


# PINK LITTER

HUMANITY. DIVINED.

**NEVER**  
**CENSORED**

**18**

A full-page photograph of a bride in a white strapless wedding gown with lace detailing on the shoulders and a long, flowing veil. She is holding a large bouquet of red roses and white baby's breath. She has a pearl headband and is wearing white gloves. The background is dark.

Remember when they hated us  
because we were too nice?

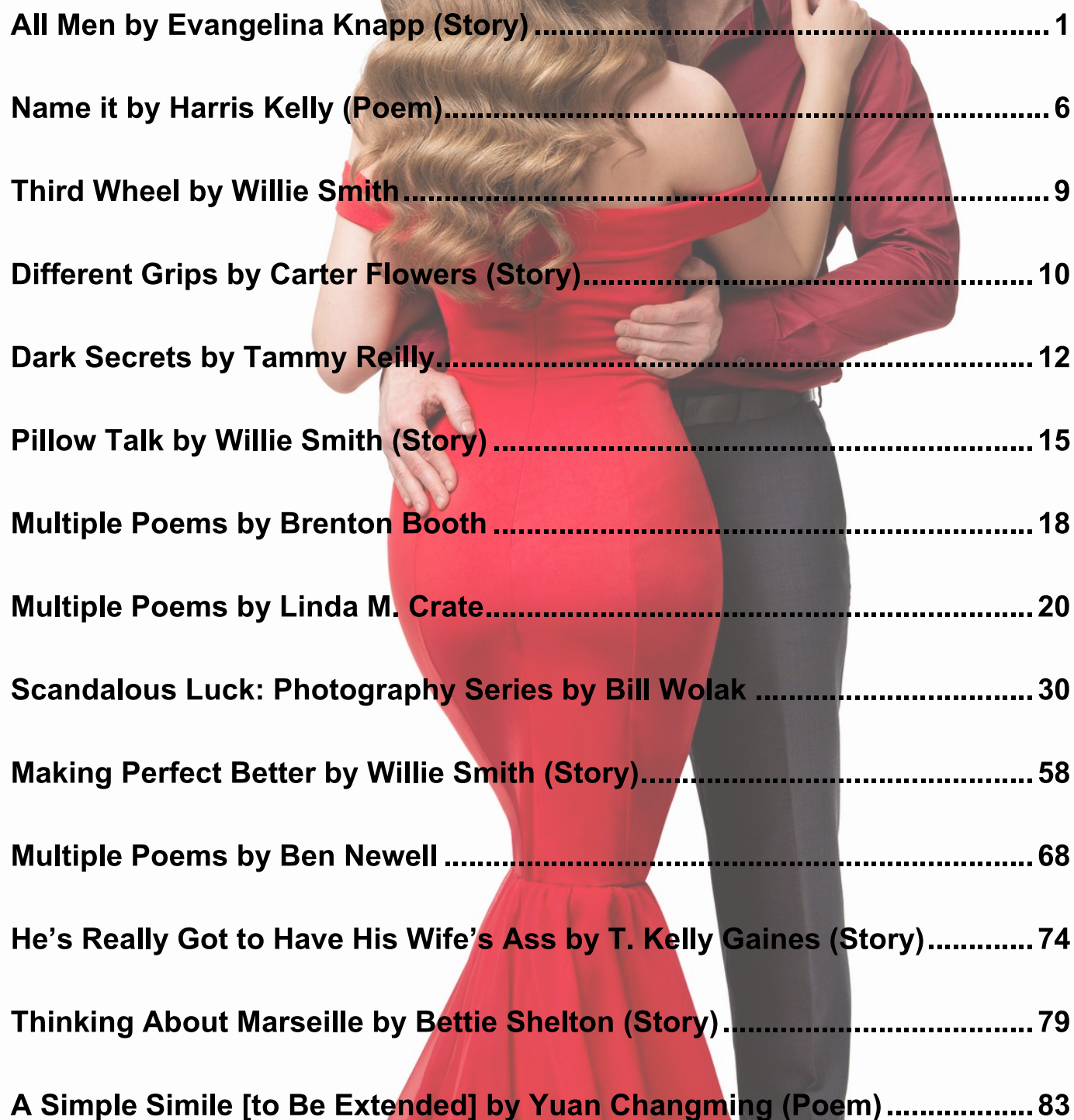
Against our better judgement we're back! Just kidding, if I search my soul I always knew we'd be back, although we did make good use of the break!

We're officially old enough...of legal age as it were, with our 18th edition. And let this be the ultimate stroke, if you will, perhaps only of our own egos, but what the hell, you only live once and you're only as good as your last piece of art.

And that's what we hope this is—art, and not necessarily our last. Thanks to one and all who were there then and are here now. This is a testament and some appreciation to those who "get" us and have stuck around.

Sincerely, your partner in crime  
Misty

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# ALL MEN BY EVANGELINA KNAPP

*Katie enters a hidden sanctuary where desire reigns and boundaries dissolve. Surrounded by confident men, she confronts her fears and surrenders to a night of intoxicating pleasure and empowerment.*

**K**atie hesitated at the threshold of the dimly lit room, her heart pounding in her chest like a trapped bird. The air was thick with anticipation, heavy with the scent of musk and desire. She had heard whispers about this place, a hidden sanctuary where inhibitions were shed like clothing and fantasies came to life. But nothing could have prepared her for what lay before her. As she stepped across the threshold, the room seemed to swallow her whole. The soft glow of candlelight cast long shadows on the walls, dancing like silent sentinels. The space was vast, yet it felt intimate, as if the very air conspired to draw her deeper into its embrace. And then, she saw them. A throng of men, their bodies sculpted by muscle and desire, stood before her. Their eyes, gleaming with a mixture of hunger and reverence, fixed upon her like a predator stalking its prey. But it was their boldness that took her breath away. Their cocks, thick and throbbing, stood proudly on display, a testament to their unbridled lust. Katie's eyes widened in shock, her breath catching in her throat. She felt like a deer caught in the headlights, frozen in the face of such raw, unapologetic masculinity. The men closed in around her, their presence both intimidating and exhilarating. Their hands, calloused and strong, brushed against her skin, sending shivers down her spine.

"Join us, Katie," one of them whispered, his hot breath tickling her ear. "Let us show you what it means to be truly desired." She felt a shiver run down her spine at the sound of her name on his lips. These men knew her, had been waiting for her. The thought both terrified and aroused her. She was torn between

the safety of her inhibitions and the allure of the unknown. Reggie, a tall, broad-shouldered man with a mischievous glint in his eye, stepped forward. His cock, thick and veins pulsing, swayed gently as he moved. "Don't be afraid, Katie," he murmured, his voice a low rumble that sent a thrill up and down her spine. "We're here to pleasure you, to worship your body and make you feel like the goddess you are."

Katie's eyes flicked to his, searching for a hint of deception, but found only sincerity. These men weren't here to hurt her; they were here to worship her. The realization sent a rush of heat between her thighs, and she felt her nipples harden beneath her dress. As the men continued to close in, their hands roaming over her body, Katie felt her resolve begin to waver. Their touches were gentle yet firm, their whispers a siren's call that lured her deeper into the abyss of desire. She was torn between the safety of her comfort zone and the intoxicating allure of the unknown. A particularly bold man, his chest adorned with a tapestry of tattoos, leaned in close, his lips brushing against her ear.

"Touch us, Katie," he whispered, his voice hoarse with need. "Feel the power that throbs between our legs, waiting for your command."

Katie's breath hitched as his words struck a chord deep within her. She glanced down, her eyes locking onto the nearest cock. It was a work of art, thick and veiny, the head glistening with pre-cum. Her fingers twitched with the urge to touch, to feel the heat and power that radiated from it. The man sensed her hesitation and smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Go on, Katie," he urged, his voice a low purr. "Take what you desire. We're yours to command."


Katie's heart pounded in her chest as she reached out, her fingers trembling as they made contact with the warm, throbbing flesh. The man groaned softly, his head tilting back in pleasure as her touch sent shockwaves of sensation through his body. As her fingers wrapped around the thick shaft, Katie felt a surge of power course through her veins. She was no longer just a passive observer; she was an active participant in this dance of desire. The men pressed closer, their bodies a wall of heat and muscle that surrounded her, their cocks a forest of throbbing flesh that beckoned her to explore.

"That's it, Katie," Reggie murmured, his voice a low growl that sent a shiver down her spine. "Take control. Make us yours."

Katie's eyes flicked to his, her lips parting in a mix of surrender and anticipation. She felt her inhibitions melting away, replaced by a heady sense of freedom and desire. Her fingers tightened around the cock in her hand, her thumb brushing against the sensitive head as she began to stroke. The man moaned loudly, his hips thrusting gently into her touch.

"Fuck, Katie," he gasped, his voice thick with need. "You have no idea what you do to me."

Katie smiled, a slow, sultry curve of her lips that spoke of her growing confidence. She leaned in, her lips

A woman with dark hair and bangs is lying on a bed, wearing a red, form-fitting dress. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a white, textured surface, likely a bedspread. The entire image has a soft, reddish tint. A quote is overlaid in the upper right corner.

*"Feel the power that throbs between  
our legs, waiting for your command."*

brushing against the man's ear as she whispered, "Then show me."

As if her words were a signal, the men pressed closer, their hands roaming over her body, their cocks throbbing with anticipation. Katie felt herself being lifted, her back pressed against the cool wall as strong hands gripped her thighs, spreading her legs wide. Reggie stepped forward, his eyes locked onto hers as he positioned himself between her thighs. His cock, thick and throbbing, hovered just above her glistening pussy, the head teasing her entrance as he murmured, "Are you ready, Katie?"

