

THE

NGY

REVIEW

No1

「abandoned」

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Twenty-twenty is over

We need the arts.

If last year was another year, a usual year, there would be no need to make it special, to put it in perspective, collectively. Things happen, I know. On March 11, 2011, I was taking a nap and got shaken out of it. Nearly all the world remembers. But the shock wave, the waves, didn't reach everyone. Maybe the trash got to America but nothing like this. On September 11, 2001, I was asleep in Los Angeles when my mother called to tell me New York was being attacked. Most of us remember that. 2001 and 2011 were special years, but special in a very narrow sense.

I spent a long time thinking about this first issue. Going through designs and such, reading several hundred works of art. All of these pieces were written before the pandemic. I was almost ready to give it to the world. But 2020 hit, the economic, mental, physical, and emotional fallout of it nearly destroyed me and this project. Abandoned. And that was the original theme. But as the clock struck 2021, I decided to roll it out anyway, whatever I had. To keep it simple.

I don't know what our uncertain future holds. There will be a No2 soon. There were many voices that were supposed to be included in No1, but I couldn't fit them in on time. And I hope there will be a No3. But finally there's a No1. And I thank you all for your patience. This inaugural issue will contribute to the arts in 2021 and beyond. I hope you like it. Peace be with you and stay safe.

Cam Villanueva
January 2, 2021
Nagoya, Japan

five poems by Gale Acuff

Miraculous

When I die I'll live again is what church
preaches, ours anyway, and Sunday School,
if I think I'm having fun now alive,
when I *am* having fun that is, it won't
be a thing like the fun I'll have when I'm
dead our preacher says with a smile and I
wanted to raise my hand during his speech,
sermon that is, but you don't do that in
church, Hell, I don't even do it at school,
regular school I mean, I guess that's why
I get called on a lot but still I'm not
prepared, I guess I'm a little proud of
that but anyway to have good clean fun
in Heaven I have to die anyway,
no one lives forever, God doesn't count,
he's not flesh and blood and though Jesus was
it's kind of not fair, He's also a god,
the Son of God they say, and the Holy
Ghost, who really knows who *He* is, I don't
think I want to live again no matter how nice
it is and after Sunday School class this
morning I told my teacher so and she
asked why and I said that I like it here
fine, on Earth that is, most of it, if God
can make Heaven then He ought to be
able to stop overpopulation
or send some folks to other planets and
help us all see to ourselves, forget
that we'd be aging maybe forever.
And then she sat down but the thing was

she was already. It's a miracle.

Where Love Can Lead

I may not have much time left even though
I'm ten years old and in perfect health, more's
the pity, God might take me at any
time, I'll have to leave my dog and parents
and regular school, I won't miss it much,
and Sunday School, where I'm kind of in love
with my teacher even though she's old, she's
25 but that's all right, Jesus said

love your neighbor and sometimes love leads to
marriage and when I'm older it won't so
much matter if she's older, too, any
-way I guess when we're dead we'll be the same
age, everybody will, well, not -body,
we'll leave our bodies behind but get new
ones she tells us kids but anyway I
could die, like I say, whenever God wants

me to so I shouldn't waste time, I should
maybe waste my breath instead and tell her
that I love her and maybe she'll say that
she'll wait until I shave and drive and work and
maybe I'll go to college and become
a preacher and then she can come work for me
and we'll go home together after church
but first the Korn Dawg King for the special

and talk with our parishioners, that's folks
who will come listen to me and then we'll
go home and have a nap, then wake up and
watch TV and maybe read the Good Book
and have supper and then watch TV or
maybe hit the Bible again and have
a snack and then go to bed and wait for
children - I guess you must pray for 'em *hard*.

Prim

Hell yes, I love Jesus I shout when she asks all us children if we do, love Him I mean, Jesus that is, Miss Hooker I mean, our Sunday School teacher, so I guess I get a little carried away some -times, I just get all -jacked by the Spirit. also known as the Holy Ghost and most -ly so in our church, we're what you call prim -itives, that's what Mother and Father say, they should know, they hardly come to church at all but send me here since God's close enough to walk to so they don't have to drive me anywhere, any other church I mean, God's as good there as anywhere else says Father and Mother says I'll drink to that ha ha but we don't drink, at church I mean, I'm only 10 so I don't drink but then Father likes his Blatz and Mother Mogen David and besides there's nothing good on TV Sunday mornings anyway, no cartoons but Astro Boy and Tobor and Simba the White Lion and I'm in love

*with her, Miss Hooker I mean, even though she's 25 flippin' years old but one day we'll get spliced if only for a spell until she dies but Mother told Father once *It's not how long it is, it's how you use it* and maybe that's good for ages, too, not just whatever she was talking about and maybe I'll tell Miss Hooker that or maybe she'll tell me or maybe I'll ask her first just what gives but any -way she held me back after Sunday School and told me not to never curse in class again, *not in the House of God, not for no reason nor good nor bad*, that's a lot of Thous-shalt-nots but not in so many words and I said *Yes ma'am, can I go now, I've learned my lesson, whatever it is.* But I might die before she does. True love.*

