

the good life review



GJR

ISSUE IV

HONEYBEE PRIZE ISSUE

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The Good Life Review is an online literary journal independently operated by graduates and candidates of the MFA in Writing program at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

Our group of writers, editors, and designers came together to craft a space intended to shine a light on the diversity that exists in the Midwest.

Based out of Omaha, Nebraska—astride the often unnoticed—we recognize a myriad of voices that call the regions surrounding us home. *The Good Life Review* is committed to exploring the overlooked. Our mission is to lift the strange, the daring, the underrepresented; and reveal complexities hidden in the Heartland and beyond. We seek to elevate writing that takes risks and challenges perceptions, writing that haunts long after the last line.

To our contributing writers, thank you for trusting us with your valuable words. To our readers, thank you for supporting independent journals and believing in the literary arts.

ISSUE FOUR MASTHEAD

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Social Media

Trelana Daniel

Arts & Crafts

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Pamela Brodman
Luna Blue

Honeybee Literature Prize Judges

Kate Gale
Marco Wilkinson
Douglas Manuel

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from the editor

Dear Readers,

Spring has arrived in Omaha and with it, the promise of daffodils, tulips, and iris pushing through the newly thawed ground, rain to wash away winter grey, and this—*The Good Life Review's* first Spring issue.

Our aim from the start was to create a space worthy of the myriad of voices that surround us. For our third issue, we attempted to draw in a larger, more diverse population of writers, and were pleased by the number and quality of submissions we received, some of which found us from half a globe away. I was personally touched by the submission letters from students in South Korea, who were hoping to publish their work in order to build their portfolios for school. I could not help but think what amazing times we are living in, that such connection and communication are possible.

This issue includes poems, stories, and personal essays by a group of incredible writers from the likes of Nebraska, Georgia, New York, Oregon, California, Michigan, Illinois, Washington, the Philippines, London, and Australia. It's truly more than I could have hoped for and a wonderful representation of what *The Good Life* can be. Thank you to all of our contributors for making this issue fabulous!

I'm also thrilled about the addition of stage and screen plays to what we are offering our readers. This would not have been possible without our two skilled script editors, Jacob Lawson and Joe Atkinson. I am thankful that they were willing to join our team and spend their time and effort with us. I'm also pleased as punch to have the

lovely Tacheny Perry joining our flash fiction team. Welcome Jake, Joe, and Tacheny! And similar to our previous issues, I'd also like to extend my gratitude to the rest of our staff, who continue to dedicate their time and talent to our organization.

In producing this issue I developed a greater understanding of the potential impact that our publication could have on an individual as well as the literary community we support. Quite a responsibility, indeed, and one that I don't take lightly. It is one thing to state that we are working toward becoming a more diverse, inclusive, and welcoming space, and another altogether to be active in pursuit of this goal. There are a number of challenges that we need to work through in order to hold true to our mission and vision. How we approach these challenges and the actions we take to amplify marginalized voices, support other local and national organizations, and fairly evaluate the writing that we receive will solidify who we are as a publication. I'm excited to see what 2021 will bring and hopeful that we can continue to grow and learn together.

To our readers, thank you for visiting, for reading, and for your support of the arts. We hope you enjoy all of what this issue has to offer and that you will return again and again!

That's it for Issue #3, Spring 2021.

Cheers to Sitting on Patios and Sipping from a Full Cup,



~Shyla Shehan



FICTION

honeybee



KOREE SCHUELER

Koree was born and raised in Kearney, NE. She is currently pursuing her MA in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing, at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. She is also working as a graduate assistant at UNK. Her previous work has been featured in her university's literary magazine *The Carillon*. She draws inspiration from the overlooked aspects of everyday life, such as a rental inspection form.

INSPECTION CHECKLIST
Winner of the Honeybee Prize for Fiction

inspection checklist

Name: Kami Shultz Kami- Kameron Mason. Which name do you want?

Property Number: 618

Please fill out this form based on the condition of rental at the time of move in and return it to our office.

Living Room

Carpet:

New condition. It smells like the deer hide rugs that my dad keeps rolled up in the closet under his stairs, but it is too new and too clean for this apartment. It clearly does not belong here. There isn't even a drop of dust on it yet. I set the baby down on the white carpet and she crawls along the floor yanking up at it as if it were white grass. I watch my baby pull and tug at the carpet and hope—for a moment—that she will take a chunk of the freshly laid carpet up. Just a small piece. The carpet looks too perfect in this apartment with its scratched paint and haunted air. Yes, the air is haunted. You can tell by one breath with the doors shut that there is something lingering here. If you can get past the stale smell of Marijuana from the neighbors, you can feel the spirits, breathe them in and let them play around in your lungs before you expel them from your nostrils in a sharp sigh. It is haunted. But the carpet is not and for that reason, I cannot trust it. It does not belong here. It can be ripped up and thrown in the garbage at the first sign of damage. It can be replaced. I do not trust the carpet.

Walls and ceiling:

Wood paneling? It's bad enough that the ceiling is popcorn and my entryway is a stair-

case that leads down into a dark hobbit hole of an apartment, but now I have to spend the next two years in a prison of wood panels. Two walls in the living room are painted white but from the empty cans hidden in the crawl space, I assume you ran out of paint and decided to call that well enough. I set up my couch to face the unpainted wall so that it did not feel forgotten. If I turn my back to it for too long, I can hear it ask, "Do you not have time for me either? What did I do?" So now I face that ugly brown wall as I eat my meals and type at the computer. We keep each other company in the stillness of time.

Doors:

The doors function like doors. Open and close. The doors can open but they can also close. This space was never meant to be an apartment, so the doors are too close together. If you try to open two doors at one time, they will fight each other for the space. Each thinking that it is their right to exist in that spot but both receiving damage in the impact. Chips in the wood are evidence of these domestic disputes. The bright side of this? These doors do not slam like my old ones used to. Here there is only me, the baby, and the cat. The baby is just learning how doors work, she will have a few years before the slamming begins. As for the cat, she prefers running into walls and pulling at the carpet with her claws. She doesn't trust the carpet either.

Carbon Monoxide Alarm/ fire alarm:

They are all there. Blinking that red eye of light to remind me that they are working and checking the quality of my air every day. They do not check for ghosts, though. I do not need an alarm for that. Even when I feel

inspection checklist

my throat growing tight, at least I know that it is not due to smoke or carbon monoxide poisoning. I am just “processing my failed marriage,” as I am told is healthy to do by my counselor. That’s reassuring, thanks. The red-eye lights watch me unpack boxes; they are there to keep me safe, but they feel more like watchdogs.

I have decided to remove the alarms from my house, is this a risk? Absolutely, but at least the next time my chest swells and my breathing is short, I can consider the possibility that there is smoke somewhere in the house or invisible gasses wrapping themselves up in my lungs.

Windows and screens:

The eyes watch me from the windows. No, I have not seen these eyes, but I know they are there and I know what you are thinking. She is crazy, and yes you are also probably right, but as I sit alone on my couch, waiting to be served with divorce papers, I can feel the eyes on me. They are there, watching me care for the baby. Watching me sift through the cat’s litter like a child digging up sand. They do not trust me to function as I did before. To shield me from them, I have taped blank paper to the glass windows creating a membrane between me and the eyes. They can still see my silhouette but not the defined details of me.

Kitchen

It is less of a kitchen and more of a living room extension that has been supplied with some kitchen appliances that most likely outdate the dinosaurs.

Countertops:

They are marked with cuts, reminders that this is a temporary engagement. I will be nothing more than a few cuts on a countertop to the next tenant.

Cabinets:

The baby pulls on the drawers and slams them shut as I prepare sustenance for myself. She is starting to slam things earlier than I expected. The finalizing sound sends her into hysterics. Laughing as she pulls the next cabinet open and prepares to close it as hard as her little body can manage.

“Dada” she screams as the door smacks into place. Her giggles cause my lungs to seize and I check to make sure the carbon monoxide alarm is still absent from its place on the wall. My cat watches from the stairs, cleaning its claws.

The baby continues to open and shut the drawers and her giggles transform into an imitated anger and she slams the next drawer. “Sut up bith” The baby tests out these new syllables and then falls on her butt, face red and smiling as the cat watches from the stairs, ready to pounce. I place the baby back in her bed with a cookie to keep her from saying more, thankful that the eyes can’t see exactly what I handed the baby. The cat returns to cleaning between her toes.

Stove/ Oven:

The stove is a monster. Old and yellow, the oven’s large mouth pours smoke out if you try to cook anything in it. Before I disposed of the smoke alarms they would wail every time I preheated the old beast. Now I stick to things that can be cooked in the micro-

inspection checklist

wave or, better yet, pulled straight from the fridge.

Sink:

The sink is invisible under the dirty dishes that have accumulated there. I let them sit, not because I don't like washing my dishes, but because I don't want to see my face reflected back at me.

Fridge:

Someone has gutted the inside of the fridge. The shelves and edges are missing, except for one shelf that is sporting a suspicious crack in the middle. I fear that it will not be able to support more than a half-gallon of milk; that will be fine since there are only two of us now and I don't drink milk. But I still worry about that shelf as it sags more every time that I open the door. The plastic looks to be made of rubber as it dips lower but never breaks. I assume that it is unbreakable. I stack things on it to test this. I bought a whole ham, not because I like ham, but so that I can see if it will finally break the one shelf that is left standing. I want to watch it break in half. I will prove that even the most flexible of objects can snap. I drop the whole ham on the shelf, and it lets out a surprised squeak and bends ominously, bouncing a little as it adjusts to the weight of the new resident on its back. The satisfying sound of the shelf breaking never comes. Still, I sit in front of the open refrigerator. The only light comes from the bulb in the fridge. I sit there letting the cold hit my face as I observe the sagging shelf, taking mental notes. I sit there. Like that. The cat sits next to me. Watching. When I moved here my therapist pushed me to adopt a cat. "A clean slate". But the cat seems to have her

own baggage. We sit together on the floor, watching the shelf bounce. The only light is still the one in the refrigerator.

Laundry Room

There is not a laundry room in this complex. You really should have a couple of versions of this generic form so that those without laundry rooms are not reminded that there is something that they lack.

Bathroom

Windows:

Seriously? There are no windows in this bathroom. Did you even look at this apartment before renting it out?

Lights:

The light is fluorescent, and it flickers. A nice change from the sunlight that filters through the paper on my windows in other rooms. There are no other lights in the bathroom. I breathe in the flickering of this one that reminds me of the horror movies that we used to watch, all tangled up together on the couch. In a house that belonged to us. Not this home that I have retreated to now. I smile as the light flashes. The mirror reflects my smile between flickers of light. The baby shrieks from the bathtub.

Bathtub:

The bathtub is blue. Not in a retro-blue kind of way. But in a stained, science experiment gone terribly wrong kind of way. My fingers are red from the scrubbing. I guess magic erasers do not work on everything. I throw out the mangled sponge and start to run a bath. Bubbles cover up the blue splotches that have infected the surface of my tub. The best I can hope for is for the color to fade

inspection checklist

over time. The blue reminds me of the time I spilled sprinkles on my dad's deer hide rug. They looked like a rash. That night, after I went to bed, my dad threw the sprinkle rash rug in the trash. He knew I would be upset. He always said I looked like Bambi when I cried. I still can't help to think that deer died to be discarded.

The baby is sleeping at her dad's house, so I sip from my wine glass as the water rushes into the tub like a manmade waterfall. The eyes would not want me drinking with the baby at home. My phone appears in my hand and I appreciate the stable light that is radiating from it. I lay in the tub as my fingers flick through pictures of men. Swipe left. The cat jumps onto the side of the tub and sticks her paw into the water. Shocked by the sudden wetness, she runs to the closet and lays on top of the towels. Swipe left. No. Ew. Swipe. That's just a picture of a rock. Swipe right.

I shut the flow of water off with my toes as I mindlessly shuffle through the "hot singles in my area" trying to distract myself from the fact that my skin is touching the blue-stained bathtub. Faces blur as I swipe past eyes and shining teeth, none of the pictures seem to take full shape and I stopped reading the words after the second picture.

The cat hisses at me from the other side of the room. None of the pictures have screamed soulmate to me and the water has turned cold. I suck down the last of my glass and pour another as I wrap a yellow towel around me. Water seeps into the dry towel, creating an outline of me. I go to my own profile on the app and change my bio to

Wanna see my blue bathtub?

Sink:

The sink is shaped like a shell. A seashell, like the ones you find on the beach. This seems out of place in this apartment, but it is old and worn and I can tell it is haunted too. The pipes are exposed and run down into the ground like blood vessels carrying fluids through the house. Creating circulation.

Mirror:

The corner of the mirror is shattered, not to the point of unusability, but the previous resident is definitely going to have a rough seven years. As a kid, my mother told me my eyes were too big for my face, so now I peer into the mirror and highlight my "too big eyes" with eyeliner and brush yellow eyeshadow over the lids to bring all attention to this feature. Shattered in the broken part of the mirror I have fifteen eyes instead of the two that I actually possess giving me the appearance of a deer that spent her whole life drinking from a toxic water supply.

Bedroom 1

Floors:

My bare skin pressed against the new carpet. I can feel it becoming more haunted with time, but I still hate it as the small fibers scratch at my skin. I roll to my side to look at the guy lying next to me on the floor, I study his face, but even now the features do not stick in my brain. They slide off of my memory like raindrops.

"You're unforgettable," he says as he turns to look at me with his eyes. These eyes inside my house that do not belong to the cat.

inspection checklist

Or the baby. They are open windows. It feels nice to have another soul in the house; for a few moments, though, I wonder what the eyes in the window think of this new silhouette in the house. They would frown on my playdate.

