Switchback

Relaunch Celebration

Issue 2016, Volume 12

Features

Interviews

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

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Jordan Serviss

Jordan Serviss is currently in his second year in the University of San Francisco M.F.A. program where he writes fiction. Originally from Northern New York, he completed his M.A. in Writing from Coastal Carolina University (Ō15) where he spent two years living in Myrtle Beach and assisting *Waccamaw*, a journal of contemporary literature. In addition to his role at *Switchback*, he also serves as an Editorial Assistant for *Hobart*, another literary journal. .

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

Editor's Note
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Editor's Note

Jordan Serviss

Welcome to the relaunch of *Switchback*. It is an exciting time for the journal and we are glad that you are here! TodayÕs featured pieces of prose and poetry mark the beginning of our transition from the traditional, issue centric format weÕve followed for 22 issues to publishing on a regular basis. We are starting modestly and are set to publish once a week while we expand towards our goal of releasing new material throughout the week.

Since its inception in 2004, *Switchback* has been a staple of USFÕs MFA in Writing program, and has consistently published quality writing that we can all enjoy sharing with the world. As Editor-in-Chief, I want nothing more than to continue that tradition while also building upon the incredible foundation that those before me have put in place. In the near future we will have a revamped website (thanks in advance to Greg Poulos and Dan Morgan) that will represent the evolution of the journal and showcase our commitment to bringing *Switchback* into a new chapter with momentum.

Not only is the publishing structure of the journal taking a new approach, but we also have had a changing of the guard in our Faculty Advisor position. At this time I would like to thank Nina Schuyler for all her hard work over the years with helping make *Switchback* what it is today. She has been a constant resource for our editors to lean on for her expertise and advice during her time in this role; it is much appreciated!!!

With that said, it is my pleasure to announce that Beth Nguyen, Academic Director of the MFA program, has filled that void. Beth has been instrumental in helping me maintain smooth sailing throughout this entire process and encourages us to think about the ways in which we as *Switchback* find our footing in the larger literary landscape. Thank you!

It is important that I take the time now to give many thanks to everyone else that has helped make this all possible. I owe a lot to the genre editors who have taken ownership of their respective clan and aided me in facilitating the selection process: Kelsey Ahlmark (Nonfiction) Stan OÕNeill (Poetry), Carrie Sheppard (Fiction), and Colter Ruland (Features). They certainly made my life easier in a lot of aspects! I also need to shout out Greg Poulos, the former Editor-In-Chief, for showing me the ropes and guiding me through the countless questions IÕve bombarded him with since he graduated. Then there is Micah Ballard, the money guy and Administrative Director of the MFA program, who I rely on a lot and is always there to handle anything that may arise! Thank you all!!

Getting things going for us are a couple of poems from Lana Austin, an essay from Geoff Watkinson, and a short story from Jonathan Danielson. All three of these writers bring their own unique style to the page and you will see that on display in their work here. We are thrilled to have each of them a part of this kick-off celebration!! I hope you enjoy and be sure to look for us each week!

Jordan Serviss
Editor-in-Chief

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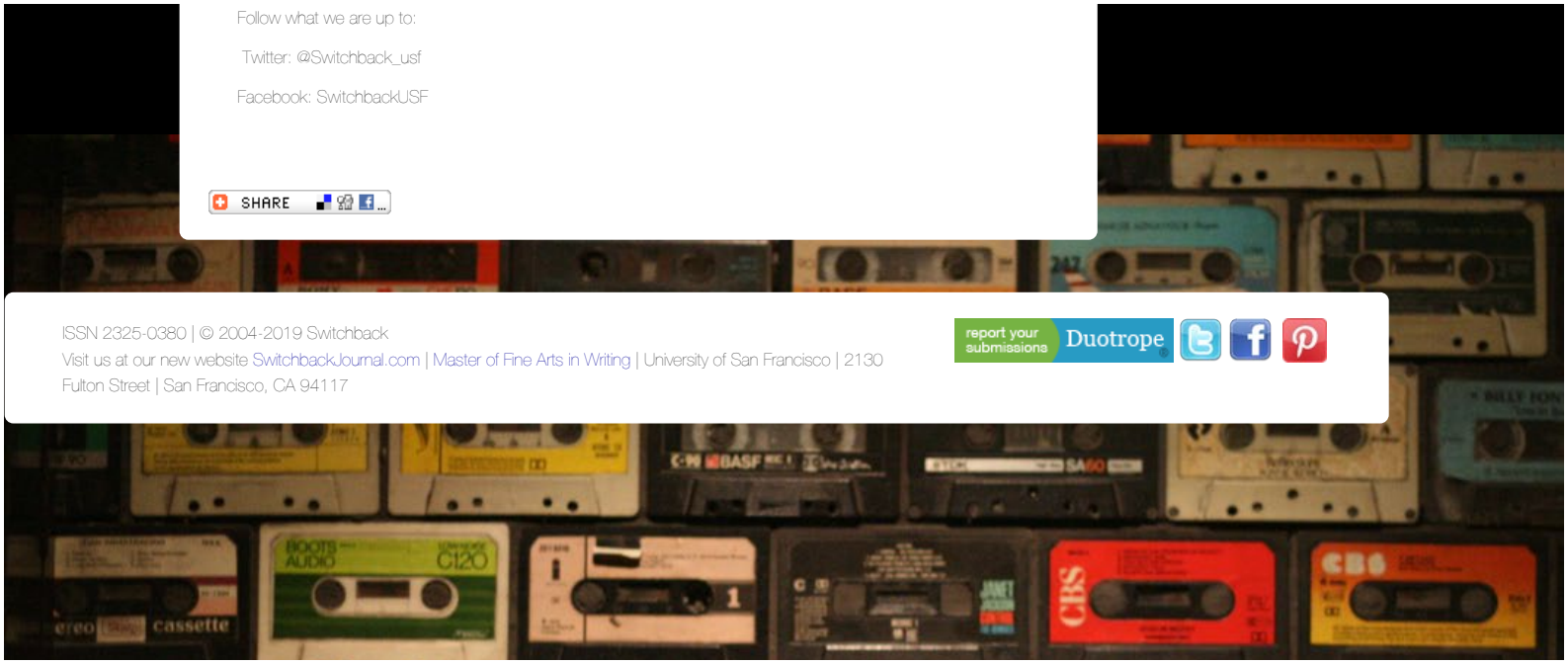

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Kelsey Ahlmark

Kelsey Ahlmark is a second-year MFA student studying nonfiction writing at the University of San Francisco. She's a fan of the nonfiction essay, true crime shows, and rescue dogs. She teaches at a charter school in Oakland and was most recently published in the *IGNATIAN*. She misses cohabitating with the southwest desert.

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A Conversation with Jill Talbot

Kelsey Ahlmark

Where are you right now? What can you see out of your nearest window?

IÕm sitting on my couch, and the open balcony door leads to the three stories of apartments across the parking lot. My favorite balcony across the way is adorned with potted plants, the pots purple and teal and orange, the plants reaching above the railing or huddled between the railingÕs bars. Every once in a while, a large black and white dog wanders out to look out over the edge, and when the door to that balcony opens, I can see a road sign on the wall, a 30 miles an hour speed limit sign, which always slows me down inside.

Can you share with me what you were like when you were young? What were you like as a little girl? What did you spend your time thinking about and what did you enjoy?

I was very isolated as a childÑand content to be so. I spent much time in my room playing Animal Hospital with all of my stuffed animals in various makeshift beds or reading or pretending to be Marie Osmond singing with her brother on my Donnie and Marie microphone. When I was outside, I was riding my bike with My Friend Mandy hanging on to the back of my bike or I wandered the sidewalks, thinking and eating honeysuckle from the vine next door. I had a dog, a tall (to me then) Peek-a-Poo named Skeeter, and she and I spent many afternoons lazing under the weeping willow across the street. IÕd rest my head in the middle of her back and talk to her, watching the clouds sift through the moving branches. If I did have friends over, which was rare, I remember playing CHiPsÕ Wives. There was a show in the seventies, ChiPS, about Òthe adventures of two California Highway Patrol motorcycle officersÓ named Ponch (Erik Estrada!) and John (Larry Wilcox!). My friend Brenda and I would pretend to be on the phone at our respective houses, talking about our husbands (Ponch and JohnÑwe switched each time we played to be fair because all the girls I knew had crushes, even posters, of Erik Estrada as Ponch). I remember myself as introspective, contemplative, often pretending.

Where did you grow up?

Texas.

What were your parents like?

My father was a head football coach in Texas for thirty-five years before becoming an administrator. At eighty-two, heÕs still the Purchasing Director for a very large school district in Texas. My mother was an art teacher and eventually a high school principal. SheÕs retired now, but she still adjuncts for a university observing and mentoring secondary student teachers. They are both very committed to education, and they both love sports (thereÕs a picture of them at a Rangers game on my refrigerator) and going out to eat in Dallas. When I visit, theyÕre watching the Rangers or the Cowboys or whatever college team theyÕre supporting (usually because my motherÕs former students are on the team), and theyÕre planning the next trip to one of their favorite Mexican food restaurants.

What do you have on your desk?

On my writing desk, I have a toy model Black Jeep, because that was what I drove in my twenties. I miss that Jeep, and I miss the girl who drove it, wildly, with the top down. I have a Òwriting rockÓ that my daughter, Indie, gave me. My laptop rests on two hardcover Jack Kerouac books, *Lonesome Traveler*, and, *On the Road*,

because Kerouac is one of my muses, and I need his support. One more: a bumper sticker that reads, *Johnny Cash is a Friend of Mine*, because heÕs a muse for me, too.

Describe your favorite pair of shoes.

My running shoes, which I replace every three to four months. Right now I wear the Asics GT 2000-4. Yellow and gray and blue.

What are you currently reading?

IÕm currently reading HemingwayÕs Boat: Everything He Loved in Life and Lost.

What is the best place you ever camped for a night and what color was your tent?

Bottomless Lakes, New Mexico, circa 1997. My best friend, Tracy, and I rented the tent from the Texas Tech Outdoor Shop, and I think it was beige, though I canÕt recall (we had lots of tequila and Tecates on that trip).

WhatÕs something you've never told anyone before?

Nice try.

What would you most like your daughter to learn from you?

Empathy, empathy, empathy. But I canÕt say she learns it from meÑsheÕs had that beautiful quality since she was very young.

When did you first fall in love?

High school. Freshman year. Todd Simpson. I keep a shoebox with photos and notes and the breakup letter he gave me in C-hallway one day before sixth period. He wrote that one page letter in pencil, and I read it so many times the words faded and the creases are tender with unfolding. Interesting story: heÕs the one who gave me the model Black Jeep. We reconnected several years ago (he grew up to be a veterinarian and a member of the Army). One afternoon I came home to find a small box between the screen and the front door and inside was the black Jeep. WeÕve lost touch now, or, I fear, he did not return from his most recent deployment, but even though I havenÕt heard from him in three years, I send him a birthday email every January 10th, and I will continue to do so every year of my life.

How would you describe your work to others?

For people who know nothing about writing, I keep it simple: ÒI write about my life.Ó

For people who know the essay, I say: ÒI write about the gapsÑin my memory, in my past, in my life, and I write in the gap (the overlap) between story and essay.Ó

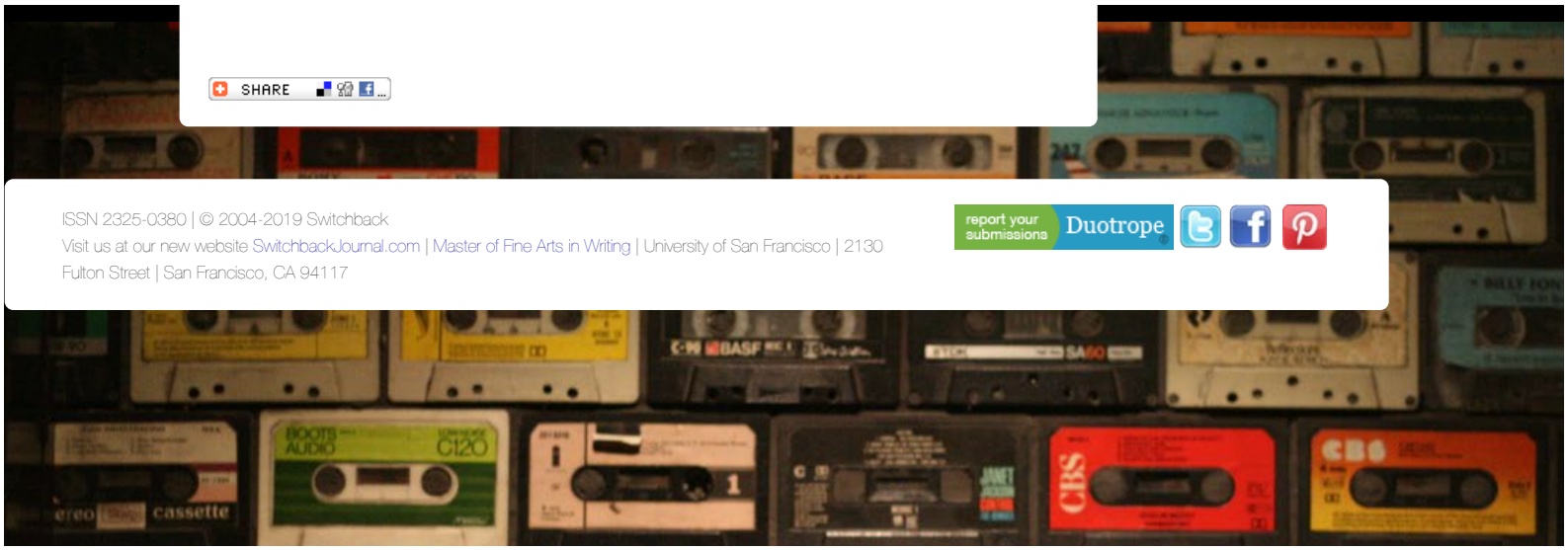
Favorite sentence from a book.

IÕm not going to declare a favorite (there are so, so many IÕve underlined with my blue pen), but I kept a line from Sandra CisnerosÕs Loose Woman on my refrigerator for years:

I guess life presents you
choices and you choose.

Favorite Stevie Nicks song?

Oh, wow. Can I do top four? ÒRhiannonÓ; ÒLandslideÓ (for a few years in my thirties, I listened to it every year on my birthday, *Well, IÕve been afraid of changing / ÔCause IÕve built my life around you.*); ÒLeather and LaceÓ (I always associate it with an afternoon I played it on a jukebox in a bar while playing pool); and ÒGo Your Own WayÓ (I blasted it in my Jeep on the way to my dissertation defense).



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Lindsey Clark

Lindsey is from Wisconsin and has gone on to live in Massachusetts, North Carolina, California, Colorado, Italy, Morocco, Madagascar, and Antarctica—along the way exploring nearly sixty countries on six continents. Her work has been published in Aeolus, World View, and Hippocampus magazines, as well as the Africa anthology “Memories of Sun.” She is also the author of the travel memoir "Land of Dark and Sun."

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A Cutting
Nonfiction

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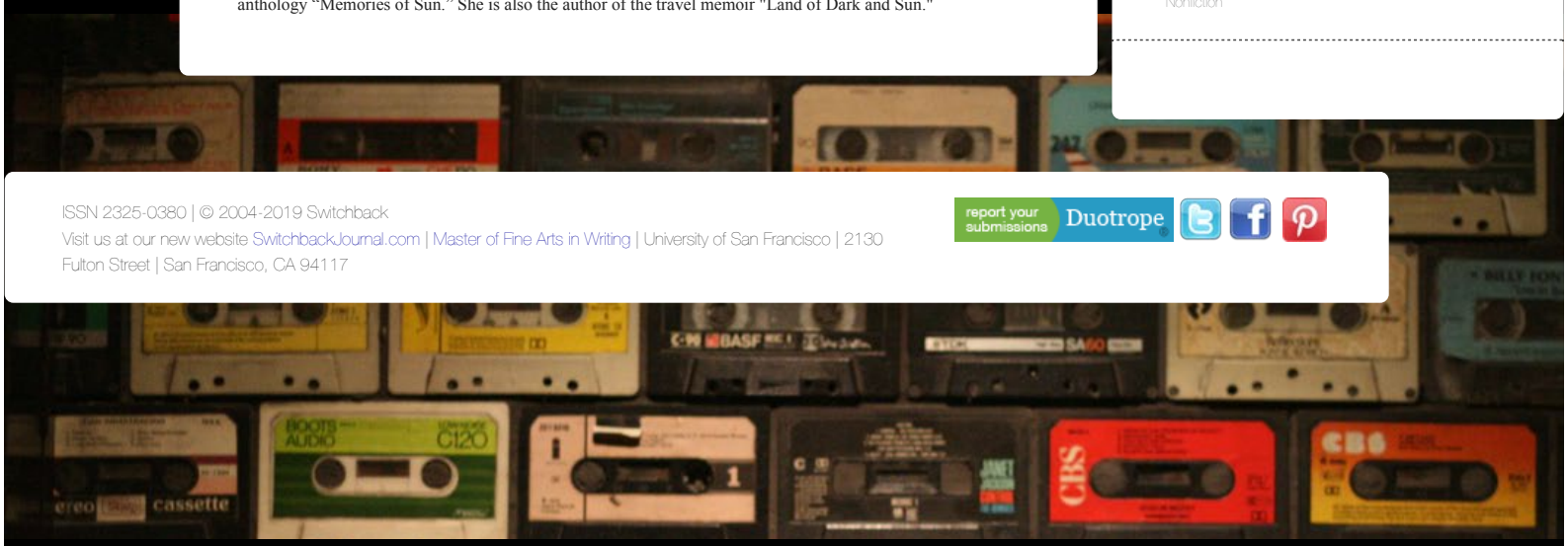


A Cutting

Lindsey Clark

Chanted singing, occasionally interrupted by long, hollow wails of a conch shell, begins in the early afternoon. The voices ringing from the east end of the village suggest a traditional ceremony is brewing, but I have no clue as to the event. I have been living in this hamlet of thirty or forty wooden houses in southeast Madagascar for nearly a year and a half. In that time, I have heard the shell blown to announce community meetings, marriages, deaths, cattle thefts, and even an uncontrolled brush fire in the adjacent national park. Funeral rites are sometimes conducted with a raucous festivity that would put an American birthday party to shame, so I cannot even tell whether todayÕs call is in celebration or lamentation.

My American reluctance to interfere with a familyÕs private life or invite myself to a party keeps me from walking over to investigate. In reality, the Malagasy of the Antandroy and Antanosy tribes (who mingle in this village in a tribal transitional zone) would not even identify with my concepts of privacy and imposition. But I just stick close to my house. If it is okay for me to participate, someone will eventually call me into the fray.

Within a few hours, the singing blossoms into a stomping dance, its instigators migrating among several clusters of houses. They gather force as they go; soon the posse is fifty people strong. My curiosity becomes nagging. If there has been a death, is it someone I know? I resolve to ask the next passer-by what is going on.

Just then, my friend Molisoa appears, walking straight for where I sit reading on my porch. She is one of my favorite people in the village, in part because of the sweet genuineness with which she tries to include me in everything. Her patient smile has been my guide through a wedding celebration, national Independence Day, and several rice transplantings and harvests.

Today, she has something specific to say. She says it several times and unfortunately, I still have no clue what is happening. She points to the party zone, speaking rapidly, using words I do not know.

Tsy azo, I donÕt understand, I apologize. *Misy fety?* There is a party?

Eka, Yes, she confirms.

A marriage? I guess.

No, Molisoa shakes her head. She begins explaining again, this time making a scissoring motion with two fingers. Instantly, I remember where I have seen this gesture before.

Azo amizao, Now I understand, I assure her.

Molisoa looks relieved and asks, Do you want to go with me?

I nod enthusiastically. There is going to be a circumcision.

As part of the intensive training I participated in before coming to live in the village of Tsimelahy, I was coached in Malagasy culture by a Peace Corps employee. Jouvin was of Antandroy ancestry. He spent long afternoons teaching my group of three hopeful volunteers about the traditional ceremonies of the Antandroy region and arming us with the proper things to say on each occasion.

One afternoon, he introduced a new word with the endearing giggle he let loose around any sensitive topic. We stared at him blankly. Then, with a scissors-snipping gesture, he raised his eyebrows sky-high and pronounced in heavily accented English: ceer-cum-see-zhon!

Our laughter dissolved into semi-alarmed awe as he detailed the procedure, Malagasy-style. Female circumcision is not, thank goodness, practiced in Madagascar. But boys are expected to face the knife. In very

remote areas, a visiting doctor might attend to several dozen boys between the ages of one and ten in an assembly line. Snip, snip, snip! JouvinÕs fingers cut the air as he explained. Families that can afford individual ceremonies hold a party in which everyone stays up all night dancing; the operation is performed at dawn when the child is, in theory, be too tired to fully register his pain. Snip, snip, snip!

Jouvin wrote out the Malagasy word for circumcision on a flipchart: *tapaka*. The same as the verb meaning Òto cut.Ó Then he went on to describe various methods of disposing of the foreskin, one of which is to stuff it into a banana and feed it to the childÕs grandfather. Jouvin giggled and snipped the air once more as we struggled to absorb this highly unusual information.

When Molisoa makes that same scissors gesture to me on my porch eighteen months later, I have yet to witness a Malagasy circumcision ceremony. The closest I have come was my first week in the village, when a toddler named Goa visited me daily to display his newly circumcised penis as it progressed in the healing process. Now, my sojourn in the village is nearing its end. I am grateful for the chance finally to see a *tapaka* ceremony. As we head through a cluster of wood houses toward the party, I thank Molisoa for her invitation.

We find the straw mat where her husband, Firiana, is already seated, leaning against a mud hut. He happily gestures for us to join him, and we sit. Several people call hello and wave to me as I look around. Most of the children are caught up in the nomadic dancing troupe that stomps and sings its way among the wood-plank houses. The adults chat, relaxed. The women wear their newest, brightest dresses under *lambahoany*, colorful cloth wraps. Many of the men hold sleek, lethal-looking spears with long wooden handles and metal tips.

It is not just the traditional costumes that indicate the special occasion. I marvel at the large bottles of Coca-Cola and Fanta being passed around; few in this village can afford such luxuries and the nearest place to buy them is more than five miles away down a road that only sees two public bush taxis per week. Other glass bottles contain *toka gasy*, the local sugarcane rum. One man sitting several yards from me is bedecked in an oversized sports coat, ragged shorts, gold-rimmed sunglasses with ocean-blue lenses, a spear in one hand, and a bottle of *toka gasy* in the other.

Molisoa interrupts my staring at the man in blue sunglasses to tell me this is an individual circumcision ceremony for a two year-old called Sijira. It is *fomba gasy*, Malagasy custom, she says, that you give the childÕs family some money to wish them well on such an important occasion. I ask her how much, and she looks embarrassed, insisting that it is also okay not to give money. I feel an all-too-familiar confusion. I want to give something, but not ostentatiously more than other people. After several minutes of faux-casual conversation, I finally wrestle it out of Molisoa that her family will give one thousand ariary, about fifty cents.

Once I have the information I need, I feel bad for making her uncomfortable, and I change the subject. Is it true that people will stay awake to dance all night?

Yes, she nods, And then they will do the circumcision at sunrise.

And will they put the foreskin in a banana for Grandpa to eat? I ask. Not knowing the word for foreskin, I call it Òthe thing that is cut off.Ó Molisoa looks at me with an expression I cannot quite read and shakes her head no. Is her smile amused or confused?

Our conversation is interrupted when the singing and dancing troupe heads our way. Some of the kids who visit my house daily for games and idle chatting with the *vasaha* (foreigner) break their expressions of concentration just long enough to give me brief, shy smiles. Their stomping kicks up thick clouds of dust. I cough, squint my eyes shut, and uselessly fan the air in front of my face as all the adults around me do the same. The kids dance on.

Go dance with them! Molisoa prods me. But I hate the way my presence tends to become the focus of any situation, destroying the momentÕs natural grace. Glaringly inept dancing would only quadruple the effect. I resist.

I do not know how, I tell her.

Just try, she hollers over the harmonizing.

Seeing the *vazaha* dance would give everyone a good belly laugh, I know, but I am just not in the mood. At twenty-eight, I am less than five years younger than Molisoa, but she has three teenage children. My failure to

reproduce even once makes everyone see me as much younger than I am. But no one over the age of twenty is up there dancing. I resort to what I suspect is a safe gamble.

Okay, I yell back, IÕll dance if you do, too!

As I had hoped, Molisoa doubles over laughing and refuses my offer. Just then, the sweating, stomping, singing circle veers away from us in another huge cloud of dust. The girls go one way and the boys go the other. They reunite by unspoken consensus on the other side of the courtyard. Now we can watch without a dust storm and converse without shouting. Molisoa points out SijiraÕs mother, a girl in her late teens. She moves busily through the crowd with wild, unkempt hair that contrasts the neat braids of the other women.

Firiana and MolisoaÕs daughter Hafalia appears beside us. Molisoa tells her to go haul some water. Since I need to do the same chore, I decide to take a break from the party and go with Hafalia to the stream the village women visit several times daily. We both stop at our houses for buckets before walking to the water. On the way, I compliment Hafalia on her obviously new, bright orange dress. Her mother made it, she tells me, smiling softly. Then, with gentle tact, she points out a huge dirt stain on the back of my dress. At a formal ceremony like a *tapaka*, unnecessarily sloppy attire could be seen as an insult. Good thing I did not get up to dance, after all. I thank Hafalia and, swinging our buckets, we continue down to the water terrace.

By the time I eat some dinner, wrap myself in a clean *lambahoany*, and return to the party, dusk has fallen. I have difficulty recognizing peopleÕs faces on such a moonless night. Looking for Molisoa and FirianaÕs mat, I see that many of the revelers have been feeding their appetites with the homemade rum. When I finally find him, Firiana sits exactly where I left him an hour earlier, but his speech is slightly slurred as he introduces me to his father, a spindly old man now seated to his left. A third man, whom I do not recognize, sits to the left of FirianaÕs father. As soon as I am settled, the stranger quickly shifts to sit beside me. His manner is urgent, but I cannot make any sense of his sentence fragments. Something about my family in America? Molisoa steps in to explain that he assumes I am related to an American named Wendy who lived in this area a decade ago.

I am saved from describing the size and anonymity of America by another voice calling my name: *Leen-see! Vetivety! Avia!* Lindsey, come over here a moment!

It is Ramose Jerve, the village mayor and schoolteacher. He sits in a huddle with two other men. One is the man in blue sunglasses, who has not discarded his prized apparel just because night is setting in. As soon as I crouch alongside them, Ramose points to the large communal mortar and pestle behind me.

They will pound the rice but they will not winnow it! he tells me with great urgency. His breath reeks of *toka gasy* but he is aware enough to register my confusion. We are telling you about Malagsy custom! he exclaims.

Oh, yes, I nod.

He continues: There is a chicken, and the child will eat its left thigh.

No, right thigh, right thigh! admonishes the man in blue spectacles.

Excuse me, right thigh, Ramose corrects himself, lifting his hands from his left quadriceps to replant them on his right leg. Then he points to the house behind him and says something I do not catch at all, ending with *iza izaÕny fomba gasy*: And that is Malagasy custom!

So, you understand? he slurs.

Azo, I understand, I tell him, deeming this an inappropriate moment to ask again about the banana and the foreskin.

Do you understand it all, or just some of it? he persists.

I only understand some of it, I admit, But not yet all.

You donÕt understand it all yet, he repeats, But you will see, soon you will see Malagasy custom.

I thank him and say that I am going back to sit with Molisoa, but that if they have anything else to tell me, I will return. All three men nod in satisfaction.

Back on the other straw mat, I ask about some of the things I do not yet understand. Molisoa patiently reiterates that tonight, a special kind of rice will be prepared along with a chicken. In the morning, after the circumcision, Sijira will be fed the right drumstick.

But why? I ask, wondering what is special about the right leg.

Firiana interjects with a fervor to rival RamoseÕs and a single, emphatic nod of his head: *iza izaÕny fomba*

gasy. That is Malagasy custom!

Thus inspired, he takes over my education. Stripes of hair will be cut from SijiraÕs head, one starting from his forehead going back to the nape and another from ear to ear, crossing over the top. Then a silver bracelet will be sewn into the remaining hair on the crown of his head. I try once more to get at the origins of this custom: why? But the answer is simple. Firiana nods proudly and repeats, *iza izaÕny fomba gasy*.

Then he loses me in a long monologue that I become desperate to follow when I see him pantomiming the cutting of the foreskin. Finally! My question might be answered. I listen intently for the word *akondro*, banana, but it never comes. Firiana finishes his explanation with a flourish, a dramatic pointing toward the sky, a vigorous nod of his head, and *iza izaÕny fomba gasy*!

I am determined to get to the bottom of this. I tell him I do not understand and ask him to repeat. Again, Firiana holds out his index finger, and again, he mimes the circumcision. Then he points to his finger.

Basy, he tells me, then mimes returning the foreskin to his finger. I am so focused on his pantomime that I hardly listen to the words. But when he makes an exploding noise, I suddenly remember the meaning of *basy*: gun. I have heard of this before. After Jouvin explained the attention-grabbing banana method of foreskin disposal, he mentioned a second possibility: families fortunate enough to own or borrow a gun will stuff the foreskin down the barrel, aim for the sky, and pull the trigger. There might not be any doctored bananas on the way, but vaporizing the foreskin in a terrifically loud gunblast could be interesting, too.

Suddenly, Molisoa stands and heads to an adjacent house, motioning for me to follow. For a moment we just stand in the doorway. Inside, several hands hold kerosene lamps high against the total darkness of the night, illuminating the people packed from wall to wall.

LetÕs go, calls Molisoa before diving into the crowd. It seems impossible there could be room for two more people inside, but I plunge in after her, ushered forward by the people whose toes I crush with every step.

Azafady, azafady, Excuse me, Sorry, I apologize again and again, until I finally near the opposite wall and rediscover Molisoa. Everyone in the room has begun chanting, hopping, and stomping to a primal, rhythmic song that veers from joyful to sad to eerie and back again. The air hangs acrid with thick smoke from a fire being started against the south wall. My eyes water and my throat burns. Huddled on the floor to my right is a tiny child. When I see the silver bracelet atop his head, I recognize Sijira. He looks concerned, but not nearly as terrified as I expect a toddler might be under the stomping feet and growing volume of this celebration in his honor. Molisoa tries to pull me closer to the center of the circle she has joined.

Akoho! Chicken! she shouts amid voices that slide low, then rise higher than ever. She points. I peer over another womanÕs shoulder to where a straw basket and a blanket of feathers cover the floor. The women who can reach are frantically helping to tear a chicken limb from limb. Each part is reduced to smaller pieces with a kitchen knife. Blood trickles down their forearms and the chanting rises to a roar. For a few perfect moments, I feel totally invisible, lost in the beat of feet on the dirt floor, consumed in a thick soup of humanity that has lost its self-consciousness and succumbed to pure harmony of purpose. The women surrounding the basket jump, thrusting bloody chicken organs high into the air alongside the kerosene lamps, knives, and spears of the others. Among the smoke comes whiffs of *toka gasy* and sweat. My eyes blur, straining into shadows. My ears ring. People jostle against me from every direction, and I feel utterly surrounded by the vibrant urgency of life.

Then, just as mysteriously as it built, the intensity fades. The voices lower, the dancing calms, and the spell is broken. I become hyper-aware of all the knives and burning oil held so close to peopleÕs skin and hair. The woman in front of me has sliced her finger open and stops dancing to wipe away the blood and search for a rag to bind it. Sijira begins sobbing loudly. Someone sweeps him off the floor and tries to comfort him. Though I did not even notice the movement, all the chicken parts have been passed to the pot above the fire. Four men stand surrounding it, stirring the water with the wooden ends of their spears.

On seeing them, I realize the crowd has thinned, people slipping outside one by one. A few of the remaining women start giggling and staring at me. To my left, I hear the conch shell being blown once again. SijiraÕs father cradles it in his palms, performing his own private dance. Then he stops, and with a mischievous smile and a glance at me, he repeats the announcement that caused the giggling: *iza izaÕny fomba gasy!* This is

Malagasy custom! Everyone left in the room grins at me. Molisoa rolls her eyes and leads me out of the house. SijiraÕs father continues to sound the conch and holler after me: Malagasy custom! This is Malagasy custom!

Outside, the party gathers around one of the thigh-high community mortars. SijiraÕs male relatives line up to take turns pounding the rice he will eat in the morning, separating the grains from the hulls. They use two pestles made of tree trunks. The alternating rhythm of their work becomes the base for a mournful-sounding call and response among the women standing in the outer circle. Gusts of wind from the mountains keep putting out the lamps until, finally, someone fetches a flashlight. I feel a tug on my arm and turn. It is Mayor Ramose.

Now do you understand it all? he asks me.

Yes, I tell him, Thank you.

ThatÕs good, he nods, Now you see Malagasy culture.

Though I hadnÕt realized she had disappeared, Molisoa reapproaches from the direction of her house. I tell her that I have money for the family. She leads me over to where SijiraÕs mother holds him in her arms to watch the preparation of the rice. I give her a little less than Molisoa told me her whole family would contribute. She thanks me graciously. Then Molisoa walks away from the crowd, motioning for me to follow.

The preparations are over, she says, And now we can go home.

Really? I try not to sound too relieved.

Yes, she assures me, Some people will stay up all night but I am going to eat and go to sleep. Then she hesitates, adding, Or do you want to stay up so you can eat with them?

The truth is I feel almost sick with sleepiness and had been dreading staying up all night but had not wanted to seem ungrateful for her invitation by going home to sleep. Now, I admit I already ate and am dead tired. She laughs, and we agree to return to the party together at dawn. We say goodnight, and as I turn and stroll a few starlit steps farther to my own house, I suddenly find my eyes welling up. I feel small, yet part of something big, something beyond my understanding, that includes me regardless. I fall asleep to the nearby sounds of whistling, singing celebration.

The morning sky is pale and clear, the air crisp. The most dedicated revelers are still singing, though with much less energy. By the time I dress and seek out Molisoa, SijiraÕs father has resumed his conch shell call, beckoning back anyone who went home to sleep. When Molisoa sees me coming, she ducks back into her house and brings out a basket containing two cups of rice, a cup of kidney beans, and a small bottle of Coca-Cola. She hands them to me ceremoniously, saying they are from SijiraÕs family. It is their way of thanking me for the money I gave since I was not there when they shared dinner with the other guests. I feel terrible: this food cost twice as much as the money I gave them. I try to refuse but Molisoa insists. It would insult the family if I returned their gift, she says. All I can do is dash back to leave the food in my house.

Molisoa and I rejoin the party, squatting in the hushed crowd as one of the women begins a repetitive, dirge-like chant. Others add their voices to the core phrases, pulling their blankets tighter around their heads and chests against the slight morning chill. SijiraÕs mother wanders around looking dazed. Sijira himself perches on an uncleÕs shoulder, head resting wearily in his hands, a bored expression making him look oddly mature.

The man with blue glasses has not lost them during the night. He begins a spirited debate with a woman seated on the other side of the courtyard. At first it sounds like an argument, but eventually I realize it is choreographed, a performance of sorts. I cannot follow what they say, except for when the bespectacled man declares there will be no speeches.

Sijira is carried off to the side of the crowd to where a cow, the most sacred possession of any Malagasy, has been presented in his honor. Two men wrestle the animal into a firm hold while a third pours a cup of water over its head. Disgruntled, the beast thrashes away through the brush. Its captors, their mission apparently accomplished, scatter and rejoin the crowd. Then SijiraÕs father appears, quite drunk, and loudly demands some chairs. Several people scramble to accommodate him, for in his wake walks a quiet, graying, dignified man I have never seen before. He is the doctor invited to perform the circumcision. He, at least, looks sober and well rested.

Three chairs materialize. While the doctor sits on one and arranges his instruments on another, Sijira is placed on the third, held in an uncleÕs lap. He has finally begun to suspect that this might not be all fun and

games. When onlookers start pressing into a tight circle around the trio of chairs, his fears are confirmed. He begins to cry. Either out of instinct or vague understanding, he presses his palms down to protect his groin. But he is no match for the dozen hands that reach in to help hold his arms and legs and remove his shorts. His cries escalate to screams and his eyes dart desperately among the doctor, who draws local anesthetic into an ancient-looking needle, and those of us who watch but fail to help him in his distress. I feel a wave of shame at my voyeurism, but curiosity prevails. SijiraÕs cries peak and he pees everywhere as the doctor injects the anesthetic.

After leaning in to assure him, It doesnÕt hurt anymore, now! It doesnÕt hurt! SijiraÕs father takes a swig of rum, swishes it around in his mouth, and spits it all over SijiraÕs crotch. He passes the bottle to an uncle who does the same. I sincerely doubt that the alcohol in the rum cancels out the germs in their saliva, but the doctor remains unfazed. He wipes the rum away with a cloth and gets to work. His ungloved but practiced hands quickly place two clamps on the foreskin around the tip of SijiraÕs penis, makes the famous snip between them, and sutures the wound. Sijira continues to cry, but now struggles only halfheartedly against the hands that hold his legs. His eyes are slightly curious as he watches the doctorÕs needlework. His father shoves a Gouty cracker into SijiraÕs hand and tells him to eat. Still sobbing, the poor kid cannot eat, but he keeps a firm grip on the cracker for the rest of the procedure.

About ten minutes after taking his seat, the doctor is finished. He hands Sijira to his father and the foreskin to the grandfather. Both men disappear with their prizes as the doctor cleans up and the crowd disperses. Molisoa has left without me noticing. Even SijiraÕs grandmother leaves her house with an empty bucket and walks toward the water terrace. I figure I will not be missing anything if I do the same. Down at the river, the all-night dancers chatter and scrub twenty-four hours of dirt off their feet. They greet me cheerfully.

I am leaning down to fill my bucket when the air rings with a gunshot. We all start and twist our heads toward the village. A few of the girls snicker before resuming their baths. I cannot believe it: I missed the climax of the whole ceremony. But looking over at SijiraÕs grandmother, I realize that it was not for me to see.

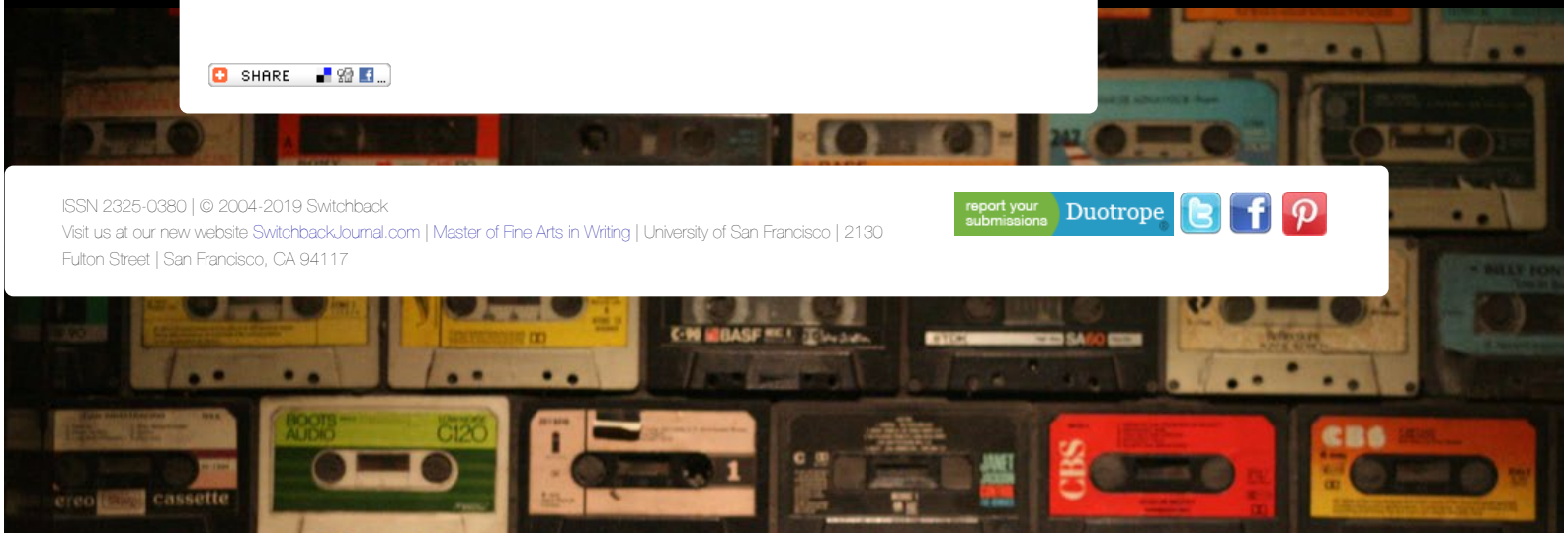
She smiles at me and says, *vita ny tapaka*, the circumcision is over. Then, she adds, *iza izaÕny fomba gasy*.

I blink a few times, tears gathering on the rims of my eyes. I do not even know what prompted them. Happiness? Confusion? Weariness? Gratitude? Amazement at this place, my home, this planet, these people, the entire beautiful chaos of humanity?

I smile back at SijiraÕs grandmother and ask, And now you can sleep?

Now we will sleep, she agrees.

We hoist our brimming water buckets onto our heads and walk slowly back to the village.



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Marlena Johns

Marlena "Zen" Johns has lived an adventurous life, raising twin sons and teaching high school for twenty years. She was Teacher of the Year for AHS in 2011-2012, a Claes Nobel Educator of Distinction and a University of Chicago Distinguished Educator. One of her plays was performed at a local community center. She won a prose contest sponsored by the University of Houston. Two of her poems are set to be published in the upcoming summer and fall issues of *Restless,* and *Five 2 One* magazine, and three will be featured in an anthology titled *Let's Talk about Being Human.*

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Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

Mothering a Member of an Endangered Species
Nonfiction

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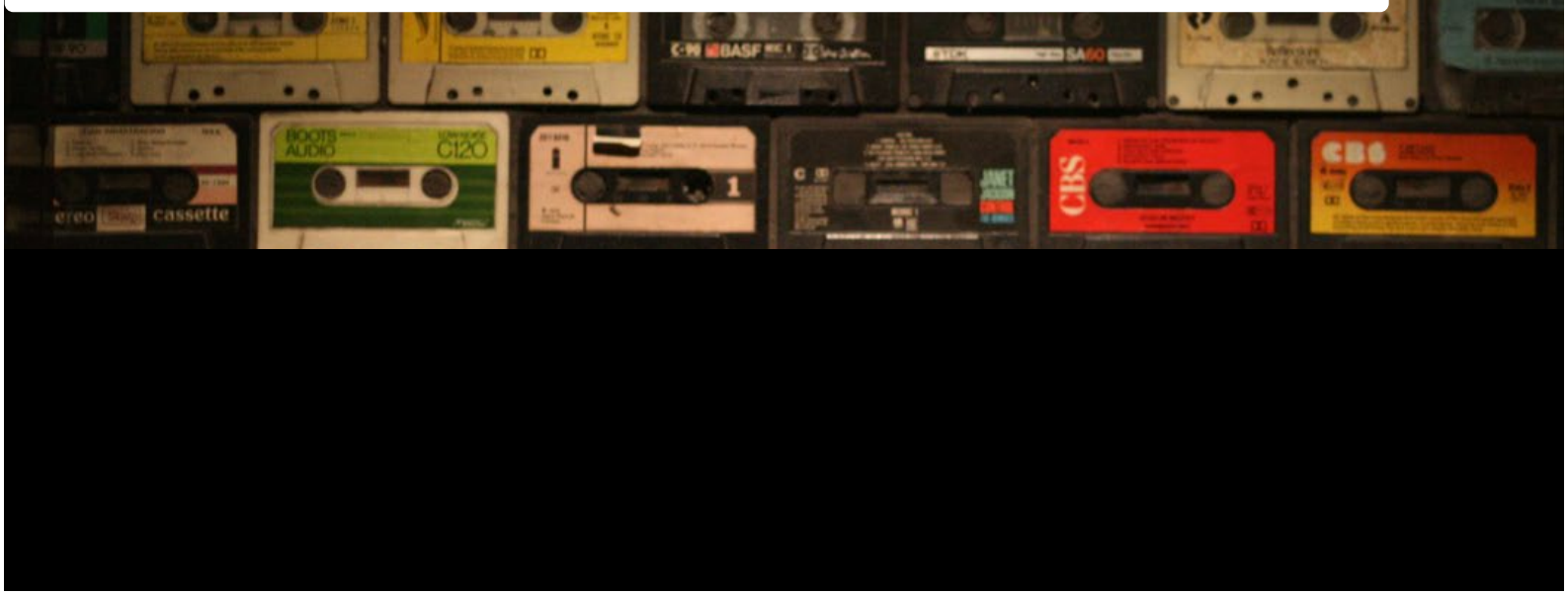


Mothering a Member of an Endangered Species

Marlena Johns

I remember the night that my sons made the transition, completed this rite of passage that catapulted them from the, ÒIsnÕt he cute?Ó comments to stares of suspicion. They were 12. I wasnÕt ready. I wasnÕt ready for them to go on dates, or take their first drive, or get a job. I absolutely wasnÕt ready for them to be stopped by the cops.

It was October 31st, 2008, and we had just returned from hours of face painting, pizza eating, bobbing for apples, sliding down huge inflated slides, and boxing with inflated gloves at a church about 30 minutes away. It was still early, around 7:30, and my kids wanted more candyÑalthough they each had a bulging basket, so I let them out in front of our house, told them weÕd make a quick trip around the neighborhood and call it a night. They began walking to the next door neighborÕs house, and I began to turn the key to open my front door. WeÕd won a cake that night in a game of musical chairs, and I planned to drop it off in the kitchen and join them. But before I could even do that, out of the corner of my eyes, I saw flashing lights, and the cops were jumping out of a squad car yelling, ÒHold it right there young man. What are you doing?Ó I sat the cake on my porch steps and began walking towards the scene, not believing that my sonsÑin full Halloween finery and clutching baskets full of candy-were being questioned by the police who assured me that they were only stopping them because someone reported that it looked like some young men were Òcasing a houseÓ. How unlikely that excuse sounded to me since the hood of my car was still warm, and I hadnÕt even had time to open my front door.

We went inside right after, and my kids gave all their candy away to the next group that knocked on the door. No one had much of an appetite.

That was my baptism into the life of a black teenager in America. My sons werenÕt wearing hoodies or gang colors; their pants werenÕt sagging; they werenÕt out late at night, when all Ògood kidsÓ are home in bed. They were 12 and trying to trick or treat on their own street, in a neighborhood theyÕd lived in for five years. The neighborhood they went to school in. They were knocking on doors of their neighbors trying to get candy. They were trying to be kids.

Over the next seven years, my perception of law enforcement took a real beating. Maybe it was because my kids were harassed sitting at playground swings after school in the neighborhood playground adjacent to their school. Maybe it was because on their first double date at a local mall, I got a call halfway through the movie that I needed to come quickly. Security had escorted two drunken adults multiple times to the exit of the mall, and these adults, who happened to be white, had decided to taunt my sons and their friends. An argument ensued, and when security called the police, the adultsÑwho had carsÑall left the scene while the teens were left waiting for me. I walked up to hear officers threatening my son with jail time for disorderly conduct because of a request to pull the video footage to see what really happened since the whole altercation was caught on film. Maybe it was

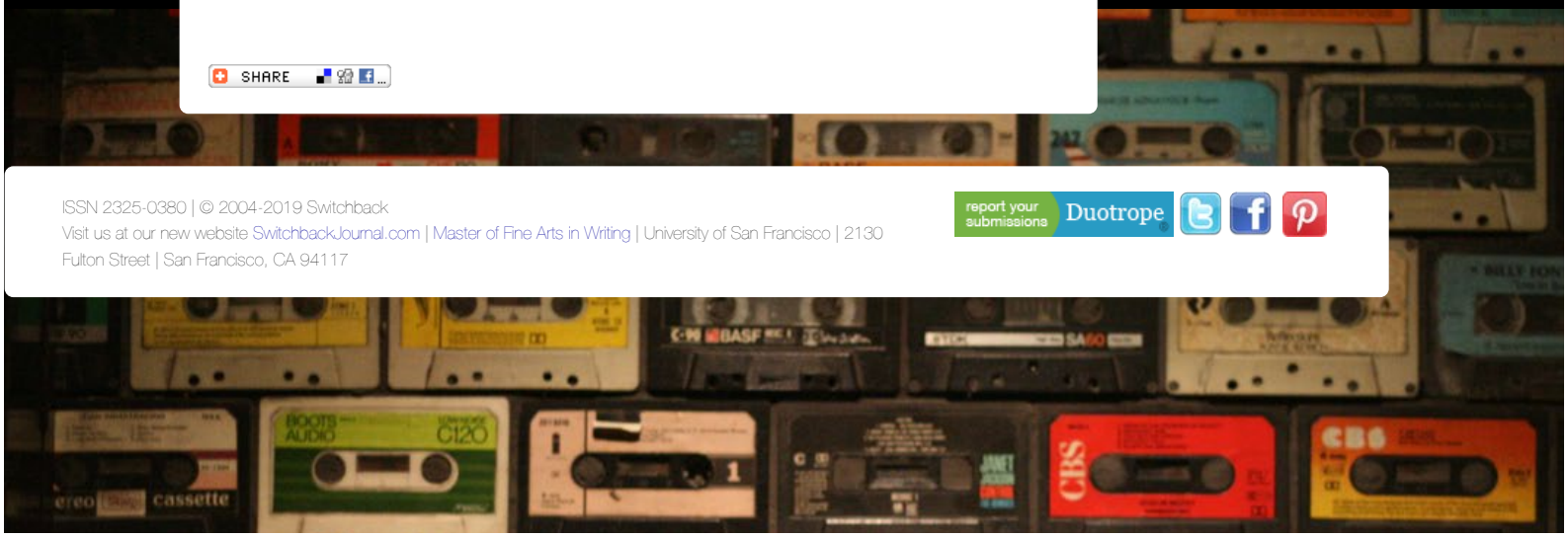
because the first time they rode in a car with a friend whoÕd just gotten his driverÕs license, they happened to see two female classmates, who happened to be white, walking home. They innocently offered them a ride. A few minutes later, the new driver was explaining that he wasnÕt trying to kidnap the girls, check his student id officer. We go to school together. We all live in the same neighborhood. Maybe itÕs because my son was caught on camera walking by the door of a locked classroom at his school, and when a phone ended up missing at the end of the day, he was the one being questioned by the police. Who was he, Casper, able to float through walls at will? Maybe it was because both my sons and my husband at the time, had guns pulled on them

while doing yard work in our backyard because a suspect was fleeing police custody, and it looked like he came that way.

Maybe because the time of my sonsÕ lives that was supposed to be the most carefreeÑtheir teenage years, when they were supposed to make memories that they laugh about, that last them the rest of their lives, was filled with the number 33. Thirty-three, thatÕs the amount of times that my sons were collectively detained in the span of 8 years. An average of four times each year. I know thatÕs a lot less than some articles IÕve read where young men say numbers like 100 or 200. But I canÕt mentally process 33. Once a season, on average. They canÕt look back at a single milestoneÑtheir last time trick-or-treating, their first date, their first ride in a car driven by their friend- without there being a memory of fear, a sense of being a target. And as a mother, who wants the best for her sons, who wants them to be happy and healthy and whole, their childhood or lack thereof, angers me.

And the other things that happened around them, terrify me. See, no kid grows up in a vacuum. And my sons were popular, and involved. Football, basketball, track, band, debate team, lyricist society, Black student union, mock trial team, choirÑ keeping up with their schedule was a huge addition to my full time job. And by the time they hit ninth grade, they had a local pack of companions, ten in fact, a few a little older, a few a little younger. As parents we had cookouts and sleepovers, car pools and birthday parties with this dozen in attendance. They pictured graduating together, going to college together, doing the same things they were doing now as friends, with their kids. When graduation came, of that dozen, two were dead- one stabbed by a Hispanic classmate at a high school my kids no longer attended, and one killed in a home invasion. Four were in jail. Six walked the stageÑ four friends and my two sons. So 40% of my sonsÕ friends made it to 18. Six in all, including my sons, were alive and un-incarcerated. So, even graduation was bittersweet.

IÕve heard it said that more black boys are born than black girls, 8 boys to every 7 girls, but by the age of 18, thereÕs one boy left for those seven girls. The other 7 are dead or in jail. I heard a comedian once say, people say black men are an endangered species. No theyÕre not, if they were, theyÕd be protected by law. IÕve posted statistics about police profiling, about Sandra Bland, and Eric Garner and Trayvon Martin, and been called a racist for pointing out what happened to them. That and the fact that American society tends to blame the victim, thinking there must be a reason why Òthese thingsÓ happen to Òthose peopleÓ led me to not want to put my name on this piece. After all, I work in a conservative field where people are quick to judge. So for seven years, IÕve stayed mostly silently, posting here and there when the pain got too deep. But now, IÕm writing to America. As a mother, as a neighbor, as a friend, as a church and community member and begging, pleading for each of you to see the bullÕs eyes on my sonsÕ backs. Pleading for you to see the targets on my students' backs, on the back of every Trayvon Martin who is still walking around carrying a bag of Skittles and an iced tea, minding his own business. And take them off.



