
THE
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The After Happy Hour Review

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COVER ART:
"MYSTERIES OF THE UNIVERSE" BY MASHA FIKHMAN

LAYOUT AND DESIGN BY MIKE LAMBERT

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* Submitted through the Hour After Happy Hour Writing Workshop

Foreword

Dear Reader,

I've been assigned the thankless task of writing a foreword to this, the 3rd Issue of the After Happy Hour Review, an assignment I initially relished, not knowing exactly what writing a foreword to a literary journal entailed, or even what constitutes a foreword in general. I was told to look at other journals to get a sense of what I was supposed to write, with the added qualification that no one would read the foreword anyway so "no worries."

I first referred to the lit mags available within arm's reach, *The Paris Review*, *Columbia*, and *Puerto Del Sol*, none of which had a foreword. I then dug a little deeper, turning to the periodicals stockpiled in the bathroom, *The New York Review of Books*, *Adbusters* and *Found*, none of which had foreword either. Of the five percent of the online literary magazines that I sampled which actually contained a foreword one hundred percent of them had some sort of self-congratulatory, self-aggrandizing, back slapping statement directed at the staff of the magazine and not the readership.

I won't waste your time with another one of these self-fellating tributes to an un-relatable set of accomplishments. I will say that in the brief time that I have been an editor of *The After Happy Hour Review*, I have been proud to work with an editorial team dedicated to publishing the best writing and art available, regardless of genre, style or niche, and that the proof of this claim is in the following pages, not in this foreword.

Sincerely,

David Joez Villaverde, member of *The After Happy Hour Review* editorial staff.

FRED MOUNT

From the Balcony

BY BRANDON FURY

Tonight I saw a sparrow
blow from the bell of a trumpet,

suspend and pulse like a whole note,
until finally
it dissolved into the dark above the audience

swaying left to right in unison, all the nondescript
faces singing along. I kept seeing

my dead father in that small space next to me,
angling his long legs, uncomfortable.

He was my burden, a coat,
scarf, a placeholder for a woman

who wasn't coming, her ticket
sitting on the counter at home. This seat

is taken, I lied to the flashlight
that clicked on then
off just as quick. A man played

a saw with a bow, the air weeping
with tinsel. My father, good
with his hands,

clapped when the song was over.

MASHA FIKHMAN

The Diving Horse

BY MICHAEL ALBRIGHT

I was sixteen when they almost broke up
but decided instead they needed a break,
just a few days so that no one got hurt,
and my dad said he should go on a trip,
but he didn't want to take it alone,
so we hit the road for Atlantic City,
before the casinos and neon and glitz,
still jitneys and trinkets and saltwater taffy,
stayed at the Hideout at the end of the line,
air-conditioned and ten bucks a night,
where my dad needed to sit in the dark
and smoke, so he gave me a five and I walked
up the boards to the famous Steel Pier,
where one price fit all, went through the funhouse,
which wasn't much fun, all moving floors
and distorted reflection, saw clowns
on bikes and acrobats, then to the dance hall
for the oldies show, the Dovells, the Duprees,
Chuck Berry himself, pushed my way up to the front,
my hands pressed down on the makeshift stage,
close enough to touch his shimmering size
fourteen silver snakeskin boots, and he said,
Now we're going to sing us some blues,
and looked right into my innocent eyes,
You know what the blues are? and I bobbled up
and down like a toy, and he laughed, No, white boy,
no, you don't, but someday you most surely will,
and then I saw the horse led up the ramp,
the pretty lady arranged on his back

in a one-piece suit and a bathing cap,
and I wondered how they made him jump,
until I saw a man with a pointy stick, nudging him
closer to the edge until weight and gravity
pulled him down. When he hit the tank,
everyone close got splashed and soaked,
and gasped and shrieked and clapped and cheered,
but as he fell I could see the flailing mane,
the nostrils flare, the look of terror in his eye,
and I used my last dollar to buy two corndogs,
and a coke, sat on a bench and cried and cried.

FRED MOUNT

Paradise Furnace

BY MICHAEL ALBRIGHT

Cedar, branches riverward, curve
down to brush the wash, and reach
green locks of leaves and mistletoe
to kiss and skim the watersheen,

my uncle's cottage on that shore
of Yester's Creek that's now a lake,
then just wide and deep enough
to walk it's bed of polished stone,

current yearning to pull me down,
yet still the scene falls into space—
startled trout between my feet,
a heron on the opposite bank

rises to wingspan, sudden, blue,
my father planted in the yard,
pointing his brother a double-
barrel, daring him to make a move.

That's what the boy in me recalls,
but it's underwater, soft and wet.
What's forgotten is never missed
'til it bubbles to the top, and bursts.

I'll never know what broke that day,
or what was fixed, and what was not,
but uncle, bird, fish and I all lived
to swim and fly beneath the tide.

Pop this sluice, release the flood,
we'll find the world that used to be,
a lost continent of memory,
homes and streets, a little store,

rising from the man-made sea,
the chimney where they smelt the ore,
buildings where real people lived,
the school, the bar, the ruined church.

Corpse Pose

BY KELLY ANDREWS

I'm sure I've swallowed
a once-living thing, sure my lips
parted just a little for it to creep inside,
sure if I speak again the sound
will bruise every last rib, awaken
what I cannot let die. I imagine
flensing my arms, my hips,
my body down to thistle-bone.
Beside a mound of dirt I watch
the beetles dig, let them crawl
across my nose. I'm playing dead
in a grove of graves, the cicadas
syncopating with my breath
as I count the rows of headstones,
all those names we'll never know.
I sink my hand into the soil, stroke
it like I would your side. I'll lie
in this corpse pose until dawn,
a fledgling fleeing the granite night.

MICHAEL KOEHLER

Funeral for the Devil

BY JACOB MAYS

Satan in a box
just a box.

The pews are full of sobbing debutantes.
Retired politicians. Death metal bands.
His biblically extended family. I married in
for the Christmas dinners. Open bar.

Around the altar we pose tokens of life:
An oil painting of a lush mustache
trimmed to suggest a smirk.
A Polaroid of a cherry red toddler
wearing a tuxedo, smoking a cigar.
Prom pictures; a Napoleonic leisure suit,
regal in a mob of frothing cheerleaders.
A bulging ring of city keys.

I speak a eulogy.
"What new can be said?
He always made eye contact,
shook hands like a Kennedy.
He was a patient listener.
He loved us.
And we, him."

The coffin is lacquer black, so deep
it glows. I lay my palm against the lid.
I could fry an egg on it, still.

FRED MOUNT

White People

BY BRANDON GETZ

The white people moved in on the second day of summer. My wife said they were albinos.

"Albinos have pink eyes," I said. "Like mice."

"Did you see their eyes? Were you up close in their eyeballs?"

I wasn't, and said so.

"Maybe theirs are dark pink. Maybe they're some other kind of albino. Australian or something."

My wife, Midge, thought everything exotic came from Australia. Ever since she bought a jar of Vegemite from the international aisle at the supermarket. She thought it was the zaniest thing. "Why don't they just use peanut butter?" she'd asked me, grinning. She was proud of herself for trying something exotic.

The husband—Mr. White, my wife called him—mowed his lawn in shorts and a t-shirt. Mrs. White sunbathed on a plastic lounger, big movie star sunglasses covering her eyes. She never turned a shade darker; if anything, her skin and hair became more radiant. Midge and I would argue about this, me insisting that the wife was whiter, Midge replying that Mr. White was the brighter of the two. But when we saw them side by side, framed inside their open front door, when we took over a plate of macadamia cookies, any differences in whiteness were only a trick of the light. A certain shadow on the cheek or the elbow. The white people were simply an absence of color, from their eyebrows to their fingernails, white as a blank sheet of typing paper.

"We brought cookies," Midge said.

"Thanks," the Whites said.

"Your yard looks good," I told Mr. White. "Real green."

"Thanks," Mr. White said. "Here, let me take that plate of cookies." The Whites were both smiling. Midge and I were smiling. The sun was hot on our necks, and there were kids shouting in the street, punctuated now and then with the splat of a water balloon.

"We would invite you in," said Mrs. White, "But we're fumigating."

"Oh," said Midge. "Is it silverfish? We had a silverfish problem. They were getting into the Wheaties, even. We had to go stay at my mother's."

The Whites looked at each other. They were a good-looking couple, the white people. Symmetrical faces, slim jaw lines, and high cheek bones. Mr. White had his white hair cut short and styled in an old-fashioned way, how my father might have worn his hair in the war. Mrs. White's lipstick was white against her powdery skin. A white ribbon held back her hair, and she wore a modest little white dress. It was true, their eyes weren't pink. They were white on white; iris, pupil, and all, thin round lines distinguishing what was what. That was a little disconcerting, the colorless stare of the white people, but with contact lenses and a little rouge, they could've looked like any young couple this side of the Missouri.

"My," Midge said, "How do you keep your whites so white! Do you use baking soda?"

Mrs. White then looked nervous. Mr. White looked like he might drop the cookies right there on the front stoop. Leave it to Midge to say something offensive to the new neighbors. When the Fayads moved in down the block, she'd asked Mr. Fayad when he was going to bring all of his other wives over. He'd shaken his head and told her he was from Chicago.

"Do you need someplace to stay?" I asked. I didn't want to, but in this neighborhood, you had to be polite. It was in the Neighborhood Association bylaws. Thou shalt be kind to your neighbor. "I mean, if you're fumigating?"

"Oh, no, we're fine. We're used to it." Mr. White took one of the cookies from under the saran wrap and began to pick at a nut with his fin-

gernail. The beige of the cookie looked so out of place in his hand I wanted to take it away from him and give him, I don't know, a shaved coconut or something. The color didn't belong. That's when I noticed they'd whitewashed the house, from its old dusty yellow, and the walls behind them had been re-paneled in pale white beadboard. I didn't like it. I didn't like the whole scene. I wanted to take the cookies and go. I smiled a big Neighborhood Association-trained smile and said, "Midge, it's about time we started dinner. We don't want to miss *Beat the Clock*."