“My house is haunted,” I say towards the ceiling. The man laughs as I watch the cat’s bright yellow eyes peer out from under my bed. I wish I could fit under there with her.

“It’s ok, I’ve dated a Goth before,” I hate the way his lips curl into a smile at this. We met two hours ago. He knows nothing.

“The ghosts are coming,” I stand up and shove his boxers towards him, the fox print looking up at me. He barely has time to get them on as I push him out into the hallway and turn the deadbolt, a barrier between me and his open-window eyes.

I curl up in the nest of my bed. The cat cautiously crawls out from under the bed, sinking her claws into the carpet where the man had lain. As I watch her, I can still feel the places on my back where the floor rubbed against me.

Windows:

Yep. There are windows in this room too. You keep asking for this form back, but how can I fill it out quickly if you expect so much information?

Closet:

There is a hole in my closet. I can feel the anger that caused it even though I was not here to witness the action. At night I sit in the dark. The ghosts stay away from the

closets. They don’t want to be labeled as stereotypes. And I secretly think they are afraid of the hole. I cannot see anything behind it and I am convinced that it leads to a different dimension. A dimension where ghosts don’t exist. Where I am still married. And all of the bathtubs are stained white. I take my wedding ring off of my finger and drop it in the hole. Maybe one day someone in the other dimension will have a use for it.

Miscellaneous:

There is a loose cable hanging from the ceiling. The baby screams every time she sees it. It is kind of unsettling as it swings back and forth by itself. I don’t know who thought it would be smart to run a cable through the ceiling, but I don’t watch TV, so I just lay in bed and watch it swing. Sometimes I wonder what the cord would feel like on my skin. Cold I imagine.

Bedroom 2

Windows:

The features of this room are all the same as if they were copy and pasted. You would know this if you actually spent time in this apartment. Do I really have to keep filling out this form?

Ok, there’s a window in here too, the eyes like this window the best.

I have put plants on the windowsill. All of them have turned brown from the lack of sunlight. The baby and the cat sit on the floor and take turns batting at the shriveled leaves. The baby is corrupting the cat with her mischief. I move the baby away from the window and place her in her crib. I shake a yellow toy shaped like a fish in front of her

inspection checklist

face. I hope the eyes notice that I can play with the baby too. Thankfully they can't see the tears rolling down the baby's face. The cat nudges my elbow and I scratch her between the ears, allowing the baby to self soothe.

Carpet:

The baby likes to roll on this carpet. I think it reminds her of grass. She ignores me when I tell her that it is haunted. Maybe when she is older, she will start to feel how scratchy the carpet really is. At least the cat understands--she is reluctant to come into this room.

Closet:

The closet in here does not have a hole.

Doors:

It's a door. Like every door, it has hinges that hold it in place even when gravity wants to push it down.

Ceiling:

I lay on the floor, waiting for the baby to fall asleep. She wants me near her, but I can't stand her sweaty skin against mine, so I lay on the floor next to her crib and look at the ceiling. This ceiling is popcorn too, but it has bits of glitter in it so that when cars on the street drive by you can see a quick glimpse of false stars. I imagine this draws the ghosts in, they get to momentarily forget that they are dead and will not be able to see the stars again, so they anticipate the moment when the ceiling reflects light before the room falls dark again. I feel sandwiched between the sparkling ceiling and the not haunted carpet. The cat is standing right outside the door, waiting for me. Her

eyes make me feel like I am looking into the fridge at that yellow lightbulb hovering over the shelf that won't break. *



ALEXA KOCH

Alexa Koch is an MFA candidate at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where she runs *The Watermark Journal*. Her thesis project will culminate in a short novel of literary fiction that challenges the conventions of narrative and the thoughts that create the human psyche. She lives in Quincy, Massachusetts.

EVERYTHING IN THE MIDDLE

everything in the middle

The rings around the bathtub won't come out. Hard water stains, the broker had told me when I blanched at the sight of them. Should come out with some scrubbing and bleach. Hard water stains, the landlord told me when I called to tell him the tub was impossible to clean. I've scrubbed, bleached, and soaked. I've called a professional cleaning service. I've broken down and begged Dillon to move. He tells me that the time and money I've spent is unhealthy, but I can't get over the discolored lines that don't quite make a geometrically accurate rectangle. When I watch the dirty water swirl down the drain, I imagine the greyish rings going with it. But they never do.

I climb into the empty tub. It's breathing around me, the whole porcelain thing inhaling and exhaling, the rings expanding and shrinking. Something that is supposed to be me is reflected in the silver-toned faucet. Neon suds swell at the drain in foamy swirls of pink and purple and yellow. Now blue, green, orange. I'm hyperventilating. I'm okay. It would all be better if I... Maybe I could... Don't look at it. One fish, two fish, red fish, blue....

The hour is late and I can't sleep and the fan drones on. I sit down at my desk because it faces a window, am annoyed by the clutter: a pile of books, a coffee mug full of pens, miscellaneous receipts, a ceramic pumpkin that I put out last September, a half-empty prescription bottle.

I hear Dillon's voice in my head, see him shake the orange canister at me. *Are you even taking these?* When I first started on the little white pills I had sudden urges, what I'd eventually learn is an uncommon side effect on the grocery list of possibilities

that the pharmacist stapled to my prescription bag and that I threw in the trash without reading.

I still have the urges sometimes. Deep in one particularly unexplainable mindset, I once found myself, on the bus ride home, wanting to curl up under the bank of seats across from me and let the filthy floor streak my jeans with dirt. I wanted people to stare. I craved the feeling of cold metal against my skin and the whispers of the other commuters. I wanted to ruin my clothes. I wanted someone else to feel even a fraction of my discomfort.

A more common urge was the need to break things, an impulse to smash a vase of dried flowers, to drop a glass lamp, or to hurl dinner plates at the wall. I never acted on it, but the desire was strong and lingered. If...

I stand up and sweep everything but the pumpkin off my desk onto the floor in a motion so sudden it shocks me. Lots of noises at once. The rustle of papers, plastic and ceramic bouncing off the wood floor, pens rolling in different directions, the thud of paperbacks and hardcovers, some landing open, spines facing up.

I stand above the mess I've created, hands shaking, eyes scanning. Nothing is broken. I didn't so much as chip the mug.

I'll have to clean this up before Dillon gets back from Canada.

I walk over to the couch to lie down, hoping the change from the bed will help, but I can't sleep. It's late. Or early, depending on how you want to look at it. The fan drones on. I clamp my hands over my ears, squeeze my eyes shut, and imagine a shiny white bathtub, the satisfaction of scrubbing it to a gleam myself.

everything in the middle

Fish don't live in this kind of water on first look, but the nutrient-rich cold depths keep them swimming back. Flounder, pollock, herring, and shad are year-round residents; tuna, mackerel, bass, and bluefish serve as summer tourists. The water is dark and uninviting. I walk to the end of the dock where a father and son are fishing. The kid is yelling excitedly—"Dad, dad!"—that he hooked something. Dad leans his own pole against the wooden railing and runs over as the boy reels and reels. Eventually, his catch breaches the surface. A clump of seaweed dangles from the hook, the red and white bobber swinging.

The kid is speechless, shocked, his mouth hanging open. The father laughs.

"Hmm, should we broil or fry this one? I'm thinking lightly breaded with lots of lemon."

"Ewww! Can I try again, Dad?"

Dad grabs for the line, but it slips through his fingers, the seaweed swinging and wetting both of them with the cold bay water. The boy squeals with delight ("It's cold!"), and Dad tries again, this time catching the thin, nearly invisible nylon line. I turn away as he unhooks the seaweed and tosses it back into the water.

I used to fish with my dad. The jack we'd catch were most active in the evenings, so that's when we'd go sit on the concrete sea wall at the end of the street, my legs dangling above the water, jelly sandals safe on the grass behind us. The thought of piercing a wriggling beige worm and watching the hook come through the other side was always too much, and I wished desperately that the tackle kit's rubber invertebrates, with their brightly colored feathers and bobs, would entice the fish—all I needed was

to hook one—but they never did. So I'd inhale the salt of the brackish lake water that I couldn't really see below me and wait for my father to hand me the pole with its skewered worm.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I ignore it. Instead, I take a sip of my Vietnamese coffee—delicious... I'm glad I finally decided to try one of these— and walk back in the direction of Lincoln Park. I consider a potato doughnut from the place on Exchange because an old-fashioned doughnut sounds great and I'm feeling nostalgic.

I pass one of many pottery shops, one of many breweries, one of many seafood restaurants touting lobster rolls. I pass a man shooting up in an alleyway and a man selling used books alongside a "name your price" sign. I scan his selection, the only one I recognize is a tattered copy of a Stephen King novel I've never read. I hand over the few bills I have for a volume titled *Red Rising*. I like the simplicity of the cover, a red wing set against black.

Settling in on a sun-warmed park bench, I open to the first chapter to find a handwritten list on the blank page across from Pierce Brown's first page of prose.

I skim the bulleted points, what appear to be events paired with dates. Some of the events are momentous, milestones even, others insignificant to anyone but the writer. *First real job, 5/20/09. First apartment, 9/1/09.* First promotion, first date with John, first pet, the list goes on. I'm surprised to find that it's pretty long and has a right-pointing arrow suggesting more. I turn the page but there is nothing written there. I flip to the end of the book, where the entire last page and back cover is filled with some stranger's life. The last bullet is

everything in the middle

dated 2016.

I grimace at the thought of taking a pen to a novel— chaotic evil— and flip back to the front.

He'd given me just two options that morning, Shirt A and Shirt B. Shirt A was a purple and white checkered one and Shirt B was the same, but blue and green. I *should* have picked Shirt B. I really *hate* that shirt! I shook my head, facepalmed my forehead. We should shop for you this weekend!

I smiled at him, expectant.

Huh? What...? No. No. God, Bree, how did this— Dillon gestured to the blue Honda, my knuckles rapping its hood over and over—*happen*? Why did you do this?

I didn't mean to, I countered, the syllables coming out as one long, strange word. *Ididntmeanto*. He'd nearly caught me in the act. It was petty, he'd said after. What the fuck? he'd demanded at once. I had laughed too loudly and asked why it mattered. How quickly my words came, how inappropriate my responses, how rash my actions— none of it within my control.

How does *this* just happen?

I shrugged exaggeratedly.

Does it matter? The spot is mine, right?

The cavernous garage was silent, the only noise the hissing of two freshly slashed tires, one on each side of the car that I would regularly find in the assigned parking spot that costs me \$75 every month. Management had done nothing after countless complaints. I balanced on the balls of my feet, waiting for whatever it was Dillon was going to do.

I left more than one note on the windshield, I reminded him. Have you ever

done this? Like a forsaken lover in a shitty country song. We're just missing a banging screen door. And a six-pack. I guess it's not like a shitty country song?

He gave me a strange look, a combination of bewilderment and concern, before his features set in a more familiar way. Let's not stand here and wait for someone to walk by. And give me that. He took the knife from my hand and tucked it carefully into his bag before asking, with staged nonchalance, if I was still taking the meds.

If you don't stop asking me about the fucking meds....

He put up his hands in surrender. We'll pretend this never happened then, he said. And we did. I purged our apartment two days later to the sound of *The Doors*, throwing things out, heaping clothing into piles for donation, sorting things to list for sale online. He came home to a downsized wardrobe (goodbye, purple-and-white), no coffee maker, and stuff everywhere, while I bartered with a pawn store clerk over the value of a necklace that I found at the back of my jewelry box.

I knew that he was leaving for Quebec that afternoon and we wouldn't cross paths before he had to go to the airport. I let my phone die and didn't charge it for three days, so I don't know if he called. The rest of that week takes up space in my mind as an excess of everything but sleep: too much spending, too much cleaning, too much idealizing. All of it ultimately out of my hands, too slippery to hold, a fish on dry ground, without me realizing. Both of us left gasping for breath.

I think, now, that the silence between Dillon and me is too thick. I can taste it. Lemons, fractionally sweet, not enough to

everything in the middle

save us from all the sour, not enough sugar to ease the pucker. I like lemons.

“Hi. Can I pay for these?”

I hear the voice but continue typing rapidly on the keyboard.

The customer shifts, probably uncomfortable, waiting for me to acknowledge her. I make a note on a sticky pad with a flourish before clicking the pen a half-dozen times.

“Sure thing.”

The woman pushes a small pile of books across the counter towards me.

“This is a good one,” I say approvingly, scanning the one on top. “This one, though...”—I hold up a small blue paperback— “is so bad. So boring. I met the author once. He was boring, too.”

She gives me an uneasy smile and taps her debit card on the counter, the thin plastic making an irritating *click-clack*.

“Can you not do that?” I look pointedly at her pink-painted fingernails.

She stops tapping and replaces the card in her wallet as I finish ringing up her selections. She doesn’t make eye contact when I hand her the bag, mumbling a “you, too” when I wish her a good day.

I return to the computer, to the spreadsheet created to help organize the new inventory. I can barely focus, the familiar abbreviations for genres and publishers meaningless to me. I feel, overwhelming, that I’ve lost something. *It’s not working*, reads the sticky note, the black ink of my loopy handwriting the barest contrast against fluorescent blue. I trace the words with the pen, bolding the letters. It’s not working.

