



# SHIRLEY

ISSUE TWENTY-TWO  
APRIL 2022

KYRA ENBY  
ASHLEY MCCURRY  
JESSICA WRIGHT  
MELISSA PUMAYUGRA  
ABIGAIL DENTON



AS SEEN ON TV

BY KYRA ENBY

### Lubegonol Television Ad

A haggard, cartoon brunette in her mid-thirties mopes into a cavern of a doctor's office. The color palette should resemble the inside of a colon, or perhaps grayscale. The Lubegonol label (a magenta swoosh and gold font that splits and pops from the design) displays prominently in the television screen's lower right corner. The brunette patient grimaces as she takes a chair opposite a wavy-haired doctor. The doctor's hair shifts at infrequent intervals, so viewers at home may grow queasy.

Voiceover (actor should possess a warm, pleasant baritone): Your medication eases your pain —

With a large grin the wavy-haired doctor pulls a draw string hanging stage left from the ceiling that causes a diagram of the small and large intestines to trundle down like a window blind. (The interpretation of the digestive tract should have enough detail to show how the system works and just enough that it may turn someone's stomach if the doctor's waving hair doesn't do the trick.) The doctor winks and motions to the cartoon diagram.

Voiceover: — but the pain relief your medication provides could leave you constipated.

Closeup of the female patient holding her stomach. She wears a pained, worried expression. She may even bite her upper lip as if she's tried (or is trying) to use a commode but can't.

Voiceover: You may suffer from Opioid Induced Constipation or OIC.

Zoom out to show the patient, doctor, and the diagram. They dissolve into OIC. The acronym should either be magenta or gold (one of the Lubegonol colors), so the viewer associates OIC, the problem, with the medication, but the viewer also gains a degree of separation from the words, opioid and constipation.

Voiceover: Don't worry. Lubegonol might be able to help.

The patient gulps and massages her belly. The doctor's office transforms into a park: pond, trees, sunlight. The color palette should contradict the office as best it can, which shouldn't be hard to do if the graphic designer chooses the inside of a colon for the office.

A magenta and gold capsule with arms and legs and the Lubegonol label joins the patient on a walk in the park. The patient and the capsule hold hands. She places her head on the part of the capsule where Lubegonol would have a shoulder if it had one.

Voiceover: You don't feel like yourself when you can't go. You can't do the things you want when your GI tract won't give you a break. Lubegonol will get you smiling again.

The magenta and gold capsule and the slightly younger looking brunette patient sit in folding chairs near a fountain for a pair of caricaturists. (Play up the woman's transformation so gullible viewers may get the impression that Lubegonol could reverse the aging process.) The two artists paint a picture of the woman and Lubegonol smiling.

Voiceover: Lubegonol can get your life back on track.

The capsule and brunette skip on a golden park trail. Birds flutter past them. Frogs and bunnies leap with them. All they need is a cat and a tin man and they could be following the yellow brick road.

Voiceover (read through the following as fast as you can while enunciating each word): Common side effects for Lubegonol include mild headache, dizziness, high blood pressure, irritable bowels, and, for some people, constipation.

The capsule and brunette patient run from the park to a black and white cityscape. They wave at passersby, and the passersby wave back. With each step they take, the ground shines gold, and the sky melts to purple.

Voiceover (read a touch slower than the previous warning): People over the age of sixty should consult their physicians to see if they're healthy enough for taking

Lubegonol. Women who are pregnant or could become pregnant should not take Lubegonol, and women who are breastfeeding should not handle Lubegonol.

The capsule and brunette patient reach the doctor's office, but this time the room is as bright as the park. The woman high fives her doctor and then the capsule.

Voiceover: If you're a patient on opioids and you suffer from constipation, talk to your physician today about Lubegonol.

## Pebbles from Heaven

A haggard, cartoon brunette woman in her mid-thirties sits on a toilet. Her legs are swollen from sitting too long. She types "how many pain pills make you constipated?" into Google. She finds a page of pain pill addiction results. She skips those. She goes to the second page and discovers an article on constipation relief sponsored by some company with a purple and yellow logo. When she clicks on the link, a popup window invades her screen.

