



Winter 2020

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LITTLE DENIALS

I can't say what inspired me
to sell Chiclets door to door
on our dull loop of split-levels.
Or why my mother bought a dozen
boxes of gum, cellophane-wrapped,
which I took without asking.
Do your parents know
you are selling these?
my neighbor Mrs. Ross asked,
before handing over a quarter.
Oh yes,
I lied – surely this was just
like selling Girl Scout cookies.
Did you buy these yourself?
Mrs. Troy wondered aloud,
before buying two packs,
twelve sugar-glazed pieces,
two tight rows in each
flimsy paper box.
Mrs. Sharkey picked the box
on the bottom of the stack,
from which I'd taken a piece,
chewed it and spit it out
when the flavor, the thin shell was gone.
Maybe she wouldn't notice.

She shook the pack.
We both could hear five Chiclets
gliding back and forth, clicking
against one another in the void.
Are you sure they're all here?
She looked directly into my eyes.
Yes, they are all there,
I insisted,
expressionless, almost believing.
She hesitated,
pressed her lips together,
gave me the quarter.

Kristin Davis

HOLDING ON

Lynette Benton

Hoarding: Persistent difficulty . . . parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value. The behavior usually has deleterious effects for the hoarder and family members. Commonly hoarded items may be newspapers, magazines, . . . plastic bags, boxes, photographs, household supplies, food, and clothing.

– Anxiety and Depression Association of America

Though I'm not among the apparent five million Americans (figure quoted as a minimum) who qualify as hoarders I cringe while watching their phobias publicly revealed on TV after their families or local authorities insist they excavate their dwellings. I have some experience of this type of intervention. A student of mine in a writing class for seniors feverishly dug through one of three bloated shopping bags that created a fort around her legs to show me a letter she'd received from her town's public health director, warning that she had to clean out her house.

Once a year or so, fire officials in my grandmother's hometown in Florida summoned my mother in New York to clear out her mother's house and the vacant lot adjacent to it that her mother owned. They mentioned fire hazards and fines. My exasperated mother would fly the thousand miles that had liberated her from such clutter and spend a week going through her mother's papers, sorting clothes and kitchen utensils to donate to worthy causes, and bagging household trash and yard waste. Once or twice during my teens I took the trip with her.

I personally own no battered boxes of expired pastry mix squashed into kitchen cabinets; dolls dressed in tawdry organdy outfits, reeking of the dry odors of a century ago; or plastic garbage bags stuffed with defective decorations toppling in corners. In my house, there are no narrowed paths winding through debris-filled shopping carts in a “this-way-lies-madness” sense. In fact, my home is neat. Most of my possessions occupy their own nooks (even if some no longer entirely fit).

But I have a suspicion (call it superstition, if you like) that if I discarded much of what I own my future would flourish before me, and my life sparkle with the spaciousness of possibility. (Even my opinion of my past would miraculously mend; I’d see it from a better, that is, a more satisfying perspective.) With fewer belongings blocking my way, I could lay claim to a pleasing vista that would open up in front, in back, and beside me. I’d become *grounded*, but grounded in a way that’s the opposite from the way my belongings ground me, since actually, they don’t ground me so much as burden me. With them out of the way, I’d breathe more freely because the air that had been hiding in the crevices of these former possessions now would be available to my yearning lungs. My days would expand. So would my mind.

It’s hardly surprising that when I’m away from home, my life – my past and the possibilities inherent in an imagined future – seems to scintillate. Freed of responsibility for all I’ve amassed, I feel I can avail myself of anything I want from life’s buffet. I could become a different person. But vacations end and at home once again, I’m bound to my possessions as they are bound to me . . .

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RIGHT WITH GOD

Gavin Kayner

In Magdalena, Mexico one celebration seemed much like another until the day Esmeralda Cruz married.

The marriage took place in the spring of 1890. Her parents, Jorge and Carlotta Cruz, announced the wedding proudly, though setting aside a suitable dowry proved a great sacrifice. The small bag of coins hidden in the wall behind their bed was a lot of money for a family who had so little. To protect others from temptation, they had told no one of their diligence.

Every night Jorge counted the silver coins with Carlotta at his shoulder. A father with a daughter is rich, he told her one evening as he spilled the coins across the frayed blanket, until she marries.

On the wedding day, Jorge heard his wife singing as he shook sleep from his head and grinned. It had been a long time between songs. He left his brother, who had traveled from Monterrey, sleeping in the corner. Let him rest, Jorge told himself, he's come a long way.

"Buenos dias, Mother," he greeted Carlotta.

"And you, old man. Where have you been all morning?"

"Is it so late?"

"For people who work to eat."

"Your tongue is quick," Jorge returned and reached to embrace her.

Carlotta swung away. "And your brother?"

"Let him sleep."

"Will he feed himself, then?" The snap in Carlotta's voice turned Jorge to her.

"If he must," he said quietly.

Carlotta shrugged and continued with breakfast.

The moment passed. Jorge sat at the table. “Where is Esmeralda?”

Carlotta set a plate of eggs and beans in front of him. “Already out with her cousins.”

“So many cousins. So many people. Relatives I never knew. Faces I’ve never seen.”

“Our friends were free with our hospitality,” Carlotta said, “but we will manage. We always have.”

“Yes, in your hands, five loaves feed thousands.”

“Don’t be blasphemous. And remember to eat as if you are one.”

Jorge laughed. “A man needs his strength.”

“Strength comes from the heart, not the belly.”

Jorge extended his arms. “Then love me, *mi hijita*, and I will conquer the world.”

Carlotta came to the crudely made table and dropped a warm tortilla on his plate. “Have your world,” she said. “It’s a bitter place.” Their eyes locked. Jorge took his wife’s hand.

“But for days like this,” he said.

“Yes, but for days like this,” Carlotta granted him and a long-suffering smile creased her face. She brushed at his unruly hair. “Now finish and go help with the preparations . . .”

Order this issue to continue reading.

FROM AMAICHA
A Dialogue: Language Lost and Found

*Languages are vast realities that transcend those
political and historical entities we call nations.*

Octavio Paz

How did you lose the word for *bread*,
water, and *wine*?
How did you lose *love*?

Were your elders fighting each other
when the Incas overpowered them?
Did your words grow tendrils

curling inward through hectares of dark
vineyards your brothers once planted?
Were they misplaced in the fires

preparing *la tierra* each year?
Did you leave them behind the *algarrobal*
for later?

Did the *Vallisto* fold them within his prayers
woven into the very fibers
of the basket where truth rested?

Did they walk away?

*

You want to know truth
when you stop to listen.

You want to watch it

wash the edges of your life
retreating always to return
touching borders to edge out something new.

You want to know love.

In the beginning words spread outward like fields of corn,
inward toward fields of silence.

Alexandra Newton-Rios

*As we get older we fight harder to preserve innocence,
in ourselves and those we love, our children,
those we teach, even our mothers.*

ALEXANDRA NEWTON-RIOS



passenger