I tap my fingers against the steering wheel as I wait in the arrivals area at PWM. I’m idling at the front end of the pick-up line, away from most of the other cars, wondering how much time I have before one of the officers yells at me to move. Dillon’s flight only just now landed, but I check my rearview mirror every few seconds, expecting to see his lime green hard-topped suitcase that I hate and he loves roll through the sliding automatic doors. Eventually, he appears on the sidewalk. Then behind the car. Then next to the car. Then in the car.

He drops a small, paper-wrapped object into my lap.

I pick it up, glancing at my side-view mirror. The lone officer is concerned with a minivan stalling traffic as a traveler stuffs their baggage into the backseat. I unwrap the gift, the paper crinkling. It’s a snow globe, the nicer kind with a glass sphere and a ceramic base. A miniature skyline and the letters Q-U-E-B-E-C in blue block letters forever underwater. I flip the globe upside down and set it on the dashboard as the tiny flecks of white flutter around the cityscape.

“See any moose?”

He doesn’t hear or he simply ignores me, focused instead on finding something in his backpack. I rejoin the flow of cars, eager to get away from the airport. Dillon holds up a second paper-wrapped object, this one a small rectangle, and says something about the next red light.

We’re just a couple of miles from the freeway, so another 25 minutes will pass before I can open it.

“How was the trip?”

“You know.”

I don’t.

A pause.

everything in the middle

“Is this how it’s going to be?”

I wait. He doesn’t answer.

“Is it? Just weird silence?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

He puts the wrapped item in the center console, where it goes untouched red light after red light.

The first day of August I sit down at my window-facing desk and make a list. It begins as a gratitude list, a “grounding technique” I read about in a magazine in the optometry office last week, but it twists and turns as I go, shifting to pet peeves, to people I used to know, to subjects I didn’t like in school, to favorite foods. I stop only when I run out of space on the notebook page, every line and margin filled. I’ve authored a page of words that tell no story.

I consider the impressive list in *Red Rising*, the list-maker’s choice to collect her firsts in one place, a place she might forget that she’d put them. A place that no longer belongs to her. Why firsts? What good does such a chronology do?

I flip to a blank page, thinking I’ll fill the lines with my own firsts.

First day of life, 5/24/87.

I scratch the words out. I don’t think that one counts. Too broad. Too contingent. My mind races through the years, scanning for some significant inaugural moment or event, and comes up with nothing. It feels like I can never pull things from my subconscious when I want them.

The wrapped gift from Canada sits on the corner of the desk next to the snow globe. The snowflakes are still, a few suspended at the top where the water doesn’t quite meet the glass. I notice now the silver sparkles mixed with the white flecks.

I pick up the gift, about half an inch thick, contemplate its weight. I don’t care enough to open it. Why did he buy it at all? He often travels for work and rarely brings home any sort of souvenir or trinket. Aside from a Chicago postcard on the fridge and an airline credit card in his wallet, there is no tangible evidence of his frequent travels.

I once asked him why he never brings anything “fun” home from the places he visits, and he made a face that told me all I needed to know. *Why would I?* “Inappreciable kitsch,” I imagined him following up with.

I rip the paper off of the mystery gift, hoping it will give me a hint, a clue that will help me begin the list.

A deck of cards, shrink-wrapped in thin plastic, the second layer of protection for something most would not consider fragile. The seal is easily broken with a fingernail. I cut the deck. Each card has a different image on the back, the suit side the same as any other deck. I attempt one of the fancy shuffling techniques I insisted on teaching myself as a kid, but the cards are too stiff in their newness and fly out of my hands, pictures of forest and city and moose and beavers raining onto the floor.

I bend down and corral the cards the best I can, shifting them so they all point in the right direction, not bothering to flip them to face up. The card on top is a long, greenish fish with a snout-like mouth. A pike. Its shiny black eyes look out from the card’s one-dimensional world, and I look back.

I go to the museum on my day off because it’s one of the only places I can wander for long in the sheeting late summer rain.

everything in the middle

My favorite piece of art in the entire building is a lamp. One of those Tiffany-style ones with a mushroom-like stained-glass dome of red, yellow, and green. It is always lit in its case, a warm glow I can't feel, an unseen cord connecting it to its power source. I dreamt once that I'd broken the lamp, the glass case gone, the gallery unlocked and vacant. I had picked it up and dropped it, my dream form materializing somewhere else I don't remember before it hit the concrete floor.

There is one other person in this wing, and I watch her watch a painting from my bench by the lamp. The expression on her face is bizarre, something like wonder and grief, were these two emotions to exist together. The painting is something I've seen many times, but something that I could not describe to someone else. The truth is that I don't know what is there on the canvas.

I've seen it many times but haven't looked at it. Now, I do look. It's a jay, bright blue, alone. It's a photograph, not a painting. The background of the photo is a black and green blur, a forest or bush or tree. The woman lifts her hand as though she is going to touch the frame but thinks better of it and replaces it by her side. She stands for a moment more before turning away, in search of something. Her eyes alight on the only seating in the room, my bench that is big enough for three or four. I look down before she realizes I've been staring.

Peripherally, I see her sit at the opposite end and cross her legs in an unusual way, crossed at the knee, right foot hooked behind left ankle.

"That's a great book," she says, pointing to my bag. The unusual expression on

her face has gone away. I've taken to carrying *Red Rising* around, though I imagine I will never read past the first chapter. "Have you read the series?"

I shake my head but say nothing, probably an impolite response. For a second, I consider showing her the list, telling her about how I feel compelled to bring its unseen writer, the author who penciled herself in with dates, with me, to offer her new firsts. That I like the idea that we might experience some things together, for the first time, however irrational and impossible, despite not knowing if she still exists somewhere. That I wonder if she made a list of lasts, too. If she reached an end, or if her end, like mine, is yet to come.

Beyond first birthdays and anniversaries, it seems like most people care more about the stuff in the middle, all the in-between, so I maintain the silence. I think about asking the woman about the jay in the photograph, to seem nicer, but I don't. She's looking at the lamp, her glasses reflecting its light.

I wonder if she would agree that maybe the firsts are what mean something because they allow for the existence of seconds. In the bigger scheme of things, maybe seconds matter more.

We sit there, connected by nothing.

With all the windows closed, I exhale towards the ceiling. The smoke hangs in a cloud near the window, and I wonder what it would look like if it could make patterns on the glass.

I click the pen and open the notebook to a middle page. I'm trying again to write a list. This time, I'm starting with lasts.

Cards.

everything in the middle

Snow globe.

Both a goodbye. Not an immediate one, but an eventual, inevitable one. I can't find it in me to care.

Pull, exhale.

Grandma's service.

College graduation.

Thirtieth birthday.

The cards sit on the coffee table, the glassy black eyes of the pike somewhere in the stack. Nothing to see within it. I shuffle the deck and deal myself two hands. It's impossible for me to lose. *



NONFICTION

honeybee



SARAH LASS

Sarah Lass is a Colorado-raised, Massachusetts-based dancer, writer, and educator. Her current book project, *Small Dances*, is a collection of essays which connects the work of dance to the work of building a more tender, more compassionate, and more joyful world. Her essay, “Ephemeral Does Not Mean Impermanent,” was recently published in the 2021 issue of *The Briar Cliff Review*. Lass received her MFA in Dance from Smith College in 2018 and graduated *summa cum laude* from Kenyon College in 2013. She has taught dance courses at Smith, Hampshire, Marlboro, and Keene State Colleges.

HERE, GONE, AGAIN
Winner of the Honeybee Prize for Nonfiction

here, gone, again

It is late May in a quiet corner of New England. I sit on a hill that tumbles towards a pond in two definitive slopes: the first precipitous drop from the quiet street above empties into an inviting grassy expanse before dropping off again towards the water. Two edges, two drops, separated by the fleeting respite of horizontality. Green flesh whispers softly to green flesh. Every so often, the water shivers.

It isn't warm. Summer is tentative. Evening slinks across the lawn, bringing with it a more assertive chill. Above, an echelon of geese parts the sky. The formation circles, circles again, and then descends. Two wings stretch out from each plump feathered body, doming elegantly over unseen supports. The approach to the pond's surface is met with increasing exclamation and outcry. "It's happening," they shout—vehement, uncertain, alarmed, ecstatic. "We're landing! It's happening!"

The next day, I'm back at the pond, but this time in the dance studio nestled on its banks. I stand with my back pressed against the wall, the generous expanse of the studio floor spilling out from my toes. These are trees underfoot: oak. Two bodies move a few yards away, beginning their exquisite play of weight and tone and rhythm and reference and space and relationship and and and; they listen, they offer, they listen. Light drapes across limbs like a soft, indulgent fabric, continually redoing its weave on their bodies. We have begun. We are improvising. I could reach the two bodies in a few steps if I wanted, but I stay on my edge, simultaneously dilating myself open and extending myself outward into the action. The brew of that meeting place—between my attention and their movement—will tell me

something about what's happening. This is how my body can begin its strange calculations, etching emergent formulas across and through itself. There will be no resolution or conclusion, only the narrowest of windows into a revelation: *now. Enter now.* All I can do is be ready to answer the call—whenever, whatever, however, it emerges. Attachment, in this circumstance, is an impediment.

The moment arrives and I go. I don't decide to do it, but suddenly I am in it. I arrive into the free-fall of composing. I trip and stumble (sometimes literally, more often figuratively). I've released myself from the demands of logic, but I am still involved in sense-making, just with a more expansive understanding of what that means and how it happens. Occasionally, in this regard, I find a fleeting foothold. *What are we doing?* I know from experience that if I look at the question directly, I'll have no hope of answering (and answering is not even of primary concern). More reliable (and more interesting) is a mantra: *this is happening.* The unblemished spread of oak, the generous emptiness of the room, the landscape of light and shadow—it all gives the impression of controlled conditions, the circumstances of laboratory work. But in addition to this winnowed focus, the world goes on. We are in it. It is in us. Conditions are anything but controlled. Even though we experiment and question, improvisation is not a laboratory—it is a garden and an unruly one at that.

More dancers arrive, forming a loose cluster nearby. They are clouds gathering before a storm. They are the unruly chorus of instruments that greets the arriving orchestra-goer, all tuning towards whatever lies ahead. They are the scattered chants that ultimately build into protest. I don't

here, gone, again

think these things there in the studio, in the moment of perceiving them. Naming them in this way will slow me down. I will miss things. More perilous still, if I name them and require that they meet and maintain whatever moniker I have assigned them, then they cannot become anything else. No—they are all of these things and none of these things. They are people moving together—here, now—and I know what they’re doing just like I know how the clouds gather and the orchestra prepares and the chants build.

I drop into a peculiar rhythm as I travel around the group, feeling a syncopation of my right toe, tail bone, and left shoulder. To say I *feel* it isn’t quite right, though. I don’t simply feel it—I feel *into* it, like when I stretch my hand into a glove and reach around for the fingers. I excavate the sensation. I am active inside of it. I commit myself to the rhythm even as (or especially as) I wonder about it. On the opposite side of the group—itsself wrapped up in some imprecise geometry of embrace—another body loops about languidly. She is a moon in orbit. She shifts her pelvis this way and that, flirting with momentum as she falls in half-circles, her limbs trailing, ribbon-like. My rhythm cedes into an increased muscular tone; I begin to feel desire. I want physical contact. I want pressure. A body brushes up against my own, spilling into me from my left hip up to my shoulders. It is warm, steady, reliable, and still moving. The fleshy surface offered dips gently downward. *Here is support, if you want it.* I do. I fall into it. I am carried—delivered from my location on the periphery into the tangled mass. I feel what it is to share my weight with another; to stay active without leading; to experience a shift. I feel

what it is to be moved. *This is happening.*

To say our dance is collaborative is true. Since we don’t know what will happen or how it will come about, our primary commitment is to being together. However, being together does not mean agreeing. In fact, in order to discover anything at all, we have to challenge one another—a little, a lot, just enough—so that we all have the sense—no matter where we are or what we’re doing—of being on the brink and at our limits. I remember the playful contests of childhood. *I bet I can make it to the fence before you. Whoever does the most cartwheels wins. Let’s see how fast we can go.* The game is proposed not so much to bring about the outcome, but rather to engage the players. We hold hands (or arms or legs or feet or all manner of imaginative ephemera) at the lip of a precipice. We step into it together.

I think of the geese. Webbed feet splay in readiness, stretching into the rapidly closing space between palmate and pond. Wings beat with new desperation and bleating voices reach a chaotic zenith. Feathers fan, their tips reaching out and up like the ends of paintbrushes dragged from upper canvas to lower. Water welcomes ample bellies and breasts with fanfare, sloshing and spraying in jubilation. This has happened before and yet, it is somehow still surprising. A few final exchanges and expletives amplify the excitement, and then the urgent discussion is over. Quiet returns. The water parts gently just as the sky did above. Fine lines of disruption trail each perky tailfeather, the ripples extending into a ghost of the V-shape marked, when airborne, by fellow fowl. The geese land, but glide on, the voyage not ended, but altered.

I don’t know that luck is

here, gone, again

responsible, but it always feels lucky, coming upon that thing on the other side of composing—that thing that we’re hoping to reach through the act of composing. Whatever it is, it doesn’t feel like we’ve made it; authorship is not absent, but it’s also not the point. Whatever it is—that thing—it emerges. It catches us. We land in it.

I am tempted to say that our dance crystalizes. This is not the wrong word to use, but it is also not the right one. There is certainly a coalescing and a clarity. There is a kind of undeniability of structure and form (no matter where the dance falls on the spectrum of those terms). And yet, the dance does not solidify. It is not immobile. It is not set. Perhaps we could say this: it goes from being many things to not being many things. Or, similarly, it goes from not being some things to not being most things. Or we could liken it to the experience of hiking up a mountain, of finding one’s way through trees and brush, looking through shaded density, winding and weaving through foliage, possibly losing one’s way any number of times, and then, finally, emerging into the clearing or onto the mountain-top lookout and feeling the accompanying quieting and stilling, the sense of wide-eyed arrival.

