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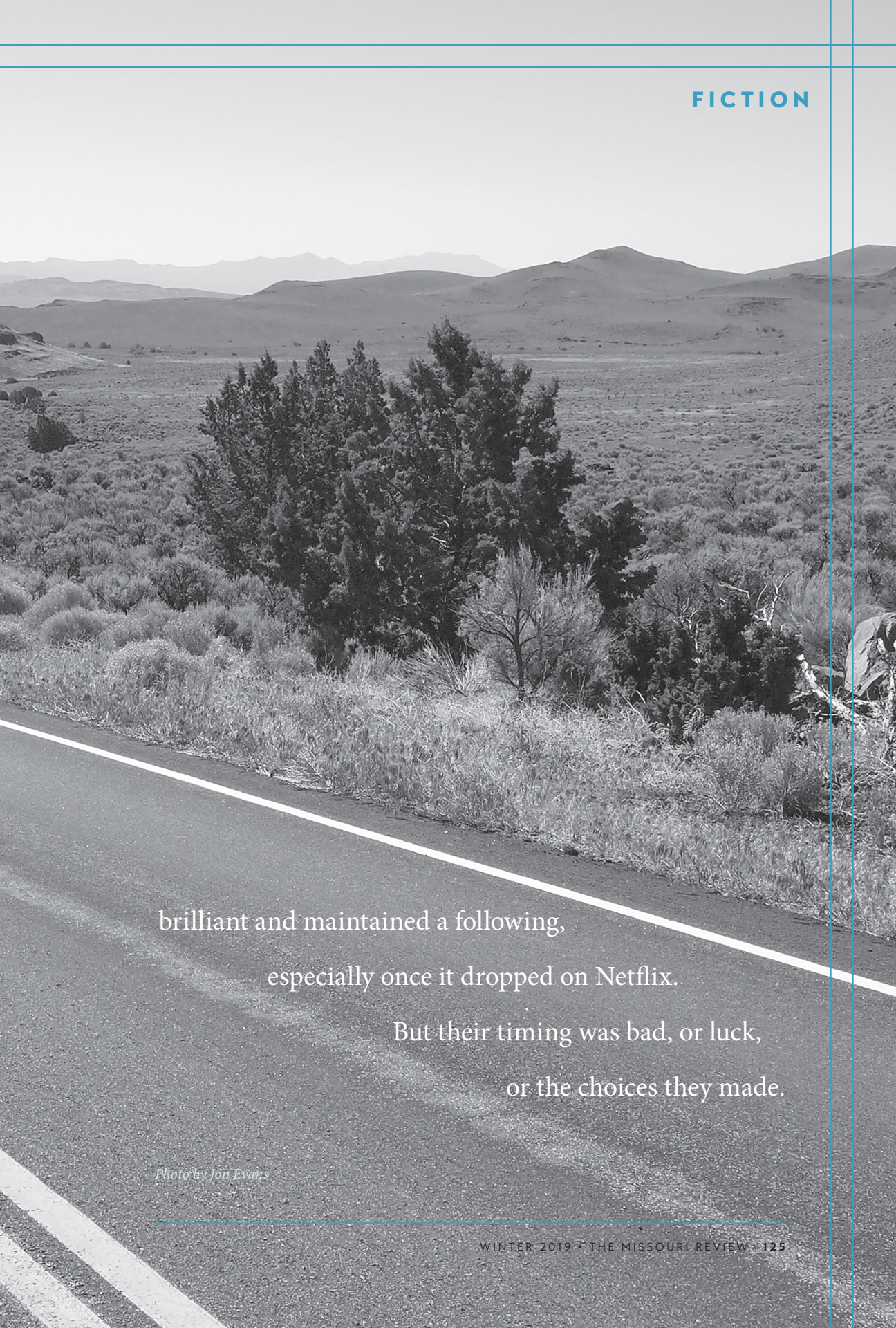
Ursula and Will

Catherine Gammon

They were minor stars.

They met on the set of a series
that was shooting in a castle near Prague.

They should have been famous. The series was



brilliant and maintained a following,
especially once it dropped on Netflix.

But their timing was bad, or luck,
or the choices they made.

Photo by Jon Evans

Now they lived together and did odd jobs to make ends meet. Sometimes she got a commercial. He accepted an almost invisible role in a single episode of something or other for network TV and died in the opening scene. She barely saw his face, even when they brought him back later as a body on a slab in the morgue. When they weren't acting, they temped, incognito, or waited tables, or cooked with a catering crew, careful that the restaurant or gig wasn't one likely to draw people from the industry. They still collected residuals. They still had agents. But they had effectively disappeared.