"*Beat the Clock* doesn't come on for an hour, darling," Midge said because Midge can't pick up a hint to save her life.

Mrs. White widened her smile and took the plate of cookies from her husband. "Yes, it's also about time we started dinner. We don't want to miss *Beat the Clock*." She turned into the house, white dress flouncing, and Mr. White closed the door.

Midge looked like she'd just been told her Jell-O casserole tasted like snot. Which it did. "Can you believe that, Roger?" she said. "The nerve!"

The nerve, all right. The nerve we had to interrupt the white people. We should have minded our business. This is America. You have the right to be a white person without somebody having something to say about it. You have the right to be any damn color you please. I could still see their white eyes looking down at me like wet leather, and it gave me the willies. I knew we'd made a big mistake. Per Neighborhood Association bylaws: Thou shalt leave your neighbor in peace. Midge and I had broken that peace.

"Roger, agree with me, will you? I can't stand here all day waiting for you to agree."

"Honey," I said, "I disagree. Full stop."

She knitted up her brow like she does when I don't agree. "Roger. Those people shut their door in our faces. After I gave them cookies. That was my mother's recipe."

"Honey bear, what did you want, a ceremonial eating of the cookies? We gave them some welcome cookies, they took them, end of story. Let's go home. I'll grill something up. Some of those burgers you like, with the mayo in them."

Midge was huffing and puffing up the walkway to our front door. "Roger. That is not the proper way to accept a welcome into this neighborhood. It says so in the Neighborhood Association bylaws. Thou shalt accept a welcome with a welcome in return." Her voice was squeaking because she was trying to keep her voice down, on account of the white people being just next door. "They were supposed to invite us in and offer us coffee or scotch, and we were supposed to sit around and chat idly about the weather and how do they like the neighborhood, while *The Shores of Waikiki* plays on the phonograph. Then we say, oh, gosh look at the time, and they say, golly, yes, time flies when you're meeting new friends, and we go home and have dinner just in time to watch goddamn *Beat the Clock*. That is how things are done, Roger. Now how will things be between us when we all show up to the neighborhood luau in August?"

She threw open our door and went straight to the bar to fix a scotch and soda. That one down, she fixed another, then a third, which she offered to me. The TV was still on, and the newsman was saying something in a stalwart tone about the Russkies. I went to the window and lowered the venetian blinds.

"What are you doing?" Midge said.

"Subterfuge," I said. "Espionage."

"Don't talk to me like I'm a soldier, Roger."

"Yes, sir."

She rolled her eyes and walked over to where I was by the window. I stuck my fingers between two of the slats of the blinds and plucked open a space to see through. "Have a look?"

My wife smiled. If there's one thing in the whole world she loved, it was spying on our neighbors. Mrs. White was in the kitchen, chopping something on the counter out of view. Mr. White was in the back yard hosing his azaleas. They were dripping nearly dead with water. He'd put on his wife's sunglasses for the task, and looked like some black-eyed bug man with a water-hose proboscis.

"What do you think they're fumigating?" Midge said. "They don't have a tarp up or anything. Don't you need a tarp for that? One of those colorful numbers?"

"They're not fumigating anything. Fumigating us," I said. "Getting rid of the pests."

"Speak for yourself."

"I'm speaking for the Whites. We were pestering. Did you see how nervous they got about their laundry?"

"It was a harmless question," Midge said. "Any wife would ask that. Lord knows your whites don't even count as white compared to that man's trousers. And I use lye soap."

"Hush, honey bear," I said. "She's about to throw something in the skillet."

Mrs. White threw something in the skillet. We couldn't tell what it was. It was so white we couldn't even discern the texture of it from our vantage point behind our venetian blinds.

"Did you ever see them eat before?" Midge asked.

"No," I said. "I never noticed. I figured they ate like anybody. Steaks, potatoes, and casseroles. Maybe a TV dinner if they felt lazy."

"Me either. I never watched them eat."

"It's in the Neighborhood Association bylaws. Thou shalt not watch your neighbor eat."

"No it isn't."

"Then let's keep watching," I said. "I want to know what that is."

Beat the Clock came and went. Midge and I watched the window in shifts. She toasted some Wonder Bread and slathered it with Vegemite, and I fixed two more scotch-ands. The white just kept sizzling in the skillet, if that's what it was doing. There had been no change in its color, no discernible smoke or odor. Mrs. White was somewhere upstairs; Mr. White was reading a book in the living room. From so far away, we couldn't read the title.

"What if she doesn't have the heat on?" Midge said.

"She does," I said. "I saw her light the match."

"What if it was a trick? She knew we'd be spying so she put some cotton balls on the stove to fool us."

"That isn't cotton. It isn't anything. It's just white."

Midge had her blouse unbuttoned at the top by now, and it was hard to stay focused on the task at hand. She was gorgeous when she was a woman on a mission. She was blushing from all the scotch, and her chest was flushed pink. "It can't be nothing. Christ on an axle, it has to be burning to a crisp in there."

I looked again through the blinds. "Nope. It's just the same as it was." It was getting dark, so I turned off the lights so they couldn't see us peering through the window. Then I got the idea that maybe they'd see there were no lights on in the house and get suspicious, so I told Midge to turn on the lights upstairs, but close the curtains so nobody could see in. She did it and came back and mixed another drink. She'd taken her blouse off upstairs, and now she was just in her slip and skirt.

"It isn't neighborly," she was saying. "That was my mother's recipe. I spent two hours making those goddamn cookies, the least I could get would be a thank you and a goddamn pleased-to-meet-you and a goddamn *Shores of Waikiki*. What happened to our *Shores of Waikiki*, Roger? I loved that

album."

I was only half watching the white people's kitchen. Mostly I was looking at Midge. "It was scratched, honey bear. I'll get you another."

She sniffed. "We should go on vacation. When was the last time we went to the beach?"

"Before the twins were born," meaning my brother's twins, Anna Lisa and Anna Maria, two perfect little angels. "Remember, we had to use our vacation time to see the twins."

Midge slumped in her chair. "I miss the beach," she said. "Little umbrella drinks in coconut cups. Everybody in their bikini tops and nobody gives a damn."

"We'll go to the beach," I promised. By that time, neither of us cared much about the white people. I took one last look out the window and saw that the skillet had been removed. I didn't see the Whites or the skillet anywhere; there weren't any lights on except in the kitchen.

Midge and I went to bed, and boy, did we. That was the night we conceived Doreen, our first. We had it so many ways, I'm surprised we didn't have triplets.

§

The next day, the Whites were still in their white house, going about their business. Mr. White was grilling on his patio when I got home from the office, and of course, the burgers were blanched straight white like somebody leached all the color out of the meat. But it was almost definitely hamburger, and after that, I stopped asking questions. This is America, and if you want to eat a white hamburger, that's your prerogative. That's freedom. If you went around getting suspicious of every white person doing something strange in the whole U.S. of A., you'd never have time for anything else.

The white people even came to the luau in August. They brought a mayonnaise salad. What else was in it, Lord knows—the whole thing was like milk soup. I tried a little bit, and it wasn't bad. Kind of smoky, with a hint of cayenne. At first Midge was icy, on account of the whole cookie fiasco and also because she was sick as a dog with Doreen in there gumming up the works. But me, I try to be a good neighbor. I do my best to adhere to the Neighborhood Association bylaws. I said to Mrs. White, who we'd learned by then was named Carol, "Great salad. You'll have to give my wife the recipe."

Midge frowned and continued sipping her orange juice from a little plastic coconut. There was a pink umbrella stuck in the drink, but she wasn't in her bikini, on account of Doreen, and she wasn't happy about that—she would say, looking in the mirror in our bedroom, not even wearing her slip, "What kind of summer is this. I'm as white as the neighbors." But to me she still looked like Nancy Olson in *Big Jim McLain* in her luau dress. Gorgeous.

"I'll have to give your wife the recipe," Carol said, and her husband handed her a plastic coconut full of milk.

"How do you like the neighborhood?" I said to Don, the other White. Fayad and a couple of the other neighbors were trying to get a limbo game started up across the yard, and John Burnstone, President of the Neighborhood Association, was grilling hot dogs and pineapple slices on his big gas-powered barbecue. Don was cradling a heaping plate of his wife's salad, shoveling it up with a plastic spoon.

"I bet it's a lot different from Moscow," Midge said snidely. "Not as many polar bears."

Midge was alternatively convinced the Whites were either KGB or Martians. We'd spent many a night getting half undressed by the window and staring into the Whites' but all they ever did was read books and over wa-

ter their garden and burn pale, amorphous foods they got from God knows where, certainly, Midge said, not the Food-Plus supermarket. We didn't see any clandestine radio broadcasts. No flying saucers scooting about their chimney. And as an American, I believe innocent until proven guilty. I believe, lacking hard evidence and a fair trial by the jury of one's peers, you can do as you like, even if it means absolutely murdering what were once prize-winning azaleas that some of us would've killed to have in our own back yards.

Carol looked puzzled and sipped on her coconut. Don gulped down a mouthful of salad, smiled his white teeth, and said, "It's a lot different from home." Then he laughed, a good old ha-ha, and gave a thumbs-up, about American as you please.

The limbo game got off the ground, and everybody in the neighborhood was lining up to a samba tune playing on John Burnstone's hi-fi, which he'd dragged out onto his patio just for this purpose, and husbands and wives in bright Hawaiian shirts indulged in their God-given right to shimmy beneath a stick held aloft at chest level. I asked Midge if she wanted to limbo with me, limbo being one of the highlights of the annual luau, but Midge was already running to find someplace to throw up, so I asked the Whites if they were game, and they both stretched their white mouths into grins and followed me to the samba line. Some of the bystanders were cheering us on with beers in their hands, or plastic coconuts for the ladies, and the sun felt good on our skin, reaffirming then and there the reason for luaus, to come together one and all as citizens of the Neighborhood of God's Green Earth.

