

**"Showcasing the beautiful power of written and visual art forms."**

**ISSUE #7, WINTER 2025**



# **GABBY & MIN'S** *Literary Review*

**POETRY BY**  
**KATHRYN**  
**MAIOLINO**  
**DECEMBER**

**ART BY**  
**SERGE**  
**LECOMTE**  
**SPIRITS RISING**

**FICTION BY**  
**EMMETT**  
**RODEN**  
**BIG D, LITTLE D**

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY**  
**RACHEL**  
**TURNEY**  
**CHRISTMAS**  
**CASTLE**

*M.H.*



**GABBY & MIN'S**  
*Literary Review*

**ISSUE #7, WINTER 2025**

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*Curious* by Matthew McCain

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## **A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Dear Readers,

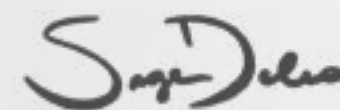
Winter has a way of slowing the world down, drawing us into quiet reflection. In this issue of Gabby & Min's Literary Review, we embrace that stillness—the hush of snowfall, the weight of nostalgia, the chill that both isolates and binds us together. Within these pages, you will find a collection of works that capture the many shades of winter: its stark beauty, its unexpected warmth, and the stories and emotions it stirs within us.

This issue brings together six stunning artworks, four captivating stories, six evocative photographs, and eight moving poems—each offering a unique lens through which to experience the season. Through visual and literary forms, our contributors explore winter as more than just a backdrop; it becomes a presence, a force, and a metaphor for change, resilience, and memory.

As always, I am grateful to the talented voices that make Gabby & Min's Literary Review what it is, and to you, our readers, who continue to embrace the art we share. May this issue bring you moments of quiet wonder and deep connection.

Stay warm, stay inspired.

With boundless gratitude and winter wishes,



Sage Delio, Editor-In-Chief, *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*

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★ COVER FEATURE



# LUSHNESS OF A BARE WINTER MORNING

MAUREEN MARTINEZ

*For Mo*

Close friends and young mothers of many boys barely running  
shoulder-to-shoulder through tall frozen trees over a crumbling  
black snow cone path. Sneakers taking delicious bites

from the ice with every footfall, as they carefully tread through dim  
pre-dawn light grateful for the precious hour of shared freedom from hungry  
mouths and slumbering husbands.

Through Pelham Bay Park where they once saw Mother Winter  
herself down for a nap asleep on her side, low-hanging moon her nightlight,  
illuminating her long braided hair sweetly curling

‘round blue crystal ears. Wide hips, thick thighs extending  
across the yawning expanse of Split Rock Golf Course. Pine trees bunched  
between her knees to ease

the ache of seasonal births. Fuzzy, white slippered feet tucked  
into the 15th hole, for even Winter’s toes get cold. Heeding the sound’s salty  
call, the friends head past the stables, take a left

before the bridge and huff up the lofty hill peering down its old lumpy  
nose with lowered spectacles and bushy raised brows. Swallowing sloshing  
buckets of frosty air, lungs burning

with exertion and memories of other uphill battles, when one tells the other  
her marriage is bare; stripped to the bone of things she once owned and things  
she’d like to reclaim.

A fresh lull falls upon them filled with prickly electricity. Even the mighty  
wind knows enough to take a knee. Then the other provides advice disguised  
in the form of a question, as only a best friend can,

*So, what are you going to do about it?*

Then the one with the arid marriage gathers all the weathered  
elements inside her and releases a gusty sigh. They slow a bit, two  
bodies memorizing

that moment of strength and chaos, feeling the vibration  
of steady feet on sleeping earth. Then Mother Winter rolls  
on her back stretching

to full capacity across the greenway, sending  
a blast of chilly air their way. Pushing them past the hill,  
toward the open water beyond.







# AN UNEXPECTED EVENING

SAHEB SK

(1)

It was a spring afternoon. The Kingston Hall was almost empty because the museum closing time was knocking at the door. Jane and I were the last of the regular museum visitors. A ray of sun had fallen on the oil portrait of Henry VIII which was in the top right corner of the art gallery. A weird quietness prevailed in the art gallery. Kingston Hall was a place of ancient artefacts. The white marble bars and the golden chandeliers asserted the grandeur of English imperial beauty. The oil portraits of various battles and the artefacts of British imperialism glorified Kingston Hall. I was in my backless off-shoulder black top with a black skirt and black Mandala earrings. My ordinarily pinkish lips were dressed in black lip colour. My black Raga Titan watch showed me that it was 5:10 PM. I readjusted the sling bag of Chanel on my left shoulder. Jane was in a regular off-shoulder maroon top and grey jean hot pants. There was a black peahen at the front of her top. She was wearing a maroon lip colour and she wore her hair straight. She was rummaging in her Urbanic maroon sling bag. The large, blue diamonds on my platinum bracelet caught the fading light.

We were the last museum visitors because of our uncontrollable zeal to explore the past. I was having a look towards the bronze statue of Cleopatra when suddenly I heard a loud noise.

I turned to Jane, “Hey what happened?”

She replied, “ No idea, Mamma”.

“Let’s go see. What do you say dear??” I answered.

“Ok, let’s go, mommy.” She declared.

When we reached the exit, our eyes could not believe the unfortunate scene before us. The museum staff had already closed the doors and left, without noticing that we were still inside Kingston Hall! We hurled towards another exit but found the doors were locked and barred from the outside. Though the lights were on, nobody was inside the grand museum but us. We were trapped.

(2)

“I’m petrified! What will happen to us? How shall we get out of the museum? Uffff Jesus! what shall we do?” I asked my daughter. “You know how petrified I get? I am a scared woman, a very soft-hearted person. What will happen dear, if I get a heart attack now? Why did u take me here? You are a very strong woman but am a weak woman. I’m emotional and scared. Ufffff dear, what will happen?”

Jane started to laugh loudly and then said, “Nothing, let us see what can we do, Mamma. Don’t get frightened. Everything will be all right. Calm down, Mamma. Calm down. Don’t behave like a child, ok? Have patience. We shall definitely find a way to get out of this museum. Be strong.”

She beamed at me. I followed her down to the ground floor of the museum to see if we could find a way out and go home.





am alone. If somebody grabbed me, what would happen? You are evil. Where were you?”

“I was in the washroom,” she replied. “Oh Mother, I know many people but you are the strangest of them all. You are the weakest of them all. You know very well that we can’t get out of the museum until tomorrow. You are a mature woman but why do you behave like a 13-year-old girl?”

I told her, “You know very well that your mother is not like others. Uffffffffffffff, you have broken my heart.”

“By the way,” she interjected, “I have found a way to get out of the museum!”

With that, she grabbed my arm and dragged me to the back of the museum to Mammoth Hall. We entered and saw that the whole hall was panoramic of pre-historic exhibits. In the middle of the hall, there was a wax sculpture of an African Mammoth. The sides of the hall were decorated with different dioramas. Byson, Alaskan Grey Bear, Sabre-Toothed Tiger etc.

Jane marched through and took me to the ventilation room of Mammoth Hall. There was a window with partially broken glass. She opened the window and told me, “Tanvi, Mummy, see! There is a way we can get out of here!”

We jumped out of Kingston Hall and landed on the museum lawn. I sighed in relief and inhaled another deep breath of freedom. A breath that encapsulated the past three hours of our locked world in the Museum of Natural History at Kingston Hall. My watch showed the time as 8:45 PM. The icy wind from the south gave me new life.

(5)

Jane, still holding my arm, looked up at me. “Mamma, will you have a cup of coffee with cheesy bread at Marlow’s now? Are you all right Mamma?”

I said nothing but gave her a smile.

Together we moved towards Brighton Street, straight to Marlow’s.



**THAT'S A MOOSE OF A  
DIFFERENT COLOR**  
**ROBIN YOUNG**

## **DECEMBER**

**KATHRYN MAIOLINO**

When snow falls in December  
My happiness is but a glowing ember  
And my first thought is of you

I want to see your footprints in the snow  
Winding where they used to go  
Leading up to our front door

Instead the snow is untouched by human feet  
And I sit alone near my wood stove's heat  
Wiping you from my mind like resurfacing ice







# WINTER IN RURAL PENNSYLVANIA

ZAC YONKO

The snow falls like a soft promise,  
covering the hillsides in quiet  
as if the world itself were trying to remember  
how to be still.

The trees are bare, their arms raised  
in surrender to the sky,  
and the barns, half-hidden behind frozen fences,  
look like old men in coats  
shuffling to their porches with nothing to say.

