Switchback

Issue 22

Volume 11

Greg Poulos — Editor's Note

Featured Artists

Tammy Ruggles — Nature the Beautiful

Josh Steinbauer — ICELAND.

Nonfiction

Marilyn Horn — Snake

Jim Krosschell — Loon

Greg Larson — Confessions of a Minor-League Jockstrap Washer

Sagirah Shahid — Inheritance

Lori White — Writing Strategies

Poetry

Walter Bargen — Pyrophoric

Allison Campbell — Wave-ing

Jessica Cogar — The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)

P.S. Dean — I Woke Up From a Vision

Kelly Fordon — Riding the Train Through New England

Patrick Hansel — To My Never Born Brother or Sister

Alan Hill — Amelia Hill

Will Nixon — Rain

Clint Smith — Keeping Score

Fiction

John Gifford — Droning

Dylan Henderson — Saturday Morning

Douglas W. Milliken	Toledo
Rebekah Orton	The Suitcase
Warren Read	Clouds of East Danford

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Greg Poulos

Greg Poulos is the current Managing Editor of *Switchback*, and an MFA student at the University of San Francisco, where he is working on a novel. Before that, he used to program computers. He occasionally does things, and also stuff.

Contributions to Switchback

Reviews

Invisible Hands: Voices from the Global Economy
Reviews

Issue 21

Editor's Note

Issue 22

Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Greg Poulos

Welcome to Issue #22 of *Switchback*. We're glad to have you here!

Fall is coming to a close here in San Francisco, and with any luck the rains are finally returning to the city. None of which has been lost on the staff at *Switchback*, it would seem: if this issue is any indication, the mood here is an autumnal and melancholy one indeed. Although weÕve long since stopped assembling our issues according to any sort of explicit theme, those darn themes somehow keep finding their way into the magazine. Funny how that works out.

In her manifesto for the issue, our fiction editor wrote that *Switchback* looks for Òstories that tease the senses.Ó We may have gone a bit beyond merely "teasing" in this issue, in fact. As I look through our contributorsÕ pieces, I keep coming back to the word *austere*. The starkness of the natural world overwhelms the issue: from the fragile cries of loons sounding across a Maine lake, to vast clouds drifting above the rippling chestnut trees in East Danford. Clouds also loom in the black-and-white visions of photographer Tammy Ruggles; our other featured artist, Josh Steinbauer, takes us to distant Iceland, capturing its ancient wave-worn coast on film. Meanwhile, metaphorical waves strike against the poet in ÒWave-ing.Ó

Et cetera, et cetera. I've only just started enumerating them, but this issue of *Switchback* is simply riddled with such connections. I warmly welcome you to spend some time searching more out yourself.

Without further ado, let me announce the Editors' Prizes for this issue.

The second runner-up prize goes to Greg Larson for "Confessions of a Minor-League Jockstrap Washer," an engrossing and not-always-pretty look behind the scenes of a minor-league baseball affiliate. The first runner-up prize is awarded to Alan Hill for his poem, "Amelia Hill," a deeply felt work of reflection and loss. And the grand prize goes to "Loon," an essay by Jim Krosschell. It's probably no coincidence that this beautifully written essay perfectly captures the valedictory melancholy suffusing this whole issue.

But I should quit yapping and let you get to the issue. Before I go, though, two last crucial pieces of business. First, I need to thank all the amazing Switchbackers who've worked tirelessly to get this issue out. Thanks especially to Nina Schuyler, our faculty advisor, and Switchback's genre editors, Virginia Barrett (poetry), Robert O'Connell (nonfiction), and Stefani Wright (fiction).

Second, it's time for me to announce the changing of the guard at *Switchback*. Maybe **that's** the real reason I've been been so preoccupied with melancholy and loss in this note: after the release of this issue, I'm officially no longer the Managing Editor of *Switchback*. But it's not all sad news, because taking my place is the extraordinarily capable and passionate Jordan Serviss. Keep an eye on this space in the future, folks, because I'm pretty sure Jordan and the new editors will be taking *Switchback* to some pretty fantastic new heights.

It's been real, folks. In the great words of the sages: *Be excellent to each other, and party on, dudes.*

Greg Poulos

Managing Editor

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Editor's Note
Greg Poulos

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Tammy Ruggles

Tammy Ruggles is a legally blind photographer in Kentucky. Her professional photography began in 2013 with the help of a point-and-shoot camera and a 47-inch computer monitor. She is also a published writer and artist.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Nature the Beautiful

Featured Artists

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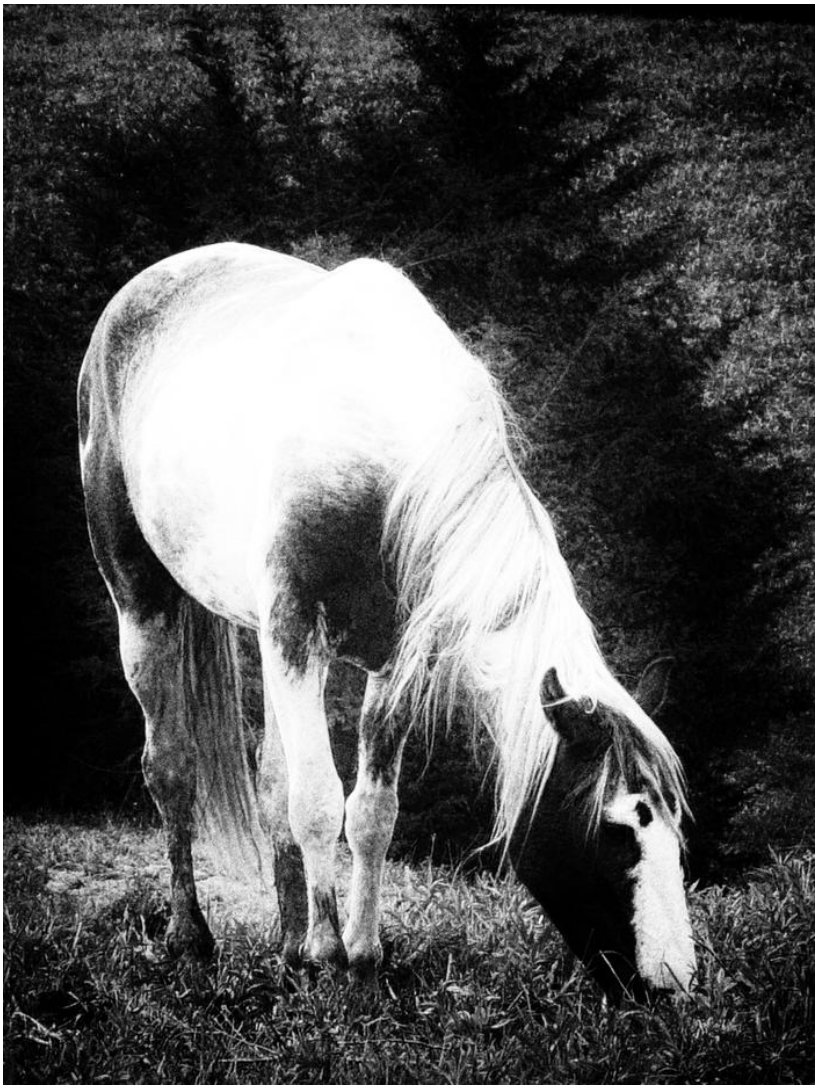
Nature the Beautiful

Tammy Ruggles



Grazing

1 2 3 >>

SHARE

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Page 1 of 3 >>

Featured Artists

Nature the Beautiful
Tammy Ruggles

ICELAND.
Josh Steinbauer

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

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Nature the Beautiful

Tammy Ruggles

As a Cloud

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

<< Page 2 of 3 >>

Featured Artists

Nature the Beautiful
Tammy Ruggles

ICELAND.
Josh Steinbauer

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

<< 1 2 3 >>

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Nature the Beautiful

Tammy Ruggles

Side of the Mountain

<< 1 2 3

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

<< Page 3 of 3

Featured Artists

Nature the Beautiful
Tammy Ruggles

ICELAND.
Josh Steinbauer

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback
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Josh Steinbauer

A filmmaker in NYC, Josh Steinbauer is the proud recipient of the PeopleÕs Choice award from the International Pancake Film Festival. His short "Cap'n Flapjack: The Curse of the Sticky Anchor" and feature *Paper Stars* are due out in next year. Probably his worst job ever was at a beef jerky plant in MinnesotaÑhe came home from work one day and cried about it in the shower.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

ICELAND.

Featured Artists

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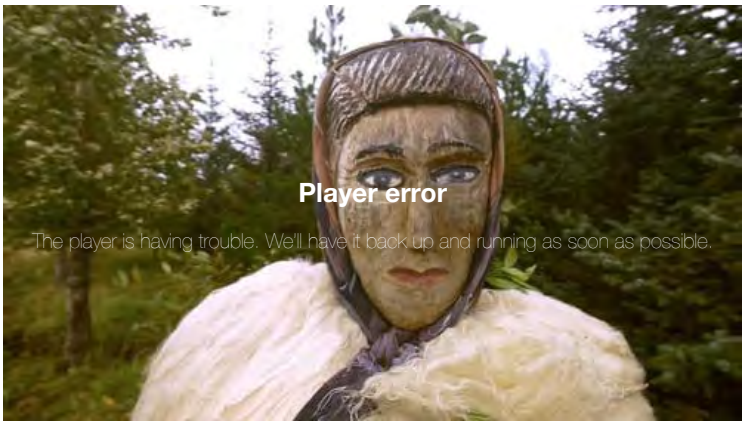
ICELAND.

Josh Steinbauer



Music by Adrianna Krikl

SHARE

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nature the Beautiful
Tammy Ruggles

ICELAND.
Josh Steinbauer

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback
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Marilyn Horn

Marilyn Horn (marilynhornwriting.weebly.com) is a technical editor in Silicon Valley. Her short stories have appeared in *Marathon Review*, *Blotterature*, and *NonBinary Review*, among others, and she also presents at San Jose's Flash Fiction Forum from time to time. A collection of her stories will be published in 2016 by Thinking Ink Press.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Snake
Nonfiction

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback
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Snake

Marilyn Horn

It is July 13, 2003, and I am about to run over a snake. I am driving down Highway 5 from San Jose to L.A., wondering for the umpteenth time if I should have flown instead, when I turn into the rest area near the Firebaugh exit and I see the snake, coiled on the hot asphalt of the parking lot. It looks cozy and content, like a cat on a couch, up until the moment I drive over it. It all happens so fast: the seeing it, the driving over it. *That was a snake*, I think, and then, because of the way it was coiled and because of its gold-and-brown bands, I think, *That was a rattler*. But I don't feel any bump as I pass over it, and when I look in the rear-view mirror there's no dead snake on the road.

Where has it gone? Perhaps it has snuck up into the lower part of my car, winding itself around something mechanical. The carburetor or radiator or alternatorÑI see them all, wrapped in reptile. Or maybe it has wound itself around the tire somehow, has managed to delve deep into the tire grooves and is now circling around and around. Either scenario disturbs me, so I don't stop at the rest area but keep on going, thinking again that I really should have flown, if not for my sister's sake then at least for the snake's.

All the way to L.A., I keep the radio off, listening for a rattle, for a clack of fangs against the brake pedal. I imagine the snake wedging its head out of the A/C vent, poking at the electrical wires, molting on top of the engine and creating its own duplicate, so that when I open the hood I won't know which is which. The snake gets hotter and angrier with each mile and it will kill me if it gets the chance. Still, it is easier to think about the snake than what is up ahead. It is easier to think of fangs and scales than to berate myself for waiting so long to make this trip.

I get to the hospital and park and I can feel the snake's tiny eyes on me as I make my way to the entrance. It won't leave me alone. Even in the waiting room, even as my brother tells me *You're too late* and my mother says *She won't know you* and my father says *You should have flown down*Ñeven then, I think of the snake. My brother and I sit side by side on couch, just like in the old days on Easter Sundays when we sorted through candy in our Easter baskets, only now there is an empty space between us.

We are silent and dumbfounded and starving as we sit in the waiting room, and my mother puts on the TV. Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez are on Entertainment Tonight. *She sure is cute*, Mom says. She smiles a kind, doting smile she reserves for puppies and some celebrities, like this is a normal day, like we should ever give a shit about people on TV, especially on a day like today.

But I can't reprimand my mother about smiling over Jennifer Lopez. I am still thinking about the snake. Maybe when I drove over it, I think, maybe it liquefied into almost nothing. Maybe its fangs are still in my front left tire.

I imagine its family, its nest of snake babies, waiting for its return. Even when the nurse ushers us into the ICU, even when the monitor starts to shriek and the doctors rush into my sister's room, and even when the nurse pokes my sister's arm with another needle, and even when my mother says to no one *Can't they just leave her alone now?* and my father says nothing but just stares at the floor, even then I think of the snake, resting, I am sure, on top of my car's battery, licking up the battery acid with a burp and a sigh.

When my sister is gone (my brother was right, she didn't know me, I should have flown instead of drove), when my sister is gone, my brother opens the window in her room and looks out toward nothing. I stand next to him. A hot and muggy dayÑa small warm breeze drifts inside. My car is ten floors below us in the parking lot, but I'm afraid to look. I know what I will see. The snake is wound around the steering wheel. It is sticking its head up, hissing, trying to get my attention. Its eyes are two tiny embers.

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Snake
Marilyn Horn

Loon
Jim Krosschell

Confessions of a Minor-League Jockstrap Washer
Greg Larson

Inheritance
Sagirah Shahid

Writing Strategies
Lori White

Poetry

Fiction

Maybe if I don't look, I think, maybe it will go away.

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Jim Krosschell

Jim Krosschell divides his life into three parts: growing up for 29 years, working in science publishing for 29 years, and now writing in Massachusetts and Maine. His essays are widely published (see his website and blog), and North Country Press has recently published his book *Owls Head Revisited*.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Loon
Nonfiction

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Loon

Jim Krosschell

On the last day of the year, at dawn on a ten-degree morning, a man lies in bed thinking about *temps perdu*. Just offshore, a loon yodels, announcing itself and its territory as if summer never left.

