

# COOL BEANS LIT

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2

WINTER 2023





# Cool Beans Lit

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# *Cool Beans Lit*

Volume 1, Issue 2  
Winter 2023

*A Light in the Dark*

EDITOR: Lauren Avedis  
ART EDITOR: J.L. Stagner

**COVER ART**

*My love, my life, my Armenia* by LuizA NaslYan





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# Editor's Note

Winter 2023

Welcome to the second issue of our emerging literary magazine! Enjoy our eclectic mix of literary and visual arts.

The theme of this issue is "A Light in the Dark" and may include a myriad ways of representing what is a light in someone's life in either words or images. We hope to enlighten your mind with this special curated issue.

We aim to showcase the works of authors and artists from a wide range of backgrounds, experience, and talent. In this issue, we are lucky to have 31 amazing contributors, some of whom are being published for the first time. As editors, it is challenging to select only a small number of works to publish due to the large amount of talented authors out there. We are grateful that they shared a bit of their soul with us here at Cool Beans Lit.

Please support our contributors by reading the Contributor Bio section and visiting their websites and social media accounts. We strive to grow the online presence of noteworthy writers and visual artists. It is our goal to promote this enriching community because it continues to provide so much light in an otherwise dark world.

**Lauren Avedis**  
Editor-in-Chief

**J.L. Stagner**  
Art Editor







LUIZA NASLYAN



Personalities\_sp\_1



JOHN R.C. POTTER

## Camera Obscura

This darkened chamber  
that is your heart,  
taking these mental pictures  
and making love just an art.

An image begins to take hold  
when this light is reflected,  
shadows begin to take shape  
as another love is deflected.

I am a camera:  
a blind unblinking eye on you,  
gathering evidence from the prints  
in a vain search for just one clue.

When you see yourself there  
an image then comes to mind  
of someone, something, somewhere  
and just what you've left behind.

The vision shifts and settles  
inverted, the image takes on a form;  
the greatest shadows will appear  
across the sky just before a storm.

And yet you are not the mystery  
nor is it found in what you do,  
it has something to do with me  
and my inability to say adieu.

Our fates seem to be so intertwined,  
we cannot get distance from what we are;  
we need to see our love from a camera,  
through a shaded aperture, from afar.

JADE HAN

## How I Annotate

I'd want you to annotate me.  
Not just notes in the margins,  
but full sections bracketed and boxed.

Write in your allusions and connections  
colored in thought bubbles.  
Draw in all your arrows, circles, and stars.

Take your time picking apart every word  
for hidden meanings and subtle double entendres.  
Then tell me your favorite lines.

I'll watch your eloquent cursive  
turn to unintelligible scribbles,  
as your hand chases after all your thoughts.

And then I'll ask to see your hands.  
The sides of them, and your fingertips,  
in all their tiredness and ink-stained glory.

Fill the page to the brim with your words,  
until mine are no longer recognizable.

Recite me from memory.  
Word for word.  
Eyes closed.

I'll have you remembering why poetry exists.  
I'll have you falling in love with words on a page.



KELLY SARGENT

## Sky Scraper

I used to jump off my backyard swing when I was a kid.  
After pumping skinned calves

and gripping twisted, rusty chains,  
I wanted to flee into bruised skies

to hide among cumulus crumbs,  
a fugitive from lunch and lunacy.

I carried shadows on my back,  
where rose-colored laces wove

a pattern of cat's cradle  
and a hand inside that was not my own.

I wanted the sun to take them  
and gift them to the moon and starry night,

to be swallowed like flat ginger ale  
that didn't burn my throat when I swallowed.

Sometimes, I search the night sky  
for a footpath made by little girls,

and pretend a falling star  
is a loosened pebble

instead of a wayward tear.

KELLY SARGENT

## Leaving

I should like to pass  
in autumn  
with the leaves.

And like the crepey birch  
and beech  
and sugar maple,

release worries —  
one by one —  
like leaves

in the crisp,  
cool breezes  
when they come.

My child's demanding boss,  
my sister's broken ankle,  
my friend's lost calico cat

will swirl in a restless funnel  
before collapsing  
in a resigned pile at my feet.

Brittle and dry,  
without attachment  
to lifeblood

which once fed  
and fretted  
and, sometimes,

caused them to fester  
like thistles  
stuck in husky shadows.

Worries that, in the end,  
recycle  
like moonlight and a dewy dawn.

And when I am bare  
and ready to sleep,  
I will look down in the receding light,

and notice  
how breathtaking  
my worries are,

now  
that I have let them  
leave.



ZOE STANEK



Family Roadtrip



MO MURRIE

## Easy in the Dark

Let's walk to the moon  
at the end of the street  
while the cat's on fire  
and the dog's asleep  
let's get into one of these cars  
and drive to the moon  
in the middle of the night  
do something we'll remember  
for the rest of our life  
nobody knows who you are

and everything  
is a little bit strange  
it's a little bit soft it's a little bit changed  
it's you and me moving through time  
so how can you lose  
in your pretty blue shoes  
whichever way it turns however quick it moves  
just press the ignition and drive

you can drive to the moon  
you can go that far  
and never see nothing but the seats in the car  
you got to get out of your mind  
and if the snow's too hot and the road's too white  
like it gets pretty weird on the moon at night  
we'll turn into side-streets and hide

cos everything is a little bit strange  
it's a little bit soft it's a little rearranged  
it's everything moving in time  
and we'll nurse one another  
through the worst of the night  
and hope we've recovered when the sun sheds light  
on the road where the oceans divide



ROHAN BUETTEL

## Immortality

Such a radical in your youth, always set  
on changing the world, you take a set

against those who cannot move with the times  
and yet, with each passing year you become more set

in your ways, less able to keep up  
with new developments, you have been set

in your place by the decay of a mind  
running down, unable to learn, as if set

in a fixed state, wobbly and unreflective,  
your brain warm milk allowed to ferment and set,

become curd, a grey pudding, a junket, a jelly  
lacking substance, your table now set

with crockery, cutlery and glassware before the cloth  
is pulled from underneath, the stage set

with the props and scenery for another performance  
of sound and fury, signifying the set

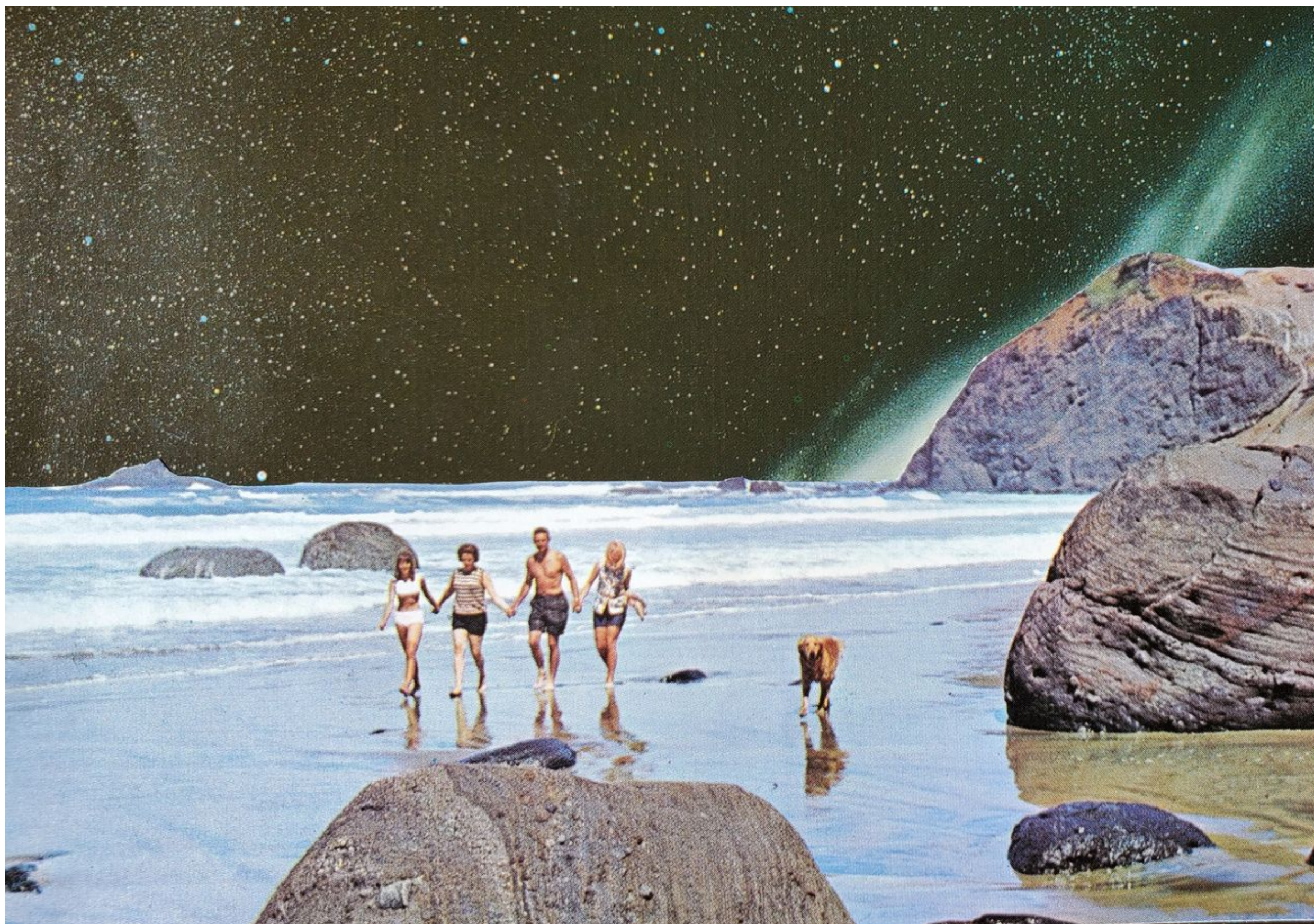
of arctic winds, ferociously driving all before.  
Grief will come to the clipper ship, sails set

for a fast passage between worlds, old and new,  
and places in between, the universal set

for the writer who creates an empire of words  
on which they hope the sun will never set.



ZOE STANEK



Beach Vacation



R. GERRY FABIAN

## Baking Humble Pie

I bake humble pie.  
Someone has to do it.  
To a mixture of  
weeviled flour, lard  
and well water,  
I add the anxiety of anisette  
with the false flavor taste  
of black strap molasses mistakes.  
This is shaped in an earthen  
platter of pity.  
Cubed pieces of broken heart,  
and slivered tongue  
are then topped with  
crumbled confessions.  
This mixture bakes  
in a guilt oven  
until it bubbles over.

V.M. DOUBT

## Love's Lifecycle Lit Up Through My Cell Phone

our unspoiled glimmer  
a spark  
to shimmer the magic hour  
biting down smiles  
at promising quiver

aura resonating  
through covetous nightstand  
fronds unfurl on palm  
to bear the flare in willing hand  
set like waxing crescent  
night's vision for who I burn for  
incandescent

then through jangled tremors  
comes combustion  
of my nerves' fray  
as Harvest Moon enters  
each glare  
an arsonist to ardor's shade  
until  
her fix of silence, an eclipse

our memorandum  
now solely in my hips  
with phone  
sunk to depths of dark pocket  
and prone  
to vibrations' phantom



A.R. ARTHUR

## Locked

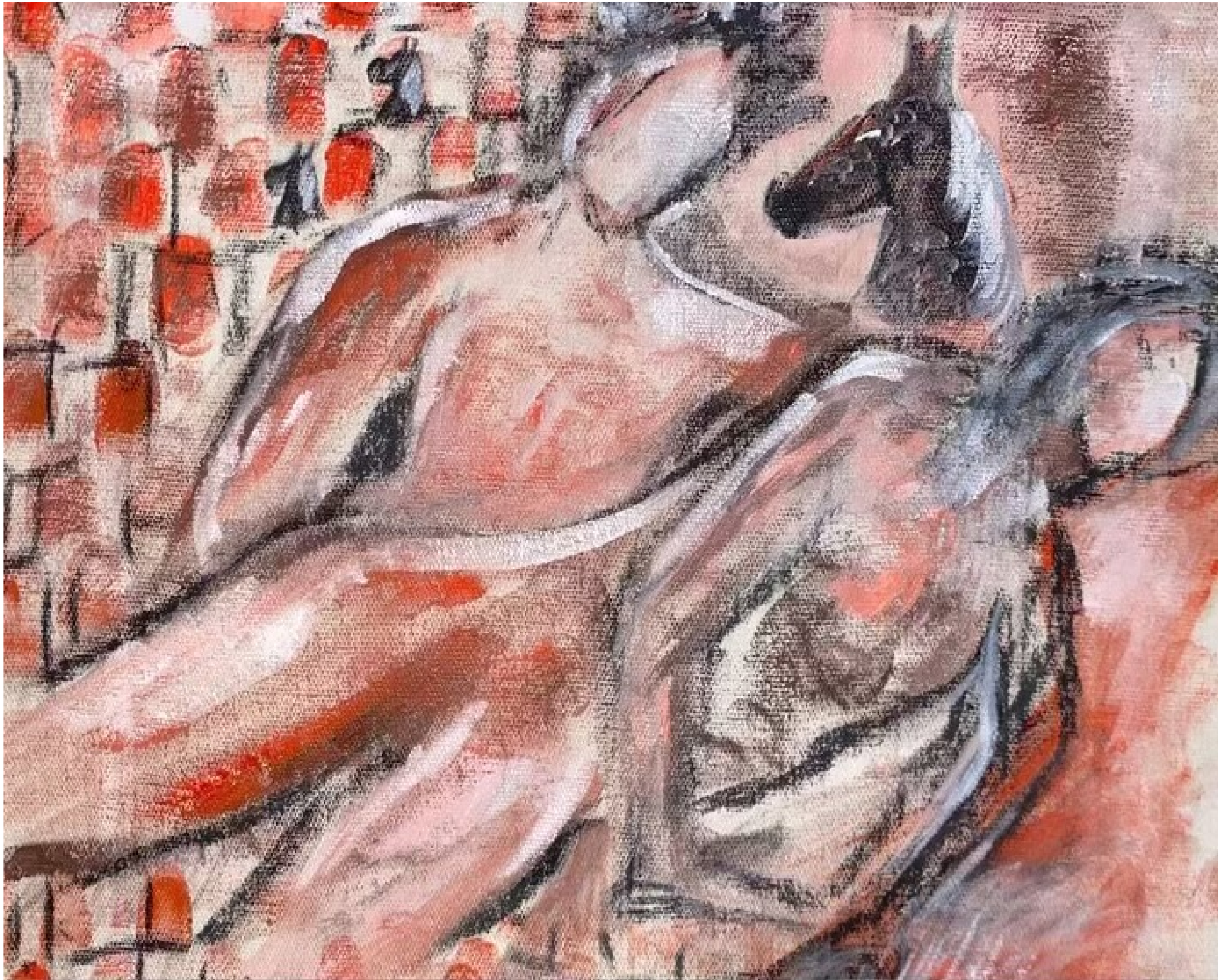
You lean in and savor my skin;  
Bronze and worn with lashings of rogue hairs  
That no laser tame,  
But you do not care about my shame,

My bodily image divided by foreign perceptions,  
No, you merge with my fears and travel  
The length of my saline discontent  
Until I am fused with your heart beat

As your chest hair absorbs my finger tips  
Lost in a jungle of lust,  
A fever dream of calmness,  
But we are hidden behind closed doors

That render our union momentary;  
Legs entwined and lips locked in motion.

