take this opportunity tae git on a treadmill then? Maybe lose some of the flab. You figuring tae do yir Chang Kai Chek in the super-heavyweight division, Terry?Ó

ÒWhat did you say to me, you little homunculus?Ó

ÒYou heard me fine.Ó

ÒOh, come on, fellows,Ó pleaded Lillee. ÒNot this again.Ó

ÒFuck,Ó offered the macaw. ÒFucky-fuck.Ó The bird commenced preening the light blue of its tail feathers.

ÒYouÕve been teaching it to talk,Ó said Rich.

ÒThere have been countless useless setups,Ó snarled Duffy. ÒThese fancy shots of yours are the equivalent of putting tap shoes on a paralyzed man.Ó

ÒI didnÕt even know a macaw was able to talk,Ó Rich noted.

ÒHeÕs smarter than some people ah know,Ó said MacPherson.

ÒI have an eye is what I have,Ó said Duffy, pointing at his eye.

ÒFucky aye,Ó said the macaw. ÒFucky aye-aye. Fucky-fuck.Ó

ÒIs that all it says?Ó asked Rich, stroking the birdÕs head. ÒJust expletives?Ó

The bird feinted a bob, intent on nipping his finger with its beak.

ÒIÕve been in more movies than youÕve *seen*, MacPherson. IÕve worked with the best. IÕve been directed by men whose shoelaces you are not fit to tie, mister. And this is all, so...Ó Duffy contemplated the worst insult. ÒThis is all so *television*.Ó

ÒWhat did you *say*?Ó MacPherson was incandescent with fury.

ÒLet it go, mate,Ó said Lillee, pawing at the directorÕs arm.

The director pointed a clap stick at DuffyÕs nose. ÒThereÕs some actors want tae direct, some want tae write, some want tae produce. This here medieval fuckÕs the only wan ah know wants tae be an assistant director.Ó

ÒI will have you fired,Ó said Duffy, smiling. ÒOne phone call is all it takes. One, and I will have you replaced by the genuine article. DonÕt you forget it, little man.Ó

ÒMake yir call then, fatso. See if ah care.Ó

ÒWhat did you call me?Ó snarled Duffy. ÒWhat was that?Ó

ÒOh Christ,Ó muttered Lillee.

ÒWanka, wankaÓ clucked the bird on MacPhersonÕs shoulder. ÒWankawanka.Ó

ÒAye, thatÕs whit this yin is,Ó said MacPherson. ÒWell seen, Claverhouse.Ó

ÒYou watch your mouth you little chanty-wrastler.Ó Duffy spat, balling his fists. ÒOr I will be sorely inclined to smack you one in the kisser.Ó

ÒGo ahead. AhÕm sick of it! Come oan, I *want* you tae punch me in the coupon! Go ahead.Ó MacPherson inclined his chin, pointing at it. ÒTake a big swing, porky.Ó

ÒDonÕt tempt me, you imbecilic gnome,Ó said Duffy.

ÒI donÕt see how this is productive,Ó Rich offered. ÒThe studio believes...Ó

ÒWe all remember how you were injured,Ó roared Duffy.

MacPherson glanced at Rich. ÒAh pitched intae a big massive thorn bush is all. The spines went and embedded in mah leg.Ó

ÒHe was intoxicated at the time.Ó

ÒRubbish.Ó

ÒHe uses chica like mouthwash. The poison put him into anaphylactic shock.Ó

ÒAh wis jist fine.Ó

Duffy turned towards Rich, smirking. ÒHe was raving and calling for his mammy at one juncture. Stick that in your report to the studio, suit.Ó

ÒAhÕve had this yin up tae here,Ó yelled MacPherson. ÒAh donÕt like actors in the first place, and in the second place ah donÕt like them telling me whit tae do on a set, and in the third placeÑÓ MacPherson hesitated, Òah donÕt like them in the first place.Ó

The director threw the clap stick like a discus deep into the ceibas, retrieved his crutch, and gimped back to the editing tent. Claverhouse hopped clockwise on his shoulder. Duffy stared intently at the bare white skin around the birdÕs light yellow eye.

ÒSo MacÕs gone off the deep end again,Ó said Rich. ÒMany times is that?Ó

The crew looked at Lillee, seeking guidance from the lieutenant. The Australian chewed at his lip, considering.

ÒSomeone go get that clapper maybe?Ó he suggested finally. ÒMight need that.Ó

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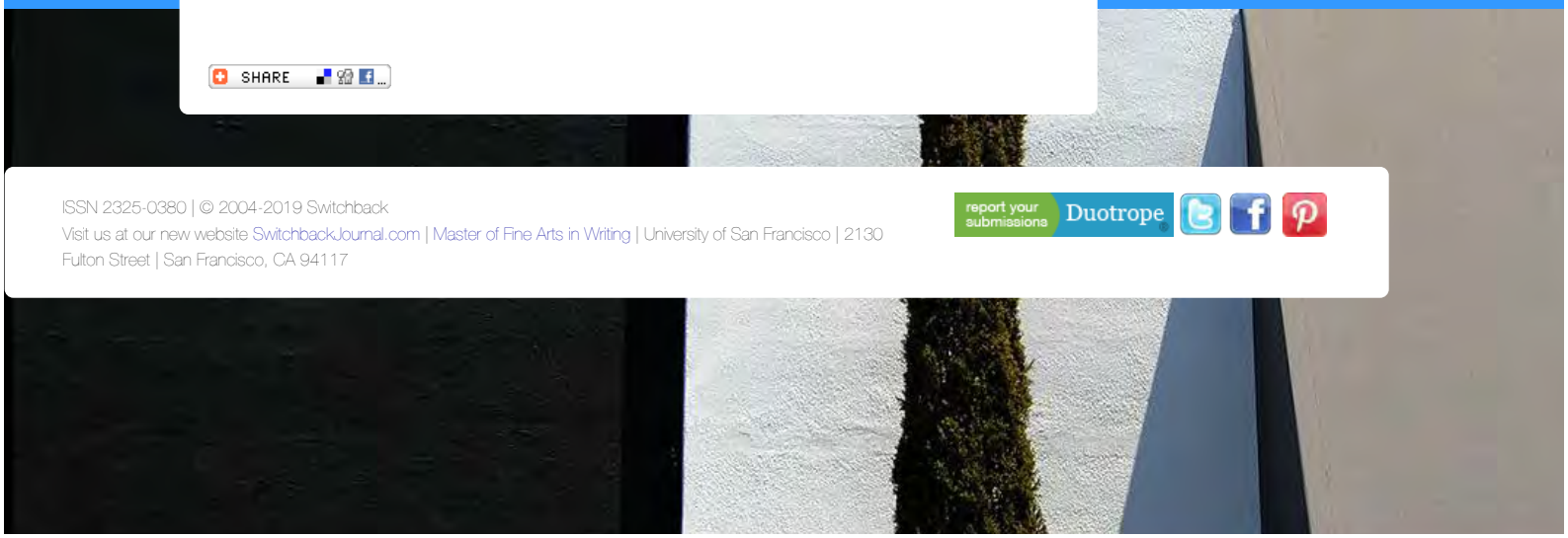

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Night Shooting

Rob McClure Smith

4.00 a.m. and two grips rolled the dolly to the stockade. The camera operator turned the wheels and the focus puller crouched low behind his shoulder. Another grip stood on the tongue, counter-weighting the job arm on which they sat. A video camera trailed the shot and the DP, watching the playback on the monitor, observed the same problem with the reflections. So they reset and the grips rolled it back and forth again, and then again.

