

In this issue, we present a multigenre review feature with five reviewers addressing the themes of joy, hope, and delight.

SAKINAH HOFLEER

## Black, Girl, Joy

*Gorilla, My Love*. Toni Cade Bambara. First edition Random House, 1972. Vintage, 1992. 192 pp. \$15.00 (paper).

There's a spectacular category of writers I like to call badasses. These writers aren't just writers: they're juggling two to three other careers, they're activists, and they're so busy, one wonders, *How do they find time to write?*

Yet they do.

Toni Cade Bambara was one such badass. Not only did she publish works of fiction and nonfiction, she majored in theater, studied mime in France (yes, mime), worked as a social investigator, served as a program director for a settlement house in Brooklyn, became a professor, and contributed to documentary films. What makes Bambara even more badass is the way she writes. Growing up, I was exposed to a number of African American writers, many of whom only need last-name identifiers: Morrison, Baldwin, Wright, Hurston, Ellison, Walker, Angelou, Haley. While I love and appreciate their depictions of different slices of Black life, I yearned to see a reflection of my Black life in America—an urban youth surrounded by fierce Black folk from all stations in life, with the white gaze as menacing and present but more background music than mainstage concert. Then one day in grad school, I randomly picked the story “Gorilla, My Love” from an anthology to present to my class, because I liked the title. After I read the first few lines—“That was the year Hunca Bubba changed his name. Not a change up, but a change back, since Jefferson Winston Vale was the name in the first place. Which was news to me cause he'd been my Hunca Bubba my whole lifetime, since I couldn't manage Uncle to

save my life”—I devoured the story. The language was fire. Hazel, the protagonist, reminded me of a younger version of myself. I promptly purchased the full story collection *Gorilla, My Love* (Bambara’s first book, published in 1972) and devoured that too.

The title story has a simple plot: Hazel, the fierce, sassy character who makes the most appearances in the partially linked collection, has a coming-of-age realization that adults often lie and mislead children. She connects her uncle’s name change as well as his relationship with a new girlfriend (he had previously jokingly promised to marry Hazel) to the time she went to a movie titled *Gorilla, My Love* and discovered the movie was not a King-Kongish, gorilla-type movie, but a movie about Jesus.

What drives this story is the voice, the precise use of details, and the astute, nuanced Hazel. Bambara’s use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) feels natural. Geneva Smitherman, one of the original advocates for AAVE as its own language, points out that the “crucial difference in American culture lies in the contrasting modes in which Black and White Americans have shaped . . . language—a written mode for Whites, having come from a European, print-oriented culture; a spoken mode for Blacks, having come from an African, orally-oriented background.” When you read “Gorilla, My Love” or any of the fifteen stories in Bambara’s collection, the orality stands out; the rhythm picks up and slows, picks up and slows. These stories are meant to be spoken. “A Sort of Preface” foreshadows the tone of the collection: “It does no good to write autobiographical fiction cause the minute the book hits the stand here comes your mama screamin how could you and sighin death where is thy sting . . .”

Even in stories where there’s less AAVE and more of a focus on “heightened” language, the narration prioritizes orality. In “Sweet Town,” a precocious teen lays out her woes before deciding whether or not to follow her new beau out of town with money stolen from a friend’s grandmother: “‘Dear Mother’—I wrote one day on her bathroom mirror with a candle sliver—‘please forgive my absence and my decay and overlook the freckled dignity and pockmarked integrity plaguing me this season.’” Read that aloud three times and note how pleasing it is to the ear, the effective use of slant rhyme in “mother”/“mirror”/“sliver” and “dignity”/“integrity,” and the presence of allit-

eration both adding tension to mundane teenage angst. In a heavily anthologized story, “The Lesson,” Sylvia and her classmates have an epiphany about inequality during a field trip to FAO Schwarz. The story begins: “Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid and young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right, this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup.” It’s like you eavesdropped on a conversation between friends and just missed the opening of “Girl, let me tell you . . .” Bambara never stops to explain words like “jones” or “thizzin” or “commenst.” *Keep up*, she’s telling the reader. *Welcome to my world*.

