



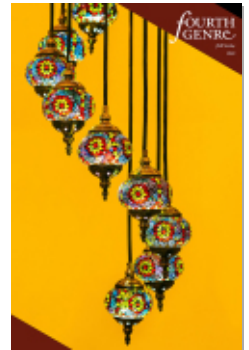
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Going gone—a short list of things disappearing

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Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction, Volume 26, Number 2, Fall 2024, pp. 171-177 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press



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LAURA BERNSTEIN-MACHLAY

THE LATEST GIRL

Three a.m., the wail comes caterwauling across my phone. The strangled screech of an AMBER alert jolts me from bed, driven not from sleep because I rarely do that anymore, but from dreams, nonetheless.

Be vigilant, such alerts tell me. You, too, might know enough to bring a child home.

I don't. I never do.

Lost this time, Addie Knowles. Just three years old—a baby, right? In a pink tee with unicorns emblazoned across the front, hair braided to her shoulders, so you know someone takes time with her.

I'm helpless, but it's good they let me know, if only to cast my plea into the moonless night—*please let Addie return safe, soon*. This small girl stolen from her bed, possibly huddled right now in the back of a dark Chevy driven by whom? The alert doesn't say. An angry family member? The mother's disgruntled lover? A stranger?

No matter. *Be brave, Addie*, I whisper to the black sky. *Hurry back. Someone, I don't know who, will be waiting for you.*

MY GIRL

My daughter Celia, who's grown and gone like a dandelion seed flown into the wind. Leaving me behind with the cats and my husband Steven, all of us wandering around a little aimless. Now I'm both proud and bereft as the last house on a burnt-out street.

I know. *Such drama*, right?

In truth, I see her often enough. When she misses me, when she's not too busy. Her job, her friends, take precedence most days. This means I did right as a mother, letting her blithely slide from my hands into her own story.

It's all good, I remind myself.

Celia calls plenty on the phone, too, her voice soft and still pitched high with youth. She's only twenty-two. "What'd you do today," she asks every time, like the darling daughter she is. Like anything thrilling would happen with her gone.

I press my thoughts to the surface. "Not much. Chores, teaching. I joined a ceramics class. I worked a little on an essay."

"Ooh. Your writer's block is easing up?"

"Sure," I say. As if every word isn't squeezed like hard clay through an extruder. "But enough about me." *Tell me you're eating, that you're safe in your teensy apartment and not too lonely, that no one hurt your feelings today or tried to nab you from your bed or off the street.*

"Tell me everything," I say, and settle in to listen.

WORDS

I've joined a ceramics class, desperate to make *something* since my words jammed up in my chest. Because of COVID, which left me editing myself before I speak, so these days I'm always parched as rice paper and my voice cracks when I raise it above a whisper.

In class we focus on hand building. My colleagues deftly carve roses onto vases and share sculpting tips and tricks for the kiln. I have nothing to add.

I construct wonky flowerpots and cracked platters. I want to say, *forgive my lack of skill. See how the clay goes rubbery, unreliable in my hands?*, but instead I zip my lips.

Across from me, Carla tells the group about her stints in rehab, then Kenna shares details of a lively wedding she attended. She stops and mouths, “Is he cute or what?” about the tall guy making his way to wheel throwing. She could be his mother, as could I, who noticed him also. The women cackle, a raucous coven of witches. Except me, too busy spoiling project after project. What can I offer the discussion? I’ve never been to rehab, though I drank enough vodka and cheap wine in my twenties that the idea isn’t outrageous. Kenna’s wheel thrower with his black hair and winged brows is indeed hot, but the conversation’s moved on, and every wedding I’ve attended was too dull to discuss (though I still cried).

I’m dull with my words hiding behind a wall of dismay.

Around me voices rise and fall like waves on the shore.

I sculpt a lumpy base, score and slip it as I’ve been taught, then press it to the bottom of my vase when—plop. It drops to the floor.

I open my mouth, maybe to swear or just to sigh. Then I close it and start over again.

THE BEES

I remember my first sting, the pain rising red across my kid brain. The *horror* of it. I’d been petting a dandelion, then brushing it over my wrist to turn the skin yellow when the honeybee—a pretty thing, dressed in its clown finery—parted itself from the yellow background and set my arm afire. It didn’t matter that the bee died for its sin.

After, I wished all bees would disappear from the earth. Now I fear they are. I watch my neighbor Damon pouring Roundup into the cracks in his pavement where sprouts dare to poke through, so my husband flinches and pleads, “Not close to our yard, please.” And I cringe at what’s coming. How the neonicotinoids we apply with such gusto are doing their job on more than unwanted foliage. How we spray these and other pesticides in wide swaths for the wind to catch up and carry where it will. To buzzing hives everywhere just minding their business.

Soon enough the yellow and black armies flitting from purple coneflower to beebalm in our garden—their resounding hum, how they hover impossibly still in air—will dwindle to single divisions, then the lone soldier.

Then nothing but memory.

TIME

Because it's slippery. It's sliding behind me like spilled paint of every color and shine. I once had it by the bucketful, so it sloshed everywhere and made a mess of things. Imagine, too much time. To overthink, to get in snits over slights I imagined. To spend like stray coins on daydreams and boredom. Wishing time would pass already, so I could get to the real stuff of life.

Now I'd like more, perhaps for the cello I never practiced in youth, or the Spanish I was too lazy to learn. I'd like to become decent at ceramics. I want to revise all five of my half-made novels, but who's got such time?

Barring catastrophe, I might have decades remaining, but it isn't enough. I want to see my mother young again outside photos. I want my twenties with their supple nonchalance. I want endless nights to watch the fireflies. I want to be Celia's contemporary, so she'll tell me her secrets.

