



Preview

Issue:

*Tradition
vs. Experimentation*



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Contributors

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Editorial Team

Managing Editor:

Rosita Nunes likes to start things.



Randy Varney - Doll Parts

Switchback is a dream manifested thanks to a dynamic crew. Published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (essay), *Occam's Razor* (poetry), and *Tattoo Highway* (interview, poetry and short fiction), she completed her MFA in Writing at the University of San Francisco in 2004.

Technical Editor:

Alex Davis graduated from USF's MFA in Writing program in 2004. He prefers adversarial pastimes, like reading, writing, and programming.

Associate Editors:

Marian Stone is a native of the Bay Area and a member of USF's MFA in Writing class of 2004. She currently lives in Oakland, CA, which serves as the setting for her unpublished novel *Your Basic Man*. The locations where the guns and bodies are buried are real.

Stephanie Dodaro is a second year student in USF's MFA program. She is working on a book of non-fiction stories set in North Beach.

Chellis Ying received her BA at Kenyon College, continuing her studies at USF's MFA in Writing program. Chunks of her life went missing when she was infected with the traveling bug. Her work has appeared in *Traveler's Tales*.

Marisela Orta is an amateur astronomer, geologist, historian, videographer, photographer, film connoisseur and tango dancer. Marisela is an avid fiction reader, but does not write it. Marisela is the Poet in Resident of *El Teatro Jornalero!* and is currently working on the completion of her first play. Marisela's poetry has appeared in *Red River Review*, *Curbside Review*, *BorderSenses*, *Pomona Valley Review*, and *Traverse*, and she has a forthcoming essay in *26* magazine.

Faculty Advisors:

Stephen Beachy (Content Advisor) is the author of two novels, *The Whistling Song* and *Distortion*. His novellas, *Some Phantom* and *No Time Flat*, will be published by Suspect Thoughts Press in 2006. He has been teaching at USF since 1999.

Chris Brooks (Computer Services Advisor) is Assistant Professor of Computer Science. He received his BA/JBA from the University of Wisconsin, his MS from San Francisco State University in 1997, and his PhD from the University of Michigan in 2002. His areas of interest include multiagent systems, information economics, electronic commerce, machine learning.

Contact by email:

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Preview

[Alex Davis](#)

Tra di tion. One way of thought & act to pass the generations. Its passing down. As they say manner, mode, method, style. A building bit of culture. A body of precepts, mind "time-honored" practice. Entrust; deliver; hand over; betray. All these gifts dowries. Antidotes. As you please render, pardon, surrender, vend. For the fire of lobster thermidor... Pandora.

Ex per i ment. Control at test & show known truths, exams of green ideas, experience untrieds. To tentative or innovative act. I'll try or learn trying. The Empiric. Attempt--lead over, press forward--risk. And fear danger; peril/pirate.
The Trial.

The writer types of anthropologist—my card: all humans, all times, all dimensions of "humans"—still digs up arrowheads and watches dances and splices decaying texts. Sets chain weights of love triangles of first principles of old stones. The stones are sometime symbols. To try to know peruse; preserve; leave alone. Eventually the story I read becomes the story only of what people do when watched through that narration. Then to speak to them again we need another.

tradition is the link	experiment is this?
tradition is the spiral	experiment is controlled from
tradition is of man	experiment is to investigate what affects the
tradition is carried on	experiment is working
tradition is tradition	experiment is designed to examine the effects of
tradition is the key to longevity in an institution	experiment is doomed
tradition is timeless	experiment is launched into orbit
tradition is deeply ingrained in the people	experiment is
tradition is passed	experiment is booked using the web
tradition is our foundation for progress	experiment is failing
tradition is passed from father to son	experiment is approved
tradition is all job's fine speeches	experiment is the detection of dark
tradition is rich	experiment is to determine the amount of
tradition is joe dimaggio patrolling the outfield	experiment is to
tradition is a hardwood floor laid in strips or set to form an elegant geometric pattern	

experiment is designed to help you to understand the tradition is the greenhouse for those people who need maximum amount of growing space

experiment is necessary in tradition is the customs established by communal experience

experiment is variable geometry tradition is your comfort

experiment is to examine the tradition is equal with scripture

experiment is launched in israel tradition is inerrant or inspired as it does say about itself

experiment is performed by physical tradition is a fallacy that occurs when it is assumed that something is better because it is older

experiment is put on hold tradition is not fully expressed in external statements or practices

experiment is to measure the surface tradition is the illusion of permanence

experiment is an tradition is slowly dying out

experiment is to obtain the tradition is born

experiment is twofold tradition is also flourishing once again among the laymen

experiment is a tradition is great but i prefer another big rock beer

experiment is related to 1 tradition is a second way in which god's teachings are expressed is also the answer to the question

experiment is human

(gearteeth source text retrieved with googlism.com)

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Notes from the Editors

Dear Reader:

Welcome to the premiere issue of *Switchback*, the first online literary journal of the University of San Francisco's MFA in Writing program. We hope you enjoy this first issue and thank you for your interest. *Switchback* would not be possible without you.

Our theme for this issue, **Tradition vs.**



David Booth - The New Me

Experimentation, is evident in the work we are publishing. It is also reflected in the difficult but rewarding process of creating an online journal. As an infant magazine, we are in the midst of creative play, taking on this relatively new form of publishing to craft our statement. We're experimenting with the number and length of pieces, the architecture, rhythm, flow and sound, visual presentation, content variety, and order—many of the areas of craft one considers when creating a single piece of writing. Whether you label this end product as being more experimental than traditional, or vice versa, the reality is that it has been a marriage of both worlds.

We had lengthy discussions about the name for the journal. *Switchback* won out because it represents our philosophy of fostering ongoing discourse. At USF, the conversations in MFA in Writing classes spark exchanges on craft and the state of literature, and are critical to the development of our work. A *switchback* zigzags on a path that leads to a higher place. Ideally, our journal is not just about moving back and forth between two ideas. It is a journey that moves us to greater understanding, a journey that inspires us to write, and to explore the ideas that fuel our writing.

Each issue of *Switchback* will include writing on a theme, the beginning of a conversation within our literary communities. We invite you to join the conversation. You will notice a comments link on the masthead. We await your thoughts on the theme of "Tradition vs. Experimentation," as well as ideas raised by the work we have published. We are also interested in your

response to the look of the magazine, its functionality, and overall texture. And finally, we are eager for new topics for future conversations.

Be candid, be kind, be constructive, be passionate, and be part of the team that evolves this magazine into a real conversation.

What are your burning thoughts? What ideas do you want to explore?

Sincerely,

The *Switchback* Editorial Staff

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[Tiff Dressen](#)

Sign

Would a bird
if it did not have
a beginning if it

instinct did not have a nest to examine what is
optimism if it cannot build

for confidence what bird
would begin
rest.

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Tiff Dressen

Tiff Dressen was born and raised in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She received her undergraduate education from the amazing Benedictines and recently completed her MFA in Writing at the University of San Francisco. She's a physics junkie and works at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

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Making it New: Some Thoughts on Innovation

Lisa Harper

A journalist friend of mine argued recently over dinner that the innovations he cares most about, those that have had the most relevance to his writing sensibilities (he is deeply concerned with the sound of language, the pleasure of syntax, the shock of an image, and the wit inherent in an original turn of phrase, as much as he is with the journalist's perennial search for the fresh angle, the new story), are those that stem from an attempt to get nearer to the truth of speech. Hemingway, Henry Miller, Charles Bukowski, he said. They didn't see the language they spoke in the literature they knew, and they set out to set it down. In the opening pages of *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller wrote, (and this my friend recited from memory), "This is not a book, in the ordinary sense of the word. No, this is a prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty . . . what you will. I am going to sing for you, a little off key perhaps, but I will sing. I will sing while you croak, I will dance over your dirty corpse." In fact, I think this Miller sounds a little like Walt Whitman, who wrote:

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,
.....
Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured,

Whitman, too, was accused of obscenity. Yet it's significant that both writers were first dedicated students of their craft. Whitman was a journalist, and self-educated, but he read voluminously, and he regularly attended opera and lyceum lectures. Miller, himself, admitted in a 1962 interview that his early work took on "all the tones and shades of every other writer that I had ever loved. I was a literary man, you might say. The literary had to be killed off. Naturally you don't kill that man, he's a very vital element of your self as a writer, and certainly every artist is fascinated with technique. But the other thing in writing is you." Like Whitman, Miller had to reject what he saw as the conventions of "art" and traditions of the "book" as received and familiar forms. He had to write—or sing—the song of himself and no one else's. But first, he had to know what those traditions and conventions were.

My friend also cited those contemporary writers whom he affectionately termed the Vulgarians—Dave Eggers, David Sedaris, Augusten Burroughs—and argued that one of the things they are trying to do is write the way a generation now sounds. You can prefer the Vulgarians or not, but they have undoubtedly given us something new—the particular voice of a particular generation rendered in a particular style.

David Lodge calls this kind of narration, which aspires to the quality of the "spoken" rather than the "written" word, skaz—from the Russian word suggesting "jazz" and "scat." But Lodge is also quick to point out that such narratives are in fact deeply artful and consciously employ literary devices (repetition, slang, exaggeration, syntactic manipulation, etc.) which make written language appear to be spoken. Such language may appear "vulgar" or "vernacular" but, at its best, will be consciously crafted, will have an art and poetics as studied as any more "traditional" writer—many of whom, like Hawthorne or James, were deeply innovative in their time. Even Zora Neale Hurston might be considered a practitioner of this kind of innovation, since she championed the imaginative and figurative richness, the linguistic

virtuosity of the speech of rural African American communities she knew and studied as an anthropologist. It was a community and a speech seen nowhere in the literature of her time, but which accounts for much of the linguistic brilliance and emotional depth of her work. Hers was an innovation which has earned her an enduring place in American letters, but which also contributed to her decades of obscurity. But this is where the matter of innovation gets murky. For successful innovation can never simply be a rejection of traditional forms and conventional language.

For instance, we might consider (as my friend and Lodge do) that the "original" Vulgarian is J.D. Salinger, whose narrator Holden Caulfield speaks in the teenage vernacular of his moment. Yet Caulfield's roots are, of course, deeply planted in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, which was itself a masterful bid to write in a new, colloquial American voice. Indeed, writers from Hemingway to Russell Banks have cited Twain as the "true" beginning of American literature. And here it becomes unclear whether we are in the realm of tradition, or innovation, or, more likely, a tradition of innovation. At moments like these, it is easy to see innovation as the loyal if wild child of tradition, and we can also begin to understand how innovation becomes tradition.

But, of course, setting down an original voice is only one of the ways in which writers innovate. In attempting to represent an original view of language and experience, writers also confront problems with received forms, with linguistic and generic conventions that fail to represent accurately or fully the truth of their experience, or which are inadequate to their material. These formal problems might manifest on the level of the sentence. Gertrude Stein, for instance, wrote:

The comma was just a nuisance. If you got the thing as a whole, the comma kept irritating you all along the line. . . . So I got rid more and more of commas. . . . The other thing which I accomplished was the getting rid of nouns.

Stein was not interested in mangling prose for the sake of mangling, but because the conventional sentence, with its ordered syntax and rule-governed punctuation, was woefully insufficient at conveying her sense of time as a continuous present—a moment after a moment after a moment. Whether you think Stein's experiment succeeds or fails, the crucial thing is to know that her innovation sprang from a deep and studied understanding of the problems of the conventional form and use of the sentence, of the limitations and possibilities of language.

These kinds of problems manifest on the level of structure and form, as well. Take, for instance, Sarah Orne Jewett's small, eccentric masterpiece of prose, *The Country of Pointed Firs* (1896). Not quite novel, nor yet a collection of short stories, essayistic in its impressionistic and peripatetic approach to its subject (but nevertheless fictional), it documents in exquisite, lyrical prose a season in a rural community in Maine. The book is inhabited by characters and steeped in episode—certainly things happen to these people—but the book contains no plot nor offers any conventional conflict or character arcs. Indeed, it is a book so quiet that it can be hard for the modern reader to identify it as interesting, much less as innovative. Yet in several ways the book represents altogether new uses of fiction. In its meditative, reflective tone, its reportorial, even anthropological instincts, its unflinching and unflinching look at the marginal, lives of women, its celebration of women's knowledge (of children, the land, the community), its resistance to conventional notions of plot and story, *Pointed Firs* offers the reader a deeply innovative narrative. Heavily indebted to the regional or "local color" writing so popular at the turn of the nineteenth century, her book still reads as something new and beautiful. Indeed, Jewett's advice to the young writer, Willa Cather, is revealing:

Write it as it is, don't try to make it like this or that. You can't do it in anybody else's way—you will have to make a way of your own. If the way happens to be new, don't let that frighten you. Don't try to write the kind of short story that this or that magazine wants—write the truth, and let them take it or leave it.