As usual, the manÕs family is celebrating anti-New YearÕs Eve in Maine. The drive north on the thirtieth has been made, salmon from JessÕs Market broiled for dinner, a quiet night passed, and now anticipation grows for a morning of reading books and staring at sea smoke on the bay, a walk later to Ash Point, an early dinner at a favorite restaurant from the kidsÕ childhood, a movie on Netflix, bed by ten. No fireworks, stupid hats, dropping balls, champagne, headaches, waste. No temptation to fiddle while Rome burns or party like thereÕs no tomorrow. WhatÕs to celebrate? Another year to be claimed as the hottest on record? More consumption ahead? Well, OK, there is that slight temptation to say the hell with the quiet life. Carouse, spend, drive fast, turn up the heat. Bad news can make you reckless.

He turns over and looks out to sea. His inner sybarite fades away. The loon calls again: letÕs stay in the north forever.

When he thinks about loons, he thinks about fragility. A third of the males die in mating season in fights over territory. Once fertile, a mated pair makes a ridiculous nest of grass and twigs on the edge of the shore, in full view of predators. Loons can hardly walk on land, hence the derivation of ÒloonÓ from Old English for lummox. Innocently, they eat lead sinkers, mistaking them for gastroliths to aid their digestion. TheyÕve been thought to be funny, crazy, eerie. Motor-heads in power boats try to run them down. Loons from the lakes of the Midwest and inland Canada sensibly migrate to the Gulf of Mexico for the winter, but the ones from the lakes of Maine are apparently dyslexic and fly to the icy coves of the Gulf of Maine. The Canadian dollar coin is called the loonie not only because the loon is featured on the reverse but because Canadians donÕt take themselves too seriously, and the name used to seem vaguely funny, or at least self-deprecating. Now Canada mines tar sands for oil and cuts boreal forests for toilet paper and no loon is laughing.

ThereÕs nothing funny in nature except what humans bring to it. We photograph animals in hats, in laundry baskets, kissing under mistletoe, doing the things we wish we could, as if we were innocent of the burden of time. In nature time merely passes. Humans are the only animals that squander it.

Are we squandering it? The man puts a human trait to work, his memory. A few months before, he and his wife and daughter and her boyfriend canoed a lake in central Maine on a late September day. The lake had a camp and nothing else on its shores but trees and rocks. Mt. Katahdin filled the view to the north. The day was bright and warm, promising a clear, cool evening. A loon surfaced close to the canoes, sleek, graceful, painted black and white in patterns like VermeerÕs, perfectly within its element. It started calling. Its wail was the classic one so familiar on pure northern lakes, signaling its location for a mate, haunting like a conscience. The call reverberated around the lake shore and in the hearts and bones of the humans.

Lying in bed, looking out on the cold bay, the man knows that is the way time should be felt: in the sun-bound rhythms of the day, in the deep-seated magic of the seasons. People and their crafts are of no account at that moment on the lake. He wonders if the loon cry could be the song at the new year, the auld lang syne, his meme of lost time. IsnÕt this how all of our passages should be reckoned?

Silly man: a birdÕs cry will never replace noisemakers, or chain saws. Now whoÕs the crazy one?

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Snake
Marilyn Horn

Loon
Jim Krosschell

Confessions of a Minor-League Jockstrap Washer
Greg Larson

Inheritance
Sagirah Shahid

Writing Strategies
Lori White

Poetry

Fiction

Greg Larson

Greg Larson is a second-year MFA candidate in nonfiction at Old Dominion University. Although the Minnesota Twins are his first love, the Baltimore Orioles hold a special place in GregÕs heart as his former employer. When heÕs not watching baseball Greg likes to take the stairs instead of the elevator, he likes to eat pepperoni and sausage pizza, and he likes to write terrible poems.

GregÕs work has appeared in *Ruminate Magazine*, *Bell Reve Journal*, and his college memoir, *Learn How to Not Suck*, is available on Kindle or in paperback from Amazon.com.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Confessions of a Minor-League Jockstrap Washer
Nonfiction

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Confessions of a Minor-League Jockstrap Washer

Greg Larson

Alex Schmarzo sits in front of his locker in the Aberdeen IronbirdsÕ clubhouse during preseason workouts. There are forty players milling around a locker room meant for thirty. Schmarzo was the OriolesÕ forty-eighth-round draft pick in 2010, which means one thousand four hundred thirty-seven players were chosen by every team in Major League Baseball before him. ItÕs 2012 now, and he is twenty-three years old, a veteran among children who have just been drafted out of high school, barely old enough to legally spit the tobacco they have lodged in their lips as they laugh around Schmarzo in groups of fours and fives. Everyone wears high black socks and all-black dry-fit shirts and shorts with the OriolesÕ cartoon logo on them.

SchmarzoÕs lip, too, is fat with Grizzly Wintergreen chewing tobacco that he spits into a small paper Dixie cup in his left hand. Framing his mouth is a fu-manchu mustache that makes the brown gobs of spit look like footballs soaring through goalposts. Bags shadowing his blue eyes, he stares at the ground that is visible through the faded carpet. I know Schmarzo well enough already to guess that he did not sleep last night.

When I ask him whatÕs going on, he glances up and shakes his head, running his hand through his hair, which is coarse and feathers out from the bottom of a mullet sticking out the back of his Ironbirds cap. This is what the players refer to as a Òflow,Ó as if his hair always has the wind-swept look of running, even when he sits still (which, as a relief pitcher, he often does). ItÕs one of those baseball styling choices that garners respect in the dugout and clubhouse, but makes the guys look like high-school kids in the real world.

ÒIÕm leaving,Ó he says. ÒJust look at all these guys.Ó He gestures around the packed clubhouse to players enjoying themselves despite the fact that some of them must inevitably be released.

He has already cried wolf about quitting baseball at least twice since he drove up from Sarasota, Florida, where most of these guys have been playing in hundred-degree heat in front of crowds even smaller than the team roster at the OriolesÕ minor-league spring training facility.

I only nod to acknowledge his statement.

ÒIÕm too fucking old to be here, man. What am I even doing here?Ó

I donÕt remind him that his ERA was 6.69 last year, much worse than what he would need to move up in the organization. The IronbirdsÕ season has not yet started, and Schmarzo, like several others in the oversaturated clubhouse, is not on the roster and is therefore not being paid. He is a Ònon-roster invitee,Ó which means that he is spending his days working in Aberdeen, Maryland for no more compensation than the privilege of working his ass off at the ballpark for a team of which he is not technically a part.

I shake my head, not sure how to respond.

ÒTheyÕd be doing me a favor if they cut me, really. But I donÕt know what IÕd do. Look around at most of these guys: almost none of Ôem have a college degree. Jiminez, Rivera, Nivar É they probably never got out of elementary school. Maybe three guys in this clubhouse have college degrees, and IÕm one of Ôem. And even *IÕm* fucked. Some were drafted out of high school. Most of these guys donÕt know how to take care of themselves because people like you feed them and do their laundry and shit.Ó

ItÕs early on in my new job as the clubhouse manager for the team, and Schmarzo is simplifying it a bit, but yes: essentially, I feed the team and do the laundry. I, like Schmarzo, have a college degree, but find myself caught in the web of baseball the same way he and the other players in the clubhouse have been ensnared. I will be spending my summer cutting up celery, oranges, and watermelons and whipping up chicken salads to feed the

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Snake
Marilyn Horn

Loon
Jim Krosschell

Confessions of a Minor-League Jockstrap Washer
Greg Larson

Inheritance
Sagirah Shahid

Writing Strategies
Lori White

Poetry

Fiction

Ironbirds as if IÕm the Team Mom. IÕll spend nights after home games scrubbing their game-worn pants, throwing them in the laundry, and cleaning the clubhouse well into the A.M. Some nights I wonÕt even sleep because the visiting team will arrive at two or three in the morning just as IÕm finishing up the IronbirdsÕ laundry, and IÕll have to wash the visiting teamÕs jerseys and jockstraps. The sun will rise and itÕll be time to make coffee for the Ironbirds coaches who arrive hours before the players. My next summer working for the Ironbirds, maybe IÕll say Òfuck itÓ to having an apartment (which is populated by no fewer than three Ironbird players sleeping on my floor at any given time) and just start living on a blow-up mattress in the equipment closet.

But IÕm not even a player for a professional baseball team: I do all of this humiliating work because I just like to be around the game. IÕm the little brother tagging along because I want a taste of what itÕs like to be a big kid. Ever since my days of playing high school baseball, I wanted nothing more than to be drafted and become a professional baseball player. The problem was that I couldnÕt hit worth a damn and I was the back-up shortstop on a low-level high school team in metro Minnesota, a state known more for ice fishing and hockey than producing baseball stars. And IÕm not Joe Mauer, Dave Winfield, or Paul Molitor: IÕm Greg Larson, and I suck at baseball. The problem, IÕm seeing already, is that these guys in the minors donÕt suck at baseball. In fact, they are some of the most elite players in the world, and the difference between their skill level and the skill level of those on a major-league roster is so small that an average person wouldnÕt know the difference. The players themselves often donÕt even see the difference. They hold on to their own illusions, blind to the fact that almost none of them will ever step foot on a major-league ball field. Alex Schmarzo harbors no such illusions. Alex Schmarzo could be served well by being a little blinder.

ÒMost of us donÕt have any idea what weÕd be doing if we werenÕt playing baseball,Ó Schmarzo continues. ÒItÕs our identity.Ó Zach PetersimeÑAlexÕs best friend, roommate, locker neighbor, and forty-fifth-round draft pickÑwalks past. ÒSlime,Ó says Schmarzo to him, ÒWhat would you be doing if you werenÕt playing baseball?Ó Slime looks at Schmarzo like theyÕre both stupid and shrugs as if the question has never crossed his mind before.

He says he has no idea and walks away.

ÒSee what I mean?Ó Schmarzo says. ÒThis life fucks with you, man. I always say itÕs like scratching lottery tickets: when you have enough guys together playing the lotteryÑbuying scratch-offsÑof course one or two of them are going to win big. ItÕs inevitable. But they win and youÕre just left sitting there scratching away. You throw your money and time away one dollar and one day at a time. But those guys won, though, right? So maybe I can, too. So we keep coming back for more and more until we realize that weÕre broke and out of time.Ó He breaks his frantic eye contact with me and leans his elbows back onto his knees and stares through the floor again. ÒThatÕs what itÕs like to play Single-A baseball.Ó

Nearly three years after that conversationÑand long after I stopped working as clubhouse attendantÑthe only lottery ticket winners from that seasonÕs Ironbirds team have been right-handed pitcher Kevin Gausman and first baseman Christian Walker, who were respectively drafted fourth overall (first round) and one hundred thirty-second overall (fourth round) in 2012. Kevin Gausman has been a valuable pitcher for the Orioles in his first few seasons as a major-leaguer, and Christian Walker was called up to the Orioles for the first time in September of 2014Ñlong enough to have his Òcup of coffeeÓ in the majors, as they say, and long enough to hit his first big league home run.

In the day-to-day operations of the clubhouse, it was obvious that Schmarzo was right when he said that most of these guys didnÕt know how to take care of themselves. As the clubhouse attendant, I did what the players couldnÕt do for themselves, which was often everything except wiping their butts for them. Aside from cleaning up after them, I fed them and did their laundry. And itÕs this aspect of my job that makes me feel at least partially responsible for being part of the unfair system that takes advantage of minor-league baseball players. Although scrubbing game pants and having a pre- and post-game food spread was necessary, the way I was compensated for this job makes me feel guilty even to this day.

The exchange of money in baseball clubhouses works on an archaic system that nobody can quite explain. I mean that in two ways. First, clubhouse managers, or Òclubbies,Ó provide food and services to the players (think tobacco and beer runs) in exchange for daily duesÑseven dollars per player per day in my clubhouse.

What makes me feel guilty about this system, which is used in every clubhouse across minor- and major-league baseball, is that the meal spreads I provided often consisted of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or leftovers from the stadium kitchens, items that cost me no more than a few bucks for a jar of peanut butter or a twenty to grease the palms of the food services kids in the kitchen. When you also consider the schemes I had running inside and out of the clubhouseÑe.g., trading opposing teams cases of beer for team caps, then trading those caps to the stadiumÕs beer supplier for even more cases; or making players turn in their broken bats for new ones, then selling those broken bats through the gift shop for a cut of the saleÑI was turning a profit higher than most of the players on the team. In each of my summers working for the Ironbirds, I netted about $15,000 in a couple of months. There were at least a handful of players on that team who made less than me, even when you added their sub-$10,000 signing bonus to their season salary.

Low-level minor-leaguers make about $1,200 per month. And thatÕs only during the season, which for us was only two-and-a-half months long. According to a complaint in an upcoming lawsuit between a group of former minor-leaguers and Major League Baseball, big league salaries have increased more than two thousand percent since 1976, while minor-league salaries have increased by only seventy-five percent, a rate that does not even compensate for inflation over that time. When you take into account the dues they had to pay to guys like me, plus rent to host families, cell phone bills, and agent fees, Schmarzo was right: a lot of these guys were literally losing money to play minor-league baseball.

Some guys recognized this fact; some of them wouldnÕt have noticed it if you hit them on the side of the head with a ninety-five mile-per-hour fastball. And everyone coped with the struggles of minor-league baseball differentlyÑthe nine-hour bus rides, the sixty-hour work weeks, the shitty meals, the separation from wives and girlfriends. Most often I saw them get drunk and cheat on loved ones.

My second season with the Ironbirds, our trainer, our manager, and I spent almost every homestand night sleeping in the clubhouse: the trainer with his air mattress blown up on the weight room floor, the manager in his private office, and me in the equipment closet. The three of us would stay up late drinking beers on nights before the team would go on the road at dawn, taking cuts in the batting cages at three in the morning with stogies in our mouths. The manager would tell me about the yoga instructor he was looking to fuck, and IÕd think of the tickets for his wife that I had left for him at will-call a few days before. More than once I remember having to shake our still-drunk trainer awake so he could get on the bus full of kids half his age and twice as sober. Likewise, our batting coachÕs fiancŽe broke up with him in the middle of the season because of problems related to his constant absence.

