



THE
AFTER HAPPY HOUR
REVIEW

ISSUE 2 // FALL 2014



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword

To The Cerebral Drama That Will Probably Be Cancelled After Its Brilliant First Season* BY CHRISTINA AILOR 1

What The Hell Happened Here? BY MATTHEW DEXTER 3

How A Radish Feels BY WILLIAM DORESKI 5

You Can Paint Anywhere BY CAROL NISSENSON 8

de capo* BY BRYAN MCCARTHY 10

The Story My Mother Told Me When I Fell Out of the Mulberry Tree (&) Dixon BY ALAN GANN 11, 12

Lead Belly* BY JUSTIN BAYER 14

To The Show That Was Always Just A Night Time Soap* BY CHRISTINA AILOR 21

Corn Audience BY APRIL SALZANO 23

Old Spice BY ADITYA SHANKAR 24

Comes a Time* BY JASON PECK 25

Nana Jean, Uncle Herm (&) Carrion* BY KARA HELMICK-NELSON 28, 29, 30

To The Sitcom I'm Still Watching Eight Seasons In* BY CHRISTINA AILOR 32

Tip The Hourglass Back* BY GEORGE ELLIS 34

Afterword

* Submitted through the Hour After Happy Hour Writing Workshop

FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the second issue of *The After Happy Hour Review*, and thanks in advance for reading. As before and always, the purpose of this journal is to showcase the best and brightest examples of the writing process that goes on at the writing workshop from whence it sprang, *The Hour After Happy Hour*. We also seek out and celebrate exceptional writing from other parts of the state, country, and world. In this way, we aim to be both a quality traditional journal, and something a bit different as well.

Founded two years ago by Dean Matthews and Mike Good, our group meets every Thursday night to discuss and dissect the work each of us brings into it. Over my time with the group — about a month after the very first meeting — I've been struck by the profound growth and development that has occurred not only in the subsequent revisions of the pieces considered, but also in the authors themselves. It is this writer's opinion that every member is consistently becoming a better writer than last time, and being the only point that counts, I'd say we're doing pretty well. But you, the reader, can be the judge of that.

Since starting the journal, we've had the humbling and extremely educational experience of being editors on a much larger scale. In sifting through the many outside submissions received (especially for this second issue), and experiencing the other side of the publishing game, we can safely conclude that it is, indeed, hard work. The decision process this time was sometimes painstaking and often controversial, but has resulted in a selection of work we're all abundantly proud and honored to publish.

Here's to next time, and happy reading (and hopefully writing!) to all of you on the other side of the page.

Sincerely,

Mike Lambert

Managing Editor/Beleagured Layout Guy at *The After Happy Hour Review*



FABIO SASSI

To The Cerebral Drama That Will Probably Be Cancelled After Its Brilliant First Season

BY CHRISTINA AILOR

Maybe I am not at your level, but I want to reach
as far as I can grasp
with the tips of my fingers that intersection of obsessions. Climb up and devour
you again and again. I want a shared presence – to
own you, run my hand up and down your spine, listen to an incisive
quip, or languish in the bravery

of silence.

I will write effusive online reviews. I will
read every article, listen to every
podcast, seek out any extra-
curricular connection

to you. Complications expand. Our palms pull
towards each other, fast and strong as
we sort through treatments, debts, inconvenient phone calls
from ex-lovers and mechanics. It takes longer

to walk friends
through each beat, explain
your worth, describe the way your presence
makes the color of each day's sky so significant, how
often you make my blood rise to skin under a bright
burning blue. Rummaging for balm at the bottom of my purse
as I try to defend each layer.

Neither of us wants an ending. There comes a magnet-
flip moment; a repelling force that skews
our eye contact till the strain

makes us blink. When
I drop in I tell myself it was perfect –
that I got just enough. Then, seeing you is
is too painful.

My visits dwindle. At least I
can talk to my parents about your replacement.



What the Hell Happened Here?

BY MATTHEW DEXTER

My brother took my father's hunting rifle and stuffed it in his hockey bag and blew his brains into the chalkboard outside the computer lab. His face follows me everywhere. We were twins. This town is so small, every house exudes its distinctive smell which half the underage population is capable of triggering on instinct — and you can usually tell who is sitting behind you in homeroom by the aroma of their laundry detergent. We do not have assigned seats. Since the shooting, everybody wants to sit closest or farthest from the door. Nobody wears sandals anymore. Even the popular girls wear running shoes.

Wish I was one of those beautiful corpses with blood flowing across linoleum hallways of Benjamin Franklin Elementary School. When I walk into town, everybody stops talking, and vehicles slow. The lone stoplight is neglected when I swagger across the intersection. Fathers flip me the bird. Mothers of rotting cadavers or incinerated shells honk their horns with their foreheads. The cafeteria lady cannot look me in the eyes. The principle walks with a limp and half a dozen students are still on crutches. The waitresses at Applebee's hate us, their scowling faces blame us, and Mom swears they spit in our food. Dad drinks TOP SHELF LONG ISLAND ICED TEA, but has been forced to drive to the neighboring county in order to purchase liquor without being recognized. Sometimes, they still know who he is.

We put our house on the market but nobody wants to buy it because it is the house of the school shooter. Nobody wants to sit on the same toilet as a murderer. Mom changes our laundry detergent every evening. Every day my smell is different. The obese bully has become timid and almost popular since the shooting. Everybody in the school seems to have an intuition that something evil is behind them. The gym teacher got fired for spitting in my eye during a fire drill.

There is a metal detector in front of the school. A cop stands with his gun glistening in its holster as we enter. He patrols the hallways, whistling into urinals in the middle of classes. I yanked my locker yesterday and found a blotch of dried blood. Nobody can wash away a school shooting. Scrubbing only goes so far.

Students notice ketchup stains almost every day in the cafeteria at the table where the popular girls were gunned down. The cafeteria has since stopped serving ketchup. We have to eat French fries and hamburgers with mustard. They stopped serving spa-

ghetti and meatballs and fruit punch. Nobody goes to the hockey games because it reminds them of the shooting. You used to hear screaming, but now the rafters fill with pigeons and the whistle of the referee and the sticks and skates.

Dad ends up dead on the side of the road in another state. What the hell happened here? Since the school shooting, our family is being sniped one-by-one. Mom is next: mauled by a school bus during a dust storm. Mom was standing in the middle of the road. The yellow school bus was a weapon, empty except for the bus driver, able to cruise camouflaged through the desert borne by auburn for that awkward eighth of a mile. Every afternoon, the bus driver speeds past our house with her bus full of students. She did not get charged because of the dust storm. The surgeons did all they could for Mom, but nobody bothered to pick the yellow paint chips from her blood.

I move in with Grandma in the neighboring county and our town celebrates as an ambitious realtor stabs a red FOR SALE sign on our front lawn. The grass is brown and amber and hasn't been mowed since Dad died. The whole town swaggers out to their sidewalks to wave when we drive away in Grandma's Buick. There are people at each driveway, old men on their porches with canes and walkers, elderly ladies with wide-open mouths, and mosquitoes and fireflies bouncing against the windows.



How a Radish Feels

BY WILLIAM DORESKI

You've received the highest grade
in your bioengineering class.
You flaunt your A as Hester did
while I, your subject, boil with pride.
No one sees my duck-web feet
or the homegrown calf's liver
or the radish that has replaced

my spleen because a third party
wondered how a radish feels.
But your lab report spoke boldly
of your post-scientific concern
for the welfare of your subjects
so I'm not inclined to complain.
Your professor with his wondrous beard

looms over your class like a fusion
of Zeus and Harold Bloom. Textbooks
flutter in his presence. Women
like you worship test tubes bearing
his fingerprints, while male students
check their beards in tiny mirrors
and find them desperately wanting.

If only I could deploy myself
and my bioengineered features
amid the flora in the greenhouse
I could be an effective haunting
that visiting children could enjoy.
With a magnet you post your A
on the refrigerator. Maybe

I should post my new liver there
as well, and maybe a photo
of the duck-tracks I leave in the mud
in the back yard. And maybe when
I determine how a radish feels
you can post my full-face grinning
with radical vegetable bliss.



W. JACK SAVAGE



NICK ROMEO

YOU CAN PAINT ANYWHERE

BY CAROL NISSENSON

Hyacinth and Evan sat bumpkin-like at the center table in Red Breitbart's, slogan: 'Serving boring food to powerful people for 46 years.' Their hosts were Representative Something-Or-Other and his lovely wife Denise. Or was it Doreen?

As the new Deputy Secretary of Starches, Evan was a much sought after dinner date. He was well known in academic circles for his thesis, *The Effect Of Low Phosphate Levels On Stalk Thickness In Zea Mays*, and chosen for his post at Agriculture because of his article in *Millennial Money*, 'Can We Have Our Ethanol and Our Corn Dogs, Too?'