I describe this because of the feeling—the quieting, the stilling, the wide-eyed arrival—but landing in that thing on the other side of composing is, truthfully, nothing like hiking to the forest clearing or the mountain lookout. It is more like wandering the tundra, without commitment to route, to destination, or even to eventual return; it is like setting off with the commitment only to the going, and then—on the way and in the midst—discovering a mossy stone, which you bend down to caress with complete de-

votion for a time; and then, later, looking to the sky to find a bird accompanying you from above, tracking it and you for a while as you move in an unlikely duet; it is like when, later still, you become transfixed by the crunch of your feet in concert with the chirp of an insect. One thing about the thing on the other side of composing is this: the mossy stone leads to the bird, and the bird gives way to the crunch and the chirp. The clearing leads, once again, to the woods. The thing we’ve found—precious and specific—keeps moving, slipping away, becoming something else. In other words, the grassy expanse drops into the next hill. The hill empties into the pond. The geese take flight again.



Over the course of two quiet afternoons in July 2020 I read Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. I finish it sitting on the hill by the pond. My back leans against its first sloping incline, my legs sprawl out into the grassy field. The sun has lain down across my skin like a warm, gentle body wrapped intimately around my own. A breeze picks up, toys with becoming a wind, and then decides against it. Flowers bloom.

“There’s so many of us,”¹ the ghost Richie says in the book’s final pages. Though he has discovered the circumstances of his death, there is no redemption for Richie, who had hoped that the knowledge might help him “cross the waters,” “be home,” “become the song.”² There is no redemption for the countless other ghosts, who Jojo, the novel’s young black protagonist, encounters in the story’s final pages. “They perch like birds but look as people”³ on the branches of a great tree in the woods behind

here, gone, again

Jojo's house. The ghosts—men, women, the elderly, and the newborn, those who lived two hundred years ago and those who lived last week—look out at Jojo from their crowded branches in the gathering dark and tell him about their deaths with their eyes, each one singularly horrific. That these ghosts might know their own murders and still have no peace intimates that such horrors remain unresolved, remain present, remain alive. “The ghosts don’t still, don’t rise, don’t ascend and disappear.”⁴ Even when Jojo’s little sister Kayla commands them to go home, they stay. There can be no ascension—no resolution—while the horror continues. And it does. It goes on and on and on.

Why the protests that surged across the nation in the spring of 2020 gained such momentum and garnered such widespread involvement will likely be the source of research and discussion for decades to come. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery ignited the wave of outrage, but the murder of black and brown people by white police officers was not and is not new. What was it about that time in particular that, more than any other in recent history, made inaction—especially within white communities—finally unconscionable? George Floyd. Breonna Taylor. Ahmaud Arbery. These were the names shouted out in call and response in the gathering heat of approaching summer—these names, these singular people, murdered in singularly horrific ways. And yet. *There’s so many of us.* Standing in a city street in May, facing a police precinct lined with unmoving, armed officers, I added my voice to the chorus, shaping the names in order to summon the people and I felt how many, many more arrive.

It is one thing to know of racism—to know it is present and operational and monstrous—and it is another to know racism. The ability to experience a distinction is a privilege afforded by racism. It is one thing to perceive the motor of white supremacy—to hear it, to feel it, to see its gears and pistons, well-oiled by systemic and systematized hate. It is another to discover oneself an operator of this motor and a benefactor of its machinations; it is another still to find its wiring extending into and through one’s body, to feel it ignite when picked at, to become intimately acquainted with its unoriginal methods of trickery: deflection, disguise, disassociation. The spring and summer of 2020 felt to be characterized, in some ways and some white communities, by this profoundly overdue realization. *Now. Enter now.*

Posts proliferate. Emails are sent. Books published years ago and long available are suddenly out of stock. Solidarity is professed and action steps, communicated; racial violence and injustice of every guise is condemned, vehemently. I lose count of the number of posts I see. *I am part of the problem. I have not done enough. I have been complacent. I have been complicit. I can see now.* Newsfeeds repurposed as confessionals host hoards of penitents, all piling in with the requisite contrition and the necessary disclosures. The noise, the commotion, the fanfare—here is a landing of sorts.



The net of bodies into which I’ve been deposited continues knotting and unknotting itself. Those involved dart through empty pockets of space, which balloon

here, gone, again

open between moving masses and then pop closed, punctured by continued action. The speed at which they appear and disappear thrills. The moon—that dancer flung outward from the ensemble—seems to have metabolized the loping circles which carried her wildly through space moments before, that unruly curving and carving now traveling through the interior of her form, buffeting her from the inside-out.

Though there have been a couple of spatial reconfigurations and though a number of seconds have now elapsed between what was happening and what is happening, the facts of the dance remain largely unchanged. And yet, in the midst of it all, I perceive a kind of sharpening, as if we all, having entered an unfamiliar room without glasses and having stumbled about there for a time, have now found and donned our much-needed eyewear. *This is happening* has led us to *this, this, this*. Moss. Chirp. Bird. Attached as *this* may be to them, it is also more than them; dependent upon them, but also irreducible to them. *This* swells beyond its facts—exceeds them—lifting off from them the moment it lands in them.

I remember another dance, from years earlier. “What if attention is the dance?” Jennifer Monson called out from a corner of St. Mark’s Church on a hot afternoon in July 2017. We had turned off all the lights, perhaps in an attempt to trick ourselves into believing the space was cooler than it actually was, or perhaps in order to better facilitate the score we were exploring—something about light and shadow. I was at the back of the church, at the perimeter of the wood floor that blankets it, surrounded by the thirty or so other dancers participating in the workshop. I was

a couple of feet from one of the poles that supports the church’s second-story balcony, which now provides office space for a couple of arts organizations but which ones, I discovered while reading a *New York Times* review of choreographer Reggie Wilson’s work, served as a slave gallery.⁵

I was pouring myself into and out of an ill-defined corridor of light which beamed down from the west side of the building to the east. I had been doing this somewhat aimlessly for a few minutes, winnowing my focus to the prompts offered so that I might be led—via the confluence of my activity, imagination, and curiosity—into expanded presence. I had been largely unsuccessful until Jennifer Monson’s provocation. The question materialized in the air like a sculpture. As we danced, we moved around it, surveying it from various perspectives so we might come to understand something about it.

Upon hearing it, I suddenly perceived my own form as nothing more and nothing less than a landscape of light and shadow—one which was contiguous with the landscape of light and shadow around me. I tracked the estuary of these light-based landscapes—my own and the room’s—and I discovered that I could be moved according to the refraction of the room’s light through the various fleshy densities of my form. Dark matter meets warm light, splinters and scatters, eddies, pools, pours back towards darkness, tends to itself there, meets more shadow, commotion, agitation, uproar, light spreads, shadow beckons. *This*. The landing was not in movement, exactly—not in the compositional particulars of time, space, gesture, effort, though all of these were certainly present and happening; it was instead

here, gone, again

in a way of attending to what was already happening.

If the dance is not, in fact, its facts—if it is not the moss or the chirp or the bird, not the movement that takes me into and out of that corridor of light—but rather a matter of attention in relation to these facts, then I wonder if the dance isn't always, already happening, if it isn't perpetually underway. If this is the case, then there is nothing to make, but rather everything to find. The missing element—the element that shepherds us, ultimately, to *this*—is attention, which is not to be confused with awareness, a related but by no means synonymous term. As we have seen, we can be aware of something without attending to it; I can know of something without knowing it.

In an episode of the podcast *Code Switch*, hosts Shereen Marisol Meraji and Gene Demby question why white people showed up and spoke out in the summer of 2020.⁶ “Some major shift appears to be happening with a large cohort of white people. But why now?” Meraji and Demby ask.⁷ After posing that very question—“why now?”—to their many new white followers on Instagram, a theme emerged: white people saw other white people speaking out. Whereas previously it had felt conspicuous to discuss and post about racial injustice and violence, it now felt conspicuous not to.⁸ There was both pressure and permission in white communities to say something, Meraji and Demby explain, but regardless of the specific rationale, action arose due to dynamics between white people.⁹ “Few people who responded to me said that they had become activated because of social proximity to black people,” Meraji continues. “So, while much of the conceptual space and groundwork for this

Meraji continues. “So, while much of the conceptual space and groundwork for this moment was laid by black organizers, these messages suggest that much of this political foment among white people is happening because of contact with other white people.”¹⁰

I try to remember who it was, that dancer who transplanted me into the tangled mass of bodies, carrying me from the periphery into the fray, to that place where, eventually, we came upon the dance? Does it matter that I know who it was who carried me? Absolutely. It matters that I am here, certainly, and it also matters how I came to be here. If I know who it was who moved me, I can call upon this as the composition continues. It matters because it tells me something about how I might attend to the dance now—in this new moment—and now—in this one. The dance doesn't stop, and if I do, I am no longer a part of it. It is important to be here, to have landed, but it is most important not to stay here. There are countless clearings to reach.



The geese float across the surface of the pond. Their journey appears calm, but I know it's a ruse. Just below the water's surface the webbed feet that trailed them like rutters in flight have been repurposed as motors. They paddle themselves forward in flurries of undisclosed activity—a few seconds of quick, insistent kicks at the water around them, a few seconds of rest. Repeat. They remind me that stillness is a myth, simply a slowing of perpetual, though sometimes imperceptible motion. They reach the center of the pond and then, responsive to

here, gone, again

some impulse or stimuli unknown to me, they cry out to each other. They beat their wings with a muscularity that seems to alarm even them, hoisting themselves from the water with heroic though inelegant effort. Their transition to flight seems most difficult in the intermediate space between pond and sky, the horizon, its underneath riding the seam of the earth and its top indicating with a peculiar clarity (considering the imprecise nature of the term) that realm we describe as “above.” The work is arduous, but eventually, the geese gain the sky. How strange and beautiful—to watch momentum increase in an upward trajectory. They circle, collecting themselves and each other, and then set off across the treetops which surround the pond, heading towards the mountain a few miles away. They disappear behind the trees. I do not know where they’ll land.



I wonder what it’s like on the other side of revolution. I wonder who I am there. I write this because it’s true—I do wonder—but my formulation is misleading. I am already happening, already underway. So, too, is revolution. Instead of wondering, then, I continue. I activate and inquire in the intermediate; I ready myself for engagement; I enter before I’m ready; I fall; I commit without commentary; I lose and am lost; I marvel: I embrace: I let it all go: I delight and exclaim with each arrival; I expect departure; I attend; I attend again; I attend differently. One might say I am made and re-made over the course of things. One might say I am undone, over and over. Which of these is more correct is, perhaps, not the most interesting

question. It is not that we are remade or undone, but simply changed—here, and then elsewhere, *this* and then *this*. *

Notes:

- 1 Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (New York: Scriber, 2017), 281.
- 2 Ward, 281.
- 3 Ward, 282.
- 4 Ward, 284.
- 5 Gia Kourlas, “Review: Connecting Dance and Worship With Poetic Imagination,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/arts/dance/reggie-wilson-review.htm>
- 6 Gene Demby and Shereen Marisol Meraji, “Why Now, White People?” June 16, 2020 in *Code Switch*, podcast audio, 28:50, <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/16/878963732/why-now-white-people>.
- 7 Demby and Meraji.
- 8 Demby and Meraji.
- 9 Demby and Meraji.
- 10 Demby and Meraji.



REBECCA DAVEY

Rebecca Davey is an actress, writer and producer and founder of Ceres Productions Inc, a multi-media company which fills its expanding creative universe with diverse projects big and small. She has written several web series, including *Running With Violet*, which has garnered over thirty awards and nominations and is available on OUTtv and Amazon Prime. She has a Masters of Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia and is working on her first middle grade novel. She lives in Toronto with her husband and two daughters, but is actively discovering what more time in nature brings to her creative work.

FENCES FOR NEIGHBOURS

fences for neighbours

*Pseudonyms are used.

“We’ll do it quick,” I say. “So quick, they won’t even know it happened.”

I’m trying to convince my husband and father-in-law to knock down our decrepit old plaster kitchen wall. The goal is to beautify the wall as well as put up new layers of soundproofing—all in the space of a weekend while my neighbours are away. My husband acquiesces and picks up the sledgehammer. Boom. Right away we discover (as is the way with renovations) that this quick and dirty job is not at all quick, and is exceptionally dirty. With the knocked-down wall comes many layers of plaster dust, along with a thick layer of black charcoal. Who knew the wall was covering up a chimney?

“Will some of that black stuff land on their side?” I ask my father-in-law as he reaches for the broom, his body covered in soot.

“A little,” he says. Which means A LOT. Dread creeps into my belly as they dig around in the wall muck, feeling the implications of our rash act. Indeed, the neighbours come home to their entire kitchen sprinkled in a black dredge that has settled on both sides of the wall. I know this because when I put my ear to the fresh drywall, now adorned with a triple layer of insulation, I can still hear the upswing of Jeff, my neighbour.

“What did they do?” he asks, at which point the terror starts to course through me. How is it possible that I can hear him more clearly than before? The triple layer of soundproofing was supposed to fix that. Now it’s as if there’s no wall at all.

My fraught relationship with my

neighbours—Jeff and Mandy—has taken up many years of brain space—eight years to be exact, as I try and guess what they’re thinking, wondering constantly if I’ve upset them, if they like my bangs, how I could bring up the sharing of the cost of porch paint.