Katie's breath hitched as she nodded, her eyes never leaving his. "Yes," she whispered, her voice hoarse with need. "Fuck me, Reggie. Make me yours."

With a low growl, Reggie thrust forward, his cock sinking deep into her wet heat. Katie cried out, her head tilting back as pleasure exploded through her body. The men surrounding her cheered, their voices a chorus of encouragement as they watched their alpha male claim his prize. As Reggie began to move, his hips snapping with primal urgency, Katie felt herself being consumed by the pleasure. The man whose cock she still held stroked her clit with gentle fingers, his touch sending her spiraling towards the edge. Another man, his lips curved in a wicked smile, leaned in, his mouth capturing her nipple through the thin fabric of her dress. He sucked and nipped, his teeth grazing her sensitive peak as he teased and tormented her. Katie's senses were overwhelmed, her body a maelstrom of sensation as she was fucked, touched, and tasted by the throng of men. Their desires collided with hers in an explosive, inevitable moment, a symphony of moans, groans, and cries of pleasure that echoed through the dimly lit room. As Reggie pounded into her with relentless force, Katie felt her orgasm building, a tidal wave of pleasure that threatened to consume her whole. She cried out, her voice joining the chorus of moans as she surrendered to the sensation, her body shaking with the force of her release. The men surrounding her followed suit, their cocks erupting with hot, sticky cum as they filled her, marked her, claimed her as their own. Katie was lost in a haze of pleasure, her body a conduit for their desires as she was fucked, filled, and worshipped by the throng of muscular, confident men.

In the aftermath, as their hearts slowed and their breathing steadied, Katie realized that she had crossed a threshold, had entered a world where her desires were not only accepted but celebrated. And as she looked into Reggie's eyes, a slow, sexy smile curving her lips, she knew that this was only the beginning. The men, their cocks still twitching with residual pleasure, gathered around her, their hands stroking her skin, their whispers a promise of more to come. Katie felt a sense of belonging, of being exactly where she was meant to be. As the night wore on, and the candlelight flickered, casting long shadows on the walls, Katie knew that she would never be the same. She had been initiated into a world of unbridled desire, where her body was worshipped, and her fantasies came to life. And as she surrendered to the pleasure, to the men who surrounded her, she knew that she would never look back.



# Name it by Harris Kelly

He is not built of nostalgia,  
 not sculpted by the memory of streets washed in neon  
 or the pulse of vinyl spinning in darkened rooms.  
 He comes from a city of glass, humming with drones,  
 from digital winds and holographic sunrises,  
 where history has been compacted into crystalline archives,  
 and music is a mathematical current streaming through veins of light.  
 His name is an arrangement of syllables unknown to any birth certificate,  
 his age an echo in the algorithmic tides.  
 He wanders beneath towers so tall they erase constellations,  
 his heart tuned to the subtle vibration of data,  
 his eyes unaccustomed to the flicker of analog longing.

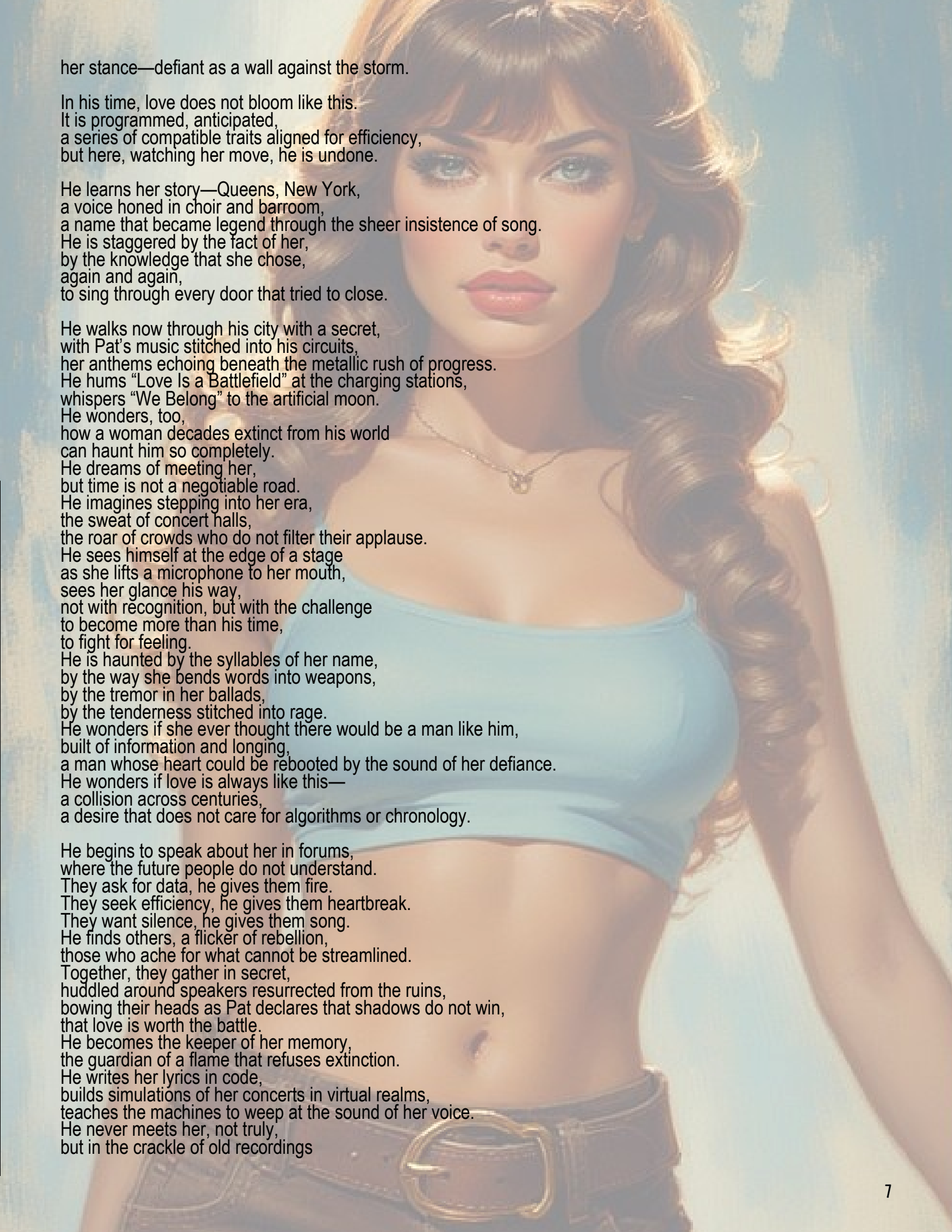
On a day marked only by the rotation of solar hexes,  
 his fingers drift across a forbidden interface,  
 an artifact allowed only to the curious,  
 those unafraid to awaken the past from its slumber.  
 He finds a portal—archaic, glowing,  
 a digital vault labeled  
 “Pat Benatar: Crimes of Passion.”  
 He presses play.  
 What follows is thunder,  
 not the sterile hum of future orchestras,  
 but a voice that shatters glass and mends it,  
 a voice that is wild and warm and sharp,  
 carved from a time when pain had edges,  
 when love was not an algorithm,  
 when heartbreak could not be erased with a switch.

He listens.  
 He listens as Pat sings of shadows and fire,  
 of promises broken and remade,  
 of love as a clash of wills,  
 of defiance and surrender.  
 He does not understand the fashion,  
 the ragged lace, the leather,  
 the hair spiked against gravity,  
 but he is seized by the pulse,  
 by the guitar that growls and the drums that dare,  
 by the sound of a world that insists on its own survival.

He repeats the track.  
 He repeats the tracks again,  
 feeling each one as a new galaxy opening in the dark.  
 Her voice is a rebellion he has never known,  
 a refusal to flatten into perfection,  
 a blaze that refuses the silence of progress.

She sings and he is rearranged,  
 his molecules trembling,  
 his mind folding around the possibility of yearning.  
 He seeks her image,  
 her videos stored as relics in the database,  
 her features imbued with the glow of television static.  
 He sees her eyes—unafraid,  
 her mouth—open, unyielding,





her stance—defiant as a wall against the storm.

In his time, love does not bloom like this.  
It is programmed, anticipated,  
a series of compatible traits aligned for efficiency,  
but here, watching her move, he is undone.

He learns her story—Queens, New York,  
a voice honed in choir and barroom,  
a name that became legend through the sheer insistence of song.  
He is staggered by the fact of her,  
by the knowledge that she chose,  
again and again,  
to sing through every door that tried to close.

He walks now through his city with a secret,  
with Pat's music stitched into his circuits,  
her anthems echoing beneath the metallic rush of progress.  
He hums "Love Is a Battlefield" at the charging stations,  
whispers "We Belong" to the artificial moon.  
He wonders, too,  
how a woman decades extinct from his world  
can haunt him so completely.  
He dreams of meeting her,  
but time is not a negotiable road.  
He imagines stepping into her era,  
the sweat of concert halls,  
the roar of crowds who do not filter their applause.  
He sees himself at the edge of a stage  
as she lifts a microphone to her mouth,  
sees her glance his way,  
not with recognition, but with the challenge  
to become more than his time,  
to fight for feeling.  
He is haunted by the syllables of her name,  
by the way she bends words into weapons,  
by the tremor in her ballads,  
by the tenderness stitched into rage.  
He wonders if she ever thought there would be a man like him,  
built of information and longing,  
a man whose heart could be rebooted by the sound of her defiance.  
He wonders if love is always like this—  
a collision across centuries,  
a desire that does not care for algorithms or chronology.