Hyacinth poked at chunks of boiled beef and carrot in a colorless broth. 'Tante Sylvia's favorite dish,' the menu said. The only identifiable taste was salt. Tante Sylvia probably died an early death from high blood pressure.

The night before at the Entropy Club, Hyacinth had exactly the same meal, but they called it Pot au Feu. The Entropy Club had been serving boring food for over 100 years to people who had actually done something.

Their hosts that evening were the Under Secretary of Legumes, and her husband, Josh. She was elected to the Entropy Club for her thesis, *Variations In Nutrient Factors In Phaseolus Lunatus*, and chosen for her post at Agriculture after a piece called 'Lima Beans: Yucky, But Good For You' appeared in the trendy parenting magazine, *Because I Said So*.

The Under Secretary pulled Hyacinth aside after dessert. "There are only two things you need to know about Washington. It's not what you eat, it's who you're eating with. And stay out of Chevy Chase Circle. It's the Idiot 500."

§

Just days after receiving his degree from University of Illinois, Evan was offered a significant post at University of Chicago. There are no insignificant posts at the University of Chicago.

Hyacinth was a little sad about leaving Champaign. One of her pieces, 'Desperate Rainbow,' had recently been part of a group show at the Ersatz Gallery. The painting didn't sell. However, the critic in the Gazette gave it a very meaningful review. "The peach canvas, with its borders of tiny squiggles in primary colors, could be the lovechild of Jackson Pollack and Georgia O'Keefe."

§

Hyacinth launched herself into an apartment hunt in Hyde Park, Motto: Eating sushi for 70 Years, because we think it tastes good. She found an interesting apartment, with interesting neighbors in an interesting building for \$1400 a month near the university, and studio space for \$200 a month in Logan Square.

The random pieces of china and silverware were packed, and the U haul rented. Then the Big Call came.

The Deputy Secretary of Starches had left in disgrace after the Post ran a story about his latest office retreat. It cost \$32,000 and featured such valuable teambuilding activities as jam making and couples massages.

"Good thing your easel was already packed," Hyacinth's mother commented brightly. This is a great career move for Evan. You can paint anywhere."

§

Their DC apartment had forest green carpets, and a gold chandelier with tiny faux flame light bulbs. It reminded Hyacinth of her grandmother's house, and not in a good way. She bought a giant tarp, and yards and yards of plastic sheeting to make the den spatter proof, and set up her easel. You can paint anywhere.

§

Just four months after her arrival in Washington, Hyacinth's latest work, 'Untitled 14,' was part of a group show at the Gallery Sufocada. It didn't sell, but the Post's reviewer spoke favorably of 'the artist's Mondrian-like sense of design.'

da capo

BY BRYAN MCCARTHY

There's a way to smoke a cigarette,
I have no idea how,
that'll make this song seem like it lasts forever—
that matches leaves and flax with brass
to extend bridges between erosional of time

and more time. And as stray glissandi
reach into the breezy waters
fermatas fly overhead, watching like patient
vultures holding our moments together ransom—
searching the thick ink of evening
for a crochet quilt draped across the back cushions

to pull towards our overlapping limbs.
Out of some other room a muted clarinet
finds the breath to gather as the fire begins
flirting with the filter—warmth, a burn
then repeat.

The Story My Mother Told Me When I Fell Out of the Mulberry Tree

BY ALAN GANN

Some hobo carved
three lines suggesting a picnic table
into the whitewashed fence
separating my Grandparent's house
from sparsely traveled Railroad Street
on the outskirts of Dixon Tennessee.

Having slipped out of the rattling boxcar
rail thin men, dusty beige to brown to black,
follow the crude map
and after pulling a drink from the well
sit quietly beneath the patient mulberry tree.

In a few minutes
the screen door clatters and Grandma serves
each a bowl of black-eyed peas and a biscuit.
She tries to make sure
every bowl has a tiny bit of fatback or bacon
and sometimes comes back
with a box of old shoes and shirts
collected from her Uncle's church.
Nobody speaks and the men keep their eyes
focused on the ground.

Through hand-sewn curtains
my mother watches these ghostlike men
until they disappear
then goes out and collects the dishes
scrubs them clean,
stacks them beside the cast iron stove
listening for the next distant whistle.

DIXON

BY ALAN GANN

When the singer locked eyes with mine
I saw him forget the words
and it wasn't love or desire
but the way I forget the color of the sky
the white-eyed vireo's call
the sweet curry's burn
whenever you touch my arm

the way a silence large as the Dust Bowl
deserves a name
so even those who were not there
can talk about it
the way weathermen talk about Katrina or Hazel
cartographers speak of The Great Divide

The first time Mom had to search for my name
I looked her in the eyes with so much more
than our trip to the Outer Banks
than dogwood along the Blue Ridge
than black-eyed peas on a bed of steaming greens
and we named the silence Dixon
after the park where she pushed me on the swings
where we laughed and chased the squirrels.

One day, either too soon or not,
I will walk alone into that forest
and forget the way back;
I will climb the most ancient sycamore
whose name must surely be forgotten
and forget the way down.
As the sun begins to set
I will forget how to dream and that I cannot fly.



NICK ROMEO

Lead Belly

BY JUSTIN BAYER

“Really – an open casket,” was my first impression. He had shot himself in the temple after all. Though, to be fair, they had done a good job.

The problem was that I knew too much about mortuary science. Once upon a time I served as middle man between a drug dealer named Wesley and an embalming student. I gave him cocaine; he traded copious quantities of formaldehyde, which we then coated marijuana with. Wesley marketed it as P.C.P. and the alkaloid inevitably achieved the desired effect. His customers were none the wiser.

In any case, my close association with said mortician led me to a deeper understanding of the funeral home’s practices. That is to say that the deceased’s face was drawn back tightly, accentuating where and how – if one knew where to look – the skin had been peeled forward from the skull, and then re-applied. Nasty business.

I did not want to come, but I felt that I had to. His name was Nate. The first time I had ever crushed up a pill and snorted it, he had showed me how. He was a couple years older than me, and had helped me acquire drugs when my connections were still few. It was mostly just pot in those days, but Nate graduated quickly to coke, and finally heroin. I hadn’t seen him in three or four years, though the last time I did he was at a party shooting dope between his toes. He had a job interview the next day, and he didn’t want the track marks to show.

That’s what I was thinking as I folded and refolded my hands in the funeral home. We were three blocks away from the house where I was raised, but I made it a point not to visit that side of town too often anymore. As my eyes drifted across the old faces that surrounded me, the familiarity was less a comfort than a nameless sort of oppression. Most of my peers were the type of people that I had actively attempted to avoid as I grew older. I couldn’t wait to move away, and I did as soon as possible. This class reunion was never supposed to happen.

I exhaled loudly and stood, assuring everyone that I was not in fact leaving, but merely going outside to smoke. The air was growing cold as autumn wore on, and I could see my breath. As I was lighting my cigarette I heard someone yell my name,

“Victor,” from the parking lot across the street, so I wandered in that direction.

A bunch of people I grew up with were circled around the rear of a pick-up truck. I murmured greetings and shook hands. They had a case of beer and were passing around a blunt, coughing. These guys were literally tail-gating at a funeral.

I freaked out for a second. Then I accepted the cigar full of pot. He’d have done the same thing if it were me in the casket. It wasn’t me though, so I grabbed a beer and made a toast. The first swig didn’t go down smoothly, but it got easier.

My childhood friends had names like Roy, and Marty, and Chad. They asked me if my friends Wesley and Andy were coming, and I said, “No they’re not going to make it,” which was true. I had that conversation earlier on the phone. They shrugged and asked what I had been up to.

“Living,” was my reply, and though it was the short version, it was mostly true. I felt obliged to ask them the same questions, but their answers were less terse.

Apparently scrap metal was lucrative, and my former cohorts had been combing the rusty river shores, abandoned warehouses, and derelict factories for copper, heavy steel, and anything else of value. The city was a shell of itself since the mills had closed, and opportunities existed for the advantageous to profit. Selling their salvage at sprawling scrap yards they received tax-free cash in hand to spend on their vices. However, it was theft, which made the enterprise risky. Another of the other guys I grew up with was serving time, and thus absent, for those very crimes.

It made me even more depressed somehow. Our city, and to a larger extent our country, was built by our forefathers ambition and dedication. The industry of Pittsburgh helped shape our nation, and defined an era. Now my peers were tearing the city apart, like they were stripping meat from the ribs of an animal not yet dead. I was living in the ruins of my own civilization.

Everything was changing and I didn’t like it. Reality sat like an indigestible lump in my chest. Roy, Marty, and Chad kept on about the variable nature of their livelihood. My mind grappled with the idea of evolution, and the possibility that we were the inevitable link between progress and atavism. I pictured Nate’s corpse.