I sambaed up to the stick and shimmied under as best I could, bumping the bar with my chin. Fayad and McAvoy, the stick holders, gave me a good 'attaboy, and we all laughed, and next up was Carol. She stepped up to the stick and stopped.

"Go on under!" I said. There were some cheers from around the yard, and Don stood behind her with that grin still on his white face. Then she began to bend backward. She kept bending 'til we all heard a loud crack, and the cheers, let me tell you, stopped so quick you thought you heard crickets. I wished Midge was there to see it. Carol bent back 'til her head was in the grass, then she walked straight under the limbo bar, all bent in half. It was summer, and the lady's dress wasn't a long one, but a set of thick white panties kept her modest. On the other side of the bar, she popped back up and smoothed out her dress. There was grass in her white curls, and she was smiling like she'd just won a million bucks. We all listened to the samba and the sizzle of pineapple on Burnstone's barbecue, and then somebody started a slow clap, and we all started clapping, especially Midge, who felt she'd just been proven right and said so later, that they had to be Martians, only a Martian could limbo like that. I wasn't so sure, because I wouldn't put it past the KGB to train a woman to snap herself in half. Or maybe the Whites had retired from the circus to become decent Americans, it wasn't any of our business anyway. That was implicit in the Neighborhood Association bylaws: Thy neighbor's circus past is none of your beeswax.

The Neighborhood Association awarded Mrs. White the First Place Pineapple in the limbo competition, and about a month later, just before the first day of autumn, the white people moved away. One night we were watching them sit on their sofa through the blinds with all our lights off, the next, they simply weren't there, the whole house emptied top to bottom. Midge said they'd taken their flying saucer back to Sydney or wherever and good riddance. After that, we didn't spend so much time peeking through the blinds and making love with our socks on. Midge got big with the baby, and we went back to watching *Beat the Clock* and all our other favorites, shouting out the answer to the Jackpot Clock when we knew it.

For Whitney Houston, Dead at 48

BY BREW WILSON-BATTLES

In the blank hours of afternoon,
they found you undressed for the party.
The safety of stages and sequined gowns
gave way to the treachery of bathtubs
and a weird luck stagger conspiring
to close your throat when all
the rock in Newark only left you hoarse.
Sometimes family are the ones
who let you do as you please,
leave you on the tracks as the train
barrels in, leave you piloting
planes plunging through clouds—
the hard fall of three octaves.

We will never piece together
the pitching time line of powder
and 100 degree water,
the shrieking yaw of your descent.
The voice as big as the sea,
then, too soft to register
outside the luxury suite
financed by humiliation,
the ill-advised tour.
Jesus, upward mobility,
and cocaine no longer negotiable
without a power note, a key change
to satisfy the pressing crowd.

When the spotlight left you shaky,
without benefit of stage fright
on swollen cord nights, nosebleeds,
clipped notes, the gasp of the crowd,
you were no longer in love with
the noise of your voice.
Black girls don't get the Streisand treatment.
Later, sweat and desperation drowned
backstage roses, the incidents unspoken
in polite company. You thought you'd retire,
open a florist shop, but forgot
the easy negligence with flowers
once the petals wilt.

MASHA MOUSEBONES VERESHCHENKO

T.A.F.T.

by Jacob Mays

In the same method as an ultrasound, geologists can map the consistency of earth miles down-- they listen for the returning ping of explosions. The first pocket of natural gas in southwestern Pennsylvania was found just off the only highway near my house. I drove by the well twice a day for work one winter, like a streetlight in a cow field. It was simple, a steel pole with a flame perched above, burning off gases too light to use. The well was hot enough to melt the snow around its base. Grass grew in that orange light all winter. I remember the long shadows the huddling cows made at night, and how people would pull over to gawk and take pictures. No one knew back then what fracking meant.

1.

I go home to the Rustbelt for my last summer before living permanently in Chicago, before getting out. Home to mud and toothless grins, cinder block bars and muscle cars that rattle and purr, and sweat. For the last two years, my dad has rented my brother's old room to a local dropout. Ryan and I have become close friends, though he sells drugs from the porch of my childhood home. He is two days older than I am, but can't spell "Chicago" when he texts me. His penmanship is beautiful, and I've seen him catch fish with his bare hands.

There's been a fight. Ryan has a badly swollen eye and a cracked lip that leaves blood on his cigarette butts. He had it videotaped.

"Should have seen it, he won't run his mouth no more. I didn't steal that bike. See, here's where he got me with that elbow. Your dad said to tell you there's a turkey in the fridge." He sputters bloodily.

The meat is soft, but tastes like birdshot. My dad calls. “Hey, I got you a job. You start tomorrow, under the table. Remember those Tonka trucks you had when you were little? You’re gonna’ drive one.” He laughs.

2.

My boss is named Bob. He’s Texan. He works for the gas company – the guys that come in the white truck but never stay for long, the guys I’m not allowed to talk to. Bob builds their drills and clears the land. He’s all Skoal and flannel, snake skin boots and a brass belt buckle of a longhorn skull. Its horns are so finely cast, the Mexicans joke that his wife would bleed if she ever brushed against them. He smiles a lot and he’s right with God. He has a beard like a football coach should have. I never get a chance to ask him why he doesn’t wear a cowboy hat. Ryan says he hired me because he needed someone local/white to keep the hicks and racists from his undocumented workers. I’d love to believe that. It’d be glamorous, but all I’ve ever done is order them beer – Cerveza! Cerveza! – and give directions.

Most of the time, I drive a forty-four ton rock truck on site, ferrying dirt from one corner of a cow field to another in an attempt to make it level. I have to climb two ladders to get into the driver’s seat; the tires are taller than I am. It’s like driving a house in a circle for twelve hours a day. The site is a slickly mudded hill, so the trucks occasionally flip over and roll. They say they’re made for that – no big deal, Jose just flips you over with his bulldozer. I smoke too many cigarettes.

Bob knows I’ve never driven anything bigger than a pickup, but he isn’t big on labor laws and the gas men gave him a deadline. He never tells me where to get a hardhat, and I don’t know how to ask for one in Spanish. I’m never taught to drive the truck. Ryan sits shotgun on my first day and we guess what each lever, each symbolically lit button does. We play follow the leader with the truck in front of us. I’d file a complaint, but I live so close to West Virginia that the only law enforcement is Fish and Game. They don’t even carry guns.

I build a road for Bob; drive a machine that shakes so hard I can't see anything but vague swirls of color while driving, like the horizon and sky in a washing machine. I ask how far into the field the road should run.

"Drive until you can't hear the drill, then turn around," he says.

3.

After work, I take the Mexicans to the bar just over the hill from my house. It's assembled slipshod from cinder blocks and corrugated tin, with traffic signs and neon advertisements to fill the gaps. The county turned off the water to the place, so no one goes there anymore. It's quiet, necessary after twelve hours running heavy equipment. The bartender is a family friend and doesn't card. He jumped bail in Oregon for a fatal hit-and-run in '85 and has been living here ever since. He's got a ponytail that goes to his waist and a tan line where he used to wear a goatee. His mother died tragically last winter in her trailer in the woods. Heart attack. He's taking it hard. He officially inherited the bar, even though he's always worked there. He's an asshole, but keeps a couple Spanish songs on the jukebox, so the guys like to drink there.

They haven't been home in almost two years. They work wherever the company finds gas, for however long the digs take. Eduardo is a year younger even than I am. He went to public school in Houston when he was a kid, so he speaks the most English. He talks on his Blackberry while driving his dump truck, has a set of platinum braces, and won't drink anything but Corona. Jose speaks no English at all and doesn't drink, so he buys hamburger buns and sits outside feeding the raccoons the bartender keeps almost tame. I think someone said he has a daughter; I'm not sure. I sit beneath the bartender's framed letter from the gas company, the same one everyone around here got in the mail one day.

"$1,000 a month to lay pipe across your property, more if gas is found. Lucrative. Clean fuel. No strip mining. A fortune beneath your feet."

My favorite part of the bar is the banner, tied to the gutter on the porch.

Five feet long with messy blood red letters, it just reads: "T.A.F.T." I don't know who painted it. It was just there one morning. But everyone around here bitches that all Texas oil companies are cheats and liars, so it could be anyone. When they first found natural gas in southwestern Pennsylvania, hoards of dirt farmers who had never before had two dimes to rub together started signing contracts. A few hundred thousand dollars sounds great until someone else tells you you should have gotten millions.

People here have also been losing their wells and springs. Now it makes you sick to drink the water. Turns out the chemicals used in fracking contaminate the aquifer. Towns have been relying on special tanker trucks for drinking water, provided by the oil companies. "T.A.F.T." just means "This Ain't Fucking Texas." Everyone from around here laughs when they see the banner. I even know a guy who got a tattoo of it. Eduardo just shrugs when I explain it.

"No, it's not. It rains more here and it's easier to get lost," he said.

4.

I don't speak Spanish, so I take commands by hand signal. My dump truck broke last week so now I bulldoze around it. I think Jose is trying to tell me to level my blade, but he looks like he's making a bed, spreading out a sheet. At night I leave my dump truck on an island twenty feet above our heads. I'm almost done here. The crew leaves in a week for the next well, the next field without me.

I try to spend a while talking to Bob and the farmer that owns the place before heading home. His name is Ray, I've known him secondhand since before I was born. He drives a shiny, cherry red quad courtesy of the gas company, and ironically does wear a cowboy hat. He has an animal skin tied to the front rack. Its blood is dripping onto his headlights.