Stray

This morning in Sunday School I had it
 bad, diarrhea I mean, too much pop
 -corn last night, the microwave cheese kind and
 for breakfast today it was grape Tang and
 Sugar Pops and though *Sugar Pops are tops*
 they were tops only in my bottom so
 I ran like Hell from our portable class
 -room-trailer-on-wheels that don't roll is what
 it is and if I was Robin, the Boy
 Wonder or is that were I'd holler
Holy Ezekiel, I mean those wheels
 within wheels he swore he saw, Miss Hooker's
 our Sunday School teacher and she really
 believes that he saw them, that he wasn't
 toasted and more power to him, I guess
 --but even more to her and as for me
 I'm only ten years old, I don't know shit
 from Shinola, at least Father says so
 but to be fair to him he says that to
 Mother, too, and my dog, and the stray cat
 that sleeps with him, with Caesar I mean, he's
 my dog I mean, and sometimes we sleep to
 -gether if I can sneak the two upstairs
 to my attic bedroom especially
 at night, I guess the heat's just to tired to
 rise to the top of the house, that's my bum
 luck and speaking of luck I made it just

in time to the bathroom off the main hall
 of our church and thank God or anyway
 thank goodness or my lucky stars, whatever,
 it's all God sooner or later, that I
 made it without soiling myself, crapping
 in my underwear I mean, talk about
 embarrassing, it's embarrassing just
 to think about and when I was finished
 stinking up the room I slipped out before
 anybody could see it was me, or
 is that *I*, and beat it back to our class
 -room, Ezekiel's Trailer I call it,
 and after church I asked Miss Hooker if
 God wanted the thing to fly, our trailer
 that is, could He make it sprout wings and she
 answered, *Gale, if He wanted to, He could*
make you sprout wings. She thinks I'm an angel

Grave

I'm going to die soon - no, I mean that
I'm going to die sometime but sometime
is pretty soon, too, even if I live
to be 100 and I'm only 10
but God's ages older and Jesus, too,
even if He's His son, Jesus is God's
I mean, but then again Miss Hooker says

at Sunday School They're one and the same since
In the beginning was the Word and it
was Jesus and she's 25, I mean
Miss Hooker's 25, that's pretty old
or older than 10, less than 100,
much less than *infinity* which is what
I guess God's age is, Jesus's, too, plus

the Holy Ghost's and after church today
I told Miss Hooker that I'm not really
10 but *infinity*, too, just like God
because He made me, He made me in His
image and since He created me there's
some of Him in me and maybe even
all and the same goes for her so there it

is and she was so surprised, *amazed* is
what she called herself that she started to
cry and then I said *Your tears were always
inside you, like the Kingdom of Heaven -
There's nothing new under the sun*, and she
finally died then, her tears I mean, then
told me to walk home like I always do

so my little trick didn't work, I didn't get
a ride, I had to walk, and as for her
tears, she probably got what's impure out
so even though I sinned I did some good
so I guess I'll go on sinning, at least
like that and not bother God to forgive
me but to sort it all out when I'm dead
and in my grave and waiting for the Judgment

Day. That should be enough time. No hurry.

Tom Barlow

Beautiful Dreams

There is still beauty in this abandoned
steel mill, like the face of an old warrior
on his bier. I imagine I can smell men's
sweat in the morning glories rampant
on the chain link fences and feel the
slick residue of the quenching tanks
between my thumb and forefinger. The
shadows of smokestacks mark the
crumbling pathways trodden by
steelworkers in coveralls and hard hats
at shift change, on their way to pour
molten steel from the furnace into the
ingots that went to war or Wall Street.

There on the long bench by the corrugated
door our grandfathers sat at three in
the morning with their braunschweiger
sandwiches and thermoses of coffee,
sharing visions of the lives their children
would lead, far from the pitiless mills of
eastern Ohio, far from filthy hands and
lungs. How can any of us pass this silent
hulk without stopping to thank them for
such beautiful dreams?

Matt Barnsley

Baby Delilah Cries at the Moon

blackened baby hole,
a womb of concrete and water
impregnated two days ago
by fear, shame, and a rejection
of motherly love,
similar in means to Moses
but with opposing ends

aside from the audience
of alley cats and garbage
(and with the natural exception of her mother)
an old Puerto Rican woman
was the first to hear Delilah
still in pseudo-utero,
herald her own presence into the world
with red lights
camera crews
and a song
written about
blackness
flashlights
and loneliness.

two poems by Mandy Brown

Proof of an Unbroken Person

Afraid of his pieces, he placed them in a bowl on the coffee table
for discussion. She counted ants between crochet stitches with a mouth

full of questions and wondered when to check the mail. He drove so far
home lost him in steaming rainbows of blacktops. She walked hallways,

ran hands along wood grain and picture frames. They never captured
her seeking: towels folded squares within squares, a life shrinking clean.

He now tastes blood and names it communion as if heartbreak were holy,
but she knows it's just the sky full of rain and thunder, echoing dead trees.

If You Insist I Linger, You May

wrap a seed in my ashes, so I may become
the speckled shadows of leafy branches.
Growth eternal, I'll layer reincarnating
rings, bear fruit, hold tire swings. Please,
place no stones with my name mark, but please
etch your lovers' names into my bark. Among
the gardens green, spread my energy, for
I'd rather ripen a grove for you than a cemetery.

four poems by Yuan Changming

Youth

The nursery rhyme jumps from my aging chest
Eager to embrace the changing world with zest

Hello, young trees! Hello, summer's sunshine!
How are you all doing along this humble line?