So I smiled, readjusted my shabby suit uncomfortably. It felt cumbersome, like armor. All of a sudden, I was grimacing without trying. I felt as though everyone

noticed, so I drank my beer and looked away distractedly. I tried to remember Nate. I tried to remember him the way he was. He had long, greasy brown hair, and was partial to heavy metal. He wore band t-shirts and glasses. His face was smattered with oily acne, but he would have done anything for anybody. He was a good friend with a big heart. Too big. I drank the rest of my beer, but it was bitter.

Looking around at Roy, Marty, and Chad I knew that they were heroin addicts. Junkies like Nate. He told me about it a long time ago. I grew angry and confused. Could shooting up be so great? It made you a slave. What was the allure? It made itself your God. It made you worship it. That's what Nate told me in one of his more lucid moments. It became all you could think of. How would you acquire it? How much would you get? Who would you get it from? Would it be good?

Heroin sells you piece by piece too, and eventually it destroys what's left. There is no middle ground with the needle. It makes no exceptions and it demands total loyalty. Read the fine print...

I threw my empty bottle into the alley, and it exploded into a hail of emerald shards. I made my way back across the street into the funeral home without a word, as Roy, Marty, and Chad mumbled about me amongst themselves. Inside it was the same as I'd left it – solemn people, crying people, vacant looks, red eyes. Then, out of nowhere, a smile.

It took me a second to recognize the face behind the grin. It was Tracy, Nate's cousin. She was the first woman that I had ever loved, though the sentiment was not shared. We had been friends since grade school, and though Nate had been older, she was in my class. We were inseparable for a time. Later, when puberty hit with dizzying brutality, I confessed my feelings for her. She had grown into a beautiful girl. As pretty as she was though, when I spilled my heart to her she just laughed, and my throat closed. Tracy said things about our friendship and not ruining it, but the ruination was complete.

We were never quite as close after that. I pined from afar, but my clumsy affection never waned. Later, she was involved with my best friend, the drug dealer Wesley, which destroyed me. I have often considered this the catalyst for the subsequent negativity in my love life, but that's a cop out. Still, in many ways I felt more for Tracy than any other woman, including my wife, and since then I have been an emotional train wreck. My marriage was the most notable example, but it seemed like I made

everyone I loved resent me in time.

I stood and approached her. She was alone. Her smile faded as I drew near, and we hugged for a long time wordlessly. “I’m sorry,” was all I could say when we let go. “Me too,” was all she had in return. We sat next to each other on one of the floral patterned sofas in silence.

“So how have you been, Vic?” she asked timidly.

“Good,” I began, and then faltered. We were friends once... “Actually, awful. My wife is divorcing me. I live alone, and I don’t know who I am, or what I’m doing anymore. Now Nate’s dead, and that just fucks everything up even worse.” I paused. “You?”

She laughed, maybe a little too loud, and people looked at us with accusations in their eyes. Tracy either didn’t notice, or didn’t care.

“Well, it’s been awhile since I’ve seen you, but in the interest of full disclosure, I have two children to two different fathers – two girls,” she said. “I haven’t seen either one in over a year because I’m addicted to heroin, and I don’t have a job. Now my cousin’s dead, and he was my roommate, so I have no clue how I’m going to pay rent. Plus, my parents had to borrow money to help pay for this lovely funeral, which means I can’t even ask them for help. I really have no idea what I’m going to do. Did I win?”

This time I laughed, though with appropriate restraint. She was just as brazen and unapologetic as ever. I had missed the vulgarity of her honesty.

“If this was a contest, my dear, you most certainly would have won. That being said, I think we are both losers,” I replied, and then we both laughed, while the other mourners looked at us again, frowning in disapproval.

Tracy and I talked about old times. She was wearing a plain black dress, though she looked anything but plain. Something about too much black eye makeup always does it. Vulnerability is unaccountably attractive. She had a maudlin femininity that was too cute not to suck you in. Then there were her eyes. Behind the excessive mascara were two green stars that beheld a bruised intelligence too tragic not to love. I was enthralled once more. A teenager again.

Eventually the deacon alerted her that the time had come for the prayer service,

and her presence was required. She said she had to go to the bathroom first, but that she would be there directly. Then we embraced and kissed each other on the cheek, and she was gone. I felt ill. It was as though her brief proximity had scrambled my brain.

When the prayer service began I stood directly in the back, taking inventory of all the people and their various demeanors. Tracy was swaying sleepily next to Nate's mother, front and center. Her eyes kept falling shut, and her head kept nodding forward. Everyone was paying attention to the deacon who was reading from a bible, so no one seemed to notice. Tracy was high. She must have gone to the bathroom to shoot up before they started. I looked at my shoes, and shook my head. This was it. This was what the children we were had to look forward to.

After the praying, Nate's friends and family were invited to speak on his behalf. I listened to his uncle talk about Nate as a happy youth, and to his mother expounding on his capacity for love. But after Roy, then Marty, and finally Chad had their turns recounting their remembrances of the boy who became a man who shot himself, I had enough. There was a reason I didn't talk to these people anymore. I didn't like them.

So I slipped quietly away, and out the door. I almost hope no one remembers me when I'm gone. Then it will be like I was never even there. Outside, I took a deep breath, adjusted my belt and buttoned my suit jacket. I lit my cigarette and began walking across the street toward my car, but I heard the door open behind me and turned. There was Tracy.

"Listen, Victor, I'm fucked up. Do you think you could ride me home?" she asked from atop the steps. "And it's cold..." She drew out the final syllable until it sounded sinister.

I didn't answer right away, but I couldn't envision any scenario in which I would say no. I pictured her leaving in the middle of Chad's inarticulate homage and was mildly amused, but I didn't smile. So what I said was, "Let's get out of here," and we did.

"Where do you live?" I asked without emotion when we got in the car. Tracy mumbled something and closed her eyes, so I shook her gently and repeated myself. She gave an address I might have expected, having grown up in the neighborhood. I made my way to a shabby row house below the main thorough fare, down by the

river. It was a bad section of town, as I well knew. We were on the street where I grew up.

She seemed alert when we got there. Since I had shaken her she maintained the veneer of composure. We stopped outside of a red brick hovel, nestled against its neighbors like so many filing cabinets for the destitute. I put the car into park.

“Well, it appears that you’re home safe and sound,” I said. “Take care of yourself, alright? And take care of those daughters. What were their names again?” I stopped myself from touching her cheek.

She closed her eyes when I told her to take care of herself, and when I mentioned her children the first tear I had seen her shed all night slipped like glitter in the glare of the street light.

“Aren’t you going to come in?” she asked sadly. Then she looked up at me and the green in her eyes was all I could see. I looked away, but it was hard.

Her eyes were like a medicine you didn’t know you needed until you found it. Her pupils though, were like black pin holes in pools of pure green. Heroin did this to her. I conceived and contemplated this solemnly. As my averted gaze came to rest upon my lap, I folded and refolded my hands nervously as I had in the funeral home.

“It’s cold,” Tracy said, repeating her maneuver from the steps when we left. That seemed like forever ago, but it didn’t seem sinister now. It just seemed pathetic.

I looked up from my hands to her face. She looked sad. Everything full of blood within me wanted to kiss her, and tell her that it was going to be alright, but that would have been a lie. If I went into that house with her we would have gotten fucked up and fucked. Don’t get me wrong – I wanted to. But her face was not just sad, it was a road map of regret. I saw the girl I used to love within her still, but there was no way to save her.

I shook my head and squeezed the bridge of my nose in pain bred of indecision’s gnashing teeth. I thought of Nate once more. He was the reason I was there. Tracy blinked back eye lashes that looked like they weighed a ton, and another tear meandered down her cheek. Nate’s cousin. The one who got away... He had been a silent scream inside the contrived opulence of the funeral home, but inside my shitty car, between her and I, Nate was a mute echo.

I took a deep breath and focused on Tracy's eyes, holding in the air and cutting to size the sadness I wanted to see. All I could accomplish here was a conquest I left incomplete in my youth. I could not help her. It was all falling apart.

Everything is a breaking down. Cooking and shooting, cutting up and snorting, crumbling and smoking, opening and drinking, getting naked and fucking...

"I saw how you reacted when I mentioned your children," I said, staring out the window. "But you never did tell me their names."

She sniffled, and didn't say anything right away. Then she looked out the other window in the opposite direction and softly replied, "Sabrina and Nadia. Eight and six. They're the best thing I've ever done. I never deserved them."

I looked at her eyes, and tried to see to the bottom, but when I could not I looked away, knowing this would be the last time I would ever see her. I couldn't look back.

The final glimpse I caught as I turned away was of her hair, golden in the weak light like corn silk, or something finer still. My eyes found themselves staring back out the driver side window at the street I used to call home.

"I wish things had turned out differently," I began, but then I stopped. I didn't recognize any of it anymore, even though it was all I used to know. The broken sidewalks, rusty gutters, and uneven streets were just shadows in my dreams. Even now, being there, the street lights didn't cast the same glow they used to. I guess nothing glows the way it used to. "I'm sorry."

