

Still Here: The Shape of Love

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V₄ A₁ L₁ E₁ N₁ T₁ I₁ N₁ E₁
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a mini-issue

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It's A Sign



Photo by Kate Hodges

Love by Simon Collinson

What a tragedy,
Canute couldn't command the sea,
neither could I make you love me,
but if I had to, I guess
It wouldn't be love.



A Promise by Raymond Braichlich

Hi, Jim. I know it's been 25 years since high school graduation, which is probably the last time we talked. Except we never really talked anyway, because you scared the crap out of me and I tried to avoid you when I could. A lot's happened. Katie's got her own family now. I've got to spend some time with your granddaughter, and she's a firecracker just like her mom. I have my own family as well—three girls. The oldest just started high school this fall. It was kind of a big deal for me, because you know that's when Katie and I met. And here I am, almost 30 years later. I'm not sure if she knows this, but middle school was terrible for me. Like in the way that a lot of kids don't survive and probably wouldn't today. The two things that really turned it around for me when I started high school were football, and her. My oldest daughter has this boy that she hangs around with. She claims they're just friends, but we all know that's not really possible at that age. But maybe it could be something that turns into that over time. I kind of hope it does. If you can hold on to someone for a long time, and they hold you back, that's a gift. No one knows you like that. Some people just get in your bones.

A Promise by Raymond Braichlich

I grew up in a family of all boys. The only dad of girls I was ever around was you. And you raised a fighter. So, thanks for showing me what's possible. My middle daughter's name is Catherine. She's not named after anyone, but it's also not purely a coincidence. Like most other things between me and Katie, labels don't work but also don't really matter. You know one of her favorite stories is about how when we were in high school you told me I had no saleable skills. Basically, that I would never amount to anything. So, thanks for the motivation, I guess. I hope my whole career hasn't been one big show to try to convince you that your daughter wasn't wasting her time talking to me. But if it is, I guess I'm ok with that too. I can appreciate your position a lot better now, though—15-year-old boys are universally unimpressive.

All that work turned out to impress someone, though, because they asked me to give the graduation speech at the high school last spring. I talked about you, and how you used to plow my parents' driveway in the winter. I asked the kids to be nice and look out for each other, the way you looked out for my family when it snowed. I think I'll take my own advice here. I'll always look out for Katie. She's a big girl and doesn't need it, but sometimes it's nice to be looked after anyway. I told her about the speech the next day.

A Promise by Raymond Braichlich

She's not good at sharing her feelings or putting them in words (I know this because I'm not either—but that's a story for a different time). And I don't know if it's because I've known her since she was 13, or almost 30 years since then, or both, but at some point you don't need words anymore. I could see in her eyes how much she loves you and how much it meant to her to have someone else see what she sees, even if only for a minute. Thanks for doing all the plowing.

When you're ready, we got your boots lined up in the basement how you like them. And I already kicked one stupid kid out of your chair.

See you around, Jim.





tulips by Daniil Ganzin

grandpa's ring bites my index finger
until it's red with shame.
hands swell on cold, i held tulips on cold,
with those hands, and the tulips outlived me.
oh, so awkward like a first-time beggar—
an ask was a lump in my throat.
she said the ring looked cute
and her lips were petals;
and my lips were cracking
damming up the unsaid.
blood whispered through the skin,
and tulips were a bonfire
melting words into poems
neither of us ever read.



Spark Flame and Ember

by Howard Osborne

Love may start off as all passion and romance
Trembling and unsure what world one is now in
And for some, it can feel like a million ants

It can be a race not all people can win
But one senses that the whistle has been blown
As if someone shouted, let the show begin

The heart can clearly see all that has been shown
And realise something long-lasting awaits
Over time what was merely a spark, has grown

Love can mature, and passes through many
states
Greater than the sum of its parts it creates



Duplex (Yes, Of Course)

by Thomas Tobin

Yes, of course, I'd like to hold your hand,
I'd rather not behold another dead corpse.

I hold enough dead corpses in my chest,
their love overpours from my chest toward my neck—
My poor neck, drowned in a love burnt to regret,
the bitter ash tastes sweet as I spit it out.

I speak sweet love from my mouth and tongue
and let fear dribble down on paper in ink.
I've placed ink on a page for all my dead,
hoping that'll tuck them in, let them rest.

I'd like to rest, have a midnight respite,
but I'm scared of waking to an old ghost's moans.
Scared of waking to a new ghost's moans,
Yes, of course, I'd like to hold your hand.



Goodbye Kiss by Kiera Fisher



Last First Kiss

by Kendra Whitfield

I might have done things differently –
worn sexier perfume,
stashed breath mints in my purse,
lit a candle to St. Anne.

I wish I could remember more,
but two years on the apps desensitizes a girl.
First dates are perfunctory. Performances.
Muscle memory thinly disguised as flirting.

We met. We talked.
Shared the obligatory drink.
His, Heineken. Mine, Scotch.
There must have been laughter.

Outside, in thin November moonlight,
his hands on my shoulders, his lips on mine –
confident, curious, firm.
Again. Just because.

And then I was walking home,
beneath Orion's bemused gaze,
lifting a gloved hand to my mouth
almost as if in wonder.



N°5
CHANEL
PARIS
EAU DE PARFUM

My Ex-Husband Will Never Forgive Me for Saving Him the Night he Chose to Die by Kendra Whitfield

I hauled him out of the shower,
the water so cold it turned January to June.
I bundled him into bed, turned on the electric blanket,

too busy bustling to see him seethe.
I didn't realize shower hypothermia
was on his list of ways out.

Next, I stopped him from refilling the bottle
when he tried drinking gallons of water
to flush out electrolytes and short-circuit his heart.

The one he promised to me – twice:
when we vowed 'til death us do part in front of God and all
our friends,
then when we pinky-swore to die together.

I can't say I've forgiven him for breaking both contracts in
one night.

Can't say which one was more heinous.

I saved him from himself because I wasn't ready to die –

I'll never know if he's grateful.



Passenger Seat

by Jessica Tsang

Hand in hand, speeding down the dark road –
I saw your knuckles turn white at the wheel,
gripping so hard your arms trembled

I want to believe it's because we were dressed for a funeral,
for whom we didn't know, but it still mattered.
So, we set out in our breaking-down Toyota –

the one your mum didn't want, with
you, in your pearl cufflinks and black ruffles;
me, a shadowy dress and shiny leather shoes,

complete with half-crescents dug into my palms.

