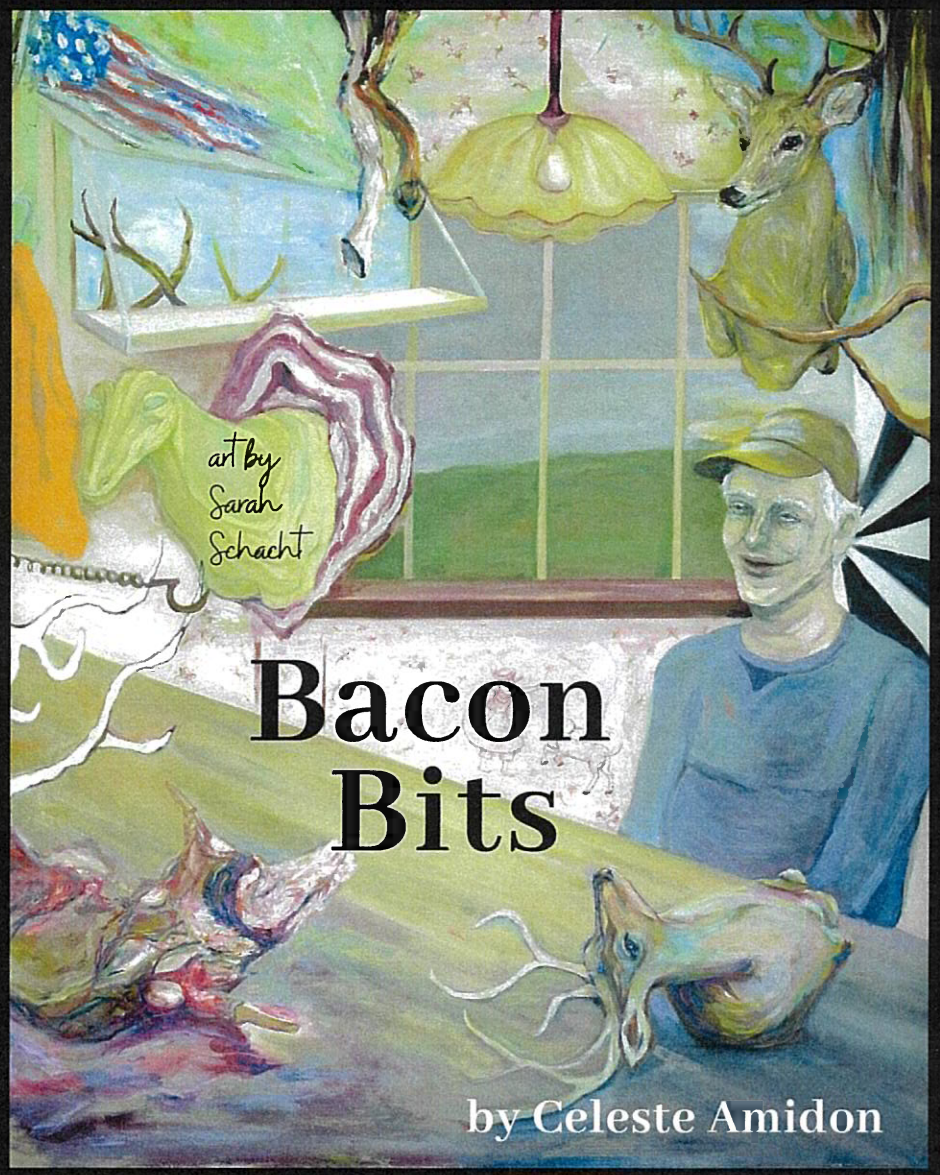
# Cusper

ISSUE #1 FALL/WINTER 2023




I'm at a friend's birthday dinner and I'm talking about the Donner Party. Again. As the waitress sets down a platter of bacon-wrapped deviled eggs, I remark on the fact that the members of the Donner Party ate bacon for nearly every meal. *"I guess it was easy to pack,"* I say, *"and didn't go bad as easily as other goods. So bacon was a mainstay of their diets. Until they were eating their own mules. And, of course, eventually, each other."*

I'm met with blank stares. *It wasn't intentional. It just came up!* ... Just like it had come up the week before, when I was at karaoke and told a loose acquaintance that many of the children on that fateful journey simply wandered off into cornfields, never to be found again. And the week before that, when, at the zoo, I remarked to an unsuspecting employee that members of the Donner Party tried eating rugs before they resorted to consuming each other. I couldn't help it. Bringing up this very specific and horrific historical event as much as possible felt compulsory to me.