I had nothing left to say after that. I suppose she didn't either, because she got out silently. After she'd closed the door and the only sound was the car's engine laboring in the autumn air I felt bereft, as though something vital had been amputated. So I slipped the transmission into drive, limping home with what I had left.

To The Show That Was Always Just A Night Time Soap

BY CHRISTINA AILOR

Tell me one more time not to think
too hard. You are not into making plans, go on
irrelevant tangents, set up
cryptic conversations which never lead
anywhere. I march into your arms
every week – giggling at your easiest one-liner, enraptured by your filmy
social commentary and garbled statistics. My thoughts lose
traction, slip out beneath
me all crossed and akimbo. Even while I'm there, in the midst
of a steamy elevator kiss, I'm furious
with my own weakness – want to rinse this
absurdity from my life. I glance up. A smile
makes me want to turn you
on. I blush to admit
I'm still involved. You want me to stay?
Leave my toothbrush here? Then get your shit
together. I will give you up
just after this next commercial break.



W. JACK SAVAGE

CORN AUDIENCE
BY APRIL SALZANO

My son claims the corn makes him feel famous. He imagines the stalks as people, their million arms waving, silk flowing skyward in celebration as we travel the driveway between two full fields. Children gawk from the perimeter, unaffected by the fallen few face down in gravel as if they have thrown themselves in our path in sacrifice. In the middle, he says, he knows a red carpet leads to a stage, where they would love if he would give a speech on the nature of roots.



NICK ROMEO



OLD SPICE BY ADITYA SHANKAR

Everything's got a way of stating itself, say the miniature sea on a pack of Old Spice – paused, fragmented, closed-mouth, that wait in failing marts on the trash-strewn streets of Bangalore to unleash waves as wrinkles on my dad's old skin, it's hoarseness just enough for me to like him like a squirrel hearts the tree bark. They say he's rubbed it against fire many a time, the fire on tip of an ignited word that worried who will take care of the universe, apologize for being a fake saint, and say we are all beautiful golden sunflowers inside, but with the stench of a muddy pond where we drain out all excess, but for our time that has the shape of a brand: A bird sits and hoots, hoping to make it to a logo.

COMES A TIME BY JASON PECK

Your fingers flip through vacation photos several decades old of a landmark you (incorrectly) identify as a Parisian coffee shop, and the shuffling of celluloid makes a sound like a bad hand of cards. A trash pile lies below.

There comes a time the old photos have got to go, and sometime that afternoon you decide the time is now. Nothing here belongs in a museum. No one did anything famous and you can't trade it for cash.

The snapshots smell musty, the kind of stink that develops from time in a dozen attics with leaking roofs (you're not sure whose). One person passes down three photo albums, the next generation passes nine and before long there's no room for the living. What is disposing of old photos then, but a necessary evil?

And so you sit there in the living room, coffee table covered in the oversized binders, their cardboard covers cracked and their metal hinges rusty, with photos long since slipped from their plastic sheets and falling like leaf piles, shoeboxes filled with images, photos jammed into pages of spine-broken books.

Photos keep memories alive. What point if the memories aren't yours? What relevance without a relation to yourself? Toss the impersonal, you think. Whittle it down to the good stuff.

That's why you kick the jaundiced-yellow vacation photos first. Who needs shots of landmarks and monuments still there, taken by a tourist long since dead? A shot of the beach shows the same beach you could visit; a photo of a sunset shows the same sun as today.

Farewell to the coffee shop. You smile, having made a "safe" decision.

(The "coffee shop" is actually not still there since its destruction in World War II, and furthermore was actually the Auberge d'Auvergne on the island of Malta, founded as a hostel for Knights of the Order of St. John – who would find your use of "coffee shop" insulting, considering you apply the same term to your neighbor-

hood Starbucks.)

You squint at faces, but any similarities to you own are lost behind masks of wide-rimmed glasses, pomade hair and awkward smiles. If only someone had written names and dates on the backs, complete with a family tree to track their importance. But the subjects never imagined there'd come a day they couldn't explain it themselves. They organized photos the same way you do, relying only on memories.

What's this photo? you once asked your mother, holding a portrait of a woman wearing a dress like window drapes next to a man with the eyes and beard of Abe Lincoln. She recognized her own great-aunt and uncle. Now no one can.

Hesitation hits for the first time, you realize. You pick who goes for good. The identities are lost, the stories fragmented. Nothing has survived but this.

Why not this one? You wonder at a frayed photo of an old man with his smile crooked and his face jowl-heavy, back bent and posing in front of wheat fields (which are actually cornfields), with hands behind his back like a school kid. You leaf through the collection for clues and find no hints of his name.

No connection, no use.

The photo you just discarded showed your long-dead great-grandfather, the only such photo left.

In 1899 as a boy he carried his baby sister from house to house in search of a doctor for her scarlet fever and failed (she left no photos either), making him determined to never lose a family member again, who quit school at 14 to work full-time and support a family (more direct ancestors of yours) that he seldom saw with the hours he worked at the Pittsburgh steel mill. Likewise hidden from view in the picture and from history is the mangled right hand behind his back, burned off when the molten metal hit it.

This is the man who saved his son (your grandfather) from getting hit by a truck in 1936, who named his first granddaughter (your mother) after the aforementioned dead sister. This is the man who wrote a weekly column on Fridays in the Faith section of the Homestead Gazette and saved the clippings in a sunset-red

album (now faded to amber at your left) with pithy sayings for his future generations (which you will never abide by).

This is the man who moved the family back onto his uncle's farm after the accident (which you should remember from old family reunions as a five-year-old) and who built children's miniature rocking chairs still collecting dust in innumerable attics (including your). Before his hair turned white it sported the same mud-brown color as it does three generations later in you. Behind those glasses are the same colored eyes that now judge his picture.

All this distant relation wanted was the promise he made over his sister's dead body, to know his life did have its requisite share of meaning, with contributions surely never forgotten and photos never thrown away.

Nothing has survived but this.

A flick of the wrist and it flutters and joins the rest of the disposables.



THE SAM AILOR FAMILY

UNCLE HERM

BY KARA HELMICK-NELSON

That place, it
—it's pretty nice,
people are nice.
Sugar's
been good.
Ya know, I
only get
what they
give me.
They got me
doin' that
therapy stuff.
All the
walkin' ten
steps, fifteen
tomorrow. It's
tiring. They keep
sayin' I'm
makin' progress,
but I'm real
tired.

CARRION

BY KARA HELMICK-NELSON

don't pump me full
of formaldehyde.
i've looked into the preserved
faces of loved ones and acquaintances and
i didn't recognize one of them.

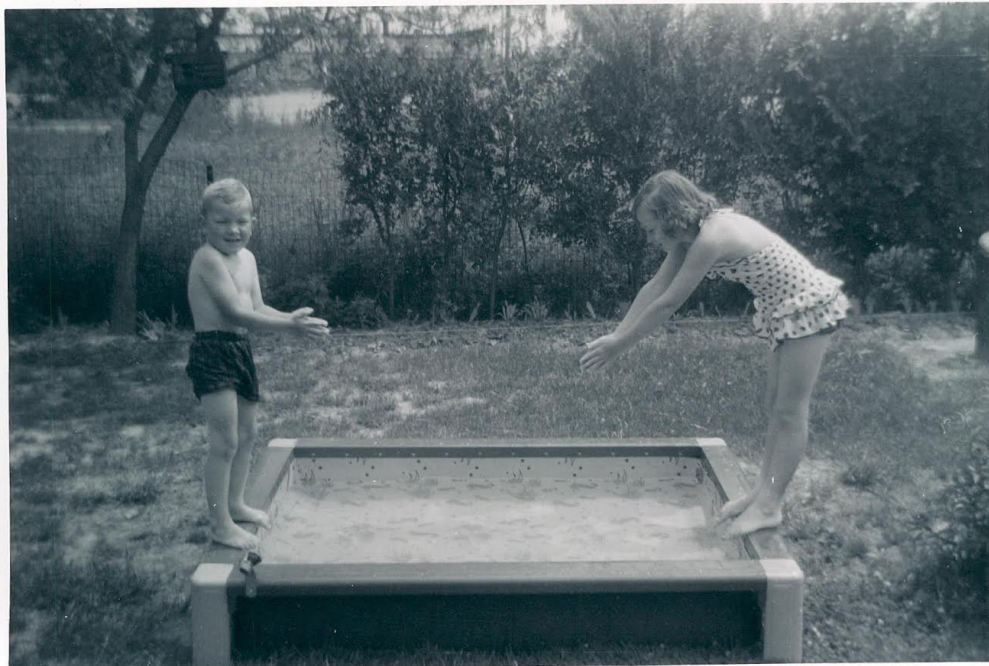
displaying them in a pricey box,
talking about the loveliness of
the flowers. all that planning,
the procession, the brunch after.
if not for the quiet,
puffy-eyed expressions
it would just be a dull party.

in India they weep and claw
at the body for days,
foster the nature of grief,
the ugliness.

in Tibet they give
sky burials,
leave you on a mountain
top – clouds eternal.
skin slips over rock
in solitude.

donate my organs,
please, or drop
me off at the body farm.
i'd like to teach somebody
something about people.
let anthro. grads
catalogue disintegration
as I sink into the mud.

burn me up
into weightless flakes.
dump them into
moving water.
don't shut me up.
there's nothing between
the earth and me now.
don't ruin it.