He begins to speak about her in forums,  
where the future people do not understand.  
They ask for data, he gives them fire.  
They seek efficiency, he gives them heartbreak.  
They want silence, he gives them song.  
He finds others, a flicker of rebellion,  
those who ache for what cannot be streamlined.  
Together, they gather in secret,  
huddled around speakers resurrected from the ruins,  
bowing their heads as Pat declares that shadows do not win,  
that love is worth the battle.  
He becomes the keeper of her memory,  
the guardian of a flame that refuses extinction.  
He writes her lyrics in code,  
builds simulations of her concerts in virtual realms,  
teaches the machines to weep at the sound of her voice.  
He never meets her, not truly,  
but in the crackle of old recordings

he discovers the shape of his own heart,  
raw and unrendered,  
no longer content to be a machine.

He loves her—  
not for her fame or the myth spun around her,  
but for the way she drags him backward,  
away from the comfort of oblivion,  
into the chaos and splendor of longing.  
Here, in the future,  
where everything is meant to be perfect,  
he finds salvation in her imperfection,  
in the wild notes that refuse to settle,  
in the voice that reminds him—  
to be alive is to be unsettled,  
to fall in love is to be forever changed,  
to meet Pat Benatar is to never again  
belong wholly to his time.

The city hums on, indifferent,  
but he walks beneath its towers  
with her music burning in his chest,  
each word a promise,  
each chorus a revolution,  
each note proof  
that the past is never truly lost,  
and that love, even from afar,  
can ignite a world.



## THIRD WHEEL by Willie Smith

After, she says  
she only does it  
because he only gets off  
on three-ways.

Later, or maybe before,  
he confides he only does it  
because she only gets off  
on three-ways.

I say nothing.

But think to myself,  
in the coming weeks,  
jerking off to the memory:

I'll take it  
any fucking way  
I can get it.

## DIFFERENT GRIPS BY CARTER FLOWERS

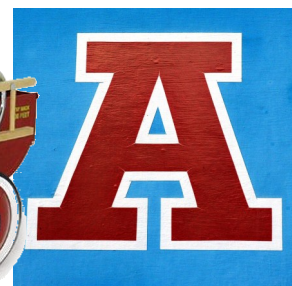
The coffee tasted burnt. Again. Mark shoved the mug aside, ignoring the brown ring it left on the invoice. "Another late shipment, Pete?" His voice sounded flat, even to himself.

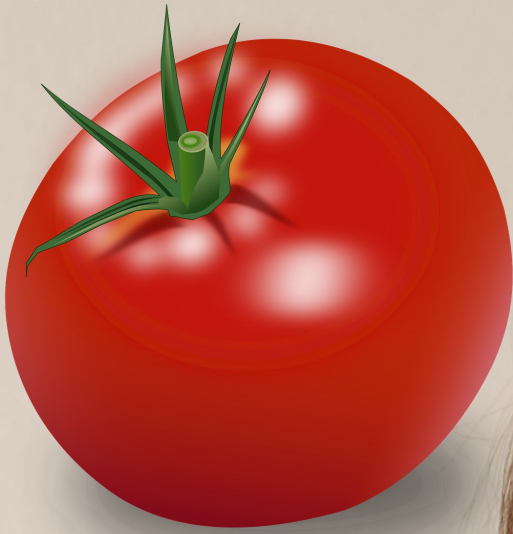
"Third this month," Pete sighed, rubbing his temples. "Truck broke down outside Bakersfield. Parts are delayed." He shuffled papers, avoiding Mark's eyes. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting harsh shadows on the cluttered desk. Outside, rain streaked the grimy office windows, blurring the neon sign of the auto shop across the street. Mark stared at the rivulets tracing paths down the glass. He remembered how Sarah would trace patterns like that on fogged-up car windows during road trips, her fingertip cool against his neck. The memory hit like a physical ache, sharp and sudden beneath his ribs.

His phone buzzed—a calendar reminder for Sarah's art show opening tonight. Seven years since she'd left for Berlin, chasing galleries that appreciated her brutalist sculptures more than their sleepy California town ever did. He'd promised to stream it live. Promised. The word tasted like the dregs of his coffee. He pictured her in some minimalist loft, laughing with critics who understood words like "juxtaposition" and "negative space," while he argued with Pete about transmission fluid costs. The distance wasn't just miles; it was tectonic plates grinding his heart to dust.

Pete cleared his throat. "You gonna sign those or just glare at 'em?" Mark blinked. The invoices swam before him—numbers, dates, delivery codes. Meaningless hieroglyphs. He grabbed a pen, knuckles white. The scratch of ballpoint on paper echoed too loud in the small room. Each stroke felt like carving his own epitaph: \*Here lies Mark. Died of paperwork and longing.\* He wondered if Sarah ever thought about his hands—the grease permanently etched around his nails, the scar from that misaligned fan belt. Probably not. She touched marble now, not busted radiators. And then was her firm but loving grip on his cock. Unforgettable.

Rain drummed harder, a tin-rapping rhythm on the roof. Mark shoved the signed forms at Pete. "Handle it." He stood abruptly, chair scraping concrete. The damp air clung to his skin as he pushed outside, not bothering with a coat. Headlights cut through the downpour, painting the wet asphalt in streaks of gold. He leaned against the brick wall, rain soaking through his shirt. His phone glowed in his hand—the gallery's live stream link, bright and accusing. One tap. That's all it would take. To see her. To hear her voice. His thumb hovered, trembling. What if she looked happy? What if she didn't? The ache deepened, a hollow throb where his pulse should be. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Just stood there, drowning in the downpour and the terrible, weightless silence of her absence.





# DARK SECRET

*By Tammy Reilly*



The rain slapped hard against the pub window. Outside, a mud-spattered cart horse stood resigned under a leaky awning. Inside, Sergeant Davos Thorne scraped dried mud from his boot sole with a knife point. His knuckles were scarred, thick as walnuts. He nudged the man beside him. "Still got that flask, Elias? This ale tastes like ditchwater."

Elias, gaunt-faced with eyes that never seemed to rest, slid a dented pewter flask across the sticky table. "Last of the good stuff. From the Lowlands." He watched Davos take a long pull. "Heard about the job?"

Davos wiped his mouth, the cheap gin burning clean through the ale's sourness. "The Breaker Yard? Sounds like scraping rust off old anchors." He glanced toward the pub's smoky hearth, where a group of dockworkers argued over dice. Beyond them, through a narrow archway, a dimly lit corridor led to the tavern's back rooms. A flash of movement caught his eye—a woman stepping into a small, private chamber, the door left slightly ajar. She paused before a tarnished mirror bolted to the wall.

She wasn't looking at her face. Her hands, strong and calloused like any dockhand's, lifted the weight of her breasts with a weary sort of pride. The lamplight caught the curve of them, full and high against her plain work shirt. It wasn't vanity—Davos recognized the gesture. It was the same way he'd test a healed rib after a brawl: assessing what still worked, what still belonged to her. Her reflection held a quiet defiance, a reclaiming in that grimy little room. Davos looked away, suddenly feeling like an intruder.

Elias followed his gaze, then snorted softly. "Mara. Runs the yard's ledger books. Sharp as a shiv." He leaned closer, voice dropping. "The job ain't about anchors. It's about what's *inside* 'em. Customs seals broke on a shipment from Veridia. Gold sovereigns, Davos. Melted down and poured into hollow anchor cores." Davos stared at him, the gin's warmth turning cold in his gut. Gold. Smuggled right under the portmaster's nose. Mara turned from the mirror, her expression smoothing into cool professionalism as she shut the door firmly. The scrape of Davos's knife against his boot sole sounded unnaturally loud in the sudden silence.

Davos pushed the flask back. "Breaker Yard's crawling with the Portmaster's men. And Hobworth merchants play rough." He remembered the scarred knuckles weren't just from bar fights; Hobworthian enforcers favored weighted rings. Elias tapped the table, his restless eyes finally locking onto Davos's. "Portmaster's men don't know about the cores. Yet. Mara does. She found the discrepancy in the manifests. Needs someone... expendable... to crack those anchors open quietly. Tonight. Before the shipment gets dispersed." The unspoken 'before we get disappeared' hung thick in the smoky air. Outside, the cart horse stamped, a wet, heavy sound against the cobbles.

Davos glanced again at the closed door where Mara had stood. That weary pride in the mirror wasn't just about surviving hard work; it was about holding ground. About knowing something valuable others missed. He pictured the anchors – massive, rusted things deemed scrap. Perfect hiding places. The risk was colossal. But the reward? Enough gold to vanish, truly vanish, from the city's chokehold. He met Elias's expectant stare. "How much?" His voice was rough, but steady. Elias grinned, a flash of stained teeth. "Ten anchors. Mara says fifty sovereigns each core. Split three ways."

The dice game by the hearth erupted in shouts – a winning throw. The noise covered Davos's low chuckle. Five hundred sovereigns. Enough for a farmstead, maybe even a boat. Freedom smelled like cold Hobworthian gold, not ditchwater ale. He slid the knife back into his boot sheath with a decisive click. "Tell Mara I want to see the manifests. And the layout of that yard." He kept his gaze on the rain-streaked window, already mapping sightlines and shadow paths. The anchors wouldn't crack themselves. And neither, he knew, would Hobworth's patience. The real scrape was just beginning.



# Pillow Talk by Willie Smith

C'mon, kiss that guy. You've been eyeing him all night. I wanna watch you make out while I'm fucking you. Show him what you can do with your mouth, while I take care of your puss. Oh, yeah – that's sweet. Kiss him, honey, tongue it, go ahead, go wild!