MARIANNA ANGEL



Lovers Quarrel at Knight



# CHRISTOPHER RUBIO-GOLDSMITH

## Curved Lines

So here is the deal, you agreed with yourself  
and claimed middle aged. No yelling, no pouting, you loved  
the day that much.

You and your three imperfect friends, cruising the 405 in a gorgeous car,  
sunroof open, the gods looking in, envying your mortality, and this is when

you needed something to do, *anything*, because the tired song on the radio  
reminds you that often action is a good response to grief. You began lifting

the big happy inflatable sheep up through the car's sunroof.  
A scene out of a movie, a cliched comedy, where the characters wait  
for more waiting,

at 65 miles an hour, and they travel prepared for adventures  
with adult pool toys. Orale, this is a new moment. The blow-up toy

looks regal, and the sound of the rushing air around the plastic animal  
reminds you that curved lines are more interesting than straight lines.

You enjoy watching others in their speeding cars reacting to the inflated  
five-lane freeway daredevil. Especially children who laugh without shame.

But isn't one of the reasons for speed, to have fun? And shouldn't  
everyone enjoy the surprise of a blow-up sheep cheating death?

This all lasts for several miles. Songs heard in waiting rooms fuel your determination.  
The sheep trusting you more and more, knowing you will  
never let go. The sun amused.

Your youth exiting the freeway off ramp without regrets. And the highway patrol car  
with the lights flashing, rushing to rescue the inanimate object  
from certain doom.



FRANK WEBER

## Pain

You have to feel the pain  
and roll around  
down in the dirt and the gravel  
swimming out of puddles and  
ankle-deep potholes  
there's no other way to grow and  
there's no other way to gain  
from the world around you.

You have to taste that pain  
when it burns your tongue  
you have to savor the flavor  
as you swallow it down  
let it cling to every fiber  
deep inside and  
let it burn deep down  
into every vein of your body.

If you can't ever feel it,  
then you won't ever know it  
If you can't live with that pain,  
then you won't ever own it  
If you run from that pain then  
you're forced to live without it  
and it will leave you  
an empty glass wanting to shatter.

You have to take that pain  
you have to take it as a gift  
Because you gain nothing from safety  
Because you gain nothing from calm  
If you never felt it  
you won't ever know it.  
Not without the pain.

Not ever.        Not ever.

*No...you won't.*



TOM SQUITIERI

## Dismantling Me

It is dark now  
In the morning as  
Fall draws closer

So it is only the steam of  
My coffee and nothing  
Else with me

Except of course  
You  
The smile  
In the steam

Hard to think of  
A better way to begin  
A day  
Except to know you  
Will be here with me  
The entire day

Dismantling me  
From the past  
And reminding  
Me of the future

I am on the deck  
Now, overlooking the end  
Of the garden season  
But think more of the seeds  
That were planted today  
That will grow for  
A new season that  
Ignores a calendar



# TOM SQUITIERI

Just a ray of  
Moonlight  
Shows me the wildflowers  
As the basil sends only its smell  
And the proud tomatoes,  
Lush and ready,  
Know soon they will  
Be enjoyed

We will drink  
This fragrant coffee  
Full of love  
And watch a  
perfect, creative day  
Call to us

Soon the sun  
Will say hello  
And then it will  
stop to stare,  
As our smiles tell  
the sky we  
see each other

When fall holds  
Hands with spring  
And gives us winter hugs  
And summer warmth  
We know we have found it

N.T. CHAMBERS

## Night Watch

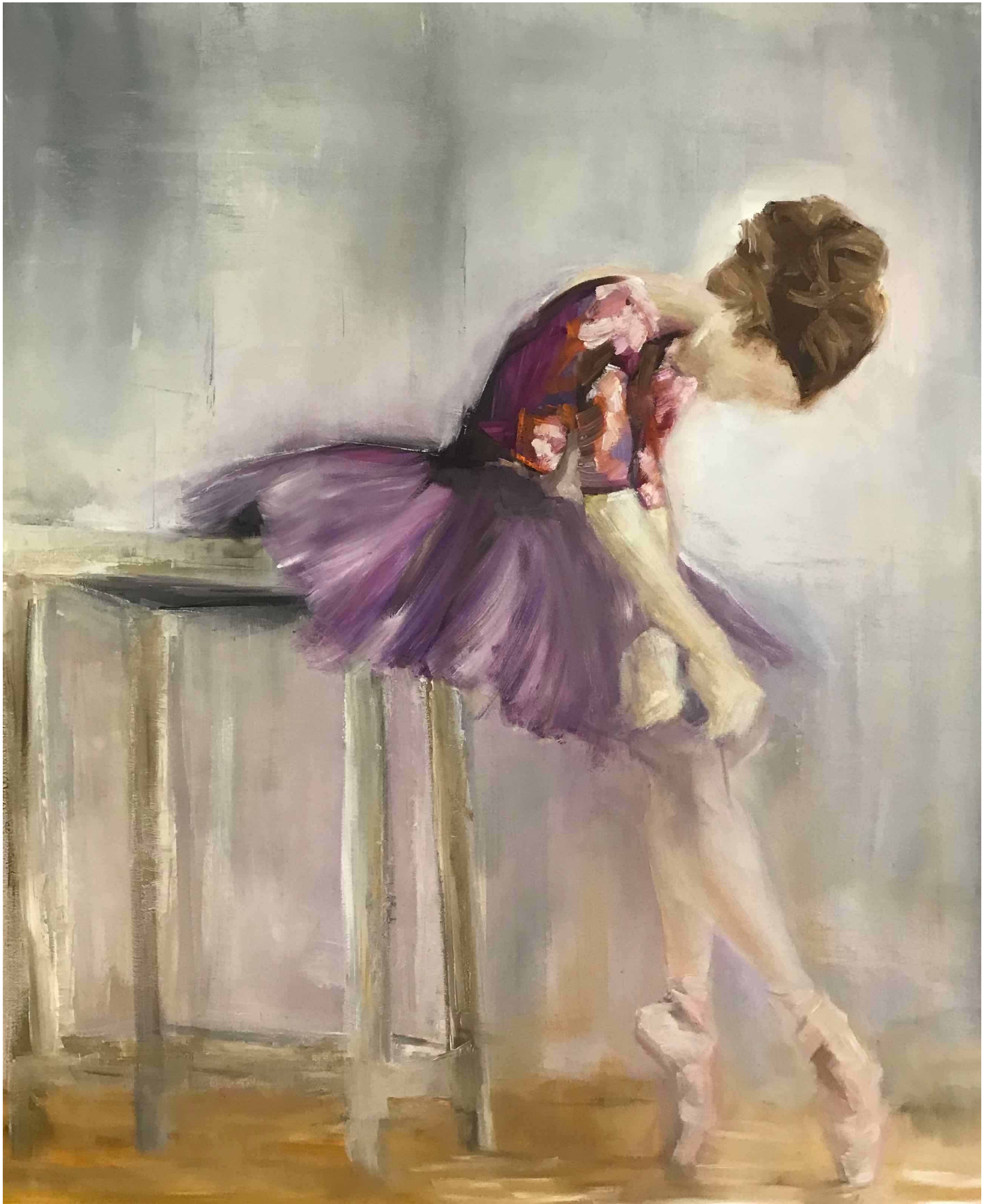
Her rhythmical breathing creates  
the night tides of our bed  
as murmurs of yesterday's battles  
swim unconsciously downstream,  
spilling themselves softly  
onto our rumpled sheets  
heard only by my tired ears  
and a half-alert dog  
snuggled down  
for the night in the corner  
wrapped in his own  
ancestral dreams and ample fur.

She stirs and moves  
her willowy, tense body  
closer to me still,  
entwining her long, sinewy legs  
around mine  
soaking up the heat I offer  
to a body chilled by the night  
as well as ancient blows  
to the heart and spirit -  
both having known  
more weariness than joy  
but currently pursuing  
a time of future peace.

A childlike smile dances  
briefly across her face  
then she's off again -  
stealing what comfort  
she can from sleep  
hoping it will be enough  
to sustain her  
through the attendant trials  
of the creeping dawn  
while I  
a silent witness  
to this nocturnal ballet  
embrace the sleeping ballerina  
savoring the music of the night.



ELIZABETH RICKETSON



A Moment in Time

BERNARD PEARSON

## Paradise Finally Lost

The indulgent pyre  
We built for our mother earth,  
Is now well alight,  
It's dressed in all her finery  
She'd worn upon her wedding night  
(Fake) Flowers now of every hue and shade  
Green silk and damask coronets  
That from once shone diamonds bright

She was a frightful heretic you see  
For giving of her treasure  
To man and not asking for a fee  
So we tied her to our stake  
Of avarice and greed.

Now there's only  
Ash and bone where once  
Was fertile fruitful earth  
mere broken empty weasel  
words on which  
we arsonists may feed



ANNA MAEVE



Frozen Lake  
(Part of the *Immortality* series)



ANNA MAEVE



Cliff  
(Part of the *Immortality* series)



SARAH WALLIS

## We Are But Candy Striped Rock

We carry what has gone before  
tamped right down in the dark, the transplant

seamless into our DNA  
like broken seaside towns hanging on to a name

struck through them in old sticks of candy striped  
rock and our strata says - look – this terrible

wrenching happened, a howl I heard  
from my mother, she from her mother, her mother's,

mother - grey day reasons for no reasonable  
sadness other than feeling the weight of days,

noted, piled up and gone down in the west,  
here, we are golden, watching the sun disappear,

the day's curfew and ours, we pay respects, rituals  
we hold for us, for the dead; tears, yellow flowers,

clutching Ophelia's rosemary-in-remembrance,  
monochrome photos, bright spots of memory

and a lit candle to show the way,

the eventual way out of the shadow

HIRAM LAREW

## Dripping Faucet

When all is said and done  
It's the bad apples that ooze good.  
And it's weeds that teach us  
To dig and wish or pull.  
Even getting sick takes us far away  
Like a ticket.

Beyond that,  
We don't really shine until we hurt  
Do we?  
And what would we do with more nice anyway?  
Make a snowball?

That's the leaky point --  
How nature behaves so cross-crooked with us.  
Yes to be very honest,  
How the louder the groans are in the morning  
The better the day turns out to be.



## Amsterdam

I want to tell you about one of my transitional periods.

It was during an era when I carried my music on a cassette tape player manufactured by the Sony Corporation called a Walkman, and mine — although able to store maybe two dozen songs, if memory serves — carried but one, “Good Night Irene.”

On the other hand, I had every rendition I could find of it, by Frank Sinatra, Tom Waits, Eric Clapton, The Weavers, Nat King Cole, Billy Williams, Jerry Reed, and the original, recorded in 1933, by the ex-con who composed it, Huddie Ledbetter, whose stage name was Lead Belly, a moniker he had gotten in prison.

I also carried a homemade book from pages I had ripped out of a Gideon bible I found in the nightstand at a Motel 6. There were only four chapters in it: Genesis, Proverbs, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes, but also many handwritten and typed pages of my commentaries and emendations. The cover said “Tetrateuch” in block letters I had drawn with black, red, and yellow Crayola crayons.

As I travelled with these props — trying to get a relationship I had fucked up out of my system — the book provided all I needed to know, the music all I needed to feel.

I hoped that living in strange places would help let me bury a past that was waking me up at two a.m., three if I was lucky, four if my guardian angel happened to be perched above the bust of Pallas at my chamber door.

On the advice of a friend I went first to Italy, where, at one point, wasted on Chianti, I attempted to climb the five-hundred fifty-one marble steps of St. Peter’s on my knees, playing the heart-piercing melody of “Goodnight Irene” over and over, reasoning that the pain would be proper penance for being such a jerk. I didn’t get very far, however, before being arrested by two officers of the Vatican City Police Department, whose official name is *Corpo della Gendarmeria dello Stato della Città del Vaticano*.

