

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Big Fiction. Issue Nine

I first made the call to release *Issue Nine* as a serial publication before the coronavirus bore down on all of us, though I didn't define it as such until Avery Irons (*Glass Men*, Issue 8) was kind enough to retweet the first release (*All These Cats Have AIDS*, Jason VILLEMEZ) while also using the term. Leave it to a friend to offer something you do just a little more definition than it previously had, especially in light of VILLEMEZ's fiction that seems to turn reels of serial reporting about the AIDS crisis, once dramatized for mass media consumption, into a fiction where the "I" humanizes the pain, the cynicism, and the courage of the moment. The conversational tone helps to consolidate the anxious tenor of the time: the lengths that people and those around them will go to for simple, human dignity.

The slow releases made sense in part because there are eight (EIGHT!) novelettes in this issue. Each coming in at an average of 14,000 words, I didn't want them to get lost in the internet ocean already home

to so much valuable and fun fiction. I wanted each of them breathe for a while, to inhabit their own space on our website, in your imagination, and in the marketing plan that was also an ad hoc choice: three days of featured social media posts culminating in the writer's bio and author pic—a personal presence to go with the work they labored to craft and form. And I say personal because they weren't always faces. Jane Harrington, for example, offered us a picture of her walking away, a body of water in the distance. Her novelette, *Béarra*, winds its own path to the distant past, with a narrator who takes us through her father's telling of forced Christianization to her own experiences of indentured servitude across a continent. It reads as intensely as you'd expect, as raw and turbulent as that kind of imagery can manage.

Along the way, though, the COVID-19 social distancing effect took hold. I couldn't release the manuscripts on the schedule I'd set out for myself. My teaching duties transitioned to digital classrooms. My academic duties assumed an ever-present and ever-superficial Zoom form. My kids came home to continue their own schooldays from our kitchen, our living room, our bedrooms, our *all* the rooms. My own novel manuscript momentum took hold and became its own running engine that needed attention. And, finally, my wife's work transitioned to our home office, too, and our whole house became a 24/7 hotspot of digital activity and constant human interaction that necessitated an emotional and intellectual strength I haven't had to practice in a long time.

Amidst all that, we didn't let our community impulses wane, either, as we continued to give our time and money to groups that wanted to stay active and helpful in a Seattle metro area that had become a much tenser place to live. Seldomly going outside meant you paid closer attention to things around you, near you or approaching you or just crossing your line of sight. Short distances bore their own drama, with heightened senses that carried their own drama each time they were triggered. A. L. Phillips's *What She Believed In* held onto some of that tension of place and granular life for me. The story's narrator embodies a character who examines loss and the things that loss leaves in its wake. She's character who sidesteps close interrogations of herself while hoping to hold onto the things that begin to mean something to her as she navigates a new solitude. She's a character of fleeting, cautious breaths that let me place into the reading a little of my own fleeting, cautious breaths.

I initially thought I had to navigate this social distancing time with a daily log. Not a diary, necessarily, but something more like a sparse record of my own activity: what I did, what happened, and what I expected to come next from it. My family and I took our social distancing seriously, especially because both my cousin and my father had come down with the virus, and the horror stories of what they had experienced or continue to experience affected us deeply. Add to that one of our own editors coming down with COVID-19, and we found almost any excuse

not to leave the house. I limited my trots and stop about town to Trader Joe's, to Target, and maybe sometimes into a drive-thru coffee shop to keep me going on the road. And, yes, I did try to record all these the movements, if only to keep the writing habit going amidst a sudden, hair-raising shift in my suddenly very stationary body. I released Clare Wilson's *Fin Del Mundo* online at around this time. I'll admit that its daily journal narrative form, one that accounts for the emotional and physical paths walking the Camino de Santiago, wasn't just a small influence in my limited and short-lived attempt to record my life in social distancing. Wilson's narrator's accounting of the landscape, from turns in the stone to the things people discard or are supposed to leave behind at junctions along the walk, feels like more than just markers on the road. For me, they felt like monuments when all I had were my walls, and even if only momentarily, I used the narrative's movement as a replacement for my own.

In this way, releasing the issue in piecemeal became a way to measure the days and then weeks away from friends, away from relatives road trips or long flights away, and away from even the strangers I'd gotten used to seeing on commute to work. How were they coping? Were they home? Were they making it through? Were they out of work? I interrogated myself everywhere, especially about the things I needed to keep some semblance of a routine going. I began to position every editorial or writerly task as even a doubt that needed answering, even if it

did take me a while to reason through it. Was I communicating to the authors about their release dates? Was I setting up the online environment for each publication? Had I communicated to the reviewers and editors asking about what was working in each manuscript and what needed some revision, if anything at all?

It felt good to get lost in the work—in the works themselves. They offered a creative normal. Selfishly, too, reading them and looking them over geared me up for whatever writing I wanted to get done on any particular day. Chinkeung Li's *She Said Let There Be Light*, for example, activated a language detective side of my brain. The fiction's interplay between a baby's memory stream and a vulnerable assessment of the narrator's adult situation, at home with his mother and fatherless and trying to stitch how his life's become what it has, begins with gutsy move. It unapologetically drops you into the sensory past, and then expects you to catch up. When you do, you realize the "work" part of the reading is crumbled quicker than you could account for the scrolling pages.

