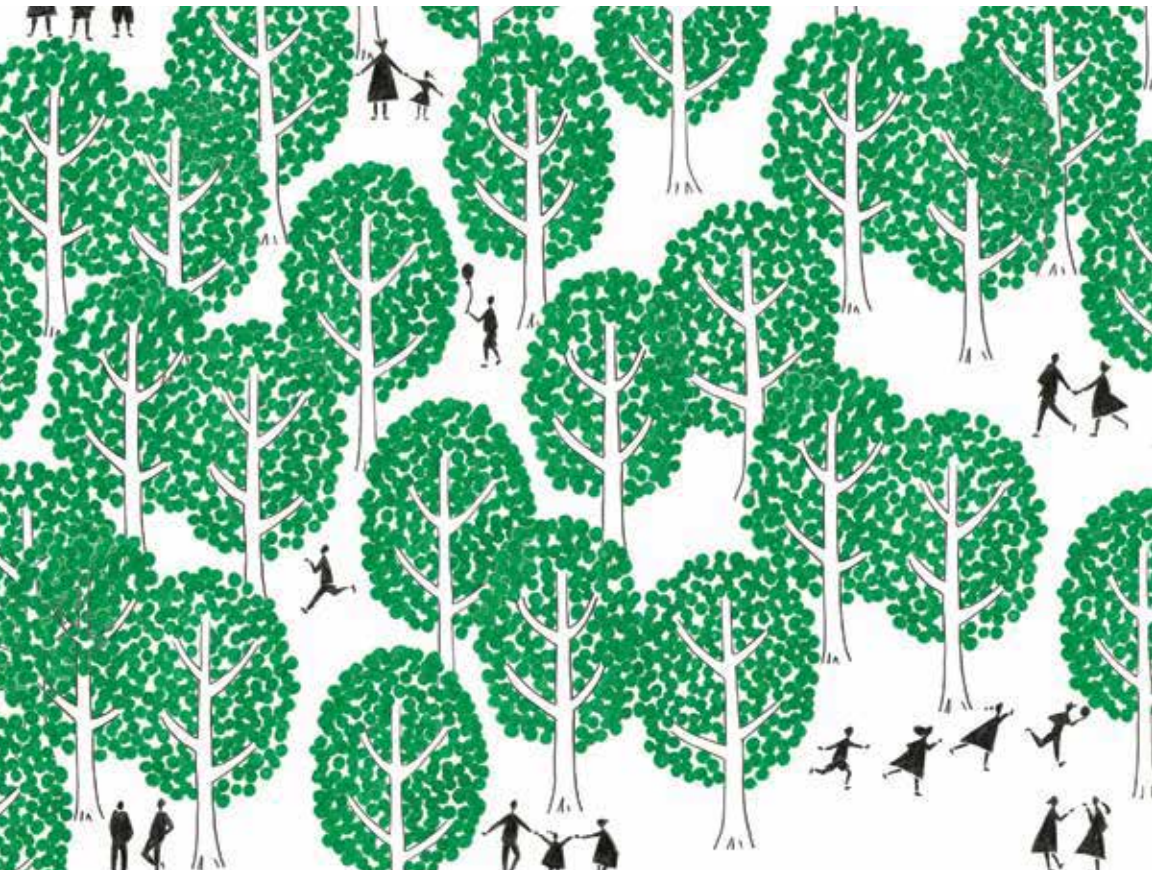


ALL THE RAGE

Punching back at 2020

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

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THIS MORNING, I GOOGLED PUNCHING bags. I have never used one, and I really wouldn't know where to start with the punching. Or kicking? You get to kick it too, right? Do you shuffle your feet between jabs, like you're waiting to return a serve on the tennis court? I can see myself hurting my hand. I can see myself losing my balance and falling on my rear. I can see the bag swinging back and knocking me over. I think I need one anyway. It's been that kind of year.

All sorts of consumer goods have sold out in the last nine months—toilet paper, of course. But also Peloton bikes and backyard swing sets. Outdoor heaters. I haven't heard about a shortage of punching bags, but it wouldn't surprise me. I've been known to literally run from confrontation, yet here I am with the urge to whale on a punching bag. I imagine there are a lot of Gravy readers with similar urges, maybe for reasons much better and more valid than my own.

Here at the hinge between 2020 and 2021, I'm frustrated with myself for being unable to get enough done, despite support from a loving and thoughtful husband, wonderful childcare, and coworkers whose role in my life approaches that of family. I spend too much time feeling spoiled and whiny and useless. When I'm in the car, or on a walk, or even playing with my children, my head is filled with thoughts big and small.

I spool out endless to-do lists. I fear for my family's health. I puzzle over work and motherhood and societal problems. Occasionally, as I'm jogging under a blue sky or pulling my children to the dead end of our quiet street in their wagon, I have a glimmer of hope that I could help: Through my work, maybe I can push one small something in the right direction.

I've been so afraid this year. I've been angry and confused and sad. But I've also

spent more time outside than I can remember. The weather in 2020 was uncannily beautiful. By my calculation, I logged some 500 miles pushing our stroller. I saw the wisteria bloom in March and the leaves turn red and gold in November. I visited with neighbors. Some were laid off. Some were lonely. Some have been sick. Some gave birth. We became friends.

I listened to Switched on Pop and Planet Money and The Hold Steady (old) and Taylor Swift (new). I listened to spy novels and political satire. In the late afternoons, I drove the country roads around Oxford while my son napped in the backseat. In the early mornings, I read mysteries and drank coffee and watched the sun rise out of a gap in the houses across the street. Come nighttime, my husband cooked dinner and I put the children to bed. We ate on the couch and marveled at how tired we were. At how much we had to do. At how little of a dent we seemed to make each day. We went through a lot of Jeni's Darkest Chocolate ice cream.

There were times when my work really seemed to matter. When I was inspired. In May, we hosted a writing workshop and I got to see—yes, over Zoom—the smiles of writers having breakthroughs and pushing their stories to new places. In September and again in December, I worked with writers I admire to edit the fall and winter issues of Gravy. And in October, I edited scripts for a podcast season on climate change. I hope you'll listen. We approach a global crisis through relatable, individual stories—the kinds of stories you'll find in these pages, too.

I almost feel sorry for 2021. This year can't possibly live up to the expectations heaped upon it by 8 billion souls who need a break, in 8 billion different ways. I hope we all get one. There might not be enough punching bags to go around. 🥊