After that unsuccessful sojourn, I decided to give Amsterdam a try. I had just seen “Pulp Fiction,” the best movie ever made from the best screenplay ever written, and had read that Quentin Tarantino wrote it in a rented room there. It took him three months working with felt-tipped pens and spiral bound notebooks. I figured if it was good enough for him it might be good enough for me. I would get over the girl and write a blockbuster. Some psychiatrists would call this sublimation; others, delusion.

\*\*\*

I knew immediately I had chosen wisely. With its museums Amsterdam is like Florence, but not so stuffy. With its canals it’s like Venice, but properly maintained, with better sewers. And it’s got a big river. I love big rivers.

A river represents the flow of life, and the flow of time. Its presence comforts me, as much as a person like me can be comforted. And Amsterdam has the wonderful Amstel. In fact, that’s where its name comes from: The damming of the Amstel, hence Amster-dam.

\*\*\*

## MICHAEL BRODIN

When I get close to a river — any river — my mind drifts to this verse from “Goodnight Irene:”

Sometimes I live in the country,  
Sometimes I live in town,  
Sometimes I take a great notion,  
To jump into the river and drown.

That’s the other reason I like a good, deep river: It’s there in case you need it.

\*\*\*

I conducted my therapy according to a strict schedule. I would take a long clockwise walk along the canals in the morning and a counterclockwise one at night, Walkman clipped to my belt, headphones to my head. In between those bookends I worked, starting my sessions by reading a passage or two in my Bible to seduce the mighty Muse.

Day after day I scribbled, working with Pilot G-2 pens (I’d bought a dozen at a Staples in New York before I left), scissors and tape, and, most important, a wastebasket. I took no days off, nourishing myself with bread and cheese in the morning, meat and potatoes at night, washing everything down with cheap wine. This is where Rome and Naples had the advantage, obviously, in the Department of Food, but it was also part of my penance — eating like a monk.

\*\*\*

I did that for two and a half months, running out of ink just as I was running out of mojo. But that paints an inaccurate picture of it, because I’d left quite a few pens behind in various cafes around the city. Unconsciously, I’m sure, I wanted to put an end to it, and the deal I had made with myself was that I’d stop writing when I physically couldn’t, for how can you possibly write when there’s nothing to write with?

The symptom of no mojo, by the way, is that one’s brain feels like cement, one’s blood like ice water. There was nothing left in me that could properly be termed alive. Of the three choices in “Twenty Questions,” animal, vegetable, or mineral, I had moved from the first, through the second, and into the last. I had killed myself, in a manner of speaking. Outwardly I looked the same; inwardly I had been obliterated.

\*\*\*

The day I abandoned the screenplay I slept through the night for the first time in years. Till seven a.m. No doubt this was a result of pride in my accomplishment, but clearly more important was the morphine I had bought from a pretty whore in De Wallen, a blonde with a lazy eye who reminded me of my mother.

And for the following two weeks I rewarded myself this way every evening, reading my version of Psalm 23:2 out loud before taking a hit:



# MICHAEL BRODIN

Verily, I say unto thee:  
Morphine is my shepherd.  
I shall not want.  
It setteth me down in gentle green pastures.  
It leadeth me into quiet warm waters.  
It restoreth my soul.

This was what I discovered by my experiment: In a strange city you can always find a friend to sing you a lullaby before bedtime if you have enough cash... and a vein.

\*\*\*

Back home the consensus of my writing group was that the story I had written was pretty good. It was that of a boy and a girl. And of another boy. And the two boys liked the same girl, which is of course a story as old as the oldest story ever told — except for the one about the guy who killed his brother — but mine was different. For several reasons, they said, the chief being that many of the most important words in my cheap notebooks had been smeared into illegibility by my tears.

THE END

## Fat Cat

Bruno is spending hours on the couch drawing fat leopards. It's an assignment for his art class: pick an animal to draw over and over and make it fat. He's done this kind of exercise before with modes of transportation. He turned long, sleek airplanes into chubby flying saucers, and made trains look like link sausages. There's an overt friendliness to obese vehicles that makes me want to take a road trip with nothing but a backpack and a bag of donuts.

Each of Bruno's leopards assumes a different pose and personality. Some look like mob bosses and others like couch potatoes.

"When you were small, you confused the word *leopard* with *leper*," I say standing over him which is something he tolerates but does not enjoy.

"That's because they sound exactly the same." His gaze stays on the paper.

"Then how can you be sure you're not supposed to be drawing fat lepers?" I like to say ridiculous things, mostly to see if he's listening.

Bruno continues with his pudgy cats.

I wash the dishes and wonder what it would be like to spend a whole day doing nothing but drawing. I'm glad my son has been afforded certain advantages like art classes. At his age, I held a low-wage job at the A&P. Stocking shelves was tedious, but it felt good to make money. I've tried explaining this to my teenaged son, but he's not interested in getting a job. He's fine with being supported. He likes the long, dreamy hours and the constant handouts.

I remind myself that I gave him an artsy name, after all, and wonder if it's dumb luck that he became interested in drawing. *Bruno* could also be a fitting name for a deli owner or a tailor—both respectable occupations, though far less romantic than an artist. Daniel wanted to call him Oliver. Oliver and Bruno evoke green and brown colors and as certain shapes. They are round, fat names.

"I could really use a day to goof off," I say wiping my hands on my pants.

"Take one," Bruno croaks from the couch. "What's the big deal?"

The big deal is that nothing interesting comes to mind. No great people to hang out with, no amazing places to go, no wild notions of what to do. Just a blank feeling with no inspiration to draw from.

I suddenly turn toward my son with an idea. "Gimme a piece of paper and a pencil."

"Why?" Bruno closes his sketchbook protectively. "I don't want to mess up my book by ripping out pages."

"But I'd like to draw something."

"Mom, you don't draw."

"You've never seen me draw, which is different. I can draw fat mice."

"Mice are already fat. You have to pick something like a giraffe or a gazelle."

"I love giraffes. Paper, please." I hold out my hand and wait for supplies, hoping to feel supported. Like an artist.

"Don't screw up the point on this pencil. It takes me forever to shave it down. Okay? I don't know why you're even doing this..." He carefully and unenthusiastically hands me the pencil and



## GINA M. ANGELONE

tears a piece of paper from his precious sketchpad. It's like his skin is being flayed as it rips, spoke by spoke, off the coiled metal spine.

I hold the graphite gingerly between my fingers and begin to trace large circles in the air.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm warming up my wrist. And my imagination." I wink at him, and he rolls his eyes.

"Don't break the pencil," he says again, like a teacher speaking to a reckless child.

I begin tracing lines across the page to get the feel of it. A large sphere appears out of smooth, soft circles.

"What's that?" Bruno laughs.

"I just started. Don't judge." My hand slides upward as a long neck stretches to invisible treetops. Giraffes are good at adapting to their environments. I had grown up thinking I'd be a travel writer, acclimating to ever-changing customs and cultures and horizons. That was a real stretch of the imagination. Instead, I'm in the same place every day. Same trees. Same sky. Same kitchen sink. I hope Bruno will get to see the whole wide world and fill up on all the things I only dreamt of doing.

The alarm monitor beeps, and the front door opens. It makes an annoying *blee-deep* sound three times in a row. I always mimic the noise at the same time it's happening which makes it twice as annoying to my son.

"Mohhhhhm!"

"It's involuntary."

"It's not."

A set of keys lands on the counter with a metallic scrape. Daniel places his computer bag on the floor and surveys the room. "Looks like the number of artists living under my roof has doubled since this morning."

"Mom is still a mom." Bruno keeps his eyes on his sketch.

"Rome wasn't built in a day," I volley back in my own defense with a strained note of defiance in my tone. Daniel just called it his house.

My husband stares at my fat giraffe and smirks. "It looks like one of those South American gourds with a metal straw they use for drinking tea. Am I right?"

"Why would I draw a gourd? It's a giraffe."

"A fat giraffe," Bruno qualifies. "And I'm drawing fat leopards."

Daniel coughs up a single laugh which sounds more like huh. "So, what's for dinner? Whatever it is, I hope it's fat. I'm starving."

"There are leftovers on the top shelf of the fridge. I took the night off from cooking so I could experience the life of an artist."

*Huh* is muttered for a second time. "Must be nice." Daniel opens the fridge, grabs a beer and the leftovers, and sits down to eat.

"Aren't you going to heat those up? It'll just take a few minutes..." This is just the kind of thing that gets on my nerves, but I decide to let him do what he wants. I'm trying to be more giraffe-like and adaptable.

"I'm too hungry." Daniel digs into the cold plate with a fair amount of noise, chewing the coagulated casserole and washing it down with stout. "Since my family is busy drawing fat animals,

## GINA M. ANGELONE

I'm going to put on the TV..."

A documentary about an indigenous tribe in Ecuador ignites on the screen. Tribal members sit around the fire, passing large bowls of cooked fish and rice. Daniel aims a belch in my direction. I know what he's thinking: Even the poorest wretches in the world can get a hot meal at the end of the day. He burps a second time.

"Can you please stop that? It's gross." I exaggerate my disgust.

He offers a taut, greasy smile as an apology.

My gaze drifts from the paper to the Amazon as a young woman begins sweetly singing while cutting off her hair with a sharp knife. As the last bit of her mane falls to the dusty ground, I wonder how it feels to do something so simple yet so severe—to take a knife to one's head, disallow anyone else's thoughts...to exercise one's own will...to feel dispossessed but happy.

I can't imagine such freedoms.

I hand the pencil carefully back to Bruno. "I'm not in the mood to draw anymore. Thanks for letting me use your stuff."

"You're giving up already?" Bruno looks me in the eye for the first time.

"I guess I don't have what it takes." I whisk away Daniel's plate and walk over to the microwave.

"You don't have to do that..." Daniel wipes his mouth with the back of his hand like a cat.

"It's okay," I murmur, knowing that nothing is ever guaranteed. Not a hot dinner or a grown-up life or satisfaction.

As the microwave counts down the radiated minutes, I stare into the sink. I do not want to die alone or diseased on some doomed island of domesticity. I want to live something bigger than this. A leopard would instinctively know how to make that leap. I do not.

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The clock hits zero and its series of high-pitched beeps go off like an alarm my head. I stand frozen.

"Hon...?" Daniel is poised with his fork, ready to finish his dinner.

I want to remove the casserole and give it to my husband, but the flashing zeros on the microwave remind me that I'm incapable of making art or dinner or taking a night off for myself. I suddenly hear cackling from the TV as peals of laughter mock me all the way from the Amazon—another big, fat place I'll only ever dream of.



CORINNE HARRISON

## The Song from Next Door

I was eleven when I last saw my mother. She'd been cleaning up after our dinner of bread and cheese, pottering around the kitchen and coughing as though death had entered her lungs. Winter chilblains had turned her walk into a shuffle, and she stopped for a moment took my way.

I'd been scrubbed raw and told to wear my Sunday dress. My suitcase sat neatly at my feet, a scratched-up, box-like thing, crammed with all my possessions. I was ready, but my mother did everything but wait with me on the sagging couch.

The November evening fell fast and it scared me. My mother shot anxious glances at the oven clock. We couldn't afford to keep the lights on much, so she stood in cold shadow. A strip of dying light struggled through the window and flared up her bony back like a corona, turning her into an eclipse. Through the darkness, her sadness emanated from her in waves. It nurtured my own despair at my imminent departure.

Then the peal of the doorbell froze us in our places. I waited for her to answer the door, but she remained caught in darkness like a fly encased in wax. She'd been washing the kitchen knife. It was a sharp, dripping silhouette in her hand.

An impatient knock, followed by a painful stab behind my eyes. My vision swam, a sensation that had taken hold frequently since the social worker's last visit. That's when the walls started to melt around me, paint and plaster lumps pouring in sheets to the floor. When the clothes hanging on lines across the front room twitched and spun, when the dust on the floor skittered like bugs around my feet. The pain behind my eyes intensified. Somewhere Frank Sinatra's *My Way*, a song I'd often heard playing from next door's vinyl player, started up. It flew around my head, as real as the music that used to blare through our walls before our neighbour moved house.

My mind pulled apart. The music staggered to a monumental crescendo.

Knife dripping by her side, my mother made straight for the door, and as a commotion unravelled outside the house, the music crashed around me.

#

Fourteen years later, I performed a similar mute charge through my own house, an envelope crumpled in my hand. Halfway up the stairs, I paused, heavier now my belly swelled with life. I cocked my head. Music emanated from my neighbour's house, faint, like a party blaring from down the street. I continued into the nursery, a room filled with the smell of fresh paint – and stopped, the paper in my hand forgotten.

I stood in a half-painted dim woodland of glistening trees marked with woodgrain. A syrup-coloured path wound its way down a wall and a red-cloaked girl danced down it. Tom stood on a chair, his paintbrush working at a flurry of crows straining towards the ceiling. I realised why he'd asked me to stay out of the nursery until it was done.

"I thought we'd decided on a Roald Dahl theme?"

It was what I'd imagined when the pregnancy stick showed me those two pink lines; a room painted with colourful, cartoonish wonder, toys and baby books, so different from my own

## CORINNE HARRISON

childhood room which had been closet-sized and moulding.

“Ahh, I told you not to come in, I wanted it to be a surprise,” Tom said without turning. “I had a rush of inspiration. It’s good, don’t you think?”

“It’s a bit – I don’t know, morbid for a baby room.”

“Snowflake,” Tom said playfully. “I grew up with the Grimm Brothers, and I turned out just fine.”

With a jolt, I remembered that morning’s mail. I brandished the envelope and fought to keep my voice steady.

“We got this in the mail today. I thought you said you’d paid the water bill.”

Tom turned, wearing a lopsided smile. His stubble had dappled purple dust along his jaw.

“Relax, I get paid tomorrow for that portrait job, I’ll get to it then.”

“But,” I gave a desperate huff. “It’ll count as a late payment.”

“It’s fine, Han. I’ll sort it.”