You were going so fast; everything was a blur. I only saw
something running down your face and the tremble of a sob,

the way your elbows pressed into your sides, like you were
trying to make yourself small. I watched you look into the rear mirror,
blinking at what stared back. I didn't know what else to do,

I followed suit. I let my eyes lock onto myself
and watched time burrow through my skin,
the years flying by until I no longer saw even you.



Latrodectus Mactans

by Morgan Tracy

Call me widow
i'm such a maneater
it's no matter

At night, she sinks –
her teeth into me,
chelicerae

My head is spinning
webs of silk, her
intoxicating venom

She lets me weave touch on her sacred skin
sternum, breast, exoskeleton
call me widow – call me anything you like.



Sitting Back With by Morgan Tracy

sanguine hunger
sipping on that syrup
caress or chokehold

keep a shine
keep me in line

queer smile – you're clean –
countenance, bathing in it
bathing in it



After the Light Arrived

by Alex Missall

It had gone from dawn to midday.

Earlier,

two morning walkers
talked their way up—

side by side—
an empty road I took

a little too late.

Nevertheless,

the old graffiti tagged on wooden steps,
which ascended

toward a trailhead loop,
was mostly washed away

at that point
by rain and weather,

with only the letters MA left . . .

After the light arrived,

it had gone from dawn to midday.

Then I found you,

somewhere between
the sky and quiet

After the Light Arrived

by Alex Missall

of the meadow,
and its faded acres of wheat,

which I stopped to capture
with my camera,

there,
where your plane of possession

listened,
before I heard you say,

No naming,
just yet.



The Naming of It

by Alex Missall

Before
reaching

these leafless
maple groves,

I had my own
desire to name

the dawning light,
which falls

now through
canopy

and branch,
then upon a trail

it seems
you're walking

with me,
and I'm right here too,

you know,
patiently,

searching
for a better

word
than love.



Epitaph Poem

by Alex Missall

During this stark
and windy afternoon,

something opens,
you know,

with the singular
sound of flag

rattling
against metal,

while you walk
through the cemetery
on your way home.

Between graves,

while you walk
the gravel

and snow
drifted way,

Epitaph Poem

by Alex Missall

there's the slow
understanding

of the blank page
you share with her,

the bare bones of that
quiet,
then the fine line

of fear,
which appears

to divide
you,

love,
and death.



unlocked by Lisa Delan

i unbound
my eyes for you
through the shadows and
the light refracted
in the well of
yours

immersed and still
i drink and
ascend
breathe
and draw under again
again

you swallow my
gaze, open and
wet as you hold me
silent under the water,
my pores rich with
breath

there is no
struggle
only suspension,
only the fossilized
amber of our
metronomic pulse

and your eyes
fluid prisms
reflecting worlds
rising like Atlantis
their gates opening
to receive me



the story of now

by Lisa Delan

i saw you before
i opened my eyes
before i knew the
story of colors but
did not speak your

name until i learned
that sun is a color
and sea is a color
where darkness
wears all shades

of time deep in
her buoyant ether
wholly unjarred by
the punctuation of
pelagic movements

now oracles debate
the tides because
they cannot hear
the frequency of
our laughter as

we ride crests to
shallows swallowing
breaths the color of
oyster shells of heron
beaks and of coral flesh

circling the sages we rise
like suns as the silent
current sounds us in
the everness of all
the days that are



the morning after by Lisa Delan

Your hands are dew,
leaving tiny pearls
clinging to my skin.
You watch in wonder,
you whisper of thirst,
your eyes are
quenched.

As I walk in the world
no sun glints on my
arms,
no light returns from
the small moist
globes;
to the naked eye
I am brushed, am
matte.

But I know I taste of
rain,
and that each cool
drop
paused on each pore
holds the reflection
of your open eyes
where I am luminous.



Return by Lisa Delan

I wished for you / until I wished you away / layering
bits of ribbon / feathers / and words like nacre
spinning sand / I sealed you in scalloped edging /
sank you with the sea / and slept.

When your shell fractured / I awoke in Neptune's
palm / his trident luring my siren's song /
euphonious / riding a thoracic wind / to your
mollusked ear.

I drew you with my breath / or maybe the sea
delivered us / waves racing with palace horses /or
we were carried by laughing gulls / away from
Neptune / and my own resolve.

Did we plummet from red beaks? / Sink in salt
marshes? / I summon memory / see us in our
shattered casings / enrapt and doomed / with
brined breath rising / evanescent.



Longing by Kiera Fisher



and a blue sky bag of this by Jacob Stavros

my beloved sees me in the clouds of tomorrow:
this (is?) grace that shakes the most unshakeable.
the dance i've dreamed of is one of lakes and rivers
their hand extended, their breath turned to fog.

i close my eyes and heave my love to my beloved:
a pebble dancing down a stream bed, trusting,
metals can stop stain but not the vines of time
loving is the falling leaf on an updraft.

my beloved, love is already not enough:
that's how to know it's love and not mania
i have been building us a cottage in the times
square.
please pick the oldest color you know, my love.

my terror chatters then i summon every effort:
effortlessness but comes as but the children in
rainy seasons.
i take my beloved's hand to discover it was already
in mine.



tending by Jacob Stavros

trembling, at nearing
a risk of burning
but nearness /singed and softer
hearing this
you repeat. reserve.