I will resume my old childhood dream
I will try this new feature like ice cream

I will return to my long lost native place
On this planet's other side to find the face

& confess to her as the apple of my eye
Pretending I can restart my life, can't I?

Shhh

The cosmos is expanding
Black holes sucking
Old stars sparkling
New stars being born
Manmade satellites moving around the earth
Earth rotating & revolving
Clouds colliding
E.signals shooting

The swishing of traffic on Granville Street
Sawing at the house construction site nearby
Power-washing
Mowing
Talking to a fellow human

Tick-tacking of the clock
Buzzing of the fridge
Computer fanning while in the present moment

My heart is beating, as silence presents itself as
A vast stage, where noises enter & exit one after another
As if to leave my protobeing alone, all in a hurry

Heartfelt Hieroglyphics: Learning the Chinese Characters

怒: anger influxes when slavery

Rises from above the heart

愁: worry thickens as autumn

Sits high on your heart

闷: depressed whenever your heart is

Shut behind a door

意: meaning is defined as

A sound over the heart

思: thought takes place

In the field of heart

忘: forgetting happens

When there's death on

heart

忍: to tolerate is to bear a knife

Right above your heart

Crows Are Being Born Again

It is an undeniable fact now:

They have arisen from the bare ground

Like the phoenix flapping its wings out of its
Legendary ashes, where are they going?
Nowhere but high up into a virtual space, a world
That, like history book, is full of black headlines

Big names, & bold details. All transmitted
Into digital forms. Even the most unidentifiable
Has become a star above its dark caws.

Each

Taken for an angel winged with the rainbows
Of tomorrow, while all cranes and swans are lost
In their dances to the tune of death

Bruce Louis Dodson

Four Feet Over Six Feet Under

Our lustful need for one another
Turned combustible
And she had teenage kids awake at her place
Mine was thirty miles away.
She led me to a grassy, well kept graveyard
Where the night was still as death
I asked, "Aren't you afraid here?"
"It's the safest place in town," she said.
We made love on a marble slab at midnight
Undisturbed beneath a sickle moon
But I did not go back with her again
Into that quiet place
For reasons still uncertain.

John Grey

Abandoned Farmhouse in the New Hampshire Woods

It's just the bones of a house,
its skin long peeled,
the frame of four unequal rooms,
and doors that usher in nothing and nowhere
out of and into the sun and rain.

The towering oak may boast
a roof of new shiny leaves
but the dwelling hears nothing
from that quarter.
Its scattered tiles are
overgrown puzzles for squirrels.
A rotted roof beam spears the mud floor
of what was once a cellar.

The everyday has totally abandoned
this hapless structure.
No one cooks, no one sleeps,
no one even stands out
on the collapsed veranda
and scratches.
No first name is called out
from the invisible window
on the second floor.
No last name will ever answer.

three poems by Richard Luftig

The moon quarters

in place
 tonight
this winter
 all sifting
of sand.

Gusts gather
 from out
of the north
 then wander
their own

separate ways.
 Shadows stand
on their heads
 in tidewater
pools while plovers

skip about.
 Snow squalls
and winds cry
 through stunted
grass. Then weak,

brief sun.
 Dunes sag
their rounded
 shoulders.
They have learned

to accept
 their losses
surrendering
 whatever treasures
of shells and glass

the sea
 has brought
like bereaved
 mourners,

full tide to neap.

Haru Kosumi

Dew flower,
The color of frost.
I touch you
And you vanish.

In the rain,
Wet with cold,
Sunset clover,
By moonlight.

And these flowers
Who would teach
Their secrets if only
I would linger to learn.

Wabi-Sabi

Spring

Plum blossom
 Peach and pear.
Timid weeds peek
 Out for a first
Look at sun
 Shy flowers hide
their faces where
 a garden returns to wild.

Summer

Peonies.
 Flowering thorn.
Then wild roses
 Where roads thin
And end
 To turning paths.
These flowers
 That bloom best
On difficult land.

Autumn

Lake grows cold
 On mountain's ridge.
Among the oaks,
 Autumn seems to rise
Then fall.
 Leaves drift.
The bare, white birch
 Helps one welcome
What is to come.

Winter

These fallow fields
 All brush and bramble.
Farmers keep
 Their own special
Time. They dream
 They can see
Their crop
 Stretching awake
Under frozen snow.

five poems by Avra Margariti

Home

You have a home in me, she says.
Home takes me by the hand and kisses my bloody knuckles.
Home bakes mushroom pies and brews my favorite anise tea.
Home is as home does.
She says, if it smells like a home,
tastes like a home,
draws you inside like a welcome mat outside of a home,
then surely, it must be one.

In the end: "I can't be your home anymore. My hearth is broken."

Poor Ladies Of

Forgiveness	mercy	restraint
Mary	Maria	martyred

virgins praised for the pain
inflicted on them
for the things not impaled in them.
Now, once again trapped in churches and museums
true to fashion the brick and stone
won't let them breathe
won't let them scream

"I am not your role model!"

Falling

Baby, I've been falling again
wings tarred and skin cracked open
and I know it's not your fault
but I do wish someone would catch me
in their net tonight.