*It’s fine sweetheart, I’ll sort this out,* my mother’s voice said in my head. My small hand held a glass under a slow dripping kitchen tap. The water trickled into the basin and joined a muddy soup.

Tom knew about my childhood, but he didn’t know those words had been stripped of their value long ago. I subconsciously rubbed my stomach, hugging her close.

“Don’t they – I don’t know – count it against you? I don’t want any trouble with –”

“Hannah, don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

Tom’s carefree smile dropped as he studied my face. I forced down my bubbling hysteria.

“I’m ok, really, just – *please* tell me when you’ve done it? I just want everything right for when the baby comes.”

“I will love. Come here.” He held out his arms and I let myself be consumed by his embrace.

My vision swam. Out of my periphery, a half-painted crow, one with a teal blush texturing its feathers, turned its head so imperceptibly, I nearly missed it.

#

Hours later, the wall separating us from our semi-detached neighbours still hummed with the same song. I started dinner to distract myself and winced as my neighbour turned it up. A rich voice swooned through the wall in elongated tones, a deep crooning voice. It was a ballad.

“Han,” Tom poked his head around the corner. “I’m expecting a call about a job soon, when’s dinner?”

“Half an hour.”

I brought the knife down on a head of broccoli, watching as each floret sprung from the stem. I thought of the unpaid bill, of the nursery, flippantly painted into a world where children lost families and misfortune lay around every corner. A pain stabbed behind my eyes.

I was about to bring the knife down again when the handle gave a great jerk. I stared. Slowly, the tip of the knife curled, and the rest followed, coiling to meet the handle. A slug of light curved around the bending metal, until the whole thing was a shiny ring in my hand. With a gasp, I



## CORINNE HARRISON

snapped my eyes closed. Hiding in darkness, I counted to ten and looked again. The knife was normal, sharp and straight.

The neighbours turned the music up again, and this time I was able to catch the words. A cold flushed between my ribs. Frank Sinatra's *My Way*.

Something touched my shoulder and I jumped a mile. Tom stood next to me, but he veered back as I instinctively flailed the hand holding the knife. His lips moved and I watched them, distracted. He was saying something to me.

"What?"

"I said I've been calling you. You alright?"

"Sorry darling," I ran a hasty hand through my hair. "That bloody music is giving me such a headache."

There was something about the way the room darkened, as though the sun had been swamped by a cloud. The way the layout of my kitchen evoked the memory of my childhood kitchen. It felt suddenly, like a cold November night. My hand grazed the counter. Here. She would have stood here washing the dishes that night.

I turned to Tom and was astonished to find him frozen, eyes frantically reading my face.

"There – there's no music sweetheart."

The phone rang in his hand. He looked, pained, between me and the phone.

"Look I – I'm going to answer to reschedule, just – *please*, stay right here."

He left the room in a hurry. I felt as though my stomach had dropped to my toes.

Suddenly, the music was louder, encompassing. The overhead light shrank to a peering eye. At Tom's words, the pain behind my eyes intensified and the room around me whirled. I gripped the counter. By my fingers, the broccoli florets started to scatter in a whirl.

And she was next to me. Shadow had poured into her form; the shrunken bird-like body, the crumpled posture, the thin strands of hair. Half woman, half shadow, she turned towards me. The light shifted and her face was blank tension, a mask of a woman who had been prone to fits of incomprehensible and irrational behaviour. Her fits meant she couldn't hold a job, that family members abandoned her in her time of need, that we'd go to bed with angry knots of hunger in our stomachs.

My heart gave a jerk. She was my height, my build. She took a step forward and I took one, two, several steps back, until I was running from the room. The music chased me, tumbled up the stairs, dragged by my terror. Under my feet, the stairs softened like soufflé. I cupped my bump, trying to dispel the image of a woman stricken by the kitchen counter.

I found myself in the nursery, clutched in the midst of a raging scene. The Grimm's woods had been torn into a morass of colours, images careening and tearing in a mess on the wall. Trees ripped from their bases, the red cloak shredded into confetti, and paper-flat crows gusted from the corner of the wall, dove-tailed into the scene and spread like madness to fill night sky above a row of terraced houses. My childhood street.

## CORINNE HARRISON

The mural shuddered to life. It showed a woman struggling in the hands of two men clad in white uniforms, knife disarmed on the ground. She was howling like an animal, willow-with hair in strips over her face. Shadows pulled from the corner of the room and dove into the woman's open mouth, melting into the hole and pulling back out like ribbons of grief.

Behind the struggle, a girl was tucked in the arm of another woman, ushered from the departure that was supposed to be a dignified removal from her home. The girl took a last, scared glance at her mother.

"Go back," I whispered. The girl turned from the screaming woman, shrinking in on herself. The panic the girl felt would turn to misery, then irrational anger and bitterness towards the mother who was not allowed to keep her. Then, inexplicably, an inability to renew contact.

The music raged around the nursery, poured into my head and crammed in my ears like cotton wool.

"Don't leave her, it's not her fault." My hand flew to my stomach. I screamed at the girl. "*Go back.*"

"Hannah?"

I whipped around, terrified. It was Tom, hands up in appeal, face guarded.

"Tom? Where'd you come from?"

I stood again among dark, fresh painted woods, their arms gently stirring. The music had stopped.

"Han – why don't we start by putting that down."

I looked down, perplexed. The knife was tight in my hand, pointing straight ahead. I let it go and Tom pulled me back as it clattered at my feet. I burst into tears.

"I can't take it Tom, I-I can't do this. What if – what if it all goes away? What if we fail her?"

I cried into his paint-stained shirt for hours. He held me close, telling me our situation was different, that we had friends and his family to support us through any misfortune, that we had help if we needed it. My mother hadn't had anything.

He didn't say anything about going back on my medication. He spoke to me in gentle tones and drew shapes in my palm with his finger until the world was silent and still. I knew he'd approach the subject when I'd overcome my hysteria.

I rose early the next morning and sat in the living room, filling the minutes by staring at the house phone. It took me an hour to dredge up the courage to dial a number I'd been given long ago by a mental institution. It rang for several moments, and I wondered if I really wanted it to connect. It did. I took a deep breath.

"Hi, mum."



SHELDON KLEEMAN



Once was Jane



## Wallet Size

Nora had nearly thrown up when she first learned that she and Lewis shared a birthday.

June 8, 1959.

It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd been just a couple of years younger; somehow she felt that his birth year being in the '60s would have improved things just a bit. But no. Making matters even worse was the fact that they'd been born in the same hospital. She hated imagining her newborn self swaddled next to him in neighboring cribs in some dimly-lit nursery, their little pink hands balled into fists, screaming at the cruelty of being born.

Their waitress, a teenage try-hard with a plastered-on smile, approached the table.

"Happy Valentine's," she chirped, pouring their waters. "He getcha something nice?"

Nora didn't respond and neither did Lewis. A few uncomfortable seconds passed and the waitress gave a nervous laugh.

"I'll just give y'all a minute with the menu."

As she disappeared into the kitchen Nora looked across the booth at Lewis, another hot surge of anger rising in her throat. Lewis flipped through the smudged laminated pages of his menu, concentrating as if it were a holy text, his expression otherwise blank. Nora knew he wasn't reading it. She knew already that when the waitress came back he would order a hamburger, well-done, with a coke and a pickle. He was so boring; so predictably his age — her age. The bald spot on his fifty-two-year-old head gleamed at her in the window light of the shitty little diner. She felt an urge to reach across the table and punch it, but she resisted.

It had been like this the entire drive. Nora had been irrationally enraged to learn that Lewis listened to his music through an aux cord connected to an ancient iPod Touch, just like she did. He liked Paul Simon and The Eagles, just like she did. He said stupid, corny things like "glad we're not on that side" when the southbound highway was backed up with cars across the median, just like she did. But worst of all, most egregious and unforgivable, was the fact that he kept a small photograph of Becka in his wallet. Just like she did.

A tiny piece of Nora, the piece that was exhausted and grieving and desperate for some semblance of peace, had hoped that Lewis would surprise her. That he'd be unexpectedly funny or cool or charming. That he'd seem younger than her and therefore age appropriate. She'd wanted at the very least to understand what Becka saw, because it certainly couldn't be this: a shiny-headed boomer with an unironic '90s Patagonia and a well-done burger with a coke.

The waitress returned, looking more wary this time, and Lewis handed her his menu.

"Hamburger, please. Well-done."



## AMY MONAGHAN

They stayed in a cheap motel somewhere in a barren wasteland outside Salt Lake City. Separate rooms, of course. That went without saying.

Nora couldn't sleep. In the grim light of the bathroom mirror, she impulsively cut her bangs with a pair of nail scissors. She hadn't had bangs since she was in her twenties, and it felt like the sort of innocuous life change that people in situations like hers were expected to make. She'd hoped it might make her feel better, if only for a second or two, but when she finished she took one look at herself in the grimy mirror and collapsed into painful, choking, guilt-ridden sobs. Becka had never known her with bangs.

The next morning they climbed back into Nora's Subaru in silence. Lewis didn't comment on her hair. He held out a sad-looking cellophane-wrapped muffin.

"From the lobby."

"I don't eat lobby muffins."

She pulled out of the motel parking lot and onto the highway as Lewis picked pitifully at his foraged breakfast. When he was finished he folded the cellophane into squares. Nora glanced at the trash-based origami with contempt and felt she couldn't contain herself any longer.

"She said you were a movie director."

Lewis looked up with a resigned yet determined expression, as if he'd been waiting for this and was prepared.

"Yes, that's right."

"I didn't find you on the Internet."

"It's been slow the last few years. I used to do music videos. Some ads here and there."

The cellophane crinkled between his fingers. "You're in finance, right?"

Nora recognized the attempt to turn the conversation towards herself and decided not to allow it. She ignored the question and fell back into silence, her knuckles white on the wheel.

*In finance.* It was the sort of vaguely accurate description of her old job that Nora could imagine Becka telling him, although she hadn't worked in several years. Not since Eddie's death and the settlement. They'd been married twenty-eight years when he'd gone in for a routine dental procedure and the tech had overdosed him on anesthetic. Nora hadn't had a cleaning since. She wondered if Lewis knew all that.

Lewis unfolded the cellophane, then folded it again.

"I don't mind driving for a while."

He never let Becka drive when they went places together. It was an issue between them. One she wasn't supposed to know about but had pieced together from fragments of phone conversation overheard through thin walls that week last spring when Becka came to visit.

Nora would have run them off the road before letting him spend a second at the wheel.

The landscape outside grew greener and more wooded as they ascended into the mountains. And then, too quickly, they were there.

At the top of the winding highway was a wide overlook that stretched out above the peaks below. Nora and Lewis got out of the car and stood by the edge. A layer of clouds hung in the air

## AMY MONAGHAN

beneath the dropoff. For a strange moment Nora remembered being a child, when she thought that clouds were like pillows you could rest on if you climbed too high.

She walked back to the car, her body moving of its own accord now, and reached into the backseat, where she'd placed the box that contained Becka's ashes.

Lewis was staring down at the clouds when she returned.

"They look like pillows," he said.

An emptiness settled over Nora and suddenly it felt like all her rage had evaporated in the thin mountain air. There was nothing left in the well of silent mockery. She was coming up dry and somehow it was worse.

She held the box out to Lewis, and he stared as if fearful of a trap.

"You," she said simply.

He took the box.

The act itself took seconds. Becka's ashes swirled in the breeze and disappeared into the clouds. Gone as quickly as she'd come, not even thirty and already dust. Lewis was crying, but Nora's face was dry.

"Thank you for letting me do that. Letting me be here."

He really did seem grateful, but Nora didn't give a shit. It was just that if the task had been left to her, she'd be standing on that mountain until the earth itself stopped turning.

#

The sun was setting as Nora looked over at Lewis from the driver's seat. He was sleeping, his head pressed against the window. He looked like that vision she'd had of him as a baby: her neighbor in the hospital nursery on June 8, 1959. He looked just like a child. The unfairness of it all made forward movement seem impossible. She pulled the car to the shoulder, parked, and opened the door to step out. Lewis did not stir.

The winding mountain road smelled like juniper and fresh rain. Nora stood stock still and stared into the distance, seeing everything and nothing at the same time.

Years and years ago when Becka was fourteen, she had taken one of the floral-patterned kitchen knives that Nora had bought on sale from a catalogue and used it to cut her wrists. Eddie found her in the bathroom covered in blood and they rushed her to the ER in a nightmarish haze. White gauze soaked with red, careful quiet whispers from the nurses, a referral to an in-patient program. But the next day was picture day at school, and, inexplicably, Becka had wept at the thought of not making it into the yearbook. The psychiatrist found this encouraging and suggested Becka's treatment be pushed back just one day so she could have her photo taken. She wore a long-sleeved purple dress, smiled too wide, and wound up looking slightly manic. It was the photo that Nora had kept in her wallet ever since, and also the photo that Lewis now kept in his. She imagined Becka giving it to him and wondered if he knew the story, if he knew about the floral patterned knife and the white



## AMY MONAGHAN

gauze and the careful quiet whispers. For a second she thought of asking him, but just as quickly changed her mind. It didn't matter now.

Nora climbed back inside the car and found that Lewis was awake. She looked him over: from the creases by his mouth to the sparse forest of hair on his head. Somehow in the span of a few minutes, everything childlike about him had vanished. And Becka would never get to look that old.

“Winterfresh?”

Lewis held out a pack of gum.

Nora felt her jaw clench. She ignored him and put the car in drive.

#



SHELDON KLEEMAN



Raise Your Right Hand



LESLIE POWELL

## Baby Ghost

There's a stain. It lives in the middle of the sofa cushion. The size of a fifty-cent piece. Obvious. Obnoxious. Yet you've lived with it so long, you've internalized the darkness. It's become part of you. But now you're desperate to fix it, eliminate anything ugly before he arrives and stands for the first time in your living room, noticing everything and will, no doubt, sit on the sofa and look and see and judge and think: ah, she's unclean, white trash, just like they said she'd be.