Then there was Gary Allenson (or Muggsy, as he was known in the clubhouse), an ornery prick who called everybody ÒSlick.Ó Muggsy had a bushy mustache and piercing blue eyes, and if he stood up straight enough he was maybe five-foot-six on a good day. His career batting average in his six years in the major leagues (from 1979 to 1985) was .221. The year before I worked in the clubhouse he had been the manager for the OriolesÕ AAA affiliate, the Norfolk Tides, and spent time as a bench coach for the big league team; now he was coaching nineteen-year-olds in Short-Season Single-A in Aberdeen Fucking Maryland, as most called it.

ÒHey, Slick,Ó he called to me from his office one boiling hot afternoon during pre-season workouts. He gestured for me to enter, so I walked in. He shut the door behind me.

Before I could say my prayers, he said, ÒI canÕt open the beer.Ó Dejected, he held up a bottle of the Fat Tire I had left in his fridge at his request.

I pulled the bottle opener off of my keychain and handed it to him.

ÒKeep it,Ó I said, and he cracked the top and sucked down the beer as if it might quench something other than thirst in the middle of that early June day in the New York-Penn League.

Lucky players wind up with a career like MuggsyÕsÑa few years of major-league service, a coaching job in minor-league baseball, and a desire to get back to The Show to somehow vindicate what they could never fulfill as a player. Left with no college degree and no job prospects outside of baseball, former players often have no choice but to go into coaching. This is what happens when organizations take kids straight out of high school or the Dominican Republic as teenagers and drop them into a life that grinds them down every single day, never giving them the tools they need to help themselves financially, socially, or mentally. The players all believe they can make

it, because from the time they could throw a baseball hard enough to make the other kidsÕ knees shake, they have been pumped full of bullshit. First from their dads and coaches in little league and Legion baseball: ÒYouÕll be a major-leaguer some day, son.Ó Then the college coaches who showed up to watch them play: ÒWeÕve got a scholarship with your name on it.Ó Then the major-league scouts with radar guns and charts in their laps, sitting behind home plate wearing sunglasses and polo shirts with Tampa Bay Rays or Cincinnati Reds logos on the breast, telling kids they project theyÕll be in the majors in four years, maybe three, if they stay on the same path. Then they get drafted, and minor-league directors and strength coaches tell guys like thirty-ninth-round draft pick Scott Kalush that if he works his ass off, he has a shot.

Scott Kalush spent the majority of the season packing on muscle that did nothing but pad the space between his ass and the aluminum seat of his spot in the bullpen, waiting to warm up the next relief pitcher during the game. He brought his weight up higher than his college batting average of .198. He packed on muscle so he could be nothing more than a bullpen catcher in an organization that only hung onto him so he could help develop its pitchers, because although he couldnÕt hit, the pitchers loved throwing to him; his instinct behind the plate far exceeded his instinct in the batterÕs box. He had soft hands behind the plate that allowed him to block balls and frame pitches with the skill of a veteran, but those soft hands did not translate to hitting prowess once he took off his pads and stepped up to the plate to hit. Kalush once told me that he thought he had a chance of being a major-league player all the way up through the middle of that season, a time at which he had a .120 batting average.

With the unfavorable odds involved in the major-league draft, there are bound to be young men left in limbo like Scott Kalush and Alex Schmarzo. Baseball isnÕt like other major American sports; for example, the NBA drafts two rounds of about seventy players and has only one developmental league. The NFL drafts seven rounds of about two hundred twenty-five players and doesnÕt even have a developmental league; their drafted players go straight to the big team. The NHL drafts seven rounds as well, scooping up about two hundred players from all over North America and Europe who often go into one of two major developmental leagues, where they are unionized and make a livable salary of $32,000–$42,000 a year or more. But the Major League Baseball draft? Forty rounds with nearly fifteen hundred players and about twenty developmental leagues. None of those fifteen hundred go straight to the major leagues; most will never throw a single pitch or get a single at-bat at the major-league level, and few will make an livable wage. (Until a few years ago there were fifty rounds in the Major League Baseball draft, and in 1996 there were a full hundred.) Some of the higher draft picks get significant signing bonuses, and these are also the draftees who are slapped with a ÒprospectÓ label by the organization, often given a faster and more lenient track to the higher levels of baseball. The rest are left to fend for themselves at the bottom of the pecking order.

The Aberdeen Ironbirds are near the bottom of those twenty developmental leagues that are affiliated with major-league teams, but still a step above the extended spring-training team in Sarasota where most of the IronbirdsÕ new players came from throughout the season when others got released or moved up in the system. One of our pitchers, Luc Rennie, who was a sixteenth-round draft pick and eighteen years old at the time, said, ÒWelcome to The ShowÓ without a hint of sarcasm when one such player from Sarasota made his way into the IronbirdsÕ clubhouse for the first time.

Alan Mills, the pitching coach who wears the kind of sunglasses that were fashionable during the height of his career in the mid-nineties, busts through the door of the clubhouse that leads out to the field. His six-foot, two hundred-pound frame commands the room when he struts into the clubhouse; orange fungo bat in hand, itÕs as if heÕs dragging every one of his twelve years in the major-leagues behind him with each step. ItÕs only the pitchers and me in the locker room, as I continue talking to Schmarzo, still staring at the carpet when Mills walks in.

ÒPitchers!Ó he yells, and they all scramble from the couches and chairs near their lockers. ÒTime for PFP, cocksuckers,Ó he booms, spitting the juice of a fat horseshoe of tobacco wadded behind his lips. He struts around the room, tapping guys on the dick with his bat. They all throw on their caps, grab their gloves, and hurry out to the field for PitchersÕ Fielding Practice. After the last of the pack exits the clubhouse, Mill turns around to Schmarzo.

ÒHey, meat, you cominÖ?Ó

Schmarzo exhales because he knows he isnÖt going to leave. He isnÖt going to stop scratching until someone tells him he canÖt. He sets down his spit cup, slowly stands up, and grabs his glove from his locker before twitching his neck to the left as he does sometimes before walking outside behind Mills to field ground balls and throw them to first over and over again.

Schmarzo will be back the next day, and the day after that, until he gives up a grand slam in his first appearance of the season and sings the same tune again. ÒIÖm too old for this shit,Ó he will say. But then something will change, something will click like the twitches of his neck whenever he makes a bad pitch: Alex Schmarzo will give up all hope of success and in doing so he will enter a hot streak of eighteen scoreless innings of relief over the course of nearly three weeks in July. His dream does come true: Alex will be moved up to the OriolesÖ low-level Single-A team, the Delmarva Shorebirds. But Delmarva is still a long way from Baltimore. And here in Aberdeen Fucking Maryland, even though Camden Yards is only thirty miles down the roadÑfor Alex Schmarzo, Scott Kalush, and many others in this clubhouse, it might as well be a thousand miles away.

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Sagirah Shahid

Sagirah Shahid was born and raised in MinnesotaÕs Twin Cities. Primarily a poet, her work often seeks to make sense of the complexities surrounding the human experience. Sagirah is a 2015-2016 winner of the Loft Mentor Series Award in poetry. Her worked has appeared or is forthcoming in: *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Mizna*, *Bluestem*, *For Harriet*, *Black Fox*, *Knockout Literary Magazine*, and *Qu Literary Journal*.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Inheritance
Nonfiction

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Inheritance

Sagirah Shahid

When I first met her, my Aunt Sheila was cracking jokes during my birth. The air was smoldering, the kind of heat thatÕll strangle you in your sleep if youÕre not careful. The humidity of the season was heightened by the growing chatter of voices flocking towards the confines of a county hospital delivery room.

Because this was her first time, because my mother was the baby in her own family of six siblings, my birth took place in front of an audience. My boisterous family jammed so much of themselves into that snug room, itÕs a wonder my mother could even hear my Aunt Sheila, who for the past hour or so had been hunched over within eyeshot of my motherÕs ever so slightly expanding vagina.

ÒGirl, hurry up and have that baby,Ó my Aunt Sheila teased.

Ten years my motherÕs senior, Sheila had watched my mother blossom from a skinny girl sashaying around in her big sisterÕs skirts into the frightened soon-to-be mother now laying in front of her, gripping the free arm of my soon-to-be father.

ÒIÕm trying!Ó my mother wailed, her tears and sweat mixing in her throat indiscriminately.

My father, not really knowing what to do with his free arm, slid it beneath my motherÕs neck as she convulsed upward in pain, pushing in rhythm with the contraction.

When it was time for me to come, my father held on to my mother and said, ÒI hope itÕs a boy,Ó his handsome smile revealing his giddy, childlike pride.

ÒI see the head,Ó my Aunt Sheila shouted from behind the doctor. ÒItÕs aÑÓ

Sheila paused to make eye contact with my father. ÒItÕs a boy.Ó She smiled her sweetest smile.

ÒYes!Ó he said.

ÒJust kidding, she said.

ÒSheila, you play too much.Ó My father scowled.

My mother forgot about her pain and laughed so hard she almost didnÕt notice me.

The doctor handed a clean-as-can-be baby girl to my mother for the first time.

ÒWhy does your baby look so white, Zakkiyya?Ó my Aunt Sheila blurted out.

ÒSheila!Ó my mother shrieked.

ÒLook at herÑsheÕs whiter than the nurse!Ó My Aunt Sheila pointed an accusatory finger at a very confused and cautious Caucasian nurse.

My family will recite this story to me again and again until it sticks to me like white on rice. Like a tiny piece of spinach wedged between not-so-white teeth. Until I realize they were trying to pay me a complimentÑmy whole family reminding me that, while IÕm not a boy, IÕm smart and pretty and this has something to do with my pigmentationÕs inheritance.

It will take years for me to understand this, to confront the jagged edges of this, and to make peace with the realization that our fair skin is the filmy residue of a forgotten and distant ancestorÕs twisted tastes. But for now, we poke fun at its persistence.

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Snake
Marilyn Horn

Loon
Jim Krosschell

Confessions of a Minor-League Jockstrap Washer
Greg Larson

Inheritance
Sagirah Shahid

Writing Strategies
Lori White

Poetry

Fiction

Lori White

Lori White earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles. Her recent work has appeared in *The Nervous Breakdown*, *The Boiler*, and *Pithead Chapel*. Her story, ÒGambling One Ridge AwayÓ won first place in the 2013 Press 53 Open Award for Flash Fiction. She teaches English composition and its various writing strategies at Los Angeles Pierce College and Oxnard College.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Writing Strategies
Nonfiction

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Writing Strategies

Lori White

Beginning Your Essay

Marisela wrote her first essay about her pen pal, Christian, a guy in prison for murder. He was the one person in her life who motivated her to do better, her go-to person whenever she had problems or needed advice. When she was tired of school and wanted to drop out, he was the one who told her to stay. Her friends didnÕt understand how she could be with a murderer. *They donÕt see the big picture like I do*, she wrote at the end of the essay. *It might be a rocky road for us, but I know we can make it through together*.

I wanted to ask her what she thought Òbe withÓ and Òmake it throughÓ meant, phrases that sounded more like middle school than community college. Instead, I tried to redirect her to the assignmentÕs objectiveÑto focus more on her learning than on Christian, a response that I now see offered nothing.

Classifying and Dividing

To open the discussion of Gloria NaylorÕs essay ÒNigger: The Meaning of a Word,Ó I called myself a *white, kike, dyke*Ñan absurd rhyme that raised eyebrows and drew a few uncomfortable chuckles. I reminded them of NaylorÕs thesis: words alone are harmless; itÕs context that gives them power. Then I asked students for the names theyÕd heard, the ones that still sting to say aloud.

Amir was the first to raise his hand: *sand nigger* and *towel head*. Jorge called out *terrorist*, and Amir slid a little lower in his seat. Yeah, he said, terrorist.

Next, Yesenia raised her hand: *illegal, beaner, Mexican*. Several in the class agreed.

But you *are* Mexican, another student said.

Yesenia crossed her arms. Not like *that*, she said.

Lionel ruffled his faux Mohawk, a move I mistook for his wanting to contribute. He shook his head. None of those words bothered him. I asked what word did bother him, and he thought for a moment. *Strawberry picker*, he said, and the class laughed. I pressed him to explain. Because thatÕs what my family does, he said. We pick strawberries.

Guiding Your Reader

Oscar asked me to edit his next tattoo. He wrote out two sentences, and handed the paper to me. I canÕt decide which is better, he said. *LifeÕs sweet* or *Life is sweet*? I said he should use contractions based on what they convey, which only confused him more.

Arguing

Two sisters, Kassidy and Jessyca, were enrolled in my introduction to Creative Writing class. They were short and wide, like round, unhappy trolls whose names I always confused. Each week they arrived late and setup breakfast at their desks in the back of the class. I warned them about their chronic tardiness, for which they supplied a battery of excuses: they got locked out of their house, they had a flat tire on the way to school, their printer died.

Kassidy wrote a sonnet about the drive-by that killed their mother. The sisters dodged childrenÕs services for a year until the eldest (Kassidy? Jessyca?) turned eighteen. I praised her use of imagery and figurative language.

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Snake
Marilyn Horn

Loon
Jim Krosschell

Confessions of a Minor-League Jockstrap Washer
Greg Larson

Inheritance
Sagirah Shahid

Writing Strategies
Lori White

Poetry

Fiction

After class, I found her poem in the trash.

Comparing and Contrasting

Aurelio had to miss class for a court date. He was worried the absence would count against his final grade. Three weeks passed before he showed up again, wearing a stained sweatshirt and dusty jeans. He averted his eyes as he explained that he might be going to jail for stabbing a guy in Oxnard. Under the circumstances, I agreed to accept his research paper late.

Analyzing Causes and Effects

Wikipedia had written the first two pages of IvanÕs essay for him. I reminded him that plagiarism was a guaranteed fail with no chance of revision. After class he emailed to apologize: *i thought it will be a good idea if i would paraphrase some ideas from the internet to impress you with the writting. I hope this mistake don't make you feel any different from me.*

Defining

Michelle was late for her meeting; her plane from Dallas had been delayed. I asked her what kind of work she did. She unzipped her pink velour hoodie and fanned her face with the latest draft of her essay. She said she was a poker hostess at high roller, underground games. ThatÕs when I made the mistake of asking her to explain.