i go to the pharmacy
yes, i want

holding is just
a tempo of grabbing of
rotation. when the axis
creaks, will anything live but jagged

tomorrow's sunrise can't ever
get farther away,

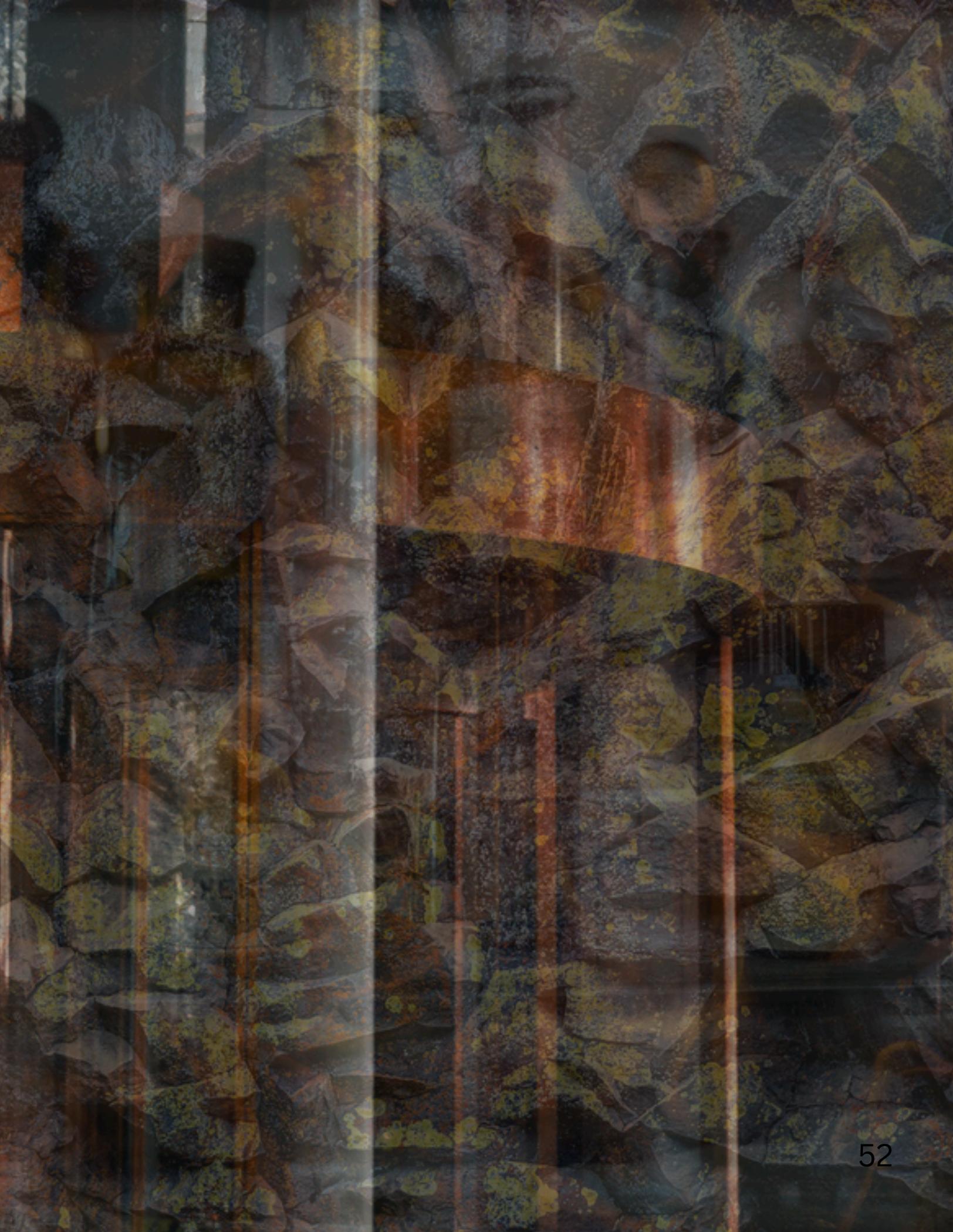
do my rolling nights

i go to the station./
this bag drags with us./
up til the skin breaks./

tending by Jacob Stavros

you watch yourself
in
the glass of a revolving door
in
decency, closed.
fingertips open them.

it's a bad day. it's a
series of baths for the sun



sound decision by Jacob Stavros

when i scream for you it is still .

(somewhere some whisper to someone
so even as paper rubs my pinkie finger
so even as the dry skin fights off
their screams to you all the same)

kneeling on the job waiting for
a drenching of dead autumn-greens to humble
my accent to puzzle
me awake writing some infinitives that even
the billboard cannot bear upon.

a long time ago yesterday
i loved like

a long time ago today white flowers

guarded the sill until buried, brick by
brick, under their loving treasure.



The Guépière by Earl Smith

Their reunion was in his favorite bar, with its dark wood and discrete waiters. He stood as she came in.

“Robert,” she said.

“Evelyn.”

She kissed him lightly on both cheeks. They sat across from each other.

“You look good,” he said.

“You look like you’ve lived,” she replied.

They ordered drinks – whisky for him, red wine for her. Sat quietly until the drinks arrived.

“After twenty-two years...,” he said, slowly shaking his head.

“Yes.” She nodded and smiled. “Finally, a reunion.”

“I stayed. You left,” Robert said.

She smiled. “Made a life in Paris. And you?”

“I married Iris. Maybe you remember her.”

Evelyn nodded.

“She was a great lawyer. Smart, steady, professional. And a good wife, to boot. The backbone of our lives together. We had three children. Two boys and a girl. I lived in the same house for almost two decades. Dinners at seven, Sundays out. Christmases with too many presents. We got fond of cruises. Did the rivers of Europe once. I stayed in advertising. Signed clients. Ran campaigns. Built a business. Then I started my own. Now I’m retired. It’s been a good life.”

He looked into his glass. The whisky trembled when he set it down.

Then, slowly, “But it was a narrow life. We didn’t fight much. Didn’t laugh enough. Still, I really loved her.” He paused, as painful memories came. “She died two years ago. Cancer.”

“I’m sorry,” Evelyn said.

He looked down at his drink. “She was the right woman for me. Kept me honest.”

Evelyn touched his hand. “Are you okay?”

“I am... mostly. The kids are grown. Scattered. Doctor in Denver, preacher in Boston, engineer in San Diego. Good people. Iris did that. More than me.”

He looked up and smiled. “And you? I can see Paris has changed you. You’re not the Evelyn I once knew.”

She swirled her wine gently. Watched the light dance off its surface. Smiled. Then looked back at him.

The Guépière by Earl Smith

“Yes, Paris and France changed me. In ways I hadn’t expected. I thought being there would be about writing. I was going to starve in a garret. Write the great American novel during the mornings. Cheap street food for lunch. Wandering the city afterwards. Late nights in smoke filled music halls.” She paused, remembering.

“It was that way until I met Alain.” She told Robert how she’d met the artist by chance. How he smoked too much, was ever quoting Sartre and Emerson, kissed like he meant it. How she’d moved in with him after six months. Robert listened, smiling.

“This Alain must be something special to have changed you so.”

“Oh, he is. But it wasn’t just him. I was... emerging. Let me tell you my emerging story. It began with a gift. At first, I thought it insulting. Then silly. In the end, it was life changing.”