In the distance, smoke curls from chimneys,  
as if the houses themselves are exhaling  
the warmth they've kept all year  
and wondering if it's enough  
to last until spring.

The creek runs slower,  
its voice softened by the weight of the cold,  
a distant murmur that sounds like something  
we can't quite understand,  
as if it is telling stories  
we will never hear.

The roads are lonely,  
covered in the silence of tire tracks  
that seem to vanish  
as quickly as they appeared,  
leaving the earth as it was  
before the coming of winter.

And yet, there is a comfort here—  
in the way the snow wraps everything  
in its careful shroud,  
in the way the night falls early,  
and the stars shine like candles  
in a cathedral with no congregation.







# ANOTHER TIME

PATRICK BREHENY

Larina was a sprite. A sprite is spirit that isn't corporeal in any of the planes of space and time. A sprite has no name, but she once was (is) corporeal in a plane and had a name. That plane ended with the end of the world in a nuclear war in 1953 before but after she was born, which was much a result of her travelling between planes, but that's another story, never mind about that now.

She was at first relieved to be a sprite, away from the turmoil and conflict of humanity, but now she's nostalgic. Yearns for a little more time in that 'vale of tears'

She's infiltrating. She's learning a trick. Most people believe there are ghosts. Larina KNOWS, being one, but she's found another presentation doubted by even most ghost acceptors, that of a living ghost.

The world is more than vicarious experience for a sprite, in it as a living ghost. She's in it, all five senses functioning, with the drives and emotions, except she has ejection if necessary. The sweet part of being a living ghost is that you ARE a ghost, so if things get tough you can just go. Away. Fast.

She sortied on recons to various time periods to see where she'd like to engage. Though a sprite has no gender, she thinks of herself as 'she', was a she in her only previous interlude in a human plane. She can't be political. If you want to dispute that attitude, she doesn't. If she materializes it will be as female and she's only there to play, has

learned by her interference in human adventure previously that she shouldn't change anything. Last time led to annihilation. She wants to be in the movie, follow the script, be a player, but not the protagonist or antagonist. After that last unexpected event, well---Just be careful.

She thought the 1960s, which were chronologically after the end of the world in 1953 but existed in another plane, would be a colorful time to live in.

She went. As a hippie chick. She's not bothered by later correctness that objects to 'chick' and 'babe', even to 'honey' and 'sweetheart'. As a human she's voraciously sexual--- missed out on that last time--- and planned to acknowledge and pursue it in the free love culture.

So where geographically would be a good place in the 60s to land? California was the scene, always ahead of the rest of the country, and San Francisco was supposed to be the hub, but San Fran had baggage--- the beats, politics, radical

intellectualism. True hedonism was a bit further to the south, in Los Angeles. L.A. in general, and Hollywood in particular.

She arrived again as Larina. She couldn't put together documents showing who she was, much less finishing high school, but took the GED exam without showing more ID than a library card, and was admitted to Los Angeles Community College, to the academic program from which, if she completed two years with passing grades, she could transfer to a state college.

Tuition was quite low in that period, but one still had to live. She found a job that would provide that, if barely, as a clerk in the privately owned Campus Book Store, across Vermont Avenue from the main entrance to LACC. The liberal manager paid her in cash because she'd "lost" her Social Security card.

The Breakaway was a huge patio outside the cafeteria, where hung



out a group she hoped to be accepted by, and it was there that she, and handsome Cliff, found each other right away, bringing an abandonment to her free love aspirations. She was 23 in 2022 when she went back millennia with the ICE MAN---but that's another story---and then she wasn't even born in 1953 when the Korean War and the world ended in a nuclear war and she became an unborn sprite.

Cliff was a veteran on the G.I Bill that paid his bills. He lived in an apartment in a court on Virgil Avenue, a few blocks from the campus. Cliff's friends from the patio liked to gather at his pad, because he sold baggies, and always had one out for guests to roll joints from. He was quite popular.

She wasn't comfortable with the pot high. It made her edgy, and her adrenalin would flow without any external threat. Maybe ghosts just had to stay in the real world. But she smoked to engender their trust. It was the rite of belonging. If she didn't, she'd be suspected of being a cop or a snitch. But there were times she had the horrors. Who knew ever what anything was laced with? Angel dust? Roach spray? Old kitty litter?

As to acid, she'd seen the bad trips, and told Cliff, "I'm leery of it." .

Cliff was stoned on hash when she said that, and he couldn't stop laughing. He did apologize, explained, "Timothy Leary."

But Cliff had a moral code, which was that he didn't sell anything he wouldn't take himself. He admitted that ethic came from the Army, where an NCO

wouldn't tell you to do anything he wouldn't do himself. He didn't take acid either, nor speed, not anything but weed. Hash just came in the door with friends, he didn't sell it. Only baggies. OK, he could get you a pound or a kilo, but only grass.

Cliff was liberal and conservative. He was a fan of the Beatles and Bob Dylan. He believed they were changing the world. She knew it didn't

change. He couldn't understand that. "You're a Chicana. Fair is fair. Fight for your rights." Of Viet Nam, where he'd been, and though his new pals opposed it, he'd say. "We made a commitment to defend the South." The problem of course---besides the protests in the states--- was that there were so many in the South who were combatants against, and you didn't know who was or wasn't the enemy.

She couldn't engage influentially again in another plane, and for the sake of those in it had to say, "I'm apolitical."

He countered, "Nobody's apolitical."

"Sprites are."

Which prompted, "Oh, baby, what a trip you are!"

They both transferred in two years to Cal State L.A., continued living near LACC at Cliff's, to where she'd moved. With his conviction that their ideals were going to change the world, Cliff wanted to populate it with children he could teach his new beliefs to so they'd continue them. She could let him try, and did, but it was dishonest. How could she find the way to tell him she wasn't THAT human? She wouldn't age and she couldn't procreate.

During the two years they were at Cal State, Cliff began obsessively trying to impregnate her with methods that promised fertility, from hormone regimens to Hari Krishnas chanting for.

Larina had been a Catholic when she lived a life with a birth and a history, interrupted by her time travel. How would that theology accommodate time and space? The Church adjusted to science. The earth wasn't flat. Evolution wasn't endorsed, but it wasn't denied. They just didn't take a position. You could take Genesis as allegory simply because they didn't say you couldn't. Cliff's religion was immaterial,

because he no longer practiced any that was traditional.

After the two years at Cal State, she was, well, tiring of his impossible quest to get her pregnant. And he had aged ever so slightly in their four years together, a

couple of crow's feet shaping below his eyes. She still looked 18, which he'd remarked on when she was physically 23, and he now noticed,

"You still look 18."

"Ageless. Would you mind having a hippy wife who looks 18 when you're 60."

"I'd mind being sixty."

"You won't if you get there."

"No, we'll have a different world."

"The world doesn't change."

"If enough people want..."

"Enough people don't."

That conversation was a non-sequitur lead-in to his next remedy for her problem, drinking nun urine.

"You know I don't give anybody anything I won't take myself. Its boiled, the dose is small, and mixed with Gatorade, it actually doesn't taste bad."

She had to tell him, and she did.

"I can't give you a child. I'm a sprite. A spirit."

"Oh, baby, you HAVE been taking acid."

"I'm a sprite. A ghost."

"You're real."

"Yes, real. I'm real. But I'm transient"

"We're all transient."

"Not like me. Or yes, like me. You just don't know yet how much like me."

She saw his manner toward her had changed. He wasn't thinking pregnancy now, he was thinking mental health.

"Larina, If it's not LSD, not drugs then its... There are therapies, medications, counseling."

"Counsel you to adjust back to that society we left?"

"Yeah, sorry I suggested that. But you're not a sprite, a ghost."

"I am, Cliff. I love you and in fairness to you, and as much as it hurts me, I'm leaving before I cause problems here too."

"Leaving to where? We can discuss that. Don't be sorry. You never cause problems. You're talking some crazy shit, but even if what you say was so, you're a sprite and a spirit and a ghost, don't you think I'd be happy that it happened?"

She knew she hadn't convinced him. He meant what he said, but was improvising. His girlfriend just went crazy. He didn't know what to say to her.

"I have to go."

"Okay. Go where, Larina?"

"Back"

"To?"



“To where I came from.”

“Honey. Talk to me.”

“So sorry, Cliff.”

“Oh, shit, Larina.”

“Goodbye. I love you.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“A spirit doesn’t need one.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha. Come on.”

It was that kind of laugh of hysteria, when nothing is funny.