They were young enough that they could have made another life, but tenaciously held on, to their hopes and ambitions, to their sense of their own beauty, to their love for one another. When they were desperate they sat together in bed watching their still only somewhat younger selves fall in and out of and again in love. In the series they had played a brother and sister, driven by sensual passion and abhorrence of incest—vampires, metaphoric, not literal. They had played their scenes against the real desire they felt for one another and resisted throughout the three seasons of intermittent shooting, all the way to the finale, when he did or didn't die but either way irrevocably left her.

She had always let herself believe that his character lived, her only evidence the closing shot of the series and his presence beside her in the bed.

At last, at the end of shooting, they had surrendered to the thirst and mystery of their bodies. On set, they had been naked together on several occasions, enacting scenes of unrealizable fantasy, but now their bodies were their own, no longer images, not for sale, and they were free. Still, the traces of their several years of fictional life hung around them, like a gauze, she thought, a silk. A spider's web, he said. Or your hair. They played their parts in bed together, uneasily, unhappily, until slowly, in their bodies, they found themselves again and their fictional selves began at last to fade.

They did no work during that time, despite the concerns and pleas and warnings of their agents.

"I have a history of stopping short," Will said.

"You're too young to have a history," Ursula said.

"No, really," he said. "In my senior year of high school I signed up to do an independent project in place of taking three core classes, and instead of doing the work I spent all my time with a girlfriend until the

last week when I churned out a barely passing paper. When my dad was teaching me to drive, the first corner I turned I blew out a tire and never drove again.”

“How can you live in LA and not drive?”

“Uber, Lyft,” he said. They hadn’t yet returned to the city, not together.

“I rejected the first role they offered me,” he said. “I was still a kid. My parents let me say no.”

“Lucky for me,” she said.

“Maybe not. We’d be sitting pretty. As my dad used to say.”

“Like, *When our ship comes in?*”

“That, too.”

“Our dads were sort of the same, then.”

“Don’t go there,” he said. He let the implication sink in before he continued. “I pull out of things before they’re done.”

“Not with me, you don’t,” she said, as if a sexual joke could disarm his worry. Fail, she thought. “And don’t even think *Not yet*. History isn’t destiny.”

In Los Angeles, living together, sort of, in the apartment she kept with another aspiring and often absent actor, alone together one night as they ate Thai food in bed and watched themselves perform their Renaissance love story with the volume set on mute, she said, midepisode, “They warned my sister not to marry the man with the bright red car, the steel-toed boots, the little goatee. They told her to give it up, to let him go. But she wouldn’t listen. She packed her bags and ran off with him. She’s the happiest person I know.”

“Like you and me,” he said.

She shrugged and turned the sound up as a scene they had shot together began. When it was over they made love, slow and silent, as if her absent housemate was awake in the next room, or as their fictional selves, caught in a nightmare.

“To not make a sound is absurd,” he said afterward. “Sound is what we are. Breath is sound. Blood is sound. Muscle and bone and skin and pain and pleasure. Or maybe the problem is in the making, the not—”

“Hush,” she said and put her fingers to his lips.

On a weirdly wet hot afternoon they walked on the beach, sand fleas popping on and off and up and down her naked legs. “I remember a

house full of fleas when I was a child,” she said. “A tattered couch, faded, rough, teal. I was ashamed of the fleas and the tattered couch. I remember the cats we had then and how they loved us. I remember the sound of my father whistling.”

“I think we’re done,” he said. “I think we need to move on.”

“Move on,” she repeated. People were walking or sunbathing all around them, but not so many as there would have been if the air had been cooler or dryer or the beach free of fleas.

“The agents are right,” he said.

“Really?” she said. “Last night we were getting married.”

“That’s never going to happen,” he said.

When she didn’t respond, he walked away and into the waves, cutting through the salty water until she couldn’t see his legs, and at last he turned to face her. “Come on,” he called, “wash away the fleas,” and when she reached him he pulled her hard against his body and groped her under the water, fingers sliding between the binding of her bathing suit and her skin and finding her, pushing deeper in. He bit her lip and turned her and pressed against her from behind and kissed her neck and ear and probed until he was fucking her, water splashing with and around them, rolling in and rolling out, hiding and revealing, until, satiated, they collapsed to the soaking sand and let themselves be washed over, held their breaths and surrendered to being swept in from the deep and back to land.

