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surely

Laura Wolf Benziker ♦ Suzy Eynon ♦ Avitus B. Carle

Pickup / Drop off

by Laura Wolf Benziker

“Socks on? Inhalers puffed? Books packed? Teeth brushed? Nuh nuh no you’re not done yet. Count to thirty, slow. Front teeth, back teeth, up, down, left side, right side. Okay that’s good. Boots on! I know you hate your boots. Boots on! Juice box. No, we’re not a home lunch family, sorry. Mittens, don’t forget your mittens. Why don’t you wear *this* hat? The one that’s not stained. Oh it’s stupid. Okay. Zip your coat! No, really! Zip your coat! If you go out like that someone will call child services. What’s child services? Never mind. Here’s a tissue. Blow your boogers out; don’t snort them in!”

The kid reaches a mittened hand for the chrome door knob and rotates, with no purchase. Back and forth. Back and forth. She waits a beat for him to crack the puzzle. Nope. Opens it herself. They step into icy air, and at the top of the stoop he turns abruptly so she almost topples them both to the driveway.

“What did you pack me for snack?” He has to know.

“Goldfish.”

“But you gave me goldfish *yesterday*. And the day before.”

“Well, we don’t have a lot of other snacks right now.”

“William gets something different for snack every day.”

She rolls her eyes.

“Home lunch kids get part of their lunch for snack, since they get so much stuff.”

“Okay okay, I’m happy for them. Talk while you walk!”

It’s Friday and of course they’re late. It’s Friday and it’s sunny and it’s biting cold. It’s Friday and she has decided to be a climate-conscious citizen so she hasn’t pre-warmed the car. The kid stops to inscribe a smiley face in the frost with his warm finger. Mitten cast to frozen ground.

“Here we go! Pick up your mitten! Move your body! Get in the car! Pull your foot in; I’m closing the door! Buckle up!”

On the second try the engine chugs to life. Tires low? Check. Back hatch doesn’t fully close? Check. Needs an oil change? Check. All systems go. She pulls out of the driveway and sprays the windshield as they drive, wobbly, through the quiet neighborhood; swapping glasses for prescription sunglasses. Squinting. Clarity for one second and then washer fluid blooms into a crystal garden across the windshield. Stop; scrape.

Back and buckled. Kid demands the same cd as everyday: *Best of Eighties New Wave!!* Minimalist synth beats fill the car. The deadpan delivery of nostalgia. They bop their heads to the beat and sing:

When I’m with you baby, I go out of my head

I just can’t get enough

I just can’t get enough

She grins at him in the rearview mirror, and the kid’s smile could fill a room.

I just can’t seem to get enough of

She swings her head around and they aim index fingers at each other like gunfighters.

It’s all so eighties, the pleasant markers of suburbia: sledding hill overlooking city and cove; stately white houses perched high enough over the street to keep watch; 1950s capes built too close together. Crossing guards; bicycles with their bright plastic child seats. These sync up nicely with the music.

Hello teacher tell me what's my lesson? Look right through me, look right through me

The hem of dirty snow caked on the sides of the road: so eighties. Like a feathered-haired god with a frat boy smirk has taken a shaker and dusted liberally with diesel-flavored coffee grounds.

"I'm thirsty!" whines the kid.

"Didn't bring a water bottle; sorry. We're almost there."

"Found an old Gatorade on the ground."

"...Okay."

"So much Gatorade on the ground. Pretty lucky."

She parks a block away and they join the other stragglers rushing to school. The ones who couldn't quite get it together this morning. Any morning. The kid skips and bounces. He flops backward into the filthy snow. True, true glee.

"Ugh," she says as she drags him up.

At the crosswalk she clamps onto his wrist to keep him from careening into traffic that's never as slow as the blinking sign says it needs to be. She herds him into the safety of the school yard, waves and smiles at the teachers who wave and smile at her. At one corner of the yard there's a cluster of high functioning moms, overseeing. They all wear the same black high tech puffer coat, fitted to show off their Peloton and clean-eating-honed physiques. Smooth hair just longer than shoulder length. These moms wouldn't dream of giving their kid a half-empty bottle of Gatorade they found under a pile of trash in the back seat. Snobs. She feels a tug at the corner of her eye and turns to see two of these moms whispering and stink-eyeing her. Maybe it's her outfit? Oversized crazy quilt jacket; flare pants in a clashing pattern; teal moon boots. The sporadic yoga classes she attends don't get her anywhere close to the sanctioned body type, and let's not get started on her hair. She sends a saccharine smile and a little finger-wagging wave.

Pulling back into her neighborhood she's whistling along now. Picturing a glittering free hour between the end of work and picking up the kid.