I want to remember what forever feels like.

LIKE THE BEES, THE FIREFLIES

Habitat loss, toxic chemicals, light pollution: I'm sorry to say they're working in tandem to wipe fireflies from the face of the map—those tiny flickering flashlights, those sparkshows, their lit butts trembling in the dark, zipping here and there. Now ya see 'em. Now ya don't.

We still get them sometimes, on gummy summer nights. My house nestled between Damon's place on the left and Surry's on the right, both neighbors who tore up their backyards to spread asphalt for their cars to rest on—this being the Motor City, after all. Then there's our yard, sweet and plush, which Steven refuses to fertilize, so weeds grow thick among the lilies and irises, among the milkweed and goldenrod he plants for the pollinators.

And at night when the neighbors finally shut off their porch lights, the fireflies find their wobbly way to us, now and then resting on our shoulders, then launching toward another perch, their flame-party brightening the darkness. With traffic songs from nearby 7 Mile serenading us, Steven and I

watch the fireflies pogo and jitterbug. For these moments outside time, I am no longer bereft.

SPACE

It's dwindling by the day, my house so full it's tipping toward sea level. The plastic bins—little museums—crammed with Celia's childhood drawings, her starred kindergarten homework, her old toys and college notebooks. There's the surfeit of books swimming the shelves. The record collection we still own. Linens overflowing their assigned drawers. My sad projects from ceramics class. Ten thousand photos of Celia. Others of dead relatives, all carefully framed to draw the eye and make us remember.

So I'll panic and say to Steven, "We need to purge. What about these books, this wooden box, this wolfman tchotchke?" And he'll be horrorstruck.

"I need those things. The box holds my tarot cards and the instructions telling me how to work them—"

"Which you never open, never use—"

"Those Carlos Castaneda books defined my twenties. And Rusty gave me the wolfman as a wedding gift—"

"Not for our marriage."

"No. Me and Jessica."

"You got divorced. And you've been out of your twenties for decades. Do you really need the doll or books anymore?"

"Of course, I do. What about *your* books, or some of the photos?"

"Whoa, now—"

So I fret about Steven and me decrepit or dead, and Celia tasked with the mission of picking through our crap. But I'm not ready to divest yet, with politics topsy-turvy, each side nulling the other, with the forests burning to ashes in the incessant summer heat. With children fading into the night and the imminent loss of bees and fireflies. Better to keep my strata of accumulation as buffer between me and the great, vanishing world.

SLEEP

The *scritch-scratch* behind my eyelids as they lower and rise, shut and open wide-wider-widest. Staring at silhouettes in the inky dark: the indoor plants settled at their windows, dreaming of daylight, Steven hunkered beside me in the tousled blankets and dreaming of his garden. So I lie night after night, brittle as old clay, and listen to the cats perform their nocturnal errands, their cloak-and-dagger lives I know little about. How I crave the warm bath of sleep, luminous sleep, heavy like a weighted blanket, luscious and thick as molasses. I want to touch it, let it possess me.

I've owned it, you see. After nightly prayers, I slumbered like a stone through childhood. As a teen I rarely roused before noon on weekends. I woke replete back then, my arms and legs nimble, my skin sure. Unlike now, the loss accumulating with time, when I spend my days edgy, my bones halfway hollow. Anticipating the anxiety of the *just-before* time, when the sun drops like an orange beachball below the horizon, when I'll try yet again. The liar-bed falsely inviting.

So sleep calls—*You want me, don't you, sugar?*

And I answer, the words coming easy for once—*Yes. Yes, I want you. You have no idea. Someday I'll die with you. Nowadays, I live for you. The rare, stolen hours. How good they feel. How good you feel. Flawless as rainfall against my roof. Elusive like fog. Enticing as the far stars.*

GOD

Child-me used to pray. *Dear God*, I'd whisper as if commencing a formal letter. *Please protect those I love*. Then I'd list the admirable traits of each to remind God to look out for them, lest they all dropped dead in one terrible reckoning—*thud, thud, thud*.

There was more, too. A glut of prayer that combed through the details of my days, included apologies for random malice—because children are bloodthirsty angels—and desperate promises to be better. (How I miss this young self, frantic as lightning, when I thought desiring something with such ferocity was nearly to have it.)

As a teen, I quit praying when I started getting wasted with the cool kids. When, stoned on bad weed and MD 20/20, replete with delight, I skipped a few nights and nothing terrible occurred. And too, it felt embarrassing. “Aren’t you over *that* by now?” I imagined my new friends asking.

I admit, I was relieved to be done with the chore, even as I fretted God would despair at my desertion.

Or that I’d regret it one day. Honestly, I’d have gone on clinging if I had the option, but at some point in my late teens, I’d turned away too long and God disappeared over the far horizon, untouchable as air, inscrutable as moonless nights.

Leaving me clear-eyed come morning, a little lonelier on the emptying planet.

THIS SMALL CATCH

What’s left then, but learning to bear it? All the darlings slipping beyond sight. Beyond the dreams of this world, collapsed into black holes never to be seen again. And I admit it here: It hurts to think of them that way, gone with no trace outside our fragile memory.

But when the weight of everything departing buries me like old bones, I comfort myself with how talented we humans are at making do, however poor it renders us.

I make do with what’s left: The children come home at last, my cluttered house, the stolen hours of sleep, the bees and fireflies remaining in my husband’s magnificent garden. It’s not enough, but it matters.

Which leads me to now, this small catch in time. Blink and it’s passed.

“I’m here,” I whisper to the empty sky still suspended above me.

Then I get on with things.