A woman who looks like her shuffles into a doctor's office shaped like a bowel movement. A purple and yellow logo for something called Lubegonol is in the lower right corner. She grimaces and sits beside a doctor with epileptic hair.

Voiceover (some overpaid bastard with a voice too sexy for the toilet): Your medication eases your pain, but the pain relief your medication provides could leave you constipated. Don't worry. Lubegonol can help.

The woman slaps the close window option on her screen. "I don't need to see that shit."

That stupid commercial with the creepy purple and yellow butt rocket interrupts every other video she watches on YouTube. It makes her pee, not take a dump.

She adjusts herself on the commode, gets the blood in her thighs and aching knee flowing, and holds the phone's receiver to her mouth. "Alexa, call the doctor."

She waits a few moments for a receptionist with a warm, soothing voice to answer. "Doctor Cagada's office."

"Yes. I'd like to make an appointment." The woman tries to mask that she's calling from the toilet by placing her free hand close to the receiver. Don't want the

echoes to give her away. “I ran out of the stool softeners Doctor Cagada prescribed me. I still get constipated and haven’t gone in a few days.”

The receptionist types something on a computer. “I can get you in to see the doctor later today.” The receptionist’s voice sounds of disinfectant spray, an ocean from where she calls. “But I’d like to transfer you to the triage first.”

Before the woman can say she’d rather see the doctor, she hears a click and another woman who sounds like she has too much to do greets her.

“I have constipation and would like to be seen.”

“It says in your file that you had knee surgery over a month ago.”

“Yes,” the woman says. She flexes her right knee, and her knee doesn’t like it. “Can you get me that lube pill?”

“Are you still taking OxyContin?”

The woman flexes her right knee again. Pain shoots up her leg, and she rubs it out. “I’m still having pain. I wasn’t supposed to feel pain after the surgery.”

“You can see the doctor today,” the triage says, “but you will have pain after surgery, manageable pain. You need to switch to Tylenol or some other pain reliever.”

Her knee pangs, and she grabs it, almost dropping her phone. “I’m taking my medication once every four hours like the doctor said. I just need a lube pill.”

## We’ll Leave

A haggard, cartoon brunette in her mid-thirties — but her ashen face makes her look like she’s in her mid-fifties — lounges on a threadbare couch with a faint southwestern design. She sinks into the cushions’ grooves and listens to a nearby television because her eyes can only see in kaleidoscope.

Voiceover (a deep, distant voice): Your medication eases your pain —

The same pills don’t do it for her anymore: only Fentanyl or Dilaudid. Doctor Cagada won’t see her. She’s seen wavy-haired doctors, blonde ones, dark-skinned ones, and even some woman ones. When they don’t give her what she needs, she does something a little drastic and takes a hammer to her ankle. She’ll say that she tripped

and fell down the stairs again. She doesn't care if no one at the ER believes her story. A crushed ankle doesn't hurt as bad as her bum knee. Her throbbing knee may kill her.

Voiceover: Don't worry. Lubegonol might be able to help.

Who cares about taking a shit when you don't have the shit to take in the first place? She pops a few more pills, two or three more than whatever Doctor What's His Name said to take, and her eyes hold sandbags. She must close them. She floats above her threadbare Southwestern couch and goes kayaking.

Shallow breaths. Magenta and gold pills. Lubegonol can get your life back on track.

"Doc is sure, said my conditions are good."

She holds hands with a magenta and gold capsule in the park. They sit down so two caricaturists can paint them. "Open a Coke, Open Happiness." All smiles.

They prance back to the doctor's office, waving to people they meet because "switching to GEICO could save you 15% or more on car insurance." The people wave back. When they reach the doctor's office, the doctor isn't there. "We'll leave the light on for you," the purple and yellow capsule says as it turns off the light.

The capsule sidles beside her. It asks, "How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop?" It places one of its hands over the woman's mouth and nose and shushes her until she can't breathe.

