

SHHIM SHAM

By Janet **Ehrlich** Colson

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor DENNIS HINRICHSEN writes...A former tap teacher, a brother's suicide, AIDS, a hotel room—what a compelling opening moment in this non-story that deftly weaves many story lines that radiate from the same basic idea of what do we owe those we love in times of crisis. What holds it all together is the found form of the title—a tap dance routine—the moving forward, moving back, feet apart, feet together—that perfectly captures the movement of Colson's mind here and lends a gravity to each one of the layered crises. The feeling of being forgotten as a child by a parent, for example. Or being a parent herself being late picking up a child. To the worry (unstated) that links the opening moment of assisted suicide with the potential need to put down her dog. What a fine non-story that captures the complicated nature of our lives—our commitment to each other that fails at times but nevertheless is focused on helping each other live, even if that means helping each other as we die.*

Five stars.

Shim Sham

My tap teacher helped her brother commit suicide in a hotel room. This was back in the 80's when AIDS was a new thing. Her brother wanted to commit suicide before he was too sick to say goodbye. She told me other stories, too, because my mom was always late picking me up. Mostly, I remember my tap teacher telling me about her brother. I picture her brother looking just like her, but with shorter hair.

When I was fifteen or sixteen, my mom forgot to pick me up from the bus station after I came back from Milwaukee. When I got home, all the lights were off and the car was gone. I imagined what it would be like if my parents never came back, but they had just gone up north for the weekend. My friends asked me to spend the night so I didn't have to be alone, but I was okay. I liked having the house to myself.

Our dog got sick and we don't know why. Was it something she ingested? A toxin? Something in the backyard? A skunk? A tick? My son Forrest was up late that night so I

asked him to come with me to the vet. I needed his help getting Scarlett into the car (she weighs more than 80 pounds).

My mom used to leave me in the toy section of the supermarket and then she'd vanish. She'd head straight for the produce, leaving me to look at the same toys that were there every week: jacks, marbles, the fake Barbies, the handcuffs. I could always use another pair of handcuffs.

There was an infectious disease specialist from the university who came to my high school to give a presentation about AIDS. The gymnasium was packed. Outside there were vans with television equipment and cameras from the local news. I was taking a video production class so I got to stand in front and videotape the presentation.

I ask Forrest if he's sure he wants to come with me to the vet. He says he'll come but he doesn't want to drive. He's almost 16; the same age I was when my tap teacher told me about her brother. The conversation in the car is mostly one-sided. I talk about tap dancing, AIDS, and euthanasia. Forrest asks if I can change the subject.

My mom and I both lose track of time. Or maybe it's that we lie about it. This has been going on for quite a while.

The other day I pull up at Forrest's school to pick him up. "I'm only six minutes late!" I announce as he gets in the car, even though we both know it's seven. Why would I lie about one minute? "It's fine," he says. I ask him if he wants to drive home. He doesn't.

I can't find my mother. I look up and down the aisles. I look in the produce section. I go to the canned soup aisle. The bakery. The meat counter. A couple of times I think I've spotted her, but it's always someone else. Eventually, I go to the service desk and have her paged over the PA system.

We were supposed to be on the road the day before yesterday, but we're just taking off now. We're stuck in traffic on the 23 South near Ann Arbor. I leave a message for the vet with the answering service. I forgot to tell them about the tick. They'll get back to me on Monday.

I love my cat as much as my children.

They say when you're in the middle of something you can't get any perspective. (I am always in the middle of something)

My tap teacher taught us to drum with our feet. Rhythm tap. Time steps. The Shim Sham. Tap as language. Tap as blues. Old School.

The vet asks me lots of questions about Scarlett. She asks about her appetite. Urination. Bowel movements. We tell her that we knew something was wrong when we were getting ready for our trip and she wouldn't come out of her crate. (Ordinarily she doesn't go in

her crate at all. We just keep it there because there are receipts piled on top). There were other things, too, that worried us about Scarlett. She lay down during a game of badminton. She stopped playing with the puppy.

I used to dream about getting lost in the supermarket. Now I dream about hills, stairs, grass. Sidewalks. I dream about flooring. Linoleum. Carpet.

We got a puppy because we thought Scarlett was depressed. I realize how dumb this sounds as I'm saying it. The vet sends me a report with test results, blood cell counts, and observations. Some of my stories about Scarlett are in the report. They don't sound that dumb.

They call me back from the vet on Monday. They are recommending a bone marrow biopsy. She'll need to be there for several days after the surgery.

I dreamed I was about to fall from a wire but I remembered to point my toe.

I am exhausted.

The medication has made Scarlett a different dog. She's always thirsty. She's irritable. She'll bite my fingers when I give her treats if I don't watch out. She used to leave kibble in the bowl. Now she licks it clean and comes back for more. She's getting into the garbage, stealing from the counters. Digging in drawers. We locked her out of the kitchen. She ate my underwear.

Sometimes a dream will come back to me if I can remember what the grass looked like.

Sometimes I do a tap dance inside my head. (Bum-pa-bum, bum-pa-bum, bum-pa-bum-*pa-bum-pa-bum*...)

I'm highly allergic to cats.

We blamed my parents' dog for pulling a roast off the stove when we were up north, but I think it was Scarlett.

Eventually, Scarlett will go off the prednisone and stay on another immune suppressant. Three quarters of a pill two times a day. We have to wear gloves to give it to her. We drew a skull and crossbones on the bottle.

My tap teacher told me that the medication to kill her brother was in a paper bag.

Forrest and I were talking about the kinds of stories in which the protagonist is looking for something and finds something else along the way.

(When I was sixteen, I thought about how much I weighed more than I thought about stories.)

My cat weighs 16 pounds.

Forrest says all stories are like that, but I'm not sure. I think some stories end when you get back to where you started. Others end because you never get back there at all.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I started this piece on the road, pre-COVID. I've been on the road a lot lately, and felt the rhythms of the Shim Sham rumbling their way back into my head (along with the bone-rattling sounds of my car). An earlier version of the piece was slated to be published last spring in a magazine that went dark during the pandemic. I've since revised, renamed, and wondered what it was - fiction, non-fiction, or something else. I landed on creative non-fiction, which I think covers it.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Janet Ehrlich Colson (she/her/they) is a playwright and actor living in Detroit, Michigan where she recently relocated with her family. Along with being displaced during the pandemic, she wrote several plays including ZA-92, a Covid zombie play, Coming Out Inside, about coming out during a quarantine, and The Dreamwalker, based on the true story of a somnambulist. Her full-length play EA (Eaters Anonymous), an audacious tale of recovery from addiction, was presented virtually by Riverwalk Theatre in Lansing. Their hybrid poem Socially Distanced appears in The Social Gap Experiment anthology. Janet is drama editor of the deliciously defiant literary zine, Fleas on the Dog (www.fleasonthedog.com) which published her play, Coming Down, and a mini collection of poems in Issue 6. www.janetehrlichcolson.com

EDITOR'S BIO: Dennis Hinrichsen, author of *This Is Where I Live I Have Nowhere Else To Go*, winner of the 2020 Grid Poetry Prize.