Indeed, it’s Bambara’s approach to her fictionalized but realistic world that completes the circle of her badassery. Often, stories from the African American community reflect harsh realities, the oppressed struggling to thrive under oppression, slavery, the ripple effects of Jim Crow and systemic racism, living beneath the burden of the white gaze—stories that elicit sympathy, empathy, and understanding. Bambara opts instead for the approach of joy, with an emphasis on community and Black femalehood. These stories take place in Harlem, Brooklyn, Mississippi, and a few unnamed places in the South. All the protagonists are female, and they’re connected by blood, friendship, or neighborhood. The young, fierce Hazel from “Gorilla, My Love” and “Raymond’s Run” grows into the Miss Hazel who comments about Ollie’s despair in “Happy Birthday” by saying “I don’t understand kids sometimes.” Gretchen, Hazel’s competitor in “Raymond’s Run,” grows to be Aunt Gretchen the “gofer” in “The Lesson.” Inéz, a young music writer trying to convince an artist to move from Mississippi to New York to record an album in “Mississippi Ham Rider,” becomes a scorned lover in “The Johnson Girls.” Bambara welcomes us into these communities, and we watch as these fierce girls have their epiphanies and mature into teenagers and women. What’s deeply satisfying about many of these stories is the celebration of Black life absent the white gaze. As with systemic racism, it’s still there, such as when Manny gets picked up by the police for playing basketball in “The Hammer Man” or when Sylvia sees how the other side lives in “The Lesson,” but, for the most part, the girls and women in Bambara’s stories are focused on work, love, teenage woes, motherhood, dealing with abuse, winning races, and coping with grief and loss.

One of the most significant stories in the collection is the first one, “My Man Bovanne.” During an initial reading one might miss that the protagonist is a grown-up Hazel. Miss Hazel’s grown-up children are embarrassed that she is at a political function drinking and dancing with Bovanne, a blind man. Her daughter gripes about her mother’s hair, her mother’s drinking, her mother’s dancing, and the fact that she’s dancing with a man who is blind. “Like a bitch in heat,” her daughter says. Miss Hazel’s clearly upset with her children’s treatment and with their obsession with a certain type of Blackness/Black performance: “And just yesterday my kids tellin me to take them countrified rags off my head and be cool. And now can’t get Black enough to suit em.” The beauty of this story lies in how Miss Hazel is still the Hazel we’ve come to know and love. She leaves the function with Bovanne and purposefully invites him back to her place for the night. And we’re rooting for her because her children are assholes. The story ends with this conversation between Miss Hazel and Bovanne:

“I imagine you are a very pretty woman, Miss Hazel.”

“I surely am,” I say just like the hussy my daughter always say I was.

Hazel has the final say in how she will live her life. And that’s how many of the protagonists operate in this collection: fierce, gritty, complete badasses in every positive sense. In *Gorilla, My Love*, Bambara tells the reader: *Welcome to my slice of Black life. Welcome to my celebration of Black language. Welcome to my celebration of the Black female.*

## Joy and Pain, Sunshine and Rain: Exploring the Nuances of Janel Pineda's *Lineage of Rain*

*Lineage of Rain*. Janel Pineda. Haymarket Books, 2020. 40 pp. \$10.00 (paper).

The beginning of 2021 was mostly heavy—the COVID-19 vaccine wasn't quite yet a reality for most, and the winter was particularly thick and unrelenting, stretching and stretching into the gray distance. Yet from that season, one of a few effulgent memories remains for me: the virtual launch of Janel Pineda's *Lineage of Rain* in February. That night, Pineda moved me in a way that I no longer thought possible for digital literary events. I found myself weeping from the poems, each a clear display of dignity, love, and affirmation in the face of difficulty, my tears a visceral reaction to the honesty of the artist. In the midst of incredible separation and solitude, Pineda read her work from her Southern California dining room, with family members who appear in her collection finding their way to her computer camera, demonstrating the delicious inextricability of art and life. I imagined how centering it would feel to read my work in Oakland around my family, English interspersed with our Sierra Leonean Krio dialect in between poems. Pineda cracked the Zoom screen and beckoned us to walk through its shards.

Janel Pineda's *Lineage of Rain* is a chapbook that achieves a narrative virtuosity even many full-length collections rarely do. In the span of forty pages, Pineda interrogates identity through the lenses of multi-generational personal and diasporic histories, bringing into relief themes of migration, familial kinship, race, class, and gender. One of the book's features is its focus on the symbolism of rain and its dual capacity to pummel and flood or nurture and replenish. What appears in greater abundance is the poet's scrutinization of emotional complexity—especially joy, hope, and delight in the context of challenges and sacrifices.

Pineda's collection is divided into two sections, opening with a proem, "In Another Life," in which the narrator speculates about how an alter-

native fate, perhaps one without war, might inform the legacy of the Salvadoran diaspora:

In this life, our people are not things of silences  
but whole worlds bursting  
into breath. Everywhere, there are children. Playing  
freely, clothed and clean.