The games begin at 10 p.m., she said, and last past dawn. I serve drinks and meals prepared by a personal chef, make Armenian coffee, and give back massages at the table when the players get stiff. On a good night, she added, I make a thousand dollars in tipsÑtax-free.

Sounds like a great gig, I said, picking up my pen to shift the attention to her draft.

Yeah, she said, except for the matching bra and panties and six-inch heels I have to wear.

From the time Michelle was young, her mother set three rules for her daughter to follow: go to college; donÕt rely on a man to support you; and never take your clothes off for money. Two out of three isnÕt bad, Michelle said as she crossed her legs, careful not to scuff her white sneakers.

Ending Your Essay

Marisela stopped coming to class and ignored my emails that threatened to drop her from the course. One afternoon, I found her smoking in the faculty parking lot. Her red hair was a nest of wood shavings and ash. She said sheÕd been trying to write her paper on her phone, but the battery kept dying. I almost asked if Christian knew she was cutting class. Instead, I encouraged her to try to find a place to start. That night she texted me her opening sentence: *I have been using crystal meth since I was 17.*

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Walter Bargen

Walter Bargen has published eighteen books of poetry. His most recent books are: *Days Like This Are Necessary: New & Selected Poems* (2009), *Endearing Ruins* (2012), *Trouble Behind Glass Doors* (2013), *Quixotic* (2014), and *Gone West* (2014). He was appointed the first poet laureate of Missouri (2008-2009). His awards include a National Endowment of the Arts Fellowship (1991), the Hanks Prize (1996), and the William Rockhill Nelson Award (2005). His poems, essays, and stories have appeared in over 150 magazines. www.walterbargen.com

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Pyrophoric
Poetry

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Pyrophoric

Walter Bargen

One of those nights when the drawers all through the house
lose their handles. Nothing left to grasp not even ignorance.
Space foreclosed and dumbstruck.

The stars counterfeit. Quantum momentum off in every direction.
The knives sequestered, feeling lonely with no one to threaten.
The forks thanking the governor for a last minute reprieve.

Spoons happy to continue shoveling stale air from one side
of darkness to the other. On the kitchen walls, pots and pans hang naked,
reminiscent of too many blurry black and white photographs:

a far hill, someone on their knees, an innocent looming oak branch,
barb wire coiling tight around the light. Your face mirrored in polished
copper-bottomed pans, stare back even as you turn away.

In the bedroom, the bodies are stacked under encyclopedias of sleep
until there is nothing left to research and the years confuse their
timeline. The sheets brittle as old newspaper headlines.

You are so thirsty. Water slips though your hands.
Fingers clamped together hold back a drop or two
of night before crossing the desert, each step a spark.

Sirens race through your veins. Your flesh sharpened
on bones. Each step leaving a trail of sparks. In the sky,
Janus stares: the moon a swinging stethoscope,

a flattened bullet. In the morning you look
for a screwdriver to solve all your problems: tool box
stuffed with antlers, feathers, open crab claws.

You become a danger to strangers and friends.
The drawers slide easy as morgue trays.
Pull and there you are smiling. Push and you are gone

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Pyrophoric
Walter Bargen

Wave-ing
Allison Campbell

The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)
Jessica Cogar

I Woke Up From a Vision
P.S. Dean

Riding the Train Through New England
Kelly Fordon

To My Never Born Brother or Sister
Patrick Hansel

Amelia Hill
Alan Hill

Rain
Will Nixon

Keeping Score
Clint Smith

Fiction

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Allison Campbell

Allison Campbell studies poetry at the University of Southern MississippiÕs Center for Writers where she also works as associate editor at the *Mississippi Review*. Her poems have most recently appeared in *Harpur Palate*, *STORY*, *Drunken Boat*, and *The Cincinnati Review*. Her first full-length collection of poetry, *EncyclopŽdie of the Common and Encompassing* will be out from Kore Press in April. See more of her work at allison-campbell.org.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Wave-ing
Poetry

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Wave-ing

Allison Campbell

ÒAs a billion various ocean waves are all in fact water, wave-ing, so the water is just the universe ocean-ingÑ holding in the form of water.Ó Ð Jennifer Michael Hecht

What I take as personal greeting, is you announcing the universe. The black screen and you all white. The heart beat a guitar string plucked by invisible fingers, same ones that stroke the ocean. Such a thin sequence of crests and troughs.

Body, body-ing, reproduce-ing and I canÕt tell if there is a self along for the ride. What you do is what you are. When seen straight on, when the ultrasoundÕs high frequency goes in and on, against you, a right arm lifts up towards the outline of your head. Then itÕs lowered.

You, this struck thing inside me, wave. I am on the shore, it seems you know IÕm watching. Or donÕt. You are not all water, though floating, and you wave.

A week later we are swimming. My back on the sea, the water lifts and drops. I will not think about our parallels. The reflection or transmission of the sky does penetrate. A billion, or more, various parts are holding.

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Pyrophoric
Walter Bargen

Wave-ing
Allison Campbell

The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)
Jessica Cogar

I Woke Up From a Vision
P.S. Dean

Riding the Train Through New England
Kelly Fordon

To My Never Born Brother or Sister
Patrick Hansel

Amelia Hill
Alan Hill

Rain
Will Nixon

Keeping Score
Clint Smith

Fiction

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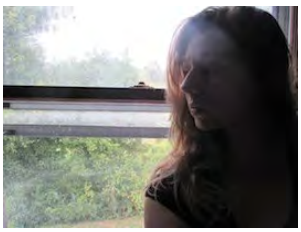
Jessica Cogar



Jessica Cogar is currently a masters student in poetry at Ohio University, where she teaches courses in writing and rhetoric. Her poetry is featured in *IDK Magazine*, *Scapegoat Review*, *small po[r]tions*, *The Boiler* and elsewhere. She lives in Athens, Ohio.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)
Poetry

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The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)

Jessica Cogar

ÒRise and eat,Ó my father says, holding an open knife in his right hand. He could drown a star in its own light, standing in the kitchen donned in a jacket of familiar air. I hold a bird like a soft fruit, spread the feathers of her wing between the blades of my scissors. I feel her breath on the back of my finger. My father is holding the needle, sewing together the three parts of my shadow and cracking eggs onto the hot sidewalk. My car folds itself around a telephone pole. The restaurant doesnÕt know heÕs taking a break, taking his time folding handwritten directions to tow my car. The white billiard ball breaks the triangle and heÕs skinning an apple with a pocket knife. ÒWho the fuck are *you*?Ó he asks me. The bird answers him, in a human voice: ÒI am your son.Ó

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Pyrophoric
Walter Bargen

Wave-ing
Allison Campbell

The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)
Jessica Cogar

I Woke Up From a Vision
P.S. Dean

Riding the Train Through New England
Kelly Fordon

To My Never Born Brother or Sister
Patrick Hansel

Amelia Hill
Alan Hill

Rain
Will Nixon

Keeping Score
Clint Smith

Fiction

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P.S. Dean

P.S. Dean is a Mississippi native, and he received an MFA in poetry from the University of Mississippi in 2013. Currently, he lives in New Orleans and is working on his first book.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

I Woke Up From a Vision
Poetry

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I Woke Up From a Vision

P.S. Dean

that John lay down in bed
with his hospice gown
and high water socks on
whistling ÒShall We Gather at the River.Ó
I heard the sound of croaking
bullfrogs at midnight.
Brother Larry woke me up,
said it was visiting time.
We drove up the hill in the Pontiac
and knocked so hard the hinges broke.
The door opened like the tomb
of an old king that fell
on his own blade.
Cigarettes fumed in an offering plate
turned ashtray.
Larry wiped his forehead
with a handkerchief,
said it was hotter than hellfire.
I plucked a coin from the plate
and put it in JohnÕs palm
to pay the old manÕs toll.
His eyes rolled back
toward the ceiling fan.
I thought this is what you did
back in the younger days
when the moon was full
and hot like it was searching
for a prisoner at the ferry
without the fare to cross
the water to the other side.

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Pyrophoric
Walter Bargen

Wave-ing
Allison Campbell

The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)
Jessica Cogar

I Woke Up From a Vision
P.S. Dean

Riding the Train Through New England
Kelly Fordon

To My Never Born Brother or Sister
Patrick Hansel

Amelia Hill
Alan Hill

Rain
Will Nixon

Keeping Score
Clint Smith

Fiction

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Kelly Fordon

Kelly Fordon is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *On The Street Where We Live*, won the 2011 Standing Rock Chapbook Contest and *Tell Me When it Starts to Hurt*, which was published by Kattywompus Press in May 2013. Her novel-in-stories, *Garden for the Blind*, was published by Wayne State University Press in April 2015.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Riding the Train Through New England
Poetry

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Riding the Train Through New England

Kelly Fordon

In New England anyone might emerge from a clapboard house.
A bonnet, a walking stick, a gnome with a cauldron.
On the train, a foliage kaleidoscope, slide by light,
an American flag, a construction worker studying a clipboard.
You can buy clothes at ChloeÕs Closet
and whose to say theyÕre not yours?
I have been crying for no particular reason.
My friend is facing forward and IÕm looking back.
Every time the conductor ambles through,
he asks me for my ticket again.
ItÕs not a replicant.
You know that light that doesnÕt quite touch the earth?
That bony old lady in a shawl?
Winter just crawled out from under her leaf pile.
The farther you move away from civilization, the clunkier the cars.
A small boy in dirty cleats mucking up the clouds.

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Pyrophoric
Walter Bargen

Wave-ing
Allison Campbell

The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)
Jessica Cogar

I Woke Up From a Vision
P.S. Dean

Riding the Train Through New England
Kelly Fordon

To My Never Born Brother or Sister
Patrick Hansel

Amelia Hill
Alan Hill

Rain
Will Nixon

Keeping Score
Clint Smith

Fiction

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Patrick Hansel

Patrick Hansel has published poems, stories and essays in over 30 journals and anthologies, including *HawaiÕi Pacific Review*, *Ilanot Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Turtle Quarterly*, *Passager*, *Parachute*, *Perfume River Poetry Review*, *The Meadowland Review* and other journals. He was selected for the 2008-09 Mentor Series at the Loft Literary Center in Minnesota, and was a 2011 Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grantee. His novella *Searching* was serialized in 33 issues of The Alley News. His poem ÒQuitting TimeÓ was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

To My Never Born Brother or Sister
Poetry

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To My Never Born Brother or Sister

Patrick Hansel

To imagine you is to look inside
our mother, look inside death
and see you under water,
your bones tender like shoots
of new asparagus, your smile
hidden, your heart coming
to a full stop. You never

got to breathe, to hold
in your hand a ball,
a book, a rabbit or peony picked
from a neighborÕs yard. My parentsÑ
our parentsÑforgot to name
you, or if they did, they forgot
to tell us. You came out wrong

and they baptized you
on the kitchen table, and that
was that. You went to limbo,
we went to forgetting. I
do not know how
to address you, little one,

gene of my genes, remembrance
not remembered, false alarm
at the birthing stool. I want
to put my flailing arms around
you, and push you back, in
time, and in our motherÕs flesh,

and give you something, a
sword, a little stick, some talisman
to shove in the face of death.

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Pyrophoric
Walter Bargen

Wave-ing
Allison Campbell

The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)
Jessica Cogar

I Woke Up From a Vision
P.S. Dean

Riding the Train Through New England
Kelly Fordon

To My Never Born Brother or Sister
Patrick Hansel

Amelia Hill
Alan Hill

Rain
Will Nixon

Keeping Score
Clint Smith

Fiction

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Alan Hill

Alan Hill has been previously published in North America in *CV2*, *Canadian Literature*, *Vancouver Review*, *Event*, *Antigonish Review*, *Sub-Terrain*, *Poetry is Dead*, *Quills*, *Cascadia Review*, *Reunion: The Dallas Review*, and in a number of anthologies and in the United Kingdom in *South*, *The Wolf*, *Brittle Star*, and *Turbulence*. His second full collection, *The Broken Word* (Silver-Bow Press), was published in mid 2013. He is a regular reader of poetry at readings in Vancouver and has appeared at both Word on The Street and Summer Dreams literary festivals.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Amelia Hill
Poetry

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Amelia Hill

Alan Hill

The dead get more demanding as I age.
Yes, the living are tricky, the dead however
downright devious.

ItÕs just that they need us more than we need them.

Last Sunday morning
I found my grandmother, who died in 1980
behind the cherry tree at the end of the driveway.

Still in the full blossom of her dementia.
Still with her polished mahogany breath
the regimental cutlery of her being
presented formally against the bare sheeting
of her Edwardian black

She surprised me by the recycling bin
buried my head into her Hell dried hair.
She wanted me to smell her, nothing else.
To know a little more of maps, blueprints
of the genetic ropes and ladders
the pulsing bloody empires
that bind my daughterÕs scent to hers.

Later, I escorted her back to the demolished hospital.
I needed those long gone nurses to know
that it was I that bought her home.

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Pyrophoric
Walter Bargen

Wave-ing
Allison Campbell

The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)
Jessica Cogar

I Woke Up From a Vision
P.S. Dean

Riding the Train Through New England
Kelly Fordon

To My Never Born Brother or Sister
Patrick Hansel

Amelia Hill
Alan Hill

Rain
Will Nixon

Keeping Score
Clint Smith

Fiction

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Will Nixon

Will Nixon has published two poetry collections, *My Late Mother as a Ruffed Grouse* and *Love in the City of Grudges*, as well as several chapbooks. He lives in Woodstock, New York. His website is wilnixon.com.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Rain
Poetry

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Rain

Will Nixon

Why does rain in the movies always mean sadness?
Why does rain imply sex in the novels of Yukio Mishima
as my boarding school English teacher once informed us?
Why does the rain sound like stampeding baby feet
on my cottage roof as I sit down to write morning pages?
Why do I not have the words for rain the way Eskimos
do for snow: do we not have thirty-two varieties of sadness?
Or sex? Or longing? Now the rain has thinned into harp strings.
Now it has brought fog to the wood pile. Now it has returned
with the vengeance of bullets that dissolve into puddles.
No one should decide what the rain means in the novels
of Yukio Mishima, but the lovers themselves, plotting
their lives under an umbrella as loud as a typewriter
clackety-clacketying with the downpour of news.
Whenever they chose to, they can drink from the sky.

