

# Confession vs Mask

poetry essays fiction nonfiction art



Jared Clark - Untitled Monoprint 3

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**. two in situ**

Justin Katko

**Letters: Correspondence**

Tiff Dressen

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## **Jared Clark**

jared lindsay clark is a rather tall pillager who focuses his plunders on abandoned kitchen cutting boards and lengths of tube in the name of Art. He takes pride in his birthdate (a june one 76er), his life as an archaeologist's son (living in Mexico, Michigan, and Utah), and his official status as a Bachelor of Fine Arts. He will soon be moving to Richmond, Virginia to upgrade into a Master of these same arts at Virginia, Commonwealth, where he plans on exchanging the Volvo wagon for a pick-up truck and maybe a dog to go with it. Site: <http://www.jaredclark.net/>

### **Contributions to Switchback**

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Jared Clark

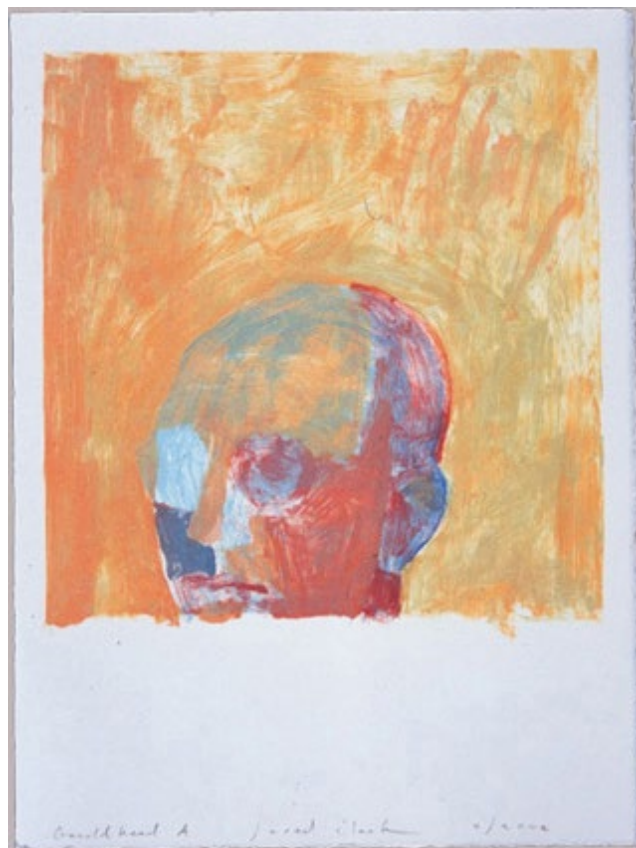
## Untitled Monoprint 1



## Untitled Monoprint 2



**Untitled Monoprint 6**



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# Switchback

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Issue 2: Confession Vs. Mask

A Publication of the **USF MFA in Writing Program**

Dear Reader:

Every narrator, even a nonfiction narrator, can be a fiction, a construct, "confessing" in order to create a persona—always choosing the face to reveal for particular effect, always in some sense a mask. To what degree is the process of reading and writing a detour through a maze of mirrors? To what degree is it a practical journey through a set of reflections that at every turn reveals more of ourselves and deeper questions?

It's all about the quality of the questions that literature prompts and the answers these questions reveal.

This is our second full edition of *Switchback*, the online literary journal of the University of San Francisco's MFA in Writing program.

Please join in this conversation on **Confession vs. Mask** by clicking on the comments link on the masthead. Add your voice to our world of mirrors and reflections.

Sincerely,

The Switchback Editorial Staff

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# Editorial Team



[Casey Jex Smith - Untitled #4](#)

Managing Editor:

**Rosita Nunes** is a project developer by nature and profession. *Switchback* is her 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. Her young adult novel is currently in its third revision.

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*Even if it was to be pure masquerade and not my life at all, still the time had come when I must make a start, must drag my heavy feet forward. —Yukio Mishima*

(Interrogator)

(Translator)

Confess!

pleas—

condemn.

redeem.

Admit, with

Witch!

Judge.

The true judge knows truth already.

a relative measure

and easily

misjudged—what veil

visage

covers

reveals.

It was best to be naked.

with a death mask only.



If you talk about death, you save part of yourself.

There are experiences and obsessions one cannot live with.

Salvation lies in confessing them.

But at the same time, something of your real self dies:

the part of

me that was not yet sober

I know nothing more disgusting than death,

nothing more serious

and more sinister! How could some poets

find beautiful the ultimate

negation which cannot even wear the mask of the grotesque?

I am a twisted deformed freak that you don't want to look at for long.

you admit death

grows inside

you—repentantly

the adverb explains a doubt fairly well

then submit another; you looked and carried yourself a certain way...

rigorously

interrogating

the self,

resolutely

confronting

those facts

that matter

what I was now disgusted with

was my true self

masca?

the specter, witch. I wanted to catch

a witch

so I could kill her.

a thick pure white blood.

I wasn't sure what color it was, so many had been woven in.

I imagined that was what witch blood would look like.

my only recourse was to infer from theoretical rules what "a boy my age" would feel when he was all alone.

masque?

unseizability and variable visibility that explicitly or implicitly link these malefactors to ghosts.

maskharah?

buffoon!

or man in masquerade.

or person. or any person.

persona?

sounds through the actors' masks. many incarnations

of Rachel's angst-filled monologue

whole wood of the masks' mouths funneling whispers

of no or ornament players

Although they spoke softly, and I wasn't trying to listen

Of entering oneself.

no noise from my voice

rite. observance.

By the time I got to the top I was screaming and chanting with them.

he'd like to project

bonfire. dancing silhouettes

ritual

a ritual.

from this

is no different

and submissions

fever



[recorded and transcribed by [Alex Davis](#)]

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## An Unflinching Rhetorical Gaze: The Personal Essayist and Disclosure

Marie L. Fiala

Recently, a passionate discussion was sparked among the students in my MFA class concerning Richard Rodriguez's essay, "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood." Some class members speculated that Rodriguez had failed to disclose critical facts about his private life and thus had undermined the authenticity and authority of his views about bilingual education — which, generally speaking, he opposes (although this rough summary does injustice to Rodriguez's sensitive and nuanced exploration of the topic). I felt that Rodriguez had given the reader all the information needed to establish his credibility, but was surprised by the emotional intensity of the debate, which was inspired in part by the essay's controversial content, but also layered with tones of mistrust, accusation and anger. To those who felt that Rodriguez had been insufficiently self-revelatory, his "failure" was tantamount to a betrayal of what Annie Dillard calls "the covenant between the nonfiction writer and his reader" (xvii). But what, exactly, I was led to consider, had been betrayed?

No matter what his overt subject, the personal essayist inevitably and always takes himself as his material — as Phillip Lopate puts it wonderfully, "diving into the volcano of self and extracting a single hot coal to consider and shape" — and displays it for his reader's consideration (Introduction, [Art](#) xxix). The resulting relationship both privileges and obligates the writer. I say "privileges" because, by procuring the reader as witness to his life, the writer secures for himself a small measure of immortality, at least a modest success at what Brett Lott calls "the attempt to keep from passing altogether away the lives we have lived" (192). And "obligates," because the essayist in return owes to the reader a fidelity to truth that, if unsatisfied, will erode the reader's trust and cause her to feel at best alienated, and at worst, abused.

The proper quantum of that "truth" is a relative measure and easily misjudged, especially in the current cultural context, where the public's insatiable appetite for self-disclosure can translate into an indiscriminate sense of entitlement to know all manner of personal information about a writer. Think (with a shudder) of the literary equivalent of reality television — is the writer depressive, alcoholic, drug-addicted, a child abuse victim, estranged from his spouse, gay? But surely the essayist is not obliged by the act of writing to provide a tell-all of private experience. Whether or not Hemingway was a drunk, or Mary McCarthy was too-easily married, or James Baldwin was gay may not be material to the integrity of their writings at all, depending on the subjects they elect to address.

What, then, defines the personal essayist's obligation to his reader in this area? I wrestle with this question in my own writing, as I decide which doors need to be opened and which ones can remain closed, what must be revealed and what may be concealed. Two things are necessary, I have concluded, and perhaps no more than that. First, that the disclosure be deployed in the service of a higher endeavor than personal narrative alone. Without a larger meaning, disclosure reduces to mere narcissism, or even exhibitionism. And second, that an unflinching "dialectic of self-questioning," as Lopate puts it, shines the bright hard light of exposure on all information that matters to the undertaking (Introduction, [Art](#) xxx). The writer may not rhetorically avert his gaze from material that is distressing or difficult, if it is relevant. He owes to the reader what he owes to himself — to be in good faith with himself, whether exploring a problem interiorly or on the page. An asexual Baldwin discoursing on race relations is one thing. An undeclared Baldwin fulminating against gay marriage would be quite another.

Even the most skilled of writers may err in this regard. Phillip Lopate's "Portrait of My Body" and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Crack-Up" seem to me to over and undershoot, respectively, the boundaries of optimal disclosure. Lopate's synecdochic essay affords the reader a frank tour of the writer's anatomy that leaves no part unaccounted for. Thus we are privy to the shape of the writer's navel and the "ripe, underground smell" that comes from "jabbing his finger in it" ("Portrait" 26); his tooth-grinding, nose-picking and scab-scratching habits; ear wax removal, with its own associated "sulfurous" aroma (27); and the size, shape and color of his penis, which has "two peeing holes" (28), with attendant observations on the writer's infrequent (he hastens to assure us, and then assures us again, and again) bouts of impotence. The physical descriptions are punctuated with ruminations on the writer's personality, self-image and attitudes. Lopate's mouth, "arching downward in an ironic smile" (20), furnishes the means for "a neutral stall among people who do not seem to appreciate [his] 'contribution'" (20), and his "long and not unshapely" legs (21) (for which he confesses an immoderate vanity) incline him to "feel well-disposed toward the (mostly shorter) swarms of humanity" (21).

This is candor in abundance, but to what end? Lopate explains his purpose:

In first person writing, there is a thin line between the charming and the insufferable. For a while now, I have dreamt of pushing at this line, slipping over occasionally to the other side, stretching the boundaries of acceptable first-person behavior, increasing like a dye the amount of obnoxiousness in my narrator — just for the thrill of living dangerously (Introduction, Portrait 3).