Stanzas, later, she imagines implications of a different destiny for her family:

My grandmother is  
still a storyteller although I am  
not a poet. In this life, I do not have to be.

These lines beg a rather philosophical question of artists—is the compulsion to create innate or borne out of particular circumstance? In Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile*, he posits that individuals who have experienced exile often become part of the intellectual, political, and creative classes: "Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees. In the United States, academic, intellectual and aesthetic thought is what it is today because of refugees from fascism, communism, and other regimes given to the oppression and expulsion of dissidents. The critic George Steiner has even proposed the perceptive thesis that a whole genre of twentieth-century Western literature is 'extraterritorial,' a literature by and about exiles, symbolizing the age of the refugee." While the narrator refers to neither herself nor her family as exiled, her ability to lucidly and attentively articulate the ruptures caused by migration make the experiences almost seem as if they were her own.

Part I of Pineda's collection contextualizes the narrator's identity through a sequence of poems that highlight her upbringing, culture, and family. The poem "Rain" demonstrates the poet's preoccupation with this weather phenomenon. Even as the narrator speaks about it as part of the tumult of the natural world, the poem also reveals how the word *rain* itself can feel euphemistic:

the first time I ask Tana  
why she left El Salvador,  
me dice: *porque allá mucho llueve.*

for weeks, Tana watched sky fall  
to earth from bus windows, she held on tightly  
to herself and the thought of mi mami,  
borders away and alone somewhere en la capital.

In this instance, rain connotes death and references the Salvadoran Civil War (1980–1992), which claimed the lives of approximately seventy thousand civilians and displaced countless others. Pineda’s work joins the legacy of artistic pieces that engage with water and forced migration, including Jerika Marchan’s *SWOLE* (2018), John Akomfrah’s *The Nine Muses* (2011), Patricia Smith’s *Blood Dazzler* (2008), M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008), Ishle Yi Park’s *The Temperature of This Water* (2004), and Ousmane Sembène’s *Black Girl* (1966). While seemingly disparate, each of these works shows how water shields, water engulfs, water washes, water disappears, and water pushes marginalized bodies to new locations.

Water also relates to language and fluency for Pineda. “How English Came to Grandma” details the narrator’s grandmother’s relationship with English and her understanding of its powerful, albeit violent, history:

For grandma, everything americano  
was soaked in English and she  
wanted to bathe in that language’s  
ocean, no matter how bloody  
she pretended it didn’t look.

Written in English and Spanish, this poem examines language’s role in migration, including its effects on one’s sense of belonging and its manifestations in later generations. In this way, the poem reads as an origin story from which the narrator emerges. Another poem, “All This to Tell You: Grandma Still Does Not Speak English,” shows the grandmother’s English language acquisition, as influenced by life experiences and occupation:

her thick *jes mahm*’s  
and *rright agüey, mahm*  
from her jobs cleaning houses  
in *wudlahn Heel*                      *paz á Dína*  
sometimes even *beh-ver-lé Heel*

While the title might suggest that the poem is about failure, I cannot help but read it as about self-possession and the expansion of language. Here, Pineda undertakes the arduous and delicate task of transcribing and rendering the interstices of English and Spanish. Through innovating orthography, Pineda honors the music and curvatures of new language, showing the ways in which English must bend to the arc of the immigrant mouth.

Part II of this collection departs from interrogating family histories, instead mining interpersonal relationships, class structure, and the futurity of the Salvadoran diaspora. “Before the Interview,” “When The Call Finally Comes,” and “All This to Show You” form a triptych of poems that chronicles the narrator’s interview process for a prestigious international scholarship and the attendant anxieties, including imposter syndrome and other educational barriers commonly faced by students from marginalized backgrounds. However, the poems also show the evolution of the speaker’s self-regard, ending on a note of triumph in “All This to Show You”:

How I take English  
by its bloodied shoulders  
dissolving its body  
into its own soris  
until it offers its wallet  
to pay for my flat  
by the river  
where I spend  
months learning love  
finding ways  
to forgive  
this tongue  
its treachery  
this language  
once monstrous  
made wholly  
my own.

This poem brings a circularity to the text—a language steeped in a

colonial legacy is ultimately vanquished by the poet. This is not assimilation but liberation, arguably the greatest of joys.