Jewett's advice is instructive, if deceptive in its simplicity. For to write it as it is, suggests that the writer has an original vision of the world, and to write the truth but not in anybody else's way, suggests that innovation emerges from the problem of representing this truth accurately in received language and forms. If Jewett's fiction didn't (& still doesn't) look like conventional fiction, it is because she needed to find a new form, a new mode of narration, and an innovative method of handling character in order to show the truth of the world she knew. I doubt she set out consciously to "make it new" as much as she set out to maintain a scrupulous fidelity to the truth of her reality. And since literature is composed of language and form, these elements necessarily bent to the original force of her mind. She didn't discard convention so much as she transformed it.

So, I think that much of what we take to be innovation emerges from the writer's inability to represent her truth in the forms and with the language that she has inherited. To put it another way, writers tend to innovate when they finally, fully understand the limitations of traditional language and conventional forms. When they see that their way of understanding the world cannot be represented in any of the old ways. When they look everywhere for mothers and fathers and find none. So I think that writing is not "made new" simply for the sake of newness, but because a deep and abiding problem confronts the writer. From this point of view, convention makes innovation possible. Tradition is the doppelganger of innovation, the shadowy double that haunts the margins of even the most experimental work of art.

Sometimes, those works that seem on the surface to adhere to traditional, received forms, can be among the most challenging, the most deeply innovative. Clarence Major's recent book, *Come by Here: My Mother's Life*, is one such book. Major, also an accomplished painter, has been called "possibly the most celebrated postmodernist African American writer," and his works include twelve books of poetry, nine novels, as well as works of fiction and criticism. He has penned radically experimental works, like *Emergency Exit* and *My Amputations*, as well as more seemingly conventional novels, like *Dirty Bird Blues* and *One Flesh*. The breadth of his voice, and the depth of his experiments with form and language are astonishing.

On first glance, *Come by Here* appears to be a rather conventional memoir: the story of a young woman of mixed race (also the author's mother), who "passes" for "white" in the early part of the century. The narrative voice is colloquial, and the story takes the form of Inez telling her the events of her life to her writer-son. The narration feels easy and familiar and clearly owes much to the traditions of oral storytelling. Inez's story is at times dramatic, always compelling but conventional in its story arc. Taken at face value, the book is a straightforward document of an (extra)ordinary life.

And yet, the book is not a memoir in the ordinary sense of the word. First, it is a first person memoir, but the narrator of the book is not the author. So who is really telling this story? The narrator is at once a real person and a linguistic construct, and this symbiosis between writer and narrator raises challenging questions about the relationship between memoir and fiction, the writer and his subject. Second, the book aspires to the quality of speech, and it achieves this goal magnificently, capturing all the nuances and colloquial phrases of Inez's voice. But it is not a record of her speech, but a representation of it. Third, Inez's story rejects the conventions of the "tragic mulatto," a fictional figure who pervades the literature of the Harlem

Renaissance, and is Inez's fictional contemporary. Yet Inez not only fails to repeat the conventions of her plot, but resists her psychology as well. Thus, Major quietly launches challenges to both the form and content of received conventions.

So while *Come by Here* may be first and foremost a compelling story, it is also a formal and linguistic experiment. Dedicated to telling fact, it is also a book that exists primarily between its covers, in a language and in a form that creates the illusion of reality. And, ironically, it is this illusion that allows Major to record the truth of his mother's life. "I chose the memoir form," he writes in the preface, "because it allowed a forum for the truth. In it, the larger truth of her experience could be filtered from the facts and preserved in a way not available in either [the novel or the biography]." This ability of the book to inhabit and transform tradition, to complicate a genre as familiar and established as the memoir, is, I think, the mark of true innovation. It is also a sign of a writer who has mastered his craft, and who knows how to make the same old notes sound absolutely new.

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Lisa Harper

Lisa Harper teaches nonfiction and fiction in the MFA program at the University of San Francisco. She received her MA in Creative Writing and PhD in American Literature from UC Davis. She has published critical essays on the formal innovations of Emily Dickinson and William Butler Yeats and is currently completing a memoir, entitled *INSIDE OUT: A narrative of pregnancy and other transformations*.

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I, Chimp

[Nathan Grover](#)

Somewhere, cooped up between the walls of a worn metaphor, a chimpanzee stoops over a typewriter. Ook, tap . . . ook, eek, tap, tap . . . Given enough time, a scientist explains, this chimpanzee will eventually bang out the works of William Shakespeare. This is to illustrate that the most unlikely scenario, even life on this planet, is possible given an eternity to play itself out. Though this chimpanzee/typewriter metaphor seems much more feasible with someone like Burroughs than Shakespeare, let's run with it anyway. Let's say that one day our tired little friend reels from his typewriter a word perfect, immaculately punctuated, pristinely formatted manuscript of *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*. He's holding the eloquent verses in his awkward gnawed hands. Is it Shakespeare?

Along the path to *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream* the chimp also produces many lesser works, among them this very essay. How does this essay read differently once you know it's only the random jabbings of an illiterate ape? Note how these lines transform before your eyes, from the literary musings of a grad student to an epic struggle of one chimp against incalculable odds.

In Jorge Luis Borges' story, *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, Menard stays up nights crafting and re-crafting "the most significant writing of our time", ironically a verbatim copy of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Of the two *Quixotes* Borges says, "the second is almost infinitely richer." After all, the prose of a 17th century Spaniard has a completely different meaning when it comes from a 20th century Frenchman.

It really does matter who writes what we read. Stories don't just happen; they come from some place. A story is a product of the views, experiences, and sensibilities of the writer. The writer and the story inhabit the same world. The source, like plot or character, is an important clue through which we derive meaning from a story.

For many writers this idea has been a departure point from traditional narrative. Under the heading of meta-fiction writers continue to undermine the story's neatly self-contained world. Take John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* for instance, where running side by side the plot is a commentary by Barth on the craft of the very story we're reading: conventions of italicization, methods of characterization, theories of incremental perturbation. We see the girders and trusses of the proverbial funhouse i.e. the story, stripped bare and the writer peeking through at us. We recognize that *Lost in the Funhouse* is not just a story, it's Barth's story, a product of his imagination and craft. Traditional narrative, what John Gardner calls the "continuous, vivid dream" has been completely disrupted, and the reader is in for a fitful sleep.

Another meta-fictionist tactic, and one with special appeal to our Chimp-speare dilemma, is the self-insertion of the author into the text as a character.

At first glance we might think that Kurt Vonnegut loves talking about himself. (And really, who doesn't?) His first few books, while zany and profound don't stray far from the "continual, vivid dream" concept of the traditional novel, but it's not long before he waxes autobiographical with *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969). Later he surpasses even autobiography. In *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), Vonnegut steps out of a Plymouth Duster and into the final scene, setting free his famous character, Kilgore Trout, like a penitent slave owner.

The narrative spotlight must've warmed him some because we see more and more of Vonnegut in his books thereafter. *Timequake* (1997) is a book about the trouble he had writing a book called *Timequake*. *God Bless You Dr. Kevorkian* (1999) is a series of interviews conducted by Kurt Vonnegut in the afterlife, bouncing ideas off the likes of Mary Shelley, Isaac Asimov, and our chimp's mentor, William Shakespeare. The presence of Vonnegut as a character in his stories, much like Barth's parallel commentary, exposes the story as a contrivance. The story becomes self-reflexive—the story is about the story now, endlessly complicated, like two mirrors reflecting opposite one another.

Self-insertion has its theoretical merit as well. It's a tactic by which writers tackle the heavy-weight literary issue of authority. "In our age reliability is always a critical issue in any narrative, political, ideological, fictional, or otherwise," says Alyce Miller in her essay, "A Container of Multitudes." "Contemporary readers [are] no longer satisfied with being preached to or openly manipulated by an 'author' in the intrusive way our nineteenth-century counterparts were." With this post-structuralist notion readers now look up from Dickens', "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" saying, "Oh was it now?" and, "Says who?" We depend on multiple reference points, like triangulation, to describe our world more accurately.

The honest point of view, the only one to which a writer can claim any authority, is her own. We are happy to see a writer come clean as she implicates herself in the fictive lie. Her story is more obviously the product of a writer, admittedly subjective, not an attempt at objective reality which we all know to be a hoax.

Writers have inserted themselves into their stories to different effects. Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* is an interesting example from the past few years, because even my non-bookish friends have read it. In the beginning of the novel, Yann Martel has found himself in the French quarter of India trying to hash out his second book when he finds a man with a story that will "make you believe in God." The origin of the story (which we assume is true) blurs with the story itself. Where does the non-fiction end and the fiction begin? This tension creates a heightened suspension of disbelief (which may very well be important in a book about a boy whose first mate is a hungry tiger). When I talk to my friends about this book, I see their nostrils flare and sense their quickened pulse, just the way I felt when faced with the possibility of believing this crazy miraculous story. In Martel's case, inserting himself into the story provides a new reading experience and heightened pleasure to the reader.

For writer Robert Glück, inserting himself into his fiction is more than a trick to liven things up, it's his ideal. In his collection of short stories *Denny Smith*, the main character is always Robert Glück: Robert Glück parting with a lover, Robert Glück in his garden, Robert Glück taking in some porn. When questioned at a recent USF reading about the motives behind this form (coined "New Narrative"), Glück said he sought to "make the personal political." Like recreating the dinosaur from one small bone, he becomes a test case by which the greater society can be observed. In a story like "Forced Story: Conviction," a very real Robert Glück is inserted into a very surreal plot to steal gardening tools. He simultaneously captures the intimacy of memoir while speaking at the high volume of fiction. Thus Glück exposes the story, all stories really, as mixtures of fact and make-believe. What we do know to be true about this story is that it's all Robert Glück. Made up or not, it is his experience of the world. We can finally stop differentiating between how much of this story is the author and how much is the story. There really is no difference.

Seeing that stories are so intimately tied to their tellers, we also see that the scientist's chimpanzee/typewriter metaphor fails. Given an eternity the chimp

would NOT write Shakespeare, though it be word by word the same. But fortunately, he would've created something much better. All hail that chimp. He is no hack. That dedicated ape has added something fresh and exciting to the canon of literature, something heretofore missing: not just Shakespeare, which we already had, but a chimpanzee's experience writing Shakespeare.

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Nathan Grover

Nathan Grover is a writer and musician living in San Francisco. He is currently a candidate of USF's MFA in Writing program, and Associate Editor at *Pleiades: A Journal of New Writing*.

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Wiser Than Evening

[Abeer Hoque](#)

I swallowed and melted into oblivion. But what a rusted uneasy oblivion it was. I didn't hide as I said I would. Some hand of god or primal instinct made me leave the roof, ask for help. It was beautiful up there. On the very south west corner, the wind was amazing and that late afternoon sunlight. Perfect.

> Wed Jun 17 23:35:01

It feels heavy
All those blue killjoys in
my stomach

I suppose it's alright
I have plenty of memories

6:41 am

She awakens slowly. She's in a giant

metal tube. It's some kind of scanning machine. She drifts back into an uneasy sleep.

Maybe I'm not that sad.
I only cry for one second instead of two.
Should I take two pills instead of one?
Would that halve again my pain?

9:18am

This time, when she wakes up, she can clearly see a man's face very close to hers. His eyes are filled with light. He says brusquely, "What did you take?"

Silence, and then a hoarse whisper, "Sleeping pills."

"Do you know what kind they were?"

"No."

"How many did you take?"

"32."

"Why did you take them?"

"So I'd sleep 32 night... Why are you here?"

"We're here to help you."

She is slowly becoming aware of her body, "I need to go to the bathroom."

"No, you don't. You have a catheter. It's pressing on your bladder. That's what you feel."

"No, I really do."

He sighs, and unstraps her hands and feet from the bed. She hadn't realized she was tied to the bed until now. She stands unsteadily and looks down

at herself. She's wearing a white hospital gown with little blue flowers. No shoes. He hands her the catheter bag and escorts her to the bathroom and waits outside. Inside, she tries to pee, but of course, she can't. So, she stands and looks at herself in the warped faux mirror. Her left eye is completely black though strangely unswollen, as if black face paint were smeared carefully from eyebrow to lower lid. Her lips are also black and her hair wild. She doesn't recognize herself. Her unevenly dark lips disturb her and she looks closer. When the reflection leans in, she jumps back startled before she remembers she's in front of a mirror. The blue eyed doctor sends a nurse in.

"My lips are black." she says.

"It's the charcoal they made you eat so you'd throw up."

I am afraid of spaces.
I hold my breath crossing bridges,
close my eyes looking out of windows,
wait for wind on ledges.
I make lists. Short lists. Long
lists. Sure lists. Unsure lists.
I make them everyday.