*After several years in the military Kyra Enby came out as non-binary. They are an author of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. They live where the Platte and Missouri Rivers meet with their wife and kids. They hold a BFA in creative writing from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and their work has appeared in Menacing Hedge, Spank the Carp, Danse Macabre, The Door is a Jar, and other journals and anthologies.*



# PELVIC FLOOR PHYSICAL THERAPY

BY ASHLEY MCCURRY

First, Happy Baby. I am on my back, legs spread, soles of my feet toward the ceiling as the rise and fall of my abdomen radiate energy through my sacrum. Inhaling deeply: lotus flower blooming. Controlled exhalation: petals expanding, filling the room.

I am soon face down on the padded table in Child's Pose, my hot breath stifling in the oppressive cavern of an N95 mask. The breathwork is intended to stimulate the vagus nerve and desensitize a trauma response, taking my body out of "fight or flight." What she doesn't yet know is that I never actually make it to these crossroads.

*The freeze response is attentive immobility.* I believe I read this in an article once. My breathing synchronizes with the hum of the therapist's laptop in that sterile, intimate space.

I struggle to steady myself on all fours, imitating both cat and cow, trying not to tuck my tailbone. "That's what scared animals do," she says. My back arches, alternating both concave and convex motions in languid oscillations. I am contemplating the appeal of either salmon or manicotti for dinner while focusing on my breathing. We haven't been out to eat in a long time.

My muscles are as tight as banjo strings (she said). If these taut bands of tissue were to lose their tension at any time, slacking for even one moment, my entire world might unravel.

"You'll need two times-a-week for eight weeks, which will just about get you to your deductible," the therapist says.

I get in the car and peel the sweat-infused mask from my face, lotus retreating. I doubt my ability to pay for these sessions in addition to the recommended weekly counseling. I have endured this gnawing pain for several years at this point. We coexist, now.

On my phone, I read about a school shooting, not too far from my hometown. My sacral vertebrae assume their traditional curled position at the base of my spine.

I brace myself for another long drive home.

*Ashley McCurry (she/her) is a speech-language pathologist and MFA student, currently residing in the Southeastern United States with her husband and three rescue dogs. Her work has appeared in Bright Flash Literary Review, Flash Fiction Magazine, Six Sentences, Potato Soup Journal, Pigeon Review, and The Dillydoun Review.*





# A PAIR OF SHOES (AFTER RAYMOND QUENEAU)

BY JESSICA WRIGHT

In three hundred and fifty-seven seconds, the press, suddenly, were all over it. Their flashes and snares tripped beneath Lara's lenses. Alone in the bathroom, she closed her eyes long enough to steady their pulse, and then, when only a slow, green light remained, she thought in a crisp tone, *Really, Charles? An elephant could die in that response time.*

Charles arrived like a hand at the back of her neck. *There are no elephants out here, Madame President.*

His breath was warm, but she bristled. Kept it professional. *It was a pair of shoes, nothing more.*

Cameras hissed in her sockets.

*Even I have forgiven him.*

He chuckled like a river breaking on rocks and threw her mind back to a childhood spent on-planet. Social climbers everywhere. Gravity sucking her feet like iron filings to a magnet.

You had the most to lose. His voice a kiss crawling her inner ear.

Opening - The president and his wife live in an undetermined portion of the galaxy; both take lovers.

Rising Action - The president purchases a pair of expensive shoes for his mistress, and the media discovers it.

Risk 1 - The president's wife feels the media activate their tracing devices in her brain; she summons into herself her lover, who is a journalist.

Risk 2 - The president's wife provides her lover with information: that it was just a pair of shoes, that she has forgiven her husband.

Climax - The lover tells the president's wife that of course she has forgiven her husband, and she had the most to lose. His laughter reminds her of childhood, through which we learn that (a) she is not entirely satisfied with her current elevation, and (b) she has a long way to fall.

Conclusion - The lover's betrayal and his kiss feel the same.

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Trapped inside an egg that rolled in circles around the flaming mouth of a god, the silver birch stood alone by the lake. Six waves rippled by silently, and then a flurry of wings: the waterbirds rising. The wind caught in the branches of the silver birch and held still until the birds straightened like a tie against the dark blue of morning. The silver birch sent roots into the soil — exploring, teasing, securing, stabilising. A fox arrived at her base and lifted one hindquarter.