One of the narrator's other defenses is love—namely that which comes in plenitude from her family. Of particular note is the poem “To the Eldest Daughter,” an ode to her older sister, who made innumerable investments in the speaker:

years of my jet-setting  
big dreaming  
sleeping soundly  
knowing she was  
home doing everything  
that needed doing  
and still she drove  
six days  
cross-country  
alone  
to watch me  
descend  
Old West's steps  
graduation cap  
and all,  
the string of roses  
she spent all night sewing  
draped over  
my neck—

This is a praise song to the eldest sister, whose enduring love helps relieve her younger sister of some of the weight of racialized, gendered, and class-based struggles, and inspires her to continue to construct a boundless freedom.

In the last poem “& It Is Green,” the narrator orients us toward a tomorrow that has been nurtured by rain, whose vibrancy is evidenced by its title. In this poem, the narrator and her mother revel in a sensation that feels like the dissolution of oppression:

mami and I still alive  
viejitas together, rocking gently  
on the porch of a wood-framed house  
in a future worthy of our joy.

Time is suspended, and the safety of laughter, touch, and the certainty of survival carry us to the close of the book.

From a mother and father who work indefatigably in the service of their children, to a little brother's prayers to *Diosito* for the prosperity of his sister, to the elder sister who gently braids her little sister's hair—how can the narrator sink when the sweet pressure of care only forces her to rise? Pineda's collection is faithful to the wise and perspicacious eye of the child of immigrants, as it accurately renders a nuanced joyfulness that denies neither the existence of heartache nor the wages of the "American Dream." Pineda's words are urgent, elegant, and true, never losing sight of the waters from which they spring.

## A Findable Veil: Joy and Hope in Carl Phillips's *Wild Is the Wind*

*Wild Is the Wind*. Carl Phillips. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. 80 pp. \$23.00 (cloth).

The time had come to talk about sex. My grandmother and I were engaging in our ritual: her in bed watching old Westerns while I read next to her in her rocking chair. I had never talked to her about the people I've wanted to "know" biblically, but alas, when she asked me to hand her what I was reading—Carl Phillips's *Wild Is the Wind*, opened to "Gold Leaf"—I was sure that my desires were about to be untethered from their secrecy. At twenty-seven, I had yet to have sex, due to trauma or fear of God and the church. I hesitantly handed her the book, and she read aloud,

. . . looking back, back through the skull,  
into the self that is partly the animal you've always wanted to be,  
that—depending—fear has prevented or rescued you from becoming

When she asked me what I thought it meant, I didn't want to tell her what it represented to me. That I wanted to fuck. That I wanted to be more animal. That I wanted to inhabit and take full control over my body and what I did with it. Instead of answering my grandmother's question, I volleyed back, "I'd like to know what you think." Unflinchingly, she talked at length about the "you" character's desire for intimacy. After our discussion, I sat not so much with what she said but with the fact that she said it, what I couldn't say.

The threads that run throughout Phillips's work—the deep investment in nature, in the body, in our relationships to each other—especially in conjunction with my experiences now as a sexually active person, have brought me to a new understanding of intimacy and the erotic within *Wild Is the Wind*, that is, the agency, joy, and hope that come with becoming the "animal you've always wanted to be." What's more, though despair, intimacy, and love were all ideas that I'd come to know well in Phillips's work, I hadn't thought much about joy and

hope until I started watching the Instagram Live Cooking videos that he started during the first months of the pandemic. As he taught us recipes while singing and dancing across the kitchen, I thought, “How could the joy that he exhibits here in real time not make an appearance in his work?” It’s not that it wasn’t there; it’s that I wasn’t looking for it.

Phillips is well known for his embrace of abstractions in his poetry, which he addresses directly in “If You Go Away”:

I know death’s  
an abstraction, but I prefer  
a shape to things, though the shapes  
are changeable. In my latest version,  
          death is a young man with a habit for using  
one side of his mouth to blow his hair slightly  
up from his brow, while with the other half he  
mutters things like *Each time I leave,*  
          *it’s like I’ve left forever.*

Phillips reminds us that these abstractions—pleasure, intimacy, death—are unstable because they are crafted by our own desires, which are connected to memory—and what is more unstable than memory? Here, the speaker crafts their own version of death, namely, a death that is inextricable from longing and the grief of leaving. This kind of grief is prevalent throughout Phillips’s body of work, but *Wild Is the Wind* refashions melancholic ruminations on intimacy in a way that leads to a particular kind of joy and hope, one that can be accessed only through eros, or the erotic.