Thursday I don't care about you; It's Friday I'm in love

She pulls into the driveway; waves and smiles at the neighbor dad (another straggler THANK GOD). Her teenage son launches from the door, sprints to the road, sees her and screeches to a halt. He's lanky, wearing a 1970s flannel that she got him,

and thrown over, collar crumpled in haste, a faded red wool shirt that's been in the family forever.

"I missed the bus," he puffs.

"Climb in, I'll give you a ride."

He waits for the eye roll, for the conditional clause, and it doesn't come.

"Thanks, I'm sorry," he says.

I don't care if Monday's blue, Tuesday's gray and Wednesday too

They pull into the high school campus and stop again as a trail of students crosses the road in front of them. Kids sporting all different styles; kids all heights; kids all skin colors. So cute! There goes a punk girl with green hair and five-inch platforms. So eighties! What a victory to have raised a child to become one of these creatures. Those elementary moms have no idea. With their indoor soccer and their grass-fed beef burritos and their French tutors and their skinny margaritas. What they don't know about kids is this: They either make it or they don't.

At the curb he flips his somehow-cool middle-parted hair, ducks out and offers in his newly-deep voice,

"Thanks, Love you, Bye."

She gets to the main road and remembers she's almost out of gas. There's a station on the way home.

She pulls into the gas station behind a periwinkle Eurovan. She squints in the winter glare as she fills the tank. The denizens of the van come piling out as the mother pumps gas. Blond children in brightly colored clothes, teasing and pushing and laughing at each other in another language. Some tumble into the convenience store, some flop back into the van. Mesmerizing. Like peasants in a nineteenth century pastoral painting.

She has a thought: *I hope that mom forgets to put her gas cap back on.*

But on goes the cap. The mother revs the engine as kids pile back in, and peels away.

She replaces her own gas cap and takes in the bright blue sky. A cloud with a dragon shape drifts by, undulating like a prized float in a Lunar New Year parade. The icy wind stings her skin, in a good way. Ah, the blankness of freedom!

A shrill cry splits the air. A small girl stands on the walkway by the store,

caterwauling at the van that has just driven away without her.

She looks at the van, heading straight down the long main road, and looks at the girl. She looks back at the van.

“I think we can catch them,” she says. “Should we try?”

The girl, about four, white blond with white blond eyelashes, screams,

“Var ar min mamma!! Jag vill ha min mamma!!”

She hustles the child into the car and buckles her up. She’s too small to be using the booster seat, but hey, there’s nothing for it.

“Here we go!” she says, and pulls out of the gas station. Only four cars between them and the Eurovan. It occurs to her to offer the child Gatorade, but she shakes that off.

“Where’s your family going? Where Going? Where Mama?” she tries, as she cranes her neck to see around a truck.

“Jag vill ha min mamma!”

The van makes a sharp left, and in a split she almost cuts across the stream of traffic to follow. Foot heavy on the break; heart bumping; bump! bump!

“Var ar min mamma!”

She sucks in a slow breath; waits for the green arrow.

At the far end of the street she just sees a flash of blue, ducking into the labyrinth of mix-use zonage. Homes with barber shops, halal markets, tattoo parlors, nail salons at ground level. Faded decades-old signs interspersed with the trendiest graphics money can buy. Endless blocks of sand-colored brick apartments. A secret mechanic shop where she got her transmission fixed last year, and promptly forgot existed.

Squinting, she sees the van some blocks up, leans on the gas pedal, then slams the brake when an animal trundles out in front of them. A giant raccoon makes its way across.

“What the flip??!!” she uses her kid-appropriate swear, then realizes that in this case it probably doesn’t matter.

“Tvattbjorn!” squeals the child, a sudden warmth in her voice.

A swish of bushy tail through a chain link fence and the van, too, is gone from sight.

She makes her best guess at where to turn. It was the wrong choice, and a white ball of terror appears at her solar plexus. A silence that vibrates. With each wrong turn in the labyrinth, it radiates. Makes its way up her limbs. With each empty street that unfolds before her, it expands, shshing out the edges of the road noise like fine sandpaper. Muting Echo and the Bunnymen as they proclaim,

Fate, up against your will

Through the thick and thin

He will wait until

You give yourself to him

Well, she thinks, Now I've done it.

She backtracks. Methodically drives one street and switches back the next, painting the grid between the borders of the cove and the thoroughfare. A snake stalking. And then behold! Parked at a warehouse-turned-coffee shop, sits the periwinkle Eurovan.

They pull up behind it. The mother: statuesque, high-cheekboned, in a halo of golden braids; stands on the walkway talking into her phone.

Rushing to unbuckle the small child, she leads her by the hand to the mother.

"Mamma" the child says with satisfaction.

