



# NEON & SMOKE

APRIL ANTHOLOGY: WOMEN ON FIRE

APRIL 2026



Thank You

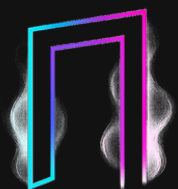
-T & J



## Midnight Snack

By: Theresa Ti Avena

Theresa Pisani has been a fine artist and professional muralist for many years, with a focus on capturing the light on her subjects, whether it be dawn or dusk, night, or a cloudy day. She is also an animator, illustrator. She divides her time between New Orleans and California.



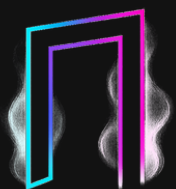
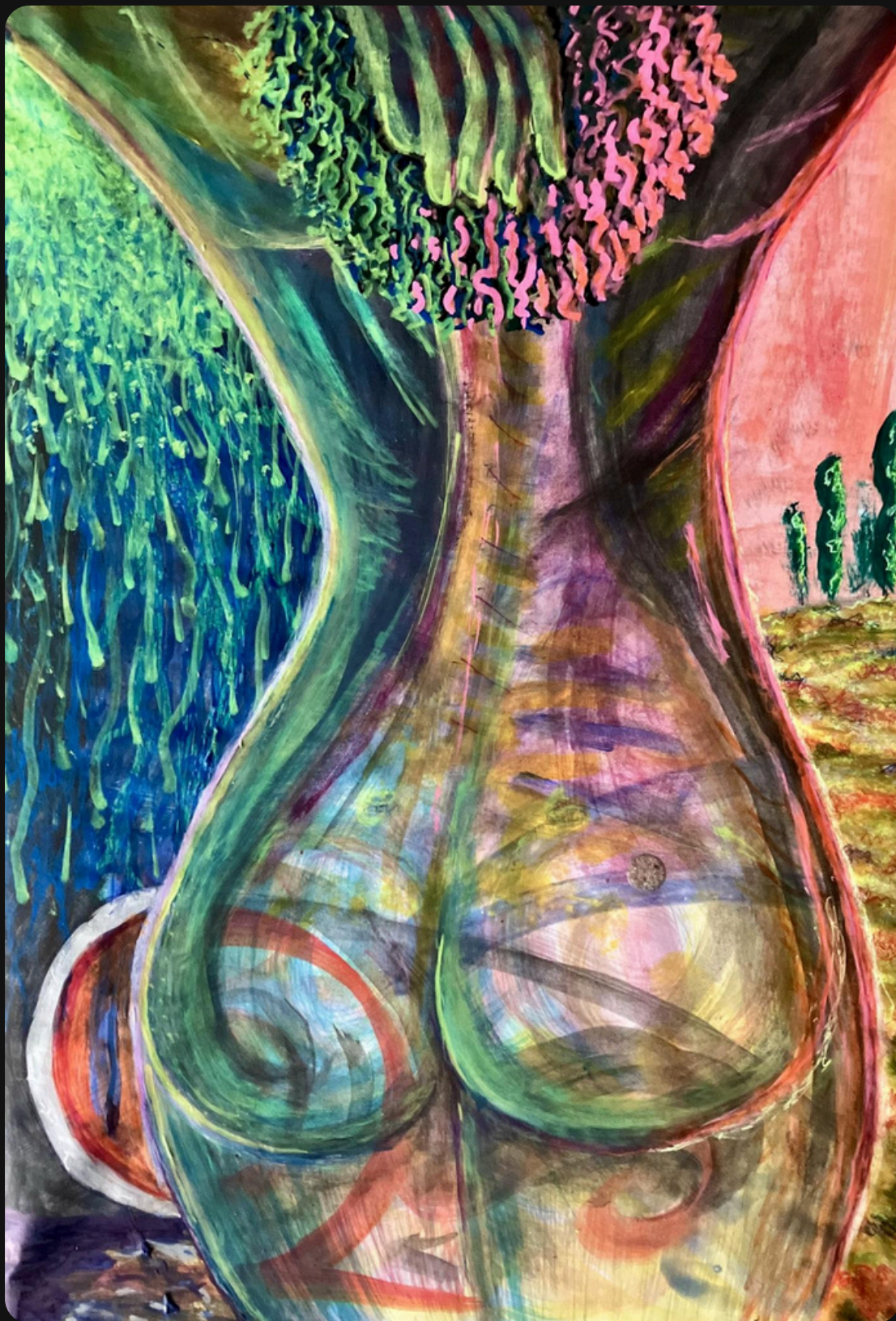


**Unashamed: So long as there is life within me there/ will always be the flapping of my wings/ carrying me toward those unknown things/ that have yet to turn upon the world.**

By: Andrea Bond

About the Artist:  
Andrea Michelle Bond is an artist, musician, polyglot, polymath, award-winning journalist, educator, entrepreneur, synesthete, and economic geologist. She has a penchant for gardens, power tools, the outdoors, empathy, music, and endless exploration.