One night when I was in conversation with interdisciplinary artist Jayson P. Smith about *Wild Is the Wind*, they said, “We often think of the erotic as something that is inherently sexual, but I want to move that to a kind of carnality, meaning of or relating to the body.” Smith then asked me what embodiment and the erotic meant to me. The question made me unravel in a similar way as when I read *Wild Is the Wind* for the first time with my grandmother. The first thing I thought of was danger. I feel most safe when I’m alone. When I’m alone, men can’t see me. Can’t touch me. Recently I self-pleasured and pretended that God didn’t exist. But then I thought of embodiment in the context of *Wild Is the Wind*, and *danger* was no longer the word but, rather, *return*.

“What does it mean to consider all returns to the body as a precursor for joy, or as joy itself?” Smith asked. What *does* it mean to treat these moments of intense embodiment that Phillips considers—the distinctly internal and external bodily act of making and consuming a meal or “getting slowly dressed again,” as in “If You Will, I Will”—as joy? My return to my body after assault, after reconceptualizing my notions of the divine, meant that I could touch myself and say it is good. That I can be touched and say it is good. That my body can be a site of return rather than danger.

Consider the first verse of the jazz standard, sung by Nina Simone, after which the collection is named:

My love is like the wind . . .  
Give me more than one caress,  
satisfy this hungriness,  
let the wind blow through your heart,  
for wild is the wind.

In the jazz standard, the wind represents the singer’s love, and in Phillips’s “Givingly” it is the same good, wild thing:

The wind was clean. The wind  
was a good thing, in his hair, and across our faces.

Some of the most erotic experiences come from nature, like the delight felt by the speaker here, who seems to feel as much joy and pleasure when he feels the wind across his face as he does in bodily contact.

In thinking about returns to the body, I also think about agency. Take “That It Might Save, or Drown Them”:

Two points make a line—but  
so does one point, surely, when pulled at  
once in two opposed directions: how  
to turn away from what’s familiar, for  
example, toward what isn’t  
  
defines hope well enough, but can define,  
too, despair . . .

Here we have a movement that will become either hope or despair, dependent on the context of this turning away. To deny oneself despair,

to move in a way that engenders hope, is a kind of choice. I can't think of a Carl Phillips poem where the speaker is without gestures of agency. They are all either making choices or standing on the other side of their choices. For example, "If You Will, I Will" includes an example of how even (and especially) in the moments after intimacy, Phillips's speakers assert themselves as their own authority:

*You've changed*, he says,  
getting slowly dressed again. *You don't know me*, I say, I say back.

Phillips's work is a practice of saying it back.

When I've told colleagues that I was writing a book review about joy and hope centering *Wild Is the Wind*, they are often surprised that I'm not writing about a poet like Ross Gay. But the kinds of joy that Phillips and Gay talk about are not as different as some might suppose: yes, there is a difference in the level of exuberance in Gay's work, but both writers write about sensory and sensual experience as pathways to varying iterations of joy and hope. It's worthwhile here to turn to Phillips's "Craft and Vision":

Always, if it's wanted badly enough, there's  
somewhere a findable veil just waiting to be lifted or pulled  
slowly aside, classic revelation, a word that itself at its  
root has a veil within it, somehow making the word feel  
all the more like proof, as if proof meant nakedness, as if one  
and the same—darkness  
and weather; force, and sex."

*Wild Is the Wind* is indeed a findable veil that, when we lift it, helps us find our way back to our bodies, to find agency in our bodies, and to find choice through a meditation centered in our individualized emotional spaces, even though emotions, in the moment, don't feel like something that you can choose. The syntax in these poems, the way that it spreads out and keeps us between two temporal possibilities, creates a meditative and erotic tension, a sense of anticipation. The reader has time to decide, to say either I'm coming with you, or I'm not. The body, here, is the conduit to these transcendent experiences; it is the only thing that will lead us there. It is the intermediary that we have.

SONJA LIVINGSTON

## A Final Blessing

*The Circus Train*. Judith Kitchen. Ovenbird Books, 2014. 180 pp. \$15.00 (paper).

Twenty years ago I sat with a dying friend in his hospital room. He'd experienced a degenerative disease for years and decided the time had come. It would take a few days for his body to let go. In the meantime his large Italian family crowded the hospital room, weeping and swapping stories. The assemblage of cousins and uncles and brothers gave way only when the priest we'd known since childhood arrived. Some went for a cup of coffee, others stepped outside for a cigarette and fresh air. I don't remember why I stayed behind. I just remember folding myself into a corner of the large room as the priest stood near the bed speaking in hushed tones. When he left, my friend called me over.