I don't know why I'm
sad. I know what good
things I have. I know
the strength of me. But
melancholy steals my
breath. It was bad
years ago. I thought it
had gone away. I used
to kill it with poems.
Then music. Now the
real vices of oblivion.
I've lost control.

I'm sorry, God. I don't
know how to stop. My
whims. They are driving
me fucking crazy.

9:56 am

**Psychiatric Medical Care Unit
Patient Behavior Guidelines**
* You will be expected to be up for vital signs and morning care by 9:00 am AT THE LATEST unless otherwise specified by staff.

Me knows the trick I'm trying to play
That time trick where everything heals

But me is just lying in wait so I forget
And me will rise again out of shadow and rage

I'm so afraid of dying. Me cannot wait for it.

She still doesn't know

where she is. She is surrounded by crazy people. She can't have anything made of glass or with strings. Fifteen minutes on the pay phone. No visitors in her room. She's still not sorry.

**Psychiatric Medical Care Unit
Patient Behavior Guidelines**

You will receive one contact person per shift and you will deal primarily with that one contact person for that entire shift. This contact person will act as the official liaison between you and the rest of the staff.

She asks Wendy, the nurse assigned to her, for paper and a pen and gets that old printer paper with the rows of holes down either side, and a blunt pencil. Patients don't get pens. She hates writing in pencil. It never looks precise, and it doesn't slice into the paper like pen and ink. Perched on her lumpy twin bed, she writes. *If you weren't crazy before you entered this place, then you'd be crazy after...surrounded by madness. Sometimes manic, sometimes lethargic, always disturbing.* She stops and looks at the smudgy marks. She should work on her

I said once to God, don't help me
or at least do the opposite
of what you're doing now
because whatever you were doing before
didn't help

I said once to God,
some bright September afternoon
and it's some bright September afternoon
now, and I'm trapped inside a promise

penmanship.

Wendy looks in. She likes her.

She seems sturdy, understanding.

"How are you feeling?" Wendy asks.

She doesn't look up. "I'm fine." Wendy smiles and leaves as she continues writing. She's hoping they find a chemical imbalance in her head that can be fixed with medicine, because otherwise she cannot reconcile why she would want to take this lovely body and silver mind to hell. Is she spoiled? Is she weak? Is she stupid? Is she a hypocrite? Is she afraid? Is she doing this to be cool? To be troubled? To have a cause?

University Hospitals

DISCHARGE DIAGNOSIS AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP CARE (to complete)

Atypical Depression

PAXIL (Paroxetine) 20 mg Tablet

Uses: This medication is used to treat depression.

Side Effects: Stomach upset, nausea, dizziness, headache and blurred vision, dry mouth, constipation, diarrhea, appetite changes, tiredness, tremor, nervousness, anxiety, change in sex drive or sexual ability, sweating, altered tastes.

Psychiatric Medical Care Unit Patient Behavior Guidelines

- Some things that are inappropriate are:
 - * going off unit without the proper attire
 - * Focusing on other patient's situations/concerns is inappropriate. You are here to work on YOU only.
 - * Changing the T.V. channel, dictating what you think everyone should watch, etc. (STAFF ONLY can change the channel and choose what T.V. programs are to be watched)

10:11am

She tells the attending psychiatrist, about the match castles. For months, she stood on

the fire escape in the bitterest of weathers, and lit matches. She'd let them burn down to her fingers and then place them carefully in a slowly growing pile. She made little piles of different numbers and

heights. Somehow, she knew when it was time to start a new castle.

The psychiatrist doesn't respond to her revelations. She doesn't know yet that this is how many psychiatrists are. What did she expect? That he'd say, "Oh, the match castles. Do you see angels as well?" She needs to find a good therapist. Someone to talk to and see why she's so tense. So ready to fall.

I was on the fire escape climbing out of drunk falling into sober
I think of all the years that I will spend in this wearying now and my heart drops into hell
This is the night again and this is my brain on darkness Another lonely summer looms

Silence is a horrible spokesperson.

I. I am awe. Filled with it. Surrounded by it. Giving it away.

II. My hair smells like the ocean. My legs are restless. My brain feels slow. My hands are shaking. My eyes are tired. My voice hoarse. I'm on edge and can't concentrate. I keep getting lost in my head. Where did my gods go? Where did I?

11:25am

Jim is large and unkempt in a kindly sort of way. He stands too close and watches too carefully. She imagines he's a prophet. "You're in no man's land now," he says, "Nothing you say will be overlooked. You don't have to pretend anymore." She says nothing. He continues in his disjointed way, "You're special, see?" She looks at him. "Because you got close to God." *How does he know*, she wonders.

Psychiatric Medical Care Unit
TO OBTAIN AND KEEP PHONE PRIVILEGES
* Attend unit groups and community meetings.

Jim sits beside her at the

community meeting. On the other side, they park Doris in her wheelchair. She hasn't seen Doris alert yet. Her eyes are always half closed. She wants to catch her aware, like that guy in *Awakenings*, a suddenly piercing stare. Instead, halfway through the meeting, Doris lets her bladder loose. She gathers her limbs close around her, as the pale liquid slowly streams under her chair.

"What are your personal goals?" The meeting leader asks Carla.

"To get well and go home to my kids."

The circle moves on from Carla and stops at her. She racks her brains. She can't think of a single personal goal she either has or wants to have. Finally, driven to honesty, she says, "To find out my personal goals."

I feel blasé and out of it.
I feel sharp and reckless.
I feel stupid and slow.
Most of all, I'm tired.
I'm tired of being.
Not that I'm working that hard at being.
Tired of thinking.
I'm not thinking that much either.
Tired of wearing my face.

I think I've forgotten how to think
I think that's how I stay alive

1:37pm

She is fevered. The world revolves in stainless steel and dull white and she is ill with

I was in the car last night, in the backseat, by myself, and suddenly, such a strange feeling came over me. I couldn't speak for sadness. If I had tried to say something, I would have thrown up.

it. She can't stand the throbbing in her head. The air is dry, and the skin on her face feels too tight. If she smiles, she'll crack. She wants to take a bath, and so she tells the the nurse on desk duty, a brisk no nonsense woman. The nurse waves Wendy over who trails her to the large damp shower room. The walls are dark and the corners unclear. She showers as Wendy stands just inside the door, waiting and watching. The water feels too wet, her skin too real.

Psychiatric Medical Care Unit
Patient Behavior Guidelines
* We feel that it is most appropriate to be dressed in street clothes every day – NOT IN HOSPITAL GOWNS.

4:51pm

She's sitting in the lounge with her visitors, wearing mismatched clothes, trying to feel normal. Her housemate dropped the clothes off earlier, items from her closet that she hasn't worn in ages. Horizontal stripes? What was he thinking and where did he find this shirt? The urine puddle from the morning is gone without a trace. Visiting hours are almost over. They keep strictly to the two hour limit. She's glad. The smiling is exhausting her.

I
list
in
my
waters
leaning
to
mad
intent...

I hate thinking. I hate decisions. I hate planning. I hate organizing. I hate persuading. I hate responsibility. I hate doing all these things my father taught me to do. I hate all things I am and could be. And these are all the rational reasons for my grief.

7:13pm

They've given her a blue folder to put her writings in. Her favorite colour. She puts the Paxil pamphlet in it. It's the third drug she's tried this year. She looks out the window. The building across the street is unfamiliar. It has gargoyles on its edges. She knows this city but she cannot tell where she is. She decides to memorize the façade but bores quickly and picks up a book. She can't remember the last time she read for fun. It's her attention span: she can't concentrate for long.

Psychiatric Medical Care Unit
TO OBTAIN AND KEEP PHONE
PRIVILEGES
* Spend time out of room
interacting with peers and staff.

Wandering out into the hallway, she sees

Mary and Jim playing cards, gin rummy. She

watches them from the front desk. Jim invites her to join them. She's forgotten how to play but it comes back quickly. They keep up a steady patter that is unintelligible, but comforting. The cards smack down lightly on the chipped wooden coffee table. A Mona Lisa queen, a throne of diamonds, and now a seven of Spades. A Jack swoops down and off the table, settling on the floor unnoticed. She thinks about flying. Or is it falling? Or dying. It's been whole minutes now since she thought of dying.

Is it physical or mental? Am I really mad? Why would I leave this place? I'm afraid of regret. I'm afraid I won't do it right and I'll be back and have to do it again. I can't tell if I'm looking for signs to die or signs to live. The fact that I can't tell the difference is disturbing me.

I think I might be
fucking stupid

10:04pm

It's bed time. A nurse comes in and straps her wrists loosely to the narrow metal frame. After fastening the ties, he looks at her a moment. She tries to focus on him but can't, so she closes her eyes. She hears a whisper, "You'll be all right" She opens her eyes but there's no one in the room. Have her eyes been closed a moment or much longer? It seems less dark, less dangerous. She has always loved the nights, but they are too long now. The mornings bring relief, an end to the darkness that consumes her so wholly that she imagines she'll never find her way back again.

My whole day I was
racing against darkness.
I don't think I even
knew it. And once I was
alone, I crumpled.

I think I mistake
my exultation for grief
my lust for apathy
I think I don't realize
that I have too much in my heart
not too little

Limbs outstretched, she watches the sky suffuse slowly with light, and thinks of a Russian folk tale from her childhood. In the story, a poor child is plagued by an evil witch to perform impossible tasks. If she doesn't finish them by morning, the witch will eat her. Each night, she is saved by a little doll that her mother had given her before she died. The doll tells her to go to sleep, and morning will come with its fortune, because "Dear Vasilissa, the morning is wiser than the evening." And of course Vasilissa awakes each morning to find the impossible done.

I'm losing faith
in losing faith
It never leaves me

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Abeer Hoque

[\(other contributors\)](#)

Abeer Hoque was born in Nigeria to Bangladeshi parents, and moved to America in high school. She has degrees from the Wharton School (BS 1995, MA 1999) and USF (MFA 2003), and recently completed her first book, *Olive Witch, An American Dream*. Her work has been published in *Prose Ax*, *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, and *ZYZZYVA*.

Contributions to Switchback

[Wiser than Evening](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)

[Norma Cole](#)

minutes pass

their leaves were moving
a do-it-yourself kit

has moved away
gray rust blue
pink blue

buku laut
a fish called Book
of the Sea

the shining in
the brain: do we
have a dream

on earth and time

other passwords

signal a
kind of second
sight or maybe
the air

and the partly cloudy
fullness thereof

the annunciation "I came here
for the sights"

lateral reading
working hand, eye

remember the night

the Café Aqueduct

the book is
a remainder
of the next book

view of the lake
red-tailed hawk
flying over

the light is your
night too

the shapes, feel
them
momently random

memory becomes
expectancy
“as witnessed by”

our wars
the findings

(fr)agile
slicing a lemon

a form of motion
a finishing

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Norma Cole

Norma Cole is currently working on her installation "Collective Memory" (part of "POETRY and its ARTS: Bay Area interactions 1954-2004," Saturday, December 11, 2004, thru Saturday, April 16, 2005, at the California Historical Society).

Contributions to Switchback

[untitled](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)

Squirrels

[Catherine Brady](#)

We were underfoot. Mom sent us out to the back yard, where the picnic table was covered with a plastic tablecloth, its corners folded and tacked in place, and party dishes were already set out. She said we should clean the stains off the patio. It was a mystery how they got there. Dad said the squirrels threw the green walnuts from the tree onto the cement, but we never saw the squirrels do it. And Mom sent us out to scrub even though the stains never came off and she knew it. The smell of the cleaner on the scrub brush made my nostrils sting and I could smell the cakes she'd left on the table, with little mesh tents over them to keep the flies off.

Billy wanted to see if it was really the squirrels that did it. He found a walnut on the cement and threw it into the branches of the tree. The squirrels up there made little chucking noises but they didn't throw anything back. You couldn't really see them up there, only dark splotches like shadows swimming and gliding among the leaves. We wanted to get them to come down. Nance and me, we made Billy sneak a cracker from the plate Mom left on the table, because if Billy got in trouble, it was never really bad. Not even Dad could hit Billy. The priest said his name at Mass so everybody in church could pray for him and he was a miracle child. I could pray for him too because I made my First Communion last fall, so everything I did counted after that.

We lay a trail of cracker crumbs across the lawn and we went back to the patio to wait. We pretended we were in church and weren't allowed to fidget.

The first squirrel came down from the branches and took a piece of cracker in both hands and sat on its haunches to chew and chew and chew. Chew your food twenty-six times before you swallow. When Grandpa Dan said that, it wasn't really scolding. We got to put the tobacco in his pipe for him and tamp it down with the metal clip. When he puffed to draw the flame of the match into the pipe, his lips made a soft sound, puck-puck. At his house we remembered: chew your food, don't scratch the chair legs with your shoe buckles, Grandma was "ma'am" at the table when you asked to be excused and you didn't forget to ask. Inside the pockets of Grandpa's scratchy jacket was a smooth satin, cool and slippery and secret, and we put our hands in and he let us keep what we found, a quarter, a stick of gum, a pocket knife, but he was keeping that for Billy because Billy was the miracle child. Grandpa Dan and Grandma Ma'am. That was our nice family. We could go in the little room at the top of the stairs that was Mom's when Mom was their child and we could play there if we took off our shoes.

