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## The Stripper at Fred's Lounge

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## THE STRIPPER AT FRED'S LOUNGE

KATHERINE MCCLUER

I would hate to be just a woman.  
I crave the soft power this profession gives,  
the adoring faces.  
The way the men look at me  
as if they'd never been in love before this moment  
before they turned on their blinker and  
abandoned the highway for the evening.  
Most days I settle down by a keno machine  
until it's time for my shift.  
Here, the incandescent light gives a sense of anonymity.  
I do my job, and can be who I want in the morning.  
No one respects us, but I've always considered it an art.  
The red lights, the staggered bar stools, the glowing machines,  
they are our instruments.  
We give comfort to travelers, passersby,  
anyone who wants to break free.

Watching another girl spin her way up the pole, her muscles flexing,  
I think I might be losing my strength.  
She's dancing to some bleak drum beats.  
I wish she would choose something more up-lifting.

The girl is beautiful, young.  
We've spoken once.  
I told her to get out while she can  
Go to college, travel, all that.

She works her way back down the pole, face down,  
and does a hand stand as she flips onto the stage.  
I gulp back another shot of tequila while I watch.

She looked at me, beaming, when I said this.  
“I just graduated from University of Maine.”  
She’s here to experience something new.  
I guess there’s no scaring her away.  
But I’ll have to be an inspiration somehow.  
At my age it’s all I have left.