“Sounds intriguing,” he offered, leaning in a little.

She paused, smiled. “It was our first Valentine’s day together. In the evening, after a very romantic night of dinner and dancing, there was a box in my bathroom. Tied with a red ribbon. I opened it excitedly. Then froze. It was a guépière. You’d probably call it a teddy. Black, with red garters dangling. I thought he’d lost his mind. My prudish American self-rebelled. The feminist litany of my youth cascaded through my mind. Objectifying women. Putting us in boxes. Men telling us who we are. Misogyny. But I held all that in. Thanked him. Shut the box. Put it in my closet. He was hurt. I was confused.”

She laughed softly. “The next day, I sputtered about it to my friend Emilie. She rolled her eyes, and said, ‘It’s normal, Evelyn.’ We must get you proper stockings to go with it. In France we women love our guépières. Being sexy for our men is power. Pleasure. Adult.” Evelyn smiled slyly. “Robert, imagine me, raised on Fruit of the Loom, lectured about being feminine by a French PhD student.”

Robert smiled, nodded, quietly savoring an image.

“After Emily and buying the stockings, I thought... why not? Why not play? Why not see myself as he did? So, I wore it for his birthday. And Robert, it was wonderful. A door opening. Being feminine wasn’t weakness. It was power. Exciting. Liberating. Loving.”

Her voice warmed. “And it wasn’t just the guépière. It was the way the French live. No endless hair dryers, layers of makeup, no nail polish, no perfume to hide behind. Just yourself. When I stopped all that, Alain said he could finally smell me. Not scented soap. Not powder. Not perfume. Just me. And that he loved it.”

The Guépière by Earl Smith

She looked at him steadily. “I became less afraid. Less ashamed of being a woman. Less afraid of pleasure. And because of that, I discovered I could, as a woman, love more deeply. I relaxed into becoming Evelyn. All the over intellectualized bullshit that I had been brought up on fell away. It came to me one morning as I watched him sleeping. We weren’t equals. Alain was a man and I was a woman. I had mine and he had his. Together we made a whole. I stopped wanting to be the same as him. To be a pseudo-man. And I realized that he wanted the same. Alain loved me as a woman, and I decided to stop contradicting him.”

She paused, swirling the wine in her glass. “That opened so many other doors. I began to write differently. Not hiding behind intellectualized language. More openly and honestly. At first, I wrote about the experience of emerging. Soon, words were pouring out of me. Everything in my life came alive. I got published. People liked what I wrote. Particularly women who were inspired by my journey. That little bit of lingerie didn’t just set me free; it set my writing free as well. It set my world free and allowed me to become the author I am. The woman I am.”

She fell quiet. Reached for her wine. Robert watched her, the corners of his mouth lifting.

“You sound happy,” he said.

“I am. Well, not every day. Life never gives us that, does it? Alain leaves paint brushes soaking in wine glasses. Forgets to pay the rent. Curses in three languages. But he makes me feel alive. We fight, make up, laugh about the silliness of it all. We raised Monique – she’s seventeen now. Beautiful. Wild. Too much like me. She terrifies Alain. But he adores her.”

He nodded. “You got what you wanted.”

“You know,” Robert continued, his tone softening, “I wanted to marry you. Even proposed once.”

“I remember.”

“Do you ever regret turning me down?”

“No,” she said. “Not because I didn’t love you. In a way, I did. But I wasn’t ready to be anyone’s wife. If I’d stayed, I’d have ended up resenting you. And myself. I needed Paris and Alain to become who I am.”

They got quiet, and then Robert said, “I was happy. Mostly. But it was different. No black teddies. No doors opening onto new lives.”

She grinned, patted his hand. “You’d look ridiculous in a guépière.”

He laughed, then grew quiet. She watched the color leave his face.

The Guépière by Earl Smith

Her hand stayed on his. Her eyes softened. “Robert,” she said gently. “I’m so sorry about Iris. I don’t know what I’d do without Alain.”

Robert frowned. “I’m closing chapters. That’s why I wanted to see you. I didn’t want to leave things as we had. To tell you that I had found a good life and hoped that you did as well.”

The space between them warmed. They began to talk more freely. Openly. Reminiscing about old times. They shared smiles and occasional laughter. Revisited the awkward times – the misunderstandings. He began to relax. She could see the healing wash over his face.

Her smart watch began to beep. Alain was waiting for her. They were having dinner with a museum owner. She was glad they’d talked. A kiss on each cheek, warmer this time. Her hand lingering a bit longer than politeness required.

As they parted, she said, “Be kind to yourself, Robert. Don’t spend all your time closing chapters. Try opening a few new ones.” Then she leaned forward and whispered, “You must come visit us in Paris. I have a friend in mind.” She grinned slyly. “Léa’s a widow. Our age. She might be too much for you. But I’d like to watch you try. And... I think you would enjoy the trying.”

Then she was gone.

What remained, the echo of her voice, the faint scent of her, the stories of a life he hadn’t lived, hovered like incense.

He told himself, not for the first time, that he had chosen well. Iris had been right for him. Suddenly, he remembered her laugh – quick, surprised, as if she hadn’t expected life to amuse her so.

He remembered the night their first son was born, Iris gripping his hand and saying, through pain and fear, “Don’t you dare faint.” He hadn’t. He’d been proud of that. He was proud of a lot of things: providing, staying, showing up. Pride that had accumulated quietly.

But there were other, less comfortable, memories. The nights he stayed late at the office, not because he had to, but because it was easier than going home to the silence they’d both decided not to break. The conversations that never happened. The arguments avoided so thoroughly that they calcified into habits.

Evelyn had always unnerved him that way – always wanting things said out loud. Back then, he loved her energy but found her intensity a bit frightening. With Iris, life had narrowed, yes, but it had also steadied. He’d built something with her that endured. Children. A business. A reputation. Those counted for something.

The Guépière by Earl Smith

A life well lived.

Still, he couldn't stop seeing Evelyn, as she'd been across the table – unapologetically alive in a way that had nothing to do with youth.

The bar felt suddenly too small, but oddly intimate. Something had changed.

As he glanced at his glass, it came to him. “Half full, Half empty. That's been me since Iris died. All full of yes and no – back and forth – not moving forward. Half full and half empty.” He could hear Evelyn – or was it Iris – impatiently telling him to get on with it.

