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Code Violations: *Chicago Review* in the 1990s

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Code Violations: *Chicago Review* in the 1990s

In his introduction to *Chicago Review*'s fiftieth anniversary issue, former editor David Nicholls writes, "Andrew Rathmann, Angela Sorby, and I met throughout the winter of 1996 to read through the archive of back issues and report to each other on what we had found. After about three months of reading, we came up with a list of intriguing works." That three months of reading is now a blank spot in my brain, even though I am the aforementioned Angela Sorby. My most vivid memories of *Chicago Review* are not textual but spatial. During the 1990s, the magazine was edited from the top-floor ex-bedrooms of a decrepit former private residence called Lillie House. Lillie House had an unsafe, Gothic ambience; there was even a black cat with prominent fangs who lived on the first floor, tended by a coterie of women from something called "The Math Project." Entering Lillie House felt like entering a parallel universe, *at* but not *of* the University of Chicago. The U of C, circa 1990, was not the type of place to harbor cats, fanged or no. It was capital S—Serious, in the throes of critical theory and the canon wars.

Many of us at *Chicago Review* were graduate student poets and fiction writers who had inexplicably chosen to attend a university with no graduate creative writing program. Instead of sitting in a circle critiquing our own poems Iowa-style, we found ourselves doing something even more instructive: reading contemporary poems by *other people*. The mail tray overflowed with odes, panegyrics, pantoums, and of course loads of confessional free verse. It was great to "discover" unknown (to us) writers like Robert Daly—whose current renown as Director of the Kissinger Institute has perhaps eclipsed his status as the author of the neglected libretto, "The Passion of the Aardwolf and the Spoon." By the time I became Poetry Editor, after two years on the staff, I had half-inadvertently developed an aesthetic sensibility derived from funny, frank poets like Denise Duhamel, Adrian C. Louis, and David Kirby. This sensibility informed our 1994 pop culture issue—in which Duhamel voices the fears of a disabled Barbie doll, Louis involves the Seven Dwarves (focus: Dopey) in his sexual fantasies, and Kirby snags a bit part in the Jonathan Demme film *Something Wild*.

Of course, my sensibility was not the only one incubating. *Chicago Review* was a collective project that enabled each of us to give and take what we needed. Devin Johnston, the poetry editor after me, moved the magazine in a more cerebral direction, from three-chord garage rock to Erik Satie. But this, as ex-staffers have often noted, was and is the vertiginous genius of the magazine's editorial model. Devin and I both went on to publish poetry books that bear the deep imprint of our education(s) at *Chicago Review*, and I suspect other poets from our era—such as the versifying juggernaut that is

Maureen N. McLane—would say the same. Insofar as grad school training can sometimes involve a lot of disciplinary parroting, *Chicago Review* was not grad school. The magazine nurtured the creativity of its editors and contributors precisely because it inhabited an invisible campus space full of literal and metaphorical code violations. In the future, as American universities become ever more data-driven, a U of C forensic accountant will stumble upon the *Chicago Review* files and ask: *What the hell happened here?*

And the answer to that question is, of course, *read the magazine*. I particularly recommend “The Passion of the Aardwolf and the Spoon: A Libretto.”

Angela Sorby