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Pyrophoric
Walter Bargen

Wave-ing
Allison Campbell

The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)
Jessica Cogar

I Woke Up From a Vision
P.S. Dean

Riding the Train Through New England
Kelly Fordon

To My Never Born Brother or Sister
Patrick Hansel

Amelia Hill
Alan Hill

Rain
Will Nixon

Keeping Score
Clint Smith

Fiction

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Clint Smith

Clint Smith is a teacher, writer, and doctoral candidate at Harvard University. He is a 2014 National Poetry Slam champion and was a speaker at the 2015 TED Conference. He has received fellowships from the National Science Foundation and the Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop. His poems and essays have been published or are forthcoming in *The Guardian*, *Kinfolks*, *American Literary Review*, *Harvard Educational Review*, *Still: The Journal*, *Off the Coast* and elsewhere. He was born and raised in New Orleans, LA.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Keeping Score
Poetry

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Keeping Score

Clint Smith

After Nabila Lovelace

The cards nestled under their noses like a magician the moment before the final act. How they abracadabra a memory out of breath. Call a spade a spade or call it a sputtering streak of light.

Pops and Uncle Craig eyed each other from across the table. Blinking like they could communicate the count in their hands through their retinas. Spades be like that. Will have grown men thinking theyÕre X-men reincarnated at a 7th ward barbeque, like they could turn the porch into the sort of sanctuary that scoffs at what the world says they cannot do.

Mama and Auntie Ness laughed like they had nostalgia smoldering in their bellies. Heads bent backwards toward the sky as if watching constellations playing the dozens behind the moon. They been playing partners since before either of them became a fleet of anchored vessels.

You could tell they had the lead by the way Mama crossed her legs. How the crisscross of her brown beckoned for PopsÕ excuses, begged for him to claim she *ainÕt do nothing but get a lucky hand*. How she kept tapping the pencil on the yellow notepad the same way the rain is a metronome against concrete.

She loved to rile him up like that, turn him into the boy she met back when none of them were keeping score.

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Pyrophoric
Walter Bargen

Wave-ing
Allison Campbell

The Poet (On Being Folded in Half)
Jessica Cogar

I Woke Up From a Vision
P.S. Dean

Riding the Train Through New England
Kelly Fordon

To My Never Born Brother or Sister
Patrick Hansel

Amelia Hill
Alan Hill

Rain
Will Nixon

Keeping Score
Clint Smith

Fiction

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John Gifford

John Gifford is the author of the story collections, *Wish You Were Here* (Big Table, 2016) and *Freeze Warning*, which was named a finalist for the 2015 Press 53 Short Fiction Award. His writing has appeared in *Louisiana Literature*, *december*, *Southwest Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Oklahoma.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Droning
Fiction

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback
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Droning

John Gifford

His wife, Sharon, is away more often now, her reserve unit keeping her a week or more at a time in preparation for its upcoming deployment to Fallujah. And after three or four days of making lunches and driving the kids to school, dragging himself to work and back home, and then dinner and homework and baths and teeth brushing and, finally, bedtime, Larry begins to feel hollow and insubstantial, like he might float away with the breeze, drift off into the clouds, into irrelevancy. Nights are the worst. Isolation rings so loudly in his ears that at times it seems they may burst. He turns the television on and invariably dials up alcohol to chase away the monotony of these one-sided conversations. Sometimes he tells himself he should be the one deploying to the Middle East. More often, another voice wells up from the basement of his mind, a voice that wonÕt be silenced, wonÕt be washed away with the beer, telling him the kids have to be up by seven, that school starts at eight-thirty, that Lucy Jane, his youngest, prefers peanut-butter crackers in her lunch, that the kids need to be at school no later than eight-twenty, that he should take the left carpool lane because itÕs quicker É Then his usual response: *IÕve got it. Everything will be fine.*

* * *

ItÕs Friday and after a long, dry week at the office, Larry stops off at the Git-n-Go for a twelve-pack. Back in his car, he darts across the street to the Army-Navy Surplus heÕs been itching to explore, the tripwire entry triggering the cowbell on the door, which clatters as he enters to an explosion of rubber and canvas, the somber sight of leather combat boots lined up in row after pointless row as if filled with the cold feet of dozens of attention-standing Sharons of different sizes, and yet of a singular, stony disposition, one indifferent to the tip of his index finger tapping, flicking, touching toe after toe as he examines the boots like some overzealous lieutenant inspecting his troops, one whom, in the absence of any discernible discrepancies, makes the same banal remarks to each soldier.

* * *

He spreads a formation of Triscuit crackers on a cookie sheet, tops them with spaghetti sauce and cheese, and places them into the warm oven. Five minutes later, when the cheese is bubbly, he serves them. ÒHold on,Ó he says as the kids hover over the tray. ÒLet them cool.Ó

Lucy Jane, the eight-year-old, shakes her head and says, ÒThis isnÕt how Mom makes pizza.Ó

* * *

His boss has been talking for the better part of an hour. The companyÕs value proposition. Its competitive advantage and position statement. The need to diversify. Etc., etc., etc. Sitting in the leather chair, directly across the conference table from Katie, his bony-kneed colleague from sales, LarryÕs mind is like a static-filled radio cycling through the same dozen or so stations as it pulls in disparate frequencies, conflicting signals that crackle and flash momentarily before fading into obscurity: the e-mail he received this morning from Helen Krupps, his

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Droning
John Gifford

Saturday Morning
Dylan Henderson

Toledo
Douglas W. Milliken

The Suitcase
Rebekah Orton

Clouds of East Danford
Warren Read

sonÕs math teacher, who said Cam has missed turning in several homework assignments this week; the feasibility study heÕs been working on; sex with Sharon; the presentation heÕll give to the executive committee two Mondays from now; the thought of sex with Katie; the overtime heÕll have to put in to finish the presentation, now two weeks overdue; groceries he still needs to buy; the nagging feeling that his car might break down if he doesnÕt get it serviced; (groceries!); SharonÕs voice: *I didnÕt ask for this war* (and his typical reply: ÒI didnÕt either!Ó); the thought of kissing KatieÕs bony knees É

* * *

The gadget on the surplus storeÕs counter is shaped like a black question mark. It has three propellers and a remote-control unit with a full-color screen. ÒWhatÕs this?Ó Larry says, feeling as if heÕs been teleported back to his favorite toy store from childhood.

The Vietnam-era shopkeeper snuffs out his cigarette and flips his gray ponytail over his shoulder. The look on his face says heÕs explained the same thing to the last ten customers who asked about it, but at great pain and inconvenience, heÕll do it again. ÒItÕs a bitchinÕ new toy,Ó he says in a gravelly voice. ÒThey call it the Phantom, but the name doesnÕt make a damn bit of difference. This is whatÕs important,Ó he says, pointing to the list of features. ÒTwenty minute flying time. Check,Ó he says. ÒSixteen megapixel camera for stills, check, and videos, check,Ó he says. ÒAnd this is the best thing,Ó he says. ÒYou can watch everything right here on the remote, in real time,Ó he says. ÒCheck.Ó

ÒDo you need a license for something like this?Ó Larry asks.

ÒItÕs like Dodge City out there, dude,Ó the shopkeeper says as he inverts his cigarette pack and taps out a smoke, Òbefore all the damned tourists showed up.Ó He jams the cig into his lips, lights, inhales, squints, then lets loose with a long, smooth stream of smoke. ÒJust stay away from the airport and youÕll be fine.Ó

* * *

Sometimes, late of an evening, Sharon calls and he hears the contentment and tripod-steady purpose in her voice and heÕs both envious and frustrated. ÒSo what do they have you doing?Ó he says.

ÒSame stuff,Ó she says. ÒHow are my babies?Ó

ÒTheyÕre fine,Ó he says. ÒSleeping.Ó Then, ÒI miss you.Ó

ÒMiss you too,Ó she says.

ÒSo when do you think you might be home?Ó

ÒCanÕt say,Ó she says. ÒAnd even if I knew, you know I canÕt tell you on this unsecured line.Ó

ÒRight,Ó he says. ÒI know. I knew that.Ó

ÒTheyÕre calling all the shots here, Hon,Ó she says. ÒIÕm just doing what I have to do and youÕre going to have to do the same. You know?Ó

ÒYeah,Ó he says as he imagines the afternoon heat weighing on Sharon, the sunÕs sharp rays carving crowÕs feet around her eyes, signs of her exposure, her commitment, scars sheÕll carry the rest of her life, which will remind both of them of her sacrifice. ÒI know,Ó he says.

* * *

After the kids are in bed, he settles into the recliner, beer can in hand, and watches news coverage of the ongoing military operations in southwest Asia. The helicopters fascinate him, especially the Marine CorpsÕ Super Cobra with its protruding twenty-millimeter cannon, which reminds him of the hornet heÕd once encountered as a child. It descended on him from the rafters in his parentsÕ garage, swirling, buzzing, causing Larry to flee in terror, screaming, swatting, although the hornet never stung him. Still, thinking about it now makes him sweat.

Gradually, his breathing accelerates along with his rate of consumption until, at some point, anxiety parachutes into the room and he finds himself worrying for Sharon, for her safety, while fighting the guilt that tends

to pin him down and fire on him right there in his own living room nearly every night, volleys of incendiary thoughts lobbing back and forth in his mind: *What if? What if?* And, occasionally, that familiar voice: *You should be the one É*

* * *

ItÕs the television that awakens him. When he opens his eyes, itÕs as if heÕs dreaming. Yellow, blue, and red lights converge on the wall beside the recliner, animated, animating. Cartoons, he realizes. He watches for a few seconds before a noise in the kitchen startles him. Cam and Lucy Jane are eating cereal at the kitchen table.

ÒYou all want some juice with that?Ó Larry says, walking into the kitchen, feeling dizzy and disoriented, desperate for coffee, wondering if he should call in sick today.

ÒI donÕt,Ó Cam says. Then, a moment later, ÒDad, can we walk to school? ItÕs not very far, and Kevin and Eric get to walk. Lots of kids walk,Ó he says. ÒIÕll watch Lucy Jane and make sure she gets there okay.Ó

Larry looks at his daughter, who surprises him by saying, ÒCome on, Dad. Let us walk.Ó

* * *

He waits until the kids are two houses down before sending up the Phantom. From the recliner in the living room, he watches the procession of backpack-toting children ambling along the walkway like a column of colorful ants. Now a couple cars come into view on the screen, followed by a school bus, which from three hundred feet in the sky looks a bit like a yellow landing strip. ThereÕs a blip on the screen as something shoots by. A bird? Another drone? He descends for a better view and spots a woman leaving her house. He hovers above her as she walks to her car, opens the door and gets in.

His phone rings. ItÕs Sharon.

ÒI wanted to say hi to the kids real quick,Ó she says.

ÒYou just missed them,Ó Larry says as he leans back in the recliner. He extends the footrest, telling himself heÕs going to take a sick day. ÒThey were up early this morning.Ó

ÒWish IÕd called earlier. IÕll try to call tonight,Ó she says. ÒHowÕs everything going?Ó

ÒFine,Ó he says, cradling the phone on his shoulder, eyes focused on the remote in his hands. ÒEverythingÕs fine.Ó

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Dylan Henderson

Born in a trailer parked on a gravel quarry, Dylan Henderson has lived his whole life within the borders of the Cherokee Nation. After dropping out of high school at sixteen, he enrolled at the local community college and, eventually, earned advanced degrees in history, literature, and library science. He now lives with his family in a small town and spends his free time reading, writing, and restoring their century-old farmhouse.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Saturday Morning
Fiction

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback
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Saturday Morning

Dylan Henderson

The toy locomotive, following the curve of the track, slowed as it passed the depot and rumbled into town. I handed my son the last block, and standing on the tip of his toes, he placed the cupola atop the roof of the old Sequoyah Hotel on Main Street. The cat, its tail twitching, watched from the toddler bed near College Hill.

ÒItÕs finished,Ó I said, watching the train as it passed through town on its way to the coal mines, Òunless we buy more blocks, that is.Ó

My son straddled the track, turning a stray boxcar over and over in his hands as the train passed between his legs. He smiled but didnÕt respond. Though only two years old, his smile had already hardened and become serious, melancholy even.

He turned and, looking at me for the first time, pointed at the locomotive as it disappeared beneath the bed. He spoke his own language just as I had at his age, and I understood him perfectly.

ÒWhere does it go?Ó I asked, smiling. ÒIf we owned more blocks, IÕd show you.Ó I nodded my head towards the strip mines north of town. ÒPretend that the rug marks the city limits. From there, the railroad follows the old highway for a long time. On a clear day, you can see the bluish-green outline of the Ozarks off to the east, but the land on either side of the track is flat. Barns and farmhouses, abandoned ranches mostly, line the highway.Ó

I took a deep breath and, leaning against the wall, closed my eyes. I spoke softly, afraid to wake his mother in the next room.

ÒUnless theyÕve torn it down, the steeple of the First Baptist Church still pokes through the top of the pecan groves. Past the church, the track begins to curve as it approaches Claremont Mound, cutting right through the field where the Cherokees surprised the Osages at rest. IÕve followed the tracks that far, and just west of that spot, the river has worn a channel through the limestone. The bottom has filled with water, and the sides are honeycombed with caves.Ó

I paused, remembering. My son sat down beside me, still fingering the toy boxcar in his hands.

ÒThe railroad,Ó I said slowly, Òcrosses the canyon about a mile below the dam. YouÕd have to hike a long way from the main road, but if you leaned over the bridge and peered into the water below, youÕd see huge catfish swimming lazily along the bottom, their scales flashing in the sun.Ó

He leaned his head against my shoulder, and I ran my hand through his wavy hair. I could hear footsteps in the hall.

ÒI took your mother there once when we were dating,Ó I said quietly, Òbut we saw the spot differently. She could only see the broken glass and the gnats and the bones bleaching on the rocks along the shore.Ó

The footsteps paused outside the open door. Even with my back turned, I could smell the whiskey on her breath.

I stood up, pushing my fists deep into my pockets. ÒThatÕs as far as IÕve followed it,Ó I said, trying to sound lighthearted. ÒI donÕt know where it goes after that."