The last time we spoke on the phone
I clutched the granite countertop
like I wanted to splinter myself against it.
I asked you to pick up your stuff when I wasn't home.
You laughed ugly and low in your throat,
said: "Have fun hitting the ground."

I spread tattered lace wings and settle
into my old knowledge
of trusting in the wind
to catch against flight feathers and hollow bones.

Harpy

I'm an apple tree in the afterlife
which is ironic, really.
An avian monster perches on my branch.
"Snatcher," I greet the harpy amicably.
"Suicider," she retorts.
She preens. She reeks.
Her eyes tell the tale of bottomless things.
"It's a bit unfair," I tell her, "isn't it?"
The harpy doesn't agree with me or contradict me,
only pecks at a maggot-stuffed apple.

Frida Kahlo as Wounded Deer

Frida Kahlo as eventual compost
Frida Kahlo as blood
Frida Kahlo as tree
As arrow as hunter as entropy as decay
as regrowth
Frida Kahlo as the eye of the beholder
who looks into the eyes of Frida Kahlo and sees
herself.

Guna Moran

The Lovesick Flowers

translated by Bibekananda Choudhury

I love flowers as destined
But cannot love flowers in the measure of flowers

I love
You
Would keep on loving so
Cannot but express love every moment
Flower is my heart
Do understand my importance

A word from the heart
And a little nurture
Flowers don't need anything more
That too I can't always manage

Love becomes full of words overflowing the heart
I caress holding the stem of the flower
Flowers glitter with laughter
From the joy of soul

In the incessant battle with the thorn
The love of heart remains in heart
It does not mean that o flower
I am ignoring you out of laziness or anger

Flower is my heart
Do understand my importance

Tyler Barton

Bodycheck

They will bodycheck the robot if it comes to that. One way or another, they're knocking it over. Maybe in the spice aisle, maybe in the bakery. Maybe they'll break it, and bleed out all its battery, because maybe it's like those orange torch flies everyone is killing gleefully, maybe it's something that's hurting humanity.

Maybe then these boys will become Tori's real friends, or her siblings.

It's Tori pushing the cart, and in the cart it's Kai plus Kai's kid brother, Christmas. He was born on Christmas. Tori, on Halloween. Kai, however, fell from heaven fully formed, lip rings and all. Ask him his age and he'll say, "Infinity," but Tori's best guess is thirteen, a year older than her. Kai's stretched head would fit well in a scream mask, and his buzzcut's all dot-dashed with white scars. To Tori these marks look like the starts of stripes, as if he's growing up to be bengal tiger. Christmas, four years Kai's junior, has space-black eyes and a deep, dark widow's peak. Tori's never seen him wear a shirt with a sleeve.

Ask the boys her name and they might shrug. Last month they came to stay at Tori's house. They came from the mud-cult. Her moms took them in. Her moms who make the boys' beds and baked potatoes (it's all they'll eat). Her moms who cry each night like the kids can't hear through the vents. Her moms who say not to call it a mud cult, but rather a *messy utopian attempt*. "So, is this our attempt?" Tori asked, on the day Mom Molly told her about the boys. She poked at a tomato made rotten by a torchfly, only half listening to her mother's reasoning.

Her moms are not alone in the fact that nothing in their garden grows. They're alone in that they keep planting.

PLAN A: FOODFIGHT

"There it is," Kai whispers. Christmas crouches down and watches through the shopping cart's metal bars, like a possum in a cage. Tori's only here to steal taco supplies for Mom Kel, but the brothers insisted on coming along, and Kai's pretty convincing. He has a point to make.

Tori stares it down too: the robot, a 6-foot obelisk gilded with a glow-blue light. It's like a tombstone, the tall kind rich people get, except on wheels. The pace it moves at is elderly. It has eyes, googlies—two of them. And a drawn-on, soup-bowl smile. And a name tag. When the coast is clear, Christmas whips a vanilla bearclaw but misses his target. The robot ignores the mess. *Sam E* is the robot's name, but the brothers refuse to acknowledge the ways in which the engineers tried to make it human. They avoid its dumb gaze. They call it "the robot". Or just "it."

Tori tries for eye contact. "Psst. Sammy," she says to the robot as it surveys the cheeses.

"Lemming," Kai scoffs. "It *wants* you to think its name is Sam E, because it *wants* you, Victoria, to think it's just like *us*," he says, over still-warm donuts

they won't pay for. Tori listens, nods, as Christmas draws a Bavarian-crème mustache on his face. It's not that Kai's speech has Tori rapt—it's the first time he's said her name. "It believes it deserves *decency*."

The robot blinks its light at a baguette basket, makes a tight turn at the Pepsi mountain.

In its squeaky, cartoonish voice, Sam E says: ENJOY THIS LOW-

"STOP!" Christmas yells at the robot, and it does. Other shoppers steer their carts wide to avoid, not the robot, but Christmas.

"I'm sure you heard about how AI can fly now," Kai says to Tori.

"Drones?" Tori says, thinking of gym class when she flew hers into a tree as a joke, but it knocked down a nest of torchflies. Her classmates all took to stomping the bugs as the teacher cheered, but Tori started crying and she's still not sure why. "So what?" she says.