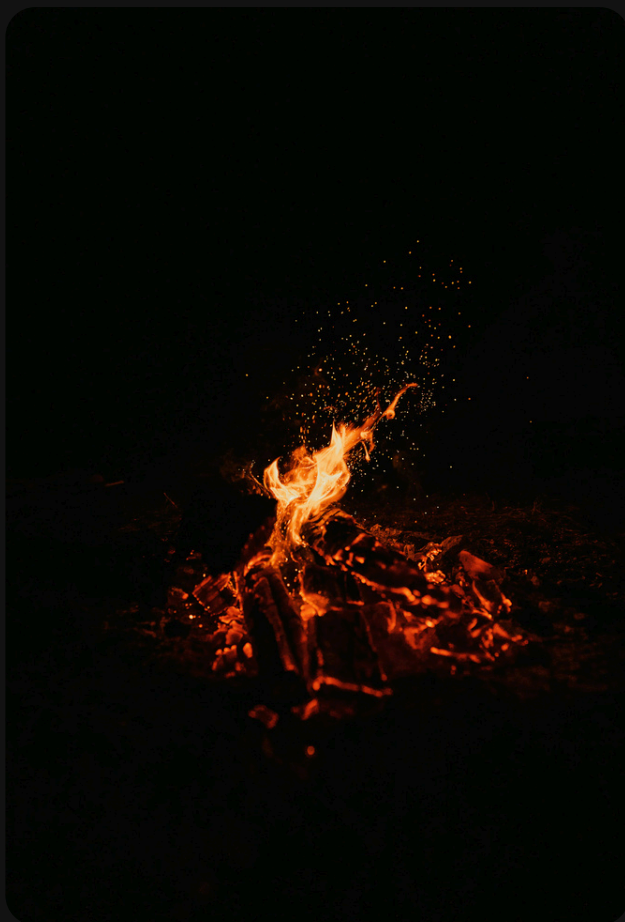
Website:  
[andreabond.art](http://andreabond.art)





By: Angela Abbott

## This Brushfire Within



Angela Abbott is the author of *Of My Cells: Poetry on Infertility and Motherhood*. She is both an educator and book editor, though when she's not adhering to the social requirement to work, she is spending her time with her husband, two kids, and three dogs. Her work most recently appears in the *Writer's Read Bellevue Literary Review* collaborative anthology: *Body Language: True Stories of Illness, Recovery, and Discovery*. Additional work can be seen in *Atticus Review*, *805 Lit + Mag*, *Adanna Literary Journal*, and elsewhere.

Cover by: Clay Banks @clay.banks (IG)



## This Brushfire Within

It's been hot as a devil's tooth since the drought. I can't even put my cigarettes out the window of my car, for fear of fire, but the truth is, the sun's been beatin' on me to quit anyhow. I adjust the radio dial, but the only station that comes in is Christian radio. Might as well turn it off. I ain't seen the truth in God since Sunday School. Sister Ruth and all them church ladies will sharpen their teeth on your eyes if you let 'em.

I pull into our gravel drive. Mama's not home. Suppose if she were, she'd be next to dead in her chair anyhow. Her veins can't stand the needle much more, I'll tell you that.

I pull out another cigarette from my pack, and begin pacin' the wooden porch. It crucifies my feet-- probably conviction splinterin' my steps, 'cause I don't believe in God no more. But I want to. I think. I want to believe I could be loved like that. Sometimes it feels like I'm pullin' for beliefs like they're stuck in the attic behind mama's old rock records said to be satanic. I inhale, and feel the smoke deep in my lungs, hear the fire sizzle, think about how that fire and brimstone will get me some day if I don't get my act together. Maybe I do believe. Maybe I just don't like him sittin' up in the sky castin' judgments and punishments on me like he does.

What mama don't know is I'm leavin' tomorrow. I don't remember much about my daddy, but he sure taught me how to leave. I still remember that suitcase, with the sleeve of his white button-up hangin' out the zipper, reachin' for me as he walked out the door. Suppose his leavin's got somethin' to do with the way I let Jesse Ray's truck bed burn my thighs ever since I been brave enough to let it.

The sun's settin' red like some Revelation plague when I go to my room to count the money I've been savin' for 2 years babysittin' and workin' late hours at the diner. It should be 1,763.00. I remove the sweatshirt atop my jewelry box, pull it down from the corner of my

closet,unlock the box, only to find that there's nothin' there. I look everywhere for the money, butIknow the only place it could be is there in that jewelry box and since it ain't, I know who hasit.And she ain't even here to yell at. Even if she were, it'd make no difference. I keep tryin' todoitright, but all it leads me to is wrong. Tears well up like hot springs in my eyes, burnin' meupjust like the time she pulled twenties out from under my mattress, and the only thing I thinktodo is scream and head to Jesse Ray's.

“Well, hey there, baby,” he says.

“Shut up and fuck me.” I say. I'm a fiend for somethin' that barely pleasures. Sort of like suckin in cigarettes.

“Now, wait a minute,” he says.

“Do it now.” I say and start unbuckling his belt. Slide his jeans down to his ankles, and push him up against the barn.

“Are you even ready?” He asks.

“I'll be fine.” I say, but really, I want it to hurt. I want it to burn like hate. He starts thrustin'. “Harder.” I say. He thrusts faster. “Not just faster. Hurt me.” So he does. My eyes steady on a nail on the black barn wood just when the bruisin' begins. I start to cry. When he pulls out, I fling off the tears, light a cigarette and leave.

“Hey, where you goin'?” He yells after me. My body shakes as I drive home.

I walk into the house and mama's in her chair, arm hangin' loose like a wet piece of paper. Blue lines blurrin' together—nothin' but vein and pale. A ribbon of smoke tangles its body to mine. It smells thick like the spirits stuck in them glass bottles on the tree out back.

Mama's cigarette must've dropped out her mouth, 'cause fire is eatin' the walls and gnashin' its teeth on the floorin'.

"Mama!" I try to wake her.

No response.

"Mama!" I say, shakin' sweaty shoulders. She comes to. "Mama, the house!" I yell.