“You’ve always been like that,” my friend Sarah says, “a little obsessive.” We are sitting in her backyard eating bran muffins as I try to pick her brain for memories of me. Is this who I am, I wonder. Obsessive? I’m tempted to defend myself, but it’s true, certain people do take hold.

It’s another Sunday and the service has just ended. Everyone is milling about the way it happens in evangelical churches. I see my childhood friend across the sanctuary. She has long wavy hair and just discovered she has a long-lost dad who’s also an actor. She also has a singing voice like vanilla pudding, which makes me totally jealous. I too want to be an artist but only consider myself a solid medium. Nice church people like Thomas and Ruth and Renfrew Bently—all come up to shake my hands. People are friendly and interested in my life here, but I’m only half-listening to everyone because I have one eye on my friend and who she is talking to. Who is the person that is interested in her life? Whose orbit is she moving into next, and will I be excluded? I want to be her.

“Sam was another obsession,” Sarah says. “You pursued him with an unwavering focus too. Remember all those letters?”

“I signed them with a star instead of a heart.”

“Sounds like you. You just weren’t particularly interested in the odds if you wanted something.”

I think it’s a family trait, this intent

fences for neighbours

focus—animal-like—compelling us to seek out our prey, but with soft loving hearts.

Jeff and Mandy move into the Victorian row house next to ours a year after us and I'm instantly enamoured. She's in fashion and wears surprising combinations like sky blue shorts and a yellow t-shirt with brown leather loafers. Her hair is cut into a sleek bob and sometimes she ties it all together with bright red lipstick, setting off her perfectly imperfect front teeth. I can't take my eyes off her. He makes high-end shoes from scratch and sometimes wears a smoking jacket. I tell all my friends that my neighbour makes shoes. I feel cool to be orbiting so close to them, the same wall.

It's ludicrous the proximity—practically incestuous—sharing the same wall. I think about how with the right tools I could cut a hole in the wall like they do in movies and walk right through. If I put my ear to the wall in our kitchen, I can hear their banal conversations, but I listen anyway. Until their voices start to make me feel sick, from the overextension of my neck! Why am I standing there? What am I hoping to find?

One time, Jeff sends me a text in the middle of the night. I was in Winnipeg, staying in an unglamorous dorm room with my family during a weekend break from a summer course. There were no students in the dorm because it was the summer, so we had been running the bland halls with our toddler. My older daughter, who we had unfortunately trained to love fancy things, found the dorm disappointing. The duvets weren't cozy and the bathroom didn't have a TV. She acted disgusted the way I felt inside. Plus, the only take-out we could find was less than average. We ate it on the bed, and nobody thought it was delicious. My toddler man-

aged to slurp the occasional piece of noodle; the rest getting ground into the industrial carpet.

"It's a full moon tonight," he wrote, taking me by surprise. I was just getting up to go to the bathroom when I saw my phone flash. I took my phone into the bathroom to read it a couple more times. My heartbeat accelerated. Up until now, we hadn't spoken more than five words to each other alone. I didn't even know I registered on the radar of the dapper man with the homemade shoes, so specific in his taste and moments of kindness. So, a sudden text at night about the moon? I'm making headway.

"Yeah, great moon from Winnipeg," I wrote back. I wonder if he thought I was on the other side of the wall that night. I sat on the toilet and waited for a response, but nothing came.

It takes me a while to accept that Jeff and Mandy are actually terrible neighbours. Their intimacy is inconsistent, always on their terms. She texts me when she needs something: an onion, ice cubes (it takes them three months to return the trays), a lemon, ketchup. I keep telling myself we're in the building stage. This is us getting to know each other as I give her my last egg. He texts me when he's bored, starting the conversation with, "Hey. What are you doing?" which dupes me into thinking he really wants to know. It takes me a while to learn what he's really after.

When she says at a porch party early on in our relationship that we should go to Cape Cod together as families, I'm ready to go inside and start packing. But the next morning and every other time we meet it never seems to come up again. Even after she blows off our early morning yoga date,

fences for neighbours

our park date, and our wine date, I continue to dream about Cape Cod—a symbol of what could still be.

“Are you mad?” is her constant text refrain.

Of course, I’m effusive about saying how not mad I am. I don’t want conflict. Plus, I have reciprocated a few texts to her husband. I’ve stepped over a line. Good people--neighbours--aren’t supposed to do that. I have no moral ground to stand on and the quality of the ground beneath my feet has always been a concern for me. I’m a church girl after all. I have been trained to worry about others. Especially my neighbours. To think about my output. Now everything is getting marred. The pristine leather shoes are covered in scuff marks—some of them mine.

Once there was a pair of narcissists who lived right next to a naive Christian girl, who was wracked by guilt for receiving their attention. Or was their attention more like ignoring? More likely they were too busy staring at their reflections in the kiddie pool in their backyard while she obsessed about her ranking on the scale of good to very, very bad.

If you climb into our attic, you will find that it is completely open across six houses, meaning, if you don’t slip through the floorboards to your death, you can run from one end to the other. I imagine avoiding near death and climbing down on their side. I will find them at the dinner table, “Surprise, it’s me! Remember me? The neighbour you dangle like a cat toy.” They will look confused because they don’t have a cat, but my point will be made.

I make a short film in our house and get caught up in the moment of the scene.

I let the actor sing her climactic aria over and over ending in a high-pitched squeal. This is my first time directing and I love every second. Again! Again! More squeal! It doesn’t occur to me until Jeff knocks on the door in the middle of the scene that the actors’ voice has been breaching our shared wall for hours.

Maybe that’s when they decide to go to Cape Cod by themselves. I imagine them walking around Commercial Street in matching salmon pants and chewing on saltwater taffy. I feel left out because there was that one night of drinks where she said we were going to be best friends, two cool couples living side by side in Victorian row houses. Also, I love the chewy tang of saltwater taffy. I thought they knew.

Jeff leaves a vase of lavender on our porch for Mother’s Day one of those years, which feels like an olive branch, but then they don’t look at us for the next four months. That typical push and pull that reels me in over and over—the sucker that I am—disappointed by their stabs of kindness. Puncture, then a jab.

Somewhere along the line, I stop responding to his texts. Maybe it’s because my mind is full of grief? We have just received the news that our baby will be born with a heart defect requiring open-heart surgery at six months. I’m grieving in my usual obsessive way—constantly, a writhing sort of agony—at which point the NEIGHBOURS deign to have a party. I make Sam go over to knock on their door and put an end to their music that is echoing through the walls. (Did they install a speaker system along the stairwell? My god, they’re satanic!) Jeff tries to divert Sam by inviting him in for some chocolate fondue, but Sam stays strong, “My wife is

fences for neighbours

weeping upstairs because of your reverberating bass.” Boom. Boom. There it is again.

We each build up our grievances, like an osprey building its protective nest. Stick after stick. It’s easier to hate than love. Jeff tells me that he despises opera. I leave them an expensive bottle of wine to apologize. They never say thank you.

It’s around the time that I stop texting that I start listening avidly at the walls. I want to know if I’ve been found guilty. Also, to see if they are drinking my wine. I am certain that they are talking about me and I need to know what, precisely, they are saying. I have to listen a lot—every chance I get—to confirm my suspicions. It’s making me ill. The knot in my stomach is constant as I strain my neck to press my ear flat. The cup technique is a ruse. I can only ever make out a few words but it’s enough to keep me coming back for more. One time I hear them say “Emily.” And more than once I hear “her.” Her. I am her. For a while, I think I might die when I come in my house because the neighbours are so close. I can hear their front door open and close. I can hear their footsteps on their staircase, their lives on the other side of the wall.

I read a poem recently called “In Praise of Pain”—it seems relevant to those fanatical years, where I returned to the discomfort again and again.

The obsession seems to wane on both sides when we have kids, but I’m still a little too interested in what they think, still hoping that Cape Cod can happen—the symbol of what was gained and lost in a matter of minutes. Let’s chalk it up to my faith-based naiveté. God can move mountains. No one is irredeemable.

We are no longer filming shorts in

our houses or throwing chocolate fountain parties because now we are doing other annoying things, like sanding our floors at odd hours of the day and night to save money. We don’t give the neighbours any warning because it takes too much effort to talk to them, to deal with their inconsistencies. It’s also our histories that prevent us from speaking clearly. When Jeff is feeling empty inside, he still sends me a random text. He finds me when I’m rocking my baby to sleep, when I am just about to get into the bath. I listen at the wall to see what he might be doing when his voice pierces through the drywall interrupting my life. I listen for the ice cubes clinking into his glass (he must be drunk!) or the snorting of cocaine (he must be high!).

And yet I have envied how Jeff and Mandy look at each other, able to shut the whole world out, while I am clawing at the walls trying to find a hole so I can see what they’re doing over there. Just like I looked for my friend across the sanctuary. Always longing to be somewhere else, to be someone else, convinced that “there” was better than “here,” “she” better than “me,” even if I know I’m staring at people who don’t deserve all this time and energy being expended.

I forget which particular construction project is the last straw for Mandy. Is it the charcoal detritus or the sanding of the floors? Or is it Sam asking to see the plans for their basement excavation? Definitely, our contractor coming to cut a single piece of wood for a window trim is the catalyst to let it all out. When his jigsaw rings we receive a sharp text saying,

“From now on we need 24 hours’ notice for ALL work.”

fences for neighbours

We've never sent these kinds of acrid texts; we've never spoken our disdain out loud. Something has been unleashed. The walls become hot to the touch and I don't even dare listen. I'm afraid of burning my hands, my ears on her wrath. But the world conspires and we run into them in the park that same day. For 45-minutes Mandy yells at Sam about our insensitivity and bad behaviour. The floors, oh how she put up with the sanding of the floors at every hour. And the random banging without warning. And our happy times too—they rubbed her most of all! I watch the scene play out from across the park, unable to move my body over to where they sit and support my husband who is graciously taking the fall. I watch human behaviour—petty and wounded—spread itself out like the chalk markings of a dead body.

“Good fences make good neighbours,” says Robert Frost in his poem “Fences.” The inverse is also true: no fences at all and a shared wall make for bad neighbours especially if you're a masochist who gets enamoured with people to the point of obsession and can't find relief even in your own home. Also probably true if you're just a normal group of humans causing normal levels of irritation. A lack of boundaries, AKA human beings sharing the same wall, is a recipe for danger. Messed up humans. Full of good and so much bad, full of holes we think texting about the moon will fill up. Thinking we are doing a good job loving because our families are okay, but forgetting to spread the love just five metres to the right.

The first time I remember eavesdropping was in grade three. I had won a hands-free phone from “Jump Rope For Heart” and discovered that the flimsy phone, when

plugged in, could listen in undetected on all my mom's calls. I heard her cry with my aunt about my dad who wouldn't talk to her, the genesis of my worrying about their marriage. Another year, I “eavesdropped” on all my Christmas presents, unwrapping and then subsequently rewrapping each one. None of them were what I wanted. Merry Christmas, Emily.

Curiosity kills the cat.

Curiosity feels like a restless hamster rooting around in my belly.

Curiosity, what some might call obsession, has been my nemesis, even before I met Jeff and Mandy.

Now that we're forty and mellowing with every year, texting is boring. We each have a few failures under our belt. We're getting a little more body fat that we can't get rid of which makes us humble. Our kids have exposed our inconsistencies, our parental inadequacies for all the world to see. They have heard me yell. I have heard their repeated door slams. It also helps that Mandy has quit her high-paying job in the fashion industry and started listening to Tara Brach. She posts about the environment now and how she lets her children be sad when they need to. I am mixed about the changes I see in her—not sure if this new better person will extend any of that grace to me, her neighbour. I still brace when I get a text from her, knowing she probably needs my penultimate lemon.

But even still, I am tired of slandered them to anyone who will listen, “My neighbours. God, my neighbours!”

Sometimes I try to cross the expanse between us by chit-chatting about the things I know she cares about now. In my mind, I imagine also talking about the things I still

fences for neighbours

care about: Remember when you didn't come to yoga? Remember that interminable yelling session in the park? Remember when you took three months to return our ice cube tray and as payback, you offered to fill them up with water first? I would accompany these questions with the beating of my breasts. I would confess that I have texted her husband. I would invite her to church. I would say "I love you" and "I'm sorry" at the same time, which would sound like another language, "I slorry."

Maybe we could laugh about how good fences make good neighbours, but we share the same wall! The joke is on us!

I don't want to feel that anger toward my neighbours anymore. I don't want to feel that anger toward myself. I want compassion and empathy in my life, to transform myself like psycho Carol who returns to the Netflix show "Superstore" dramatically as the "empath." I want to be this empath, to take long slow breaths with my back to our shared wall and wish them well. A long inhale and an even longer exhale. I think if I must put my ear to the wall, it should be to listen for something to pray for. What if I eavesdropped in order to pray more specifically? I'll have to see what my God thinks about that idea.

This morning I still crawled out of my bed when I heard them talking on the street—just to see what they were wearing. A compulsion in my body that I haven't quite evacuated. Obsession is a habit. I have considered moving to get away from them. But I know that I will just find other neighbours to problematize. Relationships are always quandaries because they are dictated by broken people. If you interact with another human, you are at risk. Relationships,

half-relationships, waving from across the street—it's all risky. Exposing ourselves a bit or a lot. And doing it with shared walls? It's going to be hell. Sometimes at least. Unless we stick it out until we're seventy, at which point maybe our conversations start to resemble heaven?

