

# LOVING MONSTERS

STORIES

LAURA  
EPPINGER



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*Loving Monsters*

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To Nate,  
who doesn't appear in these pages at all.

What if I've been the monster all along?



# ENERGY FROM LIVING THINGS

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I examine the head of lettuce, but I don't know what he wants me to see. Broad romaine leaves the color of spring rest outside his canvas shopping bag. A few minutes ago, John shouted because I'd placed my slicker on the wrong hanger, or through the wrong loop inside the jacket; it's hard to tell. As I kicked off my muddy boots before stepping through the door, I thought I was following the rules, but I missed another, and this time instead of lecturing, John yelled.

He pouts thin lips at me now, pale eyes seeking confirmation. “The roots,” he says.

I recognize a clump of brown beneath the white neck of the bunch. “That’s sad,” I say. I’m sad, waiting for an apology I know won’t come.

“Do you think it’s alive?” John asks, running one long finger over a single hair of root. “Should we plant it in the alley?”

Just behind his shoulder, the blades of his knife collection catch a ray of sunlight. Our apartment windows are smothered by blackout curtains to help John’s sensitive eyes, though sometimes a spear of light peeks through. I’ve often been scolded for slicing back and forth with a paring knife, or using a ribbed one to make smooth drops with the blade.

Serrated, this task. I pick a knife and sever the roots from the leaves in a few jabs more than necessary, to justify my blade selection.

“Thank you,” John says. “I still hate that we need to take energy from living things to survive.”

He cradles the leaves in his bluish-white

hands and nurses them all the way to the fridge, where they will live in the crisper, always positioned on the second shelf—no exceptions. I tuck the clump of roots into the composter under the sink, using my left hand as a bib to catch any microbe of dirt that might fight free. Nothing will fight free, not in this apartment.

I stuff the loose oat (reusable) bag into the grain tin and tuck the agave syrup on the shelf, exactly where its predecessor sat.

John will decompress from errands with episodes of anime I never get to pick but always have to watch, because being apart makes him worried I'm angry. My body sits in its usual spot in the knobby couch, but my brain doesn't come along.

If I could see my sister privately, I'd crow to her that John treats the fucking lettuce gentler than he treats me. *What'd you expect, she'd say, dating a lifelong vegan.* We'd freeze our tits off under puffy down jackets—yeah, it's mean to the ducks to use their body parts, but I like being warm, too—and will each cigarette to last another drag longer as we sit in the mall parking lot, wasting the few

minutes between our appointments for pedis.

There's no good reason I can't see her. It's that John will never entertain—it's too overwhelming to have invaders over who don't understand his systems. It takes too long to explain upfront; I've been here six months, and I still make mistakes every day. He's not keen on me leaving that much, either. Of course I'm *allowed* to leave, but what if I wake up before his alarm goes off and my stirring interrupts his sleep cycle? What if our appetites or meal schedules get out of sync? No way could two separate dishes get cooked out of this kitchen too close to one another—it takes too long to clear the clean dishes from the drying rack, inspect them for any food or soap remnants, scrub the counters with disinfectant, select the proper utensils, gather the ingredients, explain the plan of attack to each other, and then get started on the actual cooking. Then, cleaning before eating. Then, the eating and the cleaning up after eating.

That's not to mention the orienting of the dining room before the meal is served.

The placemats must be aligned optimally, and the cushions! The cushions on the wooden chairs could leave behind their filmy glue, so they are removed when no one is sitting upon them but laid back out over the chairs before either of us sits down to dine.

It's really only logical that I don't see anyone but John, and John doesn't see anyone but me.



John yells at me now, all the time. Sometimes it's a short snap he claims he can't remember an hour later. Sometimes it's over the phone, involving three breaks to suck in new breath, when I text him that I researched talk therapy and found that my work insurance will cover it. He screams to me that he doesn't need counseling. He screams that I exaggerate, he never yells.

He screams, and then he begs me not to leave because he has trust issues from that messy childhood. So much grief from watching his mother die. He's trying to be a

good person, he's trying to eat in a way that causes no harm, he needs me to see how good he is. Routine soothes him. Routine is good. I eat so healthy since I moved in, cut out drinking and cigs—much to be grateful for.

So, I feed the compost under the sink, all our little veggie scraps. The stems from bell peppers, banana peels, used tea bags—it's a joy to squish up and squeal a little as I stuff them down with my open palm. I try to choke the life out of them, to hasten their ecstatic decomposition. Free up their nutrients so they can nourish something else. Isn't that the noblest course? Releasing all the best parts from inside us, to be a feast for others instead.



I turn the black humus we've saved from this waste-free kitchen. I tell John I leave out the scraps for the cooperative compost pickup service, and that's not a lie. But I don't donate all of it, just yet. Ever since I found the hunk of roots sprouting new lettuce leaves on top,

I felt hope for the first time in a long time. I didn't let my mind wander like it does when John plants me in my spot so he can watch his favorite childhood cartoons—my face pointed at the screen, but none of the colors or shapes sinking in. No, my mind was turned on this time, and even in the dim light enforced by the curtains, my eyes registered a tiny little life. All those saved scraps made it happen. Sacrifice does pay off.

That weak sprout could use the carbon dioxide, I reasoned, so I whispered to it that day.

*Hi.*

It was hard to think of what to say to a being that wasn't John; I'm always trying to think of the right thing to say to John, though sometimes it makes him mad at me anyway. I like that this little bud can't talk back.

*It's nice you're here.*

And now I linger in the kitchen after every meal, saying nice things to the lettuce.

*I like you a lot.*

*You look great.*

And today, *No one should ever yell at you.*



I'm flushing under my cardigan, checking one more time that I have the red-handled kitchen scissors in my hand and not the black-handled office scissors. Sure, you can wash them with soap and water, but John does *not* want them mixed up.

It's my turn to show him roots under lettuce, my turn to say, *Look, Look.*

"It grew under the sink, in the compost bin," I say, tripping over some of the words because I am talking too fast. "Let's mix it in the salad, too."

John turns his head toward the leaves pulled from the composter and then tilts back to the scissors in my hand. I shake the dark not-quite-soil back into the bin, making sure not one single speck hits the floor or the countertop. I selected the smallest cutting board to work over, which must be the right choice.

I want to meet John's aquamarine eyes, but he's stepped out of the kitchen; he does not like when I leave a room without

warning, so it's odd he'd do this now. In a flash, I feel him behind me, tall and reedy. A jolt strikes me as John pulls my hair over my head as if making a high ponytail. A kiss? We haven't touched in weeks. I close my eyes to savor this surprise.

I hear a whine of scissors opening their legs—did I have the desk scissors, after all? A cold peck at my neck tells me a breakdown is coming.



A LITTLE  
PIGEON BOOK

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Laura Eppinger (she/her) is a Pushcart-nominated writer of fiction, poetry, and essays. Her work has appeared at *The Rumpus*, *The Toast*, and elsewhere. She's the journal editor at *New-found* and knows that the Jersey Devil is real. Visit Laura at [lauraeppinger.blog](http://lauraeppinger.blog).

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