

Mouths to Feed

J.L. Austin

The mother-in-law unit moved closer each day.

It moved intelligently: at night, or in the early hours before I put on the first pot of coffee. It probably even moved quite a bit while I studied during the day, creeping forward an inch at a time.

But the indisputable fact remains that it moved.

To its credit, it waited patiently during the first month after Sasha found it. It sat along with our house—the main house—empty for some time as the lot was parceled, fought over, then reconsolidated by a family that had lived in town for nearly eighty years. The value was in the well, still producing long after the neighbors had begun pumping up nitrates and sand. Eventually the one remaining family member had no choice but to sell. Sasha, heady on some recent success as a project manager, had grabbed my hand and asked me to marry him and move into this place he'd seen while scouting investment properties. We could live in the main house, he explained, and rent out the extra unit. It would need a little work, but business had been slow for his old roommate Ben, who still lived in the area. Sasha was sure he would welcome the side cash.

When I saw the house it did not speak to me like it did to Sasha. Fixed to the edge of a tight turn, it looked like it had been thrown into the lot by centrifugal force. The paint had not been refreshed in a good thirty years and one of the porch pillars had been left in a state of mid-repair. Swallows flew in and out from the eaves, their nests as large as cow pies. Swabbing his face in the summer heat, the listing agent observed that the birds returned each season. *Hirundo rustica*, I thought, as we stepped inside the main house. The agent observed the original light fixtures and ran his hand over the clay tiles in the kitchen. He turned the vintage faucets off and on to show us they were in good working order. When he and Sasha moved to the next room, I reached out and jiggled the knobs to make sure that they had truly clicked back into place. The house, I felt, would not like it if we left it changed.

Sasha closed on the property later that month.

Meanwhile the granny flat rested, not even much of a flat before Ben showed up with his pickup and his new roommate to redo the sheetrock and put a good roof on top. Before they finished they found a dried-out wasp's nest in the walls and a lethal-looking electrical cable snaking through layers of bull thistles in the back. *Granny flat* is a strange phrase, I remember thinking as they cut the cable and threw it in the truck bed. As they relaxed in the shade, Sasha chatted with Ben about his plans for the unit. "Eventually it'd be nice to have a renter. I'd love to have you back, Ben, but it looks like you're good with your new guy here."

The roommate smiled and the three of them toasted.

“We might be better off with a gardener, anyway. Someone who could work for a discount. Or maybe do right and find a POC.” Sasha’s voice sounded funny saying *pee-oh-SEE* like an acronym. He was still commuting into work at that time, along with everyone else. As the men’s voices drifted into upstairs study, I wondered how Sasha planned on finding his model minority tenant. I even pictured him stalking the company’s campus, asking people of color whether they were looking to rent a granny flat from a newlywed couple in a rural-ish bedroom community. I wondered if, in other circumstances, he would have considered someone like me.

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We never did get that tenant, but Sasha’s mother, Elena, moved in three months after we’d closed on the property and social distancing became real. Sasha wanted her close to us, but not close enough to breathe the same air. He played the dutiful son, leaving groceries on her tiny stairs. On Sundays he’d slow roast a chicken and make up a whole plate just for her. “She likes being close to us,” Sasha told me when I asked about cabin fever. “And she doesn’t need a lot of space—more space means more places to fall.”

I must have looked skeptical. Sasha pulled me in and kissed the top of my ear. “She doesn’t need a lot of space,” he repeated. “Older people like to have things just within reach.”

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It was the first morning that felt like fall when I noticed the yard had changed. I had gotten up early and brought the coffee pot upstairs, where I planned on putting in a solid three hours. When I finally sat down I spotted condensation nibbling at the edges of the window panes. I put my hand against the glass; for the first time in awhile, it felt cold. As I went to pull my hand away the view seemed misaligned.

When we first moved in Sasha had made some attempts to reinvigorate the yard with some fresh saplings. A dwarf peach tree stood between the granny flat and the main house, looking as forlorn as ever. It also looked like it had been moved closer to the granny flat. I made a note to ask Sasha about it and glanced back to a chapter on proteins.

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That night we both lazed around in bed, listening to moths tap gently at the window, as I took notes in a secondhand copy of *King Lear*. There would be a literature component on the exams, and I had chosen *Lear* from the long list of suggested reading after finding an old college edition on the shelf. Sasha trimmed his toenails into a waste bin while I read.

“Pelican daughters.” I smiled.

“Hmm?” Sasha kept trimming but briefly turned his head my way.

“Lear calls his ungrateful children ‘pelican daughters.’ Look.” I pointed to the passage.