He took a swallow. The whisky burned. Then came the smokey sweetness. Finished his drink, paid his tab.

Outside, the city was alive, as it always had been. Somewhere, Evelyn was walking toward Alain, toward paint-stained hands and unfinished arguments, toward a life still in motion.

As he got to the sidewalk, he wasn't sure what he was going to do. Which way to go. Then he stopped – thought... maybe Paris. He wondered what Léa was like. And smiled.

The Guépière by Earl Smith





The Mask by Ramzi Rihani

Power dresses itself in the clothes
of the most courageous gladiator.
It looks in the mirror
And sees how weak it is.

It keeps the secret
as if it were its sanctuary
Not knowing that it is being watched
by all the people.
It slices the darkness out of the night
attempting to preserve a refuge,
but forgets that everyone
visits the refuge after sunset.

Nervous about being vulnerable,
it puts on a mask of a clown
then changes it to a lion,
and then back to a clown.
The lion reminds it of its strength.
The clown reminds it of its freedom.
Strength and freedom duel in its head.
Strength is noticeable.
Freedom is invisible and therefore invincible.

The clown mask becomes a living sanctuary.
No need to hide anymore.
There is a savior now,
an easy one,
that peeked from behind the clouds
before heavy rainfall.

How better off we would be
if fake powers wear masks of a clown!



Touching A Fantasy

by Ramzi Rihani

In the realm of her existence,
she conquers her past
and liberates herself with mockery.
She reinvents herself, longing for a new dawn
with colors no one had ever seen.

The book of her sleepless nights
opens to a stream of emotions
hidden behind a steel-solid mask,
like a prisoner who has never
seen the light for a thousand years.
The shield is a protection from the already
seen.
No renewal, no restoration or revival.

Suddenly, a laser light seeps in unexpectedly
to provide a breath of life, laughter, and
rejuvenation.
Up the eucalyptus tree
the song climbs, aiming for a miracle.
The campfire is silent, but the flame starts to
ignite.
Unknown to her, a miracle is about to happen.
The dream is touchable. You can smell it.
Its color is the song's color.
The song of her endless passion fills the air,
stumbles and touches the long-awaited
fantasy.



The Winner Takes It All

by Ramzi Rihani

Between misery and happiness
a clash starts
agonizing the woman
searching for her lover.

Between distress and comfort
a challenge fades
relieving the woman of her anxiety

Silence filled the air.
So powerful
that an explosion was unheard.
So forceful
that it became her breathing space.

She washed her face with memories
until there were no more.
She was yearning to be what she dreamed of being
But she turned out to be what she has always been.

She did not raise her expectations,
so that she won't be deceived.
She did not lose confidence
because some people deceived her.

No effort was exerted to change
She was at peace with herself.
She fought to own her choices in life
thinking the winner takes it all
but realized that the real winner gives it all.



They Held Hands For Balance

by Kat Merrigan

My parents were blessed with a rare gift of growing up and growing old together. From dating as young teens until death parted them, theirs was a love that few witness and even fewer experience.

I'm sure it sounds hyperbolic. Perhaps my memories are tinged with a hint of nostalgia. Once people are no longer with us, we do tend to remember them more fondly. But I can honestly say their love amazed me as much as it garnered my sincerest admiration.

Of course, they argued and fought. Door slams that would knock a nearby painting off the wall. An all too quiet house because someone deployed the silent treatment.

Were there times they probably didn't like each other very much if at all? I have no doubt. Yet every day for over seven decades, they chose to stay. They chose each other.

When they were young and dealing with the growing pains of newlywed life, they stayed. When there were complications on their road to becoming parents, they stayed. When raising those kids, they'd prayed for became frustrating and overwhelming, they stayed. When the children were grown and their nest was empty, they stayed.

They Held Hands For Balance

by Kat Merrigan

No matter what came their way, they stayed. Not because they had to, but because that's what they both wanted.

There are so many moments, great and small, that demonstrated their connection. In the interest of time, I'll only mention a few.

Mornings began with Mom reading the newspaper to Dad. Resolving world problems over coffee, tea, cereal, and toast.

Then there were the puzzles: crossword, acrostic, cryptogram. Mom would start one and then sit with Dad to finish it. I can still hear her giggling while he'd crack jokes. She'd always say, "He's my best friend. And he still makes me laugh."

Sharing a spontaneous dance in the kitchen after mealtime. Saving their best moves for parties and events. Gliding across the room in perfect harmony. We'd signal each other when they hit the floor. No one wanted to miss their unique mix of grace, elegance, playfulness, and pure joy.

In later years they had a standing date to watch Mom's soap opera in the afternoon, and a movie or show at 8:00 pm sharp. Many mysteries, crimes and misdemeanors were solved before the credits rolled.

They Held Hands For Balance

by Kat Merrigan

Arguably, my personal favorite example of their bond was how they always held hands in public. It impressed me how natural and effortless it was. A kind of magnetic force drawing them together. Neither one has to initiate contact. They were in perfect synchronicity. Hands simultaneously rising to grasp one another over and over again for more than seventy years. A quiet declaration to the world that they were together. Two souls joined for a lifetime.

As they got older, they used to tease that it was no longer a romantic gesture. “Now, we hold hands for balance” they’d say with a smile. And maybe that was truer than they realized. That simple act, done countless times throughout any given day, may have helped bring balance. A balance not necessarily in the physical, but more so in the emotional.

It’s not easy to stay annoyed or upset with someone when you’re holding their hand. Mutual touch born from habit, now easing a tense moment or a cranky mood. A gentle reminder that they were committed to this love, this marriage, this life. A rededication literally in the palms of their hands.

It was a small display that brought their loved one’s security and hope. A genuine example of faithfulness, loyalty, and devotion.