It's an old blemish. Born through blood, pain, and violence. The way everything gets born.

You kneel. Rummage under the kitchen sink. Search for the blue and white can. Don't forget the sponge. Stand over the dark spot. Shake well. Take aim. Depress the white nozzle. Squirt. Not too close. A stream of foam. Pure. White. Hopeful. Something you've never been. Until now.

Walk away. Put on a record. Jazz. Bill Evans.

Give the fizz time to work. Five minutes should do it.

Maybe you can't make it disappear, but you can hide it. You're good at hiding. You've done that for decades. Trick the eyes of the onlookers. You look normal. Happy even.

Will he look like you? Will he have your eyes?

Blot. Don't rub. Be gentle. Don't make it worse. You risk a tear, something permanent you can't repair. Just like the risk you've taken inviting him here. No time to buy new. It's old and fragile. Like you. Like you feel today anyway, at forty-five.

He already knows you did the worst thing you could do. You went against nature, against the primal maternal urge. Did you have the urge to mother?... to take him home... You did. Forever after. But never mind that. You left the hospital alone \_\_ unencumbered or so he thinks. He doesn't know you carried him everywhere. Your baby ghost.

Be prepared. The baby's grown to manhood in your absence. No mother can prepare for that!

Look on the bright side. He's coming. Nobody forced him. He could've have said no. Instead he shocked you. How's next weekend? Great. Wonderful. Like you'd say no. No time for a new sofa. No time to redecorate. But who cares? You do. You want everything to be perfect.

Keep patting the stain.

He insists on a rental car. No airport reunions, please. Okay. He'll find his way to you through a dark New England back road.

Turn on the porch light. Sit on the front steps. Listen for the crunch of gravel. Stand. Smile. Step toward the light.

## The Sliding Door of a Toronto Streetcar

Spadina Avenue runs south toward Chicago back through my heart. Stepping from the side alleys onto the bustling streets, over the pigeons, past the bums, past the Bao Woman selling sweets on the corner, past the bums again, through the beautiful stench of it all—the world begins. It all opens up. Chinatown is Toronto and Toronto is the world. We're all here some way or another.

The streetcar slows to a stop and she gets off. Her light brown crop gets pulled up by the bottom of her backpack as she jogs to beat the light. Her shoes are still filthy from the night we snuck to the top of Casa Loma and drank strawberry soju until our eyes couldn't see and the CN Tower was nothing but a dancing Monet in the night. The silver-blond highlights in her hair glimmer under the Canadian sun. And through it all, I can do nothing but stare.

That's been the story of my summer. I came to Toronto on assignment: come up with 2,000 glorifying words about the ongoing gentrification of Kensington Market and how the city should be grateful for its new yuppie ruling class and make it go hashtag trending.

It takes a certain type of man to interview nepo-babies and tell the story of how brave and daring they are for selling \$14 artisanal currywurst in the name and pursuit of culinary greatness. Usually that man is poor and his bills are due soon. So much for investigative journalism. Oh well, Northwestern was a lifetime ago. Things change.

The stereotype is true, you know—Americans can be bought and sold to the highest bidder. Or at least I can. Money is money and rent is due and food only lasts so long before you need more. The only problem was the mag paid Canadian. Not only was I selling my soul, but I was doing it at a 30% discount.

My apartment, or rather my room, was just off D'Arcy in one of the compact residential alley-streets you see all over Chinatown. It was filthy and covered in trilingual graffiti, but that's Toronto. I never could've guessed Hell had a turquoise front door.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I heard as I stepped onto the landing.

A loud crash. My feet stalled on the first step.

"I fucked Steve last week!"

Who was Steve?

More crashing, more shouting. But my suitcase was heavy and the flight, though short, was turbulent and awful, so I shrugged and continued up. There were worse places to die.

I had to lift the door and jimmy the knob to get it open. And when it finally did, they were both there. A haggard woman wearing a tattered sari gripped an old desk lamp and stood fuming. Her blonde hair was drenched in sweat as she screamed and cornered a tiny man in desperate need of a shave and shower.

Pupils dilated, they glared at me like a pair of raccoons that'd been caught sifting through the trash as I pushed through the door. They didn't know whether to bite or run or keep on fighting, so they just stared.



# NICHOLAS COURSEL

It took them a moment, taking me in, but when they finally did it was the man who spoke first. “Who the fuck are you?” he asked, and my heart almost stopped.

My hands rose above my head as I chuckled to hide my quivering legs. “I’m just here for the AirBnB. I come in peace.”

The man relaxed, sighed, and shoved past me. “You picked the wrong place. Have fun living with this crazy bitch. We’re done, Sarah. This is it.”

“Fuck y—”

The door slammed to the sound of laughter and footsteps climbing down the stairs. I knew what he was doing, egging her on, but I don’t think she did. Or at least she was too angry to be rational to notice. Before I could get a word in, the lamp was soaring through the air two or three inches from my face. It crashed against the freshly slammed door and shattered.

“Sorry about him. He’s just—”

“Crazy?” I suggested. It was better to have the lamp thrower on my side, especially when the alternative had already slammed his way out of the apartment.

The woman laughed and shook her head. “Something like that.” She extended her hand and I took it. “Andre told me we had a fresh one coming. You’re the American?”

I nodded.

“My name’s Tammy. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Sorry,” I replied, eyebrows furrowing, “I didn’t catch that. What’d you say?”

“My name’s Tammy,” she repeated. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Peter. Nice to meet you as well.”

“Welcome to Toronto, Peter,” Tammy-Sarah said. “Follow me. I’ll show you your room. It’s the furthest down the hall, close to the roof deck for when you bring girls home.”

I forced an awkward chuckle again and cursed the editor who’d booked the cheapest AirBnB possible. “You’re gonna love the neighborhood,” he assured through the phone. “Super authentic.” And if I didn’t, oh well. There wasn’t anything I could do about it. I was illegally working on a tourist visa, getting paid into a bank account back home in America.

Three hours later the forty-something-year-old double-named-woman made me a full Vietnamese spread and talked about the Chinese lover she probably didn’t but certainly had in Florida or South Carolina—she said them both three times each—and we ate together next to what remained of the lamp.

The words and stories she spoke were disjointed and nonsensical, but I’d be hard-pressed to say she was lying, at least not intentionally. There was something there behind the wrinkles, something kind and true and at one time probably something beautiful. It was an odd occasion, almost definitely racist, but she felt genuine and loving and like she truly meant well. And the food was among the best I’ve ever had.

“Your last day in Toronto,” Mei says, pulling me into an embrace as she reaches the sidewalk.

“So what’s the plan?”

“Same as always, probably.”

“Xiao long bao?”

“Our spot’s down the road.”

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“Our spot,” she repeats.

I take her hand. It’s full of sweat. We continue walking.

The walk is much quieter than usual. There’s something about feeling the last page of a book and knowing it’s ending but not having read it for yourself yet. Two paragraphs remain and you’re praying for the twist you know isn’t coming. Life isn’t an M. Night Shyamalan movie. It’s predictable. You see the ending long before it comes. It changes for no one.

“Number one and number three, please,” I tell the lady behind the counter, but the register already says our total.

Mei pulls out a wad of bills and hands it over. I smile and thank her and silence settles over us again as we stand and wait. When it comes, we say thank you once more and then head outside to sit down on the park bench we’ve sat on fifty-five times to eat. And then she asks me the question she always asks, “Why don’t you stay?”

“This isn’t my home.”

“It wasn’t mine either when I first left Guangxi.”

“And now look at you. You’ll never leave.”

“Exactly. Where else would I go?”

We both know the city flashing through my mind, but there’s no point in saying it. We’ve already been through it a thousand times. Too dangerous, too far. Too impractical. There are so many different ways to say no.

“I wish you would stay.”

“It’s impossible,” is all I can manage. She doesn’t believe it, and probably never will, but it’s the truth. Maybe it won’t be looking back, but it sure feels that way looking forward.

“Why?”

“Toronto’s—”

“Don’t act like you don’t love it here,” she interjects.

“I love—” I stop myself, sigh, then say, “I loved it for what it was.”

“For what it was?”

My turn to look away. She can never know that our first time meeting at the film festival I’d accidentally broken into was among the best moments of my life, second only to the first time we kissed, up on my rooftop overlooking the skyline. She’d shown me *Old Boy* and *In the Mood for Love* and taught me how to say and forget basic Cantonese.

Her adopted city temporarily became my adopted city, and I found myself walking up and down Spadina late at night dreaming about how long I could stretch it all out. Each day was something else. Cabbagetown, the Beaches, an overpriced boat ride to Toronto Island. Three months was a lifetime and I wasn’t yet ready to die. She knew all of that. She’d lived it right there with me. But what she didn’t know were the calls to my editor, one becoming two, and two becoming three, a small feature turned into a deep dive.

There’s more to this, you know. I think we need to go deeper. One more month should do it. Well, actually, maybe two.

What’s the point in telling her? That part of me’s dead. I’m an internet writer—a blogger and full-time embracer of the twenty-first century. Maybe I’ll start writing about crypto, or go all-in and pump out sales emails. Then maybe I could stay. Maybe I’d even be able to afford a condo



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without two-named crazies. Or maybe that's just the American in me. Anyone can do anything if they try hard and work hard and keep on trying and work hard.

"It was the best place to spend these last three months," I say finally. "A fun city to get sent on assignment."

"A fun city to get sent on assignment?" I can feel her looking away.

"It'll be huge for my portfolio, I hope. Maybe I can use this to get something going back home. Something bigger. Something real I actually care about."

How a series of blog features on persons of interest in Kensington Market, Toronto's hottest and most up-and-coming neighborhood, will inch me closer to real investigative work back in Chicago is beyond me, but it sounds nice to say. It's a dream I desperately want to get caught up in. So I have to go. I have to keep trying.

A young busking man settles across the intersection and begins setting up his chair and unpacking his guitar and unfolding the QR code bib he wears so nobody steals his tips. My eyes focus on him. We're all pimping ourselves out, one way or another.

At least he retains some dignity. The internet doesn't allow for that. It's forever. I could go on to win the Pulitzer and if somebody typed my name into Google and searched hard enough they'd find it. They'd find it all. Kensington Market: *Toronto's Best Kept Secret*, *Eating Your Way Through Toronto's Eclectic Hidden Gem*, and *Currywurst and Community Gardens: An Afternoon with Leslie Kim*. Those articles were my summer, but they served a purpose. Each letter was another evening with Mei, every paragraph brought a moment I'll never forget.

"Let me read it."

"What?" The focus snaps back into my eyes.

"Your article," she says. "You know, the one you've been working on all summer."

She has no idea. It's better that way.

"Oh, no. I can't."

"I want to read the thing that brought you here. It's been three months and you've hardly said one word about it."

"Absolutely not."

"I don't care what it's about—"

I look away from the busker as he picks up his guitar and begins his first song. "They won't let me. I signed an NDA."

Peter the blogger, slinging articles on currywurst and vegan honey on the internet. That's part of me she never gets to see. That's not the man I want her to remember.

"Okay," she says softly.

Her voice fades into the soft strumming of the guitar. A song is playing and I'm sure it's beautiful, but I can't hear it. No one can. The busker's words are swallowed by the hundreds of engines roaring up and down Spadina. Movement. People coming and people going. There's a palpable energy to the street. And to think, just three weeks ago we were one of them.

Driving to Niagara in a rented U-Haul box truck because that's all I could manage being twenty-two and foreign and broke and wanting to impress a girl with four hours' notice. Rushing and getting back before midnight so we could afford dessert by avoiding another day's rental fee, but having to walk seven kilometers because of it.

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It was a summer of clichés, but dammit, clichés are cliché for good reason sometimes. The world would be a much better place if we all embraced them. She made the absurd and the gritty and even the downright disgusting have new meaning and that means something. If it doesn't, what's the point in any of this?

"I can't believe summer's finally over."

"Maybe this wasn't the best idea," she replies. My hand tightens. "Maybe it's impossible to ever truly have one last good day."

"We should've left it at Casa Loma." I don't mean it, but it's true.

"That was a good night."

A wry smile comes over my face. Hers too.

"When does your plane leave?" she asks.

"Tonight. Eight o'clock."

"And you're sure there's no way? My family came here with nothing."

"There's no visas for wannabe writers."

My sentence trails off into nothing. It's not as if I haven't tried. Eighty nights of Google searches and Reddit threads. It only took a week after meeting her to realize I wanted to stay, even if it meant staying on with the mag. But there's only so far you can stretch things.

"If there's one thing Toronto doesn't need," I force myself to say, "it's another struggling writer crowding the streets of Kensington."

"There's always another way."

"You only say that because it worked out for your family."

"I'm saying it because I don't want you to leave."

"Neither do I."

"It just sucks."

"That much we can agree on."

My grip on her hand tightens and I can feel her shake. My heart does the same. It feels like my chest won't be able to contain it much longer. Neither of us are willing to let go. "So this is really it?" she asks quietly.

No, no, no. It's not it. Anything but—*please*.

"This is it," I sigh.

And in that moment, I become the Boy from Chicago and she becomes the Girl from Toronto in the story of our lives. She remains where she is, but not really. Not in any of the ways that matter. Cars honk all around. She ignores them; we both do. A red streetcar slows to a stop. She jogs to it. I watch in slow motion. The busker continues to play. The door slides open and there's only one thing left.

We've run out of time. Our life, our future boiled down to a singular moment, rolls back to zero. She steps inside and the sliding door closes. The streetcar pulls away. She's right next to me but she's gone. I want to watch her leave and watch the streetcar fade into the water, but I can't. It's far too painful.