Grabbing the book with one hand, Sasha read the footnote: “It was once believed that pelicans nourished their young chicks with their own heart’s blood when food became scarce. Lear is suggesting that his cruel and ungrateful heirs will figuratively bleed him dry.” Chuckling, Sasha tossed the book back across the bed then crawled over to nuzzle me. “And what does our lovely biologist say? Is this strange case supported by the literature?”

I winced. Sasha still had the clippers in one hand, and I worried he would tip over the waste bin. I looked away and out the window.

“Did you move the peach tree?”

“I bet there weren’t many pelicans in the old days of London. What was it — medieval times?”

“Sasha.”

“Come here.” He grasped my leg and scooted me closer.

“The peach tree. Did you move it?”

“Why would I move a tree? I was the one who planted them.” He reached out and tickled my bare foot.

I wrenched away, jumping off the bed to move the waste bin. As I carried it into the bathroom, I heard him sigh dramatically behind me.

“My pelican wife.”

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The peach tree looked even closer to Elena’s house next day, but I knew I couldn’t rely on my eyes alone. Sasha was unhappy when he discovered the two yards of yarn strung between the peach and the granny flat. I watched him unknot the string carefully and put the wad into his pocket, which angered me a little. He his hand on my shoulder and guided me carefully away, bringing his voice down to a low whisper. “It’s just for a time, love. If we really start to need the money then we can revisit this. But right now it’s about making ends meet.”

I wanted to feel guilty but instead I just felt tired. The hand squeezed me gently.

“We’ve all got to give a little right now. Every little bit helps.” An inchworm was making its way across Sasha’s shoulder, translucent in the afternoon glare. *Paleacrita vernata*, I thought. Or *Aplocera plagiata*. The worm stopped moving; it had snagged itself in a loop of cotton. As I reached up to brush it off Elena’s face appeared in the kitchen window.

Go away, I thought. Then, a tug of worry that I had just spoken aloud.

“Was I saying something just now?” I asked Sasha. But he was turning and waving to his mother in the window.

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By the time I realized that the dwarf peach hadn’t moved at all, that it was Elena’s house all along, even Sasha had to agree that I was right. The granny flat had shifted closer with alarming speed, closing the distance between us by nearly two yards within a single week. Hiding behind my volumes of *Lippincott Illustrated Reviews*, I would sometimes look up and try to catch the house mid-step. I never did, but I spotted caught Elena in the window instead, staring as from a ship adrift.

Finally, Sasha reluctantly agreed to call Ben back out to the to see if he could find an explanation for a house on the move. Ben made a show of taking his surveying equipment out from the back of the truck but both he and Sasha eventually conceded quickly that the unit was, indeed, moving.

“I’d feel really bad if this was me. But the foundation still looks great, and none of the work should’ve caused the house to shift like this. Not the work that we did, anyway.”

“I know,” Sasha was reassuring Ben. “It’s fine. You did a great job.”

“I’ll get in touch with the county tomorrow. I’m not sure if they’ll be able to come down, with everything on lockdown. But we can still put it on their radar. For now, my guess is that you’ve got a dense clay grade right here—” Ben gestured with his bottle, and the two picked their way around the backside of the unit.

Feeling hungry, I went downstairs and made myself a cheese and pickle sandwich on white bread. Bringing it back upstairs, I watched as Ben and Sasha rounded the unit and grabbed a shovel out of Ben’s truck. Ben handed the shovel to Sasha, then turned and waved at someone in the window of the flat. Leaning into the effort, Sasha planted his foot and the shovel went into the ground. The dwarf peach came up easily enough. Ben picked it up by its skinny trunk and together they went to find a new plot.

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The next day I sorted five shelves of books before giving up and going outside. A small mound of dirt was heaped where the sapling had been, like a grave for a pet. Perhaps spurred by

the recent activity in the yard, the swallows had begun to abandon their nests for the season. As I stepped back onto the porch, I observed that the spiders had quickly taken over, leaving dirty webs to billow in the eaves. I got a broom from the shed and got to work, pushing the bristles up into the cracks to scrape out the strands I could reach. I honestly didn't mind spiders, but Sasha had never been keen.

As I worked I made up a tune for an 17th century ballad I had found the night before. Sasha had passed out quickly after sharing a final beer with Ben, so I had taken my laptop and blanket upstairs and spent the evening reading more about Shakespeare and Renaissance life. More searching had led me to an online archive of ballads. I had to quickly lower the volume when the sound of graduate fellows singing for long-dead lovers came piping from the laptop's tinny speakers.

While spinning my broom full of cobwebs, I began to hum, then sing a few lines from "Man's Felicity and Misery."