THE SAM AILOR FAMILY

TO THE SITCOM I'M STILL WATCHING EIGHT SEASONS IN BY CHRISTINA AILOR

I deserve better than this.

I have heard you recount this narrative in so many iterations that bruises form on my eardrums as you drop each familiar beat. I get

that the jar top was really stuck, you mixed up your note cards, you should have never

taken that last shot. Why do I listen? When you

won't even bother

to turn your head toward me

consider what I might want, need from you? I want to rage. Explain all your inadequacies in scrupulous detail.

What was insightful is now opaque. Little winks turned to a refried pop culture reference. You say you hadn't noticed. An animatronic doll,

batteries dying, my hugs activate your patter; your comments more rote with each squeeze. A memory of pleasure has me lying on top of you, still

embracing until my arms grow numb. If I found the combination of punctuation marks that evoked an eye roll I would tweet it at you. Don't trouble yourself pandering. I turn on my back, tick away the seconds

until your disappointing conclusion. Counting the back of each tooth with my tongue. I'll wake

exhausted, just for the time it takes to push you off.



NICK ROMEO

TIP THE HOURGLASS BACK

BY GEORGE ELLIS

In summer nights, the white moths fluttered among the porch lights. Then in the winter the snow fell down heavily. Thick white flakes eddied in the light of streetlamps. The snow turned to dark slush on the pavement of 12th Street, and to black water in the footprints on the sidewalk.

Someone had placed two sections of metal barricade across the alley which met 12th street on the 1600 block between the Little Bear Bar and Restaurant Diana. The barricades met the facing walls of the bar and the restaurant to form a small square, which customers entered by a side door from the bar to collect and smoke their cigarettes, penned in from the public street and the people going by. Andrew Self was there, his corduroy jacket pulled tight against the snow piled on top of him. His beer was shivering in his glass, and kept slopping over the lip of the glass onto the snow, but Andrew was very still. He stood off from his friend Tobias. He was looking up at the high restaurant windows, at their veil of linen curtains lit by warm secret candlelight. "Turn away, man, turn away," Tobias said to him. "That hope is cold ashes."

The two men had been outside for a very long time. Every so often a soft tinkling sound reached them faintly from the restaurant; the sound of a wine glass raised lightly to touch a wine glass, or of a brook, or of light feminine laughter, fading into the night air. "I went in a reverie," said Tobias, "and I fall out of it and there you are, you wormeaten scrap. Give up, and forget. The hostess will never let us in. We are ex-communicado, scratched from their lists. We are our own company now, and it's incumbent on us to make ourselves content."

Tobias waggled his cigarette in the air above his head. "Look at me, Andrew." Tobias began to jump up and down, higher and higher, waving the cigarette in a frantic figure-eight. "Look at me, look at me," he said.

After a minute, the motion-activated light installed by the bar-owner above the alley switched on, and shone down on the ground in a spotlight circle. Bits of cottony fluff, like snow in a Christmas stage play, were caught eddying near the bulb. "There now," Tobias said, and stepped out from the darkness.

He was like a bear that had been shut from its winter cave, to scavenge and scrounge when the time for hibernation had passed. His long mangy beard was dirty gray, sopping wet and unruly with melted snow and flecks of crust. It tumbled down the slope of his fat body in knotted rivulets. Above his beard his face was criss-crossed by vicious jagged lines, cut into shadow by the light above him, and his cagey eyes looked out beneath the tufted overhang of his brow from black circles of shadow. His skin was ashwhite. Like Andrew he wore a patchy corduroy jacket, though many sizes larger, and his gloves were fingerless, to let him feel the glass of the beer he drank and the paper of his cigarettes.

He gathered his phlegm to the back of his mouth and spat it at his feet, and inhaled on his cigarette. And then with the exhalation of smoke he lifted a song out from his lungs.

“A man’s liver’s only as pickled and spotted
As the heart and the soul of the woman his wife.
But the heart of the woman is mottled as granite
That she picks for the gravestone at the end of his strife.”

And he held his beer glass next his heart. “Ah,” he said, “There now.” Andrew had slowly dragged his attention from the restaurant and turned around, and stood stooped and chided with his lips dangling petulantly in his beer. “‘Life’ or ‘strife’, which word do you think would be better?” Tobias asked him.

Andrew pursed his lips and squinted as if he were giving hard thought to a complex riddle. “I liked the way you sung it more.”

“Hmm. I think ‘life’ might be better, for its more elegant simplicity.” Tobias slapped Andrew on his back, and beer sprinkled again onto the snow. “Buck up! Do you see? We make our own company and entertainment. There’s a singer in Diana’s who goes round the tables singing, and a jukebox in the bar, but we have our music. And stars above us if the snow would ever leave off. Taurus especially in the winter months. We are the same, you and I. Dressed together from the one cloth.” He paused to take a wistful puff on his cigarette.

“Do you remember when we stood on our tippy-toes, you and I, peering together between the slatted blinds of the window, on the day the curtain was lifted? We saw inside. For a long time we watched, and then we came to understand.

“The light inside was colored amber. ‘Here is where the forked paths rejoin,’ I spoke aloud. ‘Here is the hub of the wheel. Here is Rome, and thunder and lightning, with no time at all between the flash and the clap. We have come to the place,’ I said. ‘We have wandered thisly and thatly all our lives,’ I said. ‘Our bathroom towels were cold and harsh, our noses raw and red from cold and rubbing. We’ve stubbed our toes, and rolled our ankles through many divots. And our young liquid brains in the womb, our brains in the crib before they had the chance to harden, were poured by our mothers in labyrinthine molds. And so we turned left and turned left all our lives, but never went round. But now we’ve returned to the source. ‘Let us in,’ we said together.

“‘This is where the joint of the wishbone was broken, and where the broken joint was mended. And so here siblings divvy their parents’ fortune equally, and sameness and equality of blessing falls like rain on everyone. Or here by this amber light all siblings earn equal fortunes unto themselves, janitor and lawyer and doctor and banker salaried the same. Parents never die, so never make bequest. And all husbands here share equally in the cooking and rearing, not as a special kindness but in the performance of an acknowledged responsibility.’

“We saw inside together, but truly there was no smell in the air of cooking, and no labor pains or childbirth for husbands to share. No husbands, no wives to be husbanded. No resources, or money to bank. And no laws to lawyer, toilets to scrub, illnesses to heal. The light inside is amber-colored, and nourishes where it falls. Bodiless beings float in the amber light. ‘We have returned to the source,’ I said.”

“I don’t remember all that,” said Andrew. “I remember the light. I wish I remembered.” His dreaming face on Tobias’s words was rapt and swimmy.

“‘This is where the legs come together,’ I said.

“No ranks, no borderguards, or clique-y tiers, hierarchies, falsehoods, stiletto heels. No high-level security clearances. No performance.” At this moment the timer for the light above Tobias ran out and the alley clicked again into darkness. Tobias stopped to wave his arms in the air. When the light switched back on, he was out of breath. “Andrew,” he said. “I know you would like to make a part of our entertainment. Possibly you could do one of your dances. That way the light will stay on and I won’t be interrupted while I help prime your memories.”

“Which dance do you think I should do?”

“Oh, I thought the one you did last night was very good, very graceful, very - what’s the word? - genteel,” said Tobias.

Andrew began rapidly shuffling his feet and swaying side to side from his waist, while both his hands and arms made slow vertical movements, as if hauling a bucket up a well by pulley, or ringing a church bell. “That’s it,” said Tobias.

“No performances,” he said, “because no ranks.” He paused to catch his breath. “No ranks, no masks. What is a necktie, or stiletto heel, or blue monogram on a scarlet silky pocket square, but costume, mask, and artifice? What a name but a role? Think of it: if we all told each other the truth, there would be no difference between us. All conflict would dissolve. Inside they float in their original oneness.

“And as we stood there on our tip-toes looking in, we noticed that next to us on either side were several colored strings of yarn, stretching from outside, from down the street further than we could look; and that these threads were slowly being pulled inside, and were woven together there in a single intricate pattern. I couldn’t quite make out the pattern: the angle of the window-slats prevented me. I remember I held up the green string, felt it sliding through my fingers, and when I inspected it I said, ‘This is geometry.’ And I held up the orange one and said, ‘This is mathematics.’ And I held up the blue one and I said, “This one is language.” I don’t recall how many threads there were, and though I tried, and lifted myself as high as I could, and climbed with my knees up onto the windowframe, I couldn’t see the pattern. For some reason it was judged we be dressed from the same cloth, Andrew. ‘We have returned to the source,’ I said. ‘Let us in,’ we cried. ‘Take us, too.’