"Hey Ray, is that a dog?" I ask incredulously.

"Nope, coyote. Heard him yipping like hell last night, got him down by

the road when I was coming up. I think there's a pack around," he says.

Bob snorts and wads tobacco into his mouth. He isn't looking at us, he often doesn't when he speaks. I think cowboys find it easier to talk to other men while looking at something bigger than themselves, like the horizon or weather.

"Yep, we got coyote in Texas. Tons of 'em around the rigs. Trick is to shoot 'em from your machine. They know what a person looks like, but ain't scared of a bulldozer. I make my guys carry guns down there," Bob says. He smiles and I can see the fine lines around his eyes, like grooves in the dirt where water once flowed.

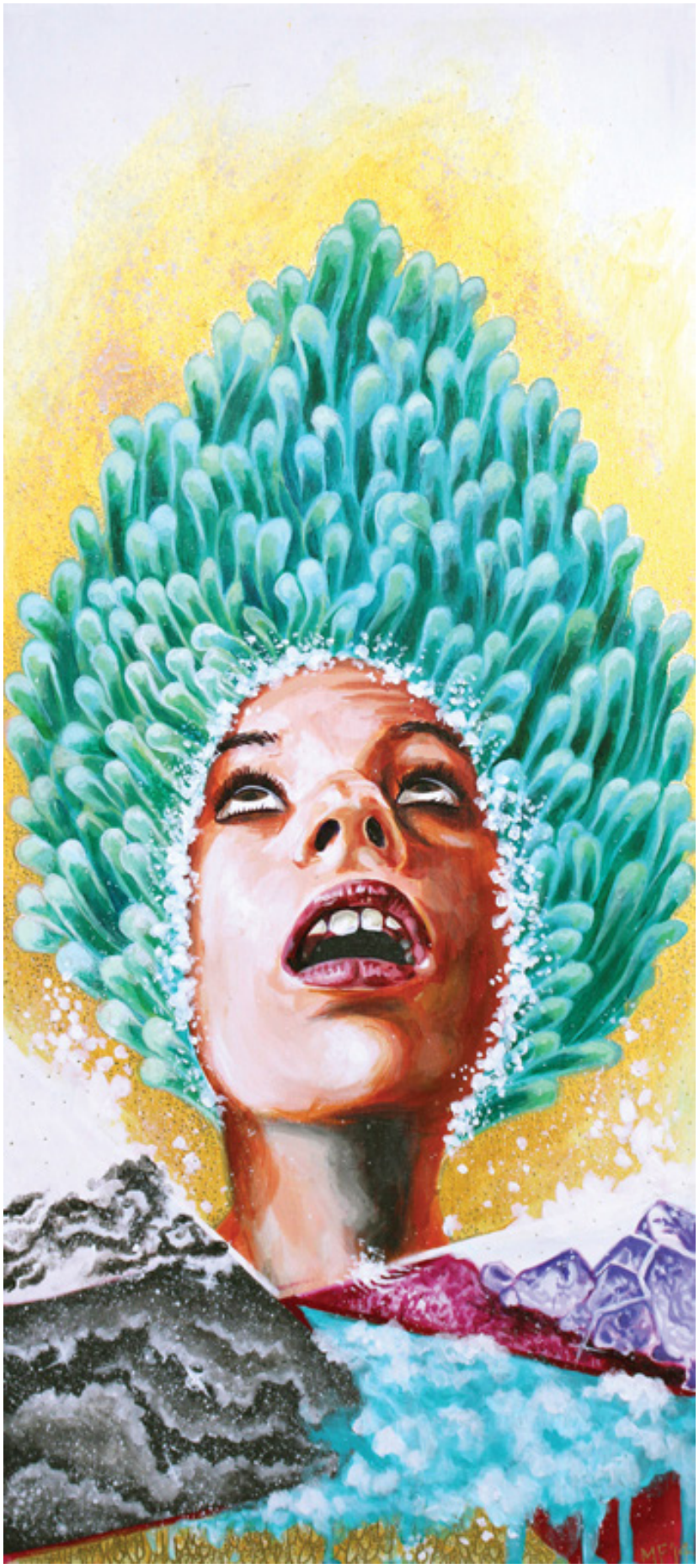
I say goodbye and only get stuck in the mud twice on my drive home.

5.

Weeks now without a job and my bags are packed. The morning news is all about a well explosion in West Virginia, three miners dead. The fire has burned now for days. They've flown in tanned experts from BP to explain "top-kill" extinguishing to hick firefighters. At night I can hear coyotes yowling and crying in the valley. Two days before I leave for Chicago, I wake to find my old dog ran off in the night. I wish him well.

I'll miss the rust and the hills. My girlfriend says my house smelled like kerosene, and she doesn't know what she'll do without it. Ryan doesn't live here anymore, and is currently awaiting sentencing on thirty-four counts of criminal trespass regarding the theft of electric golf carts, the possession of hallucinogenic mushrooms, and other gloriously lurid charges. Bob still owes me money, but he assures me that it's coming.

RAYMOND THOMPSON



MASHA FIKHMAN

She could hear her mother's bell coming from upstairs. It was porcelain with a little wood nymph on top. It used to sit as decoration on an end table in the parlor. Violet made her way up the back stairs. Her mother lay in an enormous bed. The mattress was sinking in the middle, swallowing her tiny mother up like a Venus fly trap.

"Imuth rilethe melth." Violet nodded and pulled back the blankets. She picked up her mother and carried her down the hall to the bathroom. Carrying her mother was like carrying a large, surprisingly heavy bird. Her bones were brittle, almost hollow, but somehow she still had substantial weight to her.

Violet held her mother over the toilet until she finished, trying not to listen to the splashing urine. Her mother refused to wear adult diapers. She would bite and claw at Violet like a feral cat whenever she tried to put them on her. The doctor said this was the best way to avoid upsetting her mother.

She carried her back to bed and propped her up with pillows.

"Ith Maura ommin vu binner om Somtay?"

"No mother. Laura lives in Vancouver with Boris now, remember? They are going to try to make it down for Thanksgiving."

Her mother intermittently thought Laura lived in different places. Some days they would pass Laura's old room on the way to the bathroom and her mother would start wailing at the sight of it. She expected to see Laura's ruffled canopy, the life-size rag doll that sat in the corner missing the eye that Laura had ripped off, the paint-by-number trees and cats hanging on the walls.

Other days Laura lived across the Taltsmore Bridge, on the bottom floor

of a house owned by a divorcee, who only made noise when she was cussing out her ex-husband. He called once a month and begged to be taken back. A vein in Violet's forehead had started ticking at the mention of Boris' name. She could hear him demanding to know where Laura was through the phone receiver. She had told him to go to Hell. Now he was driving to Violet's house to find out where Laura was.

Violet left her mother's bedroom and walked down the hallway. It was narrow enough that both her shoulders brushed the walls as she walked. Her mother used to lock them in this hallway as children when they were bad. But Violet didn't mind small spaces. She found them comforting, like a cocoon. She used to sit and stare at the wallpaper pattern between the narrow walls, looking for animal faces. Even now as she walked past, she could still spot the lion.

She went down the back stairs to the kitchen and made coffee. The coffee tasted bitter; she dumped in more sugar. She got up and paced around the kitchen. The counter tops were covered in a thin film of grease from yesterday's fried chicken, Tuesday's meat pies, Monday's buttermilk pork chops. Fried meat was the only thing her mother would eat.

Violet fried it and then tore off strips of meat and threw it into the blender with some gravy. She would spoon the slushy, brown meat pâté into her mother's mouth and watch her mush it down with her gums. She always had a damp washcloth sitting beside the bed so she could wipe her mother's face and hands after meals.

Violet rifled through a nearby cookie jar and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. She lit one and leaned against the counter. The cigarettes weren't hers; they were Laura's. Laura had left them when she was there for Christmas.

They would sit on the old tractor out back and smoke because that's

what they had done as kids. The tractor hadn't run in years and sat behind a shed. Laura would sit in the driver's seat with her legs stretched out in a V around the steering wheel, and Violet sat on the hood.

Violet walked over to the kitchen table and turned on her electric chessboard. She left it set up on the kitchen table, on an old oil cloth place mat, and played whenever she wasn't cleaning or taking care of her mother.

She used to be very good. She had beat Eric Mattleson at the high school state championships. The gold-plated trophy sat in her room.

She moved her bishop, and the phone rang. She knocked over her coffee.

"Shit... hello?" Silence. And then some alien voice. A heavily accented woman selling something. Violet hung up. She sopped up the coffee with a dish towel.

Then she heard a vehicle winding up the gravel driveway. Boris' truck shook and rattled its way to a stop. Violet opened the drawer next to the silverware drawer and pulled out a gun. It felt too big for her hands.

She had bought it after a man had broken into the house last year. She had been sleeping when she heard him downstairs opening and closing drawers and cupboards. He was a quiet burglar, which made her even more frightened because she had no idea what he was doing to her things. The next morning she'd found very little disturbed. Their old tube television was gone along with her grandmother's china. Apparently, they didn't have much worth stealing.

Violet held the gun in front of her and pointed it to where she thought Boris' heart might be when he walked through the door. He opened the screen door and let it bang after him. He looked at the gun and then walked over to the kitchen table and sat down.

She kept the gun pointed at him. He traced the outline of a burn mark

left on the table. “This looks like a rose,” he tapped it with his finger.

“It’s supposed to,” she gripped the gun tighter. He nodded at her and kept tracing.

Laura had thought the burn mark was ugly, so she carved it with a knife to make it look like a rose. It had taken her days. She would sit in the kitchen carving, as Violet made dinner or played chess.

Violet stared at his fingers. His skin was so fair you could see the blue veins crisscrossing under his hands. Laura had told her his whole body was like this, see-through, like a ghost. She turned the lights out during sex to avoid looking at him.