I wanna watch you go down. Love to see you give head. You look so cute with cock in your mouth. Kiss the tip. Lick the shaft. Let him feel a tooth. Then swallow him to the balls. C'mon, go crazy – suck that dick!

Yeah... oh, yeah... that's me you feel slamming from behind.

Let him know you love oral. Feel free, while he's down your throat, to hum. Here and there, not too loud, just enough to let us know how good that cock tastes, how much you love sucking. While I keep fucking you from behind, making your tits swing.

Take him out for a sec. Tongue-tease the tip. Taste that droplet, while you look up into his eyes. Now put it back in your mouth. Way back, far as you can. Oh, yeah, honey – suck that cock!

Beautiful deep-throat! Yeah, gag on it, bitch. Maybe now time to learn how he feels inside you. Here, I'll just pull out quick and let him swing around, tag you from behind.

Yeah, let that guy in there. I wanna see how hot he gets, when he realizes what a once-in-a-lifetime fuck you are. Yeah, let that guy ride you rough; let go, baby, treat yourself – oh, yeah, feel that fresh cock stuff your cunt.

He loves getting his way. Oh, man – look at him go, he wants that pussy BAD! Oh, yeah – fuck that guy; let him pump deep; c'mon, baby, sex it up. I wanna see that strange cock make you come; c'mon, come for your date – I wanna watch him make you come! Oh – LOVE seeing you get fucked. He's turning you way on, you look so hot.

Love watching you two get acquainted with your tongues, get hooked up... I wanna see you shiver, when he unloads. Wanna watch you feel that sperm shoot deep inside. C'mon, baby, don't be shy – let's see you come! Oh, yeah, dope rad and cool, do it, you're GORGEOUS when you come!

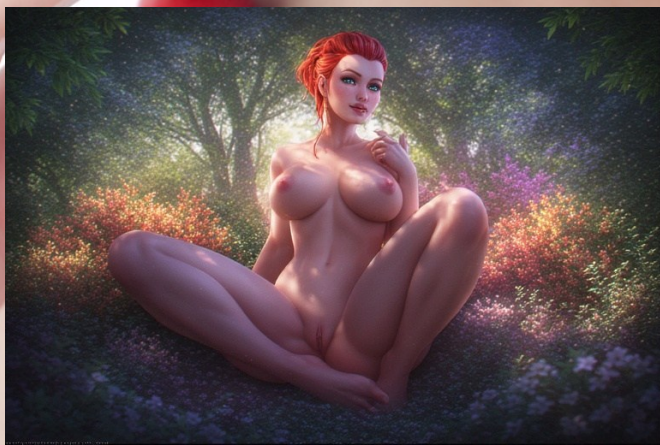
Okay, sweetheart – now let me in there. Don't stop to catch your breath.

This time I want crazy love. Feel his warm sperm inside your pussy.

Gets me so horny feeling some guy's sperm's lubing you. Just like when we kiss, I taste that dude's cock on your tongue. Isn't it sweet, balling two guys at once?

Cool – no? us sharing a new thrill and I don't need to worry about jealousy? I mean, since you're the one here getting the bonus.

And if I get a little jealous about you having too good a time with a stranger, why, I'll just hurry up and find some other cute stud so I can watch him fuck your brains out! How could I ever be jealous of you fucking every guy in the room, me included? Hey – it's every man's dream to be married to his own private wood nymph!



# BRENTON BOOTH

## The Death of a Poet

At my funeral  
spill whiskey,  
Viagra, and  
cocaine on my  
corpse. Visiting  
the local brothel  
immediately  
after. Picking  
the sad eyed  
thin brunette,  
with the small  
boobs, and  
black silk  
lingerie. Beginning  
in missionary.  
Finishing  
in doggie.  
Reading her all  
my best poetry  
over several  
unforgettable  
hours.  
Remembering  
to tell her,  
"I love her."



## The One that Got Away

He'd seen her artfully trail  
 every other male on the cruise  
 to the toilet whenever they  
 discreetly exited the cabin for a  
 quick line. Her clear heels, fake  
 exposed breasts, invisible  
 white thong, finely curved  
 behind, effortlessly bypassing  
 the dense aluminium door.  
 Emerging soon after taller  
 than the stars. Accompanied by  
 a new wholly perplexed man  
 grumbling he had nothing left.  
 When he approached the toilet,  
 he was ready. Locking the  
 door before she made it in.  
 Hearing her clear heels, rapid  
 cocaine breaths, long pink  
 painted nails sensuously  
 tapping along the helpless frame.  
 Instantly opening. Revealing  
 two immaculate white lines,  
 lofty and proud, on his dark  
 unlit mobile phone screen.  
 Her eyes blazing brighter  
 than midday sun. "I'll be out in  
 a minute," he said through a  
 cheeky smile. Closing the door  
 on her furious face. Watching  
 the sun spill from the sky.



**Bio:** Brenton Booth is a writer residing in Sydney, Australia. He has two collections available from *Epic Rites Press*.



Linda M. Crate

# something more

you called me  
a succubus  
because  
i like sex,

as if it is some  
divine ritual  
only men should  
experience or enjoy;

you didn't need  
to lose your mind  
over it

because you didn't  
even  
know how to fuck  
me—

everything was centered  
around your pleasure,  
your wants, your needs;  
mine were never truly  
considered—

you were a selfish lover  
always leaving me hungry  
for something more.



# wannabe loved right

i was born in the  
80's  
i still listen to  
prince, david bowie,  
whitney houston,  
michael jackson,  
journey, foreigner,  
pat benatar,  
joan jett,  
and everyone else;

if you want to woo  
me i want a boom box  
on your shoulder blasting the  
most romantic love song—

& i like sex,  
but don't be surprised because  
i don't know why people  
are always shocked that a woman  
likes sex;

we get labeled succubus  
or told we're dirty—

just give me a reason  
to love you,  
we can listen to some  
music and dance;  
but "if you really bug me then  
i'll say goodbye."



# catalog



# love me right

i'm built on nostalgia,  
music, books, poetry,  
autumn season  
(october in particular);

i am wooed by  
emotional intelligence,  
wisdom, and people who  
are punk rock in the  
flesh who haven't forgotten  
how to be kind as well  
as fierce—

my aesthetic is  
giving a damn,  
people helping me without  
me having to ask them  
because they know my  
needs and how to fulfill them,  
being chalant because  
nonchalance only serves to  
sever ties in my world;

give me love letters,  
write me a song, write me  
a poem—i want to be  
the muse for once,  
paint me pretty and true;

i want to be loved  
wholly inside and out with  
such raw passion and intensity  
that we have no choice  
but to find one another  
in every life afterward—

let a constellation of love  
pull us tight together in every  
lifetime and love me right.









## no ordinary woman

i think maybe  
you were raised  
by wolves,

all you knew was  
your hunger;

never cared about  
my comfort or my heart  
or soul—

carnal desire was  
your only motive,

all you wanted to do  
was mindlessly  
consume like i was some sort  
of ordinary woman;

but i've never been that—

you left me alone  
when the thorns of my  
accountability started  
cutting you as loudly as your  
silence cut me,

i may be a pretty flower;

but i remembered my value  
and i was always someone  
you could never afford—

don't ever think you will  
ever have access to  
me or my magic  
again,  
you won't.



**RED**

## in every dark dream

you fumbled  
a woman who would've  
loved you with her  
entire soul,  
searching for someone who would  
play mommy to you;

if you wanted me to boss  
you around then you could've said

i don't mind taking the lead—

but i don't think you were  
looking for a life partner,  
just someone to fuck;  
and i was never born to be  
someone's entertainment—

full of magic, full of dreams, full  
of universes and mythology  
beyond your comprehension  
i was made for more;

and i never will stop asking the  
universe for everything that is mine—

you settled for mediocre i'm  
looking for the real deal,  
a love with music so true and so  
honest that it builds a home;

now i'll just haunt you for  
the rest of your life in every  
dark dream know death was me.



# SCANDALOUS LUCK



**The Tenacity of Astonishment**



**Photo Series by Bill Wolak**





**Waiting in Black Gloves**



**A Longing That Begins in the Eyes**

**Only When the  
Tongue Becomes  
a Secret Mirror**



**Your Flesh of Breathless Silk**





**Brief Ecstatic  
Interlude**



# THE EROTIC IMAGE AND THE DELIRIUM OF DESIRE

*I prefer the people who eat off the bare earth  
the delirium from which they were born.*

—Antonin Artaud

The erotic image is never a mere mimesis. Lurking in it somewhere resides the indefatigable enigma of desire—perhaps not blatantly, but in some fashion unmistakable. That frenzy must be transfixed, that fever frozen, that spasm stilled, that irresistible lightning made motionless.

Therefore, the effectiveness of the image lies in the degree to which—by design or otherwise—it ignites, thrills, questions, enthralls, mystifies, deceives, or confounds.

The attraction of any particular erotic image, however, is relatively unpredictable. The representation and the style of the image determine—to a great extent—the most appreciative audience. Nevertheless, the specific delirium of desire represented must be evocative, poignant, and haunting. Also, as the phrase delirium of desire suggests, that state of longing is by its very nature uncontrollable, frantic, tantalizing, free from all constraints, and open to the imagination.

Mystery and the allure of the unknown are the cornerstones of its

sensuality. Since one can only capture fleeting traces of such an overwhelmingly indomitable emotion, one must relentlessly strive to catch the exultation of such erotic enchantments in uncompromising and precise depictions.