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The reality is there are no new stories, only predictable ones. I know that and she knows it, too. Whether we wish it to be is irrelevant. I was always leaving and she was always staying. Love, if you can call three months that, has a funny way of falling to the wayside when you're young and drunk on ambition. Just look around. Toronto's full of people like us, damned if we do and fucked if we don't. The choices we make, the outcomes, they're all the same.

She opens her mouth but closes it again. Hope lies south of the border, but she's right in front of me. She's a certainty. The capital m of Maybe lives in my brain and fights against what already is. Visas, writing, respect—making it. These are the technicalities of life and art.

What if I go to the right cocktail party? What if I meet a guy who knows a guy who knows a guy and the blogs become a book and that book becomes two and everybody forgets about how it all started? But then again what if I don't and she meets somebody else? Planes fly in and out of the city two to one, after all.

Hours will pass and nothing will change. I'll go home and I'll duck into the alley and ignore the pigeons, the bums, the bao, and everything else. A rat will scurry past and I'll just be disgusted. The magic of the city, the amazement, it'll all be gone. Stench is stench. D'Arcy is empty. The turquoise door leads nowhere. Only fools fall in love with a halfway-home, with a woman that's not a citizen in a place he can't get a visa.

Tammy-Sarah sits alone on the couch and the lights are all switched off. A bag of peas sits lifeless on the floor by her foot. I don't say anything. We both know.

"Your last day?" she asks as I near my bedroom door.

I stop moving. "Yeah."





Joy is My Birthright





Late Bloomer



## A Hairstory

Ask a black girl what her type is.

She could simply say, “Tall, dark, and handsome.”

If she’s in a playful mood, she might quote “Whatta Man,” the Salt-N-Pepa song, “My man is smooth like Barry, and his voice got bass. A body like Arnold, with a Denzel face. He’s smart like a doctor with a real good rep.”

When she’s hair-brained, she’ll say, “Oh, mostly 4C. But there’s a patch of hair, in the middle of my head, that’s 4B- I swear!”

Ask a black girl what her type is. But please be specific. What type of partner do you want? Or... What’s your hair type? If it’s the latter, prepare to listen to her hairstory, which will be riddled with kinks, submission, and hopefully, love.

Everyone, regardless of race or gender, has a hair type. Though the categorization, read ranking, system is irrelevant outside of the black community and it mostly affects black women. The types are as follows:

Type 1 hair is straight, and it is the standard by which all other types are judged. Type 2 hair, which is wavy, is less desirable but it’s not damning. Type 3 hair is curly. It is the type of hair people associate with mixed race women who have one black parent and one non-black parent. Last and least is type 4.

Each type has a subtype, differentiated by the letters A, B, and C. For the sake of our conversation on black hairstory, we’re only going to delve into 4A, 4B, and 4C type hair. Also, our focus is monoracial black women and it is safe to assume that most of us fall into the type 4 category.

Reader, I do have another ask. After you learn the differences between the 4A, 4B, and 4C hair types, do not correct a black girl who tells you she’s a 4A when she’s clearly a 4C. She will take off her bamboo earrings, kick off her Jordans, have her homegirl hold her red Telfar bag, and then proceed to beat you down like she owns you. Her self-love is hinging on a hair caste system, after all.

Natural Hair Rules, a website run by Tamara Floyd, explains the differences between the type 4 hair subtypes but they are all designated as kinky and fragile. Type 4A is “tightly coiled” with a “more defined curly pattern” (Floyd). The next type 4B has “more of a ‘Z’ shaped pattern” where the curls are less defined (Floyd). Finally, 4Cs have “curls that are so tightly kinked, there is seemingly no definition” (Floyd).

When I was a young’un in 1990s and early 2000s, we were not as formal when describing out hair. Your hair was bad. Nappy. “Thick” was a euphemism for “girl, your hair so nappy that Madam C.J. Walker is going to rise from her grave just to make an exceedingly, an exceptionally, and an extraordinarily strong relaxer to straighten that mess into something doable.”

Lucky for me, I had good hair. Soft hair. That 4A hair. Oh, I cannot tell you how many times I’ve been told, “*Amber, you have a good grade of hair.*” Because I am humble, I just smile. And because I practice gratitude, I have over 35 entries in my gratitude journal saying that I am grateful that my mama’s mama had a Native American grandmother. My daddy’s daddy had 4A hair, too. I got them good hair genes from both sides of my family tree!



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Okay. I'm lying like Jada Wada's edges, or the baby hairs that are sculpted into hills of curves along her forehead. It is true that I've been told I have good quality hair, but I do not have a gratitude journal. Nor am I grateful for having the type of hair that I do. It's because I understand the ugly hairstory that fuels such "compliments."

Hair has never not been important to black people. In western Africa, prior to chattel slavery, a hairstyle denoted a person's age, debt, fertility, manhood, marital status, social rank, tribe, and wealth. The styles were beautifully intricate, and it could take days to fashion them. The first Africans were abducted from their homeland to work as slaves in the United States in the early 17th century. Slave masters did not allow the enslaved people to practice their customs, including the hair customs. Further, black people were not given the tools to properly care for their hair. They resorted to using baking grease, butter, kerosene, and sheet brushes for haircare. As slave owners understood that a black woman's hair was her crown, black women's heads were shaved as a form of punishment.

There is the macro-version of black hairstory. When we whittle the scope of our lens to the micro-level, we learn that every black girl has a hairstory. Oftentimes, our individual hairstories are tragic too.

There's a photo of me that was taken on picture day at Busy Beaver, the school I attended for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. My mom told me I was sick. However, my dad insisted I go to school. Eventually, the school called my parents to come get me but not before I got my close up. I had on a yellow sweater, layered over a white turtleneck. If you study the photo, you can make out the gold teddy bear necklace I wore. I did not smile but my hair... Let me tell you! My mom straightened it so good there was not a nap in sight. She sectioned it into four ponytails, two in the front and two in the back, held up by white hair bobbles. Each ponytail was twisted, and white barrettes marked the end of them.

I had hair them 4Cs dream of. And hair them 4As and 4Bs, whose hair would not grow, pray for. I was no fool, though. I saw the types of girls who were called beautiful. The types of girls who got the cute boy. They were cast to represent me but they did not look like me. Not their skin. Not their nose. Not their lips. Certainly, not their hair. Those heffas had 3A hair at best, 3C at worst. Two of my favorite heffas were Tia and Tamara Mowry, stars of *Sister, Sister*. Every weekend, save for weekends preceding a vacation from school, my sister and I endured a hair routine that was as painful as it was long. On Friday afternoon, my mom washed our hair. Then she greased our scalps with Blue Magic hair grease and braided it. On Saturday morning, subjected to oldies not goodies that played on the radio, we sat in an uncomfortable kitchen chair as our mom straightened our hair. If we forgot to fold our ear down when she got to the section of our hair that surrounded the ear, we got burnt. If I had a dollar for every scab I had to pick off my ear, I'd be on the Forbes list of richest black women in the world.

I dreaded shower-time, this was even more so on the couple of days that followed Saturdays. Water was the enemy that I had to protect my straight hair from it. First, I wrapped my burgundy and black scarf around my head. If my edges were not covered, I re-wrapped. Next, I put on the shower cap. Then... the shower. I'd stop scrubbing down to reposition the scarf and shower cap when they shifted out of place. Despite all I did to keep my hair from getting wet, my kitchen, or

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the hair at the back of my head, kinked right back up. My only consolation was the game of make believe that I played in the mirror, placing a bath towel on my head, and imagining it was my hair. Straight, long hair - like Topanga on *Boy Meets World* or Cher in *Clueless*.

I knew I'd never have hair like Topanga and Cher. They were white girls, and I was just a black girl. Thusly, I adjusted my aspirations accordingly. Identify the black girls with straight hair that blows in the wind and do what they did to get my hair like theirs.

On the first few seasons of *Sister, Sister*, Tia and Tamera wore their hair in its natural state. Their natural hair is type 3, the acceptable curls that'd never be referred to as nappy. In season four, the twins appeared in an episode with straightened hair. A new hope blossomed within me. The days of pretending a towel was my hair could be behind me. I knew what I had to do, and I asked my mom.

"Ma, can I get a perm so my hair can be like Tia's and Tamera's?"

(Note: Perm and relaxer are used interchangeably but they are not the same thing. A perm curls the hair, and a relaxer straightens it.)

My mom responded, destroying this new hope and without explanation, "Your hair wouldn't look like that."

Well, damn. Mom let me believe Santa Claus was real until I was twelve years old. Yet, she shut me all the way down when I asked to relax my hair so it could look like the girls' on TV.

There have been numerous iterations of a natural hair movement, the most recent one beginning in the 2010s. The purpose of the movements were to encourage black women to love their God-given hair as it is and to teach them how to take care of it. Jouelzy, a black woman who does social commentary on YouTube, posted the video, "The Natural Hair Movement Failed," in July of 2022. She argues that one reason the movement failed is because "corporations relied on women with looser textures to promote these products" (Jouelzy). Maybe type 3s were born with it, but type 4s can buy it.

Countless black women who have type 4 hair repeated Jouelzy's sentiment. A movement that was started to uplift women with hair that was traditionally viewed as bad was usurped by women whose hair texture is generally considered acceptable. A Yara Shahidi, a woman with one black parent and one white parent, is hired to push curl activator to a Marsai Martin, a woman with two black parents. Tia and Tamera are cast to play black girls. While it's revealed that their biological TV father is white at the end of the series, it's too late for me. Two years after the series ended in 1999, I relaxed my hair. And once you relax, there's no going back. I had my first hit of creamy crack my freshman year of high school. My mother was not opposed to me chemically straightening my hair - she started relaxing her hair one year before I was born. She only wanted me to have realistic expectations. We swapped out one hair routine for another. Chemical straighteners look like white frosting. They earned the nickname "creamy crack" because they are addicting and harmful to its users. If a black woman wants to wear her hair in its natural state after relaxing it, she will have to cut off the relaxed hair, a process we call the Big Chop.

I would not be offended if you question my intelligence, or other black women's intelligence, after you read the next two paragraphs. This is not an excuse, but we are desperate. Sojourner Truth asked, "Ain't I a woman?" in 1851 and we're still asking that question in 2022. We're breasts. And hips. Thighs. Rear ends. We're strong. And angry. Sassy. Temptresses. (Worst of all, we don't even



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have pretty hair.) We're reduced to body parts or personality traits. We human though and we wanna be loved too.

Relaxers smell like rotten eggs. That should've been enough to change my mind. The promise of a future where I could shower without my edges coiling up was too alluring. My mom slathered the white substance on my hair. The goal is to let the relaxer stay on as long as possible for the best results. I never lasted more than 10 minutes. No sooner had the relaxer started to burn I cried, "Ma, it's burning. We gotta wash it out!"

The pain I experienced from washing the perm out was worse than the burning I felt after it was applied. When the water hit my scalp, every hair follicle stung. The pain traveled from my scalp to the unwounded strands of hair. The outcome was mostly worth the discomfort. Destiny's Child's album, *The Writing's on the Wall*, came out the same year *Sister, Sister* was cancelled. My favorite member, Beyonce, is front and center on the album cover art. Her brown hair is cornrowed, with hints of blond throughout the braids. My big-ticket Christmas gift for 2001 was that I got my hair braided just like Beyonce - sort of.

I showed the woman who was going to braid my hair the album cover and pointed a figure at Beyonce, "I want my hair like hers."

Two hundred dollars down my parents' toilet and eight hours later, the woman finished my hair. She didn't cornrow the black hair all the way down. Instead, she braided the hair to the crown of my head and left the rest of it hang loose in a wavy pattern. Coincidentally, my best friend's hair was done in a similar style. A kid in our health class asked me if I got my hair done to match with my friend. I said yes. You lose some, you lose some.

If a black girl maintains her braids, she can keep them in for a few months. I only kept mine in for a few weeks. I took care of them, but they were so heavy. And itchy. My mom and I took them out in the living room, where the television was, departing from the kitchen where our hair routines were usually performed.

One of the worst things you can say to a black girl is, "Your hair is falling out." As she was taking the synthetic hair that was mixed in with my hair out, mom said, "I hope this is not *your* hair."

My mane attraction, tresses that cascaded past my shoulders, was now thin and barely reached the base of my neck. I didn't know what to do with it so I sported the same weak hairstyle for the better part of three years. I combed my hair back and wore different styles of headbands. I had not learned to make lemonade out of lemons as my foremothers had. Enslaved women did not have the same resources to style their hair as their ancestors had. Still, they worked with what they had to do their hair in styles that were pleasing to them. White women felt threatened because white men were attracted to the enslaved women with exotic hairstyles. To curtail this attraction, the Tignon Law was passed in the 18th century. The law required black women and mixed-race women to wear headscarves to signify they were members of the slave class, whether they were enslaved or not. They also could not wear their hair in pretty styles or wear feathers or jewelry in their hair. The law said the feathers and jewelry couldn't be worn in their hair. Not the scarves. Black women used high end fabric for the scarves and decorated them with beads, brooches, and ribbons.

I've been a baldie for about five years now. Baldie is the term for women who wear their hair in the shorter length that is typically worn by men. It's not uncommon for black women to be baldies,

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especially after the Big Chop. I never did the Big Chop. Mine was more of a chop, not big, and little c.

By the time I started junior year of high school, I was so sick of my hair I was willing to try anything. My mom, sister, and I occasionally watched *Charmed*, starring Holly Marie Combs, Rose McGowan, and Alyssa Milano. I do not remember anything about that show except when Alyssa rocked a pixie cut.

I know what you are probably thinking, “Amber, you jacked up your hair trying to be like Tia, Tamera, *and* Beyonce. Now, you’re going to get your hair done like Alyssa? And she has white girl hair, you don’t!” Hear me out. Please.