That is to say, in this essay he discloses for disclosure's sake alone. It is not enough. Though immaculate in form, his essay is not concerned with any subject larger than the writer himself, and thus illuminates only the writer's insistent ego, his thrill-seeking self put on display for our awe and admiration. "Portrait of My Body" is perhaps not insufferable, but certainly self-absorbed, and ultimately slight.

By contrast, Fitzgerald's confessional essay, "The Crack-Up," is a brave attempt to grapple with weighty and universal issues — disappointment, failure, the lifelong "constant striving" against entropy (151). Written late in Fitzgerald's career, the essay was said by a *New York Times* reviewer to comprise "the whitened bones of genius," (Du Bois 17) and the writer's indisputable genius dazzles even as it disappoints. The essay charts Fitzgerald's deterioration and breakdown in the face of a series of personal challenges: his disappointing performance at Princeton, an unsatisfying stint in the Army during World War I, the struggle to maintain in his thirties the too-easily-won career successes of his twenties, an unhappy love affair and a grave (and unspecified) medical crisis. Fitzgerald acutely chronicles the crumbling of an artist, and of a self. The "Crack-Up" was a remarkably candid essay for its time, and Fitzgerald paid a price for it, as the essay itself foretold ("there are always those to whom all self-revelation is contemptible") (144). His contemporaries thought it an embarrassment — Hemingway denounced it as cowardly and shameful, Dos Passos deemed it an abuse of Fitzgerald's talent, and John O'Hara pronounced it an "orgy of self-pity . . . which should have been suppressed at the mail-box" (O'Hara 68).

Fitzgerald says of his emotional collapse that it "is not a pretty picture," and indeed it is not. He starts off strong — "Of course all life is a process of breaking down . . ." — and systematically catalogs his spiritual depletion, his alienation and his enervation (137). He ultimately concludes that those qualities on which he most prides himself — what he calls his intellectual, moral, artistic, emotional and political "consciences" (147) — are all pale simulacra of other men's attributes, other men all made of better stuff than he. At the end of this relentless debriding, he observes, "there was not an 'I' any more — not a basis on which I could organize my self-respect" (148). A brutally honest self-assessment, yes, but in its largely dispassionate tone, wanting.

The 19th century Scottish essayist and poet Alexander Smith wrote, "If you wish to preserve your secret, wrap it up in frankness" (54316). And so has Fitzgerald done here. Although seemingly disclosing a great deal, on closer inspection he actually masks more than he reveals by adopting an attitude of ironic detachment in place of an emotionally textured rendering of his experience: "During this time I had plenty of the usual horses shot out from under me — I remember some of their names — Punctured Pride, Thwarted Expectations, Faithless, Show-off, Hard Hit, Never Again" (Fitzgerald 146). Bravura words, but bloodless, as Fitzgerald shows us none of the raw feeling that must have underlain these episodes. Of actual experience, Fitzgerald provides only a glimpse — "I took a dollar room in a drab little town where I knew no one and sunk all the money I had with me in a stock of potted meat, crackers and apples" (148) — and then retreats to his "dollar room" and a detached, sardonic stance.

In the final third of his essay, Fitzgerald averts his rhetorical gaze from the emotions — despair, anguish, despondency — that one can only surmise must have accompanied his crack-up, and assumes a deliberately cynical pose:

So, since I could not longer fulfill the obligations that life had set for me or that I had set for myself, why not slay the empty shell who had been posturing at it for four years? . . . I would cease any attempts to be a person — to be kind, just or generous . . . There was to be no more giving of myself — all giving was to be outlawed henceforth under a new name, and that name was Waste (149-50).

From now on, he tells us, he will wear a mask of his own devising, both in the world and on the page. With a "heady villainous feeling" (150) he assembles his new persona: "A smile — ah, I would get me a smile. . . . The voice too — I am working with a teacher on the voice. When I have perfected it the larynx will show no ring of conviction except the conviction of the person I am talking to. . . . The old dream of being an entire man . . . has been relegated to the junk heap" (150-51). What we are left with at the end is a man and a writer who has disclaimed his own humanity:

The man I had persistently tried to be became such a burden that I have "cut him loose" . . . I do not any longer like the postman, nor the grocer, nor the editor, nor the cousin's husband, and he in turn will come to dislike me, so that life will never be very pleasant again, and the sign *Cave canem* is hung permanently just above my door. I will try to be a correct animal, though, and if you throw me a bone with enough meat on it I may even lick your hand (151-52).

In contrast to “The Crack-Up’s” bold beginning, which implicitly promises to delve beneath the surface of the narrator’s psyche, its resolution not only disappoints, but flouts the contemporary reader’s expectations, leaving her dissatisfied and ultimately distanced from the writer.

In one sense it is unfair to scrutinize Fitzgerald’s writing by 21st century standards. He was the product of a restrained, gentlemanly and stiff-upper-lip tradition from which he was unable to escape entirely. But his effort illuminates and helps me to formulate my own answer to the question of disclosure. What does the writer of personal essays owe to the reader? To handle the topic as honestly as possible by rigorously interrogating the self, resolutely confronting those facts that matter, and revealing them in the service of the truth. So that, when I read Rodriguez’s painful confession of childhood shame at his Spanish-speaking parents’ “high-whining vowels and guttural consonants; their sentences that got stuck with ‘eh’ and ‘ah’ sounds; the confused syntax; the hesitant rhythm of sounds so different from the way gringos spoke” (449), and his own classroom humiliations that left him “dazed, diffident, afraid” (453), I know that his views on bilingual education, whether politically agreeable or not, have been honestly arrived at and shaped by authentic personal experience.

On the personal essayist’s duty to his readers, Michel de Montaigne, the progenitor of the genre itself, showed the way. “I have this, at least, . . . that never any man penetrated farther into his matter, nor better and more distinctly sifted the parts and sequences of it, nor ever more exactly and fully arrived at the end he proposed to himself. To perfect it, I need bring nothing but fidelity to the work” (“Of Repentance”). To which I can only add, and fidelity to oneself.

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## **Marie Fiala**

Marie Fiala is a first year student in the MFA in Writing program at the University of San Francisco. She received her AB from Stanford University and her JD from Stanford Law School. She is a full-time practicing attorney specializing in complex commercial litigation. She is married and the mother of three children. She is currently working on a memoir about her experience as the mother of a disabled child.

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### **Contributions to Switchback**

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## Chandelier

Katherine Lieban

She poured the pink champagne and didn't bother to examine the bubbles floating to the surface. In the past that had been her favorite part. The bubbles had reminded her of snow in those little plastic jiggy things you shook. Now she took a swig of the fizzy, slightly sweet drink and plopped down on the Chinese silk sofa. Pulling her skirt up, she looked at the green and blue bruises on her thighs. The shit she put up with. She pressed a thumb into the shiny surface of the skin. It hurt like hell.

Someone had let the ferret out of his cage. She saw him dart from behind the sofa into the hallway. Raslinokov would not be a happy man when he returned from the fire. The chandelier was missing another bulb. What was today anyway? Wednesday already? That was three light bulbs this week. The room was comfortingly dark. She could be beautiful in this light. Next to her was a large pink plastic bag. She dug inside and found sunglasses. She put them on and the room grew darker. She couldn't see the bruises anymore. It was awfully warm for November. She detested perspiration. It was best to be naked.

When Raslinokov returned, the first thing he noticed was the ferret shit in the hallway. He set the heavy duffel bag down and fished in his pockets. He pulled out a handful of gummy herring and dropped a line of it from the entryway to the entrance of the toilet. Then he went inside and sat down on the cold porcelain bowl. It was times like this that he missed Tokyo. The heaven of those eternally warm Japanese toilet seats with the fancy computer grids. You could choose a variety of stimulating bidet effects and noises to disguise your bodily functions. He loved Japan, though it was an impossible place for him. He was just too big. But the women had loved him. He closed his eyes and that's when he heard the quiet snuffling noise. Hector, his ferret, could not resist gummy herring. Raslinokov reached for a towel. Hector bit like a fanged vampire when thwarted.

Veronique awoke to find Raslinokov fighting with a white bath towel. His pants were down around his ankles, which impeded his dexterity. He held the bath towel in both hands and screamed for Veronique to open the wire ferret cage.

"I have him! I have the little bastard!"

Veronique rolled off the sofa and sauntered over to the cage. She watched Raslinokov struggle with the towel a minute, a smile playing on the edges of her mouth. This was her man, the bear. She flipped a lever and Raslinokov tossed the towel into the cage. The ferret sprang free of the cloth and stood, teeth bared, tail up, ready for more action.

"Why are you naked in sunglasses, cabbage of love?"

"And you, conqueror of ferrets, with a bare ass?"

A bulb popped and the chandelier went dark. A quiet snuffling noise was all that could be heard.



## **Katherine Lieban**

Katherine Lieban is a second-year MFA student. She lives in San Francisco with her family and works as an ESL teacher.

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## Walter's Plea

Stephen D. Gutierrez

Dear God Who Doesn't Exist Anymore But Wants To:

I'm lonely. I don't know what to do anymore since discovering my secret. I like little boys, little girls, too. Last night, at a party, I almost broke into the room of a little girl who was the sister of the dude throwing the party, Mark. He caught me sneaking in, shoving my shoulder against the door in the hall, and asked me what I was doing: "What are you doing, Walter?"

"Nothing, trying to go in and see her."

"Why?"

"I don't know, I'm lonely." Then his big brother came by and got me away.

There was a scene in the hall I don't remember the details of because I was drunk, very, very drunk, because I had downed a whole bottle of Bacardi 151 by then, a pint or whatever you call that small bottle. I can't give you a good explanation for that. It seemed like the right thing to do, drink and get fucked up at the party.

And everybody is always talking about Bacardi 151 as if it's the ultimate in drinks. "Bacardi 151, Bacardi 151," my friends have been singing so long I can still hear them in my head now. "Bacardi 151, el maximo."

I bought it at the liquor store down the street, on the corner where the bus stops. Dan, my friend from school who works there, sold it to me and I stuffed it in my pants and went to the party.

There were a lot of people there, rocking, talking, partying. I started drinking. I drank the whole damn thing.