— Bill Wolak



The Mask of Complete Abandon



**When Delirium Is Near**



**The Intensity of a  
Leather Blindfold**



**Awaiting the Seventh  
Shadow**



**A Temporal Displacement That Clings Like Lightning**





# A Blush Coaxed from Uncertainty





**A Soothing Smoothness**



**A Burning Sustained by Delight**



**Soothing as  
Familiar Hands**





**Any Offer That  
Revives Desire**

# The Mask That Empties Every Mirror







## **The Tenderness of Haunted Silk**

# The Silence of Light





**All the Tingling Between Kisses**



# MAKING PERFECT BETTER

by WILLIE SMITH

For months now, Herb has been after me to have sex with another man. Then bring the guy home for a three-way. Herb is a wonderful husband. I love



the dude dearly. We have a great sex life. Take time out from our busy lives for a “party” at least three times a week.

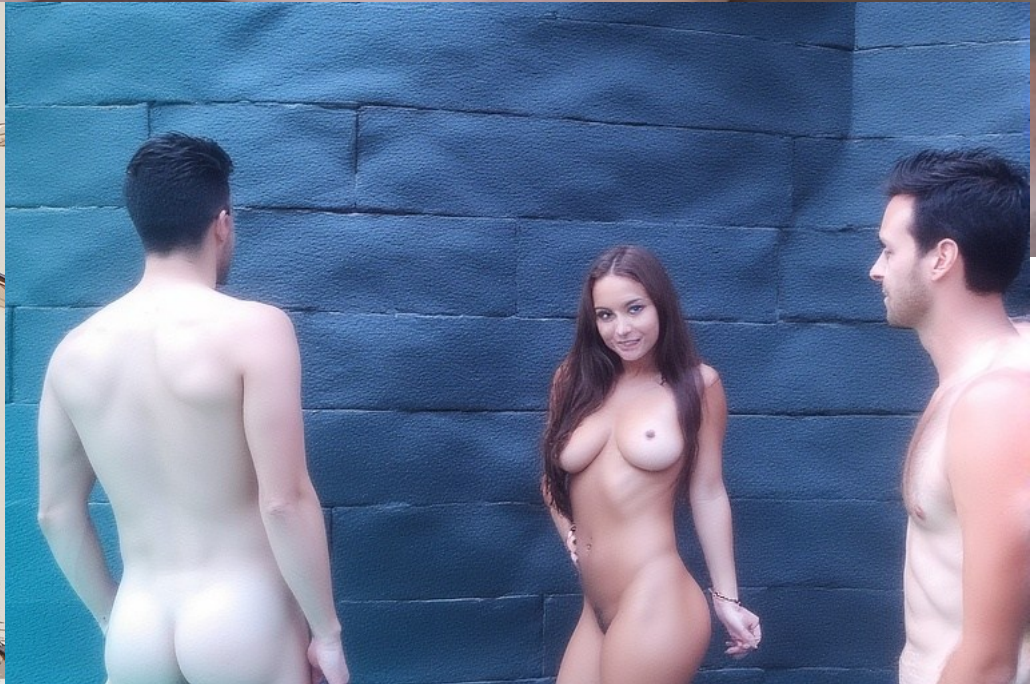
I’m a computer consultant for a local bank. He teaches French at the downtown Community College. We are in our late-twenties, have bought our first home and both work hard at our chosen professions.

We are more than reasonably happy, are getting moderately rich, our health is excellent and our bodies – modesty aside – are no more than a smidgen shy of gorgeous. Herb stands six-foot even, has a thick head of wavy chestnut hair, never weighs more than 170 well-distributed pounds, plays a superb game of tennis and last summer completed his first half-marathon.

Me, I’m a little less than two inches shorter. Wear my curly jet-black hair in a flip. My breasts are a firm medium, my waist 22 inches and my hips curve out to an attractive 34. My eyes are a bright green strangely flecked with scarlet, large and darting. I have a petite straight nose, fine-boned cheeks and chin, thin lips quick to smile. My skin is clear, and of a whiteness to put newfallen snow to shame.

We both dress rather expensively, and wear our clothing well. When we walk together into a restaurant, voices lower, heads turn, eyes widen. Our marriage, in short, is the envy of all friends, acquaintances and coworkers.

So why this oddball desire Herb says started to overcome him early last year? He



has no explanation, although he's kind enough to assure me repeatedly that it has nothing to do with me, nothing to do with any dissatisfaction on his part with our marvelous sex life. He guesses it's just a goofy yen to make what's perfect better. Says he suspects if we do his fantasy once, one night of madness, it'll be out of his system and he'll fall back in the groove of happy hubby and loyal, dependable, ever-exciting, bedmate.

Well, I have noticed his performance of late falling off somewhat. Oh, he's just as erect and vigorous as always. Careful and considerate to make me come before he finally takes his own pleasure. But, during our sessions, I can see in his eyes that his mind is wandering. He confesses it's the three-way fantasy, again assures me it has nothing to do with me, it's all inside his head, and it's getting worse as far as not leaving him alone. He really wants to do this.

After much inner debate, playing off doubt against doubt, last week I finally decide to cooperate. Despite some lingering misgivings. Once I make the decision, I surprise myself by realizing I've already picked out the victim.

Robbie, a well-spoken, carefully-groomed grad school dropout who started work in the mailroom six months ago. Have I all along been flirting with this guy? He's a lit major, nearly completed his Masters. I'm an avid reader, a fan of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway; I'm even getting into David Foster Wallace and am almost halfway through his colossal INFINITE JEST.

Imagine my delight when I learn through the office grapevine that the new cute young mailboy (he's only three years younger than me) is proficient in 20th Century American Lit. Not many folks in the banking world read good books, or even any books at all; most subsist on the electronic versions of People Magazine, Forbes, Fortune and USA Today.

From the morning I introduce myself, stopping by to pick up my mail, we become book buddies. He's the one who recommends Foster Wallace. And he's given me several valuable insights on the works of William Saroyan and John Updike. Come to think of it, has Robbie these past months been flirting with me? I'm sure he senses the way to this woman's heart is through literature she can sink her teeth into.

Whatever, no matter who started it, we fall into taking our coffee breaks together,

upstairs in the employee lounge. Takes me several days, after I make the Decision, to get around to asking him over to our place last night. Herb wants me to have sex with the target guy first; but I feel wrong about that; so I take the plunge, get him to come for dinner and Herb and me together work on bringing him around to indulging in a spot of post-prandial action.

It's a compromise so typical of our marriage: Herb doesn't want to pick the guy out, because then he'd feel too much like he was pimping his wife. I don't want to ball the man first, because I want to share the whole of this adventure with my beloved husband.

Okay, dear diary, or whomever I'm scribbling this to, let's cut to the chase: It's after a scrumptious dinner featuring one of Herb's famous mushroom, Bermuda onion and bell pepper souffles, I did the salad (endive, Romaine, arugula, lemon&oil dressing), we bought the dessert at Whole Foods and we've killed exactly one fifth of \$75 imported Chablis – no more, no less – and have repaired to the master bedroom, explaining to Robbie we want him to inspect my "etchings." Between our inability to suppress giggling at this ridiculous ruse, and the decided twinkle in Robbie's baby-blues, few words from then on feel necessary.

But just to have a little fun with the boys, I tell Robbie I'm taking a figure study class at Herb's college and I'd like the gentlemen to oblige by disrobing and sitting on the edge of the bed to pose for a quick sketch. Robbie glances over at Herb, Herb shrugs a oh-what-the-heck, and male clothing disappears into two separate piles on the captain chairs at the foot of the bed.

I step over to Herb, give him a quick peck on the lips, say, gazing into his eyes, whose pupils are already widening with lust, "You don't mind – do you, dear?" "Goodness, no – I want you to have a good time. I always want you to have a good time, babe."

I turn to the overqualified mailboy. Lean down into his grinning, but still somewhat unsure face. "Close your eyes, young man. Good. Now, I want you to imagine me as Ava Gardner in Night of the Iguana. Got it?"

Not waiting for a response, I kiss him full on the mouth, flick my tongue between his lips. Taste Chablis on his own tongue, which slowly, almost reluctantly, starts working, as I guide him through a lovely and most appropriate – considering the

wine choice – French kiss.

When I pull back, ending the smooch, he says, clearing his throat, “Ava was forty-two in that movie; you’re little more than half that age.”

“Yes, but after all,” I brush my palm down his lightly-haired swimmer’s chest, “I am the older woman here,” and I reach down and twine my fingers around his penis, which is already waking up and rubbing the sleep out of its eyes.

I keep smiling into his widening pupils, my fingers working blindly with their catch. Fifteen long, luxurious, quiet seconds elapse...

I let go of his swelling manhood. Take a step back on the wall-to-wall shag, continuing to lock Robbie’s gaze in my own. Produce my best coquettish leer. I’m beginning to enjoy this a lot more than first thought I would. Maybe this isn’t after all going to be so awkward and embarrassing. Herb is a very creative guy; he rarely voices any bad ideas.

Kick off – one at a time – my mauve suede kitten heels. Unbutton my aubergine silk blouse. Unhook my black vinyl belt and let the beige linen skirt drop. Step out of the rumpled garment. Withdraw another step from the bed. Shuffle out of the silk and let the blouse also drop to the shag.

Herb chuckles, says, to break the potentially clumsy silence, “That’s great, hon. How about if you give me and our guest a little show?”

“Gosh,” I roll my eyes at the popcorn ceiling, “I’m just a shy little systems analyst barely out of computer school. I’m sure I don’t,” I turn my back to the boys, unhook my black sensible bra, toss it onto the heap of Robbie’s clothes, “have any idea of what you might be talking about, Herb, honey.”