The whites of her eyes are pink spider webs, what you can see of 'em at least. She bats me away. She's not registered the fire, so I grab her and put her outside, run back in and fill a pitcher of water. But it's no use. I cough out the darkness and run outside. We both stand there by the glass bottle tree. I still remember the two of us hangin' them bottles after daddy left. I wonder if this smoke is freein' them spirits. I wonder if it can free mine. The smoke grows higher, and the only thing left to do is watch it burn. I'm close enough now to know what hell feels like.

My knees grind into gravel. Mama sits beside me. The glow of opossum eyes behind us, all demon and dime. I can't stay here consumed by this fire. I'll end up like her or worse. Mama used to say "To everythin' there's a season," but my eyes can't harvest this raw earth I been dealt. So I get up. Breathe out the black lung and venom. Surrender so I could mend my morrow and settle this brushfire within.

"Where you goin'?" she says. "Ruby Ann!" I don't turn back. I get to my car. My hands grip the wheel, white knuckle and bone. An old hymn enters my mind, comes out my mouth like wheezin', "And oh, what weeping and wailing, As the lost were told of their fate. They cried for the rocks and the mountains. They prayed, but their prayers were too late."





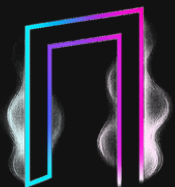
By: Daniel Cloyd

## Uncle Clyde is Dead



Daniel Cloyd is a second-year student attending Howard University, majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing. His work has appeared in Freedom Fiction Journal, Macabre Magazine, and F(r)iction Literary Magazine.

Cover by: Iris Avi @iriisavi (IG)



Uncle Clyde was dead and the repast was packed full of mourners who acted like they missed him, who piled their plates with greens and macaroni and cheese and fried chicken wings, potato salad, yams, baked beans, everything heavy and sweet and meant to fill the holes in people. They were laughing and talking, chewing and swallowing grief like it was Sunday dinner. I stood there in my black dress even though black was not my color. It never was. It made me look like I was pretending to be respectful, like I was part of something I had already been pushed out of.

This was the first funeral I had been invited to since I stopped pretending to be saved. Since I left Mississippi and the Lord both behind. Mama and Auntie were together as usual, whispering like they had secrets only they could keep. Cousin Rob and Cousin Louis were sitting near the window eating like it was their job. They had gotten bigger, both of them, and not just in size. Bigger in the way people get when they never leave. I walked past them slow, smiling like I belonged, trying to remember which one of them used to make me laugh before all the ugly things settled in.

They called me pretty. That word stunk the air. Mama and Auntie turned toward me, both of them lighting up like my face was a revelation. They came running, arms open, all teeth and perfume and church hugs, saying "Lord, Ida, you so pretty now, look at you." They hugged me like I hadn't been gone, like they hadn't prayed over me when they found out I kissed a girl. They said they were proud of me, that family was family, that they missed me. They said all of it like a lie told enough times starts to sound like love.

What was there to mourn? Who was there to feel bad for? Uncle Clyde, who begged all the girls in the family to sit in his lap? Clyde, who everyone called God-fearing like that word could clean a soul? They all said he was a good man. He worked hard, he sang in the choir, he bought candy for the kids. That was the story. But I remember Darlene, sweet Darlene, who used to

laugh at everything until he started being touchy and weird with her. She was sixteen when she hung herself with a belt in her bedroom. I knew something was wrong before she did it. I could see it in how she stilted when Clyde talked to her. How she'd pull her sleeves down when he walked by.

Darlene grew over the summer, and the family started calling her fast just because she wore tank tops in the heat. I remember one night sleeping over at Uncle Clyde's house, watching how his eyes lingered on her when she walked into the kitchen for a glass of water. I told Mama about it. She didn't even look up, just said, "Baby, that's 'cause Darlene don't be covering up," like cloth could fix the way a man sees a girl. I should've known then what it meant when adults blamed the child for the way a grown man watched her breathe.

They said Darlene was troubled. Said she was weak. Said she didn't have the Lord in her heart. But they never said what broke her. They never said who did it. They didn't even invite me to her funeral. Said they forgot. But I knew it was because I didn't fit their picture of grief. You can't mourn the right way when you're the wrong kind of woman.

Now Clyde was gone and the church was full, people crying and laughing like they couldn't decide which one was more holy.

Mama came over after the service, plate balanced in her hand, eyes soft but mouth sharp. "You still living that lifestyle?" she asked. I smiled and said, "You mean being happy?" She frowned. Said I always had to talk smart. Said she was just worried about my soul. I told her it was fine. She said she prays for me every night. I told her she could stop, that I was doing alright without all that praying. She didn't believe me. Nobody here ever does.

I stepped outside when I couldn't breathe anymore. The air was heavy with the musty heat of summer. The parking lot was half full of people laughing like this was a reunion instead of a

funeral. That's how it always goes down here. Cry inside, gossip outside. Somebody said they were gonna miss Clyde. Somebody else said he was one of the good ones. I lit a cigarette, just to have something to do with my hands.

Smoke curled up in the air. I thought about Darlene again. Thought about Mama praying for a man who didn't deserve it and praying against a daughter who just wanted to live. Thought about how easy it is to forgive what's familiar and how hard it is to love what's true.