Her arm was starting to get tired from holding the gun. There was a dull tingling that started at her shoulder and traveled all the way to her hand.

“I’m not going to tell you where Laura is, so why don’t you just get out?” She tried to look him in the eye, but could only manage to stare at his right ear lobe. He ignored her.

“Whenever I come back here I think of Laura’s birthday party. The one where you made her that fake crown out of cardboard and gold spray paint and everyone danced all night on the sofas and coffee table? Do you remember how Laura sat on my shoulders the whole night and said that I was her throne?”

He smiled and walked over to the doorway that adjoined the living room and kitchen. She knew that everything looked the same. Except the spaghetti stain on the sofa.

“I remember how you used Laura as an ashtray. She had little round burn marks going up and down her spine.” When they healed they raised and puckered and stuck up from her back. Laura had thought she looked like a Stegosaurus.

"She was playing house with some guy she'd met at the grocery store. Some jackass who stocked shelves with her. I got home early from my truck route and found them watching television in their pajamas. Snuggled up together in their fucking Christmas pajamas."

He walked over to the front door and looked out the window. "Didn't you ever think that maybe Laura gets what she deserves?" He pulled up his shirt sleeve and Violet saw thin, pink scars on his arms.

"Laura attacked me with a knife. We were driving home from our friends' house. Laura was smitten with their little girl, Eleanor, but the little girl shrieked like a banshee whenever Laura came close to her. I made the mistake of telling Laura that she wasn't good with kids, and wouldn't make a good mother. She dug this tiny, little pen knife out of her purse, and started slashing my arm with it."

"You're a liar," she shook her head. "Laura has never physically hurt anyone."

"Don't be naive. Are you telling me that you're stuck in this rundown house, helping some old woman piss and shit all day, and you've never lost it? You've never starved her or hit her when she was being difficult?"

He walked closer to her. She could see the pores on his chin, large, black dots that needed cleaned out. She pushed the barrel of the gun into his chest, pressed the cold muzzle between his ribs until his heart began to race. He stepped back.

She had never starved or hit her mother, but she had taken away her bell. She thought if she heard it ring one more time that day, she'd go mad. So she took it and hid it in the back of the china closet. She checked on her mother every couple of hours and gave the bell back after a few days of peace. After her mother had wet herself a half dozen times and Violet had to change her nightgown and strip the bed.

"I don't abuse my mother," she lied. She watched him pace around the kitchen and stop at the refrigerator. He pulled off a magnet.

"If you say so. When she was drunk, Laura liked to tell me how your mother left you at some amusement park when you were little. You kept riding the same ride over and over again, waiting for her to come back, but she didn't. When Laura got sick you were kicked off the ride," he held up the magnet. "I remember this. Good old Oxford Bay. Laura never could go anywhere without sending you a magnet."

"My mother left to get us funnel cakes. The lines were just really long," she walked over and took the magnet from him and put it back on the refrigerator. The refrigerator was covered in Laura's magnets.

She could still feel Laura's throw up on her new shoes from that day. The ride had been a pirate ship that swung back and forth in the sky. Violet had to walk around the amusement park looking for her mother in canvas shoes soaked in vomit. Laura sobbed as they looked for her, and Violet had to pull her baseball cap over Laura's eyes to keep people from staring.

They found their mother sitting at a picnic table with the funnel cake, devouring it. She liked food that she could tear off with her hands. Doughy cakes mostly. And meat on bones. She did this sometimes. She would just disappear, and they'd find her huddled somewhere with food. Like a dog who'd found a bone and couldn't concentrate on anything else.

"That's not how Laura tells it, but Laura is prone to wild exaggerations, isn't she?" He raised his eyebrows and then walked over to the kitchen table and wrote something on a piece of paper. She'd been making a grocery list.

"I better be going. I have an early route in the morning," He walked toward the door. "But if you ever change your mind about your sister, call

me," he pointed to the grocery list.

"I'll never change my mind. And if you come back, I'll kill you." She stared at the wallpaper behind his head. She saw a crab.

He laughed as his eyes traveled up and down her body. "I won't be back." The screen door banged behind him.

She lowered her gun and looked down at herself. Crusted gravy was smeared across her chest. She walked over to the sink and scraped at it with a butter knife. She watched the gravy flakes fall into the drain. She rinsed them down with water, then stood there watching the running water go into the drain, until her mother's bell started ringing.

This Way This Fast

BY ANDY FEATHERS

we're lying together in bed,
& you have fallen asleep on me
again, trying to finish the ending
of The 400 Blows with half of your merlot
left, i empty my paper cup into myself
& start onto yours—

i hope tomorrow morning,
when you apologize for dozing off,
& shorting out on all the fun,
that you'll remember it was your idea
to drink & watch a movie
instead of get more work done
on the painting series you need to have
ready for your show in two weeks,

& when your anxiety kicks in,
& we begin its traditional remedy,
cleaning up all the clutter around the apartment,
wondering how it gets this way this fast,
i am going to kiss the left side of your mouth
with the right side of mine, like i'm doing now,
making sure not to let my cold sore, lazy
& contagious, touch your lips & transmit
to you, in this dark room

aside from laptop screen & rotations
of green, pink & blue of neon sign
across the street, the Chinese place
outside the window, occasionally lighting up
your yoga books on the floor,
everything breathing slowly with you,
i hold mine in a moment longer
to fall in line.

An Explanation of Impossible Love

BY STEVE KLEPETAR

Because you dyed your hair pink and strode across campus
like the Queen of Clowns, I practiced juggling far into the night.
Cameras flashed when you took my hand. I graduated from soft
pillows to balls of glass and then to firelight, my fingertips burnt
as though I had something to hide. Nevertheless we sat
on the roof drinking Cutty Sark and I told you how it wasn't
the whiskey or the ship, but a witch with a short shift
from Burns' poem and you shouted "Weel done Cutty Sark!"
and we laughed like maniacs until security came with their bugles
and flashlights. They pinned badges to our eyes, they drove
us to a lake where swans dipped their quiet wings.
It's never been easy being your friend. Your orange parachute
haunts me with its mechanical tail. But only you could love my aunt,
who drank vodka in her morning tea. She whistled "La donna e mobile"
on her way to the factory and you let her go on believing Rigoletto
the crowning achievement of our doomed race, this species
heading for oblivion at the outward arm of a swirling spiral of stars.

At 5

BY BREW WILSON-BATTLES

After midnight mornings came
and went with the crush and fly of gravel
snapping the windshield
of a "56" Chevy ringed
by last smashed cans of
Red, White and Blue,
she'd find him hunched in the kitchen,
half-dead over coffee, a dented empty
crammed between unfiltered Camels and
Butter Rum Lifesavers he grabbed
from the rickety machine
just before the third shift whistle.
Saturday morning war stories
littered rooms with the clutter of short pay,
peeled beer tabs and candy,
stale, unrecyclable.

ELIZABETH ACOSTA

Zeus

BY STEPHEN PUSATERI

This, he offered
as his only excuse –

"Hera," he said, "you're a cow.

And I fuck better when
I'm the only animal in the room."

– Proving there was a separate god
Whose purview was tact.

FRED MOUNT

The Invention of Heaven

by Beth O'Sullivan

"We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness."
--- William Wordsworth

No one could figure out why Aiken Muldoon ran outside stark naked under a Donald Duck bathrobe, XL men's. He was covered up decent with his mother's hot pink patent leather belt holding it closed, his bare feet inside a pair of unbuckled red galoshes, with an eighteen-inch Mylar teddy bear helium balloon attached to an Easter bonnet, several sizes too small, that he had tied around his head. The teddy bear had a pink heart on its belly with, "I Love You," written in lipstick – red – across it. It buoyed in the wind, this way and that, above Aiken's head, while he stood in front of the tenement where he lived with his mother.

I was the first one to notice him standing there because I noticed everything about Aiken since the day he was born. He looked to the left, down towards the river where we had spent most of our childhood watching the trash float by. Next, he looked at all of the storefronts down Jordan Boulevard to the left, which included the convenience store, Flower Alley, the post office, and Jarvis's Jungle of Junk. After that, he scanned our block, looking at each one of us like he was looking from a great distance, like he was looking down on us all from heaven.

It had been one of those sweltering days where you feel like your whole scalp's going to peel off like wall paper in steamy heat, and you kind of wish your scalp would peel off in case some breeze came along, it could get straight access to your brain and cool you off.

The sun became our enemy that day. Our sneakers stuck to the sidewalk like chewing gum. And that evening, when Aiken came out dressed so strange, everyone in the whole neighborhood was outside cooling off. Mrs. Garrity and James Cooley had hauled out some lawn chairs and a bunch of the old people sat in them in a semicircle together on the sidewalk. Mrs. Garrity and James rested their feet up on

a metal trunk sized cooler that looked like it had been through the war along with James. I saw Mrs. Garrity shoo off everybody's feet so she could get another beer out of the cooler. Shayla and Noreen were playing Chinese jump rope while Garvey balanced himself on the wide stone edge along the stairs behind them, trying to get their attention. Mama was halfway down the block sitting on the stoop with Kelcie. Their lips were already purple from the pitcher of sangria that sat on the stone stair between them.

Two full blocks in this city and we all knew everybody else's business. I had lived in that neighborhood for four generations, ever since Great Grandma Sweeney stowed away on a ship of American soldiers out of Limerick at the end of WWII. Our neighborhood started out small but then, well – you know – people kept having babies. I was the only woman who didn't live with a man or children and, in that neighborhood, every once in a while, both. The men in the neighborhood had a tendency to leave, but some of them came back. My daddy was always coming and going. Seems like men need breaks. And with jobs getting so obsolete, as Aiken said, it's understandable. Now that I was twenty-five, a freak in the neighborhood for not having a baby, if not a husband, everyone had got their eyes out for a man for me.