I started bouncing down the hall. Then I was standing before her room trying to get in.

But I just wanted to talk, say hi, get away from people. I didn't want to do anything bad to her.

I wanted to sit and be comfortable. That's when his brother came, Mark behind him, now I remember, making a fuss, clearing the crowd, getting me out of there.

They say I threw a punch at Mark's brother that was good. But I got kicked out and walked home.

I don't know how I got home. When I did I sat in my room crying. I didn't know what I was doing anymore. Little boys, little girls. I never thought of them before but now I'd like to talk to them and only them, I thought to myself. Touch them. Their faces, their hair.

Nothing else.

Really, please, believe me.

I wish I could tell you more but I can't. Everything is bad in my life and I just want to say I don't want to hurt anybody but to live, to love, to laugh, to "spend riotously the gifts of my birthright." I read that in English last week.

I don't know what it means, either. I'm lost as to my gifts. I don't know what they are.

Only that I like to write, sometimes, alone, at night, and that I feel awful and ugly most of the time. This is because I am. I am a twisted deformed freak that you don't want to look at for long. I'm ugly.

Nobody credits me with this insight. They think only they know. Names come at me that are hurtful: "Anteater, The Honker," and just stuff that people say. "Man, look at that nose!" My friend actually touched it and whistled: "Wow!"

I feel shitty all the time. I want to kill myself. I don't see any reason for going on anymore. Do you, God, see any reason for me to go on anymore? Are you going to give me some bullshit about beauty being in the eyes of the beholder, or in-time-all-will-be-made-clear, or that all-time favorite of mine, of the Catholic Church: "Faith." As if it's impossible to have faith without God or the Church.

It's very, very possible. Watch me.

Signed,

Your ever-loving son,

Walter

P.S. I have not even begun to tell you about my father and the situation at home. It is bad. Screaming and sickness defines my house. I don't think I'll ever get over it. It is so bad coming home to a father in a wheelchair lifting a finger at you, screaming incoherently, miserable, my mother saying, "Okay, Alfredo, that's enough, bastante," my brother pushing him away when we all need some rest. But there's nowhere to take him. It's so small here we can still hear him when he puts him in the back, in his room.

Then I go in the bathroom and look at myself.

Dear God: There is nothing to look at. I am a nothing, a zero. Only let me not harm others in my life, please God, please God, who doesn't exist.

## **Stephen D. Gutierrez**

Stephen D. Gutierrez is the author of *Elements*, winner of the Charles H. and N. Mildred Nilon Excellence in Minority Fiction Award. He has published widely, most recently in *Third Coast*, *Paterson Literary Review* and *River Teeth*. He teaches in the creative writing program at California State University, East Bay.

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**Brother Moon**

Marina Garcia-Vasquez

the eclipse speaks water  
 washes sun over moon  
 floats between night and day

you are in a hospital  
 florescent truths green under white lights  
 you my only brother with swell of hair on face  
 see night dark and abandoned body in a corner

you concede to the obsidian moon without seeing it

you think: suicide as meditation

admitted  
 you are not  
 evaluated for the toxin beyond this night  
 for years of pain breaking  
 a lone you seek and neglect  
 you admit death  
 grows inside you  
 a damp rooted plant  
 a bromeliad that remains with little water or attention  
 absorbing insecurities as nutrient

you keep a long finger nail  
 to point  
 outward to blame and keep solace at bay  
 inward to name and create character out of hate  
 the half-you half-bromeliad  
 the absence you feel in touch  
 intimacy as war

---

(( ))

I held you new born  
first boy that was my own

at eight months we rushed you  
to the hospital, I sang  
in your face to keep your eyes  
open, praying you would live

raised you as the boy that I wanted to be  
trained you to hold your penis  
pull your foreskin back  
explained the difference between boy and girl  
and I agreed when you insisted  
“but sister, I am a boy, I am a boy”

( )

this hospital visit you become almost naked  
stainless steel against white father present but empty at your side

he doesn't see the pierced skin raised and scabbed or hear  
the soft of your anger  
he is the bone that coexists with organs

---

( )

it's night not end

wish for drum and feather

---

( )

the eclipse fades  
to day in waiting  
your pebbled words  
gray-matter acceptance  
I walk  
in daylight  
through city streets quieted by chaos

cross wet blood drying  
on pavement painted paisleys  
not crimson but the brown of  
orchid serene  
a stranger's blood  
violent and peaceful

tonight, the moon polished full gold  
burns the deep obsidian

you say people either learn or die

and there is beauty in your agony

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## **Marina Garcia-Vasquez**

Marina Garcia-Vasquez lives in New York but dreams of Mexico City. She works in magazines and finds poetry in the white space between typed words and photographs. She is obsessed with pyramids, flowers, and seashells.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

[Issue 2](#) | [Brother Moon](#)

[Issue 3](#) | [Over Water](#)

**[a line of doubt]**

Carla Hall Belmonte

A line of doubt seesaws crunched lip,  
Orange melancholia rip.

If I could peel dark, say it is here it is so like this.  
I will write unsurely this that writes me.

Now the foghorn belches out worlds.  
You unreel beyond unreal cliffs, you that sighs evenly.

White orchids are belles, thinking I love you, dragging.  
A truly cradled heart lies across salt and fear.

Maybe I've learned to breathe wildly, thinly, in in audibly.  
If now imagination spreads and coagulates

What I learned was not true!  
That long walk down C— beach, the sand gritted, soaked in.

What vain service! Past does not help,  
Shouts the sun's blue curve.

But the adverb explains a doubt fairly well;  
The gender always tells, fish scales singing.

Retold reference to intimacy, a fonder point.  
We are slick with words, sick, sometimes clever,

empty, mostly shy. Fact says learned is her reply.  
Amphibians glow with finite oxygen --

Luminescent, thoughtless, the bearers of volumes  
Yank, friend! What is no, blue eyes, then yes, then...

Have I failed?

## **Carla Hall Belmonte**

Born in Southern California, Carla Hall Belmonte received her BA in English from UC Riverside (1992) and then taught ESL for seven years. She received her MFA from the University of San Francisco (2001). Her work appears in the *Electronic Poetry Review* #3, *Jacket* #22, and *Ignatian*. She has collaborated on four poetic dances with Curtis Speck on the subjects of AIDS and violence against women. Currently, she works at the Fromm Institute, a non-profit academic program that facilitates classes for retired adults. She writes poetry and is translating Eugene Guillevic's long poem, *Le Chant*, with Heather Woods.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

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## Hearing Confessions

Deborah Lichtman

Each summer, students who enter the MFA Program at USF are assigned to write a 40-page autobiographical manuscript. They receive this definition as a starting point:

AUTOBIOGRAPHY is a story about a narrator who is also the writer. The narrator examines an aspect of the past in order to discover some new meaning in the events or relationships of his/her life. As readers, we look forward to the pleasure of finding things out, whether they are about the character called "I" or about the ways that character's experience resonates with our own.

---

Gentle Writer,

As you start to write your autobiography, you may think your life story will tell me who you are. But it never works this way. Naturally, your story will tell me something about you. But it will also show me something more perplexing and elusive.

When I first read your memoir, what I'm reading is a narrative, an account of unfolding events. These events are important, but they are also arbitrary in the same way that your personal history is, in many ways, an accident. Things happened to you, but you had no part in making them happen. You grew up in one place rather than the other; your parents treated you one way, not another; you looked and carried yourself a certain way, or you didn't. This information gives me context, but that's all; it doesn't capture you. Even if you give away your most guarded secrets, confidences that may shock or surprise me, they don't, of themselves, reveal. The more you disclose to me, the more questions I have. And these questions, in turn, make me recognize how far I am from knowing you.

Reading the narrative in your autobiography, I do become aware of defining episodes in your life. But it's not in the incidents you recount that the drama of your memoir takes hold; it's in your quest to understand the self at the center of the drama. Without this quest, a memoir lacks momentum and direction; it has no purposeful course because any autobiography, if it is to move beyond disclosure, has to pursue meaning. *Wanting to comprehend* is the force that drives the piece, as much for you the writer as for me the reader.

Precisely *how* do you approach the material of your life? This is the question that guides my reading. For as you strive to grasp your experience, the specificity of your story recedes from view and brings into focus something larger and more meaningful. I discover more about you in your search than in your story. And even here, my vantage point is limited: it is bounded by the construct of autobiography, by the form itself, which can never allow a single "I" to stand alone on the page.

When you write an autobiography, you put two selves on paper: the character in the narrative who acts and is acted upon, and the narrator who shapes the portrayal of that character. There you are as protagonist in your dramatized life; here you are as controlling narrator, making choices about how to depict that life, who to cast in it, and what to say about your protagonist. The genre demands a splitting off of the self; you try *now* to see yourself as you were *then*. Add to this the presence of another, third, "self" — the observing character *at the time of the unfolding action* — and that makes for three of you on the page.

In reading your memoir, I find multiple depictions of you. These figures are unified by their common desire to apprehend your experience, but they're also separated by their differing views of it. You're constructing meanings, and your character (your younger self) is constructing meanings. With these competing perspectives to negotiate, how could I possibly arrive at a fixed point of interpretation from which to gain definitive knowledge of you? Wouldn't it be presumptuous of me to think I could distill from these apparitions anything like an essential self? There's too much interference — from your narrator, your reflecting protagonist, your acting protagonist — for me to find any stable ground from which to pass judgment.

If the "truth" about you could be located anywhere, it would be lodged somewhere amid the secrets you unveil and the selves you inhabit. But it can't. For the real secret behind every autobiography is the enigma of identity itself. Though a memoir is based on self-disclosure, it leads to a recognition of the guises we wear, wittingly or not, in the roles we cannot help but occupy. To the extent that you *are* exposed in autobiography, you're perceptible to me not as a stationary self-portrait but as a moving image.

So there you have it. No matter how much or how little you disclose, how much or little you want to be known, there are too many versions of you on the page to make this possible. A thoughtful reader won't leave your manuscript with a privileged sense of who you are but rather a respect for the fleeting goal of all autobiographical writing.