**I am obsessed with the Donner Party.**

The story goes like this. In 1846, a group of Illinois farmers fell upon dismal financial times. Though the Gold Rush had not technically begun, word had spread across America that California was the place to be. Eighty seven people set off on a journey to the land of sand and oranges. About half made it. Several perished along the way due to horrific weather conditions. Some died from disease. Others, famously, were eaten by fellow members of the crew — which tends to be the takeaway from the Donner Party story. Ever since reading about it in a harrowing book called *The Indifferent Stars Above* by Daniel James Brown, the tale of the Donner Pass has lived, as the children say, *"rent free"* in my hippocampus.

## *Why?*

I was born in London to a very British mother (thinks country music is "horrid," favorite show is Fawlty Towers) and a very American father (obsessed with Pepperidge Farm Coconut Cake, grew up in New Jersey). My family moved to the American East Coast when I was a year old. My older brother, seven at the time, shed his British accent the moment the plane landed at JFK and signed up for Football — the American kind — the next day.

Growing up, I was an irritatingly good student, a real *aren't-you-gonna-assign-us-homework*? type. I played flute in the school band and hoarded extra credit assignments in lieu of partying and dating. I was told that if I focused and worked and, as the kids also say -- "grinded" -- all my hard work and sacrifice would *"pay off."*

Pay off in what way? I did not know. I don't think I stopped to wonder. I did well on the SATs and got into a good college, continued to turn in essays early and obsess over internships. Then I graduated into a corporate job, spending over half my paycheck on a closet-core apartment in New York that I barely spent any time in because I was too busy going for networking drinks and dating guys who said *"don't worry about that"* when I asked them about crypto. All my life, everybody had told me how important it was to move forward, to strive for something else, something greater, something that would be worth it.

*Trust us!*

Back in 1846, the details to which these Illinois Farmers clung regarding what their new lives would look like once they arrived in California were almost comically vague. *It'll be awesome! Trust us! There are oranges! You can swim... we think! Now pack up every belonging you have and walk.*

While their lives in Illinois weren't ideal, they certainly were not catastrophic. But they were pioneers. In search of something better. They kept their map handy and followed it precisely, even when the route took them up rolling cliffs, leading them deep into swirling snowstorms.

My mother often tells me that people in England simply don't *strive* the way Americans do. They are content, she says, with what they have. Indeed, Europeans mock us mercilessly for our oh-so-American rise-and-grind mentality; our collective need to optimize every bagel we eat. My father, while working in Italy, once suggested his team work through lunch. What ensued ran the full gamut of human emotion: despair, disbelief, anger, outrage, panic.

I do wonder if this need to sacrifice immediate happiness for a later, more opaque happiness is what sets Americans apart from others. That willingness to do like my Greek great grandmother: get on a boat and get off in a land you know barely anything about.

The Donner crew decided they wanted something greater than their swamp, and set off on an epic journey toward something intangible but better. It had to be better.

But in striving, they were destroyed. First by each other; by greed, interpersonal conflict, petty rivalries. Then by the utterly inhospitable climate, the same one they were striving for. Then by each other again.



Life was kind to me until March 2020, when Covid donkey-kicked me (and everybody else I knew) in the face. I was twenty-one and working a sexy job and living in Manhattan and "grabbing drinks" with people who worked for "multi-vertical brands." Moving back in with my parents in Central Massachusetts, taking zoom calls in my Powerpuff Girls pajamas, chugging down boxed-wine-with-a-side-of-lexapro, relying on Mad Men for happiness – this was not part of my plan! Suddenly, I had regressed. New York City, a land of dreams upon which I had staked a claim, became unlivable and I fled in the opposite direction from where I'd been told life would lead me.
Thrust, in one motion, back to the beginning of my American journey.

I was at a family pool party recently talking about the Donner Party again. I told my mother how, despite everything, one of the survivors of the Donner incident wrote to her extended family back in Illinois and implored them to come to California. My mother sat under the shade of a patio umbrella and watched people congregate around the barbecue grill, hotdogs sizzling. I thought of how Daniel James Brown had described cooked human flesh as smelling no different from other types of meat. I told my mother that, if it was me back then, I would have much rather stayed in Illinois than ventured out on the horrific journey to California.

*"But you'd have been bored to tears in Illinois,"*

she said, adjusting the brim of her hat. I laughed. She was probably right.

photos by Julia Delmedico