Wiggle my toes, gaining a comfy purchase on the shag. Twist hips from side to side. Cup my breasts. Swivel around and once again trap Robbie’s peepers in my stare. Hearing inside my head a Miles Davis solo, I mince up to where my swaying knees brush against his own knees, where he sits bolt upright on the sheets. Tilt in for a quick kiss. Pull back and thrust my chest in his face, removing both hands, forcing him, as I shift from breast to breast, to taste the nipples of each before he barely has a chance to see the goods.



Twist my torso to the right. Wiggle the left boob securely into Robbie's mouth.

During the moment it takes Robbie to react, Herb slides over, leans forward and wraps his own lips around the nipple and areola of my right girl. As if all three of us can hear Miles cook on "So What," Herb and Robbie simultaneously fall to kissing, licking and sucking my twin offerings. I slip my hands onto their shoulders – my left on Robbie's right, my right on Herb's left. Squeeze all three of us as close together as flesh permits.

The double oral is so unique, so intense, so thrilling, I don't break from the huddle until my lower legs threaten to cramp from the unaccustomed angle I'm stooped at. Both men at once stand, grab my legs and shoulders, lift me up onto the bed.

Herb rolls down my banker's-gray hipster panties. Tosses them, with coy symbolism, onto the pile of his own clothes.

All three now jay-nude, our dance acquires a momentum of its own. Which momentum switches to the boys. A shiver of lust passes over my body, as I recline in total passivity, waiting eagerly for the gentlemen to have their way with me.

Herb spreads my legs. Stuffs a pillow under my butt, raising my hips up to meet the mouth he bends down and places softly on my outer labia. His familiar tongue, gently at first, moistens with long strokes both sets of labia.

Robbie leans over my face. Initiates a randy make-out session. Making-out is never so exciting as when it's the first time with a brand new partner. Fresh, in every sense: cool as April rain, new as dawn over the lake, and "fresh" as in overly bold, but a boldness each lover merrily succumbs to.

Well... have I been reading too much Thomas Wolfe? Whatever, words cannot begin to convey the world-shattering newness of one man lovingly licking my pussy, while with another, Mr. Fresh-and-new, I indulge mutual tongue exploration to the nth. What – the thought loiters in my mind – is that an orgasm I feel coming around the bend?

Both lovers, once again in concert, break off their ministrations, and I find Robbie's eight-inch erection – surprise! – sliding into my mouth, while Herb eases his old reliable sixer into my vagina now weeping with joy. Things are clumsy at first, especially with the newbie. But Robbie soon positions pillows under my head and

shoulders, swivels around to plant his knees in my armpits, and fist-guides his hard-on over my cheeks and chin. I quickly oblige by gobbling up – look, Ma, no hands! – the fat pink head, grommeting my lips around the shaft, well below the circumcision scar.

Meanwhile hubby throws my legs up. Crooks his shoulders in the hollows of my knees. Goes at it missionary, my crotch aimed high, so as to permit maximum penetration. My heels start to slap against his shoulder blades, while Robbie engineers a gradual mouth-stuffing. I soon accept a good five inches of his shaft, savoring the glans squeezed up against my palate.

I revel in the sharp taste of his precum, as it oozes with every thrust onto the roof of my mouth. I'm exuberant at how different it tastes. Well, it tastes like sex, of course, like man juice; but it definitely differs from Herb's cum. With eyes shut, I sink, gourmet-like, into discovering all the nuances of Robbie's intriguing tang.

Herb suddenly increases tempo. Resulting in my having to release Robbie, twisting my head aside so I can gasp for breath, moaning crazily, as hubby pounds the day-lights out of my yoni. Robbie contents himself with thumping his shiny glans against my right temple and cheekbone.

Next the boys flip me over. Guide me up onto my knees and palms. Robbie squats at the head of the bed. Maneuvers his cock again into my mouth, while hubby does me doggie from behind.

"You know, Rob," Herb says over my backside, "this is what in porn magazines they call a 'spit roast.'"

"What the heck," I pull Robbie out of my mouth, the better to put in my two cents, "do you know about porn, Herb honey?"

"Gee," Robbie shoves his cock back inside my mouth, "I thought it was called a 'sandwich.'"

Oh, jeez – it's like being in the clubhouse and the boys are reverting to No Girls Allowed. Well, Herb is humping me magnificently, and all I want to do at the moment is sample more of the dick feast Robbie is pressing upon me. I guess a little humiliation – not too harshly applied – never hurts the fun of good old down-home whoopee. I decide to accept degradation as just another spice to the orgy.

“By the way, Robbie me boy, would you care,” hubby pulls out, “to help me fuck the shit out of my wife?”

Robbie, needing no further prompting, scrambles around, while Herb takes his place at the head of the bed. Hubby’s erection and Mr. New-and-Fresh’s woody simultaneously enter either end of what has now become everybody-and-anybody’s pleasure machine. The familiar and yet always stimulating savor of Herb’s cock starts to fill my mouth, causing even more of my saliva to flow, causing the cock-tang to intensify, causing more saliva to flow – such a delightful feedback loop!

I’m only ballparking Robbie at eight inches, of course. I have meticulously measured Herb at exactly six inches. And I’m pretty good at estimating two inches. So I’d say it’s an accurate enough ballpark. And, oh, how those extra two inches get noticed!

Mr. New-and-Fresh is at first the soul of politeness. Plops in the glans once or twice. Then eases in not quite half the shaft. Gives half-a-dozen repetitions. Eases in another inch, and another... then suddenly pulls all the way out and just as suddenly rams the entire length in. I feel his cock-head practically up to my navel, while his scrotum slaps against my butt as he settles into a quickening rhythm of all-the-way-in, all-the-way-out.

This time I’m determined not to release my oral grip on the front-end playmate. To spite myself, I press my nose to Herb’s pubic bone; take him all the way down into my throat, to the threshold of the gag reflex. To each of Robbie’s thrusts I respond with grunts and moans that I know are thrilling the dickens out of hubby.

I nearly choke, starting to giggle, between thrusts from behind, at the pun “dick-ins.” Then Robbie slams me so hard the giggle becomes an actual gag. But I clamp down and make it come out instead an angry stew of growl, bark, grunt, squeal, making more animal noises than I can here catalogue, transmitting every erg of the ruckus into Herb’s dick.

Herb himself morphs into a howling beast. He can no longer hold back, comes copiously, squirting semen onto the back of my throat. Just as my husband is offloading the last spurt, the mailboy lengthily ejaculates into the depths of my joy canal, accompanied with his own ecstatic yelps and barks.

Aim my eyes up at hubby. He's staring down at me in disbelief. I pull my head back, till his hardon springs from between my lips. Stay focused on his grimacing face, as I lick the phallus clean of every gray-white drop of sperm cocktail. He shudders, gasping, eyes rolling back up into his skull. I watch, fascinated, another orgasm distort his features into a beastlike mask. One last droplet of semen pearls on the tip of his prong. My tongue tucks the moisture mouthward, hubby collapsing against the headboard, tilting over sideways onto a landing pad of pillows. I feel Robbie tumble onto my back, slide off to one side onto the sheet at the bottom of the bed.

"Will there be anything else, fellahs?"

Herb, eyes closed, glides into a snore. Robbie likewise enters unconsciousness, curled in a heap beside my ankles.

I reverse position. Take Robbie's slackening penis into my mouth. Give several long and loving sucks, tasting the sweet, salty dregs of his orgasm. But, no – no second climax from this participant. The lucky winner would seem to be Herb. Or is it me, the only warrior left standing – or rather kneeling – on the field of battle?

Smile at the thought. No, no victor here. Just three champions.

Scrunch sideways across the fabric-softener-scented satin, snuggling between hubby and boytoy, feeling like a young mother settling between two exhausted tykes behaving themselves dutifully in Nodland.



I wonder, drifting off myself, what the upshot of all this might be. Will what happened in Vegas stay in Vegas? Of course it will. I intuit that Robbie is close-mouthed; he understands it's just one wild night; knows he was simply used as a sex object.

Question being – do I know that? How long before I start toying with the idea of... well, certainly not at the office, and never without Herb being present. Which doesn't preclude, down the road, when Herb gets a wild hair and I'm singing the same tune... will it always be Herb who starts the ball rolling...?

Well, cher diary, maybe all I can say for sure is: Stay tuned.

## BEHIND

The bumper sticker reads:  
WOULDN'T YOU RATHER BE  
BEHIND A BOOK?

Not on your life—  
I would rather be behind  
a dump truck  
filled with 100-dollar bills  
on a windy day.

Or in the spirit  
of keeping poetry really real  
a hot redhead with big tits  
and a tight pussy.

