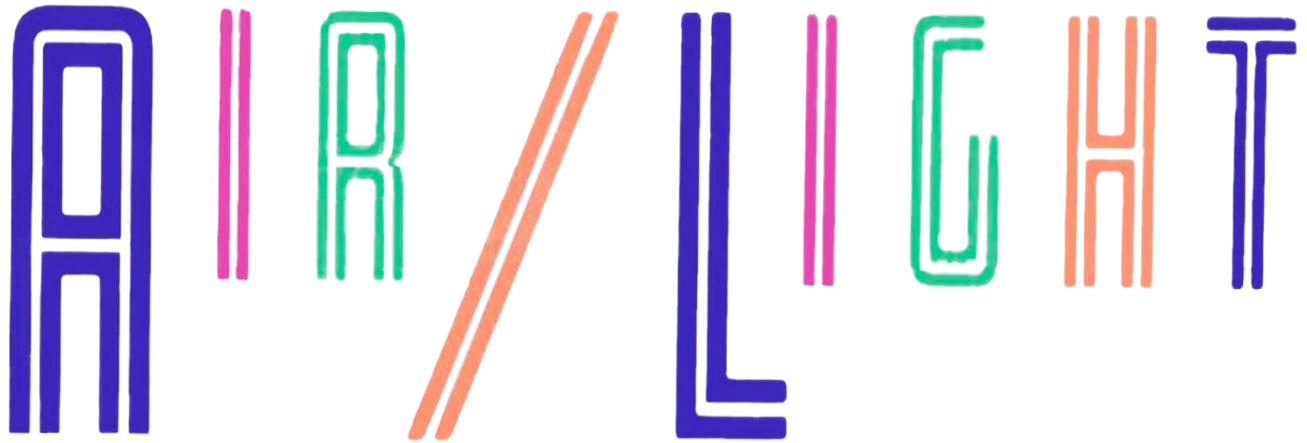


AIRLIGHT

ISSUE 5: WINTER/SPRING 2022



Winter/Spring 2022 Issue 5

Los Angeles, California



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Air/Light is an online literary journal published by the English Department at the University of Southern California. We showcase both traditional and innovative works. We are firmly of California and the West Coast — the occupied land of the Tongva in Los Angeles, where we are based, and those of other indigenous peoples of the Americas — but also national, international. We mean to look out expansively from this place rather than to gaze narrowly back at it, to express a West Coast aesthetic, a West Coast sensibility, and direct that lens onto the world.

Submissions should be made at <https://airlightmagazine.org/about/submissions/>

FICTION

Man of the House

Laurel Doud

I got a job. I got a girl. I got a license to drive. I got *all* pumped up. Well, maybe not like Schwarzenegger when he was a beast, but I got definition. It seemed the right thing to do, you know, now that I'm the man of the house. At least, that's what the cop said as he drove away, his face glowing ghostly green in his dashboard lights. *You're the man now.*

I hadn't thought about it before, not until that night, that night the guy next door threatened my mom. Todd. A redneck from the Valley. A defensive lineman from a state college who bragged he could still lift twice his body weight, now a security guard with a plastic badge and a mail-order bride, Grace. Even his name was stupid.

The fights between Todd and his wife had been getting worse as if she was finally figuring out she didn't have to take it anymore. They had a little girl, and I wondered whether she could ever sleep.

That night, it was close to midnight and still warm. All our windows were open. My bedroom looks across Todd's driveway into his kitchen and, when my room's dark, as it was then, it's like watching TV. He was yelling at Grace as she was doing dishes. She screamed back, the words coming so fast I could hardly understand them. Well, except for *beer* and *late nights* and finally *divorce*.

Fuck marriage. Marriage drives people crazy. My parents never fought. Never.

I saw Grace turn from the kitchen sink and, facing our house, call out in her high, accented voice, "Claire!"

Todd froze as Grace pushed past him and out of the kitchen, the swinging door, just like ours, bobbing back and forth until it settled. He glared across the driveway—I sat completely still—before he followed her.

As if her name had been some sort of signal, my mother shut off the water in her bathroom. Grace had never involved her in their fights before. But she and my mom talked. At least across the front lawn. Just the day before, they had been going on about what a three-year-old could get into.

My mom flashed past my room and headed down the hallway toward the front of the house. I followed, passing my sister's room—empty since last month, her college poster pinned to the wall over the desk like a blue-ribbon award—and then my father's study, abandoned in June, stuffy air escaping from the cracks around the closed door, the vents shut down to save on the AC.

I came into the living room to see my mother on the porch, the overhead light making her spiky red hair glint. On the sidewalk, Grace and Todd argued by her Toyota. The anger had seeped out of Todd's voice and he sounded whiny. Grace strapped their sleepy daughter into the car seat.