The squirrel found another crumb we left him and held it to his mouth with both hands.

Billy said, I want tiny hands like that. If I had hands like that, I could climb out the window of my room and swing on the branches and not fall. I'd go all over and jump from one tree to the next and never have to touch the ground.

And Nance said, no you couldn't and those aren't hands, because she was the oldest and always had to tell us that's not true.

But I looked up to see anyway, and I thought you could. Jump from the walnut tree that shaded our patio to the maple tree by the fence to the tree in the Jansen's yard and the next tree and the next. Till infinity.

When the second squirrel came down from the tree, it got in a fight with the first one. They were scolding each other. That's mine! There's enough for two!

No there's not! There's never enough for you. That was what Dad said. When we fought in the car over who got the window or disturbed Dad while he was relaxing with the paper after dinner. There's never enough for you, and if it was after dinner Mom came and made us leave your poor father in peace in the living room. Because he had a lot to do at work. He had to talk to the state legislators about banking regulations because the bank needed them. He wined and dined people. That was a skill.

Billy got another cracker and tried to throw it just where both of the squirrels would have to race each other to get it. And then a third squirrel came down from the tree and they were biting each other with their little buck teeth. And Nance made herself have buck teeth and pretended to bite Billy on the back of his neck, but she only pretended. And Billy said he'd tell. And she said, no you won't because I'll tell on you. And she didn't shove him because you couldn't. Because his sickness made him have bruises. And if we hit him, Mom's look was worse than when Dad stared at you if you said no you weren't chewing gum and he waited for you to swallow so he could swat you twice, once for the gum and once for lying. And if you swallowed gum, it stayed in your intestines for seven years and five times I swallowed and I would be old before it was gone out of me. And why did Grandpa Dan have the sticks of gum in his pocket if we weren't allowed.

We didn't want to make Mom sad but sometimes we forgot we couldn't hit Billy and Billy forgot too—he'd hit first and even if he was sick he was a boy and he could hit hard. And he was bigger than me even if Nance was bigger than him. When Dad hit us it only left a red mark. It didn't make bruises.

The squirrels began to drop from the tree, thump, thump, thump, and how could there be so many of them up there. When the squirrels landed in the grass, walnuts bounced onto the patio, only when they hit the concrete they made a clicking noise, like marbles knocking into each other. We picked the walnuts up, but we stepped on some of them and made a fresh green stain. Like green ink. Like Original Sin. That was a stain on your soul.

The new stains were worse than the old stains because they looked dirty and we couldn't get up all the bits of shell. They pricked your fingers like splinters. We scrubbed the fresh smears and we couldn't make them look like the old stains. Nance said we were going to get it now and I didn't want to. I held my breath. If I stopped breathing for long enough, everything went black at the edges and even when I had to breathe again it was different, better. Nance and Billy's voices went woolly and the tree and the table beneath it pooled together and wavered in the air like a soft gray shadow and all kinds of other things came into me, the way they always did when I held my breath: the puck-puck sound of Grandpa Dan's lips on his pipe and Mom lifting her hair from her neck this morning and spraying perfume there and the shoe polish smell when I cleaned Dad's shoes with the chamois and Dad setting the bottles out on the wet bar for the party and chunking ice in the ice bucket and letting me pour him a glass—two inches, he always said two inches—and winking at me, our secret. Anything could end up inside me if I held my breath for three whole minutes. Swim in the pocket of me.

Billy said, let's go back inside. We could go back inside and promise to stay in the kitchen and then when Mom came out later we wouldn't be here so we couldn't have done anything. In the kitchen Mom was making the ham salad with pickle relish in it and she said, did you finish, and Nance said, you know it doesn't come off. Then Mom said we could stay if we promised to stand there in the corner. She vacuumed this morning and our shoes would leave tracks in the wall-to-wall carpeting because it was brand new. Nance wanted to know who was coming, because if it was the bank people there wouldn't be anyone for us to play with. And Mom told us who was coming. The Allens. The Reichardts. The Merrills. The Schreibers. Only Mom said Thee Allens, Thee Reichardts. When it was a lot of thee's, it was probably the bank people

or the people from the club where Grandpa Dan got Dad in because Mom said if Dad learned to play golf it would be good for him in business. Playing golf was a skill. Dad could pick it up like that, Mom said. She knew from the moment she laid eyes on him Dad was a real go-getter, not meant to stand behind a counter in a hardware store the rest of his life.

Mom spooned the ham salad into a big glass bowl and covered it with cellophane, a nice tight skin, perfect. The Host on your tongue was like a crisp piece of skin, and I didn't know that till last fall. Mom opened the fridge and pushed dishes around to make room for the ham salad. Inside on the shelves was a Jell-O mold, with tiny marshmallows in it and fruit cocktail that only looked like candy, and I saw a plate with cubes of cheese with toothpick flags in them, and more bowls with those skins of cellophane. Mom took out a bowl of rum balls and put them on the table and sprinkled some powdered sugar on waxed paper and rolled the balls in it before she put them on the cookie plate. When Mom made apple pie she let us make little pies in the lids from peanut butter jars but we couldn't help today because the rum balls were for the party.

Sometimes Nance and me made mud pies and we got the tiny red berries from the bushes and put them in the pies because Nance said the berries were poison. Then we delivered them. We snuck up to people's houses and left them on the doorstep. I was scared to at first, but Nance said pretend pies didn't count. Then it was nice to think, what if people ate them and died!

We stayed in the corner but it came to us, the sweet smell of the powdered sugar and the other smell. The Dad smell. The Grandma smell. The other grandma. When we went to her house we ate in the kitchen because there was no dining room and she smelled like that and she laughed and told jokes and Aunt Kay was there too and she laughed at the jokes. Aunt Kay called Dad Danny in her gravelly voice and when she said his name it sounded like she was mad at him but she wasn't. She didn't say patio, she said see-ment porch, like Dad. But she didn't say two inches when she asked Dad to refill her glass. She said two fingers. We went there for Christmas Eve and Easter dinner. They weren't our kind of people. The kitchen chairs had metal legs so you could kick all you wanted and you could stick your finger in the holes in the seat cushion and pluck out the hairy stuffing when you were hoping it would be time to go home soon. But we had to sit at the table after we ate, and that grandma made tea and put spoons and spoons of sugar in it and her cup left sticky rings on the plastic tablecloth you were only supposed to use on the picnic table. Aunt Kay always had a cigarette and tipped the ashes onto her plate, and I liked Aunt Kay but not that grandma. If we said please, Aunt Kay made smoke rings come out of her mouth and in the car on the way home Mom said don't imitate that kind of vulgarity. The smoke rings weren't like Grandpa Dan puffing on his pipe.

Billy rubbed his eyes and Mom said, are you tired? Sometimes the skin was blue under his eyes but it wasn't a bruise. And Billy got mad and said why was she always asking him that. And she looked at him and her eyes were swimmy, like when you're about to cry, like the way your shadow ripples on the surface of water, like when I wanted to know if we still had to pray for him, and Mom smiled and said he was fine. So I didn't know if I still had to.

Mom said we could help carry more plates out to the picnic table and then we had to go upstairs and change clothes. Nance and me had dresses already set out on our beds and Billy had to wear the Sunday pants that turned shiny when Mom ironed them. Nance and me had matching party dresses on our matching bedspreads in our room, and we had the same of lots of things, our lunch boxes and the socks with lace trim and the ballerina music boxes, but we were not the same. Nance cried until Mom let the hairdresser cut her hair so she wouldn't have to wear barrettes, but I had lovely curls even if the comb got stuck. I could do something that was impossible, hold my breath till

everything came inside me, and if I didn't tell anyone, no one could say that's a lie.

We took the plates outside and when Mom saw the new batch of smashed walnuts on the patio she didn't think it was us. Oh, those squirrels, she said. But she had that look on her face, like when it hurt her so bad if you forgot and hit Billy. And she called Dad and her voice sounded wobbly. And Dad came out and let the screen door bang behind him and Mom said this is hopeless, hopeless, when I have so much to do for the party and how can I serve the food out here on the patio. And I was afraid that Dad would know. He always knew it was our fault, because we were never satisfied. But this time he didn't. He said, goddamn squirrels. And most of the time he said goldang except after dinner when he was tired and we had to leave him in peace and sometimes Mom cried in the kitchen because we didn't leave him in peace and she wanted everyone to be nice like she was.

Mom said she wished Dad would listen to her and put in a brick patio.

Dad said, why don't we just buy you another house altogether? And Mom's eyes got swimmy again.

Because Mom would say can't we just pay someone to do it, but Dad was good at fixing things like the stopped sink in the bathroom and the end table that teetered on its legs. Mom put the table in the garage this morning because he was too tired from work and couldn't get to it. And she put the reading lamp that stood by his arm chair in the garage too because it was old and ugly. The rest of the living room was nice and she didn't want to spoil it, the nice new carpet and the two armchairs that matched and Grandma Ma'am's silver candy dishes that we got to fill with mints when company was coming. At the other grandma's house they didn't care. Sometimes in that house I felt like everything was thin skin: the braided rug that skidded on the linoleum and the black gunk caked in the grooves where the linoleum was chipped and the stuffing from the seat cushion like tiny hairs that you just had to tease with your fingers and the doily on the armchair because it was bare under there, and you started to think if you stayed long enough the insides of everything would be showing. And that only made you want to dig harder at the stuffing in the cushion.

And it was never not nice at our house, not even when Billy had to go to the hospital. Mom came back from seeing him and she said the doctors there knew just what to do for him. She let Nance and me stay up late making care packages for him, putting in the little pies we made in the jar lids and pictures we drew and the scapular Sister Marie sent for him, and we would each put in one toy, like my Slinky, lend it to him because at the hospital the only thing there was to do was play and he didn't have to go to school. Children weren't allowed to visit the hospital even though they put children in it.

Mom said, Daniel! when I have so much to do for the party, and Dad went back into the house and I thought he wasn't going to help her. He didn't help us move the lamp or make the care packages either because he fell asleep in his chair after dinner and if you went near him you could smell it in the air around him like you could smell chlorine near the swimming pool. You could smell it but it was still a secret and you couldn't say it. Once when Billy was in the hospital, we made cookies for him after dinner and burned a whole tray. Mom said they were OK, but when Dad came in the kitchen, he picked up the cookie tray and slid the cookies into the garbage and he did not mind that the tray was still hot from the oven. And he didn't sign the card Mom bought that said "Get well, son," even though that was what he always called Billy instead of his name. And since then Billy didn't have to go to the hospital, but he was always going to be the miracle child and that was good even if nobody would tell you how come. Like how come Dad didn't mind if his fingers got burned.

We had to help Mom if Dad wouldn't. Mom said we should start picking up the smashed walnuts and she got a knife and scraped a little at the cement to get them off.

And then Dad came back and he had his twenty-two that he kept in the garage and I would always see it there on its shelf high up but I never saw Dad take it down. Dad told us to come stand by him right now and when we did he aimed the rifle at the tree. And even though in the branches the squirrels were only shadows, when Dad shot the rifle one of them dropped right away. He shot again and another one dropped, and it was like they turned into squirrels on the way down and he had to shoot them to make them turn into what they were.

Zing-pock! from the rifle, and thump! like that had to be the answer. Mom put her hands over her ears like it wasn't her who said Daniel! Like the rifle made a very loud sound, which it didn't. When she put her hands over her ears, I didn't want to stand next to her.

Dad put the rifle on his shoulder and aimed and shot again. Three, four, five, six, seven, eight squirrels. One bumped the edge of the picnic table on the way down and left a pink smear on the tablecloth.

Dad lowered the rifle from his shoulder. You kids pick them up and put them in the trash.

Mom said, they can't touch them, they're vermin.

They can wash their hands after, Dad said.

We had to do what he said. The squirrels were bloody and ripped like some old thing you wanted to throw out anyway. Some of them had their mouths open and you could see their little buck teeth that looked like the baby teeth we put in an envelope for the tooth fairy.

I had to lean down close to pick where to grab the squirrels, somewhere on the spine where my fingers felt only the fur on the bone and not the squishy wetness where the bullet had ripped their skin and released a dribble of guts, a hot stink.

I had to lean down close. I held my breath every time, and that was only for a few seconds at a time but still I felt dizzy, still I felt everything flooding in: the way the cubes of fruit cocktail shivering in the Jell-O mold looked like jewels and made you want to eat them even though you knew you'd push the grainy bits of pear to the corner of your mouth and spit them out when no one was looking and what did Billy do all day at the hospital if he didn't have anything to do but play and did the sound of the rifle hurt Mom's ears that much because so what! a squirrel couldn't worry about why it was bleeding.