She had not believed him when he said it was over, but that act of sudden sex on the beach turned out to be their last, at least for a time. “Someone is asking a question no one can answer,” he said as she drove home. “Every groping for an answer is another question, every answer a refusal. When? What? Why? Why not?”

In the morning he packed a bag.

He was going on a shoot, a freebie, supporting some indie director, starring in her short, a showcase for festivals and grant applications. For a moment Ursula was jealous of this woman. “No, no,” he said, and she believed him. He was always doing shorts and student films and artists’ experiments for which he never got paid. What difference did it make? They were who they were, she thought. They would always be who they were for each other.

He was gone for five days, as expected, and then for another five.

In his absence she found time to see her agent. She allowed her agent to awaken, if only briefly, her interest in taking another series role. She sat for fresh headshots and saw in them a new and beautiful sadness.

When Will came home he packed everything that was his and moved half a mile away, back to the room he kept in another apartment with other mostly absent actors.

Occasionally they still served together at parties—for the aerospace industry or transportation, bioscience, gas and oil, steering clear of music, arts, entertainment, politics. Even so, they were too often almost recognized, despite her simpler makeup and hair, despite his clean-shaven face and the absence of his best-known character's long black curls. It never happened when she worked without him or to him when he worked without her, only when they stood and moved together through one of these busy rooms where they were meant to be invisible as furniture, merely functional in their black-and-white or sometimes red uniforms, offering trays. Instead, in a room together they rearranged space. A pulse, an urgency, palpable, as if in a show of magic, revealed them in all their glamour as their fabulated selves. Inevitably someone saw. Often a loner, an introvert, a man or woman standing off to the side of the loudly or softly chattering crowd, scanning, watching. Ursula could see the change in such a person's attention and would find an escape before the seeing became a certainty. But now and then she failed, missed the person or the sign. One night a banker slipped her his card. He wanted them to perform for him, privately. He wanted to watch. At a wedding reception under spotlight palm trees, a woman stared at her and then at Will and back at her, and hours later, after their cleanup, they found the woman drunk in the road, waiting to follow them home. At a corporate headquarters high above the city lights, a man in Buddy Holly glasses backed her up against a wall and said, "I know who you are." She denied it. "What are you doing working this party?" She continued to deny it, inching away from him without success, obstructed by a big potted banana plant, until all at once Will was there, yanking Buddy Holly by the shoulder, away from her, a fist in his face. The plant crashed along with the man. Broken glass, champagne and flutes, shocked guests, a retreat to the kitchen, a caterer torn between laughter and rage, too high to care. They forfeited their pay for the night and found a new service to temp for.

"We should try to not work together," Ursula said on the street.

"I don't know," Will said. "I thought that was kind of fun."

She drove him home and dropped him off, without an agreement or even a kiss.

Usually when he left her, even now, he gave her something to take away—a word, a sensation, an image to tease herself with, a touch, a hint, an allusion. That night there was nothing.

The next time she saw him, he was married.

She got serious about finding another role and took every word of advice her agent gave. She sat for another round of photos, going for a harder edge to balance the wistfulness of the previous set. She enrolled again in acting classes, designed for professionals only. Will continued accepting small parts in quirky little indie projects, comedies mostly, in which he never presented himself as the man she knew he was. As if he had lived a lifetime's worth of ambition and darkness as her haunted brother and was now as done with that complex, driven character as he was done with her. As if he could escape them both just by taking off his spectacular wig.

They had let him keep the wig. Multiple wigs, actually. Mementos of the show.

Someday, maybe, they would be worth a fortune. But only if he allowed himself to become a star.

And his wife, the woman he'd married, wasn't even in the business. She taught third grade. He'd met her visiting her classroom to do a puppet play for the kids.

He lived across town with her now and Ursula rarely saw him. She threw herself into the search for real work, and after accepting a part in the ensemble cast of a Netflix series developed from an old line of comic books, she spent hours every day with a trainer when she wasn't up in Canada shooting. Her makeup was garish, and no matter how broad and bad she played, she was told to play broader and badder, an instruction she found both liberating and annoying, but the money and exposure were better than she had seen in years, and once the series dropped, when Will came by to congratulate her, he stayed to binge the first season, eating Thai food with her side by side in bed, for old times' sake, he said.

