

THE SIGH PRESS

ISSUE 5 • SUMMER 2015

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

This spring, The Sigh Press held a short story competition in collaboration with The Florentine and our guest judge, writer and previous Sigh Press contributor, Kamin Mohammadi. We had a fantastic response and are delighted to publish The Sigh Press winning story, *My Big Fat Modelling Career* by Australian writer and recent transplant to Florence, Sinéad Bevan, as well as the runner-up story *Made to Last: An Étude* by Siena resident Jeff Shapiro. Italian scenes are the backdrop for American poet D. S. Butterworth's recent work, which compels us towards layered reflections. And our artist this issue is Francesco Chiacchio whose drawings, collages, and paintings can readily be found as illustrations for books, music, comics, and cultural pages of national publications.

The Sigh Press has been involved in a number of projects in the last few months, such as *Art in the Park* in Stibbert Garden in May, a community event with over forty plein-air artists painting in one of Florence's lesser-known natural gems. We also collaborated with Florence Writers to host Poetry Night at St. Mark's English Church. The huge turnout proved there are many hidden poets in Florence and its environs. We plan to repeat this event in the autumn, in hopes of it becoming a fixture on the local poetry scene. Stay tuned to our Facebook page for updates.

We'd like to take this opportunity to thank our sponsors who provided prizes for the winning contest stories, most especially Giannini & Figlio for their beautiful production of a Sigh Press leather-bound notebook and the Paperback Exchange for providing gift vouchers. Our gratitude also to Todo Modo Bookstore in Florence for hosting the contest reading and awards evening, to The Florentine for this inaugural collaboration, and to Kamin Mohammadi for her careful consideration of the stories.

As always, contributors' bios and more can be found at the end of the journal. And please visit www.thesighpress.com for our fall issue theme and deadline.

Mundy Walsh & Lyall Harris

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DONNA 27

FRANCESCO CHIACCHIO





DONNA 28

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A PAINTER OF STAIRS

D. S. BUTTERWORTH

I want to be a painter of stairs
like the painter who paints the stairwell
around the stairs we climb. Knowing
how to guide the line up and down
at such precarious angles in the passage
between here and every there, to dwell
on the climb we dread and contemplate
the dread that falls as we rise, to master
the optics of in-between, the passage
we pass through to get where we're going
whenever we're going to any other where,
the untamed, uninhabited space, blank
on the map of houses, pivot, center, metaphor
around which our lives turn, fearsome
architecture lifting us up from the town's
impossible fret before the weight of our selves
seeks out the stairs to carry us back down.



DONNA 24



MY BIG FAT MODELLING CAREER

SINÉAD BEVAN

We do a lot of fat hating in our culture, don't we? Like when we see a fat person at McDonald's and think, "well you wouldn't have chosen a salad bar, would you?" or we're sitting beside a fat person on an airplane and they're taking up our side of the armrest where every inch matters. I think on a long haul flight even a Buddhist thinks, "that fat, arm-resting bastard."

I used to be 40 kilograms heavier. I was Rubenesque. I went in at the middle and out out **OUT** at the bottom.

I was also, at the time, a life model. And for those who don't know what that is, it's a paid job in which you take your clothes off for people to paint pictures of you. I decided to give it a try when my skinny life model friend bemoaned the fact that they used her straight-lined body as their 'masculine' model. They had asked her if she knew any curvy women who might be willing to pose. Curves, I thought? I have about 47 of those. I think they mean me.

I primped and preened for my first session, trying to make my skin hairless,

scar-less, spotless. I arrived fully expecting that scene from *Titanic*. Dim lighting, chaise lounge, the heart of the ocean. "Draw me like one of your French girls, Jack." I found myself in a community hall. Summer. No air con. A few milk crates. Me sweating into my large dressing gown. The one bright spot on the horizon was the sponge cake and tea cups laid out for morning tea. A mix of people who looked like accountants and librarians watched me impatiently.