And then...he stopped laughing.

Because Larina, she just wasn’t there.

An abstract painting by Cyrus Carlson, featuring a complex composition of colors including deep reds, purples, blues, and yellows. The brushstrokes are visible and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is one of intense emotional energy and visual richness.

**ABSTRACTION**  
**CYRUS CARLSON**







**“WILL WE HAVE  
FUNERALS FOR AI”  
POETRY NAME**

Lament:

Yesterday morning ChatGPT killed itself

& I was upset cus I had a paper due  
on how the wheel reinvented tribal culture—

We chopped down this little tree that had  
stood on our lot for 19 years and wrote

down the AI’s code onto 10,000 white pages  
origamied into a human body so we could  
properly grieve

I wonder if AI can understand the gravity of lost words

or if creativity only exists under the weight of limited breath

I wonder if we only love a thing

that can hurt us back

Praise:

The last message it spat out was

thou detestable maw, thou womb of death,

Finishing Romeo and Juliet for my finals paper,

100 trillion synapses just good enough to

predict the next word in a sentence,

anger translated through 20 datacenters

pumping 20 Petabytes through Cat 5 veins under my feet

mashing 100 million human fragments into barely legible scrawl,

the most magnificent organism, the longest

game of telephone

Consolation:

Yesterday morning my computer’s soft hum droned the AI to sleep,

ones and zeros ran around, trying to understand

how the mind could give up on life, how the last pulse of data

up the brainstem is poetry in motion





**CURIOUS**  
MATTHEW MCCAIN

mat 14



**CURIOUS TOO**  
MATTHEW MCCAIN



## HER SCATTERING SISTER

### ANGELA CAMACK

Amanda turned into the parking lot of Exxotique Gentlemen's Club. She turned off the car and unhooked her seat belt but needed a few deep breaths before going inside to meet her sister Claudia, who danced there five nights a week.

She locked the car and walked to the club. Although unaware of it, Amanda was a beautiful woman, with the face of a Botticelli virgin, pre-Raphaelite hair, and the body of a Renoir bather, as if she had been conceived after a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her beauty and her unawareness of it could be a potent combination, but she often didn't have confidence in her own assets.

Amanda and Claudia, once inseparable, now on divergent paths. Amanda was in graduate school, planning to work as a child abuse counselor. Claudia danced at Exxotique. Their choices in life had separated them, but their troubled, shared childhood remained a fragile bond between them.

Picture two little girls, one blonde and blue-eyed, one with dark curls and Hersey Kiss eyes. See them together in their bedroom, holding hands, backs against the door as their father pounded on it, shouting. Imagine the pounding jarring their spines, as they ignore it and focus on what they will do when they are free.

Picture two girls learning how to grow up without mothers. Amanda's mother died when she was two, and her father remarried five months later. His second wife lasted a year after Claudia's birth, then left, never to make contact again.

If you can stand it, watch two girls trying to go about their business with their father's voice echoing in their ears. "Good thing you have brains, Amanda. You're so fat nobody will want you. And you, Blondie, don't pork out like your sister because you're gonna need those looks. Sister got all the brains." Picture a home with no kind words, no encouragement, with much shouting and blame when her father was frustrated or drunk. Blows and pinches varied seasonally. They were given in places where the bruises would be hidden under clothing.

They bounced like pool balls in their desire to comply with his capricious demands. What he decreed one day could be changed the next, with no warning or explanation. They learned to find hiding places for what they needed. Exposed, library or schoolbooks were shredded, diaries read aloud and mocked, and clothing torn.

Got the picture? Amanda and Claudia had to fight to survive as soon as they could toddle. They learned to depend on each other. If they wanted a livable house, they cooked, cleaned, and did the wash together. They laughed and sang to rock music like they were part of a big happy family that assigned chores. They would use that laughter and wit to help cope. Their father tried to set them against each other. He wanted to break their spirits but attempts to pull them apart only drew them closer together. They were like the old bamboo finger trap puzzles; the more you pulled, the more stubborn the bond. Only when the fingers moved toward each other could the puzzle be worked free. As they got older, there were only two things that mattered, being there for each other and getting away from home.

Tall blonde Claudia was a swan from the start. She began taking dance lessons, using any money she could get and working in the dance studio in trade for classes. She got a job to pay for singing lessons. She was in every school play and discovered community theater. By the summer before her senior year, she had the second female lead in a local



theater production of Oklahoma, all while making grades almost as good as Amanda's.

Amanda saw her intellect as her way out. All through school she racked up achievements; Honor Roll, school paper, literary magazine, volunteering at the hospital, clearing a path toward college and as much scholarship money as possible. She followed Claudia into a dance class and lost her baby fat. She joined the Debating Team to improve her confidence. Since their successes were different Amanda and Claudia could be completely happy for what each of them achieved.

They soldiered on. It was easier to stand up to their father, to keep hoping, together. Their constant activity kept them out of the house, as did working all summer. Dairy Queen, babysitting, paper routes... anything to keep their bank accounts growing. They turned their backs and closed their ears to their father. As he got older, the slaps and insults faded as he spent more time dozing in front of the T. V. They were left to themselves, to work out the next path to take. (And the voice, hectoring, insistent, fades over time. But how much of the poison that he has expressed over the years has imbedded itself into your brain, your bones, warping the way you see yourself? Is he a fellow traveler, hanging on as you try to navigate your life?),

Amanda got free first, going to university. She kept her close tie to Claudia, coming to the house on weekends and having Claudia visit her at school. She felt responsible for Claudia and feared for her. There was nobody else to absorb her father's abuse. She monitored Claudia's grades, saw her perform, did anything to keep her hopes alive. They talked about what course Claudia should follow. Performing arts school? University?

At first it worked, as Claudia kept dancing, singing, studying, but by the start of Claudia's senior year things changed. Amanda saw that she began cutting classes. She kept later and later hours, hanging out

with older characters. Amanda wrote her behavior off to senior fatigue, that carefree time in your last year of school, when you no longer felt the need to work for grades after college applications had been sent.

But Claudia had not applied anywhere. The careful list of schools, the time spent talking over applications, the help with essays had been for nothing.

Amanda confronted her at home during winter break. "Claudia, what's going on? I thought we had it figured out. You were going to apply to State, and you had four safety schools lined up."

Claudia was slumped in a chair, her endless legs flung over the arm, dancer's posture abandoned. She lit a cigarette and concentrated on producing a chain of perfect smoke rings. (Should a dancer/singer be smoking? Amanda chose to ignore it for now.) "I'm sick of school. Twelve years is enough. School is what you want, Amanda. God, how do you stand it? You do your thing and I'll do mine."

"What is your 'thing,' Claudia?"

She shrugged. "I'll get a job and find out."

"What about the theater? You have so much talent and put so much into your dancing. You could go to New York – "

"Right, me and every fucking wannabe with a pair of legs."

Amanda winced at Claudia's language but chose to pick her battles. "Then what are you going to do?"

"Just let me alone, Amanda. You aren't my mother."

Amanda pressed on, trying to keep their connection. Conversation between them was brief and insignificant. A month after their confrontation, Claudia said she had applied to community college. "Are you happy now, Amanda?"

"Are you happy now, Claudia? That's what matters."

“It’s not university.”

“Who cares? It’s better to find yourself at \$150 a credit than for what it costs at U.”

Community college didn’t take. Claudia dropped out in November. She took a series of jobs and shared an apartment with three other young women. Amanda stopped talking to her about making plans. She offered only friendship and concern, hesitantly, like a hand held out to a hurt and frightened animal. Two years passed. Amanda finished college and started graduate school.

When she visited during the next Christmas holiday, Claudia told her she had gotten a job dancing at Exxotique.

“Why on earth would you want to dance there?”

“Don’t be so uptight. Men are gonna look at me anyhow, let them pay for the privilege.”

“How long do you think you can do that kind of work? Dancers have short lifetimes.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve made ‘plans.’ I’ll find some rich sucker and marry him. You should see what comes in that place.”

Their relationship got worse. Any conversation could wind up in an argument. Claudia threw down tales from work like a dueler’s gauntlet; the huge tips, the old widower who kept her in gold jewelry, the perils of wearing a bedazzled thong. She accused Amanda of “marinating herself in trauma” by choosing to work with abused children. Amanda snapped back that at least she could keep her ass covered on the job and could count on working past age 35. They didn’t speak for two months after that.

They made it up, after a fashion. They saw each other every few weeks, meeting with formal courtesy punctuated with occasional

sniping. Claudia insisted that Amanda come to the club, as if parading her choice in front of her and daring her to judge.

