

# THE ART FARM

by Maggie Nerz Iribarne

## The End

The installations, every one of them, burned all night. There was no sign of Sam. Sharye pictured him driving his beat-up Honda down route 92, windows cracked to dilute the smell of gasoline, the cold air flowing through his long hair, a crack of a smile lingering around his lips.

## Before

Sam appeared out of nowhere, tapping on Sharye's window, causing her to jump as she stood at her sink.

"Morning, mam," he called through the glass.

She opened the door to face the stranger. Herb growled, unusual for the dog.

"I'm Sam. Lookin' for work," he said.

She laughed. There was lots of work, just no pay. "We're on a really tight budget."

He scratched his beard, crouched, held his hand out for Herb.

The dog approached, licking the welcoming fingers.

"Ya need anything fixed?" Sam smiled, crinkles around his bright blue eyes.

Sharye wanted to get back to her coffee and watercolor—a robin's nest she'd been painting.

"OK, I get you. I was just drivin' around—always liked this place."

Sharye forced a smile. The draft from the cooling weather blew in around her legs, something shifted.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" She pulled at her sweater.

Sam stepped forward, looking around as if to assess the space, sat down at the table.

Sharye found a mug in the cupboard and pulled out a plate for the Pepperidge Farm cookies she always had on hand.

Sam took one mint Milano, sipped his black coffee.

"You live around here?" Sharye asked.

"In town." He scanned past her shoulder, something her ex always did when she was in the middle of a story. He stood, moved to the easel, squinted at the half-finished nest. He put his hands in the front pockets of his jeans and smiled. "Yours?" he said.

"Yes."

"I'm an artist too."

"What do you make?"

He smiled, "Whatever you need."

Sharye knew Sam's offer would not be acceptable by the board of the Art Farm, the struggling outdoor art park she received free housing to oversee. She could not Google him because she did not know his last name. She had no idea what his art was like. He offered

no photos, had not brought the sample he promised. She waited. She forgot about it. She was on the verge of securing local artist Jose Ramirez, who made giant insects and had offered one on loan. They were kind of gross, but maybe kids would like it, she thought.

She was just about to order a giant bug when, one morning, something caught Sharye's eye. A disjointed, impossible pile of books stacked up, rising high, a breath of air would topple them. She wondered how they would fair in the rain, the snow.

The next morning the pile of books had risen even more. They were bent into an arch—an arch of books.

When she finally saw him again, she waved as he bumped along the gravel road.

He stopped. "Hey, Sharye," his slight southern twang audible in the *a* of her name.

"That's really something with the books," she said, placing hands on her lower back. She peered in the backseat of his car. No books, tools. Nothing.

"You like it?" he said.

"Uh yeah, but how'd you do it?"

"Magic," he said, eyes twinkling.

It was like *Field of Dreams*. Cars started entering the farm. The donation box overflowed with cash.

The next time Sharye saw Sam's beat-up white Honda, she asked him to dinner. He arrived holding a bottle of whiskey, wearing what Sharye saw as his version of dressy—a threadbare tweed sport jacket with a black tee underneath, jeans, and dirty white Converse. He smelled of ashes and charcoal, like a fire, like the outside.

She made him pork chops, applesauce, and an apple pie. This was central New York

in September after all—apple season. He held up the whiskey bottle and she consented, offering a glass with some ice.

"So how'd you do it?" she asked him.

He shrugged. "I told you."

"Magic?" She smiled, questioning him with her eyes.

"Yup."

She felt warm and woozy. When it was time to get dinner, she reached out for his knee and let her hand linger there before pushing herself up from the couch.

At dinner she served red wine.

"It must be wine o'clock," said Sam.

"You sound like my ninety-year-old father," she replied.

They were back on the couch for the pie, and Sharye felt drunk enough to lean into him and bury her face in his neck. He turned toward her, moving her hair away from her face, strand by strand, observing her, like he was going to eat or paint her. Then he kissed her, the taste of wine and apples suspended between them.

"Magic?" she asked.

"Yup."

In the cold silence of the next morning, she made him coffee. He gulped it down and left.

The only thing Sharye could count on Sam for was an occasional, unpredictable show-up, holding his bottle of whiskey, engaging his deft lips, and shedding his emberly smell.

In between the loving, book installations continued to appear. A stack of books looking like a Sphinx. Rows of books assembled intermittently like bar graphs, reflecting some unknown data. Books arranged to create a bouquet of flowers. Always books. Where did he get them all? What did it mean? He never told.

Meanwhile, the cars kept coming, the donations piled up, and the board had questions.

“These installations have not been approved, Sharye,” the board director said.

“I know. I know. But now we can afford real artists. We can have all the things we want.”

“We don’t even know who this man is.”

Sharye thought of the lovely things she knew about him. That mole under his left arm.

“The board has met. These . . . these book things need to go. ASAP.”

Sharye sighed. “I think it’s a big mistake.”

“You are not in a position to think anything.”

Sharye could not disagree, but her face burned with anger, or shame.

She resolved to tell Sam the next time she saw him, but since he had no phone, no address, no email, she really didn’t know when that would be. She would just have to wait.

The last installation, his crowning achievement, the one that brought the newspapers, the requests for school visits, and more widespread questions: an outdoor library seemed to have grown straight from the ground overnight. The whole thing, built on uneven ground with aged wood shelves, leaned and lurched, though remained upright. Already-tattered books packed the weak-looking structure, forming a kind of altar before small seats made from the same graying, withering wood. Covers of books flapped in the breeze, each volume shedding its pages, molting in real time. Sharye imagined it as a library for ghosts, woodland spites, fairies. A library that, even at conception, made of paper and wood, was vanishing, melting into nature before her eyes. It was beautiful and heartbreaking and perfect.

Sharye shook her head. When did he do this? Why didn’t he stop by? Why did she

never see him coming and going? Maybe it was magic? She looked down and saw the book *Travels with Charlie* on one of the benches. She picked it up and held it close. Smelled it. Placed it in her coat pocket. Winter was coming.

He slipped into her bed one night without knocking, without speaking.

Unsurprised, she turned toward him and whispered in his ear, “The library is beautiful. The best one yet.” She could see his smile by the faint light of the dying fire. “The board wants to meet you,” she said.

“No.” His stubbled cheek scratched hers.

Sharye left that one word hanging in space, unattached, unanswered.

She awoke thinking he was beside her, but the smell in the air was something different. Outside the window were wafts of smoke. She stretched her arms into her robe, stuck her feet into her rubber boots, and ran out the door, Herb close at her heels.

She couldn’t help but be breathless from her exertion and from the beauty of it, all six of Sam’s installations ablaze, tongues licking the December air. She stopped and took it in—the purity of the flame, the paper and wood reducing to ash, the smoke wafting like incense, going nowhere, or everywhere. She would never know for sure. ∞

Note: Sam’s final installation is inspired by [Stacks](#) by artist David Harper, on display at the Stone Quarry Hill Art Park in Cazenovia, New York, from 2013 to 2020.

—previously appeared in *Montana Mouthful*, June 2021



## Stacks by David Harper

about the project:

*The theme for Harper’s installation: “these trees shall be my books,” comes from William Shakespeare’s “As You Like It,” but the goal of the work goes far beyond Orlando’s wish to immortalize Rosalind. Harper seeks to immortalize the love of knowledge, and the homage owed to the living things we use to create stores of knowledge for all to study. “STACKS” captures the transformation from living tree to store of knowledge.*



image info