I had got the little one room in the basement on the corner with its shoe-eye view of the city. Everyone kept telling me, don't wait on Aiken, I don't think he likes women, but I didn't care about that. We were best friends and I liked my job at the bakery--- had it since Aiken went away the first time when we was fifteen right up until I started working in Aiken's clinic. No one cared I was underage when I started at the bakery. They kept writing sick notes 'til I turned sixteen. It gave me enough money to get out of there every once in a while. I took the bus up to the mountains and camped overnight, if there was good weather. I didn't have a tent, I just tied up a bedroll and lay down under the stars. I loved it up there. But Aiken said they didn't like him up there on account of his thumbs, so he wouldn't go. I didn't understand that man half the time. Most of the time. There was nothing wrong with his thumbs.

After Aiken looked down on us from heaven, he just walked away down the steep hill towards the river. I'd only ever seen the bathrobe once. It was hanging in

his mother's closet. Aiken showed it to me one day when we were twelve and Aiken got real interested, obsessed I'd say, with who his daddy was. All his mama, Minerva, ever said was that his daddy was a rabbit in God's magic show and disappeared with a wave of the wand.

Once, when we were eating tomato soup in Aiken's kitchen, he said, "Minerva?" Ever since he was four, Aiken called his mama by her Christian name, Minerva. He said that everyone had a mama but that there was only one Minerva. "What did daddy like to eat?"

Minerva sat down, crossed her arms across her chest and closed her mouth real tight, like she was being tortured in a war and holding out on the enemy.

When Aiken showed me the bathrobe hanging in his mama's closet, he said, "I think it was my daddy's."

I ran my fingers over the shiny cloth. It was pure silk and felt real smooth. The background was midnight blue and all over it was inch tall Donald Ducks in all his different postures. Angry, fishing, laughing, kicking his heels, lying down confused, roller-skating, in love...

"Where do you suppose he got it?" Aiken asked.

"I dunno," I said. I rubbed the silk against my cheek.

"What kind of man would wear something like this?" Aiken asked.

Aiken was tall but too thin, without enough girth to fill up the Donald Duck bath robe, so when he walked away towards the river, the hem trailed on the ground behind him like he was Queen Elizabeth in her coronation robe. Aiken started to disappear behind the hill. First, up to his knees disappeared, then up to his waist, then up to his neck, 'til all we saw was that teddy bear balloon, punching the air on its rainbow ribbon, keeping up with Aiken's long strides. Everyone watched the balloon disappear with their mouths gaped open, wide enough to park a train inside.

We was born on the same day, me and Aiken, so we grew up together kinda' like twins. Aiken never was like the rest of us. He was real smart. When all the other kids started making up stories about how they were really orphans, Aiken and I figured we weren't orphans exactly, but we were each other's changelings, switched at birth. He shoulda' been Rosaleen and I shoulda' been Aiken. Since his mama already had a girl and my mama already had a boy, we figured our mamas switched

us. That's how hard it was to explain where Aiken's brains came from, but I assured him it wasn't no more likely that he'd turn out a genius in my family. Believe you me.

Aiken and I grew up along that river. I wondered why he was headed down there in that outfit. After Aiken disappeared over the hill, even the Mylar teddy bear, everyone just kept sitting still in the sweltering heat. Even the sun, on its way down, couldn't toss that heat over the edge of the world with it.

Time was, Aiken and I would walk down to the river together every day after school. There's a thin bank of rocks, then a strip of dirt before a row of ramshackle dead warehouses from back when warehouses were a mom and pop operation.

No one bothered us by the river, that's why we hid our childhoods there. Aiken and I was both incompetent to join the pickup games of stickball and broom hockey all the other kids played in the alleys and concrete yards behind the tenements. We tried to join them once but Aiken ended up tripping on the drain grate and fell flat on his face and then Colin tripped over him and then Frankie tripped over Colin and it kept going on like that, like dominoes until everyone was in a mess of a pile except Eensy Eagan who did a running jump and landed on top and stood up and yelled, "I'm the king of the mountain!"

I ended up getting my Miss Piggy T-shirt caught in the barbed wire at the top of the chain link fence in the back of the courtyard that day. I had to rip it to shreds to get it unstuck. As me and Aiken limped home, I didn't even remember climbing the fence, or why. It must have been one of those flight or fight moments.

We never tried again and anyway, we were only ever really happy alone with each other. We'd practically skip down to the river together after school. We'd play follow the leader on the rocks. Sometimes big flat ones suddenly tipped. We pretended the river was Victoria Falls, Aiken said they're the biggest falls in the whole world and we looked at pictures at the library to spook us. If we slipped on the rock and fell in, it was a certain death. But the river was actually the champion slug for miles around so all either of us ever got was a shoe full of grade-A pollution.

One day, Aiken created what would become our favorite game. He called it The Invention of Heaven. We'd sit around on the rocks and invent heaven. That day at school we'd learned that Kiwi McNulty had died of an embolism. We'd nev-

er known anyone our age who died before. Something was wrong with Kiwi even before that, but we never knew what. He was half the size he shoulda' been and the only human being I ever met who'd have fit right in with a police line-up of kiwi birds.

"There's a viper coiled in the pit of your stomach," Aiken said. We were watching some lazy fleets of Styrofoam drift by on the river. "Our whole life's nothing but getting through every day waiting for it to strike..."

I still feel guilty about it, but all I can say is we were eight years old. I couldn't stand the idea of a snake coiled up in my stomach moving that way snakes do. At first you think it's still as a statue, but then you notice that only its head is still and its whole body is twisting in and out of itself, a big slithering blob. I couldn't stand it, so I closed my eyes and put my hands over my ears and sang, "Lalalalalalala," over and over at the top of my lungs until Aiken was done talking about the vipers. That's the big difference between me and Aiken. We was born on the same day, but I was a baby when I was born.

When he was done talking about snakes, I took my hands off my ears and Aiken leaned back with his arms behind him on the rocks and looked up. "When all this is over," he said, "we'll be free."

I looked up too. The clouds were imitating the Styrofoam in the river.

"God's house is infinite," Aiken began. "There's an infinite number of rooms in heaven, so we won't have to walk into any rooms where there's someone we don't want to see."

"Dr. Liskadorne," I said. I hated how he hammered me once a year during my checkup at the school gym.

"Mr. Naughton," Aiken said. Mr. Naughton was our principal. He'd never had a genius in his school before and he was always pulling Aiken out of class for long chats.

"What do you talk about?" I asked Aiken once.

"He thinks I'm a goddamn fortune teller," was all Aiken said about it. After all those chats, when he was ten and already got him a GED diploma they put him in eighth grade in another neighborhood.

"And there's fields," I said. I loved The Invention of Heaven, right from the

start. “Where we can walk and walk forever.”

“And there’s streams with no trash,” Aiken added.

“The first room we come to is filled with lemon meringue pie,” I said, trying to be more practical.

“And the meringue won’t ever demulsify,” Aiken said. “ They’re the clouds,” he added.

Heaven kept growing and changing, as we got older. It became filled with tree houses and libraries, and we could sit down and talk to Homer and Einstein and Saint Joan. We kept playing The Invention of Heaven right up until they sent Aiken away from us when he was fifteen.

“Somebody should run out after that boy,” Mrs. Clooney said. She was drinking hard lemonade. She raised her eyebrows in my direction like she was pointing at me. “It’s strange behavior, even for Aiken,” she said, shaking her head. She took out a handkerchief with yellow happy faces all over it, and wiped the sweat from her delicate disappearing hairline.

Then we saw that silly Mylar teddy bear punching the air again on the sidewalk’s horizon, and then Aiken reappeared over the hill. He ran past his doorway and right up to the corner, diagonally across the intersection from us.

“He’s like that on account of his name, she never shoulda’ named him that,” said Murphy. Everyone knew the story of Aikin’s name. Minerva had taken her daughter May-Belle to the library for story and sing-a-long hour when she was eight and a half months pregnant and all alone because whoever-he-is had left as soon as Minerva announced her second pregnancy.

Minerva’s feet were hurting a lot that day. At the library there was a story about a hedgehog and they had toy hedgehogs all over. May-Belle, who’d been trouble since the day she come out feet first and kicking, bit the nose off one of the hedgehogs and the librarian practically had to stuff her whole fist into May-Belle’s mouth to get it out. Minerva, who was lightly snoring with her big body spread out across the floor, had slept through the whole ordeal.

A man got up front with a guitar around his neck and a moon mask on his face, and that made May-Belle scream so loud that Minerva woke up and the man had to sing his song with his voice on full volume:

There was a man lived in the moon,
Lived in the moon,
Lived in the moon
There was a man lived in the moon,
And his name was Aiken Drum.
And he played upon a ladle, a ladle, a ladle
And he played upon a ladle,
And his name was Aiken Drum.

Right then and there, Minerva decided to name her child Aiken, whatever the sex of the child turned out to be. She said it described her condition of aching.

"She complained so much about her aching feet, you'd think she was a millipede with an ache in every foot," Murphy continued. He lay down a card on the steps between him and Dwarf Dopey, who wasn't really a dwarf, just a little short. They were betting with shots of cheap whisky. "It's a name bound to make a boy feel guilty all his life," Murphy added. But everyone knew Murphy's full name: Murphy Malachy Magee Minx Baloney Maloney. So no one paid any mind to his analyzing Aiken on account of his name.

"Well I say it's his sister what's pushed him over the cliff," said Glynna. She was leaning back, with an elbow on a step behind her, wearing hot pink shorts. She put her cigarette holder to her mouth with a little flourish of her wrist. Her fingernails, shiny and purple, were long enough to kill her prey, like Siberian tigers. She took a long puff and then added, "When they got that postcard of her as a call girl in Hollywood."