"No, on commercial flights. International, too. The handler buys two tickets. One for him, one for the...intelligence. Even though it only exists in the cloud. Seats just sitting empty."

"Well then it exists in the cloud and in the *clouds*."

"She thinks it's a joke," Christmas says, mid-chew.

"Jokes on you when you become a handler," Kai says. "Funny, sure, until it gets to the point where they don't need handlers at all. A whole plane flying, no humans at the wheel, no humans in the seats."

"What if Sam E just wants to help out with the store?" Tori says, because she likes when Kai's voice hits the pitch where it crackles. When it hits the pitch where it crackles, she swears she can feel her body hair growing. It's the feeling that comes from creating a reaction, her favorite means of this being humor. Seems like so long ago, but she used to crack her moms up.

"It doesn't *greet* you, so it's not a *greeter*," Kai preaches, now standing up in the cart and towering over her. "It doesn't ring you up. It's not a clerk. Doesn't do spills—not a janitor. It's a camera, Tori. The government. It's a bridge too far!"

Admittedly, Tori does not know what its job is either, but she's pretty sure it's not a *camera* for the feds. Probably it is a camera, though, for shoplifters like her.

"We must launch a pre-emptive strike," Kai says, and his brother in his swim trunks, nods. "Draw first blood."

"Then we're going climbing, right?" Christmas says.

Kai stops walking and points at his brother's yellow mustache. Tori's only known these kids for a month, but she's always surprised by the moments Kai chooses to sit down in. "You look awesome, bro." It's this intimate understanding that Tori has with no one, not even herself.

"Thank you," Christmas says, swallowing his last bite. "Brother."

PLAN B: SPILLAGE

They think bodychecking Sam E might hurt, so they move it to the bottom of the list.

Plan B, then, is spillage. Kai tells Christmas to get a carton of chocolate milk, one of the 89 cent ones that taste like sugar dirt. "When we bump the 'bot," he says, "you drop the milk." Tori motions for Christmas to stay in the cart, because what they're talking about here is theft, and if anyone's caught stealing, it should be her. The donuts were her work too. If either of the brothers wind up in trouble, the polo-shirted smilers who delivered these boys to Tori's home might well arrive to take them back. Tori's grades are good, so she can afford a little trouble with the law, is how she sees it. Kai, who climbed a cellular tower last

week to prove how easy it'd be to trigger a "data blackout", cannot. Tori's moms had to beg the officer who yelled him down not to press charges.

Tori chooses a strawberry milk, figuring it's more chemical-rich, more chances for damage. If she gets caught, at least it'll grab her moms' attention. Christmas sips the milk and grimaces. Kai wants to push the cart but Tori says no—she's pushing. "You're just the director," she says, and makes him pry her fingers from the handlebar one by one. Kai is very strong and claims to have built his own hut at the mud cult. "Mud bricks are *much* heavier than clay ones," he once said, kicking at the foundation of Tori's farmhouse.

Within seconds of being behind the reins, Kai runs and shunts the cart into the path of Sam E, who stops on a dime. No collision. The robot towers over them with its cemented smile.

"Spill!" Kai yells, but Christmas is shaken by the sudden jolt. When the kid remembers the milk in his hand, he pours it deliberately onto the robot's wide base.

ANYTHING ELSE? Sam E says. IF YOU YOU NEED A PR-PRICE- and the robot falters. Its blue lights flicker on and off. I WOULD LOVE TO CHECK-CHECK. I WILL CHECK-YOU.

They run. Tori leads, and in a rare moment of forgetting her body, she screams.

Kai believes technology will converge to kill humanity. This much Tori understands. The way tree roots speak to each other below the earth, all gadgets talk through the cloud. Everything from a Blu-Ray player to a FitBit to the order screen at Wendy's. This is the DNA of his community's culture, his community who built their brown homes low in the loamy valley of the Appalachians (in one of the few remaining pockets immune to network coverage), his community washed out by flooding and rescued by what he sourly calls "The Feds". The mud cult people don't believe they would have drowned. Their leader—called only Kendra—still claims it was in the best interest of her community to order them to stay, to learn how to climb trees, to swim in rushing rivers. When the SEALS finally threw the ladders down into the flooding valley to pick the littlest from the branches like fruit, all the mothers of the Unitarian church Tori's family belongs to threw up their hands to take a kid. Or two. Tori's took two.

It hasn't even been a month yet, but Tori knows the score. On one side it's her moms and on the other it's these brothers. She's in the middle, trying to figure out which team she belongs to, or else how to be the glue to keep the strange group of them together. Her main move is humor, though she never seems to make anyone laugh. What they don't understand is that even though things are shit, the world is funny. The torchflies that kill all the crops, they make a little scream when you stomp them, and you can laugh at that. You're allowed. Tori knows it's funny, but she doesn't laugh, or can't. She learned about irony in Communication Strategies, so she knows what's funny about the passionate campaign to kill a thing in order to save another thing, but still she doesn't laugh, and she doesn't even stomp. She wonders if she's losing her humor.