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Iza Wojciechowska

Iza Wojciechowska is a writer and translator living in Durham, NC but originally from the southwest desert. Her nonfiction has appeared in Tupelo Quarterly, Sycamore Review, Misadventures Magazine, The Common, and elsewhere. She also translates poetry from the Polish. You can find her at izawojciechowska.com and follow her on Twitter: @iza_wo

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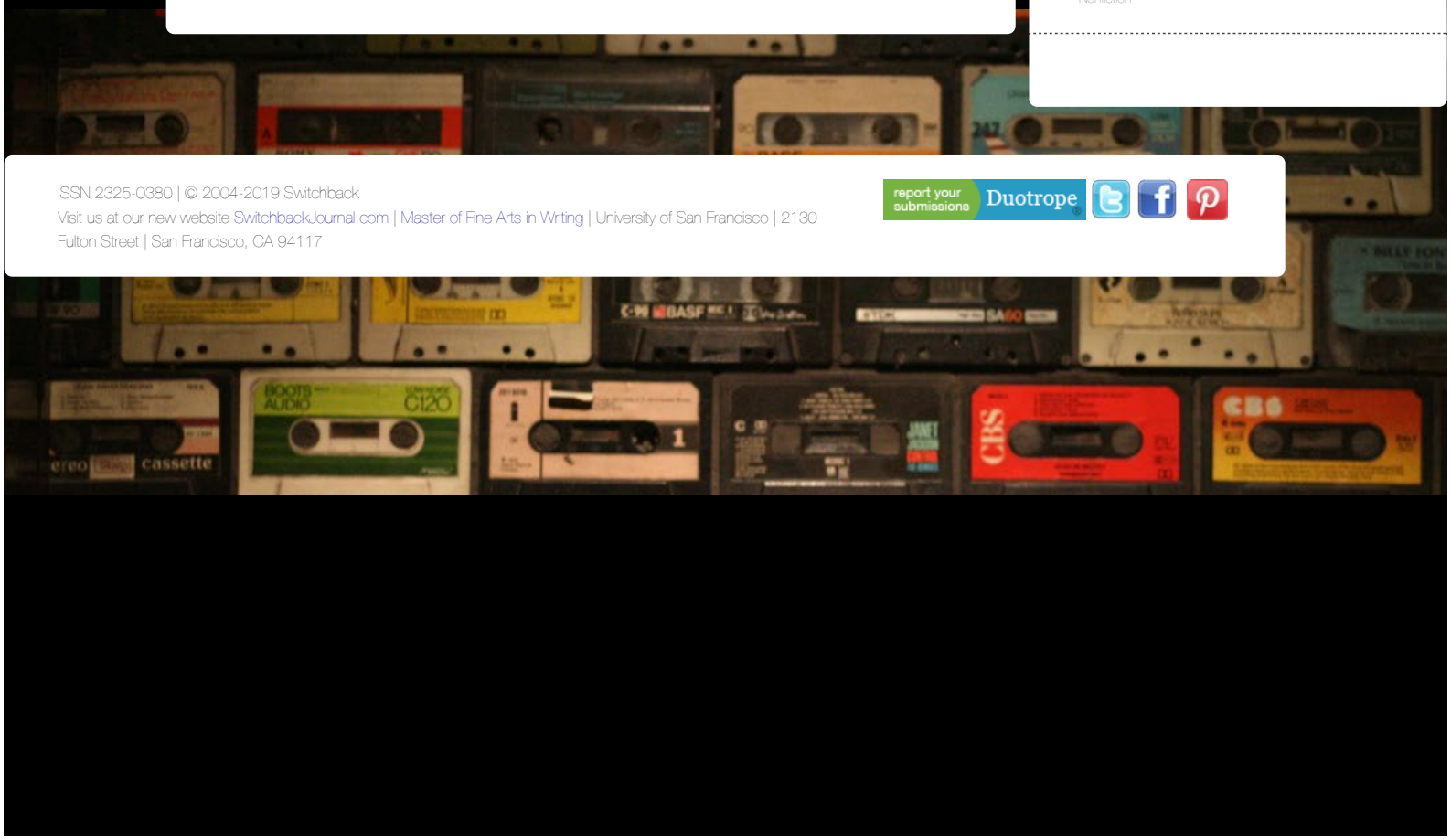

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What, Rabbit?

Iza Wojciechowska

My father started baking bread when I was sixteen. The first loaf was a tragedyÑlumpy, too yeasty, the texture of coarse cloth. No one ate it. We feebly praised his effort. After years of experimentingÑdeveloping careful proportions of different kinds of flour, grinding it himself with a contraption in the garageÑand after baking loaf after loaf with varying degrees of success, his bread has been perfected. From his oven in Texas emerge replicas of the dark ryes and wheats my parents grew up buying from tiny bakeries in Poland twenty, thirty, years ago. My father is proud of his accomplishment; the longest conversations I have with him tend to revolve around dough and molds, poppy seeds and crusts. I receive picture text messages of particularly successful graham-flour rolls.

ÒNo bread in Europe is as good as Polish bread,Ó he says, after returning from a summer road trip from Warsaw to Athens and back again. As he speaks, he saws open a fresh loaf, its porous interior still steaming, and asks me if I want any. ÒAlthough one can always hope to find something even more perfect.Ó

ÒI want half a slice. The smaller half.Ó

ÒYou knowÓÑhe looks up from the knifeÑÒhalves cannot be smaller or bigger. A half is a half.Ó And we move to the table considering fractions, eating the bread religiously.

My mother has told me to be nice to him, because he thinks I hate him, so I stay at the table and listen as he feeds me math problems he created while driving through Romania or Hungary or Greece. I give up. I donÕt know how to prove that the speed necessarily must, at some point, exceed the distance remaining. He examines the jam jar and says it might help if I drew a diagram.

I used to sit at this table and practice multiplication. IÕd hold my hands in front of my face and fold a finger down to learn the nines: three times nine, fold the third finger. Two remain standing on the left, and seven on the right. Twenty-seven then. Easy. Sometimes, if the numbers were being particularly uncooperative, IÕd stop and watch my father at the other end of the table: a small, thin man with large eyes that donÕt focus on the real world for too long, eyes that donÕt hide frustration or disappointment, or his constant preoccupation with math. At the table heÕd be filling pages with some sort of cuneiform that he said was research, but math is so fundamental that I wondered how it was possible to discover something new. I wondered if you had to be incredibly smart, and grew suddenly self-conscious of my finger-folded nines.

Now, many years later, we still sit across from each other, he resigned and chewing, me on a second cup of coffee. I know I donÕt put much effort into calculating the area of a triangle or the distance a snail has crawled, but even when he offers up other questionsÑabout my life, for instanceÑand pretends they arenÕt difficult for him to ask or somehow intrusive, I still answer with shrugs and monosyllables. He expects me to elaborate, to make some sort of effort, but I pick at my fingernails and at crumbs on the table. He stares at wrens through the blinds. I have nothing to sayÑI have never had anything to sayÑbut it is far from hatred.

He grew up splitting Christmases. Christmas Eve with his mother, an artist and actress, who lived in a small flat overlooking WarsawÕs National Theater. A quiet dinner of soup and fish, an elaborate dessert; forks conversing with plates, and the basset hound watching from the corner. ÒItÕs too salty, isnÕt it?Ó sheÕd say, and heÕd assure her it was delicious. ÒNo. No, itÕs too salty. As usual.Ó And they would stare at the centerpiece and move spoons toward their mouths.

Christmas Day, he would take the tram back to WarsawÕs Żoliborz neighborhood, to his fatherÕs cramped apartment with an intelligent cat. Here, sometimes there was a stepmother and sometimes there wasnÕt. Sometimes the meat was burned and sometimes it wasnÕt. Sometimes theyÕd tell jokes: A rabbit and a hedgehog pass each other on the street, and the hedgehog is chewing something. *Co jesz?*ÑÒWhat are you eating?ÓÑthe rabbit asks. *Co, zając?*ÑÒWhat, rabbit?ÓÑthe hedgehog responds, presenting an untranslatable play on words. ÒWhat are you eating?Ó sounds identical to ÒWhat, hedgehog?ÓÑwhich the rabbit ostensibly didnÕt ask, but which the hedgehog chose to hear.

After the holidays, my father endured a battery of questions from both sidesÑWhose Christmas was better? Whom would you rather spend time with? Did I give you better presents than your mother? Was my dinner better than your fatherÕs?Ñand heÕd have to be diplomatic, though no response was ever satisfactory. He liked clean, simple solutions. He spent his childhood doing geometrical proofs.

At the University of Warsaw some years later, he spent weeks with hundreds of other students camping in abandoned buildings, demonstrating against the Communist government already on the verge of collapse. And yet he would have preferred to spend this revolutionary time alone at his desk poring over textbooks, doing what he had come there to do: to study computers and math. He became preoccupied with an advanced and obscure field of higher-order algebra, and right after I was born, he was invited to do a PhD under the disciplineÕs foremost scholar at a university in distant, exotic Ohio.

He accepted, but leaving the country then was difficult. He answered the phone when it rang one day in 1987, in his fatherÕs apartment in Warsaw.

ÒMeet me in the Europejska CafÉ at noon tomorrow. WeÕll talk about America,Ó said a male voice on the phone, and my dad said he didnÕt know who was speaking. ÒI know,Ó the man said, Òbut I know who you are.Ó

And so my father went, because in those days you followed orders, and he waited until a stranger walked through the door, sat down next to him, and pulled out a file. TheyÕd had their eye on him for some time, the man said, and theyÕd like to offer him a visa, along with arrangements for the family.

ÒTo leave the country?Ó my dad asked. At the time, this was a near impossibility; people did not leave Communist Poland, and obtaining a visa required a run through a gauntlet of muddied bureaucracy.

ÒYes.Ó A pause.

ÒBut there is a catch, of course?Ó

ÒOf course,Ó the man murmured in approval. ÒYou will be at an American university, getting a doctorate degree, and working with computers. You will hack into their programs, learn their secrets, and write us monthly letters about what you find. You agree.Ó It was not a question.

My father agreedÑthough he never intended to follow through on his promise and never didÑand he braved the Atlantic shortly after that, stepping off a plane onto a Greyhound, and off the Greyhound onto a curb in the middle of the night in the middle of the country. It was snowing and silent and foreign, and he left footprints in the newly fallen snow as he walked toward town, gripping the two gray suitcases bearing most of our possessions. My mother and I brought one more when we joined him a few months later to make our way through the American Dream, first in Ohio and then in Texas, where my dad ended up teaching math at a university and baking bread.

In the summers, we returned to Poland, and each time, I fell in love anew with the countryside and the wildflowers, the small dangers of roadside nettles, and the characteristic gray smell of rain. I fell in love with the legends that engulfed the tiny Polish villages and with swans and storks and the idea of heritage.

I would go outside and whisper childish secrets into the trunks of trees or the yellow centers of flowers that grew along the sidewalks. IÕd imagine that I belonged here and that my home was not my home. I imagined I was someone else, a lost child at the end of the world, and that someone would always, eventually, come save me. I was a long-lost princess waiting to reclaim my long-lost throne. I imagined these things, walking slowly and quietly through the fields alone. Whenever someone talked to me, I hid behind my mom and stared with big unblinking eyes until my parents answered for me, saying, ÒThank you, sheÕs just shy.Ó And to me theyÕd say, ÒWhy

donÕt you talk to anyone?Ó And IÕd say I didnÕt know.

ItÕs unusual for children of foreign immigrants to speak their native tongue to one another, but my brothers and I do. We were forbidden to speak English at home growing up, and every time an English word surfaced, it was immediately corrected.

But I have always been too literal. I perversely took the rule too far and clung to sweeping associations: English wasnÕt allowed, and therefore, I decided, neither was anything that occurred in that language. My parents wouldnÕt hear about what happened at school. If they asked about my classes, IÕd answer but not elaborate. If they asked about friends, IÕd shrug. In order to explain anything, after all, IÕd have to pull one world into the other, and one language into the next. IÕd have to mix Polish verbs with English nouns and use them with the appropriate declension. It felt unnatural. I couldnÕt do it. I refused. So I kept my worldsÑand my wordsÑseparate.

Whenever my father picked me up from school, in a dented Chevy with a broken door, heÕd make attempts. ÒHow was school?Ó heÕd ask.

ÒGood,Ó IÕd say.

ÒOkay,Ó heÕd say, and weÕd drive the rest of the way home in silence.

Maybe it wasnÕt just me. Maybe it wasnÕt just my arbitrary decision to keep my languages separate, to leave Polish for bread and holidays and straw-thatched villages, to leave English for everything raw and unfamiliar. Maybe my father just didnÕt want to pry. Maybe he didnÕt know how to deal with American childhood. Maybe I had already been incapable of normal conversation the first hundred times my parents had tried, in kindergarten, in first grade, in one language about another, and so maybe they gave up. My father is non-confrontational and so am I, and the line between confrontation and conversation is fine. We talk about easy subjectsÑnumbers and breadÑand then retreat to orbit our own stars in silence. My father withdraws into hobbies and algebraic formulasÑ clean and reliable pursuits that eventually give the desired result. If I wonÕt yield, he wonÕt push. But for years I waited.

My parents once met a teacher of mine who told them I was smart and that he liked to talk to me.

ÒShe talks?Ó my parents asked and looked blankly around the room. An unfamiliar variable can stump even the most expert mathematician.

Now I come home only once in a while. It is not the perfect fruit of my childhood imagination; I have not been rescued and returned to the throne.

My parents invite their colleagues to a dinner party. I set the table and walk toward the kitchen, pinching olives from a bowl before anyone arrives.

ÒWhat are you eating?Ó my father asks in Polish as he opens a bottle of wine.

ÒWhat, rabbit?Ó I respond, and we laugh as someone rings the doorbell.

But once the guests arrive, itÕs accents and English and small talk. ÒAre you finishing school now?Ó my parentsÕ friends ask me, and I nod, explaining trivialities.

ÒAnd what kind of job are you looking for?Ó my parents say to me in English to keep a conversation afloat, even though they know the answer.

ÒYou know I donÕt know,Ó I say in Polish and shrug meekly at their friends. I grew up speaking Polish to my parents, and it is now an unbreakable habit. I grew up saying little to my parents, and that will not change either. It is muscle memory of the tongue.

ÒShe says she doesnÕt know,Ó they translate and apologize on my behalf. They shoot me looks that implore me to act my age. This entails speaking a language that doesnÕt belong in this realm. This entails some sort of inexplicable betrayal.

Ò*Poproszę o s—l*,Ó I say in a secret act of defiance, and they reluctantly pass the salt.

Maybe it is simply because of the languages. Maybe it is because of some failureÑbut on whose part, I donÕt quite know. Now, my dad and I talk on the phone.

ÒHowÕs New York?Ó

ÒGood. Big.Ó

ÒThatÕs good.Ó

ÒI guess.Ó

ÒWe planted more tomatoes in the garden.Ó

ÒOh?Ó

ÒThey are suffering this year. And IÕve begun making white rolls.Ó

ÒThatÕs good.Ó

ÒSo.Ó

ÒOkay.Ó

ÒIÕve been meaning to ask you.Ó

ÒWhat?Ó

ÒAssume there are *x* number of sparrows and *y* number of wires. If the sparrows sit in pairs, there are one too many wires. If the sparrows sit individually, one bird wonÕt have a wire. How many sparrows and how many wires?Ó

ÒI donÕt know.Ó

ÒItÕs easy.Ó

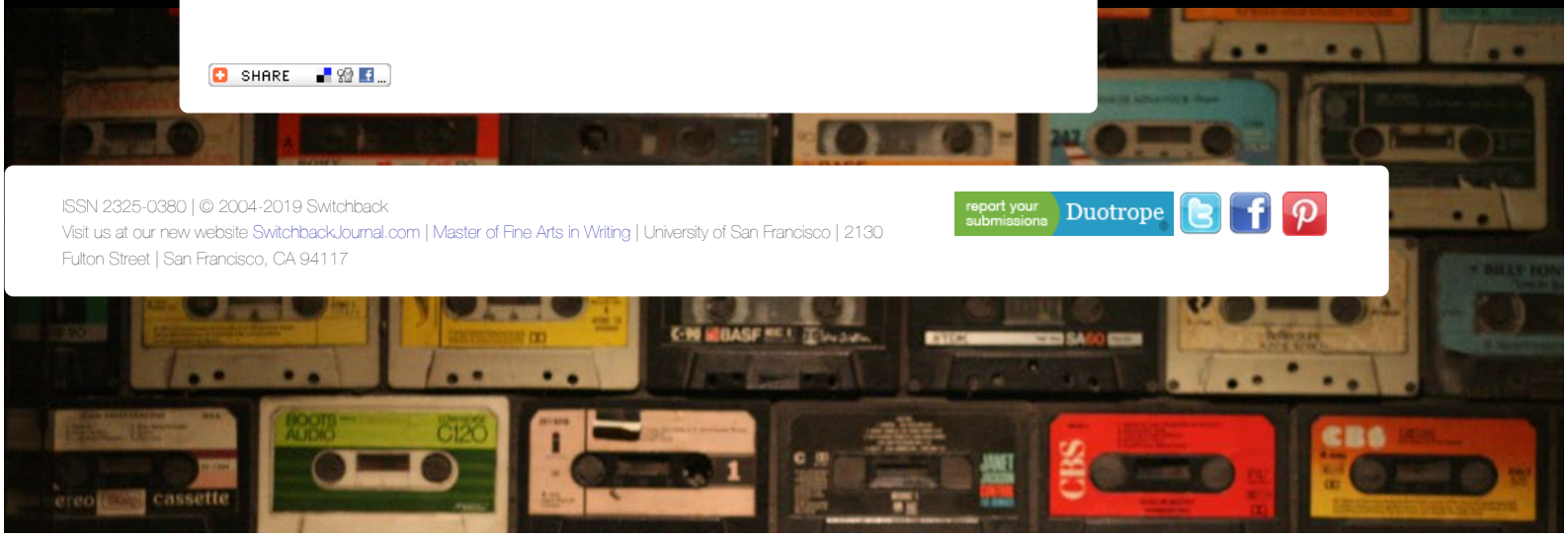
ÒOkay.Ó

ÒIÕve been meaning to ask you. YouÕre doing well?Ó

ÒYes.Ó

ÒGood. Well. Thanks for calling.Ó

Then we both hang up the phones, staring at walls or into receivers. It seems too late to change anything. This is a habit we have spent years carefully cultivating, one of attempts, hesitations, and small talk. Nonetheless, I understand the problem. I know that there are four sparrows and three wires. While the others perch, one sparrow flutters, alone, wanting something, reluctant to intrude on someone elseÕs wire.



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Susan Pagani

Susan Pagani is a journalist, writer, and editor in Minneapolis, MN. Her nonfiction essays have appeared in *Revolution John* and three collections, O.R.P.H.A.N.S., *Minnesota Lunch,*and *The Secret Atlas of North Coast Food*. Her book reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *Sierra Magazine*, *Heavy Table Magazine*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. She recently completed her MFA at Bennington College.

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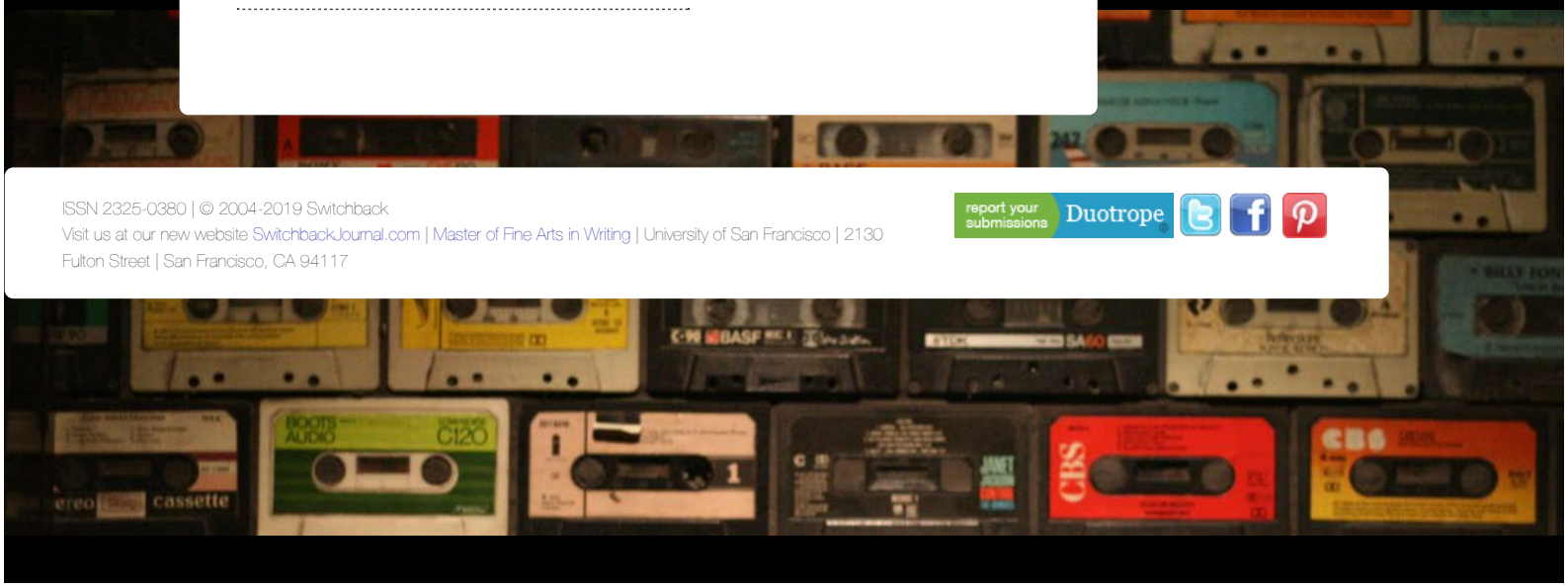

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On Living With Geese

Susan Pagani

The goose arrived in early Autumn. William, my husband, was standing on top of the shed, working on the roof. The shed was ramshackle, its floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with bottles and bags of powdersÑalumina, bentonite, borax, cobalt oxide and lithium carbonateÑwood working tools, packing peanuts, and weathered cardboard boxes. It belonged to his mother, Daphne. Nearly eighty and a working potter, she used the shed to mix her glazes and pack her pottery off to folks around the country. WilliamÕs father, Roger, had built it in the seventies, and the asphalt shingles were so curled and cupped that the roofing nails had all been exposed and were bleeding rust. As William pulled the nails out, steel strained against the wood, creating a series of rapid screechesÑ something like a manic squeaky toy or the call of a domestic goose.

DaphneÕs house and shed sit on a slim tidal canal that is fed by the San Francisco Bay. She has a double lot, on which she has created an English gardenÑwell, sheÕs English, so thatÕs what we call itÑcharming and unkempt with a rambling bed of roses, fruit trees and, as she says, some *rather* brackish kale plants that grow wild on the canal bank. Across the water, there is a tiny dollop of land called Santa Margarita Island.

Nail after nail, William cast his song out over the canal, and soon it was returned in a see-saw of callsÑ scree-honk, scree-honk, scree-honk. William looked up to see a snow white goose fly over the island and land on the lawn below the shed.

In gray workpants, a T-shirt and a red fleece cap, William looked more like a lanky garden gnome than a gander, but the goose waited below, pacing the bank of the canal and answering his nails with a plaintive honk. When at last he climbed down the ladder, she ran at himÑneck bobbing, legs waddling madly. William took hold of the ladder, prepared to give ground, but the goose stopped short of his legs and dropped her long, slender neck, and so he knelt down. Her eyes were cornflower blue, her beak was bright orange and knobbed, and she cooed and trilled as he pet her back feathers.

The goose hung around for the rest of the morning. If William went up the ladder, she waited at the bottom, venturing only as far as the bank of the canal to graze on the kale; if he came down it, she followed him into the shed and about the yard, watching attentively as he worked.

At some point, Daphne made a cup of Earl Grey tea for William and took it out to him, our catahoula Ella trailing not far behind. When the dog spotted the goose, her tail dropped between her legs, but her muzzle moved cautiously forward. The goose flung her wings wide, as if to say, ÒCome no further!Ó and charged. Ella retreated, bounding into the house. Daphne turned to follow, the goose hurtling along, hissing and honking behind her, the hot tea sloshing over the lip of the cupÑshe decided to ditch the cup, and as she bent to set it on the ground, the bird leapt up and pinched her hard in the bottom.

When I arrived several hours later, Daphne greeted me at the door, still chuckling. ÒThe most extraordinary thing has happened,Ó she said. My mother-in-law has wispy gray-blonde hair and a beautiful, deeply lined faceÑall the lines arch up and into her pale-blue eyes when she smiles. SheÕs a small woman, often cold, so she wears a turtleneck every day (part of her uniform: jeans, wool socks, and rubber sandals). But her most striking feature is her hands, which are large and muscular, perhaps from all those years at the pottery wheel. She used them to tell me about the goose, two meaty hands gliding through the air like the goose coming into the yard, its beating wings, the rudder-like tail of a dog brought low. ÒNo one can come near her, only William. SheÕs chased me all aboutÑI mean, she really goosed me! There Õll be a bruise; IÕd better find that tin of arnica. Well, never mind, come

and see.Ó

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By the time WilliamÕs goose flew into the yard, we had been living with Daphne for two months. We had moved to Marin from San Antonio, Texas, at the end of a hard time that had begun with the death of WilliamÕs father, Roger.

One day Roger had called William in San Antonio to say that he was inexplicably clumsy; a few days later he was disoriented and having trouble walking. He lost control of his bladder. William told his mother to take Roger to the hospital. It turned out Roger had a glioblastoma multiforme, an aggressive tumor in the center of his brain, the corpus callosum. It was at first no bigger than a seed, but over the course of daysÑas the neurologist explained to William in a metaphor too beautiful and benignÑit hatched and, like a cabbage white butterfly, spread its wings across both sides of his temporal and parietal lobes. By the time we got to California, RogerÕs short-term memory was gone. He knew us, but not why he was in the hospital. Every day William had to explain to his father that he was dying. Two months later, he did die.

After the funeral, we returned to Texas. I went back to my job at the cityÕs alt weekly newspaper, where I was a food editor and news reporter. William expected to jump back into his residency and his books; he had one more board exam to pass before he could start practicing medicine. But it wasnÕt that smooth. Roger had been the sort of father who gave his children cocaine for toothaches, swung his way through the 70s, and spent his last years perennially on the edge of bankruptcy because of bogus get-rich-quick schemes. But he was also an inventor, a carpenter, and wonderful hugger, who told his children he loved them every day. The glioblastoma had made it impossible for William and his sisterÑfor any of usÑto make satisfying peace with him. He had died at a low point, poor and disappointed, and much too early. As a son, William felt he should have taken his fatherÕs side more in life; as a physician, he should have been more helpful at the end. During his study hours, IÕd find him whittling sticks in our chicken coop or napping on the couch. Both of us were sad and lonelyÑeveryone who had known Roger, everyone who understood, was back in California.

We were also broke. Rent and food were cheap in San Antonio, and weÕd always been able to allocate the better part of our meager salaries to medical school loans and to set aside a small savings for travel and car repairs. Traveling back and forth to California for two months had eaten up some of our small reserve, but the rest weÕd blithely frittered, cooking large and elaborate meals for our friends and buying each other treats. My old Honda stopped running after a handful of expensive but unsuccessful repairs, so William bought me a new Honda Ñthough weÕd vowed always to buy used cars. When William fell in love with a huge paintingÑa luminous pink splatter based on the Fibonacci formulaÑI bought it for his birthday. I donÕt remember how we justified it all. Maybe we believed these gifts would lift the pall of exhaustion and grief that had fallen over us. Maybe we believed eating the good cheese meant everything was all right. Maybe we believed that when William finished his residency this period of our lives would end and everything really would be all right.

Summer came, residency ended, and with it WilliamÕs half of our income. We had no plan, we were living on my $1,500 a month salary, and we owed $80,000 in med school debt. William still had to take the medical board exam. HeÕd need a course to study for it and a plane ticket to get to the test center. All of that would cost money. It was no time to quit a job, but the newspaper was imploding under new managementÑmany of my favorite people had already bailedÑand we were itching to get out of Texas and the oppressive heat. Moving would cost money. We decided to call our parents.

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I followed Daphne into the yard and saw the goose sitting in the grass. The grass was yellow; the goose was white. The tips of her wings were crossed over her upturned tail feathers like a fancy napkin and, in the arch of her neck and the turn of her head, there was so much grace and contentment. I said, ÒOh.Ó It came out quiet as a sigh, but she heard it. Her wings unfurled and she shot towards me, body low and flat, neck outstretched. Her beak unhinged, and a bright red tongue extended in a silent honk. She was a magnificent goose; I thought her feathers must be fine and soft. I saw her blue eyes. I thought I could pacify her, as one might do a broken dog, and so I knelt and put my forehead on the ground. The yard was incredibly still, and for a few seconds all I could hear were her great webbed feet crushing the dry grass as she crossed the yard.

And then the goose was on my head, in my hair, rapping hard at my ears. I yelled and laughedÑwas I in danger?Ñand sat up and tried to fend her off, flailing my arms yet distantly aware that I was fighting a bird. I never felt a single feather, only her sharp beak as she pecked my elbows and pinched my knees. It seemed to go on forever, but William was right there and he lifted her off me.

I stood and felt my ears for blood. There wasnÕt any, only the grass in my hair. William had the goose in the crook of his arm. She let him hold her, but her neck stayed in constant motion, bobbing and weaving like a boxer.

ÒIs it wrong to punch a goose?Ó I said.

ÒOh no, you canÕt hit her,Ó Daphne said. Her accent is strongest when sheÕs incredulous.

ÒShe hit me first.Ó

ÒYes, but why did you lay on the ground? Silly girl.Ó

She was scolding me. I looked at William to see if heÕd caught it, but he was too involved with the now calm goose. She sat heavy and relaxed in his armsÑWilliamÕs hand deep in her feathersÑand her legs dangled beneath her, slack as a resting marionette.

ÒLook how tame she is,Ó William said.

ÒSheÕs someoneÕs pet, isnÕt she?Ó Daphne said. ÒWhat lovely eyes.Ó

*****

In Marin, William had signed up for a medical board prep course, and IÕd found a job writing real estate and insurance forecasts. It paid twice what IÕd made at the alt weekly. My beat was the building, buying, and leasing of retail space. The people were nice, but it was dull as rocks and I had to be at work at 6:30 in the morning for earnings calls and breaking newsÑAthletic Shoe Company Opens 16 New Stores.

The goose came back every morning. From the roof, William would see her swim a lazy zigzag down the canal, and then pick her way up the bank and into the yard. Thinking she might belong to someone on the canal, Daphne called her neighbors; all of them were charmed to hear of a tame goose, but none could claim her as their own.

One afternoon, I stole a spare moment at work to research our goose. Her blue eyes and knobbed beak pegged her for a Chinese goose, an exotic domestic descended from swan-y show birds, and true to breed in temperament. She was a great talker: The slightest noise from William and sheÕd respond with a loud honk. The Internet said this attentiveness made Chinas terrific watch geese, but that they were rarely ever cross or petulant, and capable of great fondness for humans. They liked to forage their meals out of grasses and non-woody plants, and people often kept them as lawn mowers.

I returned home feeling flush with these fascinating tidbits, a pay stub, and a check for Daphne, the first installment on the loans that had helped us get out of Texas.

I found Daphne up in her room. Her house had started out as a low-slung 1950s California bungalow with two bedrooms and a garage. But Roger had converted the garage into her potteryÑthe studio where she threw and fired her potsÑand built a bedroom on top of it, a large open space with a sliding glass door at one end that provided a great quantity of light and air and a long view of the canal and Santa Margarita. Daphne kept a desk, a few bookshelves, and a bed. It was all plain, serviceable furniture but every surface in the room was covered with sketches, paintings, pots, rocks, wooden objects, teapot clouds, mango fruit wombs, and wonderfully lumpy female torsos. My favorite was a tiny clay sculpture of Daphne, sitting inside an egg with her head on her knees. ÒWhatÕs this one about?Ó IÕd asked once.

ÒOh yes, that,Ó she said. ÒI made it a long time ago. I had this feeling that I was waiting and waiting, and it was all so awfully boring.Ó

ÒWhat were you waiting for?Ó

ÒExactly.Ó

On this particular evening, Daphne was sitting at her desk, working over a ledger book and listening to the Bulgarian WomenÕs Choir. When I came up, she turned from the desk easily, as if looking for a diversion, and listened attentively to my goose research, adding an ÒI should sayÓ in regards to her protective nature and Òyes, she has, hasnÕt she,Ó about the knob at the top of her orange beak.

ÒAnd you found all that on your computer? How extraordinary,Ó she said.

ÒOn the Internet.Ó

ÒRoger had the Internet,Ó Daphne said. ÒHe wanted me to have it too, but I couldnÕt be bothered. And now I think itÕs too late, IÕve missed out on all that.Ó She turned back to her ledger.

ÒThere is something else É a checkÓ I held it out with a flourish.

Daphne took it, set it face down on her ledger, and turned away from me. It was as if all the agreeableness had been sucked from the room. ÒI donÕt know why you bother.Ó She pushed the check toward me. Her fingernails, caked with clay, made the tips of her fingers look large and square. ÒYouÕll only borrow it again.Ó

ÒNo, actually, I think weÕre okay,Ó I said, more evenly than I felt. My own parents had not been overjoyed to bail us out of Texas, but I hadnÕt expected this reaction from Daphne. She and I had never talked about the loan, and William had only said that she was over the moon that we were coming to stay for seven months. Why had I brought the check up instead of giving it to him to deliver? IÕd wanted to say thank you. But that wasnÕt really it: I had expected recognition that William and I were, in fact, good kids. IÕd wanted the credit for working to get us out of debt, but it hadnÕt occurred to me that I might have to talk about what got us into it. ÒWilliam and I want to pay you back. ItÕs important to us.Ó

ÒBut can you afford it?Ó She turned, wincing at me through her bangs, one hand lightly covering her face.

ÒYes, or we wouldnÕt do it. Please, take the check.Ó Outside, the light was high in the tops of the trees on Santa Margarita, and I could hear WilliamÕs hammer in the yard.

*****

I went out to the shed to find William, but the goose was there. So I waited until later that night, as we lay in bed, to relay the conversation in a stage whisper. The door to our tiny room was closed, but the walls seemed to conduct sound and, if she heard voices, Daphne might pop her head in for a final thoughtÑÒIÕm giving up on string theoryÓÑor sweet dreams (she couldnÕt get used to knocking, and was always walking into rooms, a startling habit that made taking a dump uncomfortable and sex nearly impossible).

We slept with our window open, and the air came in cold and briny off the canal, which allowed us to pile on the flannel sheets and wool blankets. Our bed felt heavy and warm and safe. I told William about the check, about his motherÕs hunched shoulders and covered faceÑas if it was embarrassing or hurtful, I didnÕt know which. ÒI forgot how shaming she can be,Ó he said. ÒIÕm sorry, that must have felt terrible.Ó

His theory was that she felt bad that she couldnÕt just give us the money. It was kindness that had come out wrong. She didnÕt seem angry with me; sheÕd been fine at dinner. I pointed out that sheÕd done the same thing the day before. Silly girl!

ÒShe was just teasing you,Ó he said. ÒThe goose was in your hair, it was hilarious.Ó

Perhaps I was too finely tuned in to DaphneÕs moods and words. Maybe I should have led out with gratitude instead of Òta-da.Ó Maybe I should have explained our plan to pay down our debtÑ$1000 each to her and my parentsÑbefore we left. Maybe I should have left it to William.

When the next month rolled around, William took her the check. ÒHere you are, Mom,Ó he said. ÒThree more months to go.Ó

ÒThank you, Son. Well done,Ó was her reply.

*****

From the beginning, there was something exceptional about the goose and its love for William. So I didnÕt mind about the bruises at first, I accepted them as part of the deal. Wild animals behave wildly, I thoughtÑand, also, whatÕs in it for me?

In the annals of love, geese are famous for choosing one mate for all their lives. IÕd read that if not reared among other goslings, a gander would imprint so strongly on his owner that heÕd neglect to mate at all. I thought this must apply to geese, too. Ours had clearly imprinted on WilliamÑbut like a chicken, sheÕd lay without a gander. Chinese geese are fulsome layers: up to 100 eggs a season, as opposed to the 55 eggs of your older European breeds. This was thrilling: IÕd tried a goose egg once, and though the whites had a slightly chewy texture, the yolks were rich and tasty. Eventually, the goose would get used to me. SheÕd keep intruders out of

DaphneÕs privet hedge and mow down the dandelions, and weÕd make 100 rubbery omelets.

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Of course, we were grateful to Daphne for letting us move into her house, but weÕd never stopped to talk about how it would work. Daphne seemed to assume our living together would be like our visits, in which we all more or less followed the regularly scheduled program. William and I assumed that weÕd continue to live our life just as it had been, but in her house.

RogerÕs death had changed how William saw the house. He hadnÕt looked at it carefully in years, and when he did, he was shocked at how run down it had become. He felt badly for the fact that he had not been there to help care for the place. He made a list of projectsÑthe kitchen cabinets and drawers needed a coat of paint; the avocado green carpet in our bedroom was full of mold and the floor beneath it was half rotten; RogerÕs belongings had to be sorted and sold or given away, his tools cleaned and organized; and the shed was near falling downÑwhich he tackled one-by-one and with hardly a word of warning to Daphne, much less a by-your-leave. All of the repairs seemed necessary, and making them gave William some purchase on his fatherÕs death. And Daphne never complained.

It was not as easy for me to assume my way into the household. After keeping house for sixty or so years, Daphne had settled into a routine: she made the same meals on the same days week after week, she spread her grocery shopping across three stores to get the best price on each item, and she did laundry in the smallest number of mixed loads possible and always in the evening, when she got the best price on gas because of the kiln. I tried to help with these chores, but I had my own way of doing them, so my efforts only led to argumentsÑ William had lost his favorite white guayabera in the battle of Little Pink Towel in JulyÑand I soon gave up.

Not to whine: I liked coming home to a basket of warm towels, a full refrigerator, a set table, and TuesdayÕs hot tamale pie. DaphneÕs meals were more than habit, they pleased and comforted her, and she prepared them carefully. She enjoyed feeding us. But I did miss cooking, especially cooking with William, and being locked out of the kitchen contributed to my feeling of having only achieved guest status in the house.

Cleaning was the one thing I could do. For as long as IÕd known Daphne, there had been a cartoon on the refrigerator that said, ÒDonÕt worry spiders, I keep house lightly.Ó This was true, and something I had admired as a woman and an artistÑuntil I had to clean the house. The house was tidy, but dirty (there was clover among the crumbs of the silverware drawer). Each week I vacuumed and mopped the floors, scrubbed the toilet and the tub, and dusted. On the one hand, I thought Daphne expected it; sheÕd fired the cleaning lady when we moved in, and she never said not to clean. But she also never said thank you, and at times she seemed to resent it. I could understand that: It always feels like judgment when another woman vacuums out your kitchen drawers.

And then one evening she met me at the front door, saying, ÒLook what William has done.Ó I looked around, expecting something miraculous, a docile goose perhaps. ÒHeÕs vacuumed.Ó

ÒThatÕs great,Ó I said. ÒYou know I vacuum every week, right?Ó

ÒYes, but heÕs moved all the dining room chairs and vacuumed under the rug, clever boy. DoesnÕt it look splendid?Ó

******

In the weeks that followed, the gooseÕs attachment to William grew tiresome. She had stolen the quiet of the yard from me, the yard that made the house seem bigger, that provided a place to have a private moment, alone or with William.

It should have bothered William most of all, for although the goose spent every day following him around the shed, she took no interest in his work there and was always in the way. One day, she absentmindedly stepped into a tray of red barn paint and then went walking about, leaving a trail of goose prints across the floor. William only laughed and painted the floor red.

Daphne was no better. She served her salad scraps and sliced figs rescued from the neighborsÕ sidewalk in a shallow bird bath she had made from soul clay, an ancient-looking, rusty colored, and granular body sheÕd invented. The bath stood a foot off the ground, table height for big birds. Daphne had fired it for a pair of ravens that came to the yard each morning to devour her leftovers. The goose had sent the ravens packing.

They were not the only ones. Our nephew, a towheaded boy of four, came to play two afternoons a week.

He had an adventuring attitude, but the novelty of having a tame goose in the backyard lasted only as long as it took the goose to chase him, screaming and crying, across it. The goose did not seem to mind if the boy was on the deck; however, the deck had limited appeal to the former master of the garden, house, and potteryÑespecially since it was now covered in swirls of deep-green goose shit. After a few weeks trying to conquer the gooseÑÒBut why canÕt I have a stick?ÓÑand playing with clay in the pottery, he told his mother he didnÕt want to come back.

And so Daphne called the Animal Human Society to see if something might be done about the goose. They declined to take her: No one would adopt a bad-tempered goose, they certainly could not afford to maintain her for the rest of her daysÑshe could live 24 yearsÑand sheÕd probably end up euthanized. They agreed she must belong to someone, and suggested that Daphne put an ad in the paper. In the meantime, she might consider supplementing the salad with some corn meal.

Daphne did all these things and, because the nights were getting cooler, put a waxy cabbage box lined with straw on the deck, just outside the sliding glass doors of the kitchen. The goose loved her box. It had a door cut into it, and as soon as all the lights went off in the houseÑas soon as she was sure there was no hope of her waddling into the kitchen or William walking out of itÑshe would step gingerly into the hay and arrange herself so that she could monitor the house.

In truth, I envied the goose. Everyone suffered every accommodation for herÑand here I was, not the least bit fractious, and *rather* underappreciated.

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Daphne had the idea that one should eat a dish exactly the way the cook served it. One evening, I ran a pat of salted butter through my quinoa. ÒI canÕt imagine why youÕd do such a thing,Ó Daphne said. ÒQuinoa is a very ancient grain, you know.Ó

ÒQuin-waaaaaah, the ancient grain,Ó William and I sang together, an habitual response to the weekly helping of quinoa, which always came with the explanation that it was a very ancient grain.

ÒYes, yes, but you canÕt possibly taste it with all that butter,Ó Daphne said.

ÒI think the butter actually makes it tastier,Ó I said.

ÒItÕs quite tasty on its own, itÕs nutty.Ó

ÒI might put some soy sauce on it.Ó

ÒYou wouldnÕt,Ó she gasped, and we bickered our way along like that, until suddenly we were in the middle of a spectacular rehashing. IÕd thrown away a recyclable toilet paper roll and composted a good apple that only wanted trimming to be quite edible. IÕd disorganized the kitchen drawers; nothing was where it ought to be. IÕd left the bathroom door ajar, though IÕd been told often enough not to because of the open window, and we were heating the whole of the outdoors. And, worst of all, my dog stole sweet corn off the counter and came into her bed every night and barked at the garbage man in the morning and she simply wasnÕt getting any sleep.

I felt sick, but I sat back in my chair and let her ramble on, feigning calmÑa maddening habit IÕd learned from my own family. I apologized for the recycling and the drawers, and promised to ask before I threw away any fruit. Everything she said was true, so I didnÕt add that the apple had been brown with rot and covered in fruit flies or that she might thank me for the cleaning.

Daphne turned her body away from me. ÒMom,Ó William said, trying to make light of the situation. ÒWhat about me? I pruned your peach tree down to a stump. It may not fruit. And I ate an entire loaf of bread this morning. IÕm very bad.Ó

ÒItÕs very hard. ItÕs just very hard,Ó Daphne said, and went into the pottery studio. William went after her.

*****

I didnÕt want to see her euthanized, but sometimes I imagined swaddling the goose up in the cabbage box and packing her into the car. IÕd take her on a one-way road trip while she slept. SheÕd wake up in the marsh next to the Oakland airport; IÕd wake up alone with my husband.

I was not alone in my desire to be rid of a goose. Wildlife Services reports, responding to the Canadian goose explosion, recorded long lists of complaints against the goose: They dropped hazardous waste eight times an hour, making waterways foul (giardia, e-coli, and Chlamydial) and walkways slippery. They threatened to destroy agriculture by grazing young crops, cars by napping on roads, and airplanes by flying into them. The latter

happened more often then IÕd imaginedÑan average of seven ÒingestionsÓ a month nationally, according to the FAAÑand humans died. But mostly people in the report expressed what IÕd experienced, a Ògeneral decline in quality of life.Ó

I found accounts of people trying everything from relocating the geese to scaring them away with decoy predators and loud noises and herding dogs. They even hunted them. But the clever birds mapped their way home, adapted to propane cannons and plastic alligators, and sneaked back into the pond when the dogs and guns had gone home. Some folks gave up and just tried to keep the geese from breeding by ÒaddlingÓ their eggs. In the verb form, addle means to confuse; in the adjective, rotten. In the lexicon of the braveÑhell hath no wrath like a properly pissed off ganderÑit means to smother the eggs in corn oil or steal them. Our goose had no eggs to addle.

I wouldnÕt disappear our goose, so we adapted. The goose and I would wake up with the five oÕ clock alarm. IÕd wander into the bathroom for a shower, and the goose would pace the gray boards of the deck, honking loudly and occasionally giving the sliding glass doors a good, solid knock with her knobby beak. After a bit, IÕd trundle out to the kitchen, put the kettle on, throw a scoop of corn meal at her head, and both of us would go about our business.

In the evenings, it was a different story: IÕd come home, and the goose would hiss and pinch. In the event of a goose attack, the experts say to keep your body calm, maintain eye contact, and slowly back away. But by December, IÕd developed a kind of goose -fu: When she charged, IÕd reach out with my leg, gently apply my shin to the middle of her neck and turn her backwards, briefly addling her so that I could run past and kiss William before she pummeled the backs of my calves.

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The pottery studio was a wonderful place, once I ventured into it. Wooden shelves of stacked tea cups, bowls, variously shaped vases, and the chips of clay used to test the glazesÑred, yellow, brown, green, and DaphneÕs favorite, a ponderous blue full of sky and peacocks and dark Prussians. The floor was paved, the kiln red brick, and everything was covered in a fine dust that gave the pottery a hazy yellow light (silica and alumina, so pernicious it had sloughed the ridges off DaphneÕs fingers; it took her three years to get citizenship because officials couldnÕt take a fingerprintÑthey inked her big toe finally).

Sometimes, on the weekends, IÕd sit at the top of the steps leading down into the pottery and knit while Daphne worked. WeÕd listen to Ralph Fiennes reading ÒOscar and Lucinda,Ó pausing the cassette now and then to get a cup of tea and a digestive biscuit or to discuss what sort of Christmas pudding I might make, now that I was cooking.

*****

Toward the end of year, William passed his medical board exam and was offered a job in Minneapolis. When I announced that I was leaving at work, people were surprised, but I hadnÕt been there long enough for them to think of missing me. They were, however, fairly attached to the goose, and worried about what she would do in WilliamÕs absence. One of my fellow reporters called a friend at the daily newspaper, hoping an article would unearth the gooseÕs owner.

A photographer came to the house, and asked William to hold the goose. The goose was calm, neck high, feet dangling loose. But as the photographer stepped forward to get a close-up of her blue eyes, the goose jumped on WilliamÕs head and stretched out her wings and neck. In dismay, William looked upÑand saw a ganderÕs impressive paternal apparatus spiraling down on his head. No wonder there werenÕt any eggs.

Without other geese to compare for body size and beak knob, itÕs challenging to sex a goose because the male genitals are curled up in the cloaca, the same opening that serves their urinary tract and intestines. WeÕd just assumed the goose was a female.

All along, IÕd wondered who the goose was: Me, Daphne, my rival. But now that he was a gander, I realized maybe he had nothing to do with me. Maybe he was a stand-in for Roger, the missing father and husband Ñdifficult and hapless, occasionally magnificent, and very much loved.

The headline in the paper read: ÒCouple Hopes Happy Pet Goose IsnÕt Sad When Owner Finds It.Ó In

fact, we hoped there was no owner. We were leaving, and but for the gander, Daphne would be alone in the house again.

*****

ÒI think,Ó said Daphne, one evening. ÒI might like to have someone come stay in your room once youÕve gone.Ó

ÒA tenant you mean?Ó William asked.

ÒNo, more like a person to look after things.Ó

ÒLike a servant?Ó

ÒNo, not a servant, I donÕt want them to clean, I want them to care for me.Ó

ÒYou want a boyfriend?Ó

ÒNo, no! Who wants that trouble?Ó she said. ÒI want a woman to stay, a friend, but someone who would be particularly interested in me and my well being.Ó

ÒShe wants a ladyÕs companion,Ó I said. ÒLike in the novels.Ó

ÒYes, thatÕs it,Ó Daphne said.

ÒI think you have to pay for that kind of companionship,Ó I said.

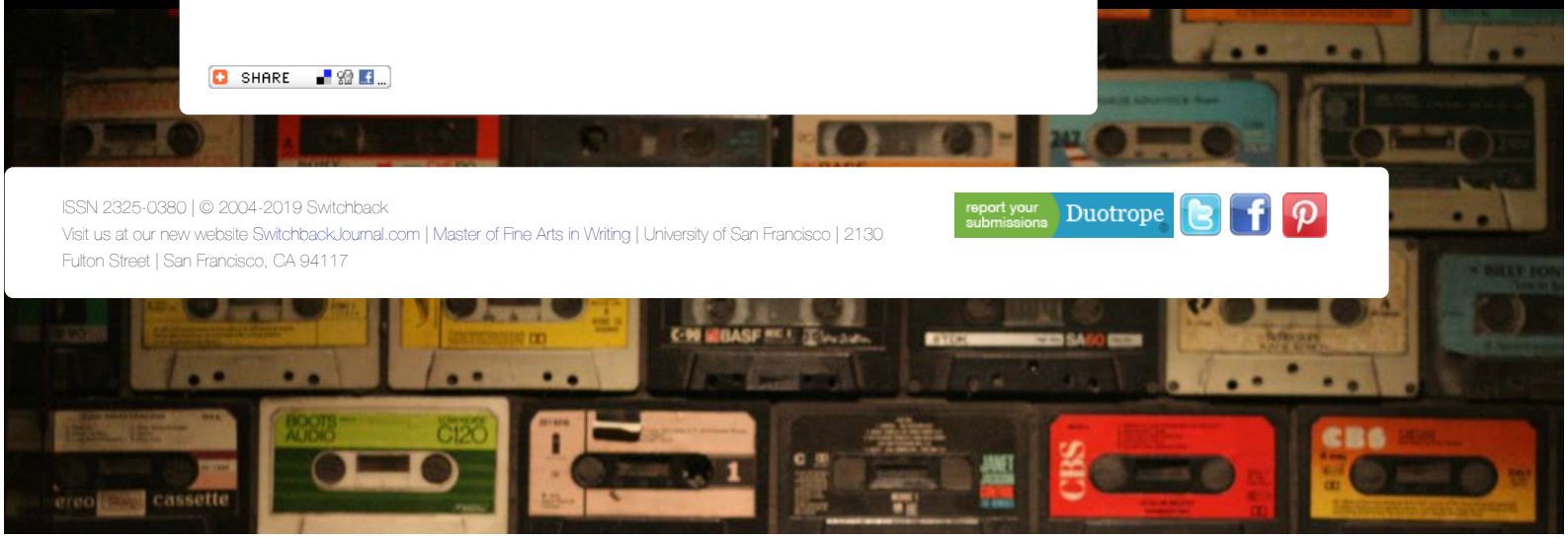
ÒReally? How extraordinary.Ó

*****

The gander did stay on with Daphne. SheÕd call and tell us all about their winter routines. In the morning, sheÕd go out and break the ice on the ganderÕs water dish. HeÕd honk like mad, and sheÕd say, ÒAlright, alright,Ó and spray him down with water. ÒI give him a nice bath, a little cornmeal, and thatÕs all,Ó she told us. ÒI have to ignore him for the rest of the day because you donÕt want to spoil the thing, heÕs already quite a nuisance.Ó

In late February, the gander began to disappear for long stretches of the day, Daphne had no idea where. She tried to find him out, walking along the canal and over to the local pond, but he was never there, and no one had seen him. In the evenings, heÕd wander into the pottery, and she found herself relieved.

This went on for several weeks, and then one night the gander didnÕt come home. Our nephew was pleased to see him off, but for Daphne the gander had been a good and companionable pet. There was a period of mourning, and then she put up his box and invited the ravens back into the yard.



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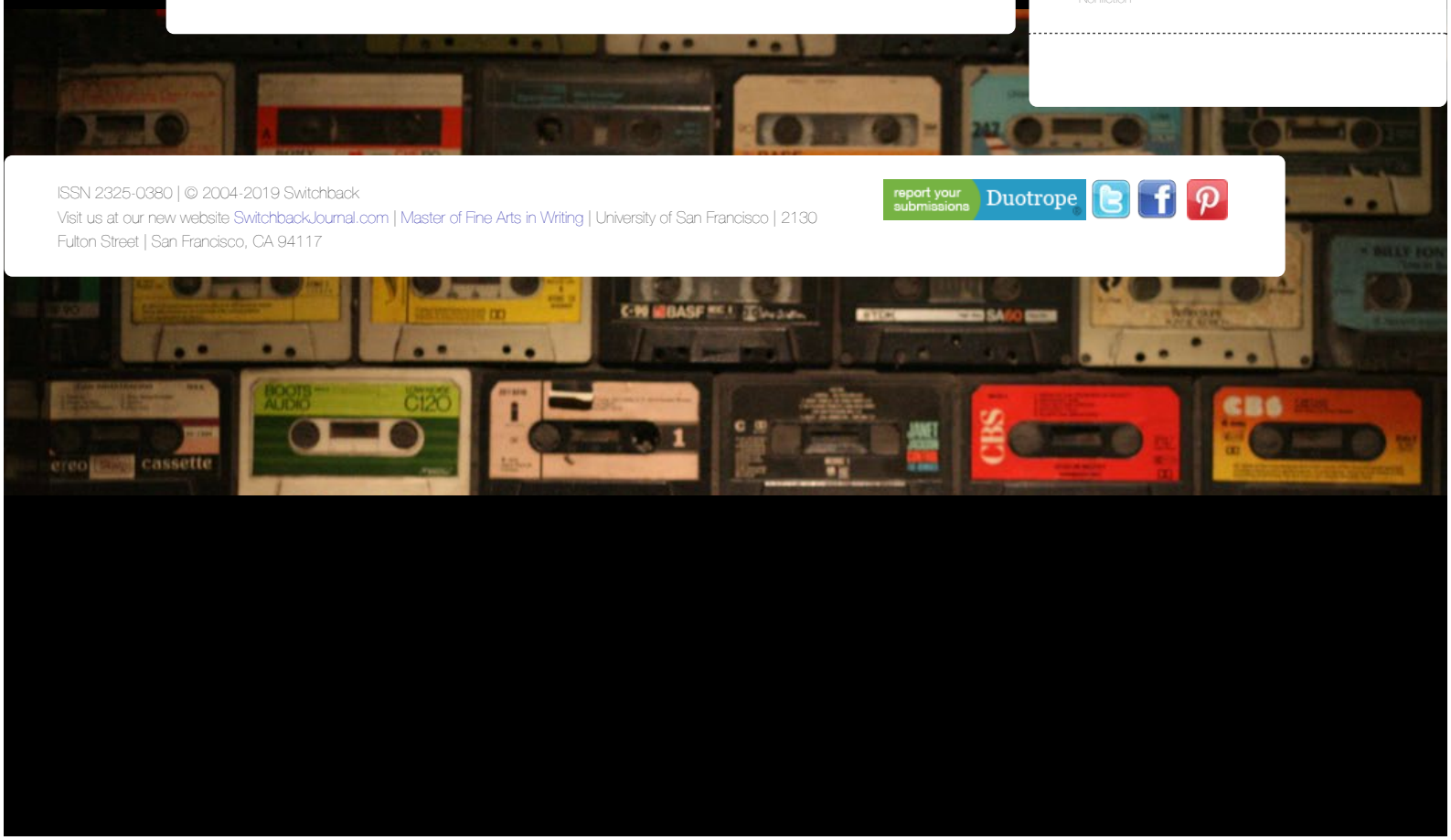

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On a Train Platform in Siberia

Sara Alaica

It didnÕt seem odd that a heavily armed police officer was leading a German Shepherd through the train, looking in at my open cabin as he passed. It was Russia - they didnÕt take terrorism lightly. They had locked down Sochi and brought in hundreds of thousands of armed guards to protect civilians, and I could still remember what had happened to the Chechen militants that had taken hostages in 2002. All forty of them had been gassed and killed while still unconscious.

Or maybe it didnÕt seem odd because I had just been reading the Gulag Archipelago. I had thought it would be appropriate to bring with me on a train journey through Siberia, and now it seemed like the police officer had stepped out from the pages of the book.

I sat up in my bunk and looked at the clock on the small table separating the beds. In a few minutes weÕd be stopping and IÕd be able to go out onto the platform. The windows didnÕt open in the cabins and they kept it uncomfortably warm, so that indoors I sat around sweating in a tank top and shorts, and would have to put on layers of clothes before going back out.