But I knew Aiken loved the fact that he was named at the library. It was the most important place in his whole life. He would have been happy if, when he walked out the back door of the library, he'd have been walking in the front door of another library in all the infinite rooms of library heaven.

Way back when they cut out story hour at the library, Aiken volunteered twice a week to do it. He thought everyone in the world, whatever their age, should have a story hour and that's when Blind Brendolyn Bumble Bee got born.

When Aiken took over story hour, everyone of all ages started going. Cranston even started to close down the grocery during story hour, so's he could join in. They had to move it to the hall where people from out of town sometimes came and gave lectures. It turns out Brendolyn, the Blind Bumblebee, was around for just about every important event in human history. Aiken told how she helped Romulus and Remus found Rome, she and Helen of Troy put lipstick on together, and she was God's best friend. When Genghis Khan ripped off her wings, she waited for God to inhale and then rode on the wind it created right up to heaven where God gave her brand new amethyst wings that glowed in the dark.

But God never restored Brendolyn's sight and it was her blindness that led her into the most prestigious moments in history. She took a wrong turn in a field of dandelions in Macedonia and flew right into Brutus's forehead and stung him and killed him. Once, she was trying to cross-pollinate bluebells and violets, for one of her favorite things, beside killing tyrants, was to invent flowers. She created the miniature sunflowers of Orkney and Crete's purple weeping lilies of the field. She got lost on account of being blind and she flew in the window of Independence Hall right after Ben Franklin signed it and collided with his long feather pen and if she had been just one minute sooner, there might not be an America to this very day.

But by far, Brendolyn's finest moments were with the great spiritual leaders, in the gardens of Lao Tzu and buzzing around Gandhi's head at the salt mines. She landed on Saint Francis' knee, flew alongside Abraham, Jesus, Mohammed and Moses. Aiken spent a whole month with Brendolyn sitting on a lotus listening to Siddhartha.

If, on occasion, we got fact and fiction confused and answered on the state exams, "none of the above," the test scores for history in our school were still so much higher all of sudden, and so out of whack with the rest of our subjects, that the state education department actually paid a visit in person.

Across the street, Aiken pushed the buttons to stop traffic in both directions. When the traffic stopped, he didn't cross the street but took the stopped traffic as an opportunity to sing and be heard. He had a beautiful tenor:

"There's no place in this world where I'll belong when I'm gone

And I won't know the right from the wrong when I'm gone
And you won't find me singin' on this song when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here."

The traffic started again and Aiken stopped singing and pushed the buttons again and did a pirouette while he waited.

Aiken left our neighborhood when we was fifteen. He went down to Duke University. They'd been sending him letters since he was a kid and even visited him, so, it felt natural to him to go down there. On the Saturday morning story hour the day before he left, the library was packed. Everyone who ever heard an installment of Brendolyn the Blind Bumblebee come to hear what was going to happen to Brendolyn while Aiken was away.

Well, Brendolyn hadn't ever visited the twentieth century before but in this last installment she went on a tyrant-killing spree. She killed Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini and Pol Pot. When she was done, she was exhausted, as much from seeing all of the suffering those men caused, as from her busy activities. She flew to Malta for a vacation. There, she cross-pollinated Sea Daffodil with Southern Dwarf Irises and the common poppy. All along the high tide mark on the beaches of Malta, the strangest flowers covered the sand. Brendolyn took refuge in one, on a red poppy petal surrounded by purple and yellow Iris petals and on the outside, White Sea daffodil. She stared out across the ocean and died of a heart broken by the suffering she had witnessed.

God looked down and picked her up, gently, lifting her to heaven, mumbling how she was too good and compassionate a soul to survive earth. She was God's best friend so God wept and wept until there was a river of tears running right across heaven and God laid Brendolyn down on a boat made of red poppy petals and set it to sail on the river of tears and she's still floating down it, as if in God's dream.

Well, first all the little kids in front started to wail. They'd grown up with Brendolyn and didn't want her to die. Pretty soon everyone was wailing along with them. For weeks, the whole neighborhood was mad at Aiken. "He didn't have to kill her off," they complained, and I don't think anyone really trusted Aiken after that.

Until he started his clinic.

Finius, who was six, went around ringing everyone's bell asking them did they know where Brendolyn was buried until we had a ceremony with a walnut we said was her coffin and buried it under the sapling in front of the pizza parlor.

The traffic stopped again and Aiken continued his song.

> "And I won't be laughing at the lies when I'm gone
> And I can't question how or when or why when I'm gone
> Can't live proud enough to die when I'm gone
> So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here."

Then he did some more pirouettes, right there on the corner, pushing off with his right foot and turning on his left tiptoe, the balloon circling around above him. I half expected him to have toe shoes on but he only had those silly red galoshes. None of the people in the cars seemed to notice him at all.

It was four years before any of us heard about Brendolyn again. After three years at Duke, Aiken went to the state medical school and before Christmas, he'd dropped out. Not only did he drop out, he took to his bed and wouldn't get up. I sat with him day after day, between bakery shifts, and just sat in the darkening room. If I lifted the shade, he'd cover his eyes with one arm and wave the other in the air until I lowered it again. He went to doctors but no one could figure it out.

Then they did something really awful. They gave him shock therapy. It scared him to death. Some people said, well, see? It worked. It got him up and they applauded it. I didn't see how torture could ever be a good thing. Anyway, Aiken started talking.

"I was assigned, with a study partner, a young man named Alden, to dissect a human cadaver." I wasn't sure what a cadaver was but I just kept listening. "They wheeled a body out on a trolley and laid it on the table. We got ready and I looked down at the woman. She was older, in her seventies. And she'd written us a letter. The people who donate their bodies to medical school have the option of writing the students a letter and she did.

"'Remember,' she wrote. "Be respectful. I am a mother, a grandmother, a sister, a

child, and above all, a human being who loved life. I hope that I can help you understand more and enable you to go on to help many people. Thank you.'"

Aiken got out of bed and raised the shade and squinted out at the sunset. "They really hurt me, Rosaleen. They put these headphones on me and zap!" Aiken did a kind of dance version of a seizure, standing straight up.
"Anyway," he continued. "Her name was Evelyn Wilson. And as I raised the dissecting knife, and I looked at her face, it was my satori moment." He sat back down on the bed. "I won't go back," he said. I can't do it. I realized that she was God. That Evelyn Wilson was God. And Alden Tinker, who took over the knife when I stopped in my tracks, was too. I looked around the room, and everything, Rosaleen, animate and inanimate, was God. I didn't have any choice. I took off my lab coat and covered Mrs. Wilson up and knocked the dissection knife out of Alden's hand and pretty soon I was in the infirmary talking to this nurse about how everything is God and they sent me home and fried my brains." He shook his head.

Then, the evening of the bathrobe, Aiken did something that made all the folks on the block stop what they were doing and stand up. The old people put their hands on the metal arms of the lawn chairs and pushed themselves to a standing position with a lot of audible bone creaks, Kelcie knocked over the sangria pitcher and it smashed to smithereens on the pavement and the kids stopped jumping and rough housing and put their sodas down and just stared.

All of a sudden, Aiken ran into the middle of the intersection. He side skirted a fire- engine red VW bug and slammed his hand on the back of it. The pink belt held tight and the balloon bobbed all over the place while Aiken jumped back and forth avoiding the cars. In the middle of the intersection, he resumed his pirouettes.

After he dropped out of medical school, Aiken started practicing his own kind of medicine. Minerva's apartment was his clinic, he used all kinds of Chinese herbs and his services were practically free. I went with him into Chinatown once to meet his teacher. We walked into Dr. Song's little shop. There were roots and herbs hanging everywhere and long wooden shelves covered in tall glass bottles. I had never seen an ancient Chinese man look as happy as Dr. Song was when he saw Aiken. He turned over the "Open" sign so that it read, "Be back soon" and took us to the back room behind a midnight blue velvet curtain.

We sat on silk covered pillows. The room was lined with bookshelves with large very old leather-bound books on them. Dr. Song got up on a little stool and pulled down one of his largest books, bound in cracked red leather with gold indentations of Chinese characters. He opened it and handed it to Aiken pointing at one of the columns. I was amazed to find out that Aiken could read the Chinese lettering. He leaned down so I could have a look as he ran his finger over the characters. He nodded his head and said to Dr. Song, "I think this is it, I'll buy some."

We went back into the storefront. While Dr. Song packaged some herbs for Aiken, Aiken said to me, "Dr. Song is the most knowledgeable Chinese doctor in the world."

"And he is smartest student," Dr. Song said. His eyes twinkled and he smiled so wide I thought it would shoot off the side of his face like a rocket ship.

And eventually, after the clinic was busy enough for me to quit the bakery and help Aiken keep things clean and stuff like that, Aiken resumed the story hour at the library. There was another bumblebee, a Chinese bumblebee named Hui –Jing who had found a powder that would bring Brendolyn back to life. He hadn't found her yet but meanwhile, he was having some very Brendolyn-type adventures, while he tried to find the shores of the red poppy-boat.

Aiken's pirouettes didn't last long. The only excuse all those cars coulda' had for not stopping was if someone had cut their brake cables. And I didn't see how that would be possible. But there was one thing I'd learned from living on the block all my life: anything could happen, and it happened to Aiken that night.

That's when the delivery truck driver for "Poultry Live Killed", the store on Jordon Boulevard a few blocks beyond our neighborhood, slammed on his brakes. A van full of flowers slammed into the "Poultry Live Killed", then a little compact slammed into the back of that van, and then, from the other direction, a big car with tinted windows swerved and went into a telephone pole and a little put-put car that looked like it was made of tin foil driven by a little old lady slid into everything. There were flowers all over the road, sunflowers, and daisies and bird of paradise and roses of every color, and two of the poultry crates were busted open and turkeys and big fluffy white ducks with big orange beaks were squawking and hopping around and fluttering their wings. Some of them actually made it up to the car

hoods where they seemed to do a dance.