* * *

5.00 .a.m. and the shot was good, in the can, a wrap, an absolute corker. All done but for the steadicam. The crew uttered ÔsteadicamÕ as a Muslim might Mahomet. The steadicam shot required the summoning of the beast from his lair.

The shot involved the operator gliding around a stationary figure. This key pre-battle sequence needed the flexibility of handheld without the jerkiness. The viewer would see in one fluid motion a man standing in the shadows, low-hanging vines and branches, blocks of blackness, and then, circling, the stockade before him, impregnable, and then, re-circling, an extended arm and, last, the firing of the pistol, the signal to advance. On the storyboard it was poetic. Off the storyboard, there were two problems: first that the man in the shadows couldnÕt get the pistol to fire, and second that the man was Duffy.

ÒThe powder must have got damp,Ó Duffy was saying, jerking the trigger back and forth.

The weapons specialist explained that although the flintlock was an accurate replica of a steel Doune pistol, down to the fluted barrels at the breech and the octagonal flared muzzles, it was not a real gun. No powder. It only shot blanks.

ÒWell, far as I can see,Ó sneered Duffy, ÒitÕs not shooting anything, sonny jim.Ó

With a screwdriver, the specialist made adjustments. He wiped it with a cloth and handed it back to Duffy, who stared into the barrel, finger on the trigger.

ÒPlease donÕt do that,Ó the specialist said, trying to snatch it back.

ÒYou just said it has blank cartridges,Ó said Duffy, jinking away. ÒI have acted in films for thirty years. I am aware these are harmless.Ó

The specialist gently extricated the pistol from the actorÕs grasp, explaining that the blanks contained a paper plug sealing the powder in a wad. A cloud of hot, expanding gas expelled at high velocity from the muzzle of a pistol firing blanks was not a good thing. There were accidents on movie sets through carelessness with pistols.

Duffy snatched his pistol back, turned it in his hands.

ÒIÕve fired more guns than youÕve had hot dinners, laddie. I must've killed tens of thousands of villainous individuals, and not a one of them accidentally. Including all those Zulus that time.Ó

Duffy resumed gesticulating wildly with the pistol.

ÒWell, thatÕs real good,Ó said the specialist, backing away. ÒExperience is good.Ó

ÒIÕve never had an accident,Ó Duffy shouted at those dispersing around him.

Lillee whispered in RichÕs ear. ÒBe a good fellow, and go get Mac before old Duffer blows someoneÕs arse off. The ancient bastardÕs right stonkered.Ó

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* * *

MacPherson stared blankly at a bank of monitors. Claverhouse perched on one, preening with his black and white beak.

ÒTheyÕre ready now, Mac.Ó

MacPherson looked upset.

ÒHow you feeling?Ó Rich tried.

ÒAh wis copacetic till ah saw this."

MacPherson motioned him to two adjacent screens featuring stills of the actress playing DuffyÕs romantic interest: the first from the studio, the other from yesterday on the beach.

ÒWhit do you notice?"

ÒThat sheÕs beautiful?Ó

ÒLook close. WhitÕs different?Ó

Rich looked again. ÒHer hair?Ó

MacPherson shook his head.

ÒEyes?Ó

ÒYir jist guessing! Yir not even trying.Ó

Rich couldnÕt see what was different. ÒHow about a clue?Ó

ÒFuckÕs sake,Ó MacPherson groaned. ÒAhÕll give you a clue, Dick. *Tits*?Ó

ÒTits?Ó Rich looked again. ÒOh, theyÕre bigger! Her breasts are...larger.Ó

ÒAye, and itÕs no them swelling up in the jungle heat. How dare she do this tae me! Again!Ó

ÒWell,Ó said Rich. ÒIÕm sure no one will notice.Ó

MacPherson cackled bitterly.

ÒYou need to try being nicer to Sir Terry,Ó Rich offered. ÒHeÕs the reason we got this Toubacanti thing financed.Ó

MacPherson growled like a wounded animal. ÒAhÕm being chewed tae death by iggers, up tae eight anti-histamine a day, mah actresses ur growing massive bosoms even as we speak. Believe you me, Ah donÕt need to be nice tae naebody. The Indians call him Gungidule noo. It means man of gold. They say his Oscar is a powerful nuchu. They practically worship the auld fart.Ó

MacPherson sat with his head in his hands, rocking back and forth. Rich waited.

ÒWhit halfwitÕs idea wis it tae make a film of the Darien expedition in actual Darien anyway?Ó

ÒYours. It was going to be your Aguirre, your Fitzcarraldo. Remember?Ó

ÒExcept commercial.Ó

ÒRight.Ó

ÒAch, give us that crutch there. Claverhouse! Tae battle!Ó

The macaw flew to his shoulder, making a clacking noise with its beak.

* * *

A light tropical rain fell, spattering the leaves, dripping from lianas and black Saragossa, glinting in the arc lights on silvery petrels, as MacPherson paced the circuit to be tracked by the steadicam operator. He was shadowed by a key grip carrying a .45 to protect the director from animals lurking in the undergrowth.

ÒIÕm supposing *his* gun works,Ó Duffy sniffed.

MacPherson issued final instructions to Gunther Klein. The Austrian behemoth, wearing the operatorÕs harness with the iso-elastic arm attached to the sled, couldnÕt bend down. MacPherson was lifted up on a wooden crate. He spoke up at Klein from the crate. The big blonde man nodded, Teutonically.

Action.

Klein circled Duffy, rotating and tilting the sled pole. The cameraman needed to be strong because the

apparatus weighed sixty-five pounds, the steel harness attaching the operator to it rather than vice versa. The fluidity of the shot, the smoothness of motion provided, was in inverse proportion to the ugly splayfooted waddle required of its operator. Klein walked after the fashion of FrankensteinÕs monster as he wheeled smoothly around Duffy, who stared off at the fort, impassive, lips pursed, brutal and silent. Klein stopped. Duffy raised the pistol. Nothing.