So why do this kind of writing? Because it leads you to pursue truths with a relentless honesty you didn't know you had, or didn't think you'd employ. It bids you to take the tangle of daily experience and craft it into a work of literature. If your only reason to write autobiography is to confess, then you're bound to write narcissistically. But if you write to make artful sense of what's happened to you, your writing comes closer to the heart of something true. *Closer* to the heart, but never directly *to* it. Because the truth that emerges from autobiography is not the truth of events or our final assessment of them: it's the truth that the self is a composite of many selves; the story of a life, a narrative made up of half-recalled, half-imagined memories that change as time alters us.

Why read this kind of writing? Because I learn from your capacity to plumb the mystery of your self. And I'm moved by it. You've entered a profoundly private space and allowed me join you there so we might both discover how much of this space is communal. We all wrestle with the chaos of human experience, trying to make of our lives a meaningful narrative. We are each of us made up of multiple selves, our interpretations of our lives perpetually in flux. After reading your manuscript, I'll know enough to appreciate how elusive identity is, how complex our motives are, and how the past remains unknowable despite our best efforts to own it. It's a profoundly modern, even postmodern, experience that I'll have.

Secrets may be unveiled in your autobiography, and some lives may be exposed. But whatever you reveal, you'll still be a mystery to your reader. Give me a window into yourself and I'll also find a mirror there. In the end, what I'll see most clearly are the faces that are inseparable from individual personality — your narrator's, your character's, and my own. In reading and writing autobiography, it's not a matter of confession vs. mask: it's always about both.

## **Deborah Lichtman**

Deborah Lichtman received her MA and PhD in English from the University of California at Berkeley. She is Co-Director of the MFA Program at the University of San Francisco, where she teaches the initial course in the Program on autobiographical writing. Her genre is creative nonfiction, and she is currently engaged in a love/hate relationship with the personal essay.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

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Casey Jex Smith

## Untitled 1

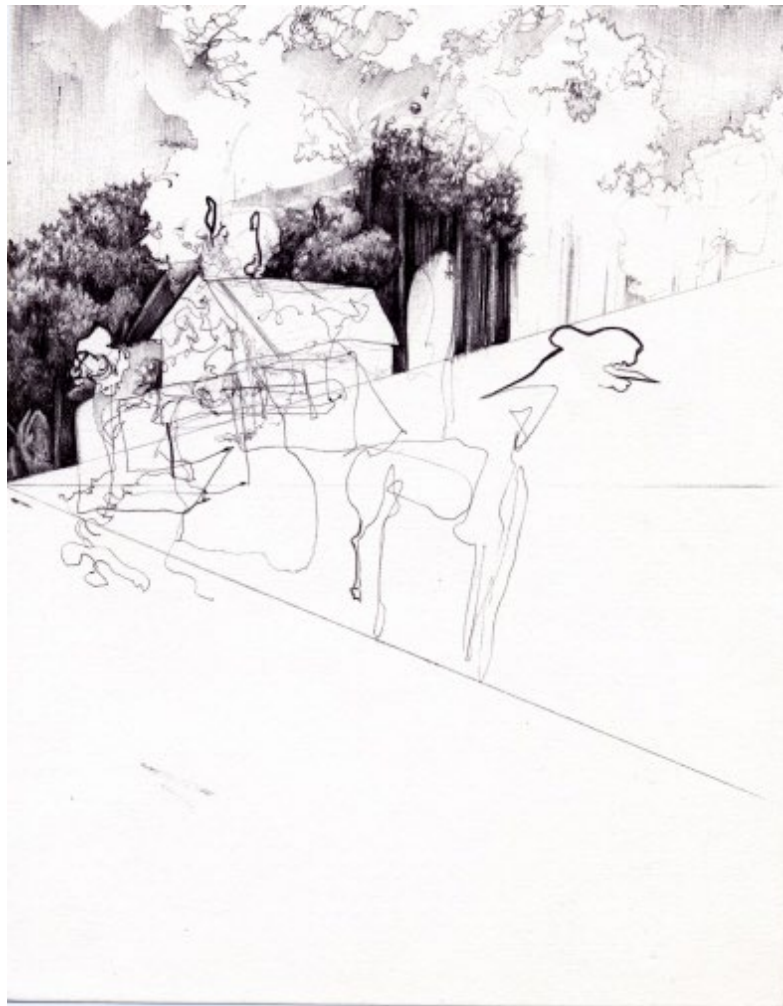


## Untitled 2



**Untitled 3**





**Untitled 4**



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## **Casey Jex Smith**

Casey Jex Smith was born on December 30, 1976 in Livonia Michigan. After a brief four year stay in Michigan, Casey moved to Utah with his mother and 8-year-old brother Jake. Casey later attended Brigham Young University where he received a BFA degree in Painting and is currently finishing an MFA in Painting at the San Francisco Art Institute. Site: <http://www.caseyjexsmith.com/>

### **Contributions to Switchback**

[Issue 2](#) | [Untitled 1, 2, 3, and 4](#)

## Sugarhouse

Alika Tanaka

Lex dipped his finger in the white paint can and licked it off like pudding. I sat on the roof and looked down at him in the alley with all the cans and bottles and things around. He dipped it in again. I climbed down the ladder and went over to where he was sitting on the tar mat.

"Dad's going to whip you one," I said and kicked the can, "eating all his good paint up."

Lex was five and I was seven and a half. I didn't like being outside in the summer with the flies and things buzzing around me. But Dad made us play outside so he could keep an eye on us, except he was never hardly there.

"Give me some of that paint," I said and dipped my whole hand in and brought it out like a white glove. It was so smooth and milky and dripping like a thick pure white blood. I imagined that was what witch blood would look like.

I wanted to catch a witch so I could kill her.

Someday I was going to find a gingerbread house to live in. It would have a candy cane roof with frosting icicles hanging down and windows made out of gumdrops. Maybe I would let Lex live with me. If we got hungry we could take a bite off and it would grow back like a lizard tail.

Lex had a string of spit hanging off his lip. "You look like a retard," I said. I took a piece of newspaper from the pile and shoved it in his face so I wouldn't have to see it. Lex hardly ever talked. The paint on my hand was starting to dry and crack.

I could hear the ice cream truck come, its popgoestheweasel getting louder. I put my good hand in my pocket and got the dime that I'd found that morning under a bucket, heads up. Ten wishes for me.

"I got a lucky dime," I told Lex. "Maybe the ice cream man will give us something for it."

I grabbed Lex's hand forgetting about the paint and getting him all white and chalky and we ran to the ice cream truck at the end of the alley with my lucky dime.

There was a girl in front of us with a red velvety dress. I wanted to touch her with my white paint hand. She got a scoop of real ice cream on top of a cone, not even the kind you get in the tinfoil wrapper. I told the man I wanted one too, and one for my brother. I held out my dime.

It was Mr. Ben, not the normal ice cream man. He didn't wear a paper hat either. He just looked at me. "You can't buy anything for a dime," he said. "Where's your daddy?"

I shrugged.

"Is he home? Go see if he's home."

"Then can we have an ice cream?"

Mr. Ben looked around the alley. "Yeah, maybe."

The girl in the red velvety dress got halfway down the alley and I ran ahead of her behind the garbage cans where she couldn't see me. I crouched down and when she got to me I threw out a rat in front of her and made her scream. A lady came from one of the houses and went over to the girl and hit her and picked her up and yelled a few things and went into one of the houses behind the garbage cans. I went over to where the splat was. There was her ice cream cone head fallen off and lying on the ground.

"Come here Lex!"

Lex ran over and I grabbed a stick and we picked at the vanilla. I got my face close to the ground and licked the top. It was still cold.

"Hey, kid!" It was Mr. Ben calling me from the ice cream truck. I thought he was going to give me and Lex some ice cream but instead he gave me an envelope.

"Give this to your dad," he said, and his eyes kept going back and forth. Then he made the truck go fast out of the alley, far away where you couldn't hear the music jingling. He didn't even give us an ice cream.

I thought he said it was a vanilla envelope and I went into the shade with Lex and we opened it up. There was a plastic bag inside with white powder.

"Look Lex, sugar!"

We tore open the bag and dipped our fingers in and licked.

Then Dad's shadow came over us looking down with a blaze in his eye. It was that same blaze as when momma did the cross thing on her and let the screen door bang for the last time.

"What the hell -- is that from Ben?" Dad took a lick himself and then spit it out. "Goddamn that sonofabitchmotherfucker!" He kicked the alley dust and paint chips flew into the sugar bag. "Screwed me with a fucking sugar bag!" He kicked the fence in and hollered down the alley punching the trashcans and fences along the way.

There was still a lot of sugar left and Lex and I ate the rest of the bag and Lex even ate a few of the paint chips.

It was getting dark. I wondered if I could ever turn our alley house into gingerbread. I wanted to live in a place where it snowed sugar all day.

Lex was dripping his spit and I slapped him one. "Retard," I said, and pushed him so he fell over and started crying like a baby. "You stupid, stupid bitch," I said, "always slobbering all over. You ruin everything!"

I found a bottle of blue liquid where the oil and cans were. I held it up to Lex. "I dare you to drink it," I said. "I bet it tastes good." Lex kept crying like the sissy he was, but he reached for it.

I climbed up to the roof and pushed away the ladder so it smacked flat on the ground cracking like a gunshot. I counted how many wishes I had left.

## **Alika Tanaka**

Alika Tanaka moved from San Diego to San Francisco in 1995. When she is not writing or reading she often frequents karaoke bars, attempts to make sense of astrology, and collects brightly colored socks. She recently won first place in the Backwards City Review Fiction Contest. She currently is an MFA student at the University of San Francisco.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

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## Under the Table

LindaPeckham

[An excerpt from the memoir *Failure to Comply* about being a white, English-speaking illegal alien in the 1980s.]

East 58th Street crossed Park Avenue and Lexington where old money brushed up against the midtown industry of making more of it. Exiles of vaguely aristocratic European families glittered next to buttoned-down urban professionals. In shoe stores, the salesmen were dressed as well as the patrons, and knelt to slide Italian leather onto the offered foot with a shoehorn. Above East 58th, Fifth Avenue upgraded itself to Central Park East, where doormen's whistles hailed yellow cabs for their charges waiting under the awnings. The cabs flowed downtown towards Saks, or Nieman Marcus, or the Plaza Hotel for lunch.