I knew it was possible to get my hair done in a style like Alyssa’s hair. Anita Baker, Toni Baker, Nia Long, black women with short hair, were proof.

My family and I were at the mall. My mom sent me to Arby’s to get curly fries. A black woman, with a blond pixie cut was in line. I told her I liked her hair. Coincidentally or not, she was a hair stylist. I scheduled an appointment with her about a month later. She chopped a few inches off my hair and styled it à la Anita Baker and I haven’t looked back since.

Between 2014 and 2017, I stopped relaxing my hair. The most recent natural hair movement was also underway, but I was not aware of it. I don’t have social media so I’m always out of the loop. Although, I noticed the increasing numbers of black women and girls whose hair was natural. In 2015, I got a job that I had to take one bus, and two trains to get to. Smart phone in my hand, long commute - music was a way to make the rides tolerable. Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly* was released spring 2015.

During my interminable commute to and from work, I listened to Lamar’s catalog. He’s a Californian native and several of his songs have references to the Black Panther Party. I superficially knew who the Panthers were, but his music made me want to *learn* about them. I read Huey Newton, Angela Davis, George Jackson, Mumia Abu-Jamal. Perhaps we could say my re-education was not in chronological order because I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* after I read about the people Malcolm inspired.

In undergrad, I chose Malcolm X to be the subject for an essay I had to write for a history course. During my research, I came across a video of him making a speech. Even after I completed the assignment, I’d pull up that video.

In the speech, Malcolm asks his audience, “Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet?” He goes on to say, “You should ask yourself who taught you to hate being what God made you.”

He was speaking to an audience of black people, but self-hate is a universal affliction. And while it’s universal, it’s not innate. A man who is short does not hate being short because shortness indicates something is “wrong” with him. He hates being short because he was taught that short men are not as valuable as tall men. Type 4 hair isn’t bad. Ugly. Or unprofessional. There’s an oppressive hairstory that says it is.

Recently, I’ve grown bored with the baldie look and I’ve been considering dreadlocks. My sister told me that the “dread” in dreadlocks was derogatory, but she did not tell me why.

Haile Selassie was crowned emperor of Ethiopia, or Negus, in 1930. Six years later, he went into exile after leading a resistance against an Italian invasion. Ethiopian warriors refused to cut their



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type 4 hair until Selassie was released. After a while, their hair matted and locked. These warriors were “dreaded,” and the term dreadlocks was born.

When I learned where the “dread” in dreadlocks came from, it didn’t seem so derogatory to me. The Negus guerilla warriors were so badass that a hairstyle was named after them. The origin of the term “dreadlocks.” The Tignon Laws. Baking grease, butter, kerosene, sheetbrushes. Lemons to lemonade.

Black hairstory and history, macro and micro, it seems is about perspective. When I look at pictures of black people in cotton fields, I see survivors not slaves. I choose to love my upward-bound coils not hate my nappy hair.

As a collective, black women can choose to participate in categorization systems that rank our hair as last and least. Or we can choose not to. It’s not that simple but nothing worth having in life is.

Maybe one day when a black girl with a magnificent afro is asked what her type is, there’ll only be one way to answer it, “Well-a, I like ‘em real wild, b-boy style by the mile. Smooth black skin with a smile. Bright as the sun” (Salt-n-Pepa).

But please, reader. No matter how tempting it is, do not touch her hair. I’ll be waiting by her side, ready to hold her bag. Because one thing that will never be acceptable is to touch a black woman’s hair.

LISA WRIGHT



Green Thumb  
(Part of *Views from a Greenhouse* Collection)



BRAD SHURMANTINE

## Little Deuce Coupe

The summer I turned seventeen I wrecked the family car, a 1965 Buick Skylark. I called it “my little deuce coupe,” having no idea what kind of vehicle the Beach Boys were actually singing about (a 1932 Ford Model 18 hot rod). The Skylark was indeed a coupe, smaller and infinitely cooler than the Buick Special station wagon it replaced. It was the last new car my mother would ever buy.

My brothers were in college and had their own cars, which I couldn’t touch, so the little deuce coupe was mine. The station wagon we got rid of was brown and had dirty fabric seats laden with dog hair. My little coupe gleamed white, inside and out, with plush leather seats where I perched like a prince. I loved cruising around in that car, window down, my arm dangling out holding an imaginary cigarette, singing out loud.

*She’s my little deuce coupe  
You don’t know what I got*

I would volunteer for any family errand, a burger run or carting my sister to a Girl Scout meeting. But that evening I had plans of my own.

“Where are you going?” my mom asked.

“Nowhere. Me and Mike are just going to drive around.”

She accepted that response. “Just driving around” was how teenagers in the Kansas City suburbs normally entertained themselves. Gas was 19¢ a gallon. If we could get our hands on some alcohol, we were set.

“Be careful,” she said resignedly, her usual parting words. Of course we’d be careful. We didn’t intend to do anything dangerous that night, like getting black-out drunk, but our first stop was the neighborhood Safeway where Mike slipped a fifth of Bacardi under his jacket while I stood watch.

Mike and I were neighborhood friends. We met when we were kids on our little league baseball team; Mike was the steady shortstop and I was the problematic second baseman. I could not be counted on to always glove grounders, and my coach made sure Mike covered the bag on all stolen base attempts. Mike hit an occasional home run, while I relied on what baseball scouts call “a good eye.” I wasn’t fooled by pitches out of the strike zone and usually walked my way on base. I could recognize a hanging curve and pop that ball into shallow right, or squirt it between infielders.

Mike was the real athlete, and I noticed when we reached high school how his shoulders broadened and he approached adult size. I, however, could not achieve escape velocity from 125 lbs., despite the milk shake and tablet products I consumed to bulk up, purchased through comic book ads. Mike went to public schools, which I imagined toughened him. I was sheltered in my Catholic schools. We parochial kids assumed we were better than the Protestant rabble, but granted them their street smarts. My high school was “college preparatory;” who the hell knew where those public-school kids would end up. But Mike was a solid guy and I maintained that friendship. No one better to go joy-riding and drinking with. I figured he was experienced with this sort of thing, the Virgil to my Dante.

## BRAD SHURMANTINE

The drinking was all my idea. Most of my high school weekends were devoted to tracking down beer or weed. Intoxication was a door swinging open, releasing me from my middle class, suburban cage. *The road of excess, Blake opined, leads to the palace of wisdom.* Back then I hadn't yet encountered the "Proverbs of Hell" (or Dante either), but I seemed to be unconsciously guided by them, without quite having set my sights on any "palace of wisdom."

When I got to college and actually discovered Blake they became my MO. To this day I read the "Proverbs of Hell" with pleasure, finding them truthful, since I'm a poet and, like Blake also said, "of the Devil's party."

Teenagers too are of the devil's party. Their psychological task, according to Erik Erickson, is identity formation, which requires pushing boundaries. Lucifer was just trying to figure out what kind of angel he was. He crossed the line, unfortunately, but that shit happens. I had to test the waters; I had no choice. *He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.* Blake's proverbs cast light on the teenage soul, including the kid who wrecked his mother's car. *Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity.* Of course, Blake wasn't writing with teenagers specifically in mind; he never had children. If he'd had a teenager skulking around the house, someone like me, he might have done a little more editing.

We drove aimlessly. We had no place to go. Mike would take a slug and I would take a slug. It was a warm and glorious night and we felt like pirates. The windows were down and the radio was up. I drove with one hand on the wheel and the other clutching a yo-ho-ho bottle of rum. I remember cruising down Blue Ridge Road under the streetlights and feeling an overwhelming sense of well-being. So happy, so cool.

*Well I'm not bragging babe so don't put me down  
But I've got the fastest set of wheels in this town  
When something comes up to me he don't even try  
'Cause if I had a set of wings, man I know she could fly*

*She's my little deuce coupe  
You don't know what I got*

After that it's just shards of memory. I'm in the passenger seat—how'd I get here—leaning my head against the door. Who's driving? Mike is driving. I know I'm really drunk but feel safe because Mike is behind the wheel, this big, sure-handed guy, and he's laughing. No worries.

Then we're in our neighborhood cruising down a hill I've skateboarded hundreds of times. At the end of that street is a field. Whoops, we're in the field, jolting over rocks and bushes that scrape the undercarriage and make a huge racket. My head bounces against the car door, not unpleasantly, and I feel suspended in air, waiting for the carnival ride to end.

*Improvement makes strait roads, but the crooked roads without Improvement, are roads of Genius.* The car rolls to an abrupt stop and the genius opens the door and falls out. He can't stand but manages to sit up, trying to understand what's happened. The headlights pierce the darkness and there's smoke and steam everywhere... A cop is lifting me to my feet, gripping me hard under my



## BRAD SHURMANTINE

shoulders. Our front door opens and I stumble past my mother into our living room, fall to my knees and vomit on our worn sage-green carpet.

*You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.* I woke the next morning, Sunday, feeling like shit and fully aware of what I had done. I was alone in the house; my mother and sister had gone to church. I walked down the hallway, my head splitting, mouth full of sand, stomach roiling, and listened to the awful accusatory silence. In the living room a pail of dirty water and a bottle of Mr. Clean sat on the carpet where I had thrown up. The acrid odor of vomit and disinfectant assaulted my nostrils.

I plopped down on our old yellow couch and stared at the ceiling, swamped with guilt and remorse. At that point I didn't know our car was totaled; I thought we just got a flat tire or something, and when mom got home I'd face the music and then go find the car and change the tire. I'd make it up to her somehow. I felt lucky I hadn't been arrested, grateful for the nice cops who simply brought me home. (If they had pulled us over while driving, they would certainly have arrested us; instead they just found two drunk boys lying in a field beside a smoking car—much easier to take them home to their mommies and call a tow truck.) One thing for sure: I never wanted to drink again. I had learned my lesson.

Nah, I didn't learn any lesson. At mass my mother apparently decided to forgive me (thank you, Jesus); there were no angry tears or recriminations when she got home. She sat next to me on our old couch and asked me what happened. I told her the truth. I told her how sorry I was. I was very, very sorry. But I knew immediately she had let me off the hook, and I'd be able to continue with my teenage rebel antics. Maybe employ that long neglected "good eye" and be a little more discerning. I poured myself a glass of orange juice, slipped into my jeans, and prepared to go out and change the tire.

Mom shot that plan down. "The car's been towed somewhere. Just go to church." Which I did—missing Mass was a mortal sin. The next day we learned the entire undercarriage and engine block had been ripped out by the boulder field we drove through. The little deuce coupe was scrap metal.

That week was grim and difficult as I realized the full weight of the financial catastrophe I had wreaked upon my mother. She was still making payments on the Skylark; the insurance money would pay it off but leave nothing for a new car. Then the company would jack up her rates. She was a widow with four grown kids who still lived at home—she fed and clothed us and paid our tuition. I had a part-time job in a shoe store which covered my school lunches, gas, and weekend movies. I couldn't contribute anything toward a down payment on another car.

A kind salesman at her dealership did her a favor, and she managed to secure a '64 Buick LeSabre, a big boxy car with patches of rust on the rear fenders. There was nothing sporty or cool about that lunky LeSabre; I was embarrassed to drive it. But it started in the winter and got me back and forth to school. Whenever I pulled into the parking lot, I prayed none of my buddies would see me.

*If the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise.* I persisted. I wasn't a complete delinquent. I earned good grades, had major roles in school plays, won speech trophies, and my test scores (in my opinion) were fantastic. I worked hard to make my mother proud of me and win her approval, and she steadily granted it. She never once made reference to her smashed coupe, and I kept smoking weed and chugging beer. I did back off the hard stuff.

## BRAD SHURMANTINE

Eventually I got cocky and careless and was suspended from school, nearly expelled, for smoking pot in my hotel room at a speech tournament—pulled from class and cast down like Lucifer. The Dean called my mother at work and gave her the news; I was too emotional to speak. When she got home she peered into my eyes, her face trembling, and asked, “Honey, are you addicted?”

“No, Mom. I’m not.”

But the hurt and worry on her face did not stop me from careening down the highway of excess. I ate ice cream, watched soap operas, and smoked pot throughout my suspension. In college I never turned down a drug, as long as it was in pill or blotter form. Needles scared me. I told my mother a half-truth. I wasn’t a dope fiend or an alcoholic, but I was addicted to pushing limits.

In time I arrived at that “palace of wisdom:” the high school where I wound up teaching. So many adults I knew were intimidated by teenagers, but I loved being around them. They constantly surprised and amused me. Nothing they did or could do ever shocked or disappointed me, unless they were mean or hateful, and they rarely were. No more than most people. They weren’t perfect—they could be maddening, and I was often flabbergasted by their refusal to learn simple things I tried to teach them, but hey, they couldn’t be bigger fuck-ups than I was when I was their age. In the room with them, I felt at ease. I ran a comfortable, judgment-free classroom where they could be themselves. I even let one kid give a demonstration speech on how to shoot a beer, though I made him use a can of Pepsi. (Maybe that wasn’t exactly wise; not my best Virgil move.) I pushed and challenged them academically, but I couldn’t quite wipe the smile from my face when they’d brag about their wild weekends. I kind of wished I, married with kids, could join them.

In time I forgave myself for wrecking my mother’s car. In her true wisdom she showed me how, that Sunday morning. She forgave me for being a kid; she made it simple. But like my students, I could be a very slow learner. Another nugget buried in the “Proverbs” makes sense to me now, but when I was a teenager, trying too hard to become myself, it would have been cryptic and impenetrable: *Damn*, braces: *Bless*, relaxes. It took me a while to learn to relax, but I got there.





# CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

## COVER ART:

**Luiza NaslYan** is a multidisciplinary artist currently based in Dilijan, Armenia. She started her artistic professional career in 2019 in China. Later, she graduated from the art center in Yerevan, Armenia, and got certified as an art teacher with MoMA New York. She joined in various art residences and exhibitions. Her travels to more than 15 countries brought her to her current art styles. She explores individuals with various cultures and backgrounds, as well as individuals such as animals and plants.