Before he left, he told her he was leaving his wife. He had not been unfaithful to her or she to him. But he was bored. With everything, he said. It wasn't his wife's fault, but he was a weight on her, bringing her

down. To marry her had been a mistake. His mistake. As if he could evade his fate. He had gone back to school. He was studying philosophy and history, he said, when he wasn't volunteering on somebody or other's student film.

In his absence, Ursula had been careful to avoid relationships. She had had sex with a few men, hookups from the catering world, strangers from one of those random gigs, one-time encounters half anonymous, never with anyone who knew her or ever could know who she really was, never leaving an electronic trail. She did not permit herself surrender beyond the physical, and now that she had a public face again, her options for one-off sex were even more limited. She no longer shared an apartment but rented a small house on a hillside and filled it with plants and a pair of cats and hired a sitter to live in it whenever she was away. Will haunted her fantasies, where she dwelled in her imaginary of him, lover and brother from a simpler and more beautiful world. His breakup with his wife hadn't brought him any closer, and Ursula was often away in Vancouver shooting the second season, which was longer than the first. As her character's arc gained complexity, she was allowed at last, for a while, to wipe the clownish blood-red lips off her face, but months later, when Will showed up with takeout to binge the drop with her, calling it a new tradition and wearing black silk and denim, his hair long, darker than its natural color and thickened, "Are you in costume?" were the first words out of her mouth.

"You sound like her," he said.

She knew who he meant. "I *am* her. Her voice is my voice."

He started talking at her, in convoluted academic language, about power and menace, parody and kitsch, comparing comic-book characters, comic-book colors and costumes, comic-book plots, with plots and characters drawn from historical records, costumes and colors nuanced and modeled on centuries of art.

She laughed at him with her comic-book character's stiletto laugh. "Are you trying to grow your wig? Do you intend to be my brother forever?"

They almost fought but backed off, settled down into her pillows and muted their phones to watch, uninterrupted, all fourteen hours of her show's second season. After her character's foray into vulnerability, by the finale she was painted red again—her mask, though a little more

lifelike, as impenetrably enameled as before. When it ended they fell asleep together with the cats at their feet, and when they woke up the next afternoon they almost made love.

The Will waking beside her, faux-black hair tousled, with Thai food on his breath, was a lazy imitation of the dangerous, driven lover of her deep desire and devotion. A caricature. He smiled as if a smile was all he needed to win her back, or over. Where was the suffering? The ambition? Buried under layers of kind gesture and graduate-student mannerism? He had wanted to conquer the world. Or at least their world.

“I never meant to be a star,” he said, trying to explain himself. “That was you, Ursula. That was all you.”

But she didn’t believe him. He had been brilliant in the part of her brother.

“The writers made him,” Will said. “The period, the history. The wigs. He wasn’t me.”

“You weren’t unhappy then,” she said. “All that time. You weren’t drifting the way you are now. Do you still have an agent?”

He shrugged and tried to change the subject, to get her out of bed, to feed the cats, to shower, to dress, to go out somewhere for dinner.

“I don’t want to go out. Everyone knows me out there again.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” he said. “Nobody knows you. Not even your name. They only know that ridiculous character.”

His cruelty confused her. “And what about you? What do they know about you?”

“Me?” he laughed. “My pretty face?”

She asked why he was dyeing his hair. He was reluctant but finally answered. “Part maybe. Superhero movie. Ensemble.”

She waited for more, but “Jinx,” he said, shaking his head.

“I don’t know you,” she said. “I don’t know you at all.”

“Did you ever?”

When the wind slammed in from the east, the endless overdry heat intensified their longing for adventure, for change, for sex. They drove, mostly. She drove. Into the hills or up the coast or down to the beach. Drove in circles, drove wherever speed allowed her, and day after day he rode beside her. They avoided the city and all its playgrounds. She blew her trainer off. The desert was good. She drove straight into it, the heat and the wind, and the air in the desert was cooler. They thirsted, they

didn't know for what. Not for each other. They went to the movies. They went to a club. They ate. They drank. They danced. They played cards. They gambled. They went to the races. *Off to the races*, her father used to say every day on his way to work. "No one talks like that anymore," she said. They were walking in the park. They called it hiking. They saw a mountain lion. In her yard they saw deer, a coyote, a rabbit, a feral cat. The wind died but the air stayed hot and the sky filled with the smoke and pinks and reds and oranges of wildfires. Birds still liked her trees, out of reach of the cats. A fog rolled in. After Thanksgiving, he didn't go back to school. When the rains came, the cats flew into the house, still wild, still chasing one another and the mouse they'd lost inside the stove. The rains brought flood and mudslides.