The silver birch shook her branches in the wind.

The fox peed.

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She had the most to lose, that was what he told her, his voice landing like a kiss in her ear, crawling down her jawbone into the soft beneath her tongue.

He would never have caught her off-guard if she hadn't been thinking at that moment of her childhood, the way the river smashed down into the rocks outside the house where she grew up on the planet's surface. His laughter reminded her of that sound, this was what did it.

Why was he laughing? Because she had said of her husband, *Even I have forgiven him*. Right before that, she had heard the cameras in her eyes almost pissing themselves with excitement. All because she had said, *A pair of shoes, nothing more*.

It was Charles' fault for arriving. His presence a warm hand on her neck. *There are no elephants here, Madame President*. His voice peeling her open.

He'd only mentioned the elephants because she had tried to mock him, to strip him in advance of the power he held over her. *Really, Charles?* She had thrown the thought out into the melee of recording devices chuntering in her eye sockets. *An elephant could have died in that response time*. Six minutes, it had taken, give or take a few seconds. Six minutes since her husband bought those shoes for that woman, and then there they were. The media, Charles, her ladyship standing alone in the bathroom. The mirror a dark slit of an eye.

*Jessica Wright lives in West Yorkshire. She holds a PhD in Classics and a graduate certificate in the History of Science from Princeton University. Her work has appeared in *clavmag*, the Michigan Quarterly Review, and *Foglifter Journal*. Her first book, about ancient Mediterranean theories of the brain, is due out with UC Press in 2022. Her work can be found on Instagram (@sublunam) and at [jessica-wright.co.uk](http://jessica-wright.co.uk).*



# MILKIES

BY MELISSA PUMAYUGRA

The weirdest nursing experience I ever had was actually after I quit nursing my baby, Grace. I was drunk, but I swear to you, had I been sober, I would have screamed.

I was sick of the middle of the night rousings, the crying, the pawing at my shirt, and I felt like 13 months of “milkies” was certainly more than enough to ensure I was a GOOD MOTHER. I wasn’t working quite yet, but that wasn’t the first plan. Get her off my teat then get her into daycare ASAP.

I was celebrating my newly-returned freedom with a night out with some new mom friends at a local Tiki bar. The Tahitian Tuesday special meant that for \$27 and a decent tip, I was accidentally hammered. Teri dropped me off once we realized it was nearing 11. “Someone’s gotta get Chris ready in the morning,” she claimed, but we all knew it was actually her the entire time. It was wishful thinking that we would have not only 3 hours off in the evening, but that Gary would also help out in the morning. Too much of a stretch.

Teri parked outside my home and I got out of the car. Suddenly I felt myself stumbling a bit as I attempted to unlock the door. I was suddenly grateful James had installed the number keypad. I pressed 2-3-4-6. It stayed locked. 2-3-5-4, finally releasing the handle. The next few minutes were a blur as I knew that my shoes, pants and then, all my clothes were likely strewn across the living room with the baby’s toys. I felt exhausted, but slightly buzzed.

“I’ll pick this crap up later,” I thought.

Sleep came easy, the down comforter already warmed with the heat of my husband and our sweet girl. I crawled in and that’s all I remembered. I must have slept for at least a few hours.

The next thing I know, I felt a small hand grabbing towards my shoulder, insistent. A mewling from a protesting baby. “Shhhh shhh shh,” I said, tugging the blanket up over my body. “Milkies are broken now, baby.”

A gentle sweeping of my arm again, then my neck, then the familiar tug of a strong

latched infant, I breathed a sigh, prepared to remove Grace and rock her to sleep in the adjacent chair. I moved my arm to embrace her and relocate, when instead, when I felt it's smooth head.

I opened my eyes and there it was, content like my own young, nursing in a cradled position. I started to panic. "What the hell is it doing?," but then I reasoned to myself, "Pulling it off me would cause more harm than leaving it." I stared in disbelief. "What is this thing?" Exhausted, I decided to just see what happened. I didn't want to move too quickly and startle the little thing. I didn't want it to potentially bite me or the baby.