But I can also feel myself backing away from the drama. Will she disappear completely, the youthful me who could get swept away by a text, who could fall in love with a shoe man for a few months without worrying where it all might go wrong? I have seen and experienced too much. I have lived through a pandemic along with the rest of the world. I have woken up too many times to the news of ten more deaths in a mass shooting. Today the victims are in Boulder, Colorado.

With these newer older eyes, I see the dapper man's fuller humanity. Cocky, a bit narcissistic, but also just a human, made in my God's image, getting more and more normal with each passing day—especially in his new dad costume: running shoes and the same drab vest. Just an average man wanting to blend into a crowd. Not the decade-ago shoemaker man, who texted me about the sky. Who were we then? Where did we get that energy to love and hate each other? From the upstairs window, I can see Mandy walking with her dog. Her hair is thinning and she badly needs a haircut, like everybody else. Also, a hug.

Unearth a rusty nail here, tighten a screw there: we are all works in progress, under construction, full of charcoal dust if you dare to cut through a layer. *



POETRY

honeybee



PAMELA SUMNERS

Pamela Sumners is the author of *Ragpicking Ezekiel's Bones* (UnCollected Press 2020) and a Rane Arroyo chapbook selection (Seven Kitchens Press, 2021). A listing of publications and literary awards is available at pamelasumners.com. A native Alabamian and former constitutional and civil rights lawyer, she now lives in St. Louis with her wife, son, and three rescue pit bulls.

APRIL IS THE CRUELEST MONTH
Winner of the Honeybee Prize for Poetry

april is the cruelest month

I was watching the trial of a white cop who put his knee on a Black man's neck for almost 10 minutes but my viewing displeasure was interrupted by breaking news of a white cop who shot a Black man and then later on the 10 o'clock news I saw two white cops taunt a Black guy dressed in Army fatigues and pepper-spray him and then a quick cutaway to more breaking news of another school shooting some where else in my America today but it's all OK because the first Black guy I was watching on noon TV was an addict passing a fake bill and the second Black guy was breaking Minnesota law because they don't like little pine-tree deodorizers dangling from rear-view mirrors that jangle white cops' nerves because they impede everybody's ability to see what's behind them and the ability to see backwards in Minnesota is required so that is why in the Land of 10,000 Lakes you should leave your pine trees at home because if you don't the poor officer might get confused by that second Black guy getting mouthy with his breath about air fresheners dangling in cars and this might lead to another tragic accident and you know it's sad how in that last school shooting on the 10 o'clock news it was a magnet high school where you just do not expect that sort of thing like you might at a regular school or a massage parlor in a strip mall or at the mall so big they call it The Galleria or at the multiplex movie house inside the big Galleria or maybe at a market, concert or someplace that's already dangerous anyway like a gay bar within shooting distance of Disney World for Chrissakes and the NRA and your representative in Washington ask for thoughts and prayers

april is the cruelest month

for the victims of these tragic accidents
that could all have been avoided if Black
people all just complied with the law
and reasonable requests from the cops
and if those dead kids and maybe all
of us just had guns to defend ourselves
except the Black people, who should
just follow orders and not resist—isn't
that about right, if that's a question? *



DANIEL J. FLOSI

Daniel J Flosi is an apparition living in a half-acre coffin in the township of Rock Island, IL within the V between the Mississippi and Rock Rivers. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Prometheus Dreaming*, *eris & eros*, and *Wild Roof Journal*. Drop a line at entertainedamerican.com.

FROM THE STEM

from the stem

*Charles Darwin hypothesized that
language emerged from a song-like proto
language.*

look! down the misty hillside
our ancestors
work the soil
while soughing trees
prattle on about their mysteries
seed laden grasses
rustle in the breeze
twin streams of birdsong ripple
rows of wheat
teasing apart the meaning
from the music
all the while our thoughts pull
pull the precious memory
from the stem *



FLASH FICTION



DEREK HARMENING

Derek Harmening's work has appeared in *Five on the Fifth*, *Newfound Journal*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *101 Words*, and *Vita Brevis*, among others. His flash fiction story "Stitches" was the recipient of the *101 Words* Editors' Choice Award in February 2017. A Nebraska native, Derek now lives and writes in Chicago.

WHAT THE CHERUB SAW

what the cherub saw

i.

We spent five days in July repaving the Arrowhead Baptist Church parking lot. That summer found us approaching saintliness, all bronze and sinew, terracotta forms baked into the husks of our lime-green safety shirts.

The pavement on which our town's lavender-scented Buick Lucernes and Lincoln Town Cars settled each week was older than my parents. Decades of fickle weather, of ruthless freeze-thaw cycles, had left the once-sturdy ground riddled with alligator cracks. Potholes emerged like lanced boils. We were sent to tear it up, stabilize it, resurrect it. Each morning, the air cool on our necks, the clipped lawns still glinting with dew, we arrived, young and able-bodied, to desecrate that holy ground.

Bored mothers eyed us wantonly from the safety of the sidewalk. Filing into the church vestibule, they sighed as we pulverized asphalt, murmured as we spread tack oil. They brushed dry palms over poplin skirts, racking up a few blissful seconds of covetousness for which they'd soon be absolved.

ii.

There were three of us: Hilliard, McTeague, and me. Fischer, the project manager, didn't count. He was twenty years our senior, partially deaf, and spun dark theories about ancient symbols he claimed were hidden in the creases of sweat-damp dollar bills.

"Population control," he'd shout from the throne of his asphalt roller, jabbing a calloused index finger at webs of contrails floating in the sky. "A toxic cocktail meant to snuff us out. Better believe it."

Hilliard was bookish. The ungodly hours he spent poring over Dostoevsky and

Woolf, his wiry frames slouched against a heap of featherdown pillows, vision deteriorating in the oily half-light of a bedroom lamp, manifested by day in the bags beneath his eyes.

"Poetry's for women," McTeague spat, whenever Hilliard began to ruminate on some passage he'd been chewing over.

"You what?" yelled Fischer, cupping a hand to ear.

"Speaking of which," McTeague said. "Ought to get yourself a girl, Hill. Then you can read to her every night. Stop yapping at us for a change."

McTeague's rap sheet, a scarlet letter of assault and petty theft, clung to him like an unsightly mole. His own employment resulted from a lost bet. His father played euchre with Fischer and, at one such gathering, called in a favor.

"Forget it," Fischer said, fanning his cards. "I work with heavy machinery."

"Let's play for it," said McTeague's father.

A case of Schlitz and three tricks later, the old men shook hands, and McTeague had a job.

We never spoke of McTeague's troubles. The gist was clear: he'd drift for a few months, burning through odd jobs, before invariably landing himself, bleary-eyed and shivering, in the Lynn County jail. Other stories we pieced together ourselves, a wet pulp of rumor and hearsay. Supposedly, McTeague's cleft lip was a souvenir from a knife fight with a man whose wife he'd bedded. Once, when he thought he'd been hustled in a game of one-pocket, he broke a pool stick over his rival's head.

We thrived on these details, consumed them like air.

what the cherub saw

iii.

"Hilliard, for Christ's sake," said Fischer, kneeling to survey the fresh parking stripes. "Did you sleep last night? Looks like someone with delirium tremens painted these."

The sun glared down on Arrowhead Baptist Church. Hymns emanated from within. A small fiberglass cherub ornamented the front lawn. Around its polished neck hung a plasterboard sign reading: HOPE WILL ARISE.

Hilliard leaned over the Rust-Oleum line striper, shaking his head. "Tom Sawyer," he said, "would have tricked you into doing this yourself."

iv.

Lunch was our sacred time. We devoured bacon-topped pizzas, hard-boiled eggs, Italian beef sandwiches, loaded submarines. We broke cookies that tasted of vanilla cardboard, read each other's fortunes over the greasy remains of our General Tso's chicken.

"The usefulness of a cup is in its emptiness."

"To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing."

Hilliard was snoring beneath an elm tree. When we prodded him awake, he said he'd been up 'til 3 a.m. with *Jane Eyre*.

McTeague ran a tongue over chapped lips. "She cute?"

The air boiled with the rank odor of bitumen. We'd begun resurfacing the final quadrant, a narrow, rutted plain shaded by leaves.

"A kid I knew died here," said McTeague. "This exact spot." His arms, covered wrist to shoulder in inked tapestries of rose blossoms and half-clad women, rippled as

he worked a steel tamper over the hot-asphalt mix.

"Sure he did," I said.

"Right hand to God. Freak accident. Same year that beauty pageant girl was strangled."

"Speak up," barked Fischer.

It happened, said McTeague, to a first grader named Andrew. A blizzard dumped twenty inches on Lynn County. Buried sedans, collapsed roofs, nowhere left to pile it all. Snowplows filled whole parking lots, including Arrowhead's, with icy mounds ten feet high. Andrew, bedecked in navy pants, red mittens, and a striped Peruvian hat, had arrived at the church and begun digging tunnels. He was burrowing away, hidden from view, when a snowplow rolled into the lot, delivered a fresh heap of snow, and trapped Andrew inside. He suffocated.

"How'd they find him?" Hilliard asked, wiping the rheum from his eyes.

"Warm spell," McTeague said. "The choir ladies saw him first. His arm was poking out like a branch. His mittens were still on."

The cherub watched from its spot on the lawn. A sprinkler coughed to life, draping it in mist. I imagined a child's mitten reflected in its resin eye.

v.

We finished the next day. Loaded up, cleared out. From within the jungle-tropic sanctuaries of our home bathrooms, we convalesced. Applied frothy handfuls of Dove soap to burned, tar-blackened flesh. We winced with relief, pressed our faces into the hot spray as whorls of filth swirled down and away.

what the cherub saw

The three of us stayed on through fall
until the elms shed their robes and the gut-
ters choked.

In October, McTeague was arrested
for stealing hood ornaments.

That parking lot will outlive us all. ✱



FLASH
NONFICTION



KEN SZYMANSKI

Ken Szymanski is the 2020-2022 Writer in Residence for Eau Claire, WI, where he was born and raised. He honed his craft through nights performing at poetry slams and even later nights writing concert reviews as a free-lance music journalist. He's a long-time contributor for *Volume One Magazine*, and audio versions of his essays have appeared on Wisconsin Public Radio. With his wife and two sons, he lives in Eau Claire—where he teaches 8th grade English. He recently released a collection of non-fiction essays called *Home Field Advantage*. For more on Szymanski, visit kenszymanski.com.

INTO THE STRATOSPHERE

into the stratosphere

Call me foolish, but I'm pulling up to Flynn Elementary School on a windy Sunday in March with two sons, two kites, and a dog. We've come in search of wide-open space and great gusts of wind and compared to the valley down below where we live, this place feels like Mount Olympus. Spring days like this—with 30-40 mph gales—are rare, and up here on the hill, the kites should take flight with ease.

We park on the road and walk out onto the open soccer field—the sweeping sky above us. I get Kite One up in no time. My thirteen-year-old son struggles with Kite Two's tendency to nose-dive while my ten-year-old son runs with the dog on a leash. Before I even have a chance to admire Kite One and say something like "Gravity's got nothing on us," the dog has cut loose and I realize I've got one too many things to hang onto. Kite One is already at full height and going strong, so I hook the C-shaped plastic spool to the soccer net and help my younger son catch the dog.

Once we've retrieved our dog, I hold the leash while the boys work the kites—now both sky-high. Acting as ground control, I shout instructions through the gusts of wind. "They're going to get tangled! Pull back! Pull back! Move over!"

My younger son asks, "What would happen if I let go?"

"Don't," I respond.

"But what would happen if I did?"

"Don't," I repeat.

I go help my older son, who is stuck with the slightly defective Kite Two. We make adjustments and get a better lift-off. Then he turns and says, "Look at Evan's kite! Woah!!!!"

It's drifting—far past the string's limit, 100 yards up and over the school. And it

just keeps going. Forget about, "Houston, we have a problem." I can guess the problem.

"Did you let it go?" I shout into the wind.

"I did but I tried to catch it!"

"Why did you let it go?"

"I tried to catch it!"

It's only a four-dollar kite, but that doesn't mean it's OK to send it into the stratosphere. Both boys run to the other side of the school to track it while the dog and I bring down Kite Two.

I place Kite Two in the van and go check on the boys. My annoyance is replaced by the lift I feel from seeing them excited and collaborating. They're under a tree in front of the school looking up, pointing, and laughing. The kite is still flying high in the air, but the C-shaped spool caught a tree branch. Now, in effect, the tree is flying the kite—with far less effort than we were putting into it.

"With the wind blowing like this, that kite is not coming down," I say. With the spool caught on a branch too high up for us to reach, that kite will be in limbo all day. Again, it's a four-dollar kite, but if rescue is possible...

"We could go home and get the ladder," I say. "Or maybe if we stood on top of the van, we could reach it."

"Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" they yell. "Get the van!"

The dog and I return with the rescue van, which is parked close by on the road, and we pull it beneath the tree. I boost both boys up on top of the van. They're not only lighter than me and easier on the roof, but they're also thrilled to be standing up there. From his new scaffold, the oldest is just tall enough to grab the spool, unhook it, and hand it down to me. When I was younger than both these boys, I

into the stratosphere

once flew kites with a bunch of relatives in a Minneapolis parking lot. The string slipped out of my cousin's hand; it shot straight toward the sky with the kite. But my uncle saw it, jumped up, and snatched the string—with the agility of a Labrador retriever leaping after a Frisbee. That looked like a superpower to me. Here, our kite rescue is clumsy by comparison, but satisfying nonetheless.

"Can we fly the kite out the window on the way home?" my older son asks. I remind him of powerlines. "Oh yeah," he says.

