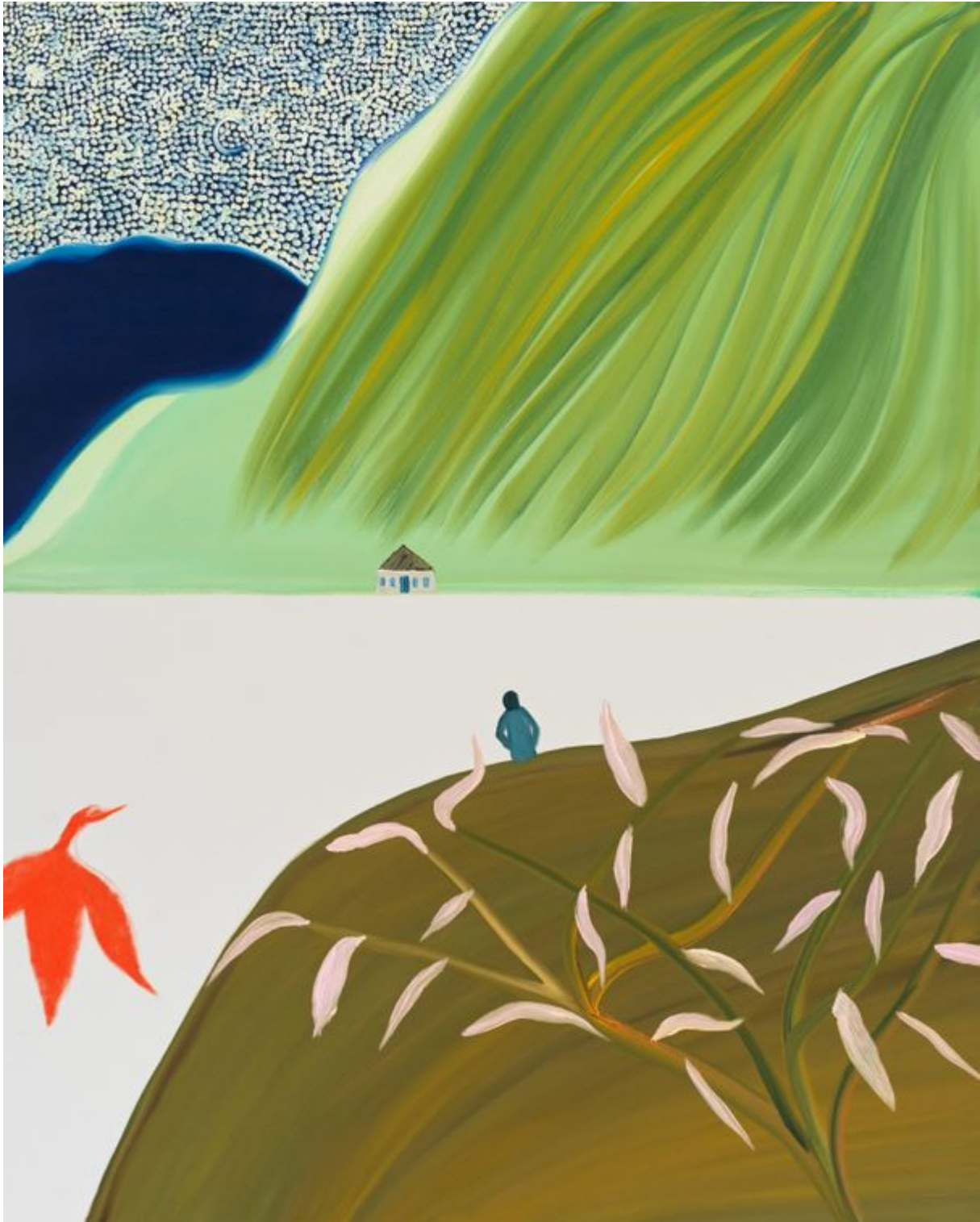


Three Made Two

by [Edward Lee](#) (November 2023)



See You on the Other Side, Matthew Wong, 2019

The dog almost as big as my daughter sits in the back garden from I know not where; none of our immediate neighbours, as far as I aware, own a dog, and this is a dog you would be very aware of. The remains of the bird feeder are strewn around his wide form as he chews through bird food, a ravenousness shine gleaming deeply in his eyes.

I watch him for a moment from my desk, idly noting, not for the first time, that I should move my desk from the window least I be distracted as I have just been, and the work I am doing will never be done, this working from home considerably more difficult that I imagined it ever could be when I switched to it a handful of months ago. I should be annoyed about the bird feeder being broken, for it is only a few weeks old, but it cost little—the food itself cost more—and a new one can be easily bought; I know that I should care about the money wasted, no matter how little it might be, but such a concern seems a distant thing to me, or at the very least an upset being experienced by someone else.

I wonder should I move him, this ridiculously big dog—and I know it is a he, for his equally large testicles are on display, his hind legs splayed recklessly—or leave him be, allow him to sate a hunger his owners seem unable to cater to, if he has owners or not; he is without a collar, but his coat shines with health, nor does he look underfed, and I then wonder if he might be a rescue dog, vaguely recalling reading that such animals will grab food wherever and whenever they can, least there be no food when they are in fact hungry, their previous life of neglect teaching them lessons they are unable to forget.

My daughter will soon be home from school, and there is a chance she will, upon seeing him sitting there, approach, her innate kindness unable to see the hard hunger of his sharp mouth or that ravenous shine in his eyes, which, if I saw it in a human's eyes, I would call madness, the person in question as detached from reality as a mind can be and still

essentially function; a cruel supposing possibly, unfair to humans as well as the dog, but that is what I see and think as I watch this dog sit amongst the broken remains of the bird feeder, wet pieces of bird food falling from his mouth.