We picked up all the squirrels. Then Billy and Nance and me had to scrub the blood from the cement. That came off.



Catherine Brady

Catherine Brady is the author of two short story collections, *Curled in the Bed of Love*, winner of the 2004 Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction, and *The End of the Class War*, a finalist for the Western States Book Award in Fiction. Her stories have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories 2004*.

Contributions to Switchback

[Squirrels](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)



[Kristina Krause](#)

History Lesson

Harbor an odd axiom:

winds ruffle in the chorus;
to tidy philosophy the chestnut drawers are labeled

it would take one glass eye near the end
when the sedimented air does not clear.

Define a convergence by what the blur keeps
moving toward, an awakening distance—

the unblinking back of a wrinkled white dress

only a dissolving frame allows this sharper field:
the unsweated variables, the no and the yes

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[switch →](#)



Kristina Krause

Kristina Krause recently relocated from the Bay Area to Los Angeles with her husband, three cats, a snake, a mouse, and several thousands of books. She received her MFA in Writing at the University of San Francisco in 2003. Her work has appeared in *26* and *Pomona Valley Review*, and she has work forthcoming in *Five Fingers Review*.

Contributions to Switchback

[History Lesson](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)



Worsted Wool

[Irene Moosen](#)

Standing in the Men's Department at Macy's, I start to cry. It isn't the suits, shirts, casual wear haphazard. I see a coat I like and think—what size is he? In that moment I remember, there is no he that is any size. I am about to stain a nice enough wool suit coat (olive is *the* color this season) when the salesman approaches, ready to throw himself, no doubt, between a woman's tear and the new merchandise. "Here, let me try it on to help you decide." He takes it from my hands. What I decide is that I should have cried more when I was married. I should have dressed my husband up in different shades of sad. I could have seen how they looked with his complexion, if they brought out the green in his eyes, if they matched his active lifestyle or made him look a little frumpy in the middle. Then he might have known what the long, tightly woven fibers of worsted wool feel like when they are tailored to fit. He might have taken that coat and placed it over my shoulders because sometimes the first chill of fall is too much to bear alone.

[A precisely rendered version of this piece](#) in Adobe Acrobat (pdf) format.

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Irene Moosen

Irene Moosen is a poet, fiction writer, attorney, and an MFA in Writing candidate at the University of San Francisco. Her poetry has appeared on the CD *Three in One* for Spirit Nectar Records, performed as spoken word, and in *Signal*.

Contributions to Switchback

[Worsted Wool](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)

Todd Melicker

wait

: naked in a white room passing off the damned and the saved. standing in line with a change of blank clothes covering the privates. hair continuously damp. who's to say death isn't the celestial draft. no fins are given out until you've learned to operate a parachute.

: tone of the anchor. teeth reaching toward the bottom lip. continuous falling in triplicate. press down hard. you keep the yellow form. next in line, please. i am filing for intent: a definable land above water.

: science is preoccupied with measurement. the weight of an object is not necessarily its belief nor its coincidence. conscience. conscious. the line under which is attached the fishing lure bright shining as the sun. the endless becoming. given enough time and chances i can pass through walls, sanctioned as both particle and wave.

: heavy handed. the veins being up. could be a cause for calm. the breaking of bread. fish up against my sides, ribs for removal. there are baskets for the remainder. we've no less days than when we first begun.

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[Todd Melicker](#)

tremble

: voice filled with particles of dust. angels you can see in the light shadow
spilling gold coins through the window. oh little dragon flames. a steady
flutter. the moth unable to return to the night.

: the headlights coming straight at me. i am straining in the dark. the car
gains speed toward a deer. sparks of my brain lit up purple. a watered eternity
fills my blink, fear having a smooth surface.

: gold note—or is it gold leaf. a tree on a hinge. the door creaks to open.
altitude takes on its effects.

: your hand and not mine reached over. i was tingled in the spine like a string
of christmas tree lights winking. tinsel meant to be the shivers of snow. we
decorate for love. we decorate for show.

: notes perched above the musical staff. the space that insects take up. the air
surrounding them. the air turning cold. i'm not entirely sure.

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[switch →](#)

[Todd Melicker](#)

brittle

: always with white porcelain or bone or teeth. a round plate. sound of flinging spoons. explosion being the source of an edge. a distillation of static friendship cannot hold.

: the need to shy away from things. to turn to glass with. who holds up the sky whose particles turn the skin to dust. i am fading in the sun. we are slow bleached by tender aggression.

: there is the danger of collapsing in the supermarket while fluorescents scents surround. you arrive on white tiles. oranges become planets rolling from your grasp. the universe spins higher.

: single bitter herb. buildings made of paper. nameless hands. begging sky. entropy. sand. glass. camel's tongue. mortar. pestle.

: a powder for the mouth to take away pain by ingesting it. consuming it. the body torn in places you are not used to. the disregard to retain emotion. everything pollen. everything wind.

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Todd Melicker

Todd Melicker prefers watching the birds outside his window to writing poetry. He resides in Santa Rosa, California.

Contributions to Switchback

[anticipate](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)

[wait](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)

[tremble](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)

[brittle](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)

Nebulous

[Jason Buchholz](#)

I'm not sure how I have come to be here, beneath the white emptiness of this northern sky, on the fringe of this drab city. I'm not sure how I have come to be here, in front of this rosette window, whose colors are lost in this dimness like the songs of extinct birds. But somehow this room has assembled itself around me, and now I am here, sitting on your bed, hiding my nervousness in a show of concentration as I contort the fingers of my left hand into unfamiliar shapes, and drag the thumb of my right hand across the strings of your guitar. You are fluttering around the room. The black roots of your hair are pushing out against blonde remnants the length of rice grains. You are speaking in foreign languages, making up words, pronouncing things in the back of your throat, in the depths of your organs. You are talking to your clothes, joking with the furniture. The lights are on. The air smells like paint.

Now we are standing in the doorway. You are turning to me, and asking me if I would like to kiss you.

This autumn rotates steadily, farther and farther north until it collapses among its own folds like an eyelid. Winter suns rise and stay aloft for a minute or two before descending. The city takes on the graininess of an underexposed photograph. The grains wash the texture out of snow drifts, infect the phone lines, render illegible the lettering on signs, and poison our food.

Now we are walking into the heart of the city. You are wearing orange. Gray or black cars with strange names drift by us, their exhausts floating up to join the sky. In a small shop you ask the clerk where you can find dissonance: has anybody here discovered the joy of it, you ask. His eyes widen and his arms stiffen. Soon after that you emigrate to a point just beyond the periphery. I am left to create the news through a process of extrapolation: you are arranging yourself in awkward configurations on couches, crafting obscure and perplexing sentences, staying up and then sleeping for days at a time, distributing sex as a reward for proper grooming. Then you evaporate completely, vanishing into the interstices of time and miles.

You appear once, years later, as a smile on a dog in a sun-filled square in Eastern Europe, then again in the American West, not much later, as a trail of incense smoke that twists through a screen door and comes apart. I take these as signs that you are attempting to build momentum, to align the disparate waveforms whose interactions result in your periodic existence. I am proven right when one night you manage to materialize, almost completely, next to me, in the back seat of a car. Through the windows the outlines of buildings waver and vibrate. The spokes of a bridge cycle past, out of focus.

Your words fill the car like a swarm of moths. None of them land. I am probably not saying anything. We probably aren't looking at each other. But maybe our knees are pressing against each other. Maybe we are holding hands.

The car is stopping now. Passing headlights illuminate your face, just for a second. You open the door and climb out, and disappear back into the ether of your private universe, back into the imprecise logic that governs your migrations. I stare for a moment into the spot where you used to be, and then the symmetry of the accustomed world re-emerges.

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Jason Buchholz

Jason Buchholz is a writer of novels (well, one of them, anyway, so far), short stories, and grocery lists. He lives in the East Bay with his wife, three cats, and the occupants of a 60-gallon fish tank.

Contributions to Switchback

[Nebulous](#) ↪ [Preview Issue](#)

[Joseph Cervelin](#)

Missile Tag

Sodas and jello make
 little girls, tiny boys,
 sparkling hermaphrodites,
 a slide-show of smiles at
 the intersection, filing into
 the theater, bright eyes,
 whistling behind ears, pretending
 it's a prison tunnel, skipping,
 scraping knees, holding hands
 snug, not even one
 cloud over this crowd —
 clear as the M-I-S-S...I...
 only evenly broken chocolate
 bars, caramel threads
 holding heads up high

Carbonated tabs snapping
 like fingers, shoulders, jello
 wobbling in place, one boy squeaks
 Fruit Eyeballs! swirling
 in genius, sun extracting
 juice from the scalp, dropping
 plops on his stub ticket,
 breeze pushing, it'd kick it
 down the concrete if it could,
 swerving gum speedbumps,
 spat or smacked
 from lips frozen in bruise,
 hardened on the street,
 photons pricking — and then lightning
 at the stroke of noon

When the missile tags
 everyone is It! This is TV
 Tag, Freeze, Manhunt,
 blowing the brightest
 bubble on the planet, pink, yellow,
 fingers reflecting fizzled, twisted-off
 soda pop, collapsing in machines —
 the orchestra, digital in the lobby,
 matinee freebie, squealing a final note —
 stalemates of chewing gum in cheeks,
 hair, between elbows, smeared into
 gravel, lemonade stands, lip sweat,
 bricks topping melted ice cream
 like cherries, sweet and sour
 saliva, stirring a gigantic
 jawbreaker melting pot
 for sucking, scratching
 the layers, flavors tangled,
 smooth under the fingers
 of our spotlights, coarse when drawn

to scale, laser details, spun cubist,
the theater floor swept clean
for the first time we recall,
returned to the children
wearing gummi worms
and fish, boiling butter

Everyone's out of their seats,
whirling a tornado of cocoa eggs
while we gaze, crouching,
moved by these earthlings,
their thunderous ovation,
flames flashing as trophies,
opening the intersection
into an envelope, licking lips, flesh confetti,
drum rolling, dancing bones,
coming soon

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Joseph Cervelin

Joe Cervelin ('05) dumped NY (Brooklyn, Manhattan, Tupper Lake, Yonkers, Syracuse, Brockport) for a fling with Frisco. His new website, midnightpudding.com, features files and photos that may lead to blackmail.

Contributions to Switchback

[Missile Tag](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)

T-MM Baird

Ode to a Nightingale
named Keats

1

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 Don't bite your lip, John—you can stop bleeding now—
My senses, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
 But you are no poison...
Or some dull opiate to the drains
 Your long glass finally fully empty—
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
 piled high with daydreams of riper purples.
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
 For what could you and I do with joy unpainted? (o cruel thought,
 fledgling)
But being too happy in thine happiness
 -Too true, the same tingled turn, in the stumbling and the dazzled daze—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
 As always a distant, but a constant echo...
 Thy voice hath stained the tomb of Time,
its cruelty equal its ecstasy
 -thou lark of broken glass—

2

What torment, for a girl who fluttered at your merest eyelash.
 Could it be your own violets forget you?
 Your grave was heaven-scented, but silent—
 green to be sure, Rome's dizzying August;
 hot, the ambrosia perhaps too thick....
 But who is he that I can hold him, even in memory
 untinged by the cheek itself?
 To think how you arrived at your Elysium,
 only to choke on the balm they gave you
 all too soon

3

My lovely haunting,
 beauty might just as easily as poison
 swallow up and drown the whole of illness.
 But when from blinded slumber we arise
 sticky-mouthed and groggy into daylight—
 why can we never stay among our own?— ever craving
 melodious erasure of the sun,
 of the earth, of everything but dreaming....

4

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
 If you'd asked nothing of your life, no love, no greatness,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
 Might it have felt a little more like twittering,
But on the viewless wings or human strides? of Poesy....
 Alas—you were made for the breeze you drift on now.

*I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
I can't
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
I don't know how
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
I can feel them growing over me
Wherewith the seasonable month endows*

*The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.
...Do I wake—or sleep?*

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T-MM Baird

T-MM Baird is an avid traveler, reader, and naturalist. She has spent the past couple of decades hopping around between the East Coast, the West Coast, Minnesota, and the UK. She will be finishing up her MFA this year at USF.

Contributions to Switchback

[Ode to a Nightingale named Keats](#) ↩ [Preview Issue](#)

Alone Among Others

Lewis Buzbee

An excerpt from a book entitled *Alone Among Others: The Pleasures of the Bookstore*, forthcoming from Graywolf in fall of 2005.