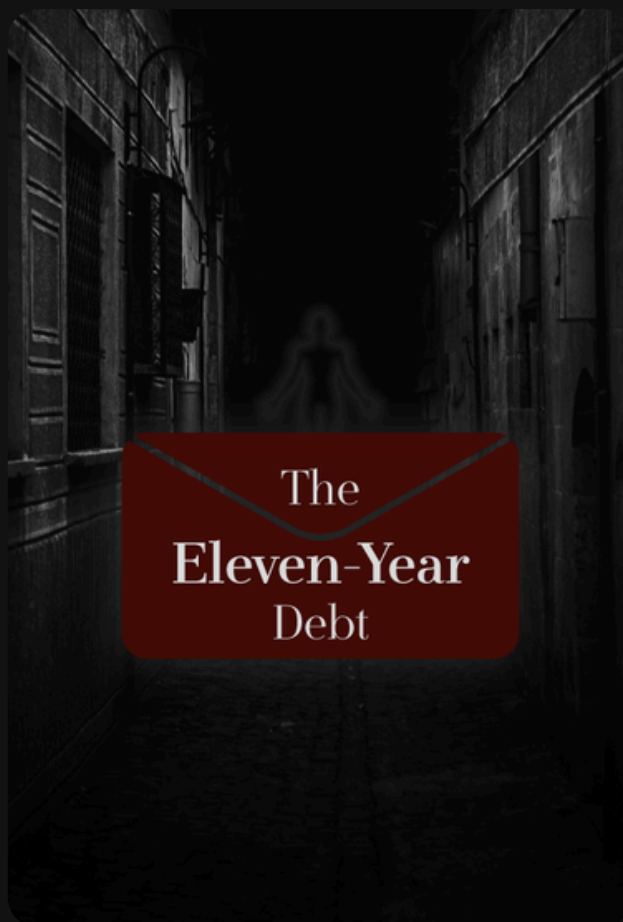
Mama and Auntie said he was saved, he was in a better place, Darlene would be burning since she took her life and that's against the book, an abominable sin, my morals were different now ever since I kissed that girl. Mama and Auntie and Cousin Rob and Cousin Louis kept stuck to it like they were chewing the same old piece of gospel-flavored gum, working it till the taste was gone but refusing to spit it out.

Uncle Clyde was dead and I was still here. Standing outside the church, watching the smoke fade into the heat. I walked to my car, slipped out of the dress I never looked good in, and pulled on a tank top and jeans. Didn't know where I was headed, but anywhere had to be better than staying for dessert.

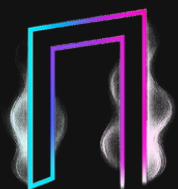


By: Danielle Ellis

## The Eleven Year Debt



Danielle Ellis is a writer from the Quad Cities and a reader for The Colored Lens. Her work has appeared in Westbrae Literary Group, Kings River Review, Third Wednesday Magazine and is forthcoming in Penumbra, Neon & Smoke, and Brilliant Flash Fiction. You can follow her on Bluesky, @daniellefellis.



THE ELEVEN YEAR DEBT

Red envelopes were from the State. Deep and rich. Mahogany. Flaunted riches. Rupa took the letter from her box. Heard the paper crinkle as her hand shook. Concern flickered but was doused before she could truly feel it.

Rupa opened the letter carefully. Finding the seams and gently separating them. Pulling out the State's letterhead. No greeting. The first line informed her that Adea Costa had died. The second line listed the financial responsibilities Rupa was inheriting.

The last line requested she confirm the relation, that Adea Costa had been her mother.

Rupa folded the letter and slid it into her pocket. Weight was added to every step up the stairs. Into an apartment that held only three items: A couch, a microwave, a mini fridge. She barely had enough space to squeeze in.

Seven dollars and thirty-four cents. Her entire life savings. Every penny had been gathered. Combined in hopes for some news shoes. Her toes peeked out of her black sneakers; the last bits of the thread abandoned her last week.

Rupa looked at the letter again. Glared at the flourish detailing the State's logo. Frustration started simmering into anger. Hatred. Her neural implant jolted, an inter-cranium shock. Rupa cried out, touching her temple.

The implant deconstructed her anger, building good humor in its place. Rupa squashed it into apathy and sat on the couch. She looked down the street of her heart, spotting grief in the distance. Out of reach for now.

The letter was signed and sent. Rupa sewed the holes in her shoes and searched for a third job. Once it was found, she reached for a fourth.

Four hours of sleep each night. One meal, the same meal, every day. Odd jobs on the occasional day off.

Sometimes frustration tiptoed near but was chased. Exhaustion was reconfigured into ambition.

Mother's debts were paid off in year five. Happiness was flattened into a line of ambivalence. Paid debts were a milestone. Grief was the goal.

Year seven, her hands forever cramped.

Year eight, her heart lost its steady beat.

Year nine, she got sick.

She went to work anyway. The neural implant made an incident report, noting her fever and chills, sending a memo to the state. She was sent home with a citation for endangering the workforce and a warning to vary her diet to prevent illness from happening again.

At home, Rupa lay on the couch. Its white polyester innards stuck out. Between vomiting and coughing spells that toyed with never ending, she thought about Mother. Mother had worked as hard as Rupa, maybe harder. Trying to minimize her debt, knowing it would become Rupa's burden.

She had lost a day of wages. More food added expenses that shoved grief further down the street. Rupa would expand her diet. Not because of the State's command. Because Mother would want her to.

Year eleven. Rupa hugged herself. Felt her bones rubbing together. Relentless working allowed just enough muscle to take the train downtown.

Sixteen blocks from the station, a building stood tall, shining like a beacon amidst the cracked and brittle gray bricks surrounding it. The State building in all its rich glory.

Inside, the elevator was broken. Rupa took gentle steps to the eighth floor. Journeyed through several corridors until she saw the LED sign.

Emotion Subscriptions.

Busy. The queue extended into the hall. She waited. Not eager. Not excited. Not yet.

Hours passed. Intermittent baby steps until she reached the counter. Stared at the teller with bags under his eyes but wasn't allowed to feel tired.

