

Burning Breath

By [Diane Webster](#) (September 2024)



A Man Smoking (Gustave Courbet)

Burning Breath

Into the room he enters
like a sudden dust storm
filling lungs, ears, eyes
with cigarette stench.
Probably even noticeable
when driving behind his car
with windows rolled down.

Smoky smog permeates
every sensory monitor cringing,
recoiling in self-preservation mode.
Neighbors near his house
think it's burning down
perpetually, and no longer look.

If they perceive a whiff
of fresh air, do they remember
how to breathe deep and cleanse
the sooty residue clinging,
clinging, always clinging,
and does the smoker man
cough and wonder
what that smell is?

Ripples Out

Like a skipping stone launched
the flabby inner tube
splats into the pool;
ripples echo
outward and back
while the owner lowers

his overhanging butt
into the tube's doughnut hole
and splays his arms and legs
across the black rubber
sagging but buoyant
like a fisherman's bobber
dangling succulent bait
patiently awaiting a record whopper
to gulp the morsel
and drag the whole gear to the depths
before the line snaps slack
like a spider's strand waving
in breeze across the lake.

The man rolls over
to extract his butt
from the inner tube
as water slickers
his skin to catch and release
for another day.

Daughter Status

The good daughter didn't know she was the "good daughter"
until Mom had a stroke which brought the two sisters
together for doctor conferences, assisted living furnishings,
funeral arrangements, Dad's advanced dementia.
More conversations than decades before
when the older sister revealed the designations
of "good daughter" "bad daughter."

It was news to little sister who fled the state with secrets
avoided
in phone calls and years of random visits.

Intense heat from Mom's microscope seared her actions because Mom pounced to brag about her daughter—senior prom when the boy called at the last minute, begged her to go to the dance, and she excused she had no dress, no shoes, no time and refused; knowing her parents would disapprove of a black boy taking their daughter to prom, but Mom insisted a way could be made to get her to the prom and must have puffed and gushed to the neighbors who filled her in on who the boy was and disapproval molasses smothered the “good daughter” listening to why she shouldn't accept dates from black boys when it was only Kenny, when she had already refused, when she believed Mom seethed only because she bragged to the neighbors and was embarrassed they knew who Kenny was.

Now the “good daughter” inhales for the first time as the closed casket dominates the chapel for the last time, the last time her daughter has to do anything her mother wants, and she weeps with grief and relief siblings, sisters one wearing the badge of the “bad daughter” hearing praises of the “good daughter” camouflaged on microscope's edge.

Robe Fur

Mornings the woman graces her doorstep
in a pink robe—sunrise blushes
clouds across her nightgown
no matter the rise or fall of degrees,
no matter how cigarette smoke
mingles with her January breath
or puffs smoke-signals in August.

Perhaps her glowing cigarette
immunizes goose bumps or pink
fuzziness of her robe bristles like cat fur
until she enters her house again.

Crazy Cousin

Crazy cousin Kerry shows
after years of disappearance—
mistaken for an old man before
her familiar stare and odor ripples
a heat wave stench around her scowl
shriveling any responding smile.

No conversation, just on the prowl,
but not for cousin number one
staring at his computer too busy
to look up and see.

She cruises hallways
on a mission known only to her;
she stomps upstairs
where the other cousins sit
but safely on the phone or not the target.

She leaves her reek adrift like smoke
after a wildfire swath, and witnesses
recount the event in slow-motion detail.

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Diane Webster's work has appeared in *El Portal*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *New English Review*, *Verdad* and other literary magazines. She had a micro-chap published by *Origami Poetry Press* in 2022, 2023 and 2024. One of Diane's poems was nominated for Best of the Net in 2022. Diane retired in 2022 after 40 years in the newspaper industry.

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