"Sonja," he asked, laughing. He was always laughing. "Was that Last Rites?"

I didn't answer right away. I was unsure about the propriety of telling someone he'd received a final blessing; didn't that mean the show was truly over? Beyond the question of etiquette, I was stunned by the realization that something as momentous as Last Rites—and even death itself—could succumb to the awkward and murky churn of the everyday. Shouldn't such moments be situated outside the realm of the ordinary? In movies and art, these sorts of scenes are elevated and crystal clear. The camera zooms in. Violins are cued. A nimbus of light descends. All these years later, my friend's blessing stands out for the granularity of its texture and how astonishingly ordinary even the most extraordinary moments can be.

Judith Kitchen's wildly intelligent final collection, *The Circus Train*, hinges on the writer's awareness that she is dying. Published in 2014, in the months before her death, these essays show that Kitchen is all too aware of the shocking incongruity of real time but refuses to be bound by it. Instead, the essayist turns largely to the past to contemplate questions of mortality, meaning, and loss. She's specifically concerned with

an image from early childhood: a train chugs through the valley in New York's Southern Tier while five-year-old Kitchen sits in a strawberry patch watching the "blue and yellow and lavender cars following the tiny plume of smoke, rounding a bend, suddenly emerging from a string of trees, . . . pulling the animals and acrobats and jugglers from somewhere to somewhere else."

Kitchen's circus train winds its way through her prose as the writer gives herself to the past, and it's worth noting that Kitchen's chosen form—a segmented novella-length essay spanning 122 pages—parallels this central image. Like a series of brilliant boxcars strung together, each segment brims with color and movement as Kitchen slips from the near to distant past, shifts points of view, and moves associatively from one dazzling image to the next, all of which lends the writing the kaleidoscopic quality of an old-time circus on opening day.

Though Kitchen returns to her illness only occasionally, it is always there, providing a quiet but insistent backbeat to her extended meditation. The tension in *The Circus Train*, however, comes less from Kitchen's terminal diagnosis than from the distance between the distilled past and the imperfect present, along with the staggering accretion of memory and the corresponding sense of just how quickly time passes. A given moment's inability to reflect its own momentousness may explain why Kitchen is so interested in memory. By its very distillation, memory washes the debris away. The tedious, trivial, and inessential clutter are forgotten. In memory, as in art, we're left with the emotional core.

But even memory is complicated. As Kitchen circles through space and time—landing in Scotland, Ireland, Brazil, western New York, Port Townsend—she realizes she could not have seen that circus train exactly as she remembers because there was no view of the valley from her strawberry patch. She's conflated two memories or lifted the circus train from another source and fused it onto her memory of the strawberry patch.

The fallibility of memory does not derail Kitchen's desire to pin it down. As Kitchen, clear-eyed and secular—perhaps even cynical—struggles with the mystery of the circus train, her belief that memory matters, that it is as wise as it is mysterious, grows more insistent. This provides the reader with hope that our own memories and the things

of this life, however minor, are worthy of attention and reverence. “It must have meant something as it moved across my horizon and vanished into the haze,” she writes of the little train. “It must have meant something, because it keeps on trailing its scarf of smoke.”

*The Circus Train* is Judith Kitchen at her best. The extended title essay and two shorter essays accompanying it offer a view of a woman looking back at her life and simultaneously present an essential but often overlooked pioneer of the lyric essay at the height of her power. Kitchen’s sharp gaze travels over the images of a life while her poet’s ear luxuriates in the pleasures of language as she weaves a tapestry of geography, literature, relationships, and family.

Despite the exquisite feast of memory that is *The Circus Train*, the writer’s present provides the platform on which she stands to reach us. Not just the startling appreciation of the quotidian in which Kitchen revels despite the cancer—the hint of moon through the skylight, the graceful movements of the soccer player on TV, the sound of the foghorn in the distance—but the cancer itself which, however unlovely, provides the occasion for the writer to whisper into our ear. It’s the present-tense writer straddling life and death who lassoes the reader with the image of a little train from seventy years before; who asks “Is this all there is? This quick, spent cartridge?”; who looks out from the page, saying: “Whoever you are, I hope you are watching the world go past. Your world, and your inner world within it. . . . Everything persists, even as everything changes.”