Rupa dropped her life on the table. Paper bills. Glimmering silver and copper. Enough for one day.

The teller added it up. Pushed the button on the screen. The neural implant hummed, a burning buzz in her head.

Everything happened at once. The pain. The exhaustion. She stumbled past the crowd. Eyes watched with muted curiosity. Oblivious to the hurricane inside her.



She remembered mother's hands. Calloused and rough. Walks on the beach. Kitchen spun treats. Bed time stories and encouragement. Home wrapped in a person; mother's voice was the front door. Happiness and love Rupa knew existed, even if she was never allowed to feel it.

Rupa fell to her knees, burying her face in her hands.

Finally allowed to scream.

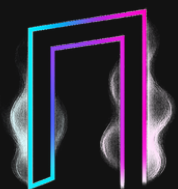


## Objects Learn Judgment



By: Fendy S. Tulodo

Fendy S. Tulodo stays in Malang, Indonesia. He makes art from words and sound, looking at how time moves slow for some, fast for others, and why certain bonds don't break even when they should. By day he sells bikes. At night he writes songs, records them as Nep Kid. His work sits in the silent gap between what's spoken and what's really meant. Find him on Instagram at [@fendysatria\\_](https://www.instagram.com/fendysatria_)



## Objects Learn Judgment

Samira wakes with her license letter pressed to her cheek, ink damp, paper warm like it has breath. The clinic sign outside hums too loud. Her hands shake, not from age, from hurry. Someone reported her. Kindness travels faster than lies, then circles back sharp.

She folds the note tight, slips it under a cracked saucer. The saucer has a blue ring where coffee once sat too long. The place tightens around her. Walls pull closer. The ceiling lowers its opinion. Objects learn judgment.

Samira has sold touch since before the river bridge changed color. Old work, yes, but not soft. She learned weight, timing, when to stop talking. She learned how bodies lie even when mouths do not. She stopped correcting people long ago. Correction takes air. She keeps air for walking.

Youssef is dying across town. He asked for pills, not money. He asked with a smile that never learned fear. They met years ago at a back stair near a theater that now sells phones. He played cards badly. She liked that.

She moves fast, coat half-buttoned, hair pinned wrong. The street lifts heat into her calves. Vendors shout numbers that mean nothing. A bus sighs like a tired animal without fur. Her breath finds rhythm.

At the pharmacy, the counter sweats. A man watches her hands, not her face. She buys pain relief meant for joints, cough liquid meant for nights. She buys twice what is allowed. The clerk's eyes sharpen. He stamps paper hard. Stamps teach lessons.

Outside, a poster peels. A singer smiles from another year. Samira remembers sleeping with him once. She did not. She lets the false memory sit.

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Youssef's place sits above a tailor who has gone quiet. Stairs grind dust into her soles. She knocks once. No answer. She knocks again and enters.

Youssef lies on a thin bed, chest moving like it negotiates each rise. A fan cuts the air into squares. The fan decides where time goes. His skin looks waxed by sickness. He grins anyway.

"You came," he said.

She sets the bag down, lines bottles by height. She pours liquid into a spoon, steady. Her hands behave now.

"Drink," she said.

He swallows, coughs, then laughs, sharp, pleased. "You always line things up."

"Habit," she said.

He watches her face like he is counting doors. "They'll come for you."

"They already did," she said.

He presses his lips together, then speaks soft. "I told them nothing."

She believes him. Belief is another habit.

He reaches for her wrist. His grip has faded, but intention stays loud. She stays.

Desire drives bad choices, even now. She helps him sit. His back bones mark her palm. The bed complains. The fan clicks into a faster pace.

She tells him about the letter without reading it aloud. Words on paper can bruise. He listens with eyes closed. He says her name once, careful, like it could spill.

"You could leave," he said.

She shakes her head without moving it. "I am tired of leaving."

He smiles, then drifts. She stays until the fan slows, until the light shifts. She leaves the bottles, all of them. She takes the empty bag. Empty things look innocent.

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The clinic calls her before sunset. The voice on the line wears polish. It says rules. It says safety. It says concern. Samira listens, then ends the call early. Ending early saves power.

The city watches her walk. Doors stare. Chairs keep secrets. A trash bin tips itself, spills wrappers that glitter with oil.

At home, the saucer waits. The letter waits. She reads it now. Suspension. Review. Effective immediately. Words push her backward. The place grows smaller. The ceiling lowers again.

A knock arrives. Hard. Then again.

A man stands there with a badge that catches light too well. He asks her name. She gives it. He asks about pills. She tells him where she bought bread this morning. He does not laugh.

“Someone reported you,” he said.

She meets his eyes. “People report weather.”

He writes. Paper scratches. The pen smells of oil. He asks if she knows Youssef. She says yes. She does not add that she loves him. Love complicates records.

He leaves. The place exhales late.

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Night thickens. The fan in her place stops working, then starts again slower. Objects grow moods. The saucer sweats. The letter curls at the edges like it wants to leave.

Her phone rings. A neighbor’s voice tells her Youssef is quiet now. Too quiet. She sits, stands, then sits once more. Her legs forget which comes first.

She walks back to his place. The stairs feel longer. The fan is off. Youssef lies still, mouth open like a question dropped. She touches his wrist. No pulse. She closes his mouth with two fingers. This matters.

A woman from next door watches from the threshold. “They will ask,” the woman said.

“They always do,” Samira replied.

She straightens the bottles, empty now. She lines them by height. Order calms walls. She leaves before uniforms arrive.