ÒWell, damnation,Ó Duffy said to the camera. ÒPowder has got damp again.Ó

ÒCut. Cut,Ó screamed MacPherson. ÒThere is no fucking powder. The thing fires blanks, damn it.Ó

Lillee rested his fingers on the directorÕs shoulder.

ÒAwright.Ó MacPherson raised a hand. ÒAh know, ah know.Ó

ÒWeÕre having a few snafus with the gun is all it is.Ó

ÒAhÕm good.Ó

The weapons specialist returned, chagrined.

ÒI donÕt see,Ó Duffy was saying, Òwhy we canÕt use a real weapon. It's not as if anyone will know.Ó

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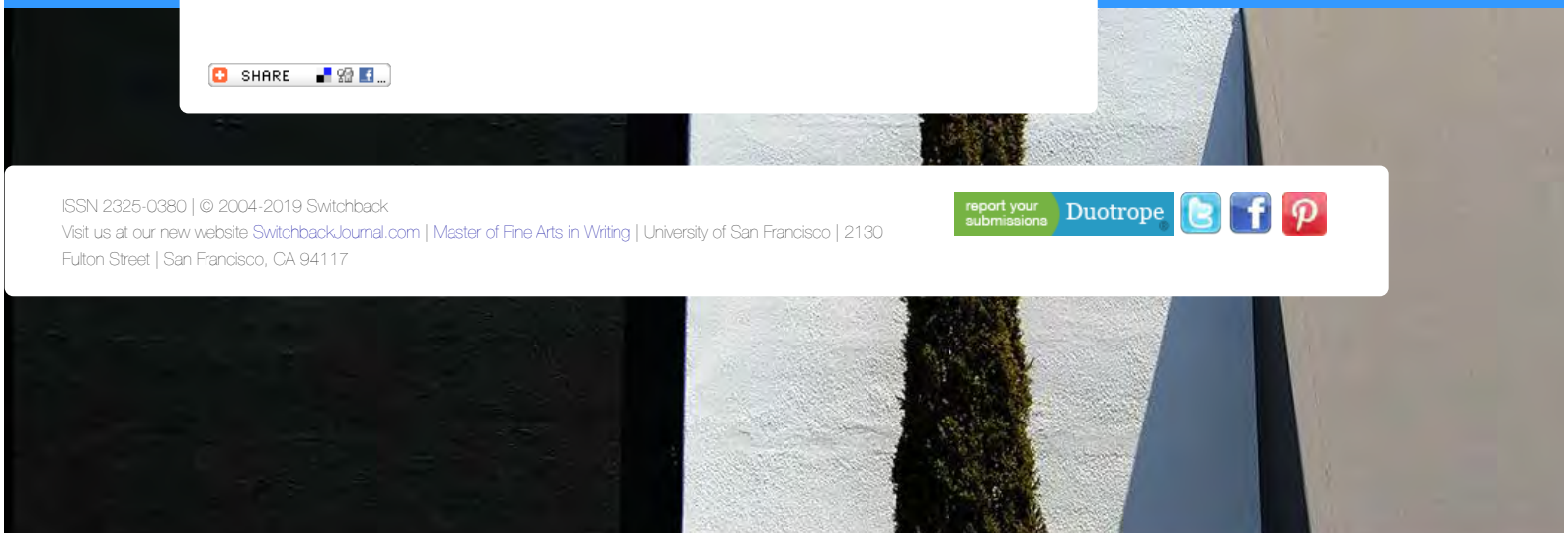

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Night Shooting

Rob McClure Smith

6.00 a.m. A recovered clap stick clapped.

This time Klein did not complete his loop but gave a small cry and toppled, as in slow-mo, camera weighing him down as he disappeared into a head-high thicket of prickly palm from which he commenced screaming in agony.

ÒScheisse. Scheisse.Ó

MacPherson was concerned. Òls the camera okay?Ó he cried. ÒFor GodÕs sake, is the camera awright?Ó

Lillee crouched over Klein, extricating camera from sled.

ÒItÕs fine,Ó he said, with a thumbs up. ÒNo damage.Ó

ÒThank Christ.Ó MacPherson wiped his brow. ÒThatÕs a relief.Ó

ÒScheisse,Ó screamed Klein, rolling to and fro. ÒMeine beine tun wir meh.Ó

ÒSprachen Sie fuckinÕ English a minute here, Gunther?"

ÒNaibe dugologuad,Ó said one of the Kuna, pointing at KleinÕs leg.

ÒCan we get a translator here? This is like the fuckin' Tower of Babylon.Ó

ÒNaipe naipe,Ó shouted another Kuna, alarmed.

ÒPoisonous snake.Ó Duffy announced. ÒThe big Kraut has been bitten by one, got at by the fangs of the coral snake or a big bushmaster, perhaps.Ó

ÒDie Schlange,Ó yelped Klein, trying to sit up. ÒDie schlange.Ó

ÒGuntherÕs got bit by a snake,Ó Lillee said, redundantly.

ÒAw, Christ oan a bike.Ó MacPherson looked at the writhing cameraman with annoyance. ÒHow careless wis that?Ó

Klein looked up pleadingly, pawing at his leg.

ÒWhat does one do in a situation like this?Ó asked Lillee.

Òls there anyone else can work the steadicam?Ó asked MacPherson.

ÒFor GodÕs sake,Ó said Rich. ÒCan we get this man some medical attention?Ó

ÒMaybe someone should suck out the poison?Ó suggested a Spanish officer.

There was a squall of nervous laughter.

ÒThatÕs what they do in the movies,Ó said an extra.

ÒWell, this isnae the movies,Ó said MacPherson. He considered the statement. ÒAnyway, ahÕm no sucking oan nae big German fella. For wan thing, ah donÕt swing that way. For anither, ah donÕt know where heÕs been.Ó

ÒThe man may be beyond medical help already,Ó intoned Duffy, gloomily. ÒThe venom of jungle snakes is so poisonous that cardiac arrest often follows within seconds.Ó

Duffy straddled Klein, who looked up at him with a startled expression. Duffy turned to a Kuna.

ÒElardo! Go get me the chainsaw. The one they used on those tree things.Ó

ÒWhat you want a chainsaw for?Ó asked Rich, nervously.

Duffy shrugged. ÒWe need to amputate the leg before the poison seeps into his circulatory system. ThatÕs what needs to happen.Ó

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ÒDonÕt be fucking ridiculous,Ó Rich shouted. ÒNo one is cutting off no oneÕs leg with a goddamn chainsaw. Are you mad?Ó

ÒItÕs the only thing for it,Ó Duffy shouted in his face. ÒIf you donÕt want to help him live, get the hell out of my way. IÕm about saving lives here.Ó

All eyes were now on Duffy, including the macawÕs yellow ones.