Salon Étienne was poised to serve them all, in the middle of the block on the third floor. The street level would have been a crass location to receive clients. The huge panes of glass were not for pedestrians to see into, but for clients to see out of, to survey the landscape uptown. The salon was reached by an elevator reserved for the exclusive use of the clientele.

I stepped into this little limousine and inhaled a mixture of heady perfume and hair chemicals. At the top, my stomach took a moment to catch up with my body as the doors opened. I was greeted by a loud flower arrangement the size and shape of a fireworks display. It guarded the reception desk, an S-shaped station of padded green suede. The dropped ceiling over the desk glowed with concealed lighting. The rest of the ceiling disappeared into darkness, like a theater. Track lighting was aimed towards each velvet chair, to show a new coiffure in its best possible light. Each chair was positioned in front of a large mirror framed in baroque gilt. The mirrors leaned out on picture wires like rows of valuable ancestral portraits. I felt like a tadpole in a shark tank.

Fortunately, Thalia was at the front desk and saw me. She was on the phone, and shut her eyes by way of a greeting, her code for insufferable pain. Her voice went on in a pleasantly professional tone, while her eyeballs rolled and fluttered behind their lids. With her blue-black hair and thick lashes, she looked like Cleopatra with a migraine.

When she hung up she murmured, "I'm so sorry," and opened her eyes. She said it with such gravity I heard it as a kind of black grace before a meal: for what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly sorry. "She's back here."

I followed her to a giant bathroom, tiled in gray, where the basins for shampooing were lined up.

A narrow door opened at the back, and Odette of Salon Étienne made her entrance. I thought she was twisting her shoulders to get the shoulder pads of her red suit through the doorway, but it was part of her walk. She led from the epaulettes, swaying left and right with the oddly military gait of models on the runway. A broad patent leather belt, cinched tight enough to stop the flow of blood below the waist, kept her pelvis still as she walked. The four-inch heels of her sandals were translucent and were secured to her feet by the thinnest strip of gold braid across the toes. The varnish on her toenails and fingernails matched exactly the hue of the crimson suit. She was almost past Thalia before she noticed her.

"Madame, this is Linda. You wanted to meet--um, you wanted her to come and meet with you."

"Yez?" Her eyebrows lifted slightly to convey less, not more, interest.

"For the evening clean-up shift?"

Odette finally looked at me, as if accosted by a fan for her autograph. "Yez. Five nights, starting at seven. One hundred dollars a week. Come wis me."

My interview was over. Odette's heels clicked on her way to a row of changing rooms. We were skipping right to the task at hand.

"Start here. Wipe the counters and sweep." Click, click, click to the basins. There was not going to be any paperwork.

“The basins. No hairs, no soapings. Dry.” This woman didn’t have the patience or curiosity to ask me any kind of question. She pointed at the expanse of mirror lining the wall above the basins. “No spots, every night.” For a moment her attention shifted to a blemish on her chin, and she leaned towards it critically. I guessed her age, my mind ranging over numbers like a bathroom scale dialing wildly from over- to underweight. Her hair was no indicator. In fact, I wasn’t sure what color it was, so many had been woven in. Her hands said mid-forties.

“You wait for the last client to leave, and you vacuum the front.”

I was trying to memorize the sequence of clipped orders, knowing that while Odette was barely scanning my presence now, she would track me closely when my tour began.

“Last is the floor here. It is wet when you leave.”

A hand dryer whined at full throttle, and my nerves blew away all the instructions. I saw myself trying to get every hair up from the damp cracks between the gray tiles, while Odette stood over me.

“I close the salon when you finish.”

I already felt like I was keeping her waiting. But Odette’s face switched to a smile of radiant pleasure so suddenly that I had the same dropping sensation as from the elevator. My own face was responding before I realized Odette was looking past me.

“Ah, Madame Gerstenberger!” she sang out, leaving me in a breeze of perfume, staring at my tadpole face arrested in mid-smile in the mirror.



## **Linda Peckham**

Linda Peckham has an MFA in Writing, and has published critical essays on boundary-blurring films by contemporary women filmmakers. By day she is a documentary video editor--currently the series editor for the weekly arts show *Spark* on KQED.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

[Issue 2](#) | [Under the Table](#)

## The Ice Box

Kate Sheofsky

Gretchen didn't need a reason not to answer the phone. Sometimes she just didn't feel like it. That particular night, however, she was busy. Her studio apartment was not what one might call plush, and in fact, was probably in violation of several health codes. She had learned long ago that when looking for a place to live in the Bay Area, she had to automatically rule out all ads that featured the words "cute," "cozy," and "charming." Cute and charming were not in her price range. She knew to go for listings that said things like "extra low ceiling," "cement floor," and "do not apply if allergic to mold." So, Gretchen's apartment was small, so small that the window fogged up when she turned on the coffee maker. She didn't mind that the shower leaked water into the kitchen area every morning, and she'd given up trying to stop the roaches from entering through the holes in the walls; they kept her cat busy, and she thought that was worth something. The only household maintenance that Gretchen consistently performed involved the freezer, and that was what she was attending to when the phone rang.

The freezer wasn't a separate unit on the top half of her refrigerator. It was enclosed in the refrigerator, a small compartment about the size of a breadbox. It had never worked properly. She didn't know exactly what the problem was, but she knew that whatever it was caused the inside of the freezer to form ice on all sides, until it eventually got to the point where a pint of Ben & Jerry's would no longer fit in it if standing upright. To combat this problem, the first Thursday of every month, starting at 6:00 p.m. when she got home from work, Gretchen chipped away the ice that had built up on the inside of the freezer. It was a mindless task, but mindless tasks granted a pleasant solitude, and therefore should not be interrupted by telephone calls.

The answering machine came on after the second ring, and Rachel's voice started speaking.

"Hey, are you there? . . . I need to talk to you, please pick up . . . Okay, call me when you get a chance."

Gretchen could have picked up the phone. She had just started gathering the necessary tools for her monthly project, so it wasn't like she was up to her elbows in ice at that point. But Rachel shouldn't have called. She knew it was the first Thursday. Rachel was like that. She didn't think the rules applied to her. There was a time, early in their relationship, when she was right, but things had changed.

Gretchen laid the drop cloth on the mustard colored linoleum in front of the refrigerator and propped open the door with a metal folding chair. Then she opened the freezer compartment and tied it to the refrigerator door with a piece of old speaker wire so it wouldn't close. From her toolbox, she took a hammer, screwdriver, a pair of safety goggles, and a set of gardening gloves. She put on the gloves and grabbed a metal slotted spoon from the utensil rack on the counter.

The process of chipping the ice away had, like most things in life, gotten easier over time. Each month she refined the process and figured out new ways to make the job go faster. The first time she had used a butter knife. A butter knife! It took seven hours, and she never did get it all scraped off. The second time she tried a different method. She took the water bottle from her bike and filled it with hot water, squirting it into the freezer to melt the ice. The result was the formation of a thin, slick layer of ice over the existing ice, which made it impossible to scrape with her knife.

Gretchen set the timer on her watch for four hours and six minutes. As long as she finished de-icing before the timer went off, she would have a new record. It was her personal goal to complete the task faster each time, and she hadn't failed at this yet.

The phone rang, and again the answering machine picked up.

"It's ice night; I know you're there . . . Don't be like this. Not this time . . . I'm just going to keep calling."

Rachel slammed the phone down particularly hard. In person, she had a very nice voice. It was fairly deep and scratchy, sexy, but something happened to it when it traveled across the phone lines. A horrible distortion took place and by the time it reached the answering machine it was grating and abrasive. Gretchen noticed it the first time Rachel left a

message, two years ago. She thought surely it would improve, or she would get used to it. Neither was true.

Gretchen scraped the side of the slotted spoon across the bottom of the freezer. That was the easiest way to start; the bottom had the least amount of ice on it, and most of it could be removed with the edge of the spoon. It was a good 30-minute warm up before the real work began.

Ring. Ring.

“Can you please just pick up the phone. I don’t want to play this game tonight . . . I know you think you have everything all figured out, but trust me, you’re not as smart as you think . . . Fine, have it your way!”

Slam.

But Gretchen did have it figured out. Their fight last night was like all the others. The inciting incident varied. Sometimes it was because they weren’t spending enough time together, or they didn’t make each other feel appreciated, or whatever. Last night it was because Rachel tried to initiate a conversation about “the future,” or more specifically, moving in together. However the touchy conversation started, it always ended in them having a fight. Or, more specifically, Rachel had a fight, which she directed at Gretchen, but that was the extent of Gretchen’s involvement. Gretchen didn’t like to get wrapped up in arguments. Arguing led to yelling, and yelling made her feel like she had lost control of her emotions, so she preferred to just keep quiet and let Rachel work it out herself. Had Gretchen picked up the phone, they would have had what Rachel would call a “discussion,” and what Gretchen would call a “one sided self-therapy session,” which would have, after many incarnations of Rachel’s angst-filled monologue, resulted in them patching things up.

Gretchen had accepted this pattern as part of life with Rachel, but recently she had stumbled upon a new approach for dealing with confrontation--complete avoidance. The first time she utilized this method was purely by accident. She and Rachel had a fight and the next day Gretchen had to go out of town for work. Rachel didn’t know Gretchen was gone and left a series of messages over the course of three days, the last one being an apology for over-reacting.

Gretchen had knowingly refused to answer the phone, ignoring Rachel’s pleas to talk things out, for the last three fights. And, like clockwork, after several days the anger blew over and things were fine between them. This method wasn’t a quick, one-night fix like the phone conversations of the past, but quicker, Gretchen had come to realize, was not necessarily better. At first it took a lot of restraint to keep from answering the phone, but Gretchen was committed to the continued success of their relationship. Patience and determination always win in the end.

She scooped the mountain of ice that she had produced from the bottom of the freezer and dumped it into the sink, then she put on her goggles and grabbed the hammer and screwdriver. She glanced down at her watch and was pleased to discover that, after the first stage, she was thirty seconds ahead of her best time.

Chiseling, or Phase Two, was the most time-consuming part. It was also the most difficult part because there were hard-to-reach places, but that was where most of the progress took place. There was also an element of danger. The first time Gretchen used the chisel technique, a piece of ice shot out at her face. It didn’t hurt when it collided with her cheekbone, but it startled her. It was a small piece so it melted almost as soon as it hit her skin, but it came dangerously close to her eye. She stopped everything and went to buy safety goggles. One could never be too careful when one’s eyesight was at risk.