Outside the unending birch forest filled the window, clothed in the yellow and gold of October. The book had unsettled me. In one passage Solzhenitsyn had addressed the reader directly, addressed me, in the future, as I sat in a Russian passenger train going past the places he had been exiled to. On all the railroads of the country this very minute, right now, people who have just been fed salt herring are licking their dry lips with bitter tongues. They dream of the happiness of stretching out one's legs and of the relief one feels after going to the toilet.

It made me think of New York, when I had gone to the currency exchange and the man behind the desk had told me that they didnÕt sell Russian rubles. ÒWhy not?Ó
ÒBecause of the issues in that country right now,Ó he had replied, and I had been annoyed at the inconvenience, but had never thought about what that meant. They werenÕt selling rubles because the currency was being devalued so quickly, that ordinary citizens, like the ones on this train, were losing their life savings, while I was travelling for pleasure, in first class, with a cabin door that locked.

I needed some fresh air.

The train attendant folded out the metal stairs and I climbed down onto the cold platform. ÒTridstat minut?Ó I asked her, raising my fingers into a three and a zero, and she nodded yes, thatÕs how much time I had, so I tucked my hands into my pockets and headed down the platform.

It was just another Siberian town, like all the others, with rows of concrete platforms separating the tracks, a station with a clock tower and stray dogs sniffing under the train carriages. Passengers from other parts of the train stood huddled near their cars, talking and smoking, while others lined up at the wooden kiosks scattered along the platform selling cold water, fresh fruit, dried noodles and off-brand toys.

As I neared the back of the train I could make out another group of passengers in the distance, just past the last car. They were sitting on the ground, surrounded by police officers. The man I had seen earlier, the one with the German Shepherd, walked along the perimeter. He had been on the train because we were transporting prisoners.

I approached as closely as I dared and saw a man being led down the stairs of the carriage, his feet shackled. I had been transported to the past Ð this couldnÕt be happening now, exactly as Solzhenitsyn had described to me. His words came back to me. At times they did make the prisoners sit right there awkwardly on the platformÉ how are they supposed to look at us? With hatred? Their consciences don't permit it.

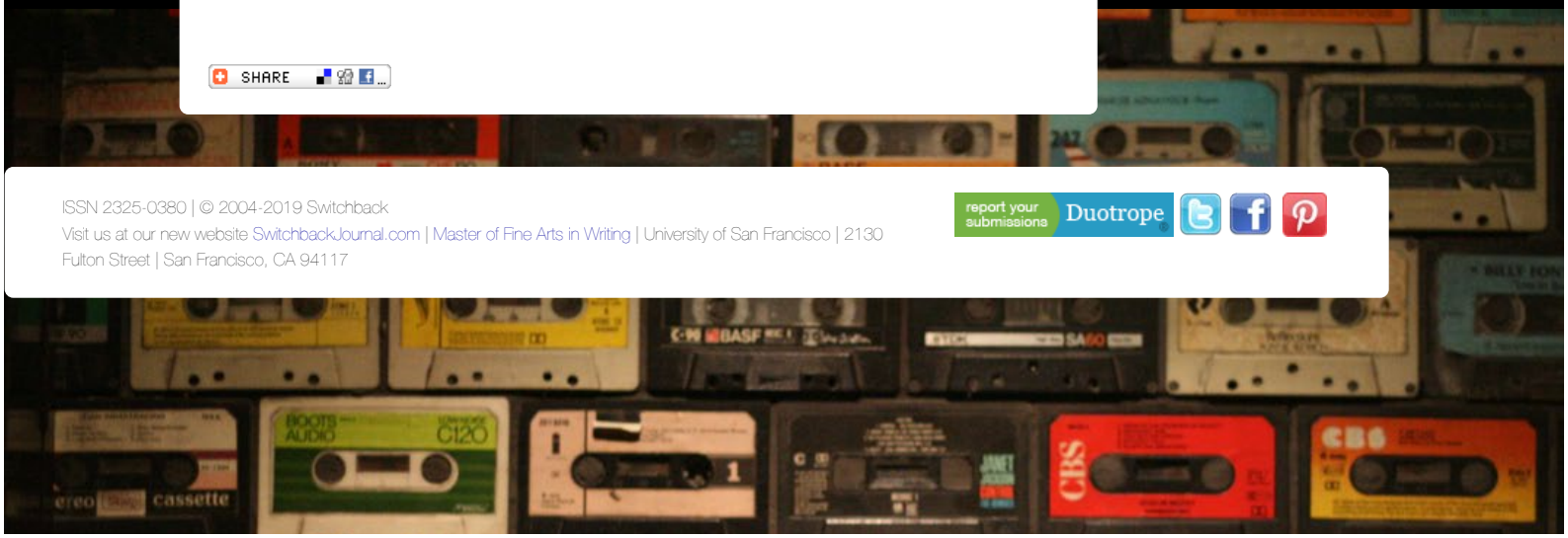
So I stood there and stared at them, too afraid to take a photo, already knowing why they were seated and not standing, because Solzhenitsyn had told me, because it was harder to escape that way, until a truck pulled up next to the train station and one of the police officers went over to it.

And since they never blew a whistle to warn you that the train was ready to leave, I realized that I would have to run to the front of the train to get back in time, so I turned away reluctantly, and watched them over my shoulder, with pity.

The train began moving as I settled back into my cabin, and the little town passed slowly and then faster and faster by the window, until it we had left it far behind. The Gulag was closed on the table, so I picked it up and leafed through it until I found the passage I was looking for.

The train startsÑand a hundred crowded prisoner destinies, tormented hearts, are borne along the same snaky rails, behind the same smoke, past the same fields, posts, and haystacks as you, and even a few seconds sooner than youÉAnd could you possibly believeÑand will you possibly believe when reading these linesÑthat in the same size compartment as yours, but up ahead in that zak car, there are fourteen people? And if there are twenty-five? And if there are thirty?

I put the book down and looked out the window at the rolling taiga. Yes, I could believe it.



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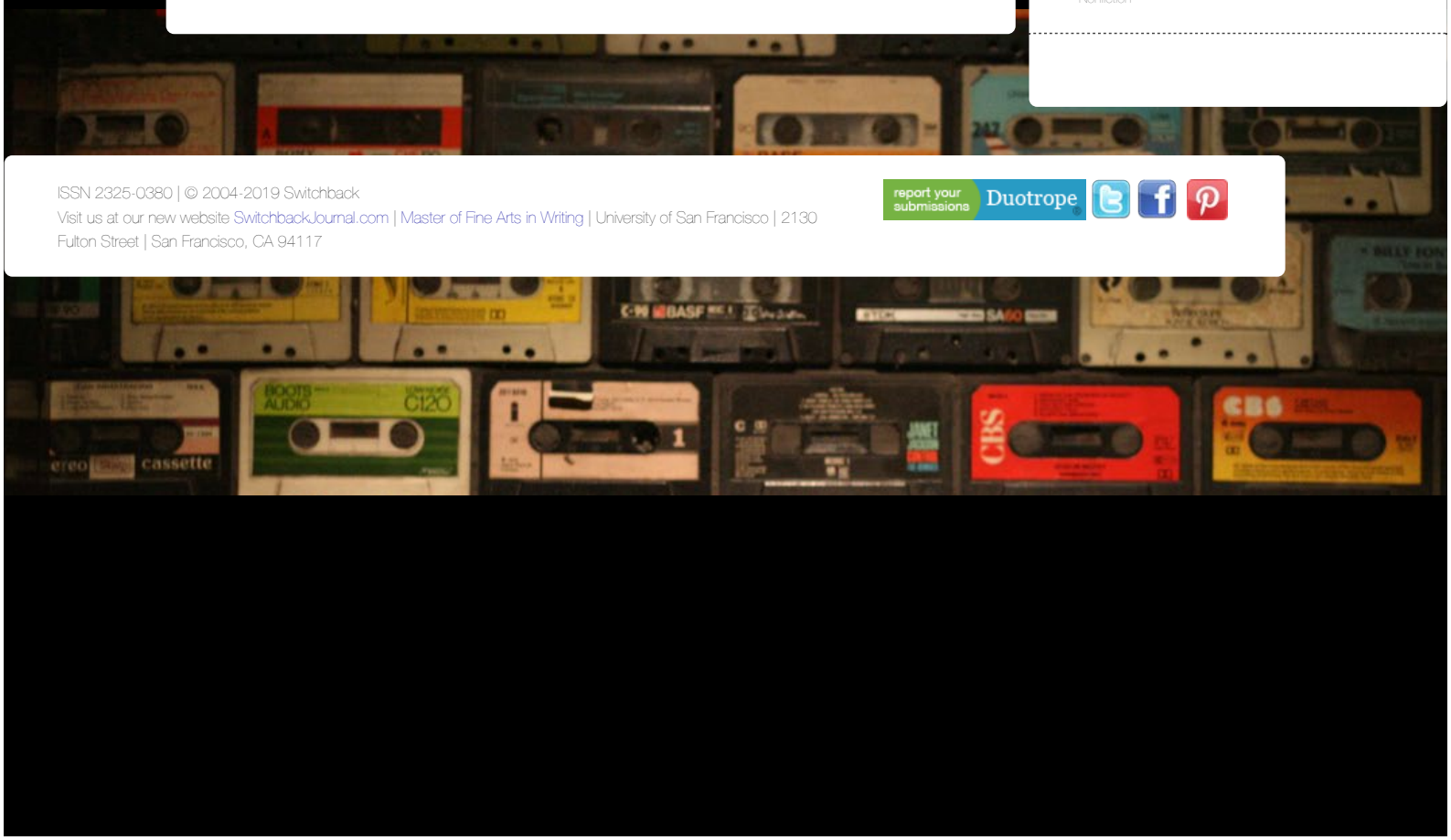

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The Breakers

Geoff Watkinson

With straps to AR-15s slung over their shoulders, two New Jersey State Troopers warmed their gloved hands over barrel fires in the sand-covered median of Route 35 in Toms River, approximately 100 yards from the Tunney-Mathis Bridge that extends over the Barnegat Bay and into Seaside Heights. The two barrels, with orange flames and burnt-out holes in the sides, looked like jack-o-lanterns, dark smoke rising into the cold November morning. It was two days after Thanksgiving in 2012 and three weeks after Hurricane Sandy struck the northeast. Residents were allowed to return to their homes for brief periods. What had been a two-lane bridge in each direction was reduced to one to control traffic, creating a line of cars a couple of miles long.

My mother drove, father in the passengerÕs seat, me in back. We were on our way to check her fatherÕs house in Lavallette, in the middle of the twenty-mile long, thin barrier island: the Barnegat Peninsula. A plumber followed us to shut off the houseÕs water before the pipes froze. My grandfather, mostly immobilized by a progressive skin cancer, was staying with my maternal aunt in central New Jersey with his black miniature poodle, Murphy.

I had an eerie sense that the destruction caused by the hurricane was only the beginning of wide-sweeping changes in my life. I was 26, halfway through my second graduate program and, little did I know, on the brink of stepping into a two-year relationship that would force me to stare down life decisions that I wasnÕt prepared to make: moving in together, moving out of state, getting a dog. I was trying desperately to hold onto something, but I couldnÕt figure out what I was trying to hold onto.

*

Some of New JerseyÕs richest habitats are within the 600 square miles of New JerseyÕs Barnegat Watershed: bay islands, wetlands, migratory nesting grounds. ItÕs an oasis in an otherwise overdeveloped, environmentally challenged region.

As a boy, I loved, in the most novice sense, bird watching: black skimmers, osprey, hawks, and my favorite, the great egret. The great egret is one of the most common birds in eastern US estuaries. That didnÕt matter when I was a boy. There was something about the bird that struck me as noble. Maybe it was its size (an adult can grow to three and a half feet), or its silky white color, or its long S-shaped neck, or its stick legs, or its long yellow beak. Maybe it was just its nameÑThe Great Egret. Like the hero of a story that my grandmother would have read to me after *Tikki Tikki Tembo*.

It was unclear how badly my grandfatherÕs house had been damaged. The day after the storm cleared a YouTube video shot from the roof of the townÕs liquor storeÑwhere my grandfather purchased his scotchÑshows water covering every inch of street and land for as far as the camera can see. In many locations, the ocean and bay shook hands, creating new inlets that the Army Corps of Engineers would spend months undoing. Like the rest of the islandÕs residents, my grandfather had been evacuated.

Across from where the troopers stood, on the edge of a furniture store parking lot, a large red sign with white

lettering read ÒJersey Strong.Ó

As we drove over the midway point of the bridge, the destruction came into focus: houses on each side of the bay had collapsed into the water. Others had broken in half. By the time we reached the island, boatsÑsailboats, speedboats, and jet-skisÑwere in the streets and on front yards. Even with the windows up, there was a distinct smell of dead fish.

On the surface, the water looked strangely calm, but underneath was a minefield of debris: lost crab traps, sunken boats and cars and houses. Large quantities of fuel, oil, pesticides and chemicals were released into the bay and ocean. In most places along the barrier islands, the sewer infrastructure had failed. In other words, the sewage spewed, unimpeded, into the water.

We passed the baseball field next to the public library where hundreds of cars, trucks, and buses were lined up in the outfield, as if it was overflow parking for a concert. The inside of the windows were covered in condensation. Debris stacked nearby reached three stories, a mountain that could be seen from many blocks away. Ranch homes lay in ruins: some had sunk into the ground; others hung over holes created by the ocean. More had simply imploded. The debrisÑwood planks, appliances, garbageÑwas everywhere.

I kept thinking about that sign: ÒJersey Strong.Ó And IÕve thought about it a lot since Ð not the sign, exactly, but the sweatshirts and hats and bumper stickers and Facebook pages that center around this idea of New Jersey Strength. That notion initially forced its way under my fingernails, where it rested uncomfortably like a sliver of scrap metal for a long while. The problem with the slogan, it seemed, was that it wasnÕt trueÑthat it simplified something elusive, complex, undefinable.

On a side street, a group of men attempted to flip a Jet-ski right-side-up as a Trooper approached. I imagined he wanted to see their identificationÑto see their paperwork. Looting had been widespread in the days and weeks after the storm. Each vehicle had to show proof of residence and identification to get onto the island.

As we drove past each block, the scene was similar: houses reduced to lopsided collapsed roofs, piles of two-by-fours and jagged wood, shattered glass, chunks of concrete rising up through the surrounding piles of sand. A varying layer of sand remained in the street, trees and branches resting haphazardly, piles of waterlogged possessions rising from the asphalt as if everyone on the street had suddenly decided to remodel. I snapped a picture of the pile in front of one house, which still looked structurally intact. On the pile was a blue leather loveseat, a refrigerator, a microwave, dark yellow insulation, a rolled up carpet, cardboard boxes, upside down wicker chairs, a TV, a tool chest, red and blue buckets, a green cloth couch, and a stack of black and white photographs. The piles were all so similar that, collectively, they took on a greyish hue matching the overcast sky.

Residents wore white masks over their noses and mouths to protect themselves from the growing mold. As if on a loop, people went into their homes, grabbed a handful of items, tossed it on the pile near the curb, and repeated.

We reached the corner of Route 35 and the ocean block of Camden Avenue. Across the street was Saint Bonaventure Church, a 22,000 square foot light brown gothic structure that my grandfather used to walk to almost every day. The steepleÑone of the tallest points on the islandÑwas tilted, the basement flooded.

My mother parked in the muddy sand of my grandfatherÕs driveway. The deep gray sky seemed to push toward the ground, and the ground toward it. Up the front steps of the porch, about an inch from the bottom of the front door, was a brown line where the water had reached its climax.

ItÕs a rainy summer evening when IÕm 13 and my sister 10. With two friends we made at the beach that weekÑ

also a brother and sisterÑwe play truth or dare on the front porch. The street is flooded, thunder and lightning in the distance, the rain gaining strength. The girl smiles, puts her wet blonde hair behind her ear, and dares me to run through the flooded street and touch the wooden electric pole. I say dare because I donÕt want her to ask me if IÕve ever kissed a girl (I havenÕt) or if I have a crush on her (I do). So I take off my shoes and run through the water and touch the pole. When I got back to the porch, the girlÕs eyes bright, Grammy comes outside.

ÒYou could get struck by lightning,Ó she says.

ÒI just went into the street, Grammy. ThatÕs all.Ó

ÒWho are your two friends?Ó she asks. They introduce themselves. ÒWell, itÕs getting late. You two should probably go home.Ó

ÒBut Grammy,Ó I say. ÒItÕs only six oÕclock.Ó

ÒWeÕre going to have dinner soon. Be inside in five minutes.Ó

We didnÕt often have visitors at the house, outside of family. I didnÕt understand why as a kid. But over the years, it became clear that the purpose of the house was to get the family together. Not to entertain. Family was something my grandparents expected us to respect. It was, after all, their home. But on that night, with the street flooded, I was angry at my grandmother. The girl left the next day and I never saw her again. I hadnÕt thought about her, or that night, in years.

As I stared at the water line on the front door, my mother unlocked the door then we walked inside. My grandfatherÕs dusty golf clubs were in the corner of the small foyer. I veered right through the living room and saw that Murphy, my grandfatherÕs poodle, had destroyed another screen in the window that looked out onto the front porch. The clear glass lamp with shells inside, made by my grandmother, sat on one of the coffee tables. A photograph of my grandparents, brother, sister, and me at the Cape May Zoo 15 years earlier was in a frame on the bookshelf near the stairs. I could see my breath inside.

Before entering the kitchen, I knelt down and felt the tan carpet. It felt cold, which, for a moment, made me believe it was damp.

ÒItÕs dry,Ó I said to my mother.

She nodded and walked through the kitchen and into the back of the house. I walked upstairs from the living room and into the bedroom my brother and I shared growing up. I hadnÕt slept there in yearsÑa combination of me having moved to Virginia and my grandfather having become a progressive scotch drinker after his wife died a decade before. Nights with him were unpredictableÑthe sorrow and scotch fusing into a potent cocktail of unpredictability.

I laid my face down on my bed, or what had once been my bedÑthe twin on the right side of the room. The faded blue flower-patterned bedspread smelled like salt and must, as if the smell of the ocean had somehow decayed. My grandmother had enforced a morning bed-making policy, which included precise tucks and foldsÑa process that has, more-or-less, stayed with me ever since. I turned over and stared at the ceiling, ears ringing from silence.

It occurred to me that my grandfather might die before returning to this house. All utilities were down on the island. Regardless of the structural condition of the house, the island wasnÕt going to be able to support residents for months. Every time I talked to him, he spoke obsessively about getting home. ÒJe-sus Chris-mas,Ó heÕd say,

Òwhat a damn mess.Ó

On my back, I closed my eyes and went back in time. ItÕs morning. IÕm 10 years old. I can hear my grandfather in the kitchen below, scrambling eggs in a pan with a spatula. Bacon is crackling in a skillet and the smell has filled the house. My grandmother, 4Õ8Ó and shrinking, is talking to my mother in the living room and I canÕt quite make out the words. I imagine that maybe sheÕs not feeling well and is talking about another test sheÕs having at a hospital in New York CityÑtests that would never determine what was wrong with her. I look over at the bed next to me, and my brother is already gone, probably boogie-boarding up on the beach. IÕm the late sleeper, usually the last one up. My grandmother calls it Òbeauty sleep,Ó and itÕs one of the many things we have in common.

I opened my eyes and the musty ocean smell was back. I got goosebumps as a disorienting rush of thoughts came. Tapping the fingers of both hands against my sternum, I thought about how I had lost my childhood and I didnÕt know what to do about it.

I went downstairs, out the sliding back door and into the detached garage where my mother was. The cement floor was wet with scattered clumps of black mud. It smelled like the channel in my backyard in Virginia when it emptied during low tideÑthe brackish water retreating, exposing the sludgy river bottom, tiny crabs scattering from a hungry great egret that always seemed to be around. It was an uncanny smell to find on a cold November day in New Jersey in the confines of a detached garage five hundred yards from the ocean.

ÒCarÕs shot,Ó my mother said, looking at it with her hands on her hips. ÒIt wonÕt start. But we knew that would likely be the case.Ó The windows of the almost new Cadillac Deville were foggy and coated in condensation.

ÒGuess IÕll start cleaning out some of the crap in here,Ó I said.

I didnÕt know where to start. A dark ring encircled the walls of the garage, two and a half feet above the floor. I picked up a circular saw my grandfather had taught me to use to make wooden airplanes when I was a kid. In just a few weeks, the saltwater had begun rusting the blade and corroding the plug, the metal feeling of fine sandpaper. I put it outside on the driveway. In a cardboard box was a stack of bound National Geographic magazines (more like encyclopedias) from the Õ30s that had belonged to my grandmotherÕs father. I picked up one and the black cover was mushy, the color transferring onto my fingers. I opened the book, the pages sticking together, ink bleeding.

ÒShould we try to dry these out?Ó I asked my mother.

Òls there mold on them?Ó

ÒNot yet.Ó

ÒI guess itÕs worth a shot,Ó she said.

ÒOh, come on,Ó my father said, Òwhat are we going to do with a stack of old books thatÕs been sitting in water for the past three weeks?Ó

ÒTheyÕre worth something,Ó I said.

My father stopped rummaging through the back corner of the garage, stood up straight, and nodded.

When my grandfather moved to the beach soon after his wife died, he threw out a lot of the trinkets that had been

collected over the course of their lives, like that *Tikki Tikki Tembo* book that my grandmother used to read my brother, sister, and I. Much of what was left ended up in boxes on the floor of the garage.

There was a box of beach toysÑa nerf football heavy from water saturation; a wooden paddleball set, black mold creeping up the handle; and one of my first baseball gloves. I picked up the glove, which was now heavier, the leather more brown than the tan it had once been. I tossed it out onto the driveway with the saw. There was the beach chair my grandmother had sat in, the metal frame rusting. There were boxes of her beach reads, hardcover Danielle Steele novels. She was a librarian and loved the classics, but on the beach she simply wanted to be entertained. They were all waterlogged, and as I brought the box outside, the bottom fell out, the books falling onto the pavement.

I began putting everything into garbage cans and then carted them to the curb and dumped the contents. I grew angry. As my twenties had progressed, it seemed that more events like this presented themselvesÑand always sooner than when I wanted to face them. My parents had moved two years earlier from the house where IÕd grown up. They got a dumpster and I threw out almost everythingÑscience fair ribbons, soccer and baseball trophies, books from the Illustrated Classics series. My mother insisted she hold onto my childhood paintings and drawings. She put them in a box, and I imagine, at some point, IÕll end up cleaning them out of my parentsÕ basement with the rest of the items with which theyÕre unable or unwilling to part.

I donÕt like change. I donÕt like not having control. I donÕt like letting go. But thereÕs no choice in the matter. Sometimes it seems that my childhood is territory being fought over, but IÕm the only one aware that thereÕs a war going on. I aggressively fight growing older, and the more I fight, the faster time moves.

I was cold and hungry. I lit up a cigarette by the curb and looked at the front of the house. For the first time, I noticed that my grandfather had left the American flag raised on the porch before my aunt had evacuated him. The flagstick was partially broken, the flag ripped and maimed. He had always kept the flag immaculateÑputting it up in the morning and taking it down at night. If the flag got a tear, he replaced it. I put out the cigarette, walked up the steps, took the flag down, folded it, and placed it inside.

After most of the garbage had been cleaned out and the plumber turned off the water, my father and I decided we needed a break. We walked up toward the beach. A few houses up, a neighbor nodded to us as he tossed a wicker chair on his heap of debris.

A backhoe was parked where the boardwalk had once been. The ocean and wind uplifted the boardwalk planks, propelling them through the front windows of the beachfront homes. The gazebo beneath the lifeguard tower had been destroyed. My brother and I spent our teenage years walking that boardwalk, looking for girls, sitting in that gazebo.

ÒI never expected this to happen,Ó I said to my father. ÒI knew it could, that it probably would, but I still never *expected* it.Ó

My father nodded.

The topography of the beach had been transformed. The beach was shorter, the dunes flattened.

ÒItÕs completely unrecognizable. All of it,Ó my father said.

Dad and I looked south and didnÕt say anything for a while. In the ocean two miles away was the Jet Star

rollercoaster from Seaside HeightsÕ Casino PierÑthe iconic image that emerged from Sandy. It had dropped straight down with the pier and into the Atlantic. The roller coaster was 50 feet tall, with 1700 feet of track. From a distance, it looked as if an erector set that had been tossed into the water, struggling to stay upright.

The only time IÕd ridden that rollercoaster was with my first girlfriend, Brittany, the summer between high school and college. As I looked out at the coaster from the beach, the bottom 10 or 15 feet submerged in the sea, I thought about that night with Brittany. ItÕs one of our first dates. We drive down the New Jersey Parkway together and blast Bruce SpringsteenÕs ÒJersey Girl.Ó That night, we hold hands while walking the boardwalk. I win her a large stuffed bear playing ring toss. On the coaster, the two-person car bangs around the track, up, down, the salty breeze compounding the excitement, the danger. WeÕre above the ocean, after allÑon top of it, so high up.

ÒYou know whatÕs strange,Ó I said to Dad, Òis that we all knew this was inevitable. We knew that a storm was going to come. There was that one in the early Õ60s that wiped out the island, but that was before it got so industrialized. IÕve heard the locals talk about it for years. We knew that everything, eventually, was going to get destroyed, and nobody did anything about it.Ó

My father nodded and looked out at the ocean. ÒBut nobody can live like that, Geoff. This stuff just happens.Ó The rebuilding of infrastructure on that fragile barrier island was already underway. A few hundred yards away, a man worked a backhoe futilely tried to rebuild a section of dunes.

Jersey Strong. What did that sign before the bridge mean? Strong enough to withstand a hurricane? Definitely not. Strong enough to rebuild after one? ThatÕs economic strength, not emotional strength. Real strength would be recognizing the reality that maybe, just maybe, we shouldnÕt rebuild a barrier island that the ocean wants to take back.

And this wasnÕt Queens, where most people didnÕt have flood insurance. Where most people lost their primary homes. Their only possessions. This was an economic hub for New Jersey. Where most people lost their vacation homes. Where most people could afford to rebuild.

I wanted to believe that everyone was wrong. That somehow I was the only one who grasped that people had no place on that thin barrier island. Because then I would have control. Then I would never have to go through this again. But it wasnÕt true. ÒNobody can live like that,Ó my father had said. And what I was finally beginning to realize is that I couldnÕt control everything, no matter how much I wanted to.

Jersey Strong meant a lot of things. It meant holding onto what, collectively, New Jerseyans love: the promise of summer on the warm sand of the Jersey shore, overpriced ring toss with poorly made prizes, clunky roller coasters that push you closer to your creator, and time spent with family in a place where families have spent time together since people decided that sitting on a beach was a good idea for a vacation. And that was especially true for my grandfather. Even if heÕd never sit on the beach again, if it was possible, then all was right in the world. The Jersey shore was an idealÑa delusion of grandeur that had to exist for people in the tristate area to keep on living. It was something to fight for, even if the enemies were the unstoppable duo of wind and water. Jersey Strong meant community. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, the locals rallied. From social media updates to the organization of local rebuilding nonprofits, the community was there for one another.

My father and I walked toward the coaster, out there in the distance. Debris was scatteredÑbuoys, soda bottles, pieces of wood. We walked along the beach like that for a while and then sat on the cold, compact sand and looked out at the water as gulls glided silently overhead. The ocean lapped onto the beach in thin sheets, the only sound. The cold from the sand on my bare feet crawled up my legs, sending a shudder through my torso that made me yearn for the end of a winter that had yet to begin.

When we got back from the beach, I called my grandfather.

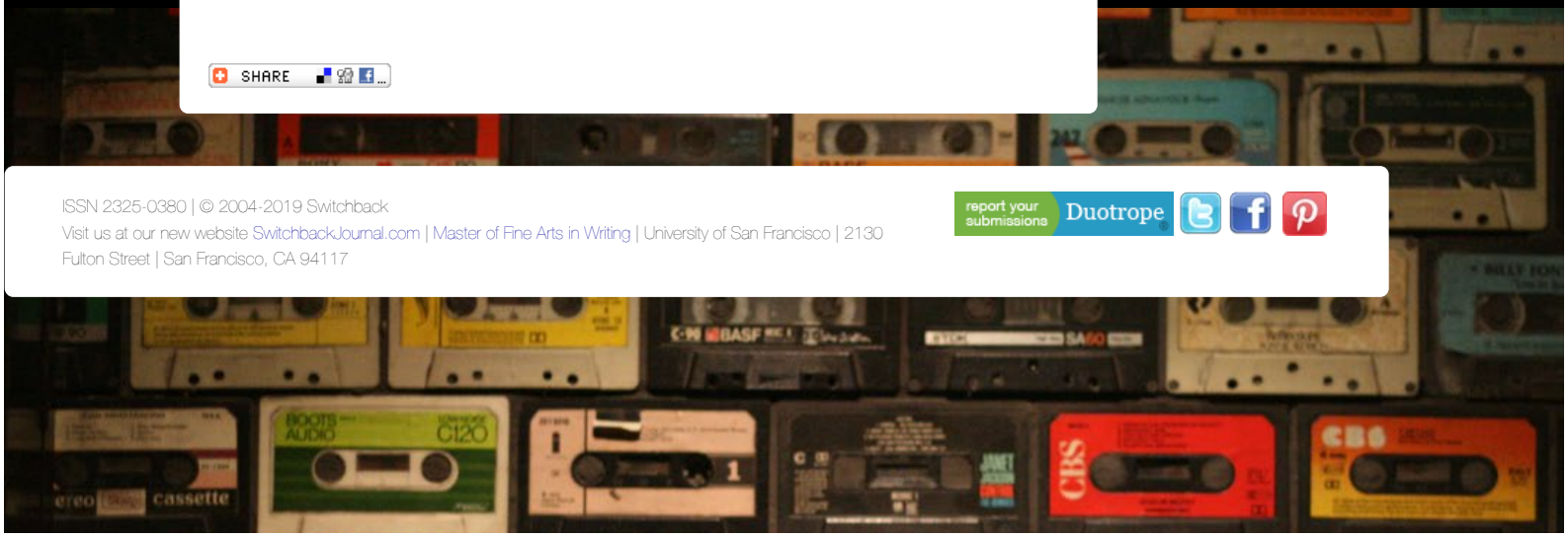
ÒWell, the house itself looks okay,Ó I said.

ÒWhen do you think IÕll be able to move back?Ó

ÒI think thatÕs going to be a while, Poppy. The carÕs shot. And a bunch of stuff in the garage. But the house is okay.Ó He was quiet. ÒI took the flag down for you. It had seen better days.Ó

ÒThanks, kiddo. IÕm glad the house is okay. IÕll see you when you get back.Ó

After weÕd finished cleaning out the garage, my parents were tired, and so I drove north up the New Jersey Parkway towards their house in central New Jersey, my father beside me and my mother in back. As we crossed the bridge to the mainland, I wanted to look for the great egret. Sure, it was too late in the season, but I wanted to catch a glimpse of one anyway. Just one, wading in that green-blue water of the Barnegat on a summer morning of my youth, patient, intent, looking for a fish to eat. But I couldnÕt look.



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The Tomorrow of Slot Machines

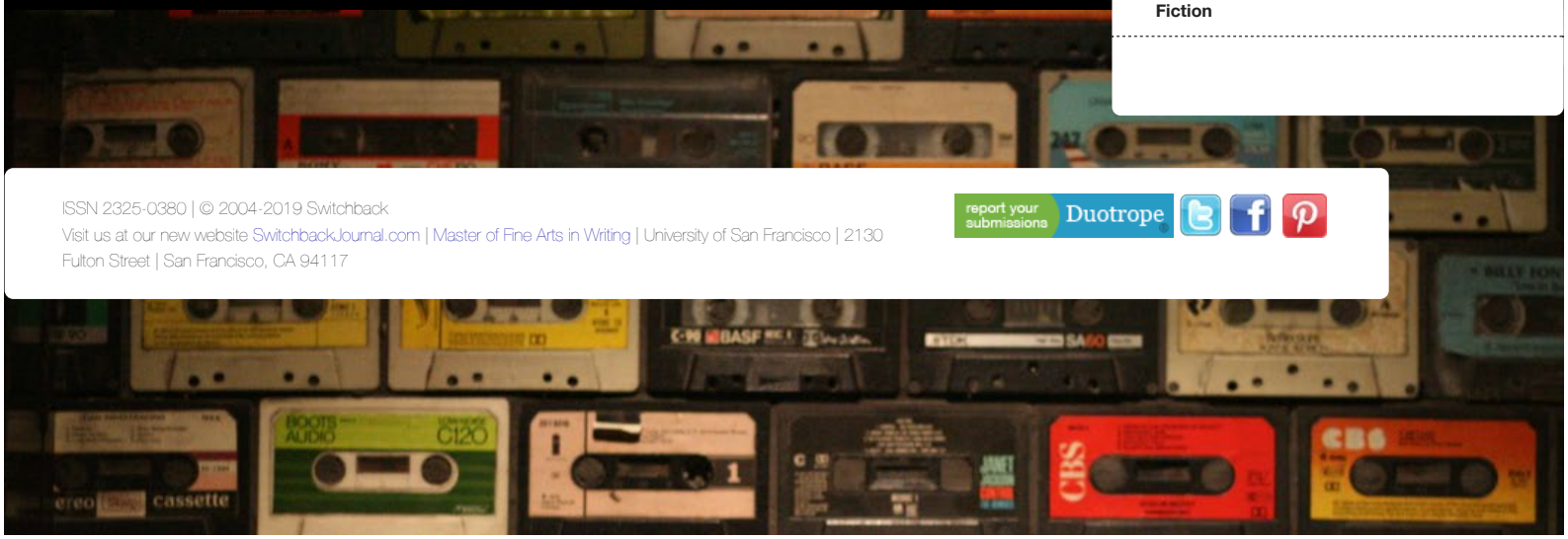
Larry Narron

While I sleep, the blue light
of the aquarium waves to me
from the ceiling. The fish wave
their tails, saying buenos dias,
casting their anarchist shadows

over my face, disturbing
the crest of a dream into foam.
Instead of stirring myself
awake, I sleepwalk downstairs
through the golden casino

in only my boxers & shark slippers,
shuffling through the ocean
woven by the carpetÕs design
of unraveling tides. I am hunted
by smoke that ushers me toward

the tomorrow of slot machines.
I slide down before one with
a *Saved by the Bell* theme
& somebody hands me a drink
that isnÕt strong enough to wake me.



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Juleen Eun Sun Johnson

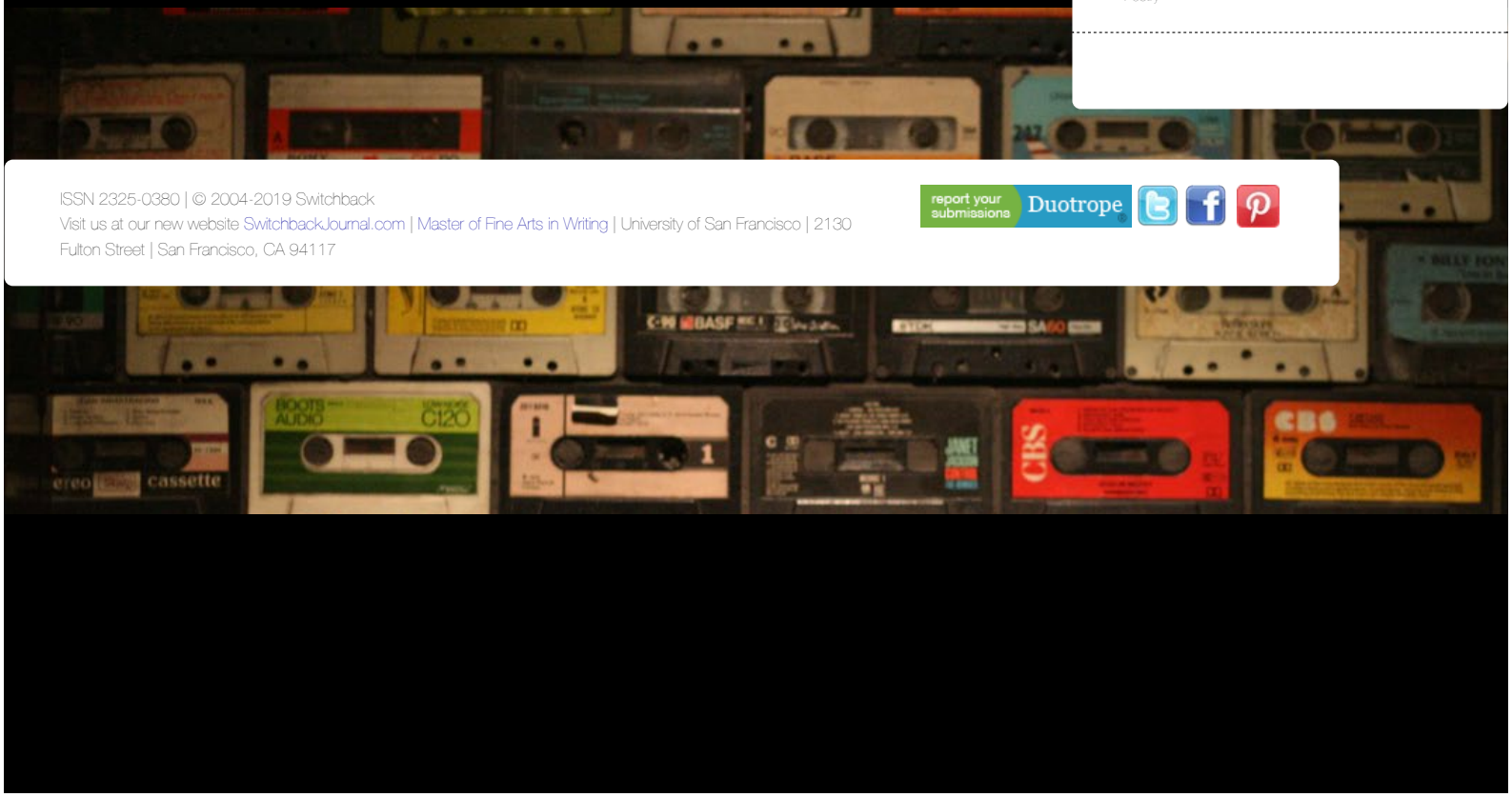
Juleen Eun Sun Johnson has been published in printed publications, including *Cirque: A Literary Journal, Nervous Breakdown, The Rio Grande Review, Buried Letter Press, Apeiron Review, The Round, Whiskey Island Magazine,* and other journals. Johnson currently writes and creates art in Portland, OR.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

Winter Stand
Poetry

No There
Poetry



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Winter Stand

Juleen Eun Sun Johnson

A Map of Wyoming fills
an empty white wall.
Have you seen winter stand still?
White disguises ranges.

Not like riverbeds
but as a white stallion.
Your fist-filled leather.

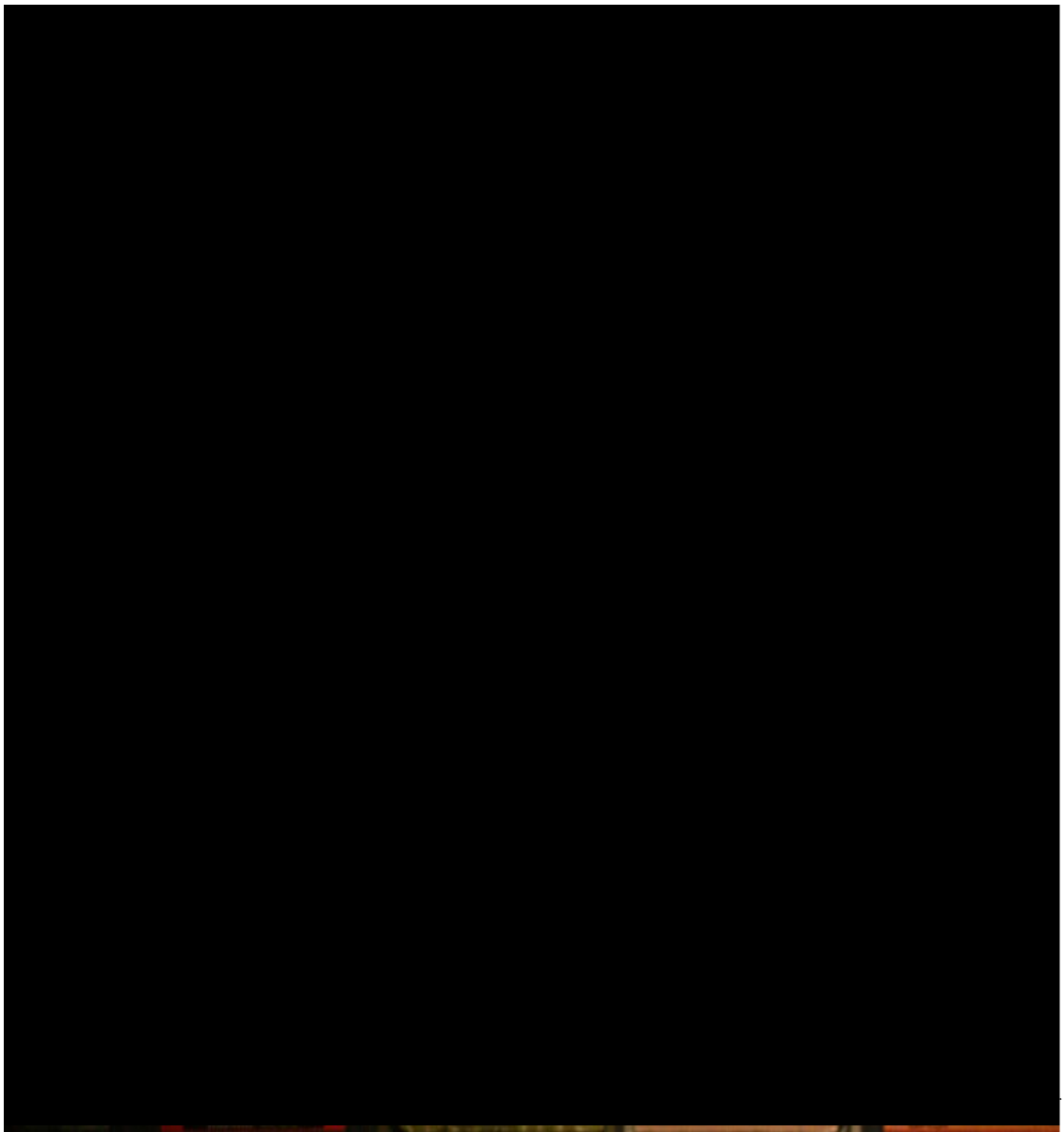
Her back is tired
but she loves you.
An apple still full in her mouth.
She kisses your hand.

Listen
As she breathes
lead her to water.
She takes on new life
as you hold her.

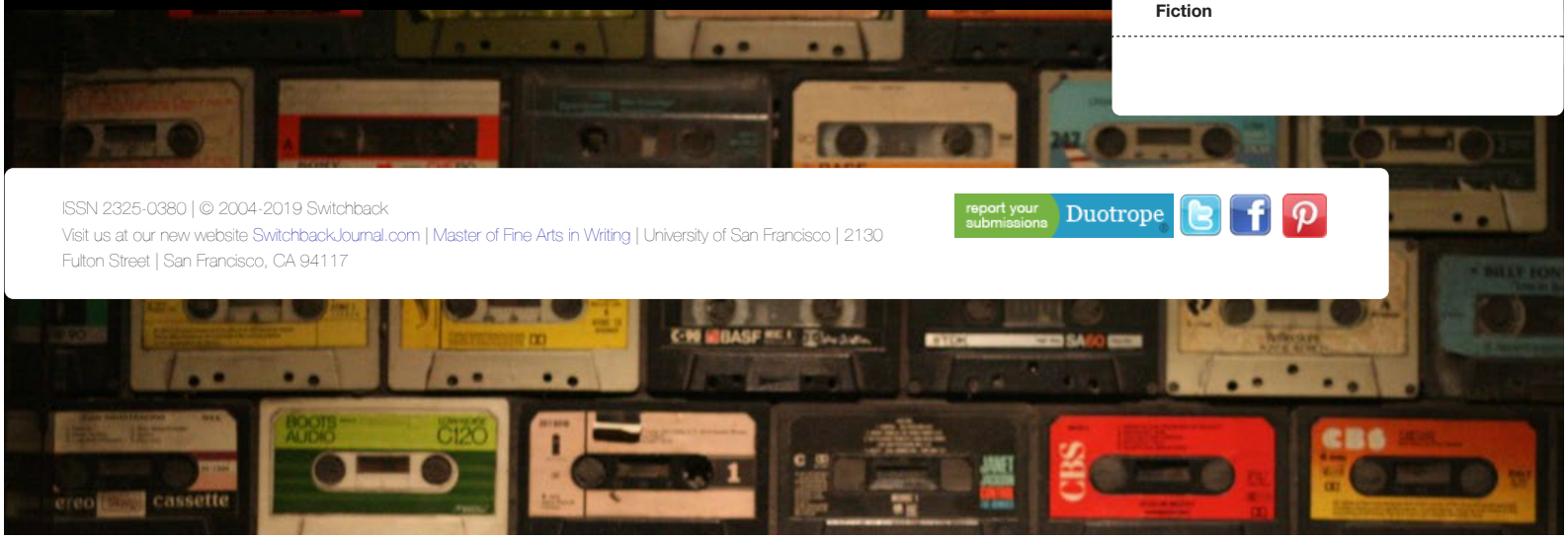
Reclaim your wildness
in the vastness of her eyes.

Sand gathers around the door to a house.

Sun comes down
around quiet,
wind comes
from the East.



Fiction



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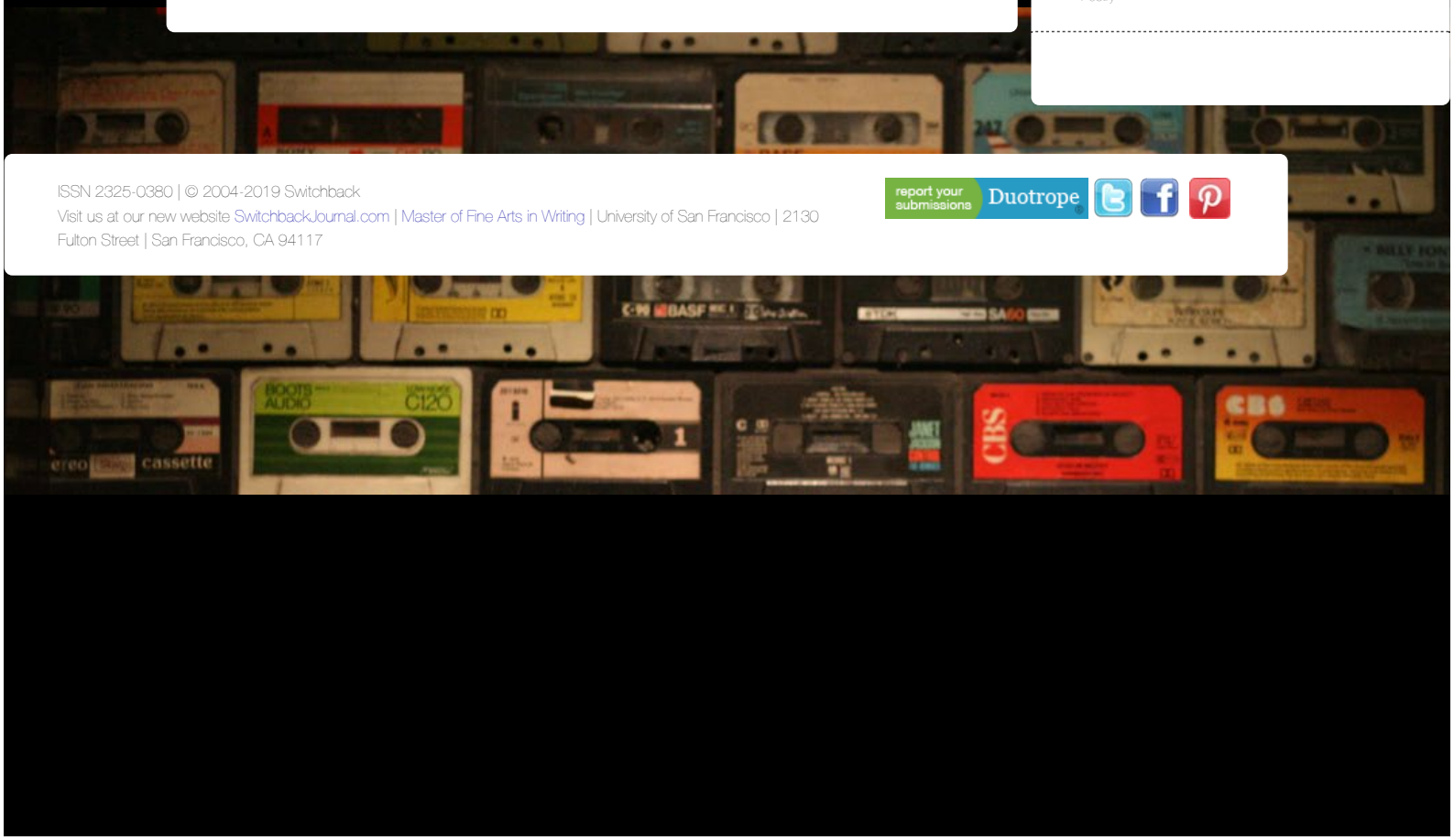
Michael Rerick

Michael Rerick lives and teaches in Portland, OR. He is the author of In Ways Impossible to Fold, morefrom, The Kingdom of Blizzards, The Switch Yards, and X-Ray.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

From: Moss
Poetry



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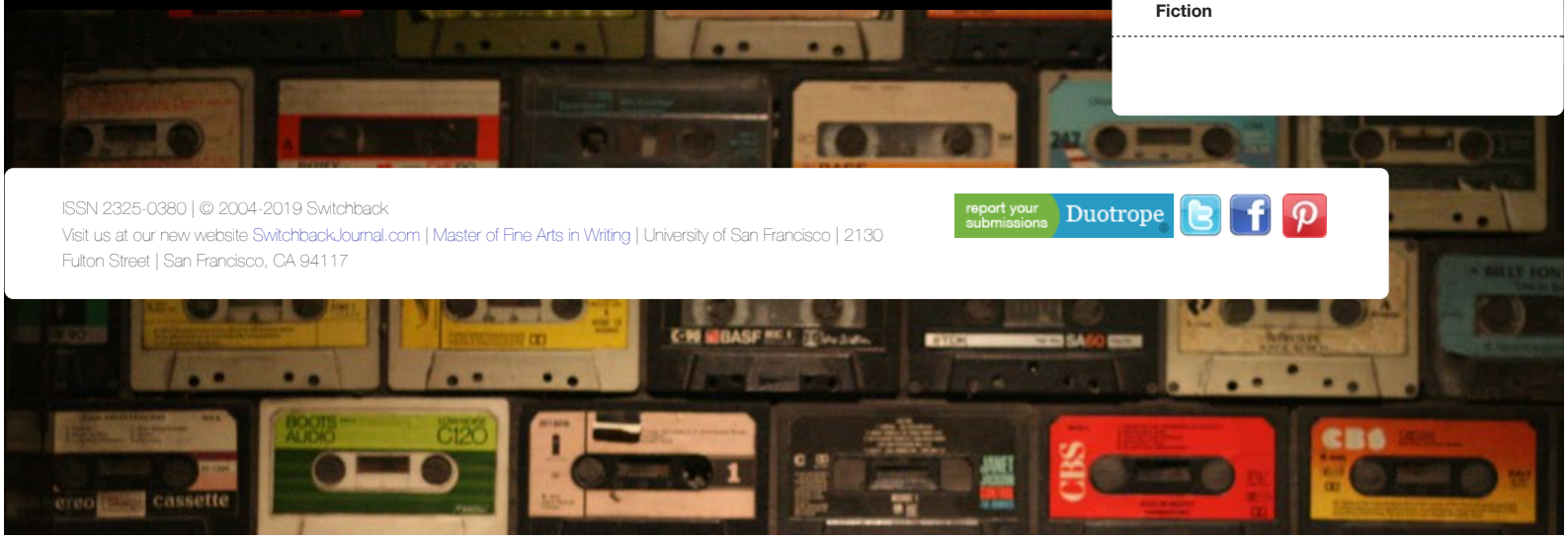
From: Moss

Michael Rerick

Halloween bones feel fallÕs moist chill
air as cloud with variation
bodies reflect surreal mirrored hospital walls
with parental attention
before juniper shrub stink
a Japanese weeping maple feathers a box top apartment
and rain shucks concrete oysters
as tires clap over dry leaves to speed a roar of applause
through a thin outline framed by small columns
crows stop and tap at opaque yellow plastic tower windows
in meat and wood stove smoke

blockades and grades
stimulate landscape
desire fractures
(in pressed berry
and salmon print)
little fissures in gray
moss bound crooks
clung to vibrato-time

in the train rumble lull and horn
blue Doppler volumes comb wet fall pine and wind and tall grass heads
along easy motel style apartment living
because the moon is a streetlight window reflection effect
working over and over with a paper cup thermos replacement
slowed by small yellow leaf storms
and bird bullets shot from silver fir recesses
that target slick street worms
as the blue billowing tarp strings hold
and the gutter spills on the tin wood pile roof
in oncoming red alder hours that rustle like walled shower pipes
adding to the lavender grey and clipped green senses



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Kym Cunningham

Kym Cunningham received her MFA from San Jose State University with emphases in creative nonfiction and poetry. She acted as the lead Nonfiction Editor of Reed Magazine, the oldest literary magazine West of the Mississippi. She received the Ida Fay Sachs Ludwig Memorial Scholarship and the Academy of American Poets Prize for outstanding achievement in her writing. Her writing has been published in Caesura, Santa Ana River Review, South 85 Journal, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, The Writing Disorder, The 3288 Review, Drunk Monkeys, Zingara Poet, and Reed. Her writing is forthcoming in Claudius Speaks. She has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

"Boys named Josh are trouble"
Poetry

Gifts
Poetry

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Gifts

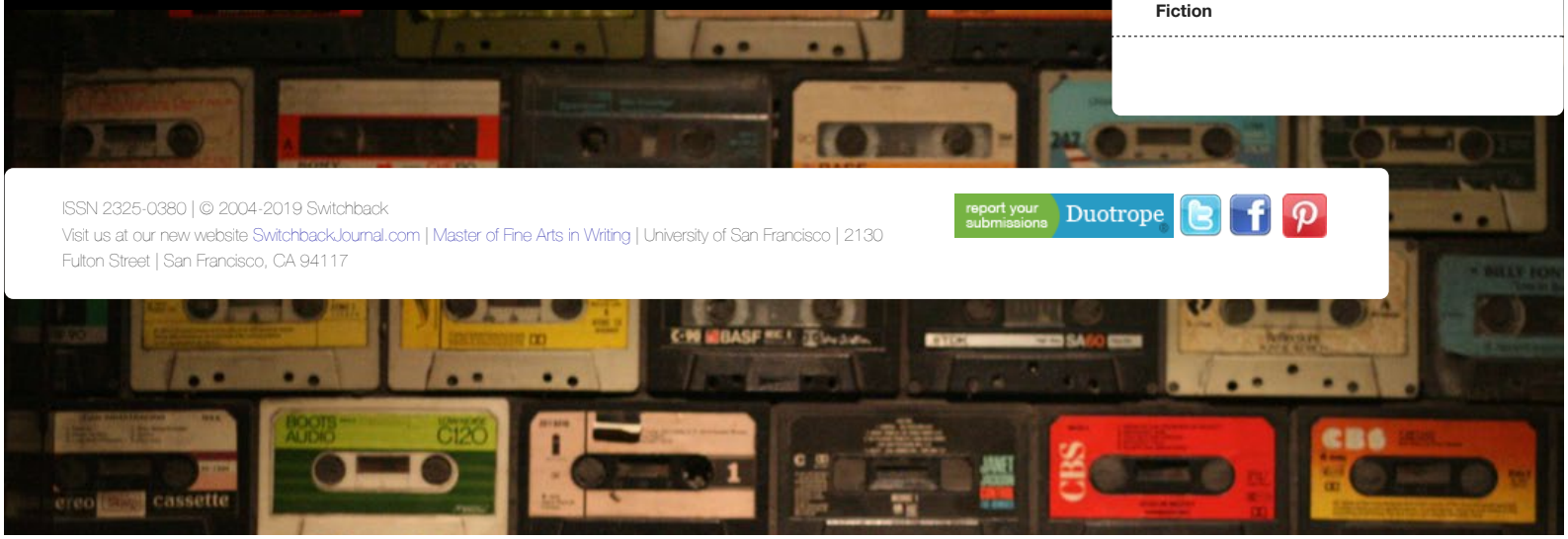
Kym Cunningham

Dr. Seuss must have been on acid
How else would he have known
the meaty
thwack
thwack
of chopping down truffula trees
was the same as Jon's head
slamming against the pavement
thwack
thwack
We had to call the police
He didn't take anything
we swore
staring at the sun to make our pupils less dilated
We hid the stopper that heÕd licked
Ñanywhere from 5 to 100 dosesÑ
our dealer saidÑ
in a combat boot
Fuck me up the ass
He yelled
eyes glazed in blood haze
Fuck me up the ass
we didnÕt know if he was joking or not
They cuffed him
releasing us on our own recognizance
of which there wasnÕt much left

Ten years later
A kid runs into the street
thwack
thwack
Gets hit by a car
a bad combination of
whippets
alcohol
and thanatos

It is the expected narrative
Death has never been
a good enough deterrence

Fiction



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Katie Hibner

Katie Hibner is a confetti canon from Cincinnati, Ohio. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bone Bouquet, inter|rupture, Timber, Up the Staircase Quarterly, Vinyl,* and *Yalobusha Review.* Katie's criticism can be found at *Entropy, Heavy Feather Review,* and *Queen Mob's Teahouse*. She dedicates all of her poetry to her mother, Laurie.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

The Town's Patron Saint Asks
Poetry

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The TownÕs Patron Saint Asks

Katie Hibner

The townÕs patron saint asks,

Why the bruises on your foreheadsÑ isnÕt it Ash Wednesday?
and falls off the ark of our pansy faces.