\*\*\*

Weeks pass without names. The clinic never calls back. Money thins. Samira sells the coat. She keeps walking. She visits the river bridge and tells herself she once stood here with Youssef when he was young and loud. She did not. The false scene warms her.

She stops correcting people when they say she was kind to a fault. Faults imply structure. She was deliberate. She chose. Desire drove it. She accepts the cost.

A new letter arrives. Not from the clinic. From a community board asking for volunteers. She laughs, loud, alone. The laugh hits the walls and stays.

She sits on the floor. The floor cools her palms. The saucer cracks along the blue ring, sound sharp, final. She watches the break spread, clean. Things change shape. So do lives.

Outside, the city keeps moving. Inside, Samira breathes, steady. The aftershock hums and doesnot stop.



By: Isabel Fontes

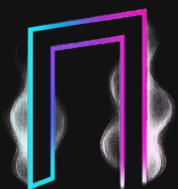
## Words That Scream the Soul's Orgasm



Born and raised in Lisbon, Isabel Fontes learned early that culture is something you build, not wait for. She writes poetry and short fiction and has published internationally, with recent recognition in the United States. Alongside her writing, she has spent years developing cultural and performative projects, working across literature, music, radio, and television. Isabel does not separate writing from living — both are driven by curiosity, restlessness, and attention.

She currently lives between Cardiff and London. On Instagram (@isabel0fontes), she mostly documents travel, friendships, and the occasional escape from words.

Cover by: Callum Skelton @thecallumskelton (IG)



### **Words That Scream the Soul's Orgasms**

I believed my world was whole — with you, who once belonged to me. I thought I was certain of my certainties, when in truth I was only living inside your world, suffocated, trapped in a borrowed, unreal reality.

I needed so badly to need you.

I thought I knew the corners of my soul by heart —  
the gestures that gave me pleasure, the places that gave me shape. I

thought more of you than of myself.

You completed me.

And in your absence, I miss you in such a ridiculous,  
simple way

I never thought possible —  
not until you were gone.

I feel split,

torn between diverging paths.

I trained my mind to lose itself —

in me,  
in you,  
in us.

I've lost that spark,

the one they say flutters like butterflies in the stomach.

I cry without reason,

smile without cause —

this is the state of my soul. I want you so much,  
and yet — not at all.

These words ache with longing.

They are body and desire,

shiver,  
orgasm.

Daily, you corrode my thoughts.

I lie in bed, inert, without direction or choice.

Someone once said distance would help —  
that what the eyes don't see, the heart won't feel.

What nonsense.

Polished stupidity.

Who lives untouched by the consequences of what they feel? I am

thirsty.

Hungry for skin.

But I know — deep down — it's wrong.

You failed.



We failed.  
We were a beautiful mistake.

And still,  
I never tire of thinking of you.  
You haunt my dreams with a familiarity that wounds.

You are my quiet shame.  
I don't breathe you —  
I sigh you into silence.

We soared too high,  
and burst into wild, formless delirium.  
And in secret you'll remain:  
a carnal memory lodged in thought.  
I carved your name in my heart.  
We'll be eternal —  
but nothing more.



## Grip

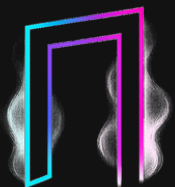


By: Jessica Edmond

Jessica Edmond is a writer working across poetry, flash fiction, and hybrid forms. She favors long sentences, a wink of mischief, and letting language misbehave. Jessica also writes under the pen name Genesis Pearl.

Instagram: @MischiefandRigor

Bluesky: @Genesis-Pearl



## *Grip*

Low and slow, a private gravity drawing everything inward.

Breath thickens, lingers in the throat, warm and heavy.

Heat spreads with intention.

A soft pressure blooming and blooming again.

Sweet with ache, rich with promise.

The center of you grows insistent.

Sensitive to thought alone.

To memory and the bare idea of closeness.

Wanting tightens and loosens at once.

A deep pulse keeps time without permission.

Nothing about it is polite.

Hunger hums instead of begs.

Stillness feels intimate.

Charged, saturated.

When everything goes quiet, it doesn't leave.

It settles deeper.

Glowing.

A slow, unmistakable reminder of what it means to be awake.

Exquisitely, relentlessly alive.

Lust.



## Rose Fumé Blanc

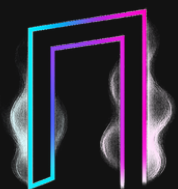
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### *Rose Fumé Blanc*

The studio was a velvet-lined chamber, humid with the scent of amber and the sweet, heavy musk of a woman who knew the exact consequence of her own power. Rose did not teach through diagrams or clinical distance; she taught through the blistering reality of the skin. She was a woman of deep, mahogany radiance, her presence a silent heat that made the men who entered her space feel sharply aware of the thrumming blood in their own veins. They came to her with their palms sweating and their voices low, seeking the map to a kingdom they had only ever blundered through in the dark.

She moved through the room with a disciplined grace, her silk robe sliding over the curve of her hips like oil over heated stone. This was not a space for the timid or the apologetic. Eric was her third appointment of the afternoon, a man who looked like he had been holding his breath for a decade. He watched her with a raw, focused hunger that she found more useful than the fumbled politeness of the others.

"Get on your knees," Rose said, her voice a low, musical friction that vibrated in the small of his back.

He obeyed, his breathing coming in shallow hitches as she stood before him. She didn't offer a preamble. She reached down and loosened the sash of her robe, letting the fabric fall away to reveal the dark, gleaming expanse of her chest. Her nipples were already dark and turgid, reacting to the stillness of the room and the sudden, sharp intake of Eric's breath. She took his calloused, trembling hands and brought them to her breasts.