*My wife will never follow me,
Goe where I will, at home stayes she,
Though I from Morne till night doe come,
She smiling bids me welcome home,¹*

I paused to scrape the webs from the broom on the side of the porch. At that moment, I heard a noise from the other side of the yard. Squinting in the heat, I spotted a figure standing next to the granny flat.

It was Elena. Her neck strained from the yellowing collar of a house dress as she craned her head in my direction. Her smile lit up the daylight. With an outstretched arm, she clutched the peach sapling in one hand. No, not a tree, I thought. A broom. Still smiling, she began to sweep the eaves. The brittle wood splintered and clattered above her. Turning my back, I wiped the sweat from my eyes and tried to get back to work. But the blood froze in my veins when I heard her begin to sing.

*Her businesse she will nere neglect,
But brings all things to good effect;
Shees to her Babes a Pelican,
O shees the best Wife that ere had man.²*

¹ Song lyrics from a 1632 broadside ballad, "Man's Felicity and Misery," which can be accessed in full here: <https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20182/xml>

² See footnote one

Distracted, I didn't notice that I had bumped a swallow's nest until clods of dirt rained down on my head. I heard a small thud as something fleshy hit the porch. My head pounding, I squatted down for a closer look. A small, gummy-pink chick wriggled on the boards. I looked up at the partially destroyed nest. No mother. Still squatting, I picked up the tiny bird as it screwed up its sightless eyes. Its mouth opened and closed in a fixed action pattern of feeding.

It's too late in the season for chicks, I thought. Remembering the myth that human touch will force mothers to abandon their young, I gently reached up to put the chick back.

And nearly dropped it when I spotted the mites crawling up and down my wrists.

Breathing hard, I shoved the bird back into the mud-nest then wiped my hands on my jeans in a frenzy. The nest must have been infested. Pulling off my shirt, I ran straight for the shower.

The baby bird squalled soundlessly, and Elena kept singing from her porch.

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That night I fell asleep to the muffled murmur of a late-night meeting echoing over the speakers in the downstairs office. I dreamt that I was outside, trying to string a clothesline between Elena's house and ours. Sasha's shirts were in a basket, waiting to be clipped onto the line. With the first shirt the line dropped on one side, dragging the clean shirt through the weeds. The paper taste was already strong in my mouth. I itched at having to restring the shirts. Finding the the slack end trailing in the dirt, I walked around towards the front of Elena's house, looking for a place to string it back up.

As I approached her kitchen window, something shimmered in the grass that had grown up around the steps. A sour smell rose from the ground. At first I thought it was the leavings of a wild animal, but as I peered closer I started to gag. A pile of chicken bones sat in a puddle of glassy pink liquid. The puddle had coagulated; I could see small pieces of gristle suspended at the edges. A sudden breeze shook an inchworm free from a nearby tree; I watched as it landed onto a fleshless thigh bone and twisted helplessly in the clear bile.

I looked up from the mess on the ground. Elena was standing behind the glass, staring past me towards our house. Her mouth opened and closed, and I could see the white bone of her jaw just beneath the skin. Each her mouth opened, the foggy circle on the glass grew wider.

Downstairs in our house, a light went on.

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I nearly broke my mug when I dropped it into the sink the next morning. Five yards seemed to have evaporated between the houses overnight. I shouted for Sasha, who appeared in the doorway of the kitchen and followed the direction of my eyes.

“Ben called the county yesterday,” he said slowly. “They can send a geologist out to take a look, but he’s not sure they’ll be making it out right away—”

My hand tightening around the handle of the mug, I insisted that this thing with the house wasn’t right. That we might even be in danger. Sasha kept his eyes closed while I argued. When I took a breath, he opened them and asked: “Are you feeling OK? Because you don’t look OK.”

A tender vein pulsed beneath the skin on my temple. The room felt warm but the cold coming up from the original tile floor felt sharp. “No,” I said. The truth was that I wasn’t feeling well at all but I needed him to hear what I was saying. That her house, maybe both of our houses, were on a direct collision course. That we might wake up tomorrow and be able to peer straight into the darkened heart of his mother’s living room by looking through our kitchen window.

“You’re looking flushed, love. I can see the sweat on your forehead.” Sasha came over and held me by the arm. The kitchen seemed to wobble, so I took it but it held it stiffly so that he would know I wasn’t happy.

He kept talking as he walked me in the direction of the bedroom. “I think you should take it easy for the day. Stay in bed. Maybe do some reading. They’ve got me tied up in meetings all day but I’ll poke my head in in a few hours. Sound good?”

I rested on the edge of the bed, looking down. I told him that it wasn’t good, that we should go somewhere where houses didn’t move.