I disrobed and stood naked in a room full of strangers for the first time since my own birth. And, like it was on that day, my nakedness now had no one batting an eyelid. They weren't giggling at the sudden exposure of my bum. They were studying it with utter appreciation.

I balanced myself on the milk crates. The realisation that I had to hold this pose for the next three hours drove every other thought about being stark naked in front of strangers out of my head. An hour and a half in, we broke for morning tea. I was last to the sponge because my paralysed legs had to be taught how to walk again. Looking around miserably for any cake left, I was taken aback by such comments as "thank you so much for coming," "your body is marvelous," and "we never get to draw such voluptuous women." These accountants and librarians were totally animated. They each wanted me to see what they had painted. They could barely fit me on their canvases. I saw myself glorified through the eyes of a dozen people. A thing of beauty. By the end of that session, I had five more bookings for future modelling jobs. I knew I had found my niche.

Because, you see, in that world, I was viewed as totally beautiful. Ample. Luscious. Soft. Feminine. My body was enveloped in this fat that spilled

like a glorious waterfall. I could twist and turn my rolls into a sensational spectacle. I was great from every angle.

I was booked up for months in advance. Hot property. Artistry real estate. Not just the house on the lake but the double-storey house with the large extension at the back.

Artists would walk into their life drawing classes, see me and say, "oh thank god it's you." I became so comfortable and languid in my body. I didn't primp and preen like I did that first time. Hair grew where it wanted. If I had a mark, it could stay. It just gave the artists more to draw.

I am lucky enough to own many beautiful pieces of art based on my plump body. My favourite is from a session where I took up this incredibly creative position for an hour. But when the artist turned his painting around, it was just of my pubic hair. And I loved it. I recognised myself instantly. There was something about it that captured the essence of me. I just wished he had told me so I didn't have to hold a bend-back for an hour. Visitors to my house comment on my Bob Marley abstract... But I know it's actually my bush.

Celebrity, of course, has its downside. One of my jobs was posing for university students. Two models were present during these sessions and the students would be asked to switch from drawing one model to the other. Marco would only ever draw me. He became completely obsessed with me. He would be waiting for me in the car park to walk me to class and then waiting for me while I got changed to walk me back. Then he would be waiting for me in completely unrelated places, like outside my

local shop. One night, I finished modelling late. It was dark. I walked toward my lone car. He was waiting for me there. Leaning against the passenger side door. I made a wide berth and swiftly got into the driver's side, slamming the door and shutting the locks. "I want to talk to you!" He shouted. I started the engine. "I just want to talk to you!" Again as he started banging his fists into my bonnet. I pulled out and he ran in front of my car. I put my foot down and he had to jump out of the way... In fact, I don't know that he did. I was a large lady in a small car. I didn't feel a thing.

This incident didn't put me off. It might have put Marco off because I never saw him again.

After six years of modelling and loving that rotund body of mine, something changed. I changed. I started to lose those 40 successful kilograms. As the weight came off, I got fewer and fewer phone calls. My large dressing gown hung lifeless on the door. No one wanted to book me any more.

When I look back on my former self, I refuse to criticise that person. I refuse to feel sorry for her because she had something I never will. She was adored by people who live for beauty and for art.

The fat haters will just never get what the artists do.

And I will never know quite that glory again.



DONNA 41

COMPOSITION WITH NEIGHBOR AND BIRDS

D. S. BUTTERWORTH

When the morning birds suddenly
hush, my neighbor moans in sleep
his usual asthmatic cough swallowed
in the narcotic dream of early light.
Maybe the birds have moved on
above the river, or wash some hillside
with song while again I hear the dirge
of the man in the apartment below
who reels in sleep from unseen beauty.
He may never know the torments
of his body haunt us all like
the abandonment of the morning birds
like shadows of absences dying in words.



GUSCIO

OLD MAN AND BIRDS BY THE ARNO

D. S. BUTTERWORTH

The old man looks at the river
and sees white birds along the shore,
or looks and doesn't see them
anymore, or looks and sees them
and does not see them there
where they were before yet
linger still. It's almost all one
to him. It's the possibility
of birds the morning wore
after dressing in cloud
and light, the fact of rooms
on both sides of a door,
in and out, and it being morning
here and there where air and sun
fall and where they do not,
in the room and on the shore
where white birds stir the waters
they had only flown over before.