It is this last possibility that decides me, the chance of danger to my daughter. And if not danger—though I cannot imagine this dog to ever be harmless—then disappointment, for she may believe this is the dog she was promised by her mother before the cancer took her last breath, a promise I have been unable to follow through on, for the very thought of it causes the last hard months of my wife's life to play vividly across my memory and I do not need to be reminded of all that I cannot forget but try to every day if only to get through that day without weeping until my daughter is asleep and I curl into myself in the bed that seems wider than the world without my wife beside me.

A dog would be good for her, I admit, but, despite my inability to touch the notion without a need to weep, we are both still trying to adjust to this new life of ours—though I believe my daughter has adjusted better than I have—this life of two instead of three, her return to school only recent, with that return aiding her adjustment, being surrounded by routine and her friends again, while I now work from home so I can be here when she goes to school and when she returns, be present whenever she needs me, with the formlessness of my days, no matter that the work I do has not particularly changed, seeming to sharpen the already keen edges of my grief.

A dog would be good for me too, perhaps, though I have never owned one before, and I have no doubt that the bulk of its care would fall on me. The house seems acutely empty during the day, when my daughter is at school, silent too, but for whatever sounds I make myself as I sit at my desk, my fingers on the keyboard, my sighs and shifts in the chair, the occasional work call or zoom meeting the only notable

disturbance of that silence. When we were three instead of two, I would not even be here myself, nor my wife for that matter, the two of us working full time jobs—how silent must the house have been then, a version perhaps of a tree falling with no one to hear it? —which is yet another worry settling itself deeply inside me, two wages reduced to one. And this wage of two reduced to one makes my seeming indifference to the broken bird-feeder, the waste of money, the cost of buying another one—which we will, for it was my daughter's idea to buy it in the first place, her way, I believe, of saying that she can wait for her dog without saying it—all the ... stranger, is not the right word, but at the moment I can think of no more suitable one; and stranger, as wrong as it is in this scenario, seems to be a perfectly apt description for all that our life has become in the wake of my wife's death, stranger, no longer normal, or normal as we once judged normal to be.

I step into the garden and shout nonsense at the dog, guttural sounds like I am trying to learn some previously unknown language. In my hand I hold a sweeping brush, not to hit him, or even threaten him, but to have at hand in case I need to defend myself; how do I know that he won't attack me, though I can easily imagine the damage he could cause to me with those large teeth? The dog barks in reply, making a mockery of my own attempt at sounding intimidating, the deep rolling rock of his roar—and it is indeed more roar than bark—causing my body to tighten in fear. He stands—Christ he is huge! —and stares at me. I can see him deciding whether or not to lunge for me, the cold calculation behind his madness-filled eyes, and my hand tightens around the sweeping brush, its wooden handle feeling embarrassingly thin and fragile as the dog stares at me. I wonder how far I am from the back door—why did I not remain standing at least within the relative safety of the doorway? —but I dare not turn to look, least the dog takes this as some opportunity to attack. I feel like a fool, standing there, feeling this fear of this dog, a fear so sickeningly similar to the one I experienced when the doctor

explained the shadows on the x-rays to my wife and I, and the gentle surety in which he told us of the time left, the knowledge that I would be losing the love of my life, and, perhaps a deeper wound, I would not be able cope without her, unable to both comfort and raise our daughter on my own while trying to survive my own grief, almost as though I was being given a taste of the pain that was soon to be bestowed upon me.

In the weeks after that sobering visit to the doctor, my wife, while succumbing to her untreatable cancer, began to organize all that I would be solely responsible for, telling me where various paperwork was kept, what businesses we had accounts with, numbers to ring, all the things that make up the life of a family, most of which, I am embarrassed to say, I genuinely did not even consider before then, she always the driving force behind our family. She even went so far as to make the arrangements for her funeral. And through it all she repeatedly told me I would be fine, the two of us who be fine, reassuring me when she was the one who was dying. Once, after reassuring me for the umpteenth time, she said she would be looking down on us from heaven, even though neither of us had believed in such things; our daughter did believe in God and heaven, in that way only the very young can, wholeheartedly and complete, and I think what my wife said about looking down on us from heaven was spoken through the belief of our daughter, or maybe she did begin to be a believer, her approaching death turning her mind favorably to such thoughts, though I never asked her—I am not entirely sure I registered it at the time, swamped in shock and grief as I was, the words and their meaning only making themselves fully known after — and she never mentioned it again, that one time obviously enough for her.

Tears blur my vision as I stand in the garden, the dog nothing more than a shimmering blob of brown and black. I do not raise my hand to my eyes in case this could be perceived as some

attack to the dog who continues to bark at me, a note, I swear, of indignation, heavy in it as though I am the one intruding upon the dog's home, the house he and his wife bought while their daughter was growing inside her womb, their life of three soon to begin, to begin and not end for decades—decades! —to come. I could almost laugh at the ridiculousness of it all, but laughter seems as distance to me as my concern for the broken birdfeeder.

And then, his decision made, the dog turns and leaps, with little effort, over the wooden fence we built to replace the original metal one that had been rusted and broken—the garden squared, I always used to say though why I did I cannot remember right now—bird food scattering from his mouth, returning to his home, maybe, or to somewhere else to find food to ease the hard and huge hunger inside him. I rise my hand to my eyes and wipe my tears away, feeling no desire to return to my desk, or do anything but remain standing there.

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Edward Lee's poetry, short stories, non-fiction and photography have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen*, *The Blue Nib* and *Poetry Wales*. His poetry collections are *Playing Poohsticks On Ha'Penny Bridge*, *The Madness Of Qwerty*, *A Foetal Heart* and *Bones Speaking With Hard Tongues*. He is currently working on a novel.

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