The mayor just pooh-poohs her as a space case,
swigging milk with his mashed pocket squares,

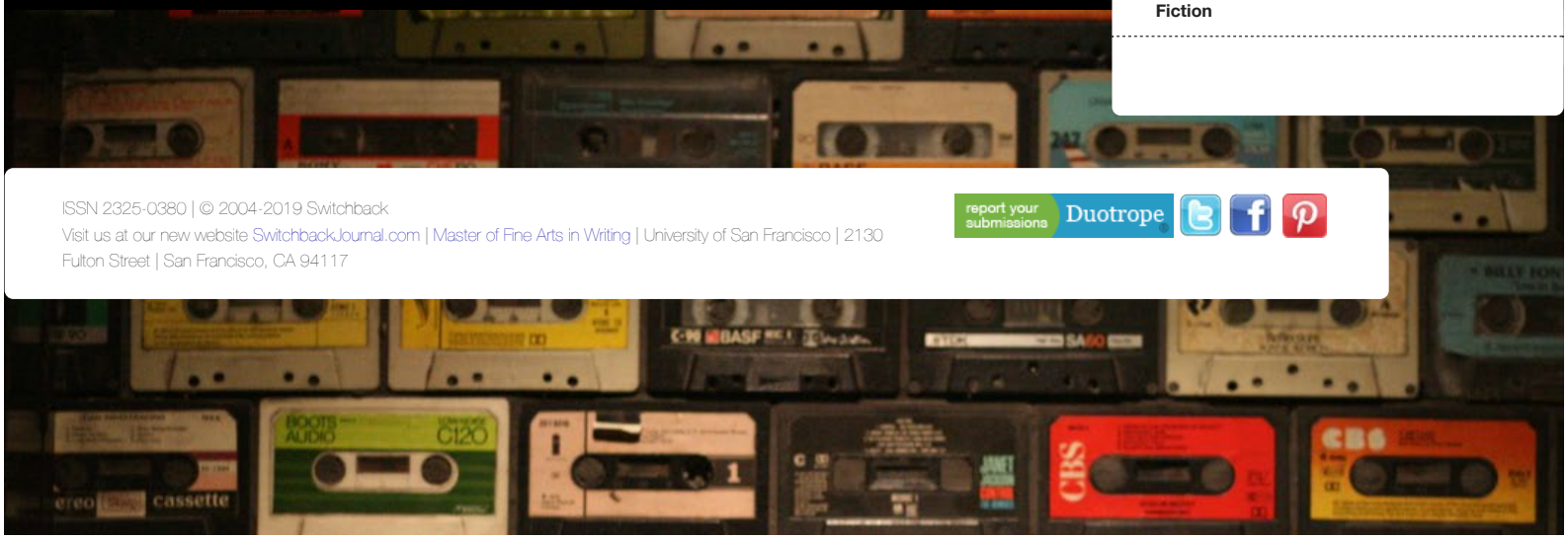
so we swarm the firewall
protecting their phagocyte.

We heehaw around it in our goatskins
and conjure a yule-bomb.

Our foreheads are Òbruised,Ó
but our necks are anointedÑ

these marshmallow torcs are our floaties to Valhalla.

Fiction



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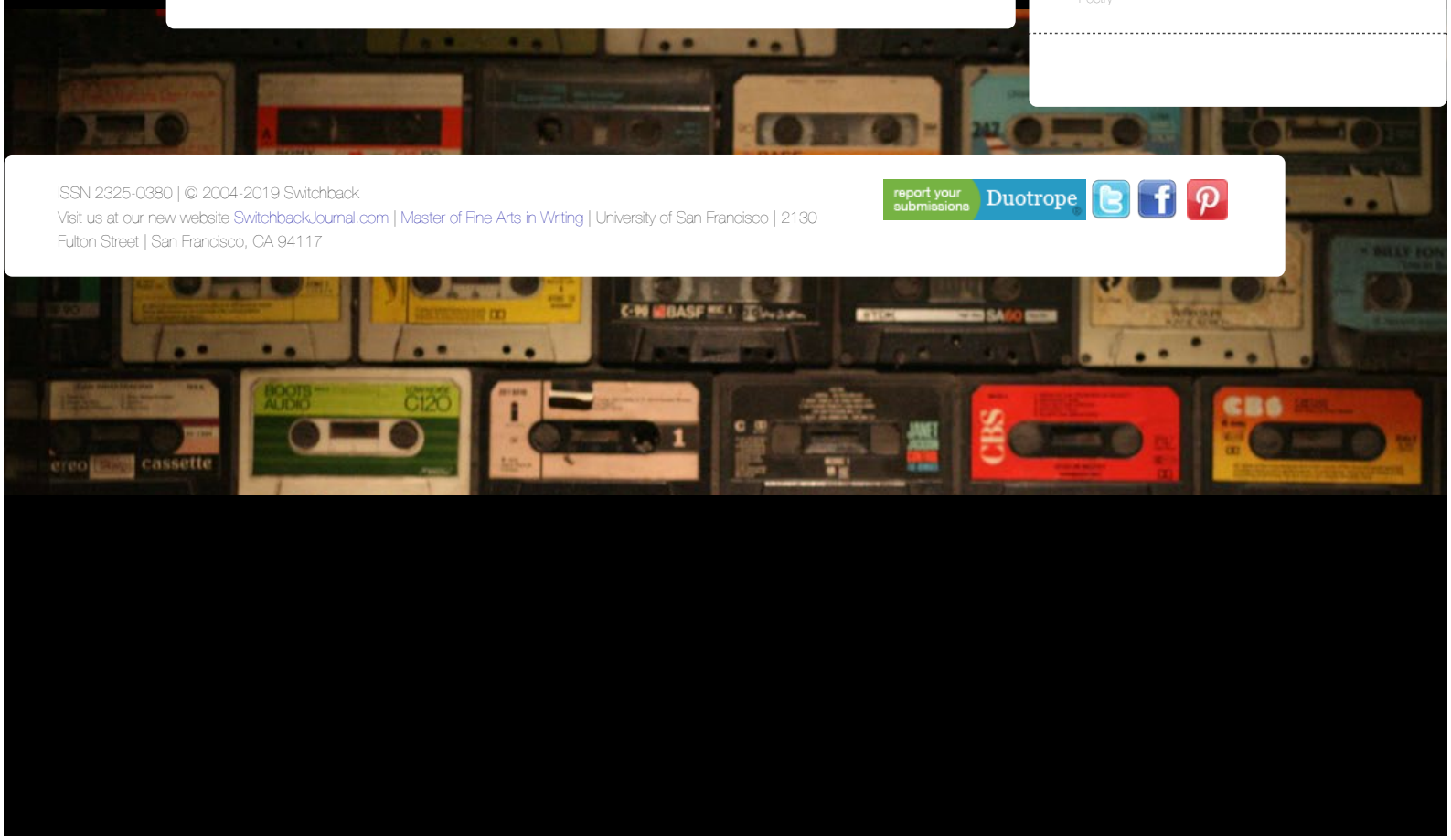
Courtney Druz

Courtney Druz is the author of four books of poetry including her most recent volume, *The Hannah Senesh Set*, from which this poem is drawn. She has worked in architecture and graphic design, and her poems have appeared in a variety of journals. She lives in Israel. www.courtneydruz.com

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

Endurance in Yielding
Poetry



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Endurance in Yielding

Courtney Druz

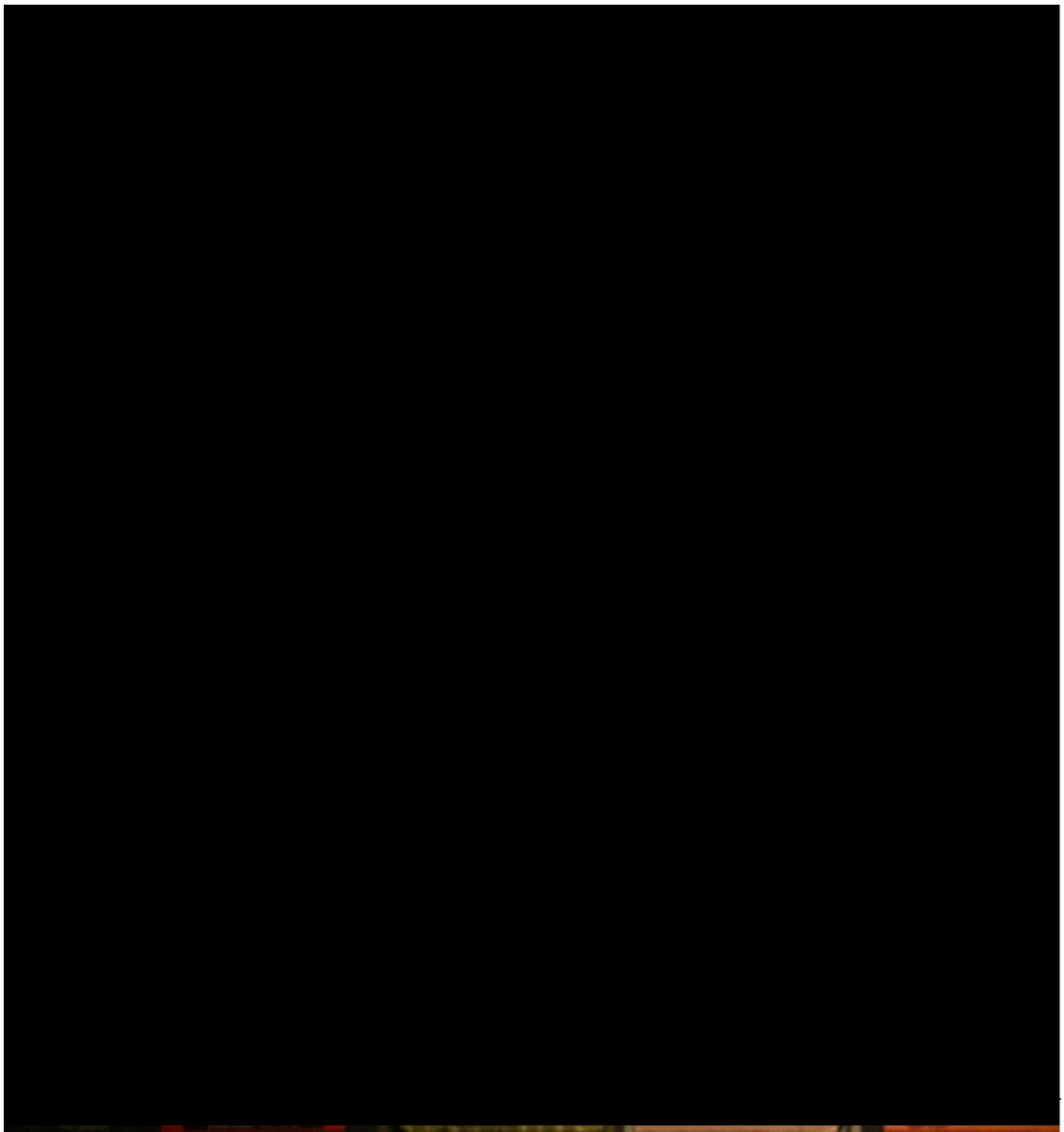
I store my silk dresses in the shed,
I write my name in the triplet of its origin,
uniform, uncapitalized, a breath

out, caught and gone. I am known
by my chapped hands and by what they touch:
this cold gray water where my visage sinks

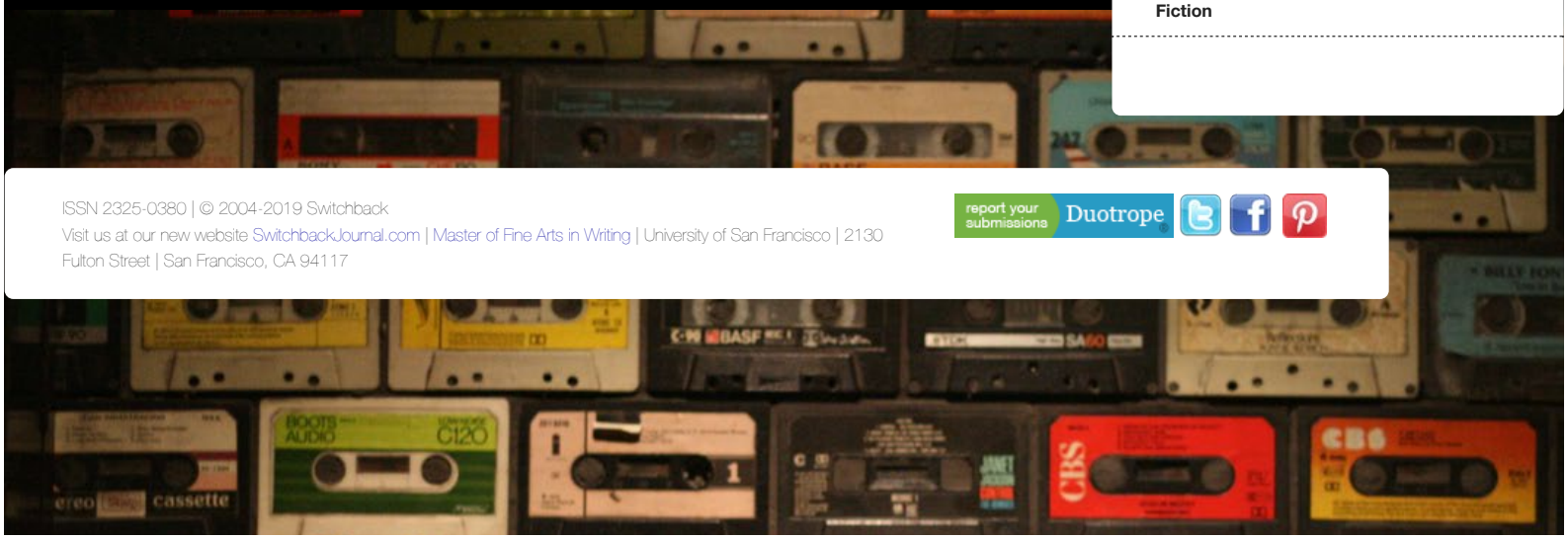
scrubbed out with the rest of our coverings
could be my name more than could erase it,
could carve itself in stone. I am here

brought by water, soaked in it. I carry
and repair, but everything breaks again,
falls, drips; dirt breaks down the broom.

My sleep is spent on breathing, my breath
is sleep. I dissolve. I am here
but rearranged. Taste me in this air.



Fiction



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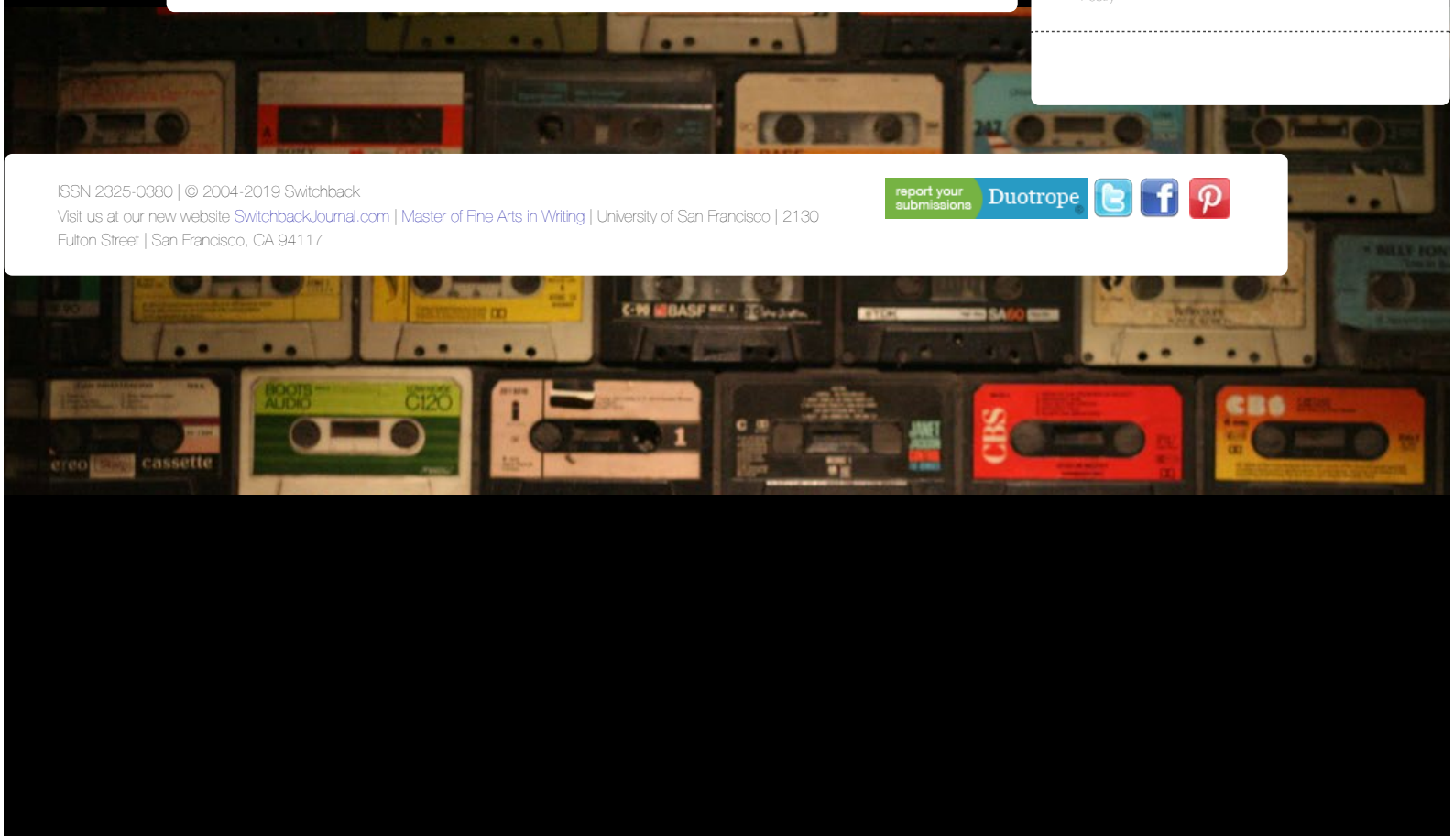
Lillian Brown

Lillian Brown is an articles editor at *The Missing Slate*. Her work appears in *Cleaver Magazine*, *The Sonder Review*, and *Driftwood Press*, among other publications.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

Soft Subjects
Poetry



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Soft Subjects

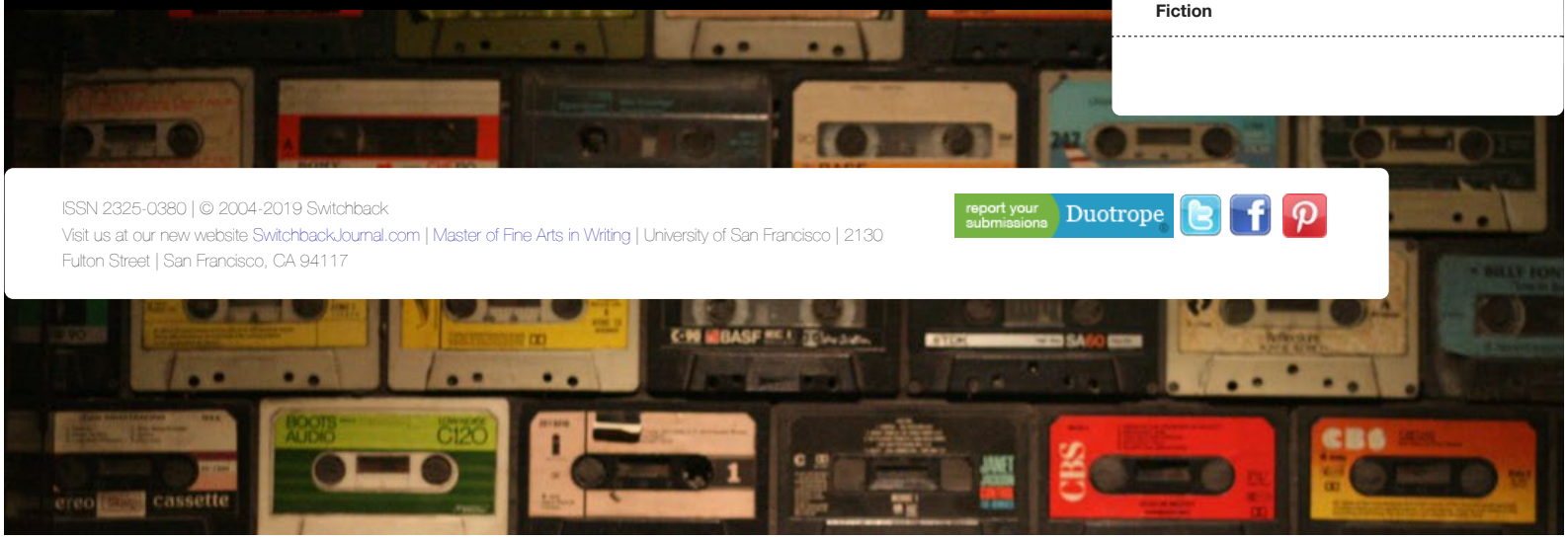
Lillian Brown

After Yusef Komunyakaa

Say something with complete certainty,
something that you know to be true,
fact-checked & people wrecked
& get a little naked while you do it.
Strip down & speak in absolutes,
explain how you know, why you know,
who rubbed your back when it happened,
& why theyÕre not the one hundred & fifty
pounds of flesh snoring next to you in bed.

Say something about never cutting the crust off of sandwiches,
about second-guessing first loves & first times
& how birthdays stop & start
mattering again within the space of a few years.
Say something about your mother & your father,
about blood, curves, empty spaces, empty bedrooms.
Yes, say something about ÒguestÓ rooms
that arenÕt for guests,
about flushing the dead fish,
about who slips on the ice after the storm
& whoÕs already waiting on the ground.

Fiction



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"Boys named Josh are trouble"

Kym Cunningham

I rail a line off her ribcage
coke fits perfectly in the skin
between her bones

She doesnÕt look at me when I lick
my finger
rub her sweat
into my gums
taste her drip-
drip-drip-ping down my throat

Her eyes look too
much, missing the glaze they get
when they know
the haze doesnÕt reflect me
as well

Clumps surround her nipples like stardust
sheÕs so hot she could be in porno
when she turns 18

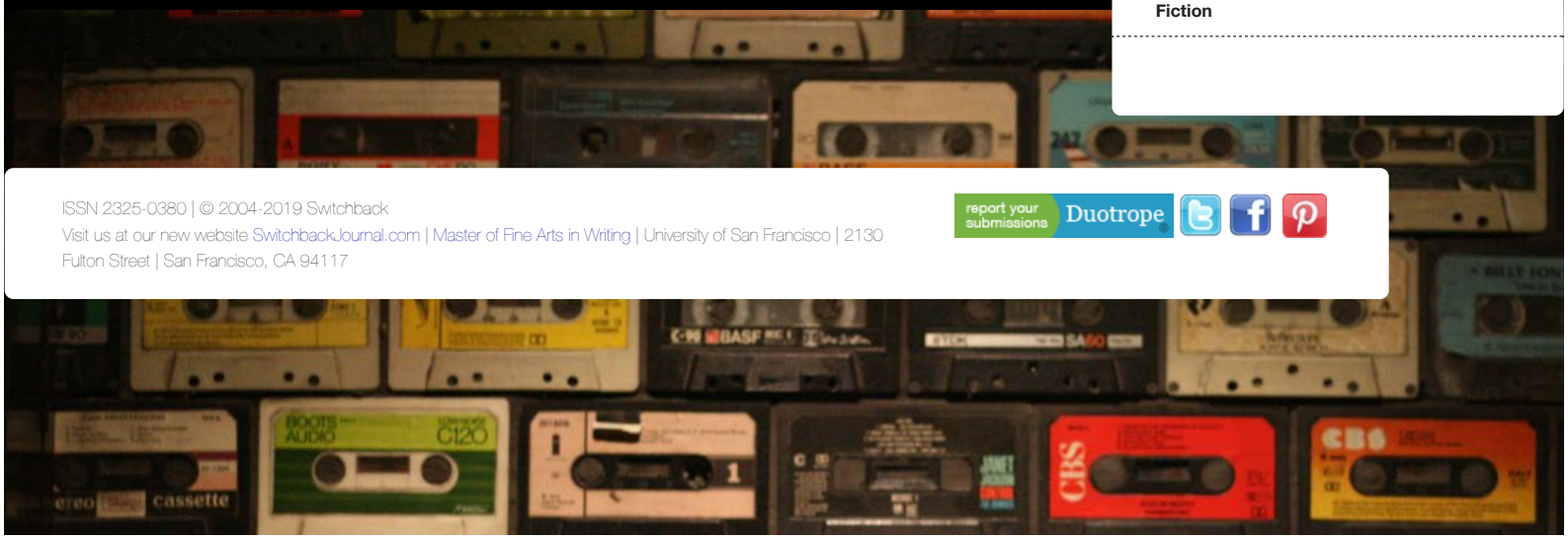
I tell her so
and she almost smiles
hasnÕt figured out
her braces yet

I canÕt help but
drain her

She points at the razor and mirror
Òmy turnÓ

I hold back her hair
shove the straw up
her nose

Fiction



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Scott Wordsman

Scott Wordsman's poems have appeared in *THRUSH, BlazeVOX, Forklift/Ohio, Reality Beach, Slipstream,* and elsewhere. He reviews books for *Colorado Review,* teaches composition at William Paterson University, and lives in Jersey City.

Contributions to Switchback

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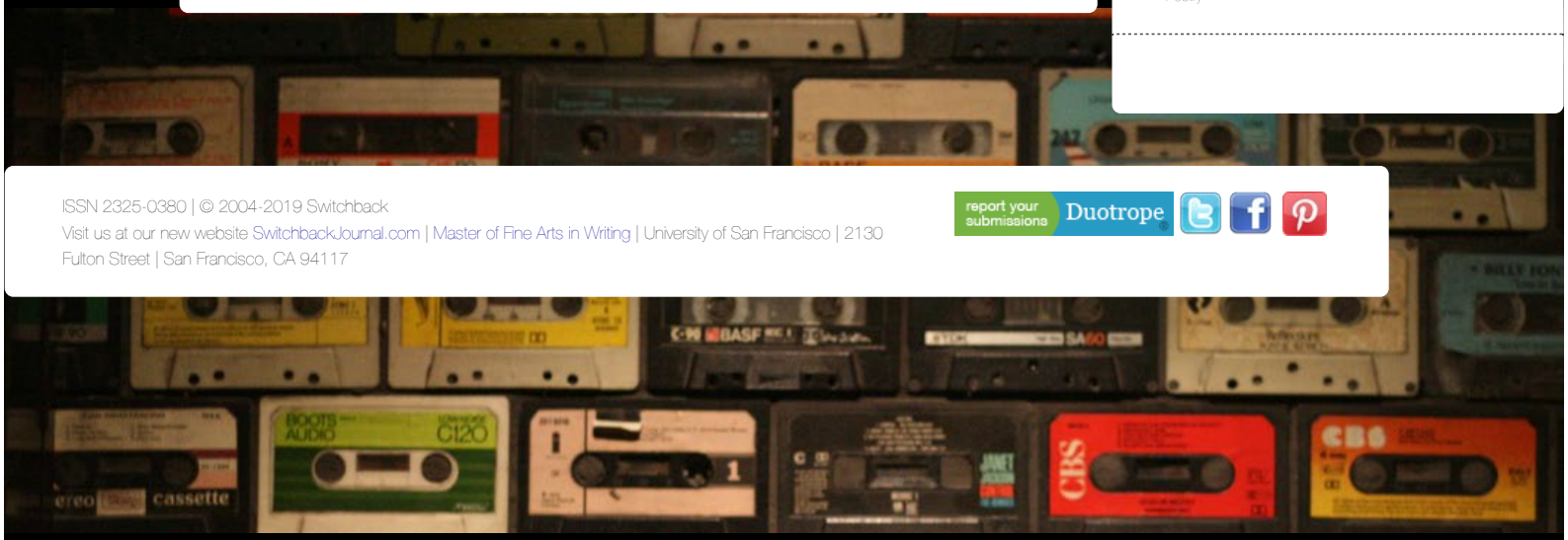
SPF 2016
Poetry



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SPF 2016

Scott Wordsman

Pain and *shame* come out the same
between your teeth

when you are sleeping. On
the beach, an anklet-toting teen

talks herself out of deepening
water. The sand has over-

splayed its welcome, remains
the greatest mess of minced

glass and assuaged ash
this side of sea. I am stepping

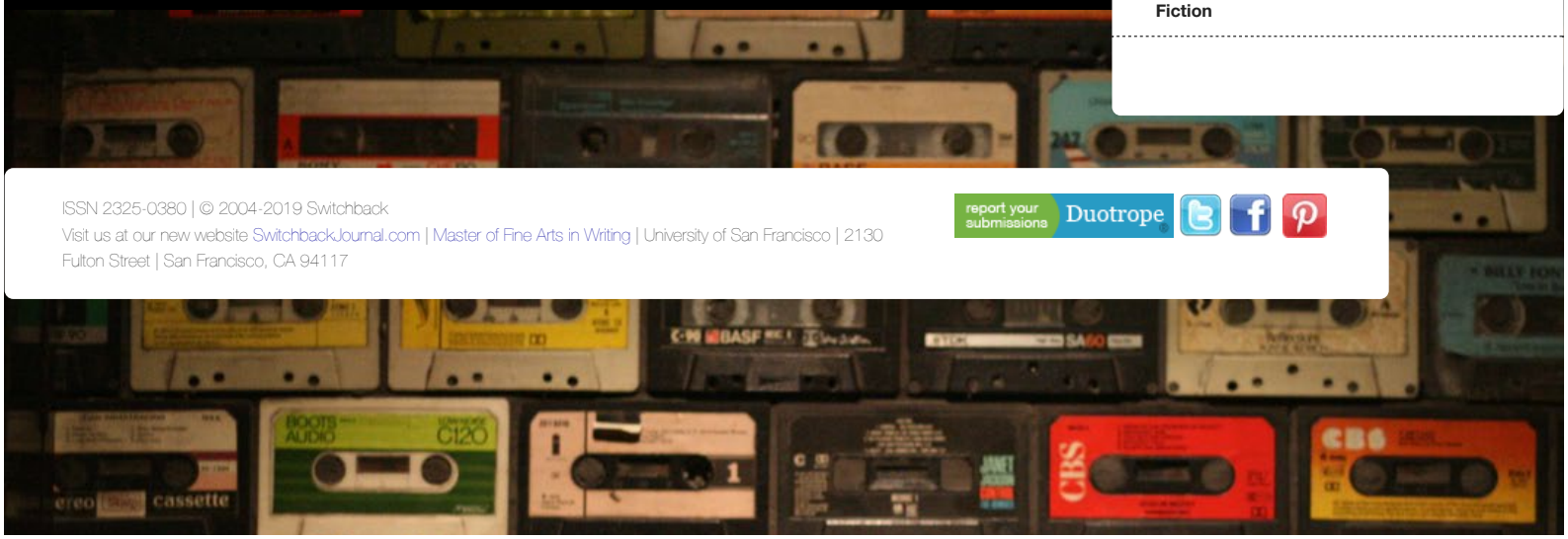
on my fatherÐÐI am dying
for a suntan. Across the pool

of my iris, two blues fight it out.
Does this assert finality?

Tomorrow, my skin will echo
the red of the cyclical stain

youÕve left in the bed.

Fiction



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James Valvis

James Valvis has placed poems or stories in Ploughshares, River Styx, Arts & Letters, Hubbub, Midwestern Gothic, Rattle, Hot Metal Bridge, Cloudbank, The Sun, and many others. His poetry was featured in Verse Daily. His fiction was chosen for Sundress Best of the Net. His work has also been a finalist for the Asimov's Readers' Award. A former US Army soldier, he lives near Seattle.

Contributions to Switchback

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Pity
Poetry

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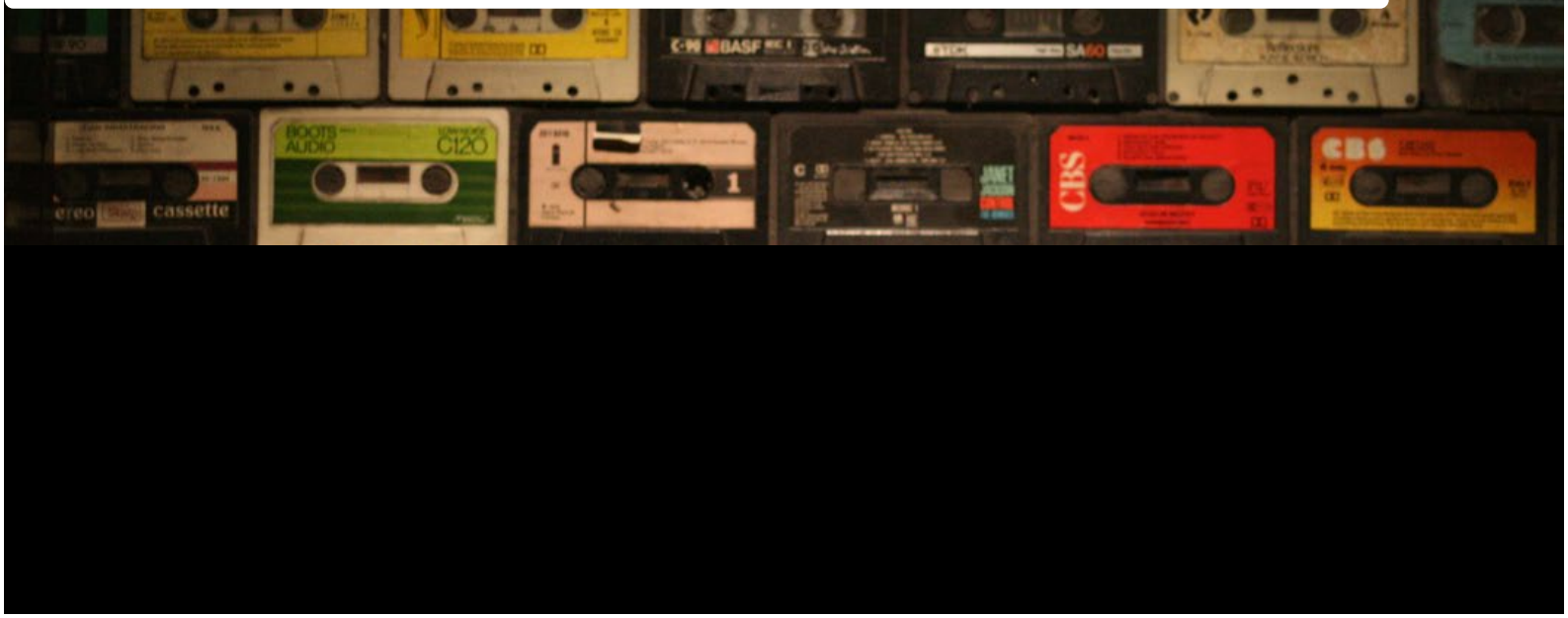
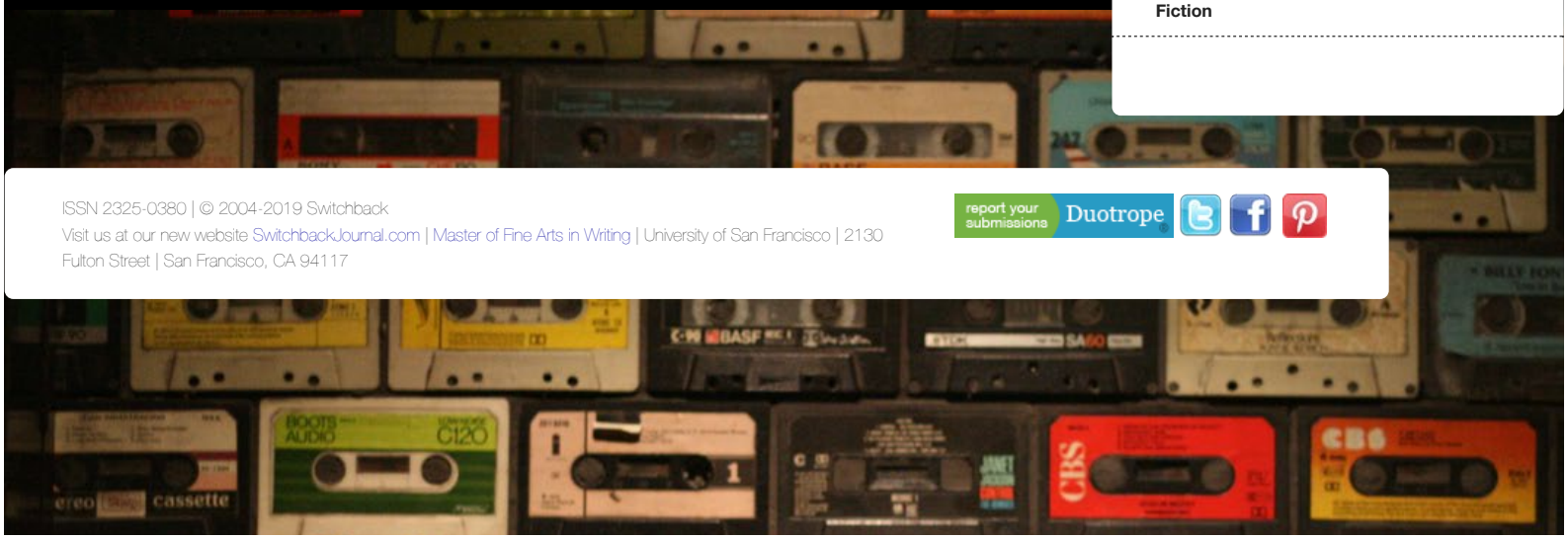


Pity

James Valvis

Drunk, raging, my father
punched me and I fell,
lip busted, head spinning.
All ten years, all five foot
nothing, all one hundred
pounds of me rose again.
And he punched once more.
I stumbled a second time,
sliding against the wall,
smearing it with blood,
dizzy now, seeing three
windows where thereÕd only
ever been one, and he told me
no matter how many times
I got up, heÕd keep hitting me,
so I had better stay down.
But, wobbling, I stood,
and he shook his head.
Let me have it a third time.
I donÕt know how often
I rose to my feet, only
to end up flailing again,
white wall streaked
with lines of red
like an American flag
stripped of all its stars,
but ultimately he gave up
punching and kicked
until I coughed up bile
and could not stand.
This is how it was,
a sad, sad story.
If ever anyone deserved pity,
it was my poor father.

Fiction



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Julia Rox

Julia Rox is a recent graduate from Lipscomb University where she received her BA in English and philosophy. She recently spent a year in NYC teaching at St. Aloysius School as a member of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. She is currently pursuing her MFA in poetry at Eastern Washington University. You can find more of her work through Fractal Magazine, The Dr. T. J. Eckleburg Review, and Phantom Kangaroo.

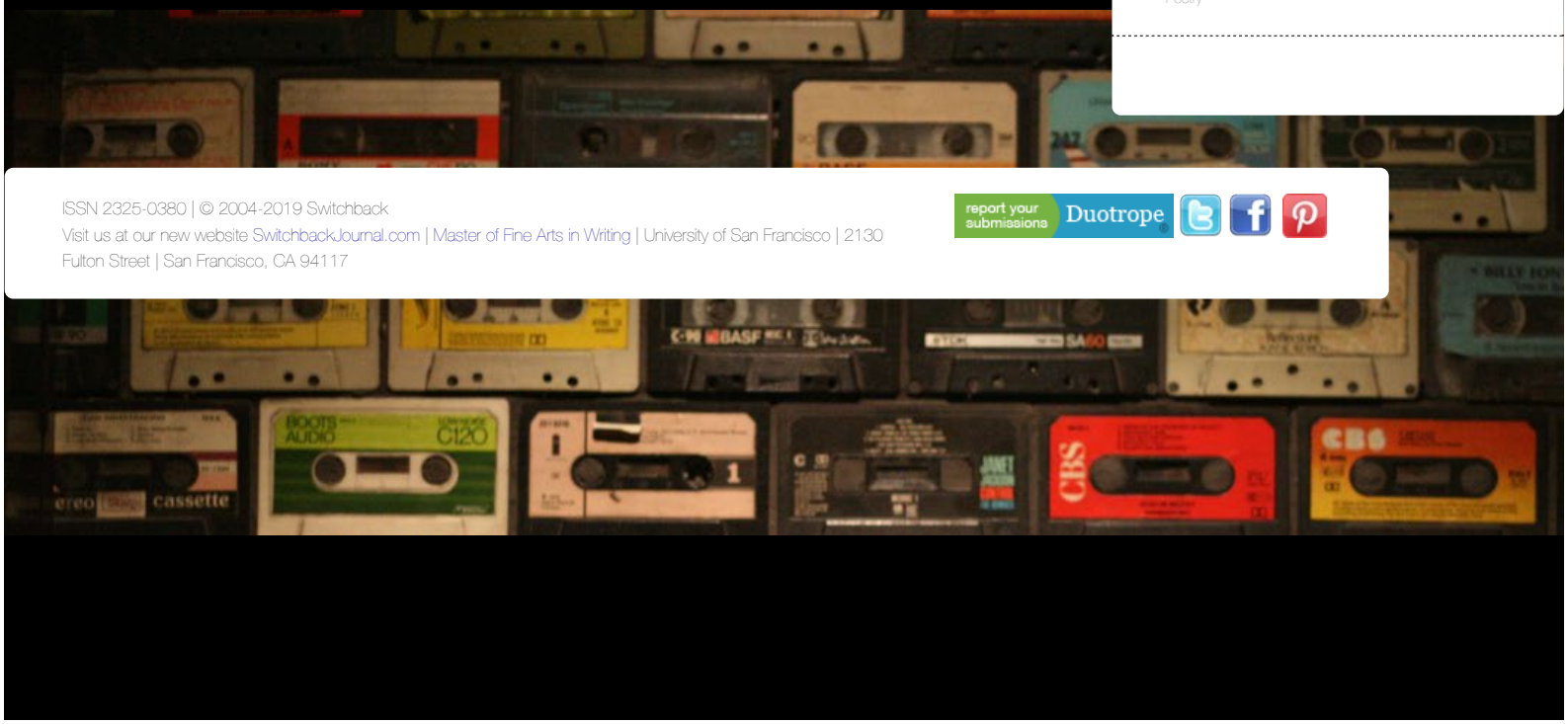
Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

Donating Plasma
Poetry

Craigslist Missed Connections: theseus and the minotaur
Poetry

What Grows After a Forest Fire
Poetry



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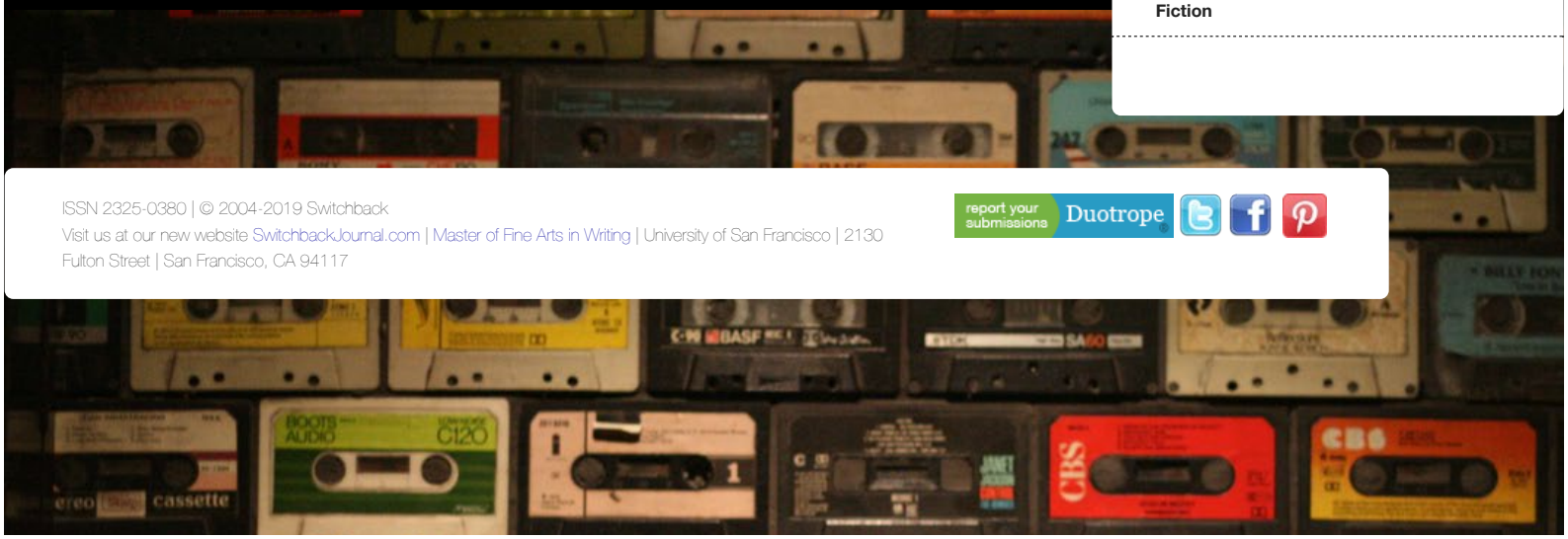
Donating Plasma

Julia Rox

You said once that the blood bank
was the most romantic place
you could meet someone. I always
thought maybe there was something
to that, something true about being
surrounded by the exposed matter
our hearts are made to move.
I actually donÕt know if you said that,
your brother told me you did, and
this is not even the blood bank.
However, it is your blood
I imagine as I watch my blood
move up through the tube into
the machine, and back into my vein
again, my fist pumping in time to
the silent mouths moving in unison
on the TVÕs mounted in rows around the room.
There is a western playing and the cowboy
is talking to the girl in the corseted dress.
They are arguing and they are making up
from the argument and he is kissing her and
they are both making it count this time.
We never argued like that and
we were never that romantic, really,
except once when we lived in New York City,
a man gave us fifty dollars and told us to
do something good with it. We didnÕt tell anyone,
we just each pocketed twenty,
and used the rest to buy sangria for our
roommates, which we drank most of.
Nothing was ever sweeter than our mouthsÑ
blood red, and laughing.

Fiction



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Craigslist Missed Connections: theseus and the minotaur

Julia Rox

I.
Òyou are a minotaur insideÓ
posted 22 hours ago// body: athletic
ÒYou have an inner strength
and beauty that few possessÓ
Was it a beauty you wanted to possess?
Or did it possess you? rendering you
powerless like
Pasiphae, who fell so madly in love with
a beast that she could not
think of anything else.

II.
Posted 3 days ago// age: 28
Òl stripped in your living room on
our first date: I wish I could go back and re
live that moment when I just started taking
my clothes off in front of you. Hope
you remember it fondly, too.Ó
Did she see the birthmark on your thigh
shaped like a closed umbrella?
Did your skin shine like a white
bull, too beautiful to sacrifice?

III.
ÒDown the street. .beautiful....from OregonÓ
Will you go to Daedalus,
looking to get closer
to what you want?
Ò....plz help heal me. ..email me backÓ
Sometimes
if you get too close to the sun
you will fall into the ocean. Sometimes
if you get too close to what you want
you make a monster or
you become a monster,
trapped in a maze, and with all of us,
looking for healing.

IV.
ÒWhere are you, Rebecca? Are you ok? - m4wÓ
Posted 12 hours ago// height: 5Õ4ÕÕ
Are you standing in your kitchen
on a Friday night
where the neighbors smoking on
the fire escape can see you
naked, making tea with your cat?
They ash their cigarettes into empty beer
bottles and they also wonder about you.
So many mazes to get lost in.
So many bottles
lost at sea.

V.
Òl hope you found the right
boots that don't hurt your feetÓ
I hope you know that

I am also a minotaur inside.
I too
have found myself with
no natural source of nourishment and
devoured humans for sustenance.
I too
have followed
my need for human flesh.

VI.
ÒAnd, if nothing else, I really want to know the color
of your eyes as they look into mine.
I bet you a bowl of soup and a
hunk of bread that they're as lovely as I
imagine them to be.Ó
Yes, her eyes are lovely,
her voice is rich and
smooth, and her hands are not soft.
She will ask of you
more than you
are willing to give.

VII.
ÒI saw u on hwy goin to Rathdrum on sunday
On my way to the hairdresser…I realize u called me
On my birthday in May and on Christmas
Does Becky know u r doin this?Ó
w4m//location: united states
Does Becky know? Does
Becky put away the boots that hurt your feet
when you come home? Would she walk to you
from here to Crete to keep you from sacrifice?
when
you send a message in a bottle,
do you think it will ever reach the shore?

VIII.
ÒIt has been difficult.Ó m4w
It has been difficult
to learn how to leave things behind. Even now,
every time I get off the subway I turn around
and make sure IÕm not leaving anything
in the seats.
But we are always leaving something behind
always flying the black sails of death as we go.

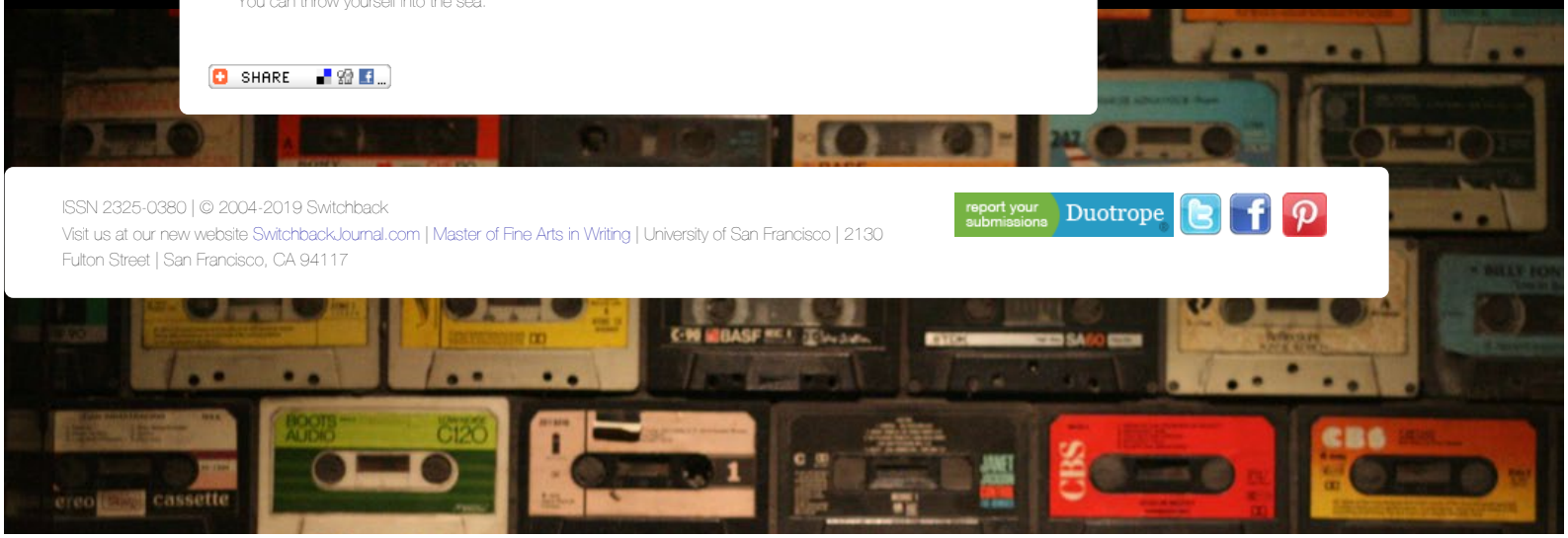
IX.
Posted about 3 hours ago//status: single
Ò15MAY79 - m4w
That's your birthdate. It's funny how love works.
It's been well over five years since we've communicated,
yet you still pop into my head from time to time.Ó
I hope you know that
you are still a minotaur inside. I hope
you walk a thousand miles
with a thousand miles of yarn,
trailing behind you.

X.
Posted 9 hours ago//body type: slim
ÒTell me what kinda car you were driving.Ó
Tell me where I left my trail of yarn,
what color it was, and what material.

XI.
You have fallen asleep.
ÒI knew then that I had fallen.
You were not ready, so I stayed,
But peace is coming, believing that you are
waiting for the right time to return to meÓ
I want to return
but the yarn has all unraveled,
and I am on my way home

without you.

XII.
Sometimes we forget to fly
the white flag ahead of us
ÒSame place we met last week.
*I'll keep checking for you*Óm4m//location: park
You can keep checking, but
there will not be a sign.
You can keep checking.
You can throw yourself into the sea.