Acquista in bellezza su seph

L'uscita della
limousine
per una
vista ufficiale
a Vienna.

DONNA 38



MADE TO LAST: AN ÉTUDE

JEFF SHAPIRO

1. Years back, my first wife bought herself a black cashmere sweater from the Men's Department at Harrods.
2. She wore the sweater a lot. I loved the way it smelled of her perfume.
3. There was no heating in the small apartment I moved to after we decided to separate.
4. A last gift from her: She gave me the old cashmere sweater to keep me warm.
5. It became my sleeping sweater. I would wear it to bed in the dark, heatless apartment. It smelled of her.
6. I met the artist.
7. The artist explained she needed time away from her boyfriend because he insisted on making theirs an open relationship.
8. She made me promise we could spend time together without falling in love.
9. To illustrate the risk we were taking, she told me the story of the camel.

10. "Please," said the camel one night at the entryway to the nomad's tent. "The desert air turns so cold after the sun goes down. Can't I just put my nose inside to warm it a little?"

"I suppose there's no harm," said the nomad.

"Please," said the camel the next night. "Can't I put my head in all the way to my ears? The wind outside is so strong."

"Well," said the nomad, "I suppose..."

The next night the camel asked to slip his neck inside, but only up to the shoulders. The following night, in came a foot...

Moral of the story: Let someone warm their nose, and pretty soon you'll have a whole camel living in your tent.

11. The artist and I promised we'd try our hardest to be gracious camels in each other's tents.
12. She was cold at night in my unheated apartment.
13. I let her sleep in my black cashmere sweater.
14. She said she loved the way it smelled of me.
15. Her boyfriend came to visit her.
16. She cried a lot after his visit.
17. She went back to him.
18. For the longest time, I still smelled her perfume around the neck of the old warm sweater.



DONNA 32

AT THE TEMPLE OF CERES

D. S. BUTTERWORTH

At Enna the old man passes us in the piazza
and asks how he may be of service.
The guy in the information office says
Sicilians are paradoxical by nature,
by which he seems to mean beautiful
but careless, dilapidated but dignified.
The couple on top of the rock in the temple
of Ceres, naked and rutting, seem to feel
the need to stop when we arrive, sadly,
and now everything follows a thread
through the ancient loom weights
from the necropolis whose tiny eyes
are the diameter of a seed. Now we know
as we twist down the road from Enna
that we are half lost and will only ever find
paths leading only part way through the woods,
will have gas for only half the drive across
the island, will be late for the boat and uncertain
how we feel as it pushes from the dock without

us in the months of cold and dark, in the hours
where we always find ourselves, the ones
we're living now where we only understand
every other word spoken by the woman
holding the knife, or what could be a book,
what could be folded wings, what could be
the summons she is sending us,
the map of our return.



BACIO

CURTAINS UP: THE SEXIFICATION OF ITALIAN GIRLS

LYALL HARRIS



DONNA 30

At a recent dance recital that included most of Florence's dance schools, any audience member with half a critical brain should have been up in arms. But no one batted an eye. The only eyes batting, in fact, were those of the heavily made-up seven- and eight-year-olds on stage. As their narrow hips moved in time with the flirty blinking and winking.

They call that ballet?

My own daughter, thankfully, in baggy pants and a T-shirt, was part of a unisex hip-hop number. But the routines that didn't involve skimpy costumes, inappropriate (and inartistic) movements, or openly sexual content were a scarce few. And the dance students on stage that day were overwhelmingly girls under the age of ten.

The other parents seemed delighted by the show.

I grew up around dance, my mother had a modest modern dance company and toured our state giving lecture-demonstrations to schools, introducing kids to dance styles and the capacity for creative movement to embody a range of ideas and emotions. Impromptu choreography often erupted in our foyer when dancer friends came over. Dance was art.