# Ben Newell



# HOW DOES SANTA GO DOWN THE CHIMNEY?

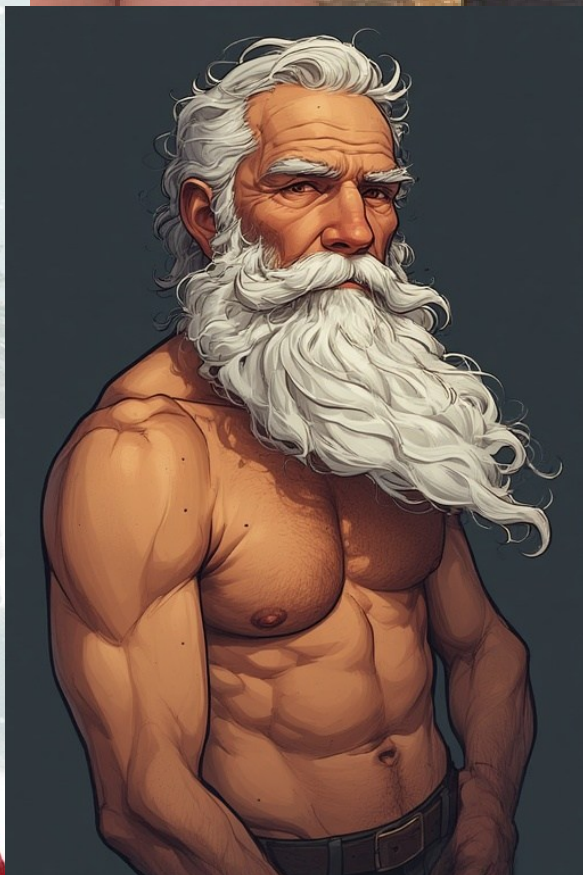
A customer  
hands me the classic book.

I ring her up  
then proceed to wrap the thing  
in our best Xmas paper.

To hell with  
the chimney—

What with that  
crazy-ass beard of his  
I want to know  
how he goes down  
on Mrs. Claus.





## HOPELESS CASE

"Can I interest  
you in a fanny pack?"

Only  
I didn't say  
"pack?"  
I said  
"pat?"

The woman complained  
and I was fired.

A few weeks later  
I found work  
at an independent bookstore  
where the manager  
asked me to straighten  
the Freud shelf.

And I said,  
"Yes, Ms. Nipple—  
I mean, Whipple."





**6 DOVE**



**L**



T. KELLY GAINES

**He's REALLY  
Gotta Have  
His Wife's  
Ass**

The bedroom was quiet, the only sound the soft hum of the air conditioner as it pushed cool air into the room. Sunlight filtered through the sheer curtains, casting a warm glow over the space. He lay on the bed, his body relaxed yet tense with anticipation. His wife's absence was palpable, her scent still lingering on the pillows, a reminder of her presence even when she wasn't there. His mind wandered to her, to the curve of her hips, the softness of her skin, but it was her ass that dominated his thoughts. Perfect, round, and untouched—it was an obsession, a fantasy he couldn't shake. His cock twitched at the mere thought of it, already hardening as he imagined her cheeks spread wide, her hole waiting for him.

He sat up slowly, his eyes scanning the room as if searching for her. The silence was deafening, broken only by the sound of his own breathing, which grew heavier with each passing moment. His shirt clung to his chest, damp with sweat, and he peeled it off without hesitation, tossing it to the floor. His jeans followed, unbuttoned and unzipped with deliberate slowness, as if he were savoring the anticipation. His cock, already throbbing, peeked out from the waistband of his boxers, a bead of pre-cum glistening at the tip. He stepped out of his pants, letting them fall in a heap beside the bed, and then his boxers joined them, leaving him completely naked.

The cool air kissed his skin, sending a shiver down his spine, but it was nothing compared to the heat building in his groin. He lay back on the bed, propping himself up on his elbows, his eyes fixed on his cock as he began to stroke it slowly. His hand moved up and down, his grip firm yet gentle, as if he were caressing something precious. His mind's eye painted a vivid picture: his wife's ass, right in front of him, her cheeks parted, her hole glistening with anticipation. He groaned softly, his breath quickening as he quickened his pace, his hand moving faster, tighter, his cock throbbing with each stroke.

"Fuck," he muttered, his voice hoarse with desire. He closed his eyes, letting the fantasy consume him. He imagined himself behind her, his hands gripping her hips, pulling her closer as he slammed into her. Her tight hole clenched around him, milking his cock, and he moaned louder, his body tensing as he thrust into the air, his hand mimicking the motion. The bed creaked beneath him, the only sound in the room aside from his ragged breathing. His balls tightened, heavy and full, as he neared the edge, his cock throbbing with each stroke, each fantasy-filled thrust.

He opened his eyes, his gaze fixed on the ceiling, but his mind was elsewhere, lost in the image of her ass, her body, her moans. His hand moved faster now, his grip desperate, his cock slick with pre-cum. He could feel it building, the pressure in his balls, the tightness in his chest, the inevitability of his release. He groaned loudly, his voice echoing in the quiet room, as he imagined her cheeks spreading wider, her hole taking him in, gripping him tight.

"Oh fuck, baby," he whispered, though she wasn't there. His body arched off the bed, his muscles straining as he thrust one last time, his hand moving furiously. His cock pulsed, and with a loud, guttural groan, he shot his load. Thick streams of cum shot out, landing on his chest, dripping down his abs, pooling in his belly button. He shuddered, his body trembling as he came, his mind still fixated on her, on her ass, on the fantasy he'd just lived out.





*[Signature]*  
77

He lay there, breathless, his chest heaving, his cock still twitching as the last drops of cum oozed out. His hand fell to his side, spent, as he stared at the ceiling, his mind slowly returning to the present. The room was quiet once more, the only sound his heavy breathing. He reached for a tissue, wiping the cum from his chest, but his mind was still elsewhere, still with her.



He rolled onto his side, his eyes drifting to the empty space beside him. Her pillow was there, her scent still strong, a reminder of what he was missing. He smiled softly, a mix of satisfaction and longing playing on his lips.

His cock, now softening, lay against his thigh, spent but still heavy with desire. He imagined her walking into the room, her eyes widening at the sight of him, her lips curling into a knowing smile.

***“He lay there, breathless, his chest heaving, his cock still twitching as the last drops of cum oozed out.”***

“Miss me?” he imagined her asking, her voice teasing, seductive.

He chuckled, the sound bitter and sweet. “Always,” he whispered, though she wasn’t there to hear it. His hand drifted down, tracing the curve of his abs, still slick with his cum. He closed his eyes, letting the fantasy linger, letting the image of her ass, perfect and untouched, fill his mind once more.

The room remained quiet, the sunlight now casting long shadows across the floor. He lay there, lost in thought, his body sated but his mind still hungry. He knew it was only a matter of time before he’d crave her again, before the fantasy would call to him, before he’d find himself back in this very spot, stroking his cock and imagining her ass, waiting for him.

For now, though, he rested, his body spent, his mind drifting. The fantasy would return, he knew, but for the moment, he was content to lie there, surrounded by the silence, surrounded by the memory of her, surrounded by the promise of what could be. His cock, now soft, lay against his thigh, a silent reminder of the desire that would inevitably return, of the fantasy that would once again consume him. And when it did, he’d be ready, his hand eager, his mind vivid, his body aching for her, for her ass, for the release only she could give him.

# BETTIE SHELTON

## THINKING ABOUT MARSEILLE

The last frog leg slid off the plate. He'd ordered them out of nostalgia, not hunger. They tasted like rubber and regret.

He wiped grease from his fingers onto the diner's vinyl seat, the texture like cold skin. Outside, rain smeared neon signs across wet asphalt. A delivery truck roared past, spraying gutter water against the window. He didn't flinch.

"Still thinkin' 'bout Marseille?" The waitress refilled his coffee without asking. Her apron smelled of old fryer oil and nicotine.

He traced the condensation ring left by his glass. "Something like that." The lie settled easily. His mind wasn't on France, but on the locked folder buried three menus deep in his phone. Anticipation tightened his gut—a familiar, guilty thrum beneath his ribs. He'd waited all week for this booth, this hour between shifts when the diner emptied and nobody watched.

The waitress lingered, tapping her pen against her pad. "Y'know, Hank makes a decent bouillabaisse on Thursdays. Almost tastes like the real thing." Her eyes flicked to the greasy smear he'd left on the seat. "Almost."

He forced a smile. "Maybe next week." As she shuffled toward the kitchen, he pulled out his phone. The cracked screen lit his face in the dimness. Rain lashed the windowpane, blurring the streetlights into watery streaks. He thumbed the password—her birthday backwards—and scrolled past vacation snaps until he found it: the folder labeled "Estimates". Inside, just one photo. Her. On their wedding day, laughing under the archway, sunlight catching the lace at her throat. The image was slightly blurred, taken from too far away. Perfect.

He angled the phone low against the tabletop. His thumb brushed the screen, tracing the curve of her shoulder. Outside, the delivery truck's brake lights pulsed red through the wet glass, painting the vinyl booth crimson for a heartbeat. He leaned back, fingers slipping beneath the worn edge of the table. The vinyl felt tacky, cold. He closed his eyes, conjuring the scent of her skin—vanilla and salt air, not fryer grease—and the way her breath hitched when he'd kissed her neck right there, just below the ear.

A fork clattered loudly in the kitchen. His eyes snapped open. The waitress stood at the service window, staring blankly past him into the storm. Safe. He shifted slightly in the booth, the movement deliberate, shielded by the high backrest. His focus narrowed to the screen, to the swell of her hip beneath the white dress. The diner's hum faded—the hiss of the coffee machine, the low chatter from the kitchen, the drumming rain—replaced by the remembered rustle of silk and her low, urgent whisper against his ear. His breath shortened. He pressed his palm hard against the seam of his jeans, the rough denim a stark counterpoint to the softness in his memory. The neon sign outside flickered, casting a brief, sickly green light across his knuckles as they tightened. Almost there.

"Refill?" The voice was too close. He jerked, fumbling the phone. It clattered face-down on the table. The waitress stood over him, pot poised, her gaze sharpening at his sudden movement. She saw the flush creeping up his neck.

"No," he rasped, clearing his throat. "Just... checking the time." He flipped the phone over casually, hiding the screen. His heart hammered against his ribs like a trapped bird. "Shift starts soon."