He stopped fiddling with the blankets and stared at me. “And where would we go?”

I found it difficult to swallow for a moment.

“There’s a nationwide pandemic right now and your face just screams ‘infected.’ You’ve got chills, and you’re dizzy, right? We can’t just check you into a hotel.”

A pandemic is global, I thought to myself. Out loud, I said: “Ben lives close by. We shouldn’t stay here.”

“We’re not putting this on Ben,” Sasha said firmly. “We’re going to self-isolate, just like the CDC says. Just like you would say if it were me. You’re getting some Tylenol and lots of water and if you get a temp, we’ll take you to St. Joe’s in town.”

Something sharp poked my heel; I lifted my foot and a toenail clipping skipped down between the floorboards.

“I’d rather go now,” I said.

He was quiet for a moment. “I canceled our plan.”

“What?”

“The health insurance plan. I canceled it.”

I stared, comprehending but not.

“I wanted the house paid off ASAP. I didn’t want us to be owing a bank years into the future. So I put a hold on the plan for now. I can take you to St. Joe’s but it’s going to cost us an arm and a leg. There’s really no way to spare that right now. *I* can’t spare that. We’ve got mouths to feed and a mortgage to pay.”

I rolled over, not wanting to look at him. Sasha left the room for a minute. When he came back, I heard the tinkling of ice cubes in a glass. He set the glass and two pills on my copy of *Lear*. The paper taste grew, along with my headache.

“At least drink some water,” Sasha said softly.

I reached up and grabbed the pills—Tylenol—and downed them, glimpsing my overblown iris in the glass’ reflection. I took a minute to swallow and swept the water ring off the book’s cover. The sleepiness hit me before I even settled back into the pillow.

“It’s like I said. We’ve all got to give right now.” He patted my thigh on top of the blanket and quoted a movie I once loved: “I’ll be right in the other room. And look—I can see you on that camera right up there.”

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I awoke with a start. Someone was knocking at the front door with urgency.

For a fleeting moment I thought that it might be the county geologist. I pictured him on the other side of the door with the face of our listing agent.

The knock came again.

I swung my legs from the bed, listening for Sasha. The voices continued to drone on from down the hall, behind the office door.

“Sasha,” I called. Then winced at the pain. The knocking paused as if listening for his reply. My head began to pound and my temple still pulsed under my finger.

I looked at the time. It was 9:43pm. I reached up to switch on the light and knocked over the glass and the book. The knocking restarted.

I suddenly became afraid, no longer certain that the county geologist was here to save our house. To get through to Sasha. Who knows how much distance Elena’s house had eaten up while I slept.

I got up to make my way down the hallway. Hearing me move, the knocking became more insistent. “Sasha,” I called. “I think Ben’s here.” As I neared his office, the chatter on the other side shaped itself into distinct voices I tapped on the office door. “I know you’re in a meeting,” I said. “But someone’s here.”

The voices and the knocking went silent.

Then the door to the office opened. Sasha stood with a look of expectant joy on his face. “Thank you so much for getting me” he said. “I’m glad you let me know.”

Something made me look past his shoulder. Innumerable faces of men and women stared back at me from his monitor, walled in their virtual cells. A woman with a ponytail near the center waved and a mustached man blew a kiss from the corner of the screen. Sasha turned and followed my gaze, smiling at the meeting attendees.

“She’s here, everyone. We’re all doing great.”

A single bead of sweat slid down the center of my back. “I don’t want to interrupt, but someone’s at the door.”

“Of course, love. I’ll take care of it.” He turned back toward the meeting attendees once more.

“Just a minute, everyone. I’ll be just a minute.”

Another round of cheers exploded from the computer speakers. Sasha stepped forward and before I could protest, wrapped me in a deep bear hug. “It’s alright,” he whispered. “It’s just for a little bit. At least we’re still all together.”

He brushed past me and strode to the front door. I stepped away from the the threshold of the office as a man shouted at me: “Get well! And come back to us soon!”

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I knew before Sasha opened the door who would greet us on the other side, just as I knew what the rest of August held. I saw a quiet procession of weeks in which the wells would fill with undrinkable water and the thistle would grow to record heights. Families lucky enough to be nearby would close ranks and live only for the safety and comfort of one another. Mouths would be fed and mortgages would be paid. At night, strangers would meet online and celebrate their collective resilience during unprecedented times. Hundreds of miles away, the last of our barn swallows would bank their wings towards a warm, southbound retreat. From where I stood, I could practically feel Sasha's hand trembling with childlike excitement as he turned the doorknob, enveloping our home in the old world scent of obligation and open-hearted return.

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