1965



al-Fargueil, que l'in-
t de voir sa fem-
t les semaines d'ao-
ennes, et l'autorité
s familles; mais Mo-
s cartes d'Eric. Elle
ils sont indiennes,
elle ne cachait plus
ait avec M. Morand
tentait de les regar-
ment, avant de les
sur le palier, au moment de
la serrure. Un jour, en examinant
seconde fois la carte, elle vit...
même instant elle cessa de voir,
g lui menta au cœur, au cerveau,
elle tomba assise sur la banquette
le n'était pas évanouie, elle était
avec de ses sens, elle ne pouvait
re, ni voir, et elle avait une impu-
r folle de retrouver la vue, pour-
on ! Est-ce qu'une pareille chose
s d'abord avait aux yeux ? Est-ce
rien que toucher la carte sans
elle ne s'achèverait jamais qu'à
elle ne faisait jamais attention
remises qu'Eric avait l'air de
nonchalamment qu'il portait

... C'est Eric...
Le conseiller ne p...
... qui fait...
... et qui m...
... la tendit la carte...
... son mari et dit d'une voix
... elle balbutia...
... le lui dans ses yeux
... à l'...
... naturel...
... pas remarqué, quand on...
... j'ai pu...
... j'ai...
... Ca m'a bouleversée...

Holding my heart in your hands by Joanne Macias

My heart is pulled into two.
What is and what could be.

My heart filled to the brim,
I hold onto it tight.
I wonder what would happen
if you let it overflow.

I crave what is forbidden.
What would shatter my world in two.

I dream of your gentle touch.
The one that lets me know you are near.
I dream of you offering more
I await for it to come again.



Patience by Jodie James

Love is patient. I loved you every day. I loved you in vibrancy. In silk sheets, in black lace, Under neon stars and the light of day.

I loved you when you talked to me. In whispered promises and terms of endearment. I loved you when you didn't. When the silence stretched for days, pointed and poignant.

I loved you when it was only me. Wrapped against you, warm in your arms. I loved you when others traded places with me, like children whose parents just divorced. Visiting on weekends, unless you wanted to see friends, go to the dance, or stay with mom instead.

I loved you before I meant to. I loved you after I decided to stop. I loved you in the purgatory of waiting. I loved you hoping you would come around and save me. I love you knowing you won't.

Love is patient. I am not.



Human Connection by Kiera Fisher



Stardust by Hannah Dilday

For my late father, Randolph whose existence was something like a shooting star. The otherworldly love you and mom shared made me believe in soulmates.

Loving you was like
lassoing a shooting star.

I see your face in every
puddle I jump,

waiting on the doorsteps
of my dreams.

You said my soul sparkled
bright in your eyes,

nothing about our story
was of this world.

Even after all this time,
I still catch glimpses

of the stardust
your touch left behind.



Senseless by Hannah Dilday

My dreams used to be senseless—

food had no flavor
flowers wore no fragrance
art yearned for color.

With you, I dreamt in all my senses.

I spilled every secret

I wish I could today because

I knew you'd forget them

in the morning, and you did the same.

I had never been so honest
with you...
with myself.

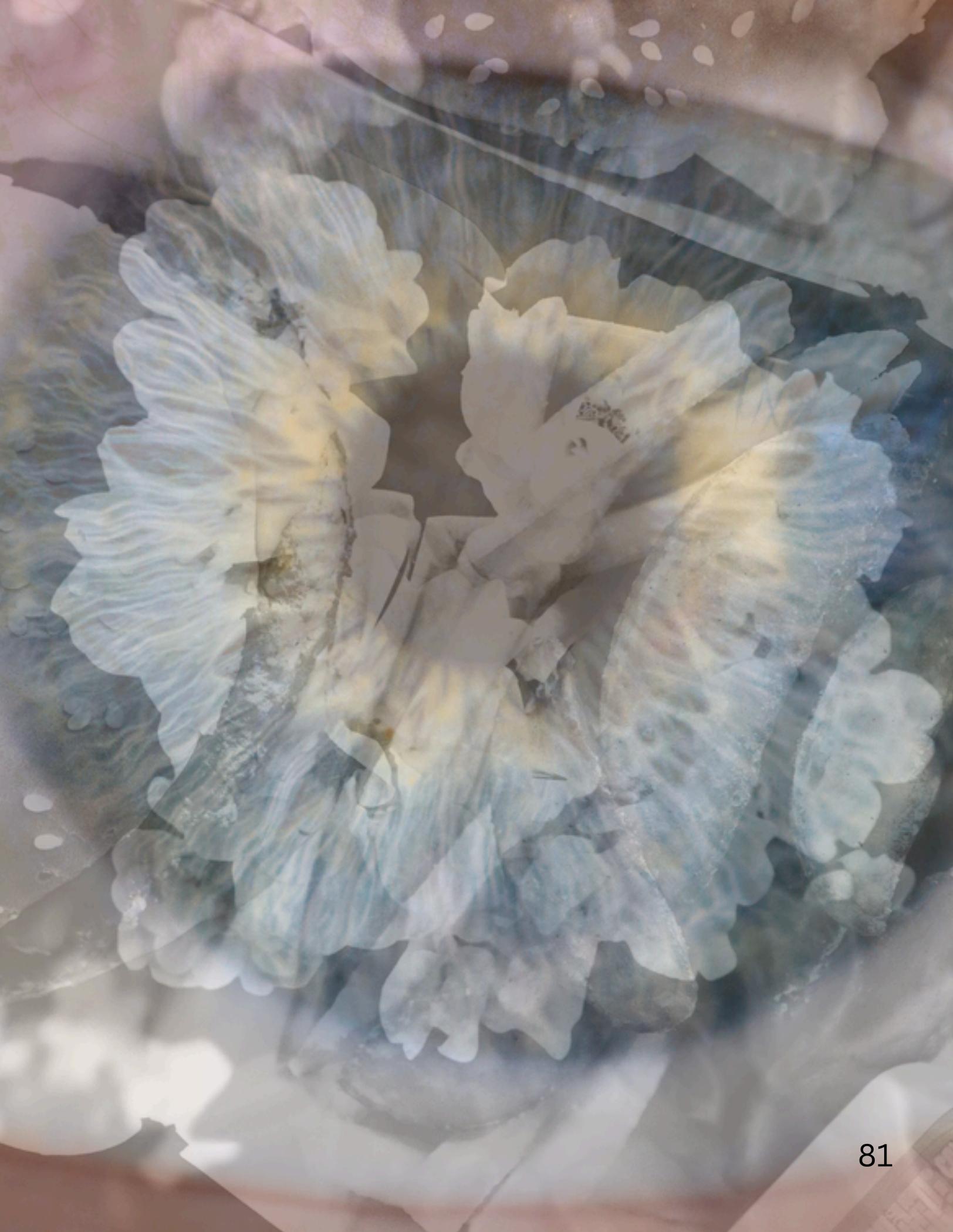
White lies blushed as
my eyes became blue.