My mother stood witness and I didn't know whether she was being brave or stupid. She was different now, prickly like her hair. Some nights, though, I heard her crying and, in the morning, her face looked stretched and her eyes puffy. I didn't know what to say, so I pretended I didn't see and, honestly, she seemed relieved.

Grace held her hand out, palm up. Todd gave a shifty-eyed glance in my mother's direction, then slammed the car keys into the flesh of her hand. Grace barely flinched, just got in the car, my mom waiting until she was down the street before turning back into the house. I slid silently into the hallway, listening as Todd opened his gate and came up the driveway.

He was shouting, but it took a few seconds for me to realize that it was at my mom.

"Come out of that house, you redheaded bitch," he yelled. "and I'll give you something to take back in with you. I'll teach you to stay out of my business. No wonder your husband left, the pussy was probably no good."

The police—two squad cars, lights flashing but no sirens—were in front of our house in ten minutes. I hadn't consulted my mother. I'd just dialed 911.

I figured I knew then who had left the message *lets fuck* tucked underneath the windshield wiper on my mom's car a couple of days before. "The lack of the apostrophe eliminating many a suspect," she had said, laughing

it off. But I think the note bothered her more than she let on, because she pinned it to the kitchen cork board with the date and time she found it. Like it was evidence.

I met the police on the sidewalk. My mother stayed in the house and they didn't ask to speak to her. I was the one who had made the call.

I told them what happened and that it was just me and my mom now. One cop left to knock on Todd's door and the other pulled out his notepad.

"That gray truck his?" the officer asked, pointing the tip of his pen in the direction of the beat-up Nissan Frontier spotlighted by the streetlight.

I was watching the other cop out of the corner of my eye, but Todd's porch light didn't come on and the door didn't open. "No, that's Matt's truck."

Matt's been my best friend since we were kids, and he lives on the other side of Todd. I gestured to the truck behind the Nissan. "The blue one's Todd's. The Ford 250."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure they're both gray," the officer said.

Recently I found out I'm color blind, but I'm not anywhere near as bad as my grandfather. He has to read the labels Grandma puts on his sock drawer, so he knows whether he's pulling out blue, black, brown, or red.

The cop told me that since Grace and the kid had left and Todd had only verbally threatened my mother from the sanctity of his property, there wasn't much he could do. There was no way to prove Todd had written the note.

"I'll write up an incident report," he said, pulling a business card from his breast pocket and handing it to me. "If he does anything else that alarms or concerns you, call us and make sure you document the day, time, exact wording. For now, I'll send a patrol car around every couple of hours for the next week, but stay vigilant." He got into his car, powered the window down, and added, "You're the man now."

I sent my mother to bed as if she was a tired and cranky eight-year-old. She didn't argue, only asked in an exhausted voice, skin around her eyes tight and blue-ish, "Are you staying up?"

I felt a stab of what she might have been going through these last couple of months, how her life had changed without her consent.

"Yeah," I said, and watched her disappear into her room.

She looked small.

I locked all the doors and windows, turned off the lights, and adjusted my

night vision to the perimeter of the house. I stood sentry in my room with my baseball bat, the Louisville Slugger my dad had bought me a couple of summers ago, braced behind my neck, my wrists dangling over the grip and barrel. I watched Todd mutter and curse, drink and pass out at the kitchen table, head in his arms, empty beer bottles like pinball bumpers around his ears.

In the morning, my mom woke me up with a hand on my shoulder. I was slumped in the leather chair I had dragged from my dad's office, loving and hating that it still smelled like him.

"How late did you stay up?" she asked, trying not to look into Todd's kitchen.

"I don't know," I mumbled, stretching out my cramped shoulders. I hadn't meant to fall asleep at all. "What time is it?" My room was dark, but the morning was brightening.

"It's still early," she told me. "Go to bed and sleep a couple more hours."

Just before she closed my door behind her, she added, "Nathan, I can't thank you enough. You were a real hero last night."

*

So working the job at the coffee shop's easy peasy, as my grandfather likes to say. I press a couple of levers, clean a couple of pots, make change.

When I first got the job, I was scheduled with this girl—Erin. I liked working with her. She was friendly with people and I got braver. I tried harder to be funny and nice to the customers and sometimes they'd laugh and drop another quarter in the tip jar. Even now on the weekends, when we open before dawn, she's quick and funny. Not that she doesn't have her bad days. She can be silent, almost pouty, and then no one, not the customers or the rest of us, has any fun. But when I can get her to laugh, she's herself again. Sometimes I wear mismatched socks just to make her giggle and tease me. For some reason, she finds my color blindness amusing.

I was too scared to ask her out in the beginning, but then a group of us decided to hang out one night and I planned to stay as close to Erin as pos-

sible.

It wasn't hard at all. I said really annoying and obnoxious things all night and she punched me, slapped me, pinched me. I kept at it. Anything to make her touch me. After a while, I only had to open my mouth and her hand was on my arm.