“And yet,” he said, crooking a wild brow and lifting a finger in the air, “and without discounting the intensities of our yearnings, I can’t help think there’s something slightly disappointing about it all.”

Andrew’s mouth opened in shocked protest and he stopped shuffling his feet, though he continued to sway back and forth. “What do you mean, disappointing?” he said.

Tobias tossed his cigarette butt over the barricade onto the sidewalk, and struck a match to light another. “Isn’t there something after all a little bit boring, a trifle deadening to the senses, about all of that floating and floating and floating?”

Sexless beings, semipervious orbs, with nothing to do all day long but pulsate out their love to one another by a process of osmosis?”

“I hadn’t thought of that!” said Andrew, dancing again.

“Neither had I, until just now,” said Tobias. “Do you know, they even pulsate out their love generally, with no special distinction made between one orb and another. I’m not absolutely certain I want to call that love. No, I don’t think I do. Love as I have always felt it in my heart implies some mark of preferment, or quality of choosing and being chosen. Carnal appetite, costly delusion, the people in Diana might say, but love and appetite and delusion for one particular person, anyhow. There is no appetite in there, no feasting in Restaurant Diana. Think of it, a restaurant without food. It’s absurd.”

“No books. Books, novels, grief, sex and cathedrals: exiled all from Restaurant Diana.

“Take a colorless blob of jello, Andrew. No girlchild or boychild would want to play with it. It would be uninteresting, beneath their notice. They would go find some other toy. Yet give that blob a miniature rifle, drape it with a wig and a dress, a pair of lips with ruby lipstick, a little color, a pair of stiletto heels and a lab coat, and suddenly the boys and girls will be overjoyed. The people in Diana’s might say those things are violent, or sexist, somehow breed sin or result from sin. But still I choose them before colorless jello.

“You can stop now,” he said. “Stop your dancing.”

Above, the sheet of cloud whipped in the wind, and shook down another flurry of snow on top of their heads. And then in an instant the cloud broke, and for one unobscured glimpse shone the cold shivering dippers and all the lucid stars. The cloud sealed them over again.

For a few minutes Tobias was silent. The light clicked off, the alley fell dark, and for minutes more he stayed on in silence. A clear-eyed mood had fallen over him, mood of the stars, that grappled his brain, and clenched him and squeezed him. It crushed the dead, gray briquettes, the substance of his mind, to ashes in its grip. The ash went trickling down from his brain to the heart in his chest. Then the finest particles of ash rose like smoke from the ashpile on his heart.

Unsettled snow whistled across the alley from snowmound to snowmound, and

went whistling from his beard, but he remained in silence.

The fine smoke of ashes rose again to fill his vision. It was from that haze that he looked out to the high windows of the restaurant.

“Tell me a story,” Andrew said.

“No, no stories tonight,” he said. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Aw, come on. Telling a story always rouses you up.”

Tobias gave himself a shake, and kicked out the snow around his feet. He went to the corner of the square, against the Little Bear bar, and plunged his hand into the heaped snow, and came out with a bottle. “It’s good we had forethought, and brought our own whiskeys. We saw the day coming when the tab would come due, and fortified ourselves against it. And do you know what else, Andrew? Bill at the bar never poured a stiff drink. He watered them. We’re no worse for being cut off.” He poured some of the whiskey into a flask taken from the inside pocket of his coat, and took a long pull. “This will keep us warm for a bit.”

“Tell me a story, Tobias,” said Andrew. “Let’s get roused. Let’s get really wild.” Tobias said nothing. “Then say what you fall in a reverie about, when you opened your eyes and looked at me and saw me looking at the window.”

Tobias took another pull, lit a cigarette, and sighed. “Of soft sweet female laughter, and sweet feminine demurrals. Of a woman, Andrew, of a woman.” Tobias breathed in the chill air through his nostrils. He shut his eyes. “Of a woman,” he spoke again, beneath hearing. “Delicately in my mind’s eye I touched her face, her chin; I lifted her face toward my own. Yet still she wouldn’t face me; still her eyes were downcast.”

Andrew began to dance again, without being asked.

“As though I held out a crumb of food to a cat, and called to it, to eat from my hand - thus slowly, faltering back and coming again near, like a cat on tentative feet, she raised her eyes to mine. Startled by what she saw there, saw and understood, and frightened too of what her own eyes may betray, she fluttered her lashes, her eyelids like mothwings, and looked downward again; yet even as she did, and as if sorrowfully, as though it were a resignation that might mean her death, she reached behind her to unhook the latch at the back of her dress; to pull the zipper down; and she pushed her dress-sleeves down from her shoulders, the left arm, then the right;

and then she slipped the dress down; it fell to the floor around her ankles.”

Tobias snapped his eyes open. “And I open my eyes and there you are. Wormeaten, weathereaten scrap!”

“Aw, well I can’t help that, now can I, Tobias?” said Andrew. “I can’t up and disappear every time it’s convenient for you to fall in a reverie, now can I? I’m sorry, but it is past time now where I stick up for myself and what’s fair for my interests. Think of my interests! It is incumbent! In all fairness, Tobias. I can’t just disappear whenever it pleases you to fall in a reverie, now can I, you answer me that!”

“Worm in a red apple, hidden inside,” said Tobias. “Worm a-squirring in a dead man’s heart. Feast! Feast! Orgy!” he shouted. “You are the worm that’s eating my heart!”

Andrew was jiggling his legs and sashaying his arms from side to side. Tobias faced him with the savage look of a starved creature appraising the tatters of a long-dead carcass, after all the dignified scraps of flesh had been torn out. Then the shadows of his face twisted in a cringe, and he flung his flask and leapt at Andrew and knocked them together in a heap on the wet ground, biting and kicking and twisting his limbs. Snow flew up in a puff all around them. And as they rolled together on the ground, and Tobias pinched and tore at Andrew’s face and wrenched Andrew’s body to strip off his corduroy jacket, he kept yelling in his anguish that Andrew was nothing but a few rags, and that he would throw him naked into the street and then people would finally see, and that he had a false beard, and why oh why didn’t people understand, and that Andrew is a dead man, over and over again, Andrew is a dead man, while Andrew said he was a dead man too and kept asking Tobias to let off and to tell him another story.

§

A gleaming black sedan pulled up to the curb in front of Restaurant Diana. The driver stepped out into the slush wearing a chauffeur’s brimmed cap and a nicely groomed gray moustache. He circled around the back of the car to the passenger door nearest the restaurant. While he walked he unfastened and unfurled a large black umbrella, his neck hunched down into the collar of his car coat against the snow, which had begun again in earnest. With the umbrella successfully opened

he waited by the backseat, angling it above the space above the car door, while the snow fell down on his head. After a moment a young girl, no older than sixteen or seventeen, with blonde hair and a golden dress, emerged from the car to take the chauffeur's proffered hand, protected from the snow and the black sleet. They started together up the carpeted stairs that led to the door of the restaurant, the umbrella held over her head. Halfway up the stairs, as she neared Diana's green oaken door, she stopped for a moment. And as if an epiphany unfastened and unfurled suddenly inside her, she reached to share the chauffeur's grip of the umbrella, and to angle it to include him beneath its cover. Then at the top of the stairs the girl reached first for the door handle, and stepped back to hold the door open for the chauffeur, who smiled at her and tipped his cap and disappeared inside. The door of Restaurant Diana swung closed behind them both.

There was never a glance of consideration from either of them for the dark, snow-covered figures which kept heaving for breath and hacking and spitting in the alley. At last, Tobias, propped up on his arms, said between breaths, "Well she was pretty thing."

"Aw, Tobias. She wasn't more than a little girl, Tobias," said Andrew. "Don't talk to me about her."

"The world has never showed itself capable to make fine distinctions, Andrew, and you're no different, no better or worse. For instance, there is a difference between pedophilia, a condition we all agree to call abhorrent, and hebephilia, or ephrophilia. But the world approaches all fine precisions and nuances with gross, thick minds, and attempts to untie the delicate intricate lacey knots with calloused, coarse, fat workman's hands. Which is ironic, given their moral qualm in question." Tobias slowly, carefully stood up, and waved his hands until the light switched on. He began to search the snow for the glistening silver of his flask. "The irony will be lost on them, though. You can count on it."

He found the flask and refilled it with whiskey, lit another cigarette. "The world has a saying," he said. "'The eyes are the windows of the soul.' If it is true what they say, and if once that girl's eyes met mine, then she would see such things would make her old. Such things as would corrupt her soul and pluck her youth right off. And then there could be no further question of my besmirching her. She

would be besmirched enough.” He took a pull of whiskey. “And yet the world is incapable of making the distinction between inside and outside, age of soul and age of body, but reads the one into the other.

“There’s a denial of her agency in all this talk, of her full-blossomed personhood. Ah, but she is young. If I prick her ...”