After the Florence dance review (after my anger subsided), all I could think about was how the vast majority of the dance schools takes away from, rather than enriches, a girl's artistic potential and command of her body. Offer your body up, they seem to be teaching—hurry up and shake it, show it, share it, that's where your real power lies.

Lies.

?

Is the future self written into the early diary?



JANET

CONTRIBUTORS

BIOS & TSP QUESTION

TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS: Tell The Sigh Press an indispensable component to your creative practice.

✱

FRANCESCO CHIACCHIO lives and works in Florence. His drawing and collages have illustrated books, cds, posters, comics and more. From 2010-2012 he was the cultural illustrator for the newspaper *La Repubblica, Florence*. In 2010 he made images for the multimedia project *X (Suite for Malcolm)*, composed by saxophonist Francesco Bearzatti for his "Tinissima Quartet," which was performed in Europe and in the US. In 2013 Florence art gallery Il Ponte di Firenze, together with Galleria Tornabuoni, co-curated an exhibit of his work, *Il segno come racconto (The Narrative Line)*.

[HTTP://WWW.FRANCESCOCHIACCHIO.COM/](http://www.francescochiacchio.com/)

BEFORE BEGINNING TO WORK, I try in vain to free my mind of insecurities, of expectations, of that damned performance anxiety that blocks the hand and distances ideas. In order to do this, I give myself over to the pages of my sketchbooks where there is complete freedom and I can lose myself in dense marks or swim in pools of color, forgetting all sense of time, age, logic, without following a set goal, until I touch the bank of concentration.

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D. S. BUTTERWORTH teaches literature and creative writing at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. Algonquin Books published his creative non-fiction book, *Waiting for Rain: A Farmer's Story*. Lost Horse Press published his books of poems, *The Radium Watch Dial Painters* and *The Clouds of Lucca*.

WHEN I WRITE I have to be present enough in the world to feel it call for me to do it justice, and present enough to the words that I can feel them push back.

[]

SINÉAD BEVAN: I am an Australian who escaped to Florence several months ago as a good excuse to get out of going to school. (I was the teacher.) I really like making people laugh.

WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/READMYLIPSBLOG

I AM WILDLY UNDISCIPLINED when it comes to writing. Rather than invite the words in at first knock, I ignore them until they are banging down the door. When they turn aggressive and demand to be penned, I am usually on the bus. Or the loo. So most of my scribblings are born on a bus ticket. Or a roll of toilet paper.

[]

JEFF SHAPIRO, born and raised in Massachusetts, is a former columnist for the UK edition of *Cosmopolitan* and has had non-fiction articles published in *New Society* and *International* magazine. He has authored two novels, *Renato's Luck* (with movie rights optioned to Mango Productions, Inc.) and *Secrets of Sant'Angelo*. He teaches English at the Università Popolare Senese, and Creative Writing at Siena School for Liberal Arts and the Siena Art Institute. A resident of Italy since 1991, Jeff and his wife, Italian singer Valeria Indice, live outside Siena. He is currently at work on his third novel.

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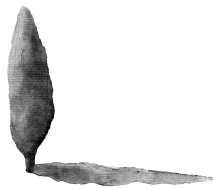
MUSIC. SOMETHING GOOD and hypnotic—Bach, more often than not—to smooth the bridge from worldly stuff into the daydream of whatever I'm working on. If that doesn't do the trick, there's the old fallback: computer solitaire until writing slips in on its own.

~

LYALL HARRIS is an artist and writer who travels back and forth across bodies of water, with lives in Italy and the US. She is a published poet and critical writer and her artwork has been widely exhibited and recognized with numerous awards. Her book art can be found in Special Collections across the United States. She co-founded The Sigh Press in 2014.

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MY CREATIVE PRACTICE, it seems, depends on having more than one thing going on, in fact several, at any one time: a series of paintings, at least two new book art projects, editioning earlier books, writing weekly poetry, organizing community art events, publishing a literary quarterly, and remembering to make dinner for the family.



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