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EMPTY ROOMS  
LONELY COUNTRIES

WRITTEN BY  
CHRISTIAN A. DUMAIS

This free sample of EMPTY ROOMS  
LONELY COUNTRIES contains the short  
story “Geneva Street”.

“The Illusion of Swing” was originally published in **City Style Magazine**, October 1998, Vol. 2, Issue 9.

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“Mad Dogs” was published in **GUD Magazine**, Autumn 2007, Vol. 1, Issue 1.

“Counting Nuns” was published in **GUD Magazine**, Autumn 2008, Vol. 1, Issue 3.

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The Ghost Track on page 161 is “A Lot Like the Ones Back in High School”

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## GENEVA STREET

As far as I know, the house on Geneva Street is still there. Whether it still stands or not is irrelevant, because it still exists in my dreams, looking down at me as I approach with its dark windows, its archway frowning, its foundation absorbing my shadow.

My father used to live in it when he was a child. My aunt – my father’s sister – lived in the house when I was young. There are a lot of memories with the house. My memory blurs with my father’s. He’ll tell a story about something he did at the house when he was a child and I’ll think, that was me, wasn’t it? It was me who left pennies on the railroad that ran behind the house. It was me who rode the bicycle down the hill towards the railroad and hurt myself. It was me who woke when a train passed at midnight and wondered if a drifter would crawl through my open window.

The building next to the house is where the first carousels were built. Sometimes, when I played in the backyard, I could hear the music that the horses marched to in circles. The music made the winter air ambiguous and the summer air dreamlike. There was a little rose garden behind the house where I’m convinced I saw my first fairy, a girl with large orange Monarch wings, and she was collecting fallen rose petals to put in her book.

There was a lot of magic at the house on Geneva Street. It was something I could easily identify with. My hearing impairment allowed me to see life at a distance and magic sort

of bloomed in the void in between. I was young enough to know that magic was good, but not old enough to understand there was such a thing as the bad kind of magic. I just knew that the house was a good house with a few bad corners. The corners were fuzzy and vague and intangible, and if you weren't paying attention, you could get lost in them.

I remember my aunt cooking in the kitchen and telling me about a ghost that she once saw there. It was wandering in the living room at the front of the house. I avoided the living room for a while after that, but eventually my curiosity got the better of me. I really wanted to see a ghost. I thought of ghosts as imaginary friends that people could see. I wanted to talk to one. Maybe it would want to play with me.

There was one place in the house I didn't like. When you went downstairs into the basement, there was a parlor if you turned left. It used to be a kitchen when my father was little, but my aunt had turned it into a salon. There was a large barber chair that would rise if you pushed down on the handle. Before the parlor, to the left of the doorway, between the stairway and the parlor wall, was a little closet. The doorway to the closet wasn't exactly even, as if it were carved out, and instead of a door, there was a red curtain. The closet was tiny and there was usually only a broom and a mop in it. It looked like a room that shouldn't be there, like a weed pushing its way out of a crack in the asphalt.

The first time I noticed the closet, I was exiting the parlor to go upstairs. My eyes caught something red and when I turned, I saw the curtain shifting suddenly, as if someone or something had closed it quickly. I stood there a minute just staring at that curtain. It looked like the kind of curtain you saw at a movie theater or a stage play. I thought to open the curtain but I ran upstairs instead.

My first dream with the closet started like the last memory, only when I looked at the curtain, there was a mime with his head sticking out of the curtain. His face was a perfect white and his eyes were huge and yellow. I could only see his right hand, also white, which held the curtain. He brought a long pale finger to his black lips, signaling me to be quiet. Then he brought the same finger forward and beckoned me to come.



The finger moved back and forth mechanically, as if he were scratching the chin of some invisible creature.