We knew we weren't real
so, we cried imaginary tears before
we went home in the morning.

I pinched myself,
but the pain paled

in comparison to
the realization that

it was all senseless.



Halfway into the woods

by Sarah Watkins

I think it goes on like this forever:
me with you

withdrawing \$80 from a cigarette-scented ATM
buying a sleeve of crackers so that the gas station clerk
won't think we're just using her for her money,

mascara swatches and Chapstick slicks
in the passenger seat of my car
telling me how he really is different this time

the time before when I was clutching the wheel
turning up the song on the radio I chose to make you angry
knowing you wouldn't listen

then you are back in my passenger seat
near-catatonic
saying in a drone how it is all your fault

at seventeen
eighteen
then nineteen

I am here
knowing it all by now

that in a few months
you will need me to hold your hand
as the stranger with a tattoo gun

traces your handwriting
while you grin at me
with gently snagged teeth

knowing it always ends
with me here too
digging wadded cash from my pocket



AKBANK

AKBANK

ATM

The Offering by Hanna Bergman

My partner brings me popcorn in the bath—
an offering as sweet as it is impractical,
love unconcerned with logic.



Anatomy of Love

by Annabelle Gould

Where is love stored?
There are 206 bones in the human body
Is it in one of those? Perhaps the heart?
But it weighs less than a pound
Love weighs much more
Not the brain, no
Too prone to thinking itself out of love
Lungs, maybe, make the most sense
Do I breathe it in?
Love in my hands, that write odes?
Love in my mouth, that proclaims it?
I wonder this aloud to you
And that's when it hits me
Love isn't kept in the body
My love isn't kept in my body at all
It's kept in you



Гр

Red String Theory by Kiera Fisher



Thanks to the Contributors!

Kate Hodges
It's A Sign

Kate Hodges taught middle school science before shifting her career to work for nonprofits. She was born and raised in Philadelphia, PA. She has published fiction and photography. She is working on a graphic novel. You can follow her on Instagram @katehodgesandagiraffe.



Simon Collinson

Love

Simon is a writer from England. He is a member of the All Seasons writing group. He seeks stillness and solitude.



Thanks to the Contributors!

Raymond Braichlich

A Promise

Raymond Braichlich is a writer in the Chicago area. His first creative nonfiction essay was recently featured in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*.



Daniil Ganzin

tulips

Daniil Ganzin is a Russian national who left home after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war. He spent two years in Budapest, where he joined several poetry collectives, won slam contests, and performed at Sziget 2025. He is now based in Tbilisi, Georgia, where he hosts his own poetry events and open mics.



Thanks to the Contributors!

Howard Osborne *Spark Flame and Ember*

Howard has written poetry and short stories, also a novel and several scripts. With poems published online and in print, he is a published author of a non-fiction reference book and several scientific papers many years ago. He is a UK citizen, retired, with interests in writing, music and travel.

Thomas Tobin

Duplex (Yes, Of Course)

Thomas Tobin is a Columbus-based poet studying Creative Writing at the Ohio State University. He has previously been published in journals such as “In Parentheses” and “The Word’s Faire.” When he is not creating poetry, Thomas can be often found playing one of his dozen guitars or walking one of his lovely dogs.



Thanks to the Contributors!

Kiera Fisher

*Human Connection, Goodbye Kiss,
Longing, Red String Theory*

Kiera is a Cincinnati-based Muralist and Mixed Media Artist who embraces bold colors and imagery to create art inspired from her surroundings, incorporating her lived experiences into her work— with themes of love, home, and self identity. She works with a variety of media and materials, including anything from illustration, to textiles, to fine arts. You can find her work @Rainbowfish.art on Instagram!



Kendra Whitfield

*Last First Kiss, My Ex-Husband
Will Never Forgive Me for Saving
Him the Night he Chose to Die*

Kendra Whitfield lives and writes on the southern edge of the Canadian northern boreal forest. When not writing, she can be found basking in sunbeams on the deck or swimming laps at the local pool. Her poetry has been anthologized by Beyond the Veil Press and Community Building Art Works.



Thanks to the Contributors!

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Passenger Seat

Jessica Tsang is a speculative writer and poet based in London. She's been nominated for Best of the Net Poetry 2021 and shortlisted for the London Writers' Awards 24/25. You can find her on Instagram at @byjessicatsang.



Morgan Leanor

Latrodectus Mactans, Sitting Back
With

Morgan Leanor is a Southwestern writer and self-proclaimed weird girl. Her work lives in liminal spaces with themes of queerness, disability & identity always underfoot. Fascinated by the conventions of the human body and nature, she is spurred on by stretching the limitations of her language, both in the profound and mundane. Her work has been previously published in Conceptions Southwest, Sad Goose Cooperative and Flare Magazine. Her Instagram is: lady_mordrid



Thanks to the Contributors!

Alex Missall

After the Light Arrived, The Naming of It, Epitaph Poem

Alex Missall studied creative writing at the University of Cincinnati. His poetry collections *A Harvest of Days* and *Morning Gift* are forthcoming from *Finishing Line Press*. He resides in Ohio, where he enjoys the trails with his Husky, Betts. You can find him on X @MissallAlex or at alexmissall.com.



Lisa Delan

unlocked, the story of now, the morning after, Return

Lisa Delan's poetry has been featured in a broad range of literary publications, receiving a Best of the Net and three Pushcart Prize nominations. Her poems have been set to music by prominent classical composers, and a contemporary choral work based on her libretto recently premiered in San Francisco. When she is not writing, you can find the soprano, an international performer who records for the Pentatone label, singing songs on texts by some of her favorite poets. Her website is: <https://www.lisadelan.com/poetry>



Thanks to the Contributors!

Jacob Stavros

*and a blue sky bag of this, tending,
sound decision*

jacob stavros is a writer from houston in brooklyn. he is a co-editor of emdash, a new york city poetry calendar. he can be found at poeticsofrelation.neocities.org, though it is a terminal work in progress.