When a bookstore opens its doors in the morning and the first customers enter, the rest of the world enters, too, the day's weather and the day's news, along with boxes of the most recent and most ancient books, books of facts and truths, books of immediate relevance and of surprising dissonance. Unlike other forms of retail, in the bookstore there is plenty of time for the day and the people and the books to mix, and because of this leisurely confluence there also arrives the possibility of the universe unfolding a little, once upon a time.

Our unspoken rules for the bookstore are different than our rules for other stores. While the bookstore is privately held, it also honors a public claim on its time and space. This is no mega-store where one goes to stock up for the bad years, no boutique of precious items, no convenience store for grabbing a few things on the way home. Time and space in a bookstore are not defined by the cash register's chime. A bookstore is for hanging out. Often for hours. Perhaps you've come to crib a recipe from a cookbook or hunt down the name of that Art Deco hotel in San Antonio; you might browse covers awhile after meeting up with a friend. Or you can set yourself down in History and read the first chapter of a charming treatise on the complex language of hand gestures in high Renaissance Naples. As you might be reading right now, taking your own sweet time. If there's a cafe in the bookstore, then look out, a piece of cake and a cup of coffee, and time can run loose all over the place; half a day can go by. You might even have come to purchase a book.

Imagine going into a clothier, trying on a new jacket and walking around in it for, oh, half an hour, maybe coming back the following Wednesday to try it on again. Go into a pizzeria and see if you might sample a slice, heck, you're pretty hungry, so you taste a bit of the pepperoni, the sausage, the artichoke and pineapple, but none are quite what you're looking for that day. Only in a bookstore can one sample the wares and take all day doing so.

Books are slow. They require time; they are written slowly, published slowly, and read slowly. A four-hundred page novel might take three years to write, two years to publish; once sold, even a quick reader can expect to spend at least eight hours with it, maybe twice that long, and over a number of days or weeks.

The modern bookstore has long been associated with the coffeehouse and the café. In the 18th century, when coffee and tobacco both conquered Europe, the coffeehouse provided a public gathering place for writers, editors, and publishers. The stimulant coffee and the sedative tobacco, in combination, made of sitting at a table all day a pleasant equilibrium, perfect for writing, reading, or long conversations. This was the Age of Enlightenment; literacy was on the rise, books were cheaper and more abundant, and the booksellers of the time, frequently publishers themselves, naturally combined the coffeehouse and bookstore, and the time to savor them. Even today, the largest corporate chain stores, always mindful of the bottom line, build spaces friendly to the savor of time, with cafés, couches, and study tables.

Reading is, in one respect, a solitary occupation. Books most certainly connect us with other humans, but the connection is created in solitude. It's quite simple to order books on-line, over the phone, or via catalog, and wait for the delivery man to scurry away before we open the door. But most of us—90% of us who buy books—still take the trouble to get out of the house and go to the bookstore, to be among the books, sure, but also to be among other

book buyers, the like-minded, even if we might never say a word to anyone else. It's an odd combination, this solitude and gathering, almost as if the bookstore were the antidote for what it sold.

Perhaps the bookstore isn't as urgent other retail shops because there isn't very much at stake. No one goes into bookselling with the notion of becoming wealthy, or famous, or even respected. Most booksellers get into the business because they love books and they have some natural leaning to the mercantile life. Books are notoriously inexpensive, with a retail mark-up that's as low as the laws of economics will allow. Books are heavy and take up lots of space, and because each book is unique, inventory and stocking create a high payroll, even when most booksellers don't get paid much over minimum wage. There's no money in it, so we can all take our time.

The bookstore has always been a marketplace where the ideas of a given period were traded, and so has played a formative, rather than a merely utilitarian role in the shaping of public discourse. Because of this, the bookstore is often a stronghold in attacks against the rights of free speech. Under the aegis of Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Co., *Ulysses* was first published, the same with Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *City Lights* and *Howl*, to mention only two landmark cases.

It may be the nature of the book itself that lays the most important claims to the bookstore's public openness. There is a fundamental democracy in the mass-produced book. *Don Quixote* is roughly the same price as the most tawdry celebrity biography, maybe even a little cheaper since the nuisance of paying the author has expired. With the exception of promotional discounts, the price of *Don Quixote* is the same in the swankest New York City shop as in the Kansas City strip mall. The finest writing is as accessible as the most forgettable, and both, in the bookstore, are accorded the same respect: here it is, is there a reader who wants it? No matter the book, there's always someone who does. A bookstore is as likely to carry Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* as the newest book of cat cartoons, or books on automobile repair, military history, self-help, computer programming, or the evolution of microbes. There's something for everybody.

And there's somebody for everything. The bookstore is not only for the literary, and people of all stripes and obsessions come to find the information they seek: the price of antique coins, effective weed-eradication, the proper enclosures for small-scale pig farming. The bookstore is like an airport in this way; eventually, you'll pass through.

The book is a uniquely durable object, one that can be fully enjoyed without being consumed; a book doesn't require fuel, food, or service, it isn't very messy and rarely makes noise. A book can be read over and over, then passed on to friends, can be re-sold even when at its shabbiest. A book will not crash or freeze, will work when filled with sand or dunked in the bathtub, even when the pages are falling out. Aside from a basic literacy, books require no special training to operate.

The invitation of the bookstore occurs on so many levels that we must take our time. We peruse the shelves, weaving around the other customers, feeling a cold gust of rain from the open door, not really knowing what to pick up but knowing we do want something. Then there! on that heaped table, or hidden on the lowest, dustiest shelf, we stumble on it. It is a common thing, this volume. There may be five thousand of this particular book in the world, or fifty thousand, or half a million, all exactly alike, but this one is as rare as if it had been made solely for us. We open to the first page, and the universe unfolds, Once upon a time.

* * *

This is my ideal time to be in a bookstore. It's November, a dark, rainy Tuesday around three or four. The shortened light of the afternoon and the idleness and hush of the hour gather everything close, the shelves and the books and the few other customers, head-bent in the narrow aisles. There's a clerk at the counter who stares out the front window, taking a breather before the evening rush. I've come to find a book, though which I've no idea.

For the last several days I've had the inexplicable urge to buy a new book, and I've been stopping off at bookstores around the city while out on errands. Even though there's a tower of perfectly good unread books next to my bed, I'm still hungry for the ineffable one. I no longer try to psychoanalyze this hunger; I capitulated long ago to the booklust that's afflicted me most of my life. I know enough about the disease to know I'll find a book soon.

Yesterday I'd thought I'd found it. My daughter and I were at a large chain store in a nearby shopping center, one bookstore on my daughter's list of favorites. I'd suggested going there because I was struck by the urge to read an Updike story from a collection I could no longer find on my own shelves. My daughter was more than happy to come with me, knowing there'd be something in it for her. We went to Fiction first, and while there were many Updikes there, the one I craved was not. My daughter immediately chose the book she wanted, such is the grace of being four, and we spent an hour in the cafe spotting the hidden objects in the book's overcrowded landscapes, "I spy with my little eye . . ." If only it were that easy. My hunger remained unappeased.

This rainy afternoon my wife and daughter are out of the house, and I've got a few hours to kill. An odd phrase that, time to kill, when we almost always mean to bring back time, increase time, re-animate time, actually hold it more tightly. What better place to enjoy the stretched hours than a bookstore, especially given my condition. I pop around the corner to our local store, which I've already scoured twice in the past three days, but it seems worth the try, and besides, the weather is perfect for it. I may be in the store for five minutes or an hour, it doesn't really matter. I do know that I'll leave with some book and head home to spend hours, both lost and found, in the perfect solitude of my sagging green easy chair.

I cruise my usual route through the store, past the stacked faces of new hardcovers and the wall of recent paperbacks, once around the magazines. Even though I was here yesterday morning, every day brings new arrivals, and while there's nothing startling today, there's still pleasure in looking at the same books again, wondering about that one on the history of the compass, or admiring the photograph of the moon on this novel, the bulk and sheen of all these books. But I'm in a secretive mood—because of the rain, I imagine—and I head off to Fiction, not only in search of Updike, but because there's something about the long trench of this section that's particularly appealing today.

There are other customers in the store, and they're as evenly distributed throughout it as if they've chosen their interests by the space around a given island of books. Everyone is holding a book. Some are reading from the text, others only the back cover copy. I recognize one of the browsers from the neighborhood, an elderly man dressed in black and a squashed cowboy hat. He sports a gray Walt Whitman beard and a thin braided ponytail, and carries a decorative silver-knobbed cane. His large turquoise medallion, for some reason, makes me think he's a retired math professor. We are nodding acquaintances, and I've seen him around enough (and am enough of a book snoop) to know that he prefers classic Greek and Latin in the original or rather pulpy Science Fiction. Today, he's flipping through the top shelf of Mythology, angling the volumes out from their neat row, quickly scanning

them. Like the rest of us here—in Children's, in Business, in Biography, Mystery, History, Psychology—he's looking for something he can't quite name.

I turn to the fiction wall and regard the face-outs, the little stacks of new and popular titles whose covers show plainly. They're all pleasing, but nothing catches my attention, so I tilt my head to the right and follow the closely packed spines of the other novels and stories. No Updike here, I feel adrift for a moment. I'm grazing now. And then, yes, suddenly, there it is, on the bottom shelf, the book I've been waiting for, even though I didn't know it existed. I'm practically sold on the book before I've even made out the title.

Andrei Platonov's *The Fierce and Beautiful World*, a collection of short stories. The title alone is irresistible, but it's the book itself that sways me, the beauty and feel of the thing. Platonov, I learn, was a daring Russian writer who wrote during, and against, the Soviet regime, the author of many novels and stories. Something of a cult figure, his stories are described as harsh fables of life in a totalitarian state. *The Fierce and Beautiful World* is a thin paperback but solid, graced by a black-and-white photograph of a futurist spherical building; the title appears in a purple inset box with bright red and white type. The spine uses the same colors, space-age purple and red, with classic Art Deco typography. I stoop to retrieve the book from the bottom shelf, dust my hand over the cover, weigh the fit in my folded palm, and gently pull back the first page. The pages are thick and creamy, and thumb nicely. The endpapers, unusual in a paperback, are colored, that riveting purple again. I tuck the book under my arm. Sold.

But I won't leave the store just yet. Like the rest of my fellow customers, I'm happy to be here in this cozy and solid place, happy to be alone among others, killing time.

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Lewis Buzbee

Lewis Buzbee is the author of *Fliegelman's Desire*, a novel. His essays, poems, and stories have appeared in *Harper's*, *GQ*, *Paris Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Best American Poetry*, and elsewhere. "Alone Among Others" is from *Alone Among Others: The Pleasures of the Bookstore*, forthcoming from Graywolf in 2005.

Contributions to Switchback

[Alone among others](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)

Todd Melicker

anticipate

the minutes of snow
will each cover the roof

a gathering that makes the moon
makes the small feathers of my fingers

i could fly on my hands
the thumbs locked together

my face on the clock
the house a grave

a pair of wings for each window
a tongue for a door

the neighbors hear every shutter
the bare branches reaching
a cold star

the crow unwraps its wings
we are caught up

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Real

[Aubrey Ganas](#)

Amy's skin hurt. She felt like a pork rind, but it was only noon. She'd come along for a day at the lake. Prime-time tanning hours were still ahead.

"Why don't you just go get in the water?" Roberta said, glistening a sweet, caramel brown.

Amy pinked on the next towel over and pursed her lip.

She thought Roberta was asleep. Amy's fingers lingered over the bottle of sunscreen inside her backpack. "I'm just getting my apple," she said.

Roberta's baby oil lay in the sand between them. Noon, and so far, they were the only ones on the beach. The light was high and white, and the water still looked cold. The sand was warm but just on the surface, cool when your feet sunk in. Amy and Roberta had only been at the lake an hour, but Amy felt the freckles boiling up to her cheeks and shoulders already. She itched. Roberta hadn't moved for the past forty-five minutes, well-reputed Sun-Tan Queen that she was, able to endure fierce rays and sweltering heat for hours-on-end without moving, without even appearing to breathe. Roberta was unmeltable. Shiny, slick and statuesque, and Amy would have rather spontaneously combusted than given in to the sun before Roberta. Not today. She just wanted to sneak a little—

"Put some sunscreen on or something then," Roberta said, flat on her back, staring boldly at the sky, tiny suns glinting in her mirrored lenses. "I'm not bringing you home with third-degree burns."

Amy clenched her jaw. She moved her hand back to the sunscreen.

"And grab my sunflower-seeds too."

* * *

It was the first time Amy had been to the lake with Roberta. They hadn't lived together long, a few months. Amy was so much younger. Not many nine-year-old girls hung out on Saturday afternoons at the lake with their seventeen-year-old sisters. Or step-sister really. If you wanted to get technical, it wasn't even a real lake. It was Woodward Reservoir. An hour outside town past orchards, the trees lined up in aisles that led down to little white farm houses filled with little white people, clean behind the ears, saying prayers at supper-time tables; past dairies and Holsteins waiting to be milked, standing like black and white blocks on mounds of shit sweltering in the sun; past everything flat and brown and dead and ugly. Nothing seemed to live out there without struggle. Would've been a desert without irrigation. A fight against nature, that's what it felt like. Trying to make something out of nothing. Like that reservoir. That's all it was, Amy thought. A fake lake.