By embodying the present, even as it speeds through time, *The Circus Train* illustrates that the moments we inhabit are, in fact, momentous. Ordinary time can be—if not always beautiful—at least true. And more than anything, Kitchen is devoted to truth. Just as she refuses the cotton-candy pink of breast cancer awareness or platitudes about bravery, she acknowledges that she isn’t sure how or whether all the moments add up and what they mean. But they do mean something (this extraordinary collection attests to that), and Kitchen is right there on the page the whole time, so close you can feel the soft chug of her breath as she discusses Beckett and Frost, the strum of rain on the window, or the circus train forever winding through the valley of her memory.

When all those years ago my friend called me over to ask what the priest had done, I was too astounded by the confusion about his final blessing to see that the actual blessing was in the utter authenticity and vulnerability of the question itself and the way we touched when I finally said, “I think so.”

So too is the blessing of Judith Kitchen’s final work. She is real with us until the end. Her revelations, in all their beauty, confusion, and longing, illustrate the delight and power of her beloved essay form while supporting the book’s unspoken but central conviction that our days do, in fact, add up to something. The significance of our lives and its most lasting joys are found in the truth and heft of the words we share.

## “He Lived with Hope”: A Reconsideration of Stanley Elkin’s *The Magic Kingdom*

*The Magic Kingdom*. Stanley Elkin. First edition Dutton, 1985. Dalkey Archive Press, 2000. 317 pp. \$12.95 (paper).

Nobody reads Stanley Elkin anymore. He’s too perverse, too ironic, too wordy, too dark. I once heard Charles Baxter describe Elkin’s sixth novel, *The Magic Kingdom* (1985), as “diabolical.” Indeed, at first glance, it does seem like a cruel joke: Eddy Bale, an Englishman grieving the death of his only child from cancer, plots a Make-a-Wish-Foundation-like trip to Disney World for seven dying children. Elkin assigns these kids absurd terminal illnesses: Benny Maxine has Gaucher’s disease, sugar accumulating in his cells, or as he says, “I’m candy.” Charles Mudd-Gaddis has progeria, which makes him look (and act) like an octogenarian. Rena Morgan wipes away her cystic fibrosis fluids with skillful sleights-of-hand. Their caretakers are equally absurd: one nurse, Mary Cottle, who as a “carrier” for genetic disorders has been told not to have children, regularly sneaks off to masturbate. When I teach this book each year to a group of future therapists and special-education teachers, I warn them: “There is perhaps a gratuitous amount of masturbation.”

But Elkin wasn’t some sicko, or he was in a more profound way: he had multiple sclerosis and was disabled himself, attuned to the absurdities of America and our responses to the body. Long known for his “black comedy,” Elkin maintained that the term didn’t fit, that his work was shot through with a deep optimism. And I’d argue that *The Magic Kingdom* is the most optimistic of novels.

Of course it would be Disney World. When I was fourteen, my parents took my twin brother and me, something they’d promised for years, usually as an enticement to complete some disgusting task of manual labor. I’d clean out the black mold from the garage but find myself no closer to Florida. When we finally went, I was too full of teenage angst to enjoy it. But our trip did have its perks: my twin brother had severe

cerebral palsy and used a manual wheelchair, which meant we zipped to the front of the line for rides, ahead of the able-bodied saps who still had to wait in the heat. My brother had a fine time but was freaked out by Mickey Mouse, who as far as he was concerned was just some stranger in a mouse suit. He would have preferred a trip to the mall (he loved shopping and air conditioning). But what I remember most was all the people staring at us and smiling madly, as if to say, “How cute: a disabled boy at Disney World.” I could practically hear the singsongy “Awwwww . . .” So it’s no surprise that to skewer America’s sentimental attitudes toward disabled people, Elkin brings his motley crew of disabled kids to the most sentimental place on Earth.

Late in the book, a park employee mistakes the group of terminally ill kids for a troupe of actors just pretending to be sick. He fears it’s in bad taste: “He couldn’t deny the outrageousness of the concept. Only where was the art? What did it take, after all, to display the dying?” This novel navigates the ethics of representation, crossing lines less to violate than to illuminate. Written during the telethon era, in which nonprofits competed for donor dollars by broadcasting the supposed suffering of disabled children, *The Magic Kingdom* begins with Eddy Bale begging for starter money from the Queen of England, framing his son’s suffering for the Ask: “They turned his blood into dishwater. They caused him such pain, Monarch.” She writes Bale a check but orders him not to cash it, just to show it to his other marks. Though we might sympathize with Bale, who is insane with grief, the Queen teaches us to be wary. In his representation of disability, Elkin is less interested in disabled suffering, which capitalism inevitably turns into commerce, than in the rowdy thrum of life.