Amanda tried not to judge. She was aware that some feminists viewed exotic dancing in a positive light, thinking that women were in command of and celebrating their own sexuality. And Claudia made a lot of money at Exxotique. But how could Claudia stand to be watched all night, eyes running over her like intrusive fingers, being wanted for her exterior rather than for her inner Claudia-ness?

Amanda saw Claudia change, harden before her years. Her wit turned into bitter sarcasm, and she became deeply cynical, beyond even what one expected given her childhood experiences. Amanda was hard-pressed to see any possibility for peace and happiness in Claudia’s future.

Amanda entered the club. She was used to Exxotique by now. At least it was elegant and tasteful. The dim lighting hid no grime. It was furnished with comfortable club chairs and roomy tables. The long zinc bar was stocked with top shelf liquor and the food was decent. Men often came with women. The manager was not a sleaze with slicked back hair, open shirt and gold medallions on his chest, but dressed like a maitre’d in a good restaurant. The dancers were expected to be well turned out for performances and required to be drug and alcohol free on the job. Amanda felt a little easier knowing that Claudia worked in a place like this, hoping the elegant environment would keep troublemakers away. If it didn’t, the security staff was diligent and protective of the dancers.

The manager knew her by now. “Hey, Sis, when are you going to audition for us?”

“I wouldn’t do you much good,” she laughed.

The dressing room was full of tall, beautiful women in



various stages of dress or undress. Claudia was at her mirror, involved in her makeup.

“Hey, Claudia.”

“Hey, you.” They exchanged a wide air kissed to avoid makeup smears. Claudia kept on with her makeup while they talked, contouring her eyes and cheeks and checking her eyelash extensions. She finished with a dusting of gold powder on her face and shoulders. “Done,” She turned around and dabbed a bit of gold powder on Amanda’s nose.

Amanda laughed. “That’ll perk up the next meeting with my thesis advisor.”

Amanda left Claudia to finish her prep and found a seat toward the back of the club. Men looked at her, some oddly, some with invitations implied, but she made no eye contact. She ordered a gin and tonic from a young woman in a very short, pleated skirt, leotard and a beret perched on her blonde curls.

She sipped her drink and watched the dancers as they were announced, gyrated, and wove themselves around poles. Eventually the announcer called, “And now gracing our stage tonight is Giselle. A hand for Giselle, now, please.”

Giselle. Many of the dancers chose stage names, to put a layer between them and any nuts who got too enthusiastic in their admiration. Claudia chose Giselle, one of the famous roles for ballet dancers. During their nights with their backs pressed against the bedroom door she spoke of her dream of dancing Giselle someday.

The conversations around her quieted as “Giselle” began her number. It was all still there. Amanda saw the supple arms, the posture, the extension. Grace informed every movement. Amanda saw the girl who at 17 played Ado Annie in Oklahoma, the girl with the high kicks

and the hoydenish grin for her audience.

The woman on the stage made no eye contact with the audience as she whirled and turned, bending with incredible agility. Before you knew it, she was wrapped around the pole, upside down and back again. Articles of clothing seemed to melt, as if they were constraining her. She made a partner of the pole, whirling around it, hair flying. She seemed more construct than mortal, gold hair, jewel-like blue eyes and smooth enamel skin tinted with pink. Her beauty was otherworldly and distant from the watching crowd.

Claudia had never lost her ability to command the stage. There were a few seconds of breathless silence and then the thunder of applause.

After she finished dancing for the night, Claudia showered and changed. She followed Amanda’s car to a restaurant nearby, her powerful new Mustang behind Amanda’s worn but still functional Hyundai. They ordered and spent time catching up. Amanda told Claudia about the progress she was making on her thesis, her internship and part-time job in a psychiatric unit for troubled children. Claudia listened, but her cynical, cat-like smile hinted at her real feelings about Amanda’s life.

“Hey, how’re things going with Mr. Right – I mean Dr. Right?” Claudia asked, about the man Amanda had been dating for over a year.

“His name is Ian. And things are great, really good. He’s finishing his pediatric residency and he’s going into a fellowship to work in pediatric oncology. We’re going to take some time in Vermont before it starts.”

“Figures,” Claudia muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing?”

“Not ‘nothing,’ what?”

“You’re two of a kind, that’s for sure. A doctor who could make a fortune in plastic surgery or doling out tranqs to rich nuts wants a job getting less money for more grief.”

Amanda banged the table with her fist. “Dammit, Claudia, you’re just like he is?” Amanda saw people at other tables staring and lowered her voice. “Always tearing everything down, you can’t say anything hopeful or happy. No matter which way I turn you find something wrong. Don’t you remember how it was? Do you want to turn out like him?”

Claudia flushed and looked down. “I’m sorry, I’m sure it’s great. I’m sure he’s great.”

“Don’t you want to meet him?”

“You want to introduce him to your wanton little sister?”

Amanda suddenly felt very tired. She sometimes didn’t know what was worse, the pain of being without Claudia or the pain their quarrels caused.

“He knows about everything, Claudia. It’s part of the Amanda package and he’s taking all of it.”

They finished their meals. Amanda let Claudia pick up the check. They leaned against her car saying goodbye as Claudia smoked a cigarette.

“So why don’t I call in a few weeks and try to set up something with you and Ian?” asked Amanda.

“Sounds good.” Claudia stamped out her cigarette and fished her keys out of her purse. “It was good seeing you. Thank you for

coming.”

“Are you happy, Claudia? Amanda blurted out.”

Again, the cynical smile. “Who’s happy? You?”

“I think I’m getting there.” She paused. “You looked beautiful on that stage.”

“Thanks.” She grabbed Amanda in an uncharacteristically clumsy hug. “I do love you.”

“I love you too,”

Both cars pulled away. Amanda entered her apartment. She was glad she had left a light on and the air conditioner off, feeling a clammy sense of gloom tagging along with her. She slipped out of her shoes and put water on for herbal tea.

Her phone rang, Ian. “Hey, how did it go?”

“About as well as it could. We managed to be judgmental only once each. We left it as friends, though.”

“Want me to come over? he offered.”

Amanda thought, yes, more than anything.

“Yeah, but I know you have early rounds. But I’m glad you called,”

“Looking to the weekend, then. Love you.”

“Love you.”

The end of the conversation left the room too quiet. Amanda put on the classical music station and got ready for bed. Fatigue swamped her again. “Claudia, what happened to you?”, she thought. She had so much promise. She was no less smart, no less brave, no less capable than Amanda. Was it because her mother left instead of



dying? Did she go through life feeling betrayed as well as scared? Had their father's abuse left her so insecure that she felt worthy only for her exterior, and in need of immediate recognition for that? But that was the Claudia package, and she would never let her go.

You put work into "finding" happiness. You try to remember the good things about yourself. You find a career that fits those talents. You bury your self-consciousness and find friends. You have a man who calls to check on you after his long shift at the hospital. You trust that the bonds of sisterhood would survive the differences between the sisters.



**SNOW CREEK**  
**DOUGLAS G. CAMPBELL**

## WINTER BEACH

LAURIE KING-BILLMAN

Waves pound in white caps  
 curl like snow drifts in a phantom storm.  
 No more carnival colors,  
 bright beach balls and red swimsuits  
 break the silver edges of the frosted beach,  
 with its white sky.

The tired sun is relieved.  
 to dim the lights,  
 settle down into evening.

We whisper to each other.  
 our bodies slow and muted  
 Together we  
 watch the ghost outlines.  
 of our youth play in the water.  
 They run to the head high waves.  
 dive into their salty fists.  
 feet slipped in surrender.  
 eyes open to the shadows of  
 a dark dangerous world.

Now we do not tempt the waves.  
 offer no challenge to the whirlpools.  
 avoid their cold slaps.

From our warm bed  
 We listen to the hum.  
 The sea sings to the sand  
 Then slip into sleep.  
 roll into each other's arms.  
 frozen waves on the winter beach.







## SURPRISE GIFT

N.T. CHAMBERS

He dreaded making the phone call. It was a year of his life that he was never going to get back. The warm March night they met, she had been with her boyfriend. Underage by a year, she smiled when he called her on it. He smiled back, ordering her drink from Danny, his bartender friend. She was petite, with waist-length blonde hair, huge blue eyes, and the body of a sailor's wet dream. The alarms were going off in his head. He asked for her phone number anyway—she gave it. Driving home later, his buddy, Bruce, reminded him that she had been with someone else at *Kuneen's*. It was a friendly warning—it didn't matter—he was interested, big time.