So I laid there, nursing an alien. Then, as quickly as it latched on, the thing pulled away from my weary body. The sleek, gray creature had not only decided to nurse, but also release itself. I closed my eyes and feigned sleep, careful not to meet its giant eyes. "Maybe I'm too damn drunk for this to be happening," I reasoned. "This can't be real."

The Tahiti buzz over, I listened to my slumbering child and husband gently snoring next to me. I wasn't scared. I was just...confused. "Maybe this was a one-time deal," I thought. "Stopping in for a snack on the road," I reasoned in my silent head. Eventually, I was able to fall back asleep, clutching my baby's hand and gripping the covers over me.

I wasn't afraid, I was just tired. That is, until the little gray alien came back again, with a friend.

*Melissa Wabnitz Pumayugra is a writer based out of central Texas who enjoys a great tall tale and a medium iced coffee. Her work centers around identity, cultural phenomena, and embracing the past. Her photography and writing can be found in Blood Orange Review, You Might Need to Hear This, Oklahoma Today, Emerson Review, Hobart and many other obscure publications scattered throughout the globe.*



# THE LAKE

BY ABIGAIL DENTON

The lonely pine on the hill was struck down by lightning last night, but still Jakob will not take my concerns seriously. There's no telling how long we may be here, then.

The mornings here are always bright, gloriously gold and green. But these are deceptive. The water may glitter in the sun, but the lake cannot fool me. There is no treasure there, only darkness.

I saw the faces peering up at me from the depths.

Each day is the same. Jakob and his pack of scholars go out to explore the lake, dredge it for gold or material signs of the past. To study. To make them rich. To lord it over the others who have more clout with the university. To say, look: we are the favorites now.

And each day, they find nothing. They come home...quiet. I don't know my husband anymore. I don't know our friends. We used to spend hours with each other, spread out across the floor in front of the fireplace, letting the flames burn our backs as we gossiped, discussed the university, shared bits and pieces of the latest research we were doing. Jakob would smile at me from across the room, and I would know then that he loved me. I haven't felt warm in so long.

Each day, the light drains from their eyes.

Each day, the lake shines more brilliantly.

I wonder how long we can stay here before their souls are forfeit.

Jakob had a strange dream last night. He told me that he went down to the lake and saw me standing there. I had two beautiful stag antlers grafted to my head. They were covered in the remains of the body laid out before me. His body.

The way he stopped after revealing this, the way his eyes...I felt cold.

I'm sorry, I told him at the time. Now, I'm not sure that I am.

While they are at the lake, I read the notes they've left. Each day, there is hope that something will be found as they pull their heavy nets from the bottom. Each day, there is only mud. Their research shows that this lake once belonged to nobility, that an estate

was built up around it before it was pillaged and burned. They have done sonic readings, so promising. Of course there is something here, they argue. It must be buried deep beneath the silt at the bottom of the lake. Only natural, of course, that over time, sediment would cover it. As if the earth had something to hide.

They have mapped their movement out on a bird's eye drawing of the lake. It has only one dot where they have searched. The center of the lake.

It has been weeks.

I must snap them out of it. I must think about what I know.

Jakob comes home that night as all the other nights before. He kisses my forehead and murmurs something about his exhaustion. He and all the others sit at the kitchen table until I make something. Sometimes they mutter about me under their breath. I would resent me too, I suppose. We never used to be like this. I never used to feel like an outsider, like a housekeeper to an exacting jarl.

They eat and leave, and I can either wash their dishes or go with them. I follow them silently. They go to their beds in the living area and read. I stand and watch. Everyone is quiet. Sometimes I hear the scribbling of pen against paper, but that is all. Jakob has a desk, but he spreads his materials out on my side of the bed. He forgets to clean them up when he goes to sleep, so I have to choose between sleeping on the floor and clearing them off. I know he will be mad at me if I clear them.

Tonight, instead, I will read. What difference does it make when I sleep, so long as I am awake in time for dinner? My books haven't been used in so long. Why did I pack them if I wasn't going to study? I don't want to study, I realize sadly as I pull them out. I don't want to subject them to the scrutiny of eyes that are too tired to make the reading special.