**Armenian Artists Project** - Our cover artist was discovered via the Armenian Artists Project, which is a charity project aiming to exhibit, promote and sell pieces of original art created by Armenian artists living in Armenia. Every time a work is sold, the matching amount of what the artist receives is put aside to be allotted as charity in Armenia. As the balance of art sales revenue is used for direct operational costs of the AAP website, the art buyers get almost a 60% income tax deduction of their art purchases. Established in 2018, the website [armenianartistsproject.org](http://armenianartistsproject.org) has been operating for three years. During this period more than 100 artists – painters, sculptors, tapestry makers – have joined the Project. Over 1500 pieces of Armenian art are exhibited on the website with a wide variety of styles, mediums, sizes and shapes. Buy art from [armenianartistsproject.org](http://armenianartistsproject.org) – do charity in Armenia!

## CONTENT:

**Marianna Angel** (b. 1995) is a Miami-based artist and writer. Her range of mediums, including writing, photography and collage, intersect at multiple points. Angel depicts intimate gazes into herself and glimpses into memories that are fleeting but resonate within. Angel explores ideas of domesticity and the self.

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**Gina M. Angelone** is a documentary filmmaker and fiction writer. Her work has received Emmy awards, international prizes, and grants from foundations such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the American Academy of Arts & Letters. Gina is currently writing flash fiction that attempts to step into a moment in time and reveal the fractured connections between people and the places they inhabit, both physically and emotionally. Her work is published in several journals and magazines.  
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**A.R. Arthur (formerly A.R. Salandy)** is a Black Mixed-race poet & writer who has spent most of his life in Kuwait jostling between the UK & America. Anthony's work has been published over 260 times internationally. Anthony's Reviews have been published, or are forthcoming over 70 times internationally. Anthony's Flash Fiction was shortlisted and received an honourable mention in the 2022 The Dillydoun Flash Fiction Prize Competition. Anthony has 3 published chapbooks titled 'The Great Northern Journey' 2020 (Lazy Adventurer Publishing) & 'Vultures' 2021 (Roaring Junior Press) as well as a novel 'The Sands of Change' 2021 (Alien Buddha Press). Anthony's Chapbook 'Half Bred' was the Winner of the 2021 'The Poetry Question' Chapbook contest. Anthony is the EIC of Fahmidan Journal/Publishing & Co, Reviews Editor at Full House Literary & Poetry Editor at Chestnut Review. Twitter & Instagram: @ararthurwriter  
Author Website: <https://ararthurwriter.wordpress.com/>

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**Michael Brodin** is a physician who spent his most formative years in Brooklyn, New York. He has written one novel SKIN GAME (Zebra) and was featured in the anthology HAVING BEEN THERE (Scribner's). His work has appeared in 101 words, Flashfiction Magazine, Friday Flashfiction, Fairfield Scribes, and Passager.

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**Rohan Buettel** lives in Canberra, Australia. His haiku appear in various Australian and international journals (including Presence, Cattails and The Heron's Nest). His longer poetry appears in more than fifty journals, including The Goodlife Review, Rappahannock Review, Penumbra Literary and Art Journal, Passengers Journal, Reed Magazine, Meniscus and Quadrant.

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**N.T. Chambers** has led an interesting life before becoming a writer. Among the many jobs held were cab driver, bus driver, sales drone, pizza deliverer, wine merchant, improv actor, editor, educator, professional counselor, and, of course, every writer's "go to" job - bartender. The author's works have been published in the following magazines and journals: Grassroots, In Parentheses, You Might Need to Hear This, The Elevation Room, Wingless Dreamer, Months to Years, New Note Poetry, Bright Flash Literary Review, Quibble, Indolent Books, Banyan Review, Inlandia, The Orchards Poetry Journal, The Decadent Review, Emerald Coast Writers, Share Literary Journal, Bluebird Word, Red Coyote, Bookends Review, Flint Hills Review Anthology, Gabby & Min Publications, Blaze Vox, SBLAAM and Black Coffee Review.

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**Nicholas Coursel** is a French-Canadian writer and educator born and raised in Chicagoland. His work aims to shed light on the forgotten while always embracing his working-class roots.

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**V. M. Doubt** (she/they) is a Scottish poet residing in Toronto, Canada. Their work centres the queer experience of trauma, recovery, neurodivergency, polyamory, love and loss. They have publications in Hot Pot Magazine and Naked Cat Lit Mag with a forthcoming publication in Toil & Trouble Magazine. Social media handle: @vmdoubt

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**Amber Dukes** - I do not enjoy long walks on the beach, but I love touring malls across the United States to see how they differ from one another. Surprisingly, working in retail for 15 years has not made me mall-phobic. I entered the banking field in 2020-a dream come true for a personal finance enthusiast-and am currently pursuing an M.A. in Creative and Professional Writing. If I'm not working or doing coursework, I am probably at my local library.

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**R. Gerry Fabian** is a published poet and novelist. He has published five books of poetry: Parallels, Coming Out Of The Atlantic, Electronic Forecasts, Wildflower Women as well as his poetry baseball book, Ball On The Mound. In addition, he has published five novels: Getting Lucky (The Story), Memphis Masquerade, Seventh Sense, Ghost Girl and Just Out Of Reach.

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**Jade Han** (they/them) is a mixed Korean and Mexican gender non-conforming poet from Buffalo Grove, IL. They are a staff poetry writer for Dalika Magazine and have had poetry published/forthcoming in Papers Publishing, ONE ART Poetry Journal, The Afterpast Review, Flurry Magazine, and Outland Magazine. Han currently attends the University of San Francisco. Their work explores the different aspects of their identity and the ways they interact with one another. Alongside writing, they are also an avid skateboarder and visual artist.

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**Corinne Harrison** is an avid reader, writer, and coffee drinker. She's a digital nomad travelling the UK, often taking inspiration for her writing from the places she visits. Her fiction has appeared in Kelp Journal and in Elegant Fiction. Her second submission in Elegant Fiction won its monthly competition.

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**Sheldon Kleeman** is a multi-medium artist mixing collage and assemblage with written words and music. Self taught, he is drawn to surrealism, abstract, cubism, social and political commentaries Originally from Philadelphia, now living in Trenton, New Jersey. Instagram: @kleemansheldon

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**China Lamont**, also known as Chi.Casso, is a self-taught visual artist from Queens, NY. Using her talents to create artworks with the intention to heal others, she creates bright colored pieces that often communicates messages to the viewer. China's favorite medium to use is acrylic, creating art using several different art styles. Recently, she began creating sculptures and textured art. Her love for art allows her to express herself without limiting her work to just one style of art.

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**Hiram Larew** - Founder of Poetry X Hunger: Bringing a World of Poets to the Anti-Hunger Cause, Hiram Larew has had poems appear in recent issues of Contemporary American Voices, The Iowa Review, Honest Ulsterman and other journals. His most recent collection Pathy Ways was published in 2023 by CyberWit Press. [www.HiramLarewPoetry.com](http://www.HiramLarewPoetry.com) and [www.PoetryXHunger.com](http://www.PoetryXHunger.com) @HiramGLarew

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**Anna Maeve** is a 30-something jill of all trades hailing from beautiful New Zealand. Website: [annamaeve.com](http://annamaeve.com)

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**Amy Monaghan** is a queer Los Angeles-based writer with an MFA in Screenwriting from UCLA. Her fiction has appeared in publications such as Witness Magazine, Mulberry Literary, Cagibi Lit, and The Write Launch. In her free time she enjoys road trips to towns with one gas station, reading books about tragedy, and collecting pinecones in the park. Learn more at [amymonaghanwrites.com](http://amymonaghanwrites.com).

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**Mo Murrie** is a traveller, writer, father of three living in the west country. He's worked in theatre and had two plays professionally produced, "The Bird" at the Crescent Theatre and "I She You Me" at the Mac - both in Birmingham. Also poems in various magazines including The Cricketer and The Countryman.

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**Bernard Pearson** is a published poet with work in The Madrigal, Edinburgh Review, Aesthetica Magazine, Wild Court, The York Literary Review (amongst one hundred other magazines and journals) as well as "In Free Fall," a selection of my poetry published by Leaf by Leaf Press in 2017.

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**John R.C. Potter** is an international educator and gay man from Canada, living in Istanbul. His poems, stories, essays, and reviews have been published in a range of magazines and journals, most recently in Blank Spaces, ("In Search of Alice Munro", June 2023), Literary Yard ("She Got What She Deserved", June 2023), Freedom Fiction ("The Mystery of the Dead-as-a-Doornail Author", July 2023), and The Serulian ("The Memory Box", September 2023). The author has over a dozen upcoming publications in the coming months, including an essay in The Montreal Review. <https://author-blog.org/> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/JohnRCPotter>

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**Leslie Powell** writes plays, fiction, nonfiction, essays and poetry. Her plays have been read and produced throughout the U.S. and in Toronto, Canada. Most recently “Heart-Land: a Lesbian Drama” was selected for National Pride Month in 2022 and presented as a staged-reading for Aria Production in San Antonio, Texas. Her first poem “Stuffed” was published in KYSO zine and selected for ‘Best On The Net’ in the print version. Her fiction “Benediction for a Murderer” has appeared in Zoetrope on line and her essay “Son of Man” appeared in Pandora magazine. Her resume can be found here: <http://pullins.com/leslie-powell-resume>

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**Elizabeth Ricketson** is a graduate of Providence College with a BA in English. She has always had a love of literature and the fine arts. In the 1990s, Elizabeth studied figure drawing at the Rhode Island School of Design spending years dedicated to understanding human form, movement and anatomy. [www.elizabethricketson.net](http://www.elizabethricketson.net)  
Blog titled “It’s Complicated.” <https://wordpress.com/view/elizabeth-ricketson.com>. Elizabeth’s essays focus on life experiences and life in Vermont.

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**Christopher Rubio-Goldsmith** was born in Merida, Yucatan, grew up in Tucson, Arizona, and taught English at Tucson High School for 27 years. Much of his work explores growing up near the border, being raised biracial/bilingual and teaching in a large urban school where 70% of the students are American/Mexican. A Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, his writings will appear in Drunk Monkeys, Bear Paw Arts Journal and have been published in Sky Island Journal, Muse, Discretionary Love and other places too. His wife, Kelly, sometimes edits his work, and the two cats seem happy.

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**Kelly Sargent** - A significantly hearing impaired writer and artist adopted in Luxembourg, Kelly Sargent is the author of two memoirs in verse, entitled Seeing Voices: Poetry in Motion (Kelsay Books, 2022) and Echoes in My Eyes (Kelsay Books, 2024), and a short form poetry collection entitled Bookmarks (Red Moon Press, 2023). Other works have appeared in more than eighty literary journals, most recently including Rattle, Chestnut Review, and Broad River Review. Honors include: Firebird Book Award winner, The Rash Award in Poetry finalist, Eric Hoffer Award nominee, Touchstone Award for Individual Poems nominee, and two-time Best of the Net nominee. She serves as the creative nonfiction editor of The Bookends Review. Visit [www.kellysargent.com](http://www.kellysargent.com) to learn more about her.

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**Brad Shurmantine** lives in Napa, Ca., where he writes, reads, and tends three gardens (sand, water, vegetable), five chickens, two cats, and two bee hives. His fiction and personal essays have appeared in Monday Night, Flint Hills Review, and Catamaran; his poetry in Third Wednesday, Cacti Fur, and Blue Lake Review. He backpacks in the Sierras, travels when he can, and prefers George Eliot to Charles Dickens, or almost anyone. Website: [bradshurmantine.com](http://bradshurmantine.com)

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**Tom Squitieri** is a three-time winner of the Overseas Press Club and White House Correspondents' Association awards for work as a war correspondent. He is blessed to have his poetry appear in 35 venues including publications, books and anthologies, podcasts, a spoken word concert, the art exhibition Color: Story2020/2021, and the films "Rings of the Unpromised" and "Fate's Shadow: The Whole Story," where he shared the Los Angeles Motion Picture Festival "Grand Jury Prize Gold for Monologues & Poetry." For 2023, he is the poet laureate of the Rose Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. He writes most of his poetry while parallel parking or walking his dogs, Topsy, Batman, and Melody.

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**Zoe Stanek** - Born in Nebraska and raised in Western Colorado, Zoe Stanek has found her place among the trees in Oregon's Pacific Northwest. She is an writer who takes inspiration from nature and different regions across the United States. Her dream is to become an author of children's books and novels that might someday be part of everyone's libraries. Zoe sells her work and runs an art Instagram (@she\_tried\_art). She graduated from Pacific University with a BA in Creative Writing in Spring 2022

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**Sarah Wallis** is writer based on the East Coast of Scotland, 2023 works include poem art at Osmosis, podcasting with Eat the Storms and a winning story at The Welkin, new pieces now at Green Ink, RockPaperPoem and Paperboats. A new chapbook Poet Seabird Island is due from Boats Against the Current next year.

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**Frank Weber** is a freelance writer from Erie, Pennsylvania. He is a published author and has been featured in several print magazines, local interest books and advertising campaigns as both writer and model. Frank draws inspiration from the Kerouac-Bukowski-Thompson vein of writing. His work encompasses a firm conviction, a simple honesty in written word and enough of a raw edge to make people feel what they read.

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**Lisa Wright** is a freelance writer and amateur photographer. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, cooking, baking, baseball, and U.K. dramas, panel shows, and mysteries. She has been seen in unstamatic, Mixed Mag, Peatsmoke Journal, Small Leaf Press, Atlantic Northeast, and Matador Network, among others. You can find her on Instagram @lisamakeslunch and @dolphy\_jane









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