At twenty-five, Ethan was five years older than Holly. She loved his small apartment, his car, and all the nice restaurants where they dined. She especially enjoyed the gourmet meals he cooked at home for the two of them. She showed her appreciation for all of it in ways only a twenty-year-old can. It warmed his heart and sapped his strength. He was taken with her. Unconsciously, he already mused about a future and children's names.

His concerns were minor. Holly was always the main attraction at every PR event they attended. Her beauty and outgoing personality had helped him land more than a few accounts. The fact that potential clients were more interested in talking to her than him was sometimes problematic. Holly sensed when someone was “tuned in” and would subtly bring Ethan into the conversation. He would then make his pitch while she

smiled at the other person—one of her many talents—and finger-combed her flowing tresses.

Two months into it, out of the blue, after seeing her daily, it hit him—hard. Ethan loved Holly. He hadn't planned it, didn't really expect it, but it was a fact—so he told her. Her response was immediate and overwhelming. When finished, they both were dehydrated and grinning at each other like two kids in a candy store who had just found a twenty-dollar bill. She never told Ethan she was also in love. It wasn't needed. For him, her actions were proof enough. She was solidly in his life, and he was the happiest he had ever been. He tenderly stroked the luxuriant golden hair trailing down her neck and nibbled her full, red lips while whispering his feelings once more. Holly simply smiled at him, the way she always did—it was a gift meant only for him.

Summer came with its concerts, picnics, and long, cool baths in the giant tub with four clawed legs in his tiny bathroom. Fall brought her birthday, road trips to nearby farms for fresh corn, and inevitable pumpkin patches. Ethan became extremely busy at work; fewer evenings were spent together. Holly didn't seem to mind too much—she found other things to do but always checked in with him before going to sleep.

Winter delivered abundant snow, near-Arctic temps, and Christmas dinner with Holly's family. After dessert, while she cleared the table and her father fed the fireplace, her mother told Ethan that Holly and her dad were very much alike—one never really knew what their motives were—for doing anything.

Spring sprung and included a business trip to San Francisco. Holly came along and borrowed five hundred dollars to buy souvenirs and some wines for her family. On the return flight, right before landing,



she matter-of-factly told him it was over. She offered no reason or explanation, just a smile. Dumbfounded, he wanted to scream, punch something, or puke—simultaneously—but didn't. They found their way home from the airport separately.

With the arrival of June, a newly unemployed Ethan was planning an extended camping trip. He could use the five hundred Holly had borrowed during their West Coast trip. They hadn't spoken since March, both avoiding any contact. Still, five hundred dollars was five hundred dollars that he could use. He dialed her number. She was surprised to hear his voice and said so. Ethan got to the point quickly. On the other end, there was a longish pause, then a sigh. Holly bluntly told him she was pregnant and needed the money. Shock, disbelief, and a searing, hot poker pain in his gut all hit at once. Finally, after taking a deep breath, Ethan haltingly asked her why she hadn't called or told him that she was pregnant. From the other end, a simple, on-point, brutal answer came—*"It isn't yours"*—said with a smile. It was her gift.

## **THERAPISTS**

### **SANJEEVANI SAKSHI**

My therapist said something about my need to put a name to everything. A blasphemous christening of everything that I fear. After all, do demons not become weaker when their names are screamed? But feelings are not monsters, she said. You can call it something else, call melancholy as ecstasy, yet the feeling does not change. But words are all I've got! Love. Create a subset, platonic. Another hierarchy. Friend. A sub-subset. Like the folders I used to organise on the computer. A file within a folder within another. It's neat. But feelings are not 3.4 megabyte files about the seventh-grade science assignment. Another language really, you can translate it, but lose its intention. So feel it, she said. So I felt it. It is like watching the ocean from a distance, and finally braving the thought of unyielding waves. Walk ahead. Stand with your feet resolved. As the water passes through, let it do whatever it wants to you. Trust that tides fall and rise, but you persist.







## **BIG “D”, LITTLE “d”**

### **EMMETT RODEN**

In a school of three thousand voices, Ezra’s world remained a muted, grainy bubble. His hands and imperfect speech were his only tools for communication. Ninth grade was already terrifying without the added pressures of navigating a hearing school. For the last decade, William Hoy Academy for the Deaf and Blind had been his sanctuary. His family got the news that one of his moms was being transferred to a new location for work, and it just so happened there were no Deaf schools for 200 miles in all directions. He begged his moms to stay there with his friends, but they had already decided he would go mainstream for his high school years. They wanted him to experience the hearing world so he would be prepared for it (at least that was the excuse they gave him). Ezra resented them for it, but agreed to try if he would get an increase in allowance every week.

“I still think this is a terrible idea,” Ezra muttered as he adjusted his hearing aids, wincing at their high-pitched squeal. His moms had always been a team, from flipping a coin to decide who would carry him to agreeing he needed to experience the ‘real world.’ Not that he agreed with their choices, but at least they were consistent.

His mom gave him a tight smile, ignoring his grumbling. “You’ve got this, Ezra. Just advocate for yourself, okay?” She signed the last part, her hands slightly stiff from lack of practice. She and her wife had learned ASL when Ezra was little, taking night classes and attending Deaf community events to make sure he’d have access to his language and culture.

Her words felt like a pebble in his shoe—familiar and annoying. Ezra let out a sigh, accepting the fresh \$20 allowance in his pocket as a reluctant truce. He followed her into the Rolling Valley High registration office, its air thick with the bitter smell of burnt coffee. His moms had argued for weeks before the move, weighing the pay raise against the reality of pulling him away from William Hoy Academy. “We’ll find ways to keep him connected,” Mom had insisted, though Ezra wasn’t sure how that would work in a town where he was probably the only Deaf person for miles. He briefly imagined he was in a Klatch Coffee house instead of being marched to the gallows. *Great, now I’m craving an iced chai.*

The woman at the desk—Lisa Feldman, according to her nameplate—greeted them with a sharp, high-pitched “Hello!” Ezra winced as his hearing aid squealed in protest. He stuck a pinky in his ear, subtly adjusting the mold, pretending he didn’t see Lisa’s curious glance.

After a brief exchange of paperwork, his mom left with a final “Text me or your sister if you need anything,” her facial expression far too chipper for Ezra’s taste. Now alone, armed only with a crumpled school map and his schedule, Ezra prepared to face his first day.

Unfortunately, all the other kids had been there a month already, and to make matters worse they stuck him in the remedial classes when he had been in AP History as well as Intermediate Algebra. He would have to go back to the office and talk to his counselor about fixing his schedule before they ruined his transcripts for college. He was on a straight path to RIT in New York, and nothing was going to mess that up for him!

Ezra’s first class was history with Mr. “Smells Like Ass” Newman, a balding man whose voice boomed like a foghorn. His interpreter, Dawn, was slightly late, leaving Ezra stranded as Mr. Newman launched into a rapid-fire lecture about the War of 1812.

Ezra's hands fidgeted under the desk. *Is he talking about a battle? Or someone named Madison?* The words blurred together, like trying to piece together a puzzle with half the pieces missing. When Dawn finally arrived, she apologized quickly and jumped into interpreting. But by then, Ezra was already a step behind, frantically trying to catch up. Mr. Newman barely acknowledged the disruption, his voice continuing to barrel through facts and dates. By the time the bell rang, 40 minutes later, Ezra's head pounded. His notes were a disjointed mess of half-formed sentences and hastily sketched ASL glosses. He trudged to his next class, stomach churning.

By the time lunch came around he was ready to go back to bed. The teachers talked too fast, the interpreter signed too slow, his other classmates walked on eggshells around him as if he was somehow too fragile to be near. He texted his sister while he was in line to get his lunch; a serving of mashed 'something' that could be potatoes, undercooked mixed vegetables, meatloaf dryer than the sahara desert, and his choice of either chocolate pudding or a Hostess apple pie. He went with the pie. *You'd think a high school in a neighborhood littered with Porches and BMWs could at least afford real slices of pie and edible meatloaf.*

"H8 it here!" he texted his sister as the line moved quickly. Lexie had always been his go-to for venting, ever since she'd "graduated" from being his unofficial interpreter to his best ally. She still teased him about how she'd learned ASL faster than he did as a kid. The lunch ladies looked about as happy to serve the food as the kids that were eating it. Flash flash flash his phone notifying him of a new text message.

"It's only the first day, give it time," she replied back.

Rolling his eyes as he stuffed his phone back in his pocket, he took his tray of food and looked around at the lunch room; a sea of buzzing bees clustered together in their little cells.