The mother raises her eyebrows at her daughter and continues her phone conversation. She squats and holds a burly arm out for the child, who jumps onto her and clings like a baby monkey. Perched comfortably on a husky hip, the child lifts the mother's handknit Nordic sweater, pulls out a breast and starts sucking. The mother stands cold and radiant on muscular legs, vintage jeans, teal moon boots. Same as the ones she wears.

She stands dumbly for a few moments, as though witnessing an act of deity. She returns to her car. In the back of the Eurovan two kids are horsing around. They spot her and bring their faces up against the glass. One of them sticks her tongue out and smooshes it into a grotesque, morphing blob. The other presses his open mouth on the glass and blows to inflate his cheeks like a hideous deep-sea fish. They stare into her eyes. They look through her soul. And then far beyond. Into infinity.

Laura Wolf Benziker is a parent and small business owner making a messy go of it in Portland, Maine. Her work has appeared in Lit 202, Clackamas Literary Review, and others. She was longlisted for the Desperate Literature Short Fiction Prize. She can be reached on Instagram @laura_wolf_benziker_.

Gerbil Girl

by Suzy Eynon

“Where do all the gerbils come from?” Madeline asks.

Madeline is obsessed with rodents, especially gerbils. She studies and collects them. She envisions vast gerbil cities contained within her suburban bedroom, plastic tubes connecting condominiums of gerbil families. She keeps the catalog that comes with the tunnel pieces and accessories, the one that shows her possibility.

She had learned the hard way that gerbil families are difficult to cultivate when her first gerbils Mickey and Minnie, who she thought of as siblings, had babies. Her brain had sputtered as she stared into their ten-gallon aquarium and struggled to grasp that the pale pink squirming shrimp nestled in the pee-saturated wood chips were gerbil babies. She later faced their murderous tendencies when, fully grown, these children attacked their own brother, killing one of a set of gerbil twins. She had discovered what was left of the body but can only recall a tiny femur and a lot of pink.

“You saw them,” her mother says. “They’re at PetsMart.”

“No, originally,” Madeline says. “They’re not born at PetsMart.”

Madeline checks out all the library books she can pull from the shelf at the branch by the mall. She loves the photographs of gerbils in the desert, like Tina and Inky

have been transported from their fish tanks to the brush. Their back feet nestled in the sand. She wants to believe these are the relatives of her gerbils, those who stayed behind while others travelled to Phoenix so she could point them out in a bin at the pet store and say, “that one, with one eye missing.”

Madeline doesn't like to go to bed. It's not that she minds the ritual of it. She enjoys routine, following a set of steps to arrive at a fixed point. The surrender of consciousness is what troubles her, this feeling of slipping from the waking world to the dark, and that she is expected to trust this shift each night, no questions asked. Everyone is complicit in the propaganda of sleep. Each night her mind slips away, and she doesn't like that she's unaware during those hours, that the world doesn't exist during this allotted time. She awakens in her bed each morning and is relieved to find that her surroundings are the same as they were when her bedside lamp winked off, and she resolves to avoid entering sleep again.

When she hears the *Law & Order* theme song pulsing through the wall from the TV in the family room, she knows she's late to fall asleep. She doesn't want to get in trouble for staying up, so she imagines herself small and safe, her bedroom a cage and the roof a removable lid, the kind with plastic grating and an extra little door for dropping in treats from above. Maybe a giant hand will deposit pellets for a midnight snack. She's curled in the giant's palm, contained. She doesn't consider that the hand might close over her, smash her with one flex of the palm.

At night as she resists sleep, she imagines the gerbils' journeys. Maybe they travel via shipping vessel, or ride cargo on a plane. She pictures each gerbil in its own tiny travelling case. She has a nightmare that instead of arriving at the pet store by ship or plane, the gerbils are born in a barn. Huge barns in rural areas, nondescript enough to be full of chickens but these are full of gerbils, crates of them, stacked to the rafters, the babies scratching and squeaking at sides of plastic containers, climbing on top of each other to grab a gulp of air or flash of light. A plane flies overhead or someone makes noise in the barn where they're stored, and they claw themselves into a frenzy.

When she forgets to click an aquarium lid into place, one of the gerbils, Chuck, jumps up to knock it off. He hops out over the side, landing with a straight shot out of Madeline's bedroom. She sees him as he crosses the threshold of her doorway, but he has

no tiny backpack or suitcase, and she thinks he hesitates for just a moment. She could grab him in this pause, scoop him up securely by the base of his tail like the books describe and deposit him back in the aquarium. But she hesitates too and lets him run. She gives a little wave goodbye. He's too small to leave fleeing footprints on the sand-colored carpet.