They still had not made love.

"Nothing is simple anymore," she said.

"We live in a desert," he said. "A desert canyon surrounded by desert mountains, a desert basin opening on a desert beach. We wait for the hot wind and when the wind comes we wait for the rain and when the rain comes we pray for it to end. Nothing we know can survive the fires and heat and rising ocean, and even though we know this we just go on and on."

They still had not made love, and then they got busy again with work.

By the time he came to watch season three with her, he was married to someone new, already divorcing, and the superhero film in which he had played a small but standout supporting role was in postproduction. She had started season three as something like a superhero herself, then passed through an incarnation as a ghoul. By the end she didn't know what she was—fallen monster, victim, saint. She began to wonder how much longer she could play this character and fantasized advocating for her death in the coming season.

She had other friends and she knew he did too, but their worlds of friends were separate from their life together. A life together, she thought. What a strange idea it was. Their annual comic-book-series binge, their desert drives. She saw his movie without him, more than once. She liked it better at home than on the big screen. She would have seen everything she loved about him in his small performance but for its exceptional sexlessness. Then he asked her to be his date for the Oscars.

"You know what that would mean?" she said.

"We'd be seen together? Photographed together? Talked about?"

“What? You want that?” The idea troubled her, not because she wouldn’t enjoy being on display with him again, an opportunity to play their old desire in public, before cameras, to pretend to be pretending. What bothered her was his interest in it, his willingness—she couldn’t find his motive. “Why?” she asked, but his only answer was “Why not?”

“We’d have to check with the agents,” she said. She had not told anyone she was seeing him, least of all her agent.

“They’ll love it,” he said. “We’ll play it for the romance.”

“They won’t love it. They’ll be afraid of another disappearance into catering gigs and anonymity.”

“Let them,” he said and made a horror-film face at her and horror-film hands. “Be afraid,” he said. “Be very afraid.” He laughed. “Wear that campy lipstick. I’ll wear one of the wigs. We can dress in matching outfits. White shirts with plunging necklines and ruffles and flounces, voluminous sleeves. Skinny black leather pants, hooded red cloaks, boots to the knees. I’ll stick to you like glue.”

“I don’t want to play that kind of part with you.”

“What then?”

“Real,” she said. “Like a drive in the desert. A job to pay the rent. We were serious once.”

“You don’t know me,” he said. “We can get a deal out of this if we play it right.”

“A deal,” she repeated.

“Together,” he said. “We can work together again.”

“As what? Sardonic vampires?”

“Sexy sardonic vampires. Rock stars. Royalty of rock and roll. There’s a vehicle for this waiting out there for us. We’ll summon it by showing ourselves, twinned at the hip and thirsting. We can drive in the desert forever if we work together again.”

The weirdness of the world sometimes overwhelmed her. He got his rock-star vampire movie. He got her to play the part. They fucked on screen and off. She didn’t know who he was, or herself. He had been the unattainable throughout her short working life. When he married for a third time, the ingenue victim of the rock-and-roll vampire queen, Ursula attended the wedding. She celebrated her thirtieth birthday reading a pile of scripts. Better scripts, scripts without garish lipstick or black leather pants. She missed him the most when the hot winds blew and she drove to the desert alone. Her long-running comic-book character was

not killed off, but her agent got the producers to write the part smaller and smaller, limiting the time Ursula had to spend in Canada. Will had joined the series—someone’s cameo idea run amok. She continued missing the Will of catering gigs and anonymity. She looked for a script that could evoke those days of hiding out in ordinariness and invisibility, a script that would give them a chance to perform it, to manifest that moment when touched by the gods or God their bodies altered space. She wanted that rush when the fire between them blazed and made them visible. She wanted to see it one more time, that instant of transfiguration, captured on film. She wanted to feel it again. In the doing. In the watching. Without the campy trappings. Without the wig or flaming lips. Without the skinny pants or red capes or bustier or black leather boots. Without the fetish-high heels. It would have to be a comedy, she thought. Comedy was the only solution. Just the two of them, alone, ordinary bodies, working a crowd, offering exotic finger foods and flutes of champagne.

Photo by Heather von Rohr



Catherine Gammon

Catherine Gammon is the author of the novels *Sorrow* (Brad-dock Avenue Books, 2013) and *Isabel Out of the Rain* (Mercury House, 1991). Her fiction appears most recently in *Cincinnati Review* and *New England Review*, along with NER’s online interview, “Behind the Byline.” www.catherinegammon.com.