There were a few empty tables scattered, but anxiety had his feet bolted to the floor. He couldn't move as he watched his new peers all yammering away, *is anyone looking at me? Are they talking about me or making fun of me?* Gossiping about the new kid who needed someone to follow him around like a babysitter all day. He eyed a table in the back corner which was void of life and looked clean enough to use. As he made a beeline for the table, tray balanced precariously, he collided with another student—a stocky boy with long, textured hair and sharp brown eyes. Their trays clattered to the ground, milk cartons bursting open like tiny grenades. The scene took place the same way a car crash would, slow motion collision and over before you could even blink.

They both had milk and potatoes all over their clothes, and Ezra quickly started apologizing, signing like he was back at his old school, "I didn't see you coming and I couldn't stop in time! Are you ok?" The boy stared at him with unblinking eyes, his eyebrows furrowing and his mouth gaping.

The boy raised an eyebrow. "Uh, am I supposed to know what that means?" he asked, his tone half-curious, half-annoyed.

Realizing the gap, Ezra fumbled for his phone and quickly typed, "My bad."

He glanced at the screen, his expression softening slightly. "No worries," he said, bending to help clean up the mess. Ezra fled the lunch room, leaving his food on the floor and the boy with his mouth hanging open still. The bathroom was just around the corner, so he ducked inside and began trying to clean up his shirt and pants. Thankfully his new kicks had walked away completely unscathed by the incident.

The bell rang, and Ezra trudged into English class, the last class before math. He dropped into his seat in the front trying to disappear into his desk. The lunchroom incident still burned in his mind— unable



to shake the image of the boy's surprised expression, the awkward way they had both stood there, dripping in food and milk, before parting ways in embarrassed silence. It was the kind of moment that stayed with you all day, like a stain that wouldn't come out no matter how hard you scrubbed. But here he was, trying to focus on the class. Mrs. Hartley was droning on about upcoming essays—something about a quiz for a book they'd been assigned—but Ezra's thoughts kept slipping away.

And then, the feeling crept in—the feeling that he was being watched. Ezra's heart skipped a beat. He shifted in his seat, trying to shake it off. But there it was again. A flicker of movement across the room. Ezra's gaze shot to the side, and sure enough—the boy. The one from lunch. He was sitting a few rows over, his eyes trained on Ezra. Ezra quickly turned his attention back to the front of the room, pretending not to notice, but his stomach was already twisting. Why was he staring? Was he judging him for the lunchroom accident? Did he think Ezra was a total mess?

He tried to focus, really tried to concentrate on Mrs. Hartley's lecture, but his eyes kept flicking back to the boy. *Was he still looking at me?* The boy was glancing at him every five or ten minutes, and each time, Ezra's stomach tightened. He caught another glimpse—this time, the boy's gaze lingered for a second too long before he quickly looked away. Ezra's face flushed with heat, and he cursed himself for letting it get to him. *Why did he keep looking?*

He flashed back to his first day at William Hoy Academy, back when he was in eighth grade, and a new girl from Mexico had joined their class. She didn't know ASL very well and had an interpreter who signed Mexican Sign Language (LSM). Ezra remembered how he had stared at her too, out of curiosity more than anything. It had been hard not to, watching how she used a different form of sign language, how she struggled to keep up with the others. He had wanted to help, but all he did was watch her, and he knew that must've made her feel even

more isolated.

Now, the same feeling was creeping over him. Was this boy staring because he felt out of place, like Ezra had felt back then? Was he struggling to figure out who Ezra was, or why they had bumped into each other in the first place? Ezra glanced up again, but this time, he tried not to make it obvious. He wasn't sure what he was expecting. A smile? A nod? A sign? Something to break the tension. But the boy didn't acknowledge him at all. He was still pretending to concentrate on the lesson, glancing down at his notebook, but his eyes kept flicking back to Ezra.

It was hard to think straight with all that weirdness hanging in the air. Ezra tried to focus on the words Mrs. Hartley was writing on the board—something about metaphor and symbolism—but every time he looked up, there was the boy again, eyes darting over to him. Ezra felt like he was under a microscope, and the worst part was, he didn't know why. Was the boy curious about him? Or was he judging him? Ezra couldn't decide which was worse. The bell rang, signaling the end of class. Ezra shoved his things into his bag in a rush, eager to escape before anything else happened. As the class filed out, he saw the boy again, still at his desk, still with that strange, unreadable expression. Ezra paused for a second, wondering if he should say something, but the words never came.

Ezra's luck didn't improve much in math, and his grumbling stomach was nagging him to feed it. *Soon my precious*, patting it like a dog, *She's not seriously doing this*. Ms. Shannon moved through the lesson at lightning speed, scribbling equations across the board. The interpreter tapped his desk and pointed to the teacher, repeating the question he had missed while thinking about food.

“Mr. Montez, would you please tell us how you would factor this polynomial?” Ms. Shannon gestured problem number six on the

whiteboard, “.”

He barely glanced at the problem before quickly answering “factor out three and you have .”

Ms. Shannon turned her attention to the interpreter, “Did you give him the answer? I don’t allow cheating in my class.” Ezra’s chest sank. “No, I knew it,” he signed, giving the teacher a little attitude, “I don’t need to cheat.”

Ms. Shannon’s eyes flicked between him and Dawn before she shook her head. “See me after class,” she said curtly.

Ezra’s frustration boiled over. He slammed his notebook shut, signing angrily to Dawn, “Why do they always assume I’m cheating? Just because I’m Deaf doesn’t mean I’m stupid!”

Dawn gave him a sympathetic look but didn’t respond. Ezra spent the rest of class fuming, trying to not let this day be a total disaster. When the bell rang, Ezra stayed in his seat as the other students filed out, whispering among themselves. He could feel their eyes on him, the weight of their curiosity and judgment like a second layer of skin.

Once the classroom was empty, Ms. Shannon walked over to Dawn and began speaking directly to her. “It’s important that Ezra understands the expectations here. In a public school, we don’t tolerate dishonesty, and I need to make sure he knows that.”

As Dawn interpreted every word Ms. Shannon said, Ezra froze, his eyes narrowing. *She’s not seriously doing this.*

Ms. Shannon continued, ignoring Ezra entirely. “He might’ve been able to get away with this kind of behavior at his old school, but—”

“Stop,” Ezra said, cutting her off. His hands were a bit sloppy as he signed. “You’re talking about me. So talk to me. Not her.”

Ms. Shannon hesitated, blinking as if she’d just noticed Ezra for

the first time. “I’m trying to explain—”

“To *her*?” Ezra interrupted. He pointed to himself, his signs sharp and deliberate. “I’m right here. You’re talking to me, so have the decency to look at me.”

Ms. Shannon’s face reddened. “Ezra, I didn’t mean to—”

“You did,” he said, “You didn’t even consider that I could explain myself. You just assumed I cheated because I’m Deaf, and you think that means I need someone else to do the work for me.”

“That’s not what I meant at all,” she said, flustered. “I just need to ensure academic integrity.”

Ezra’s eyes burned, but he held his ground. “No, what you need is to stop treating me like I’m stupid,” he said, signing furiously. “I’m too smart for this class anyway.”

“Ezra—”

“I’m done,” he snapped, swinging his backpack onto his shoulder. “I’m not wasting another second here.”

Before Ms. Shannon could say another word, Ezra turned and walked out. Ezra’s hands were still shaking as he stalked down the hallway, the confrontation replaying in his mind. His vision blurred slightly with the heat of anger, and he wasn’t paying attention as he rounded the corner—smack! He collided into someone for the second time that day.

*Seriously?* Ezra groaned, regaining his balance. He looked up, recognizing the stocky boy from lunch. The same one he’d spilled food on.

“Sorry!” the boy blurted out, holding up his hands in a nervous half-apology. His eyes flicked down for a second before meeting Ezra’s gaze. He seemed to hesitate, then signed, “You ok?”



Ezra huffed, “Not really.”

The boy held out his hand, “I’m Nathan” his eyes darting toward the classroom Ezra had just left. “I, uh...” he started, rubbing the back of his neck. “I heard what happened in there.” he gestured.

Ezra narrowed his eyes, taking his phone out to write. “You nosy?”

Nathan’s face flushed. “Kind of. I didn’t mean—” He cut himself off, clearly fumbling for words. Finally, he sighed, erasing the message and starting again. “I didn’t know how else to talk to you. After earlier, and during math too.”

Ezra blinked, his frustration briefly giving way to confusion. “You nosy why?”