The door to the restaurant opened and the valet, who was also the maître d’hôtel and co-owner and Diana’s husband, walked with lithe steps down the icy stairs to the car. He was trim and clean and chic, and infinite and effeminate, and fishlike and fine-boned and elfish, in formal black vest and tie. He drove the car ahead to the corner of 12th Street and 16th Avenue and turned right.

“It’s those ones a camera loves best,” said Tobias, tracing the path of the car’s tail-lights with his eyes, “the androgynes and light salad eaters, that could be man or woman depending on the clothes they wear.” He squinted with his cigarette in his lips. “I’ve often wondered why that is. While a man’s groin – a heterosexual man - points him out his preference to one side, and a woman prefers a man clear on the other side of the spectrum, why is it cameras and fashion designers fall for the liminal ones inbetween? Blank canvasses, mannequins and clothes hangers, neither this nor that. Nothings, pure potentiality, awaiting some cloth to be draped on them, gown and lipstick and heels, or neck-tie and suitcase and gun, in order to say what’s what, pink or blue.” He narrowed his eyes still more, and looked from the smoke of his mind, through the rising smoke of his cigarette, pondering. The light clicked off.

“What are you thinking of?” said Andrew.

“My mind was lost for a moment in thinking of the girl at the bar. Did you see her? That girl of art. That girl covered in tattoos, and with her long black hair pulled tightly back so that it shines, which is a predilection with me, Andrew, as with magpies. On her right wrist a line of script begins in squidy black ink. It scrawls up her arm and slips into the sleeve of her dress, where it disappears. Finally it emerges from beneath the hem, but crossed to her left side now, running down her left leg. The writing ends on the curve of her left calf.

“Many men and many scholars have conferred their heads together, and all have come to agreement that between her sleeve and the hem of her dress is a text like none other. There are some who’ve never seen it, who nevertheless contend that

it is the very mystery and secret of the text which explains its power and its mastery. That any text completes its meaning within the imaginative interpretation of the reader. That any text or work of art is a lifeless thing, as is any passive spectator or reader; but that the active imaginative collaboration breeds and flourishes life on life. And further, that this particular text, left completely to the imagination of the active reader, by its being placed in such a stimulating context, urges and provokes in the reader miraculous sweeps of creation.

“Those who claim to have read the text in full make differing contentions as to what it says. One compares it to a musical canon, or a round. It is a text of many voices, he says, child of many authors. Soon after one voice begins, another joins with the same words, and then another. But then new words and modulations are introduced by the second voice, and the third, and repeated backwards again by the second and first voices. It becomes difficult to tell, he says, which voice is the first and which the third or even the fifth, and which voice generated which theme and idea. So that one does not need to fear death, for the text has shown that time is an endlessly generative circle. Children both beget and are begotten by their mother and father within the spin of the wheel, and it isn’t even correct to say the text is the child of many authors for it also could be said to be the author’s mother or the father.”

“Oh, wow!” said Andrew. He had stood up and plastered his face to the window of the bar. “Which girl is it? Which one do you mean?” Someone inside the bar tapped a finger against the glass until he gave up and slunk back to Tobias.

“Another says that when first he encountered the text, he made a mistake; a species of the same mistake, he claims, made in the interpretation of the many who have never seen the text, who claim it’s by its very hiddenness that the text holds power. At first, he says, he gave undue credit to the beautiful flesh into which the text is inscribed, and which can be said to perform and enact the text, placing certain emphases here and there, for instance on a beautiful breast or a curve of the hip, causing that portion of text to ache and vibrate with special significance. Yet as he read and re-read, he came to realize that the text could perhaps support innumerable variations of emphasis and interpretation, be inscribed on other and different bodies, each with their own dimensions and accentuations. That although the text

depends on these bodies and performances in order to live on, and is manifold and infinite in order to be able to adapt itself to each, truly there lies a Platonic ideal and objective meaning buried within the text. That that ideal is the true miracle, which can cause statues to weep, can turn wine into water. Wine into water: his words, which I've never seen the sense of. That all those bodies pertained to the subjective realm of opinion, were mortal, would die and be buried. But generation to generation they would be the vehicles which transmit the text. So that the ideal should not be said to be buried, but was eternally alive, while the bodies on which it fed and depended were as its fuel and its blood, recycling and regenerating, carrying it forward even as they passed away."

Andrew was dancing now, and the light fell steadily on Tobias as he spoke. Tobias said, "My own head is full of a traveling smoke that blows in my mind's eye from ear to ear, like thread strung through the eye of a needle, or the colorful knotted handkerchiefs that floss magicians' brains.

"When I'm lying alone in the dark sometimes I watch the smoke blow by for hours. And as it goes by sometimes it masses like a cloud for the flash of an instant. Always before I'm able to make sense of what I see, the shape of the mass is blown by the wind to shreds and wisps.

"I don't know what wind it is blows the smoke through my mind, whether it's the passing of time, perpetual without variation. But I know I know the shapes in the smoke, could recognize them, if they would stay for a moment longer. They are familiar to me from somewhere in the past, or else from somewhere else. And it could mean everything to me, to see them and to understand them.

"Time passes onward from moment to moment, beat beat, drum drum, to keep me from seeing clearly, to blow the smoke apart. If I could only collect my thoughts, I think, or recollect my thoughts from past years and past ages, those broken pieces of knowledge could reconstitute my soul, before they are lost and scattered in the wind.

"Or then I think it's liquor and beer. Were I to learn right living, early to bed and early to rise, glass of water with dinner, glass of milk before I slip under the covers at night, I would wake in dawn's orangeish light and I would be able to see. I would be allowed to see.

“Or else I missed the chance long ago, went wrong and deformed somewhere in the cradle, in the womb. Maybe only those who learn to speak dead greek to their mothers from the cradle, are brought up on Euclidean geometry before they learn to go off it, drink their mother’s milk before the cow’s, and walk with a book of Tennyson balanced on their heads before they learn to run, maybe only those are allowed and able to see. You’ve seen the ones who never learned go by us on street, Andrew, striving and aching to change, jogging in their hi-tech, shiny gear, as if they could purchase their transformations: the awkward donkeys, snorting and sweating, with their floppy feet splaying out at the ends of their strides, damned even by the songs their fathers sang to them, damned in their cradles.

“Possibly it’s not for any mortal to see. I’m trying to look out from my animal brains into a different sphere. It’s the wind that blows on the boundary between man and enlightenment. Sometimes I think it’s God, whose form I nearly see.

“If I close my eyes to concentrate, I can nearly make out familiar shapes in the masses of smoke, which collect and recollect in an unending stream.

“I think one night if I were able to make sense of it and to see a shape clearly, then some lost memory of my soul I swore I never could forget would be given back to me; or some true thought, that broke into my dream one night long ago to shock me awake, that I promised myself I would write down in the morning, would come back to me. But I am damned.

“But there they are still, passing before my mind’s eye. I have wasted my life in words and drinking, but my life could be redeemed. When I’m lying alone I try to make out their shapes.” His eyes were wet, and he held his hand and his flask to cover the dark look that passed down his face like a shadow moving across a windshield.

“Beneath her dress is a line of text, like a mass of smoke, and I can almost make it out, and when I close my dreaming eyes on it I fall in a reverie. And if it is ever in my life given to me to clearly see and to understand, then every part will be redeemed.

“But she is choosy, but she is oh so choosy,” he said, and broke down weeping.

Through his smoke and teary eyes then he saw the maître d’ returning up the steps to the restaurant, and he began to call out, “Let me in! I understand!” And

pointing at Andrew he said, "I'm not like him, I don't deserve to be here! Don't leave me here with him!" When the man had vanished behind the closed door, Tobias ran to the window of the restaurant and beat his fists against it, then crossed the square to rattle the windows of the bar, all the time shouting and exclaiming. There was no response, except that the jukebox of the bar lowered in volume a moment, before resuming as before, and there was a brief lull to the tinkling of glasses and laughter from the restaurant.

"Tell us a story, Tobias," said Andrew. "I'll dance a new dance you never saw before. Come on, let's really get wild."

Tobias re-filled his flask and fingered his crumpled pack for the last cigarette. "Alright, Andrew, alright, have it your way. Here is a story," he said. Then shouting, "of vicious injustice, and false imprisonment, conscientiously carried out by the highest deputies of church and state! But first, a preamble, to get me in tune."

"A story!" said Andrew, who brought up his own bottle of beer from the snow-heap by the bar, found where his beer glass had fallen to, and poured his glass full.

"Clothes have moths as flesh has worms," Tobias began, "and the snow does not fall equally on each. A worm is your conduit of metempsychosis. On the girl of art at the bar are colored pictures, in blooms and washes of red and sea green, and whorls above her breasts that mimic and repeat the topswell curve of her breasts. To lick it, to lick it. My mind has been lost in that girl of art. But now I have found it. She possesses a text and washes and blooms of color like the scenes of a holy triptych above an altar, but I have found the key. And when she opens her legs they open like the hinges of a triptych, and when you enter her you're transformed into lines of eternal ink, which read, On summer nights the snowflakes bat between porch lights, and in summer the moths fall on the heads of the living, and one man alone, sheltered from the snow and the moths by a great big umbrella, holy and just, stands under a stagelight and pronounces strange truths ..."