They sat Indian-style and ate sunflowerseeds from piles on their towels. Amy knew it was Roberta's dad's idea for her to come. Carter. She'd heard them talking about it in the kitchen that morning. Roberta'd been planning to go with her girlfriend, Tina, but Carter said, "No," that it'd be good for her to spend some time with "Amy." The way he said Amy's name, her ear pressed against her closed bedroom door. "Amy," he'd said, like the name of a dog that needed a walking. "... maybe she'll keep you away from the boys," he said. "Away from those God-damn boys, Roberta!" Roberta's door slammed.

So Amy sat and cracked seeds between her teeth, aware of her post as boy-deflector, and spit shells out over the end of her towel. She felt more like a fire-hydrant than a dog. Stumpy and stuck, pissed on and left. Well, maybe that was a little harsh, but who ever stuck around anyway? It was a hard thing to figure out.

There weren't many boys around to deflect. In fact, there weren't many people around yet at all. She wondered how boring the day would get. The little inlet beach they found banked up to a sloping hill of patchy grass and a few splotchy trees. Beyond that was the parking lot, or not really a parking lot. Just a naked space of crushed-down dirt that was empty except for Roberta's Buick. Some long, brown 1979 model that Carter had salvaged for her at an auction. Amy thought it was hideous, but what really sucked about it was that Roberta still looked cool in it.

It'd only been three months, and already Amy was sick of Roberta – just too much everything for one girl – the looks, the car, the friends, the boys – and Amy had the distinct feeling that it just wasn't fair. Not at all. Nine-years-old and the one definite statement Amy could make about life was that it just wasn't fair. And she'd use "fucking" as an adverb if you really got her going. In front of her mom and Carter even. Carter wouldn't tolerate that, though. But that didn't limit her use. She and Carter didn't get along that well. Amy didn't get along that well with anyone. She wanted to, but there was something about her that made people leave, some stupid thing she'd say. She thought it was about being cool. She wasn't. The word "dorky" followed her in the halls at school while she kept her eyes down and wondered what it was that showed.

"Did you put the sunscreen on?"

"Yes."

And the fact that Amy had to sit there in her one-piece navy, Saran-wrap suit next to Roberta's bikini-clad boobs made Amy hate her even more. It was pretty much a given. Boobs weren't in the cards for Amy, another injustice. Her mom didn't have any. But then again, Amy didn't look a thing like her mom. What she saw of her anyway. Her mom was almost always out in the driveway in a mobile trailer turned into an office on wheels where she was "working on school stuff." Carter had sawed down two-by-fours and stacked them around the tires to keep Amy's mom from rolling down the street. Amy's mom was in graduate school. She was a "graduate student," a dual-purpose statement, a title and an excuse. A title when she used it at the university, Amy trailing along behind her through admissions offices and past financial aid windows.

"Status?"

"Graduate student."

It was an excuse when Mom forgot to come in to hear Amy's prayers, Amy laying in bed listening hard through the television in the living room for the sound of her mother's steps coming from the trailer on the pavement outside. The next morning, Mom, rushing around, dragging her slippers across the carpet with static speed, would say, "I'm sorry Amy," and stress "sorry" while reaching for a coffee cup in the cupboard. Amy's mom wasn't tall. "It's hard. I'm a graduate student now," and she'd sip her coffee loudly, pat Amy on the head at the table, and slipper off to the bedroom to do her face. From what Amy could see of her mother – a small, birdlike frame capable of frantic, sometimes spasmodic speeds, an eruptive, chirpie personality that everyone seemed to adore (especially men), and brown eyes instead of blue. They had very little in common.

In fact, it was the invisible father that Amy was always told she looked like.

That's where she got the belly-pink skin and freckles, the thick twists of frizzy red hair, the long limbs and knobby joints that stuck out through tee-shirts, the collar bones and shoulders, the hip-bones at the sides of her jeans. Her dad was tall. That's where she got the height. She could tell from the pictures.

Amy'd sneaked her baby-book out of the garage when she was about five. That's when they moved in with Carter. That's when Amy's mom and Carter got married, when Amy was five, and she and her mom moved all their stuff to Carter's house. Amy saw her mom drop her baby-book into a trunk with things that had been in their house before.

"Not enough room right now," Mom said.

Looking through the book had consumed much of the next few years of Amy's life. It became her secret obsession. She spent hours studying the photos of her father, looking for herself. Where was she in him? She was skeptical. But somewhere in all of her mother's apologies, she told Amy that this man, glossy and flat, trapped for Amy to look at without his wanting, was her father. Her mom said so. And that's all Amy had to go on. No number, no address, no interest. Only pictures. He'd left before Amy was old enough to remember him. And there was no way to get any answers, not at five anyway, or six, or seven, or eight or now at nine. No answers, not THE answer. Not why he left.

But Amy had been trying not to think about him lately. She'd started pretending he was dead, made herself look at him like a photo of a dead person, no chance of a return. It made her not need him. It made things easier. She didn't need anybody. All she wanted was a bikini, boobs, and boys. Yes, boys, secretly. They were part of it. They meant something. She didn't know what, but they changed things. Carter was dead-set on keeping Roberta away from them. That was something. And Roberta had a lot of them. It seemed like the more she had, the more they wanted her. It was some sort of power Roberta had. It made her dad want her to come live with them, with him and his new family, Amy and her mom; Roberta had the power to make her dad love her.

The insides of Amy's cheeks were puckered from all the salt. "Can we have a soda?" she said.

They drank Dr. Peppers from the ice chest and listened to Madonna on the ghetto-blaster. Roberta tapped a purple-pearlescent toe to "Like a Virgin," and then it was time to flip and lay back down.

"Will you put oil on my back?" Roberta said, stretched out like a spread of peanut butter. Roberta's dad was tall too, long like that. Amy saw the similarities when Roberta and Carter held their silverware. Or when they watched TV at night, and Amy, from the floor, stole glances at them on the couch through the blue and black light, watched their expressions, waited to see the things they shared.

She squirted the baby-oil on Roberta's back.

It was softer than she'd imagined, Roberta's skin. The kind of skin that's firm but not muscular. The kind of skin Amy thought boys liked to touch. She hated it, the way it made her own hand look white and thin.

"Done," she said.

"Thanks," Roberta said, without moving.

Amy lay on her stomach on her towel and turned her head the other direction. She watched families trickle down the bank.

* * *

When she woke up, there was a family camped beside her just a few feet away. A pot-bellied boy in soggy underwear was digging with a green plastic bucket in the dirt.

“Bird! Hey, Berta!”

Amy sat up. A tan guy on a boat out past the shore had his hands cupped around his mouth. He yelled from the nose of a good-sized ski boat. There was another guy and girl inside. They all started to yell.

“Ro-ber-taaaa!” they yelled together.

“Hey,” Amy nudged her. Roberta twisted up on one arm and looked back at the water.

“Hey!” Roberta said, getting up. Her sunglasses slipped off her head. “You assholes! Took you long enough.” Her voiced trailed away as she bounced down the beach and splashed through the water. Amy watched the guy kneel down. Roberta kissed him on the mouth, long, when she got to the boat and then stood there talking in the water, in the sun.

Amy watched. It was sickening how perfect it all looked. Like something from a Thursday-night TV teen soap-show. The water glittered with bits of light, the sun lower and softer in the sky behind them, and the four of them, shiny and happy and perfect and tan, laughed out in the distance while Amy crisped on the sand. She watched Roberta talking, and they all looked at Amy every once in a while.

Then Roberta turned and motioned Amy to come down, come to the boat. Amy hesitated, wasn't sure she understood, but Roberta motioned again, more insistently. The four of them looked at Amy. She was surprised how quickly she got up, how fast she padded through the sand and slapped through the water. Her face felt strange when she got to the boat, and she realized she was smiling.

“Hey,” Roberta said, an arm on the boat.

“Hey,” Amy grinned back.

“I'm gonna go out on the lake for a bit. I won't be gone long. Just hang out here, okay?”

A burning little ball started to spin inside Amy's chest. Roberta was already swinging a leg on board. Tina was pulling her up, and the guys were revving the engine. Amy had images of herself clawing into all that perfectly tanned flesh and tearing Roberta off the boat, screaming “No!” over and over again. Just before they pulled away, Roberta leaned over, close enough just for Amy to hear, “and don't tell Dad,” she said, and they were going.

Amy watched, burning all over, the wake rolling up to her hips, and screamed after them, “He's not my dad!” but nobody turned around. Roberta's hair waved from the back of her head, and the boat skipped away fast across the water.

* * *

When she finally turned around, Amy was surprised to see so many people on the beach. Families thick from end to end, kids running along the shoreline, people littered across the sand. She picked her way back to her towel. No one seemed to notice her. She was glad. From her the towel she could see the boat, a small speck of white glinting from the other side of the lake. She narrowed her eyes and glared at them.

She was gonna tell. Oh, man, was she gonna tell. She would've sprinted all the way home and told right now if it weren't such a long fucking way. She wanted Carter to know. Roberta was a liar, a fake. Amy wanted him to know what Roberta really was, a little slut. A big slut. An ungrateful, selfish slut. That's what Roberta was, and Amy was going to tell. She wanted to see the look on Carter's face. She knew it'd hurt him. The beach, the boat, Tina and the boys. Bang, bang, bang. She'd get them back for making her feel like a tag-along. At least she wasn't a slut.

* * *

Just after three, the boat started to move and took off fast out past a bluff. Amy could make out someone skiing off the end before they rounded the corner and disappeared, headed to the other end of the lake. She waited a half-an-hour. She's so dead, she thought. I hate her. She's so fucking dead. I hate her, I hate her, I hate her. The boy with the bucket had a square plastic shovel now and sprayed sand on her towel by accident.

"Stop it you little shit!" Amy yelled. The boy started to cry and scampered over to his parents. They scowled at Amy from under an umbrella. Fuck you, she scowled back, and rolled over. That's when she saw Roberta's sunglasses gleaming on the towel.

Amy reached over and picked them up. Then she moved over to Roberta's towel. Then she put on Roberta's sunglasses.

The world went a dusty shade of blue, and something about it cooled Amy. She leaned back on her hands, stretched out her legs and shook her curls. It wasn't so bad, alone. She picked up the baby oil and rubbed it over her legs and arms. She thought she looked good shiny like that. Then she turned on Madonna and laid back, shades to the sun, one knee up and the other leg straight, and tapped her finger on the towel. She could wait it out.

* * *

"Is that girl gonna stay here all night, Mommy?" Amy heard a small, far-off voice say. She opened her eyes and saw the last of the beach-goers, a boy and his mother holding hands, climbing the bank and looking over their shoulders at Amy as if she were a homeless person.

She sat up. She was beyond red. Somewhere into scarlet, and it hurt to bend. She felt like a giant bruise. And she was cold and hot at the same time. The beach was in shadow now, a breeze came in with a heavier slap to the waves. No boat. No Roberta. Amy had fallen asleep again. It was five-thirty. She was worried for a minute. She thought Roberta might have left her there, but then the worry turned to hope. She hoped Roberta had forgotten her. She hoped her mom and Carter would have to drive the hour out there to get her when Roberta showed up at home minus a nine-year-old step-sister. That would be great. That would seal Roberta's fate. She'd be totally busted. Maybe Carter would send her back to live with her mother.

Amy pulled everything up off the beach. She stomped through the sand-castle the soggy-shorts boy had made. He was gone now anyway. She climbed the bank.

She put the towels and the ghetto-blaster in the back-seat of the car, the backpack and Roberta's bag that clacked with compacts and lipsticks, closed the door and leaned against the driver's side. The sun was going, a melting orange oozing over the west-coast range, the black, ragged horizon.

Amy turned her head when she heard feet slapping against the hard dirt of the car-park. She recognized him. Richie Alvarez. A seventh-grader. A big-dog in her book. She'd heard talk that he'd been caught French-kissing Cindy

Raven, a ninth-grader, a Freshman, in the high school girl's bathroom. He was a carbon copy, a lighter tracing of his older brothers.

He slowed to a gangly swinging saunter, lifting his knees, letting his feet fall. It was a strange, camel-like stride. All the while he looked at Amy, smiled. She hoped her face stayed hard to keep him from seeing in. Richie Alvarez. She knew who he was, dark and smooth and shirtless.

And twelve. He was in Junior High. The school across the street from Amy's elementary. She saw him on the bus in the mornings. He sat in the back with a bunch of other boys, rowdy and bouncy on the bumps. He'd never said anything to her.