"Feel that," she commanded, her fingers digging into the backs of his hands. "The heat isn't a suggestion. It's a demand. You don't touch me to see if I'm there; you touch me to find out where I end and you begin."

She guided his thumb over the pebbled texture of her areolas, her own breath catching as the friction sparked a low, pulsing ache between her thighs.

"Now," she whispered, her voice thickening as she pulled him closer. She sat, opening herself to him with an audacity that turned the light in the room to liquid gold. Her skin radiated heat, the curls between her thighs glistening. "You aren't here to find a button, Eric. You are here to learn the pulse."

She forced his fingers into the slick, honeyed depth of her, her own hips rising to meet his touch with a pulsing tension. She dictated the velocity, her voice a silky growl against his ear as she taught him the difference between a fumbled gesture and a deliberate, searing stroke. His tongue found the curve of her inner thigh, his hunger finally breaking through the shell of his hesitation. He wasn't just a learner anymore; he was a participant in a shared fever.

The afternoon shifted when the door opened for her final session. Jaron walked in, a man who didn't carry the usual stutter of the uninitiated. He moved with a confident gravity that made the air in the studio feel smothering.

"I heard you were giving lessons," he said, his voice a seductive taunt that made her nipples tighten into hard, aching points.

Rose felt a flicker of annoyance. This was her cathedral, and he hadn't knelt.

Jaron was the one variable she had built her careful architecture to avoid. Teaching had been a way of containing the ache of him, of turning longing into control, absence into expertise. She had learned how to instruct other men because she had spent years running from the only one who never needed instruction. Seeing him now, so unannounced and unrepentant, collapsed the distance she relied on.

Jaron didn't wait for her command. He bridged the distance in a few strides, a singular focus in his gaze that drew the warmth in her limbs into a slow, opulent cadence, beautiful in its restraint and dangerous in what it intended to take.

He didn't take the seat she offered. Instead, he reached out and caught her chin. Rose didn't flinch, but her pulse hammered a frantic, uneven rhythm against his thumb. He was a complication she hadn't charted. Jaron stripped away the last of her robe and the remaining pretense of the teacher.

No more instruction, no more musical syntax of the teacher. There was only the reality of his mouth against the dark, wet flower of her center.

Each unhurried pass of his tongue was indulgent and exacting, a predator's patience translating her power into ruinous pleasure. She was lost in the ferment of him, her moans turned into an ecstatic sob as he drove her toward an edge that had no ending. Jaron didn't just take the lead; he met her at the summit she usually occupied alone. His hands mapped the curve of her waist with a deliberate touch that forced the air from her lungs in a silver exhalation.

He worked her with a terrifying, seasoned patience, his tongue finding the exact cadence of her pulse as she tried to anchor herself against the rising tide of her own release. Every stroke was a command, a demand for her to surrender. The sweet musk of her arousal mingling with the clean, sharp salt of his skin stained the air, turning the studio into a chamber of pure, unadulterated lust. She resisted the peak until the friction became a physical weight, a demand for an honesty she rarely afforded herself. When the release finally claimed her, it wasn't a surrender to him, but a surrender to the enormity of her own capacity.

Her skin glistened with a fine sheen of sweat that caught the dying light. Jaron didn't pull away; instead he moved up her body, his chest warm against her sensitized breasts. They lay there as the power in the room settled into a new, predatory equilibrium.

Rose turned her head, her teeth grazing the hollow of his neck. She felt the heavy, sonorous beat of his heart. The same stuttering vulnerability she had cultivated in a hundred other men. "The lesson is over, Jaron," she murmured, her voice regaining its low, musical edge as she

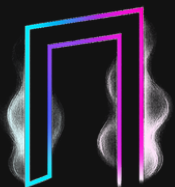


By: Rowan Tate

## Eve Writes A Letter To God



Rowan Tate is a Romanian creative (poet, essayist, visual artist, songwriter) whose work probes identity, memory, and the ways we construct reality.



## ***Eve Writes A Letter to God***

*By Rowan Tate*

First of all, the ground here is different. Not bad, just different. More stubborn, like a child who won't answer unless you call more than twice, or a scab. I've learned how to plant the seeds of a fruit, how to tell when the water is clean enough to drink, how to hold a chicken still to slit its throat clean, and how to salt a fish so it won't go soft by morning. We mark time now by the state of our feet. Did you think it would come to this? I have learned which ribs from the carcass of dead animals break easiest for tools. Is that the lesson you wanted me to learn? I made fire. With flint. Thank you for fingernails. And sweat glands. And clay that hardens into something useful. I understand decay now: the things that die help us live. You and I don't have to wonder what it's like to be the first of anything. To be without precedent. You made me from absence and called it help; I make bread from stones and call it dinner. I don't miss it, in case you're wondering. I don't need paradise. I need a decent rain now and then. I need one child to come home clean. I need fewer dreams where I taste the fruit again and wake up with a mouthful of dirt. The animals have become unkind. The children are loud. Abel watches ants take apart a fig and doesn't interfere. Cain bites his nails and strangles snakes in the grass when he thinks I'm not close enough to see. He is trying to understand. Why did we have to leave? Why did He stay? When can we go back? Adam breaks the bread unevenly. He looks at me now the way you did the last time I saw you, like I'm part of the wilderness to be tamed. I write so you cannot pretend you do not hear me. I want you to know what it costs us to live in the world you abandoned. Do you remember when you taught me how to swim? When we put stories in the skies and gave the stars names? Please stop sending the snakes, as if we need the reminder. I know what you're doing. I haven't forgiven you yet. Read this aloud in your silence. I invented this alphabet from what you left us in order to say I remember everything, I will not let you be the only one to tell this story. I can still name things. You didn't take that from me.