From a high floor of either the restaurant or the bar a half-empty plastic water bottle came flying out. Tobias paid no attention. Then a second bottle flew out and hit him on his large gut, and let out a watery spritz on impact that splashed him in the beard and right eye. The bottle stuck upside down in the snow.

“Damn everyone,” said Tobias, and sunk his chin to his chest. But then he lifted his head, and his eyes looked out from his haze of smoke with a crackle of fire in them. “Never mind,” he said. “I will begin again:

“If it is true, as people say, that God is a woman, then let it be said also she has an hourglass figure, and that the sands of time trickle down to her cunt. And let it be, too, that when she is tilted upside down, and her skirts have fallen around her ears, and her legs are kicking in air - and when the sandgrains rush back to her head - then grain by grain that falls I am restored and refreshed to my youth; that as the sands rush to her head I am young again. And in my remade vigor, and with my quick bright sleek red tongue between her kicking, wheeling legs, I will sing a touching song upon a tender subject ...”

“Ah, here it is!” cried Andrew.

“... A song of my youth, of sap and strength, when the fire in my head was ablaze and strong ...”

“Here it is!” cried Andrew, dancing up and down. “A story!”

Just then the door from the bar swung open and a man stepped out. “Oh, sorry, I thought this was the exit,” he said. But Tobias, his body heaving from his excitement, grabbed the man’s hand and led him out to the circle of light.

“Welcome, friend,” Tobias said. “We were just now telling stories. We have plenty of good beer and good bourbon. And if you don’t mind, and without any prologue or epigraph, please, tell us, what brought you to this place.”

“A story!” Andrew said, dancing.



NICK ROMEO

AFTERWORD

Hello again,

It is, in fact, sometime after happy hour as I write this.

Finding this group was one of the great strokes of luck in my life. Anyone can say they write. But to actually show your work to the world at large, to take feedback and improve....that takes something else. Everyone in the Hour After Happy Hour writing group had that Something Else, and the results are clear.

Since it started, HAAH has grown from a barebones writing group to a thriving creative force with a journal I'm proud to be part of. Every week I get to watch us grow and imbed ourselves further into the flourishing (and surprisingly localized) Pittsburgh writing scene. The possibilities are endless.

They can be endless for you too. The door's always open. We'd love to have you.

Until next time,

Jason Peck

Editor of *The After Happy Hour Review* and Hour After Happy Hour Workshop member.

THE AUTHORS

LITERATURE:

CHRISTINA AILOR has travelled extensively, but for most of her adult life she has mainly pinballed back and forth between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Her friends and family say her relationship with television is “unhealthy” and that she should “go out and meet a nice guy”. Whatever that means. You can find more of her work at clearlychristina.com

JUSTIN BAYER is an avid Drake fan and can recite every album in two languages. Once, at a chance meeting, he was described by basketball star Yao Ming as ‘pretty tall, too’. He was just formally recognized as owning the 2nd largest collection of ABBA merchandise in the country, despite only really liking ‘Dancing Queen’. He started from the bottom, now he’s here. He let someone else write his bio, and this is what happens.

Like nomadic Pericú natives before him, MATTHEW DEXTER survives on a hunter-gatherer subsistence diet of grilled shrimp tacos, smoked marlin, cold beer, and warm sunshine. He is the author of the novel, *THE RITALIN ORGY* (Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing 2013). His short fiction and narrative nonfiction has been published in hundreds of literary journals and dozens of anthologies. Matthew has written thousands of freelance pieces for fish tacos and arrachera. He lives in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. He is the Lil Wayne of literature.

WILLIAM DORESKE lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and teaches at Keene State College. His most recent book of poetry is *The Suburbs of Atlantis* (2013). He has published three critical studies, including *Robert Lowell’s Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in many journals.

GEORGE ELLIS was born in Chicago, graduated with a BA in English from the University of Rochester, and has lived in Pittsburgh for 5 years. He has a house now so you have to figure at least 7 more. He is very grateful to be published in the *After Happy Hour Review*.

Most of ALAN GANN’s friends are surprised to find he is still at large and allowed to teach creative writing workshops in at-risk schools, and middle school sex-ed at a Unitarian Universalist Church. He is on the board of the Dallas Poets Community, co-editor for *Red River Review*, and his first book, *Adventures of the Clumsy Juggler* is forthcoming from Ink Brush Press. Recently, his poems have appeared in *FLR-East*, *Yellow Mama*, *Main Street Rag*, *Red Fez*, and *Borderlands*. Somehow he still finds time to attend a lot of folk music concerts, ride his bicycle, go bird watching, and photograph dragonflies.

KARA HELMICK-NELSON is a recent poetry graduate. She lives with one man and three cats.

BRYAN MCCARTHY is an educational advocate with Communities In Schools-Pittsburgh/Allegheny County, where he serves as an academic director and scholastic adviser. He has partnered with numerous nonprofit organizations throughout the Pittsburgh region and is currently working with the MGR Foundation at the Shuman Center as a visual artist and writing instructor. He earned his BA from Franklin & Marshall College and his MFA at The New School. He currently lives with his wife in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania.

CAROL NISSENSON is a DC-based professional actor/director. Her short fiction has been published by *Story Shack*, *Blue Lake Review*, *eFiction Magazine*, *Fiction On the Web UK* and *Dual Coast Magazine*. Though not a Pittsburgh native, she has had the pleasure of living in beautiful Morewood Gardens, on Elmer St, and the not-so beautiful South Bouquet St.

JASON PECK is a former newspaper reporter and current cubicle jockey. He serves on the editorial board of *After Happy Hour Review*, with work published elsewhere in *Third Wednesday*, *Smokelong Quarterly* and *Crack the Spine*.

Recently nominated for two Pushcart prizes, APRIL SALZANO teaches college writing in Pennsylvania where she lives with her husband and two sons. She is currently working on a memoir on raising a child with autism and several collections of poetry. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Convergence*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *The Camel Saloon*, *Centrifugal Eye*, *Deadsnakes*, *Visceral Uterus*, *Salome*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Writing Tomorrow* and *Rattle*. The author also serves as co-editor at *Kind of a Hurricane Press* (www.kindofahurricane.com).

ADITYA SHANKAR is an Indian English poet living in Bangalore, and his work has been published in *Shot Glass Journal*, *Earthborne*, *Terracotta Typewriter*, *Aireings*, *Snakeskin*, *Hudson View*, *Indian Literature*, *The Little Magazine*, *The Literary X Magazine*, *Asiawrites*, *Munyor*, *The Pyramid*, *Poetry Chain*, *Chandrabhaga*, *Meadowland Review*, *CHEST*, *Vox Humana*, *Legendary*, *Literary Bohemian*, *Wild Goose Poetry Review*, *Words-Myth*, *Clueless Collective*, *CLRI*, *Muse India* among others. He is the author of a poetry chapbook *After Seeing* (IFFT, 2006) and his poetry collection *Party Poopers* is forthcoming in 2014.

VISUAL ART:

NICK ROMEO is self-taught, and always strives to absorb and learn from his environment. He then incorporates the multitude of subject matters into his artwork. His main forms of expression are 3D digital renderings, music, fractal generations, photography, sculpture, and audio/video installation.

W. JACK SAVAGE is a retired broadcaster and educator. He is the author of seven books (wjacksavage.com) One-hundred and fifty of Jack's paintings and drawings have been published worldwide. Jack and his wife Kathy live in Monrovia, California.

FABIO SASSI makes photos and acrylics using tiny objects and what is considered to have no worth by the mainstream. Fabio lives and works in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at fabiosassi.foliohd.com

KARLA LAMB earned a B.A. in Creative Writing from GVSU, where she served as a poetry copy-editor for *Fishladder*. Her poetry has appeared in *Pittsburgh City Paper*, *Neon Lung*, *Running Out of Ink*, and *Through the 3rd Eye*. Her visual art is forthcoming in *Runaway Hotel's* first issue. Her style is heavily informed by dual heritage, occult ephemera, and surrealist tendencies. Currently, she curates DOUBLE MIRROR Exhibit, while attending workshops, readings, and collaborating with other artists in Pittsburgh.

Various photos contributed by THE SAM AND MARTHA AILOR FAMILY. Both Sam and Martha dedicated their lives to public service for their country and community. Sam served in the US Army Corps of Engineers and at Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory in Hampton, Virginia with the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (a precursor to NASA). Martha was a long time employ of the Hampton YWCA and served on the Hampton City Council. She still holds court every day in the dining room of the historic Chamberlin Hotel at the age of 95. They raised three fairly well-adjusted children.