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Droning
John Gifford

Saturday Morning
Dylan Henderson

Toledo
Douglas W. Milliken

The Suitcase
Rebekah Orton

Clouds of East Danford
Warren Read

Douglas W. Milliken

Douglas W. Milliken is the author of four books, including the novel *To Sleep as Animals* and the pocket-sized collection *Cream River* (out this November through Publication Studio/Downeaster Editions). His stories have earned prizes from *Glimmer Train*, *McSweeney's*, and the *Stoneslide Corrective*, and have been published in *Slice*, the *Collagist*, and the *Believer*, among others. "Toledo" was written as part of a fellowship with the Hewnoaks Artists Colony. www.douglaswmilliken.com

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Toledo
Fiction

Issue 19

Eyetooth
Fiction

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Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Toledo
Fiction

Issue 19

Eyetooth
Fiction

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback
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Toledo

Douglas W. Milliken

The bus broke down somewhere between where I was leaving and where I was going, so rather than waiting with everyone else at the edge of the road, anticipating help that might not ever come while the bus driver addressed us all earnestly in a speech I could not begin to understand, I elected to start off walking on my own. It was hot and bright yellow out, some blooming weed along the roadside stirring its pollen up through the still air. My white jacket felt heavy but my suitcase felt light. After a mile or so, a pickup truck pulled alongside me, a man and woman and child riding inside the cab with the bed loaded high in lumpy burlap sacks. The man didnÕt speak English but I got the gist. I tossed on my suitcase and climbed onto the loaded bed, lay on my back across the uneven landscape of whatever was inside the burlap sacks and stared up at the total absence of clouds while the cool wind and dust tickled my cheeks. It felt like we kept straight on the road for a long time but we could just as easily have turned and turned again and I would never have known, laying there like that with nothing to see but sky and more sky. After a while, the farmer stopped in the stone-cobbled square of some town, and as soon as we stopped, I immediately began sweating again. All the buildings were arranged in a rough circle around a statue at its middle, but I could not make out what the statue was supposed to be, and all the buildings were painted bright oranges or blues or clean, bright whites, but only as high up as a man could easily reach on a ladder. I climbed down off the bed full of burlap and thanked the driver and he was gone. He could have been going somewhere else in town or maybe he was just passing through. I had no idea where I was.

The town looked like every other place IÕd seen down here, only smaller. I took off my white jacket and clapped out the dust and put it back on, then found a bar that I somehow understood had a few rooms to rent upstairs. I went inside and approached the bartender and though I donÕt speak the language, ÔtelephoneÓ translates the same around the world. He pulled a black rotary phone from under the bar and I called you and told you about the bus and hitching a ride to this town I couldnÕt name. I tried to describe it but it sounded like anywhere. It sounded like Toledo. You laughed and said you werenÕt surprised about the bus. You said you thought you knew where I was. You told me: sit tight, have a drink, get a room and take a nap, and by nightfall you would be there. I thanked you and apologized and hung up the phone. Then I followed your directions to a T. I wanted an anise drink but couldnÕt think how to ask for it, so I did the easy thing and ordered a bottle of beer and took it outside to one of the tables beneath the front awning. I sat down and held my suitcase between my feet like a tourist. The awning was white, orange, and blue, like all the buildings surrounding the square. Almost no one was out on the street. Two laughing boys who looked like brothers were glistening with sweat and taking turns trying out tricks on a bicycle. Now and then a truck rolled through the square stirring up dust, and I stared hard at each one, hoping foolishly it was you. I puzzled over the statue. It looked like it had once been shaped like a man but had eroded into anonymity over the years. But maybe it was only on its way to becoming a man-shape. Maybe it wasnÕt there yet. At some point, I noticed a woman with long dark hair and a blue skirt standing beside a stack of crates outside what I took to be a church. She looked skinny but had nice hips. At first I thought she was watching the boys with their bicycle. Then I realized she was watching me. She looked like a woman I had seen earlier on the bus. She must have hitched a ride here like me. SheÕd been traveling with a wooden box in her lap and in the box had been a chicken. Now the box was gone. I wondered what happened to the chicken. I raised my left hand from where it lay on the table and gave her a lazy wave, but she turned her back on me and walked off. So maybe she wasnÕt who I thought.

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Droning
John Gifford

Saturday Morning
Dylan Henderson

Toledo
Douglas W. Milliken

The Suitcase
Rebekah Orton

Clouds of East Danford
Warren Read

The heat made everything look yellow. I was sleepy from the beer, so made up my mind to negotiate a room with the bartender, but just as I was getting up to do this a crowd of people filled the square carrying long lengths of colored ribbon and paper lanterns on strings. I couldnÕt tell where the people were coming from. I didnÕt care. The bartender was a dark man in a white shirt and he said some things I couldnÕt understand. Which was fine. I often prefer not knowing what IÕm being told. I wasnÕt sure if I had enough to pay for the room. I assumed, once you arrived, you could help me cover the cost. The bartender made some gestures with his hands and I nodded and said sure. Then he led me upstairs to a small room of white plaster with a bed and a bureau and a small electric fan with no grill to protect the blades. When I looked out the window, already the people had strung the ribbons and lanterns everywhere. The lights crisscrossed in the air above the square, forming some kind of star with the statue at its center. They were going to have a party. The bartender left and I sat on the edge of the bed and toed off my shoes and lay down without taking off my jacket, and first I dreamed that I was back on the bus and then I dreamed I was home on my porch, watching two dogs fighting in the driveway, and then I dreamed I was in my room above the bar and the girl in the blue skirt was sneaking quietly in. She lay herself down softly on the bed beside me and spread out her hand on my belly. Then she moved her hand inside my pants. Outside, a band was making festive music rise up through my window. I could smell the girlÕs perfume and smell her sweat all mingling with the scent of road dust, and for a moment I knew this wasnÕt a dream but then decided it was. Her hand moved more confidently in my pants. It felt fine, and then felt better. The snarl of the dogs was like a tailpipe grinding over pavement. The crowd outside cheered all at once, then laughed and clapped their hands. The girl licked her hand and wiped it on the bedspread. She reached inside my jacket to the pocket above my heart. The dogs bared their teeth and pressed their mouths together. Her hand came out holding my wallet. I wondered who would win. The bus bucked over the rutted road. The trumpets all blatted in triumph. I slept.

It was dusk when I woke again. For a while, I lay with a blankness in my head where I didnÕt know who I was or what I was doing or even how IÕd found this room glowing softly with the festival lights moving through the window. Then, gradually, I remembered. I sat up and ground the heels of my hands into the sockets of my eyes. I let out a long beer-sour groan. I didnÕt bother checking for my wallet. I got up and stood by the window for a while, watching the people moving through the square, and the buildings were glowing bright with color below the web of lanterns, but above they were drab stone and mortar, dissolving dully into the nightÕs black. I stared and still could not make out what the statue at the center was supposed to be. But I got the feeling, like a bass note droning through my bones, that it could make me out just fine. I put on my shoes and carried my suitcase downstairs and took up at a different table beneath the awning. I set my head in hands. There were still lots of people in the square, celebrating something but I couldnÕt know what. Every voice I heard was speaking a language I didnÕt know. My eyes and mouth felt thick and woolly and my crotch felt gummy and slick. It wasnÕt a comfortable feeling. I was sitting outside a bar where I still owed money with come drying to my leg, staring at all the faces passing in this village in a country such a long way from home, and none of these people were the woman in the blue skirt and none of the people were you. I understood all of this, and hated it. The bartender came outside and tapped me on the shoulder just as far off past the hills, a peal of thunder came rolling in, and I knew you werenÕt coming tonight. I was on my own. Which struck me as a polite way of saying fucked. I was fucked. I turned to regard the bartender and whatever he had to tell me beneath the colored stripes of the awning and waited to not understand.

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Rebekah Orton

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Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

The Suitcase
Fiction

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The Suitcase

Rebekah Orton

The dog was heavy, and it didn't move when Karlee poked it, or again when she stuck her foot under it and lifted. She knew it was dead; she could tell by the awkward angle of its head, the way its eyes were frozen half-open. The small puddle of urine leaking out from under it wasn't fresh.

It wasn't her dog, but still she thought briefly about giving it CPR or mouth-to-mouth. The dog was old, its muzzle peppered with gray. She wasn't sure exactly how she would fit her mouth over the dog's with its lips stretched back over its long snout. She imagined herself pulling the lips over the teeth with her hands and making a smaller opening right at the front of the dog's mouth. She realized she'd need to stretch her own mouth over the dog's nose as well to keep the airways closed. If it were a person, or even a smaller dog, she might have used one hand on the nose, but this dog was too big for that.

Luckily, the flesh under the fur was cold, and the limbs stiff. She'd waited too long to resuscitate the animal. Truthfully, she'd waited too long to come feed the dog. If she had been here just a few minutes earlier, if she'd come this morning when she was supposed to, then maybe it would have bounded up to her, or shuffled toward herÑanything other than this eerie quiet. She could hear the clock. The dogÕs food and water remained untouched from the night before. It must have died in the night, in its sleep.

She dialed the number of the hotel before she'd done the conversion of hours, and by the time sheÕd been transferred by the bright attendant, she remembered that it was late in BrusselsÑalmost one in the morning.

Mrs. StevenÕs voice sounded shocked, as if it had been pushed through a bicycle pump in a rush of air. ÒIs everything OK?Ó

ÒWell,Ó Karlee started. No, everything was not OK, but now that she had to tell what was wrong, she felt a little panicked. She poked the dog again with her foot, narrowly missing the puddle of urine, yet still hoping the dog would miraculously move. Then sheÕd laugh and say, sorry, false alarm! Everything was fine here. No one had died. ÒI think I killed your dog.Ó

The line was silent for a moment. Karlee could imagine Mrs. Steven blinking through her anger, the words for her loss and pain not quite able to rise to the surface. I trusted you, she would say. And you let me down. How dare you. How could you be so irresponsible?

ÒIt was an old dog,Ó Mrs. Steven said. ÒI feel really bad.Ó Mrs. Steven cleared the sleep out of her throat. ÒYouÕre sure itÕs dead?Ó

Karlee poked the dog again. ÒItÕs pretty stiff.Ó

ÒHuh.Ó

ÒLook,Ó Karlee said. ÒI can buy you a new dog. The same kind. Or a puppy. Whatever you want.Ó

A half-laugh traveled across Europe, then the Atlantic, and all the way through the United States to Seattle. ÒYouÕre kidding, right?Ó

ÒOr a cat,Ó Karlee offered. ÒMaybe you want a cat.Ó

ÒI didnÕt want a dog.Ó Karlee heard the hotel bedsprings shudder as Mrs. Steven sat up. ÒDo you think you could take care of it for me?Ó

ÒLike, bury it?Ó

ÒGod, no,Ó Mrs. Steven said. ÒWhere would it fit in that yard? In a flower pot? The vet does cremations.Ó

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Droning
John Gifford

Saturday Morning
Dylan Henderson

Toledo
Douglas W. Milliken

The Suitcase
Rebekah Orton

Clouds of East Danford
Warren Read

ÒCremation?Ó Karlee whispered. She didnÕt want the dog to hear her, even though she knew it was dead. What if its ghost was somewhere in the house, hovering over the food dish, or waiting by the door with its leash? What if it were just waiting to jump back into its body? Maybe she should try mouth-to-mouth anyway. She shuddered at the thought of the urine.

Òl donÕt want to upset the kids,Ó Mrs. Steven said. ÒlÕll pay you double, alright?Ó

Karlee turned away from the dogÕs glassy eyes. ÒDo I need to get out of those ceramic pots they have? For the ashes?Ó

ÒAn urn?Ó Karlee heard Mr. Steven groggily ask what was wrong; Mrs. Steven shushed him.

ÒTheyÕll give it to you in a box,Ó Mrs. Steven said. ÒJust put it on the kitchen counter.Ó

ÒOK,Ó Karlee said.

ÒAnd make sure you scoop in the back yard,Ó Mrs. Steven sounded like she was about to hang up the phone. ÒAnd maybe gather all the dog things to donate. ThereÕs a box at the vetÕs for that, too.Ó

* * *

After she hung up, Karlee called the vet from the number on the fridge. They said to bring the dog as soon as possible. TheyÕd have the remains taken care of that night, and she could pick up the ashes in the morning. The office closed at five, could she get the dog in by then? Karlee looked at the clock and said she probably could Ñit wasnÕt very far away. She called her mom and left a message for her to leave work and come to the StevenÕs to drive her somewhere important. She didnÕt have great hope that her mother would get the message before she was done with work, or that she would come.

While she was waiting, Karlee sopped up the urine she could reach with paper towels. With great effort, she managed to roll the dog over to clean up the underside as well. The dog let out a very unsettling puff of air when it landed on its back. Karlee jumped away, certain the ghost had gone back in the dog and it would leap up and growl at her for her negligence.

It didnÕt move, which was unfortunate, really, because the easiest way to get the dog to the vet was to walk it there, since her mother probably wasnÕt coming. Karlee got the leash anyway, thinking she might drag it. After that, she fetched the dogÕs kennel, but that didnÕt have wheels. Plus, it seemed a little dishonest to put a dead dog in a kennel. She walked the house looking for a wagon or a stroller to move the dog, but Mrs. StevenÕs kids were her ageÑlong past the time theyÕd need wheels to be transported.

She paced the basement, futilely searching for some way to move the dog: a box or a sled or anything, really. A skateboard? Rollerblades? SheÕd probably need two pairs, but if she secured the dog, it might be still enough to pull to the vet standing up. KarleeÕs eyes lighted on a gigantic rolling suitcase. She tilted it down from the top shelf and zipped it open. It was big enough. She zipped it up and tested it on the floor. One of the wheels pulled sharply to the left at first, and she had to really yank to get the handle out, but once she got it started, she easily managed to bump it up the stairs and back to the kitchen by the dog.

She remembered to lift with her legs as she rolled the dog into the suitcase, and the dogÕs joints werenÕt so very stiff that she couldnÕt bend them to fit inside with a little finagling. She shuddered when she lifted in the snout: the wet blackness of it fading to pink, the spots like congealed freckles lining the flesh. SheÕd almost breathed into that, she thought, as she threw the dogÕs dishes and leash and chew toys on top. She managed to get the zipper closed without catching any fur. Another call to her mother went to voicemail, so Karlee heaved the suitcase to stand up. . She got it over the threshold with a little maneuvering, then narrowly avoided whacking her ankles as she thumped down the front stairs. Going down the walkway was easier, and with a wide turn, the suitcase easily followed her onto the sidewalk.