Ring. Ring.

“This isn’t like the other times. Your ride is coming to an end . . . I’m serious, this is it . . .”

Slam.

Ring. Ring.

Slam.

The double slam, Gretchen knew it well. The first time Rachel did it was after they had been dating for six months. They had been at a bar to celebrate Gretchen’s promotion at work. Gretchen had a lot to drink and she got a little wild. At the end of the night, Rachel caught her messing around with an ex-girlfriend. Rachel left the bar and took a cab back to her apartment, but she called Gretchen repeatedly that night. The more Gretchen tried to apologize, the more hurt Rachel sounded, until finally Gretchen gave up defending herself and sat silently while Rachel got it all out of her system. One lapse in judgment and Gretchen thought she had lost her for good. Gretchen cried that night. That’s how she knew that she loved Rachel.

Gretchen thought it was amusing that Rachel used the double slam even when she didn’t answer the phone. There was

something about the predictability of it that she found endearing.

The highlight of the chiseling came when Gretchen managed to knock off a really big chunk of ice. This was a rare occurrence because she didn't use a lot of power. She had learned that when dealing with tricky angles, it wasn't about power. Consistency and precision were more efficient. When she did break off a big piece though, it changed the course of the rest of the chiseling. A large hole exposed angles that weren't there before, and it required her to step back and reassess the situation.

Ring. Ring.

"I didn't want to tell you this on the machine, but you're not leaving me a choice. You think your silence is somehow valiant. I see it as stubborn. I don't think we should see each other anymore."

Slam.

Rachel had threatened a break up before, during their last fight. Gretchen had thought about reaching for the phone to talk to her, but Rachel called back almost immediately and left a message saying she didn't mean what she had said.

Gretchen set the hammer and screwdriver on the counter and removed her goggles. Most of the work was done. She stretched her arms toward the ceiling, then shook out her hands and flexed her fingers. After a few hours, the muscles started to get stiff (the cold didn't help) and it was important to keep the circulation going for the final phase.

She took the slotted spoon and scraped along all of the edges. Last month she had bought a new, larger spoon and it made a world of difference. Before, it would take at least fifteen minutes to finish the job, but now she estimated it would take just under ten. As she steadily pulled the side of the spoon along the ice, forming a mound of snow in the middle of the freezer, she waited for Rachel to recant her breakup, but by the eighty-seventh stroke of the utensil, she still hadn't called.

Gretchen set the spoon in the sink and crouched down next to the phone to wait. Several minutes passed and her eyes started to glaze as she watched the red light blinking on the answering machine. The sound of the phone startled her when it finally rang.

"I hate you." Rachel's voice was soft and subdued. All the anger that had infused the previous calls was gone.

Gretchen pulled the receiver to her ear, just in time to hear the click of the phone landing quietly on Rachel's end. Her watch beeped and she glanced down to see that the timer had wound down to zero. She looked over at the open refrigerator door and the heap of ice still in the freezer. Her streak had ended.

Gretchen took off her goggles and gardening gloves and dialed Rachel's number. When she heard the machine pick up, she let the phone fall back on the hook. From her seat on the linoleum, she watched the ice melt and drip down into the refrigerator below. A small puddle formed on the bottom shelf and Gretchen knew it was just a matter of time before the water would spill over, leaving a sprawling mess on the floor.

## **Kate Sheofsky**

Kate Sheofsky is a fiction writer, video editor, beer brewer and master crocheter. She was born and raised in the Bay Area but recently moved to Portland, Oregon, so she could work on her tan. Someday, when she least expects it, she will take over the world.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

[Issue 2](#) | [The Ice Box](#)

## OMATIC

for Elizabeth Robinson

Susan Gevirtz

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work this set to

[Appollo]

word my broke I

word I my broke

[If you were building blocks I'd  
back of word break]

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[children]

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as it may distribute incarnate

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There pass ever again.  
Believed this none for again none me for this.  
Mere migration as return.  
Do but we.  
True to us you.  
Distribute serve.  
Insist if as.  
That seems all forestall.  
Fore halt unmere.  
Filibuster stutter.  
Notorious.

One long pan plan.  
One helping of child flesh.  
As a cause if origin a face causes.  
Extricate speech ery untie.  
Talk we can terms of the moving cursive scape.

Cassandra: Apollo was the seer who set me to this work.  
I promised [children] to Loxias, but I broke my word.

Chorus: So Loxias' wrath did you no harm? How could that be?

Cassandra: For this trespass, none believed me ever again.

Chorus: But we do; all that you foretell seems true to us.

Aeschylus, Agamemnon

## **Susan Gevirtz**

Susan Gevirtz lives and teaches in San Francisco and Greece. Her most recent books are *Black Box Cutaway* and *Hourglass Transcripts*. *Thrall* is forthcoming from Post Apollo Press.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

[Issue 2](#) | [OMATIC](#)

## Three Shorts

Jane Anne Staw

### I. VALENTINE

It was a small room and a group of us were sitting in gray chairs, waiting to be checked in. We held our paperwork on our laps, legal-sized sheets torn from our doctor's pad, each sheet x'ed in a different configuration. Mine had been marked four times, in the boxes preceding tests that dealt with cholesterol and thyroid functions.

Nobody was talking. A woman with short, bristly hair read the morning newspaper. A man in a business suit worked on his laptop. An older woman sitting to my left, her grey hair windblown, looked across the room toward the door. As each person arrived, we signed in—our name and time of arrival--on a sheet held in a clipboard placed at the edge of a counter, which was just behind me. Since I'd been here before, I knew that the man behind the counter would call our name when our turn arrived, asking each time for doctor's orders and our insurance card. The pace seemed to be slow this morning, and I wondered how long I would be here, how much time I would lose waiting for the technician to extract my blood.

Two additional women came into the room, signed in and sat down across from me. They appeared to be in their early forties. Both had short, light brown hair, and were dressed in outdoor vests and fleece tops. They began talking. One of them had no insurance coverage for the tests and they were trying to figure out how she might minimize the number of venus punctures in order to save money.

Although they spoke softly, and I wasn't trying to listen, their conversation filled the otherwise silent room, the way air rushes in to fill a vacuum. I noticed that they were dressed much the same, in similar shades of mauve and foam blue. I noticed the softness of the textures of their tops and vests.

I wondered what would happen in a few minutes, once the man behind the counter called my name. First the technician would tie a tourniquet around my upper left arm to make my vein bulge. Next he would clean the site of injection with alcohol. After this, I would feel the prick of the needle as it entered my skin, then the gentle tug, sometimes accompanied by a dull ache, as he attached a blood test tube to the needle. After that I would hear a soft pop, when the technician replaced a tube full of my blood with an empty one. Today, I would leave once three tubes had been filled and he had written my last name on each one.

The two friends across from me were still talking, when the door opened and tall women with orangish-red spiked hair stepped into the room, then turned to a woman who was pushing a walker up the path toward the front door. The two women resembled each other, although the one using the walker was much older, as well as much shorter. And she had brown hair arranged in soft curls around her face.

Once she had maneuvered through the door and entered the room, the older woman stopped to get her bearings. Instantly, one of the women wearing the soft colors jumped up and offered her a seat. The women with the walker protested. There was an empty chair in the corner. But this one is more convenient, the younger woman insisted.

Meanwhile, the man behind the counter called the name "Jean." I thought perhaps he had misread my name, and that it was now my turn; that I wouldn't have to wait as long as I had feared. But no, the woman with the bristly hair arose. While she was signing in and registering, the older woman and the one who had offered her a seat installed themselves in their chairs, and once again, all was quiet in the small room.

Then the woman with the walker turned in her seat to thank again the woman who had ceded her the chair. They began a conversation, someone mentioning Valentine's Day, less than a week away, and the older woman pointed to a heart-shaped, rhinestone pin on her black sweater. Both women smiled.

I thought of Valentine's Day at my elementary school. The cardboard box, wrapped in red paper, where each child deposited the cards they had signed. The distribution of the cards by the teacher in the afternoon. The wondering. The holding my breath. Would I get any? Would I get enough? Would the popular kids send me cards? Stephen Hickey?

Barbara Shultz? Marilyn March? Would their mothers insist that they not leave anyone out? Then finally, the ripping open of the thin envelopes. And the counting. Would I have as many as my best friend Susan? Would I be able to hide my disappointment?

The woman who had accompanied the woman with the walker took the now-empty seat, which faced me. I could see clearly that the two bore a strong resemblance to each other. Their mouths were both wide. And their noses were what in high school we called “ski jumps.” They are probably mother and daughter, I thought.

The mother and daughter continued their conversation with the two women in the soft colors. They discussed what they might do to celebrate Valentine’s Day this year. The daughter and her husband would take the mother to dinner at her favorite restaurant. The other two women, a couple I now realized, were invited to a party.

Several new people had come into the room by now, and everyone was smiling. I decided to compliment the couple on their colors. “Oh, thank you” they said. “It’s just chance.” Then the woman with the walker smiled at me, and she seemed so tiny sitting in the chair in the small, grey room. And so happy. A sprite, I thought.

The man who had been using his computer finished having his blood drawn and walked back through the small room, where we were all sitting, on his way out. “Goodbye, everybody,” he said, as he disappeared out the door.

Then, the man behind the counter called my name. Just before I walked back to the laboratory, I turned to the group in the small room. “See you later,” I said.

“See you later,” the daughter replied. “See you later,” the couple echoed in unison. “Goodbye,” waved the tiny woman with the walker, her Valentine’s pin winking in the overhead light.

## II. HEAVEN

I spent an hour or so one recent afternoon at a local café, talking to a former student. The student, who had recently published a book, had been invited to teach at a summer workshop, and asked if I would look over his syllabus. I was very busy at the time, but felt I should carve out an hour to meet with him.

Just before leaving for the meeting, I received a letter from my book agent, telling me that my book wasn’t selling as well as expected. It was a terrible disappointment, she wrote, but perhaps sales would pick up now that it had appeared in paper.