ÒIÕm going to faint,Ó said Klein. He had wisely reverted to English.

ÒNo youÕre not,Ó said Lillee, patting him on the head. ÒThat would be stupid.Ó

Elardo returned, carrying a hatchet.

ÒAh, that will do the job,Ó said Duffy. ÒThat is satisfactory.Ó

Klein pointed at Duffy, trembling with fear or anger. ÒFick dich, Wichser.Ó

ÒDonÕt let them near him,Ó cried Rich.

ÒIÕm going to die,Ó Klein sobbed. ÔIÕm going to die.Ó

ÒNo oneÕs going to kark it on my watch, mate,Ó said Lillee, yawning.

The Kuna passed the hatchet from hand to hand, talking loudly.

ÒThey are saying,Ó said Duffy, Òthat if we do not act soon the snake devil will crawl into the manÕs body...Ó

ÒEnough wiÕ the fucking snake devils,Ó said MacPherson. ÒJust get him back tae the medical tent and git him...aspirin...ur sumthin."

ÒWanky wank,Ó screeched the macaw.

ÒDonÕt you be starting telling me whatÕs enough, midget-man.Ó The pistol was in DuffyÕs right hand as he waggled it at the directorÕs shoulder. ÒIÕm trying to save a manÕs life while you lot are signing his death warrant by rank negligence and...Ó

The pistol discharged.

Everyone jumped, including Klein. Then no one moved at all. The jungle was silent. The macaw flew up to a tree. The birdÕs flight was awkward. It clung to a branch, one dark blue wing outstretched and shattered and streaked red as its underside. Its feathers shone in the arc lights with an iridescence of metallic gold. The bird looked down, almost wonderingly, its eyes filming, and then fell with a flat splat to the dirt.

Klein looked a little better, a pile of bloody feathers bunched before him.

ÒThe good news is,Ó said Duffy, Òthe pistol now seems to be operational.Ó

MacPherson made a flying leap for the actorÕs throat. The attempted strangulation was averted, though, and the director thrown to the ground beside Klein, held down by a group of uniformed men.

ÒYou killed Claverhouse, you fuckinÕ prehistoric lunatic,Ó MacPherson bawled. ÒYou murdered mah burd.Ó

Duffy looked around. ÒThis incident was obviously accidental.Ó He gestured towards the weapons specialist. ÒThe fault lies there if anywhere. That man is an incompetent of the first water. It is a good thing he didnÕt bring harm to someone.Ó

ÒYou homicided mah macaw.Ó

One of the Kuna bent over Klein and rolled up the GermanÕs pant leg. ÒHe mash up good. Bullet ant.Ó

ÒThere you go,Ó said Duffy. ÒA false alarm. One of them ant things again. I suspected as much.Ó

ÒPissen sie auf!Ó said Klein, struggling to get to his feet.

ÒI am perfectly amenable, you understand,Ó said Duffy, Òto purchasing a new parrot, one which he can also teach to use profanity as he sees fit.Ó

ÒHowÕs about that,Ó Lillee offered, hopefully, Òis a wrap?Ó

* * *

6.30 a.m. MacPherson was borne to the medical tent for a sedative and Klein for a tetanus shot.

ÒWhat am I going to say to the studio?Ó Rich asked Lillee. ÒWhat am I going to tell them? That the Darien Disaster is officially now a Darien Disaster?Ó

ÒYou ask me, mate, you just tell them itÕs going a hell of a lot better than the last one.Ó

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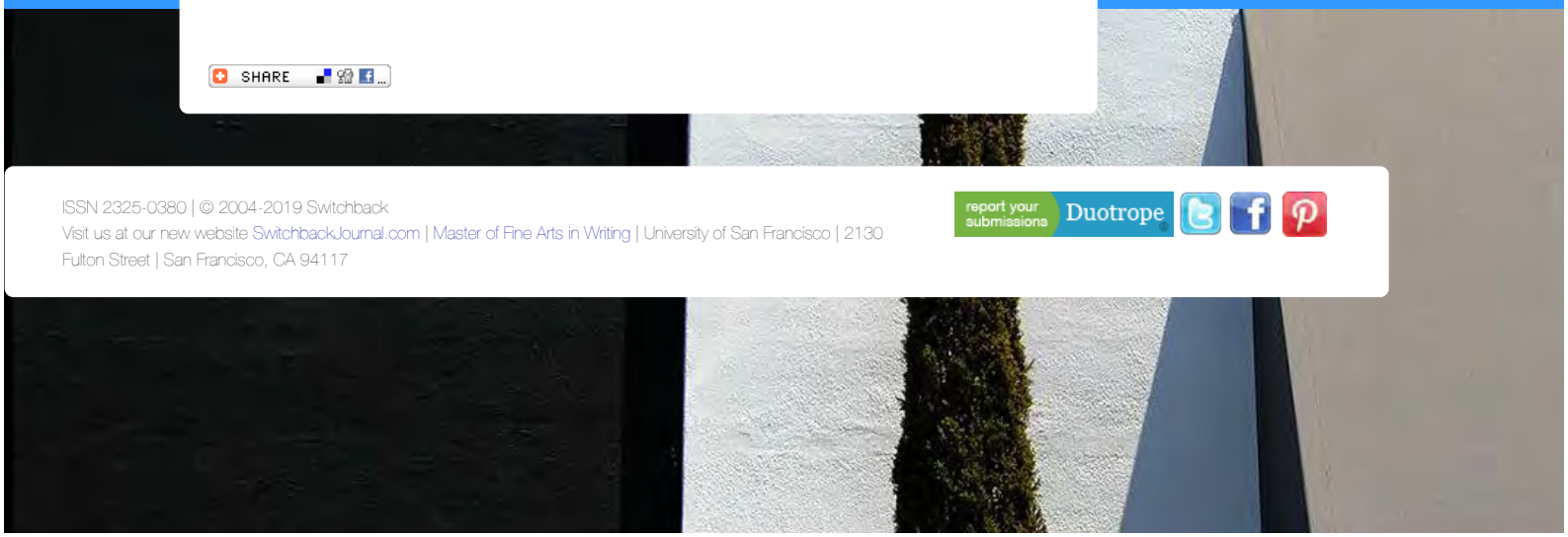