The novel then shifts focus to the true heroes of the book: the children. Elkin adopts a roving third-person omniscient point of view, giving each kid a unique subjectivity. Benny Maxine, fifteen, talks like a Borscht Belt comedian and would rather go to the nude beaches in Monte Carlo. A committed gambler, “he lived with hope,” betting that he’ll live long enough to see the next joke through. Like my brother, most of the kids don’t even want to go to Disney World. Instead, they obsess over getting into Room 802, the extra suite Mary Cottle has secretly rented to slip away for bouts of self-pleasure. Each child daydreams of what they’ll do there. One wants to order room service and

control his own diet. Another is already going through puberty and wants to explore her body. When constant surveillance by medical professionals and overbearing parents makes the whole world seem like a hospital, their actual “dream holiday” is their own eccentric privacy.

In one of the most poignant scenes, a nurse, Colin Bible, takes the children to view a Disney parade. But the parade is not Disney characters—it’s the bodies of the supposedly “normal” park attendees. Long considering themselves the grotesque ones, the children now notice the grotesque reality of the “normal” bodies in front of them, like a man’s “enlarged veins on his legs like wax dripping down Chianti bottles in Italian restaurants.” As often happens in this novel, the characters fall into Cockney slang: “It’s simply a case of your lumping, right grotty greedguts.” Then they just rudely point. With this comic reversal, this staring back, Elkin erases the distance between “normal” and “disabled,” revealing the normal body to be just as much of a fantasy as the Disney characters themselves.

But Elkin is attuned to the realities of the disabled body too, the daily aches and pains of impairment. It’s in this shadow of sickness that Elkin shines brightest, showing the joy of being alive. In one scene, Benny and Rena give the slip to their handlers in the hotel and flirt, mocking the guests and staff with teenage silliness. Later in the book, when the children sneak away with Colin to sunbathe on a lagoon island, Elkin drops the grotesque lens and describes the children staring at each other in a very different way: “And it was wondrous in the negligible humidity how they gawked across the perfect air, how, stunned by the helices and all the parabolas of grace, they gasped, they sighed, these short-timers who even at *their* young age could not buy insurance at any price, [. . .] how, glad to be alive, they stared at each other and caught their breath.” In their pending mortality, the staring shifts here not to ridicule but to delight in their bodies as they inhabit a moment of lyrical beauty.

Benny and Charles Mudd-Gaddis are the first to slip into Room 802, where they spy on Mary Cottle masturbating, which Benny declares is the “*real* Magic Kingdom.” It’s a scene of uncomfortable nonconsensual voyeurism, as if Elkin is casting disabled boys in a raunchy teen sex-comedy. But Elkin switches to less problematic fare when Benny returns to Room 802 with the other children, as they enjoy the room

for themselves. In a plot too convoluted to explain, they are rudely confronted by two vengeful park employees dressed as Mickey Mouse and Pluto, which sends Rena Morgan into a deadly coughing fit. On her literal deathbed, she declares her love for Benny. The trip doctor, so sure that he'd selected only children who could survive the trip, is incredulous but realizes that he'd "simply failed to factor her desire into the equation." She died because the doctor didn't consider the fullness of her life, that she could fall in love.

This book, in the end, is a comedy, which is a genre of survival. The hero falls but gets back up. The novel concludes not with a funeral but with an implied birth. Mary Cottle, mourning Rena's death, breaks her eugenic celibacy and procreates with Eddy Bale. In a tour-de-force monologue, she invokes the historical record of disability, from early mythic "monsters" to the "unfit" and "disabled" of the modern age: "Thinking, Now, now, goddamn it, *now!* And accepting infection from him, contagion, the septic climate of their noxious genes." Rather than give in to dread, they embrace the inevitability of human vulnerability. They choose to have a disabled child.

In this most unlikely, most hopeful of novels, Elkin shows how desire does not quit the body just because of a diagnosis. He shows his disabled characters as sick and dying, sure, but also complicated and funny and very much alive. As we approach the final days of the COVID pandemic, in which doctors have denied care to disabled patients because they lacked a "quality of life," Elkin's novel is now more relevant than ever. With his full-throated, language-drunk voice, the maximalist Elkin makes a profound case for disabled "quality of life," in all its flawed and overflowing humanity. In the end, he imagines that someone like my brother could be born and met not with mourning, not with pity, but with welcome for all the delight to come.