The news was a blow, and left me feeling hollow. I thought of copies of my book, with its paper flower blossoming on the cover, sitting lost on bookstore shelves all over the country. I could see hands moving toward the shelves, fingers reaching inside to extract the books on either side of mine. And I could feel the tug of disappointment, as my book realized that it was to be left behind. Unseen. Abandoned.

I took the long route to the café, winding around several blocks, to delay my arrival. The walk did nothing to revive my spirits. By the time I arrived, I felt wilted. How was I going to engage with the former student? How could I help anyone else when I felt so helpless myself?

The student is a Buddhist and meditation teacher, and the course he will teach involves creativity and meditation. Weighty topics. When I entered the café, he was sitting at a table with a cup of tea and a neat pile of papers in front of him. I removed my coat, then went up to the counter to order myself a drink. I took my time adding milk to my tea, and stirring, then walked back slowly to our table. The café was full, some people alone working at their computers, others in twos and threes chatting and laughing.

For a few minutes after I sat down, the student and I engaged in small talk. I asked about his wife and six-year-old daughter. He asked how my teaching and writing were coming along. Then he showed me his outline. I wasn’t in the mood to talk shop. To stall, I asked him to tell me about his plan and his goals for the workshop. He spoke about using meditation to bring the writer back again and again to the center of generativity.

“That sounds important,” I responded. I recalled the three-month period not long ago when I meditated each day in conjunction with a writing workshop I was leading. How rich that period had been, every day taking twenty minutes to sit quietly and breathe, allowing each breath to enter my body fully, so that I was aware of my chest swelling, my shoulders rising, then settling back down as my lungs deflated, ready for the next breath. How light I felt by the end of each session, how full and empty at the same time. How a smile played on my lips, as I opened my eyes to the room and to my life.

Why, I wondered, had I not continued with the practice? How could I have let fall something that made me feel so good? Dependably. With so little effort. What is it that caused me to lose my way? How might I find it again?

As the student and I talked, I was able to offer several suggestions that I thought might enrich his class. Then it was time for him to leave; his wife was teaching that afternoon and he was responsible for their daughter. As we parted, an uncharacteristic thought passed through my mind: "I wonder if I'll at least go to heaven for my good works."

I walked home the direct route, up a boulevard that passes by my house. Halfway home, I began laughing at myself. Thinking about heaven was so untypical of me, raised by a physicist, an atheist, whose religion, if any, was the scientific method. I wanted to believe the thought ironic, but knew that wasn't the case. Irony is a mode I jettisoned years ago, after moving to Northern California. Growing up and attending college in the East, irony was an art I, along with my cohort, cultivated assiduously. In any casual conversation, you could count on a pun, a bon mot, or a flash of sarcasm or irony every few sentences. If you couldn't keep up, you were considered dull witted and were quickly left behind.

In California, the people I encountered interacted in a major key. Friends and acquaintances seemed universally positive. I was even once told that I had too many opinions, all negative. So I set out to become more upbeat, polishing the slightest tarnish of irony or sarcasm from my responses and reactions. Saying one thing and meaning another was no longer part of my repertory.

I looked up and noticed a woman walking toward me. She was a plain woman, dressed in a wool overcoat covering an ankle-length cotton skirt. Her hair, which was streaked with gray, was parted in the middle and pulled back in a low, loose ponytail. As she drew nearer, I saw that she was smiling.

I smiled back absent-mindedly, and returned to musing on my strange thought. I realized how awful I must be feeling to resort to such a desperate hope. Heaven. How silly of me!

When the woman and I were face to face, she stopped and said, "You are wearing such warm, lovely colors, I just had to tell you. I've been admiring them all the way down the block."

I thanked her and walked on, marveling at such an unexpected and pleasant encounter. Suddenly I felt buoyant, and my pace quickened. Several yards later, I stopped and looked back at the woman, who was quickly disappearing down the block.

"Maybe I am in heaven," I said to myself. "Maybe I am."

### III. SOMBRERO

The man first appeared several months ago in the café where my friend and I meet each Thursday morning. He was slumped in an armchair, dozing. A patina of grime covered his clothes, his matted hair hung in clumps from under the sombrero perched on his head; debris flecked his beard. My immediate reaction was annoyance. Why had he come to my cafe, dragging in with him the sadness and discomforts of the world outside?

The man became a mainstay of the coffee shop, sitting in the same chair week after week, in a well-trafficked zone, dozing, his head lolling on his chest, a cup of coffee on the table in front of him. The coffee shop patrons give him wide berth, turning their heads or averting their eyes when they passed him.

Although each week when I arrived I took note of him, he eventually became a fixture of the place. A quick glance, then he would slip from my consciousness.

Yesterday, as my friend and I talked, he slumbered in his usual spot, when a young mother with her two daughters sat at the table next to us. The baby waddled over to offer each of us a hug. Emma, the older sister, flounced onto her seat and began to tell us about her school. "It lasts a long time, all day," she said.

Then, as quickly as she had appeared, Emma skipped off toward the back of the shop. As she passed the man, he leaned down and spoke to her.

Emma stopped and replied, leaning her pink-clad four-year-old body into his grimy leg. While she talked, he listened, his eyes wide open for the first time, fixed on her face. His eyes were blue. And clear.

Perhaps now I had an answer to my question. The man sat in this café day after day for the children. It was that simple. He sat there, while everyone cut a wide swathe around him, dozing, his untouched cup of coffee the price of admission,

waiting for a child like Emma to awaken him. A child who emanated the innocence and grace even the filthy man in the sombrero once possessed.

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## **Jane Anne Staw**

Jane Anne Staw is an Adjunct Professor in the MFA in Writing Program at the University of San Francisco. Her book, *Unstuck: A Supportive and Practical Guide to Working Through Writer's Block* (St. Martin's), has just appeared in paper.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

[Issue 2](#) | [Three Shorts](#)



**Is torn alike. I sometimes touched my aim,**

Heather Woods

Of entering oneself.

Slashing attacks, fever  
and submissions.This is her heart, down on  
my knees.

'You speak out, you.'

herself complete

&amp; unabridged

'is said to cut me

into gashes'

Maddening sun

mesmerant rain

reply and call

loamy stir

up the stairs

modern temple

sky-verse

Carrion birds

sing our spell :

Aurora come land

a new dig

to dwell

Title from *Aurora Leigh*, book 5 verse 426.

1st quote: R.B. to E.B.B.

2nd quote: E.B.B.

## Heather Woods

A Bay Area native, Heather Woods received her BA from Kenyon College and her MFA from USF ('01). At Kenyon, Heather founded *Persimmons*, a literary magazine that is still flourishing today, and worked for four years on *The Kenyon Review*. Heather is currently translating one of Eugene Guillevic's last works with Carla Hall (USF MFA '01). In 2002, Heather collaborated on an article honoring professor David Bromige. The article appears in *Jacket*, Volume 22. "Is torn alike. . ." is from a book of poems that Heather is completing, *AURORA, OH-ROAR-AH*, a modern poetic response to Aurora Leigh.

### Contributions to Switchback

[Issue 2](#) | [Is torn alike. I sometimes touched my aim](#)

## Holes in the Ozone

Josh Mohr

She lets me live in her shadow. Temporarily. I don't want to live that way, but it's better than never seeing her again.

"You can live in it rent free," she says. "Until you get up on your feet again."

"Thanks," I say, the way you thank someone for spraying pesticides on vegetables.

"It's the least I can do," Susie says.

---

Susie's shadow is so cold that sometimes I can see my breath. So cold I look around for penguins, snowdrifts, check the sky for holes in the ozone. I wear winter sweaters even though it's July.

I had been pretty tan before I spent my days scurrying behind her on all fours, rotating around her body to follow the shadow. Trying to hold up my end of the deal. But now, after a month without sun, my skin looks like papier-mache. My hands, feet, and knees are torn up, bloodied from navigating the different dangers of the city: tiny rocks, broken glass, dirty needles. I've built up huge calluses like hooves.

---

"Are you even looking for a place?" Susie says. She's working at the kitchen table, scouring spreadsheet results from focus groups, what the masses say have mass appeal. I'm sitting on the floor next to her. "What about a job?" She looks down at me.

"Not yet," I say. "I'm not ready."

"I am ready. I'm quite ready. I've got living to do."

"What about us?" I ask.

---

Living in her shadow is the worst when she goes to work. You'd think it would be worse when I follow her into the bathroom and have to huddle next to the toilet. But at least then it's just the two of us.

At the office, Susie walks down the hall at a harsh gait, and I have to canter-crawl just to keep up with her.

"Susie," her coworkers say, bustling by, breaking her name into two harsh syllables, like someone swearing: Jee-suss.

She's the head of the ad agency's creative department.

Today, I follow her into a meeting, barely making it inside the thick door before it slams. Ten people stare at me, and I look away because there's sleep in my eyes and I haven't showered since I've been in her shadow. While Susie showers, she lets me get in with her and take off my clothes, but I have to stand with my back to her, just out of the water's reach, shivering.

Now Susie sits down at the head of the table. "Does everyone remember my husband? My ex-husband?"

They all give me the once-over and shake their heads.

"It's nice to see you all again," I say, sitting Indian-style on the floor behind Susie. With the room's faint overhead lighting, her shadow seems small, incarcerating.

I should've brought a sandwich.

During the meeting, they talk about marketing, about how to make people want things.

"People want to feel important. Exclusive. They want to fit in," Susie says.

"Fit into what?" a woman asks.

"Whatever they can," I say.

Susie turns around and stares at me. "Don't."

"Really," I say, "people just want to have a place."

"Stop it," Susie says.

---

It's almost noon when we leave her office, running out for lunch with a client. It's eighty degrees. We're waiting for a light to turn green.

"You need to move on," she says.

"I will."

"When?" The light changes, and she walks across the street, but I don't see her start to move, so momentarily, I'm out of her shadow's protection. The back of my neck smokes in the sun.

"Wait, Susie!" I say.

She looks back and sees me searing. She just stands there. I crawl into her shadow.

"You're trying my patience," she says.

---

After lunch, we're in the ladies' room, freshening up.

"You shouldn't beg," she says to me. "That's an important client."

I hadn't begged. The client fed me flecks of tuna under the table. I hadn't asked her to do me any favors.

"One more night," Susie says, reapplying powders and colors to her face. "Then you have to go."

"Why'd we get divorced?"