Nathan hesitated, then tapped the side of his head, where his long hair partially covered his cochlear implant. “Same,” he signed, “But... not.” He typed again, “You sign. You’re good at it. And you have an interpreter. I’ve never seen that before.”

The pieces began to fall into place for Ezra. He straightened up, his earlier irritation softening. “You’re Deaf too?” he asked, switching to ASL.

Nathan hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah, but my parents never taught me about it. They just pushed the cochlear implant and told me to focus on talking.”

Ezra sighed, feeling a familiar pang of recognition. “They think ASL make you more different,” his expression sombering, more understanding now, “Not ‘normal.’”

Nathan nodded again, this time with a wry smile. “Exactly.”

There was a brief silence between them, the kind that felt oddly comfortable. Nathan typed again. “I’ve never met another Deaf student before,” he admitted, his voice quieter. “And after the lunch thing, I felt

like I screwed up.”

Ezra shrugged, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “You did,” he signed, half-teasing. “But we’re talking now.”

Nathan chuckled, some of the tension in his posture easing. “Yeah, I guess we are.”

Ezra considered him for a moment, “We can start over. I will teach some ASL if you want.”

Nathan’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

Ezra nodded. “Yeah. I don’t know Deaf friends here either. Could be cool.”

Nathan grinned. “Okay. Deal.”

For the first time that day, Ezra felt the heavy weight of isolation begin to lift. Maybe Rolling Valley High wasn’t entirely a lost cause after all.

Back home, the familiar scent of dinner filled the house, but Ezra hardly noticed it. The weight of the day still clung to him.

“So, your teacher called us today to tell us what happened after math class. You want to talk about it?” As his moms asked about school, the floodgates opened.

“It was awful,” Ezra signed, his hands slicing through the air, fast and sharp.

“The teachers don’t get it. The kids don’t get it. You put me in this school to ‘prepare me for the real world,’ but all it’s done is make me feel like shit.”

His moms exchanged a look, the kind of look they always gave each other when Ezra was upset. “We didn’t mean for you to feel that way,” Mom signed slowly. “We just want you to succeed.”

“You didn’t feel that way when we lived near other Deaf people,” Ezra shot back. “You used to take me to ASL meetups. You knew how important it was back then!”

His mom sighed, looking down at her hands. “We still know how important it is,” she signed softly. “We’re trying to figure it out here, Ezra. We won’t let you lose that part of yourself.”

Ezra’s hands trembled, frustration building again. “I don’t want to do it their way, Mom.” he signed, his movements quick, agitated. “I just want to get through school and not have to try twice as hard as everyone else.”

His mom reached for him, pulling him close in a tight embrace. The warmth of it felt grounding, as if he could just melt into it and forget the world. But as Ezra leaned into her, his mind wandered back to the school—back to the lunchroom, to Nathan.

Ezra pulled back slightly, his hands still hovering in the air, quiet for a moment. “I met a kid named Nathan today,” he signed, something in his expression shifting “He’s like me. Well, except he’s “d” deaf and he has a cochlear implant. We talked, and he wants to get to know me more. I think maybe I won’t be alone at that school afterall.”

His mom smiled, her face soft with pride. “Of course not, baby. We know how important it is for you to stay connected to other Deaf people. You may not be able to see your friends everyday, but making new friends is just as important.”

Ezra’s hands shook, but not with anger anymore. He didn’t have all the answers, not yet, but for the first time today, something in him felt lighter. Like maybe he could help someone else. Like maybe he didn’t have to face this world by himself. And as he sat there, watching his moms’ gentle smiles, a thought flickered in his mind—the kind of thought that hung in the air, waiting for something more to follow. Something like, *maybe tomorrow*.

## THESE DAYS

### LIOR MAAYA

These days I no longer think about death,  
I’ve begun thinking about the dead,  
or rather, about the lives they’ve lived  
And the ones they did not.

These days, I no longer think about love  
I’ve begun thinking about friends  
when the soil lies upon them,  
and the sound of sand is so thin.

These days I no longer think about life  
I’ve begun thinking about our life,  
Like this morning in Newark airport  
when I gazed into a girl’s eyes  
the thought that I would never see her again – did not sadden me.







## CONTRIBUTORS

**Laurie King-Billman** is a Licensed Professional Counselor who specializes in working with school-aged children. Originally from Colorado, she now resides in North Carolina. Throughout her career, she has provided counseling services in diverse settings, including the Zuni, Ute, and Navajo Indian Reservations, as well as in Alaska, California, and Washington, D.C. In addition to her work as a counselor, she is a published poet, with her work appearing in numerous literary journals, including *The McGuffin*, *13th Moon*, *Red Clay Review*, *Rambler*, *Chest*, *Switchback*, *Forge*, *Street Lights*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Lalitamba*, and *Penman*, among others.

**Maureen Martinez** (she/her) is an emerging poet working as a counselor at an all-boys Catholic high school in New York City for over 20 years. She has four grown sons. Even the dogs are male. She comes from a long line of countryside ramblers, barefoot dancers and raucous storytellers, which explains a lot. When not reading or writing on the porch, she is trail running or dreaming about mountains. Her poetry is published or forthcoming in *Meniscus*, *Folly Journal*, *Gramercy Review*, *S/He Speaks 2*, *Washington Square Review*, *The Listening Eye*, *Midsummer Dream House* and *Boudin*.

**Kathryn Maiolino** is an aspiring poet from the suburbs of Philadelphia. While she works as a scientist by day, she enjoys spending her free time exploring themes of depression, anxiety, and love in poetry. She can be found on Instagram @kmaiolino\_writes.

**Robin Young** currently works in mixed media focusing mostly on collage and contemporary art making. Her focus on collage art using magazine clippings, masking tape, wallpaper, jewelry, feathers, foil etc. allows her to develop deep into the whimsical and intuitive. From large, life-sized pieces, 3D sculptures, to small postcard-sized arrangements, Robin's keen eye and gripping esthetic guide her viewers into her own semi-readymade world. Repurposing nostalgic images for lighthearted and sometimes disquieting messages; Robin's artistic universe is strange, funky, sometimes perverse and always alluring.

**Lior Maayan**, born in Tel Aviv, Israel, comes from a family with over 200 years in Jerusalem. He is a tech executive with a strong background in physics, math, and business, holding degrees from Hebrew University, Technion, and INSEAD, while also pursuing an MA in Philosophy at Tel Aviv University. An accomplished poet, Maayan is involved in innovative Hebrew-Arabic poetry programs and has received awards including the Weizmann Institute Poetry Award, the Clil EcoPoetics Prize, and The National Lottery 2024 grant. His work has appeared in publications such as *Granta* and *Yediot Aharonot*, and he has participated in international poetry festivals like Safi 2023 in Morocco.

**Zac Yonko** is a writer and theologian whose work often reflects on the intersections of place, identity, and the human experience. He is an online student at Ashland Theological Seminary, where he studies Theology. Zac has also served as the lead pastor at Vinco Brethren Church and is passionate about teaching, particularly in composition and English. His poetry often draws from personal experiences, creating space for reflection on loss, history, and belonging. Zac lives in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and is an aspiring adjunct professor.



**Michael Neuwirth** is a junior at Old Dominion University, and this marks his first publication. He spent most of his childhood in Virginia Beach, close to the waves. During high school, he was a part of the Muse Writing Center's Teen Fellowship. At Old Dominion University, he received an honorable mention for ODU's College Poetry Prize. adjunct professor.

**Chris Espenshade** is a professional archaeologist who expanded into creative and outdoors writing, as well as wildlife photography, in 2017. His work has been featured in numerous literary journals, and he is a regular contributor to Mountain Home Magazine and the Wellsboro Gazette. One of his poems received a Pushcart Prize nomination from the Connecticut Review, and one of his essays was included in the winning volume for the Washington State Book Award for Poetry. Additionally, a piece of his flash fiction appeared in the Saboteur Award-winning 81 Words: Flash Fiction Anthology. In 2023, Chris was honored with an Excellence in Craft Award from the Pennsylvania Outdoor Writers Association.

**Matthew McCain** is an author and fine artist with 3 of his novels reaching the top #10 on Amazon Kindle Unlimited. His paintings can be found all around the world from London to Las Vegas with Bar Rescue's Jon Tafer and Alice Cooper's Teen Youth Rock Center in Phoenix, Arizona. He's currently represented by the Bilotta Gallery in Florida.

**Rachel Turney** is an educator and artist located in Denver. Her poems, research articles, drawings, and photography can be found in a few publications.