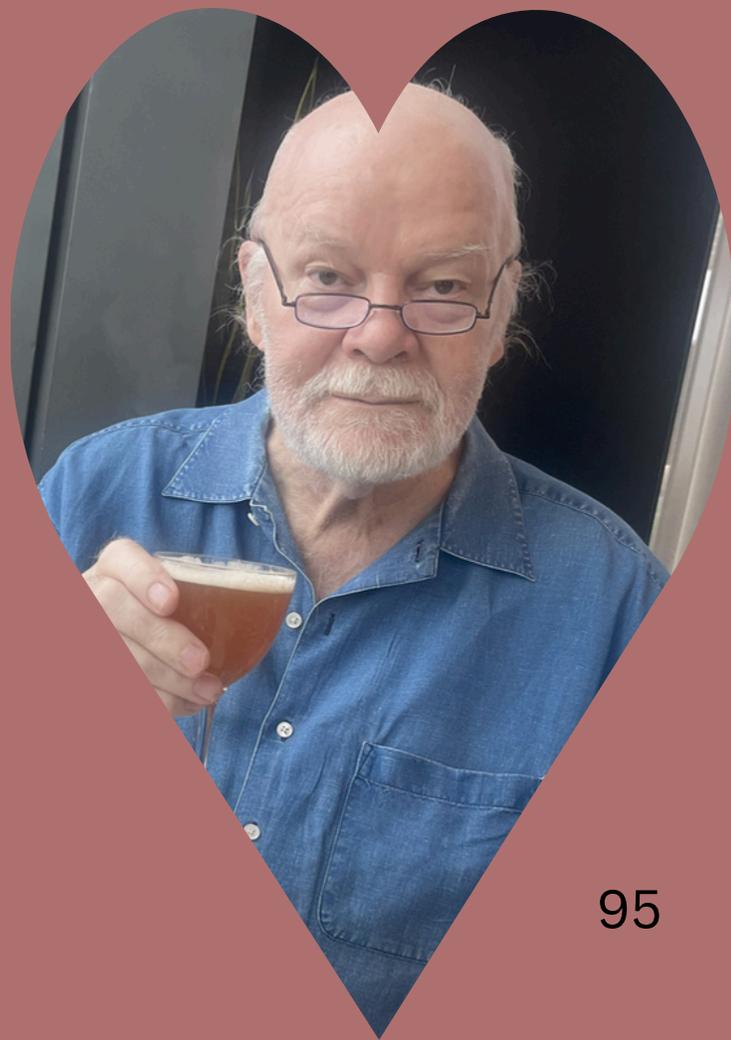
Earl Smith

The Guépière

Earl Smith writes short stories, poetry, and essays focused on the human experience.

Most of them are drawn from personal experience. He also writes action-adventure thrillers – often with a paranormal twist. In addition to published novels, his work has appeared in multiple literary journals.

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Thanks to the Contributors!

Ramzi Rihani

The Mask, Touching A Fantasy,

The Winner Takes It All

Ramzi Albert Rihani is a Lebanese-American writer. He received the 2024 Polk Street Review first-place poetry award. His work has appeared in several publications in the US, Canada, UK, Ireland, Belgium, China, and South Africa, including Arlington Literary Journal, Seventh Quarry Poetry Magazine, Fine Lines, Chronogram magazine, Last Leaves Magazine, The Brussels Review, Cacti Fur Journal, Poetry Potion, Ephemeral Elegies, and The Silent Journey Anthology. He is a published music critic. He wrote and published a travel book, "The Other Color - a Trip Around the World in Six Months" (FMA Press). He lives in Potomac, MD.



Kat Merrigan

They Held Hands for Balance

Kat Merrigan was born and raised in NY. She's a published author and actress who recently made her feature film debut in the independent movie *Tried By Fire* from Broadwil Films. Her work has appeared in *Bunker Squirrel*, *Spillwords Press*, *The Gilded Weathervane*, *Bluebird's Scribe Review*, *Harrow House Journal*, *Soul, Poetry, Prose and Arts Magazine*, *Flights e-Journal* and *Instant Noodles*. She has been featured in a *Cloaked Press* anthology, *Calla Press*, and *Academy Of the Heart and Mind*. She narrated one of her pieces for the *Story Unlikely* podcast. She hosts original content through IG: *Kat Controversy* and FB: *Kathy Merry*.



Thanks to the Contributors!

Joanne Macias

Holding my heart in your hands

Joanne Macias is a multi-disciplinary creative, having featured in both online and print publications including Still Here Magazine, Gentian Journal, Pan Haiku, Five Fleas Poetry, Mania Magazine, Eloquentia and many more.

Focusing on no set genres, she loves to challenge reader perception through unique scenarios in everyday settings. If not writing, she is either teaching poetry or being distracted by the neighbour's cat. Follow her adventures at [@joanne_macias_writer](#)

Jodie James

Patience

Jodie James is an emerging poet raised in the Midwest and currently based in the Washington Metropolitan Area. Her work often explores themes of grief and has been previously published in Canvas Creative Arts Magazine, NoVa Bards: An Anthology of Northern Virginia Poetry, and The Good Within The Khaos Magazine. You can find her on Instagram at [jodiewritessometimes](#).

Thanks to the Contributors!

Hannah Dilday

Stardust, Senseless

Hannah Dilday (she/her) is an American writer residing in the Netherlands since 2020. Prior to relocating abroad, Hannah earned her BS in Philosophy from The University of Oregon. Hannah's poetry has appeared in *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Maudlin House*, and *ONE ART*, among others. Recently, Hannah joined the team at *Forevermore* as an Editor.



Sarah Watkins

Halfway into the woods

An Arkansas native, Sarah Watkins is an educator by trade and a writer by necessity. She currently resides in northeast Arkansas with her husband. Her work has recently been featured in many publications, including *Pine Hills Review*, *The Clayjar Review*, and *Literary Forest*. Instagram: [@sarahwatkinspoetry](https://www.instagram.com/sarahwatkinspoetry)



Thanks to the Contributors!

Hanna Bergman

The Offering

Hanna Bergman is a poet based in Toronto, Canada. She's a big proponent of talking to trees, vintage fashion, and literary fiction. She loves dogs, stirs her tea with intention, and believes poetry is one of the best ways we learn how to pay attention.

Annabelle Gould

Anatomy of Love

Annabelle Gould is a student living in Minnesota. She has had a passion for writing for as long as she can remember. She enjoys art in any form, nature, and her pets. Her pets consist of a dog named Hazel, two guinea pigs named Star and Thea, and a goldfish named Clementine. Her Instagram is: @annabelle.makes.art





Love looks different for everyone and that's okay.