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Lana Austin

Lana Austin was a finalist for the 2015 James Wright Poetry Award. Her work has recently been featured in or is forthcoming from *Mid-American Review*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, *Southern Women's Review*, among others. Her first poetry chapbook, *In Search of the Wild Dulcimer*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. Austin has received multiple poetry awards & scholarships from Hollins University, The University of Mary Washington & American University & has an MFA from George Mason University. Born & raised in Kentucky, she has lived in England & Italy but currently resides in Alabama with her husband & three children. An adjunct writing instructor, she teaches multiple writing courses & is about to begin directing the first Opera In the Schools program in Huntsville in 2016, culminating in original operas being written & performed by area students.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

Naming What Isn't
Poetry

Greasy
Poetry

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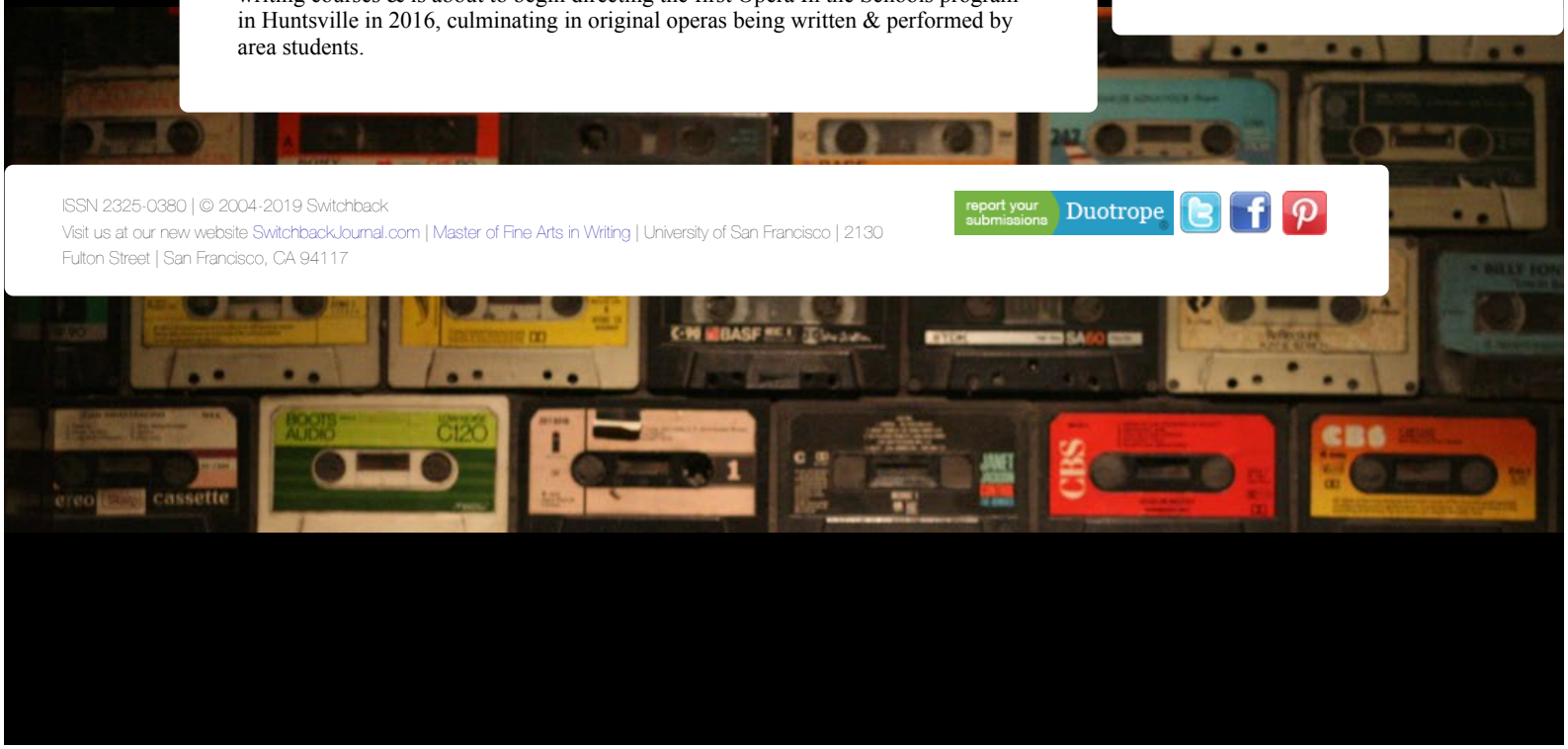


Naming What Isn't

Lana Austin

What has flown away?
Is it a quick moment of air,
once thin and crisp,

the hummingbird beats
into nothing
with his rapid wings?

Or is it something
languid, to vanish
so slowly you are

never aware
of its slipping,
mountains eroding

over thousands of years?
Or is it something,
just as my grandmother

said, not to be spoken
of ever againÑ
the worldÕs unwording,

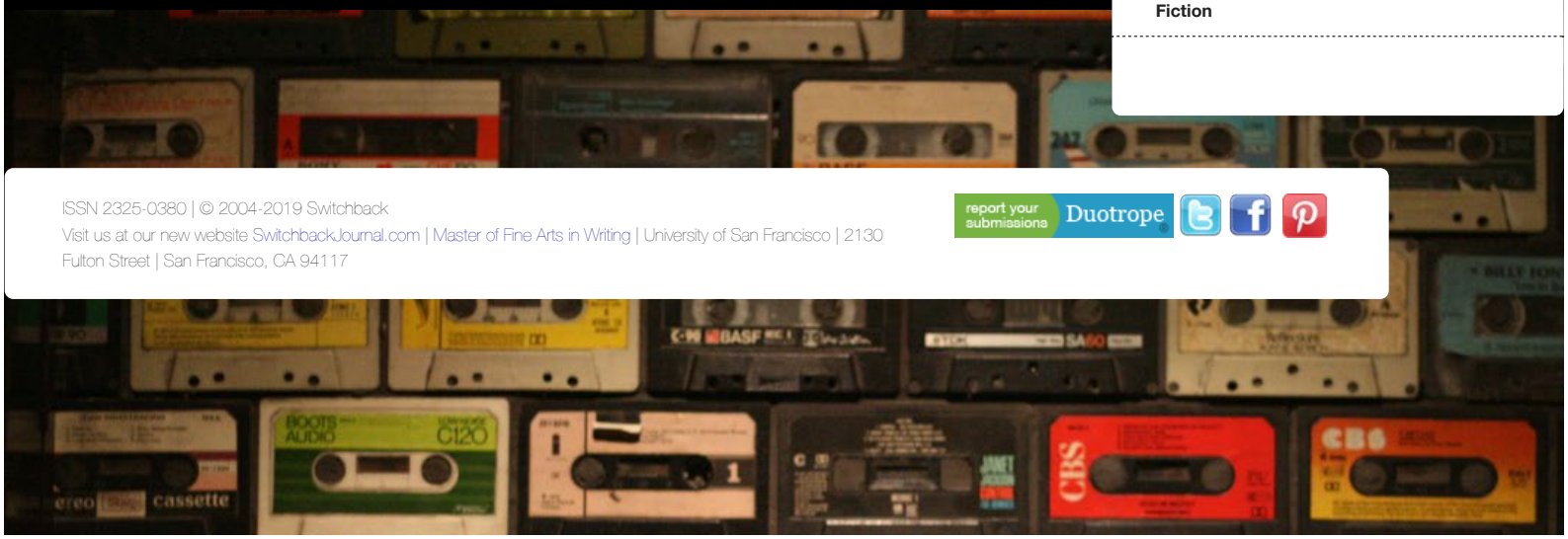
lost beyond timeÕs
finger-flexing.

This paradox
is everything which isnÕt,
like when I die

and someone performs
an autopsy theyÕll find
nothing unknown to them,

yet something missing. There
they bear witness to a hymn,
a hallowed center.

Fiction



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Jennifer Matteson

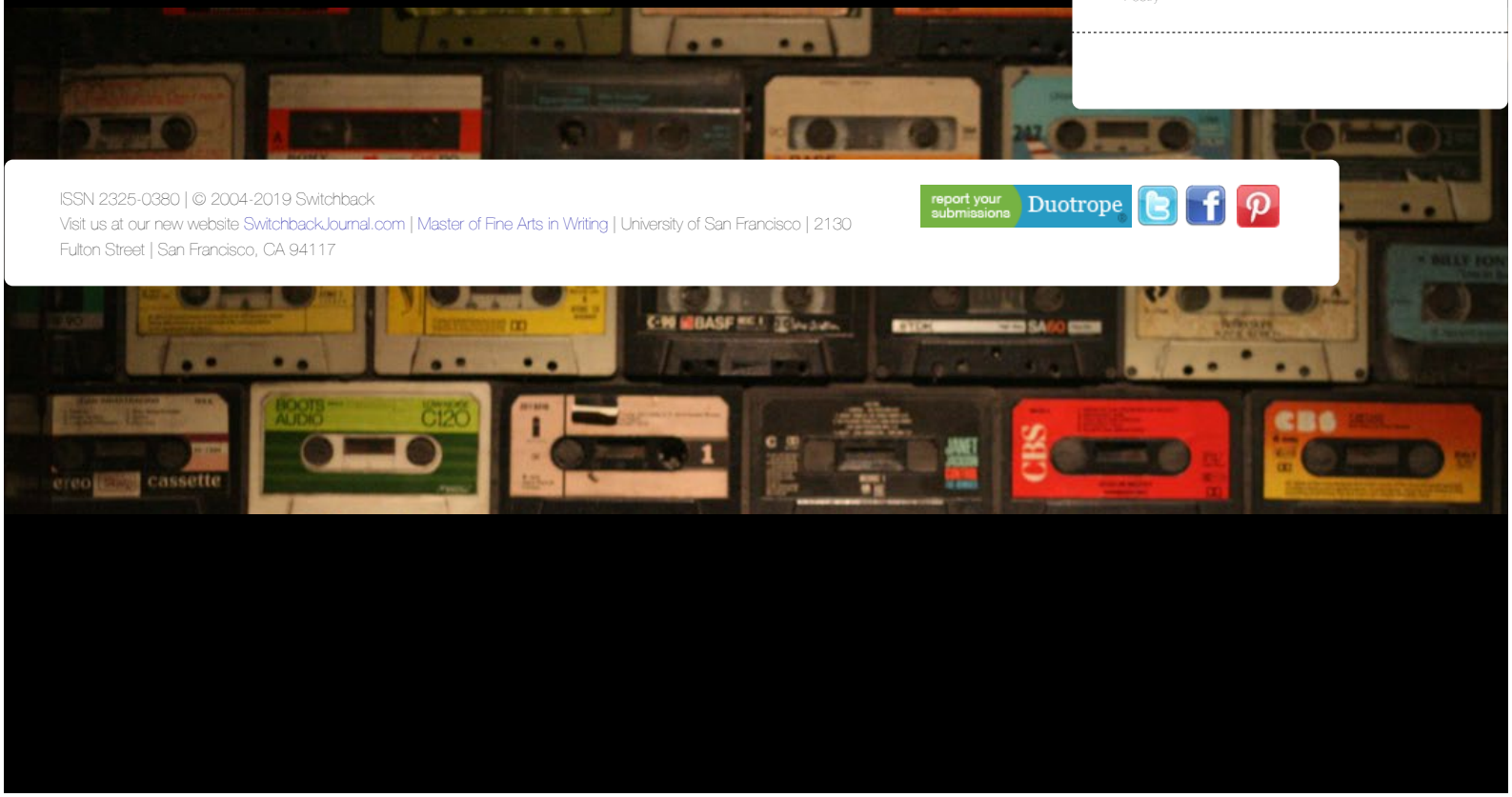
Jennifer Matteson has an MFA in Creative Writing from Fresno State. Her work has been publish in Tar River Poetry, Third Wednesday, and The Doll Collection anthology (Terrapin Books). She lives in Fresno, California, and teaches writing at Fresno City College.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

Respiration Chorus
Poetry

Time-Lapse
Poetry



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Respiration Chorus

Jennifer Matteson

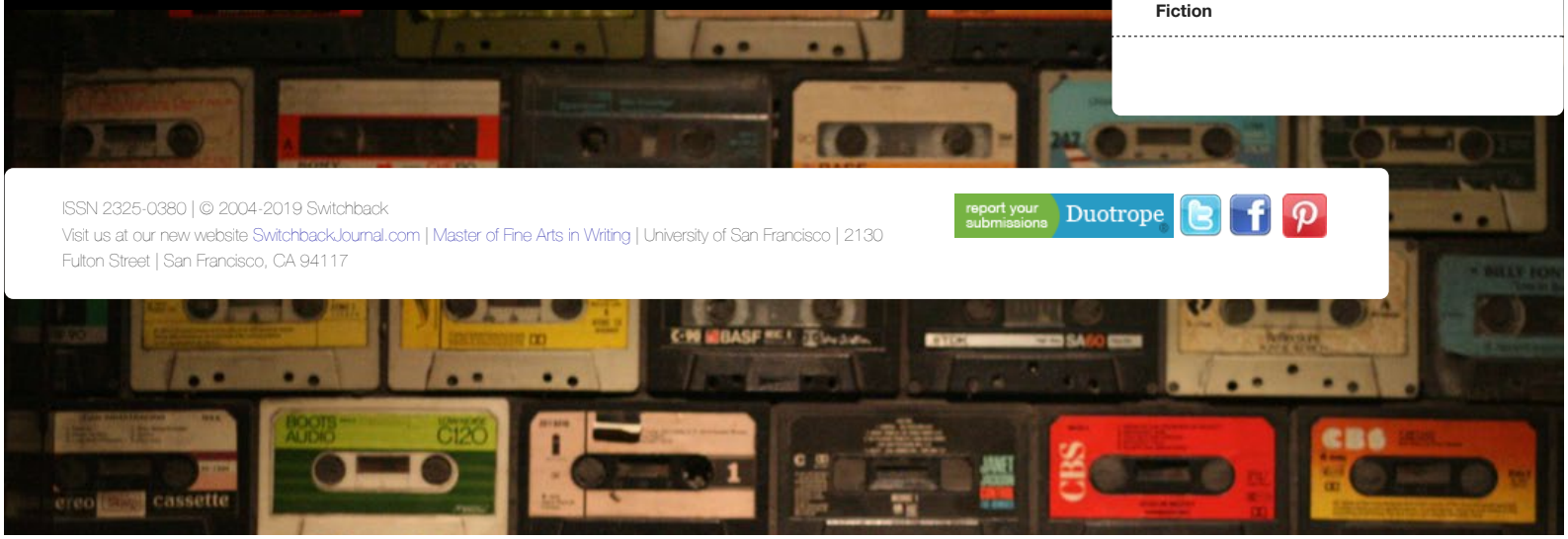
The sky above Fresno merges with the sky
above Charleston, Salzburg, Arad,
and other places I have gazed upward into clouds
blown in from across the globe and outward again.

Drafts creep in from places like Los Angeles,
Prague, and Puerto Vallarta bringing with themÑ
sometimes rain, sometimes flocks of geese,
sometimes large gray sheets of shadows. How far

the words I exhale will travel skyward
before they are taken into another bodyÑ
a young woman singing songs in morning traffic,
a boy yelling at his dad from across the lawn.

Some nights, it is possible I inhale the breath
of lovers, not my own, that have slipped in
around doorways from other beds. Somewhere,
a newborn fills his chest with the last gasp

of an old woman alone in her blankets. What you speak
also pushes up and weaves with what floats in
from Melbourne and Havana, Tokyo and Pine Ridge,
and joins in the harmony of our ancient breath.



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No There

Juleen Eun Sun Johnson

There is no there,
There in Fresno.

Just fallen sheep dogs
and farm land that has since buckled under
tract homes.

The moon floats in water sky
surface, pale-silver,

stars as tadpoles
in August when the children
swim with plastic buckets, mouths open ready.

There is no there,
there in Fresno,

The Tower District
escape the ordinary.

Street light signifiers
cocaine killed Ross in May
I make the journey through Pacheco Pass,
from Monterey in a Toyota Celica GT-S. I only cried a little.

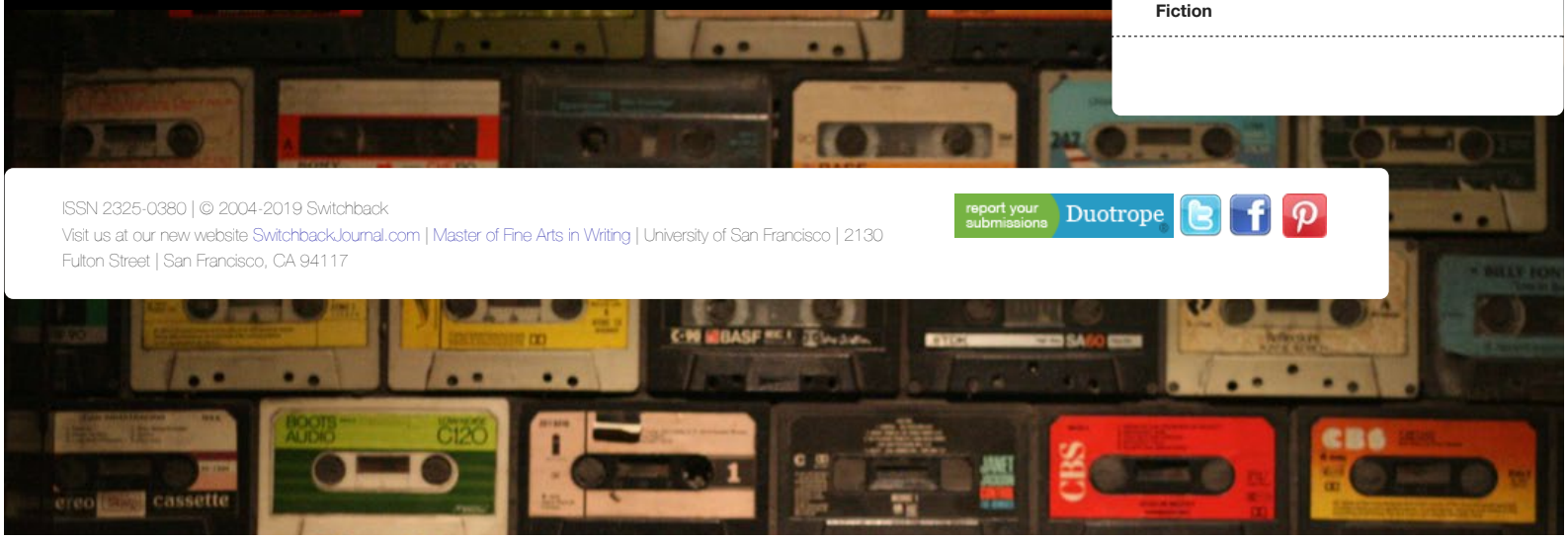
The fog came down across the car,
as we sank deep into the valleyÕs stale air. Once you
are there, there is no coming up for air. The gray suffocates.

There is no there,
there in Fresno,

2001 Blackstone Ave.
bullets came from blackened windows
body bags lined the streets.
The first body I saw
I was driving a truck to the Fresno Fair.
I didnÕt have my license.

A cop covers
the body with white tapestry.
A Turkey Vulture ghostly above the scene.

Fiction



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Matthew Travieso Williams

Matthew Travieso Williams is a Sacramento native currently serving with Peace Corps as a TEFL Instructor in Mongolia. His work has appeared in local Sacramento publicationsÑ*PoetryNOW, MedusaÕs Kitchen,* and*Calaveras Station*Ñas well as *Collective Fallout*. When not writing or reading, he enjoys pretending that he can play musical instruments and singing so loudly that annoyed neighbors bang on the walls.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

Stray
Poetry

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Stray

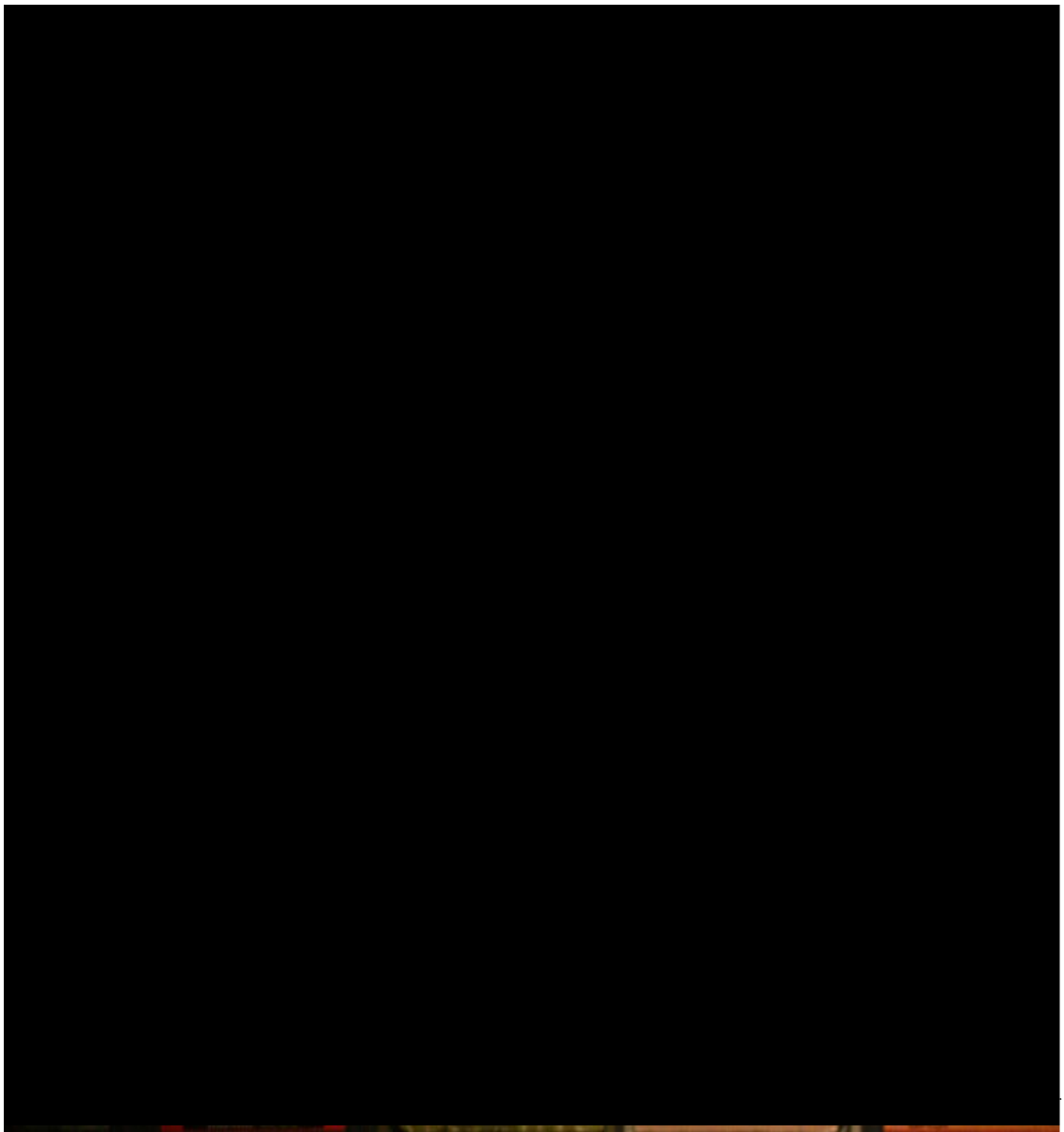
Matthew Travieso Williams

Fall recalled the heat of summer,
the stroke of sun fell heavy as a Pst.
Walked the path behind the kept hedges.
In the chain-link, a hole was rent
to permit a man on hands and knees.

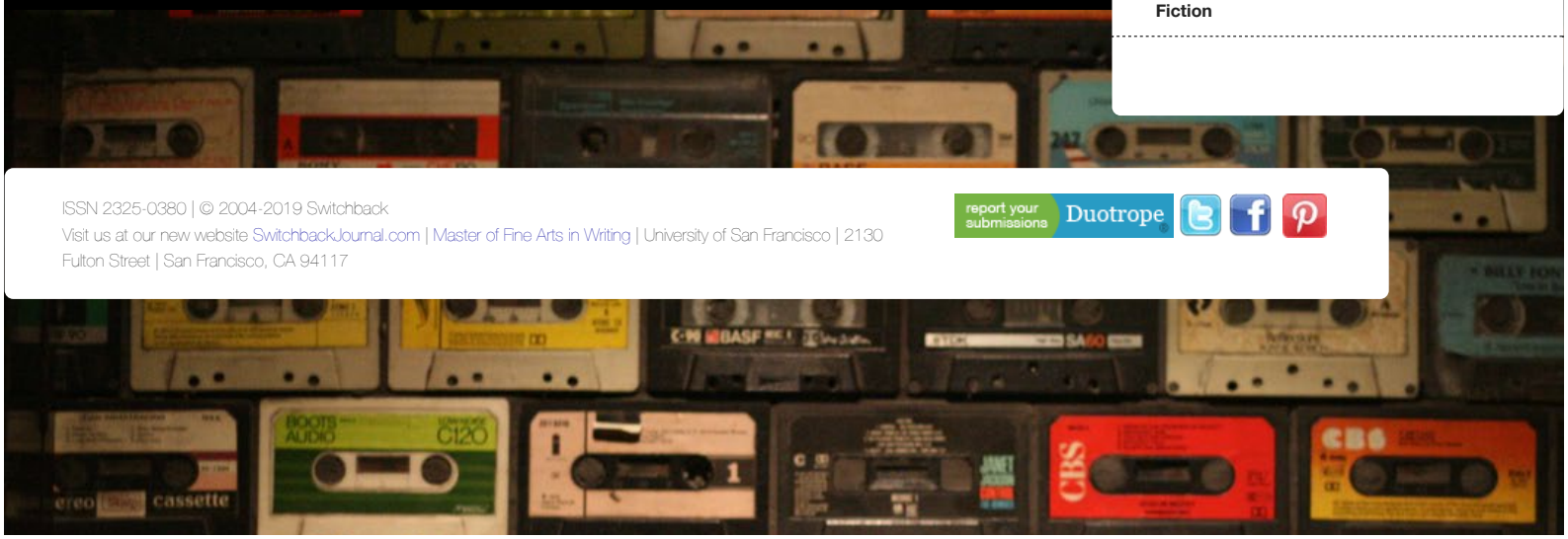
Read your message again:
My wifeÕs in Monterey. Meet me in the Peld
behind the park. IÕll take you for dinner.

Tender-palmed, crawled through bur clover
into Plaree, wild radish, wild oats, and foxtail. All gold
and one incendiary touch from ash.
Hugged the fence and met strangersÕ backyards:
a sterile pool become fecund with a scum of fallen leaves.
a girl leaping from a swing set, her parachuted skirt.
a busy cloud of ßies attending the unclaimed
fruit broken beneath an apple tree.

A few branches arced over the fence.
I stole into the bank of shade.



Fiction



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Larry Narron

Larry Narron's poems have appeared previously in *Switchback*, *Phoebe*, *The Brooklyn Review*, *Permafrost*, *Whiskey Island*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *The Boiler*, and other journals. They've been nominated for *Best of the Net* and *Best New Poets*. Originally from San Diego County, Larry currently lives in northern Michigan, where he serves as a literacy coach for elementary school students via AmeriCorps. He is the nonfiction editor of *Dunes Review*.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

Metropolitan Diary
Poetry

The Tomorrow of Slot Machines
Poetry

Issue 2018: Winter Playlist

Winter Formal
Poetry

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Metropolitan Diary

Larry Narron

In this city where shoplifters
stand watch over bootleg
bazaars, pickpockets navigate
rivers of neon that warp

whatÕs seen at eye level
by the crowds as we ooze
in flows that scrape against
one another. What silent

episodes passed in the weeks
that went by without entries?
False prophecy of weathermen.
Sketches of a flip book

moon under my thumb,
its cold white rind peeled back
to reveal black fruit, bitter
night, yet young, not yet ripe.

Issue 2016
Relaunch Celebration

<Previous Work Next Work >

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Larry Narron

Winter Stand
Juleen Eun Sun Johnson

From: Moss
Michael Rerick

Gifts
Kym Cunningham

The TownÕs Patron Saint Asks
Katie Hibner

Endurance in Yielding
Courtney Druz

Soft Subjects
Lillian Brown

"Boys named Josh are trouble"
Kym Cunningham

SPF 2016
Scott Wordsman

Pity
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Donating Plasma
Julia Rox

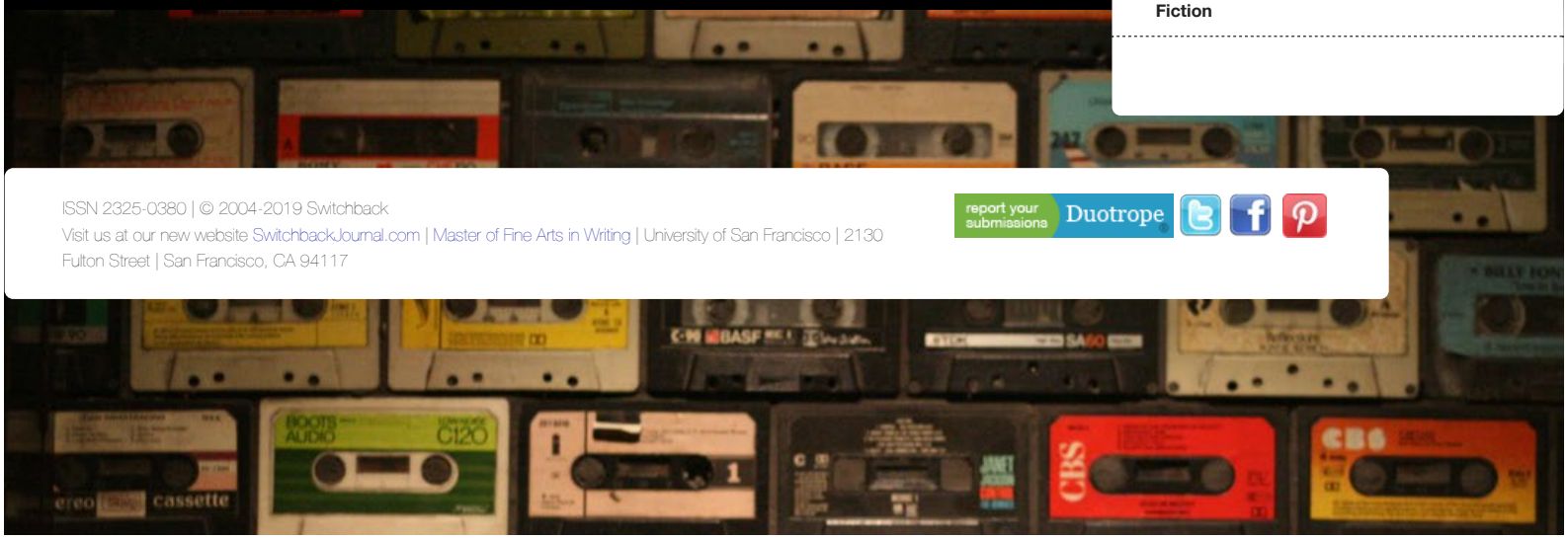
Craigslist Missed Connections: theseus and the minotaur
Julia Rox

Naming What Isn't
Lana Austin

Respiration Chorus
Jennifer Matteson

No There
Juleen Eun Sun Johnson

Fiction



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Cheryl A. Ossola

Cheryl A. Ossola is senior editor *at Dance Studio Life,* a writer for San Francisco Ballet, a member of the San Francisco Writers' Grotto, and a former associate editor at *Dance Magazine*. She's working on a novel and a poetry collection, plotting a middle-grade book, and regarding her reading list with despair. She holds an MFA in writing from the University of San Francisco—in longform fiction, not poetry, but as USF instructor Lewis Buzbee likes to say, novels and poetry have much in common. Visit her at cherylaossola.com.

Contributions to Switchback

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Fishing
Poetry

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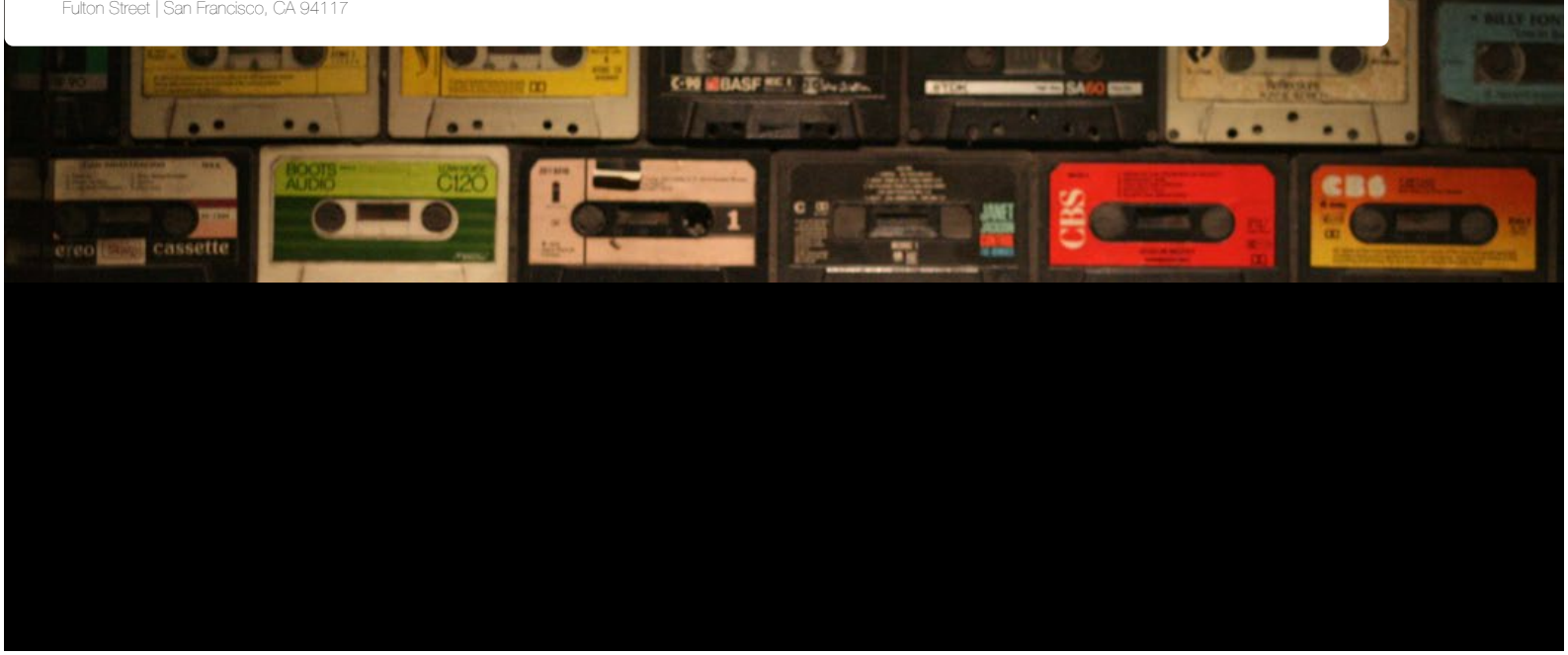


Fishing

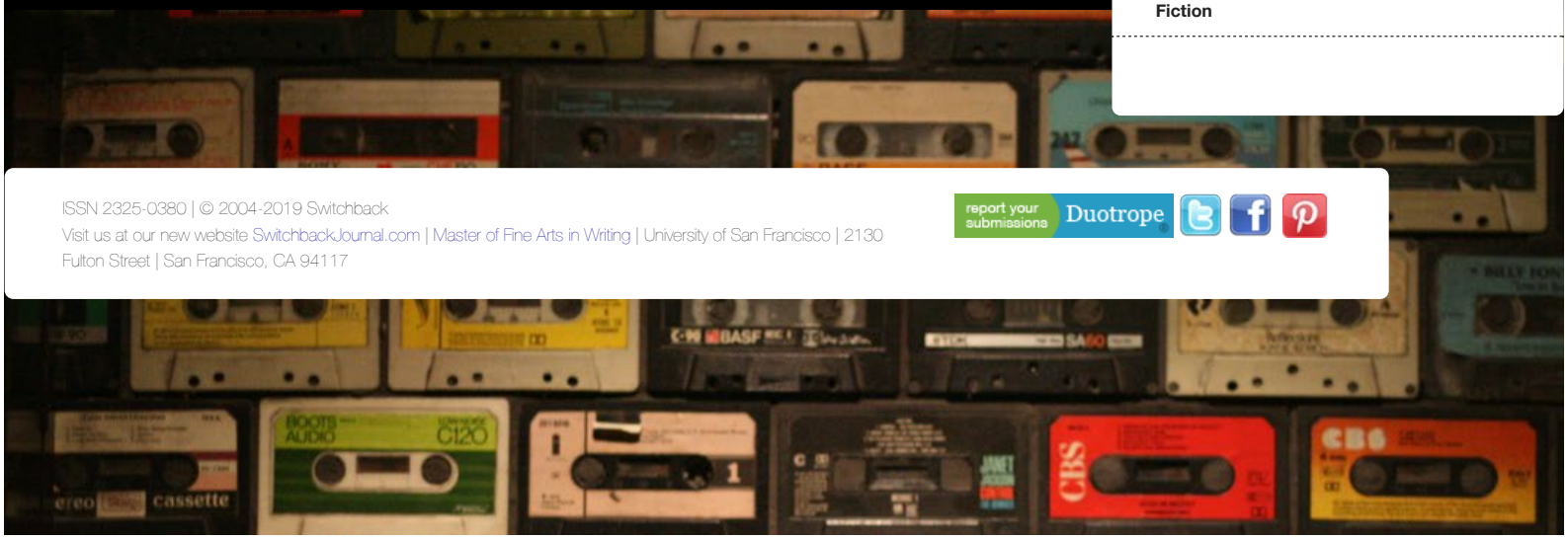
Cheryl A. Ossola

Coiled on your plate,
a harlequinned ring of
beheaded, de-bodied flesh,
hamachi-kama,
adorned with tiny twin wings
of spiny skin,
ruffled fans, as if flight still
were possible.

You dissect it, this
filigreed semi-serpent, feather
through neck muscle to find
the most delicate part,
a tender sliver
walled off by membrane.
Your chopsticks reach
for my mouth.

I take the warm white tangle
with my teeth and tongue,
let you feed me intimacy,
memories.
You must know
what you do
because
when you see me smile
you do it again.

Fiction



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Jessica Lakritz

Jessica Lakritz lives in Barcelona, Spain. She is a writer. She has just begun working on a new project called Sex on Sundaze, where she writes her poetry on skin, one each week, posted on Sunday, inspired by the energy each person has transmitted to her: www.sexonsundaze.com.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

Tangerine Bones
Poetry

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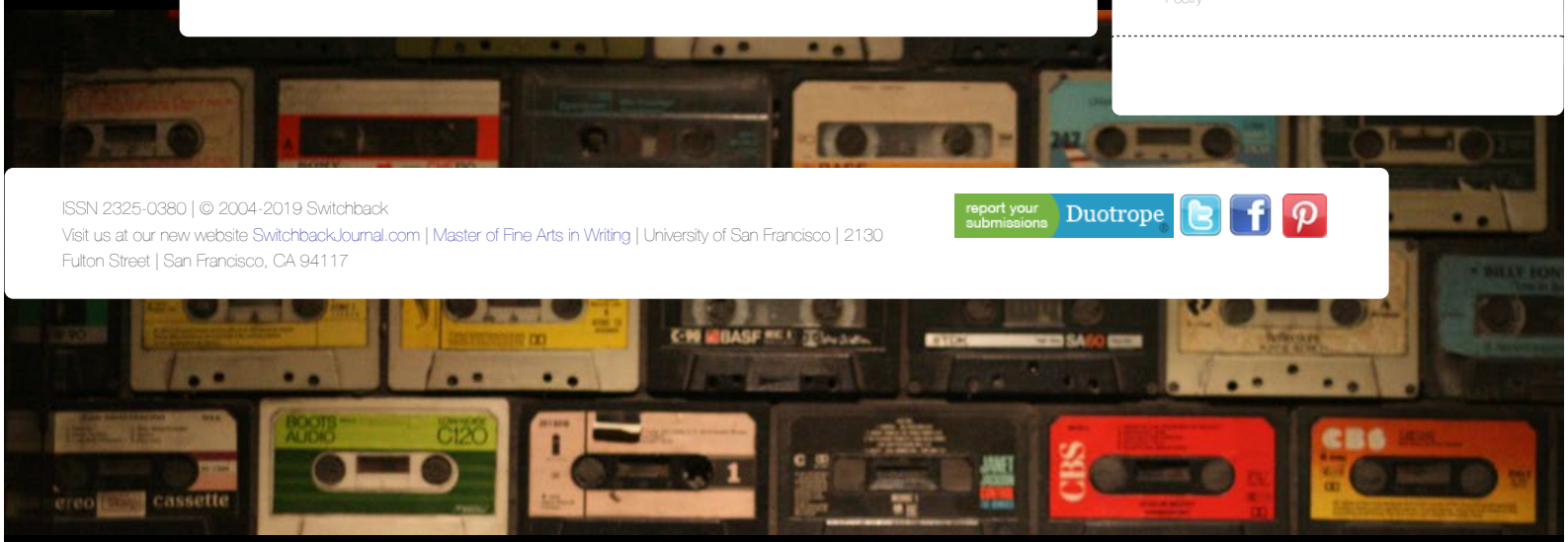


Tangerine Bones

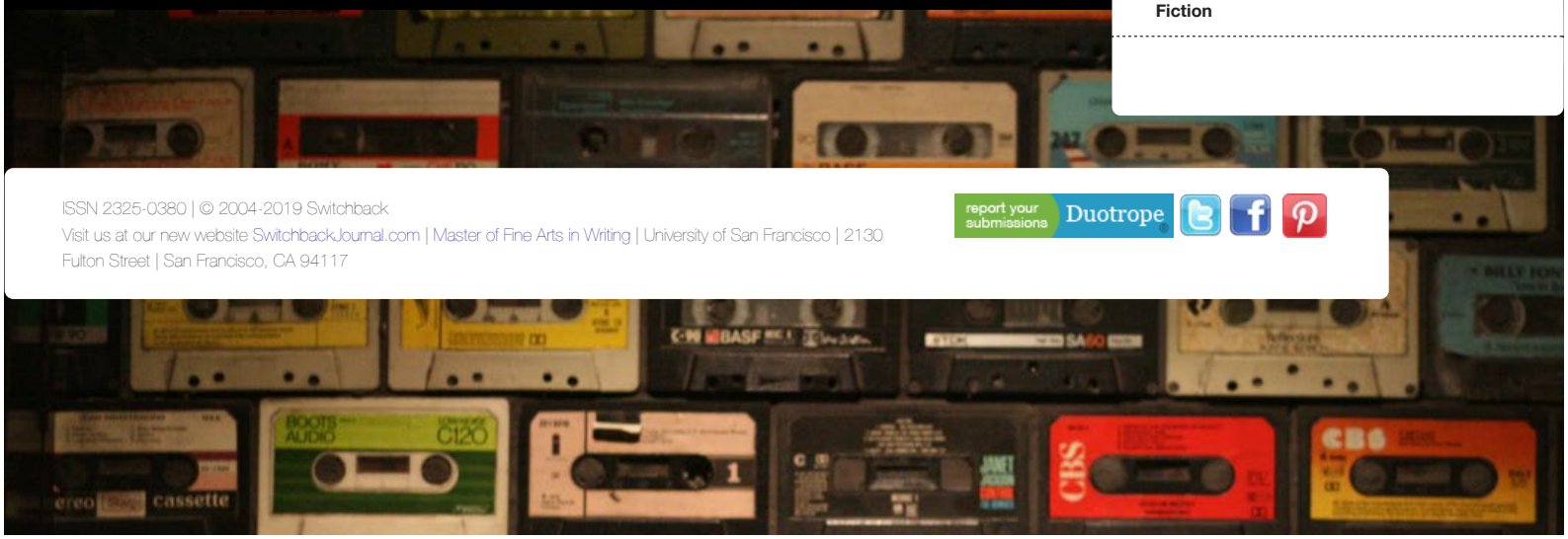
Jessica Lakritz

The fruit is sweet and alive. You spend
your whole life wanting it
to mean something, and the fastest way
to discard the bones is to burn them.
I took a picture of a purple house, I took a picture
of a white line across a pale blue sky, I took
a train to the place where I would bury
my bones, I took the last flight out of Atlanta
for the night without knowing
the destination. Your whole life,

it means something
while youÕre living it,
isnÕt that enough? I played a song,
pressed my fingers to the cold keys, I felt it go
through to the other side. I took a picture in the sky
of my mind as I flew across the Atlantic
and saw my white line draw itself into the
Eastern morning. Ashes to ashes, bones to ashes,
tangerine bones to tangerine trees, I figured it out.

In Spanish, fruit seeds are called *huesos*, or bones,
thatÕs why he called them tangerine bones.
Now I want to make love in a forest
the air sharp-full of pine and dogwood (you know
they always told me about the curious way
that dogwood smells like semen).
It all factors in, somehow, the accumulation
of each bit of one thing into something else.
HeÕll pull out
to plant seeds
into the earth, and
it will mean something to me.

Fiction



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Gonzalinho da Costa

Gonzalinho da CostaÑa pen nameÑteaches at the Ateneo Graduate School of Business, Makati City, Philippines. He is a management research and communication consultant. A lover of world literature, he has completed three humanities degrees and writes poetry as a hobby.

Contributions to Switchback

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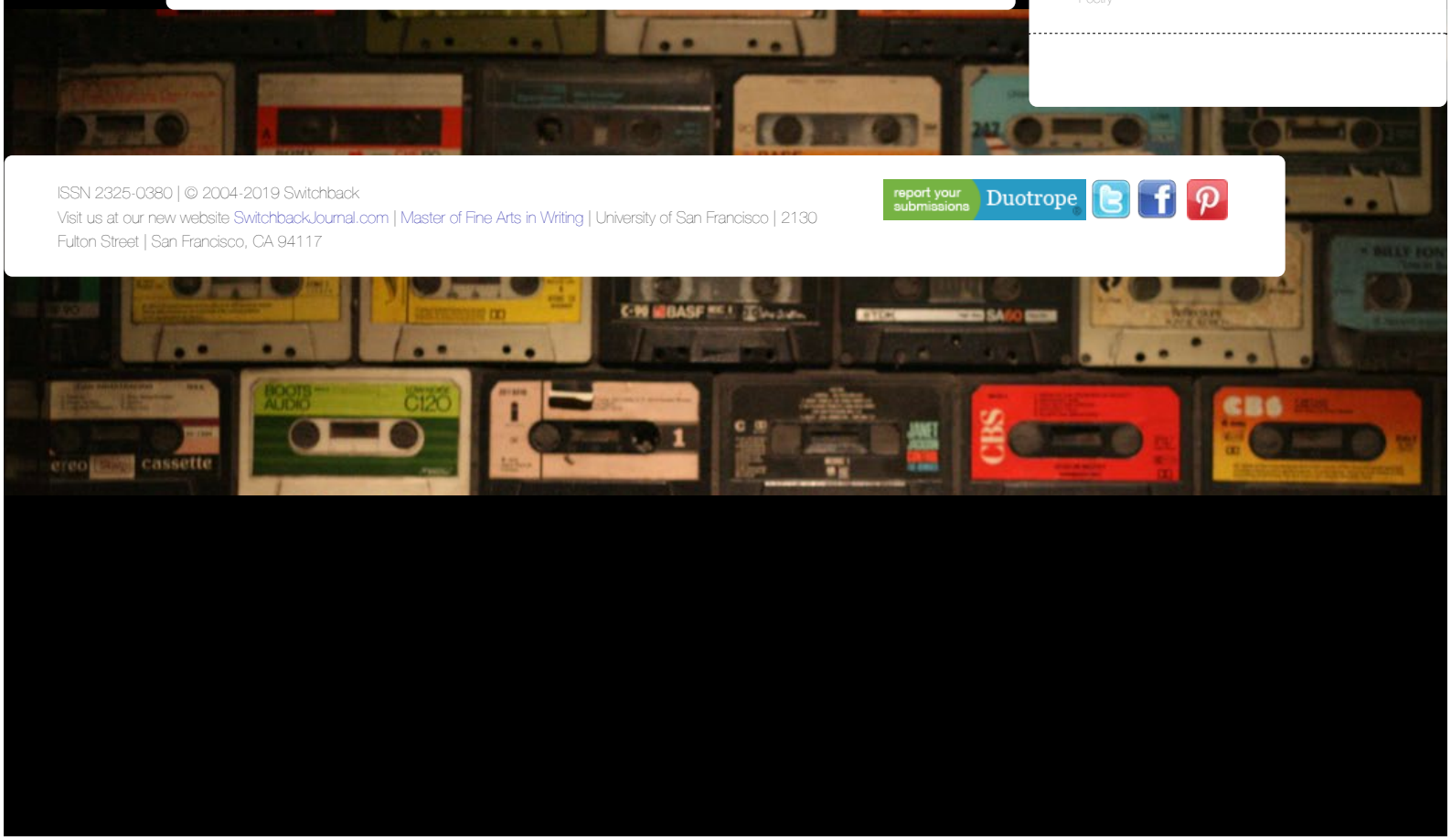
Documentary
Poetry



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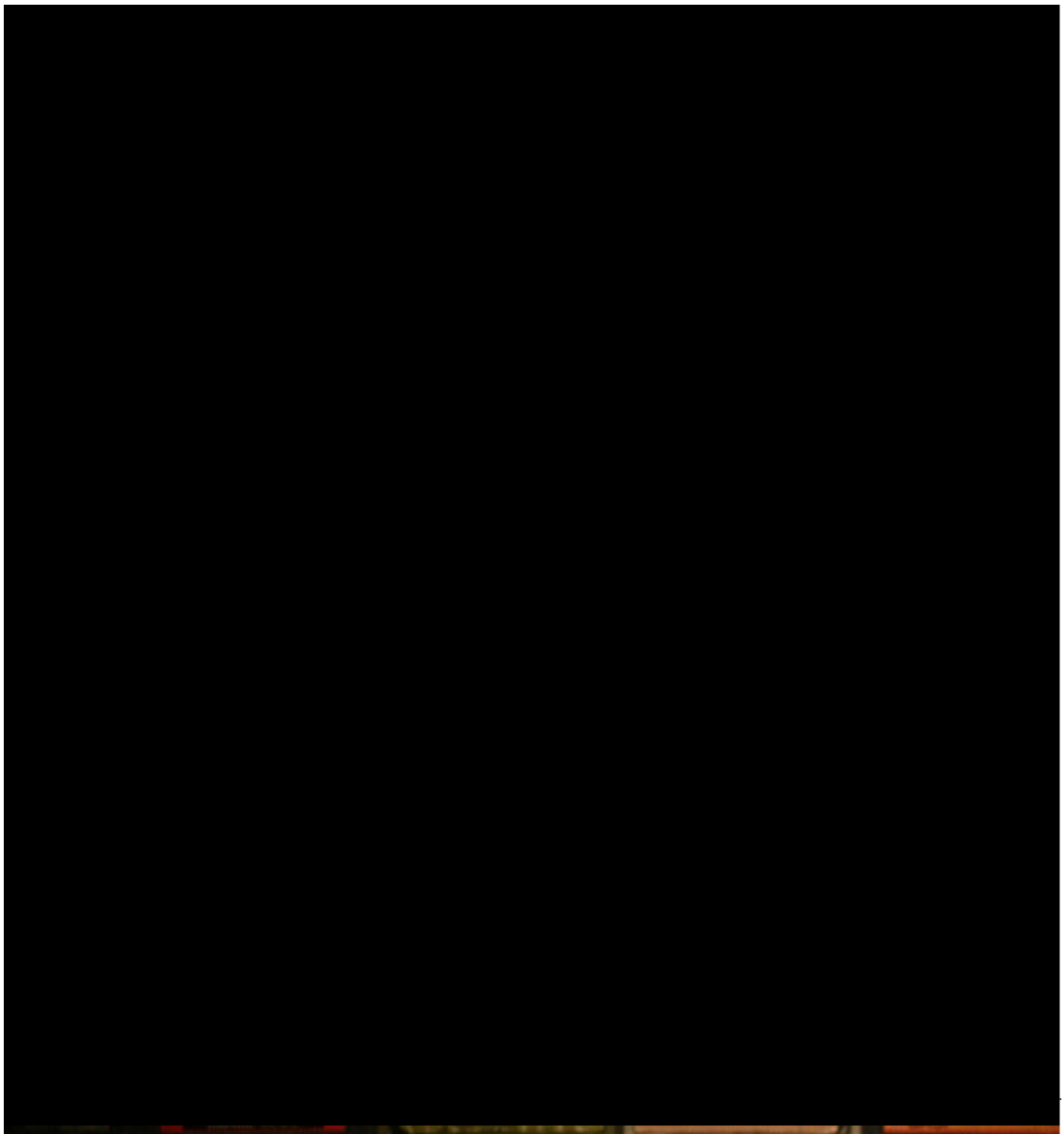
Documentary

Gonzalinho da Costa

Snake swallows frog.
Marten bites snake.
Snake coughs up frog.
Snake wriggles free.
Frog swims away.
Frog snares dragonfly.
Frog swallows dragonfly.
Snake goes hungry.
Marten goes hungry.
Frog is gratified.