Jakob raises his head when he sees that I am unpacking my books. His gaze makes them turn red-hot in my hands. They are not contraband, I tell myself. I am not being secretive. I am not doing anything wrong.

I sit at the kitchen table and read.

It is a book about herbs and their association with miracles and magic. There must be one that dispels magic, breaks one out of a curse, sends away whatever demons or sirens have hold over my family. There are many plants that do so, but they are so rare. Then I read that parsley was worn at weddings as a means of keeping evil spirits at bay. Parsley grows wild in this place. I have seen it.

I have seen it, I realize suddenly, next to the pine on the hill. My omen. The flash of light was for me. Meant to warn me and point me towards our salvation.

Outside, it is raining. I imagine the lake soaking up the water, getting stronger. I will not let it take them from me. I bundle up and hurry out. The sound of the rain is pounding, beating louder even than my heart as I mount the hill. I slip many times but manage to hold onto my footing.

I am soaked by the time I reach the tree, but it doesn't matter. There, beneath the charred, broken tree, is enough parsley to scourge all of hell. I gather it in my arms tenderly, unwilling to let drop even a leaf of it. The musty smells of rain and dirt and grass overwhelm me. As I walk back to the cottage, it is as if in a dream. I cannot feel my hands or my face, I am cold, the rain blinds me to all but the light coming from the cottage. I can hear the lake roiling. It knows its reign is ending soon.

Everyone is already asleep when I enter the house. Jakob shifts uncomfortably in our

bed full of books. His face is troubled, wincing every now and then as if in a bad dream. I smooth the wrinkles away from his temple. My hands are still wet, still cold. His eyes open. For a moment, he doesn't see me. It must be all light to him. He raises his hand to his forehead and dabs at it. He looks at me, he sees me now. His lips are quivering, and he murmurs, is it blood?

I go to put the herbs in the kitchen. Tomorrow will be the end of all this.

I rest while they go out to the lake, perhaps for the last time. I tried to surprise Jakob with a kiss on the cheek as he left, but he didn't acknowledge it. My dreams are empty. I am alone on the hill. Time has passed, because the split tree is now just a stump that I can comfortably sit on. The lake has long since dried up. There is nothing there but soil. I am free.

I wake up in the late afternoon and start dinner. The parsley chops up like a dream, filling the space with its heady perfume. As I add it to the pot, the soup inside groans, and I remember that our water supply has been boiled lake water. All the better, then.

I don't notice the group come back in, but by the time I am done, they are there, sitting grimly at the cold kitchen table in the weak light of dusk. Jakob stares at me blankly as I place the soup in front of him. Is this it? I know he is wondering. But he eats it all the same.

An idea comes to mind as I glance out the window at the lake, and I haul the pot outside and pour its contents in the lake. Stay away from me and mine. As the bits of parsley float towards the center, I feel calmer than I have in a long time.

No one is eating anymore when I return. They are mostly in their beds again, except for one who has passed out on the table. They look so tired. Jakob just gazes at me as I stoop down to give him a kiss. His pupils are dilated, his hands clench and unclench. I wrap my hands around his. They are cold. Tonight, I will sleep next to him. I will hold him. I will breathe with everyone here and remember the warm nights we spent at university, the congenial nights we will spend once more under no one's spell but our own.

The morning is cast over when I wake. Everyone is gone. When I go outside to find them, there is no one in the boat, though it has drifted out to the center of the lake.

Their bodies are in the water, more bodies than I recognize. Jakob's boots are caught in the reeds at the edge of the lake, anchoring him. Everyone else has floated elsewhere, like some sort of joyless jubilee. There is no blood, no sign of struggle.

Around mid-morning, the clouds part, the sun shines through, the lake glitters.

What have I to be afraid of now?

*Depressed, repressed, and dressed to impress, Abigail Denton is a fiction writer in Miami University's Creative Writing MFA program. She's fascinated and haunted by dreams, anguish, bodies, hopelessness, mental illness, magic, mythology, and religion. Find her on Twitter @thatlivingdeath.*