Then the cars what could still move backed away and the rescue truck came, it only had a block to go. There lay Aiken, in the middle of the fracas. I ran over and shooed the ducks and turkeys that had started to climb on top of him, away. I looked up and me and Minerva were both there, one on each side.

There wasn't blood, but Aiken's eyes were open, staring up like he was looking straight through heaven. The Easter bonnet was crumpled under his head and the Mylar balloon kept getting in the way. They looked like glass eyes. You could tell they couldn't really see any more. And that was the end of Aiken.

Just like Aiken didn't have any choice up there at the medical school when he saw God everywhere, I don't have a choice either. I'm the only one who knows why Aiken put on his daddy's bathrobe and ran out into the street. He woke up that morning and felt the viper stir in the pit of his stomach, coiling itself, getting ready. Aiken just wanted to beat him to it. I'm going to search for Hui-Jing. We'll go on up to heaven together and find Brendolyn and Aiken in all of his infinite rooms of heaven.

Conan

BY ROBERT WALICKI

Before killing the dragon,
before stepping foot on the mist filled battlefield,

be sure you have a weapon.
Be sure your sword is not a knife for cutting drywall.

Take cover from the enemy in a beat up station wagon,
dry docked in a sea of frozen mud.

A hundred men in Silverados will pull next to you,
steam pouring out of their exhausts.

All that horsepower growling for heat.
When it's time to go to war, you'll leave that horse behind,

carry weight only on your hip, a dead blow hammer,
a tape to measure things, slide razors for cutting, a drill to bury those screws deep.

When you are inside, everything will fit inside the space
between one stud and another—

the son you left behind in another state, your name,
the mother who got stoned on Coors Light and took her top off in the front yard—

the earth that kept tilting under her feet, your own sky
that kept falling as if there was no bottom to reach.

When you're ready, cover it with sheet rock and score it with a razor
if it fits, break it with your knee. You might hear a soft snap.

crack of gypsum, soft powder and tear
of paper, burying the knife deep—

When you're ready to go inside, someone on the jobsite
will recognize you, some drunk in a hard hat will turn and laugh,

call you Conan the Barbarian, because you said you liked those movies
once, because you let your guard down.

he can't see your thin arms flex under hidden flannel,
your hammer smacking that board so hard the nail disappeared.

Afterword

Dear Reader, again,

If no one reads the foreword, then there is a comfort in writing the afterword. With that in mind, I would first like to congratulate you on reading this brief statement of ours. More importantly, I would like to thank you for reading our third issue of The After Happy Hour Review.

A lot goes into editing a fledgling journal such as this. A lot of reading, a lot of determination, and a lot of truly determined people, not least of which is our readership. I do not wish to be self-aggrandizing in this afterword. In contrast, I want to thank all those that put their work forward, either in poetry, flash fiction, or short fiction. Whether the work was accepted or rejected, all works were appreciated.

A journal such as this relies on two parts. The first is based on a workshop which recognizes that writing is a process, and an arduous one at that. The second depends on the wealth of outside submissions that we have received, which has ranged from chock-full of potential to the downright actuation of that potential, and everything in between. But know this: all has been enjoyed and appreciated humbly and sincerely.

Keep reading, keep writing. keep submitting,

Charles Brown, member of *The After Happy Hour Review* editorial staff.

RAYMOND THOMPSON

The Authors

Literature:

Michael Albright has published poems in various journals, including *Blast Furnace*, *Uppagus*, *Pretty Owl, Tar River Poetry, A Narrow Fellow, Pembroke Magazine, Cider Press Review, Revolver, Moon City Review*, and others. He lives on a windy hilltop near Greensburg, PA with his wife Lori and an ever-changing array of children and other animals.

Kelly Andrews' poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *PANK, Up the Staircase Quarterly, Melancholy Hyperbole, Apeiron Review, Weave Magazine, Pear Noir*, and others. Her chapbook "Mule Skinner" is available from *Dancing Girl Press* (2014). She co-edits the online journal *Pretty Owl Poetry* and has a hand in creating *B.E. Quarterly*, a sometimes-quarterly zine. Like most people she knows, she has an affinity for cats.

Andy Feathers grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where he still lives today. He earned a B.A. in Integrative Arts at Penn State University and seems, somehow, to keep finding employment. He is chief editor of the *Runaway Hotel Literary Journal*, and his poems have been featured by *Festival Writer, Carbon Culture Review, Turbulence Magazine, The Copperfield Review*, and others.

Brandon Getz holds an MFA from Eastern Washington University in Spokane, WA, and currently cobbles together a living by copyediting manuscripts, blogging for local theaters, and serving bitter coffee bitterly. His fiction has appeared in *Versal, The Ampersand Review, Burrow Press Review, Paragraphiti*, and was recently nominated for the Pushcart Prize by *The Delmarva Review*. He lives in Pittsburgh's Little Italy with his dog, Marlo. Read more at www.brandongetz.com.

Steve Klepetar's work has received several nominations for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. His latest collections include *Speaking to the Field Mice* (*Sweatshoppe Publications*), *Blue Season* (with Joseph Lisowski, *mgv2>publishing*), *My Son Writes a Report on the Warsaw Ghetto* (*Flutter Press*), and *Return of the Bride of Frankenstein* (*Kind of a Hurricane Press*).

Jacob Mays lives in Pittsburgh where he writes ebooks of poetry (*Campfire Badge* and *Hunt/Gather* plz buy), welds, and makes friends. He would like to be your friend too. He is a graduate of Columbia College Chicago, where he majored in Creative Writing and debt. He can be reached at jacobfmays@gmail.com or at Remedy in Lawrenceville.

Patricia O'Sullivan studied writing with a fellowship at the Boston University Creative Writing Program with Leslie Epstein. She has published book reviews in *The Boston Herald* and stories in *Free Parking, Sidelines, 236 Journal, The Tower Journal, Belle Reve Literary Journal*, and upcoming in *99 Pine Street*. The support of two patrons enables her to write fiction in Paris part of the year. She advocates for others to similarly support individual artists. It was just such patronship support that enabled *To Kill A Mockingbird* to be written.

Stephen Pusateri holds a bachelor's degree in English Literature from the University of Pittsburgh and is a regular at the Pittsburgh Poetry Exchange. He works for WYEP-FM on their soul and blues programs.

E.B. Taylor lives in Brighton Heights with her husband, four cats, and two dogs. She aspires to write full time, in her kitchen, on a yellow typewriter.

Robert Walicki's debut chapbook is *A Room Full Of Trees* (*Redbird Press*). His work has appeared in *Stone Highway Review, Pittsburgh City Paper, The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Grasslimb*,

and on the radio show *Prosody*. Most recently,he has won second runner up in *Finishing Line Press'* Open Chapbook Competition in 2013 and was awarded finalist in the *Concrete Wolf* Chapbook Competition (2013). He lives in Pittsburgh where he curates a monthly reading series, *VERSIFY*.

Brandon Fury earned a BA in writing from the University of Pittsburgh and is currently enrolled as an MFA candidate at Carlow University. His work has been featured in *The Fifth Floor* and the poetry anthology *Amidst the Splendor.*

Brew Wilson-Battles only had two goals in her life: writing collections of poetry and making ESPN Sports Center "Plays of the Day." At 40, her ESPN window of opportunity has likely closed, but she has plenty of time left for the book. Now that she has completed her MFA thesis, *Grass Widow*, she plans to update her CV with her most recent tattoos in an attempt to join the carnival.

Visual Art:

Raymond Thompson currently works as a Multimedia Producer at West Virginia University. He received his Masters' degree in journalism from the University of Texas at Austin and his bachelor's in American Studies from the University of Mary Washington. He has worked as a multimedia photojournalist for the *Door County Advocate*, the *Times of Northwest Indiana*, the *Kane County Chronicle*, *Times Community Newspapers* and the *Washington Times*. His work has won several awards from the *Virginia Press Association*, and the *Alexia Foundation* Grant for his documentary project "Justice Undone."

Masha MouseBones Vereshchenko was born in Russia and immigrated to Detroit at age 12. Her paintings reflect her current fascinations and struggles; at present, overcoming addiction, her love for drag queens, fashion editorial, and Avant-garde. She lives in Pittsburgh, PA and creates constantly. Her work has been shown at 19 Karen Contemporary Artspace in Australia, featured in Unicorn Mountain's *The Black Forest*, and *Catapult Magazine*.

Michael Koehler, a Pittsburgh born artist, has a masterful illustrative style complemented by a deeply personal mythology. While working as a graphic designer, he began applying his design sensibilities to his personal artwork early on. Michael's work is characterized by narrative and figurative paintings depicting wizards, wolves, and other weirdos often with a limited color palette.

Fred Mount is a Buffalo, New York based conceptual photographer, his work concentrates around portraits of the human condition. The photographs focus on all the idiosyncrasies that make society as a whole work or, more interestingly, fail. While a sense of loneliness and conflict can be felt in the photographs there is also an underlying ironic humor that keeps the photographs enjoyable to look at while leaving the viewer with unanswered questions concerning the who, what, why, when of the photographs.

Elizabeth Acosta aims to combine my love for art and purpose. Graphic Design is the perfect balance. She is always learning and experimenting with new techniques and mediums.

Masha Fikhman is a Russian-born, Pittsburgh-raised artist who graduated from theUniversity of Pittsburgh in 2011 and has since been exhibiting works in various galleries throughout the city. She experiments with mixed media and celestially laden imagery to explore the relationship between self and universal identity. Her most recent paintings are largely based on imagery of the human figure juxtaposed with elements of nature, animals, and the cosmos to suggest the interconnectivity of all living things.


MF'14