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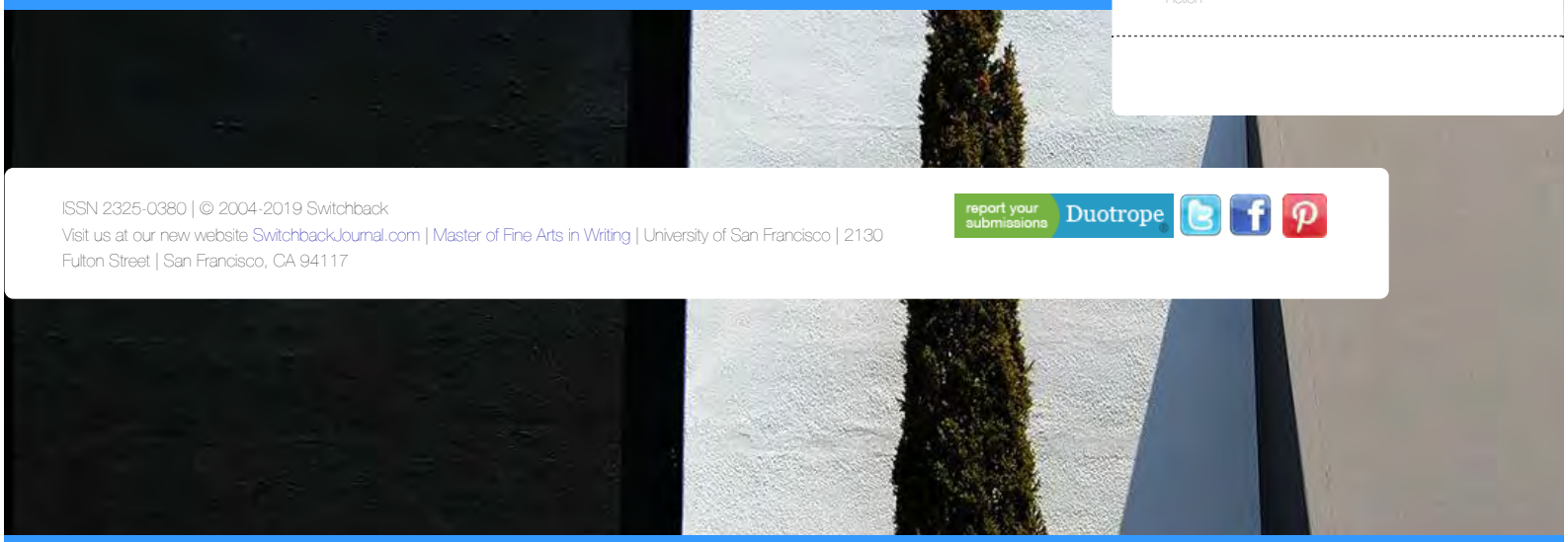

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Nothing Gold

Alaina Symanovich

If NikhilÕs mother hadnÕt found the gold-stamped Honors Society envelope under the avalanche of SAT workbooks in his room, he would've never had to become a Peer Ambassador. And if he hadnÕt become a Peer Ambassador, he wouldnÕt have had to sandwich himself in an abhorrent orange vest to patrol the school grounds twice a week with a pad of tear-off detention slips in his hand. And he never wouldÕve bumbled into Macy CameronÕs line of sight as she spraypainted a camel-cursive *m* onto the gymnasiumÕs exterior wall.

Because sheÕd chosen gold, each curve of the *fuck him* scintillated in the third-period sunshine. NikhilÕs glasses fogged as he exhaled, his surprise visible in the January chill.

ÒHey,Ó he called out, his palms sweating like they did when Mr. Stetler made him scribe geometric proofs on the blackboard. In his months of Peer Ambassador policing, the worst crimes Nikhil had encountered were wads of bubblegum smeared across cafeteria tables, paper airplanes lobbed during assemblies, middle fingers thrust during class changes. Usually the perpetrators shuffled around in groups of three or four, slouch-shouldered and slow-eyed. Macy stood alone, five-foot-four in tailored clothes, haloed with the fragrance of strawberry shampoo. A gold charm bracelet hung off her right wrist, its Bambi pendant clattering against the nozzle of the spray bottle.

She didnÕt flinch. ÒArenÕt you going to call somebody?Ó The sun flashed across her pupils, sunbeams on a frozen lake, as she shifted her weight to one hip.

ÒIÑno,Ó Nikhil shook his head, confused. He might as well have been facing Mr. Stetler, chalk melting in his hand as the teacher dismantled his reasoning. ÒThey donÕt give us phones.Ó

As Macy continued to stare, Nikhil felt all too aware of the thrumming behind his collarbone, the heat on the apples of his cheeks. Like most boys in the sophomore class, heÕd fantasized about approaching Macy Cameron, but in his mind the scenario never unfolded like this. HeÕd pictured a balmy Friday afternoon, dazzling her with a half-grinÑsans bracesÑuntil she giggled, tugged a lock of hair, hinted she didnÕt have any plans for the weekend. Now her face seemed etched with the hieroglyphs of last weekÕs newspaper article, with its words becoming mirages in NikhilÕs watering eyes, *Star Quarterback Killed in Crash*, his mother elbowing her coffee mug over, his father shaded in silence. The memory slogged muddy shoes over the present. *Lovington High senior Austin Cameron died Saturday night*, his mother had read, her thick Bengali accent comic. *Charges are pending against the suspected drunk driver*. DidnÕt Nikhil know that Cameron boy? DidnÕt he have biology class with his cousin? WhatÕs-her-name, Marie? Molly? The poor girl.

Macy, his syllables had thunked like lead weights. *Her nameÕs Macy*.

ÒSo turn me in.Ó The can twitched in MacyÕs fingers. ÒThatÕs your job. Nikhil, right? Turn me in.Ó She cocked her head to the side, casting an oblong shadow over the shimmering gold behind her.

ÒIÕm sure Dr. Jeffreys will understand,Ó Nikhil said, focusing on her hand. It seemed like the only safe part of her. ÒIf you want to just go homeÑÓ

ÒI want you to turn me in,Ó she said, taking a step forward. He could make out another charm on the bracelet: Bamm-Bamm, the adopted Flintstone. He remembered ogling that grainy cartoon on Saturday mornings in elementary school, in the pilfered hours before his father clicked to nature documentaries.

Nikhil imagined what his mother would say if she could see him in that moment. Her lips would probably frost with a hailstorm of reprimands: how dare he get this poor girl in trouble, didnÕt he know what sheÕd been

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through, shame on him. But maybe refusing Macy would be just as offensive. He sucked his lips against his braces, nibbing small cuts along the inside of his mouth. He watched his shadow bobblehead against the brick as he consented.

ÒIf youÕre sure,Ó he pretended to deliberate. But already he was pivoting in the direction of the main doors of Dr. JeffreysÕs office. She snapped to follow him.

He hurried to grab the door for her, training his eyes on the DO NOT PUSH ON GLASS sticker as she swept past. The school smell of erasers and cafeteria chicken nuggets bit at NikhilÕs nose, somehow intensified by the lobbyÕs emptiness.