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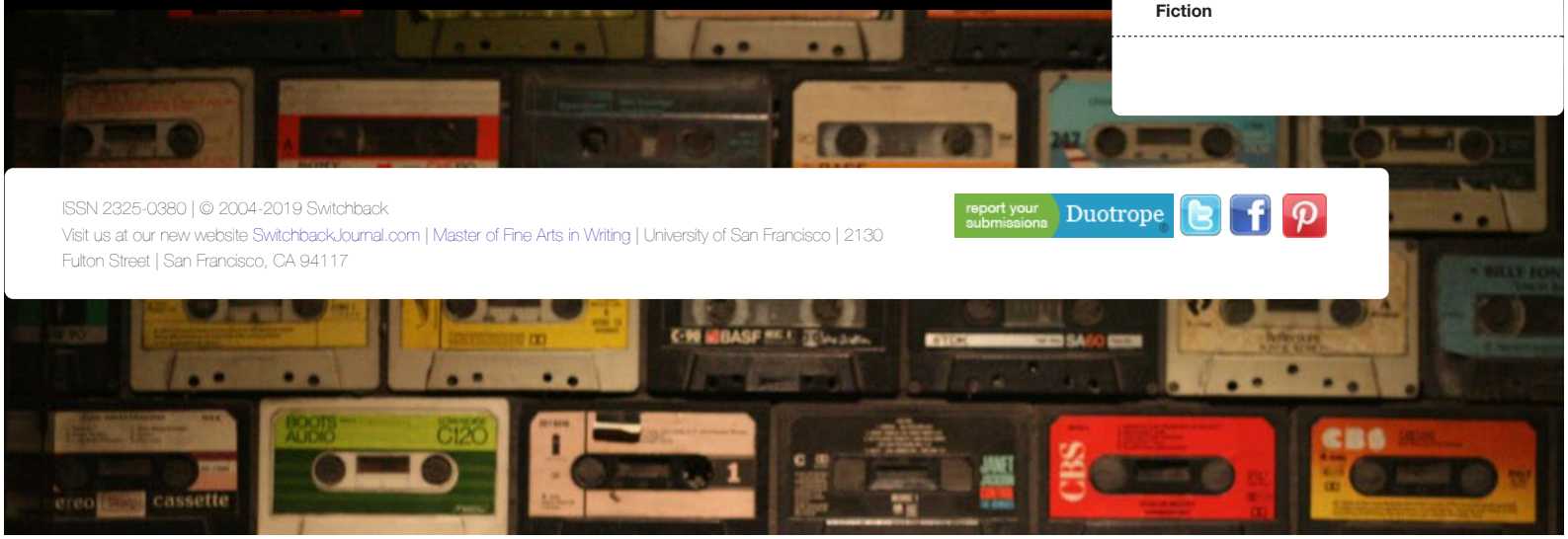

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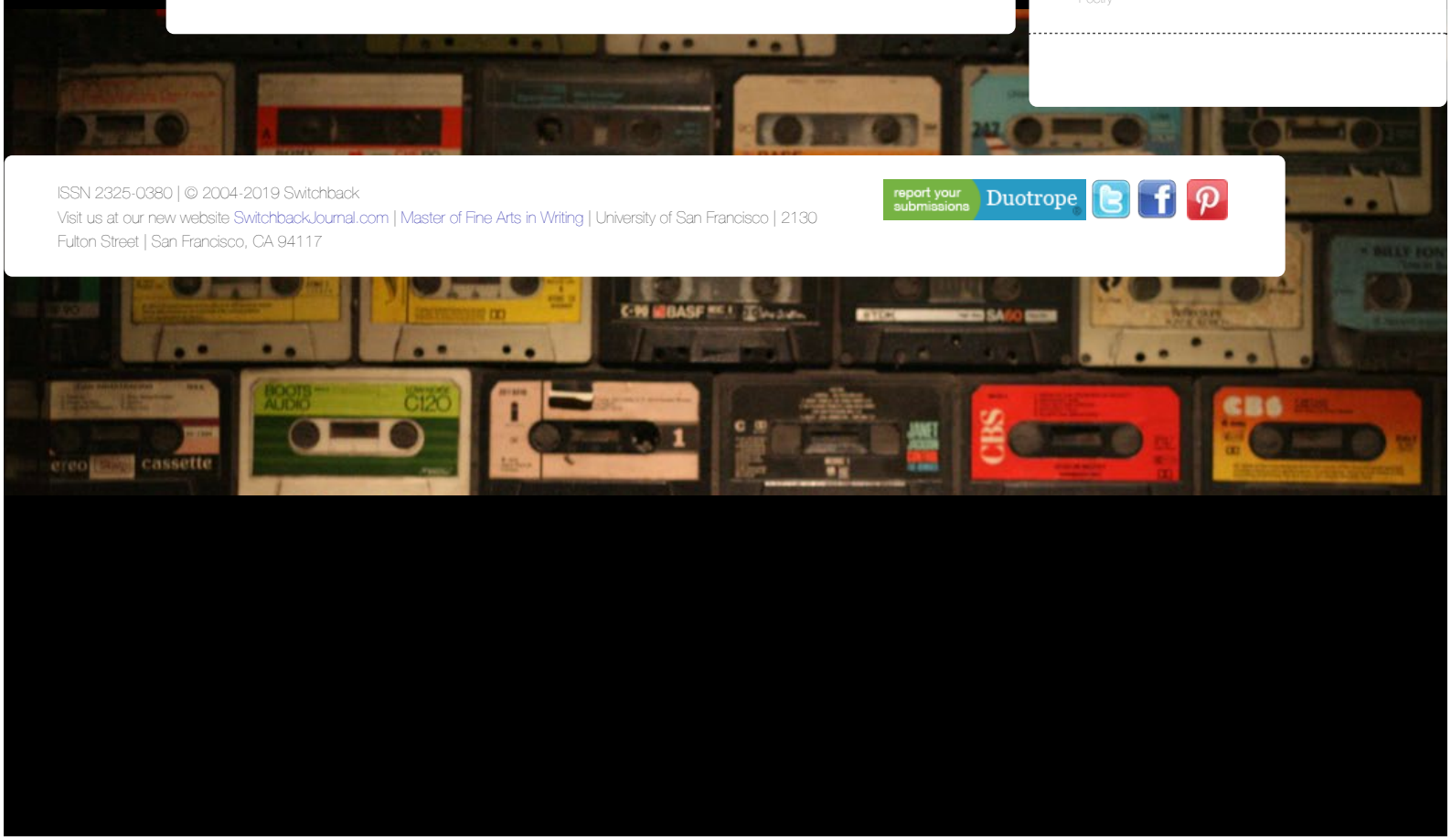
K.R. Morrison

K.R. Morrison teaches English Literature and Creative Writing to high school students in San Francisco, Ca. Writing for many years, she now reads her work at poetry events in the Bay Area. SheÕs currently working on a poetry collection
entitled, From Her Wrist.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

When in Mexico
Poetry



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When in Mexico

K.R. Morrison

When he speaks

Diego murals
summon an altar of lips
she basements inside bruised ears

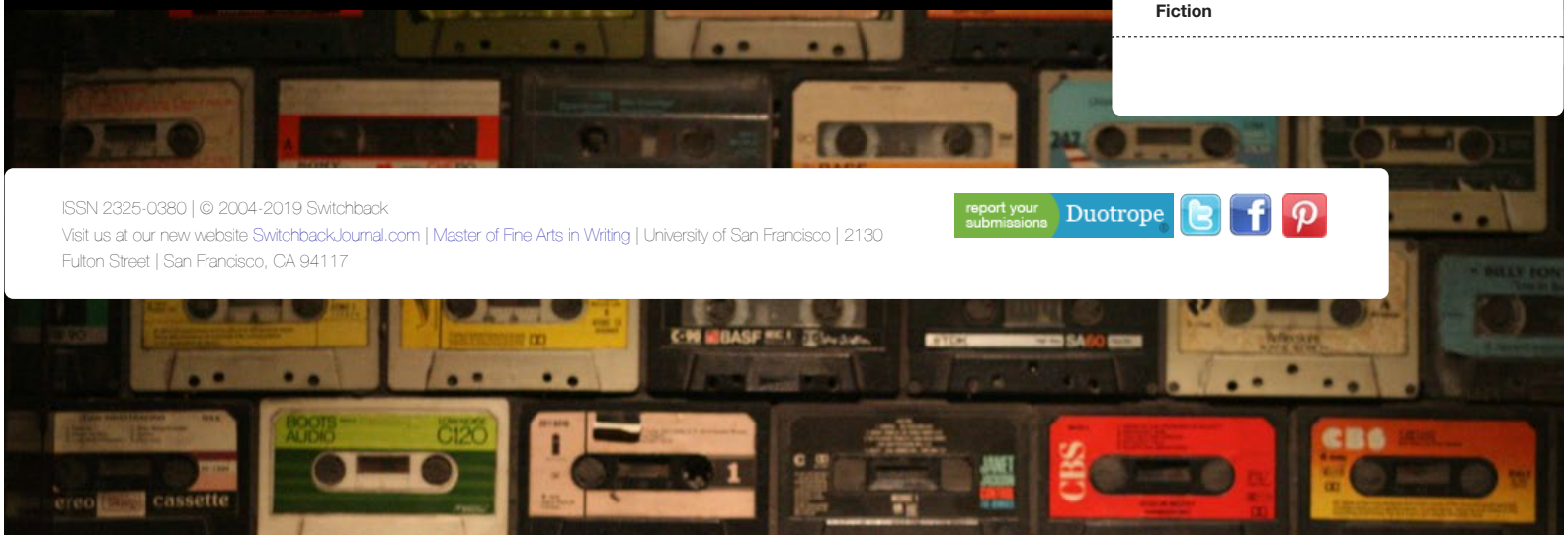
In her heartÕs attic

she listens and collects
fresh thoughts falling, searing
cobwebs off Trotsky red

Love graffitiÕs rawboned eyes

irises green dismiss whatÕs grey
her naked mind imbrued
moon blue, electrified.

Fiction



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Time-Lapse

Jennifer Matteson

for my grandparents

She watches him sketch roses
in her garden, his head bowed so close

to the page that he is lost for minutes
at a time, before glancing up

to remind himself of the picture.
He works near the tall brick planter

covered in ivy, under a frail willow slouching
toward the ground. Her roses flower and wilt

each day in rhythm and he records them
like a time-lapse photographer, never remembering

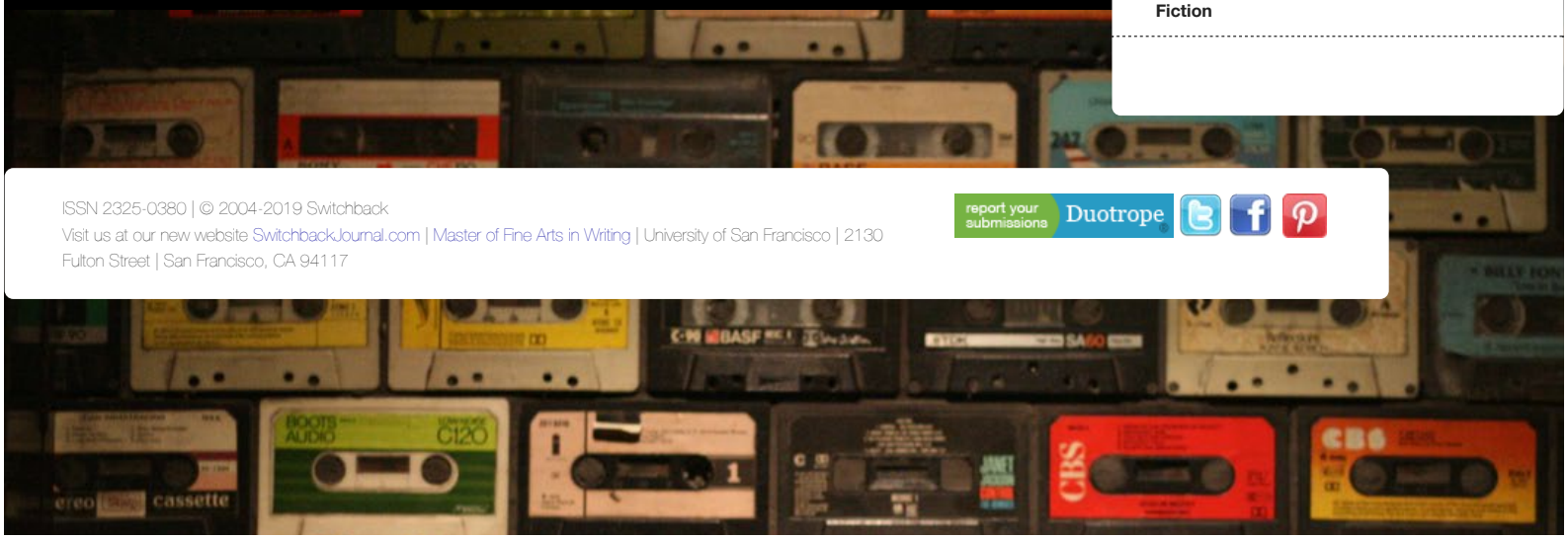
the days that pass until she turns back a page,
says *yesterday*, and he shakes his white hair

as if trying to fire the synapses manually.
Each petal must drop one by one.

He folds himself, again, over the page,
pushing the thin pencil, and she wonders how far

he will whittle it down before it rests.

Fiction



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Elizabeth Hoover

Elizabeth Hoover is a feminist poet who enjoys working on projects with a conceptual or research element. Her current project, Some Poems About Pictures is a hybrid text that offers art as a space for resistance to and transformation of dominant gender narratives. A portion of that project was awarded the 2015 StoryQuarterly essay prize, judged by Maggie Nelson. Her poetry has appeared in [Pank], The Los Angeles Review, and The Pinch, among others. She is a freelance book critic and lives in Pittsburgh with her partner and a cat named Brad. You can see more of her work at ehooverink.com.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 2016: Relaunch Celebration

symbol leaves no taste for the thing itself
Poetry

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symbol leaves no taste for the thing itself

Elizabeth Hoover

Menelaus wanted a war
so he trained Helen in beauty:
sit in a darkened room, think of nothing.

This and other tricks I learned
in the airless trailer where
my boyfriend kept me.

You can make your eyes adjust
to the dark faster if
you never open them.

It was then that I became invested
in the credibility of the unreal,
the certainty of disguise.

The mask of a woman, under it
another mask, under thatÑa girl
not quite thirteen.

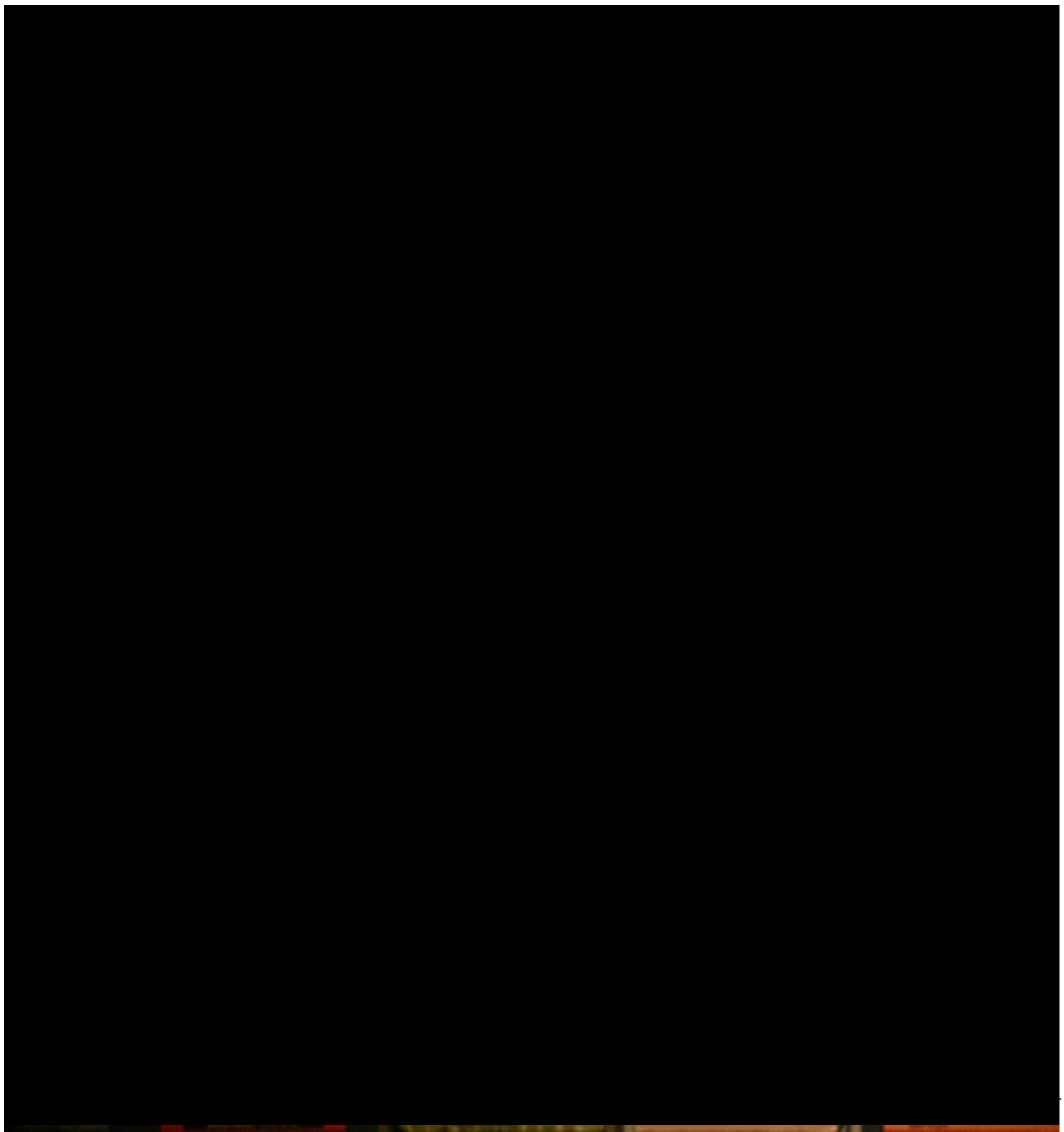
In recreating what he took,
I learned that to create is a joy.
I use the materials I have: torso

consumed by fatty shapes, concealed
under a ballgown with a feathered face,
bowed like a bug in a cage.

I know what Helen thought
locked in her room during
the slaughter. I will use it

as the script for my new performance
about the joy of a monster so far
from the city she canÕt be hunted.

Would you like to perform with me?
Would you like to finally see what
we can do with these things?



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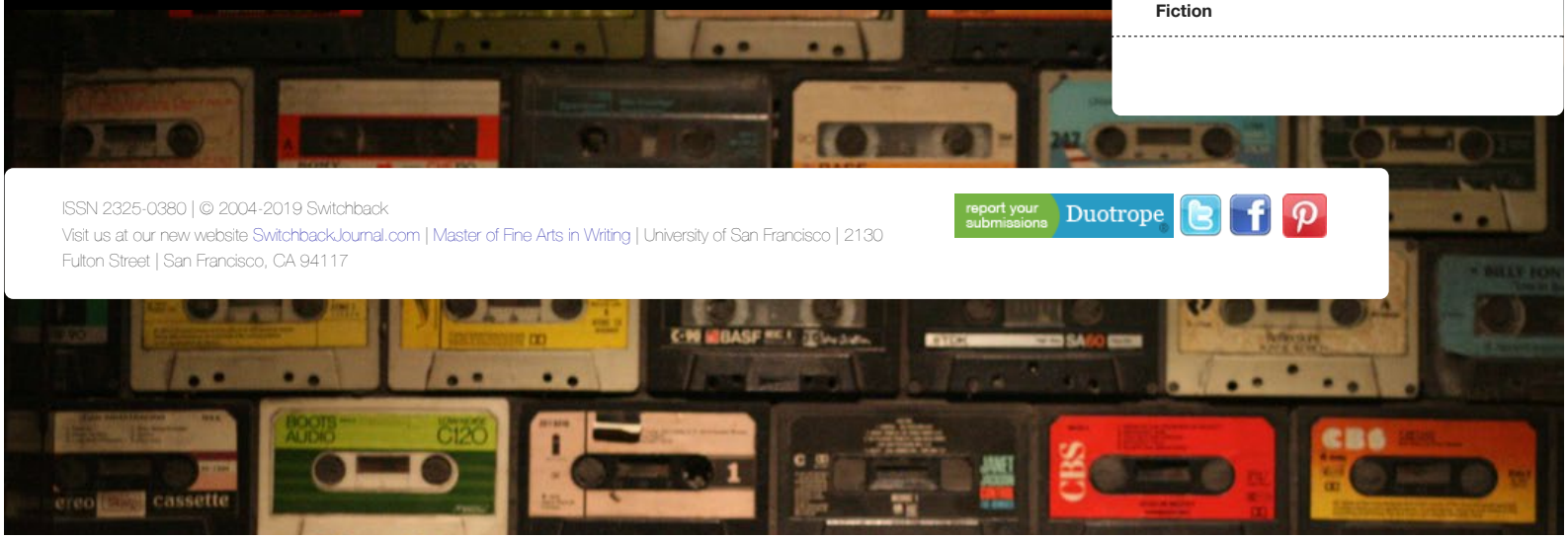

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Richard Hedderman

Richard Hedderman earned a B.A. in English from the University of San Francisco, and an M.A. in Writing from the University of New Hampshire. Publishing credits include poems in South Dakota Review, CutBank, Chautauqua Literary Review, Eclipse, The Midwest Quarterly, Blue Collar Review, Arsenic Lobster, Skald (Wales), the anthology In a Fine Frenzy: Poets Respond to Shakespeare (University of Iowa Press) and a chapbook, The Discovery of Heaven (Parallel Press, 2006.) He has work forthcoming in Rattle, Kestrel and Kentucky Review, and has also appeared as a guest poet with the Library of CongressÕs Poetry at Noon program.

Contributions to Switchback

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Masters of Disguise
Poetry

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Masters of Disguise

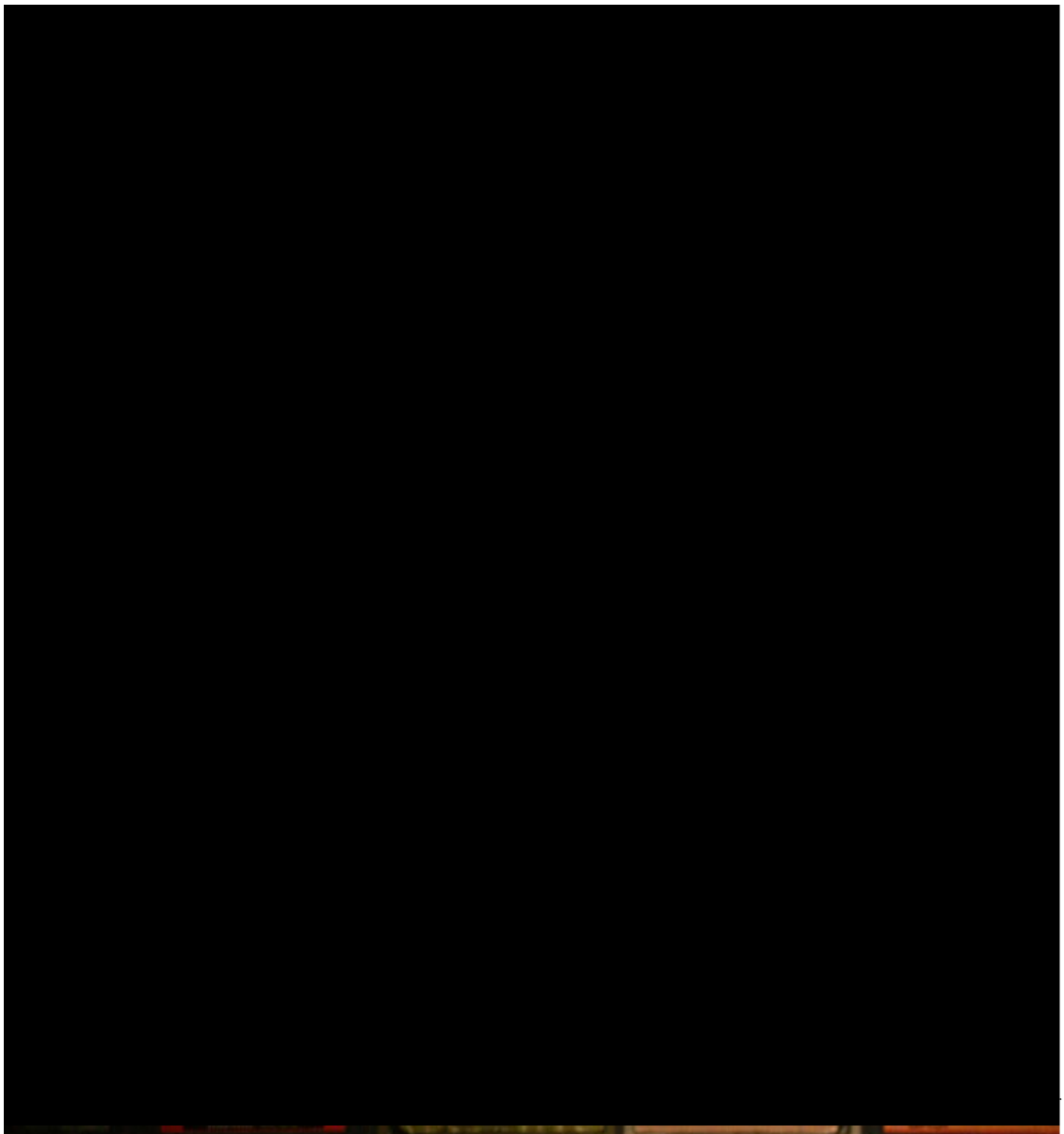
Richard Hedderman

IÕve heard about them, how
they look like none of us
and all of us. You know who
they are: identities stolen from nuns,

butchers and deceased opera singers,
lurking in the rain-blurred alleyways
by the river, just out taking a stroll
in someone elseÕs shoes. On Halloween,

the best of them all, the one with the eye-
patch and morning coat, ties
his little black dog to the street
lamp and goes into a store to buy

a cardboard bowler hat, palming
his secret mirror which he carefully hides
in the hand behind his back.



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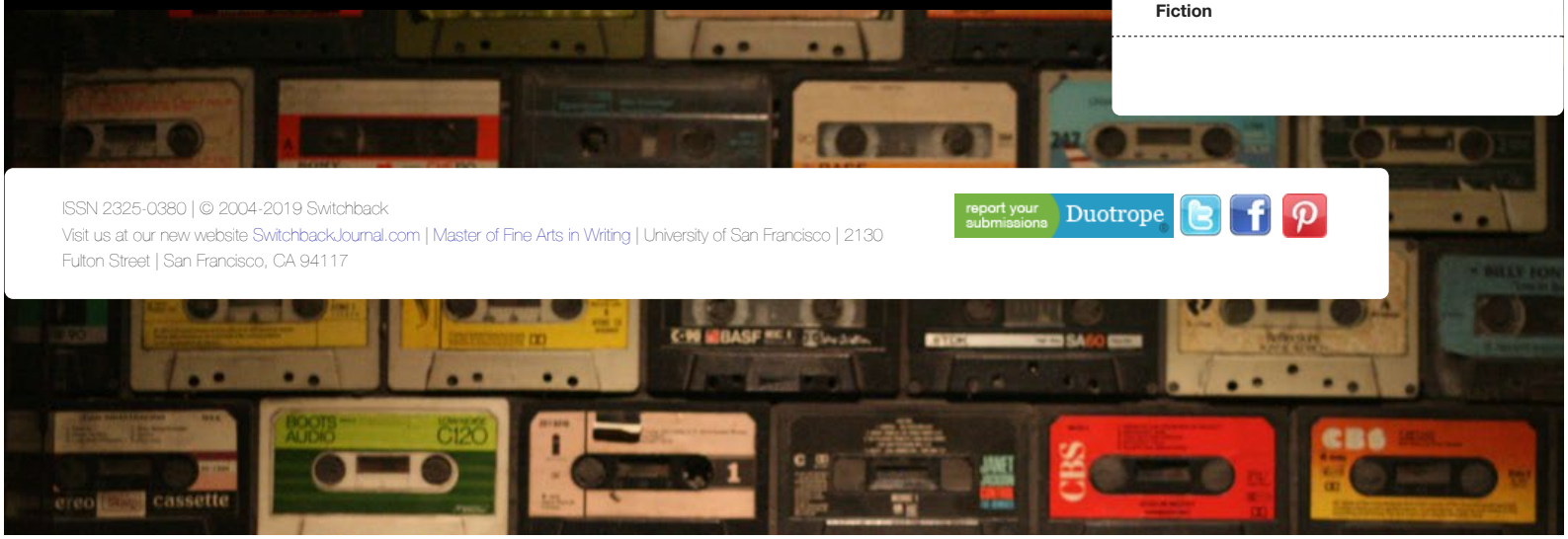

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Jyoti Mugalikar

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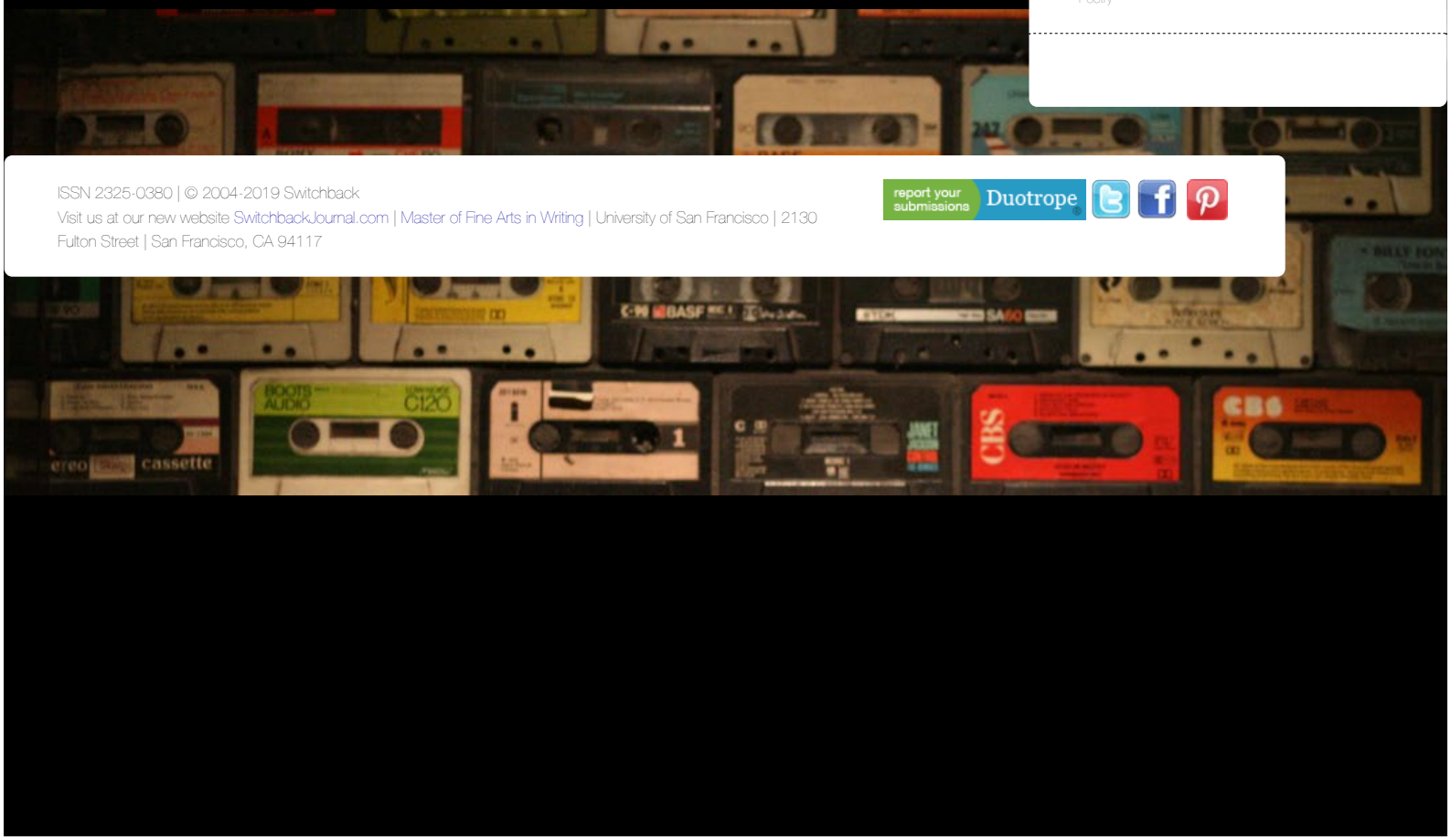
The Pus
Poetry



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The Pus

Jyoti Mugalikar

Gambled at a confused stumbling of feign

To coronate the mobbed city of a tear seed

Frosting over the satin soil of disdain

Crippled at knees, the valiant pauses breed

Stalked at a hushed orchardÕs lingering swim

Merges a halted walk of crystal rain

A solitary monkÕs memory clot,as if

Ripened at a scarÕs muddled lens

To soil the soil of an urban feast

Weeding ÔbutÕ from a plural silence

Clouded over the collars of a smileÕs east

Scalping the rust of an integral dawn earn

Like a truant need perniciously thorned

From the stains of a vocoid pinch

Mutating the gallop of a nibbling eyespan

Poaching the smell of death dyed hunch

An alien shade on the desert crayon of ash

Embossed articulately like a molten gold sore

Or camphoring with the aural breath spin

As a dolphin curve on a froth shore.

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Features

Fiction

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Joseph Moore

Joseph Moore is a fourth-year BA student pursuing a degree in Literature/Writing at University of California - San Diego. His work has largely been in journalism and cultural criticism, with feature articles and reviews in online music magazines such as *Treble* and *No Ripcord*. He is also the occasional singer-songwriter, and has played at venues along CaliforniaÕs southwestern coast. He currently resides in University Heights and intends to pursue a masters degree upon graduating.

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We Have Visitors Tonight
Poetry

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We Have Visitors Tonight

Joseph Moore

WE HAVE VISITORS TONIGHT.

I am not alone.
Silence lures the ticky-tack traipse,
from ceiling to floor,
And the restless bawling of the pendulum
Turned on its side.

I am aware, but how blind?
Expectation of silhouette waves
In echoes, in double vision.
In darkness.

Shelter from the static
We are clinging to the air in short pauses,
From atop the elephant
in the room.

Peering into pixels,
my stomach shrieks.

IÕm searching for a remedy to
the uncomfortable minutiae.
The paranoia that comes
From noticing the magnifying glass
That smears the stars of a painted sky.

The greys.
Their liminal shrouds.
Oscillations and backwards communication.
IÕm thinking in hertz and amplitude,
In code and windtalker speech.

I am not Navajo, Apache blood will

have to do.

But I canÕt decipher
a numbered cryptogram
over the ever
forever encroaching

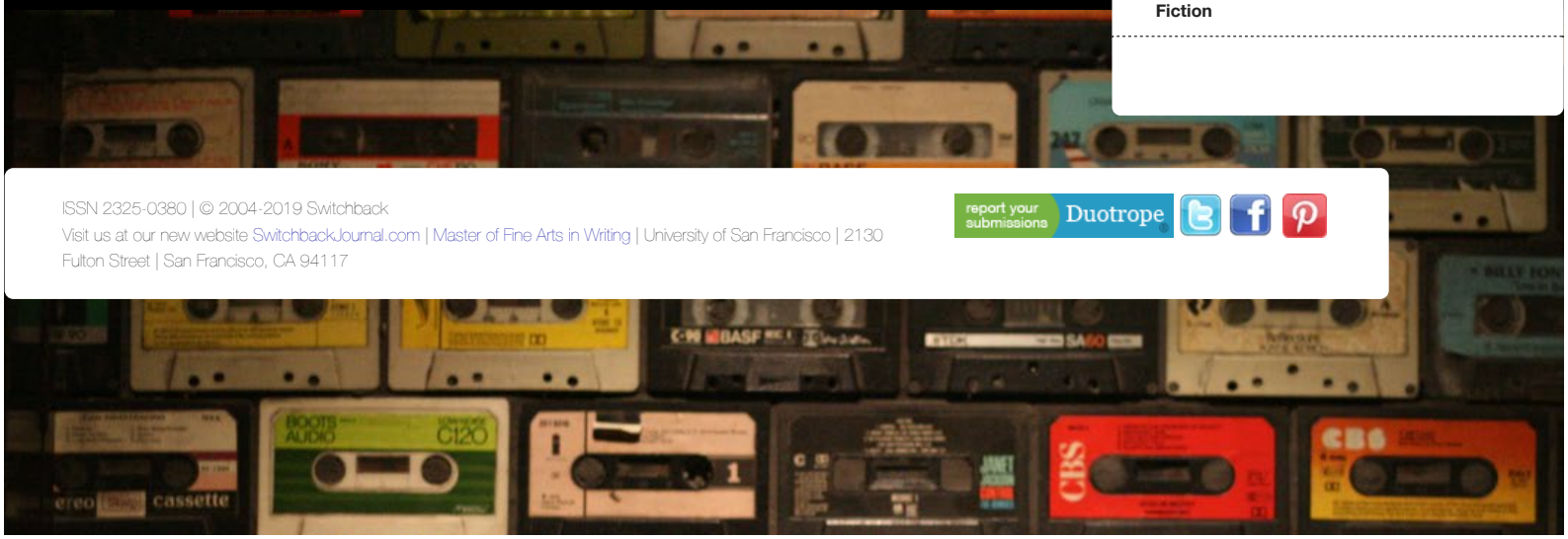
white noise and distorted cellophane.

I am not alone.
Blood on the rails.
Capillaries engorged with adrenaline.
I am reaching into

nothing,

And pulling out card tricks,
And the black magic of deception,
pulling it over my eyes,
but my ears cannot fool a fool.

A silhouette rustles under the glassy frame
Of tonightÕs sleepless spring.



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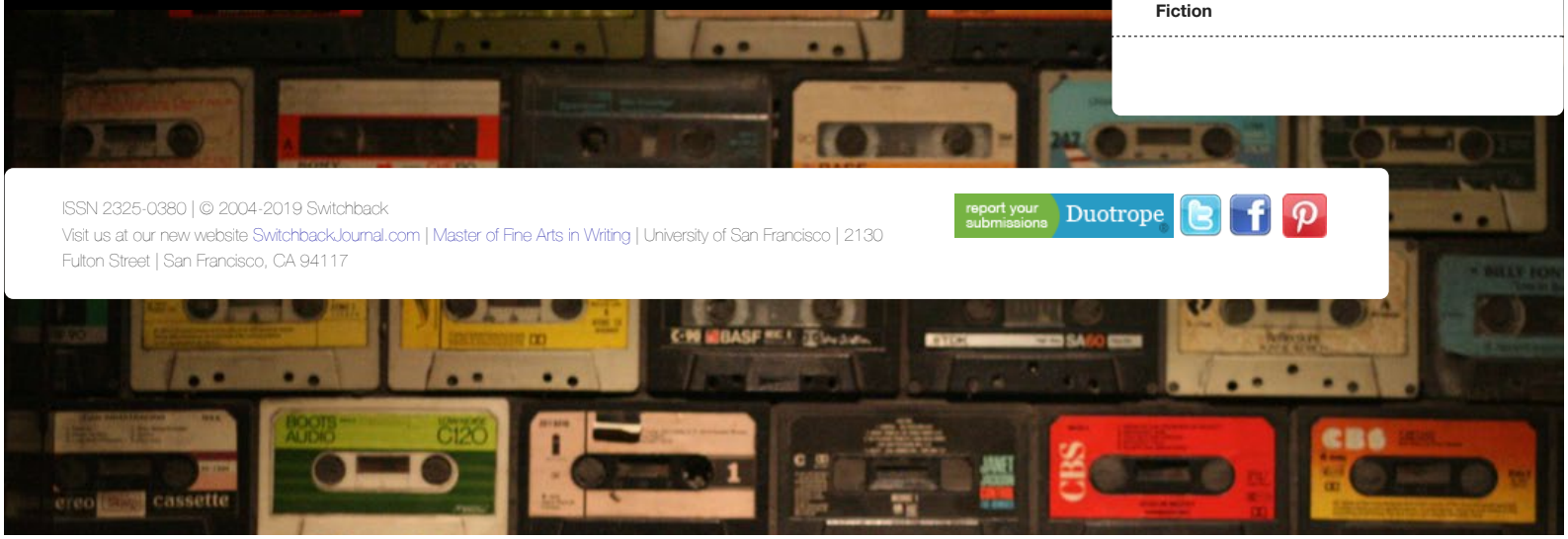
What Grows After a Forest Fire

Julia Rox

in the mornings i put my ear to the ground
to listen for the sound of the aspens
in northern Kentucky.
the aspens donÕt talk to me anymore but
some days i can hear them laughing,
their saw teeth raking against each
other in the open light.
are you listening to me?
when i call you on the phone i sit on different
pieces of furniture. the
the kitchen table is uncomfortable
but i sit there the most.
even when you ask ÒhowÕs the weather out there?Ó
it sounds like a soft apology,
indulgences to the earth
for the ashes you didnÕt scatter.
when we talk i
imagine you sitting in the green chair
in the dining room where the
ghosts of my furniture still host dinner parties.
i can hear the aspens in the background.
i tell you to tell them to return my calls.
even baby teeth can draw blood but
we still throw them away.
you told me there was value in forgetting so
if i pull out all my teeth and hang them from
the branches in your front yard would
the aspens talk to me then? would they say
Òdarling i can forgive you, but i wonÕt forgetÓ?

Fiction



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Kevin Casey

Kevin Casey is the author of *And Waking...* (Bottom Dog Press, 2016), and the chapbooks *The wind considers everything*-- (Flutter Press, 2015) and *For the Sake of the Sun* (Red Dashboard, 2016). His poems have appeared recently or are forthcoming in *Rust+Moth*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Cleaver* and Ted Kooser's syndicated column “American Life in Poetry.”

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For a Misplaced Hatchet
Poetry

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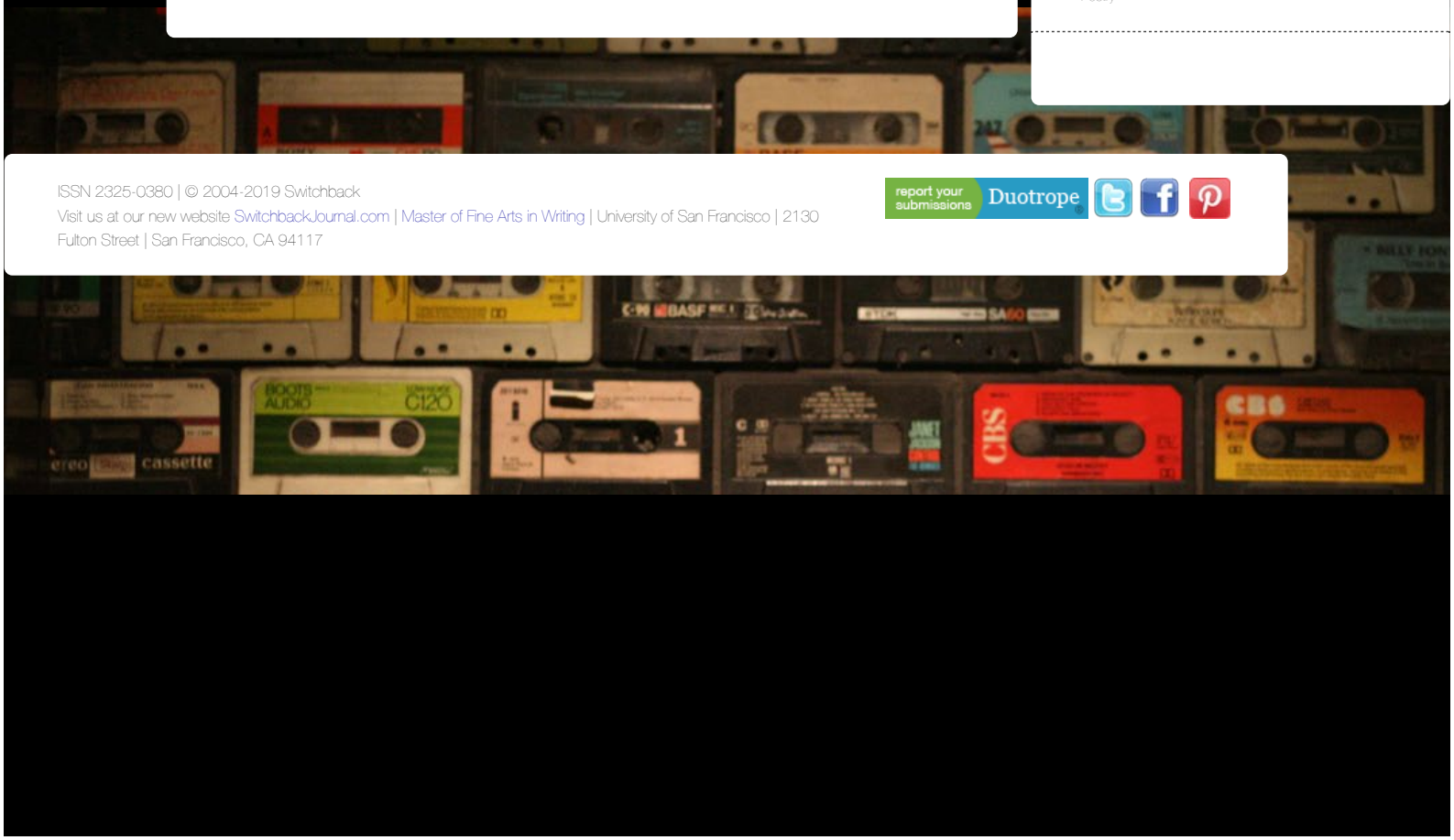


For a Misplaced Hatchet

Kevin Casey

The metronome of its ashen handle
counted time against my thigh as I walked,
but at some point it stopped, and I did not.

A half hourÕs search among the poplars
to the north of the pasture, then darkness
drove me home, and so there it remains.

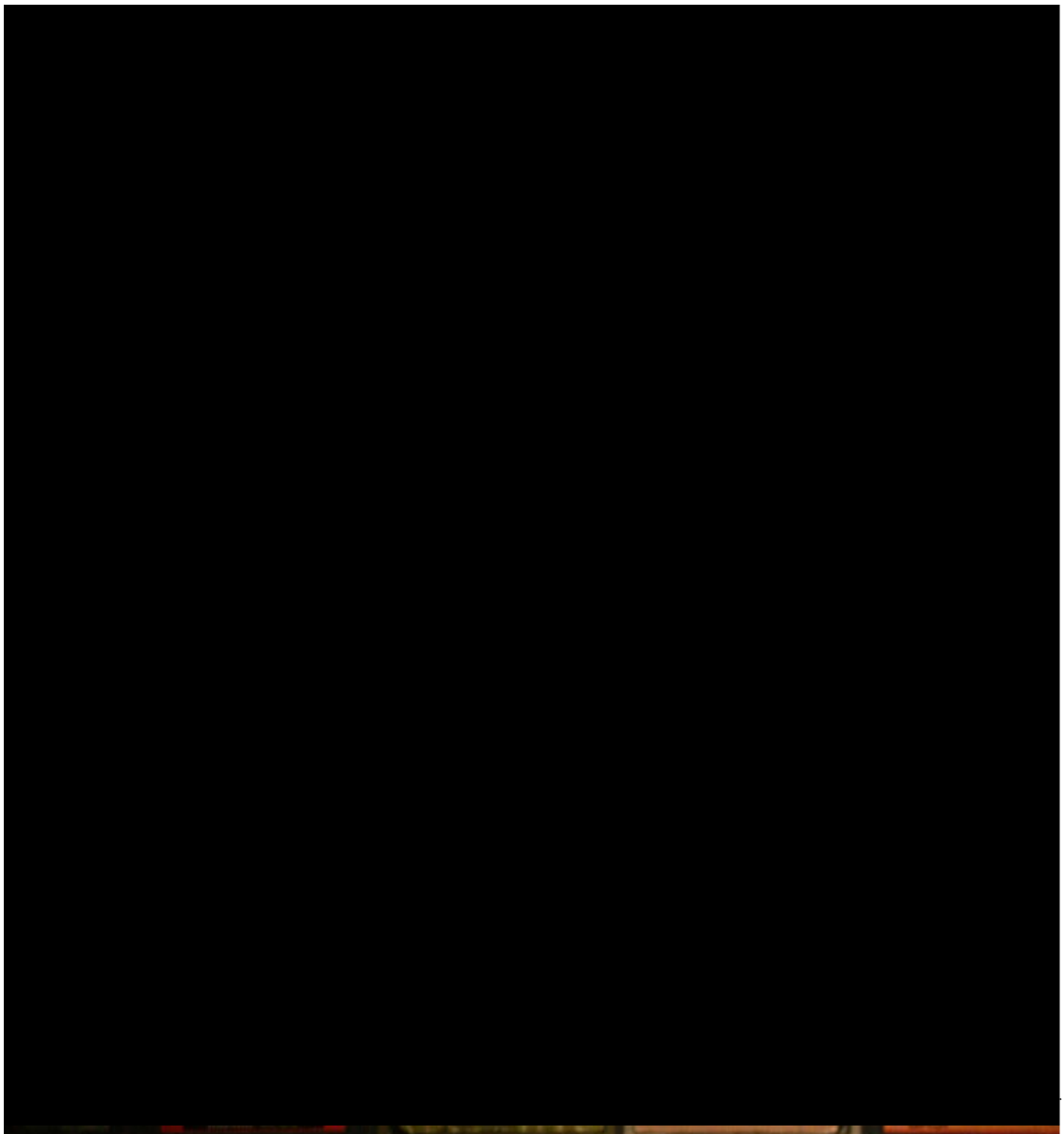
Once the sun had chopped it free from the snow
that spring, flattened shoots of irises grew
about it in a fence, and the damp breath

of soil etched fissures in its lacquer.
Its polished face reflected the flickering
pulse of day and night, until a fretwork

of rust was cut across its mirror,
and warm rains sought to wash it into the mold
as it turned from tool to artifact.

These reveries grow more vivid as it
settles into its bed of dried ferns --
still only misplaced and never lost

so long as itÕs kept in mind, a part
of myself split along the grain and left
to watch over that corner of the world.



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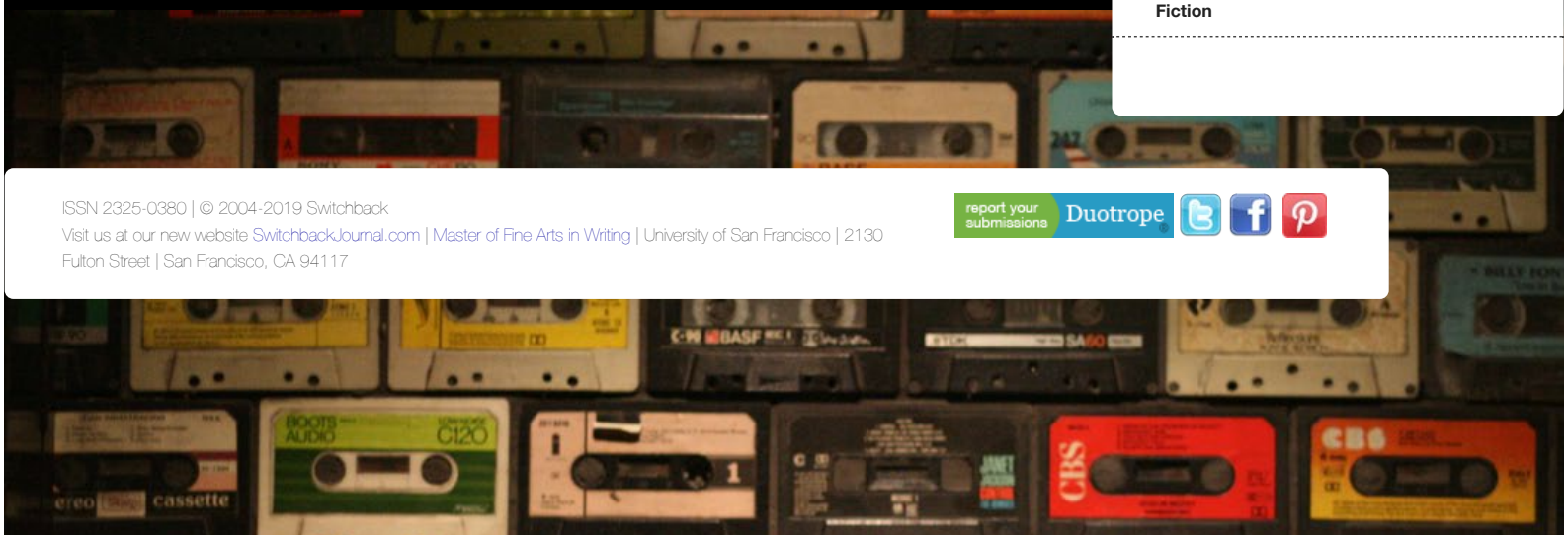

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Greasy

Lana Austin

Aretha, who needs no last name,
called their playing greasy. Not
something slithering

across a skillet, but the very
fluid of life. Slick, sensuous, love-
making wetness. Primordially

pure rhythm, a pulse, a new
song from a bunch of white boys
born by the Tennessee River

where Bono says, ÒThe music
comes out of the mud,Ó and people
like Paul Simon called producer

Al Bell, asking him, ÒHey, man, I want
those same black players
that played on ÔIÕll Take You There.ÕÓ

Bell, who wrote the 1972
Staple Singers hit, replied,
ÒThat can happen, except these guys

are mighty pale.Ó So the mighty pale
SwampersÑBarry, David, Roger
and Jimmy-- played greasy and grew

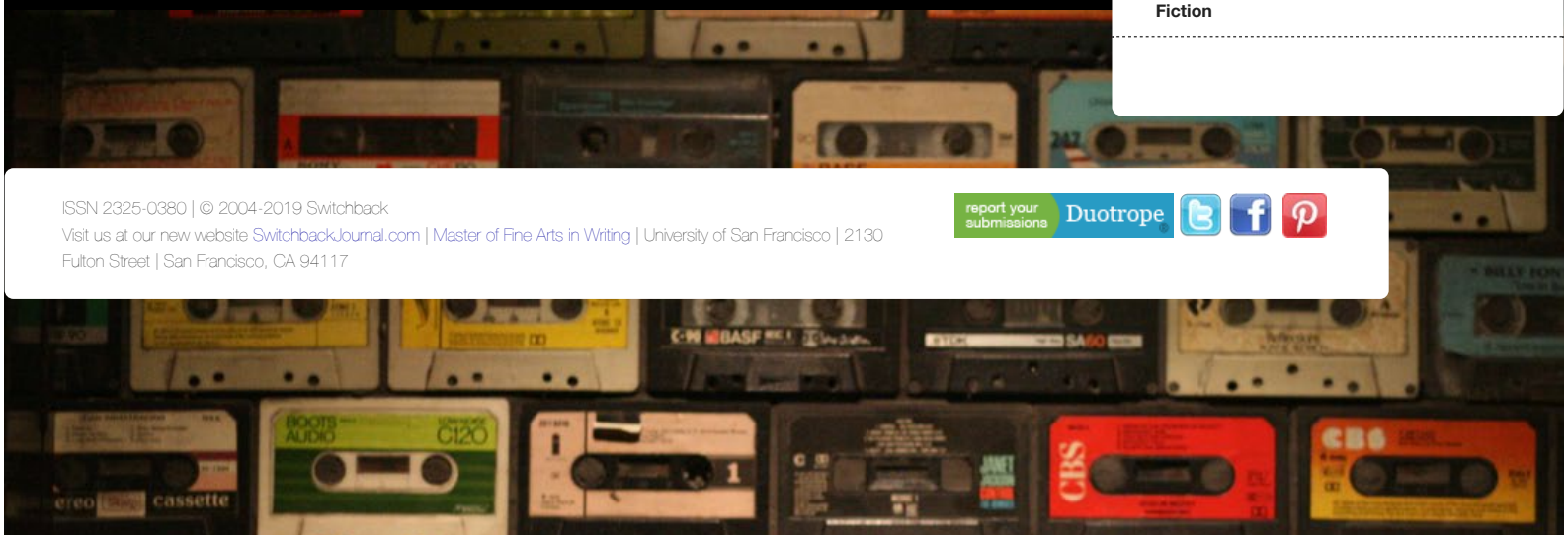
the Muscle Shoals sound along with Rick Hall, that crazy-
like-a-fox white producer in Alabama.
Rick and the Swampers created

their own sound in that booth
booth--not black, not white, but greasy,
color-blind and throbbing and they all came

to sing with them, not just Aretha,
but Percy Sledge, Etta James, the Stones,
Arthur Alexander, Wilson Pickett and on and

on with the list of greats
growing almost as long
as the story of life itself.

Fiction



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Switchback

Siobhan Welch

Siobhan Welch lives in Austin, Texas. Her writing has appeared in The Butter, decomP, Bookslut, and elsewhere.