Then, on our way down Brackett Hill, back to the lowlands, my younger son asks, "What would have happened to the kite if the tree hadn't caught it?"

"It would've just kept flying forever," I say.

He thinks about it, then responds: "Imagine if in a million years some guy was flying to Mars and he looked out the window and saw it." Imagine.

I return home with two sons, a dog, and two kites: all intact. Ground control, mission complete. The kids soared like kites, and I was their string, keeping them tethered. And on this day, the winds—which are always beyond our control—gave us a lift for the ages. *



ALI BRYAN

Ali Bryan's first novel, *Roost*, won the Georges Bugnet Award for Fiction and her second novel, *The Figgs*, was a finalist for the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour. She's longlisted for the CBC Canada Writes CNF prize, shortlisted for the Jon Whyte Memorial Essay Award, and won the 2020 Howard O'Hagan Award for Short Story. Her debut YA novel, *The Hill*, was released in March from Dottir Press. She lives in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, where she has a wrestling room in her garage and regularly gets choked out by her family.

BLINDING

blinding

Gather the children. The leggy girl, eight and full of promise. The freckled and fat-footed boy in the Ninja Turtles trunks. The slippery baby with the coppery hair and a penchant for breastfeeding.

Guide them across the pool deck avoiding the snapped goggles and wet Band-Aids and Croc-ked lifeguards. The towels in lumps against the wall. The moms that don't swim. Adjust your sagging suit.

Stop outside the steam room and study the sign. Note the shapeless seniors hunched and parked like stuffed animals behind the foggy glass door. Wonder if there's room for your small army to join their séance. To melt away.

Remind your kids this is not a play place. It's a place to sit. A place to drip. A place to think. *About what?* They ask. *Anything*, you reply. Thinking is free in the steam room. Your children process this with fierce anticipation. They think about what they'll think about. The baby grabs your breast. Milk is all she thinks.

Push open the door and swallow a cloud of heat. A woman in a practical Speedo with cashew skin leaves to make room. An older woman follows. Arrange your brood across an upper bench. Remind them that they're here to think. The boy closes his eyes.

Observe the man across from you. His hide-like skin, tanned and age-spotted, his large hands bracing the edge of the seat. Hair the color of steam. His smile. Wonder why he's smiling. Assume he's a pervert. Here, alone. Which of you is he staring at? Which of you does he want?

Tug your kids into a tight heap, like a pile of laundry. Close. Embrace the heaviness of the steam, the silence and the scent of the chlorine. Ignore the baby's desperate attempts to nurse, the man's desperate attempts to connect. He's still smiling. He watches. Hope that he will go. Hope he will award you two minutes alone in this sacred place to think/not think.

You're lucky, he says. *To have three*. Three kids, he means, of course. Their fleshy thighs press against you, their sopping hair and wrinkled suits graze your arms. Know they worship you. Know the weight of their expectations. Heavy as steam.

I am, you reply, as you contemplate his comment. Strange, but not perverted. A benign observation.

I used to have two, he says, wistfully, thoughtfully. *My son died ten years ago*. In a car accident. The story, like the car his son was driving, moves full speed ahead. My daughter crosses her ankles, fidgets, traces shapes on the blue-tiled wall. My son is still thinking, eyes squeezed shut. The baby bounces her face off my chest. *He came to the top of the hill. They think it was the sun, hey? Blinded him. Head-on collision with a tractor-trailer. Died instantly*. The man shakes his head.

His grief floats around the room. You swallow it whole. Taste his pain. *I'm sorry*, you whisper. Sorry that you lost a child. For thinking that you were a pervert. For thinking that you were anything but a human looking for something: connection, commiseration, compassion.

blinding

*We only have our daughter now to rely on.
We are old.*

Sit, all of you, with your thoughts, which swirl and collide and touch. Except for the relentless baby who does not. You stand. Collect her on your hip, tell the others it's time to go. They open the door sending in a rush of cool, thoughtless air. You stop and turn to the man. Your words have fled, but you still have your hands. You touch his shoulder. You touch his shoulder. You touch his shoulder.

In the locker room, you dress. Your son jumps up and down, shares what he was thinking. Your baby feeds. Your oldest brushes her hair. You stuff wet towels into a bag, order kids to stand in a line, collect things, tie laces, zip coats.

You walk outside into the blinding sun with your three. *



STAGE &
SCREEN



STEVE LOIACONI

Steve Loiaconi is a journalist in Washington, DC and a graduate of George Mason University's MFA program. His fiction has previously been published in *GRIFFEL*, *True Chili*, and *River River*.

CAGED

ED: a 20-something struggling actor and hopeless romantic.

MARY: Ed's ex-girlfriend and current roommate. It's awkward.

ROY: a 30-year-old cryptozoologist who is either very good or very bad at his job, and it's not entirely clear which.

KAPPA: spokes-creature for a fast food chain. Heard but never seen on stage.

SET: a cramped New York apartment divided into three sections: a bedroom, a living room, and a fire escape. The bedroom has a closet door and a woman's bed covered with stuffed animals. The living room has a couch, the front door, a coat rack, a doorway to an unseen kitchen, and a window leading to the fire escape covered by a security grate.

A cage rattles in the darkness. Lights come up on the bedroom.

ED sits on the bed wearing a military uniform and holding an automatic rifle, staring pensively at the closet where more rattling and scratching can be heard. The door between the bedroom and the living room is open.

ED picks up a stuffed bear dressed like a soldier, looking at it for a moment and then tosses it back on the bed.

A screech comes from inside the closet and he tightens his grip on the rifle, raising it toward the closet door.

Lights come up on the living room as MARY enters. Spooked, ED swings toward the bedroom door, gun in hand, as MARY approaches.

MARY

I'm home. Oh! You're in here...with a gun. Is this—Am I going to—Are you—

ED

Sorry, sorry, it's not—I didn't mean to—it's not even real. I'm just edgy. There's—never mind. Nothing. Edginess is all.

MARY

Okay. Good, because for a second there I thought you'd gone totally off the reservation and I was like, I knew he was—Wait. Why are you on my bed?

ED

Do I need a reason?

MARY

Yes. What's going on? Why are you looking at the closet like—
She is interrupted by clattering and snorting from the closet.

MARY

What was that?

ED

Nothing. *(A loud crash.)* Okay. Maybe something.

MARY

Open the closet door.

ED

If I do, you're going to scream like a girl.

MARY

If you don't, I'm going to whomp your ass like a girl. Let me into my closet. *(Another sudden crash from the closet.)* You've got like an eight-foot python in there or something, don't you? I swear these frat boy pranks aren't nearly as charming as they were when we were dating.

ED

Fine. All yours. Remember, I warned you.

ED whistles as he walks to the living room. Behind him, MARY cautiously opens the closet door, screams, slams it shut and runs after him, closing the bedroom door behind her. Lights down on the bedroom.

MARY

What the hell was that?

ED

Some manner of web-footed turtle-monkey.

MARY

It's—But it—What the—Where—It's—

ED

Plushy? Yeah. Kind of.

MARY

What is it doing in my closet?

ED

I don't know. It was sleeping but I think it woke up just before you came in.

MARY

I mean, why is it in my closet?

ED

Well, I certainly wasn't going to put it in mine. It's cute, though, isn't it?

MARY

It looks like the kind of thing you don't feed after midnight. Why are you dressed like a GI Joe?

ED

I had a job today.

MARY

Oh, no. You're stripping again.

ED

No! This is—I was supposed to be in a commercial.

MARY

Supposed to be?

ED

I got fired.

MARY

What did you do this time?

ED

So Ultra Burger has this new line of breakfast sandwiches coming out. The All-American Ultra Mega Muffin.

MARY

All-American?

ED

It's a blueberry muffin with an egg white and a slab of rare steak. It's...not pleasant, but that's beside the point. I was cast as a soldier in the ad. The basic idea was: a French guy walks into the restaurant, asks for sausage, egg, and cheese on a croissant and the manager kicks him out. British guy walks in, asks for it on an English muffin, gets thrown out the drive-thru window. Then I come in, in my army uniform, and demand my breakfast on an American muffin. The manager salutes me and hands me this thing. "The real American breakfast sandwich!" Cue the national anthem, star-wipe to a flag waving in the wind, etcetera. Then they would shoot a close-up of me taking a bite of the muffin, swallowing and smiling. I kind of spit it out on the first take. And, you know, the next fifteen takes after that. So eventually the director got pissed off and sent me home.

MARY

I'm sorry. But what does that have to do with the thing in my closet? What is that?

ED

You know how their mascot used to be that penguin in the top hat before it killed all those people?

MARY

(solemn pause) Rest in peace.

ED

Anyway, I'm sulking off after I got canned and I hear this rustling in one of the dressing rooms. There's nobody else around, so I peek in. There's this small cage in the center of the room holding this brightly colored turtle shell. The color made it seem almost animated, you know? As I get close, this monkey-like head suddenly pops out and snarls at me. This pudgy, cartoonish animal waddles forward in the cage, big old cartoonish eyes watering. I realized this thing is their new mascot. They were keeping it in a cage to sell burgers. So I did the only thing I could do.

MARY

You stole it?

caged

ED

If we must put a name on it, yes.

MARY

What the hell were you thinking, Ed?

ED

I couldn't just leave it there.

MARY

Yes. Yes, of course you could have.

ED

They were keeping it in a cage.

MARY

So are you.

ED

Only temporarily. I was, I don't know, going to set it free at some sort of magic wildlife sanctuary somewhere. Or sell it, maybe. Look, it's not like it was real well thought-out plan.

MARY

Very far from it.

ED

It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.

MARY

You're paying to replace whatever it eats, shreds or soils in there, you know that, right? (*A loud clanging and shrieking rings out from the bedroom.*) What was that?

ED

There's no way that was a good sound.

They creep back toward the bedroom silently. When they open the door and turn on the lights, the closet door is open and stuffed animals are scattered across the bed and the floor. When they hear shuffling and scratching, they quickly close the bedroom door again and the lights go down. In the living room, as crashing and thumping come from the bedroom, MARY takes out her phone.

ED

Who are you calling?

MARY

Animal control.

ED

That's not an animal. It's a...I don't know what the fuck, but don't worry. Put the phone down. I already called Roy, he's on his way over and I'm sure he'll have a whole file on the damn thing and like eighteen weapons that can kill it.

MARY

You called Roy? God, why?

ED

Because there's something freaky-ass strange in this neighborhood right now and the Ghostbusters aren't real. He's a cryptozoologist. This is what he does. You need to calm down.

MARY

Calm down? You locked a fast food spokes-puppet in my bedroom.

ED

Emphasis on 'locked.' We're totally safe. *(They both look back at the door for a moment, waiting.)* I kind of thought it was going to burst through the door there. But see? Fine.

The doorbell buzzes and a muffled knocking comes from behind the front door. ED runs to the front door and MARY follows. ROY steps into the room and removes a fedora from his head. He drops a duffle bag to the floor. He unzips his leather jacket, weathered, torn, and stained with specks of black and red that were once either fresh dirt, blood, or paint.

ROY

Eddie-boy, you're looking good. Mary, you've put on some weight.

ED

So how have you been?

ROY

Good, man. Good. I'm like this close—*(Roy holds his thumb and index finger about an inch apart. He thinks for a second, then widens the distance to about six inches.)* Okay, more like this close to tracking down the papal chronovisor. Oh yeah, the pope's got himself a time machine. More like a time camera, I guess. It was invented in the mid-1950s by Father Pellegrino Ernetti, Werner von Braun, and a team of—

MARY

Is any of this story going to be even remotely believable?

ROY

Not to you, no.

MARY

Can we move on to catching the scary cartoon monster in my bedroom then?

ROY

If you wanted to get me alone in your bedroom, all you ever had to do was ask, honey.

MARY

Is he drunk?

ROY

Please! *(Roy takes off his jacket and rolls up the sleeves of a white dress shirt.)* Like I do any of this shit sober. Wait, did she say cartoon monster?

ED

Scary cartoon monster.

ROY

It's just going to be one of those nights, isn't it?

ED

What do we do now?

Thumping, squawking, and crashing resumes from the bedroom.

ROY

We fight. Mayhaps we die gloriously. Let's see how it goes.

MARY

Before you two charge in there and Butch and Sundance up my room, can I remind you that we're all accessories to kidnapping that thing at this point? Maybe we should just call the police and give up before we violate any more laws?

ED

Come on. I don't think there are any laws for situations like this.

ROY

Oh, there are. They're secret, though.

MARY

Fine. Just do...whatever it is you do.

ROY

Alright, you two wait here. I'm going to do some recon. If I'm not back in ten minutes, set this place on fire and run.

MARY

I am not burning down my apartment.

ROY enters the bedroom, where lights remain down. ED and MARY sit on the couch.

ED

Want to see what's on TV?

MARY

All of this is your fault.

ED

I didn't expect this to happen. Not all of it, anyway.

MARY

What did you expect? Sometimes I wonder how I dated you for almost three years.

A beat of silence then a loud crash from the bedroom.

ROY

(off stage) It's okay! I'm fine!

ROY limps back into the living room. They both stare at him.

ROY

Well, that could have gone better.

ED

What do we do now?

ROY

You got any pie?

MARY

You two do whatever the hell you want. I'm going to go out on the fire escape, light a cigarette and pretend this isn't my life. Excuse me.

MARY walks over to the security gate covering the window leading out to the fire escape and tries to unlock it. ED and ROY watch as she struggles to pry it open.

ED

Need any help?

MARY steps back and kicks the metal bars. ED unlocks the grate and pulls the bars along their rusty, screeching track. He raises the window for MARY. She takes his hand to maintain her balance while she steps out. Her eyes briefly meet his.