They trooped past the spot where Nikhil had been standing the first time he saw Macy: last year, August 28. He and his friend Rohan stood under the school banner, pretending to compare schedules as they side-eyed the coursing crowds around them: track girls in matching hoodies, their legs whippet-thin; upperclassmen boys chugging milk cartons, catcalling girls in short skirts; thespians gossiping about the new director. The clamor quieted a few decibels when Austin yanked open the door for Macy.

Austin was the first junior to captain LovingtonÕs team since the Ô80s since Bill Krezinsky, who couldÕve gone pro if he hadnÕt busted his knee at Syracuse. Even Nikhil, who had watched all of three football games in his life, knew about him. And since Rohan had worked at the Tastee Freeze with Macy all summer, Nikhil knew of her also.

ÒGood God,Ó Rohan whispered, clenching his schedule tighter as she passed. She was all he talked about after each shift. Because she had a perfect ski-slope nose and hair the color of warm honey, the manager let her idle behind the register instead of slogging through the puddles of chocolate sauce and soft-serve along the prep line. She earned the same as Rohan, whoÕd emerge exhausted and besprinkled at 11:30. Rohan never complained.

ÒDamn,Ó Nikhil said, eyeballing Macy until she turned the corner. He repeated the word, thinking how lucky he was to go to school with honey-haired girls, to use profanity in a clogged hallway without fearing detention. This was high school, alright.

ÒAlways with the cousin, though.Ó Rohan glanced down at the crinkled schedule in his hands. His thumbprint imprinted a splotch of dampness. ÒI wouldÕve maybe talked to her if he hadnÕt sprinted in after every shift.Ó

Nikhil snorted. ÒSure you wouldÕve.Ó

ÒI mean it,Ó Rohan tucked the mangled paper in his pocket. ÒWith most girls itÕs the father youÕre supposed to worry about, right? Whoever heard of going through the cousin?Ó

Nikhil laughed, made some jab about Rohan needing to get through more than just Austin, but the conversation ghosted him for the rest of the school year. This year, sitting three seats down from Macy in biology, heÕd often felt the prickle of AustinÕs stare when the seventh-period bell rang, noticed those shoulders hulking the classroom threshold. He decided Rohan had a point: something about the Cameron family signaled *stay back*.

Macy sidestepped Nikhil at the Main Office door, grabbing the handle before he could and darting inside. The spray can clunked against the doorframe, drawing the secretaryÕs gaze.

ÒIÕm here to see Dr. Jeffreys,Ó Macy announced. For the first time, Nikhil heard the bravado in her voice. He watched the corner of her mouth bunch as she chewed her cheek.

ÒSo am I,Ó he said, too quickly. The secretary crinkled her forehead at the pair of them, and Nikhil realized how heavily they were both breathing.

ÒYou donÕt have to come in with me,Ó Macy whispered as they waited for the secretary to dial the principal. Nikhil didnÕt look at her as they were led inside Dr. JeffreysÕs office. As they sunk into the burgundy pleather chairs, his eyes snagged on the ficus perched near the window, its leaves blotched russet around the tips. He wondered when anyone last watered it.

Nikhil stayed silent as Macy recited her story. She grumbled off the facts in the same way Mr. Stetler listed postulates, one gray detail after another rolling off a conveyor belt. When she stopped, Dr. Jeffreys looked at Nikhil.

I know, sir, Nikhil pleaded with his eyes. *I wouldnÕt have turned her in*. The disappointment splattered across the principalÕs face, shining like a curse word in the morning sun, shamed Nikhil. *Fuck him*, Macy had

sprayed. Nikhil didnÕt know the name of the drunk driver who killed Austin. He wondered if she did.

The silence itched NikhilÕs throat. ÒIÕll clean it off,Ó he said. ÒIÕll stay after school.Ó

ÒNo way,Ó Macy shook her head. ÒItÕs a five-day suspension for me. Minimum. And a formal disciplinary review *and*ÑÓ she glared at Nikhil, Òif this is like last year, when those seniors graffitied the equipment shed, *I*Õ*m* the one who has to scrub it off.Ó She crossed her ankles. Òln Saturday detention.Ó

Dr. Jeffreys raised his eyebrows.

ÒThis is a stressful time, Macy.Ó He used the same placating tone NikhilÕs mother used when she goaded him to run weekend errands with her.

She folded her arms.

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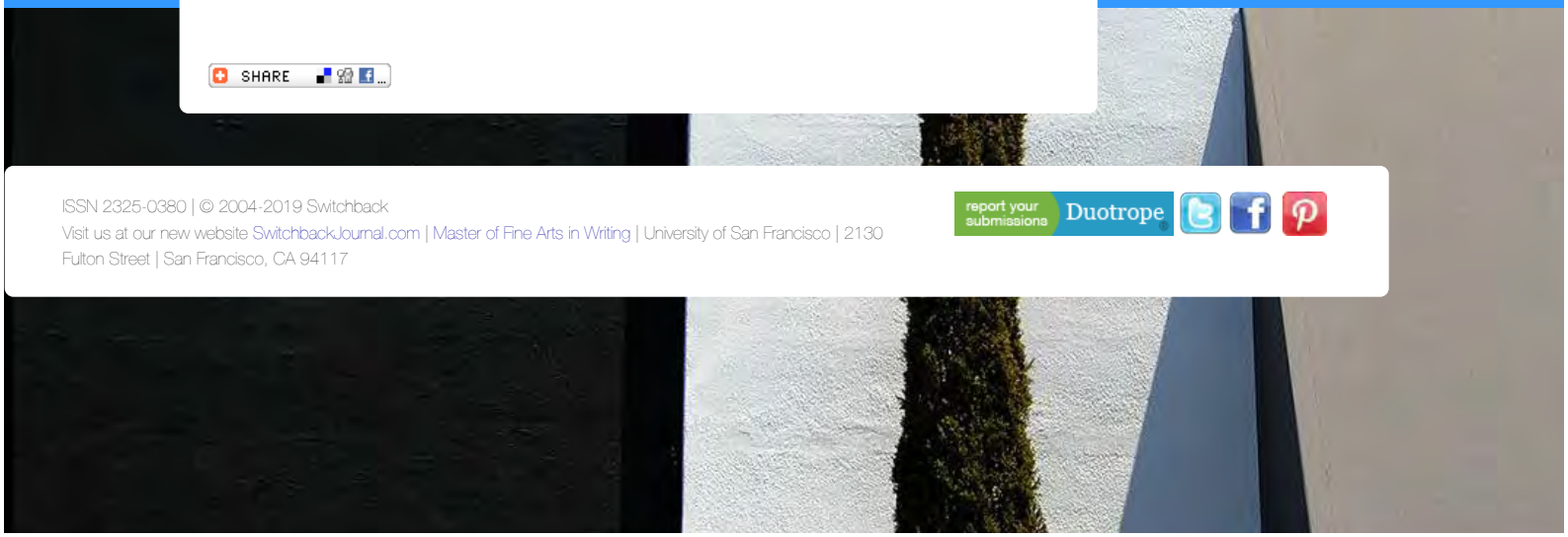

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Nothing Gold

Alaina Symanovich

Saturday morning dawned cold and clear as Nikhil drove the seven-minute route to the high school. His mother had clucked over him until he agreed to stuff his gloves with hand warmers, to bring a thermos of hot tea. After endless bartering with Dr. Jeffreys, Macy had finally sulked out of the office with nothing more than a cotton-soft admonition to take care of herself. Nikhil didnÕt feel right about rescinding his offer to clean the wall, and Dr. Jeffreys didnÕt ask him to. Macy hadnÕt looked at him in class all week.