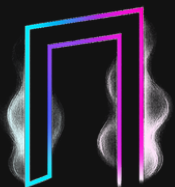


By: Stan J Wild

## Bleeding Seamonster



Stan J Wild is a new British writer. His stories appear or are forthcoming in Vestal Review, Hinterland Magazine, Suddenly and Without Warning, Free Flash Fiction and now Neon & Smoke. A shorter 500-word edit of 'Bleeding Seamonster' first appeared in Vestal Review. The accompanying artwork is by him.



## Bleeding Seamonster (1,000 words)

Trixie moves in first, plays it perfectly; she says: “where’s Gee Street?” So, the poor bastard pulls his map’s app up and Max can see he is susceptible.

She collared the man, stepping out the lift at the top of the concourse. She plays dumb, gets him to really spell it all out to her. *Subtlety*, I tell them: Trix has that in abundance.

The man has his kid in a pram and some cockerpoo too, sniffing about and pawing at Trix; she indulges it since she loves dogs but mostly so to prime it for Max.

Max finally clocks he is laden, then spies that glorious timepiece. He slips watches like he sweats WD40, but he does not know them from a candy-bracelet without Trix.

The pram rolls midway between the lift and barriers, nice and slow. It is like Trixie is rolling the damn thing, total control. She has Max in her sights and moves on to ‘*Gee Street.*’

Then it is Max with all the scars across his face, all cockney: *blah-blah-blah*. He goes eye-to-eye with the man, really tries hypnotizing him with these crazy eyes he has.

*No, no, no:howmanytimesamItellingthiskid?* I say: “*subtletyMax; just take it easy, why don’t you.*” The kid is thick as pig-shit, which is why we always say it: *never let Max talk.*

*Look at Trix:* she gets the man with the pram; prime in anyone’s eye. She clocked the Rolex too, plays damsel-distressed and is gone.

She smiles tight-lipped, since she knows that broken-tooth is distinguishing but swishes her ass as she goes, so to take the bastard’s eye: she still has something.

She says *Seamonster* for *Seamaster* still but knows them by the tick. *Seamonster* she says: you smell the Weston-Super-Mare on her; salt-sea-and-sewage, my little pirate.

“*You’rearegularhorologist,aren’t youTrix*”: I said once, and felt the weight of her at my temple. All she was hearing was *whore* and bang. That was when she was fresh off the train from Bristol.

It gave me butterflies for her, flapping all over my innards and not long after she was touching up this fat-cat’s whiskers, which sent us wild with the jealousy, so I told her about my office.

What did it was how she was holding his face: I was spitting feathers; you could see how horny he was, and he did this move so to grind up to her.

It was like I drank ethanol all over, sparked-up and flamed in the pit of me; like I sparked every-last-motherfucker, then shanked my own heart: knuckles bleeding, dripping down my wrists.

She clocked him from the cash-machine starry-eyed, stumbling: all of it textbook though; *Houdinied* the wallet right out the bastard’s pocket while she did the reach-around.

Then she leaves him there stranded in an ocean-of-suits and she is moving all sassy toward me, clacking this gum in the side of her mouth and I could have sworn she had this red-lipstick on.

She held herself to me next, slipped the watch on me, all sleight-of-hand: *ableedingSeamonster*, she says; I was smitten. It was back when her clothes were still clean and she moved quick.

She was right tight to me, pressed up so that her nipples were sweet midget-gems at my chest; I was purring, and all the hate fluttered out my skin with the butterflies before my eyes: pure magic.

She has these audacious eyes, sea-green and whispering of themselves, and she was chewing gum, so that she was all spearmint-smelling and for weeks we slept in that office I knew.

That is when she told us of her little Naomi and her plan; she cannot sleep for thinking of it though and is insomniac-guaranteed until she has her back in her arms.

We got these old sleeping-bags from the god-botherers, zipped them together and made a fort with the packing-boxes and polystyrene balls so she did actually sleep in fits, clinging on to us.

There were no blinds, so we woke to sun streaming through the fort each morning, pigeons cooing and views across the whole of London, *Big Ben*, *Buckingham Palace*, everything; it was paradise.

We had the Seamaster-money in all, so it was grapes and beers and all the *Golden Virginia* you could smoke; we even had flowers blooming from the sink: she loved that.

The thing about Trix though is she goes cold and when I found her letters it was like she hated us; they were wet from rain and drying, and I barely glanced at them, but she got so fierce, so I said:

*You never send them anyways.*

*Oi cahn't, she says and: it's none o'yer goddamn business.*

That is when I got mad, but I never hurt her, and I told her about my Danny and Louise and how I would cut my balls off just for visitation.

So, we added them all into the plan and a dog and it is happening, I swear it. But then we came back one time and there was men taking boxes in and all our stuff was splayed out across the street.

Not long after the Seamaster-money was spent and we had to get serious about *welfare* and I smelled her this one time and she stank as bad as everyone of us, but Trix is mine: my little pirate.

Trix is skinny all over but for her belly and her jacket bulges like the Michelin-man since she keeps all little Naomi's letters in her sleeves; she got it off the god-botherers, god-bless-them.

*Welfare* say we are on a list for a place of our own now with Trix being pregnant and all but how long is a piece of string and winter is here: it is Baltic.

Trix says this bump is a Christmas miracle what with her being a virgin and all, which is exactly the sass that got us hooked in the first place, god-bless-her.