She considered walking to the vetÕsÑat a brisk pace she could barely make itÑbut the suitcase was heavy and a southbound bus pulled up to the stop right as she passed, so she climbed aboard, lugging the suitcase up the three steps with three grunting tugs. It narrowly fit down the aisle of the bus, but couldnÕt quite fit between the seats.

ÒItÕs got to go up,Ó the bus driver said. She was a squat woman with thighs melting off the front seat

and a square fleshy face. Karlee wasnÕt sure how the driver reached the pedals. ÒItÕs a fire hazard. Get it up.Ó

Karlee grunted again and managed to lift the suitcase almost a foot off the ground. The whole bus was watching her, the engine idling as they waited for her to lift the suitcase onto the luggage shelf that ran the length of the aisle. The suitcase slammed against the ridged floor of the bus and rolled away from her.

ÒMay I?Ó The voice belonged to a boy a few years older than her, slim with narrow shoulders in a wrinkled polo shirt. He didnÕt look like he could lift the suitcase either, but together they managed to get it up and onto the luggage shelf above the seats. True, it hung out over the edge, but the boy stood with one hand on the suitcase and one on the bar beside it.

ÒDid you rob a brick store?Ó the boy asked as the bus lurched forward. Karlee kept her eyes on the suitcase, but it was too heavy to shift in the lurch. There was a faint golden gleam whispering out through the zipper and Karlee realized maybe she hadnÕt been as careful with the fur as she had thought.

ÒIÕm Milo,Ó he said.

ÒKarlee.Ó

They rode along in silence, Milo with his hand proprietarily on the suitcase. Karlee tried not to imagine the suitcase falling when she tried to get it down, but she could picture the whole thing landing on her, her body folding up like an accordion under the weight of the dog and the suitcase. She glanced around her to see if there was anyone else to help her if Milo got off before she did. There was a tattooed man a few rows ahead of her whose shaved head glinted in the afternoon sun, and a businessman with his eyes on his Blackberry. She looked up at Milo who was looking at the suitcase.

ÒNo, really,Ó he said. ÒWhatÕs in here?

Karlee thought for a second about telling him the truth. She could picture the story spilling out of her. How it was the StevensÕ dog and this was the third time sheÕd watched him, but heÕd never died before. She knew how weird this was, sheÕd tell him, to have a dog in a suitcase on a bus, but she couldnÕt reach her mother and didnÕt drive and she couldnÕt just leave the dog there, could she? But maybe he was an animal lover and heÕd think she was some sort of monster. And then maybe he wouldnÕt help her off the bus.

Karlee tried to think of something heavy that would fit in a suitcase. ÒJust some old electronics,Ó she lied.

ÒLike speakers?Ó

ÒYeah,Ó Karlee said. ÒAnd a monitor and stuff.Ó

Milo nodded. It made sense to put electronics in a suitcase, but not a dog. ÒVintage? Or just last yearÕs model?Ó

Karlee shrugged. On the sidewalk outside the window, a man walked a dog. It was a small dog, and spotted, with curly fur on its ears. The dog didnÕt look anything like the StevensÕ dog, and yet Karlee looked up at the suitcase anyway. Was that a wet spot she could see between the bars of the luggage rack? Maybe she should have been more careful with the urine. Maybe the dog had leaked more. She checked her pants to make sure nothing had dripped down on her. The bus stopped.

ÒWhere are you going to get off?Ó Milo asked.

She told him in three more stops and he grinned and said that was the one before his stop. He had a nice smile. Dimples. She didnÕt mind looking up at him through her lashes and pretending she was only a girl on a bus, pretending someone else was responsible for that horrible suitcase.

###

Even with the two of them lifting, the suitcase resisted. The suitcase veered dangerously to the left and nearly dropped on a neighboring seat. It was indeed wet, Karlee noticed, as she braced the frame against herself while Milo maneuvered it down and over, directing her to gently lower the back of the suitcase. It landed with a pop, but it stayed shut, even when Milo hauled the top of the suitcase up and extended the handle.

ÒHave you got it?Ó he asked as she took the handle from him.

The driver glared at them through the rearview mirror, her cheeks red and accusing. Karlee nodded.

She bumped the suitcase toward the front of the bus, narrowly missing one passengerÕs toes and nearly ramming into anotherÕs calf. At the top of the last step she looked back and saw that the fabric bulged. The dog had settled, she could tell, and now the water dish pushed clearly out through the fabric to make a perfectly round

O through the top pockets. Come to think, it really did look like an old speaker. Karlee yanked, but she didnÕt pull the suitcase far enough off the bus. It teetered on the curb and then fell against the side of the bus.

Milo jumped over the suitcase onto the curb as the driver closed the door. She pulled away before the two of them could right the suitcase, and it dragged against the side of the bus as it pulled away, leaning farther and farther into the street before falling into the plume of exhaust the bus left behind and landing facedown with a *whomp* in the street.

Karlee stepped into the street to retrieve the bag, but Milo jumped off the sidewalk before she could reach the retractable handle.

ÒMilo,Ó she said. ÒI thought you were getting off at the next stop.Ó

ÒIt was worth getting off here.Ó He pulled the suitcase toward himself and turned to her, his face strained by a malicious smile, his dimple suddenly a vast fissure instead of an endearing imperfection. ÒElectronics, right?Ó

His eyebrows twisted and he shoved her with his free hand. She stumbled backwards, her legs falling against the curb. Her backside hit the sidewalk with such force that it jarred her teeth together.

ÒThat shitÕs worth money,Ó he said. The suitcase came toward her, a big black cloud that hit her face and sent her falling slowly back, the sky stretching slowly wider until her head landed hard against the cement.

ÒMilo!Ó she managed to slur as his skinny frame ran away. She was still on her back, and from this vantage, the suitcase looked nearly as big as Milo as he dragged it behind him. She should call someone, she thought as he lumbered toward a corner. One of the wheels was loose from the fall and she watched it hanging askew behind him at an angle, the way her teeth jagged out when she was young and they were loose.

Her teeth! Karlee felt she had been very strong until now, but the thought of losing her teeth while trying to dispose of the StevenÕs dog was too much, and she began to cry even before she had run her tongue over every firm tooth. She breathed in too quickly and gagged when a gust of exhaust caught the back of her throat. Milo and the suitcase were gone even before the scent of spent fuel had left the air.

###

She rolled to her side away from the street and the exhaust. She wiped her nose on her sleeve. She tried her motherÕs number again, but got only got a bright, recorded voice. Maybe she should call the police, she thought. File a complaint and get them to find the suitcase and bring it back. But it could take weeks and then theyÕd have to burn the dog and the suitcase. Meanwhile, what if Milo opened the case? Karlee looked up at the buildings around her, half expecting a window to open and the suitcase to come flying out and the dog to land in a heap at her feet, its crumpled snout and dead eyes staring up at her. She giggled. Milo would be so mad.

To her right, Karlee saw a bus coming toward her across the street going the opposite direction. She heaved herself up and limped across the empty road. Her hips groaned as she lifted herself up each step on to the bus. The driver didnÕt ask her what had happened to her; the balding man didnÕt even skim his eyes her way. Before sheÕd even sat down, the bus thrust her forward and into the seat in front of her.

She slid down onto the molded plastic and planned what exactly to tell the Steven family when they asked about the dog and then the suitcase. The vetÕs office was slipping further behind her, two blocks and then three. She should have stopped there just to get the type of box they might put the cremated remains of a beloved pet in. If there even was a box. Maybe theyÕd send it home in a plastic bag, the way sheÕd once brought home a goldfish. For some reason, the thought of the dog in a plastic bag made her laugh. A plastic bag of ashes. Or dust. Anything gray, really. SheÕd think of something. It was summertime, but the Stevens werenÕt the type of people to clean out their fireplace. She imagined the ashes loose in the wind, cloudy like exhaust and settling on Milo, alone with his suitcase and the water bowl and the poor departed dog.

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Contributions to Switchback

Issue 22

Clouds of East Danford
Fiction

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Clouds of East Danford

Warren Read

It was a long time before my mother spoke to me again. We drove out of the school parking lot and took the back route, all the way past OlsenÕs Discount Furniture on the edge of town, and the whole way she said nothing. It wasnÕt until we crossed the Cedar Creek Bridge and spilled out into the low valley farmlands that she even cleared her throat. Black and white cows spotted the green fields, their heads bowed to the ground. A few small houses rested under crowded canopies of trees, pale oases waiting at the ends of dusty driveways. Straight through it all, the valley road cut like a long, black zipper.

ÒHave you been out here before, Ray?Ó she finally asked me. Her hands worried at the steering wheel, cherry red fingernails flashing with each movement. She took her eyes from the road to look at me.

I had not been across the flats in my whole life, and I told her so.

ÒYou sure?Ó she asked. ÒYou wouldnÕt keep something like that from your mother?Ó

ÒIÕm sure,Ó I said. There was something in the way she was talking, her tone gripping the edge of nervous. ÒI've never been down here,Ó I said. ÒNot with anyone.Ó

The roadway lifted and fell, and my stomach tumbled. Outside my window barbed wire zipped past, the tic of black fence posts a silent rhythm beneath my motherÕs trembling voice.

ÒOkay then,Ó she said with a sigh. ÒIf you say so, I believe you.Ó

Behind us, in the back seat of the used Pontiac my father had bought from a man who was his supervisor six months earlier, my school bag was filled with reading and multiplication I was supposed to do that night. I couldnÕt be sure how much work was waiting for me, but we were driving farther and farther out into the county and my mother had not yet told me why she had come early to pull me from school. I had always been good about my homework. Mrs. Carmen expected things on time and correct, and I didnÕt want to cross her. Junior high was coming next year, and I had to be ready for it.

ÒWhere are we going?Ó I asked.

ÒHand me my purse,Ó she said, punching the dashboard lighter with her thumb and nodding to the lumpy handbag sitting at my feet. She glared at the road ahead, her brows pressed down, the low sun washing the blond so that they looked almost white.

Smoking was something I saw my mother do rarely, sometimes when she was anxious over something, and always at the end of an argument with my father. In those moments she would magically produce a pack of Vantages from a drawer or a coat pocket, tap it against her palm, and slide one out like it was a sword. Holding the lighter with a shaking hand, sheÕd draw from the cigarette as if it was the spout of a hose in the middle of the desert.

ÒIÕm not mad at you, Ray,Ó she said, digging through her purse. And then she lifted her eyebrows suddenly as if sheÕd just remembered something. ÒOkay?Ó

ÒI know that,Ó I said.

ÒDo you?Ó

ÒYeah. Because I didnÕt do anything wrong.Ó

ÒYouÕre right,Ó she said. ÒNo matter what happens, I want you to remember that.Ó And then she patted my knee with her hand.

We came through the valley flats and then we crossed the red trestle bridge on the far side, taking the lazy

Issue 22

Fall 2015

<Previous Work Next Work >

Featured Artists

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Droning
John Gifford

Saturday Morning
Dylan Henderson

Toledo
Douglas W. Milliken

The Suitcase
Rebekah Orton

Clouds of East Danford
Warren Read

hill into East Danford. I knew it from the grand old Victorian shops and the spotting of Easter egg-colored houses that rose up the hillside. I had seen pictures in school and my teacher had talked some about it, of the early settler days and how it was the mill workers and lumbermen who built the whole west side of town. In fact, sheÕd said, the old Danford-Smith sawmill was the same one that had put out lumber back when her own great-grandparents settled the area. My father, I told Mrs. Carmen at the time, worked at Danford-Smith. Now I could see the twin smokestacks some distance up river, white billowing into the sky as if they were making the clouds.

My mother pointed at them and asked, ÒWell how about that, Ray?Ó as if it was the greatest thing ever. ÒHave you been to see your dadÕs work?Ó

ÒNo, maÕam,Ó I said. ÒI told you I was never out here.Ó

ÒWell, weÕre not going all the way out there, thatÕs for sure,Ó she said. ÒBut there the stacks are. Everyone over here knows the mill.Ó

When we got to the top of the hill, my mother pulled the car to the side of the road and rolled down the window all the way. She snapped her cigarette out into the street and put her purse on her lap. She reached in and moved some things around, holding it so I couldnÕt see what she was after. Finally she took out a scrap of paper and unfolded it. She leaned out the window and looked up at the houses. The air was cool in spite of the low October sun and I drank it in, a thankful reprieve from the smoke that had not been able to find its way through the cracked wing window.

ÒWhatÕs that street sign say?Ó she asked, pointing to a green tag at the end of the block on my side.

ÒGrover,Ó I said.

ÒGrover,Ó she repeated, slowly, like she was taking the time to pronounce every letter. ÒGrow-ver.Ó She looked at the paper again. I could see there was a map of some kind drawn over it, and something written in cursive, which I was still not very good at reading.

ÒRay,Ó she said, turning to look at me, her hands on the seat next to me, ÒI think IÕm about to do something here. And the thing is, IÕm not sure exactly how itÕs all going to turn out.Ó She was leaning close and her breath smelled both raw and sweet and her forehead was layered with creases, as if she might break into tears any minute. ÒI want to apologize to you now in case it goes south. I might not be in the frame of mind to do it later.Ó

I wondered then if something illegal was about to happen, maybe a bank robbery or a store holdup. I couldnÕt see my mother doing either of these but at this point anything seemed possible. ÒWhatÕs happening?Ó I asked. She must have heard the fear in my voice because she put her hand on my arm.

ÒIÕm just going to talk to someone is all,Ó she said. ÒThey might not want to talk to me, though, or they might not even be home. So in that case this whole thing will have been a waste of time and gas.Ó She looked over her shoulder and pulled back out into the street. ÒBut if things go the way they might, you should just sit and not say anything. No matter what, just be there with me.Ó

At the end of the block we turned off to the left and took a narrow, winding road down into a neighborhood of smaller houses, houses with peeling gray paint that were crowded together like the railroad cottages against the switchyards in West Danford, where we lived. We drove with my mother leaning into the windshield, peering up at the house numbers.

