

# 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.

## **[Table of Contents](#)**

**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.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)