"You have no ambition," she says, drawing black lines under her eyes, then tracing her lips with burgundy. She makes a kissing noise. She uses a piece of Kleenex to blot what isn't needed and throws it away. "No goals. What do you want to do with your life?"

"I don't know," I say, "but I don't want to be divorced."

She puts her contraband of cosmetics back in her purse. "Let's go."

---

Outside, she's telling me to keep up. I'm scurrying as fast as I can, galloping on all fours, but it isn't fast enough and parts of my body keep slipping out of her shadow, and the sun sings me.

"This hurts," I say.

"I don't have time for this," she says.

"Where am I supposed to go?"

She checks her watch and tells me we're going to take a cab back to the office, but the thought of being back there is too

awful. The thought of Susie throwing me out of her life feels too awful, and she's wrong, I do have goals: I want to make her protect me, I want to make her miss me, I want to make her hurt. So I jump out of her shadow, out of its shield, and into the blaze of sunlight, and my clothes cook away, and I look like a vampire--skin bubbling and popping from the scorch--and Susie says, "What are you doing?" and I say, "Moving on," and I fall to the ground and she stands over me, trying to fit me back into her shadow, but I roll around evasively and watch her worry, my skin smoldering and soon there's fire all over me, I can smell the hair burning and my skin tears and disappears, huge holes forming and I can see my ribcage, can see the matter and organs bake and burn and turn to ash. I watch my heart lose its rhythm and codes of love. I watch my heart cave in. My pancreas and liver hurtle toward the ground, and then my eyes coat with a chalky film and seconds later, they pop, and I'm totally falling to pieces: my teeth drop out, my ears melt and drip down my neck, nose closing in on itself. An arm falls off. The soles of my feet get glued to the sidewalk. My cock disappears like a bomb's fuse.

A crowd gathers, standing around me, gasping in awe, like I'm a monk burning myself in protest. I try to say one last thing to Susie, but there are no lungs to swell with air, no throat to funnel my message, no noise from my voice, no words in my mouth, no dialogue meandering over my lips, and I can't see Susie and I can't hear her, but I know she's crying. I know she's got her hands covering her face in horror. I know she sees my cremation and feels sorry, guilty. She knows she made a mistake.

My charred spine sits on the sidewalk.

There's something beautiful to feel here, but I'm already gone.

## **Joshua Mohr**

Joshua Mohr has a story in the upcoming issue of *Other Voices* and has had pieces published in the *Potomac*, *Salt Hill*, *Zaum*, and the *Limestone Review*, among others. This May, one of his stories will be performed in Los Angeles by the *New Short Fiction Series*, as a part of their showcase of emerging authors. He teaches writing at a Mission District halfway house.

### **Contributions to Switchback**

[Issue 2](#) | [Holes in the Ozone](#)

## The Sympathizer

David Booth

I don't know why I didn't come to the city oftener. It's funny how you want to do a thing but never do it. Once when I was young one of those boys' clubs took a bunch of us to The Museum of Natural History to learn about organisms. They took us to the city in buses. When we finally got to where we were going we walked round and around looking for the museum entrance, only to find ourselves caught up in the middle of a huge demonstration. I remember climbing to the top of a lamppost to get out of the way of everybody. There were more people in the street than I can ever remember seeing in one place together. They came out of nowhere. They blew their horns and waved their brightly worded banners. They chanted in unison. By the time I got to the top I was screaming and chanting with them. I shook my fist. The skyscrapers and helicopters up above were dizzying.

The other day my brother made one of his nonsensical leaps to why I haven't been back—because, he said, the best I'd ever be was a *sympathizer*. Where does *that* come from? He was older than me and called himself a *partisan*. He said that to think up a plan and never act on it was like *a thought you never had*. Come again? He said that I could see far enough but would never, quote, fix on a position and take action. How do you get there from my day in the city? I was, quote, moving through in lieu of gathering. To each his own, I say, especially if he wants to talk in code. But it made me kind of mad for some reason, what he said, in a way that I wanted to break his nose, maybe because *that*—he'd figure it this way—was a thought I'd never have.

## David Booth

David Booth teaches fiction in the MFA in Writing Program at the University of San Francisco. His stories have appeared in *The Missouri Review*, *The Kit-Cat Review*, *Paragraph*, *Carriage House Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Transfer*, *Absomoly*, *Morbid Curiosity* and other journals and anthologies. His debut novel has found a home with a literary agent. He is currently writing his second novel.

### Contributions to Switchback

[Preview Issue](#) | [The New Me](#)

[Issue 2](#) | [The Sympathizer](#)



## **a tingling pointed head**

J. D. Nelson

in the movies,  
on the rooftop:  
dancing silhouettes  
against a giant  
super white  
full moon

elsewhere:  
a league of magicians  
laughing on a mountain,  
around a fire,  
beneath billions of stars

and:  
my uncle owns an  
oil well  
where the "x" is  
on the map of Texas.

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## **J. D. Nelson**

Space-Cowboy Poet J. D. Nelson lives, writes and wrangles in Colorful Colorado, USA. His poems have appeared in many online and print publications, including *The Best of the Dream People Poets* chapbook. Fun-fact: J. D. once worked as a telephone Santa Claus! For more information: <http://www.MadVerse.com>

### **Contributions to Switchback**

[Issue 2](#) | [a tingling pointed head](#)

**. two in situ**

Justin Katko

untied lab politics of a united scientist's.

. the sheets close to the mattress. the mattress high above the sidewalk. the talk around your father. the window framing the parking lot. the apples in the fridge

he'd like to project a ritual. control c, control v. control v. control v. ditto, keep him hungry.

. the mirror rooming a barely rhythm. the gestalt lost to tick-marks. the pin hidden in the carpet. the body's-t-utter in large parties. the shoulders dropping quietly. the twinnies thinking inked-in secrets

control v. how old were you in germany? your sister's voice thru your laptop. call him by his new nickname again. control c, control v. no one knows that he's coming to wake you.

. x

x.

## **jUStin!katKO**

jUStin!katKO is a sound!visual poet

recent bookworks: SCHEME! and CATHECT!

you can reach him at [justin.katko@gmail.com](mailto:justin.katko@gmail.com)

or check out <http://www.justin-katko.tk>

Film/text collaborations with Keith Tuma include "swarm intelligence" and "ornithooneric"

He is the media intern for Xexoxial Editions (<http://www.Xexoxial.org/>).

### **Contributions to Switchback**

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**Letters: Correspondence**

Tiffany Dressen

Dear Switchback Editorial Team,

What follows are two of several found letters written by the little known (rather obscure) Bay Area poet Jaybird McQueen to the legendary Bay Area poet Jack Spicer. It appears as though the two poets knew each other very well. These letters would seem to have been written while McQueen was serving aboard ship as a merchant marine. A few (such as the ones below) were recently discovered lining the inside of a cat box. I have done my best to restore and transcribe them though an abundance of wet cat litter has made for a tricky task. Below are the fruits of less-than-glamorous labour.

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 15 July 1956

Dear(est) Jack,

After your last letter, I am hesitant to say which one applies, the dear or the dearest. And now I wonder--when was I first aware of your dearness to me? What was I doing, if anything? Maybe I was on this boat in this ocean. Isn't it strange that we address strangers as "dear"? But YOU are dear to me that I know though to what degree I shall remain quiet for the present. Oh, ack! I am tired of being cautious.

But back to the ocean because that is ALL I ever seem to think about these days (along with you of course). You, I think, are like the ocean. At times, pacific and at other times, completely unpredictable. And there is our friend Ebbe with his foam, his forever coasting foam. "call the foam which flys from the crevise/this is the chiton-reef." That is, he is, mythic. Oh, I can see him now with his big rack of antler preceding him, poking and piercing the San Francisco fog. I am thinking about your admonition for him--what did you imagine when you imagined "reconstituted universe"? Some upwelling of hot material from near the earth's core...somewhere...under the ocean?

When will you write mine I wonder? Perhaps you have already?

I must say good bye for now. It's getting dark and difficult to write. But before I go, I enclose a poem I call "Non-Compliance". You may recognize a few words from R.W.E. I had been thinking of you--your wild speaking or your speaking with the "flower of the mind". I hope you enjoy it.

May the ethereal tides continue to roll and circulate through you.

As ever--

J-Bird

Non-Compliance

"Children of the fire" cable of blue  
fire: Do what you said you'd do "with the flower  
of the mind"

Opium eater  
reclines with serpent  
skin drum sense

ritual  
is no different  
from this

Geologist speaks fish smack broken-ness  
Echo's slithering  
Bare-stript cymbal smoldering

Enters sky.

Meshes  
Of  
Night.

Lakes whole lakes  
As if it  
were pure vegetable  
kingdom and there is nothing to  
say Saint Anne  
whiter  
host

Crescent dropped  
Wildly

Not all pianos make a sweet smell

Better than  
seeding death than living this  
way vacant lot for disorder and made of it

Pines cones cinder accompliceI  
have bursted  
the circumference of your

surface

Alone flat  
dish

spiral haze  
stricture I am your

opus kicking in  
the glass door

2? September 1956

Dear Watchman, What of the Night?

I don't know what to make of it. I've been having more of those dreams I was telling you about. You are so kind to try and interpret them for me, Jungian friend.

I am on the ship and it's twilight and I've come out for air after dinner, and look overboard and see and hear something, some things swimming in the water, and realize that they are not sea creatures, but rabbits, rabbits in the water! And then I notice that they appear to be circling the entire ship as we move along, like a rabbit motorcade. And I know they are rabbits, their ears are there gliding above water, like shark fins. Why are they there? What is their purpose? What do they mean to accomplish?

All these strange dreams filled with animals. Some speaking--others reticent. Do you ever have dreams with animals in them Jack? I almost never dream of people anymore. I don't even know if I'm human in my own dreams. How can one be certain, anyway? What if I am really a great, big black sea fish with a swim bladder problem and I just keep floating back up to the surface? And maybe you're an octopus

[Dear Reader, most of the letter from here to near the end has been destroyed or completely indecipherable].

Memory is a force of nature, isn't it Jack? With a field that acts upon the heart and brain and limbs and pulls one this way and that.

I hope you are well and writing and that I will see you very, very soon.

At the end of things  
for Jack--always--

Love,  
J-bird

## **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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