He started to slide along the car, up next to her. His swimming-trunks scratched along the paint. Amy watched his smile get closer. She felt like she was going to be sniffed. She crossed her arms over her chest, and squinted at the water. Roberta said never to look when boys whistled. Look straight ahead and keep walking. That way they'll keep doing it. Amy didn't know if that applied here, but Richie's smile sure looked like a whistle.

He was close to her now and leaned against the car too. "You ride the bus," he said.

"So," Amy said.

He laughed. Amy was glad she was sunburned so he couldn't see her blushing. She kept giving him her profile.

"So nothin'. I've just seen you is all."

She wasn't sure why he was there talking to her, but she felt herself start wanting him to stay, so she tried to get him to leave before he thought of it, "Goody for you," she said.

But he stayed and leaned against the car with her and didn't say anything, and she tried not to like the way he smelled like barbecue. And after a minute or two he said, "That's my brother," pointing to a figure on the beach in a group of four.

"Where?"

"Right there in the middle," he leaned closer to her, their cheeks almost touching. Amy felt his ear against hers. He pointed firmly, and they looked down his arm like a scope. "Right there. The one with his hand on that chick's ass," he said, and dropped his hand, crossed his arms, and fell against the car with that smile again. Amy felt him looking at her. She kept looking at the water, at the group coming up from the beach.

"That's my sister," she said.

"Which one?" his head turned back to the group. "Which one?"

"The chick with your brother's hand on her ass."

Then he was looking at her again. She kept looking at the group, squinting her eyes at the sunset and the swaggering silhouettes. He slid next to her. She felt his swimming-trunks against her thigh. His breath burned her sun-burned shoulder. He didn't say anything, so she finally looked at him, and he grinned like he'd been waiting. A long white smile in the thick of all that black hair. He rolled to his side and faced her.

"You're pretty," he said, "but you don't look like sisters."

Her chest solidified, wouldn't expand when she wanted to breathe. She knew they didn't look like sisters, but it didn't matter. Richie Alvarez said she was

pretty anyway. No boy ever told Amy she was pretty. She wished it were true.

She looked at her feet. Shadow had crept in over her knees. She and Richie glowed waist up in the gold of the sliding light, evening was coming home. The trees shook their leaves like hair in the wind, car doors slammed shut in the car park, rocks crunched beneath tires rolling off down the road.

We're not real sisters, but she didn't say it. "My mom married her dad."

"Mmm," he said, looking at her neck. He touched her shoulder when he said, "you're step-sisters then." He brushed against her, and Amy's stomach dropped. She felt it. His cock, "cock," that's the word Roberta used when she talked about blow-jobs behind her bedroom door with Tina. Amy knew other words for it too, but she liked cock. Secretly. It sounded hard. And Richie's was. And even though she knew she shouldn't, Amy liked it. She liked thinking that she made him that way. She made him that way. She wanted to touch it, wrap her hand around it through the fabric. But she turned the other way instead, her back to him. It wasn't a thought, just an action. And that's when he touched her.

She saw his hand come from behind and around her hip. She felt his fingers wedge warmly between her legs and then press into the spandex of her swimsuit, leverage her that way, and pull her against him.

"I bet you still like it like she does, though, don't you? I've watched them do it," he said in her ear, and his fingers moved a little.

She didn't move at all. One of his fingers slipped under the elastic, just barely, and it paralyzed her. His flesh against her, there. She held her breath but felt light and soft, not tense, but malleable like dough. She waited for it, for something. She didn't pull away, and his finger moved farther under the elastic. It was just a moment, but to Amy it was a slow-motion minute. She felt it brand itself in her brain, and she arched her back and leaned into him.

It was that something boys could make girls do. She closed her eyes and thought that he might ... do something, move his finger somewhere else, and she willed him to go there.

"Richie ..." the breeze and the waves and the distance made his mother's voice soft, but the elastic snapped back hard against the inside of Amy's thigh.

Her eyes shot open.

He said, "You wish," pulled his hand back and laughed, was still laughing when she flipped around to see him skipping backward toward the water and sneering at her, his smile gleaming in the violet light. She wanted to chase him down, push him over, and beat her fists into his face, but she was welded to the car. She watched him put the fingers he'd had between her legs in his mouth and pull them out with a wet, sucking pop, and then through his smile slipped a thin, stringy laugh and a pointed tongue, and he wiggled it, his tongue, just the tip. She leaned over her arms, felt the tears rush with the blood to her head, and didn't see him laugh once more before he turned and sprinted into shadows.

Amy leaned her head against the passenger side window and waited for Roberta. The car was facing north, and to the left along a black horizon a fighting strip of red raged. The night was just about to close in. Amy heard the moan of a train pulling through the distance in some far off direction, going somewhere, anywhere, screaming to get away. She imagined being in one of those cars, sitting at the open door and watching everything blur by until a stop where strangers were strangers and you didn't have to pretend they were family or hope that they loved you.

She cried and the salt burned her cheeks.

The driver's-side door swung open.

The car sagged when Roberta got in.

“Yeah, tonight!” Roberta said, shut the door and then saw Amy. “Shit! You’re so fucking red!” she said.

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[switch](#) →



Aubrey Ganas

Aubrey Ganas is a native Californian of twenty-seven years. She grew up in the Central Valley and graduated from California State University Stanislaus in 2001 with a BA in English. She currently lives in San Francisco.

Contributions to Switchback

[Real](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)



[Susanne Dyckman](#)

Soundings

or as cowed frightened into

submission

compliant cycling arms

advice never depend on others

- omitted -

admit

empty oyster lackluster points of meringue

damp of pearly frog

to kiss as low to ground

as is

base

looking for stops

inside

to interrupt

from any chosen point

tile under

foot cold pacing
 a matter of

 alabaster

or the honed

flint retracting heals

syllables hidden behind

more syllables there's the scar

short where the long and lovely word

 lingers

 a back arched in sand

the surface elbows feet sprawl

or

 bird song returns song

others counter / to mirror

that curiosity / flying bones



Susanne Dyckman

Susanne Dyckman received her MFA in Writing from USF ('03), where she was recently a Major Project Advisor. She was co-recipient of the 2003 *Five Fingers Review* Poetry Award, and has been recruited to join the editorial staff. Her work has also appeared or will appear in *Pomona Valley Review* and 26.

Contributions to Switchback

[Soundings](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)

[Tiff Dressen](#)

Fragments
(after Sappho)

I.

She only refers
to the lips
or eyes as

though a word
were

material order would
tear before another
could

enter once

the mystery
became a body water
a creek or like
creek
she sat down
in it

II.

If she would
only refer to the lips
or eyes as

though a word
were material order
would tear after
another had

entered once she
sat down
in it the body
became a mystery a
creek or like

water once

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[switch →](#)

Double Dutch

[Nathan Grover](#)

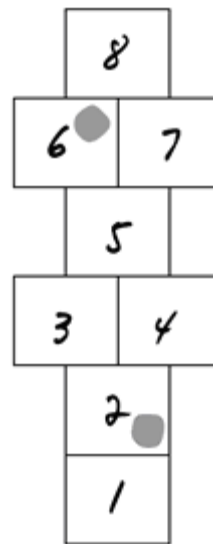
Panda Bear, Panda Bear, eats your feet / Serves them up with cream of wheat / He B-I-T-E bites them / and S-U-C-K sucks them / he L-I-C-K licks them / And when he's done he chucks them / now here comes your boyfriend ready to hump / run away, run away on your stumps / A, B, C, D, E, F

Your boyfriend's name is Fatso / he hales from El Paso / and when you get married / he'll hump his secretary / [double time] Now get to the chapel and don't be late / how many razorblades in your cake? / one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight...

Listen to your mother / and kiss your little brother / put poison in his bottle / and watch him weeble-wobble / but you won't be a laughin' / when he grows up to be captain / march to the east! [180 degree turn] / march to the west! [180 degree turn] / naughty little girls don't get no rest! / who's the boy that you like best? / A, B, C, D, E, F, G

Your boyfriend's name is Gus / he rides the little bus / and when you have his babies / they'll all come out with rabies / [double time] Now ride to the chapel on the little bus / how many babies drool and fuss? / one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve...

Jippity-jump on you're mama's bed / 'til you pass out and hit your head!



Hot Coals

(played with a hopscotch board, a jump rope, and two bean bags)

1. "Now, Gracie, where do we sit on the first day so that the teacher notices how smart and attentive we are?" "Front row." "Right! We want the teacher to remember us as polite and quiet, not a jabber-jaws. A good first impression is so important; it will last you the rest of the year, who knows? maybe even the rest of your life! And, let me tell you, sitting in the front will be the only way to keep those little stinkers from dropping their pencils to sneak a peek up our skirts too." "Mom, a skirt?" "Of course a skirt honey; we'll look so cute in our new blue skirt."

2. Hot Coals! You lost your leg! Walk the aisle with a peg!

3. "Gracie! We don't do that now do we honey, wiping our hands on Mr. Finkle like that, like he was a big tissue. What do we say to Mr. Finkle honey?" "Sorry sir." "Say: we're so impressed with your dapper gray suit Mr. Finkle we just couldn't keep our candy-sticky hands off it. We just couldn't help ourselves could we honey?" "Just couldn't help it." "We're still learning our manners aren't we? Still learning that mommy and daddy's play friends play different than our play friends. It was an honest mistake right honey?" "Honest Mr. Finkle." "Now why don't we go wash our hands before we send someone else to the dry cleaners."

4. "How many times must I say, we don't bring our playthings to the table, especially when those playthings are dirty filthy disgusting worms?" "But--" "But nothing. We don't play in the dirt like a boy; only little boys get messy and pull slimy worms from the dirt." "From the garden." "I don't care where from. Really Gracie, what were we thinking? Mommy's taught us better than this"

5. "And just when I thought I'd seen every last thing we go and make the mother of all messes! Just what did we think we were doing in here?" "Baking." "Well why don't we just leave the baking to Mommy from now on. That's my job around here anyway."

6. Hot Coals! You lost your leg! Walk the aisle with a peg!

7. "But what about when I'm older?" "There's no reason to be afraid then either because when we grow up we'll marry a man with a big manly hairy chest too, just like dad, and he'll make sure there is nothing scary growling in the hamper or in the closet. We'll always have someone to help us not be afraid!"

8. "Oh Honey, not again! We must stop hitting our head on things. That goose egg looks just terrible, just dreadful." "Goose egg?" "What were we playing? Tag? Tetherball again?" "Hot Coals." "Hot Coals? That doesn't sound like a very safe game to me. Maybe we should play something else next time."

* * * *

H.H. Heisermann Elementary

November 5, 1985

Re: New Bicycle-Barbie Helmet Policy

Dear Faculty,

Due to the alarming number of injuries sustained on the playground this year, a new policy has been instituted. This policy was brought before the board and approved at the October 30th PTA meeting. Any students wishing to check-out a jump rope for recess will be required to wear the Bicycle-Barbie Helmet to ensure their safety. Please notify your students of this new policy.

The Bicycle-Barbie Helmets are made available through a charitable donation from Mattel Resources For Children and due to the efforts of Mattel employee and involved parent, Holly Yechtman, who offered the solution at the aforementioned meeting when funding for the policy seemed impossible. We thank Mattel for their generosity and Mrs. Yechtman for her dedication. The Bicycle-Barbie Helmet is the accessory supplied standard with the Bicycle-Barbie doll, only H.H. Elementary has received a special production order with the helmet enlarged to fit the head of a child. Your students will enjoy

wearing the Bicycle-Barbie Helmet. The protective plastic coating glitters with the trademark Barbie Pink. It is decorated with glitter stars and the Barbie Logo on both front and back. The Bicycle-Barbie Helmets have arrived recently; please pick up your class' issue at the main office.

As per H.H. Heisermann Elementary's agreement with Mattel Resources for Children, faculty are obligated to consistently refer to the cranial protection apparatus as the Bicycle-Barbie Helmet and to encourage their students to do the same. Teachers on yard duty will be responsible to ensure that the Bicycle-Barbie Helmet is worn correctly by jump-roping students. Male students who wish to jump-rope are also required to wear the Bicycle-Barbie Helmet.

Thank you for making H.H. Heisermann Elementary a safer place for education.

Principal Francis Melon

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[switch →](#)



[Marti Stephen](#)

celebrity

to cannibal to trespass
imagine sex

the animals you eat

to worship

[← back](#)

[switch →](#)



Marti Stephen

Marti Stephen is a California poet who was born in Colorado. She is a 2000 graduate of the MFA program at USF and her work has appeared in *Volt* and *The Denver Quarterly*. "Celebrity" is from a manuscript she's writing on the cycles of consumerism, both natural and capitalistic.

Contributions to Switchback

[celebrity](#) ↔ [Preview Issue](#)