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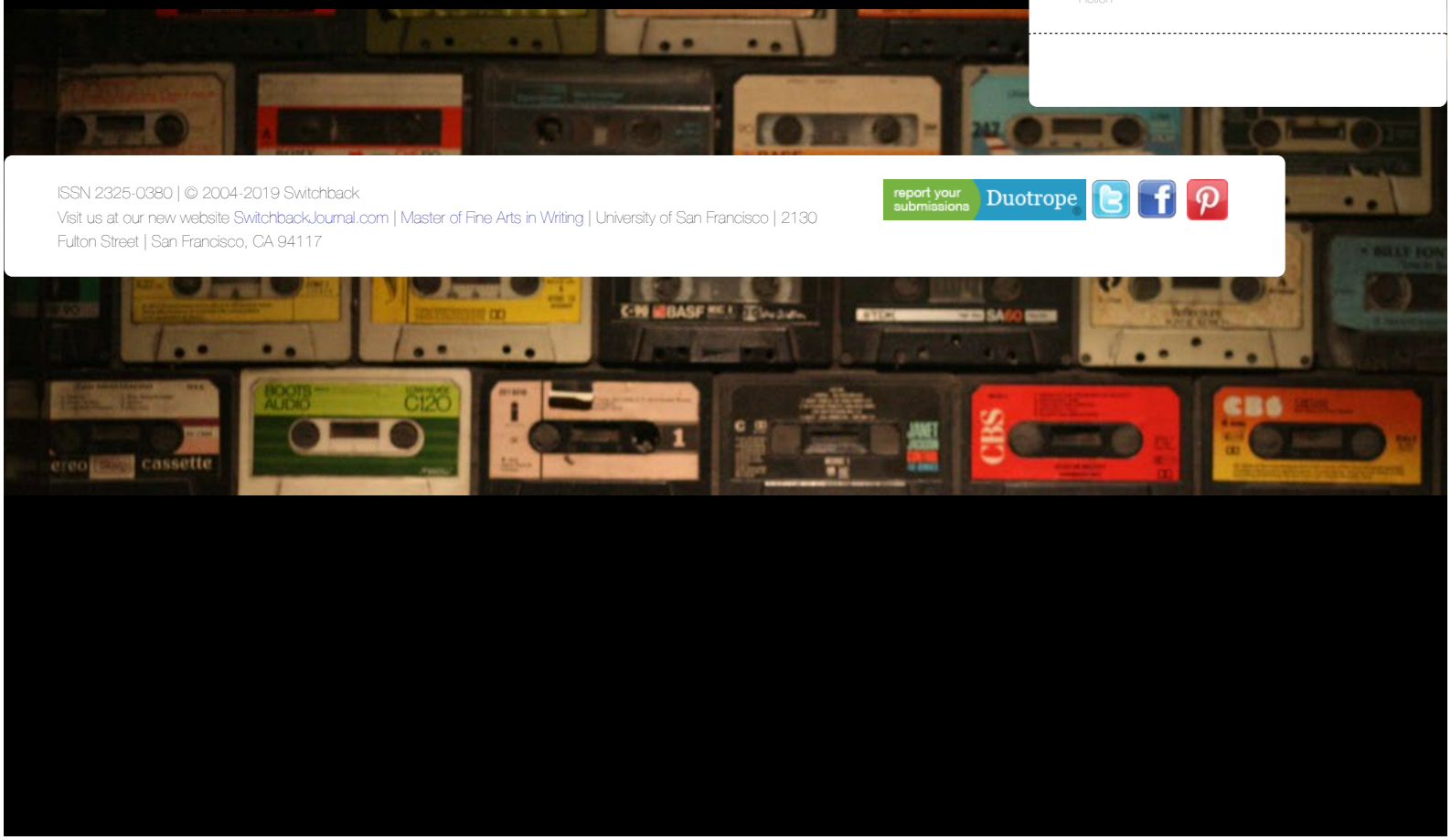
The Next Best Thing
Fiction



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The Next Best Thing

Siobhan Welch

BrentÕs last roommate left behind a case of Tanqueray, so Cate googles Òwhat to drink with ginÓ because sheÕs tired of juice and hates the taste of tonic.

ÒThey used to use quinine for abortions,Ó she says, reading the internet.

ÒThatÕs interesting,Ó Brent says.

After a while she suggests they just shoot it. ÒTo hell with it,Ó she says and demonstrates her disgust by holding her nose and tossing her head back as she swallows the liquor and lets it burn down her throat.

*

Later, when sheÕs hungover: ÒFound a job yet?Ó her father wants to know.

ÒNot yet!Ó Her father always asks this, and each time she tries to sound hopeful.

ÒFinding a job should be your full-time job.Ó

He lives in Tallahassee, and Cate calls him when she needs money, which is often, because she knows he'll always oblige.

ÒYou just gotta put yourself out there,Ó he says. ÒHit the pavement.Ó

He's remarried now, with a new wife and a new home in the suburbs. Cate has spied on her stepsisterÕs online profile, which is set to private, but her profile photo is public: the girl dancing en pointe, her hair slicked back in a bun.

ÒNobody goes anywhere anymore," Cate says. ÔEverythingÕs online.Ó

*

ThereÕs never any money; except, when they need weed, money appears out of an ATM like manna. Then Brent drives to the ApplebeeÕs where they sit in a parking lot and wait on a guy who is always late.

Afterwards, they smoke a bowl and drive through WendyÕs. Brent puts two number-twos on his credit card, and they eat the fries in the car. At home they watch reality television, and the shows get worse as the night goes on.

In bed, they tell each other things. In the dark she canÕt see his face so itÕs easy to open up, the way it had been easy for them when they first met online.

My momÕs a lesbian.

IÕm a trust fund kid.

My ex was fucking my best friend.

I canÕt get it up.

Lying next to him now, Cate still feels this urge to confess. Her thoughts churn, gather momentum and spew forth, like vomit.

ÒIn high school, I had to babysit this kid,Ó she says. ÒMy dadÕs girlfriendÕs son . . . DadÕs first girlfriend after Mom came out.Ó She stops, thinks about this. ÒDadÕs first real girlfriend ever, I guess.

ÒThis kid was super obnoxious. WouldnÕt eat, wouldnÕt watch TV, wouldnÕt shut up, wouldnÕt go to bed, that kind of thing. And of course I got stuck with him all the time.

ÒSo this one night IÕm about to flip out. ItÕs eleven-thirty, theyÕre not coming home till two, and heÕs not tiredÉat all. So I say, ÔIÕm gonna make you some yummy chocolate milk.Õ Only it was Kahlua and milkÉwith some crushed up Valium for good measure.Ó

ÒJesus.Ó

Cate doesn't tell him what a chore it had been trying to get the kid to drink the milk, how his fat cheeks had turned pink, his little heart-shaped mouth blasting out that word over and over: ÒNo.Ó How sheÕd screamed at him and said if he didnÕt drink the milk, sheÕd flush his stupid binky down the toilet.

ÒHow old was he?Ó

ÒFour or five? I know, itÕs horrible! IÕm horrible. I'm a horrible person.Ó

When he doesnÕt dispute this, she asks, ÒIs that bad?Ó

ÒDid anything happen?Ó

ÒNo, thank God. And he did finally sleep like a baby.Ó

ÒWell then who cares?Ó Brent moves closer to her, puts his arm over her, pulls her near him. ÒWe all did stupid shit back then.Ó He rubs her back until sheÕs able to fall asleep. ÒIt's what happens now that matters.Ó

*

Brent spends most days in his bedroom, which is their bedroom now. "Shooting Germans," he calls it, the sound of computer-generated gunshots ripping into the background.

When they got serious, her roommates had teased her. They didnÕt understand why sheÕd rather chat with some weirdo on her computer than go to the Strip where people partied-as-a-verb, groped each other on dance floors, and went home drunk with other peopleÕs boyfriends.

ÒIf we were youÉÓ they clucked.

After catching the guy she was seeing with his dick in her roommateÕs mouth, in the bathroom at Big DaddyÕs of all places, Cate became depressed. Being online felt safer somehow, easier to pick out the trolls. She and Brent hit it off in a chat room and things moved quickly: from instant messaging to phone calls to falling asleep with each other on the other end of the line.

After they decided they were indeed Òtogether,Ó Brent surprised her by showing up at her apartment one night, a twelve hour drive across four states and one time zone. When he called her that night, he told her to come out to her car, and there he was. ÒLike Houdini,Ó he said. While her roommates thought it was creepy, Cate took it as some sort of sign.

He took her to a touristy tiki bar on High Street where they drank Yuenglings on the patio and talked about their families. CateÕs parents had divorced when she was two. Brent was adopted.

ÒThey paid almost ten thousand dollars for me,Ó he told her. ÒAnd this was in the 80s.Ó

ÒAt least they loved you that much."

ÒI was an investment. With a shitty ROI.Ó

Before he left, he asked her to move in with him. He even got down on one knee to make it official. ÒI want us to be together,Ó he said. ÒForever until the cows jump over the moon.Ó

Cate liked the sound of forever, so the day after graduation, she packed up the last few years into her Civic and headed West to a place he promised she could finally call home.

*

The last of the gin runs out, and Cate still canÕt find a job. She wonders what Brent is going to do if he doesnÕt need one in the first place.

Instead, he hoards, as if holding onto relics of his past will illuminate some sort of path to his future. His house is full of Americana knick-knacks from every touristy resort town heÕs visited on family vacations: empty beer bottles and bottle openers, Frisbees, koozies, guitar picks, wire mesh wastebaskets full of aluminum cans.

ÒSeven trash cans?Ó she asks, and he answers with empty promises to get rid of things.

Cate stays home making complicated chore charts, determined to get his house, their life, in manageable order. She uses the chaos as an excuse to stay inside, avoiding HoustonÕs intricate highway system. Brent calls it the Òspaghetti bowlÓ, a designation that compels her to drive in it even less.

Florida feels very far away.

In her free time Cate sends applications to office jobs that will never call and watches her friendsÕ lives unfold online as they move on to the next phase of their lives without her, a rearrangement of girls with tans and white teeth and long hair. She clicks through the photos of them in groups, clutching sweaty bottles and Solo

cups, and wonders, looking around BrentÕs house, if everything fun has already happened, if the best years of her life have already passed her by.

At night, she badgers him. ÒWhat's our plan?Ó she wants to know. She doesn't think it feels right that they can just live in this house without jobs while the rest of the world has to struggle.

Brent pouts when they fight, his bottom lip puffing out like a childÕs. Cate canÕt help but stare when heÕs like this. She marvels at how clearly she can imagine him as a little boy, his outright brattiness, sense of entitlement, and his bottomless need for attention.

The first night he stayed over at her apartment in Florida, the night he surprised her, his mother had called.

Òl can't. lÕm not at home,Ó he told her over the phone. Then, ÒltÕs none of your goddamn business.Ó

ÒJeez,Ó Cate said afterwards. ÒA little harsh, donÕt you think?Ó

He shrugged. ÒNot everything can be explained.Ó

*

Cate waits for him to finish leveling up and come to bed so she can tell him whatÕs been bothering her all day. ItÕs the routine. Even sex is routine, which has to be planned so he can take Viagra ahead of time. By the time heÕs hard, sheÕs no longer in the mood.

ÒMy sophomore year in college,Ó she begins. She senses the slight movement away from her, the change in BrentÕs energy, but she keeps talking anyway. Òl was downtown, and I was alone because my friend never showed up. But I stayed anyway. Independent woman out on the town, you know. Bullshit.

ÒBut then, some frat guy started chatting me up, so I left---and lÕm drunk and on I-10. I donÕt even know how drunk I am, the radioÕs blasting, and all of a sudden. Bam. lÕve hit someone right there on the highway."

ÒWhy are you telling me all this?Ó

ÒEverything happened so fast.Ó

Brent grows quiet, and in the pause she feels the way she used to when she would stare at the screen waiting for a response, not knowing if he was still on the other end, not knowing, at times, if he was even real.

ÒWas anyone hurt?Ó he says finally.

Òl took off. I didnÕt know what else to do! It was like something took me over, and I couldnÕt think."

Cate still remembers the collision. The red brake lights that appeared out of nowhere on the empty highway. The crunch of metal grinding metal. The squeal of peeling out, hitting the gas. She shuts her eyes, in her memory everything goes black as she speeds down the highway and away from the wreck until sheÕs far enough to forget it for two, ten, twenty years, forever.

Òl had to get out of there.Ó

ÒYou could have killed someone,Ó he says and rolls away from her.

*

Soon she stops driving altogether. When she stops running errands in the neighborhood, he tells her sheÕs overreacting.

ÒThis is absurd! YouÕve built this driving thing up, and itÕs all in your head.Ó

ÒEveryone drives so fast here,Ó she says. ÒltÕs a death trap.Ó

He tells her itÕs not logical, that the roads in Houston are no different from the roads in Tallahassee. ÒAnd besides,Ó he says. ÒYou drove yourself here.Ó

Cate never told him, when she moved to Houston, what should have taken twelve hours---a straight shot across I-10---took her fifteen because she kept getting honked at by men in 18 wheelers, and each time, sheÕd pulled into the next gas station and inspected the air in each tire, determined to find the one that was low.

Cate tells him that not driving now is post-traumatic stress disorder, triggered by talking about shit that shouldn't matter anymore, but he gets angry and says to stop blaming the past.

ÒltÕs a new city, a new chance.Ó What he means is she needs to get out more. He suggests they take a vacation.

ÒFrom what?Ó she wants to know.

*

During the holidays Cate puts her job search on hold. ÒNo oneÕs hiring till after the new year anyway,Ó she tells people, but mostly herself.

ÒThen nowÕs the time to strike. Be the early bird." Her father sends a hundred bucks to tide her over, which she and Brent spend on dinner and drinks before going to his parents for Christmas empty-handed.

BrentÕs family all look alike, all the cousins. ÒThe Aldinger seed is strong,Ó he says, with their high foreheads, weak chins, and pointy little noses. ÒYou donÕt just not look like them,Ó Cate says on the ride home, Òyou donÕt even look like youÕre from the same planet.Ó

BrentÕs bigger, more stocky, the kind of kid who went from fourth grade to football player in one awkward summer. He once told her that when he hit puberty, his mother had stopped showing him any affection. Cate has seen photos of him as a kid, his adolescent body already the size of a twenty-year-old man, towering over his scrawny, hairless friends.

In high school, he tells her now, he dropped out. Ate acid. Sold weed. HeÕd have his friends over to get high while his mother served them baby carrots and M&Ms and Rice Krispie Treats arranged just so on a platter. His bedroom thick with smoke.

ÒShe really had no idea?Ó

ÒPeople believe what they want to believe,Ó he says. Cate believes sheÕs the only one heÕll ever love because right now everything is still possible. They talk about their future as if itÕs a given, tossing out baby names like dinner suggestions.

*

For her birthday he buys her shampoo and conditioner, the two bottles neatly lined up next to the coffee maker so that sheÕll see them first thing in the morning.

She wonders if this is a sign.

The pile of dishes has disappeared from the sink, but she finds them later, inside the oven, shoved into a sad, crusty pile. It dawns on her that he spends so much time trying to get out of things that there is no time to be ÒinÓ anything anymore: in progress, in luck, in love.

On the computer, his profile page is up, a half empty beer bottle next to the keyboard. HeÕs changed his profile picture. In it he has a handlebar mustache, dressed in a three piece suit. A photo from a wedding a few years back.

Cate remembers when he used to wake up when she did, when heÕd pop out of bed at the sound of her making coffee. Now he doesnÕt bother.

She stands in the doorway letting the hallway light flood the room. It smells like booze. HeÕs still in bed, the sheets twisted up between his legs.

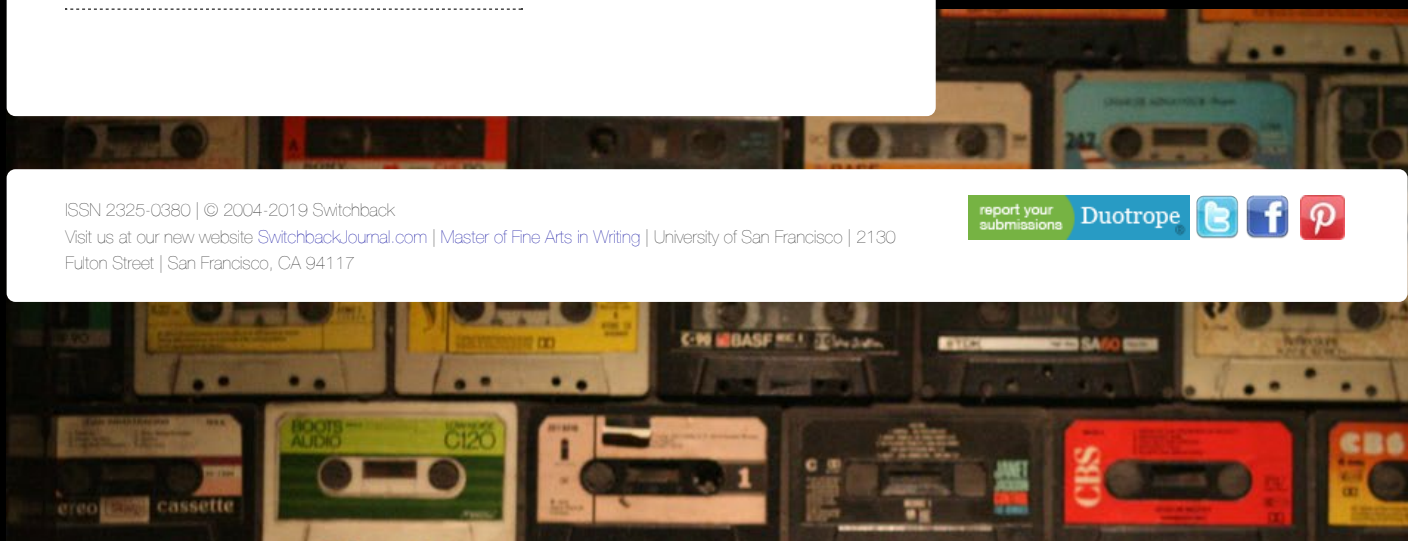
ÒHappy birthday,Ó he mumbles, squinting.

She shuts the door and imagines him snoozing a while longer, maybe playing a video game while she makes breakfast before they eat. Then they will settle back onto the couch to watch their shows and wait for their lives to begin.

ÒDonÕt get up,Ó she says.

Poetry

Fiction



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Switchback

Laura Post

Laura Post is from New Jersey and lives in New York. She teaches English at Mercy College in the Bronx and also bartends. Laura holds an MFA in poetry from Sarah Lawrence College. Her poetry has appeared in New South, The Moth Magazine, Your Impossible Voice, The Squaw Valley Review, and elsewhere.

Contributions to Switchback

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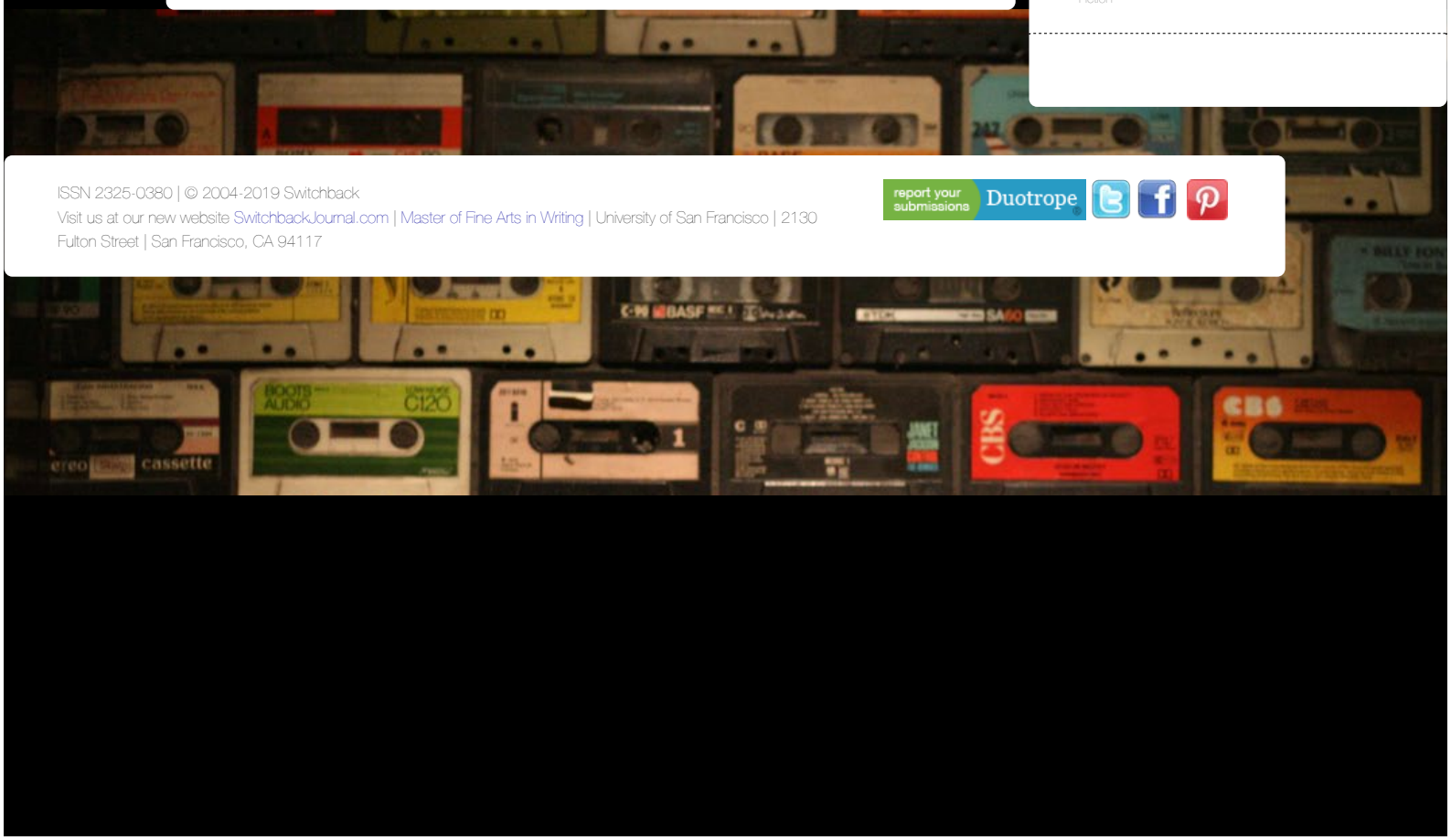

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Funeral

Laura Post

Sometime during the stickiest part of summer the ants came back. Maybe theyÕd never left, but at least for a while weÕd managed to forget about them. None of us could remember the last time weÕd eaten anything without checking it first, turning our food over in the light to make sure it wasnÕt glittering with ants. At first it seemed they only came out at night, in a slow trickle, hefting crumbs wherever they could find them before disappearing back into the cracks. Their grey little bodies flattened like sesame seeds under our thumbs.

*

ClayÕs truck sputters and settles into a harsh purr. I reach over and turn the key in the ignition. The purring stops.

The sunlight is starting to fade, and weÕve been driving since about four. I wrench open the passenger side door.

After a minute or two Clay joins me on the hood.

Up the road about sixty yards is a small brush fire. ItÕs been so dry lately, Clay tells me, that theyÕll just pop up sometimes without warning. We will wait for the fire to jump the road

and move on.

*

Summers were when Dad visited us most often. We always did the same things with him, played the same games, our rituals. Our favorite was based around these prize dolls we had seen at a carnival that passed through town. The dolls were seated upright, and no matter how many times you pushed them backward, they would sit back up again. My brothers and I would sit on the carpet around our father, and he would push us over again and again, pinning us down and then feigning anger and surprise, as we giggled and rocked ourselves back up.

Other times Dad was a grizzly bear, snoring comically in hibernation, and we would prod him, shove against his body as hard as we could, pull at his bushy hair, clamp his nose trying to wake him. After a few moments of resolute snoring, he would snort and startle, rise up, his hands forming great swiping paws, roaring and tickling us, and we all laughed until we hurt.

*

The funeral is long.

My whole body aches, all those moments that had bitten into my bones years ago, now grab hold of me, shake me back to them.

I remember the time in fourth grade when a bird flew into the window and died in a smash of feathers. I had been sitting in my chair reading, reading so long that I stopped turning the pages but the words kept changing. And then, in the one instant I looked up from my book and out the window at the smooth blue sky, a bird hurtled right into the glass next to me. I felt the hard flatness of the cement under my feet seep up into the rest of my body until it froze. I felt like if I moved I would crack and crumble.

I woke up on the floor.

After the service we all drive out to the house and rifle through stacks of junk, looking for traces of ourselves.

I follow Clay to the old elementary school.

If the school building surpassed a temperature of ninety-five degrees, state law said they had to let us free. There had been a lot of those days at the end, those last few days of school. Clay and I would sit in the scratchy brown grass at the edge of the teacherÕs parking lot, watching the heat wrinkle the air. We dragged sticks through the melting tar that creeped thickly down the wooden telephone poles, stuck our homework papers to the hot black glue.

We lay on our stomachs in the tall grass along the tracks, soaking in the roar and thrum of the train that leveled all other noise to silence, watched the gravel skitter and pop like frying oil. Afterward, we would lie there in the deep quiet until the six oÕclock siren sounded at the firehouse, calling us home for supper. We traipsed home through the sticky heat, dragging our feet along the shadows of the powerlines.

We would practice telling each other the most horrible things we could come up with, forecasting terrible accidents to our loved ones, untimely deaths and disease, disfigurements, loss in all forms and colors, in an ongoing effort to soften the blows of the inevitable future calamities. We were almost reverent about it, our scorched earth policy about painÑthe world might end in fire and we were ready, burning anything we could find. We were together so often it was a different kind of loneliness. We needed each other around to have somebody to talk to, and once we knew each otherÕs secrets, we couldnÕt be let out of each otherÕs sight for long.

*

At bedtime, those nights after Dad had gone away again, my brothers and I would implore Mom to tell stories about him, and she always had the same ones.

Your father loved storms. When it would get real quiet outside, it was like he could smell the rains coming. He would drive out to the woods and get out of the car, wander deep into the trees. He loved the crashing lights, the burning smell of split-open pines. DidnÕt matter if it was a hailstorm or a hurricane and everyone was buying candles and boarding up their windows, heÕd go right up to it.

But what did he always say? she waited for us to ask her, though we knew.

Mom would smile, the light from the hallway cutting out her face from the dark of our bedroom.

And she would say in a muted, booming voice, *I want to see shrapnel and limbs torn from bodies.* Then she would kiss us good night and flicker the switch in the hallway, making the dark house shiver with light. We listened to her footsteps creaking away from us and we accepted the darkness and slept.

*

The last time I had seen Clay, the last time I remember really being there, I had gone early to his house. I remember the kitchen wallpaper in yellow curls like dead skin on the linoleum. His house was a dying thing, a dead thing, bled through with melting snow. The ceiling had rotted to mush and fallen away in places. There was a stepladder always in the living room, almost a piece of furniture, next to a wall striped with paint samples. Clay climbed to the top and grabbed soggy fistfuls of plaster, let them rain down like cake. His body disappeared halfway into the attic. Once the hole was big enough for us both I climbed up to join him. Through the gable vents of the attic we watched the treetops sparkling December in the early dawn.

They didnÕt taste like anything, I remember he said. The tabs. The sun struck all of a sudden, drenching everything. We followed our shadows, wet inks slipping stainlessly across the bright ground.

On our way to the lake we stopped and watched with the cows. We could see their thoughts, slow jellyfish billowing undersea. Somewhere farther along we found two children, a boy and a girl next to a row of plastic mailboxes. The boy sat in a green wagon and the girl stood holding the handle. They stared through us, their eyes hungry fields. We pulled them along behind us for a while.

*

Clay kicks off his boots and we lift away our clothes and slide into the glowing water of the hot spring.

The sky in Idaho. Sky and sky and sky and sky. The mountains are like paperweights pinning down its edges. When I was little, I used to cry and cry every time I went to the doctor. My mom thought it was because I was afraid of the doctor, or of getting a shot, or of taking medicine. She never knew that I cried because there was a fish tank in the waiting room, and I hated how the fish never blinked. They stared and stared and their gleaming bodies slid through the water aimlessly.

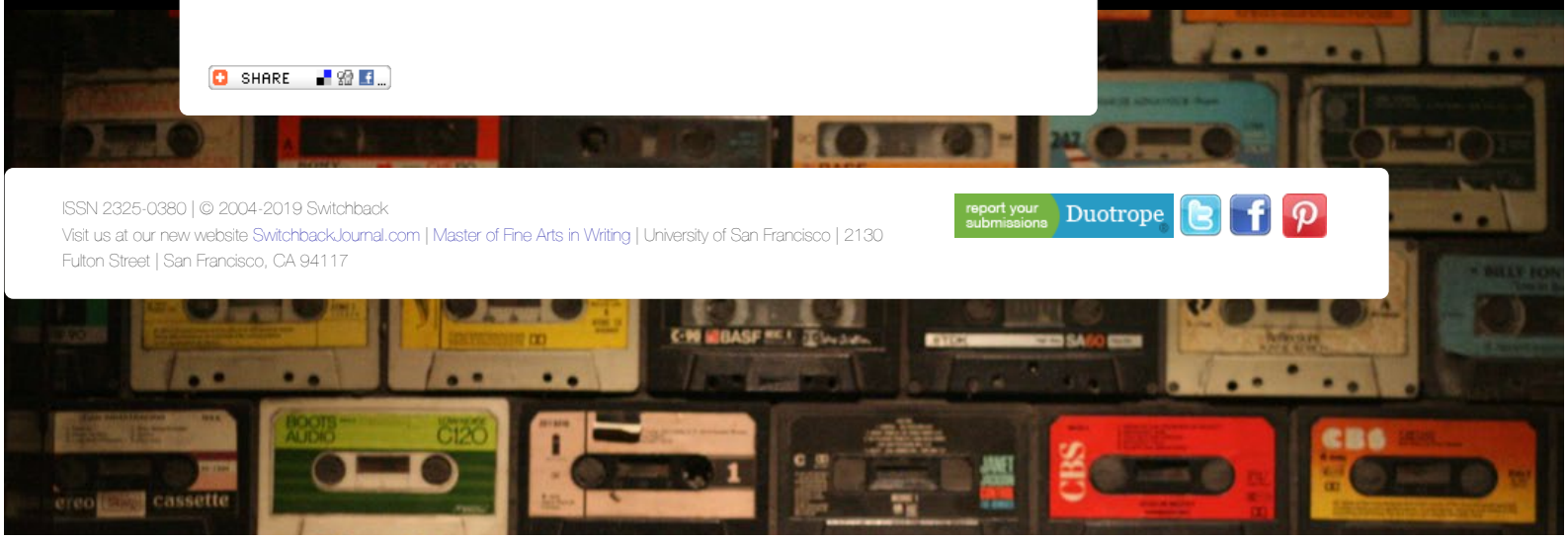
Being in Idaho under the unblinking stars made me feel like I had millions of fish eyes on me, like I was painfully giant and invisible.

ÒHow long will you be out here for this time?Ó Clay still spoke so softly sometimes, the fog of his breath streaming from his lips.

I sink down and lay my head sideways, dipping the right plane of my face into the surface of the water.

We watch the steam waft up around us and disappear into the deep black sky. I feel the goosebumps begin to prickle up between our skins, but I wrap his arms tighter around me.

Òl used to want to live in one of those little houses on stilts, you know, like the ones in Indonesia. Where it floods all the time but youÕre ready for it, youÕre part of it.Ó I close my eyes and try to imagine myself on an airplane, suspended somewhere above the clouds, hurtling home.



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Helen Lehman

Helen Reed Lehman is from San Diego county. She attended San Diego State University, earning cum laud honors with her degree, a double major, English and Theater. Besides writing stories and poems, Helen also works in theater. Like Annie Temple, she is a widow. Helen has two sons.

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Annie Temple and the Bear
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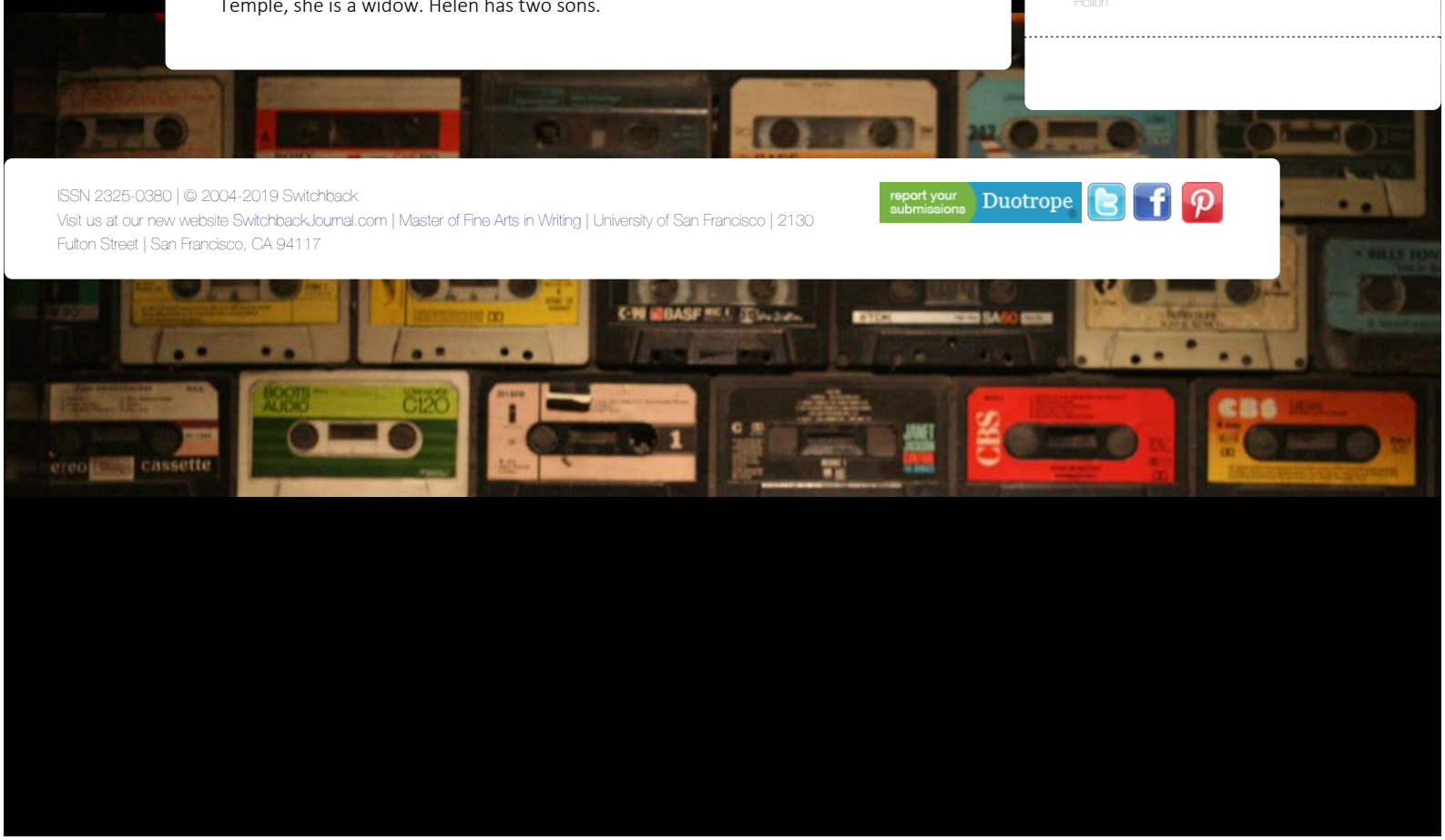


Annie Temple and the Bear

Helen Lehman

Annie Temple liked the bear at once. She thought, ÒMy, thatÕs a handsome animal.Ó

She was standing at the fence which separated visitors from the grotto where the captive bears had to live. It isnÕt known what the bear thought about Annie, but he stood up and looked at her.

The bear lived in a grotto with two others. They were brown bears, maligned by the name Ògrizzly.Ó The grotto had high cement walls, extending to the edge of a moat. The moat kept people and bears separate. Its walls had been painted to look like cliffs. They didnÕt look like cliffs. They looked like painted walls.

There was a pool in the grotto. The pool was too small for the bears to swim in, but they seemed to enjoy splashing in it.

Annie had come to the zoo to visit her niece, Eliza Thomas. Eliza was a veterinary technician. She worked with Dr. Sam Ennis. The lab assistant was Rob. They took care of hooved animals and primates.

Annie was the widow of Herb Temple. They were genealogists. They traced family trees back into the fog of the distant past. Herb said to prospective clients, ÒIf we donÕt find a kingÕs mistress or a famous buccaneer among your antecedents, sue us.Ó Annie missed Herb.

Gazing at the gorgeous bear, Annie told him, ÒYou remind me of my late husband, so IÕll call you Herb. Is it terrible, being confined in there, and having people stare at you, Herb?Ó

She ignored the curious looks from other visitors.

The charitable ones thought, ÒShe must be a researcher, finding out if bears can talk.Ó Others thought, ÒLook at that crazy woman, talking to a bear.Ó

Annie went to the laboratory where Eliza worked. She thought, ÒItÕs neat and squeaky clean, as it should be.Ó She noticed a stainless steel operating table.

Eliza said, ÒAunt Annie, IÕd like you to meet Dr. Sam Ennis. Dr. Ennis, Mrs. Temple.Ó Annie noticed that Dr. Ennis was as good looking as the bear. ÒAnd this is our lab assistant, Rob.Ó

Dr. Ennis said, ÒElizaÕs being so formal. My nameÕs Sam.Ó He reached to shake hands.

ÒIÕm Annie. ThatÕs such a lovely gibbon in that cage. HeÕs the color of a newly minted doubloon.Ó

Rob said, ÒHis nameÕs Golden Boy. HeÕs a favorite of ours. He had a hip replacement.Ó

Annie walked over to his cage. She said, ÒHello, Golden Boy.Ó Then she asked, ÒDoes he sing?Ó

Sam answered, ÒYes, certainly he sings. But not here, not away from his clan.Ó

Tony Alonso came into the lab.. Tony had flashy good looks. He did publicity for the zoo. Tony grinned at Eliza, ÒWant to go to lunch, lovely?Ó

Sam arched his back like an indignant cat. ÒEliza and her aunt are having lunch with me.Ó

Tony pretended surprise, ÒOh, itÕs you, Ennis. I didnÕt see you there.Ó

To Annie the men stood like tomcats, facing each other, then looking away in disgust, then staring again,cats do this mime just before they tangle in earnest.

Eliza stepped between them. She said, ÒYes, my aunt and I will lunch with Sam. Thanks anyway, Tony.Ó

ÒOK, please yourself. IÕm sure you and Ennis *do* please yourselves.Ó

ÒDonÕt talk to Eliza like thatlÓ Sam stepped around Eliza, making a fist.

Eliza soothed him, ÒOh, Sam, TonyÕs a paper tiger. His babble is worse than his bite.Ó

Annie, Eliza and Sam had lunch in a restaurant on the grounds of the zoo. Its dŽcor was jungle kitsch. Cartoonish zebras, okapis and leopards stood among papier mache palm trees of a bilious green. However, the food was good.

Sam told Annie, ÒVeterinary medicine has learned from medicine for people. We learned the technique to replace his hip. IÕm grateful.Ó

Eliza put her arm around SamÕs shoulder, and said, ÒSam and I are an item, Aunty. WeÕre in love.Ó

ÒSurprise, surprise."

Sam and Eliza went from lunch with Annie to SamÕs house for Òafternoon delightsÕ. Sam owned a house near the zoo. It was in an area that had once been desirable, but was marred by messy pepper trees, whose roots lifted and crumpled the sidewalks.

They undressed each other leisurely, not with the frantic haste of their first encounters. Sam gasped at the sight of ElizaÕs beautiful breasts. He kissed and fondled her nipples. She reached for his erection, and said, ÒWhat shall we do with this?Ó

Annie had gone to see the bear, after lunch. He trundled to the edge of the moat when he saw her.

She said , ÒHello, Herb.Ó She smiled at a kid, who stared at her, baffled by the woman talking to a bear.

Annie told the bear, ÒIÕm watching the dynamics of a triangle, Herb. Usually triangles intrigue me, but this one seems sinister. I think that Alonso is a goniff. She looked around her at the kibitzers. ÒGotta go now, Herb. The natives are getting restless.Ó

Tony Alonso had an office in an ornate, Spanish style building on the grounds of the zoo. He had taken his office manager, Shelly Davis, to lunch, in lieu of Eliza. Now they were at TonyÕs desk.

Shelly thought Tony was the handsomest, most intelligent man in those parts. Tony concurred with that opinion. He took advantage of ShellyÕs infatuation by bedding her. They used a day bed in a back room behind ShellyÕs office.

Annie and Herb Temple had been patrons of the arts. They also gave to causes they thought worthy. The zoo was one of those causes.. Tony Alonso gave them a certificate. He didnÕt remember. To be fair, Annie didnÕt remember him either.

Annie walked quickly from the parking lot to the bear canyon. It was a Monday morning, so there werenÕt a lot of nosy people to wonder why the woman wanted to talk with a bear.

ÒHello, Herb. I had quite a day yesterday. I lunched with Eliza and Dr. Sam. They *are* in love. I told you so. Dr. Sam is a mensch! That Alonso wanted Eliza to go to lunch with him. He and Sam crossed swords over it. Oh, Herb, a man in a uniform that says Zoo on it has come to stare at me. Guess IÕd better go. Bye, Herb.Ó

Tony Alonso stood in the bushes outside Dr. EnnisÕs lab, watching the door. He saw Ennis come out. Then Tony made his move. He knocked. Eliza came to the door. Tony pushed it open.

ÒHello Eliza.Ó

ÒDr. Sam isnÕt here, Tony.Ó

ÒI donÕt want to see him. I want to see you.Ó

ÒWhy?Ó

ÒCome on, Eliza! I wanted to take you to lunch---IÕll settle for dinner and drinks tonight.Ó

ÒNo, Tony. I wonÕt go out with you tonight. I wonÕt go out with you ever.Ó

ÒYou little bitch!Ó Tony grabbed Eliza roughly. She beat his back with her fists.

Rob, the lab assistant, walked through the back door. ÒGet away from her, you crazy bastard!Ó

Golden Boy jumped around in his cage, huffing as though he wanted to get into the action. Gibbons donÕt beat their chests like gorillas, but he looked like he would have, were he a different species.

Tony picked himself up, straightened his clothes, and tried to save face.

Eliza texted Annie, who was at the bear grotto. She told the bear an only slightly heightened version of ElizaÕs story. She didnÕt care if she was overheard.

Annie said, ÒI knew, Herb. I just knew that goniff was trouble. Wait till you what he had the chutzpa to do.Ó

Tony Alonso was dead.

He had been given a tranquilizer meant for horses. Shelly Davis knew it was used by Dr. Ennis on zebras and antelope.

Shelly Davis called 911. When the police came, she took the lieutenant to the room behind her office, where TonyÕs body lay on the day bed.

She sobbed, ÔTonyÑI mean Mr. AlonsoÑcame in to my office. He seemed to be drunk, but it was only three in the afternoon.Ó Through tears, she went on, ÒHe staggered in here, and collapsed on the bed. I was frightenedÉ.I called his nameÉno answer. I shook his shoulder. *Oh God, Tony, donÕt be dead!*Ó

Lieutenant John Fargo asked gently, ÒWho are you, please?Ó

ÒThe office manager, Shelly Davis.Ó

ÒMs. Davis, this is a crime scene. IÕ m going to have it cordoned off. My sergeant will bring you what you need from home, if you give him a key.Ó

The people who worked at the zoo saw that TonyÕs office was closed for police inspection. They got together to gossip about it.

ÒDid you hear about the fight at SamÕs lab? Tony tried it on with Eliza andÉ.Ó

Lieutenant Fargo interviewed Dr. Ennis, Eliza and Rob.

ÒMr. Alonso was killed by the injection of a horse tranquilizer. You use it for zebras and antelope, Dr. Ennis.Ó

Rob asked, ÒWhatÕs its name?Ó

ÒMy forensics guy says itÕs called equinomorph.Ó

Dr. Ennis frowned. ÒAlonso *was* a horseÕs ass, but I only use it for my hooved patients.Ó

Eliza called Annie.

ÒYou and Uncle Herb found dead ancestors---I want you to find someone---the murderer. Be a detective, Auntie.Ó

ÒWhat if I find evidence that Sam did it?Ó

ÒI would get a good lawyer.Ó

ÒYou donÕt think the police are competent?Ó

ÒLieutenant Fargo is OK. He thinks heÕs funny, though.Ó

ÒTell him what IÕm doing. I donÕt want to sneak around.Ó

ÒYouÕll do it, then? Thank you, thank you, Aunty!Ó ElizaÕs voice was full of relief.

ÒWho could have done this, who, besides you, Sam and Rob could get that tranquilizer?Ó

ÒWell, somebody could have been in the lab, when the meds cupboard was open. We donÕt leave it open often, though.Ó

Annie told the bear, ÒI went to see Lieutenant Fargo, Herb. He gave me the spiel about amateurs endangering themselves by messing in police business. WhoÕs messing? IÕm just helping.Ó

Rob whistled as he gave Golden Boy his breakfast of fruit and monkey chow. ÒHere you go, handsome.Ó he said. He looked over, to see Lieutenant Fargo in the doorway.

ÒRobert Hackman, youÕre under arrest, for the murder of Anthony Alonso.Ó

Annie looked around the room. It was a bleak chamber, in which inmates and visitors were allowed to meet. They sat at a long grey table, in chairs which made no concession to comfort.

Rob said, ÒI didnÕt kill him. Somebody beat me to it.Ó

Annie asked Rob, ÒWho did you have in the lab with you, just before Alonso was killed?Ó

ÒI donÕt want to tell you. She had nothing to do with his death, but you wonÕt believe that.Ó

ÒYouÕre being charged with murder, do you think you have a choice?Ó

Annie said, ÒWhat an awful place! Poor Rob. LetÕs get him out of there fast!Ó

She and Elizawere on the patio of the zoo cafŽ. It was still early afternoon. Annie had a fruit salad, like Golden Boy. She also had a glass of pinot grigio, not like Golden Boy. She said, ÒI must go see Shelly Davis, but first IÕll visit a friend of mone.Ó.Ó

Before she went to see the bear, she knew it was her obligation to update Lieutenant Fargo. He told her, ÒBe careful, Mrs. Temple. A lot of people know what youÕre doing. The killer might try to stop you.Ó

Annie knew that Shelly Davis had been allowed to go home, so she showed up at the apartment. She told Shelly that she was there to commiserate with her.

ÒI met Mr. Alonso only once, but he made an impression on me.Ó She didnÕt say what kind of impression.

ÒThank you for your sympathy, Mrs. Temple. I think you know that I wasnÕt just TonyÕs office manager. IÕm through with men. I was through with Tony.Ó

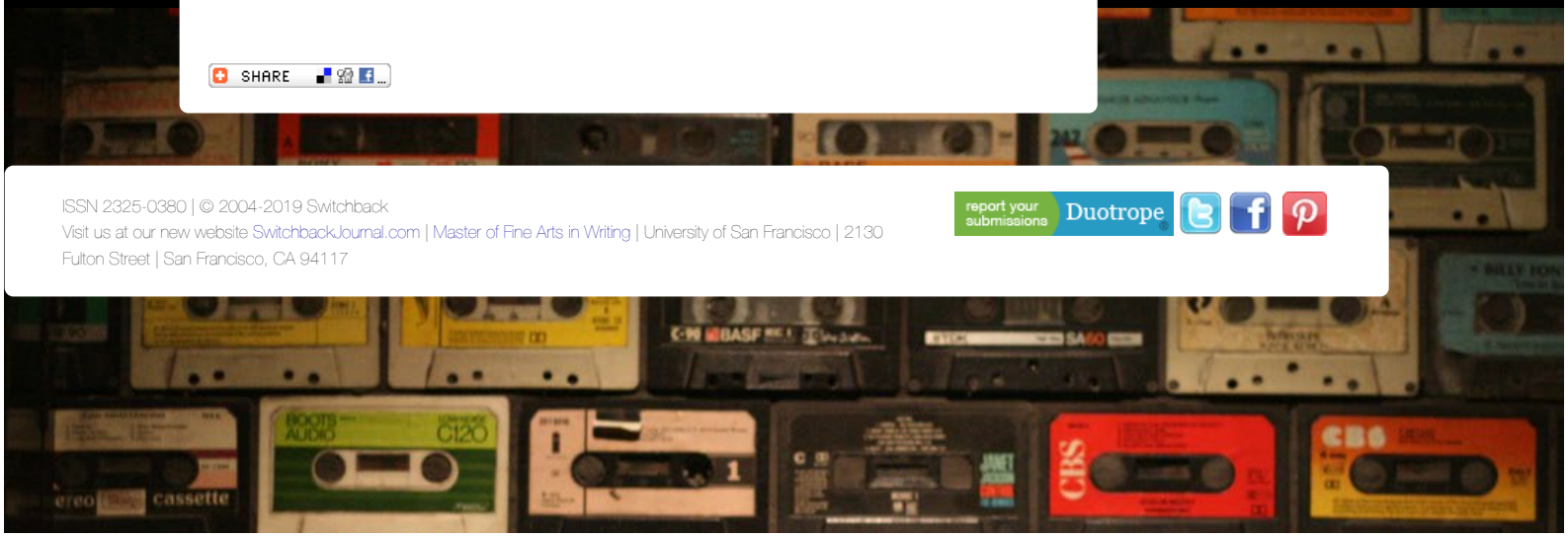
ÒHow did you get the horse tranquilizer, Shelly?Ó

ÒTony had it. ThereÕs a cupboard in the room behind my office. The stuff was in there. Tony said he had it Ôjust in case.Õ He meant to use it on a jealous lover, or an irate husband. I think my using it on him is poetic justiceÓ. Then Shelly cried out,Ól donÕt want to die in prison!Ó She took the hypodermic needle she had used to jab Tony from the folds of her tunic. She tried to stab her am with it.

ÒNo.Ó Annie gave Shelly a bear hug, keeping her from stabbing herself.

Annie was at the bear grotto again. She wanted to tell Herb what had happened.

ÒI did what you would have done Herb. I hugged her.Ó Then she said , ÒI have to go now, Herb. Bye.Ó She gave the bear a rueful little wave.



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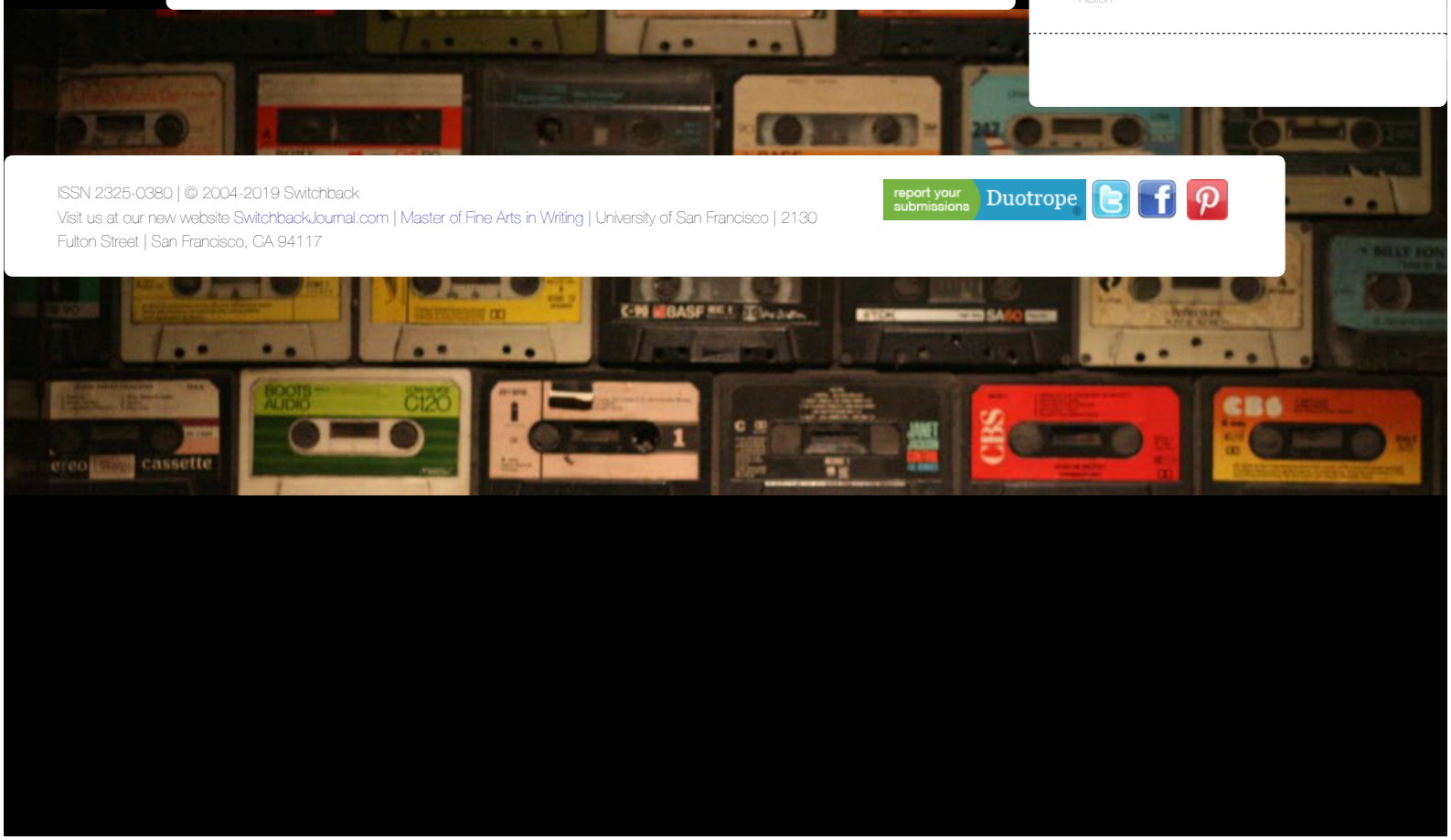

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Brothers

Ben DuPree

ÒRemember when we found that lizard?Ó Ryan asked.

ÒWe did?Ó Caleb asked.

The boys stood with their backs against the chain-link fence that enclosed the school yard. The other kids played tag on an adjacent lawn. It was recess. Ryan pointed across the yard to where oak trees with broad green leaves grew up a steep slope. After the trees came big homes and then the Santa Monica Mountains.

ÒWhen our class went into the hills on that nature walk,Ó Ryan said. ÒWhen Jimmy Wareth fell and hit his head?Ó Caleb asked.

ÒThat was before.Ó ÒAre you sure?Ó

ÒYes.Ó

Time confused Caleb. It moved fast when he played and slowly in class. His mom also told him he was nine, but he could not remember that many years.

ÒWe found it under a rock,Ó Ryan said. ÒCaught it and kept it in my pocket.Ó ÒI guess,Ó Caleb said.

ÒKicked over the rock and there he was. Just reached down and scooped him up.Ó Ryan punched CalebÕs shoulder. ÒIsnÕt that right?Ó

Caleb couldnÕt remember the lizard, but the more he squinted at the distant fence and trees the more he could picture the small creature thrashing as RyanÕs hands trapped it.