NikhilÕs lips had turned to pufferfish, numb and stupid from the wind chill, by the time the last of the gold residue surrendered to the Wipe Out gel. When MacyÕs shadow spilled over the damp brick, he could barely manipulate his mouth into a greeting.

ÒI was thinking you could do me a favor,Ó Macy said, ignoring his hello. She stared at his chin, seared scarlet by the mauling wind, letting him know he looked ridiculousÑa Rudolph gone wrong.

Backlit by the gold sun, MacyÕs hair turned to fire around her temples. The memory alighted on Nikhil, fast and frenetic as a hummingbird: Macy striding through the corridor that first day of freshman year, Austin at her helm. How her eyes sliced through the crowd, undaunted. Had she stood closer, had the light glinted any brighter off her charm bracelet, had he not been a gawky and glasses-faced honors student, he would have reached for her hand.

ÒI need a ride,Ó she explained, tilting her head toward his car in the adjacent lot.

ÒWhere to?Ó

But she was already pacing toward the vehicle, ducking her head against the wind. Nikhil jogged after her, feeling for his keys. She tugged the handle of the Escort as he fumbled for the unlock button.

ÒHome Depot first,Ó she said after the engine huffed to life. Nikhil nodded, noticing the astringent chemical scent that plumed around him when he maneuvered the gearshift. Macy sat on her hands.

ÒIÕm sorry IÕm such a bitch.Ó

Nikhil nodded, unsure how to respond. HeÕd never been on a date with a girl, nothing more intimate than a partner project in the library. He wondered what sort of things a girl like Macy would want to hear.

ÒI can be normal,Ó she continued, looking out the window. ÒI used to be normal. HereÑask me something. Go on. Anything you want.Ó

He swallowed. ÒI donÕt know.Ó

ÒYes, you do. It can be anything. LikeÑI donÕt knowÑwhatÕs your favorite flower?Ó

He glanced at her, a side-swipe to verify she was really curious. For once she met his gaze. He sat up straighter, cleared his throat.

ÒMy mom used to plant marigolds,Ó he said. ÒBack when we had a garden. Every spring.Ó Macy didnÕt speak for a long time; Nikhil felt the silence chisel a space between them. Just when he thought heÕd misspoken, thought the chasm would swallow them whole, she laughed. It sounded hollow, debris tumbling down bedrock, but it was a laugh nonetheless.

ÒWe had a garden, too. My mom was too goddamn lazy to take care of it, so she paid Austin to do it.Ó

Something about AustinÕs name seething between them felt disconcerting to Nikhil, inauspicious like a humid winter night or storm-charred afternoon sky. He couldnÕt muster anything more than *IÕm sorry*, which he said to the dashboard.

ÒHe was *always* there,Ó she said as Nikhil steered into the Home Depot lot. And she didnÕt say anything else, except that sheÕd be out in a minute and that he should keep the heat running.

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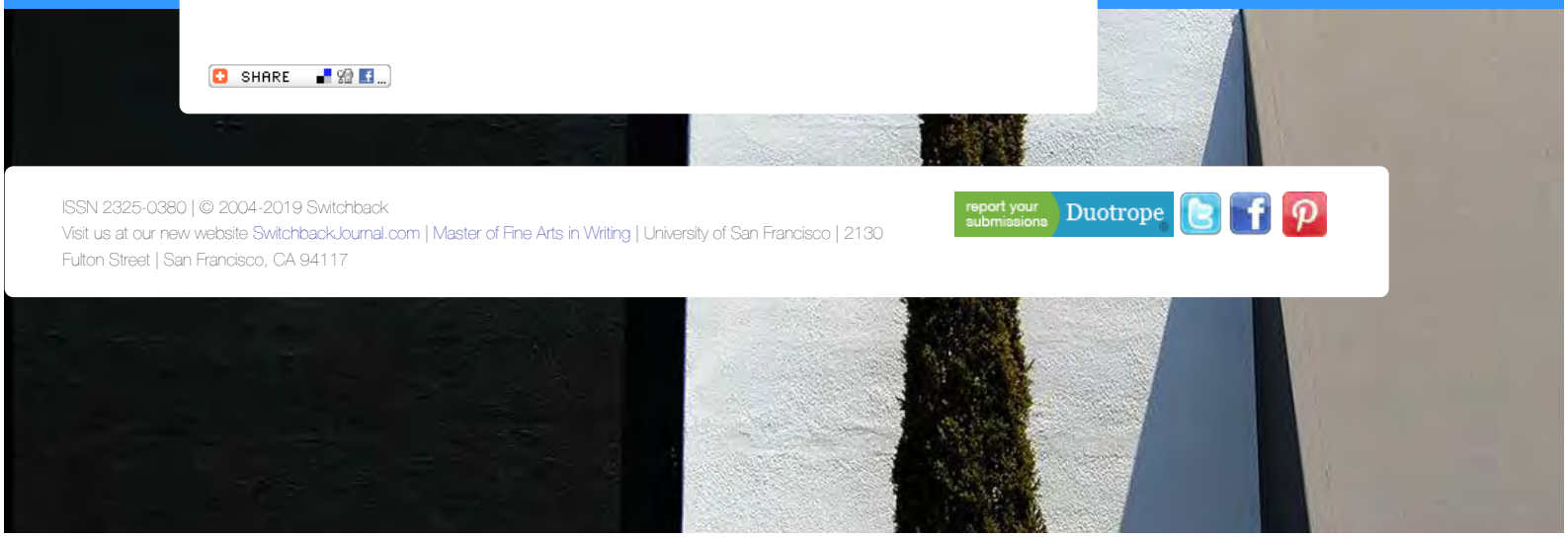

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Nothing Gold

Alaina Symanovich

At one oÕclock Nikhil found himself, dumbfounded, idling outside the Lovington First Presbyterian Church. He tried to swallow the anger carbonating in the back of his throat. Patience; he knew Macy needed patience. But something about sitting outside the funeral irked him. Maybe it was the shock of the intimacyÑlike opening a bathroom door to find a stranger unpantsed on the toilet. The jolt of exposure. All he knew was, one minute he was navigating forested back roads, vigilant for deer; the next, he faced a mass of mourners all in black.