Despite the impossibility of the situation, I made my way towards the curtain. The crime of any dream is its ability to make you do the things you know you shouldn't do. With every step I made toward the curtain, his smile grew more and more, his lips stretching to impossible lengths, wrinkles folding over one another upon his cheeks. And when I made it to the curtain, I looked up at the mime. He was taller than I thought. He opened the curtain. The small closet was not there, instead there was only darkness. This didn't bother me though. Instead, what began as a tickle in my brain and expanded into panic was my inability to see the mime's body. I took a step back. The mime's smile faltered, an involuntary gesture that made his face turn ghastly. His eyes turned to slits and darkened. His hand reaching out for me was the last thing I saw before waking.

I took the dream personally in the way that only children can. I never trusted the closet after that. Though I kept refusing to acknowledge it, I still felt myself drawn to it, like my tongue gravitates to a loose tooth. Whenever I passed it, my eyes would be fixed on the curtain. And while I was curious enough to approach the closet, there wasn't enough courage in the world for me to open the curtain.

The closet was the first thing I can clearly remember hating.

I'm thousands of miles away from Geneva Street today, a continent and an ocean separates me from it, and yet, I'm only a step away from its shadow when I'm sleeping. In my all-too-frequent dreams, I'm wandering in the house on Geneva Street. Ghosts are floating all around me. The ghosts are harmless. We laugh together sometimes. I walk into the kitchen. I look to the door which leads to the basement. The ghosts tell me not to, but I never listen. I open the door and descend the small set of steps. If I go straight, I can walk out a door to the backyard where there's sunshine and horses dancing in circles to music and fairies flirting with roses. I turn left instead, to the basement, and of course, the closet. Once I'm there, I pull back the curtain, because in my dreams

curiosity is the same as courage. The closet is now replaced by another set of stairs leading downward into darkness. I follow the steps. It gets darker and darker.

The darkness gets thicker the farther I go. The absence of light becomes suffocating. The stairway feels endless. The air is hot. Eventually, there's a light far below. The presence of light is the invitation for the noise to begin; scratching sounds usually followed by shrieks. I keep moving even though I know what's going to happen next. When I reach the light, the source of the sounds will be revealed. I've seen this creature hundreds of times by now, and it hasn't gotten any easier with time. Once I'm standing in front of it, the creature moves with the stealthy precision of an eel. The creature grins and opens its mouth as it moves closer. I can hear its breathing and when it blinks, the sound of its eyelids sliding across its yellow eyes suggest something juicy.

There are slight variations to this scene. Sometimes the creature isn't in the light; instead it descends the stairs behind me. Sometimes, the creature isn't there at all. In its place is a cardboard box of all the things I've lost in my life. Socks. Toys. Books. Odds and ends. I go through the box carefully. Each item I discover brings me closer and closer to the present. Finally, when the box is empty and all of my things sit on the floor, the creature is standing next to me – only he is in the shape of a man. He is the mime, but without his makeup. His skin is black as diesel. His eyes are still yellow above that same horrible grin. He has a long tail that taps the walls behind him. He picks up a watch or a tie or a lost memory that smells of alcohol. He sniffs it heavily, his yellow eyes rolling up in his head, before turning away and gesturing me to follow.

There's this room in the distance. An open doorway with a light inside that flickers and moves back and forth, casting shadows that twitch and stretch all around me. There is someone in there. I can hear crying. Sometimes I don't move, sometimes I take a few steps forward. If I get close enough to the room, the mime will stop and look at me with an expression bordering on pity, his grin nowhere to be found. Sometimes I think that if I enter the room, the dreams will

finally end, and other times I think that if I enter the room, I'll discover another set of stairs descending into more darkness.

There were birthday parties at the house on Geneva Street, slumber parties, games of Hide and Seek that went on forever, adventures at the railroad track, cloud gazing...but all these memories of sunshine and laughter are overshadowed by that closet in the basement and the creature that lives inside of it. My mind has transformed these beautiful memories into some kind of dark mythology.