ÒWe brought it home and took it for a swim in the bathtub,Ó Ryan said.

The memory was built in pieces. The lizard was small and in the tub with them. Ryan churned hot water with his hand. Steam carried to an open window. The lizard struggled, its legs slapping wildly.

ÒSure,Ó Caleb said.

ÒYou liar,Ó Ryan said. ÒThat never actually happened. YouÕre such a liar. YouÕll say anything.Ó

Caleb felt heat on his cheeks and around his eyes. He bit his bottom lip. ÒSorry,Ó he said.

The bell rang. Kids groaned and began walking to classrooms.

Ryan hit Caleb again. ÒCome on you liar,Ó he said. ÒCanÕt stay out here forever.Ó

Ryan rushed ahead and joined the others. Caleb put his fingers through the fence and gripped it hard, focusing on the cold metal, taking deep breaths to keep from crying.

#

The year before, CalebÕs mom and RyanÕs dad divorced their spouses and married each other. After the wedding, the new family moved into an area of west Los Angeles called Brentwood Glen, near the 405 and the southeast end of the Santa Monica Mountains.

The new house was big and the color of the ocean. The boys had separate rooms on the ground level connected by a shared bathroom. Outside their windows were the backyard and a chain-link fence draped with ivy. Behind the fence was a slope that led up to a copse so dense the branches overlapped.

People often mistook the boys for brothers; they were both in the fourth grade, with matching buzz cuts and the same pale green eyes. This confusion vexed Caleb. While others focused on similarities, he considered the differences. Ryan walked fast on shorter legs. Ryan spoke quickly and loudly. Ryan liked stories about monsters, or pirates, or people who were lost.

When Caleb was unable to sleep, he lay in bed and traced worries across his mind. He wondered how

others could consider he and Ryan brothers when they were not truly related, and if families could be undone as quickly as they came together. If his mom could say ÒI love youÓ to Ryan, did that mean that, someday, she might love Ryan more? On those nights Caleb sometimes heard noises from RyanÕs room, like the other boy was moving around.

Caleb was sleepless the night after Ryan made up the story about the lizard. Part of him wanted to slip away to dreams, to forget. But he knew that sleep would bring tomorrow. He pulled his comforter up to his nose and formed sentences in his head. *Stop teasing me*, he could tell Ryan. *It hurts*.

That night, as he whispered pained words to his blanket, Caleb heard a scraping sound through the walls. It was brief and sharp, like metal against metal, followed by silence. He got out of bed. The room was still. He heard the scraping sound four times, and then it was gone. He wondered if Ryan also had heard the sound, but hesitated to knock on RyanÕs door. Tomorrow would be even worse if Ryan knew he was scared of the dark.

Caleb started back to bed when he saw a light out his window and a short figure moving through the yard. Caleb opened the window and leaned out.

ÒRyan?Ó

The figure turned. A beam of light hit CalebÕs eyes.

ÒWhy are you awake?Ó Ryan asked.

ÒI heard a noise,Ó Caleb said.

ÒGo back to bed.Ó

ÒWhere are you going?Ó

Ryan gestured toward the ivy-covered fence with his flashlight and put a finger to his mouth. ÒItÕs a secret,Ó he said.

ÒA secret,Ó Caleb repeated.

ÒAs in I canÕt tell you, mind your own business, go away. Secret.Ó

The boys stared at each other.

ÒAre you going to go crying to your mommy?Ó Ryan finally asked.

ÒWhat if I do?Ó Caleb asked.

#

Ryan ground his feet into wet grass. ÒPlease,Ó he said. The uncertainty in RyanÕs voice surprised Caleb.

ÒI wonÕt tell,Ó Caleb said.

ÒYou wonÕt?Ó Ryan asked.

CalebÕs legs and the tips of his fingers tingled. ÒOnly if you take me with you.Ó

Caleb watched Ryan climb the fence behind their house, and then he followed. The ivy over the metal was slick between his fingers. When he reached the top, he looked down. Darkness was everywhere. Caleb tensed as he looked for Ryan, but then he saw the flashlightÕs beam.

ÒHurry up,Ó Ryan said.

Caleb climbed down and they moved up the slope and into the trees. Ahead, the flashlight unzipped wood and uncertainty. Ryan moved like his feet knew how to avoid each root and rock. Caleb struggled to keep pace, often slipping to his knees. He grasped handfuls of cold dirt as he pushed himself up.

ÒCome on,Ó Ryan said.

Behind Caleb, darkness hid the way home. He fixed his eyes on Ryan, who looked impossibly tall ahead of him on the slope. His face was a blur except for his mouth.

ÒWeÕre almost there,Ó Ryan said.

Soon the trees thinned and they came to a wide lawn with short grass. Ryan turned off the flashlight. Caleb saw broad trees spaced evenly apart, holes filled with sand, a distant dirt path lit yellow-orange by street lamps, and a half moon alone above the trees.

ÒThe golf course?Ó Caleb asked.

Ryan walked to the edge of a nearby sand trap, pulled down his pants, and began peeing. ÒIÕm marking my territory,Ó he said. RyanÕs hands were on his hips and his feet were wide apart.

Caleb stood next to Ryan and pulled down his pants, too. He focused on the sand, but nothing came out.

ÒIÕm on an island,Ó Ryan said. ÒItÕs my island.Ó He poked CalebÕs shoulder. ÒYouÕre only here because IÕm letting you be here.Ó

Caleb nodded.

ÒThereÕs a sandy beach and there are coconuts in the trees,Ó Ryan said. ÒI pick them and eat them by the ocean. Everything is perfect.Ó

Caleb only saw the golf course. A breeze prickled his skin. He longed for his bed, for the stuffed bear that slept by his head, and for the safety of his blankets. But he was afraid to go back alone or to ask Ryan to take him.

ÒAre there monkeys?Ó Caleb asked.

ÒSometimes,Ó Ryan said.

The boys pulled up their pants. The moon and the lights from the path were at their backs.

ÒI was on a ship that hit a rock and started to sink, but IÕm a strong swimmer so it was okay,Ó Ryan said.

ÒWere you scared?Ó Caleb asked.

ÒNo way. People lost at sea always wash up somewhere. I ended up here, and itÕs great. ThereÕs a little creek where I can get water, and plenty of food. I sleep under the stars. When I close my eyes, I hear the ocean.Ó

ÒWhat do you dream about?Ó

ÒAll of it.Ó.

Caleb had trouble remembering his dreams. It made him feel sad, like pieces of himself were slipping away.

ÒYou wonÕt tell my dad, will you?Ó Ryan asked.

Before Caleb could answer, he heard movement behind them. He turned and saw the outline of a tall figure.

ÒWhat have we here,Ó a man said.

ÒGo!Ó Ryan shouted. ÒRun!Ó

Caleb tried to step back, but his feet were stuck. The man moved toward him.

#

Ryan crashed past trees. Branches raked his face and arms. He tasted blood.

The manÕs voice had been deep and slow, like how Ryan tried to make his own voice sound when he read scary stories aloud. And the manÕs face was hidden, part of the night.

He reached the fence behind his house and started to climb.

ÒHurry,Ó he said. ÒTheyÕll hear us.Ó

Ryan reached the top and jumped. His arms were wide, like he was trying to glide on the air. He landed on his feet. He turned, expecting to see Caleb climbing the fence. But Caleb wasnÕt there.

ÒCaleb?Ó

Ryan gripped the fence with both hands and watched the trees for movement, but there was no sign of Caleb or the man. Ryan looked back at the house. The windows were still dark. He could return to his room, wrap himself in his blankets, and forget about the man and about Caleb.

Ryan had been upset when his dad told him that he and Caleb would be brothers.

ÒHow can someone go from being a stranger to being family?Ó Ryan had asked.

They moved into a new house. RyanÕs real mom went away and was replaced by a woman who smelled wrong and said the wrong things. And she brought Caleb with her, who was constantly getting in RyanÕs way, asking to borrow his toys, asking to play.

ThatÕs when Ryan first visited the island. He jumped from a sinking ship moments before it disappeared under dark water. Then he was alone, floating on an ocean, trying to find land. It was night. The sea and sky were everywhere and empty. He thrashed against waves until his body ached. He was scared, but never doubted heÕd make it.

The island became RyanÕs safe place. Things on the island didnÕt change unless he wanted them to change. When he wasnÕt on the island, Ryan was often angry. He yelled at Caleb and

his parents. He got frustrated and broke things. He didnÕt pay attention in school or finish his homework.

RyanÕs dad sent him to a man in a tall building who worked in a dim room lit by small lamps. The man was thin and his forehead was covered in wrinkles. He asked Ryan questions in a quiet voice. Ryan sat on a sofa and told the man that he was tired of things changing. But he never told the man about the island, because he knew that the man would try to take it away.

The moon above Ryan was bright. He saw his reflection in his bedroom window, and that he was crying. He wished to be back on his island, for the man to disappear, for Caleb to disappear, and for everything to go back to normal, when he and his dad and his real mom lived in a house that looked down on the ocean, when they would walk a sandy path to the beach and Ryan would swim in warm water that was the color of the sky.

#

The man was tall and smelled like smoke. Caleb couldnÕt make out his face, but he imagined a mouth that searched for him as the man bent forward at the waist. The manÕs teeth would be massive and drip with saliva. The manÕs eyes would be the only light fixed on Caleb. And the last thing Caleb would feel would be the manÕs hot breath.

ÒLetÕs see what we have here,Ó the man said. A beam of light hit CalebÕs eyes. ÒBarely a mouse. YouÕre not supposed to be out here.Ó

Caleb squinted. The man didnÕt sound like a monster.

ÒWhatÕs your name, son?Ó the man asked.

ÒCaleb.Ó

ÒYouÕre trespassing, Caleb. Do you know what that means?Ó

Caleb shook his head.

ÒIt means this is a private place,Ó the man said. ÒLike if I were to walk around your house without your say-so. You wouldnÕt like that, would you?Ó

ÒI guess not,Ó Caleb said. The light left his face.

ÒOf course you wouldnÕt.Ó

As CalebÕs vision adjusted, he saw the man was older and heavyset, with a white beard that covered most of his face. The man wore a tan jacket zipped up to his chest and shoes that looked like tennis shoes, except they were black.

ÒLooks like the other kidÕs long gone,Ó the man said.

ÒThatÕs Ryan.Ó

ÒYou two related?Ó

ÒHeÕs my brother, but not my real brother. Our parents got married.Ó Caleb hesitated. ÒI didnÕt run because I thought you were a monster and I was afraid.Ó

ÒA monster?Ó The man laughed. ÒI havenÕt heard that one before.Ó

ÒItÕs dark.Ó

ÒI didnÕt mean to scare you. ItÕs my job to make sure people arenÕt causing trouble.Ó

ÒOthers come out here, too?Ó

ÒSometimes. Teenagers. Kids from UCLA. YouÕre the youngest IÕve seen.Ó

Caleb clenched his teeth and stared at the ground. The golf course was RyanÕs secret, but he had been forced to show it to Caleb. Was that like trespassing? And if others came to the golf course, did that mean that multiple people could have a secret kept in the same place?

ÒWhat were you doing out here?Ó the man asked.

Caleb wondered if others could discover secrets as easily as he had found RyanÕs, and whether Ryan would be extra mean because Caleb knew his secret. ÒI canÕt tell you,Ó Caleb said.

ÒNo?Ó

ÒItÕs a secret.Ó

#

Ryan was almost eight when he first went to the island. It was his first night in the new house. It was

raining; he lay in bed listening to drops hit his window. His room was bare because his toys and books were packed in cardboard boxes. He closed his eyes and tried not to forget how his room used to look.

Ryan had not believed that his mom and dad wouldnÕt be together anymore and that another woman and her son would come to live with them. Throughout the divorce and remarriage, he waited for things to go back to the way they were. But that first night in the new house, Ryan knew he was wrong. He hid under his blankets and hoped the sound of the rain would hide his crying. His eyes burned. The air around him was wet and close.

Then the tears stopped. Ryan felt like he had been transported. He saw that he was still in his room, but he also knew that he was in a different place and that he needed to escape. He left his bed and got dressed. The rain had slowed to a misty drizzle. He opened his window, went into the yard, climbed the fence, and stumbled through the wooded area behind the house. He felt an emptiness chasing him that would swallow him up if he slowed. The trees blocked the cityÕs lights and the clouds hid the moon. The emptiness was an ocean. It would be easy to slip beneath the waves if he lay down and closed his eyes.

Darkness became a pale light as he found the golf course. To Ryan, the light was a sunrise, and it was beautiful.

He stood in a sand trap and imagined he was on a beach. He kicked off his shoes and put his arms in the air. He felt like a survivor.

ÒI made it!Ó he shouted.

He looked back at the trees and saw the ocean. The house beyond was a memory, a ship beneath the water.

#

Ryan peered out from behind an oak on the edge of the golf course. Caleb and the man were close. Both were in a place where light didnÕt quite reach.

This was the first time the island was in danger. Ryan was mad at himself for not being prepared and for running when threatened. He blushed and remembered the darkness and the waves and his empty room on that first night. There were worse things to fear, he thought, and heÕd braved them all because he was strong.

If he wanted to save his island, he would need to do it himself. He knelt down and felt around until his hands found a rock. He picked it up. It was heavy.

#

ÒDo you have any brothers?Ó Caleb asked.

ÒThree of them,Ó the man said. ÒAlthough oneÕs not with us anymore.Ó

ÒWhere did he go?Ó

The manÕs eyes were heavy and sad. ÒHe died.Ó

ÒOh.Ó

ÒWe were young, like you. This was a long time ago. Back then we lived in Oregon, in a town outside of Portland called Troutdale. Do you know where that is?Ó

Caleb shook his head.

ÒItÕs north, far away,Ó the man said. ÒWe lived by a big river called the Columbia. Some nights, my brothers and I would sneak out after our folks went to bed and play by the water. WeÕd have us big adventures, floating on tubes from tractor tires and trying to catch fish in the near-dark.Ó

ÒThat sounds fun.Ó

The man smiled. ÒThat night things were good. It was just us. We were the kings of that river. We wouldnÕt have traded anything for it.Ó

Caleb tried to picture the man as a child, but he couldnÕt imagine him without his beard.

ÒKnow the feeling?Ó the man asked.

ÒI was just following Ryan,Ó Caleb said.

ÒI suppose that was me. I was the youngest by a couple of years, but my brothers had me along anyway. That night was our last one out, though.Ó

The man was quiet. His lips twitched, as if he wanted to talk. But then the words didnÕt come.

ÒMy big brother John was there, and then he was gone,Ó the man finally said. ÒI thought it was a joke. I

watched the water. Everything was black. We were laughing, waiting for him to wrap around our legs and drag us on down.Ó

Caleb was silent.

ÒAfter a few minutes, we got scared. We couldnÕt find him,Ó the man said. ÒSo we ran home and woke our parents. They called the police. By morning, seemed like half the town was out searching for him.Ó

ÒWhat happened?Ó Caleb asked.

ÒWe found his body later that day.Ó

ÒHis body?Ó

ÒHe drowned. He was so pale when they pulled him out of the water, not a hundred feet from where we were playing.Ó

For Caleb, fear was waiting for something to happen but not knowing if it would happen. It was an emptiness that bad things or monsters could fill up. Caleb wondered what it was like to be afraid of something so far in the past.

#

RyanÕs feet were cold because the water on his shoes had soaked through to his socks. He imagined himself standing on the beach at low tide, where the ground was slick with seaweed and bubbles. Ahead were Caleb and the man, standing at the place where water washes up to their ankles.

ÒNo!Ó Ryan shouted.

Caleb and the man turned toward Ryan, who held a rock over his head with both hands as he ran.

ÒRyan!Ó Caleb said.

Ryan closed in on the man and saw that he was massive; light and shadow cut diagonals across him. Maybe he was a pirate, with a rounded gut and a greying, bushy beard. Maybe he was a monster coming out of the dark. Maybe he had been on the island the whole time.

He threw the rock as hard as he could.

#

The man lay on the ground next to the rock. His eyes were wide and locked on Caleb. There was blood on the manÕs face.

ÒThere might be more of them,Ó Ryan said. ÒWe have to go.Ó

ÒMore?Ó Caleb asked.

ÒIÕm sorry I ran. I was scared.Ó Ryan took CalebÕs hand and led him away from the man. ÒBut I was brave in the end,Ó Ryan said. ÒI protected the island.Ó

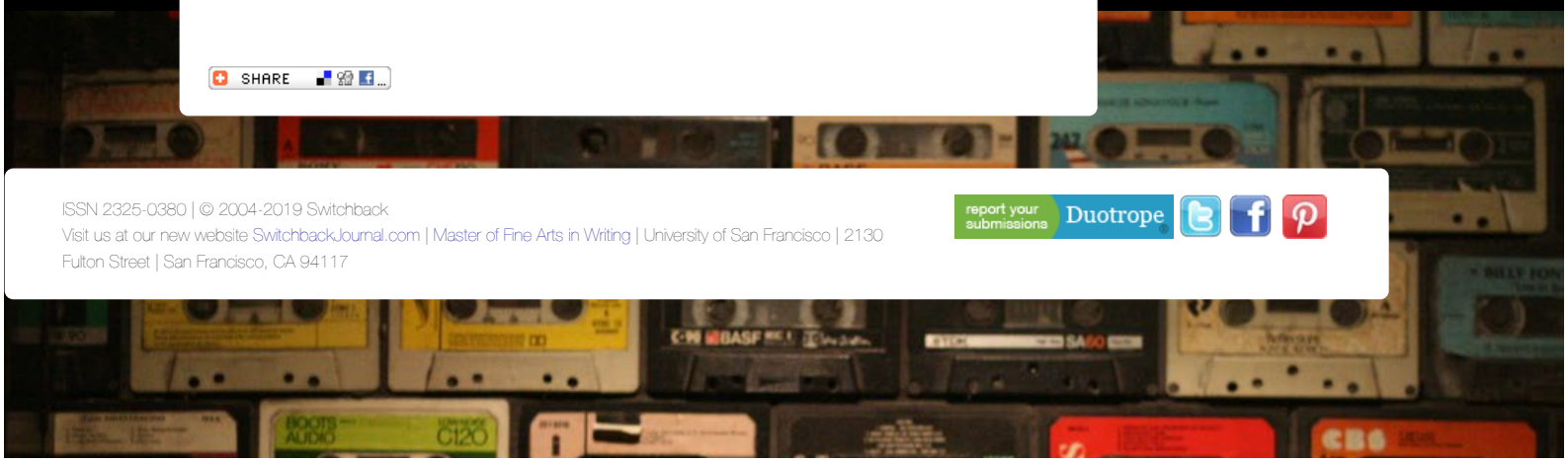
Soon they reached the trees between the golf course and the house. Caleb could no longer see the man.

ÒThis is my secret,Ó Ryan said. He squeezed CalebÕs hand until it hurt. ÒBut youÕll help keep it safe, wonÕt you?Ó

Caleb pictured the manÕs surprise as the rock hit his face.

ÒWonÕt you?Ó Ryan asked again.

Caleb wanted to break free and run, but RyanÕs grip was too strong.



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Contributions to Switchback

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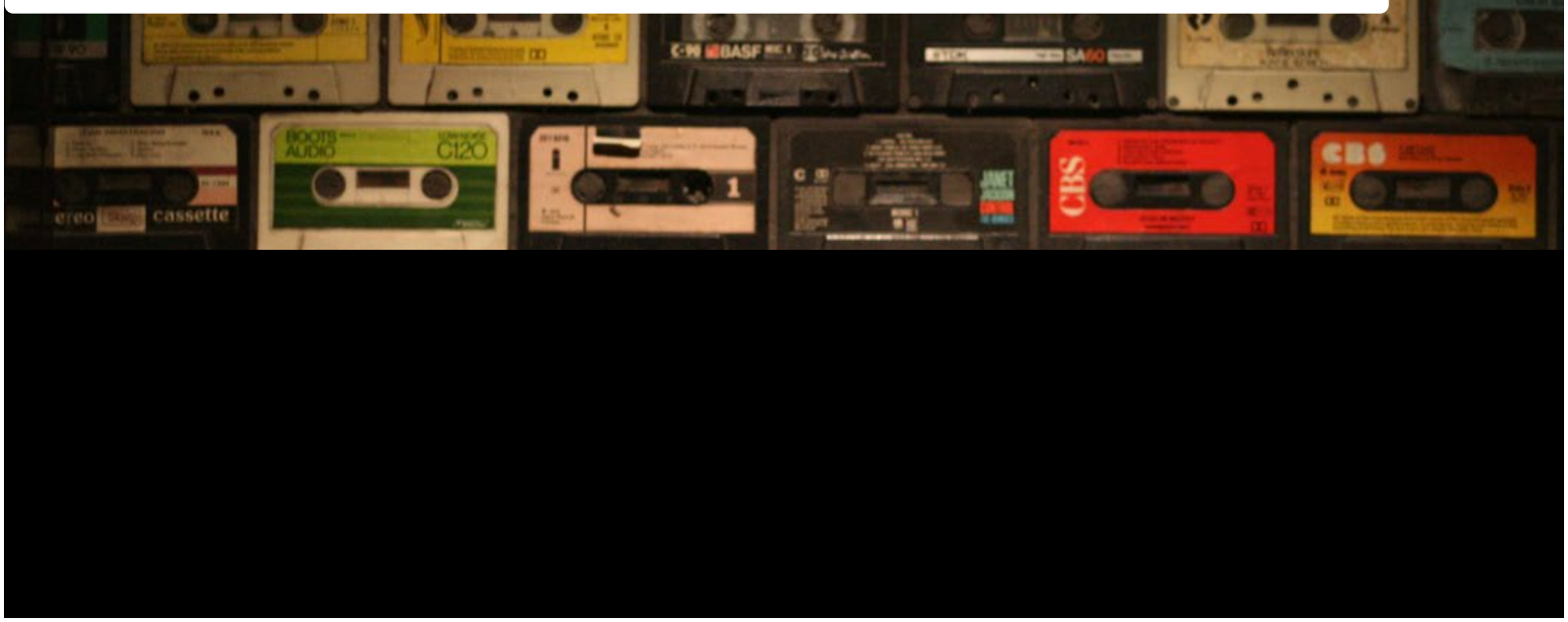


Borders

Jonathan Danielson

The morning after the law passed, I was already out of bed when Mom came in and turned on our light and told us it was time to go. I started pulling on my shorts, but she told me to put on pants because it was cold out. Fede hated getting up and groaned as Mom shook him. I didnÕt know how he had slept at all, Dad outside our window loading up our truck with his tools and MomÕs mattress and plastic garbage bags filled with our clothes and photo albums and anything else that would fit.

ÒFederico,Ó Mom said after Fede pulled his pillow over his head. ÒAhora.Ó She yanked off his sheets. She rolled them up and turned to me and said, ÒJavier, he better be dressed by the time I get back.Ó She only called me Javier when I was in trouble.

ÒFede, get up,Ó I said, sliding open our mirrored closet. Half my clothes still hung in my closet because there wasnÕtÕ room to take everything. I pulled down a t-shirt, but saw my Larry Fitzgerald jersey balled up in the dirty clothes on the ground, the white eleven cracked and peeling because I wore it so much. Outside, Dad tossed ropes over our stuff. The night before we had to come straight home from my Little League game and pack, and Dad was still in his coachÕs uniform and hat. Fede tucked his hands between his knees and buried his face in the mattress. ÒNow,Ó I said, putting on my jersey and a hoodie over it. "Or Dad's going to leave you."

~

After Dad finished loading what would fit, he showered and got dressed. His hair was still wet when he locked the front door. Our porch light was turned off even though it was still dark out, and our furniture and TV and toys were still inside where we had left them. Fede was asleep before we pulled out of the driveway, DadÕs window open so he could adjust his mirror and see around our stuff. SpongeBob barked in the yard because we didnÕtÕt have room for him in the truck. Dad said they left enough food for him until the pound came, and Mom nodded. As we drove away, Mom watched her mirror, at our house getting smaller and smaller, and every time we passed a streetlight I could see she was crying.

When we passed the Circle K, Mom asked Dad if he wanted to pull over and fill up, her voice cracking when she said it, but Dad said we had enough gas to get to Uncle NinoÕs. That he didnÕtÕt want to stop until after we crossed the border. On the highway we passed the turnoff for our school, then the turnoff for DadÕs work, then the Cardinals stadium, and after a while we were in the middle of the desert, the sun coming up behind us.

~

Fede finally woke up after he smelled the McDonaldÕs in Quartzsite. He said he was hungry. He was always hungry.

ÒNot now,Ó Mom said, looking over her seat at me like it was my fault he had said something. Dad drove with both hands on the wheel, his eyes on his side mirror. ÒTodav'a est‡ all'?Ó Mom asked, looking out her window behind us.

ÒWhatÕs going on?Ó Fede asked. He tried getting up to look, but I grabbed his pants and pulled him down.

ÒSit down,Ó I said. ÒAnd shut up.Ó

ÒDonÕt tell your brother to shut up,Ó Dad said.

ÒYa se est‡ moviendo,Ó Mom said. DadÕs hands tightened around the steering wheel.

ÒA copÕs behind us,Ó I whispered.

ÒCool,Ó Fede said, and he got up again. Dad didnÕtÕ say anything, so I unbuckled my belt and did the same. Our stuff in the back was in the way so I couldn't see anything. I turned around and looked in MomÕs mirror. The cop was passing the Mustang behind us. I thought he would keep going and pass us, but instead he brought his radio to his mouth.

ÒEst‡ hablando con alguien,Ó Mom said. Dad breathed heavily out of his nose. ÒVas muy r‡pido?Ó

Dad told her heÕd get pulled over anyway if he went any slower, and Mom said *donÕt say anyway*. The copÕs lights came on, red then blue. Fede put his hands over his ears and fell on his butt when Dad hit the brakes. The sirens were loud and then quiet as they passed. The cop pulled off at the next exit and raced toward the trailers and motorhomes in the distance. Mom started laughing. Dad didnÕtÕt even smile.

~

Twenty minutes later, Dad was praying for the truck not to run out of gas. Fede snored. When we came through the mountains, jagged and brown, we passed the turnoff for a rest stop and then crossed a bridge, the Colorado River shallow and green and gross beneath us.

ÒPuedes hacerlo,Ó Dad told the car. He patted the dash. ÒShhhhhhh.Ó

We passed the blue *Welcome to California* sign and came to a checkpoint where officers behind mirrored sunglasses waved us through. After the checkpoint, Dad pulled off onto a smaller road that ran alongside the highway. ÒPuedes hacerlo, puedes hacerlo,Ó Dad told the truck, and when we couldnÕtÕ see the checkpoint anymore we pulled over and parked in a dirt field. Mom said *s'guele*, but Dad said we broke down.

ÒAt least we made it to Blythe,Ó he said after he took his key out of the ignition. He pulled his cellphone from his belt and gave it to Mom. ÒCall Nino,Ó he said, and opened his door. Warm air filled the cab. ÒCome on,Ó he said as his leaned his seat forward. I crawled over Fede while he undid his belt, and the three of us got in a line and peed in the bushes, laughing at who could go the farthest.

~

An hour later, Uncle NinoÕs truck rumbled down the road, a cloud of dust behind him. Ò*La migra*!Ó he yelled after he parked and hugged my parents. He wore a white sleeveless shirt and tan lines ran across his biceps. He pulled a red gas can from his truck bed. ÒQuŽ pasa?Ó he said when Fede hugged him. ÒQuŽ tal Javy?Ó he said to me, and even from a few feet away I could smell his armpits.

ÒGood,Ó I said.

ÒBien?Ó he asked.

ÒBien,Ó I said.

ÒBieeeeeeen.Ó

While Dad counted out dollars from his pocket, Uncle Nino emptied the can into our tank. He wouldnÕtÕt take money from his big brother, he said. When he was done we got back in our truck and followed him past dirt fields and homes surrounded by chain link fences with plywood over their windows. At Uncle Nino's house we parked beside his three dead trucks in the empty lot next door. In the driveway, my cousins and their friends played basketball.

~

Uncle Nino stood on our back tire and untied the ropes holding down our stuff and yelled for Eduardo and Junior to put down the fucking ball. Eddie took one more shot and missed. He had gotten huge in the two summers since I saw him last, when we stopped on our way to Disneyland and stayed for the night. He was half a head taller than me now, and his hands were huge like baseball mitts. When Uncle Nino tossed down the ropes, Eddie grabbed my motherÕs white mattress and set it in the dirt.

ÒEn su cuarto,Ó Uncle Nino told him. He handed Junior a blanket that came undone and dragged on the ground. Dad handed me MomÕs pillows. Fede kicked rocks under the truck.

Inside, Aunt Yolanda yelled as Eddie and his friend tried to turn the mattress into the hall. Ò*Qu'tenlo del piso! Lo van a ensuciar!*Ó she said, her one had on her pregnant belly and her other pointing and directing. ÒMi hijito Javy,Ó she said when she saw me, and she hugged me against her stomach. ÒLes fue bien de viaje?Ó

ÒToo early,Ó I said, and Aunt Yolanda smiled sadly. Eddie gave the mattress another push and Aunt Yolanda yelled *Álev‡ntelo!* But Eddie got it to turn. His friend dragged it down the hall. The room was empty except for Eddie and JuniorÕs dresser and nightstand, their Laker posters and toys missing. Eddie and his friend dropped the mattress next to the closet.

ÒWhereÕs your stuff?Ó I asked. We had played PlayStation in the room the last time we were here, but now everything was gone. There was a hole in the wall above the dresser like someone had punched it.

ÒIn the garage,Ó Eddie said.

ÒWhy?Ó I put my motherÕs pillows on the mattress.

ÒBecause thatÕs where weÕre sleeping.Ó His friend pushed the mattress against the wall with his shoe. ÒWith you.Ó

~

Once everything was unpacked, I waited in the kitchen for Dad or Uncle Nino to tell me what to do next. Dad had taught me what it meant to be a good visitor in someoneÕs homeÑto always be helpful and always ready to helpÑ and I was trying to impress Uncle Nino and Aunt Yolanda with how responsible I had gotten since the last time we were here. Dad eased himself into a chair at the dining table and asked if there was any coffee left from breakfast. Uncle Nino brought him a beer. In the kitchen, Aunt Yolanda fried chicken at the stove. Without looking at my mom, who sat at the counter with her hands in her lap, Aunt Yolanda asked if there werenÕt more of my mother's clothes to be brought in from the truck. Uncle Nino twisted his beer and tossed the cap across the table and asked my aunt why she was asking questions she already knew the answers to. Eddie came out of the bathroom and grabbed the Cheetos and lime juice off the counter before heading outside. Dad nodded for me to follow Eddie, and then he told Uncle Nino about all the tools he had to leave in our garage. Uncle Nino took a sip of beer. The pan sizzled as Aunt Yolanda turned the meat and nodded sadly, her lips bouncing into brief half smiles.

I followed Eddie out front where Junior and his friends were playing basketball, but everyone stopped playing and

ran over to pull out dirty fistfuls of Cheetos once Eddie poured lime juice in the bag. We picked teams after that, me and Fede and Eddie and EddieÕs friend on one team, Junior and his friends on the other. Eddie didnÕtÕt pass the ball once to me or Fede. I took off my hoodie because I was tired of running around and having my Fitz jersey stick to my back with sweat. I tossed my hoodie over the tailgate of DadÕs truck, covering the magnet for his plumbing business back home. Eddie took a shot and the ball bounced my way. ÒCardinals?Ó he said like he was accusing me of something. Ò*Los Cardinales son maricones.*Ó

ÒFitz is like the best receiver in the NFL,Ó I said, picking up the ball.

ÒHeÕs all right, but he ainÕt done shit without Warner. Besides, youÕre in California now.Ó

ÒBig time,Ó EddieÕs friend said.

I dribbled the ball once in the dirt. ÒAnd whatÕs that supposed to mean?Ó

Eddie stepped toward me. ÒRaiders, baby,Ó he said, and pointed his chin at me when he said it. ÒNegro y plata.Ó I dribbled again, but he snatched the ball mid-bounce and ran to the hoop, laughing as he bricked it off the backboard. ÒBlack and silver, baby,Ó he yelled. Junior got the rebound and scored. We played another game and then another.

ÒEddie,Ó I yelled out by Uncle NinoÕs trucks when Edie still wouldnÕt pass, everyone else crowding under the hoop.

ÒP‡samela,Ó EddieÕs friend yelled, even though two guys were on him.

ÒI was open,Ó I said after the ball got stolen. ÒEddie,Ó I said, grabbing his wrist so heÕd look at me.

Ò*No me llames Eddie,*Ó he yelled. His palms dug deep in my ribs, and all my air pushed out of my chest. I was already on the ground before I realized he had shoved me, my hands scraped raw on the dirt of the empty lot. The net swished and snapped back after Junior took his shot. Eddie stood over me with his fists clenched until Dad yelled my name, him and Uncle Nino watching us from the porch. Blood clumped in the dirt on my hands as I got up and ran over. I thought Dad was going to ask what was going on, to get my side of the story first, but he just pointed at my chest and asked why I was wearing *that*.

ÒWearing what?Ó

He put his finger on my jersey where it said *Arizona*. Uncle Nino took a sip of beer.

Dad told me to take it off.

ÒTake what off?Ó I asked.

ÒNo me hables as',Ó he said, and grabbed my collar. I raised my arms and closed my hands so I wouldnÕt get blood on the inside. When it was off, Dad wadded it up and threw it in the dumpster around the house. He slammed the lid closed.

ÒWhyÕd you do that?Ó I yelled.

Dad slapped me. Eddie laughed.

ÒGo clean up,Ó Dad said.

ÒBut whyÕd youÑÓ

Uncle Nino told me I better not talk back anymore.

~

After dinner, Aunt Yolanda put on her soaps and me and Fede and Junior and *Eduardo*Ñ not Eddie/Ñsat on the couch in bored silence. When the episode was over, we waited for Junior or Eduardo to ask if we could change the channel, but no one did and another soap started. ÒTime for bed,Ó Mom said to me and Fede. Uncle Nino and Aunt Yolanda exchanged glances. ÒContinuar ahora,Ó Mom said, looking at them while scooting us toward the bathroom. After we washed our faces, Mom walked us to the garage. The fluorescent light flickered when she flipped the switch. The couch between Uncle NinoÕs tool drawers was pulled out and next to the refrigerator were two sleeping bags. Fede jumped on the bed and Mom told him to get off.

ÒThatÕs where your cousins sleep,Ó she said, straightening the sheets.

ÒBut theyÕre not going to bed yet.Ó

ÒShhhhh,Ó Mom said. She knelt and pulled back the sleeping bag for Fede. I took off my pants and got into the bag next to him. Mom kissed us goodnight and turned off the light, but the bulb still glowed above us. The concrete was hard beneath me.

ÒI wish we brought our TV,Ó Fede said in the darkness after Mom left. ÒThen we wouldnÕt have to watch Aunt YolandaÕs stupid shows.Ó I rolled over. The freezerÕs compressor kicked on next to my head. ÒMaybe we can get Dad to drive back tomorrow and get it, and then we can put it out here and hook up our Xbox andÑÓ

ÒDadÕs not going back for the TV,Ó I said. ÒOr Xbox.Ó

ÒWhy?Ó

Crickets chirped behind the freezer.

ÒBut why?Ó

ÒJust shut up, Fede,Ó I said. I rolled over hard, like I was showing the ground how much I hated it. I wanted to be back in my own bed, even if I did have to share it with Fede. I wanted to watch our own TV and play Madden, even if it was three years old. I wanted to play against Dad, who always let me play as the Cardinals even though they were his team too. Who took us to every home game because we had season tickets in the end zone. I kicked off my sleeping bag.

ÒWhere are you going?Ó Fede asked when I pulled on my pants. ÒMomÕs going to be mad.Ó

ÒIÕm going to pee, all right?Ó

Out back, the kitchen window was open when I creeped around the house, Uncle NinoÕs voice and Aunt YolandaÕs soaps coming through the screen. A doctor told someone *su padre siempre estar'a en un estudo de coma*. Uncle Nino told Eduardo to grab two beers from the fridge. Hunched over so I wouldnÕt be seen, I went toward the gate for the front yard, but Eduardo appeared in the kitchen window, his back to me as he opened the fridge. I froze as glass bottles clinked together. I didnÕt move until he let the door close and went to Uncle Nino and

my dad at the dining table. The handle for the gate dragged against the metal pole. On the TV, a lady cried about her fatherÕs condici—n.

Out front the dumpster was next to the garage. I had to keep the lid open with one arm and lift a bag of trash with my other to get the jersey from underneath. The mesh was wet with chicken juice and coffee grounds. Gently, I lowered the lid and shook out the jersey and shoved it in the bushes until I could clean it off and hide it. I went back through the gate and stopped to pee, so I wouldnÕtÕt lie if Fede asked, because Fede always knew when I was lying.

On the other side of the window Uncle NinoÕs voice told Dad that Uncle Ricky was always looking for people to work for him in Fresno, but it might be a few weeks until then. Aunt YolandaÕs soaps went to commercial. Aunt Yolanda told Eduardo and Junior it was time to go to bed. Eduardo argued until Aunt Yolanda yelled at him. I wanted him to shut up so I could hear what Uncle Nino and Dad were saying, but I missed the next part and only heard that Uncle Nino would call Uncle Ricky in the morning. Until then, Uncle Nino said, he could get Dad a job in the fields with him.

With my thing in my hand, I stood waiting for Dad or Uncle Nino to say more about

Fresno or Uncle Ricky, who wasnÕtÕt really an uncle but we called him that anyway, but then Eduardo said, ÒYou hold it that long, youÕre playing with it,Ó and when I turned around he was watching me through the kitchen window.

~

The next morning Dad and Uncle Nino left before anyone woke up. Mom said theyÕd be back in the evening and for me not to worry and to go play with *mis primos* until then. Eduardo rode his bike with Fede on his handlebars, and I rode JuniorÕs bike with Junior on the handlebars, even though the bike was too small for me and my knees hit my hands every time I peddled. We rode past the canal and radio tower, apartments complexes and empty fields, the RV park until we were at the river, dropping our bikes next to the concrete beam for the highway onramp, a mural of America half covered in graffiti.

Except for Eduardo, who stood with his arms crossed over his Kobe jersey, we kicked off our shoes and ran barefoot in the sand. Junior and Eduardo shouldÕve been at school, we all shouldÕve, but Uncle Nino told Dad *no siempre tenemos familia visit‡ndonos*, and what was the point of enrolling us with everything up in the air?

ÒCan we go swimming?Ó Fede asked, and he threw a rock in the river.

ÒIn the summer, yeah,Ó Junior said. He skipped one out to the middle of the water. ÒWhere would you even swim?Ó I threw a rock toward the truck stop and hotel on the other side. Toward the *Welcome to Arizona* sign along the highway. Toward the mountains we had driven through on our way here. ÒOur pool back homeÕs bigger.Ó

ÒItÕs better than your pool,Ó Eduardo said.

ÒYeah, in the summer the waterÕs like up to here,Ó Junior said, pointing to his feet.

I threw another rock and it splashed where the other had landed.

ÒSo we canÕt go swimming?Ó Fede asked.

ÒItÕs too cold now,Ó Junior said. He picked up a rock and then another, then walked along the shore like he was searching for only the right ones to throw. ÒBut when it gets warmer, yeah.Ó

ÒBut you wonÕt be here,Ó Eduardo said. ÒWhy not?Ó Fede asked.

ÒCuz youÕll be in Fresno. Dad said so.Ó

ÒWhatÕs Fresno?Ó Fede heaved another rock and the splash got his shorts wet.

ÒItÕs ghetto there,Ó Junior said. He thumbed through the rocks in his hand, pushing certain ones to the ground.

ÒFive-five-nine,Ó Eduardo said. He said ÒBulldogsÓ and barked.

ÒWhatÕs that mean?Ó Fede asked.

Eduardo laughed. ÒShit son, you donÕt know now, youÕll never understand.Ó Junior said it was the gang there, and that they were lame. ÒYouÕre lame,Ó Eduardo said.

ÒIs it far?Ó I asked. JuniorÕs rocked skipped five times before sinking.

ÒYeah man, itÕs far.Ó

ÒSan Francisco far,Ó Eduardo said. He barked.

~

When Dad and Uncle Nino came home that night, me and everyone were shooting hoops by the streetlight at the end of the driveway. Dad got out of the truck slowly, his face and arms dusty and sunburnt. Each step he took was heavier than the last.

ÒWhere you been?Ó I asked after I ran to him.

Uncle Nino laughed and said Dad had just gotten soft plunging the toilets of white people. Dad handed me a tarp and nodded for me to follow Uncle Nino, who headed to the garage. When everything was brought in, Uncle Nino showered, and we watched cartoons until he came out with a towel around his waist, the black hairs on his chest wet and stuck to his skin. He took the controller from Eduardo and changed the channel. On the news people held Mexican flags and Arizona flags and signs with that said ÒNo SB 1070Ó and ÒYes SB 1070,Ó and they chanted and screamed at each other.

ÒYouÕre lucky you left there,Ó Uncle Nino said, changing the channel. ÒNo se puede vivir all‡.Ó On the other couch, Eduardo nodded. Next to him, Junior picked his nails. Fede watched the steam from the pan that Aunt Yolanda stirred.

ÒI want to go back,Ó I said as Uncle Nino flipped channels to a commercial for a car dealership in Indio. When the channel didnÕt change, I turned to Uncle Nino. He was looking at me like he had never seen me before.

ÒQuieres regresar?Ó he asked.

ÒItÕs better there,Ó I said. Eduardo snorted.

ÒBetter?Ó Uncle Nino said, his eyebrows lifting. He stuck out his lower lip and nodded. Aunt Yolanda stirred the pan and said, Òleave him alone Sergio,Ó but Uncle Nino said *no, no, no,* like it was no big deal. Eduardo watched us instead of the TV. ÒWhyÕs it so better?Ó

ÒI dunno,Ó I said. I thought about our house and about my friends and Little League team, but I didnÕt say any of that because I didnÕt want Uncle Nino to think I wasnÕt grateful for him letting us stay. ÒIt just is,Ó I said.

ÒJust is,Ó Uncle Nino said. He nodded. ÒBecause your friends there? Tu maestra and stuff? You got a novia we donÕt know about?Ó

ÒNo,Ó I said, and I snorted like Eduardo had. ÒItÕs just better.Ó

ÒSolamente mejor,Ó Uncle Nino repeated. He took his feet off the coffee table and leaned toward me. He squinted, as if to see me better, his wet hair falling in his face. ÒIf itÕs so better,Ó he said, Òthen how come they donÕt want you?Ó In the kitchen, Aunt Yolanda said *Sergio* the way she says *Eduardo* when heÕs in trouble.

~

The next morning I lay on the ground in the garage and listened to Uncle NinoÕs truck rattle over the curb and head onto the road before I kicked off my sleeping bag. I stepped over Fede and then tiptoed past Junior and Eduardo on the pull out. Eduardo stopped snoring when I opened the door.

Outside, the sun hadnÕt risen but an orange glow hugged the bottom of the sky. I went around and quietly opened the gate. I pulled my jersey from the bushes and it was crunchy and covered in ants. I laid it on the ground and unwound the hose and sprayed it, then tucked it back in the bushes so it would dry and I could hide it under my sleeping bag before Dad got home. I snuck back in the garage but the wind took the door from of my hand and slammed it against the house. Fede pushed his face in his pillow and groaned as the garage filled with light. Junior covered his face with his blanket. Eduardo didnÕt move.

Later, the wind blew worse and the whole garage shook and woke me up. Junior and Fede stirred when I tiptoed past them, but Eduardo was awake and staring up at the ceiling, his hands behind his head. Outside, the wind kicked up dust and I pulled my shirt over my nose. When I reached into the bushes, my jersey wasnÕt there. It wasnÕt in the yard, and it wasnÕt across the street. I ran into the garage, Junior telling me cut the shit and go back to bed, but I grabbed my shoes and went out front and grabbed JuniorÕs bike. My knees hit the handlebars so I dropped it and grabbed EduardoÕs bike instead. I took off into the fields, riding the canal, searching for any sign of red. The wind carried a plastic bag into the sky, swirling and twisting until it was gone.

~

When I got back, everyone was eating breakfast.

ÒWhereÕs my bike?Ó Eduardo said. He held his cereal spoon like a club.

ÒCome and eat,Ó Mom said, standing as I came in. I told her I wasnÕt hungry and went out front. A few minutes later, Eduardo and Junior and Fede came out. ÒNice shot, *ladr—n*,Ó Eduardo said when my shot hit the rim and bounced toward the house.

ÒIÕm not a thief,Ó I said. I kicked the ball out of the bushes.

ÒYou stole my bike,Ó Eduardo said. ÒSounds like a thief to me.Ó

ÒI didnÕt steal your bike,Ó I said. ÒI brought it right back.Ó

ÒLetÕs just play,Ó Junior said. He tried swatting the ball out of my hands, but I dodged him.

ÒNo juego con ladrones,Ó Eduardo said. ÒBall.Ó

ÒNo,Ó I said.

ÒSo now youÕre stealing my ball?Ó

ÒI was playing with it first.Ó

ÒItÕs my fucking ball,Ó Eduardo said.

ÒYo, technically itÕs my ball,Ó Junior said. ÒCan we just play?Ó

ÒIÕm not playing with thieves,Ó Eduardo said. ÒBall.Ó

Fede said I didnÕt steal anything because, look, thereÕs your bike right there.

ÒC‡llate pelado,Ó Eduardo said. ÒThe brother of a thief is just as bad as a thief.Ó

ÒDonÕt call him that,Ó I said, and I threw the ball at Eduardo as hard as I could. He caught it in his stomach.

ÒDonÕt tell me what to do,Ó he said, and he threw it back just as hard. I caught it as he charged. I thought he was going to tackle me and we were going to wrestle like every other fight I had fought in school, but he punched me instead. I fell and he got on top of me, punching and punching until I jabbed my finger in his eye. He yelped and I got on him. I raised my fist, and when I was about to bring it down on his eye, already pink and bruising, Mom sprayed us with the hose. Fede stood next to her, his arms around her leg. Aunt Yolanda yelled as she wobbled our way, her belly cradled in her hands. In the driveway, Junior shot the ball off the backboard and got his own rebound.

~

I was made to sit at one end of the couch and Eduardo the other, and we werenÕt allowed to look at each other as Aunt Yolanda watched her soaps. When our fathers came back, Dad dirty and exhausted, we had to stand and say what happened. Uncle Nino slapped Eduardo, two, three, four times, then yelled for him to go to the garage. Dad lowered himself in the recliner and told me to go play, but then Eduardo came back inside, his eyes red and watery, the one I poked green around his cheek.

ÒYou left this in the bushes this morning,Ó he said, and threw my jersey at me. ÒYouÕre welcome.Ó

~

What was I doing with that, my dad asked. Why was I fishing garbage from the trash? He expected an answer. ÒI donÕt knowÓ was not an answer. Look at me, he yelled, and he got out of the recliner with a speed I did not expect. QuŽ es esto, he said, and I yelled I wanted to go home, and he yelled that home was with my mother and brother and him.

I yelled I wanted to go back to our house and school and he yelled that that place did not want us, so we would not want them. He tore the jersey from my hands and grabbed the collar and ripped it down the middle, the eleven becoming two separate ones. I screamed but it stopped nothing, and he threw the jersey at my chest and told me to make sure it stayed thrown away this time.

~

I didnÕt cry until I was outside and the air conditioner on the roof kicked on and made a metal scraping noise that was loud enough so no could hear me. At the end of the driveway, the streetlight turned off. When I opened the dumpster, the smell was so bad that I could taste it. I tried to think of a way to fix the jersey, to get Mom to sew it

when Dad wasnÕt around, or learn to do it myself. At the bottom of the garage door, the fluorescent light seeped through the weatherstripping. Behind it, EduardoÕs rap blasted from the radio on Uncle NinoÕs workbench, Eduardo singing along, saying bad words Dad would never let me listen to or say back home. The music stopped and Aunt YolandaÕs voice started yelling and Eduardo yelled, *ÒYo no lo puto aqui,Ó* and Aunt Yolanda slapped him. She slapped him again and then the light turned off, leaving everything, Uncle NinoÕs dead trucks, DadÕs truck, EduardoÕs and JuniorÕs bikes, the mountains on the other side of the river, in the glow of the moon.

~

I peddled EduardoÕs bike past the radio tower and RV park, my arms in the sleeves of my jersey which blew behind me like a cape. I cut over to the path for the bridge, but stopped before the onramp. The checkpoint was lit up like a prison. A police car was parked on the side of the bridge, its lights flashing where it had pulled someone over. I rode back under the overpass and dropped EduardoÕs bike in the dirt near the mural, red then blue then red again from the police lights bouncing off the river. Except for the lights, the water was motionless. Still and shallow. I picked up a rock and threw it, and could tell by its ripples that it landed almost on the other side. Almost on the side with the truck stop and mountains and our house a few hours behind them.

I took off my jersey and laid it on the sand. I took off my shoes and tied the laces together, then took off my pants and shirt and folded them, just like Mom had made me when we packed. I took off my underwear. I stacked everything neatly inside my jersey, my body shivering in the air. The coldness of the sand burned my feet and knees as I squatted and tied the jersey together. I dangled my shoes and jersey bag over the handlebars of EduardoÕs bike. I walked the bike to the waterÕs edge and put one foot in, but gasped and stepped back. The water was colder than the sand ever could be, and it burned my skin and crushed the bones inside my toes. I stepped from foot to foot until I could feel them again. At the check point, the brakes of a semi hissed. On the bridge, the siren of another police car beeped as it pulled up behind the first.

I would warm up on my ride home, I told myself. I would be so hot biking that I would appreciate the cold until then. I would have a whole closet of warm dry clothes ready to wear once I got there, SpongeBob barking when I rode up the driveway. I would turn up the heat all the way until Dad and Mom and Fede drove back to get me. I could make them stay, and we would never again sleep in Uncle NinoÕs garage. We would sleep in our own beds and watch our own TV and go to our own games with our own stuff in our own home. I closed my eyes and stepped forward, the water rising up my shins, knees and thighs, the freezingness stealing my breath when my waist went under. I wanted to cry. I wanted to turn back. Another step and I lifted the bike on my shoulder. Two more steps and the water was above my chest and the bikeÕs handlebars and my jersey bag and shoes. I tried lifting the bike higher but it was too heavy, and then the weight lightened and the handlebars emerged and my clothes and shoes were gone. Another step and the ground disappeared and I tried to go back but couldnÕt, my feet kicking in search of anything, the bridge and police lights drifting farther away, my head titled back to keep my mouth above the water, the weight of the bike harder to hold, and when I touched the ground something popped under my foot and pierced through my numbness. My mouth filled with river when I screamed. Bubbles swarmed around my face, and I finally had to choose between me or the bike, and I let go of the bike and swam toward the surface.

Very quickly I made it to the other side, my foot floating behind me, my arms and shoulders and lungs burning from the swimming. I hopped out of the river on one leg and fell, the ground rocky and without sand. My body shivered too much for me to catch my breath. In the moonlight, I could see the shimmer of a curved piece of green glass, like from Uncle NinoÕs beer bottles, in the bottom of my foot. I tried to pull it out, but it hurt so bad that I couldnÕt even touch it.

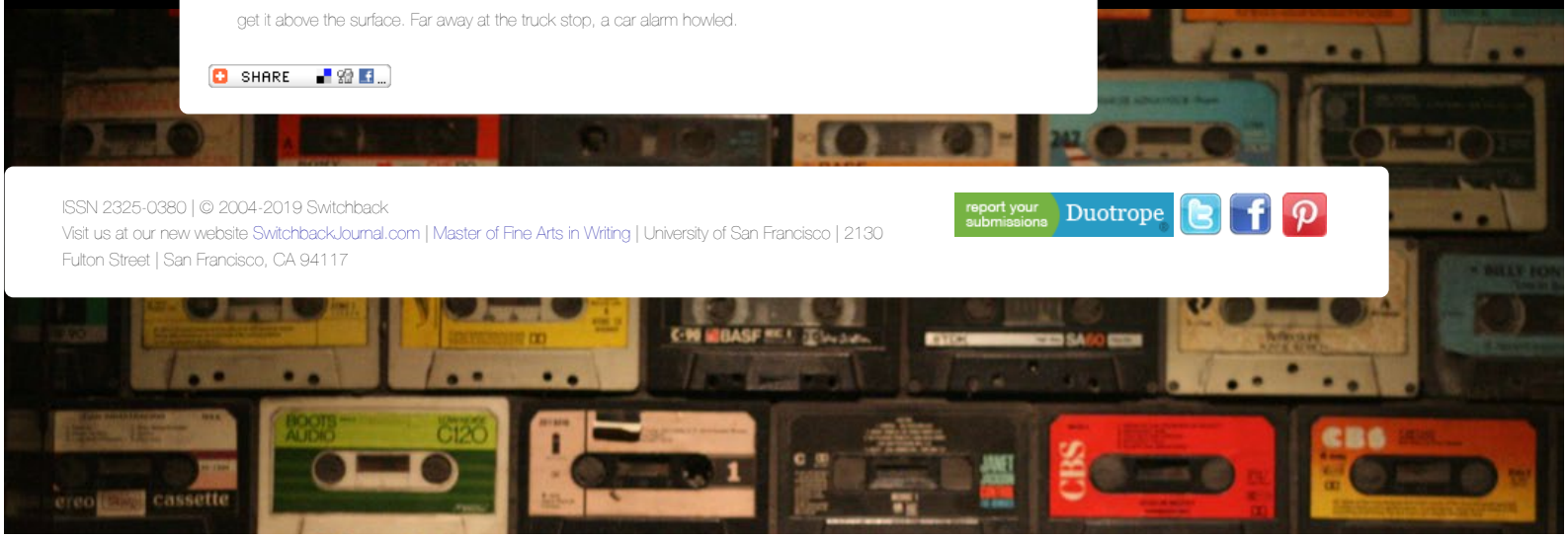
ÒMom,Ó I yelled, knowing she couldnÕt hear me. On the other side of the river, the lights of homes and streetlights made a halo in the sky. I tried calling for Fede, the letters repeating in my teeth, my heart keeping pace.

ÒMom,Ó I yelled again.

In the moonlight the river moved quickly, and the stars reflected themselves in the calm middle, the stars stretching from one end of the sky to the other in only the distance between shores. Even if I swam across and walked back, I would not have my clothes, and I would not have EduardoÕs bike, and I would still have the glass in my foot which left a stain in the dirt and throbbed the more I warmed up. I would not have anything. But I had nowhere else to go.

ÒDad,Ó I cried.

Still shivering, still out of breath, I crawled back into the river, the water warmer than it was before. As the lights of the checkpoint and police cars drifted farther away, I raised my hand above the surface and took my first stroke, my arm sore and stiff the way Dad was when he came home from the fields. I wondered if Dad would be sore in the morning or if he would wake up and feel like nothing had happened. If he would wake up and be ready for the fields with Uncle Nino, or Fresno with Uncle Ricky, or wherever we would have to go. I reached out in front of me and my hand sunk when it entered the darkness. I reached out with my other arm, but it was so heavy I couldnÕt get it above the surface. Far away at the truck stop, a car alarm howled.



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