As the weekly, biweekly, (triweekly, is that a thing?) serial releases and marketing took shape over the next few months, I'd see the social media comments come in, users responding to some posts more than others, and the sharing and reposting spread the marketing more horizontally. The ebbs and flows of audience responses really illustrated for me what it means for a literary magazine to try to create an audience. At around the same time as I was working on this, my wife took on a lead

role managing the social media rhythm at her job, so I was learning, alongside and from her, about the ins and outs of crafting an image for a digital audience. The differences in task between us soon became glaring, though: she was operating under salary, with a team, and with adjustments in mind, not to mention her own wild curiosity about how it all worked together; and I was operating with some guideline of a very, very simple plan. I won't any time soon be tallying the *Big Fiction* approach in terms of successes and failures (pretty sure we'd lean toward minimal impact anyway), but I will have to put stock in the value of *branding*, that previously nebulous term that has since become more tangible for me.

Voice. Regularity. Audience interaction. Content. Building an audience for a literary magazine venture, one that already seems to operate on the fringes of profit-centered literary capitalism, feels daunting, and largely because publicizing, for me, feels daunting. I am perhaps almost ferociously private. Personal social media accounts have certainly made me a bit more public-comfortable, but not without some serious growing pains mourning that loss of privacy. Still, though, I'm probably too personally private to fully get how to steer an operation like this literary magazine into a more outward-facing gaze, not to mention the drastic steps I'll have to take to truly feel comfortable being outward-facing for my own writing life. It's for this reason that I felt so at ease publishing David Rutherford's *Notation*. Its experimental approach to

craft seems to do a lot of the branding work for the magazine, in ways that start to really demonstrate how *Issue Nine* is something like an ensemble of fictions as much as a collection of stand-alone pieces. *Notation* tells the story of a dancer and musician responding to a fading seaside town in the final years of the twentieth century. Through fragmented windows into the place and into these points of view, the text becomes something like a celebration of imagination, one that takes its lead from a wide array of old media allusions.

Once May came around and our new reality of social distancing and mask-wearing and tragi-comic protesting of that social distancing and mask-wearing seemed here to stay, or, at least, linger for a while to come, my role as curator for this whole literary experience took on a shape I'm still trying to wrap my arms around. I understand, in theory, how I pull and keep pulling together first phase readers, second phase readers, and fiction editors to repeat the selection process for the next issue and the one after that and so on. But I haven't been able to yet anticipate how many readers and editors to invite into the process—at least before the queue of 10K+ word manuscripts, as it has in the past, multiplies into a many-multi-page Submittable list. Clearly the literary community is having fun with its need to produce and read fiction of a breadth wider than what most literary magazines are calling for. There's a desire to stretch the short story, not because writers can't craft to concision and exactitude, but because there are fictions that simply can't drop its layers to make

itself complete, to make itself known, and those manuscripts need more room to exhale, especially after all the more breaths they had to inhale to get to where they had to go. Even in realism, there's a messiness that needs its space to really get ruffled up and shattered in. Case in point, Daniel Coshnear's *An Ordinary Love Story*, a fiction that ends so abruptly, its reflection tidily sums up the ambiguity of wonderfully complicated stories. Betty, the main character, has writerly aspirations, and she takes refuge in her fiction. She eventually comes to realize, however, that no matter how creative, her imagination always circles right back to her gut-check of a life. Loving someone with an addiction is heartbreaking, and within or after it, everything about that love always feels stuck in that in-between experience.

What the next few months and year have in store for us as a post-pandemic, post-vaccine world, a part of me, I'll admit, already wants to be there. I don't want to be back to any acquiescent understanding of normal, though. In fact, I want whatever we used to consider normal about working culture, about public culture, about physical and digital culture, to be wholly disrupted, re-termed, reconsidered so that we don't walk ourselves, unintentionally or not, into some new misunderstanding of what normal has to feel like. I don't want what we look and act like next to have definition or to be dictated by our -isms, our old ones and whatever new ones emerge.

All that said, I also don't know what I want next from public life. I fear, though, that not knowing what I want, refusing to put parameters around even my hopes, unintentionally opens the door for people or groups of people with economic or political leverage to step in and impose their own vision boundaries. This is the reason that Brenna Lemieux's *The Canon* was released last in the serial approach to literary magazine publication. In it, the writer presents one hell of a future, a place and time where a company that produces an avastar, a holographic program designed to act like a real person, shapes public perception and influences the direction of social norms and public governance. The narrator navigates her role producing this stuff, and we follow her as hackers try to rebel against the programs until finally a corporate mole does what nobody had been able to do: throw a big enough technical error into the program that the world and the company can't simply sweep the misstep under the rug.

How we navigate public life after COVID-19, as the people so many of us have lost linger in painful memory, after so much of our working lives have turned upside down or simply dried up, after our home lives have been disrupted or been left completely untenable, is the one question I keep passing off for tomorrow. Not because I don't want to be part of some collective response, but because getting through this day and this week, creating a rhythm for this *now* life, feels like the only small answers I can handle. These localized moves might turn out to be

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insignificant in the long run, but I hope they're not. I hope they do something to help me figure out my role and my place in the things I love to do and the people I want to spend my time with. I hope time, too, becomes something I can make more meaning out of. It used to feel like I had to wrest time out of somebody else's hands, because usually anybody but me commanded how I journeyed those small increments of time outside my house. I want to believe I can keep that fight up once people start imposing physical constraints around my time again. I want to believe this time away from a place I have to be—time in a place where I can decide when I turn on my computer to work—has made things I really should be fighting for that much clearer.

Juan Carlos Reyes

Editor