Macy had given no clues. SheÕd emerged from the store smelling of cold, had winked at him as she settled into her seat.

ÒSupplies,Ó she said, wagging a new bottle of gold spray-paint in front of him. ÒAnd thatÕs not all.Ó She fished inside her coat pockets, found two seed packets and dropped them in his lap. ÒFor you.Ó

ÒMarigolds,Ó he read, fighting to shade the smile lighting his face. The flowers in the seed-packet pictures blazed like suns, and as he hunched over them Nikhil decided he didnÕt care that Macy hadnÕt returned with a bag, or receipt. He hadnÕt cared where she wanted him to drive, eitherÑjust kept nodding as she instructed *turn right* or *itÕs the next left*. With so many marigolds and suns kaleidoscoping his mind, thoughts of the funeral never occurred to him.

ÒShould IÉ?Ó he gestured toward the church, tensing his stomach muscles as if preparing for a punch.

ÒItÕs best if you donÕt.Ó She paused for a moment, her grip slackened on the door handle. A shadow tinted her face a new shadeÑsadness, or regret, Nikhil thought. He almost told her not to go. But the moment passed and as the passenger door slammed, he chided himself for being stupid. Of course she would, should, attend AustinÕs funeral. And of course he would wait for her.

More guests coursed through the double doors, a black vein that didnÕt trickle dry for fifteen minutes, until the service must have started. What kind of person, Nikhil wondered, walked into a funeral late? And then the thought splashed him with shame. Maybe the stragglers were AustinÕs childhood best friends, football camp roommates, fellow Boy Scout sufferers. Maybe theyÕd cried under the shower spray that morning, had remembered too late that their black jackets needed ironing, had stubbed their toes on their way out the door and collapsed to the floor in tears. Maybe it was a miracle they came at all. Maybe he didnÕt know anything.

And then Macy was back at the passenger door, her whole torso twisting as she wrenched the handle. When he unlocked the door, she fell into the seat, trembling. ÒDrive. Fucking *drive*,Ó she commanded, splintering like balsa wood as she lowered her forehead to her knees. The church doors snapped open and she screamed at him again, an electrocution he felt all down his legs. He started the engine and lurched backward out the parking space, too flustered to check the rearview mirror. He swerved onto the road, not allowing himself to look back at the receding building.

ÒFaster,Ó she said to her kneecaps. ÒJust go. Anywhere.Ó

Her back arched with each breath, the comb of her spine undulating across the landscape out her window. SheÕd left her jacket in the church, Nikhil realized. He cranked the heat and drove faster, hugging the roadÕs sinuous turns and praying no deer would materialize around its endless curves.

He eased the Escort off the road at the rough-hewn sign for State Game Lands 176. He wriggled out of his coat and held out the bundle for Macy.

Òl want to show you something,Ó he said, already maneuvering out of the car, letting in a snap of frigid air.

She followed, keeping the coat cradled in her arms.

The wind pricked small razors against their cheeks, in their eyes. He didnÕt squint, and she didnÕt surrender to the coat. Leaves shuddered like fallen soldiers beneath their tramping feet as Nikhil accelerated, guiding Macy around a rock-studded turn and up a hill.

ÒMy dad took me here as a kid,Ó he said, his voice startling against the dense quiet. ÒHeÕs a botanist, so heÕd quiz me on all the trees.Ó

Macy clutched the coat tighter to her chest. ÒDid you have a favorite?Ó

Even as his eyes teared, Nikhil smiled. ÒThe tree of heaven. ItÕs really gross, actually. The whole thing stinksÑkind of like bad peanut butter.Ó

ÒMaybe it got kicked out of Eden, too.Ó

Nikhil raised his eyebrows. ÒAnd that was its punishment? Instead of the curse of childbirth, the curse of peanut butter?Ó

Macy stopped and pulled the bottle of spray-paint out from the wads of his coat. He tried not to look surprised. ÒI need to do something.Ó

She struggled to pry the lid off the bottle; eventually, frustrated, she clobbered it against the trunk of an oak. Its metallic cap arced through the air and landed, a strangled star, in a bank of dead brush.

ÒItÕs no tree of heaven,Ó she said, swiping out the familiar letters, Òbut itÕll do.Ó

Fuck him: one tree, two trees, three trees. She scribed it in cursive, in print, striping some trunks with candy-cane swaths of words, writing lengthwise up others. The words smeared into illegibility.

Finally she stopped, turning to him and tilting her head. ÒNo more Eden.Ó

Nikhil shrugged. ÒWell,Ó he toed the dead leaves, Òmaybe the rainÕll wash it away? Someday?Ó

She glared at him. ÒSome things donÕt wash away,Ó she said, and the frost in her voice sliced him deeper than the wind. ÒI didnÕt cry, you know. My own cousinÕs funeral and I didnÕt even cry.Ó

Nikhil blinked, fuzzy from the spray-paintÕs fumes. ÒYou really loved him.Ó

Her mouth curdled, suddenly ugly. The way the tepid light toyed across her face made Nikhil want to back away. ÒI *hated* him.Ó She shook her head, hard, the way sheÕd shaken the bottle before each long spray. ÒFuck it, I hated him. You donÕt knowÑÓ She shook her head again.

ÒJust take me home,Ó she sighed, starting back down the hill. Nikhil hurried to keep pace, his legs pipe-cleaners clambering over the rocks. As they rounded a bend near the bottom of the slope, he noticed a small pond, iced over and shrouded by a pine grove. From his vantage point above the pond, no sunlight seemed to glint its surface. The ice masqueraded as a patch of clouded night on the afternoon landscape, disconcerting him as AustinÕs name had earlier.

Nikhil assumed Macy followed his gaze because, the next thing he knew, her gold bottle was rocketing through the air, skittering across the ice. It rolled and bounced, then lay stranded in the center of the pond. She clomped the rest of the way downhill, indifferent, and Nikhil imagined what his father would say if he could see the scene. His lips would staple into a frown; heÕd elaborate on the toxicity of spray paint, on the devastation it would bring to the pondÕs ecosystem. When it would happenÑwhen the temperature would rise enough to conquer the layer of iceÑwas impossible to predict. But someday soon, sunshine would subdue the cold, and the bottle would leach chemicals like secrets into the murk. The fish and their eggs would die; the bushes fringing the shore wouldnÕt flower with young buds in spring. The vessel would poison the pond, would sink to the bottom, and the brown trees would weep gold.

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Unseen

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Things That Used To Be

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Seattle Green

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Unfinished

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Partly Cloudy With A Chance Of Showers

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