ROY

That chick is totally bitch-hiking on my chi, dawg. This ain't nothing but a thing. Think of it like you just got a big-ass, colorful, misshapen mouse up in here and I'm one of those guys who catches mice real good.

ED

You couldn't have just said that to her?

ROY

Bitch is a bitch, man. Here's how we're playing this—it's gonna take maybe five, ten minutes tops to wrangle that thing into its cage. When she ain't looking, you lock up that window. Then you and me go out, get drunk and get some ladies. Know what I'm saying?

ED looks back to the window as ROY stumbles into the kitchen to rummage through drawers for weapons. MARY blows smoke into the night air. ROY steps out of the kitchen holding an ice cream spade. ED scratches his head.

ED

What the hell is that? An ice cream scoop?

ROY

It's an ice cream spade.

He tosses it up in the air, catches it, then spins it around in his hand like a baton, eventually fumbling and dropping it.

ED

Dude, there's like twelve knives in that kitchen.

ROY

Eh, I'll be good with this. *(ROY picks the spade up, practices swinging it vertically and horizontally before tucking the handle into the waist of his pants.)* I once stared down the ghost soldiers of Gettysburg armed with nothing but a spork and a can of bug spray.

ED

Nobody believes you when you say things like that, you know.

ROY

Yeah, well, half the time I'm making them up anyway.

ED pauses to look at MARY again. Behind him, ROY clears his throat.

ROY

Remind me why you're still living with an ex-girlfriend with a thoroughly unpleasant personality and, I have to say, rather small boobs.

ED

Never sign a two-year lease with a no-subletting clause.

ROY

It's been almost six months, man. It's well past time to crawl out of the wreckage.

ED

I don't have any place better to be.

ROY

I'm just saying, I love you like I would my brother if he wasn't a three-time convicted felon and a crack addict who lost my car in a back-alley dice game, but if I were her, I'd be totally wiggled out by pretty much everything you've done since she shipwrecked your ass.

ED

You're a good friend, you know that?

ROY

I'm just saying. You don't seriously still have a plan to win her back, do you? Because I'm picturing you Wile-E.-Coyote-ing over some blueprints and maps in a room wallpapered with her picture and that's some restraining order shit right there.

ED

It's not a plan. It's just, you know, wishful thinking.

ROY

You walk the line between creepy and sweet more deftly than any other man I've ever known. But sometimes you cross it, is what I'm getting at.

ED begins to follow ROY, but he keeps peering over his shoulder. They hear shrieking inside the room again. As ROY reaches for the doorknob, ED stops him.

ED

Can you handle this one solo? She looks cold.

ROY

So you gotta go get your chivalry on? Shit. When you finally snap and kill her, I just want you and me to be clear that I'm not helping you get rid of the body, so don't come asking for a shovel.

ED

I'm going to go out there.

ROY

Where she is. Stalker!

ED heads to the fire escape where MARY is staring up at the sky. Without looking back at him, she moves a little to her left to make room for him next to her. He joins her and stares upward.

ED

Ever look up at the sky and wonder if some exploding star somewhere light years away has already ended everything and we just don't know it yet? Like a thousand years from now, some guy will wake up in the middle of the night and there'll be this huge flash of star fire and then nothing. That'll be it and it already happened.

MARY

No. Never thought about it.

ED

It's that in-between kind of cold, like you never have the right jacket for it.

MARY

What?

ED

The weather. Not quite winter, not quite spring. In limbo. You never feel quite right, you know what I mean?

MARY

Not so much. Do you mind rubbing my shoulders a little? They're really sore for some reason.

He stares at her for a beat, but she just turns her back to him and looks over her shoulder smiling. He moves closer and runs his hands over her shoulders.

ED

Doesn't it feel like this whole crisis has brought us closer together again?

MARY

Only in the very literal sense that it's forced us onto a fire escape together.

ED

That's what I'm saying. Same wavelength, you and me.

She suddenly moves away.

MARY

Were you just trying to kiss me?

ED

No.

caged

MARY

Because it felt like... never mind.

ED

I really wasn't.

She bends over and looks into the apartment. Suddenly they hear a crash and a scream.

ROY

(Off stage) It's alright! I'm okay!

MARY takes a cigarette from her pocket and puts it in her mouth. She feels around in her pockets for a lighter. ED pulls one from his and lights the cigarette for her.

ED

I thought you'd stopped smoking.

MARY

Some nights it's easy. Other nights are like this.

ED

I know what you mean.

MARY

We can't get back together, you know.

ED

What—When did I even suggest—

MARY

You were going to. You were building to it.

ED

I was so not—I didn't even say anything.

MARY

Is that what all of this was about?

ED

Yes, you've uncovered my diabolical scheme. I kidnapped Curious George in there so I could seduce you into taking me back. Curses! Foiled again! And I'd have gotten away with it if not for you pesky kids and your dog...Is that really what you think?

MARY

Honestly? No, but, well, yes, maybe. I think you might do that. You got kind of unhinged after—

ED

You dumped me.

MARY

I was going to say, after we broke up.

ED

But you meant, after you dumped me.

MARY

For the love of—it was six months ago! How is this still a thing?

ED

You brought it up.

A series of crashes and thuds inside their apartment.

MARY

What the hell is he doing in there?

ED

Do you really want to know?

A prolonged high-pitched meowing.

MARY

That sounded like a cat. We don't have a cat.

ED

Again, I ask, do you really want to know?

A loud boom from the bedroom, followed by what sounds like a roar. MARY yelps and reaches for ED's hand. With another explosion and a crash inside, she grips it tighter. The living room fills with smoke.

ROY

(Off stage) It's alright! Totally under control in here! Nothing's burning!

MARY lets go of ED's hand.

ED

See? What was that?

MARY

What was what?

ED

With the hand-holding. You were just holding my hand. You got scared and you grabbed my hand.

MARY

Why does this matter?

ED

You remember when you asked me to move in, you were all like, no, this won't be weird at all, and I was like, no, really, it's gonna be weird? This right here, this is how it's weird.

MARY

My hand grazed yours. It's not like I jumped your bones in the shower.

He looks over her body. She clears her throat.

MARY

Stop thinking about me jumping your bones in the shower.

ED

How did we end up here?

MARY

You stole a rabid corporate mascot. The rest was inevitable.

ED

I'm talking more big picture. Us and all.

MARY

That's complicated.

ED

We had a really good thing.

MARY

Maybe we did. But then we didn't.

ED

My friends think this is really strange. Us. Being together and yet, you know, not. And I'm saying, my friends—you've met Roy, so imagine where their threshold for strange has got to be.

MARY

Mine do too. But they never really liked you much anyway.

ED

I assumed that didn't bother you.

MARY

It didn't. I just wanted them to see the side of you I saw.

ED

Which you don't see anymore.

MARY

No, I don't. I'm sorry. I was just trying to live my life.

ED

You were my life.

MARY

Oh my God. Do you ever listen to the way you talk about us? It's like you start channeling a bad teen soap opera.

ED

Come now. That's just a low blow.

MARY

I just look at you and I wonder when you're going to move on. I want to know that you're happy.

ED

But not happy with you?

MARY

Yes. Not with me.

ED

Sorry to disappoint you there. I'm starring in fast food commercials and direct-to-DVD erotic thrillers and I'm alone, except that I live with my ex-girlfriend who, oh yeah, doesn't have any interest in me at all anymore. You want to see me happy? Seriously? Have you seen how bad of an actor I am?

MARY

And cue the weepy emo ballad, poignant montage and fade to black. Tonight's episode featured music by—

ED

I'm going inside now, evil living puppet monkey or not.

MARY

There's something we need to talk about.

ED

Is it about how you're secretly still madly in love with me? Whatever it is, just say it.

MARY

I'm leaving.

He waits for her to say something more, but when she doesn't, he shrugs.

ED

Alright. Well, fine. I'll see you later tonight, then, I guess.

MARY

No, I mean...I'm moving. A senior field producing job opened up in the Chicago bureau. I was going to tell you when I got home but, well, that happened. It pays well enough to cover my half of the rent here for the next few months. Consider this thirty days' notice or whatever.

ROY

I think I got it!

MARY climbs into the apartment. ED thinks for a moment, then follows. ROY meets them in the living room, holding a cage with a sheet over it.

ROY

It's back in the cage.

ED

I can see that. You're bleeding.

ROY

In a few places, yeah. Bugger's got claws. You wouldn't know it to look at it.

KAPPA

Ultra-size your combo for only forty-nine cents.

ED

It talks?

ROY

Unfortunately. Mostly just bits and pieces of fast food menus.

KAPPA

Try our new fish pancakes!

ROY

Are those what they sound like?

ED

Pancakes with bits of fish in them? Yep.

ROY

Can't say that sounds entirely pleasant.

ED

So what the hell is it?

ROY

I'm fairly certain what we're dealing with here is a kappa. Never actually seen one before. It's a river imp that lures small children back to its underwater lair and sucks out their life force. See, in Shinto folklore, the kappa—

MARY

How much of this am I going to care about?

ROY

Not much, likely. Honestly, the details get a bit disgusting.

MARY

Let's just skip that part, then.

ROY

Sorry about the mess in there. I swear almost all of those stains will come out. Don't worry. I have insurance for these situations.

ED

What are you going to do with it now?

ROY

Take it down to the playground in the morning, let it out and see if it starts chasing little kids. Science, baby. Catch the magic!

KAPPA

Ask me about our new dessert salads!

ROY pulls the ice cream spade from his belt and slams the top of the cage.

ED

Was that really necessary?

MARY

It's a mythical river imp, Ed. I'm sure it can't feel pain.

ROY

Oh, no, it can. I just like doing that.

MARY

Leave my apartment.

ROY shrugs, picks up the cage, and salutes ED.

ROY

My work here is done. Expect my bill before the next full moon.

ROY walks out the door.

ED

Well, I have to be honest. That went better than I expected. Though mythological Japanese river imp would not have been my first guess.

MARY

I'm going to get some sleep. We can clean this mess up tomorrow.

MARY heads into her darkened bedroom. ED sits alone on the couch. After a moment, he walks over to the window and closes the grate. MARY returns wearing pajamas.

MARY

Uh, my bed is sort of ripped in half in there. Do you mind if I—

ED

Take mine. I'll just, you know, out here on the couch.

ED drops to the couch. He struggles to kick off his shoes.

MARY

Ed.

ED

Yeah?

MARY

Are you going to be okay?

*ED adjusts his position on the couch to face away from her. MARY turns down the living room light and returns to her room, leaving him alone in the dark. **

ISSUE IV ART

FICTION: “Innerness” by Claire Lawrence

Claire Lawrence is a storyteller and mixed-media visual artist living in British Columbia, Canada. She has been published in Canada, the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and India. Her work has been performed on BBC radio. Claire’s stories have appeared in numerous publications including: Geist, Pulp Literature, Litro, Ravensperch, Brilliant Flash Fiction, Hot Flash Fiction and more. She has a number of prize winning stories, and was nominated for the 2016 Pushcart Prize. Claire’s artwork has appeared in many magazines including: A3 Review, Sunspot, Cold Mountain Review, Inverted Syntax, pulpMag and more. Her goal is to create and publish in all genres, and not inhale too many fumes.

NONFICTION: “Language of Water” by Lana Eileen

Lana Eileen is a musician and visual artist currently based in Australia. Through painting, photography and sculpture, Eileen’s work fuses abstract elements with fine details, combining seemingly disparate fragments to evoke a sense of magic realism. In 2019, she undertook an artist residency in remote Iceland. Previously based in New Zealand, Eileen currently resides on the island of Tasmania, where she attends the School of Creative Arts and Media.

POETRY: “Tragic New Years” by Isabella Suell

Isabella Suell is a student at Millsaps College, who is double majoring in English and Anthropology. She has been published in two literary journals and has been a feature in *Portico* magazine as a writer. She has won a national silver key from Scholastic for her written work, and other keys for her photography and portfolio. She has most recently been published in *Stylus Magazine* and *In Parenthesis*. Her goal with her work is to provide the viewer with immediate feeling, through story and imaginable narrative. She believes the picture should inspire feeling, and subsequent internal storytelling by the viewer.

ISSUE IV ART

FLASH FICTION: “The Time Card”

FLASH NONFICTION: “The Water Bearer”

by Noë Piña Bio

Noë Piña, was born in Los Angeles, CA as a first generation American. He grew up traveling throughout Mexico and in those travels visiting museums, galleries, and cultural institutes. He studied at The Los Angeles Music & Art School, Plaza de La Raza, Instituto Cultural Cabañas, Guadalajara, Mexico, Cal State LA, and Otis College of Art and Design where he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts. After college he helped establish and led the Arts program at Oxford International School, later he taught Art to inner-city students at Soledad Enrichment Action Inc. a non-profit organization founded in 1972 by mothers in East LA who had lost their sons to gang violence. He was then recruited by Sister Jennie Lechtenberg, SNJM Founder of P.U.E.N.T.E. (People United to Enrich the Neighborhood Through Education). There he taught Art and Language Arts in conjunction with a partnership from The J. Paul Getty Museum: Art & Language Program.

STAGE & SCREEN: two paintings by Emily Saenz

Emily Saenz, also known as E.SRose on Instagram, is an eighteen-year-old artist who is just starting out in her career. Currently she is attending college in Arizona for a Fine Arts degree, with plans of continuing her artistic expression outside of school. She also loves hanging out with her family (especially her two dogs) and creating artwork with a strong focus on color as well as internal narrative.

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