Some nights when I wake up, I can't tell where I am or when it is. I feel like I've been here before for something that hasn't happened yet. If I pull it apart and decipher the details, it fades away in its own absurdity. Other nights, in that brief clarity between wake and sleep, it feels like it's not a mystery at all; I just need to avoid the basement and walk outside into the sunlight instead. Perhaps the fairy will be waiting for me. Maybe she and I will have a laugh about all of this and ride the carousel until the dizziness and laughter wakes me up.

There was this woman from a few years back. I met her at this party. To be honest, I wasn't sure how I got there. The house was massive. The people were all nice, but strangers. At one point, I went to find a bathroom. Each door I opened revealed a bedroom. Eventually, I came across a reading room. She was all alone, standing there like she was waiting for me, with an open book in her hand. She said she needed to get away from all those people, and before we knew it, we had spent the whole evening talking to one another. When we finally left the house, we learned that the party had ended hours before.

Months later, I ended up telling her about the dreams. I didn't have a choice. It was dark and I could feel her next to me in bed. Her hand was stroking my face. My heart was still beating too fast. My throat still aching from the scream I carried with me when I woke. When I was done telling her about Geneva Street, I asked her what she thought it meant.

She didn't say a word.

I wanted to tell her that I was afraid, that I was tired of being afraid of memories. I also wanted to tell her that I loved

her even though I knew it wouldn't be enough for us, that we were over before we even started. I had this brief image of one day opening the box and seeing her in there, and my eyes were overwhelmed with tears. I wanted to tell her so many things, but the water in my eyes made me feel stupid and weak, and the way she pushed closer and held me so tightly, like she was keeping me from falling, somehow had me feeling lonelier than I've ever felt. I thought to myself, I am here, but I am not here.

It was quiet for a few minutes. Her fingers traced the path of one of my tears to its end. I could feel her mouth trying to say something, but instead she let out a heavy sigh. She kissed my forehead again and again. This was when I realized she was crying too. I felt her feet touching mine, only it felt more like a hand.

Finally, she said, "Your life would've been so much simpler if you hadn't found me in that room."

## **REVIEWS OF SELECT STORIES:**

"[Counting Nuns] is quite engaging . . . you're bound to appreciate the humor and true-to-life inner dialogue Dumais presents."

**-THE FIX**

"Christian A. Dumais's "Counting Nuns" . . . contains a richness of language and imagery that many fictional stories lack. A perfect example of the editors taking a risk publishing an unusual piece that pays off."

**-THE FUTURE FIRE**

"Mad Dogs" by Christian A. Dumais . . . chronicles his night out drinking with some visiting Secret Service and Air Force Two staff, a night which ends with him sitting in the apartment of two Polish lesbians. You'll have to read the essay to find out how he gets there; but what's great about this piece is that it makes real life seem just as strange as the fictional realities depicted in the rest of the magazine."

**- WHISPERS**

EMPTY LONELY  
ROOMS COUNTRIES

collects 27 heartbreaking and funny short stories that span two continents, five countries and multiple universes to explore love, loss and redemption in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

PAYING  
THE TAB

A prophet says be with the ones you love and the world will sort itself out. It's good advice, but all I'm seeing are a bunch of people too afraid to love. The clock pushes closer to midnight and they're afraid of rejection. Two pounds of anthrax with the potential of killing one-hundred thousand people, dirty bombs, mutant flues,

**2+2=5**

written on the walls, a collapsing economy ...and you're sitting there still afraid of a two-lettered word.

MAD  
DOGS

Why did the Secret Service take the time out from protecting the second most powerful man in the world to completely screw up my life?

**Were they under  
orders to doom me?**

THE ILLUSION  
OF SWING

I know at dawn I will hate myself because I will have to come to terms with the fact that we could have been starting a REVOLUTION or perhaps a new RELIGION, but instead we got DRUNK, SLOPPY and STUPID inside an era NOTHING like our own.

OCULAR  
SINISTER

I thought about my past and how it felt like a succession of UNIVERSES created one on top of another, shaping and altering the architecture of my life, removing details—here, adding things here, until I couldn't quite place what was new, what was old, what was TRUTH and what was MYTH.