I didn't tell my mom about Erin right away. She'd have been happy for me, but it didn't feel right.

I didn't tell my dad either. When I see him, he's always pumping me for details about my life. "Any cute girls?" he'll ask, all jovial, as if we're just two cool single dudes out on the town.

I wanted to tell him about Todd. I wanted to tell him that I had taken care of it, that I had done his job. But that didn't feel right either because it wasn't true. Because I hadn't taken care of it. Because the next day when I left the house to go to Matt's, Todd was out front, mowing his lawn. He loved that lawn. You could putt on that lawn. He gave me a head nod, all *Howdy, Neighbor-like*, as if nothing had happened, nothing was different, like there was nothing I could have done about it anyway, and I just kept thinking, if I was a real hero, a real man, I'd have shoved his stupid ass down on his stupid lawn and buried my foot up to his kidney.

Parents and teachers say you should walk away from a fight, but I don't know. Matt and I talked about it that morning. I told him everything, all the gory details.

He listened and then said, "No problem. I'll get Trent and Urs and we'll hold him down and you can kick the crap out of him."

Having Matt lay it out like that—four-on-one—made it sound, I don't know, chickenshit.

"What about a gun then?" Matt asked, like it was no big deal.

He was just messing with me, but I'd been thinking about that too as we sat on his bed, tossing a nerf football between us. "Nah. A gun's too...im-personal."

He looked me over and snorted. "Well, dude, if you wanna go mano-a-mano, you're gonna lose. You'd better come to the weight room with me. We gotta pump you up."

At first, it wasn't any fun. I was pretty pathetic and the jock-strap stink of the place, the old school posters of Arnold and Lou Ferrigno and Ronnie Coleman peeling off the mossy walls, made me want to spew. Eventually, though, I got to like it. There was something about the sweating and the

grunting and, my favorite thing, the punching bag. Mrs. Parker, my English teacher, would probably have some metaphor about it. You know, something about the bag taking all my rage. It felt like that at first. I saw Todd's face in the leather and I gave him a straight right to the nose, splintering the cartilage, blood streaming from his nostrils. Sometimes another face flickered on the surface, an older version of the one I see in the mirror. Him I gave my knockout punch until he was kissing the canvas.

Still, after a while, it felt, I don't know, like calculation, like Spiderman learning to use his spidey-sense. Testing what worked, what the best combinations were, how the sting of my hand could tell me how good the punch was.

At night, when I watched Todd alone in his kitchen like it was my favorite TV show, I realized no fucking way he could lift twice his weight anymore. He was only getting older and slower and I was getting stronger. Even Erin mentioned it, stroking my biceps and saying teasingly, but not mean or anything, "Look at those guns."

I was all pumped up.

But an annoying thought kept creeping back into my brain. Being strong, was that enough to make you a man? According to some of the guys at the gym, it was sex, but I couldn't see that being right either.

One afternoon, Matt dropped me off and a U-Haul trailer was in Todd's driveway, the metal ramp out on the cement. My mom was heading toward our front door, grocery bags in hand.

"They're leaving?" I asked. I couldn't believe it. All this work? All this sweat?

"Grace got her stuff weeks ago. She's already moved to LA. I guess she's got relatives down there. He's moving, I suppose, to a smaller place."

"Good." I hadn't seen Grace since the night she left, but I didn't know for sure she had stayed away.

A grimace twitched my mom's face. She looked up at me—I hadn't realized I was so much taller. "Was it good for you when your dad left?"

My mom didn't talk much about him leaving and it was like a punch to the gut. I didn't know what to say but after the pain of the jab faded, I asked the question I hadn't wanted to ask, because I didn't want to know the answer. Because I thought he'd come home. "Why'd he leave, Mom?"

She stared unseeing across Todd's front yard, teeth biting down on her lower lip. "He stopped loving me."

"Seriously? Just like that?" I wasn't calling her a liar or anything. It just seemed too easy.

She nodded and shrugged all at the same time.

"Did you stop loving him?" I asked, surprising myself that I really wanted to know.

"No," she barely breathed, the skin around her eyes tightening in the way that was becoming so familiar.

"Well, that sucks."

The snort that burst out of her was like the sound of a balloon rupturing, a strong pop that fizzled out, the pressure finally released. Her eyes softened and I thought maybe she wasn't so different from Erin.

I didn't care about Todd then. He was leaving. He was already gone. Hasta la vista, baby.

"Come on. I'll help you make dinner," I said, taking the grocery bags and pressing them into a couple of bicep curls. I stepped forward and asked, "Like my socks?"

We both looked down. I had purposely put the socks on that morning. For Erin. Their color looked the same to me, but I could tell there was a difference in the depth of it. I figured they were good enough for a chuckle.

My mom laughed, a real one this time, the sound making me happy, and she gently shoved me up the front steps, into the house.

Contributors

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