The cars along the sidewalks were the kind that my dad liked to call *welfare rigs*, most of them splotched with gray primer or covered with vinyl tops peeling like sunburned skin. My mother said, ÒOkay nowÓ, and steered the car carefully into an empty space against the curb. She put her keys in her purse and held it on her lap. Then she rested her chin on her chest and closed her eyes as if she was praying.

Outside the sun was resting behind a line of conker-spotted chestnut trees. I had climbed the giant one on the vacant lot near our house countless times, to pick the spiky fruit that hung from its thick branches. My friends and I would form small piles along the edges of the lot, then hurl them at one another from behind makeshift plywood shields, the bruises on our bodies war wounds of which we could be proud, showing them off at school to anyone who would look. It drove my mother to the edge to see my arms covered in circular spots, but my father would laugh and shake his head, and remind me to guard my face at all costs. The day it was cut down and the lot dozed for what would be a skinny house with no front porch, my best friend and I swore under our breaths from

the sidewalk across the street.

My mother finally snapped her purse closed, looked up, and opened the car door.

ÒLetÕs go.Ó

A half dozen cracked and moss-striped concrete steps led up to the front porch of the tired-looking gray bungalow and we climbed the steps slowly, my motherÕs purse swinging from her shoulder and slapping against her side. White drapes were pulled to the edges of the front picture window, and I could see a table lamp illuminated just inside. A freshly tilled garden bed ran along the block foundation, from the porch steps to a thick holly shrub at the corner. When we got to the top, my mother pushed the doorbell without pausing.

ÒHere we go,Ó she said. ÒNo turning back now.Ó

A wind picked up from behind us and the air was wet, and I wondered if it might start raining soon. The sky looming above the rippling chestnut leaves moved in pillowed, smoky clouds.

ÒI guess theyÕre not home,Ó I said. I forced my hands into my pockets and leaned against the porch railing. She rang the bell again, and it seemed to me that she was determined to be sure she had done all that she could do, but that even she hoped we could turn around and just go back home.

ÒHello?Ó A voice called out from along the side of the house. A woman appeared from around the holly bush. Unlike my mother, who always wore slacks stretched over pear-like hips, this woman was thin, with a flannel shirt tucked into her jeans and sleeves rolled up to her knobby elbows. And she was young. Her face was a landscape of freckles, the kind of face IÕd see on girls across the street from the high school running to our bus stop, stacks of books held tightly to their lumpy chests. She took the dirt-caked gloves from her hands and pulled a long strand of black hair back over her shoulder.

My mother came down the steps and stopped at the base. She moved her purse from one shoulder to the other and rested a hand against her hip.

ÒAre you Sara?Ó she asked.

ÒYes.Ó

ÒYou work at the mill down there? At Danford-Smith?Ó

The woman brought her hands to her front and took the gloves in a tight grip. She glanced up and down the street and then looked at my mother again, and then up at me. She held me in her gaze and I could sense that even though sheÕd rather my mother wasnÕt there, she especially wished I had not come. Something was to happen that I should not be a part of.

ÒWell?Ó my mother said.

ÒYeah,Ó the woman said. ÒI work there.Ó She slapped the gloves against her leg.

ÒShould I introduce myself? You know who I am?Ó My mother pointed at me over her shoulder. ÒThis right here is my kid, by the way.Ó

ÒIÕm pretty sure I know you who are,Ó Sara said. Her shoulders rose and fell with a heavy sigh. I felt sorry for her at that moment, sorry that my mother and I had come to her house uninvited and sorry that we were probably two people she did not want to see. Then she said, ÒMaybe we should go on inside.Ó

The house was dimly lit, and the place smelled like whatever had been cooked last, fried grease maybe, not the kind of smell that made a person wish they could sit down to eat. The walls were checked with photos of people in close-up with curled knuckles touching their chins, or in chairs or standing behind one another, hands resting stiffly on shoulders with teeth bared in forced, unnatural smiles. A leaf-bordered carpet runner led from where we stood and disappeared into the darkness of what I assumed must be the back of the house, where the bedrooms were and probably the bathroom that I hoped I would not have to ask to use.

I followed my mother into the small living room where we sank onto a blanket-draped sofa, noisy springs and stiff lumps giving way beneath us. Sara took the chair on the other side of the coffee table.

There was not a great deal of room in this house; in fact, the living room was not much bigger than my bedroom. I could see into the kitchen and there seemed to be hardly enough room in there to move, much less cook. A square table pressed against the wall with two wooden chairs. A single countertop was interrupted by a stove that looked about half the size of the one in our kitchen.

ÒCan I get you something?Ó Sara asked. ÒWater or coffee?Ó

ÒI donÕt want anything.Ó My motherÕs tone was rusty.

And then we all sat there, not talking, for what seemed like an eternity. Sara kept her eyes down at her hands but my mother just stared at her, unblinking. The noise of each of us breathing choked the room and I wanted to break from the little house and run into the street, run as far from the thickness of that place as possible.

I had begun to realize as soon as we sat down on that sofa that all of this had something to do with my father, and with this woman, though I wasnÕt yet sure exactly what that something could be. By that time in my life I understood the way things worked between men and women, but I suppose I hadnÕt yet placed my own parents in that complicated world. There had been nothing at home to suggest that my father might be taking up with another woman although I knew that sort of thing happened. IÕd seen it plenty on television. I knew a man in the neighborhood who left his whole family and moved in with a waitress heÕd met while he was on the road delivering whiskey. IÕd heard his own daughter say she hoped they both might be found dead on the side of the road someday. But I never once heard my mother ask my father where heÕd been all night, or answer telephone calls, saying ÒHello? Hello?Ó into the receiver while the other end remained silent.

ÒThis is Ray,Ó my mother said, pushing her knee against mine. ÒSay hello to Sara.Ó

ÒHello, Sara,Ó I said.

Sara whispered, ÒHello, Ray.Ó She continued looking at her hands.

My mother laughed then. It wasnÕt a full release but more of a cough, something she caught hold of before it could go on any further. ÒI have to say,Ó she said, ÒyouÕre not much to look at. Scrawny. I guess I thought thereÕd be more.Ó My mother tapped her knee against mine again. ÒWhat do you think of her, Ray?Ó

I just shrugged my shoulders. At that moment I actually thought that she was a decent-looking woman, pretty in the face and she wore her clothes nicely. But I was not about to say as much.

ÒYouÕve got your youth, thatÕs about it,Ó my mother said loudly, and then she leaned over and said in my ear, ÒSheÕs got youth, Ray, nothing more. And besides, it wonÕt last. We all get to have that for a short time. I had it. Some of us make better use of it than others, thatÕs all.Ó

Sara leaned her head down and her hair fell so I couldnÕt see her face anymore. My mother took that purse of hers and moved it onto her lap and clicked open the clasp.

ÒYou should know that Ray is in the sixth grade,Ó she said. ÒHeÕll be going to college someday, but weÕre not building a plan based on scholarships. HeÕs a good student, but heÕs not a great student.Ó

Sara raised her head again to look at me. The way her eyes hung at the bottoms she seemed to be apologizing, as if she had brought us into a situation in which there was no way out. As if someoneÑor maybe all of usÑwould not be getting out of this alive.

ÒHe plays sports, too,Ó my mother said. ÒA lot of sports, two seasons a year. Basketball and baseball.Ó

Sara nodded.

ÒHow much do those cost, Ray?Ó my mother asked.

ÒI donÕt know.Ó

ÒYou donÕt know?Ó Her tone hadnÕt changed and it sounded as though she was angry with me, now. ÒIÕll tell you how much,Ó she said. ÒA hundred and twenty dollars. Each season. And heÕs outgrowing his clothes faster than we can buy them, and thereÕll probably be braces soon and God knows what else.Ó

Sara slid to the edge of the chair and ran her hands over her lap, smoothing out denim that didnÕt need it. She glanced around the room some and then she looked to my mother.

ÒI understand what youÕre saying,Ó she said.

ÒDo you?Ó my mother asked. ÒMiss Thing. Lester Bell doesnÕt have a life of just cutting boards and drinking beer. HeÕs got a family, you know. Lester Bell has responsibilities.Ó

Hearing my fatherÕs name like that had the effect of dropping him squarely into the room, as if the ceiling had opened up and heÕd fallen straight down onto the sofa alongside us. I could almost smell the scent of his aftershave, and the sweet aroma of cedar.

ÒI know he does.Ó

ÒDo you?Ó My mother said it again. ÒDo you?Ó

Sara got up from her chair then and went to the window. She pulled the drapes back through they were thin and not all the way closed, and we could all see everything that was outside, closed or not. I could see the branches on the chestnut tree moving in the breeze, and the conkers too.

My mother said to her, ÒWhat are you thinking about? Are you thinking about how stupid you are? That all thatÕs been going on wouldnÕt have consequences? That there wouldnÕt be a face at the other end of all of this?Ó

ÒIÕm guess what IÕm wondering right now is what IÕm going to say when I go in to work tonight,Ó Sara said. ÒAm I going to tell him you came by here today?Ó She glanced at me, then looked at the window again. ÒMaybe he already knows youÕre here.Ó

ÒHe doesnÕt know a damned thing,Ó my mother said. ÒHe doesnÕt know a thing, Ray.Ó

And then I said, ÒI know,Ó because it was the only thing at that moment that made sense to me, that my father would know nothing about all of this.

Sara turned and came toward us a few steps, and her hair had fallen down over her face again so that I couldnÕt see her eyes. She brushed it back and looked into the kitchen as if she was thinking she should offer us something, and I really thought she might. I was ready to decline whatever it might be. I supposed my mother would not want me to accept something from this woman, no matter what it might be.

But instead Sara said, ÒCan the boy go outside for a minute?Ó She was looking at my mother, but her hand was held out at her waist, the palm up with her fingers pointed at me like she had just thrown dice. ÒI have a few things IÕd like to say about all this. And the truth is I donÕt think itÕs right for him to be here.Ó

My mother slid back on the sofa and took her purse in her hands again and began to play with the strap. There was a look in her eyes that made me think she might not want me to leave, the kind of look that said she was afraid of what might happen if she was on her own in there. But I got up from the sofa anyway, just made for the front door and pushed through, ran down the steps and out into the street, over to the chestnut trees on the other side.

Most of the conkers still lived in the trees, but there were plenty that had fallen onto the ground, their spiny coats split and showing the deep, mahogany wood-like nut peeking through. I sank into the grass and scooped handfuls of them closer to me, and began peeling the covers from the nuts. They were smooth and cool, and I filled my pockets with them as fast as I could since I did not know how long my mother would remain inside that house, and I had a sense that when she did finally emerge, she would be in no mood to wait for me to finish scavenging like a squirrel.

From somewhere up the hill, from where we had driven past the colorful houses and the vista of smokestacks in the distance, the sound of a dogÕs barking knocked out, its voice deep and hard, angry. It kept on, pounding like a bass drum or the litany of a dozen gunshots. I slid a few more nuts into my pockets. A car horn blared and somebody shouted over it, and then it all came to a stop.

My pockets were tight now and they stuck out from my legs in strange lumps. A wind picked up, carrying the smell of wood smoke from somewhere, and the dampness of fall that was fast coming upon us. The front door of SaraÕs house snapped open, and my mother stepped outside onto the porch. She didnÕt look up at me or say any final words before leaving; she just moved her purse from one shoulder to the other and came down the steps in a casual fashion, as if she was leaving the home of a friend, or somebody she had delivered a package to.

ÒPathetic,Ó she said as soon as she closed the car door behind her. ÒI hope you realize just how much filth that was inside there. Pure, absolute filth.Ó I asked her if we were going home then but she just put her purse on the floor between her feet and said, ÒRemember what I told you, Ray. Not a word about any of this.Ó

ÒI wonÕt,Ó I said, though I wasnÕt sure how I would be able to honor that promise. My father and I did not share a good many words with each other at the time, but I still believed that he could see into my head when I was not being truthful. HeÕd told me many times that he could smell a lie before it even left my lips and I believed him, mostly because it had seemed to be true. I could not lie to save my life, and I imagined I would smell just like SaraÕs kitchen the moment I tried. Greasy and sharp, and impossible to miss. My mother turned on the radio as we pulled from the curb, and when the song began to play she hummed along with it.

ÒThis person, this guy singing,Ó she said, reaching over and tapping the dash above the radio,

Òoverdosed in a cheap hotel room, all by himself.Ó She shook her head. ÒSuch a waste. He probably had at least thirty more years of music just waiting there inside him. And the world will never hear it.Ó

ÒPeople do dumb things,Ó I said.

ÒPeople are selfish,Ó she said. ÒTheyÕre selfish and they do what they want, when they want to. They donÕt think for a second about the mess they leave behind.Ó

As we came back down into the valley and hit the mouth of the red trestle bridge, I watched through the side mirror white smoke pushing out of the mill stacks, like the plumes of quills brushing against the fading light of the sky. I thought about Sara sitting in her house all by herself, picturing her tongue hard behind her teeth, her hands clasped on her knees as if in prayer.

Of course she would tell him everything. Years later my mother would say over and over, ÒHow could she not have opened that mouth of hers?Ó SheÕd laugh then and shake her head, and knock dishes together or beat her hand against the pillow hard before tucking it back into the sofa. ÒIf sheÕd had an ounce of self-control in her, she wouldnÕt have wound up with him in the first place, now would she?Ó

And the chestnuts that pressed against my legs on that drive home would, in the early hours of the next morning, roll like polished stones scattered across our kitchen floor. My motherÕs tennis shoes would kick through them as she pulled me by the wrist to the car, the trunk loaded with suitcases and plastic garbage bags filled with unwashed clothing and mismatched bed linens. SheÕd swear and cry while the whole time my father hung back in the hallway, a shadow with no discernable features that I can recall, no eyes or mouth or hands to reach out for me as I was led past him. The things I remember can fit into the space of a twelve year-oldÕs closed fist: the sound of a fatherÕs breathing, rattled and thick, and shoulders that should have been strong from years pushing rough-hewn lumber now fallen and empty, like the branches of an old chestnut at the end of a long autumn.

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