Suzy Eynon is a writer from the desert. Her work appears in JMWW, Roanoke Review, Passages North, Autofocus, X-R-A-Y, and elsewhere. She lives in Seattle with her cats. Find more of her work at <https://suzyeynon.com>.

I Keep My Orgasms to Myself

by Avitus B. Carle

I keep my orgasms in an urn, just in case. In case Roger with the gap in his teeth licks a little too hard and I just want the whole thing to end. Our situation relies on him not asking questions, a negotiation down from him not talking at all.

In case I'm watching two girls or two guys or hidden cameras or cartoons or Sims and the moans are grating on my nerves but, somehow, lasting longer than my computer's battery. In case I'm bored or, in case I'm not, but why not?

And I tell myself every time I can stop. I don't need to look inside the urn, to pull one or two or more of my orgasms out. Especially tonight, while 'm studying for a final exam I probably should pass. I mean, public speaking should only take practice but my C- and I don't have time. Passing the exam would spare me the D which would let me survive another semester but...

But I've already removed the lid.

My orgasms all look like me, but naked. Confident, with crossed legs and hair pulled back and hips slightly turned so every stretch mark and layer rolled over layer shows.

"I just wanted one."

"Girl," the weakest of my orgasms grabs the pillow from my bed and holds it

between her legs. The others run out of my bedroom, all laughing, all excited and smelling like Cucumber Melon or Warm Vanilla Sugar.

“Just...get back in the urn.”

My weakest orgasm bites her lower lip, drags her body over the pillow. I leave, not because she’s stubborn, but because she’ll take the longest to finish.

“Hey,” my suspect orgasm whispers, peeking from behind my roommates bedroom door. “Got a minute?”

“I need to pass my exam!”

“You don’t *need* anything,” my twin orgasms call, one with legs spread in the bathroom while the other is probably squatting over the kitchen sink.

She is.

She washes herself, tugging on the sinks extendable neck, water hesitating to leave her eyelashes, the tip of her nose, her hardened nipples.

My couch orgasms turn on the TV and fight over which sport has the most sweat, the best ass-cam footage, whether that’s football or baseball. Until my remote orgasm does what she does best.

“A little help?” Her legs spread on the back of the couch. I can barely see the power button.

“No,” I say to them, to myself. To my counter orgasm and my fruit orgasm poking through the fridge. To my vibrator orgasm digging up dirt in my flower pot where I hid the batteries two hours ago. To my quietest orgasm hiding under the sink and my finger orgasm who stares at me, bored with the whole thing.

“You’re not being fair,” and I hear a door open even though there is no door. “You deserve this,” the chimes of quarters being jostled in someone’s pocket, “we all do.”

The smell of detergent. Of dryer sheets. She hugs me from behind and I feel the warmth of freshly dried clothes. The chill of eyes watching through glass windows replaced by the sweat and vibrations of one machine, two, more.

“The laundromat is closed,” I pant without meaning to but it feels good to be out of breath.

My spin cycle orgasm, my strongest orgasm, licks the outside of my ear.

“I have to—”

She holds my hand and that's all it takes for me to follow her. My other orgasms watch as she guides me to the window where I draw the blinds, stare out into the dark.

My spin cycle orgasm removes my shirt and unclasps my bra. Presses my breasts against the cold window.

"Let them see you," she says, and I want them to. Even though there are no lights on in the apartments around us, I can see the faint glow of a TV.

I'm naked with my orgasms. With that one TV screen and whoever might be watching, imagining their eyes flicking towards me, my orgasms trembling between my legs. Some hold my arms, others wrap around my legs until I struggle to hold them all. My spin cycle orgasm never lets me go, her breath hot on my neck, her touch an unpredictable force on my breasts, releasing me moments before the pain settles.

A light reveals a neighbor's bathroom. Another shows a front door opening. A censor light picks up movement. A snap and there's a whole kitchen before me. I wait for their eyes, for them to see me and my orgasms. The thought of just one gaze makes my orgasms hold me tighter. The thought of all of them looking nearly makes me collapse.

"You deserve this," they all say in unison and I can see a new orgasm forming in my reflection. She is running towards me, her hand reaching for me, and I know how much I want to deserve this will always overshadow how much I need this to end.

Avitus B. Carle (she/her) lives and writes outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Formerly known as K.B. Carle, her flash has been published in a variety of places including Five South, F(r)iction, Okay Donkey Magazine, Lost Balloon, CHEAP POP, and elsewhere. Avitus's flash, "Black Bottom Swamp Bottle Woman," was recently selected as one of Wigleaf's 2023 Top 50, and her experimental flash, "Abernathy_Resume.docx," was included in the 2022 Best of the Net anthology. Her story, "A Lethal Woman," was included in the 2022 Best Small Fictions anthology. She can be found online at

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