

Ann Stewart McBee
Not Even Max

In the morning Max is scurrying circles around the apartment. He's making a protein shake. He's sucking it through a straw. He's opening the blinds. He's closing them. Light in. Light out. *God's sake if he could just be quiet.*

He talks in bed. Asks if I like grits. Comments on the light shapes in the room. Tells me the shadows of the stuffed animals on my bureau look like a patch of mushrooms. His kisses are wet and fleeting. Just a trace of spittle and gone. Just the squish of our bellies and then quiet. Finally quiet.

Mom has read his palm, drawing a stick man with her fingers on his skin. He has a serrated life line. There are grooves in it, always full of sweat. When he's upset, he opens and closes his fists, like Dad did just before his heart attack. One day he will split and burst open like a puffball fungus you kick just because.



In the morning Max is picking at the plants. He is vacuuming the fern leaves off the floor. He is slurping coffee. He is flipping through channels at breakneck speeds. He is sniffing. The sun fills the room with puddles of light. *Do you mind? I'm sleeping.*

He is like a desert lizard crossing over the hot sand. Why can't he for God's sake sit still? Is there a parasite writhing inside of him? Is he about to transform into something like a frog or a newt? Has Mom put a hex on him? I am incensed that I can still smell incense on him.

Mom says his aura is pastel black. I think of a dead infant's bedroom. She burns candles for whatever Max has lost. He moves so much, she says, because he is running from something. She calls him Max-million. *If you don't mind. I can't hear the fucking television.*

In the morning Max is stuffing his backpack and zipping it up. He is opening and closing drawers, looking for a pen and paper in the deep throat of the junk drawer. He takes the persimmon-scented candle I was saving. I can't keep anything nice.

I picture my Dad's heart, full of holes, but still glistening. Mom's hand is around it, caressing. I picture Max's tongue. I think, what an ugly sound, the pulsation that comes with all this silence. *Turn it down, would you.*

At night, the light is pastel black. I can't sleep, and I can't read even a trashy novel properly. The words slip into a ravine in my mind and lay in a pool of stagnant water where nothing is moving. Not even Max.

Ann Stewart McBee was born in Kalamazoo, MI. She holds a PhD in creative writing from University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and served as an editor for *Cream City Review*. She has published fiction and poetry in *Ellipsis*, *So to Speak*, *Citron Review*, *Blue Earth Review*, and *At Length*, among others.