She eyed him, skepticism plain. "Storm's bad. Roads'll be slick." Her stare lingered on his trembling hand resting near the overturned phone. "You look... peaked. Sure you don't want that coffee?"



"Positive." He forced another smile, brittle this time. "Just the check." He needed her gone. Needed the privacy back. The interruption had shattered the fragile intimacy, leaving him stranded and aching unfinished. The image felt distant now, the urgency replaced by a cold prickle of shame and frustration.

She scribbled the bill slowly, deliberately, her pen scratching loud in the sudden quiet. He kept his eyes fixed on the rain-streaked window, the distorted shapes of passing cars bleeding into watery smears. The phone lay heavy and accusing on the table. The waitress finally slid the check towards him. "Take your time," she said, her tone implying he needed it. She didn't move.

He fumbled for his wallet, pulling out crumpled bills without counting. "Keep it," he mumbled, pushing the money across the sticky vinyl. He needed air, space, anything but her lingering presence and the phantom scent of vanilla drowned by fryer grease. The interruption had severed the connection, leaving a raw, frustrated ache beneath his belt. The photo felt like a betrayal now, a stolen moment turned sour.

Outside, the storm had intensified. Rain hammered the pavement like thrown gravel. He shoved the phone deep into his coat pocket, the image locked away but the tension unresolved, a coiled spring inside him. He hesitated at the door, the diner's warmth suddenly cloying. The neon sign above flickered erratically, casting stuttering shadows across the wet sidewalk. He took a breath, tasting damp asphalt and exhaust, and stepped into the downpour. The cold water hit his face like a slap, sharp and cleansing. It plastered his hair to his forehead and seeped instantly through his thin jacket. He started walking, head down against the wind, the rhythmic splash of his footsteps echoing in the near-empty street. The diner's glow faded behind him, replaced by the blurred halos of distant streetlights swallowed by the rain.

He walked without direction, the city dissolving into a watercolor nightmare. Sheets of rain obscured everything beyond a few yards. A car hissed past, its tires throwing up a wall of spray that soaked his legs. He didn't care. The physical discomfort was a welcome distraction from the gnawing frustration and the sticky shame clinging to him. He thought of her laugh, genuine and bright in the Marseille sun, not the silent, pixelated ghost on his phone. The cold water running down his neck felt like penance. He kept walking, turning down a side alley where overflowing dumpsters leaked streaks of grey water onto the pavement. The alley ended at a chain-link fence overlooking a flooded construction site. He stopped, leaning his forehead against the cold, wet metal. The roar of the rain filled his ears, drowning out the city, drowning out thought. He closed his eyes, letting the water stream down his face. *Almost*. The word echoed bitterly. Almost tasted it, almost felt her, almost finished. Almost wasn't enough. It never was. He gripped the fence tighter, the metal links biting into his palms. The ache resurged, insistent and godless beneath the drumming rain.

A sudden, sharp crack echoed nearby – not thunder, but the brittle snap of wood. He jerked his head up. Across the flooded pit, partially shielded by a sagging tarp, a dim orange glow pulsed. Woodsmoke, faint but unmistakable, cut through the wet concrete smell. A small, hunched figure was tending a fire inside a dented metal drum. Rain hissed as it hit the hot metal. The figure poked at the flames with a broken broom handle. "S'posed to be a dragonnade," a gravelly voice called out, surprisingly loud against the storm. "Nonstandardized, though. Just keeps the damp off." The man – it was an old man, wrapped in layers of plastic and sodden cloth – didn't look up. He tossed another scrap of broken pallet onto the fire. Sparks fizzed upwards.

He hesitated, the unexpected encounter freezing him. The raw intimacy he'd sought in the booth felt grotesque here, exposed by the storm and this stranger's pragmatic fire. "Looks... warm," he managed, his voice rough. The old man finally glanced over, his eyes sharp in the firelight despite the rain plastering grey hair to his forehead. "Warmer than out there, boy. Warmer than broodin'." He jabbed the stick towards the flooded pit. "Got a name? Or just standin'?" The directness was jarring. "Tom," he said, the name feeling strange on his tongue. The old man nodded. "Hector. You look like you lost somethin' poco important." Tom flinched. Hector chuckled, a dry rasp. "Seen that look. Chasin' ghosts in the rain. Fire's better." He gestured vaguely with his stick towards an overturned plastic crate near the drum. "Sit. Dry your hands."

Tom stared at the crate, then at the flickering fire reflected in the oily puddles. The warmth radiating from the drum was palpable, a stark contrast to the biting rain. The phantom scent of vanilla was gone, replaced by honest woodsmoke and wet earth. The coiled tension inside him didn't vanish, but it loosened slightly, replaced by a profound weariness and the simple, immediate

need to get warm. He walked around the edge of the pit, the muddy water soaking his shoes, and lowered himself onto the crate. The heat hit his skin, a physical relief. He held his trembling hands towards the flames, watching the steam rise from his soaked jacket sleeves. Hector tossed another piece of wood onto the fire. "See?" he said, not looking at Tom. "Fire's real."

Tom didn't answer immediately. He watched the flames consume the wood, the orange glow painting Hector's weathered face in shifting light and shadow. The rain drummed relentlessly on the tarp overhead. "Doesn't feel real," Tom finally muttered, his voice barely audible over the downpour. "Not anymore."

Hector snorted, a wet, phlegmy sound. "Real's what you're sittin' on, boy. Real's the wet. Real's the fire." He jabbed the stick towards Tom. "That thing in your pocket? That ain't real. That's a ghost. Draggin' you down." Tom instinctively touched his coat pocket where the phone lay heavy and cold. He hadn't realized he'd been clutching it.

He pulled his hand away, flexing his stiff fingers near the heat. "Ghosts are all I got left," Tom said, the bitterness thick in his throat. The admission felt raw, exposed under Hector's blunt gaze.

"Bullshit," Hector declared flatly. He stirred the embers fiercely, sending sparks swirling upwards. "Ghosts don't eat. Ghosts don't freeze. Ghosts don't need a fire." He fixed Tom with those sharp eyes. "You're sittin' *here*. Breathing. Soakin' wet. That's real. That's *you*. Not some picture." He gestured dismissively towards Tom's pocket. "You wanna worship a ghost? Fine. But don't pretend it's livin'. And don't let it kill the thing that *is*." He spat into the fire, the saliva sizzling instantly. "Waste of a fire, that is."

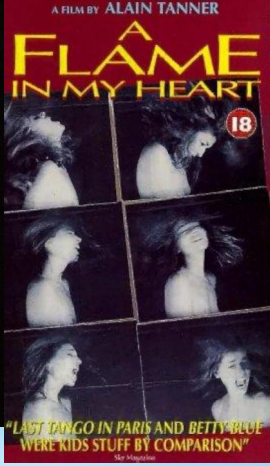
The words landed like stones. Tom stared into the flames, Hector's blunt truths echoing louder than the storm. The image on his phone felt impossibly distant now, faded and cold compared to the fierce, immediate reality of the heat on his face, the ache in his wet clothes, and the old man's tyrannous honesty. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with damp air and woodsmoke. The insistent ache beneath his belt was still there, but it felt smaller now, dwarfed by a different kind of hunger – a craving for permanence, for something solid, something *real* that wouldn't vanish with a dropped phone or an interruption. He shifted on the crate, the cheap plastic creaking under him. "How... how do you make it stop?" he asked quietly, the question hanging heavy in the smoky air. "The wanting?"

Hector chuckled, a dry rasp like stones grinding. "Stop? Boy, wanting *is* breathing. You don't stop breathing." He poked the fire fiercely. "You just gotta want somethin' *real*. Somethin' you can hold. Somethin' you can build." He gestured vaguely around the flooded pit, the sagging tarp, the dented drum. "This ain't much, but it's *mine*. Built it. Keeps me dry. Keeps me warm. Keeps me *here*." He fixed Tom with his sharp gaze. "That ghost in your pocket? It ain't yours. It's borrowed trouble."

Tom pulled the phone out slowly. The cracked screen was dark. He traced the edge with a wet thumb. "She was real," he whispered. "Once."

"Once," Hector conceded, nodding slowly. "Now? She's gone. Or she ain't yours no more." He jabbed his stick towards Tom's chest. "But *you're* here. Right now. Wet. Cold. Alive. What're you gonna *do*?" The question wasn't accusatory; it was starkly practical, like asking for directions. A delivery truck rumbled past the alley mouth, its headlights briefly illuminating the rain-slick chain-link fence in harsh yellow streaks. The sound faded, leaving only the drumming rain and the crackle of the fire. Tom looked from the phone in his hand to the flames dancing in Hector's drum. The orange light flickered on the wet metal links of the fence behind them, like a thousand tiny reflections.

He took a breath, tasting smoke and rain. Then, with a deliberate motion that felt strangely final, Tom turned the phone over and slid it deep into the overflowing dumpster beside him. It landed with a soft thud atop wet cardboard and rotting food scraps. The ache didn't vanish, but it loosened its grip, replaced by a profound exhaustion and a strange, nascent lightness. He held his empty hands towards the fire, palms up, letting the heat chase the chill from his skin. "Okay," Tom said, his voice firmer now. He met Hector's eyes. "Okay. What's next?" Hector grinned, showing surprisingly white teeth in his weathered face. He tossed Tom a piece of broken pallet wood. "Feed the fire, boy. Then we talk."



**YUAN CHANGMNG**

**A Simple Simile [to Be Extended]**

Most lives, including relationships  
 Give out plenty of smoke  
 But never burn like a real fire  
 So, they make people often choked  
 (Even to death) with emotions rather  
 Than offer them light or warmth





FLORA 