Thought it's true her moms weren't perfect before the boys moved into the basement, things have deteriorated fast. About a year ago, Mom Molly lost her job at a doctor's office when the entire company switched to A.Issistants. Mom Kel got a gig as a grower for a local market, but nothing's been growing in southern Pennsylvania for months, ever since a little earthquake broke ground near the nuclear plant, and the torch flies started appearing in fields all over the state. The protestors believe it's a conspiracy and spray paint "Farmageddon" on the signs they hold outside the capitol in Harrisburg. All these things have made Tori's mothers angry and silent, until ten PM when it all comes out in shouts over skunked beers on the patio. Last night it was especially bad, with voices hoarse

and glass breaking. Tori listened close to the fight's every moment and watched the boys sleep through it all. Theirs certainly seemed like the team to join.

"Did you guys hear that?" Kai asks in the family bathroom. "It threatened us—I *will check you.*"

Tori's not sure what all a person's born with or who puts it in us, but Kai got too much.

"It's practically harassment!" she yells, failing to match Kai's exasperation. She gets to work cleaning the strawberry milk off of Christmas's hands. "You know what we should do?"

"Yes."

"Write a bad review online."

Kai shakes his head like it'd take too much precious energy to understand her. Tori smiles to herself about her joke, and Kai sinks back into his speech. "Check us? That thing thinks it can attack us? Not if we attack first. We're being too coy, using all this food. We need brute force. We need to use what it can't—our bodies. The mission isn't over. "

Tori knows it's better to have a mission than to have no mission. She tries to remind Kai of hers: "I can't forget to get tomatoes."

"Ew," Kai says. "Lab-grown? That's all they're gonna have."

"It tastes the same," she says.

"Hah!" Kai claps his hands. She's proven his whole point. "They've already got you."

The first thing Tori's two new brothers did was break her Xbox. Kai blamed it on the military watching him through the controller, but Tori knows it's because he lost. Failure shrinks his intelligence to toddler levels.

He just doesn't understand first person shooters.

"Where am I?" he kept saying.

"There," Tori said. "That's your rifle."

"That's my rifle, but I don't see me."

"The rifle is being held by you."

"But where am I?"

"Dead," Christmas said. "Where you are is dead."

And they laughed so hard it made me nervous. The next time he died, he cocked back and launched the controller into the console.

Needless to say, the boys have strained things in the house. Mom Molly spends a oddly large part of her day with Kai, talking on the back patio while Christmas climbs trees and I hide from the summer inside and Mom Kel goes out to work on other broken farms for less than minimum wage. It's almost like Mom Molly thought taking on two refugees would prove to the world and her wife that they were fine financially—*look, if we can care for two new kids, then we're stronger than ever.* A fake-it-till-you-make-it situation. A crazy charade, if you ask Tori, who Mom Kel has been taking to the big box stores and showing without a word the easy ways to steal. She's aware of the pockets Tori sewed into the lining of her jackets. Today she asked her daughter to run to the superstore—Food Lion—and gave her a list with no money. It's Mom Molly's birthday, and they need taco things. Tomatoes are her favorite.

"I got us these," Tori says, pulling the pack of stick-on mustaches from her pocket. "It's seen us. Now we need disguises." Kai nods vigorously. In the family bathroom mirror, they watch themselves work. Kai slaps on his handlebar, too much fur in his nose—he sneezes. Christmas gets the Dalí upside down, looks like a mutant insect. Tori sticks the Chaplin between her eyebrows "Call me Mom Molly,"

she says, making a mean joke. When the boys smile and Christmas giggles, she could quit the day. In fact, she feels like maybe she should.

PLAN C: Table-Top

After some thought, Plan E will be Bodycheck. Plan D will be Pizza Peel—Kai's idea is to take one off the shelf in aisle 8, slam it under Sam E's base like a shovel, and then jump on the handle so that the robot tips back, falls to the ground like a cut pine. Genius, yes, but for now they're on Plan C, Table-top. It's Tori's idea.

A table-top is like pulling someone's chair out before they sit, except with teamwork. First you choose a Mark. Person 1 sneakily makes their way behind the Mark, crouches down into an arch position—in yoga, the cow—and as soon as Person 1 is firmly in place, Person 2 comes at the Mark head-on and shoves. The Mark steps back into the table of Person 1's body and goes down ass over teakettle, as Mom Molly would say. Tori's moms taught her the table top—a prank they used to play on each other as long as there was carpet underfoot, a way to spice up a Saturday if things got too sluggish.

"Do you think he's going to crush me?" Tori asks. She'll be Person 1, the table top, because Kai claims she's good at going undetected.

"He? He who? Kai says.

"It," Tori corrects herself. "Sam E is probably super heavy."

They're tracking the robot as it follows a mother pushing a big car and her wobbly little daughter pushing a tiny cart with a flag that reads, "Customer in Training." The girl keeps looking behind her and crying at what she sees.

"Our bodies are capable of so much more than we know," Kai says and then tells about a tree that fell on Kendra. "Mom took that trunk in stride. Back on her feet in a week. Listen, Tori—the base is heavy, yes. Which is why I'm going to hit it high, and Chris here is going to hit it low. The only part to touch you will be its empty plastic middle. Easy. As long as you stay solid."

The mom and her kid turn into another aisle. Sam E pauses, considering its next move.

Kai and Christmas slink away down the aisle to approach it from the front. Tori cinches up close beside Sam E to determine where she'll place her body when the time comes. She wonders if it would be better to turn stiff and solid like Kai said, or to allow a little give.