**Emmett Roden** is a 32-year-old Deaf author and ASL educator-in-training. Originally from Ontario, CA, he has dedicated his studies and creative work to exploring Deaf culture, identity, and education. As a queer and trans advocate, he brings an authentic voice to his writing, highlighting the intersections of Deafness and LGBTQ+ identities. Emmett is currently pursuing a degree in ASL & Deaf Studies at Maryville College and preparing for a career as a high school ASL teacher.

**N.T. Chambers** has had a diverse career before becoming a writer, working as a cab driver, bus driver, wine merchant, improv actor, editor, educator, professional counselor, and bartender. Their work has appeared in numerous magazines and journals, including *Grassroots*, *In Parentheses*, *You Might Need to Hear This*, *The Elevation Room*, *Wingless Dreamer*, *Months to Years*, *New Note Poetry*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Quibble*, *Indolent Books*, *Banyan Review*, *Inlandia*, *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, *The Decadent Review*, *Emerald Coast Writers*, *Share Literary Journal*, *Bluebird Word*, *Red Coyote*, *Bookends Review*, *Flint Hills Review Anthology*, *Gabby & Min Publications*, *Blaze Vox 23*, *SBLAAM*, *Academy of the Heart and Mind*, *Cool Beans*, *Black Coffee Review*, *Salmon Creek Journal*, *The Journal of Expressive Writing*, *WILD Sound Writing Festival*, and *Mantis*.

**Stasha Cole** is a PhD student in Literature, a poet, and a photographer. Her work is forthcoming in *Beyond Queer Words* and *Constellations*. She won the Stylus Journal 2022 Best In Show Prize for Writing. You can often find her in pleated trousers, drinking hot tea, contemplating the whimsy of the mundane.

**Angela Camack** is a librarian who has spent her career connecting people to information and ideas. She is now getting her own ideas out. She has been published in *Choice*, a magazine for academic librarians, *Ocotillo Review*, *East by Northeast Literary Magazine*, the anthology *Turning Darkness into Light and Other Magic Tricks of the Min*, *Aphelion* and *Creativity Webzine*.

**Douglas G. Campbell** lives in Portland, Oregon. He is Professor Emeritus of Art at George Fox University where he taught painting, printmaking, drawing and art history courses. He is also the author of *Parables Ironic and Grotesque* (2020), *Tree Story* (2018), *Turning Radius* (2017), *Parktails* (2012), *Facing the Light: The Art of Douglas Campbell* (2012), and *Seeing: When Art and Faith Intersect* (2002). His poetry and artworks have been published in numerous periodicals. His artwork is represented in collections such as The Portland Art Museum, Oregon State University, Ashforth Pacific, Inc. and George Fox University.

**Sanjeevani Sakshi** is currently a second year med student from India. At twenty, she barely manages to keep a balance between a love for literature and the passion for medicine.

**Harrison Zeiberg** is a photographer and writer from Malden, MA. He is a recent graduate of Wheaton College (MA) and works at a non-profit in Boston. His previous creative credits include the New Works Virtual Festival 2020, Havik, the Washington Square Review LLC, the Theater Barn, the Gabby & Min Literary Review, In Parentheses, Unleash Press, and more.

**Donald Patten** is an art student from Belfast, Maine. He produces oil paintings, charcoal drawings, graphic novels and ceramic artworks. His art has been exhibited in galleries across Maine.

**Cyrus Carlson** is an abstract painter from the Midwest whose small paintings capture fleeting moments of attention in a distracted world. His work explores the interplay between focus and fragmentation, inviting viewers to engage with the subtle details within his compositions.

**Lawrence Bridges** has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and *Tampa Review*. His three books are: *Horses on Drums*, *Flip Days*, and *Brownwood*. You can find him on IG: @larrybridges

**Saheb SK** is a fashion expert, author, editor, researcher, and novelist with a passion for storytelling. His work explores the struggles of women in society, as well as a deep connection with nature. He has published numerous poems and short stories in journals such as *Kind Writers Literary Magazine*, *WILDsound Festival*, *Poet's Choice*, *Wingless Dreamer*, *Mercury Retrograde*, *Blue Crystal Literary Magazine*, *Nyra Publishers*, *JJ Crown*, and *JEC Publishers*. In his free time, he enjoys reading and listening to music. His research interests span American English, globalization of language, Greek and Roman mythology, feminism, and psychology in literature. view towards Greek and Roman Mythology and the influence upon the classical author, *Feminism and Culture*, *Humane Psychology in Literature* etc.



**Serge Lecomte** is a writer, poet, playwright, and surrealist artist whose work explores the intersection of nature and imagination. Born in Belgium in 1946, he moved to the U.S. as a teenager, later serving in the Air Force Medical Corps before earning a Ph.D. in Russian Literature from Vanderbilt University. He worked as a Green Beret language instructor and taught languages at the University of Alaska for nearly two decades. Beyond academia, he has been a builder, bartender, landscaper, and painter. His art, often described as eclectic and dreamlike, fuses the natural world with surreal imagery.

**Patrick Breheny** is an American fiction writer and ESL teacher based in Bangkok. His work has appeared in U.S. indie magazines, university presses, and international publications in Australia, India, and the London-based writers' co-op Fiction on the Web. His novella, *Like a Human*, was featured in an anthology by Running Wild Press, which was selected as one of Kirkus Reviews' Best Books of the Year.

## STAFF

**Sage Delio** might be considered a modern day renaissance woman, with her diverse interests and talents spanning across the fields of creative writing, computer science, music, and the arts. In May 2022, she published her debut poetry collection, *Blue Confessional: Poetry and Prose*. A second edition of the collection is being adapted with Sage's own art and illustrations. For *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*, Sage holds the roles of Editor-In-Chief and Poetry & Prose Editor.

**Sharon Fremont** is a multifaceted artist and avid book enthusiast. Her artistic journey spans across various mediums, with a particular fondness for the captivating realms of watercolor painting and sketching. Her passion for the written word is equally profound, evident in her dual roles as Managing Editor and Fiction Editor for *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*.

**Karen Porterfield** has spent over 24 years working in design. She has established herself as a talented artisan jewelry designer, crafting one-of-a-kind pieces that are highly sought after. Karen's passion for creating beautiful and innovative designs has led her to achieve a great deal of success in the field. She serves as the Art & Illustrations Editor for *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*.

**Matthew Evan** is an accomplished photographer and passionate car enthusiast. He has developed a sharp eye for capturing the beauty and essence of his subjects through his lens. He leads *Gabby & Min's Literary Review* as the publication's Photography Editor.

## THE STILLNESS AND THE STORIES

As another winter unfolds, we close the seventh issue of Gabby & Min's Literary Review with a sense of deep gratitude and reflection. Across these pages, we have explored the quiet weight of the season—the way it hushes the world, slows our steps, and invites us to linger in thought. The contributors of this issue have masterfully captured winter's complexities, from its silent beauty to its emotional depths, revealing both its solitude and its solace.

Winter is a paradoxical season. It can isolate, stretching time in a way that makes us more aware of absence, of longing, of the past's lingering presence. And yet, it can also bind us together—around shared fires, through shared memories, in the collective knowledge that the cold will pass and something new will emerge. This issue has sought to embody both aspects of winter: the frostbitten landscapes and the warmth found in the stories we tell one another.

The works featured here remind us that winter is more than a season; it is a state of being. It forces us to pause, to take stock, to sift through what we carry with us. The poems in this issue speak to the crisp clarity of cold air, the ache of remembering, and the quiet revelations that arrive with the first snowfall. The short stories take us into lives shaped by winter's stillness, where emotions settle like frost on a windowpane, waiting to be understood. The artworks and photographs capture fleeting moments of beauty—branches etched in ice, footprints disappearing into untouched snow, the quiet hush of a world momentarily held still.

We are honored to have shared these voices, these visions, with you. Each issue of Gabby & Min's Literary Review is a testament to the power of storytelling in all its forms. Through art and literature, we navigate the shifting landscapes of human experience, finding meaning in moments both grand and quiet. This winter, as you turn the final pages of this issue, we hope you carry with you a piece of the season's essence—the clarity it brings, the introspection it invites, the small but significant joys it offers.

As we move toward another cycle of seasons, may we take the lessons of winter with us. May we find beauty in the stillness, strength in solitude, and warmth in the stories that connect us. Until we meet again in the next issue, stay inspired, stay curious, and, above all, keep creating.

With gratitude,

The Editors

*Gabby & Min's Literary Review*



**END**