A bug lands on the trunk of Sam E. It's a torchfly, with its fire-orange underside that supposedly spreads radiation around, stopping crops from becoming food. Tori shivers herself into goosebumps.

"Do you feel that?" she whispers to the robot while itching her fake unibrow.

I DIDN'T HEAR YOU, Sam E says, pivoting around to her. PLEASE SCAN YOUR SHOPPER—

"Do you feel the torchfly? Can you feel it on your body?"

I WILL CHECK.

The sound of running comes from the adjacent aisle. Tori drops into table formation at the base of the robot. By the time he gets here, Kai will reach a full sprint.

From the ground, Tori feels Sam E's googly stare. Either that or it's the bug watching her. This is the first torchfly she's ever seen inside a building. It feels tenfold more wrong than when she sees one in the street, or swarming in a dying holly bush. She imagines slicing into a lab-grown pepper and finding an egg sac, opening a box of Fruit Loops and five flying out.

The running squeaks to a stop—the shoes she assumes to be Kai's. Someone shouts.

TELL ME WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR DOWN THERE

The next person to turn the corner is not Kai, and it's not Christmas, but an employee in a red polo, pointing. His face says that Tori is a torchfly and he's coming to stomp her. Sam E begins to rove, never making contact with Tori's tabletop. Instead, it takes a turn at her head, and then another at her feet—a full circle. The employee starts running.

I'LL ALWAYS BE RIGHT HERE, Sam E says.

Still in the ground, Tori shouts, "I'm only down here to kill this bug!" She winds back her arm and aims for the fly with her open palm. But she misses and hits Sam E where if he was human his knee might be. The blow turns his head-light briefly green.

I'LL BE FINE, Sam E says, as the manager grabs Tori by the arm.

Kai is certain Kendra will come back to collect them, all her followers, all her kids. Kendra is awaiting trial right now, but Mom Molly says the charges won't stick.

"It's just not cut and dry," she explained to Mom Kel and Tori over plain pasta last weekend. The boys were out in the woods, 'learning the environment', which Tori knew meant climbing trees to the very top, to the point where they creak and sway. "You can't argue that Kendra had the wrong intentions."

"Power? What kind of intention is that? Mom Kel said. "She's s power-whore, plain and simple. Can't admit weakness, so she pretends it's right to order all the people who love her to climb trees, wait for the water to rise. I hope they build the jail on top of her toxic ass."

"Oh, you're an authoritarian now? What do you know about the law?"

Mom Kel: "Enough to know she should rot in prison."

"RIP," Tori said.

"Tori, stay out of this." Mom Molly's catchphrase. "Kel, that's sick."

"Rot. In. Prison. Get it?"

"Good one, Tor," Mom Kel said, though she didn't laugh. She just stood up and left.

"First thing," the manager says to them, waving at their faces, "is take these off." They're in an office in the corner of the deli, behind a door made of those sticky plastic strips. There are no windows. Kai is a stone, tight-lipped for once behind his handlebar mustache. Christmas rips off the long strip of his and flings it on to a prep table. The manager sweats. His name is Geoff. Tori places her unibrow in Geoff's hand, and he thanks her.

"Where are your parents?"

"Jail," Christmas says.

"Home," Tori says. "In the garden."

"Mother was wrongly persecuted," Christmas adds. Kai is still silent, though the cups of his eyes are quivering. Geoffrey has them write down our names, address, and phone number. Everything Tori writes is true. The boys' lies are obvious. For a birthday Kai puts June 31st.

A man in a pink-stained apron pushes through the plastic strips, flips a switch on the meat slicer in the far corner, and begins to shave a block of ham. The sound turns Tori's stomach, and an acidic little puke crawls up her throat. She swallows it down.

"What did Sam E do to you?"

Tori wants to answer, but she's looking at Kai.

And that's when Kai does something brilliant: he bursts into tears. The butcher is still at the slicer, but Kai's howling trounces the sound. Geoff's face turns white, like he's just realized he can't have three kids alone in a back room. He's going to let them go, Tori can feel it.

He stands to leave—"One second," he says, and pushes through the plastic.

"Well done," she whispers to Kai, but he's still going. He's run out of noise, so the gulping sobs are almost silent. She worries that whatever it was he had too much of now is gone for good.

"He gets like this when the mission fails," Christmas says, feeling the sticky residue on his upper lip. With his other hand he pats his brother's back. "Kendra says he's got a rose for a soul."

"You're good to your brother," Tori says.

"He's not really my brother."

"Don't say that!" Kai says.

Behind the plastic door they see a blue glow, hear the churning rubber wheels of Sam E.

"Listen," Tori whispers. "The mission isn't over. Kai won't look up from his lap. "So what? We're caught? We have our skills. We have each other." She doesn't know quite what she's doing, except trying to get his attention. She surveys the wide deli office for something to make everyone laugh, or maybe something they can use as a weapon. "We're stuck, but we're not finished, she says, walking toward the meat slicer. "We just have to learn our environment."

Soon Tori will have to choose which side she's on, the sinking ship of her Moms or the makeshift raft of these brothers and their anti-everything bond. Kai and Christmas seem more fun, but Tori already misses her moms. What she doesn't know is that she's already well into the process of grieving the death of her family. Then again, maybe if the boys are taken away today, her home will still be capable of repair. Or maybe the guilt of how the three of them couldn't protect these boys will be the final dagger. Tori feels that it's either follow these two into danger, or retreat into a crumbling sanctuary.

The first week they were here, after the Xbox, Tori asked her moms to meet her in the sideyard. She made what she feels is a compelling case for sending these two boys backs to CPS.

"When she gets out of jail, and she'll probably escape, she'll come for them. She could hurt us. Kendra might—"

"Don't say that name in this house," Mom Kel said. "They aren't going anywhere."

"Honey, don't you want some friends?" said Mom Molly. "Maybe try asking them—"

"You're not thinking about actually adopting them are you?"

"Don't forget, Tori," Mom Molly said. "You were adopted too."

"You know what?" Tori said, crying. "I'd almost forgotten."

Tori hasn't learned a lot this summer, but she has learned that if a person you love starts crying, it's wrong to just let them stand there and shake.

When Geoff walks into the meat office, he doesn't see them—he only sees Christmas, doing his best little boy cry at the table in the back corner. Geoff hurries to his aid.

Kai and Tori are perched on the counters just inside the doorway, so when Sam E appears behind Geoff, pushing through the plastic, they leap. Kai from the left. Tori from the right. She gets her arm around the trunk of Sam E and tries to let her bodyweight bring it down. Kai climbs up to its face, clings like a monkey around its head, arms and legs wrapped tight around. Sam E stays upright, but tries to move, can only pivot in place. They hold on through the rodeo. The robot emits a kind of digitalized groan, like a deep squeal running through a wire with a foot on it. Kai shakes back and forth, works Sam E into a sway. Geoff turns and sees them. Tori slips off and gets to work kicking the base, bruising her toes.

She spits to show she's serious. Up there, gripping the robot and swaying, Sam E begins to tip from side to side.

ALWAYS OPEN, ALWAYS KIND, ALWAYS SAVING, Sam E grumbles, its rim of neon light flaring red. ALWAAAYS FOOOOOOD LIIIIIOOON.

Geoff grabs Tori by the arms but she leaps with both feet and kicks Sam E in the trunk, forcing it to tip fully toward the counter. The fall is patient but happening, and Kai could easily scramble off, but he holds tight, wants to both see and feel it finished. Sam E lands with its blocky head on the surface of the meat slicer, like a felled tree leaning on a smaller, healthier tree. The robot's eyes stare at the bloody blade. Kai falls to the floor.

"Get out of here!" Geoff screams, but Kai reaches for the slicer, finds the button he saw the butcher press. Geoff pushes Tori back and grabs Kai tightly. Kai's squirming with a look on his face Tori's never seen before—real pain. Geoff wrenches him away from the slicer.

"Let him go!" Tori says, holding her hand just over the button.

Geoff releases his arm, but forces Kai to the floor, stands over him.

"Thank you," Tori says and slams her fist down to start the machine.

Kai and Christmas escape from Food Lion by running, screaming through the store and into the parking lot. Theirs is a zigzag pattern Mother Kendra taught in case the ATF ever opened fire from the top of a hill. The Food Lion employees are no match for the boys, and in seconds they disappear into the foliage across the road. Having chosen the side of the mud cult kids, Tori tries to follow but falls, loses them, and then finds the front door blocked by a robot glowing pink—SAMANTHA. She turns back, thinking she can at least grab a tomato before fleeing out the back, but there's Geoff, and the butcher, and three other adults, all blocking her path.

It won't matter that Tori can't make it away with the boys. Her moms will soon learn everything—the store has tons of footage. The pure damage in dollars will be enough to prosecute, and the first thing the state will do is take those kids away.

Sometimes Tori thinks about the mess of the blade in Sam E's head—the lack of sparks, the dark plastic shards flinging into her face, just smoke and a melting smell like armageddon. The cut only went about half-way into Sam E. Tori could tell by the way the sound morphed from a moan to a whine that Sam E's trunk was hollow inside. Nobody to speak of. All the important stuff was in the base. The kids didn't do any real damage or make any progress, and what they won was the opposite of prizes. Though they did make the news. "State of Art Shopping Assistant Maimed in Local Food Store." Tori's moms wouldn't let the crew interview her. And the boys weren't speaking to anyone. That is, until two days later when the social workers came to take them away.

"But you're our sister," Christmas had said, confused that Tori didn't have to pack a bag. She helped him pull a stuck zipper closed and tried to smile. "But we live here."

"No, we don't," Kai said, not waving as he left. "We don't live anywhere."

*

Tori saw the story on the news. They put a fat, six-inch bandaid on Sam E's head and had him back on the floor by Monday morning. The only change in Sam E was his voice—it never returned to its cartoony, singing pitch. It'd fallen a few octaves, like slipping into puberty. The reporter hugged Sam E to close out the interview, and a few employees clapped.

"What was that, buddy?" the reporter said, pulling away from the embrace. "I think he whispered something to me." Just before the robot spoke, a torchfly flew into the shot, and someone swung at it like an instinct.

LOWER PRICES EVERY DAY, Sam E said. THEY GO LOW; WE GO LOWER!

What scared Tori most was how his new voice made him seem more human than ever.

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